From Ruin

by GraeFoxx

Summary

It all went wrong. Harry was locked away in Azkaban for decades as Voldemort destroys and conquers the magical world and beyond, unchallenged. However, Voldemort's greatest strength will be used against him when Harry is sent back in time with one mission, to kill the Dark Lord before he rises again.

Notes

Just a couple of things...

This story is inspired by I'm Still Here over at FF.N. The author, Kathryn518 hasn't
continued it... I truly hope they do... in the mean time I have to satisfy my trashy shipper heart and write my own. She is aware of my version and has given me the green light to keep writing.

Next, updates may not be regular. I gotta be real with you guys-- full time job, Gf, friends, you know the gist. But I'll try my absolute best to do once a week.

Last, I'm mostly considering the movies, but with some details taken from books 1-7.

- Inspired by *I'm Still Here* by Kathryn518
Out of warped space and reality, Harry materializes, dropping from the sky at a height high enough to feel his delicate organs stir up before he lands hard on cold muddy earth. The pain of his touch down wrecked his fried nerves but that is nothing compared to the burning in his eyes and head. The sudden invasion of normal daylight is like a fire to sensitive eyes that has lived in a torture cell on the lowest level of Azkaban prison for decades. Even with his eyes shut, it feels like too much. Harry shuffles and shifts his weak body to hide from the painful light when he registers wet on his back. The wet reminds him of his origin.

The cold impossibly black crypt of his cell, where no light entered, no wind felt, no sound save his screams and the smacking of meat against stone, could be heard. Decades of darkness in that prison felt nothing like this. The air is fresh instead of stale and decayed. The sun feels like fire on his fragile and sickly skin but it's countered by the freeze of the wind. His overwhelmed senses has to be proof the horrific parasite actually did it. The Horcrux-Voldemort had brought them back to the past.

...Possibly, his rational mind begins to reason.

Harry is much too desensitized to properly take stock of his surroundings. All he knows is light is painful, he's in cold mud and it feels like he's naked. His ears pick up every sound like the earth's sounds is on maximum volume. Harry needs time to adjust, but he needs to make sure he's safe first. There is no telling if he actually made it back in time or if he just managed to apparate out of the prison. As a method of relaxing, Harry's mind absentmindedly reviews the arithmancy of Horcrux-Voldemort's theory.

Harry weakly packs on mud over his eyes until it's a spotty black and blue under his eyelids instead of bright orange and red. As his hearing begins to adjust, his mind sees no flaws in Voldemorts math. Harry knows he has to check his surroundings to verify they did in fact return to the past but at present, he can't see and barely distinguish sounds. Harry wants nothing more than to retreat from the constant agony of sensory overload when he recalls his mindscape. Harry withdraws into his mental refuge and immediately starts to dial down his perception. Having never done it before, it takes him immeasurable time; Minutes or hours he couldn't say, but eventually the blaring sounds of nature diminishes, providing him with some relief.

Using his reconditioned sense of hearing, his mind naturally maps out his surrounding as accurately as possible. Little by little, grass and dirt patches form, then trees and rocks, shrubs, many birds, a squirrel and possibly a raccoon, or cat. It all shapes an image of a forest in Harry's mind, but it's not a dense forest. If he allows more sounds to add to the rough mental image, he can easily make out sounds of people walking—high heels and flats on concrete—and talking, cars running, doors closing and windows opening from buildings, strollers, dogs, music, and many more sounds that tell Harry; metropolitan.

“Whe...” Harry tries to speak the possibility that they're probably in a park, but his jaw, voice and mouth all refuse to aid him in speaking. Harry reasons he'll be weak for some time and for the moment concentrates on his environment. The idea of being in the world, outside of a prison cell is a challenge to stay calm and composed The fact that I can hear people and animals is so good... it's soo... Harry's thoughts feel like they're made of tears. He can feel the swell of emotion gain strength and speed, so with practiced ease he calls on his occlumency to reign in on his overwhelming emotions.

In his mindscape that looks like his dank cell in Azkaban, Harry calls out, "Did you hear that, you
psychotic bastard?" Looking around, there is no reply. Harry isn't sure what to make of Horcrux-Voldemort's lack of response but what they did is unprecedented, and bound to have unforeseen complications. The parasites disappearance may be linked to that in some way.

Maybe he's magically exhausted? Harry questions in his mind, though the logic of how a piece of a soul can feel tired doesn't make sense. Years spent with that spiritual tumor rooted in his mind is telling him something either very good has happened, or it's on the loose. Harry's certain if the monster was still in his head, it would've assumed full control of his body again; eager to torture him with images of his friends being raped and murdered.

It was one of his favorite source of amusement. That or mentally dueling Harry in a true to life reality it controlled like a God. Towards the end, Harry didn't care how impossible it was to brutally fight it because any opportunity to momentarily kill, maim, hurt, or even tire the monster was worth it. Of course no matter how well Harry fought, it was all in the mindscape Voldemort ruled. A mindscape—it seems—it's no longer dominant over. Harry won't rule anything out but if the parasite isn't answering, the most likely reason is it's gone.

Harry's theorizing is interrupted when hears a nearby voice, seemingly right above him say, "Well, will you look at that. She was right."

Harry immediately leaves his mindscape, recalling that his eyes are caked over with mud, he uses the nearby sound of breathing, heart beats, and tone of voice to quickly learn there are two people near him, one male, the other, unconfirmed. Harry panics. He doesn't know these people. It's likely they want to through him back in prison, he reasons. Then Harry's magic rages in panic as well.

"Wow!" The male voice starts, as Harry hears shuffling away. "Wow, oh uh, one- one moment, young man," The male asserts from a bit further. "We mean you no harm! I repeat, we mean no harm, by either myself or my wife. So long as you do not attack us, we will not attack you. You have my word."

"It's true," the female voices in a comforting tone. "We mean you no harm."

They repeat that phrase until his magic reacts less and less to his lowering sense of danger. Harry's breathing is panicked, but the words do turn over in his mind, simmer a moment, then suggest certain possibilities. Harry hasn't interacted with people in such a long time, replying his thoughts with his actual voice sounds like crazy talk. His occlumancy has the hardest time keeping his emotions from barreling out and reducing him to a weeping mess. Harry desperately stays his magic from accumulating any further and in his mind he repeats a question, practicing until he finally asks in a croaky, broken voice, "who... are... you??"

"My name is Nicolas," the man replies in a comforting tone. "And with me, as I've stated, is my wife, Perenelle."

"Hello," a kind voice emerges from the hazy mass of cloudy shapes in Harry's mind.

"Now, I would like to avoid... distressing you further, as you've clearly been through an ordeal. So I'd like to ask you how you want to proceed. Though I would recommend clothes. It's not quite cold but being in the buff can still bring a man a rather deep chill."

"Honestly," he hears Perenelle mutter as he measures every word he hears, and analyzes the threat level. It's odd. The more they project safety in their words, the higher his confusion. Why do they want me to drop my guard, he asks himself. It can't be anything good. Harry decides to stall and keep them talking. He asks, "'m... na'ked?" Truthfully, his nudity didn't bother him because aside from the pain drawn by every breath, he can't feel anything else. Still, he needs more time and
“Quite,” Nicolas states. “But no need to feel embarrassed. I am obviously male and Perenelle is a healer whose seen thousands of nude forms. If you consent, she can look you over with diagnostic spells. Nothing invasive of course. You have my word.”

When the thought of them having wands while he is literally bare fills him with steady dread. Of course they would have wands! He mentally chastises himself for not thinking of their wands earlier. Not only is it pointless now, but he doesn't have any way of defending himself against a witch and a wizard. Why haven't they used their wands against him, his mind questions and immediately formulates theories that range from rational to outlandish. Assuming the simplest theory is the preferred explanation for an unknown phenomena, Harry has to believe they actually mean him no harm. But trust is too far a leap for him to make. The only test that would reveal the situation for what it is comes out of his croaky unused voice, “oath.”

The silence deadening but less than a moment later, Nicolas says, "certainly." The sliding noise of a wand exiting it's holster terrifies his magic into briefly flaring, but Harry tapers it down. He can hear Perenelle move a step forward before saying, "On my magic, I swear to do no harm, intentionally induce pain of any sort, or take advantage of the young man before me in any way he disapproves as I examine him for injuries.” A faint thickness seems to warm the air a moment before disappearing.

Harry tilts his head in the direction of Nicolas' sounds and a moment later he too removes his wand and states his intentions clearly before swearing on his magic. It calms Harry down dramatically, but not completely.

“As I've said,” Perenelle begins. “I will only be using diagnostic spells. Afterward, we can discuss some more what you'd like to do.”

Harry can briefly feel a faint and foreign warmth wash over and through him, like stepping out into warm sunlight. While she does her spell, Harry asks for more information. “Why... ar' ou... here?”

“That is a story best left for another time,” Perenelle chimes in, her tone very perturbed. "He's incredibly weak and it won't do your condition any good to hear anything remotely alarming or even mildly stressful. Can you tell me your name? If you like, a nickname is fine.”

“...Hedwig,” Harry weakly answers.

“Very good name,” Perenelle softly states.

“Old high German, if I recall correctly,” Nicolas adds in an attempt to fill the space with conversation. “My old German is pretty rusty but I believe it's broken down to two elements: Hed, combat or battle, and Wig, fight or duel.”

“You remember Eleonora?” Perenelle asks almost cheerfully, also assisting in expanding the soothing effect of conversation despite the seriousness of the situation.

“I'd hardly forget the queen of Sweden,” Nicolas says before raising his voice in a clear apologetic voice at the speculative eye of his wife. “Not because she was attractive. You have to admit she was a dominating figure. I'd remember her regardless of how she looks.”

“Mnhm,” Perenelle hums. Despite the small break, she finishes her examination and states as much. “Young man- Hedwig, I must say... I don't even know how you're conscious at the moment. Your condition closely resembles a state of stasis similar to a corpse. Your heart is hardly beating
and erratic, have low blood pressure, you have hypothermia, severe muscular atrophy, bones so weak I thought my diagnostic spell might break them, magical imbalance, and... well, I can go on but it’s a whole host of other ailments.”

“I’d also like to know why you have mud on your eyes,” Nicolas adds hoping some humor might alleviate the grave atmosphere. “Truthfully, I have a multitude of questions I’d metaphorically die for answers to. However before we can get to that we need to restore you to proper health. Hedwig, if we swear to help you regain your strength, will you consent to hospice care in our home?”

Wandless and naked as he is, everyone present knows full well there is little he can do in his condition, yet they ask. As abnormal as they are, Harry has to trust that there's nothing of value for them to hatch an elaborate plan like this in order to manipulate him later. Though before he agrees, Harry asks, “Wha’... year... s’tis?”


‘Fourth year,’ Harry's mind recalls.

They missed. Horcrux-Voldemort calculated for the end of third year, but they're in the beginning of fourth year. The World Cup hasn't happened yet, nor has the Tri-Wizard fiasco. Barty Crouch Jr impersonating Moody, Cedric's murder, the parasite finally getting a body. Now that it seems he has complete control of his body, Harry has to stop all of that from happening. His overwhelming need to be ready for it and prevent the deaths of his loved ones has him nodding to Nicolas' offer of assistance. They promptly make their detailed oaths to do him no harm. He knows it's a magical bond when, oddly enough, he faintly feels their magic.

They tell him everything they're going to do and though it scares him to place himself in the hand of strangers, he has to continuously remind himself the oath is binding, this is to kill that bastard, and he has no other choice. Harry doesn't return to his mindscape. He instead prioritizes his mind, body, and magic to healing. He feels great stretches of blackness between moments of consciousness, but with every moment of lucidity, he's feels ever more stronger than before.

Apparently a whole week passes in the hospice that is Nicolas and Perenelle's home. Harry wakes in the now familiar room, and for the first time, his body has no further need to return to sleep. He feels strong enough to remove the thick blanket and walk, or maybe even run. Instead, Harry enters his mindscape, which still looks like a dank and dark cell. He walks over to a dark gray brick he knows to represent his body. Placing his palm on it's surface, Harry utilizes his magic to analyze and enhance his body's natural recuperation. Harry finds that his body is recuperating well above normal. It's odd that this is all he can accomplish, when he hears the click of a door open.

Returning to the surface, Harry opens his eyes in the darkened room to see Perenelle enter. She walks over to him, greeting him with a “good morning,” as she runs quick diagnostic charms over his frame. Harry has a much easier time of sensing magic now as opposed to when they first found him. Even with his enhanced memory, he can't recall ever being able to sense magic to this extent. It only leads him to more theories about this new world or what Horcrux-Voldemort did to his body. Theories that beg for confirmation.

“I'm ready to talk,” Harry announces with much less strain than before. Perenelle looks him over and nods before leaving the spacious room. It's not long before she returns with Nicolas and they pull chairs up by the bed to sit in.

Harry has gone over dozens upon dozens of probabilities and hazardous topics to avoid in his mindscape. With his ultimate goal of killing Voldemort, Harry has to see every moment as either opportunity or set back. Most scenarios he played in him mind try to account for the best and most
efficient way to achieve this goal with or without help. Excluding assistance of any kind, going it alone always has the worst percentage of success by comparison. The results don't mean he'll take anyone however, but he reasons keeping a small and talented network of assistance will be the best case scenerio. And depending on how they answer his queries, he may not consider any further help from them. He starts with an easy test topic.

“You're Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel,” he states with absolute certainty. He couldn't place them in his weakened state but when he regained his strength, he recalled their heads on the wall of decapitations Voldemort taunted and tormented him with during his confinement. He recalled Voldemort happily expressing indignation over his immortality being challenged by the 'immortal alchemist.' For more than one immortal being to exist was a personal slight to the dark monster. Add to that, the Nicolas of his world refused to give Voldemort his remaining philosopher's stones, or the recipe to create it, and he easily butchered them, mounting their heads along the collection of friends and family in Harry's first cell.

The Horcrux lodged in Harry's head postulated that Voldemort did find either the recipe or stone, which reduced the need to depend solely on Horcruxs thus forcing the Harry/Horcrux to imprisonment. In a way, it's very possible Nicolas's stone ultimately led to Harry's travel into the past, to then be found by the very man. That seems far too fortuitous for coincidence and Harry reasoned there's something missing.

“Seen my head on a chocolate frog card have you,” Nicolas easily states with a smile.

“Something like that,” Harry responds with in an ominous tone. The room isn't completely dark. They've been adjusting it little by little so Harry can get accustomed to light. But it's dark enough that his response seems darker, changing the impression of the room to something more grim.

“How did you find me?” Harry asks one of his many questions.

“That's an interesting story actually,” Nicolas starts, seemingly brushing away some of the haunting feeling. “As you know our identity, you may also be aware of why we're famous. Even now coursing through your veins is the famed, 'Elixir of Life'.”

“How I hate that label,” Perenelle groans with a small hint of irritation. “I'll never forgive that oaf Guillard for betraying our trust.”

“Can you blame him?” Nicolas poses to his wife. “We did tell him we were nearing 500 years of age.”

It doesn't seem like the elusive and recluse couple would go around dosing complete strangers with the elixir of life. There's no way they can be sure it would for the betterment of the world or not. If, for example they had come across a young Tom Riddle and gave him the elixir on a whim, they could've helped destroy the future that much faster. “You wouldn't have given me your elixir of immortality so easy,” Harry comments. “My recovery is the only thing that feels different.”

Nicolas and Perenelle share a look of surprise before the older man turns to Harry. “May I have your word that you will not reveal what we share with you to anyone; for profit or recognition of any kind?” Harry nods easily. He may not know the exact avenues of his immediate plans, but he knows his goals are nowhere near as self-serving as immortality or money. “It's quite surprising and very perceptive of you to note your recovery. Yes the 'Elixir of Life' is exaggerated by uneducated rabble... well, to a degree. While it's true the reason Perenelle and I have lived for so long is due to the elixir, it is not a perpetual remedy. We take it twice a week to continue prolonged life.”

“And as you can see, it doesn't make us younger,” Perenelle adds wistfully. “But it does help our
bodies perform to ideal levels. Your condition was systemic as it was cataclysmic. It wouldn't be a leap to say you were dead for several months before slowly starting to come back to life. As something of a medical professional, your injuries was so extensive—and keeping in mind it's not a permanent remedy—I deemed the elixir to be the best treatment for you, or else we would not have given it to you.”

It seems to Harry the older couple are hoping he might elaborate of the circumstances of his condition, but he only nods. When it seems Harry won't shed any light on the events that led him to his near death-like state, Nicolas continues.

“So, in the expanse of our time circling the globe, we've seen it all, I'd say. Or heard about something remarkable. Oh the tales we can tell. The rise and fall of great kingdoms, and in this case a plethora of characters met along the way. Some were very good, truly heroes of their time. Some, not many but enough were quite evil. The ‘chaos for chaos' sake’ types. But for the most part, everyone was normal. There have been a few special cases. Talented witches and wizards, such as Merlin, or the Founders—of Hogwarts that is—King Oberon, Merwyn the Malicious.”

“Vindictive troll,” Perenelle mutters though easily heard. “Herpo the Foul,” Nicolas smiles as he continues. “Some of our encounters were with experts in the unconventional practice of divination; Nostradamus, or in this case, the witch that has led us to you, Cassandra Lufugōd.”

“Poor girl,” Perenelle chimes with sorrow.

“Poor family, more like it,” Nicolas estimates. At Harry's quiet and curious exterior, Nicolas continues to further explain. “We came across her plight through our travels in Greece. While most soothseers are born with their ability, Cassandra's ability was the result of a curse placed upon her by something wickedly powerful. We never learned who or what would do such a thing, but for the rest of her days, she would be cursed to foresee only the bloodiest, most tragic acts of wanton destruction perpetuated by vile and evil men. Naturally we attempted our very best to help the poor lass.”

“Even in constant despair, she tried to stop what she could,” Perenelle picks up the explanation from her husband. “And we like to think she was successful, but being unable to see positive outcomes, she couldn't ever know for sure if she in fact made a difference. What's worse is the curse continues throughout her family line—though only among daughters, if I remember correctly.”

“Well it does weaken,” Nicolas adds. “We were able to examine a descendant and found it's much weaker now than it was in Cassandra.”

“The Lovegoods, I believe their surname has evolved to,” Perenelle notes as a matter of fact.

Independent of his desires, the name immediately recalls memories of being forced in penseive records to bare witness of his blond friend's bestial rape and bloody murder. After which they mounted her head on the wall beside his other friends. With a healthy body, a clear memory, and an agonizing spirit, his magic automatically responds, like a lite blaze within him. Unexpectedly, his body is a poor container for his rage induced magic, and a flash forms erratically and repeatedly, floating objects, splintering the wood of the bed frame, or blasting window panes.

“Hedwig!” Perenelle calls as Nicolas pulls his wife away before the surge becomes life threatening. “What's the matter?! Please calm down! Hedwig!”

“This is a safe place!” Nicolas tries shielding himself and his wife from all the debris flying around the room. “You're safe here!”
Angry as he is he can still hear their words, like a distant echo. Harry quickly calls on his occlumancy to calm down. Almost immediately the flaring of erratic magic subsides and everything calms. After a moment of awkward silence, Harry mutters, “sorry.”

Regarding the green eyed boy carefully, Nicolas nods and begins replacing or repairing the scattered furnishing of the room. Perenelle moves to Harry to check him over for any injuries or abnormalities. Seemingly content, she lowers her wand around the same time Nicolas finishes restoring the room. “You seem to be as normal as any 13 year old,” she states officially.

“I don't know about that,” Nicolas chimes. “I can't say I've ever come across any children—let alone adults—capable of doing whatever that was. It seemed like a cross between accidental magic, and magical force similar to an obscurus.”

“There isn't any trace of foul magic like that in him,” Perenelle remarks. “As unlikely as it is, that was his magic.”

“Can you stop talking about me like I'm not here,” Harry asks, preferring to move past this. Truth be told, he's a little embarrassed at losing control like he did, but he certainly wasn't expecting to hear about Luna's family. The surprise and the sudden flashes of painful memories is something he'll have to be more careful with in the future. There's no telling what other triggers he might come across. “So, can I assume Cassandra mentioned me in one of her premonitions?”

Setting their seats in place beside Harry's bed, Nicolas nods, “yes. Her only premonition to us. While we were attempting to remove the curse, she told us to be at a Lilly Hill park in Brecknill, UK, June 13th year 94, if we wanted to avoid certain travesties. We may not have taken her seriously but for the fact we never told her we were essentially immortal. That she knew without being told gave her the credibility for us to act on her instruction. And low and behold,” he gestures at Harry with both hands.

“Can you imagine?” Perenelle asks. “The United Kingdom hadn't even formed until the early 1700's! How could we not take her seriously?”

It's a little jarring to think that an ancestor of Luna's from the distant past would help him on his return from the bleak future. The other nugget tugging at Harry's mind is Lilly Hill park. Harry dives into his Horcrux-Voldemort enhanced, perfect recall, to his childhood with the Dursleys. That park was one of the larger nearby parkland he used to pass on his way to primary school. Why would he return there, and not in his cell in Azkaban?

Sifting throughout the memories of his youth, Harry notices there's a set of similar or different occurring memories from the age of 4 to 7, like images with slightly different changes. Observing one pair of memory of the same day and event, he notes actually happen differently. The day Harry received his first black eye, one memory is how he knows it happened in his past-past, while the returned-past is more severe and was administered by a fist from Vernon instead of Dudley, like he remembers.

One event with two memories. Two different experiences of the same moment in time. The Horcrux-Voldemort did postulate that it was possible that a ripple may form upon breaking through the fabric of the past and that it could extend through space and time, affecting past events differently by a small margin or not at all. It's why the parasite was so meticulous with his arithmancy—it didn't want to change past events more than would be to his benefit. The numbers, magic and runes had to be perfect to keep the ripple as small as possible. It's the only reason Horcrux-Voldemort needed Harry's cooperation. The energy required was astronomical. Not only did they have to remove the magical limiters from his mind, but the parasite had to use the decades of ambient magic soaked in the wards and structure of Azkaban, or they couldn't have done it.
Harry will need to spend a lot of time going over this slightly altered history.

Harry's deep dive into his memories is interrupted when Perenelle speaks up. “Mr. Hedwig,” Perenelle starts and continues when Harry opens his eyes. “We were hoping you might shed some light on what those travesties we might be avoiding are by helping you.”

“We can tell you are... a very guarded person,” Nicolas takes over. “And normally we would not pry, but we're almost sure this involves my wife and I. If you can place yourself in our position, and imagine. We've come and gone in the affairs of man and wizard sparingly for hundreds of years. We've seen the rise and fall of kingdoms, of dark lords, and short-lived peace without the need of much intervention. Having seen and been through so much, what could Cassandra have seen that might make this future so devastating that we would need to be involved? The only outcome that would make the most sense to a couple of immortals, is their demise.”

“It's why we feel it's in our interest to help you if we can,” Perenelle interjects. “If you need a sworn oath to hold true all you share with us, I am willing to do so.”

Harry takes a moment for thought before looking at Nicolas for a similar pledge. Understanding what his eyes are asking, Nicolas says, “I would like to make a similar oath. I truly would, but I cannot be certain my silence will aid or hurt us, and others, in unforeseen ways. You can be a dark lord for all I know.”

Harry stamps on his rage with his occlumancy before it can even spark his magic to frantic life. He can't exactly blame Nicolas. That's a rational precaution.

“That may leave us in a bit of a conundrum, I think,” Nicolas continues. “You may not be willing to share what you know without my oath and I will not give that oath without knowing more about what you're unwilling to share.”

It certainly seems like a catch 22 but Harry can be sure to explain one thing, no matter the oath. “I am no dark lord,” he says with disgust. “Nor will I ever allow myself to come close to being regarded as one. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that my entire existence is for the sole purpose of dismantling and utterly destroying... self-proclaimed dark lords.”

The vile bitterness of his tone alone is more than enough to tell the Flamels that this young man is deathly serious. But the light of green illuminating his angered eyes is the exclamation point of legitimacy. The couple share a look of concern, then a look of curiosity, and finally acceptance before returning their focus on Harry. “If you can swear that to me, I'll feel safe in swearing silence on anything you tell us now and in this room.” Nicolas and Perenelle seem unified on this but Harry isn't sure how much he wants to say.

They seem honest in their intentions and they did help him regain his strength without asking for much in return, but is that enough reason to tell them the truth. Harry's mind quickly analyzes the pros and cons of the critical decision before him. Not telling them doesn't mean he couldn't do what'll need to be done to eliminate Voldemort. The con there is it'll take longer, as he's already learned through simulated scenarios. But if taking longer is the best way, shouldn't he follow that path? No, his mind easily answers. There was nothing to stop Voldemort from his eventual return because everyone did nothing. In Dumbledore's case, he prepared a child for martyrdom that still ended up failing. Destroying the snake is his sole focus and attention, but he has to consider what telling others about the future might do to change an already battered past-future—or is it new-future—into something worse.

In either case, telling them might be helpful in ways he hasn't considered. Not to mention, they've lived for centuries, so if anyone in the entire planet, can handle the responsibility of such a secret,
it's the Flamels. They're recluse, observant, intelligent enough to reason, and they promised magically binding oaths.

Harry takes a deep breath. “I can't promise to tell you everything,” he starts to say. “But I'll say enough for you to grasp the entire situation.”

The couple share a look and with a nod, Nicolas says, “I think that'll be fine.”

“First, my name is Harry.”
“...Everyone?” Perenelle breathes in frightful shock.

After their oaths, Harry explains enough for the couple to know he's from the future—there was really no way around that. Initially, Nicolas couldn't move past that fact until his wife threatened him with sleeping on the couch if he didn't stop asking questions about the future. Harry refused to tell him what became of many people who he honestly didn't know, or the exact mechanics of how Horcrux-Voldemort used arithmancy, runes and magic to traveled back in time.

“Everyone,” Harry grimly returns. “After he started putting the heads of muggle presidents and other leaders on the wall, I knew the war had extended past the magical world, and that the very little they could do with their weapons, didn't work.”

Harry continues telling them how he was transferred to Azkaban after Voldemort's reign was secure. “Having already taken over my body, that's where the horcrux in my head devised the plan to not only escape, but to claim what he felt is rightfully his. It's funny. Voldemort's hubris is giving me another chance to destroy him,” he adds without a hint of humor. Fortunately, Harry didn't have to explain what a horcrux was. Surprisingly, they knew Harpo the Foul, the creator of the Basilisk, Horcruxes and his other many travesties upon magic.

“With the little resources available, Horcrux-Voldemort learned it couldn't do it alone,” Harry states, recalling the lowest moment of his life. “He... he imperiused me to control my help, but when that eventually stopped working, he tortured me with cruciatus. After that stopped working, he promised, he gave me his oath, to spare everyone I care for if I helped. Out of everything... with so much death... I couldn't not... I was responsible for it all and...” Harry takes a break to calm down. “The reasons don't matter. I agreed to help, and we worked at it for decades. Now I'm here... without the horcrux apparently.”

The room was quite as tentative, horrified faces digest the world shattering revelation. Nicolas' chair scraping the ground as he gets up sounds like a canon in comparison to the abject silence. Nicolas paces the room as he takes it all in, while Perenelle is as still as a statue. Learning about their death or the deaths of everyone is very disturbing and clearly difficult for the pair to process but at some point within an hour, Nicolas stops pacing and turns to ask Harry, “why you?”
Harry isn’t sure what he means and the confused look says as much. Nicolas endeavors to be more precise. “What I mean to say is, why you and not Hardwin Potter, The Boy Who Lived?”

“The boy who- ...What?” Harry inadvertently gasps before his reason kicks in. “Hardwin. Hardwin... That- that has to be a result of the ripple caused by breaking through to the past. The parasite theorized that breaking through and forcing existence in a space and time that was otherwise fixed might cause a ripple in the continuum, altering certain things or events.” Harry’s mind is reeling over that change in events. What all this can mean and how different everything can be is discouraging. “Just to be clear, neither of you have ever heard of a Harry?”

Nicolas scratches his brow while Perenelle tilts her head, both in thought. “I don’t believe so,” Nicolas says at last. “Many Harrys over the centuries, for certain, but none of note that could be connected to this.”

“Maybe a surname,” Perenelle says in an asking tone.

Harry huffs in turmoil. He’s been careful with his words but he doesn't want to give anything away needlessly. Still he needs more information. Just the fact that he apparently doesn't exist changes everything. But he certainly has memories of a youth at the Dursleys that are fresh and different from his previous memories. ‘So does he exist, or doesn't he exist,’ he ponders to himself. Instead he asks, “Did you lend Dumbledore your Philosophers Stone, three years ago? And did it get destroyed?”

“Why, yes,” Nicolas, says with a straighter back and a stiff nod. “As a matter of fact, I did... and I never will again,” he exclaims. “For a former apprentice of mine to lose such a priceless magical item the way he did... Perenelle will tell you, I was incensed for weeks. Even now just thinking about it—”

“Dear,” Perenelle cuts in, bringing him back from his downward spiral of anger.

Harry makes a note to avoid that topic unless necessary. “Are you aware of any escapes from Azkaban this past year, or dementors stationed around Hogwarts?”

“I remember reading a member of the Black family escaped,” Perenelle squints her eyes trying to recall the article. “And the, quite frankly, idiotic decision to place dementors around a school full of children. It was almost a miracle some poor child didn't get their soul sucked out.”

Harry only nods at that, ignoring the memory it conjures up to continue.


“I’m certain he’s the current head of the Noble and Most Ancient House Black,” Nicolas easily answers. “Their history stretches quite far, you know, and until recently, a family mostly steeped in Dark Magic.”

‘Okay, so he never went to Azkaban,’ Harry mentally tells himself, trying as hard as he can to keep a straight face. “What can you tell me about, Hardwin?”

Perenelle takes that as her cue. “Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter, who's family line can be traced well into the middle ages during the Norman rise and domination over the Byzantine empire. We only heard of the Peverell-Potter union after the fact, however it did whip up quite the bevy of excitement. Currently, the Head of House Potter is Lily Potter nee—”
“My Moth-” Harry stops himself from asking how his mother is still alive, but his shocked and stern expression does not go unnoticed by the couple. The concerned and curious look shared between Perenelle and Nicolas says as much.

Perenelle gently asks, “Is your name... Harry Potter?”

Harry doesn't answer but he doesn't have to. His downcast gaze seems to prompt Perenelle to continue. “James Potter and Lily Potter nee Evans,” Perenelle pauses a moment when Harry's shocked eyes find hers. “-Are Hardwin's parents, though James Potter did not survive that fateful night. The Potters are firmly a light family, very close to Albus from what we've heard, and beloved for the heir as much as their influence in the magical community. Naturally Lily holds a seat in the Wizengamot. As to what she does for work, I couldn't say. Hardwin Potter is, of course, The Boy Who Lived, famous for being the only wizard in known history to somehow survive the killing curse and ending the rise of Lord Voldemort some thirteen years ago, give or take.”

“Allegedly, it would seem,” Nicolas chimes in. “Considering your depiction of the future, it's safe to say that the dark lord has not yet risen but most assuredly will. How he learned of creating Harpo's foul abominations is beyond me, but I can easily see the calamity ahead, as clear as I can see you. Which means his rise from ruin is only a matter of time.”

“Spring of next year is when he'll return,” Harry announces with a tone of dread, pushing past the emotional juggernaut that is his mother being alive and well. “I have to stop him.” Harry raises his voice. “Because no one will survive him if I don't.”

Perenelle turns to her husband and he gives her a small smile and nod. Returning to Harry, she states, “You have our support.”

“As much as I detest the senseless neanderthals that govern the magical world,” Nicolas adds. “This is beyond all of us. We cannot ignore this and will, of course help in anyway we can.”

“...uh, thank you,” Harry uneasily states. After considering the unstable state of affairs and unknown variables, some help will likely be for the best. He immediately moves to planning for the sure thing. “If we break it down, the first thing we need to do is find and destroy all the Horcruxs before we can deal with the main spirit.”

“How many are there?” Perenelle asks. “Herpo only ever made one, but you make it sound like Voldemort has many.”

“If the diary was destroyed last year like it was in my time-line, than there should be six left,” Harry answers her, to the Flamels great shock.

“Six!” Nicolas gasps. “How is he able remain sane enough to speak, let alone be a dark Lord?”

“Sanity was never his specialty to begin with, but, well... and I hate to say this, but he's brilliant,” Harry says by way of answer. “Terrible, but brilliant. Besides Tom's Diary, there's Marvolo Gaunt's ring, Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's cup, Ravenclaw's diadem, Voldemort's pet snake, Nagini, and if Hardwin was the one who stopped him this time, than he has a scar on his forehead that's actually a horcrux.” Harry raises his hand and touches his own scar. Even now it's still present but by some obscene fortune, free of his soul parasite.

“With the exception of Nagini, I know where the rest are. The only ones I think I can get right now are Gaunt's ring and possibly Slytherin's locket.” Harry's mind is already formulating the finer details of a battle plan and skips ahead without realizing it. “Breaking into Gringotts to get Hufflepuff's cup will be difficult but not impossible. Getting into Hogwarts unseen is going to be
another challenge. I'd have to be able to do it multiple times too.” Harry's whimsical musing is interrupted by Nicolas.

“Why Gringotts and Hogwarts,” he asks, realizing Harry is losing himself to planning. Nicolas easily attribute that behavior to his decades of nonexistent human interaction.

“Gringotts has the cup in Lestrange's family Vault. But now that I know what to expect, it should be easier to break into the vault. And most of what'll happen this year will center around Hogwarts. It'll also be best if I stay near Hardwin until I figure out how to deal with the horcrux in his scar... if he has one.”

“I think we all need to take a moment to digest this information,” Perenelle interjects. “For now, it's more important to your health you rest. You're still not at a hundred percent, even with the elixir.”

“The very last thing on my mind right now is rest,” he flatly states. “Nothing is more important than killing that Merlin forsaken monster. And I'm not crazy enough to think it's going to be easy, which means I need to start now.” Harry states adamantly, flipping over the covers to escape his comfortable bed.

Perenelle isn't having any of that and stands as he does, deliberately stepping in his way to prevent him from moving. “I do not disagree that we need to stop this maniac, but even if you were at a hundred percent strength, you would still need a solid plan to kill a dark Lord, and there's still too much we don't know about each other's time-line. Take this time to gather your strength as well as the knowledge necessary to formulate that plan. Unless you think it's productive to run around like a chicken with it's head cut off.”

Harry can feel within him the gall to push her aside and leave regardless of her rational protest, but with great effort he ignores the urge, and returns to bed with a huff of irritation.

“Perenelle is right,” Nicolas affirms. “It wouldn't do to waste time on missteps going forward, for any of us. At the moment, it's best if we all apprise ourselves of all there is to know. Also, I think it's best if I reopen our London estate,” he tells Perenelle who nods in agreement. At Harry's questioning look Nicolas answers, “Surely you don't expect us to assist you all the way from Sweden?”

For the next week, they gather as much information as they can and with every new piece of the puzzle, it seems to alter the loose form of a plan. Aside from information, they also need to assemble their tools for the battles to come. The first thing Harry needs is a wand. Fortunately the Flamels have two spare wands. Somehow they have Merlin's first wand, before the legendary wizard switched to a staff, and the wand of a wizard named Prospero, of Milan, who's wand is made of pine but is deathly white. He hadn't heard of Prospero but upon a single light touch to the wand's stem, his magic raged and pleaded to be free. It took a lot of will and occlumancy to retain control of himself.

At first, Harry practices his wand work in his true to life mindscape. It's been so long since he's held a wand, his hand movements were bound to be rusty. He spends several free hours everyday practicing his wand work like he was facing Horcrux-Voldemort all over again. Considering their vast amount of time on earth, Harry expected Nicolas or Perenelle to be far better than they actually are. They all quickly learn he can defeat them both without even using his own wand. Still there's enough data to note that wandless magic is harder for him to incorporate with great affect despite his heightened magic.
Nicolas points out that they are researchers first, and warriors very much last.

Very soon it was frightening how quickly he can switch into combat mode—into an effective killer—all due to his numerous battles he suffered at the cruel hands of the horcrux still perfectly intact in his memories. The horcrux is gone, but it's knowledge remains. It's not the only thing that's gone, he realizes. After everything he's been through, Harry easily says goodbye to leniency, to tolerance, to Dumbledore's way and embraces severity and most importantly, results—by any means necessary. Where he came from, everyone died with the "compassion for all" mentality Dumbledore preached. Harry's done with all that. Now, he's going to be as hard and as ruthless to Voldemort and his ilk as humanly possible. No more expelliarmus, stunning or stupify. If the enemy fights with cutting curses, blasting curses and exploding curses, so will he.

Harry practices with his decisive wand when he's not on a mission. Nicolas joins Harry on his first task, apparating to the Riddle mansion and spending the whole day searching for clues, documents, items, anything of note that can be used to locate Voldemort's current location or likely area to hide in. They find nothing but flimsy speculation.

Outside the mansion, in a familiar grave site, Harry is buried in memories. Standing by the family plot in roughly the same spot Cedric Diggory was killed in, Harry has the strongest urge to set fire to the entire property, yet kept his head long enough to set a trap instead. Walking over to Thomas Riddle's grave Harry banishes the bones within, transfigures some rocks into bone, and places them in the grave. Should all his other plans fail, and by some unjust horror, they make it this far, Harry hopes the ritual backfires enough to kill the lot. Harry banishes the bones of every Riddle in the plot of land as well, just in case.

After Riddle mansion they apparate to Gaunt's shack. There they find and analyze Gaunt's ring, and determine it's sinister evil is in fact the first of six horcruxs. They store it in a small lead box, and turn their attention to the Slytherin's locket in Grimmauld Place. After attempting to call Kreacher fails, Harry diverts his attention to researching the current head of house Black.

Harry doesn't expect the emotional feedback of learning about Sirius and his "new" life. Even with his control, he has to apparate to the top of some mountain under the night sky to truly allow his raging emotions an outlet of solitary expression. The daily prophet clutched in his hand reports the announcement of Head Auror, Lord Sirius Black and Eve Davis engagement for a winter ceremony. The article also mentions Black's best friend, and mother of the Boy Who Lived, Lady Lily Potter will be his best woman.

Freezing as it was on the mountain top, Harry doesn't cast a warming charm. In that moment, he felt so out of place, he could die and literally no one would care. Ron and Hermione don't even know him in this timeline. He could actually die and no one, not a single friend would even know. It's a diminishing and debilitating feeling that extends his freak out in a major way. After an hour though, it seems no matter how much ice forms over him, burying him, his heart, magic, the elixir, or some combination of all three won't allow him to disappear just yet.

Eventually, Harry feels emotionally stable enough to shakily brush himself of snow and casts a warming charm on himself, before returning to the Flamels. At dinner that very night, Perenelle brings up another avenue of their goal. “You'll enroll in Hogwarts,” she states as a matter of fact. “How do you propose to go about that,” Harry asks as he enjoys his surprisingly good soup. Just a few days of her food, and Perenelle easily beats out Molly Weasley's culinary skills. She's now contending with Hogwarts's house elves for best cooking. “I'm sure you know I can't just say I'm Harry Potter.” Harry chuckles, “Oh, how quickly I'll be branded a loon, ready for the psyche ward of St. Mungo's, or just as easily some dark wizard attempting to take over the world with an army of
"I would've disagreed if I hadn't read about Minister Fudge," Nicolas agrees with a smirk. "We've talked it over and agree with you. Using the name Harry Potter just will not do. We thought of something else which will still draw lots of attention, but for far different reasons." Nicolas' smile makes Harry put down his spoon.

"I can't use an alias either," Harry alleges, realizing what they're suggesting. "It's too problematic. As soon as I'm within Hogwart's wards, anyone smart enough to check will see I'm not who I claim to be. I know because there's a map I had in my timeline that uses the school's wards to track everyone within school grounds. If Hardwin has it, which he ought to by now, and takes one look at it, I'm done. He's going to wonder why there's a dot with the name Harry Potter under it."

Perenelle seems surprised to hear that, and Harry assumes that squashed their proposition so he returns to his soup, missing Perenelle look at Nicolas with a questioning raise of her brow. Nicolas just shrugs with an easy nod. Turning to Harry she says, "that shouldn't be a problem."

Now it's Harry's turn to be surprised.

Raising his eyes to hers before she continues. "While we didn't know about a map-" "Sounds interesting though," Nicolas cuts in. "We were aware of the wards and their ability to identify any soul within the grounds. Getting in and out of Hogwarts will be easiest if you just go to school, so we thought of a solution."

Harry is a little taken, happily so and asks, "what do you have in mind?"

"You become our heir," Perenelle comfortably answers him. Again, Harry can feel the impact of bewilderment wash over him. Since he's unsure of what to say, Perenelle continues. "The ring given to the heir of a Noble House has many functions. Since the heir-apparent of a great house isn't always a blood relative, one of those functions is to project your title upon wards that can read it. So, when we go to Gringotts to register you as our heir, along with a drop of blood, the name we provide will be ingrained into the ring, thus displaying Harry Flamel, instead of Harry Potter within the schools wards."

The three go back and forth that night about the merits of the move but Harry eventually agrees. Aside from actually having to attend classes, there are far more positives than negatives. Honestly, with Voldemort's knowledge and his enhanced magic, classes would just be a waste of his time. He also doesn't like the idea of being near Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna again, no matter how amazing it'll be to see them alive. He's apologized to their lifeless heads so many times, he doesn't think he can hold it together in person. However, everything will be happening in Hogwarts and Hardwin is there. He has no choice but to hold it together.

As discussed, the new identity will also help explain his past, or lack there of. "You've obviously been living with us and have been home schooled until now," Nicolas had mentioned at one point. "In this manner, anything magical you do beyond your years can just be accounted to home schooling." Harry had to admit, that would be helpful. He didn't like the idea of limiting his ability to that of a thirteen year old just to avoid drawing in unnecessary attention.

Harry also agreed because it would give them a good reason to visit Gringotts and break into Lestrange's vault, but Nicolas later tells Harry he has a plan to get the cup without having to break into a heavily warded vault.

"With the knowledge I've gained from the parasite," Harry argues. "I doubt it would take me more than two hours to break in, and that's only because I don't want to tip anyone off."
“Those are rune wards performed by goblin rune masters,” Nicolas counters.

“The parasite figured out how to draw in natural magic using runes and warp back in time,” Harry dreadfully asserts. “I don't think I need to worry.”

“Be that as it may, I feel my way will go about better for everyone.”

“Which is what exactly,” Harry asks dryly.

“To ask for it.” Nicolas explains his plan, and Harry has to admit, it’s better than his plan—bold and potentially fatal, but better. Perenell can't say she likes the idea of blackmailing goblins—wars have been started for less—but she can’t say it's not the best way to go about it. The following day, first thing in the morning, Harry is exiting Gringotts with the heir-apparent ring of House Flamel on his finger, and Hufflepuffs cup, in a lead case. Nicolas threatened the Goblin chieftain to use his famed stone to open up his own bank and give each account twice as much gold as they bring in, easily putting Gringotts out of business—not that Nicolas would follow through with his threat as it served no purpose to their goals. As amazing as it was to watch Nicolas blackmail Ragnok, the manager and chieftain of Gringotts into giving them the cup, it wasn't the most important detail to Harry. The one thing Harry can't put out of his mind is the name Nicolas submitted to fool the wards, the map, and everyone.

“Were you going to tell me about the name before hand? Maybe ask me first?” Harry can't help but ask the very moment they walk inside the comfortable Flamel home. He wanted to ask immediately after he heard the name Nicolas provided, but he couldn't seem to appear bothered in front of the goblins, or overheard arguing in public—not that the name is a big deal, but still, “Ares Flamel?”

“What?” Nicolas asks with genuine curiosity. “What kind of Heir of the House Flamel is named Harry? As a Potter, it has a nice ring to it, but for Flamel? Ares is soo much more appropriate for you. Not only does it sound similar to Harry, but it's the Greek God of War, the very thing we are currently waging.”

“Oh did he actually go through with it,” Perenelle shouts from the kitchen.

“You knew!” Harry couldn't help but ask. No response from Perenelle is all the response he needs. Harry rubs the bridge of his nose in irritation. He's not offended and considering the second Horcrux in his hand, not to mention everything else they still need to do, Harry can't really make a big deal out of it. It's just a name and the Flamels are helping out in ways that expedites the destruction of Voldemort faster than he's mentally calculated. Letting the name go is an effort on his part but he's brought back to the present when Nicolas asks his wife, “is it ready?” Harry wonders if they're referring to breakfast but that couldn't be since they ate before they left.

“Just about,” Perenelle answers before she walks back out through the back door. Nicolas smiles gleefully, like a little kid—like the fate of the world doesn't depend on them. He waves for Harry to follow, which he hesitantly does after securing the lead box in their personal vault in the study.

Outside, in their spacious backyard, which is actually a hundred acre forest, is a large cauldron atop of burning wood. Harry recognizes the runes painted on the side of cauldron as, Sun, Bird, Flames, Time, Resurrection, and Consecration. At the sight of him, Perenelle says, “take off your shirt.”

“Will someone explain to me what's going on,” Harry demands with a touch of irritation. The only answer his knowledge can give him is a ritual of some sort, which likely now involves him somehow.
“Well thinking of Hogwart’s wards,” Nicolas starts, as he's gesturing for Harry to remove his robe and black long sleeve. Harry reluctantly removes his clothing as Nicolas explains. “The wards will prevent you from apparating—and we're aware you know where all the secret ins and outs of the castle are—but that wouldn't help much if you have to, let's say, quickly get from the dungeons to the tower for whatever reason. You also mentioned the chamber of secrets. If you need to be at another point in the castle in a hurry, you'll have to run, won't you?”

“So this ritual will allow me to apparate within Hogwart's wards?” Harry asks with a twinge of levity.

“No,” the older man flatly answers. “This ritual is to bond you to the phoenix ashes within.”

Harry blinks at the entirety of the statement and just for clarity sums it aloud, “I'm getting a phoenix.”

“You're getting a phoenix,” Nicolas repeats with a smile.

And Harry does get a phoenix. The ritual is certainly uncomfortable, and long, but every moment he felt like complaining about the searing heat, he remembers the hours upon days, upon months of torture and agony at the hands of Voldemort. Fighting Voldemort in his mind with every sensation he would feel outside made sitting in a boiling solution until the salt of his body mixes with the ashes of the phoenix seem like a light, hot bath by comparison. At the end of the twenty-four hour ritual, Harry has a baby phoenix the size of a pigeon sleeping comfortably in his hand. It's amazing enough on it's own to have a legendary creature for a familiar—after all, Dumbledore is the only person he knew that owned one—but for his to be a mostly black, with red highlights and feather ends, not unlike the look of a cardinal, really sets him apart.

“They don't all look like Fawkes you know,” Perenelle expresses.

Realization dawns on Harry a lot slower than he would like. Or maybe his brain is only focused on any and all information related to ending Voldemort. Still, he says with educated guessing, “you gave Dumbledore his phoenix.”

Perenelle nods her head, “yes, but under the condition he never reveal where he received one and that he give us the trace amount of ash left after every rebirth. Despite popular belief, phoenix’ do die. It just takes nearly 1500 years. They leave behind a little bit of ash after every rebirth and we use that ash in the ritual to create a new phoenix with which can bond to a witch or wizard.”

“You'll need to name him,” Nicolas comments with a smirk. “Something good, too. Fawkes is just so...” Nicolas sighs instead of finishing his statement.

“Is it a him?” Harry absentmindedly asks.

“It's neither a him nor her,” she answers. “Whatever you feel, it will as well, and respond as such. But they do not mate so gender is irrelevant.”

“I think I'll name her Nova,” Harry says, somehow confident the legendary bird would like it.

In one week, he's taken possession of two horcruxs, acquired a permanent solution to enter and exit Hogwarts, and gathered all the necessary information that distinguishes each time-line. In disguise, they had to navigate the archives of the Daily Prophet and learn that not a lot has changed. It's still unknown how Hardwin survived the killing curse or how it was reflected on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The only thing that is sure is what Lily and Dumbledore have said, that it was a magical blessing—driving people to think of Hardwin as a blessed child and treating him as such.
Judging by the rare pictures of the savior of the wizarding world with his mother, the Blacks, and Weaselys at quidditch events, he seems to be very happy in the photos. Harry expected him to look identical to him but it's more the opposite. Hardwin has Lily's face with Jame's eyes.

Not to say everything in the week went well. Harry couldn't find Mad-Eye's home after days of searching—not to say Harry expected to find the veteran Auror's home listed where just anyone can find it or an owl to be able to track the evasive man. That's not Moody's way. But Harry did hope to come across an old haunt of his or an acquaintance that might know something reliable that Harry can further investigate. So warning the retired auror, or trapping Barty Crouch Jr. was out. Also a thorough search of the Riddle home turned up nothing of worth. Harry's sure Voldemort would've already made a hide out elsewhere thanks to Pettigrew, but nothing in Riddles home hinted to a possible location, nor did anything appear to be missing. It seems to Harry the majority of the fluid plan to find Voldemort will rely heavily on being in Hogwarts and catching Barty Crouch Jr.

Come July, Harry—with Nova is lightly stuck to his shoulder, sleeping, despite the amount of movement—is adding layers upon layers of security to his brand new seven compartment trunk that comes stock with all the latest features and functions. With Perenelle and Nicolas' help, Harry is filling the trunk with any and every potion or item they can think to need. With a large extension charm in the second compartment, Harry puts as many books at they're willing to give or lend him from their massive collection. He's certain Hermione would be extremely jealous of him if she were alive... well, his-Hermione anyway.

To finish it off, he's imbuing the wood container with the best level of security Voldemort's knowledge graciously left in his mind. Intent wards mixed with blood identification mixed with magical signature recognition mixed with his favorite, intruder neutralization. Harry thought long and hard between knocking an intruder to sleep or cutting off a hand. Considering the amount of children in a school, Harry opted to knock out the would-be thief out with drought of living death. It still disgusts Harry that the knowledge so neatly arranged in his mind is mostly all from the parasite but he can't deny it's useful to have, and poetic to use it against the very monster.

Harry finds himself thinking of Hermione when he marvels at Voldemort's intellect. He wonders if this is how she felt all the time when his thoughts are interrupted by an unexpected flash in the fire place, alerting the home to an incoming floo call. Harry immediately leaves the room, into the kitchen as Nicolas enters the sitting room. Harry tensed when he heard Dumbledore's voice through the fireplace. Perenelle decides to let her husband deal with the headmaster and moves beside Harry to watch. She gives him a reassuring smile, however Harry doesn't share her confidence. Sensing her master's distress, Nova chirps and sings a short but lovely melody of encouragement, to great effect. Though calmer, Harry is still not sure what to make of the prompt call from the Headmaster himself. After all, they'd only just sent out an owl two hours ago, and it didn't do anything more than inquire details about enrolling a transfer straight into fourth year.

“Nicolas, my dear friend, how are you?” Dumbledore starts with a mix of concern underneath a tone of pleasant surprise. “Everything well I trust?”

“Who can say, Albus,” Nicolas embellishes with a long sigh. “It's only due to good fortune that Perenelle and I are still here. What can I do for you?”

“It would seem it is I who can do something for you,” Dumbledore sagely admits. “I have a letter here seemingly from you, inquiring about enrolling a student at Hogwarts directly into fourth year. Is this truly from you?”

“Well of course it's from me, Albus,” Nicolas snorts. “Why on earth would you believe otherwise?”
“Ah, to that, I ask if you recall a few of your, uh, well intentioned pranks during my time as your apprentice,” Dumbledore's voice hints that he was never a fan. Perenelle smirks beside Harry, who wonders what kind of pranks Nicolas had played on Dumbledore before.

“As you know my boy,” Nicolas winks at Harry, who holds in his smile. “Time doesn't mean what it once did. I'm afraid my days of pranking along with many other frivolities are over.”

“Well, then...” Dumbledore seems more at a loss than Harry has ever heard. This bizarre and unexpected second chance to see this sagely wizard shows a much more critical Harry that Dumbledore was never the greatest man he believed he was. He was just an old man with old thoughts; not at all deserving of the pedestal Harry placed him on.

One of Horcrux-Voldemort's favorite psychological games was sifting through Harry's memories and showcasing just how much of a simpleton he was for ever believing he had any real choice throughout his life. Horcrux-Voldemort would point to examples of Dumbledore's mastery in manipulation, and no matter how much Harry would deny it screaming, he couldn't dispute it. Leaving a baby on the doorstep of an abusive home with only a note for explanation, keeping so much about his or his family's history from him, doing nothing to help Sirius before Harry met him, never outing who Voldemort really is to the magical community, and finally breeding Harry for slaughter as if there was no other way. No. Harry no longer believes Dumbledore is as great as he'd like everyone to believe... as he used to believe.

“I'm at a loss as to the nature of your inquiry,” Dumbledore continues. “Is this for the child of an acquaintance? Should that be the case, I'm not certain we'll be able to allow a transfer into a higher year without at the very least, an in-depth evaluation.”

“No, no, no nothing like that my dear lad,” tuts with head shaking. “And if there is a single thing to worry about, I can guarantee you it is not Ares's magical competence. He's spent a number of years with professional instructors, myself and Perenelle included and is quite gifted.”

“That sounds... exceptional,” Dumbledore slowly asks, and Harry can just imagine the old man's sharp mind going over the glossary of names in his memory while he's stroking his long white beard. “Ares, you say.”

“Yes,” Nicolas states. “To be perfectly honest, he's well beyond the fourth year curriculum. The only reason Perenelle and I are considering institutional education is so he may gain more social experiences among young witches and wizards his age. We feel it would do him a world of good to form bonds with others.” Harry can't say he likes the sound of that. The last thing he wants to do is waste hours upon hours of time mingling in the common room over inane, trivial topics, or playing games. He doesn't have time for any of that. No one does.

“I have no doubt we can provide him with an educational challenge,” Dumbledore proclaims. “Our professors are among the very best in their field of study. However, I still do not understand your relation to the boy. You admitted to me before you would never take on another apprentice. Have you changed your mind?”

“No, no, I haven't,” Nicolas answers. “I'm afraid I don't have much energy for that anymore... or time,” Nicolas adds, like a soft jab to Dumbledore's blunder with the stone. Harry had to smile at that one. “Ares Flamel is our heir.”

“You're-” Dumbledore cuts himself off and starts coughing, making Harry wonder if he was eating one of his candies at the time. “I'm sorry, Nicolas, can you repeat that, please? I don't think I heard you properly.”
“I’m terribly busy, my boy,” Nicolas says, opting not to repeat his statement. “As you know time waits for no man. Shall I send you the details?”

“Yes. Yes, that would be most helpful, but if I may, this is quite surprising. An heir to your house is something I have never heard you express any interest in, much less consider.”

“We are allowed heirs, Albus,” Nicolas points out like it's the most obvious thing in the world. “What could be so surprising about that?”

“It's only that you never mentioned an heir in any of our correspondence,” Dumbledore returns. “How long have you had an heir? And why have you never told me?”

“I hardly feel the need to tell you everything that goes on in our lives, as I don't expect you to tell us intimate details about your personal life. Ares is quite personal for us and we felt a quiet life away from all the hubbub of the magical community suited us best. Of course, after the recent loss of our most valuable stone,” Nicolas sighs for dramatic effect as Perenelle snickers silently besides him. Even Harry’s smile widens as he shakes his head in mirth. “We thought it best to expand his social circle. You know, before the inevitable.”

There's several moments of silence, where Harry thought Dumbledore was feeling remorse for how he handled the Flamels stone. Having shared the details about his first year with the Flamels, Harry couldn't believe Dumbledore lied to them about the circumstances of their stone's destruction. With the article in the daily prophet about a break-in at Gringotts, they verified what happened in Harry's time line matches with the current time line and the Flamels felt like fools for trusting Dumbledore's reason of using the stone to test poisons. When Harry debunked the headmaster's false report of a dark wizard braking into the school and destroying it in his attempt to steal it, the ageless couple did not react well to the revelation. Perenelle wanted to rip the beard off his face for endangering the lives of the students the way he did; keeping a Cerberus behind a door anyone can unlock, or tempting a dark wizard with their stone. Nicolas was angered all over again and went into his lab to brew all day.

When Dumbledore says, “I'd be happy to help guide the boy,” in his grandfatherly voice, making Harry want to gag. He can almost feel the old man's manipulative tendrils trying to wrap around him, ready to move him as he pleases, like another disciple to his congregation. “And with your blessing, I can introduce him to some of our more exceptional students his age. If he's as advanced as you say, I'm certain he'll fit right in.”

“You're a good lad, Albus,” Nicolas says with a roll of his eyes that makes Harry chuckle; Nova tweets and coos along with him. Nicolas gives Harry the distinct impression Dumbledore doesn't like to be made to feel like a child, adding to the humor. “But that won't be necessary. I'm certain he'll be find his own way. He’s quite head strong.”

‘Damn right,’ Harry thinks to himself.

“It would be no bother at all, Nicolas,” Dumbledore insists. “As you may know, I happen to be delightful friends with the Noble House of Potter. Lily's son, Hardwin, will also be in his fourth year, and this summer, they'll be attending the Quidditch World Cup. I can make introductions.”

Harry snaps his eyes to Nicolas and shakes his head, no. They've already discussed Harry going to the quidditch match, not to watch the game, but to capture a Death Eater. Since he couldn't locate Moody or capture Barty Crouch Jr. Harry reasoned the Quidditch World Cup is the next best place to capture a Death Eater and interrogate him for information on Voldemort. It's obvious that the target needs to be a wizard of value, which will be difficult if they're all wearing their stupid masks. With their faces covered he can capture a leader just as easily as a foot soldier and that won't do.
The goal, then, has to be taking one before they dawn on their masks, or else there's just no way to tell. For any of this to work out in their favor, he has to have the liberty to move without restrictions, and can't be held up by drunk idiots admiring Veelas, or kid's talk of broomstick maneuvers. Aside from all that, Harry's not here to make friends. He's here to save lives—his friend's lives—by killing Voldemort and his death eaters.

“I'll bring it up with him, but we've already planned on spending these last few days together,” Nicolas answers. “Can I assume he'll be welcomed at Hogwarts than? Because if not, I can always reach out to my Beauxbaton contacts-”

“No, no,” Dumbledore quickly interrupts before composing himself. He takes a moment to clear his throat, then says, “That won't be necessary. Hogwarts would be very happy to take him.”

“Wonderful to hear,” Nicolas says evenly. “I'll inform you if he decides to go to the quidditch match. Now I really must go. Good day, Albus.”

“Ah, well if you must,” Albus states. “Have a pleasant day. I look forward to meeting young Ares. And give Perenelle my best.”

As soon as the flames evaporate, Nicolas huffs, “not even one apology about the stone... I'm so grateful we didn't mention our spares.”

“Agreed,” Perenelle states. “I have to say, it's hard to think of Dumbledore as a genial and benevolent man. On the other hand, as someone whose seen the rise and fall of some of the worst people to ever exist, there's little I could expect Dumbledore to do to prevent it, save for drastic measures of course. I can't blame Dumbledore for Riddle any more than I can blame Nicolas or myself for Harpo, or Merwyn, not to imply we were very close, mind you. The thing I just can't accept about his approach is his defeatist attitude and blatant manipulation over your life. How can he think it's okay to keep so much from those the knowledge directly affects the most? To keep so many in the dark about is debilitating. How can you make informed decisions without all the facts. That's like a tree without roots. Let me stop myself before I start rambling.”

“It's okay,” Harry genuinely expresses. Discovering and accepting Dumbledore is little more than a normal wizard, complete with flaws and failures, was a hard day, or year really, for the imprisoned Harry. Magically gifted, no doubt, but still only human.

“It's crossed my mind multiple times a day,” Nicolas interjects. “There's no way of knowing if Dumbledore has, or had, the right idea of destroying Voldemort by sacrificing you, but I'm a firm believer in there's more than one way to skin a cat. You're clear proof of that.”

“I still haven't figured out how the horcrux was removed and until I do, I can't be sure it's something I'd have Hardwin do... if it turns out he's a horcrux as well.”

“Still,” Perenelle chimes in. “This is war, and we'll wage it with everything we've got.”

Chapter End Notes

You tell em Perenelle.

I always wondered if there could've been another way to remove the horcrux. Sure JK wrote it that way but did it have to be Voldemort shooting another killing curse at
Harry and surviving again... or could it be something else. I mean Death... the actually reaper, exists in this world by evidence of the deathly hallows. My brain won't allow me to think, "oh, no Gray. You're wrong and there was no other way." I want to dig deeper, and positively vent :)

Thank you for reading. Please let me know what you think. I'd be happy to hear your thoughts.
Touched By War

Chapter Summary

Harry's dear dear friends suffered far worse, and he demands equal compensation.

Chapter Notes

This one took all my free time to finish but I'm happy with the result. I hope you all enjoy it as well! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry is sprinting at full speed through the large acre forest surrounding the Flamel home in Sweden. It's hard avoiding trees when his attention is constantly in the sky, but this game is difficult enough as it is without seeing where she's coming from. It turns out teaching Nova to flame is similar to a game Harry Hunting, minus the beatings. The early stage of their union is the best time to teach her to flame. In the infancy of their bond, Nova's need to be with her companion is so strong, she will abhor being away from him for any length of time. Nova will chase his. She will catch him and clutch onto him with a painful grip as strong as a hug from Hagrid.

Nicolas instructs Harry to apparate no more than thirty feet away every time she tries to cling to him. “This will also help your awareness of one another. Eventually Nova will be quite upset over being unable to stay with you, she'll flame right to you.”

It's heart breaking to feel Nova's longing for Harry, nevertheless he practices all week. Infant though Nova may be, it's still the size of a hawk and an extremely capable flier. With it's powerful wings, it has an easy time catching him on the plains, but in the thick forest, it's much harder for her. Still, Harry has to keep a sprinting pace for as long as he can, as well as be ready on a moment's notice to apparate just far enough out of the legendary bird's fast talons.

Harry can feel Nova's approach. He scans the wooded space around him and locks on a landing to disappear to when a sharp whip of wind announces the sudden aerial drop of his familiar. Harry turns exactly as Nova is extending her claws to sink into his shoulder, when he apparates precisely to the spot he picked about fifteen feet away. After a week of this game, Nova is sharp enough to know where he'll land and flaps powerful gusts to stop before altering course to give chase. Harry has just enough time to set his sight on the next target spot and apparates. The distance is still too short and Nova is not far behind. Harry is constantly apparating away with Nova close behind. A dozen jumps later, Harry takes to the skies when he has no viable option on ground, but the air is Nova's domain. Just barely avoiding capture, Harry apparates to the edge of a cliff. The amazing bird dives sharply with aid of powerful gust of wind and just before claws sink into him, he hurls himself off the cliff's edge.

“Come on Nova!” Harry yells, ignoring the rapidly approaching ground to extend his hand.
Harry isn't sure how their bond communicates but he knows there is communication. It reminds him so vividly of Hedwig, he's certain Nova will understand what he wants. He's felt it for a few days now and can tell Nova is close. She just needs a little push. Seeing your master fall off a cliff and extend his hand out for help seems to do the trick and Nova flares brilliantly, disappearing a moment before appearing in front of him in a fast burst of fire, and clutching at the flesh of his arm in very familiar pain. They flame away together. Harry notes the characteristics between flaming and apparating is fundamentally different, and most certainly better. It's less of a tunneling, twirling feeling and more of a bursting through a water-like pressure as Harry and Nova land on soft grass.

Uninjured and firmly on the ground, Harry lifts his arm to raise Nova up to eye level. “That was bloody brilliant!” He says with a broad smile. “I knew you could do it.” Nova chirps and crows happily. “I'm completely serious,” Harry answers somehow understanding the gesture of crowing. “I don't think there's a better way to travel than that.”

Nova hops from Harry's arm to his shoulder, punching eight more holes into his flesh. Harry couldn't say he minded the pain. After all, he's been through far worse and something in her talons eventually nulls the pain. Though he'd prefer not to constantly have to repair the holes punched in his clothes. They practice flaming short distances rapidly, then to farther and farther distances. Harry learns that it does put a strain on Nova, so he continues pushing her until she can't flame anymore.

“Great job, girl,” Harry softly says as he cradles and pets his phoenix. “I only wanted to see how far you can go. Get some rest now. You've earned it.”

It didn't take Harry more than one jump to return with Nova in his arms from Africa to Sweden. Walking through the door, Harry finds the Flamels organizing their belongings for the move to their brownstone in London when Nicolas asks, “how'd it go?” Perenelle exits the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel and perks up to listen.

“We managed to flame,” Harry answers with a half smile. “Made it to Africa before she hit her limit.”

“That's exceptional for her age,” Perenelle calls out from the kitchen. She sets down a bowl of salad on the dinning table. “I'll get her some bacon. After some rest, she'll recover quickly.”

“Just in time for the World Cup tonight,” Nicolas points out. “Are you certain you need to take her?”

“I wasn't going to at first, but it'll be a good opportunity to test flaming against anti-apparating wards,” Harry answers as he takes his seat at the dinning table. “I don't want any surprises when I really need to flame out within Hogwart's wards. Is the room in the brownstone ready?”

“I've stocked it with everything you asked,” Nicolas answers him, though it's obvious he's not fond of those potions. “Are you truly willing to go so far? I understand what's at stake, if only from a peripheral point of view, but those potions do some terrible, irreversible devastation to the body.”

Harry begins with his soup and only pauses a moment to say, “whatever it takes.” He's already given them the option to be absent from the interrogation. Personally he's not sure how much he'll be able to stomach but, he knows he'll go to any lengths to save his friends. In Harry's mind, the time for stunning the enemy, then locking them away in Azkaban so Voldemort can later free them and continue his reign of terror is over. That passive way of fighting this evil clearly failed and he will not let it happen again. Everything that happens now will be fighting fire with fire.

Before Harry departs, his features have to be altered to a more permanent stasis than the short-lived
From this moment on, Harry will need an alteration more durable to avoid looking like James Potter, but comfortable to walk around the throes of the wizarding community. Perenelle and Nicolas seem all too eager to help "create the character," as Nicolas puts it.

His hair is lengthened to his shoulder with a potion of Perenelle's creation and she gathers his shiny jet black hair back into a ponytail but with a knot instead of a normal fall. Surprisingly, his unruly hair behaves under the potions influence. He almost chuckles when he realizes Hermione would probably trade her books for the hair taming potion on his head. The unique hair style did a lot to attract attention from his familiar face. “Apply it once a month to make sure that unruly mop stays,” Perenelle instructs.

Of course, Nicolas couldn't leave it there—that's not enough "visual story" for an heir of the Noble House of Flamel. Just under the skin, Nicolas uses a darker skin tone ink he brewed to imitate scar tissue, and magically tattoos two very distinctive lines of scaring, meant to allude they've been gained in a fight by a sharp blade of some kind. One scar ran from the left side of his forehead, down his left brow—interrupting the hair of his left eyebrow midway—completely avoids his left eye and continues with a smaller line cut in his cheek. Another smaller length is drawn counter to the length of his nose—at the middle—and stretches a little past the nostrils.

“There you are,” Nicolas steps back to admire his work. “It'll add more credibility to your skill level and at the same time, the larger scars detracts from the smaller one on your forehead.”

“Very roguish,” Perenelle adds with a clap of her hands. “It's not permanent, but it can't be removed easily either, so no need to worry about it being washed away, rogue charms, or the like.”

Harry examines himself in the mirror and it's jarring how much those little alterations break away from his family resemblance. If you look close enough and have an eye for detail, he still looks like his father, but with his hair cleanly pulled back, in a knot, canvasing more attention on his eye-c Catching scars, he won't be mistaken for the late James Potter easily. With any luck, it might even keep others from getting to close to him.

Harry lands just outside of the anti-apparation ward that's covering the grand area of the World Cup and walks from there. The moment his foot passes through the ward, Harry is zapped with an impression of the sheer power holding the immensity of this ward in place. It's like standing underneath a strong waterfall. Mentally noting the experience for further investigation at a later time, Harry continues on with his mission. He's several hours early, but clearly not early enough. At least half of the grounds that he can see are already covered in magical tents, with drunk witches or wizards walking about or clumped together in jolly groups.

Being seen by others is of little concern to him, but Nova on the other hand is quite distinctive. Even if it's mostly black with bright red accents, it's still a phoenix and easily attention orienting by nature. Due to her magical nature, she naturally resists most magic placed on her, including the disillusioning charm. The next logical step they tried is placing a small invisibility cloak over her but she's either too young to sit still or doesn't like the idea of hiding her beauty, and wiggles right out of the loose garment.

With only one real solution left, Harry asks Nova, “Fancy a bit of flying, dear?” Nova turns her beak to Harry, and gives him a critical eye, to which he takes to mean, 'is this a trick?' “No, not anymore. That was just so you can learn to flame, nothing more,” he answers. “I'm not leaving ya, I promise. I'll be down here the entire time and when I need you, I'll call.”

Nova squawks and shuffles closer to his head with a grip that makes Harry wince, seemingly saying she's unfavorable to the concept of leaving him.
“Oh, come on girl. This is a mission, and it won't be good if everyone starts crowding me to look at how beautiful you are.” Nova ruffles her feathers, extends her neck and flaps her powerful wings. The gust is so strong, Harry has to engage his core muscles and legs to keep from being pulled with her. “Of course I want people to see how beautiful you are, but right now the mission has to come first. You understand, right?” Nova seems to slump and lower her head sadly. “Oh don't be like that. Really, I don't want to separate from you either but peoples lives are at risk. It's the most important thing to me that I save them. Won't you help me save them?”

Apparently, Nova understands that, because she responds energetically. Without a moments hesitation, she extends her wings and with a single flap, takes to air like an arrow shot out of a bow. The gust fluster and stir his dark robes wildly, prompting Harry to raise his collar to his jaw. As she soars high at a swift pace, Harry feels how happy she is to help, and how much of that positive nature reminds him of Hedwig. The sentiment lasts no longer than a moment as the world reminds him of his mission with a rowdy group of magicals singing to Victor Krum's eventual victory.

Harry trolls the pathways around the tents and through the growing crowds of witches and wizards, young and old, in fanciful colors and memorabilia. He moves fast to avoid giving anyone the chance to stop him but more importantly because he has a lot of ground to cover. As he passes witches and wizards, Harry draws in many a curious looks. While some glances linger, possibly trying to place him, or peer at his scars, none bother to approach him as quickly moves about.

Speeding though the crowds is also a byproduct of what he's gone through. Being among large crowds takes more getting used to than he expected. For so long, decades really, it's only been him in his mindscape with his Devil God and torturer, Horcrux-Voldemort for company. Looking around at a merry gathering of people almost gives Harry a sense of panic. The sudden shift of exposure from tortuous silence, to being surrounded by heavy, abundant joy and laughter is a harsh reality check. It's so disorienting Harry has to use his occlumancy to keep his mind focused and his fluctuating emotions balanced. It's so distressing, Harry can tell even Nova is concerned, prompting him to find a private space to calm himself. Drawing from his celebrity experience as The-Boy-Who-Lived actually helps him deal with his rising agitation, bothering him less and less.

Harry stays closer to the treeline and scans anyone he can see for any connection to Death Eaters. He can't say he knows every witch or wizard who are death eaters but he only needs one. Malfoy, Carrow, Dolohov, Macnair, Nott, Goyle, Crabbe. Anyone to follow to where ever they all might gather. He only needs a string to pull on so he can find the rest. And with any luck he might be able to prevent the zealots from hurting anyone today. Spending hours combing through the large area and increasingly growing gathering, he doesn't spot a single sighting of a Death Eater or suspected Death Eater. Harry even looks for the children of Death Eaters, but again, nothing.

As the match is about to start, Harry stays close to the stadium. He recalls seeing Draco at some point and figures he can follow him to his father. Instead he sees a very familiar head of red hair, among a large family of red heads.

Ron, Hardwin Potter and the Weasley clan all walking together to the delight of witches and wizards nearby. The pair are clearly great friends as they talk boisterously together, surrounded by the other Weasleys, happily strolling through the entrance of the stadium. Harry is so shocked to see Ron he barely acknowledges his... brother? ...Other self? In either case, the string of traumatic memory brings along his crippling guilt. Harry can't stop comparing how happy and joyous this-Ron looks with flashes of his-Ron's dead and decaying head hanging on a spike. Harry leans heavily against a tree and takes unsteady steps to move deeper into the cover of trees, hiding from public discovery before slumping down to the moist dirt floor.

His guilt is so strong, his occlumancy cannot keep it all at bay. The failure of being unable to
protect his best mate restores his panic with intense savagery. So much so, Harry doesn't even realize Nova is on his knee, until it's beautiful calming song breaks through his cloud of indescribable guilt and excessive culpability. Focusing on his familiar's song helps tremendously and for the sake of his sanity, he allows the song's serenity to fill him and chase away his terrible onus. For how ever long it takes, Harry's breathing eventually returns to it's normal rate. Harry is so grateful he pulls Nova in for a hug.

“Thank you girl,” he conveys dearly. He lifts himself to his feet, forcing Nova to flap her wings a couple times to land on his shoulder. “I feel loads better,” he admits.

Judging by the dimming light, it's evening. Harry knows the game has started and he's likely missed a few opportunities to tail a Death Eater. Ignoring the debilitating shock of seeing Ron alive and in good spirits, Harry considers other possibilities when the snap of a breaking twig blares in his ears, like the sound of a cannon. Instinct kicks in and Harry's wand slides effortlessly out of his wrist holster as he spins towards the source of the sound. In less than a split second, he's ready to stun first and check to see if it's a threat later.

Harry catches the silver blonde hair, and hands raising before he instantly reacts and puts Draco Malfoy down with a strong stunner. Harry's relieved he only stunned Draco and not an innocent bystander. Still, this Draco wouldn't know him so for all the pasty git knows, he got stunned for no reason. Upon further inspection, Malfoy doesn't even have his wand out. Harry has a quick deliberation in his mind about the most appropriate next step. He decides to disillusion and silence himself, then wake Draco up. Hopefully the Malfoy scion will lead him to where ever his family parked their tent.

As Malfoy sits up, groaning and checking himself, Harry watches from a few feet away. On his feet the Slytherin boy is dusting himself off as Harry prays Draco leads him somewhere good when the blond suddenly starts talking to himself. “I'm not crazy,” he mutters to himself as a point of argument. “That was Potter.... I know it was.”

Harry is flabbergasted at hearing him say that. He does nothing as Draco looks around for a few moments. Seemingly unable to decide on what to do next, he leans against the very tree Harry was leaning against earlier. He looks depressed, Harry notes, far more than he's ever seen growing up. The blonde scion, in his rich robes slides down to the dirt floor, picks at the grass around him, and throws it. Obviously he's troubled about something and Harry wonders if this is an act of some kind.

‘What could he mean,’ Harry thinks to himself. *There's no way this Draco would confuse him and Hardwin. Add to that, James Potter still died years before.*

For a long time, Draco just sits against the tree and Harry watches on. Even as the first few cheers sound off from the stadium, Draco seems no more interested in the international quidditch game than he does in the grass he carelessly rips from the ground and tosses in no particular direction. Something is definitely off, with this Draco. Harry reasons this display must be one of the changes due to the ripple created traveling back in time.

“How...” Malfoy suddenly says. “How, how, how, how, hOW, HOW, HOW, HOW!” His voice crescendo's from low and simply curious, to loud and demanding.

Harry removes his silencing charm, but adds the best privacy spell he knows to the area so others can't overhear and quietly asks, “How what?” He doesn't really understand why he's changing his plan from surveillance to open dialog, but there's something strange enough about Draco that a direct approach could tell him more than lurking in the shadows.
Malfoy sits up at the sound, yelling, “who's there,” before he has the sense to fumble for his wand. Looking around desperately, Draco points his wand downward. Harry doesn't assume it's a submissive move and he's right when Draco casts a spell to transfigure the ground to mud. Harry quickly and silently casts an immobulus on the ground he's standing on, making it seem like there's no weight pushing the mud down as Draco sinks to his ankle in the mud he created. Harry notes the Slytherin's cleverness when a sudden wind moves the mud a bit and that's when Draco sees the still hard ground underneath an invisible Harry.

“It's you, isn't it Potter,” Draco asks, oddly enough, in a hopeful tone. “It's actually you.”

Harry takes a moment to answer, “no. My name's not Hardwin.”

“Is it Harry?” Draco asks with a cocky tilt of his head. “Cuz that's the only Potter I know.”

Harry is at a loss. The unexpected has yet again put him at a disadvantage. The moment of silence extends to uncomfortable levels for Draco, but Harry needs a few moments to know how bad of an obstacle Draco is. For a second Harry wonders if he should take Draco and torture him for information but realizes whatever vital information Draco knows, it won't have anything to do with Voldemort. He's just too young for him to know anything important.

Harry non-verbally calls Draco's wand to him, and sticks the yelping boy to the tree behind him with a sticking charm, before revealing himself. Harry transfigures the mud back into solid ground, trapping Draco to his ankles in the hard cold dirt, before stepping just close enough so Harry's death white wand is pressed threateningly to his neck. “Explain!” Harry demands at a near shout.

Draco suffers the second it takes for Harry to subdue him in silence, but his gaze is clearly angered. Draco's pride and entitlement is ingrained into his marrow and for him to be detained like this takes a grand effort on his part to keep from yelling indignities. “Oh-kay! Okay,” Draco announces. “I won't do anything.”

“You can't do anything. There's a difference,” Harry retorts. “I'm giving you twenty seconds, Malfoy. Fill them with words or I'm going to break into your skull and take the answers before I wipe it clean. Now talk!” Harry yells leaning in, brow knotted and dangerously serious. He's had enough surprises and emotional instability for one day. Now is the time for answers.

“I'm from the future!” Draco proclaims quickly when he sees a red electric current quickly travel the length of his wand and Harry's iris's glow green. “I'm from the future okay! Just like you.”

“How!” Harry yells not even attempting to deny it. A collective whoop and energetic cries erupt from the stadium, but Harry's focus is singular and nothing and no one was going to interrupt him from getting his answers.

“I- I...” Draco tries to come up with something and the wide eyes Harry gives him provokes him to just vomit words with little meaning or punctuation as they form in his head. “I don't know... it happened sucked in like, I don't know. I don't know. I was there, watching runes in blood. I mean blood runes one moment. And the next, I just woke up in my bed. Forty years in the past.”

“Malfoy,” Harry breathes to calm his thinning patience. “You need to start making more sense or this'll be the last time you have memory.”

Draco takes the risk of closing his eyes a moment to collect himself, but Harry shakes him to keep
him off balance. Harry realizes Draco will make less sense if he doesn't have his wits about him but he can decipher the garbled mess after he wipes his mind clean. Because there's no way Harry's going to allow Draco Malfoy of all people to run loose and ruin his plans. He won't! And that determination is only feeding his rage.

Draco fumbles to speak but it is clearer than earlier. “I came from the future,” he starts. “I know I did because... because I know what happened and what's going to happen. I had everything. We won. We beat you. No one could stand in our way, and we didn't stop at the wizarding world. We conquered the muggle world as well. And you, you, the champion of light, were rotting in a black cell, and your friends were...” Draco stops, eyes widen and for the smallest moment, Harry guesses the blonde spends an infinity of time in his head, in his memory.

When the far off look passes, he continues, “they were... treated the worst.” The crowd erupts in the background with a chorus of boos and cheer, and after they grow silent, Draco says in a quiet voice. “We sent you their heads. All their heads. Anyone we thought meant something to you.”

Not only did Harry pause his righteous fury to acknowledge the overwhelming memory, but Draco looked away in shame. “It was my idea,” he says in a small voice. Harry's fury pleaded to kill Draco when the blonde captive starts to ramble as much as he can in the moment Harry takes to raise his wand to his neck again. “I don't deserve to live,” He yells. “I know I don't... and I didn't! I didn't. The dark lord... he killed me.”

When Draco notices Harry pauses, he keeps going. “I was twenty-seven, and thought everything was finally as it should be. Pure-bloods in their rightful place and everyone else... gone or broken. I was married. I just had my first child and the joy I felt in that moment was immeasurable... Then it happened. There was a decree that all first born will be sacrificed in a ritual so he could create a soul shard. Not slaves or, muggleborns, or any of the other races we imprisoned, but pure blood. I learned then, I did,” he chuckles sadly.

“Pure-bloods never mattered. My boy... My beautiful- I couldn't... It was my first born Potter. My baby boy! I took him and ran, but of course I was also the first born. My alleged family served me and my boy to that monster, and if it had been quick, I might've moved on, but- bu- ...he but'chered m' boy in front of me! For his own amusement! My parents, my wife, just watching!”

Harry didn't need to use legilimency to see that the anguish in Draco's words and the shattered expression on his heartbroken face are completely genuine. The tears flow freely, reddening the rims on his troubled eyes, but stuck as he is, Draco cannot wipe them. After a moment to himself, likely to move past the flashes of venomous memory, he continues.

“He didn't kill me right away. Torture, rape, always playing a never ending loop of what he'd done to my son in my head. And when he finally got bored of me, he killed me in front of my wife and parents. He didn't even use me for his ritual. I know because my soul refused to move on. I couldn't. What right did I have to join my beautiful boy? How could I justify what happened? What I allowed to happen? What I was complicit in creating, and how it would eventually murder his innocent life? ...I couldn't.”

“I awoke in Azkaban. I don't know if that's where he killed me or if it's where I wandered to, but I eventually found you in the deepest, darkest cell. At first, I didn't know why I couldn't leave that cell. I tried, often, but as the years past, constantly looking at you survive each day, I discovered why I could not pass and see my son. I saw it in your withering face. I learned I was wrong, Potter. I was wrong about it all.”

With absolute effort, Harry chooses to ignore Draco's revelation about his friend's heads or the abandonment of his parents and even the murder of his son. He'll even forgo Draco's spirit haunting
him all those years. It's all important, he knows, but it's much too important to properly consider in
the amount of time he currently has. He's not even all that sure it's completely true, but if Draco
really was a spirit, than he saw the runes Horcrux-Voldemort drew on the walls in his blood. It's a
piece of knowledge that can lead to time travel if discovered. It's not the complete puzzle, but
should Snape, Dumbledore, or Merlin forbid, a risen Voldemort look into his mind for whatever
reason and learn of what he saw, it could be catastrophic. The last thing he wants is for any of
those men to possess that kind of knowledge. Even if Voldemort is technically genius enough to
figure it out on his own, he's currently not motivated to. This knowledge must be safeguarded and
taken with Harry to his grave.

Harry isn't even sure what other disadvantages Malfoy might cause to hamper his goals in the short
or long term, but the son of the best arse licking Death Eater, can not learn about the possibility of
time travel. Draco's too much of a wild card, who he can't, unfortunately, kill without people
noticing or altering the already off-path past more than it is. Harry isn't sure of anything and the
only option he can see that'll keep his plans solid moving forward is to probe Malfoy's mind, then
obliviate him to his birth.

Harry didn't realize Draco was waiting for Harry to say something, but when he does, it's clearly
not what Draco wants to hear. “I'm sorry your son had a piece of shite like you for a father. He
didn't deserve that.” Harry raises his wand to his temple as Draco looks nervously at it. “If it makes
you feel any better, I won't forget him.”

Before Harry can obliviate him, Draco yells, “I'll swear a loyalty oath! I'll swear it on my magic, on
my life! Please! Please let me...”

“Please?” Harry gasps, a mixture of confusion and anger. “Please, please, please what Malfoy?
What are you begging for here? To let you live your miserable life? Don't worry, I am! Not
because you deserve to, but only because it'll raise too much of a stink if I killed you.”

“Not to live,” Draco cries, shaking his head earnestly. “That's not-”

“I can't bring your son back,” Harry cuts him off.

“I want to kill the dark Lord!” Draco yells over the boom of a cheering stadium of witches and
wizards. “I want him dead. By my hand, yours, little Colin Creevey for all I care. Anyone! So long
as that snake bastard is goblin food and passing bowels... anything, anything is worth it. I'll do it,
Potter! I'll swear it.”

It's the first time Harry's seen this amount of strength, or determination in Draco's eyes. He's known
Draco for a long time and this resolve is more intense than he's ever expressed even in his bigotry.
The smart thing to do would be to obliviate the blond ferret, but a loyalty oath is nothing to
overlook. Harry automatically calculates the possibilities in the back of his mind. He can choose to
ignore this liability-now-turn-opportunity... but will he? Draco passing him insider information
from the den of snakes is enticing. Enough so to still his wand and allow Draco to plead his case.

“Let me prove it to you!” Draco shouts. “It's all I ask.”

“It's not all your asking,” Harry counters. “How else are you suppose to make an oath without your
wand? You want me to give it back but how can I possibly trust you? YOU! You're solely
responsible for showcasing their heads!”

“I know! ...I...I know,” Draco agrees, a great shame returning to his eyes. “I was wrong in so many
ways about so many things for my entire life. That's why I have to make it right. I have to help you
make it right.”
“Why!” Harry spontaneously asks. “How can you possibly do that!”

“We're in the past Potter!”

“That doesn't mean you're any different! I still remember! I will always remember you.”

Draco looks stricken but accepting. He turns to Harry again, strength in his eyes. “I don't want to be that anymore. I couldn't even if I tried. Give me my wand and I will swear you my life—to always be loyal to you.”

“Why, Malfoy,” Harry asks. “Not that I especially care, but do you know what that means? After learning how you butchered my friends, how do you know I won't just make you end yourself? Maybe make you take your parents with you? A good ol' dramatic murder-suicide ends the Malfoy line. That would make me giggle,” Harry says angrily, without any trace of warmth.

“Because I told you! You only know because I told you. I wouldn't have if I didn't think you were the best way of killing that thing. And yes, all pure-blood noble families know about loyalty oaths. We're raised to never give them. Even Voldemort didn't demand loyalty oaths. But if that's what it takes, I'll do it, gladly.” They stare at each other, stretching the moment as they take measure of each other's sincerity. Harry slowly lowers his wand, and Draco adds, “let's not forget that I know you too, Potter. If you commanded me to kill myself, I wouldn't blame you, but I know you'd never ask any of your followers to sacrifice their lives or the lives of their children for some pointless ritual.”

Harry can't disagree on that point, except to say,“...I don't have followers. I have friends... had friends.”

“That's my point. You don't see them as a means to an end. They mean more to you. Everyone around you means something to you. Life has meaning to you, and that's the kind of world children should live in.”

Against his better and vengeful judgment, Harry decides to risk it by slamming Draco's wand hard against the silver-blonde's chest. “Just give me one reason, and you're dead,” Harry promises. With the scars and the green of his eyes lightly glowing, Draco doesn't doubt it for an instant.

When Harry allows Draco movement, he slowly lifts his wand. “I, Draco Malfoy, do solemnly swear, on my magic, on my life, to serve, defend, and support Harry James Potter in all his endeavors to the best of my abilities. I furthermore swear to never break his trust, to never divulge his secrets, and never betray him to any party by any means without consent until such time he releases me from my oath. So mote it be.”

Immediately after, a wave of flashing, rainbow light surround the boys, filling them with a peculiar sensation, like standing next to a warm person you can't see. It leaves as abruptly as it formed and Harry can't help but say, “you idiot.”

“Just because I pledged my allegiance to you doesn't mean I'm going to keep letting you talk to me like that. I'm a Mal-” Draco pulls up short and again, Harry sees that agony in his eyes that can only come from the worst memories.

Just because Harry isn't killing or obliviating him doesn't mean he'll let him slide. “Say it! You're a Malfoy, you arrogant sod! You were the reason my friends heads were mounted on spikes and you want me to treat you with respect?! Like you've earned it?”

“I can't answer for myself,” Draco chimes. “Not for who I was. I know what I did can never be
forgiven but we're here now, and I promise you who I can be is going to be a hell of a lot different. I won't ever forget, but for what it's worth, I'm—"

“Don't even bother! Your apology's worth fuck all to me,” Harry spits. Draco doesn't seem offended even by a small margin. It's such a weird turn of events but Harry is confident enough to remove the rest of the sticking charm. He takes a few steps back to allow Draco to uproot his buried feet, but Harry's wand is still out, partly raised, and eager for any excuse to unleash his turbulent magic. Draco puts his wand away and massages the aches in his muscles. Several long moments of silence pass before Harry asks, “how much do you know about what I did to get back?”

Draco's face morphs from a show of jolted curiosity to deep thought. “Mnn. Not a whole lot. I saw runes that I couldn't place... in your own blood no less. And then nothing until the moment you... I don't know. As a spirit, it looked like an explosion of colorful light. When I felt, actually felt something, a pulling, I wanted to run like the rest of the spirits, but instead I got pulled into this white circle. Next thing I know, I wake up in my bed, in the past. What did you do? I've never seen or heard of magic like that.”

“How's your occlumancy?” Harry follows up, ignoring Draco's inquiry. “Do you have mental shields against legilimency?”

“Most pure-blood families train their children in occlumancy from an early age,” Malfoy answers confidently. “I'd say mine are fairly strong.”

“Do you mind if I test them?” Harry asks, taking a step closer to the blonde.

Malfoy is slightly taken aback by Harry's intense proximity, but clears his throat and says, “yeah I gu-”

Before Malfoy can finish, Harry slams into Malfoy's shield with a decent amount of power. Harry can sense Draco wobble on his feet at the unexpected mental impact, but he stays upright. To Harry's surprise, his shields hold. He then starts analyzing the surface of the mental obstruction for weak points. Finding no easy entry, Harry focuses his probe into a fine point and targets a smaller mark. Harry applies more force behind his attack and easily pierces through Draco's protection. Harry manages to see the baby face of a boy who looks very similar to Draco before he exits. Back in his awareness, Harry locates Draco on the mud ground, gripping his head with a hand, a look of obvious pain on his face.

“How'd you do that?” Malfoy asks with a grunt. “I fortified my shields the second I got back. They're about as strong as future me... before I died.”

“They're not bad,” Harry notes. “They'll hold up well against most, but the shield needs an alternating pattern to help absorb and divert pin-point intrusions. Pin-point attacks aren't good against thick shields but with enough force they can be devastating.”

“Fine,” is all he says. Draco allows a few more moments of silence before tentatively asks, “how did you get us back?” Malfoy can see he brought Harry out of his thoughts. “They fed you moldy bread every other day. Weak as you were, how?”

Harry is skeptical to answer, but settles on saying, “what you saw could be dangerous in the wrong hands, Malfoy. I would rather you die than let Voldemort, Snape, or anyone see what you saw. That knowledge can never get out, understand? Never!”

Realizing much time has passed and the game will end soon, Harry asks, “where are you guys camped anyway? I've been looking for any Death Eater for hours.”

“I'm not a death eater,” Malfoy reflexively retorts. At Harry’s tilt of his head, as if to say, 'come on' he amends himself. “Not anymore. And there's a deluxe lounge inside the stadium.” Harry tilts his head up, clearly annoyed for not thinking of looking inside the stadium and let's out a deep exhale of disappointment.

‘Of course there’d be,’ Harry mentally berates himself. Why would they congregate with the 'lowly' and 'undignified'?

“Where were you,” Malfoy asks incredulously. “I thought you'd be with Hardwin and your mother. I had to walk away from that sniveling little brat looking for you.”

“Wait, what?” Harry genuinely directs at Draco, letting his head tilt drop in his direction. “Why would I be with my- with them?”

“Where the bloody hell else would you be? Some things are different, sure, but not everything. I'd expect a Potter to be with a Potter.”

“I'm not Hardwin,” Harry asserts, confused with Draco's line of questioning. “You know that right?”

Now Draco looks as confused as Harry feels. “I think I'd know who I've been talking to this whole time. You're Harry, Hardwin's brother.”

“No, I'm not...” Harry exclaims nearly defensively, feeling that familiar lack of insight, like child too young to understand a dirty joke. “There is no Harry Potter in this time line,” Harry maintains.

“That can't be possible,” Draco returns. “There has to be one here or you wouldn't have a body to return to.”

Harry turns that information over in his mind, correlating it with what he felt when he first got here, then theorizing what connections he can make.

Draco takes that moment to continue. “I'll admit I don't know specifically about a Harry Potter. I don't recall one in my newer memories and no one seems to have heard of one. My family thought I was going a touch mad when I asked. As a spirit, I know the human body is like an anchor to the soul. You couldn't be here, talking and walking, unless there was a body here for your spirit to return to.... unless your body came back as well?” Draco scratches his chin, thinking more on it, and then asks, “but then why would you be young again? If your body came back, it should be as old as you were- er, or become? This is a little confusing. Did you make it so your body could reverse in age? But even the Flamels couldn't reverse age. But then they never went back in time either...”

Harry stopped paying attention to Draco as he works over Horcrux-Voldemort's extensive math and rune work. The arithmancy and natural magic was indeed intended to only send their spirits as the parasite postulated his body couldn't survive the power he was imbued with. They both knew he was suppose to lose his withered and decaying body, but for him to return in a near death like state... something isn't adding up. The questions storming around his mind center around his death like state. Draco is right. He should've returned into a body, otherwise he'd be a spirit wondering the earth. This might also explain his horcrux. The parasite wasn't a part of his soul and may have been separated, or purified might be a better word, from his own soul in the all-consuming portal to the past. Harry turns to Draco and asks, “Do you remember this life as well as the previous?”
Draco was clearly expecting an answer to any of his many questions but with a huff of irritation, he answers, “yes. There are some differences but nothing diverges too much from the original time. For the most part everything is the same.”

Again, Harry returns to the quarry of questions in his mind, sifting through the deep pit for the most pertinent ones. Why didn't he and the Flamels read anything about a Harry Potter in their research? Why was he in such a state when the Flamels found him? Why do the memories of the newer time line stop when he's six? The pit of his stomach can feel something dark develop and fester, alerting him to hard answers ahead.

At the sudden yell of the crowd and then an announcement declaring the Irish the champions, Harry runs out of time. The celebration is quickly spilling out into the camped fields when Harry turns to Draco. “Where are they attacking people from,” he demands to know.

“I- I don't know,” Draco answers when he recalls Harry's asking about the death eater attack. “They never told me before hand. When father left, I just thought he was going to get shitfaced. I left too. Later we ran into you, Granger and Weasley.”

“Damn it Malfoy,” Harry spits before he starts walking out of the forest. Harry could never have expected Malfoy or any of the resulting revelations. Now the chances of capturing a high value death eater is greatly reduced to piss all.

“Oi!” Malfoy calls, running after him. “Potter!”

Harry immediately turns around, forcing Malfoy to abruptly stop and pull up mid-step. “From now on, don't call me Potter. Don't call me Harry either. That just sounds weird coming from you.”

Harry turns and hurries through the tree line to the crowd.

“Fine,” Draco accepts with a roll of his eyes, as if he likes using the name anyway. “What do I call you than?” He asks as he follows the kill-me-green eyed boy.

“Don't worry about it,” Harry calls behind his back, then stops and turns to him. “Until I figure out how I want to include you, work on your occlumency and don't write anything down. I'll meet you on the train.”

Without another word, Harry takes off, recalling where he, Hermione and Ron were when it all started last time. Without knowing the large acres of terrain better, he decides to play it safe and stay closer to the tree line, listening for screams. Harry is passing by a group of Bulgaria's fans, bemoaning the the lack of quality players among their national team. “All but Krum,” one drunkenly yells and they all, “Aye, ayes,” when someone, a witch, slams into the group, knocking two to the floor and spilling more drinks. They cry and hollar the injustice when the witch screams and desperately rushes to her feet pointing behind her. The others didn't understand right away, that her screams are not of joy or merriment, and in their sloshed state, they probably couldn't.

Already sprinting in the direction she pointed to, Harry looks out for any sign violence, any sounds of tyranny. He can feel his heart hammering unholy hell in his chest corresponding eerily well with his barely contained magic, boiling to break free. Harry truly couldn't understand why his magic suddenly feels so uncontrollable, but a loud ear piercing scream rips him from his thoughts. In no time at all, he's racing toward the helpless victim passing scores of frightened and fleeing witches and wizards. Most in this area seem to be French, but their outcry is universal expression of panic. Two English shouts did confirm his suspicions however.

“Death Eaters!” They wailed.
With cold determination, Harry sprints ahead until he spots clusters of Death Eaters spread out
along destroyed camps and trees. A single Death Eater is lighting tents on fire, two are tossing a
wizard in the air like a doll between them, playing a game of catch and laughing all the while. The
third group is the largest. Four death eaters surround a hunched over figure on the floor. A quick
glance is all Harry needs to know they're ripping a girl's robes off a bit at a time, as she covers a
child with her body, protecting the child from the masked men.

The group of four are the furthest away but to Harry, they're the only ones that matter. In that first
step forward, Harry finally gives in, and lets the tsunami of energy flow angrily to the surface.
Hermione's dead and battered face. Ron's broken in skull. Neville's missing eyes. Luna's skinned
features. All their deaths and suffering at the hands of these jackals. It's all fuel to the inferno
raging within and Harry's anger reaches it's peak. He raises his wand, doesn't even say, expulso, but
the curse blasting out of his wand is so strong, the Death Eater dropping the poor wizard bursts in
an immense explosion of shredded meat, tattered garb, and warm blood.

The meaty boom stops everyone. Thankfully so did the one using crucio on the partly naked girl.
Even Harry stops, and oddly enough, takes that moment to marvel at the strength of his new wand.
It seems to be perfect for hexes and curses because the most that should've happened, the most
Harry expected, was the Death Eater to be blown back several feet and land unconscious with
broken bones. The entrails swinging off a branch before dropping to the ground with a splat
however, tells him no, it's clearly more than his wand. Where as Harry's magic previously felt
more like a minor hazard, now his magic feels like a natural disaster by comparison.

Being caught unaware only lasts long enough for everyone to realize powerful magic was used to
blow a wizard to bloody bits and the first to snap out of it are the Death Eaters. There may be
plenty of trees but no one has taken cover behind one, thus the Death Eaters easily spot Harry and
impatiently, angrily, send a barrage of curses in his direction. Harry dodges the devilish curses with
shields and critically timed evasion. He feels one clip his left shoulder and suddenly, his body is
highly instinctive, like being back in his mindscape, fighting off multiple Voldemorts. Rolling into
a crouched position, he calmly notes his left arm is sluggish before he throws up multiple shields.
With minimal cover and multiple assailants, strategy guides him in blowing a large hole in the
ground, casting a large amount of smoke to minimize visibility.

“Nova,” Harry calls and his familiar dives down and fast enough to cause a whistle to emit in it's
trail. She barely grips Harry's shoulder before they flame away, materializing high above the fight.
“That's good there,” he says, aiming to land near the tortured girls and Nova lets him fall.

Unbeknown to the ruthless attackers below, he has more than enough time to rain down an unholy
gambit of cutting curses, blasting curses, and conjured fire arrows on them. Harry manages to cut
the wand arm of a Death Eater when the rest notice the aerial assault. He hears a pain-filled cry as
they move away from the girls and the satisfaction it brings to him is joyous. They move and
dodge or shield themselves as best they can by the unexpected aerial onslaught of deadly curses,
but Harry does not let up on his rapid casting. He manages to get another agonizing squeal, like a
stuffed pig, before slowing his fast descent to land hard yet closer to the girls.

Touched by war, Harry marks a shift in the battle as he sprints low towards the badly wounded
girls. He nearly manages two steps when a barrage of spells are cast in his direction. The incursion
of so much violence directed at his survival speaks to a very primal side of him, as if the world is
demanding his silence, and he just doesn't have it in him to give it.

‘Fuck you!’ he mentally yells but physically growls.

Injured as he is, his heart is pumping mercilessly against his ribs, his magic rages and he doesn't
notice that his eyes have started to glow neon green. Having cast strong protegos around him, zig-zagging from left to right, one curse manages to tag him in the back sending him to the floor. Using the momentum of the impact to roll to his knees beside the girls, he grits his teeth and grunts out some spit as he ignores the searing pain and subsequent warm wet feeling. He transfigures up a wall of hardened earth to surround him and the girls.

The wall is immediately bombarded with spells from multiple sides by an unknown number of attackers but at the very least giving him an idea of which direction they're firing from. He knows for sure he took out two on his rapid descent from the sky, leaving four remaining, but he hasn't clocked this new attacker. A late arrival, his mind answers him before he resumes his offensive strategy. It would be idiotic to simply stand up and shield himself, then fire on separated enemy, not that he couldn't do it, but he's already been clipped twice and there's a high chance it could happen again, possibly with a curse far worse. Harry just needs a moments pause to return fire, when he recalls Malfoy's trick from earlier.

“P-pupupu- puleeezze,” the older girl covering the younger staggers to say, her eyes pleading with his glowing ones. Her body twitches randomly in the aftermath of being crucio'd and the back of her robes are in tatters. Deep bruising and bleeding welts litter up her back, but Harry notes her french accent before recognizing her very familiar face.

“Fluer?” Harry lets slip. The poor girl spasms horribly over the prone form her sister, Gabrielle, who she's protecting with her own body. Before the injured witch can respond, the wall is completely demolished by a powerful bombarta and Harry has to erect a strong protego around them for the rain of subsequent spells aimed at them. The dazed, pained look in her eyes makes Harry forget all about capturing one alive—no easy thing considering his mind's near robotic detachment to irrational and emotional decisions. It's not to say Harry can't be swayed by his emotions—clearly he can—but his mind never stops thinking. He knows when he needs to allow whatever he's feeling be, and when not to. At the moment, his emotions are demanding blood, and his mind isn't protesting.

‘They probably didn't know anything anyway,’ the darker side of his mind reasons, in support of his homicidal thoughts. When he doesn't hear a counter argument in favor of sparing them, which may sound a lot like Dumbledore, Harry's green eyes glow brighter upon his resolve. The air around him sizzles and sparks from aggregating his magic. Minus their footing, he transfigures fifty meters of ground in every direction into deep, watery mud. This is taking more magic than he's ever felt capable of in his previous time line, but at the moment, he barely feels a drain. He hears the creaking and banging of leaning or colliding trees and the second after the curses stop flying, he uses the same amount of power to harden the ground, keeping them in place for all the time he needs to satisfy his craving for bloody justice.

Despite the protest tugging from his back muscles, Harry rounds out of the shields but keeps it over the girls. Noticing that his stuck attackers were closing in, he targets the nearest Death Eater with a bone breaking curse, packed it with enough power to turn the wizard's entire skeletal system to dust. The mangled crushing noise before his ear piercing scream is certainly satisfying, but not enough to appease Harry's craving. He turns to the second Death Eater and bombards him with a series of reductos to a more satisfying result. With the magical terrorist's legs cemented into the earth to the thigh, he screams with each impact as his body flings and bounces around like a rag doll, unable to properly rocket away, breaking at bends the human body is not designed for. Yes, his pain filled cries are much more satisfying to hear, but again, it's not enough.

Harry's friends suffered far worse he demands equal compensation.

Moving to his next prey, the other two are luckily assisted by a third—another late arrival—and
initiate their attack, albeit more sluggishly. This time it's clear their aim is to kill as they hurl avada kedavras at him. Harry dodges the first three, moving closer to the girls knowing the protego he has around them will not protect them from the killing curse. Harry return rapid-fires his standard array of cutting, blasting, expulso and reducto curses in the span of seconds as he moves closer to the girls. It doesn't matter quite so much if he connects but he prefers they defend and stop shooting killing curses so he can erect another wall of earth around the vulnerable girls. Once beside the Delacours, confident he can stop anything aimed at them, Harry rainbow casts powerful confringos over his newly formed wall, and hope it hits one or at least sends massive chunks of debris at them. When he clocks two more Death Eaters show up and attack the wall from another direction, Harry considers flaming Fleur and her sister away. Defending them from five Death Eaters while wounded himself is a little more risk to their safety than he's comfortable with.

Expecting a barrage of dark curses and hexes, Harry acts with both defense and offense in mind. He rapid fires three destructive spells in between many smaller more precise shields layered around the three. After a moment he realizes the spell work is only coming from one direction. The shattering flare of blue shield succumbing to green death hex only to be absorbed by solid earth lessens to possibly one man when Harry realizes that they're about to portkey away. Harry groans as he feels more resistance from his mangled back when he recklessly rounds his half destroyed earth-wall in an attempt to grab one. A killing curse just barely whizzes by his head, forcing him to take cover, but not well enough as a piece of debris rockets into his thigh. The heat of the foreign object is enough to make him groan from the shooting pain.

Still, he tries again despite it being in vain. It's all the time the death squad needed to take their brothers still in one or two pieces with them and disappear. The torn and smoking clearing ahead where a group of Death Eaters used to stand, and the sudden silence amidst the battle field is like a splash of unforgiving cold water to Harry's system, highlighting the complete and utter failure of his mission and the wounds gained in the process.

"Fleur!" A young girl's small voice wails, bringing Harry back to the present. Annoyed, sweating, bleeding, but not exhausted, he takes a step towards the girls when pure pain flourishes through his body. The agony sends the very clear message that he has a broken piece of branch sticking out of his thigh, a shredded back and a broken left shoulder. When he begins to feel his back heat up like a fevered wound, he irritably begrudges all the future time he knows he'll spend in recovery with an overly fretful Perenelle. For now, Harry ignores the surmounting pain, and limps to the crying girl and her tortured older sister. Gabrielle is hysterical and crying and Fleur holds her tightly despite losing consciousness.

Harry doesn't get close enough to the girls when he hears a loud, "Stupify," some thirty feet away. Mentally still more fight than flight, Harry has enough instinct and function in his mobility to side step out of the stunning spells trajectory, making him take a step away from the girls. Turning to the new wave of attackers, Harry easily spots all are Ministry Aurors. Leading the pack, he recognizes Sirius in the exact moment his living, breathing Godfather angrily orders him to, "freeze!"

"Drop your wand," Sirius commands with all the hostility he'd show an enemy. This unit begins to surround the area, and Harry is so shocked to see his Godfather alive and healthy, he barely notices Kingsley Shacklebolt aim his wand directly at his chest. His body is not completely shut down and he automatically dodges another light stunner cast at him—this one from Shacklebolt—coaxing him to react.

Without a word, he conjures a whirlwind of fire to spin around him. It might've looked like fiendfyre from the outside but Harry only needs it to obscure him from the "protectors" of justice. "Nova," he lightly calls, seconds before his legendary familiar dives down the eye of the fire
tornado to grip her master and flame him to the Flamel's London home. The flash of his phoenix based travel evaporates along with the twirling tower of flame, masking his escape perfectly.

“Where'd he go,” one of the Auror's yells, astonished by the wizard's disappearance. “Is the ant-apparation still up?” someone else calls.

“Did he have a portkey?” Shacklebolt asks Sirius.

“Search the area,” Sirius commands before rushing to the Delacours. “And get a mediwitch!”

In a beautiful, Victorian whitestone townhouse in Islington, London, Harry flames into the foyer of the first floor and lands hard on his injured back. Despite the tremendous pain, he does not cry out. He only takes deep audible breaths and glumly mutters, “Fucking hell.”

Chapter End Notes

I was really looking forward to this chapter. Draco is the first of the main characters I got to incorporate in this story. And the action scene was tough but gratifying to work on and finish. Honestly the action was very hard to write for me. I'm more partial to dialogue.

Thanks for reading and please let me know your thoughts.
Going To The Grave

Chapter Summary

These are the twists and turns to the otherwise straight line you'd much rather take to the goal. Harry meets Hogwarts again and it doesn't quite go to plan!

Chapter Notes

This one was a challenge to write. Still I told myself no later than noon, Sunday, and deadlines are important. I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry stares at platform 9 ¾ wondering about certain past events. He ignores the few oddball stares he's getting for having a colorful plush toy parrot on his shoulder and wonders if Hardwin freed Dobby at the end of second year, or if the house-elf possibly stopped him from entering the platform in his third year. It's a passing thought he reflects on before moving deeper toward the inception clawing at the back of his mind. The thought was another game of Horcrux-Voldemort. In a genial effort to destabilize Harry's relationship with anyone in his life, as well as make him feel like worthless sheep, Horcrux-Voldemort pointed out certain details Harry would've never considered himself. He's currently staring at one of them, asking himself the very question that damn parasite asked him after replaying the event.

'How is it that a matriarch, like Molly Weasley forgets where the entrance to the platform is when she's already done it a number of years for Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred and George?'

When you consider Dumbledore's interest in Harry's life and his close ties to the Weasley house, while it may not be a damning question, it certainly seems suspect. Enough so, that Harry does wonder if the fortuitous meeting was staged by the manipulative headmaster in a preemptive attempt to keep him close. Harry wouldn't put it past the cunning old man to try. He might've had a better defense against Horcrux-Voldemort if it seemed like Molly was only asking for Ginny's benefit, but it really didn't look that way.

Shaking his head of disparaging thoughts, Harry calmly walks through the barrier, just in time for the sight modifying charm he placed on Nova to wear off. The charm didn't really affect Nova so her natural defenses didn't need to react. At the same time, muggles only saw a plush toy instead of a black and red phoenix. Dressed in simple jeans and black long sleeve shirt, his trunk is shrunk and attached to a thin unbreakable chain around his neck, Harry has nothing in his hands as walks the large platform toward the train. The platform is mostly empty this early in the morning as he takes a moment to admire the imposing beauty of the giant steam train.

Showing up extra early is a two fold plan that is purely for peace of mind. They told Dumbledore he'd be arriving around the time of departure so that he can instead show up early, take a compartment at the very back and avoid the crowd he or his phoenix is sure to draw. There's also the possibility of sitting near enough Slytherins to eavesdrop on their conversation—a far more
successful endeavor than the results of his last mission. Walking through the nearly empty platform he laments the failure of his previous mission; which ended with him in the foyer, wounded and bleeding out on the cedar hardwood floor.

Nicolas and Perenelle were alerted to his injury via the heir-apparent ring and the house wards, so it wasn't more than a minute before they found him. It's then that Harry learns from Nicolas that Nova's healing tears won't develop for at least a year, but her talons are helpful, which means he should really be careful. His back was the worst of the injuries but as a whole, his wounds weren't so severe that a few potions and good healing magic couldn't quickly remedy. After they're certain he'd be fine, they inquire about the details of the night. His instincts immediately wants to withhold information but he reminds himself of their level of commitment and moves past his customary reaction. He tells them everything except for Malfoy's name, who he code names, Ferret for security purposes and his amusement.

"How might you be planning on using this, Mr. Ferret," Nicolas asks.

"I don't know exactly how he'll help," Harry says then hums. "But he does have a connection to Voldemort or at the very least, his inner circle. He's the son of one of the higher ranked Death Eaters. In all likelihood, I'll use him for information."

"That could be very dangerous for your friend," Perenelle states. "Are you sure he's okay with being a spy?"

"He is not, nor will he ever be my friend," Harry returns with vitriol he regrets directing at the older lady. "Sorry," Harry huffs in frustration. "I didn't mean to snap." When Perenelle nods her acceptance of his apology, he continues.

"Ferret's suffered at Voldemort's hand in ways even I can't understand," Harry answers her. "He's motivated enough to pledge a loyalty oath to me." Nicolas and Perenelle both gasp at that, shocked a wizard would willing pledge life and magic to another. It's essentially self-induced slavery. "Look, we were enemies in our time line—I mean we hated each other. Merlin knows I could've killed him for one of any number of things he did to me or my friends and been entirely justified. If he hadn't pledged fealty to me, I definitely would've obliviated him to birth and sent him on his merry way."

Nicolas and Perenelle share a look of concern but say no more on the topic. It's then that he reveals the most significant portion of his interaction with Malfoy.

"There's a Harry Potter in this time line?" Perenelle repeats aghast. "How can that be? We never found any mention of another Potter."

"It would seem to make the most sense," Nicolas admits. "The human body is the tangible vehicle of the mind and soul—a vessel, if you will. A fragile one but a vessel nonetheless. Regardless of the point in time, you are the soul of Harry Potter, which of course means you inhabit the body it was created for."

"The only reason we haven't heard about him is because he somehow still went to the Dursleys," Harry sternly voices.

The edge in his tone is potent in bitterness, and while Nicolas might have left it be, Perenelle felt a need to ask, "and the Dursleys are?"

Harry doesn't answer immediately, instead he contemplates the power that family seems to still have over him. After everything he's been through, his time with the Dursleys should be a vacation
by comparison. Yet, they're still a nightmare in their own right. Harry answers with just enough
information. “They're the relatives I stayed with before Hogwarts and in the summers. It was... a
challenging place to live,” is all he consents to say as he gets out of bed.

“What do you think you're doing?” Perenelle asks in the stern tone of a healer.

“I feel better,” Harry starts. “And I need answers now.”

“It's the middle of the night,” Nicolas protests.

“Less chance of being seen,” Harry answers him as he puts on a dark turtle neck.

“I dare say a wizard of your caliber ought to be able to do the same during the day,” Nicolas easily
returns.

“There's no sense in waiting,” Harry rebuttals without breaking stride. He's putting on boots and
nearly out the door when Perenelle speaks up.

“What are you hoping to learn that you can't simply ask your mother about?”

Harry whirls around, energized by thoughts of horrible implications, and answers, “If she has even
half an idea of how that family treated me, and still kept me- this Harry there, than she's no mother
of mine.” With that, he apparates out of the brownstone, just outside of number 4 Privet Drive in
Little Whinging, Surrey. It looks exactly as he remembered and his breathing immediately
quickens. There's suddenly a burst of fire that quickly evaporates, and Nova lands on his shoulder,
clutching him far harder than she needs to.

“Sorry girl,” Harry states evenly, still looking at the Dursley home. “I lost my head a bit. I didn't
mean to leave you.”

She softly clicks and tweets, easing the strength of her grip. Harry smiles and takes a step toward
the house. Wand in hand, Harry casts detecting charms on the premises, but finds no ward of any
kind. He apparates inside with a near silent pop, landing in the hall. Everything is still, if not silent.
Harry can clearly hear the loud trumpet snores of both Vernon and Dudley upstairs. Harry raises
his wand and casts revealing and detecting charms that report only three occupants in the house and
no trace of magic. Harry steps to the cupboard under the stairs, intent on satisfying some twisted
urge of proof. With apprehension, he opens the small door and discovers nothing but boxes and
toys inside. There isn't even a tiny bed.

Harry examines the whole house, room by room, looking for any hint of his presence once upon a
time, until he's eventually standing beside Vernon and Petunia's bed. There wasn't a single trace
that another boy might've lived here once. Harry has little option but diving into their minds and
searching for the truth. With no hesitation he searches Dudley's memories. Besides revealing that
this-Harry did live with them, he didn't learn anything of note. For a moment he was tempted to
exact some level of retribution on the small orca, but decided against it. It was unnecessary. It
wouldn't change anything and served no purpose to destroying Voldemort.

Watching the married couple sleep, he pushes past all the pent up resentment and rising animosity,
but uses the animus it fuels to delve into their minds with ease. Petunia first. He navigates through
the woman's obnoxious motherly duties, her revolting obligations as Vernon's wife, into the
memories associated with hate. It's in this emotional tether Harry does find memories of a young
Harry Potter exactly like in his time line. It turns out Vernon is the first to discover an infant on
their doorstep in the morning. Harry takes a deep, steady breath as his relatives read the note
Dumbledore left. It detailed the wards that would be placed around their residence if they should
take Harry as a surrogate son until his seventeenth year. It also informed them of a monthly stipend for his care.

How any of this was allowed, even with his mother alive, he'll never understand. A further exploration of her memories shows the few times Harry was punished by Vernon, and her joy of watching it. The violence also excited her and Vernon's sex life. Harry quickly exited his aunt's mind, finding the information he needed. Apparently this-Harry just ran away one day and never came back, not that she cared. She thought about telling Lily—her own sister—her son ran away for less than a minute before shrugging and continuing on with her life. Taking a step back to view Petunia sleeping comfortably, again, Harry felt a strong urge to repay them for their "hospitality."

With great effort he ignores the desire and dives into Vernon's porpoise mind next. Navigating past his love of food, the submissiveness of Petunia, his dutiful son, and his secret longing for his wife's sister, he explores the large man's hate-filled memories. There are a lot of things that Vernon hates, and in the center of that massive archive is a cherished memory; one of Harry. Going over one event at a time, this Vernon seems to enjoy tormenting Harry early and often. Spraying cleaning fluid in his eyes, leaving the frightened boy outside in the cold all night, never letting him shower, starving him, then finally graduating to hitting him. The progression was fast and by age six, future-Harry can tell, this-Harry was hit one to many times by the way he stumbles around, and doesn't speak. It's odd to note the large man did actually use restraint with his beatings, but it didn't stop Vernon from hitting this-Harry a little too hard one day.

In this memory that actually gives Vernon a sexual rush, he hits Harry so hard, the boy's body crumples to the floor, unmoving. It's disgusting to look at but Harry steals his heart and stomach, and watches on as Vernon leaves the unconscious boy alone until he finishes the show he's watching. Later when his younger version hasn't moved an inch, a miffed Vernon picks up the young meat-bag, puts him in the car, and takes him to a dark alley. Vernon throws him behind a large dumpster, then returns home. He tells Petunia the brat ran away, gone for good, and they proceed to celebrate in their bedroom. Harry dives out of the memory before bile completes it's run out of his mouth. A loss of brain function might explain why Harry can't access memories past age six. They wouldn't properly, if at all, but it doesn't explain how he ended up in a park nearly dead years later.

At an extra loud snort from Vernon, Harry is brought back to the present. Looking at their peaceful sleeping faces, Harry doesn't feel an urge for revenge. He's angry, no doubt, but he can't put that all on them. He has a mother and Dumbledore that deserve some portion of his ire as well. After all, there's plenty of fault to go around. For the moment, a debt must be paid, and it isn't for personal satisfaction—though there is that. These people—if he's generous enough to call them people—are as vile and monstrous as Voldemort; the only difference is scale. While Voldemort is powerful enough to affect the world, Vernon and Petunia's poison can only extend to a single boy. Harry wouldn't even be surprised if the Dark Lord approves of them. From the ruin of their villainy will Harry demand vindication by taking from them all joy they seek in life.

They may not go to prison, but from now on, Dudley will never enjoy anything delicious again. Harry shuts down the large boy's sense of taste as well as never feeling the gratification of a full stomach. ‘*May the orca die from gluttony,*’ Harry mentally recites. Petunia will now harbor a deep, physical lust for her son and think about being touched by her child every chance she has, all the while reacting physically ill from her husband. Like his son, Vernon will lose his sense of taste and forever feel starving but as a special bonus, the leader of this retched house will never be able to get an erection unless he's physically abused; in pain, beaten black and blue or bleeding at the hands of another man.

‘*Let them suffer with this for now,*’ his mind ordains. Harry briefly considers how light the
punishment for all three are, but there's nothing saying he can't come back and make it worse. If their punishment was a meal, than this would be the appetizer.

As Harry boards the nearly empty train, he recalls explaining everything he discovered with his pseudo-parents. He must've seemed more raw by the visit than he realized or Perenelle is very good at reading emotional cues because she implores Harry to learn his mother's side before acting on conclusions of incomplete information.

“Keep in mind, it's still only half a picture,” she explains. “I wouldn't dream of telling you what to do or preach in any way—I know that's not my place. I only suggest, until you know more, act on the benefit of the doubt. They deserve what they deserve but make certain it is deserved.”

Harry doesn't outright ignore her advice, but he doesn't completely agree either. As much as this is distressing—to say the least—it has nothing to do with his goal of destroying Voldemort. For now he'll let it lie and compartmentalize the crisis neatly in his mindscape.

Entering the last compartment, Harry applies a weak intent charm on the door meant to discourage anyone gullible enough from entering. He takes a seat and pulls out an ancient book on the sand used in time turners. It's mostly a theory based book but it might be helpful. Harry knows Horcrux-Voldemort used the salt and sand of Harry's withering, natural magic infused body to act as power to invoke the dark time warp, but he's hoping it might provide a clue to guide a theory for removing a horcrux without destroying the container. Most of the knowledge in the book is similar to Voldemort's assessment, if a little behind the lunatic. It's creepy how genius a motivated Voldemort can be.

In the hours before departure, Harry hears the bustle of children coming, going, and talking incessantly. Through his mindscape Harry enhances his hearing, wondering if he might pick up anything of note from the compartments nearby. It's a toss up where the Slytherins might settle but they tend to claim anywhere from the middle to the last few cars of the train. Harry plans to eavesdrop for any slip of information a Death Eater spawn may know, without actually being around them. He doesn't like the idea of talking to anyone, much less junior Death Eaters in training. If any of those uptight arse kissers see his unwillingness to share as a sign of hostility, it'll draw more attention than he'd like if he wants to continue working from the shadows. He'd also much rather be alone—his mind is more stable alone.

Using his enhanced hearing, the only conversation any of them can gossip about is who's attractive, who's ugly, quidditch in general, the world cup specifically, and the most talked about moment of that night, the Death Eater attack—an event that keeps the Slytherins firmly segregated from the other houses. Harry saw the Daily Prophet that morning and luckily it didn't mention anything about him or the Delacours, but it did highlight the Morsmordre sent into the night sky. Harry never saw the dark mark in the sky, but if he had, he would've blown it out of the sky. The article did say there was a casualty but wouldn't reveal the identity of the deceased. Harry is wondering if they're withholding the other Death Eaters he's killed when the train begins to leave the station. It's mostly an uneventful trip until two thirds of the way to Hogsmeade. The compartment door swings open with tremendous force.

In steps Draco Malfoy, looking exasperated. “Bloody hell Potter! What'd you do to the door?”

Harry lets out a huff of irritation then forcefully moves Draco inside, before looking out into the corridor. Harry doesn't see anyone nearby but it doesn't mean someone didn't hear the obvious slip. Annoyed, Harry raises his best privacy wards. When he's sure they can't be overheard by anyone or thing, Harry whirls on Malfoy, “What did I say about using my name?”

Malfoy is curiously looking at Nova and then his eyes bulges, pointing at the legendary bird
repeatedly, “That's- That's a bloody phoenix!”

Harry's irritation continues to rise. He takes his seat next to Nova as she prunes her feathers. They both ignore Draco when he yells, “a phoenix!” again, arms extended and expecting some explanation. None is forthcoming.

Malfoy looks from the phoenix to Harry and back. Whatever questions he has is ignored so in a huff he point's out, “you didn't exactly give me an alternate name to use when I curse,” still amazed at the site of a phoenix picking it's feathers. “I was looking for you for hours. Whatever you did to the door is crazy strong.”

“I put a light intent charm on it,” Harry answers. Harry has thought long on the best way to incorporate Malfoy in his plans and for the moment Harry's going to wait for the right opportunity to present itself. Considering his goal and Malfoy's connections, he'll likely not have to wait long to utilize him. “Maybe you're just exceptionally weak.”

“I'm not weak. I still have the same knowledge and roughly the same skill I had when I died,” Malfoy yelled back. “Maybe you just don't know the meaning of light, Oh-Nameless-One,” Malfoy exhales forcibly and takes a seat, letting the silence stretch for several moments until Harry finally breaks it.

“My new name is Ares Flamel,” Harry states by way of moving past their natural animosity. “Either is fine, but no more Potter... even in private. Less chance you'll slip later.”

“No,” Malfoy bellows. “No, none of that is fine! Are you daft!? How can you think to use a name like that?”

“Calm down,” Harry warns. “I'm not crazy about Ares either but what's it matter? It's just a name.”

“Not about Ares,” Draco corrects him. “That's loads better than Harry. I meant Flamel! Everyone know who the Flamels are. Merlin's balls, Dumbledore is close friends with the immortal alchemist! It's obvious why you can't use your real name, but Flamel? Really? That's almost as bad as saying you're a Potter no one's ever heard of. The second Dumbledore spots you, he's going to call his friend-”

“Malfoy,” Harry calls loudly. “If you'll kindly stuff it for a minute, I can catch you up.” Harry explains to Draco all the pertinent details he's gone through since his arrival. The Flamels finding him because of a Lovegood prediction hundreds of years old, telling them the truth, becoming their heir, and getting Nova. It took him more time to explain the horcruxs.

“You're father never told you what the diary really was?” Harry asks genuinely shocked.

“He told me it was an important artifact that belonged to the Dark Lord,” Malfoy answers. “He's an avid collector. I didn't really think anything of it.”

“Of course you didn't,” Harry inwardly sighs. “We currently have two, Hardwin and the diadem are at Hogwarts, Nagini is with Voldemort, the locket is probably with Regulus or Kreacher, and the diary was destroyed... presumably; I still have to verify that. The plan is to destroy the six remaining horcruxs before I take the maniac down. As you can imagine, Hardwin is going to be the most delicate part of the plan. I still haven't figured out a way to remove the horcrux without killing him.”

“...H-How,” Draco gasps, totally at a loss. He clearly never expected it would take so much to kill Voldemort. “How are we suppose to do all of that without him noticing?”
“One at a time and carefully,” Harry easily states. “For now, I still don't know how best you can help.”

“What do you mean?” Draco looks at him curiously. “That much should be obvious. I'll be your spy.”

“And in our time line,” Harry begins to ask. “When did you really start being involved in actual Death Eater meetings or missions?”

“Sixteen, seventeen, I'd say,” he answers.

“That's two to three years from now; far too long down the line,” Harry tells him. “I'm planning on ending him this year, which means you're too young for them to tell you anything and there's no real group for you to spy on anyway. The most you can do would be giving me the locations of all the major families, so I can dismantle them one family at a time.”

The cold, murderous tone of Harry's voice, the intensity of his eyes and his scars tell Draco everything he needs to know about how he plans to handle the Death Eater families. He's going to kill them all, and Draco isn't sure how he feels about that. “I don't want this to sound like I'm being... mnn, uncommitted, or disloyal, but do you have to kill them,” Draco warily asks.

The hesitation in Draco's look and voice is very satisfying to Harry and he can't help but smile. “Why do you ask Draco? Afraid for your Death Eater friends? Having second thoughts or is this some pure-blood nonsense about superiority?”

“I'm not having second thoughts,” Draco states. “And I now know pure-blood superiority is hogwash, but there are a lot old families who I'd say are more misguided than all-in supporters of the Dark Lord. These wizards, the ones that aren't like Bellatrix or Crouch Jr. treasure their ancrestry and can trace their lineage back for hundreds of years. They take pride in their customs, culture, habits and ideas. Did you know before we had Halloween and Christmas, it was Samhain and winter solstice celebrations? How would you feel if a tradition your whole community participated in for hundreds of years was suddenly taken away and replaced by some trivial commercially geared holiday? They felt like they were losing their place and only really support the Dark Lord because they wanted their life to have meaning again.”

“...Malfoy, I had no idea they have such a noble concept of prejudice and bigotry. What a crime. Oh, the fucking humanity,” Harry sarcastically states with enough venom even Draco is impressed. “Their place? Really? Don't forget you and the like believed your place was above everyone else. You said it yourself. After the destruction and murder of everything and everyone I hold dear, you felt like it was all right again. Is that the rightful place you're talking about? Lord of graves? The problem you all seem to have isn't anything ancestral or noble, but your bigotry, your discrimination, your bias. It's your fucking pride! Your reign came to an end by the people you felt superior to. You all learned that you weren't the best, that blood and who you're born to didn't matter, and got angry at us for showing you up. So angry, in fact, that a madman easily convinced you he was your one and only savior, never mind the massive amount of human sacrifice it'll take, as long as it's not you. Isn't that right Draco?”

Harry knows the blond boy's mind immediately burrows deep into memories of his murdered son. Like any intense exposure to suffering, Draco is lost in his head for a good forty-five minutes. Harry leaves him to his agony, knowing exactly what he's going through and not feeling an ounce of remorse. When Draco returns to the present his voice is weaker than before, and his eyes are pained.

“...I know” Draco acquiesce. He wasn't going to argue the merits of equality for all, not after
witnessing how his ideals led to the murder of his son, but he also didn't want to know he was trading one murderous psychopath for another. “I do. It's because I know, I ask you show them a another way,” he says with a little more determination. “I learned the hard way how wrong I was, but they don't have to. And all I'm really asking is, do you have to kill them all?”

“I never said I was going to kill them all,” Harry returns. “I'm not homicidal... much. Though I'm sure none of you asked Voldemort the same question before he murdered my friends. Why would you? Aside from being utter cowards, you all believed the shite he was pedaling into your mouths.”

Hard kill-me green eyes, bold scars, and a violent frown... The hard gravitas Harry's passion projects is an impression Draco can't shake and tells Harry as much. “I'm sure if you saw how little-but-kind-of-a-lot murderous you look, you'd disagree. I'd also point out you've already killed Rowle, Jugson, and Nott Sr's brother. Father was livid... not that I cared.” Draco had already mentioned who Harry managed to take out and none of them were really important.

“Let's be perfectly clear here Malfoy,” Harry states pointedly. “This isn't a game and I'm not pulling any punches. You put on Death Eater garb, terrorize, rape, pillage, plunder, you're dead to me. Dead! I only have one goal here, and that's killing Riddle. After that, equality for the Noble families and Magical Britain can sod off for all I care.”

“That's all I wanted to know,” Draco states putting his hand up in defeat. Harry curiously looks at him like, 'that was an odd thing to say,' that Draco has to respond. “What? It's not as if you sound like the Potter I knew. I just wanted to be sure you're still about the right things.”

“I'll admit I'm not the same. I've gone through horrors same as you. I have teeth now, that's all. And while I have zero empathy or patience for Death Eaters and those I know are responsible for what happened... will happen... may happen, it doesn't mean that I'm willing to just kill anybody who doesn't agree with me, or my way of doing things. I'm not your dark lord.”

“He's not my dark lord!” Draco announces, standing to his feet. After an intense stare down, Draco takes a seat. “So what do we do? What's your immediate plan?”

“For now we'll train,” Harry abruptly starts, moving past another minor altercation. “I need to do a few things which will be dangerous, so I need to know how well you can handle yourself.”

“Sounds good,” Draco says. “Dangerous or not, I'm all in.”

“We'll be doing physical conditioning as well, so be ready for strength training.”

Slight frown, Malfoy only nods before moving to leave. “You should get ready. I imagine you'll be in Gryffindor again. How do you want to meet up if we have to talk?”

“Afraid of being publicly associated with the enemy?” Harry eyes Malfoy, who only shakes his head at the jab. “If I have to talk to you, I'll walk straight to you. House lines don't mean anything compared with what we're doing.”

Draco nods his head and exits the compartment. Harry changes into his unaffiliated school robes and waits for the train to disembark. Once he's certain everyone is off, he exits the beautiful train with Nova on his shoulder. Stepping down the Hogsmeade platform, he looks around the familiar and beautiful station, taking in it's sight and sound as he reminisces on better days. He knows it's one of the many magical communities destroyed for not submitting to Voldemort's rule. Staring at it now, he can't help but feel guilty and resolute at the same time. Guilt for not stopping that animal when he should have and resolve to do all he can to keep it from happening again.
In the shadows and away from the carriages, Harry observes until the students dwindle and grab the last carriage. Harry spots two girls who didn't board the last few carriages—not for lack of space. The Slytherin's sense of entitlement simply won't allow two members of another house to ride with them. And Ravenclaw didn't seem to treat them any better. Well away from the groups, leaning against a column, Harry observes as he realizes these Ravenclaw girls just seem like the ones the school accepts to bully. The blonde's straggly waist-length hair immediately reminds him of Luna. Even the taller girl next to Luna, with lots of bushy brunette hair reminds him of Hermione. Thoughts of his friends always take him to a dark place.

“.....Bloody hell,” Harry chokes out, his eyes widening the millisecond he realizes both girls are his Luna and.. and... “Hermione.” Harry's knees buckle and he drops on them, using his hands to help keep him from completely falling flat on his face. He's vaguely aware of Nova shuffling to keep upright, or her coos of concern. Their eyes are the worst of his agony. Horcrux Voldemort once told him eyes are like windows to the soul and in Hermione and Luna's torture session he can easily see their suffering, fury, and their condemnation. Harry knows they blame him. He can see just see it. It's all his fault... his crime against humanity.

Harry focuses on his occlumency to fight back his tsunami of raging emotions. ‘It's alright,’ he tells himself. ‘They’re all alright now. Just save them this time and everything’ll be alright. Everything’ll be alright. It’ll be alright.’

In preparation for entering Hogwarts and expecting to run into his deceased friend's doubles, alive, happy and unaware of what they meant to each other, Harry finds that repeating this promise to himself, this mantra, helps him relax his explosive emotions and focus his unraveling mind. He knew he would see Luna, Hermione, Ron, Neville, the twins, but he hoped it would be one at a time. Certainly not together like this. A voice brings him out of his contemplation.

“Are you okay,” Hermione asks with concern, kneeling low to see him better. Harry looks up directly into her chocolate eyes, the light of life in them is so distinctly different from the magically preserved, dead head he remembers blankly staring at nothing for years in his cell. He's known Hermione's severed head almost as long as he's known her when she was alive. When he notices her concerned expression change to awkwardness, Harry tears his glassy eyes away and mentally repeats his mantra before getting to his feet.

“Yes,” Harry croaks, paying more attention to dusting his hands than looking directly at her. Still, he can feel the warmth of her a few steps away like a hug. “Yeah, I'm alright. Just slipped a little.”

“You have a beautiful phoenix,” Luna says in her familiar distant and dreamy voice, unimpressed about being so close to one.

Before Harry can say any word of gratitude, or Nova can even enjoy the compliment, Hermione notices the bird and shrieks. “That’s a phoenix!” She apparently saw him on the ground before she was aware of the phoenix. “Merlin, a real life phoenix. Oh, my! Oh my, oh my. I don't even know what to ask first.” Her excitement is palpable but Luna strikes the first question.

“Does she defecate on you often?” she easily asks. “I've seen studies that suggest bird droppings bring great fortune.”

“Of all things to ask...” Hermione mutters to herself, deflating a little.

Fortunately a carriage arrives for them and Harry points it out, ending the talk but for only a moment. Harry holds the door for them, which surprises Hermione as Luna just steps on. Once Harry is settled on one side, Hermione, seated on the other side next to Luna, rapid fires just a few of the questions he knows she can't help but ask.
“Are you allowed to bring a phoenix to Hogwarts? I don't believe that's ever happened as a student. Oh, what am I saying, of course you would. That's silly of me to ask. Where did you get him? Do phoenix' have genders? Have you had a chance to study it's tears? Can they truly heal all wounds? How many injuries have you tested against it's healing properties,” Hermione has a hard time controlling herself as she stares at the legendary creature, but when she looks at Harry, more specifically to his obvious and fake scares, she yelps. “I'm so very sorry,” she cries. “I didn't mean to imply- I didn't mean to point out your scar- your injuries.” Harry is about to reassure her he's not offended and truthfully he completely didn't think about it when she continues. “I also didn't mean to bombard you with so many questions. I've been told I say too much. Apologies... I'm a curious person by nature.” Harry doesn't like the slight pained look in her eyes before she leans away and draws into herself.

“She really is beautiful,” is all Luna adds in her sing-song voice, unbothered by Hermione's agitation.

It's the first time Harry wonders what their school life might be like without having met a Harry Potter in their past. It might also answer why he didn't see Hermione with Ron and Hardwin at the quidditch game. Harry doesn't like the idea of Luna or Hermione possibly having had a hard life just because he never attended Hogwarts in this version of time. Despite a rising need to encourage as well as make amends for not being there, he also felt caution and tact is necessary on how he interacts with them moving forward. As much as he values and cherishes their friendship, advice, and devotion, he'd also prefer to keep them from danger wherever possible. After all, he's only here to kill one man. It's not as if this is war that needs soldiers to win it. Rather than pitting army against army, his goal is closer to an assassination attempt, which only needs the smallest team possible.

So with a mix of cordial caution, he says to them, “I'm not actually sure if I can or can't have a phoenix on school grounds or in classes, but as you've probably guessed yourself, she's my familiar and as such cannot be separated from me. I got her from t- from my parents. Phoenix' don't have genders, but she feels like a she to me. Big as she is, she's still an infant so no tears just yet. It'd be nifty to have though. I almost never remember I have these scars, so, really, you have nothing to feel sorry about.” By the mid point of his response, Hermione comes out of her cover of hair and sits up with rapt attention that reminds him so much of his Hermione. “And her name is Nova,” Harry adds before looking at Nova. “Reckon you'd like to say hello?”

Nova extends her long neck and wings and coos and caws lightly.

“Hello,” Luna states with a small smile. “It's lovely to meet you too.”

“Hello,” Hermione adds herself before turning to Harry and smacking herself in the forehead with a hard slap. “Of course! How rude of me. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Hermione Granger. This is Luna Lovegood. And you are?”

Harry smiles at the familiar greeting before answering, “It's nice to meet you. Call me Ares.” He purposely leaves out the surname to avoid that bomb for as long as possible and moves along with a question of his own to avoid disclosing his connection as a member of the immortal family. “Are you both Ravenclaw? What year are you?”

“Yes, we are,” Hermione quickly answers. Harry never really wondered why Hermione ended up in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw. She's easily one of the bravest witches he knows and fits in well in the house of the brave, but overall, Harry will admit she's certainly more attune to Ravenclaw's studious ways. “I'm Ravenclaw fourth years; Luna is in third. I've noticed your
uniform doesn't have representative colors. How is it that you're not a member of a house, yet clearly older than a first year? If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say you're new to the school but older which means a transfer student. Is that the case? Ah, my apologies, I'm being intrusive, aren't I?"

Before Harry can reassure her, Luna interjects questions of her own. “Is your name inedible? Is that why you want to avoid saying your last name? Because it tastes bad in your mouth?” Luna easily asks with an air of welcome.

Harry's eyebrows can't help but rise at her astute question while Hermione whips on her friend, calling out, “Luna,” in a reprimanding tone. She turns to Harry and apologizes, “I apologize for my friend's rudeness. She didn't mean to imply anything untoward, I promise.”

It's disconcerting to hear Hermione apologize so much. Harry smiles a small reassuring smile and says, “it's okay, Ms. Granger. She's right. I was avoiding saying my last name, but not because it tastes bad,” he says with a smirk.

Hermione looks from Luna to Harry. “Well, even if you were, I'm sure you have your reasons, and it's not our place to pry,” she says to Luna with finality. “We've only just met after all.” Hermione says though in a low and shy voice.

Harry smiles wider, before stating, “maybe. But it is rude to withhold my whole name as well. It's Flamel, Ares Flamel.” Hermione's inquisitive knitting of her brow tells Harry she's likely tracking down the familiarity of the name through the massive maze of knowledge in her mind. It doesn't take her more than a second. Even Luna's eyes seem surprised... well, more so than normal.

“Flamel... as in thee Flamel?” Hermione asks. “As in Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel? As in the immortal alchemist, Flamel?” Her eyes are starving for confirmation. Harry only nods, trying to keep his amusement in when her jaw drops from the shock.

“I'd appreciate it if you kept that between us,” Harry asks lightly. “Not that it'll matter when they call my name to be sorted.” Harry is slightly worried about being sorted. Just knowing that the sorting hat might be powerful enough to enter Harry's well guarded mind as well as it's location in Dumbledore's office, makes Harry sick to his stomach with all the possible ways this can backfire on him.

Closing in on the school grounds, Harry abruptly feels the strength of the school's wards as they pass the entrance gate. It's not quite as powerful as he might've expected. Harry wonders a moment if something isn't as it should be and if he'll have to investigate it later. In Harry's mind, this is ground zero for his war and he want's to leave nothing to chance. If the school's wards aren't working as they should, he has to figure out why.

Nova is on Harry's knee while Hermione and Luna pet his phoenix. He's amused by how much Nova loves the attention when a big splash is heard that turns Harry's attention to the lake. Bursting out of the water is the imposing Bulgarian ship from Durmstrang. Harry's wondering if the canons work when he spots the carriage from Beauxbaton flies in from the depth of the dark sky and land somewhere to the side of the castle, likely somewhere near Hagrid's hut.

The girls notice his gaze and one look at the lake has Hermione asking, “that top sail has Durmstrang's emblem on it. What's Durmstrang doing here?”

Harry doesn't want to divulge too much for no reason, so answers, “I'm sure we'll learn soon enough.”

When the three exit the carriage, Hermione and Luna turn to Harry. “It was lovely to meet you Mr.
Flamel. And you Nova,” Hermione says happily. Nova flaps her wings once reciprocating the feeling.

“Ares, or Flamel is fine,” Harry tells her, still amazed to be seeing her again. He tries not to stare at them both but it’s hard not to. It seems they both seem to pick up on his weird energy.

“You have sad eyes,” Luna states as a matter of fact. She pulls out a copy of the Quibbler and extends it to him. “This should mostly cheer you up. It features an accurate article on Umgubular Slashkilter and how this fantastic creature is actually the Minister of Magic through it’s puppet, Cornelius Fudge.” She explains serenely.

Hermione shuts her eyes and tilts her head up as if praying for patience. Harry only nods graciously and takes the magazine. “Uh, thank you Ms. Lovegood.”

“You can call me Looney, if you want,” Luna starts telling him evenly, as unbothered by it as she is by most other offenses against her. “Most of the other classmates do. Even the teachers don’t mind.”

Before Hermione can say one word of protest, Harry answers, “I like Luna, if you don’t mind. I think that’s a good name.”

“My mother named me,” Luna says, turns and enters the castle. Hermione lingers a moment, as if tempted to either ask more or explain more, but finally decide to do the "polite" thing and not "bother." Her body language is very telling, Harry notes to himself. She quickly waves to him then rushes after the shorter dirty blonde.

“Nova, if you're ever in a position to protect them, do it,” Harry tells his familiar. “They're the best.” Nova coos and nods her beak. Turning to the boats of first years just starting to land on the shore, Harry decides to wait inside. There are a few groups of students, mostly older years, talking amongst themselves, catching up on each others summers as they watch the Durmstrang ship. It's the bit of time they have before the sorting starts to talk. Harry didn't need to enhance his hearing to hear them talk about the pandemonium that ensued after the quidditch world cup. Square shouldered, Harry moves toward the Great Hall and immediately a hush falls among the crowds nearest him as he moves further into the hall way. Harry can feel Nova get most of the attention, but he does note a few pointing to his scars.

Entering the Great Hall, his legs automatically move toward the Gryffindor table, but realizing a moment later that he hasn't been sorted, he stops himself and stands against the back wall instead. Crossing his arms, he takes it all in without focusing on any one spot. The four house tables are mostly sat and a grand majority of them are eying him or Nova, whispering, or talking loudly about him or his phoenix. He ignores nearly every student and spots Hardwin, Ron, the twins, even Ginny exactly where he would be sitting if this were his time line, looking towards him as well. After squashing his unstable emotions meeting Hermione and Luna, Harry has an easier time of seeing the Weasley's from a distance. From this range, managing his reactive emotions is perfectly doable.

Also not as surprising as Hermione being in Ravenclaw, Neville is sitting and talking with the Hufflepuffs, all attempting not to stare and talk about Harry or Nova. Hermione and Luna are sitting by themselves, away from the others; Luna with an exact copy of the quibbler she gave him, and Hermione reading a large, age-ravaged tome. It's so like them but there's an air of woe around them, as if they're accustomed to not speaking in a room full of other classmates. Again, Harry wonders why they're in this state. Even Neville looks like he has more friends than Hermione. It's an odd sort of eyeopener.
“That fucking ripple did a number on you guys,” Harry mutters to himself before taking a quick look at the professor's table.

The usual professors he recalls from his time line are still there; Hooch, Sinistra, Flitwick, Babbling—though he doesn't remember her being so beautiful—Vector and Trelawney, sitting and talking amongst themselves. Professor McGonagall should be here soon with the fresh crop of first years. Severus Snape is also seated with the other instructors and Harry almost chokes when he sees him talking jovially with his very own mother. She looks exactly how he remembers her; eye-catching red hair, green eyes and beautiful. Even from a distance, the sight of a living, breathing, smiling Lily Potter, has Harry taking deep quick breaths, using all his focus on trap down hard on his raging whirlpool of emotions; longing, anger, sadness, joy, fear, shame, envy, love, anticipation, all mixing and parting so intensely, Harry doesn't even know how he feels. His Occlumency is working hard to keep as stable and sharp of mind as possible, when he suddenly feels a gentle graze against his mental shields—imperceptible to most maybe, but not him.

Harry pushes off leaning against the wall, lowering his hands in case he has need of his wand. Nova flaps her wings, creating a gust and drawing in the attention of nearly everyone in the great hall. The mental graze is gone but Harry locks eyes with Dumbledore, the twinkle in his stare nearly gone before Harry realizes the old man tried to enter his mind.

It takes a deep breath and five seconds for him to absorb that intrusion, that violation from someone he trusted so much. How high of an opinion does this miserable bastard have about himself that he feels completely comfortable illegally entering the mind of a minor without consent? Horcrux-Voldemort pointed at the twinkling of the headmaster's eyes as a dead give away for the use of legilimency. The parasite had a good laugh throughout Harry's many heavy denials, and he denied it desperately. Harry stares at the genial Headmaster, no one in the great hall the wiser, until the older man looks away to have a conversation with Flitwick.

Harry feels a presence walk towards him, but he pays little attention to the approaching figure because he knows it's Malfoy. Something about his loyalty oath just helps him detect the blonde better. He's still staring at the Headmaster when he hears Malfoy awkwardly say, “Flamel.”

Harry lets out a calming exhale and returns to leaning against the wall, his arms crossed and Nova relaxing. “You're going to have to work on that, Malfoy,” he answers. “It sounds terrible.”

“Can you give me more than a couple hours with it,” Draco returns hotly.

Harry ignores Draco's haughtiness and tells him, “I hope you worked on your shields like I told you to. I just felt a light tap from our holier than thou headmaster.”

Twisting around enough to look behind him at the professors, Malfoy is more surprised that Harry would talk about the great and much beloved Albus Dumbledore that way than he is about the headmaster using legilimency on a student. He turns back to Harry and reassures him, “I have. You can test them if you want.”

“Later,” Harry answers, ignoring the look of disgust the Gryffindors are sending Draco. ‘I see the bitter rivalry between houses is still alive,’ he thinks.

“I thought I'd mention before the sorting, someone was hiding.” Draco stops talking with a deep scowl from Harry.

Harry casts a quick and wandless muffliato. “You really need to learn to think before you speak. What if someone is listening? There are ears everywhere.”
Draco has the decency to look reticent, before clearing his throat and continuing. "Yeah. So, while you were dueling the Death Eaters, someone witnessed nearly the whole thing."

"Do they know it was me?" Harry pointedly asks.

" Doesn't seem like it," Draco answers. "Tracey Davis is saying he gave his memory to the Aurors, but he was too far away to get a good look. It was dark and apparently your eyes were glowing green, so it made it hard to make out your face. They're calling you the Green Reaper by the way. Still, the wizard sold his memory to the Daily Prophet, pissing off Black, her soon-to-be step-father for obstructing an active investigation. It looks like multiple fronts are trying to track you down, and honestly I'd be more worried about Rita Skeeter than the DMLE."

"If you're ever talking about sensitive information, keep your eyes peeled for a beetle on you or anyone else. Skeeter is unregistered animagus. That's how she gets all those inside stories. If you can, trap her in an unbreakable jar." Harry states when he notices Hardwin and Ron get up from their places at the Gryffindor table. For a moment Harry wonders if they've somehow figured out a way to listen in. Harry's pretty certain Fred and George haven't invented their extendable ears yet, and they don't know enough at this point to break through his privacy charm.

"Also, I should warn you," Draco continues. "I can't say for certain it'll happen, but I wouldn't be surprised if father pushes Fudge to lean heavily of the DMLE to press charges on the Green Reaper for... well, you know, killing wizards-"

"Death Eaters," Harry corrects quickly and hotly. "If it wasn't such a colossal waste of time, I'd almost be tempted to tell them it was "Ares Flamel," just to see them shit themselves." Harry clocks Hardwin and Ron walking to them. Ron leans over, whispering to Hardwin, obviously stoked out to see a phoenix. "Malfoy?"

"Yeah."

"Be nice," Harry commands plainly as he easily removes the charm with a wave of his hand. Malfoy turns around when Ron and Hardwin step up to them, first staring at Nova, then Malfoy, Harry's scars, and finally Harry. Hardwin's eyes linger on Nova and Ron can't make up his mind between staring at Harry's scars or his phoenix familiar. Harry waits comfortably against the wall, feeling confident his emotions won't run amok around Ron, even with his guilt over his best mate's murder. Ron just has a natural way of calming him down or drawing a laugh when you really needed one. Though the more he thinks about his Ron the more he feels sadness start to creep in by the loss and quickly holds it at bay.

"He's not even sorted, Malfoy, and already you're looking for another victim to initiate," Hardwin starts on Draco, who only answers by way of barely restrained sneer. Upon closer inspection, Harry notes that they could in fact be brothers, but definitely not identical twins. Hardwin is taller, rounder in the face and shoulders. Clearly he's playing quidditch with intent. His hair is a similar mess of unruly locks, but brown instead of jet black and his most striking feature is the lightning shaped scar on his forehead, which is displayed proudly with his hair parted to the sides. Pushing aside the surreal thought of suddenly having a twin brother, Harry focuses on Ron.

"As if this school didn't have enough snakes," Ron adds with a sneer geared towards Malfoy. Ron is just as Harry remembered him, in fourth year, except his robes are new instead of the bargain quality hand-me-downs his family are known for wearing. The tone in his comment isn't very surprising for Harry to hear, but knowing that Draco won't retaliate adds a small measure of distaste to it.
“Just being welcoming,” is all Malfoy says, evenly, without his usual pompous and condescending tone.

“And you without your branding iron,” Hardwin remarks snidely, then turns to Harry. “Are you by chance, Ares?” When Harry nods Hardwin smirks. “Sweet. Actually, we were looking for you on the Hogwarts Express. Headmaster Dumbledore let us know we should take good care of you while you're here.”

The mention of Dumbledore's good intended gesture feels like a noose around Harry's neck, though he can't tell if the rope is for hanging him or leading him around like cattle. It can just as easily be both when it comes to Dumbledore, though Harry tries not to let the agitation show on his face when he says, “I must've missed you.”

“I reckon it'd be hard to miss you,” Ron quips, nodding at his phoenix with a smirk. Ron tilts his head at Malfoy, before pleasantly warning Harry. “You'll soon find out that some wizarding families are more genuine and considerate than others,” Ron states with a ring of familiarity. “You wouldn't want to go making friends with the wrong sort, would ya? You've no doubt heard of this bloke,” Ron says, shrugging in Hardwin's direction, with amusement. “I'm Ron Weasley.”

“Not everyone's heard of me, Ron,” his brother ribs Ron with a proud smile before turning to Harry. “I'm Hardwin, Hardwin Potter.”

They both stick their hands out in warm greeting but Harry is more surprised at how nearly identical Ron's greet is to how Draco first introduced himself, before their sorting. The switch of roles between Malfoy and Ron is so jarring Harry doesn't feel emotionally overcharged as he did moments before. Harry momentarily notes that nearly every eye in the room is on them, waiting breathless. For what, Harry couldn't say but he shakes each hand. “I'm Ares. Pleasure,” he says tightly.

“How'd you like to sit with us,” Hardwin asks, half turning expecting a yes.

“There's plenty of room at the Gryffindor table,” Ron adds. “Best table in the house, they say.” Hardwin laughs a little and for a moment, Harry feels envious of their companionship; to be able to laugh with Ron again seems so impossible and not at the same time. Harry can feel the waves of impassioned longing to be best mates again start to rise, but he quickly stamps it down, still.

Clearing his throat, Harry tells them with an even tone, “I haven't been sorted yet. I'll just wait here, but thank you for the offer.”

Both Ron and Hardwin seems a little taken by being brushed away so easily, but before any more can be said, Professor McGonagall walks into the Great Hall, escorting all the first years to line before the Sorting Hat. Hardwin and Ron take their seat. Malfoy and Ares share a nod before Draco returns to his seat.

The sorting moves along exactly as Harry remembers. He's surprised however when his name isn't called with the other "F's." For a moment he panics, assuming the heir-apparent ring didn't work. It isn't until they pass where "P's" that Harry realizes, Dumbledore wants to make a bit of a show with his introduction. And true to his suspicion, Dumbledore stands and addresses the whole of the large room.

“Before I make a few start-of-term notices, I'd like to invite a new student to be sorted. He has been home-schooled until recently by very dear friends of mine, so lets all be helpful where ever possible.” Dumbledore nods to professor McGonagall. As the old man retakes his seat, she calls out, “Flamel, Ares.”
Harry ignores the eruption of hushed yammering, or gasps and pointing at either Nova or his scars as he ponders how this is going to go. Walking between tables, he ignores everyone and takes a tentative seat on the stool. Harry pats his lap, Nova flaps her wings and lands on his thigh, sinking her sharp talons in. Harry takes in a deep nervous breath as the sorting hat is placed on his head by McGonagall.

In no time at all, Harry hears a voice in his mind but without the cruel violation sensation that is the standard legilimens mind-rape. It seems to Harry no amount of occlumency shields can stop whatever magic the Sorting Hat is imbued with, which is impressive considering the intellect he's inherited from the parasite.

'Hmmm, difficult, very... well you're certainly a lot older than I'm used to- ...What the bloody hell?!' the voice gasps.

'Uh, I can explain. Oh Merlin, please let me explain,' Harry mentally pleads.

'No need for that Mr. Potter! I can see it all here, clear as day.' The voice returns with a hint of haunting. 'I can't say I was expecting to see proof of prophecy today. Godric, to say you've seen your share of horrors is certainly the understatement of the century.'

'To put it lightly, yeah,' Harry mentally shrugs it off. It seems there is nothing the hat can't see and as such, he needs to know, more than anything, it won't tell Dumbledore or anyone else for that matter.

'There's no need to worry about that Mr. Potter,' the hat responds after reading his unspoken thoughts. Harry isn't sure if thinking, or thinking in conversation with the sorting hat matters.

'It doesn't,' the hat answers. 'And to answer your concerns, anything and everything I may learn from all who wear me are kept completely confidential. So much so in fact, it wouldn't be too far of a stretch to say I forget everything the moment you take me off. The enchantments placed on me forbid me, in every way, from disclosing your thoughts and knowledge to another, even the headmaster. On a personal note, I don't think I'd even want to know such monumental information.'

'No worries there. It's going to the grave with me,' Harry answers.

'If it didn't seem like you're expecting to see an early grave, I'd think little to nothing about that comment,' the hat notes in gloomy doom.

'I can't expect to kill, arguably the greatest dark lord in history, and survive,' Harry honestly states. 'At best, I'm expecting some form of mutually assured destruction.'

'And this is a burden only you can carry is it?' the sorting hat questions.

'This is how it has to be,' Harry returns. 'Not because I want it to, but because there is no one else. Unless you have a better plan, there isn't another way.'

'The great never know by which way they tumble and fall because there is by way and large, more than one. Wouldn't the best result come from utilizing more than one method to bring the dark lord to ruin?'

'Are we really going to talk about this now?' Harry thinks, unclear why a conversation with the Sorting Hat will help his goal of killing Voldemort—he's going to kill him no matter what. Even if, by some miracle, Voldemort was somehow a good person in this time line, Harry would kill him out of spite—his commitment is that deep. 'Can't you just put me in Gryffindor and wish me luck?'
'If you would indulge an old hat, Mr. Potter. It's true there isn't much I can do to help you. I am only connected to a building after all, but knowledge is always a factor in war. Isn't it worth some of your time to hone your logic against the perspective of another?'

'It's not going to change anything,' Harry weakly returns.

'I only wish to help in the limited way I can,' The Hat easily counters.

'...I suppose,' Harry renders. 'Unless you're going to tell me I should be recruiting my own squad and take them to battle—possibly die for me—when they could just as easily stay away. I won't ever agree to that. It'd be for the best if I just killed the dark maggot myself.'

'I'm not meant to tell you what to do. You make your own choices, but if I can help your powers of selection, than I'll feel fulfilled. And I don't mean to imply you actively seek an army of warriors, however I will say a lot more people are involved in the outcome than just one man. Shouldn't they also have a chance to fight in this war?'

'This isn't a war,' Harry returns. 'I'm the only one who can destroy him. I failed last time, and everyone died because of it. I won't let that happen again!'

'You're vow to this enormous undertaking is admirable and while I don't fault your logic, I do ask you keep an open mind to the possibility of allies. As I've already stated, the risk to the future affects everyone. Mr. Malfoy has already pledged his assistance to this cause. I ask you don't turn away a helping hand simply because you'll feel responsibility for their well being.'

'Even if it means their death?' Harry returns. 'Because that's what'll most likely happen.'

Somehow Harry feels the hat lower it's head glumly. 'Yes even then, I'm saddened to say,' the hat solemnly states. 'Everyone has the right to protect themselves and their loved ones. You may have been selected by destiny to accomplish this undertaking but nowhere does it say you must do it alone. It would be a gross misuse of your vast strength to impede on another person's right to fight simply because it might be dangerous.'

'There's no 'might be' about it,' Harry returns heatedly. He's not angry at the hat but thinking about the future and his failures to prevent so much destruction always fans his passions. 'It's the most danger anyone can put themselves in. Worse if they follow me. Malfoy, I couldn't do anything about, but I'm not going to simply let anyone go against that madman or his henchmen when they don't have to. That'd be just as irresponsible.'

'I only ask you keep an open mind. Aside from Mr. Malfoy and the Flamels, I'd say more help will be required. I also feel like assistance will present itself in ways we cannot foresee.'

'Couldn't the room of requirement help,' Harry asks trying to find an avenue away from this topic. He did briefly wonder if the room might be able to create an instructor but it sounded far too good to be true.

'The room of requirement can do many things but nothing more than setting assimilation,' the hat answers before rearing back to the topic at hand. 'A fine place to training yourself and others, not exactly the help you'll need to battle the forces of evil.'

'This isn't a battle,' Harry annoyingly protests. 'It's not a war either. At most, it's a targeted strike. There's only one thing that needs killing, and if anyone is stupid enough to get in the way, they deserve lay in the ground right next to him.'

'Against this evil and the likely outcome, I'd agree. A hard hand will be necessary... but so will
more than one,' the hat easily adds. 'It's not as if we're asking you to befriend everyone involved. Keep your distance if you must, but don't turn away good help. That will only minimize the chances of success and we must not let that future happen again—even if it makes you uncomfortable to work with others.'

Harry mentally exhales with some frustration. He wasn't exactly expecting to get schooled by a hat today.

'I wasn't expecting to help avert the end of the world either, but life rarely asks permission,' the hat returns.

After a moment Harry remarks, 'I'll try my best not to turn away appropriate, useful, or durable help, but I won't make any promises.'

'That's fair,' the hat states with some levity. 'Now, where to put you...'

'What do you mean,' Harry asks confused. 'I need to be in Gryffindor to be close to Hardwin, even if he seems a bit full of himself.'

'I don't believe that's the case,' the hat theorizes. 'This is only my guess but I do not believe he has a horcrux in his scar.'

Harry very nearly physically whips around on the stool hearing that. Unbeknownst to Harry, it's eerily silent in the great hall as his sorting nears the record of seven minutes and forty-seven seconds set by Dumbledore himself. When Harry sits up after the hat's belief about Hardwin, everyone shifts expecting a house to be yelled, but when none is called they return to murmuring about Harry instead.

'What?' he ponders heavily, his mind already speeding through this theory and how feasible it might be. 'Why do you say that? Did you not see the horcrux when you first sorted him?'

'I am unable to speak about his sorting as I would be unable to tell others about yours. First you must understand that I am not all-knowing. I can see what is in your mind, your thoughts, but not it's make up, so if you have a foreign soul imbedded in your own, I'd be able to see the culmination of attributes as a whole, but not the physical or spiritual make up that affects those thoughts.'

'Like being blind to what's causing me pain. If I don't know where or why I'm hurting, you wouldn't know either. All you would know is that I'm hurting.' Harry asks for clarity.

'Crude example but serviceable, yes,' the hat agrees. 'The reason I feel your brother may not have a horcrux in his head comes from this memory of your previous sorting. I'm unable to see the horcrux specifically, but I am able to see it's traits as a part of you. It's the reason why I suggested Slytherin for your house, even if I couldn't see the soul shard responsible for the Slytherin attributes. Without it, you would be Gryffindor material easily. With it, you display the qualities of both Gryffindor and Slytherin. I will not divulge the details of Mr. Potter's sorting, however, I can attest he is most assuredly Gryffindor material.'

'...So, if he didn't have the qualities of Slytherin, it's possible it's because he doesn't have the Horcrux that would've swayed your suggestion.'

'This may only be a guess but I'd say as much, yes.

'But it could also be the way he was raised...”' Harry muses. “I'd imagine he came from a happier home. I mean we were raised differently.'
'It's possible, but I look for other habits aside from how happy a child is to suggest Slytherin. It's worth some investigating at the very least.'

'All the more reason to be around Hardwin,' Harry reasons before his mind catches up. 'No, never mind. It would only be the right move if he in fact does have the Horcrux. Otherwise I'd be surrounded by well intentioned Dumbledore lovers who'd easily keep him informed of anything I do.'

'And should that be the case,' the hat reasons. 'Slytherin would be more advantageous to your overall goal. You need the locket and currently, befriending Miss Tracey Davis gives you a high likelihood of gaining entrance to House Black's estate without having to break in.'

'Not to mention being in the middle of the snake pit, from which all future Death Eaters reside will be a good way to keep tabs on their parents,' Harry states with a feral murderous tone. 'And the icing on the cake... it'll frustrate the piss out of Dumbledore!'

While Harry hears the hat laugh in his mind, he has no idea that the hat is also laughing aloud to a speechless crowd on the outside. 'Yes! I'd say so, very much,' the hat chuckles. 'Sometimes I don't know whether to praise him or curse him. Oh, my!' the hat halts a moment and Harry wonders if something is wrong seconds before the hat's voice returns. 'It seems a request has been made on behalf of Salazar Slytherin.'

Harry opens a space in his mind to take in new information he was not expecting. It's beginning to be a habit in this new time line, and he can honestly say it's very frustrating to plan around. Still, he asks, 'what do you mean?'

'Well it seems obvious you are bound to Slytherin House and unknown to every witch or wizard on Hogwarts grounds, a shade of each founder exists,' the hat states. It's certainly news to Harry. His logic takes a bit of a leap and wonders if this has something to do with the apparent weakness of the Hogwarts wards. Harry shelves it for later when the sorting hat continues. 'They are in me as they are within the very walls of this castle, and no founder is more upset by the state of their house than Salazar Slytherin himself. I'd like you to understand, it takes a lot to speak to me like this and for Slytherin to do so risks great unbalance.'

Harry mental shakes his head with the smallest hint of frustration and a great degree of patience. 'Okay,' Harry declares. 'What can I do for... Salazar Slytherin,' Harry slowly states, realizing that Salazar Slytherin is actually making a request of him.

'He feels his house is in shambles, led be weak-minded prejudicial thugs and fostered by incompetent faculty. He requests you be the example of what a Slytherin can be. He requests you be a basilisk in a pit of snakes.'

'Ooh, so nothing too serious,' Harry sarcastically says before returning to his serious tone. 'How the bloody hell am I suppose to do that? I'm not even a real Slytherin.'

'Can't say for sure,' the hat easily responds, bothered none about the request. 'Can't ask him either. He's already gone. I'm sure you'll figure it out. Enjoy your time in... SLYHERIN!"' the sorting hat yells like a canon in the highly anticipated hall. The suspense before the exuberant call even startled a few older hearts among the elder staff to start beating hard.

The Great Hall was silent.

Chapter End Notes
I love dialogue. It's my thing. But this one just wasn't clicking for me. I tried my best and I really hope the general ideas I was trying to convey a bit more eloquently than this is at least clear. Thanks for reading! The support has been amazing. Till next time.
Harry meets the Snakes and understands more of what was asked of him by Salazar Slytherin.

Apologies for the short chapter. Tooth aches, headaches and dentist visits was the entirety of my free time this past week. Still I hope you enjoy and I’ll try to post what can be considered the part 2 of this chapter sooner than I normally update.

Upon taking off the sorting hat, the accents of his robe and uniform change to the deep green and silver colors of Slytherin as Nova hops back on his shoulder. After the moment of stunned silence, the Slytherin table shout and holler like triumphant maniacs, as if Harry was some ultimate once-in-a-lifetime prize they had won and can now lord over the rest of the school. Most everyone else are motionless, though Gryffindor seem to be the first to break out of their stunned detachment to glare at him.

It's amazing how fast that instant hate appears, he thinks to himself as he ignores everyone's chatting or glare, and makes his way to Slytherin table.

Even among the professors, only Flitwick, smiling as he graciously does and Snape, with a blank expression, clap properly. His mother, which he now has a better view of is clapping very slowly, unsure of how to react. Harry wonders how much she knew about Dumbledore's suggestion for Hardwin to "watch out" for him. He shouldn't care really, not after her part in whatever happened to this-Harry. He tries not to look directly at her, not simply for the sake of his fiery emotions, but also because if anyone could connect his resemblance to James Potter, it would be her, and possibly Sirius. Luckily, Nova is on the shoulder blocking most of his face from the professors direct view.

Harry looks over the excited Slytherins and spots an empty space beside Malfoy. Better the devil you know, he mentally says with a physical shrug. He takes a seat next to a surprised and confused Malfoy—the only one he can see not clapping. Harry can see Draco wants to ask him how this unnatural turn of events happened but Harry isn't willing to explain anything in front of so many people, or very little in private. He tells Malfoy, “later,” and Nova hops on the table to the wonderment of everyone nearby. Harry's grateful he doesn't have to tell anyone not to touch her as they wait for Dumbledore's start-of-term notices.
Draco leans in and says, “That barmy madness took nearly ten minutes. You shattered the record for longest sorting.” Draco looks around his classmates. To the left of Draco is Crabbe and Goyle, ahead of him is Nott, Parkinson and Zabini, on Harry's right is Greengrass and Davis. Draco notes many of them, along with the older years, are trying very hard not to look at the phoenix on the table, pruning it's feathers in front of Harry, or at his eye-catching scars. Most of them fail utterly, while others have a look of sheer greed or envy in their eyes. Draco can understand. In their minds, this is the son of the immortal alchemist who's philosophers stone can turn any base metal into gold. They easily see Harry as potentially being the wealthiest wizard in all of Britain. And with great wealth comes great power.

“I could care less,” Harry plainly voices as he massages the base of Nova's neck. It's nice to shower his phoenix with affection but truthfully, Harry needed to do something with his hands. Seated amongst so many future Death Eaters, he could feel them twitching for deadly action. There's a strong argument in his mind that he can save a lot of lives by killing them all now—Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, the Carrows and who knows how many others—and the only thing keeping his hand, besides Nova, is that it might do more harm to the future than good. What makes sitting among them so much worse is they all look eager to embrace him into their narrow minded fold, as if he believes and agrees in their superiority nonsense.

“Does that also include being Slytherin,” Draco whispers. “Because I never saw that coming.”

Any further conversation is suspended for the moment as Dumbledore goes through his usual start of term pitter-patter. Before he can introduce the delegations joining them for the year, Harry's number one target bars through the Great Hall doors. Dumbledore introduces the new Defense Against the Dark Art's professor, Alastor Moody, but a careful eye of his lip and eventually Harry spots it—the tell-tale sign of a quick lick of his lips. A key figure in the enemy's organization, Barty Crouch Jr, features very prominently in Harry's plan to destroy Voldemort, or at the very least, hinder the monster severely by eliminating the zealot. Harry can feel his magic start to boil with savage want at the mere thought of Barty Jr's ability to walk around breathing, as if he deserves to live. Harry forcibly returns his focus on Nova, using her as a focal point to regain control.

Harry pays enough attention to understand Dumbledore is speaking and the delegation from Beauxbaton and Durmstrang are making their flamboyant entrances, but it's hardly the amount of focus he's diverting to the best way to bring Crouch down. The two problems he's facing is Moody's eye, and the potential for collateral damage. They're in a school full of children and the last thing he wants is casualties. He'll have to be careful of all the methods of detection Moody would no doubt have for Crouch to use—most notably, his eye—and no matter what, he can't do it around any witnesses, whether they be human, ghost, or portrait.

*I really wish I had the Maruader's Map*, Harry mentally yearns.
The only time Harry pauses his mental calculations is to evaluate Fleur's condition when the Beauxbaton students enter the great hall. He never had the chance to check her over before flaming away and was worried her injuries might've been more serious than what he could see. He scanned the prophet and the french paper for any mention of Delacour, injured or not, and found none, which he took as a good sign. The Delacours are a prominent family and if one of theirs was seriously injured or killed, he's sure it would've been reported. Seeing her now, beautifully smiling, charming almost every man, women and ghost in the room, Harry feels a sense of relief. After her graceful dance number and curtsy, the Beauxbaton delegation take their seats at the Ravenclaw table.

Harry ignores most of the murmur surrounding Krum as the Durmstrang delegation take their seat at Slytherin table. While nearly all eyes were gazing at the international quidditch sensation, Harry notes that Malfoy doesn't attempt to make conversation with the Bulgarian this time. The silver-blond hair scion makes no move to greet Krum, reminding him yet again that Draco is much older than he looks and has suffered more than most in the room.

The rest of the announcements are as Harry remembers them before they're finally allowed to eat, and everyone bombards him with questions. Harry is preparing a plate for Nova when Pansy Parkinson blurts out loudly, “Is that a real phoenix? Why is it black? Shouldn't it be red?” at the same time Theodore Nott asks, “are you really the son of the immortal alchemist? Does that mean your immortal too?” Zabini and Greengrass don't ask him anything as they eat their dinner, but Harry can tell they're listening as intently as everyone close enough is.

When Harry doesn't immediately answer with the same zeal everyone seems to be possessed with, Tracey Davis asks, “Why did Draco walk up to you earlier? Are you friends or something?”

Realizing he wants to remain open to relations—he wouldn't say friendships—he knows he should answer, but establishing his character is also integral. He has fake scars for a reason. Playing the damaged persona fits his mind frame and keeps him from being a talker. Harry prepares his own plate before answering. “It's a real phoenix. No, I'm not immortal. And I've known Malfoy a while,” he answers vaguely before snapping his deathly white pine wand out of his wrist holder and into his hand, causing several eyes to spring up confused.

“Is that your wand,” Pansy asks aghast as he starts casting detection charms over the food. Harry notices Draco stop eating, put his fork-full down and waits, seemingly for the okay from him. The majority of those close enough are looking at him oddly.

“Hello,” the girl beside Harry greets him. “I'm Daphne Greengrass, heiress of Noble House Greengrass” she says cordially.
She smells nice, he thinks then mentally berates himself for the useless thought. Aside from her
gracefully stunning face, Harry can't say he knows this blonde beauty well, or much at all. He
purposefully has to dive in the archives of his perfect recall for her profile. In his time line, he's
seen her a number of times around school, but never has directly interacted with her—not that he
would, being Gryffindor. Harry faintly remembers the boys in the commons giving her a very high
rank among all the girls in school. She turned a lot of heads and possibly broke a lot of hearts.
Other than that, he doesn't recall her head on the prison wall, so there's a good chance she became a
Death Eater or the wife of one—though possibly not by choice. He finishes scanning his food
before responding in just a cordial a manner as her. “Hello. I'm Ares Flamel.”

When Harry begins to eat, Draco does as well, while making a mental note of the Green Reaper's
social snub. Draco will have to talk with Harry about it later but for now he says nothing, since it
would only make it worse. Greengrass continues, “May I ask why you're examining your food?”

The way everyone is feasting on his replies as much as the delicious food in front of them is more
annoying than when he was the Boy-Who-Lived. It's making him feel like a caged animal in a zoo.
Harry answers her simply because she was the only one to introduce herself. Everyone else was too
impressed by his phoenix or his surname to even be polite. Greengrass and Zabini at least kept
their cool. “I didn't see the house elves prepare it,” is all Harry answers. When he sees Greengrass's
brows move together, confused, he explains further. “I can't be sure there isn't anything poisonous
or worse in this if I didn't see it made.”

“You think someone would actually poison your food?” Greengrass asks startled.

“It's happened before,” Harry offhandedly states, trying very hard to ignore the memory of cursed
or rotten food they would give him in prison. They thought it was funny to give Harry a genuine
fear of food and would randomly poison what they gave him so he'd always have to guess. When
Horcrux-Voldemort eventually made him realize that they couldn't kill him, Harry ate anything
they gave him, poisoned, cursed, or not, because his hunger trumped his immediate safety. At least
being sick gave him something to do.

Harry is vaguely aware that his action has drawn some attention from his professors, most notably
Dumbledore and Snape, when Parkinson takes another stab at getting some answers. “I'm heiress
Pansy Parkinson, of Noble House Parkinson. Can you tell us how you got your phoenix?”

“Certainly,” Harry feigns in a higher tone than normal. He notices immediately many ears perk up
at this stunning revelation, including Draco, though in his case it's more shock. “If you take a
chicken egg and stick it on the very top of your head. It has to be the very top—that's important.
And walk around with a chicken egg on the top of your head for thirty consecutive days, it'll hatch
a phoenix.” Please, oh please, let some Slytherin idiot try, Harry mentally pleads.
“Really?” Parkinson asks excited. “Is that really what you did?”

“Would I lie?” Harry responds far too innocently. In a feat of impressive timing, Nova flaps her powerful wings lending authenticity to the prank, and blowing away anything that doesn't weigh much. To his left, Draco is grinning widely and his shoulders shake as he silently laughs to himself. To his right, Daphne does everything she can to maintain her composure but the upward tick of her full lips and knitted brow are obvious give-aways.

Even the well dressed Zabini, who held no expression of humor, states, “that's a good one.” Harry doesn't remember much of the tall, dark-skinned boy besides following him once and a comment he made to Ginny.

“Theodore Nott,” Nott announces. “Heir and future head of Noble House Nott.” Harry is going to have to ask Draco why they all insist on adding their houses to their names like it's suppose to mean something. “So, you're a true Flamel, aren't you? Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House Flamel?”

Harry takes his sweet time chewing, amazed they're actually ruining the delicious taste of the food. Harry and the Flamels were expecting the question, even expecting to make the paper in a day or two’s news cycle, but it's still annoying to hear. Once he swallows his food, he simply answers, “Do you know any others?”

Nott looks around before replying, “Well, no, but for all we know you could've been raised by some bottom feeding muggles with the same name and be a mudblood yourself, eh Draco?” Nott nods to Draco with a wide grin, expecting a laugh, but none is forthcoming. Draco continues to eat, and oddly enough that bewilders everyone but Harry.

Harry grips his fork tighter at the blasé manner Nott so casually uses that slur, fanning that fire of emotions within. Having been raised by the worst muggles, Harry is acutely aware that bigotry and prejudice have nothing to do with one's blood. It's exactly like Salazar Slytherin claimed. Weak-minded fools who form opinions based on the claims of other prejudicial idiots; treat their "lesser" like little more than cattle simply because they weren't born into the right family.

Harry tilts his head and squints his eyes as he responds in a tone thick with sarcasm. “Oh, yeah, because it's so simple to be home schooled in magic, by non-magical parents, and still transfer straight into fourth your. Yes, I think you might be on to something there.”

Draco leans over and hardly whispers, “I wouldn't be surprised if I see an egg on his head tomorrow.”
At that, Harry snorts and smirks when Tracey interjects, “I've noticed you haven't answered the question. Are you really related to the immortal alchemist? Or would you simply prefer we believe you are with no proof.”

Again, everyone who is close enough has an ear open for his answer. Personally, he doesn't care what they believe but he'd rather get this out of the way. The faster they learn, the quicker they’ll stop bugging him about it. Instead of responding to her, Harry extends his hand and allows the official heir ring of House Flamel to show with a small flash of white. It's a thick ring with a clear emblem and letter F on its face. Since many of them are heirs themselves, they should spot its authenticity. “I suppose that would be hard to fake, Miss?”

“Tracey Davis, soon to be Black,” she states then adds, “Of Noble and Most Ancient House Black.” Her smile tells Harry how much she enjoys the title and status.

“Heir-apparent,” Harry states obscuring the ring again. “Not that it matters much when the head of your house is immortal.” Harry can see the ring send a ripple throughout the Slytherin table, up to the Durmstrang representatives, but not beyond. Not to say the Hufflepuffs didn't hear or spot his ring, then alerted anyone else who'll listen. It's just Slytherin's refuse to cross house lines, even to pass along obviously juicy gossip.

“Does that mean that you're immortal-” Nott starts but is interrupted by Draco.

“Oh will you let the man bloody well eat in peace,” Draco declares not only to Nott but anyone else who wants to bother Harry with questions. As if a silent Malfoy wasn't shocking enough to these Slytherins, he also defends without using his fathers name, bragging or campaigning for favors. Tracey in particular seems the most suspicious.

Harry raises his brows in pleasant surprise a moment before returning to his meal graciously. He's relatively quiet after that and Draco doesn't push for conversation any more than the others, which he's grateful for. Soon the meal clears and the student body is greeted goodnight before the prefects lead everyone to their houses. Heading down to the dungeons with Draco at his elbow, Harry felt weird traveling down rather than up toward Gryffindor commons and with Draco no less, instead of Ron and Hermione.

They reach a stone wall, and their prefect, a tall, large boy says loudly and clearly, “Brotherhood.” The bumpy faced prefect then begins to explain that the password will change every month, posted on the notice board and should you forget it, you'll have to wait outside until someone lets you in. The wall moved to the side and they all entered the Slytherin common room. It's exactly like Harry remembered it the one time Ron and himself snuck in their second year. The room's color pallet is
a variety of blacks, greens, silvers or dark oak. Even the lighting throughout the room gives off a greenish hue. It's furnished with ornate and plush looking couches, chairs and tables, scattered throughout the cavernous room. And there are snake ornaments everywhere! Almost every fixture has some sort of snake motif or carving on it.

Harry notices that none of the upper years have retreated to their rooms, but take up the best seats in front of the largest fireplace. The entire house remains in the spacious common room as the gruff prefect with a nose that's been hit with too many bludgers addresses the first years in an arrogant and commanding voice. “Settle down! I am your seventh year prefect, Zemdai Khan. Allow me to be the first to welcome you into the noble house of Slytherin. As members of this prestigious house, you will abide by it's rules and it's... unique expectations without question.” He grins disgustingly to the first years. Harry notices many of the sixth and seventh year boys smirking and nodding their heads with their prefect, but none of the girls express a similar vigor, and their body language reads as stiff to him.

"First off, you are Slytherin as much as Slytherin is you, but only as far as the best you have to offer. That means you're only really Slytherin when you are exemplary. To fail in any aspect of your time here is to fail your house and your housemates. Gain as many house points as possible, be better than the rest and never be late. The other prefects will help guide you to your classes to make sure you know where they are.” Khan puts his hands behind his wide back and begins to slowly walk around the first years, not unlike a shark prowling for prey.

“Second, never give others the opportunity to catch you alone. This is the best house in Hogwarts. That means the other houses will do everything they can to humiliate and hurt us because they feel inferior to us. You must never give them the chance. Always stay with at least one other Slytherin, even if you have to go to the lavatory.” Khan is eyeing many of the first years hard enough to intimidate them. Being two or three times their size, he must seem like a monster glaring down on to them.

“Third. A part of the reason why we are so great is because we don't care if you're out to break the rules,” Khan waits for some of the surprised first years settle their bemusement. “It's true. This is the house of the cunning. If you do something the rules say you're not supposed to, it doesn't matter... SO LONG AS YOU DON'T GET CAUGHT,” he yells. Harry doesn't like that open invitation for wanton mayhem. It can lead to all sorts of deplorable trouble.

Khan actually has the nerve to glare at Harry, intent on putting fear in what he must think is simply a meek fourth year with a phoenix and a title. Little does he know he's been tortured for decades and stood toe to toe with Voldemort countless times. This pathetic display is no more intimidating than a gentle breeze. When Harry doesn't back down, Khan grunts and continues addressing the firsties. “Should you get caught, and cost this house points for whatever reason, you can expect immediate and adequate repercussions—the higher amount of points lost, the worse the punishment will be.”
“Fourth. Anything that happens in Slytherin, stays in Slytherin. If you are caught gossiping about what goes on in-house, or Merlin forbid, with a professor, you can expect severe repercussions. I repeat, SEVERE repercussions. That brings me to the last rule. In the eyes of the school, we represent a united front, at all times. Any and all internal disputes are resolved in-house. We have dueling pits here for just those kinds of ‘discussions.’ Any and all disputes against other houses—Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and those daddy sucking Gryffindor—are supported by every member of Slytherin whether you agree with it or not. Outside this common room, we are one. Slytherin is one. No matter what.” He makes sure everyone understands that point before his sinister expression returns. He’s standing exactly where he started but makes sure to stare at Harry. “Above all other rules, never violate that one, because I will make it my personal mission to break you of your lapse in judgment, and make a clear example out of you. Does everyone understand!” It was more of a point than a question so the first years nod.

“Everyone has their own room. Your name will be by the door. It has the bare essential. If you know the spells, you may alter it however you like. Do not ask a prefect to alter anything for you because the answer will be no. Now get,” he commands pointing in the direction of their rooms. Harry turns to Draco assuming his room is with the other fourth years when Khan calls, “Oi, Flamel!”

Draco along with everyone else don't move far away, eager to see how Harry might submit to the “older” boy. Harry returns his attention to the portly prefect who squares his large shoulders and tries to step into Harry's personal space. Nova expands and flaps her wings threateningly, voiding him of the notion that intimidating her master is a good idea. He hops a couple steps back, looking at the angry phoenix wearily. Trying his best not to look intimidated he states, “Did you get all that?”

“You know what Khan,” Harry starts in his best condescending tone. “Only the parts that were in English.”

“It’s prefect Khan to you and you best watch your mouth boy,” Khan threatens before turning to Draco. “Show him his room. Fourth year wing. And make sure he knows why I don't care who his family is.” He looks at Harry. “Final warning.” Khan turns takes the big seat in front of the fireplace, surrounded by sixth and seventh years.

As the biggest group of bullies in Slytherin laugh amongst themselves, Draco asks Harry with an impending sense of farewell, “He's not going to make it, is he?”

“Fortunately for him, he's not my concern,” Harry easily answers, turning to head to his room. “But I'd be surprised if he did,” he adds.

They silently make their way to Harry's room. Entering the fourth year wing, they make a right as
Draco explains, boys on the right and girls on the left. At the end of the hall they stop at a door with the name Ares Flamel in a gold plaque on the wall beside it. Once inside, Draco is about to talk when Harry frustratingly puts a hand up, halting the blonde from uttering a word. Harry flicks his wand out of his wrist holster and proceeds to cast layer after layer of protection, detection and privacy charms. Once finished, he looks at Draco and states, “the next time you start talking without a privacy charm, I'm going to have to think of creative ways to make you remember.”

Draco tries to retain as much dignity as he can but nods anyway. The room has a bed, table chair and another room for his shower and toilet. It's the bare essentials, as Khan said, but Draco is looking around a moment, brows knitted in confusion and states, “that's weird. Normally your trunk is here before you are, but I don't see yours.”

Harry removes the chain with his shrunken trunk from around his neck. “It's more secure this way.” Harry turns the trunk back to his normal size. After, using his magic on the top compartment, providing a blood sample, then whispers the pass-phrase, "From Ruin," it allows Harry to open it and fetch Nova’s stand. With Nova comfortable, Harry turns to Draco as the silver blonde says with something of a smirk, “low and behold, Harry Potter, the Slytherin.”

“Stuff it Malfoy,” Harry returns unamused.

“At least tell me why you're here instead of Gryffindor,” Malfoy asks.

“Maybe later,” Harry answers before digging for information of his own. “What can you tell me about second year? Specifically about the Chamber of Secrets.”

Draco takes a moment, leans on the desk then states, “I can't say there were too many differences. All the kids who got petrified were healed by the end of year. We never learned who the heir of Slytherin was or where the chamber is or what was petrifying students. Whatever it was did ultimately stop.”

Harry massages his jaw, curious how the event was resolved in this time line. If Hardwin doesn't have the horcrux, he shouldn't be able to know parseltongue and enter the chamber. “So it just ended one day? Nothing was resolved?” Draco thinks some more, then nods. “Did Hardwin at least speak parseltongue when you dueled him? If you dueled him?”

“No,” Draco says with realization. “I mean we did duel but he just banished the snake. He's a much better duelist than you are.” Draco absentmindedly states before quickly backtracking. “Well, not so much anymore. Why?”
Harry isn't sure how much to tell Draco, but decides some context wouldn't be bad. “I told you about the diary but I didn't tell you about the Chamber of Secrets. The entrance is on the second floor girls bathroom and I want to use it for various reasons since only someone who speaks parseltongue can open it. In our time line, I went down there and fought a Basilisk before destroying the diary with its Basilisk fang.”

“So that's how you got it,” Draco says slightly astonished. “Bloody hell you fought an actual Basilisk.”

Harry nods then continues. “The problem is I can't be sure if Hardwin killed the Basilisk in the Chamber or destroyed the diary some other way because I'm not sure if he's a horcrux or not.”

Draco takes most of the news in stride, except for Hardwin's eye-opening revelation. It doesn't make sense to Draco and he asks what, why and how?

“Lots of theories but not enough evidence to support anything for the moment,” Harry answers. “I still need to get into the Chamber, which might still have a live and hungry Basilisk in it.” Harry turns to a shocked Draco with the hint of a smile and asks, “you still sure you want to help, Malfoy?”

Draco turns his stricken face toward Harry, locking eyes before stealing his features. “Did I stutter Potter? I said I'm in, didn't I?”

Harry shrugs and continues. “Stop saying Potter. The Chamber's where I'm planning on keeping Crouch Jr.”

“Crouch Jr?” Draco asks confused. “How are you going to bring Crouch into Hogwarts?”

“Oh, Malfoy,” Harry chimes. “Didn't they tell you anything?” Harry then explains how Crouch Jr's death was faked as well as the plan to impersonate Moody and lead Harry to the cemetery on Riddle's property.

“Can't anything be simple with you?” Draco asks exasperated.
“Welcome to my life,” Harry answers easily.

“I can't imagine it'll be easy taking him alive,” Draco continues. “Moody's bewitched eye plus whatever other methods of detection the real Moody has for Crouch Jr to use. I remember he was a wicked fighter among all the Death Eaters. Even father said he'd never willing fight him. Sounds tough. You have a plan?”

“Nothing I like,” Harry admits. “For the moment, I have the element of surprise but there are too many students he'd no doubt use as shields. I don't want to give him that option. There's a map that'll help me get him when he's alone, but I'll need to steal it from Hardwin or the twins.”

“We could ask Faux-Moody if he'd train us,” Malfoy suggests and at Harry's curious look Draco continues. “What? If he's Crouch Jr, than wouldn't he want to train Lucius Malfoy's son? That'll get us alone with him, then we can take him.”

“He's supposed to act like the real Moody who is notorious for bringing down Death Eaters and the like. The last thing he'll want to do is train a Malfoy. Plus Crouch hates all Death Eaters who walked instead of helping the monster like they should have. He'd kill you as easily as any other Death Eater who didn't support his master. I'll put some serious thought behind it later.”

Malfoy just nods his head in understanding. “What about training? We can't just expect to battle the Dark Lord without proper training.”

“We'll train both physically and obviously magically. For physical conditioning, we'll train in the morning. As for magical, if the Basilisk is gone, we'll train down in the Chamber,” Harry states. “For a teacher, honestly, I can't think of a single witch or wizard that's a perfect fit. I'd prefer Moody over anyone but-”

“But with him being trapped in his own trunk and all,” Malfoy interjects, finishing Harry's statement. “Snape?”

“He was a fair duelist at best and we don't need a duelist,” Harry answers. “We need a fighter. And even if Snape was an option, I could never trust him. Is he the same as I remember?”

“He's got less of an edge,” Malfoy starts. “But for the most part, I'd say yes. He smiles at least once a month in this time line. How about Sirius?” Harry locks eyes with Malfoy at the mention of his Godfather. “He's suppose to be the best fighter out of all the Aurors. Even father hates admitting
how good he is.”

“I'd be open to it if I knew more,” Harry says. “Relationships, loyalties, personal history, they're all different in this time line. And more than anything, I don't want to travel down a path that leads to Dumbledore, which will be hard considering most roads lead to him or Voldemort. I'll send Nicolas and Perenelle a letter asking if they know anyone that I can pay to train us. For now, I'll see to the Basilisk before I test your skill level.”

“You're not going tonight, are you,” Draco asks in disbelief.

“Not now exactly,” Harry answers. “I'm thinking four in the morning when everyone's asleep. There's less chance of Hardwin or the twins seeing me on the map at that time.”

Draco shakes his head like he can't believe he's doing this. “I guess I'll see you at four in the morning.” He gets up but stops half way to the door. “I forgot to mention, you're going to want to ward your door to keep Khan or any of the Upper Order from breaking in.”

“What the hell is the Upper Order and why would they break into my room?” Harry asks with a frown. It almost sounds like a challenge to Harry. “Not that I wasn't going to ward it anyway.”

“Every year has it's own faction. Myself, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Nott, Parkinson, Davis, and Greengrass would be fourth year's faction. The Upper Order is the faction for all of Slytherin. The way most wouldn't want to cross me because of my family name, everybody are taught not to cross the Upper Order. The Order was primarily made of prefects but it's grown that last few years,” Draco explains.

“So, Junior Death Eaters in training, is it? My way is law; do it or die sort of group,” Harry summarizes as Draco nods. “And these top dicks break into to peoples rooms?”

“Basically. They say it's to motivate the younger years to protect themselves at all times, even among your housemates, but it's done to any witch or wizard, regardless of year. It's to teach you to always be on guard in life, especially in places you consider safe. If your wards aren't good enough, they break in haze you. Khan in particular is probably the best in-house at dismantling wards.”

Harry shakes his head at the lunacy of Slytherin house. No wonder Salazar is in a huff about this den of idiots. “Is that why he thinks I should be afraid of him?”
“No,” Draco answers. “He's vicious, as you'd expect of a Slytherin, but in his case, he's not privileged by status like most of us.”

“Privileged, or burdened?” Harry eyes Malfoy.

When Draco realizes he's slipped in old, self indulged habits, he shakes his head and corrects himself. “He's not as misguided. He's a little more clear-cut; primitive and brutal. He doesn't have a family that any of our parents can threaten, so there's nothing that can stop him from doing what he wants. Since his first year, I've heard they've tried to expel him a total of eight times for going too far. As you know, Dumbledore doesn't expel anyone. So Khan gets a slap on the wrist and then he gets revenge. After the eighth victim, no one messes with him anymore. He'll keep away from heirs and the like but anyone else is fair game.”

“I...” Harry pauses to reign in his anger before clearly stating. “Dumbledore and Snape approve of this? I can't for a second think McGonagall would allow any of this.”

“I'm pretty sure McGonagall doesn't know too much,” Draco reasons. “She might be Deputy Headmistress but she's still head of Gryffindor and Snape only talks house business with Dumbledore.”

Harry shakes his head amazed. “I've never heard of anything like this from other houses.”

“It's not called the den of snakes for nothing, Potter,” Draco retorts. “If you want to stay safe, you really have to be on guard here, all the time, or you'll regret it. Most of the time it's nothing but embarrassing stuff that's forgotten about in a week, but sometimes... sometimes it's more than that.”

Harry's frown turns dark as Draco's implication sets in. “What do you mean?”

Malfoy is more alert of Harry's tone but answers anyway. “I mean you have to protect yourself as best you can here, women especially. It's why we're in groups. Alliances and pacts are formed here just like in the real world to advance agendas and safeguards against threats. If you thought we were all great chums here like you, Granger and Weasley, you couldn't be more wrong. Friends here is the best way to ensure a knife to the back, and everyone knows it... or they learn to.” When Harry has no words of reply, Draco continues.

“The first night isn't bad by comparison. The older kids know first years aren't going to have great wards to protect themselves. The most that'll happen to them is something embarrassing but
painless. After that, they have time, usually a month or two to learn something decent or it gets worse. The only real rule is no lasting physical damage. The emotional damage serves to show us who's weak, and who isn't. No matter what they do, you keep it in and shrug it off because if they smell weakness, they'll stay on you until you break.”

Harry's expression grows darker with every sentence and Draco can't help but take a small step back. “You said it happens to all years?”

“I've never taken part myself—like I said it's mostly older years—but for fourth years and up, it can get pretty bad,” Draco says carefully. “As you might imagine, some of the older boys like to break into the girls rooms. I can only speculate what happens. I know the girls tend to sleep three or four to a room for protection, but sometimes that doesn't work. It's part of the reason why Khan is so sought after. He can dismantle some of the best wards in Slytherin and he's a good duelist. Heiresses are usually safe but if you don't have allies or a powerful family, than... well, I can't recall anything too terrible, but than again, I didn't- I wasn't in the right frame of mind to care.”

“What time?” Harry demands to know in a dire tone, his storming eyes glow in a soft green. Harry's anger is ready to burst. It's not necessarily the Slytherin first years that has his insides twisting, but the memories he was shown over and over of what those disgusting animals did to Cho, Katie, Angelina, Alicia, Lavender, the Patils, Susan, Gabrielle, Fleur, Luna, Ginny... Hermione; His best friend! The one who stayed with him through everything. She suffered because these jackals were never met the violent hand they seem to need to learn to stop. In his mind, this is ground zero for that type of violation and Harry will not stand for it.

“What time what?” Draco asks before he realizes what Harry means to ask. “Oh, uh, usually around Midnight to 2 AM.”

“Do the professors know?” Harry continues to hunt for more symptoms of this disease. Even if most don't know, he's sure those at the top must, and that makes him all the more angrier.

“I can't say, not for sure,” Draco slowly states, wincing as he feels—actually feels—Harry's magic smother and strangle the air in the room. It's hard to breath, yet Draco feels the need to complete his assessment, albeit carefully. “But I don't see how Snape and Dumbledore wouldn't know. Remember rule four. The few that have broken it... were made examples of.”

“Change of plans,” Harry abruptly states. “The Chamber will be tomorrow night.”

Draco is still straining against the magical force Harry projects and is almost scared to ask but does anyway. “And tonight?”
“Go get some rest Malfoy,” Harry says, ignoring his question.

Malfoy eyes Harry nervously. “...You're not going to kill anyone, right?”

“Death would be too good for them,” Harry answers barely aware of the question as his mind races to formulate the best punishment for these misguided young snakes. At the time, Slytherin’s request seemed like little more than a nuisance. Harry certainly didn't think he was here to be the parent these baby bigots need. It's almost humorous to think he traveled back in time to be life coach to Slytherins, but after what Draco said, after realizing that he's at the center of where it's all cultivated, he can't ignore it. More than that, he's looking forward to taking on this responsibility.

When he realizes he's doing this not only for the women this might affect in the future, but also as a way of apology to them, he feels great shame. Shame because there's some part of his mind that's doing this as penance for his own failings. He blames himself for failing to prevent the suffering his friends went through, and to relieve that guilt he's going to correct this error in their character. That this is as much for himself as others is the definition of selfishness. Harry knows whatever punishment he settles on needs to happen but he can't seem to separate the need for redemption from the remorse he feels.

It's a cycle he doesn't wish to continue, so while he navigates the first year halls, he's adamant about keeping this to himself and makes a mental note to ensure Draco doesn't tell anyone as well. As tempted as he is to give them a target for their paltry ire, if he came out and let them know he was responsible for their suffering or embarrassment, whether justified or not, they won't see the retribution for what it is; a lesson. They'll only see a challenge to their rule, to the status quo, to their dominance and completely ignore their actions as the source of their sanction. They're so self absorbed they'll easily mistake a moral lesson for a test to their 'claim.'

No, Harry mentally decrees. This is one lesson they WILL learn, or it'll only get worse. So much worse. He won't let this cycle of dictatorial 'one rule over all' continue. This fight is also against Voldemort, Harry reasons, and he rages against this problem with as much fire and devotion as he has for actually killing the Lord of Parasites himself.

A Basilisk among snakes indeed.
I'm considering this Chapter part 1 of 2 because I don't feel it's complete. But as I did not have much time this week and I really want to keep to my personal deadlines, I thought I'd post this now. I just know I wouldn't be able to finish what I feel is a complete chapter to my standards by tomorrow.

While not a lot happened in this chapter(I lament to say), I'd love to know what you think! Please leave a comment and thank you for reading.
Chapter Summary

It isn't well wishes and hope that punish the Upper Order. It's a hard hand, and they either learn or die.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys,

So this is the second part of the last post. I managed to do it in a few days which is a big deal for me. I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Around five in the morning, Harry zaps Draco with a light stunning spell, waking the silver-blond boy from a fitful sleep. Draco bursts out of his bed, wand already in hand and aimed at the shadow attacker.

Harry isn't worried in the slightest about the wand pointed at his chest but says, “easy Malfoy. It's just me.”

Recognizing the voice, Draco shouts, “Potter!” He wipes his face of sleep and dried tears. “Bloody hell, what are you doing here?” Harry studies Draco a moment and makes some educated guesses about how little sleep he must get. Somehow Harry knows Malfoy sleeps about as little as Harry.

“It's Flamel, Malfoy,” Harry responds. “I'm going training and thought you might want to tag along even though I'm giving you no choice.”

Draco shakes the slumber from his limbs. “What time is it?”

“Nearly five in the morning,” Harry answers before moving to the door. “See you in the commons.” When Draco nods, Harry exits his room.

A few minutes later, Draco finds Harry playing with Nova as they wait by the Slytherin exit. On
the way to the grounds outside, Draco asks, “how did you get in my room? I put the best ward I knew.”

“Are you a runes expert?”

“Are you trying to say you are,” Draco asks and Harry returns a look of pure confidence as an answer. Draco shakes his head, saying, “still, I know a hell of a lot more than I did when I was fourteen. That ward scheme is specifically geared toward me and activates against anyone that doesn't have my magical signature. The second it felt your magic, it should've knocked you out and alerted me.”

“That ward scheme has a flaw,” Harry informs him as they traverse the empty and silent halls of Hogwarts. “It can be re-sized to any entrance's shape.”

“How is that a flaw?” Draco asks puzzled. “It's a useful ward scheme if you have multiple entrances, all different sizes.”

“Maybe,” Harry states as they step out on the cold grounds. “Have fun up there,” Harry tells Nova. “I'll be down here.” Nova takes off in a powerful push of her wings. The sun has yet to breach the horizon, so the grounds are still murky and dark as they walk, but it won't be long until dawn.

“Sometimes people forget the simplest things,” Harry tells Malfoy as he walks toward the Black Lake. “In order for a door to open, it has to have space between the frame and the door. Lets say I modified the size of the entrance so the bottom crack of the door is enlarged tall enough for a person to walk through. The flaw in the rune scheme is it will think it's area of influence is being adapted and just correct itself while I walk underneath it. Without even touching your wards, I essentially moved your protection overhead and walked under it. It took all of three seconds to get through.”

Draco rolls his eyes and mutters, “the crack of the door...”

“It's not a bad ward, just interlace that rune array with at least seven other creative security schemes and it'll keep most out.”

“Seven? It takes long enough just to make one ward scheme. Interlacing it with seven others is just paranoid and a waste of hours.”
“And you're going to do it anyway,” Harry commands. “I don't want to go on offense without shoring up my defense, and like it or not, you're on my side. That means I need confidence that they can't get to me through you.”

“Careful, Flamel. It sounds like you might actually care about my safety,” Draco taunts.

“If only just, Malfoy,” Harry responds.

“So what are we doing this early in the morning?” Draco asks. They land on the grass field near the black lake.

“Running and swimming,” Harry starts. “We're training our bodies to be stronger, tougher, and quicker. This training regiment is going to be a daily activity, and I don't want hear crap about how stupid this muggle way of doing things is.”

“I wasn't going to say that,” Draco acknowledges. Harry is actually surprised to hear that by the former pure-blood supremacist. Draco casts a quick privacy charm before saying, “well, you wouldn't know this but when we took over the muggle world, we had to carry spare wands with us. If one of their muggle fighters caught you without a wand, they could break bones with their fists! They were primitive but not without fight, and what's a fight if not primitive?”

Ignoring Draco's casual mention of taking over the world Harry says, “Good. Wizards have such an aversion to pain they wouldn't last long without wands, potions and charms. There's a benefit to physical strength and speed, and I know it'll enhance our fighting abilities.” Harry demonstrates stretches that target different areas of the body than the one's they already know from quidditch training.

Once warmed up, they tackle a ten kilometer run, followed by a forty minute swim. Harry and Draco push themselves to complete the course as fast as possible, and even though they're both sluggish and weak by the end, they feel a certain level of mental clarity because of it. To Harry, this is more advantageous as a training of the mind rather than simply the body. Harry was hoping to find Draco's mental limit rather than his physical one, and to his surprise Draco continued on right beside him. No matter how wobbly his legs became or how numbing cold the water of the black lake was, he kept up.

“This might be... irrelevant to ask... but did the Upper Order... try anything on you?” Draco asks through labored breathing as the sun is passing through the horizon, illuminating the purplish blue of the sky in a light golden hue.
To Harry, Draco sounds like he's losing his lungs. Harry almost wants to give him a potion Nicolas made for physical exhaustion but decides otherwise. Not only is it good to push the body, it's also far too weird that he wants to help Draco-fucking-Malfoy's feel better. “No, I doubt they had the chance,” is all Harry says. “We'll do this every morning and in the evenings we'll train magically.”

“Sounds like plan,” Draco heaves.

Harry is wondering how many consecutive days Draco can keep this regiment going, specially when he starts incorporating weights, before he mentally breaks when Harry feels his spine hum and his neck hairs rise. On sheer impulse Harry shoves Malfoy out of the way of a threat Harry couldn't see much less identify. Rolling to the side himself, he lands crouched, his wand out of his holster and ready as a stunning spell speeds through where his right knee would have been. The stunner hits the ground blowing rock and dirt on a sprawled out Malfoy.

All aches and pains forgotten, Harry is consumed by his heightened combat senses. His eyes quickly searches the field and locates his attackers. They are only two people that he can see, both wearing blue robes and female. Oddly enough, they're circling each other with their wands out, not even looking at him or Draco. It seems like they're in the middle of a duel until they hear a loud 'SCREECH' call from Nova who flies over to Harry, did they see.

Harry stands as Nova lands on his shoulder, his wand still out but lowered, relatively sure he's not in actual danger. He reassures his familiar, “it's okay, girl. I'm fine.” Malfoy is cursing putting his wand away as the two girls are rushing over to them. An agitated Malfoy is dusting himself off by Harry's side as the two girls from Beauxbaton approach looking worried. The girls stare at Nova most of the way before sharing a look of amazement between themselves. Harry instantly recognizes one of them as Fleur Delacour, perspiring in a way that only enhances her magical beauty, and more importantly, in a way he can tell they've been training for a while; hard. Like a reflex, Harry worries about his control over his emotional stability. A quick intake of air is the only evidence of his uncertainty and he monitors his emotions carefully.

“Monsieurs, we apologize,” Fleur starts to say before they reach the boys, slightly out of breath in her french accent. “We were not expecting anyone to be out quite so early. Are ei'zer of you injured?” she asks in genuine concern.

Harry quickly slips his wand back as Draco raises his voice in agitation, “Fortunately for you, no, but if not for good reflexes we could've been!” The girls are taken aback some by Draco's brashness and Harry is reminded of the Draco of old.

The girls tense up when it's obvious the blonde scion wants to say more, but a firm hand on Draco's
shoulder cuts him off as Harry says, “It's okay, right Malfoy?” Harry stares a clear warning to be less hostile.

Draco can easily see the sternness in Harry's kill me green eyes and huffs out his agitation. He turns to the girls and says, “yeah,” glumly. “We're fine.”

“It was an accident, I'm sure,” Harry adds. Harry isn't sure how he wants to interact with Fleur. Though he's happy to see she's alright, he would prefer to remain distant. Being around her just reminds him of his past and everything he lost because of his failures.

“It was,” the dark haired girl says in an accent much thicker than Fleur's. “Vee vere dueling and not paying sufficient attention tu our surroundings.”

Draco makes a show of rolling his eyes but says nothing, “You'll have to forgive Draco. He's not partial to the unexpected. The last time he was caught by a spell, it didn't go well.” Harry removes his hand and Draco is calmer, no doubt remembering the spell he was killed with.

“My name is Annabelle,” the dark haired girl states before nodding to Fleur. “Zis is my friend Fleur Delacour. And you are?” She's looking at Harry's phoenix but Harry has the impression she's asking him.

While Annabelle can't help but look at the legendary creature on his shoulder, Fleur is looking intently at Harry when he answers, “Ares Flamel.”

Both girls react astonished to hear that. “Eet iz tru,” Annabelle happily tells Fleur. Keeping her composure, Fleur takes the lead. “We've 'eard rumors of a 'ogwarts student wiz a phoenix familiar who is 'eir to zee 'ouse Flamel. Are you indeed 'eir to zee immortal alchemist?”

“Yes,” Harry says with a touch of annoyance. “Though I don't really get why that's such a big deal. It's common for a house to have an heir. It means even less in my case if you consider the head my house is immortal.”

“Oh can you say zat!” Annabelle cries in surprise. “E ees ze immortal alchemist who's philosopher's stone can turn any base metal into gold.” While Annabelle is clearly excited, Fleur is still looking at Harry like someone trying to place a face they don't remember seeing. “You can 'ave any life you can dream ov!”
Harry's sure if he stays longer, Fleur will either figure out why he looks familiar or ask questions he'd rather not answer. “Yes, well, gold isn't everything,” Harry answers quickly and to move pass this he continues to say, “well, we won't keep you from your morning training any longer. Have a good day.”

“Wait!” Fleur calls. “We cannot just- In keeping wiz custom, it's improper of me to part wiz you wi'zout offering you a token of apology. Given our station, mine as the daughter of the French Deputy Minister of Magic and yours as heir of a noble and most ancient house, it is expected of me to treat you; to maintain or endorse proper relations between our families.”

This all sounds like high society gibberish to Harry, but to avoid embarrassing her by relaying how little he cares about high society custom—or knows, honestly—he says with respect, “I appreciate the uh, gesture, truly, but it's not necessary. No one was hurt and I'd feel as if I was taking advantage of your generosity over a none-issue.”

“You should not feel so,” Fleur returns with conviction. “Zhis is for zhe benefit of good relations among us as well as our family.”

Harry can feel his irritation start to rise. It's not that Fleur's insistence is annoying but these archaic and benign rules of society is only going to expose him to matters he doesn't want to be exposed to. He doesn't want Fleur to learn he was the one who saved her because it'll just draw in more unwanted attention. “May I ask,” Harry starts only after making sure there was no frustration in his tone. “Would you offer the same token of apology if I was not heir of house Flamel?”

Fleur is a little taken aback by the question and shares a small look of concern with Annabelle before answering, “tradition and etiquette dictate behavior among those of wealth and status sinze zhe possibility of working relations wiz or among zhem is more likely.”

“So can I assume if I was a common wizard, you would not extend the same honor?”

Begrudgingly, Fleur nods her answer, then Harry continues. “I only ask because despite my house's name, I believe great friends or relations can come from anywhere. I've met amazing muggle-born witches and great people from lower houses. You both seem very lovely and I don't want to offend but I'd ask if we can remain welcoming without tradition... at least in this case.” Harry hopes Fleur isn't put off by his request. He remembers her suffering as vividly in his time line—infinitely worse than what she suffered at the world cup—as all the others and he doesn't want to be the cause of any pain or even disappointment in this time line.

*She deserves to be happy*, Harry thinks. *They all do.*
Fleur seems lost though covers it up well. Her tone however is light as she says, “zat is quite irregular.” Harry felt he was free to leave when she takes a few steps forward. “I respect your point o' view, Monsieur Flamel.” She extends her hand for a shake. “If possible I 'ope we may speak again, as you say, wizout customs obliging us.” Her tone is sweet and hopeful.

Harry does not want to shake her hand but knows it would definitely be insulting if he didn't. A sweet smell suddenly fills his nostrils and Harry wonders why Fleur suddenly looks so amazing; flawless skin with a rosy glow, sensual eyes blue as the sky, and silky blonde flowing locks. He's known she was beautiful since the first moment he's seen her but looking at her now feels like discovering it for the first time.

He's about to shake her hand gratefully when Draco calls out, “He would love to talk to you.” Harry turns to the blonde scion gazing lovingly at Fleur and immediately recognizes the dilated pupils, idiotic grin, and flush cheeks as being enthralled. Realizing what's happening is all Harry needs to snap out of the hypnosis and right his mind as Draco continues to say lovingly, “he would love you so much, wouldn't you H-”

Instinctively, Harry smacks Malfoy hard upside his head, breaking him out of the allure with sharp and abundant pain.

“Bloody hell,” Malfoy automatically yelps, a hand rubbing at the point of impact.

Shocked faces are on all four students. Draco out of physical pain and realization of being enthralled. Annabelle for slightly being enthralled herself but more because Harry broke out of the allure in seconds. Fleur for meeting someone who is so unaffected by her allure, it wouldn't be a stretch to say he could be naturally immune—a very rare thing in the world. Harry's shock mostly has to do with Fleur either losing control or using her allure. Harry isn't angry at her. Maybe if he didn't have such a singular focus he would've accepting whatever token of apology she had in mind in the first place. Maybe she didn't have complete control in the moment—it's happened before. As everything stands, he rather not be involved any more than he has to.

He ignores the allure and lightly shoves Malfoy's shoulder to move. “It was very nice to meet you both, but we have to go. Have a good day,” Harry tells them, rushing Draco back toward the castle before they can respond. Draco shrugs Harry's hand off once inside the halls again.

“That's a lot stronger than I remember,” Draco mentions as the walk down to the dungeons.

“A veela's allure is strongest in their younger years,” Harry absentmindedly answers. “Fleur told me it gets easier to control the older they get but it will still affects young knobs and sex-crazed
wankers easily.” Harry looks at Draco specifically when describing who her allure affects

“I'm not either of those options,” Draco mutters, ignoring Harry's jab.

“Face it Malfoy, you're a hormonal teenager again,” Harry comments.

“Like you're not!” Draco returns hotly.

“I'm at least focused enough to keep myself from spilling my guts around her,” Harry returns just as easily. “You're lucky you weren't in control or you might've lost your magic or your life to the oath. Work on your occlumancy. I don't want to be responsible for your death.”

Annoyed by losing control, he simply nods before mentioning something he's been meaning to bring up. “You really need to learn proper etiquette.”

“The hell I do,” Harry snorts.

“Like it or not you're high society now,” Draco returns. “Which means you need to act a certain way or it's considered offensive. You nearly offended Greengrass yesterday, and if Delacour was a little more conservative, you could have offended her as well.”

“I don't care about all that nonsense,” Harry groans, bothered by the entire topic.

“Maybe you should,” Draco argues. “If you want to get into Black Manor, Tracey inviting you to the wedding would be your best bet.”

“Wouldn't they just invite the Flamels anyway?” Harry reasons. Though he doesn't know much about the politics of high society, he does at least recognize an obvious political ego-stroke like that. “Inviting big family names to boast about all the powerful people you know is normal, isn't it?”

“Most of the time, yes,” Draco admits. “It's a long standing tradition among upper class witches and wizards to have the biggest most lavish wedding possible. It's as much for political purposes as it is for social ones. It can also be very lucrative. Weddings are great venues for supporting
businesses or political negotiations. My gormless father did loads of business during his own wedding; helped catapult the Malfoy name to what it is today.”

“Get to the point, Malfoy,” Harry implores, unmotivated and bothered by hearing about the rich and the stupid.

“If this were a normal wedding you would most definitely get an invitation, but Black is different,” Draco announces. “He doesn't care about any of that.” Harry can't help but allow a smile of pride don his face as Draco continues. “He's even marrying a witch who was primarily raised in the muggle world, is a divorcee, and already has a child from a muggle man! That's unheard of for a prestigious house like Black. It's a social snub of the biggest kind.” Harry allows his smile to widen and linger before Draco wipes it away. “That's also bad for you; us. It's because they don't care, that the Flamels, along with a lot of other prominent families, won't get an automatic invitation.”

At that, Harry does stop smiling and wonders how else he can break in that doesn't involve pretending to care about social niceties.

“I know the wedding is going to be a smaller, more personal affair at Black Manor,” Draco mentions. Harry doesn't know where Black Manor is. It wasn't listed anywhere—not that he expected it would be—and it wasn't part of his time line. But if it's an ancestral home, those wards are among the hardest to bypass, since they're brimming with centuries of latent magic. “And Black is the head Auror which means the best defense you can imagine plus a good portion of the DMLE will be there. As you can guess, the best way of getting in, is going by invitation and that's not going to happen unless you play nice with Davis.”

“Couldn't you do it?” Harry weakly asks, suddenly feeling drained. “You know all this crap a hell of a lot better than I do, and honestly, it's vomit-inducing just thinking about it.”

“I do,” Draco easily agrees. “But I can't. She, uh, doesn't like me.”

Harry isn't surprised to hear that, whirling around and looking at Draco expectantly. “What did you do?”

“I-” Draco cuts himself off before he changes tactics. “Let's just say she has cause, and move on shall we?”

“No,” Harry tells the silver-blonde boy. “We shall not. She already asked me about you once.
Don't you think she might ask again. I don't want to be blind sided Malfoy. What did you do?"

Draco huffs in irritation and looks away as he says, “I called her a filthy mudblood slag who should get used her place on her back and feel honored her miserable existence is at least seductive enough to please her betters.” Harry and Malfoy are silent several beats before the blonde continues. “That was our first meeting. And before the engagement, there were a lot of other similar insults.” Harry can't even put into words how colossally stupid Malfoy is. “That was before I 'came back,’ of course.”

“Of course,” Harry states sarcastically. “Merlin's balls Malfoy. I could've done without making friends with someone she more than likely hates!”

“I wouldn't say we're friends exactly...” Draco tries to input a valid point of contention, embarrassed by his behavior.

“No shit!” Harry yells. “Neither would I, but she doesn't know that, does she?” Harry exhales loudly and continues waking down. They nearly arrive at the Slytherin entrance when Harry turns to Draco and says, “you're going to apologize to her, and for Merlin's sake, you're going to mean it. I mean really mean it. Think you can handle that? I know prostrating yourself isn't something you Malfoy's are good at-”

“I got it, okay!” Draco yells. “You don't have to tell me how big of a prat I was; I got it. I...” Draco seems to shut down after that and they silently make their way to and through the Slytherin entrance. For the thousandths time since he's returned from the future, Draco wonders what about his place in this world and the influence he has over it. He wonders about his son and the environment he helped create that ultimately snuff his little life. An iron grip of guilt constrains his heart but oddly enough, reinforces his determination every time.

No matter what, Draco assures himself. I will not let it happen again.

Draco's mind is so preoccupied with his passed mistakes and the results of his misleading ideals, he doesn't notice any activity from the few Slytherins already out and ready for the first day. Harry and Draco retreat to their rooms to shower and change. Draco is the first of the two to return to the Slytherin commons. The gallery of students is much larger now than when Draco first entered. Nearly every student of Slytherin are seated or standing together, all facing the first year dormitory's entrance.

Draco isn't sure what to make of it. It seems like the majority of the house are clumped in their social pockets of order waiting. For what, he learns a moment later as he walks toward the other
fourth years—Crabbe and Goyle automatically flanking his rear. Prior to any question Draco can ask his fellow fourth years, the Slytherin entrance opens to allow Dumbledore and Professor Babbling to enter.

“What's going on?” Draco asks no one in particular. Tracey, Greengrass and Zabini don't answer him, not that he cares as much as he would have before his ’return.' Pansy and Theodore eagerly answer instead.

“You're not going to believe this,” Theodore chuckles. “All the upper order were found frozen this morning in the first year dormitory. Snape's in there now. He kicked us out so you can't see it but nearly all the Upper Order, including Khan are petrified—probably forever. No one knows how it happened. That or they're not saying. I wouldn't either. Against the Upper Order, they would've just signed their own death warrant.”

“It's terrible,” Pansy exclaims as they all watch Snape talk with both Babbling and Dumbledore. “The rumor is someone must've broken in because none of the other prefects could cancel the spell. They had to bring in Professor Snape to rescue them, and when even he couldn't, he called for Dumbledore and Babbling. Though I can't imagine why they would allow a mudblood into Slytherin.” Pansy's tone describing Professor Babbling is clearly derisive, and Draco can't help but use her as proof of his toxic system of support. Between his friends, money, and family, Draco would like to say he had no way of avoiding how he turned out, but he has his doubts.

“Even a Gnome can figure out whatever happened to the Upper Order involves runes and wards,” Greengrass answers with an air of aristocracy. “Whatever trapped them in place must be of a high level if Professor Snape felt he had to call both Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Babbling.”

“Look at them,” Nott points at the happy first years. “It's beyond wrong they haven't gone through the same hazing we did. It's just not fair. They should suffer too. It's tradition!”

“I wonder who could've broken in,” Tracey adds to the group but mostly speaks to Greengrass.

Pansy adds her view without being prompted. “It's obviously some mudblood sympathizer who's stupid enough to think he can embarrass us.”

“How is that obvious, Parkinson?” Greengrass plainly asks and even without an attitude, everyone can still sense the annoyance.
Raising her wide nose to the challenge, Pansy makes her point. “No one but misguided peasants would think attacking their betters is a good idea. They were born weak, poor and jealous of everything we have and everything we are. It's the simplest thing in the world,” the future mother of Draco’s son states.

Draco’s wondering how blind he was to think she was the perfect girl for him when a flap of wings produces a strong gust that rustles the robes of everyone nearby. Everyone is startled to see Harry with Nova standing by the group when no one noticed him approach.

“What's going on,” Harry asks Draco in a disinterested tone without looking at him. Greengrass moved to answer but Draco beat her to it.

“Apparently, the Upper Order are frozen, petrified in front of the first year rooms,” Draco says lightly, almost with a hint of all knowing.

“That's it Malfoy,” Tracey asks with clear derision. “No additional quip of pure-blood retribution against misguided cretins. Aren't you going to rally your noble parents to fight this injustice for you like you always do?”

Draco takes a moment to stare at Tracey yet see all the wrongs he's done her. “No,” Draco easily answers. Tracey doesn't seem phased by his response but he notices Greengrass narrow her eyes skeptically. “It's just as I said,” he assuages as he turns to Harry and continues. “The working theory is someone broke in and used wards to stop them from hazing the first years.”

“We don't know anything for certain,” Greengrass adds, eying Harry evenly but speculatively. “It's too careless to assume we know why this happened... but I find the timing is very suspicious.”

Harry doesn't respond and Greengrass doesn't elaborate as their eyes meet for some seconds. Before any more is said Dumbledore and Snape walk up to the gathered Slytherin. Dumbledore looks around the room before clearing his throat and addressing his students in an overly grandfather manner of way. “While our dear professor Babbling is analyzing the unfortunate circumstance keeping a number of our students trapped in place, I would like to inquire if anyone in this room found themselves in a position to witness anything in the late hours. A portrait made note of a small gathering of Slytherins returning before curfew.”

The Slytherins looks around the room eager to see if anyone saw anything. Harry is petting Nova, unconcerned when Snape adds, “Come now, speak up. Even if only the smallest detail was witnessed, it is your duty as Slytherins to assist your housemates.”
Again, everyone is looking for anyone that knows more about this compelling mystery. Draco notices Greengrass eye Harry's neutral—almost bored—expression. Draco feels a sudden spike of panic. He's always known Greengrass had a sharp mind—it's the main reason she irked him when he was an idiot—but the way she's analyzing Harry, he can almost see the heiress plotting in her mind, or at the very least, compiling an accurate assessment of him. Draco makes a mental note to warn Harry later.

When no one speaks up, Dumbledore adds, “You can speak with your head of house or myself in private if that would make you most comfortable, but I implore you to voice your observations nevertheless. Currently the best manner to reverse the restraints on our students is by locating the perpetrator.”

“And keep in mind, any aid to this transgression will not go unpunished,” Snape adds with venomous authority. Harry can't help but think how counterproductive his warning is. The "perpetrator" won't reveal himself and those that know nothing could be questioned and pressured needlessly, possibly to the point they might invent information to show that they are loyal to their house. It's almost fostering misinformation.

“Hopefully that won’t be necessary,” Dumbledore counters Snape's stern approach, showing all his grandfatherly warmth—it's a good ploy to cultivate trust among the younger impressionable students, Harry muses to himself. “I know my students will do all they can to assist those in need if given the opportunity,” Dumbledore adds.

There's some snickering and eye rolling among the older students in the pit of snakes that imply otherwise, and Harry almost snorts himself. Harry can always count on Dumbledore to have faith in everyone, even if the person is holding a wand to his throat. _But this is Death Eater boot camp_, Harry mentally tells Dumbledore. _And what they need isn't faith and well wishing, but the appropriate incentive to be decent fucking human beings._ And Harry promises to give this children exactly the lesson they need... or death.

“Perhaps it's as the Headmaster says,” Snape says looking out the worried Slytherins. “I would hate to later learn a member of our house was complicit in aiding this deplorable-”

“Genius!” Babbling's excitement echoes the the room as she exits the first year corridor and skips straight to Snape and Dumbledore. Harry wonders how young she is because he's never seen a professor skip in joy. She doesn't so much ignore every eye that's drawn to her as much as unable to concentrate on anything but runes and the professors. She babbles over this like discovering an ancient artifact. “In all my years of study, these rune schemes are some of the best defensive wards I've ever come across! They're absolutely genius!”
“Calm yourself woman!” Snape starts. “You sound like an insufferable quidditch wench.” Many of the students snicker at the insult.

“Severus,” Dumbledore calls like a child who's crossed the line.

“Forgive me Professor,” he says evenly, absent any sense of authenticity. “I simply cannot fathom how you feel a dozen of my injured students can be described as genius!” Snape raises his voice. “I am only concerned with their safety.”

Babbling seems taken aback by Snape's public shaming but doesn't let up. “I am just as committed to our student's well being as any other professor, Serverus. But these runes almost reinvents how I learned them. It's not unlike discovering Skele-Grow can also be used to as a Pepper-Up potion. It's just genius!”

Harry, Draco, Zabini and Greengrass don't react like the exited Slytherins whispering to one another about the stunning news. Dumbledore asks if she can elaborate on her findings. She nods and continues saying, “After casting many diagnostic spells, I've discovered significant points within the ward scheme. I'm sad to say,” she relays trying to hide her smirk. “They're beyond me so I can't cancel the wards. It's also independent of the schools wards which is why the Headmaster is unable to as well.”

“What can you tell us,” Dumbledore asks.

“First,” she starts as she ties her hair in a quick ponytail. “The wards are intent based but on a goblin rune master level. The intent in this case should be harm or ill-will. I can tell from the few instances I was honored enough to study with a horde. It's also why we, along with the first years were able to enter and leave a room without incident. I can't make out what each array does specifically but I can say the students captured are not in any physical danger. They will however need to be asked pointed questions to determine what set the wards off to begin with.”

“So you believe we will be able to speak with them?” Dumbledore asks. “I feared the worst when even I could not cancel the effects.”

“Oh, yes,” Babbling returns. “Studying each ward, I noticed a pulse like rune that seems to recycle to a weaker and weaker signal. I believe it to be a timer. I can't determine how much time is left but I know it's not indefinite.”
“Is there anything else you can share?” Dumbledore asks.

“Oh, yes,” Babbling gasps beside herself. Harry almost smiles because she is acting a bit like a groupie. She almost reminds him of Hermione learning about a new book or topic. “So much. The entire ward system are made up of individual schemes arranged like an index, or an order of activity. I can’t determine what each array will do but I know it’s specific to some effect. The first determines intent. You can imagine, if there’s ill-will to the student within the room, the whole thing activates. The second gambit to activate, an array for petrificus totalus. It keeps them in place but awake and aware enough to experience time and even see us. I’m sure I spotted a marker rune, but the arrangement is unlike I’ve ever seen. The next gambit activated seems to be a sensory based effect. I believe they’re hearing something, though I can’t say what it is.”

“Listen to yourself,” Snape mouths low enough for only a few to hear, to the lovely Babbling with contempt. “What’s needed at this very moment is not your adoration. As much as it would disappoint you, what we need is a method to eliminate these wards.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore easily states and Snape backs off, crossing his arms. The old Headmaster turns to a sore and steaming Babbling. “Serverus is correct. We need to remove these wards as soon as possible from the first year corridor, or we may have to move all the students until we do so.”

“I don’t feel that’s necessary,” Babbling says in a clipped tone. All mirth and amusement gone as she continues. “It’s my professional opinion that these wards will not harm anyone within the room they protect. Aside from the Headmaster’s office, these rooms might be the safest in the castle, because that’s what these runes are used for; defense! I’d be more interested in learning what intention the older students had in mind for the children inside to set off the wards in the first place.” She narrows insinuating eyes at Snape before addressing Dumbledore again. “As for removing them, I have to admit it would take me three, maybe four weeks to remove one and I can’t even guarantee that.”

“You are a Rune Master yourself, dear Bathsheda. How is that possible,” Dumbledore inquires, stern of brow.

The room is silent as they listen to Babbling explain, “these wards are so impressive, they’re interwoven with ambient magic. They’re self-sustaining. It wouldn’t be hard to believe natural magic created these wards to protect the children. Trying to remove wards of this caliber is nearly like removing magic from existence. If you’re truly desperate to remove defensive wards only meant to keep children safe, I’d recommend hiring a team of Rune Masters or Cursebreakers. As Rune Master myself, I can tell you it’ll only cost a small fortune.”

Dumbledore strokes his long beard with a thoughtful expression when suddenly a loud ear piercing
sound of fingernails scraping against a chalkboard fills the room. The constant screeching scratching of nail against chalkboard is so excruciating, everyone in the room desperately cover both ears in hair raising pain. The immense visceral reaction lasts a full seven seconds, prompting a few of the students to run away when it finally stops. Everyone has a second to breath a sigh of relief when another sound explodes in the room. This time it's the painful cries of each of the older years trapped in the corridor. Wide eyed with terror, they're so desperate to escape the hall they're stumbling over or shoving one another out of the way.

Before everyone assembled, the upper order amass in the commons, tumbling to the floor or over chairs, groaning and humming in pain as they cover their ears. One student is banging at his ears with his fists, most keep their palms locked flat on the sides of their heads. One of the more desperate sixth years is clawing at the side of his head, cutting into his skin and drawing some blood. Their manic reactions surprise and disgust many in the room, except Harry. He keeps his blank mask on, inwardly enjoying their suffering as the professors try to help the unwilling students.

It takes the professors many moments to calming the students. Snape finally manages to get Khan to focus enough to ask him, “What happened?”

“Ughh,” Khan starts, shaking his head almost reflexively, like trying to get water out of his ears. “It- It was horrible! It wouldn't stop! It wouldn't stop!”

“What?” Snape tries to ask. “What wouldn't stop?”

“That, that, that, that, that-”

“Mr. Khan!” Snape interjects, snapping the boy out of his loop.

“That noise,” Khan chokes out. “It- It was like the class chalkboards and... and...” “Don't say it!” Another student yells.

“It's okay,” Snape tells the boy. “I think we know what you heard. Can you explain how this happened?”

“I, I don't know,” Khan mutters, starting to get the shakes. “W-We didn't do anything wrong. We were going to test the first years wards, and, and, and...” Khan stops as the shakes get bad. Harry almost snorts at the large boy's wide eyed expression of horror.
“Let's bring the children to Poppy,” Dumbledore tells Snape. “I want to ensure they're no lingering effects. Bathsheda if you would please continue to examine the wards and inform me of all you learn. I will consult a cursebreaker I am closely acquainted with to assist.”

Bill, Harry immediately thinks. Harry isn't sure how good Bill is. He doubts it'll make a difference, but the eldest Weasley did work for the Gringotts after all. He might have better luck than professor Babbling, since his whole focus is on breaking wards.

“As you wish Headmaster,” Babbling acquiesces. “Though I still feel these wards are perfectly safe. If you can find the person responsible I'd even recommend adding these wards to every room in Hogwarts.”

If this school disciplined properly, these wards wouldn't be necessary, Harry mentally interjects.

“I'll keep that in mind Bathsheda,” Dumbledore naturally states.

The Slytherins are whispering and gossiping among themselves when Snape orders everyone to head to breakfast. Draco turns to Harry only to discover he's already gone. Looking around, he notices Daphne eye the entrance to the common room as it closes. Draco catches up to Harry, Nova on his shoulder, in the halls heading toward the Great Hall.

“Well, I can't say I was expecting that,” Draco comments. Harry is about to respond when a winded Crabbe and Goyle scamper to the future boys.

When they cover each side of Draco's back, Harry gives them each a brief look. Harry smirks ahead of saying, “I hope you boys don't have eggs stuck on your heads.” Harry keeps walking ahead as the large boys snort and shrug. Draco looks at the tops of Crabbe and Goyle's head and sees nothing.

Wondering why Harry would even talk to them, Draco feels the urge to command them as he's always done. In this case to never put an egg on their heads. But his new found sense of morality gives him an unnatural code of conduct he's still not accustomed to. Ever since he's come back, there's always doubt; there's always conflict which naturally extends to Crabbe and Goyle. Like every other aspect of his life, one side of his psyche would tell him it's right to command those beneath you. Why do they matter when you were the one born to privilege? Yet, another smaller, louder side of him is telling him it's wrong. No one is better or worse than you are and deserve to be treated as you would treat yourself.
But they stood by while my son was murdered, Draco thinks as they continue toward the Great Hall. Not only did they bare witness to my sons murder, they were ordered to rape me. And while they both looked disgusted during the act, they nevertheless did as commanded. How could they possibly know any better if they've been taking orders their entire lives and were often celebrated for it.

Draco turns to his long-time companions; his face stern and unkind. The large boys pull up at the abrupt stop and look confused a moment before Draco addresses them. “From this very moment, I will no longer be dictating your actions. Do you understand what that means? I won't be telling you what to do or how to do it. If you don't want to follow me, than don't. If you want to do something that you thought I'd disapprove of, than do it. I am no longer your master.” Considering their intellect, Draco clarifies some boundaries. “That doesn't mean I'm giving you permission to do bad things. The both of you are going to be responsible for your own decisions and the consequences they might provoke. Think about the people you want to be and if you need help with that... I'll be happy to talk to you about it. But I tell you now, don't be surprised if I stop you from hurting anyone. Don't be surprised.”

He glares intently at the both of them unsure they really understand. With a defeated exhale of air he turns to see Harry was observing the entire time. With the slightest of nods, Harry returns his trek to the Great Hall and Draco follows only just by his side.

Chapter End Notes

Nails on a chalkboard absolutely kills me. I can't think of a worst noise, but if you can, I'd love to hear it.
Snakes Hunt Prey

Chapter Summary

Draco blames everything on Harry's horrible luck.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Welcome back! I really liked writing this chapter. I liked writing it so much even though it was a busy week, this all just flowed effortlessly. So I really hope that bleeds through and you enjoy it as well!

I also want to reiterate that this fic is like a rework of an existing fic called I'm Still Here on FFnet. I'm writing this because that author hasn't finished theirs and years later, I still can't get it out of my head. So this is like therapy to me. There are similarities--themes and a name--but no outright copying. I do recommend I'm Still Here but like I said, it's not finished and it doesn't seem like it will be(God I hope I'm wrong)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nova firmly on his shoulder, Harry enters the Great Hall with Draco at his side. Of the four long dining tables, three are full and active with cheerful students. At the professors table, the only missing professors are Dumbledore, Snape, and Babbling. The one empty dinner table is already generating plenty of buzz among the other houses. Harry and Draco being the first Slytherins to breakfast is already worthy of drawing every curious eye in the hall, let alone with the inspiring sight of one of magic's most legendary creature on the shoulder of the heir of one of most prominent family in history.

Harry is certain he's drawing far more attention now than he did as the boy-who-lived. Curious about this time line's chosen one, he spots Hardwin and Ron staring derisively at him, seemingly still upset by his house placement, or his association with Draco, or both. It's worrisome to think of possible scenarios where he'll need them to trust him, but they won't capitulate simply because he's wearing Slytherin colors. Ron in particular is giving him one of his better stink eyes.

Moving towards the empty Slytherin table, Harry spots something that almost makes him stop. A small paper quidditch player is charmed to fly around in the air and dive directly into Hermione's bushy hair. He can see the popular students of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor laugh with each sunk player—even Ron. Focused as she is in her large tome, Hermione hardly seems to pay attention to the obvious bullying. As Luna takes each paper player out though, Hermione seems to shy deeper into her large book, inciting Harry with the strongest urge to incinerate the paper players along with the dining tables. He manages to restrain himself... barely.
Somehow Harry finds the strength to ignore it—if only for the time being. He stops when he reaches the Slytherin table and kneels down, as if to pick something up, making Nova flap her wings to readjust herself. She then decides to use Malfoy's shoulder as a stand. He almost seems honored to have a phoenix use his shoulder until the very moment her sharp claws sink into the soft flesh between his shoulder and neck like a hot knife through butter. Draco has to do everything he can to keep from crying out in agony. Fist in his mouth, he groans muffled and in pain until Nova's talons eventually numbs him to it. Under the table and hidden, Harry whips out his wand with a flick of his wrist. It takes him no more than a few moments to cast a charm underneath the Slytherin benches. It's a faint line that looks similar to an age line though runs the length of the seats instead of in a circle. Standing back up, he notices a glassy eyed, red nosed Draco breathing heavily, looking pained.

“Don't be such a wuss,” Harry tells Draco walking past him. Nova instinctively hops and latches on to Harry's shoulder and he continues to explain, “the pain lasts a second and the punctures heal nearly instantly.”

“Only you would think being stabbed by eight sharp claws is normal,” he argues as he rubs the moisture from his eyes. Ignoring the occasional or blatant stares, they take a seat and start filling their plate. “What were you doing, anyway? It looked like a charm.”

Harry quickly checks his food as he watches Crabbe and Goyle walk in and make their way to them. Smirking, he says, “it is a charm. I placed it under the benches so it would be hard to spot, but it should still work there.”

“And it does...” Draco implores, leaving the question open-ended.

“You'll see,” Harry responds.

Crabbe and Goyle are about to take a seat beside Draco. The second their butts touch the wood, a shell cracking noise is heard before deep, surprised groans. The eggs both boys had disillusioned over their heads are crushed and the yoke splats into their scalp and oozes down their face. Both boys grunt startled and panic as they stumble and rush out of the Great Hall to the laughter of the few lucky enough to see it. Harry smiles genially on the outside, and laughs maniacally on the inside, so much so that his shoulders actually shake in mirth.

_Sirius would be proud_, he thinks.
“Nova hops on the table as Draco asks, “is the charm to crack any eggs on a persons head?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry answers as he returns to checking his breakfast for any trace of tampering. Draco shakes his head at the petty prank, but he can't help but laugh later on when multiple Slytherins have to rush from the great hall with yoke and egg fluid dribbling through hair and down their face. He laughed hardest when Pansy ran out of the hall screaming. She must've used two eggs judging by the amount of icky yellow goo cascading down her face. All three houses laugh with each slimed Slytherin—with the exception of Hermione and Luna, Harry notes—and in the end, Harry, Draco, Tracey, Greengrass, and Zabini are the only fourth years who had a full breakfast. The first and second years seemed to have been left out and so stayed to enjoy their breakfast as well.

“How'd they get their hands on eggs so fast?” the normally stone-faced Zabini asks with an actually chuckle.

“One of the upper years knows where the kitchen is and went out last night before curfew,” Daphne answers with a wide smirk of her own. “He returned with two baskets full of eggs and sold them for a sickle each,” she smiles as she tries to keep from laughing. Harry can't help but admit how pretty her smile is and immediately clamps down on that train of thought, eager to ignore what a beautiful face can do to him. Fun was only a byproduct of this prank. What started as an easy joke turned out to have a lot of potential for an immediate goal in mind.

“That was bloody brilliant, Flamel,” Tracey calls to Harry between laughs.

“I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Davis,” Harry innocently says with a knowing smirk. Tracey enjoying the prank is the success he was hoping for. If the Sirius in this time line is anything like his own, he's confident the Maurader would appreciate a good prank when he heard one. He wasn't completely certain Tracey wouldn't put an egg on her head, so it was a gamble but she seemed observant enough to understand he was only joking. Harry chose the bonus points a good prank might earn him by impressing Tracey, and if she were to mention it to him via letters, possibly impress Sirius as well. It's obviously not enough to land an invitation to the wedding, but it's certainly a good introduction... if this bubbly strawberry-blonde writes.

“Would someone care to explain why it is Slytherin students are dashing out of here like a cat on fire,” Professor McGonagall states as she walks up to the few fourth years. With the exception of Harry and Draco, the others shut down without showing any of the typical Slytherin attitude—at least more respect than Nott or Pansy.

Draco however answers the Gryffindor head of house. “It maybe only be the start of the year, professor, but I think they might be cracking under the pressure.” Ignoring the unladylike snort from Tracey, Draco shakes his head in feigned disappointment as he mutters to the deputy headmistress, “rotten eggs, the lot of them.”
McGonagall eyes the snickering group skeptically before handing them each their course schedules. After watching Hermione race from the Great hall with her giant tome in her arms, Harry takes a quick glance at his schedule, all the while wondering what could've happened to his best friend to make her run out so fast.

He's dreading having to waste his time in these mind-numbing lessons when Draco snags his schedule and compares it with his own. “Damn,” he says. “I completely forgot to change my courses. You have Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. I'll talk to Snape and have him transfer me.”

“Even if you had your daddy's help, Malfoy, there's no way you can transfer into either course with us,” Tracey tells him with a smirk. Clearly it's going to take more than a couple of jokes to change Tracey's opinion of Draco, if her derisive tone is anything to go by, but Harry needs Draco to be—at least—on respectful terms with her.

Draco's natural inclination is to fire back insults but he holds his tongue, instead calmly asking, “and why is that?”

“You don't have the prerequisite necessary to take second level of either Ancient Runes or Arithmancy,” Tracey answers him. “The most you can do is transfer into level one classes with the other third years.”

“It doesn't matter,” Harry tells Draco. “They're just classes.” What Harry really wanted to say is that it's a waste of time no matter what and the thing that's truly important is the strides they make in bringing Voldemort down. Harry tries to convey that to Draco with his eyes but isn't sure how well it translates.

“I wouldn't quite put it like that,” Tracey tells Harry in a lighter tone than she used with Draco. “These are arguably the hardest courses in all of Hogwarts, and Daphne here is the only Slytherin that can compete against Ravenclaw, who for the moment are top of the class. But this is a new year, right Daphne?”

“I'll overtake Granger this year,” Greengrass confidently proclaims. “I heard she's got far more on her mind than studies.”

Curious to know more, all Harry says is, “good luck with that,” stands and leaves. Nova flaps her powerful gust-producing wings a couple times to take to the air and rainbow lands on his shoulder. Draco stands and follows, wincing at the sight of the legendary creature's talons latching on to
They have charms first and Harry enters Flitwick's class with Draco, Tracey, Greengrass and Zabini behind him. He wasn't expecting them to stick so close to him as he walks the familiar halls. With Tracey there, he couldn't exactly tell them to piss off, so he kept quiet. Fortunately Tracey prefers to talk with Daphne, and Zabini and Draco share a few words along the way. Harry heard Zabini ask Draco how long he's known 'Ares Flamel' to which Draco only responds, 'a while.' Harry enjoys to social isolation all the way to his seat at the front of the class. As Draco takes the seat next to him, he again laments having to waste his time in class.

They wait for the rest of the fourth year class to fill in with more fourth year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Harry smiles internally as many of the Slytherins look like they've had fresh showers—a positive feeling that didn't last as Hardwin and Ron rush in before the final bell. They scowl at Harry and Draco as they make their way to the other side of the stadium seating to sit by Seamus and Dean. Harry easily recalls their decapitated heads in his cell as well, but fortunately he doesn't freak out. Grateful to be handling his emotional response better than before, he simply mentally promises to save them and repeats it over and over.

Once class is settled, the gregarious half-goblin professor Filius Flitwick takes his place high on his podium to welcome the class, instruct them on the material they'll be going over, and what they'll be accomplishing for the entirety of the year; summoning, seize and pull, banishing, and mending charms. Harry wants to groan in pain when he realizes how far ahead of the fourth year curriculum he actually is. A slump in Draco's shoulders tell Harry the silver-brunette is at least advanced enough to find this equally as trivial.

The instructions write themselves on the chalkboard and Harry hopes the Upper Order enjoy that sound of chalk to chalkboard while in their classes. Students bring out their wands and follow the written direction while Flitwick moves from student to student to offer guidance and encouragement. Harry flicks his wrist and his death white wand easily shoots into his grasp. Without even voicing the summoning charm, he flicks his wand in the general direction of the floating cushions and feels his magic eagerly respond. One of the many cushions everyone is unsuccessfully calling on, zooms right to his open palm. He catches it in one hand to the complete surprise of everyone—minus Draco—in the room.

“Oh,” Flitwick gasps. “Oh! Very good Mr. Flamel! Fifteen points to Slyther-” Flitwick is cut off when Draco summons a cushion to his hand as well, however not as fast. “Oh my, you've certainly been practicing Mr. Malfoy. Another ten points to Slytherin! And no homework for either of you, I think.”

Harry is aware the class is surprised but it's Hardwin and Ron's reaction that gives him the most
pause. They're clearly unhappy being "shown up" by Slytherins. Rationally, Harry is primarily concerned because of how he might need them in the future; Hardwin in particular. Since the majority of his future predictions are fluid, and should not be completely relied upon, he can't get too close to them unnecessarily. While he can think of a few scenarios where he could use them, he might not need their help at all, and if that's the case, he'd much rather let them enjoy their lives free of this burden.

As Flitwick allows the students to leave his class, he ponders on the ease by which Ares performed every summon charm in class. Being the heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Flamel will cause an uproar among the magical community as it is, but to also be highly gifted wizard as well... It's only been the first class and already, Flitwick can tell the boy is beyond the fourth year curriculum. Ares will be the talk of faculty; he's sure of it. Most professors are eager to know where the boy's natural talents lie, and Flitwick is happy to say Charms is a fair bet.

Flitwick also mentally catalogs not only the ease by which Ares summoned the cushion but doing so without uttering a syllable. *That's far ahead of even human adults,* he tells himself. He also finds it interesting to see Ares use a wrist holster. That's an item used by official Aurors or professional duelists, not students—or at least none that he's ever seen. Flitwick's observations might have been at the behest of Headmaster Dumbledore, but the old headmaster isn't the only one requesting intelligence on the young heir. He may work for Magical Britain, but he's still an active national of the Goblin Nation and as such decides that Ares is high value enough—intelligence wise—to be more diligent with his observations. There may be things he'll need to keep to himself from both Dumbledore and Ragnok. It might cause him some friction with his superiors but until he knows what his observation may lead to, he'll err on the side of caution.

Exiting the charms class, Harry's grateful he at least earned the credit without having to turn in rolls of parchment. Harry, Nova, Draco and the others don't get very far down the hall when Hardwin, Ron, Seamus rush ahead and cut him off as Dean, Lavender, and Parvati follow. It's not an overly aggressive gesture but it's not friendly either. Tracey and Daphne stand to the side, alert but without aggression. Nott and Zabini square their shoulders and tense their neck, ready to attack themselves. Draco is as calm and collected as Harry. Bored expression on Harry's face and unwilling to say the first word, he stands waiting.

“So Ares Flamel, the Slytherin,” Hardwin vilely declares. Ron stands by his side staring intently.

Tracey takes a step forward before Harry can give a lackluster response. “Leave him alone, Hardwin,” she warns. “Don't think I won't tell Aunt Lily your bothering Flamel.”

“She's not your aunt, and tell her what?” Hardwin responds. “That I said he was a grass-eating snake? It's hardly an insult to a snake is it?”
“Oh, because you would feel honored to be called that,” Tracey returns.

“And snakes don't eat grass,” Daphne adds with an air of aristocracy. “They hunt prey,” she says eying them sternly.

“Oh I'd like ta see ya try ya trollop,” Seamus returns stepping up to the group of Slytherins.

“Just leave Tracey,” Hardwin states loudly, though not quite yelling, “I just want to have a quick chat with Flamel is all.” He turns to his mates and chins for them to leave. “See? The boys are leaving too.” Reluctantly, every Gryffindor except Ron leaves.

The house divide might be stronger in this time line than in his own but Harry cares a lot less than he used to as well. He simply wants to move along. “It's okay,” Harry tells his housemates, almost bored. “You can go on ahead.”

“Slytherin stand together,” Tracey whispers to Harry.

“I won't be long,” Harry tells her.

Tracey hesitates but eventually walks away, glaring at Hardwin the entire time. Daphne studies Harry a moment before rushing after Tracey. When Nott and Zabini linger, Harry tells them, “go on.” Ignoring how much it irks him for Death Eater spawn like Nott try and defend him. Harry crosses his arm and waits for his brother to speak.

When the four of them are alone, Hardwin starts as if revolted, “Dumbledore's pretty certain you belong in Gryffindor. And Dumbledore is always right about everything.”

“You have a phoenix for Merlin's sake,” Ron exclaims. “Just like Dumbledore. You couldn't belong anywhere more than in Gryffindor.”

Hardwin steps up to Harry. “I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and say you didn't know what you were doing. Malfoy probably got to you first and confused you and you asked the hat to put you in Slytherin. It was an easy mistake to make.”
“Malfoy can be a prat like that,” Ron adds. “As you might've guessed by now.”

“So just say the word and I can speak with Headmaster Dumbledore. It might take a bit of doing but I'm certain we can have you moved into Gryffindor by tonight,” Hardwin suggests. “Honestly, I'm sure you'll like it a hell of a lot more than being in a pit of slimy snakes.” Neither Hardwin or Ron hide their displeasure towards the calm Draco.

“Why is it Gryffindors always have the courage to talk no matter how stupid they sound,” Draco genuinely asks Harry. At least his tone is lacking a thick layer of condescension as he continues to tell the two Gryffindors, “you know it takes just as much courage to sit down and shut up as it does to run your mouth. You should try it.”

“Draco,” Harry warns, though he will admit, it was slightly amusing. However, insults between houses mean nothing to their overall plan and Harry would like to be on good terms with Hardwin for a number of reasons. “I appreciate the offer, Potter,” Harry feels weird saying that. “But the floppy hat everyone seems to take as gospel sorted me into Slytherin, so why shouldn't I stay there?”

“Because Slytherin's are nothing but backstabbing snakes who only care about blood supremacy, wealth, and dark whack-jobs,” Ron answers back hotly. “They supported you-know-who for crying out loud! And they're still around, too. You may have seen the Prophet's article about Death Eaters. They are parents of Slytherin! Are those the kind of wizards you want to surround yourself with? Is that what you're like too?”

“I am who I am,” he easily answers Ron. “And honestly, as long as I have my own room, it makes no difference what house I'm in,” Harry tells them.

Hardwin and Ron share a look of surprise at hearing that before Ron asks, “You have your own room?”

“...You don't?” Harry asks, faking some disbelief. “How many of you share a room?”

“N-Not many,” Ron nervously responds. “Just- just two really.”

“That’s not bad,” Harry points out. “I thought you were going to say four or five. I'd go spare being packed to the gills like that; not an ounce of privacy.” When the warning chime sounds, Harry states, “well, we have history next, so...” Harry walks around Ron and Hardwin without another
exchange of words.

“I had no idea Gryffindors have to share four or five to a room,” Draco says in a low voice, amused. “I'd suffocate for sure.”

“It's not bad when you care about every one,” Harry returns as they near Binn's snore-fest of a History class. Harry can spot Nott and Zabini waiting for them by the class door, and still feels weird about it... well, weird as in not feeling the urge to kill them. Being in peaceful standing with future Death Eaters as well as dreading the next few hours recapping goblin rebellions hits a frustrated Harry like a bag of bricks. He can't help but ask Draco, “is history as bad as I remember it?”

“No,” Draco comments. “It's a lot worse. I can feel my body shutting down at this very moment. Why?”

Harry sighs loudly. “To hell with that,” he asserts, stopping mid stride. “I'm not doing it. I'm far too old for nap time.” Harry turns and leaves.

“Where are you going?” Draco calls, surprised and uncertain about following him or not. He looks from Nott, who spreads his arms wide as if to ask 'what's the hold up,' to Harry who is nearly to the stairs. Draco rushes after Harry and asks again, “where are we going?”

Looking around to the portraits lining the walls and seeing them for the chatty eavesdroppers that they are, Harry nonverbally casts a privacy charm around the pair. “Room of Requirement,” he answers. “For the diadem.” He would've taken possession of Ravenclaw's Diadem last night but warding the first year rooms took all night.

“What about class?” Draco asks. “It'll only get worse if you keep getting detention for ditching.”

“I don't care about detention,” Harry returns as they reach the seventh floor, left corridor. “Killing that dark wanker isn't some silly side project that'll be done when we have free time around classes. I'll put up with a lot, but Binns is probably the most useless professor in Hogwarts and that's time better spent on things that actually matter.”

Draco doesn't utter a word of protest since he completely agrees. They reach the secret entrance opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and Harry walks past the entrance three times while thinking of the Room of Hidden Things. When a door materializes, Harry and Draco step inside to
an impossibly large room exactly as they remember it. A large expanse filled with mountains of random and obscure items. Harry walks over to where he recalls the Diadem is; by the chipped bust of some old ugly warlock. When he finds the old discolored tiara, he removes the thin chain from around his neck, enlarges his trunk and proceeds to disarm it's many security precautions and traps. After fetching the lead box within, Harry floats the diadem inside, and seals it.

Draco points his wand out at random and calls, “Accio wrist wand holster!” Sensing his magic finding purchase somewhere in the room, clacking and banging of pushed or falling objects sound off before a pink leather wrist holster zips into his hand. Harry laughs at Draco's dejected frown. “Pretty,” Harry states. With an annoyed look, Draco slowly rolls up his sleeve to don on the accessory.

“At least examine it for dark curses before you put your pink holster on,” Harry humorously tells the blonde as he puts his silver chain back around his neck. “I'm sure you'd rather keep your hand.” While a slightly embarrassed Draco examines the wrist holster, Harry, with the lead box in hand tells him, “meet me inside the second floor, girl's bathroom.”

“Why? Where are you going,” Draco questions, still running diagnostic charms on the wrist holster.

“Nova,” is all Harry says and flames away in a bright flash of fire.

Shaking his head, Draco sarcastically states, “of course his phoenix can apparate. Why wouldn't it?”

Harry flames into the living area of the Flamel's London brownstone. Certain the wards will alert the Nicolas and Perenelle of his arrival, Harry heads down to the basement towards the fidelius charmed armoire. He navigates through the numerous security checks successfully until he can finally opens the double doors, and places the lead box next to the other two.

“Three down, four to go,” Nicolas calls from behind Harry as he and Perenelle descend the stairs.

“Maybe not,” Harry states after he closes the armoire. Walking up to them, he adds, “We either caught a lucky break—which I don't believe for a second—or we know far less than we should.”

Both Flamels take one look at his Slytherin house colors and are hit with surprise. Perenelle can't help but say, “you mean like learning that our heir is a Slytherin?”
Harry sighs, dropping his head with some frustration. “Please,” he implores. “I don't want to hear about it. They're just colors, and quite frankly, mean nothing in the face of killing Voldemort.”

Perenelle looks sheepish a moment before smiling and agreeing. “Yes, or course. You're right. I just... I've never liked that chronic peeper. There are multiple reasons why his animagus was a snake. Quite the pervert, that one.”

“Can you blame the wizard for knowing beauty when he sees it,” Nicolas comments eyeing her flirtatiously, then gives her a loving kiss in the cheek.

“Oh you charmer,” Perenelle smiles with brighter cheeks. “But also yes! I can. Beauty isn't without it's thorns and if I had caught him, I'd have cut is balls off.”

Harry didn't feel any reaction he has to these comments was acceptable so continues by explaining to his surrogate parents why he's in Slytherin colors and more specifically, what the sorting hat told him. “So either there's one less horcrux out there, or there's one running around somewhere.”

“To know more about what happened that night, well, it's not something we'll be able to learn about in a book, is it,” Perenelle states.

“Very true,” Nicolas says, scratching his bearded chin. “If we want to know for certain what atrocity transpired that night, we have little option but to ask the only adult alive who was in a position to witness anything.”

_Lily Potter_, Harry mentally answers what they're all thinking.

She was the only person that fateful night who could shed some like on what might've happened. It's possible she might've told Dumbledore but Harry doesn't think for one second he would get a straight answer from the old manipulator; not without an exchange of some sort. It's odd to think she might be a point of focus in his future plans to kill Voldemort. He can feel a knot in the pit of his stomach form at the idea of talking to his mother—a thing that was impossible in his time line without the resurrection stone. So far, in this time line he's only seen her from a distance and already, that's a challenge for his occlumancy to withhold a magically charged, emotional outburst. He can't be sure how he's going to talk to her, or even if he can.

“This might be wonderful news for Hardwin,” Perenelle adds. “If he doesn't have the horcrux in
his forehead, that's one less concern to worry about.”

“Yeah,” Harry mutters. Shaking his head of nervous thoughts, he stands up to leave and Nova flies from her stand by the wall to his shoulder. “I have to get going. I have to meet Ferret by the Chamber of Secret.”

“Well, actually,” Nicolas interrupts Harry from leaving. “I was hoping to speak with you a little longer.”

“What about?” Harry asks turning to the older man.

“Perenelle and I have been discussing the plans we've all come up with thus far as well as future probabilities, and we felt we could be doing more,” Nicolas begins as he takes his wife's hand. “Aside from maintaining your cover, there isn't anything significant we can help you with. It's not unlike what you must feel like, sitting in class when you know there's more important work to be done. It's unsettling to say the least. Only in your case, being in class is assisting by being in the best possible position to strike. Perenelle and I however, are now on the outskirts with little else to contribute. We thought we'd bring it up with you and ask if there's some other way we can help stop this madman?”

Harry takes a moment to consider their plight. After experiencing charms class he can easily understand how difficult it must be to sit idle when there's plenty more that needs to be done. Harry has always had a single-minded focus, unable to concentrate on anything else until the largest problem is resolved. Hermione and Ron were usually the ones to remind him to be patient. They kept him from slipping into obsession, and now all he has is Draco, which is a depressing thought. Harry considers what he might need help with and tells the couple, “there might be a few things. The first is getting access to Black Manor. With the majority of the Black family residing there, it's the most likely place for the locket to be. I'm working on my own way of getting in but it never hurts to have an alternate.”

“Since it's an ancestral home, an invitation would be the easiest way in,” Nicolas finishes in understanding. “We'll have to return to the public eye but.”

“But that was the plan since the beginning,” Perenelle finishes for him with a gentle smile. She turns to Harry. “We'll find a way to make introductions. There are several customs in etiquette and forms of conduct among the high society that can assist us.”

“You should know, Sirius isn't your typical high-born,” Harry tells them. “He doesn't care about status or privilege. He... he's made of tougher stuff, you know; bravery, kindness, loyalty. And he
loves pranking people.’” Harry takes a moment to pull himself away from that train of sentimental thought. “He's different, is all I mean to say,” he tells them quietly.

“We'll keep that in mind,” Perenelle softly responds in understanding.

Nicolas clears his throat before he asks, “you mentioned a few objectives?”

“Huh,” Harry abruptly asks before he remembered the second point he wants to bring up with them. Thinking about his godfather distracted him with images of good times and the best moments of his childhood. “Oh, yeah, um... I need a note from you giving me permission to skip History of Magic.”

“Why on earth would you ever want to avoid that course?” Nicolas can barely believe Harry would avoid that of all the courses to pick.

“And ask us,” Perenelle adds. “Two of the leading first-hand figures in much of history, known or otherwise. Learning history is important for your own personal history.”

“Significant events, people, developments, and achievements in the past aid us in the present and help avoid making horrific mistakes wherever possible,” Nicolas dovetails. “Not learning the history of magic is simply wrong, and I cannot in good conscience deprive you of it's merits.”

Harry is hardly fazed by their passionate outcry when he responds. “I don't have a problem learning the history of magic if that was actually what was happening. Having already been through professor Cuthbert Binns’ History of Magic class, I can attest to you both we learn nowhere near that type of knowledge. He's been teaching there so long he's literally a ghost who doesn't know he's died. And for years, all he ever drones on about is Goblin Rebellions and Giant Wars. I've learned more about magic's most prominent pioneers outside of that class. It doesn't help that Binns, bless his ghost heart, is the most boring professor ever to teach wizard-kind. His wheezy, monotone voice will cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes of hearing it, five in warm weather. His class is commonly considered nap time, and I just don't have it in me to waste a minute of my time that way. I just don't.”

“That can not be,” Nicolas voices like a hurt puppy. “That sounds ghastly. Could you possibly be overstating a bit?”

“I'll give you a memory if you want, but overestimating? Not even a little,” Harry says in a serious
tone. “I'm sorry. I can understand how you feel but I do need that note. Otherwise I'll be skipping detention along with class, and who knows how long I can keep that up before it becomes a problem.”

With a stiff nod, Nicolas slowly exits the room to his desk to write out the letter of exemption while Perenelle stays with Harry. “So how's school?” she asks half out of humor and half out of curiosity.

“It's fine,” he simply answers with some trepidation. When he traveled to the past, he never considered going back to school again, much less talking to a caring guardian about it. Though he can imagine Hermione being absolutely thrilled by that prospect.

“Oh come now, Harry,” Perenelle returns jovially. “It must mean a lot to you to see your friends alive and well. Add to that, you now have a mother and a brother you have a chance to know. This has to mean more to you than, 'it's fine.'”

“...I-” Harry sighs. It's uncomfortable discussing this, not that he feels Perenelle is prying or being uncivil. He just has such a hard time keeping his tender and fickle emotions in check as it is. Harry knows he's holding his emotions back and whether it's good for him or not, he can't exactly talk it out with his mother, brother or best friends. How could it help if they have no idea what they mean to him? Keeping them at a distance is simply the best emotive move for him right now, if not the most appropriate. “I'd rather not talk about that.”

“Well, for what it's worth, I think you should,” Perenelle tells him warmly. “It would be good for you in ways you've yet to realize and if you ever feel like you need to, even if just to decompress, I'll always be here to listen.” Harry can easily see in her unwavering eyes how much she means it. Harry only nods his appreciation hoping to leave it there. After a moment though she easily tacks on, “and just so you know, I won't judge you in the slightest if you crave a bit of aggressive cuddling with a lady friend.”

Harry coughs, eyes widen at her insinuation. “...wha- what?”

“'Moistening the Pope,' is what the kids called it a few hundred years ago,” she informs him as a matter-of-factly.

“Perenelle- I don't know-” he licks his suddenly dry lips. “It's not what I- This isn't a very-”
“Oh come now Harry,” Perenelle waves her hand at his shock as being silly. “We're old souls able to discuss mature topics, aren't we? Despite your mental maturity, you're body is young and I can't begrudge you your urges. It only makes sense you'll want to have your bean waxed every now and again.”

“Oh~kay, P-Perenelle,” Harry stammers uncomfortably and red in the cheeks. “We really- in fact I insist- we don't have to talk about this, at all! I'm not- I won't be- It isn't a thing. It isn't an issue.” Harry lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

“I just want you to know I think it's fine if you do, that's all.” Perenelle is holding her need to smile down to a stern smirk. After a moment of silence, when Harry's certain the subject is dropped, Perenelle can't help but add, “just make sure he or she is on the older side of young. Even a professor would be more than fine-”

“Oh, for crying out-” Harry quickly moves to the door. “I'm going to see what's taking Nicolas so long. Take care, Perenelle.”

“Don't forget to write!” Perenelle calls as Harry exits. After finding Nicolas, he greets him farewell and flames back to Hogwarts. Having never shown Nova the girls lavatory on the second floor, Harry flames to his room in Slytherin. It's private so no one will see him, and it's close enough so it's not a far walk. Exiting his room, he finds most of the Upper Order having a lye—seemingly recovering—about in the center chairs and couch before the fireplace.

When they spot him exiting the fourth year corridor, Khan and a few of his cronies, Boyle and Yaroslav if Harry remembers properly, meet him before he can exit. “You're suppose to be in class, Flamel. How did you get in here?”

“I used this sophisticated device called a door,” Harry easily answers, obviously agitating Khan. “Really innovative stuff that. They're everywhere too.”

Khan immediately takes an intimidating step toward Harry, but no more when Nova spreads her wings and aggressively crows at a very high pitch, halting Khan's advance. The large, meaty seventh year tries to ignore the agitated phoenix with little success though still states with as much gravitas as he can, “you will apologize- no! No, I want you to gravel, instead. I like that better. Tonight. In front of everyone. You're going to be the first example of the year. Congratulations.” He tries to glare fierce intimidation—or what he thinks is intimidation—but to Harry, it might as well be a puppy whining for treats. “Remember, I did warn you.”

“He couldn't even last a day,” Boyle adds with a loathsome chuckle.
Khan moves out of Harry's way still staring him down as Yaroslav states, “every year there's always one, tho in'it? He'll learn after tonight though, won't he.”

Harry ignores them as he moves toward the exit of Slytherin common room. Khan shouts as he leaves, “don't even think about crying to a teacher! It won't help!”

Harry puts it out of his mind the moment he leaves the dungeons. It's not long until he's walking into the girl's lavatory on the second floor.

“Where the bloody hell have you been!” Draco yells, clearly upset. “It's been ages!”

“It's barely been half an hour,” Harry easily returns. “Binns’ class isn't even done.”

“Well you didn't tell me anything before you apparated... I didn't even know you could-” Draco calls but is interrupted by a stern frown from Harry.

“Do you remember what I told you about talking,” Harry tells the impatient blonde.

“I can't say that I've ever seen a lover's spat between boys,” Moaning Myrtle bemoans appearing out of her toilet. “OH! I wouldn't mind seeing you two make-up right here, if you want to. Please want to. I can totally tell who's on the top,” she says looking at a wide-eyed Harry.

Draco makes a choking noise and Harry completely understands the sentiment, though he hides it better. “No,” Harry starts. “No... lover's spat. I'm actually doing some investigating and I was hoping you can help me, Ms Warren. Myrtle Warren, right? That's you?”

“It is,” She sings with a gleeful smile. “Though everyone just calls me Moaning Myrtle. And you are?”

“I'm Ares Flamel.”

“Ares Flamel?” Myrtle slowly repeats. “You're all the talk among the other ghosts. You're quite
handsome, even with the scars; no, especially with the scars. You must be soo dangerous!” She playfully nudges up to Harry and tries to touch the scars on his face. “Will you tell me how you got them?”

“Uh, maybe later,” Harry answers. “Will you help me first? With my investigation.”

“What sort of investigation?” Myrtle flies higher keeping her suspicious eyes on him. “Are you here to learn who make fun of me? Because I have several leads. I don't know their names but I know what they look like. I haunt all of them whenever I can.”

“Them?” Draco asks the wailing ghost.

“Oh, yes,” Myrtle expresses as she cozy up to Draco, gently moving her translucent hands down his clean face to his chest. Draco moves away as best he can while Myrtle continues. “At least a dozen! These girls can be so mean. Vicious little pixies! And I'm not the only attractive girl they painfully accost to tears. I haunt them for the sake of others!”

“Myrtle,” Harry interrupts. “I'm actually here about something very specific. You see, I've heard about your death day, and I thought I could help.” Moaning Myrtle looks ready to cry at the mention of her death day, so Harry quickly continues. “I know what happened to you was terrible, and I'm here because I don't want it to happen again... to anyone.”

“How can you?” Myrtle exclaims nearly at a sob. “I don't even know how it happened, it was so quick. All I saw were large yellow orbs, then nothing. I died!”

“I thought so,” Harry states. “Would you mind telling me what happened two years ago? Weren't other students being injured then as well?”

“Why do you want to know about two years ago when you can stop these nasty girls now?”

“I think there's a beast here,” Harry tells her. “A very terrible beast that needs to be stopped. I think this terrible beast hurt you as well.”

“Would you really stop this... beast?” she weakly asks.
“I will,” Harry sternly answers her. “But can you tell me how many people have been through your bathroom? To that wall there, by the sink?”

“I couldn’t say why, but I don’t see all that many witches use this lavatory. Every once in a while, the mean girls come in and bully the other girls into doing heinous things… Mnn, oh, there have been boys as well… I’ve seen Headmaster Dumbledore in here not too long ago. He said hello to me!” Myrtle squeals in delight.

“Can you tell me about Headmaster Dumbledore?” Harry asks earnestly.

“Oh, well, I flew through his robes once,” she says. “You wouldn’t believe how long his pubic hair-”

“Myrtle,” Harry interrupts at the same time Draco snorts and laughs. “I meant did he do anything while he was here?”

“Mnnnn, no,” Myrtle comments bored. “He looked over that wall you pointed to with his wand for five minutes. He said hello but rather than pay more attention to me, he only had eyes for some book, then he left!”

With a flick of his wrist, Harry's wand is in hand and he's examining the wall for any wards Dumbledore might've put up. Sure enough Harry finds a simple detain and alert ward underneath the sink, near the serpent engraving. Harry stands and returns to the deviant ghost. “Myrtle, would you mind keeping this a secret between us? This might be dangerous and I don't want to get in trouble for trying to stop the beast.”

“Why ever would you get in trouble for that?” Myrtle remarks. “You would be a hero! …a handsome hero.”

Ignoring the admiration, he answers, “some people might not see it that way, since I’m young, and a real hero shouldn’t have to boast about his good deeds, don't you think?”

“Well,” she coos affectionately, floating closer to Harry. “I wouldn't mind at all, actually. Not One. Bit!” Her voice is high and suggestive as she pops each word; slightly alarming Harry. “As long as you wouldn't mind "making-up" with your… delicate boy friend right here.” She blows a fish-lips kiss to a horrified Draco, who dodges the imaginary affection. “Don't be afraid to be rough,” Myrtle suggests to Harry with wide and feral eyes.
Taking a single second to think of alternate counterarguments is apparently unacceptably long for Draco who yells out, “No! That is not happening! I'd rather you tell the entire miserable castle!”

“Well I don't want that,” Harry pointedly eyes Draco, easily reminding him about his oath. The blonde scion scowls and crosses his arm, shaking his head but saying nothing else. “And Myrtle you don't want us 'making-up' either.” The feral grin dropping from her face, Myrtle looks suspiciously at Harry before he continues. “What you really want is help stopping the bullies from picking on you.”

“I don't mind them picking on me,” she answers easily. She looks at Draco lavishly before saying, “not if I get to see this in exchange.” The way she licks her lips is disturbing to both boys, Harry just hides it better than Draco.

“Maybe not,” Harry continues. “But what about the other girls who are being picked on? You said they cry and have bad things happen to them. You fight for these girls don't you?” Harry asks innocently and Draco catches on to his train of thought.

“What kind of bad things have you seen happen to them?” Draco asks, trying to get Myrtle to think about the bullied girls suffering. He tries to engage the ghost girl to take some culpability and forget all about trying to force him to make-out with another boy. “Is it really bad?”

“Well, I suppose you can say some things were bad,” she says slowly as she thinks over the victimized girls. “Normally it's putting antlers on their head, or hooves on their feet, fur all over their body but once, they made these poor girls strip naked!” Harry remembers how his own father bullied Snape—holding him in the air, up down in only his under garments—and though forcing girls to strip is pretty bad, it's not terribly hard to believe. “Then towards the end of last year, a few boys found out and made the girls do deplorable acts to them.”


“Mostly silly things, like burning their underwear or making the girls kiss but once I caught a boy holding one of the girls head to his crotch,” Myrtle admits remorsefully. “He was calling her a mudblood while making her suck him off! If I hadn't shown up when I did, who knows how much worse it could have been, the poor thing!” Myrtle weeps from the guilt and heartache.

“Myrtle,” Harry calls, trying to get the weeping girls attention. “Myrtle, if I stop that from happening will you keep what we do here a secret?”
It takes her a moment to regain her composure. Like a call to arms, Myrtle looks determined and nods her head. “I will! If you can help those girls, I won't tell a soul you were ever here.”

“It's a deal,” Harry deadpans. He turns and walks over to the wall, nodding to Draco in a way that says, 'keep talking to Myrtle.' Confident Draco can get all the necessary details, Harry takes out his wand and begins to disassemble the ward. He can't say he was expecting this of Slytherin. Inside the house, he can understand having to deal with privileged, depraved idiots thinking they can take what they want but for them to force themselves on others outside the house as well? Harry is now looking forward to Khan's misguided threat.

“What were their names,” Draco asks. “The girls being bullied? Or the ones bullying them?”

“I never heard their names,” Myrtle tells Draco. “I only scare the nasty ones away. I don't console the victims. I know the boy who made the witch give him a blowy is in Ravenclaw; the girl too actually. She had untamed bushy hair and her friend with dirty blonde hair was made to watch. Poor thing couldn't stop crying after I scared him away.”

Harry was in the middle of the most delicate stage of dismantling the detainment ward when he heard, 'untamed bushy hair.' His magic spikes alongside his rage and the immediate magical surge triggered by hearing how one of his most treasured friends is being defiled, completely destroys the wards.

“What were their names,” Draco asks. “The girls being bullied? Or the ones bullying them?”

“I never heard their names,” Myrtle tells Draco. “I only scare the nasty ones away. I don't console the victims. I know the boy who made the witch give him a blowy is in Ravenclaw; the girl too actually. She had untamed bushy hair and her friend with dirty blonde hair was made to watch. Poor thing couldn't stop crying after I scared him away.”

Harry was in the middle of the most delicate stage of dismantling the detainment ward when he heard, 'untamed bushy hair.' His magic spikes alongside his rage and the immediate magical surge triggered by hearing how one of his most treasured friends is being defiled, completely destroys the wards.

“Shit!” Harry shields himself from the wave and blinding flash eradicating Dumbledore's wards causes. Split between grilling Myrtle for more details and fleeing the bathroom before Dumbledore arrives, Harry chooses flee for now, murder a Ravenclaw later.

~Open~ Harry commands the entrance to the chamber. “Draco! In, now!” The urgency in his tone prompts Draco to hurry to the tubes. “Myrtle I'll keep my promise. Please don't tell anyone we were here!”

“What do you want me to do here, Ares?” Draco looks down the large pipe. “It's a dark deep piiiiiiiiiiiiiiii-” He screams as Harry pushes him in. ~Close~ Harry hisses before jumping in himself. He hears the entrance close shut behind him. He free falls almost leisurely since Nova has extended her wings to catch as much air drag as possible. When she senses the ground approach, a few flaps of her strong wings, slows Harry's descent considerably. Casting lumos as his feet gently touch down, he finds Draco rolling around in pain, gripping his left ankle.
“You okay?” Harry asks.

Draco grunts in pain scowling at Harry. “What the fuck was that about!”

Harry doesn’t feel bad about the blonde’s injury, even slightly, but he doesn’t feel good either. Rather than feel culpable, his rational mind simply considers how unfavorable it’ll be if Draco has to run for whatever reason. In a very real way, their shared past and most of Malfoy’s worst deeds have been erased—though not forgotten. Even if the future is all about positive change, he doesn’t think he’ll ever forgive Draco, so he can’t feel remorseful for the man’s pain.

“Look, I didn’t intend for you to get hurt, okay. I just, when I heard...” Harry trails off recalling Hermione’s ordeal from his own timeline. Her anguish, her desperation, agony, torture, rape... days of it, until they finally gave her the mercy of death. “I lost my focus while I was disarming the ward; destroyed them actually. They were a combination of alert and detainment rune schemes. They weren’t difficult to bypass but when I heard about... her, what was done, well, we only had moments before Dumbledore showed up. How’s your ankle?”

Draco sighs. Harry can easily see the guilt in the boy’s eyes and nods his head. “It feels broken,” the blonde glumly states. “Or twisted... I don’t know; it hurts.”

“I’m not much of a healer,” Harry explains. “Oddly enough the parasite didn’t spend much time focusing on the discipline of healing people. Take off your shoe.” Instead, Harry conjures an elastic bandage and has it wrap itself tight around Malfoy’s ankle. “That should help. If you want, you can stay here and I’ll check for the basilisk on my own.”

“No way am I staying here by myself,” Draco winces, moving to stand. Harry grips his arm and helps him to his feet. When Draco puts some weight on it he says, “I think I can manage. Plus you might need me.”

“How would I need you?” Harry genuinely wants to know. “I still don’t even know what you can do.”

“I don’t know,” Draco calls in frustration. “But two wands against a basilisk makes a hell of a lot more sense than going against it alone... if it makes a difference.”

“If the thing is alive, I’ll have a better chance facing it alone. The most I’d ask you to do is support; from afar. And don’t forget I have Nova,” Harry states, Nova spreads her wings in triumph as he
starts walking into the outer-chamber. Remembering where Ron and Lockhart were blocked, Harry mutters, “Huh, no cave-in.”

Draco looks at the ceiling and asks, “What cave-in?”

“In our time line, when Ron and I were down here, we brought Lockhart.”

“That dodgy prat actually came down here?”

“Well, we sort of held him at wand point. Anyway, he managed to grab Ron's broken wand and tried to obliviate us, but it backfired, causing a cave-in.” Harry stops in front a large circular door. ~Open~ he hisses in parseltongue. Draco marvels as a serpent animates itself to slither in a circle around the round frame of the door, unlocking it's many locks with a clanking boom. The large door slowly opens wide enough to allow the two to enter the large chamber. Torches flare to life as they pass each column.

At the end of the walkway stands a large statue of Salazar Slytherin with a grand royal chair at it's base. Considering there's not a large dead basilisk on the floor in front of it, Harry can assume the basilisk wasn't killed like it was in his time line, if at all. A heavy atmosphere sets deep to his very bones and Harry puts everything out of his mind, including Hermione's abuse. He saves that rage-inducing revelation for later. At the moment, what they might be facing will require his full attention, because against one of the most dangerous magical creatures in existence, even the smallest distraction can get them severely injured, killed or petrified.

“Draco,” Harry starts, thinking of easing the blonde into the higher likelihood of danger. “What do you know about Basilisks?”

“A lot,” Draco answers him as his eyes scan every trace of their surroundings. “It's Salazar Slytherin's familiar. One of the toughest hides known to wizards; resistant to most, if not all, spells. Eyes kill with one look. Lethal venom that kills almost instantly. All Slytherin boys dream of having one.”

Harry chuckles, “yeah, right. I doubt they'd want one when it's trying to kill you. You're mostly right. Though Phoenix tears can heal against the poison. It's how I survived being bitten before.”

“It's a good thing we have a phoenix, than,” Draco comments as they slowly move closer into the large, ballroom sized hall.
“Nova's tears won't develop for another year or so,” Harry states flatly. “Malfoy, I want you to understand, I killed this thing in the first place because I was able to use parseltongue to get down here. I'm only a parselmouth because I had the horcrux. If Hardwin doesn't have the horcrux, he can't speak parseltongue, he can't get into the Chamber of Secrets, which means chances are high he didn't kill the Basilisk.”

Draco lets out a long strained sigh. “That has nothing to do with your brother and everything to do with your rotten luck! Ever think about that Potter?” Draco bemoans frantically, scanning the entire chamber desperately now for the faintest hint of movement; difficult as that is with the flickering shadows of fire-light. “Merlin's balls, I've never met anyone that had this much shite happen to them!”

“Will you shut up,” Harry sounds low and to the point. He's keeping his eyes on the statue; knowing that's where the monster resides. He's just not sure if it knows they're here or not. Only one way to find out, he tells himself. “Last chance, Malfoy. You can leave and I'll close the door behind you.”

Draco takes the barest of moments to consider it before shaking his head of those thoughts. He would've left if this were his previous self. Scared as he is, for his lost son, he'll stay and fulfill his promise. “Let's just get this done.”

“Suit yourself,” Harry comments before going into instructions. “Keep your eyes closed until I say otherwise, but if you have to open them, keep them downcast. Look at it's shadow if you have to, but never look up, understand?”

“Yeah,” Draco answers, gripping his wand tightly and ready. “Do you have a plan?”

“Kind of,” Harry admits with a shrug. “Last time Fawkes showed up with the sorting hat. I was able to pull out a sword from the hat that killed it.”

“Wha- That's it! Another phoenix and a hat is your brilliant plan!”

“Merlin's balls will you stop whining!”

A sudden banging and hiss fills and echoes in the large cavernous room. At first Harry thought it was simply hissing until he understood, ~¿whoooooo?~ When he hears the dry scraping of skin
against stone, Harry understands that the mouth of Slytherin's Statue is still closed.

~*The heir of Slytherin is no more*~ Harry hisses to the statue.

~¿*Master?*~ the king of snakes replies. ~*Noooooo... you dare impersonate Master!*~ The large snake bangs coils of it's large body against the inner space of the statue.

“Master?” Harry repeats curiously to himself when Draco asks, “What? What are you saying? I’m kind of freaking out here!” Harry ignores him and continues in Parseltongue ~*I am not your Master Slytherin, but if you do not obey me, you can not survive.*~

~*A mere insect is no challenge to the king of serpents!*~ The large snake continues to bang against the confining statue, to the point it creaks. Harry can easily hear the stone casing begin to break. ~*I will coat my fangs in your blood and feed upon your sinew!*~

“To hell with this,” Harry calls, whipping out his wand. He turns to Draco and tells him, “Get behind that last pillar by the entrance. I want you to cast fire charms floating all around the room. If you can cast and control Fiendfyre than use that.”

Draco starts to limp back toward the circular door they first entered. “I'll stick to *Incendio*. I could never control fiendfyre,” Draco admits him. “What's the plan?”

“I just want you to focus on those fire charms. Keep em going. It can sense body heat and magic so I really want you to heat up this whole room. If you can keep that going without baking us to death, it'll be harder for it to spot us. Do not attack it! Against that hide, your magic won't do a thing and I don't want it going after you. I'll shout when I need you to start casting,” Harry replies. “And for the love of Godric, please remember I only need the heat, not the entire room up in flames.”

It's banging it's large body against the inside of the statue and when another crack surges down Slytherin's stone figure like lightning. Harry brings up his white wand, points it at the statue and closes his eyes. Regardless of the titan-sized killer serpent desperate to break free, Harry concentrates on a proper state of mind. Always feeling magically on edge, it takes less than a moment to submerge himself into that familiar psyche of fierce warfare. He calls on his unbound magic, and like vehement hemorrhaging it flows with greedy urgency as he casts the unbreakable charm on the old, magically rich stone. Harry knows it won't hold. Unlike Rita's animagus form stuck in an unbreakable jar, a Basilisk is far too strong to be held by even his enhanced unbreakable charm. It'll fight it with a frenzy. Not to mention the stone itself is imbued with too much natural magic for his charm to work to full effect. The best he can hope for is enough time to
set up traps.

“Nova, keep to the air behind the statue. When you get the chance, take out it's eyes,” Harry loudly commands his companion to contest the grating banging coming from the statue. With a great cry of spirit, Nova takes to the air with her powerful wings, eager to follow through. She's not nearly as old or possibly as experienced as Fawkes, but Harry can feel her courage and he has great faith in her.

Harry wants to place a multitude of sticking charms on the floor and wall to slow the beast down as much as he can at several spot when a triangle of stone pops free from the statue, opening a hole. It's not large enough to allow the large snake to escape but it won't be long now. ~I'm going to enjoy ripping your organs from your mutilated body filthy human!~

Harry can see the great snake try to forcibly widen the hole with it's snout and calls, “Malfoy!” and without looking he can tell Draco is casting a series of fire charms to dance around the perimeter, lighting and warming the room up in fire light.

As the heat rises, he mentally reinforces his balance. Forming the attack plan in mind, he softly speaks, “Aguamenti.” Soft his tone may be, but a torrent of water bursts out of his death-white wand with such force, Harry has to hold his wand with both hands to keep control. The magical waterfall spins, twirls and curves it's aquatic force in a few loops before directly smashing into the opening of the statue. The serpent fights and thrashes against his aquatic canon. Similar to water being squeezed out of a plastic bottle, Harry throttles his robust magic to force a stronger, relentless stream of water to flood the interior of the statue's hollow space.

Harry wouldn't mind if the giant snake drowned in it's flooding container but he wouldn't be surprised if it didn't. It couldn't exactly be the king of serpents and die by drowning when a weaker water snake would survive. Harry keeps the pressure on even when little jets of water shoot out of small cracks from all around Slytherin's fracturing statue. It feels like it only took seconds of gluttoning the statue when the back-burst of water alerts him that there's no space left to fill. Still, he doesn't relent and nor does it. In fact, it only fights harder to be freed.

When the demise of Slytherin's stone monument seems imminent, Harry quickly let's up on the water jetting and without a break in casting conjures a bright, yellow-white bolt of lighting from the tip of his wand. The powerful electrical bolt strikes the water-filled effigy with a thunderclap loud enough to rumble the very stone of the room. The light is much too bright to see if it's an effective attack. The painful screeching of the king of snakes mixed in with constant crashing pounding of it's writhing body against stone is the only certain way Harry knows his attack is having any affect. Despite the incredible amount of power he's wielding it doesn't feel like his magic is waning much, so he doesn't stop.
Until he's made to stop.

He's nearly to the point of marveling in the awesome improvement of his magical strength when the snake's thrashing finally exceeds the strength of his unbreakable charm. The statue bursts violently, scattering large rock segments and thousands of liters of water in every direction—debris big enough to destroy a few pillars. He barely has a second to avoid a chunk of stone the size of him by rolling to his left, ending his electrical attack and drenching himself in water. With the water drag, he's not quick enough to escape the second fragment of rock the size of his head from striking him in his side, below his right arm pit. With a painful grunt, he's knocked back meters. Instinct forces him through the pain into a rolling tumble, reorienting himself and landing on his soaked feet, ready for the next attack. He's pretty sure a few ribs are broken and his blood is flowing freely but he ignores that as the large snake erupts out of the statue.

“Anytime now, Fawkes,” Harry says, hoping the phoenix will appear as before. “Sorting Hat!”

Draco's flames dance and fly through the air without consuming too much of the chamber, but doing an effective job of hiding his heat signature. Harry has his eyes downcast but he can sense Nova springing her attack on the snake's sense of sight. She must've sunk one of her talons into it's soft ocular flesh by the sound of it's pained cry. Despite the mounting pain and heat, Harry immediately rapid fires a combination of sticking charms, cutting curses and maximum blasting curses. The strength of his cutting curse can cut minimally well into it's tough scales but no further and the blasting curses is only enough to keep it off balance, but that's all Harry needs at the moment.

*Attack from the top and the bottom.*

Harry only needs to keep enough of it's attention away from Nova, so his phoenix can mutilate it's eyes. Harry continues to rapid-fire *Bombarda Maximas, Expulsos, Reductos, sticking charms* until Harry hears the meaty splat of a large yellow and bloody eye the size of his head split and rupture on the hard flooded stone floor. He has precious little time to even wonder why she felt the need to take out it's whole eye when he remembers his instructions—making a mental note to be more specific with his directions in the future. It must've been difficult for Nova if it took her so long just to pull one eye out.

“Nova!” He calls and his loyal companion flames right to him. Despite looking triumphant with her black feathers covered in basilisk blood, she seems so small as she latches onto his forearm. Looking at her, Harry can't help but feel like they're playing a game of fetch. He spares a moment, at most, to tell her, “you don't have to take out the other eye this time. Just injure it badly, then watch out for Draco. Now fly girl!” She caws loudly, spreading her wings before flaming—Harry can only guess—by it's other eye, as he keeps his vision to the ground.
“Focus up, Potter,” he mutters to himself. “Or you're going to be the next thing that snake shits.”

Sweating and lightheaded, Harry kicks it up a notch by focusing all his curses to a single point on the serpents body. He layers cutting curses deep into a single point of it's scales before trying to dig in deep with a series of expulos and bombardas. His rapid offensive is interrupted by the sticking charms hes repeatedly casting to keep it from freely moving to attacking him with it's tail-end. Not only is it so powerful it breaks his best sticking charm in a second, it still swipes at him with it's massive body, like a large tidal wave crashing against him. While Nova flames around it's evasive head, trying the best it can to keep it's eye from the phoenix's sharp talons, Harry tries to continue attacking the base of it's elevation, gouging out as much tough scale as possible.

Harry finds himself dodging the bulk of it's body by rolling into some of Draco's flames. He lets the flames lick his fire resistant robes a moment as he calmly walks out, all the while attacking that single softening spot. Harry knows it's getting tender when he tries to cover the growing weakness with it's coiling body. He arcs his casting so his series of curses rainbows with less accuracy against it's growing blister. When one of the explosions erupts deepening the wound, greenish-black blood starts trickling out along with it's pain-filled hissing shriek.

~Call me your Master, and I will let you live!~ Harry hisses, risking a bit of diplomacy, desperate to end it all. Instead he get's an exceedingly fast whip of it's tail slam through his impromptu shield and into him. The force is so strong, he's rocketed back twenty five yards, rolling and skidding to a stop.

~You will never be my Master!~ It hisses.

Already light headed, he now sees spots and stars in his vision. He can taste copper from the blood rushing down his nose and into his mouth. His lungs hurt when they expand and his ribs now feel feverish, like super heated metal. He faintly hears Draco shout his name through the ringing in his ears, but more important than that is the dampened high-pitched screech that fills the great hall when Nova sinks it's talons into the other eye. Harry doesn't hesitate to sluggishly look up in time to see Nova flare her entire body in yellowish-white flames.

Harry hesitated, staring at his familiar flay with her fiery talons tendrils of yellow eye. Impressed with her evolution despite the situation, his shock didn't last longer than the pain reasserting itself as the dominating impression in his body. Nova rips slices of it's eye off before flaming away to Draco's side. With the room engulfed in dancing flames, heating it beyond bearable, and with both it's eyes disabled, it'll have a difficult time locating Harry.

~This is your final chance. Submit!~ Harry hisses painfully, realizing he's giving away his location.
The great serpent turns its mutilated head towards Harry's direction upon hearing him. ~There is... no serpent... greater than I... worthy... of the honor... that is loyalty. I shall never... surrender... my Master's side.~

Harry grips his wand and takes a labored step toward the great serpent. He's mildly impressed with it's conviction, but that won't stop him from killing it. He understands that unless it pledged it's loyalty to him, it will have to die, not only because of the danger it poses to the school students, either now or in the future, but also for to harvest it's deadly, horcrux-killing venom.

Harry doesn't allow it another second of rest and aims a volley of his deadliest curses at the bloody opening he created. The giant basilisk slithers toward Harry while attempting to cover it's wound. Harry manages to evade a poorly timed strike from the creatures tail. Using the fire for cover, he jogs as quietly as he can while it searches for him. Ignoring the singe and steam of his super heated robes, Harry sends a short burst of blasting curses before moving again. He stops and casts a barrage of his deadliest curses, then moves on. He managed three critical hits before it's tail desperately crushes through a pillar, sending dust and rubble directly at him. Harry shields against most of it but still gets clipped just above his left ankle by a sharp rock. Ignoring the sharp addition of pain, he attempts to flee but the snake's tail circles him and the mass of his body quickly to wraps him up.

It tightens it's hold on him until the scales are cutting past his robes and into his skin, drawing blood in addition to putting tremendous pressure on his wounds. A moment in the vice grip feels like a lifetime but he manages to call out, “Nova!”

His majestic bird dives down fast. The second it's talon grip Harry, they flame away and land close enough to the large snake's wound with only a moment for Harry to cast the most devilish amount of wild fire into the profusely bleeding wound. It's not fiendfyre he's casting, but it's the closest fire curse he could cast with relative safety at the moment. His body's can't withstand the demands of casting fiendfyre and he can hardly hold up against the fire curse he's blasting now. The gigantic snake writhes and shakes as it's body is incinerated from the inside. Though Harry feels every second like a minute of sheer agony, he doesn't relent for an instant until the head of the great beast plummeted to the ground. A few yards away, he feels the head's impact rattle the floor, it's tongue slack and it's nostrils motionless.

Though physically tired, his magic feel just as wired and it takes a lot of effort on his part to call an end to the cursed fire. Though the air is foul, made up of blood, fire, burning flesh, and toxic fumes, Harry takes precious seconds for quick and painful breaths. When it feels like he's choking, he instantly knows he doesn't have long before he's either drowning in his own blood or passing out from blood loss.

“Take me to Draco,” Harry croaks and no sooner did he finish his sentence, he was standing beside the blonde Slytherin who was ending his flame charms.
“Merlin,” Draco gasps at the sight of a torn and bloody Harry. “I can't believe you killed a basi-”

“No.. time,” Harry manages. Taking hold of Draco's shoulder, Harry states, “his room.”

Harry's never flamed with another person before but he doesn't have the wherewithal to worry about it now. Fortunately this ability has more to do with Nova and as she's uninjured, she's completely capable of taking them both to Draco's room. Flaming into the lavish room, Harry drops a little—bending at the knees—and it hurts enough to warn him he might not be able to stand much longer. Before Draco can say anything, Harry instructs his phoenix in a barely audible voice, “Fla.. mels.”

Harry flames into the foyer of the first floor of the Flamel's brownstone, landing on his feet this time but without delay, he drops hard to his knees. Despite the tremendous pain, he does not cry out. He simply keeps taking quick shallow breaths until he can feel himself start to pass out, giving him enough time to think, 'fucking Fawkes,' before he fades to black.

Chapter End Notes

I meant to post earlier but AO3 wasn't working for a while. Anyway, I hope this update was enjoyable. I know it's been a long day and it'll start to pick up soon. Thank you again for reading and please let me know what you think. Have a great one!
What an Enemy Isn't

Chapter Summary

Harry breaks Slytherin rules by talking with Hermione, and the Upper Order catches up with him.

Chapter Notes

Hello!

I want to thank all the positive, helpful and complimentary comments along with everyone who have left kudos. Thank you. I truly appreciate it, and a special thanks to Katheryn (the author of I'm still here, the fic mine is inspired from).

Without further ado!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you okay?” Tracey asks her distracted friend. Both Slytherin girls are sitting for lunch with most of the other fourth years.

“Hmm?” Daphne hums absentmindedly, as she pulls her eyes from the entrance of the Great Hall to her friend. Daphne recognizes the speculative look on her friend's face, and instantly knows the question isn't just the question. A grand majority see Tracey as little more than a pretty face, but Daphne knows she's a lot sharper than she let's on—if only she cared to use her intelligence on anything other than gossip, drama, and status. Recognizing the smirk on the bubbly girl's glossy red lips, she can tell her friend is fishing. “I'm fine,” Daphne answers impassively, raising her occlumancy to their normal levels.

“Are you sure,” Tracey coos, not even attempting to hide her smirk. “You seem awfully distracted. Since History, right Blaise?” Tracey asks turning to Zabini.

Familiar with her friend's mischievous tendencies, Daphne easily keeps her cool. Tracey's stirred the pot between them so many times, Daphne doesn't even think it odd anymore. It's not in her nature or in her strict upbringing in the Greengrass household to drop an ally just because they don't meet all your civil standards. It doesn't help that being in Slytherin, she can't be too picky; especially when the other options are Pansy Parkinson or the Carrow twins. Also, Tracey is a strong ally to have; more so now that she's soon to be Tracey Black, of the Noble and Most Ancient House Black.
Blaise eyes Daphne suspiciously. “I'm not sure,” he answers shortly, but Daphne can already see that's not exactly true. The tall boy is usually very stoic, admittedly hard to read most of the time, except when it comes to her—he's not unlike many boys when it comes to her. At the moment she can almost sense him analyzing her, recalling evidence and to her great annoyance, come up with wild and biased theories.

“You may be fine, but I can tell you who's not going to be,” Theodore Nott tells them rushing in and taking a seat. He moves in close and says only loud enough for them to hear. “Word is Khan's charging Flamel with a Red Order.”

“Late as usual, Nott,” Tracey chimes in. “We already know.”

Nott easily scowls at Tracey before continuing. “Whatever. I heard Khan's not just going to make an example of Flamel, he wants to break him! Phoenix or not, I wouldn't want to be Flamel right now. It's going to be an intense beating.”

“It's not going to end well if his parents hear about it,” Zabini adds.

“It's not completely surprising,” Tracey comments. “That disgusting bastard has hated highborns his whole life, and Flamel's practically as high as they come. It's a shame. He's got that rugged good-looks and dangerous vibe thing really going for him. I know Daphne agrees. I bet you're extremely upset about this.”

As naturally as she can fake, Daphne turns her blank expression enough to see the bubbly, strawberry-blondie's smirk from the side of her vision. It's an underhanded way of digging closer to whatever truth she thinks she knows, but that's how Tracey operates. Nott eyes Daphne's bust like a perverted simpleton, but Blaise seems to draw into himself at Tracey's comment, giving nothing away. He's so stoic Daphne wonders if he's even breathing.

“I'm wondering what might've happened to the Upper Order,” Daphne states, not drawing attention to Tracey's comment by ignoring it. “It's only the start of the year and a lot is going on. I'm just curious.”

“About what?” Tracey asks, and Nott leans closer to have a better listen. “Except for what happened this morning, everything else is pretty normal.”
“This morning, certainly but, there are other events as well,” Daphne tentatively states. “There's a lot to think about. Seemingly random pieces that only appear random.”

“Ugh,” Tracey bemoans. “Daphne, stop thinking so much. You need to start taking my advice and have more fun, or you might end up a lonely old spinster with boils and bumps all over your face!”

*Kept you from wearing an egg on your head didn't it, Daphne mentally retorts back.*

Daphne can sense Tracey checkout of the conversation at that point but Blaise brings her right back in. “Is Flamel one of those pieces your thinking a lot about?”

*Jealousy, Daphne mentally declares and inwardly rolls her eyes. The most unattractive quality in a man.*

Daphne can practically feel Tracey salivate at the juicy drama beginning to bloom in front of her. When the food appears before them, Daphne starts to fill her plate. For a moment, she considers checking it for any foreign potions or curses, but following Flamels rather pragmatic lead now seems ill-considered. She's sure to be on Blaise's radar for a while.

Daphne doesn't answer his question, knowing no answer that will dissuade Blaise from thinking what he's already formulating in his mind. While she may want to indulge Tracey as much as she can now to get what she wants later, this is crossing a line. Daphne ignores them completely and looks down to the second years, quickly spotting her baby sister. As always, her smiling face instantly makes her feel better—better about her choices, her burdens, her sacrifices. For her sister she'd do anything.

“Where the hell have you been?” Nott, calls out when Draco takes a seat beside Tracey. Daphne can feel her friend shift away from the Malfoy scion. “You skipped Binns! He marked you and Ares absent.”

“Where's Flamel?” Tracey asks, looking around the hall before waiting for an answer.

“Gimme a minute will you?” Draco huffs. “I just sat down.”

“Oh, come off it, Draco” Nott scoffs. “We all know you can't wait to lord over us how you're "great" friends with the heir of house Flamel. We get it. I'm pretty sure half of Slytherin already
told their parents the Malfoys are tight with the immortal Flamels. Congrat-u-fucking-lations, you're untouchable.”

“Very good move,” Blaise adds. “My mother would be impressed, and she's never impressed.”

To Daphne's surprise, Draco ignores both Nott and Blaise's praise without even a smirk of self-satisfaction and starts filling his plate. The skinny blonde flicks his wand out from a wrist holster, just like Flamel does and checks the food. Though Daphne finds it odd he'd hide it with his robe's sleeve, her sharp and observant mind automatically tells her he didn't have a wrist holster this morning. She mentally tallies all these little differences as he's checking his food exactly like she wanted to do.

Once satisfied with his food, the Malfoy scion provides some answers for the group. “Apparently Ares heard about Binns, so we skipped it. I haven't seen him since we went our separate ways.”

Tracey smiles beautifully as she says, “you're so going to get detention and then you'll be next on Khan's hit list.” Draco spots the comment as weird enough to ask for clarity. Daphne doesn't ever remember Draco being sharp enough to spot that open ended comment as Tracey answers him, “Khan's called the entire house tonight to execute a Red Order on Flamel.”

Draco holds in his laughter, and uses his occlumancy to school his features.

Unbeknownst to the entire school, Draco just witnessed Harry bring down a fucking Basilisk nearly by himself with strength of magic on par with Dumbledore, Voldemort or maybe even Merlin. He could remember actually feeling—physically feeling—waves of Harry's magic. With the eerie image of Potter's flaring green eyes in his mind as he waged battle with a Basilisk, Draco has absolutely no worry about a Red Order. Despite wanting to laugh at the insanity, he's actually more worried about Khan and all of the Upper Order, because if they don't learn quick enough, he's not sure they will survive the week, let alone the year. His only real concern is whether Potter's healing or dying right now. By the end of the battle, the boy-wonder has certainly seen better days.

“A Red Order, huh?” is all Draco says between hearty bites. Using soo much magic himself, he's feeling famished. So hungry in fact he doesn't notice Daphne's elegantly stern eyes soak in every inference of his calm demeanor, of what he says, and what he doesn't say but should. If he has to, he'll face Khan in Harry's place. Not bothered by the threat, Draco only says, “I'll let him know when I see him.”

“If he's really your ally, than you better tell him to pay the man off or run,” Nott adds with a
chuckle. “Not that it'll help. Khan's like a rabid dog with a bone. He'll never let it go until he's satisfied.”

“Or chokes on it,” Draco says easily as he takes a moment from eating to regulate their expectations of *Ares*. “Listen, you guys don't know him well but don't let it slip your mind for one second that he's been home schooled most of his life by a great and ancient house. He likely knows magic we've never even heard of and I wouldn't be surprised if it doesn't go well for Khan.”

“Sounds like wishful thinking on your part,” Zabini states evenly.

Nott laughs and adds, “bet all your galleons on the wrong team, Draco. If you don't floo your father, you might as well cut ties with Flamel now.”

Daphne snatches this moment to learn more about the biggest mystery she's come across in a while. If Draco's willing to share, she'll drag out as much information as she can. “So how well do you know Flamel, Malfoy? Khan is a seventh year. No matter how advanced Flamel may be, he shouldn't have a chance against a seventh year, right?” Daphne eyes the silver-blonde carefully.

The way he's weary of her feeds her curiosity all the more as he simply answers, “I know all I need to know.” Then he returns to eating. It's clear he won't say more and doesn't partake in Nott and Tracey's speculation. Daphne turns her gaze to her little sister again, absentmindedly playing out theories in her mind as she subconsciously ponders what it's going to take to save her only sister's life.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Draco's making his way to Herbology when Harry walks up beside him looking fresh from a recent shower but very tired. He wanted to ask if he was okay but instead says, “You missed lunch.”

“Busy,” is his only reply.

If there's any more details to hear about, Potter doesn't express them and Draco knows by now not to discuss freely out in the open. Instead he tells him, “Khan's out to make an example of you tonight. He's put a Red Order out on you.”

“What the fuck is a Red Order?” Harry asks actually curious.
“A Red Order is public shaming to the extreme,” Draco starts to explain as they traverse the open grounds toward the greenhouses. “In Slytherin, there are unwritten rules everyone has to follow, chief among them is recognize who's in charge. It's usually just the prefects which is why everyone wants to be prefect, but Khan invited others when he took over, which is why they're called the Upper Order. Knowing you, you either challenged them or tarnished Slytherin's name somehow to their great dissatisfaction, which is only surprising because it's the first day of the year.”

“What can I say,” Harry responds with a large lack of energy. “I'm an over achiever.”

“Well, Khan and his are all just itching to congratulate you,” Draco sarcastically states. Harry just shakes his head.

Herbology is nearly as Harry remembers, with a few exceptions. He has to ignore more whispers and pointing at either him or Nova than when he was the-boy-who-lived, and Neville Longbottom in Hufflepuff colors. Harry puts little to no effort in class as they're introduced to Bubotubers, but it was an emotional roller coaster to see Neville alive and well, talking with Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, and Justin Finch-Fletchley. It was almost difficult to see the boy happy and healthy, compared to what became of him and his family in his time line. The Longbottoms were butchered like pigs and fed to pigs, and the memory of the entire event was saved for Harry's express viewing pleasure. His occlumany blocks the downward spiral going down that memory is sure to be and Harry has to mentally repeat his mantra for nearly the entire class to stay emotionally sane.

*I won't fail them this time. Not this time. Over and over again.*

“I'll talk to Snape and see if I can test into fourth year Runes and Arithmancy,” Draco tells him before the split up.

Harry is far too tired to respond with anything more than a shrug of his free shoulder. Draco leaves for Care of Magical Creature's with Crabbe and Goyle flanking either side of the silver-blonde and Harry turns toward Ancient Runes as he downs another vial of pepper up potion Nicolas made special for him to keep going. He was so badly injured he had to take the Elixir of Life again which works best as you rest. Though Perenelle healed his broken bones, internal and external bleeding, and his punctured lung, the fact that she did it in an hour without the bed rest makes him feel more exhausted. Like running a marathon, then immediately working a full-time job.

Though he should be in bed resting, he still has Runes, dinner, the Red Order and most importantly, a Ravenclaw boy to kill. Harry had not, for one available second, forgotten about what was done to Hermione. He almost doesn't need a pepper up potion when he thinks about what happened to her in this time line. To think, she's supposed to be safe in school and away from him,
but isn't? It fills him with rage enough to last for weeks.

Harry steps into the stadium style seating of Ancient Runes and immediately notes that the class is made up of all the fourth years from every house; Ravenclaw being the most prominent. Harry identifies Greengrass, Davis, Zabini, from his house, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff, Eloise Midgen from Gryffindor, and Corner, Boot, Padma Patil, Brocklehurst, Li, Turpin, and Hermione from Ravenclaw. Predictably Hermione is seated at the very front of the class.

Harry is waved over to the empty seat beside Zabini by Tracey; though Daphne doesn't seem to approve. He may have taken it, at the very least for Tracey's sake, but no one is sitting beside Hermione and he can't help the great need that swells up in his chest. She's arranging her materials meticulously, almost obsessively on her desk and Harry can't help but feel her loneliness.

*She shouldn't have suffered like that*, he thinks, blaming himself for not being there when she needed him... again. A part of his mind argues it's an irrational response because he wasn't in Hogwarts for some reason when this-Hermione needed him, but he still can't shake the crippling guilt. Harry can remember, clear as day the way she cried for him in the many memories they forced him to watch. Recognizing the harrowing train of thought for the emotional pitfall that it is, he tears himself away before he loses himself. He can not trigger here. The hurt and suffering she went through would only incite maddening rage, and doing nothing to help her now is far too shaming. Until she's safe, he won't be able to think about anything else with the absolute focus necessary.

In another part of his mind, he can't help but feel like he owes her. He owes her for her loyalty, her intellect, her suffering, for being a staple of support when he had no one else. She did far more for him than any other witch or wizard he knows. And this might not have anything directly to do with his quest to destroy Voldemort, but her torment, whether at the hands of a dark lord or someone else, is still a wrong he's very eager to right. In a way, this is only an extension of his purpose here. The hard part will be maintaining some boundaries while attempting to open her up and trust him. His approach will take a lot of finesse, with equal parts honesty and omission.

“Why don't you say hello to our friend,” Harry casually tells Nova. She trills and crows softly, catching the attention of most in the room. She draws all the eyes when she takes flight, glides across the room and lands easily in front of Hermione. She jumps back when Nova lands on her desk and Harry can see she's a mixture of nervous, delighted and ruffled. The gust generated blows away some of the materials but Harry is there to keep them from hitting the ground using wandless, non-verbal magic to float them back on her desk exactly as she had them.

“Sorry about that, Ms. Granger,” Harry says trying not to smile at her shocked face, though he can't tell if she's shocked more by Nova's appearance or his talent in magic. “She missed you and couldn't wait to say hello.”
She quickly veers her gaze from the legendary creature bending her neck, bringing her head down for a pet, to the scarred Slytherin transfer student and back. Ignoring the whispers and chatter of nosy classmates, Harry points at the empty seat beside her and asks, “is this seat taken?”

The question directed at her seems to bring her voice back and he wants to smile, because you can always count on Hermione to want to answer a question. “You can’t!” she yells, then quickly slaps her hand over her mouth, as if she said the dirtiest word. Removing her hand she attempts to clarify. “I only mean to say... you shouldn't. It's not... proper.”

“And why’s that?” Harry asks, continuing to keep his face as neutral as possible; nonthreatening but not overtly friendly either.

Hermione looks from Harry to Nova who takes two arching steps closer and trills affectionately for attention. Even without being a glorified magical creature in all the wizarding world, Nova's still very cute with her dark ruffled feathers and soulful eyes. Curious and respectful as Hermione is, it's impossible for her not to pet Nova's head.

*Nice*, Harry mentally says with an inward smile.

She's so drawn to Nova, Hermione only notices Harry again after he's taken the seat next to her. She draws in a deep scandalized breath and says, “Mr. Flamel, I really must insist you take a seat with your housemates. It's the natural way of things.”

“And why is that natural?” Harry asks. “Because it doesn't feel that way to me. You and Ms. Lovegood were the first people I spoke with. Nova here really likes you and I've also been told you are the smartest witch in our year. Why wouldn't I want to sit by you?”

Hermione blushes some at the compliment then stops petting Nova, focusing a more skeptical eye on him. “Is this some sort of cruel jest? Are you attempting to throw me in a bad or prejudicial light?”

Harry easily answers, “no, but please explain your argument.”

Hermione furrows her brows, concentrating her perceptive eyes on him as if deciphering a coded message. “You're a Slytherin,” she whispers.
Harry looks at his uniform before answering, “yes. Yes, I am. Is that a precursor to attempting to make you look prejudicial?”

“Statistically speaking?” Hermione more states than questions. “It almost guarantees it. The best I can hope for from any Slytherin I've ever met is indifference.”

Harry can't help the displeased reaction that formulates on his face. “If that's the best you can hope for, that's actually upsetting to hear.”

“It is really upsetting or is that sarcasm meant to get a laugh at my expense?” Hermione looks suspiciously at him. “Because if it is, you'll be disappointed to learn it's already been done and doesn't get quite the laugh it used to.”

“Ms. Granger,” Harry starts, hoping to argue the ineptitude of the sorting system to his favor. “Can I assume the prejudice you're referring to is about house allegiance? The assumption being that simply because I am Slytherin, I can't possibly want to sit by you or even speak to you without ill-intention?” Hermione still looks suspicious but she doesn't respond so Harry continues. “So should I believe because I'm placed in Slytherin, it must mean that I'm evil? Should I also assume that all Ravenclaw care only about their studies and hate simple people? Or all Hufflepuffs will bend over backwards to help even an enemy because they hate conflict? Or all Gryffindors just want to goof around and break the rules? That seems silly don't you think?”

It only takes her a few seconds before, wide eyed, she can't help but call out, “you're implying I have a faulty argument because I'm affirming the consequent by using that same fallacy!”

Harry allows a grin to spread his face, happy to hear hints of his-Hermione's passion for rhetoric, before a simple nod of agreement. When Hermione shakes her head with a slight smile, Harry adds, “you caught me Granger. Maybe I am using a faulty argument but from what I've seen so far, it's hard not to think Hogwart's sorting system adds a thick layer of personality driven conflict among the student body. The reckless glory hounds have their pack. The social-irrelevant nerds assemble in one—no offense. The dark lord worshipers have their congregation and the tree-hugging virgins have their hovel.” Hermione is surprised by his vulgarity. He only raises his eyebrows in challenge, to which she smiles the smallest of smiles.

Hermione's eyes are light and humorous before returning to petting the happily cooing Nova. “I wouldn't quite put it that way, but to some extent, I'd agree. I've always thought it was a little silly. Adolescence is the most impressionable time for us and our largest opportunity for development throughout our life. What we learn now, we take into adulthood. How is it beneficial for our development if we're placed in a group of singular characteristics and still expect us to be well-
rounded witches and wizards at the other end?”

“Like a half finished sculpture still able to be molded any number of ways,” Harry states, getting into the grove of talking with Hermione again. “You don't take an impressionable kid, identify them by one character trait and lock them away with another hundred enablers.”

“Exactly,” Hermione agrees eyes wide with excitement. “There are muggle studies that suggest students, or youths in general, need a carefully constructive variety of influences to slowly develop a balanced member of society. It's almost impossible to be anything more than our experiences form us- to be...” Hermione doesn't finish what she was saying and turns away from Harry, continuing her petting. Harry assumes this has something to do with how isolated she seems to be but it's likely the things she's just not ready to share.

“This type of personality based segregation is a good reason to be home-schooled,” Harry jokes, removing his class materials from his robes inside pocket and enlarging on the desk. “I may not have much experience with people, but I know what a hurting person looks like. It's in the eyes.” He can hear her breathing hitch slightly. He doesn't bring any attention to it but continues to say, “and trust comes hard to those who've been hurt.”

Turning towards her and petting the base of Nova's neck himself, Harry tells Hermione, “I'm not asking you to trust me right away. I myself don't trust easily, so I can’t expect that of others. But I do ask you give me a chance. I'm being sincere when I say I'd like to get to know you better.” Neither chocolate or green eyes break contact in what can be described as a charged moment, until Professor Babbling enters the room in a mad dash; hugging a number of parchments to her bodice. She takes several moments to catch her breath as Harry softly adds, “plus Nova likes you and she's an excellent judge of character.”

He ignores her speculative eyes evaluate him as Babbling is arranging her messy parchments on her desk at the center of the room. The parchments with designs on them are then posted on the board behind her and the lovely professor stares out to her students with a wide grin. “Oh what a wonderful day! You, my dearest pupils, will not believe the discovery I've made this morning. It's extraordinary!”

“What is it, professor?” Susan Bones asks the excited Babbling.

“Quite simply some of the best rune arrangement and implementation I've ever seen here in Hogwarts! I wanted to put together a little field assignment for us but unfortunately the location is an issue that quit frankly shouldn't be and for the moment I've been unable to get permission from the head of house. I'll keep working on that however. For now I was able to study it for an hour this morning and through lunch and make designs of the activated arrays. I should start by asking, what can you tell from these wards... lets see, Terry?”
Hermione is all business for the remainder of the class, ignorant of everything but the joy of learning runes, and Harry is more than fine with that. He pays enough attention to know when he should answer, which seems like it'll be the pattern for all his classes. Like the Snape in his timeline, Babbling asked Harry several more questions than the others. But unlike the slimy git, she asked him "difficult" questions in a respectable way. Once it became clear he knew what needed to be known, she moved on to the Runes he used on the first year dorms.

When class was dismissed, Babbling rushes over to Harry and Hermione. "Mr. Flamel," she calls before turning to Nova on her stand. "And hello to you as well."

"Her name is Nova," Harry tells Babbling as he bundles he materials and shrinks to pocket them.

"Hello Nova," she says politely. Turning to Harry she continues, "I just wanted to welcome you to my course and let you know if there's anything I can assist you with, I do have study sessions. Hermione can tell you when and where if you're interested."

"Thank you," Harry responds the bubbly teacher in a rather bland tone; Not disrespectful but not thrilled either. "I appreciate it."

"Very good," Babbling states before turning to leave.

"Have you read sixth year material?" Hermione asks as she gathers her things.

"I don't think so," Harry answers honestly. "If there's one thing my parents collected throughout the centuries, it's books. They have a huge library of all sorts of knowledge." Harry notices her knees wobble and her mouth open to let out a breathy whine noise. He shouldn't tease her like that but he needs to use what he knows to gain her confidence as fast as he can. "So, I've read a lot of books but I don't know what's considered required text for sixth year. Why do you ask?"

Hermione lets out a breathy moan with wide eyes as she repeats, "...librry."

"Excuse me?" Harry asks as if he didn't hear.

Hermione snaps out of it and fumbles with a response. "I- yes. Well, P-Professor Babbling... is
very good with recognizing the education level of each student, so she can ask them challenging
questions without embarrassing them. I imagine she's been this way since she started teaching a
few years ago, but I of course only noticed last year. It's quite ingenious when you consider how it
promotes learning without the excessive pressure to learn at a fast rate.”

“Makes sense,” Harry interjects as they exit the class. Harry can easily feel many eyes on him as he
walks beside Hermione, and in the back of his mind he's calculating how this might affect
befriending Davis; though the probability is good that none of the Slytherin's will like him
conversing with another house. He ignores the feeling of melancholy that walking beside her
springs up in him to say, “everyone learn at different rates. No one method works for all.”

“I agree,” Hermione affirms with a touch of exasperation. “It's why Professor Babbling is one of
my favorite instructors; it shows how much she really cares. As I was saying, your home-schooling
with- with your large...” She shakes her head slightly and clears her throat. Keeping down a short
bout of laughter, Harry keeps a straight face as she continues. “Your home-schooling explains why
you wouldn't know this, but in our third year, out of all the students she only ever asked Daphne
Greengrass and myself fifth and sixth year material questions. I'm certain we're the only two who
have read so far ahead, but for her to ask you similar questions must mean she believes you very
knowledgeable on the material.”

Exiting the class, a number of Ravenclaw classmates are waiting for them down the hall. Michael
Corner and Terry Boot lead the way, with Lisa Turpin, Padme Patil, and Brocklehurst trailing
behind. Hyper aware of Hermione that he is, Harry notices her take the slightest step back when
Corner steps up to them. He's clearly the ringleader and his aggression did not go unnoticed by
either Harry or Nova. Harry steps ahead of Hermione and Nova extends her long dark wings,
raising her sharp head and glaring red eyes down at the startled boy.

Corner and his posse take a few steps back when Harry tells them, “careful. She can sense
aggression and doesn't like it.” Harry's happy to note Zabini, Greengrass, and Davis standing
nearby listening, instead of stepping in and escalating the situation.

“If anyone's being aggressive here, it's you,” Corner returns, trying to regain some dignity. Harry
has to look up at Corner, and while not as tall as the dark-haried Ravenclaw, his facial scars and
hawk-sized phoenix more than make up for the height difference. “I'd believe you trained her to do
that before I'd believe she can sense aggression.”

“You an expert on phoenixes?” Harry asks mildly.

Corner hesitates a moment before stating, “no. But that doesn't mean you're automatically correc-”
“What do you want, Conner,” Harry interrupts, ribbing Corner's ego by mistaking his name.

“It's Corner,” the boy retorts. “Michael Corner, and I want you to leave our housemate alone,” he proclaims, pointing to a very quiet Hermione. “I don't care if you have a phoenix, don't think we won't report you to deputy headmistress McGonagall and our Head of House, Professor Flitwick for bullying Ravenclaw.”

“What would they do if you told them about Ravenclaw being bullied,” Harry asks just as blandly and evenly as before, but Corner seems to think he's gained some advantage.

The misguided boy replies eagerly, “as stated per Hogwarts' disciplinary guidelines, any student revealed to harass, abuse, and or otherwise intimidate the safety and well-being of a fellow student can expect a minimum of detention, point demerits, and must issue a public apology, the severity of which will all be determined by faculty based on infraction(s).”

“Which means,” Terry Boot can't help but add with a sneer. “In case you're too shortsighted to see, that you'd be made a public fool, laughed at by the entire school and incur the wrath of your very own housemates for losing them possibly hundreds of points.”

After a very real yawn, Harry looks to Hermione, who seems only slightly fearul, but still aware. He rolls his eyes for her benefit before turning back to Corner and asks, “is that it?” Listening to this 'blowhole' has exhausted Harry nearly as much as battling the Basilisk. When the boys looks stunned, Harry continues, “no physical discipline? No expulsion followed by a call to the Aurors to arrest said bully?” Again neither boys respond and Harry takes another step forward. “Seem kind of light compared to what I'd do.”

“...What would you do,” Susan Bones asks from behind the boys.

“I'd challenge them to an honor duel,” Harry answers easily, and Terry snickers for only a moment. “That way I can rip off limbs, shatter bones, blind, maim, or otherwise torture the person who bullied my friend to within an inch of their life, and it'll all be legal.”

That isn't what they're expecting, and his fake scars only adds to his credibility. It's a subtle warning Harry's hoping they'll pass along to the right abusers, though he doubts it'll have any real or lasting impact on the problem. At least now he can say he tried diplomacy; even if it was indirectly. And when that fails, war.
“You can't do that!” He unexpectedly hears Hermione say before turning to her. Again, she quickly raises her hand to her mouth, seemingly surprised by her own outspokenness. This-Hermione doesn't give him the impression she's unapologetic about sharing her opinions in public like his-Hermione is... was. That's just odd and hard to admit considering she looks exactly like his best friend. It saddens him a little to see one of Hermione's greatest strength tyrannized to the point where she looks apologetic just for speaking her mind. Timid chocolate eyes to fierce green ones, it's obvious to him only one of them knows how strong she actually is.

He turns to her and easily replies, “for my friends, I like to think I'd do anything to protect them. Wouldn't you?”

Hermione seems taken aback but somehow draws enough strength to return with some conviction, “p-protecting your friends isn't what you were saying. You were talking about maiming and blinding casually... like it's normal. That's just violence. And- And violence is never the solution.”

Harry casts muffliato wandlessly before saying, “is that what you tell yourself when you see others being hurt, or are terrorized yourself?” Harry's gaze is sharp—too much so for her—and Hermione can't help but look away. Harry wonders if he's rejuvenated her own traumatic experiences, so with shame he cancels the privacy charm as everyone is fingering their ears or checking the surrounding for the unidentifiable buzzing noise. “Violence may not be an acceptable solution but there are times when it's the only one you have.”

Again Hermione moves past some invisible barrier of fear to answer him, “if- if violence is your only option... than you haven't thought hard enough for another way.” She speeds through the end of her sentence fearfully, yet Harry still understood.

“Well than consider me the last resort,” he says solely to her. “Because I can guarantee you there are evil men out there you can't reason with, you can't plead with, who are infatuated with chaos.” Harry then tells her, “take care, Granger,” before walking through the parting Ravenclaws.

Walking the stone halls, he wonders how much was overheard by the portraits and how fast they're reporting to Dumbledore. Harry isn't happy to be the topic of secret, behind-doors discussions—he's always hated the attention. He was tired of it as the boy-who-lived and hates it far more now. He would much rather pass through the halls unnoticed but if that can't be the option, than he'll keep most away by using their irrational fear of a "dangerous" character. Unfortunately, it won't work for everyone as Tracey, Greengrass, and Zabini catch up with him on his way outside.

“What was that,” Tracey bellows.
Emotional and physically drain, Harry is completely relying on his Occlumency to keep from disregarding her too offensively. It really shouldn't be this hard but at the moment he's having a difficult time playing nice. Suddenly he's thankful that the Flamels are endeavoring their own approach to the Black wedding. It'll be a good safety net if he fails at befriending the shallow strawberry-blond. “How do you mean,” he asks mundanely.

“Don't play dumb, Flamel,” Zabini states with some hostility. “You know damn well what you did went against the Order.”

Harry mentally files the tall boy's attitude in his probability bank. Thankfully, Harry didn't hear Greengrass add in her bid for house dominion as he continues through the halls. They all stay quite when other groups of chatty students would pass them or stare at Nova until they're outside of the stuffy castle in brisk air.

“You sat with the enemy,” Tracey dramatically points out. “That's the Ravenclaw that Daphne's trying to beat for the number one spot, and in case you didn't know, all Ravenclaw think they're so much smarter than the house of the cunning. For you, a Slytherin and noble heir, to get all cozy with her is an extreme violation. She can't even be bothered to look presentable. Look at her hair for Merlin's sake! It's like a bird's nest on top of withering barn hay.”

Harry abruptly stops. She nearly bumps into him as he turns to face her. “Let's all save ourselves some time, shall we,” Harry states with a bit more edge than he intended. Keep it civil, a small voice in his head reminds him. “I don't give two shits about house superiority. Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor; what the fuck does that really mean besides different color ties? We're all still Hogwarts students.” Harry can feel his voices edge sharpen and his tone deepen. “And it takes a hell of a lot more than where a wizard was born or what house they sleep in to earn my hate. So no, Ms. Davis, I don't see her as the enemy.” Eyes sharp, he frowns fiercely at all three of them. “And if you disagree with me, I don't care. But until any of you are broken and bloody, fighting a madman for your very fucking life, don't presume to tell me what the meaning of an actual enemy is.”

Harry spins about on his heels, his robes billowing nearly as impressively as Snape's does, and he leaves the three stunned Slytherins to stew. “How did he ever become a Slytherin,” Zabini asks Daphne. Blaise stares intently at her but she doesn't respond to him by look or sound. Instead she follows after Harry. Zabini seems to hesitate a moment before his anger pushes him to follow Daphne, with Tracey not far behind.

“Did Malfoy tell you about the Red Order,” Daphne asks him, when she catches up.

Harry ignores her to tell Nova, “go on girl. I know you're feeling restless.” Nova takes her cue and shoots into the air with one strong flap of her wings, generating a strong gust that pushes and pulls
at their robes and the grass. Harry then turns to Daphne, who has to ease and remedy her flustered blonde hair. It's a little jarring how sexy she looks with her disheveled silky blonde locks flowing as it canvases her face. Harry shakes his head slightly, stating, “I don't care,” as he mentally curses Perenelle.

“If you think Draco or even his father is going to help you get out of this, you're sorely mistaken,” Zabini declares with authority. “Even Snape can't help you. Khan doesn't care about status, and in a few hours you're going to learn that.” When Harry returns his attention to Nova's flying figure, ignoring the three, Zabini turns to Greengrass. “Let's go Daphne. Home school obviously made him too stupid to understand when he's in danger.”

“Or when others are just trying to help him,” Tracey adds.

Greengrass looks from Harry to Zabini, then Tracey's gleeful face, obviously enjoying getting Zabini riled up. Daphne wanted to talk more but with this situation as it is, she decides to just follow Zabini and her "friend" back to the castle.

“Thank Merlin,” Harry starts. “I thought they'd never leave.” Walking toward the forbidden forest, he passes the Durmstrang ship in the Black Lake, then the Beauxbaton Carriage before finally entering the thick tree line. He doesn't need to go too deep but far enough he's sure no one will see him. “Nova,” he states, then his partner swoops down to grip his shoulder and flame to the Flamel's brownstone. Landing in the study, Harry looks around the warm home and finds them in the kitchen, preparing dinner.

“Ready?” Harry asks Nicolas.


“Let me get my equipment,” Nicolas happily calls, looking very forward to this as he rushes out of the kitchen.

Perenelle continues talking with her heir. “You should be resting, Harry. You're body's youth is irrelevant, your mind still needs periodic stretches of rest, especially after doing battle with a Merlin-be-damned Basilisk!”

“I will,” Harry tells her. “Tonight. Promise. Right now I want to make absolutely sure we have enough basilisk venom to destroy horcruxs a hundred times over.”
When Nicolas returns, grin on his face, Perenelle returns to her cooking as she mutters to herself, annoyed, “I'll never understand... hundreds of years old and still gets giddy like a loon over the most dangerous things.”

They watch her chopping broccoli stems hard enough to cut through bone, Nicolas nods to Harry to move silently. Once they're in the study, the older man explains, “I find it best to give her a bit of room when she worries.”

“That's worried?” Harry asks analytically.

“She hasn't had to worry about me in a long time and she cares about us both so it's a little more acute than normal,” Nicolas explains as he moves close to flame. Harry takes a moment to realize what the older man said before ignoring it as a slip of casual talk. With Nova on his shoulder, Harry grips Nicolas' shoulder. “You're certain, the basilisk is dead?”

“Honestly, I had to get back to class so I didn't check, but I'm fairly sure,” Harry answers wearily but truthfully.

Nicolas seems a little apprehensive yet still eager to go and they flame to the Chamber. When they flame in the exact spot he and Draco left hours ago, the torches in the room light up on their own, one at a time, slowly revealing the corpse of the giant basilisk.


“That wasn't my experience,” Harry murmurs with a frown, shaking his head.

Careful step by careful step, Harry watches the old man move ever closer to the carcass, his small leather bag in hand. After he reaches the head, Harry decides to have a look around the room. Examining the scorched walls, he casually calls out, “how long is this going to take?”

The answer he was expecting was not a long, loud hissing that translates to, fooooooooooood.

The instant it sunk in that it was still alive, Harry sprints to Nicolas, yelling, “Nicolas!” The older
man quickly runs from the giant serpent, Nova takes to the air and Harry's wand is already drawn, ready to attack. Harry meets Nicolas in the middle of the large hall yet sees no evidence of danger. The large serpent has not moved at all. It still looks very much dead. Harry can't understand why he heard the language of the snakes, without a living snake near to speak it.

“You did hear that hissing right?” Harry asks the jumpy man.

“Y-Yes, yes, very much so,” he calls back, wand in his hand and ready to attack. “All too clearly!”

“Keep your eyes closed, just in case,” Harry commands. Nothing more happens until Harry decides to reply, ~¿If you can hear me, we mean you no harm?~

The sound of slithering quickly fills the room. From around the large carcass, a whitish-blue snake as long as he is tall and as thick as his arm is slithering towards them fast. Harry is surprised to not only see a baby basilisk, but that he didn't die as a result of seeing it's eyes. His mind only processes it's eyes seem shut when he hears, the infant snake hiss, ~Master!~

“Uhh,” Harry allows his confusion to slip his lips as the snake uses it's forked tongue to navigate toward him.

“That sounds far too close, Harry,” Nicolas frighteningly calls.

Nova landing on Harry's shoulder and closing her wings is surprising enough to not immediately respond to Nicolas. The fact that she isn't alert or worried about the large infant snake starting to coil excitedly up his leg, crying out, ~Master! Master! Master!~ is truly telling. “Uh, I think it's fine,” Harry tells Nicolas a little too soon. The childish snake is already coiled around his waist nudging at his head with it's own, licking him like an affectionate pet, and squeezing his recently healed and exhausted body tighter and tighter.

“What do you mean it's fine,” Nicolas asks aghast, his eyes still closed. “Can I open my eyes or not?”

~Food!~ It hisses as it tries to snatch Nicolas in it's jaws. Harry moves away from the older man before the snap of it's jaws finds the older man and he reprimands the young snake like he would a child, or dog. ~No! Not food! Bad! No eat!~
The snake tilts it's head confused, before recalling Harry as it's master and tightening it's grip so hard Harry wheezes out, “Nova,” and flames a few feet away though somehow the snake still attached, squeezing him. He's straining against it's unbelievable grip hissing to it. ~Down! ...Down snake!~

Taking it upon herself, Nova almost lazily grips the snakes body in her sharp talons and gathers enough aerial support to pull the snake away, helping Harry wiggle some room to breath out of his bondage. Surprisingly, the snake didn't attack or bite Nova in any way.

Nicolas dares a peek and is shocked to see Harry wrestling with a large baby snake to be free. “What is going on?”

“I-” Harry starts using all his exhausted strength to keep himself out it's strong coil. Harry's arms are visibly shaking as he states, “I... ugh, think it's a... baby basilisk.”

“Why are you playing with it?” Nicolas sheepishly asks as it keeps hissing and trying to hold Harry.

“Does it bloody look like I'm remotely playing!” Harry bellows, then hisses back at the snake.

The snake's hissing language and Nicolas can at least tell the sounds have a similar tempo. “What's it saying?” he asks.

“It's calling me-” Harry cuts himself off, recalling Nicolas' child like nature to mock and haze. In an attempt to avoid the teasing that's sure to follow, he answers instead, “It thinks I'm it's master.”

That didn't seem to convince Nicolas however as he starts to grin wickedly amused. “It thinks... oh my sweet Merlin this is wonderful! It thinks you're it's papa!” He laughs.

“Ha, ha, ha, laugh it up.” Harry returns to the giddy man. “Just know that I'm also trying to convince it you're not food. So comment at your own peril, yeah?” Nicolas can easily tell it's a hollow threat but keeps his laughs and comments to himself nonetheless.

In the remaining time until dinner, they learn that it seems to smell the scent of 'parent' on Harry and to some extent, Nova. Recalling the battle Harry theorizes the poisonous fumes he thought he smelled might've been an imprint of sorts. Harry tells the snake he's not it's master but it's just too
young to understand. They also learned the diminutive king of serpents has been eating it's actual mother, trying as it can to rip off as much of it's shredded flesh as possible. Harry was hoping to explore the chamber and couldn't, but at least Nicolas collected liters of basilisk venom. The old alchemist is lecturing Harry non-stop of all the properties of basilisk venom he's looking forward to testing before he drops him off at the brownstone.

“You might as well name him and get it over with,” Nicolas gets out with a chuckle. "I have several suggestions if you're interested."

Harry rolls his eyes and flames to his room in Slytherin. Walking into the Great Hall, Harry's eyes immediately snap to Hermione sitting next to Luna towards the end of the Ravenclaw table and apart from her other housemates. Everyone is already eating but he's so distracted by his bushy-haired friend, he nearly walks toward the Gryffindor table. Taking her own initiative, Nova flies over to Hermione and Luna as he makes his way to the empty space beside Draco. He's surrounded by the other fourth years but for the first time, none of them speak to him about anything. They don't outright ignore him but talking seems prohibited. Draco is the only to tell him why.

Harry's filling his plate, then checking it for any foreign substances when Draco tells him, “they've all been warned by the Upper Order not to speak to you.” He speaks normally but the other Slytherin's are stunned Draco would violate the Upper Orders decree. Even Crabbe and Goyle seem overly perplexed.

“Draco,” Nott warns the silver-blonde. “They're watching!” Harry tilts his head just enough to see the older years glaring at him. “You don't shut up, they'll add you to the list!”

Harry is paying more attention to the way Hermione and Luna are feeding Nova, while the rest of the Ravenclaw look on with jealousy, than he is to the Slytherins in front of him. He starts eating himself and stops only enough to say, “it's fine.”

Harry didn't know how hungry he was as he stuffs himself, though he notices Greengrass's baby-blue eyes analyzing him intently. After a moment, Harry turns at her expectantly. He assumed she would return to talking with Tracey, but she doesn't.

After only a moments pause, she whispers, “Why aren't you scared?” Tracey grips Daphne's arm in utter concern as she looks around the table. The others, especially Zabini are astonished and dismayed at her daring to go against the Upper Order. Harry can tell even Daphne is nervous.

Harry doesn't mind one bit if he's targeted by the "older" years. He doesn't mind if they target Draco either. But he doesn't know if Daphne deserves some consideration or not. He can't recall
any interaction with her in his time line but for how attractive and popular she was. He doesn't ever recall mention of her or her family becoming Death Eaters. If he considers her beauty, it's more than likely she became a bride of one, willing or not. He'll have to ask Draco later, but for now he doesn't want to add any undue strife on her shoulders, even if she was the one who broke the "rules." Harry just winks at her to at least acknowledge he heard her without starting a conversation and putting an unnecessary target on her back.

When the other Ravenclaw felt brave enough to approach the majestic creature, Nova takes to the air and returns to Harry's shoulder. Once full, Harry stands and leaves ahead of most of the other Slytherins; Draco following slightly behind his side. Rather than talk in the open, they walk the halls in silence until they reach the statue of Gregory the Smarmy. A quick flick of his wrist and his white wand is in his hand. Draco looks around suspiciously but says nothing. After a moment, Harry moves on. Draco is curious but again, asks nothing until, they reach the one-eyed witch statue by the stairs to Defense. Again Harry brings out his white wand, subtly motions it with a practiced hand, then promptly leaves.

Harry enters Slytherin common room followed by Draco, no more than three steps in and almost every eye is on him. He ignores them all as he makes his way to the fourth year dorms. Standing and moving to intercept them are all the prefects, seniors and sixth years in the Upper Order, led by Khan.

“Can't have you hiding in your hole for days now, can we? Not that it would stop me. It's been decreed by the Upper Order that you be charged with a Red Order. It's unavoidable, Scarhead,” Khan speaks loudly, drawing in eager fight fans. He points toward the stair case spiraling down to the lower levels. “You know where the dueling pit is.”

“I don't, actually,” Harry wearily answers him, his agitation rising. “I've only ever dueled once in my life and it wasn't in here.”

Looking at his scars, Khan and the others laugh a great deal. Khan's wiping his left eye of a tear or laughter. “Oh Merlin that's hilarious,” he says, before turning to Malfoy. “Lead him down Malfoy. And don't even think for a second your safe from us... or you, Daphne.” He eyes Daphne lavishly, defiling her with clear intentions and annoying Harry in the process. “Oh I can't wait to take a hands on approach with your punishment.” As the center of the entire rooms attention, he yells out to everyone, “and let this be a lesson to all of you. It doesn't matter if it's the first day or the last, if you're an heir of a great house or not. If you fraternize with other houses, disrespect the great house of Slytherin, or challenge the Upper Order in anyway I disapprove of, you will regret it in blood and agony. Especially you first years-”

“Oh will you shut the fuck up already!” Harry bellows, cutting of the large prefect and jolting everyone into stunned disbelief.
Harry may have allowed the Orca to bask in his precious spotlight if he featured in his plans like Tracey, but the bully doesn't. There isn't a single member of the Upper Order that requires this level of restraint. It's unnecessary and honestly, Harry's exhausted by the hours spent in useless classes, the fierce battle against a basilisk, and learning about Hermione's ordeal. To then have to listen to this walking advertisement for contraception puff his flabby chest when Harry could kill him seven times over before the prefect would even notice is too much. Harry whips around to Draco and asks, “where is it? Where's the pit? I want to get this over with.”

“So eager-” Khan tries to start but Harry walks away, following Draco to the wide stairs that lead to the lower levels. The other Slytherins part ways for them and they lead everyone down to the dueling pits. Taking the biggest stage, Harry stands at the furthest end of the square platform, Draco behind him while all the Upper Order take position on there end. Once inside the square the protective ward rises to keep the spectators safe from stray spells.

All the other years quickly settle around the protective ward, trying to get the best position to easily see either sides of the square. Thinking it clever, Khan yells to Harry, “I'll allow you to put your pet outside the ward, unless you're too scared to duel without it.”

Rolling his eyes at the obvious attempt to fight Harry without his phoenix, Harry turns around to place Nova on Draco's shoulder. Harry wants to laugh when the silver-blonde haired boy is tenses up to be the substitute bird stand, but instead he stops half way. A thought occurs to him and he wants to smack himself for not thinking of it sooner. “How're you feeling, Draco? You know what, never mind. I don't care. Consider this your evaluation. You're up.”

Harry sidesteps to allow Draco to step forward. He looks a bit taken but immediately steels himself and steps forward. Harry ignores the rustling of the other students for Khans immediate indignation.

“What the bloody hell is this shite,” Khan yells. “There aren't no replacements! This here,” he says pointing to the stage, “is your lesson that needs learning. Malfoy'll get his soon after.”

“Now, later, his, mine,” Harry mundanely returns. “Who gives a shite. Just go... unless you're too scared to.”

Khan only takes a moment to consider, then nudges to one of the Upper Order, a sixth year who then takes his position lined up with Draco. Harry raises his hand and calls out, “wait.” He walks up to Draco and asks him, “how many you reckon you can take?”
“One after the other, or together,” Draco questions for clarity.

“Same time,” Harry says at the tail end of a yawn.

Draco looks at the thirteen boys and answers truthfully, “four for sure, maybe five.”

Harry nods and turns their would-be attackers, “he wants another five. Another five at same time. He'll even give each of you Boy-Bottom Riders a hundred galleons if you beat him. Come on, you know he's good for it.” The perimeter are no longer whispering. They're all blatantly excited and either cheering or yelling taunts.

“We don't ride boy's bottoms!” the fifth year prefect Harry can't name yells.

“Why so defensive if it's not true?” Harry innocently yet wearily asks.

There's more snickering than outright laughter but it angers the posse enough. At Khans angered nod, five more boys line next to the first. Draco looks at Harry as if to say, really, Potter? Harry ignores it and tells the scion, “I need to see what you can do, and I'm fairly certain they won't kill you, especially now that they think there are galleons to win.”

“No, that's great. They'll only come at me that much harder,” Draco says with scornful bitterness.

“Exactly. What are we going against, Malfoy?” Harry asks him seriously. “Who's the real enemy? I need to know what you can do and this is going to help me. Take it seriously. Afterward, I'll be able to come up with an effective training regiment for you.”

“Alright. I got it,” Draco responds, revising his mentality and attitude.

“You have experience,” Harry says. He knows Draco isn't as powerful as him but against this, his experience should trump their numbers. “Use it and show me what you can do.” Harry steps away to the corner to stand watch.

“No surprise attacks Flamel, or the rest of us jump in,” Khan calls out.
“Yeah, yeah,” Harry quips. “Ring the gong.”

Khan calls for the duel to start and six wand hands rise to attack, while Draco simply flicks his wrist. That half second edge gives him enough time to call out, “Impedimenta!” before the six boys call out, a hair-loss curse, the jelly-finger curse, the tongue-tying curse, the jelly-legs jinx, a finger-removing jinx, and a head-swelling hex.

Childish, Harry thinks. Not a single shield.

Having temporarily slowed down all six boys, Draco side-steps the bothersome spells and quickly casts four banishing charms that impacts four boys hard in the chest before the last two manage to raise their shield to defend themselves. Continuing his sidestepping, Draco doesn't lose a second and stays on the offensive casting, “Depulso! Depulso! Aguamenti!” The first two are distractions when not too high above the boys, water forms and dowses them with a splash. Harry can guess what the blonde's strategy is here. Unbeknownst to the older gang of bullies, Draco saw Harry use this combination to some effect against a giant basilisk, so when Draco casts, “Baubillious,” the room is filled with muffled screams of electrocuted boys.

The four banished boys starting to retain their senses, and stand to continue fighting when Draco aims his wand well. Four, “Stupify!” later, all six boys are incapacitated, to the silent and complete shock of the entire room. Harry can understand why. None of them would've expected a result like this from the Draco Malfoy they're accustomed to, but Harry's body needs rest. He's nearing fifty hours without sleep and has already downed five vials of Nicolas' pepper-up potion to minimal effect. To move this along, he calls out, “Next!”

Khan is the first to snap out of the unexpected daze. He yells and pushes his other members forward. “Move! Surround him!” Khan himself draws out his wand while Harry stands by watching the fight and making mental notes.

“Warm-up's over Malfoy,” Harry tells Draco. “They didn't take you seriously before but they're after you now. It's do or die.”

And true to his suspicions, Khan and his ilk level spell after spell at Draco. Harry can hear they've upgraded the barrage of spells to serious curses; cutting, blasting, fire, bone-crushing, blood-boiling —pretty standard issue for Death Eaters, Harry muses. Those were some of Horcrux-Voldemort's favorites and Harry's felt each and every one over a thousand times at least.
Draco evades as best he can and combines shield-by-magic with shield-by-transfiguration to block the curses he can't sidestep. Unlike the stone floor or walls of the castle, the dueling ring is easily manipulated by magic, aiding Draco when a curse is able break through his *protego* charm. Harry can feel the anxiety in the room double by the curses yelled out by the Upper Order. He can understand their unease is mostly politically based and not genuine concern for Draco. Aside from being outnumbered, they're leveling some devastating curses to the heir of the Noble House of Malfoy. If Draco is seriously injured, who knows what Lucious Malfoy would do to all involved.

Harry doesn't care much about the boy's safety, but Draco is on his side and he needs to know what he can do. Analyzing the way he fights, Harry muses, *It's not terrible, but he'll need a lot of work.*

Draco extends his left hand, stopping a bone-breaking curse he couldn't dodge or protect from with it, breaking the bones in his hand. His loud guttural growl is the only indication it hurt tremendously as he continues to evade, side-step, shield, and attack whenever he sees a chance is available. Flames catch the end of his robe as he escapes a series of blasting and fire curses that destroys an arrow riddled wall he had transfigured.

“Why aren't you helping him,” Daphne yells at Harry over the cheering crowd from just outside the safety ward.

Harry didn't realize she was standing behind him, making him wonder if he's just *that* tired, just *that* focused on Draco's combat assessment, or *she's that* good. “He still has some fight left in him,” he answers her.

“He's going to be seriously hurt if you don't help him,” Daphne yells over the crowd. “Isn't he your friend? Don't you care?”

*About Malfoy? His mind snickers. After everything he did in the previous time line, it's a miracle we're even working together.* Unable to say that aloud, he instead tells her, “He'll be fine.” Draco may not be Harry's favorite person, but he wouldn't allow the pompous idiot to die or get irreversibly injured for his own amusement—that would just make him too much like the thing he's trying to destroy. He returns to watching Draco, who sustained another injury, this time to the right thigh. *A conjured arrow must've slipped through his defense,* he reasons. Still, Draco managed to down three out of his seven attackers.

The Upper Order are getting desperate. Khan in particular, is prowling the outer edges as his three companions are trying to suppress Malfoy's quick casting and strategy. Harry can tell Khan's looking for an opening to hit Draco with but there's enough distance for Draco to react when he needs to and dodge or block what's racing toward him. While not the best strategist, Malfoy is aware enough to keep them all from completely surrounding him; conjuring spikes on the floor, and returning stunning, banishing, or cutting curses of his own.
Harry put the probability of this fight lasting long quite high, not to say that Draco's a bad duelist. Fighting against six attackers without the option of running away, and surviving this long is a victory in itself, but when neither side can gain the advantage, it's bound to take a long time... that is until Khan has the brilliant idea to awaken the unconscious upper years and bring them back into the fight. They're not at a hundred percent but in this case the more wands the better. One look at Draco, and Harry can tell he doesn't have a plan. There's hesitation in his steps—uncertainty—and he's being backed.

*Let's see how long you last,* Harry thinks, unconcerned with the blonde's well-being... well, more to the point, with the blonde's comfort. Draco tries to blind them with a powerful *lumos*, and while it was a good trick it doesn't work against all nine that are attacking him. The converging spells cross midway and while Draco manages an *expulso* between their shields, it misses them. Draco is downed when two *reducto* hit and destroy his shield. Robe burned, cut or tattered, the silver-blonde flies back, landing hard enough against the floor to kick the air out of his lungs and aggravating the arrow in his leg. He's a few steps away from Harry, on his back, coughing blood, bleeding from his nose and wheezing to get air back in his lungs.

Khan and his ilk stop attacking and take gleeful stock of their doing.

*Pathetic,* Harry thinks. How can they possibly feel pleased about this kind of victory? Harry sighs as he realizes he doesn't care about the answer to that question. Turning to Draco, he says, “get up.” Dazed he may be, but Draco does hear that as the heaving, fallen boy tilts his head up to spy at Harry. Harry can see he's sprawled out and tired but commands him again. “I said up, Malfoy.”

Harry ignores the shout of fury and scorn from the crowd, yelling at him. He can hear Daphne clearer than the others, yelling at him to stop being a wanker—which is funny language to hear from the mouth of a noble heiress. Harry also ignores how Khan has enervated all but one of his down brothers and they advance on him slowly. He tells Malfoy again, “get. Up.”

“Fuuuuuckin...” the boy wheezes as he starts to turn and lift himself. “....slave driver...” Draco heaves as he manages to make it to his feet, wobbly as they are. Harry takes Nova and sets her on Draco's shoulder; not even wincing when eight claws sink into his pasty flesh.

“Hold her for me,” Harry tells the semi-conscious boy. While it may look like Harry is being a bit of a dick to Draco, none of the of the students watching know that the talons of a phoenix have some curative properties, and that Draco should start to feel better soon. The talons won't completely heal him, far from it, but it'll help with the pain and the body's own healing process. Harry flicks his wrist and his death-white wand slides perfectly into his grasp, his magic already aching to be freed, despite his exhausted body. He starts walking to the meek tyrants, indifferent to their numbers or their threats.
“Last chance. Bow to me,” Khan calls. “Be my slave the entire year, and I won't hurt you too badly.”

As quick as a two count, Harry overflows more than enough magic into his mentally spoken, *Petrificus Totalus* through his death white wand to petrify every single one of them without uttering a syllable or missing a step. There are whispering and shouting all around the room as none of the older bullies move a muscle. Harry calmly walks up to each of them, and with a swish and flick of his wand, he whispers a severe *confundus* charm, that's closer to total sensory deprivation—cutting off all sensory stimuli to the brain. Their eyes roll into their heads and they drop to the ground, still conscious, but like a sack of dead meat, unable to move. One by one, Harry brings each boy down, saving Khan for last.

Standing before the giant oaf, staring up into his enraged eyes, Harry says in a tired and drawn out voice, “as of this moment...” Harry yawns deeply. “Apologies. Tired. As of this moment, the Upper Order is disbanded. And you're going to resign as Slytherin Prefect. Of course you don't have to, but I will say it's in your best interest.”

Harry's wand flicks and swishes and Khan eyes crawl up his head. The fat tyrant is severely confounded like the others—unable to see, hear, feel, taste, or smell—adrift in his mind, awake but detached from any connection to the world. As flabby body and wand hit the ground, Harry wonders if he should do more to them. It's a great spell for psychological torture. The trick behind this form of agony is making the one it's casted on lose all sense of self. The longer they're isolated from each of their five senses—all the while conscious of that destitute limbo—the worse it'll be to recover. Time feels infinite as they quickly lose their grip on their sanity. The weak-minded ones might go a mad in an hour's time without medical assistance.

Nova lands on Harry's shoulder as Draco drags his injured right leg over to stand beside him. “You should've said something cool like, 'Order Rescinded.'”

“Don't make me hurt you,” Harry states. He turns to him and finds the silver-blonde looks better, or at least not in agony. “You think you can make it to the infirmary on your own? Never mind.” Harry states as Crabbe and Goyle rush up to flank Draco. The safety ward drops and a very excited crowd rushes them. Harry turns and exits, ignoring everyone after him for whatever reason; whether congratulations, threats, petition for favors, or pumping him for information. He ignores them all until he makes it to the common room. Annoyed by their pesterling, he turns to scowl at them and it's enough to leave him be.

All but Greengrass. She's asking him questions similar to the others and he ignores them too; much to her frustration. It doesn't seem like she's used to people ignoring her and she follows him to the boys wing of the fourth year corridor, where he stops to face her. “I don't mean to be rude, but it's
been a long day and I'm really tired.”

She seems opposed to being rebuffed so easily but pulls herself together and asks, “than will you agree to speak with me tomorrow?”

“We're in the same everything,” Harry answers mundanely. “Chances are good we'll talk again-”

“I mean in private,” she cuts him off. They stare at each other, sharp baby-blue eyes into drooping bright green ones. “Please.”

“If I have time, sure,” Harry states and Harry and Nova enter a room she immediately forgets the location of.

Chapter End Notes

Harry finally gets some sleep! It's been a slow start, but it'll start moving soon. I'd love suggestions for the baby basilisks name. I have one in mind but I'm hoping you guys might have a better one :)

Thank you for reading and I appreciate all comments. Have a great one!
“So,” Draco gasps between deep breaths. “How'd I do?”

Harry and Draco have just finished their morning swim and are starting their walk back to the Slytherin common room. They didn't talk much since Harry broke into Malfoy's room that morning and woke him up via Stinging Hexes—though Draco was happy to hear it took Harry longer than a few seconds to break into his room.

“You mean your evaluation?” Harry asks as he looks around grounds for any dueling Beauxbaton students. At Draco's nod Harry answers in a drained analytical tone, “If you consider three strengths of combat; creativity, quality, and execution. Creativity being your weakest point, I would rate your performance as Poor. With some training, maybe Acceptable.”

“What!” Draco calls, winded. “That's rubbish! I was up against seven wands. I brought them down to four before I was downed. Even for an adult, that'd be hard to do.”

“I'm not comparing you to your every day wizard,” Harry states. Malfoy hitches his head back confused as he looks to Harry. “I'm comparing you to Voldemort, which for all intent and purposes is the only standard that matters. If you fought him as you are, at best you'd last seven seconds.”
Draco’s eyes and tone express deep sarcasm as he asserts, “Oh, my fault. I hadn't realized we were using the bronze standard, ‘pretend you're a fighting the Dark Lord,’ to rate my dueling ability. There's a reason why he's the Dark Lord, P- Flamel. I wouldn't even think of surviving against him. No one would.”

Harry exhales his annoyance, easily recalling how effortlessly Draco can irritate him. “Well, maybe you ought to,” Harry responds, noting the Elixir he took yesterday coursing through his veins, rejuvenating all the strength his body lost in the run and swim. “You need to start thinking about not only fighting against the odds, but winning against them, no matter how impossible it may seem.”

“You need to recall the natural order of the world,” Draco returns. “It's the most normal thing for the weak to lose to the strong. That's so basic I shouldn't have to even explain it. We can't all be supercharged magical freaks like you or the others.”

“What others?” Harry questions, genuinely curious as he turns to Draco.

“The founders, Merlin, Morgana, Dumbledore, Grindelwald, Voldemort,” Draco lists absentmindedly. “All larger than life figures exalted by magic itself. They're a cut above the rest and having felt your power, I'd say you're not far behind.”

“I don't care about my place in history Malfoy, as long as I bring Riddle down. That brings us to your first and honestly your most vital point of improvement. Creativity. It doesn't matter how strong a witch or wizard is, if you're clever and inspired, there's nothing to say you can't do something that hasn't been done before.”

“This is weird,” Malfoy comments as they reach the entrance to the castle. “You giving me a pep talk is so very weird.”

“What's weird is someone as old as you getting your ass handed to you by school children,” Harry returns. At the sight of the first portrait, he waves his hand and concentrates on wandlessly erecting a privacy charm around them. “Last night, the battlefield changed on you. You went from fighting a few to fighting a squad. I know it's difficult, but I also know you still could've beaten them. If you train yourself to think under pressure and come up with a new strategy to combat the changing offensive, you would've won.”

“You say that like it's the most effortless thing to do,” Draco returns. “I am nowhere near as strong as you. Even when I was older, I couldn't wandlessly or wordlessly do shit—that's Lord level magic you're talking about. Us regular wizards aren't strong enough to do whatever it is you did to
“It was a simple body bind charm and you don't have to be,” Harry reiterates irritated. “A creative mind can think of alternatives ways to fight even in the most desperate of situations. Look, pretend you and I are dueling and we both knew you were stronger. My plan would start by yelling out at the top of my lungs, 'surrender to me now or I'll flood the entire dueling ring.' When I only raise enough water to reach your knees, looking stupid for boasting, what would your immediate thought be?”

“That you're a daft wanker, who's far too wound and in need of a good lay,” Draco answers with a smirk.

“Don't tone down your hormonal instability on my account, Malfoy, but do shut up about it,” Harry declares turning to Draco. “Are you going to take this seriously? Because if not, I could be-”

Draco puts his hands up in defeat crying out, “alright, alright, alright, alright. Jeez, I'd think that person is all talk and no skill.”

“...Right,” Harry agrees after a moment. “That's a natural assumption I would then use against you, because the moment I conjure hundreds of hungry piranhas in that water, you're going to freak, and that's all I need. Listen, I'm not attempting to beat you with my skill per se. I'm attempting to break your focus and attention. And while you may not be able to beat everyone with your skills alone, you can break their concentration. That'll lower their guard and give you an opening. Creativity leads to the unexpected, the unexpected leads to hesitation, and when they hesitate, you execute.”

Draco takes several moments to absorb Harry's combat insights. “Are we going to train tonight? In the chamber?”

Harry recalls the baby basilisk and thinks to warn Draco of the large snake for all of a second before deciding not to. Harry nods to the blonde, all the while smiling on the inside, and the morning continues unremarkably until breakfast. That isn't to say it was uneventful. As soon as Harry came out of the fourth year corridor, most of Slytherin older years were waiting for him. It's none from the Upper Order. As far as he knows they're still in the infirmary recovering. The ones glaring daggers at him now seem to be the supporters—mostly wizards but a few witches as well. They seem about ready to ambush him but he showed no concern and softly stood his ground. None attacked him as he calmly made his way to the exit an on towards the Great hall; Nova on his shoulder, Draco trailing beside him and most of the fourth years keeping their distance. He can tell his year-mates are torn between wanting to avoid catching the fury of the older years and supporting their fellow fourth year.
Walking into the Great Hall, his eyes immediately look for a number of people. As expected Ron is absent, likely still asleep; so is Hardwin it seems. Barty Crouch Jr is also absent and while that worries him immensely, he also knows that for the moment, there isn't anything he can do that's worth the risk. *Map first, then him*, Harry mentally reminds himself. *He isn't going anywhere.*

He spots his mother speaking with Snape, and it makes Harry very uncomfortable to see the Potions Master so... alive. *Prat*, Harry thinks. As for Lily, Harry is still feeling a hopeful joy at the sight of her, as well as woeful despair. *How much does she know,* Harry continually wonders. He needs to make plans to interact with her but finding the motivation is problematic. Pulling his gaze from his beautifully living mother, they land on Hermione and Luna.

Both girls seem well enough sitting together at the Ravenclaw table quietly reading; one a large ancient looking tome while the other is reading the Quibbler right-side up. Looking at them Harry has the oddest sensation at the pit of his stomach. It's indescribable in words but the feeling he gets when he looks at them is like watching a boat drift aimlessly or like a puzzle with missing pieces. They remind him of when Umbridge took over Defense Against the Dark Arts, and they were only allowed to read what they should've been practicing—all theory without action. *Books and Cleverness,* Harry remembers Hermione once saying. It strikes Harry when he realizes that books and cleverness was never enough for Hermione. She had the drive to do more than observe and learn, but to charge at life armed only with her intellect and conviction. Or how else could she stand beside him through thick and thin when even Ron couldn't? As he takes a seat at the Slytherin table, all Harry knows is that Hermione and possibly Luna—he's not afraid to admit he doesn't fully understand her—need something else.

Harry ignores most of the differing looks from his fellow Slytherins, primarily because if he allows himself to be annoyed too much, he's likely to kill any future Death Eaters—if only secretly. It's a slippery slope from miffed to murderous and it wouldn't do to attract that kind of attention, so instead he focuses on checking his food then eating, until the post arrives. The majority of the table and room receive either letters, parcels, the Prophet or a combination of that. For Harry it was the most unexpected shock he should've predicted. Like all his other friends, he knew she'd be alive as well, but he couldn't seek her out knowing he caused her death.

A snowy white owl lands gracefully in front of him, just as beautiful as he remembers. After the many bouts of emotional mania he's suffered since entering Hogwarts, he's currently having an easier time keeping his longing, melancholy, delight, rage, thrill and remorse from debilitating him too much. Nothing else exists but this owl. Even still, he has a hard time reaching for his post. She drops it in front of him and nips at his hand exactly as he remembered she did, forcing him to act.

“Thank you,” he happily croaks to the snowy owl. “Have as much bacon as you want.” Both of his birds eat from his plate as he takes the letter to force his focus on something other than his snowy friend.
He isn't expecting to receive anything from anyone unless it comes directly from the Flamels. To help guard against cursed or dangerous mail, Perenelle insisted Dumbledore reroute all incoming post for Ares to their family home in London. Their home's wards will do all the work of sorting out the good mail from the bad and send him the letters afterward. He originally wanted to throw them all away. It's not as if he knows anyone in this new time line he'd correspond with, nor is he interested in all the rubbish that'll likely come in the mail. He's sure it's all going to be garbage but Perenelle convinced him otherwise. Garbage or not, it's all still information—good for political insight or maneuvering—and while it may all seem useless in the present, you never truly know when having it might be useful in the future.

The letter that he picks up—all the while staring at Hagrid's gift from so long ago—is from Perenelle. He opens the envelope for two pages of a short letter.

Dearest Ares,

It's only been three days but we miss you immeasurably. It's quiet without you and I cook too much food now. We should scrap this whole experiment. Come home... or not. It's up to you. Your father has been crying. He says hello by the way.

Your Ageless Mother,
Perenelle.

Harry chuckles with a shake of his head as he easily spots the hidden message. He flicks his wrists and out comes his white wand, scaring a few Slytherins nearby. Harry taps the letter and whispers, “From Ruin.” The rest of letter reveals itself.

Well, I can't expect you to have much difficulty with this password, so we should come up with a new one to keep our letters private. I recommend telling us in person next you visit. We've also purchased a new owl for your letters so you won't need to use Nova all the time. Nicolas expected we might have a lot of mail and so felt we should buy one dedicated to correspondence with you. I picked her. Consider her yours. We named her Hedwig, after the first name you gave us. We thought it would be funny, but you never told us the significance of that name so I hope it's not inappropriate. Please let me know if it is.

Harry takes a moment to pull himself together. Even in this time line, she's a gift for him and still named Hedwig. Looking at her dinning with Nova, Harry is suddenly happy that Nova isn't the jealous type. Returning, he reads...
Please send Hedwig as often as you can so she can deliver your letters to you. I'm certain it'll be a lot, which is sure to pile up. Also be sure to send us the "junk" letters you've already read that might give us some insight into the current political landscape. Letters of intent, invitation, pledges, support, they can all be useful should the need arise.

I have been forced to add this to the letter. Nicolas wanted you to know his top three names for the baby basilisk are, Asmodeus, Gorgon, or if you're feeling a little silly, Snakespeare. I thought you should name it Gryff, after Gryffindor because I felt it would absolutely take the piss out of Salazar... that pervert.

Now, on to some serious business. Nicolas and I have reached out to the Ministry to speak with the heads of both the DMLE, and of the Aurors Department. The official purpose is to discuss potential theft of our valuables and additional security precautions to our home. Unofficially we're using the meeting as a soft contact with Sirius. The fact that he's the head of the department will work in our favor as we'll insist only he and possibly the head of the DMLE be allowed to enter our home to look for vulnerabilities. We have a few ways we can play this but I'm certain we can keep them around for dinner and go from there. We'll be sure to keep it light and fun per your suggestion and I'll let you know how it goes. I'll also keep you appraised of any back-story we may have to invent for you to fill in any unexpected holes. I'm certain we'll mention adopting you, but I don't think it'll get quite so personal, so soon. Knowing Nicolas and his propensity for drama like I do, I thought it best to warn you now.

Nicolas, Harry mentally bemoans. That mischievous old timer. They've already established a general outline of his back story, but the consensus in the Flamel household is to avoid those questions wherever possible. No one needs to know everything about him, and that's exactly how Nicolas and Perenelle like it. So this has Harry wondering what nonessential details Nicolas might enjoy adding. Harry sighs deeply and draws the attention of a blue eyed blonde.

"Is that a letter from your family?" Daphne asks, her own letters in her hand, unopened. Tracey looks up the table to the older years, seemingly concerned they have heard Daphne speak to him. Zabini is also extra attentive to Daphne.

Harry eyes the beautiful girl sitting across from him and says, "yes, it is," in a mundane tone and returns to reading.

I'm sure you've noticed the additional scars that are now on your body...

He did, much to his complete surprise and subsequent anger. Removing his clothes to take a shower that morning, Harry was very surprised to see more fake scaring on his torso and back, adding more gruesomeness to the painting that is 'Ares Flamel.' He was ready to call Nova and flame straight into the brownstone to yell at them, but upon playing the argument out in his head,
he realized he already has fake scars on his face. What's it matter if he has fake scars on his body as well. They'll only add to his authenticity and they're not even permanent, so ultimately, it doesn't matter.

I first want to apologize for doing that while you were unconscious and without your consent—no matter how opportune the timing, it was still very inconsiderate. If you feel the extra "detail" is unnecessary and want to remove them, we of course understand and will remove them post haste. Nicolas felt the facial scars without body scars was like, and I quote, 'the meat without the potatoes.' Silly I know but he really felt additional scars would better help explain your magical aptitude should you ever happen to lose your garments in a bloody mess again. I made sure he didn't tattoo more than five scars—though he did make them on the larger side.

If you're wondering why the scars align with a few of your wounds I've already treated, well, in all honesty, I wanted their placement to be physical reminders. Again, I am sorry for agreeing to this without your consent, but I don't disagree with the scars themselves. I think of them as notes, reminding you that you are NOT immune from severe or critical injury, and regardless of the elixir coursing through your veins, or how strong you are, you can still die! So, for me, please be careful whenever possible. I know there will be more battles ahead and they will be hard fought, but if you could stay clear of any more basilisks, I would greatly appreciate that.

The rest of the letter explains in some detail tests Nicolas is performing on the Basilisks venom and a request to write often, before she signs farewell. Once he secures the letter in his robes, Draco leans over with the morning paper in his hand, showing Harry the front page. He glances at it a moment before rolling his eyes and turning away in favor of petting Hedwig. Still his retention acuity is amazing enough to mentally read a good portion of the article before he turned away.

**IMMORTAL HEIR COMES TO HOGWARTS!**

Revelations from Hogwarts opening ceremony are prodigious and astonishing, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent.

For the first time since it's cancellation centuries ago, the TriWizard Tournament is revived and will be hosted in our very own Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

For those unaware, the legendary tournament saw it's last day after tragic deaths and injury of spectators from
a rampaging cockatrice. I'm certain many would agree this tournament is a spectacular announcement, and this reporter promises to cover every moment as news develops, but it pales in comparison to a most amazing and unexpected revelation the very night of the tournament's announcement.

The reclusive head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Flamel, best known for the creation of the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life, Nicolas Flamel and his beloved wife, Perenelle Flamel have finally returned to the magical community in the most prodigious of ways! Along with the immortal pair now comes an immortal heir! Yes, witches and wizards, you read properly. The the lovely Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel now have an heir to their untold fortunes, eternal youth, and magical knowledge amassed throughout the centuries. And if that wasn't astonishing enough, along with the promise of certain fame and fortune, the young man is accompanied by a familiar of legendary proportions, a midnight black Phoenix! What a glamorous life this youth must lead. The heir apparent is 14 yr old, Ares Flamel. This determined reporter will do all she can to bring you the very first photo of this young man, but sources close to the heir have described him as having devastating good-looks with soulful green eyes.

Why is the magical world just now hearing about such a prominent youth, you ask? A question I will work tirelessly to answer for you. From the little that is known, the young man has been home-schooled until recently, presumably
by his parents, and has now been transferred into the fourth year curriculum at Hogwart's. As close friends with the immortal Alchemist, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwart's is the ultimate benefactor to this jewel that is Ares Flamel, for who can tell what exciting revelations this young man will have on the future of the Magical community but the Grand Sorcerer himself. While it's too early to tell how magically proficient young Ares is, the political implications already have most in the Ministry and in the Wizengamot reaching out to the immortal family for their affluent power and support. Who will have the most luck is hard to say. While arguably thought of as a light or gray family, one must now also consider what house the Flamel heir has been sorted into. Young Ares has, as of this published date, been sorted into none other than the house of the cunning, Slytherin. It's now anyone's guess what political inclination this family leans toward and how they might affect policy votes in the future.

For hopeful heiresses interested in tips and tricks to courting young heirs of great houses, see our sister paper, Witch Weekly, for a special report.

For the analytical minds interested in predictions of the economical impact the Flamels will have in the magical community, domestically and internationally, see Galleons Galleons Galleons(3G).

For more news on the Triwizard tournament, see page 7...
Yeah, definitely worse than the-boy-who-lived nonsense, Harry inwardly says with a long sigh. At least he knows why so many in the Great Hall are randomly eyeing him. Harry is halfway done with his meal when he senses a presence walking in line to approach him.

“Mr. Flamel,” Snape announces. Harry turns to the man as he chews on a scone. With as much lack of respect he can muster, he slowly chews on his flaky scone as he waits for the dark haired professor to continue. “See your way to my office. I'll expect you shortly.” He turns, robes perfectly billowing behind him.

Harry looks down the Slytherin table and finds the older years are snickering amongst themselves at his expense. Turning back to Draco, he simply says, “see you in class.” Harry grabs another scone and calmly trails after Snape. Nova leaves Hermione and Luna as Harry exits the Great Hall, landing easily on his shoulder. Along the way to Snape's office, Harry leisurely wonders if this is about the Upper Order, some digging for Dumbledore, something else he hasn't anticipated, or all of the above. As a Potions Master, it's possible he could be hoping for phoenix tears, but Harry wouldn't be surprised if it's more along the lines insults or belittlement.

Harry knocks on Snape's office door, earning a firm, “enter.”

Harry lets out a deep breath, resolute in playing the goodish Slytherin and enters the office. It's as gloomy and dimly lit as the Slytherin dungeons, but without so much green or ornate snakes.

“Have a seat, Mr. Flamel,” Snape neutrally offers.

Harry passes the shelves of plants, pots, and jars filled with liquid and animal bits, including a human hand, and takes a seat ahead of the man's humble desk. Harry happily notes there isn't a single portrait that might overhear him in the man's office—not that he's planing on revealing anything of note. He's also aware Snape can easily just give Dumbledore a memory. “Professor,” Harry returns, deliberately keeping it open-ended. Harry's done a number of things to be sitting before the man, so he'd rather let Snape take the lead.

Snape conjures a bird stand for Nova, immediately making Harry suspicious. Not only because it's a nice gesture—a little too nice—he's unaccustomed to but because he can't be sure the stand is something more sinister than it appears. Rather than scan it to make sure it's safe, Harry pats his leg, prompting Nova to hop off his shoulder and rest on his thigh instead. Snape raises a curious eyebrow, but says nothing about the slight snub. Harry met the man's dark eyes unflinching and he can see subtle micro expressions of suspicious familiarity. Like a hound with the slightest trace of a scent, Snape leans in, focused—not on his scars, but on his eyes.
Damn, he's sharp, Harry thinks as he prepares himself and raises his occlumancy shields.

“I realize class will start soon, so I'll be brief,” Snape starts in a deep, drawn out tone. It's bizarre listening to Snape speak to him without the derision, condescension and or loathing he was accustomed to from the Snape in his time line. The man isn't happy or cheerful, nor does he strike Harry as cordial, but it's definitely not repressed anger. Harry keeps his face passive as he listens. “I've been meaning to speak with you sooner but with the usual chaos that comes with every opening ceremony, along with other events, I haven't had the chance until now.”

“I see,” Harry responds evenly. “What did you want to speak with me about, professor?”

“I'd first like to know how you're settling in,” Snape inquires. “Home-schooled the last three years, I can imagine adapting to a setting absolutely brimming with students must be overwhelming.”

“My education started longer than three years ago, but a castle as big as this is a lot different than what I was used to,” Harry lightly responds, recalling his decades in Azkaban. “So far, I haven't had any issues finding my classes.”

“And your classmates,” Snape continues, leaning back in his chair, yet no less perceptive. “Have they been helpful or have raised any issues you'd like to inform me of?”

Here we go, Harry mentally notes. “I'm getting along with my housemates well enough. As the year moves on, I'm sure we'll get to know each other better.”

“I've noticed Mr. Malfoy seems particularly helpful,” Snape says, altering tact. “I don't believe you've left his side since opening ceremony. Knowing him as well as I do, I'd almost say he considers you a friend.”

Ugh, Harry groans internally, but reveals nothing. Haven't left 'his' side? “He's been helpful; showing me around, informing me about the odds and ins of the school. He actually knows quite a lot. More than I think he lets on.” Harry swears Snape hasn't blinked once since Nova took residence on his leg.

“Yes,” Snape agrees. “I've always suspected latent talent within Mr. Malfoy. He'll be a good ally to have in the future, should you ever have need of one.”
“Well, yes, but he's already helping out immensely by keeping away selfish witches and wizards that have a mind to gain favor with the house Flamel. You can never be too careful when desperate or greedy wizards want something from you.”

“Has that been your experience?” Snape asks carefully.

“It's happened from time to time,” Harry answers before quickly adding. “With a family like mine, we draw out the worst megalomaniacs.”

With a stern nod, Snape then asks, “and your impression of Hogwats thus far?”

“I certainly didn't know what to think about yesterday morning,” Harry claims with a tone of feigned disbelief. “That was unexpected. I was a relief to learn that's not normal here.”

“Quite unexpected, I'd say,” Snape asserts before changing tact. “What led to the duel last night? And I ask you don't insult my intelligence by claiming not to know what I speak of. I have thirteen students in the infirmary and as the Head of this House, they all speak to me.”

Snape applies thick pressure in hopes of getting the boy in front of him to break or slip but Harry keeps his quaint poise as he answers without pause, “that certainly was some funny business. It seems that I was to be made an example of by a group of older students who are referred to as the Upper Order. I got the impression they have tyrannical rule over the Slytherin body. If you were unaware, you may want to check on that. It seems they've been in operation for a while. They insisted I duel them. Draco tried to be a good ally and duel them on my behalf. Helpful as Draco continues to prove himself to be, ultimately it was too many wands for him to fight on his own.”

“But not too many for you?” Snape interjects.

“We told Headmaster Dumbledore I was advanced,” Harry tells the attentive professor. “I learned a lot before I came here.”

“And that includes how to send thirteen of your fellow Slytherin to the infirmary, and inciting a touch of madness in them? Most of them are scared to sleep and Mr. Vonner still refuses to speak,” Snape snaps at him but oddly enough, Harry doesn't get the sense that he’s angry, or genuinely upset. To Harry it feels more like an act to understand his social cues and reactions.
Harry just shrugs. “I never told them to go thirteen against one. If they wanted to be honorable and duel one at a time, it might've gone differently for them.”

“Mr. Flamel, as your Head of House, you must know I would have resolved a situation like that without anyone requiring a visit to the infirmary,” Snape responds sternly and Harry can feel a small rise of agitation within him. “I'm sure Mr. Malfoy has told you much about his father and what he can do as the Chairman of the Board of Governors. As a close friend, I can tell you he would not approve of his son's injury, even if it was in your defense.”

“Is it normal for me to call my head of house to report on the house's prefects and friends?”

“If you felt your safety was imperil, yes,” Snape responds. “I do not tolerate physical harm within my own house. Why didn't you come to me first before taking matters into your own hands?

“Short answer? I have no confidence in you to properly resolve the situation,” Harry answers just as sternly, much to Snape's surprise. Harry's sure the man's raised eyebrows have more to do with his brazen audacity to questioning his position, than the Upper Order's rule itself. “Though to be honest, that rationale largely depends on how long you and the Headmaster have known about their totalitarian grip over Slytherin house. Because I've been told this little faction have been imposing their ill-will and demands on whomever they please for years, and instead of sanctioning the group with expulsion, they're rewarded with the title of prefect. What sense would it make for me to report this group of Slytherin prefects and company to an administration that's done nothing—seemingly for years—to restrain them?”

“How dare you lecture me on how to run my domain and appoint yourself judge, jury and executioner. Regardless of the back alley talk, rumors, or what may think you know, you are incapable of knowing the full scope of the truth of past situations. It is for that very reason than an institution—not one wizard—is the absolute arbiter of guilt or innocence, and I am that institution. How can I be sure you didn't do this out of some self righteous revenge, which would make you just as guilty as them?”

“For the most part, I agree,” Harry answers. “However, they're the ones who challenged me, not the other way around. The facts speak for themselves. I don't know what more you'd like me to say on this topic, professor, but you're more than welcome to bring this up to the headmaster or the governors. Though I fail to see how a brand new student, who was forced to duel thirteen to one is guilty of being a self righteous avenger.” Even if in some ways, it is true, Harry mentally finishes.

Snape gravely eyes Harry, appraising his unflinching gaze, and clear tone. Harry doesn't say more and with a straight face, he's vaguely dumbstruck that Snape seems more concerned with his daring to question a teacher than he is with the Upper Order's reign, as if this band of terrorists beating and abusing others is the most natural thing in nature. Harry has said all he's going to say on that topic,
and if Snape wants to push it, Harry wouldn't mind seeing how they try and justify thirteen senior years dueling a single fourth year.

The silence stretches for a full sixty seconds as they take stock of one another, before Snape decides to irritably move on. “...The curriculum. Any difficulties you'd like to share with me?”

“None at all,” Harry responds easily. “I'm finding it all very easy.”

“I've been told by professor Flitwick you performed well in his charms class,” Snape adds. “You'll meet the second half of your course load today. Do you foresee a similar experience?”

*With everything I know, I could be teaching the teachers,* Harry internally muses. “Well, you can never really say for sure, but I don't think I'll encounter much struggle.”

“It's never wise to get ahead of oneself, Mr. Flamel,” Snape affirms. “It can lead to an over inflated sense of self worth. I can assure you my potions class has never been described as *easy.*”

“I wouldn't say Potions is my greatest passion—I'm partial to Charms and Defense—but I'd say I'm fairly competent. I have no doubt I'll be fine in your class as well.”

Snape tilts his head and intakes a longer stream of air, as if gathering patience instead of air in his lungs. “Perhaps you wouldn't mind a small test than. Tell me, what potion awakens a person from a magically-induced sleep as well as cures minor damage?”

“That would be the Wiggenweld Potion,” Harry answers easily. “Strong enough to even cure Draught of the Living Death.” Harry easily recalls the first test the dark haired professor ever gave him, happily taking him back to simpler times of public shaming.

Snape eyes Harry a moment before asking, “name a potion that produces a choking gas that can also suffocate those near it?”

“Garrotting Potion,” Harry answers.

Snape hastens his questions in hopes of throwing Harry off. “Describe the Erumpet Potion.”
Harry takes less than a second to locate the potion in his mental archives with his perfect recall. “It's a potion that's highly explosive when it touches or is touched by any outside source. Widely used in the manufacturing of racing brooms, actually. It's the secret to their acceleration.”

“Name two potions that use Aconite.”

“Wolfsbane and Wideye, or Awakening potion,” Harry answers, unbothered by the increased speed of Snipes questioning.

“What ingredient is used as an antidote to ague and Love potions?”

“Ashwinder eggs.”

Snape squints his eyes a moment before stating, “final question. List all uses for the Valerian plant.”

“Draught of Living Death, Draught of Peace, common sleeping draughts, Forgetfulness Potion, and in the tasty dessert Treacle Fudge from Honeydukes; though I'm a bigger fan of their Marshmallow Fondue.”

Snape leans back on his seat with a measure of finality, not impressed by Ares but not disappointed either. “At the very least, you seem to know your facts, Mr. Flamel; though that can easily be attributed to an adequate memory. All that's left is to see how well you brew. If your knowledge is anything to go by, I don't expect an exploding cauldron.”

Harry snorts, “Even with my worst instructor, I've never caused a cauldron to explode.”

Snape tilts his head, asking, “you've had multiple instructors? I was under the impression you learned solely from your parents.”

“Well,” Harry shorts a pause. “As impressive as Nicolas can be behind a cauldron, he's no professor of basic potions for beginners,” Harry answers easily. “He located independent instructors to elevate me to a high enough level where he can then properly take over my studies and instruct me. If not, I'm sure he would've ripped out what's left of his hair in sheer frustration,”
Harry quips and Snape actually smiles. It was so creepy to see, Harry forgets to fake a smile of his own.

Snape corrects himself and clears his throat before saying, “I can sympathize... intensely.”

Harry nods his head and continues. “Potions can be an unforgiving skill to acquire if not taught properly. Some time ago I had an instructor whose idea of teaching was, 'the instructions are on the board. You have two hours.' And would then glare at me as if hoping I'd make a mistake.”

The crease between Snape's eyes deepen, vexed. His tone is more sinister when he asks, “and you think you know the appropriate way to teach the noble art of potions, do you?”

Harry raises his eyebrows. “No, professor. As I said, potions isn't really my passion,” Harry slowly states.

“Then scrutinizing an instructor's method of educating as an uniformed student yourself is just ignorant!”

“Maybe,” Harry calmly acknowledges, apathetic to Snape's verbal venom. “I'd argue constructive insight can come from multiple perspectives, but more to the point, I wasn't the one who initially felt that way—how could I, young as I was. It was the Immortal Alchemist, who I'm sure you'd agree has a fair hand in potion making. He told me that man is a worthless instructor for never demonstrating how to properly store, maintain and prepare ingredients, didn't lecture on the multiple techniques of brewing, or ever explain proper cleaning procedure so as to not contaminate future potions.” Snape's expression was still fierce but receptive. Clearly, Harry's hitting close to home, but without outright accusation, the black-eyed professor can still listen. “When he told me that incompetent instructor could've possibly killed me by instilling gross negligence in a skill that can very easily cause your cauldron to explode, I took that to heart; like everything else they've taught me.”

Harry was a little surprised when Snape left it at that by saying, “it's nearly time for classes, Mr. Flamel. I wouldn't want you to be late.” Harry nods his head and stands, Nova hopping to his shoulder. Before he exits the office, Snape asks, “Should I expect more dorms in Slytherin's halls to be warded, Mr. Flamel?”

Harry's certain Snape would've never taken him seriously without invoking the name of one of the greatest potioneers in magical history. Nicolas Flamel might have even been a hero to a young Serverus Snape. Harry's logical assessment of Snape's teaching methods carries all the weight in the world now.
Harry turns to the man and answers without a shred of sincerity, “how would I know, professor? Being new to the school, I wouldn't even know why those wards are necessary in the first place.”

Harry enters the Arithmancy classroom moments before the final bell. Much like Babbling's Runes class, professor Vector's course includes almost all of the same fourth year students from every house. Daphne, Tracey, and Zabini are eyeing him just as inquisitively as they were at breakfast. He finds Hermione's bushier tresses easily enough at the front of the class, hiding behind a large tome with her eyes barely clearing the top of the book as she spies on him. Just like in Runes, she's sitting alone.

“Take your seat young man,” Vector calls as she begins writing a "complex" number chart comprising of natural, integer, rational, imaginary, magical, and real numbers. Understanding Horcrux-Voldemort's arithmancy necessary to travel back in time, Harry doesn't worry about this course in the slightest.

Ignoring Corner and Boot's glare, Harry walks over to the spot next to Hermione and asks, “is this seat taken?”

“Just sit,” Vector calls to Harry, the last man standing. “There's very little time for your courtesy while we have equations to master.”

Harry takes his seat next to Hermione and for the entire course there isn't a word of discussion between them that doesn't pertain to class. By the end, Hermione seems torn between wanting to level a mountain of questions at him—likely around the fact that he answered every problem effortlessly—and not wanting anything to with him. In some ways he's hoping she picks the latter. While he would love far too much to talk to his strong best friend again, he also doesn't want to drag her into the dangers of his world. His fate is sealed and death awaits him and anyone around him in the near future. He can't let her sacrifice her life for him again. Add to that the emotional component he's dreading will overrun him. How could he bare having a form of his Hermione back in his life as if he wasn't the reason she was raped and murdered in his time line? How can he possibly laugh innocently with her, genuinely hug her, all the while knowing what his presence in her life can lead to? He's not strong enough to overcome that crippling guilt, and just thinking about it makes Harry breath heavy.

The entire time he gathers and shrinks his belongings, she still seems very conflicted, which oddly mirrors his own inner turmoil. Should I, or shouldn't I? Regardless of how little she's involved in his life, he's still going to find that Ravenclaw rapist who abused her and deprive him of his fun sack. That's a certainty that makes his blood rush. Without the Map he'll have to break into Ravenclaw and dive into every fourth through seventh year male to find him, but there's just no
other option until he gets his hands on the map.

*Should I, or shouldn't I?*

Harry curtly nods to her, “Granger,” then leaves, deciding for the moment her safety comes first. He may want to kill a certain Ravenclaw boy, and he may want her to be as strong as he remembers her to be, but that doesn't mean he can allow her to be pulled into his perilous world if he can help it.

He's in the hallway by the time Nova lands on his shoulder, trilling sympathetically. “Thanks girl,” Harry exhales. Nova must’ve sense some form of how much he hates walking away from Hermione, especially after everything she did for him in his time line. Harry stops by Myrtle's bathroom. She tells him that Dumbledore did rush in moments after they disappeared but she said nothing and he makes her promise to tell him or Draco if she sees any girls being bullied, before heading to Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration. He meets Draco and Hufflepuff house in the room and much like every other class, he's far ahead of the curriculum, much to the surprise of everyone who doesn't know him.

“What did Snape want?” Draco asks Harry as they walk to lunch.

Harry looks around and Tracey, Daphne, Zabini, Nott, Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle are close enough to listen. It's depressing for him to see the company he now keeps. Harry vaguely notes Crabbe and Goyle flanking Nott instead of Draco like they usually do. With a droll tone, he mildly answers, “nothing much. Just wanted to welcome me to Slytherin and ask about the Upper- excuse me, the former Upper Order.”

“It's not former, actually,” Pansy calls. “No matter how badly you want everyone to think they are. Everyone knows you cheated.”

“Who's saying that?” Tracey asks surprised to be out of the loop.

“Everyone,” Zabini answers. “It's why most are keeping their distance. They don't want to be collateral damage when the Order comes back... and they will come back.”

“I heard Vonner and Drach went home and maybe even withdrew from Hogwarts,” Pansy shrills. “You should count your blessings they don't have an influential family, Flamel, or you'd be expelled for sure; maybe even be made to pay an honor tariff, or possibly sent to Azkaban,” Pansy
annoyingly makes her thoughts known.

“IT was an official duel and Vonner and Drach aren't even noble,” Nott tells her. “There's no way those small houses would dare to go against House Flamel. They'd be stupid to even try!”

Pansy adds, “I hear the rest of the Order should be out by dinner,” and Harry is struck with the sudden urge to kill her just to shut her up.

“Do you realize none of the Upper Order have been to classes yet?” Tracey humorously comments. “They keep getting too hurt to go!”

Everything Pansy says, Nott's laughter and Crabbe and Goyle's subsequent chuckles grate on Harry's nerve. For what must feel like the hundredth time, Harry can't believe he's not killing or seriously maiming these future Death Eaters.

“What did you tell Snape,” Tracey asks Harry.

“I told him what happened,” Harry answers, holding back as much agitation from his tone as possible. “We dueled, they lost.”

“What did you do,” Zabini asks suspiciously. Harry is instantly aware of how much easier it was to tolerate the tall dark-skinned boy when he said nothing. More specifically Blaise asks, “what magic did you use in order to stop all of them? You haven't exactly explained what you did. It's why everyone's saying you cheated somehow.”

“Only because no one could hear what he said over the crowd's cheering,” Daphne adds defensively. The way Zabini stares at her, Harry can understand that there is some story between them, but he doesn't care enough to think further on it.

Harry hesitates to say what he actually used on the off-chance they don't believe him and pester him more. Fortunately Malfoy answers perfectly for him. “You don't think I was the first to ask, Blaise? He couldn't tell me just like he can't tell you or anyone else. It's family magic.”

The group seem to accept that with nods and hums of approval. Upon entering the boisterous lunch hall, Nova makes her way to Hermione and Luna, and he finds Hedwig waiting for him were he normally sits. Her beautiful hoots and three Slytherins running out of Hall with egg yoke slim
running down their faces has a very positive affect on his mood. He notes the stack of post in the snowy owls talons. He scans them with his wand and sure enough, they're safe to read—not that he will. Sifting through all of them, he recognizes a few family names, like Nott, Zabini, Vane and Diggory, and many he doesn't recognize, so he knows so he just stuffs them in his robe to read later. Harry dines and dashes out of the great hall, eager for fresh air and a good amount of time alone.

By the Forbidden Forest, watching Nova, fly high in the sky, Harry thinks of purchasing a broom—not to play quidditch but to be able to fly with Nova and Hedwig. He always did enjoy how flying helped clear his mind of all that ails him. Watching his familiar, a sound of bushes rustling, leaves crunching and twigs snapping alerts him to the tree line where a group of Beauxbaton girls to burst out of the forest. On instinct, Harry snaps his wand in his hand, mentally ready to engage any threat to the girls as they run to their enlarged carriage. Harry is sprinting flat out for three seconds, desperate for every millisecond before he registers their cries as laughter and the overall mirth.

Harry slows to a confused halt when one of the girls spots him. Fleur, he recognizes. She falters in her steps a moment before changing direction and running toward him. He isn't sure what to make of this so he doesn't retract his wand—it could be an unexpected and elaborate trap for all he knows. He scans his surroundings and besides the group of giggling girls—nearly to their carriage—there are a few older Durmstrang students near the lake, and no one else he can see. Fleur slows as she approaches with a grace and poise of a divine creature, and even if her radiant smile seems to soothe his body's restlessness, his mind is strong enough to remain weary.

“You will pretend we were speaking, yes? Togezer?” Fleur says in a throaty groan, winded by her run. She looks around with excited nervousness, as if having done something silly she wasn't supposed to. She's close enough for him to feel her labored breaths and despite his mental discipline, his mind is, to some extent, breaking down under her overpowering scent. Focusing on his confusion, Harry is about to ask what she means when Hagrid and Madame Maxime walk out of the forest quite close to one another with an air of magnetism around them, if their smirks are any indication.

Harry isn't as confused anymore but still doesn't know the whole situation. Fleur panics when Maxime and Hagrid see them and makes to grab Harry's robes by the elbow, a move that elicits an extreme reflex from him. In no time flat, he grips her wrist tightly and steps in close to press the tip of his white wand under her elegant chin. Fleur seizes in his grasp, and panics at the weapon that has her at his mercy, immediately sobering her of the jolly fun she was having with her friends to the cold, hard reality of danger. Fleur is scared, and as much as the wand pressed under her chin or the strong hold he has on her propel the panic rising in her, it's his eyes that threatens her safety the most.

His brows are knitted fiercely, his scars crack his handsome features like a trench, and the bright green of his clear eyes reminds her of the only killing curse she's ever seen. The bright green of the Avada Kedavra that swelled in her eyesight as it raced towards her, it's only intention, to kill her.
and her sister. Her mind instantly transports to the night of the Quidditch World Cup; when those masked cowards caught her and her sister, when she tried to fight them off to protect her sister, when they disarmed her, when they tore off her blouse, and when they tortured her with the Cruciatus Curse. With those disgraceful images flooding her mind, comes the high waves of emotions; anger, shame, regret, guilt, disgrace, and chief among them, helplessness. To be so easily subjected to the whims of cowards for their own sick amusement is the shining bane of her existence.

In that moment, Fleur can't justify wasting time fooling around with her friends and snooping on her headmistress and the gamekeeper when she's so weak. It feels worse when she thinks about her cherished little sister and what that night has done to her since. Her beautiful sister means the world to her and that night plagues her sleep with horrific night terrors. Now Gabrielle is tired all the time because she can never get a full night's rest and barely eats. Fleur would do anything to help her feel safe again, but right now she can barely coax a smile from her once vibrant sister. It breaks her heart like nothing ever has to be so weak when her sister needed her the most.

It was looking in his bright green eyes that brought it all back; the horror of it all. But more than that, Ares' eyes also remind her of their mysterious savior. Ares' eyes aren't glowing like her savior's but the green is at least a similar shade. In the dark night, terribly injured and highly stressed as she was, she never got a good look at his face, but her Veela nature still felt the rage of his tremendous magic as well as his absolute passion to protect. She distinctly remembers feeling like he would never let harm come to them or leave them. Of course, Fleur is aware that her helplessness under that amount of trauma must've exaggerated the details and her feelings, but even still, in her greatest moment of need, he was there. That moment is a shocking discovery of revelation for her and she begged her papa to do everything in his power to find the man responsible for saving their lives. However, even with her papa's influence, they could not find a single solid lead on their protector, and the closure she sought seems destined to stay beyond her reach. That incident—knowing exactly what would've been to her and her sister if not for their savior—has pushed her in ways she never felt capable of.

In the infinity of that moment, Fleur is entirely scared, but not completely for her life. Forcibly held and under another man's wand, she stares into murderous eyes and sees a similar, familiar fear. Something about her Veela nature told her his scars extend past the flesh and runs deep into a fractured soul. While she may not know why or how, she can infer his reaction was not out of malice, bigotry, or love of violence, but of hurt and vulnerability. It scares her to see that in someone else because it easily reminds her of her own vulnerability. Suddenly his expression morphs from confusion, to shock, then remorse.

Harry immediately lets go of her wrist and hops several feet back, “Fleur- I- I mean Miss Delacour. I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I- I don't know what came over me. That was- I shouldn't have done- I apologize.” Harry expresses vehemently as he takes slow measured steps back. His eyes navigate from the reddish purple hues she's massaging from her wrist to the fearful look of concern imprinted on her beautiful face, and it makes him want to throw up to know he was the cause of that. He can actually feel bile rising as he recalls flashes of her rape and torture from his time line. He never wanted to be the cause of her pain, or any of their pain again. He just wants to save them.
But here he is, hurting her.

His mumbling apology is cut short as he notices Maxime and Hagrid walk towards them. With a final, “I'm sorry,” he abruptly turns and rushes away, barely restraining his growing sense of shame and guilt. Chastising himself, he doesn't stop, nor would he have stopped if she called for him to; which she didn't. Nova's beautiful song relives most of the crippling remorse, but he still carries his shame into Potions, where he quietly goes with the flow and absentmindedly brews the perfect Girding Potion despondently. Harry mildly notes Snape actually guide the class on proper preparation and brewing. While it's not professor-of-the-year ardor, it's more than he's ever done; surprising some students.

Harry remains quiet and somber all the way into Defense Against the Dark Arts with the Gryffindors. He ignores everyone including, Hardwin, Ron and Draco; Hardwin, Ron for their neighborly glare, and Draco's curious if not worried glances at him. Class starts off similarly to how Harry remembered, though not exactly.

“If you lot really want to learn to defend yourselves against all the dark dangers eager to get yer tiny little arses, you won't be learnin' how to REALLY do that from no book,” Faux-Moody starts off. Like every other student in the room, Harry pays close attention to Faux-Moody but not for the same reason. Barty Crouch Jr's preference to the practical approach seems to include getting the useless book stuff out of the way as fast as possible so they can start on the real work. So, the class studies Erklings and Redcaps, and assigns a massive amount of homework to be tested on first thing next class.

Remarkably, Harry has a far easier time controlling himself than he was expecting. After hurting Fleur the way he did, he was expecting a hard spike of rage at the first sight of the man, but as the imposter limped in, Harry felt only deadly resolution. Harry is comforted by his plan for Crouch. The dangerously clever and ruthlessly determined wizard will be captured by him, alive, and tortured for information, before he continues his torture as recompense for past crimes, and finally kills him... or not. There's something much too final about death, and Barty deserves the harshest hell he can give him that has no end. Harry has his plan, and he will not settle on anything less than this cretin deserves.

Before end of class, no one knows why or how but a large stack of parchment is blasted everywhere. In the confusion Harry's wand is immediately in his hand and he's already reading the room for any presence of threat. After a second, a small enchanted parchment slides right in front of him. It's a note with impressive flowing cursive.

After Dinner, Owlery?

-DG.
Harry turns to Daphne as she and Tracey are leave, Zabini and Nott following after them. She eyes him impatiently, but he doesn't nod to accept before she leaves with the other Slytherins. Harry isn't sure that he's up for any interaction for the remainder of the day. He casts muffliato around himself and Draco as they leave the defense class.

“What can you tell me about Daphne Greengrass?” Harry asks.

Draco seems taken by the abrupt question but quickly takes a moment to gather his thoughts before answering, “uh, well, she's first born and heiress to their house—a fairly wealthy family. Mostly gray political affiliations but I know her father is an ambitious business man trying to enter the political game. Her mother is gone, passed away I think. She has a little sister, who she loves a lot though she tries to seem aloof about it, which is smart. You don't want other Slytherins knowing your weaknesses. Daphne herself is one of the most cunning witch in Slytherin, and certainly one of the hottest girls in the school. Only a few guys have managed to get close but she's real picky about men. I also remember from our time that she's into women too.”

Harry looks at Draco like he lost his mind. “Facts, Malfoy. I just need to hear the facts, or at the very least if she's a threat to us or not and why. Did she become a Death Eater? Does she believe in their dogma or that pure-blood nonsense? Things like that, not her sexual preference.”

Draco looks sheepish a moment before answering, “no, she never became a Death Eater. At least not entirely. She's an heiress of a noble house that deal a lot with dark families. So, in many ways she's meant to act a certain way whether she wanted to or not. I know she did end up working as an Unspeakable. She never married but she was supposed to; to Nott, actually. I know, she's leagues too good for him, but that's the power of alliances through arranged marriages. The marriage never happened because of a freak accidental death, killing Theodore. Rumor was she killed him and even with veritaserum, no one could prove she did it. Most men stayed away after that.”

“So she didn't become a Death Eater,” Harry repeating the important point while mentally giving her credit for taking Nott out. “Did she work for Voldemort in some other way? Can't you tell me anything more about her character?”

“I don't know,” Draco insists. “She's hard to read and whatever she did for Voldemort, I wasn't in on it. She was in the brain sect. Planning, potions, prophecies, whatever. My crew was for... well, you know.”

At least Draco has the decency to look ashamed, so Harry lets it go and asks instead, “So she did work for him?”
“Everyone worked for him in the end,” Malfoy states solemnly.

“Can't you tell me anything else?” Harry asks. “Use your brain; Think.”

“Look, she turned me down... several times, so being the way that I was, I did my best to ignore her very existence. Everything I heard about her, came from Zabini, who only did it to put the piss in my drink, and that was mostly bragging about what a wildcat she was in the sack. Aside from her sister dying and her taking it really hard, that's all I know.”

“How do you know she took it hard,” Harry asks. “Her sister dying I mean.”

“Zabini claimed she lost herself after her sister died. Like Daphne always had lines she wouldn't cross here and there, but apparently after her sister's death, she'd do anything; didn't matter what. At the time I just thought Zabini was scared to lose his weekend girl but now I'm not so sure. I didn't hear about her after that.”

Harry takes a few moments to consider that. Of everything he's heard, her reaction to the loss of her sister is the most humanizing bit of real interest. Though buzzing around in his mind like an annoying gnat is curiosity to know the type of things Daphne does in the sack. It makes his heart speed up and it irritates him that he's reacting this way when there are infinitely more important things to do. Stupid hormones, he thinks as Draco asks, “Why do you ask? You're not feeling a little sex-crazed are you? Because impure thoughts are for young knobs, remember?”

With bitterness, Harry looks to Draco incredulously. “I can't wait to train tonight. Aren't you glad we have potions that can heal broken bones quickly?”

Draco's antic deflates quickly and to move it along, he repeats, “Yeah, so, why ask about Daphne?”

“She wants to meet after dinner in the Owlery,” Harry answers. “But I needed a little more background on her.” Entering the Slytherin common room, most of the students are settling in to get as much homework done before dinner as possible. Harry spots Daphne seated next to Tracey at a table across from Nott and Zabini. She notices him as well.

Draco asks, “you going to meet her?”

“I guess,” Harry lazily answers. “I already told her I'd talk to her. I might as well get it out of the
“I thought she said after dinner,” Draco comments rushing after him.

“Why wait,” Harry returns.

“Well, she isn't a Basilisk for starters,” Draco says somewhat desperately.

Harry stops and turns to him asking, “what?”

“All I mean is this isn't a combat situation, so there's no need to rush,” Draco explains. “Greengrass is cunning and hyper-aware. If there's something you don't want her to know, she might still figure it out. She can read people like a book. If she's looking to speak with you, I guarantee you it's because she has an angle.”

Harry thinks nothing of it and states, “Unless she tells me she has a line on our missing parasite nothing she says will work with me.”

“Fine,” Draco acknowledges with a sigh. “I'll see you at dinner.”

“No, no,” Harry says before Draco can take a step away. “I'm going to need you to help split this group up so I can signal Daphne to meet now. Zabini's been giving me dirty looks all day and Nott is toxic to my patience. I don't want them around.”

“Fine,” Draco concedes. “Want me to do anything specific?”

“Yeah, ask Tracey to speak in private,” Harry starts to which Draco immediately responds, “no, that's a bad idea.”

“Have you apologized to her yet, like I told you to?” Harry asks. When he gets no response, he adds, “mend the fence Draco. Now.”

Obviously irritated, Draco huffs in anger and walks over to the table. He walks up to the seated
Tracey, who's eyeing him apprehensively. Draco pauses for several beats, adding to the awkwardness and coaxing Harry to pat him hard in the back of the shoulder, proclaiming, “you got this!”

Draco, whirls his head around to see Harry's smug smirk, and he wants to curse him on the spot. Instead he turns to Tracey and says, “future heiress Black, I'd be humbled and honored if you would consent to allow me a moment of your time to speak in private. To convince you of my sincerity, heir Flamel has agreed to chaperone.”

Other than letting out a longer breath of air than normal, Harry doesn't show any sign irritation. He only nods when Tracey looks to him. Harry can tell the entire table is surprised by the respect of Draco's formal request. To hear him asking Tracey, visibly upsets both Pansy and Nott. Zabini shows no reaction. Tracey herself doesn't quite know how to respond and turns to Daphne. Catching Harry's eyes, then nod, it takes Daphne less than a second to realize what's actually happening. Daphne whispers to Tracey who then responds, “I accept your request, heir Malfoy, only under the condition Daphne chaperone as well.”

With a nod from Draco, the four find themselves walking the wooden bridge behind Hogwarts that leads to the rear forest. Tracey and Draco are several meters ahead, giving Harry and Daphne plenty of privacy.

“So you wanted to talk,” Harry starts after casting a privacy spell. Both Harry and Daphne are keeping their eyes forward watching Draco and Tracey as they speak to each other.

“What was wrong with the Owlery?” Daphne asks. “After dinner would've been the best time to meet.”

“Why is a best time necessary in the first place? I don't see the need for all this cloak and dagger. If you wanted to talk privately, why not simply ask no matter who's around?”

“Clearly you don't consider social snubs and or alliance alienation. Lets just say when I do something, I'm either gaining favor or I'm losing it and currently, talking to you is not very popular in Slytherin.”

“Is that what this is? Gaining favor? Please tell me I didn't carry on this silly charade so you can gain favor with House Flamel?”
“Of course not,” Daphne returns confidently. “I’m here to help you.”

“Oh,” Harry boringly states. “And what specifically are you supposed to help me with?”

“Protection,” Daphne replies.

Harry wants to snort at the insinuation, instead he smiles lightly and asks with a humored tone, “and who are you protecting me from?”

“The Upper Order, the other insulted years, threats by other houses and anything else I discover that you might want to know. I said protection but I meant via intelligence. With a name like yours, you should be the most sought after wizard in all of Hogwarts, but you don't socialize or network the way you're supposed to. That can be very offensive to those who expect affirmation of their reputation from someone like you. It hasn't been a week and you're already a threat to their influence, popularity, or some other form of power, making for a very hostile environment to live in. For a wizard who takes delicate precautions even with your food, information concerning these hostilities would help you.”

“Okay,” Harry returns. “If you want to tell me something than feel free to. If you don't, than don't. I don't mind either way.”

“Don't pretend you don't want to know these things,” Daphne responds curtly. “I can easily tell unlike other wizards you value knowledge.”

“I do, but the knowledge you're selling has no worth to me.”

“All knowledge has worth. You just need to know how to make it work in your favor.”

“You really are a business man's daughter,” Harry lightly notes.

“You know of my family,” she comments. “It's why I make it my business to know as much as I can about what people don't want me to know. It's why Tracey and I are kept up to date with a lot of what goes on in the castle. We have insight and without my intelligence, you may not know when the Upper Order figures out you had something to do with those wards in the first year dorms.”
Feigning a curious look, Harry asks, “you think I had something to do with those wards?”

“I can't prove it, of course, but what would that matter to the Upper Order, right?”

“That sounds dangerously close to a threat, Greengrass,” Harry comments lightly.

“I'm not threatening you, but do you actually think they won't come after you again? Or that your family magic is going to keep you safe in the future? Slytherin is the house of the cunning and the year is long. If a direct approach won't work, they'll simply change tactics and ambush you when you least expect it. That's how Khan works. He doesn't let things go. He doesn't let anything slide. And when they have you, they'll make you wish you never crossed them.”

“Call it arrogance if you want, but they still don't worry me.”

“I call it foolishness,” she retorts.

“Do you always insult everyone you're trying to help?”

“No, but you're making it impossible for me to help you when you don't even realize the situation you're in,” she exclaims with mild irritation. “What else would you call that?”

“Do you really think I don't realize the situation? I've been told you're one of the smartest witches in Slytherin—with the cunning of Salazar himself. Think about everything you've seen me do, heard me say, remove your expectations and answer me this, 'why don't I care?’ Look me in the eye and tell me. You answer me that question to the best of your ability and we can continue talking. Don't and I leave.”

Daphne takes a moment, then turns to him, staring intently in his eyes and Harry can tell her mind is working a mile a minute. After several seconds of silence, she answers, “I don't think you're lying, or, at the very least, I believe you believe what you're saying.”

The political response makes Harry smile a little. She continues, “based on what I've perceived thus far, you're not concerned—as you should be—because they don't actually worry you. And the reason they don't worry you is the same reason why you have those scars, your phoenix, why you
can do some wandless magic and why your studies seem to come easy to you... you're strong, advanced, and you've gone through a lot—maybe more than most. If you were older, I could believe you'd be fine against them but—"

“But that just means I'm abnormal, Greengrass. So shall we start again? Why did you want to talk?”

“I really do want to be of help to you,” she says stubbornly, returning to watching Draco and Tracey. “There must be something.”

“There isn't,” he says flatly.

“Perhaps a token of sincerity,” she states and Harry doesn't say anything. He almost looks bored so she continues. “Perhaps you'd like to know more about Hardwin Potter. I'll admit I don't know too much more than what most of the world already knows but I do have a connection most don't.” Again Harry doesn't take his cue to speak, so Daphne continues. “I can tell you a lot about the Potters or Weasleys, the Blacks, and other prominent families.”

“Were you invited to the Black wedding?” Harry abruptly asks.

“Yes. I'm a bridesmaid, in charge of pinning a flower or ribbon on the guests.”

“Do you have a date?” Harry quickly asks, unwilling to acknowledge an elevated heart rate or how bizarre this tactic to getting into the wedding is. She turns to him with a confident smile and it makes his palms perspire a little.

He's almost relieved when she says, “It's a tradition for the bridesmaid to accompany one of the groomsman, but I can ask.”

“Don't bother,” Harry tells her, relaxing again. “It's fine. I was just curious.”

Daphne huffs loud enough he can hear before continuing. “It's not just prominent families I can tell you about. I have information about other families or lesser popular students. Parkinson, Nott, Zabini, Diggory, Bones, Patils, Lovegood, Granger. I can tell you more about the first person you met at Hogwarts if you like.”
“You can?” Harry asks, turning to her. *Is it possible she might know,* he mentally wonders. “Like what?”

“She's smart,” Daphne starts. “I hate to admit she's smarter- or at least academically ahead of me.”

“You said she might be too distracted to stay top student a couple days ago. What did you mean by that?” Now Daphne says nothing, somewhat to his irritation. Not because she's being smug or anything like that, but because she might know who's bullying her and hasn't said. “What is it I can help you with Greengrass? That's what this is, isn't it? Trade? You offer me something because you need something from me?”

“I won't deny you might be able to help me with a concern of mine,” she states. “But I won't accept charity or the invisible strings it might carry, so yes, fair trade.”

“And I won't deny that I'd like to know more about Granger, but I think I'll wait until she tells me. So, if there's nothing else...”

“Granger is being bullied,” Daphne presses on as neutrally as possible. “And that's something she would never tell you about, or anyone else for that matter. There's an underlying fear there that's common behavior among the abused.”

“I've gathered,” Harry absentmindedly states, though his exasperation is rising.

“And you don't like it, do you?” Daphne continues with a tone of levity, finally feeling like she's making progress.

“I can't say that I do, no,” Harry states.

“I'm certain you'd like to know more,” Daphne teases, playing the information game just like she was taught. “It's only natural if you care.”

“Why are you doing this?” Harry levels on her. “Trading on misery for your own gain, like some ancient, chaos-loving warlock?”
"I'm not,\" she states in a low tone somewhat taken by his callous question.

\"No? Aren't you telling me that you know Granger is being bullied and possibly more than that but you're refusing to do anything with that information unless you benefit as well? That sounds exactly like trading on misery to me.\"

It takes Daphne a moment to move past her surprise before her brows furrow and she responds in kind. \"Now you're starting to act like some bleeding heart Gryffindor. Should I expect you to thoughtlessly charge to her rescue next? Perhaps tell the professors? You think it's so easy to get anything done in this school with a headmaster who's positive to a fault? Who insists people are good by nature and should they happen to do bad, it's because they don't know any better or are simply misguided? That they should all be given heaps of chances to change regardless of offense? Go report to Snape, McGonagall, Dumbledore. See what that gets you when everyone idolizes Dumbledore like the second coming of Merlin; than suddenly the offended party is wrong, or misguided, or partly to blame and it's hard not to think it's your fault somehow because they're the adults. The authority with reputations to maintain, won't change without public shame and if you can't change anything than you look out for you and yours. You have no reason to help me, a stranger, right? Just like I have no reason to help Granger.\"

They stare at each other intensely.

\"You represent so much of what I hate about people,\" Harry tells her honestly. \"But I can't say you're wrong, even if it is. I see a lot of that in the mirror... weakness. I don't even think I can blame you. For much of my life, I've had to solve my own problems despite being surrounded by adults, and that didn't always work out well. It's shameful but I can be guilty of the same thing.\" Harry had been deliberating on whether he should or shouldn't be more involved in Hermione's new life since Arithmancy. Keeping Hermione at arms length may save her life but it may also continue her misery. Is that acceptable to him?

...Fuck it, Harry mentally declares nonchalant. \textit{If there's anyone smart enough to be ready for the future if properly trained, it's Hermione Jean Granger.} Harry has to admit he's feeling charitable toward Greengrass for the clarity, and while he may not want to get too involved with Daphne, he's willing to hear her out more.

\"So what's this about,\" she hears him calmly ask. For many seconds there's total silence, then Daphne says, \"My father's a businessman and has amassed a large amount of wealth on his business acumen. It's also why I know that everyone wants something... myself included. I'll admit it's difficult for me to infer what it is that you want, but believe me when I tell you I'm not expecting something for nothing.\"
“I'm not looking to make a trade,” Harry calmly, almost softly tells her. “But feel free to tell me what you want and if I can help, I will.”

Daphne takes a moment and neutrally says, “what I would like is to read a book or two from your family library. None of your family's grimoires of course just whatever is available to read.”

“I can send a letter to see how they'd feel about it but I need to know why. They're not just going to allow anyone into their library—it's among their most treasured possessions. They were around for a few of history's mass book burnings, so they've amassed the largest library I've ever seen—it's literally mountains of all sorts of old and new books. If that's what you really want, you need to tell me what this is about.”

“...I can't,” Daphne answers. “I don't know you, Flamel.”

“I don't know you either, Greengrass,” Harry states. “But between the two of us, I can learn what I need without the other.”

“Look, if Granger's ordeal isn't important enough for you to not ask questions, than just tell me what you want,” Daphne implores. “Anything! Really. I- I'll be your girlfriend, if you want... do things for you,” she says in a low tone. “There are things I know boys like, and I can do that... for you.”

Harry mechanically turns his head to her. “You don't know me and so can't tell me what this is really about, but you're willing to prostitute your own body to get what you want instead?”

“If you get me access to your family's library and don't make unreasonable demands of me, than yes, you can- we can do certain things.” Harry is stunned a moment. Long enough for her to nervously add, “Despite my maidenhead, I know I'm... proficient at some things.”

“...Greengrass-”

“I've just offered you my body, Flamel. I think you can call me Daphne now.”

“...Daphne,” Harry starts. “I'm going to have to say no to your... proposal, and it's not because I don't think you're pretty or wouldn't want to. It's because I know what being dependent to abusers is like. Before the Flamels took me in, I went through far too much and did many things at the
behest of others just to survive. I know that doomed feeling of helplessness and I wouldn't make
terrible demands of you because I wouldn't condone that situation in the first place.”

Daphne seems to be hanging on every word. He continues.

“You don't want to tell me because this means more to you than yourself; which means family—
more specifically, your sister. They or she mean everything to you, and that knowledge gives me
power over you more than your body does, which is why you don't want to confide in me. But,
since I already know what your sister means to you—that this is about her in some way—and I'm
still not playing this trade game with you, how about you take a leap of faith and just ask me what
you really want to ask me.”

Her eyes water with tears refusing to shed, making her arctic blue eyes dance in place. Her
eyebrows crinkle closer together with desperation and her cheeks flush deep red, as she sniffs then
asks “... can you help me save my sister?”

“Sure Daphne,” Harry answers.

Chapter End Notes

First, thank you for reading! I'm so happy to be doing this and overwhelmed by the
positive response :D

The story is finally starting to move and aside from Dumbledore and Lily, we've
nearly met most of the major relevant players(I think).

Lastly I have plans with my GF this coming week and I don't think I'll have the time to
write and post next Sunday. I'll try of course but if I don't, I'll try to make it up to you
guys the following week. Thanks again for reading!
Law of Retaliation

Chapter Summary

Daphne is immediately helpful, much to the detriment of a bad student, and Harry gets closer to someone he never knew.

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a fun holiday weekend last week--for those who celebrate Easter... and for those who don't i still hope you had lots of fun. I truly had a blast. But I missed you all and I was itching to write again. It's a little over 13,000 words, so personal best for me :)

Bit of a trigger WARNING. Torture and Implied (Past)Rape.

This takes place immediately after Harry and Daphne's conversation.

So please Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He shouldn't have said, 'sure Daphne,' like some insipid hero rescuing a damsel, but she dragged the school's injustice into his well developed tunnel-vision and blurred the lines. He could ignore it if he really wanted to—he should ignore it—but than he'd be just like everyone else, casually giving these abusers a free ride because it has nothing to do with his ultimate goal—abusers Voldemort would happily approve of. It's easy to imagine Dumbledore refusing to accept any student as truly bad and only in need of guidance, but that only provides them a safe haven from the proper punishment necessary. If the parents aren't helping as they should and the school isn't drawing a line, than why wouldn't they freely attack or violate when there are no serious repercussions. Harry sighs as he watches the girls leave when he's joined by Draco.

“I hope you're happy, you wanker,” the boy bellows sounding much like the pompous Draco he remembers. “Because of you, I made a complete idiot out of myself.”

“Really,” Harry asks, perked up to hear. “I'm all ears.”

“You could've warned me it was going to be a long conversation. If I'd I known, I wouldn't have kept talking out my arse just to keep her there.”
“What'd you tell her?” Harry asks curiously. When Draco doesn't respond, Harry insists. “Come on Malfoy. As your quote unquote friend, I'd be the one to know, wouldn't I? You have to tell me.”

“...I apologized,” he starts with a huff. “And I meant it! When I noticed you were taking your sweet time, I apologized about some more specific stuff. By the end of that series of apologies, you looked absolutely smitten with Greengrass—” “I was not smitten—” “SO, I said even more crazy shite and now she thinks I've been repressing my deep-seeded love for her all. These. Fucking. Years. You prat! She thinks she's the reason I've changed! She's probably having a good ol laugh about this! They both are! And by tomorrow, I'm sure everyone'll know!”

After a beat of silence Harry lets out a deep, slow, rare yet captivated laugh. He laughs for ten minutes straight, and occasionally smiles in a good mood all the way to dinner where Daphne is waiting for him by the entrance to the Great Hall. She looks at Draco, smirking but staying silent, clearly waiting for Harry's lead.

Harry looks to Draco, smiles at the mental image of Draco pronouncing his undying love for Tracey—which annoys the silver-blonde—then turns to Daphne and says, “it's fine. Lover boy here knows.” Draco glares at a joyous Harry but says nothing.

“Piss off,” Draco mutters under his breath.

“Your Ravenclaw's name is Hammond Hilliard,” Daphne starts promptly without greeting, much to Harry's predilection. “His older brother Robert Hilliard came to Hogwarts nearly a decade ago, became a Ravenclaw prefect and is now legal aid to Hogwarts governors board.”

“So Hammond has legal cover if he needs it,” Harry mutters, all trace of humor gone. He's never heard the name before but it's just as well. He rather it be a stranger, than someone he actually knows.

Daphne continues, “Hammond's rumored to be together with Isobel MacDougal, but I don't think that's the case. MacDougal is vain, arrogant and nowhere near as smart as she wants to be. So I'm betting she was the one who set Hammond on Granger out of academic jealousy and spite.”

“How do you know all this?” Draco can't help but ask.

“A friendly ghost who loved my mother, a creepy old portrait who likes me more than he should, Tracey's side of the network, and sharp intuition.”
Harry's heart starts beating fast, his magic boiling against his meager restraint, and all he can ask is, "Where is he?" His tone is dangerous and makes both Daphne and Draco worried.

Daphne suddenly feels an unexpected responsibility for Hammond's life. "You're not going to do anything too bad, are you?"

"Point him out," Harry demands, ignoring her question. Daphne hesitates, turns to the filling dinning room and spots Hammond gathered with the other Ravenclaws around the clique of Beauxbaton girls, in their flattering silk blue uniforms, who decided to dine in Hogwarts today. "He's one of the boys talking to the Beauxbaton girls."

"Which," Harry demands, identifying Fleur among the group of beautiful girls. Some of his fury dulls from shame when he recalls how he hurt her earlier in the day; Though not by much.

"What are you going to do," Daphne asks sternly.

Harry turns his piercing green eyes on her and after a moment says, "I'm going to ask him to stop... politely."

"I don't believe that for a second," Daphne retorts.

"I understand," Harry states as he leaves her for the Ravenclaw table.

"What's he going to do," Daphne asks Draco.

"Figure out who Hammond is, I imagine," Malfoy simply answers her.

"Obviously," Daphne retorts. "I mean what's he going to do to him."

"I don't know, I'm not his keeper," Draco tells her with obvious irritation. "You may be on the fence about trusting him now, and you should, but pay attention, because he doesn't do half measures. Sooner or later, you're going to have to decide; you're either in or your out."
Nova flies off and lands before Hermione and Luna, much to the squealing surprise of the Beauxbaton girls nearby. His two friends are alone between large cliques and Harry can see Hermione's hands are webbed as she appears to be straining to get up, as if a great weight is keeping her down. When neither Hermione or Luna pet Nova, Harry immediately understands why. The Ravenclaw students brazen enough to laugh at the girls, do so, while the others just ignore them, and to Harry's great disgust, some of the Beauxbaton girls smile at the prank. The Professors that are present at their table do nothing, huddled and conversing among themselves as they wait for dinner. Harry can tell they aren't even aware of Hermione and Luna's plight as they talk to each other. From a distance he can tell it has something to do with the prophet but he doesn't heighten his hearing to eavesdrop.

Nova cozy's up to the immobile girls as Harry walks past them, straight to the older Ravenclaw boys talking to the beautiful Beauxbaton girls. Harry spares an apologetic eye and nod to Fleur before addressing the group. “I'm looking for a Hammond Hillard?”

“It's Hilliard, heir Flamel,” States a tall sixth or seventh year boy next to Fleur. Judging by his stature, the older boy probably plays for the Ravenclaw team. He's currently sporting an idiotic, dopey grin, has a hooked nose, and neat, slick-back, sandy-blonde hair.

“Apologies mate,” Harry returns, playing the part of a friendly stranger. “I lost a bet and was told to give a galleon to Hammond Hilliard.”

“Is this some sort of joke?” Hammond questions with a suspicious brow. “Who said? And what was the bet?”

Harry makes the gold coin appear in hand. “If you don't want it that's fine-

“Alright, alright, give it here,” Hammond flaps, stretching his hand to collect his coin. “It's my lucky night or what, eh ladies?” He joshes as he smiles at Fleur.

“Luck of the devil, I'd say.” Harry's smile is far too forced as he slings the gold coin with a strong flick of his thumb, striking it hard enough to hear a distinct ping noise, then leaves. As he passes Hermione and Luna, he flicks his wrist for his wand and neutralizes the sticking charm keeping both girls stuck to the table and bench. He also cancels the animal charm that webs their hands and fish-scales their skin, all without stopping. Wand back in his wrist holster, Nova landing on his shoulder, Harry exits the Great Hall, no longer hungry for food, but instead starving for retribution.
It seemed to take an eternity for dinner to conclude so most students could walk back to their common rooms. It's the easiest sequence in the world to wait for Hammond close to the Ravenclaw common room, call the gold coin he'd given the boy earlier to exit his robes, hit the floor, roll it away as the upper year gives chase. Disillusioned himself, Harry stuns him unconscious and flames him to the chamber.

Sticking the unconscious body, spread eagle to the cold stone floor, Harry's very first step is too ensure the baby basilisk will not eat Hammond. In the moment when the large infant snake slithers happily to greet it's master, does Harry learn that the snake's eyelids have lifted. After his initial shock of surviving the death stare, Harry examines the snake and learns it actually has two eyelids —the second, a clear membrane acting as a protective shield. After making sure the large serpent knows never to open the second eye lid, Harry tries to explain the plan to the adolescent serpent with little success.

~ ¿Why does master not eat bad food?~ The snakes hisses his question.

Harry groans internally before trying again. ~Ares. I'm Ares, not master. Ares is my name and it's not food, it's a bad man.~

~ ¿Does me have name? I want name! I want name too! ~

Thinking how much Nicolas is going to enjoy this moment, he hesitates to name it, but he can't keep calling it baby basilisk. With a sharp exhale he nods and looks deeply at his snake, letting himself gently feel the aura of the serpents magic, before finally hissing ~Yes, yes you do have a name. And your name will be... Nāga. That is your name. I'm Ares. You are Nāga.~

After many minutes of trying to calm the over excited baby basilisk down, Harry has an easier time explaining that he wants Hammond to stink of fear, rather than be food. It was like using his name made the jolly serpent more receptive. How the infant snake understands him so quickly is beyond him, but when he ponders how quickly infant creatures take to their nature, he thinks little of it.

Harry divests Hammond of all his clothes, keeps him spread eagle on the floor before enlarging the shrunken trunk he keeps chained around his neck. Disarming the security precautions and unlocking the fourth compartment housing Nicolas' special potions, Harry conjures a table and sets up a number of vials for the task ahead.

Harry grips the edges of the table and simply allows the most vile and evil acts he can think of to flood his mind, fuel his body and contaminate his soul. This may be in defense of his best friend but defending her isn't exactly what he's going to do to the rapist. He's going to torture this boy and
the price for that is surrendering himself to the darkest, poisonous, and evil parts in him—a process that takes him little time to accomplish. In some ways he can understand Hermione's hesitation to use force to punish; it would wake her up to a side of herself she's unfamiliar with and could very well be scared of. Gentle to a fault she may be, but if he was ever given the choice, he'd much rather be her.

In the face of what he's about to do, Harry chuckles at such an ideal dream.

Harry dims the flame light in the room to near total darkness and enervates the stuck nude boy into consciousness. The older boy takes in a deep breath with a cough before utter confusion registers. When the cold hits him, he tries to move only to find that he can't—that's when he starts to panic. Aside from a few arches, corners and crevasses of his body, his head has the only real freedom of movement, looking around as best he can, but he can't see well in the darkness nor Harry. His struggles start to become frantic, and soon he's calling out, “help! Anyone! Please! Help me!”

Harry immediately wonders if Hermione ever felt the same way, called out for help the same way, making Harry want to kill him on the spot, but he's holds in his rage. Suffering will be better, he tells himself. And this isn't just for you. In Parseltongue, Harry asks, ~¿Can you smell his fear, Nāga?~

Hammond shrieks, “Wha- Who's there!?”

~Nāga loves playing with master Aresss!~ The large snake childishly hisses from the perimeter of the darkened room, escalating Hammond's agitation and cries for help.


Harry blinks twice and tilts his head up silently exercising his patience. He's tolerant of the adolescent snake because of it's youth and Hammond doesn't understand what they're saying, and that's all that matters. ~Nāga, use your tongue and try to sense how the food feels. ¿Can you do that for me?~

~Nāga do anything for master Aressss.~ Harry can hear the large snake constantly slither on the stone floor around them, so he knows Hammond can hear it as well. ~Food grows more an more fear.~

~Keep slithering around us, Nāga, and food will grow even more fear.~ Harry walks up to the boy,
“You!” Hammond yells angrily, as Harry starts walking around him. “Let me up you manky tosser! What the fuck is this, you sick freak?! Why am I naked?” He shuts up when he sees Harry pull out Hammond's wand. “That's my wand! I swear to Merlin almighty if you do-” he wails loudly like a sudden feeling of falling when Harry snaps the rapist's wand in half, then burns the half in each hand to ashes. “You motherfucker! I'm going to kill you! You hear me!? You're dead! You're dead!”

Despite Hammond's rage, Harry appears calm as he slowly walked around the yelling boy to a stop between his stuck legs. Harry nudges his prisoner's flaccid penis out of the way with his foot, and presses down on his left testicle until the angry boy calls out, “wait! Wait! Stop! Please, stop! Look, look, I'm sorry. Please, I don't care about the wand. Whatever you want... you can have anything you want! I promise! Just- Just, please-”

“Stop talking,” Harry serenely states. “If I hear another word come out of your mouth, I'm going to crush the left one, you have my most solemn vow.”

Hammond's rapid breathing is heavy and loud but he nods in fearful understanding.

Harry doesn't remove his foot as he continues to say, “the first thing I want you to know is that I'm not going to kill you. Really, I'm not. You must be thinking, 'of course he wouldn't actually kill me. That would be murder,' but that's only because you think I've never killed before, and that death is the worst thing that could happen to you. You'll learn very soon that it's not, and before long, you'll be praying for me to kill you.” Harry's tone darkens as his mind eagerly anticipates how he'll revel in this abuser's torment. He can feel his magic resonate with his flaring rage and has to do all he can to hold himself back, or he might end up killing him right away.

“Beg for it, plead, wish, or cry for it. You won't die so easily. I won't allow it. It's too good for you and I need to see you suffer. I want you to hurt, everyday, worse than she did.” Despite the fear in his eyes and the sweat running down his red and perspiring face, Harry can tell the 'she' registers something in his mind. He wants to probe his mind right then and there but finds it far too easy. When it looked like Hammond was going to ask about this 'she', Harry presses a bit more weight on the boy's soft left testicle, drawing out a strangled cry of shocking surprise from him.

~Food has much much fear, master.~ Harry hears Nāga hiss from nearby. Through the agony, Hammond frantically looks around for the source of the hissing and slithering but can't see anything.
“Until I say otherwise, keep your mouth shut.” Hammond nods, shutting his mouth but that doesn't keep the groan of pain from escaping his throat. Harry can hear Hammond's teeth chattering before he continues. “Now that you know I won't kill you, I also need you to know this isn't some random attack on you, or anything to do with you specifically—to be clear, I'd do this to anyone who hurt my friends, even if it were a female abuser. This has everything to do with my intolerance of certain behaviors you seem to think you're entirely justified acting on. I'll allow you to speak now but only because I'd love to hear you deny you're a rapist.”

Hammond's first word of protest turns to a powerful cry of pain as Harry puts all his weight down on the boy's soft reproductive organ, giving him the distinct feeling of crushing a particularly juicy grape under his foot. Harry lets the immobile boy writhe against his restraints as he cries and yells profanity for a minutes, soaking it all in.

~Nāga, come say hi to food.~ Harry hisses and the giant baby basilisk slithers quick as a whip over Hammond's legs, next to Harry. Fangs the size of Hammond's hand, large putrid yellow eyes and it's angry hiss of death elevate Hammond's cries of pain to high pitched shrieks of monumental fear. It's only a few seconds before Hammond's wide bulging eyes roll back into his head and he passes out from the extreme anxiety.

~Good boy, Nāga.~ Harry states petting the top of the suddenly affectionate snake. It starts to tangle and squeeze Harry in devoted ardor. ~Okay, okay. Just give me a minute with food and we'll play again.~ Nāga elicits a cry of joy and slithers excitedly away. Harry shakes his head in reserved gaiety as he steps around the unconscious Hammond. Snapping his wand into his hand, Harry points it at Hammond's head and uses legilimency to dive into the boy's chaotic mind.

Harry looks around the boy's most recently stored or called upon memories, and sure enough, he finds the proof he didn't actually need to hurt the Ravenclaw, but couldn't continue without absolute certainty. Hermione, forced to her knees, fists gripping hair to hold her in place and giving Hammond a blow job. In terms of severity, what he was made to watch in the previous time line was leagues worse than this as well as specially geared to elicit the worst torment from him, but to see Hermione suffer again is no less infuriating or agonizing. In the memory, Luna is being held and groped, to his surprise, by an older Gryffindor boy Harry has seen, but doesn't know. Isobel MacDougal is holding both Hermione and Luna's wands watching on with glee and yelling derogatory remarks.

“You filthy good for nothing mudbloods need to learn your place. It is us, of pure magical blood, that are your superiors,” Isobel vilely retorts. “You think you're soo much smarter than us, but that didn't keep you from ending up on your knees, sucking cock like some cheap, corner-walking whore, did it! You fucking disgust me! You shouldn't even be aloud to live because you taint everything you touch, you disgusting slut!”

At that, Harry only has enough patience to learn that was the first but not the last time it happened.
There have been three occasions in total, as far as Hammond's memories show, the last of which was two nights ago, catching her, despite her caution, when she was exiting the library. He uses brute force to hold her hands so she can't get her wand, and immediately forces her into an empty classroom and down to her knees.

“You know what I want, Granger,” Harry hears the boy tell her before quickly exiting the unconscious boys mind. Harry takes several steps away from Hammond before retching up bile in place of the dinner he skipped. His eyes water and his nose is prickly stuffy, but he doesn't relent mental control to his shame tarnished urges of swift revenge. Though every urge of his being screams to kill Hermione's abuser, his weakened rational mind is afraid that recourse won't actually help her in any meaningful way. The most natural response in the world would be to make this filth suffer and die, but doing it by his hand would only avail him, not Hermione, and that is the only thought that stays his hand. He has wrongs to right, certainly, but killing this filth isn't the way to go about it.

Still, Harry walks back to the boy and wakes him up by stomping down hard on the right testicle with a gushy splat, jolting Hammond's head up, screaming a high pitched wail as the sharp scent of fear, blood, and semen starts to fill the air. His screams give Harry some measure of righteous satisfaction, but it's not enough; it's nowhere near enough. Harry knows, more than anything, he just wants Hermione to be strong and punishing this fool is only a pity prize. Harry watches the boy scream and wail until he's red faced, sweaty, streaming tears down the sides of his face. He spasms from the constant waves of pain and the shock of getting his balls crushed. Harry stares into Hammond's pain-filled, pleading eyes with a blank almost clinical countenance for several minutes, absorbing the boy's torment before he turns and walks over to the table. He picks up the first of three vials and returns to Hammonds side, sitting crossed-legged by the rapists wailing head.

Harry puts the vial down next to him as Hammond stares pleadingly for it. “Does it hurt,” Harry asks.

Red eyed and puffy, Hammond yells between coughs, “I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!”

Apathetic to the threat, Harry whips his white wand in his hand for Hammond to see. “I'll give you one chance to answer my questions.”

“FUCK YOU!” he returns and Harry immediately conjures salt to rain down on his blood busted sack. The ear piercing scream turns guttural as he tries desperately to break free of his magical restraints. Harry lets him scream and cry for twenty minutes before he conjures a ball of fire to dance near his crouch. “W-W-W-Wait! Wh-WH-WH-WAIT! P-p-p-ple-please....” he pleads sobbing.
“Does it hurt?”


“Do you want the pain to stop?”

“Yes!” Hammond bellows, voiced thick with agony.

“Tell me what you did to her and I'll give you this vial for the pain,” Harry states, dancing the ball of fire close to Hammond's twitching pelvis.

Rapidly erratic breathing and constantly moving his head, as if to escape the agony, he speaks anguished and with great difficulty. “I- I did- I did it... I made that- I made Granger suck me off, b-b-b-b-but that's it! That's it! I didn't... ugh, oh Godric! I-I-I-I didn't u-u-u-use her for magic practice... like the girls did!”

“Who was the Gryffindor with you?”

“H-H-H-H-Higgs,” he bemoans, sniffing with an ever present groan from the pain. The boy didn't even question how Harry knew of the Gryffindor as he continues to answer, “A-Aamon Higgs, s-s-s-seventh- seventh year, like me!”

“Did he violate her too?” Harry asks, his tone low and homicidal.

“Yes!” Hammond cries. “Once! Just the o-o-one time on the traaiiinn! ….Please, mummy, it huuuuurts...”

“Anyone else?” Harry asks lifting the vial close to the boys face but refrains from administering the potion.

Hammond answers anything and everything he knows as fast as he can to end the pain. “Isobel MacDougal, Qarinaah Bagnold, Nimue Desford would give G-Granger and the blonde a hard time, and-and-and-an Aamon was going to bring some- some k-k-kid around. McLaggen I think he said! And that's it! That's it...” he wails, sobbing. “Please, let me out of here! I told everything I
“Do the professors know?”

“NO!” Hammond yells. “I d-d-d-on't think so! A ghost caught us, once. Filch nearly c-c-c-caught us, but no professors!”

“Was Hermione the only one you raped?”

“Yessss,” Hammond tearfully sobs, then croaks to a roar. “I'm not... not some p-p-p-pervert that enjoys raping girls! Isobel said it was okaayah! And- and- and Granger- she... it's not like she hated it... she- she would've liked it eventually!”

Harry's monstrously angered eyes glow bright green for a long second at the drivel—the blasphemy—this parasite is using as cause to violate her.

“Held and abused against her will and you think she...” Harry mouths in disbelief before he uncorks the vial. Hammond drinks the entire content before a gasping choking shoots spittle up. Harry slaps his hand over Hammond's mouth, keeping the potion in his mouth as his bulging brown eyes stare fearfully at enraged green ones.

“Cheers, maggot,” Harry angrily growls. “It's for the pain, yeah, but what I didn't say was that it amplifies it just beyond your pain threshold. It won't let you pass out, and it won't kill you, but after twenty minutes, you'll be begging for death just to end it.” Harry gets up, ignoring Hammond's pitiful pleas of mercy. “I want you to know this is only the beginning. You'll be my guest for a while, and everyday I will treat to a new form of agony. If you ever wonder why this is happening to you, just know, I don't think you hate it, and I'm sure you'll eventually like it.”

“No! Waiiiiiiiiiii--” Hammond's words choke in his throat as the unbridled agony inflames his entire body. When his pulsating veins pop up clear as day on his tense and seizing muscles, Harry walks over to Nova. ~Nāga, I'll be back later. Do not eat this food and I'll bring you a treat.~ Harry hisses as Nova hops on his shoulder and the large snake slithers to him.

~Treats, treats, treats! ¿When can Nāga haves treats, Master?~ The large snake hisses happily.

~Soon Nāga. So be a good boy, ¿okay?~ Harry rubs the underside of Nāga's round head and neck
before flaming to his room in Slytherin. Walking into the common room, Harry easily spots Draco seated at a table, his back facing him, with the other fourth years doing their homework—Tracey sending quick glances at Draco. Harry's mind quickly notes everyone in the large common room, and pays attention to possible threats, like the Upper Order seated on the plush couches and seats in front of the roaring fireplace. Without needing to call him, Draco turns around, as if sensing him, to which Harry only tilts his head, as if to say, 'let's go.' Draco immediately picks up his books and heads to the fourth year dormitory while Harry waits.

Harry can feel the tenseness in the air as the silence expands throughout the room and Slytherins move farther away from him. Then he hears, "Stupify!" from behind him, recognizing Yaroslav's voice before he feels the oppressiveness of his magic barrel through the air. Harry easily evades it with a fluid sidestep as he snaps his wand to hand. By this point, Khan and Boyle are in position at opposing points from Yaroslav, like the points of a triangle with Harry in the middle, and everyone else taking cover from stray spells.

"Incarcerous!" "Expelliarmus!" "Stupify!" "Diffindo!" "Relashio!" "Stupify! Stupify! Stupify!" The three yell at the same time without boasting or stopping.

Harry evades spell after spell by the smallest of margins with laughable ease, never moving more than a few steps in any direction or forcing Nova to lose her balance on his shoulder. Their casting is so linear and slow, he can easily map their trajectory and evade the curses without the slightest bit of worry. He raises his wand and barely thinks the disarming spell before his magic flares and all three wands attacking him are ripped from his attacker's hands and fly to Harry. Letting his own wand slide back into his holster, Harry wandlessly catches all three wands, keeping them afloat before him, much to the amazement of the astonished crowd. Ignoring the bullies demands or pleas to give them back their wands, he takes each one and snaps them in two with a sort of numb detachment. Truthfully, Harry didn't feel much during the exchange or as he burns the six pieces of broken wood to ash. Harry does nothing else to the three for the simple reason that they barely qualify as a nuisance, but when Khan rushes him, out of his mind in pure anger, with clenched fists, Harry easily catapults him straight up, hard and fast, striking the stone ceiling with a hard THUD, and sticks him there with a sticking charm.

When Draco reenters the common room, he wasn't expecting it to be so chaotic. Everyone in groups, blatantly talking or pointing at either Harry or Khan, who is stuck on the ceiling, limp and bleeding copiously from his head. Walking towards Harry, Draco is certain Khan is out cold and asks, "what happened to him?"

Harry turns to leave the common room as he answers the blonde, "The same thing that happens when a gentle breeze tries to move a mountain."

Draco follows Harry as they make their way to the seventh floor. Envisioning a room to duel in, Harry and Draco enter, finally giving Draco the chance to ask him, "what happened to Hilliard?"
“You should worry more about yourself,” Harry tells him as he moves to the opposite side of the square dueling mat. “First thing's first, we're going to work on your defense. It took me a long time to be able to defend against Voldemort's offense. Just because you shield doesn't mean it's strong enough to handle potent curses and I'm going to come at you with just as much ferocity.”

“I wasn't implying I was worried, but I should know these things,” Draco counters, ignoring the mention of training. “So I know how to act if certain subjects are brought up when you're not around.”

“...He's not comfortable, but he's alive,” Harry answers. “You ready?”

Near midnight, the two exit, Draco slumped and heaving with Nova's healing talons gripping his shoulder, and Harry no different than when he entered the room. Harry doesn't slow his pace as Draco limps along.

“Will it kill you to learn some bloody healing spells?” Draco mouths as they travel the dark and silent corridor.

“What you think just anybody can learn healing magic? It takes a particular mental and magical outlook that doesn't work well with my dark onus.” Turning to wait for Draco, Harry huffs and adds, “but I'll take a look at some of the easy stuff... later, when things settle down some.”

“Or in class when you have nothing to do,” Draco suggests. “It's not like it matters what you learn during that time. You might as well learn a few healing spells so I don't have to go to the infirmary after every training session. I'm sure after a while, people are going to start wondering why I keep getting hurt.”

“I suppose that's better than using any of my potions,” Harry whimsically states.

“Wait you have healing potions! On you right now!” Draco calls out.

“Will you shut up,” Harry tells him as his senses alert him to nearness ahead.

Harry feels a presence nearby as Draco says, “let me have something here, Flamel. It shouldn't hurt
Harry turns to Draco and puts his index to his lips, telling the silver-blond to keep quiet. The moment Harry deduces the sounds are the steps of two professors, one male, the other female, walking towards each other at the juncture ahead, he calculates he has no more than seven seconds before they meet. Understanding that his familiar is resistant to magic, Harry whips around and whispers to Nova, “flame back to my room and stay there. Draco, make your way to the infirmary from there.”

Nova flames away with Draco before the silver-blond can get one word out, and Harry mentally starts the clock. He may have told his avian friend to wait for him but he knows if she doesn’t see him after twenty minutes, she'll promptly flame straight to his location no matter who may be around to witness it, and that's something he'd definitely like to avoid. Harry has enough time to disillusion and silence himself before he's surprised to see Severus Snape and Lily Potter meet at the juncture just ahead. His shock didn't last long as Lily gives Snape a friendly hug, who appears content and accustomed to allow the familiar greeting.

It's the closest Harry has ever been to his mother since she was murdered in his time line—he can already feel his chest cavity constrict against his swelling organs. The only thing harder than never getting to know his mother in his time line, is learning that she abandoned him again in a time line where she lives. Standing before him is a life time of burning questions without answers, eternal wants without gain, and longing love without the time to appreciate it; He's stunted and stalled in the face of her. It's so sudden, but somehow Harry feels like she's the only thought he's ever had. His mind should be clear, should stay rational and alert, but he's senseless, thoughtless and vaguely notes a physiological response in her presence when he feels trails of moisture run down his face.

When Snape steps back, suspiciously looking around the hall, Harry focuses on pulling himself together and raising his occlumency to help him take control of his downhearted melancholy. It's fortunate for him that Lily is one of the few memories Horcrux-Voldemort could never tarnish. He didn't know much of anything about her, so how much could Horcrux-Voldemort really hurt him with her memory if he never cultivated their mother/son connection? Even when Horcrux-Voldemort took her face, or said malicious things about her, it never hurt him because he never knew her. Still, through the years of torture and torment, in his mind, she was a source of reprieve from abuse. Thoughts of her were the precious few places he could escape towards where only minimal pain existed.

And now she's standing in front of him, living, breathing, beautiful.

“So, Severus, how goes your start-of-term woes?” Lily jokingly asks before looking around the corridor for any evidence of unruly students. Harry's chest tightens even more at the sound of her voice and his knees waver to hold his weight. His face is already warm with rushing blush, wet with tears and his dry throat feels clogged.
“The year is already proving to be considerably more taxing than ever before,” Severus answers her in his drawn out tone yet with more levity than Harry is used to hearing from the man, like old friends catching up. They start to slowly check the corridor together room by room, cupboard by cupboard.

Harry moves closer to them, confident the potency of his invisibility and silencing charms will conceal him from even Snape's abilities of detection. Harry finds that he has to actively force himself not to move too close to her as he can't seem to tear his eyes away from her. He can't be sure she won't rush into him due to an unexpected reason.

“It can't be that bad,” Lily returns. “Surely acquiring the gem that is Ares Flamel must feel satisfying even to you.” At the mention of Ares, he recalls that she left this time line's Harry and his anger grows in direct competition with his longing. He can feel it spike within him before he reasserts his control over his emotions.

“Capital,” Severus easily responds, earning a smirk and head-shake from Lily.

“Minnie is so upset about losing the Flamel heir, she's resorted to using some of Pomona's special herbs for a little extra comfort.” Lily states with a smirk, placing her thumb and index to her lips as if holding a cigarette. Harry's eyes bulge at the idea of his strict and rigid, Transfiguration professor, McGonagall smoking special herbs. It's easily the most salacious thing he's ever heard.

“Oh dear me,” Severus coos sarcastically. “How will I ever live with myself cognizant of the part I played in her puffing? The injustice. Shall I turn myself over to the Aurors now, you think?”

With a wide grin Lily smacks his shoulder, telling him, “oh, you stop your silliness. It's her one indiscretion. We're all allowed to have our one thing.”

“Albus had placed no small amount of importance on Mr. Flamel's academic success, considering what it could mean for him and his goals,” Severus answers in a droll tone. “Given his association with the family, the boy's placement in Gryffindor was an easy assumption to make.”

“I've heard good things from the others, Filius in particular is beside himself,” Lily continues. “All of his professors are in an uproar, actually. It's a shame he isn't taking Muggle Studies. I would've liked to have been the professor to one of Hogwarts' most prodigious students.”
“You'll simply have to settle with the title of head of a Noble and Most Ancient House and mother of the Boy-Who-”

“Oh, please don't utter that infernal title in my presence, or I swear I will hurt you,” Lily interjects with authority. Good to know I'm not the only one who hates that bloody title, Harry mentally says, nodding his head. With an uptick of the corners of his lips, like he knows how much she hates it, Snape puts his hands up in lame surrender. “Have you had a chance to speak with Flamel, yet?” she asks, moving away from unpleasantness of her sons moniker.

“I have,” Severus states, poking his head inside a classroom before closing the door.

“And?” Lily murmurs, taking a look in the opposing classroom, finding nothing, then closing the door.

“And... nothing,” Severus tells her, looking ahead.

She turns a suspicious eye directly on him. To Harry, she doesn't seem to buy it as she tilts her head and presses lips to a thin line. “I don't know why you continue to think you can hide anything from me, Severus. Even when we were kids, I could always tell when you were holding something back, now spill.”

“It's not your concern, Lily,” Severus returns.

“Well of course I know that,” Lily agrees. “That doesn't mean you can't tell me, your fellow professor, what an intelligent student of Hogwarts is like. Unless, there's something more complicated involved. Maybe something along the lines of an interested third party, curious about our new student, making you do their bidding.” Severus says nothing so she continues. “Don't think I don't know Albus has a plan for the boy. He's already asked Hardwin to be friendly with him, behind my back no less, and believe you me, I will be having very direct words with him about that.”

“Clearly that friendship didn't work out as he'd hoped,” Severus points out.

“No, it didn't and don't think you're off the hook either,” Lily returns. “Now, spill it. Why'd you pause?”
“I didn't pause-”

Her tone bored and low, she quickly interrupts, “you paused. I know you paused. I heard you pause. You have a tell, so come now, un-clench.”

"Lily!" Severus gasps at her vulgarity.

"Severus!" Lily mocks in good humor.

Severus lets out a long strained sigh. “Very well. I do agree with the general consensus of Mr. Flamel's abilities. He is skilled beyond his years, however, he's also aloof, and far to smug.”

“I think you’re the only one that's described him as smug and aloof,” she quaintly states. “What gave you that impression?”

“As I've said, I've spoken with him, and I gleamed a great deal from our exchange,” Severus tells her. “He isn't at all what I was expecting from an heir of a great house, or even your typical student.”

“How so,” Lily questions analytically.

“Generally you would expect heirs of great houses to be spoiled, obnoxious, out of touch, entitled, adequately educated, with a higher emphasis on business dealings, politics, and or high society.”

“Not all heirs,” Lily whispers loud enough to hear in defense of Hardwin. Snape presses his lips and ignores the comment. “From our conversation I can tell you, Ares Flamel shares none of those traits. He's acutely aware, well spoken, very direct, annoyingly unapologetic, and worst of all, he's far more talented than your typical fourth year. He has all the makings of an arrogant antagonist. You've no doubt heard about my many senior Slytherins visiting the hospital wing a few nights ago?”

“No thanks to you,” Lily lightly throws back. “I swear Severus, as your best friend I often find myself learning about what goes on in your life from others. It's not right, I say.”

“I am busy, Lily,” Severus explains as an excuse. “I'd also go so far as to point out this castle has a severe gossip problem. Why bother repeating myself when you can learn of a thing nearly as fast as it happens?” Harry can easily tell Hogwarts' rumor mill exasperates Snape. It's odd seeing so many
emotional sides of the older man; not enough to be normal, but far more than Harry has personally seen.

“This castle is quite the chatter box,” Lily laughs. “Sound logic, and yes, Poppy did tell me about your injured students—Merlin, fourteen! She was amazed by the charm used and couldn't believe a fourth year had cast it. I'm familiar with the sensory deprivation charm; it's often used to assist diviners, aspiring animagus transformations, as well as certain trauma patients in the Janus Thickery ward at St. Mungo's. How'd it all happen?”

“Ares Flamel is what happened,” Severus easily tells her. “He dueled all twelve older years at the same time and soundly defeated them.”


“He was not,” Snape affirms. “I saw a memory and even I cannot completely explain what he did precisely. I've heard my students say he used magic from his family's grimoire; though at the moment, it's an unconfirmed theory.”

“This is clear proof of what happens when practicing magic goes too far,” Lily argues shaking her head disapprovingly. “For the life of me, I simply can't understand why there's a dueling ring in Slytherin. None of the other houses have one, nor should they. Students need to be monitored when practicing or we risk their safety.”

*Practice? Yeah, right,* Harry mentally snorts. He can easily tell Snape has no qualms about letting her think it was only a practice duel gone wrong.

“Yes, well,” Snape continues. “They must learn from their mistakes. Considering this has been long approved by the Board of Governors, I don't expect Lucius to change it anytime soon,” Severus tells her.

“Then there should be more restrictions,” Lily argues. “Surely a prefect referee for the duels or implement hours of operations. You went to see Albus about this, correct; to show him the memory?” Lily states, not even a hint of question in her tone.

“How did you know?”
“You always go through the antechamber when you're on your way to see Albus, and honestly, when it involves that man, it's the only time you hold back on me.”

“Lily...”

“I know, I know,” she says putting her hands up. “It's Albus, trust Albus, Albus knows all. Believe me, I know. But I'm no fool. I can tell he's interested in Flamel, not that I can completely wrap my head around why. If it's to gain support from Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel, than why not ask them directly? They're old friends after all. And if it's to do with Hardwin, I can't understand why involve Ares Flamel when Hardwin and Ron are nearly inseparable. It's terrible enough to imagine something happening to Ron simply for being friends, let alone risking another student to the dangers in Hardwin's life; not that I foresee a blossoming friendship between a Hardwin and Ares anytime soon.” Again, even though Harry knows he has a brother, just the mention of Hardwin is like he'd forgotten and is reminded all over again. It's so surreal.

Snape takes a moment before stepping closer to Harry's mother. Snape places both hands square on Lily's shoulders and says, “I can't speak of our conversations, Lily, but I will confess Albus is merely curious about the boy, more specifically, his origins.”

“What do you mean?” she asks looking expectantly.

“Don't you find the timing of his sudden appearance suspect, if not, at least odd? Even for their house?”

“No, not particularly,” Lily honestly answers. “Revered as the Flamels may be, they've always been a recluse household. I assume they can hide their child as easily as themselves. I find it more amazing that we even have this opportunity to see them in our lifetime. We've only lived a speck of time compared to them.”

“It's certainly excitable news among the community,” Snape admits. “However that only proves the point. We don't know anything about him. Of all the dangers that can possibly lay ahead, the unexpected and unprepared for are truly the worst affairs to behold. Apparently the existence of the boy came as a complete surprise to Albus and he's been unable to acquire any new details from anyone, let alone Nicolas, which is troubling. Albus is simply doing his due diligence.”

“Why?” Lily questions. “I don't get it. After Bellatrix’s escape from Azkaban last year and her attempts to kill my son ever since, what does the heir of Flamel really matter?”
“Nothing matters more to Albus than protecting your son,” Severus asserts. “With regards to Ares Flamel, the headmaster is simply curious, but I’m certain he won’t rest until the dangers to Hardwin are abated. And neither will I, Lily. You have my word.”

“I know,” she tells him with a heart warming smile. “Truly, I do. I’ve always been able to count on you.”

For the longest fraction of a second, Harry was terrified Severus Snape was going to kiss his mother and that spike of fear must’ve signaled Lily somehow, because she turns around as if sensing something. Harry stands still, looking directly into her cautious green eyes—I do have her eyes, he oddly notes—until Snape asks, “is something wrong?”

“...No,” she responds lightly, turning back to him. “I suppose not.” They separate when Harry senses Nova's agitation—alerting him to the moments before his brilliant arrival. He hears Snape ask, “any word from Remus?” before he soundlessly sprints away from them to the opposite end of the corridor.

Harry strains to hear his mother respond, “No. None, so f...” before he rounds a corner, just in time for Nova to flame brightly right in front of him. Hoping they haven't noticed the flash of light in the dark halls, he grips his phoenix's feet and quickly flames back to his modest bedroom in Slytherin.

In the silence of the room, Harry feels incredibly lackadaisical and just falls backward into his bed. Laying there for quite some time, Harry doesn't know how to absorb all he heard. Simple as their conversation was to understand, he can't get passed the knowledge of hearing his mother speak and laugh, seeing her smile and her mannerisms, taking in the scent of her fragrance, her eyebrows when she arches one, her cheeks when they rise, her vibrant red hair pulled behind her ear, her mouth, and her eyes; Harry memorizes and relives every part of her he witnessed tonight for the entire night and into his dreams. By early morning, he felt like both an expert and novice on the subject of his mother, as well as apprehensively eager for more and less.

With several hours to go before his morning work out with Draco, he decides to flame to the chamber and is greeted by the sweet sound of long, hoarse, breathy groans of a wounded animal. Hammond is exactly where he left him, slick with sweat, rancid with the stench of feces, twitchy and nearly catatonic. Harry raises the chamber's firelight as he walks over to his table. He can distinctly hear the large baby basilisk that claims the chamber as it's home slither quick as a whip towards him.

~Master Asressss!~ Nāga hisses jubilantly. It wraps itself around Harry squeezing him far too tightly.
~ Oh’kay! Nāga! Nāga, down! Down boy!~ Harry hisses as he tries to keep the large serpent from crushing him. After several desperate moments of struggling, Nova takes the initiative to grip Nāga’s body in her strong talons and help unravel Harry. When Nāga begins to play with Nova, Harry is relieved and focuses his attention on Hammond. Harry grabs the second vial from the table and walks over the the stuck boy, who's only able to protest with weak mewling whines. Hammond is too weak to resist Harry when he force-feeds the potion.

“There you go,” Harry tells him. “You'll start to feel better real soon.” Harry moves to Hammond's discarded clothes as the draught counteracts the pain enhancing potion as well as numbs the pain from his injury. Hammond groans loudly in sweet relief as Harry grabs Hammond's Ravenclaw tie then returns to the bound boy. Harry observes him weep and pleads to let him go.

“I crushed your balls but the sack isn't so badly cut where you'd be in any danger of bleeding out,” Harry starts, looking the large splatter of dried blood and semen. He drops the tie on Hammond's chest as he walks over, between his legs.

“Please!” Hammond immediately starts to panic as he frantically attempts to break free. “PLEASE LET ME GOOO!! I'LL NEVER TOUCH HER AGAIN!! I PROMISE, PLEASE!!”

Harry only stares, unflinching and resolute as he points his wand towards his crotch and warns, “I wouldn't move too much if I were you.” Hammond redoubles his futile efforts to escape. Numb to the pain, Hammond can only see instead of feel, when Harry cuts off his scrotum, burns it to a crisp in front of him, and sticks the cleanly cut skin together again.

“In my book, rapists forfeit your right to make babies,” Harry tells him. “That's the first penalty. But, cheer up mate. It was painless and you get to keep the shaft.”

“You cut my balls off,” Hammond repeats as if he can't understand what he's saying or how it happened. “You mutilated me! I'm- I'm permanently disfigured because of you, and you want me to be happy about it! I'm going to fucking kill you! I'm going to take everything you love and destroy it in front of your eyes. You will regret this!”

“Oh, please do fucking try Hilliard,” Harry happily retorts staring maniacally amused into Hammond's eyes. “I relish the thought! Because the moment a piece of rapist shit like you tries to come after me, I get to kill you free and clear. So yeah, be happy because if it was up to me you'd be suffering every possible way I can imagine for years, decades, or at the very least, dead.”
“I didn’t-” Hammond starts before swallowing deeply and crying anew. “I didn't want... oh Godric... Isobel said- she said it was okay.”

“Did Granger say it was okay? Did you ever even hear her when she pleaded no? ...feel her try to push you away when you held her down? I don't think you know what she went through—what you put her through. Which brings us to penalty number two.”

“No, please,” Hammond pleads as Harry grabs the tie from his chest. He looks over at Hammond's penis, and transfigures the tie into a wooden approximation of Hammond's organ. “If you thought having a small penis would ever work out to your benefit, this might've been it. But seven centimeters(3in) doesn't really strike me as punishment so...” Harry elongates the wood phallus to seventeen centimeters(7in). Harry kneels down next to a wrecked and ravaged Hammond. “This isn't going to hurt like last night, but in some ways, it's far worse... and appropriate. Your cock—well, a bigger version—is going to go in your mouth and down your throat until the moment you gag or attempt to swallow, and only then will it come back out. I'll give you half a second to breath before it goes right back down and the cycle will continue over, and over again. And just so you don't choke on your own vomit...”

Harry unsticks him from the stone floor and levitates him to the nearest pillar. He forces Hammond to his knees and sticks his hands, arms, back and feet securely to concrete.

“You're responsible for your own choices. You don't get to blame this person or that person for abusing someone else. You're the one that held her down, not Isobel! 'You know what I like, Granger,’ remember Hilliard? That was you!”

“...Th-Than you sh-shouldn't either,” Hammond weakly reasons.

“As a victim, you certainly have the right to feel that way, but don't forget you created a victim as well, and you didn't listen to her, did you? Instead you opted to indulge in your sick compulsion, forcing yourself on her with no regard for her feelings. Do you know who I am?”

Snot running down his nose and streams of tears escaping his tormented eyes, he slowly answers, “Ares... Flamel.”

“No,” Harry asserts, his gaze as intense as ever. “I'm the person telling you to stop. I'm the person telling you you're wrong. And you're going to listen to me. Do you know why?”
Hammond's mouth opens and closes several times in genuine fear before he states, “because you'll murder me... if I don't.”

Harry shakes his head. “Murder is a term used to describe a type of investigation pursued by the Ministry's DMLE in the event that a corpse is discovered as a result of foul play. 'It looks like murder,' is what they'd say. Which means I can't actually murder you if they can't find your body. And remember, I have a large snake who's always hungry.”

Harry slips his wand into his hand and mutters a Latin incantation to charm the wood phallus to piston on it's own. Harry forces it into Hammond's mouth and a good way down his throat before his prisoner started gagging, then pulled it back out. Harry let go and the large wood replica of Hammond's cock continues to repeat it's trained motion effortlessly, despite Hammond's attempts to move away. By the third time he gags, bile starts to rise and stream down the corners of his widely open mouth. Harry watches him choke and recover, choke and recover for half an hour before he leaves the chamber—much to Nāga's displeasure.

Harry and Draco finish their morning exercise and even race to the Room of Requirement to incorporate weighted resistance into their morning regiment.

“My arms...” Draco whines as they make their way back to the Slytherin common room. “My arms feel like sacks of dead troll.”

“I read it'll feel worse tomorrow,” Harry responds with some drain but not feeling nearly as exasperated as Draco. Unlike Draco, Harry's body is performing at optimum levels because of his mastery of his mindscape and the elixir still coursing through his veins. “You'll need to prepare yourself mentally. As things go on, I'm not going to slow down or stop simply because you're sore or tired. You break, twist, pull, or tear anything, we'll just repair it and keep going, understand?”

Though tired, Draco can still manage to respond with heavy sarcasm, “As my Green Reaper commands.”

Sweaty, tired and late, they enter the common room to a mostly packed room. Draco takes one look at Harry and notices he's not surprised before heading to the gathered fourth years and asking Tracey and Daphne, “what's going on?”

Tracey seems conflicted to answer so Daphne answers in her stead. “It happened again,” she tells the silver-blonde though she spots Harry and gives him a once over before elaborating. “Some of the more stubborn Upper Order members decided to pay the first years a visit last night.”
“Where have you been,” Nott calls excitedly. “Khan, Boyle, Yaroslav, Pucey, Montague and a few others I don't know—basically half of the Upper Order—are stuck right now, and they're fucking naked, mate!” Nott laughs and Crabbe and Goyles chuckle alongside him. It seems the large enforcers have replaced Draco with Nott.

“One of them had an erection, it's so gross,” Tracey adds with a severe grimace, as if she can confirm the finding first hand. “They're getting looked over by Babbling right now. Snape's here too but Dumbledore still hasn't shown up.”

“Some Headmaster,” Parkinson adds her own inane thought. “Shows how much he cares. I'm going to let daddy know just how heartless Dumbledore is when his own students are suffering. Maybe he can talk with the board and get him fired!”

Draco ignores Pansy and asks the group, “If they couldn't get in before what made them think they could get in now?”

Harry hears all he needs to and decides to clean up. Refreshed, Harry and Nova exit his room and happens to find Daphne slowly navigating the halls, confused. Harry sneaks up to her and calmly states, “this is the boys corridor, Daphne.”

Her shoulders tense and her spine straightens is the only indication that he caught her unaware. She turns around to a smirking Ares with Nova on his shoulder. “I was trying to find your room, but for the life of me I can't seem to remember where it is. I'm certain it's with the other fourth year rooms, though.”

“You were looking for me?” Harry interrupts. “If it's about sending a letter to my parents I did, last night. I'll let you know what they say.”

“I, well, thank you, but that's not why I was looking for you,” she tells him as she gives Nova a small curtsy.

“Oh?” Harry responds, taking a forbidden moment to enjoy the sight of her lowering herself for a moment.

“Hammond Hilliard,” she asserts, returning her attention to him. After wandlessly casting a quick muffliato, Harry does little more than raise his eyebrows in place of asking, 'what about him?"
“What did you do to him? I have sources that say he never made it to his common room last night. They want to know if I knew what happened to him.” Again Harry doesn't say anything, prompting her to ask, “well?”

“Well, what?” Harry asks, looking deep into the crystal blue of her concerned eyes. “What do you want to hear Daphne? That he's fine, that he's dead, that I had nothing to do with anything? What would you feel comfortable knowing?”

“The truth,” Daphne retorts. “I'm Slytherin and an heiress who will one day inherit my family's business—the legal parts and the not so legal parts. You don't think I'm capable of bearing bad news or hard truths? I need to know because you're jeopardizing my network. If any of my sources start to feel sharing information with me might lead to the harm of others, than they won't continue to do so, will they?”

Harry quickly sees her perspective, asking, “So you need something to tell them? Your sources?”

“I'd like for you to trust me enough to tell me the truth,” she returns. “But if you can give me something sensible or factual to assuage my sources, that would be helpful.”

Harry visually takes her in and reassesses his opinion of her, taking no more than a moment to realize she's made of tougher stuff than your typical Slytherin. A smirk extends her lips as her eyes droop seductively. She straightens her posture and somehow amplifies the attention of her ample bust. Suddenly the form fitting black cardigan with silver accents, her Slytherin color tie and plaid skirt seems more enticing than before. “Reconsidering your decision to have an affectionate friend like me, Ares?”

Even her tone is unexpectedly more flirtatious, but Harry shakes his head in answer and to clear his hormone riddled mind. “Tell your sources you're not sure what happened to him but you heard he might be around by dinner.”

Turning a bit side faced to pageant her profile she nonchalantly asks, “And will he? It wouldn't do if I was labeled a liar.”

He says nothing as his eyes are enough to express, 'trust.' At her smile, Harry steps around her to join the others in the common room when Daphne calls to him. He turns to her, who looks very much like a temptation his mind is warning his body not to fall for, and she tells him, “I asked Tracey if I could bring a date to the wedding.” She walks beguilingly past Harry, her palms behind her back, accentuating her figure as she ends her coy remark with, “if you're interested in knowing what she said, you're always welcome to ask me.”
Left alone in the corridor, Harry starts to realize what a tremendous nuisance teenage hormones are—he doesn't remember feeling this much during his own time line. Happy to compartmentalize certain rebellious urges, Harry joins the others in the common room. Blaise eyes Daphne and Harry suspiciously, much to his annoyance and he ignores the back and forth theories shared between, Nott, Parkinson, the Carrows and anyone else around them until Draco resurfaces from his room.

“Any change?” Draco asks. He's about to get a response from Tracey when Dumbledore walks into the common room, leading in William Weasley. *Bill,* Harry mentally calls as the tall red head turns his gaze all around the room, taking in the ornate green and dark brown of the plush chamber, likely never having entered the Slytherin common room before. Harry's very happy to see him, as with many other familiar faces in this time line, alive and well. *He looks strong,* Harry thinks as they make their way to the first year corridor.

“Who's that,” Nott asks.

“Freakish red hair like that, no doubt a Weasley,” Parkinson adds with derision.

“That's the heir of the Ancient House of Weasley,” Daphne answers. “Though not nobles, they're still an important family. I'm certain his name is William.”

“I met him once visiting Auntie Lily,” Tracey adds. “I remember she said he's a curse breaker for Gringotts. Could be why he's here.”

“You reckon he can break the wards on the first year rooms,” Nott with hopeful longing. “Because those manky first years are acting so smug it's making me sick. I might even help the Upper Order break 'em in a bit just to set 'em right.”

_No, no,* Harry thinks as he turns to Nott and stares intently as he asks, “Care to repeat that for me Nott?”*

Sensing the extreme pressure from his kill-me green eyes, Nott back peddles and stumbles through an explanation. “No- Not that I want to join them, obviously. I'm not looking to attack you or anything, mate. It's just, well you know, those first years are all... happy, like they've earned it, when it's clear they haven't. This is Slytherin! It's not right.” Harry keeps his gaze fierce and intense. “They just need to learn is all I'm saying.”
“They are learning,” Draco intercepts. Harry notices Snape, Dumbledore, Babbling and Bill walk out of the corridor, but deliberate among themselves instead of with the crowd of rapt Slytherin.

“And what’s that,” Zabini intently asks, critical of the importance of an answer. Harry enhances his hearing in hopes of snagging any bits of information from Bill or the others, but picks up only buzzing, telling him that they’ve taken to protecting their conversation.

“You’re a smart guy Blaise,” Malfoy responds. “Isn’t it obvious?” The group awaits a moment before Draco then points to the first year corridor. “You want to be like them, you're going to end up like them.”

“And you're going to be the one to teach em, eh Malfoy?” states an older boy Harry recalls as one of the Upper Order. Gosforth... Damon, Harry thinks, recalling a few shouting his name during the duel. He has an arm possessively around the shoulder of a girl, Ella Wilkins. “Khan said one of you might know something, to keep our eyes peeled and low and behold, he was right. It's all too clear who it is now, isn't it?”

“It wasn't Draco,” Pansy asserts defensively. “He wouldn't have anything to do with going against the Order! Why would he when he'll definitely be a member as early as next year?”

“Pansy,” Draco calls in a low and threatening tone. “Don't talk for me... ever.” She reacts like she's been stabbed in the chest.

“Yeah Pansy,” Gosforth mouths with a deviant smirk. “Keep you trap shut and let the boy do his own talking.”

“Think whatever you want Gosforth,” Draco starts. “Run back to your owner and tell Khan whatever you like. This is never going to be settled with words alone, but I'll warn you nonetheless. The law of retaliation may be an eye for an eye, but that's the best way to ensure the world goes blind, stays deaf and acts dumb. You ought to really think about what you're doing and why, because if it doesn't end well for you, you'll have no one but yourself to blame.”

Such an open-ended and well reasoned threat certainly wasn't what many were expecting Draco to say—Tracey and Pansy in particular seem surprised—but unlike them, Harry knows the silver-blondie is thinking about his son and the world he would've liked to create for him instead of the world he did create. Clearly killing everyone isn't the answer for him but at such an early stage, Harry's sure these bullies and their enforced hierarchy won't understand the words until they've met the fist.
It’s a bit tense between Draco and Gosforth—who looks like just the right type of idiot to start a duel in front of a professor, the head of Slytherin House and the Headmaster of Hogwarts—when quite suddenly and nearly as unexpectedly, a loud male moan of pleasure rings loudly throughout the entire common room, rendering everyone to stunned silence. Everyone mature enough to understand that sound is quickly in denial, eyes wide, ears alert and perfectly still, unable to grasp the source and unwilling to describe it.

*SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, SLAP,* “Mnnnnn,” a male voice rings distinctly throughout the room again, like the melody to the percussion of fleshy meat slapping against fleshy meat. “Yes, Albus! Oh yes!” the delighted voice that sounds nearly identical to Severus Snape exclaims. “Keep fucking my ass! Ahhnn, Yessshhh! Just like that Albus! Just! Like! That!”

*SLAP, SLAP, SLAP.* “I love fucking your ass, Severus,” an airy, older voice that’s clearly Albus Dumbledore exclaims. “Your ass is the greatest joy in my miserable old life, I can’t wait to suck on your cock next!”

The relentless, moist smacking sounds is almost as visual as the two men standing before the entirety of Slytherin and inspires uncomfortable and stomach turning imagery. Dumbledore holds it together well, but Snape is visibly shaking with rage and his black eyes are so murderous, no one in his line of sight dares to laugh. Though there are broad, restrained smiles or queasy looks spread throughout the Slytherins, Harry notices the younger years shocked fearful faces as they huddle together and stepping away from the stoic Headmaster and a fuming Snape. Bill is redder than usual, eyes tightly closed and clearly holding in his laughter by covering his mouth with both hands to keep it together. Babbling looks extremely embarrassed, blushing a deep shade of red down to her neck and unsure of what to do with her hands. She clearly can’t look at either the headmaster or the head of Slytherin.

The nearly endless seven seconds of loud, intense audio intercourse between Snape and Dumbledore comes to an end with audio-Snape yelling out, “CUMMINNNNNNGGGG-”

Then there’s only an abrupt cut to silence. It’s so silent Harry can hear someone who must have a vivid imagination dry heaving somewhere in the room. Screaming erupts soon after, crying and wailing emanating from the first year corridor. Nobody assist the rushing Upper Order as they tumble out of the hall in a hurry, holding their private bits—some actually sporting shiny coated erections. When the older bullies see Dumbledore and Snape standing next to each other, some—Khan among them—immediately throw up white or yellow bile as the others wail and flee the other way.

Seemingly far too enraged to be of any use, Snape decides to leave, black robe billowing behind him, and without uttering a word. Dumbledore clears his throat for an announcement and the
slinkering or hushed laughter dies down. “If anyone has any relevant information concerning these wards please see myself, Professor Babbling, or Professor Snape. Otherwise, I suggest we all adjourn to the Great Hall to enjoy breakfast.” Harry easily notes there's less grandfatherly tone and more strain.

“Breakfast? Not bloody likely,” Draco murmurs to Harry, still, loud enough for the fourth years to laugh. “You'd have to have a stomach like a steal trap to hold down any food after hearing that?” Harry can't help the smallest of smiles to don his face.

Dumbledore says something quickly to Bill and Babbling that Harry couldn't hear, then promptly leaves. There's a great boom of laughter and or disgust in the wake of his departure that Harry doesn't stay to partake in. He didn't know Bill as well as he did Ron but he's still a reminder of a blood filled past Harry would rather not think about, so he makes his way to the Great Hall, Nova on his shoulder, Draco right beside him and other highly amused fourth years trailing behind.

Entering the already full Hall, Harry's primary attention is not on Dumbledore and Snape's absence as Nova flies over to Hermione and Luna, or the small group of the Baeuxbaton delegation seated together—Fleur among them—with several delighted Ravenclaw boys around them, but with the snickering group of Ravenclaw girls Harry immediately recognizes as Isobel MacDougal, Qarina Bagnold, and Nimue Desford. Harry walks over to Luna and Hermione and quickly spots they're wearing mouth masks with an image of a phoenix on it, but have a knife and fork stuck in each hand. Nova is visibly concerned for the girls as Harry flicks his wrist for his wand and wordlessly dispels the hexes as he passes them. Stopping only when he's right in front of Isobel, who seems annoyed when Hermione and Luna are free of her hex. Harry is ready to do far worse in public than he should and anger barely begins to describe the expression on his face as he glares at the slightly taller older girls.

“What's it going to take for you to leave them alone?” Harry tells them, still looking very agitated. “You know who I am, my last name and what that means. Don't answer me now, but think about what it'll take and let me know after dinner.”

Harry turns and walks to both girls, asking, “you alright?”

“Quite well now thank you,” Luna lightly states. “I wasn't looking forward to going about my day with ever-wet undergarments. It's not quite as fun when everyone thinks you've wet yourself. If you'll excuse me.” It didn't take Harry longer than a nanosecond to understand that they must be wearing cursed undergarments that are charmed to always be wet.

Hermione stands up as well, though slowly and more embarrassed. Isobel and her friends laugh loud enough for Hermione's benefit, but his best friend ignores them. “Thank you,” she tells Harry but stands still obviously conflicted to say more. After a moment, she says, “you.... are
incomprehensible to my natural inclinations.”

Harry takes a second to consider his response before stating, “with your intellect, I suspect that won't be the case for long.”

“...Thank you— again, I mean,” she says as she starts walking away. “If you'll excuse me.”

Harry calls out to her, “see you in class.”

He gives the bullies one last look before returning to the Slytherin table. In unexpected show of emotion, Zabini seems like he can't wait to ask, “what's up with you and Granger? Is she your type or something?”

Harry ignores him and the resulting haughty conversation about house allegiance. The day progresses as expected with a noteworthy announcement made before lunch by Deputy Headmistress McGonagall asking anyone with information on Hammond Hilliard, to please see a professor. Harry heard the murmurs ripple throughout the room and weathered Daphne's nervous eye well enough until dinner, when Hammond finally makes his appearance.

Harry flames into the Chamber to the worst sound of gagging and groaning, and the worst smell of stale bile and vomit. After giving Nāga a magically enlarged rat as a treat to chase and eat, Harry clears away the dried vomit from the floor and only the floor—the vomit on Hammond, stays on Hammond. The Ravenclaw's eyes look dead, hopeless and the rims are so read and puffy, Harry wondered if he started crying blood. The wood phallus goes in easily, some spray of bile gurgles up but nothing more than that. No reaction, no fight, no spirit.

“Congratulations, Hammond,” Harry starts, taking hold of the saliva and bile coated phallus and throwing it to the side. “You've survived. There is one final penalty you must undergo before I let you go.” He gets no response from the stagnant Hammond as Harry walks over to the table and grabs the last vile with a clear liquid inside. He easily pours the contents of the vile down his captives slack jawed mouth.

“There you are,” Harry whips out his wand. “This one won't hurt you physically but it'll be long lasting. Personally, I think this is the best penalty.” Harry starts to enchant as he aims his wand at Hammond's chest. For the next twenty minutes Harry enchants ugly and uneven script to an immobile Hammond's chest. Not unlike a tattoo, in bold and fluid letters, it reads 'I'M A SICK RAPIST,’ on Hammond's chest.
Harry finally releases Hilliard from his magical bonds and he immediately drops to the floor. Harry gets his clothes and simply ties it around the older boy's waist, though not in any way that truly hides the boy's nudity. Harry slaps Hammond's face a few times until some life comes back into his eyes. At the sight of Harry, he immediately starts welling up, as if he only just recognized Ares was back.

~Nāga.~ Harry hisses and the snakes slithers over. The large snake asks, ~¿More fear Master?~ to which Harry responds ~Yes, Nāga, more fear.~

“Hammond,” Harry starts as the large snake slithers and begins to slowly wrap itself around Hammond. “What have we learned here?”

“I,” Hammond starts and stops as his voice sound depressed or nudged in such a way as to make it uncomfortable to talk. He's eyeing the large snake as he struggles to say, “I... won't... touch... her... ever... again.”

“Why, Hammond,” Harry asks. “Why won't you touch her again?”

“Because... it's wrong. I... was wrong. And- And because... you'll hurt me.”

“What if you only see it happen right in front of you, but you're not involved?”

“Than... I'll... stop it. I swear.”

“Good. Very good. Now, you have an intent based dark mark on you. It won't disappear easily, and forewarning, every time you get excited about a girl, every time you pop a stiffy, that mark that I've enchanted on your body will move right up to your face, and the words 'I'm A Sick Rapist' will be visible for all to see—at least for an hour or so. Do you understand me, Hammond?” The boy nods his head emphatically.

“People are going to ask you were you've been and you're going to feel safe with them. You might even be tempted to tell them what you know. Should that ever be the case, remember two things. First, my family has more reach than any safety you think they can give you, and two, I won't care about you anymore than you make me. Say nothing to anyone and nothing more will happen to you. Talk and we'll pick this up right where we left off, understand?”
Hammond is nodding his head throughout the entire threat, adding when he finally can, “I swear... I won't say... anything.”

“I know, Hammond. I know,” Harry answers as he helps him to his feet and Nova lands on Harry's shoulder. They're just about to depart when Hammond asks, “you said... won't disappear... easily?”

“I truly only care about my friend,” Harry tells him. “If you hadn't of touched her, you wouldn't be here. To her cores, she believes in a better way... she believes in redemption and gives people second chances, so I'll give you one... only one. In the distant future, if you ever truly repent, in mind, body, soul, and magic, the curse'll disappear.” The boy only nods. Before they leave, Harry adds, “but if you ever touch her or anyone else again in a manner they don't approve of, we're going to do this my way, and I promise you you won't survive it.”

After they flame out of the chamber, Harry enters the Great Hall along with every other student. He sits down and again, Dumbledore and Snape are absent but Bill is present, sitting with his exuberant family at the Gryffindor table. Without the other delegations present, dinner is under way but before everyone begins to eat, McGonagall again addresses the hall.

“Before we enjoy our meal, I'd like to once again remind everyone that we need to speak with Mr. Hammond Hilliard. If you see Mr. Hilliard please direct him toward any of the faculty.”

She takes her seat, and it isn't until Faux-Moody shows up late to dinner—as he always does—that Harry's test proves his theory. Limping into the hall, his magical eye immediately swivels to the invisible floating object above Ravenclaw table. Faux-Moody immediately draws his wand and yells, “finite incantatem!” disenchanting Hammond, proving what Harry had guessed—the magical eye can see through his disillusionment charm, which means he can't rely on that to catch him by surprise. Hilliard drops from where he was being levitated, landing hard on the table top before Ravenclaw witches Isobel, Qarinah, and Nimue. The vile strapped to Hammond's back breaks on impact and tentacles of white smoke streak out and high for all to see. The smoke turns into blazing fire, and soon form angry words of warning.

Shocked gasps spread wide and fast, immediately followed by screams and shrieks. Chaos erupts in the hall as the students rush away from the mostly naked boy on the table while the faculty close in on the injured and catatonic student. McGonagall and Flitwick rush him out of the room, the rumor mill in full force as the news has likely spread to Hogsmeade by now. A flash alerts Harry that a camera went off, likely Colin Creevey, capturing the flaming warning high in the Great Hall for all to read.

TO THOSE WHO INFLICT ABUSE,

YOU WILL NOT BE LECTURED,
YOU WILL NOT HAVE POINTS TAKEN,
YOU WILL SERVE NO DETENTION,
YOU WILL ONLY BLEED.
FOR I AM THE EDGE,
CROSS ME, AND YOU WILL FALL.

Harry simply carries on eating his meal throughout the entire commotion, all under the calculating eye of Daphne Greengrass and Hermione Granger.

Chapter End Notes

I enjoyed writing this chapter a lot, especially getting to write Lily and Harry's reaction to her.

The torture stuff was a bit unnerving for me but I figure, for the story and the character arch, don't be afraid to show ugly things. The world isn't always sunshine and rainbows, you know?

If any of you actually picture Dumbledore reaming Snape... my job is complete, lol. J/K

Please, I welcome all constructive thoughts and opinions :)

Thanks for reading!
When It Rains...

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of what happened to Hammond and the Upper Order has nothing on the misery of this day.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I hope everyone had a pleasant week!

I enjoyed writing many aspects of this chapter and I hope you all get a kick out of it too!

I wouldn't say a lot happens per se, but it's 12K of the best that I can write it :D

Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What did you do to him?” Daphne asked.

Harry is in the Owlery petting Hedwig when Daphne had entered. He starts walking down the circular steps as he says, “Such an open ended question, Daphne. I couldn't possibly know what you mean.”

Daphne ignores his verbal shrug and continues, “Not that it matters, really. It only occurred to me to tell you if you're not more careful, it won't be hard at all to put two and two together, no matter how little proof you may have left.”

“If you're worried about others learning where I got my information, don't. I won't say anything, because there's nothing to say, let alone having to mention you. You have my word,” Harry commits aloud.

“I wasn't worried,” Daphne returns.
“Yes you were,” Harry states. “You be an idiot not to, and you don't strike me as idiotic.”

“And what about you?” she asks, moving past his offhanded compliment. “I expect you took precautions; to make certain it doesn't fall back on you?”

“I suppose I could tell you, 'I gave him a little something,' but in the interest of setting your mind at ease... You may or may not know throughout the centuries, there have been a lot of ground breaking advances in the field of memory alterations, starting with, of course Mnemone-”

“Radford,” Daphne interjects. “A witch, the very first to develop charms to modify memory. Before her we had to rely on potions in order to keep our society secret from the muggle world. Her breakthrough charms were efficient and invaluable. Of course I know. Look at who you're talking to,” she answers with unexacting sass.

“Good,” Harry says with a smirk, momentarily recalling what it's like to speak with an intellect on Hermione's level. “Then you may also know that some hundred years before the memory charm, forgetfulness potions and drafts were mostly weak or ineffective, until a wizard by the name of Ameles Potamos discovered the key ingredient to make the current forgetfulness potions so incredibly potent: water collected from the river Lethe. Ameles researched this ingredient with a friend he knew at the time, Nicolas Flamel. So, when I say it's unquestionable that Hilliard will remember his punishment but mask his perpetrator's face and voice, you can count on it.”

Harry walks outside to the darkening sky with his snowy owl and gives her a stack of string-ribboned letters. “To the Flamels, Hedwig.”

Having followed him outside, Daphne continues to say, “You still ought to be less brazen with your... retribution. There may not be any proof but that's hardly mattered before. Potions aside, you must also consider the human element. Against our Board or in the Ministry itself, there have been many instances where just the appearance of motive is enough to find you guilty, convict you with a fine, political subjugation or be sent to Azkaban. And there's bound to be an investigation on Hilliard. I'm certain this will be pursued though all the official channels, and you may not like where it ends.”

“All of that is as trivial to me as the Upper Order and I have far more important things to worry about,” Harry tells her.

Daphne steps forward, tilting her head and staring deeply into his eyes as she sensually asks, “such as?”
Harry is acutely more aware of her feminine figure, the length of her slender neck and the smooth way it curves into her trapezius. Deciding hormones are a curse and physically more impassioned he may be, Harry is harder to sway when it comes to his mission to kill Voldemort, so he only answers her with, "such as getting a good night's rest. Good night Daphne."

While the calamity surrounding Hammond Hilliard was the talk of the school, the rest of the week passed by with little event. The only highlights being the Upper Order attacking Draco instead of Ares. The Malfoy heir did well against his seven attackers but still ended up in the infirmary along with them. Instead of coming to Draco's defense, Harry stood by and watched, deciding instead to let Malfoy sharpen his skill with the wet stone that is the dwindling Upper Order. He shared his decision to let the Malfoy heir handle his own battles with the blonde by his hospital bed. If he happens to get hurt, caught and embarrassed, that's on him, because Harry will not rescue him from children. Draco is not surprised to here it and to his credit, he's more than fine with the arrangement.

Another point of the week came from Daphne's network. When she got wind that other houses learned about his How-To for phoenix hatching and owning, he couldn't resist placing charmed lines underneath all the benches in the Great Hall. There were so many students who had crushed egg dripping down their faces, Dumbledore had to make an official announcement to inform everyone to stop sticking eggs to the tops of their heads. He explains to his students, as an owner of a phoenix, "sticking an egg on the top of one's head will not give birth to one." The knowledge that Harry managed to prank both Fred and George was the highlight of his first week in his return to Hogwarts.

And then Saturday dawned.

While Draco is taking an evaluation test to determine whether he can join his year mates in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, Harry is following Snape up the Headmaster's tower. He shouldn't be surprised. This meeting was bound to happen at some point if not for what he learned from Snape and Lily's conversation, or his alleged involvement with the Upper Order, than simply for being Nicolas and Perenelle's heir.

"Liquorice Arachnid Legs," Snape states and the Gargoyle opens to allow them entry.

Walking into the Headmaster's large circular office to the oddest little sounds coming from a number of curious silver tracking instruments, Harry isn't as amazed by Dumbledore's office as he was when he was younger—seemingly a life time ago—nor is he in awe of the old man seated behind his ornate wood desk. The room is occupied by Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall, which doesn't concern Harry in the slightest but if McGonagall stays, it does tell him Slytherin
business is probably not on the agenda. McGonagall takes her place beside Dumbledore and Snape leans against a bookshelf on the left side of the room.

Before anything else, Harry walks over to Fawkes on his stand and says, “hello,” giving the older phoenix a playful rub of it’s long neck. “I wouldn't have mind seeing you a few nights ago,” Harry lightly says to the elder phoenix. He turns to Nova and asks, “Reckon you'd like to meet Fawkes, Nova? You are related after all.” Nova takes one look from Harry to the large red phoenix and hops off Harry's shoulder to the second branch of the bird stand. They trill softly to one another as Harry moves back towards the professors.

“Ares, my boy, please have a seat,” Dumbledore starts gesturing to the empty seat ahead of his desk.

“Albus, you old man, how are you?” Harry returns chum like, taking a seat.

“Mr. Flamel,” McGonagall exclaims aghast. “You will do well to remember your manners in etiquette and address the headmaster by his proper title or professor, promptly followed by his surname. Do I make myself clear,” McGonagall asserts with all the sternness in her authority.

“Certainly, professor,” Harry starts, not at all sounding sorry. “I simply followed the Headmaster's example and assumed that a casual greeting of my own is implied, if not encouraged.”

“It most certainly is not-” McGonagall starts.

“It’s quite alright, Minerva,” Dumbledore states with a genial smile. “Would you care for a lemon drop?” Harry declines with a palm up, before the headmaster continues. “Mr. Flamel, I'd first like to say, welcome to Hogwart's and apologies for not having the chance to meet with you sooner.”

“No apologies necessary, professor,” Harry states. “I wasn't expecting to meet you at all if I'm being honest. Is it normal for students to have an exclusive meeting with the Headmaster, the Deputy Headmistress and one's head of house?”

“We make a valiant effort to meet as many students as we can,” Dumbledore easily replies.

“I see,” Harry replies as he gets more comfortable in his seat. “May I ask why I'm here?”
“Of course. I must express my bafflement. You are more gifted than Nicolas led me to believe. I have received a number of reports from your professors,” Dumbledore looks over to Snape a moment before continuing, “the majority have all been glowing. Some members of the faculty have even questioned whether it would not be more prudent to advance you to a level they could then offer you a more appropriate challenge.”

“What level is that?” Harry asks, not at all expecting a conversation like this. Maybe that's the point, the paranoia in his head that sees dangers everywhere answers.

“Sixth year,” McGonagall answers.

“Are you offering me the chance to move ahead?” Harry reiterates for clarity.

McGonagall nods her head as she makes a very clear point to say, “you must, of course, take your OWLs. That's Ordinary Wizarding Levels, in case you were not aware. We don't expect you'll face much difficulty there, but you must understand that should you gain unsatisfactory test results, we cannot allow you to advance.”

“We are placing a great amount of faith in only a week's worth of witnessing your abilities, despite my objections,” Snape takes the lead, though Harry doesn't turn around to pay him respectful attention. “You should consider it an honor to even be presented with this level of advancement, as it's only been offered a hand full of times since the birth of this great institution.”

“As you might tell,” Dumbledore assuages with a grandfatherly smile. “We are all taking this very seriously, and so should you. Come now, this isn't the time to be speechless. What say you?”

“Thank you, but no. I'd rather not,” Harry flatly puts out quick enough to draw a second's long pause from the professors. Harry can't see Snapes reaction and while Dumbledore seems more calculated, McGonagall's jaw droops a tiny bit in genuine shock.

“I beg your pardon,” McGonagall responds recovering her stern demeanor. “Are you... rejecting this great honor?”

“Yes,” Harry answers her, offering no further explanation.
“A wise choice,” Snape bemoans in a manner that certainly doesn’t sound like a compliment.

“There is nothing of notable importance that has to change if you would not like it to,” Dumbledore calmly relays. “You are more than welcome to stay in the same dorm room, eat and associate with your current friends; the only difference will be your classroom and the difficulty of the course work.”

“Moving to the sixth year corridor or who I sit with during meals has nothing to do with my decision,” Harry tells Dumbledore, who deliberates a moment as McGonagall states her reasoning.

“Surely you can see this would be in everyone’s best interest,” she says. “It’s evident the fourth year curriculum is no challenge for you magically or intellectually. Why not join a group of students on the same educational level as you?”

*The teachers aren't even on the same educational level as me,* Harry mentally muses.

“Would this have anything to do with your foster parents,” Dumbledore interjects softly. “Do you believe Nicolas and Perenelle would not approve?”

*Foster? ...He's fishing,* Harry thinks, then answers, “No, Headmaster. They'd support any decision I make.”

“And would you be so kind as to indulge us as to the reason you would spurn our humble offer,” Snape challenges from where he leans.

“The primary reason for my being here isn’t the education offered,” Harry tells the room. “I wasn’t expecting much of a challenge to begin with and can learn on my own easily enough. It’s just as Nicolas informed you, Headmaster. They wanted me to cultivate relationships with others my own age since the one-of-it's-kind, life sustaining stone they entrusted to you was destroyed in your care. So, in the event of their eventual passing, they’ll feel better knowing I won't be quite so alone.”

“Are you saying you have no other family?” Dumbledore asks, breezing through his culpability for the destruction of the philosopher's stone. “What of your biological family? Surely, you have extended blood relatives that you might turn to in an hour of need.”
Internally, Harry rolls his eyes but answers nevertheless, “couldn't say one way or another, Headmaster. I've been alone for most of my life, until I came across the Flamels of course. But even if I did have other family out there, I don't need them any more than they needed me.”

“Should that be the case, surely the knowledge of who they are is enough of a reason to search them out,” Dumbledore reasons. “If you like, I can make discreet inquires on your behalf and should you ever decide to finally have answers to those questions, we can discuss them however you feel most comfortable. Hows that sound?”

“Generous, but I'll decline, thank you,” Harry easily answers. “If I can help it, I don't outsource answers to my questions any more than I outsource solutions to my problems. So your assistance, while appreciated, won't be necessary.”

“Again—” Snape starts to say at the same moment McGonagall speaks, so he yields to her. “Your problems,” she points out. “And what problems might those be?”

Harry catches Dumbledore spy Snape before turning to McGonagall and lamenting, “Well, my dear Minerva. It doesn't seem like Mr. Flamel is interested in advancing ahead, which is of course his right. If you'll excuse us, I do have some matters of a personal nature I'd like to discuss with him.”

“If possible, Headmaster,” Snape starts. “I'd like to remain and discuss a few Slytherin affairs.”

Harry can't tell if Snape is looking at the Deputy Headmistress, but she's certainly looking at the dark-eyed potions master. McGonagall takes a moment to ruminate about her sudden dismissal, before reverting to her duty, nodding to Headmaster Dumbledore, then exiting the circular office.

When it's just the three of them, Dumbledore gives voice to presumption. “Might I hazard a guess and say these problems you speak of are related to a group of troubled Slytherin students?”

“Troubled?” Harry singles out aloud, internally incredulous.

“Yes,” Dumbledore maintains. “Do you not believe that those who act out tend to be the most troubled? I can tell you, in my many years as an educator, I've come to find that many students who act out aggressively, verbally or magically tend to do so as a means of compensating for personal insecurities, low-self esteem, excessive exposure to violence at home, or complicated situations among the parents.”
“Maybe, maybe not, Headmaster,” Harry marginally agrees. “I just don't have it in me to play the victim simply because some simple bloke with an itchy wand is out of touch with his emotions.”

Dumbledore nods as he strokes his long white beard. “I've also come to learn a zero tolerance approach is counter productive to properly developing a troubled student's compassion towards their fellow wizard. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say you never had a meaningful conversation with any of the troubled students that have given you a hard time, have you? It's a cry for help, Mr. Flamel, and we should show them our compassion if we ever expect them to reciprocate it in return.”

Harry isn't enthusiastic about engaging in more conversation than needed to ease the old man's curiosity about him, but he's finding it very hard not dispute with the sage old wizard. It's almost like Dumbledore doesn't see a difference between bullies that are just starving for attention, and wizards who are violent monsters intent on inciting chaos for the pure joy of it. He just lumps them all together like they're one in the same and in need of the same discipline. In Harry's mind there are just some wizards who can't be made to see the light, no matter how much compassion you show them.

Keeping with his rather aloof demeanor, Harry states, “Well, I'm not an educator but even I can see if you coddle bullies, that's no different than giving them your blessing to continue their behavior. Young as I am, I can only imagine the more you reinforce that the bully is the one with the power to invoke change, the more you empower them to carry on their dominance over whomever they see as weak. Why would they want to stop doing what they're doing if you, the authority, are the ones telling them they are the ones with the power to do, or not do? If anything, you're making the idea of getting away with abusing others more thrilling and attractive to them. I'd wonder if your approach isn't more detrimental to the reform you're hoping for, professor.”

“...Is that what you believe,” Dumbledore questions with the smallest of strain in his voice. Harry has to admit, the old man really knows how to hide what he thinks or feels. “And have you considered any solutions for your opinion.”

“Not so much, no,” Harry tells him. “This is all so new to me and I've only been an institutional student for a little over a week after all, but, there was an interesting perspective witnessed by the school a few nights ago that might have some merit.”

“The night of Mr. Hilliard's unfortunate ordeal?” Dumbledore recognizes aloud. Harry nods and Dumbledore asks, “and what perspective would that be?”

“It's only natural not to want to cross the ledge of a cliff, for fear of falling to your death,” Harry answers. “I'd imagine bullies would think twice about their behavior if the prospect of abusing others was as unattractive to them as committing suicide.”
“That's...” Dumbledore starts, taking a moment to consider his words. “A disturbing approach, if
you don't mind my saying.”

“Well, whoever did that to Hillard must be disturbed,” Harry easily agrees with the Headmaster.

“Hilliard,” Dumbledore corrects.

“Of course,” Harry feigns the blunder. “Hilliard.”

“Don't you feel your approach to dealing with some of Slytherin's more troubled students is
disturbing in it's own right?” Snape asks, finally stepping into view, exactly where McGonagall
stood, his dark eyes trying to burn holes into Harry.

Harry turns to him, failing to feel intimidated and answers, “not at all. But since you're bringing
that up, what are you planning on doing to punish them for attacking me and have you spoken with
my parents about this?”

Dumbledore and Snape share a look for a moment before Dumbledore says, “As you were never
injured in these unauthorized practice duels, and don't seem particularly offended, we felt it didn't
warrant notifying your guardians. However since many of the injured students are claiming you
enforced excessive and undue violence on them as well as destroyed their personal property, we've
decided to have a word with you instead.”

“Me,” Harry questions curiously. “Why speak to me about their misbehavior?”

“Clearly, institutional education is difficult for you to grasp,” Snape adds in his naturally slow and
deep tone. “Compromise is the corner stone of diplomacy. Everyone must make the
accommodations necessary so no one group can be allowed to have everything their way—that
only leads to disorder. These troubled students have been punished for their misguided acts, but for
your part, you did not handle the situation properly. As such, you are also subject to strict
guidance. Moving forward, I expect you to report any and all conflict or disputes you encounter to
me, your head of house, so that I can properly deal with the situation. Do I make myself clear?”

Dumbledore hops on Harry's cue to answer by adding, “we'll be giving you a warning this time,
Mr. Flamel, under the provision that you apologize to your seniors, shake hands to show no hard
feelings, and of course, it's only fair you purchase new wands for those you destroyed. Then we
can put all this unpleasantness behind us.”

*No, no, no, no, no,* Harry automatically thinks. “Are they here now,” Harry asks, looking around for Khan and the other Upper Order members. “Or outside the doors?”

“They are not,” Dumbledore says. “But it wouldn't be any trouble at all to have them join us. I can set the tea out so we may work through this like young adults.”

“Don't bother,” Harry returns. “I was only asking because I wouldn't mind saying it to their faces. I have no intention of apologizing to any of them, shaking their hands or buying them new wands since I didn't do anything to warrant apologizing, I don't want to touch them, and I'm fairly certain they'll just turn around and use the new wands I paid for on me.”

“How dare you be so arrogant as to oppose your headmaster's mandate,” Snape snaps. “If it was up to me, you would most certainly be expelled; possibly brought up on charges.”

Dumbledore suggests, “be reasonable, Mr. Flamel or this will only become worse for you, and I know that is not what you or anyone wants.”

“What I want,” he states clearly. “Is to go about my day without being accosted for no other reason than to maintain their illusion of superiority. And as the one who was attacked, I fail to see how this will only get worse for me.”

Dumbledore leans in, then says, “We'll start with point deductions and if you still refuse to compromise to a fair accord, than you will have to serve detention for disobedience.”

“Am I here to learn to obey?” Harry asks rhetorically before continuing. “You're more than welcome to do as you like, headmaster,” Harry answers. “Take all the points you want. Assign detention for every available day of the school year. I don't care for your arbitrary point based system, nor will I serve one minute of detention I don't feel I deserve.”

“And you don't feel at all remorseful for destroying the wands of other students?” Dumbledore asks with some disbelief.

“Not when they attacked me with said wands, unprovoked, three to one, and in the open where anyone else could've been hurt,” Harry tells the old man. “You may have heard of a muggle
concept called self-defense. I was responding to the threat of injury to my person by using force in kind to defend myself. You should understand that considering one of your classes is called, **Defense Against the Dark Arts. Am I not allowed to defend myself in your castle when attacked?”** Harry asks pointedly.

“Defense is one thing,” Snape returns. “You've far exceeded the limits of self-preservation and extending well into impetuous savagery.”

“Even Prefect Khan and his friends have expressed feelings of remorse after their misdeeds, and are willing to shake hands and settle this discord with you,” Dumbledore claims. “But if that is how you feel, we'll start by taking seven hundred points from Slytherin,” Dumbledore states evenly. “Headmaster-” Snape starts trying to reverse the flow of conversation, but Dumbledore continues as if uninterrupted. “And every week you continue to feel unrepentant will be another hundred points deducted. We'll add to that a month's detention with Professor Snape and Mr. Filch.”

Harry isn't bothered by the tepid form of discipline, but Snape continues to reason with the old man. “Headmaster, surely it doesn't do to punish the entire house because of the selfish behavior of one ungrateful student.”

“...Perhaps you're right, Severus,” Dumbledore states, rethinking his course of action. “I can be reasonable. I will, instead, take five hundred points from Slytherin and forgo the weekly deduction. However, you will serve detention—not for your debatable involvement in dealing with some of the more misguided students, but for skipping your History of Magic course. It is noted here, that you have yet to attend a single one of Professor Binn's classes.”

Harry simply reaches into his robe as he mutters loud enough for them to clearly hear, “if you can call that a class.” He hands Dumbledore the note Nicolas had written for him, excusing him from attending such a poor excuse for a class. Having read it, Harry couldn't help but note several pointed opinions directed to the Headmaster. Nicolas had penned in finely curved detail what a disappointment it was to hear how mistreated such an important topic is in a school that claims to be the best.

As Dumbledore reads it over, Harry explains, “As first-hand witnesses to much of known history, it's not hard to imagine why Nicolas and Perenelle are more than disappointed to learn that a subject that's dear to them is being improperly instructed to students that will one day lead magical society into the future. That is a written, signed and stamped consent from my parents excusing me from attending History of Magic with Professor Binns.”

“That is not possible, nor is it acceptable,” Dumbledore states as Snape reads over the note. Dumbledore continues, “I will also personally speak with Nicolas and reassure him of the first-rate quality of our History of Magic course, but until then, you have no other recourse but to attend
classes.”

“I’m sure he’d like to speak with you as well, Headmaster,” Harry returns with a satirical grin. “However, until Nicolas says otherwise, I will not be attending my scheduled nap time, nor will I be going to detention for preferring to use said time productively. If that puts you in a precarious position, I do apologize. That is not my intent, but I will not be forced to attend a sub-par curriculum to an important subject.”

“An important subject?” Snape throws out, finishing the letter. “You act as if the only purpose for your blatant defiance is higher education, when it’s more clear to me you suffer from an over-exaggerated self-opinion. You wish to learn History, but object to the manner in which it is taught simply because it's not on your self imposed terms. That arrogance only encourages this compulsion you have to always prove how right you are, especially to authority. You are nothing new-”

“Severus,” Dumbledore states, halting any further biting opinions from the potion instructor.

“Maybe I’d agree with you, professor Snape, if I wasn't such a fan of history myself,” Harry starts undeterred by Snape's candid tongue. “It's not a stretch to say my future is very much a product of the past, so I find history to be very integral in my decision making. It's also impossible to live with Nicolas and Perenelle and not enjoy a plethora of interesting, informative, or funny first hand stories from as far back as the founders of this very school you hold dear, to as recent the latest Dark Lord, Tom Riddle.” If there was ever a breach in Dumbledore's impervious mask of self-control, it was now. His eye brows rise, his eyes bulge, his shoulders slump, and it's clear as day the Headmaster—along with Snape—are absolutely befuddled with shock that 'Ares' would know that name. Harry relishes in their shock for only a moment before he adds, “more commonly know as Lord Voldemort.”

“How could you possibly know that name,” Snape asks aghast.

“The real question is why doesn't everyone,” Harry muses. “It seems like a fairly important topic to cover in a history class, don't you think? I can guarantee you everyone would stay awake in a class like that—if not have nightmares.”

“If you would be so kind as to tell us how you've come to know that name,” Dumbledore implores.

“You seem surprised,” Harry notes, acting heedless and faking mild concern. “It's all in his name, and you really should remember Nicolas, Perenelle and I are astute students of history, and for us, long-aged lineages are often discussed during dinners, almost like a game. The Gaunt family,
descendants of Salazar Slytherin himself, are certainly one of the many interesting families we've discussed.”

“You must tell us how specifically you've learned about that man,” Dumbledore commands. “As well as everyone else you might've told.”

“...Mnn, this is starting to feel very "secret society," so maybe some other time Headmaster,” Harry conveys, raising his occlumency for the possibility of a sudden intrusion. “I'm not comfortable discussing this with strangers. And besides, I should be going,” Harry says standing up. “Nova likes to fly early, and as often as I can muster.”

“You have not been excused, young man,” Dumbledore calls sternly but not domineering.

“Are you going to hold me against my will?” Harry blatantly asks, turning back toward the headmaster.

“This is of the utmost importance,” Dumbledore proclaims, standing up as well. “You must stay and share what you know.”

“And as I've said,” Harry starts, staring down the professors, feeling an itch in his wrist of his wand hand. In Harry's mind, the possibility of a fight between them has jumped up to very likely, but he maintains, “I don't feel comfortable disclosing what I've learned to strangers.”

“Strangers?” Snape repeats with a scoff. “Even if I am but a footnote in the annuls of history, Headmaster Dumbledore is a Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump, and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. He has defeated the Dark Lord Grindelwald and is the only wizard Lord Voldemort fears. Even an imbecile should be able to grasp how immensely prevalent this man is. You must tell us everything you know, Mr. Flamel, for there isn't a more capable wizard on this planet you could place your trust in.”

“Maybe, that's true. I couldn't say one way or another,” Harry states shrugging his shoulders. “You certainly are revered, Headmaster, and seemingly for good reason, but besides titles, I don't know anything real about you. And you're not asking me for my trust, you're asking me for blind obedience for no other reason than because you're older and I'm younger. Maybe in time I'll feel comfortable talking to you about all sorts of subjects, but right now, all I see is a headmaster who's trying to convince me your History of Magic class is the best thing since Butter Beer, who didn't inform my parents that I was attacked multiple times in this castle, and who thinks I should buy new wands for said bullies- excuse me, 'troubled' students because I destroyed theirs whilst defending myself. So, no, professors, I don't feel comfortable telling either of you what I know or
how I've come to know it.”

“Comfortable or no, we are your authority and we demand you tell us,” Snape steps forward, but Harry doesn't back down. In fact Harry steps forward as well, stern with no hint of fear or wavering in his kill-me green eyes, tempted to draw wand first.

“Trust is a very precious thing,” Dumbledore slowly interjects. “Perhaps in the future, I'm certain you will come to see me as a character worthy of your faith and deserving of your trust. Until then, I think I will speak with your guardians... soon. Severus, if you would escort Mr. Flamel out and inform Minerva I must attend court shortly.”

“Nova,” Harry calls and his phoenix returns to his shoulder as they are escorted out by the potions professor. There’s only silence as they traverse the halls until they are about to part ways. Snape tells Harry in his deep, drawl voice, “Tread carefully, Mr. Flamel. I would not be surprised if the rest of Slytherin house don't take kindly to the student responsible for losing five hundred points. Fortunately for you, I am here to help should the need arise.”

Snape leaves, the fringe of his cloak billowing impressively behind him. Harry makes his way out of the castle, walking through crisp September air of the valley before heading towards the Forbidden Forest. In the distance, near the Beauxbaton carriage, he spots Fleur dueling two other girls at the same time. They seem quite tired, as if they've been practicing all morning. At the sight of him, Fleur hesitates and the loss of focus is enough to be struck in her side by what looks like a stinging hex. She drops to one knee and grips her side while her friends rush to check on her. While worried himself, Harry's certain she's fine and doesn't walk over to make sure. Instead he continues into the Forbidden Forest, walking deep enough to be sure no one can see him flame to the Flamel's London Brownstone.

After setting the kettle on, Perenelle inquires if his sudden visit has anything to do with their meeting and subsequent dinner with Sirius Black and Amelia Bones.

“No,” Harry tells them. “You could tell me now if you like, but I figured the probability of getting an invitation on the first meeting was low and expected a letter saying as much.”

“He's a very charming fellow,” Nicolas states. “Much more butch than I'm accustomed to, but with a good head on his shoulders and a good heart to match.” Harry smiles at the compliment, recalling precious good times with his Godfather.

“It was refreshing to hear him speak of his fiancee without the usual high society drivel that passes for ideals,” Perenelle happily adds. “Genuine love for another is very rare and it's nice to see them
flourish in spite of the social stigma.”

“We talked about you a great deal more than I was expecting,” Nicolas adds. “Though nothing more was brought up than what we were already prepared for,” he says with some disappointment.

When Perenelle returns with kettle and tray, she adds, “we spoke about all our teenagers, Susan and Tracey included. It was an amusing point of note that none us at the table have actually birthed a child but find ourselves responsible for the life of one.” Harry looks at her weirdly and expectantly. “Oh, calm down you. You know very well I only mean in regard to the narrative.”

“By the way, Tracey did write to Sirius as you hoped and he got quite a laugh from your egg prank,” Nicolas mentions with a smile. “Best prank he'd ever heard of, to hear him tell it. I enjoyed it as well but a little forewarning would've been nice, Harry. All in all, I think we're making good progress. I have another meeting with Sirius and Amelia next week. It's just a luncheon to discuss the current political climate, but if we're going to be more involved in the political war associated with the rise of Voldemort, we're going to need as much information about the Ministry, as well as all the members in the Wizengamot, their families, and most importantly, where their galleons come from.”

“Should that luncheon go as well as dinner, I expect we may receive an invitation to the scandalous wedding of the year before long,” Perenelle comments.

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry optimistically states. He then proceeds to inform them of the meeting he had with Dumbledore with regard to Voldemort. “You should be prepared to hear from him soon, because he will not let that go.”

“If you didn't want Dumbledore's attention,” Nicolas muses with a smile. “Than you have a funny way of going about it.”

“I'll admit I didn't have to say anything,” Harry confesses, stern of eye and tense in the shoulders. “But that'll only keep him like he is; too set in his ways. If there's ever any chance of making him a proper ally, we have to rattle him, little by little break him out of his upright attitude; challenge without antagonizing him. I figure we have some down time before I snag Crouch, might as well start now.”

“Is there anything specific you want us to do or say,” Perenelle asks. “Or just play the simple, mistaken discovery as we planned it.”
“I gave them a subtle hint but I don't think they spotted it. So, just like we planned should be enough for now,” Harry answers. “I also thought I should prepare you...” and he tells them what he discovered as far as the abuse going on in the school and the gist of what he did to Hilliard.

“I would not have been opposed if you had done more,” Perenelle states in a vile tone, Harry can understand. It's a detestable state of affairs that shouldn't correlate to a school or it's students, and he didn't even explain how personal it is for him—only that the girl was really nice and smart. “In the many centuries I've been alive, violence is the most terrible constant, but in a school among our youth, it's just evil.”

“Oh, Albus...” Nicolas grumbles, turning to Harry and asking, “Do you expect he'll contact us tonight? Because I'm looking forward to giving him a piece of my mind.”

“The impression I left is mainly to do with Voldemort and skipping history. I don't think they suspect me for Hilliard or the wards, so be careful with what you say. I'd let him lead, so when he doesn't mention something he should, you can trap him,” Harry tells him. “He mentioned going to court so I imagine it won't be long after that, if not tonight, than tomorrow.”

“Ah yes,” Nicolas states raising his index finger in the air. “Amelia brought it up during dinner—giving me the distinct impression she's looking for a political ally, not that I'm opposed. She explained the debate will center around whether the Wizengamot should intervene in the ministry's decision to allow no age restriction for the TriWizard Tournament and wanted my opinion.”

“What did you tell her,” Harry asks curiously.

“Prrfft, I told her the truth, what else,” Nicolas delivers indignant, shaking a hand in the air. “A thousand Galleons and eternal glory don't last longer than a year. Risking some of our most promising students for that is just utter nonsense.” Harry gives him a definitive nod to hear.

“For as long as we've lived, we should know,” Perenelle adds before taking a sip of tea. “At least everyone at dinner wholeheartedly agreed.”

“Were you able to learn where the trophy's located?” Nicolas asks.

“Without drawing attention for asking, or going door to door, no,” Harry states. “Besides, I never minded the idea of having a direct path to Voldemort. Should an alternate plan present itself in the future, I can always destroy the trophy or take it out of play some other way.”
“Does this mean you'll be entering your name in the Goblet?” Nicolas asks with a slight uptick of excitement.

“Why do you sound so happy?” Harry questions. “I thought you said it was nonsense.”

“I'm not happy, and it is,” Nicolas defends. “But it's going to happen anyway, and I can't say I'd worry about you like I would a normal student, now can I?”

“....Uh huh, and no,” Harry answers him sternly. “There's no need to put my name in. I don't need to be in the tournament to get to the portkey.”

“I suppose not,” Nicolas agrees, slumping his shoulders down again.

Harry says his farewell to both of them, and returns to the Forbidden Forest for a good solitary walk as much as giving Nova time to stretch her wings and enjoy the high skies. Exiting the forest, he senses a figure approach him before he identifies Fleur in her form-fitting blue Beauxbaton uniform. She seems intent to approach him so he doesn't try to avoid her. The delicate sway of her walk ends a few feet away, staring intently at him, as if attempting to read the make up of his soul like a book written in a foreign language. While his occlumency can easily make it impossible to read any facial expression, he does allow some of his guilt to bleed through.

“Monsieur Flamel,” Fleur stiffly addresses him.

Harry understands if she feels awkward being around him, but she shouldn't have to when they both know he was in the wrong. She has every right to be angry with him. “Miss Delacour,” he returns.

"I was informed 'ow treacherouz zhe Forbidden Forest ees,” Fleur states nodding to the forest behind Harry.

"It is," Harry tells her. "But no more than school, I think."

Fleur smiles much to prettily before saying in her lovely French accent, “like our first meeting, I would like us tu be een good termz. I want you tu know I do not believe you 'ad any intent tu 'urt
me. So please do not feel the need to walk away from me in the future. I am not mad.” Her soulfully deep blue eyes seem to heighten the silver glow around her.

Harry can feel trace amounts of warmth and yearning in the air, but knowing her allure is the cause, it doesn't sway him as he says, “I really am sorry for what I did.”

“I know,” Fleur says with an unmistakable smirk as she tucks her long silver-blonde hair behind her ear. “But you did not ‘urt me. Een fact, you ‘ave made me remember certain promises I made tu myself, and for zhat I zhank you.”

“Please, don't thank me,” Harry tells her. “I don't deserve it.”

“Eet is not a zhank you like ‘ave bought me Gelato,” she expresses with a gentle sway of her head and a smirk. “eet ees simply acknowledgment for 'elping me tu remember.”

“Oh... okay,” Harry says unsure. “You're welcome.” Harry feels uneasy. She seems to have an easier time putting his grabbing her out of her mind than he does.

“I can see a lot more zhan ozhers realize,” Fleur states before shaking her head and correcting herself. “Non, 'see' is zhe wrong word. Eet ees a sense I 'ave due to my nature as part Veela, and eet ees quite accurate. W'en I look at you, zhe only zhing I can say I 'see' for certain ees pain.”

The clear look at his scars, Harry quickly replies, “I have scars, Miss Delacour,” in an obvious sort of way. “Like a lot of people do. And what's a scar without a story or the pain that comes with it? Though, mine are not ones I'd like to discuss.”

“Yes,” Fleur exclaims, taking a panic step forward. “I nevrr meant to imply to. I only mean to say, I can unzerstand. In my culture scars only display zhe war one 'as gone t'rough and zhe bravery zhat was necessary tu survive eet. My pappa 'as one as well; on 'is chest—though eet ees smallerr zhan yourz. W'ere I am from, we considerr scars tu be beautiful.”

He feels her allure heighten with her frenzy, and while it felt much stronger than the trace amounts he picked up earlier, his mind still resists succumbing to her magically enriched enticement. “That's nice of you to say. It says a lot about your character and how you were raised. 'There is no place like France,’ my parents like to say. Thank you for your kind words, and understanding but I should be going. I'm late for lunch—"
“Wait,” Fleur states, taking another step forward, now standing close enough to touch him. “Your pupils are dilated, there is more color in your cheeks, and you breathe easier, but you do not lose control. Have you encountered any others like me? Other Veela or half-Veela? You must have, or how else can you resist more than half of my allure to this degree?”

“I, uh, have, once, when I was much younger,” Harry admits, wondering how she’d react to learn she was the first one he’d ever met. “I wouldn’t say she taught me how to resist allure, but I often work on my mental fortitude,” Harry oddly answers about himself.

“May I—” Fleur seems to argue with herself, before shaking her head and just asking, “May I relinquish control of my allure even front of you, s’il vous plaît?”

“You mean—” he doesn’t finish asking as she nods her head sweetly. Harry is very confident of his mind’s control over his body’s natural responses, which is the only reason he can diminish the magically inspired urges. So, he nods his head in acceptance and nearly instantly, he feels a very physical magnetism enrapture him—body and magic—and gravitate toward her. The sense of his magic surging like ocean current took much more concentration to keep under control, giving his body slightly more leeway to fixate on Fleur. Gazing at her and the natural perfection of her entire being, the crisp grass, the flowing trees, even the taste of the scent in the air; everything around her becomes that much more beautiful because of her. It draws him to her like a bee to a flower, determined to take her, resolute to have her, and rapt to devour her stunning figure—to the point he clenches his fist in defense.

Though her magnetic lure feels like the size of a mountain, it doesn't change the nature of what it is. He knows why he feels this way, this intensely, and why mentally it can seem artificial: it’s magic. He’s always thought of magic as making the impossible, possible. And just like everyone else, no one—especially those as beautiful as Fleur—would love him without magic. So even if his heart is pumping at a critical rate, his hands are itching to hold her and his breathing is both deep and shallow, his mind doesn’t fall for the breathtaking fairytale before him nor does it relinquish control of his actions. Though his fists are clenched, Harry stays put.

She seems to almost relax, as if a huge weight had been lifted off her delicate shoulders. Her brilliant smile and perfect teeth almost make him forget where he was or why he’s there but he stays strong. “I can feel ‘ow robust you are... simply amazing, Monsieur Flamel! I ‘ave never encountered such resistance to my allure even my life. Eet ees simply astonishing!”

“It’s- Well,” Harry is almost at a loss at what to say. Talking to her now feels like a slippery slope and he’s desperate to retain himself. “Ms. Delacour-”

“Call me Fleur, please,” she says happily, and Harry has to take in a deep breath to resist her exuberance.
“Fleur, I really would like to grab something to eat, before...” Harry states taking reluctant but necessary steps away from her.

“Oui, of course,” she says, dialing down the strength of her enslaving charisma. “May I join you, Ares?”

Harry would prefer to maintain a healthy distance but he can't think on the spot very well, much less think of a good reason to decline her without being rude. “Sure,” Harry answers as he starts walking. “I'd like that.”

The conversation back to the castle is light and no more than what most know about him already. When Nova lands on his shoulder, she becomes the star of all her questions, yet again, nothing more than what's already been asked and answered. Walking the halls toward the Great Hall, heavy wood clacking against stone alerts Harry of the monster he's hoping to torture soon. Spotting Faux-Moody hobbling ahead of them towards the dinning hall, late to meals, as usual, Harry's mind automatically conscious of the sandy-haired imposter. Harry makes sure he's interacting with Fleur normally, in case Moody's highly convenient eye is spying on him. Though, it's more likely Fleur would be the target of the former Azkaban prisoner's lecherous peeping than Ares would.

Entering the Great Hall, it's the tail end of lunch but there's more than enough students for many longing eyes to quickly land on his company. At the Gryffindor table, seated with his rowdy brothers, Bill is also drawn to Fleur, and quite suddenly, Harry feels extremely immoral for being this friendly with her. There's nothing indecent or shameful about walking into a large room together, nor is Fleur an ultra close friend on Hermione's level, but he's getting along far better with this Fleur than he did with the Fleur of his time line... and now Bill is watching them... wondering—not unlike any other male in the room—what the story is between them.

*There's nothing going on!* he mentally yells.

Fleur's doppelganger's husband from a previous time line is watching them and it's enough to make Harry uncomfortable. So uncomfortable he'd rather deal with the glares he's getting from the dozen or so remaining Slytherins, making it extremely evident they know he's the reason Slytherin House are now in a four hundred and fifty or so point deficit. Draco seems to be explaining something to his year mates, and Daphne, along with the rest of them, do not look pleased at all. Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy are clearly the most angry. Not that it matters in the grand scheme of things, but their antagonism toward him is bound to be more annoying than their friendliness towards him.

Turning instead to the Ravenclaw table, he's further dejected to see the day is not done being miserable as Hermione stops Faux-Moody to ask him a question, showing him something from the
fourth year textbook. It's always uncomfortable to see students approach him, unaware of the significant danger he poses, but seeing Hermione so close to him is double the aggravation. Yet, despite the homicidal impostor among them, all blatant or spying eyes are on him and Fleur. So many in fact, Fleur has to ask him, "eet ees too strong?"

"Reckon it might be, yeah," Harry answers as Hardwin steps up to him from beside the Hall's entrance, as if he was waiting for him.

"I know where you've..." Hardwin starts to tell Harry, is then caught by Fleur's presence, and now his brother can't take his enthralled eyes off of her until she reclaims full control of her allure.

Hardwin clears his throat garishly before addressing her with a slightly deeper tone, "Hello, I think I might've seen you here a few times. I'm-" his voice cracks, "I'm Hardwin Potter, heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter. You may have heard of me, but please, I'm just like everyone else. And you are?" he asks, extending his hand.

While Fleur smiles gracefully and introduces herself, Ron races over to Hardwin, absolutely stunning Harry, because gripped in his best mate's left hand, is the Maurader's Map—the very thing Harry has been coveting since he entered these hallowed halls. Harry doesn't retract his wand right away as his best mate pulls Hardwin's shoulder, spinning him about and interrupting his coquetry with Fleur. Though it would be the easiest thing for Harry to just take the map that's only an arm's length away from him, it wouldn't be a clean snatch, and he'd rather avoid the resulting attention. For now it's enough to know they have it and are clearly using it.

At least I know what I'm doing tonight, Harry thinks to himself, as part of his mind begins running simulations about breaking into Gryffindor and stealing the map. As Draco gets up from the Slytherin table, Harry wonders if he should give the task of retrieving the map to him instead, but upon catching Draco's piqued grey eyes, Harry quickly changes his mind. The silver-blond is smirking suggestively at them, like an idiot, obviously alluding to something indecent between him and Fleur arriving together.

His attention returns to Ron and Hardwin and Harry's entire being is immediately gripped with deathly fear. Harry can't breath as Ron points purposefully on the map—likely at a dot—then points to Faux-Moody. He wouldn't, is all Harry manages to think before his brother calls out to the dangerous impostor standing next to Hermione in a room that has far too many potential casualties, "Oi, Professor Moody! When was your name ever Bartemius Crouch?" He called out, loud enough to draw in plenty of attention, smiling as if this was some sort of secret the school can joke about, as if there must be some sort innocent misunderstanding, as if Bartemius Crouch Jr wasn't one of the Death Eater's strongest fighters disguised as the retired Alastor Moody at the behest of Lord fucking
Turning to the current Boy-Who-Lived, there isn't a trace of humor on Faux-Moody's enraged face, and Harry is the only one in the room who has the insight necessary to know what's moments from happening. For a fraction of a second, everything in the room is still, silent and calm, in sharp contrast to the storming rage ready to destroy everything near it, starting with Hermione.

Wands are instantly in hand, Harry summoning Hermione to him, none to delicately, with “Accio!” and Crouch firing “Confringo” directly at Ron and Hardwin. Even as Harry felt his magic grip his best friend, he manages to fiercely kick Hardwin out of the way, hard enough to knock him and Ron to the ground. The dark charm is scalding down to the skin as the blasting curse grazes his thigh and bombs chunks of ancient stone off the wall by the entrance.

With a strong arm wrapped desperately around a wincing Hermione, Harry is afforded a moment as Crouch takes stock of the threat that is Ares, to realize this is the worst possible way to confront Barty. While the Hall has only a fourth of it's usual gathering, there are still far too many innocent bystanders spread throughout the room to think everyone is going to make it out unharmed. Emotionally it already feels like another win for Voldemort. The heartless concept that should any person be injured or worse killed by Crouch when he—with all his knowledge and strength—should be able to prevent it, feels like the future he came from is still a very real possibility. And why wouldn't it be? He hasn't done anything yet, he hasn't saved anyone yet, he hasn't killed Voldemort yet, and that realization makes him absolutely furious. The past was all his fault. All that suffering, pain, and murder, because he was too weak.

Not again, Harry thinks. Not again! Not ever again! He repeats over and over in his head, getting angrier and angrier at the one available person he can take all his pent up rage out on. Barty Fucking Crouch Jr.

Within the delayed reaction it takes for everyone in the room to catch up to the idea that a battle has sparked and is about to rage, Faux-Moody flicks his tongue over his upper lip as Harry forces Hermione behind him. The resulting screams fill the room as Faux-Moody manically attacks Harry with a murderous, “Avada Kedavra!” That curse doesn't incite the same panicked fear in Harry as it does everyone else around him. Magical barriers may not work against that Unforgivable, but solid objects do, and Harry shields himself, Hermione, Fleur, Hardwin, and Ron by summoning the nearest plate to him and fluidly enlarging it to cover the entirety of the green killing curse. The impact with the large shield-like plate vibrates venomously his bones.

“Nova,” is all Harry says, picturing the terrified, and stunned students around the hall. He feels Nova withdraw from his shoulder with a powerful lift and somehow he knows she's going to help evacuate as many children as possible.
Even angrier than he was a second ago, Harry carefully employs the best strategy for the combat situation, wordlessly returning a curse of his own. With Nova assisting the overcome students, he focuses the entirety of his combat on Crouch, not waste time or advantage by voicing his attacks, and more than anything, he needs to be fast. Faux-Moody's surprise lasts a second as he protects himself from Harry's *Confringo* with a shield not quite strong enough, as the residual force of the blasting curse pushes him back a step.

Harry notes a lot of frantic movement on top of Nova dragging scared children out of the Hall by their robes to safety as the dueling pair begin to cast spell after spell at one another, rapidly and without uttering a word. Harry was hoping for a longer opening when Crouch realizes a fourteen year old is keeping up with his casting speed, but it's raw mania and determination in Faux-Moody's eye and Harry doesn't hesitate to match. While certainly the most impressive duelist he's faced, Crouch Jr. is no Horcrux-Voldemort. Harry takes a step forward, in front of the line of fire, to keep the threat on himself, and because he can.

At the rapid-fire pace they're leveling spells off at one another, neither Harry or Crouch is able to waste the time to voice their dark curses, but as they quick-cast curses and shields, it also means the offensive magic can't be obscenely destructive in nature. It takes time to cast truly devastating spells and Harry isn't going to give this monster that chance. So while the spells fired are simple, they're the best strategy Harry has to keep Crouch preoccupied, give everyone time to escape, and avoid mass casualties.

The dragging seconds of equal match intensifies with every calculated step forward Harry is able to make. While Faux-Moody has the rage, focus and violence needed for powerful curses, Harry is simply magically more potent, pushing Crouch back as Harry slowly advances on the man. Harry is hoping to close the distance and tag Crouch faster than the man can defend, however, Moody side steps a cutting curse to shoot a spell to the side—a one-off towards the Gryffindors before resuming his attack on Harry. Harry's combat mentality keeps him from panicking and he just barely manages to shield a terrified Lavender Brown from a destructive spell.

At nearly the same time he defends Lavender, he has to wandlessly cast a shield on himself with his left hand, stopping a Blood-Boiling Curse from hitting him. Stepping out of the way would've been the best tactic but with Fleur, Hermione, and Merlin knows how many others exiting the Great Hall behind him, he has no other recourse but to shield. However his left-handed defense isn't stable enough and knocks him back a couple steps, shredding bits of his robes sleeve off and making the blood in his body warm sourly. While his insides feel hotter, making him sweat even more, the effects stop there. Sweat leaking off him, Harry reorients himself and continues to press forward with more fervor than before.

Nearly in the same moment Harry begins to dread the idea of Faux-Moody attacking innocent bystanders nearest to him, Crouch begins to randomly shoot off spells around the room in hopes of forcing Harry to give the maniac a fatal opening. Booming screams of fear laced panic repeatedly pierce the air in the room as Harry manages to shield curse after curse from finding their frightened targets. Within the second of every large shield charm he'd cast, Harry is attacked with a
Disintegration Curse, Cutting Curse, Blasting Curse, or an Entrail-Expelling Curse. The shields he raises to protect himself are so close to his person he can feel the impact rattle his bones and momentarily drown out the sound, leaving an eerie ringing in his hearing.

As Harry creates large shields around the room, effectively blocking Crouch's indiscriminate attacks from hitting many of the students, he notes Bill, Vector, Trelawney, Pince and Filch are the only adults who are in any position to help, even if they don't have the ability to do so. While Bill does manage to coral many of the Gryffindors he was seated near to a corner and protect them, the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw hiding around their tables as best they can have only Harry's fast reflexes to keep from getting hurt.

“Draco!” Harry yells between deep breaths. “Get! Everyone! Out!”

In the heat of the battle, he can't tell who or how many are behind him trying to flee, but it's keeping him rooted in place and he's going to need some room to move if he wants to take this madman alive. Though Harry may have to protect everyone scattered about the room, he can wield magic with both hands. He uses his wand hand to protect the Hogwarts students and attack, and uses his left hand to protect himself with relative success. However, stationed as he is, he can't overtake Crouch and protect everyone without some wiggle room, and that's Crouch's only advantage over him, which he exploits spectacularly.

“You bloody whelp!” Faux-Moody calls out amused, hurling deadly curses at him than at a Hufflepuff witch. “How about another scar to add to the collection!”

Moody sends a targeted cutting curse towards Draco, who manages to see it and defend from it. Harry has little time to question how he knew Draco's Protego would be too weak, but doesn't hesitate to shield him and the students around him when Draco's shield shatters against the dark curse. As Harry blocks it, Crouch has time enough to catapult the entire length of the Hufflepuff table high in the air, barreling toward the running or hiding Slytherin and Hufflepuff students that Draco's trying to evacuate. Harry arrests the length of the large dining piece from burying the students with hand and wand, but in the process, Crouch shouts, “Expulso!”

The dynamite curse is mostly stopped by a section of Hufflepuff table Harry uses as a shield. Mostly. The wood splinters on impact, blasting dagger-like shards toward Harry, sinking deep in multiple spots of his flesh. Lowering his arm and ignoring the sharp sticking pricks on his chest and arms, Harry slams what's left of the table still in his magical grasp on Crouch, who uses the Ravenclaw table to intercept the strike. Within the boom of colliding furniture, Harry returns an, “Expulso,” of his own, erupting fragments of wood to rain down on the imposter. A quick Evanesco vanishes the dagger like splinters of wood protruding from his wounds before Harry presses his attack on Crouch, who's gripping the side of his bleeding neck where a splinter nicked him.
Crouch defends himself silently and relentlessly under Harry's continuous barrage. Step after step, Harry pummels Crouch with as many of the strongest curses he can rapid fire, certain that if he can get close enough, Crouch Jr. won't be fast enough to react. However, pushing Crouch into a corner is not unlike trying to catch a wounded animal backed into a corner alive, and in Crouch's desperation, he casts a large ball of fire at the Gryffindors stuck in the corner before tumbling under large debris of broken table to avoid Harry's attack. Battle heightened as his magic-sight feels, Harry's certain that the cursed fire could not be dowsed with regular water or transfigured like he'd normally like. Instead he quickly levitates the Gryffindor table to catch most of the deadly flames and what remained of the fire was mitigated by Nova flying into the curse's path, take the cursed flame squarely and protecting the Gryffindors.

Harry's heart tightens at the sight of his avian familiar being struck and bouncing off the wall to the floor. A touch of rage permeates his wand work but he remains focused and clear of mind—losing control would mean losing the fight and he won't allow that. Harry raises the flaming Gryffindor table still in his magical grasp and drops it where Crouch should be as Bill rushes the remaining children into the antechamber just past the teachers section. Crouch destroys the large burning projectile with an explosive curse, sending burning planks everywhere, yet Harry presses forward, praying that all the students and staff are safely away so he can focus all his efforts on capturing Crouch.

Faux-Moody and Harry go back and forth, from defense to offense, rapidly and without uttering a word, when an arrant spell is shot at Crouch, who has sense enough to block it, but it's enough to give Harry a short opening to cast a quick *Reducto*. Crouch is good enough to stop most of the *Reducto* but the impact is stunning. He takes a few stews back and Harry presses his advantage keeping him on the defensive. His magic tells him that the spell was Draco's.

“Is everyone safe?” Harry yells.

“Almost,” Draco calls back. “Just a few-” he starts to explain before a strong *Confringo* blasts through his shield, whirling Draco off his feet and onto some fire lite debris.

“Draco!” Harry calls hoping to hear a response, but even straining his ears, he hears nothing. While continuing his barrage he sacrifices his advance to conjure a great swarm of fire arrows to rain down on Faux-Moody. He takes his eye off of the enemy for a second to turn to his fallen comrade, wandlessly grips and tosses him emphatically towards the entrance of the hall, hoping someone will see to him. Taking that split second to note Hermione and Fleur are trying to help two other students—one being Neville Longbottom—trapped under debris was a costly price to pay when he hears a loud, “*Crucio!*”

Harry is instantly wracked with a familiar, intense, and excruciating pain, and screams through
gritted teeth. His body seizes painfully and not of his control. Every nerve throughout his body feel like they're blistering and splitting, his brain is expanding too large for his shrinking skull and every bone of his skeleton feels like it's being drilled by thousands of nails. He can't even hear Faux-Moody's maniacal laughter over his own screams. Agonizing as the seconds are, he's more familiar with this pain than he is with anything else, and so grits his teeth, calls desperately on his ample magic to force—in no certain way—the pain to away.

Faux-Moody is surprised when Harry rips away the sinister and intrusive unforgivable with his left hand, as if he were swatting away a fat annoying fly. Even as Harry roughly inhales a dull-pained breath he brings his wand up and returns a sharp cutting curse. Along with his swimming vision, his wand hand shakes sporadically so his aim is slightly off and instead of cutting off the man's wand arm, the curse connects with Faux-Moody's left shoulder, left ear, and part of his scalp, drawing plenty of blood and a nice grunt of pain.

In the peripheral of his eyes Harry quickly notes his wand hand is dripping with more blood than sweat. The red of his life essence quickly reminds him that several of the warm pinching pains on his chest and shoulder is beginning to throb and ache, but after the Crucio, it's easy to ignore it for the chance to end it all with the imposter. Harry is disappointed by how slow he returns to form as he continues his barrage, Faux-Moody defending himself despite the great misfortune of losing his magical eye. With part of Faux-Moody's ear missing, it's not hard to assume the strap holding the magical eye in place was cut.

It's a fortunate moment that didn't last as Crouch transfigures a wall of stone that Harry easily destroys. However it gives Crouch Jr. enough seconds to cast a stream of powerfully enchanted fire. Harry sends a desperately quick banishing charm but it doesn't interrupt him soon enough. He may have blown back Crouch, but a large serpent nearly twice Naga's size made completely of cursed fire scorches the stone it's on as it slithers toward Harry, burning everything it touches.

"Fucking Feindfyre," Harry thinks as it savagely slithers towards him.

"Bombarta Maxima!" Harry hears Crouch Jr. yell, followed by a reverberated boom and large sediments of stone crumbling. Harry easily assumes Crouch is trying to escape but he has precious little time to do anything about it before it's too late, and dealing with Fiendfyre is no small thing. Instead of slowing it down, Harry uses valuable seconds as it closes in on him to put forth maximum concentration in conjuring enchanted water.

"Aguamenti!" he yells, creating a very large, swirling blob of water encasing the blazing inferno in the shape of a snake. There's immediate wet hissing as cold water attacks searing fire, producing large quantities of thick steam. Harry focuses on conjuring more enchanted water as the raging Fienfyre steams it's watery cage, losing volume nearly as fast as Harry can create it. He nearly has the entire snake blackening and crusting over when the large serpent begins to expand, repeatedly beating against it's own crusted skin, before erupting like a furious volcano in the ocean.
Expanding and thrashing soon bursts the orb of water prison.

Stuck in the Great Hall mostly filled thick with white mist, Harry isn't excited about his options on dealing with the Fiendfyre serpent. As the flow of mist is sucked out of the large hole in the wall created by Crouch Jr., he's all but given up on having enough time to catch him. Instead Harry recalls the location of the Great Hall and decides the best tactic he can employ at the moment is forcing the sinister fire outside.

While the flaming snake resists his strong magical banishment toward the hole, Harry hears a mighty screech. Covered completely in flame, as if she were made of fire, Nova dives to the snake of fire and clutches its head with her sharp talons. Though overjoyed to see his familiar, Harry doesn't spare a second.

“Take it outside!” Harry instructs Nova, as he makes his way to the hole. He avoids a wide strike from it's flaming tail, catching his robe instead. “Toss it in the lake!” Harry yells, tearing off his bloody and burning robe, before jumping out of the hole into crisp autumn air and sunlight.

On his way down, Harry easily spots Barty, already past the lake, scampering along the field as fast as his handicap will allow him, towards the front gate to the edge of the anti-apparition ward. He feels feverishly hot despite Scotland's chilly air as he mentally tally's the few clusters of students watching the commotion from a safe enough distance to be disregarded. Harry slows his descent, mentally citing *Arresto Momentum!* He touches down firmly, and sprints after the mad man as quickly as he can.

The first few steps sends a shooting pain throughout his chest and down his arms and legs that refuses to be ignored. Gritting his teeth and gripping his blood stained wand tighter, he pushes his legs to their maximum velocity. Though thankful he's been training his muscles with Muggle exercises, he's wishing, now more than ever, he had purchased that broomstick like he intended on doing.

Overhead, a roaring screech from a raging phoenix descends fast from on high to produce a roaring whistle, giving Harry the strangest image of an asteroid hitting water. Harry can hear the splash and steaming hiss behind him as Nova dives into the lake, dragging the cursed fire snake in with her. From reading, Hogwarts, A History, Harry knows that the lake's water has some enchantments protecting the aquatic plants, creatures and merfolk within from all sorts of dangers; icing and poison being chief among them but also from extreme heat. Harry's perfect recall knows the book mentioned fire, but whether cursed fire like Fiendfyre counts is anyone's guess. Harry hopes it does.

Though completely able-bodied, and faster, Harry doesn't calculate he'll reach him before Crouch Jr. makes the boarder, free to disapparate back to his wretched master and out of his reach. Harry
conjures a mass of arrows to hail down on Faux-Moody, slowing him down but not completely stopping him. Fake Moody zags as he shields against the rain of sharp bolts and returns a blasting curse, followed by the killing curse. Harry dodges both and sends a cutting curse of his own. Crouch Jr. dodges with a roll to the ground before getting up, now facing him and starts to walk backwards. It's a much slower approach to the open gate but he's close enough to make it and clearly doesn't want to risk getting tagged in the back.

Harry and Crouch are trading curses again. Despite enduring their fair share of injuries, they are no less fierce than when they first started fighting. Step by step, Harry's forward advance is matched by Moody's retreat to safety. Without the added stress of protecting innocent lives in a castle that resists magic manipulation, Harry has a far easier time moving around and incorporating transfiguration into his attacks. He doesn't have to stand in one spot or use time to defend others. He can dodge and attack Faux-Moody's footing. Dodging allows him to advance and focus more potency in his curses and charms, effectively shredding or destroying every shield Crouch Jr. erects and shifting or spiking the earth to halt or slow his retreat. Distracted by the unexpected swamp earth, a cutting curse manages to destroy Crouch's shield and cut more than half way into his left bicep.

Crouch yells in pain as his arm hangs on by a bit of muscle and skin, but he's nearly to the edge and the freedom it brings, so while Crouch takes that last desperate step, Harry tries to summons him with, “Accio!”

Fake Moody feels the strong magical grasp take his arm but instead of allowing his body to follow, he yanks away from the rest of his magically gripped arm and throws himself over the gate's threshold. The very moment Barty Crouch Jr. is outside the anti-apparition ward, he disapparates with a loud crack.

Harry lamely catches the wrist of the Death Eater's torn off arm, staring at the spot his best chance of learning Voldemort's location just disapparated from. The majority of his front—his dress shirt and loose Slytherin tie, scrapes and cuts—is covered in his blood, hemorrhaging freely from several inflamed wounds on his face, chest, shoulders and arms. His head is spinning, he's in ever growing pain, and he has no idea how many others who suffered through that nightmare are too. However, nothing can feel worse than his gutting failure to capture Barty Crouch Jr. He couldn't capture one of the several Death Eaters after the Quidditch World Cup and now he couldn't capture the one Death Eater that actually mattered.

He stands there dejected, staring so long, Nova flames to him, landing on his shoulder with a very weak grip. It's her exhausted wobble that snaps him out of his disgrace. She falls forward and he catches and cradles her in his free arm.

“You did great girl,” he weakly says as he slowly limps back to the castle. “You did great, so stay with me. Stay with me,” he continually repeats.
Well.... well, well, well. I've been waiting a while to add this fight. It's a very pivotal moment from I'm Still Here that stayed with me since Katheryn wrote it. Mine isn't the same as hers but I still hope I did it justice. So again, I want to say thank you to Katheryn for giving me her support and if anyone hasn't read her fic, definitely check it out on Fanfic (dot) com.

I would like to thank everyone so so much for all the positive comments and words of support! It's been such an amazing experience and I look forward to continuing to be worthy of that support :D

As always I'd love to hear your thoughts and thanks for reading.

--Grae
The Vulnerability of Gratitude

Chapter Summary

Harry is forced to do things he would never willingly do if not for the familiar tone of his viciousness. He must accept gratitude.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

I'm so glad to update. This chapter takes place immediately after failing to capture Faux-Moody. It also deals with some hard truths Harry would much rather avoid. I really tried to focus on the theme of gratitude so it's more dialogue and high society stuff than anything else. I hope it shows!

13K for those who want to know.

And without further ado...

Despite his grocery list of injuries, Harry didn't have time to stop, drop to the ground, and wait for help to find him. With the Elixir and his mindscape doing the best it can to alleviate the worst of his wounds, they shouldn't be in anymore danger. Nova cooing weakly cradled in his free arm, Harry absentmindedly wonders if the cursed fire that struck his familiar was less severe because of her natural affinity to fire. If that's the case, it would mean the impact of the spell hurt her more than the cursed fire did. Though he's not looking to test that theory out anytime soon, Harry files it away in his mental library for further reflection.

Harry's going to take a lot of time to reflect on this afternoon. He so desperately wanted to capture Crouch alive that he carelessly risked lives that should've been his sole priority throughout the entire exchange. In a situation like that with so many potential casualties, he should've just killed Crouch right away, instead, in the heat of the battle, he clung to his capture mission. Now, limping back to the castle in the cold crisp air, he's soon going to learn and accept how many were injured or Merlin forbid, killed, because of his single-minded focus.

It's truly a long, hard walk.

When the sight of the castle with a large whole through the side of it was easily visible in his swimming vision, Harry started to note the gathering crowd. The Durmstrang delegation are off
their ship, being corralled by their Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff, and kept in formation with military precision. At the sight of them, Harry's grateful the Beauxbaton carriage and students have their site set up on the other side of the castle, near Hagrid's Hut.

At the thought of Beauxbaton, he's praying Fleur and Hermione had remained safe throughout the entire fight. He remembered seeing them help Neville from under debris before he was struck with the Crucioatus Curse, and after that, nothing. Faces flash in his mind then; Draco, Fleur, Hermione, Neville, Lavender, Bill, and Merlin knows the names of the rest.... The possible severity of their injuries is enough to get his magic roaring sick with rage again, and Harry has to stop limping to take a small respite and calm himself down. With his body focusing on recovering, he's in an ideal condition to lose control of his magic, and accidental magic at his level would not be a good thing for anyone nearby.

“Merlin's beard,” Harry hears the familiar gruff voice of Rubius Hagrid grunt. Harry opens his eyes and looks high, above the half-giant's bushy beard to concerned-filled brown eyes. The large man looks him over, down to the bloody arm Harry's gripping by the wrist. “You keep still now, young one an wait fer 'elp. Yer' in no condition ta be movin' about.”

“Professor Hagrid?” Harry slowly asks, half from the pain and half to keep up pretenses. He's never met Hagrid in this time line, but he seems just as kind as his Hagrid.

“That's right, so don' worry,” Hagrid reassures him with both palms. “I'll stay wit'cha til 'elp arrives.”

“Thank you,” Harry states. “But it's better if I keep moving,” he replies, and it's true. While the Blood-Boiling Curse did little more than graze him, his blood feels like mud, and moving keeps it pumping until he can get it treated. Harry notices the Durmstrang students eyeing him as intently as the few Hogwarts students as he continues his trek to the castle, against Hagrid's stern advice. Hagrid offers to care for Nova, and any other time he wouldn't mind, but in this case, he doesn't want to let her out of his sight. When Harry asks about the other students, Hagrid couldn't say how many are injured or not. Harry only nods as Hagrid follows him, making sure other students keep away.

“Give em room,” Hagrid would say. “Come now, away with ya! Back to yer dorms! Keep back,” he'd add, keeping most back until Headmistress hastens to them. Her presence clears many of the students.

“Oh! My dear word,” McGonagall gasps at the bloody and disheveled sight of Harry. Her eyes hold on him for a long staggered moment before turning to Hagrid and stating, “we must continue searching for any injured students. In the event you find more, bring them to the hospital wing, even if the injury is minor or they're just frightened. Then make absolutely certain no one is
traversing the grounds. I want everyone in their houses, understood?”

Hagrid nods earnestly, “Yes, Deputy Headmistress. I'll bring Fang along wit me. Best search hound aroun', he is,” He turns to Harry and states with a smile, “you'll be fine lad,” then rushes off.

“Now, be at ease, Mr. Flamel. I'll bring you to the infirmary without further delay,” McGonagall states, bringing out her wand. At the sight of the wand, combat instinct triggers Harry to hop back, dropping the appendage and snapping his bloodied, white wand in his hand, ready to attack or defend.

For her part, McGonagall doesn't seem offended or aghast by his action toward authority. She slowly raises her empty palm while lowering her wand. “Mr. Flamel, you are safe now. I promise you I won't hurt you. I simply want to bring you to the infirmary.”

Harry doesn't put away his wand, but he does lower it. “How many are hurt?” he can't help but ask, quickly followed by, “did anyone- was anyone killed?”

McGonagall lowers her palm and returns her wand to a slot in her dress. It took no more than a second but the suspense was killing Harry until she answers, “no one lost their life, thank goodness.”

“But some were hurt?” He quickly asks.

With dismay, she nods, and states, “yes. Some have been injured.”

“How bad?” Harry immediately follows up.

“Come now, Mr. Flamel, there'll be time enough for questions later. You really must be looked after,” she responds concerned.

“I prefer to walk,” Harry tells her, taking a step.

“Absolutely not, young man,” she passionately returns. “I will not allow you to cause undue stress upon such grievous injuries-”
“I assure you, professor, I have certain family safeguards keeping me from mortal danger. And while I may be injured.... I just don't want to feel anyone else's magic on me,” Harry declares, sternly staring directly in her eyes a mixture of aggressive vulnerability. It's not that he expects her to do anything untoward, he just can't. Mentally, he's still too wound up from the battle, forcing him to vividly recall past onslaughts against Horcrux-Voldemort for supremacy of his mind. Despite rational thought telling him the chances of further danger is relatively low, he's just not in a place to trust anyone at the moment... or at least anyone who hasn't pledged a loyalty oath to him. He just needs more time to calm down, if not for himself, than for the safety of others.

“Very well,” she sorely states. Harry's aware allowing it must be against some procedure, so he appreciates her putting him over the rules, or maybe she understands this choice would be the safest. “But I insist on accompanying you the entire way and if I think for the briefest of moments your life is in imminent peril, I will use any means necessary to bring you to the infirmary, including rendering you unconscious, do I make myself clear?”

Harry slips his blood smeared wand into his holster, wondering why the charm on holster hasn't cleaned the blood off. Then he realizes his blood is still cursed, which means he'll have to clean it by hand. Slowly picking up Crouch Jr.'s torn off arm with a grimace, Harry answers McGonagall, “I can agree to that.”

“At least allow me to hold... dear me, the severed arm,” McGonagall uneasily requests.

“No need, professor, I got it,” Harry tells her, restarting his trek. “How many are injured?”

“...A few,” she answers after a pause, leaving Harry to wonder if she's lying and there are more than a few, or she simply feels odd answering the question of a fourteen year old.

They make their way into the school's front entrance when McGonagall asks, “who's arm does that belong to, Mr. Flamel? And please explain to me, from your perspective what occurred in the Great Hall.”

“I will,” Harry dully answers, walking empty halls, thinking, everyone must be on lock down. The biggest shuffling of movement comes from the portraits as painted subjects follow them. “I reckon many official witches and wizards will want to know what happened as well. Truthfully, I have a few questions of my own. So until everyone who needs to be here is, I'll wait, so as to not repeat myself with every posh robe that asks.”
“It isn’t about repeating ones self, Mr. Flamel,” McGonagall explains. “It’s about going over the facts of the event while they’re still fresh in your memory. The mind has a funny way about dealing with trauma, and this is about as traumatic as it gets.”

Harry turns to her, willing her to see his fake scars and the seriousness of his eyes and answers, “I guarantee you it's not.” The scars may be fake, but Harry has to admit, they add a certain weight to his words he couldn't manage as quickly with a clean unblemished face, like it's easier to believe he's had a hard life because there's visible proof. While he may not like the deceptive marks, he finds that they are an advantage. “And don't worry about my memory,” he assures. “I have a harder time forgetting than remembering.”

McGonagall presses her lips pondering her response when she tells him, “I will accept that for now as long as you tell me if there's anything imminent or dangerous I need to know about now to keep our students safe?”

“Yeah,” Harry groans. “Careful who you hire,” is the last thing he says—to conserve strength and for the sake of breathing properly.

Harry steps through the double doors of the hospital wing, a very familiar room he didn't expect to see again—especially in the first week of school. The sight of him has Madam Pomfrey calling out, “Why has he not been brought straight to me! Oh never mind. Any free bed is fine, Minerva. I'll be with him momentarily,” she assertively states as she rushes behind some screens. She seems very much in her element, but the only thing on his mind is the amount of students in beds—at least a dozen. While all beds have privacy screens, revealing only knees to feet, two beds have screens covering the entire bed, which can only mean they're in serious condition.

Counting fourteen pairs of feet on beds—minus the two completely covered beds—Harry whips around to McGonagall, despite his body's acute and painful protest and pointedly asks, “you call this a few?”

“The grand majority of the injuries are minor; scrapes, bruises, some smoke inhalation and or cuts,” she expresses, directing him to the nearest empty bed with a guiding palm.

Harry stays put, only of a mind to ask, “who are the two behind the curtains?”

“They are not for you to concern yourself with,” McGonagall states sternly.
“Yes, professor, they are,” Harry nearly yells, then leans over from the rolling avalanche of agony. While not overly loud, his tone was clear enough to draw the attention of the nearest few behind partial curtains.

Hermione rushes from her bed as McGonagall tells Harry, “Mr. Flamel, please take your bed this instant or I will make you.”

“**Harry**!” Hermione happily proclaims, her fluffy hair swishing behind her, and all smiles in her haste to him. When Harry realizes he mistook her *Harry* for *Ares*, her relief quickly sours to extreme concern.

*What a sight I must be,* Harry thinks. Grime, sweat, dirt, blood everywhere, cradling a weakened phoenix in one arm and gripping a severed arm in the other. She covers her mouth with both hands at the sight of him, and he tries smiling to reassure her he's fine, but he's not certain it came out well, because she's instantly by his side, her hand desperate to pull him to a bed, but careful not to hurt him.

“Oh, Merlin,” Hermione exclaims, leading him to a bed. “I'll-I'll get Madam Pomfrey for you. And- And she'll fix you right up, you'll see! You're going to be just fine, I promise you!”

“Thanks,” is all Harry states, finding it very difficult to look at her, so worried for him, and not think of his Hermione when she looked at him the same. Turning away, he unceremoniously sets the dirty and bloody arm on the night stand—finally noticing Voldemort's dark mark on the arm—then gently sets Nova down on the bed, before anxiously asking Hermione, “how are you? You're fine, right? I mean you weren't hurt anywhere?” he asks, his concerned eyes looking her over. Besides a thick build up of dirt and smoke residue, she looks well.

Hermione gawks at him, incredulous that he'd think to ask about her condition in spite of the state he's in, and quickly wells up with fat tears that should fall down her dirt stained cheeks but don't. Both hands cover her mouth and nose and she only has it in her to nod vehemently, finally shaking those fat tears loose and run down her cheeks, taking some of the dirt with it.

“Hey, now. No need for that,” he tries to placate her, taking a step closer to her, but her shedding tears quickly turn into a weeping sob and she turns away, rushing around Fleur and Fleur's older sister, to leave, calling out “I'll get the madam-”

*She just needs a bit of time,* a concerned voice in his head sounds as Harry quickly realizes he mistook Fleur's mother for an older sister—an older sister he ought to know she doesn't have. Young and beautiful as Fleur's mother looks, she's all concern and worry, holding onto Fleur as if
afraid to let her go. *Apolline,* Harry recalls, from Bill and Fleur's wedding. Fleur herself steps closer to Harry, aghast at the sight of his injuries but sternly tells him, “there are many who are only alive because of you. And this makes the second time you have saved my life,” she conveys, red nosed and strikingly grateful.

Eyes wider, Harry's too exhausted to deny it convincingly and even if he did, they both know she wouldn't buy it. Before any more can be said, Madam Pomfrey walks in from behind them, requesting privacy with demanding insistence. Apolline looks from her daughter to Harry, relaying in a sweet song voice, “until we speak again, be well Mr. Flamel.”

Madam Pomfrey draws the curtains to a close before whipping out her wand, making Harry very nervous. But before she can run her diagnostic, the screen opens for Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and a few others behind them Harry can't see.

“What is all this,” Pomfrey starts indignant. “I'm in the middle of caring for a patient, Headmaster.”

“I see that Poppy, however, is there anyway you can spare Mr. Flamel for a few urgent questions. Minerva has expressed that he's well enough to walk on his own and in no imminent danger.”

“Use your eyes, Albus,” Pomfrey returns dumbfounded. “Does he look well enough for questions? No, this is one patient your questions will have to wait until I've cleared him.”

“I do apologize Poppy,” Dumbledore starts with a bit of urgency. “I understand your oath compels you to do all you must for the injured, however this is a state of emergency, and I only ask you treat him as we question him to ascertain what happened and why.”

“I'd say that's pretty clear,” Harry grunts, feeling the injuries catching up to him. “You hired a murderer, Headmaster.” Startling both Dumbledore and Pomfrey.

“Headmaster, if we can relocate somewhere private,” Harry hears a child-like voice behind Dumbledore asks. The voice sounds familiar, though he's too tired to recall. Clearly there's a bit of a crowd with Dumbledore and Harry's fairly certain they all came straight from the Wizengamot.

“You must all leave, immediately,” Pomfrey calls out, stepping up to the group. “I cannot have this much commotion around my patients!”
“It is regrettable Poppy but I’m afraid I must insist,” Dumbledore asserts. “For the safety of the castle, we must question Mr. Flamel.”

“Well I refuse your insistence Headmaster,” she returns. “So long as I’m the Madam of this castle, I have final authority over all injured students!”

“There’s a madman on the loose, woman,” someone calls from the back, and Harry’s had enough.

“Madam Pomfrey,” Harry calls as he grabs the severed arm from the night stand. When she turns to him, Harry states, “if you can give me five minutes I’ll get rid of everyone and be right back so you can treat me, though I promise you, I’m mostly fine,” he reassures her. “You’ll see. But they need answers and it won't take me longer than five minutes.”

“I dare say it may take longer than that but I promise we'll keep a careful eye on him, and return him to your healing hands right away,” Dumbledore adds to Harry’s compromise.

“No,” Harry tells Dumbledore, surprising Pomfrey. “It won't take longer than five minutes,” and Harry means it. He honestly doesn't want to get dragged into an endless cycle of useless, irrational, and repeat questions.

“Fine,” Pomfrey acquiesces. “five minutes. Not a second more or I stun first, understand me?” Harry nods and Dumbledore leads the host of officials who insist they’re important enough to be there outside. Before he follows them, Hermione rushes up to him.

“Where are you going,” she demands, then looks him over. “You haven't been treated yet. You should be resting!”

“I will,” he gently tells her. “They just need a little information from my end. It won't take long, but can I ask you to watch Nova for me,” he asks turning to his resting familiar on his bed. “I don't want to leave her alone.”

“Of course,” Hermione quickly answers. Harry can see in her eyes, she wants to say more, but instead nods solemnly and sits with Nova. Before he exits, he walks over to the two beds completely covered by the screens. Somehow, a faint feeling tells him Draco is the one in front of him, and he wonders if he should check on him when the curtain abruptly opens. A shaken Narcissa Malfoy opens the screen wide enough for him to see Draco. The silver-blond's eyes are closed and he appears to be resting as he slowly raises his hand to Harry. It's enough to let him
Out in the hall, Harry meets Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, the source of the childlike voice Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, Lucius Malfoy, Amelia Bones, Sirius Black, Kingsley Shaklebolt, a woman he isn't familiar with and Madame Maxime; all of whom are alarmed in their own way at the sight of him. Harry actively has to avoid gazing at his Godfather, who's looking much more healthy and handsome than the Sirius Black from his time line. While it's a grand joy to see the old dog, fortunately it's not emotionally devastating. Rushed crisp footsteps echo down the hall toward them, prompting Dumbledore to suggest, “perhaps we should take this to the next room for some privacy.”

Many start moving automatically at his behest, and stop just as abruptly when Harry clearly pronounces, “no. That won't be necessary.” It wasn't a death threat so Harry can't understand the shocked faces. He can only assume the majority of them have grown very accustomed to Dumbledore. It's like they count on the wise old leader of the light to know what's right and take the lead.

As it turns out, those footfalls belong to Lily Potter, Harry apprehensively notes, as she rushes to the double doors carrying a tray of vials. The moment her kill me green eyes land on him, she immediately makes a beeline for him. Harry had to fight everything in him from taking a step away from her worried approach. Her scent enters his nostrils just like her presence softens his soul. She's so close to him, beautiful green eyes deeply concerned and he's so overwhelmed he only has sense enough to keep his mouth shut and struggle not to look too stricken. He doesn't even understand her words when she says, “Good Godric, what in Merlin's great name are you doing out here? You need to be in bed!” He only takes exigent comfort in the sound of her voice.

Dumbledore clears his throat and tells her, “It's quite alright, Lily. Poppy is aware. Please continue to aid her and I assure you, Mr. Flamel will be in before too long.”

Lily gives Harry one last look. She tilts her head a moment, before slowly entering the infirmary. Harry hopes that his look of weariness, all the dried blood, sweat and grime on his face and his mucked up hair will be enough to mask his near emotional break. With her gone, Harry takes a moment to correct himself, giving Umbridge, in her garish fluffy pink outfit, enough time to fake a cough, “Hem-Hem,” drawing attention to her and stating in her childish high pitched voice, “I'm sure I misheard you Headmaster Dumbledore. It's quite clear this is a rather serious matter and will take some time to-”

“Hey lady,” Harry rudely calls, interrupting her. Glaring at this time line's Delores Umbridge easily recalls her cruelty, her sadism, and garners very little patience, if any for this toad in pink. “Does it bloody look like I want to stand here all damn day and answer your fucking questions?”
That caused a commotion among the adults, or at least from those that don't expect that from a fourteen year old that's also heir to a Noble and Most Ancient House. Snape, Dumbledore, and McGonagall didn't react much more than resigned acceptance, Umbridge is immediately offended, and Harry manages to catch a smirk from Sirius.

“Such a silly silly thing to say, young man. Perhaps you are confused. We are all friends here,” Umbridge recites in her high pitched singsong tone. “Allow me to introduce myself. I'm-”

Harry overlooks her to address the group. “Allow me to be perfectly blunt. I'm fairly certain this constitutes an official investigation by the Ministry, and if you're not my Headmaster, the head of the DMLE, or the head Auror, consider your presence here a courtesy.”

Sirius's grin makes Harry feel proud but he remains stern of countenance as Amelia steps forward, just as hard and serious. “I'm the Magical Law Enforcement department head, Amelia Bones, and this is Head Auror, Sirius Black. What can you tell us.”

“Pleasure,” Harry dully states, holding out the arm to Sirius. “I took this off of the impostor who attacked everyone in the Great Hall. You'll note Voldemort's-” many shudder, gasp, or yelp at the mention of the name but Harry ignores them. “Dark mark on the arm; it only appeared recently. It wasn't there when I first cut it off.”

“How could you have possibly-” Lucius starts to say when he's interrupted.

“An impostor?” Amelia asks interrupting Malfoy Senior. “You mean to say, he wasn't your Defense Against Dark Arts Professor, Alastor Moody?”

“How can you be sure?” Dumbledore asks in his grandfatherly voice.

“Three clues; in order of observation. This Professor Moody drinks often from a flask. I heard it was a habit born out of paranoia, but I just thought he was a paranoid drunk. Still, nothing significant there until Hardwin Potter called him Bartemius Crouch in the Great Hall. Not sure who that is, but the impostor did not take too kindly to the name. Of course he could've just been overreacting, despite the few killing curses he threw out, but if you add the dark mark reappearing on a younger looking arm, I figured he must've been disguising himself, likely through the use of Polyjuice Potion.”

Amelia turns to Sirius. He nods and brings out his wand. He chants quietly a moment the reverse
incantatem charm, a gold thread-like magic extends from his wand and connects to the arm. The resulting mist-like body that extends from the arm was a ghostly echo that wasn't quite as clear as a ghost, but left no doubt in anyone's mind.

“Barty Crouch Jr!” Amelia gasps. “I thought he was dead,” Sirius adds. Everyone who knew the name seem to react in their own stunned way to the revelation. Madame Maxime asks, “Who ees zhis man who attacked my student?”

“I'd be happy to brief you if would be so gracious as to give me a moment,” Amelia tells the large Headmistress before turning to Sirius and commanding him to, “take Shacklebolt and Longbottom to the Ministry and arrest Crouch Senior. Don't even bother asking him to come quietly. Stun him first, then ready the veritaserum. No one questions him until I get there, understand?”

Aside from the shock of hearing Neville's surname and the woman who must be Alice Longbottom leave, Harry really appreciates Amelia's no nonsense approach. It reminds him a lot of what the real Moody would do. Nodding along Harry adds aloud, “You may also want to check fake Moody's living quarters.”

“We intend to, in good time,” Dumbledore starts. “But first I'd like to know how you managed to survive an encounter with a renown and powerful Death Eater?”

“Like I said, I didn't know who he was, and I still don't, but are you sure you wouldn't rather check to see if the real Moody is trapped or dead somewhere first?” Harry returns looking at Dumbledore, bewildered by his callousness. “He might have friends that are worried about him or something,” Harry adds, slightly more amused than he should be to throw Dumbledore's friendship with Moody in his face.

Snape explains to a confused Lucius and Umbridge, “for prolonged use, the potion needs a stable source of samples from a living person to function.”

“Which means he's more than likely alive and trapped,” Amelia realizes. “And he'll have to be close for easy access.”

“Professors McGonagall and Flitwick,” Dumbledore turns to them. “If you would be so kind as to check the living space of the impostor.”

“I'd look in the trunk,” Harry suggests as the professors leave, followed by a large painful yawn
and wince. “If someone would contact my parents I'd appreciate that,” Harry tells them as he turns away, intent on checking on Nova.

“Hem-Hem,” Harry hears the pink toad fake her cough to get his attention but he continues until Dumbledore calls, “Mr. Flamel.”

Harry turns to the older man, responding, “yes, headmaster?”

“I realize you are hurt, but if you could be courageous for a bit longer and answer a few more questions, it would be tremendously helpful,” he states. Even Amelia looks hopeful to learn more.

“Tough,” Harry replies. “There's nothing more for me to say, and I think I've been courageous enough for one day. Anything else you want to know has other witnesses you can ask, so, if you'll excuse me.” Harry enters the infirmary ward and heads straight to bed, where Pomfrey quickly takes over his treatment.

A strong hand holds Harry down, stabbing him in the gut with a large knife, awakens Harry with an aggressive fright, violently sitting up on his infirmary bed, snapping his wand in hand as his blurry vision adjusts to the light.


The sight of her and the peaceful infirmary slowly lowers his guard and his wand. Pressing his hand to cover his eyes, he starts to recall the long list of nightmares and asks, “How long have I been out?” In that moment, Nova flaps her long wings on her drop from her stand to his lap and hops closer to cuddle closely to him. “Hey, girl,” Harry tells her, affectionately stroking her feathers. “I missed you too. You were so bloody brave. I'm so proud of you.” Harry makes a mental note to go check on Hedwig as soon as he can.

“A solid eighteen hours,” Perenelle answers bringing out her wand and running a diagnostic.

“Eighteen hours?” Harry voices unbelievably. “I may have been tagged a few times but that seems like a long layabout.”
“It isn’t actually,” Perenelle returns as she continues to look him over. “Treating circulating blood that’s been cursed to boil can be a lengthy treatment. You, my young Trouble Star, are now about as perfect as can be,” she pronounces, putting her wand away. At his questioning brow, she explains, “Well, you do seem to find yourself in the middle of very dangerous situations an awful lot... much to my dismay, if I’m being honest.” At Harry’s half-lidded, stern, ‘you know I have to,’ look, she raises her palms to yield.

“How are the others?” Harry asks looking around the nearly empty ward. He spots one bed with a screen blocking down to his knees but Harry can tell it’s Draco. “What’s been happening while I was out?”

“Everyone is fine, Ares,” Perenelle says, using his cover name. The direct way her eyes are looking at him tells him that it’s not safe to talk so Harry enacts privacy charms on top of Muffliato and she continues, “The grand majority were released yesterday. As far as the investigation, they haven’t told us much more than confirming what you’ve already guessed.”

“How’s Draco?” Harry asked with the mildest amount of concern he’ll allow himself to have for his quasi-companion.

“Young man, very fair head of blonde hair, looks a bit like a ferret?” she asks and at Harry’s smirking nod, she answers, “his injuries were fairly extensive, however he’s resting well now, and Madam Pomfrey has told me he’ll make a full recovery by Monday.”

“Where's Nicolas?” Harry wonders as he sets Nova on the bed and grabs his spare clothes from the night stand.

Perenelle stands and turns to give him privacy. “He’s either meeting privately with Dumbledore to chew him out, meeting Dumbledore and the governors to figure out what to do about History of Magic class, or with Madame Maxime, all of whom are very eager to speak with us as promptly as possible.”

“Talk to us?” Harry wonders. “Don't they have everything they need?”

“They have nearly everything they need from the Weasley heir’s memory and the few children who consented to give their memory. When I said us I mean house Flamel. It's the typical situation management one might expect after a horrible event like this. So he's dealing with the scheduling of all that at the moment. I hope you've prepared yourself.”
“I don’t underst-” Harry cuts himself off to ask, “did you add another scar?” Looking at the three inch scar on his right thigh where the Blasting Curse grazed him.

“Oh!” Perenelle hotly gripes. “ Noticed that did ya? The one in the spot where a blasting curse could’ve easily taken your leg? Is that the one you’re referring to,” she asks, clearly upset but with a lot of bite in her words. “Nicolas and I would like you to know we worry, and every bloody scuffle you’re apart of is in some ways like a scar for us-”

“That you then tattoo on my body,” Harry exclaims, putting on his slacks.

“Just a helpful reminder,” Perenelle tries to keep the sharpness from her tone as Harry grumbles nonsensically. With a deflating sigh, she states, “let us know whenever you want them removed.”

He can't for the life of him think who would see the scar on his thigh, but he doesn't care enough to get it removed, and every time he showers, they do remind him of his battles, past and future, like a small call to arms for the war that lays ahead. “...So, what's this situation management your talking about, and why do I have to be prepared for it?” Harry asks, putting on his black, long sleeve, winter sweater.

“Oh, you know, it's the usual... oh,” Perenelle chuckles, then turns to him with a wicked smile. “Oh, Merlin, you're not going to like this.” Harry gives her an impatient look and she further explains. “Okay, lets assume you were a middle or lower class citizen and you saved someone's life. Normally, they thank you in whatever way they feel is proper or can, and then you both run along your merry way. That instructional guide, for instance; the one Nicolas gave you to help train your body. Year of the Dragon by Lee Jun-Fan, was an honor gift of gratitude from a young man Nicolas helped escape a group of gangsters trying to kill him in the streets of China. The boy didn't have much but he knew how to train. He wrote it all down and presented it to Nicolas to show how thankful he was, and though my husband would never use it, he graciously accepted.”

Harry's looking at her with a thick amount of suspicion as he points out, “But I’m not middle or lower class.”

Perenelle nods in lamentable acceptance and repeats, “But you are not middle or lower class, no. As a member of high society, or let's say a Noble and Most Ancient House, the process of receiving honor debts is far more... regulated? Cultured.”

“Bothersome-” Harry clarifies.
“Formal-” Perenelle counterclaims.

“It's annoying, isn't it?” Harry interjects already feeling anxious about this.

“It's just a grander affair, is all” Perenelle corrects. “With some silly rules here and there.”

Though she's trying to make light of the situation, Harry is properly irritated by the headache ahead. “You're saying I'm going to have to do things I'd never voluntarily want to do, aren't you?”

“You know,” she starts trying to add a positive spin. “At it's essence, it's still an expression of gratitude nearly like any other. Maybe a little more extravagant for your taste, but Harry, it's the method they feel can best show you how thankful they are.”

“I'll just take the, 'thank you,' if I have to, but honestly, I don't care for that either. I'm not doing this for anyone's gratitude.”

Perenelle gives Harry a long tilted look before remarking, “you know, for someone who would rather keep everyone at arm's length, you sure do have a funny way of going about it. Do you know how many lives you saved? There are thirty-six souls, young and old, who are walking, talking, and breathing because of you.”

“What does that mean, or matter, really? Of course I didn't want anyone to get hurt—no one would—but that had little to do with saving them and everything to do with my responsibility. I was the only one there strong enough to stop him, so I did, end of story. And now, what, you want me to dress up, put on a show about what a great humanitarian I am and endorse their praise, like I didn't think they were severe handicaps holding me back from capturing that sadistic fuck?”

“Language,” Perenelle automatically points out, making Harry tilt his head at her with some disbelief.

Harry shakes his head and continues, “I didn't do it for them. I did it because I didn't have the option not to, and accepting all that praise and gratitude for something anyone would've have done if they could've is just letting them believe and publicize a lie. It wasn't a selfless act, like you'd expect of a proper hero. I did it for selfish reasons. They're alive because I'm tired of the guilt! And I don't want Voldemort to win anymore! How can I look someone in the eye and accept this falsehood, when I know it's wrong? No, Perenelle. I'm sorry, but I don't want to be a part of that simply because of my status.”
“Sooo to hell with all of them? You're plan is to what, turn them away at the door? Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Sure, whatever works,” Harry answers, nearly ready to leave, when Perenelle motions for him to sit on the bed, which he reluctantly does while she takes the seat right in front of him.

“Listen, and listen well,” Perenelle starts, looking him straight in the eye, earnestly and tenderly. “I'm not buying it,” she said sweetly as she called him a liar.

“On some level, you may be right, but that isn't what this is really about. I've been alive long enough to recognize those eyes and that rationale. You need to understand, the goodness in most people when they are faced with their own mortality or the near loss of a loved one is immense. The heirs of Houses Malfoy, Greengrass, Zabini, Weasley, Longbottom... Potter; you saved all their lives. You saved the life of Sirius Black's future stepdaughter, as well as a Beauxbaton student who just happens to be the first born daughter of the Deputy Minister, Stéphane Delacour of the French Ministry of Magic. Even without social status, mothers and fathers who love their children more than their own lives, won't have to suffer the terrible ordeal of purchasing coffins to bury them in... because of you. To you it may very well appear like some casual thing no different than passing the salt, but to them, for the terrible road narrowly avoided, they want to offer generosity that goes far beyond a simple handshake and a shrug. And you do them more harm for not accepting—”

“It's still—” Harry tries to interject, shaking his head at her argument as he excessively bounces his left knee.

“No, sir, you've said your piece, now you listen to mine,” she interrupts him sternly and continues, not giving him the chance to respond. “You are not lying to them. You did save lives, and for that act alone, they want to-No, they need to express their appreciation, but your stubbornness won't allow them to because that benevolence terrifies you... because it forces you to acknowledge their perspective of how they see you; that you are amazing, that you did something great therefore you must be great, and you don't see yourself that way, do you? On that level of emotional honesty, how they see you contradicts your own self-view because you think you're damaged beyond repair. You think there's not enough goodness in you to be a decent person. You think you're unlovable. And why wouldn't you? After the horrors you've lived nearly your entire life.”

The feeling of toxic confinement grows too much for Harry who abruptly gets to his feet to leave the suffocating space, but she stands and steps in his path faster, staring up, deep into his tight, red-rimmed eyes.
“I look at you Harry and I can tell the pain is easier to bare than the love. You think it'll break you to let anyone in, to allow that vulnerability, but you're wrong. Maybe in some ways it makes what you feel you need to do for all of us easier, but I'm telling you, I promise you, it won't. What you did for everyone in the Great Hall was bravery of the highest order, but I'd be even more proud of you when you realize there is far more strength in a family—the one you're born into and the one you choose—than there is in solitude. Because when you really need your family, they will not let you down.”

Fists clenched, eyes wet and hard, fierce brows knitted together, Harry is rooted as Perenelle continues, ‘‘I am not a dark lord,’ remember? ‘And I will never allow myself to be one.’ Your words to us when we first met. Do you think Tom Riddle ever liked the idea of vulnerability or sees attachments as nothing more than a means to an end, handicaps besides? You may not feel worthy of the gratitude, but for this, Harry, you hold your head high and accept that truth about yourself. Don't lie like he would. Their opinion of you doesn't change what you have to do, so don't follow that dark tosser's example and graciously accept their gratitude.”

Harry is lost in that small space, and looks for anyway out, randomly reasoning, “I didn't-”

“I know,” she cuts him off again. “I know the plan was to capture him, but the circumstance changed and you adapted to it as best as anyone could, Merlin included. You didn't fail Harry. Every person alive because of you is like another fat, ‘fuck you’ to Voldemort.”

“... language” Harry says weakly, hoping to break some of the suffocating tension. The briefest of smile on her face is like a dam of relief and he quickly steps around Perenelle, muttering, “got to fly Nova.”

Harry is racing through the Dark Forest, spending hours going deep into it's ancient trees at top speed, unconcerned by the many dangers it houses or direction he takes. All Harry wants to do is find a dark place, and not matter to anyone for the briefest of infinities. While Nova flies overhead, a heaving Harry spots a particularly interesting pine tree that's deathly white.

“A death tree,” Harry recalls from one of Perenelle's 1000 Uses for Roots book. He read any tree can turn deathly white, from root to leaf, when the blood of a unicorn is spilled on the soil above it's roots. The book didn't mention if it was good luck or not to be near it, but it seems fitting he should sit, cross-legged and lean against the ghostly pine. For nearly three hours Harry can only wonder if he really is gravitating toward Tom Riddle—slowly and without notice. He's far more different than he used to be, but he was always able to convince himself it was just his lot in life and he was doing the best he can. How could pleasantries, quidditch, family, friends, how could any of that matter in the face of stopping the worst evil the world had ever known... will know?

But in the process, Harry never once questioned if he now shared a similar doctrine as Tom Riddle.
How much of himself is like that monster? He wonders over and over. The possibility shakes him to the core because hating all of Tom Riddle, now means hating part of himself and every time he manages to convince himself there's no other way, he wonders at the validity and the falseness of it to utter confusion.

From an emotional stand point, letting anyone in does terrify him—even this Hermione, since Ron will keep away on his own—but what's worse is he's certain Voldemort would never let anyone in as well, automatically making him not want to be so closed off. But to what degree, is the only thing Harry has left to ponder when checks back into the world and he is surrounded.

So lost in his head, Harry never realized a whole horde of very large acromantula have surrounded him in a perfect circle around the death tree, clicking their pincers away in rapt hunger. His obvious thought of why they haven't attacked is immediately answered by the Death Tree. Harry theorizes they won't dare cross the Unicorn tainted soil, which is the only reason he felt no danger while he was within his mind. Not bothered in the slightest by the very large, hungry spiders, Harry calls, “Nova.” She flaps down from the branch she was perched on to his shoulder and they flame back to his room in Slytherin.

By Monday, Harry receives a shock he wasn't expecting as Draco enters the empty common room for their morning work out.

“Here,” Draco extends to Harry a ratty old parchment that's slightly burned, but is as familiar to him as his own hand. “I know you initially wanted it to catch Crouch, but when Weasley dropped it, I thought you might still want it. Plus, if we have it, than they can't track us so easily.”

Harry slowly takes the Maurader's Map, uncomfortably unsure of how to express an unanticipated feeling of gratitude he didn't know he could actually posses for his former, school yard nemesis. “...Thanks, Draco.”

Immediately after he said it, they both feel weird, prompting Draco to spout, “you're still a right tosser tho.”

“Right back at you ferret wanker,” Harry returns, and quickly enough, exercising with Draco to insane lengths felt normal again. The week passes in at a hurried pace, with little else for the school to talk about other than the attack on Hogwart's. Predictably, it made The Prophet's front page, but worse, is the moving photo from a memory they somehow acquired. It clearly shows the panic in the large dining hall from the perspective of a frightened Gryffindor, with Ares Flamel and Fake Moody battling it out. The photo is only a three second loop but it's near seamless enough to make it seem like the longest trade of quick casting wand work. Every day there's a new article pointing out another unexpected but equally mundane point to it's readers and it makes Harry do his absolute best to avoid crowds wherever he went. He's the last one in class, first one to leave,
disillusions himself when he has to walk the halls and all meal periods are taken either outside or in the kitchens.

His hope is if they don't see him, than most can start to forget him, but with every issue of The Daily Prophet comes another wave of enthusiasm. If that wasn't enough, Cornelius Fudge could not be seen doing less than a fourteen year old and has stationed Aurors around the school so the ministry can seem like they have the situation well in hand. While the public clamor for more Ministry involvement to protect the children, they can't quite agree on what and have been holding daily meetings to deal with this threat.

The first weekend after the incident was already full, scheduled by Nicolas and Perenelle for Honor Meetings to talk about the life debts incurred. Harry agreed to do his part, much to Perenelle's delight and Nicolas' surprise. So, for three weekends in a row, Harry was bound to these meetings that can last as long as two hours. Though Nicolas and Perenelle do most of the talking, Harry has a part of his own he's obligated to do to accept their gratitude, what's referred to as the Esteem.

After the speech by both Houses, the meeting would be about finding acceptable terms for galleons to be rewarded, extravagant gifts and or favors to give. In every case, the Flamels would try to lower their generosity to simple or meager gifts or favors. Everyone knew The Flamels have more money than they know what to do with and can buy anything their heart desired, so by the end of each meeting, Nicolas and Perenelle would walk out with either a unique item they already own or an unspecified favor to be called on at a later date. Naturally none of the Flamels had any intention of calling in the favor unless it would prove useful in stopping Voldemort in some way.

Most of the Honor Meetings are held in a private room in The Three Broomsticks, in Hogsmeade Village. They were also simple and clearly about nothing more than expressing stunning gratitude to Ares and the Flamels. The Malfoys, however did not go quite as predicted. Harry was certain Lucius was going to be shrewd, cruel, and a pompous aristocratic arsehole, if not both Lucius and Narcissa, but the only one he wasn't was cruel. It would've been a new feat for him to be cruel and gracious in an Honor Meeting but he, along with Narcissa, kept to the code of conduct and Esteem speeches set by the society and commission.

It didn't stop Malfoy Sr. from expressing his entitled thoughts after the negotiations, “I must say, I couldn't for the life of me fathom why my son would forgo alliances the great house of Malfoy have cultivated to establish a rapport with you, heir Ares, but clearly he was insightful enough to see what no one else did. Having witnessed the memories available of your duel against that rather capable impostor, it's clear to me you don't at all appear as distressed by the use of the Dark Arts as your dear Headmaster exemplifies.”

It's a new low in Harry's life when Lucius Malfoy is trying to relate with him and he can feel his stomach roll when he doesn't completely disagree with the man. “I can't speak for the Headmaster
but I'm sure even he would agree attempting to kill children shouldn't end well for anyone.”

“No, it should not,” Narcissa vehemently asserts. One stern look from Lucius and the Lady Malfoy says nothing more.

“Well, while the Headmaster could not resist his sanctimonious urge to share his displeasure for the severity of your tactics, I find it a comfort to know the future of the Dark Arts is steadfast in our youth.”

“It's not about the Dark Art's, Mr. Malfoy,” Nicolas claims. “It's about irresponsibility. No one has the right to impose their will on others. Dark or Light.”

“And any who try, will only find ferocious opposition,” Harry adds staring at the man with bitter severity.

“You certainly have an interesting taste in allies, Draco,” Malfoy states with a stiff upper lip in reserved indignation.

“Heir Ares and I share a vision for an enlightened future, father; where power doesn't require the sacrifice of children to keep it.” It's clear to Harry where Draco's head is at—always with his son—but it wasn't until this moment when he thought of himself in that assessment. Narcissa tilts her chin higher, her restrained smile clear proof of pride while Lucius gives Draco a disappointed eye. The Malfoys stand to leave but before Lucius does, he reaches into his fine cloak.

“On the matter of Dumbledore's growing pattern of incompetence,” Lucius starts turning to Nicolas. “In light of the growing number of students neglecting their History course, the Governors have a proposition to offer you. If you would be so kind as to alert us of your decision by the end of the week.” Lucius hands Nicolas a leather binder before leaving, officially ending the Honor Meeting.

Out of all the Honor Meetings, Daphne's, Tracey's, Fleur's and Potter's were the most flavorful experiences, far too spicy to go down without choking. Tracey's and Potter's meetings caused Harry crippling apprehension since Sirius and Lily are the two most likely to see the resemblance between him and his father, James Potter, and make connections no one else might, likely leading to a whole host of hard questions Harry can't answer truthfully. While covering his face didn't make any sense and would only serve to increases suspicion, Nicolas and Perenelle both understand that they need to take the lead in most of the conversations to keep as much attention on them and away from Harry as much as possible.
For Tracey's Honor Meeting, Harry thought of an interesting idea to rush through it and only needed the right opening to use it.

“I'm sure you've been hearing this a lot but customs and whatnot being what they are,” Sirius starts with an eye roll and a dejected huff. “I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, do pass ourselves unto thee, Ares Flamel, heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Flamel, grace of gratitude and honor of debt, for delivering precious life blood of our noble house from immediate and untold peril. As Head of our Noble House what we give, you have but to ask and it is yours.”

Practiced and just as bored by it as Sirius is, Harry weakly responds, “I, Ares Flamel, heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Flamel, humbled with the dignity of thy house, do accept your most gracious and honorable debt and gratitude for precipitous and selfless deeds rendered. As heir of our Noble House, we ask but for the world of your words, and the fruits they may bare.”

By their lackluster tones, it's clear neither of them like the social mandates of high society.

“Fucking bullocks, isn't it,” Sirius calmly asks Harry from the opposite side of the table, who wholeheartedly agrees with an audible groan of annoyance.

“Siri!” Tracey's mother calls with something of a smirk. Seated next to him, she isn't reserved enough not to smack him in the shoulder for breaking custom. Tracey seemed to accept his aloof demeanor and keep herself poised like a good heiress should.

Nicolas just laughs as Perenelle smiles. “It's quite alright,” Nicolas says. “I'm not sure any of us are thrilled by high society and noble customs so I doubt the Ancient Noble's Society will hear about it.”

“I think it's absolutely vital to maintain our customs and ways,” Tracey announces from her seat next to Sirius, making her position known. “Or we risk losing the ties of our heritage and the greatness that was so revered.”

“I agree we should never forget our past but we should not let it define us either, young heiress,” Perenelle tells her with all the centuries of knowledge clear in her understanding tone. “It is our values and heart that will always keep our modern growth tethered to the best our roots.”
“Well said,” Tracey's mother agrees.

To the best of Nicolas and Perenelle's efforts, they attempt to lower the extravagance of their offer, much to Tracey and her mother's surprise. “It's not that we can't comprehend or even fathom what this means to you,” Perenelle looks over to Harry and he understands that technically, they have seen him injured often enough. He looks a little sheepish as she continues, “because we can. When you've lived as long as we have, well, to put it as plainly as I can, we'd rather enjoy the company of friends and loved ones in place of stylish and opulent gifts. It's always been our way, so if possible, we'd love to have family dinners whenever possible.”

“As my wife said, a good meal and plentiful laughs is what makes life great, and we'd love nothing more than to share a dinner or two with you and toast to good times ahead.”

“Dinners and toasts?” Sirius asks shocked himself.

“And all you want are dinners?” Tracey's mother starts. “Your son saved my only daughter's life,” Tracey says looking at Harry incredulously.

“Oh, pish posh. Before the galleons and accolades, I always remember the friends and the times we shared, Nicolas tells them. “Those memories are among my most treasured possessions and you can't put a value on a good laugh, wouldn't you say, Ares?” Nicolas asks, and though Harry would rather avoid Sirius's attention, he catches on that the statement is for Sirius's benefit and does nothing more than smile.

Thinking about Harry's school prank, Sirius can't help but look up fondly and saying, “that was a bloody brilliant prank.”

“There must be something else the Noble House of Black can offer you,” Tracey implores. “This is about honor and duty. Surely you must want something of equal value.”

“I'd say the value of friendship is more than fair, and like fine wine, only becomes richer with age,” Nicolas tells the girl.

“Than you must come to our wedding,” Tracey's mother declares. “I insist. It'll be a casual affair, but we would be honored to have you. You must attend.” Sirius agrees with a nod and a loving look
at Tracey's mother, and adds, “it's the least we can do.”

“It's much too least we can do,” Tracey says, prompting Sirius to turn to her.

“You'll have to forgive Tracey,” Sirius says with a smile. “I think she's been reading far too many romance stories about marriage contracts between pompous rich boys and modern girls.”

That's exactly what Harry needed to rush this meeting along—something big that might help move them from this whole affair. Tracey breaks decorum and looks sufficiently embarrassed. More so when her mother jokes, “is that true, honey? Were you expecting talks about marriage contracts?”

Before Tracey can protest, indignantly, Harry chuckles along with Sirius and nonchalantly yaks, “ha! not if Draco has anything to say about it!” Harry laughs despite Tracey's large surprised eyes. Her parents express a jolted curiosity at the name drop as they turn to their speechless daughter, who's starting to turn red in the face. “You should've seen the glare he gave before coming to meet you,” Harry continues feigning obliviousness. “I swear he thinks it might happen!”

In truth, the look Draco gave him before the meeting was of mild disinterest as he was too exhausted from the weight and intense core exercises they did early in the morning. And while Harry knows this might cause Draco added annoyance and irritation, Harry needed to do it to give the Black's another focus they'd prefer to talk about.

“Draco?” Sirius queerly questions. “Draco Malfoy? A Malfoy?” And from there the meeting is over in a matter of minutes, much to Harry’s relief.

The Honor Meeting with the Noble House of Greengrass was almost as strenuous because Daphne's father did offer them a marriage contract. Seated in the same set up as every other Honor Meeting, with the Greengrasses on one side of the table, and the Flamels on the other, Harry's first impression of Daphne's father was of a business elite, soulless automaton and only worsened from there. The man was exceedingly strict and Harry didn't like how he seems to see his daughters as little more than commodities. The slightest tenseness in the skin between Daphne's brow made Harry wonder if she knew her father was going to offer a marriage debt. Of all the Honor Meetings, Mr. Greengrass was the only one to offer marriage—not for Daphne's hand, but for Astoria’s. Fortunately, the youngest Greengrass was not present, but even if she was, Nicolas and Perenelle would've turned the offer down with all the politeness of their station.

Mr. Greengrass then proceeded to compose a masterful business proposition between their houses that if accepted, would leave an impression on the whole of magical society and stand the test of time. By the end of the meeting, the Flamels thanked him for his thoughtful presentation, accepted
a third of the galleons offered, a favor for a later date, and nothing more. Daphne was hard to read throughout the entire exchange but something told him, she expected as much. As she dutifully followed her father out of the private room, Harry makes a mental note to talk to her in detail of the things left out of the meeting.

“That was tense,” Nicolas tells the two. “I would've offered family dinners but...”

“No, no, I quite agree,” Perenelle hops on that sentiment. “Dinner with a troll would be less tense.” She turns to Harry and asks, “so that lovely young lady is interested in perusing our library during winter break? You said she's looking for books on blood curses?”

“Yeah,” Harry answers. “Her sister, Astoria, has some sort of blood curse she wants to cure. But first she needs to learn what the curse is, hence searching your library. She's already searched a number of other libraries but hasn't been able to find anything yet.”

“Please let her know we'd be happy to examine her sister the first available chance we have,” Perenelle tells Harry. “And she's more than welcome to look through our library come winter break.”

“I'm sure she'll be happy to hear that,” Harry states as they start to leave.

“Happy enough for a kiss or two?” Perenelle jokes.

“Perenelle...” Harry groans, exasperated by their constant innuendo.

“Maybe Mr. Greengrass offered the wrong hand in marriage?” Nicolas adds on in good humor, irritating Harry further.

The Delacours Honor Meeting could not be chanced in the private room of The Three Broomsticks, so they floo'd to the Flamels London Brownstone where privacy would be assured. Fleur's parents and even her little sister joined the Flamels in the parlor room beautifully lite as the afternoon sun shines through the many window wall that leads to the patio. The seating arrangement is no different than the other Honor Meetings with the Delacours on one side and the Flamels on the other. Tea and biscuits are put out and though there are no negative feelings between the families, the room is tense.
“Why did you never come forward?” Fleur abruptly asks Harry, much to Apolline and Stéphane's vocal chagrin.

“Fleur,” her mother admonishes.

“Please forgive our daughter,” Stéphane states with all the gravitas of a commanding official. “She can forget herself in her excitement, however she knows we have etiquette that custom our behavior.”

“No apologies necessary,” Nicolas replies with a smile. “And please, you're welcome guests in our home. While there is a time and place for formality, I can assure you this is the time for neither.”

“Nicolas and I felt,” Perenelle starts, taking a moment to look at Ares. “Given what's at stake for us, for our Ares, delicacy in this meeting is paramount.”

“Ow do you mean?” Apolline asks confused. “Afterr all zhat you 'ave done for our family, eet ees us w'o must be considerate of you, I should zhink.”

“We feel this case may be different,” Nicolas tells the Delacours, before turning to Fleur. “We do not deny what you must've already guessed and it would be in poor spirit to sell you an inaccurate cover story. If our families are to develop favorable relations, a lie at the beginning just would not do.”

“E saved my sister’s life zhat night,” Fleur declares, looking at the Flamels in disbelief, as if wondering why they can't understand such a simple thing. “Az well as my own. I do not unzerstand why you neverre came forwarrd so zhat we may properly show you zhe 'onor of our gratitude.”

“May I ask how you made the connection?” Nicolas asks Fleur.

“Eet ees in zhe eyes,” Fleur answers Nicolas, all the while looking at Harry. “I will neverre forget z'eir shade. And when 'e was dueling zhat monster in zhe Great 'all, before 'e was was struck wiz zhe cruciatus curse, 'is eyes glowed brightly, exactly az zhey did zhat night.”

“I must say, young man,” Stéphane reveals. “Az one of zhe few privileged enough to see zhe memories in zhe pensieve, your combat skill is in a league of it's own. I know many amazing duelists in the circuit; your professor Flitwick the most skilled among them, and I do not believe
anyone could've spontaneously contended with that man's skill without losing a single life. Your tactics, awareness, and casting, considering your age, I must ask 'ow you acquired such extraordinary skill?"

It's not a question he hasn't heard before, especially after the memory photograph in several articles of the Prophet. Nearly everywhere he goes, he hears some variation of that same question by teachers, students or civilians when he's in Hogsmeade. Dumbledore in particularly has been trying to suss out any detail that might further help him unravel the growing mystery that is Ares Flamel. Rita Skeeter has resorted to sending requests for an exclusive interview three times a day. As with everyone Harry feels should hear some kind of answer, he tells the Deputy Minister of the French Ministry of Magic, “most of it came from my head. The rest, I learned in difficult situations.”

“'Ow difficult,” Fleur couldn't help but ask.

“Fleur,” her mother warned.

Again, the large scars on his face combined with stern silence is answer enough for all of them.

“Yes well,” Nicolas starts, after taking a sip of tea. “You may, or may not be aware that the one such difficult situation after the World Cup has resulted in an ongoing investigation by the DMLE. An investigation that's hoping to discover the identity of who they've given the moniker, the Green Reaper, for causing the untimely end of some of those wizards.”

“Cochons dégoûtants,” Fluer mutters under her breath far too loudly.

“Fleur!” Apolline sternly calls to her daughter. Harry notices Gabrielle's dismay, and wandlessly moves the tray of biscuits towards her. He gives her a small smile when she notices, and is delighted to see either the biscuits or wandless magic.

“So you see,” Perenelle takes over, not drawing attention to Harry's simple feats of magic. “It is us who should be considerate of you for the precarious nature of the information you have on our little trouble star,” she finishes with a smile.

The Delacours are silent for several moments, after which Stéphane turns to Ares and states, “'ow do you feel causin' zhe deathz of zhes wizards?”
Some may consider that an important question to be asked, especially considering the potential outcome, but Harry feels like that's the easiest question to answer. “I can't say as I feel anything for them, Deputy Minister,” Harry solemnly starts. “I think that if those wizards were not there doing things they shouldn't be doing, than they wouldn't have met their end. And while their deaths were not my intent, in that situation, I was not in a position to consider their lives over the ones I was protecting. As I see it, the chaos of evil men do not go unnoticed and should I happen to be in a position to stop terrible things from hurting innocents, than I will do everything in my power to do just that. Whether that makes me callous to the sanctity of life or a criminal... I'll worry about that only after everyone is safe.”

Stéphane ponders on Harry's words, but only a moment before responding, “My position as an elected official of the French Ministry mandates I report any and all crimes I ascertain to the appropriate body of power, in this case, Madam Amelia Bones, head of the DMLE. That is my mandate as an elected official, but as a man, and more importantly, as a father, my principles will not allow me to do anything more than thank you from the bottom of my heart with everything that I am. You saved the life of both of my daughters, one twice over,” he pauses for the audible click of tongue from Fleur, clearly disappointed in herself. “Do not be ashamed of this my daughter. You live to fight another day.” Turning back to the Flamels, he continues, “I love my beautiful girls more than life itself. And for what you did for this family, I will forever be een your debt.”

“We will forever be een your debt.” Apolline corrects, taking Stéphane's hand in hers.

Comfortable, with the safety of Harry's secret, the Flamels then proceed to haggle and reduce the property or monetary sum offered, completely but gracefully deny any interests in marriage debts, or the invaluable Grimoire passed down through Apolline's Veela heritage. As honored as the Flamels are and express to their guests, they ask for the same intent of familial friendship as they did for the honor houses of Black, Longbottom, and Potter. Once the meeting was settled and the Delcours accepted the invitation to stay for dinner, Gabrielle was finally allowed to ask Harry for a hug, who agreed but felt very weird about it. Though when he felt how tightly her little arms held him, he knew Perenelle was right. Gabrielle needed this as much as many people needed to thank him; to move on. So he let her hug him...

… which turned out to be a big miscalculation.

Harry inadvertently allowed a door to be opened he was unprepared for. Before dinner, while Stéphane expertly helped Perenelle in the kitchen, Apolline graciously helped Nicolas partake in Ogden's finest—to their mutual delight—in the study, and an absolutely thrilled Gabrielle fell hard for Nova's majestic phoenix song in the foyer, Fleur asked to see Harry's room.

It was a simple request but it made him breath heavy. He very rarely had long moments alone with Fleur, and while he knows how brave and loyal she is, he doesn't know much more about her than
that. After they move past how horribly bare his room is, she asks for a hug of her own. “To thank you,” she said and he hesitantly agreed.

It was much more different than letting Gabrielle hug him. After all, Gabrielle is no taller than his stomach, while Fleur is his height, and can press her warm cheek flush with his; feeling ticklish as her breath vibrates his little hairs. She was oven warm, firm yet soft, and her enchanted scent was a motley identifiable aromas that confused and enticed him. She smelled sweet, like vanilla, strawberry, cinnamon, and citrus, like orange, grapefruit, lime, but couldn't make sense of how the alluring scents harmonized so alluringly. His hands were placed safely in the middle of her back, but pressed as she was against his front, the danger of squeezing tighter was substantial.

Harry's starting to wonder if he's holding her for too long when she finally pulls away, giving him a sensation akin to hollowness. Nevertheless, they're soon discussing lighter topics about her sister, their parents, and the differences between their schools. It made him smile, if not laugh, tease her, if not make her laugh, and ponder more about her, if not outright ask. They enjoy safe and easy conversation from her place leaning against the bed frame, and his place, leaning against the bare desk opposite her.

So when she asks, “ow many women 'ave you been wizh?” he instantly feels lost and unsafe. It must read on his face because, she smiles and giggles akin to thee goddess of love. Fleur is suddenly incredibly attractive and he's highly attuned to even the smallest of her feminine details; the gentle sway of her model figure, the serene cascade of her long dazzling light blonde hair, her sultry dark blue eyes and sensual pink lips. Though incredibly enlightened by her presence, Harry can feel her allure and while physically captivated by her beauty, his mind is steady and in control of his faculties, which only seems to excite her, as she says, “you do not unzerstand 'ow amazing eet ees zhat you can rezist zhe allure so completely. Een my mozherz culture, you would eazily be 'ighly sought after az a potential life-mate and even zhen you would more zhan likely be shared.”

Harry isn't sure what she means by shared or much of what she expects from him, if anything. Fleur seems very direct, which he doesn't mind at all, but she doesn't seem to understand the concept of safe or unsafe topics. With all his intelligence and experience, Harry isn't sure what part of civil conversation this is. It's more brazen than he's used to, like the broom cupboard kind of talk he never took part of. Even with his best mate, the worst they've ever talked about was how nice a girl's skin can be. Fleur is far more bold than anyone he's used to, including the Fleur from his time line. Could it be that fucking ripple again? He asks himself. His mind's silence is his only answer, so Harry sticks to his instincts and asks minimal questions, like, “why is that?”

“Eet ees incredibly rare, Arez,” Fleur explains. “Not even fazher ees az reziztant az you and 'e 'as many more yearz of constant exposure, I should think. I am but a quarter Veela, az such my magic does not experience zhe full affect of zhis phenomena, 'owever, eef you 'ad saved zhe life of a full Veela, 'er magic would 'ave imprinted on you.”
“Imprinted?” Harry questions. “You don't mean she would be beholden to me?”

“Not completely,” she answers. “She would not be your slave, like many wish to fantasize. Though I've 'eard many exciting tales of playing the slave with a trusted lover.” She smiles at Harry's raised eyebrows and slight blush, as he starts to note how seamless she can blend sex or innuendo into normal conversation and tries his best to prepare for it. “Nor would she be compelled by their bond to accept non-consensual abuse.”

“There's consensual abuse?” Harry abruptly asks.

“Oui,” she easily answers. “There are many who find much pleasure in pain. I, myself am looking forward to discovering the depthz of my appetite,” she tells him with a smile that should be a sin, before continuing. “Though, the wizard who saved a Veela would form a very powerful bond, 'is wordz 'old little more meaning to 'er zhan zhe strengzh of zhe man's character. Zhe bond between Veela and wizard can be extremely powerful, but, only eef zhe man ees worzhy of 'er,” she tells him, her dark blues looking deeply into his eyes. “And tu know eef 'e ees worzhy, she must rely on 'er Veela abilities.”

Harry swears she can hear the thumping of his rapid heart beat from where she's leaning, so quickly ask, “so, it isn't the same with you, correct? Since you're only a quarter Veela?”

“No one can say for certain, monsieur,” she says clasping her hands behind her back, emphasizing her womanly assets and adding far more curvature to her already racy silhouette. “Full blood, 'alf, or a quarter, eef we all still 'ave zhe right of choice, who ees to say 'ow much of my Veela blood makes me feel zhe way I do? W'at you may call a bond, only tellz me zhat my 'eart and magic feel strongly for zhe man I zhink ees worzhy of zhem,” she states coyly.

BILL! Harry's mind yells, begs him to think about. Remember Bill! Bill! Bill!! They hear the call to dinner and Harry steps forward, prompting her to mirror his action. Closer now, yet respectfully apart, with a solid tone of voice he tells her, ‘I'm sure whomever you choose will more than be worthy of your feelings. He'd be an idiot not to.”

“Of zhat, my dearest Arez,” Fleur says with a cunning smile. “We both agree.”

Dinner was delicious, hearty, and blatant manipulation on Fleur's part to extort a few sparing sessions from Harry. The Delacours loved the idea, while Nicolas and, especially, Perenelle were no help at all in preventing it. It wasn't until they were saying farewell to the Delacours when Fleur pulls Harry aside, much to the delight of Perenelle, Apolline and Gabrielle, if their knowing smirks are anything to go by. What Fleur reveals to him, Harry doesn't know quite how to reconcile with.
“I was not the only one to see you when your eye’s shade illuminated,” Fleur whispers, but Harry can easily hear because she’s standing so close to him.

He almost didn’t pay attention to what she said in the presence of her warmth, but still manages to ask, “who? Who else saw?”

“Zhe girl you first saved from zhat monster,” Fleur answers.

“Hermione?” Harry ponders aloud with worry.

“You know ‘er,” Fleur asks with a curious quirk, before catching on to his clear look of apprehension and adds, “do not fear. I spoke wizh ‘er immediately after and made ‘er promise not to szay anyzhing to anyone about eet.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Harry tells her. “Hermione is the smartest witch in our class.”

“Smarter zhan you?” Fleur jokes.

“I don’t count,” Harry answers.

“Why do you say zhat?” Fleur genuinely curious to know.

“Because unlike me, she works incredibly hard,” Harry tells her straight. “Hermione is very inquisitive and she hates mysteries. She’ll keep her promise but she’ll research on her own none-stop until she gets answers.”

Taking Harry’s response in for a moment, she surmises easily, “you know ‘er well, monsieur Trouble Star. S’ould I be jealous?” She asks with a coy smirk.

Harry again realizes how close she is when they hear Apolline call out, “Come now Fleur.”
“Oui mamma,” Fleur happily calls back before giving Harry a quick kiss on his reddening cheek and exiting with her family via the floo network.

Ignoring the warm burning of his cheek, a pragmatic-minded Harry figures Hermione will either learn or not learn about one of his secrets and ponders some moments on how involved and prepared he should be for either scenario when he turns to his cover parents to help clear dinner. One look at Nicolas and Perenelle's poorly reserved, giddy, thrilled and elated faces, makes Harry shake his head using the full rotation of his neck.

“Nope, not one word!” he demands, quickly calling for Nova and escaping to his Slytherin room in a bright flash of flame.

Chapter End Notes

Perenelle put the smack down on Harry! It took me a while to really understand how accepting the appreciation of someone may not be how you see yourself and in Harry's case, he truly doesn't believe he's lovable or deserving of being seen in a positive way. It was an interesting write and I hope I did it justice.

There will be more Umbridge! I thought about her this week and I was struck with all sorts of ideas, so I can definitely say she'll be back.

I think the girls will be closing in on Harry soonish, and while I have ideas on how to portray it's assembly as organically as possible, I don't think it'll happen in one chapter, but I feel like we're getting closer.

Please let me know what you think! You guys really help me stay focused and driven-not that I'm getting tired at all:)

Have a great one,
--Grae
Contend and Press On

Chapter Summary

What Harry is certain of is that others are safer the further they are from him, but no one else seems to agree.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is like a part two of the last chapter. I didn't put the Potters Honor meeting in the last one because the chapter was getting too big and I still needed to revise a few times before I posted.

SO this chapter deals with the rest of the aftermath and moves the story ahead.

A little over 13K for those who like to pace themselves :)

Of all the Honor Meetings the Flamels attended, the Potters was the most nerve wrecking for Harry by far. Sitting in the private room of the Three Broomstick's, in the similar set up as with other meetings; Lily and Hardwin on one side of the table, and Harry, Nicolas, and Perenelle on the opposite. Even though Perenelle is seated in front of Lily, the Potter head is looking at Nicolas' half bandaged face as Hardin looks straight at Harry's bandaged face. Half of Harry's face is bandaged as he recites the obligatory acceptance statement that is due of his station after Hardwin's honor edict. Harry's hands, Nicolas' hands and part of Nicolas' face were also bandaged as well. Harry's fear that Lily would make the connection between James Potter and a baby Harry Potter was so strong they resorted to a cover story to hide part of his face. If anyone would notice, Harry's sure she would. Harry also didn't want to give a stiff performance using his occlumency the entire time.

“Your'll have to forgive my idiot husband and matching son,” Perenelle states with a tight smile after the pompous recitals. It was decided before hand Perenelle should take the lead as much as possible, since an exhausted motherly figure is as relatable as it can get, though Harry's not sure how much of it is acting on Perenelle's part. “They've taken an interest in combining muggle motors with rune schemes. Working on it this morning... well, clearly it did not turn out as well as they'd hoped,” she tells Lily, turning an irritated eye at the bandaged pair.

“You have an interest in the muggle world?” Lily asks Ares with genuine curiosity. “Despite being the head of our House, I'm half-blood born and raised in the muggle world before I was accepted into Hogwarts, and now I teach Muggle Studies. So I'm very well acquainted with many of their discoveries. What sort of motor is it?”
“A two wheeled motor that relies heavily on the rider's sense of balance,” Nicolas answers for Harry, drawing the attention to himself. “It's the electricity that's causing the runes we're using to short or... as you can see, backfire,” Nicolas admits sheepishly, holding up his bandaged hands amiably.

“It was a motorcycle,” Harry states in a rougher than normal voice, like he's had a soar throat for days. “Which we'll make sure to register with the Muggle Artifacts Office... you know, when we get it working.” Ares looks over to Nicolas and they both nod excitedly.

“...Of course one explosion wouldn't be enough for you two,” Perenelle mutters and sighs as Lily smiles.

“Hardwin has a friend who's father is very keen on many muggle artifacts; plugs, batteries, all sorts of knickknacks. He questions me to no end about the simplest of their inventions,” she lightly laughs. “Isn't that right, honey?”

Hardwin turns to his mother, a slight tired and irritated look on his face that only she, as a mother, can see and answers, “sure, mum.”

*He hides his emotions well, like a good heir should*, Harry imagines but Harry can pick up minute details and can accurately guess that Hardwin isn't happy.

Lily gives Hardwin a curious look before turning to the family across from her. “I suppose we should move on to the Honor Debt,” Lily tells the Flamels and looks specially to Ares. “It's been a little over three weeks ago and I'm still in awe by what you did for Hardwin, myself and our house. I don't even want to think about how much worse it could have easily been if not for you, so I must insist on the maximum monetary token allotted by the Ministry's Aristocratic Commission, as well as the cooperation, patronage or accommodation this house and it's members may be in a position to assist you with as guided by the Ancient Noble's Society. If there's any help we can offer, please, you must let us.”

Harry has a most distastefully good idea. If she's true to her word, and he asked, she would have to tell them what happened that night when Voldemort attacked. He could ask her anything and she would have to tell him. She can't lie when honor and magic are a factor. Honor Magic is odd, nearly fringe magic, and impossible to study but the generally accepted idea is, a wizard's magic resonates with the wizard's feelings, more so with extreme feelings, and to lie when one's honor is at stake can have unforeseen and adverse results—almost as if the magic is balancing itself in negative ways, inviting bad fate into ones life, so no wizard risks it.
If Harry asked about that night and she tells them about a second child no one seems to know about, he could ask more questions to find out everything there is to know about *this* Harry. Why did she abandon him? Why didn't she check on him, at least when he was of age to attend Hogwarts? How was Dumbledore involved? Of all the people in the world who should, why doesn't she love him? Harry is frozen with indecision for the simple reason that knowing the answers to these questions won't help him track and kill Voldemort, and why should anything else matter more than that? But he can't keep quiet the burning questions in his head. The questions have a life of their own and fiercely fight against his logic and mission.

“While we graciously accept the spirit of your offer, and don't mean to diminish their significance in anyway, we cannot in good conscious accept such a large sum,” Perenelle tells Lily. “Though we more than appreciate the honor of your generosity, the House of Flamel has always placed more value in friendship and good relations than in monetary gain. We're odd that way.”

Of course, Lily respectfully objects and as they haggle, Harry continues his internal conflict. He's only interrupted when Hardwin asks Harry, “how'd you do all that? I saw Bill's memory and everyone's been saying the same thing. No one our age should be capable of dueling like that. Even I can see that's not possible.”

Harry looks at his brother's blue eyes a moment before answering, “First, it wasn't a duel, it was a fight. Second, under normal circumstances, I'd agree with you—and *everyone,* I guess—but my life is anything but normal.”

“That's not an answer,” Hardwin states with an edge. “This is about Honor and Magic. You are compelled to be honest in these meetings.”

To Harry, it seems Hardwin has no issues demanding answers to his questions. “Nothing about what I did that day is a lie,” Harry responds lightly. “Whether you want to believe it or not.”

“How about 'not,' and you answer me,” Hardwin mouths back.

“Hardwin!” Lily snaps. Hardwin says nothing and Lily turns to Ares, “I apologize. He really is grateful.”

Harry absentmindedly raises and shakes his hand, as if to say, *don't worry,* adding, “it's fine, Lady Potter.”
Lily pauses, tilts her head in a slant, staring suspiciously at Harry, as if trying to look through thick mist.

“We've spoken with many honored and distinguished house, Lady Potter,” Perenelle interjects, likely catching what Harry stopped breathing over. Drawing Lily's attention to her, Perenelle continues, “in all honesty we're simply looking for goodhearted people from all walks of life we can associate with, now that we've returned from our self imposed isolation.” Perenelle smiles and chuckles but the joke falls flat for Lily, who's still looking out of sorts.

“We'd love, if you find it agreeable of course, to have a few get-togethers,” Nicolas suggests trying to garner attention. “Possibly when the children are out of Hogwarts or later if it's more convenient for you.”

“I think that sounds lovely,” Lily states evenly. “Don't you agree Hardwin?”

“...absolutely,” he lightly states with a dull voice.

“Wonderful,” Perenelle announces. “Perhaps we can meet later for details, maybe over tea?”

“...Yes. No yes, of course. You can come by my office or I yours,” Lily states with a start laugh. “My apologies, I must seem so absentminded. I was just... well, yes. I think that would be great.” After more high class frivolity, they depart.

“What do you think,” Perenelle cautiously asks Harry. “Something you did must've sparked a memory or impression. It looked like a close call.”

“Yeah,” Harry tells his cover parents. “But even a close call can grow to questions, and from there, questions can grow to much worse.”

“Why much worse?” Nicolas asks. “What does it matter if she knows who you are... at least in this time line.”

“I imagine there are a lot of situations where having one's mother in their life is a good thing,” Harry starts to explain. “Fighting arguably the greatest Dark Lord in history to my possible death isn't one of those situations.”
“Is that the only reason?” Perenelle asks.

“No,” Harry honestly answers but doesn’t elaborate on it as they leaves the Three Broomsticks.

Possibly the best thing to come out of all of this for Harry is being able to talk to Luna and Hermione freely, without restraint. Hearing them call him Ares, is still weird for him, but calling them by their names again is like a healing balm to the insanity that is traveling back into a deranged time line. It started a week after the Crouch incident, during lunch, and to the shock of the school.

Harry and Draco had been avoiding crowds for several days after the story broke in the Prophet, drawing the entirety of the public eye on Hogwart’s, and more specifically, Ares Flamel. It was ten times worse than when he was The-Boy-Who-Lived. It was so bad, rumors started floating around the halls stating the Auror's department or the Ministry were keeping him away from school in a desperate attempt to recruit him, making him the youngest Auror in history.

The real reason no one saw them was because, he and Draco resorted disillusionsing themselves as they went to classes, taking seats in the back of class, as well as eat outside or in the Hogwart's kitchens just to avoid the mob of questions, the fearful looks, or the gazes of admiration. Hedwig was working extra hard due to the massive influx of letters, and Harry didn't care for it. He always felt all the attention were like big fat flies constantly buzzing around his face, and diving into his eye or open mouth, but the attention troubled Draco in an unexpected way.

“I've always wanted people to look at me the way they look at us now,” he glumly states. “Little did I know I'd have to be at the edge of death to get it. I never thought to thank you...”

Surprised, alarmed, confounded, leery, thoughtful, yet light of heart, Harry tells the silver-haired boy, “Yeah well, don't bother. I still hate you,” Harry says trying to defend the fragile balance of their comfortable antagonism.

Draco swings his head surprised—not that Harry would say so, but that anyone would say that to a Malfoy—but looking at Harry, a whole history of unbridled chaos and regret chokes his nurtured arrogance to submission.

The familiar misery and hardship in his housemate's silvery eyes compels Harry to make himself clearer. “I mean, not as much as I used to. You're tolerable, obviously. Though it still annoys the shite out of me when you don't anticipate obvious attacks.”
“Oh bugger off,” Draco quickly responds. “You attack from three opposing fronts at the same time! And what’re ya getting all soft on me for? I hate you too! Doesn't mean I can't be thankful or nothing.”

“Fine,” Harry throws back. “Forget I said anything you manky tosser.”

With an audible breath of relief, Draco says, “That's more like it,” finding the concept of friendship with Harry Potter just too weird.

“Yeah,” Harry agrees, finding the concept of friendship with Draco Malfoy just too weird.

“We eating outside again?” Draco asks moving past the weirdness.

“No,” Harry tells the boy. While Daphne hadn't told him of any new attacks on Hermione or Luna, he's been worried about them and needs to see with his own eyes that they're safe. Walking into the imperceptibly repaired Great Hall, Nova naturally flies above the boisterous Ravenclaws to Hermione and Luna, whom are very happy to see her, signaling to all who are paying attention, that the fourteen year old who defeated a Death Eater is here. Ignoring the gazing or hushed whispers Harry makes his way to the doppelgangers of his past friends.

The Ravenclaw and the Slytherin tables have large sections of it’s seats taken by the French and Bulgarian delegates, watching him, and as he passes Fleur, he gives her a nod, hello, all the while not quite looking forward to their scheduled Honor Meeting. She nods back and sticks to the custom of minimal contact until they and their families can meet to make their honor offerings of gratitude. It sounds ridiculous to Harry but the insanely rich often seem ridiculous to him to begin with.

Harry spots Hammond, still looking out of sorts and agitated, keeping a nervous eye on Isobel, Qarinah and Nimue. Seems like the penalties he suffered are as permanent at the enchanted tattoo on his chest. Harry hopes the mark always reminds him of what's in store for him if he doesn't keep to the civil and law-abiding.

Harry notes Hermione and Luna seem fine as he approaches them. “Hey,” he starts. “Sorry I haven't been around. I wanted to thank you for looking after Nova when I had to talk to the officials, but after the articles, well, it's just more attention than I like.”
“There's no need for apology, heir Flamel,” Luna starts. “It’s a sign of good character to seek not the attention of crowds but the respect within oneself. It means they do not govern your actions, but it also means you make an ideal target for Skin-Walkers.” Luna nervously says in a hushed voice.

“I’ll, uh, try to be careful, then,” Harry states. “And you can call me Ares, if you like. Both of you.”

“I would,” Luna answers with a smile. “I always felt the sound your voice was highly pleasant to hear, like if radishes could speak, so I’ve wanted you to call me Luna since we first met.”

“Radishes aside, I’d very much like it if you called me by my first name as well,” Hermione tells him as she continues to pet Nova. She seems far less reserved or conflicted than when he became Slytherin. “Would it be possible to have lunch together at some point,” Hermione slowly asks. “In the future and outside of course.”

“Why not now?” Harry says taking a seat next to Hermione, and picking up a plate.

As if another Death Eater had entered the Great Hall, it grows very silent in the expanse of the room as Harry fills his plate. Nothing is immediately said about the Slytherin sitting at the Ravenclaw table for several moments before the damn holding scandalized whispers breaks, and the room is flooded with hushed conversation of the heinous sin. While cognizant and irritated by the room's agape astonishment for the breach in House loyalty, Harry prefers the sense of ordinariness Hermione and Luna’s company provide—though at the moment, Hermione and Luna are looking just as dumbstruck as the others.

Harry checks his food as he usually does and finds no foreign contaminates. Before he eats and feeds Nova, Hermione asks, “what is that spell you cast over your food?”

“It’s a useful little charm that I’m frankly surprised not many use. It’s a diagnostic charm I learned to make sure your food is safe to eat...”

They continue to talk and no one dares tell Harry to return to his own section—the teachers because it’s not actually against any rule, and the students because the terrifying maniac he defended everyone from is still fresh in their minds. Through the weeks, the three become comfortable with each other, so much so, it's nearly like having his Hermione back.

It's not long before she astutely points out, “you're a very private person.” Seated in the valley watching Nova fly, Harry isn't sure how best to respond so Hermione continues. “It's not as if I can
say you don't answer questions, but when you do, they tend to be vague, as if you want me to imagine my own answers without having to say definitively yourself. If you'd like to explain why, I'd love to hear it, otherwise I'm going to make my own assumptions as to why you want to keep things things to yourself—not to say it's wrong.”

“Don't you feel it's a little soon to open Pandora's Box,” he answers with a wry smirk. “You might not like what you find.”

“Oh, har-har,” Hermione returns sarcastically. “I highly doubt it's quite so monumental. Of course you don't have to tell me if you prefer not to, but you're my first friend—not to disregard Luna in any way. We are friends, certainly. She's sweet, has a good heart and an oddly arranged, though nevertheless, sharp mind, but we are different in most others ways, making it a challenge to be truly close friends. At the risk of frightening you away, you're the first proper friend I've had since I've started Hogwart's three whole years ago. It would just mean the world to me if... if this was a friendship that could stand the test of time, and- and that simply can't happen without trust first.”

“Even time is a test for you,” Harry humorously tells her, slightly sidestepping the seriousness of her plea. Harry knows with a hundred percent certainty they'd be friends forever if forever was a possibility, but right now, her safety seems far more probable a good distance away from him.

“I- well, I just don't see what's so offensive about tests. They're a great way to measure one's progress,” she adds with a sheepish smile. “And honestly why do a thing if you're not going to do it to the best of your ability. Don't think I didn't notice your evasiveness. Shall I take that as my answer, then? I'll continue to be your friend regardless. I simply want you to know you can trust me.”

“I do trust you Hermione,” Harry easily states. “We may not know each other long but I do trust you. It's everyone else I don't trust.”

“How do you mean?” she quickly asks. “Not even your parents?”

“Who tells their parents everything,” Harry humorously asks and immediately regretted it. Hermione has such a struck look of shame on her face, clearly telegraphing to Harry that she never told her parents about the abuse she suffered through. The regret on his face is enough to let her accurately guess that he knows.

Hermione clears her swelling throat, and with a clear tone of detachment, asks Harry, “how? How do you know?”
“...Myrtle,” Harry speaks just as cautiously. “She wanted to help the bullied girls.”

“So Hilliard really was you. I couldn't completely comprehend why I thought of you, but I suspected as much,” Hermione asserts looking away. “I must seem so horribly unclean to you, don't I? Filthy, really. You clearly know what I did... with Hilliard. It feels like a seed, if I'm honest... a disgusting retched seed that will only fester and tarnish my future, and nothing I do can stop this feeling...” Her voice is low and full of self-loathing as she unconsciously shifts away.

Harry takes her hand before she gets too far away, and dearly holds firm. Though feeling sympathy pains himself for the ordeal she suffered through and has since, he must be careful. What he wants her to know is that she's as safe as she wants to be, but certainly not that she's only safe with him, because he's the most unsafe person in the world to be around.

“I came upon a concept...” Harry chuckles lightly. “I say came upon, but it's more like Nicolas shoved a book in my hands. I assume he thought it might help me, but in truth, it's made things more complicated... not that I'd ever tell him that.”

“Why's it more complicated?” Hermione softly asks with a moist sniff, eager to overshadow her shameful horridness, and learn a little more about Ares.

“Because it proposes pushing me in many ways I don't want or like to be pushed,” He answers Hermione honestly.

“It sounds like an interesting book if it can push you,” she offhandedly comments, still attentive to her stigma. “Why bring it up?” she asks.

Harry hesitates to give Hermione such an insight about him but, looking in her red-rimmed brown eyes and crunched up brow, he's blinded to the rationality of keeping her away. “...It's not hard to guess I've gone through unpleasant experiences, and for a long time, the question that burned brightest and longest in my head, is, 'why me?' Naturally I couldn't help but ask a slew of other irrelevant questions. 'Why couldn't it have been someone else? What did I do to deserve this?' And so forth. The old book Nicolas gave me was on a Greek philosopher named Democritus. I'll assume you've heard of him?” He playfully asks.

“I don't know everything, Ares,” Hermione returns with a slant of her head and shaking his hand a bit. “But yes, I can say I've heard of him. Daddy once referred to him as the widely regarded father of modern science from the muggle world, primarily remembered for his formulation of an atomic
theory centuries ahead of it's time.”

“Five points, Mrs. Granger,” Harry says with the tone of authority, to her slight amusement. He realizes that he's been holding her hand this entire time but there's an odd comfort about it, not unlike returning to a place some might call home. It makes him think, its fine, if only for the one moment.

Harry continues, “Democritus was a cheerful man with a profound understanding of natural phenomena. He believed the knowledge of truth is difficult, because the perception of truth is subjective, and the reality of this world isn't always happy, peaceful, or encouraging. Which means, in this world, there's heaps of shite to be sad about. Truth: the world we live in allows for bad things to happen to good people all the time. Democritus knew all of this not from a naive position of privilege who can only guess how bad things can be, but from his own travels through hardship of the common folk. Yet the man was genuinely cheerful. He laughed—not a fake, disingenuous laugh, but real laughter of mirth. He laughed despite the despair because of how he thought of the world and how we live in it. They called it, Cheerful Despair.”

“Democritus was a realist who knew humankind have a natural propensity to be greedy, to murder and to lust, we're prone to error, weakness, and cruelty, and are constantly exposed to dangers of random or planned misfortune. He was so aware of this darkness that he ultimately realized he didn't have to constantly register risk and suffering at the forefront of his thoughts in order to acknowledge they exist. In his eyes, the darkness of life is a base line of existence. He expected a variety of terrible things to happen because he believed them to be an intrinsic part of what being alive means. So whenever anything good happens, it's kind of like a bonus to him, which is why he's genuine in his elation.”

“That sounds frightfully bleak,” Hermione mentions.

“I could've told you pretty words,” Harry sympathetically reveals. “It wouldn't have been hard, in your case, or a lie. You're smart, kind, and courageous, but like the burning questions that still plague my mind, those kind and honest words are no solace from the onus. I told you about Democritus because the answers and the search for them will be your own to explore, and I respect your intelligence too much to treat you with pretty, uplifting words.”

Hermione is moved by the esteem conveyed by Ares, a prodigious student of magic and intelligence. She takes in a deep and calming breath commenting, “so, his ideology proposes that because he accepts the world as a constant, dark and bleak existence, it makes the good things that happen in life stand out, like sharp contrast.”

“Stand out, to be sure, but equally as important, the good that happened shouldn't feel like compensation for the bad suffered,” Harry answers. “His ideology helped him realize the world
didn't owe him a great and wonderful life and to expect it is delusion. It's giving us exactly what it's made of and we only gain, despite it the evil, when we do our utmost ability to contend and press on,” Harry tells her squeezing her hand for emphasis.

“...Contend and press on?” Hermione mumbles. “That's what you do. 'Violence may not be an acceptable solution but there are times when it's the only one you have,' is what you said to me once. I argued it, like an idiot, and then you said the very thing I've been unable to stop thinking about, 'there are evil men out there you can't reason with, plead with, who are infatuated with chaos,’ and you were right. In my arrogance, I stupidly thought I knew better than you because I do everything I'm supposed to; listen to my elders, work hard in my studies, get the best grades, try to help others, and it never amounted to anything! I'm meant to know better because I know wizards like Hilliard are misguided and troubled and- and- and-”

Troubled, Harry's mind narrows in on, and hope's for the Headmaster's sake that this was only a coincidence of word and that the old man didn't know about her abuse.

“And nothing, Hermione,” Harry interrupts her. “It's not your job to worry about them. Your very first priority is to protect yourself to the best of your ability, and no one has any right to say otherwise. If you have the option to use diplomacy, than absolutely take it, but if not, believe me when I say, you do not have to be a victim, and anyone that asks you to regard the abusers for rhyme and reason like some fucking case study, deserves a solid kick in the balls,” she chuckles thankfully. “Because they're running away as well.” She leaps from her seated position, wrapping her arms around his neck. Harry has to engage his core muscles to keep from falling back. She holds him tight and after a moment's hesitation, he returns the hug, holding her torso to him, noting how truly amazing, comforting, and melancholy the connection between them feels.

“So Democritus can acknowledge pain and suffering while delighting in the happier things life has to offer?” She asks, arms still firmly holding him.

“His direct quote is, a life without festivity is like a long road without an inn... or in my case, a road-less thicket of dangerous forest fraught with danger,” he says, and despite how serious he meant it, she chuckles hard enough to shake, and suddenly he registers how soft parts of her feel pressed tightly against him.

When her humorously apt scent of leather, ink and parchment connects, in addition, to the toasty warmth her soft body pressed upon him transfers, it gives rise to a great outcry of physiological response from his rebellious hormones, infuriating Harry to no end. This has never happened before, not with her, and while he may be incredibly happy to have her in his life after everything he's been through, he shouldn't feel this excited to have his best friend in his arms again. In an effort to remain calm, he asks through her wavy brunette mane, “What would you call magical defense of the mind against external penetrat-”
“Occlumancy, obviously,” Hermione quickly answers, scooting back to how she was seated, red-faced—likely from the crying, he reasons—and tucking her hair behind her ear.

“...Five points,” Harry states, after clearing his throat. “For the life of me I can't understand why that’s not a class offered by this school but if you're serious about wanting to expand our friendship, occlumancy will be integral to that.”

“So, in other words, you're saying you are willing to trust me, but as I have no mental defense, you can't trust the odds that someone won't learn of what you tell me—be it what you had for breakfast or your family's greatest treasure—through legilimancy.” Harry nods. “But that would also mean you know occlumancy,” she argues.

“Many heirs or high born know occlumancy,” Harry informs her with a nod. “Even the ring of the Head of House can offer minor occlumancy. But yes, that pretty much sums it up.”

“How did you learn,” Hermione asks eagerly, clearly thrilled by the prospect of learning. “I don't recall seeing textbooks on Occlumancy in the library.”

“You recall every book in Hogwart's library?”

“Not every book, but I certainly would've remembered one of that topic.” Harry notes she's starting to look better as the conversation moves further away from her abuse.

“I'll lend you one of Nicolas’ more effective instructional tomes on the discipline and give you any tips you might need.” She seems very happy to be receiving a step-by-step book that's not offered in Hogwart's library, and when Hermione's happy, he's calm.

After the first grueling weekend of Honor meetings, Draco joins Harry at the Ravenclaw table, throwing off the entire Great Hall nearly as much as 'Ares' did, but more importantly, it surprised Harry. The Malfoy scion had stopped talking to Harry when he alerted Draco of what he did in order to rush through Sirius' Honor Meet. Aside from coming at him recklessly hard during their spars, Draco avoided all optional contact, glaring at him every available opportunity. The issue brought up an unpleasant realization for Harry... he was getting used to talking with Draco—short those conversations may be.

Harry turns to him and lightly says, “hey.” Draco only nods. The way Hermione and Luna look at
Draco makes Harry wonder if he should introduce the silver-blond to them. 'Introduce him as what,' however is an irritating thought. Draco doesn't exactly fit the category of friend or enemy, and he's around him to often to be just a classmate. ‘This is Draco Malfoy,’’ is all Harry says to the girls.

“I know,” Hermione spits. “And I honestly can't believe you're friends with him.”

Harry immediately looks at Draco, suddenly apathetic to what he said to Tracey about Draco. Draco only nods his head, as if to say, 'yes, I said terrible things.'

“Ms. Granger,” Draco starts. “Allow me to formally offer my sincerest apologies for my behavior these past years. There is no excuse I can give that can erase the pain and humiliation I've surely caused you but I give you my vow, with Ares as my witness, that I will not antagonize you ever again.”

Hermione is stunned by Draco's apology and looks to Harry, who nods to her approvingly. Luna stretches out her hand, “I'm Luna Lovegood, we have Ancient Runes together.” Draco shakes Luna's hand, saying, “you haven't insulted me terribly, so I'll be happy to help in Runes if you wish.”

While Draco did well enough in his Runes evaluation exam to join the third years, he doesn't seem to have a head for Arithmancy and so continues to take Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid. “Thanks. I'll keep that in mind.”

It was a quiet meal and an odd week when Draco would join Harry at the Ravenclaw table or in the Library. Being with Hermione takes his sentiment back to his time line, but with Draco there, he's constantly reminded of how different everything is. At one point Hermione mentions, “you two are the oddest sort of friends I've ever seen. Are you always so antagonistic toward one another, because I can't see how two opposing people can still develop a friendship?”

“How's your occlumancy coming along?” Harry simply asks.

Hermione gives him a funny look. “That information can't possibly need protection from Ligilimens.”

Harry can see her point but regardless, he maintains his position. “Sorry, but it does. I will, however, say Draco and I understand one thing about each other, and that one thing happens to be
what matters most to us. In every other way, we could very well be enemies.”

“That sounds dangerously close to the enemy of my enemy,” Hermione points out.

“The Source of Sovereign States, by Arthasastra Kautilya,” Harry mindlessly recalls aloud. “Nicolas has a duplicate in ancient Sanskrit from the 4th Century, though he never told me how he got it.”

“You have to let me...” Hermione starts to say before she holds her urge in with what appears to be all the self-control she has.

“You want to see their library?” Harry asks lightly holding in his own amusement. “Well, that’ll just be another good reason to learn occlumancy as best you can. Remember not to rush it though.”

“‘Haste makes waste,’ is one of the first things I ever learned,” Hermione admits before they split up for the day.

Catching Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Tracey, and Daphne on the way to the common room, Harry walks up to Daphne and asks to speak with her a moment—much to Zabini’s clear distaste. Agreeing, they soon find themselves on the long bridge behind Hogwart’s where Daphne first asked him to help save her sister. After securing their conversation from three nosy Slytherins hiding behind the stone frame, Harry relays Nicolas and Perenelle’s offer to scan Astoria for any blood curse, as well as allow her to look through their library.

Harry can tell Daphne needs a moment to temper her emotions despite how reserved her graceful appearance is. She sniffs through her pretty button nose, and says, “even if there isn't a positive outcome, thank you and your family for helping her. I was slightly worried your parents might be put off to helping after meeting my father. He can be very...”

“Off putting?” Harry suggests with a bit of a smirk.

She graces him with sweet smile and a nod before looking out onto the lake.

“What’s your father doing to help Astoria?” Harry asks.
Daphne scoffs before stating, “my father died when my mother did. The wizard you saw wearing my father's skin is nothing but a coward who's already written off his youngest daughter simply because of a family curse. Offering her in marriage was nothing but strategic offsetting of "damaged" assets to gain status and power... the pompous arse.”

“And you don't know what it is? The curse?” Harry asks smiling at her ire. “It'd help Nicolas and Perenelle find some kind of treatment if they knew exactly what they're dealing with.”

“Mother never told me before she passed away, I've searched all the books we own with no success, and father would only say there's no cure and that I should just forget about Tori, my own sister, like she's already dead!” Clenched fists, Daphne swallows hard and takes a moment to settle down before grasping for a change of topic and asking, “Were you aware Khan's been trying to gather support to teach you the error of your anti-Slytherin ways? He hasn't been very successful.”

“Just because someone is down, doesn't mean they're out,” Harry sternly points out, wondering more about what Voldemort could be planning now, instead of what Khan might be planning. “I wouldn't be surprised if he tried something else.”

“Agreed, but I don't see them going after Malfoy again,” Daphne suggests. “You've trained him too well.”

“I didn't really train him,” Harry returns distastefully.

“You shouldn't be so modest,” Daphne comments. “It's unattractive.”

“If that were the case, I'd be the most modest wizard in the world,” Harry returns happily.

“You make it sound as if you'd prefer to be alone,” she says, not with concern, but with coy skepticism. “But that can't possibly be the case considering how blatantly you broke a cardinal rule by eating at the Ravenclaw table, all so you can speak with Granger.”

“Was there such a rule?” Harry poorly feigns ignorance to the point of mocking. “Who knew?”

“Did you tell her?” Daphne asks. “About Khan?”
“Is that your way of saying you think Khan might go after her?”

“How’d you put it? 'Just because someone is down, doesn't mean they're out,'” Daphne repeats. “If he can’t get any of the girls in... I wouldn't be surprised if he went after your new friend.”

Harry turns to her and genuinely asks, “if he can't get any of the girls in... what?”

Daphne takes a moment to gather her thoughts and frame her meaning. “Malfoy told me I would have to pick a side. After Hilliard, then losing five hundred points, I was certain you were more trouble than you were worth, and wouldn't have any more to do with you.”

“Daphne,” Harry starts. “I am more trouble than it's worth, and you shouldn't have anything to do with me.”

“Oh Merlin, you really do have a hero complex,” Daphne asserts with shocking dazzle. “You want to save people as well as protect them from the dangers surrounding your life.”

“If he can't get any of the girls in... then what?” Harry repeats.

Seemingly content with his shrug of her analysis, she answers by asking Harry, “Haven’t you noticed how all the girls are sleeping in the first year dorms? None of the Upper Order can get through those wards and more importantly, Khan, in all his detestable knowledge, can't get through those wards. The older girls are even paying the first years to sleep there. It's the best sleep most of them have had in a long time.”

“Where does your sister sleep?” Harry wonders aloud, working through his acrimony.

“I put the best rune scheme I know on our rooms. It would take him hours to get through.” Harry looks on irritated by this knowledge as she continues to say, “things are much better now. Most of the Upper Order don't want to go anywhere near the first year corridor.”

“What are the odds the older years'll sleep in their own rooms again?” Harry innocently asks, already making plans to add more wards to the female Slytherin dorm rooms.
“I'm not much for gambling with inconclusive answers. I'll just say, there's not enough evidence of anything to give a proper answer. Besides, I'm far more curious to know what this hold Granger seems to have over you,” Daphne casually comments. “Is it some sort of emotional debt, like you feel responsibility for not "rescuing" her?”

Ignoring Daphne's question, Harry only informs her, “I'll let you know when Perenelle has some free time to examine your sister.”

“Don't you mean Professor Flamel?” Daphne smiles broadly. Harry looks at her curiously to which she answers, “of course I know.”

“Of course you know,” Harry weakly repeats.

“So they're really going to do it?” she asks excitedly, looking over the large lake. “They're going to sack Professor Binn's and replace him with Perenelle Flamel!”

“Looks that way,” Harry mundanely states, apathetic to her excitement. “After more and more Slytherins stopped showing up to History, the governors, well, Lucius Malfoy had Dumbledore by the short hairs, so Dumbledore caved. Of course, hiring a disguised Death Eater to teach children didn't help.”

“They hired your own mother, all so that you'd have to go to History Class,” Daphne laughs. “Oh Merlin, that's great!”

“Yeah, laugh it up,” Harry says, not at all bothered by her good humor. “You won't be laughing long when you see what a slave driver she can be. Who do you think gave me most of my scars?”

Daphne turned to him surprised, “you're joking!”

Harry smiles, “yeah, I am.” Though it was fun to shock her, he wasn't going to let that accurate secret go just yet. The pair say nothing else, content to enjoy the scenery as Harry waits for Nova to return.

With October's arrival, so to is the Goblet of Fire's second unveiling. Announcing the rules to the packed room, Dumbledore takes the stage. Behind him stands Ludo Bagman, and taking over Barty Crouch Snr's position for the Ministry is none other than the pink fuzz, Dolores Umbridge.
Dumbledore announces to all, “After careful and exhaustive consideration by the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and the participating Wizarding schools, it has been agreed upon by all parties that an age restriction will be implemented, allowing only sixth and seventh year students to place their names in the Goblet of Fire.”

The cheers were drowned out by the boos and it takes Dumbledore a minute to settle the room. “Now, each school has selected an exemplary student to be the first to cast their name and lead all respective contenders that follow. May those three students please join us.”

Harry doesn’t recall that happening in his time line and pays attention as Victor, Fleur, and Cedric walk to the center of the room and join their respective headmasters, or mistress as well as the ministry officials.

Before they drop their names in the Goblet however, “Hem-Hem,” somehow rings throughout the large room so that all eyes fall on Umbridge. She steps forward, surprising Dumbledore, who reluctantly allows her the stage. “For the few that do not know me, I am Dolores Umbridge, Undersecretary of the amazing Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, and I am here in the spirit of friendship and solidarity for all. As I will be residing in the castle for the duration of the tournament, I’d also wish to take this moment to offer a sympathetic ear to those poor souls still suffering from the hardships that transpired in this very Hall. The Minister wishes to reassure you, he is doing absolutely everything in his power to keep everyone safe, including stationing several aurors on the premises for your continued protection. For you all, he would even replace the Death Eater look-alike, Professor Alastor Moody if he thinks it would make everyone feel that much safer. The Minister and I are here for you, thank you.”

Bullshite, Harry thinks before quickly losing interest as they all pose for a photo before the three hopefuls throw their names in the blue burning goblet. The majority of students clap after each name is dropped in the flames but seated in front of him, Harry is pleased to see Luna is as uninterested as Hermione. While Hermione is neck deep in the Occlumency book Harry lent her, Luna is has been staring at her breakfast without once touching it. As Harry slides his plate of bacon to Nova and Hedwig, he asks, “what’s wrong Luna?”

Draco is inhaling his breakfast after their morning workout as Luna states, “Oh, well, my mind is inordinately preoccupied with worry over the herd of Thestrals. Beautiful creatures don't you think?”

“I do,” Harry answers her honestly. “Why are you worried about them?”

“They’ve grown quite restless of late. Normally they adore the rotten apples I feed them but they're
fairly tense at the moment and aren't eating properly. When I told Professor Grubbly-Plank, she couldn't see any way of caring for them as she can't actually see them.”

“Why didn't you tell Professor Hagrid?” Harry asks, wondering if the skeletal horses truly enjoy eating rotten apples. “Doesn't he usually deal with all the magical creatures in Hogwarts?”

“Normally, yes, but he's gone and Professor Grubbly-Plank doesn't know when he'll return. This is really quite vexing,” Luna gently says, though to no one in particular. “I'm terribly vexed.”

A thread forms in Harry's mind that makes no sense and so he follows it by asking, “wait, she doesn't know where he is, or when he'll be back?”

“He hasn't shown up to teach for the past four days,” Draco adds. “It's been Grubbly-Plank in the interim and no one is eager to have Big-Beard back, not even Potter,” Draco adds with a satirical smirk. “She's practically worshiped for saving everyone from the Blast-Ended Skrewts for cutesy animals and the like.”

Harry knows Rita hasn't reported on Hagrid's half-breed status, so isn't sure why Hagrid isn't teaching the class. “I'll ask Daphne, later,” Harry absentmindedly comments, bringing Hermione out of her tome. “She might know something.”

“What's this?” Hermione asks.

“Just curious about where Professor Hagrid's gone,” Harry easily states and quickly remembering to add, “and why the Threstals are upset.” Luna presents him with a dreamy smile of appreciation.

Suspiciously, Hermione asks, “do you think he can be another impostor and the Threstals sense that?”

“I'm not sure of anything right now,” Harry casually says. “I'm just curious.”

“I've seen him with the Headmistress of Beauxbaton a number of times,” Hermione says. “Maybe she knows something that could help.”
“Thanks, I'll ask her,” he tells her before leaving the Great Hall. When Draco catches up with him, he asks the silver-blond, “Is there anything you were leaving out you want to tell me?”

“It might be nothing but during class four days ago, Big-Beard stops lecturing to meet a centaur by the treeline. I couldn't hear what they were saying obviously, but he cuts class short, runs into his hut, and comes out with his dog and crossbow. *Muffliato!*” Draco calls, wand in hand, and Harry feels odd to hear him use something he taught him, but the silver-blond continues under privacy to ask, “you remember that lovely time in the Dark Forest our first year? Where the school knew something was killing unicorns so they wisely sent four first years students and a chicken shite dog after it? That was the impression I got this time, minus the four firsties. Maybe Big-Beard and his mutt ran into that ghoul and it got him.”

*Fuck,* Harry thinks, his shoulders tensing enough to make Nova flap her wing to stay on. *No, it's too early to know anything for certain,* he mentally corrects himself, but what Harry can say with absolute confidence is that bloody ripple in time and space he created is really starting to grate on his nerves.

“That wasn't a ghoul killing Unicorns,” Harry starts to tell Draco. “That was Professor Quirrell possessed by the wondering spirit of Voldemort. He was killing Unicorns and drinking their blood to help sustain his weakening body. It's possible the centaur could've been Firenze. Hagrid's sort of an unofficial peacekeeper in the forest, so they come to him when there's a problem.”

“Merlin's balls,” Draco gasps. “Wait you don't think-”

“Don't know anything yet,” Harry asserts. “But you can bloody be sure I'm going out there to find out. Tonight.”

“Okay, what's the plan?” Draco asks resolute.

“Draco, it's very possible this might be-”

“I can only hope,” Draco interrupts, with a very clear edge to his tone.

Harry can feel his anger and though he doesn't think Draco is ready for that kind of action, he's not going to govern what he does. “Fine, but remember, he's better than you. I don't want you to lose your head and charge in like some brain-dead git. Play to your strengths, and even if he is stronger, it doesn't guarantee you'll lose, or, well, die. You already know his favorite curses. Train your
mind to think of unexpected counter tactics.”

Before they head out, however, they must attend a day's worth of irrelevant classes, which Harry would've gladly skipped if he thought there was any chance of spotting whatever is out in the Forest during the day. Also, his decision to be a good student in some ways is influenced by Perenelle's first day as Professor for History of Magic. Currently, Harry is sitting in the stadium style classroom with all four houses of fourth year students in attendance. Hermione is seated with the Slytherins in the very front next to a very reserved Harry. Daphne's taken the seat Draco usually takes, forcing the silver-blonde to sit next to Tracey and Zabini in the elevated level behind them.

Harry is more focused on the teachers scattered around the highest level of the stadium seating. Severus Snape is standing next Lily and Flitwick, McGonagall, Babbling and Sprout are conversing among themselves. Headmaster Dumbledore is standing among his professors but not engaging in conversation. Directly in Harry's line of sight, he can see the old man is keen to know what Perenelle will talk about, which is odd because she submitted a syllabus to the Headmaster and the Governors for approval. While the other professors seem merely curious for curiosity's sake, Harry can easily assume Dumbledore's only here on the off chance Perenelle might shed even more light on how they know about Tom Riddle.

Busy as Dumbledore has been the past few weeks reassuring the governors, the Wizengamot, the British, French, and Bulgarian Ministry, the International Confederation of Wizards, as well as the public outcry that there is no longer any threat to the students, foreign or domestic, on Hogwarts' grounds; the revered wizard still finds time to try and question Nicolas, Perenelle or Harry about what they know. He's been rebuffed a number of times but it wasn't until all three Flamels were in Nicolas and Perenelles personal chambers hosting Dumbledore to tea as he attempts, yet again, to get them to talk, that they decided to say more.

“I honestly can't fathom why you insist on this line of questioning when that Death Eater is still at large, and the school is not completely secure,” Nicolas tells the man. “This just isn't the time for old news, young man.”

“It is simple, my old friend,” Dumbledore starts, setting down his tea. “I am aware of details that might, with your assistance, put certain important events into perspective.”

Perenelle takes her slice of Dumbldore, stating, “this castle has not proven itself to be the safest place in magical Britain, as you've so claimed, and instead of ensuring that our heir along with the sons and daughters of other parents are safe from this madman, you want to know how we learned the dark lord's given name? This is absolutely absurd!”

“Perenelle I understand that you are worried for-”
“No, Albus, I don't think you understand at all. It's not worry that's keeping me up at night. It's the fact that my son might have incurred the wrath and vengeance of a Death Eater and the safest place for him to be is in seclusion with us. But instead of securing your defenses, you're having tea with us, asking about a dead man's name. It doesn't instill me with a great vote of confidence.”

“If you would but trust me,” Dumbledore tries to placate her. “As you have in the past-”

“You mean like when we entrusted you with our stone, that was destroyed under your care,” Nicolas asks with an edge. “Do you mean trust you like that?”

“That was most unfortunate,” Dumbledore ruefully states. “And I've apologized from the depth of my heart for the destruction of your stone, but I'd ask of you now, can we not all agree that it was a most unfortunate outcome, so we may look towards a more productive future? I am asking you to trust me, not simply because of our friendship, but because this knowledge could very well help save the life of an innocent.”

The Flamels look at each other a moment when Nicolas asks, “who is this innocent you believe will benefit from such a simple piece of word play?”

“Excuse me?” Dumbledore asks confused.

“Are you a fan of anagrams, Headmaster” Perenelle asks. “As you know, Nicolas loves them, and it wasn't until Ares asked who the man behind the great name Voldemort was that we soon realized there is not much if any information on the Dark Lord. Our investigation, academic as it was, led us to stumbled upon an astounding connection.” Harry hands Dumbledore a piece of parchment with the writing, 'I Am Lord Voldemort,' on it.

“You've always been a smart lad, Albus,” Nicolas totes as Dumbledore looks over the parchment with strained brows. “I don't doubt you'll solve it before long, but if you'll excuse us, I'd like to continue to help my darling wife prepare for her first day.”

It didn't take him long nor did it deter him from trying to ask the Flamels more about what else they've learned. It's almost as if the man who holds all the secrets doesn't trust anyone to tell him all of theirs. Watching the man over the stacks upon stacks of new History Books on the professor's desk, Perenelle takes her place as the student's sole focus.
“Hello one and all and welcome to History of Magic,” she calmly starts off. Harry oddly notes Lily waving to Hardwin, who though embarrassed gives her a small wave back. “I am Perenelle Flamé, please call me Professor Flamé, or Professor. There are a few things that need to be said before we embark on this educational journey together. The very first is as the Headmaster announced during breakfast, all of your first period professors have been gracious enough to impart thirty minutes of their time with you so I may give you all a rough outline of what we’ll be covering throughout the year. Which means, if History is not your first course of the day, you’ll only be here half an hour before returning to your normally scheduled class. The rest will stay.”

“Next, as interesting as Goblin Rebellions and Giant Wars are, and it's true, they are interesting, I wouldn't exactly call them the most significant events in magical history.” Arms crossed and slouching in his seat, Harry can feel Hermione's excitement as she leans forward in rapt attention, a stark difference to the calm reserved Daphne to his left. “While I'm certain Professor Binns did his level best to detail the events of our shared past, I've been brought in to push us further to the very boundaries this curriculum has to offer-”

“And to make sure Ares goes to class!” a Gryffindor that sounds a lot like Ron calls out, to the great laughter of many non-Slytherins in the room.

Harry doesn't let it bother him as Perenelle turns to the Gryffindor section and asks, “who said that?” in a carefree manner. Many of the Gryffindor's look around or at a very stern McGonagall, not willing to rat Ron out. “Come now,” Perenelle continues. “Surely it takes less courage to admit it after you've already said it. Isn't this the house of the brave I'm speaking to?”

That seemed to do the trick and though looking very reluctant, Ron was about to raise his hand when Hardwin—who's seated beside him—stands up. “It was me, Professor.” Many eyes are split between Hardwin, Perenelle and a stone-faced Lily.

“Mr. Potter.” Perenelle starts. “How selfless of you to cover for Mr. Weasley. Now, I would take five points from Gryffindor for disrupting class and interrupting my lecture, but you can certainly make that up in the next class, couldn't you? Instead, I'd like you to please come to the front and do twenty-five pushups.”

“What?” Hardwin bellows, many in the class looking around confused. Hardwin glances at Dumbledore before returning focus on Perenelle. “I- That's not the rules. And you can't make me.”

“I certainly can't make you do pushups, despite how easy twenty-five push-ups should be to a boy who plays quidditch. However, it is in the rules that I can take as many points as I'd like from your house. It can be as low as one, or as high as one thousand. I believe the Slytherins are still minus a hundred and seventy points simply to return to zero and that's even after a Slytherin saved lives in the Great Hall some weeks back.” Nearly all the Slytherin's glare at Dumbledore for his insistence
on Ares' punishment despite acts of heroism. “How long do you believe it would take Gryffindor to come back from a thousand point deficit simply because you don't have strength enough in you to do twenty-five pushups?”

The other houses are in awe or humored by Perenelle's stance, despite the headmaster being in attendance. Gryffindors watch on in shock but several are looking at Dumbledore or McGonagall for help. When none is forthcoming, Ron stands up, scandalized as he calls back, “You- can't do that! That's house discrimination! Clear favoritism!” “Yeah!” some agree, looking at Dumbledore to back them up.

“No, Mr. Weasley.” Perenelle tells the redhead, willfully ignorant of the Headmaster or the other professors before telling the entire class. “As the headmaster and every professor watching knows, it's perfectly within my power to take as many points as I like, or Mr. Potter can do a menial task as punishment for the disruption. Because unlike points, pushups can not be absolved by another professor in their class. So, what say you Mr. Potter? And let's be quick about it, I'd really like to continue with the lesson.”

Lily looks sternly at Hardwin, who then stands, grumbling to himself as he makes his way to the front. Anger clear on his face, he starts doing his disciplinary pushups before Perenelle continues as if never interrupted. “As I was saying, significant events in magical history. To have a comprehensive understanding of where we come from, that is to say, where our values, our legal and political system, our society and it's culture comes from, we must look at examples of our strengths and our weaknesses and ask ourselves what do we really know. Something that may be bad, could've started off as something favorable or useful to society. An example; how many are familiar with the Killing Curse?”

Nearly every student raises their hand. When Perenelle catches Harry, arms crossed and slouching, she tilts her head as if to say, really? Harry slowly sits up as Perenelle continues. “Good. I think we can all agree it's a most terrible curse, but I'm certain not one of you can tell me who invented it. A hint: it wasn't a Dark Lord.” No one, not even Hermione, who is completely dumbstruck, raise their hand. “Ares,” Perenelle asks. “I can feel your burning spirit for class participation.”

Ares tilts his head as if to say, ‘really?’ But nevertheless lamely answers, “Helga Hufflepuff,” to the sheer gasps of every Hufflepuff.

“Five points to Slytherin,” she calls out before quickly adding in a lower tone, “less sass next time.” She turns to the properly surprised room and continues, “Don't be upset if you weren't aware. I've been to enough of history's book burnings to tell you what may have been written down once doesn't always stand the test of time. We'll study more on Helga along with all the founders at a later date, but in the interest of time, I'll simply say Helga Hufflepuff had a gift for food-related charms, and in order to kill livestock as humanely and painlessly as possible, she invented the killing curse. To be clear, she never intended to use the curse on humankind, nor was it named the
killing curse to begin with. 'Kedavra' an evolution of the word, *cadaver*, which means, 'corpse,' and derives from the Latin *Cadere*, or, 'to fall.' The Killing Curse's original name was the *Cadere* curse.” Perenelle gives the stunned room a moment to digest the outrageous information about Helga. The students also seem to appreciate Perenelle as well as the ease by which she speaks to them, as if they're not simply students but young adults responsible enough to know this information.

“Ares, would you be a dear and pass out the textbooks?” Perenelle asks sweetly, as a red-faced Hardwin finally finishes his twenty-five pushups. Harry gives her a tired look before capitulating to her request. Harry walks over to the forty or so textbooks stacked on her desk. Instead of taking a stack and passing them out by hand one by one, Harry uses wandless magic to exercise more focus and control on his summoning and banishing charms by slowly sailing book after book to each student.

Despite his impressive feat of magic, Perenelle continues to say, “this year you will learn a number of historical facts and events that have altered the course of magical history in revolutionary and or bloody ways. I will not make light this subject and solely focus on teaching about history's greatest heroes, their intellectual discovery or their magical feats, because it won't be comprehensive if your don't learn about the Dark as much as the Light. So, you will learn about history's greatest villains as well—the Dark Lords, and their contributions to the annuls of wizard kind. And make no mistake, they have led to some of the greatest innovations to date. So prepare yourselves and welcome to the study of magical history.”

“Your mother is an absolute joy,” an excited Hermione couldn't help but share with Harry as he, Daphne, Draco and Tracey exit the classroom.

“She does inspire a thrilling passion to learn,” Daphne notes from Harry's other side. Wondering about the Forbidden Forest, Harry couldn't pretend to be as elated as Hermione and Daphne, and so, comes off the wrong way.

“How can you be so down,” Hermione asks, genuinely curious. “She's the best professor that class has ever seen.”

“He's just butt hurt he won't get skip anymore,” Draco teases, though his mind is also in the Forbidden Forest.

Though Harry will lament playing and training with Nāga during that free time, he instead tells Draco, “it's not about going to class or not, you discount Veela.” Harry tells Hermione, “I've already memorized the textbook. I'm just thinking about Professor Hagrid, is all.”
“Why?” Daphne starts. “I've been told he's as comfortable in the Forbidden Forest as we are in the castle. I'm certain there's nothing to worry about... unless you think he is the danger.”

Harry considers his words but after a moment, Hermione asks, “is it safe to assume that you can't tell us why you're so worried because we're not proficient in occlumency?”

“Speak for yourself, Granger,” Daphne tells her with a smirk. “I've been trained in Occlumency since I was eight. You're the only one here at a disadvantage. If you're really Ares' friend, you'll excuse us so he can speak freely.”

Bothered by how calmly Daphne shrugs Hermione off, Harry stops walking, looking around the hall and the portraits, and walks into the nearby empty classroom, calling for all of them to, “follow me.”

Once they're all inside the empty and dusty classroom, Harry gives Daphne a stern look before turning to Hermione and saying, “fear is pain arising from the anticipation of evil.”

Hermione nods a second before she easily answers, “Aristotle.” Her eyes grow wide when she asks, “please don't tell me Nicolas was friends with Aristotle as well?”

“No, he wasn't alive yet,” Harry answers lightly. “But according to Perenelle, he went through a phase.”

“So why say-”

“My say indeed,” Harry interject looking at her sternly, willing her to grasp what he knows shes already capable of.

Hermione looks around the room and though apprehensive to have a bit of an audience, she trusts 'Ares' and reverse-maps out his puzzle aloud. “…Well, obviously the quote is to allow me access without actually giving it. In the quote, evil is rather subjective. It's more apt to say ill-intent or unpleasant results than evil. That quote explains that expecting pain or trouble can be as bad as what you may perceive of as 'evil.' And while you've never explained specifics to me before because I'm not an Occlumens—as of yet—you've always given me enough to make my own accurate assessments. The deviation in this case however is you don't know what the unpleasant result might be, or you would've said, which means you have a bad feeling that something's going to happen but you don't know what.” Harry nods in the affirmative, pleased. “Would that also mean
“It may be nothing but...” he doesn't have to say more, before she departs to her next class. Harry turns to Daphne. “You may want to remember that while you've had many more advantages than she's had, it in no way impairs her ability to use her mind effectively.”

“You really do like her, don't you,” Daphne questions looking him with some disbelief.

“Regardless of who I associate with, your life would be better off without me in it. I'm the farthest thing from safe you can possibly be.” Harry turns to exit the room before he adds, “The Flamels will of course still help you, so never doubt that.”

Before Harry exits, Daphne calls out, “so why continue to associate with her than? If you're so dangerous?”

“Because she outright refused to leave,” he answers he before leaving.

After a few seconds of silence, Draco says, “it's like I told you, Greengrass, he doesn't do half measures. You're going to have to decide, just like Granger did, if you're all in, or not. Personally, I think he likes you, not that he'd ever admit it, but it explains why he'd rather keep you away. Those scars really aren't for show.” Draco extends his hand out for Tracey, and the bubbly blonde exits with him, leaving Daphne to her thoughts, alone.

“Why is it the easiest thing in the world to find something when you don't want to find anything, and to find nothing when you want to find something?” Draco asks walking out of the forbidden forest well into the middle of the night. They didn't find anything more than a wide variety of hungry, nocturnal predators, some of which they had to flame away to avoid death.

“As always Draco, your company is an absolute bloody joy,” Harry says sarcastically. There's enough night to get a few hours of sleep before their morning work out, but Harry is already considering changing their routine to accommodate nightly searches. It doesn't seem likely that whatever is attacking Unicorns, if anything is attacking Unicorns, is likely to need another fix so soon, but Harry doesn't want to chance missing it.
Nothing much changes through the month of October until the night prior to Halloween. Harry and Draco had taken to splitting up when Harry was certain Draco could search the forest on his own without dying, but they still met every two hours. The night before Halloween, confirmation finally happened in Draco’s search of the woods—a completely cloaked entity, feasting on the still quivering flesh of a Unicorn. The skirmish that ensued between Draco and the ghoul was short and before Harry can arrive to Draco’s signal, it escaped.

Now Halloween in the Great Hall, standing well away from the spectacle of the crowd as Dumbledore prepares to draw the champion's names, Harry is discussing the results of his search under privacy charms at the nearly empty teachers table with Nicolas, Perenelle and Draco.

“I can't believe a whole month of combing through that fucking forest and all we have to show for it is a dead unicorn,” Harry groans dejectedly to the group.

“Hey, I could've died with that unicorn,” Draco returns. “That ghoul was fast, strong, and it flew! I couldn't get a single one of my curses to land before it disappeared.”

“It wasn't a ghoul,” Harry returns, unsympathetic to the silver-blonde’s near brush with death. “Taking Unicorn's blood exactly like in our first year can't be a coincidence. But at the rate Quirrell’s body was disintegrating, he couldn't have lasted this many years.”

“Which can only mean it's someone else,” Nicolas offers.

“We can always get a pensieve and look at the memory,” Perenelle proposes.

“I suppose that's better than nothing,” Harry estimates. “How fast can you get one?”

“We had an old one that no longer functions in Sweden,” Nicolas answers. “But never bothered to get a new one. It's not wise to dwell in the past, which is a very easy thing to do in our case. I'll place an order tomorrow.”

“And now the moment we've all been waiting for!” Dumbledore calls out to the entire assembly of students, foreign and domestic. “The selection of the TriWizard Tournament Champions!”

“Harry,” Perenelle calls out in a serene manner, drawing Draco and Nicolas' attention as well. “Were you aware that Ms. Greengrass stayed after class one morning rather troubled.”
Harry looks confused, as do the other males, but answers, “no. Was it about her sister? Did something happen?”

“Something did indeed happen, but not concerning her sister. I think the earliest I’ll be able to pay her sister the proper attention will be end of November, as I informed her. No, she was was troubled by something you said to her just about a month ago, and concern-mixed curiosity would not allow her to think of much else until she ultimately decided to simply ask me about you.”

“Perenelle?” Harry asks, starting to worry. Perenelle's eye-line is directed behind Harry, and when he turns, he spots Hermione and Daphne shuffling through the bunched up crowd toward them. “Please, please, please tell me whatever you told her took into account that she's safer away from me.”

“And Ms. Granger?” Nicolas asks curiously. “I see you two nearly as much as you and Mr. Malfoy.”

“Out of every person I've ever met, Hermione was the one who stuck by me through everything,” Harry tells them with a manner of finality. “This Hermione seems to be no different in that regard and she told me as much.”

“Be that as it may,” Perenelle continues. “Ms. Greengrass seems as keen to know more about you as Ms. Granger.”

Hermione and Daphne step onto the elevated platform for the teachers table and walk to the group. Harry looks at the Flamels before turning to the approaching girls. Harry expands the privacy charms to include them when Hermione excitedly tells him, “This was one of the most challenging skills I've ever had to learn, but absolutely worth it! I can feel such efficient clarity in my thoughts and memory. I thought my mind was effective before, but now... it's like a dynamic evolution.”

“I'm happy for you,” Harry responds. “But you know you didn't have to.”

“I most certainly did,” Hermione returns with bright brown eyes and Harry can easily see the same loyalty he was honored to be the recipient of in the previous time-line. “And I have all of you to thank for it, minus Malfoy, but including Daphne.” Harry turned to the crystal blue eyed blonde while Hermione continues to explain. “She approached me, apologized for what she said, and offered to help me. She's been helping me this whole month.”
Daphne hasn't said a word while Hermione speaks her mind but Harry can see she's not employing her occlumency, making her apologetic regret easily readable.

“We talked, properly talked,” Hermione continues. “And while I may not know details, I feel confident Daphne is a good person to rely on and be friends with.”

Harry exhales loudly, to the point one might confuse it with a sigh. He extends his right hand and places it on Hermione's forehead. Warm to the touch he allows his magic to flow as he stares into her chocolate eyes to check the strength of her mental defense. While she has much room for improvement, they're just barely strong enough for only a month and a half of training. He also notices she took his advice and weaved a unique pattern that is unique in it's meaning and arrangement to her within the shield. It's a subtle defense in case of legilimency followed by obliviation. The pattern doesn't defend against either but when you're conscious again, you'll know something is wrong if the pattern isn't the same. “They're solid enough to know if someone is trying to enter your mind, but it won't keep a strong legilimens out. If you continue to work on it, it won't be long before you'll get there.”

Harry removes his hand as Hermione states with a gasp, “you know legilimency as well?”

“Only a little,” Harry tells her before turning to both girls. “You're both far too smart for your own good. You're too curious to leave matters that you don't belong in well enough alone. If you don't understand, allow me to clarify it for you. My life is akin to charging head-on towards death, which puts everyone around me in immediate, untold and mortal danger. Nicolas, Perenelle, Draco, they know being around me can very easily be a one way road and have made peace with that. And whether you would or wouldn't have a similar determination, you shouldn't have to.”

Dumbledore reduces the fire light from the torches hooked to the columns, adding more emphasis to Harry's words, but the blue light of the raging fire spreads about the room with ease. Dumbledore slowly places both palms on the surface of the magical goblet before announcing, “It's time!”

“You're right,” Daphne retorts. “We're both very smart and it doesn't take a genius to see your life is very dangerous. The Great Hall battle is proof enough of that.”

“And it's obvious that wasn't the only one,” Hermione interjects, and it's clear she's referring to his green eyes. He looks away a moment as the flicker of red light before a slip of parchment is expelled from the goblet. “It's clear you've been in a number of battles for your very life. We are not ignorant of that fact.”
“The Durmstrang Champion is... Victor Krum!”

A great booming cheer erupts from the Durmstrang student along with every Victor Krum fan in the room, as Daphne continues to say, “what you don't seem to understand is that we're not just studious to have the best grades and get a good job. We're looking for meaning... for the very essence of what matters in this world.”

A victorious Victor Krum passes them as he enters the antechamber just past the teachers table. Another blowout from the Goblet, then a piece of singed, gentle looking blue parchment floats to Dumbledore's hand.

“If knowing was enough for me, I'd stick to just reading books,” Hermione tells him. “But there's a wisdom about the text you can only truly learn through experience. The burden of knowledge has always been a source of strength because it protects, empowers, affects the world on a fundamental level. That's what I want. To impart great change.”

Dumbledore reads the pretty blue paper before calling out the next name. “The Beauxbaton Champion is... Fleur Delacour!”

While the Beauxbaton students mostly seem upset by the announcement, nearly every male in the room cheer a great symphony of lively glee.

“I'm going to be an Unspeakable after Hogwart's,” Daphne states. “Because I need to know the secrets of this world more than anything. Granger and I have intellect enough to create lasting change—good or bad. We understand the monumental dangers involved with the responsibility of that knowledge and we accept them. I think I can speak for the both of us when I say we've accepted that responsibility long before we met you and I guarantee you if it wasn't you now, it would've been some other powerful wizard later.”

They both seem adamant to Harry and so decides to impress upon them a little more of how dire tangling themselves with him will be. “The evil anticipated in this case, is absolute evil by every metric,” he tells them. The entire time they were expressing their commitment and dedication to truth seeking, he was wondering what method would completely stop their curious nature. His mind drew no answers that didn't involve a major violation. “Who do you love most? Think about them, their faces, their laughter, because you'll be putting their lives on the line as well as your own.” Fleur passes them on her way to the antechamber. She dazzles his grim gaze with a smile and wink, which quickly morphs to curiosity at the serious sight of him, before reluctantly entering the designated waiting area.
“I can't completely make you understand how incredibly dangerous my life is without telling you what a shit show it's been. The loss that I've suffered since infancy is as constant as it is great, and worst of all, not at all of my control. I'm like a magnet for this, born under some terrible star from which there is no escape. I won't hurt you, I won't obliviate you, and I'll do my very best to make sure you're always safe, so I'm begging you, please let that be enough.”

Hermione and Daphne look at one another, nearly convinced, but not nearly enough when Hermione says, “I already told you I don't abandon my friends.”

“If I run from the harshness of this world now,” Daphne starts. “Than I'll always run from it.”

Two pieces of parchment shoot out of the Goblet, drawing an extra portion of Harry's keen attention. Catching both singed, brown parchment in each hand, Dumbledore looks at both pieces, clearly speculative before his voice booms throughout the room, “The Hogwart's Champion is... Ares... Flamel.”

The room turns stone silent as they all, surprised, gravely and or angrily look at Ares, who just slumps his head down, shaking it from side to side in sick disbelief. And in the absolute silence of the room, his voice rings out, sullen with incredulity, “fuck me...”

Chapter End Notes

An event occurred this week that made me so glad part of this chapter was written from the last update. And that event is Avengers Infinity Wars! I'm not ashamed to say I saw it three times already. Yes, I am a nerd.

But I had to pull an all-nighter to get this one done. So if there are any mistakes or grammar issues, I apologize, but my lack of self control with that movie would be why.

I did however enjoy writing Hermione's conversation with Harry which made it a breeze to go through. Democritus is a real person for those who don't know. My GF was the one who sent me the link to him so I was glad to have read it, cuz it really helps with Harry and my plans. It offered steady foundation for me to build upon.

Daphne was fun to write in this chap too.

And of course Harry had to be the Hogwart's champion. At least Cedric lives.... maybe.
Thank you all again for your support, reading my fic and taking the time to comment. I truly appreciate it, and until next week :)
The Iceberg's Deception

Chapter Summary

Harry has a hard time understanding how to deal with the girls, but everyone won't be able to see the dangers that lie underneath the surface.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Happy Post Cinco De Mayo Hangover Day! Surprisingly, I didn't drink much; barely got a buzz.

I want to give everyone a heads-up. My and my GF families do Mother's day pretty big, so next week seems VERY unlikely that I can update. Part of the reason I can write is because my weekends are free, unlike most of the family, so I get to do a LOT of driving around :( I will try to write and update but to be honest, I don't think I'll have the time. Sorry.

This chapter deals a lot with the aftermath of the Goblet and involves the girls more--taking more steps toward them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If hard work places a person where good luck can find them, what traits must Harry herald for bad luck to stalk him so effortlessly? Where is the sense of fairness? he wonders. *Am I the counterbalance to some other soul on this planet that has inordinately good luck?* If so, Harry is nearly willing to dedicated what remains of his life after killing Voldemort to search for this person for the express purpose of punching them in the face.

“You really do have shite luck,” Draco chuckles.

“Language,” Perenelle reminds Draco, who rolls his eyes but says nothing.

Daphne and Hermione give each other a look that's a mix of concern and curiosity while Nicolas asks Harry, “who do you think it was?”

“Don't know,” Harry glumly states before turning to the gawking crowd, now beginning their whispers or shouts of the unfairness. Spotting Dumbledore's expressionless countenance, holding both parchments, Harry tells his immediate surrounding, “excuse me.”
His phoenix on his squared shoulders and agitated, the crowd of students part for Harry as he walks straight to Dumbledore. Landing just before the old Headmaster, who's still quite expressionless, Harry accepts both parchments and looks them over for several moments. He then addresses the old man, “one definitely has my handwriting.”

“He admits it,” a voice that sounds exactly like Khan yells from somewhere in the Hall. “He admits he put his name in the Goblet!”

Ignoring the children and their inane fuss, he continues to explain to Dumbledore, “But it's been ripped off in such a way, I'd wonder if it was taken from an assignment I turned in. The "Hogwart's" that's written in isn't even in my handwriting. You ought to ask the professors if any of the work I've submitted has a missing section where my name should be. This second one looks like it's been written by an entirely different person. A practiced hand judging by the clean and rounded loops. I'd guess an older person that writes many professional correspondences day in and day out. I'll give these to my parents so they can look it over and oversee the investigation.”

Harry turns away before the Headmaster can say anything and heads right to his group. Handing the parchments to the Flamels, he tells them within the secrecy of his privacy barrier, “this isn't the work of a Death Eater following Voldemort's orders–”

A couple of gasps, alerts him to Daphne and Hermione's shock at hearing the moniker of the Dark Lord spoken aloud without fear or apprehension.

Harry continues, “none of them know or need me like I might expect they need Potter. The likeliest suspects are Dumbledore, Snape, or someone from the Upper Order, Khan more than likely. Talk to Amelia and see if there's any legal advise she can give that we can pursue.” As the Flamels look over the parchments, Harry turns to Hermione and Daphne. “Draco and I train in the mornings, five AM by the main entrance. If the name Voldemort shocks you, don't come. If you think there's even a remote chance I put my name in the Goblet, don't come. If you want to keep being knuckleheads about this, than I insist you train as well. For your sake, I hope I don't see you tomorrow morning.”

If they do show, Harry optimistically wonders if a bit of hard training might change their minds as he leaves them and enters the antechamber. Nodding at Fleur and Krum's confused faces, Harry makes a note of how completely silent it is despite being next to the Great Hall as he takes a seat. Fleur gracefully takes the seat next to him, her scent instantly satisfying to the senses. “Arez, why are you 'ere? 'Ave zhey asked you to come fetch us, or were you simply too eager to congratulate me?” She asks with a wide grin.

“Congratulations on being Beauxbaton's Champion Fleur, but it seems I'm Hogwarts' Champion,”
answers her with a chuckle. Recalling his past, he can't help but add before she can reply. “No, it's not a joke, but I wish it was. Yes, I'm too young, but my name still came out of the Goblet, and I don't know why.”

Fleur is understandably surprised to hear a fourteen year old will be in the tournament despite the age line put in place to stop just that, but Harry can also register her concern. “Eef you zay you did not put your name in zhe Goblet, zhan of course I believe you, but 'ow can zhis 'ave 'appened?”

Before Harry can answer, the chamber door opens and in walks a stunned Hardwin Potter, answering one of Harry's initial questions of how fast Barty Jr. tampered with the ancient magical artifact. *Within the first week*, he reasons.

“Why are you here?” Harry asks Hardwin, playing the fool when Ludo Bagman suddenly enters the room, announcing to all with clear amusement, “as if this tournament couldn't get any better with a surprise underage Hogwat's wizard, we now have a fourth underage Champion!”

Krum's brows instantly furrows, registering how upset he is, Harry continues his perplexed countenance as Fleur states, completely mystified, “Zhis must be zhe joke, yes? 'E cannot possibly compete.”

“The age restriction was never a rule in previous tournaments. It is only a stipulation enforced by the Wizengamot, as such, any and all names selected by the Goblet, no matter how they ended up there, are still required to participate.”

Hardwin looks lost and Harry wonders if he displayed a similar mix of confusion and fear when the very same thing happened to him.

Dumbledore, Madame Maxime, Karkaroff, McGonagall, Snape, the real Mad-Eye Moody, and Umbridge all hurriedly enter the antechamber. Dumbledore—the furthest thing from calm—rushes Hardwin, grabs his shoulders, and shouts as he shakes him, “did you put your name in the Goblet? Hardwin, did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?!”

“N-No,” Hardwin stutters, leaning away from the headmaster. “No, I didn't professor, honest.” Dumbledore let's Hardwin go as Lily Potter enters the room, and hurries straight to her son... that she's aware of, and wraps him protectively in her arms. As Nicolas enters the room, Dumbledore turns to Harry, and asks with just as much enthusiasm, “did you put your name in the Goblet, Mr. Flamel?”
“I already explained that I didn't, Headmaster,” Harry calmly answers him as Nicolas stands close to Harry without hovering.

“They, or at least one of them must be lying,” Snape tells the room. “While Mr. Potter seems to have a propensity for being the target of malicious intent, Mr. Flamel, has a clear history of challenging authority by any clever means he can think of.”

“Challenging inane dichotomy, I'll give you that much, professor Snape,” Nicolas states with a smile, and just as calm as Harry. “But I assure you, he hasn't learned everything he knows by detesting authority on principle. It's hard to learn from one you might hate, after all.”

“Hem-Hem,” Umbridge coughs, but is ignored in a room where everyone wants to say something.

“How could dis have happened, Dumbledore?” Karkaroff levels at the Hogwart's Headmaster. “Clearly you successfully orchestrated two of your students to enter the tournament for twice the chance of winning.”

“That is not, nor has that ever been Headmaster Dumbledore, or Hogwart's position or intention,” McGonagall declares. “It's more clear to me something afoul has occurred.”

“Could you 'ave made a mistake wizh your charm, Albus,” Maxime asks. “Zhat ees zhe only explanation zhat makes sense, non?”

“More so dhan Hogwart's doubling dhere odds of winning,” Karkaroff asks Maxime, who's unsure.

“Regardless of the Age Line,” Lily tells the room. “Hardwin would never put his name in the Goblet! He wouldn't!”

“I demand the official position of Britain's ministry,” Karkaroff orders of Bagman, before turning to Umbridge and adding, “as well as an impartial opinion.”

“As I've already explained, age restrictions have never been interwoven into the enchantment of the Goblet,” Bagman informs the assembly. “It does not distinguish between age, but rather magical proficiency of each participating student within the school they represent.”
“Couldn't be more clearer to me,” Moody speaks up dragging everyone's attention to him. “It'd explain what that dark filth wanted to sneak in here for this entire time: to kill Harwin Potter.”

“No,” Lily protests. “That couldn't be. He couldn't have been here for that when there were other, easier opportunities to hurt my boy.”

“Well, he weren't here for the love of teachin this lot o' brainless sacks, that's for sure,” Moody tells her.

“Could that be the cause,” Dumbledore asks Bagman. “If the Goblet believed there was a fourth school and put one name in, could that be why Mr. Potter's slip had no school name?”

“It very well could be,” Bagman answers.

“Hem-Hem,” the pink toad lady fakes her cough more sternly, finally taking the attention she craves. “While I'm most certain Mistres Flamel and Potter did not expect such an outlandish outcome, I can see no proof of foul intent by which their names were entered, and without concrete proof, I will report as much to the Minister. Instead, I feel it would be prudent of the ministry and all responsible in this to make certain they are telling the absolute truth. Veritaserum is the only clear way to ascertain the truth of this matter.”

“I will not allow you to give my son Veritaserum!” Lily emphatically asserts, staring daggers at Umbridge.

“Nor will I,” Nicolas adds, making Harry feel weird for being called someone's son.

“You certainly are entitled to your opinion, Professor Potter,” Umbridge sweetly conveys in her abnormally child-like voice. “But should our great Minister decide-”

“The statements made by the Head of a Noble and Most Ancient house with a highly influential seat in the Wizengamot is far more than an opinion, Undersecretary, and you would do well to remember that!” Lily quickly shoots back.

Umbridge's head tilts oddly with a twitch, like her neck muscle tightened intensely before she fakes a wide smile.
“The path forward is clear,” Dumbledore tells the room, cutting through the heated debate. “All four must compete. There is no other choice.”

“I must strenuously object,” Maxime states. “Zhey are too young. Eet is far too dangerous.”

“I do not see any other alternative, Madame Maxime, that does not cause them to lose their magic,” Dumbledore admits. “However I am open to suggestions.”

In the silence of the room, Harry decides to move this along, asking loud enough for the room, “when is the first task?”

“You seem to have accepted this quite well, Mr. Flamel... one might say, quickly, even,” Umbridge states, looking at Harry suspiciously.

“Can't say as I see much alternative between a task or two and losing my magic,” Harry snidely answers her without gravitating to insults—though the tremendous urge is there. “But now that your passive way of saying you don't believe me is well received by everyone in the room, can you kindly shut it so Mr. Bagman can tell us what we need to know?”

It's only the second time he's spoken directly to Undersecretary Umbridge, and he can't seem to quell his extreme dislike of the pink toad woman—he has to admit, he almost feels incapable of it. Even telling her to shut up was him holding back as much of his animosity toward her as he can. The room is silent, unsure how a student as young as him from a Noble and Most Ancient House can act like such a delinquent toward authority. Harry catches a tight smirk from both Nicolas and Lily, and a wide grin from Moody.

“You insolent-” Umbridge starts when she's interrupted.

Bagman clears his throat, before rushing past the awkwardness and into his explanation.“Right! The first task will be on the twenty-fourth of November. It will test your daring and resourcefulness, so you will not be told what the task is until the day of. You are forbidden to ask or accept the help of any professors and your wand will be the only tool you may walk in with.”

“To assist with your preparation,” Dumbledore tells the youths. “You will also be excused from end-of-the-year exams.”
“I cannot simply allow this,” Karkaroff tells the room, followed by Madame Maxime’s, “Nor can I.”

Harry gets up to leave, saying, “if that's all you have for us...”

“Ares,” Nicolas calls. “If you would be so courteous as to escort Ms. Delacour to her carriage. I'm certain this may take some time.”

Ares stares at Nicolas's encouraging face with squinting eyes of clear betrayal. Without officially saying he would, Fleur stands and bids her headmistress goodnight with a kiss on each cheek before sweetly looking at Harry to leave. The Great Hall as well as the hallways are empty of students by that point and Harry is sure there’ll be a celebration in both Slytherin and Gryffindor houses. Nova takes off into the night sky once they leave the castle's entrance.

“I believe you did not put your name een zhe Goblet,” Fleur shares with Harry. “You could not do a zhing like zhat and refuse to claim credit for saving mine and my sister's lives.”

“How's she doing by the way?” Harry asks.

“I zhink meeting her savior 'as done 'er good,” Fleur answers with an easy smile at the thought of her sister. “She sleeps better, and eats properly now. She may 'ave developed a crush on you.”

“I uh, am flattered,” Harry uncertainly states.

Fleur laughs. “I wonder eef you know 'ow to be flattered, monsieur Trouble Star. Glory and praise do not seem to interest you een zhe slightest. Do not worry about Gabrielle. She 'as already given me notice, and will wait until she is older before she attempts to seduce you. I 'ave until zhen to stake my claim.”

His heart pumps a beat harder as her carefree approach to such private affairs boggles his mind and tightens his chest. He doesn't know how to respond, so he says nothing.

“You do not 'ave to be so reserved wizh me, Arez,” Fleur says, sensing his inexperience. “You are alwayz free to speak your mind. I do not balk so eazily.”
“I... I wouldn't be surprised if you regret that,” Harry tells her as he starts to wonder if warning Fleur, Hermione and Daphne about the dangers of associating with him is helping to dissuade them in anyway. Absent a better more genuine argument, Harry continues, “I'm not the good person most might think me to be.”

“I already know you 'ave taken life,” Fleur states. “Ow can eet be worse zhan zhat.”

“I've tortured a seventh year boy,” Harry claims, looking directly into her beautifully hypnotic, dark blue eyes.

“What did 'e do?” she asks, as if there are perfectly good reasons for torturing someone.

Harry returns his eyes to the carriage just ahead before hesitantly answering, “...he raped my friend.”

“Zhen I 'ave no pity for 'im,” she quickly and easily asserts. “But please, continue attempting to convince me you are too terrible for 'relations.'”

“I don't care to be with anyone,” Harry continues to say, but feels like it'll just fall on deaf ears. “...I can't love.”

“Respectfully, I disagree,” Fleur counters. “I would believe you love too much before I believe you do not love at all. Een my opinion, well, een zhe opinion of someone who know men very well, you may 'ave developed a fear for zhe one thing zhat you believe can 'urt you the most. Eet ees why I zhink you avoided me zhis month.”

“I wasn't avoiding you,” Harry returns, bypassing her analysis of him. “We just have conflicting schedules.”

“Zhat ees a terrible excuse,” Fleur voices, leveling him with a pout and raise of her chin. “Eef a man desirez a woman, nozhing een zhe world ees truly able to stop 'im from proclaiming 'is love for 'err. And nozhing ees wrong wizh that.”

“Maybe nothing is wrong with that, but what if the man doesn't desire her?”
“Zhen zhey can be zhe best of friends,” Fleur honestly answers. “However, eef ’e ees lying to ‘imself zhen zhey can be neizher friends or lovers. Are you a liar Arez?”

It couldn't be more clear how simple she sees the depth of this... coupling? Pairing? Entering a social status of union? This is blowing Harry's mind. Little, skinny, Harry Potter with the object of everyone's extreme adoration, Fleur Delacour? Could this topic of discussion actually be about the two of them engaging in some form of relationship that extends the boundaries of friendly acquaintance into something more? Could that really be what this conversation is about?

'Bill!' His mind calls out loud but then another side of his mind returns just as loudly, 'A life without frivolities is a long road without an inn...' His mind annoyingly recites to him Democritus. But isn't that the choice he's already made?

It's almost like he's fighting with himself when he tells her, “Fleur, call me a liar if you want. I won't think bad of you if you did, nor will I ignore you if you do, but, believe me when I say I have far too much to do in this life to be thinking about dates, and dances, and long strolls about the castle.”

“I zhink zhe dates, and dancing, and strolls about zhe castle are simply zhe fun bits,” Fleur tells him. “Zhere real purpose is quality time spent togezher.”

He stops and turns to her, resolute in his mulct punishment. “What I wouldn't give to have the luxury of devoting such time to a single person, as if they were the sole focus of my life. It's unimaginable to me because the moment I take my eyes off of the enemy, another friend dies; another loved one dies,” he tells her, praying that she understands. “So you tell me how it is I'm suppose to look away to enjoy the fun bits when I know that person could very well be the next dead eyes I see in my dreams?” His eyes are hot as he continues to say, “The purpose of being with someone is just not an option for me, Fleur. That's just too normal for the lot I've been given, and it's not fair to put anyone through the craziness of my life. If I wasted your time, I apologize, but I can't give what I don't even know is in me to give, because that would be the real lie.”

Standing by the Beauxbaton carriage, Fleur seems taken, though by his honesty, his rejection, or his priorities, he can't say. Fleur turns around and walks up the few steps ahead of the carriage doors. Harry's mind is already plotting what part of the forest to search next when she turns to tell him one last thing. “Expectation ees a weed zhat growz absent 'ard work. I apologize az well, Arez. Maybe I should not treat you like every ozher wizard, for you 'ave already shown me ozherwise. Please, spar wizh me, as you promised. Zhis Saturday, an 'our before noon, 'ave a friendly contest wizh me.”
If that is a compromise, Harry'll gladly take it. “Sure. Saturday.”

Harry flames into Draco's room late in the night as he has every night since learning of the possible ghoul feeding on the Unicorn. The silver-blonde closes an old green tome he was reading as he was waiting for Harry, when he states, “Khan's all but admitted putting your name in the Goblet; boasting about your death and how everything will go back to the way it was when you're gone. He's scaring others into returning to the fold.”

“Don't care,” Harry easily conveys.

“Figured as much,” Draco returns. “Which is why I made sure everyone knew you survived worse than a tournament.”

Harry rolls his eyes as he grabs Draco's shoulder and they flame to the usual clearing within the Dark Forest. “The second piece of parchment matches Dumbledore's writing from a letter he sent me in the previous time line.”

“Why would Dumbledore put your name in the Goblet? Not that I don't believe the wrinkled tosser wouldn't. If it was anyone else, that's like a death sentence.”

“I'm fairly sure it has more to do with learning all he can about me and testing my abilities, than actually attempting to murder me,” Harry explains. “It's not completely unexpected considering how he's so used to having his way and the Flamels have not fallen in line.”

“And you used to gobble up everything that came out of that manipulative bastard's wand,” Draco recalls aloud with a nose of superiority as Harry puts Nova on Draco's shoulder.

“Remember, Nova,” Harry tells his avian familiar. “Rotten as he is to the touch, try to stay with Draco for as long as you can. If there's any trouble, come get me.” His phoenix nods as Draco responds, “afraid to admit she's taken a fancy to me, Potter?”

“Not really, Malfoy,” Harry answers. “She loves bugs and bacon, and you don't look the least bit hearty.”

Draco sneers without any vitriol, and takes his direction, wand in hand, and phoenix on his shoulder. It would be the easiest thing in the world to leave Nova with Draco the entire night, so
she can quickly flame to him if there's trouble, but at her best, she only lasts thirty minutes away from him before the bond they share compels a great need for her to return to him. It's the only reason he missed the blood sucker last night. Since it fed last night, Harry never expected to run into it tonight, and they call it quits by two in the morning.

Stepping out of Hogwart's front entrance by five, Harry finds both Daphne and Hermione wearing their respective house quidditch team's sweat top. While Daphne wears form fitting legging, Hermione has on loose sweats. Both girls have their hairs tied back as they stretch their limbs to their limit. Despite his purpose of exhausting them, Harry can't deny their appeal as he walks up to them. He doesn't understand the intrusive nature of how engaging they look in their sweat jumpers as they stretch, but as is his habit now, he calls on his occlumency to help him focus on the blood flow that actually matters, and hopefully getting the girls to quit.

After an eleven kilometer(7mls) run, they swim for forty minutes in the freezing black lake under the same instruction he had given Draco in the beginning, no warming charms. It's cruel and harsh of him to put them through so much right at the beginning but to their credit, they pushed themselves until they dropped or drowned—both of which happened multiple times. At the end, Harry is helping a heaving Hermione with her arm around his neck to the castle's entrance while Daphne refused help. He gives them a pepper up potion for a bit of energy and casts a warming charm on them as well. “Take it easy, stretch, and get some food in your system soon. We spar after classes.”

“Are you sure about this,” Draco heaves, holding himself up with his hands on his knees as Hermione and Daphne drag their exhausted feet back to their rooms.

“This being?” Harry asks.

“I just want to know how involved they're going to be here,” Draco returns, still trying to catch his breath. “How much are you going to let them in on?”

“None of it, if I can help it,” Harry answers. “But that doesn't seem likely, given how perceptive they are. If I have to, I'll bring them in on the same Voldemort story we're feeding Dumbledore—”

“And that you think he's still alive?” Draco asks.

“Yeah, but no more than that. So please, Malfoy, be careful with what you say from here on out,” Harry warns the silver-blond.
“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Not to impress you or anything but I can hear,” he responds sarcastically.

“I'll keep them distracted with intense training while we look for the bloodsucker. At the very least, I'll feel better knowing they can handle themselves if neither of us happen to be around.”

“At the risk of making more sense than you're obviously comfortable with, this is not going to end well, you and them I mean. Tracey's already asked me what you really think about Daphne, no doubt for Daphne's benefit. Not to mention I always thought you and Granger were broom cupboard friends too.”

“Broom cupboard-” Harry exhales when he understands. “We weren't, and with everything going on, I don't care about all... that stuff,” Harry huffs.

“...That stuff,” Draco mumbles amused. “You know, with every scrap of information you have in your scared up head, I sometimes forget you really have no experience with that stuff, locked away like you were with a fucking parasite for company. You don't understand how fragile girls can be about all that emotional nonsense.”

“Who says there's any emotional nonsense going on now,” Harry asks, deflecting Draco while quickly picturing Fleur in her form fitting uniform, smiling at him.

“You really want to ignore what could be a major issue later just because it's uncomfortable now?”

Harry groans, rubbing his forehead raw. “In my wildest dreams I never thought I'd be having a conversation like this with you,” Harry sadly points out, more to himself but Draco gives Harry a nodding exasperated look that clearly matches the sentiment. Harry shakes his head and asks, “you offering a solution on how to keep them away?”

“I don't know, my marriage was arranged and Pansy was a dutiful wife so I never had to worry about her feelings... until they mattered,” he glumly states, his silver eyes shaping his saddening thoughts again. “But if you really don't want them getting close...” he says pondering a moment. “Girls hate liars and cheats. So theoretically, you can date one, then cheat on her with the other, and when they both find out what a disgusting horn dog you are, they'll both happily drop your cheating arse.”

“You would come up with some sick shite like that.” Harry mouths disapprovingly as he walks away.
“You never specified what kind of solution,” Draco says with a shrug, following Harry.

In the Room of Requirement, remodeled perfectly for their dueling needs, Hermione and Daphne are looking around amazed.

“How did you ever learn about a place like this?” Daphne asks, astonished. “Even I didn't know. Me!”

“It can configure itself to accommodate anything you need?” Hermione asks as she touches one of the ten training dummies in the center of the room.

“The house elves told me,” Harry answers Daphne before turning to Hermione. “And within reason, yes. Even a library, if you may have been wondering, though I’ve never tried. I only use it to train in peace.”

“So this is where you and Draco go every day,” Daphne mentions, looking over the line of training dummies, though each dummy to the left, gets bigger and bigger.

“Aren’t you tired after using your magic all day?” Hermione turns to Harry, who's taking off his robe, sweater vest and green an silver tie, then rolling up his sleeves. Looking over to Daphne, they both nod and remove their own robes as well. While Daphne removes her vest and tie, Hermione just rolls up her sleeves and for the first time since starting Hogwarts, she regrets wearing the optional slacks girls can wear instead of the flowy plaid skirt Daphne is wearing to great effect.

“The amount of magic you use in class is shite compared to what you'll be using here,” Draco answers her. “Makes what you use in the day look like a vacation.” Draco then turns to Harry to quickly add, “speaking of which, I'm staying with you for winter holiday.”

Harry looks at Draco weirdly before turning to the girls. “I believe in quality over quantity,” Harry starts addressing the girls, Draco by his side. “The number of spells you know isn't as important as the quality of their makeup. What does a protego matter if it's not strong enough to stop a deadly curse? To help with that, you'll use these training dummies. They're enchanted to weigh more than they look. Draco.”

Upon hearing his name, Draco walks over to the middle of the line of dummies—the fifth dummy in a line of ten—and calls out, “Depulso!” The fifth dummy slides back around four meters(13ft).
Draco moves to dummy number six, casts the banishing charm, forcing the dummy to slide back nearly three meters (9.5ft). Dummy number seven slides back one and a half meters (5.5ft), dummy number eight slides back under a meter (2.2ft), and dummy number nine slides back a fraction of a meter (0.9ft). When Draco strikes dummy number ten, it wobbles a bit, but stays firmly in place. Draco looks winded with a bit of sweat on his brow as he walks back to the fascinated girls.

Harry walks over to dummy number ten and without uttering a word banishes the heaviest training dummy back nearly twice the length of Draco's push of dummy number five, smacking against the wall of the chamber with a rumble. Slipping his wand back in his holster, he turns back to the shocked girls, and tells them, “for now I want you both to focus on this; working from dummy number one all the way to eight. This training regiment will help the potency of your spells so you can add a higher level of force in every cast, making it a little easier to defend against truly strong opponents. When you can push dummy number eight one meter back, we'll move on to quick casting.”

“What level would you say the imposter, that Death Eater, was,” Hermione can't help but ask.

Harry ponders an answer a moment before estimating, “if we're strictly talking about the potency of his magic, I reckon he's on a fourteen or fifteen dummy level.”

The girls are skeptically amazed, almost as if wondering if it's possible while simultaneously curious about their level, when Daphne shakes out of her stupor to ask, “what level are you?”

“Higher,” is all Harry says as he and Draco head over to the other end of the large training center to train. Resolute, both girls begin forcing the first dummy back and forth between each other. By the end of the session, Hermione is working the second dummy with more success than Daphne's having on the third. To Harry's surprise and dismay, the girls never quite. The intensity of the training throughout the week never waned and while they may stumble and or sink, they kept pushing themselves to finish, and Harry has no idea why.

Harry simply can't understand why choose to go through this with as little knowledge as he's given them. It always makes him wonder why Ron and Hermione from his time line stuck by him when things got worse every year. It's easy to just say they're his best friends but this time line's Hermione and Daphne have only just met him a few months ago. Harry has never been the most studious so their claim of ultimate knowledge doesn't make much sense, so he can only really speculate that there has to be more, but what? Harry doesn't ponder on it long and continues their training even on Saturday.

A letter from Fleur informs Harry to meet at three in the quidditch field, as she has secured permission to use it for their sparring session. So Harry and Nova, accompanied by Luna, Hermione, Daphne, Draco, and Tracey are walking through the castle to the quidditch field, when
an angry voice rings throughout the courtyard.

Two very heated Gryffindors are staring each other down, Hardwin yelling at Ron, “Yeah? Well, if that's how you really feel, you best bloody keep away from me than!”

“Trouble in pride paradise,” Tracey hoots beside Draco.

“Stay away from him?” Draco mocks curiously. “You mean except when they see each other in class, or meal times, or in their dorm?” Draco mouths humored, to Tracey's amusement. Harry candidly looks over to the silver-blondie who just shrugs. Ron, Dean, Lavender, and Seamus leave a fuming Hardwin in the courtyard. Hardwin spies Cho Chang as she and Cedric leave in the same direction.

“We'll be late if we don't hurry,” Tracey comments from behind Daphne.

An errant thought about Hagrid and dragons enters Harry's mind, 'surely someone else will help Hardwin with the first task'. Just because Hagrid was the one who warned him in the previous time line, and this Boy-Who-Lived doesn't seem to know Hagrid well, doesn't mean that no one will warn Hardwin...

“I'll meet you down at the field,” Harry tells his group as he walks over to an irate Hardwin. “You an your mate have a row?” is all Harry can think to ask since he's fairly certain the fight is no different than the one they had in his time line, when Ron wouldn't believe Harry had nothing to do with his name ending up in the Goblet.

“What powers of deduction you have, Lord Obvious,” Hardwin sarcastically calls. “Was it the yelling and anger that gave us away?”

“Hey, I'm sure whatever's going on between you two will blow over, and when he sees it, he'll remember what an awesome person you are and how amazing your friendship is,” Harry states, making Hardwin look at him oddly. “I mean, personally I think you're a spoiled, ungrateful twat, but Weasley probably doesn't.”

“What do you want Flamel?”

“I honestly only wanted to check if you're okay,” Harry tells him. “I've been told the specific
phrase for it is called, *expressing concern.*

“Why do you care? You have your friends,” Hardwin remarks, nudging his chin to point behind Harry. When Harry looks behind him, he sees Draco, Tracey, Daphne, Luna, and Hermione have decided to wait for him, rather than meet him at the field. “If you don't hurry you'll be late,” Hardwin sourly adds.

Harry finds that last statement odd and asks, “what do you mean, I'll be late? Where do you think I'm going?”

“Obviously to the quidditch field,” Hardwin states as though obvious. “And you don't have to invite me to join you. I was going anyway. If you'll excuse me, I don't want to be seen around a slimy Slytherin any longer than I have to.” Hardwin leaves in the same direction Neville Longbottom is also moving toward.

Walking toward the field, stone silent Harry quickly grasps the irritating situation and his group quickly grasp that he figured it out. Sure enough, by the entrance of the quidditch field, most of the stands are filled with students and teachers with an elevated square dueling platform in the middle. Harry swivels to Draco first, the annoyed impatience expressed easily on his face doing all the talking.

“First off,” Draco begins. “Everyone else only found out about an hour ago, after it was rescheduled. And second, I would've told you but I'm still pissed at you for...” Draco tilts his eyes toward Tracey, and continues, “certain things.”

“Been hanging out with certain things a lot though, haven't you,” Harry returns and Draco, at least has the decency to look away, as the truth about their meaning remains hidden from Tracey.

“Oh, really Ares, what's the harm,” Daphne questions. “You were okay letting us watch. What's a few more really matter?”

“I think everyone here knows I don't care for fame or crowds or attention, and this is literally all three combined,” Harry tells the group.

“Does the educational value and reason for the spar change simply because more people are in attendance,” Hermione questions. “It's still to our benefit to see.”
“It's possible he may have performance issues,” Luna ponders about Harry aloud, to Draco's great cough and snicker. “Are you afraid of speaking in public?” Luna asks Harry in all seriousness.

“I'm certain he can perform more than adequately,” Hermione quickly defends.

“So forward, Granger,” Draco calls suggestively. “It's almost like you're speaking from experience.” Hermione turns red as Harry glares at Draco—who's large, challenging silver eyes, and facial expression easily conveys to Harry, 'it's not fun, is it?'

“I can spar with Fleur in private or not at all-” Harry quickly stops when he senses a substantial body of warmth rushing at him, and pops his wand in his grasp. Tilting his head to the side, his peripheral vision spots Gabrielle, her wavy blonde hair running to him before spearing him at his waist and hugging him fiercely. She didn't notice him retract his wand in his wrist holster when he hears a french voice call, “Ah! I was beginning to zhink you would not show.” Fleur walks up to the group.

Harry pats Gabrielle's shoulder before she lets go. “Fleur,” Harry calls patiently. “Why are there so many people here?”

“Eet ees quite amazing, non?” Fleur tells him with a dazzling smile. “I only informed my Headmistress of our intent to spar, as we were instructed to do eef zhe occasion occurred between schoolz. Zhen I am told zhe world record 'older for consecutive dueling championship, Professor Flitwick will be overseeing our friendly contest! And now zhis!” She happily states waving her hand at the four closest seating units to the dueling ring are nearly filled.

“Thank Merlin, he's arrived,” Professor Flitwick walks over to the group. “We were beginning to wonder if we should let the others start first.”

There's far too much Harry doesn't know and it's starting to shove at his patience, daring him to blow up. Harry takes a deep breath and calmly states. “I was told about none of this, and in case anyone was wondering, I'm not a fan of crowds or their flippant attention.”

“Really,” Flitwick asks genuinely curious. “Hadn't your parents informed you? Nicolas is in the stands with the other professors, and Perenelle is on-sight to look over any injuries that may occur.”

Harry smacks his head and drags his palm down to his neck, thinking to himself, of course they
“Listen,” Harry starts as kindly as he can muster. “I only came to spar with Fleur, not dance to the whims of a crowd like some dancing troll.”

“As interesting as that would be to see,” Flitwick starts. “This is hardly that. You are sparring with Ms. Delacour, who not only is a student of an international wizarding school, but is also their champion in the Triwizard Tournament, which complicates matters. It’s the very reason I’m here, along with the Headmaster and Madame Maxime. This is not about dancing to anyone’s whims, Mr. Flamel. And the crowd I’m certain is only here for the same reason everyone loves to see dueling tournament; they’re fun... and not at all about witnessing the skill of a young man who defeated a Death Eater.”

Harry is silent and at a loss, so Hermione asks Flitwick, “you mentioned others to start ahead?”

“Yes, Ms. Granger,” Flitwick tells them. “When the Durmstrang delegation learned of the spar between two of the four Champions, they refused to be sidelined. Headmaster Dumbledore naturally opened the ring to anyone who’d like to duel as well, and thus, we have an instant and impromptu dueling tournament. Oh my blood is just boiling with excitement!”

Harry once again feels powerless at keeping a low profile, despite all his strength.

“I must say,” Dumbledore's voice reaches the group as the elder man walks to them. “Hogwart's rumor mill has exceeded itself once again.”

*I'm sure you had nothing to do with that,* Harry thinks.

“Filius,” Dumbledore calls. “We should begin soon. Would you like to make the announcements?”

“Headmaster,” Flitwick returns. “I feel we may have to start without Mr. Flamel. He was unaware of the sudden changes to his sparring session with Ms. Delacour and would prefer not to participate in the contest.”

“Oh, well we can't have that,” Dumbledore states staring at Ares. “Would the possibility of a prize change your mind?”

“Oh,” Flitwick states. “Of course, their should be a prize for the winner.”
“How about that Mr. Flamel,” Dumbledore asks. “Would that be satisfactory?”

Harry is about to tell him it wouldn't when Fleur steps forward, her allure rising some, but he can tell she's trying to keep it under control and asks, “please, Arez.” Harry looks all around and as they watch him expectantly, he reasons it'll be less trouble to spar with her a bit, than outright refuse. In addition, he already told Fleur he would.

“Ares,” Hermione says with a pleading tone. “Please, would you? I can only imagine how much I'll learn by watching.”

Harry chuckles a bit at how Hermione, Hermione always is. “Fine,” he tells everyone and they walk onto the field. Immediately, Harry registers how much shorter the stands are, giving them a much closer bird's eye view of the duels. Walking toward the center of the grounds, Harry is stunned to see Tonks talking with another auror he recalls named, John Dawlish. When the Aurors see them approach, they both nod at Dumbledore and Flitwick as they continue up the stairs to the dueling ring and greets the young students. Tonks, while dressed professionally in her auror uniform, still had a strip of bubblegum pink hair fall down her face, keeping to her upbeat personality and making Harry smile.

The Aurors give Nova a furtive ogle before Dawlish addresses them, “I'm Auror John Dawlish, here to make sure everything stays on the up an up throughout. And this is Nymphador-”

“Tonks, Auror Dawlish,” Tonks quickly corrects him. “Tonks is what I like to go-”

“You go by whatever your commanding officer dictates junior auror, Nymphadora,” Dawlish berates, instantly annoying Harry. Tonks seems more reserved than he remembers her to be, though it does look like she'd like to punch him in the face. Dawlish extended his gloved hand and in a less commanding voice, says to Harry, “I wondered if I might shake the hand of the wizard who took that grievous monster's arm.”

Harry hadn't expected that from Dawlish. The man never seemed anything more than a whining lackey—if not criminal—in the previous time-line. Keeping his hands in place, Harry does nothing more than nod to the man, perfectly fine acting standoffish, much to Hermione's chagrin.

“Ares,” she whispers heatedly, smacking his shoulder, simply aghast by his lack of respect for authority.
Dawlish smiles courteously and proceeds to shake Daphne's, Hermione's, and Draco's hands. Harry and Fleur wonder if he's prejudicial to half-breeds when he didn't offer to shake Fleur's hand. “I've read the report and could not be more proud of the courage it must've taken to stand up to that monster,” he tells the young students.

Tonks is so inspired by Dawlish, she excitedly extends her hand to Harry with a smile. “I heard as well, wotcher Ares! I couldn't believe it myself when I heard. Put her there!” He gratefully shakes her hand and she moves along to the next, shaking everyone's hand, except Draco's. Looking over to the silver-blonde, he just nods tiredly, as if to say, 'yes, I said terrible things to her.' Harry isn't surprised, but amazed by how effortlessly Malfoy can alienate anyone he feels is beneath him. As much as Harry missed seeing Tonks, he's eager to keep his emotions in check so, he states, “it was lovely to meet you Tonks... and you, Dawlish.”

“Auror Dawlish, young man,” Dawlish corrects.

Harry ignores him and keeps walking when Hermione asks, “what was that about?”

“Not sure,” Harry plainly states. “He just rubs me the wrong way.”

“And he's got sweaty palms,” Draco adds, brushing his hand on his robe. “Which is saying something considering he's wearing gloves.”

“Draco,” Harry calls. “You're with me. You might as well get some practice.”

“What about us?” Daphne asks, gesturing to herself and Hermione. She eyes Fleur, then asks Harry, “shouldn't we experience dueling against others as well?”

“You will,” Harry reassures her, wondering why Luna is looking questionably between Hermione, Daphne, and Fleur. “In due time. For now, just pay attention to the strategy.”

Hermione takes Daphne's wrist and starts pulling her away, telling Harry, “good luck! We'll be cheering for you.”

“If ever we have another chance to cheer for you in the future, will you give me a week's notice,”
Luna asks in a dreamlike voice. “I'd love to make a snake's head dress out of papier-mâché to support my friend.”

“I... of course Luna,” Harry agrees, not sure if it'll ever happen but happy she's still very much Luna.

As the short, straggly dirty-blonde walks away, Fleur mentions, “you 'ave many blonde friendz.” Harry turns to her, confused by the observation when she sweetly asks, “you must be quite partial to blondez.”

A low whistle from Draco attracts Harry's attention and the silver-blonde rushes up the steps to the elevated dueling ring. Harry clears his throat and follows after Draco, Fleur right behind him.

Harry notes in the middle of the elevated ring, stand Victor Krum, Zemdaï Khan, Cedric Diggory, Hardwin Potter, grinning Fred and George Weasley, and on the sideline are chairs for the few allowed on the dueling platform; Dumbledore, Madame Maxime, Igor Karkaroff, and acting as the ministry's representative, Dolores Umbridge.

“Good afternoon, one and all,” Dumbledore's booming voice starts. “I'd like everyone in attendance to know this is simply a sparring session.”

While Dumbledore explains to the audience how this contest came to be, Flitwick speaks with the contestants. “I am but a humble mediator, here solely to ensure a fair duel, however, regardless of how you feel concerning any of my verdicts, you will all abide by them. So, as all this began with Ms. Delacour and Mr. Flamel, do either of you have any ideas on the style of tournament you'd like to proceed with?”

“Vhy can dis not be typical tournament?” Krum remarks. “Only da best should fight in dhe end.”

“As this originally started between Ms. Delacour and Mr. Flamel, it could be said we are intruding on their sparring session, as such, it would only be polite if we yield to them in this matter. We can all draw lots, of course, do single or double elimination, ladder or pyramid tourneys are an option as well.”

“I'm only here to spar with Fleur,” Harry states his opinion to the group. “As long as that happens, I don't care how we do it.”
“I agree,” Fleur says. “I 'ave no preference so long az I duel wizh Arez.”

“Done with Daphne, are ya,” Khan tells Harry before eyeing Fleur. “Just as well. She ought to have a proper man about her.”

“I don't believe I like your tone, prefect Khan,” Flitwick tells Khan.

“Sorry professor, just guy talk,” Khan easily tells Flitwick in a sympathetic tone. “I'll duel whoever but I'd like to duel Ms. Delacour if possible.” Harry doesn't like the cruel perversion in his eye and prays he has the chance to duel him.

“I am very eager to duel vith Mr. Flamel,” Krum states, staring challenging at Harry.

“I'm fine with anything,” Cedric tells the group, and Hardwin agrees, “same here.”

“We don't care,” Fred announces.

“We just thought this sounded loads better than sitting with the crowd, eh Fred?” George asks his twin.

“Right you are brother o' mine,” Fred returns.

“I think we ought to do a challenge tourney,” Draco proposes, drawing everyone to look at him. “Anyone of us can challenge any one of us to a three point duel. If you lose, obviously you're out of the tournament, and those that remain can continue to duel until the final two. You can choose the order of the challenges professor. In addition, everyone has the right to contest one challenge. If for instance, Krum challenges Delacour, and Ares felt either Delacour or Krum might lose, he can contest the challenge for the right to duel either Krum or Delacour. In that sub contest if Ares beats either Krum or Delacour, they are not out of the tournament, but they will have to wait their turn to challenge again. If Ares loses, he's out of the tournament. Last one standing wins whatever the prize will be.”

Harry wonders if a challenge based tournament will keep him from having to duel too much, since he doesn't think any of the participants will offer him much challenge.
“Fine proposition, Mr. Malfoy,” Flitwick states joyfully. “Are there any objections?”


“It has not been discussed as of yet,” Flitwick tells the twins. “However we will announce it as we move closer to the finals.”

When it seems like everyone accepts Draco's idea, Harry speaks up, “I'm fine doing a challenge tourney, but I don't care for points. That was never a point of focus in my training, or upbringing for that matter. I'd prefer victory by submission, wand disarming, or knock out.”

“At the most, this is an exhibition, Mr. Flamel,” Flitwick points out. “With all four of the Triwizard champions participating, no less. I don't think the headmasters will approve of that.”

“I'd much prefer this method, professor,” Krum tells the diminutive half-goblin. “If no one objects?”

None in the group seem keen to object but the weight of what that means sober the group of the levity and humor the tournament was mere moments ago, to something they should take more seriously. Flitwick then walks over to the headmaster and informs him of the type of tournament and the rules. Dumbledore is clearly hung up on the safety of the champions, and after informing the audience, he makes sure everyone knows he or Professor Flitwick will stop any match they deem too unsafe.

Everyone picks a spot around the ring to stay during matches. Fleur and Draco are on either side of Harry on the side of the platform closest to the forest. The twins, Hardwin and Cedric are the following side, Khan and Krum are opposite side of Harry, and the headmasters with Umbridge are seated in the middle of the fourth side.

From the center of the square dueling ring, Flitwick announces to the crowd, “we will allow either Mr. Flamel or Ms. Delacour to make the first challenge,” to a grand cheer.

Harry turns to Fleur, directs his palm to the ring, conveying, “ladies first.”
She curtsys with far too much sex appeal, make Harry breath in deeply, then proudly walks to the center of the ring.

“How you reckon it'll go?” Draco asks. “She ought to know if she chooses you, Krum or one of the others will contest it for the right to fight you first.”

“Only if they think she could beat me,” Harry tells the silver-blonde. “If I was Krum, I'd rather love the chance to see how my style of fighting is, so as to think up a strategy to counter it.”

“I would like to challenge Arez Flamel,” Fleur sweetly states with a brilliant smile. Many of the Beauxbaton girls coo, woo and whistle suggestively, while nearly all the boys are booing Harry, shouting off a few, “tosser!” ”Wanker!” And or, “lucky prat!”

“Please refrain from shouting profanities. Don't think I didn't see you, Mr. Davies,” Flitwick warns the four filled stadium benches. “Now, would anyone like to contest?” Flitwick asks the contenders.

Before Khan can step forward to contest, Draco beats the seventh year prefect to it, announcing, “I wish to contest. I'd like to duel Ms. Delacour.”

Flitwick nods as Draco turns to Harry. “Much as I'd love to stand here and watch you play with your french delicacy,” Draco suggestively states with a wink. “Some of us would rather take this seriously.”

“I'll believe that when I see it, Malfoy,” Harry returns as Draco leaves to take an opposing position to Fleur.

Both wands in their hands, the clear barrier protecting the audience from catching stray spells raises high above the before Flitwick gives a stern cry of, “begin!”

Draco possess relatively the same magical strength and knowledge he had before he died and with Harry's help, he's improved, but Harry's told him that doesn't guarantee anything. This is a good opportunity to see if Draco's been paying attention. From the start, Draco calls out, “Lumos Maxima,” blasting a light as dangerous to look at as the sun, followed by quick, “Depulso, Depulso, Depulso,” in her general direction.
Harry manages to hear Fleur say, “Levioso,” by the time the flare of light subsides. Draco is sidestepping when everyone in the arena sees Fleur had elevated the square tile she was standing on about eight feet. Harry notes the entire barrier from the seven foot mark and down is vibrating, signaling that it's protecting everyone outside from some form of danger. Draco calls out, “stupify!” as he runs around her, to which she protects herself with a shield. It's then when Draco notices the barrier vibrating, containing unseen danger within. Draco can't see what it is, and is about to call another spell when he missteps, and stumbles to the ground. He's slow to get up, wrecked with extreme slumber.

“Expeliarmus,” Fleur states from her elevated stone tile, and Draco's wand tries to shoot out to Fleur, shift his arm up but it's clearly tethered to his wrist holster. Disarming him however doesn't matter since he's asleep and Flitwick ends the match. Fleur flourishes and swipes her wand and the sleep charm she must've casted during Draco's Lumos stops agitating the barrier and disappears.

That's what happens when strength meets strategy, Harry mentally berates his unconscious comrade.

“Winner: Fleur Delacour,” professor Flitwick sounds with his magically enhanced voice, to a great cheer from the male population. Harry walks over to a sleeping Draco and notices a thin trail of blood stream down his face from his forehead. “Oh, dear, he must've hit his head when he tripped,” Flitwick states checking Malfoy over. Flitwick wakes him up with the counter charm.

“You did well, Mr. Malfoy,” Flitwick instructs.

“You lost,” Harry states evenly. “In case you were wondering.”

Draco looks around, palming his blood cut forehead, and seems to accept it easily, before asking, “how?”

“Easily,” Harry answers. “I'll tell you later.”

“Professor Flamel will treat you,” Flitwick informs him. “Just down the steps, if you would, Mr. Malfoy.” Fleur gives him a courteous curtsy that Draco returns with a short bow before he heads down the stairs.

“And now,” Flitwick announces to the crowd. “Mr. Flamel will state his challenge.”
“I notice you're tensing when you take a right step,” Harry tells Fleur as they walk. “Did he nick you?”

“Qui,” Fleur states with a tight smile that's close to a grimace. “There ees much more impact een 'is spells zhan I was expecting.”

“You ought to have it looked at,” Harry suggests.

“I appreciate your concern Arez, but I've 'ad much worse zhen zhis,” she tells him, and they both remember her pain from the night of the Quidditch World Cup, before she returns to the sideline, where Harry conjures a chair for her to sit in.

Harry then turns to Flitwick, and simply states, “Zemdai Khan.”

“Mr. Flamel will be challenging Slytherin prefect, Zemdai Khan,” Flitwick announces. “Does anyone wish to contest the challenge? No? Well, then beg-”

“Wait!” Khan yells. “You're not planning on letting him duel with a bloody bird humpin his shoulder?” He asks Flitwick.

“Mr. Khan, please,” Flitwick chastises the young fat prefect. “That is no way to speak to-”

“Go on Nova,” Harry turns to his beautiful dark phoenix. “Enjoy the skies a bit.” Without much hesitation Nova takes off as if shot out of a canon into the afternoon sky. Harry watches her fly high around the Forbidden Forest before turning his glare on Khan, who's returning a hated look of his own.

“Well, then, begin!” Flitwick calls followed by a palpable cheer from the crowd. Harry can tell the adults are highly more observant while the younger witches and wizards are simply excited to see the wizard who fought off a Death Eater.

“Let's see how you do when the adults are watching your every move, freak,” Khan spits, despite Flitwick's earlier warning.
Harry doesn't snap his wand in his hand. Instead he lazily places both hands behind his back and starts walking toward Khan.

“Expulso!” Khan shouts, shocking the crowd that he would cast a dark curse that causes immense explosions. Flitwick takes a few steps forward to, more than likely, stop the dark curse, but Harry easily sidesteps inbound threat without worry and the spell strikes the invisible barrier with large, rippling vibrations. Harry has a wide variety of points of attack, and is nearly struck with indecision on how to best enjoy incapacitating the large seventh year.

“Did you put my name in the Goblet,” Harry asks, wordlessly and wandlessly amplifying his voice so the entire stadium hears him.

“Fuc-” Khan starts to say, when he realizes his voice is amplified as well.

He's touching his throat as Harry asks again, “did you put my name in the Goblet? My family have spoken with the head of the DMLE and depending on motive the perpetrator or perpetrators have, they could be brought up on criminal charges.”

“You're a disgrace to the great name of Slytherin and if you refuse to leave of your own accord, you only have yourself to blame if you die in the first task! Reducto!” he calls his voice still amplified, followed by the Entrail-Expelling Curse, the Disintegration Curse, and the Finger-Removing Jinx; all truly terrible in their intent.

Harry narrowly avoids each curse, reading the trajectory of his aim before the spell even exits his wand. Just as the Finger-Removing Jinx bursts from the fat Prefect's wand, Harry mentally summons Khan's dress slacks with Accio, while simultaneously banishing his dress shirt, spinning the boy in the air with great enough force to completely flip him twice before landing hard on his flabby back, shirt and slacks having been ripped off of him.

Harry transfigures the ground to clamp manacles on both of Khan's hands, preventing him from getting up or casting another spell. Since the struggling seventh year hasn't submitted, isn't knocked out, and Harry hasn't disarmed him, Flitwick doesn't stop the match as Harry calmly walks over to the half naked, struggling Prefect.

In an amplified voice, Harry tells Khan, “you need to ask yourself, what's more important, Khan. Your legs...” Harry conjures six swords high above Khan to descend faster than the force of gravity on Khan's legs, missing flesh by the barest of margins, making the boy gasp. “…or your pride?”
“Mr. Flamel....” Flitwick states, making sure he knows he'll stop anything that's too severe.

“Fuck you!” Khan screams throughout the stadium when he regains some of his lost fury.

“Your magic,” he continues to say, as he conjures two axes that spin in the air for several moments before landing stuck, cutting into the stone tile that could've just as easily been both of Khan's wrists, “...or your pride?”

“You don't scare me! You can't do anything!” Khan correctly states. With the professors on the verge of stopping the match, Harry always knew what he could do to him in public would never amount to the level of sufficient opposition, but it's enough of a warning to Khan as well as Dumbledore.

“Think about this Khan, with every single person here as my witness, if you don't get it through your thick skull to leave me and mine alone, I'm going to make bloody well sure you lose something you'll never get back again. Stupify.”

And near as he said it, Khan is knocked unconscious, the crowd is deathly silent and unsure of what to make of the public drama between Slytherins or Harry's clear threat. Harry walks back to Fleur as Flitwick assists transporting Khan's unconscious body down to the ground so Perenelle can do the bare minimum of adequate health care. Harry is joined by Dumbledore as Flitwick announces Hardwin Potter as the next contestant to challenge.

“If you would allow us a moment of privacy, Ms. Delacour,” Dumbledore asks the beautiful Beauxbaton student.

Before she acquiesces to his request, Harry says, “that won't be necessary, headmaster. You are welcome to speak with my parents if you wish to know more about the investigation into the parties involved in putting my name in the Goblet.”

Hardwin takes center stage and angrily calls out, “I challenge Ronald Weasley,” causing a ruckus among the crowd, and surprising Harry himself.

Dumbledore tilts slightly toward Hardwin, with a small amount of concern before returning his attention to Harry. “That is not what I wish to speak with you about,” Dumbledore states, then turns to Fleur. “Ms. Delacour, if you please.”
Fleur nods to Harry before getting up and walking toward her Headmistress. When she walks away, Harry notices a familiar beetle fly around in circles before landing on the hem of Dumbledore's robe's sleeve. The weighing of the wands isn't scheduled until tomorrow but it seems Rita is an early riser. “You threatened that young man, Mr. Flamel.”

“I made a promise, Headmaster,” Harry returns as he watches Ron enter the arena. “One I intend to keep if he doesn't leave me alone.”

“Did you even consider your station, your guardians, before recklessly proclaiming an ill-advised threat?”

“Perenelle was the one who encouraged me to start taking limbs if they refuse to listen and leave me alone,” Harry returns. “She's rather tired of her heir being under constant threat in your castle, as she's already expressed to you. It seems to me your best avenue for peace is to convince Khan it will not go well for him if he continues to try to go after me or my friends again.”

“I had to reassure Undersecretary Umbridge that this useless display is nothing more than a schoolyard scuffle, but clearly I was mistaken. I cannot impede on an official ministry investigation if she chooses to instigate one. Is that what you prefer, Mr. Flamel? Must I allow her to make a case of arguable criminal intention simply so you can see the errors of your way?”

“The only error I see here headmaster is misplaced faith and delusions of grandeur and I will not play along for the sake of the illusion of peace. I have nothing more to say on this matter but you're welcome to take it up with my parents if you wish. There's a bug on your robe by the way.”

Dumbledore lifts his left arm and the beetle flies away, likely to write a salacious tale for the Daily Prophet by tomorrow. Dumbledore returns to his seat before Ron and Hardwin's match begins as Fleur rejoins him. “Madame Maxime wishes I should be more careful with you.”

“She's not completely wrong,” Harry tells her.

“Madame Maxime informed me of the pink toad woman's intention of bringing criminal charges against you. She would like you to know that she will speak on your behalf to the French Ministry if necessary. And I will of course inform my pappa of that boy's maliciousness toward you.”

Harry feels odd in his graciousness for their staunch defense of him. “Uh, thanks, Fleur.”
“My pleasure,” she sensually says.

“You believe someone put Flamel's name in the Goblet but you don't believe me?!” Hardwin yells at Ron in disbelief.

“That's because I know how much of a glory hound you are!” Ron returns.

“This is getting interesting,” Harry states, when he feels an unexpected bout of concern, like the growing darkness of clouds and the uncertainty of just how severe the storm ahead will be. Harry looks between Hardwin and Ron and feels nothing out of the ordinary from them. He turns about him, eager to find this terrible gravity weighing on him, looking at the crowds. He feels no different scanning them over when he spots all sorts of birds flying away from the forest, drawing his attention to the tall, wind swaying trees. It could very well be nothing, but like an iceberg’s deception, the danger lies hidden below the surface. Harry back-steps into the ring, keeping a measured eye on the forest as Flitwick is about to start Hardwin and Ron's match.

“Arez,” Fleur questions curiously.

“Mr. Flamel, if you'd kindly step out of the dueling space,” Flitwick asks.

His unease gets worse, despite the source of it remaining unknown. His rising agitation makes him snap his wand into his palm and he automatically looks all around him as if the danger has grown much larger than he could withstand. He quickly looks for Hermione and Luna, but finds Hermione and Daphne gone from their seats instead, only adding to his growing agitation.

“Oi, Flamel,” Hardwin calls trying to get his attention.

“Oh, it's Flamel now?” Ron berates Hardwin. “Getting real cozy with a Slytherin are you?”

Just then a loud screech reverberates throughout the arena from high in the sky, drawing everyone's attention. Nova dives so fast from the sky she produces a whistle in her wake. She extends her great wings to halt her high speed descent, causing a large gust on the stage. Her claws find Harry's robes and pulls at him to leave.

“Nova,” Harry apprehensively questions. Her behavior is unlike anything he's ever witnessed before and he can instantly tell she was the reason for his extreme concern earlier, as she tries to
pull him away. She has enough strength to easily lift him so he knows this is like her pleading to go. He can feel her great need to leave, yet he has no grasp on what has her so scared. “Nova, easy girl. Be eas-” he starts until the arena finally senses rumbling approaching.

Dumbledore himself stands and stares at the Forbidden Forest. Flitwick steps ahead, extending his open palms, like on might do in order to keep a wall from falling, somehow sensing through them.

“We need to cancel this now,” Harry suggests, but can't give a conclusive reason as to why, all the while trying to calm his avian friend down.

“He's right Albus,” Flitwick states in a panicked voice. “Everyone needs to leave now.”

When a distant, symphony of clicking starts to fill all the air around the entire arena, Dumbledore quickly amplifies his voice and alerts the audience. “I'm afraid we'll have to conclude the matches at this stage.” Dumbledore turns to Flitwick, who's also gone alert. “If everyone would kindly return to the-”

An ear piercing scream cuts through the air at the first leg of a highly dangerous throng of beasts savagely emerge from the forest, clicking and screeching ferociously. One quickly turns to tens, then by every inch of the treeline, hundreds, and if the distant, violent shuffling of trees is any indication, could be up to a thousand car sized, eight legged and poisonous creatures raging with ferocious hunger rush the field toward the arena much faster than any human can possibly outrun. Without the trees to slow them, they swarm and blacken every blade of cold green valley grass, like a grand blanket of darkness flooding the land.

Cold, stricken, and doubtful of thoughts of tomorrow, Harry mentally identifies the hundreds upon hundreds of twelve foot tall, poisonous threat...

...Acromantulas.
I'm REALLY SORRY that I left this at a cliffhanger, especially since I don't think I can update next week. It's really bad timing. If I can make it up to you guys, I will, but again, sorry :( 

The girls are getting closer or Harry's breaking down, and I thought of a funny idea with Draco and Harry that I can't wait to write.

Thanks again for reading and supporting. Please let me know what you think and Have a great week/Mother's Day!
The Acid Ocean

Chapter Summary

What's a wizard to do when stopping this overwhelming force is like standing in the path of a tsunami?

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Welcome back. I hope everyone had a great Mother's day weekend, and Happy belated Mother's day to all that apply :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...Well outside of the castle's strong defenses...

...With far more innocent and scattered lives than he can save...

...Who are paralyzed with fear at the sudden reality of facing an all but certain death under large venomous fangs...

...Of what looks to be hundreds upon hundreds of large, enchanted, cannibal spiders, clicking and screeching madly for human flesh...

...Is the immediate dilemma Harry proposes his mind find a way to solve without a single loss of life.

His mind snickers at the ludicrous request and only thinks of the dead-ends. The castle is much too far away to out run the eight-legged beasts, and no one has broomsticks to fly to safety—not even Harry, who told himself to get a racing broom after the fight with Crouch Jr. Not that it would solve this catastrophe in any way, but it would help, as nearly none of the students are magically strong enough to defend themselves against the all around tough beasts who have the highest Ministry classification of XXXXX—a designation given to wizard killers.
The chances of saving every soul from this black plague are so dire, Harry actually contemplates leaving everyone but Nicolas, Perenelle, Hermione, and Luna to fend off the large tsunami of poisonous spiders that are poised to overwhelm them all. It's terrible, for certain and he'll likely hate himself for a time but it's the only sure thing he can do with the minutes they have.

“We're all going to die! We're going to die!” someone yells looking over at the field that's quickly being overrun by large, strong acromantulas. “Run! Go!”

In the field, midway between the forest line and the quidditch field, a blue shield-like pillar extends high in the sky—nearly as tall as the castle—and it's quickly over run by acromantula. It doesn't stop the majority of spiders sprinting toward the quidditch pitch, but many decide to probe the solid-looking shield. Like a stone in a river, the mass of acromantula swarm around it and continue to the quidditch field.

With a magically amplified voice, Flitwick yells, “Don't run! You'll never make it on foot! No, stop!”

“What are they to do,” Karkaroff yells. “What can we do!?"

“They must come on the platform,” Maxime declares loudly, her wand ready in hand. “Come to the platform! Behind the safety of it's shield.”

“They can't all make it down the towers and onto the platform,” Dumbledore states. “We must do all we can to delay them from overwhelming us.”

“Vill the ring’s shield even hold against so many?” Karkaroff desperately asks.

“Fawkes,” Dumbledore calls, and not a second later, his mature phoenix appears from a flash of flame. “I need you to transport as many students to the safety of the castle as you can.”

Some students hysterically try to escape, despite Flitwick's instruction. They're just too scared to listen. Flitwick hops off the dueling platform, lands gently at the base of the second tower, and forces all the students back up. With Professor Sprout and Nicolas assisting Flitwick with trying keeping all the children calm and in place, Harry has to worry about them only slightly less as Dumbledore commands the students to remain at the top of the tower until his phoenix can take them to the safety of the castle. The sage Headmaster also tells them that the professors will stop the onslaught, but the way Fleur takes shaky and fearful steps back, makes Harry realize that this
level of doom is hard to ignore and these delicate teens aren't hard enough to stand there waiting for Fawkes to save them one student at a time.

*How does Dumbledore expect to stop the poisonous, wizard killing swarm from closing in on five separate groups of lives?* Harry wonders what the old headmaster can do in such a situation against so many. Any attack or method of prevention that may be of help on a large scale would be difficult to control, if not involve casualties, and he couldn't be sure to get all of them. He'd have an easier time holding water in his hand than stopping these crying children from meeting a certain gruesome end.

Still, Fleur is here, and Harry's nearly as worried for her as he is for Hermione and Luna. Suddenly what was so uncertain a moment ago became a clear plan he doesn't have nearly enough time to fully implement. The spiders will be on them in mere minutes.

“Fleur!” Harry calls. Despite yelling her name so near to her she can scarcely take her eyes off the stampeding monsters. Barring time for delicacy, Harry takes her hand and forces her to look at him, her red-rimmed eyes, full of moisture, are a clear indication of where her head is at—not that he can fault her in any way for it. She may have faced a dragon in his previous time line, but she, along with the other champions, were aware of them before hand... and it was only one. This colony of acromantula is tantamount to facing a hundred dragons on one's own.

Harry squeezes her hand tight, to the point she winces from the pain. He'd rather avoid causing her pain but he needs her steady and focused now, because he doesn't have the time to comfort her with words.

“Slow them down,” he states in a calm commanding voice. “Don't hit them directly with magic—they're too strong, and there are too many for that. Conjure or transfigure spikes, swords, spears, anything sharp and long. Understand?” Fleur is nodding her head slowly, likely not grasping what he needs from her. Harry squeezes a little tighter, looking directly in her dark blue pupils. “Fleur, do you understand?”

Shaking her head more determined now, Harry looks over to Nicolas, Sprout, and Flitwick who are keeping all the students in place and transfiguring long, sharp studs on the legs of the towers. Harry amplifies his voice with *Sonorus*, as Umbridge discreetly yells at Dumbledore, “I am a most important Ministry official and I demand you save me first!”

Harry doesn't have the time to be disgusted by her, and calls out, “Professor Flitwick! Nicolas! I need you to slow them down.” Still holding Fleur's hand, he turns to the others near him; Krum, Cedric, Fred and George, Ron, Hardwin, Maxime, Karkaroff and Dumbledore. “Help them stop as many as you can. Slow them down and buy me as much time as possible!”
“My seester-” the tearful Veela tries to say.

“Fleur,” Harry yells, looking at the oncoming truck sized poisonous spiders. “Buy me as much time as you can.” Harry lets her go and ignores Dumbledore and Umbridge as he dives into his mind. Mentally landing in that familiar place that he can only feel, like a world without land, where the knee-length water reflects the starry night sky, making it appear as if he's standing in the middle of the night sky. Wet to his knees, Harry is actually at it's most shallow, but it's no ordinary water rippling around from him. It's the augmentation Horcrux-Voldemort made in preparation for it's escape—the changes he tries to use as little as possible for the very real fear of driving himself mad. Apprehensively, he senses how expansive and deep this world is and he asks himself, 'who are you? What do you want to do? How are you going to do it?'

Walking deeper into the acidic ocean of his immense magic, he feels the robust energy flow through him with every step, like a potent drug, already multiplying his magical strength. *It's not enough*, his mind informs him. He steps further, deeper, sacrificing his sanity for more power... sacrificing himself for his friends. The cost will be high, he knows, but for what's ahead of him, he needs to drown himself in this acidic strength. The Basilisk he fought certainly took much out of him to defeat it, but this is far beyond that adversity, and he'll need much more magical strength than that if he truly wants to save everyone.

Fully submerged, Harry opens his eyes and sees the world like he's never seen it before. Suddenly everything is more vibrant, so colorful, in fact, everything shines without blinding. Patterns of different colored light seem to ebb, flow and connect to everything. Highly impressive this enhanced vision is, it's also very informative on an intuitive level, like knowing an answer to an arithmetic problem without the proof to back it up.

Beyond the visual beauty, however, a blight of deadly wizard killing creatures are flooding the land on track to kill them all. With his magical sight he somehow reaches the conclusion that they are stronger in a horde than they are individually, like an orchestra of voices rather than one voice, or like the time he was taught team work in primary school. A single pencil can break with enough force, but a stack of pencils is a much hard thing to break. These creature's magical aegis seem to heighten in waves the closer in packs they are. A trivial thought in Harry's mind wonders if it's a social skill developed by their constant clicking, like the beating of a marching drum, as he focuses on the immensity of his noxious magic.

Flitwick, Fleur, Maxime, Karkaroff, Krum, Cedric, George, Fred, Ron and Hardwin try to slow the rushing wave of stampeding acromantula. They try a series of tactics. Spikes of stone all over the ground, boulders falling from the sky attached to nets to tangle them in place, and the acromantula stunning spell, *Arania Exumai*. And they do buy Harry time, but with so many of them charging recklessly at them, it's just barely enough time.
With his magic sight he can easily recognize Flitwick is the strongest offensively, Maxime is a natural defensive juggernaut, and try as the group might they won't be able to completely stop the wave of dark energy rushing them. The sight of Dumbledore's aurora is more powerful than Harry had ever imagined but, transferring students three at a time will take too long. They need to go where the large acromantula can't get them and they all need to go at once. Harry extends his wand, priming his now immense strength, and mentally casts,

*Wingardium Leviosa.*

Even when nothing moves, his entire being suddenly feels as heavy as a mountain—a thing that he needs to move without the aid of his muscles. Harry concentrates his magic on clutching firm the dueling platform and the four towers of benches full of hysterical students. Their desperate screams fill his ears and Harry extends his left hand lower than his right, palm up as if holding an invisible Quaffle in his hand. Slowly, with a jerky unsteadiness, every large beam of wood, seat, stone tile, and the eighty or so warm bodies squirming in fear requires all his focus to lift.

Magically asserting dominion over the four towers and the dueling ring to rise, the towers resist his demands, but Harry will not relent. The jerk of the platform alerts everyone to Harry's levitation charm and the slow rise of such a large object. Everyone steal amazed glances of him, but he ignores them for the absolution of feeling more magic in him than he's every felt before- No, not ever before. In the previous time-line, in the deepest darkest cell in Azkaban, when he transfigured his body to magical sand of time to travel back, it feels similar to that—though that was like drowning in the deepest pressure of the ocean, while currently, he feels like he's drowning in the shallows. His every fiber feels heavy with magical energy to the point of ripping, and though it may hurt physically, mentally he feels eternal.

Despite the group of wizards do all they can to keep them away, the acromantulas are nearly in the quidditch field as Harry starts lifting the dueling ring. Slowly, Harry raises the platform high enough to keep a single large acromantula from reaching them, but the erratic spiders are desperately climbing over themselves to get at them. Harry keeps raising the platform as he tries to lift the resistant first tower faster.

Upon noticing the absurdity of what Harry is attempting to do, Flitwick destroys the grounded legs off of the first tower and uses the sharp debris of splintering wood to stab as many of the screeching eight legged creatures as possible. “Bringing... them... over!” Harry yells to the professors. Flitwick destroys the wood beams holding the second and third tower to the ground as well, as Dumbledore levitates as many students as he can to the dueling platform.

Desperate enough to ignore how his body feels like it's decaying, Harry expends more magic to lift the second and third towers faster at the same time as he continues to rise the dueling ring and the first tower higher. While he's confident the first tower is out of the spiders range, the other towers are still very much in danger.
He's finally pulling up the fourth tower faster than a snail's pace when spiders grab hold and quickly climb up to the terrified creaming children at the top. Ignoring frightful cries for help, Harry concentrates on lifting it but the large spiders are climbing over themselves for more and more reach that would normally be impossible for them. The worst is the strong webbing the acromantula try to snatch the third and second towers with. Flitwick and Maxime seem to be the only ones capable of penetrating the spiders natural defenses, but Fleur, Cedric, Krum, and Hardwin do well against the strong webbing they're using to try and climb up to them. The spiders however are relentless and resilient, madly focused on eating and devouring soft, young wizards. As the fourth tower continues it's upward struggles to climb higher, the large hungry spiders have climbed over enough of themselves and the webbing to reach the third tower.

“Kill them!” Harry hears Krum yell.

As they continue to rise higher over the trees, the students are levitated onto the dueling square by Dumbledore, Sprout, Nicolas, and Nova, packing more and more bodies into a tight crowd on the square's center. Fawkes is flaming students three at a time to the castle, clearing a bit of room but not fast enough since the desperate crying groups of students are clinging to each other, forcing the process to take longer.

“First tower is clear,” Sprout finally yells at Harry.

Relief would have Harry simply drop the heavy frame, however lethal anger singles out the opportunity. He tosses it into the thicket of the poisonous hairy murderers clustering underneath the third tower, sticking to it like a web that won't break, trying to reach the fear-filled children at it's tip. There's a heavy thudded crash followed by a loud multitude of screeching, but the third tower still feels too heavy, so he knows he didn't get all of them.

The fourth tower has it the worst and Flitwick concentrates all his efforts on the mounting threat when Nicolas yells at Harry, “head for the blue pillar!”

“Why,” Harry manages to growl, now less hampered by the loss of the first tower.

“Perenelle!” Nicolas emotionally calls. “She's in the center of that horde!”

“We cannot!” Umbridge calls. “Helping anyone in the middle of that is impossible! I order you to take us to safety!”
In the fourth tower a spider manages to strike a student, lancing him in the stomach with one of it's clawed legs, before trying to drag him away—a boy, Harry judges from the piercing scream. Flitwick manages to cut the appendage and banish the large spider away before it can claim the wailing life.

Seeing no other alternative, Harry yells, “Nova!” And in front of everyone, his phoenix flames just like Fawkes has been doing, to the injured child, snatches him in her claws and flames right next to Harry. “Headmaster!” Harry calls to heal the seventh year before he dies, but he can't hear Dumbledore's response over the boy's agonizing screaming trumpeting right next to him. Nova returns to the fourth tower to help Flitwick by latching on to the large spider's bulbous backs and pulling them off the overrun fourth tower.

“Get them off of there!” Harry yells to anyone, cognizant of his inability to both make sure he's keeping everyone elevated from certain death below, and attacking these magically tough creatures at the same time. Maybe he should descend deeper into devastating magic, but how much less time will his body have under that pressure? With the release of one more tower, he might be able to help attack as well as keep everyone elevated from danger, but they have to work faster.

Dumbledore takes the injured teen and four students hold on to him as Fawkes flames them away, an impressive feat for the elder phoenix. Reaching twice the height of any tree around, Harry starts moving toward the flickering blue tower shield.

Despite the cold bit of the strong gust at that height, Harry's sweating profusely as Umbridge yells at him. “Young man, you take us back to the safety of the castle this instance! Or we will all surely die!”

“I'm not going anywhere without my wife,” Nicolas yells to Umbridge as the last student from the second tower floats into his outstretched arms.

“The second tower is clear!” Sprout calls.

Harry quickly tosses the tower to the growing clicking of black beneath the fourth tower as another piercing scream drowns out all other sound. This time a girl's cries of agony cuts painfully through the air as she's yanked away from the cowering corner of children by a large incensed acromantula. Harry drops the platform a little as he conjures a great sword to pierce through the center of the large spider, releasing the girl's bloody arm as it screeches and jitters in pain. Nova flames to her, clutches her in his talons before appearing beside Harry in a brilliant flash of flames.
“Get them off that fucking tower!” Harry yells at the wizard attackers on his side.

“We're trying!” Hardwin yells back.

“Don't try!” Harry returns. “Just do!”

Dumbledore returns with Moody, who immediately starts assisting with the spiders trying to kill the students on the fourth tower as the headmaster gently takes the injured girl by her waist, along with another four students, clearly pushing the limits of what Fawkes can travel with at a time.

Before he flames away, Dumbledore warns Ares, “Think about the forty or so souls on this platform. *They* are our immediate concern. You must turn around.”

“*Your* immediate concern is going to bleed out to death if you don't get her out of here,” Harry shoots back, and the Headmaster soon flames away.

“Third tower clear!” Nicolas yells before he and Sprout work on bringing the remaining students from the last tower.

Harry uses the third tower like a bat to break the still connected line of spiders and webbing trying to get at the students in the fourth tower. With less weight, Harry is able to help Sprout, Nicolas, and Moody to bring the remaining students from the fourth tower onto the overcrowded platform. Harry hadn't noticed two more students, a girl and boy are pale, still, deathly looking but not heavily bleeding like the others. Sprout and Maxime are looking after them tending to poisoned students as best they can when the Headmaster returns.

“Start taking the students to the castle,” Harry tells his avian familiar. Without the absolute focus needed to keep the towers in the air, Harry can walk over to the edge of the platform and stare down at what he initially thought was a black abyss. Only in this case the large sink hole is following them, climbing over themselves and desperately shooting out webbing that can't reach them.

He looks over to the overrun blue tower of the five point shield—a Pentagon Shield, his memory reminds him. Without the burden of holding four towers along with the dueling platform, Harry can progress the speed of levitation, and with less and less students, he can get there faster.
Umbridge is at the fringes of her patience and demands he brings them to the safety of the castle. “I command you to turn us about this instance, and return us to castle!” she yells, the panic creeping into her child-like tone as they move closer to the large black build up of wizard-killing spiders.

“Pomona,” Dumbledore calls. “I will send you along with them to handle all on coming students. Fawkes.” Dumbledore commands and Sprout nods before taking the two injured students and another two flame to the castle. Unlike Fawkes, Nova can take no more than three at a time.

Harry turns to Umbridge and tells her, “I'm not leaving without Perenelle, and you'll only be wasting your breath trying to convince me otherwise.”

Fuming, fists clenched and tightening her shoulders, Umbridge whips out her wand and points it at Harry.

Harry only smiles at the toad woman as Maxime and others nearby cry out, surprised by her threatening action, “Madame Undersecretary,” “Dolores!” or, “Are you crazy?”

“I'm the only thing keeping the platform from falling into a sea of hungry acromantula,” Harry tells her without fear. Looking at the blue of the towering Pentagon Shield flicker and wain in strength, Harry's magical sight informs him that the shield won't last for much longer. He puts more focus into speeding the platform faster as the phoenixes continue to do their best to transport the children to safety.

Pushing through the tight crowd, Luna beckons Harry, “Ares? I've looked- I've looked everywhere a-and can't find Hermione.”

_Hermione_, Harry thinks and can't help the platform from a quick wobble at the thought of his time line's counterpart. He takes a second accept it rationally and without panic, before looking over the faces of frightened children for her, when Dumbledore approaches him. Nicolas conjures a handkerchief and extends it to Harry. He hadn't realized his nose started bleeding from both nostrils.

“Who else is missing,” Harry asks Luna, holding the now red stained clothe to his nose as Dumbledore tells Harry, “as your Headmaster, I insist you bring this platform and everyone on it behind the safety of the castle's defenses. This is clearly having a negative affect on your health, which jeopardizes everyone still here.”
“She left with Daphne,” Luna quickly answers Harry, managing to keep the platform from trembling again, as he turns to the headmaster.

“No,” Harry quickly tells Dumbledore, now easily tasting the copper tang of blood in his mouth. “Not without Perenelle. Hermione isn't even here. Did you take her and Daphne to the castle?” The second he asked the question his mind immediately thought of the Map, but to take it out here in front of everyone stills Harry's hand. Then the thought of not being able to find Hermione's name anywhere on the map, makes the platform wobble along with his trepidation again.

“...Ares,” Dumbledore starts looking at the boy as if he's going to lose it, when Nicolas interrupts.

“That five point shield,” Nicolas points to the blue shield. “I’m certain that's Perenelle doing, but the Pentagon Shield isn't something one can do alone.” Nicolas is running to the edge. The pillar is overrun with black, like a pile up the size of a hill, all trying to break through the shield. The sea of large spiders fills much of the visible valley, but the heaviest build up is clearly around the pentagon shield as spiders crawl over themselves to get at the wizards within the shield.

“We have to save her because she's not alone,” Nicolas implores of the group. “That shield is strong precisely because it utilizes the strength of five wands to create it, which can only mean at least four others are with her. But clearly they can't hold it indefinitely. We absolutely must save them now!”

Harry looks deeply over to the weakening shield and the hill of spiders encasing the base of it and not only does he sense Draco clear as day, but his magic sight shows faint wisps of colorfully patterned light, six in total. “There are seven people in the shield,” Harry tells the group.

“Hermione!” Luna interjects. “She followed Daphne down to spy Tracey checking on Draco.”

“Lies,” Umbridge calls. “There's absolutely no way you can tell that from here! You're just trying to trick us.”

“Aye, the lad's right,” Moody calls using his magical eye to see what's not visible to the naked eye. “There are seven; Three adults, four tikes. Two of the adults seem unconscious. If we mean to avoid cleanin a bloody mess later, we ought to save 'em now, before it's too late.”

“There is no way you can know that,” Dolores argues to the group despite reason. “It won't take but a few minutes to take us back to the castle. Surely they have a few minutes. You're only trying
to convince us of this suicidal folly because you believe such an act of heroism will save you from losing your position as a professor, Alastor, but I tell you here and now, it will not!"

The blue protective pillar nearly fades completely. Harry turns to Dumbledore and decisively warns him, “you have until all the children are gone before I drop this platform on these fucking spiders.” Harry's body is starting to ache with every movement, some of his fingernails have even fallen off, and his nose has not stopped bleeding, when professor Flitwick joins him, standing by his side.

“I will join you,” Flitwick tells Harry, looking at the strong colony of magical predators.

“Az will I,” Fleur announces just before Krum's, “I vill fight.” Both champions walk over to the edge, nervous but determined.

“I admire your spirit, your courage, all of you,” Dumbledore tells the group, as Nova and Fawkes continue to flame the frightened students back to the castle. “But I cannot allow you to risk your lives when the chances of success are nearly impossible—you in particular Mr. Flamel. You've used far too much magic and are in great need of a healer's immediate attention.”

“Those abominations are classified wizard-killers for a reason!” Umbridge adds on. “This is not up for debate! None of your little spells did more than annoy them to greater frenzy, and there are hundreds of them down there! Whatever madness is possessing you all to think you would succeed in any way other than meeting your gruesome ends, you can be sure I will save you from it. With all the power vested in me by the ministry, I forbid any of you from going down there!”

“That the official position of the Ministry now, is it?” Moody asks stepping closer to the edge. “Let our own die cause it's bit hard to save em?”

“Alastor,” Dumbledore starts. “We save who we can. I'm certain even you can see that, and while no doubt courageous the will to save our own is, in the end it would ultimately be futile. We cannot reach them while the shield is up, and the moment it is down, it will be impossible to save them all while simultaneously fending off so many.” Nova takes Hardwin, Ron and George, while Fawkes takes Fred and another three.

“Filius,” Dumbledore calls sympathetically, imploring the half-goblin to, “see reason.” The charms professor seemed very conflicted but when Dumbledore affirms, “you know I speak the truth,” he takes another look at the swarm clicking and screeching madly, and dejectedly turns away from the edge, solemnly moving to Dumbledore's side.
Madame Maxime puts her hands on Fleurs shoulders and sadly forces her away from Harry's side. Upon Fawke's return, the phoenix takes Moody forcefully. Krum seems very defiant to Karkaroff's orders, but with a foul grunt, he ultimately steps away as well. With nearly everyone gone now, Nicolas is the only one by Harry's side, and Harry won't allow him to stay. This isn't where Nicolas' talents lie and he would only get in the way.

“I'll get her back Nic,” Harry states as he signals to Nova, and against his will, Nicolas is the next to be flamed to safety.

Harry turns to the tower-like shield as it dims and flickers before turning to the headmaster. All who remain are, Dumbledore, Flitwick, Maxime, Fleur, Krum, Karkaroff, and undeterred, he tells them all, “you have a minute before I'm dropping this.” It shouldn't take Fawkes and Nova more than another jump to get them to safety and in preparation, Harry transfigures the platform to extend long sharp spikes from the bottom. Ready to drop the heavy platform with spikes underneath it on the hill of acromantula several stories below, the moment he's the last one.

Harry returns his attention on the blue pillar-like shield just as it goes out completely, scaring him so bad the elevated platform wobbles in the wake of his dreaded fear piercing through his focus. Instantly after retaining his focus, Harry concentrates an intense amount of magic on conjuring a little under a hundred long, sharp lances, high in the sky and shoots them down on the massive colony of horse sized, poisonous spiders—careful to avoid where he thinks his friends are. Flitwick moves next to Harry to conjure his own attack when Dumbledore puts his hand on both their shoulders and they all flame away.

Landing just inside the castle's entrance and in the mayhem of injured, scared, or frantic children, Harry can see in the far of sky the platform with spiked bottom drop down onto the large crawling hill of blackness, causing a distant screeching sound of pain. The blue pillar of protective shield no longer visible as it's over run by spiders, Harry yells, “what do you think you're doing!”

“NOOOOOO!” Nicolas wails horrifically in struck agony—just as painful as the worst cries Harry's ever heard.

“The rest of the castle is secure, Headmaster,” Snape informs Dumbledore. “All students are being directed to their houses and the ministry has been alerted.”

“Fetch the Durmstrang and Beauxbaton students from their lodgings through the floo-” Dumbledore starts to command Snape when Nicolas rushes forward, attracting Dumbledore's worried attention.
“Ares!” Nicolas tearfully begs, pleading in expression what doesn't need to be said.

“I'm on it!” Harry returns trying to sense Draco's location to flame to, but it's hazier from this distance.

“You cannot go out there,” Dumbledore orders, before turning to Nicolas. “I am sorry my old-”

“Nova!” Harry quickly calls, deciding to just go high and land as close as possible. His flaming familiar swoops down to clutch him, but is interrupted when Dumbledore uses the ancient and all powerful elder wand to cast, “Petrificus Totalous,” rendering Harry in a full body-bind. Harry falls face first to the ground as Dumbledore then tries to incapacitate an evasive Nova as well. “I'm truly sorry young man. I do commend you for your exemplary efforts. Truly admirable-”

“What are you doing!?” Nicolas yells at his former apprentice, who would've hit Nova if she hadn't flamed to avoid it. “Stop! Stop! Stop, we have to save them!”

“I'm sorry to say, but it's impossible,” Snape states, looking at the hill of hairy black legs and bulbous backs.

“There are closer to a thousand wizard killing beasts between us an them,” Dumbledore returns. “With no way to apparate to them, we simply cannot fend off such a large colony without sacrificing a disproportional number of wizards for the task. I lament to say, my dear friend, that while it's possible they may still be breathing, they are nonetheless gone.”

Nova dodges the headmasters spells by millimeters when Nicolas shouts, “I'M NOT GOING TO LET HER DIE!” The legendary alchemist whips out his wand, and in his great grief, attempts to detain the greatest wizard currently living. Dumbledore sadly, yet easily enough, defends himself against his former instructor, and Nicolas can do nothing to change the elder sorcerer's position, but time was all Harry needed as Nova speeds down, like an arrow, clutches at her master then flames away.

Harry flames high in the air, roughly near where he feels Draco's location, which is the only notion he has that tells him everyone is alive. As he hoped, Nova's majestic magic canceled Dumbledore's full-body bind, and he regains full control of his body once again. With the full velocity of gravity, Harry starts to descend into a dark sea of acromantula with more rage than he's felt in a long time. Unaffected by the high probability of his death—either by magical exhaustion or wizard eating acromantula—and absolutely fuming over what Dumbledore did, Harry tells Nova in a low and
Nova flames away as Harry focuses the bulk of his powerful, and physically harming, magic on conjuring a thousand, sharp spears to rain down on the perilous horde below. Harry can only tell if he managed to kill a few of them by the slightly diminished sounds of fierce clicking. Harry's high enough to send two waves of conjured lances to skewer as many car sized spiders as possible before he absolutely needs to slow his approach—not necessarily because he's too close to the ground, but because there are so many hairy acromantula, he can't even see the ground.

It's not possible to see grass over the dust up, spears, and spiders so Harry slows his momentum to land on the inclined back of a pinned down acromantula. Though it had three lances keeping it stuck in place, it was still trying to free itself and feed on Harry as he grips the completely shoved through spear butt with his left to keep himself from falling off it's round backside.

“Wizard flesh! Fresh meat!” it screeches and clicks as long saliva trails drip down it's fangs. Not a second after landing, a spider is quickly on him, but before it can sink it's large fangs into Harry, his wand is already aimed at it's center of mass and he blows it up with a magically excessive *Confringo*. And from the eruption of the spider's bleeding body parts, blood, venom, and smoke, a larger burst of flame, like the harbinger of death, reveals a fierce, fiery phoenix clutching a much larger Basilisk in it's talons. Though technically still an infant, it's at least a third larger than a month ago, and it's larger glottis makes Nāga's savage hissing sound closer to an ear-piercing, feral screeching—a boom-like effect, spreading throughout far and wide.

The Basilisk's war cry and musk of warning is immediate and widespread, making the infinite clicking noise sound panicked. With his magic sight, Harry can see the pattern of ferocity in the acromantula suddenly spoil from potent magical rage, to cautious timidness, and Harry has no issues commanding his murderous king of snakes.

~ *Nāga, kill!* ~

Nova drop the murderous snake on the fearful acromantula, and it's clear the only thing they have on Harry's Basilisk is overwhelming numbers and crippling fear. Nāga listens to his master, like many times before, and to the snake's absolute pleasure, it slithers quick as a whip, wrapping it's strong body around one acromantula, squeezing it to a crunchy death, while sinking it's long poisonous fangs into the brain of another before hunting for the next one.

Harry couldn't exactly explain why in the heat of the battle, but he could see Nāga knew exactly where to bite to pierce the brain of the magical beasts and kill them. They scatter from the large king of snakes but they fall over themselves, giving Nāga all the seconds necessary to kill as many as he likes.
-**Kill them all Nāga!**- Harry hisses as he moves closer to where he feels Draco to be all the while avoiding the extending clawed legs and fangs.

Nova ignites her entire body before swooping down and clutching any part of the closest acromantula; a limb, the head, or the round back of it's abdomen before setting the entire creature on fire and burning it alive. Wizard spells and charms may be weak on these magically durable, eight-legged creatures, but clearly phoenix flame is substantially more severe and with his heightened senses, Harry can easily smell the burning hair and boiling flesh. When Nova can't set it ablaze due to the sheer numbers attacking her, she resorts to swooping down for a strong rake and flaying of their eyes.

Harry doesn't worry too much over his pet snake and phoenix familiar as he defends himself against an onslaught of hungry spiders. Acknowledging that he is easily surrounded, outnumbered, and slower than their long and quick limbs, Harry can't take the chance they won't strike him in a blind spot and quickly exploit the opening. To counter this vulnerability, he conjures four extremely sharp swords, one pointing straight ahead of him, one behind him, and one either side of him, before spinning them around himself, like a large saw. With his wand, Harry's highly potent and volatile magic, cuts through any abrupt or wayward attacks with a cutting or blasting curse, while his left hand controls the protective, spinning swords. As the swords can get stuck in bone, or break, Harry has to continuously conjure a ring of swords with his left hand to spin fast around him, cutting into anything stupid enough to get near him like a blender.

With the first spray of blood mixed venom splattering on him, he quickly feels the stinging burn on his skin. If the chemical-like burn is the only downside to this strategy than he's going to have to deal with it because the temporary pain is readily more acceptable over the alternative. Not to say another strategy wouldn't be better. Instead of feeling this fire-like liquid on his skin, he could transfigure as much of the ground to swamp, and trap them all, but he can't be sure if it'll put Perenelle and the rest in a fatal disadvantage. So far, he can still feel Draco, and that alone tells him that at the very least, the silver-blonde must still be alive.

Harry couldn't see Nova or Nāga, but even without his magical sight, he's always had a good understanding of where they were. But with his strange sight, he can actually feel their fury match his own, like three hearts beating as one.

It doesn't take him long to notice his clothes weaken and diminishes in thready patches. His mind quickly answers the meek curiosity. Slicing through spiders, he punctures their venom sacks, and the spraying acidic ailment is so strong, it burns the fibers of his school uniform. Spider fangs aren't able to reach him thanks to his spinning blades, but Harry doesn't always stop the extending claws on their long hairy legs before he cuts the appendage off. They either barely missing him and ripping clothes, or cut him faster than he's able to avoid. Despite it all, his white wand would not stop blasting or cutting a path toward Draco, and hopefully, to the rest.
When Harry steps in thick, warm liquid, he realizes the ground is muddy with blood and venom mixed dirt. Harry keeps pushing through, and though more further than he cares to be, Harry conjures more lances to rain down hard through the attacking spiders. Along with his withering, highly overpowered body, his mind starts registering the deteriorating effects of the poison, and though he tries to ignore the system wide failure, his chest aches, his lungs feel half drowned, and his neck feels swollen to the point he fears his wind pipe might close. He debated stopping to rest for only a moment, when he hears a girl scream not far from him.

“Nova!” Harry hoarsely calls, and she flames to him, steaming from the way her fire burns off the cursed blood she's splattered in. She grabs hold of him and flames above the closer sense of Draco's position.

Harry drops to earth again as he hoarsely tells his familiar to, “get him!”

On his way down, Harry can't see anything but a large pile of black twitching legs where Draco should be. He can feel the panic creep on his exhausted mind, fearing the worst before unbridled rage dives him deeper into the pressurized depths of his immense magical energy. His body makes a desperate and painful plea for salvation in the anticipation of total body organ failure should he continue his magical overuse, but the faces of Perenelle, Hermione, Daphne, and even fucking Draco push him much further than safety would ever allow.

Sighting a small pocket of colorful auroras under the spiders, Harry focuses his dominating magic to conjure long sharp poles made out of rock to jettison out of the ground as fast and as hard as an iron ball shot out of a cannon. Painful screeching and clicking fill the air as the bamboo-like lances skewer and puncture frenzied acromantulas, raising them up off the muddy floor. Harry cuts a hole through the rising arachnids and slows his descent until he touches earth. Now underneath the blood-raining canopy of impaled spiders, he covers his eyes from the toxic rain of their blood and venom with his chemically burned left arm. Since very little light can breach the shroud of elevated clicking spiders, it's much darker as he rushes through the bamboo like forest of lances.

Just ahead, a large acromantula that didn't get lanced is digging into dirt with a frenzy. Walking toward the spider, Harry wonders why it's choosing to dig in the ground rather than come after him. Wand up, Harry walks up beside the large wizard killer, yet a safe enough distance to defend himself, and it still refuses to attack him in favor of the prey out of reach in a dug out, yet shielded hole.

“Gives, gives, gives,” it screeches.

Where the five point shield should be, is now a freshly dugout hole, big enough to walk upright in
and not see over the edge. Looking down the hole isn't any different than looking down into a trench in a battle field, and he identifies Draco, Tracey, Daphne, Hermione, and Perenelle, all on their backs, shoulder to shoulder in a tight line laying over two unconscious Aurors, Tonks and Dawlish. Try as they might, Harry can easily see Draco and Perenelle are the only two capable of damaging the one magically resistant spider that didn't get lanced and is trying desperately to fit in the hole to eat them.

Daphne and Hermione are the first to spot Harry standing beside the large frenzied and famished predator, and he'll admit, it's not hard to understand why curious expressions easily replace their fearful ones. It must be odd to see the fierce acromantula ignore edible prey standing next to it for the few protected behind a shielded in a trench. Harry conjures a sword and banishes it straight into the large predators brain. When it's legs fall limp, Harry magically lifts and discards the carcass as more spiders are barreling through the bloody bamboo-like spears protruding from the ground. Harry hops into the trench and erects a strong shield over head as the clicking of gigantic spiders reach them, and smashes into the impervious strength of his shield.

They slam themselves madly against the barrier as the spiders chant in scratchy voices, not unlike the sound of stone grinding against stone. “Girl,” “Boy,” “Gives,” “Us,” “Girl,” “Boy,” over and over. Their words lead Harry to wonder more about their erratic behavior from the normally passive colony. What they mean to say is clearer a moment later. “Gives us the girl! Gives us the boy! Gives her to us!” The dozens of wild creatures near them keep repeating their demands as they continue to try and break through. Before Harry can ponder on it more, Nova flames above them all with a bloody Nāga in her talons, putting the fear of death into all the near acromantula.

“Fucking hell, not another bloody Basilisk,” a dirty and bloody Draco bemoans aghast, clearly recalling the last Basilisk he came upon.

The spiders back away a safe distance when Harry commands his snake in parseltongue, ~Nāga... kill all spiders!~

With his lungs filling with fluid, Harry can hardly breath, and so ignores the shocked surprise from the three fourth-year witches who didn't know he can speak the language of the snakes.

~For Masssster!~ the snake hisses, powerful enough to reverberate a murderous screech throughout the immediate swarm, before slithering into the dark, clicking, multi-legged darkness, and attacking with reckless abandon.

With Nāga and Nova doing their best, there are less spiders trampling on his shield, not that it would matter, since it's unlikely to break. Harry swivels about to the group and the immediate way they all narrow in on his eyes, he quickly understands the green glow is a byproduct of his magical
“Eyes.... His-his eyes are glowing,” Tracey gasps.

“Fuck me, you're the Green Reaper.” Daphne quickly reasons.

Perenelle has more worried eyes than the others as she looks over his wounds. Feeling slightly self conscious, he quickly realizes his tie is long gone, his shirt is in stringy ruins, showing most of his chest and abdomen, and his slacks have patches of ripped off spots. It's almost as if the sight of his body made him realize that even though he feels strong, his body is in much more agony than he remembered.

“I can take some of the venom from your skin,” Perenelle states stepping closer and using her wand over his many wounds. She quickly examines him, learning most of his wounds are deep tissue acidic burns and claw cuts—not the worst he's been through—but the magical exhaustion is critical and the venom is as dark as it is strong. Harry, and now Perenelle, knows he won't last long.

“For the venom already in your system, you'll need a serum-” Perenelle notices his shrunken trunk around his neck and orders him to, “take it off.” It's a strain to move his arms to take off the thin silver chain around his neck, but it's decidedly easy to enlarge his trunk and unlock the compartment for storing healing draughts and potions.

Still, the danger isn't over and Harry opts to lead with the bad news first as Perenelle looks through the vials. “If I flame now... I won't be able to.... flame right back,” Harry tells Perenelle who would be the only one to expect Harry to flame multiple times in order to save them all since she knows Nova's limits. “I can't make out... a definitive location... with the piles of spiders... covering everything... there is too see.”

“And you can't flame us all at the same time?” Draco asks as Perenelle hands him a vial to drink.

“Nāga... included?” Harry asks skeptically, before quickly downing the entire contents of the vial. Though he's not sure what he drank, he trusts her, and instantly his lungs don't feel like they're drowning anymore. “...I've, I've never tried with this many, two of whom are unconscious, and a huge basilisk. Also I'm not keen on putting Nova through that.”

“You got a better plan?” Draco asks, as Perenelle hands him another vial.
“No,” Harry answers, taking it, and though his chest stopped aching, his intestines still felt like they were on fire. “Not better, but I'm certain it'll work. Nova?” His steaming and sizzling, black, gore-covered phoenix flames into the shielded trench.

“She can always sense you,” Perenelle reasons now starting to remove all the venom and blood off his exposed upper body. “Which means you'll have to stay behind,” she gravely states.

“I want you to take them to the infirmary, girl,” Harry tells Nova. Turning to Perenelle, “she can't take more than three so it'll be a few trips.”

“Tonks, Davis, Draco first,” Perenelle explains, still attending to her heir. “Draco, tell Pomfrey I couldn't wake her with Rennervate, which means a dark spell or drought of some kind. I'll be right behind with this wanker. Inform the authorities if they're not already there, and I'll take...” Perenelle pauses, wondering who else to take with her. Daphne and Hermione look at each other, clearly understanding that who stays and goes means more than just urgent safety. Terrifying as it is to stay, it could mean more to witness what it is to stay behind with Ares—a risk for knowledge they're both willing to take.

“Take Daphne,” Harry quickly makes the decision for them, ignorant of the surprise of the arctic-blue eyed blonde, for speculations about Perenelle's animosity toward Dawlish. “I'm sure her sister's worried,” he easily reasons. “Hermione and I will be last.” Harry takes the Maurader's Map from out his slack's pocket. “Draco? Keep an eye out,” he says as he extends the map to the silver-blonde.

Draco takes it as Perenelle tells Harry, “you can shrink your trunk. The rest I'll take care of later.”

Nova latches on to Draco, who's holding Tonk's wrist, while Tracey latches on to him. In a burst of light that quickly dissipates, they're gone. Harry turns toward the spiders and without seeing Näga, he can tell where his general location is. Harry points his wand the opposite direction to be absolutely certain he doesn't hit his large slithering companion, and transfigures more long lances to shoot out of the ground, killing two and injuring three as they struggle to be free.

“Gives her to US!” the screech desperately and repeatedly.

Harry ignores it for the sudden way his knees give out. Extending his hand to clasp at the dirt wall, Harry holds himself upright when Perenelle and Daphne are right on him to help. Harry isn't sure if it's the venom finally seizing more of his body's motor skills or the over use of magic shutting his body down to save itself from oblivion. It's likely both, but regardless, Perenelle takes one arm, Daphne takes the other as she says, “can't we all flame now? You can't stay here any longer.”
“More than anything I wish she could,” Perenelle starts to say. “But flaming is more concentration on both Ares and Nova's part than it is magic, like trying to make your index fingers touch perfectly with your eyes closed. If they're off by a little, it's tantamount to splinching, but worse.” They hold onto him even as his legs are slightly more stable, when Hermione approaches him, not looking afraid of the situation, but concerned for him, exactly like in his time-line, when he first believed Sirius betrayed his parents and she slipped his invisibility cloak off.

He can't help the smallest of smiles at the nostalgia behind such a familiar face, as she moves some of his long, matted black hair away from the front of his face. He thinks about how comforting and invigorating her hand is when he recalls what he still has yet to do in order for all of them to survive this nightmare. Nova returns soon after and he realizes than she's having a harder time flaming.

“You bring him straight to me,” Perenelle directs Hermione, who nods before Perenelle and Daphne hesitate to grab Dawlish. Nova immediately takes the three, leaving Hermione and Harry in the trench.

“Nāga's... not going to fit in here,” Harry weakly tells her.

“Nāga,” Hermione states, needing to take a deep breath to accept the large basilisk has a name. “Nāga, is her name.”

“Him, actually,” Harry tells her. “Don't worry... he won't hurt you... and when we get up there... I won't let any of them get you.”

“I believe you,” Hermione answers. “I won't let them get you either.”

Harry takes a moment to read determined tenacity in her eyes before he nods. “We'll keep ourselves back to back. They have natural defense against charms and spells so conjure as many needles as you can to attack their eyes.”

~Nāga!~ Harry hisses, as Nova flames to his shoulder, slouching nearly to the point he thought she might fall off. Harry wonders if it's poison or exhaustion ailing his phoenix, but he has no definitive answer. Instead he tells his familiar, “don't worry girl. Just a bit longer.”

Transfiguring stairs out of dirt to exit the trench, Harry conjures sharp swords and spears to shoot
and lodge itself into any acromantula coming at them as they step back on normal ground. Harry tries not to explode any spiders for fear their venom will spray Hermione. Back to back, with Harry's left hand reaching around himself, keeping Hermione securely pressed to his back in the same way her left arm is reaching behind her, gripping Harry's slacks to keep him to her. She does as Harry suggested to great effect, conjuring needles and shooting them with the same focus she places in her school work. It doesn't down the large creatures but it stops them long enough for Harry to finish them off with sword or spear strike through the brain.

Back to back, Harry notices that they prefer to attack Hermione rather than him, even though it makes more sense to bring down the biggest threat before attacking her, but something about Hermione is driving them crazy. It's not long before Nāga shows up and the frenzied Acromantula back away. The wizard killers don't go far, however. They seem determined to rush them if not for their greatest fear slithering around their prey, as if eager to attack them but still heavily frightened of the king of snakes. Nāga slithers protectively around Harry and Hermione, and Harry notices many deep cuts in his thick hide, with a few cuts actually bleeding and a fang sticking out of one part of Nāga's body.

“Gives us the girl! Gives us the girl! Gives her to us!” The wild creatures keep repeating.

“Nova,” Harry calls taking hold of Nāga and Hermione, and with a brilliant flash, they flame to the Chamber of Secrets, all of them landing hard on the ground. The room lights itself with firelight from the torches and the group lay still, taking a moment to contemplate what was so narrowly avoided. Like any worried legendary pet, Nāga licks Harry's sweaty, bloody, and dirty cheek.

Hermione looks around the large chamber in wonderment before asking, “where are we?”

~Okay, okay... Nāga. You were... amazing.~ Harry hisses to his basilisk, before answering Hermione, “Chamber... of Secrets.” Hermione lets out airy gasp, surprised more by the ability of still being surprised by Ares than actually being in the Chamber of Secrets. “It's like you live in another world,” she can't help but say to him.

Harry sluggishly tries to make it to his feet and she quickly helps him up. Holding him tight to her, he tells her, “Hermione,” then pauses as he feels his body rapidly start to decline. “I don't... have time.”

“Of course!” Hermione quickly sorts herself, looking straight in his eyes. “What can I do? Anything at all, just tell me.”

“First... take that fang... out of Nāga's hide.”
“R-Really?” Hermione asks, for clarity. “The basilisk's hide?”

“Don't worry... he won't... bite you,” he weakly tells her, and her need to help him easily gives her the courage, As Harry removes the thin unbreakable chain holding his trunk from around his neck, he tells Nāga in Parseltongue ~Nāga, my friend... is going to help you. Do Not Bite Her.~

~Fr- fri-end... fffriennnd~ Nāga hisses, testing the new word out like an unknown flavor. Nāga moves closer to Hermione, sticking it's tongue out to correlate the word with the person. Slightly worried, yet still trusts Ares, she cautiously moves toward the wound with the fang sticking out of it. ~¿What iss fri-end, Master Ares?~

~It means.... she's important... to me.~ he answers as he rests on his feet.

~Important to Masssster... She is Master's mate!~ Nāga hisses confidently. ~Nāga protect all of Master's mates.~

“....Whatever,” Harry resigns from correcting the young king of serpents as he looks Nova over. His familiar seems less injured upon examination than he imagined, but with their connection, he can tell she's nearly at her limit.

Hermione responds, “...uh, what do you mean, whatever?”

“Sorry,” Harry tells her. “Go ahead.”

Nāga barely felt Hermione carefully take the fang out of his wounded hide, then weakly asks Nova, “ready... for one last jump, girl?”

Nova trills feebly but bravely. She takes her place on Harry's naked left shoulder as Hermione wraps his right arm around her neck while wrapping her own arm around his waist to better support him.

In the hectic and packed infirmary, Nicolas, Flitwick, and Sprout are assist by settling the frazzled children, while Lily assists Pomfrey and Perenelle treat the students worse off; those mauled or
poisoned. Grouped together outside the infirmary, halfway down the hall is Dumbledore and Umbridge as they listen to Hagrid explain what he knows.

“On me life, Headmaster,” Hagrid expresses. “Arogog, he ’ad no control over his colony. He barely resisted what darkness controls ’em now, and he's the strongest of ’em all.”

“You have yet to properly explain your reason for meeting those foul creatures in the first place, professor!” Dolores states, insisting he explain. “How do we know you didn't cause this somehow.”

“They are not foul creatures. Gentle and loyal beasts they are-” Hagrid starts to argue when Dumbledore interrupts.

“What reason did you have to meet Arogog, Rubeus?”

“Well, Headmaster, he'd been helpin me figure who's been hurting the unicorns—dthere've been two so far. The last was the night before Halloween. There is a foul creature in the forest alright, but it's not Arogog or his colony. They've been nothing but docile this entire time, they have.”

“Well, it seems quite obvious to me it was them killing unicorns all along,” Umbridge states, poking the tall half-giant in his fur coat covered belly. “And you're frankly disturbing love of dangerous, wizard-killing creatures is a clear impediment to your judgment.”

“If it ’ad been any acromantula, they'd 'ave left not but bone,” Hagrid educates her. “That's o'course if they ate it there and not dragged it to dere webs like they normally do. No, the unicorn's deaths were cause by draining of their blood, and that's no easy thing to do, what wit em being the fastest creatures on land and all.”

“I'm incline to agree with Professor Hagrid's assessment on this,” Dumbledore tells Umbridge. “When I speak with Auror Dawlish-”

“I'm certain you meant to say, when we speak with the auror,’ headmaster,” Umbridge corrects. “I will not allow a Ministry employee, as he undoubtedly is, to be questioned by anyone other than the appropriate authority, as he is subject strictly to Ministry oversight... very much like Hogwart's, Headmaster.”
“Only under extenuating upheaval, Undersecretary Umbridge.” Dumbledore reminds her. “And I'm fairly certain this is not such a circumstance.”

“We shall see won't we,” Umbridge adds.

“Thank you Rubeus,” the headmaster tells him. “Please assist with the castles defenses, and prepare yourself should you need to accompany the Ministry outside when they've arrived to assist.”

“Right away Headmaster,” Hagrid states before exiting, bumping into Moody as he enters the hall and rushes to Umbridge and Dumbledore.

“Snape and McGonagall finished flooing every Beauxbaton and Durmstrang student from their lodgings outside,” Moody reports. “They're escorting em now, along with the headmasters to the empty Ravenclaw and Slytherin dorms, respectively.”

“Any word from the Ministry?” Dumbledore asks.

“Not in the three minutes since Amelia sent you her last patronus message,” Moody states defensively, still chaffing over being removed from battle by force. “I reckon it won't be longer till they're fully mobilized.”

“I should hope not,” Dumbledore states, not at all bothered by Moody's annoyance.

“How are the little ones?” Moody asks.

“Through a combined effort, Severus, Nicolas, Perenelle, Lily, and Poppy, they have managed to counteract the dark poison beset upon two of our students,” Dumbledore explains. “Thankfully, the other injured students do not appear to be in further danger.”

“And the Flamels,” Moody asks. “They still holding out hope for their boy?”

“They are keeping their minds occupied at the moment, attending to the students,” Dumbledore answers. “Until this crisis is over, that may be for the best.”
“Unbelievable how he managed to snatch six souls from the jaws of death like that,” Moody comments. “An' a Slytherin ta' boot. Wonders never cease.”

“At the cost of his own life,” Umbridge states. “His sacrifice must be so awful for the Ancient and Noble House, but I'm certain they'll be thrilled when our esteemed Minister arrives to offer them his support. Such an honor.”

Harry and Hermione flame into the hall, landing right outside the infirmary double doors. At the sound of Harry's bones snapping break under his dead-like weight when he hit the floor, a dirty and haggard Hermione quickly pushes through the doors screaming at the top of her lungs for help.

Nicolas dashes to the entrance, eyes solely on Harry's body, bleeding on the stone floor from his ears, nose, mouth, and the few poisoned cuts on his arms and chest. Wand out Nicolas quickly levitates and moves Harry to the nearest bed where Perenelle rushes to. Hermione is cradling Nova in her arms when Dumbledore, Moody, and Umbridge rush into the room.

“How is he,” Dumbledore asks.

“Let me work,” Perenelle asserts with the clinical detachment of a professional as she completely shuts the curtain around the bed.

“Wonders never cease, indeed,” Moody voices more to himself in complete shock of the boy's grit.

“Nicolas, my dear friend,” Dumbledore starts, attempting a smile of support, but his eyes under his half moon spectacles are regretful. “Words cannot convey how deeply relieved I am that young Ares is returned-”

“Relieved?” Nicolas questions, low, and thick with condensation, before impassioned fury ignites him and guide his vitriol. “We've known each other for some time, Albus, but now I know who you really are.” Nicolas is glaring at Dumbledore, approaching the old man in repressed rage.
“You are no good,” he continues. “You're just a big shadow, large in sight but thin of substance. YOU'RE A LIE!” He yells shaking with anger, and gathering the attention of everyone able to witness it. “Albus Dumbledore, the great and powerful! Defender of justice! Vanquisher of evil! How many titles to your great name and you were bested by a fourteen year old! ...I would've died to bring them back, and there was a time when your train of thought wasn't so different. Now you've lived in the center of adoration so long, in a light of your own making, you believe in this superior destiny of yours more than the endangered lives in front of you. Look me in the eye and tell me you couldn't have done more Albus! TELL ME! Such a great sorcerer, and you'd let those you're suppose to protect die because you know the truth—your large capacity for humility has been replaced by your detestable pride. How can you be the greatest wizard alive when you lack the virtues and principles of what it means to be a great man? You sicken me today, Albus. Sicken me.”

If Dumbledore had any reply in his defense, Nicolas didn't give him the chance to state it. The ancient alchemist turns and guides Hermione, still holding an unconscious Nova, to the empty bed next to Harry, leaving the great Headmaster in the pique of wounding silence.

Chapter End Notes

I'm almost glad for the extra time Mother's gave me because this chapter took some time to plan and structure. Several ideas for the battle kept getting scrapped for what I felt was a better portrayal of how it might go until I ended up with this.

My logic was that if it takes a team of trained wizards to handle a single dragon, than this large acromantula attack would be VERY difficult for young and or untrained wizards to handle, and I tried to stick to that.

If I did well, or not, please let me know, and why because I'm definitely going to have more battles/fights in the future and I want to make sure they're the best I can make them.

Thanks again for reading and all the support and suggestions. I appreciate it,
--Grae
“How much longer do you think he'll be out for, professor?” Hermione asks Perenelle, sitting beside Harry's bed in the privacy of Nicolas and Perenelle's living quarters. It's been a week since the Acromantula attack, and though Harry is recovering well, he has yet to wake up. Perenelle is making sure Harry is comfortable when Hermione asked.

“It's difficult to say,” Perenelle answers. “Physically, he's as fit as can be, but mentally, I'd say he still has more fatigue that'll require a bit more time for rest. The mind is an infinitely complex thing, not unlike magic itself.”

“How do you mean?” Hermione asks.

“Mnn, I say this as someone who's lived for quite some time,” Perenelle starts. “The human mind is the most complex map we will never have the privilege of fully exploring, exactly like the mysteries beyond our world and how magic connects it all together. Even at this age, I'm constantly surprised by what the mind and magic can achieve.”
“Is that why Ares is the way he is?” Hermione asks curiously, looking at the sleeping boy. “Because he's explored more of this complex map than many of us have?”

“He's certainly experienced more than most,” Perenelle returns sourly. “And on average, his explorations are more life-threatening than I care for. Just once, I'd like for a problem of his to be something simple like having no clue what to wear for a date.”

Hermione smiles, adding, “he really does run head first into a lot of dangerous situations,” prompting a smile from Perenelle as well. “He wasn't joking about that. I know he warned me, us, and on some level, I knew he was serious about keeping us from those dangers—I mean his scars say as much—but until I was in it, I never really knew.” Hermione looks forlorn at thoughts of the attack.

“If you happen to be reconsidering how close a friend you'd like to be,” Perenelle starts to propose. “I'm sure he'd understand.”

“From a life preserving stand point, I won't deny that would be a pragmatic decision, but it's odd,” Hermione tells the elder professor. “Sometimes when I look at him, I get this feeling, like he knows me. Not always but sometimes. I have this feeling, as if recalling this certainty that he'd never abandon me. And he didn't, did he? Even when the Headmaster, who's suppose to be the one to protect us, did, Ares didn't. How can I possibly reconsider a friendship like that?”

“He'd say, 'you might live longer,'” Perenelle says with a smile.

“He also says, 'quality, not quantity,'” Hermione responds with her own smile, making Perenelle laughs.

“He does, doesn't he. Well, one piece of advice than,” Perenelle donates. “That boy is as stubborn as a mule, but whether you agree with him or not, he always appreciates candor when speaking one's mind. So never be afraid to honestly speak yours.”

“I won't,” Hermione states when there’s a knock on the door. Perenelle nods at Hermione who gets up and leaves the room to answer it. Not surprised to see Daphne, she lets her in and they make their way from the common room into Harry's room.

After greeting Perenelle, Daphne takes her seat from the wall by the dresser, and pulls it close to Harry's bedside while Perenelle tells them, “okay girls, I have a professors meeting to get to,” as
she moves to the door. “Fetch me if there's any change.”

“Yes Professor,” Hermione says at the same time Daphne states, “we will.” It's been like this the past four days since they started coming to Nicolas and Perenelle's dorm regularly.

“Has the 'Queen of France' been around,” Daphne sarcastically asks, dramatically fanning back her hair with a unnecessarily flamboyant hand.

“She's not that bad,” Hermione insists, humored. “And no, not yet.”

“To you, maybe,” Daphne adds. “You're practically flatmates now. She gives me the haughtiest looks.”

“No she doesn't,” Hermione asserts.

“Can I please speak to the real Hermione? The smart one?” Daphne asks, without a sense of insult.

“Oh, you mean the one who's beating you in every subject?” Hermione returns just as casually before her eyes widen, surprised by her own retort.

She's about to apologize when Daphne smirks and says, “Catty Granger. It's nice to see you're not a push over,” Daphne commends her before continuing. “You must see how threatened she is by me, right? With her looks and her family's position, she's likely always gotten whatever she wanted, whenever she's wanted it... until now. Ares looks beyond nobility and the physical, which I'm big enough to admit she is... well, beauty has many forms, doesn't it? We're all beautiful in our own ways. Hers is just...”

“Outlandishly unforgivable,” Hermione curiously finishes.

“I was going to say, exotic,” Daphne undoubtedly returns. “Which only denotes a small measure of foreign allure.” Hermione just nods her head in clear acceptance as if it would just be denial to say otherwise.

Daphne continues, “but that's my point. Beauty isn't the real competition in this case. Her greatest
strength doesn't influence how Ares treats her. Do you know how exhilarating that is? That he's the type that puts more emphasis on the character of a person, rather than their looks? She's part Veela; seductive on a magical level with thee ability to charm wizards. With her allure, every guy and half the girls would kill to be with her.”

“Except Ares,” Hermione finishes for her.

“Except Ares,” Daphne agrees with a grin. “What do you suppose she expects to happen? She doesn't strike me as the, wait-and-see type which means she's had to have made a move by now. If that's the case, than he more than likely said no, or she would've told us to keep it friendly with him, if not outright asked us to stay away. The arithmetic value of this being the probable state of affairs is—”

“Sixty-seven point four percent,” Hermione interjects. “And to answer your question she probably expects the same thing you do... for Ares to pick her on the merits of her character rather than the pleasure of her looks.”

Daphne catches the slight bitterness in Hermione's statement and asks, “would you rather not talk about this?”

Hermione pauses a moment longer than she should around the very perceptive Daphne. “While I'll admit talking about the subject matter in front of the subject matter is a tad unsettling, you're the one who wanted to talk about this,” Hermione returns.

“No, well yes, but you just seem... quietly introspective,” Daphne asserts. “I just thought maybe...”

“...Maybe...”

“Maybe you were having second thoughts... about helping me.” Hermione clears her throat intent to speak, but she stalls for an adequate response and that's all the indication Daphne needs. “You are having second thoughts!”

“It's not that I'm having second thoughts,” Hermione responds. “I meant what I said before. I really do feel like if a close girlfriend and I liked the same boy, I'd step aside. I've never liked the notion, or even the perception of girls fighting amongst themselves over a boy. I find it to be so incredibly degrading to women, and a colossal waste of time better spent studying.”
“You can always go for his mate,” Daphne suggests. “Draco is garnering a lot of attention recently. He's always been attractive, but now he's a lot less of a complete prat.”

“I'll admit he's attractive in a delicate sort of way, but I don't think I can ever date someone who was so horrid to me,” Hermione returns. “He made me cry on numerous occasions. Call me a unconventional, but I'd prefer a boy who doesn't have to pick on me because he's deathly afraid to say the words, 'I like you,' though I'm certain in Draco's case, he was just naturally contemptible. And how silly is that? Someone is mean to you, makes you cry, so then the natural course of events is you accept his advancements and date him? I just don't see the logic or romance behind that. Also, Tracey is a little scary, and I'd feel much more comfortable going about the rest of my school years without making an enemy out of her.”

“I suppose she would be the proverbial final nail in that coffin. Tracey and I were nearly at each others throats over Ares. It's why I thank Merlin every day for Draco, or I'd be fighting her and the Croissant Queen... but I suppose I now need to replace Tracey with you.”

“Honestly, Daphne,” Hermione wearily expresses with a bit of irritation. “Did you not hear a word I said?”

“You also left your intent open,” Daphne returns. “You don't like a cat fight but...”

“There is no but,” Hermione tells her. “I want to be his friend, his best friend if he'll have me, but I won't deny I've entertained a fair amount of thought of what it might be like to be more, and I'd be lying if I said I'm against it.”

“You're being very indecisive about this,” Daphne claims. “Which is a terrible attitude to have going into anything. Either help me or help yourself, but you need to commit, or you run the risk of ending up with neither friend or more.”

“It's not indecision,” Hermione defends herself. “You seem to think that just because I'm not fighting you for Ares that I'll lose out in some way, but that's not the case. The probabilities being what they are, well, you said it yourself, Ares looks for the character of a person rather than beauty or title. That girl can be almost anyone. My point is that no matter what happens, I still want you all in my life. If he chooses you, I can accept that as much as I can accept him choosing Fleur, and I'll still be your friends. I don't mind competing against you for top Hogwarts student, but Ares is not a competition to me and it feels demeaning to even think of him like that. So if I can't see him as competition, than obviously I can't see you as an adversary either.”

“Life and love are battlefields you have to fight for if you want to win, Hermione,” Daphne states.
“And you may come to regret that liberal approach later on.”

Hermione nods with a shrug as she says, “the only thing I'll regret later in life is if I don't make Minister of Magic before I'm thirty.”

Daphne shakes her head lightheartedly with a smirk before saying, “I don't understand how you can put so much focus and detail into planning your future, but not into the person you want to spend it with.”

“I don't think I can give you an answer for that,” Hermione says. “Except to say, I can't control other people's feelings. If a boy does or doesn't like me, I can only assume he means it, or else why say it, or show it.”

“Outside of one thing, boys never know what they want.”

“Than I'll wait for the one who does,” Hermione pledges. “In the mean time, I'll focus on the one thing I can control, my future.”

“Fine,” Daphne says with a huff. “I'll just put you in the possible threat pile.”

“I'm not a threat,” Hermione starts when there's a knock at the door.

“Maybe not,” Daphne states with suddenly sharper eyes. “But a galleon says the person behind that door is.”

“You know,” Hermione starts as she walks to the door. “It isn't a betrayal of how you feel to genuinely be friendly with her. But what would I know?” she sarcastically asks without expectation of an answer. “It's not as if I subscribe to the sway of popular romantic ideology.”

Sure enough, the shapely figure of the enchanting Fleur Delacour enters the room, dressed in her form fitting, powder-blue, silk uniform, smiling radiantly with her cherry sweet lips and sweeping long eyelashes. As is her custom, Fleur presses her rose petal soft lips on each of Hermione's cheeks.

“Bonjour,” Hermione returns.

“‘Ow ees ’e,” Fleur asks, following the bushy haired girl.

“No change,” Hermione answers as they enter Harry's room.

“Bonjour Daphne,” Fleur greets her with a double cheek kiss as well. “Eet ees zhe zhree of us again?” Fleur asks looking around for Nicolas or Perenelle, or any of the other visitors; namely Luna, Draco or Tracey.

“Professor Flamel had a staff meeting to get to, and Nicolas left early this morning to speak to the head of the DMLE,” Hermione informs her as Fleur moves beside Harry's bed. Fleur doesn't bring a seat to the bedside however. She just plops on the bed, crosses her legs and leans against the headboard. Daphne's crystal-blue eyes pay far too much attention to the liberties Fleur is taking, while Hermione eyes Daphne with a look that says, 'be nice.'

“Ees zhere any newz on whezher zhey will charge ’im?” Fleur asks either of the girls.

“Are we even allowed to tell you anything about that?” Daphne cautiously asks. “Considering the diplomatic liability this crisis between our governments would no doubt create if we tell you what we may or may not know.”

“Eet ees possible,” Fleur answers honestly. “I 'ave every intention of defending Arez, as does my fazher.”

“Than maybe we should stay clear of this topic for now,” Daphne says. “I don't want to be responsible for any sort of testimony I may not want to give later on.”

“That's probably for the best,” Hermione agrees. “At least until Ares wakes up.”

Tucking her beautiful cascade of white-gold hair behind her ear, Fleur tilts her head down to the quietly resting Harry, and whimsically asks, “‘Ow many years must you make us wait before we
“I must say, Fleur,” Daphne starts. “You seem to know Ares quite well, to wait here like this until, how’d you put it? Turn into stone?”

Fleur turns to Daphne, eyeing her with a certain everlasting confidence. Quickly uncomfortable in her seat, Hermione brings her book closer to her face but can't concentrate with as much focus as she usually does when studying. Picking up on Hermione's unease, Fleur tells her, “come now, 'Ermionee. Zhhere ees no need to feel unsettled. Eet ees true, we do not know much of each ozher. Zhhat ees what you're curious about, non? You weesh to know more about me?”

“This is the fourth day in a row you've come to see him,” Daphne points out. “And you're neither his first friend at Hogwarts,” indicating Hermione with a nod in her direction. “Or his housemate. So, yes, I feel it's perfectly reasonable to want to know a little more about you.”

“I am 'appy to 'ear you zhink so,” Fleur returns. “After zhree dayz of small talk, I am very eager to learn more about each of you. Why do we not go around zhe room and say somezhing important about ourselfez zhat zhe ozhers may not know. I'll go first,” she says, not giving them a chance to refuse. “Hmmm, ah, nozhing irritates me more zhan small talk. I come across zhat impotent talk too often een galas and events, and consider eet a tremendous waste of time.”

“Why is that important to you,” Hermione curiously asks. “It doesn't seem like a big deal.”

“As you may already know, I am part Veela,” Fleur tells them, pausing only a moment to see if the girls react prejudicial towards half-breeds. When they don't, she continues. “Due to a part of my 'eritage, I am 'ighly perceptive and attune to zhe emotions of ozhers. Eet does not work wizh everyone, but after much practice, I have a good sense of whezher a person ees lying to me or no, among ozher zhings. Een my experience, small talk ees merely a mask for zhe weak who are too afraid to speak what ees truthfully on zheir mind, and az zhe daughter of zhe Deputy Minister, I 'ave no choice but to entertain zheir aggravating lies of grandeur. Eet ees zhe sole reason I will stay away from politics.”

“...That's a neat trick to have,” Daphne says slightly envious.

“Oui,” Fleur agrees. “Ermionee?”

“...mmnn, well, it's very important to me that I become the Minister of Magic,” Hermione tells the
“That's not fair,” Daphne proclaims. “I already know that one.”

“Well, I did not,” Fleur states. “And I suddenly feel embarrassed for what I said. I did not mean to imply all politicians are aggravating—my fažher ees not, for instance.”

“No, I know,” Hermione says, not at all offended. “I can understand that part of politics isn't the best.”

“Still,” Fleur continues. “Zhat ees an ambitious and amazing goal, ’Ermione. Eef I am ever able to, you must allow me to assist you.”

“Than at least tell me why?” Daphne asks Hermione. “You never did tell me that. Out of every job you could possibly do, why Minister?”

“Well, I'd love to say something altruistic like I want to enact lasting and positive change for all magical kind, and to an extent, that is true, but I can't deny how angry I get over the way muggle-born witches and wizards are treated by others in our society. Bad things can happen to them... very bad things, and- and it's like no one cares. Even at the top of my class, I'm consistently looked down upon, like some know-it-all teacher's pet, who'll never amount to anything simply because of the lack of status behind my birth.”

“I unzerstand you completely,” Fleur sympathetically and vigorously expresses. “Een my case, eet ees infuriating to be seen az nozhing more zhan an object to facilitate sexual desire. I am een zhe top one percent of my class, az well az one of zhe finest duelists they ’ave ever produced, and yet wizh most of zhe men I meet, I can sense zheir pledges, gifts, and words of kindness serve only one purpose een zhere minds.” Hermione and Daphne have a slightly clearer understanding of the french beauty, when Fleur continues to tell Hermione. “I know you are more zhan zhe status of your birzh, just az I am more zhan a sleeve for zhe sole purpose of wrapping around a cock.”

“...So,” Daphne almost hesitates to ask Fleur. “And you don't have to answer this if you don't want... but... you've never fooled around before? Or had sex? I just mean considering your stance I could understand, but you seem... there's a certain level of... experience about your demeanor.”

Daphne is curious and a little shocked, as is Hermione. They both thought with her age and beauty, she would've already experienced making love with a man.
“Eet saddens me to zay my maiden head ees still intact,” Fleur actually looks sad to say. “Owever, you must unzerstand eet ees not my fault,” she states emphatically, pointing a finger at them. “My mozher ees also decided not to allow me to seduce older men or zhe professors, even zough zhey are better at resisting my allure zhan zhe boyz een my school. Furzhermore, every potential mate nearest my age zhat I ‘ave ‘igh ‘opes for, cum all over zhemseleve een a matter of seconds. I can ‘ardly get on my knees before, ‘prfft,’” she adds a squirting, spitting noise with her mouth and tongue, along with a hand jerking motion for their benefit—not that Hermione or Daphne needed the audio and visual effect to understand the dismayed french girl.

“Uh,” Hermione tries to search for words to a conversation she's never had with other girls. “I've- I've read that's called premature ejaculation,” is all she can think to say, her cheeks a twinge with rose blood. “It's caused by high levels of stimulation.”

“...Is that a uh, common occurrence... among french men?” Daphne asks slightly scandalized.

“Of course not,” Fleur answers. “Eet can ‘appen to any man. Een truzh, eet ees not zhere fault. I simply lack zhe control over my allure when I am most passionate, or excited. Once, I waz wizh zhe most beautiful man you 'ave ever seen. 'E was twenty-four years of age, so naturally I did not tell my mozher... and neizher will eizher of you—zhis stayz among us girls, yes?” The two nod their head before she continues. “I waz so excited to lose my virginity to such an Adonis, I could not control zhe strength of my allure, and he came zhe moment my tongue brushed zhe underside of ‘is man'ood.” Hermione bit the corner of her lip apprehensively before shaking her head, as if to alleviate herself of troubling thoughts. It did not escape Daphne's notice as Fleur continues to say, “Zhe weakest of my stale-mates, ejaculated een ‘is trouzers zhe moment I tried to unfasten ‘is belt.” Fleur sighs deeply before asking, “too much seductiveness can be an unforgiving bitch, non?”

Daphne and Hermione turn to each other and the question is clear in their heads... was that a rhetorical question? “Well... uh, I have no desire to be Minister,” Daphne says evenly, slightly apprehensive at how open Fleur is to sharing. “So, I'll help you in any way I can.”

Hermione just nods gratefully, still thinking about Fleur's unique problem. Oddly fascinated yet more than satisfied with the amount she's already heard, Hermione turns to Daphne and with a chipper attitude states, “your turn.”

Daphne didn't seem like she wanted to play along but let out a quick breath and says, “I... would prefer others know nothing about me.”

"Weak," Fleur calls graciously.
“Well, despite your best efforts,” Hermione starts. “That does seem to be very important to you.”

“You do seem a ‘touch’ controlling,” Fleur jokingly points out. “Not unlike someone we know,” she adds, nodding toward Ares. “Why ees zhis important to you?”

Again, Daphne seems to not want to play along, but ultimately says, “aside from being a good quality to have as an Unspeakable, I was raised with a business like mentality, where deception and unpredictability are strong qualities to have. If you never let your enemies know you, than they can never defeat you.”

“Do you zhink everyone is your enemy?” Fleur asks with some concern.

“No,” Daphne responds. “Most don't care enough for that.”

“Will you at least tell me why you want to be an Unspeakable?” Hermione asks.

“I suppose that's fine,” Daphne states. “Unspeakables know all sorts of dark and terrible things the rest of the world isn't suppose to know, and I like that. What they teach us in school is a joke compared to all that's out there to learn. Things the world has no clue happened or could happen that might've easily destroy our very way of living. Forbidden knowledge is thrilling.”

“Well, you've certainly earned your green and silver,” Hermione jokes before asking, “the Department of Mysteries report to the Minister on a weekly or bi-weekly schedule?”

“I can't say,” Daphne answers with a smile. “Or won't,” she adds with a confident smirk.

“You 'ide yourself quite well.” Fleur comments. “Even I cannot sense anyzhing more from you ozher zhan zhe ‘ostility a protective mate bares upon a potential suitor.” Straight faced, Daphne neither confirms nor denies anything to the french beauty.

“Even if that was the case, it doesn't seem to bother you,” Hermione says, more curious than anything.

“Why would eet?” Fleur asks. “Arez ees unlike any ozher man I've ever met, non? Eet ees
understandable Daphne should feel this way. Zhe one I do not unzerstand, 'owever ees you.”

Hermione looks confused, asking “How do you mean?”

“Of everyone een zhis room, you seem to 'ave zhe strongest sway over Arez 'eart,” Fleur tells Hermione.

Out of her peripheral, Hermione can tell Daphne is paying extra attention. Hermione doesn't know what to say, but Daphne follows up with, “why do you say that?”

“Zhat day of course,” Fleur answers in reference to the acromantula attack. “Zhe day of second chances—or zhird een my case,” she looks sad to admit before continuing. “I am unsure of all you've been told but I confess to you I was terrified. My fazher has seen zhe memories een zhe pensieve, and even 'e admits, wizhout Arez, zhere would 'ave been a substantial loss of life. Az I stated earlier, I can receive emotional impressions from ozhers due to my Veela nature, zhat I can zhen interpret many likely theoriez. Eet was effortless to read zhe tremendous amount of magical strengzh Arez was displaying. Eet was absolutely astronomical and all of it came from an unmatched desire to protect. I felt 'is need to protect you, Daphne, Professor Flamle, Draco and Tracey, but out of everyone, you, 'Ermionee caused 'im zhe most fear. Zhe platform we were standing on nearly collapsed when 'e learned you were in zhe field. 'E defied 'is 'eadmaster and zhe near certainty of death to rescue you all. Zhat ees a man of great conviction, and eef nozhing else, you, Ermionee, mean a great deal to 'im.”

There's a moment of silence. Each girl taken with their thoughts about Ares. What he means to them, what they suspect he feels toward them, the undetermined potential of his ability and what the future can look like. Regardless of future hopes and dreams, the three girls have never met an opposite sex in their age range, very much in a league of his own before, and the excitement of what that can mean going forward is perpetually thrilling to them in their own ways.

Daphne turns to Hermione, asserting, “well, you've just been bumped up to definite threat.”

Hermione rolls her eyes as she shakes her head in disbelief. “So,” Hermione clears her throat before asking Fleur, “you really fancy him, than, like properly fancy him?”

“Oui,” Fleur easily answers. “Despite 'ow I believe 'e may feel about you, 'e 'as saved zhe life of my precious seester, 'e 'as saved my own life zhree times now, 'e can resist zhe full strengzh of my allure and 'e 'as not explicitly stated 'e 'as a lover. 'E ees handsome, powerful and I seem to 'ave developed a fetish for scars. My fantasiez are saturated wizh scared men now.”
Daphne and Hermione both smile at Fleur's odd sense of inappropriate remarks, when Daphne adds, “you should've seen him without a shirt. He has more scars; larger than the ones on his face.”

“You must tell me!” Fleur gasps happily.

“No,” Hermione throws out, only slightly amused. “We can't. We shouldn't.”

“Why not?” Fleur asks, brows crunched in curiosity.

“Well,” Hermione starts, grasping for logic. “Well, don't you feel it's a little inappropriate to think of how attractive he- how- ...He was seriously injured rescuing us. His entire torso was exposed from the Acromantula clawing at him, ripping his clothes off. His muscles were tight, twitching, and his skin was burning from the dark venom. How are we supposed to just... admire him like that?” She asks but her cheeks blush slightly.

Fleur just turns to the other blonde in the room, “Daphne?”

“He's more muscular than you might imagine,” Daphne starts to say as Hermione plops back in her seat, feeling defeated. “He's very fit, toned, right down to his hips, which you could just tell keeps going all the way down. He's defined, but not bulky.” A knock at the door interrupts what was sure to be a good hour of delightful communion, insightful anecdotes, and analytical observations about Ares' body. Hermione gladly gets up to answer the door and returns soon after with Nova, happily cooing in her arms, Draco and Tracey following behind the bushy haired girl.

“Where'd Luna go,” Hermione asks Draco.

“Went to play with the Weasley girl and her joker brothers,” Draco answers.

Once near the bed, Nova flaps her wings three times, gathering more than enough lift to hop and land on Harry's chest, prompting Hermione to comment, “gently, Nova.”

“Is he still sleeping?” Draco curiously asks.
“This wasn’t a simple fall from his broom, Draco,” Daphne returns. “It takes more time to recover from severe magical exhaustion.”

“Maybe you were wrong,” Tracey tells Draco, who answers, “maybe.”

“Wrong about what?” Hermione asks.

“Nothing, really,” Draco says. “I just got this feeling like he was awake.”

“It was more than that,” Tracey adds. “Even Nova cut her flight early and rushed us to bring her back.”

Hermione, Daphne, and Fleur look at each other, startled in Hermione's case, alarmed in Daphne's case, and thrilled in Fleur's case. “No,” Hermione denies. “He- he couldn't be.”

“Arez,” Fleur seductively chants, moving closer to his ear. “Are you awake, monsieur Trouble Star?” There is no response as Nova lays comfortably on his chest. Moving a strand of his long, pitch black hair out of the way, Fleur notices a delineation in the skin tone of the right side of his forehead that resembles a lightning bolt. “I've never noticed zhis scar before.”

“So he's not awake?” Daphne cautiously asks.

“I cannot tell,” Fleur returns leaning in close to the sleeping boy. “I suppose I could recreate Charles Perrault's famed tale, La Belle au Bois Dormant.”

“La Belle au...” Hermione questions, digging deep through her french vocabulary. “Sleeping Beauty? You mean to kiss him awake?”

“Do it,” Draco calls. “He needs a good snogging.”

“What do you mean kiss him?” Daphne asks. “Where did kissing come from?”

“La Belle au Bois Dormant ees a tale depicting the waking of a beautiful princess from under an
enchanted sleep wizh true love's magical kiss,” Fleur sweetly answers. “While I do not believe in such quaint tales of naive love, I am confident a kiss from me will arouse a response from our sleeping princess.”

“Or Daphne could do it,” Tracey staunchly interjects on behalf and in defense of her friend. Daphne is conflicted and doesn't like the feeling of backing down or making her intentions so obviously known.

“Or maybe you can use your allure, instead,” Hermione suggests. “If he doesn't respond, than we'll know.”

Fleur seems bummed by the alternative suggestion but nods her head in acceptance. Draco quickly moves away to the furthest part of the room, curiously followed by Tracey. Fleur leans in closer to Ares, tracing the smooth cliffs, soft valleys and dark scared trenches of his facial features with her delicate index finger.

“Anytime now,” Daphne interjects.

Fleur gives her a sheepish smirk before she begins to relieve control over her allure, and the room immediately feels it. Before Fleur can release half however, Nova leaps closer to his head and pets his face with both sides of her cheek.

“Eet would appear we 'ave anozer rival,” Fleur comically tells the room as a long sigh escapes Harry's lips, followed by slow reveal of his beautiful emerald irises. Harry's sight is filled with Nova's beak and blood red eyes, and his hand naturally moves to pet her. “Hey,” is all he says as the shuffling of pushed chairs from either side of the four poster bed alert him to the others.

Harry achingly lifts himself upright to lean against the headboard while Fleur, Hermione, Daphne, Draco, and Tracey surround his bed. “Hey,” he simply says.

“You're awake,” Daphne exhales more to herself than the room.

Fleur moves out of the way to let Hermione hug him as she says, “we were all very worried.”

Harry places his free hand firmly at the center of Hermione's warm back, happy to see her again as Draco says, “I knew you were awake. I just got this weird feeling, than Nova hurried back antsy to
see you.”

Hermione lets him go as Harry curiously asks, “why didn't she just flame to me?”

“You're not going to like this,” Draco starts. “Take a look at her leg.”

Harry inspects Nova's leg and sure enough there's a clothe-like parchment, with an unclear rune scheme folded in a tight looking knot, making it unreadable. “What the fuck is this?”

“That,” Draco starts. “Would be a safety measure Dumbledore, in all his infinite wisdom, felt was absolutely necessary for the protection of the castle, never mind how it saved everyone.”

Tracey adds just as snidely, “though his own phoenix seems conveniently exempt from shackles.”

“You're saying it keeps her from flaming?” Harry asks the silver-blonde.

“It's tamper-proof, unbreakable, and yes, keeps Nova from flaming,” Draco answers.

“That fucking, egomaniacal knob,” Harry shouts. Taking a breath he calms himself down and asks, “how long have I been out?”

“Saturday to Saturday,” Daphne answers. “ A full seven days.”

“...Damn that's long,” Harry mumbles with disappointment. “What else has happened? Dumbledore couldn't be the only prat throwing their polluted weight around.”

Everyone looks at one another before Fleur steps forward to take the lead. “Zhere ees a strong claim zhat you were- are Zhe Green Reaper zhat zhe ministry 'as been searching for,” Fleur says.

“Umbridge and everyone on her side are the ones making that claim,” Daphne proclaims. “It's the only topic that's mattered in the Prophet, and the Minister and the DMLE are under a lot of pressure right now from multiple fronts to act.”
“There's a huge debate going on to see whether they'll charge you for the murders of Rowle, Jugson and Nott,” Draco says.

“Why not charge me,” Harry asks, lazily pulling his long hair back. “What's the other side of the debate?” he asks as Fleur helps him set his hair in a knot.

“The French Ministry,” Hermione answers before continuing to say, “the very moment the ministry proceeds to officially charge you with the murders of now known Death Eaters, the French Ministry will have legal precedence to use that official charge to retaliate by claiming those same British wizards attempted to murder prominent French wizards, namely the daughters of the Deputy French Minister, which could very well lead to a diplomatic and political nightmare. So the British Ministry either defends these Death Eaters and make an enemy of France, and anyone who hate Death Eaters by arresting you, or they don't proceed with anything official and nothing happens.”

“Add to that,” Tracey interjects. “The Prophet already ran the story that the Ministry forced them to hold back, the one with you and your glowing eyes, saving Fleur and her sister against a death squad, so the Ministry is facing even more pressure from the citizens if they decide to go after you.”

“Originally it was father who wanted to proceed with finding and charging you,” Draco informs with a particular disgust in his tone Harry's only now noticed he hasn't used much of lately. “But now that he believes you're the Green Reaper, he's honor bound to either defend you, excuse himself from leading that charge, or face justified consequences for breaking a magical honor oath if he proceeds.”

“The House of Flamel have garnered a lot of favors from other prominent political figures,” Hermione adds. “So you do have a lot of strong allies.”

“...Alright,” Harry says. “Well, it's not ideal, but I have complete faith in our Minister to make things worse. What else is there? What about the Acromantula attack?”

“Eet turns out you 'ave better instincts zhan I imagined,” Fleur says. “Zhe Auror you would not shake handz wizh? Zhe same one who would not shake my 'and?”

“John Dawlish?” Harry asks and Fleur nods.
“Zhey’ve learned ’e was zhe perpetrator behind zhe attack,” Fleur tells him.

“He covered his glove with a potion glaze that transferred a powerful lure on anyone who shook his hand,” Hermione states.

“What? Why? How?” Harry asks, wondering if the Dawlish in his time line was every exemplary in potions or even had the intelligence needed to formulate that plan.

“We don't know,” Daphne states. “They wouldn't tell any of us anything. They simply questioned him with veritaserum, then locked him away in Azkaban to await his trial.”

Fleur adds, “even my fažher does not know what was asked of zhe traitorous Auror.”

Hermione continues to say, “they only told us about the potion glaze because Mr. Flamel and Professor Snape had to create a counter-potion and apply it to everyone who touched his gloved hands. It turns out, he shook hands with thirteen people in total.”

“So all the Acromantula?” Harry asks, now understanding why they were so fixated on Hermione among the others.

“Once they sorted that death lure, all the wizard-killers left the castle,” Draco answers. “Well, all the ones that survived. They're crediting you with a staggering hundred and seven slayings. Witch Weekly dubbed you The Eight Eye Assassin, or Eight Eyes for short.”

“He's really racking up the titles,” Tracey tells Draco.

“And they didn't tell you anything at all about Dawlish?” Harry asks. “There has to be a reason why he did this. I can't imagine he did this on his own and even if he did, to what end?”

“Even Sirius wouldn't tell me anything,” Tracey states. “They're keeping this strictly need to know. It's that sensitive.”
Harry sighs then starts shifting his weight to get out of bed as he asks, “anything else I should know?”

“What are you doing,” Hermione asks moving closer to him, looking worried. “You need to rest.”

“Flitwick wants to see you as soon as possible,” Draco answers unconcerned about Harry's health. “And he's not the only one. Dumbledore wants to be alerted the moment you're awake.”

“Oh that self-righteous narcissist is going to see me alright,” Harry says as he gets to his feet. Harry is wearing a black long sleeve, thermal top and black pajama bottoms as he gets out of bed. He tests his wand retraction from his holster. Satisfied, he slips his white wand back, though one look at Hermione, and Harry has to reassure her, “Hermione, I’m fine, really. You don't have to worry. After a week long nap, I could do with a bit of moving around.”

“Professor Perenelle says the mind requires more rest than the body after magical exhaustion of that level,” Hermione says as Harry starts walking back and forth in the room, stretching and rotating his limbs. “You may have woken up but that doesn't mean that you're at a hundred percent yet.”

“I'll take it easy,” Harry tells her. “I'll just keep it light for a bit.”

Hermione seems reluctantly pacified and adds, “just don't overexert yourself.”

“I won't,” he says before asking Draco, “was there someone with him at all times?” At his confused silver eyes, Harry clarifies. “Was someone with Dumbledore whenever he'd come to see if I was awake?”

“He hasn't seen you, actually,” Draco answers.

“What,” Harry asks.

“The Flamels insisted on moving you into their flat by the second day,” Daphne starts to explain to Harry. “Then put the room under the Fidelius Charm. They only told us, and Luna Lovegood the secret of it's location, so the headmaster hasn't seen you. More to the point, Professor Flamel won't allow it. She's very angry with Dumbledore.”
“Zhey bozh are,” Fleur chimes in. "Zhe immortal Alchemist still refuses to speak wizh 'im."

“By the way you're in the Flamels living quarters, on the first floor, at the end of corridor four in Hogwart's,” Hermione shares the magical secret with him, so he'll know where to return whenever he needs to.

“That article didn't help,” Tracey points out with a smirk. At Harry's look, Tracey continues to say, “Rita Skeeter wrote an article about you and the Headmaster. Apparently she has a source that claims the Flamel heir has been under constant threat in Hogwarts and Dumbledore refuses to safeguard you from any harm, despite Professor Flamel's urging. With everything going on people are starting to wonder if Hogwarts is actually safe under Dumbledore's care.”

Harry can say from experience that if anything can get by Dumbledore, it will. “Good,” Harry says. “Anything else?”

“Well,” Draco continues. “Nobody outside of this room knows you speak Parseltongue, so there’s a plus.”

“As I was not zhere, I still find zhat so amazingly difficult to believe,” Fleur states. “I 'ave been most curious to know more since I 'eard.” She looks eager to hear an explanation he didn't think he had to explain. Looking at the room, aside from Draco, they all seem eager to know more. Not surprisingly, they seem to have a lot of questions for him that they’ve had to postpone until he awoke.

“There's nothing much to know, really,” Harry down plays. “I've been able to speak to snakes for a long time.”

“Does that mean you're a descendant of Salazar Slytherin?” Daphne asks before Tracey quickly adds, “and why didn't you tell anybody?”

“I'm not much of a sharer, Tracey, and no, I'm not his descendant,” Harry simply says. “I can just speak to them, is all. Though that reminds me. I suppose, no one's been able to see Nāga.”

“How did you even find the Chamber of Secrets, and how did you find a basilisk let alone put it in the chamber,” Daphne asks, more than likely having learned about the Chamber from Hermione. “They are incredibly rare,” she continues. “To the point where one hasn't been seen in decades! I just don't understand so much.”

Everyone is looking at him expecting some form of response, and despite his great and constant reluctance to bring them closer into his dangerous world, logically, sharing some things with them is the better course of action. Looking in their eyes, not a single one of them give him the impression they regret being around him despite the danger they were in last week, so if they're going to stay, they might as well be as aware as necessity dictates.

“Draco told me about what happened to you, second year,” Harry starts looking at Hermione. “You and all the other petrified students. While that fact was important, what was really key to discovering the Chamber were the death of the chickens. Professor Hagrid's roosters were killed which reminded me about something Nicolas and Perenelle once told me. Salazar Slytherin had a magical room in Hogwarts where he kept his pet Basilisk in when it wasn't hunting in the forest. And a Basilisk's mortal weakness is the crow of a rooster—not that it kills them outright, mind you. It's a substantial weakness, but not an instant kill like many believe. Asking around, I eventually came across Myrtle Warren, or more commonly known as Moaning Myrtle.”

Hermione's eyes widened at the name and Harry gives her the briefest of concerned look, before she says, “what about Myrtle?”

“In the 1940's, she was killed in the girls second floor bathroom by a Basilisk,” Harry tells them. “The reason she died back then, and the others recently were only petrified, is because she was the only one who saw directly into it's eyes. I'd imagine it would've been the same if you and the others had direct eye contact as well, but I assume they all only saw the killer eyes obscured or through some form of reflection; not head on basically.”

“That's what that yellow was?” Hermione asks. “I was walking back from the library, saw yellow reflected on a puddle on the ground, and than nothing. I woke up in the infirmary by semester's end.” Hermione is shocked and a little frightened at the thought she voices aloud. “I was almost killed by a Basilisk?”

“...Almost,” Harry answers. “It's why I wanted to investigate and make sure that doesn't happen again, to anyone. Myrtle's bathroom just happens to be the main entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, and since I could already speak parseltongue, I went down there, and killed Slytherin's Basilisk.”

“You killed a Basilisk?” Daphne asks aghast. “By yourself?”
“No,” Harry answers. “Nova was a big help. Draco did stuff too,” Harry says. Tracey immediately whips her head to eye Draco in such an adoring way that he fails to mention he stayed as far away as possible. Harry continues, “what I didn't know was that Slytherin's Basilisk was pregnant or had given birth, or whatever, but Nāga imprinted on me, so it thinks I'm it's-”

“Daddy?” Fleur asks slightly more seductively than the room was ready for. Everyone eyes her toilsome sex appeal even with the simplest of things, but all of Fleur's attention is on Harry.

“...Master,” Harry eventually corrects, though Fleur seems happier with the correction. After a cough, he turns away and adds, “which is still just as bad.”

“Will you see Nāga?” Fleur asks

“Eventually yeah,” Harry answers.

“Can we see 'im too?” Fleur continues her queries.

“...I guess,” Harry awkwardly answers. “Let me make sure Nāga's fine to see others first. For now I need to talk with Nicolas and Perenelle. Where are they?”

“Mr. Flamel is meeting with the head of the DMLE at the moment,” Hermione starts to answer. “But I can't say for how long. Professor Flamel is in a teachers meeting, but I've just remembered she wants to know the second you're awake. I suppose I'll go get her.”

“Actually,” Harry counters. “Have her meet me at Hogwart's entrance instead. I'll be there in twenty minutes.”

“I'm sure she's not going to like that,” Hermione says with absolute certainty.

“I know,” Harry responds before looking to the rest. “Um, thank you, all of you, for coming to see me. It means more than I can say. I uh, need to make sure Nāga is okay, so I'll see you all at lunch?”
“Do we have to sit at the Ravenclaw table?” Tracey asks looking sick at the thought of betraying her house so openly.

“I do not see why tables ‘ave so much say een ’Ogwarts,” Fleur states. “Zhey are nozthing more zhan simple tables. Een Beauxbaton students are free to sit where ever zhey like.”

“Draco,” Harry calls as he takes clothes into the bathroom. “Twenty minutes, front entrance.”

“What? Why me,” Draco calls as Harry closes the bathroom door. “Groupie's are perfect for doing your bidding.”

“We are not groupies,” Hermione declares to the silver-blond. “I'll see you at lunch,” she calls to Harry before exiting the room and the Flamel's quarters.

“I zhink I will go wizh 'er,” Fleur says to the group. “Au revoire, Arez.”

Dressed in comfortable black slacks and a thick, grey wool turtleneck, Harry exits the Flamel quarters with Nova on his shoulder. Harry walks through the halls of Hogwarts and is immediately recognized by the spare students traversing the corridors. He'd disillusion himself but with Nova still visible on his shoulder, it would defeat the purpose. He ignores them all as he makes his way to the long bridge behind the school. Despite the few groups of younger years following him, at the mid way point of the bridge, he grabs the guardrail and hops over. Nova lets him go as he speeds to the jagged rocks below.

He free falls two seconds before he begins to slow his momentum, eventually landing on a particularly large boulder. Looking around the rocky cliff, he starts to search for a large cavernous entrance. Upon searching the Chamber of Secrets, Harry discovered a back opening, thrice his height past the main show room. It was obviously to allow Slytherin's Basilisk free exit of the chamber to the outside, likely to hunt in the forest. Recalling an odd formed rock, Harry easily recalls the entrance into the chamber.

Standing in front of a large boulder with a small snake insignia, Harry hisses, ~Open~

The large boulder shrinks to the size of a pebble, allow Harry to enter the portal. Five minutes later he's in the chamber and calls out to Nāga. Relief floods his system when he sees his large snake is well as it slithers toward Harry with frightening speed.
The large serpent hisses. ~Master! Master! Master!~

It already has Harry in a fierce two coiled wrap, squeezing him incredibly tight. When Harry recalls Nova can't flame him to safety, he calls out, ~Nāga!~ Harry puts all his heightened strength into resisting the bone crushing hug as the Basilisk's large head affectionately nuzzles against Harry's. Nova grips the large snakes tail and slowly starts lifting their entire weight in the air. Without the leverage of the ground, Harry has an easier time getting out of the strong grip. After checking to be absolutely certain his Basilisk fine and telling him how amazing he did, Harry heads to the rear portal, telling his snake, ~I'll bring you food later.~

Once again outside, Harry flattens a nearby rock into a round platform with transfiguration. Standing on the rock platform, Harry slowly levitates himself until he feels confident he won't tip over, then quickly makes his way high in the sky. Wings spread wide and beautifully, Nova flies beside a crouched Harry as he takes the overhead shortcut to the front entrance of the castle. Already waiting for him is a very upset looking Perenelle, accompanied by a disgruntled Draco, a smiling Fleur, a serene Hermione, and to his surprise, Lily and Hardwin Potter are also waiting with them.

Despite the excess of people there and his blood family, Harry is more concerned with whatever bludgeoning words Perenelle will more than likely beat him with, in front of a crowd, no less. He realized he might be in for another lecture when he didn't find a single new scar on his body while he was changing. No notes can only mean there's a stern talking to in his future. Harry knows it's only out of worry and not malice, but it still makes him anxious to expect it.

“Maybe I should show her I'm fine,” he suggests to Nova. “So she can see there's nothing to worry about.” Nova turns away without so much as a caw. Still, Harry steps off the rock disc. The blaring cold wind envelops him as he speeds straight to the ground until he slows his momentum just enough to touch down in front of them without much strain. Nova lands on his shoulder with a few flaps of her strong wings as Harry cancels the levitation charm and transfiguration on the floating disk, and it falls to the ground, slamming into dirt with a hard thud.

“Hey,” Harry cautiously says to Perenelle, but her displeasure isn't quelled by the good health in his entrance or presence. He looks to the others a moment before he continues, “thanks for looking after me... again.” Seemingly still upset, Harry adds as a side anecdote, “I just checked on Nāga, and he's doing fine too.”

“What's a Nāga,” Hardwin insistently asks, to which Draco answers “just a small pet snake.” Hardwin rolls his eyes mumbling, “Slytherins.”

Perenelle takes a step to Harry, and for the briefest of a second, his instincts prepare for an attack.
Ignoring that reaction, he allows her to wrap him in her arms for a warm, and fiercely caring hug. One hand placed on the back of his head, the other wrapped under his arm around his, Perenelle holds him with familial comfort. It's not difficult in any way to feel her relief, concern and overall tender affection in her embrace, and that makes him nervous in his rigged, strained tenseness. People caring for him is one thing but the physical expression of it is just jarring. He can't trust it. Too many people who care for him don't make it. In a very real way, he's dooming her by allowing this, and he can't feel responsible for more pain and misery.

“You bloody scared me half to death,” Perenelle states. “That Trouble Star nickname is suppose to be ironic, you know.”

Harry lets out a long breath that he didn't know he had held in. *Maybe things don't have to go as he expects*, he wonders from some unexplored place in his mind. He has more going for him than he did in his time line, and though events that have come to pass are certainly different, he's far more determine to end the dark parasite than he's ever felt. In his previous time line, being the one to end Voldemort for everyone's sake felt like an act of divine providence. Now it physically hurts him to know that parasite is still out there, and until he ends him, he will never know peace.

Harry slowly raises a left palm and pats her back awkwardly, then holds it there. This is the last chance for the life embracing him, for the few watching, for everyone else and for himself. He promises himself he'll kill Voldemort or die trying, as he takes a step back after Perenelle lets go.

“What are you doing out of bed,” she can't help but ask.

“I feel fine, really,” Harry tells her. “Thanks.”

“Well,” Perenelle nods it away, as if to say any time. “I might as well check you over.”

Lily nudges Hardwin to step forward. The Potter heir seems very reluctant to step up to Harry as Perenelle, checking him over, asks Harry, “why do you have bruising and micro fractures on your bones already? I looked you over before I left and those weren't there.” Harry looks at her as if willing her to remember his large overexcited pet Basilisk, when Hardwin coughs to get his attention.

“Mum says we don't have to do honor debts this time since the Ministry's Aristocratic Commission as well as the Noble Ancient's Society consider the effort to rescue lives that day as a group effort. And though it's not required by the usual standards, she still reckons I oughta thank you. So, you know, thanks.”
“Making friends with a Slytherin now?” Harry hears Ron shout out before he turns to see Ron, Ginny and Bill walking towards the castle's entrance. Ron still seems angry, not that it's a surprise to Harry as the Ron from his time-line didn't see sense until after Harry almost died facing a dragon in the first task.

“We're not friends you wanker,” Hardwin calls, immediately followed by a stern, “Hardwin!” from Lily.

“Hope you two'll be happy together picking out matching bracelets,” Ron throws before leaving. Ginny tells Hardwin, “you know he doesn't mean it. Don't worry, he'll come around and see he's just being a royal prat.”

Bill apologizes to Lily who just waves it away as unnecessary, before turning to Fleur. The handsome redhead extends his hand with a suave smile, saying with a confidence he easily remembers from the Bill in his time line. “Hi, we haven't met but I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Bill Weasley.”

Fleur happily shakes his hand replying, “Fleur Delacour. Pleasure.”

Harry allows his mind to wonder how content he is that they've met again, and finds he's not quite as content as he thought he might be. He should be thrilled—over the moon, really—but he's not, and that bothers him more than they bother him.

“Well, aside from Nāga doing a number on you,” Perenelle states. “You're fine.”

“That's a relief,” Lily says stepping close... too close for Harry. “I'm sure a lot of people will be happy to here that. Perenelle reassured us you were just resting but it's better to see in person.”

“Agreed,” Bill says. “On behalf of my family, thank you.” he extends his hand and Harry shakes the charming red head's hand.

“Uh, thank you, Professor,” Harry says courteously. “And... Bill right?”

With his nod, Bill returns to Fleur and Harry turns to Perenelle and simply states, “I don't know if I
“I don't know either but it's fine by me,” Perenelle easily states. “What's on your mind?”


“Magnifique!” Fleur exclaims. “I must go wizh you! Shopping jus soundz so soothing to zhe soul, na, 'Ermionee? You will come as well, yes?”

“Well, I'd planned on spending a few hours before lunch in the library...” Hermione responds to Fleur as Perenelle tells Harry, “I'd walk you, but I have to head back for a meeting with Dumbledore. He'd like you to see him as soon as possible, but currently, I don't care for anything he wants... not after that stunt he pulled with Nova.”

“That's not sitting well with me, at all,” Harry downplays his anger at handicapping his familiar, as Hermione tries to explain to Fleur that she doesn't really do shopping.

Harry hadn't planned on anyone but Draco and himself going but he's fine with Fleur and Hermione tagging along. It'll make things easier anyway. “You should come, Hermione. Just this once.”

Hermione looks at him a moment before nodding her head, saying, “just this once.”

“Lily, I don't know if you have any plans but I still have a meeting with Dumbledore,” Perenelle explains. “Would you be a dear and have an Auror meet them at the front gate,” At Harry's questioning brow, Perenelle answers his unasked question. “New policy. More aurors on the ground and any group expecting to leave the castle need chaperones.”

“That won't be necessary,” Lily replies. “I can watch them while they shop. Actually I was heading into the village today, so it works out. We can even have lunch in the Three Broomsticks if you all like,” she tells the group.

“Oh, that wouldn't get in the way of your affairs would it?” Perenelle asks, despite the concerned rising of Harry's eyebrows.
“Not at all,” Lily responds. “It’ll be fun, won’t it Hardwin?” Hardwin whirls on his terse mother and the look in her sharp green eyes says he has no choice.

This is far more than Harry's comfortable with, and Perenelle doesn't seem to mind one bit. “Great,” Perenelle says. “Thank you.”

“I feel you might need another chaperone to watch after this lot, Mrs. Potter,” Bill states, stepping forward, with an affable smirk. Turning to Fleur, he says. “In case we need to split up.”

“Uh, Godric,” Draco starts. “Why am I even here?”

“Yes, please Malfoy make my life easier and leave,” Hardwin quickly responds, when Lily warns her son with a stern, “Hardwin.”

“Draco,” Harry calls, not wanting to witness another insult piss match between the two. Before turning to leave, Harry tilts his head as if to say, lets go. As Draco moves past Hardwin, he hotly returns, “don't forget to hold mummy's hand before you cross the street Pottykins.”

The group make their way down the trail to the gate, and beyond that, to Hogsmeade. Harry is in the lead with Nova on his shoulder and Draco beside him, Hermione and Fleur following behind them, and making up the rear is Hardwin, Lily and Bill. As they walk, Harry tells Draco, “when we split up, we'll talk.” Draco simply nods and in a little over half an hour, they're all entering the all-wizard village. They draw quite a bit of attention when other students notice Harry or this time line's Boy-Who-Lived. The adults notice a phoenix on a boy's shoulder—essentially the subject of what's been all over the Prophet the entire week, now standing in front of them. Harry hears a few, 'Eight Eyes,' or, 'The Green Reaper,' or, 'the Flamel Heir,' whispered throughout the crowd.

Harry spots the pairs of patrolling Aurors and notices how young they are. *Likely new recruits,* Harry reasons as Lily calls, “okay everyone,” gathering everyone's attention. “So where do we all want to go first?”

“Witches Wears and Wardrobe.” Fleur quickly calls from beside Hermione. “O'wever, I will need differing opinions on zhe wears I model,” she adds, hands clasped behind her, twisting her body seductively in excitement as she looks around to the mostly male group.

Bill plays it cool while Hardwin and Draco are pink in the cheeks and clearly interested. “I need to go to the Quidditch shop,” Harry says, smacking Draco in the arm to pay proper attention.
“I can take a look,” Hardwin says looking at Fleur before quickly turning to everyone and adding, “to see if I need anything new to wear.”

“Perhaps we should split up after all,” Lily states, eyeing Hardwin suspiciously. Humored by Hardwin, Bill winks an inside joke at Fleur who smiles in understanding. “Girls with me. Boys go with Bill, and gaze lovingly upon your broomsticks as if nothing else exists. Hardwin-”

“I know, I know,” he quickly interjects. “I won't buy anything.”

Walking towards the Hogsmeade sister store of Diagon Alley's Quality Quidditch Supplies, complete with huddled students ogling the Firebolt display, Harry asks Draco, “You reckon you can handle the Firebolt?”

“Reckon I can fly it better than you,” Draco returns.

“We'll see,” Harry says as the group enters the shop. The shop attendant is amazed by the phoenix on Harry's shoulder before he spots the rest of the party, Hardwin Potter in particular.

“Merlin's beard, what a joyous day. First a Bulgarian Quidditch superstar and now thee Hardwin Potter,” the elderly attendant gasps rushing to Hardwin. “It is my greatest honor to be of service to your house. Is there anything I can interest you in today?”

“Hello,” Hardwin returns with a winning smile. “Not at the moment thank you. We're just looking around a bit, but if I see something I need to have, I'll let you know.”

Harry rolls his eyes and moves toward the counter and waits for the attending to stop fawning over Hardwin. After a few minutes of the clerk asking about Hardwin's favorite team, Draco snaps, calling out loudly, “While it pains me to my second rate soul to snatch you away from a boy who did magic he can't even remember doing, would you mind terrible for a minute to customers who don't need their mummy's permission to pay for things? I promise you can worship his feet later.” Harry tilts his head, looking at Draco cockeyed, as if to say, what is the matter with you? Draco shrugs frustratingly and after a calming exhale, says, “old habits...”

The elderly attending holds his tongue from what was sure to be a very negative response as he moves over to the counter. “How may I help you?” he asks in a clipped tone.
“I’d like to purchase two Firebolts and five Nimbus 2000’s, along with maintenance kits for each,” Harry informs the older man, popping his eyes out a bit. “I'm not sure how long it'll take you to organize that but I'd like it as soon as possible, please. In an hour or less, if you can manage.”

“That's going to cost a bloody fortune!” Hardwin yells. “Your mother would never let you buy all that.”

“My word,” the older man lets slip alongside a gasp. “Young man, I can not impress upon you how high such a sum of galleons that is. I simply can not arrange that much high valuable merchandise if you do not have the funds to procure them.”

“Please write a receipt now,” Harry states as his Flamel heir ring appears on his hand, allowing the elderly man to see the official seal of the House Flamel surrounded by the insignia representing of a Noble and Most Ancient House. “So I can stamp it.”

“Very good, sir! Right away sir,” he hops to say, completely forgetting about Hardwin Potter and Draco's impatient outburst. “I'll need to have both the Firebolts floo'ed here but I'll have everything ready for you in an hour.” Hardwin looks over to the Firebolt displayed in the shop's large window and the attending states, “that's only for display purposes. It doesn't even fly.”

When the attending leaves, Harry wonders about necklaces or bracelets when Bill asks him astounded, “why do you need so many brooms? The two Firebolts alone will cost a small fortune.”

“I don't want to be caught unaware again,” Harry easily answers, turning to exit the shop. As they exit the shop Harry asks the group but primarily Draco, “where can you buy necklaces or bracelets?”

“Witches Wears and Wardrobe,” Hardwin quickly answers.

After an annoyed exhale Harry asks, “anywhere else?”

“They do have some good stuff there,” Bill interjects. “I buy stuff for my mum there all the time,” the red head adds, making it clear to Harry why they both want to go there. He just nods, and soon they're walking into the nice smelling wardrobe shop. Harry and Draco move to the jewelry section while Hardwin and Bill locate the ladies.
“What are you looking for,” Draco asks.

“Something to hang the brooms on,” Harry starts to say. “I'm thinking a bracelet would be better, since it'll be closer to their hands. Which bracelet do you think Daphne would like?”

“Are you seriously asking me for advice on jewelry for a girl?” Draco asks in disbelief. “You-YOU, bloody hell... how the fuck is this the world we live in now? Where you're asking me for jewelry advice for one your tarts?”

“I hear you call her or any of them a tart again, I'm going to make you feed Nāga from now on,” Harry calmly answers back. “And you don't think I know how weird this shite is, but you're literally my only option, which works out because you're so posh, I imagine you know more about this than I do.”

“You're acting like there's some sort of complex mystery behind it,” Draco replies with a sigh. “Just get the most expensive one. That's literally all I do.”

Looking at him in disbelief, Harry asks, “you want me to buy Tracey's too?”

“...No,” Draco states. “You already got her a Nimbus. I'll get this.”

Looking at the selection, Harry continues to ask, “and which do you think you'll get for her?”

“Not sure,” Draco answers taking a critical look at all the bracelets. “She's very conservative, really adheres to traditional values, but she initially grew up in the muggle world so...”

Draco turns back to Harry, who's just shaking his head, vocalizing his challenge, “just get the most expensive one, huh?”

“Arez!” Fleur calls, drawing his attention before Draco can respond. “What do you zhink?” she asks spinning slowly, showcasing her sensuous figure in a floral patterned, lace and silk sleeveless dress with a flaring hem that stops a few inches above her knees in red high heel shoes. Taking her full hour-glass figure in, and all her points of beauty at the same time makes Harry doubt she's even real. The way her beautifully silk blonde hair cascades over her cream shoulders and her deep blue
eyes stare into him, it's undeniable how amazingly attractive she is. “Be 'onest,” she says nervously.

“I uh,” Harry saves his dry throat by swallowing some saliva. “I think you look amazing.”

Fleur smiles coyly at Harry before skipping away as he calls out, “wait-”

“She didn't even ask me for my opinion,” Draco points out.

“I'm sure she would've if your jaw wasn't hanging,” Harry states. “....By the way, I said we, uh need to talk later..., but I didn't say neither of us is going to like it...”


“...'bout something way out of my depth,” is all Harry says.

Draco looks at him suspiciously as Fleur returns with a sexy selection hanging from each hand. “Which would you prefer to see next?”

“Actually,” Harry starts to tell her. “I need you and Hermione for a second, please. Can you bring her over?”

Fleur nods and runs back into the unplotable isles of witches wardrobes and their accessories, before returning with Hermione a few minutes later. Hermione seems nervous and slightly more like his Hermione than before. “Your teeth,” Harry mentions, looking at Hermione and thinking of fonder memories. “They're shorter,” he says with a small melancholy like smile.

“Uwahh,” Fleur wows. “E noticed right away, non?”

“Yes,” Hermione says to both Harry and Fleur. “Professor Potter did it for me with the tooth shrinking charm. I've always wanted to, I just never did. It must look odd, I imagine.”

“No,” Harry easily says. “I don't think it looks odd at all. It really suits you.”
“Doesn’t it,” Lily says coming from behind with Hardwin and Bill. “I was going to help just a tad with her hair but it seems resistant to all my styling charms.”

“It’s okay, really professor,” Hermione tells Lily. “Thank you for trying, but I’ve attempted everything I could research and nothing seems to work.”

“Perenelle has a special remedy she has me use,” Harry tells her. “My hair would be a puffed up mop without it so, I can get you some if you like.” Slightly taken and snapping a quick glance at his slick-back hair in a top knot, Hermione nods with a smile as Fleur asks, “what was eet you wanted wizh us?”

“I wanted to get you both bracelets, but I prefer you have on something you like, so ” Harry says nonchalantly, nodding at the selection. While the girls seem taken aback, Lily smiles knowingly, Hardwin is rolling his eyes and Bill moves over to the counter to take a look at the items.

“A gift?” Fleur asks excitedly. “I’m certain I’ll like anyzhing you pick for me.”

“Does this have something to do with the broomsticks you purchased?” Bill asks curiously.

“What broomsticks?” Hermione asks Bill, turning to Harry.

“I don’t know how I’m going to explain that to Perenelle,” Lily states, causing Harry to assume Bill told her. “Can you at least tell me why you spent a small fortune on racing broomsticks so I don’t come up short when she asks, which I’m sure she will.”

“As I said, I don’t want to be caught off guard again,” Harry tells them. “If I had a broom when that imposter escaped Hogwarts, I would’ve caught him. If I had a broom when the Acromantula attacked, everything would’ve been easier. I won’t let there be a third time.” He turns to Fleur and Hermione. “So I want you both to pick a bracelet to wear. I bought you brooms you’ll shrink and attach to the bracelet.”

“Wicked,” Hardwin says. “So you can always keep your broomstick with you. Mum?”

“Mum, what?” Lily asks humored. “Practical it may be, but I can’t see you resisting the urge to fly
through the halls. No.”

“It's not that I don't like quidditch,” Hermione states. “I'm just not a very good flier.”

“Than get good,” Harry tells her in all seriousness. “This isn't for fun and games. This is for last week and the other time before that. I want you both to have options available to protect yourselves for the very real possibility when I can't be there to save you.”

That seemed to register with them as they look over the various options. As they choose their bracelets, Harry tells the attending to bill everything Fleur and Hermione want to house Flamel, and stamps the blank receipt with his house ring. Harry then tells Lily and Bill, “I just have a few more things to get. Draco and I will be fine on our own.”

“I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that, young man,” Lily says, “Bill will go with you.”

Harry just nods and Draco, Hardwin, Bill and himself exit the shop. They wander around the shops as Harry keeps an eye out for bottles of hot sauce for Perenelle, and any phonograph cylinders for Nicolas’ phonograph. When they pick up the brooms Harry gives Draco his Firebolt—to Hardwin’s extreme envy—than shrinks the rest before attaching his own Firebolt to his chain around his neck. Harry explains to a curious Hardwin that while the broom are inactive they can be manipulated by magic, unlike the moment they become active and the runes renders all forms of tampering useless. Heading to the Three Broomsticks with a new bottle of hot sauce—that actually recommends diluting it before consumption—for Perenelle, but without a cylinder for Nicolas’ phonograph, Bill asks Harry, “spare a minute?” Draco pauses to stay but Harry shakes his head, saying it's fine, and the silver-blonde and Hardwin enter the popular inn and pub.

“Yes, Mr. Weasley?” Harry asks.

“Bill, please,” the eldest Weasley insists. “Don't you think it would better if you didn't remind your classmate and Ms. Delacour of the horrible experience they went through last week? They're not like us. Women are more delicate than men, so you have to remember to treat them that way.”

Of all the things Harry assumed Bill would talk to him about, this was not one of them. “You think I want them to go through that horror,” Harry asks dubiously. “You try convincing them they'd be happier in a world that's all sunshine and rainbows, because I tried and they won't. I don't want them to get hurt, but I'm all out of ideas.”
“I know you don't want them getting hurt,” Bill returns. “That's not what I mean. It's just—surely you can see buying them their broomsticks will always remind them that they're not safe, because in their minds that broom is a symbol of a possible future threat. That's not a healthy mentality to have for young women.”

“...I don't know what you want me to say here,” Harry states, looking very confused. “That stuff I bought is for emergencies and nothing more. I'd rather they have it and never need it, than to need it and not have it.”

“Listen,” Bill tries again. “The crisis is over, and everything is fine now. When you give them expensive gifts for the sole purpose of avoiding death, you just remind them, all over again, of how close they were, and will always be, to death. It's like you're trapping their mind in that time. It's unhealthy and it just seems like you don't understand that. I know you meant well, but it's insensitive to what they went through.”

With no response, Bill makes his way into the pub and Harry automatically follows, stunned by Bill's thoughts on Harry's pragmatic insurance plan. Walking into the rowdy pub, many eyes land on Nova but Harry ignores it as he incessantly goes round and round in his head with Bill's remarks. Learning everyone is in the private room for lunch, it isn't until they're about to enter the private room when Harry grabs Bill by the elbow and pulls him back with more strength than he intended to use. Bill looks curiously at a very serious Harry.

“Impotent or not, I won't ever regret giving them any tool that helps them, be it a simple hair styling potion, or as life preserving as a broomstick.”

They stare at each other intensely, firm in their stances, but without hostile aggression, when a familiar voice calls out, “Bill!”

They turn to the source of the call and Harry is gutted to see one of the best professors he's ever had in the flesh not five steps away from them. Remus Lupin, haggard and tired in his overall appearance, but positively upbeat in his mustached smile. Remus spots the tenseness between Bill and Harry, before his eyes land hard on Harry, reading him like an old and cherished book.

“My,” Remus says looking directly at Harry. “It's as if I know you.”

Chapter End Notes
I had to ask a lot of the girls in my orbit what they talk about among themselves. It seemed to revolve around gripes and boys so, I figured the girls would talk about Ares among their general concerns.

I realized that I could've just had a sentence or paragraph of Harry buying the broomsticks and be done with it, but this is all building to an idea that I have for much later in the story. So I know story-wise, it's a little fatty, but I think it'll be worth it for the muscle it builds later on.

This was a dialogue heavy chapter so I loved agonizing over every word! As always, I'd love to know what you think. Have a great one and to the fans who have served, Happy Memorial Day.
A Complex Day (2 of 3)

Chapter Summary

Healing means more than the body and Harry comes to realize the safety of his base.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

Just a couple of things. Due to my increasing work schedule (summer is very busy in my work), I will not be able to update at my usual pace. I just won't have enough time to write like I have been. I will try to write whenever possible but it'll be sporadic and when I'm not dead tired.

Since I already wrote the outline for this chapter and the 3rd part of this day, I shouldn't need too much time and it's my hope I can update next week, but if not, my apologies beforehand.

I'm still trying to focus more on those around Harry and what they can possibly mean for him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You, young man, have been in quite a number of my morning reading,” Remus says, extending his hand and looking him directly in his eyes rather than the long scars on his face.

Remus squints his eyes further in familiarity a moment before Bill intervenes by joking, “you reading Witch Weekly now, Remus?”

Lupin gives Bill a humored wary look before returning his focus on, “Ares Flamel, correct?” Harry nods timidly as he weakly shakes his old professor's hand. “My name is Remus Lupin.” He looks at Nova, adding, “And this must be your phoenix familiar. My, what an outstanding boon to have at such an early stage in your life. She's quite beautiful.”

His voice, his weathered and disheveled look, his overall positive aurora, Harry is forcefully dragged into his horrific memories, effortlessly faced with the recollection of Lupin's gruesome demise. In his time line, Fenrir Greyback starved a pack of rabid, wild dogs for several days before setting them loose on the imprisoned and chained Lupin. He was ripped apart, screaming in agony fore every conscious second. The pack devoured everything but the head, which they of course mounted on the wall in Harry's cell with the rest of his loved ones. Lately, Harry's been fortunate
enough to see the heinous death of his favorite professor among others only in his nightmares, but to have the vivid memory forced on his fragile mind's eye during the day, in public, is highly debilitating.

Though lightheaded, Harry feels his heart beat uncontrollably fast, however, his primary focus isn't in his physical decline; it's controlling the wild, unbalance magnitude of his massive magic. Using all of his Occlumancy to keep from causing accidental magic to havoc in the pub, he fights to keep hidden from the adults in front of him, how he's unraveling. Even his magical sight flares for a moment, highlighting the colorful auroras of magic in the crowded room, informing him of arrant intelligence, even telling him that Remus's magic only recently settled after October's Hunter's Moon. If not for Nova's gentle peck at his head and soft calming song, Harry would be running out of the pub to find a place to calm down.

Harry clears his throat. “...Her name is Nova,” Harry says in an oddly croaky tone, letting out a very nervous and volatile breath. “It's nice to meet you, Mr. Lupin.”

Harry hopes the earlier tenseness between himself and Bill, might mask how odd he's acting, and though they both give him cordially peculiar looks, they turn to one another as Bill asks, “what are you doing here? I heard you were abroad.”

“That I was,” Remus says with a smile. “But the tea isn't quite the same anywhere else, is it? So alas, I have returned,” Remus explains. “I'm actually here to see Lily.”

“Well, we're just in here,” Bill says, opening the door and the three find more bodies than they had initially expected. The private room is packed with Lily, Hardwin, Snape, Sirius, Tracey, Draco, Zabini, Daphne, Astoria, Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Gabrielle, Fleur, Nicolas, Perenelle, Flitwick, and Viktor Krum all seated or standing around a long, set table. Harry's mind makes the quick connections amid their grouping preference. It's mostly by age as Harry notes Lily, Snape, Flitwick, Nicolas, and Perenelle talking among themselves.

“Well, I'll a pixie's loo,” Sirius calls out in surprise, calling attention to the door. “Remus, you beautiful beast!”

Remus happily walks to the adults, completing the adults section just as he notes the younger members, Gabrielle, Astoria, Luna, and Ginny seated together toward the far end of the table. Draco is seated next to Tracey, which is a development Harry's mildly surprised seems to be maturing. The coupling that adds more nausea in his stomach and heavy anxiety on his mind is everyone else. Hardwin is on the other side of Sirius greeting Remus—a place Harry can easily and vividly see himself in—Bill asks and takes the open seat beside Fleur. Hermione is next to Krum, Zabini is next to Daphne, with Astoria on her other side, and... everything is, to him, as it should be.
So why am I here? A voice in Harry questions himself. The thoughts of Remus’s death replaying in his mind, as the extreme trepidation of recalling it is felt in his entire tense body. He looks at the comfortable, almost family-like setting and can’t help but think, How dare I...

His heart is hammering painfully hard against his ribcage, and he’s filled with a profound sense of self-loathing. These people, in their joys and even in their sorrows, he can clearly see he has no place among them. They all seem at ease, in peace, not unlike how Bill said it should be. The crisis is over for them, as it should be, but it hasn’t even begun for him. The girls, laugh, smile, talk as content as the boys, and it all irks Harry instilling a deep sense of doom, like the calm before the storm. His breathing accelerates again at the sight of how at ease they are, sitting there smiling, laughing, so openly. Remus hugging Sirius so hard, clearly elated to see his old friend, and it’s all harrowing for Harry to spy upon.

“Ares?” Perenelle calls, locking her curious eyes on him. When she stands up, he takes a defensive step back, quick enough to make Nova flap her powerful wings to keep her balanced. Sensing her master’s distress Nova tries to calm him with her beautiful song, drawing more attention.

When Nicolas steps beside Perenelle, Harry looks at them nervously, just understanding on a fundamental level that he can defend them, he can walk among them, converse with them, but he will never see a future like they do. The people in front of him enjoy living and learning together, being friends and family with one another, have fun drinking and eating, watching quidditch or dueling, and will continue to do so after Voldemort’s complete demise, while the only thing Harry can possibly call joy in his life is killing Riddle once and for all. The way they happily look at him to join them in a meal when he has no plans on living past his goal, hurts him. He feels exposed in their eyes, vulnerable in the truth that their jubilation makes him feel ugly somehow... retched.

Nova continues singing her calming song as Nicolas cautiously asks, “Ares, what's wrong?” The step closer the older man takes toward him is all Harry needs to turn around and escape at a dash. With deep yet shallow breaths and erratic unbalanced steps, Harry rushes out of the pub as fast as he can, pushing and shoving his way around unsuspecting bodies. He doesn’t even notice Nova is no longer on his shoulder as he takes off running as fast as he can toward any space devoid of people, desperate to breath again.

His rational mind catches up with his sprinting legs by the time he reaches the Shrieking Shack and he slows to a stop. His self is identifying between a confusing smear of deep disgrace for himself, and guilt for the many decapitated heads looking at him for an explanation. They say nothing, but he can see in their eyes how they blame him.

Get up, a small voice in his head says, and Harry realizes he's on the ground, leaning against the wood post of what barely qualifies as a fence. On the top of the post is Nova, singing her calming
song, helping him to recall the peace and balance within him. *Get up,*” he hears again, though more outside of his head now, and slightly lost of breath.

Harry turns to find Draco, holding himself up by his knees, catching his breath. “Losing your shit really does make you run faster.”

“How'd you find me?” Harry lamely asks.

“Don't know,” Draco answers, still trying to regain his rhythm. “Whenever I think about it, I get these vague instincts about which direction you might be.”

“Oh,” is all Harry says, mentally attributing the connection to the Loyalty Oath.

“What happened?” Draco asks. Harry doesn't answer, so Draco erects a quick privacy charm and asks again. “You getting so emotional now, you can't answer a simple question, Potter? What happened?”

After a few moments, Harry casually asks, staring off into the distance, “...Does it hurt when you remember what a shitty father you were?” Despite the stab of pain in Draco's chest, Harry continues, “to know you were too weak to save one life, no matter how much that life meant to you?”

“...Fuck you,” Draco returns, furious anger clear in his tone, but manages restrains himself from hitting Harry.

“Exactly,” Harry says unconcerned by the fitting response. “Guilt makes you angry. Guilt makes me run.”

“That's not guilt,” Draco angrily says. When Harry looks at him slightly confused, Draco exhales as much agitation out of system as he can, then answers with a clear edge in his tone, “Guilt is often misinterpreted. You said guilt makes you run, but guilt refers more to specific behavior. When the mind sees regretful action over and over, and you feel negative in someway about it, your mind is letting you know that behavior needs to change.”

“You don't think I see their faces, or think about all the shite that happens because of me,” Harry asks him aghast.
“I bet every galleon I have that you do,” Draco answers. “I have no doubt you see it all the time; just like I see what I see all the time. I know the toll of every selfish, vain decision I made throughout my life cost me my son’s life. The guilt for my actions compelled me to give you my loyalty oath; it's led me here.”

“...it's led you here,” Harry singles out. “I can't imagine you've forgotten Malfoy. Are you letting go of the past, that it? You've already embraced a new life.”

“No, you bloody moron,” Draco hotly throws back. “I'm saying we aren't suffering in the same ways because you aren't really guilty about the things you've done.” The second Harry is about to angrily retort, Draco interrupts, palm up, saying, “not completely. That thing saying you don't deserve, you're not good, no one will love you, that's not guilt; it's shame. Guilt says, you did something wrong, while shame says, you are something wrong. You run and hide because somehow you think you are the thing that's bad, which honestly I don't get. I know bad. I was killed by bad. You're the furthest thing from bad there is.”

“Guilt, shame, it doesn't change what I have to do,” Harry tells him. “No matter what, killing Riddle is the only way out. The only way everything will be right again. So, go back tell them you found me, I'm fine, and that I only needed a bit of air.”

“No,” Draco flat out tells him.

“No what?” Harry asks curiously, looking at him.

“No, I'm not telling them fuck all for you,” Draco returns, moving closer top-knot haired Harry, and sitting on the cold floor. “You can tell them whatever you want when you get back.”

“What's the matter with you?” Harry asks suspiciously.

“With me? I'm not the blubbering mess on the freezing dirt,” Draco shots back.

“Yeah and you're not acting like the irritating git that I'm used to-”

“You need to go back,” Draco says, easily ignoring the jab. “And to be clear here, you need to go
back *because* you're not right in the head. This running at the drop of a hat can't be a quirky thing you do every now and again.”

“No ending it completely, but they can make these little fucking episodes of yours easier to manage. I know you're torment like mine is seeing these things over and over, like a loop, and if you do nothing, you're as good as ensuring it stays that way. If nothing changes, you're not going to survive that way, and if you don't survive, none of us do.”

“The bloody theme of my life,” Harry sarcastically mumbles.

“Look,” Draco starts. “Nobody really talks about it in front of you but it's pretty fucking obvious to nearly everyone in that room that you're *severely* closed off. I've been asked about you by Tracey on Daphne's behalf, by Daphne when she got the balls to ask herself, by Granger, by Fleur, even her little pervert sister, Gabrielle asked me about you—which was fucking weird by the way. The Flamel's asked me about you in your school days.”

Harry turns a skeptical eye on Draco, not sure what he's getting at. “What did you tell them?”

“Relax,” Draco waves his suspicions with a hand. “I didn't tell them anything important, but they all asked me because they all want to know more about you. Traumatized, or not, they're closing in, and whether you let them help you isn't the issue here. You *need* them to be a safe environment for you to be yourself, so you don't run every time your lose your shit.”

“You want me to go back and admit I'm a bloody mess?” Harry questions standing to his feet, staring incredulously at the silver-blond. “I know they'll keep asking and asking, until I either shut them down completely or I tell them everything. And you already know I won't ever tell them where we come from.”

“For a smart wanker you really don't listen,” Draco responds, getting up as well. “I'm saying you don't have to admit anything because everyone already knows the important part; you're damaged, and guess what? They all seem fine with it.”

“They'll still want to know,” Harry insists.
“So tell them after you kill Riddle-”

“I don't plan on being alive after Riddle,” Harry exclaims. “Every single person at that table, yourself included, has a life after that parasite dies. I don't.”

“You read the future now too,” Draco sarcastically asks. “You don't know that.”

“Did they tell you how much magic I used just to stop a bunch of acromantulas? That was maybe a fourth of it, maybe, and it knocked me out for seven days. When I fight Voldemort, it's going to be the whole bloody thing. I'm going to use every ounce of power I have to erase that fucker from existence, and I don't plan on surviving it.”

Draco sighs. “....Fine, look, if that's how it goes down, let me be the first to thank you in advance—I'll name a fucking street after you—but there's nothing saying it's the only way that he dies. Like it or not, there are people behind you—people willing to do more than just stand around and let you handle everything. You think those girls stopped working out in the morning, or training in the evening while you were down? You think the Flamels haven't been doing their research on the list of Death Eaters I gave them? You think I'm willing to just forget the debt I owe my son, and do nothing when the time comes? It's just as much the end of my line as it is yours.”

“Is that suppose to be comforting?” Harry asks. “You think I'm overjoyed to know they're following me straight to death's door without even knowing it? I'm the reason they're in harms way now.”

“Merlin, you're like a broken record,” Draco mutters before saying, “I know you have an infinite capacity for self contempt, but I'm going to need you to stop licking that sweet nectar for a while, and look around you. You can't keep going on like this. Things are different now. You can't continue to expect what happened before to happen now, or again, when damn near every variable you can think of for the coming battle is different than where we're from. So stop running and hiding, because it won't change how much life seems to fucking hate you.”

Harry actually chuckles to hear that. “Merlin, you're such a massive twat,” Harry says to which Draco smiles proudly and nods his head. Somehow, even though nothing is resolved, Harry feels a little better. He still feels wrong, but at least there's a step forward he can take, and that alone makes him more comfortable in his skin. Recalling Perenelle's verbal lashing, Harry reminds himself Voldemort wouldn't go back and face his public weakness upon the judging eyes of others, and that's all the more reason to do the hard thing now.
Harry turns to Nova, who immediately flaps her wings to hop on his shoulder, as he asks Draco, “when did you get so... enlightened?”

They start walking back as Draco explains, “when I realized you were never going to learn healing magic, I started reading up on some simple spells I can use on myself. Then I started reading some more about other types of pain, ways to heal them, and I just kept reading.”

“Oh,” Harry responds, amiably surprised. “Anything else I should know before I walk into a room with forty eyes on me?”

“Ugh, I'd rather not say uplift things to you,” Draco mumbles with a sigh. “Just... create the environment with as much honesty as you can muster. I don't think anyone who really matters to you is going to push. Most seem to have enough sense to respect a ninny's emotional boundaries, so just remember, it's your environment.”


“Speaking of wankers,” Draco starts, shrugging off the gratitude. “What did Weasley want to talk about? He wouldn't say.”

Harry looks at him confused, asking, “what do you mean he wouldn't say? You asked him?”

“Only after you took off,” Draco admits. “You were acting weird after. Naturally I thought he said something-”

“To upset me?” Harry asks incredulously, with a clearly mischievous tone. “Malfoy-” “Shut up!” Draco interjects as Harry continues, “-your Hufflepuff is showing-” “Shut it!” “Are you going to hug me now?”

“Fuck you and your hugs,” Draco calls walking faster. “I could've been eating lunch with Tracey instead of dealing with your bullshit.”

“...but you care about me too much,” Harry says in a little teasing voice just loud enough for an agitated Draco to hear.
Walking down the street, all humor is replaced by apprehension as Harry sees Nicolas and Perenelle rushing to them. Draco keeps walking ahead as Harry nervously balls his sweaty hands at his side. He clears his throat and says before they have a chance to speak “sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry. I just... I was overwhelmed. It was a lot; seeing all of them.”

Nicolas puts a heavy but warm hand on his shoulder stating, “it's okay. We can talk about this later and only if you want.”

“I don't want you going back in there if you don't feel up for it,” Perenelle adds. “We can eat at Hogwart's or floo to the brownstone and I can make us sandwiches while you rest. You're still recuperating, and that doesn't just mean physically. Your mental and emotional health need time of their own.”

He just nods as the mention of sandwiches reminds him of the bottle he purchased earlier. He digs into his extendable pocket and retrieves the bottle of hot sauce. Handing it to Perenelle, he says, “it's fine, we can go back. I'm better, oddly enough. Besides, I still have to give the girls their brooms.”

Perenelle happily takes the bottle and starts reading the ingredients as Nicolas says, “we heard about that,” as they all walk to the pub. “They were quite nervous when they warned us.”

“Was that okay,” Harry asks. “I know it's not my money.”

“Of course, it's okay,” Perenelle quickly responds as if berating him for even asking. “We know why you did it, and it makes all the sense in the world.”

“You could spend all the gold we have and I wouldn't care,” Nicolas says. “Besides, we know how frugal with galleons you are.”

Walking into the pub draws more attention than before, and it's worse when he enters the private room, Hermione and Fleur are the quickest to him, while Daphne and Luna reach him with a little more grace.

“Are you alright?” Fleur asks.

“Yeah, I am, thanks,” he tells them. “Sorry about leaving like that. I was reminded of something
unpleasant.”

“But you're fine now,” Daphne asks.

Harry nods as he hears Nicolas and Perenelle reassure mostly curious, but one concerned, adults that Ares is fine now, without giving any reason for the disruption earlier. Harry then calls Tracey over, saying, “I might as well give this to you all now. Daphne, let me see your hand.”

Daphne stands a little straighter, extending her elegant left hand, seemingly more jovial as Harry puts a gold bracelet he had purchased on her wrist, followed by, “Luna.” The doe eyed straggly dirty-blonde extends her hand happily. He then brings out the five shrunken Nimbus 2000’s. Taking one, he extends it to it's normal size, explaining, “this is a Nimbus 2000. You'll each get one to attach to your bracelet. It's fast, has great maneuverability, and it's easier to control than something like the Firebolt.”

“That broom will take training to use effectively,” Krum interrupts, standing next to Hermione.

“He's right,” Harry agrees, before looking at Hermione. “It'll take some training, which we'll do every Saturdays and Sundays now. I want you to keep it on you at all times.”

“I can assist with instruction,” Krum states, and Harry isn't sure why the Bulgarian wants to involve himself but says nothing against Viktor's offer.

“Are you really giving us Nimbus 2000's,” Tracey asks aghast.

“I'm not sure I can agree to this,” Snape says with droll authority. “It's against regulations to have racing brooms within class.”

“Well, when they're bigger than the size of a button, feel free to confiscate them, otherwise you're just stealing ornamental jewelry,” Harry returns hotly, not at all thrilled with Dumbledore's number two. Snape certainly didn't have anything to do with holding Harry back from saving Perenelle and the others, or handicapping Nova, but Harry's sure everything that happens in this room will be reported back to Dumbledore and that's irksome enough. Sending his irritation through Snape to Dumbledore is irrational, but makes him feel a little normal.

“I don't see the harm in a little extra insurance,” Sirius points out, eyeing Harry with the
constitution of an official Auror. “Would've helped out a lot last week. But at least let me pay you back for my daughter's broom. We already owe you so much.”

“It's not about debt,” Harry answers, giving Tracey her broom. “This is for emergencies. Ninety-nine out of the next hundred days can be peaceful. These brooms are for that one day when it's better to be prepared,” as he hands each of the girls their brooms.

“What of my broom?” Gabrielle asks moving to Fleur's side as the older sister attaches her Nimbus to her silver bracelet.

“We will speak to pappa,” Fleur sweetly says to her little sister.

“Let's have lunch, than,” Lily calls to the room.

“Until you get your own broom,” Harry starts to tell Gabrielle. “Why don't you keep Nova company,” he says as he sets Nova in front of Astoria and Gabrielle's seats.

“Ares,” Perenelle calls, indicating to the open seat next to her. As Harry moves to take his seat, he intersects with Sirius, who eyes him with suspicious yet conflicting eyes. Harry nods his head without his usual confidence for two reasons. He doesn't want the old hound to recognize James's features in Harry's face, and just as important, there's technically a warrant out for The Green Reaper's arrest. The only thing keeping the Head Auror from arresting him is the Ministry’s decision to take on the French Ministry for the murders of Death Eaters. Harry has no idea how this Sirius feels about the whole situation, but he can't imagine it's radically different from his time line, as he recognizes some level of conflict in his grey eyes.

Nicolas is at the head of the table as Harry takes his seat, surrounded by most of the adults. Sitting beside Harry is Hardwin, and in front of him is Snape.

“It's good to see you up and about,” Flitwick expresses to Harry, as they start their meal.

“Thank you professor,” Harry responds, eager to eat his meal as fast as possible for an early exit.

“I think everyone here can agree,” Snape starts to say, eyes focused memorizing every twitch of Harry's face and response. “The magic you used was on a scale-”
“No,” Perenelle voices in a way that feels like her shoving her foot in his mouth. Most at the table pay close attention to the exchange as Perenelle continues to say, “we will not be having any conversations regarding last week or his magical proficiency. He is not some puzzle piece for you to work out.”

“I only wish to express how-”

“I'm aware, Severus,” Perenelle cuts him off. “It's quite clear your questions aren't your own, but the place and time for your interrogation is not here or now. This is meal time.”

“Severus,” Lily states and Snape nods, says, “my apologies.”

“It's okay, professor,” Ares says, willing to see past the potions master’s allegiances for the true hand that guides him; Dumbledore. “I'm sure everyone will get the chance to ask me all the questions they want later.” Again, Harry wonders how Sirius is taking all of this.

“So,” Sirius starts, catching the rooms attention easily with his good nature. “I guess the only real questions that needs answering is, are you any good on a broomstick?” From that moment until near the end, conversation among the adults is kept light and fun with a good amount of laughter from hearing some of Sirius's stories with Lily or Remus to back it up, with interesting points of topic from Nicolas, Perenelle, or Flitwick.

Sitting next to Hardwin and nearly in front of Lily, Harry keeps mostly silent and more importantly, his head down as he listens to the younger side of the table. Pockets of conversation are overheard by Harry's enhanced hearing and sorted by his impressive mental control, adding even more to his growing concern. Conversation between Luna, Ginny, Astoria and Gabrielle are mostly benign with the only unease coming between Ginny and Astoria but Luna smooths over every rough bump with her whimsical charm as they talk.

Harry ignored Draco and Tracey's slightly flirtatious conversation about traditionalist struggles for rights to keep ancient customs of magical society in place while Sirius steals horrific glances at his future daughter talking with a Malfoy. Harry also ignores Krum explaining to Hermione the merits and disadvantages of the Nimbus versus the Firebolt and his attempts to secure a one-on-one flying lesson.

“You vould be vell ahead of dhe others if you train vith me,” Krum says. Hermione thanks him for the offer but ultimately decides to train with her classmates.
Bill is possibly one of the coolest wizards Harry's ever had the pleasure of eavesdropping on. He's full of genuine, mostly unexpected, flattery that makes Fleur laugh, as well as funny stories about his work as a master Curse Breaker. He mostly asked her questions about herself, family, and future. It was impressive to see an example of what their chats might've been like in his time line. When the dark dreaded memory of the couple's demise from his time line inches closer to his forethoughts, Harry is about to ignore them for the safety of his sanity when Bill asks, “I noticed you haven't mentioned Ares Flamel. Haven't you known him long?”

“Unfortunately no,” Fleur says easily. “We did not officially meet until September, when I almost struck ’im wizh zhe stunning spell. ’Owever I am grateful to know ’im now.”

“Officially?” Bill asks. “Was he an admirer you didn't remember until you saw each other again? Not that I blame you in any way. I'm sure the list of admirers is quite long, and he is on the young side.”

“Non, I met ’im briefly in zhe summer but I never learned 'is name,” Fleur says with a smile. “And ’e ees quite zhe opposite, actually; not as enamored wizh me as I tend to expect from most admirers. ’E ‘as a far easier time denying my advances zhan I've ever experienced een my life. Zhe world ees full of mysteries, non?”

“Uh... yeah,” Bill agrees before asking for clarity. “You don't mean to say you're interested in him, but he's rejecting you, do you?”

“Rejection ees such a strong word, Beel,” Fleur expressly clarifies. “’E simply requires more effort on my part zhan I normally need, ’owever I ’ave ’igh ’opes.”

“Though I don't know the situation in it's entirety, I have to say... that's wrong, like on a spiritual level,” Bill teases. “That's so wrong, isn't it?”

“Eet ees quite backwardz, for certain,” Fleur lightly laughs and they continue their fun back and forth. It was Daphne's conversation with Zabini that drew in most of Harry's attention.

“So why did he run earlier,” Zabini quietly asks Draco. “He looked scared shitless.”

“Leave it Zabini,” Draco warns before returning to his conversation with Tracey.
“Oh, isn't that just cute,” Zabini comments to Daphne. “Draco's defending his butt-buddy.”

“Blaise,” Daphne admonishes. “You're being reproachful.”

“How are you so calm about this?” Zabini tells her looking around the large table. “We're having lunch with Ravenclaws AND fucking Gryffindors—not to mention the worst Gryffindor of all. The moment the rest of the house get's wind of this, we'll be outcasts.”

“You're the one who insisted on tagging along, and don't be so ignorant,” Daphne responds. “No one's going to do anything now. Things in Slytherin are different. You've always called everyone behind the boss sheep, and in this case, the boss just happens to be the one sitting with other houses.”

“The boss?” Zabini questions surprised. “And you call me ignorant... he's not the boss, Daphne. He's an equalizer at the most. No one goes against him because no one can go against him. He even has a man-servant,” Zabini adds looking eying Draco. “Ares does whatever he wants because he doesn't have a counterbalance like the rest of us do. You have to see he's not like us, and more importantly, you'll never be like him.”

“'Have to,' do I? Surely I can make up my own mind as to how I see things,” Daphne returns. “But, maybe he is something of an equalizer, and like all of nature's resets, he ruins the bias and lies interwoven into the very fabric of our society. He clears away the clutter, and if you continue with your outdated ways of thinking, he'll clear you away too.”

“You might as well have said he ruins society. Things are the way they are, Daphne,” Zabini says, looking at her amazed. “Are you so blinded by his power that you can't see people don't change? What's next, you're going to sit at the Gryffindor table with your 'I heart Dumbledore' badge pinned on your shirt? What's gotten into you? Your sister, a Slytherin, is playing with a Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor right now! You going to be okay with that when the rest of the house finds out and make an example out of her?” That doesn't sit well with Harry at all, nor does it go over well with Daphne.

“Blaise, I'm certain that's not a threat I heard come out of your mouth,” Daphne states, steel for eyes. “Because you know exactly how I would respond.”

“Cunningly cold, like ice, I know,” Zabini agrees. “Because I know the Ice Queen better than anyone here. Just like you know damn well what I say isn't bullshite. I'm telling you you're making
a mistake hanging out with this lot for your own good. Come back to Slytherin. The Zabini house will protect you and your sister.”

Eying the taller boy suspiciously, she says with absolute certainty, “you're making me choose.”

“He's no good for you,” Zabini tells her. “For Merlin's sake, he gave you a broom for the express purpose of avoiding death. He's going to get you killed, and than where will your sister be? Alone with no one else but your father to look after her, and we both know it won't take him long before he sells her off. You need me. Use that big brain of yours, and realize that already.”

“You don't believe I fully thought this through, Blaise?” she questions with such icy vitriol in her tone. “You should know I don't make decisions lightly, just as I know how self-serving your motives truly are.”

“We both know there's no such thing as selfless acts,” Zabini defends. “And if that's what's in your head now, you might as well buy yourself a red and gold tie.”

“Your judgment is so clouded you can't even see the grand picture, and that only happens when you think with the wrong head,” Daphne returns. “One of the best pitfalls to poor decision making is bias which is the only reason you want me to agree to your way of thinking. You want me to be like that girl you met on the first train, the one who hated everyone, and didn't trust a soul. How we relied on each other is not something I've forgotten, but how you grew to view me isn't the same as I-“

“Yes it is,” Blaise emphatically corrects. “Neither of us care like that typical, 'you're my everything' bullshite. We were just right for each other. We still are. You're just blinded by this shiny new toy, is all, but you'll wise up. Of that I have no doubt.”

Zabini doesn't say any more after that. He's not surprised by the Slytherin mentality. Zabini has always struck him as quietly cunning, not that it matters. Harry knows he's only here to end Voldemort. Any other major concerns magical society needs aid with, they can look elsewhere for salvation. By the end of the lunch, Harry is drawn into the adult conversation by a horribly different revelation.

“Severus,” Remus calls, “I wanted to offer my condolences over the loss of one of your students.”

Harry sets his mug down a little too hard on the table, causing the loose cutlery nearby to clink and
chime, producing a louder sound than he intended, but that didn't matter as Harry asks from Remus to Snape, “what loss? Who died?”

Snape looks surprised from Harry to Perenelle and Nicolas. “We haven't had much of a chance to speak to him,” Nicolas says. “He only woke up a few hours ago.”

“Who died,” Harry sternly asks Nicolas.

“A young boy by the name of Zemdai Khan,” Nicolas answers. The news that anyone died is certainly shocking, especially since the others didn't tell him, but for it to be someone he hardly cared for does little more than make him wonder if he's grown callous to the loss of life. “We wanted to be the one to tell you, because we know he a housemate of yours.”

“He was in the tent resting when it all happened,” Perenelle explains to Harry.

“Oh,” Harry says lightly.

“Oh?” Snape points out questionably. “Is that all you have to say for the horrible loss of a fellow Hogwarts's student; your own housemate besides?”

“What else would you want me to say, professor,” Harry asks. “He wasn't exactly a beacon of compassion.” The adults seem surprised by his insensitive response, but if Harry indeed wants to create this safe environment Draco is talking about, he isn't going to pretend to care for trash like Khan.

“No doubt the very reason behind your public threat,” Snape points out.

“At least he would've lived through my ultimatum,” Harry says. “And while I didn't want him dead, I'd be lying if I said I'm all broken up about it. He was young sure, but he was far from innocent, and if someone had to die, I'm more than fine with it being him.”

“He was your own housemate,” Hardwin points out, feeling like he's voicing what the adults might be thinking. “You don't care about your own housemates?”
“Housemates, professors, parents, regardless of relation, bad people exist everywhere,” Harry informs Hardwin. “And I don't excuse the bad behavior of terrible people,” he adds.

“Parents?” Hardwin calls out. “If it wasn't for my parents I wouldn't be alive right now. The magical world wouldn't be what it is right now without them. And you want to say something so stupid like parents are bad people. What is wrong with you?”

“A lot, actually,” Harry answers easily. “And I didn't say all parents are bad, but yeah, some can be. Or do you think people like that Crouch Jr. or hell, even Tom Riddle, just materialize out of nowhere?”

Snape sits up coughing so abruptly Flitwick, Lily, Remus and Sirius notice right away, and look on the ashen-faced potions master with curiosity as Hardwin asks, “who the hell is Tom Riddle?”

“Ares, that is not suitable conversation with children at the table,” Nicolas bemoans.

“I suppose so,” Harry says before turning to Perenelle and relaying, “I'm heading back.”

Perenelle nods, informing him, “dinner in our dorm tonight.”

“Sure,” Harry responds as Flitwick interjects, “I was hoping I might have a word, Mr. Flamel. Perhaps I can join you all for dinner tonight?”

Harry nods with a casual shrug, as Perenelle agrees with, “certainly.”

“I'm certain the Headmaster will want to speak to him first,” Snape points out.

“The headmaster will just have to wait,” Harry bluntly states, still angry at the old man for keeping him from saving the others with a binding spell as well as handicapping his familiar. “Nova,” Harry calls and his familiar leaves her adoring audience for Harry's shoulder.

“Are we returning,” Fleur asks in the middle of Bill's story.
With Harry's nod, Fleur, Hermione, Daphne, Tracey and Draco all stand, with Luna, Ginny, Astoria, and Gabrielle quickly following. Hermione and Fleur bid Krum and Bill farewell but the wizards, along with Zabini and Hardwin, decide to join the group.

“I guess I’ll make sure they make it back okay,” Bill informs the adults who decide to stay longer. Harry wonders who will ask about him and what the Flamels will tell them. Harry knows that Nicolas and Perenelle won't say anything more than they have to, but every little bit can help one of them understand him more than he would like. Instead he rather hopes they ask about the breadcrumb he left; Tom Riddle. He'll ask Nicolas and Perenelle at dinner.

Walking toward the beautifully lit and inviting castle off in the distance, Harry decides he'd rather stay outside, and instead heads toward the Quidditch stadium he used to love so much.

“Oi, where you off to Flamel?” Hardwin calls, then turns to Bill who's busy talking to Fleur. “Bill,” he alerts the red-head of Harry walking away.

“We're inside the gates,” Harry stops to answer him. “No need for chaperones anymore.” He then continues toward the Quidditch field, which from a distance doesn't look any different than it did before the attack. Did they repair it already? Harry wonders, quickly following up that question with, I wonder who repairs the damage.

“Flamel,” Bill calls and Harry turns to him expectantly. “I'd prefer to tell your parents I returned you safely to the castle if you don't mind.”

“You don't have to worry about that,” Harry tells him. “They'd never expect you to look after me to begin with.”

“Are you going to dha quidditch field?” Krum asks Harry, who nods yes to the bulgarian. “I understand,” he says before telling Hermione, “I vill join you momentarily,” and jogs to the castle.

Harry turns and keeps walking, Draco and Tracey follow, along with Daphne and Astoria, and Zabini decides to return to the castle with an agitated pace. Hermione and Luna follow Harry as well, as Fleur tells Bill, “Zhank you for keeping me company, Beel. I ’ad a lovely time.”

Taking Gabrielle's hand, Fleur walks beside Hermione as Luna talks to her bushy haired friend while Hardwin, Ginny and a very reluctant Bill continue to the castle. Walking into the Quidditch field, Harry indeed sees it's exactly as it was before the Acromantula attack—even the dueling ring
is gone—recalling with vivid clarity the swarm of large hungry spiders ravenous for their flesh. When he turns to the others, everyone is quiet, obviously in their own memories of that horrific near death calamity.

After looking at each one of them, he announces, “last week is something I never want to happen again. But for whatever trials tomorrow brings, I'd like it if we were prepared. So, since most of the ladies aren't really dressed for flying, how about a light spar?” Everyone excitedly agrees and after setting Nova on a conjured stand in front of Gabrielle and Astoria, Harry takes his place in front of the group, conveying, “the conditions for the light spar is no spellwork that leave lasting or severe damage,” to which Draco, Tracey, Daphne, Fleur, Hermione and Luna all agree, as it meant, “strategy and execution are key here.”

Draco takes his place and begins without the official call of start, rushing Harry as fast as his legs can push him. The girls raise their voices at the dirty tactic as Harry dodges Draco's stinging hexes. Harry quickly visualizes the entire match in his mind with his intimate knowledge of Draco's current skill level. He knows the silver-blonde's blitz is to reduce any chance of Harry dodging so he would have to shield, after which he would then attack an obscure part of the body—the feet, most likely—and create an opening that way. It's a good strategy but still too linear.

Harry conjures a red ball to roll toward Draco. He recognizes the ball for what it is, a faint, and shields himself from the stinging hexes Harry casts high. Harry dodges another series of hexes before Draco is tripped from behind by the ball he neglected that Harry summoned. The moment he lands on the ground, Harry mentally casts Expelliarmus but as Draco's wand is attached to his pink holster, it only pulls a moment before Draco submits.

“What the hell happened to you?” Harry asks Draco as they move closer to the girls. “You were better than that last week.”

“Een zhe circuit, eet ees disrespectful to start wizhout zhe official call,” Fleur tells Draco while Tracey defends him saying, “it's not like Ares is hurt or anything.”

“He may not be hurt, but starting before your opponent is ready is incredibly underhanded,” Hermione states.

“It's true this is a spar, but it's ultimate purpose is for real world conflict,” Harry responds. “And in real life, there's is no official starting call. I'd be more surprised if he waited.” Harry's explanation illuminates to them the mental expectations spars seem to mean for the green eyed scarred boy. He continues to say, “I don't know what's been said about what I did during the acromantula attack but I guarantee you I didn't do anything I didn't practice a thousand times or more.”
“I was very curious about the magic you used to lift the platform,” Luna says. “Have you lifted many platforms and towers filled with people before?”

“I used the same charm you use to levitate a feather,” Harry says. “I conjured swords and lances, or transfigured them. I used Protego and Nova, and that's it. I want to highlight these points because I don't want you to think I can just do whatever I want with magic. The magical scale between us may be different but the knowledge of spells, charms, and tactics can be of equal ability. You just have to practice.”

“I believe eet ees my turn,” Fleur states already moving out away from the others.

“You sure you want to?” Harry asks with a smirk. “I wouldn't want you to get in trouble with Madame Maxime.”

“Do not let my gentle demeanor fool you, Arez,” Fleur returns the smirk. “I'm certain you 'ave not seen a naughtier girl zhan me.”

Harry moves opposite her and the moment he turns around, Fleur is already launching a pair of Stupify's before conjuring half a dozen birds to fly high and shoot straight at him from all sides. He dodges the stunners and as he looks up to the fast approaching suicide birds, Fleur transfigures the ground to clasp his ankles, like manacles, removing his mobility for the couple of seconds she needs. Harry has enough time to appreciate her gambit of spell work and the speed by which she casts it all. He conjures a large, green, unbreakable umbrella that stops the birds with a feathery splat as he hears a tunnel of rushing wind, giving him the mental image of the Ventus charm without having to see her next attack. Using the manacles as extra leverage, he circulates the umbrella down, angling it to cover his entire lowered body, and face the canon of oncoming wind. The impact of the strong stream would've knocked him back if he hadn't bent his knees, engaged his core muscles, planted the end pole in the ground, and braced for impact.

By the end of the wind charm, the Umbrella flies away in odd loops and Harry is nowhere to be seen. Fleur staggers a moment to make sense of his disappearance, looking desperately for her target, but by turning her head, Harry has more than enough time to shoot three stingers, two from above and one from bellow. Her Protego stops the assault from above but she misses the one aimed at the created blind spot. With her sharp cry from the sting in her foot, Harry casts, “Expelliarmus,” and her wand is snatched from her hand, flying to the same spot he's been standing in the entire time. Harry disillusions himself as he catches her wand.

“Nice,” Harry says, dismissing the manacles holding his ankles. “I can tell you've had quite a bit of training,” he says walking to her. “Your attacks were very sure, almost instinctual. In spite of the spell restrictions, that's pretty good strategy.”
“Eet would seem you are slightly better,” Fleur says with a cunning smile. “Eef only for zhe moment.”

Harry is handing her wand back as Krum turns up, his Firebolt over his shoulder, with several of his school mates and a few Slytherins behind him—mostly sixth and seventh years. Krum looks very confused, or angry—it can be hard to tell with the constant scowl on his face—as he walks to the group.

“I vas undere dhe impression you vould be instructing dhem of flying,” Krum tells Harry.

“They're wearing skirts,” Harry answers by way of explanation, as Hermione, Luna and Daphne make their approach—Draco and Tracey not long after.

“So you spar instead,” Krum states, looking at the group with an approving nod. “I vill join you. We continue vere ve last left.” Krum sets his broom down and takes out his wand.

“Now wait just a minute,” Hermione calls out to the approving group. “We haven't dueled yet, so you're all going to have to wait your turn.”

“Ve do teams,” Krum suggests to Harry. “You and I vill be captains. Ve choose our team mates, and zhe winner vill take any person dhey choose to date for dinner.”

“Agreed!” Fleur instantly calls in the moment Harry only registers surprise. The other Durmstrang or Slytherins voice their approval with grunts and calls.

“...I uh,” Harry starts, looking to his camp for criticism, but finds either interested, or considerate expressions. “I don't understand. You want the winner to have a date with whomever they want?”

“Da,” Krum states. “Dhe final winner can go on date widh anyone here.”

“That sounds interesting,” Luna says, drawing eyes on her. “But the wizards outnumber the witches three to one, and aside from Fleur, the rest are three fourth-years and one third-year,” Luna rationally counters while Harry quickly nods his head in agreement. Luna continues by saying, “Aside from that, I'm fairly certain most of the witches here harbor secret fantasies of going on a
date with Ares.” Nearly all present were already paying attention to the whimsical, dream-like dirty blonde, but Hermione, Daphne and Fleur either raise an astonished brow, slightly drop a surprised jaw, or flush red in the cheeks at the mention of secret crushes. “For their protection I won't name names,” Luna inconsequentially states. “But it's unlikely they would manage to beat Ares for that coveted date.”

“She ees right,” Fleur glumly states. “Eet ees not fair.”

“Dhey have a vand, don't they,” a Durmstrang Harry doesn't know argues. “Dat is all dhey need!”

“This is about learning, not dates,” Harry starts to say, eyeing the Durms.

“It's incentive,” Krum tells Harry before turning to Luna. “Vat do you propose,” Krum asks, paying Luna the type of attention a boss would receive.

Luna answers Krum, “instead of the winner of the matches earning the gift of an assured date, we should all gamble on the winner of each match. Since there are plenty here, everyone places a bet on who might win in a one-on-one match. If you win the bet, you earn a point. Once everyone has dueled, the person who guessed the most victors, thereby earning the most points, wins the right to go on a date with whomever they want.”

“Mnn... I see your point,” Krum nods his stern head. “In Durmstrang ve believe luck is also skill. Vith dhis manner of competition, everyone is on equal terms, and it negates Flamel's impressive combat ability as he vould only be a single point. Your style impresses me, little one.” Luna nods with more raising of her shoulders than actual down tilt of her head.

“One can even say Ares is irrelevant,” Draco throws out with a lovable grin.

“No one's going to agree with this,” Harry points out, staring menacingly at Draco.

“With the amount of people here...” Daphne says counting everyone by sight. “The max amount of points a witch or wizard can earn is eight.”

“What if the person doesn't want to go on a date with the winner?” Hermione asks, looking at debased grins on some of the Slytherins and Durmstrang students—though, Hermione will admit most are directing their immoral attention to either Daphne or Fleur.
“Anyone who participates must agree to the date even if they don't like who the winner is,” Tracey calls out and several grunts in the group say they agree. All the girls have stern and thoughtful faces as Tracey continues to say, “if you don't want to risk it, don't participate.”

Judging by the mostly receptive mood of the group, Harry sighs as he states, “if this is what everyone wants to do, fine, but we're still only using light sparring rules—no grievous or lasting damage.” Harry can tell many don't appreciate the soft-core matches, but none will argue against him; especially as he adds a final and threatening warning. “And if I ever learn someone was forced to do something against their will, by potion or other means of coercion, I'm going to damage you in very grievous and lasting ways.” Harry's murderous eyes can see they all understand how deadly serious he is about that.

“I second dhat,” Krum announces to the group, agreeing with Harry.

“Krum, we never dueled,” Harry says as he turns to walk the field.

Draco conjures a chalk board and writes all sixteen names with eight circles after it, and Harry easily understands. The winners of the bet would get their circles filled in. The one with the most filled circles gets the secured date. “Alright, alright,” Draco hollers with more enthusiasm than Harry's seen from him in a long time. “First match, first match! Krum versus Flamel! Write your name and your bet on a slip and hand it to Tracey! Hurry up, you wankers! While we're young!”

“You don't have to be so foul,” Hermione yells at Draco.

The betting excitement starts similar to like Harry's seen in the Quidditch World Cup. Harry can't see who's betting for who, not that it matters, but they're all smiling and eager. On the opposite side of the coin, Harry's easily grown annoyed by the turn of events, and is highly motivated in making quick work of Krum.

“What is Hermione to you,” Krum directly asks Harry, though only loud enough for Harry to hear and the others to strain to hear. “I vill be clear. She is golden snitch I intend very much to catch, and you are my most clear opponent.”

“What Hermione is to me is none of your concern,” Harry easily responds.
Krum conjures a slip of parchment and writes his name and bet as he says, “though I long to do battle with you, I know where true victory lies.” Krum sends his parchment to Tracey. She's so surprised by the bet she shows it to Draco, who looks equally as surprised. So much so he yells across to Krum, “you can't throw the match, or I won't even give you the point.” Letting Harry know that Krum bet on Harry to win just so he would get a point.

Irritated more, Harry sends his bet to Draco and when the match begins, Krum dashes to his right as he launches a barrage of mostly safe jinxes and hexes. He runs fast and he casts faster, but Harry is irritated near to the point of anger, easily dodging the rapid cast as he conjures two dozen ravens high above, circling and poised to attack. The moment Krum looked up, Harry transfigured the ground in front of the sprinting Durmstrang into water. A large splash of water follows the large boy, and when Krum pops his head out of the surface, Harry transfigures it to earth again.

Though stuck in the ground, Harry is still cognizant of Krum's wand in his hand and stuns the struggling quidditch star soon after. Harry looks at Draco as he walks toward the unconscious Durmstrang, and the silver-blonde calls, “Match, Flamel.”

Harry transfigures the ground to water again, drags the larger framed boy out, and Rennervates him. Aside from some coughing, Krum is fine. Harry then notices that every single bet on the board had him winning—even the Durmstrang students—so everyone had a point already.

With a sigh he moves toward his group. While still annoyed by the turn of events, Harry does use the opportunity to instruct them. “This isn't about strength and power, but strategy. Faints and expectations are an advantage when used properly. If they feel they're stronger than you, use that. Project strength when you are weak and weakness when you are strong, and they will never be able to tell which is which.”

“Alright! Alright!” Draco yells as another Durmstrang student takes the field. “Who's next?! Who's next?!” Daphne takes the step forward, highlighting the next match, and so, duel after duel, the contest continues. The matches seemed to pit boy against girl often as boys continue to take the field one after the other, and wait for an opponent. The individual matches didn't take longer than a few minutes, and generally displayed a clear winner right from the start. Harry will never regret picking Luna, Hermione, Daphne, Tracey, Fleur and Draco to win, but of the total eight points he can earn, Fleur, Draco and Daphne were the only ones to win, and Daphne barely manage to eke out a victory against the older Durmstrang. If it was just about power, his choices might be different, but with the light sparring rules it really is about strategy, which could make anyone a winner.

By the end, including his own win, Harry has five points to Krum's seven. It's not at all the outcome Harry was expecting as Draco announces what everyone can easily read on the board. “The clear winner, and the only one with a perfect eight points, is Luna Lovegood.” Maybe Harry shouldn't be surprised given the cursed gift Cassandra past along her family line.
“Who would've guessed,” Luna dreamily, yet seriously asks the suspicious or amazed crowd. Clearly everyone is skeptical of her ability to correctly guess the winner of every match—even the fluke victory between the stronger Durmstrang and Daphne, where bird poop landed in the Bulgarian's open mouth, distracting him long enough to give Daphne the win—however no one can prove or even ponder how foul-play might work in this situation, and so no one says anything. Standing in front of an expecting crowd, Luna states, “I would first like to thank the Nargles for ending their campaign to steal my possessions. It's been a most welcome relief as the weather begins to turn.”

“Just tell us who you're looking to snog,” Boyle yells. When Harry looks menacingly at his, he stays silent.

“I'd like to go on a date with Ares,” Luna easily states, to the wooing or hollering of the crowd. “However, since I will be sick on the day in question, I'd like it if my friend Hermione would take my place.”

Everyone eyes Hermione and there's quick calls of injustice, “What?!” “She only got five points!” As well as shouts of bribery for the contract date. “I'll give you a galleon to give it to me!” “I'll give you two! “Ten!” “Twenty-five!” “Fleur, please go out with me!”

“I cannot accept this,” Krum growls loudly. “This is not part of the rules. How would you even know you will be sick?”

“I don't recall there being a rule saying I can't pass along my prize to whomever I like,” Luna returns not at all bothered by Krum's passion. “As for being sick, I can't say how I know what I shouldn't know, however I do hope I get well soon.”

“I should've asked her for help,” Daphne mumbles to herself as Fleur says to no one, “this ees so disheartening.”

“If you like her to have your winning, I will not object,” Krum returns irritably. “But she must be one to decide who she wishes to go on date with.”

Everyone turns to Hermione as Luna agrees, “I can see that point,” and turns to Hermione, tilting her head with her easy smile. Fleur is slightly more hopeful, Tracey is enjoying the show, and Daphne seems amused.
Hermione is dumbfounded, and rendered speechless as she nervously looks around her, but especially between Ares and Viktor. After some horribly awkward silent moments, Fleur takes Hermione's startled hand and drags her a bit of distance away from the main body of students. Luna, Gabrielle, Astoria, Daphne and Tracey follow as Tracey yells to the boys, “most of you might as well leave since even a troll wouldn't be caught dead on a date with half of you.”

“Quit running and tell us! Ve demand to kn-” a Durmstrang student yells before Krum steps in his face, glaring the boy to silence.

Draco steps close to Harry. “Any idea what they're saying?”

“Yeah,” Harry answers, his enhanced hearing picking up everything. “And it's troublesome.”

“Zhis ees not a 'ard decision, 'Ermione,” Fleur starts. “Eet ees only one date and 'e ees an international quidditch superstar.” Gabrielle and Astoria watch on in delighted interest.

Daphne moves next to Hermione and whispers, “Quite the serendipitous twist. To think that liberal stance on your convictions would be put to the test so quickly.” Hermione looks at Daphne and can see in her arctic blue eyes how much she's enjoying this. “Pick the brawny Bulgarian and we will of course continue to be friendly. Choose Ares and you and I will add love to our list of rivalry.”

Taking Daphne's words as a personal challenge, Hermione is awash with realization, and returns the gaze in much the same way. “You of all people should never forget that I excel in tests.” Hermione steps forward and announces, “I'd first like to thank Luna for being so generous as to pass her date along to me... and I uh, hope she has a rapid recovery... when she eventually gets sick, I guess,” to which Luna smiles with dream-like happiness. “With this opportunity, I'd like to promote friendship and respect, and despite what some might see as clear lines of rivalry, I'll be taking my friend, Daphne Greengrass, on a date to Hogsmeade.” There's some cat calls and whistles from the boys as Hermione yells back, “we'll be going as friends you uncouth perverts.” And this time, Hermione, firm in her conviction, does not recoil from her sharp and public retort.

Instead she turns a challenging look at a slightly amused Daphne as Draco tells Harry with a smile, “looks like you're irrelevant again.”

Draco and Luna are the stars of this chapter! It was soo fun to write Luna. She's a cutey! And Draco is always fun.

I really enjoyed the lightness of this chapter while I try to weave the relationships into the story. Please let me know what you all think! I'd like to thank everyone for their valuable insight. You all make me better and I thank you for that. You guys are awesome.

Thanks,
--Grae
Dinner in the Flamels' quarters is an enjoyable affair for the four as Flitwick elaborates on his time as a Dueling champion and his love of charms. The Flamels and Flitwick connect especially well with their respective times living in the unique beauty of the country of France. Harry listens eagerly, absorbed by Flitwick's exuberance and grateful the professor didn't push him to answer any brash questions about his past or his magical proficiency. It was a delightful luxury that didn't feel like it came at a cost; at least, not at first. It's reaching the end of the meal when Flitwick explains to the synthetic family the driving force behind his presence with them.

“Again that was lovely, Perenelle,” Flitwick graciously states. “I can't recall the last time I dined on a meal that wasn't prepared by house elves. They tend to make their wonderful meals with consideration for all tastes which can leave meals a little bland at times. I'd almost forgotten how much I enjoy spicy, though at my age, it's best to limit my intake to once a month.”

“Thank you,” Perenelle easily returns, looking over to Harry. “Ares had purchased a fantastic bottle of hot sauce for me earlier today and I thought I'd test it out.”

“So in reality, you were doing her the favor of being a guinea pig,” Nicolas adds with a smile.

“The honor more like it,” Flitwick laughs, bouncing a bit in his chair. “Well, I think it's time I should explain my interest in meeting with you all.”

“Should we assume the Headmaster will hear about this conversation?” Nicolas brashly dares to ask, clearly still bitter with Dumbledore. “I have no qualms saying we are not fans of his at the moment, and we would not take kindly if he's encouraged you to disregard our privacy to learn of anything we say all in the name of his sense of entitlement.”

“On my honor I will not mention the details of this conversation to the headmaster, or his agents, though I'm sure he likely knows of our having dinner,” Flitwick tells Nicolas. “While he does have an insatiable need to know everything, this meeting has more to do with my other native affiliation.”
“The Goblin Nation?” Harry curiously asks, his mind already wondering what business Goblins have with him.


“Well, Slytherins could use em,” Nicolas says looking at Harry before returning his attention to the diminutive professor.

“It's because of my standing among wizard society and my singular association with goblin kind, that I've been tasked to make an offer on behalf of the King of Goblins, Ragnuk the Eighth.”

“Descendant of Ragnuk the First, and obviously the eighth Ragnuk to take the crown,” Perenelle states to Harry. “That name hasn't always been the most benevolent of bloodlines to wizard kind.”

“I'm hardly surprised you're knowledgeable about our history.” Flitwick expresses to Perenelle. “It's my belief the difficulty with wizard-goblin relations has always been that neither side forgives or forgets.”

“Does the goblin nation still believe Godric stole the Sword of Gryffindor from them?” Nicolas asks.

“Oh yes,” Flitwick easily answers. “In fact, it's been instructed as fact in their academy's curriculum for some time now.”

“Maybe you have the right of it. Centuries later and yet, no change,” Nicolas says tiredly shaking his head. “I can't imagine King Ragnuk's too happy with us after the stunt we pulled in Gringotts.”

“It goes without saying Goblins are not generally fond of wizards, however the art of negotiation is rich in our blood, imparting us with a stern appreciation for a good hustle. In fact, it is because of your intervention with Gringotts that King Ragnuk has been able to come across some alarming revelations.”

“What does King Ragnuk want from us?” Perenelle cautiously asks.

“The King has been looking to procure an ingredient for some time now; an ingredient I recently sent word I may be able to facilitate for him. It's why I've been meaning to speak with you as soon as readily possible.” Flitwick turns to Harry, continuing, “you see, during your descent into the multitude of Acromantula, which still astounds me if I may say, I allocated myself at the highest tower and enhanced my spectacles. I witnessed what had to be your phoenix apparating in her fiery manner into battle with a very large snake; a snake the Acromantula were deathly afraid of. It didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that what I observed was indeed a Basilisk.”

“A Basilisk,” Harry repeats with a hint of surprise as his mind begins formulating a cover.

“Surely you must be mistaken,” Nicolas humorously states.

“Given our laws, I can understand your reluctance to confirm what I saw, but I can assure you the King, among others in the nation would believe it; would believe me.”

“Regardless of facts, it sounds as if you've already put us in a precarious position, Filius,” Perenelle tells the half-goblin who only inclines his head.

“You may wonder why that is,” Flitwick starts. “It's only natural. I want you to know I have no ill will toward any of you. Quite the opposite in fact. I hold a great deal of respect for this house and
the magical boundaries it continues to push to this day. It's because I believe this that I made this
decision."

Perenelle catches Nicolas and Harry's eyes before saying, "While we appreciate your regard, that
still doesn't explain anything."

"I realize that, and I promise to explain myself more in the near future," Flitwick expresses. "At the
moment I would simply make the King's request and bid for your understanding."

The three Flamels give each other a silent appraisal. There's much the eyes can communicate to
one another but in this case the only thing that needs expressing is objection; which none of the
three express. Seemingly content to continue, Harry regards the half goblin professor, asking,
"you're saying King Ragnuk wants a Basilisk?"

"Yes," Flitwick answers.

"I bet anything he wants to farm their venom," Perenelle suspects correctly aloud. "For weapons
more than likely."

"I cannot claim to know that for certain," Flitwick tells her. "It is not for one such as I to know the
King's prerogative, but if weapons are the ultimate goal, than he'd need a large quantity of the
venom, hence the basilisk."

"Far more venom than regulations clearly states any one certified wizard can have, let alone sell to
Goblin kind. Regulations by the Ministry's Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures states a
small amount may be sold but even that is strictly scrutinized by the Goblin Liaison Office. The
quantity your king seems to want is considered a war crime in our society, tantamount to capitol
punishment for high treason. Even with our status, they'd easily seat us over Death Potion for
this.... that's of course if we had a basilisk."

"Our King is aware," Flitwick sympathetically states. "He doesn't wish to cause your house such a
devastating inconvenience... but, he is quite capable of being in-hospitable. I don't agree with this,
however he has mandated I make you aware that he would go so far as to inform the Ministry that
you have a basilisk, which is of course illegal as well."

"Not nearly as illegal as treason," Nicolas returns.

"But adding nicely to the legal troubles we're already facing," Perenelle finishes in a hard tone.

Making it all too clear to all present, Nicolas voices, "he's trying to blackmail us."

"The King wants the venom as much as you wanted the dark item from Lestrange vault," Flitwick
returns.

"There's a reason these restrictions have been placed on Goblin kind," Perenelle starts to explain.
"Several rebellions were sparked specifically for this very reason."

"This is for war," Nicolas announces offended.

"I am not privileged enough to know King Ragnuk's plans for the Basilisk or the venom, but he is
willing to pay quite handsomely for it."

"We have more gold than we need as it is," Nicolas tells the charms professor.

"King Ragnuk is aware that may be the case-"
“I don't believe there's any amount of compensation or threat the King can offer that would make us agree to his demands,” Nicolas finishes.

“...This will be the final point Ragnuk wishes you to know, as a sign of good faith,” Flitwick cautiously begins to explain. “The enemies of his reign have positioned themselves to be your enemy as well. Dark Goblins are on the rise.”

“There have always been Dark Goblins,” Perenelle asserts. “Why are they suddenly an enemy of wizard kind?”

“Not an enemy of wizard kind; of you, as in the House of Flamel. Despite our strict adherence to client confidentiality, the Dark Goblins have learned of how you forced the King's hand. Though King Ragnuk was not involved with the strong arm you reached with Gringotts, this has been used as propaganda to make the King look weak toward wizard kind. One of the many promises made by Dark Goblins and their leader Vorkalth, is to prove their strength by killing the highly celebrated Immortal Alchemist and his family.”

“They couldn't,” Perenelle shoots back. “Even an attempt on our lives would certainly start a war with wizards.”

“It would certainly be difficult for them,” Flitwick agrees. “However if I may be frank, it is not impossible. There is a way the dark goblins can succeed without initiating all out war. If they overthrow Ragnuk, they could make a significant trade deal with the Ministry that might be enough to turn a blind eye on any "coincidental" or "accidental" death of your entire house.”

“If it's galleons the Ministry wants, I can certainly make as many as needed,” Nicolas counters. “Not to say I would.”

“But for how long?” Flitwick asks. “Will your alchemy's gold support an entire country's economy? You may be immortal but you are not an enterprise. Gringott's is our economy, and for that sort of trade deal, the Ministry might weigh their options.”

“A lot of things have to happen perfectly for them before we get to that point,” Harry pointedly interjects.

“I agree,” Flitwick says with a nod. “That was only an example. The point being, it isn't impossible and Dark Goblins are tenacious.”

Harry continues, asking, “how'd the dark goblins find out about what happened in Gringotts?” Nicolas piggy-backs on Harry' question adding, “Goblins have an elaborate spy network so you must know something.”

“All I can tell you is, sometime ago, a woman who did not look like Bellatrix LeStrange gained proper access to the LeStrange vault. When she did not find the item you already have in your possession, she became extremely upset, to the point she drew her wand, and security had to escort her out. Even with our network of intelligence gathering, she has not been seen or heard from since. She would be the most obvious culprit. The theory is she established contact with Vorkalth and his Dark Goblins, who have flamed the passion of law-abiding, yet persuadable Goblins to their cause. To my knowledge they have not uncovered the specific Goblin who shared the information with the Dark Goblins, but as I said, I am not privileged enough to know everything; only what the King deems necessary for these talks.”

“Tell King Ragnuk we do not have a Basilisk and that you were mistaken,” Nicolas says. “We want no part of this.”
“I do apologize, but I was not mistaken,” Flitwick states confidently.

“I know,” Nicolas returns. “But this is not a deal we can accept, so the official stance of House Flamel is we do not own a Basilisk. However, I am in contact with an old colleague who has a basilisk carcass if the King would like to trade for that.”

Sensing the beginnings of a lengthy negotiation, Flitwick nods his head, “I understand. I will pass along your message to the King. I do hope I haven't irreparably soured our relationship. If so, I do sincerely apologize.”

Nicolas nods in understanding as he relays, “I can only imagine how difficult of a position you must be in, Filius, to be the King’s voice. Being of two worlds, when they collide, the perilous result is the unsettled mind of those that do and die.”

“We are but soldiers,” Flitwick sadly returns.

“And the winner is death,” Harry adds.

“Such a pleasant ray of sunshine, the three of you,” Perenelle sarcastically conveys.

Despite being in the privacy of the Flamel's flat, after Flitwick's exit, Harry erects his best privacy wards. The Flamels waited in silence for fifteen minutes before Harry felt comfortable enough with his charms to speak safely.

“Well, I must say, this sounds incredibly unfortunate,” Perenelle says in a ruffled and provoked tone. “As if there wasn't enough for us to deal with.”

“I always thought we got off too easy,” Nicolas throws out, slightly nettled. “Every action certain has their equal and opposite indeed.”

“There's nothing equal about this,” Perenelle contends.

“We should wait to hear back before we do anything,” Harry tells them. “Do you think you can handle this Nicolas? I'm entirely certain this King Ragnuk isn't going to listen to a fourteen year old.”

“Well of course, Harry,” Nicolas returns brightly, as if there was never a doubt. “I won't allow the goblin king to take Nāga.”

“Nor the Ministry,” Perenelle adds. “I fear if Ragnuk does make good on his threat, we'll have another swell of legal woes to contend with.” Her statement makes Harry's shoulders fall.

“Don't even think about apologizing, Harry,” Nicolas interrupts Harry before he could speak. The look on the young wizards face clearly expressed remorse and Nicolas has no doubt the young warrior is shouldering it all and blaming himself for it. “We won't accept since you have nothing to apologize for. Now, moving on. Has Nāga eaten all of the carcass? Or has he left something for me to work with?”

It takes Harry a moment to accept support and rapport before onerously pulling himself together to answer. It still amazes him to have such a palpable show of support from anyone, and saddens him at the same time as it reminds him of how much Ron and Hermione had supported him. He clears croaky throat, “…uh, no. I thought it was weird for him to eat his own mother, so I’ve been feeding him mostly enlarged rats I get from the kitchens. He likes to chase them before eating them. There ought to be eighty percent of the carcass left.”
“Has it been rotting away in there the entire time?”

“No,” he answers. “I used one of your preservation charms on it. I eventually wanted to make a suit of armor from the hide. I moved it to the outer chamber since I just flame into the main chamber.”

“We'll have to check it out as soon as possible,” Nicolas states, his mind already running trade scenarios they might have to counter the king with should the hide not be enough.

“We can go tonight but first, what do you guys know?” Harry relays to them everything that's been told to him, and he assumes Nicolas or Perenelle must know more.

“The most pressing bit would be the Acromantula attack,” Nicolas starts. “It wasn't random, and this Dawlish character was most certainly not working alone. He had an accomplice.”

“Who was he working with?” Harry quickly asks.

“Unfortunately we don't know.” Perenelle answers tersely, as if recalling the moment she was told the frustrating news. “Even under virataserum he couldn't say. Whoever it was masked him or herself, down to their voice, giving nothing away, not even skin tone. He didn't know who it was but they paid him the largest sum of money up front he'd ever seen with the promise of the same amount after, simply to do this one task.”

“Which means, if this was really their first arrangement between the two, looking into Dawlish's past known associates might not help us find who this mystery person is,” Harry says to himself. “Still, they must be very wealthy, or have access to a large sum of galleons, and is knowledgeable or employs some one knowledgeable on potions. What else?”

“Motivated by haste and greed, Dawlish apparently reasoned the abrupt tournament you were holding with the other students was as good an opportunity as any for a distraction, but apparently the attack last week wasn't to plan.” Harry listens with such focus, his mind flourishes with possibilities with every word as Nicolas continues, “the plan was to distract in order to facilitate a kidnapping. Their target was any Flamel they could easily take during the first Task of the tournament. You, Perenelle, or myself; it didn't matter who as long as we were alive.”

Perenelle interjects, “I relayed to Sirius and Amelia the events that led us to the middle of that field, which only seemed to corroborate everything. Dawlish came to me saying his partner, Ms. Tonks, had an accident with her wand and needed assistance. In actuality, he stunned her himself. I rushed over and when I realized it wasn't what he said, it was too late. He forced me to levitate Ms. Tonks while he had his wand on me and rushed me to the gate. That's when Draco suddenly came upon us. He stunned Dawlish, and on our way back is when Tracey, Daphne and Hermione came upon us. That's of course when the Acromantula attacked.”

“He didn't tell you anything? Dawlish, I mean,” Harry asked. “While you were walking or at any point after? Maybe a hint of a plan?”

“Of course I asked why he was doing this,” Perenelle answers. “But he mainly told me to shut up and keep walking. When I offered him all the money he could want, he said he isn't stupid, and to keep walking.”

“...He isn't stupid,” Harry repeats. “How'd he say it?”

“His exact words were, ’don think so, I ain't that stupid,’” Perenelle repeats. “’I'd show you but the Pensieve we ordered won't be here for another month.’” Harry just ponders the words for any clue but finds only two viable options for that selection of phrasing. Either he truly didn't think
Perenelle would give him money, or he was scared by the person already paying him.

“I could understand why they'd want me,” Nicolas says interrupting Harry's thoughts. “It's not the first time someone's tried to get their hands on the secret to immortality, can't imagine it'll be the last either, but I can't understand why he, or they, might want either of you.”

“Most hear immortal and quickly forget we can still die,” Perenelle adds. “Without immediate magical intervention, fatal injuries such as stabbing vital organs, decapitation, being burned alive, just to name a few, can kill us just as easily as everyone else.”

“What magical intervention cures decapitation?” Harry can't help but ask.

“A Time Turner,” she answers easily.

Harry lightly snorts at that with a slight amused roll of his eyes and returns to Nicolas' earlier curiosity. “Leverage would be the best way to make you do whatever they want.” Harry tells Nicolas but adds, “if that is what's really going on here.”

“It could most assuredly be something else,” Perenelle adds. “Sirius is running the investigation, but since Dawlish is an Auror attempting to kidnap the matriarch of a prominent house, this puts the Ministry in a very negative light. Fudge is making absolutely sure nothing gets out, so there's not much more they're willing to tell us.”

“So we know more but nothing really actionable,” Harry says as his brain begins to questions what they know and why they know in order to separate debatable from irrefutable.

“Simply more questions,” Nicolas agrees. “With the big one being who is our mystery master mind?”

After a spell of silence, Harry asks one of the lower grade question rattling in the back of his mind. “Why didn't they assign you personal security? They attempted and failed once. I'm certain they'll try again.”

“Oh, they did, but we flat out refused them,” Perenelle answers. “Told 'em that was never going to happen. Aurors around us every minute of the day would only get in the way.”

“At least we know what their immediate objective is,” Nicolas states. “It'll make being prepared for their next attempt all the more easier.” While Harry has serious reservations about what they're implying, Nicolas interrupts his physically expressive thoughts, assuaging, “we know, we know, Harry, but this is what we signed up for. We need to learn more, and if the perpetrators feel we're lax in our security, the easier it'll be to draw them out and apprehend them.”

“Doesn't mean I have to like it,” Harry tells them. “You shouldn't have to put yourselves in harms way for this.”

“I'll admit, I'm not exactly looking forward to walking around as bait,” Perenelle admits. “But, we'll be as best prepared as we can possibly be.”

“...Alright,” Harry glumly states. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“I have all the make up assignments you missed from your classes,” Perenelle starts to say as Harry looks at her to be serious. “Fine. We haven't been told anything more as far as the Ministry investigating you for the deaths of the three Death Eaters, but Amelia did mention this is the first time she's hoping Fudge is every bit the coward she believes him to be. The French Deputy Minister is apparently putting a lot of political pressure on the situation.”
“We've spoken to DM Stéphane and they've assured me his government will do all they can,” Nicolas adds. “They consider it a personal attack of their sovereignty. Which might be the only thing keeping the guillotine above us from it's heavy drop.”

“They've already offered us asylum if worse comes to worse,” Perenelle adds.

“Okay,” Harry absorbs the news aloud. “Hopefully it won't come to that. I can't exactly fight Voldemort from France. Anything else?”

“When do you want to meet Dumbledore?” Perenelle asks. “He's quite keen.”


“Is it true your not talking to him?” Harry humorously asks.

“The man very nearly destroyed everything that matters to me,” Nicolas huffs with clear agitation, while Perenelle does her level best to hold in her smile and failing. “Up to that point, I never thought I had to worry about anyone but Tom Riddle and his demented followers. Now, though, who can say?”

“I'll see him tomorrow,” Harry answers Perenelle. “First thing he's going to do is take this damn shackle off of Nova.”

“He was quite set against that idea when I all but threatened him if he didn't remove it,” Perenelle informs him. “It's the reason we left the hospital ward to begin with. I was actually afraid he might do something to you while we weren't around.”

“Can't you take it off?” Nicolas asks. “I've tried and haven't come up with anything as of yet.”

“Maybe,” Harry says with little hope. “I can't read the runes because the paper is folded in on itself, which means I can't locate and exploit weaknesses it may have in the array. I'll have to think of another way, or Dumbledore can be a fucking decent human being and take it off himself.”

“Language.” Perenelle points out.

“I should've throttled him in the face,” Nicolas berates primarily to himself, though heatedly. “One good thwack across the cheek. Why use words if he's gone deaf to reason?”

“I've never been his biggest fan but, I'd still say we need him, dear,” Perenelle admits. “I feel tomorrow will be a good indication of what we can expect from him in the future.”

“No doubt our lunch today will come up,” Harry easily assumes. “After we left, was anyone curious about the name Riddle?”

“No doubt our lunch today will come up,” Harry interrupts, completely baffled by this point in the conversation.
“Life without frivolities is like a long road without an inn,” Nicolas reminds Harry, who shakes his head and exhales audibly.

Harry instead repeats a little louder, “so no one asked who Tom Riddle was?”

“Well of course they did,” Perenelle responds. “However, Severus quickly suggested you recalled the name from the Slytherin Head Boy alumni board in the common room. Sirius made a joke at house Slytherin's expense and the subject was promptly changed to how you managed to join Slytherin in the first place, among other shop talk.”

“Riddle won't stay secret forever,” Nicolas expresses to an anxious Harry. “It's only the beginning after all.”

“There is something I'd like to know,” Perenelle states and Harry nods. “What is the full extend of your magical capability? I've treated magical exhaustion numerous times, and honestly, if it wasn't for the elixir coursing through your veins, I don't see how you could've made it.”

“Even with the elixir, Perenelle and Madam Pomfrey worked on you for nearly six hours before they were confident your organs wouldn't shut down again,” Nicolas informs Harry. “The amount of focus and magical capacity necessary to levitate all that you did, conjure all that you did... well, it's ancient power the likes of Merlin may have had difficulty utilizing.”

“I told you the Horcrux in my head changed me,” Harry tells them. “It removed certain... safety restrictions, and sources magic directly from nature to augment my own.”

“Can you put them back? The restrictions?” Perenelle carefully asks. She understand she's essentially asking him if he can weaken himself despite the monster they and the wizarding world have to fight against, but if the risk is his death even in victory, than suddenly she's not in favor of such ferocious magic. “I only ask because that amount of raw magical power is not sustainable for the human body.”

“Even if I could, I wouldn't,” Harry flatly tells her. Though it irks him that she would ask, considering all the pain he's suffered, he understands she's only worried about him. “In far too many ways, Voldemort created me, and I'm going to destroy him with his hubris.”

“You could die, easily, if you use that much again,” Perenelle gravely returns, in a tone that already fears for a funeral in the future.

“I won't,” he says before quickly changing the subject. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“Let's see,” Nicolas starts, tapping his chin with his index finger. “Nova's handicapped, which is just sacrilege against such a divine creature, some unknown shadow has designs to capture any one of us for possible blackmail purposes or worse, we seem to be the target of a growing rebellion of Dark Goblins, as well as on the brink of criminal prosecution by our Ministry, that may lead to a possible arrest, which might also incite war between France and Britain... I think that's everything.”

“And don't forget all your make up assignments,” Perenelle adds with an impish smile, in a way apologizing for bringing up the issue of his magic.

“I'm glad you two are having so much fun with this... like it's just a typical Saturday,” Harry says getting up and walking toward Nova. “We might as well check on the carcass, since the world isn't dire or anything.”

With plenty of time before curfew, no one stops Harry, the Immortal Alchemist or Professor Flamel as they walk to the long bridge located at the rear of the school. Harry, Nicolas and Perenelle enter
the Chamber through the rear entrance and since Draco still has the map, he doesn't worry too much about who might be spying on from a distance. As Nāga slithers toward them, Harry hisses to his large basilisk ~these are friends.~

~Frrrr- Frrrie... Mates?~

~No, not mates,~ he answers. ~More like a family type of friend,~

~Family!~ Nāga hisses happily.

“...At least it understands family,” Harry grumbles.

“Did you tell him we're family,” Perenelle lightheartedly asks, her lips threatening to smile happily.

“No,” he answers with a little more force than he intended. “He- well, yes but, he just doesn't understand the word friend. He understands family apparently, and mates-” “Mates?” Perenelle quickly cuts in. “But I'm just trying to keep him from killing you so lets just stick to what works, yeah?”

“He seems very excited,” Nicolas mentions from behind Harry as Nāga slithers blissfully around them. “He looks extremely frightful, but, his energy is adorable.”

After they check and inspect the preserved carcass, Nicolas suggests, “we should try to make some armor with this hide. It's protection of the highest quality—right along side dragon hide armor, but thinner and lightly.”

“Seems like the smart thing to do,” Perenelle agrees. “Considering the struggles ahead, preparation is key.” Her words strike Harry's memory of other pressing, dangerous really, concerns. Fortunately, it's not long until they exit the Chamber and Harry leaves them for the night.

Walking into to the Slytherin common room he spots Draco seated with the rest of the fourth-years as well as Victor Krum in the comfortable couches ahead of the main, and largest fire place. Harry makes a minor note of the glares leveled at him from what's left of the Upper Order as he calmly crosses the Slytherin commons. Draco turns curiously to him as he approaches, spotting him a couple seconds before the others. Harry walks over to the group, Zabini eyeing him the entire time, when Daphne pats an empty spot beside her, letting him know, “I saved you a seat.”

“Thanks,” Harry tells her with a moderate smile. Looking at the inviting spot beside the beautiful blonde, the surreal realization of what that means only boosts the anxiousness he's been feeling since the morning. A cold feeling grips his lungs sharply, shaking his breath. Turning to Draco, who Krum is chatting with, Harry interrupts with a nervous, “Draco?” As Blaise, Daphne, Tracey, Krum, Nott, Parkinson, and Crabbe and Goyle pay him some form of attention, Harry continues, “Perenelle told me what you did to help her...” Harry looks at all the Slytherins and the one Bulgarian before adding, “actually let's talk in private.” Harry doesn't even wait for Draco to get up before he quickly makes his way to his dorm room.

Draco catches up to him in the hall, spouting, “thank Merlin you showed up. Krum really took to what Granger said about all that respect nonsense, now the wanker wants to get to know us.” Harry doesn't respond all the way to his door when Draco asks, “are we going to your dorm? Actually, I can't seem to remember where your dorm room is...”

“Ares Flamel's room is the third to last door in the Slytherin's boy's fourth year corridor,” Harry
shares with the silver-blonde.

Suddenly remembering where Harry's room is, Draco gasps as he asks, “you put your room under Fidelius?”

“Shut up,” Harry sternly reminds him as he opens his door. Walking in, the boxed in feeling suddenly mixes with the current apprehension gripping his lungs and hits him like death ready to snuff his life if he takes another step. Harry stops abruptly, to the point Draco bumps into him. “What the-” Draco starts before Harry interrupt, “No! We can't here.”

Picking up the heightened agitation in Harry's voice, Draco becomes alert, asking, “what? Why? What is it? You sensing something?”

“...Nevermind lets just,” he conveys and turns around, Draco hot on his heels and in alert. Walking back through the common room, Harry ignores everyone's curious gaze as the two leave the Slytherin house.

Draco ask, “what's going on?” But Harry doesn't respond in the portrait covered halls as they make their way up to the astronomy tower. Under moonlight, in the open air of the towers observation deck, Harry feels slightly more comfortable having this conversation.

Turning to Draco, Harry can't get a word out before the silver-blonde asks, “you don't plan on talking here, do you?”


“Uh, because this is kind of intimate,” Draco responds with concerned eyebrows and slightly scared eyes, hands outstretched as if the atmosphere is easy to read. “This is where guys take girls to start off before they move on to the broom cupboard. We're under the bloody moonlight for Merlin's sake.”

“Wha- Really? Son of ah...” Harry utters before he takes a deep breath, though his nerves stay just as agitated.

“If you want to talk, what's wrong with the hundreds of empty classrooms we passed on the way here?”

“Not inside,” Harry insists, before getting another idea. “Okay,” he says and they exit the tower, down it's steps, through it's lively halls, and out it's entrance before heading down to the green houses. But finding Neville there tending some of the night shade plants, forces Harry to look elsewhere. He extends his hand and asks Draco for, “the map.”

Saying the password the Maurader's Map comes to life as Draco says, “This is getting ridiculous. If you want to thank me, you sort of don't really have to you know. I'm sort of obligated to, after all.”

“It's not about that,” Harry tells him as he looks through the large number of people traversing the castle. “And you damn well better save everyone I know.”

“Well than what the fuck is this shit!” Draco returns before stopping himself and taking deep calming breaths.

“We just need a place to talk that doesn't feel like the walls are closing in,” Harry heatedly replies. Seemingly resigned to this mysterious and delicate conversation, Draco tells Harry, “fine. Let's go.” Harry follows him back toward the castle and when Harry is about to repeat himself, Draco
cuts him off saying, “I know what you said.”

Reaching the Room of Requirement, Draco mentally selects the design of the magically constructed room. When they enter, it’s a gigantic ballroom. A space so big a crowd of giants would have an easy time dancing without knocking into one another. The walls are lined with tall windows and what appears to be dawn light casting a soft golden glow through their tall opening. The tables are all perfectly pristine, set expertly with cutlery and glasses.

So impressed by the grand ornamental setting, Harry can't help but ask, “where is this place?”

“Just a place I know,” Draco answers before getting to the point. “You want to tell me what this is about?”

“...Okay,” Harry says, pulling his eyes away from the extravagance and nodding to Draco. After several seconds of nodding, Draco shakes his head as if to say, 'I'm waiting.' “Okay, okay,” Harry repeats.

“... okay, what?” Draco slowly asks.

Harry abruptly shakes his shoulders as though a large hairy spider were crawling over it, then asks, “have you been searching the forest for the Unicorn killer? Actually is there anything you were holding back from everyone to tell me in private?”

Draco looks at him in disbelief. “...you freak me out all the way here- ALL the way here to ask me that shite?”

“Well?” Harry demands.

“No!” Draco starts before taking a calming breath. “I mean yes, I've been looking in the forest every night, and no I haven't found the ghoul. Other than that, I look at the map at least six times a day and I don't see any suspicious names... though it's a little harder now that Durmstrang and Beauxbaton are staying in the castle—there are a lot more names I don't recognize. Still, I've been keeping an eye on our band, and so far, I haven't seen any sign of retribution, assault or bullying.”

“Oh okay,” Harry replies.

“Are we done here?” Draco asks. “I want to try for a couple hour's worth of sleep before we're back in the forest.”

“Okay,” Harry says nervously as Draco starts to leave. “No! Not...” Draco stops and looks at Harry expectantly. “I didn't mean 'okay,' as in okay to leave. Okay, okay. Look, we're not friends, yeah? We're not. Let's not pretend here. We've never been, we probably never will be, but that's not what this is about. This isn't about friendship... this is about desperation. So, just remember, I literally have no one else.”

“You sound certifiably mental right now,” Draco easily declares, but Harry's nervous demeanor says it all. “I'm not here to be your personal head healer, you know. I have better shite to do with my time.”

“Well tough, I don't like it either,” Harry quickly returns. “But you're all I got so, you know, support your master.”

“You are not my master!” Draco throws back but is aware that's not completely the case. Draco crosses his arms, annoyed, but waiting for Harry to unload his troubled mind when the green eyed boy again nervously says, “Okay... okay, okay-”
“Will you cut the, 'okay' shite and move it along already!”

“It's the girls,” Harry loudly throws out. “Hermione, Daphne and Fleur. I need to talk... sadly, to you, about something I heard. This conversation is... is in relation to....” The pause affords Harry several moments to realize this conversation is hard enough without having it with one of the worst people he's ever met. It's near impossible then.

Draco inhales deeply with grand foreboding, before exhaling it all out and calling, “Dobby?” Surprising Harry out of his nervous break down. With a sparkling pop, Dobby apparates into the grand majestic room wearing an old and dirty loin cloth, completely clashing the the pure cleanliness of the setting.

“Master Draco calls on Dobby, sir,” Dobby promptly responds, making Harry wonder why one of his cherished friend is still in service of the Malfoys.

“Dobby,” Draco starts. “I need you to bring me father's flask, the one he keeps in his main study.” At the fearful shakes of it's small body and absolute look of terror in his large eyes, Draco continues to say, “I know you shouldn't, but I want you to bring it to me anyway, and when the old wind bag asks about it, I want you to tell him I was the one who took it.”

Dobby looks incredibly nervous while Draco seems to revel in some level of satisfaction by taking credit for stealing his fathers personal affects, but Harry is far too captivated by his old foolish and lovable friend actually being alive to care. It calls on old, strong feelings of sadness and remorse to rise within him, kindling a fear of drowning in those feelings. In an effort to maintain some emotional stability, Harry calls to the house elf.

“Hello Dobby,” Harry calls, concentrating on keeping his emotions in check. As the large eyed house elf turns to him, no recognition in his orbs, Harry achingly remembers this isn't his Dobby.

“Good evening, sir,” Dobby responds before snapping his fingers and the silver flask the size of his hand appears. Draco takes it and before Dobby disappears, Harry tells the smaller figure, “you know Dobby, if you ever want to leave the service of the Malfoys and be a free elf, all you have to do is ask me, and I'd be happy to do that for you.” Draco and Dobby both look at Harry, Draco in utter confusion and Dobby in suicidal excitement. Harry can see he's tempted and eager, but wouldn't dare say so in front of Draco, so Harry eases his fears by saying, “Draco agrees with me as well. Don't you Draco?” Harry turns to Draco giving him such an evil eye, the silver-blonde doesn't think twice before nodding in agreement.

“...That's right,” Draco queerly states. “If you want your freedom... just ask.”

“Master Draco is too kind,” Dobby says. “Much more so than Masters father. Dobby...” he pauses to take a moment to gather his courage. “Dobby would like very much to be free elf, master sir!”

Draco turns to Harry who only tilts his head and with his eyes orders Draco to give him an article of clothing. With a huff, Draco takes off his tie and gives it to Dobby.

“...Dobby is- Dobby is FREE!!!” Dobby yells in the wide expanse of the masterful room, carrying the sound far before bouncing back in a series of echoes. ”Nevers in a million year is Dobby ever expecting this!”

“Congratulations Dobby. You deserve it,” Harry says with a smile. “Draco's mentioned how hard you work and if you ever want a paying job, just let me know.”
“Good sir would p-pay Dobby?” Dobby asks astonished.

“Of course. Good labor deserves good pay,” Harry says as Draco pulls out a chair and takes a seat before knocking back a swig of whatever the strong content in the flask is. “Would you like to work for me? My name's Ares, of the House Flamel.”

“The Noble and Most Ancient House of Flamel!?” Dobby gasps aghast to which Harry nods. “Dobby would be most honored to call sir, master.”

“Please, you don't have to call me master,” Harry starts to correct. “Ares is more than fine. Would you accept ten galleons a week?”

“Master Ares must want Dobby to die under weight of such greed,” Dobby returns nearly insulted by the outrageously extravagant offer. “Dobby will accept one knut a month.”

“A knut a month?” Harry asks surprised. “I think you're worth at least a sickle a day.”

“Master is far too kind. Six- no five knuts, bi-monthly,” Dobby counter proposes.

“A sickle a month, plus time off, final offer,” Harry states, extending his hand, and hoping he doesn't have to pay his old friend any less. Dobby seems stern as he ponders the offer, before finally nodding and shaking Harry's hand. He adds however, “deal, but only one day off a year and Dobby must be able to call Master, Master.”

“Fine, but only in public,” Harry says. “In private or with friends, you have to call me Ares.” Harry conjures a simple but clean uniform with the letter F on the breast for house Flamel. As Dobby happily adorns his new clothes with a snap of his fingers, Harry informs him, “you can stay in my room for now and I'll introduce you to Nicolas and Perenelle later.”

“Master's kindness knows no bounds, however Dobby cannot do this,” Dobby says. “Dobby must stay with other house elves and Master Ares may call Dobby whenever Master has need.” Dobby bows and pops away.

“What the bloody hell was that about?” Draco calls, waving the flask at Harry. “That was my fucking house elf you just stole.”

“He wanted to be free,” Harry sternly answers him. “Why wasn't Dobby freed in this time line?”

“In this..... That's right,” Draco recalls slumping his shoulders. “Father was furious you tricked him into losing his elf in our time line. That's the elf that helped you escape...”

“Your house and died because of it,” Harry finishes. “Exactly. He was a good friend who died saving me, Malfoy,” Harry heatedly explains. Draco simply takes a solemn swig of the flask, neither apologizing or provoking any further aplomb for the theft of his house elf. Harry continues, “I can at the very least make sure he's free now.”

Draco clears his throat and introduces a segue from the upsetting memories. “Dobby did something in this time line to annoy father. He beat him pretty good and dumped him on me at the end of second year,” Draco tells Harry. “I'm pretty sure the elf told someone something he shouldn't of, though father wouldn't tell me what, and mother didn't know. Now that that's settled....” Draco takes another quick swig before recalling, “…you said, the girls?”

Harry is quickly uncomfortable again, but seeing his old elf friend gives him some strength to continue. “Yeah, the girls. I heard them...”
“You heard them?” Draco repeats slowly, trying to coax Harry to continue.

“I'm not sure... Merlin's balls, I'm not sure what to tell you,” Harry shyly admits.

“Just start from the beginning,” Draco glumly suggests with a bit of edge in his tone. “Here,” he offers, extending the flask to Harry. Harry looks at it suspiciously a moment before Draco answers the curiosity in his eyes, “Ogdens. The finest father has to steal for the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems.”

With a shrug Harry takes it and knocks back a swig, before coughing a load of wet upheaval, and no doubt lung tissue, much to Draco's amusement. “Fuck that's terrible,” he painfully states an octave lower.

“No appreciation,” Draco mutters shaking his head wistfully. “Give it another chug. It works quick.”

After a calming minute, Harry listlessly turns to the flask in his hand, confessing almost to it rather than Draco, “I was awake, before you entered the room this morning.” Harry takes another swig, grimaces but doesn't cough as Draco listens. “I do this thing when I wake up. I pretend to still be asleep so I can take stock of my surroundings-”

“Look for threats,” Draco adds taking the flask from Harry.

“Right, exactly,” Harry excitedly confirms.

“I do that too,” Draco admits. “That's what you mean by, 'heard them?' Fleur, Granger, and Greengrass? This ought to be good. What'd they say?”

“Okay.... okay,” Harry starts and Draco gives him a stern look, easily communicating, don't start that again.

“They said they like me... like, properly like me! All three of them.”

“Gross,” Draco grunts, extending the flask, which Harry gladly takes as he nervously paces around the large hall. “Why you? What'd they say?”

Harry gives him the quick gist of how Daphne wanted Hermione's help but now Hermione likes him along with how absolutely clear Fleur's been about her feelings. “Daphne, Fleur, even Hermione! I can't believe it,” Harry repeats to the silver-blond. “Hermione! Merlin's balls, she's my best friend! She- She isn't suppose to like me; not like that. She's suppose to have this thing with Ron, well, possibly. I don't know. They were dancing around something ever since our sixth year... at least I think-”

“I'm certain I don't care. Truthfully, I don't think I can listen to any of this,” Draco restlessly admits. “The loyalty in me is willing, really, but my heart, mind and spirit aren't in any way interested this utter nonsense. If we were talking about stopping you from having a mental freak out, that's fine since it helps me kill that dark filth, but this is not that! Get yourself a poor tomato-head to gab on with, because I draw the line at helping you with your girl problems.”

“I expected that from you because as I said, we're not friends and you're a complete git besides, but when I said I didn't have a choice, I also meant you didn't either, because while your flimsy soul, mind, and heart don't want to, all I need from you is that loyalty! So park it.”

Taking deep calming breaths, they stare each other down. “...Gimme the juice,” Draco submissively states, extending his hand. “If this has to happen, than I don't want to remember it.”

Harry takes another long swig before handing it to Draco, noticing aloud, “how much is in there?”
“Ten of his best hundred year bottles, so just the right amount for this conversation,” Draco answers taking a long yet cautious gulp. “Fuck you pops! He hates those type of peasant pet names.” He raises the flasks bottom yet again for another few seconds before adding, “I think I'll call him that from now on... Papa Luci.” Draco laughs a little more freely.

“You're slurring your words,” Harry mentions looking at his finger tips as they tingle, and the two Slytherins pass the flask back and forth another couple times before Harry begins again. “This is beyond me, Draco. Ginny was the only girl I've ever been with, and we didn't do more than kiss before the cosmic joke that is my life stopped anything more from happening between us.”

“Yes merciful Ogden, please take me away,” Draco lightly moans to himself.

“Draco!” Harry calls. “You've lived more than I have and I just need a plan. I don't even need you to come up with it, but the faster that happens, the faster this ends.”

“I alwayss, thought that was weird,” Draco slowly says with a bit of a slur. “I was under the impression it wass you and Granger, you know, because of the whole constantly bein by your ssise an all.”

“She's my best friend,” Harry responds with a huff. “She always has my back. Doesn't have to mean more than that.”

“Now it's time you have her back,” Draco humorously winks at him. “You know what I mean? You know-”

“Shut up, I get it and I don't care for it,” Harry tells him. “This is serious.”

“I'm completely serious. Just go out with her, and let's be done with this,” Draco replies.

“I can't,” Harry returns with a sigh. “She's my best friend.”

“Wrong, baby cupid, sshe wass your best friend... in another time line,” Draco slowly corrects. “In this time line, she'z only met you ssome three or so months ago, and within that amount of time you saved her life twice, sstpped her abuse, and are her intellectual equal. Why wouldn't she want ta ride tha dragon?”

“Did you just refer to me as the dragon,” Harry asks terribly surprised and Draco laughs like a mix between a broken chuckle and coughing.

“Not a fan of risque colloquialism?” Draco asks between hearty chuckles as Harry takes the flask and downs three burning gulps. “Tough! Because it's going to be innuendo to the bitter end. Anything to make this conversion bearable.”

Harry rubs his face with his whole right palm, feeling less stressed and more tingling, allowing several moments to pass before continuing. “Despite how different things are now, I can't forget what Hermione means to me. More to the point, I can't be a boyfriend to any of them. I'm not built for that... or more to the point, my life has more baggage than any one girl could survive. I lost that mindset you need to be happy with a special someone.”

“Thaaan just tell 'em to fuck off and you don't want to be with any of 'em.” Draco quickly and unsympathetically returns. “That'd easily ssend em away, then you can be all alone again. Isn't that what you want? For them to back away?” Draco drunkenly imitates shooing imaginary girls away with both palms as he mockingly jests, “Back up. Back up, I say! The ninny wants to remain pure. Purity!” He laughs.
Ignoring Draco's inebriated dramatics, Harry continues with mild laziness in his voice, “I want them to be safe. I want them to survive this time,” Harry painfully acknowledges. “I like bein friends with this Hermione, Luna and Fleur. Daphne's pretty chilly but I get her, an like her too. If I tell 'em I don't share their feelins, an they actually believe me, they might stay away.”

“There's no might about it,” Draco announces with disinterest. “Girls don't take rejection well, and these girls already have potential meat wands to move onto. Fleur can varnish Weasley's blushin pole, Krum can worm the book worm, an Zabini can freeze his peter-pecker in the ice queen.”

Harry doesn't feel comfortable with the black and white decision, nor does he appreciate Draco's vivid nicknames or description. He'd prefer the current social paradigm within the group to stay the same, but if that isn't an option, than he'll have to step away for their own safety. “…Fine,” Harry says glumly. “I'll go with that. I don't like the idea of losin Hermione, Fleur, an more than likely Luna again, especially over somethin like this, but if it means they stay safe…”

“Thank Merlin,” Draco says getting up before Harry calls, “we're not done. I need a contingency plan, in case they don't believe me.”

“Why wouldn't they believe you?” Draco asks with an annoyed moan, his head slanted in a lull to the side.

“Daphne an Hermione are highly observant, Hermione's already said she doesn't abandon her friends, and Fleur is part Veela, givin her a suitable ability to detect dishonesty,” Harry answers. “There's a good possibility they wouldn't believe me if I said I don't share their feelin's.”

“…Do you?” Draco asks, slightly interested in an answer. “Because I can understan them not believing you if in fact you're lying to them about not wanting to pork one or all three of them.”

“Porking aside... I... I don't know,” Harry lamely admits, than takes another swig of intoxicating drink. “It's not like I'm blind to their... charms, I mean look at them. I'm still human—I have eyes—but, but that- that's not what this is about, right? My life's never been about what I wanted.... with reason.”

“Thaaaan pick whoever doesn't believe you,” Draco responds without much care, obviously only motivated by the need to end this conversation quickly.

“I don't think that'll work well,” he returns untroubled by Draco's disinterest. “I can't say I don't like all of them equally than turn around and go out with the one that doesn't believe me. The other two could sssee it aza test they failed, er another lie of sssorts, er a game I'm playin with them, like I'm toyin with their emotions or something.”

“So you would go out with one of them at least,” Draco susses out despite the care-free tranquility of his mind and body. “If only one liked you, who would you want it to be?”

“It's not that I want to go out with one of them,” Harry back tracks. “I'm not thinkin about dates an dancin an whatever else couples do. All of that requires a ssstrong level of commitment and affection that I'm fairly certain I lack now, let alone can act on. I want to keep the way things are now.”

“So, you're issue is you wouldn't be good boyfriend material even if you only had to deal with one of them liking you?” Draco ask nonchalantly.

“What I'm sayin is every minute of my day is dedicated to the pursuit of murdering that dark wanker, and committing time to somethin other than that feels wrong, like I'm betraying everyone...
he's already murdered. I'm saying I'm dead to the world, Draco. That means all its joys, benefits, and fuckin' merriment are just distractions. The only thing that matters is killing him. How can I be what a good boyfriend should be, when I'll always know they matter less than my purpose? If I ever had to choose between the two, I can picture the heartbreak in their eyes when I choose the mission."

“I'm not sure that's the, the,” he snaps his fingers to jog his sluggish mind. “...the point,” Draco casually states with an air of intoxicated tranquility. “I can't see how anyone would put you in that position if they're smart enough to know what's at stake, as I can only assume those three would be perfectly aware of. For the purposes of ending this agonizing ordeal, assume those three'll follow you in ending that miserable parasite; we'll even say they'd put their romantic snuggle-struggle with you on hold till the dark prick is dead. If that choice between them and Riddle never exists, who'd you pick?”

“For Merlin'sssssake Draco,” Harry sluggishly returns. “Don't you get it? I'm not what they... want. I'm not even certain I can love anyone like that. My mind would be wrecked with anxiety. And even if it isn't to the level of love, the last thing on my mind is romantic shit, like dates, moonlit strolls around the castle, conversations about our future, marriage, or kids.”

“Than do that, you moron!” Draco throws back, leaning so far forward to emphasize his point he nearly falls out of his chair. “It's sooo simple, itn'it? Pick one, which ever, and don't be accommodating in any way. Do everything exactly as you do, and when she gets tired of you, which I'm supremely confident she will, she'll no doubt break it off with you! Give her two weeks. After, if she tells the other two what a terrible, horrible persoon- boyfriend you are, I'm sure they'll reconsider wastin' their perfectly delectable assets on you.”

“This whole time I was sure you'd be a massive twat AND completely useless; turns out yer jus a massive twat,” Harry tells him with some respect. “I wasz avoidin, dreadin really, havin ta choose one, but you're sssuggestin pick one, be the bad boyfriend I'm sure to be, and in that way, you think she'll end it herself.”

“Yeah, there's a lot of genius wizardz out an about that are shite in relationships. They're very eccentric and have their own quirks,” Draco says sitting back down. “You can easily fit that category. Just explain, 'sorry I'm a genius wanker who already has a purpose in life, and this is all I can offer to the relationship.'”

“For a contingency plan, that's not bad,” Harry states.

“And if that doesn't work you can always just cheat on her, get caught, than no one'll date you after that,” Draco states getting up. “Girls want to be the one and only, so cheating definitely works.”

“Let's be clear here, I'm never doing that, you asshat, so stop suggesting it,” Harry levels a stern look of disapproval. “I-'” Harry takes a moment to think in his lucidly addled thoughts. “I guess I have ta pick Daphne than.”

“Why Daphne?”

“I don't wanna be a bad partner to any of em, but I jus met Daphne, so I'm not as...fond of her. It also helps that her high society upbringing and customs clash completely with me, makin it easier to end the relationship sooner rather than later. She also seems like the understanding type.”

“Understanding maybe, but definitely not forgiving,” Draco adds. “Maybe Fleur would be better. I mean, she's leavin at the end of the year, she can get any guy she wants so it's unlikely that she'd be upset for more than a couple hours, if that. You can be sure I'll be there to comfort her in any way
"Ya- Ya know, I'm really startin ta get this feelin you're doing that thing that a bunch of mates do when they talk 'bout witches they all fancy,” Harry stumbles to say to the silver-blonde. “We ain't mates, Malfoy. Stop. That's friends territory and it's making me... uncomfret'able."

“No... oh, Merlin I think I drank too much,” Draco shamefully admits. “Don't... please believe tha I'll always hate you. I'm just sloshed is all. It's the alcohol, I promise.”

“Yeah.... yeah, okay,” Harry agrees fearfully. “Yeah, I think, I think this is enough.” Harry moves to the exit as he says, “I'll talk with Fleur first, if I have time.”

“Talk to Fleur while Grranger and Greengrass are on their sexy date,” Draco slyly says languidly keeping unsteady pace with Harry. “Wouldn't it be great if they ended the night tonguin each others love tunnels? Merlin, I'd sacrifice someone else's left arm to be naked between that.”

“Ya know Malfoy,” Harry annoyingly mentions. ‘You ought'a remember in the not too distant future, Tracey'll come up ta me, because for some unholy reason she likes a miserable prat like you, and she'll ask me to tell her all sorts of stories about you; your likes, and what nots. What do you think I'll say abou' my fake friend who says dumb shit like that about my **actual** friends? Cutesy stuff ya reckon? Maybe yer secret love of braiding your father's ridiculously long hair on warm summer nights? Or, or maybe yer hand woven baby booty collection fer tha sssseventeen children you absolutely plan on havin?"

Draco stares drunkenly lamely at Harry for a few moments before he expresses, “Ogdens always made a devil of me, Potter, I ssswear it. You see, all jokes aside, the important thing iss how much we rrrespect our witches fer their.... minds? And refrain from ever debasing them down to simple receptacles for our sssexual gratificationsss. You undoubtedly know I'm a big believer in loving relationships, you know, right? Love of all forms, mate; wizard on wizard, witch on witch, monogamy, or polyga- poly- whatever, the other one. Jus- uh... just...”

“Howss it feel chokin on humble dick for a chang...” Harry pauses mid sentence, eyes blinking brightly as an idea races to the fore-thought of his mind. “Well, dammit Draco, you really were useful tonight. I know wha I'mm goin to do.”

Draco waves the modicum of praise for more pressing concerns, “Yeah, yea, okay, but about Tracey...”
two to three weeks, my work schedule will slow down to what it was during the spring season, so I can properly write with some semblance of cohesion again.

I'm always happy to know your thoughts, so leave a comment!

-Grae
The weather was awful that morning. By that point of the year, it was expected, but Harry's more cognizant of it than feels, it as his mind is split between the morning routine and the night before. His mind goes round and round on worn information about King Ragnuk's attempt to blackmail the Flamels, Dark Goblin's war hype assassination of the Flamels, the as of yet decided Ministry's decision on whether to arrest Harry for murder, the subsequent decision the French Ministry will make against Britain, Dumbledore's underhanded scheming in the name of altruistic righteousness, the ghoul killing unicorns and the possibility it's the wandering soul of Voldemort, obviously killing it, and of course, the difficulty of accepting that three beautiful, smart, girls are actually interested in him... romantically. It's all dreadful and none of it, to plan.

He steps out of the castle entrance into the colder, pre-dawn air, Draco and Daphne behind him, lethargically dreading the physical exertion ahead. Their attitude toward the workout regimen is
understandable. Harry doesn't just push them to their physical limits, he keeps them there until they're begging for it to end, and even then he tries to squeeze a little more out of them. It's the first morning since he awoke, and he's curious to see how they fared without him setting the pace.

The weather was bitterly cold that early in the morning, but it was quickly forgotten for the sight of Hermione, already in their meeting place, stretching in tighter leggings than she usually wears, right beside Fleur. Her attire was also form fitting, but instead of a loose sweatshirt similar to Daphne's or Hermione's house sweaters, Fleur's entire light blue with silver accents outfit, perfectly highlighted her shapely silhouette, surprising Harry, yet again, about something he, along with every male in the school already knows.

'Yeah, alright,' he mentally yells to his hormonal self. 'I get it! She's unbelievably gorgeous. Think about something else!'

A shove of his shoulder and light chuckle from Draco brings Harry out of mental reprimand. Rather than linger in his embarrassment at being caught staring at Fleur by Draco, of all people, he quickly calls out, “morning,” as they approach. Daphne is suddenly more awake as they huddle in a semi-circle, Hermione is as pleasantly calming as ever, with her large fluff of curly brown hair and chocolate eyes, which contends mightily with the rush of blood Fleur's beautiful presence demands.

Given all he overheard and the awkward and trying conversation he had with Draco about it the night before Harry feels... odd standing so near to them. The way Ogden had made it's rounds through their system, they never even searched the forest last night. It wouldn't have been smart. But he did think long and hard about the three girls in front of him, and how he wanted to proceed. He also felt odd about the plan—well, idea really—he was contemplating moving forward with. As he lay awake in his plain bed, with his sloshed senses swimming, he was determined not to allow these truly amazing girls to trouble their good hearts and precious hopes on someone like him; someone broken with a single-minded drive for death and destruction. His purpose wasn't meant for anything else. He really was the Green Reaper, and it was effortless on his part to realize they deserve better than that... better than him.

“Bonjour Monsieur Trouble Star,” Fleur returns sweetly, seemingly as vibrant this early in the morning as any other time of the day.

“Morning,” Hermione returns with a smile to all three Slytherins.

“Don't forget the flowers for your date with Greengrass, Granger,” Draco impishly mocks Hermione with. Harry wonders why Draco hadn't mocked Daphne earlier before he realizes the Ice Queen is best friends with Tracey, and that wouldn't be a smart thing to do. But Hermione has no such protection as he continues to say, “we Slytherins expect to be properly wooed.”

Harry was more than ready to bring the ferret down when Hermione easily returns, “you know, Malfoy, Ravenclaws liked being wooed with intelligence. Sadly I don't see you ever impressing any of us.”

Harry couldn't help the snort, pressing a closed fist to his lips, holding in his chuckle to a simple humming. Fleur giggles with a gentle shoulder to shoulder bump, though a part of Harry's mind couldn't help but enjoy the sound and sight of Fleur's mirth. By the wide smile on her heart shaped face, Harry could tell Hermione was proud, and he liked the ease by which she responded against Draco's taunt; exactly like she would do in his time line, he can't help but smile about.

Even Daphne gave her a smiling nod, turning to Draco. “Is that how you prefer to be wooed, Malfoy,” she rhetorically asks. “I'll make sure Tracey knows what you expect of her.”
“You want to tell her something, tell her I know how to treat a lady,” Draco grumbles to them as he walks to the side to start stretching.

“Fleur,” Harry starts with a nod. “I wasn't expecting you.”

“I invited her, actually,” Hermione mentions with a slight timidness under Daphne's long exhale. Arctic blue irises bare on chocolate brown ones, communicating an exchange of nonverbal dialogue between the girls that Harry could only guess meant friction. “She mentioned how she missed the physical workout playing quidditch provided, and well, here she is.”

“’Ere I am,” Fleur cheerfully repeats, more aware of the nuisances exchanged between the girls than Harry can ever truly be.

“Well, do let us know if you need to stop to rest,” Daphne offers with a chill that matches the November chill. When Daphne moves to do her stretches, Harry asks her to wait.

“There's something that I need to tell you, the three of you,” Harry objectively discloses, before raising his privacy charms.

“What about Malfoy,” Hermione asks, looking at the silver-blonde outside the privacy barrier.

“He already knows,” Harry replies.

“Knows what?” Daphne asks, a barely detectable rise of excitement in her tone.

“I know I've already warned you three about how my life can get,” Harry starts. “The risks and dangers sort of thing,” he lamely states and is interrupted by the three.

“Only about once a week now,” Daphne jests with a knowing smirk as Hermione adds, “you might've mentioned it,” and Fleur, “you 'ave and eet 'as not detoured us.”

“Ha, ha, ha, you joke but I doubt any of you have been targets of the Goblin Nation before,” Harry quickly drops the notice of possible threat. The three lax their shoulders at the same time if their expressions don't quite match. Fleur tilts her head and creases her brow in a the cutest way at showing curiosity. Daphne's clear eyes widen and her neat eyebrows raise completely taken. Hermione's pink lips part as she stares suspiciously at him.

“Come again?” Hermione curiously asks.

“What do you mean the Goblin Nation,” Daphne asks.

“Yes please explain,” Fleur adds to the common sentiment.

Harry then briefly but effectively explains how the knowledge of Naga could make them a target of interest and they need to be careful with the information of his basilisk. “I'm not saying they, or Flitwick will definitely approach you, but still, you know about him, his location, and me, so there's a significant enough of a chance.”

“When can we see 'im,” Fleur asks, simply brushing the possible threat of Goblins aside.

“Fleur,” Hermione gasps. “This is serious. Basilisk venom is among the most regulated substances on this planet. I'm fairly certain it's the most expensive natural liquid on the market. We need to be careful.”

“Of course 'Ermione,” Fleur returns. “I do not mean to make light of eet, 'owever all we need do
ees say nozhing of Nāga to anyone. Zhat should not be difficult. Eef anyone asks you or Daphne eef you've seen a basilisk when Ares rescued you, all you say ees non. Simple.”

“Not quite that simple for citizens of this country,” Daphne pointedly tells Fleur. “There's more repercussions for us if the DMLE or the Wizengamot ever discovered we lied to them; severe repercussions not only for ourselves but our families as well.”

“I can always make you forget.” Harry suggests to the three, trying to cut into any hostility. “Only if you want. This knowledge means a lot to a lot of wealthy or influential wizards, and it could hurt or end your futures before they even start. I'd understand if you don't want to take that kind of risk.”

“I do not require such alteration,” Fleur quickly tells him, not even taking a moment to consider the offer. “I prefer to see zhe world as eet ees, not ‘ow I would like eet.”

“This is exactly the kind of knowledge I'd rather know,” Daphne conveys doing an amazing job holding in her smirk in all but her eyes. “So, no memory charm for me.”

“You really weren't joking about the extremes of your life,” Hermione comments, to which Harry shrugs with a lazy, more exasperated nod. “I think the thing that hurts our future the most is ignorance. Not to mention intelligence is the bedrock of any informed decision. We can't be prepared if we don't know what we need to, so, I'll also decline, but I'm curious to know how you learned to alter memory.”

“Perenelle and Nicolas can both do it,” Harry easily answers, quickly wondering if that's true. “They taught me.”

“So what are we doing about this?” Daphne asks.

“Nicolas is going to take the lead,” Harry answers. “When I learn something, you'll learn it as well. So, for now, be careful.”

“Eef zhat ees all, I am quite eager to work up a sweat wizh you,” Fleur announces with a vibrant smile that somehow makes the cold air around them seem less cruel and more balmy. With a nervous swelling of his chest, Harry simply removes the privacy charms so they can start their morning work out. Of the three, Daphne is still challenged the most, still, as a group, they did well and kept pace with him. Harry was happy for the clarity of mind working out can bring and stays out just a little bit longer than normal.

Breakfast in the Flamels dormitory was comfortable and enjoyable, and Harry was able to introduce Dobby to Nicolas, Perenelle, and the rest: Hermione, Fleur, Luna, Daphne, Tracey, Draco, Gabrielle, and Astoria. “I was hoping he could start organizing the library, since, lets face it, neither of you are ever going to organize those mountains of books,” Harry tells them and a smile creeps on his face when he hears Hermione whisper to herself, “mountains,” like in a trance.

“Dobby would be most honored, Head Masters,” Dobby speaks.

“Dobby I told you in private, just use our names,” Harry explains again.

“Even though I abhor the idea of enslaving elves, or slavery in general,” Perenelle states, to which Hermione nods in agreement. “I'm okay with this arrangement, so long as it's a fair wage.”

“It's more than Dobby could ever dream of spending,” Dobby answers.
“Well, we will be needing to do a lot of research this winter break,” Nicolas reasons aloud. “Sounds good to me.”

“Dobby will not let Masters down!” the house elf cries, hugs Harry before snapping away to work on his task with gusto.

The knock on the door allows Snape to enter to request Harry's presence in the Headmaster's office. Nicolas stays silent, likely not trusting himself to say anything that wouldn't be rude in front of impressionable company. Perenelle turns to Harry, concern clear on her face. Fleur is as reserved as Daphne, while Hermione and Tracey show a bit of worry. Draco continues eating, unconcerned.

“I'll see you guys on the field,” Harry tells his group as the Head of Slytherin waits impatiently for him. Excusing himself from breakfast Harry, with Nova on his shoulder, follows Professor Snape to the Headmaster's office. After providing another odd candy assortment for the password—jelly-filled dung-beetles—they silently walk up the circular steps to Dumbledore's round office. Snape opens the door for Harry and the youth can hear the odds and ends of queer devices before he even steps inside. It's always been a warmly inviting atmosphere in the den of deans until the moment he sees the honored headmaster at his desk... always at his desk, to complete the humble appeal.

“Ah, our gallant hero has at long last arrived,” Dumbledore cheerfully starts, watching the Slytherin pair as they enter.

Harry completely ignores his elder in favor of marching straight to Fawkes, who's napping, it seems, on it's stand. Harry taps the other side of the stand and Nova hops right in place. Looking over Fawkes' talons, he confirms one of his suspicions. "Of course, Dumbledore wouldn't shackle his own phoenix to prove himself fair. No,' Harry thought. 'His phoenix gets to be free.' As if sensing Harry's rising distress, Fawkes opens her brilliant gold-colored eyes, looking from Harry to her extended family, then to the anti-flaming, anti-tampering, nearly indestructible clothe shackle on Nova's foot.

“Can you take that off of her,” Harry asks Fawkes. “Nova hates it.”

“She cannot, I'm afraid,” Dumbledore softly interjects and indicates with a gentle hand, “please, have a seat.”

Fawkes cranes her neck to wrap over Nova's smaller neck before trilling easily, calmly, in an effort to comfort the younger phoenix made of at least half of her ashes. Nova accepts her motherly comfort, stepping closer and cooing her own grief, breaking Harry's heavy heart.

Harry's chest cavity swells with malice induced adrenaline. A flick of his wrist and his death white wand is in his grasp. “Take the seal off of her,” he demands none too loud, but his ferociousness is unmistakable. When he turns to the men, they were very focused on Harry's wand, until they saw his eyes. Harry knew his emerald eyes were glowing ferocious green, the exact color of the killing curse. If their immediate draw to his eyes wasn't enough to give him an indication, than reading their magical makeup and temperament is enough to tell him so.

Dumbledore's magical make up is easily the strongest concentration he's ever seen, not that he has much experience with this magical sight. The elder's vibrating aurora gave Harry the impression of something heavy, and despite his calm demeanor, at the moment it was pulsing with rushed activity. Harry couldn't say for certain, but he got the impression Dumbledore's magic isn't quick reacting, that is to say he doesn't turn it on and off without drag. It makes Harry wonder if the sage wizard keeps his pressure on the pulse until he knows there will be no need of further casting. It would explain why Dumbledore's magic is much more active than Snape's. Surprisingly, Snape's magic has a gentle texture to it; light, nimble, but not nearly as potent as Dumbledore's. Of course
he could be interpreting what he's seeing incorrectly as it's still a developing skill, but for now, he'll assume he's right until proven otherwise.

Dumbledore palms his desk, pushing himself to rise to his feet as Snape takes a step back, not in fear, though he's clearly confused and unsure of how to respond, but rather to be properly face sideways with Harry should he need to act. Harry can tell they're both on the defensive and that's exactly what he wants. While extremely angry with the Headmaster over what the old man somehow felt entitled doing to Nova, Harry isn't so angry he would assure expulsion when he still had plans that kept him in Hogwarts.

Still, the anger was there, tempting, and not hard to draw on as he takes a commanding step forward, “take that bloody manacle off her!” His anger bringing out a stifling pressure, similar to wearing a thick cloak in the middle of summer as both professors quickly bring out their wands.

“Now, young man, you listen to me and consider your actions,” Dumbledore starts, as Snape wisely remains silent. “Violence will solve nothing here. If you have a grievance, we can discuss it calmly.”

“With who? You?” a hot Harry nearly chuckles. “How should I go about discussing my grievance, with the source of my grievance? You, who don't seem to have a twinge of remorse for maiming my familiar!”

“I understand you're upset,” Dumbledore tries to pacify the youth. “But you must remain calm and keep control, before you cross a line you will regret.”

“If anyone's going to regret what happens next, it'll be you,” Harry fiercely returns.

The stifling seconds of silence fester, increasing in fickle agitation as opposite sides take stock of each other's clout; Harry with his glowing killer-green eyes, death-white wand, and a pressure that can only be described by the targets of his ire as suffocating. Dumbledore, along with Snape consciously considering how all of this can go very wrong in the next moment or so. The only thing keeping the three from destroying the office is all three wands are currently aimed at the floor; a bearing that can change in the blink of an eye.

Harry notes Snape's swallow, while Dumbledore gives nothing away. Harry tightens his grip on his wand, ready to accept whatever fallout happens as a result. While he certainly intended to show them how serious he is about his phoenix being shackled, among other misguided decisions on their part, facing the herald headmaster and a fair dueler in Snape is certainly not the best of plans. But he can't back down now. He won't. It would be counterproductive to any assistance he might need from them in the future. The task at hand is to take it just far enough, delicate and difficult as that is.

So it was nearly to his visible relief when Nova landed on his shoulder, softly rubbing her feathered head against his with a calming trill of a chorus. It certainly seemed liked she preferred to avoid any drastic action, or, it's possible she might have innate knowledge of her masters desire, though he can't be certain. It was the type of act that reminded him of Hedwig—how she looked out for him when he would act before thinking—and made him proud to have her as his familiar.

“Would you like me to call the Aurors,” Snape asks, never taking his eyes off of an enraged Harry, now shouldering his impressive black and red phoenix, which only made the fourteen year old that much more menacing.

“Yes, professor, call them,” Harry bellows registering the slight loss of tension in the air. “I'd love to file a complaint against the headmaster.”
“What I freely admit doing to your familiar is not observed by our laws as an unlawful offense,” Dumbledore informs Harry. “I am sure even they would see it is for the safety of everyone in this castle.”

“Oh how I highly doubt that,” Harry answers back, the green of his eyes danced amused. “What you did was for the sole satisfaction of your control.”

“That is not accurate,” Dumbledore plainly states. “But if you wish to have any further discussion about this, than you must put away your wand.”

“...You first,” Harry counters. After a deep pondering breath, Dumbledore slowly returns his legendary wand to it's place in his robes, but Harry can see his magic vibrate that much quicker, likely in preparation for an attack. “Both of you.” Harry asserts, looking at Snape. The Potions Master eyes Dumbledore a moment, who nods, before he too withdraws his wand. Though vibrating the same way, Snape's magic dances nervously.

“So you're willing to trust I won't curse you both, but enslaving a divine creature, no objections there, huh. Perfectly acceptable that,” Harry gripes as he allows his wand to retract into it's holster.

“I can assure you it is not enslaved,” Dumbledore reassures.

“I'm sure you can feel your phoenix as much as I can feel my own,” Harry returns, eyes still glowing. “Don't fabricate nonsense to pacify me. You're going to remove that damn thing from her leg, because if I have to do it—which I am capable of—I will never trust you, nor will I ever work with you. The fate of the world could hinge on our working together and even then, I'd rather let it all burn.” Dumbledore seems to appraise him, and his words, and possibly finds value in them.

“...It's admirable to see how much you care for your familiar,” Dumbledore starts gesturing to the open chair in front of his large mahogany desk. “If you're open to it, we can discuss how you see us working together in this future of yours.”

Harry turns down the invitation with a long blink combined slight shake of his head. “I'm not against allies. I never was, but I'd very much prefer it if they stop acting like my enemies.”

“There's a fair amount wrong in that sentence,” Dumbledore states, taking his seat as Snape steps to the side of the chair, a unified impression of loyalty if Harry ever saw one.

Snape folds his cloaked palms over each other in front of him as he asks, “you can't possibly be suggesting Headmaster Dumbledore treats you as an enemy after your near act of lunacy?”

“Can't I professor,” Harry returns just as intensely. “He hired a mass murderer—who, from what I've been told, he couldn't distinguish from an old friend—that nearly killed me among many others. He bound me when I tried to save Perenelle and the others. He crippled my phoenix, and all this from the "great" man that's suppose to protect me? No professor, I'm afraid actions speak louder than words and the Headmaster seems just as dangerous in my eyes as any other threat I've come across in my life. Only in this case his angle of attack is of the collateral variety.”

“How self-center-” Snape starts but abruptly cuts himself off. Instead stating, “it should go without saying but if you're too absorbed in your own tragedy, allow me to properly clarify it for you. The headmaster is not attacking you. To even think such a thing is ignorance of the-”

“I can certainly see why you might believe I am against your well being,” Dumbledore cuts in. “But that couldn't be further from the truth. I am your Headmaster. Not under some flawed sense of
entitlement, but fully and committed. Everything I do is for the safety, protection, and education of all those under my charge. And it's my greatest joy to do so.”

“That's fantastic, Headmaster, really,” Harry expresses with no real feeling. “But I hope you don't expect me to believe that, as if your kindly disposition and righteous concern to protect us at all cost is supposed to explain why you crippled my familiar.”

“As I've already stated, your familiar is perfectly fine,” Dumbledore returns.

“And as I've already stated, don't piss on me and try to tell me it's rain.” Harry spits back, and the adults shirk, clearly not a fan of the analogy. “You reward her ability to save lives by taking said ability away? How about we put one of those shackles on your phoenix and see how you like the feel her sadness.”

“I can see how you might misunderstand, but the key issue here isn't with her commendable actions to guard the well being of students, but with the dark forces that would use her ability to gain entrance into these halls. We know the ultimate goal of the perpetrators behind the acromantula attack was to kidnap a member of the Flamel household. It's not difficult to imagine they will try again, and quite likely, may use their hostage to blackmail you for your effortless access into this castle. That is not a risk I am willing to take. Think of how worse you or your phoenix would feel if you were responsible for an attack in mass and subsequent loss of young innocent life.”

“Don't you have a brother?” Harry asks rather pointedly. “What's stopping these perpetrators from blackmailing you through your brother to breach the castle?”

“I am quite certain that would never happen,” Dumbledore confidently states.

“That's funny, because I'm fairly certain it'd never happen to me either, but instead of retaining all my advantages for such a threat, you've taken some away. Not to mention, what do you think these perpetrators would do to my familiar if their use for her is all but gone? I can't imagine it would end well for her.”

“Until we know more or the perpetrators are apprehended, I'm afraid the risk of breach must be mitigated,” Dumbledore responds nearly sympathetically. “As difficult as it is to hear, I would ask that you think about your fellow students, and what is best for them.”

Dropping his head some and letting out some frustration, Harry comments, “It amazes me to see someone so revered be this misguided,” before returning his focused attention on Dumbledore. “I suppose I’ll have to do it myself. Just remember, I did warn you.”

“I would not recommend attempting to break through my rune ward,” Dumbledore suggests. “It is... complex to say the least, and a fruitless endeavor of wasted time and energy.”

“Accept my place as sheep without question, is that it,” Harry suspects aloud. “What is time and energy to helping my friend? Well worth it.”

“We are not adversaries, as you well aware know, as all in this room know,” Dumbledore reasserts. “The real enemy is far more darker. Severus was kind enough to mention your luncheon yesterday at the Three Broomsticks. Quite the gathering, I've been told, and the second time you've divulged Voldemort's true identity. Despite the anagram you gifted me with, I'm relatively certain you, Nicolas and Perenelle know more about him than you let on. I further suspect our goal, if not our approach, of eradicating our actual villain, are more aligned than we've thus shared.”

“Who knows, maybe. We know quite a lot, I'd say,” Harry mentions. “We were quite surprised at
how little the large majority wizards know of his history, as if the historians collectively took a 
break from researching the latest, and possibly greatest, Dark Lord in recent memory, then 
completely forgot to do their job."

"Why do you bring him into conversation he need not be in," Dumbledore asks. "Why is it 
important to you he be publicized beyond the atrocities already well documented? What do you 
gain by terrifying those that knowledge does very little or nothing to help?"

"It's interesting you should ask that," Harry ponders aloud. "Not necessarily because if there's 
anyone that should know who Tom Riddle is, I reckon it ought to be Hardwin and Lily Potter. No, 
ot interesting because of that, but because it sounds quite oddly like your circling to the point of 
this meeting, an inkling that tells me you want something from me. I don't know what that is and I 
can't say I want to know, but this conversation will go nowhere- Tomorrow's conversations will go 
nowhere. I suggest you start learning that I am not your typical fourteen year old, because anything 
you need, want, would ask of me is, as of this moment, restricted, until you decide to be a decent 
human being and remove that fucking shackle from my familiar!"

A silence shared with Snape stretches, as Dumbledore says nothing; not even to admonish him for 
swearing. They both stare, measuring the confidence in the vibrant green eyes of a highly capable 
fourteen year old, and are forced to consider his words hold more weight despite his age.

"What would quarreling amongst ourselves gain but respite for the forces of the dark arts?"
Dumbledore finally asks, rhetorically. "I can make no promises, however, I am willing to use my 
position to inquire additional details of the investigation into last week's attack, as well as possible 
further enhancements to our defenses, among other safeguards, in order to allow your phoenix's 
complete freedom. I am willing to work toward compromise, however, I would ask for your 
patience, along with a request of my own."

"A request?" Harry questions, not at all surprised. "Really? You're the one who shackled her, and 
now you want to charge me to remove it?"

"I'll remind you that I am willing to accept the significant risk to this castle and all it's inhabitants 
your familiar poses," Dumbledore reassess. "And I assure you it is a benign request, hardly worthy 
of the word." Harry lamely nods his head simply to hear the Headmaster's request, barely 
refraining from rolling his eyes. "I'm a firm believer that intelligence deserves- nay, begets 
honesty. As such, I will not insult yours. You've stated, you are not the typical fourth year, and in 
some respects, I would agree, so, for quite some years now, I've been waging a silent war against 
dark forces; A cold war. Have you heard of this term?" he asks and Harry nods with a bored 
expression, eyes still glowing. "Recently it has become quite active. Against these dark forces, I 
wish to protect society's most treasured heir; the vanquisher of a dark Lord. A young man now, 
who has sadly been in danger since infancy."

"Hardwin Potter," Harry announces with such lackluster, it even impresses Snape.

Dumbledore nods nonetheless and continues. "I must admit, the moment I learned of your 
enrollment, I had entertained designs of friendship between yourself and Mr. Potter. While little 
about the past four months have gone as I might have imagined, I would very much appreciate an 
effort on your part to reach out and befriend young Hardwin."

Staring at the old man with squinting glowing eyes, Harry has to vocalize his disbelief. "...You 
want me to be friends with Hardwin Potter?"

"I do and I think in time you might feel grateful to have done so," Dumbledore answers in his 
goodly grandfather tone with a tilt of his head. "He really is a sweet boy, earnest and loyal. You
seem to take no issue associating yourself with other houses, breaking cardinal convention by sitting at the Ravenclaw table, and I will admit, I, along with his sadly widowed mother, Lily, would rest a little easier knowing you're by his side should he happen to come under the perils his life attracts.”

“So that's the negotiation?” Harry clears up. “I befriend Hardwin and you remove Nova's shackle.” 'Dumbledore's spy right in my circle,' Harry's mind clarifies.

“I would never use a promising friendship for bartering,” Dumbledore asserts. “That would be indecent.”

“No more so than crippling my phoenix in the first place,” Harry mutters loud enough for them to hear. “I don't have a problem with making friends, even with him, but don't expect any sort of cooperation from me about anything until you remove that prison wrapped around Nova's leg. And if I were you, I wouldn't wait too long,” he says getting up to leave, ending any further discussion. Though curious by what this time-line's Dumbledore might have done differently, Harry needs to test Dumbledore. If the old man can see the error in his ways, than Harry can feel some hope working with the man. If not, Harry's content to just go it alone.

“You haven't been dismissed yet,” Snape irritably points out.

Harry stops with the door's handle in his hand as Nova lands gracefully on his shoulder. He doesn't answer either professors, and does them the slightest courtesy of looking at Dumbledore.

“...Have a wonderful-,” Dumbledore starts to dismiss and is cut off as Harry, without any delay, Harry exits the Headmasters office before the old man could finish. Agitation follows him on his way down the tower and through the portrait halls. It was more grating than he had anticipated and Harry had to stop to give himself time to calm down.

Harry makes his way to the field, contemplating with every step both of his familiar's, Nāga and Nova fates, the demands by the goblins and their king, the threat by the dark goblins, the ministry and whether they would arrest him, Dumbledore's manipulation, and the most problematic complication consuming his every other thought, his hormones.

Harry couldn't anticipate how powerfully possessive of his conscious and unconscious mind his libido is, or what a slave his body would be to it. Not to say he didn't have control, but it was the easiest thing to forget when he was in their presence. Harry's most amazed by how thoughts of them can, at times, compete with his night terrors, causing him to wake up with a different physiological response. Walking out into the November chill, he can easily make out his group in the distance, already in the air, practicing with their brooms under the tutelage of Viktor Krum.

Harry tilts his head slightly, catching his phoenix out of his peripheral. “You know I'm going to get that thing off you,” he confidently informs his familiar. His group hadn't noticed him yet, not until Nova trills happily, despite the ache of being arrested from using her magically given ability. Overcoming his joy, Draco is the first to notice Harry, though decides to stay with Tracey. “How about we forget about everything for a bit, and just play? You think you can catch me without
flaming?” Harry teases his legendary familiar as he notices Hermione slowly and cautiously fly a shaky line toward him.

Without delay, Nova screeches triumphantly, accepting the challenge by spreading her beautiful midnight wings high, and blasting gusts of wind everywhere as she rockets into the sky. Her dark plumage nearly disappears even in the gloomy white of the graying sky. What Harry hadn't expected was the strength of the gust created doing more than flaring his clothes with the erratic push and pull of the wind. With a loud shriek, Hermione screams as she's swept over by the strength of Nova's launch, causing her to fall off her broom.

Though surprised, Harry has more than enough time to slow her downward momentum, and as her back was leading the fall, he catches her princess style. “Hey-” he starts but she wraps her arms around his neck, abruptly cutting him off and leaving him bewildered. That is until he feels the way her arms shake as she holds on to him tightly. For the first time since he can remember, he really wonders about the source of her aversion to flying.

Making a note to gently ask her about it later, he simply sways gently from side to side, similar to how Perenelle taught him to hold and comfort Nova when she was much smaller. “Hey, now. You're okay, Hermione,” he consoles into the cinnamon bronze of her fluffy hair.

“Sorry,” she tries to say mid sob. “Uh, I'm such a klutz,” she weakly adds, though not looking at him. The others join him by this point; Draco and Tracy hovering on their brooms, Luna, Daphne, Fleur, and Krum, having descended foot to chilled earth.

“Ermyonene,” Krum calls, though the Bulgarian can't help but brood over how Harry is still holding her. “Are you injured,” he asks, moving very close to them.

Only then does Hermione notice their audience and scrambles to be put down by ending her embrace and pushing away. Harry lets her down as she answers, completely red in the face, “I-I- I'm fine, now. I fell, uh, off the broom, of course. Ares just caught me,” she tells the floor, avoiding all eye contact. “Th-thank you, Ares.”

Daphne and Fleur eye the girl skeptically as Harry tells her, “it's fine, Hermione. It was sort of my fault anyway. I didn't think Nova would be so excited,” he tells them, though he's scanning the white and gray skies for his dark bullet and finds nothing. Harry's content to let her stretch her wings a bit. He doesn't think he'll be able to out-fly her unless she's a little tired first.

“What happened with Dumbledore,” Tracey asks from aerial perch.

Harry turns to the group, and simply replies mostly for Krum's benefit, “I'll tell you all later. For now, I'd like to know how the lessons are coming while Nova's warming up.”

“What warming up for what,” Daphne picks on.

“Just a little game of tag,” he easily answers as he Accio Hermione's broom wandlessly and wordlessly into his hand. “It's her favorite game,” he finishes as he hands it over to a wide-eyed Hermione. The satisfied swell in his chest makes him wonder the definition of showing off and if he's guilty of it.

“Most ov dhem are satisfactory, vith strong potential,” Krum reports. “I vill vork vith Ermyonene longer to elevate her flying ability to levels she vill be proud of.”

Harry isn't sure what to argue, but he wants to argue with the Bulgarian Quidditch star, and tells him, “thanks, but I already have an idea I think will work well.”
“I can't see anything helping Granger,” Draco throws out. “It took her thirty minutes just to get as high as she did.”

“While I loathe to agree with Malfoy,” Hermione starts. “It's true. I really am hopeless on a broom.”

“That's okay,” Harry easily tells her. “I don't need you to be the best flier. That's not what this is about. I want you to be confident enough on a broomstick to help Luna, Fleur, Daphne, me, or anyone else who's depending on you to save them. That doesn't mean it'll be easy, but I know how much you care about your friends, and for them, I have no doubt you can do this.”

Hermione beams in her blushing cheeks, but her eyes are all determination. It was all the motivation she didn't know she needed, and he couldn't be more right. “For now, just stick low to the ground and practice runs from end to end, getting faster each time,” he tells her and she nods determined.

“What of us,” Fleur asks sweetly taking a sensual step closer, eyeing him seductively, or simply normally, because he couldn't say what was driving her appeal more; her natural beauty or his libidinous desires.

“Aren't you nearly professional,” Daphne genuinely asks the French Veela, also taking a step closer toward Harry, standing tall and elegant beside Fleur.

“Today, I just want to see everyone fly, so if you're all willing, you can help me try and catch Nova,” Harry says scanning the skies to see if she's ready, barely spotting her soar higher and faster than he's ever witnessed before. “I should warn you, it'll be impossible.”

“Oh dear,” Luna calls, placing a small hand on her forehead and drawing most to look at her. “I had hoped I was wrong, but it seems my health has taken a turn for the worse. What are the odds?” Luna shrinks her broomstick and clasps it on her bracelet.

“I'll take you to the infirmary,” Hermione states. When Harry looks at her, she tells him, “I'd also like to go to the library, study on theory of flying before I meet Daphne later-”

“For your date,” Draco finishes, to which Tracey slaps his shoulder, muttering, “boys.”

Hermione rolls her eyes before she and Luna bid farewell. Without asking or expressing his intent in any way, Krum simply takes it upon himself to escort them. Hermione is clearly uncertain as a slight eye out of her peripheral looks behind her a moment before the three leave. “Nova,” Harry easily says and it's only a steadily increasing whistling that lets them know she's getting closer. The three seconds Harry has before the calamity his mind starts warning him about, has him yelling over the loud whistle, “everyone down!”

Most seemed to have internal alarms of their own they did well to listen to. Draco grabbed Tracy and flew away as fast as possible. Daphne and Fleur, aren't sure what to expect and only have a couple of seconds to guess. In that window of time, Harry wraps an arm around each girl's waist and brings them to the cold floor, before Nova cuts through the air faster than a comet toward them. Instant spreading of strong wings bursts the drag like an explosion of gust and cyclones of wind, rupturing the cold floor with the shredding force of a tornado.

Holding them close, Harry magically sticks the to the ground and protects them via a brief shield to ensure they don't fly away. The blast of air didn't last more than a couple seconds before the wind was bearable, and Nova lands innocently on Harry's shoulder. Nova adjusts herself as Harry gets up, announcing, “I guess she's warmed up.”
“You called that warmed up,” Daphne calls back as she accepts his hand. Harry helps Fleur up as well while Daphne finishes, “it felt like I was in the middle of a tornado.”

Fleur laughs, “my ‘ow exhilarating!”

Draco and Tracy slowly descend from higher altitude as the three below magically clear blades of grass, and drizzling dirt from their uniforms.

“Well, it's never been that strong before,” Harry explains apologetically. He turns to Nova, telling her, “we're going to try and catch you, okay girl. Avoid getting caught, stay within sight of the castle, and don't go too high.”

Nova trills and coos before slowly ascending not too high in the air and circling the group in a prepared holding pattern. Harry then tells the group, “if you can catch Nova, you might be ready for the Quidditch league.”

“Do we get anything if we catch her,” Daphne tries. At his curious look, she playfully explains, “as an incentive.”

“Pride,” Harry easily answers as he brings out his Firebolt with a wandless unshrinking charm. He pauses, pondering the ferocious life within the broom roaring through his finger tips. Harry's held racing broom before, but he's never imbued his magic in preparation of flying until now. It felt like it was raging in his grasp, and somewhere deep in his belly, a bubble of excitement he thought was long gone after his years of suffering was stirring. It wasn't a strong feeling, not unlike feeling sensation in a limb after years of paralysis, but even a small amount felt monumental to him and thus triggers a mental decent into his most painful past.

Quickly he felt, a dread rush through the faulty flesh of his body that said, 'you're dying,' and though the atmosphere is cold, he breaks out in a panic sweat. Holding the performance broom is a stark reminder of his past, what he could've been before it all went terrible and his entire system spikes with deep, shaky anxiety, easily unsettling his serenity. It's odd how detached his mind can be when it's telling him he's having another panic attack, as he slowly feels like he's suffocating and becomes unstable.

'Your friends rot on a wall and you're playing?' A sinister version of his voice asks. 'You never cared. They should've never trusted you. No one should ever trust you!' Harry's attacked with his fears. 'You're no savior, and they died because you never told them how worthless you really are. You, weak and talentless, were glad they died... to be free of the unyielding pressure... to take a deep breath, Ares.’

Harry, eyes wet and irritated, nose packed with cold stuffing, looks up to Draco's focused yet calm face. “Deep breaths. In. And out,” Harry hears the silver-blonde repeat to focus on his voice and to take deep breaths. It's the first time he wasn't terribly pained to see his school yard nemesis, and attempts to do as instructed. On his shoulder, Nova is singing her calming song, battling away the crippling barrage of guilty derangement, and settling his unstable emotions. Harry lets Draco direct his breathing as he calms down and after several long moments, he clears his eyes and cheeks of their moisture as he stands, turning away from the group's gaze. It's not the first time he's broken down in front of people but, its just as embarrassing every time.

“Memories?” Draco dares to ask. Harry knows that Draco knows that their audience can hear them, which means the silver-blonde is asking loud enough on purpose. And for a moment Harry couldn't understand why until he recalls this is his safe zone, and honesty in his safe zone is paramount. His environment, and those that stay will accept him but he can't hide. While he isn't sure about Tracey's presence, Daphne and Fleur witnessing his break, if unavoidable, at least feels
somewhat less distressing.

“...Yeah,” an unexpectedly drained Harry simply answers.

“Better?” Draco asks from behind him.

“...Yeah,” Harry weakly answers, though can't bring himself to thank the silver-blond without feeling further tremendous guilt.

“Good. Now, can I get back to my flying, or do you need to breast feed too,” Draco gratingly asks, returning to the Draco Harry knows and happily hates. “Why don't I sing you a lullaby and cradle you to sleep while I'm at it.”

“There's no doubt in my mind you're worthy of the title, Most Unbelievable Twat,” Harry huffs, still trying to catch his breath.

Fortunately, Tracey walks over and slaps his shoulder without stop, “Merlin, you were doing so well, and then out came the Draco I remember.”

“Ow,” Draco hoots. “Stop! I was- ow, okay, I was just joking!”

“Thank you Tracey,” Harry starts hoping to ruin Draco's day if even just a little to improve his own mood. “Sometimes it's like he doesn't know when to stop.” Draco glares at Harry, who tries to hold in his smile. “I'm glad you're caring enough to show him how his words affect people.”

Tracey shoves an irate Draco away, likely to yell at him a bit more in private, as Slytherins might. Harry allows a small smile to crack his face then, feeling normal but brittle. He slowly dares to look at Fleur and Daphne and gauge any reaction they might have; sympathy, pity, confusion, alarm, concern, and to his surprise, they seem even-headed, observant, waiting for his lead. It's bonkers to Harry they don't seem turned off by him. He looks away, unsure of what to make of their ease in the face of such a damaged person.

Harry shakes his head, turning back to Fleur and Daphne. “I guess it's no surprise by now, I'm a bit barmy.”

“You're not,” Daphne reassures him as she and Fleur step up to him. “Nothing about what you're going through is anything to be ashamed of or embarrassed about.”

“Eet ees not as uncommon as you zhink,” Fleur adds. “Een my mozher's culture our soldiers are not disgraced by wounds suffered een battle, whezher physical or mental.”

“I'm sure life would be better without going mental all the time,” Harry comments even as he actively tells himself not to. Talking about this with Perenelle or Nicolas is nerve wrecking enough, and they know nearly everything about him. To talk to Fleur and Daphne, if only a single comment, makes him extremely nervous.

“Life's a big book,” Daphne says nonchalantly. “While the current chapter of your life may be tough and dark, it's certainly not the end, and it can get better.”

“I agree completely,” Fleur backs Daphne up. “You 'ave yet to reach zhe chapters not suitable for children,” she says with a sensual smirk. “I zhink you will love zhat time zhe best, non,” she asks with a sassy smirk and devilish a wink. “Possibly re-read multiple times?”

“Fleur,” Daphne huffs with mild irritation, unsure how the french witch can be so bold in front of a boy let alone the object of their mutual affections.
“Yes, Daphne?” Fleur sweetly calls, obviously playing innocent of any inappropriate insinuations. “I simply zink he will enjoy the unknown pleasures of what may come. I know I myself would not mind a solid seven or eight, long pages of thorough reading.”

'That was unbelievably hot,’ Harry's first, second and third impression say. He didn't even recognize the moment the atmosphere changed, charged with absolute sensuality oozing off of Fleur. His mental defense is bombarded with synergy targeting the eager system of the brain that deals with pleasure and euphoria. His breathing quickens, green eyes dilate, and despite his tremendous willpower, his groin is demanding more blood, threatening to make his appearance known.

Fleur's allure even affects Daphne. The blonde haired blue eyed Ice Queen blushes madly and her breath quickens as well. Like Harry she finds it's nearly impossible to see anything but Fleur. As the only boy between two incredibly beautiful girls, Harry calls, “Fleur, um, your allure...” as he feels himself grow with ever loss of composure.

“You see,” Fleur happily sings. “Life can be exciting too, non?”

“That much excitement is likely to give someone a heart attack,” Daphne cries almost offended. She's breathing heavily, exhausted with her left palm pressed against her heaving chest and her right cupping her blushing cheek.

“Uwah,” Fleur winces. “My apologies Daphne. I was too enthusiastic.”

“Whether I forgive you or not, your allure is incredibly invasive, and some people may not like it,” Daphne states, flustered by her lose of control more than anything.

For her part, Fleur appears embarrassed more than regretful, and looks to Harry for answers. It didn't take Harry longer than a fraction of a second to realize he did not have any answers for the french beauty, nor did he know how to defuse the situation, if it indeed was one. Instead Harry is eager to blow past the awkwardness. “How about a bit of flying?” Holding back wonderful memories of exhilarating times on a racing broomstick, Harry doesn't hesitate to grip his Firebolt and stepping over it into position.

Both girls nod, taking position themselves. Feeling what must be joy, Nova expands her midnight wings high before launching farther into the skies like a bolt out of a bow. With a smile, Harry kicks off the ground and immediately feels the compounding pressure of forcing that much air in front of him out of the way. For a briefest of milliseconds, he feels completely still. Then the compression of air gives way to his upward demand, wind blaring with a bang as he gives chase. Harry didn't expect to actually catch Nova; her maneuverability is far greater than any broomstick, but he was more than eager to see how close he can get to the legendary aviator.

Harry had to conjure goggles to keep the wind from cutting into his eyes. He pushed the Firebolt as fast as it could go and he barely kept Nova in his sights. Still the whole experience lightened his heart considerably. Throttling through the air, constantly challenging the speed of sound simply to keep Nova in his sights cleared his mind of any thoughts of goblins, ministries, Voldemort, friends, family, love, loss. In the air, on a broomstick, the only world that could possibly exist is made up of speed, wind, and prey.

When Harry notices Daphne and Tracey descend, followed by Draco, he pauses his chase of the impossibly elusive Nova and makes his way over to them, a heavily panting Fleur following him as well. On the ground, he asks the Slytherin girls, “leaving already?”

“Already?” Tracey yells back. “It's been three hours! My waist, legs and forearms are burning, and I lost feeling in my rump ages ago.”
Harry hadn't realize they spent so much time in the air. It felt like minutes to him. “Oh,” is all he says.

“*Oh,* he says,” Tracey comments. “I guess time moves differently at warp speed.”

“What's warp speed?” Draco asks, and Harry can see Fleur looks just as confused.

“It's from one of Tracey's muggle dramas,” Daphne answers.

“It's actually my mom's favorite show,” Tracey tells Draco. “I just watched it with her. It means Ares was going super fast.”

“Not fast enough,” Harry mentions, sliding his goggles down to his neck as he scans the skies for his familiar.

“You must be joking,” Fleur orates aghast. The beautiful French figure walks around to Harry's backside, and it's when she runs her fingers through his long dark hair that he realizes he lost his hair tie at some point. Fleur's delicate hands slowly gathers his jet black hair and carefully puts it in his usual knot as she says, “any faster and you'll outpace light itself.” Harry picks up Draco bitterly mutters to himself, “he's not *that* fast.”

At Harry's curious look Daphne, eyeing Fleur for only the briefest of moments, elaborates, “you're faster than any professional I've ever seen. It was impossible to keep up, much less actually tag Nova. On two occasions, you blasted through the speed of sound. It was like a cannon went off. Your sweater didn't stand a chance.” Harry looks down and sure enough, to his surprise, his wool sweater was torn into several ribbons. “We need to get ready for Hogsmeade now if we want to take the carriages with the rest,” Daphne tells him.


“Our... meeting isn't until later,” Daphne points out, refusing to call the meeting a date. “We can walk around Hogsmeade for a while before then... if you want.”

“That sounds nice, but I need to look into taking that enchantment off Nova,” Harry explains. “Dumbledore's dragging his feet, so I thought I'd look at it myself. Plus, I really don't like it when she feels sad.”

“Wha... she feels sad,” Tracey moans moving very close to weeping. Fleur and even Daphne share the same sentiment as they search the skies for the bravely wounded phoenix. “After all she did for us and the school, and now she's sad! That's terrible!”

“Yeah,” Harry agrees. “It's a real punch in the guts. I'll figure it out though.”

“Think you can,” Draco asks. “I mean it is Dumbledore.”

“It is,” Harry agrees. “But he isn't magic, and there's always a way.”

“You have to tell us-” Daphne starts but reconsiders her words. “No, we *have* to help. I know Hermione will want to as well.”

“As will I,” Fleur states. “Nova should not 'ave to suffer like zhis.”

“With this much brain power, I don't expect Nova to be unhappy for long,” Harry proclaims with a rare smile. “Say hi to Hermione for me.”
Tracey whispers to Draco before following Daphne back to the castle. The three watch them go, but only one is noticeably irritated by it. Once they were out of sight, Draco turns glumly to Harry before yelling out, “I don't want to be a third wheel, so I'm leaving.” Before Harry can ask what the hell he's on about, Draco throws a finger in Harry's face, yelling out a large, “BUT, you cannot, under any circumstances let Tracey find out. I don't care what you do,” Draco sneaks a look at Fleur, adding, “or who you do it with, but whatever it is, that information dies with the day. Got it!”

Harry doesn't want to accept that Tracey asked Draco to keep an eye on Fleur and himself, especially after he just told them he planned on spending time on Nova's shackles, however Fleur isn't bothered by it at all. She hugs Harry's arm, pressing her breasts into him as she sweetly tells Draco, “all she will ever learn ees 'ow visibly upset I was you refused to leave us alone.”


Harry tried not to think about how amazingly soft her chest felt against his arm or how her amorous warmth makes him hot around his neck and cheeks. His eyes are closed as he exhales deep calming breaths, unconsciously flexing his arm. When he feels her shift, he opens his eyes to her gazing at him not gleefully like he might've expected, but content; Her smile is soft, her eyes gorgeous and at ease. Though as radiant as ever, she gave the impression of comfort, rather than luxurious beauty, and it was the first time his body urged, willed his limbs to move forward, embrace this exquisite anomaly, and to kiss her. In that moment, meeting her plump pink lips to his somehow transcended the physical need and felt more akin to spiritual guidance.

To his surprise, delight, and dread, he feels himself take an unauthorized step forward, bringing half and arm's length between them down to mere inches away from each other. So close, a short lean in will raise either disastrous alarms in his head, or the eager appendage between his legs, or both. The rose of her cheeks turn to strawberry, and even her lips redden, but she never loses that comfortable sensuality that seems to strike an amenable cord within him.

It's then that he's slightly more aware of what can be, and how much of a risk this is. Harry closes his eyes and despite doing it in front of her, takes a measured and calming breath rather than lean in those last few inches.

“Why,” he hears Fleur ask, his vision still black. “I've noticed your gaze a number of times, twenty-zhree times to be precise; mostly during morning work outh. I can also literally feel zhe attraction. So, why rezist what we so clearly want?”

'So much for trying to play uninterested,' he reasons, mentally throwing that plan in the trash. He didn't have much faith in trying to convince Fleur, possibly Daphne and Hermione as well, that he wasn't interested in pursuing a romantic relationship, at least not without saying harsh lies. And they would be lies, too. It's why he had so much more faith in his contingency plan to hopefully retain the status quo. He can claim the truth, and their pride as woman would not allow them to enter into such a union.

“Honesty,” Harry says, then opens his eyes looking deeply into hers. They haven't moved away from each other, so nearly his entire view is a thing of mindful beauty. He answers the curiosity in her eyes. “This should be simple, shouldn't it?” he says with a shallow chuckle, though her attention doesn't allow her to smile. “You're beautiful in so many ways, and I'm a guy with eyeballs. The arithmancy doesn't get much simpler than that... except for me I guess,” he adds after a humored huff.

Fleur doesn't interrupt in favor of paying rapt attention. She waits patiently, easily sensing the gravity of the moment with his every word.
“You know that relentless dedication couples have for one another? That doesn't apply to me. I wish it did. Trust me, I would love to be normal like that, but I know it's not for me, like I know I'd never cheat. So, I either stay single, which I've already accepted, enter the only other alternative; a polygamous relationship. Typical bloke fantasy I know, but I hope you believe me when I say it's not like that. I just know, regardless of the choices I want to make for myself—and this is a terrible thing to say—but the truth is, you'll never be first in my life. And it's not because you're lacking in anyway. No woman can be, hence a third party. You, Daphne, Hermione, Luna, you're all amazing, and you ought to be valued like the treasures you are.” Soft green eyes harden to that of a killer's at enraging thoughts of a Voldemort and his ilk, currently free to feel happiness; to breath. “But I have wars to fight, and if I don't fight them, people die. Friends die...”

Harry tries to ignore the visual memories of his cell wall filled with the reeking heads of his loved ones, but he can't block out the gag inducing smell, or the sounds of his dried sobs. For the lives he's lost, and those still at risk so long as that monster still exists, he can't ignore his mission. It's his hope they understand that, but an even greater hope he dare not entertain, is a friendship with each of them, despite the dangers he draws. They haven't run away yet, but he knows it's not as bad as it can get. There's still plenty of opportunity to realize how dangerous he is.

After a stretch of silence, Harry understands he can't express another honest word to Fleur. Though he feels like it's not a good enough explanation, in the end it's all he can dare say, or risk losing the steady grip he has on his sanity without Nova or Draco around. A sag of his head at the certainty that he's irrevocably changed his friendship with Fleur has his eye line turning down, then away from the view of her ample breast. He can feel his cheeks burn red with blush and it amazes him that despite the seriousness of the conversation, his dogged hormones is indifferent to anything but sex.

'How did I possibly escape this the first time around,' Harry thinks when he feels two soft, warm hands palm the left and right side of his jaw, tilt him ahead the few remaining inches needed to meet Fleur's luscious lips. It was a gentle kiss, warm and felicitous against his unexpected lips. The tip of her nose sat easily beside the tip of his, but it was colder than her lips, which only highlighted the absolute pleasantness of her soft plump lips. Her eyes were closed, soft eyelashes seeming even longer, purely feminine. A sharp contrast to his surprised pupils. Harry was stunned. His mind froze by the whole experience and it wasn't until she stepped away that he realizes he didn't want it to end.

“Zhank you,” she says with a perfect smile.

Harry doesn't know what she means by her, 'thank you,' nor can his highly logical and impressive mind interpret it. Is it a good thank you, or bad thank you? Is she saying goodbye, or that they can still be friends? Is the smile in understanding, appreciation, farewell, gratitude, or something else? Harry is utterly confused and certain it reads easily on his face as she takes a step back. Her smile and gentle countenance is unreadable as she looks at him a long second, before easily turning around and walking back to the castle.

He finally snaps out of it when Nova's volume increasing, airy whistle comes full-stop a few feet above him, oppressing barrels of strong pressurized torrents from her mystically substantial wings. Harry's hurled off his feet in an instant, landing hard several yards away, rolling several times before finally skidding to a stop. He doesn't get up right away or even eventually. He lays there even when Nova lands, and gets comfortable on his chest. Lying a bit sore on the cold dirt with his phoenix sitting comfortably on his chest didn't matter as much as the words Fleur left him with. Round and round in his head he goes, until Harry finally gives in with a tired groan and yells, “what do you mean thank you?”
There was a lot of thought put into how Harry should handle his meet with Dumbledore, VS how he should let his emotions handle the meet. Personally, I would've like him to wreck, but in my mind, that wouldn't really change Dumbledore's mind. It would just be an outburst to soothe his turbulent emotions. SO that was my thinking. I liked what I ended up with and it's going to build from there.

Some people have asked me what camp I plan on putting Dumbledore in. Is he full on Manipulation Central or is he good and misunderstood, or bad and in denial... I'm still fleshing him out. I have a good idea of the Dumbledore in my head, but I'm still forming all this as I write. I just listen to the story, letting it guide me, and try not to shoehorn ideals just because it's what I want.

Good job Draco. Way to be the reluctant backup.

For those who couldn't do Fleur's math, substitute Pages with Inches... a Reading, with F-ing/Dicking, aka Making Love(for you sensitive types)

I've actually used a variation of Harry's explanation to Fleur in real life. When I was even younger and dumber, I would break up with girls by telling them, "I really like you, but if we continue I have to be totally honest with you. I'm a polygamist... and at some point in the future, I'm going to want us to invite a third person in the relationship." Now, the break up move is called, Check. Reason being is because 97% of all girls would never agree to that kind of relationship. I understand. It makes total sense. It's why I used it to break up with girls, cuz then it's her idea to end it, and generally everyone can still have a good night. It's called Check because in the extremely unlikely event that a girl says, "Oh, yeah, that's cool." I text my friend at the end of the night... "Check Mate," and he will understand.

Ladies, if you feel offended, in my defense I am a guy, and I did say younger and dumber :)

Thank you all for reading and taking the time to support this story with kudos and comments. I feel so awesome to be a good source of entertainment for you all. Thanks and have a great one,

--Grae
**Chapter Summary**

Daphne and Hermione's "date" doesn't go as planned. Draco and Harry

**Chapter Notes**

Hey everyone! I hope we all enjoyed Halloween. I went as Luther and my girl went as Alice, though she doesn't have a familiar dress like Luther does.

This update deviates the norm a bit cause I usually try to keep it to Harry's first person perspective, but I really wanted to write Daphne and Hermione's date, and so I did.

This chap is mostly explanation and set-up, but there will definitely be action coming as soon as next update.

It's 12.5K for those that like to know. Thank you for reading and please enjoy.

---

For their "date" Hermione and Daphne decided on tea and crumpets at Madam Puddifoots. It didn't make sense to actually have a dinner date since they'll only find themselves in the Great Hall eating dinner with the others in a few hours. They were quiet on the way there, partly because attempting to become more than associates was a awkward idea to get used to. They're both very aware a Ravenclaw and a Slytherin hanging out in public without Ares around to stifle any house rivalries is a difficult concept to wrap their considerable minds around. It also doesn't help that every few minutes, anyone who pays attention to rumors and gossip point and gawk at Daphne Greengrass, the Ice Queen, and the top student in Hogwart's, Hermione Granger, who's primarily recognized for holding the title while being muggle-born.

It's certainly not the first time the two have spent time together. During their weeks of training in the month of October, both girls spent a great deal of time alone, meeting in secluded areas to avoid being seen together. Though, they had a few meaningful conversations, the majority of the sessions were simply about learning Occlumancy, as such, didn't require much personal exchange.

So while both girls were silent on their trek to the tea shop, they were comfortably so. They both ignored the occasional cat calls and had an especially close encounter with Isobel MacDougal, Qarinah Bagnold, Nimue Desford. The bullying trinity were on an intercept course with Hermione. Daphne shifted her head slightly, enough to peer at Hermione through the corner of her eye in an effort to gauge what Hermione’s reaction will be. As a Slytherin, words can be just as devastating as the wand, but Ravenclaw generally care little for conflict, normally categorizing it as a waste of time. Daphne has even seen a few speed through the bullying process, and take their abuse offhandedly simply to put it out of their minds and return to studying.
Without Ares or Draco around, which were Hermione's only saving grace, Daphne is more curious about how the top student of their year will respond to her abusers more than the calculated gratitude Ares may feel for her if she stepped in to help Hermione, thereby boosting her appeal to the Green Reaper—her favorite of his nicknames. It makes the most sense to take advantage of every available opportunity, especially with the most direct of her two adversaries currently spending time with Ares. While Tracey assured her Draco would stay in the way, something about Fleur makes her feel like his intervention wouldn't matter. Fleur is so direct, Daphne's nearly a hundred percent certain the half-veela would not mind displaying affection publicly... without shame. The croissant queen is a true challenger.

Still, with no discernible reason why, Hermione is probably the closest to capturing Ares' heart out of the three. Like many other Ravenclaw, the bushy-haired girl was always weak to confront, and with Daphne's network, not impossible to guess she was being abused on top of being bullied. Daphne recognized the pain-filled shame on her face, spotting her exiting the Hogwarts express the end of their third year. It was unmistakable to an observant and knowing mind like Daphne's. The smartest which in their class has come a long way since then, in a large way due to Ares' constant presence in her life, and that'll either cripple the bushy haired girl further, or empower her to meet conflict head on.

Not unsurprisingly, Hermione slouches, near to cowering, as she looks around for help. As a general guide, Daphne tends to believe those who lack the drive to take matters into their own hands will spend a large part of their life looking for a savior; often forgetting their own sense of personal responsibility. Daphne reads her wand at her back, expecting to be collateral damage in whatever these girls have in mind, all the while reaffirming her belief to always be self-sufficient. She can love or rely on others, but she won't ever allow herself to be so dependent on someone to the point it would override her own strength needed to survive through life. She would choose to be alone if need be, and take in a lover every so often, like Madam Zabini.

Hermione suddenly straightens, walking confidently ahead as Hammond, rushes the three girls in a panic, and starts shoving them, none to gently, away from Hermione and Daphne's path without once looking at Hermione. It was an odd thing to see, and Daphne notes the small smile gracing Hermione's face. The rest of the trip up High Street to the tea shop had Daphne pondering what Ares did to force such a change on Hammond, all for Hermione. It led to uncomfortable feelings of rejection and inadequacy for herself; two emotions of vulnerability Daphne would never allow be observed on her face.

Though the tacky, frilly, bow covered shop is a first visit for Hermione, it's as cramped as Daphne remembers from her visits. Hogwarts couples primarily populate the shop, and giving young-in-love couples too much privacy is a risk the establishment is not willing to take, so tables were fairly close together, though Daphne and Hermione don't qualify. Taking note of anyone she recognizes to add to her mental databank, Daphne naturally prefers privacy, so rather than take the open table in the center of the room, they wait for a dirty table by the wall to be cleaned before the two girls take the farther off seats.

Silence stretches and the pressure to fill it with conversation doubles. Finally, Daphne takes a page out of Tracey's doctorate in how to provoke, and asks, “so what's going on with you and Krum?”

Hermione's eyes blink, completely taken as she sits up a little straighter. Internally, Daphne smiles as her gaze automatically analyzes and infers exasperation from the bushy-haired girl, as she asks, “really? No preamble or lead-in?”

“Would you prefer I open with the weather?” Daphne dully asks, her eyes never leaving Hermione.
“I can feel your eyes rubbing against my brain,” Hermione tells her. “You don't have to analyze, you know. This is supposed to be fun.”

“No, this is you proving a point-”

“That we can be rivals and friends,” Hermione interjects.

Hotly, Daphne returns, “And it only cost me...” before slowing her retort to consider them slightly better. Daphne could've been learning more with Ares and keeping Fleur's advancements at bay if Hermione didn't have to prove a point. But like chess, Daphne plays the board, as well as the player and so has enough presence of mind to control her irritation for the possibility of steering away one of her competition. “You realize it's pretty amazing that an international quidditch superstar seems taken with you. You can tell he's interested right?”

Hermione waits a beat for quick suspicion as she asks, “do you want to know as my friend or is this an angle?”

“I am Slytherin,” Daphne answers filing her long blonde hair behind her ear with a manicured finger, acknowledging her rival with honesty by sidestepping what she won't bother denying.

“Well, I'm not,” Hermione returns with conviction. “Nor does it matter, if you think about it. You only need to look to our mutual friend to know why. Like him, I'd love to talk to you about things as long as it's with a friend.”

“Friend...” Daphne hangs her voice on. “You know, I do think there's a possibility we can be friends... far into the future, I should think, when we're both bored and about to die. Can't you see what we are now is so much more interesting.”

“And that is?”

“Honest,” Daphne points out. “Being friends has too many rules. I have to be there for you every time you need it, regardless if I want or can. We have to be understanding of one another regardless how stupid the other is obviously being. We have to compromise even if I want something more than you do, all to preserve the "friendship." No thank you.”

The waitress sets their teas down and after a smile of thank you, Hermione continues, “and Slytherins don't have to deal with that because no one is really friends in the truest sense of the word, is what you're saying. It's like rather than friends, you're associates with aligning interests.”

“Can't deny it's honest, and there's nothing wrong with competing for what you want, especially against someone you're on good terms with. It means you're worthy, valuable, unique; you have a special place in my competitive heart, Granger. But if we were friends who both coveted the same thing, or boy,” Daphne pauses so they understand she means a specific boy. “Than lies, betrayal, resentment, bitterness are sure to follow, and that is so uninteresting.”

“Wouldn't that happen even more if you weren't friends- ah, never mind. If we're honest in the beginning than it's not a surprise later, is it?” Hermione questions, and Daphne nods. “You think at some point, the person claiming to be your friend will choose themselves over you, and so you don't even bother to begin with.”

“It's only a natural part of human nature,” Daphne returns. “If people want to be ignorant of the truth to then only be surprised when the friendship sours, that's fine. I'm not the type to dictate how others choose to live their lives, however, don't expect me to follow the same rules simply because I don't object to their idiocy.”
“Well, then it's a good thing we're here,” Hermione states cheerfully. At Daphne's bemused look, Hermione continues, “I don't accept that premise, not to say that it doesn't have merit, but I don't believe it applies as often as you think it does. I don't think real friends can truly get in each other's way. Ares is Slytherin and I know— we both know, he's selfless when it comes to helping his friends. Just look at what he did for Dobby.”

“You're really hung up on that,” a vexed Daphne mentions, having heard Hermione bring that up a few times already.

“It's just so amazing that he even considers house elves, a race of magical creatures most wizards general ignore,” Hermione promotes happily. “He defies social stigma simply to do the right thing. It's just amazing,” she gushes.

“And that's supposed to prove how wrong I have it,” Daphne challenges with a knowing smirk, eager for the fun of an argument. “Have you prepared a list highlighting how I ought to idealize my pragmatic thoughts and action despite how unforgiving the world actually is?”

Hearing the jest behind her love of cataloging tasks, Hermione huffs before irritably mentioning, “while I'm certain I don't have to explain the benefits of making lists, such as how it promotes order, manages tasks by priority, organizes time, allows you to feel productive and helps relieve stress, a list won't be necessary this time.”

“Oh no,” Daphne ponders humored by Hermione's uniqueness. “Why's that?”

“Well, if I did have a list, there'd only be one thing on it,” Hermione states happily. Daphne tilts her head curiously, waiting no longer than second before Hermione satisfies her curiosity. “Be Daphne's friend.”

Daphne deflates, not let down, but unwilling to show how baffling this conversation is to her. “There's absolutely no reason to be friends. We actually have more reasons not to be friends than to the contrary.”

“I still want to,” Hermione returns with confidence that actually annoys Daphne.

“Why?”

“I'll admit it started with Ares. He trusts you, and I trust him. That opened me up to the idea that I can trust you as well. Being friends is the logical next step.”

“There's nothing logical about that, and he doesn't trust me, at least not completely,” Daphne corrects. “Actually he doesn't trust anyone, except Draco, which is always a blow whenever I think about it. I'd even go so far as to argue, to some extent, he's not suppose to. With all he knows and his station in life, it's an unrealistic expectation to have, especially considering his trauma.”

“He trusts you enough, which is more than enough for me,” Hermione answers. “Also, I do actually enjoy spending time with you. You can be challenging of course, but even then, it's not out of malice and I've always enjoyed rhetoric. I think in time, our communication and trust will only grow, so why not a little efficiency with what is a high probability?”

“A high probability...”

“Don't you like Ares?” Hermione clearly asks. Daphne doesn't answer and so she continues, “I've already said I'm not leaving, regardless of what may come. Before Ares, there would be all sorts of reasons not to be friends with you, or any Slytherin. Now, I can't think of a single reason why not.”
For a long time Daphne is silent, her countenance betraying none of her fluffy thoughts. Daphne is about to take a biscuit when she notices a beetle on one. Grateful for the distraction, Daphne raises her hand. When the attending asks what she can assist them with, Daphne shows her the beetle.

“Oh I do, apologize about that. I'll make sure to remove that from your receipt. I'll be back with another plate.”

It isn't until she returns with another plate of biscuits, does the beautiful blonde concedes by responding, “In the event you do become Minister of Magic, it would only make sense that, as an Unspeakable, we would have a workable relationship-“

“Do you mean friendship?” Hermione cuts in with a small smirk.

With squinted, humored eyes, Daphne clarifies, “positive work-” when Hermione interrupts again.

“How about favorably close,” Hermione suggests.

Daphne huffs, head turned but amused as she states, “you're just so weird.”

“You're a good person Daphne,” Hermione declares after a sip of her tea. “It's not my fault I can see that.”

Daphne doesn't like hearing Hermione speak so bold with such a piercing opinion of her. It forces Daphne to ponder how she might inevitably disappoint the Ravenclaw one day, and she doesn't like it. Clearing her head of unnecessary thoughts, Daphne returns to her first question, “so, you and Krum.”

“Oh for Merlin's sake,” Hermione groans, to Daphne's satisfaction. “Fine, what would you like to know?”

“He's seems quite taken with you,” Daphne starts. “How'd you manage that?”

“I didn't manage anything,” Hermione responds. “He'd come to the library often, which I only noticed because of the noisy fans that would follow him. Can you imagine? Noise... in the library? Madam Pince was livid, and not having any of it. One day he asked me a question and I helped him. That is quite literally all of my involvement.”

“Hmm, it's certainly strange,” Daphne states. “He likely has a type for the quiet ones. You certainly contrast his usual rabid base of fan-girls; maybe he likes that you aren't a rabid fan-girl. Are you going to give him a shot? He seems to genuinely care.”

“...Can I be honest with you,” Hermione responds, and Daphne can easily note her tone is serious, very near desperate. “And this is like a step through the threshold of my trust.” Daphne simply nods, pushing away her fears of being intimately trusting. “There are only two boys I wholeheartedly trust, and one of them is largely because the other boy trusts him.” It's not difficult for Daphne to imagine why Hermione might be hesitant toward male company other than Ares and Draco. “I sometimes get nervous, even though I know it's completely silly since I don't actually believe Viktor would do anything to me, but... it's, I don't know... an insistent unease.”

“It's the pains of healing,” Daphne quickly and confidently tells her. It's not the first time she's heard this type of account, mostly from unlucky Slytherin girls. The worst of the Slytherin boys were, for the most part, only in the initial stages of becoming rapists, content to simply force a girl to pleasure them with their mouths. In the time it takes for the boy to become comfortable with taking everything else, a snake learns to protect herself, or die in a worse way than death. Guarding her mind and emotions from her own horrors, Daphne continues, “that anxiety is no different than
an over-sensitivity to a very real possibility, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. It's a form of clarity that's certainly hard to handle, but it's not wrong.”

Hermione quietly asks, “...how much do you know?”

Taking a moment to bring her tea cup to her lips, Daphne eventually answers, “enough to feel sorry.” Hermione nods her head, taking a long solitary time to recall and reabsorb her shame in the wake of learning another person is aware of her past abuse. “Actually,” Daphne draws Hermione back. “There is something we do need to talk about.” The Ravenclaw silently asks with her eyes what that might be and Daphne responds, “we need to take control of Hogwarts.”

Forcing away her disgrace with her occlumancy, Hermione's eyes bug, surprised, and responds, “okay, I don't follow.”

Daphne casts Muffliato, exactly how Ares taught her, but even still, she leans forward. Hermione mirrors Daphne to listen as the beautiful Slytherin reveals her inner thoughts. “We both know Ares is exceptional, but we're no slackers either.” At Hermione's nod she continues, “As of right now, there's not a lot we can actually help him with; the goblins, the ministry, the unknown danger targeting the Flamels, Dumbledore's fetter on Nova.”

“It's frustrating isn't it?” Hermione asks. “I want to help him as much as he's helped me, continues to help me, only to realize I'm not smart enough or strong enough to do anything for him. It's aggravating how powerless I am to help my friend.”

“What if there is something we can help him with,” Daphne asks.

“...Such as Hogwarts,” Hermione asks though mostly to herself.

“Hogwarts,” Daphne repeats. “We can make Hogwarts a better place for him to stay. Think about it, his education up to this point has been mostly home-schooling, and clearly, dangerous real world experiences. Coming here should be better, and yet, he's dealing with one thing after another; inadequate education, bullying gangs, the basilisk that nearly killed you two years ago, Death Eaters posing as professors, acromantulas nest that is, for some reason, located an arm's length away from the school. It's a lot, isn't it? I'll admit we can't do much about the acromantulas, basilisk, or death eater, but the education and the bullies, we can affect those things.”

Hermione's brows furrow in deep concentration. Daphne can tell the girl is eagerly mulling over the probabilities of tackling this particular problem when the bushy-haired girl states, “I feel like such an idiot for not thinking of this myself. I think we need to do this. I want him to be happy here. He deserves it.”

“He does,” Daphne agrees, withholding her internal desire that it should be with her, and the rest of their time is spent brainstorming how to align Hogwarts to a home Ares can be comfortable if not happy to be in.

The two fourth years are walking back to the carriages after leaving the tea shop when out of a passed alleyway, Isobel, Qarinah and Nimue quickly ambush the girls with drawn wands. A stinger hex each from Isobel and Qarinah keeps a stunned Hermione and Daphne from bringing out their own wands as Isobel commands them, “in the alley!” Outnumbered and without means of defense, the pair have little choice but to do as they're told. Isobel seems extremely agitated as she yells with a hushed tone, “now!”

Isobel leads them in as Nimue and Qarinah bring up the rear, stopping at the halfway point of the alley. “Imagine running into my favorite mudblood and the ice bitch of Slytherin,” Nimue
proclaims to all.

“If we don't make it back to the carriages, they'll leave without us,” Daphne points out.

“Shut up,” Isobel irritably states. “We know Flamel and this cunt had something to do with Hammond,” Isobel aggressively continues. “We can't get to him, but you two, well, you'll just have to take his punishment in his stead.”

“And how do you expect that'll turn out for you,” Daphne calmly asks, not at all acting like someone at wand point. “You really think Ares'll just let that go? Do you think he'll ignore as much as you've already done? I suggest you put down your wands and let us leave in peace while you still can.”

“You're not going to say shit,” Qarinah claims from behind them. “Or we'll make your life hell.”

“How original,” Daphne calmly comments. “Slytherins hear far worse than that from their parents.”

“I'm no idiot. I don't care what you think Ares can do,” Isobel growls, only just keeping her anger in check. “He can't be everywhere at once. I'll catch you and I'll make sure some lucky boys gets to bruise your babymakers. I even have a camera,” Isobel grins manically. “Since I have you now, how about we start by taking a picture?”


“Good question,” Isobel states moving closer to the two. “How about we take a picture that shows what hungry little dyke sluts they are.”

Qarinah hops on the communal thought. “Then everyone'll believe us when we tell them how you both just love eating each other out-”

“But,” Nimue interjects. “Not as much as they like getting fucked by several dirty cocks.”

“At the same time of course,” Isobel adds somewhat calmly, as if the idea of abusing others is therapeutic to her. “But before I take the picture, we should see what we're working with. Come girls, practice makes perfect,” she demands, looking at Hermione, who's done this at their behest before. Isobel nods in Daphne's direction, expecting the smartest Ravenclaw to fall in line with her abuser's demands. When Hermione doesn't move, Isobel steps overbearingly close, jamming the end of her wand hard against Hermione's chest, glaring at the girl. Though willing to be defiant to her past abusers, Nimue and Qarinah each strike Daphne with a stringer hex, eliciting a sharp yelp from the beautiful blonde, pushing her a step closer to Hermione. It's more than likely these bullies can cast worse spells well before Hermione or Daphne can reach their wand, and so, with obvious reluctance Hermione turns to a wincing Daphne, much to the laughing amusement of their abusers.

Despite the pain of the hex, Daphne is stoic, and to Hermione, clearly unwilling to give these girls the satisfaction of feeling scared or vulnerable. It actually gives Hermione strength. From the beginning of her abuse at the hands of Isobel and her goons, Hermione never put up grit, spirit, or fortitude like the blonde standing before her is displaying. In the not too distant past—mere months ago—Hermione would've fought meekly, cried, and pleaded for them to stop. But even under the control of others, Daphne is nothing like that, which makes her heart swell proudly for having such a friend. Luna is a great friend in her own way, but Daphne is intricately more motivating. Simply by the way the beautiful blonde stands her ground against three wands eager to deal damage at point blank range. It clears Hermione's ruffled mind.
Daphne fully expected Hermione to do what they said. These girls are more than a physical threat, they're a cerebral one, and Hermione's suffered their mental abuse far more than their physical one. But Daphne knows she has ruthless pride within herself, enough so that when Hermione takes a step forward, Daphne instinctively takes a step back, absolutely hating the idea of surrendering like this. The defiance is not without it's consequence that she easily felt via the two stinging hexes striking the center of her back, and worse, the base of her neck, causing Daphne to cry out from the pain.

“Bitch, we can do a lot worse,” Nimue yells, as Qarinah adds, telling the others, “I told you this ice cunt is too stuck up. We should just stuff her with her own wand and take the pics like I said.”

Daphne's anger easily heightens, quelling the weakening sting of pain, as she turns a growling face behind her. Before Daphne can lose more control over herself, Hermione takes hold of Daphne's face and forces the girl's storming, ice cold eyes to look into her stern chocolate irises. “Hey, it's not okay, but look at me,” Hermione pleads with her. “Just look at me.”

“Should we just do Rinah's suggestion, I wonder,” Isobel playfully wonders aloud for Hermione's benefit. “It's devious even for me...”

Hermione swallows, understanding Qarinah's cruelty as something far more vile than even Isobel tends to suggest. Focusing on an irate, and defensive Daphne, Hermione calmly conveys, “forget about them. Close your eyes. Daphne, close your eyes. Take a deep breath, and please, and trust in me.” Daphne has fire in her belly, but she also has intelligence in abundance. With great effort, she limits the instinct of her fight, breathes a few deep breaths before closing her eyes enough to darken and blur Hermione's near face. So it's not surprising when Hermione tilts her head—her lips—up, enough to level her own, and places a rather chaste kiss on hers.

Daphne barely even registered their warmth surrounded by the cold of the alley before Hermione pulls away, causing Isobel to sting Hermione with another hex. The yelp from her opens Daphne's eyes to see Isobel angrily grab Hermione by her bushy hair and roughly yank back to then place the tip of her wand against Hermione's neck. Hermione's muffled yelp is ignored as Isobel practically yells, “you know damn well how I like my fucking dyke shows, you filthy mudblood cunt! If you don't eat that ice cunt's face exactly how I like it, we'll definitely do Rinah's idea.” Isobel shoves Hermione forward into Daphne who catches her, before adding, “Now get to it you cunts. We don't have all bloody night!”

“If Flamel is any sort of friend, well, with the photos we take, he'll pay one way or another,” Nimue mockingly adds.

Placing her right hand on Daphne's perfectly aristocratic jaw line, Hermione leans in without hesitation, lips up and full, pressing them, gently at first, against Daphne's slightly parted, unexpected lips. Soft, was Hermione's first thought of them, while Daphne couldn't help but note how warm her brown-eyed friend's full lips are; in fact her entire presence is easily warming in the cold November air. Hermione's button nose is the only cold part to the touch, but before Daphne can get used to the idea that she's not only kissing another girl, but a girl within her social circle, Hermione tilts her fore to the side, arching in for a deeper connection, a press-in that surprises Daphne a moment before closing her eyes and attempting in vain to settle her rising heart rate.

Daphne allows Hermione to claim her, to take the lead despite how docile it makes her feel; An easy decision for Daphne as it seems Hermione is more experienced. Daphne oddly notes the smacking, suction noises their kiss announces to their audience as they both grow more comfortable in the intimate act. The Slytherin beauty is surprised once more when Hermione rests a firm hand on her waist and pulls the Ice Queen in, pressing Hermione's soft breast against her
own, heating her cleavage, neck and cheeks in the process. After long heart pounding seconds, Daphne barely hears Nimue, or possibly Qarinah gloat, “looks like they like it.”

Daphne vaguely wonders if this makes her submissive and weak to their attackers. In a word her strict mind answers, yes. Her father would never be in this position, neither would Ares. But when her mind ponders the actual act itself, she knows she doesn't dislike it. It's simply easier for Daphne to ignore the three older Ravenclaws in favor of Hermione's impressive pleasantness.

“Grab that sexy little ass!” Isobel yells, and immediately, Hermione lowers the hand on Daphne's waist to grip a hand full of soft yet firm posterior. Daphne's eyes snap open in shock as does her mouth, to which Hermione dives inside and slips her tongue in. Daphne's heart rate accelerates even faster than their morning runs as Hermione plays with her tongue while simultaneously massaging her round bottom. Both girls are pressed close enough to swell the satin dough of their cleavage and feel the others hardening nipples.

Daphne can barely think over the sounds of their moist kissing anymore—how they got there, why she's kissing another girl, should it feel pleasant, if not nice—when Hermione removes the hand palming Daphne's face, takes hold of Daphne's hand, and forces it to wrap around Hermione's waist. It's the most surprising move yet, and not because it presses them further into each other, but because it soberes Daphne of the building haze considerably.

Hermione pats Daphne's hand twice because Hermione had placed it over her wand under her clothes. Hermione herself then wraps her hand around Daphne's waist and Daphne can tell the academically brilliant girl found where Daphne keeps her wand. Though clearer of mind, when Hermione breaks contact with her moist, vibrating lips for her neck instead, Daphne wonders why the bushy haired girl is so experienced and pleads the opportunity they're waiting for presents itself soon.

Hermione is sucking on the sensitive, long muscle just underneath her jaw, eliciting a quick exhale carrying the slightest of moans from Daphne's parted lips when Isobel chants, “That's it slut, get at her. Nim, the camera.”

The moment Nimue moves to take the camera out of her bag and place it in Isobel's extended hand, is the best opportunity both Hermione and Daphne know they're ever going to get. With deft hands, Hermione and Daphne reach and whip out each other's wand handle. Though the wands are an odd magical fit for the girls, like wearing the right glove on the left hand, they have enough anger to make due. Hermione and Daphne both call, “Depulso!” as they so often practice, to great affect, banishing Qarinah and Isobel several yards before they can react. Nimue drops the camera to bring her wand back to proper attention, but before she can cast a curse, Hermione—also within point blank range—charges, seizing the bully's wand hand, and shoves the girl hard, calling for, “Daphne!”

Angry enough to turn a tree to ash, Daphne casts a strong, “Depulso,” hitting Nimue square in the chest. The bully is knocked back several yards.

With all three girls down and groaning in pain, Hermione collects their wands with Accio as Daphne eventually cools down enough to quietly growl, “Hermione, if you're not thinking about revenge, than we most certainly can never be friends.”

Breathing heavily from the excitement, Hermione simply responds without thought, “acquaintances who revenge together, stay together,” causing an unladylike snort from Daphne.

They turn to each other in unexpected decent mood despite being stung and held at wand point. When Daphne's arctic blue eyes fall on the red of Hermione's juicy pink lips, she clears her throat
and looks away, stating, “we, uh, should, um, break their wands. It won't be enough to satisfy my retribution, but it's a good place to start.”

“Isn't that...” Hermione starts to ask an ice cold Daphne, but then reconsiders. “I mean, they've never broken my wand,” is all Hermione feels like objecting.

“I've witnessed Ares defeat Fleur, Krum, Draco, Khan, Boyle, Yaroslav, and a host of Slytherin upper years, and the only wands he ever destroyed were the ones that were used with extreme prejudice to bully and intimidate him or others. That's not what wands are for, and they shouldn't have one if they can't even understand that. If you don't want to-”

“No, no, I'm fine. You had me at Ares,” Hermione states, giving Daphne Nimue's wand and keeping the other two for herself. At Daphne's curious eye, Hermione explains, “I feel I've earned the right to break Isobel's wand, and Qarinah was the most horrid of her underlings.”

“They can't take a hit can they,” Daphne notes walking over to Nimue who, like the other two, is clutching her chest and coughing as she haggardly breaths.

“Well, we are pushing the level eight dummy now, and these girls weigh nothing compared to that,” Hermione responds as she uses her foot to push on Qarinah's shoulder, rolling the girl on her back so she can see Hermione.

Using more force than she thought it would take, Daphne snaps Nimue's wand—the first wand she's ever snapped she thinks—in front of her without hesitation. Nimue cries out profanities for a couple seconds before the pain at her chest shuts her tirade down. “Don't even think-” is all Qarinah manages before Hermione, with a gleeful smile she couldn't keep down, breaks her abuser's wand with a loud, satisfying SNAP. Her chocolate eyes dilate as she relishes the wave of euphoria that cascades from the tip of Hermione's head down to her very toes. After her moment of tranquility, Hermione's eye focus and chocolate irises locate Isobel several yards away behind them, attempting to get to her feet. Hermione and Daphne walk toward the girl, content to wait with perpetual satisfaction as the ringleader of the girl gang finally stands on unsteady feet.

“Don't... you dare... you filthy-” Hermione presents Isobel's wand before the heaving girl, gripping each end, and bends it slowly, adding more and more strength to the arching wood that was not meant to arch. At the sound of microscopic fractures, Isobel painfully yells, “I'm going... to kill you.... some way, somehow, if you-”

SNAP! The satisfaction rushing through Hermione's pleasure center was better than snapping Qarinah's wand. Hermione actually closed her eyes at the pleasurable experience drawing a curious, though accepting look form Daphne.

Before Isobel can yell more than, “...YOU STUPI-” Hermione slaps her hard across the cheek, stunning the Ravenclaw into big-eyed silence. “I'm certain trying to kill me will not end well for you, Isobel. Considering all that we've been through these past few months, you're nothing. Insignificant, which I'm certain is your greatest fear. Let me tell you something you already know. I am the smartest witch in our class, and I will continue to do so, because I have more drive than you, I have more motivation than you and I'm never scared to learn more-”

“You're just a filthy-” Isobel can't help but yell before Hermione slaps her again, harder than before.

Continuing as if never interrupted, Hermione tells the bruised cheeked bully, “but what you don't yet realize is that you've already lost, today, for certain, but tomorrow as well, and the day after that, and so on, because you don't scare me anymore Isobel. Quite the opposite, in fact; I pity you.
And for as long as you continue to be like this, you will always be beneath me.”

Tossing the remnants of Isobel's wand on the floor, Hermione leaves without so much as a second glance toward her abuser. Daphne takes a step forward to whisper with an ice cold smile, “she's far too kind. Rest assured, if you do kill her, I will salt the earth with the retched ashes of your entire family. I'll kill you and anything you hold dear, down to your fucking house plant. Go ahead and test me bitch.” Daphne straightens her posture, cold smile ever present, intent on following Hermione. Pausing midway, she stops to pick up the camera and leaves the three girls with a final warning. “In the years to come, I have no doubt you'll remember this day as the biggest mistake of your lives for making an enemy of me.”

Daphne plays an innocent countenance as she meets a suspicious Hermione on the street. “What did you say to her? I hope you didn't sink to her level.”

“I could never sink to her level,” Daphne claims. “I play on far more dangerous terrain to begin with,” she adds with a clear smirk.

Hermione simply huffs some of her bangs of curly hair away, easily dropping the matter, and instead stating, “we'll have to wait for the next round of carriages. Isobel and her lot'll probably be there by then.”

Daphne's smirk widens to a delicate cheek pushing smile as she enlarges her Nimbus, much to Hermione's great dismay. Still, Hermione reluctantly enlarges hers as Daphne states an errant thought, “you know, as far as dates go, I think that was the best one I've gone on.”

Immediately, Hermione's mind jumps to the kiss—the rather heated kiss—they shared, her fluffy brunette hair whipping around as surprised eyes land on Daphne. That reaction enacts in Daphne the same memory and she can't help the blush as she stumbles saying, “no- not... that's not what I meant! I just mean what we did- t-to them! I mean, what we did to them, and- and that's all!”

Blushing herself, Hermione simply hops on her broom and follows behind a flying Daphne, forgetting, for the most part, her aversion to flying.

“I truly do appreciate this Severus,” Remus states with awkward appreciation. In the potions room of Hogwarts, the haggard man accepts the Wolfsbane potion in anticipation of the full moon not long away. “I didn't want to be a bother.”

“It didn't stop you from bothering though, did it,” Snape coldly returns. “In truth, I have a request of my own.”

“Oh, and that is?” Remus asks, placing the potion in his robes.

“Lily wouldn't go into detail but I know you were in service to her house,” Snape starts, linking his hands in front of him. “She mentioned your travels through many different countries. I was curious to know more of the nature behind these travels.”

“If she didn't feel comfortable telling you-” Remus starts to explain when Snape interrupts to be more specific.

“I can assure you I am not asking to circumvent Lily's wishes in anyway,” Snape reassures him. “This curiosity is in no way about her or what she's asked of you.”
“If that's the case than how can I help,” Remus asks.

“In your travels, have you come across any information, no matter how insignificant, regarding the Flamels, their son, Ares, any magical adoptions, accounts of orphaned wizard abductions, private tutors possibly boasting about teaching a prodigy even if the tutor never named who he taught?”

Remus raises surprised brows for the half a second until he realizes everyone's trying to learn more about the origins of one of the greatest wizards Hogwarts has seen since Albus Dumbledore. “Off the top of my head I don't recall any mention on the Flamels until they became a reoccurring staple of the Prophet's diet. It's possible I've come across a few reports regarding missing or taken children, however the grand majority of those were related to muggle kidnapping. If you'll allow me a spot of time, I may have more for you. Sadly, for now, all I can say is I'll have to get back to you.”

“...Muggle kidnappings you say,” Snape repeats, leaning a pondering tone on the avenue of exploration.

“Why are you interested in the Flamels, or is it Ares in particular?”

“Due diligence, Remus, due diligence,” Snape simply puts, wondering how fast Lily will learn of this conversation. It was a risk asking Remus, one with a slim chance of paying off. However, all other sources of inquire have reached an impasse and there's little options left to himself or Dumbledore. Setting his mind to patience, Sanpe asks Remus to, “please contact me if you discover anything,” before showing the former professor out of his class room.

They're walking back from another fruitless night in the forbidden forest. Since Nova can't flame, Harry had decided Draco should hover near enough should anything happen, he wouldn't be too far. It makes progress regress to a crawl from what it once was, since now, they cover half the grounds they had, nor can they flame away from the multitude of dangers in the forest. Where before they would flame back into their dorms, Harry and Draco now must walk back, with Harry relaying his near catastrophic meet with Dumbledore. Chief among Draco's many peeved concerns is blared in surprise... “He wants you to be friends with your brother?”

Harry quickly erects his privacy charms as he chastises Draco, “say it a little louder, Malfoy! I don't think they heard you in the other time-line.”

“So you're really going to do what that manipulative tosser wants? After everything he's done? Are you really ready to jump on command like a good little house elf?"As my master commands,"

Draco mockingly finishes his heated tirade.

“First, you twat, it's late and I'm tired, so I'm going to need you to be a lot less of the prat you excel at,” Harry groans, mildly curious by the stale feeling weighing him down. “Second, I'm not doing what he says. I'm doing exactly what I've been doing since I got here; whatever's needed, which means I don't always get my way. Yeah, I absolutely hate what he did to Nova, and I'd be more than happy to smash his face in for all the bullshite I never had to go through because of him, but that momentary satisfaction isn't worth ruining my plans to kill Voldemort. Nothing is. Not even Nova's very temporary shackle.”

“That's harsh,” Draco huffs in disbelief. Though a Slytherin, even he understands there are just some magical creatures of divinity you don't provoke. “Well than, where's the line?” Draco
genuinely asks. Harry looks at him expectantly, so Draco continues, “there's got to be a line, right? One that says enough is enough. He's already sidelined your phoenix—a freaking phoenix! Merlin, you know what balls you have to have to do that?”

“Balls or conviction,” Harry clarifies to Draco, aware of just how far Dumbledore is willing to sacrifice. “He believes in what he believes to the point he'd risk jinxing his own life. That's not a person who'll roll over easily, no matter how much I yell or how bright green my eyes get.”

“All the more reason not to trust him, much less do what he says,” Draco chimes. “I mean what do we really need him for? He's just getting in the way, making shit harder for us. It was a lot easier getting around professors and centaurs when we can just flame away.”

“You need to start looking past the obvious,” Harry tosses back. “This isn't about trusting him, it's about using someone you don't trust. Slim chance though it may be, there may come a time I need some form of access that he can help with. More importantly, everyone, as a rule it seems, just listens to everything he says. I know I did. He plays that grandfather role to perfection because he IS good, and he IS great, and he protects adults and children alike from big bad evil most are too weak to do anything about. Why wouldn't the Potters listen to a great wizard that keeps them safe; or the Blacks, the Weasleys, or the Aurors for making their jobs easier, the Wizengamot, the professors; damn near anyone who can read would jump if he tells them to. If he was one person in the way of my plans, fine, we could go without, but he's got followers—plenty of them with influence—not unlike Voldemort, and we have to deal with Dumbledore's followers just like we have to deal Voldemort's.”

“I seem to recall you kill or dismember Voldemort's followers, Mr. Green Reaper,” Draco accuses with obvious criticism.

“I didn't mean 'deal with' in the exact same way, Mr. Obedient Ferret,” Harry aggravatingly returns. “I want Dumbledore's people to cooperate with me if I ever need them, or at least, not hinder my progress if Dumbledore manipulates them to do so; the Blacks and Potters specifically. And crazy as this might seem, the old bugger's not all evil; just a self-righteous idiot in power. I'd rather make him see how idiotic he's being than forcibly take that power away, because of the two options, the first one's easier.”

“I don't think there's a wedge strong enough to get a head that big out a wrinkled arse that small,” Draco comments. “And you didn't answer my question. Where's the line? There has to be a point where enough is enough. If not shackling your phoenix, if not nearly letting me, Trace, Granger, Daphne, Perenelle, die horribly to acromantula, or hiring a death eater in disguise he couldn't suss out... what's he got to do before you realize that old dog is beyond learning new tricks? I mean, what legitimate reason does that powerful asshole have to change? There isn't one, is the correct answer. For fucks sake, Severus is my Godfather and I don't even trust him because of Dumbledore. The man's a cancer, and I'm telling you, you need to cut him out.”

Harry can't help a snort-followed-chuckle. At Draco's curious look, Harry conveys, “You know how utterly ridiculous that sounds coming from you?” Draco rolls his eyes as Harry continues to ask, “did you ever, in a million fucking years, think you and I would be working together? How the fuck can you and I have less issues than Dumbledore and I?”

“Simple, he thinks his way is the only way,” Draco comments, drawing from his own past. With sarcasm laced tongue, Draco asks, “but what does he know, right? He's only about a million years old, revered, and powerful; never has to wipe wrinkled arse cuz they lick it clean for 'im. You think someone like that is going to just up and admit he's had it wrong this entire time because you told him? You have a better chance of playing exploding snap with Voldemort.”
“Consider the other options,” Harry prompts. “He's not weak enough to be sidelined unnoticed, quickly or quietly. I could kill Voldemort faster than it would take to outmaneuver Dumbledore. I don't know enough about the political landscape to navigate that tour with any real success. Just like Voldemort, Dumbledore has his spies; it can be a teller, a door man, a newspaper attendant, anyone. Trying without all the necessary background is a battle lost before it even starts, and taking the time to know all the key figures, along with everyone or thing around them, is more time than I'm willing to dedicate to something that could be moot after I kill Voldemort. All of that only makes putting up with him that much more suitable.”

Harry allows a moment to beat as Draco takes that time to consider his words before continuing. “Maybe you want me to kill him instead, because why not? I mean we only have a difference of opinion,” he says sarcastically. “You realize he doesn't know what we know, right? I do actually need things from him he won't willing part with, and wanting him to act a certain way without giving him the reason needed, is unreasonable; and you know I'll never reveal how we got here. I agree with you; the figure head of all that is good and just in magical society probably won't really listen to me. Hell, I'm a murderer, a Slytherin, basically a prince of dark magic. Why would he, or they, allow me free reign to do something I can't really tell them about? That's the mission, Malfoy; destroy Voldemort before he has a chance to destroy lives, and involve as little people as possible. If you thought it was going to be easy, you need to realign your expectations.”

“That doesn't mean we need to accept hardships where we don't have to,” Draco returns. “Dumbledore is in the way, and you know it. Maybe not completely but he's getting closer to that point. Sooner or later he's going to trip us up when we can't afford it, I just know it. What you're doing now isn't good enough.”

“Well, I'm sorry I can't fix this problem for you as fast you'd like Malfoy,” Harry scoffs. “Change like that isn't going to happen overnight-”

“If it happens at all,” Draco interrupts.

“He's not the enemy,” Harry states with exclamation. “He's a giant nuisance at worst.”

“And what is it you need from this nuisance,” Draco asks. “You said you need something from him. What could possibly be worth putting up with his shite?”

“...Two major things,” Harry sighs. “I need to know if I can use Snape's Dark Mark. You already know it has the ability to apparate Death Eaters straight to Voldemort. I hadn't really considered exploring this avenue with regard to Snape before because I thought I'd have my own Death Eater in a cage by now. Obviously life doesn't want me to have fun, or I'd have one by now. The possibility of Snape learning of his location could be huge... which is not going to happen without Dumbledore's compliance.”

“Well, when I had the mark, we could apparate to his side whenever he called,” Draco agreed. “We could also tell if he was near enough by the mark's contrast and by how much it hurt. So if he were back, or nearby, Severus would know. Still, not absolutely necessary. What's the second thing?”

“Aside from certain smaller inquires only he can explain, I have some idea where the diary is,” Harry answers. “The locket, Nagini, and the diary are the last ones. The locket I'm hoping to find in Black Manor during the break, without having to involve Sirius—unless absolutely necessary. Nagini I'm sure will be with Voldemort so I... or you, will kill it before I finally gut the psychopathic parasite. The diary is the last piece I need. The diary ties into Hardwin, Ginny and Dumbledore. Lastly... I want to know what happened that night, and... and what happened to this time-line's Harry.”
“You really willing to put up with that righteous praise-whore for a few answers to a couple of questions? Isn't there another way to figure all that out? Can't you ask your mother?”

“...I'm sure you can guess how unsettling that sounds let alone to actually do—I'd probably combust on the spot from sheer anxiety. Also, there's no proof what she knows is the truth. The world doesn't know about a second Potter son. There has to be a reason for that. Ideally, I'd hear both perspectives and line them up to see what sticks out. But more than that, I don't think she has anything to do with the diary.”

“You don't know that,” Draco challenges. “She might have it. Hardwin or the ginger could've given it to her.”

“Her name is Ginny and the possibility of that is low,” Harry counters. “We know the roosters were killed—that was likely Ginny—and Myrtle said, to her knowledge, no one entered the chamber, especially not Hardwin. Ginny's alive and not possessed so we know Hardwin didn't have to rescue her from the diary, but I'll give you one guess who put that ward on the chamber's entrance?”

“Dumbledore,” Draco answers in recollection. “So that's why you think he has it.”

Harry nods, explaining, “it's a good, if not the best, reason for us NOT to do anything too reckless, even if Dumbledore does deserve it. I need that diary more than I want to hit him.”

“Even if we play nice, even if we're his most loyal arse-lickers, I hope you're not expecting him to just give it to you, the eminent Reaper of Slytherin?”

“Of course not,” Harry frustratingly answers, before annoyingly adding, “and don't call me that. I doubt he'd give it to anyone, but I have a fair idea where it is which tells me, more than anything, why he felt he needed to bind Nova.” Draco's eyes widen with mild surprise as he waits for the answer to his speculation. “If I wasn't so angry at the time, I might've seen his play earlier but, well whatever. He bound Nova, a phoenix that he recently learned can apparate anywhere within the castle that I've been to, such as, the infirmary, the chamber, our dorm rooms, Snape's office, or Dumbledore's-”

“Fuck me, his office,” Draco exclaims. “Which he'd know since he has a phoenix as well. You really think he'd go so far as to stymie your turkey so you couldn't access his office?”

“Why take the chance,” Harry asks him. “Hogwarts is a fortress, his fortress, which means he probably keeps anything and everything of value close, including the diary. You also have to consider, he probably doesn't like me, or at the very least, doesn't trust me. From his perspective, I'm a piece in this game of his that he can't move, can't control, can barely predict, who knows intimate details about Voldemort and uses dark magic on a regular basis. I'm as big a hindrance to his plans as he is starting to be to mine, so, once he learned Nova can flame, he likely thought he needed to neutralize the threat of being breached.”

“Then... then that means he'll never take it off,” Draco reason slightly disgusted.

Almost angrily, Harry begrudgingly explains, “it took me far too long to realize his promises were just bags of shit flavored air, but yeah. I reckon he isn't about to let my phoenix free to roam about his nest. I'm making nice with Hardwin because from the beginning, I'd always intended to, but I completely expect some excuse as to why he can't take it off even if Hardwin and I do clique.”

“That sneaky fucking tosser,” Draco exhalas. “Gryffindor my arse, he's a total Slytherin! I mean I'm actually impressed. Keeping you immobilized and getting you to watch out for Mini Potter...
And you still want to work with that!?”

Harry lets out a deep exhale, before firmly answering, “there is a line, Malfoy, and as infuriating as it is unreasonable, he just hasn't crossed it yet, because I'm also considering the diary, the next big step. Oddly enough, the professor just needs to learn. If I can't get him to see reason, than I'll absolutely sideline him, but for now, it's for the best, whether we like it or not, to weather all the shite he's making us shovel through. Because killing Voldemort is more than worth it.”

Exasperated, Draco lets out a huff of agitated air, commenting, “up against Voldemort and Dumbledore... I don't think I ever want to be you,” he easily admits aloud, more to himself than Harry.

Harry snorts humorously. “Like you'd ever have the goods to even qualify,” Harry mocks.

Rolling his eyes, Draco sarcastically lips, “oh, I really lost out there, didn't I. Reckon I'll just have to suffer being rich and handsome, living a long life with a beautiful bird happy to butter my biscuit whenever I want. Yeah, you really won that contest.”

“No contest worth winning would ever include having to deal with your shite every day,” Harry returns. “You're like a last kick when someone's already down.”

Exhaling pent up stress, they both take a moment to feel the joy of being normal toward each other before Draco eventually asks, “So can you get that curse ward off her leg?”

“I can't see the runes, nor have I figured out how to see them,” Harry starts. “I can't cut it off, burn it off, or force it off without actually being Dumbledore. He likely used the Elder wand, which makes it exorbitantly more indestructible. It won't degrade by lesser magic or poison. Well, basilisk venom does disintegrate some of it, but oddly enough, the material repairs itself, and I'm not entirely sure how it does that yet, unless I can see the rune scheme. Short of dousing her entire foot in basilisk venom—which I will not attempt as I'm not a hundred percent sure it'll work—the material just reconstructs itself.”

“What if you polyjuice into Dumbledore?”

“Only imitates physical appearance, not magical signature,” Harry bluntly replies.

“Why don't you just blast your phoenix to ashes,” Draco suggests. Harry's neck stiffens in surprise as wide eyes turn to Draco. “What?” he defends. “She's a phoenix, she'll come back-” he's cut off by a gust of wind that messes his hair as he turns away from Nova.

“Don't worry Nova,” Harry calms his familiar. “I'd never do that to you. Her deaths have to happen naturally or else it stunts her growth you callous tosser. And it's only a matter of time before I figure- ...what are they doing here?” Harry cuts himself off as he focuses in on the entrance of the castle. Draco follows his gaze as he fixes his hair, landing on Hermione and Daphne in there workout attire. The girls walk to them as Harry looks up at the night sky, genuinely asking Draco, “how long were we in there?”

“See,” Draco whispers angrily. “I told you Dumbledore's mucking it all up.”

“Why were you two coming out of the Forbidden Forest,” Daphne starts her eyes already analyzing, ready to pick at there response despite the time of morning.

“Good morning,” Hermione says, emphasizing to Daphne the correct manner to greet others before asking with a statement “We saw you coming out of the forest, and you're dressed for hiking.”
Harry exhales, a more domineering side of his brain offering him the option to lie with a high percentage of success, while another fearful, protective side, offers him the option of telling them the truth. As he's tried to uphold after his conversation with Perenelle, he reasons that if Voldemort would choose to lie, than he wouldn't. And as he's tried to do after his talk with Draco, they, along with Luna, Fleur, Perenelle, and Nicolas are his safe place... a safe space he's training to the best of his ability to defend themselves. Draco lets Harry take the lead, and he concisely and efficiently answers, “there's a wraith killing unicorns for their blood we reckon is actually a shade of Voldemort.”

The single blink of wide-eyed, stunned girls is the only response Draco and Harry observe for several seconds before Draco adds, “we've been hunting it whenever we can since Samhain, but I only ran into it once.”

Hermione's astounded mind grasps at any information to respond with, replying with, “y-you mean Halloween.”

“Our culture and traditions predate that monstrously superficial, commercial ‘holiday,’” Draco proclaims, conveying his contempt for the holiday with quotations.

“You saw V- the dark lord,” Daphne quickly asks. Like Hermione, Daphne isn't completely scared to use the Dark Lord's name, but when taken completely aback by news someone very close to you is hunting it, she diverts to comfortable habit.

“Well, it was a cloaked being;” Draco starts content to answer all questions. “And it was dark so I didn't get the best look. But it was sucking the blood of a unicorn.”

“There's an extremely terrible magical backlash for killing divine magical creatures like a unicorn or a phoenix,” Hermione notes aloud. “Though why would you think it's... him.”

“Voldemort?” Harry pointedly asks, wondering if enough time has passed, that he can depend on Hermione's occlumancy to reveal more. It's only been a little under two months, but she's the smartest witch he knows with the combined help of Daphne, himself, and Nicolas to coach her. Though he's curious if this information will help them. Harry knows they would rather know than not know—they tell him enough times—but who doesn't say that until they know the awful truth? So far he's only explained events that have already come to pass, and Death Eater's acting on Voldemort's cause. They're still in the dark about most of it and he struggles with needlessly darkening their souls with this. “I have my reasons.... which I'll share with you later tonight, after I've checked your occlumancy.”

Hermione's face blushes with excitement to the point she forgets to ask a follow up question he knows she always has. Daphne asks in her stead. “you really think V-Voldemort- or his wraith, is here? In Hogwarts? How? Why?”

“I'll explain more, unless you prefer to remain blissfully ignorant-” Harry tries and is immediately cut off.

“Oh you mean stupid,” Hermione rhetorically asks. “No, that's not really me... us.”

Daphne nods before adding, “there's something we'd like to discuss with you as well.” Harry turns to her expectantly to which she answers, “we'll wait till later, you know, once I've checked your occlumancy,” she jests. “In all seriousness, it can wait. If you've been up all night, you should get some rest. You look tired.”

“You'll get no arguments from me,” Draco says beginning the walk towards his bed, when Harry
replies, “go ahead and start without us. We'll change and catch up.” Draco slumps his shoulders and leaves anyway, though not to sleep.

Unsurprisingly, the moment he steps into the Great Hall, Harry's the number one article of conversation worn by nearly every student and a few professors. With Daphne beside him, Draco and Tracey talk to each other behind, Harry and his companions glide between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables through the thick mist of hushed conversation gushing from the majority in attendance. It's been a week since the acromantula attack as well as since the grand majority of the school has seen him, which is an eternity of time to tell and retell the epic story of that hellish day. And now the fourteen year old student who dived into the middle of a full field of wizard-killing acromantula is calmly walking down the hall. Pointing, gazing, gossip, Harry ignores it all as he haggardly takes the seat in front of Luna, Hermione, and Krum at the Ravenclaw table.

“Morning,” is all Harry can say to the three as he's struck by the sight of them with unconstrained familiarity. Hermione half eating, half explaining the theory behind aerodynamics to Krum—with an occasional glance toward Harry—Luna, with her large radish earrings, petting Nova. The sight of them shouldn't have any reason to affect him, but it does, and that confuses and angers Harry, to the point he averts his eyes and calls on his Occlumancy to help regulate his emotions for fear he may slip further. Laying his head on crossed arms on the table, Harry's quiet for several long minutes, avoiding breakfast from sheer anger at himself for feeling so much when he has absolutely no reason to. It doesn't make sense to him and his anxiety actually increases when he debates with himself on the agonizing merits of talking to Perenelle about some sort of quick fix for his emotional and mental shake-ups. He can already see her concern rejecting taking such drastic avenues for sensible treatments he doesn't have the time or patience for.

His patience tried and mauled, Harry grabs an apple as he gets up to find peace of mind in the Chamber with Nāga before the start of first period. Turning toward the entrance he spots Fleur walking in with Bill, talking amicably if not cheerfully. More memories, good and it's equivalent terror, flood his consciousness without his consent, and Harry can feel his heartbeat drum much too hard, fast, not unlike it does during his hardest workouts.

Again, calling on his Occlumancy Harry waits a few seconds when Fleur turns to him. They lock eyes as flocks of flapping wings delivering the post enter the Great Hall from on high. Far too inside his head, Harry ponders about their kiss, the meaning behind Fleur's last words to him, 'thank you;' as well as her absence this morning during their physical training, before abstemiously observing his unspoken answer; Bill. The tall and handsome redhead turns to Harry, likely curious about Fleur's gaze. They are a picture; nostalgic and cherished. It's only then Harry realizes his gaze on Fleur must've passed the point of polite acknowledgment to invasive awkwardness.

Fortunately Daphne places a firm grip on his arm, calling his attention to the beautiful Hedwig dropping off his post from the Flamels secured mailbox. Momentarily relieved to see his avian friend, he spots the package clutched in her talons. It's a brown box he automatically checks for curses before fixing his snowy owl a hearty plate of bacon. She's been working hard everyday dealing with all his mail, especially after each events he happened to have saved lives.

“What is it,” Daphne curiously asks as he looks in the parcel. With his occlumancy in heavy use, it's hard to convey any expressive interpretation on his blank face. Harry himself is very surprised by the contents of the package, enough to bend a small wrinkle of skin above his brow on the hard mask of his face. 'It's smart to bundle them all,' Harry thinks oddly enough reminiscent of a Trojan horse. Putting these red envelopes inside a larger package would skirt rejection as Harry, much less Hedwig would not have accepted them if they were sent individually.
“Smart,” Harry states, drawing his friends curiosity as he lifts a handful of howler's addressed to Ares Flamel. There are a half dozen of the cursed audio tormentors. Harry looks around the Great Hall as it had grown silent. Apparently far too many students pay attention to him. "Or maybe some of them knew," his mind ponders.

“What are dhey,” Krum asks, observing the quiet trepidation around the hall.

“...Howlers,” Hermione quietly states above the eruption of whispers.

“If you're ever of a mood to walk around with a painful ringing in your ears for half a day, this is the most delectable way of doing so,” Luna quixotically informs Krum, who only grows confused, likely curious as to why anyone would be in a mood to experience that.

Unbothered and happy for a distraction, Harry inspects the howlers one at a time without opening them, diluting clues for his mind to play with. Most are cleanly written which means some have a deft hand at calligraphy while others feel impatient. "One writes fast or often, one enjoy writing judging by the large loops. He estimates three or four people's hand writing. Howlers aren't terribly expensive but most would rather spend the money on a good treat or clothes, accessories, good tomes, or many other things, which says they have money to spare or are simply that determined. As there are a lot, it's likely both."

Harry turns to the Slytherin table and spots a few smiles at his predicament—older years—but most seem observant rather than expecting. He doubts Hufflepuff had anything to do with it, though his paranoia does comment that would be a good cover. There are two tables in Harry's observance that seem happy by his terrible delivery: Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. Harry knows right off the bat that this isn't Fred or George's style, and the Gryffindors as a rule, enjoy any and all Slytherin misfortune whether they are the cause or not.

What clinched his suspicions on Ravenclaw culpability was that Hermione, Luna, Daphne, Tracy, and Draco all soon receive their howlers, though in their case, one each. Gryffindor's rivalry is with Slytherin, and while Fred and George don't discriminate when they prank others, as a whole, the house of the brave don't tend to target Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. Though clearly he's the target, they didn't ignore the Slytherins seated at the Ravenclaw table or those that associate with them.

With a huff and mild aggravation, Draco genuinely asks Harry, “why do you have to attract this shite first thing in the morning?” It was an irrational question Harry would only dignify with an irritated look toward Draco.

“I heard they only get worse if you don't open them right away,” Tracey nervously comments, looking at the red screamer addressed to her in her shaky hand.

“I suppose they've completely giving up their sanity,” Daphne ominously verbalizes, staring at her own howler. Harry notices Hermione's eyes travel down the table to abusers that have grown far too daring.

“Aren't you going to open them?” Isobel angrily calls out to the group. “They're probably too scared!” Qarinah adds with just as much anger. Harry notices Nimue just looks glum and distant.

Harry also notices Perenelle’s concern and appreciates her not rushing to him, however McGonagall does get up and starts making her way to them, professor Flitwick following behind her. With the mystery mostly resolved in his mind, Harry takes all of the howlers in the package, then grabs Luna's, Hermione's, Tracey's, and Daphne's howlers adding it to the thick stack in his hand. “Wh-” Draco starts, cutting himself off to look at Harry as if to ask, what about me? Harry rolls his eyes and quite reluctantly takes Draco's howler as well—it nearly hurt him to do so.
“Nova,” Harry calls extending his hand full of howlers. A couple flaps of her beautiful black wings, Nova reaches and clutches all the red envelopes. Harry takes a bite of his apple as Nova effortlessly rises near enough to the magical ceiling so as to avoid endangering anyone. Unbeknownst to all except her master, Nova erupts into a brilliant ball of majestic fire. The heat of Nova was scorching and instant, so hot in fact, hearing the flame throttle out of her feels humid within the ear.

Harry himself is a little surprised by the intensity of the burn, giving him the distinct impression that Nova is angry herself. Whether she's angry for the prison forced on her foot, or howlers sent to her master, Harry couldn't distinguish, but the magically divine creature, with her legendary magic, is far more potent than any little enchantment some third rate wizard performed on the post. All the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaw directly under Nova, as well as Daphne, Tracey, Draco, and Krum, quickly evacuate away to tolerable temperatures, leaving Harry alone, feeling, though withstanding the intense heat.

Nova incinerates their pathetic efforts to bully as she exudes whips of flame with such strength, one might believe a second sun was born in that moment and Harry can see their panic in their eyes as they rush away in fear. He can easily imagine many of them, small and inexperienced to the horrors of the world, have been forced to realize how unsafe they can easily be. They don't know Nova would never hurt them because Harry's not an institution they can willing put all their faith in; Hogwart's is. He can imagine for many of them, the safe place they naturally put their faith in, has failed them, twice, which may mean anything can be scary now, and judging by plenty of panicked eyes, even Nova.

After absorbing the surprise, professors Flitwick, Sprout, Snape, McGonagall, Moody and Dumbledore all bring out their wands as they move to maintain order in the overreacting hall. It didn't take more than five seconds to destroy the howlers. Harry barely managed a second bite of his apple as he starts to leave the dinning hall, more at ease than moments earlier. Nova returns to her natural midnight-feathery state and lands easily enough on Harry's shoulder.

Passing the taken figures of Bill and Fleur, Harry nods to Fleur, employing every ounce of control he has to keep from zeroing in on her full and sensual red lips—the first lips he's kissed in a very long time—with a, “morning,” without stopping. Fleur watches him go, responding with silence. Hoping she didn't notice the color rise in his cheeks, Harry easily admits he'll miss her. He'll miss the bold and unreserved way she speaks her mind, as well as the way she calls him Trouble Star. But he knows, more than anything, she'll be in less dangerous situations without his presence there to attract it. 'And she'll likely end up with Bill again,' Harry's mind lamely, pathetically, tries to cheer him with.

His classes as well as lunch were a haze as he spent most of it in his mind, combing through everything he knows about Voldemort from the time Horcrux-Voldemort supplanted his mind. When he wasn't considering the possible locations of Voldemort's hideouts, he pondered how to retrieve the locket from Black manor—if it is indeed there. When those mental inquiries began to go around in circles, he considered how to deal with the Goblins and the threat to the Flamels. Peppered in sporadically were concerns about his friends and his ongoing debate of whether they would be safer with or without dangerous information. It all made Harry breath heavily and come to no usable action without additional information.

'An exercise in futility,' Harry remembers Nicolas saying once, earlier in the summer when they were making contingency plan after contingency plan.

It wasn't until Defense Against the Dark Arts that Harry stopped juggling all his mental quandaries, completely taken by their new professor. Harry whips around to Draco, drawing Daphne, Tracey
and Blaise's curiosity, and demands to know, “what the fuck is she doing here?”

_Hem-Hem_, Harry hears the familiar high pitched, girlish tone, drastically increasing his aggravation. Draco answers nonchalantly, as the toad in green tweed and fluffy pink cardigan calls for the class of Slytherin and Gryffindor's attention, “oh, yeah, Umbridge is the new defense professor.”

“And you didn't think to fucking tell me that,” Harry gripes as Daphne peers at him in confusion.

“This is her first day,” Tracey tries to mitigate.

“She's not that bad,” Draco reasons, recalling fond memories of wonderful times as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad.... “Oh,” Draco bemoans, realizing his slip into his superiority complex, and easily forgetting how they had made the lives of anyone who didn't fit their ideals miserable.

“Oh,” Harry repeats turning around as Umbridge has the Carrow twins pass out new textbooks.

“I'm getting the impression you don't like her,” Daphne casually tells him as he hears Tracey ask Draco, “how do you know her?”

“She's a sadist,” Harry answers as the class settles for her to begin.

Chapter End Notes

I cut this chapter here because the class with Umbridge would've added another 4-5k and this was already 12.5K. That also means that I have some of that scene already written so hopefully I can write the next update faster.

Thank you all again for taking the time to read my fic. I'd be happy to hear any comments. As always, have a great one,

--Grae
More With Honey, Than Vinegar

Chapter Summary

Increasingly more tired, Harry shares with friends and family, that which is evil and damning to their lives.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Welcome back to another update. I hope you all enjoy it.

Just a reminder, we are getting closer to the first task and the champions are, Ares Flamel, Hardwin Potter, Fleur Delacour, and Viktor Krum.

13K chap for those that like to know

And thank you very much to my Beta, WriteVWrong. Much appreciated especially since you were under the weather :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Settle down my young pupils, settle,” Dolores starts her address in her impossibly childish voice. “Well, looking throughout this room, I’m sure we’re all going to be just the very best of friends.”

At his desk in the middle of the Slytherin side of the room, Harry wanted to throw up already, but he kept control. He needed to, or he couldn't predict how bad the aftermath may be if he lost control of his magic. Sensing her master's distress, Nova softly sings from upon the bird stand between him and Daphne. Only those nearby can hear it, affecting them with a calming serenity as well. Daphne even places a comforting hand on Harry's forearm, offering him a small smile, further helping Harry calm down as the vile, squat of a square woman continues her nauseating agenda.

“The time has come for proper Ministry approved guidance in Defense Against the Dark Arts to be reinstated in these hallowed halls. I am Dolores Umbridge, Chief Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic and our dearest friend, Cornelius Fudge, and your new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor.” She takes a moment to gaze daintily around the large rectangular room, through the rows of Gryffindors and Slytherins. Landing on the Gryffindors, she goes on to explain, “I can see in your inquisitive eyes, some of you are aware that I am now acting in both capacities. A meaningful distinction to note, as it means, for all of you a secure and safe learning environment. No more silly hubbubs while the ministry is here!” she says with a bubbly posture that induces his gag reflex.

Harry surveys the den of students and sure enough, no matter how creepy they might think the
fluffy pink toad is, the prospect of safety is far too enticing to ignore. Lavender and Parvati are even smiling comfortingly to each other. Harry recalls stopping a dark curse from hitting Lavender during his brawl with Crouch Jr, and so can't entirely blame her or the others for wanting to be safe in the "safest" school in Britain.

Umbridge's eyes square on Harry's when she points out to the class, “it also has the added benefit of extending law into Hogwarts under my fair judgment. Why, in some ways, my word holds more clout than that of our illustrious Headmaster’s.” She widens her focus to the entirety of the class, continuing, “And rightly so I should think. Much like a parent is responsible for their child, or a minister is responsible for his constituents, a Headmaster is ultimately responsible for your education, and more importantly, your safety; a task, I must sadly admit, he's grown far to lax to properly meet.”

“Bu- But, none of that was his fault,” Harry hears Hardwin pronounce in Dumbledore's defense. “He couldn't have known any of that would happen.”

Baring her gawky eyes on Hrdwin, her lips tighten to a line before her childish voice responds. “This community's most valuable resource attends this school for seven years before it is their time to contribute. Until that time, it falls upon the responsible institutions to safeguard your well being as you learn to be productive members of society. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Potter, that a parent should do everything they can to protect their child from all dangers whether they are aware of it or not?”

Harry's thoughts immediately conjure images of his long dead parents and can imagine it's the same or worse for Hardwin. The Gryffindor Potter lags for a slight moment longer to reply, and Umbridge tags on, “it must seem quite unfair to you for me to place any blame on the head of the school, what with how much Headmaster Dumbledore seems to favor Gryffindor, awarding you all with points at the end of every year to ensure you win the House Cup, while he so casually takes them from Slytherin.” Immediately, Harry witnesses fierce house loyalty divide the room.

“He's heralded as one of the strongest wizards of this century,” Umbridge continues. “And yet a student- a Slytherin student has had to bare the unwarranted burden of protecting lives that are Headmaster Dumbledore's duty to safeguard. Seems strange doesn't it?” Many of the students are still glaring openly at each other, recalling how Slytherin are still in a deficit regardless of the lives Ares saved, while Gryffindor lead the school in points. “Hem, Hem,” Umbridge fake coughs, drawing more attention as she repeats, “doesn't that seem strange?”

Some nod while Pansey calls out, “it's unfair to have a Headmaster who shows such blatant favoritism!” Adding to that, Nott states, “either Dumbledore's lying about how strong he is, or he just doesn't want to be bothered to save us!”

“That's bullocks and you know it, you slimy snake!” Hardwin calls toward Nott, and Ron was up on instinct ready to back his best mate when he recalls their feud, abruptly shutting his mouth, retaking his seat with a glancing glare toward Hardwin. With additional irritation Hardwin adds, “Dumbledore's the strongest wizard in this castle, and he'd even save you miserable lot!”

“It's been one cock up after another though hasn't it,” Nott throws back, when an incredibly insistent, “HEM-HEM,” calls the ruffled students attention again.

“Now now, we're all friends here,” she announces though Harry could hear how hollow her insincere words were. “While the Headmaster may seem callous in his affection toward the house of the cunning, I feel it is only fair that I award Slytherin five hundred points for Mr. Flamel's distinguished acts of bravery, gallantry, and overall heroism for saving the lives of many in distress at great risk to his own life.”
'She's trying to get the Slytherins to her side,' Harry easily reasons, recalling the Inquisitor Squad from his time-line and how they were mostly made up of Slytherin.

Elated with mob-emotion, Nott leads the charge in clapping for righteous justice—if not necessarily for Harry—easily gathering applause from the majority of the other Slytherins. Arms crossed, intently glaring at Umbridge, Harry doesn't reflect his housemates spirit or motion. Draco follows Harry's lead, and Tracey seemed to take the hint when Daphne didn't join as well. Watching the small glint of satisfaction in her eye, Harry realizes that though he has insulted or ignored her twice that he can remember, he's a Slytherin this time around, and they are her favorite base of natural supporters.

“She doesn't seem so bad,” Daphne comments near enough for Harry to hear, to which he responds, “you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.” She nods in understanding, and oddly enough, without needing to explain more, he can feel she's completely on his side, no matter how reasonable Umbridge is presenting herself.

When Umbridge targets the Gryffindor hardliners who refuse to acknowledge a Slytherin—regardless of deeds of bravery—she innocently asks, “do you not support a brave wizard who saves lives? Is this how your Headmaster would like his students to behave toward one another?”

Harry can tell some of the Gryffindors—Seamus, Dean, Lavender, and Parvati—are unsure and near close to clapping, while Romilda and Eloise have already succumb to peer pressure, though they look slightly ashamed to do so. Hardwin, and Ron hold firm, but cornered, and rather than let it continue, Harry raises his hand, silencing his side of the room.

“Oh, yes of course, Mr. Flamel. I invite you to say a few words,” the square toad happily beams.

“Yeah, are you running for Head of Slytherin House, or were you planning on teaching anything anytime soon?” Harry asks with a believable measure of exhaustion, though jarring enough to silence the room. All eyes are either wearily looking at Umbridge or in stunned awe of him. It's an uncommon sight for a student to be so confrontational with a professor. “Cuz I'm a bit knackered and could use a touch of sleep.”

“...My, my, young man,” she beams in a forced higher pitch. “How very neglectful of your parents, to be so unaware of the proper etiquette required of your station,” Umbridge states with extra sugar in her already disgusting voice. “It isn't your fault, I should think. As your instructor and a ministry official, let me be absolutely clear in stating that rudeness will not be tolerated. That will be your first and last warning.”

‘In for a penny...’ Harry's mind muses as he returns, “as I've told Headmaster Dumbledore, I don't care for this arbitrary personality based point system any more than I care for house rivalries. Award or take as many points as you want, professor. I guarantee you it won't matter if anyone in this classroom—in this school—ever wants to properly defend themselves from mad tyrants like Voldemort—most in the class shudder, but Harry ignores it as he continues, “or his cronies.”

“Mr. Flamel!” Umbridge blares in her sickeningly sweet childish tone. Though focused on her, Harry did notice Hardwin's stunned sights set on him. Friendship with Hardwin is far more possible if he makes his distaste for Voldemort public, hopefully bridging the wide gap between the chasm that is Slytherin and Gryffindor. “Sanctions! I cannot allow you to bring unwarranted fear and panic into my classroom or this castle. I will not have it young man!”

Before Harry can say more, Daphne quickly cuts in, “perhaps you can tell us about these new textbooks, professor?” The touch of concern in her crystal blue eyes ends his next biting retort.
“...Yes, yes, of course Miss Greengrass,” Umbridge speaks on, plastering her stretched smile on her face. “To reiterate, we are safe under the Ministry's watchful presence. I'm certain you would all agree a new curriculum certainly requires a new instructional manual. Now, I would like us all to ponder the importance that is, Ministry Approved defense. These ancients skills born within us, unique to wizarding community must be past down the proper members of every generation, lest we lose what distinguishes us forever. If everyone has their natural place, why waste unnecessary time and effort teaching defense to a witch or wizard whom may have no better qualifications than a shopkeeper, or a stay at home spouse, I ask,” she asks. When no answer is forthcoming from the confused students, she continues, “No, no, the noble profession of teaching must be efficient when we consider who is worthy of the treasure trove that is this knowledge. As such, I've prepared a ministry approved curriculum to best narrow down those among you with the necessary attributes to succeed in Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Isn't that what grading determines, you know, for all,” Daphne asks, her hand up, though quickly scanning through the book.

“Please wait to be called before speaking,” Umbridge staunchly corrects her quickly.

After flipping through one useless page after another, Daphne waits with her hand raised, but Umbridge only responds with the faintest shake of her flabby head, while crunching her wide nose. She continues, “I know how seductive it can seem to hoist your wand bravely toward evil and fight the good fight, however as we've seen these past few months, children should not be burdened with such responsibility. You are all safe now and within proper care, as such, a rudimentary level of defense is all that is needed to brave the few unsavory moments one may experience in life. For those that excel in defense, trust that I will acknowledge you.”

“This is the opposite of education,” Daphne whispers to Harry, continuing, “she's purposely dumbing us down.” He nods absentmindedly, choosing to mentally navigate around thoughts of Fleurs warm, moist lips, and think about befriending Hardwin rather than waste anymore breath on Umbridge.

Quickly skimming through long winded explanations on how to point a wand, Daphne can easily tell this education will do nothing to challenge a novice wizard of Defense, let alone a wizard of Ares’ caliber. Turning enough of her gaze on a somewhat zoned out Ares, she can't help but remember her assertion to Hermione; what they had agreed on in order to help their friend. Education and antagonists. Looking at the squat figure wrapped in ostentatious fluffy pink, Daphne feels a firm stance is necessary, not only for the boy sitting next to her, but for her future as well. Quelling her rising nerves to fortify a strong mask of calmness, Daphne slowly stands to her feet, her chair scratching the floor and drawing the surrounding student's attention.

“Please take your seat Ms. Greengrass,” Umbridge commands with her childish tone.

“I cannot, professor,” she starts, securing her composed mask despite the rapid beat of her heart. After facing Acromantula, this should be nothing but, it's a different type of nerves. Daphne doesn't gravitate toward the spotlight, much like her chosen profession, she prefers to work covertly. But if she must... “If this is the updated educational level of fourth year Defense Against the Dark Arts, I insist on testing out of this course.”

“Unacceptable,” Umbridge gasps, as the room erupts in mild whispering. “Not by any means will I ever agree to this- this folly, young lady! Now take your seat!”

Daphne's cold imposing figure doesn't budge. “I will petition my Head of house, the deputy Headmistress, the Headmaster, the Governors, the Minister of Magic if need be, to avoid wasting hours of my valuable education on material first year students already enter Hogwarts with. This
textbook seems to exalt the theory that the only way to learn is secure and risk free, which is of course impossible. There's a chapter entitled, 'Non-Retaliation and Negotiation,' another entitled, 'The Case for Non-Offensive Responses to Magical Attack.' This is Defense Against the Dark Arts, professor, and yet it seems as if you'd like to discourage the use of any defense against any dark art.”

“Fifty point deducted from Slytherin,” Umbridge calls with a credible measure of ire creeping into her sickeningly sweet tone. “For disrupting class with pointless interruptions. If you don't take your seat this instance and refrain from undermining my authority as your professor and ministry official, not only will you serve multiple detentions, but I will be speaking with your head of house for further suitable punishments.”

Daphne didn't hesitate, and yet waited a moment to answer, “no. It may not seem like it professor, but it isn't my wish to interrupt your lesson anymore than it's my wish to waste my time on a mediocre course. I simply know with a hundred percent accuracy that I will pass any test that stem from this book. Until you've prepared the final exam for me to take, I'll commit to self study.”

Daphne begins to move around a surprised Harry, intent on exiting the classroom when an indignant Umbridge howls, “You will do no such thing! No doubt you feel what lunacy expelled Professor Binns will happen here, but you would be gravely mistaken. You will take your seat this instant, or I can assure you the consequences you'll face will permeate well beyond these walls to your very career. You would do well to recall I am not simply a professor of Dark Arts, subject to the Headmasters scrutiny. I am also the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Magic, and if you ever wish to be anything more than a grounds keeper, you will do as you are told!”

A tense moment holds in near eternity for Daphne and all the other students. Her quick mind easily conceives of all the possible repercussions in the aftermath of this course of action, and the heavy toll this can have on her future. Worst still, how this decision may affect her sister. A decent amount of her father's business is with the Ministry, and should he ever vent out his displeasure, she can't help but picture a crying Astoria taking the brunt of his ire.

The other students are quite surprised, and silent. Regardless of her house, Gryffindors find her just as attractive as any boy from any other house, and now she's standing up to a professor for a better education. More challenging school work would be repulsive to many of the boys if she wasn't so attractive. Many of the girls don't mind seeing the Ice Queen of Slytherin get burned.

Standing full to height, and getting between professor and student, Harry eagerly talks back, “She only asked to test out, an option I know for certain is available since the Headmaster, the Deputy Headmistress, as well as my Head of House offered me the same thing not long ago. Whether you agree with it or not, it's a sensible request and if this year's shown us anything, it's defense against the dark arts is far more important than you or this staff clearly cares to credit it. Since Champions are exempt from finals anyway, I'll just leave in support of my friend.”

“Neither of you are going anywhere,” Umbridge yells taking an aggressive step forward, extracting her wand in the process. “It's clear to me you both pose a dangerous element to the security of this castle.”

Harry's death white wand snaps into place with a flick of his wrist. Though Umbridge had hers pointed at them, Harry didn't feel the need to bring his up. Drawing the most attention in the moderately lite room is the bright glow of his killing-curse, green eyes, fierce in their glare. Some stare stunned at the rumored Green Reaper from the Prophet, while others quickly move toward the walls of the class away from the spell path. “Your only two options are diplomacy or force,” Harry tells her with a smirk. “And neither one will end well for you... professor.” They stare each
other down, though with his magic sight, he can see how her magic hesitates in its patterned motion.

Abruptly, Draco stands, catching a few nervous students off guard, turns to Tracey, who then decides to stand as well and they both start to leave, the silver-blonde announcing, “I'll opt to test out too. Be outside.” Not to be outdone, Zabini—who's magic seems irate to Harry—trails after, then Nott followed by Crabbe and Goyle, and the rest of Slytherin. Harry doubts they truly want to test out, reasoning Slytherin motto to always support the house is the likely cause for their walk out. ‘Khan would be proud,’ Harry muses.

“This will not go unpunished,” Umbridge slowly proclaims, her cold sadism overshadowing the child-like tone of her voice.

“Looking forward to it,” Harry eerily muses. His glowing green eyes leave her and only fade once he's left the classroom and walked down the Serpentine corridor to the stairs leading off the third floor where a group of mostly worried Slytherin are waiting for him.

“We walked out on a professor!” Nott remarks in disbelief. “What are we going to do?”

“If we get expelled, I blame you,” Parkinson starts, pointing at Harry. “The House of Flamel better compensate my house if my education and future suffers because of this!”

“Oh will you stuff it, Parkinson,” Draco throws out, clearly feeling the wounds she inflicted in their previous time-line. “It's not as if you were forced. If you didn't want to leave, you didn't have to. Go ahead and claim house loyalty if you want, but at the end of the day, your decisions are your own.”

“No, seriously,” Nott asks with more force. “What are we going to do? This isn't like Binns. He didn't much notice or care. This is a ministry official who even gave us back our house points!”

“I'm sure that's gone now,” Tracey muses.

“Listen,” Daphne calls out, gathering their attention. “I take full responsibility, however, I fully intend on testing out of this course, unless they change the curriculum to something that's not a complete waste of time.”

“It would've been an easy Outstanding,” Nott argues.

“And an easy death when the time comes to use that knowledge to protect yourself,” Daphne returns, and for the first time, Harry wonders about the merits of this coup. It may not have been worth it if it kept future Death Eaters just dumb enough to kill. If anything, this class was especially made for others protect themselves from Slytherin. Though another logical part of his mind answers, ‘once you've killed Voldemort, there won't be a Death Eater squad to join in the first place.’

“In the mean time I think Ares should teach us defense,” Zabini states near to the point of accusation, as if daring the Slytherin prodigy to decline. Most of the sheep are on board with any direction the mob takes while Daphne, Draco, Tracey, Nott, and Parkinson look between the two boys. “After everything we've seen, who better to supervise this... study group?”

“Yeah!” Nott imposes. “You can show us some of your wicked curses.” Many seem to enjoy that idea. Even without his magic sight, Harry can at least interpret Zabini's nomination as disingenuous. He clearly has something to prove.

“I don't want to,” Harry easily states, earning a few groans of disapproval from the group. The last
thing he wants to do is teach Slytherins.

“What could you possibly be scared of,” Zabini asks. “It's just a study session until this is resolved. Or could it be you're all snakeskin, but no snake? You wear our colors, you have our pedigree, but deep down, you'd rather be in Ravenclaw, or bloody Gryffindor.”

With all the different angels of mounting conflict Harry's mind is dealing with; the diary, the goblins, the ministry, the shade in the forest, making certain everyone survives the tournament this time, or Dumbledore's interference, this back alley, school yard rules doesn't even muster any interest in him; especially in his tired state. His single point of interest that doesn't involve his mission is how to tell Daphne, and—to his great astonishment—Hermione, that allowing feelings to grow between them would only end up hurting them; a thought that once again leads him to Fleur and her searing warm lips... “Ares?” Harry hears Draco call, bringing him out of his thoughts.

Harry looks on a confused Draco, then to the others watching him, letting on that they're all waiting for his response. Somewhat embarrassed for zoning out, Harry clears his throat but before he can address them, the door to the classroom creaks opens and out walks Hardwin Potter, heading down the corridor toward them.

“Isn't daddy Dumbledore going to get mad at his little golden boy for ditching class,” Pansy calls out.

Hopping right on her comment, and cutting off Hardwin, Harry responds with enough force to draw all their attention. “Gryffindors don't have a monopoly on courage and bravery, nor does Slytherin have ownership over cunning and ambition, Ravenclaw on intelligence and wit, or Hufflepuff on hard work and loyalty. Those are attributes absolutely anyone can have. You think acromantula give two shits what house you're from? Fuck no, they'll eat you all the same. If I were you I’d be more worried with why this faculty keeps approving these subpar courses of education, rather than how a color offends your delicate allegiances. I mean is there actually a criteria to hiring these professors or are they completely fine keeping you stupid?”

“All the more reason to teach us,” Zabini calls.

“Would you be willing to be friends with Potter?” Harry asks nodding toward Hardwin, still registering a trickle of weirdness when using the name but not identifying with it.

“Are you having a laugh,” Zabini levels followed quickly by Nott stating, “That's bloody mental!”

“Get stuffed,” Hardwin harshly returns, despite being surrounded by "enemy." “I'd rather cuddle with a Blast Ended Skrewt!”

“Then there you have it,” Harry tells the group loud enough to stop the insults. “You can't even consider the possibility of friendship with your own school's Champion. Why would I want to teach you anything as a wizard when you're unwilling to be a decent bloke to begin with.”

“That's rich coming from a murderer?” Nott throws out looking menacingly at Harry.

“You referring to your uncle, Nott,” Harry levels with dead apathy. “The one in Death Eater garb tormenting and torturing the Beauxbaton's Champion, Fleur Delacour and her sister? Him?” Nott didn't say anything and Harry quickly adds, “if you want to hurt people, that's fine. Just don't be surprised if the abuse you're so happily inflicting on others is stopped with extreme prejudice. If you care to express any further outrage about your uncle, I'm always happy to settle them.”

Every single students standing there has either seen first hand or were told how deadly serious
Harry can be when it came to defense, and more importantly that it is *always* in defense. Further known within Slytherin, the general consensus is he's not cruel or eager for combat, despite how much stronger he clearly is. So it's unsurprising when Harry eyes Nott heavily, as if perfectly fine to leave it as is, or fight if need be.

“He wasn't a favorite in the family to begin with,” Nott concedes stepping back. Harry can't imagine Nott is fine with his uncle's death, but imagines Nott is smart enough to let well enough alone until 'Ares' drops his guard and he can strike. Harry expects it, someday.

“Did I just hear what I think I did?” Zabini asks. “You won't help your own house, but you're all about the Boy-Who-Lived? You're willing to be friends with Dumbledore's Golden Butt-Boy but can't be bothered to teach us a thing or two?”

“Sod off you manky ankle biter,” Hadwin curses back.

“It doesn't have to be Potter,” Harry shouts over Hardwin to the Slytherins. “Make friends with any Gryffindor and I'll consider a brief study session on defense.”

“You must be out of your bloody-” Zabini starts to say when Harry cuts him off.

“Fine you ninny, I'll start,” Harry states to all before turning to a his confused looking brother. “Nova needs to stretch her wings. Interested?” The Slytherin watching blanch at the sight, Nott gasps, but everyone held their tongue.

“What does a phoenix flying need me for?” Hardwin sarcastically asks.

“I can let you borrow my firebolt and you can try to catch her if you want,” Harry answers nonchalantly. “Though, I oughta warn you, it's impossible. She's way faster than you.” Unsure if it was the chance to ride a firebolt, the chance to see a phoenix fly up close, or the blatant dare that he couldn't catch said phoenix, but Hardwin gave the barest of nods before rushing down the stairs toward the castle entrance.

“Blood traitor,” Pansy pointedly accuses him, followed by Nott's, “You are a snake skin!”

“Oddly enough, I can live with that,” Harry quickly asserts without care. “If any of you want to learn anything from me, you know what to do.”

Harry is followed by Draco, Tracey, and Daphne until they're close to the entrance of the castle. It's then when Daphne informs Harry, “I'll leave you here.” He turns to her confused to which she holds up Umbridge's book, relaying, “need to read this stock of kindle to be certain I can actually test out. Plus, I can't imagine Professor Snape is going to be happy about this.”

“Just leave Snape, McGonagall, and Headm-”

“No,” Daphne asserts with the slightest smirk. “I really meant it when I said I'll take responsibility. You just leave this to me and I'll take care of it.”

“Uh, are you sure,” Harry tentatively asks. “I don't mind.”

Daphne gifts him with her most confident smile, a beautiful event that makes him spontaneously wonder if her lips are as soft as Fleur's. Fortunately she leaves before his blushing cheeks give away his unwelcome thoughts. Shaking his dome a bit, Harry turns to ask Draco with a questioning look. Draco only responds, “I don't want to be around a Potter, so I'm leaving.”

“I'll join you,” Tracey honestly says.
“Damn right you will,” Draco wolfishly repeats. Pink cheeked and hiding her smile, she follows him into the school.

“I didn't agree to this because I wanted to watch your phoenix or ride a Firebolt,” Hardwin starts from behind him. As they walk out into the field, the publicly known Potter continues. “Uncle Sirius promised to get me one as soon as my Nimbus 2001 breaks.”

“So why'd you agree?” Harry asks, as Nova takes off into the muggy grey skies. Content to walk forward so neither one are looking directly at each other, Harry tacks on, “It'd have to be something big for you to agree to talk to a Slytherin.”

“...I don't get you,” Hardwin throws out. “It's so obvious you don't care about blood superiority or picking on the weak. That Ravenclaw girl you sit with, Granger, is muggleborn, the very status your entire house despises, yet you sit with her. Slytherin is the last place you should be in.”

“Or maybe it's the best place,” Harry casually returns. To his surprise, Hedwig descends from the skies, silent as a feather and lands on his outstretched forearm; her claws don't numb the pain. For her, he'll take it. The she hoots at him, Harry has the strong inclination that she's sorry for delivering the Howlers. He pets her affectionately, telling her, “it's okay. I know you didn't intend to.” She stays with him as they walk the grounds. “If you really believe blood superiority is hogwash, don't you think you'll have the greatest success in promoting your message where it doesn't exist? I mean, how would Slytherin's really believe the message spoken from outside their camp?”

“Is that what you're doing, then? Trying to make them see how wrong they are from within?”

“Fuck no,” Harry spits, sensing a building feeling he can't describe slowly creep into the heart of his mind and chest. “I'm not here to change anyone's mind of anything. I'm just not the type to roll over when they're the ones in the wrong.” Harry takes deep slow breaths, thoughts of his avian companion recall his past constrict his chest slightly. Curious of Hardwin's motive, Harry asks, “are you going to show this conversation to Dumbledore? I imagine he's the one who urged you to be friends with me. He's wanted that since he first heard my name.”

“No, he hasn't,” Hardwin asserts with no conviction. “...well, yeah, I guess. Though I have no idea why! I mean you're a Slytherin!”

“Bloody hell- It's like a broken record. Are every single one of you enchanted or something,” Harry asks with exhausted disbelief. “If I leave Slytherin and join any other house, would you suddenly change your opinion of me?”

“Yes! They're all snakes,” Hardwin asserts and Harry would've agreed if not for Daphne and sweet little Astoria. “Most of them are Death Eaters in training. Their master is responsible for my father's murder! And you expect me to hold hands and sing songs with those wankers!”


“And they supported him,” Hardwin maintains. “They may as well have!”

“And yet, I, a Slytherin, am going to kill him,” Harry turns murderous eyes on Hardwin. “What's your point?”

It's enough to surprise Hardwin, to pull him up short. “You... I really don't... What do you mean you're going to kill him? His supporters? Is it true you actually killed those Death Eaters at the
“Quidditch World Cup?”

“Are you going to show this memory to Dumbledore?” Harry repeats, continuing their aimless trek through the cold field.

“Worried about going to Azkaban?” Hardwin poses curiously. “Most everyone I talk to are in open debate. You ask me I feel all murderers should go to Azkaban, but if you actually want to stop Voldemort's supporters without going away for it, Dumbledore is the only way to do that. Since I'm close with him, it would be better for you to answer my questions.”

“I don't want to stop Voldemort's supporters,” Harry starts to correct. “I want to kill Voldemort, and that's exactly what I mean. I'm ask if you're going to show him the memory because it seems like he's withheld information from you that you may, or may not want to confront him about.”

“What information,” Hardwin asks. “And what do you mean you're going to kill Voldemort? He's already dead. The only thing about him alive are his supporters who are still trying to kill me.”

“Tom Riddle,” Harry states. Feeling a little better at the thought of blowing up the pedestal Hardwin had placed Dumbledore on, he continues, “I said Tom Riddle in a room of people who should definitely know who he is, especially the Potters.” Hardwin looks at him extremely confused, a million questions right on the tip of his tongue, yet silent. Flicking his wand in his grasp, Harry continues after Hardwin's lack of response, “there's an anagram that'll help.” If Hardwin had entered the Chamber of Secrets their second year, he certainly would've learned the name Tom Marvolo Riddle. So conjuring swirling smoke turn into fiery letters, he rearranges the letters as he remembered, and quite unexpectedly, it triggers a rash of memories to torment his mind.

Being in the Chamber, Ginny near dead on the ground, fighting a large basilisk, and recalling the piercing agony of it's sharp fang stabbing through his arm. The memories didn't lack any detail. The thickly red blood that flowed from his arm easily reminded him of Ron's bloody death. Bellatrix took special care of the entire Weasley family and she loved her knives nearly as much as psychological trauma, forcing a Weasley member to do unspeakable cruelties to another member until they went insane and were ultimately murdered. Harry couldn't breath as the memories overran his minds eye.

He feels motion akin to falling, unsubstantial leg pain, a foggy concept of his arm extending, sweat, shaking, and shortness of breath all the while faintly hearing himself praying, “stay away. Stay away.”

Try as he might, it felt like an eternity before his promise to keep them all safe this time cleared the tormenting fog of memories. Repeating his mantra until he believes that everyone will be alright as long as he kills Voldemort, he eventually regains control of his sanity and breathing. With the flood of relief, he comes to realize he's inertly heavy on his knees, sitting on his heels with Nova on his shoulder, singing her calming enchanted song. Hedwig is on the ground, nipping affectionately at his right hand bracing himself up.

Feeling the moist cold on his face he knows tears poured forth unabashed. Harry then notices Hardwin's concerned expression and overall posture. The hazel-eyed Potter seemed to be on the brink of running but couldn't quite make it more than a few steps. Harry gets up before he was ready to but holds his wobbly balance well enough all the while Nova and Hedwig continue to be comforting. It's awkward between them. The silence stretches, giving Harry more time to gather his barrings as he rubs his arm in the exact place Slytherin's basilisk sunk it's large fang in.

“Does that happen often?” Hardwin carefully asks.
“...more than I'd like,” Harry eventually answers.

“Mum reckons you've probably had a rough go of it,” Hardwin slowly divulges. “Probably harder than my own, or at least different than me. Truth be told, she's the one who reckons I should give you a chance. She reckons you're different. Plus she loves your parents. So if you must know, I agreed to this because of her. I hadn't actually talked to Headmaster Dumbledore since the Goblet.”

Harry wonders what she might've said about him, as well as what conversations she's had with the Flamels. Secretly he wonders if she's thought about her other son she abandoned. He wonders why, if things are different now... the tight feeling in his chest begins to reemerge, so rather than continue his train of thought, he abruptly asks, “did you read it?”

“Yeah. It said Tom Marvolo Riddle, before it exploded into a ball of fire,” Hardwin answers, pointing at a bit of his singed hair. “What about it?”

“Sorry about that. Here's the rest,” Harry tells him with mild embarrassment. Exercising more control, he actually completes the anagram to Hardwin's great shock.

“Is that true!? That can't be true! That can't- You better not-” Red faced and shaking, Hardwin turns away from Harry, who can tell he's wiping away tears.

“I'm not playing you, Tom Riddle is Voldemort,” Harry slowly mentions. “Judging by the way your mum reacted when I mentioned it during lunch, unless she's a brilliant actor, I don't reckon she knows. But Dumbledore definitely knows. He's been asking us-.”

“That... monster killed... my da-” Hardwin's throat clucks shut before he starts walking.

Never factoring in for grief stricken agony, Harry abruptly feels terrible for simply dropping the information like that. Harry himself doesn't recall much more than anger and the typical sadness he always feels at the thought of his deceased parents. He yells after him, “I'll be around, if you want to talk.”

Now alone, his emotional break makes Harry feel far more exhausted than he's felt in a long time. The thought of a nap before his next class was tempting but he instead decides to further examine Nova's magical manacle.

Stepping out of Transfiguration, Harry's simply happy McGonagall had yet to be informed of the Slytherin educational revolt on Umbridge's class when he finds Nicolas waiting for him.

“Hey Nic, what's up?” Harry casually greets after Daphne and Tracey respectfully greet the legendary alchemist.

“Just wanted to let you know, dinner at ours tonight,” Nicolas answers.

“Okay,” Harry easily agrees before asking, “any special reason?”

“Not to my knowledge,” the elder returns. “Just dinner with the Potters,” he adds and Harry straightens up a bit. Nicolas eyes Harry before the elder legend makes to leave when Harry stops him.

“Can you look into mirror potions?” Harry asks, mentally sidestepping what dinner with Lily and Hardwin could mean for his plans, and his emotional state which he will admit, has been spotty at best.

“Mirror potions?” Nicolas asks confused.
They all pay attention as he explains, “I need to be able to see the runes on Nova's leg so if I can
submerge the clothe in a potion the can mirror-”

“Everything it wets, possibly seeing what's inside,” Nicolas finishes. “I can think of something,
though it won't be perfect right away. It'll need to be tweeked.”

“I can do the research if you want to get me started,” Harry explains. “I know you're busy with
Flitwick.”

“Nonsense my boy,” Nicolas swats away any suggestion of relief. “We're in this together aren't
we?” he asks with a smile, that affects Harry more than it should. Harry quells the swell of
affection and simply answers with a nod and a small smile of his own. Taking a breath to center
himself again, they head to lunch, discussing with Daphne the possible solutions once he gets to
see the scheme array Dumbledore used.

“The thing freaking me out the most is how it manages to repair itself. Basilisk venom should've
done the trick,” Harry comments when Hermione meets them at the entrance of the Great Hall. She
greets them before hoisting up the large books in her arms for Daphne, declaring, “I got them.”

“Got what?” Harry asks as he tilts his head to read the spines.

“Hogwart's Faculty Disciplinary Guidelines as well as the Ministry's former Department of

Confused he turns to Daphne, as he was under the impression she wanted to handle it alone. “If you
need help-”

“I had always intended on including Hermione,” Daphne assures him.

“Just leave this to us,” Hermione tells him with her warm smile. “Daphne left Professor Umbridge's
textbook with me and I couldn't believe how incredibly benign it is with respect to defense, as if
the idea of using defense magic is an abhorrent concept that's never necessary in the preservation
of life. What upsets me the most is, had my eyes not been opened a few months ago, I would've
believed this farce. This class is wrong and I can't support it.”

“See,” Daphne exults with a smirk.

“You'll probably have to talk with Flitwick, Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore,” Harry tells
them. “Are you sure you wouldn't want me to talk to them in your place? I already challenge
authority,” he explains. “It's sorta expected for me to cause a ruckus.”

“Well not anymore. I won't attend that class if I can learn more on my own... with you- us- all of
us,” Hermione quickly cuts herself off. Despite turning a bit from his piercing green eyes, she
couldn't hide the rose tinge the tan of her cheeks. For a moment, the only thought that exists in his
head is how adorable his fluffy haired friend looks. So much so, it took longer before the red flags
waved him from that hormonal train of thought.

“If you're sure,” Harry states. “Just ask if you need anything, from me, Nic or Nelle. I'll burn this
place to the ground if you want me to- I'm kidding, Hermione,” he jests presenting open palms to
her stern look. “Just a joke,” he adds with a knowing smirk. “It's not funny,” she mildly huffs
though not without a small smile gracing her pink lips.

Not surprisingly, none of the Slytherins sat with them at the Ravenclaw table, much less with the
Gryffindors or even Hufflepuffs. 'Fine by me,' he thinks.
After the day's classes Daphne, Draco, and Tracey follow him to the seventh floor for their afternoon training, meeting Hermione and to his welcomed surprise, Luna.

“Well, your mental shields are definitely stronger,” Harry estimates, removing his palm from Hermione's warm forehead. She beams at him, affectionately pressuring him to quickly address Luna. “I'm surprised you know occlumancy, Luna.”

“Father accurately deduced Blibbering Humdingers can be repelled by occlumancy. It's the only way I can make them stop laughing at my Butterbeer Cork necklace and my Dirigible Plum earrings,” she mentions whimsically, though Harry can't help curse these creatures for laughing at his friend.

“Well, I like your style, Luna,” Harry remarks. “But I have to ask if you want to know this information. It can be dangerous and I'll still protect you even if you don't know.”

“I know, and I'm certain,” Luna easily expresses, and they all huddle.

Standing under such expecting attention is a little nerve wrecking. The unnerving feeling doesn't linger as he hates himself for relaxing when Draco abruptly breaks the tension by asking, “did you break the news to Hardwin? Is that why the Potters want to have dinner with your family later?”

The girls are obviously confused, but Harry nods, “yeah. The-”

“Did he cry,” Draco interjects with a vindictive smile.

“Stuff it,” Harry effortlessly responds, as if it was the most natural reply in the world, before addressing the girls. Ungenerously, he extends their eager anticipation to take a moment to consider this conversation. He hadn't planned on it, but there was always a possibility, and within that realm of possibility, he surmised many variations of explaining to them the details without revealing how much it's consumed him. If they were dumb, this wouldn't even be an issue, but these girls have intelligence in abundance and he hasn't exactly done the best job of hiding his vulnerabilities. Harry clears his throat.

“I think it goes without saying I want you all to be safe. After the acromantula attack, I've had to admit to myself that I can't always be there to protect you, and in those moments, you'll have to rely on your best decision to protect yourselves. Whether I like it or not, in order to keep you safe, you need to know what's ahead; what being around me means you'll all now be facing. I didn't make this decision lightly, but if the world ever decides to engage you, I want you to be well and accurately informed. You've all proven yourselves and I trust you.” Feeling how tense it became, Harry listlessly mentions, “though, I had to take some points from you Tracey, because I just don't get what you see in Draco.”

“I'd be worried if you did, you prat,” Draco casually shoots back without feeling insulted. Tracey is too surprised he even mentioned her to take offense, though giggled at Draco's reply. Somehow the boys are beyond offense when it comes to these quick little jabs, as if they've grown callous in their hatred of one another.

“For the life of me, I don't see how you two are friends,” Hermione mentions. “You bicker all the time.”

“Boys,” Daphne apathetically answers, as if no more need be said.

“I've spoken with Moaning Myrtle and she orates this absolutely delicious fantasy between them I can't wholly ignore,” Luna mentions drawing wide eyed attention from Tracey and Daphne, while
Hermione rolls her eyes as if she's heard this before.

Draco dry heaves and Harry coughs loudly, “Okay! Another thing I need to explain... is my responsibility. In a lot of ways, this is my purpose. What I am about to share is very much the center of my world, and until I complete this mission, nothing and no one can change that. Sad as I find it, I've accepted it for myself and for the world. You need to accept that as well.”

Tentatively, Daphne asks, “what is this mission?”

Satisfying his paranoia, Harry erects his strongest privacy wards around them before feeling safe enough to continue. “Everyone here knows who Lord Voldemort is, commonly known as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or You-Know-Who. He was terrible before becoming infamous the night he disappeared. Yes, disappeared, not died. Before he was the Dark Lord, he was formerly a Slytherin wizard by the name Tom Marvolo Riddle.” To illustrate his point he harps on the fire words that seems to be enough proof for everyone. None of them can mask how surprising this news already is, and he hadn't even brought up the horribly good stuff.

“Not a lot of people know much about him, which didn't make a lot of sense to Nicolas, Perenelle, and myself, so we took it upon ourselves to do independent investigating, and discovered a number of disturbing revelations. The worst of which is he cannot die, at least not completely.” Harry puts his hand up because both Daphne and Hermione became impassioned with questions that need answers. He read the fear in their eyes, the doubt, and the curiosity. It felt like he had removed them from their safe place and now they need to make sense of it to be safe again. “I know you have questions and the more I say you'll have but, try to let me finish first.” Hermione puts her hand down and they both nod. “He's not alive in the same way you and I are, but alive enough that he can attain his power once again.” Turning to Daphne, he answers her question, “my mission, my purpose, is to do everything in my power to kill that monster... for good.”

“How is he alive,” Hermione asks.

“Very dark magic,” Harry answers. “He created objects that house his soul, so that even if his body dies, he can exist enough to eventually return.”

“That ghoul!” Hermione abruptly calls. “The one you're both hunting for in the Dark Forest!” Hermione's curly hair whips from side to side looking from Harry to Draco and back. Harry simply nods to her unasked question. “I think I'm going to be sick,” Hermione admits, her wide eyes and frown matching the sentiment.

Tracey turns to Draco and anxiously asks him, “you're hunting... the Dark Lord?” It's incredibly impactful for Draco as he recognizes the worry on Tracey's face is very much for his safety, and he wants to comfort her, and tell her it'll be okay or anything else she might believe, but his promise to his son would only allow him to sadly nod. He offered no words of assurance and she quickly became pensive.

“Tracey, I'm trusting you the most,” Harry honestly tells her, drawing everyone's attention to him again. “I know Sirius Black is an Auror, and it's his job to know these things but I'm asking you to say nothing until my parents have spoken with him first. They'll have more answers to his questions. As you may have guessed, I'm not fighting this alone. Nicolas, Perenelle, and Draco-” Nova trills and nips at his head, making him smile despite how anxious he can feel, adding, “and Nova, are all fighting this evil together. We've discussed and acknowledge Sirius Black and Amelia Bones ought to know as well, along with the Potters, since it affects them.”

“That's why they want to have dinner with you tonight?” Daphne asks and Harry nods.
“This information is dangerous because it makes you a target,” Draco tells Tracey with a level of concern nearing that of when he's reminiscent of his son. “You can't talk about this to anyone outside this room. Don't send letters, don't assume you're alone because you don't see anyone around and if possible, don't think about it in case of legilimency. Because if Death Eaters ever find out, they will take you and eventually kill you.”

“And if Dumbledore finds out you know, he'd likely wipe your mind or force some other way to keep you silent,” Harry piggybacks on Draco's warning.

“So the Headmaster knows,” Hermione asks allowing her curiosity to out weigh her fear.

“Yes,” Harry tells her. “And truthfully, I made you learn occlumancy primarily because of him. He tried to enter my mind once, I wouldn't put it past him not to try with others.” Using a tempus spell to learn the time, Harry judges it a good place to suspend this deliberation. “Take the night to think about it... behind your best occlumancy shields, please. I need to meet Nic and Nelle for dinner.”

They were all deep in thought as they left the Room of Requirement. Though Harry wondered what questions tomorrow will bring, he's quite proud of himself for compartmentalizing; keeping his, as of late, turbulent emotions in check as he explains to them the basics of one of the worst true evils this world has to offer. Harry hopes to remain as detached during dinner with the Potters. They've all agreed to give the famous pair nearly identical information he gave his group, though none of it will be voiced by him. As with all things Lily related, Perenelle will take the lead; a role she easily takes to as the very first words she spoke to the Potters when they enter their living quarters is, “I know you have questions and I, or we, rather, will answer them to the best of our knowledge. However, before we completely ignore the meal, I strongly recommend we try to dine first.”

“Can't you just tell us about Tom Riddle,” Hardwin demands only to be strongly reprimanded by Lily, “Hardwin, not tonight you hear me,” she warns, before taking a calming breath. Lily turns her son toward her and looks him directly in his aching eyes. “I know what you're feeling, and you have every right to feel it, but you can't lash out. That's not why we're here.”

Hardwin takes a deep breath and nods while Nicolas lightens the mood, apologizing for the messy state of a room that is, in reality, immaculate.

The small living quarters had been expanded and decorated to include more depth. They needed a desk far enough from the dinning table for Harry to experiment on mixtures to create a draught that can help Nova. The other purpose of equal importance was that it helped keep him away from Lily's sight. The concern brought up by the possibility she might see James' likeness in Harry's face at any moment is an uncertainty that inflates his anxiety every time they meet. They can't even be sure why she hasn't recognized him as it is; he's always been noticed as his father's son. Their working theory is the mind sees what it sees. While Harry does look a lot like James, Ares' magical prowess, scars, phoenix, and last name all help to generate a camouflage that in this case, is effective.

At the moment, Lily and Hardwin stay close together, her hand comforting on his shoulder, as they're taken to the already set table. Nicolas sits at the head, with Lily and Perenelle facing each other on their perspective sides of the table. Hardwin sits beside his mother and Harry stays at the end of the room working on the potion as they eat.

“What's he doing?” Hardwin aggressively asks either Nicolas or Perenelle. Tightening her grip on his shoulder, Lily corrects him, “he means to ask if Ares will be joining us.”

“He's currently working on a rather innovative potion, and it's a critical step in the brewing process,” Nicolas explains with his genial smile. “He'll join us momentarily.”
After several minutes of silence, neither camp thinking of anything more than the big topic as of yet to be discussed. At a poor stab of conversation, Nicolas asks Hardwin if he's nervous about the first task in two weeks, inadvertently adding more tension to the room. Perenelle made certain to mention they will help in any way possible, rules be damned.

“Won't I lose my magic if you help me,” Hardwin asks with wide concerned eyes between mouth fulls of his meal.

“To my recollection,” Nicolas begins, scratching his chin. “That magical mandate woven into the goblet was for the purpose of punishing cowards who didn't uphold their oath to participate. So as long as you show up, you're fine.” Hardwin then asks to be excused to see what Ares is working on. Lily looks at Perenelle who answers, “I suppose it's just silly to wait any longer. I only wanted to be certain we ate. It's never good to go about hard topics on an empty stomach.”

“Of course,” Lily says with a tight smile, and graciously adds, “it was delicious.”

“I first want to begin by saying how sorry we are for having to be the ones to bare this news to you,” Perenelle explains as they all head to the comfortable couch in front of the fireplace. Harry's workspace is behind the couch, making certain the only way Lily or Hardwin can see him is if they turn around.

“Please, will you tell us what you know?” Lily asks sitting on the edge of the comfortable couch, Hardwin right next to her.

“Of course,” Perenelle says standing before them. And like Harry when he explained similar information earlier, Perenelle repeats Voldemort's true identity and the fact that he's still alive. “We figured the attempt to attain our philosopher's stone was made by a professor possessed by Tom Riddle's spirit.”

“That was at the end of Hardwin's first year,” a deathlike Lily speaks aghast. “Albus had explained that it was the Dark Lord's spirit and once professor Quirrell past, it would be incredibly difficult to possess another. The theory being he can't possess anyone, or at the point of his body failing, he would've possessed the nearest person.”

“The thing Albus failed to mention was that he was more than spirit,” Perenelle continues. “He was a shade of soul, and the only way that's possible is if he had an anchor tethering him to the realm of the living.”

“An anchor? How is that possible?” Lily quickly asks.

“Are you okay to continue,” Perenelle asks the Potter matriarch. “You've heard a distressing amount of disturbing news already. A spot of time to absorb it all would do you well.”

“I mean no disrespect Perenelle,” Lily starts with more fire than any of them were expecting. “But a large part of my life is a spiral of doubt, loss, and tragedy. There isn't a day that goes by I don't suffer the failure of trying to make sense of that time. I need to know like I've lost a lung and I'm trying to take a deep breath again. Please.”

“And your son,” Perenelle asks the red haired mother, ignoring the urge to look at Harry and instead focus on Hardwin. “This is very distressing and he is young-”

“But it's alright for Flam- for Ares to know but not me?” Hardwin anxiously calls out. It's obvious he's trying to keep it together but he's been told he has his father's eyes since he was young. His father is a man he never got to know because he was murdered by a man he's come to learn studied
at Hogwarts like anyone else by the name of Tom Riddle. Lord Voldemort is a name that always made him seem larger than life, extramagical, but to learn his father was murdered by a dark wizard born with a normal name, ignited his anger, and his self-contempt for aggrandizing a simple, yet deranged murderer. “Why does he know more about all this than we do! None of this happened to him! It's not fair, it's not right, and I need to know just as much!”

“I understand you're feeling frustrated, and I want you to know it's okay to feel the strong emotions within you,” Perenelle soothingly begins to guide Hardwin like she would any and all of her patients. Harry can't even imagine how many times a healer of Perenelle's caliber had to inform a good person of horrible news. “We want you both to have the answers and closure you need. It's why Trouble Star over there said what he said, as well as why he mention Tom Riddle during our lunch in the village.” Lily and Hardwin look at each other in recollection. Before they can ask anything, Perenelle continues. “To answer your question, we know simply because of detailed research as well as being well versed in magical history and genealogy. We may prefer to be on the outskirts of society but we travel often on quests of knowledge. It's how we stay relatively current.”

“How specifically is it that he's able to remain relatively alive, and what are you doing to stop this?” Lily asks.

This where Perenelle, Nicolas and Harry had discussed drawing the line. They had no real issues informing the Potters of what they needed to know about the danger ahead; Tom Riddle is alive and seeking a body, he's anchored to the land of the living by employing the darkest of magic, and that's it. If Lily or Hardwin decide to tell Dumbledore, it's only confirmation that the Flamels know more than they've said. It's also not anything he doesn't already know. Nicolas takes the lead in explaining why they can't share any more than they already have.

“This brings us to the point we must make clear before we continue. We've told you of the man who murdered James Potter as well as the dangers that continue to exist because of Tom Riddle, however as things are, we cannot tell you what more we know,” Nicolas clearly explains and the Potters are immediately on the defensive.

“What does that mean 'as things are,'” Lily points out, placing her hand on Hardwin before he can protest.

“We are more than concerned about who you will tell,” Nicolas answers. “More specifically how much you will tell Albus, if you decide to confide in him at all. Though I'd be fine if he chokes on his beard of secrets,” Nicolas adds bitterly to Hardwin's shock.

“You see, we are aware that Dumbledore has placed himself in harms way for you, and with good reason,” Perenelle says, retaining the peace. “He has a brilliant mind, gifted magically with an unmatched strength, and a whole-hearted supporter of all that is good and just in our society. However, as of late, he has proven himself to be more than what is generally known about him.”

“Like Icarus who flew too close to the sun, we too felt his burn and nearly plummeted to our deaths!”

“He can be a touch melodramatic however he is not wrong,” Perenelle muses with all seriousness. “In my observance, Dumbledore's actions have deeper implications of a self styled superiority. He feels that if you have power, you are tasked with responsibilities others cannot understand, and may never understand; thus superseding the opinions or rights of said others.”

“It was my responsibility to protect my family, and he took that away when he kept me from helping Ares bring back my wife,” Nicolas passionately explains, his voice thick with unresolved anguish.
"I would've stopped you," Harry told him, surprising the room, as Harry had avoided involving himself in discussion. "But that's only because Perenelle would've killed me if I let anything happen to you." Perenelle smirks at Ares, before turning a serious countenance toward Nicolas.

"The jurisdiction of individual rights and decisions of the whole aren't exactly easy dominions to navigate," Lily voices before turning to Harry; scaring him into looking inside the caldron even though he had no need to. "You have a strength to do what others cannot, and took it upon yourself to do what the Headmaster could not know you capable of; that any of us could expect you capable of." Returning her attention to Perenelle, she continues to offer a different point of view. "We rely on the strong, because many of us are not; whether it be defensive ability, diplomacy, intellect, goods and services, etc. As a society, necessity dictate tasks and those best suited for them should, for the whole, perform them to the best of their already exceptional ability."

Harry isn't sure how he feels about that view point. Too many cracks for mistakes to fall through.

"I won't deny the merits of a valid point of view," Perenelle tells her. "For a society, it's necessary for everyone to pitch in and do what they're best at for the welfare of the whole. I'd ask how can we navigate the subtle difference between, 'everyone should do what they're best at so we all benefit,' and, 'I will do this for you, for your own good,'" Perenelle asks. "I tend to focus on what it is we are trading. If I give you the right to protect me because I acknowledge you can do it better than I'm able, am I also giving you the belief that you can govern me in the name of protection? Have I just enabled this person to feel they are better than me, and thus of a mind to make decisions for me?"

"I feel everyone has the right to protect their home and family," Nicolas states. "It's a personal right I certainly never surrendered to Albus, yet he felt he knew better and denied me my right."

"Why are you saying that," Hardwin abruptly cuts in staring aghast between Nicolas and Perenelle. "He's your friend—he said so himself—and you're making it sound like he wronged you because he kept you from jumping into a horde of acromantula! What was he suppose to do? Let you die?"

"I can't say I was in the best mindset, young man, I'll admit it," Nicolas tells him. "It was certainly an emotional decision but that's a part of humanity. I would move heaven and earth for the people I love; willingly give my life for theirs. Albus may have kept me alive, but it was at the high expense of my wife's very life—who's my everything—and that's a price I would never pay. It's what we do for our loved ones, you understand?"

Hardwin doesn't answer but Nicolas has roused fond memories in all the Potters in the room; Harry himself willing away the tortuous memories of his dearest friends. With a sniff, Lily adds for Hardwin's benefit, "it's why your father did what he did... bravely, for his family.” Hardwin nods once and takes his seat, his mother taking both his hands within hers. Turning to the senior Flamel, she asks, "please continue. I haven't fully understood your grievance as it relates to us."

"Dumbledore is not evil. He thinks he knows what's best and whether we agree or not is of little concern to him.” Perenelle explains, “it's like that old saying, 'if you could but with a flick of your wrist.' We handed one man three key positions in our society; Supreme Mugwump, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Headmaster of our children. Riddle isn't the only one who believes he has the permission power prompts."

"As of this moment," Nicolas takes over. “It is our contention the old boy feels entitled to govern over us, and quite frankly, we disagree. This is why we can't share any additional details with you. We felt you deserved to know the truth about the past and who's responsible, but anymore than that, we simply cannot risk he learn.”
“Why!?” Hardwin can't help but ask. “No, mum! I've had enough of this! He's the strongest wizard in the world! If he says he can do something just get out the way and let him!”

“Hardwin,” Perenlle clinically calls. “I'd like to explain something if I may?” Hardwin nods and she asks, “why do you think he didn't he tell you who murdered your father?”

“I don't know, but I reckon he had a good reason,” Hardwin affirms. “He always has good reasons for doing a thing.”

“He may have a fair argument if he kept the truth from you, a minor, but to keep it from your mother? She had every right to know. Here's another query, why do you suppose he didn't explain the truth about the danger you continue to face to this day? It's a difficult topic and one that requires delicacy when explaining to the young but I wouldn't say it's impossible.”

“Don't think that just because he doesn't tell me things, that it proves your point,” Hardwin attests.

“Do you even want to know?”

“Of course I do,” Hardwin declares.

“Because this affects you correct,” Perenelle asserts.

“Yeah,” he nods.

“So why didn't he, at the very least, inform your mother?” Perenelle asks.

“....I don't know,” Hardwin answers honestly.

“That's fine,” Perenelle reassures him. “It's okay if you don't. We don't know either. And because Albus is not forthcoming, we are forced to guess his motives. I don't mean to make him out to be a bad person, however I cannot fully trust someone who hordes secrets and knowledge that are not his to keep.”

“But you're doing the same thing,” Hardwin calls. “Instead of telling us what you're doing about Volde- about Riddle, you're keeping it to yourselves.”

“We don't deny it,” Nicolas states. “And we don't like it, but we can't be sure Dumbledore will share what he knows. He's already proven himself to be untrustworthy. He's known about Tom Riddle for a lot longer than he lets on. He's known about the dark magic that keeps Riddle tethered to our realm. He lied to us about the use of our Philosopher's Stone, leading to it's destruction. He knows what attacked children in your second year; turning them into stone. He hired a Death Eater who was disguised as his personal friend, a mistake that nearly killed children, and yet, not one word of apology. He shackled Nova—a phoenix for Merlin's beard! And this may be selfish of me, but he nearly allowed my wife die, and that, I will never forgive him for. So I'm sorry if this is hard to hear, young man. I simply cannot be involved with that man until I recognize and approve of what he stands for.”

“Of course you're welcome to tell him all you've heard here,” Perenelle tells Lily. “But it is our hope you minimize our involvement.”

Hardwin stands up, fists tight, then whips around to Harry, pointing as he exclaims, “he said he was going to kill him! You reject the strongest wizard in the world for a fourteen year old who barely handled one death eater?”

“And saved your life while doing it,” Harry couldn't help but challenge Hardwin with, while trying
hard to quell his swelling emotions. The boys stare hard at one another until Lily stands. A hand on each shoulder she forces Hardwin to turn and look at her. “Hardwin E. Potter, until I, as the head of our house and your mother, say otherwise, you are forbidden from speaking to Dumbledore, alone or otherwise, unless I or Sirius are present. Do I make myself clear?” His eyes are still hard with anger and she takes her hand off his shoulder to stand at her full height, asking again, “do I make myself clear?” Hardwin deflates and nods. Lily turns to Perenelle, stating, “for now, we'll keep this within the family, however, I very much count Sirius and Remus as family. You should know I have no intention of keeping this from them.”

“They were school friends,” Nicolas states. “I recall Lord Black saying as much. Albus is my only point of contention. As for everyone else, whomever you deem fit to know is none of our concern.”

“What about him?” Hardwin asks, his hard hazel eyes—his father's eyes—once again landing on Harry. “You can't just let him do whatever he wants because he's a little better at magic.”

“A little,” Harry snorts with knowing eyes, fully expecting it'll egg Hardwin on.

“Whatever,” Hardwin states. “We both know you have issues. We all know. Mum says you have trauma—”

“Harwin!” Lily calls her hand gripping his shoulder.

He shrugs his mother's hand away and yells, “No, mum! You said he's got scars on his mind and earlier today he had another freak out. What sense does it make to let someone who's clearly sick in the head do whatever he likes? He's talking about killing like it's normal! How does that not worry anyone here? He needs help and should be in St. Mungo's, not Hogwart's!”

Both Nicolas and Perenelle hold their tongue in the silence that follows, possibly recognizing it for what it was; a child venting his frustrations. The only sound is Hardwin's labored breath as if satisfied and comforted by finally speaking, or in this case, yelling his mind. Harry feels angry enough to attack him, muggle style, like in the lessons of his training manual, the Year of the Dragon. Instead, with obvious ire in his voice, Harry crossly retorts, “The Boy Who Lived... your life is a fucking vacation in my eyes—” “Ares,” he hears Perenelle calls, settling him just enough to calmly say, “if I had my way, the only thing I'd be killing are my Quidditch tryouts. You ought to just count your blessings you haven't seen what I've seen, or done what I've done. And don't forget, if I were in St. Mungo's, you'd be dead.”

Embarrassed, Lily points a strong finger at his seat, growling through clenched teeth, “park it!” She turns to Perenelle, Nicolas and Harry, after Hardwin complies, “I am so terribly sorry for his outburst. Nicolas, Perenelle, I won't make excuses for him, and you have my solemn vow that he will be punished accordingly. Ares, expect a formal apology from him.”

There's a knock on the door, and with a hand up, Harry quickly moves to get it, eager to give his emotions a bit of a reprieve before he hits his brother. As he walks, he hears Perenelle answer Hardwin, “if I had my way, Ares would be fat and lazy, and content to lead a boring life.”

Nicolas adds in jest, “no one tells you how exhausting raising a prodigy can be. You don't know how many times I wished for a droopy-eyed little mouth breather, where the only challenge we'd face is making sure he takes a shower a day and brushes his teeth.”

Harry rolls his eyes at how devoted they enjoy being to this domestic facade, until he opens the door and his eyes harden and glow immediately with surging physical and magical irritation.

“Good evening,” Dumbledore greets, not bothered by Ares' ire. Harry looks behind the headmaster
as the elder asks, “May we come in?”

“No,” Harry says and slams the door in his face.

“I can't believe you just did that,” Hardwin calls indignant and Harry just gives him an evilly satisfied grin. Perenelle, the last Flamel who can meet with Dumbledore and retain a civil disposition, walks around to the front door as Harry moves to cover the work he and Nicolas were working on.

She opens the door and is further surprised by the pair. “Good evening Albus... ah, professor Umbridge. What can I do for you both?”

“Good evening,” Dumbledore graciously acknowledges. “May we come in?” Perenelle steps to the side to wordlessly allow him and the squat woman in pink entrance. “Ah, I'd heard the Potters were here,” he jests, and Harry knows full well the headmaster knew exactly where they were.

“Evening, I trust dinner was excellent. I myself have always been fond of Perenelle's culinary prowess.”

“Oh how I so enjoy pleasantries,” Umbridge begins grating on Harry's patience with the power of her voice alone. “However, we are here on an official capacity,” she tells the group before turning a smug eye on Harry.

“Dolores,” Dumbledore says for her to concede the lead.

“To what do we owe this unannounced visit, young man,” a snarky toned Nicolas asks, easily making sure Dumbledore knows who in the room is the real elder.

“Albus,” Lily calls standing just ahead of Hardwin. “What can I help you with?”

“Nothing of inconvenience, I assure you,” Dumbledore starts. “I simply wanted to inform both Hogwarts' Champions of the Weighing of the Wands this Saturday,” he says looking at Harry and Hardwin, “the weekend before the First Task. The panel of judges had scheduled it for earlier in the month, however, after recent events... well, what matters is this Saturday, we meet at noon.”

“Yes, now,” Umbridge squeaks taking the lead. The sudden move of Umbridge extending a parcel with the official Ministry Seal toward Harry, nearly had him flick his wrist for his wand. “This is your Ministry Notice of Summons,” Umbridge nearly threatens in her sickeningly sweet tongue.

Harry doesn't take it, as he crosses his arms and stares irately intent. Instead, Nicolas takes the summons, informing Umbridge, “I am the head of this house and anything of official capacity that concerns my heir will be brought to me first and foremost, Madam Undersecretary. Make a mistake like that again and I will file a complaint.”

Umbridge's square chest widens comically from the air she inhales, letting out a gust afterward and calming down enough to hollowly return, “my apologies, Lord Flamel. Please note the meeting is to hear your heirs version of the event, as such your attendance is mandatory. If you fail to appear, the court will view your culpability as conclusive and issue a bench warrant for your arrest where you will be held in Azkaban until an alternative date of court can be decided. As that falls under my purview, I cannot give you a specific time as to when that might be. It could very well take quite some time.”

“That will not happen,” Perenelle states as Nicolas reads over the summons. “We'll make certain to be there.”

“For the benefit of everyone involved, as the Undersecretary, all requests to alter the date and or
time of the court appearance will not be accepted,” she says with a sinister grin. “We're all quite busy as well.”

“As we've already stated-” Perenelle begins before Nicolas stops her with a concerned hand to her forearm. She turns to him, absorbing his concern, bringing our her own anxious curiosity. Nicolas apprehensively tells her, “the time and date of the hearing... is scheduled at the same time Ares is to perform the first task...”

The implications quickly becoming quite clear to all present. Miss the task to go to court, and through the Goblets celestial power, lose his magic. Miss court in favor of the task, and face arrest followed by a return to Azkaban, for an uncertain amount of time.

Umbridge smiles at him absolutely delighted.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading and supporting and commenting. I truly appreciate it. The Task will be the next chap. Speaking of which, I feel like I can manage one more update before the holiday rush fills up my schedule. So forewarning, December and half of January is a rush period for us. I'll try to write but no promises :(

Thanks again and please let me know your thoughts or hopes.

Have a great one,
--Grae
The Work Wife

Chapter Summary

Disassociation makes for strange admissions, and Draco hates admitting sympathy for one's foe.

Chapter Notes

Dear Readers, I sincerely apologize for the long absence. I truly wish I could claim some unforeseen circumstance that delayed me so, but it's really nothing more than the demands of life, be it work, girl, friends or family. Still, I apologize.

For those readers unaware, some months ago, my story was copied—literally copied and pasted—from Ao3 to FFNet without my permission. This person created an account on FFNet with the same handle as Ao3, and was posting on FFNet as me. I called out this impostor after which this person gave me control of the account. Now both site's author(Ao3 and FFNet) is one and the same. Sorry for the confusion. I never foresaw that happening. I've caught FFNet up to Ao3 so now I will update both sites. I've already posted chap 22 on FFNet before I post here on Ao3, just to prove I'm origin. All future updates will be posted on both sites at the same time.

Real quick, this chapter is 11K words for those who like to know and most of it is in Draco's perspective.

Lastly, I understand that my story has been rather dark and ominous of late... maybe more so. I felt my Harry needed that angst for authenticity. I understand sometimes it was much but that's how I felt I can best portray this character. I want everyone to know that I feel like we've gone through the worst of it so the tone may feel different... lighter. Please, let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘That's it.’

From several steps away, Harry absentmindedly observes Perenelle, Nicolas, and Lily with simple detachment as they adamantly argue with Dumbledore and Umbridge. The three are incensed by Umbridge’s blatant manipulation, however, Harry can’t hear them. Through his somber green eyes, these adults simply look as if time had slowed down and they’re all moving at a snail's pace.

Watching them like staring at a smudge on boring wallpaper and Harry is past fed up with being there all to suffer nuisance of it all. Fighting sleep in classes he needn’t be in, House allegiances and their constant conflict, the Tri-Wizard tournament, Dumbledore, the ministry's ineptitude, Umbridge, Goblins... Harry's eager for his fight with Voldemort so he can either die or leave society forever... with the occasional visit to the Flamels. He doesn’t need the rest of it.

‘That's it,’ his mind repeats.
If Harry talked to or is placed in the middle of any more useless distractions or people for the rest of his life, it would be too soon. So he leaves. Nova flaps to his shoulder, and without uttering a word, he walks out of the room.

“Uh,” Hardwin sounds as he takes hold of his mother's wrist. “Mum, he's gone.”

Sure enough, Lily, followed by Nicolas and Perenelle, all reduce the volume of their disgusted outrage toward Dumbledore and Umbridge to notice Harry’s absence.

“Oh dear,” Umbridge’s childish voice feigns concern in contrast to her partially restrained grin. “I do hope he isn’t-”

“You shut your wretched mouth you villainous creature and get out,” Perenelle furiously demands, squaring her shoulders and moving toward Umbridge with a youthful rage in her eyes. Nicolas and Lily each take an arm firmly to keep her from attacking the ministry official.

“Minister Fudge will be hearing from us,” Nicolas asserts, looking between Umbridge and Dumbledore and commanding them to, “leave.”

“Old friend, I would very much care to resolve this if we can but talk-”

“Now!” Nicolas yells.

With a glum nod, Dumbledore follows Umbridge out their flat, leaving the Flamels and Lily Potter with assurances that he will take care of everything. “You have my word, old friend,” the headmaster claimed but it fell on deaf ears.

---

**Draco Malfoy**

Late into the night, well past their usual meeting time, Draco Malfoy curses the name Harry James Potter for what must feel like the millionth time as he waits in the empty Slytherin common room. He’d nod off into slumber if he wasn’t so angry about being made to wait, as if he was Scarhead’s lackey. ‘A lackey!’

‘Merlin, how I hate him,’ Draco muses as he walks toward Harry’s room.

Draco stops midway toward the fourth year boy’s dorm to let his son try to walk on his stubby fat baby legs. Draco smiles sadly at Scorpius until he blinks and the illuminated figment of his memory begins to fade, forcing the knot in his throat down with a hard swallow. Feeling slightly less homicidal, Draco consciously places one hesitant foot in front of the other.

With no answer at Potter’s door, Draco is about to walk in when he recalls how paranoid his murderous adversary has become. Assuming the magical freak had placed safeguards to prevent anyone from entering, Draco stills his hand rather than take the painful, if not homicidal chance of entering. Draco ultimately decides to scour the death forest on his own. Walking out of the Slytherin entrance, he spots at the far end of the stone corridor, Nicolas and Perenelle rushing toward him faster than elderly people should move. Instantly, his wand was in his hand, unsure what to expect, but comforted by the security his wand brings.

“Draco, have you seen Ares?” Perenelle worriedly asks.
Anxiously curious, he cautiously answers, “no? Should I, professor?”

“We haven't-” Nicolas starts then rethinks what he wants to say in the open. “Will you join us in our dorm, please, Mr. Malfoy.”

It isn't until they're in the security their warded quarters offers, that Nicolas begins to explain what happened at dinner as well as after when Dumbledore and Umbridge showed up. “He left and we've been looking for him ever since. The Potters halted their search by Hardwin's curfew, but we know you leave for the forest around this time and hoped he'd be with you.”

“It isn't even funny how much shite he tends to attract,” Draco huffs when Perenelle yells at him, “LANGUAGE!”

Getting up from her seat, she clenches and unclenches her fist, matching their timing to her measured breathing. After a tense few seconds, she turns to Draco and apologizes. “I'm sorry for my outburst. I am upset. Consider this a friendly warning, I will not receive jokes well for the next few hours or so.”

Draco starts, “I...” and stops himself before continuing to mention how he knows women have that time of the month, instead saying, “will try.” After her nod and a deep breath he asks, “he didn't say one word where he was going?”

“We were hoping you might know,” Perenelle replies with a heavy measure of hope that makes Draco uncomfortable to see.

“I...” Draco catches himself from making a comment about how little he ever wants to know where Potter might be, instead saying, “don't know.” After a cautious breath, he takes out the Maurader's Map. “But I have something that might help.” He taps the parchment with the tip of his wand, speaking clearly, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Instantly the castle's large layout draws itself into visibility, complete with all the castles occupants. The three scan the names and Draco makes note of the two sixth years in a cupboard together, but after a few minutes of carefully combing through the names, they concede that Ares Flamel is not among them.

“What does that mean?” Perenelle hates to ask, hoping he hasn't left Hogwarts.

“I imagine it means he probably left Hogwarts,” Draco easily reasons. At Perenelle hard glare, he quickly adds, “o-or he's uh, in the Chamber, or the Room of Requirement. The map doesn't show those locations.”

“Then let's check the Room of Requirement,” Perenelle insists, already walking to the door, the boys following behind her. They make the trek in silence and upon arriving, Draco explains, “it won't make another room if it's already in use, so...” Draco does the process thinking of his room. “…if I can make the door appear with my room than that means... and he's not here,” Draco says after looking into the room he created.

“Then...” Nicolas creates a privacy bubble before continuing. “Are we thinking the Chamber?”

“It's either that or he's gone,” Draco says having already forgotten Perenelle's touchy agitation. “And since none of us speak Parsel tongue, I can't see how we'd be able to check.”

“What's the likelihood we can find a snake that can understand the Queen's English or another parseltongue that can assist us in entering the Chamber,” Nicolas asks, though Draco wonders if that's a joke.

Perenelle gives her husband a hard look, practically spitting out, “please don't joke, Nicolas. I can't
now.” Perenelle feels her eyes water and places a shaky hand over her lips. Realizes she's more upset than she's letting on, Nicolas embraces her in a comforting hug.... making Draco eerily uncomfortable again. While he waits, he can't help but think how stupid they’re being to care about someone who's resigned himself to death in a single-minded purpose of killing Voldemort. 'Idiots,' he thinks. 'Caring like he's their own. He belongs to nobody. They're all dead... I helped kill them.' As it's been the case since he died at the hands of Voldemort, thick regret vibrates his chest and kicks the air out in his lungs. Draco tilts forward as the air quickly expels. Drawing deep needed breath, Draco wonders aloud, "can you try a Patronus, or Dobby?"

The Flamels spread apart enough to look at each other, then Draco, before they all return to the Flamel's residence. The dual lobster Patronuses from Nicolas and Perenelle floated through the air like swimming through the ocean, slowly and in Draco's opinion, the most annoying thing he's ever seen. In the old couple’s highly agitated state, he says nothing as they call Dobby while they wait for the Patronuses to return.

“Merry morning masters,” Dobby starts with a gracious bow, clearly happier being in the service of the Flamel than he ever was with the Malfoys. “How may Dobby be of service?”

“Dobby, remember when we said you don't have to call us master,” Nicolas asks when Perenelle cuts in. “Dobby we need you to deliver a message to Ares, asking him to come see us immediately or at the very least let us know where he is... and if he's alright... or if he's hungry. He didn't really eat during dinner. Actually take him food while you're at it,” Perenelle frets as she hops to the kitchen.

“Dobby,” Nicolas takes over. “We'd like to know if Ares is okay first and foremost, then if he is willing to see us.”

Dobby takes a basket that is heavy enough to force Dobby to bend over. He resorts to magically lifting it as he asks with some worry, “Is master Ares okay? Has Dobby upset Master Ares?”

Dobby squeaks as he moves to the wall is about to bang his head against it when Nicolas calls out, “No! No, Dobby of course not.” Nicolas brings the house elf back as he says, “you've been doing the most astounding job with our library. We're very happy. It's just, well, other things are making Ares' life more difficult and we're worried about him.”

Dobby stays still a moment before his face cements into a mask of pure determination. “Dobby will not let masters down!” and he snaps his fingers, disappearing with the heavy basket of food.

Perenelle looks very worried, turning to Draco and realizing, “you should send a Patronus as well.”

“I can't.” Draco slowly admits. “...I never needed it,” he adds and fortunately, the Flamels don't push him. They wait several long minutes until finally, Dobby returns, sans basket, prompting Perenelle to yell, “well?”

“Dobby has spoken with Master Ares,” Dobby starts. “Young Master has given Dobby permission to bring food, but only if Dobby promises not to bring anyone where Master is. Master Ares want Head Master and Mistress to know young master will return eventually.”

“Where is he?” Nicolas asks.

“Dobby asked and Master Ares has become sad comedian. Young master said the sea, but it was not the sea! It was large room with largest snake Dobby has ever seen.”

“Chamber it is,” Draco points out.
“And no way to get to him,” Nicolas adds.

“And we need to get to him,” Perenelle finishes.

“Thank you Dobby,” Nicolas says, excusing him with orders to send him food six times a day.

“Shouldn't we allow him a moment to process and wait till he's ready,” Nicolas asks the professional. Perenelle, however, doesn't look so sure.

“He's running,” Draco mentions in Perenelle's silence.

“And dissociating,” she adds. “Going to a place he knows no one can reach him. I don't like it. In my professional opinion, I would very much prefer he become angry, or sad. I'd know he still cares that way. This is like giving up, and it makes me nervous.”

“We have no choice but to wait for him,” Nicolas tells her, bringing her in his embrace again, prompting Draco to stand with the urgent intent to leave. “I'm certain he simply needs the day, and before we know it, he'll be white as rain.”

Ignoring the vision of his son on the Flamels couch, looking at him with a toothy smile and a book in his lap, Draco informs them, “I'll keep an eye on him when I see him.” As the slow-moving lobsters swim through the wall in their pointless return, Draco adds with a sneer. “If you need me for anything... please don't use those things to call me.”

Fortunately for Draco, it's not the first time he's had to associate himself with Granger and Lovegood without Potter present. When the freak was bedridden after the acromantula attack, he was forced to share close proximity with them, not only to look out for them but because he had to. They were Potter’s safe environment, and tending to them in the minimal way he had to, helped Potter, and in turn aided his vengeance. Daphne Greengrass he didn't mind being around, as she's very nearly the best-looking witch in Hogwarts, however, Granger and Lovegood always made him work twice as hard to refrain from leveling them with snide retort, after snide retort.

Reading about medicine is an increasing passion he never thought he would ever experience. He's taken so many lives in the previous timeline, it almost seems an insult to him that he's now considering a life in saving them. Though, with constant thoughts of his son driving him, saving lives is the direction he's dedicated himself to.

“Where's Ares,” Granger asks as she looks about the pair of Slytherin.

“He's suffering from a monthly bleed betwixt his nethers and needs the day,” Draco tells her with a satisfied grin, wishing Harry were here to hear it. Granger ignores him with a huff and roll of her eyes, easily aggravating him as she turns to Daphne for answers.

Daphne shrugs as she stretches far too alluringly to Draco, relaying, “I only know what Draco's said which automatically makes it worthless.”

Nodding, Granger turns to him, asking, “could something have happened after dinner with the Potters? That must be awful information to have to tell them. It couldn't have been easy.”

Watching the clear vision of his blond son take off down the wet cold path in a stubby uncoordinated sprint, Draco simply says, “there are harder things,” and follows after the visage.

At one point near the end of their run, Daphne, attempting to run ahead and finish first, slipped on a patch of wet grass and her subsequent tumble was as confusing as it was funny. It was as if her body couldn't decide which momentum to follow through with; the backward motion created from
the outstretched step or the general forward momentum of the run. She ended up rolling with flared legs and landing on her front. Draco didn't have enough oxygen to laugh as hard as he wanted and settling with a quiet shake of his shoulders, wishing Potter had been there to see one of his groupies eat dirt like she did.

'Serves her right for having terrible taste in men,' Draco muses as he washes up for breakfast. Meeting Tracey first thing in the morning is his favorite part of the day. She holds in her fervor when she sees him, but he can tell she's as happy as he thinks he himself may feel. Her eyes become much sharper, and her sensual perky lips curve upward a tad at its edge, and even her posture cranes, swelling one of his favorite parts of the female anatomy.

At times, he can't help but feel unclean by his lewd thoughts of her. He's mentally, if not physically, much older than she is. Yet he finds Tracey, Daphne, and several others to be much more mature for their age than he recalls... not that he paid that much attention to them when he was younger. In the end, though unsavory, he reasons he has gone back in time, and he is attempting to cultivate a much more enlightened life. Smart as these witches are, if anything, his previous life has only assisted him in catching up to their maturity.

At breakfast, the Daily Prophet printing another comedy he's adding to his collection. In it, Rita painted the best picture of a supposed love affair between a, "stunningly pretty muggle-born," Hermione Granger and her two male suitors, Viktor Krum, international quidditch superstar, and Ares Flamel, heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House Flamel, along with their fortune and a vast collection of cultural treasures. Adding a final sucker punch, heiress Daphne Greengrass is apparently trying to win Ares' heart for herself. Draco reads with wicked gusto, and by the appalled look on Granger's admittedly pretty face, Draco knows that the quotes in the fabricated tale were taken out of context and likely obtained via Skeeter's animagus form.

Draco decides not to tell them about Skeeter and enjoyed all the odd and catty looks Daphne and Granger receive for the rest of the day, wishing to Merlin, yet again, that Potter would read the article in front of him so Draco could enjoy the freak’s dismay. Draco enjoyed the day, especially how playful Tracey has gotten with him when they find a few moments of privacy.

Walking into the forest later that night, Draco begrudgingly wonders where Potter is and if he's just going to ditch all his responsibilities, much to his complete agitation. He wonders periodically throughout his night's search, 'how could that prat just relax in the Chamber like I'm not working my frozen tail off here? That sad arse is probably having the time of his life beating his bean and toting on some good green,' getting angrier and angrier.

Angry enough when Granger asks for Ares at their morning meeting, he snaps, "I don't know, okay! I don't- He's gone! He's gone, yet again! Like an idiot!"

Both Granger and Daphne eye him in complete uncertainty, as Granger asks, "what do you mean he's gone? Where did he go?"

‘...Didn't I just say-”

“Fine why did he go?” Daphne heatedly cuts him off. “What happened Malfoy? And so help me if you don't tell me everything you know, I'm putting you on the hit list and moving you to the top!”

“What hit list-”

“Malfoy!” Granger calls.

“Oh stuff it!” Draco tells the pair of them. “You think this is easy? I don't want- …I...” Draco
takes a breath ignoring confusing thoughts about Potter's well being. “He's running away... sort of. He's in the Chamber.”

“Why?” Daphne sternly asks. Draco starts walking away from the castle as he explains to them what happened the night before.

“Oh, Ares,” Granger mews, richly brown eyes looking worried. “It's just one thing after another! How does he put up with it?”

“With a wad of cloth between his legs,” Draco mutters loud enough for them to hear, earning a stinging hex from Granger, much to his surprise.

“You are horrid,” she yells at him, and he's more than petty enough to bring his own wand out, but pointing it at her brings up striking images of Granger and her pleading brown eyes from his own timeline, arresting his movement well before returning a hex of his own.

“That's enough, both of you,” Daphne states. “You're acting like children and Ares doesn't need that right now.”

“Fine,” Granger huffs, staring daggers at Draco, unnervingly similar to the Granger of old. “But if he says one more insult-”

“You'll what,” Draco challenges, unable to withstand so much her righteous integrity.

“I'll go Green Reaper on your pasty arse,” Hermione quickly promises with hard eyes.

Draco feels the unnerving tremor of his magic, an odd feeling like someone grabbing his Adam's apple and shaking it. The oath is humming and Draco responds, backing down with a, “you've been hanging 'round Ares too long, you psycho.”

“Is there another way to get in the Chamber,” Daphne quickly interjects stepping slightly ahead of an irate Granger.

“No,” Draco stated. “Unless you know a parsleemouth, we're not getting in.”

“So we wait until he comes out,” Granger thinks aloud. “He has to come out to eat.”

“Dobby's bringing him food,” Draco counters. “Forget it. He's... so annoying!” Draco finishes, uncomfortable with these sympathetic feelings violating his chest, to then be more than uncomfortable when Granger hits him with another stinging hex. They're light but still, it annoys him further. “What the bloody hell?!”

“Why do you have to be so horrible?” Hermione yells. “He's your friend!”

“He is not!” Draco counters far more petulantly than he'd like, which annoys him all the more. “He isn't, he isn't, he isn't!”

When Granger slowly turns to Daphne curiously, the concerned blond answers, “...Even I don't understand.” Daphne then points her finger at Draco, arguing, “you... you, Draco Bloody Malfoy gets to spend more time with him than anyone. What is your damage? Is the only way you can like him by hating him? Is that how you self regulate your envy?”

With a click of his teeth, Draco continues walking, silently ignoring them. The girls eventually begin talking amongst themselves for solutions as they follow. Solutions. Draco ignores many of his own thoughts on ways of helping the quasi bane of his existence on the way back to the castle.
The pureblood Slytherin feels stuck hating someone he isn't allowed to hate and loving someone that isn’t alive to be loved. He can't even say what it is about Potter that always infuriates him.

'He's just wrong,' his mind easily reasons when his next step hesitates to hit his full stride, allowing instead the airy vision of his son to run in front of him. What solutions were there when his son was murdered? They all let it happen. They accepted it. Fear killed his son. No one had solutions when he needed to save his boy because they were petrified with fear to think of going against the Dark Lord. That moment so long ago, and yet like yesterday, was the only time he thought of Potter. No one stood against the Dark Lord, because they all feared him... all but Potter. And now that golden idiot runs away, taking Draco’s vengeance with him.

Draco stops, halting Daphne and Granger as well. He turns to them and says, “abandonment.” The texts of the various healing manuals impose reason to his observations of Potter. The girls look at him confused. “…He was raised with chronic loss.”

“How do you know?” Daphne asked amazed. “He told you about his life?

“I don't need to explain myself.”

“You don't even care about him,” Granger adds to Daphne’s amazement. “Why would he tell you?”

“Listen!” Draco calls loudly. “You both know enough. He lost people and he's survived in a lot of lethal fights. Considering how you two look at him like you're thirsty for his baby juice, it wouldn't surprise me if you read everything you could about trauma,” Draco finishes. Granger is the first of the two to deny they look at Potter like that but he cuts them off. “He lost friends and family, more than likely brutally, which have left scars on his psyche.”

“…Most who experience traumatic events have an arduous task of adjusting to normal life,” Granger continues after shaking off being affronted. “It's studied extensively in the muggle world. I’ve had my father send me some of his old medical manuals on the subject.”

“With time, a good support system, and self-care, coping can become easier,” Daphne adds. “But there's also a possibility it can get worse, making it a struggle to go from day to day.”

“Without the mental and emotional support generally needed in growing adolescence, it's reasonable for him to feel shame, like a howler from life saying you're a right git and you'll never be good enough.” Draco replies as he regurgitates the healing manuals he's read thus far. He catches Granger mutter, “insufferable arse,” before he continues to inform them of his observations. “He's tired more often than not. He’s been losing focus. He’s quiet... more than usual… he’s withdrawn. With the absolutely ridiculous amount of problems he magically attracts, it's unreasonable to think he can cope with all that nonsense as if it was nothing. Sadly or whatever, Nicolas and Perenelle were too late to the gala and he'd already internalized these feelings of abandonment. Which means, rather than just kill everyone for all the shite he has to swim through, he runs.”

“Leaving it all behind,” Daphne surmises. “He's the single most unique wizard I've ever come across. I can’t just leave him like this, so, how do we help him?”

Draco makes a gagging noise, as Hermione cautiously ponders aloud to her Slytherin friend and Draco, “how hard do you think it might be to learn parseltongue? So we can get to him,” she finishes, feeling a little silly asking what might be an obvious question, but would rather have the clarity.

Draco snorts, amused, citing, “it isn't some language any ol' twisty bender can just pick up,
Granger. It's an actual magical ability gained by blood or some other unknown magical means I'm not even going to pretend to know about. You can't just mimic the sound to open the Chamber, or any idiot could do it."

“Fine,” she spits through clenched teeth, glaring at him. “So then that leaves... support?”

“Which would be?” Draco asks.

“We should talk with the Flamels,” Daphne suggests.

“If we don't see Ares today,” Granger begins to tag on to Daphne's suggestion. “Than we talk with Nicolas and Perenelle?” With a nod from the Slytherins, they cut their workout short, accidentally discovering how much more energy they're left with during breakfast.

Potter hadn't shown up the for any of their classes, annoying Draco with every arrant, unintentional reminiscence of his mortal enemy turn de facto leader. By the end of class, Draco's certain this unease has everything to do with the loyalty oath and nothing more.

“Are you okay,” Tracey asks him from the seat beside him. They all decided on dinner at the Flamel quarters to talk in private. Seated at the elongated table are Granger, Lovegood, Daphne, Tracey, Astoria, Gabrielle, and Fleur. Nicolas and Perenelle occupied the ends of the table with Perenelle seated with the youngest in the room, Astoria and Gabrielle. The Flamel matriarch had requested everyone close to Potter that could assist in supporting him, including Fleur who had been keeping her sister company at the time they got her. With Gabrielle’s attendance, so to came Daphne’s sister, Astoria.

Overlooking his hallucinogenic son nodding happily, eating toast in the middle of the table, Draco softly answers Tracey, “fine enough, my lady.” To which he spots a bit of blush stain her cheeks. Draco sits next to Nicolas with Tracey beside him as he simply listens to the groupies convey their concern and filling in those who aren't up to date with Potter's ridiculous life.

“What should we do?” Granger asks Nicolas.

“Is Ares okay,” Astoria woefully asks her older sister.

“Soeur,” Gabrielle asks Fleur in their native tongue, likely parroting Astoria. Draco feels fortunate to be seated as far away from Fleur as possible as it makes it easier to control himself, especially in front of Tracey.

“Ares heard some bad news and needs time to himself,” Perenelle easily explains to the young girls with a friendly smile. “We're here to figure out how we can help him feel better.”

“Ow do we achieve zhis,” Fleur asks Perenelle

“If you have somewhere to be, I'm certain we can fill you in later,” Daphne tells the older French girl seated in front of her.

“I'ave no obligations at zhe moment,” Fleur coolly returns, piquing a spiritless Draco's attention. ‘Come on, catfight,’ he mentally jeers.

Draco holds in his smirk when Daphne replies, “I was under the impression you had a dinner date with the heir of the Weasley brood. Or was have I misheard?”

Draco's lips crack a smirk as Fleur is visibly surprised to hear Daphne learned of their meeting. Those at the table observe and Lovegood even sets down her Quibbler.
“Eef you must know, Daphne,” Fleur smiles impatiently. “I agreed to meet Beel for dinner, however, az I count myself among Arez'z closest friends, eet's only natural I drop everyzhing to 'elp 'im.”

“Fantastic,” Daphne barely smiles. “Though I'm certain Ares wouldn't want to be the cause of hindering any precious moments with heir Weasley. Make certain you make it up to Bill, was it? He's handsome, and you wouldn't want to let that get away.”

“E ees quite handsome, but do not fret my dear,” Fleur teases with a wickedly knowing smile. “I alwayz get my man.”

“Okay, you two,” Granger jumps to say, effortlessly interrupting Draco's entertainment. “That's enough. We're here to figure out how to help Ares, not watch you two claw eh others eyes out with flattery.”

“She's right,” Perenelle agrees, looking sternly between both girls. “Let's be civil. This is about Ares and how we can help him.”

“Have you spoken with the Minister,” Hermione quickly asks the Flamels. “Surely he wouldn't approve of this.”

“Conveniently, he has been otherwise predisposed,” Nicolas tiredly responds. “It seems he's been avoiding his office due to international relations meeting, which only means he knows but is far more afraid of being caught knowing beforehand.”


“Now, now,” Nicolas bids the table with open palms. “Try to understand, when you've lived as long as we have, vain, tactless, incompetent, pleasure-seeking despots who hunger for power they ought not have is a far too common occurrence than it should be. The Borgia house were certainly no saints. King Richard II nearly bankrupted England all to feed his ego. James the Second was arrogance personified—”

“Ah yes, the Countess of Hungary, who was not only above the law but a serial murderer as well, scoring hundreds of murders of the Hungarian people,” Nicolas concludes before then thinking of, “Leopold the Second of Belgium—”

“Those are simply from Muggle history, mind you,” Perenelle interjects. “Enough blood and greed to be had for sure, however, our own history is just as littered with cruel and selfish witches and wizards. Herpo the Foul from Ancient Greece, a practitioner of dark magic and first to successfully hatch a Basilisk. Morgana Le Fey, a genius level practitioner of the Dark Arts, Merlin's arch-rival and half-sister to a squib, legendary King Arthur. Ethelred the Ever-Ready—”

“Ah, the evil counselor,” Nicolas remarked looking past any one person into the long past he’s lived through. “He would be the worst person to seek advice, however, the king of England would not listen to anyone but him, causing their loss of the Danes. Though he's most famous for taking offense absent any real reason, casting dark magic on innocent bystanders. Merwyn the Malicious, Emeric the Evil, Gellert Grindelwald, and on, and on, and on. It's hard to be surprised by the cowardly destruction of the selfish when we've seen it far too many times.”

“That isn't to say we're not sickened or aggrieved by it,” Perenelle chimes in. “He’s our little
Trouble Star after all. However, it's not surprising to witness opposing political hardliners pulling a frailly-spun puff-piece like Fudge in opposing directions. The light on one side, the dark on the other, and the weak-willed Fudge in the middle.”

“The light and dark doesn’t tell us anything,” Granger points out. “Who gains by doing this?”

Daphne responds, “traditionalists who support the pure-blood agenda have the most to gain by Ares' demise. It’s vengeance, plain and simple.”

Hermione looks at the silver-blond Slytherin, and Draco is irked by the anger in her eyes, as if he's the spokesperson for an entire pure-blood traditionalist party simply because they're right. 'We'll do it right this time,' he muses before assuaging Granger's idiotic concern. “Lucius has recused himself given the debt our house owes house Flamel. Nott's head of house is leading the political pressure to seek their justice.”

“Your minister must know what weel 'appen eef zheir ministry decide to press charges,” Fleur adds with more heat it made him sick to know it's for Potter. “Fazher 'as even discovered zhe Flamel 'Ouse 'as dual citizenship with France, making zhem citizenz and subject to zhe protection of our laws.”

They all turn to either Nicolas or Perenelle, who explains with a passive wave of her hand, “oh my, that was centuries ago. Not to mention we have citizenship in fifty... two countries?” she tosses the question toward her husband.

“Forty-eight now,” Nicolas oddly states, as if not entirely sure himself. “Sikkim, Ashanti Empire, Soviet Union, and... Austria-Hungary, I want to say, no longer exist. Honestly, we're fairly lackadaisical where we travel. Citizens of the world, as I see it.”

“So if you follow the traditional pure-blood agenda,” Granger studiously begins to comment, as if she were in class. “You actively lobby for justice against Ares, even though it was obviously heroism and self-defense by any means necessary.”

“And I'm certain they have means to hurt Fudge if he doesn't cooperate,” Draco adds unconcerned. His father always loved Fudge for the puppet he can be.

Granger ponders aloud, “on the other hand, the opposition along with the majority of public support would end his career if he followed through with this testimonial or subsequent charging of Ares. Despite the loss of his career, it's obvious he should do the right thing.”

Taking out her peculiar spectrespecs to blow hot air on them but not wipe them, Lovegood listlessly ponders aloud, “if he's an arrogant coward as Mister and Professor Flamel suggest, than it's likely he'd take whatever solution presented that would save his career and avoid diplomatic catastrophe.”

“Sadly that may be the case,” Nicolas says. Perenelle divulges to the students, “it's our belief that fiendish amphibian proposed a compromise to the minster that could solve both his problems.”

The girls smirk at the insult, grim as it all is and Nicolas adds, “If they take his magic away, Fudge could claim to have served justice to Nott and his lot behind closed doors without actually pursuing criminal charges against Ares, thereby making the purists happy. However, at the moment, the thing that is important is plausible deniability. He can't let on that he knows beforehand in case it's leaked, which is why he's avoiding me, or anyone that isn't in the know. I expect he'll keep this up until the actual Task.”
“Won't he have to be at the hearing?” Tracey asks.

“No, that's what the DMLE is for,” Nicolas answers her. “Though Fudge can tell them to drop it, it’s Department Head Bones and Auror Black’s case.

“Than we should leak the story,” Granger champions with the sort of zeal that reminds him of the Granger from their previous timeline. “This isn't right!”

“That's what plausible deniability is for,” Daphne explains. “Fudge will simply claim he was oblivious to it. He'd hang it on Umbridge, wash his hands of her and distance himself from the negative attention. She herself might even claim it was only a simple clerical error. Ludicrous as it sounds, it's a tactic often used in business to buy time.”

“Shouldn't we still do it,” Tracey asks. “If we leak it and he denies it, then he'd obviously change the times.”

“And things would stay the same,” Perenelle answers. “The puppet Fudge stays, the cruel Umbridge stays, and anger compounds to find another way. The only thing we'd get is a stay of execution. We want more than that. We need more than that. Fortunately, we have time, and we should use it to think of other solutions.”

“My fazher will 'ear of zhis,” Fleur angrily states catching everyone's attention.

“Sadly I feel Stéphane may be unable to do anything of worth that wouldn't be seen as hostile meddling in foreign government,” Nicolas “Until Fudge has Ares brought on charges, this is a British matter. In the meantime, I'll attempt to meet him every day.”

“You know I'd prefer if you didn't travel often,” Perenelle states. The eye that she gives him makes Draco wonder why that is.

“I'm perfectly safe, dearest,” Nicolas states tapping his chest when Draco recalls they're still being hunted by Dark Goblins and or some as of yet identified opposition. Draco agrees its a risk, but if the old Alchemist wants to be an idiot for Potter sake that's his business.

“So what are we doing then, professor,” Tracey asks Perenelle. “For Ares.”

“I've been ruminative on how best to assist him, and I've come to the conclusion that he could use your help far more than Nicolas or I,” Perenelle tells the group. “Due to Ares unique upbringing-” Draco snorts at that, halting Perenelle into coldly asking, “is there something on your mind you wish to share Draco?”

Draco would've never let such a challenge stand. A lifetime ago, he would've taken whatever she held dear and destroyed it in front of her pleading eyes for her daring insolence. Watching pure focus in Scorpius's eyes as the memory of his son carefully stacks equally imaginary letter-blocks on top of each other, he deflates his highly reactive vanity. Easily ignoring the attention from the others, Draco shakes his head, glumly adding, "no."

“Good,” she smiles at him, making him uncomfortable as she adds, “I'll prescribe something for your throat later,” earning a few chuckles. Tracey leans back in her chair, sliding her hand under the table and taking his. His fingers are cold compared to her warmth and he wonders why as Perenelle continues, “I won't go into detail as that isn't my place to speak on nor is it what's important. Going through one or more traumatic events as he has, affects the mind in a way that causes significant problems in social or work situations, and in relationships. One of those symptoms is avoidance. Trying to escape thinking or talking about what's causing the stress by
physically removing oneself from places, activities, or people. There's a lot going on, certainly, but we cannot abandon him. I would like us all to do something.”

“Something like what,” Tracey asks.

Astoria quickly asks, “would it be okay- do you think he might like a hug?”

Perenelle smiles warmly at the young Greengrass, pleasantly affirming, “why I should think he'd like that very much.”

“I must also 'ug 'im,” Gabrielle announces passionately, eying Astoria defiantly. Draco almost enjoys the spark of rivalry between the girls until Perenelle places a hand on each one's shoulder, telling them, “now, now, my young ladies in waiting. As Ares' mother, I can tell you nothing matters more to him than friendship. Do you think he would like hugs from girls who are nice to each other or from girls who only fight one another?”

Perenelle didn't have to look at Daphne and Fleur, but even Draco could feel the implication. The girls nod in agreement and the young Delacour even extends her hand to Astoria, surprising all in the room as she asserts, “we can bozh 'ave 'im. Fleur 'as told mozher he prefers multiple partners-”

“Gabrielle!” Fleur yells over her little sister as everyone still hears, 'multiple partners.’ No reaction in the room was tame, not even Lovegood's. Daphne, Hermione, and Tracey were all wide-eyed, high-browed and astonished by the young Delacour's assertion. Fleur turns to the surprised Flamels, smiling awkwardly while frowning as she tries to clarify, “she jests. Eet ees a joke, nozhing more.” Turning to her sister she sternly warns her, “Gabrielle Delacour, zhat ees not a funny zhing to say! 'E ees a friend, not a gigolo. No, no, zhere ees no excuse for zhis display, now apologize.”

Draco likes the idea of blowing up Potter's hive of honey's, however, he might have to stay for the resulting aftermath and answer constant questions about Potter's preferences he doesn't want to deal with, so, moves this along immediately after Gabrielle apologizes. “Besides a ménage à trois, I'm a little hazy on other forms of treatment,” Draco relays to Perenelle, getting an eye roll from Daphne, a huff of exasperation from Granger, and a stern eye from Perenelle.

“Simply put, at the moment his thoughts are in a very negative place, and what we need to do is help him return to a positive disposition,” Perenelle states.

“I'm not sure the Green Reaper was ever positive,” Draco couldn't help but utter, getting an annoyed warning glare from Perenelle, and a genuine warning whispered from Nicolas. “Tread carefully ma’ boy. Not all that is fierce are mothers, but all mothers are surely fierce.”

Draco keeps his comments to himself Granger asks, “are there any triggers we should avoid?”

“I can't answer that because I can't say what is or isn't a trigger,” Perenelle states.

“It's a surprise to us each time,” Nicolas adds. “I feel what matters is intent. We all want to help him and if we think along those lines, I believe he should see it.”

“And if not, than we explain ourselves,” Perenelle informs them.

“So what do we do,” Tracey asks again.

“If we can each come up with something, that would be fantastic,” Nicolas says.

“Oh,” Lovegood coos. “I have a splendid idea.” After a second, she stands, sliding her chair back
as loud as possible and begins to leave. “Thank you for a lovely meal,” she conveys as she exits, leaving everyone utter confusion.

“Ohay,” Hermione conceptualizes aloud. “I guess that's one idea. Any others?”

Watching the image of his son taking his first few steps on the table, Draco actually has an idea he absolutely hates. “I do,” Draco answers. For the fun of it, he waits a second before getting up himself and makes to leave.

“No, no young man,” Perenelle calls. “You sit explain this idea of yours.”

With a huff, he tells the room, “I have to get a few things together but I feel this'll help the nin-him. Come on Trace. I'm going to need your help.”

“Can you at least give us a clue,” Nicolas asks as the pair of Slytherins leave.

“He doesn't know how to dance,” Draco says before exiting. He doesn't hear the rest of the conversation but he truly doesn't have to. They discussed each idea in the days to come as Potter remained absent. By the end of the week, the only day they had any expectation he'd show was Saturday, during the wand weighing ceremony. By that point, the only ones ready to shower the green-eyed ninny with unconditional support was himself and Tracey.

Draco didn't like it. He didn't like what he had to do. He didn't like how eager they all seemed to help Scar-head, and most of all, he didn't like being subservient to Potter's code of morality. It felt like wearing a shirt made of crawling worms, coating him in cold mucus as they slither freely over his skin. Day by day since the train, Draco inched closer to a realization that this side of the battle didn't have it easy, and talent wouldn't be enough. He easily remembers having far more support in their previous timeline. Money, social and political support were great tools to be sure, but it was how electrifying the Dark Lord always was when convincing others to join their cause. There was unity, a community, all striving for one goal, and even if they were misguided in their choice of leader, it was beautiful to belong so completely in that manner and far more rewarding than wadding through this side’s moral mud.

From this side of the spectrum, Draco’s suffering from self-imposed partnership to a prat who nearly has to do everything himself. They have money and favors thanks to the Flamels, however, these tools help in a massive war that has multiple fronts. Potter's aim is surgical, avoiding every distraction that's not absolutely obstructing the fatal strike to the enemy's heart. With two more Horcrux within reach, Draco can admit Potter has reason to avoid being sidetracked. The faster they retrieve the Locket and Diary, the closer they are to Nagini and the grand end. In Potter’s eyes, it’s a search and destroy mission, not a search, fix society's idiosyncrasies, then destroy.

Still, it's infuriating. Potter is infuriating. These distractions and setbacks are infuriating. Worst of all... truly the worst of the worst... he doesn't entirely hate the idea of helping Potter. It makes him rage to feel any notion of sentiment, of sympathy, toward his most hated rival and only these hallucinogenic images of his beautiful son have any effect in calming him. For he would do anything for his boy... a series of cherished memories though his firstborn may only be.

Saturday morning came and nearly ended when the not quite bane of his existence finally showed up, looking unkempt with his midnight black phoenix on his shoulder. Trace, Daphne, her sister Astoria, Granger, Lovegood, Fleur, her pervert little sister, and the Flamels were all waiting outside the trophy room. Having spent the past hour waiting for the wanker, Draco knows inside the fairly lengthy room adorned with all sorts of trophies, old and new, were Dumbledore, the Potters, Karkaroff, Krum, Madam Maxime, Umbridge, Bagman, Rita Skeeter, and Ollivander.
Nova on his shoulder, Potter looks sullen even as Astoria and Gabrielle run to him. Draco can see him tense, likely suspect of little girls running toward him. *Glad to see his paranoia has only gotten worse,* he sarcastically thinks. Each of the girls gets an awkward hug from him, and the little pervert even wets his cheek with a kiss. With the vivid memory of his son walking beside the three, they make their way toward the waiting group for more nauseating hugs with Granger, Fleur, Lovegood, and even the Ice Queen, Daphne. Of his taste-impaired groupies, Granger takes it upon herself to fix his long black hair, taking her sweet time as she fixes it into his signature top knot.

Draco involuntarily nods when Potter spots him. They acknowledge with their eyes how very little about their mission has changed, though Draco knows there's absolutely no power on this planet that could divert Potter's gaze from the mission. From Draco’s admittedly meager knowledge on the human psyche, the silver-blonde is conflicted on how stable Potter needs to be for the challenges that lay ahead… challenges that will affect the world.

His rival nods back before hesitantly turning to everyone. Under everyone's soft or expectant gaze, he seems reluctant to say anything, taking a few seconds to even start with, “...uh... I don't know what to say. I'm sorry you had to worry needlessly-”

“No,” Perenelle states. “Nothing needless about it. If we didn't worry, it would mean we didn't care.”

“And we're all here because we care,” Nicolas adds.

“Also because your strength is quite attractive,” Lovegood softly states without a stitch of embarrassment. She adds, “though power is considered an aphrodisiac, I'm certain everyone here simply enjoys your company.” Before the bizarre blond can confound most any more, Dumbledore steps out of the trophy room, instantly setting Potter on edge.

“Ah, very good,” the elder arse passes. “Not a moment too soon. Mr. Flamel, Miss Delacour, the ceremony is about to begin. If you would...” Saying nothing, Potter moves in when Dumbledore adds, “While I admire your show of support, I'll have to ask you all to stay-”

Potter immediately turns around as if leaving, no word of protest, just simple action that makes clear his indifference. “Either we all enter or none do,” Nicolas states, though eying Fleur, he adds, “Fleur, as Beauxbaton's Champion, please don't feel pressured to stay.”

“Mr. Flamel,” Dumbledore calls out as Potter is already several feet away. “Perhaps we can bypass this custom this one time. Truthfully, it isn't necessarily mandatory.”

Potter turns about, ignoring the headmaster as they all enter the room. After quick introductions, none more extravagant than Rita Skeeter and her Quick-Quotes Quill, her request for a pre-ceremony interview were rebuffed with Potter's silence and Perenelle's rejection. Even Professor Potter refused to allow Skeeter to interview Hardwin.

Starting with Fleur, the wand maker begins verifying the wands are in good working order. “Nine and a half inches, inflexible, rosewood, with, dear me, hair of a veela for its core,” he announces to all.

“One of my granmuzzer's een fact,” Fleur proudly states.

Krum's wand is announced to be ten and a quarter inches in length, made of hornbeam and dragon heartstring. The counterfeit Potter's wand is eleven inches of holly wood with a Thestral tail hair core. Scar-head is last to present and his paranoia wouldn't allow him to remove the wand from his wrist holster, alarming only those in the room who have never interacted with him. Alternatively,
Potter extends his arm forward to allow the elder wand maker easier access and yet again, the freak’s life is unmitigated lunacy.

“...Oh my word,” Ollivander gasps, shaking as old bulging eyes take in every millimeter Potter's wand. The old fodder can barely contain his wrinkled hysteria as he struggles to explain, “th-the legendary w-wand of P-Prospero, rightful Duke of Milan.”

“Commonly known as The Instrument of Power,” Perenelle interjects, happy to teach the surprised groupies. “Though a strong wand to be sure, it would be misleading to simply say, 'Instrument of Power.' It's only a name. Most know Prospero's real source of strength came from his many tomes on White and Black magic, what we know today as Light and Dark magic, as well as his familiars.” Even Draco didn't know the details behind Potter's odd looking wand, but it doesn't surprise him that yet one more thing in that freaks life is just as weird as him. His life is like a bazaar of para-magical rubbish.

“How have you come upon such a remarkable treasure,” Ollivander breathes without taking his still amazed eyes off the death-white wand.

“Why that is an excellent question,” Umbridge states with her high pitched voice that even his son hides from her. These hallucinations are the most challenging for him when they interact with his actual surrounding. It's happened with a few of the Slytherins that will eventually become some of the nastier Death Eaters, and like with Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy, and the Carrows, the image of his son hides from Umbridge, in this case behind Potter, watching her with dread. Though he recalls his time as an inquisitor with fondness, at the moment, the toad’s viciousness is scaring his boy, instantly compelling him to see her as his enemy. “I believe it is the ministry's duty to govern inheritance rights for descendants property,” she continues to say. “It's possible a respectable and law-abiding family have been robbed of a sentimental family heirloom.”

“That's quite unlikely, madam undersecretary,” Ollivander asserts without taking his eyes off the white wand. “Even as his wonderful play remains, his lineage does not.”

“Though scribed in the 1600s, Prospero was before even our time,” Nicolas notes. With a hack for a reporter in the room, Nicolas adds little more than, “all I will say is it was a gift, though with a double purpose of it’s safe keeping.”

“I couldn't imagine safer hands,” Daphne strongly leads, eying a slightly startled Potter, and drawing Hermione's, Fleur's and Perenelle's attention. Turning away in disgust, Draco only then noticed Nova on a small bird stand being admired by Astoria and Gabrielle.

“Can you speak a little more on this wand Mr. Ollivander,” Skeeter beseeches, her quick quill scratching away. “Me, myself and my rabid readers are practically carnivorous for more.”

“Eleven inches, made of pine, core unknown as Prospero forged this prize on the island he found exile in. Many theories can explain it's milky white exterior, however, if one considers how Prospero was able to bend the spirits to his service, control weather, and even raise the dead, it would not be a stretch to assume it's core must lay with an inner component beholden to Death itself. Simply magnificent!”

“Well,” Bagman calls out. “That was... informative. Now that Mr. Ollivander has confirmed all the wands are indeed in working order, a commemorative photo-”

“And a few interviews with the champions,” Rita interjects. “Adoration is a part of the glory for champions, and one cannot champion whom one does not know!”
Unsurprisingly, Potter turns to leave, prompting Dumbledore to call out, “Mr. Flamel, you must stay for the photo and interview—Mr. Flamel!” the elder actually raises his raspy voice.

Turning to the group, Potter addresses Bagman, “Mr. Bagman, will I lose my magic if I don't stay for a photo and interview?”

After a startled moment of pause, Bagman answers, “uh, no, Mr. Flamel.”

Turning to Skeeter, Potter sternly voices his discontent. “My name was put into the Goblet without my consent, forcing me to participate in a tournament where I could very well be killed,” Potter snarls. “There’s your interview.” Catching Lovegood, he corrects himself stating, “as for a photo, you can tell your ‘rabid’ readers they’ll find it in The Quibbler.”

“Oh, isn't that just sweet of him,” Luna whimsically sings. “I can't imagine we'll have enough supplies for such a demand. I should probably warn my father of the carnage ahead.”

“Mr. Flamel, if I could have a moment of your time,” Dumbledore states walking toward him. “Perhaps lunch, while you and I discuss a few things.”

“I’m sure you meant to say we will like a moment of your time, headmaster,” Umbridge adds with a sickeningly sweet line of a smile.

Potter has a determined look in his anger repressed eyes as he walks straight to Dumbledore. With the exception of Ollivander, the room tenses in the brazen act. “Are you going to take her binding off?” the fourth year asks of his headmaster. The direct question lets Draco know that Potter still hadn't removed Nova's binding, though he wonders about a lack of frustration from Potter. Until they get that accursed thing off her leg, they'll have to continue walking... everywhere.

'...I miss flaming,' Draco can't help but muse.

“Perhaps we can discuss this—” Dumbledore starts and is interrupted when Potter turns to leave, letting his actions say the only thing that needs saying; 'no, we can't.' With the history of worship and awe Potter, along with much of magical society, showered on the old windbag, it's thrilling to watch Dumbledore hide his frustration at being scorned so publicly. Umbridge is completely scandalized at a fourth year who so blatantly disrespects authority while Skeeter is whispering with fury to her quick-quill note pad. Potter leaves without delay, his only fanfare is the line of his lady-minions following behind him.

“While I have no doubt you are fine upstanding citizens,” Umbridge starts to convey to the Flamels. “Clearly your heir is in desperate need of remedial instruction in etiquette. A lesson I’d be more than willing to impart—”

“No,” Perenelle emphatically states, moving threateningly close to Umbridge. “That will not now, or ever, be necessary, madam undersecretary. Truth be told, I don't want you anywhere near him. Should I ever find out that you have spoken to him without his guardians present, I will consider it an attack upon my heir and the Noble and Most Ancient House of Flamel. Do. Not. Test. Me,” she gravely warns, seeming two feet taller in Draco’s eyes. ‘All mothers are fierce,’ Draco thought. ‘Not Pansy.’

“Well... well, well, well,” Umbridge heaves with oddly pitched cackles. “It's become rather obvious whom he gets his disrespect toward authority from. No pity for the guilty.” Though spoken, Umbridge does take a few steps back.

“It isn't disrespect,” Nicolas interjects as Perenelle moves toward Fleur. “Though I imagine you're
so blinded by superiority, you can't see that it's the responsibility of every citizen to question authority, for only the fair and just survive such scrutiny; as it ought to be.” Nicolas gives Dumbledore a knowing look, regarding him in much the same way.

Being the Beauxbaton champion, Fleur's duty to stay with her headmistress seems to sadden her as she looks on dispirited. Perenelle presses a comforting kiss on each of Fleur and her sister's cheeks before following the Flamel heir as well. Draco and Tracey bring up the rear of the posse as it navigates through the castle toward the exit.

Outside, Nova takes to the skies while the group settles near the lake. Draco can tell being surrounded by his inner circle, Potter grows nervous by the minute, though it isn't quiet. Not a single one of his close companions wait on him to vomit a monologue of his overbearing and nauseating angst. Trace, Daphne, and Mr. Flamel are talking about a potion he's helping Daphne with, while Granger, Luna, and Perenelle are yakking about the annul of some historical figure Draco cares absolutely nothing about.

Tracey had nudged him a few times earlier, and still standing by Daphne, is now tilting her head at Potter, forcing him to plant himself awkwardly next to the silent wanker, refusing to bring up the subject Tracey wants them to talk about. Oddly enough, Astoria is between them incessantly asking questions about Nova. When Fleur and Gabrielle arrive, Astoria joins her veela friend, leaving a conflicted Draco with a nervous Potter.

"Perenelle told them not to freak you out with questions,” Draco finally claims, fed up with the silence. “I told em you have the emotional tolerance of wet parchment and wouldn't survive their misplaced concern.”

“I know you're suffering Malfoy,” Potter starts, and Draco can't help but wonder for a panicked moment if the freak can see the illusion of his son running in the cold grass. Until Potter finishes, “but there is a cure. All you have to do is walk, or jump, in that lake, and, this is the important part, don't come back up. I promise you'll stop being an arse.”

It hurt Draco to admit that was a smooth comeback even if it was rather simple, easing him back into a comforting hatred of Potter that allows him to say what he needs to. “They're all going to do something for you,” he continues. “To make you feel adequate again, I mean. It's meant to be a surprise but I rather like the idea of ruining it.”

“Really, Malfoy, the lake is right there,” Potter nods to the black lake. “I'll even help.”

“You know I'm trying to tell you something important here, and you're being a right git, you know,” Draco heaves.

“Me?! Is it so impossible for you to say something without sounding like a total prat about it,” Potter tells him, and Draco turns away from that familiar aggressive path to take a calming breath.

'Just say it,’ his mind suggests and Draco tries to do that. “I- we thought... I know... I know you don't know how to dance.” Draco can feel the pressure build noxiously in his chest, bringing beads of sweat to his forehead despite the cold, and completely making him uncomfortable in his own skin. “And with the Yule ball coming... it...” Draco's breathing quickens at the realization that he’s saying niceties to Potter, of all people. “...you would... feel better if you knew how to...” The gall of Potter to lean in simply to hear his voice, maddens him to bursting, adding, “... to not make a complete and total fucking arse out your miserable worthless self!”

Potter looks at him strangely as Draco heaves and catches his breath in relief. “...I can tell you're trying,” Potter starts to say. “but if you want to ask me to the Yule Ball, you're going to have to do
"What!" Draco yells in the middle of his asinine belief, drawing everyone's attention. "No! No! No, no one's asking a piece of shite like- This is why no one likes you, you freak!"

But Potter doesn't relent in a disgustingly sweet voice. "If you want me to be your date, you should be nicer to me."

"I'm not asking-" Draco cuts himself off to breath before his anger makes him do something that might break his oath and get him killed. Tracey walks over to him and it helps when she puts her delicate hand on his shoulder, affirming in her sweet song voice, "good attempt." She turns to Potter and asks with more patience than he's capable of, "is it true you really don't know how to dance? Because if so, you absolutely have to let us teach you. We've been practicing all last week and Draco is the most phenomenal dancer. I know he's a little rough around the edges but his hearts in the right place."

"Zhat soundz lovely but why instruct him in dance?" Fleur asks, the only member of his estrogen slaves who wasn't involved in this operation to appease the ninny.

Tracey answers her, along with the crowd, "Draco's learned from his father that there will be a Ball between the first and second task. It's called the Yule Ball and the Champions will be the ones to lead the dance. He thought Ares would enjoy himself more if he was comfortable dancing, instead of being all nervous about it."

'I did not think that... at all,' Draco mentally yells so loud, Potter quirked an eyebrow at him as if hearing his mental denial.

"I'll be helping as well," Daphne steps forward eying Potter like candy she's pretending not to want. "As- as will I," Granger nervously rehearse. "Though, I'm not very good at it."

"There's also Sirius' wedding," Nicolas remarks. "You'll have to dance there as well. You can never have too many occasions to dance in my humble opinion." The way the ever-elders gaze at one another prompts Draco to wonder why their love for each other is so endless. He wonders if his parents had a similar love, would they have helped protect him and his son?

"So," Draco asks, looking curiously at Potter.

After a moment of trepidation, Potter answers, "uh, yeah. That sounds... like... fun. Fun... am I pronouncing that word properly. I never use it," he asks with a smirk, the only indication he's being playful. It's a terrible joke, but his groupies smile broadly, annoying Draco even more.

"Thank you for helping the Quibbler with your photo," Luna softly states, breaking Draco's irritation. "Can we expect you at meal time and classes now? Not that we share any classes together, but I feel a splash better when I know you're around."

Draco's mind recalls the week prior. By the end of the second day of Potter's absence, the school, in general, grew very anxious to be left alone without explanation. Many would look over to the Ravenclaw table, or more specifically, to Granger, Daphne, or himself. Of the three, the few students brave enough would ask for him, Draco made sure to have fun with it, because, 'Dealing with a personal matter,' wasn't salacious enough for him or Hogwarts. By the third day, the rumors morphed from personal matters to death by delayed acromantula poison, to early admittance into the Auror academy, to starting a cult society for Dark Magic. It was a ridiculous week.

"Truthfully, I don't want to," Potter tells Luna and the rest. "I really enjoyed being left alone. Well,
no, that's not right. I missed you all, very much. I suppose, what I enjoyed was how uncomplicated it was. All I did was clean and lounge, among other things,” he oddly explains with something of a smile. “The chamber's spotless now. I played with Nova, Hedwig, and Nāga. I know that sounds ordinary, but I liked it... a lot.”

“After all you've gone through, that sounds perfect,” Perenelle warmly tells him with a smile. “And if there should ever happen to be a pair of happy, green-eyed grandchildren kicking their chubby little legs about-”

“Oh-kay,” Potter interrupts, clearing his throat. “Hey, yeah, right, I guess that would be okay- the dancing! Not the children. The dancing, I mean.”

“But who might the mother be, I wonder,” Luna questions loudly enough, analyzing between Daphne, Granger, and Fleur. Ignoring their reeling shock, the dirty-blond weirdo actually lands a surprised eye on Tracey, thinking aloud, “oh, wouldn't that just be a most delicious twist.”

“Uh, no. No, no, no. No delicious twisting here,” Tracey protests, taking a step back, as Draco shakes his head repeatedly, ‘no.’

“Can we please get off this topic,” Potter mumbles at a smiling Perenelle and Nicolas. 'Yes, lets,' Draco sadly thought while he witnesses his young son use a toy broom to sweep the floor rather than flying on it as he had taught him.

“Ares,” Perenelle starts. “Your friends and I understand how much you're dealing with and it's not, at all, what we wanted for you when we thought to enroll you here.”

“Isn't it,” Nicolas curiously asks furrowing his brow. “It wasn't about the classes offered here. The goal behind this endeavor was for him to develop life-long friendships. Looking around, it seems a rousing success... despite the death, carnage, and destruction, of course.”

“Of course,” Perenelle gives him. “It's no surprise to us you'd need a spit of time for yourself. Some breathing room, if you will. In an effort to help you feel more at ease, your friends thought of interesting ways to show you how much they care and support.”

“You didn't have to,” Potter tries to affirm only for Daphne slap his assertion in the air with a wave of her elegant hand, saying, “stop. It's not a bother, a hassle, or even an inconvenience. We want to. Simple as that.”

“Uh, I hate to say this, considering how lovely the mood is,” Granger starts. “But my project isn't ready at the moment.” Turning to Potter, she actually winces as she says, “sorry.”

“Mine either,” Daphne adds looking slightly embarrassed.

“Nor mine,” Luna admits whimsically.

“Well, that just leaves Draco,” Tracey states cheerfully to all, then turns to him with her bright perky smile.

Looking at Potter, his imaginary son playing the former enemies, he honestly tells him, “I don't want to—at least not today. We'll start your day of reckoning tomorrow.”

Potter rolls his eyes and thankfully says nothing. Fleur moves forward and neutrally expresses, “well, I 'ave a geeft.” They all look at her, curious what it could be as she didn't know about this plan. “Eef we may speak alone?”
Potter seems slightly taken aback, as nervous exasperation escape Daphne's sharp icy-blue eyes, and tempered curiosity mars Granger's comely face. Feeling divorced enough to leave, he takes Tracey's hand as Fleur and Potter walk further toward the lake, and asks her, “would you care to dance?”

Her easy smile evaporates many of his worries—not all his worries. Draco could never expect to forget what he's done or how the consequences of his decision eventually found him through his son. But for his days to feel something more than guilt-ridden hurt is the greatest gift he could never ask for. As his son walks beside them, he can't help but realize what Potter means to his plans to kill Voldemort. For his son's memory, and for the part Draco played in allowing that evil to snuff his world of its light, he’ll fulfill that promise to his departed boy and help Potter in any way to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I hope you all enjoyed the update. I want to let you all know that I had a good amount of time recently to write so the next update won't take me too long. Maybe a week or less.

Also, if the testimonial stuff doesn't make any sense, just think when Mark Zuckerberg had to answer questions before a Senate committee. He wasn't charged with anything but they needed his answers on public record to respond to the allegations against his company. Umbridge or Fudge do not have to be at Harry's testimonial as long as other members are. In the story's case, the Wizengamot are like audience members while other people ask Harry questions. I know some people didn't get that but that's only because I didn't update the explanation. so I sorta left you all hanging, which was not cool. More on this soon.

Since the beginning, I had always known that Draco sees images of his son often, but I couldn't EVER imagine him sharing something so personal with Harry or anyone really--which meant the audience wouldn't know either. I didn't want to just shoe-horn it in, so I thought with Harry's absence, this was a good opportunity to showcase that. I really enjoyed writing the duality of my Draco in a more in-depth manner and I hope you all understood him a little better.

Thanks again and have a great one,
-Grae
One in the Death Chamber

Chapter Summary

The only thing to do with vital knowledge is pass it on, and Harry isn't sure if more is gained than lost... especially when it comes to Fleur.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm so glad I can update. Thank you all for your comments and observations. This one is dialogue heavy. Some of it fun. Some of it set up. As always, let me know what you think.

13K. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry had not expected to see Fleur after the weighing of the wand. He was fairly certain she’d stay away after the bluff of his abnormal romantic preferences, in favor of pursuing relations with Bill. Recalling his previous timeline, Harry knows the intended pair met the summer after the tournament his fourth year and were engaged to marry less than a year later. He can't imagine that's an easy progression for any couple to make unless Bill and Fleur were unquestionably confident they were made for one another. It had always impressed him to think about their love, not unlike the love between Arthur and Molly Weasley, not unlike a love he himself hoped to have. How could he expect any less from Bill and Fleur here?

'Unless you destroyed them,' a voice trumpets in his mind.

Harry mentally forced that gold nugget of misery aside in favor of being surprised by Fleur's attendance with his group rather than with Bill. She further aids him again to forget how he's the ruin of all their lives when she asked him to speak with her…privately. Despite the eyes of his group on her or possibly because of it, the French beauty links her hands gracefully behind her back, setting her shoulder back and her carnally inviting chest out, adding a little sway of her sexy hips and clearly imprinting her womanly silhouette in his perfect memory banks, all so she can ask, “please.”

Harry's knees wobble a bit at the cute, vulnerability of her pleading expression. Clearing his throat, he stiffly nods before turning to the others and informing them they won't be long. Harry has enough time to wonder about Daphne's cold, focused eyes, Hermione's somewhat defeated posture as Luna gently pats her arm, and the way Nic and Nelle were holding back their smiles. Harry and Fleur walk some meters away, well out of earshot, easily feeling every pair of eyes on them as she leads them to some privacy behind a few trees. Though out of earshot and sight, she erects a privacy bubble to prevent eavesdropping.

Fleur smiles easily at him, and he can't help the warm feeling under her gaze as he asks, “so, you wanted to talk?”
“Oui,” Fleur answers, placing her hands behind her back and overpowering his attention with her smile and bust. “You really are the most troublesome star,” she mentions casually. Drawing his brows together confused, he responded, “...um-” to which she offhandedly changes tactics to ask, “’Ow do you feel about love?”

As per usual, Fleur throws him off with the first thing she says. His brows raise as his jaw slacks slightly and his throat feels thicker all the while Fleur seems genuine in her query, standing before him with the confidence and allure of Aphrodite, as if unaware of the effect she has. He hadn’t seen her for a week’s time, and though it feels like he’s lost his tolerance of her physical appeal, it’s always been her general way of being—her words—that always gets him flustered and turned about. She’s just so hard to expect, and so he clears his dry and swelling throat as he attempts to answer her question seriously. “... uh, think- well, I reckon I don't know of anything stronger than love.” Recalling his parents from his timeline, he can't help but add, “it saves lives.”

“I agree,” Fleur states stepping closer, enough so another person wouldn’t have the space to pass between them. The way her beautiful blue eyes singles him out, makes his heart accelerate when a weaker part of his mind entertains the notion that she can’t possibly see anyone else like she’s looking at him now. He feels like nothing and no one but him exists in her eyes, like she can’t see anything else.

In her presence, in her full attention, he feels special, and that vulnerability scares him as she further expresses, “we are friends, yes?” Not trusting himself to speak, Harry simply nods before she continues rather shyly, which is odd for her. “Zhan we must be ‘onest wizh one anozer. I ‘ave felt somzhing for a boy recently.” ‘Bill,’ is Harry’s immediate thought. His stomach tightens as she continues. “’E ees very ‘andsome, charming, does well to resist my allure. Zhough little time ‘as passed, I can see een ‘im zhe possibility of a life worzh living.”

Harry is repulsed at himself by the pang of hurt he feels in his chest when he knows he has no right to feel such a strong reaction. His mind struggles with his denial; he can’t be jealous. Bill is great for her. Weren’t they the happiest, dancing together at their wedding- ‘She didn’t call you little boy this time,’ a voice from some previously strange part of his mind thought to respond. Begrudgingly, Harry could admit this Fleur responds somewhat differently, but it shouldn’t be enough to negate- ‘She’s loyal and true to who a person really is, despite the scars on their face,’ the voice continues to argue. ‘Bill had scars first and they were real,’ Harry lamely responds. ‘Technically you did, Mr. Boy-Who-Lived,’ the voice returns when Fleur continues.

She laughs lightly as she reveals, “Never before ‘ave I felt so unfortunate to meet impressive men, yet zhat ees where I find myself. Now I seem to be forced to question what eet ees I truly desire; a zhing I rarely ‘ave to ask of myself. I’m used to knowing, you see. Putain, eef only sex was zhe deciding factor. Eet would make zhings so much easier eef eet came down to who gave me zhe best orgasms.” Though Harry blushes by the unexpected as much as the rush of hot blood to hear her talk like that, Fleur simply looks whimsical with a small smile on her face, as if imagining her wish.

Harry isn’t exactly sure how to respond, however, he’s certain this is going somewhere. She did ask if they were friends and not for the first time, she is being very open with him about her feelings. Though the realization that he can possibly be as open in return makes him breath harder, he tries nevertheless, for if he can’t be so with his closest friends, than he really is lost.

“Fleur, I care about you… it’s growing to a scary degree,” he starts, finally taking her by a small measure of surprise, or possibly interest. “Which is why I need to be honest with you too, because I never want you to regret… I never want to be the cause of your pain. Ever!” He emphasizes to cover the fact that he nearly said ‘ever again.’ “I’m lacking…” His eyes on her grow fierce with
anxiety, yet he takes a difficult step forward as he manages to express with a hand to his chest, “there’s something missing in me. I feel broken. Not quite right. And let's face, it. A girl as amazing as you deserves so much more than that. If I’m getting in the way of your happiness-”

“You are not broken,” Fleur interrupts, not simply with her words, but leaning in, tilting her chin forward to gently place her petal soft lips against his. It’s a light press, warm despite her cold nose, and simply allowing their lips to mold comfortingly together. The searing membrane of her pillow-soft lips only lasts a second against his before she pulls away and Harry’s mind flat-lines. She then asserts, “you are simply different.” Harry’s vaguely aware her lips being away and knowing that he didn’t want them away as she continues, “different than those around, different than even yourself when you were younger. Eet ‘as taken me some time to truly realize what you’ve said many times. You are different, my troublesome star, so stop trying to make my decisionz for me, yes?”

Eyes were half-lidded, Harry slowly nods, dumbly so. Her smile is oddly promising as she continues, “since summer, een one form or anozher, you ’ave been een my zhoughts, een my dreams, een my ’opes. While I feel certain zhat I would be ‘appy wizh Beel- Ah! I did not mean… Did you know I was speaking of Beel?”

With a soft chuckle and a knowing smile, a slightly smarter Harry nods as he replies, “yeah. I figured.”

She returns his smile before continuing. “And eet does not make you jealous?”

“No,” he answers regaining more and more brain function. “I have a feeling he’s a good person and would treat you right.”

Close as she is, Fleur tilts to the side, giving him a clear view of her elegantly creamy neck under streams of her white-gold hair. Avoiding his eyes, she apprehensively asks, “would zhat also mean you might entertain zhe notion of, oh I don’t know, possibly considering a male lover? And Zhink! Eef you bozh consent, I promise you would never regret eet.”

Her eyes gently snap to his, as yet again, Harry’s train of thought is completely derailed by Fleur’s uneven tracks. Eyes large with promise, she sways her shoulders, which also sways her torso and the gentle bob of perky bosom. He lets out a gasp of air, clearing his dry throat to answer, “I uh, no. No. Not that I’m aware of or ever considered.”

“Oh come now, Arez,” Fleur implores stomping a foot in a cute manner. “Eet ees not so bad. I squirm in delight at the thought of making love to bozh witches and wizards. Love ees love, non?”

Harry is seriously beginning to question why every little thing Fleur says or does have to be so sexual as he considers answering her with as much honesty as he is capable of thinking of. “Fleur, I’m just not comfortable being intimate with a man. I mean, I would rather let a witch do to me what wizards do to witches, before I’d let a wizard do to me what they do to witches. Love is love, sure, but I can’t ever trust them that way… if that makes sense.”

“…Eet does. I can unterstand zhat,” Fleur sighs with mild disappointment. “After all zhe many wild fantasies I’ve ’ad, I needed to try.”

With a short chuckle, Harry voices, “sorry.”

“Eet ees fine. I want us to be ‘onest. Eet ees why I wanted to speak wizh you; about Beel, about my feelingz. While I’m- While we are bozh fairly certain Beel is a wonderful man who may ’ave given me a wonderful life, to me, you are like zhe candy I ’ave been told I cannot ’ave. Zhe biggest, sweetest candy I ‘ave ever seen.”
Harry can’t keep his mild smile from turning into a snort of humor, before quickly addressing her analogy. “Haven’t you heard having too much candy will upset your stomach?” Harry has a fair idea why he can’t keep the grin off his face when the always-quick Fleur meets his expectation, “mnn, I zhink I like zhe sound of you upsetting my insides wizh your sweetness.”

Harry snorts as his many mental perspectives all agree, ‘this girl.’ Harry can’t deny he desires her, he’s sinfully wanton of her, however, he’s also nervous, frightened even. Out of everything he hadn’t ever planned on, this would have to be at the top of the list. Not simply because of Bill, but also because it meant allowing someone in; closer than he has in a very long time. Harry understands, before the space between them all but disappears, the last step forward is the only step he needs to decide on.

‘Can I have this?’

He finds it a miracle he’s even daring to ask the question, jostling him by how much he’s strayed from his intended path. Whereas before, anything more than Voldemort’s head on a disposable platter, felt like wishful thinking and a waste of times besides, now, the consideration of a possible after—like Fleur—will not be ignored. ‘Can I have this?’ His great burden has yet to be put down, like the feral dog it is, and yet this enchantress before him feels as if she’s challenging his commitment. It’s enough to double his already fast heart rate, shorten his breath, and daze his vision with twinkling stars.

“What are you zhinking of,” Fleur softly asks, likely detecting bits his turmoil with her veela talents.

Without hesitation, he admits, “I’m wondering if I can have this. Whether I should…”

“Zhis scarez you,” she asks.

“Infinitely,” he whispers back.

“Are you not scared when you fight madmen or ‘ordes of acromantula?”

He answers, “honestly, no.”

“But zhe prospect of ‘appiness scares you?”

He’s not certain how much she knows, but in keeping with this honest spirit of theirs, he answers, “…I have to kill arguably the greatest Dark Lord in the history of magic and when that day comes, I’m fairly certain it’ll be the last day I live. As long as you all survive, I’ll be happy with that.”

Fleur takes a moment to absorb his response before asking, “…Whezher or not you and I were coupling—often I should ‘ope—would you still kill zhis dark lord?”

“Nothing could ever stop me from ending him,” Harry ardently answers. “But how can I do that worrying about you and the others, or Merlin help me, if he kills one of you?”

“You can because you ‘ave to,” Fleur easily tells him, and he can’t help but chuckle. “Weel eet be difficult? Yes. Weel eet cost? Undoubtedly. ‘Owever, wizhin you, I see nozhing zhat cannot be achieved… Eef you say eet, eet ees because eet can ‘appen. And do not zhink for one second I will not be beside you to ‘elp… or behind you… on my back, knees, or on top. ‘Owever you need, really,” she states happily with a knowing smirk and hungry eyes.

Despite his paper-thin knees, Harry takes that final step forward, easily delighting in her warmth, like the summer sun on a brisk day. They both grin, eyes shy to connect with one another, but
highly motivated by their growing sensations and stroking urges. In a gentle way, Fleur rests her right hand on his chest over his rapidly beating heart. Harry responds with his hand on her hip, his growing urge taking momentary control enough to squeeze her fevered flesh possessively with want. He’s instantly nervous by the forward move but at her gently moan, Harry’s vibrant green eyes finally lock on her dark blues, finding reflected in them a fierce hunger that steals any resistance he had left in him.

So entranced Harry was by the woman pressing against him, he was completely taken by surprise when Draco stomps from around a tree, calling out loudly, “hope I’m not interrupting anything!”

“Malfoy-” Harry starts but is interrupted by Draco with a stern finger, who seems just as irate as he and Fleur are. Draco abruptly asks loudly, “what are you arguing about this time?” Harry isn’t sure why the blond ferret is speaking with a raised voice or more importantly why he hasn’t left. Harry extends Muffliato and demands to know, “Draco-”

“You couldn’t do whatever this is later,” Draco hotly demands of Harry. “Tracey and I were nearly to the castle when Daphne comes running with her knickers in a twist, spouting some nonsense about you two, and now I’m here wasting my time with you instead of swelling Tracey’s lips!”

“Well, you’ve certainly returned the favor,” Fleur coldly levels with more irritation than Harry expected to hear. Draco himself hadn’t realized he’d annoy Fleur to such an extent and suddenly becomes very cautious of her glare.

“Okay, listen,” Draco tries to placate her. “You know I don’t care what you do but other people care enough to bother Tracey who then bothers me with your bullshite, so, you know, a bit of decorum please. For my sanity.”

Fleur deflates of her acute irritation, turning softer eyes on Harry as she tells him, “I do not know what a future with you will bring, but I love daring, I love challenge, and life is already an adventure with you. I will not cower simply because life is more difficult. Love does save, so you have my answer and…” She places a soft peck on his lips before stepping away and looking in the direction of the group. Harry can feel her immense release of allure, clouding some of his mind yet not enough for him to relinquish control. ‘Somehow, her kiss felt stronger,’ Harry mentally notes as he holds an enthralled Draco back by his shoulder. After some moments, Fleur turns to them and explains, “Uwah, ‘Ermionnee and Daphne are very anxious.” Toning down her allure, she continues, “I know you wish for ‘Ermionnee to join us, but what of Daphne?”

“Join you for what?” Draco asks them as he regains discipline over himself.

“Uh, I never said I wanted Hermione to join-” he halts himself from his surprise when he realizes Fleur means an actual polygamous union. “…I mean, I never thought something like this-” he halts himself again when he realizes how far on board Fleur actually is “… are you really okay with something like this?”

Fleur rolls her eyes good-naturedly before stating, “my Darling Star, I will need you to be much faster than this.”

“What is ‘this,’” Draco asks with a hint of concern. “Somebody care to explain to me what’s going on?”

“Really, Fleur, we need to talk about this,” Harry tries but Fleur shakes her head.

“No need,” Fleur happily states. “We shall play possum for the moment. We pretend nothing is any different while I…” She takes a moment to consider her words, finishing, “while I begin laying
“Wow, um, Fleur…” A voice in Harry’s head simply cuts him off to exhaustively ask, ‘why are you fighting it? Look at her eyes. They’re set to fight all the Molly Weasleys in the world.’ Harry feels as exhausted as the voice, and like plaster best ripped off quickly, Harry nods his head, expressing, “okay. Okay… Merlin, I’m saying okay,” he curses with a wide-eyed huff. “Um, we’ll keep this to ourselves for now and I want to be the one to actually tell them, okay?”

“Oui monsieur,” Fleur agrees with a brilliant smile before heading out before them.

After the minute Harry needs to settle his whirlpool of emotions, he walks out from behind the tree’s cover followed by Draco, who is quietly trying to make sense of what he witnessed. Halfway back to the others, Harry’s concerned by the forlorn look on Hermione’s face, and the statuesque stoicism on Daphne’s when Draco pulls him by the elbow, turning him around. Judging by the gutted look on Draco’s face, Harry wonders if the silver-blond stumbled onto what happened.

“You… no bloody way!” Draco nearly yells.

“Will you shut it!” Harry quickly demands. “You can’t tell a soul, you hear me? Especially not Tracey.”

“She…” Draco starts looking at Fleur talking to her sister. “She… With a tosser like you? No. Tell me- tell me she didn’t agree. Tell me a bird like that isn’t up for a wanker like you in the middle-”

“What did I bloody just say, Malfoy,” Harry whispers with heavy emphasis. “Not one word! Not one!”

Draco just stares it utter disbelief between him and the farther Fleur, slowly shaking his head in denial. Looking at Harry again, pained even, Draco slowly raises his hand. Harry isn’t sure what he’s doing, or why the silver-blond states, “I’m not attacking you,” before he lightly pats Harry’s cheek. It’s nowhere near strong enough to be a slap, and it confuses Harry enough to stand there when Draco does it again, proclaiming further, “this isn’t an attack of any kind.”

“Hey-” Harry tries but is interrupted with another tap to the face. “Stop-” he retorts when Draco continues his light pats against Harry’s face, quickly graduating to using both hands. Harry tries to stop these, ‘none-attacks’ by swiveling his head but Draco moves forward and erratically keeps patting his scarred face all the while proclaiming he wasn’t an enemy or harboring any ill-will. Attempting his best to evade the face tapping, Harry returns pats of his own, calling Malfoy a, “barmy git,” among other similar offenses as they pity-pat each other’s dodging face.

“What are you two doing?” Perenelle’s befuddled voice breaks through their weird skirmish. “Stop… whatever this is, this instant!” They don’t stop until Perenelle physically separates them like two hot-headed eight-year-olds on the playground. They’re both huffing and annoyed with one another when Perenelle continues, “I don’t know what that sad display was about but we have company, so please act well above your age, or so help me, I’ll pull your ears until you shake hands and say you’re sorry.”

Sure enough, Harry spots Lily and Sirius beside a confused Tracey, poorly restraining their mirth. Harry’s mortified. Though the silver-blond Slytherin is not suicidal enough to attack Harry with serious intent, as they’re both aware of what the loyalty oath would do to him, Draco is clearly having just as hard a time accepting this as Harry is. As he walks toward the snickering audience, Harry doesn’t doubt he’ll ever live down that idiotic slap-fest.
“Heir Flamel,” Sirius grins broadly.

Nova lands on his shoulder as Harry groans a little, glumly acknowledging them both. “Auror. Professor.”

After giving Harry one final odd look, Nicolas inquires of Sirius, “so you said you had news regarding the task.”

“Yes,” Lily answers smacking an amused Sirius. Realizing Daphne, Astoria, Tracey, Draco, Hermione, Luna, Fleur and Gabrielle are listening intently, Lily turns to Perenelle, suggesting, “perhaps we should speak in private.”

“It’s unnecessary,” Harry states. Minus Astoria and Gabrielle, he assures them, “I’m just going to tell them later anyway.”

“How much do you tell them,” a sharper Sirius asks with official curiosity.

“Pretty much everything,” Harry lightly answers. Sensing Sirius was asking about Voldemort, he adds, “including Tom Riddle.”

With a stiff nod and a quick eye to Lily and Tracey, Sirius responds, “be that as it may, I’d feel more comfortable discussing this strictly with house Flamel.”

“Dumbledore also felt more comfortable keeping relevant information from people,” Harry points out.

“Well, we do have little ones in attendance,” Perenelle speaks up before suggesting, “why don’t we all meet in our residence here? I’ll put the kettle on.”

As a result of Sirius’ stiff nod, Perenelle needed three kettles as the gruff auror, his boss Amelia Bones, Lily Potter, Hardwin Potter, Remus Lupin, Daphne, Draco, Tracey, Hermione, Luna, Fleur, Nicolas, and Perenelle all find themselves in the Flamels extended dormitory seated around an extended table. Harry helps Perenelle in the kitchen with the tea so as to stay away from Sirius, Remus, and Lily as often as possible, but before they can set the first cup down, Amelia Bones addresses the gathering. “I don’t feel comfortable discussing such distressing topics with underage witches and wizards.”

“I must agree,” Remus adds looking around the younger students. “Hardwin and Ares I can understand as they’re more severely impacted, however-”

The scrapping of the chair against the wood floor grab their attention as Hermione stands and orates with a clear voice, “while I certainly understand your point of view, Madame Bones, Professor Lupin, and to some extent I’d agree with you, keeping this group from this discussion would also be doing us a great disservice. Ares’ involvement expressly means our involvement as well. Keeping us ignorant of the dangers ahead doesn’t mean we won’t face them for our friend. You may very well believe you’re asking us to leave in order to protect ourselves, but in actuality, you’re asking us to abandon our friend, which I will not do.”

“Miss Granger, what we’re saying,” Sirius starts. “Is information like this can be a taxing burden on your perception of safety and the peace of mind it brings. Imagine living your days always being scared of what may occur and how you may die. I’ve already encountered students who don’t feel safe in Hogwarts. I’ve even heard from other parents how their children didn’t feel safe last week when Ares was absent.”

“With all due respect Auror Black,” Hermione cuts in. “While I don’t enjoy boasting, the truth is I
am literally the smartest witch in our class, Daphne is right on my heels. Out of every Beauxbaton student, Fleur was chosen by the Goblet to be her school’s Champion. We are not burdened by intelligence, knowledge or the wisdom necessary to wield it responsibly. I’ve already fought in close proximity to protect those I care about and we survived because we were informed. Because Ares informed us. I trust him more than anyone within and out of this room, and if he thinks I should be here, than, respectfully, I’m not leaving.”

Harry isn’t the only one surprised by Hermione’s staunch defiance, but Harry is the only one who can appreciate her return to form. Her desire to protect her friends surpassed even his at times and he always drew strength from her unwavering defense. His gaze is broken when Fleur, who is sitting beside Hermione, winks at him before looking at Hermione while biting her lower lip, clearly in a primal way. Harry quickly returns to his tea preparation, clearing his hormonal mind and throat before addressing the room. “For the record, I do want them here. They have my trust as much as I can trust anyone.”

“Including a Malfoy,” Sirius asks eying Draco seated comfortably next to Tracey.

Again, Harry hates vouching for the face-patting git, but responds nonetheless, “just this one.”

Sirius, Lily, Amelia, and Remus remain quite uncomfortable, but keep their reservations to themselves as the calm Remus takes the lead. “Sirius, Amelia and I have seen the memory of your conversation with Lily, as well as what Dumbledore and Umbridge seem to be putting you through.”

“Seem to?” Nicolas gasps. “They as good as happily admitted taking his magic away or imprisoning in Azkaban.”

“But they didn’t actually admit it,” Remus sadly states, gently informing them the law wouldn’t work simply with the evidence of the memory.

“What was scheduled by Undersecretary Umbridge was most certainly not a hearing like a defendant on trial would receive,” Amelia states. She turns to Harry, adding, “you are not under arrest nor are you being charged... that I am aware of. Due to the political implications, I am obligated to defer to the Minister on that. Through Undersecretary Umbridge, the Wizengamot has requested to be present, but this is no more than a simple testimonial, or statement, provided by you in a hyper-formal setting. Auror Black and I will be the ones asking pertinent questions with regard to our investigation. It’s true it will be before a few members of the Wizengamot, but should they require clarity at any point, they direct their inquiry to us. As the lead investigators, if we deem their question has merit, then we’ll ask you. They will not dictate our decision in any way. Despite the audience, your only purpose there is to answer our questions as honestly as you are able and that’s it.”

“’And that’s it,’ ” Draco scoffs, adding, “like he doesn’t have to fight a bloody dragon at the same time as this testimony.” They all turn to Draco stunned, and Harry wants to slap him with much more force for his inane slip.

“Excuse me,” Amelia slowly bids for clarity.

“The first task,” Draco continues with smug confidence. “Hasn’t anyone noticed the Great Hall’s sprouted yet another tomato head during meal times. Minus the parents, the entire Weasley brewed is here. Aren’t they getting enough food at home?”

“Watch it Malfoy-” Hardwin warns.
Draco ignores him, adding, “Look, of the ones already graduated, one is here to remove runes, the other is Umbridge’s lackey, and this new one is a-

“Dragon handler,” Lily interjects with humble recollection. “He told me he was just visiting… and I didn’t think…” She eyes her gob-smacked son—the one she’s aware of—with obvious worry. She isn’t the only one, as Sirius and Remus eye their best friend’s son with just as much anxiously as his mother.

Draco easily asks the room, “and why would Hogwarts, a school devoid of any dragons, need a Dragon Handler a week from the first task?”

“…Very astute observation,” Remus tries to say with a professor-like pride but falters in the face of what that means for Hardwin. Harry knows it’s not an astute observation, but realizes it does save him from having to figure out his own way of warning Fleur and Hardwin.

“Regardless of the task,” Sirius soldiers on. “We haven’t forgotten how you fought off Crouch Jr to protect so many innocents. We made sure Fudge was getting it from all angles and he finally caved.”

Amelia continues. “As a Triwizard judge herself, Undersecretary Umbridge has informed us of the order by which the champions will start.”

“Which is how she scheduled his testimony so near to the moment he begins?” Perenelle asks.

Amelia nods before continuing. “We’ve managed to rescheduled your testimony to the member’s satisfaction to just before the task begins. It’s politics and we’re not unaware of how close that is, but I give you my word the entire testimony won’t take more than fifteen minutes, including travel. You’ll hear the task and rules, we’ll use a portkey, answer questions at the Ministry, and come right back.”

“You’ll be back with plenty of time,” Sirius claims as Hardwin indignantly adds, “to fight a bloody dragon?”

“To keep his magic,” Daphne corrects the brown-eyed Potter.

“What is the Undersecretary’s objective here, might I ask,” Nicolas directs toward Amelia. “I can’t help but feel her agenda ends with Ares’ complete acute demise.”

“While I can’t speculate what her objective is,” Amelia begins to answer him. “I couldn’t imagine she would be so brazen as to conspire to commit murder. Rest assured we will be keeping a closer eye on her movements for the foreseeable future, however, anything we learn, we will deal with under the strict guidelines of the law.”

“For her sake, I hope you succeed,” Harry tells the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement with all the gravitas of a serial executioner. No one in that room underestimates the meaning of his clear warning.

“Easy,” Perenelle whispers from beside him.

With all the tea and biscuits distributed, Remus is the first to bring up, “I hope I’m not being too forward, but how is it that you’ve come to learn so much about the Dark Lord?”

Many turn attention from Remus to Harry, who answers, “I’m surprised no one’s asked about that dark tosser till now.”
“We may have fumbled the quaffle a bit, I admit,” Remus calmly jests. “I suppose what I mean to ask is why you? Though quite unfortunate, Hardwin is the Boy-Who-Lived. It seems he’s destined to hinder You-Know-Who.”

“His name, if you must, is Voldemort,” Harry spouts, annoyed as much by the Boy-Who-Lived nonsense as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. “Or Tom Riddle, or better yet Dark Wanker. I prefer parasite. If you can’t say his name or flinch at hearing it than maybe this meeting isn’t for you. No hard feelings, but if that’s the case, I invite any of you to leave before you hear a hell of a lot worse than a name.” Speaking in such a way to his old mentor may have been harsh, but it propels the difference between himself, and the image of James Potter, stunning all into further believing in his alter-identity as Ares Flamel rather than the spitting image of James Potter. And to a small degree, he’s simply fed up with the reverence Riddle gets simply for being an audaciously charming murderer.

“It’s not about lack of bravery or even overbearing fear,” Amelia states. No one leaves as she explains, “he is a Dark Lord. Not because wizardkind named him such, but because magic has deemed him thus. A Lord by magic is a rare entity, possessing a massive amount of power, and we have yet to examine or explain these phenomenal beings. There is much we don’t yet know about what makes wizards such as Merlin, the founders, Lord Voldemort, among others, as gifted as they are when it comes to magic. It’s about reverence for such power, destructive as it may be at times.”

“He’s a wall,” Harry cuts in. “A large, sturdy wall blocking your path, but a wall nonetheless. It’s in the way and if people would break it down instead of worshiping it-”

“What Ares so passionately means to say is,” Nicolas cuts in. “Dark Lords have always existed and will likely always continue to exist. They may serve a purpose that is not easily seen at the moment or even acceptable in due time, but in most cases, they’re never worth the death and suffering.”

“Is that what happened to you,” a keen Sirius asks Harry.

As Harry fights off images—flashes, really—pregnant with pain and despair, Perenelle asks, “it is at this point that Nicolas and I must stress how adamant we are Headmaster Dumbledore be kept ignorant of anything we tell you.” When Hardwin scoffs, Perenelle adds, “while I’m aware many in this room trust his judgment and have so for a very long time now, Nicolas and I do not. We are aware that breaking with a man you’ve trusted for decades is a difficult thing to do, no dissimilar from finding out your father is not the man you always thought he was, be we ask this of you nonetheless. If that is something you can’t abide by, we cannot speak with you.”

At the second invitation to leave, no one stands. Sirius in particular expresses, “after learning what he’s kept from Lily and Hardwin-” “From all of us,” Lily corrects, clearly including Sirius and Remus. “All of us, I’m willing to do anything to make sure Jame’s family always remain safe.” Harry moves in closer to his cup of tea, taking a slow sip, and even Perenelle blocks Harry as much as possible without calling attention to them.

“I don’t mean to put too fine a point on it,” Nicolas tells the room. “But we will consider it a breach of trust should he discover what we’ve gathered through you.”

“Than why tell us,” Amelia asks. “You must know with every person you tell, increases the odds of his finding out. Even a mute cannot completely keep their secrets if one knows how to look; whether rifling through their trash, observing their habits, or interrogating the company they keep. And I’m certain the Headmaster is a professional at searching for any answer he seeks.”

“The ultimate goal isn’t to keep information from him,” Harry begins. “It’s to keep him from doing something counter-productive before all is said and done, but what I mean to say is, to keep him
from doing something stupid before all is said and done. There will come a time when what he learns won’t matter.”

“And when’s that,” Hardwin demands.

Harry answers, “when Riddle is dead and food for flubberworms.”

Amelia, Remus, Lily, and Sirius take a moment to absorb the full effect of this meeting. Harry is certain none of them expected to be hearing about how Voldemort may still be alive, how the Dark Lord may continue to threaten their society or how little Dumbledore trusts them. Harry hadn’t done well with the information the first time he learned of it, however, three of the four at the table have Hardwin to protect, and Amelia believes in justice for all, and so they take the news better than Harry had thought they might.

“How is he not dead,” Sirius nearly growls, clearly holding down his rage.

“You’ll be able to research and confirm for yourselves, I’m sure,” Nicolas starts, then turning to Amelia. “You may have more resources than most, and will no doubt want to ask, but I would caution you to assume no avenue you pursue is truly secure. Barty Crouch Jr impersonated an ex-Auror many knew of but no one suspected was a spy. This information is most damning and many have been sacrificed to keep it from becoming public knowledge.”

“For the sake of time,” Perenelle speaks after Nicolas. “I’ll refrain from delving too deeply into history. Long before what we would consider the modern era of magic, an ancient wizard of Greece by the name of Herpo the Foul, a genius of the darkest degree, achieved a most atrocious breakthrough for attaining immortality. This foul process involves splitting off a piece of one’s soul and embedding it into an object, which is then called a Horcrux. In this manner, if the body dies or is destroyed, the soul is still tethered to the earthly plane via the Horcrux. The soul, and therefore, wizard, is neither dead or alive.”

The shock on all their faces is clear as day. With the exceptions of Draco, Nicolas, Perenelle, and to a small extent, Hermione, Daphne, Tracey and Luna, the rest are horror-stricken with a strong grimace of denial. Lily is gripping Hardwin’s shoulder tightly, as if letting go may spirit him away.

“And you’re saying,” Remus begins before clearing his dry throat. “You’re attesting Voldemort has created a Horcrux.”

“No,” Harry answers. He isn’t certain if the seventh Horcrux in his head was destroyed or not, and so answers, “he created six.” As Harry’s body was the container for the seventh Horcrux and the container was in fact destroyed in the process of traveling back through time, he can’t speak to that Horcrux’ origins, so Harry says nothing until he learns more.

“Six!” Sirius gasps.

“How can that be possible,” Lily asks irate in her nervousness. “That can’t be possible. Adalbert’s Waffling’s first fundamental law of magic states that tampering with one’s soul results in grave dehumanizing; losing not only each one of the five senses but one’s perception of humanity. The metaphysical damage to the essence of one’s self would be tantamount to mutilating their soul.”

Harry oddly wonders about the pride he seems to feel at hearing his mother speak with obvious intelligence when Amelia candidly asserts, “I simply must insist.” She looks at the younger crowd as she states, “this information is far more dangerous than I initially thought and cannot in good conscious allow underage students to suffer what knowing this means. It’s too dangerous!”
“I’m aware that you are unfamiliar with us. How dangerous that is, for you and all,” Daphne states in her business-like detachment. “With the number of people in the room the risk of discovery increases exponentially. However, I would point out that none of us know the process by which to create a Horcrux, nor do any of us intend to practice such magic.”

“I know the specifics,” Harry tells Amelia. “And I swear to you and everyone in this room that I will take that knowledge to my grave.” Harry ignores the concern he can spot from Fleur and Hermione. Daphne keeps her cool control, but Harry feels like she may also be worried.

Perenelle places her warm hand over his as she states, “which won’t be for a very, very long time if I have anything to say about it.”

In a whimsical yet, sincere voice, Tracey posits, “Unless Draco pats him to death.”

Despite the serious nature, Sirius does smile at that, before the Auror says, “so he has six Horcruxes. If we destroy them, than he won’t come back, ever?”

“That’s correct,” Perenelle answers.

“Can you tell us what these objects are,” Remus asks, adding, “and how you’ve come to their discovery? Not that I doubt any of you, however, under dire stakes like this, I’m compelled to be as diligent as possible. I worry another perspective may catch something previously missed.”

Nicolas looks from Harry to Perenelle, and at their nod, he speaks to the group. “For my house, this would be the meat of this meeting, for we needed, not only, to inform and thus warn you all of what’s ahead, as every one of you is involved in some way shape or form, but to make a request as well. My family learned as much as we could before Ares entered Hogwarts. He’s discovered quite a bit more since entering—”

“Could that be why you’ve enrolled into Hogwarts,” Luna asks in her quaint voice, somehow gripping attention from everyone. “For this mission?”

He hadn’t expected her question but answers, “I came here for the missing pieces. Transferring just made sense.”

Nor had he expected her to continue to say, “you seem quite important. I hope you’d still like to be my friend.”

Blinking twice at slightly being taken, he smiles at his straggly dirty-blond friend, answering, “we’ll always be friends Luna. For as long as you’ll have me.”

She smiles a moment as Perenelle continues. “We’ve learned or gleaned or inferred a fair amount of information since being here. Bits and pieces we’ve needed to put together to learn even more bits and pieces of anything. It was quite the puzzle. Tom Marvolo Riddle, from orphan to prefect, to Headboy, to Lord Voldemort is a half-blood, believe it or not.” Remus and Sirius were visibly shocked as Lily and Amelia’s brow drew closer in deep concentration. “He was the only son of a Muggle father, Tom Riddle and a near squib mother, Merope Gaunt. Highly intelligent since adolescence. In school, he was charming if not calculated on the outside. On the inside, he was a power-obsessed megalomaniac of the worst kind.

“It was in Hogwarts we believe he created the first Horcrux, using his diary as the container. After Hogwarts, his movements were impossible to completely track, but we know this is the period he was building his strength for the cleanse he was about to unleash upon the world. Fortunately for us, narcissism is one of the easier profiles to deduce. This is a man who thinks of everything in
terms of power, who also believed the number seven was the most powerful number in magic. Through several sources, we’ve learned that before his death, seven fractured shades of Riddle existed; leaving only six now. Tom Riddle’s Diary, Marvolo Gaunt’s Ring, Salazar Slytherin’s Locket, Helga Hufflepuff’s Cup, Rowena Ravenclaw’s Diadem, and likely his familiar that’s been reported as always being with him. Power of the founders, relics of his past, and his most esteemed magical number led us to these discoveries.”

Remus abruptly stands, putting a hand over his mouth, likely repulsed by the news, however, most are numb enough where he doesn’t shock them by how quick he stands. Without pause, Nicolas continues, “of the six, we currently have three in our possession. In the interest of full disclosure, Ares and I found Gaunt’s ring at their family shack. I made a deal with Gringotts to obtain Hufflepuff’s cup from the Lestrange family vault—”

“How did you manage that,” Amelia asks in complete shock.

“They would prefer I not destabilize the magical economy by giving out free gold than to keep a dark artifact,” Nicolas answers to which Sirius laughs. “It was Draco’s intelligence through his unaware father that led us to that discovery.”

“Ares found the third Horcrux in Hogwarts,” Perenelle moves on.

“How did you all do this without anyone knowing,” Lily follows up. “I simply… I’m just.”

“It’s a difficult thing to wrap your mind around,” Perenelle sympathetically responds. “We certainly had far more time with this than you have, and I know that’s unfair, however, we still have a request; requests actually.”

“When is,” Lily asks.

Harry felt a strong urge to diverge from the plan to ask her about that night. Something about Sirius, Remus and his mother all in the same room, comforting one another, over Hardwin… it’s clear to him they all love each other deeply, and all Harry can think is why she couldn’t love him in the same way. He has an almost painful need to know the answer to that question, like a desolate farmer desperate for rain before he and his land withers and die.

Instead, Nicolas continues, “We know Riddle respected no one but himself, however, he did trust the closest of his followers with anything of real import. With Draco’s pivotal knowledge from within their camp, we learned Bellatrix held the Hufflepuff’s Cup. We also learned Lucius Malfoy held the diary. We were hoping, with Lily’s permission of course, if Hardwin could enlighten us as to the diary’s whereabouts.”

In unison, the room turned to Hardwin. He’d been quiet since learning about the dragons, simply listening with increased worry.

“What?” Lily asks, skeptical her son would know anything about the diary. “Hardwin, what are they talking about?” She asks, him before asking Nicolas, “what are you talking about?”

“Two years ago,” Nicolas answers her. “Hogwarts was under attack by an unseen monster, which turned out to be a basilisk. A basilisk communicates with its master via the language of snakes.”

“Parseltongue,” Lily points out. “Hardwin doesn’t speak Parseltongue.”

“Yes, of course,” Nicolas confirms. “However, Riddle, as well as his shades, are parseltongue and we know the diary made it to Hogwarts from Draco. Apparently, there was an altercation between the heads of Weasley and Malfoy houses. In retaliation, Lucius apparently slipped the dangerous
diary in the possessions of the Weasley’s only daughter, Ginevra. Soon after roosters are being killed and children are being petrified; miss Granger being one among them.”

Hermione didn’t wilt under their alarmed eyes, as Lily admits low enough to be a near whisper, “Dumbledore never told us it was a Basilisk… In any of the staff meetings…”

“Nor did he inform the Ministry,” Amelia bitterly adds.

“Or the Wizengamot,” a cross Lord Black speaks.

“What of the Basilisk,” Remus gravely asks. “It can’t surely still be in the castle?”

The adults catch on to Remus’ thoughts right away when Nicolas waves his hand disarming. “It has been taken care of. There’s no further need to worry.”

They seem to relax at Nicolas’ word, Sirius and Amelia eying Harry as he bites the head of a biscuit to a clear crunch. Perenelle continues. “With the help of a ghost, we know Dumbledore did have the Diary and of all the people that could’ve given it to him…” Perenelle along with most of the eyes land on Hardwin, waiting for an explanation. Lily squeezes his shoulder for support, nodding to him, ’it’s okay,’ but he doesn’t speak, looking away from the expectant eyes. Harry wonders what he could be feeling. He may be called the Boy-Who-Lived, but he likely hasn’t gone as far as Harry did to earn that infernal title. Hardwin stays quiet, brown eyes down-cast and even Lily couldn’t pierce through his conflicting thoughts.

‘He probably feels like he’s betraying Dumbledore,’ Harry muses. ‘It’s how I would’ve felt.’

After a moment, Harry speaks to Hardwin, turning all eyes on himself, including his brother’s. “If you think about it, you’ve never actually been special,” he states, never returning the attention he receives. He doesn’t trust himself not to look at Lily or Sirius when he’s feeling so on edge and only pays attention to his cup of tea, as if in a trance. Despite his downward gaze, he orates with no less credibility, “this entire nightmare just played out like it did, and if you weren’t the one at the wrong place, at the wrong time, it would’ve just been some other unfortunate bloke.”

Hardwin seems to be both confused and upset, or possibly upset for being confused, yet Harry continues. “Neville Longbottom was born around the same time as you, wasn’t he? He could’ve just as easily been made to go through all the shit you have, or worse yet, all the shite I have. Being hunted isn’t for everyone, is it?” Hardwin retains his silence, adding to the deafening quiet of the room before Harry continues. “I don’t care what you think of me, what Dumbledore thinks of me, or how he reckons this should all go. Plans never work out as you want them to and his won’t work any better, but, trust me when I say there’s no version of the future where that dark fucker doesn’t die. So you can tell me now or keep your peace. Ultimately it makes no difference, but I reckon helping others when it matters might make you feel a hell of a lot better than that meaningless fucking title of yours.”

The silence lasts no more than three very patient seconds before Hardwin turns his mum, “I… I found the diary, but I didn’t know what it was, I swear.”

“I believe you,” Lily reassures him.

“I found it in the second floor’s girls loo,” he states. “Someone tried to flush it but it just flooded. I… I talked to it, but not for long. It showed me an old memory of professor Hagrid when he was in Hogwarts. It said he caused the death of another student, so I reckon he was maybe doing it again, only this time with petrification. So I went to the headmaster, you know, to warn him and it worked too because after I gave him the diary, all the petrification stopped.”
“So you did gave it to him,” Nicolas double checks.

“Yeah,” Hardwin answers. “I wasn’t trying to keep it from anyone, but I didn’t know what it was and Headmaster Dumbledore said it’d be better if no one knew it existed while he was studying it.”

Immediately, Harry snaps forward, grave in countenance as he demands to know, “has he been writing in the diary? Since you gave it to him, has he been writing in it?”

“How the bloody hell would I know that,” Hardwin defends, before turning to his mother to reiterate. “Really I don’t know any more than that.”

“It’s okay,” Lily comforts him as Perenelle turns to Harry and asks, “what are you thinking?”

He’s thinking he doesn’t like the idea of Dumbledore writing in the diary when he recalls what wearing the locket can feel like, but surrounded by an audience, he simply voices, “not entirely sure, but...Draco said his arse-of-a-father slipped the diary among Ginny Weasley’s things, so, best bet is she’s the one who was doing- well, more accurately, being forced to do all the stuff I heard about; painting threats on the walls, killing the roosters, opening the chamber of secrets-”

“Which can only be done if you know Parseltongue,” Hermione hops on the uptake like the earliest bird hungriest for the worm. “Of which none of the Weasley’s, among most wizards, are capable of,” Daphne tacks on Hermione’s point.

“As Ginny’s renewed friend,” Luna points out. “I’m certain she wouldn’t willingly have done anything so villainous if she wasn’t coerced somehow.”

“So the diary can be thought of as part container, part possession magic,” Lily suggests deep in thought, when Remus adds, “meaning, theoretically, it’s possible Headmaster Dumbledore has been opening a regular connection to the Diary of Lord Voldemort for two years; a diary that we know for certain can coerce negative behavior and even impart knowledge previously unknown to its writer.”

“While there is a small possibility,” Amelia cautiously states. Harry’s certain no one in the room is enjoying the possibility that one of the greatest wizards of their age may be compromised by a shade of the dark Lord Voldemort. “There is quite a wide difference between the mind of an eleven-year-old witch and one of the greatest wizards in magical history.”

“Maybe, but if he’s communicating with the diary, than it’s still possible Dumbledore’s being influenced,” Sirius fiercely points out. “We don’t know precisely because he keeps everything from everyone.”

“Well, not everyone,” Lily acknowledges, as many look to her. “Severus is more than likely his closest confidant.”

“Fat lot of good that does us,” Sirius grunts. “I can’t imagine that smarmy grease-bucket would tell us anything.”

“Severus,” Lily emphasizes, “may speak to me... if I approach him-”

“No,” Sirius immediately shoots down, to which Remus calls, “Padfoot, really.” “No, Mooney,” Sirius vocally rebukes Remus. “I don’t want Lily in any more danger than she’s already in. We all know Snivellus was a willing servant to Voldemort and only got away with it because Dumbledore vouched for him. What if he’s doing so again, only this time, working for the diary through Dumbledore?”
“I feel that’s a bit of a stretch,” Remus responds.

“But not impossible,” Sirius defends.

“Padfoot,” Lily calls with affectionate authority, getting up in the face of the heated wizard. “I can
look after myself, but more importantly this is a threat to Hardwin, my son! I can’t sit by and do
nothing. I have to try.”

“No, you don’t,” Sirius insists. “I don’t like this. There’s too much we don’t know.”

“Precisely why I need to speak with Severus!” she stresses vehemently. “If he talks to anyone, it’ll
be me.”

Lord Black challenges Lady Potter, rhetorically asking, “oh, you don’t think I can make that Death
Eater talk?”

“Sirius,” Remus calls in gentle warning.

Harry isn’t sure how he feels about Lily trying to take an active part in Voldemort’s demise.
Regardless of how much he wants his own answers from her, she’s still his mother and he doesn’t
want her anywhere near danger. Talking to Snape is a sure fire way to gain immediate and fatal
attention from all the wrong wizards.

“Perhaps a compromise,” Perenelle speaks, poking at Harry’s curiosity. When Sirius hotly nods to
hear her suggestion, Perenelle continues. “We don’t need to ascertain anything from Professor
Snape right this minute, so, Lily, if you would agree to temporarily refrain from engaging him
about this, than when the time comes for answers, Sirius can agree to this conversation if someone
else was there as well; Someone strong who can remain invisible or hidden unless, of course,
action is needed.”

Lily and Sirius stare each other down, neither willing to back down from their point of view, but
able to see the logic behind Perenelle’s suggestion. They both get what they want, if not exactly
how they wanted it; Lily safe, answers from Snape, and Harry fearfully suspicious of Perenelle’s
motives.

“I’ll take their silence as agreement,” Remus states before adding, “I’ll volunteer to be the third
man.”

“No,” Sirius turns on Remus. “Sorry to pull this card on ya’, mate, but we can’t be sure when the
conversation might happen and… well, we need someone always ready.” Remus deflates at the
implication but otherwise understands.

“Should I expect your resignation, Auror Black,” Amelia asks her Auror, who turns to her
confused. “As head Auror, you already have an assignment, and after this meeting, we’re going to
be very busy. I’m limiting this information to those in this room, which means I’m going to need
you to assist me in gathering intel at the ministry as covertly as possible.”

“It’s one day,” Sirius argues, when a suspicious Harry watches Perenelle casually, almost
buoyantly, suggest, “how about Ares?” Most of them turn the suggestion over in their minds for
viability and leaning favorably to the idea. As for Harry, there were too many witnesses to blow up
about this, so he remains stoically still as Hardwin yells, “no! This is my mum! And I don’t trust
him not to totally freak out.”

Nicolas quickly asserts, “freak out or no, young man, he’s still the strongest wizard in this room.”
“We don’t quite know that…” A gruff Sirius good-naturedly challenges.

“My seester and I were surrounded and attacked by Deazh Eaters zhe night of zhe quidditch world cup,” Fleur points out toward Hardwin. “Many een zhis room were viciously attacked by a madman zhe Great ‘all. And who een zhis room can forget zhe acromantula attack and zhe lives zhat could ‘ave been lost zhat day?” Fleur heatedly lists for Hardwin the most obvious acts of heroism, leveling a stern expression on Hardwin the entire time. “Ares ees by far zhe strongest wizard I ‘ave ever met. Eef any protection ees needed, I can zhink of no better wizard for zhe job.” The preceding moments of silence in the room only ends with a final threat to Hardwin. “Do not ever let me ‘ear you doubt ‘im again.”

A low whistle has a wide-eyed and fuzzy-feeling Harry turn to Sirius who’s nodding his head to him approvingly. Harry feels a bit of blush on his cheeks before he thanks Fleur, and moves directly into their next request. “The last thing we need is from you, Lord Black-”

“Sirius,” the Auror interject with a callous wave of his hand.

“There’s more?” Hardwin gasps. “It isn’t enough the greatest wizard of our age is… I don’t even want to think about it,” he glumly admits, completely disillusioned of what he thought he knew to be unshakable. “What else could there be?”

“This is about your brother,” Nicolas starts to which Sirius quickly turns incredibly tense. “Like, Bellatrix, we believe Regulus may have also been one of Voldemort’s most valued supporters; enough to entrust a Horcrux to him for its safekeeping. We couldn’t find any information on him, and so we were hoping you might recall a locket he may have hidden, or given to someone else to hide; a friend or house elf perhaps.”

“You believe Regulus had the locket,” Sirius sternly ask.

“It makes the most sense,” Amelia ponders aloud. “I recall his trial, clear as day. He was one of the very few to proudly proclaim support for the Dark Lord.”

“I…” Sirius pauses to take a settling breath. “I am ashamed of my family’s dark past,” he admits looking sorrowfully at Tracey. “Your mother is the light of my life and I never wanted either of you to ever believe I could support that superiority bullocks. With all the artifacts the house of Black have collected throughout the centuries, the very day I became the head of our house, I disowned Bellatrix, Regulus, and moved all the dark items to the family’s vaults. I was desperate to push them out of sight and forget they ever existed.” He turns hurtfully angry as he adds, “And all this time a shade of that parasite was right under my nose!”

“You couldn’t have known,” Lily tells him.

“Calm yourself, Auror,” Amelia commands. “There’ll be plenty of time for self-loathing later. For now, I need your head in the game because we have work to do.”

“You’ll need to search for the locket,” Remus states. “I’ll help of course. I’m fairly good at detecting dark objects.”

“You’ll have to be careful,” Nicolas tells him. “It’ll more than likely have devastating countermeasures to protect itself.”

“What should I do if I find it,” he asks.

“Don’t touch it. There’s a detection spell I can teach you that will aid in your search,” Nicolas answers before turning to all of the adults. “I’ll show you all.”
“Well,” Perenelle states standing up. “I believe that’s everything.”

A few start to get up, Harry among them when Sirius steps forward. “Actually,” he starts turning an inquisitive stare on Harry. “I’d like to know a little more about you. Please believe I don’t mean to be rude. After everything you’ve done for us, shared with us, I’d like nothing more than to take things at face value. But you know more about us than we know of you. We have to trust you more than you have to trust us and how can this really work like that?”

Stepping forward, Amelia adds, “What I feel Auror Black is trying to say is, we’d like a little more confidence that we’re working with you and not for you.”

“Can I assume you mean Ares,” Nicolas asks, cutting through the red tape.

“Two of you are in the history tomes and one of you is a complete mystery,” Sirius points out. “A single-minded focus like that doesn’t come without the pain to make it,” he reasons, all the while staring directly into Harry’s green eyes.

“You do not have to answer,” Lily asserts, turning from Harry to Sirius. “I know you’re curious. I think we all are. But this is not an interrogation. Whatever his past is you can’t just demand to know.”

Just because Harry understands the need to know of a thing, doesn’t mean he’s not upset that Sirius would treat him this way. Though looking at his mother defend his right to his past so ardently, makes Harry wonder if she’s projecting this defense of a past for herself as well.

“Yeah, I’ve suffered,” Harry retorts. “And no, I won’t talk about it so you can feel more comfortable. I really can’t say this any clearer. I. Just. Want. Voldemort. Dead. Dead! End of story. Maybe if I actually survive killing him, we can split a bottle Ogden’s and I can tell you all about the blood in my past, but until then, I think we can all use a little more single-minded purpose right now. That alright with you… Padfoot?”

With the start of the first task looming in a little under twelve hours, Harry casually recounts the events of the past week as he steps onto the dueling mat. Harry feels out of sorts, uncomfortable in his own skin by how much control he’s relinquished. Sirius, with Remus’ help, promised to search every property his family owns to find the locket. Even if the relationship is strained beyond repair, Sirius and Regulus are brothers, which means no one knows Regulus more intimately than Sirius. Lily had begun conceptualizing designs to drag the truth from Snape, and though it made Sirius, Remus, Hardwin, and Harry nervous, Harry is fairly confident Snape would not do anything to hurt his childhood friend.

It’s odd for Harry to accept he has assistance with direct access to what he needs. He no longer has to break into the Black residence and hope he can locate the Locket without being discovered. Once they attain the locket and the diary, Nagini will be the last Horcrux, and a special sword can take care of that. Harry would feel happy if the unpredictable didn’t make him so nervous, certain he’s missing something, or not seeing some other complication that will inevitably spoil this latest plan.

Harry takes his place at the far end of the mat and nonchalantly flicks his white wand into his grip, all the while lamenting how his lack of operational control isn’t the only new state of mind. Fleur is completely ruining his idea of what his life should be. Though they agreed to stay discreet for the moment, they have yet to spend any time together, which is counter to what he understood their new relationship was. In fact, with regard to their steady group, very little has changed, choosing to
sit near Hermione more than anyone, but on occasion, she will also sit with Daphne, Luna, and Hardwin when he joins the group.

Hardwin has been training in a similar fashion to how Harry had trained to win the first task. Fortunately, this Potter seems to have a better grasp of magic than he had in his timeline. His Accio improved steadily enough and he more often than not stays for dueling practice as well. Though Harry’s fairly certain he just enjoys talking with Fleur.

Fleur gets along especially well with Tracey. They seem to have a lot in common and conversation between them pass easily ranging anywhere between boys and clothes. Draco and Hardwin don’t get along well every time words are spoken. For some reason, Hardwin seems to draw out Draco’s immaturity. As an explanation, Draco only ever mentions, “dealing with one Potter is my limit.” Aside for Draco and Hardwin, they all get on fairly well, and Harry enjoys this environment well enough, but in the back, middle, and steadily approaching the front of his mind, he’s wondering why Fleur is more or less the same when he was expecting some loss of control on their part. The relationship between them is honest and clear… Wasn’t he supposed to meet something akin to a vixen?

Harry should know better than to expect anything from Fleur Delacour. She seems specifically designed to entice just as much as bewilder, which heaven help him only makes him think about her and their whole situation more. Even his night terrors hold less dominance when competing against Fleur fantasies. In some of Harry’s more paranoid moments, he wonders if this entire fiasco of hers is simply a ploy of sorts, to lower his guard so she can pounce when he’s at his weakest. ‘Pounce and do what,’ a very hormonal side of him mentally voices, making Harry grimace in sheer embarrassment for thinking like a complete horn-dog.

“She’s ruining my life,” he mumbles with a bored huff as Hardwin, Fred and George take the other end of the dueling ring, wands in hand and standing ready. The sight of the excited yet serious twins brings to mind Luna’s gift to him, making him smirk at the fond memory despite his three alert opponents. Of his groups attempt to help him feel more comfortable and add a trickle of happiness to his day, Luna is the second, or third—depending if Fleur’s decision to accept the full scope of a relationship with him counts—to finish and give him his gift. It was genius as only Luna is capable of and made him laugh… out loud.

Luna had explained a colorful tale of speaking with Ginny, Fred, and George about their possible assistance in helping her thank and support her friend, Ares Flamel. Being the mavericks they are, they agreed and the four of them came up with a school-wide prank they put into effect during breakfast two days ago. Using a charm-line over the archway of the entrance, much like the charm line he used to break eggs stuck on heads, they cursed all who entered the Great Hall for breakfast with a reactionary affliction. The intent-code of the curse was simple; should anyone disobey the mandate of the magic, they would suffer the misfortune of having glowing eyes and a few fake facial scars for a full twenty-four hours. The only thing a witch or wizard had to do was look away from anyone the curse was connected to.

So during breakfast, Fred cast the curse on George, who looked away and instantly had the glowing eyes and scars of The Green Reaper, except with brown light glowing out instead of green. Fred looked away from George and instantly had similar scars and glowing eyes. Luna and Ginny did the same and they too became Green Reapers with the notable difference of their personal eye color glowing. Multiplying from one to two, to four, to sixteen, and so on until, rather quickly, the entire room was filled with Green Reapers. Only a few were afraid at first, however since Fred and George are notorious pranksters, the joyous calamity quickly disseminated to every witch or wizard and they all played with the idea of being this celebrity for the day.
Harry witnessed excited faces, some conjuring mirrors to see themselves, and laugh or smile, or panic with obvious concern. A great boom of laughter spread from the front of the room when even the professors succumbed to the benign curse. Many professors offered to break the curse for anyone who didn’t like the light and scars effect, and as Harry learned later that day, not many wanted to remove them. Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Slytherin, and even some professors, Lily among them, all decided to keep the guise throughout the day. At first Harry felt sad for them and their ignorance of what such a face means—not that his scars are real, he’ll admit—but as the day progressed, he had to take into account that whatever the Reaper’s meaning, it broke through social boundaries not unlike quidditch, dueling, or butter-beer has.

A savior or villain, loved or feared, it didn’t matter how they played with Harry’s likeness, because it resonated with him. When he looked around the many halls and classes of Hogwarts, filled with different color glowing eyes, scars, and plush toy Phoenix’ on their shoulder—a purchasable item the Weasley twins sold—their exuberance showed him some form of acceptance. It only took everyone looking like him to realize in a small way, Harry is apart of something that is more than his mission…more than his mission. It doesn’t look all that bad to him.

While he enjoyed the day, a few wizards fell too deeply into character and fights broke out as a result, but all in all, he gave Luna a fierce hug, lifting her off her feet, and invited Fred, George, and Ginny to train with them. Rather than bring them to the Room of Requirement or the Chamber, they train in one of the larger rooms.

Fred and George launched simultaneous attacks, followed quickly by Hardwin. “Rictusempra!” “Stupify!” “Protego!”

‘I guess Hardwin assumed I’d attack right away,’ Harry thinks, observing his brother’s shield made for three. With the distance between opposing sides, Harry doesn’t have to put in more effort than his reactionary battle-memory as he sidesteps Fred and George’s curses to quickly counter cast, “lumos maxima,” blinding the entirety of the practice room, before disappearing himself. It takes a few seconds for Daphne, Hermione, Fleur, her friend Annabelle, Tracey, Draco, Luna, Ginny, Astoria, and Gabrielle to regain complete sight and when they do, it’s to the sight of Hardwin, George and Fred on the floor in a full body bind.

Harry stands there, ignorant of his friend’s fascination as he wonders if he should force Draco to start using actual partners in their dancing lessons rather than the stick he’s forcing on Harry to help him keep his arms up and straight during the steps. If Fleur and Harry were dancing together, he might have an easier time talking to her alone without raising suspicion, however, the aggravating Draco is still holding a grudge over Fleur agreeing to be in a polyamorous relationship with him. The one time Harry was curious enough to ask what his problem was, Draco simply responded, “you think this is fair, you greedy git! I’m doing this for men everywhere!”

If Tracey hadn’t insisted they start the lessons, Draco would’ve never started. Even after the lessons had begun, Draco was a dictator in his instruction, refusing to let Harry practice with Fleur, Daphne, or Hermione. He shoved a stick against his chest and said, “here, call her Lola.” If Harry wasn’t so mystified by Fleur, he would’ve shoved that stick right up his pasty arse. Even now, Harry is reconsidering Draco’s part in tomorrows plans, though he knows it would only be out of spite.

“How the hell am I suppose to beat a bloody dragon,” Hardwin calls out after he canceled the body-bind. “Three of us can’t even touch you! And they expected to beat a dragon by myself?”

“Dragons don’t have wands,” Harry voices in the most mundane way.

“Could it be, dear brother, you’re feeling just as royally hurt as I am,” George calls to Fred loud
enough to be the center of attention.

“Hurt you say,” Fred play-responds.

“Royally so,” George corrects.

“You couldn’t mean to say,” Fred poses with mirth. “That no matter how many acromantula, Death Eaters, and Merlin knows what else Ares’ done epic battle with, it still hurts to have a fourteen-year-old casually pummel three of us arse-over-tit all whilst appearing as if he’s trying to recall the secret recipe to Nan’s famous crumpet?”

“Are you sure that was ‘Nan’s secret recipe for crumpet,’ daze,” George returns quizzically, “I was getting more of a, ‘why do my knickers feel so funny?’ vibe.”

“Ya’ know,” Fred fains bewilderment. “I always get those two confused.”

Harry’s amused even if he’s still deep in thought as Daphne states while walking on the mat, “I can’t imagine he had enough time to think of anything in the three seconds it took to beat you.”

Harry smiles as he pays a little more attention to Daphne, Tracey, and Luna taking a place on the mat. They had all asked to duel him and so far the triple team of Draco, Fleur and her friend Annabelle require more than reactionary retaliation from him. Fleur is an impressive tactician and Draco and Annabelle follow her instructions extremely well. Harry tells Fred, George, and Hardwin, “hard as it is, you have to ignore the faint for the real attack. Even if you have to cover your eyes, don’t do it with your wand hand. Remember, I’m just trying to break your focus.”

“You know,” George starts. “For a snake, you’re not a half-bad bloke.”

“A fair sentiment I never thought I’d ever agree with, brother,” Fred adds with mild astonishment. Amused, Harry simply nods at the two.

“You wouldn’t know Hardwin had any focus after being slaughtered like that,” Tracey adds.

Turning vindictively towards her, he speaks in a low threatening voice, “I’m so telling Uncle Sirius you’re dating a Malfoy.”

Scandalized, Tracey throws back, “Hardwin Potter don’t even think two can’t play at that game. Or Auntie Lily may need to know why a certain Boy-Who-Lived has been sneaking off to spy on a certain Asian Ravenclaw.”

Hardwin’s eyes widen fearfully first, then scrunch like there’s a super tart lemon in his mouth. Harry turns to Draco and wonders if he’s letting Tracey see the Maurader’s Map. Currently, Draco has the map in his possession. ‘He’ll need it tomorrow,’ Harry’s mind reasons, but he’ll have to make sure to take it back afterward. Though the map was made to do no good, spying for gossip’s sake just seems so distasteful.

With everything up in the air, leaving so much to chance, Harry never expected all of his ‘tomorrows’ might be one of them. Expecting to be the only one to die against Voldemort made everything else so much easier to face. Now, he’s asking the same of others, making him absolutely sick with worry. Sirius and Amelia are gathering vital intelligence covertly, likely against ministry guidelines. Lily’s determined to speak with Snape about grave secrets that aren’t even his own to tell. Draco’s first solo mission is hours away. Dark Goblins, as well as regular goblins, want their pound of Flamel flesh. Though no Unicorns have been found dead, the ghoul in the forest is still at large, placing the entire castle in danger. Hardwin could very possibly take Cedric’s place in this tournament. The inevitable battle against Voldemort looms in the distance. It
simply isn’t rational to expect to have a life after all that… to feel happiness. And yet that’s what Nicolas, Perenelle and Fleur are challenging him to do.

“Are you okay,” Daphne’s voice pierces through his mental fog.

Harry snaps into the present at the sound of her concerned voice to find Daphne is beside him while Tracey and Luna wait a few feet away. His green eyes map the elegant landscape of her beautiful face, shaped especially well under her long, gold-spun blond hair. Her cute nose, curving nicely to meet her darker blond eyebrows, long eyelashes, and crystal blue eyes. High cheekbones flush under his gaze as her pert pink lips spread to sweetly ask, “Ares?”

Staring though he was, he didn’t care as much when he realizes behind her enchanting exterior, is a witch who may have answers that could help him. “You want to be an Unspeakable,” he starts, catching her attention. “In the Department of Mystery, Unspeakable study and learn in disturbing detail about all sorts incredibly terrible things that were nearly averted or are predicted to happen. You could study how to effectively establish dominion over what is considered nature’s edict; the soul, love, time, death, risking worldwide calamity toward millions of innocents for a few nuggets of intellectual treasure. More than any job in existence, Unspeakables truly come face-to-face with our hubris, the worst part of people—”

“Stop it,” Daphne mews in an unexpectedly cute way, expanding her chest with a great calming breath. “You’re going to make me blush.”

‘This girl,’ Harry mentally muses before he asks, “that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

If Daphne wasn’t expecting the loaded question, she gave no evidence to that, taking it in stride as she calmly answers, “I want to heal my sister more than anything. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say she keeps me from the darker witch within. After Tori, being an Unspeakable would be the greatest meaning my life can ever produce.”

“Is that the same as being happy?” Harry abruptly asks. “Danger-bound as that life will undoubtedly be, would you expect to be happy as well?”

“You mean happiness with someone special,” Daphne asks for clarity. To his stiff nod, she answers, “as it’s currently defined, I never thought I would truly be happy with anyone. The process of meeting, falling in love, instantly marrying, bearing children, taking care of them and the house while the wizard works until we grow old and die? No. That doesn’t even sound like happiness to me. I’m a pragmatist. I’d always known that regardless of who this future partner of mine would be, he’d undoubtedly have a variety of flaws.”

“Pragmatism,” Harry quietly mouths, recalling it’s definition from one of Nic’s philosophy book aloud, “success through practical considerations rather than idealistic approach.”

She smiles as she continues, “I think you and I learned early on how some realities of this world work, how the worst people work; harsh and unforgiving. I never expected more than adequate pleasantness from this future wizard because every time I combined the way intelligence fascinates me with how often people let me down, it’s never like in the poems. So, I simply imagine choosing the one wizard with the most amount of intelligence and least amount annoyances that I can live with.”

“I imagine having an in-depth intelligence network would help you make that decision,” Harry muses aloud, wondering if that played a part in her need to know deep and dark secrets.

“Naturally,” she smiles knowingly. “This is all, of course, if I wasn’t arranged to be married, as
I’m certain you remember my father. True happiness like you read in poems or hear in song had never truly entered the equation in any meaningful way for me."

‘I’m hearing a lot of past tense,’ his idiot mind voices with giddy suggestion. He stares at her clear blue eyes for a moment that is neither short or long, noting sincerity and comfort in them. She never breaks eye contact as he notes how similar their pattern of thinking is. She understands the dark. She embraces it, regularly exposes herself to it, but doesn’t completely lose herself to it. Harry’s certain Astoria is in a large way the reason why, though, anything more than her sister, Harry couldn’t say. Due to a sudden spike to need to know more about her, Harry asks with a hint of amazement, “why are you the way you are?”

With a knowing smile that only exaggerates her beauty, she returns, “I can ask you the same. You tell us a lot—all of which is the most fascinating events I’ve ever heard—but it’s never your history. It’s never why you are the way you are, dark and painful as I’m sure it is. Or am I wrong?”

He shakes his head in answer, finally looking away as he genuinely expresses, “I’m happy I met you, Daphne.”

“No,” she rebuffs casually. He turns to her, brows furrow with curiosity as she adds, “you’re glad you met me.” Her smile turns playful as she explains, “‘happy to have met me,’ is something far better than this.” She turns the moment she registers his wide eyes and begins walking to the other side of the mat, asking over her shoulder, “shall we?”

A time chamber between the love and death chamber in the department of mysteries. Due to the Horcrux planted in his head, Harry had learned more than he ever thought possible, but he hardly ever wonders what more there is to know—the type of knowledge that has nothing to do with power. As the magnificently elegant Slytherin walks to the other side, speaking strategy to Luna and Tracey, Harry begins to realize that he lives in the Death Chamber, holding its inviting entrance closed in an effort to keep his loved ones from risking their souls on a lost cause. In spite of his mission, of its grand importance, he can feel how much his resolve has wain against their combined determination to reach him, instilling a great fear that one day, he won’t be strong enough to keep them from death’s gentle embrace.

Turning to the alert and battle-ready girls, he accepts that he won’t leave the dark abyss of the Death Chamber, not until its dangers to the world have been completely abated. However its beginning to feel like a relief of sorts, to know that his friends are behind him, tethering him to his humanity despite his greatest dread should he fail them again. Flicking his wand out, he imagines that tomorrow may turn out okay… regardless of how much anxiety he feels should it all go wrong. With a huff of daunting acceptance, Harry quietly answers Daphne, “I suppose we shall.”

Chapter End Notes

Fleur was originally going to be aggressive but I thought of an interesting idea that will be explained very soon. Fleur has her eyes set on Hermione, but Daphne snuck up on me toward the end there.

I wanted to do the first task in this chapter but I sort of got lost in the writing and didn't have the time, but next chapter is for sure, the 1st task. I already started writing some of it so I don't foresee and delay in meeting my deadline, next Sunday.
Thoughts, comments I'd love to hear em. Thanks and have a great one,

--Grae
The First Task

Chapter Summary

Harry navigates the challenges of the first task, those seen and unseen.

Chapter Notes

Happy Hunger Games!

Well, I've finally reached the First Task. It was starting to feel like I would never get there. That's what writing chapter to chapter gets you I guess.

I'm saddened to say a personal matter has come up that I have to deal with. I'm NOT putting the story on hold but I won't be able to get to it for at least a month. As a fanfic reader myself, trust that I hate it when stories are abandoned as much as you all do. I will not abandon, but this is heavy family stuff I have to take care of. My apologies in advance.

This chapter really turned me around trying to find the right/exciting direction. It was a tough on to consider, so I hope you all enjoy it and please let me know what you think. Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Good day champions,” Ludo Bagman calls, after theatrically tossing back the flaps of the champion’s tent. Behind Ludovic Bagman is Headmaster Dumbledore, Undersecretary Umbridge, Headmaster Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. Sirius Black and Alice Longbottom stand by the entrance, well out of the way, however ready to take Harry as soon as the task is explained to the champions. And standing beside them is Perenelle, whom Alice Longbottom can’t seem to stop chatting with. As a “minor,” Harry will need his guardian present while he gives his statement, which works out well, given Harry’s plans.

The judges make their way toward three nervous champion and a napping time traveler with a Phoenix on a stand. “Gather around, please, gather around,” Bagman happily invites. When they all gather, Bagman begins, “Now, you’ve waited, you’ve wondered and at last the moment has arrived. A moment only the four of you can fully appreciate. It is finally time to learn what the first task of this historic Triwizard Tournament will demand from each of you.”

Mumbling to himself, “mnn, let’s see,” Bagman moves the champions in the order by which they will enter the arena, Krum beside Bagman with Karkaroff behind his champion, Fleur next to Krum with Maxime behind her, Harry beside Fleur, and Hardwin to close the loose circle. Harry is grateful Dumbledore didn’t dare stand behind him, however, Harry finds it interesting he didn’t stand behind Hardwin, who looks very nervous. Bagman then opens a purple swede pouch containing the dragons for each of the champions.

A grim Viktor Krum slowly inserts his hand and retrieves the Chinese Fireball Dragon—as he had
in the previous timeline, Harry notes. A tense Fleur Delacour cautiously dips a delicate, gloved hand in the pouch and retrieves the same dragon she had previously as well, the Welsh Green. Bagman revolves the sack toward a very bored Slytherin. As Nova curiously peers in the bag from overhead, Harry idly wonders what would happen if he decided to leave it to chance. Would he still get the Hungarian Horntail this time?

In his time off, Harry had done a little light reading on souls for any clues as to what may have become to the Horcrux in his head. A theory he came across in ‘Anima Ion’ by a potioneer Svantes Agustus, states that the Soul supersedes the preeminence of Death and Time, as well as have an ability to bond with other souls in order to fully stabilize its outer form. The principle theory came under a lot of scrutiny, however, Harry felt it had some merit. It would explain why even in this timeline, Hermione, Fleur, Luna, Hedwig, and even Dobby’s souls have manage to find their way back to his, or his to theirs—to stabilize one another.

‘Bonding with a Hungarian Horntail seems less stable than that theory suggests,’ he muses to himself.

Deciding not to satisfy that intellectual curiosity, Harry shamelessly dips his hand in the swede pouch and takes out both remaining miniature dragons by their tails, causing the adults to panic and cry out, “only one, Mr. Flamel!” Harry ignores them as he gives Hardwin the smaller Swedish Short-snout, keeping the Hungarian for himself. Hardwin isn’t sure what to say, sputtering instead, “what bloody gives?”

With bored, yet, challenging eyes, Harry stares at the judges, waiting in silence for them to dispute his actions in any way. Bagman simply exhales and shrugs as the others look from one to another for any objections. While Umbridge is trembling slightly from repressing her clear outrage, the majority seem apathetic to his constant defiance, which really worries him. For how can he continue to be a rebel if they just accept his antics without much fuss?

Slightly less jovial, Bagman continues. “These represent four very real dragons which have been given a golden egg to protect. Your objective is simple… collect the egg. This you must do, for within each egg contains a clue, without which you cannot hope to proceed to the next task.”

Harry turns to Sirius and Perenelle expecting the sound of cannon fire to mark the beginning of the task, however, Bagman continues. “That is your task, however, in light of the unusual circumstances by which a second champion has been added to a single school, additional procedure had to be included to balance the playing field for participating schools as well as aid our judges in fairly deciding how best to award points.”

‘That’s different,’ Harry mentally cautions, instantly becoming more alert. Perenelle, Sirius, and Alice move a little closer to hear this new revelation themselves.

“To better understand,” Dumbledore begins to state. “There are four champions with a total point gain of fifty points, but there are three schools. It means that even if you all attain perfect scores, Hogwarts would still have a fifty point advantage. The Headmaster and Headmistress of participating schools have rightly pointed out how unfair this is.”

“It has been discussed among all of the judges, at great length,” Bagman announces. “Right or wrong, Hogwarts does have two champions, and thus twice the chance of winning the tournament. This is indeed unfair to Beauxbaton, it is unfair to Durmstrang and let no one claim that Britain cannot be impartial,” he adds with a little ire. It seems to Harry this must be frustrating for Bagman.

A childlike, “Hem-Hem,” alarms the room like a stabbing chill running up a spine as Umbridge
states, “in deference to our International relations with Beauxbaton and Durmstrang, it has been decided with the Ministry approval, that Hogwarts will begin each task with a deficit.”

Harry and Hardwin glance at each other a short moment before Dumbledore continues. “The manner by which the deficit is decided on will be half of the accumulation of points between Beauxbaton and Durmstrang. Mr. Krum will enter the arena first, followed by Miss Delacour. Half of the total points awarded to them, will be the deficit Mistres Flamel and Potter must work to overcome. For clarity’s sake, should Mr. Krum and Miss Delacour total eighty points—forty each, let’s assume—than Hogwarts will begin with a forty point deficit. Additionally, should both Hogwarts champions only earn thirty points each, exceeding the fifty point limit, only the best score will remain.”

“How is this supposed to be fair?” Hardwin blurts out, looking as if betrayed. “We weren’t even supposed to be in this tournament to begin with! We’re fourteen! And now we have to work twice as hard just to break even?”

“It is quite simple, boy,” Karkaroff spouts. “You and Flamel only need a small amount of points for Hogwarts to earn what my champion must work even harder to gain himself. It has been unfair from dhe beginning and now when some measure of fairness is implemented, you seek to profane injustice-”

“Now, Igor,” Dumbledore calls, placing a calming palm on his shoulder. “I’m sure all our champions are feeling a great amount of pressure at the moment. After all, we’ve just informed them they are to do battle with a dragon. No simple task, to say the least. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Karkaroff holds his tongue, though his face is quite indignant as Bagman continues. “In addition, a small measure of leeway has been approved to assist Hogwarts. Mr. Flamel will join Mr. Krum and Miss Delacour in their task. Not to assist in any way. I repeat, not to assist you. However, should Mr. Krum or Miss Delacour be unable to retrieve their egg, Mr. Flamel is given the option to retrieve it for them, an act which will then be awarded points to further assist Hogwarts deficit.”

“Why him and not me?” Hardwin asks, though the answer seems fairly clear to everyone. Harry wonders if Hardin is stressing too much to know exactly how he’s feeling. He seems to be all over the place as Harry recalls this Boy-Who-Lived likely didn’t face Quirrell as he had in his timeline, certainly didn’t face a Basilisk to save Ginny, or a horde of dementors in his third year. Hardwin has no choice but to feel higher levels of fear, unlike anything he’s felt before.

“The panel of judges took a vote as to which Hogwarts champion would be, what we refer to as, the Option. Mr. Flamel was appointed to this position with a three to two vote.” Something told Harry, Maximee and Karkaroff would prefer Hardwin over himself. Dumbledore and Umbridge obviously want to continue to challenge Harry, whereas Bagman likely thinks it’s too dangerous for Hardwin.

Bagman turns his attention to Harry, to affirm the conditions. “Mr. Flamel, should the other champions be unable to acquire their prize, you are under no obligation to do so, as you have your own Dragon to face, however, you must indeed enter and stay until it is your turn. The two reasons being, the precautionary measures that have been put in place to protect the audience from any dangers within.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Harry muses. He had found it odd that the only sort of protection the audience had during his timeline was the chained manacle around the dragon’s neck… which was no protection at all as it effortlessly busted the chain to chase after him. ‘You’d think after a rampaging cockatrice had killed so many of the spectators in the previous tournament from his timeline, they would make sure the audience would be safe this time around. Wizard logic…’
“And the other reason,” Bagman explains, “is, as per the enchanted judgment of the Goblet and thus the task, once you enter you may not leave until you’ve either failed or succeeded in your task.”

“So, I have to go in with Krum, right now, and I have to stay in until I get my own egg?” Harry simplifies, looking from Bagman to the waiting Sirius and Alice Longbottom, to the eerily stoic Perenelle, to a widely grinning Umbridge.

From the outskirts of the room, Sirius steps forward in light of what this means, informing, “Mr. Bagman, he can’t go in now. Our department needs him to answer some questions at the moment.”

“Well, you will simply have to wait, Auror Black,” Bagman tells Sirius. “He must enter momentarily.”

“You don’t understand.” Sirius tries again with a stern expression. “A statement has been scheduled before interested Wizengamot members minutes from now. He must be there.”

“Oh, that is quite the blunder on your part, I must say. Who would possibly schedule a deposition today, of all days?” Bagman returns, clearly out of the loop as far as what’s going on.

“Oh my,” Umbridge happily sympathizes, turning behind her to give a curt wave. A moment later the senior Carrow twins enter as Umbridge sorrowfully states, “this is most unfortunate. Crimes must be answered for, however, you dishonor yourself by clamoring for glory that was not yours to begin with-”

“How could you be so petty?” Perenelle spits, interrupting the pink toad as she marches toward Umbridge with tight fists. Harry steps in between the two, keeping Perenelle from doing anything reckless as Umbridge holds the Carrows back with a hand. Sirius steps forward with his wand drawn as Hardwin, Krum, Bagman, and Maximee holding an irate Fleur, all step back. Though physically held back, Perenelle continues to yell, “don’t think I haven’t come across a vile cretin like you a time or two! A witch, so inconsequential in any way that matters, she foolishly takes out her misplaced frustrations on the world all because you weren’t destined to be the next Merlin-”

“Oh, dear, how hurtful of you, Lady Flamel, to say such unforgivable things,” Umbridge reveals, pressing her sausage hand to her chest as if wounded. “Why you must see I had no ill intentions here-”

“You’re really not doing yourself any favors,” Harry coldly cuts in, though no longer holding Perenelle back, he still feels her hands on his free shoulder. In between the two women, Harry coldly informs Umbridge, “if I didn’t have another sadistic fuck to deal with, I guarantee you would’ve had my undivided attention. But as you mean so little to me, you only get so little.” Harry looks to both Dumbledore and Umbridge. “Do either of you know why I’m not out of my mind enraged about your silly little schemes and pathetic little plots?” Turning to Umbridge he simplifies, “arrest me if I stay, lose my magic if I go.” Turning to Dumbledore, further explaining, “do as I say or my Phoenix stays bound. Because neither of you see me. The both of you are about as blind as a muggle showing a wizard how to do magic. Eyes are open but you can’t see that I am not a simple fourteen-year-old prodigy, a murderer, or even an heir. You egomaniacs cannot teach me, win my favor, bend me to your justice because to you I may as well be prophecy! Formless but for the cavity of your own downfall and you’re both filling it, greedily.”

Harry whips his white wand in his hand, still sternly eying both Dumbledore and Umbridge. “And it’ll be my greatest pleasure to show you how your every decision will only bring you that much closer to ruin.” Nova on his shoulder, Harry turns, placing a comforting hand on Perenelle’s shoulder before walking to the long staircase that leads toward the base of the arena, calling out
behind him, “Krum. Let’s go.”

“Ares,” Perenelle calls, but they both know it’s best if Harry ignores her as he begins descending the steps. She turns to Umbridge and point-blank proclaims, “we will defend him.”

As Krum descends the stairs, the judges begin to leave to take their seat. Umbridge leaves instructions with Alecto and Amycus to wait to arrest him. Fleur, Hardwin, and Sirius move to Perenelle with clear concern, but before any of them can express their sentiment, she puts her hand up, almost lazily, and easily tells them, “just one moment, please.”

Less than a minute later, Harry returns from the descending steps, citing, “I’ve had a change of heart.” He turns to an unsure Sirius, telling him, “let’s go.”

“But your magic,” Alice calls from beside Perenelle.

“If I don’t go in, my magic shouldn’t be affected,” Harry tells them. “Just bring me back in time.”

Alecto steps forward, demanding of Harry, “you will be required to surrender your wand,” before turning to Sirius and demanding, “as Wizengamot officers, we will be escorting-”

“How could you possibly believe it’s standard procedure to surrender his wand to give a statement,” Alice Longbottom asks stepping beside Sirius as the head Auror easily explains, “I’ve more than had it with these games, Alecto. As lead investigator of this case, I, under the authority of Madam Bones, Head of Law Enforcement, have jurisdictional command and will escort Heir Flamel to the Ministry to give his statement. Now, bugger off before I start thinking of using all the authority vested in me as Head Auror and Lord Black to thoroughly investigate how the Carrow family truly earn their living.” Alecto and Amycus glare menacingly as Sirius takes the portkey he sequestered out. Perenelle has a hand on Harry’s free shoulder when Alice invites them closer to depart.

Though clearly irate, Alecto takes his twin sister’s hand, and inform them, “we will meet you there to provide additional security,” before they remove their own portkey and teleporting away.

“I have a feeling they’ll have hours worth of questions,” Harry states, to which Perenelle adds, “anything to delay us as long as possible.”

“That won’t happen,” Sirius confidently tells them. “I won’t let it,” he sternly tells them before they disappear.

Visible from within the small stone alcove entrance, is the golden egg, a good distance away at the center of the wide rocky arena on top of a rock-like platform. Now that Harry’s in it, he doesn’t actually recall ever seeing the matches of the Champions or their dragons. Krum’s dragon isn’t within line-of-sight, however, the wizards can hear the feral screech of the Chinese Fireball and the cheer of the crowd immediately afterward. Conscious of his mental countdown, Harry smacks Krum on the shoulder, and wishes him, “good luck,” before walking forward.

“You must not help,” Krum states moving forward stopping Harry from walking further.

Harry shrugs Krum’s thick hand away and harshly tells him, “hey, I’m not planning on helping you, at all. So stop focusing on me and get your head in the game.” Apparently, Krum just needed to hear the words because the Bulgarian turns even more fierce, smacking his chest with his fist, chanting for purpose and drive before heatedly stomping out into the arena, wand at the ready. Harry rolls his eyes before picking up a rock and walking out of the rocky recess of the entrance.
On top of being very cold for November, the day is gray with bits of sunlight peeking through the clouds. The entire arena for the first task is still built on the side of a small, rocky mountain a good mile from the castle. After the audience explanation by Dumbledore and subsequent canon fire, Krum cautiously steps farther out into the rocky area as Harry and Nova survey everything before them. This arena is not quite identical to the arena from his timeline, the notable difference being the space to battle the dragon is twice as wide and the audience gallery is almost twice as high as before.

On the surface of a large boulder is the Chinese Fireball, a red and black lizard with wings made of a leathery membrane and long sharp talons. It’s certainly a dragon but doesn’t look nearly as fearsome as the Hungarian Horntail. From the entrance to the arena, the Fireball is on the left of the egg, so Harry strolls to the right and away from what’s sure to be a grudge match.

A loud roar behind him vibrates his chest in an unsettling way before the crowd jeers and cry out for magical combat. Krum actually roars back, spurring the crowd further and causing Harry to reevaluate Krum’s sanity. Walking away from the action, he expands then flattens the rock into a round disk he then sits on. Controlling the lift and direction, a seated Harry slowly levitates higher and higher into the air as he listlessly watches Krum combat the Fireball with water; testing brute resilience against feral resilience.

Judging Krum to do a fair enough job, if not inefficient, Harry rotates the disk to look around the gallery for his friends to help pass the time. Moving closer to the cheering, he realizes there’s a large multitude of people coming and going, hollering and cheering, clapping or waving signs than he imagined. A flash of light easily located the Creevey brothers. In the only part of the arena that’s covered by a tent, he finds the five judges, Minister Fudge, Lucius Malfoy with half of the Governors, Rita Skeeter, Stéphane, Gabrielle, and Apolline, a couple he can only assume are Krum’s parents, and oddly enough, Horace Slughorn and Gilderoy Lockhart. Each of the houses, the professors, and other strangers fill the rest of the available seats and Harry wonders if there are more people this time than there were last time.

‘Probably didn’t notice as I was too busy trying not to get killed,’ he mentally reasons as he finally spots his friends. They are on the other end of the arena, a little close to the Chinese Fireball than he’d like. As if proving him right, a ball of black smoking fire is hurled toward the stands and as promised the runes surrounding the edge halt and spread the sizzling lethal ball of flames as if hitting an invisible wall, keeping all observers from any danger. Harry wasn’t overly worried, levitating a little higher, closer to the invisible barrier he continues his overhead journey. When the girls notice him heading toward them, they move to the wood railing, waving him over when a dull reflection of white catches Harry’s eye.

Unlike sparkles, camera flash, or bright candlelight, this simple, yet constant, flickering of redirected light from the mostly cloud covered sun above is beckoning. Standing not three meters from Daphne, Hermione, Tracey, and Luna, is a short student—likely a first year judging by the height—in Hufflepuff colors, wearing a mask and cloak. The flap of the cloak is open far enough to allow weak sunlight to reflect into his green eyes off the surface of a finely polished dagger. Harry’s entire body is immediately on alert, his eyes expeditiously begin assessing every possible threat within his vision.

Harry is easily aided in his threat assessment, for his immediate halt was all the notice the knife-wielding Hufflepuff needed to close their cloak before another flash of dull reflection catches his sharp green eyes. Splitting his attention, Harry is alerted to a second short, cloaked and masked figure sporting Gryffindor colors on the other side of his friends. A similar lavish gold and silver knife is abruptly hidden the moment Harry is aware of its existence, and its purpose. It’s clear the target of this ominous threat are his friends as a third flicker of light alerts a heavily breathing
Harry to a third, short knife-wielder in Ravenclaw colors on the stairs directly behind the girls.

The triple-threat in playful decorative masks are blended in well among the jeering crowd surrounding them and the girls. However, Harry knows the excited bystanders are not simply for camouflage. They may not be intended targets, but Harry doesn’t discount the possibility that they may also become casualties of whatever this is.

“Watch out!” Hermione yells the same moment Harry feels the rising temperature burn the short hairs on the back of his neck. Without thinking, Harry feels the direction and angle of the rising heat behind him and rolls forward and off the stone disk as a quaffle-sized ball of fire nearly flays his entire backside. Despite the trail black smoke showering him, his left hand snatches the edge of the levitating disk, holding on as the crowd noisily ‘oohs’ at the near hit. The ball of flames strikes the invisible barrier a few feet above Harry with enough impact to nearly rupture his eardrums, making him woozy from the concussive reverberation.

Though a little hazy with a slight cough, Harry isn’t worried about himself as he effortlessly holds his weight with one hand gripping the edge using habitually developed strength from his physical conditioning. Nova, however, falls off his shoulder to the rocky terrain below. She manages to flap her wide dark wings before landing roughly on the hard ground. Harry can’t worry about her as he pulls himself back onto the platform. Looking a few feet above at the hissing white steam born of extreme heat meeting extreme cold, Harry wonders what more the protective barrier would stop from reaching the benches.

Unable to discreetly pull on Hermione’s scarf with wandless and wordless magic, Harry looks below him to survey Krum’s progress. To Harry, it feels as if Krum has been battling the dragon for half a day already before he returns his attention to the triple threat ahead. They’ve moved closer to the concerned Daphne, Hermione, Luna, and Tracey. Before there were five or so witches and wizards between this threat and his friends, now there are only three. At the mere implication of what these knife-wielders might do, Harry whips his white wand in hand.

The Hufflepuff offender brings up his right palm, instructing Harry to ‘hold on,’ as Harry notices the gray skin tone and sharp nails. Harry doesn’t retract his wand but he doesn’t move farther as the inhuman hand grabs his mask by its eye holes and lifts to reveal the long sharp nose and pitch black eyes of a Dark Goblin. It’s wide toothy grin instantly puts Harry on edge. Just then another wizard between the Goblin and Luna leaves, allowing the diminutive cut-throat to take an additional step toward her.

Harry’s eyes immediately burn brightly killer green, and the Goblin smiles, his tongue salivating its lips before sliding his mask down again. Harry easily takes in the magical makeup of the species and notes its pattern is different than Flitwick’s and very different from normal wizards. The reverberating charge is slower, yet heavier, giving Harry the impression of stone, and while the shape of all three cut-throats is similar, the Hufflepuff Goblin is clearly the strongest.

The Goblin moves a step away again, obviously showcasing how easy it would be to injure his friends. Unable to leave the arena and behind a barrier that even blocks non-threatening magic, Harry’s stuck, and they know it. The girls grow confused talking to one another about his sudden grimness and eyes, looking about as their imagination warns them of a possible threat from afar, completely missing the decoratively masked threat among them.

Thoughts of warning them are interrupted when a fourth masked Goblin in Slytherin colors suddenly appears behind the Hufflepuff Goblin, whispering something Harry only manages to hear as, “not here.” The Hufflepuff nods and brings its attention back on Harry. The Goblin slides up his mask enough to show its mouth, asking in a low voice, “can you hear me?” Harry simply nods.
“Wonderful,” it smiles before sliding down his mask again. In a low muffle, the Dark Goblin adds, “it saves one of your cherished females from the unavoidable pain of leaving you a message.”

“What message,” Harry speaks just as low.

Clearly, their ears aren’t just for show, as the Goblin responds, “where are your parents?”

“Doing laundry,” Harry casually lies, focusing on searching for an advantage.

“Of course, to answer me truthfully would be to submit and the eyes before me rage in clear defiance,” he says. He tilts his head and the Ravenclaw Goblin moves down a step closer to Daphne. It’s only one step but enough to constrict Harry’s chest painfully, elevate his heart rate like its been shoved in his throat and tightening his stomach like nausea before vomiting. “Defiance will cost you greatly, little wizard.”

“Who are you,” Harry tries to ask, thinking conversation is preferable to the alternative.

As he ponders a plan that doesn’t involve magic or leaving the arena, the Hufflepuff Goblin answers, “we are but shadows. Shadows have no name.”

“Than who should I thank for casting you?”

“… King Vorkalth,” The Hufflepuff Goblin answers.

“If you had intended on killing them, they would be dead,” Harry speaks, noticing the girls beginning to track Harry’s line of sight. “Ill-advised as that is, the fact that they’re not dead means you want something.”

“The lives of these female is at the mercy of your cooperation,” the Goblin responds. “The retched House of Flamel is well known among my kind, well researched. You each hide like insects beneath a decaying log, for decades if need be. It has been decided you must know of the consequences should your family decide to leave once more. That is why these witches and their families have value; your attention. For all that, we must also prove the metal of our word and four is unnecessarily many. One will die, little wizard. Before the day is out, I promise you-”

“You’re dark goblins,” Harry interrupts, though his voice is low, his aggression is palpable. Wondering what’s taking Krum so long, Harry continues, “I know enough to understand what your word means to you, to your kind. I’m no different, and I promise you any one of their lives is worth more than your entire race.” Harry can’t even feel the bone or flesh of his body, his lungs or thoughts. He is raw emotion, weightless of anything else but pure determination as his eyes glow the brightest green, reinforcing in words, “you harm them, in any way, I will murder every last one of you. I will reign down a Godly fucking pestilence of death upon you and yours should you even think proving the metal of your word matters any more than their lives.”

“One. Will. Die-”

“Than you all die,” Harry growls, marveling at how much information his eyes are taking in. Not only can he see temperature variations in the atmosphere and in everybody before him, but he can also infer magical atmosphere—the so-called residual magic—like color evaporating from red to blue. That doesn’t even compare to suddenly being able to see through clothes and even skin.

A large and impressive harmony of frightened gasps erupts from the crowd in such unison, Harry wonders if Krum was killed by the dragon, yet he doesn’t dare look away. Even if he won’t turn his view below him, his hyper-observant eyes register the faintest metallic mist of red that his mind somehow infers is blood. The Hufflepuff Goblin casually looks down a moment before returning
his attention on Harry. The Dark Goblin wasn’t the only one looking at him. Every pair of eyes were staring at him in frozen awe as the Goblin states, “I’m curious to learn if Phoenix can resurrect from within the acid stomach of a dragon. A never-ending cycle of life and rebirth inside the a dragon’s stomach.”

Though conceptually, Harry knows he’s saying the Chinese Fireball ate Nova, he continues to maintain ferocious eye contact. Daphne holds a crying Tracey close as Hermione hugs Luna. The crowd is so quiet, Harry can easily hear the crunch of bone underneath a strong jaw.

“Your eyes do not waver,” the Dark Goblin easily notes. “These feeble female mean more to you than the power of your legendary familiar?” The Goblin leans forward as if hoping Harry might answer; he doesn’t. “Mnn, yes, that is valuable intelligence to have.” After twelve seconds of distraught silence from the crowd at large, grunts from Krum, and shuffling of hard heavy mineral against a large dragon, a unanimous uproar erupts from half the stadium before Dumbledore is heard, “the battle was fierce and hard fought… and despite the awful, tragic death that has befallen the valiant Phoenix known as Nova, Viktor Krum has successfully retrieved his golden prize. The judges will take a moment before awarding the valiant Champion his points.”

Harry ignores the eyes on him for the true threat in the arena. As no one was expecting Dark Goblins to infiltrate Hogwarts, this team of cut-throats have no reason to be suspected. Without taking off their colorful masks, they’re slightly shorter than first years wearing school colors. Of course, calling out for help is a sure way to get any or all of his friends killed, and Harry still can’t leave the arena. In the same context, helping Krum and Fleur rush through their task wouldn’t matter against the few seconds these mercenaries need to kill all his friends. With his eyes, Harry can tell, these Goblins share his focus, his determination, his drive to see the mission done.

Harry’s best solution involves Daphne, Hermione, Luna, and Tracey learning of the threat and removing themselves from their grasp, but there’s no certainty the fourth Slytherin Goblin he saw disappear wouldn’t strike from an unseen position. It’s possibly Dobby can help but four assassins against a house-elf and his friends didn’t fill Harry with confidence. As if that wasn’t enough, Perenelle, Nicolas, and Draco aren’t able to help, not that they would be close enough to prevent injury or death if the Hufflepuff Goblin gives the order to execute his friends.

“Witches and Wizards, Ladies and Lords, Deputy Minister of the French Ministry, Minister Fudge,” Dumbledore starts, pausing so, Harry can only assume, to allow Fudge a wave before the Headmaster continues. “Marvelous category-five, wizard-killing beasts, with their ability to fly and breath fire, with hides strong enough to withstand most curses and charms, with razor sharp claws and teeth, and an innate intellect for battle, defeating a dragon by one's self is no small feat.”

‘Come on, you manipulative old windbag!’ Harry’s mind yells, feeling every second like a dragging ten. Dumbledore continues, “it takes a team of five dragon handlers or a single Master Dragon handler to maintain control over such astonishing magical creatures. Champion Krum's strategy involved…”

“Time will not assist you,” the Hufflepuff Dark Goblin states just above a whisper. “In truth, King Vorkalth cares not for your female. As gold is all what matters in your society, wizardkind are beneath him. The true Goblin King merely wishes your attention and this is how King Vorkalth felt your retched house deserved his introduction.”

“He might regret that,” Harry heatedly returns.

“Such spirit,” the Goblin returns lacking any esteem. “Perhaps you will be more receptive if I…” the Goblin turns his head a moment before the Gryffindor masked Goblin moves effortlessly beside Hermione.
Harry’s heart hops up to his throat as he groans to desperately state, “whatever you want will mean nothing if my mind breaks.” The Hufflepuff returns his attention to Harry and the Gryffindor Goblin stays his threat a few paces away, ready to listen. Harry continues, “I’ve lost far more than enough people in my life. My parents were murdered in front of me. All my friends were tortured and killed. I’ve lost so much, I’m at the point if I lose any more, I’m certain I’ll lose whatever sanity I have left. And instead of getting whatever it is you’re after, all you’ll gain is a homicidal psychopath with ridiculous Lord-level magic who will stop at nothing to track and kill every Dark Goblin on this planet. Look me in the eye, if you can stand it, and tell me I’m lying!”

Harry can’t imagine what his face looks like in all his frightened anger, however, a stillness grows between an analytical Goblin and the Green Reaper as Dumbledore ignorantly continues. “…and for Champion Krum’s ability to engage in fierce battle with a Chinese Fireball, Headmaster Karkaroff, Headmistress Maxime, Mr. Ludovic Bagman, Undersecretary Umbridge, and myself have all agreed to award his valor… forty points! Congratulations Champion Krum.”

In the rather glum cheering that follows, Harry assumes Krum is leaving as Charlie and his team set up the next dragon. As the moments above come and go at a standstill, below, the Welsh Green is brought in and set in place as Bagman explains the rules once again before introducing Fleur.

The Hufflepuff turns his body slightly, showing a speculative Luna his back as the Goblin continues, “your family has been in contact with the usurper, Ragnuk.”

“Basilisk venom,” Harry’s mind immediately voices aloud as all the men in the arena cheer and holler in unison, to which Harry infers Fleur has entered her match below. Harry doesn’t motion her in any way as she has a dragon to concentrate on and would be unable to help in any case. Harry did wonder if he can discreetly give her a message and his mind began working the variables.

“The venom is but a morsel of gold,” the Goblin muffles behind his mask. “We demand the mine.”

“I’ll tell you like we told Ragnuk,” Harry begins. “We don’t have a Basilisk.”

“King Vorkalth cares not for poultry bartering. His Majesty wishes you to know the depth of his conviction, and what may become of your cherished ones should your detestable family align with our enemies.”

“All this for venom,” Harry tries to stall, cognizant of Fleur’s battle with the Welsh green and the sliver of a chance he has to slipping her a message. “All for your wars. How do you think Ragnuk is going to react if we deal with you what we don’t have to give. We don’t want to be apart of your conflict.”

“Draco Malfoy,” the Hufflepuff Goblin recites in his muffled rasp. “Heir of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. Daphne Greengrass. Sister, Astoria Greengrass. Father, Jacobus Greengrass, businessman by trade. Hermione Granger, single child of weaker humans, Daniel and Charlotte Granger, orthodontists by trade. Tracey Davis, soon to be Black… if she lives, of course. Daughter of Sharon Davis and possible step-daughter of Sirius Black, Head Auror. Luna Lovegood, daughter of Xenophilius Lovegood, editor of the Quibbler by trade. French nationals, Fleur Delacour, and sister, Gabrielle Delacour. Half-Veela daughters of Apolline and Stéphane Delacour, Deputy Minister of the French Ministry of Magic. Hardwin Potter along with Fred, George, and Ginevra Weasley are the latest additions to your troupe, an act they will surely regret, for Molly and Arthur Weasley have much more to lose. Lily Potter head of House Potter, professor by trade. All close to you—to your family—all researched at length, all effortless to dispose of for your insolence. We do not barter boy. Dark Goblins will take what is ours by any means necessary. Your only choice is deciding how many lives must be sacrificed in advance of your inevitable submission.”
“I can see a lot with these eyes,” Harry tensely states, eying the Hufflepuff Goblin measuredly. He hasn’t had much practice with his exploratory vision but he’s noticed spike like that before when he was fighting Crouch. The Hufflepuff Goblin isn’t as intense nor is their pattern the same but that spike feels like it means anger and Harry needs more time. “You’re the strongest of the four but it seems you all rely heavily on nature’s magic. It seems to weave itself into the minimal magic of your body. You take it in and mold it for your use. It’s very physical, and oddly enough, your daggers are just as unique. Hogwarts teaches far less about Dark Goblins than they do normal ones."

“There is nothing normal about those duplicitous quislings,” The Hufflepuff practically spits, as Harry notes the spike, yet again. “You are speaking to the outliners, little wizard. What could you possibly know of us, spoken from the retched tyrants of those privileged butchers- ah, I meant bankers. Do not worry, your education is near. Dark Goblins will no longer accept designated scraps. We will take what is ours and kill all who oppose.”

“You think the venom is your way out; some sort of salvation,” Harry hypothesizes. “If you think anything is going to change for your people going about it like this—"

“What bolsters this false image, I wonder,” the Goblin cuts in with deadly resolve. “The trickle of light sputtering from your pitiful eyes? The single wizard you were unable to best in your Great Hall? The Acromantula you levitated over to safety? Or the females you saved from an intoxicated group of wizards? To be made fatuous by your own hubris and yet you could not save your own familiar from the jaws of a dragon, you cannot keep your female from our daggers, and your life is most certainly at my mercy. You are delusional and thus cannot bring my King what he desires.”

Falling deeper in shaky panic, Harry’s knuckles grow white holding his wand so tightly as he dreads what this might mean for his friends. He needs more time. “I wonder if your parents would be most receptive should they learn we are responsible for snuffing the spirit from your body.”

“You’re welcome to try,” Harry tells him when a rising heat. Unlike the Chinese Fireball, the Welsh Green’s fire is speared straight in his direction. Longer than a ball of fire, steady like pressurized stream of flames shot faster than he can move, Harry barely has times to roll forward before half the levitated stone disk is chard black. The sizzling white smoke and gas choke Harry’s lungs as the surrounding radius of the laser fire-spit—along with his whole body—is engulfed in toxic white smoke. Hand gripping the edge of the stone platform, Harry magically floats to the left and out of the nauseating gas.

Not one to waste any little opportunity, he magically scribes, ‘Hurry. Danger. Friends.’ on the bottom of the half-chard stone keeping Harry in the air. Finally looking below him, Harry uses his free hand to attack the Welsh Green with the steam as cover. ‘Fleur needs to win now,’ his mind yells as he observes the dragon lose interest in him to attack Fleur again. Though his normal spectrum of visibility is obscured by smoke and ocular soreness, some higher spectrum of visibility allows him to x-ray the mass of joints between the dragon’s wings as a possible point of disability. With his free hand, Harry sends a quick and silent ‘Depulso,’ to the center-mass of the dragon.

For the benefit of the Goblins, Harry feigns some struggle to get back on the platform, thinking, whether he hit the Welsh Green or not, it was his only shot. Harry’s muscles spasm while kneeling on the platform on knee and foot, coughing real specks of blood on his forearm. His eyes are heavily irritated and his throat feels as if it’s blistering patulously. Ignoring his pain, Hermione, Daphne, Tracey, and Luna have now noticed they are surrounded by small masked, cloaked figures.

“Lord of Magic indeed, little wizard,” Harry hears with a slight amount of humor in the muffled voice. “It would appear your female have become wise to their predicament.” Sensing his
magically enhanced body engage in repairing the damage, Harry inhales and exhales slowly as he observes the girls arrange themselves back-to-back-to-back with Luna in the center and all their wands were drawn. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry’s thankful they don’t make it obvious as causing a panic could injure the innocent students around them. Harry can hear them quietly talk amongst themselves, quickly reaching the conclusion they’re Goblins.

“Not so dim-witted female,” the Hufflepuff goblin comments, turning to Tracey through the crowd, and raising a sharp-nailed finger to the mask where lips would be, stating clearly, she should not alert anyone. A booming cheer from around him feels celebratory in nature and Harry’s theory Fleur retrieved her egg is confirmed with Dumbledore’s magically amplified voice.

“Congratulations to Champion Dela- One moment, Miss Delacour- Champion Delacour, you must remain to hear your points!”

Harry couldn’t help the weak smile spread his liquid red lips. ‘She got the message,’ his minds reasons with a heavy urge to take her in his arms and kiss her to death. Harry doesn’t question the perverse joy behind that gratitude as Dumbledore informs the crowd, “the judges will take a moment to deliberate Champion Delacour’s score as the team of dragon handlers prepare the arena for our third champion.”

“I do believe you, Ares Flamel,” the Hufflepuff Goblin asserts. “Pitiful as your kind is, the pain of your eyes mirrors my own. That is how I know you will be of no use to my King as you are.” A hair-raising, air-vibrating, guttural screech blares throughout the arena, resurfacing a distant memory for Harry; one of youthful panic and irrational doubt. “The strongest of the four,” the Hufflepuff comments still facing a wand-drawn Tracey with a calm stature, letting Hogwarts students easily pass around him as if completely unconcerned by the fifteen-year-old witch. The Gryffindor Goblin faces Hermione, while the Ravenclaw faces Daphne and Luna is in the center of the three.

“Though she was not injured in a near flawless strategy, due to unauthorized interference by Champion Flamel, Champion Delacour has earned thirty-five points. A ten point deduction that must also be subtracted from Champion Flamel’s final tally.” The male ‘boos’ harmonize throughout the entire stadium of seats. Dumbledore takes a few moments to settle the zealous youths, before informing all, “after speaking with our dragonologists and Care of Magical Creatures professor Hagrid, it remains unknown if the brave Phoenix, Nova can be saved, however, do not lose hope. While they continue their collective efforts, we must now look to the third participant of this tournament, Champion Ares Flamel!”

“If it crossed your mind this would help you free your female, your plan was for naught. I have waited for this moment,” the Hufflepuff goblin states in it’s covered voice, still focused on Tracey and the others. “With your death, your parents will know the true extent of our commitment and the only course available to them—yielding the basilisk to us. Look at your female, little wizard. Look,” he insists and Harry tilts his head minutely. He still appreciates their formation and if they can hold the Goblins off, he might have a chance of saving them.

“Intelligent female within your Hogwarts, surely worthy mates among your kind. Consider their lives, their clans’ lives, their futures. If you wish for them to remain unharmed, you will retract your wand. You will descend to the arena below, walk to the Hungarian Horntail and you will allow it to kill you. If you do not, if you continue to aggrandize your false strength as you wheeze and bleed before me, we will murder these female and disappear before it is known what has happened.”

With little choice, Harry asks the only thing he could think of, “what’s your name?”

“The dead have no need.”
“Humor me,” Harry interrupts. “For the pain we share.”

“…Týr,” the Goblin answers.

The dragon below blasts another volley of ear-piercing shriek before Dumbledore speaks, “with the sound of the canon, the third Champion—” BOOM, canon fire cuts Dumbledore off.

Týr promises, “If you continue to live in ten seconds, they die in eleven.”

With no other option, Harry stands up, observing the alert unease in his friend’s faces as he slowly descends away. The edge of the railing his friends are pressed against rises in his view as he lowers himself to the large feral dragon waiting below. Landing on the cold dirt and stone floor, he retracts his wand into his holster. His brilliant green eyes remain on Tracey, Daphne, Luna, and Hermione, cornered by Týr and his crew as Harry feels the magical warmth of the large, winged reptilian-oven circle him slowly, skeptical of how easy his prey is behaving…though not for long. From behind him, he hears a crushing stomp of its left winged limb, then its right winged limb. The heavily horned head of the dragon rears back, preparing a strong concentrated blast of fire when Harry finally spots a shiny wisp of long golden-white hair racing from the left of the stadium through the crowd toward Hermione and the others.

‘She’s too far,’ he reasons, easily analyzing the distance in the remaining moment before the dragon bellows intensely heated dragon fire. The three Goblins need only a second to kill as opposed to the seven seconds Fleur needs to get close enough to save. ‘She’s too far… but they’re smart. They’re smart and you have to trust them.’ The old image of Hermione’s crying face pleading for him to trust them crowds his rational self-sacrifice, and though it makes him feel sick to the pit of his stomach to believe in anything resembling faith, he ignores the credible threat to his friends lives for the slim chance the consequences won’t end how it appears. Despite the stone melting fire blasting out of the dragon's mouth, already scalding the air around him, or the conclusive threat to his loved ones Týr is sure to see through, Harry disobeys. He disobeys the Goblins clear demands, risking his friend's lives to speak the name, “Nova.”

Fierce fire by Dragon crashes violently against extraordinary fire by Phoenix. No one could tell which murderous flame belongs to which majestic creature as Nova flares brilliantly on Harry’s shoulder made completely of mesmerizing fire. Craning her neck out of stretched-out wings, the claws latched on her master remodels his life-sustaining blood, heart, muscle, bone, brain, and sinew into pure flame. Surrounded by, and made of fire, Harry registers the feeling of freedom, of complete satisfaction, of weightlessness. With his flaming Phoenix on his flaming shoulder, Harry felt perfect in existence and could not burn with more of what was. Dragon fire couldn’t harm him any more than it could harm ordinary fire. Nova’s long and piercing caw was triumphant throughout the arena, unwavering, demanding, full of rage, and Harry felt her power like he was bred to feel nothing else.

The dragon’s horizontal tower of flames relented, and out of the thick, dark plumes of choking smoke and searing white steam of rapidly cooling air, Harry and his Phoenix step forward unharmed, red-orange fire spewing out of every pour like a strong waterfall, only racing to the skies instead of the cold ground. With soot whipping around in the cold Scottish winds, the Horntail seemed confused as to his prey’s state of living, craning and turning its head. It was enough time—enough of a total distraction—for the dragon, for the witches, the wizards, and the goblin-assassins for Luna to vanish the railing in front of her before grabbing Hermione and Tracey by their cloaks, and pulling hard, leaving Hermione to grab Daphne as they all fall over and through the invisible protective barrier toward the stony ground below.

The goblins were fast, nearly on them with gleaming daggers before their legs can clear the edge,
when a ‘Protego,’ by Daphne is shattered by a descending dagger from the Ravenclaw Goblin and a ‘Reducto!’ from Fleur strikes the wood railing nearest the Gryffindor Goblin, splattering splinters of wood into the colorful mask. Harry barely has time to notice the Goblins promptly disapparate as the girls quickly approach the ground at terminal speed. With wandless magic, Harry arrests their disastrous momentum before the two seconds it takes to reach the hard stone below are up, though Harry’s casting is interrupted when Nova flames them away, narrowly avoiding the Hungarian Horntail’s spiked tail swipe.

Nova flames near to the girls as they hit the ground hard with horrible lung-upending grunts. He had managed to slow them, though the meaty thud he heard told him it wasn’t enough to remain unharmed. Once again of flesh and bone, Harry calls, “Hermione?” He runs to them, calling out, “are you okay?” Nova still on his shoulder, he hears them groan painfully as they struggle to get off of one another. “Luna, Daphne, Tracey?” Before he can ascertain their physical wellbeing, Harry feels rising heat all around him, alerting him a second or two before deadly dragon fire ambushes them. Absolutely fed up with the stupid beast, Harry summons his death-white wand with a flick of his wrist and turns to a powerful roar of incoming spiraling flame.

Though fatal fire floods his vision, Harry calmly speaks, “Sineaere.”

Every bit of dragon fire from the tip of the fire spear all the way back to the Horntail’s maw suffocates to sickly blue wisps before disappearing entirely, to then be replaced by rising steam. Taking the very oxygen out of the air with a choking curse, the fatal dragon fire simply evaporates as the crowd ‘whoos,’ but Harry’s anger isn’t nearly satisfied as he then banishes the large dragon with enough force to propel the shrieking creature to the other end of the arena. With Harry’s demanding anger, the poultry charm keeping the egg from being summoned couldn’t resist his strength as the egg answers his wand’s call and flies straight to Harry’s hand, ending his first task.

He drops the egg in favor of checking on his friends. They’re on their feet, he’s relieved to see, lined side-by-side. A grimaced Luna on one leg, leaning heavily on Hermione for support, Hermione holding her left forearm to her chest, Tracey bleeding from her forehead with a swelling left eye, and Daphne applying pressure to a cut on the side of her head, reddening her frazzled blond hair. With his magic-sight, he can clearly see the distress in their magic from their physical pain. He can see fear, of a sort. Not truly terrified for the near end of their lives but the fear of dangerous discovery, of the way the world continues to expand from worrying about school grades to worrying about being collateral damage in a Death Eater or Acromantula attack, to worry of becoming the target of a Goblin assassination squad. In a short few months, these girls have experienced an increase in danger that took him at least four years to truly appreciate.

‘They still haven’t lost anyone,’ a voice in his mind states, acutely understanding what challenge like that can feel like. ‘And I won’t let them know that pain…….’ His death-curse green eyes widen as realization has him yell, “fuck!” It wasn’t just Hermione, Luna, Daphne, and Tracey Týr threatened. Certainly, the Dark Goblin believed it would be one of them to die, if not Harry himself, but he didn’t just threaten his close friends—and Draco—the Dark Goblin threatened their families as well. Anyone close to him or the House Flamel who is loved enough to instill terrible grief at their loss…

“Ares,” a confused Hermione calls as Harry scans each of them wondering aloud, “who would it be? Who would it be?” Luna’s father, Tracey’s mother, possibly Sirius, though he should be safer at the ministry than, say, Daphne’s father, or, “Hermione’s parents,” he reasons.

“What?” Hermione asks, as he accepts muggles would be the easiest targets to yield just as devastating hurt. Yet even still, Mr. And Mrs. Granger aren’t the only ones in danger. “What about my parents?” Hermione asks moving forward.
With intrepid fear, Harry realizes it’s been nearly two minutes since the Goblins disapparated. ‘That’s a lifetime,’ he angrily yells at himself for being so stupid. Týr may not have hurt one of his friends, but that doesn’t mean everyone is safe. Hermione looks at him with a mix of pain and worry as he realizes he’s never been to her house... ever.

Entering his perfect recall, Harry realizes he’s never actually asked about her parents in any meaningful way. He knows they’re dentists and they don’t understand or approve of some of the wizarding world’s backward methods of living. The only other time he saw them is in his timeline when they placed their heads on the wall of heads. If it can be seen as fortunate, he was spared being forced to view the memory of their gruesome death as they felt simply telling him was enough.

Harry vaguely wonders why it is he never asked to know more about the parents that raised one of his best friends as he quickly asks her, “Hermione, I need you to think carefully about where your parents might be at this exact moment. Do it now!” Harry ignores her for the other three, and those he cares for in the stands. Feeling the dread at the pit of his stomach double in weight at the thought that time may have already ended for someone, Harry whips around to the interested crowd above.

Catching a smirking Fleur straight above, Harry magically amplifies his voice, unnecessarily yelling, “Fleur!” stunning her in the process. His croaky voice or the graveness within his tone catches everyone not expecting it off-guard. “Get to your family, now! It’s not over!” Painfully clearing his toxic-burned throat, Harry scans the shaded bleachers and though he’s worried by Dumbledore’s absence, he focuses on an alert Stéphane Delacour, calling out, as Fleur runs toward them, “Stéphane... protect your family!”

Finding a concerned Lily Potter with Remus, Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny, Harry yells, “Lily, get to Hardwin! Stay with him! Remus, contact Sirius. Tell him to get Tracey’s mum... bring her here. She’s not safe.” By now most of the crowd is actively panicking as Tracey worriedly asks from behind Harry, “what about my mum? Ares?”

Despite the blistering pain in his aching throat, Harry continues, looking directly at Arthur, “Mr. Weasley, Bill, make sure all of yours are safe!” Over the clamor of rushing students and adults, Harry can’t spot Professor McGonagall, and so he yells with excessive amplitude, “EVERYBODY CALM DOWN!” Many wince at the pain of the sound, none more than Harry as his mouth and throat feel like it’s blistering and bleeding. “If you want to stay safe... stay here and shut up! Professor McGonagall? Professor McGona-” She rushes through some students to the railing to which his hoarse voice continues, “I need you... to find Luna’s father, Xenophilius. He’s in danger. Bring him here!”

Hermione moves in front of him, pleading worry in her eyes. When she spies the blood leaking from his nose and down the corners of his mouth, she wipes it with her cloak as he asks her, regardless of the Soronus, “do you know... where your parents might be?”

She nods her head answering, “their practice is closed on Saturdays. They like to go to old bookshops.”

He only nods, turning to the crowd once more and finding Astoria with the other Slytherins, speaking only, “Nova.” His Phoenix flames to Daphne’s sister, and flames right back with the eleven-year-old. Daphne is right on them as he wonders about how to reach her father. Limited on time, he takes Hermione’s hand in his as he addresses the crowd. “If anyone can get ahold of Jacobus Greengrass... let him know he’s in danger... and needs to come here immediately.”

Harry immediately flames away, landing in the waiting room of Flamel’s London townhouse.
Harry clears his throbbing and thick throat before he informs her, “we’re in Nic and Nelle’s townhouse… in Kensington-”

“Kensington is thirty minutes south of Hampstead,” Hermione quickly tells him.

“Lots of open space… right? Big and Little Wood?” At Hermione’s nod, Harry takes her hand. “Will you let me… enter your mind?” Harry takes a couple breath as she nervously voices her thoughts without filter. “Because we don’t have time for flying, I can’t apparate, you’ve never been there, and if we don’t get there now you think my parents will be killed? Yes, yes! I trust you-”

Harry places his soot-covered hand on her warm forehead and immediately sees a vision of a young Hermione, with large teeth and a round, cactus hay of fluffy hair, looking out the window of a bookstore at children playing before turning and spotting her parents exactly where they’ve been standing for the past thirty minutes, quietly reading large books and completely oblivious of the world around them. Harry feels a little of Hermione’s longing to go out into the world when he exits her detail-oriented mind. Harry immediately flames them to the alley beside the bookstore.

“On the roof,” Harry commands his familiar as he follows after a running Hermione. The second Nova’s claws leave his body, Harry feels even worse than he imagined. Still, he ignored the familiarity of the pain as he enters the quaint little bookshop, hearing Hermione call out, “mum! Dad!” They ignore the attention they’re drawing by the rudeness of their calls and the odd manner of their dress. Harry, in particular, looks filthy caked in sweat, soot, and bleeding from nose and mouth.

“Miss Granger,” calls someone who appears to work there.

Hermione rushed to the elderly man, asking, “Mr. Gershaw, have you seen my parents today? Did they come by?”

Quirking a curious eye from Harry to Hermione, the nearly dead man asks, “Ought’ you be in yer boarding school, little lady-”

“Mr. Gershaw!” she frantically interrupts. “Have you seen them?!”

“Aye, I have,” he promptly answers in surprise, placing a shaky hand on his chest. “We didn’t have what they were hoping fer-”

Hermione immediately runs out of the shop, pushing a couple out of the way, explaining when Harry catches up with her, “whenever they don’t have a book mum’s waiting on, dad treats her to ice-cream two blocks from here.” The pair sprint flat out for two blocks, Nova flying high overhead, when they come upon an ambulance by the ice-cream parlor with a small crowd of muggles watching in worry. Harry can barely keep up with Hermione. Pushing through the paramedic, and rounding the back of the large medical transport vehicle, Hermione finds her parents talking to the officers.

“Mum!” a winded Hermione calls, wiping her face of tears and snapping their attention on her as she rushes to them. Hermione wraps her arms around the stunned parents. Breathing painfully heavy, Harry uses the reprieve to surveil the crowd for threats, forming an image in his mind using the banged-up bicycle, the slightly dented car and the fact that Hermione’s parents don’t have a cup of ice-cream in their hands. ‘They were delayed and didn’t make the shop,’ he reasons.

Harry peers over the crowd toward the alleys between stone buildings. Out of the four points of possible attack, the little hairs on the back of Harry’s neck only rise at the ominous nature of one, but without his magic-sight, Harry can’t be sure. Despite no obvious signs of a Goblin threat, he
turns to Hermione, who’s explaining a bit of her presence to her parents.

“Hermione,” his voice cracks as he calls with urgency, feeling far too exposed in the open. Harry spits out some blood as Hermione drags her mother by the arm, her father following closely.

“Honey, please,” Daniel starts. “You’re causing a scene. And who taught you to leave without completing an official statement?”

“More importantly, your friend needs medical attention,” Charlotte points out, looking at the bleeding, greasy, soot-covered boy.

“We can’t stay here,” Hermione tells them grabbing her father’s hand as well. “Please, you have to trust me. We need to go, now!”

Wand in hand, Harry moves the opposite direction of that particular alley, searching for some privacy to flame back to Hogwarts. With the accident and the ruckus they’ve caused, Harry and Hermione attracted too much attention, forcing the group down the street and away from witnesses. Turning into the first bare alley, Harry calls Nova. Hearing the low whistle of his diving Phoenix, however, didn’t distract him from the barely audible padding of small feet landing on the moist ground. Harry yells, “take them,” to his familiar as he blocks the heavy thrust of a dagger to his left side from an incredibly fast Goblin with his, “Protego!”

With his magic-sight activating, Harry notes its speed as close to instant in near amazement as their special dagger which easily cut through the shield like a hot knife through butter. Despite the blade, Harry didn’t allow his shield to burst like one might when they feel it be destroyed, however, from the Goblin’s sleeve, a smaller, black knife is flicked into its hand a second before the assassin hurls it at his best friend. Hermione’s stunned surprise doesn’t match the absolute horror Harry feels at the panic of possibly losing her for a second time. At the fatal shock of her chocolate brown eyes as it narrows on the messenger of her death, Harry’s heart stops with a jolt as he stretches his free hand, begging with his pained soul and monster magic, ‘Anyone but her!’

The knife slows just as Hermione yells “Protego!” Her shield wraps around the knife, stopping it inches from her chest.

‘Expulso,’ Harry mentally yells, narrowing his sudden hatred on destroying this Goblin. The Goblin disapparates as the airy whistle of his Phoenix ends with an abrupt scream from Hermione’s mother and a flash of light when Nova flames away with all three Grangers. Reading magical atmospheric readings with his flaring magic-sight, he senses a fluctuation behind him a moment before he’s attacked. The Goblin is right on him and again, astounding him by how fast they move, leaving him with little choice but to go wide and wordlessly banish everything behind him; trash cans, the garbage within, rocks, weeds, puddle water, and the Goblin that nearly sticks Harry in his liver with its dagger.

Nova returns in a bright flash of fire, clutching at him before flaming back to Hogwarts. They land inside the stone covered arena of the first task and Harry drops to one knee. Feeling better with Nova’s anesthetic talons clutching his shoulder, he takes note of a very large gathering. On one side, the Delacours, the Potters, the Weasleys—absent Arthur and Bill—Luna, who’s holding his egg, a very worried Tracey, and Daphne comforting a distraught Astoria, are listening, talking, or arguing to the other side of the group; Minister Fudge, Umbridge, Lucius, Maxime, Bagman, Snape, Flitwick, Moody, Lockhart, and Sprout. Lily—with Hardwin right behind her—is talking to the Grangers while Pomfrey is tending to Luna’s leg.

Upon his flashy entrance, Moody, Snape, Fudge, Umbridge, Bagman, Stéphane rush him, asking the most obvious questions, “what is going on here,” “why are wizards in danger,” “what is the
threat,” “are we still in danger,” “is this a a foolhardy attempt of a prank, young man,” all at the same time. At least Stéphane asks if he’s alright. Having suffered far worse many times before, Harry simply nods.

“Can’t you see he’s hurt?” Harry hears Hermione yell from beside him and Harry is flooded with uncontrollable relief, easily ignoring all the adults in favor of his best friend’s second near death in the space of minutes. Harry takes her in his strong arms, desperate to hold her flush against him, simply to physically assure his unstable mind that, ‘She’s safe!’ With her profile pressed against his, he feels his eyes heat over at the sensation of her comforting soft warmth, he simply repeats, ‘she’s safe,” as the steady rhythm of her strong heartbeat settles him.

“I’m safe, Ares,” she repeats in a whisper and he realizes he’s so messed up, he was mumbling loud enough for her to hear. “I’m safe,” she repeats, pressing further into the side of his face with her own. After another couple of moments, Harry settles enough, abruptly clearing his throat when he recalls where they are and takes a step back. Looking into her large grateful eyes, he ignores his pain for the vivid memory of hers, vowing for the millionth time to keep her safe, when they’re interrupted by a brilliant flash of light and fire behind him.

Harry turns around to the meet the most renowned wizard of their time, Albus Dumbledore, looking wrathful from the heavily etched, aggrieved wrinkles on his angered face to the hostile posture of his squared shoulder and tight fists. With a red hot Phoenix on his shoulder and the Elder wand in hand, the Headmaster levels Harry with oppressive accusation. “You’ve stolen an item which does not belong to you.” The old man’s voice was low but fierce, an ability matched eerily well by Horcrux-Voldemort.

Unfazed by the strongest wizard of their age holding the strongest wand ever made, Nova flaps her long black wings twice from upon his shoulder as Harry, wandlessly and wordlessly, heightens the volume of his raspy voice for all in the arena to hear. “Are you honestly accusing me of theft now?” The sound easily carries throughout the bevy of magical-kind, causing all who hadn’t seen Dumbledore’s entrance to focus on them. From as high as the Minister of Magic to as low as the first year witches and wizards, all were paying attention. If Dumbledore expected the entire arena to hear Harry speak, he didn’t show it, nor did he reply and so Harry continues, effortlessly driven by the near loss of his best friend, his pent up rage, and historic resentment. “And while we’re at it, where the bloody hell have you been?”

“I do not answer to you, young man,” Dumbledore returns, his voice only carrying to those adults a few paces behind Harry. “Let’s dispense with the games—”

“Have you even heard what’s happened in the last twenty minutes,” Harry wheezes. “How four of your students were nearly killed—”

Dumbledore takes a sharp step forward, eyes still fixed in righteous indignation as he rasps, “your pride has now and truly seen to your demise. I’ve seen it before—”

“‘My pride—’ How’s it possible you can be this blind,” Harry’s magically magnified voice interrupts, projecting with absolute clarity throughout the entire arena. It’s obvious Dumbledore isn’t going to use Soronus to speak over Harry, who—though he hadn’t asked for it—takes full advantage of the power of the public. “Under your watch, four of your students were being targeted by assassins.” He takes a grating breath willing the pain away as he adds, “not a hundred feet away from the most revered wizard alive, a whole section of your students could’ve been just as injured as my friends. Do you reckon I enjoyed watching Hermione, Luna, Daphne, and Tracey being held hostage while these assassins demanded I sacrifice my life to save theirs? Please explain to me how this item you're accusing me of stealing is more important than their lives? Better still, did you
even notice the danger?”

Though upright and square-shouldered, Harry can’t detect a shred of remorse or even reconsideration, grating Harry to further yell, “do you even know how many ways this could’ve gone to complete shite? If Fleur hadn’t been there in time, four of your students could’ve died! If Luna, Daphne, Tracey, and Hermione weren’t so smart, weren’t so perceptive, they never would’ve noticed the assassins hidden in plain sight and they could have died! If I trusted you to keep your word and take that magical binding off of Nova’s leg—the binding you put there without my consent that prevents her from flaming—she would’ve never been able to save my life, and I wouldn’t have been able to catch my friends, who threw themselves into a dragon pit to avoid being killed by assassins!”

The vexing aggravation is boiling and Harry’s green eyes can only see red. He couldn’t pretend to have any self-control as he yells even with a magically amplified voice, “who the bloody hell are you?! Because you’re certainly NOT this benevolent, magnanimous, humanitarian that I’ve been led to believe. No, no, the Dumbledore Nicolas was friends with wouldn’t have used their precious stone to house bait for Dark Lords in a place where children bloody live! Nicolas spoke to me of a man who would’ve had the conscious of mind and more importantly, the presence of heart to realize that something about my behavior was off, and students may be in imminent danger. The Dumbledore Perenelle told me about would’ve noticed the difference between an old friend he hired to teach children and a bloody Death Eater who nearly killed them! Perenelle described a wizard who would’ve stopped at nothing to make sure ALL his students were safe from harm. Imagine my utter disappointment when I finally met this celebrated wizard, this savior of the innocent, this- this beacon of light who champions for the greater fucking good.”

Harry’s past bleeds through his venting speech like the blood from his blistering mouth and nothing matters as sheer frustration, decades of pent up resentment, and aggravation yells at this Dumbledore what he only wished he could have at the previous one. “What the bloody hell is the matter with you?! Why am I constantly fixing your mistakes?! Why do you seem to think you know better than everyone around you when your manipulative ineptitude is constantly forcing a boy to do your fucking job?! How much longer are you going to make me put up with your bullshite?! I’m tired! I’M TIRED!! …And I don’t want to do this!” he heaves terribly taking a moment to collect the strength to add, “but what choice do I have? What choice is there for any of us when you’ve made absolute certain only the ‘Great Albus Dumbledore’ is in any real position of strength and knowledge to save us all? What choice are you leaving us when it’s either wait for Dumbledore, or die? You want control over my life, well I’m telling you here and now, YOU CAN’T FUCKING HAVE IT!”

Despite the magically amplified deep breathing of a green-eyed Slytherin, with the number of witches and wizards, young and old, the stillness in the arena was unbelievable, like a muggle photograph. It simply didn’t make sense that wheezing breathing could be the only source of a sound, outdoors, with dragons near, for a single second let alone the ten that pass painfully slow. Dumbledore and Harry stare at one another intently without waver, until Dumbledore shares in his normal tone of voice. “Expect you and I to continue this later.”

Normalizing his own volume of voice, Harry hoarsely retorts, “with words or wands, Headmaster. Anytime.”
As I was not anticipating life's little curve ball, I did write about a third of the next chapter, so whenever I finish with this personal matter, it shouldn't take me too long to update again.

I'm a little nervous about this chapter. In my mind, I'm thinking I gotta top the crouch fight, top the acromantula attack, but I honestly couldn't think of how to top it. It was different because no one was expecting the Crouch fight or the acromantula. The First Task felt like the expectation was there and had to be raised. So this is what I came up with. It will help with some of my other plans for the future as well.

Also, I would imagine choking isn't too muggle for magicals, so there more than likely is a choking curse, if for nothing else, than erotic asphyxiation. so I invented the charm which of course you read as Sineaere. In Latin it's Sine Aere, meaning without air.

Also, Patulous is a word. It means expand. Patulously is not a word. I invented it :)

Thanks for reading and taking the time to support with your lovely/helpful comments. Sorry I've been lagging with the replies, it's just been a very busy week. Have a great one,

--Grae
King of the Monsters

Chapter Summary

Monsters are real. They live inside me. And sometimes they win.

Chapter Notes

Friends, From Ruin is back!

I am deeply sorry for the unforgivably long break. I truly had no intentions of staying away from this fic for as long as I did. For those following my other story, you know I had been writing the story The Last Prayer like a madman. That plot bunny may as well have been crack for a writer because I couldn't put it down. For those that don't know, when I took a break from writing From Ruin, I started writing a Naruto fanfiction called The Last Prayer. Since March of this year till last month, I stuffed over 300K words into that story. Craziness.

Even though I love writing the Last Prayer, with every passing week, I was missing FR more and more. I won't lie to you guys. It was very difficult to get back in the groove of writing FR. After writing TLP for so many months, I'd just forgotten the flow, character motivations, etc, so it took some time to get back in that head space, but I managed it. So from now on, I'm going to alternate updating both stories.

This chapter takes place immediately after the previous chapter. So, Harry just finished chewing Dumbledore out. Many have expressed totally valid points that Harry if facing too many obstacles and while I agree it's a lot for a person to take, that's sort of the point. I just want to let you know that it's all to plan.

11K for those who like to know. And without further ado, enjoy!

Dumbledore walks around the heaving Harry, calling for Madam Pomfrey to tend to him as Harry mentally thanks Nova and the Elixir for easing much of the fiery pain webbing from his nose down to his sternum as well as the hot, thick throbbing from the wound in his left hand. The elder wizard is quickly met by the throng of professors, officials, and judges. With Harry's enhanced ears he hears Fleur, Snape, Lily, and Flitwick inform the other judges, Lucius Malfoy, the Minister, Fleur's father Stéphane, and Dumbledore of what they know as Pomfrey rushes to Harry. He allows her to tend to his wounds as he waits for Dumbledore to get the full scope of what's known thus far, and waiting for the final piece of the puzzle that can only be provided by the elder wizard.

“Rita Skeeter is writing up a storm up there,” Daphne notes walking beside him, holding Astoria’s hand and eying the shady reporter under the shaded bleachers. “Coercion, attempt of murder, assassins, all under Dumbledore’s nose… you've dropped some major revelations I’m more than certain Governor Lucius Malfoy will request to be investigated.”
“Should keep him busy for a while,” Harry hoarsely mumbles as Tracey, Hardwin, and Luna join him and Hermione.

“Daphne’s saying our families are in danger,” Tracey starts. “Can you get my mother, Ares? Please? I reckon I know where she is.”

Hardwin tells a worried Tracey with some exasperation, “Mum already said she talked to Uncle Sirius using the two-way—”

“Then why aren’t they here yet,” she yells back.

“They’ll be here,” Daphne reassures her friend, still holding Astoria.

“At least tell me Draco’s okay,” Tracey asks.

“He’s fine, Tracey,” Harry answers as Sirius, Sharon Davis, Amelia Bones, Alice Longbottom, Nicolas, and Perenelle rush through the entrance. Amelia Bones and Alice Longbottom move toward the Minister and Dumbledore while Sirius, Sharon, Nicolas, and Perenelle rush over to Harry and his group. Tracey runs straight to her mother and the two women hug each other fiercely before Sirius envelops them both protectively.

At the sight of Harry being tended by Madam Pomfrey, Perenelle brings her wand out to assist examining and treat his injuries as Nicolas asks, “are you okay?”

“I’ve had worse,” Harry croaks when Madam Pomfrey leaves Harry to Perenelle’s care while she tends to the mass of startled children.

“Don’t remind me,” Perenelle mutters before adding, “and stop talking.” After a moment, she asks for the shrunken trunk around his neck, to which he acquiesces so she can take out the potions she needs.

While Hermione speaks in private with her worried parents, Harry turns to Luna, still holding his egg and Daphne, holding Astoria’s hand. Though Luna doesn’t look overly worried, certain her unorthodox mind is helping her cope, Harry doesn’t like how close one of best friends is to losing another parent. In his timeline, she was one of the few who truly understood him and it was a morbid connection that always endeared her to him.

“I’m sure… he’ll be… fine,” Harry manages to tell Luna, his voice nearly gone.

“I’ll be quite relieved if he is,” Luna slowly states. “I imagine finding him will be just as difficult for us as it will be for the Goblins. He’s on an expedition in the forests of Sweden, you see, and Crumple-horned Snorkacks are notoriously elusive.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry croaks.

“I know,” Luna nods, staring at him without a shred of ill-will or accusation. “But you oughten be. It’d be foolish to lay the blame at your feet simply because others are trying very hard to kill you.” His airy snort is his only response before she ponders aloud, “I hope you don’t mind my holding your egg. I feel dangerously close to learning if the egg came before the chicken.” Feeling eternally grateful for Luna’s presence in his life, Harry simply nods.

Practically adhered to her protective sister, Astoria was upset and Daphne was unreadable, prompting Harry to conjure a short bird-stand beside the first year. As always, Nova needs no verbal command to understand her master and flaps her midnight wings twice before landing on the stand, easily matching the bonny blond’s height. At the divine creature’s calming song,
Daphne’s stoic countenance finally cracks, not by much, but enough for her. The crystal blue of her eyes gloss over, her brows knit together, and her pink lips press into a line as she stares at her green-eyed savior with the most minute expression of gratitude. One of the worst anguish a person can suffer is being powerless as one waits for news of heart-aching tragedy. Sympathetic to what she’s going through, Harry nods.

As the forlorn Grangers join them, Perenelle hands Harry two vials then cleans off the dried blood from the lower half of his face. Harry groans in relief when the first vial both heats then cools the bleeding sores in his mouth and throat. Closing his eyes, he hums as the pain from acid-shredded muscle in his throat begins to recede. Drinking the second vial, Harry recognizes the taste of the Elixir and turns to her with a questioning brow, as if to say, ‘I wasn’t dying this time. Why the Elixir?’

With a bored expression, she shrugs, answering, “with you? Just covering my bases.”

“Actually,” Nicolas wearily starts, eying the elixir nervously. “Uh, there’s been a sudden issue I feel- well, it’s a delicate matter we should discuss.” The legendary alchemist looks nervously between Harry and Perenelle’s confused faces when the Weasleys break from arguing with Lily and Flitwick to walk straight to Harry’s group, prompting Nicolas to finish, “as soon as we’re able.”

Harry shrinks his storage trunk before clasping it to his chain necklace as Molly leads Charlie, his younger brothers, minus Percy, who stays beside Fudge, and Ginny. The Weasley matriarch eyes them all, from Hermione and her frazzled parents to Daphne and Astoria hugging Nova, to Tracey and her mother Sharon, to a seated Luna looking intently at the golden egg on her lap, to Harry, Nic, and Nelle.

“Mum,” George calls, spurning the protective mother on to speak to Nicolas and Perenelle. “Mr. and Mrs. Flamel, I’m hearing all sorts of talk about- about assassins, danger, kidnappings, and- and truly terrible affairs, however, no one seems to know precisely why this is. Our children can certainly cause their fair share of worry, but this? Please, as a mother, surely this isn’t how it sounds. It can’t be.”

Harry expected to get overwhelmed by her motherly presence. Mrs. Weasley was one of the strongest influences in his life before Horcrux-Voldemort filled him with enough reasonable doubt to be confused by her now. The way she had treated Sirius when they were being sheltered in his house, not knowing where platform 9 ¾ despite having taken five of her children there previously, her initial thoughts on Fleur and Bill, taking care of his vault’s key without ever asking him. Maybe she was a little intrusive and meddlesome when it came to those she cares about, but it was always because she cared, and Horcrux-Voldemort could never truly dissuade him of that. Still, she doesn’t know him now and her eyes are protective of the redheads behind her, not the three Flamels in front.

Perenelle respectfully replies, “I’m afraid I don’t have answers for you, Mrs. Weasley. Nicolas and I have only just arrived ourselves.”

Undeterred, Mrs. Weasley then turns to Harry fast enough to whip her hair, stating, “young man, I’ve heard you take after my more mischievous sons, and by your word alone, my husband and firstborn are currently searching for Mr. Lovegood as we speak. Surely this is a mistake, or, Merlin help you, a truly abominable prank. For if it is, I can assure you this will not end well for you.”

“Molly, please, allow me,” Dumbledore intervenes, less angry since minutes passed, though not happy either. The group behind Dumbledore—Fudge, Umbridge, Percy, Stéphane, Apolline, Amelia, Sirius, Alice Longbottom, Bagman, Karkaroff, Maxim, Lucius, Snape, Lily, and Flitwick
—huddle around as the Headmaster continues. “We are getting to the bottom of this incident, I assure you.”

“This is far too much, Headmaster,” Molly throws back. “Death Eaters, Acromantula, and now assassins?! It’s not even been half a year!” Having gone through far worse than this Molly Weasley can apparently imagine, it’s a little grating on his nerves she can act so innocent, however, when Harry spots Fred and George pulling an imaginary noose around their necks for Ginny’s benefit, he smiles.

At Harry’s slight amusement, Molly leveled him an irreproachable glare, spouting, “how is it you find this amusing when this trail of terrors leads directly to you!” Harry had to admit that stung and though Perenelle didn’t seem to take it well either, he’s thankful she let it be.

“I couldn’t agree more, Mrs. Weasley,” Umbridge states, righteously adding, “why, you must be absolutely distraught with concern for your husband and firstborn.”

“Molly, Undersecretary, please,” Dumbledore states before turning to Harry. “Mr. Flamel, I am now aware of all the relevant information to this event, however, what hasn’t been explained is why this is taking place.”

“Since I’m not a fan of the current company,” Harry starts, turning sharp green eyes directly at Umbridge before nodding toward Hardwin, Harry adds, “and there’s still one Champion left to go, I’ll be brief.” Hardwin’s shoulders slump as Harry continues to address the group. “While I was levitated at the start of Krum’s task, I was made to see that my friends, Hermione, Luna, Daphne, and Tracey, were surrounded by three assassins; Dark Goblin-”

“Why that cannot possibly be. You must be mistaken my dear boy,” a ruffled Fudge gasps as Umbridge adds, “correct as always, Minister. It’s positively preposterous. Proof of his duplicitous behavior is forthcoming, I’m confident Mr. Flamel obstructed justice in this morning’s official inquiry.” Harry rolls his eyes in growing annoyance as she adds, “while I’m certain he means well, Minister, he has a propensity to embellish and flaunts his disrespect-”

“Oh will you shut the fuck up,” Harry yells at the pink toad of a woman, causing a general ruckus by those who’ve never heard of his contempt for select authority as well as chuckling amusement by a few that have; Lily, Sirius, Nicolas, Charlie, Fred, George, and Ginny. “You’re not the Head of the DMLE, the Head Auror, the Minister, the Headmaster, or a decent human being, so keep your useless fucking opinions to yourself!”

Taking a step forward, Nicolas asserts with the authority of his ancient and well-respected house, “I want every official here to keep in mind that Perenelle and I are allowing Ares to cooperate as it’s the right thing to do. Make no mistake, he’s under no obligation to do so. We’ve more than had our fill with this cavalier attitude toward ever-present dangers.”

Perenelle glares at Umbridge as she interjects, “and Minister, if Undersecretary Umbridge utters another word, House Flamel and all our substantial influence, fortune, and favors will work tirelessly against your administration. I do not want to hear her neutered voice again!”

“Lord Nicolas, Lady Perenelle,” Fudge submissively begins with his best political smile, “she means well- she, in actuality, had nothing further to add.” He laughs before turning to give Umbridge a stern look of grave warning.

Amelia informs Nicolas, “additionally, no charges of obstruction will be filed against heir Ares Flamel. Your heir was questioned and answered all my questions to our satisfaction.” Amelia’s stern eyes challenge the Undersecretary when their silent contest of wills is broken by Stéphane.
Delacour.

“Good,” the French Deputy Minister comments. “The nation of France would not take kindly any injustice toward the House of Flamel.”

Fudge Amelia focuses his political façade to the influential foreign official and asserts, “Amelia would be more than happy to answer any further concerns you may have Deputy Minister.”

Turning to Umbridge, Fudge tilts his flabby head away, saying with his eyes to do or say nothing more before hurries over to the next possible French Minister of Magic.

As Harry smiles with sinister satisfaction at the garish pink toad, his voice projects further information for Amelia, Sirius, and the rest. “There were four Dark Goblins in total. The three surrounding my friends showed me their daggers; they were special. Magical to a degree I don’t fully understand… yet. The fourth Goblin’s name is Týr and he led the team.”

Half in his head, a thoughtful Sirius slowly makes note of that detail, voicing, “a four-unit assassination squad…”

Harry nods at the Auror as Amelia asks, “what did they want?”

Harry wasn’t going to admit they wanted basilisk venom or bring attention to Nāga and so explains, “their goal was to kill me as the heir of house Flamel.” Harry ignores how stunned many are to hear him speak so casually about being the intended target of assassins to continue adding, “obviously they were using the rules of the task, specifically the loss of my magic if I left the arena to their advantage.”

Focusing on Umbridge and Dumbledore, Harry reasons, “exploiting the task to manipulate me may have been for their convenience or because they felt they couldn’t defeat me in a straightforward confrontation.”

With the implication in his voice and the accusation in his eyes clear to everyone paying attention, Harry continues to tell Amelia, “before it all went bust, the Dark Goblins detailed for me the names of all my friends and their family. They wanted me to know they could get to any of them if I didn’t comply with their demands. They named the Grangers, Delacours, Lovegoods, Greengrass’, Weasleys, Potters, Blacks, and Malfoys.”

Professional as can be, Sirius asserts, “so, when they couldn’t get you or the others here in the stadium, they resorted to attacking those outside of Hogwarts to prove their point. That’s some dedication.”

“They nearly killed my parents,” Hermione announces to the group. “If Ares and I hadn’t gotten to them in time…” Turning to her parents, Charlotte places a reassuring hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“Arthur and Bill are searching for Xenophilus now,” Molly chimes with horrible angst. “Oh, please let them be safe.”

“You can always count on a Slytherin to bring about death and destruction,” Ron adds, directing a scowl at a surprised Harry.

“Enough,” Dumbledore demands before informing Harry, “we will need a memory to confirm-”

“No,” Harry states. He’s not sure how well he can mentally block his conversation with Týr from a wizard like Dumbledore, but he doesn’t want to try. Dumbledore stares at him without the comforting grandfatherly routine, and Harry simply adds, “I’m not lying and you have plenty of witnesses to choose from.”
“They were wearing masks,” Snape makes a point to mention.

Turning to the potions professor, Harry retorts, “were you hoping they had on jumpers saying ‘I’m a Dark Goblin and Here to Kill’? I’ll give you a manuscript but I don’t supply memories.”

“And we’re to trust your word,” Dumbledore sternly asks. “How are we to trust someone who keeps so much to themselves?”

“You’re one to talk,” Harry retorts with hard green eyes.

Rather than address that comment in public, Dumbledore asks, “what of all the families we’ve upended on the word of a single student?” It annoys Harry how easily Dumbledore’s partiality influences many of them. Fudge, Umbridge, Percy, Alice Longbottom, Bagman, Karkaroff, and Maxim all seem to question what is so painfully obvious simply because the revered Albus Dumbledore questions it. It nearly makes Harry laugh to think all these highly influential witches and wizards could come together to end Voldemort’s rise to power. Instead, they seem more concerned with questioning reality rather than reacting to it.

“One of those things nearly killed my daughter,” a frazzled Charlotte speaks loudly, effortlessly drawing their attention. Looking at the group of officials, the anxious mother declares, “and we can no longer allow her to stay in this—this horribly dangerous place.”

“No, sweetie,” Daniel argues before she can get another word out. “We know you love this school, this world, but you nearly died. It’s our job to protect you and if that means taking you out of this dangerous element, then so be it.”

“Dad, you know you can’t be rational in a vacuum,” Hermione fervently argues. “Which only means I need to stay here.”

“She’s right,” Harry turns to the Grangers. He feels odd disregarding their clear wishes, but he knows they’re unable to keep her as safe as he can. “Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I’m truly sorry for what’s happened to you and your daughter.” “Ares-” Hermione tries to interject but he continues. “But for her safety, I can’t allow Hermione to go with you.” Despite their acute expressions of defensive disbelief, Harry turns to Dumbledore, Amelia, and Fudge and informs them, “as a matter of fact, Hermione and the rest of the Hogwarts targets are staying with me until this threat is resolved.”

“Your initiative is commendable, however, that will not be necessary,” Dumbledore professes to Harry before focusing on the worried students and parents, smiling, as if trying to project safety.

With heavy sarcasm, Harry challenges, “oh, because it’s impossible to break into Hogwarts?” Without giving the elder a chance to respond, Harry continues telling the three authority figures, “if they’ve infiltrated once, they can do it again. And the leadership of this school has shown, yet again, that the risk to my friends or any innocent student is too high to entrust in you. So, you’re more than welcome to protect the adults, but the students are staying with me.”

“I agree,” Perenelle voices, adding, “and the only counter-argument I’ll willingly hear must come after swift and diligent actions on your parts are taken to ensure the safety of the students and in resolving this dilemma.”

“The position of our House is set,” Nicolas adds with all the authority of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Flamel.
At the stern and steadfast stance of a very influential family, a sudden awareness of importance descended on Fudge, Amelia, and Dumbledore. The three were veterans of navigating the political landscape and they could argue the irregularity of this family’s demands, the selfishness of their insistence, or the institutions that are already in place to protect them, but will they capitulate and at what cost?

“It is expected for one as young as you are to react on the liberating spirit of emotion,” Dumbledore voices, looking at Harry. He then turns to Perenelle, adding without missing a beat, “or a mother figure to ignore every consideration that does not prioritize the safety of their child.” Looking at Nicolas, Dumbledore expresses, “with respect, my old friend, I cannot allow your heir to assert any authority over my students-”

“I’d be happy to fight you for the authority,” Harry challenges, squaring his shoulders and taking a measured step toward the revered wizard. He can feel his eyes ignite with additional insight as he further imparts, “because you can’t seem to listen to any other voice but your own.”

“Watch how you speak to the greatest-” Molly attempts to intervene, but it falls on an audience of deaf ears as Harry’s defiant authority as a monstrous magical entity steamrolls over her voice.

“I’ll say it clearly, Headmaster,” Harry shouts, cutting Molly off. Stepping deeper into the ocean of Magic within him, Harry’s green eyes brighten as Nova rises, arcing her neck defensively and stretching her midnight black wings at the magical feel of her master, who declares to Dumbledore with the gravitas of an ancient magical Lord, “I do not trust you. Not with my life and not with the lives of the people I care about. So you can either step out of my way and let me do what I do best… or I can move you.”

It’s unnerving how silent it becomes, as if everyone but Harry and Dumbledore disappeared. But of course, the crowd in the stands and surrounding them haven’t and those near enough to hear are stunned at the sight. The audacity of threatening the most revered wizard alive would be troubling for those nearby to hear, but Harry’s power wasn’t just in his daring green eyes or in his legendary creature on his shoulder, but in the air around him. Without knowing it, he was aggravating the air itself with vibrant kinetic energy and everyone surrounding Harry can feel it like breathing in pure oxygen. They felt light-headed, their skin prickled with heated bumps, their eyes strained to stay open, and their breathing felt labored.

None felt the need to speak or they were too stunned by the sight of a fourteen-year-old openly challenging the strongest wizard to do so. It’s why he appreciates witches and wizards like Amelia when she steps between them and asserts without Dumbledore or her Minister’s approval, “until we have concrete proof, we’ll act to the threat accordingly. For the moment, I want all the potential targets secured in the Great Hall.”

Standing down with his eyes slowly losing their glow, Harry steps beside Nicolas and Perenelle as he offhandedly comments, “Potter still has to do his task.”

Nodding, Amelia responds, “while he performs his task, the students in the stands must return to their dorms.” Turning to Alice, she orates, “call in every available personnel. You have ten minutes to coordinate with the staff and aurors to secure Hogwarts.” Alice nods before rushing out of the arena while Amelia orders Sirius to, “take Tonks and escort the intended targets to the Great Hall. We’ll discuss the logistics after safety is assured.”

Sirius nods and casts his patronus, likely to communicate with Tonks. Harry had never seen Sirius’ patronus before but wasn’t surprised to see beautiful light shaped like a large dog exit his wand. With Flitwick’s help, the head Auror begins asking the students and parents to exit the arena with him. Lily stays with her son as he has to perform his task, however, they aren’t the only ones who
don’t leave. Though the Weasleys, a reluctant Tracey and her mother, and Lucius do as instructed, Hermione, Daphne, Fleur, Luna, and as a result, Astoria, Gabrielle, Stéphane, Apolline, and Hermione’s parents don’t move as directed.

Hermione, Daphne, Fleur, and Luna wait for their friend, a touching gesture Harry can’t help but appreciate. With a small smile, he nods, telling them, “I’ll be along. You can trust S- Auror Black.” The girls hesitate, but eventually nod and leave the arena. Luna extends the golden egg to Harry, to which he smiles and asks her, “would you mind holding on to it for me?”

With her nod, she affirms, “incidentally, the egg came first,” before following the group out of the rocky dragon pit. Amelia turns to the minister, respectfully proposing, “it seems we’ll need to discuss meeting the Goblin Nation. Would you like me to coordinate with Cresswell in the Goblin Liaison office?”

Harry’s certain he doesn’t have to look at Perenelle or Nicolas to share in the unsettling feeling of Amelia and Fudge meeting King Ragnuk. If ever there were two highly official positions to reveal Nāga’s existence to, the Minister of Magic and the Head of the DMLE would be it. Amelia would then be bound by law to take Nāga from him. As a sweating Fudge fumbles his agreement with Amelia, Harry promises himself that he’ll use every ounce of strength in him to keep anyone from taking Nāga.

“…R-right,” an unsettled Fudge calls after Amelia, taking steps away. “I’ll await a, uh, draft statement.” The Minister nods to them with his practiced broad smile before stepping away, calling, “Weatherby!” Having refused his mother to leave with the family runs after the large minister.

Dumbledore conveys to Amelia, “we will, of course, assist in every way, however, as Headmaster, it would only make sense that I safeguard the students.”

Harry would rather drown than ride that boat to safety and responds to the Head of the DMLE while staring at Dumbledore, “I’d think the Headmaster would be too busy, what with securing Hogwarts, being Supreme Mugwump, Grand Sorcerer, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Triwizard Judge.”

“I think it best I oversee the children,” Lily states from beside Hardwin. As one of the adults in the loop, Harry doesn’t mind the suggestion, however, that would also keep her in close proximity to him and he didn’t know if he could handle that emotional baggage.

“I’m in favor of that,” Amelia asserts, nodding to the Potter Head.

“As am I,” Perenelle voices, smiling at Lily. Harry inwardly rolls his eyes, thinking, ‘of course you would be.’

“Madam Bones,” Bagman voices, calling her attention to ask, “do I have your leave to continue with the first task?”

At her nod, Harry turns to leave, signaling Nicolas and Perenelle his desire to talk with his eyes alone when Dumbledore calls out, “Mr. Flamel, as you are at the heart of this matter, we will need more answers from you.”

Turning to Dumbledore in exhaustive disbelief, Harry looks around the rocky dragon arena before asking with incredulity, “now? Don’t you have a task to watch?”

Dumbledore pauses a moment before nodding and amending his statement. “After, we should
“In the Great Hall will suffice,” Nicolas asserts, placing a supporting hand on Harry’s shoulder. “It’s imperative we all discuss how this will proceed and wasting time speaking one person at a time isn’t going to help.”

“Please make your way to the Great Hall,” Amelia asks of them. “Would you like an escort-”

“Thank you, Madam Bones, but we’ll be fine,” Harry voices. As many of the remaining judges exit the arena, Dumbledore addresses the crowd above. It seems no one but the judges and Lily will be seeing Hardwin fight his Swedish Short-Snout. Walking past his unanticipated brother and distracting mother, Harry voices, “a short-snout has horrible mobility. Go for the legs.”

Harry kept on walking with Nicolas as Perenelle speaks with Lily. After passing the jagged and cold cavern, they wait on the wooden stairway between the Champions’ tent and the arena for Perenelle to catch up to them. It’s the very spot Nicolas, polyjuiced as Harry and with a fake Nova on his shoulder and waited to switch places with the real Harry before the start of the tournament. When Perenelle joins them, Harry erects his privacy wards before he asks them, “well?”

Nicolas shrugs as he affirms, “everything went as we expected. Though Amelia and Sirius rushed through the questions, Umbridge’s zealots on the judicial board tried to delay you, or me as you, for as long as possible.”

Perenelle adds, “eventually, Amelia decided to end the charade, which sparked a debate about bias between the members and her office. It became a game of optics at that point.”

Nicolas adds, “since we didn’t want Amelia and Sirius to suffer simply because they weren’t in on our little ruse, we allowed Umbridge’s loyalists to question us to their satisfaction.” He smirked in fond memory as he reveals, “you should’ve seen their smug smiles when they were sure ‘Ares Flamel’ lost his magic. How hysterical they became when I cast a simple warming charm on myself.”

Smiling at Nicolas’s good humor, Harry asserts, “good.” Harry hears the others entering the cave and the Flamels continue up the creaky stairs to the Champion’s tent.

The likelihood that Umbridge would’ve given up after her public shaming seemed low, so it was no surprise to find Umbridge, Alecto and Amycus Carrow waiting for them. The twins already had their wands out and the garish Umbridge tilts her twitchy head, clasps her hands in front of her, and voices with thick sweetness, “as I thought, you are without chaperons. No need to worry, Alecto and Amycus would be more than happy to-”

“Do we look suicidal,” Harry interjects before gripping Nicolas and Perenelle’s shoulder and flaming out of the tent. The Flamels land just inside the Great Hall and it’s evident to the three that they are ahead of the group being escorted.

“That horrible harpy couldn’t be more transparent,” Perenelle harshly remarks.

“Don’t worry,” Harry replies. “Give her enough rope and she’ll hang herself.”

Looking at the brilliant Nova standing proudly on Harry’s shoulder, Nicolas asks, “how much of a ruckus did the appearance of a second Nova cause?”

Suddenly feeling bad for the chicken they had transfigured to look like Nova, Harry sucks in a deep chest-expanding breath as hesitates to confess, “um, there, uh, wasn’t. One of the dragons ate the Nova I had.” At Nicolas and Perenelle’s solemn silence, a wincing Harry asserts, “I do feel bad
“Poor chicken,” Nicolas sadly prays.

Nodding, Perenelle quietly voices, “a life is a life, but, what’s done is done. Mr. Ferret?”

“I’m about to see him now,” Harry responds, looking around the empty Great Hall. “I assume he’s fine. I’m sure Nova wouldn’t leave him stranded. Can you guys cover for me?”

“Of course,” Nicolas answers before inquiring, “but before you go, how were you planning on watching all these students?”

Harry pauses a moment to consider the question. With Hermione and Luna, Daphne and Astoria, Fleur and Gabrielle, Tracey, Draco, Hardwin, Ron, Ginny, Fred, and George, four education levels between them that require different classes in different parts of the castle... it seemed unlikely Harry can be in multiple places at once. An effective defense seems unlikely or wishful thinking.

As he’s more curious about Draco, Harry answers, “I’m not sure... yet. I’ll come up with something though.”

Nicolas hums a moment before offering, “we’ll consider some solutions to mitigate the problem. No sense in putting all this on your shoulders.”

“Can’t say we didn’t contribute to this unfortunate outcome,” Perenelle muses with a sad smile.

“We should’ve known better,” Nicolas replies, wrapping an arm around Perenelle’s waist and bringing her in for a sideways hug.

It was almost astonishing for Harry to witness adults taking responsibility for an aftermath that he knows is, in actuality, his fault. He may not have been the one to outmaneuver the Goblins in their deal for the Hufflepuff’s cup. That’s too tangible for something as complicated as his life. Harry has no doubt the strong-arm trade they made in Gringotts only escalated to drawing in the Dark Goblins because of his rotten luck.

Another part of him wondered why they would stay by him, however, he didn’t want to indulge that twinge of deprecation and told them, “don’t worry about it. No one’s taking Nāga and nothing’s going to happen to either of you.” Clearing his throat, he hesitates to add one, “I won’t let it.” Feeling a pang of swelling grateful emotion for how amazing they’ve treated him threaten his stability, Harry immediately flames to the main chamber of the Chamber of Secrets and didn’t see their happy smiles.

Harry hardly has time to recognize Nāga slithering with his head coiled and ready to strike when he hears someone yell from above, “where the bloody hell have you been?!” Harry looks up to the tall graying ceiling of the chamber to find a flustered and sweating Draco on his Firebolt fiercely eying Nāga. It’s obvious Nāga isn’t seriously trying to eat the airborne Draco, just as much as it was

Harry places Nova on a stand as he enjoys the view. Smiling broadly, he clasps his hands behind his back and cheerfully asks, “aren’t Slytherin’s mandated to worship snakes-"”

“Potter!” Draco yells as he narrowly avoids a moist tonguing by the feathered head of the large serpent. It’s obvious Nāga isn’t seriously trying to eat the airborne Draco, just as much as it was
obvious Draco’s been flying with agitated speed for some time. Nāga’s flicking tongue and excited slithering is evidence enough of fun curiosity, however, it seems Draco can’t see beyond the fact that it’s a very large and deadly basilisk.

Rather than telling the silver-haired nuisance to calm down or calling a humored Nāga to him, Harry asks about the obvious wood furniture in the center of the grand chamber. “Why is Dumbledore’s desk here?”

Groaning in distress, a flustered Draco yells back, “did you really fucking reckon I could get through his wards?! His?! We’re talking about fucking Dumbledore! Not some firstie trollop’s secret diary, you smarmy tit!”

At some point, Draco’s insults have become amusing to Harry as he can always respond with, “you realize I haven’t called Nāga off, right?”

“Potter!!” Draco heedfully yells. “It’s going to kill me and I can’t kill it because of my oath!!!”

Harry snickers at the rare gem that is witnessing his old Slytherin enemy stuck in a chamber, trying desperately to stay away from a snake who’s only playing. With sheer amusement, Harry asks, “so, rather than do what we discussed with the ample time you had to retrieve the diary, you have Nova bring the entire desk here? Making it painfully obvious I, or you polyjuiced as me, stole his furniture in the process?”

“I told you I couldn’t do this,” the silver-blond yells. “You think we’re all magical whack-jobs capable of remembering a forty-eight step plan-”

“You wrote it down,” Harry retorts.

“Potter! This is better, trust me-” Draco’s yell is interrupted when Nāga manages to nudge the tail of the very fast racing broom. It’s not so much that the broom is slow, but that typical physical reaction speed and intent take about as long as Nāga needs to get very close. “Call him off,” a sweaty Draco screams.

Harry rolls his eyes before calling Nāga back. For a moment, the king of snakes is saddened by the game coming to an end, but he then slithers happily toward its beloved master, cuddling Harry with a strong wrap as he demands to know of Draco, “well?”

Finally settling back on solid ground thirty yards away from Harry and his snake, Draco sarcastically chimes, “you’re so crackin amazing, yet you couldn’t figure taking the whole desk could just as easily look like a good prank.”

“Speak quickly or Nāga keeps toying with his food,” Harry threatens with a smile as he taps its belly’s sleek scales. As practiced, Nāga’s body slithers and curves into a prone position, as if ready to strike. Harry ignores Draco jumping on his broom again as he climbs the hard scales, conjures a pillow and sits on its scaly back. The king of all snakes then lays its terrifying head on Harry’s lap for his feathers to be petted and massaged.

Flying in the air, Draco swallows audibly as he moves close enough to be heard. The silver-blond Slytherin explains from a safe distance, “if the wind-bag comes at you about the desk, you can play it like a prank. We know he can’t get in here even if this place was plottable, so, in the meantime, you use your utterly ridiculous magic to take the diary out and replace it with a fake before returning the desk. This is infinitely better than me going spar worrying about every little sound or booby trap trying to break into-”
“Yeah, yeah,” Harry gripes, waving away the rest of his argument.

“Genius, I know,” a presumptuous Draco concludes.

Shrugging at the minor alteration to his original plan, Harry voices, “fine. We don’t have time right now. We need to get back.”

“Why,” Draco wonders aloud, watching the large reptile practically vibrate in comfort as Harry answers, “there was an attack during the task. Dark Goblins tried to kill me by threatening Hermione, Daphne, Luna, and Tracey—”

“Tracey,” Draco harps but Harry assures him, “she’s fine. They’re all fine.”

Nodding with relief, Draco snidely observes, “you’re not in the fetal position in a puddle of your tears, so, that’s a bonus.”

Eying Draco with irritation, Harry asks Nāga in the language of the snakes, ~¿Did you enjoy playing with my man-servant, Nāga?~

The way Nāga’s head turns sharply on Draco as it hisses, ~pale servant is much fun!~ makes the sliver-blond Slytherin shooting to the ceiling on his broom, yelling out, “alright, alright!”

Harry pats his snake, massaging the sensitive scales around his plumage as he calls out to Draco, “they threatened to kill you too, by the way, so, there’s one death I won’t cry over.”

“Being a target by association doesn’t even surprise me anymore,” Draco calls out as he floats closer to the scared Harry and his pet basilisk. “Your life’s a fucking curse.”

“No shit,” Harry agrees, thinking longingly about all his friends and family, past and present, alive and dead.

The short silence ends when Draco dares to move closer to them and warily declares, “but it won’t be for long.” Harry’s green eyes look on curiously as Draco adds, “we only have to kill one nut-case, right?”

Again, Harry feels his emotions swell by Draco’s consolation, however, he isn’t sure why. It’s wildly confusing as much as it is uncomfortable and shoving it to the side, he voices, “come on. Your parents were bugging me and Tracey’s threatened to spread to cutesy rumors about me if I don’t bring you back.”

“Really,” Draco voices with a small smile before it suddenly fades from his face. All the while Harry leaps off his giant partner and hisses his friendly farewell, Draco seems to be deep in thought. With Nova on his shoulder, Harry didn’t care about what was on Draco’s mind until the silver-blond takes a step back the second Harry’s hand nearly clasps his shoulder. The skin between his black brows crinkles in confusion as green eyes communicate, ‘what?’

Though silent, Draco’s uneasy body language expressed just how apprehensive he felt about whatever was on his mind. It’s disconcerting and Harry suddenly dreads it like their girl talk a few weeks ago. His former enemy, now lackey proves him right by professing, “we’re not mates, right? Never have been, never will be, obviously.” Harry is silently apprehensive when Draco looks away and begins pacing, uttering more to himself, “but this isn’t about that.”

Nāga’s curious head slowly rises over Harry’s and Nova’s heads as the three observe the highly distracted Slytherin boy pace even in the close proximity to a man-eating basilisk. Rolling his eyes, an impatient Harry contends, “spit it out.”
“It’s fine,” Draco sputters, rubbing the back of his neck. “I- right, you should first know it’s not like I disapprove. If I had a pecker as small as yours, I’d figure out a way to permanently enlarge it too.”

Startled by the remark, a wide-eyed Harry struggles to accept what he just heard as he sputters, “w-what?”

With a furrowed brow and raised palms, Draco struggles, “look, don’t make this weird. I’m just saying I saw and… well, you may have gone a bit far, but I get it. And you don’t have to tell me how you did it, but, I mean… we’re practically… if you wanted to, I wouldn’t… mind?”

“Draco, start making sense right this minute or you’re playing with Nāga again and I tell him to move faster,” a horrified Harry declares.

Suddenly realizing the large Basilisk is looking at him with what feels like hungry eyes, Draco yells, “I just want to know what you did to permanently change the size of your meat-wand, is all! There are no spells to make that permanent and potions can go horribly wrong even with the smallest mistakes.”

Harry only understands they’re talking about his dick and has never hated his luck more than this moment. ‘Why the fuck is Draco Malfoy dedicating human words to my dick,’ his mind is nauseated to yell as he verbally vomits, “have you gone mental?”

“I was polyjuiced as you,” Draco yells getting out his Firebolt and backing away from the large looming basilisk. “You didn’t think I’d look?”

Shaking his head, Harry yells back, “nnnooo!”

“Why? Anyone would,” Draco defends. “I wasn’t getting my rocks off or nothing! I just wanted a laugh- Listen, we’re blokes and this is purely educational. I only want to know what you did? A penis is one of the few things on this planet that’s nearly impossible to change without horrible side effects. Wizards everywhere know it’s nearly impossible for a potion to be permanent, especially to that size. Like I said, I don’t blame you. I remember how small…” Draco halts his own words.

With dead green eyes and a sinister voice, Harry asks with a mind full of perfect recollection, “how small I was? Are you referring to the time when you and your fucking cronies laughed at me? Tortured and cut me? Castrated me?”

Stunned by the admission, Draco asks in shock, “castrated? I didn’t-”

“Know?” a scowling Harry angrily responds. “Why would you? I was dead to you by that point.”

“Potter, I…” a shamefaced Draco seemed to rethink his position and slowly turns his gaze to the ground as he apologetically voices, “uh, um, just forget I brought it up. I was only surprised and curious. It wasn’t my intention to make you remember-”

“That’s because you don’t think before you run your entitled mouth,” Harry angrily retorts. It grows uncomfortably silent between the time-travelers. Yet again, Harry wonders why he shouldn’t just murder Draco. He would certainly feel better, if only for a moment. However, his mind reminds him of the only monster he truly wants to kill. Draco may be a thick prat, but killing someone for such a reason is something Voldemort would no doubt do. With Perenelle’s voice, his mind always reminds him, ‘you’re not Voldemort.’

With Draco waiting on the scared boy, Harry eventually drags himself from his righteous anger
and with great irritation, asserts, “let’s go.” Harry nearly has his hand on Draco’s shoulder when
the silver-blond steps away, aggravating Harry further, eying the pale Slytherin with a furrowed
brow.

“Sorry,” Draco quickly chimes. “I just wanted to say… we have too much history to ever be okay
with one another.” Wildly uncomfortable, Draco takes out his flask of Ogden’s for a quick swig to
settle his nerves before finally adding, “whether I like you or not—and it’s mostly not—I can still
respect you.” Draco pauses to decide on the multitude of words to follow up with. Many words are
too nice, most are too mean, and none strike the perfect balance of a respectful ‘quasi-sorta-hate-
you.’ Shaking his head in failure, Draco simply finishes, “that’s it.”

Unimpressed, Harry sarcastically mutters, “fantastic,” before clapping Draco’s shoulder and
flaming to the Great Hall. The large room with the magical ceiling was virtually empty when he
left Nicolas and Perenelle earlier. Now, in addition to the timeless couple, McGonagall, the
Delacours, the Grangers, Daphne and Astoria with Tracey and her mother, Luna, Ginny, Fred,
George, Charlie, Molly, Narcissa, and Lucius are all in clumps around the professors’ tables at the
head of the grand room. Tonks, Alice, Remus and a couple of other Aurors have secured the room
with Harry and Draco flame into the center of the large room.

With Nova comfortably on Harry’s shoulder, the pair walk toward the endangered group. As
Narcissa, followed by Tracey, rush to Draco, Harry wonders if the absence of Dumbledore, Lily,
and Hardwin means he’s still fighting the Short-Snout. Sirius may be with Lily for support or with
Amelia dealing with the Goblins, but as Nicolas, Perenelle, Hermione, Daphne and Astoria, Fleur
and Gabrielle, Luna and Ginny meet him just ahead of the professor’s elevated section, Harry
wonders how he’s going to protect everyone here while simultaneously dealing with the Dark
Goblins.

“Ares,” Hermione calls when she reaches him. She grips his forearm with worry as she asks, “how
are you feeling? Has Madam Pomfrey seen to your injuries? Is your throat better?”

Smiling at the nostalgia this time-line’s Hermione always manages to bring out in him, Harry pats
her warm hand as he reassures her, “I’m sore, but fine-”

“Fine is the last thing you are, Trouble Star” Perenelle interjects. “All I did was alleviate the pain
and momentarily halt the tissue decay.” Patting the Hufflepuff table next to them, Perenelle adds,
“sit.”

Immediately feeling resistant to medical attention, Harry sighs as he takes a seat, asking Hermione
in the meantime, “how are your parents holding up? Can’t imagine they’re too happy with me.”

Harry sets Nova on a stand in front of Astoria and Gabrielle to pet as Hermione shyly admits, “it’s
difficult for them, but, they know you saved them. As for everything else… I’ll make certain they
understand.”

Hermione seems as if she’d like to say more but decides to approach her parents. Harry turns to an
expressionless Daphne watching her sister, her concern for her father hidden underneath of mask.
As Fleur takes the seat beside Harry, Daphne answers his unasked question, “they’re still searching
for him.”

Hoping against hope he isn’t about to be the cause of untold pain for her, Harry expresses, “I’m
sorry-”

“Please don’t speak,” Perenelle asks as her wand pans delicately from jaw to clavicle.
“Don’t be,” Daphne calmly returns, adding, “it’s unbecoming of a Slytherin.”

Caring very little about what it means to be a Slytherin, Harry responds, “even so,” earning a stern eye from Perenelle.

If Daphne had any more to say, she keeps it to herself as she takes the available seat beside him, allowing Luna—still holding his egg—to ask, “will we be staying in your room now?” Luna’s whimsical gaze lands on Daphne then Fleur, before adding, “it’s certainly for safety but I can’t deny it’s also exciting.”

“I, uh, haven’t figured out what’ll happen just yet,” Harry awkwardly responds to Luna, and it upsets him to think that he can’t without drastic changes.

“While you’re all certainly welcome to remain,” Perenelle starts. “If I may have some time to examine him. I promise he’ll be yours again soon.”

In less than a minute, Harry is the nucleus by which most seem to gravitate around. With Apolline observing, Perenelle examines him and prepares a tonic to begin neutralizing the acidic nature of the toxic dragon’s breath, Astoria and Gabrielle play with Nova in front of him with their sisters seated on either side of him. Nearby, Hermione is having a conversation with her parents under a privacy ward. Just as near, Draco and Tracey are being casually interrogated by each of their mothers. Nicolas explains to McGonagall, Lucius, Alice, and Stéphane that Harry is by far one of the strongest wizards he’s ever instructed while Molly and Charlie remain near enough to listen. Luna explains to Ginny, Ron, Fred, and George how the egg that hatched the chicken was the mutated offspring of a different fowl.

“I imagine the chicken must’ve appeared quite hideous to its mother,” Luna voices when Dumbledore, Sirius, Tonks, Lily, a bandaged Hardwin—with his golden egg—Krum, and the rest of the judges enter the Great Hall. Harry remains quiet as chatter erupts all around him; from Dumbledore to McGonagall, Karkaroff to Nicolas, Maxime to the Delacours, Molly to Lily, Krum to Hermione, and Umbridge to Perenelle. It was so suffocating, Harry was ready to call Nova and leave.

With a shoulder rub and subsequent smile from Fleur, Harry soothes himself with her warmth as Bagman, Sirius, and Dumbledore walk up the steps to the professors’ tables to address the gathering on the elevated platform. As Bagman begins explaining the second task, it suddenly strikes Harry that he’s sitting between Fleur and Daphne, two of the most attractive witches in Hogwarts; a position any wizard would do anything they could to be in. Feeling how warm and stunning these girls are down to his bones, Harry wonders if moments like these were meant to deter him from making the ultimate sacrifice. These girls are beautiful, smart, caring and seemingly interested in him; though much hasn’t happened yet, Harry’s fairly certain he and Fleur are dating.

As Krum asks Bagman about the items taken by the Merpeople, Harry mentally vows, yet again, that nothing will stop him from killing every shred of Lord Voldemort that exists on this planet. Looking at Fleur’s profile, then over to Hermione, then directly into Daphne’s icy blue eyes, he hates that they might feel sorrow after his death, however, he takes solace that they will be alive to eventually move on with their lives. Bagman exits the stage before Sirius explains the security that will be in place for the following task.

With the last bit of detail for the following task out of the way, McGonagall asks, “may we expect elevated security throughout the event that’s to take place this Christmas holiday?”

Harry wanted to laugh at the reference to the Yule Ball. In another life, in another time, asking Cho
Chang to the Yule Ball was the scariest experience he could imagine. Instead, he lets out a dry huff of air at the impossibly distant memory, drawing Fleur and Daphne’s attention. His small smile and shake of his head is all the answer he’ll give as Sirius responds, “yes. There will be an elevated security presence throughout the year.”

“With that,” Dumbledore begins. “We have concluded the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. I would like to congratulate the champions on a performance well done.” Dumbledore lightly claps to the champions, momentarily giving Harry a stern eye as everyone joins in. “Sadly, we are unable to celebrate this success in the adulation of your peers, however, as you are all aware, there was an unforeseen attack on our students. I would like to reassure all of you present that anything and everything that can be done for your safety, is Hogwarts’ utmost priority moving forward.”

“While it thrills me to the moon and back your so keen on keeping us from getting stabbed by Goblins, talk is cheap,” Draco speaks out, defying Dumbledore in a manner Lucius approves of. “You’re not exactly telling us anything, are you?”

“At this time,” Sirius begins, taking a step forward. “Anyone who isn’t directly tied to the incident will have to leave. Alice, Tonks, gather em up.”

“Dhis is an injustice,” Karkaroff calls out. “Viktor Krum iz dhe only champion excluded! What assurances do ve have zhat dhis is not a clever ploy to marshal your resources against Durmstrang and my champion? I demand ve stay!”

“I cannot allow that,” Sirius informs Karkaroff. “This threat supersedes the tournament and I cannot, in good conscience, place foreign guests in harm’s way because you’re feeling left out.”

“The Aurors have to keep them alive so the tournament can try and kill them,” Draco casually comments to a smiling Tracey as Bagman tries to escort and irate Karkaroff along with Krum, Maxime, and Umbridge.

“As the Minister’s eyes, ears, and voice,” Umbridge begins. “It is abundantly clear I remain-”

“Amelia tasked me with their safety, Undersecretary Umbridge,” Sirius calls out. “And as this is an active operation, my authority is final. Please try to remember this is for your own well-being. The less you know, the safer you’ll be. Alice, Tonks,” Sirius orders them, then turns to McGonagall and softly adds, “forgive me professor, but, that goes for you too. Limiting vital information is key here.”

Professor McGonagall hesitates to leave them, however, after Dumbledore assures her with his grandfatherly nod, Alice and Tonks escort Bagman, Umbridge, McGonagall, Maxime, Karkaroff, and Krum out of the Great Hall. As their combined footfall softens with distance the remaining witches and wizards are left alone in the grand stone dining hall. If it appeared to them as if they were finally ready to discuss the details of how they proceed, Harry disabused them of that notion.


Molly instantly tries to defend her adored Headmaster, aghast as she tries to voice aloud, “you can’t possibly be suggesting running off the strongest wizard-”

“Head Auror Black already said it,” Harry cuts her off, making Charlie take a step forward as if ready to defend his mum. “The less who know the details of our whereabouts, the better. Headmaster or not, the fact that he wasn’t named means he has no direct reason for being here.”
Harry turns to Dumbledore and assures him, “if he feels he needs to know any information, he’s welcome to ask Nicolas, Perenelle, or Auror Black, as I trust them.”

“And Lily,” Sirius voices, glancing at her. “When I’m not around, she’ll be in charge.” Harry isn’t quite sure how he feels about that, however, for the moment he doesn’t dispute it.

“This cannot be,” Molly essentially yells, turning to Lily for support. Not unlike a bad call in quidditch, everyone has an opinion they can’t help but loudly vocalize. The fact that Lucius Malfoy happily agrees annoy the vociferous Weasleys. Dumbledore makes his case to Sirius and the Grangers side with the Headmaster, adding more voices to the pollution of noise festering in Harry’s ears. The sheer number of moving and talking bodies around him makes Harry shake his leg as he grows more and more agitated. He doesn’t want to be a dictator about this, but as the voices get louder, Harry can feel himself losing control. His mind recalls the faces he’s let down in the past, the faces he’s seen stuffed and mounted on his wall of horrors, and with tightly clenched fists, Harry softly voices, “Nova.”

His legendary phoenix hops on his shoulder before the pair flame from his seat on top of the Hufflepuff table to the very top of the professors’ table; right in the middle where Dumbledore tends to sit. The flaming light and sudden slam of weight on an old wood table easily draws everyone’s silent attention. Time freezes in the slight moment Harry takes to look at scared faces, worried faces, curious faces, young, old, male, female and it makes him angry; at them and most of all, himself. They’re concerned, as they should be, but they’re looking elsewhere for solutions. And Harry hasn’t truly figured out how to protect all the students without locking them in a room until he kills every threat to their lives.

It’s frustrating because even with all his augmented power, he knows it’s not enough against the flexibility of this new enemy. These Goblins, Týr specifically, are focused, professional, and beyond reason. ‘We only need one,’ Harry recalls Týr’s gravelly voice saying, which is why Harry settles on the ease of mind that comes with speaking the truth. They won’t like it, but, he doesn’t need them to.

“I’m sorry Mr. And Mrs. Granger,” Harry begins looking from the parents to their daughter; the friend that always stuck by him. “I said Hermione isn’t going anywhere and I meant it. I’ll kidnap her if I have to.”

“You will do no such thing,” Mr. Granger starts as Hermione tries to hold her father’s hand and Dumbledore calls out, “Mr. Flamel, regardless of your intentions, I will not allow you to take anyone against-”

“Listen up,” Harry calls out louder. “This’ll be a very uncomfortable observation for many of you but it is our reality. We have a deadly problem here and unless I lock each of you in a room until I neutralize this threat, I can’t promise you’ll all survive… not against an enemy like this.”

“All the more reason that I should-” Dumbledore begins to plead his case again.

“This isn’t a decision by committee,” Harry loudly cuts him off. Looking sternly at the Headmaster, he continues, “Daphne, Astoria, Hermione, Fleur, Gabrielle, Luna, Tracey, Ginny, Fred, George, Ron, and Hardwin; what’s going to keep them truly safe isn’t you, Headmaster… it isn’t me, either, or Auror Black, or anyone else in charge of keeping them safe.”

Ron calls out, “I thought that’s what your whole deal is about. You keeping us safe.”

“Do the arithmancy,” Harry tells him. “There’s eleven of you and one of me. I’m strong but even I can’t be in eleven places at once,” Harry declares, referencing just the students since many of the
adults will be taking care of by the Aurors.

“There’s twelve,” Tracey hesitates to correct, looking at Draco beside her, to which Harry easily responds, “Draco doesn’t count.”

“Because he’s the love of your life,” Ron calls out.

“Because I don’t care if he dies,” Harry flatly answers the red-head; answers all of them. Even after Draco had the pompous gall to talk about his penis, some part of him wonders if he would care if he dies. A strong argument can be made that this-Draco and the past-Draco aren’t exactly the same. If the Draco he’s staring at were the same as the Draco from their shared past, Harry’s certain he would dance on his old rivals grave, but the brutal truth is they’re not; they’re eyes are different. This Draco has suffered enough to make Harry wonder what he might actually feel upon the silver-blond’s demise.

“Excuse me-” Lucius tries to say.

Ignoring the train of thought, Harry cuts Malfoy senior off as he continues with a cutting voice, “except for a few of you, I can’t say as I care if some of you die either.” In his mind, Lucius is the only person that expressly fits that criteria, however, Harry needed them to truly hear his point far more than his compassion. And the shock on most of their faces says he’s pushing them to uncomfortable realities.

“I reckon none of you want to hear that from someone who’s displayed some next-level magic,” Harry admits. “I reckon many of you would prefer I was like the Headmaster, the picture of a fucking humanitarian.”

“Language,” Perenelle’s voice cuts through.

Exhausted by her staunch stance on cursing, Harry exhales before he continues to tell his peers. “When these assassins come for you, to kill you, I want you to really ask yourselves what are you going to do if you’re alone? Ask yourselves, when these Goblins come, who can you rely on without a professor, or an auror, or me? The simple fact is, no one is going to protect you, at all times, better than you can. No one! I don’t care if Draco dies because I trained him. I trained him so well, he’s not making the mistake of expecting me to save him because of some altruistic drive is making me love humanity to bits. He knows I will save him because I can and if I can’t, he’ll save himself.”

“Mr. Flamel, not every witch or wizard is capable of performing similar feats,” Dumbledore voices. “That is why the Auror department and the professors are here to protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

“I wasn’t talking about any of them, Headmaster,” Harry responds. “I’m talking to the people in front of me; some of the smartest and most capable witches and wizards of this age.” Turning to them, Harry continues his brutal honesty. “The things that can hurt you the most aren’t Death Eaters, Acromantula, or Assassins. Those type of threats pop into existence, kill you, then leave. It’s absolute but it’s quick. The things that can hurt you the most… are the people you love… who are insensitive to reality. To go against the dominant thinking of your teachers and leaders and people you associate every day, is the strongest form of courage you will ever perform. Don’t go through this thinking that you’re powerless. You direct the power in your life.”

“It’s us, isn’t it,” Hermione realizes aloud, looking at Harry with such warmth and admiration he can’t but feel lighter. It’s soothing to hear her tell the group of adults, mostly her parents, “the best way we can survive this is to learn how to protect ourselves like a unit.”
“Young lady, how is it you cannot see this is precisely what Defense Against the Dark Arts is for,” Molly loudly directs at Hermione. Turning to Harry she further adds, “it’s what professors and parents are for. Terrible situations like these are not for young showy upstarts demanding to have things their way!”

“And how many of your kids would be dead if I wasn’t here, Mrs. Weasley?” Harry continues to ask Molly, “where was their education and professors and parents against the Death Eater or Acromantula? You know the only reason I was able to intervene against the Dark Goblins is because Hermione, Daphne, Tracey, Luna, and Fleur were smart enough to comprehend the situation and put me in a place to make a difference?” Turning to the Grangers, Harry sympathizes. “I get that it’s scary. I understand it’s dangerous and we may get hurt, but I wouldn’t have the strength I have today if I kept relying on others to keep me safe and you shouldn’t either. So, I’m asking you, help me keep you all alive by helping yourselves.”

Elated, Daphne asks with a small grin, “does this mean you’ll teach us?”

“Yeah,” Harry answers her.

“Everyday you will meet the king of the Monsters,” Nicolas sagely voices to the young, which is essentially all of them relatively speaking. “Whether it’s laziness, contempt, hatred, disloyalty, selfishness, bullies, dark wizards, or creatures. There is a new challenge every day, but that is how you learn and grow and change so you can defend yourself. You can allow us to destroy you, or you can allow us to build you up, but the result is in your hands.”

“Eef you are offering to train our daughter, zhen you ‘ave our permission,” Apolline voices. “The Delacour family trust you.”

Hermione leaves her parent’s grip, step ahead enough to turn to her perturbed parents and asserts, “I know you want to protect your little girl and I love you for it, but, what Ares is offering is the discipline to do that for myself. You must know that knowledge is more valuable than the fear I feel right now.”

“Sweetie,” Hermione’s father starts, adding, “there are regulated bodies and personnel in place that will protect you.”

“Daniel,” Charlotte begins, turning to her husband and taking his hand. With a chuckle and a smile, she tells him, “look at her eyes. When was the last time you saw them so determined?” Hermione’s chocolate brown eyes did indeed look determined and grand with purpose; as strong as Harry remembers.

Mr. Granger sighs before nodding and turning to Harry to state, “you have our permission. But reasonable or not, I’m holding you personally responsible if anything happens to her.”

“I’ll die before I let that happen,” Harry replies and though he means it, he’s taken aback by Hermione’s blush.

“I’m in,” Daphne sounds, squeezing Gabrielle’s hand.

“Same,” Tracey voices, taking a step forward. Though her mother is very worried she only nods at her daughter’s courage, a sentiment Sirius also shares as he walks to hug his fiance. The gruff auror eyes Draco a moment before nodding to Harry.

“You have my permission as well,” Lily calls out, turning to a stunned Hardwin, who asks, “mum?” Lily smiles as she responds, “it’s not like I’ll be going anywhere, but this opportunity is
what I’ve always wanted for you. Be strong, like your father.” To hear that struck Hardwin silent and torn. Harry remains neutral as Hardwin nods his acceptance.

“I don’t see any reason why father would disagree,” Luna sweetly voices before concluding, “please teach me as well.”

“Well, you don’t have my permission! I refuse,” Molly calls out, forcing an outburst from her adventurous children. Fred’s, “come on, mum,” trumpeted with Ginny’s, “please!” And George’s, “you can keep ikle Ronniekins but let us go!” “Hey,” Ron retorts.

Charlie tells Harry, “just give us a moment,” before the entire Weasley brood shuffles away to begin pleaded with the Weasley matriarch. As that drama unfolds several paces away from the main group, Dumbledore turns and stares at Harry without the guise of a caring grandfather. The revered wizard almost seems wary of Harry as the Slytherin strokes the cloth still attached to Nova’s leg.

“You made me figure your rune out on my own,” Harry points out like a detached warning. “I told you, whatever we could’ve been would evaporate the second I had to be the one to free Nova from her shackle.”

Ignoring the now-decorative cloth on Nova’s leg, Dumbledore replies, “you have until tonight to return what you’ve taken. You do not want to make an enemy of me.”

“You’re right, I don’t,” Harry admits before deathly adding, “but you’re not leaving me any other choice.”

Before Dumbledore can respond, hard fast footsteps can be heard rushing down the long stone steps of the Great Hall. Rushing straight to Sirius, Alice is frantic, red-cheeked and nearly out of breath before she whispers urgent news in Sirius’s ear. Dumbledore steps down the platform to hear the development when Sirius slowly turns a grave eye on Daphne and Astoria. Harry instantly knew what that expression meant and sadly, Daphne did as well.

With his dark eyes alone, Sirius conveys his deepest sympathy as he asks, “miss Greengrass, can I speak with you in private?”

The statuesque figure of the Ice Queen of Slytherin betrayed no emotion as she stands straighter. Inhaling, she kept it all in as she shakes her head, voicing, “no, Auror Black. We cannot.”

Astoria looks round with clear confusion, holding her sister’s hand as she asks, “Daphne?”

Daphne bends down to hug the one person in this entire world she cares more about and whispers words no one but her sister can hear. Astoria nods in their tight embrace before Daphne turns to Dumbledore, and to the surprise of all, asks, “Headmaster, if you would be so kind as to excuse us, Ares has strategies to discuss with us.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope that helped explain Harry's plan. Again, I'm so sorry I left you guys hanging for so long.

Aside from the difficulty of recalling the head-space for this chapter, all the characters
in one place were very challenging to write. So this was a very on-the-surface type of chapter. I'll go into much more detail about what's to come in the next update. We'll also be moving ahead with what I want to do with the Goblins. It's fairly important to the end game of this fic. There are a lot of points in this fic I will elaborate on so stay tuned!

Also, since September, I've starting taking writing as a profession very seriously. I've written one novel that's free on my patreon page (pay-tree-on page for my ffnet readers since ffNet censors that kind of stuff). It's patreon(dot) com/graefoxx if you'd like to read it. It was originally a modern day Harry potter fanfic that I just scrubbed the names and made original. I want to be clear here, that patreon page isn't for making money on my fanfics. My fanfic stuff is free public domain. My original is the only thing you'd be monetarily supporting. ...last thing I need is to get sued for copyright infringement.

If some of you do read my other fic The Last Prayer, keep in mind it's for adults. It has a lot of sex and cursing and morally grey areas.

Lastly, thank you all very much for supporting, encouraging, critiquing me. Your PM's and comments are very helpful to my development. I truly want to get better as a storyteller and I know I can't do that alone. So again, thank you. Have a happy holidays and a great day,

--Grae
Whatever The Cost

Chapter Summary

Whatever the heart desires, it purchases at the cost of our soul.

Chapter Notes

I was working two jobs until a couple weeks ago. Now I have more free time, I should be able to write much more. Thank you for your patience and well wishes.

12K Words. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables in the middle of the Great Hall, the group of witches and wizards targeted by goblin assassins stand in contention. After the tragic news of her father’s demise, Daphne compartmentalized, remained stone-faced, holding her sister’s hand and refused to leave to express her grief in privacy. Harry immediately felt responsible but would not ask for her forgiveness so long as she remained composed. The Greengrass sisters simply wrapped their arms comfortably around each other patiently waiting for the Headmaster to leave.

Nodding in sympathetic understanding, Sirius accepts Daphne’s decision to stay before turning to the Headmaster and asking him, “if you would, Headmaster,” while extending his hand toward the exit of the Great Hall. “I’ll come to you soon to discuss our needs.”

“I am this castle’s guardian,” Dumbledore tries again to assure them.

“Then guard these old stones,” Nicolas coldly quips from behind Harry. “Your presence here is a danger to us and if you will not leave willingly then I will withdraw Ares immediately.”

“The great house of Malfoy will also withdraw Draco from your stone death trap, Dumbledore,” Lucius suavely voices, clearly enjoying Dumbledore’s exclusion if his smug grin is any indication.

“You know Hogwarts is like a second home to me,” Sirius speaks to the aged Headmaster. The soon-to-be father then glances at Tracey before assuring Dumbledore, “but I can’t risk her life any longer. This is too much, Headmaster, and it’s gone on for far too long. Please, see to the castle’s defenses and I will do everything in my power to make certain these children remain safe.”

The great sage took many silent moments to consider their united voices before nodding, and slowly expressing to all of them, “I would very much hope you all know you can come to me any time you wish, for anything.”

“We know,” Hardwin calls out from beside Lily. Harry can easily tell he’s not the only one upset about excluding the revered wizard. Ginny, Fred, and George are a little uncomfortable, while Ron
No, no, this will be the death of us; I’m certain of it,” Molly heatedly assures Lily, who tries to assuage her fears. Harry can imagine being away from Dumbledore’s influence must feel like the sun suddenly growing cold and disappearing from the sky. He can understand their panic is like an addict abruptly cut-off, but fortunately, they’re the minority in this group.

After Dumbledore steps far enough away, Harry ensures their privacy by erecting his strongest privacy spell underneath the Muffliato charm. Sirius takes out his wand and whispers what appears to be a diagnostic spell. Seemingly satisfied, he nods before turning to the eight families. Raising his hands to call their attention, he announces, “so we’re clear, the point of all this is the security and safety of everyone in this room. All of our lives are in danger—”

“Because of him,” Ron brazenly remarks, pointing directly at Harry. “We’re all in danger because of him!”

It still irks him Ron can be so against him for no other reason than the color of his tie when they’ve been best mates for so many years. Still, Harry knows Ron just doesn’t know and that’s enough to never be bothered by the redhead’s animosity.

That doesn’t mean Daphne, Fleur, or Hermione appreciate his opinion as the three girls glare at him in addition to Hermione calling out, “if you don’t have anything positive to say, then please keep your comments to yourself.”

“She’s right,” Sirius voices loudly yet compassionately. Anger and resentment are not helpful when dealing with a large and scared group so the experienced Auror patiently explains, “this isn’t about assigning blame. It’s about discussing what’s going to happen next.”

“Without Headmaster Dumbledore, I should think that’d be obvious, Sirius,” an upset Molly calls out. “You’ve spelled out our doom!”

“Molly, please calm down,” Lily speaks privately with the madam of the Weasley household. “Arthur and Bill will be fine, as we will.” Harry eyes Daphne but she’s stoic as ever.

Sirius continues his speech to the group. “This protection detail will be managed by three official individuals and one unofficial individual. The students will remain here in Hogwarts while I secure the rest of you somewhere safe. Nicolas Flamel, Lily Potter, and a third party will be the only ones with the knowledge of the children’s whereabouts and I’ll pass along any letters or such you’d all like to—”

Stepping forward, clearly affronted, Narcissa cuts him off to ask, “you’re separating us?” Her gloved hand reaches for her blond son and he allows her concerned hand on his shoulder.

Tracey’s mother voiced a doubtful, “Siri?”

Sympathizing with the mothers, Sirius attempts to argue, “the students need to stay in Hogwarts—”

“You are not separating me from my children,” Molly calls out, her ginger brows furrowed yet her brown eyes are large and cross. “No sir,” she continues. “Not after you’ve banished our best and strongest chance of surviving this! I refuse!”

“Molly, Dumbledore left because he understood it was for the best,” Sirius carefully explains before returning his attention to the group of parents. “I understand this may sound unreasonable or heartless but what’s the alternative? Joining them in class? Walking em into the loo? We shouldn’t
make it easier for the enemy by remaining together in one spot. Dividing this group has a strong probability of dividing their plans, thus adding more difficulty to their objective.”

Since the dragon pit, that’s been Harry’s thought process as well. No matter how much they fortify their position, unless they’re completely cut off from the world, there’s always a way in. It can be as extreme as destroying the entire castle or as tame as poisoning the air or their water. Even if they split their group up—the students in Hogwarts and the adults elsewhere—Harry’s certain the team of Dark Goblins would still attack them in unison. In that scenario, it’s still preferable for Harry to guard a smaller number of people. Ultimately it doesn’t matter because the second Harry can get away, he’s hunting for Dark Goblins.

“You can trust us,” Lily speaks out in support of Sirius.

“Believe me sirs, ladies,” Sirius implores. “I’ll more than make certain Dumbledore fortifies the entire school with every charm and enchantment in the book. It’ll be the safest place for them-”

“Which only means we need to stay with them,” Molly loudly insists.

“…If you’d like to stay with your children, I’m not going to keep you from them,” Sirius begrudgingly admits. Like Harry, Sirius must’ve thought this wasn’t an argument worth fighting, however, he made certain they understood the scope of this decision. “But, for however long it takes us to resolve this situation, you will not be able to leave. You can’t go home nor can you have any contact with others outside the castle. We can’t risk compromising their location.”

“We won’t leave our daughters,” Apolline voices with a thick French accent.

“Nor will I leave my children,” Molly firmly declares.

“Same,” Tracey’s mother tells Sirius. After letting out a long exhaling, the husband-to-be agrees with a nod. With that point resolved, Harry is eager for this to wrap up so he can leave, however, before Sirius can continue, Lucius steps forward to address the group.

“As a highly respected Governor of Education for Hogwarts and Lord of the esteemed House Malfoy,” Lucius sternly voices, annoying Harry straightaway as the blood supremacist looks down on nearly everyone present. “It’s rather evident that I assume supreme authority when the Auror is absent. I do not wish to risk my own family’s affluent nobility or that of the esteemed Delacour’s on incompetent or inexperienced leadership-”

“NO,” Harry’s voice booms menacingly throughout. Harry’s mind is anxious to leave and the last discussion he wants to be dragged out is the merits of giving Lucius fucking Malfoy any authority if Sirius isn’t around.

Outraged by the curt interruption, an offended Lucius turns to Harry—in fact, everyone turns to Harry—and outcries, “I beg your pardon!”

With squared shoulders, Harry contends, “let me be absolutely transparent about this,” glaring daggers at the taller silver-haired Lord of the Malfoy house. Surprising many to hear, Harry firmly yells, “I don’t trust you. At all! And proof-be-damned, there’s no doubt in my mind you’re a fucking Death Eater.” That immediately ruffled spines and raised hackles as many of the witches and wizards stand straighter by the brazenly public accusation. The Delacours instantly turned hostile gazes on the silver-haired lord. It may be uncommon to be so vocal about what’s obvious, but at the moment, Harry couldn’t care less. He simply wanted his friends properly cared for before he leaves. “Which means the very last thing I’d ever do is trust you with any authority over me or mine.”
Lucius was visibly shaking in clenched anger, slowly growling, “how dare you accuse me-”

“Yeah, go ahead and deny it, Lady Locks,” a determined Harry spits back, taking an aggressive step toward the entitled nobleman. Despite the witnesses, Harry makes it abundantly clear to Malfoy senior, “in case it hasn’t sunk in yet, I’m not afraid of you, your pissant buddies, or the leader of your little circle jerk. I HATE Death Eaters!” Like wind whipping up bright flames, Harry’s eyes grow furiously green as he declares, “and if you want to keep acting like one, I’m going to treat you exactly like I treat all the others.”

With wide feral eyes, Lucius takes his own threatening step forward, his wand-hand immediately swinging around to the wand hidden in his cane, shouting, “you-”

“Go ahead,” Harry challenges, ready to flick his wand in place as Nova raises her feathery head. “I fucking dare you.”

Stepping between them, Sirius shouts, “that’s enough!”

Taking hold of her husband’s arm, Narcissa attempts to calm the situation by making a point of saying, “I’ve no doubt we’re all quite anxious over these events-”

Riping his arm hard enough to pull her unbalanced, Lucius demands of his wife, “Don’t you ever correct me.” Draco steps ahead of his mother to keep her from falling before glare up at his father. Harry’s certain Draco isn’t a fan of his silver-haired mother, however, anyone can tell Narcissa is under Lucius’s thumb. When he speaks, she falls in line.

Lucius seems genuinely surprised by the hate emanating from Draco’s ice-gray eyes while Sirius interjects, “I’ve made my decision, Malfoy.”

Hesitantly pulling his attention away from his defiant son, Lucius obnoxiously asks, “how mistaken you are, blood-traitor. No one beneath my station and purity will ever dictate my actions.”

“I am the Head Auror of the DMLE, Malfoy,” Sirius points out. “Which means your purity and station can stuff it. You will accept my protection in whatever manner I deem appropriate or you can leave. It may be my job to protect everyone equally but I won’t fight you if your precious sensibilities are too offended by the company.”

“Music to my ears,” Lucius spits before turning to Narcissa and Draco and commanding them, “come. We’re leaving.”

“No,” Draco sternly tells his father as he holds his cowed mother in place.

Lucius’ cold eyes turn angrily on his son as he declares with adamant authority, “I am your lord-father and you will do as you’re told-”

“I won’t stop you if you want to leave,” Draco aggressively rebukes, standing firm against the taller man. “But mother and I are not going anywhere. Leave by yourself or stay; those are your only options.”

In horrid disbelief, Lucius gasps, “to shame your own family so vindictively…” The snickering from a few of the Weasleys made the defiance painfully worse for the controlling man. Lucius’ attention flickers from an irate Harry to his son before rebuking, “such disgrace… bowing to him like some wretched house elf… pathetic.” The elder Malfoy implores his son, “stop humiliating our great name-”
“The only pathetic one here is you,” Draco loudly retorts over his father. “Irrespective of your shallow opinion, short of physically forcing us, we’re not leaving.”

“What’ll it be, Malfoy,” Sirius asks. “We don’t have all day.”

Taking in air through enraged nostrils, the long-haired purest tries to hold onto a modicum of respect as he haughtily retorts, “as Governor of Hogwarts Board of Education, I demand to know who this third unofficial individual you plan to leave in authority is?”

“Isn’t it obvious,” Draco tells his father, casually pointing a lazy thumb at a very sinister-looking Harry. Other than muttering to himself, “ridicules,” Lucius says nothing further.

“You can’t truly mean to leave a boy in charge,” Molly voices with palpable concern.

“Only after Alice, Nicolas, and Lily,” Sirius assures Mrs. Weasley.

“If I may,” Stéphane calls out. Walking to Harry, he explains, “my duty to my country will not allow me to remain with my famille-”

“Papa,” Fleur voices with concern.

“However,” Stéphane continues over his eldest daughter’s clear concern. “I leave comforted in the knowledge that they are in the safest hands imaginable.” Turning to Harry, Stéphane asks, “will you give me your word that you will look after them to the best of your ability?”

“Of course, with my life,” Harry undoubtedly assures the man. “But you shouldn’t risk being in the open until the threat is neutralized.”

“'Ave no fear, Arez, I 'ave the best security,” Stéphane assures him with a supportive nod from his Veela wife. “And no one frightens Stéphane Delacour from serving the country he loves.”

“I doubt they’d risk starting a war with France,” Sirius voices. “But Flamel is right, you should remain in a secure location-”

“No man 'as a wife as beautiful as Apolline without surviving a few thousand death threatz,” Stéphane declares with a mighty grin. “Auror Black, if I may 'ave an escort see me to 'Eadmaster Dumbledore.”

“If you’ll permit me a moment, I’ll join you, Deputy Minister,” Sirius offers and the French statesmen nods.

Moving to her soon-to-be husband, Tracey’s mother calls, “Siri?”

“It’s okay, love,” He reassures her. “I trust the Flamels and Lily. Tonks and Alice will be here as well.” Turning to the group, Sirius announces, “everyone, it shouldn’t take me long to secure where we’ll be staying. Until then, Alice Longbottom, followed by Lily, is in charge.”

Not a moment after Sirius leaves, Molly, followed by Charlie, wants to express her opinions with Harry. Fortunately, Perenelle and Lily take it upon themselves to placate the irrepressible Weasley mother. Nicolas took to assuring Governor Malfroy and a silent Narcissa of the Flamel’s stance on Death Eaters, Apolline joins Sharon Davis’s conversation with the Grangers, and the younger witches and wizards congregate together.

Harry felt stuck. Though he’d like some privacy with Nicolas and Perenelle to discuss his plan to deal with the Goblins, he doesn’t want to voice his intentions around so many ears, nor does he
want to leave his friends so exposed. They need to be safe before he feels comfortable leaving. Tonks, Charlie, and the teenagers sat at the Hufflepuff table in two factions linked together by Luna and Ginny. The girls talked about their fathers with Hardwin and the Weasleys hovering near Ginny and Harry and everyone else near Luna. Those excited or anxious enough gossip about the attack, the effects this may create, and conclusions of the current threat as Daphne, Astoria, and Tracey silently comfort each other.

Watching them out the corner of his eye, Harry remained silent, still, and brainstorming the immediate steps to end this threat. Though Daphne’s father is the only confirmed victim, truthfully, Harry’s grown too apathetic to have any grief for such a man. His only source of anxiety is his concern for Daphne and Astoria. Watching Astoria cling to her stone-faced older sister makes Harry feel responsible for their tragedy, which makes him uneasy and angry. Their father may have been a hard man to live with, but he wasn’t always that way and to have that pillar of your life taken away so abruptly, Harry knows they’ll have much grief to cope with. Watching them, Harry decides then and there to take a break from hunting Death Eaters and Voldemort to hunt Dark Goblins.

When Sirius finally returns, the gruff Auror directs them to their new lodgings. As the group silently walks through the Great Hall, Harry’s happy to note they were smart enough to stay away from the House dorms of Hogwarts but is surprised when Sirius stops at the storage room across from the Great Hall entrance. Room Eleven, if Harry remembers correctly, is the Room Dumbledore turned into an indoor forest for Firenze to comfortably teach divination.

Walking into the wide circular room, Harry half expected a mossy grass floor, thick shrubbery, lush trees, and large rocks. Instead, the carpeted room was furnished to feel very much like the Gryffindor common room with red and gold couches, carpet, love seats, curtains, tables, and a roaring circular fireplace at the center of the spacious room. It felt like a small dig from Dumbledore, but Harry didn’t care.

The eight windows were large and currently allowed the afternoon sun to stream in, however, the scenery could be adjusted to any sight they wished. Rather than opposing stairs separating the genders, four-poster bunks with privacy curtains similar to the infirmary align the circular wall. Aside from the privacy curtains available around the beds, there was no true place to hide, which Harry didn’t mind.

Rather than segregating the group by gender, Mrs. Weasley makes certain Sirius knows she won’t allow her children to sleep away from her, making the Malfoys move opposite them. Perenelle has Daphne and Astoria bunk by the Flamels and the Delacours, and Lily helps the Grangers settle in as Sirius addresses the group.

“I know you’ll need your amenities,” he begins, “However, we’ll go with chaperons one house at a time.”

Looking around their comfortable prison, Harry didn’t have time for any that. His friends are in danger and he’s waited long enough. Tapping shoulders as Harry passes both Nicolas and Perenelle, he walks as far away from the others as he could in the round red and gold common room. Erecting Muffliato, he tells them, “we need to split up.”

With growing concern, Perenelle asks, “what are you going to do?”

“End this,” Harry emphatically answers. Before they ask for specifics, he explains, “we don’t know where Týr and the other Goblins are, but I reckon Ragnuk can point me in the right direction.”

Voicing her palpable concern, Perenelle expresses to Harry, “I don’t like the sound of you taking
on the Dark Goblins by yourself and I can’t imagine speaking with Ragnuk will end well.”

Harry sullenly rebukes, “they went after my friends, Nelle.” Glancing at his friends as they listen to Sirius, Harry heatedly repeats, “my friends- No! No, I can’t let this go and I won’t be restrained. Whatever the cost, they fucked with the wrong wizard.”

Perenelle doesn’t even admonish him for his language as Nicolas takes his wife’s hand to comfort. With her reluctant nod, Nicolas tells his wife, “stay here and fortify this room. I’ll go with Ares.”

Her brows net together and her eyes are worried as she pleads, “be safe you two.”

With a nod, Harry is about to flame away when he takes a final look at his friends and is taken aback by their approach. Nicolas and Perenelle make themselves scarce to give Harry a private moment with them. As Tracey, Daphne, Fleur, and Hermione draw near, Harry feels he didn’t need to say anything to them but is glad Draco follows them.

Before addressing the girls, Harry orders Draco, “knock Lucius out, take his wand, and keep him out until I get back.”

Though the girls are taken aback by the first thing he said, they’re positively stunned when Draco simply nods and replies, “yeah, fine.”

With worry, Hermione pleads to know, “do you have to go?”

Accepting what he has to do, Daphne asks, “can you tell us where you’re going?”

While Fleur smiles as she inquires, “can you take me with you?”

With half a smile, Harry answers Hermione, “I do,” Daphne, “I’m going to end this,” and Fleur, “sorry, I can’t. This is my fault-”

“No,” Hermione emphatically interjects, whipping her hair as she shakes her head. “No matter the part you played in this, you didn’t want or intend for any of this to happen so it’s not your fault.”

Gently, Daphne adds, “you’re not responsible for their actions,” and Harry can feel the loss behind her words despite the gentle voice carrying them. She lost her father and she isn’t blaming him. It squeezed his heart for tears he has no time to shed.

“What will you do?” Fleur asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” Harry honestly answers. “But it won’t end well for them.”

“Don’t,” Hermione immediately protests moving ahead till all of his view is filled with Hermione’s worried face. Taking a moment to swallow nervously, she shakes her head before proclaiming, “I only mean- Okay, I understand there are times diplomacy isn’t the answer—I know that now—but try to imagine how easily this can lead to a cycle of violence. They attacked us, so you retaliate, then they retaliate, and it continuously escalates.”

“What would you have him do,” Draco argues. “Appear weak by putting away his wand for some pretty words? He may as well get on his knees and pucker up as he raises the white flag.”

“No,” Hermione retorts before returning her bold focus on Harry. “By all means, make a statement. I know how powerful you are, but if there’s a chance to resolve this conflict using diplomacy, peace may last longer than brute force. That’s all I mean.”
“Someone wants to be Minister,” Daphne dryly jokes, attempting normal banter that causes Hermione to blush.

Harry is effortlessly reminded of his Hermione and what a relentless pillar of strength she was for him. Taking her hands in his, Harry gratefully tells her, “thanks, Hermione. I hear you.” Turning to the others, he tells them, “for now, I think the most important thing to do is know my enemy.”

“And how will you do that,” Daphne wonders aloud.

“By speaking to the King of the Goblins,” Harry answers, leaving them with one final shock before turning to Nicolas. As the immortal elder walks back, Harry tells them, “keep training, watch out for each other, and I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

Harry palms Nicolas’ shoulder and they flame away. Landing in the chamber of secrets, the pair decide the best way to meet the king is through Flitwick. Through Hedwig, Harry sends the half-goblin a message to meet them in Gringotts before momentarily tending to a slumbering Nāga.

Brightly flaming to the stone street of the bustling Diagon Alley frightened and startled the witches and wizards nearest them. Exposed with innocent bystanders around, both wizards were on high alert as they began walking. With the immortal alchemist beside him and a midnight black phoenix on his shoulder, they were the center of attention all the way to the white marble entrance of the towering Goblin Bank. It wasn’t until they were ushered into a private room to await Flitwick that the pair spoke.

Taking a seat on the black leather sofa, Nicolas asks, “did you finish that book on speaking gobbledygook?”

“Yeah,” slowly answers walking around the room and verifying the room’s safeguards. “But I can only understand it. Speaking it is more effort than I care to dedicate to mastering.”

“I don’t mind telling you this situation must be handled with the utmost care,” Nicolas points out, eying the clear carafe water pitcher. Turning to the elder, Harry can feel how worried he is about meeting King Ragnuk. Rather than remind him of the obvious, Harry settles Nova on a stand before taking a seat on the chair across from him and pouring Nicolas a glass of water. Hands shaking slightly, Nicolas accepts the glass as he says, “we’re not in the same situation as before, Ares. We have to be ready. Or this can go downhill quite fast.”

“I know,” Harry thoughtfully agrees. After what happened to his friends, Harry will admit he’s been running rather hot. Sitting in Gringotts, however, surrounded by goblins, Harry understands aggression will not get him what he wants and if Nicolas needs to talk to distract himself into remaining calm and collected, he’ll sit and listen.

“Being in the heart of goblin nation would be unnerving, to say the least, but there’s also our shared history, for those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, and the history between us is not as improved as it should be,” Nicolas voices. Gaining a sense of comforting balance in the knowledge behind his words, he word-vomits, “there have been so many reasons for Goblins rebelling against wizard-kind: the infamous allegation by Ragnuk the First that accuses Godric Gryffindor of stealing the Sword of Gryffindor; the pursuit and imprisonment of Ug the Unreliable, who was peddling leprechaun gold; the accidental death of Gringotts goblin, Nagnok, at the hands of an untrained Security troll sent by the Ministry of Magic; imprisonment of the notoriously violent Hodrod the Horny-Handed in Azkaban, who attempted to kill three wizards; and the Ministry of Magic decree of 1631 preventing magical beings other than wizards and witches from carrying a wand.” With a nervous chuckle, Nicolas adds, “for Merlin’s sake, the Fountain of Magical Brethren in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic shows a goblin, among a house-elf and
centaur, gazing admiringly at a witch and wizard.”

“I get it,” Harry interjects, pointing to the glass of water and reminding the elder to drink. “Not only will we be in enemy territory, but we’ll also be negotiating with a group that has been subjected to injustice and bigotry by wizard-kind. The fact that I need to protect my friends with information only they can give me is irrelevant to them.”

“It’ll be like asking slaves to actively assist in finding more of their kind to enslave,” Nicolas remarks, shaking his head disapprovingly. “Goblins have fought against discrimination and prejudice while maintaining our economy for centuries and they’re still considered subservient by many wizards. Do you know how difficult it is to appeal for cooperation from a segregated group like that?”

“Which is why we need to find common ground,” Harry prudently states. “I get it won’t be easy but it’s necessary because I’m not leaving without the information I need.”

“That doesn’t fill me with a sense of relief,” Nicolas admits, shifting in his cushioned seat. “I’ve never met King Rognuk, however, I’m certain he’s the champion of their values.”

Having heard it a few times from Nicolas, Harry lazily repeats, “the rightful and true master of any object is the maker, not the buyer. Meaning all goblin-made objects are, in their eyes, rightfully theirs.”

“Exactly,” Nicolas chimes. “Which has led to many many disputes and the belief that wizard-kind cannot be trusted.”

“I don’t need them to trust me,” Harry slowly proclaims, sitting up and leaning forward. With soft and confident eyes, Harry affirms, “I need them to trust the lengths I’ll go to protect the people I care about. That’s all, Nic.”

There’s a knock on the door before professor Flitwick enters the furnished private room. After greeting each other Flitwick easily assumes, “I gather you’d like to speak with King Ragnuk in regards to today’s attacks.”

“Unless you can tell me where the Dark Goblins are,” Harry alternatively bids.

“If I knew where they were, I’d tell the Aurors right away,” Flitwick admits. “Targeting children makes them, far in a way, unfit to share the goblin name. Their repugnant attack will only hurt us all.”

“Guilt by species,” Nicolas remarks, sarcastically adding, “release the dogmatism.”

With doubtful thoughts of the future, Flitwick sighs before agreeing, “quite so, I’m afraid.”

Setting aside their concern, Harry only asks to know, “when can we meet Ragnuk?”

“I’ve sent the request before even stepping into Gringotts,” Flitwick informs them. “All we can do now is wait.”

Nicolas asks, “for how long?”

“He’s been eager to meet with you for some time,” Flitwick admits, alluding to expectations of involving Nāga. “He’ll call for us when he’s set the field to his favor.”

“This isn’t a power play or manipulation tactic,” Harry heatedly asserts. With the faces of the
living in peril on his mind, he argues, “my friends and their families are in danger, professor.”

“I understand that, Mr. Flamel,” Flitwick sympathetically remarks. “But what good will it do you to storm the palace? How will threats and destruction bring about peace and cooperation? Surely you must see the thing you seek will cost you dearly.”

Harry knows the diminutive professor doesn’t mean gold or property and contends, “I’m not giving him a basilisk he thinks I have.”

Flitwick sagely professes to Harry, “divine right of a king, my young student. Please keep this to yourselves; among our kind, the populous mandate that only the strong may be King. That isn’t unheard of throughout history, I grant you, but allow to ask, why? Why only the strong? The strongest warrior may defend us certainly, however, every goblin would be as eager to fight the enemy as the King, for no goblin is lacking in courage and grit. Cunning? Wealth? Nationalism? No, for our kind, the ability to allow subjugation. Earning the divine right of a King means that honorable goblin becomes the physical representation of our collective soul. He is transcended so our strong-minded populace can actively be governed and progress in serfdom under one.”

Nicolas points out, “you all agree your King is a divine class and this doctrine allows you to avoid war among yourselves.”

“For the most part, yes,” Flitwick answers. “It’s why Vorkalth’s challenge isn’t simply for a jeweled crown, but for the united soul of all goblins. The King of Goblins is given the divine right as a metaphysical act of humility or submission among us all; a rare thing for such prideful beings. He is the governing right by which no goblin is above, uniting us into the force we are today. We’ve had a King since the 11th century, but before that, we were killing ourselves nearly to extinction over petty squabbles, which is why King Ragnuk’s line is so important and why Vorkalth’s challenge is so disheartening.”

“Offending Ragnuk is like offending all the goblins,” Harry simplifies.

Nodding his head, the professor explains, “I say all this Mr. Flamel, because when King Ragnuk demands a thing, whether you claim to possess it or not, it means that all goblins demand it; it means give it to us or all goblins are against you.”

Nicolas asks, “yourself included?”

“Dear me, no,” Flitwick scoffs and answers. “I may be part-goblin but I know where my home resides. I’ve never felt more joy than when I’m in a classroom educating the young minds of the future.”

A small smile breaks the tension on Nicolas and Harry’s face. Once again, the devoted teacher proves his steadfast sincerity despite the difficult situation. Still, with loved ones at stake, Harry can’t compromise and confesses, “professor, I think of you as a kind, caring, and strong person, certainly one of the most positive influences in my life. But, if King Ragnuk wants to hold my friend’s safety ransom for something that isn’t an option, I promise you this day will not end well for the goblin nation.”

Flitwick stares at the conviction steady in Harry’s green eyes for a moment before nodding and answering, “we shall see.”

Less than a minute later, a white-haired goblin in a clean, black and pressed suit enters their waiting room. Harry notices the insignia on his breast pocket is gobbledegook for the letter R as he proclaims, “the mighty King Ragnuk has granted your request to meet him.”
They are escorted out of the waiting room, down the teller’s corridor vaults. Sitting in a cart, they ride the twisting and turning roller-coaster of the dark and deep stone cavern to the lowest level of the bank’s vaults. Harry’s ears pop and his waist aches as they walk the path to an impregnable stone wall with a large ornate double door numbered 000. Three goblins move to the press their palms against silver panels on the stone wall before simultaneously using their magic to unlock the mechanisms keeping the thick doors closed. They hear slow yet loud clanking and the shifting of metal for several moments before the doors finally begin to open and they’re led to a six-passenger train-car in the shape of a bullet.

Aside from the bullet cart, shooting down a tube-shaped cave like a water park slide, there’s nothing else to the train stop. Harry wonders where else the underground tunnel leads as they take a seat before taking off again. The cart is much smoother and faster than the Gringotts carts the lead to vaults and they go much deeper. No matter how deep and fast they go, it’s never pitch black, but there’s nothing to see but stone. Moving so swiftly through the tubular cave as the air hisses around them, eventually the stone tube they’re traveling through disappears like a bullet, suddenly exposing the largest underground cavern Harry had ever seen. An entire metropolis can fit in the massive subterranean cavity.

The bullet car speeds over the mega-town, giving the wizards a bird’s eye view goblin life. The buildings were stacked together and one on top of the other; made of varying degrees of gray granite stone and dark oak wood. The style of architecture is very similar to Gringotts, with many pillars and beveled edges. There were high archways over oddly glowing streams and vegetation littered the entire metropolis, however, instead of green trees, they’re blue, yellow, or white.

Though they’re rushing high above the city, Harry can tell the major veins of the streets were dedicated to various types of vendors. His green eyes can spot all sorts of craftsmen peddling their wares or pushing carts. Shooting out of the chimneys is green, red, or orange smoke that reached the vents in the ceiling. Steadily reaching the center of the city, nearly all of the buildings seem to be dedicated to smithing weapons. From their distance, Harry can only not the shiny glint of the metal, however, there were a lot.

The main veins of the bustling streets led to Ragnuk’s palace at the center of goblin capital, the only structure made of white marble and towered above the other edifices. The main entrance of the palace is four stories high with stairs constantly patrolled by a dozen pairs of guards. At the top of the stairs before the long pathway toward the palace gate is a large statue of an armored goblin, triumphant with a sword raised high and a decapitated head of a wizard that morphed into a giant that then morphed into a werewolf, and finally a vampire.

As they near the landing platform, Harry is incredibly impressed with the royal residence. The center of the palace was a seven-story large edifice connecting a five-story left and right-wing with a golden dome over it. It’s difficult to judge how many floors the palace has through the plethora of windows as the center section holding the golden dome has three-story-tall arching windows. Every column is designed with an intricate pattern and statues are on every cornered edge of a beveled divide. Despite the squadron of guards walking them to the large double doors of the palace, it was a phenomenal sight.

“Welcome to Puk’Wud-Gie,” Flitwick happily yells as they wait for the security commander just outside the doors. “Or in English, Gobelin,” Flitwick translates for them.

“My word,” Nicolas continues to gasp at the astonishing sight. “Oh, oh, the wife is going to be very upset for missing this, I don’t mind telling you.”

“It’s a shame no human is allowed in the city,” Flitwick voices turning to the city’s roofs and
towers just below their visual horizon. “There’s all manner of creativity and invention going on there.”

Turning to the active stone and wood metropolis with green, red, and orange smoke, Nicolas laments with a sigh, “I suppose I’ll have to settle for this lovely view.”

A second squadron of goblin guards walks out of the opened doors toward them. All the goblins that seem to work at the palace wear armor. It’s mostly stitched and interwoven leather with steel wrist and shoulder guards. The security commander that approaches them is wearing full metal armor and Harry notes small runes etched around the border of the metal. The armored goblin extends his hand, but rather than greeting them with a handshake, he demands, “wands.”

Surrounded by armed goblins, Harry and Nicolas look at each other and acknowledge with their eyes that there’s little choice but to comply, though it’s a comfort that least one of them is still able to use magic without a wand. With a nod, they slowly draw out their wands and hand them to the security commander. The goblin then turns his dark eyes at Nova on Harry’s shoulder and asserts, “the phoenix will remain in a secure location.”

“No,” Harry sternly voices as Nicolas quickly asserts, “this phoenix is currently bonding with Ares and at such a young age, is incapable of staying away from him for longer than ten minutes.”

“It’s his familiar and a divine creature,” Flitwick argues for Harry before adding, “even by goblin standards, that value cannot be infringed upon. You cannot separate them.”

The commander groans irately before asserting, “they will wait until called upon.” Harry and Nicolas are then taken inside the palace while Flitwick is lead away. The inside of the palace is bright with white polished marble, red plush carpet, large crystal chandeliers, portraits of likely famous goblins, silver and gold statues and ornaments; wealth and opulence was the impression left on Harry and Nicolas.

With Nova on his shoulder, Harry and Nicolas are led into a circular assembly hall just outside of the throne room. Harry sets Nova on a stand and they take a seat under the watchful gaze of seven guards. In all the visual splendor it, it was easy to forget why they were there, however, one room away from meeting the King of the Goblins, Nicolas talks through his anxiousness.

Nervous, Nicolas points out, “beautiful, isn’t it? I’ve never been to Gobelin, much less the Goblin palace. I didn’t even know the city is named Gobelin. Can you imagine? Me? No knowing something like that,” he comments with a nervous chuckle. Harry casually smiles in support as Nicolas adds, “they’re truly craftsmen of the highest order.”

Harry softly yet confidently asserts, “we’re going to be okay, Nic.”

“I’m not worried about myself,” Nicolas replies with a thankful smile. “Perenelle and I have been on the outside looking in for so long, it’s slightly unnerving to be at the center of it all now. A meeting that can effortlessly alter the fate of history is not an activity we often participate in. What we say and do in that room can damage or hinder wizard-goblin relations for generations to come.”

“If you focus too much on how things can go bad, you won’t be able to see the moment when you need to make the right call,” Harry argues. “Just try to think about something else.”

“Easier said than- oh,” Nicolas sprightly sits up at a thought. “There is something I need to tell you about. Keep in mind, this was completely unexpected by myself and Perenelle. Otherwise, we may have used other methods to heal you.”
Quirking his brow, Harry cautiously asked, “what?”

“So when I was you under polyjuice, I took a look at your penis—”

Harry gasped, “you what?” Shaking his head with the shocking expression of something sour in his mouth, he blares in disbelief, “you looked?”

“Well of course I looked,” Nicolas replies as it’s commonplace. Tilting his head, he asks, “who wouldn’t?”

Estranged fingers from rising palms shoot up to the air as if to ask, ‘why,’ when Harry answers, “oh, I don’t know, everybody. Normal people.”

“Ares, the primary reason that potion was invented was for the purposes of sex,” an amused Nicolas educates. Harry felt like a preteen getting the sex talk as a humored Nicolas gently explains, “the first recorded use of a polyjuice-like potion was by Merlin himself. He created a potion for King Uther Pendragon to change into the image of his ally Goloris, Duke of Cornwall to sleep with his wife, Igraine, which resulted in pregnancy with Arthur Pendragon. Uther lusted after Igraine, you see, and demanded Merlin help him, thus the Welsh design Polyjuice was born which eventually led to the potion currently used today. Since then, the potion’s primary market is for sexual purposes, second only to deceptive purposes.”

“Great,” Harry unenthusiastically comments. “So I’m the weird one for not checking a bloke’s junk while under polyjuice?”

“In our society, I’d say so, yes,” Nicolas plainly answers. Harry simply rolls his eyes and shakes his head before Nicolas continues. “I say all this because after I looked, I noticed an unnatural increase in size. I’ve seen your naked body while you were injured, if you recall.”

“Merlin, I can’t believe we’re talking about this,” Harry groans, feeling phantom aches in his stomach.

“Would you rather it be Nelle here explaining this to you,” Nicolas challenges.

Turning to the elder in disbelief and surprise, Harry asks, “she knows too!?”

“Well of course I told my wife,” Nicolas answers, as if it was undoubtedly obvious.

“About my… Ugh, first Malfoy and now you and Perenelle…” Harry pauses to look at the goblins nearby and wonders how good their English is.

“Listen,” Nicolas voices with a comforting pat on Harry’s shoulder. “We believe the Elixir is not only altering the length of your life-force, but also your physiology.” Leaning in closer, Nicolas whispers, “the thing you have to understand is, it took nearly all my life to finish creating the philosopher’s stone and the elixir. Perenelle and I were already old when we first started taking the potions—well into our declining years—and didn’t think it would do more than extend our lives.”

Harry points out the obvious difference by noting aloud, “but I’m young… so you think it’s making me more…”

“…I do,” “I mean, Nelle and I still have a healthy sex life because of the elixir—” At Harry’s groaning face, Nicolas protests, “oh come now, Ares, it’s only sex.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m comfortable talking about it with you,” Harry responds like the teenager he is.
“Well, you shouldn’t be,” Nicolas affectionately asserts. “I can’t imagine it’ll be very long before you engage in a romantic relationship of your own, young man. You’ll need to know things and I’ll always be here to talk about anything you need to know; Nelle and I both will.”

Not only is the topic awkward and embarrassing, it’s also unnerving to have their support in an area of his life he always figured he lost with the death of his parents. Harry knows sex is something parents discuss with their children and Harry never got that talk. Despite the monumental pile of embarrassment smothering him like bugs crawling all over his skin, Harry’s brain has a couple of questions he ought to have answers for.

“So… bloody hell…” he curses before trying again. “So, you’re sure my- You’re sure it’s the elixir?”

Nicolas hums before he answers, “I can’t possibly imagine what else it could be. Since the early stages of magic experimentation, there have likely been millions of attempts to create concoctions for enlarging the male genitalia by now and I know not a single one exists that’s permanent or without terrible side-effects.”

Considering the battles to come, another question Harry’s mind needs answering is, “does that mean I should stop taking it?”

“Well, you’ve only ever taken it to save your life,” Nicolas muses aloud. “I assume emergencies is still your requisite for taking the elixir?”

“It is,” Harry responds, assuring the old alchemist, “I’ve lived long enough.”

“No, you haven’t,” Nicolas plainly states, garnering a curious eye from Harry. Nicolas expands by saying, “you’ve been physically alive for quite some time, yes, but I wouldn’t say you’ve lived. I don’t say this to you often, but I don’t mind saying my greatest wish is for you to experience many of the wonderful aspects of life; love, success, discovery, children, family. There is so much this world has to offer and you deserve it.”

Though Harry can feel the man’s honesty through his genuine eyes and comforting smile, he’s far too embarrassed to say anything; he nods instead.

Nicolas only smiles as he returns to the topic at hand and answers the young time traveler. “As for your question, life knows more than we give it credit for. By that I mean, studies by zoologists with a background in medicine have always wondered why the male human have such large penises—”

“Ugh, you know what? Forget I asked anything,” a pained Harry tries, attempting to move away from this topic.

“No, please, this is truly fascinating,” Nicolas pleads, pulling at Harry’s sleeve. Harry only allows it to distract the elder from the meeting ahead. “Take a gorilla for example. An adult male gorilla can weigh around a hundred and eighty kilos(400lbs) and yet their penis sizes average four centimeters. Humans average around eighty kilos(176lbs) yet the average size is five inches. This stark difference is interesting because before formal clothing, the larger penises hanging loosely may have appealed to more women, thus passing those genes along to future generations; enter my theory for your sudden development. I believe your growth will stop after reaching a previous ancestor’s more well-endowed length. After all, that genetic information is still stored within you. Would you like to hear the leading theory on the shape of a penis’ crown?”

Before Harry can vehemently decline to hear any more, the security commander apparates before
them and warns them with a murderous glare, “the King will see you now, however, at the slightest provocation or hostile movement–” taking out his lustrous short sword, he asserts, “we’ve been given the authority to kill you.”

Anything to end his sex-talk with Nicolas, Harry voices happily, “thank Merlin.”

The throne room was round, lavish in gold and silver, and unduly large considering their small stature. The golden ceiling is nearly six stories high with intricately designed sculptures of goblins looking down at the royal proceedings. Many wide white columns lined the wall with hovering torches that glowed like the copper in a light bulb. The middle of the circular room is divided by a very wide pathway leading to the grand ornate chair that sits King of the goblins, Ragnuk the eighth. On either side of the carpeted pathway, well-dressed goblins observed from their stadium-arranged, plush seats.

Walking what feels like the length of a quidditch field, Nicolas and Harry were led by the commander with a pair of goblins on either side of them and another pair behind them. Harry saw Flitwick waiting at the base of the stairs leading up to the King. The higher class goblins in the gallery around them sneered, conversed among themselves, and generally looked down on them as they passed, however, Harry didn’t let them bother him. He only had eyes for the King sitting in his royal chair elevated higher than all of them.

Moving closer to the leader of a nation, Harry notes the King is dressed as finely as can be expected; a finely tailored black suit with an elegant red cape. His eyes were pure black, the skin of his long nose was egg-shell white, and his hair was long and braided. His teeth were sharp, his nails looked razor-sharp as his fingers trace the leather-wrapped handle of the battleaxe leaning against his royal chair. With his sheepskin collar over his intricately design black suit, his arms were longer and stronger than the typical goblin. Most of the goblins Harry has seen in his life were bankers, Ragnuk, however, was certainly made from a different stock.

Harry and Nicola were escorted nearly thirty paces away from the elevated King, just in front of a rectangular metal outline on the stone floor and Harry could feel magic the closer he came to the flat rectangle, like moving close to a blazing flame. Harry can tell Nicolas felt it as well; the fatigue and nausea underneath prickling hot skin. Harry wouldn’t let mild discomfort bother him, however, Nicolas isn’t made for battle. Despite that the elder powers through until they’re finally stopped just ahead of the rectangular silver platform.

It shined under the light when King Ragnuk speaks with a booming and deep voice. “Consider the platform before you as a statement of trust.” To hear the powerful goblin speak, Harry’s ears felt the impression of two stone bricks rubbing together. “Should you decide to step within the silver boundary, any hostile action you take against the crown activates the enchantment to immediately bind and torture you. It can activate with your very intention or I, the King, can activate its mechanism. Choose not to stand within the silver and I will know before you even utter a word that this meeting has no value to you, that you are without honor, and that you cannot be trusted.”

Harry looks at the highly engraved silver platform wide enough for five people to step on. The magic floating off the silver was hypnotic as Harry silently considers his options. He didn’t have a set plan for how to deal with the King to get what he needed. He only knew what was at stake and what has to happen no matter the cost.

Nicolas bows his head slowly, and though Harry would prefer not to, he bows as well. Even if nothing is gained by it, it costs nothing to show respect in someone else’s home. “King Ragnuk,” Nicolas begins. “You bring up the question of trust and honor, yet, how are we to know this apparatus won’t affect or harm us without cause?”
“How dare you question our King,” the wizards hear from the side, causing a ripple of angry grunts and cries from the gallery of onlookers and guards. “A goblin's word is all the trust a wizard needs,” another goblin yells.

“Silence,” the leader’s strong voice commands his subjects; to which they follow without question.

Looking down at the enchanted silver platform, Harry bluntly proposes, “I didn’t think a King needed petty tricks like this to take the measure of a man.” The high-brow crowd quickly becomes restless, and without any intention of stepping on a foreign magical object, Harry walks around the silver platform to face the King. With his hard green eyes looking up at Ragnuk, Harry’s defiance is clear, daring the goblin king to force him to comply. The gallery of goblins bristle and scorn in relative silence for several moments as wizard and goblin stare each other down.

Unexpectedly, Nicolas slowly steps on the intricately etched silver before announcing, “I trust in my son. Allow him to speak his mind and I will stand in your snare.”

Turning his angry gaze from Harry to Nicolas, Ragnuk contends, “your son may speak his mind within the silver or it is an insult to the kingdom.”

Harry immediately turns his back on Ragnuk, erupting several gasps from the gallery, and tells Nicolas, “let’s go,” as he walks away from the goblin royal and the loud ruckus it causes.

Nervously eying the now armed guards stalking them, Nicolas immediately rushes to Harry’s side, imploring him, “just step on the platform! This is not the time to be prideful!”

Harry keeps walking the long and wide walkway as he tells Nicolas, “I can already guess how this is going to go and I don’t have time for this back and forth game. There are other ways to get what I need.”

“Maybe,” Nicolas huffs as he walks beside Harry. “But this is the fastest and safest way to help our friends and family.” As Nicolas tries to get Harry to reconsider, Flitwick rushes to Harry’s other side.

“Mr. Flamel, please reconsider,” Flitwick voices as he and Nicolas stand in front of Harry, stopping him from advancing any further. “I promise you the silver rostrum is stood on by everyone who visits the King; even the Minister of Magic.”

Nicolas’ brown eyes urge him to reconsider as he pleads, “Ares…”

The wrinkles on Nicolas’ beseeching face are so expressive and telling that for the first time, faces of the living flash in his mind; Perenelle, Hermione, Luna, Fleur, Daphne, Tracey, Sirius, Lily, Hardwin, Ron and the rest of the Weasleys. It’s such a stark difference to the dead expressions he deliriously envisions that he can’t help but wonder if this is something the past timeline wants. For decades and with the Horcrux’s help, Harry imagined his dead friends and family would tell him everything he did wrong; Their tortured faces would ask him why didn’t he save them, listen to them, stop being so angry, so stupid, so useless. Now standing before a living and pleading Nicolas, Harry strongly felt an opportunity to avoid repeating the past by listening. With a sigh, he turns around and walks up to the silver platform, pauses to stare at the beautifully etched silver, then steps on it. Immediately, he can feel the oddly oily goblin magic coat over himself and the flapping Nova.

“You are too prideful,” Ragnarok accuses Harry as Nicolas steps on the platform.
“It’s not pride that makes this intolerable,” Harry returns as Flitwick remains by their side. “Bowing, waiting, speaking only when spoken to, sitting only after invited, more bowing, more waiting; all these rules of social vanity are a colossal waste of my time. I only need to know one thing from you and I’ll be on my way.”

“In the next room, I have your Head of the DMLE waiting,” Ragnuk states. “She would also like to know one thing from me. Shall I instead tell her of the illegal creature you keep as a pet? Take great care of how you speak to me, boy, for I have the power to ruin the future of your house.”

Untroubled by his threat, Harry calmly asserts, “tell Madam Bones whatever you like. Nothing and no one will stop me from finding and eradicating every Dark Goblin involved. If you’d like to help and tell me where they are—Týr and his team, specifically—then I’ll be grateful and on my way. If not, I can locate them on my own.”

“You won’t,” Ragnuk’s hard, confident voice replies. “They are well hidden.”

“I will,” Harry counters with just as much confidence. “Because I know what they want.”

Ragnuk tilts his head at that, taking a moment to ponder Harry’s meaning before asking, “…you would use yourself as bait?”

“Without a doubt,” Harry assured the leader, adding, “I know exactly how to do it too.”

Choosing to ignore that line of questioning, Ragnuk instead asks, “then what are you willing to trade for this valuable bit of information?”

“Nothing but the death of your enemies,” Harry answers.

Concerned with the direction Harry is presenting, Flitwick voices loud enough for the chamber to hear, “surely, there is a better way than mass extermination. Wrong some of them may be, but, innocent life must be among them and shouldn’t be the enemy.”

“Throughout the centuries, the Goblin Nation has never once degraded itself by desiring wizard-kind to fight our battles,” Ragnuk champions like a badge of honor, ignoring Flitwick’s humanitarian comment. Ragnuk continues to tell Harry, “we are stronger and more honorable than any of your species can comprehend and you’d do well to remember that.”

“You’re mistaken,” Harry honestly accuses the King. “The moment they targeted and attacked the people I care about, your battle became mine. They made an enemy of me, the worst there is, and I aim to see their end no matter what.”

“Surely it would be enough to simply end the threat,” Flitwick suggests. “I understand they threatened students and loved ones, which must be stopped at all costs, but all shouldn’t have to pay for the actions of a few. We must be better than them, lest we become the very thing we wish to destroy.”

Ragnuk laughs heartily before telling Flitwick, “this is why I do not revoke your citizenship despite your polluted lineage. While my advisers would promote monetary gain or war, you champion for the preservation of life no matter how inferior the species.”

Eyes fixed on Ragnuk, Harry tells Flitwick, “I only mean to kill who needs killing, professor.”

“…No thoughts of capturing and imprisoning,” Ragnuk notes. “No, simply kill. I’m curious how you plan to determine who must be killed and who mustn’t.”
Becoming increasingly irritable by all the extra noise obstructing the only thing he needs, Harry sullenly declares, “I’m not some politician trying to solve the problems between our nations. I’ll leave those problems for someone who cares more than I do so you can stop trying to measure me. I am only here to stop those who don’t want to stop; those who won’t quit until they’ve killed everyone they need to kill simply to have their way. I don’t support that manner of results. If you have to go after and kill children in order to have what you want, then no matter the species, I will kill you. That’s all.”

“Your words do not upset the silver,” Ragnuk notes before pausing for several moments to align his thoughts. The gallery watching on in abstract silence before Ragnuk finally says, “you speak of killing goblins without fear of upsetting me… that the silver has not bound you is a rare thing to witness. Your kind is the embodiment of every quality of weakness there is, however, it is that weakness which has allowed us to work together for centuries. I am not opposed to providing you with the information you seek, wizard, but there will be conditions, as well as a heavy price to pay.”

“As I’m certain professor Flitwick has informed you,” Nicolas starts. “The House of Flamel is in possession of a Basilisk carcass we would be happy to compensate with.”

“Filius has informed me,” Ragnuk retorts. “And I’m well aware you are in possession of a living basilisk.”

“That is not a trade we’re capable of making now or in the future,” Nicolas fearlessly responds. “As we’ve said, you’re welcome to tell Madam Bones whatever you like. The house of Flamel is prepared to weather any storm, legal or otherwise. After all, the world is large with many sanctuaries and our family is well equipped to stand the test of time.”

Harry wasn’t going to let the Goblin King know the threat of disappearing for generations was a bluff and honestly tacks on, “the only trade we’re willing to offer is some basilisk venom, the carcass—under the condition your craftsmen prepare armor for me and my friends—and a pair of specially crafted daggers.”

Harry can tell even Nicolas was surprised by Harry’s counterbid as Ragnuk aggressively grumbles, “oh, how I loathe wizards. To be so devoid of value that you would stand there, in my palace, and have the impudence to make demands of me, a King, as if to believe you are doing me the favor! Your smug and insolent proposition does not amuse me, boy.”

Ignoring the insults, Harry promptly states, “the trade is fair. I will deal with Vorkalth and his supporters, with or without your assistance, which solidifies your reign-”

“Under my reign, no goblin will ever outsource our battles to wizards,” Ragnuk declares to the hollering approval of the gallery and guards.

Calling out after the shouts settle, Nicolas loudly asks, “if Vorkalth and his supporters are defeated by a single wizard, wouldn’t that show other goblins that their claim to your crown is baseless? With or without your permission we will deal with your enemies. In addition, we offer you the carcass of a basilisk and some basilisk venom. It’s only natural we would want compensation for these offerings.”

“You offer a goblin swill and call it gold,” Ragnuk reproaches. “You forget we know the value of gold and honor and your house offers neither. No, Mr. Flamel, the price for your freedom, daggers and armor will cost you a living basilisk.”

“No deal,” Harry sternly counters.
“If I may, your highness,” Flitwick pleads from his King. With his nodding approval, Flitwick moves closer to the wizards and asks Harry, “how confident are you in your combat capabilities?”

“Very,” Harry tenaciously answers.

Flitwick sighs before then asking, “have either of you heard of Wager of Battle?” They shake their head before Flitwick expands. “It’s similar to a trial by combat with the exception of not simply fighting for one’s innocence. Wager of Battle is an ancient goblin custom still used today in criminal, military, or civil disputes to try cases in single combat rather than debate. In addition, a challenge cannot be refused without being greatly dishonored. The only exception to that is a superior is not bound to fight someone who is considered inferior which is why status and lineage are very important to goblin kind.”

“So the question is,” Nicolas thoughtfully hums. “Will they accept Ares as someone superior enough to accept the Wager of Battle.”

Nodding, Flitwick answers, “that is correct.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Harry calls out loudly, “I challenge King Ragnuk to a Wager of Battle!”

Slumping his shoulders, Nicolas huffs, “really, Ares,” as Flitwick shakes his head, protesting, “Mr. Flamel…”

Harry, however, adds to his challenge, “if I win, you will give me the information I want and we can trade the carcass for the armor and daggers. And if you win, you can have my phoenix and my life… to do with as you wish… forever.”

The gallery breaks out into hushed conversation as Ragnuk takes a moment to answer, “…you are unworthy to face a King, wizard-”

“Then choose whoever you like,” Harry defiantly insists. “I’ll take on your best warrior. If that’s not good enough, I’ll take on your best team of warriors if you think so little of me.” Looking around the gallery of assembled goblins and guards, Harry challenges, “who here would like the opportunity to shut me up or make a slave of a wizard, or possibly earn a legendary creature? I’m offering you the opportunity to back up your words free of retaliation! Will you accept like the honorable goblins you pretend to be, or will you balk at such a contest?” Returning his strong emerald gaze on the Goblin King, Harry ignores the cries of the crowd to loudly dispute, “I hear you’re the embodiment of your nation’s soul, your highness, so what’ll it be? Am I truly just a foolish boy in need of discipline or are goblins all just talk?”

“In caput eius,” Ragnuk growls to the bevy uproar of goblins in attendance. The King then calls out goblin names in gobbledegook.

Harry didn’t need either Though Flitwick and Nicolas both voice, “on your head be it,” Harry didn’t need them to translate the Latin phrase. Harry simply watches four goblins in shiny and fierce armor walk forward from the crowd while Flitwick grips Nicolas’ wrist.

Pulling his arm away, Nicolas calls out, “wait, you mean to duel now?” Instead of answering, Flitwick hastens to pull the immortal alchemist away as he argues to the King, “he just fought a dragon earlier today! This is not right!”

“Only a fool would make a challenge he is not ready to meet,” Ragnuk heatedly returns. “If he truly aims to earn the respect of a King, then he must duel as I do; defeating four of our greatest
Looking at a hesitant and worried Nicolas being pulled to the gallery, Harry simply nods reassuringly, expressing, “it’s okay, Nic.” The wide and long walkway appears to be the combat space as guards cordon off the boundary.

“As goblins do not fight with a wand, neither shall you,” Ragnuk informs Harry from his elevated plinth.

As the shield glows blue before becoming crystal clear, Nicolas yells at Ragnuk, “that’s hardly fair!”

Ignoring the frenetic alchemist, Ragnuk continues to stipulate, “and to avoid damaging such a valuable prize, the phoenix may not participate.”

Observing the finest goblin warriors surround Harry with dread, Flitwick pleads, “your highness, please reconsider-”

“Those are my terms,” Ragnuk yells, interrupting Flitwick. Returning his attention on the young wizard at the center of an improvised dueling ring, the heated goblin King declares, “accept them or run with your tail between your legs, wizard!”

The moment Harry voices the words, “I accept,” the surrounding crowd begins cheering for their warriors from behind the protective barrier. “To Nic, Nova,” he says, and his legendary avian familiar rubs his beak against Harry’s head before flaming directly to Nicolas’ shoulder, showing Harry that, at the very least, Nova can flame through their barrier.

In the round throne room, surrounded by jeering goblins on the rectangular walkway, the four general-like goblins are positioned around Harry like the cardinal points of a compass. They each have a short-sword, leather and plated armor on, making Harry wonder how similar their style of combat is to Týr and his team. He had only faced one of them, and their ability to silently apparate within striking range is a concerning possibility here as well. Without his wand, precision casting will be difficult; fortunately, strength won’t be an issue.

Despite the constraints dumped on him by Ragnuk, Harry doesn’t want this to last any longer than it has to. Vaguely noting the goblin King’s smile as he drinks from his tankard, Harry observes this is about worthiness, about value, and despite how haunting it feels to be disregarded—as if being thrown in the deepest darkest hole to be forgotten—he’s not here to play games. He has people to protect and monsters to slay, so without hesitation, Harry dives deep into the ocean of magic always at the center of him.

His eyes immediately glow a brilliant green, bringing a hush to the crowd. Harry felt heavy with concentrated magic, as if drowning in corrosive water, and without even the use of his vision, he can sense the four goblins to the north, south, east, and west of him. Analytical details about the four armed warriors immediately spring to mind.

‘Small black eyes; possible sensitivity to light. Large ears and nose; possibly weak to sound and smells. Steel plates over vital organs and interwoven leather over joints; meant for speed more than defense. Goblin runes etched on the metal of their armor; likely increases defenses against elemental and other magical attacks. Their short-swords are easy to handle, versatile, and etched with enchantments Harry assumes can disrupt his protego. Their formation feels practiced; they’re a well-rehearsed unit which means quick and successive offensive.’

As his mind plays with the different possibilities of attacks and counter-measures, Harry’s
heightened perception senses an elevation in aggression from two goblins—south and east of him—more than the other two just before the goblin king cries, “begin!”

With that momentary insight, Harry wasn’t surprised when the goblins south and east of him instantly apparate to his left and spine, primed to stab him. With his mental acuity, he can feel the defense in their armor as well as visualize them without physically seeing them, and in the split second, Harry silently apparates a foot away before immediately erupting his entire being in a powerful, “lumos maxima!”

Everyone in the room is blinded and stunned by the pure blast of severe light for several moments; more than enough time for him. Without eyes, Harry can still see them, and absent any hesitation, he aims open palms at the stunned warriors and incorporates an absurd amount of magical force in his dual-handed, “stupify!” The stone-ground around Harry’s feet as the force exploding out Harry’s hands rocket the two goblins to the dead-stop of the magical barrier protecting the others.

With his eyes still closed, the royal room, and everyone in it, appear like colorful ghosts of light as if he can see the magical makeup of an object without eyes. It’s this ability that allows Harry to sense the other goblins’ attack nearly the same instant Harry wandlessly casts, “protego!” Only for the shield to fail against their magical daggers; an effect exactly like Týr’s weapon. Still, it was enough of a delay for Harry to apparate to the opposite end of the dueling ring.

Opening his eyes to glare at the remaining goblins, the core of Harry’s eyes were practically white while the light rages out like a green flame. With their instant mobility, it wouldn’t be in his best interest to stand still for long, however, Harry didn’t need much time to interrupt their next volley. His magically-heightened senses warn him a split second before they disapparate. Rather than apparating away himself, Harry casts the shield he expected would fail against their weapons to buy enough time to voice the charm, “sonorus,” amplifying the intensity of his voice to ear-splitting decibel levels.

To a human standing ten feet away, Harry’s loud roar would cause permanent hearing damage without treatment. To the sensitive ears of a goblin standing right next to him, it was impossible to stave off 145 decibel sound waves from damaging the cells in the membrane of their long ears. The concussive sound exploding through their ear canal had them convulsing as if they were having a seizure.

Short as they are, Harry aims both palms down on either side of him at a goblin face in agony before hitting them with a potent, “stupify.” As before, detonating such a destructive wave of magical energy out of his palms spider-web-cracked the ground around him driving their armored bodies into the crumbling stone floor.

The entire fight didn’t last more than thirty seconds; it takes Harry longer to tie his shoes. Still, he didn’t feel a sense of accomplishment or victory within himself. It was an obvious result. To begin with, he had more magic and ability than they did; than most magicals do. In addition to their numerical advantage, they likely didn’t think much of a wizard without a wand as well so it’s an easy assumption to make that a fourteen-year-old boy would not defeat four trained imperial goblins.

Despite what this could mean for future negotiations, with what’s at stake, Harry didn’t see another way. Calmly, he straightens his school uniform as he walks toward the Goblin King. As Nova flames back to his master’s shoulder, his enhanced eyes can tell Ragnuk is angered, impressed, and partially anxious. Ignoring the hushed gallery of goblins and passing the enchanted silver platform, Harry demands to know of the King, “am I worthy now?”
What a fantastic learning experience this is. I had to do a lot of research, which is fun, so I hope I did the chapter justice. More goblin stuff to come but we're getting closer to the end of that arc. I know many of you are eager to answer some of the mysteries I proposed in the beginning, i.e. Lily and what happened to Harry. We'll get there!

Thank you to my amazing and wonderful patrons for your tips, I truly appreciate it! I published that novel I had on there. It's called Belladonna by Grae Foxx on Amazon if you'd like to buy the digital copy($3). That was a great learning experience. It taught me I don't know enough :) But I'll get there with your wonderful support and my tenacious attitude.

If there are any errors or comments please let me know. I always love hearing your thoughts since they help me become better. The Last Prayer is next up. I'm already 2K words in but you all know that's not enough for me. Anyway, have a great one,

--Grae

P.S. as a big fan of basketball, I just have to say RIP Kobe.

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