Summary

Harry never wanted to be special, to be a freak, but when he awakens in the body of an infant phoenix, 16 years after being pronounced dead, he finds that he’s even more different than ever. Unwilling to face the backlash that his resurrection would cause, he flees the wizarding world, only to come across some of the most unique individuals the world has ever seen. Maybe, just maybe, there’s a place for Harry amongst the Avengers, and perhaps he can prove it by helping them defeat a villain hell-bent on consuming their very souls…

(On Hiatus)

Notes

A/N: AU from somewhere in the 6th book on- Harry was captured by Voldemort before he could begin his quest for the Horcruxes. Sirius and Dumbledore are still dead; Snape is not. Various things will be AU as I see fit. This will eventually be an Avengers crossover, but it could take some time before that happens. (read, chapter 6. Chapters before chp 5 are fairly short, I promise they pick up later)
I

Chapter Notes

A/N: AU from somewhere in the 6th book on- Harry was captured by Voldemort before he could begin his quest for the Horcruxes. Sirius and Dumbledore are still dead; Snape is not. Various things will be AU as I see fit. This will eventually be an Avengers crossover, but it could take some time before that happens. (read, chapter 6. Chapters before chp 5 are fairly short, I promise they pick up later)

Also, I own nothing you recognize, just playing. This is my first story posted, so please bear with me through my growing pains. Constructive criticism is appreciated!

He came aware of himself through the pain in his ankle as his toes skidded and skipped over the rough-hewn stone of the dungeon hallway. His ankle and left forearm throbbed brightly with each bump, and Harry winced with the realization that the ankle was probably broken. He didn't bother to lift his head- if he showed that he was awake, they may make him walk. Asleep, he was much less amusing, and regardless he had little chance of escaping. He recognized the feeling of iron bands around his wrist, knees, and chest as the *mobilicorpus* spell, which meant that at least one wizard had a wand trained on him, and he was unarmed.

His forward momentum stalled, and he heard a second wizard fumble with a band of keys, unlocking the door to his cell. The doors of the dungeon where enchanted to be impervious to magic (and THAT was a paradox that he had considered many times as he went slowly insane from lack of stimulation in the small cell), and as such locking and unlocking spells were useless. The door swung open, and Harry floated forward, wincing as his left toe caught on the stone sill and pulled painfully.

“Finite.” The spell holding Harry up broke, and Harry caught himself with the heel of his right hand as he collapsed forward, coming to rest roughly on his shoulder and hip on the ground. He groaned deep in his throat, the sound erupting into a rasping cough that shook his body and aggravated the left side of his rib cage, which held ribs that were either broken or bruised. A fresh flood of coppery blood rose between his teeth as he tensed his entire body against the pain, and he only moved again once the inclination to cough was firmly trapped in the back of his throat. He swallowed down the blood grimly- no sense to lose the only liquid he had. When he glanced through the bars of the door, there was no sign of the wizards who had escorted him to his cell. It had been almost three weeks since he arrived at Malfoy Manor, and apparently he was old news. He determinedly did not think about what could be occupying their time now.

With a sigh, he carefully sat up and wiped his bloody hand on the ruin of his robes, carefully cradling what remained of his left forearm to his chest to protect it, and then began the painful process of inching his way across his cell one-handed to the least wet and drafty corner. Scraped into the rough stone of the wall were several sets of tick marks from the different people who had been trapped in this pit. He pushed the oily, dirty mess of hair back from his eyes and took a moment to trace the marks with a finger, and then lifted the loose stone at the base of the wall and chipped a line at the end of his own marks. Twenty one days. He went back and counted, a chill coming over him that had little to do with the stone-cold of the dungeon. Twenty one days since his capture put tonight at the night of the new moon, where no moon would be visible in the night sky.
Tonight was the night. Hermione had been clear. If they absolutely had to use their last ditch effort, it had to be on the night of the new moon. She had made him promise that he would only do it if it were the only option. He smiled briefly, his dry lips cracking open and spilling more blood onto his tongue.

“I promised, Hermione.” He whispered, looking up at the ceiling of his cell. “But now I have to do it. If this is the cost to protect everyone from Voldemort, if this is the best way, then why wouldn’t I do this now?”

He stared for a moment, almost expecting a whisper to come back, a response, something telling him that he didn’t have to do this. But nothing came.

He took as deep a breath as he could with the pain in his ribs, settled himself into the most comfortable position he could, and closed his eyes. The pit in his stomach slowly hardened from fear into resolve. If this was the last night, then he better make it count. He let their faces play through his mind, and let the resolve grow to fill his entire body. His mother, Lily, what he could remember of her voice, and that green flash. His father, James Potter. Sirius, how he looked right before he went through the veil. Myrtle, and all that she could have done if she had survived that night. Hagrid’s broken wand, and Cedric’s funeral, which was at least as much Voldemort’s fault as it was his own. Dumbledore’s death flashed before his eyes, the memory still a raw wound. And beyond the personal, beyond the faces he knew, to all the people who had died in the first war and all the people who could die in the second. He whispered under his breath “Purgate inflagare.”

He brought his friends to mind, Hermione with her thirst for knowledge and her aggressive mothering, making sure that all her friends were taken care of. Ron, with his sheepish grin and brilliant mind for strategy, and all the times they stood with him. Ron’s family, so eager and willing to take him in, and all his classmates, who deserved a world free of Voldemort and the shadow he cast over the world. He imagined his resolve growing into a shield to protect those he loved, and all of wizardkind with them. “Purgate inflagare.” He murmured again.

He took another deep breath, the pain in his body fading, and focused on Voldemort. Hermione had been very clear on this part. “You have to focus your thoughts on Voldemort, but you can’t feel any negative feelings, at all. You have to be pure, to accept him for who he is, and show the magic that in your purity, you are striking him down. You can’t do it out of hate, or revenge, or even dislike. You have to do it with love.”

He thought of the pensieve memories that Dumbledore had shared with him, the images of little Tom Riddle as a child being abused and bullied. He thought of him lying in bed at night, wondering who his mother was and why his father abandoned him, and he thought of a young orphan discovering his power and clutching it as the one thing that set him apart, the one thing that made him different and special, and he allowed the little spark of kinship that he felt for Voldemort to grow and blossom. He felt the spell grow and shift with new intent, the shield turning to focus on Voldemort. “Purgate inflagare.” He said, his voice growing louder.

He thought of himself and what he was doing. Who he was, and what he could be. He thought of being an auror, or possibly a curse breaker like Bill. He thought of marrying Ginny, and of little red-headed, green eyed children. He thought of flying on his broom above the Quidditch pitch while the golden snitch darted in front of him, and he thought of sharing one last embrace with Hermione and Ron, and with a deep breath he let it go. He didn’t allow it to weigh down his heart, and he didn’t allow himself to mourn for what could be. Instead, he opened his eyes, staring through stone and across distance to where he knew Voldemort was, pacing the stone floor in front of a sumptuously appointed bed that hadn’t been slept it, and he imagined lighting his future on fire.
“Purgate INFLAGARE!” He shouted, and his will burst into flame.

He felt it take root in the core of his magic and spread out amongst his veins, bubbling under his skin with scorching heat. He threw his head back and screamed, tears squeezing from his eyes, only to instantly evaporate in the heat of his magic. As his eyes squinted in the smoke and heat, he saw through the stone and across the distance that Voldemort, too, had sunk to the floor, his mouth open in a scream, fire growing from the beds of his fingernails and the corners of his eyes. Even further away, Harry saw the remaining horcruxes burst into flame as well. He had a moment for one last smile for Hermione, the brightest witch of her age, who had figured out how to stop this war, and then his world became flame and sacrifice, and he allowed the love and protection that he had summoned to engulf his soul as the magical flames roared up around Voldemort and began to eat away at Malfoy Manor.

.xOx.

Hermione wiped sweating palms on the sides of her robe as they approached the site of the conflagration. The fire had finally burnt out after three days, and now this great stone hulk was all that remained of Malfoy Manor. Areas of the stone were unnaturally smooth or cracked from where the fire had grown hot enough to melt it, and the greenery for almost 100 yards surrounding the wreck was wilted and brown from the excessive heat. She felt tears rising in the back of her throat, and her eyes felt hot and sore. Ron stepped up next to her, his broad shoulder brushing against hers. They stood for several minutes, just gazing at the last place that Harry was alive.

“We don’t have to be here, you know.” He offered, his own voice rough and low. “There isn’t much we can even do- we’re just two sixth year students who were about to go on a quest for Horcruxes. This place is crawling with Unspeakables and Aurors.”

Hermione nodded, waiting a moment before replying. When she spoke, her voice only wavered slightly. “I owe it to Harry.” She stopped for a moment. “He used the spell I found. The Wizard’s Last Strike, do you remember?” She looked at Ron. “If I hadn’t taught him that spell...” Her eyes filled with tears. Ron swung around and gripped her by the shoulders. “No, Hermione.” He said. “You gave him the means to save everyone.” He said. “He chose to use the spell. And remember what you told us about it? It couldn’t even be used if the caster had any doubt at all. Harry was completely willing to sacrifice himself for us, and that was his choice.”

Hermione nodded miserably, and hid her face in Ron’s shoulder for a moment before clearing her throat and raising her head, surreptitiously dashing away tears with the sleeve of her robe. She turned and marched forward into the ruins, pausing at the entryway. All the wood of the building had burnt away in the fire, all the precious metals boiled away. The ceilings had caved in and great slabs of stone had fallen in the heat, and so the great stone ruin was open to the sky above. Ashwinders coiled and hissed in hallways and under the stone slabs, their trails of ash indistinguishable from the general ash and debris from the fire. Hermione kept walking, striding through the ruin and past the different ministry employees. Ron hurried to keep up with her, not bothering to ask what she was looking for. He felt the same grief as she did, the hope that if they just looked under one more slab or around one more corner that Harry would come rushing out, glasses crooked and hair wild as he grinned and waved at them to wait up. He coughed to dislodge the lump rising in his throat.

The bright morning sunlight left no shadows, and no matter where they looked, all that was left was ashes and stone. Hermione kept moving quicker and quicker until she was running headlong down the hallways, ash puffing up with each step, and Ron sprinted after her, keeping the distraught girl in sight. An elderly auror moved to stop them, but a nearby Order of the Phoenix member stopped him, whispering in his ear, and he stepped aside to let them pass.
Hermione ran until her tears and the ash combined to choke her, and she collapsed, coughing and crying. Ron panted up next to her and sat down, wrapping the witch in his arms.

This was how Kingsley found them, occupied by their grief and huddled in the ashes. He sat slowly on the nearby slab, waiting for them to come up out of their shared grief. Hermione looked up, wiping tears away with her sleeves, and only succeeding in smearing ash all over her face.

Kingsley spoke slowly, removing a leather bag from his coat. “According to legend, when a person makes a great sacrifice for the good of others, that act of goodness calls to magic. And in return, magic creates a being of purity and magic.” He opened the top of the sack and lifted out a bright reddish-orange egg that glowed from within. The surface roiled and twisted, somewhere between the flickering of a coal and the leaping of a fire. “The Unspeakables think that this is Phoenix egg, created by Harry’s decision to sacrifice himself for us. They wanted to study it, but I think that nobody deserves to look after it so much as you.”

He reached down and placed the egg into Hermione’s hands, then stood and walked away. Hermione clasped the egg to her chest. It radiated a soothing warmth that somehow eased the ache of grief inside her heart. Ron reached over and laid a hand on the egg as well, and they shared a tremulous smile.
Chapter Notes

Wandering POV in this one... Apologies for that!

On the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a young girl with curly red hair stood in front of a large statue of a wizard. The statue held his wand above his head, pointed straight at the heavens above, and his face was carved in an expression of righteousness as his robes flared dramatically around him.

“Mama says you wouldn’t like this statue.” She said solemnly, speaking around her right thumb, her curly head barely as tall as the pedestal. She continued sucking her thumb, her other hand holding tight to a red fleece blanket embroidered with tiny golden lions that frolicked and gamboled like kittens.

Out on the lawn of the castle, her mother and father were helping an old woman set up tables and chairs for the annual Hogwarts Banquet to Honor the Fallen Hero. Rose furrowed her small brow. She didn’t understand. Her mother had been crying this morning, and last night when Rose should have been asleep, she had snuck down to listen to her mother and father fighting. That was when her mother had said that Harry wouldn’t like his statue or the party. Rose returned her gaze to the statue.

“Why wouldn’t you like a party? And why would a party make Mama cry?” She asked, again speaking around her small thumb. “Ever’body likes parties, especially when they’re for you!” The statue stood motionless. “Maybe it’s because you can’t open your presents!” Rose said. “After all, you're made of stone. I could open them for you, if you like?”

Rose stood on her tiptoes and placed her hands on the top of the pedestal, trying to get closer, and a shiny glass container caught her eye. In front of Harry’s feet was a rectangular glass box. Inside the box was a flickering blue flame that Rose recognized as her mother’s bluebell flames, and cradled in the flames was a bright red egg. As Rose watched, the surface of the egg slowly swirled, flickering with shades of umber, scarlet, crimson, and blood red. The base of the egg, washed in the bluebell flames, looked to be the deepest black.

Rose’s eyes lit up at her find, the statue and the party forgotten. Glancing around, she found a nearby rock, which she carefully rolled to the base of the pedestal. With the extra boost in height from the stone and a bit of scrambling, she was able to heft herself up. She crawled closer to the egg, pressing her nose up against the glass until it fogged with her breath. She watched closely, and then giggled in delight. The egg was rocking- just slightly, but she had watched the eggs that her Mama had bought hatch into chicks just the week before, and this egg was making the same motions!

Rose sat on her knees and pressed her hands to the glass, wishing that it would disappear so she could be closer to the hatching egg. It looked so beautiful! She wondered what would come out.

She hardly noticed when the glass vanished, crowding closer to the egg, but being careful not to touch. She knew she couldn’t help the chick by breaking the shell- her Mama had said that if she forced a chick out too soon, it might die! Rose frowned. She didn’t want to hurt whatever creature
“Rose!” A stern voice called from behind her. “What are you doing up there?” Rose turned around excitedly. “Mama! Look!” She said, ignoring her mother’s tone. “The egg! It’s hatching.” She turned back, just in time to see the egg give a mighty rock that tipped in right out of the bluebell flames and sent it rolling towards the edge of the pedestal. With a shriek, Rose lunged for the egg, catching it just as they both fell from the edge. A moment later, strong arms caught her too, and her father carefully lowered her to the ground.

“Ron!” Her mama said, her eyes dark with worry as she rushed over to check Rose for harm. “Rose says that Harry’s egg is hatching...” Rose’s father looked from his wife to the egg that Rose was clutching. “It’s hatching?” He said, sounding surprised. “You mean, it’s actually alive? It's been so long that I thought...” he trailed off.

Rose ignored them, gently setting the egg on the ground. The creature inside, perhaps sensing the narrowly averted disaster, began rocking with even greater force, until the beautiful flame-orange shell cracked and a small triangular chip fell from the side of the egg. A small, straight, golden beak poked out, mouth agape as it panted for air.

Hermione and Ron crouched down next to their daughter, all three staring at the egg in front of them. “Well, I suppose we should move it to a better location.” Hermione said, standing and casting a strong warming spell on the egg. She carefully levitated it and carried it briskly through the front doors of Hogwarts and towards their family quarters, Rose happily trotting at her heels.

Their small family had a room on the ground level of Hogwarts, with a hidden courtyard expanded with wizardspace that held their back lawn, where Hermione was keeping her new hens. The entrance to their quarters was concealed behind a tapestry of a rampant Gryffindor Lion, as Hermione had refused to deal with a password or portrait.

With casual efficiency, Hermione spelled the surface of their sensible coffee table with a cushioning charm and warded the edges so that nothing could fall off. She recast her heating charm to include the table, gently placed the egg in the middle, and then settled back on the beige couch, pulling Rose up to sit next to her as they observed the egg.

Ron crossed his arms. “Hermione, aren’t you forgetting something?” Hermione tugged at a curl that had escaped her plain bun, and then tucked it behind her ear. “I happen to find that watching this egg hatch is probably more in keeping with what Harry would want.” She answered primly. Catching Ron’s disapproving look, she pursed her lips. “Ron, it’s been fifteen years since Harry’s sacrifice, and every year they go up and make some speech about how noble and brave he was, and then everyone celebrates the fact that he killed Voldemort. These gatherings aren’t about mourning him, they’re about celebrating our survival, and frankly, I’m sick of it.” She blinked back a suspicious shine from her eyes.

“Besides, this egg has bothered me for years.” She reached out and smoothed her fingers over the shell of the egg gently. “Why did it appear when Harry did... that? Was it truly summoned by his sacrifice? Is it really a phoenix?” Her voice cracked a little as she continued. “I feel like I at least need to take care of this, Ron. I’m the one who found the spell he used. If it weren’t for me, he never would have thought of using the Wizard’s Last Stand...”

Ron crouched down in front of her, catching her hand in his. “Mione, you researched that spell. You know its requirements. For it to have worked, he had to recite it entirely of his own volition. He had to honestly desire to sacrifice himself to take down Voldemort. Just because you were the one who found the spell that allowed him to do so doesn’t mean that you had anything to do with that decision.” Hermione glared at him. “Just because I didn’t force him to make the decision...”
doesn’t mean that it’s not my fault! I’m the one who gave him the option.” She closed her eyes in pain. Ron rubbed the bridge of his nose. They had gone over this time and again, and nothing he ever said broke through to Hermione. He stood to join her on the couch when he was interrupted by a large wobble and a creaking crack coming from the egg. “Mama! Look!” Rose cried, grabbing Hermione’s sleeve and tugging. “It’s coming out!”

The creature inside the egg was working quickly. In the time Hermione had been speaking with Ron, it had enlarged its breathing hole by three or four times, and had also managed to create a crack almost halfway around the egg. It was currently thrashing and rocking with single-minded determination. With each monumental effort, Hermione could see the chick pushing against the membrane of the egg and widening the crack. The chick thrashed one more time and the egg tipped, the inner membrane rupturing, spilling the wet and exhausted chick out on the floor of the crate. It raised its head on a wobbly neck and pitched forward, cheeping pitifully at Hermione. She reached out, lifting the bird in careful fingers.

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Well, it isn't the prettiest bird I've ever seen…” He trailed off as Hermione elbowed him in the arm and Rose leaned in to peer closely at the chick.
"I think he's lovely!” Rose cried defensively.

"Well?” Ron asked, rubbing his arm. "Is it a phoenix?

Hermione pursed her lips, bringing the chick closer to her face with one hand. "Hard to say." She said. "Magical creatures are not precisely my area of expertise." She waved her wand negligently and summoned her copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. The book fell open to the section on phoenixes, obviously a favorite. "Like I told you before, according to Mr. Scamander, no phoenix egg sighting has ever been recorded." She trailed a finger down the page, cradled the chick to her chest, and read aloud, "While adult phoenixes are sometimes seen and rarely domesticated, their breeding and nesting habits remain elusive. To my knowledge, no person has ever seen a phoenix egg or nest, or even a pair of phoenix together. Folktales say that a phoenix can be born from the sacrifice of a noble wizard, but no factual evidence has been found to back this theory, nor has any record been made of the actual appearance of egg. Phoenix chicks, however, are well documented due to the phoenix's yearly habit of rebirth. At their youngest, the phoenix looks much like any other chick, mostly bald and covered in dark red pinfeathers, with a straight golden beak and golden talons. After its yearly Burning Day, the chick will grow rapidly, reaching full adulthood within a week, whereupon it takes the traditional red and gold coloring."

She looked up from the book, frowning. "It has a golden beak and golden claws. And…” She cast a gentle cleaning and drying spell on the chick, and the pinfeathers lightened from black and wet to dark red. "Well, that's promising."

.xOx.

It took him some time to realize what had happened. In his defense, however, it was the first time he had been a bird, and really, Harry thought, the whole process had been severely disorientating.

His memories were still fuzzy, but he knew that for a long time, everything had been fire. He remembered being content with this; it had seemed fitting, somehow, though when he had gone to examine that thought it had vanished like smoke. That too, had felt right, and so he had not struggled to remember anything but the fire. He remembered the flickering flames holding his attention, tapping with friendly arms at his mind, his soul, and he had danced and flickered too, eternally, momentarily. He had been unsure of the difference between the two, for when all was fire, what was time? He still wasn't sure how long this had lasted, but near the end, he had noticed something that was not fire. Far off in the distance, the flames had stopped and curled in, as if met
with something they could neither ignite nor melt.

Perhaps not all was fire.

He remembered that the thought had jangled unpleasantly for a moment until an especially lovely blue flame had caught his eye, and then it too, was forgotten.

Perhaps the edge had always been present, but then it had started to come closer, slowly and slowly, edging in around him. Something had started changing, and with it had come the concept of time. And then, as the edge grew steadily closer, space became finite. With time and space had come the realization that he had not always been there, cocooned in fire. Before, he had been alive. A boy. The boy. They boy-who-lived.

He remembered that the thought had jogged his memories of his last stand, and the agony of the cleansing fire bursting from him as he fell backward, a column of fire bursting out of his chest and connecting him to Voldemort, singing a song of fire and cleansing and destruction, redemption, rebirth. Harry remembered closing his eyes as he had become the fire and sunk gratefully into death.

So it stood to reason that it startled him when he managed to fight free of his egg and realize that he was not dead at all. He had crashed to the ground, hitting all along his belly, chest, and chin. He raised his head, which suddenly felt incredibly heavy on his neck, and looked straight at the woman in front of him, who was all brown curls and soft brown eyes and tan skin. He gave a short cry and scrambled forwards, pitching himself into soft hands that closed around him and helped support his wobbly neck.

“Hermione!” He said, or tried to. The name came out as a warbly chirp at about the same time as Harry realized that while Hermione had always been taller than him, she had never been big enough to encompass him in her hands. He felt his breathing pick up and twisted his head on his wobbly neck to see his own back, which was covered in wet, straggly down and pinfeathers, which was when he had realized that he was a bird.

He froze, his beak agape in shock and panting slightly as he recovered from the exertion of his hatching, and dumbly listened to the conversation above him as a charm gently washed over him, cleaning away the sticky remnants of his hatching and fluffing up his soft, downy fuzz. He immediately felt warmer and instinctually crooned, rubbing his heavy head on Hermione's thumb in appreciation. Behind his shock, he felt sluggish and tired, and it took all his attention to keep his eyes open and fixed on Hermione while she spoke. There was something different about her, he realized slowly.

He would know her soft brown eyes and wild curls anywhere, but there were faint lines around her eyes and lips that had not been there before, and a new sort of wisdom in her eyes as she juggled him in one hand and a young girl, perhaps four or five years old, in her other arm. She, too, had those familiar, warm brown eyes, and red hair that was just as familiar. She looked just like a Weasley, he thought, and then watching Hermione interact with the child, he came to another realization. How long had he been in that egg? Could this be… Hermione's daughter? He looked around for other clues, feeling his little bird heart start to beat quickly in his chest.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door that had Hermione swinging around, giving him his first glance at the other person in the room. Harry couldn't keep himself from cheeping joyfully at the sight of Ron, just as familiar and unforgettable as Hermione, despite his red Auror robes and tidy, unfamiliar haircut. He only had a brief glimpse before Hermione's body blocked his view of Ron as she gathered him close and stood up, walking to the door and swinging it open to reveal a man that Harry would have been just as happy to never see again. He screeched furiously,
beating stubby wings in an attempt to backpeddle as Hermione came face to face with Severus Snape, a man that Harry had last seen on that terrible night when he killed Dumbledore.

"Woah there, little guy!" Hermione laughed, bringing up her other hand to help support Harry as he had started to go over backward with his flailing. He stared up at her, confused. He had told her what Snape had done! He had told her and Ron what he had seen that night on the Astronomy Tower. Did she not know this was Snape? Was Snape wearing a glamour? Had he become some sort of bird that was able to see through glamours? His racing thoughts screeched to a halt when Hermione stood up on her tiptoes, still cradling him in both hands, and placed a perfunctory kiss on Snape's cheek. "Severus!" She said, dashing Harry's hope that she didn't know him. "Come in, come in. Maybe you know what we should do with this little fellow." She said, lifting her hands as if to show Harry to Snape. Harry hissed and mantled his useless wings.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "What is a phoenix doing here? It certainly doesn't seem happy to see me." He drawled, coming in and sharing an arm clasp with Ron to Harry's continued bewilderment, which tripled when Snape rested a fond hand on Rose's head and she beamed up at him. Hermione laughed, swinging the door shut and carrying Harry back to the table. Ron smiled, and said, "Well, it certainly doesn't. Maybe it doesn't like slimy Slytherins." Harry swung his head around to stare at him next. He recognized that tone as Ron teasing a friend, and when Snape responded with a dry riposte and no offense, it only solidified it. Somehow, Ron and Hermione were friends with Severus Snape.

Maybe he had died after all, he thought. This was nothing like the world that he had left.

Hermione settled Snape into an armchair sat kitty-corner from the couch, and sat back down, freeing a hand to summon a tea service. Severus poured himself a cup as Rose tugged on Ron's sleeve and whispered something in his ear that resulted in her being swept up, giggling, into Ron's arms. He leaned down and gave Hermione a kiss on the cheek and excused himself and Rose, leaving Hermione and Harry alone with Snape, whom Harry was still watching warily. Snape stared back darkly, and Harry found his pinfeathers rising up in irritation again.

Snape broke eye contact and settled back into his chair, stirring his teacup delicately. "Where did you get the creature?" He asked. Hermione gestured to the shattered egg shell on the table. "It just hatched a moment ago." She said. "From Harry's egg." Snape sat bolt-upright, his tea forgotten, perched precariously on the armrest.

"It actually hatched?" He breathed, picking up a shard of shell and turning it in his fingers. "Just think of the properties of this." He murmured. "Phoenix eggshell... What sort of potions could this produce?" Hermione shifted, raising her finger to gently stroke down Harry's head. It felt good and he began to relax into it, until Hermione told Snape that he could take the egg shell for experimentation.

At this, Harry squawked indignantly. That was his shell, damnit. Not that he really cared about it, but he didn't want to give it to Snape, of all people. "Oh hush, you." Hermione told him, tapping him gently on the head in rebuke. "Here," she said, extending him out to Snape, who moved forward to take him in surprisingly gentle hands. Harry chirped and twisted, protesting, and Snape changed his grip to gently pin his wings closed with his fingers curled underneath, supporting Harry while immobilizing him. Harry chirped angrily and ineffectually as the potions master turned him to look under his belly and explored his wings with careful fingers, before flicking his wand in Harry's direction. Harry flinched violently, but nothing happened beyond a gentle blue glow that seemed be coming from his feathers. He clicked his beak in agitation, sure that there was something nefarious in the spell. "Are you sure it's a phoenix?" Hermione asked, watching from the couch.
Snape nodded, righting Harry and lightening his grip. Harry took the opportunity to try and nip at his fingers, and the man gave him a gentle shake and otherwise ignored him. Harry settled down irritably, watching for another chance to peck. "Surely," Snape replied. "I saw Fawkes enough after his burning days. This little one is much smaller- seems younger- but the beak and the claws are the same." He cradled the bird gently in one hand and gestured to the fading blue halo. "It's also a he." Snape noted.

Hermione gazed at Harry. "Well, now that he's hatched, what do we do with him?" She asked. "Will you... will you take him?" Both humans ignored Harry as he shrilled loudly and struggled weakly against the hands holding him. "Honestly, besides the girls out back, I've never raised a bird before. And it seems disrespectful to equate raising a chicken to raising a phoenix!" Snape snorted. "I imagine that you simply feed it and provide it a warm place to sleep, and it will grow."

"Well yes, thank you Severus." Hermione said drily. "Do you happen to know what a baby phoenix eats?" Snape frowned down at the struggling Harry, who took the moment to hiss back up at him. "I'm afraid I do not. Is it not noted in Fantastic Beasts?" He asked. Hermione shook her head, brown curls bouncing. "Fantastic Beasts doesn't even note what adults eat." She said. Severus frowned. "It never occurred to me to care what Fawkes ate, beyond a few treats Albus used to give him." He said. "And this creature doesn't seem to care for me." He said, deftly moving his fingers aside as Harry took another peck at them.

"Nonetheless, I think you would be the best one to take him." Hermione said, and Harry detected a note of pleading in her voice. "Between Rose and teaching classes, and the new year starting this week, I really don't think that I have the time to care for him properly. And you would do such a better job anyways." She frowned, looking down at Harry, who stilled and returned her look, trying to convey his displeasure with his eyes. "I had hoped..." She stopped, sighed. "Well, regardless. Please?" Harry cocked his head in birdlike confusion. What had she hoped? And why did she think that Snape, of all people, would take better care of a baby animal than she would?

Snape sighed, sounding very put-out, though his fingers on Harry remained gentle. "Very well." He said. "I suppose I will take him home now, and determine what sort of sustenance he needs." Harry crooned, a low, concerned warble, and Hermione frowned at him. "Don't be like that, now. Severus knows his way around birds. He'll take good care of you."

Snape drew his wand from within his sleeve and conjured a small, lidded box. He cast several spells that Harry didn't recognize, and then lowered him inside. Harry struggled half-heartedly, his exhaustion beginning to creep up on him, but could not prevent Snape from releasing him into the dark box. The spells he had cast must have been warming and cushioning charms, Harry noted distractedly as be felt his eyes begin to slide shut, because he was suddenly very warm...
Harry had no real way of telling how long he had been asleep for, but as he awoke, he realized that he was laying in that same box on a big, scarred wooden table and that he was very, very hungry. When he saw movement across the room, he felt his head tip back, his stubby little wings flutter, and a sad, plaintive cheeping emerge from his throat as he instinctually began to beg for food.

Across the room, he saw Snape look up and approach him, a wooden tray in his hands. He set it down in front of Harry with a thump, and Harry saw that it contained several beakers and vials of potions ingredients. In a bout of sudden worry, he cut off his vocalizations and cowered back. Was Snape going to use him for potions ingredients after all?

Snape made a disparaging sound. "I'm not going to hurt you, daft bird. Why is it you distrust me so?" He lifted a small spoon and brought it to the first of his vials, withdrawing a mound of smooth, shiny black seeds. "Since we don't know what you eat, I brought you a few things that Fawkes used to eat. I remember that he loved sunflower seeds." Snape poured the scoop of sunflower seeds at Harry's feet. Harry looked down curiously, and took a sniff. They smelled dry and dusty, and he lowered his head to peck at one uncertainly, then pushed it away. It was too big. He looked back at Snape, who frowned, and lifted the next vial.

Millet seed, dandelion root, honeyberry, and moonseed were all summarily rejected, and then Snape stopped telling Harry what he was offering. Harry grew frustrated as the pit in his belly deepened and nothing Snape offered looked appetizing in the least. Finally, Snape let out a frustrated growl and reached for a pair of tweezers, grabbing a thick white grub and dropping it, squirming, at Harry's feet. "Maybe you're not an herbivore after all!" He said. Harry shrieked and scrabbled away from the grub, scrambling out of the box and halfway down the table before Snape scooped the disgusting thing back into the jar.

Harry made it a few stumbling steps further before an absolutely heavenly smell filled his nose. Lifting his head, he hurried further along the table until he found an empty teacup and the remains of a sandwich. He let out a triumphant chirp and raked at the bread with his claws until it came apart, and leaned down to lick up the amazing substance that coated it, chirping happily as he went. He didn't stop when a dark shadow loomed over him, and continued licking and scraping the last of it away from the bread until it was all gone. With a sad chirrup, he rooted around in the scraps of bread remaining, but nothing was left and he was still hungry. He tamped down on the instinctive urge to tilt his head and flutter his wings, easier to control when he was less hungry, and instead sent an imperious glare to Snape. Snape may not have hurt him yet, but he wasn't ready to trust the man.

"Really?" Snape asked, resting his hands on his hips. "You turn down all my offers of good, healthy bird food, and the thing that you want to eat is peanut butter?" Harry blinked up at him, the down around his neck and throat coated with the sticky spread, and Snape sighed, reaching down to pick him up. For once, Harry was docile and allowed Snape to lift him, hoping that there may be more peanut butter in the offing.

Three spoonfuls of peanut butter, a dish of water, and a gentle scourgify later, Harry was feeling much warmer towards Snape. He allowed the older man to carry him cupped in one hand back from the kitchen to the sitting room. This must be Snape's house, he thought, though it wasn't what he had pictured. The kitchen was small but bright, with many small windows, white cupboards,
and jars of innocuous ingredients like sugar and flour lining the counter. Harry wondered if Snape baked in his spare time. The sitting room was also small and well lit, cozy and almost cluttered, with the scarred wooden table taking up half the room and the other half occupied by a fireplace, a coffee table, a couch, and a squashy blue chair that must have been Snape's favorite, if the teacups littering the coffee table near it were any clue. The chair and couch did not match; the rug below them was of yet another color, and this combined with the table reminded Harry more of the Burrow than of Snape. He felt a powerful longing to see Molly Weasley, and turned his mind to his most pressing problem. How exactly was he going to get back to Hermione, and then how was he going to tell her who he was?

Caught up in his thoughts, Harry didn't notice Snape putting him down until it was too late. The man had lowered him into some sort of four-walled glass enclosure, and then dropped a wire lid on top like he was some sort of… hamster in a tank or something! Harry screeched indignantly at the man, who simply told him to "be good" as he grabbed his hat and gloves from the rack by the door and left. Harry fumed for a moment, pacing the walls of his enclosure. He knew better than to expect some sort of escape route, but he had to check. Snape had laid down paper towels over the bottom of the tank, and in the back corner was a pile of rags with a heating charm that felt heavenly as he walked over them. He completed two circuits before giving up - there was no way out, and he was yet a very young bird. The warmed nest was calling to him, and with a full belly and clean feathers, Harry staggered over to it and fell deeply asleep.

The next couple days repeated themselves in this pattern - Harry would wake, alert Snape that he was hungry, eat, drink, and fall back asleep. It irritated Harry, but such was the way of things for all young creatures.

When Harry awoke on the dawning of his fourth day with Snape, he realized that for once, he was neither ravenously hungry or incredibly fatigued. He stood up from his nest of rags and began to pace the front of his cage, twitching his skin. He had noticed recently that his growing feathers were itching incessantly. The fuzzy down covering had mostly disappeared, replaced with the long, narrow growths that Snape called "pinfeathers." He flicked his right wing, which was currently irritating him, and then stopped. He was a bird, right? Wasn't he supposed to groom himself? Maybe that was why he itched. Carefully, he spread the wing out to the side, marveling over how instinctual his control over his new body was, and lowered his beak to nibble along the shaft of the feather. His eyes squeezed shut in bliss as the itch was scratched, but as soon as he finished the length of the feather the itch was back with a vengeance. He came back up to the top and repeated the action, moving on to the next when he finished. It felt amazing, he thought, and carelessly bit down a little harder than he intended. He felt a small pinch of pain, and then reared back when he tasted copper in his mouth. The feather he had been grooming was pouring blood. He squawked in surprise, his wings instinctually beating, and sprayed droplets of blood over the entire tank. His head swam at the sight of so much blood, and he began to panic.

.xOx.

At his very being, Severus was an instinctual man. If asked, he would deny it and instead say that he was logical, methodical, and that he approached life the same way he approached his potions, but deep down he knew this was a lie. Because of this, when he felt a vague sense of foreboding as he awoke on a Monday morning, he forewent his usual morning routine and instead came to the sitting room to check on Potter's phoenix.

When he saw the bloody cage, he was glad he did. He swore, and ripped the top off the cage to see what was amiss. The bloody bird was frantically flapping his wings, so Severus cast a veterinary body bind that he had learned in his years of raising chickens, and then a gentle scourgify to remove the excess blood. He calmed when he saw the broken blood feather. "Daft bird." He
muttered, casting a quick spell to numb the wing and another to separate out the broken feather and pluck it from the bird's wing. "How did you even manage to break a pinfeather? There's nothing in there that you could have caught it on." He cast another spell to stop the socket from bleeding, and lifted the body bind, gently helping the rattled chick fold his wings. He had never found a spell to actually fix a pinfeather, and found it worked best to just use pluck the thing as the muggles did. Of course, magic made the whole process less traumatic for bird and caretaker, but the logic was the same.

The shaken bird ruffled his feathers, and then looked up at Severus as if he was evaluating the man. Severus glared down at him, irate. The bird was stubborn. He'd cared for many animals over the years, and he liked to think he had a way with them. It was rare that one took such strong and immediate dislike to him.

Severus almost dropped the bird in surprise when the phoenix dropped his head and rubbed it against his thumb, letting out the softest of croons as if in thanks. Severus slowly raised a hand toward the bird, which watched it warily, but accepted the tentative stroke. Severus felt a small smile tugging at his lips, and with no one but the bird to see, he let it show.

"Daft bird." He said fondly, gently rubbing at the back of the bird’s head, a universally itchy bird spot, and watched, amused, as the bird’s eyes near crossed in enjoyment. He cast his eyes over the bird and nodded approvingly. He was growing fast- when he had first hatched, Severus had been able to cradle the bird in the palm of his hand. Now, the tips of his wings and tail spilled over the sides, and all the red fluff had been replaced by the beginnings of his adult plumage. He was much less appealing, but he was growing.

Severus stopped scratching and went to lower the bird back into the warm enclosure he had made to keep the silly young thing safe, but the bird cheeped sadly and dug his claws into Severus’ hand, and he stopped.

“You want to stay out?” He asked the bird, not expecting a response. He startled when the bird bobbed his head, for all the world like a nod, and acquiesced. He lifted the bird to his shoulder and the phoenix hopped off his hand without prompting, sinking his claws into the slight padding over his shoulder. Severus hummed to himself, and then carried on with his morning routine. Phoenixes were supposed to be very intelligent, he knew. This one was likely bored of waiting in the cage all day long.

Harry clung tightly, excited. He hadn’t been outside the cage yet for any purpose besides feedings, and he wanted to see something besides the living room which had quickly lost any novelty it had once possessed. Snape moved from the living room, through the kitchen, and through a door that Harry hadn’t been through yet. As Harry peeked around the room, he let out a little whistle of surprise. This was Snape’s bedroom! And.... it looked like a normal room, with a dark oak, twin bed, matching bedside tables, and a standing dresser made of some honey-light wood that did not match the rest. The bed was unmade, there were several books stacked on the right side of the mattress, and more used teacups were scattered about the tables and floor nearby. Harry made a little trill of bird laughter, amused that Snape, the bat of the dungeons, was so untidy with his used dishes. He sobered, leaning forward and peering at the side of Snape’s face as he moved through the room, heading for another door. He hadn’t forgotten his initial objection to the man- he had seen Snape kill Dumbledore, the man Harry nearly considered his grandfather. But it was hard for him to reconcile his caretaker, who might snark and grumble but always touched him with soft, kind hands, with the dark wizard who stared Dumbledore in the face and killed him even as the Headmaster begged for his life. This Snape also seemed so much happier, steadier than the Snape of Hogwarts. His hair was lighter, streaked with gray. His face bore more wrinkles, but not all of them were scowl lines. He didn’t look evil.
Harry was so occupied trying to find some sort of evil in Snape’s face that he didn’t register where
the next door had taken them until he was lifted from Snape’s shoulder and set on smooth tiles. He
looked up in time to see Snape beginning to unbutton the neck of his night shirt (Harry wondered
briefly if he had woken him with the bleeding incident) and squawked in shock, turning his back as
the shirt came open to show a pale chest and a smattering of dark hairs. He squeezed his eyes shut.
*Nonono thanks!* He thought frantically, refusing to move as the shower turned on. He did NOT
want to see his old potions professor naked, thankyouverymuch! This situation was so weird. He
cowered on the bathroom counter tiles, declining to look until he heard the water shut off and the
distinct sound of a towel rubbing someone dry. He opened his eyes then, but stared resolutely at
the off-white paint on the wall. He heard a low chuckle behind him and then the rustling sounds of
someone dressing, and then gentle hands lifted him again, holding him in front of a dark,
penetrating gaze.

“Shy, are we?” The potions professor asked drily. “I know you’re supposed to be a smart bird, but I
don’t think most baby phoenikes know enough of human morals that they would look away.” His
eyes narrowed, gaze becoming more piercing. “Is there more to you that you haven’t shared?” He
stared straight into Harry’s eyes. Harry hung, indecisive. Should he tell Snape? He had come to the
conclusion that he was more trustworthy than Harry had initially thought, but this was a big secret.
And Snape HATED Harry. So he made no response besides a small wiggle and a curious cheep,
doing his best to project innocence. Snape hummed thoughtfully and placed him back in his new
perch on his shoulder, and moved into the kitchen to provide breakfast for them both. Harry
released a relieved puff of breath, ignoring the small seed of guilt in his belly.

.xOx.

The next day, Severus carried Harry outside for the first time, placing him gently in the grass. The
small phoenix puffed up immediately upon feeling the warm breeze, spreading his little wings to
feel the fingers of air run playfully along his feathers. That morning, he had noted some of the
pinfeathers growing out into real feathers, and now that he felt the breeze, he was filled with an
unshakeable need to fly. He quivered in excitement, squeezed his eyes shut and started to beat his
wings, faster and faster. The breeze increased! Was he flying? He opened his eyes eagerly to see
Snape looking at him with a look of badly-concealed amusement. He looked down and realized his
claws were still firmly rooted in the earth and stopped flapping, twitching his wings back in
embarrassment. He turned his head to preen some feathers, hiding from Snape’s gaze. He snapped
his head around a moment later as warm, rich laughter spilled over him, coming from the potion’s
master. He stared, fascinated, as the man laughed heartily, a hand resting on his belly.

Maybe this is why he’s Hermione’s friend, Harry thought. Maybe... maybe there is more to this
man than I thought.

Harry didn’t try to run as Snape lifted him back up to his shoulder, instead looking around. While
Snape’s house was a surprise, his yard was mostly as he had expected. Every available inch was
filled with planters and rows overflowing with healthy, thriving vegetation, from the nightshade
trailing up the wall to the carrots in the vegetable bed outside the kitchen window. Harry clung to
Snape’s shoulder as the man walked between rows of plants, stopped every once and a while to
pull a small weed or help a trailing vine wind more firmly about its trellis.

They stopped next at a little run filled with - of all things – chickens, and Harry thought back to the
conversation between Hermione and Snape that had so confused him at the time. So apparently
Snape did have his own chickens, he thought, and stared again as the formerly dignified man made
some ridiculous call that sounded like “chick-chick-chickies” and had all the hens running
towards him as he tossed out handfuls of dry, dusty cracked corn. As the hens were occupied,
Severus ducked into their small, dark shed and carefully collected a handful of fresh, light brown
eggs, which they carefully carried back into the kitchen. Harry sat next to the sink that night as Severus made his dinner of poached eggs and fresh greens from the garden, and discovered that the small, bright red tomatoes that Snape grew in his garden tasted *almost* as good as peanut butter.

.xOx.

A month later, Harry was awakened in the middle of the night by a low, thrumming buzz that grew and swelled throughout the house. Severus had swapped out his glass cage for a standing perch when Harry showed himself to be able to jump from the floor to the table with a loud and clumsy effort of flapping wings, and Harry loved the independence it gave. Now, though, it didn’t help, as he couldn’t see anything in the front room that could be causing the sound. He warbled, a low, concerned sound drew Snape from the kitchen. His brow was drawn in a ferocious scowl, and he clutched his wand in one hand. He stalked into the living room, and Harry repeated his worried sound. Severus turned to him, his scowl fading a bit as he took in Harry’s tense and uncertain posture, and he stepped up to the bird, offering his characteristic head scratches. Harry ducked his head to accept, but let the worried warble continue.

Severus’ frown gentled further, and changed, a bit of sorrow creeping in. “Don’t worry, daft bird.” He said, infusing the insult with a bit of fondness. “It’s just the wards. Someone out there wants in, and the wards are keeping them out. They’ll go away in a bit.”

Severus stepped further into the living room and dropped into his squashy blue chair. Despite his words, he leaned forward, keeping his body ready to react and gripped his wand tightly, watching the door. Harry could almost taste the emotions rising off him, anger mixed so tightly with grief and guilt that it almost choked Harry. Harry didn’t understand, but he wanted to help, so he awkwardly jumped off the stand with a clumsy glide, and then struggled up the side of the blue armchair. Once perched on the arm, he let his instincts take over, and a soft, liquid song rose from his heart, drawn from him by Severus and the growing friendship he felt for the man. Harry half closed his eyes and let his instincts guide him. He half-realized that this must be phoenix song that he was producing, but the song demanded his attention and he let the thought go. The song rippled and echoed, slowly filling the room and soothing the dark emotions rising from the man next to him, easily masking the monotonous buzz of the tripped wards. Harry noted with approval when Severus began to relax into his song, and continued well into the night, singing himself and Snape into a gentle trance as they waited out the assault on the wards.

Severus stirred, coming into himself with a snap, and sat up quickly, almost upsetting the bird leaning against his chest. He must have crawled into his lap during the night, Severus thought fondly. The bird grumbled a little as Snape carefully steadied him, and woke long enough to clamber up him to his accustomed perch on Severus’ shoulder. Snape regarded the bird ruefully as the long red wings buffeted his face and head as the phoenix resettled. He had grown in the last week, clearly at magical pace, and now stood easily taller than Severus’ head as he sat on his shoulder, looking almost as if he were full-grown. The phoenix had yet to fly, but he had demonstrated phoenix song last night. Severus felt a pang in his heart as he realized it was almost time to bring the bird back to Hermione and Ron, as his role in all this was merely the raising of the chick. He stood, using one hand to help steady the bird as he rose to his feet. He counted himself lucky that the bird had never truly gained weight, only bulk, in a trick that could only be a magical property of phoenixes. His fingers itched to write an addendum to *Fantastic Beasts*, but he knew how well an article about the lightest of creatures would go over, penned by someone with his reputation.

Speaking of which, it was time to view the damage. He slipped on his shoes and stepped out the door, not having undressed last night in case he needed to step out to control the situation, and turned to view the damage. He heaved a sigh, thanking the gods. It was only the usual- nothing to
be concerned about. He shifted, placing his hands on his hips, as he read the graffiti that they had managed to write on the wards. This was new, this dripping red writing that hung in the air, clearly painted on the wards of the house. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. This was why he had retired here, and did his best to leave only on the rarest of occasions.

There, blazoned on his wards for all to see, hung a crude replica of the dark mark, and a message that read “That which is dark may never become light.” Lower down, someone with less class had added in a different hand “Die, Death Eating SCUM!”

He exhaled through his nose harshly, feeling the bird stir on his shoulder, and was unprepared for the harsh scream that rang out from the bird as he lifted his head to see Severus’ wards. The bird reared back, wings snapping out and flapping around his head as Severus raised a hand to protect his face. Slowly, with much wobbling, the phoenix rose from his shoulder and into the air, his fierce gaze locked on the dark mark, and Severus stepped back, unsure of what to do. The ringing screech rang out from the bird again, and a red glow sparked in front of his chest, coalescing into a ball of flame. Snape flinched back as the fireball heated the area around the bird uncomfortably, and with a final screech, the phoenix somehow threw the fireball at the wards. The impact knocked Severus to the ground, his connection to the wards ringing like someone had rung a huge gong in his ear. The wards, always hazily visible to the ward holder like a glimmer in the air, flashed gold where the fireball had struck them, and then wobbled like the edges of a soap bubble, the bright gold sinking in and infusing the wards with a warm power Severus had never felt before. The red writing vanished as if it had never existed, and the phoenix swooped down once and then shot into the air, winging his way up and out the top of the wards before Severus could say anything. Severus watched him go with a certain heaviness in his heart, convinced that he would never see the bird again.

“Well,” He said, standing and brushing himself off. “There’s gratitude for you.” He gazed at the wards, still ringing softly golden with their new infusion of magic, and let a small smile form on his lips before he ducked back into the house.

.xOx.

Harry trilled in excitement, embracing the feeling of the wind in his wings, the strength in his feathers. This was where he belonged, winging his way up high through the clouds, free and unencumbered. He never wanted to come down.

Unfortunately, his body had other plans. He’d never flown before, and the muscles of his chest were already aching with the unexpected exertion. He’d barely been up for an hour, and already each wingbeat produced a sore twinge right under his breastbone.

Sadly, Harry turned and winged his way back down, retracing his path with an uncanny awareness of direction that he vaguely realized was new and may be part of this whole phoenix thing. He gave a mental shrug. New or not, it was bloody handy, he thought as he winged his way down from the sky and Severus’ house came into view. He clacked his beak. All this flying was making him hungry. Maybe Severus had found more peanut butter- they had run out a few days ago.

The ground came up below him, and Harry’s confident wingbeats faltered for a moment when he realized that he didn’t exactly know how to land. How hard could it be? He thought nervously as he slowed himself as much as he was able, spreading his wings and tailfeathers wide as he descended.

10 meters.... 5 meters.... 3 meters... he wobbled dangerously, folded his wings, and hit the ground with a little more momentum than intended, tossing himself tail over headfeathers and skidding right into Severus’ pile of gardening tools, which unbalanced in a thunderous crash in a direction
that was, thankfully, away from his fragile bird body. Harry picked himself up, fluffing his feathers and shaking off the dirt, and was in the process of grooming down a few stray feathers when the door behind him slammed open. Severus came running out, and Harry perked up, spreading his wings wide and waddling happily towards his favorite perch. He cheeped eagerly, the sound he had taught Severus meant food, when two other figures emerged from the doorway, both making cooing noises as Severus bent down and stroked over Harry’s favorite places to be pet. Harry panted with his beak agape and wings half spread, bird instincts running strongly through his body as he calmed from his impromptu flight session.

When he took a closer look at the people behind Severus, his human brain surged forward with a vengeance. He snapped his wings shut, shot his head up, gave Severus’s fingers a fond nibble, and turned towards Ron and Hermione. Here they were, finally. It was time that he found a way to tell them who, exactly, he was.

Chapter End Notes

I can see Severus raising chickens, can't you? Anyways, here we go. We should start getting into the meat of this story pretty soon here, if you're still with me.
Hermione watched, bemused, as the phoenix excitedly greeted Severus, wings spread wide and crest raised high, clearly proud of his inaugural flight. Severus had fire-called them earlier, likely thinking he was hiding his disappointment well, and informed them that the bird had left and was likely not returning. Hermione and Ron had come over as soon as they could find a babysitter for Rose, hoping to help Severus find the bird. They had found him unwilling to search, clearly of the opinion that the magical creature was gone for good. She was glad to see that he was wrong.

She exchanged a fond look with Ron as the phoenix dipped his head under Severus’ searching fingers, plainly offering a favorite spot for scratches. She had known it would be good for Severus to raise the bird, despite the phoenix’s initial reservations. The man was still healing from the war, and she knew that he still thought that his bad deeds outweighed his good. She had hoped that taking care of a phoenix, the ultimate symbol of goodness in the Wizarding World, would help him further. She wasn’t sure yet if it worked, but clearly a bond had grown between bird and wizard.

She turned away from her husband in time to see the phoenix walking determinedly at her, crossing the ground quickly in that odd side-shuffle-hop that was so characteristic of birds of all kinds. She stepped back a little. The phoenix was taller than her knee when standing on the ground, and he stared her straight in the eyes as he approached. She felt herself quail for a moment, then stood still, categorizing the differences between this phoenix and Fawkes, the only other phoenix she’d seen up close.

They were of the same stature, she noted, about the same size, though this bird was slighter across the chest and belly. Perhaps it was due to his young age? His crest was messier too, even now that it was relaxed against his head and not perked in excitement. His feathers were the same dark red, shading into gold along the edges, and his feet and beak were the same gold they’d been when he was a chick, the feet tipped in black talons that looked strong and thick.

He passed by her into the open doorway, taking a moment to brush his feathered cheek against her hand. She jumped a little, not expecting the contact, and he cocked his head back at her, clacking his beak a little, then jerked his head at her and continued inside. Hermione shared a puzzled look with Ron.

“I think he wants us to follow him in.” She said, looking back at Severus. “That was a... very human motion, wasn’t it?” She said, a bubble of hope rising in her chest. Severus looked thoughtful. Ron frowned at her. “We’ve talked about this, ‘Mione. He’s a phoenix. You ran all
those identification spells on the egg, and nothing came back human.”

“But he’s a phoenix!” Hermione argued, whipping out her wand in excitement. “Of course the spells didn’t come back human, if he’d changed forms already.” She rested the wand in her hand and incanted “Point-me Harry Potter!”

The wand lay inert on her hand, just as it had every other time she’d tried. She wilted, and Ron gently took her hand.

She looked up, about to speak, and was interrupted by a huge crash from inside. Severus winced, and hurried past them. Hermione and Ron followed him in. Before they’d left to investigate the crash that the phoenix had made as he landed (there was a lot of crashing going on, Hermione absently noted), the room had been mostly neat, besides Severus’ omnipresent teacups. Now, one of the stacks of books and teacups was strewn across the floor, with the large red bird perched awkwardly on one foot on the arm of the chair, wings half-spread for balance. His second foot was reaching for an ink well that was still, miraculously, upright. Severus swore and rushed in, whipping out his wand and startling the bird, who lost his balance and spread his wings wider, managing to sweep the inkwell and the remaining teacup off the table and onto the floor, splashing his own feathers with black ink in the process. He squawked indignantly and launched himself upward, and the wind from his wings made another pile of teacups waver precariously. Hermione shot a quick stabilizing spell at the pile.

“What are you doing, daft bird?” Severus roared, waving his wand at the phoenix and casting a complicated binding hex that had absolutely no effect. Severus hissed, his pale face flushing with frustration as the bird took a circuit of the small room, wings brushing past the mantle of the fireplace and knocking down a framed photo.

Severus drew himself up, scowling. “Bloody bird.” He muttered, then raised his voice. “You land right now, you impossible creature, or I will never feed you peanut butter again!” Hermione stifled a giggle as the bird almost immediately landed on a large perch in the corner of the room, flicking his wings back and ducking his head, abashed. He looked around the mess he’d made of the room and cheeped mournfully at Severus, who sighed gustily and went to cast Tergeo to clean the wet puddle of ink on his chair. Hermione bustled to help, and it took them a moment to put the room to rights.

Severus took a deep breath and sank into his chair, clearly flustered by the event. Ron followed suit, and Hermione waved her wand to summon three cups of tea, handing one each to Ron and Severus with a smile, and keeping her own.

“You can’t really blame him,” she said, gesturing to the phoenix, who was still exuding an air of sheepishness. “He’s still young yet, and today was his first flight. I doubt he’s realized how big his wingspan is, or how bad of an idea it is to fly in such a small space.” The bird made a forlorn chirp and hunched down even more, if possible.

Severus scowled. “Yes, but what on earth was he doing to begin with? It looked like he was trying to knock over the inkwell for some reason.” The three humans fell silent momentarily, thinking. Hermione glanced over at the phoenix again, and found him busy grooming the ink from his feathers. She sighed, taking in the birdlike tilt of his head and the smooth, habitual movements. She couldn’t help but wonder if he had been trying to use the ink to communicate, but Ron was right. She had been obsessed with the idea that something of Harry’s was left in the egg, and it was clouding her logic. There was no reason to attribute human motivations to a month-old phoenix. She set her teacup down on the coffee table with a clink and rose to head deeper into the house to the powder room. She needed a moment to herself to think.
She rounded the couch and was heading into the kitchen when the phoenix dropped off his perch and stood between her and the doorway, wings spread. Hermione slowed, then stopped, trying to figure out what the bird was up to now. He stared straight into her eyes, and Hermione bit back an exclamation as she noticed that his thin irises were a startling green. When he saw that he had her attention, he deliberately bent down and used his beak, covered in the ink from his feathers, to draw a lightning bolt on the floor. Hermione dropped to her knees, overwhelmed.

“H-harry?” She asked, breathlessly. The phoenix nodded, waddling forward and tucking his chin over her shoulder, wings spread wide in the best approximation of a hug he could manage as a bird.

“Bloody hell.” Ron whispered from behind her.

Severus stood silently and walked past them into his room, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione sat back, taking in the phoenix -Harry- with new eyes. She saw it now- the messy crest reminiscent of his messy hair, the narrow build to match his human body, the green eyes. Her heart beat fast with a messy blend of emotions- relief, joy, satisfaction that she was right, and confusion.

“But how?” She asked. Harry lifted his wings in a clear shrug, then launched into a complicated series of burbles and chirps that rose and fell like human speech.

“Harry, mate.” Ron cut in. “We can’t understand you.”

Harry clacked his beak, clearly frustrated, and bent down to draw on the floor again, but the ink on his beak had dried.

“Hold on!” Hermione said, and jumped up, digging a piece of parchment out of her bag and hurriedly scribbling a series of letters on it. Harry cocked his head at it in another uncomfortably bird-like motion, examining it first with one eye and then the other, and then he understood. Clever Hermione had written out the alphabet for him.

He reached forward with his beak and started tapping out letters, joy rising in his chest. He had told her. She could fix everything now.

.xOx.

Somehow in the course of the night, they had relocated to the couch and coffee table, Hermione thoughtfully conjuring up a low perch so Harry didn’t have to perch uncomfortably on the edge of the table. Severus had emerged from his room halfway through Harry’s explanation, and with his new mode of communication, Harry had hurriedly offered his apologies for deceiving the potion’s master, which were curtly dismissed by the proud man.

Harry now eyed Severus warily as the night lightened into the gray of pre-dawn, familiar enough with the reclusive man to know that he had withdrawn, but not sure what to do with that information. He had managed to put his history with Severus out of his mind over the last couple weeks, but with the revelation of his identity, he felt his old suspicion creeping back in. He turned his head to the side, contemplating the question he wanted to ask, but unsure. What if Hermione and Ron really were brainwashed? Had Severus obliviated them? If he asked, would Severus try and hurt them? He turned his head to the other side, and lifted his foot to scratch a particularly itchy spot on his neck, turning to preen a few feathers back into place as he contemplated.

Hermione watched, concerned. Harry seemed very comfortable in his new body, which stood to reason as he had been living in it for at least a month, plus the years he’d been in the egg. But she couldn’t help but think of her research into animagi, forced transfiguration, and the consequences
of long-term habituation to other forms. In extreme cases, wizards who stayed too long in animal forms could become stuck, their human minds slowly conforming to the animal until they lost their selves entirely. In less extreme cases, some only recovered portions of their human forms, always retaining some aspect of their animal. She wasn’t sure if this would apply to Harry, but she worried.

She stood, stretching her back with a pop and a groan as she realized that they had been up all night hearing Harry’s story. She absently collected all the teacups she could find, by hand, a habit she never quite kicked from her muggle upbringing, and wandered into the kitchen. Severus followed her, likely to take the dishes from her before she could do them by hand.

Harry watched them go with bright eyes, and turned back to Ron, getting his attention with a gentle nibble of the fingers. Ron looked down at him, eyes heavy with his lack of sleep, and Harry leaned forward over the alphabet sheet, which had gained several additions over the night. He pointed to the question mark, and then, with a sharp glance at the kitchen door, began to spell.

D-U-M-B-L-E-

Ron took in a sharp breath. “Oh, bloody hell.” He breathed. “You don’t know. Hell, we left you with Severus for a month and no one told you...” He trailed off for a moment, raking a hand through his bright red hair. Harry noted that his hairline was starting to recede a little, and not for the first time, wondered how long it had been.

“The headmaster told him to, Harry.” Ron said, his voice heavy. “He was dying. The ring... the Horcrux? You remember. It was cursed, and it was killing him. Dumbledore knew that Malfoy was supposed to kill him, and he told Severus that they needed to protect him.” Ron’s face was screwed up in anger and grief. “So that night in the Astronomy tower- yes, Severus told everyone about it during his trial, showed us the memories, even,- he was acting on Dumbledore’s orders.”

Harry sat back, his mind buzzing. It... made sense. The Severus he’d seen this past month wasn’t a murderer. He wasn’t sure if it was his new phoenix senses, but he could tell the man wasn’t evil. Dark, sure, but not evil.

He looked up at a swish of black robes, and saw Severus sitting back down. He let a liquid trill burble up his throat, and called up the sensation he had felt the night before, when he had somehow felt Severus’ emotions. He held the note and let the emotions in the room wash over him. The bright determination, the anticipation of a new academic challenge, the happiness over finding a friend unharmed- that was all Hermione. The exhaustion, satisfaction, and slight hunger (of course, some things never changed) was clearly coming from Ron. From Severus- Harry’s trill wavered for a moment. Severus was feeling guilty, ashamed, and shocked still. Also slightly betrayed, which Harry understood, and unsure of where he stood with Harry. Severus had felt a bond with the phoenix, only to learn that his phoenix friend was Harry, and that Harry had effectively lied to him for the entire time he’d been in Severus’ home. Harry hopped over, and with a quick flick of his wings, flung himself into Severus’ lap, reaching out to groom a piece of hair back that had fallen over his face. He felt Severus waver into shock and a painful hope before Harry dropped the warble, granting Severus his emotional privacy. He didn’t need it anyway, he realized, as he bumped his beak against Severus’ chin and saw his lips quirk into a tiny grin as Severus gently pushed him away with a halfhearted grumble.

Hermione came back into the room and stood in the doorway of the kitchen, arms akimbo. “Well,” She said brightly. “I think it’s time to do some research!” Ron immediately groaned, and Harry trilled in laughter.

Some things never changed.
Coming soon: Why does magic suddenly not work on Harry? How exactly are we going to get around that? Is he stuck as a bird forever? All this and more coming next episode!
Chapter Notes

This chapter was fighting me a bit, so sorry for the wait. A little extra length as a reward for your patience! I think it turned out alright (on the third rewrite) but let me know if you have any constructive feedback! We're getting closer and closer to that crossover... bear with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione cast an eye out the window as the dawn brightened, and cast *Tempus*. The numbers flowed out of her wand in a gentle gold, twisting themselves to form the time of 6:30 AM. She nodded briskly.

“No time like the present to get started!” She said brightly. Harry rustled his feathers and looked at her with a bright chirp from his place in Severus lap, agreeing with her statement. “From what you’ve told us, Harry, you remember everything of what happened up to casting the Final Strike Spell. Then, you lost track of time until shortly before you hatched, correct?” Harry nodded. “And from what you’ve told us,” Hermione continued, “You want to return to your human body, right?” Harry nodded more vigorously.

“Ok, then I suppose we should try the basics first.” Hermione pursed her lips, rolling her wand between her fingers. If she had learned anything about the magical world in her time, it was that magic messed up more things than it ever fixed. If her long assumed dead best friend had been reborn as a bird, it was going to take more than a basic spell to set things right. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t try, did it?

“Well, the first thing we could try is basic transfiguration.” She offered. “Animal-to-animal transfiguration is taught pretty early at Hogwarts, and I know I’ve read about animal to human transfiguration charms. But...” She looked down at her wand, and then back up. “I’d feel more comfortable asking Minerva to do it.” She proclaimed, looking to Severus and Ron, who both agreed.

“Certainly, none of us specialize in transfiguration.” Severus offered, getting to his feet and reaching for the jar of floo powder on his mantle. Ron followed suit in standing, and rolled up Harry’s communication sheet, passing it to Hermione.

“I’d better run and pick up Rose.” He said. “We told Mum we’d be back by midnight, and we’re much later than that.” He said ruefully, leaning in to peck Hermione on the cheek. He nodded to Severus, and regarded Harry for a moment before reaching out to gently pat the bird on the head. Harry chirped and nibbled his fingers in farewell, and Ron vanished with a handful of floo powder, a rush of green flame, and a shout of “The Burrow!”

Hermione gathered Harry up onto her forearm and tucked him carefully into her body before grabbing her own handful of floo powder and heading through the fireplace to their apartment at Hogwarts. After a brief, disorienting rush, she stepped quickly away from the fireplace, relieved to find Harry unharmed, though soot-covered, in her arms. Severus emerged right behind her. Now that they were safely through, she let up on her grasp on Harry, and he climbed from her wrist onto her shoulder, clicked his beak grumpily, and began grooming away the streak of soot on his breast.
feathers. She chuckled and raised her wand, casting an absentminded *scourgify* for him. It seemed
that bird or boy, Harry couldn’t emerge from the floo unscathed. She caught Severus’ eye, who
was sharing her smirk. Harry chirped discontentedly, and she looked back at him, frowning when
she realized that his bright red feathers were still stained with soot.

She recast the spell, paying closer attention this time. The tip of her wand glowed and emitted a
faint smell of soap, the sign of a well-cast *scourgify*, but the soot remained.

“Severus,” She began, “You’ve cast spells on Harry before, right?”

“Indeed.” He responded. “The sexing charm the day he hatched, and a few more in the first week.
Though the point-me spell from earlier failed, and so did my binding spell.” He lifted his own
wand, and swished it in the sexing charm. The spell sputtered and died on the tip of his wand. He
frowned and repeated the spell, making Hermione release a soft red glow. “The spell works on
you.” He said. Hermione sighed. “So, spells don’t even work on him anymore? This may have just
become quite a bit harder than I expected it to be.” Severus’ frown deepened, and Harry leaned
forward from his place on her shoulder, making a soft, apologetic chirp.

Hermione raised her hand and pet him gently on the head. “It’s not your fault, Harry.” She said
softly. “None of this is your fault.” Harry released a questioning chirp, and Hermione shook her
head firmly. “Nothing, it’s nothing. Let’s go see if Minerva is up yet.”

Harry trilled as quietly as he could, searching for understanding, and felt his head dip sadly as he
felt for Hermione’s emotions. Guilt. She was feeling guilt primarily, and somehow he could tell it
was because of him. She didn’t think this was her fault, did she? He fluttered his wings unhappily.
He needed his voice back so he could tell her that none of this was her fault. He couldn’t have even
cast the spell that got him in the mess if he hadn’t meant to sacrifice himself. She’d even made him
promise not to use the damn spell- this whole mess was his fault, not hers.

Unable to communicate verbally, he cooed softly and reached down, rubbing his soft, feathered
head against her cheek, tilting his head and fluffing his feathers, knowing he looked ridiculous,
until Hermione’s face broke into a grin and the heavy feeling of guilt subsided. “What are you
doing, daft bird?” Severus asked from behind him, and Harry launched off of Hermione’s shoulder
with a burbling trill, swooping around the two of them closely enough for his wing feathers to
brush Severus’ hair, disturbing the fine strands, and then darting up to wheel lazily over their
heads. As much as he wanted his voice and his old body back, he would miss the freedom of flying
without a broom.

They reached the stone gargoyle guarding the headmaster’s office (Or Headmistress’, Harry
supposed, having been caught up on the current staffing of Hogwarts the night before) shortly, and
Hermione wasted no time in providing the password and proceeding up the stairs, Harry and
Severus following after. The Headmistress was sitting at her desk already, and hardly looked
surprised to see them. That aura of calm must just come with the mantle of Headmaster, Harry
supposed, as he swooped into the room. He couldn’t help doing a giddy spiral up and around the
tall, circular ceiling of the office before dropping down to perch on the back of one of the red-and-
gold chairs facing the headmistress’ desk, in a landing much more graceful than any he had
managed before. He preened in pride for a moment, the feathers on his chest poofing out, before he
realized that Hermione, Severus, and Professor-no, Headmistress McGonagall- had started talking
without him.

“Really? This fine fellow is Harry?” He must have missed the explanation, as McGonagall was
stepping around the desk, extending a hand to him. He ducked his head in acknowledgement,
politely accepting the gentle stroke of her fingers over his breast feathers. He was surprised to see
the shine of tears in McGonagall’s eyes and crooned softly at her. She looked so much older than
last he had seen her. The steel gray that had just touched her temples before had overtaken her
whole head and was turning from gray to cottony white, and her skin had faded, taking on that
gentle, soft translucence that came with age. But her green eyes were as sharp as ever, and when
she spoke, her voice was, too.

“Well, you certainly make a lovely phoenix. But really, lad, what were you thinking?” He flared
his wings a little in alarm as the sadness in her face abruptly switched to anger. “Using a spell like
that- the Wizard’s Last Strike? Why would you do that! We would have... we were coming to
rescue you. But you couldn’t be patient, could you? Just like your parents, just like Albus,
sacrificing yourself like a noble fool.”

Harry blinked, looking between Hermione, who was nodding along with McGonagall, and
Severus, whose pursed lips showed his agreement, and raised his head, opening his beak. He
needed them to understand- they might think that he had made a mistake, but he had made the right
choice. He couldn’t let Voldemort kill him, and then go on to threaten everyone here. If it was a
choice between himself and the lives of his friends, his family that he had made here at Hogwarts,
he would make the same choice over again with no hesitation. He closed his eyes and poured his
feelings of protection, love, and sacrifice into the song, letting the rise and fall of the sound convey
his feelings.

He finished on a long, warbling croon, and opened his eyes to see Hermione and McGonagall both
wiping tears from their eyes, and even Severus looking a little bright-eyed.

“Yes, well.” McGonagall said, walking back to her desk for her wand. “I suppose, what I meant to
say, Harry, is thank you.” She said, keeping her back to him, her voice suspiciously soft. Then, she
cleared her throat and turned to him, wand in hand. “So, it’s a transfiguration we’re looking for, is
it?” She paced around the chair, and then gestured for him to hop down into the seat of it. “Let’s
see what we can do.” She pushed her tartan robes up over her knobbly elbows and lifted her hands,
moving her wand in a complicated series of jabs and darts. Harry sat completely still, hoping that
Hermione was wrong. Magic was wonderful! It would be able to fix this, right?

An hour later, he wasn’t so sure. Severus and Hermione had sat down ten minutes in, and while
Hermione was politely watching Minerva, he recognized the glaze in her eyes. She’d been up all
night with him already, and this was hardly exciting. He sighed theatrically and bent his head to
groom his chest feathers, bored. McGonagall was still casting, but now the pauses between spells
were longer than the spells themselves, and soon enough, she slipped her wand back up her sleeves.

“I’m afraid you’re correct.” She said to Hermione, who blinked quickly and sat up straighter. “I’ve
tried all the transfiguration techniques I know to change his form- no effect. The spells just rolled
off him. The last one I tried wasn’t even a transfiguration- it’s the charm to force an Animagus out
of their animal form. Nothing.” Minerva sighed, crossing her arms and leaning back against her
desk. “You know, some kneazles are the same way. Impervious to any magic. I used to have one
that would disappear for days. Couldn’t find her with any location or summoning charms. Just
learned to live with it.”

“Speaking of kneazles,” came a voice from the portrait wall. “I read a delightful book of limericks
the other day. I think it was a compilation by a man named Givengook?” Everyone turned to look
at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore on the wall, and the old man favored them all with a broad,
grandfatherly smile. “You might find something in there that might help, you know.” He favored
Harry, especially, with a broad smile. “You, young phoenix, look just like my friend Fawkes.” He
mused. “He was an ornery beast, you know. Completely impervious to any magic, he was!” The
portrait proclaimed cheerfully. “Except potions, that is. The old bird loved sherbet lemons, he did,
and once I decided to add a cheering potion to the mix. The poor bird was cackling for days until he figured it out.” He leaned back in his frame, stroking his long white beard, and beamed out at them.

“Wait, Headmaster Dumbledore.” Hermione stepped up to the portrait. “Are you saying that we can use a potion to turn Harry back?”

The portrait smiled guilelessly back at her. “Did I say that?” He said, wonderingly. “Well, that would be a treat. Imagine turning a phoenix into a person!” He smiled broadly, and refused to respond to any more questions. Hermione tried to interrogate the portrait for a bit longer, but he refused to respond. Finally, Hermione gave up.

"Fine! We’ll figure it out ourselves.” She huffed, turning abruptly to Severus. “He said that potions worked on Fawkes. Do you think you can make a potion to turn a phoenix into a human?” Severus frowned, steepling his fingers in thought. “I could do some research.” He said slowly. “But I’ve never heard of a potion to turn an animal from one form to another. That’s what transfiguration is for.” He nodded to Minerva.

“Actually,” Minerva stepped in, “the Animagus process involves the use of a potion. Have you ever looked into the process, Severus?” The dark man frowned, shaking his head sharply. “I never have. Come, tell me how this works.” He gestured to the chair next to him. Hermione nodded. “Perfect. You two work on that, and Harry and I are going to go find this... book of limericks.” She frowned at the portrait. “Though I’ve no idea how a book of dirty poetry is supposed to help us.”

She turned to leave the room, calling over her shoulder. “Harry, are you coming?” Harry ripped his gaze away from the portrait of the Headmaster, and launched himself after her, sailing over her head and to the library.

“.xOx.

“Givengook.” Hermione murmured, walking her fingers through the library catalog in the Gs. “Gilendorf...Gimil....Givengook!” She pulled the card up, reading over it, her smile falling. “Harry,” She murmured to the phoenix, who chirped inquiringly. “Givengook has 47 books in the Hogwarts library.” Harry squawked in dismay. “And they’re... they’re all in the restricted section.” Hermione groaned. The restricted section was the most poorly organized section of the library, the magic of its books somehow defying alphabetization, and the fact that all the books were there meant that not only were they full of dirty limericks, but that they were inappropriate enough that they had to be kept away from a school of children.

She scowled at Harry. “Why does Hogwarts even HAVE 47 volumes of limericks, anyways?” The phoenix raised his wings in a shrug, just as baffled as she. Hermione sighed and walked the two of them to the restricted section, placing her wand against the wards to identify herself. The padlock fell off the gate, and she and Harry slipped inside. Hermione made her way to the back of the stacks, where a round table was set up against the dirty windows, and dropped off her bag and the bird off her shoulder. She raised her wand. “Accio Givengook books!” She called. With a few thumps and one worrying crash, fourteen slim volumes came zooming out of the stacks, neatly landing on the table. Hermione closed her eyes and massaged the bridge of her nose.

“This is why the restricted section is my least favorite.” She muttered to Harry, indicating the books laying innocently on the table. “There are 47 of these books. 47! And an accio only brought me fourteen of them.” She grumbled, tucking her wand away into her wrist holster. “We’re going to have to find the rest of these damn books by hand.” She said grimly, and stepped down the first aisle of the bookcases. Harry watched her go, and then looked down the next row of books, eyeing the piles of disorganized books with dismay. Reluctantly, he launched himself off the table, taking
the aisle to the left of Hermione’s.

“Aha!” Hermione cried, grabbing a book that tried to scurry away beneath the bookshelves and hitting it with an *immobulus*. She stood up, wiping cobwebs from her cheek with a dirty sleeve that left a streak of dust on her forehead. “22!”

Harry eyed the book buried in the middle of a towering stack of volumes. He hovered next to the stack, gripping the book with his talons. He evaluated the stack. If he pulled quickly enough, maybe he could get it out of the stack without toppling the whole thing on his head? He looked at the book again, and then the stack, and then beat furiously with his wings in an attempt to yank the book out. The entire stack started to fall, and Harry squawked in panic, wishing to be back in the safety of their little table sanctuary. He vanished in a poof of flames, only to reappear above the table, the errant book still gripped in his talons, only a little bit charred. Huh, he thought. So that’s how Fawkes did that. He dropped the book in the growing pile and tapped the bell that Hermione had conjured. “29!” It dinged in a tinny, metallic voice.

“Jackpot!” Yelled Hermione, as she emerged from the stacks, an avenging goddess of cobwebs and books, her hair half fallen out of its bun. Harry trilled a snicker as she dropped a small stack of books onto the table. “That makes 35, 36, and 37!” She announced.

Harry rose up above the stacks, tired of constraining his wings to glide down the cramped aisles, and his sharp eyes caught a slim volume laying on the very top of the shelves, of all places. He winged closer, and sure enough, the word *Givengook* was scrawled across the spine. He snatched it up with a triumphant screech, dropping in on the table to the sound of “47! Nice job, Harry.”

Hermione pulled the elastic out of her hair, wrapping it around her wrist as she dragged her fingers through the resultant mess, trying to coax it back into some semblance of order. “That’s it, then.” She said, snapping the elastic back down over her rebellious strands. “We have all 47 volumes. Now, we just have to read through them all.” Hermione and Harry regarded the pile of books in front of them wearily. Harry hopped up onto the table, where Hermione had thoughtfully laid out his communication parchment, and started pointing.

“Lunch?” Hermione asked, startled. A quick *tempus* showed the time to be 2:45, and Hermione blushed, embarrassed. “That would be a good idea, wouldn’t it?” She cleared her throat.

“Mimsy!” A small, neat female elf popped into being with a loud crack. “Would you mind terribly bringing us something to eat?” Hermione asked politely. “Just whatever you have for me, and a jar of peanut butter, if you have it?” The elf nodded silently and disappeared. Hermione looked up to see Harry staring at her, surprised. “What?” Hermione said defensively, and laughed as Harry pointedly spelled out S.P.E.W. “Oh, Harry.” She said, “I had a few enlightening conversations with some elves that were NOT Dobby, and they set me straight. Did you know that House Elves have the option to drop or rework their contract every five years, or earlier if they feel that their master has reneged on some part of the contract? Turns out that some of them were only staying with their families because they weren’t sure where they could go if they quit, not because they couldn’t leave. I talked to Minerva, and we set up a work program where Elves can come work for Hogwarts whenever they feel like they need to drop their families and don’t know where else to go.
I’ve accepted that it’s the best I can do, though I still think they should be paid...”

Sundown found Harry perched on Hermione’s right shoulder, reading down the righthand page of a book to the light of a conjured candle while Hermione scanned the left. He had tried to manage his own books for the first few rounds, but bird feet weren’t meant to turn pages, and she could tell that he struggled to lean over the books and read, as he hadn’t the hands to hold them upright. After the fifth time she’d had to repair a punctured page, she removed his book handling privileges. It was easier on the books and Harry’s neck if she held the book for the both of them. She’d tried casting her favorite research spell, which scanned through the books looking for certain combinations of words, but the limerick books were spelled against such search terms, which was frustrating, but seemed to make sense. Now that they had their hands on them, she was sure she’d seen copies of them floating around the Gryffindor common room as fifth-years giggled over their contents, and she knew that Minerva had regularly cast spells screening on the books in their tower for inappropriate words. If these books weren’t protected against such spells, she would have found them in an instant.

She flipped the page, and a second later winced as Harry let out a high-pitched shriek in her ear.

“Ow!” She complained. “What was that for, you berk?” She shoved Harry off her shoulder, and he hopped down onto the table willingly, hopping from foot to foot next to the page. “Oh!” She said, looking at the page. “Did you find something?” Harry pointed with one claw to an entry halfway down the page, complete with a somewhat risqué picture of a woman with... cat ears? Hermione grimaced, and read the entry.

_Hengist was a wizard from Dover,_

_Who wanted a kneazle for a lover,_

_So he made her a brew_

_That turned cat into shrew,_

_And brought her home to meet his mother._

Hermione blinked. “Did we really spend the entire day going through all these books... for this? This one isn’t even funny.” She grumbled, gathering the book up and leaving the rest on the table. She knew the restricted section after all her forays here- the books would sort themselves back into their preferred positions in the stacks within a few days, and didn’t need her help.

She rubbed her eyes, stifling a yawn, and tucked the book into her bag. “What’s the next step?” She asked Harry, not expecting a response as she spoke out loud. She was surprised when he hopped from her shoulder to the table, insistently tapping at his communication sheet. She leaned forward, catching herself with a hand as she tipped forward a little too far. Harry was repeatedly tapping the letter Z. Hermione frowned, confused. “Z? Harry, what are you trying to say?” Harry stopped for a second, giving her an impatient look, and then slowly started selecting other letters.

S-L-E-E-P.

Hermione blinked. “This isn’t time for sleep!” She said hotly. “We just found the next clue! We need to figure out who Hengist was, if he was even a real person, and then we need to figure out what potion he used to turn his kneazles... human.”
Harry screeched, the sound assaulting her ears, and Hermione winced, looking back at the bird. He started tapping again.

W-O-R-K-M-O-R-N-I-N-G. He spelled painstakingly. S-L-E-E-P-N-O-W. R-O-N-R-O-S-E. Hermione flushed. Harry was right. She hadn’t seen Ron or Rose all day, and while they were used to her vanishing into her books for long periods of time, she didn’t usually stay away all day. Plus, she’d likely be more useful come morning if she actually got some rest.

Reluctantly, she agreed, gathering Harry’s communication sheet and the rest of her supplies and tucking them into the bag along with the book. She blew out the candle on the table and headed back to her quarters, Harry winging along beside her, grateful that Minerva was understanding of the situation and had already agreed to step in to teach her History of Magic courses in the morning while she figured out how to help Harry.

.xOx.

Harry glared at Hermione as she reached for her wand, letting out a scolding screech. Hermione sighed, exasperated, and switched to reach for her teacup instead, draining it with an exaggerated flourish. “Happy?” She asked. “I’ve slept, I’ve seen Ron and Rose, I’ve eaten. Can we get back to work now?”

Harry nudged the crust of her toast with his beak and she sighed dramatically. “Harry, you give mother hen a whole new meaning!” She grouched, and finished her toast. Harry gave a satisfied chirp, and leapt to her shoulder, grooming back an errant strand of hair. She shook her head fondly and grabbed for her wand again, summoning a sheet of paper to her. She scrawled out a quick summary of their progress from last night, duplicated it with a quick spell, and charmed one sheet into a paper crane that she sent winging down the corridor to Minerva’s office. The other, she sent through the floo to Severus.

With her research partners briefed, she packed her bag and headed back to the library, this time to find any mention of a potioneer named Hengist. She looked at Harry.

“Would there be any way you can check on Severus?” She asked. “I saw you learned to teleport yesterday. As a potion’s master himself, he may already know who Hengist is.” Harry nodded, lifting up off of her shoulder with a farewell chirp.

He focused hard on Severus, building a picture of the man’s face in his mind, and wished to be there instead. He was vaguely surprised when he felt the flames building up around him, and opened eyes he hadn’t realized he’d closed as he vanished into flame, only to reappear in Severus’ dining room, startling the man into dropping his cup of tea with a curse. Harry cheeped apologetically and looped back to the fireplace, dropping to the floor to move in a sort of flutter-hop, aware of the damage he’d done the last time he had flown in the small cottage. He collected the note in his beak and brought it back to Severus, who was grumpily cleaning his spilled tea. Harry hopped up on the table and presented the note.

“Just like Dumbledore’s bloody bird.” Severus grumbled as he scanned over the note. “Always popping in unannounced, upsetting all my experiments.” A moment latter, one dark brow rose. “Hengist, really?” He set the paper down and looked at Harry for a moment, before grabbing his wand. “Accio Notable Potioneers Of History.” A book came zooming out of his bedroom and he caught it neatly with one hand, flipping it open and thumbing through the pages until he came to an entry near the middle.

“Elgrid Hengist, born July 12th, 1676 in Dover.” He said, scanning down the page. “Childhood, Hogwarts attendee, Ravenclaw...” He trailed off. “Aha! Here. ‘Hengist is most well known for his
claim that his wife, Nivea, was originally his kneazle familiar of the same name. He claimed to have brewed a potion that allowed her to become human because of his love for her. While Nivea, notably, did indeed have kneazle-like features, such as her furry ears and tufted tail, these are easily explained by selective transfiguration. Angered by the general disbelief of this claim, Hengist and his wife retired to his family’s estate, where Hengist worked the rest of his life to create a truth serum to prove his claim regarding Nivea. He was ultimately unsuccessful, though his published work on the subject did eventually lead to the development of Veritiserum in the 18th century.”

Severus looked up. “Actually,” He rumbled. “I think...” He trailed off for a moment, brow furrowing. “Hengist is a pretty popular joke amongst potions masters.” He admitted. “Someone got ahold of his journals a few years ago, and they made the rounds. Last I heard, they had found themselves back in Slughorn’s library, the old fool. Can’t stand to let anything, no matter how useless, out of his clutches. Let me make a floo call...” He stood and made his way to the fireplace, grabbing a bowl of floo powder and kneeling at the hearth on a rug kept there for that purpose. Harry followed, but was unable to make out anything of what was said through the crackle of the flames. Instead, he made himself at home on the back of the couch and waited, excitement thrumming contently through him. What was he going to do first when he was human again? He wondered. Well, obviously, he would give Hermione a hug for all her help, and maybe Severus too. He trilled a laugh at the thought of Severus’ face if he were to hug him. After that.... Hermione had said they’d found his wand near the site where he’d been taken by the Death Eaters right after Dumbledore’s death, and had hidden it from the ministry. He wanted to hold his wand again, and cast a spell. He missed the feeling of his magic- phoenix magic was different, wild and hot, completely incomparable to the cool rush of casting magic through a wand.

At long last, Severus stood from the hearth, a pile of old books in his arms. He looked at Harry. “To the library?” Harry nodded vigorously, flying to Severus’ shoulder and thinking of Hermione. They vanished in a swirl of flame.

.xOx.

The timing spell that Severus and Hermione had set over the cauldron dinged, and Harry, Severus and Ron watched as Hermione carefully sprinkled precisely 7.5 grams of moondew blossoms into the bubbling mixture. The swirling green potion slowly lightened, brightening to a dark copper. The steam rising off the surface took on a brief smell of candied apples, and then wafted away. She carefully stirred the glass rod in two figure eights followed by three circles widdershins, and the potion abruptly went still and clear as glass. She turned off the heat, cast a stasis charm over the cauldron and backed away, sharing a brief look with Severus. He was following along with a second copy of the recipe, checking her work.

This was the fourth iteration of the potion they’d tried, and the first to get to this close the final stage. The journal had been old and in disrepair, and the recipes were incomplete, but between Hermione’s gift for old texts and Severus’ potions acumen, they had parsed out the recipe of the potion.

“Brilliant.” Hermione murmured, looking over the recipe. “What a brilliant idea, to combine aspects of the Animagus potion with Polyjuice. I mean, we already know that using Polyjuice to transform into an animal results in a permanent change, unless reversed by spells—” Here, Harry chortled, remembering Hermione’s cat-polyjuice incident, and Hermione’s cheeks flushed as she ignored him— “But the addition of the aspects from the Animagus potion should help smooth the transition between animal and human. And adding the ingredients in reverse order for the Animagus potion to promote a change from animal to human instead of the reverse... how did he even realize that would work?”
She looked at the next page, tracing over a line that they’d underlined. “Though I do wish we’d figured out what he meant by this. ‘The Anthroformus potion will grant a new form to the drinker, while maintaining both their original self and the truth of their soul.’ At least it doesn’t sound dangerous, but what is Harry’s original form? The human, or the phoenix?” She sighed, tapping her wand against her thigh, looking between Harry and the potion. “There are still so many questions, Harry.” She said quietly. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Harry looked at her, and nodded resolutely.

Hermione sighed. “The only thing left,” She said, “is the addition of ‘a piece of the soon-to-be human, added by their own agency,’ and ‘the base material of a human that the drinker wishes to appear like.’ This is pretty clear- Harry, you’ll have to drop a feather or something into the potion. For the second part, I pulled these off your brush, when you vanished.” She said, pulling a vial of short, dark hairs from her pocket. “At the time, I was thinking I could use them for tracking you or something, but this way we can give you your old appearance back.” Ron gently touched her back, remembering back to her frantic research to try and find their friend before anything could happen, and she shot a smile at him over her shoulder.

Harry looked from Hermione to Severus, who nodded. “As far as I can tell,” He added, “Everything has gone correctly this time. This is still an experimental potion,” He added. “I’ve looked into all the ingredients, and from what I can tell, they should do exactly as they’re supposed to. In addition, nothing in this combination should hurt you. But as Hermione said, there’s really no way to know what it will do without trying it. Are you sure you want to risk it?”

Harry took a deep breath, then determinedly slicked his feathers back. Severus and Hermione had been working on this potion for him for a month now, and it was time. He hopped up on the table next to the cauldron and spread his wings, setting his beak at the base of one of his secondary flight feathers and yanking it out with a quick tug and a few drops of blood. Hermione reluctantly lifted the stasis spell and Harry leaned cautiously over the cauldron, dropping the feather in. The potion swirled slowly, and the feather dissolved, tinting the clear potion a fiery red. Hermione reached over him and dropped a black hair into the solution, and the surface of the potion shivered, the hair sinking to the bottom and giving off golden threads. From the corner, Severus tsked.

“Of course, Potter’s potion WOULD be Gryffindor colors.” Hermione, Ron and Harry shared a look and Ron snickered.

“Well, of course he is!” Ron proclaimed. “That’s our Harry, after all.”

Harry wondered what sort of look Severus (or for that matter, Ron) would give him if he ever told the man how close he’d been to being Slytherin.

“Okay, Harry.” Hermione said, separating out vials of the potion as she spoke. “The instructions are clear here, too. We need to separate out two draughts of the potion. You’ll drink one, and then we need to pour the potion remaining in the cauldron over you. Once that’s gone, we’ll have you drink the last draught. Are you ready?”

Harry looked down at his beautiful, red wings, and sighed. He launched from the table, exulting in one last flight around the room under his own power, and then landed. As much fun as it was to have wings, he needed to be human again so much more than he needed to fly.

He waddled up to Hermione and tilted his head back, opening his beak. With a deep breath, Hermione lifted the first vial and poured it carefully down his throat. The potion was smooth and slightly sweet, Harry noticed, and gathered in a bright, hot ball right below his breastbone. Next, Hermione lifted the cauldron and poured it gently over him, carefully coating his feathers from crest to tail, wingtip to wingtip. Lastly, Harry swallowed the last vial, and the hot ball under his
breastbone burst, sending warmth across his body. Slowly, the edges of Harry’s feathers began to waver, turning from feather to fire and back again, and then they went up with a roar, wreathing his body in a sheet of flame.

Hermione cursed and dropped away from the flaming phoenix, watching with worried eyes. Severus came up next to her, gripping her elbow in silent support while Ron laid a hand on her opposite shoulder. Together, they watched as Harry-the-phoenix vanished in a swirl of flames that grew from bird-sized to human-sized in a matter of seconds.

It seemed like it took hours for the flames to flicker and die, leaving behind a figure crouched on the desk next to the empty cauldron. “Harry....” Hermione breathed.

The figure twitched, and then sat upright. “Did it work?” Hermione let out a glad little cry at the sound of Harry’s voice, warm and familiar, but as he uncurled, she pressed a hand over her mouth.

“What?” Harry said, catching the shock on her face which was probably repeated with both Severus and Ron behind her. Wordlessly, Hermione conjured up a mirror for Harry. With a puzzled frown, he looked into it, and then his eyes widened.

Hermione watched him take in his new features, cataloguing the changes herself. The potion had worked, but not completely. The being in front of her was some ethereal combination of phoenix and Harry. His face was mostly humanoid, though his chin and nose were more pointed than she remembered, and his lips were tinted the same gold coloration as his beak and looked hard and beaklike. His eyes, while still green, were fierce and hawklike, the pupil too big for a human eye, and his cheekbones were sharp. Red and black feathers began over his cheekbones and increased in number as they ran up toward his hairline, culminating in a fierce red crest that rose over his head. The rest of his hair was a mix of black and red feathers, and a short spray of red feathers fell from his shoulders like a cape. His arms, too, were feathered in bright red, stuck in some transitory state between arms and wings. They were arm shaped and arm sized, but feathers ran down the backs of them from the middle of his upper arm to the ends of his pinky, the primaries long enough to brush the floor. He had the barest hint of hands, his feathered fingers short and stubby and tipped in long black claws, and only the thumb and first two fingers looked mobile. More feathers sprouted from the base of his spine, forming a red fanlike tail. His legs, from the knee down, were scaled and golden, ending in giant, black-tipped claws, and the red feathers lined his thighs and hips, covering him so well that it took Hermione a moment to realize that he was completely nude.

Harry reached up one feathered hand to press it against the mirror. “Shit...” He whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Harry. Just when he's about to get what he wants, something always gets in the way. But really, what did he expect? He's using an untested potion that the wizarding community has seen as a hoax for the last 3 centuries.

If my description of halfPhoenix!Harry isn't jiving with you, think the harpies from WOW, which is pretty much what he's based off of. Except, you know, male.

Coming soon: Is Harry EVER going to get his human body back? Is he stuck in this weird, in-between state from now on? And is there really a place in the wizarding
world for a half-phoenix Savior to return to, seeing as he's been thought dead for years?
Wow, I'm so surprised that so many of you are reading this! Thank you for all your support. This, as you can probably tell, is my first story, so I'm really appreciating all the love from you all. <3
That said, another chapter! I meant this to be more evenly split between the first events and last event, but this story has a way of getting away from me. As always, comments and constructive criticism is welcome, and if you want to point out any mistakes I'm happy to fix them. I'm aware that we have a bit of an abrupt shift halfway through here, but I needed to get Harry out of Hogwarts. Sorry!

“Language!” Hermione scolded reflexively. Harry whirled away from the mirror, his crest rising and fierce, hawkish eyes narrowing.

“Language!” Harry repeated. His voice rose into a very bird like screech with the word, which only raised his agitation. “Look at me!” He cried. “I’ve become some weird... half-bird FREAK because of YOUR potion and you want to lecture me about language?!” Harry reeled away from Hermione, pacing the room in an attempt to calm himself. Every feather on his body was standing on end, and it made his skin itch, and that combined with the tick-tack-tick of his talons (TALONS) on the floor only contributed to his agitation. He felt the frustration and anger boiling inside him, flavored with tones of shock, horror, and concern, rising in an inferno that felt terribly unfamiliar. He remembered being angry as a human quite well, but that rage was a small, tame hearth fire compared to the conflagration of mixed emotions roaring in his breast, and the acknowledgment of another difference only beat the flames higher. He breathed deeply, trying to contain his rage and understand where all this emotion was coming from.

Hermione stepped forward, reaching out a hand to touch the back of his shoulder. Harry shrieked, a sound so distinctly bird like that Ron and Severus flinched back, and spun in place, raising an arm to bat Hermione away. He felt his grip on the fiery anger slip, and the motion was accompanied by a sheet of flame. Hermione yelped and fell backward, cradling her hands, which were bright red and already blistering, burnt. Harry felt the rage drain away, replaced by a horror that seemed to come from multiple directions, and then the anger came back, this time directed at himself.

He stepped forward, about to reach out and apologize, and then Ron was between him and Hermione, wand out, knees bent. Severus stepped in behind Ron, taking Hermione’s hands in his to examine them. “What is your problem, mate?” He snapped, wand trained between Harry’s eyes, all his years of experience as an Auror clear in his confident stance and grim eyes. “She is trying to help you. She’s been working day and night for weeks, first to find that blasted potion and then on all the different variations of the recipe she and Severus thought might work. She TOLD YOU the potion might not, probably wouldn’t, work. You wanted to take it anyway!” He ended with a shout, and Harry flinched back. He knew he’d reacted poorly, and the shame boiled inside him, flavored again with anger and shock, and confusing elements of concern and pain. Again, it felt bigger, deeper than any emotion he remembered. He recoiled, tried to tuck his arms around his waist, and succeeded in knocking over a pile of nearby cauldrons with an edge of his wing as he’d forgotten their length.
He squeezed his eyes, wishing to be anywhere but here, where Ron was angry and concerned and protective and Severus was worried about both him and Hermione and Hermione was in pain and so very worried about him... And then the world was melting into the familiar twist of flame, and as the flames fell away, he was soaring over Hogsmeade, red wings spread wide to catch the wind, soaring far above the castle. He felt all the overwhelming emotion melt away with the shift, and gave a trill of relief, wheeling about and absently heading up the familiar path between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, just for a direction to fly in, though something deep in his chest urged him to fly to the South. Harry ignored the urge, and marveled at the relative calm that had returned to him as he flew, all his emotions now making sense. He was still frustrated by the failed potion, but not to the same extent. All the frustration with Hermione had faded, and he had no idea where it had come from. He felt guilty about hurting Hermione, but he wasn’t near as angry or oddly protective as he’d been in the room. He trilled a short, unamused laugh. He’d been angry like Ron got angry, he thought, as he imagined Ron’s red face when Hermione was ever in trouble. Not that it helped in this occasion, he thought. Ron wasn’t likely to calm down enough any time soon to appreciate the comparison. Harry sighed. He’d best stay away for a while- he wasn’t likely to help the situation, he knew.

His aimless flight took him closer to the castle, and with his sharp eyesight, he noticed a dark spot near the gates of Hogwarts that hadn’t been there before. Curious, he winged closer, dipping down to examine it, and found a statue standing on a pedestal. He dropped closer. Had they made a statue for Dumbledore? Harry eyed the statue with amusement, noting the stupidly heroic pose the wizard was in, wand pointed uselessly straight into the sky, robes flared perfectly around him. Harry thought the robes looked almost like Severus’ did, when he was dramatically swanning in and out of the potions classroom, though Harry would never share that observation with him. But who was this wizard? On closer inspection, he didn’t have Dumbledore’s iconic beard and pointed hat. In fact, he had no wizard’s hat at all, only a mop of stylishly messy hair. Harry looked over the statue’s face, and found the lighting bolt carved proudly on its brow, and landed with a graceless thump at the foot of the statue, staring up. He flicked his wings back irritably over his back and noted absently that he was back in his bird body, but he had more important things to think about at the moment; namely, who the hell had built a statue of him, and why did it look NOTHING like him? He ran his eye over the statue in shock, noting the broad shoulders and the face that looked like every other classically handsome statue he’d ever seen. If they were going to immortalize him in stone, he thought, they could have at least bothered to get his nose right.

Harry turned to the side in disgust, and then he saw the plaque. He grumbled and clacked his beak, then wandered over to read it. 

*Harry Potter, or the Savior, (1980-1997), infiltrated the Headquarters of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named in the first year of the Second Wizarding War, shortly after the Fall of the Ministry. Believed to have orchestrated his own capture by Death Eater forces, the Savior nobly sacrificed himself to save all wizardkind with the fabled Wizard’s Last Strike spell, an incantation thought to be lost to the ages and last used in the medieval times. We humbly recognize the Savior’s great sacrifice and incredible forethought in placing himself where he could strike a decisive blow for the light side, and credit him for single-handedly stopping the escalation of the war, which had the potential to decimate the wizarding world.*

Harry blinked in shock. This was... this was all wrong. Where was the mention of Dumbledore? What about Hermione, the one who found the bloody spell? And he hadn’t meant to be captured, not in the least. He still remembered that day, when he and Ron and Hermione had accidentally broken the reinstated Taboo curse over Voldemort’s name, and he had quickly petrified and disillusioned Hermione and Ron before they were noticed, knowing that the Death Eaters wouldn’t look any further once they’d apprehended him. He had hardly done this alone. Was this really how the world remembered him?
The flash of a camera went off behind him, and he launched into the air, startled. A young boy stood behind him with a camera in his hands, and Harry was reminded forcibly of Colin Creevey.

“Oh wow!” The boy breathed. “A phoenix! Were you visiting the statue of the Savior?” Harry cocked his head to the side, and the boy smiled at him. “It’s ok! We do it too. Did you know that without him, you-know-who would have killed all the muggle-borns? That would have meant I would never have been born, you know. So all us half-bloods and muggle borns, we come here every few weeks to say thank you.”

To Harry’s horror, the boy took a few steps forward and laid a hand on the statue’s foot, bowing his head. It looked all too much like he was praying. Harry looked on in shock as more students emerged from behind the boy, solemnly lining up to do the same thing. Were these idiots actually... worshipping him? He shook his head in amazed disbelief, and the original boy lifted his head, fished out a purple flower, and laid it at the foot of the statue. Then, the boy turned to Harry, brandishing his camera. “I’m going to print this photo and show it to everyone!” He said, cheerfully. “To know that even a phoenix pays its respect to the Savior... well, it's great, just great. My dad raised me knowing that the Savior is out there still, looking after us all, and he’ll just love this photo. We can put it into the book he’s writing!”

Harry reared back, wings flaring, and shot off into the sky, leaving the boy behind. He couldn’t handle seeing that anymore. He thought back over what he knew of religion (not much- his relatives hadn’t thought church was for freaks like him, and they only bothered to go on Easter and Christmas, anyways), and realized that he needed to know how widespread this cult was. Because if there were more of them, and they somehow learned he’d never actually died... he shuddered. A resurrection myth, combined with the fanaticism he’d seen in the boy? He didn’t want any part of that.

Disturbed, he winged his way up to the astronomy tower, flying up past the windows to land softly at the very apex of the pointed roof. The place was unchanged, and Harry forced his mind away from the image of Dumbledore falling, falling. He’d come to terms with that night, but he still missed the old man who had become his mentor. He heaved a great sigh that seemed out of place in his bird body. He was tired- he’d been up all night with Hermione and Severus, keeping them company as they put the final touches on the potion, the transformation had been physically exhausting, and the fallout emotionally exhausting. He knew that he needed to find Hermione and apologize, but he was afraid. What if she didn’t want to see him? What if he got angry again? He was dangerous. And he was full-phoenix again, which he wasn’t ready to think about. Spreading his wings for balance, he resettled himself for maximum balance, turned to face the South to assuage the tug that continued deep in his chest, and then watched as night stole over the castle grounds.

Night had well and truly fallen when he stirred again, lifting his head from where he’d tucked it under a wing, and he blinked blearily, trying to figure out what had woken him. A flash of red cloak from the corner of his vision cued him in, and he spun around, losing his balance on the slick tiles and catching himself with his wings. He rose up into the air, and Ron was hovering beside him, astride a sleek black broom that Harry’d never seen before. He squinted at the handle of the broom, distracted. What was the model? It looked even faster than his old Firebolt. He wanted to ask Ron about it, but the scowl on Ron’s face prevented him.

“Hermione wanted me to look for you, for some reason.” Ron grunted, and Harry felt himself growing angry again, for no reason, and he missed a wingbeat when he had a thought. He’d thought earlier that the anger he’d felt seemed more like Ron’s than his. Was it possible that he’d been... feeling their emotions? Dumbledore had once told him that Fawkes was an “empathetic” creature, referencing his ability to detect other people’s loyalty. Maybe it went further than that,
even. Because if he followed that logic, then his disappointment with Hermione for the failure of
the potion... that was Hermione’s own. And then the oddly amplified frustration and anger, that
must have been Severus and Hermione combined, as neither liked it when a project didn’t work as
anticipated. He thought back over the encounter, and as he realized what had happened, he
suddenly was able to separate Ron’s anger from his own emotions with a clarity that had been
missing before.

Hermione! He needed to tell Hermione about this, and now that he understood, he wouldn’t hurt
her. With a moment of concentration, he vanished in a twirl of flame, somewhat amused by Ron’s
angry cursing behind him. Ron... he would be another beast entirely to appease, Harry thought.
He’d deal with Ron later. He reappeared in the infirmary, where Hermione was sitting on a hospital
bed, her arms wrapped in a white gauze that reeked of murtlap.

“Harry!” Hermione cried, and Harry felt her relief and fondness. Now that he knew what was
happening, it was easy to identify her feelings over his own, and he felt foolish for not recognizing
that the emotions he’d been feeling earlier were foreign.

Harry made an odd tsking noise in his throat, and winged closer, landing on the small table next to
the bed. This time, the frustration was his own, and he couldn’t believe that he’d fled earlier when
he could have helped the situation. He tilted his head over the cup and blinked slowly, willing
liquid to bead up in his eyes. Slowly, pearly tears began to drip down his beak, gathering in the cup,
and when it was half full, Harry pulled back and looked at Hermione, who was staring at him. Her
gentle fondness was still there, and now it was tinged with something like awe as she banished her
bandages and picked up the glass with softly murmured gratitude.

Harry looked away uncomfortably, preening down some back feathers. The awe was
uncomfortably similar to what he’d seen on the face of the young boy looking at his statue, and he
needed to ask Hermione about that. He opened his beak to ask, and realized he was stuck again in
his bird body.

He made a mumbling sound deep in his throat, frustrated, and wished, for the first time, to be back
in that half-way body. A second later, he was, and he shrieked as the bedside table overbalanced
under his suddenly increased weight, dumping him unceremoniously on the floor and bending his
tail feathers painfully. He shot up from the floor, embarrassed, and surreptitiously reached back to
straighten out the bent feathers. On the bed, Hermione laughed as she finished pouring the tears
over her arms.

Harry rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, remembering to be mindful of his long primaries.
“I’m so sorry, Hermione.” He began, and she shook her head. “No, I should be sorry.” She said.
“Severus and I looked at the potion recipe, and we realized something. There were ingredients in
there- the combination of powdered jade and sunwort? It’s a compound that’s known to uncover
latent empathetic powers. It would never have caused problems with a kneazle, but as phoenix are
already empathetic creatures...” Hermione trailed off, puzzled, as Harry laughed.

“Oh of course you already know.” Harry said, still chuckling. “It took me until just now to realize
what had happened. I thought I just had this bizarre breakdown, but then I realized I was picking up
on all of your emotions.”

Harry stepped forward, reaching out for Hermione’s hands, carefully keeping his little fingers
tucked back, which kept the longest primaries on his wings folded back, and took her hands in his
own feathered ones. “Still,” He said, “I’m so sorry for hurting you. No matter how much was
going on in my head, I never should have struck out. Especially when I don’t know what’s going
on. I had no idea that I could throw fire like that, and I didn’t know about the empathy thing. And I
completely forgot about the phoenix tears until now, which I should have given you as soon as it happened.” Now that he could speak, Harry felt the words begin to tumble out. “And I still have no idea about these things I do- I can apparate without my wand, and apparently, I can shift between this new body and my phoenix one, and then I was out on the grounds and I saw these kids worshiping my statue. What’s that about? And...”

Hermione raised a hand to his cheek, shushing him. “It’ll be ok, Harry.” She said calmly. “We’ll figure out all the phoenix stuff together.” She pursed her lips. “The statue... I’m sorry you had to see that. That’s been going on for a few years now.”

“But that means I can’t tell people I’m back.” Harry said, and Hermione frowned. “If they’re already like that, imagine if I come back to life! They’d never let go of it.” Harry threw his hands in the air, again keeping his primaries mostly controlled. He was getting the hang of this, he thought absentmindedly.

Hermione hummed in agreement. “I hadn’t thought of that.” She said, then looked at Harry. “Actually, there’s something else I’m wondering.” Harry cocked his head in question. Hermione turned to her bag, which rested on the bed next to her, and dug out a familiar length of holly wood. She rolled it between her fingers slowly, and then, with a calculating look on her face, held it out to Harry.

Harry smiled at the sight of an old friend, and reached out with pleasure, expecting the gentle flush of warmth that he always felt when he held his wand. His smile died as his fingertips contacted the wood and he felt nothing. He gave it a shake, as if that would help, and nothing. He might as well be holding a quill for all the magic he felt. He shot a horrified glance at Hermione, feeling her warm sympathy press against him like a hug. This time, the irritation he felt was all his. He didn’t want sympathy- he wanted his wand to respond to him.

He frowned at the tip of his wand, and carefully flicked it. “Lumos.” He muttered, hopefully. The wand remained inert, unresponsive. His frown grew, and he turned to the table and pointed it at the empty glass. “Wingardium leviosa!” The cup remained motionless, and his wand remained cold.

He looked back at Hermione, his frustration giving way to fear, which grew when she sighed. “I was worried about that.” She said. “It occurred to me after you... left, today. You know Riclan’s Law of Animagus Transformation, right? The principle that explains that no wizard may have a magical animal as an Animagus, as each soul may only have one magical core?” Harry frowned, not liking where this was going.

“You have all your memories of being Harry.” Hermione said, delicately. “And you ARE Harry. Except, when you cast the Wizard’s Last Strike, you gave up everything that was you. Your life, your magic, your soul. Now... we may have given you a somewhat human body, and you have your human memories, but Harry... your soul, your existence... you truly are a phoenix now. Which means your phoenix soul has phoenix magic, which means that you...” Hermione sighed, reached up and rubbed her nose, and said. “Which means that you’re not a wizard anymore, Harry.” She said it softly, carefully, like she could soften the blow. It didn’t work.

Harry felt his knees give out, and he stumbled to the floor, not even noticing as his feathers bent awkwardly under him. He wasn’t... a wizard anymore? But then... what was he?

He sank his head into his arms, his mind whirling. He’d been intentionally not thinking about this since he’d returned, but he had no idea what he was going to do. Before... everything, he’d been so focused on the war that he’d never really thought about it. Recently, he’d had some faint plan of regaining his body, somehow becoming an auror, being Ron’s partner, maybe going to find what Ginny was up to. But that all hinged on one fact- the fact that he, Harry Potter, belonged in the
wizarding world because he was a WIZARD. If he wasn’t a wizard... he didn’t belong here, in this world that had been everything to him since he’d been eleven. What was he going to do with himself now? Go out and find a nice lady phoenix, raise some chicks? He choked out a desperate laugh.

“-Harry, Harry!” Hermione’s warm worry against his mind and warm hands on his shoulders pulled him out of it, and he looked up, his crest drooping in sadness.

“Hermione.” Harry said plaintively. “What am I going to DO?”

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione said sadly, sitting next to him and winding her arms around him, feathers and all, in the best hug she could manage. “You’ll be fine, you’ll see.” She said encouragingly. “We’ll come up with something.”

Harry bent his head into her, and closed his eyes against the tears that wanted to well up as he finally allowed everything that had happened to wash over him. He hadn’t truly grieved for his old life yet, and now it all crashed over him.

_xOx._

Harry blinked his gritty eyes open, and reached up to rub the grit of sleep and tears out of them. He looked around, finding himself laying on the couch in Hermione and Ron’s living room, still in semi-phoenix form, with Ron and Hermione arguing softly at the dining table behind the couch. He froze at the sound of Ron’s voice, but then cautiously reached out for their emotions. There was Hermione, bright, determined, and... excited? About something. And there was Ron, who was feeling, of all things, sheepish, still a bit angry, and worried. Hermione must have explained to Ron why Harry’d reacted the way he had last night.

Harry rolled to his feet and rounded the couch, still half asleep, and accidentally knocked down a pile of books with the edges of his wings. He spun to catch them, his feathers automatically spreading in alarm, and knocked a teapot off a nearby table with a crash.

“Shit!” He yelled.

“Language!” Hermione scolded behind him, automatically. Harry turned to face her and Ron, and all of them paused for a moment, eyes wide, and then they broke into laughter at the unconscious repeat of last night.

“Sorry, sorry.” Hermione gasped, leaning on the table. “It’s a reflex now, you know.” She said. “It comes with being a professor, I think.”

Harry shrugged, offering a cautious, conspiratory look to Ron. “I don’t know about that.” Harry teased. “I think you’ve been telling us that since first year.”

Ron nodded, accepting Harry’s silent offer of truce. “It’s true!” He said, winking at Harry when Hermione sputtered indignantly. “You’ve always tried to mother us, you know.” Harry and Ron chuckled, and Harry felt the last of Ron’s anger melt away in the spirit of comradery he was feeling now. Harry felt the last of the tension in his feathers drain away, and finished approaching the table, snagging the open jar of peanut butter and a clean spoon from the plate next to Ron.

“What were you guys talking about?” He asked, digging a spoonful of peanut butter from the jar and licking at it like a lollipop.

Hermione shifted a little, and Ron frowned. “Well.” Hermione began slowly. “We were actually talking about your... well, your magic problem.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”
Hermione nodded eagerly. “Yeah. We were coming up with some ideas. But before we do that, I wanted to tell you that you are always welcome to stay with us, if you want. We’d never turn you away.”

Harry looked around at the little flat that Hermione and Ron shared with Rose on the first floor of Hogwarts, and frowned. It was one thing when he was a phoenix - he was smaller, didn’t take up as much room, was able to sleep on the perch in a corner. But though he knew he could switch back and forth, he liked his new body, and the flat was small for him. And he knew that he couldn’t go anywhere else. He’d already determined that he couldn’t use magic, so even if they found a way to disguise his birdlike features, he couldn’t reintegrate into the wizarding world. He knew this with certainty. And after his breakdown last night, he’d realized that he almost didn’t want to. He’d always had his destiny, the prophecy, a reason to fight, and he felt a little adrift without that guidance. Something inside was telling him that it was time to explore a little, to spread his wings, so to speak. And there was that little tug in his chest drawing him south...

He looked up to tell Hermione this, but saw her smile and realized that she, of course, had already thought this all through before he had. Clever Hermione. He smiled back, and shook his head softly. “No, you’re right.” He said. “I want to... well, I don’t know what, exactly. But I want to leave, at least for a while. See what’s out there, see what I can find to do.”

Ron hemmed. “I don’t know, mate.” He said. “What would you do? Where would you go? We can’t just fling you out into the world, you know. Without your magic, without your name, you can’t reclaim your money.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s ok, I think.” He said. “I’ll fly, for a while, I think. Explore. I’ve always wanted to see someplace other than England.”

Hermione slipped her wand into her hand, summoning a small brown bag from the other room. She caught it as it flew towards her, and dipped her hand inside, digging around until her elbow was buried deep. Harry raised an eyebrow, and then snapped his fingers. “You enchanted it! Like your bag, from that summer.” Hermione nodded distractedly, and then pulled a few items out.

“I was doing some reading about magical creatures,” she said, “specifically, the type that are immune to magic. Obviously, this has been a problem before - what do people do when they have kneazles and muggle neighbors? A normal disillusionment spell doesn’t work. Turns out, they usually enchant their collars with an area of effect illusion, so that muggles just see a regular cat.”

She extended her hand to Harry, and in the middle of her palm sat a simple, braided band, in shades of tan and brown. “This should do the same for you, when you’re in your phoenix form. It works by putting up an illusion around you, not on you. But!” She said, holding up a finger. “If you touch someone, they’ll be able to feel that you’re different from what they see, and for most muggles, that will be enough to break the spell. I also spelled it so that it should shift sizes as you shift forms.”

Harry eyed the band, and then took it, kneeling to affix it to his ankle. The feathers on his wrists would interfere with it, he reasoned, and it was safer there then attached to his wing if he were to fly.

Ron cleared his throat, a wave of red creeping up his ears, and gestured to his waist. Harry looked down, and saw an illusory scrap of gold fabric dangling around his hips, hanging halfway to his knees in something halfway between a kilt and a loincloth. “My idea.” Ron added gruffly. “Because you’re, you know, naked, without it. And don’t worry- this illusion’s a little different. It’s less detailed, so it won’t vanish if people know it’s not real.”
Hermione rolled her eyes. “His feathers cover everything, you know.” She said to Ron dismissively. “Besides...” Her eyebrows knitted together momentarily, and she looked calculatingly at Harry.

“What?” Harry asked, nervously.

“Have you had to use the bathroom yet, in that form?” Hermione asked, bluntly.


“Well,” Hermione said, “Birds are... different, reproductively.”

This time, it was Ron that squawked, and both of them were tremendously relieved as the door conveniently opened, redirecting the conversation. They all turned to watch Severus step in, holding a crate of potions in his arms. Hermione’s eyes lit up as he came in, and Severus gave her a brief smirk, black brows raising proudly.

“Of course I figured it out.” He drawled, answering her unspoken question. He set the crate on the table, pulled out a single flask, and held it out to Hermione. From the little brown bag, Hermione pulled the vial of Harry’s hair, and carefully isolated a strand which she dropped in the thick, brown potion. The potion bubbled fiercely for a moment, before turning gold. Turning, Hermione offered the potion to Harry.

He took it, and then looked at her. “What’s this one supposed to do?” He asked, warily. She grinned at him, and motioned for him to go on. He eyed her, then Severus, and then the potion, and shrugged. Could anything worse happen?

He downed the potion, and consequently dropped the vial as his skin began to bubble, his stomach squirming inside his skin like something alive. He stared incredulously as the thick skin covering his birdlike feet rippled, slowly darkening from fierce gold to skin. The black talons tipping his toes vanished, and the feathers over his arms receded, leaving only skin in their wake. Harry bolted upright before the potion could finish its work, and raced to the mirror hung next to the door. Staring back at him, lips spread in a wide grin, was a perfectly human Harry Potter, if one discounted the scattered black feathers in his hair and the fierceness of his green eyes.

He spun back Severus and Hermione, and without thinking about it, he flung his arms around Severus in a hug. “You did it!” He enthused.

Severus sputtered, shocked, but surprisingly, he lifted his own arms to encircle Harry briefly before pushing him away. “It’s not permanent.” He said, gruffly. “I had to alter a batch of Polyjuice that I had brewing. It only lasts for 6 hours, and you only have so many hairs. So it’s only for special occasions, hear? We’ll be looking into a more permanent measure.”

Then the potions master yelped. “Potter!” He said gruffly. “What do you think you’re doing, hugging people while you’re only wearing that?” Harry looked down in confusion, to find that the illusory scrap of golden cloth had followed him into this form, and laughed. He wasn’t going to tell Severus it was fake.

Hermione, also laughing, tucked the rest of the altered Polyjuice, the vial of hairs, and a quick set of muggle clothes that she transfigured from a leftover quill into the brown bag, and then hung it around his neck.

“This should also stay with you as you transform.” She said. “I packed the essentials- you have a tent if you need it, and plenty of food under a stasis charm. I don’t know the limits of your teleportation, but you can always come back if you need anything.” She stepped back, wringing her
“Did you want to leave right away?” She asked. “Because you can stay as long as you like, you know.”

Harry stepped forward, smiling, and pulled her into his arms, reveling in the ability to hug her without his feathers getting in the way.

He stepped back, holding her hands in his. “Thank you so much, for everything.” He looked around, including Ron and Severus in his thanks, and released her hands. “I’ll be back, you know.” He teased. “I’ll pop in when you least expect it!”

He went to hug Ron, who fended him off with a laugh, a pointed look at his illusory clothing, and a handclasp, and then nodded to Severus. With a final check of the leather bag around his neck, Harry closed his eyes and vanished in a ball of fire, reappearing over the roof of the astronomy tower in full phoenix form. He looped once around the tower, then shot off towards the South, obeying the odd feeling he had that was telling him he had to go that way. It was ok, he reasoned. He’d always wanted to see Africa.

.xOx.

It was on the seventh day of his journey that he saw them. He’d been flying by day, roosting by night, and passing by every settlement he’d seen, something deep in his craw pulling him ever southward. He’d barely stopped for food, and found himself eating whatever he could find in bird form, passing over the meals he knew were packed in the bag around his neck. He wanted to investigate—knowing Hermione, she’d packed him a few jars of peanut butter—but that undeniable urge kept tugging, and he didn’t want to stop long enough to shift into his in-between form. In the last day, he’d passed over a long stretch of sea, and felt the salty-sweet air that rose off the surface pass through his feathers. Early this morning, he’d come over land again, and all day he’d been passing over golden sands interspersed with occasional oases and outstretches of gray, barren rock. He cast about in his mind, and decided that he must have crossed the Mediterranean Sea, as Rome had passed under his wings not long ago, and now he must be in Africa. He wondered what country he flew over. Was it Egypt, perhaps? Or maybe Libya? He knew he should have paid more attention in geography.

It was a sudden change when he felt it; the insistent tugging that had grown over the last few days vanished, and Harry bobbled as his wings missed a beat. Rising up to take its place was a terrifying wave of horrible, overwhelming rage that battered at his mind, trying to overwhelm his own emotions, and he dove from the clouds, following the emotion. That’s when he saw them.

A giant green man was running through the desert below, his huge feet kicking up giant plumes of sand as he ran, and a small, purple-clad figure was tucked, boneless, in the crook of his arm. They were pursued by three large helicopters that were spraying them with bullets, and Harry flinched at the racket. He’d seen guns like this on TV when Dudley would watch his action movies, but in real life, the sound was so much worse than in the movies. Harry winced as he saw the bullets draw a line across the sand, kicking up small curls of sand where they landed, and cross right over the back of the green giant. He roared, and Harry winced as the rage that tore at his shields increased, howling and gibbering around the edges of his mind. Harry continued diving down to get a better look as the green man stopped and grabbed a chunk of rock nearby. He lifted it from the ground and flung it towards a helicopter, nailing it with deadly accuracy. The struck helicopter veered off to the side, its giant rotating blades biting into the neighboring ‘copter with a sickening crunch, and both machines fell to the sand in a sickening slow-motion descent, the whirring of the blades slowing to a stop as they hit the sand, and black-clad men piled out of the doomed machines like
ants. The third helicopter tilted back, pausing, as the green man shook his fist and roared at it, and then the helicopter looped around, likely to pick up the men from the downed machines.

Harry ignored the helicopters and pulled out of his dive barely 300 yards from the giant green man, and now he was close enough to see that the purple-clad figure he held was a man, likely injured and unconscious, from the way he was draped uncomfortably over the broad forearm. Big Green, by contrast, was uninjured, even though he’d been sprayed with bullets just a moment ago. As Harry watched, Big Green wavered for a moment, leaning after the retreating helicopter for a moment, and then glancing down at the burden in his arms. Harry felt another emotion come up to challenge the rage he felt coming off the big man, and he flew in front the green man, flaring his wings to catch his attention. He opened his beak and sang, concentrating hard on soothing the rage and drawing out the protective instinct he felt deep beneath.

Big Green stopped for a moment, gaze completely on Harry, and then he took a lumbering step closer. Harry flew backwards a bit, drawing him away from the site of the ‘copter crash and towards an oasis he’d seen, just a mile off.

*That’s right, big guy.* He thought, flaring his wings to catch the sun. He didn’t doubt that this creature saw straight through the weak glamor covering him, and he used everything in his arsenal to draw the green man towards him, his song turning sweet and coaxing.

Slowly, slowly, Harry drew Big Green towards the oasis, observing how the rage inside him was beginning to flicker. He saw big eyes start to blink more slowly, and stopped singing. It wouldn’t do for the big man to fall asleep on him, he thought. He had no way to haul one human to safety, let alone whatever Big Green was. And he needed them to be safe, though he didn’t know why. The tug in his breast had disappeared now that he was with them, and something deep inside him was sure that this was why he’d been drawn here- to bring these two men to the safety of the oasis.

Big Green woke up a little as Harry cut off his song, and he reached forward with one giant green hand. Harry easily dodged the clumsy grasp, beating his wings to gain a safer altitude.

“Pretty bird.” The big man grunted, and Harry blinked. Well, that worked. He trilled sweetly, and wove back and forth in front of Big Green. The big man followed closely, still trying to grab at him, and Harry led them back around a tall rock and into the green safety of the oasis.

Big Green stopped and dropped the man he was carrying unceremoniously. Harry winced as the man in purple flopped to the ground, the back of his head bouncing on the wet earth, and then Big Green was reaching out for Harry with both hands. Hastily, Harry sang again, focusing on minimizing that rage he was feeling. He was confused- Big Green didn’t look angry anymore, but the emotion still battered at his shields, strong as ever. Those big, green eyelids blinked slowly, and then Big Green rocked a bit on his feet, and then he suddenly keeled over backwards into a sound sleep. Harry winged closer cautiously, and saw that the green guy looked much smaller in his sleep.

No, not just looked smaller- he was shrinking, his skin lightening from green to tan, his black hair lightening to brown, until a small form lay curled on the ground, just as unconscious as the man in purple and even smaller.

Harry landed and shifted into his in-between form for the first time in seven days, rushing forward to check on the man in purple, noting as he got closer that the man was clad in military-grade armor and had a bow and a quiver of arrows strapped to his back, of all things. With relief, Harry noted the rise and fall of the man’s chest, and stepped closer to assess any wounds.

He froze when he heard the telltale sound of the ‘copter coming closer, and cast around in panic.
There was a broad-leafed plant in front of him, and he quickly tore off a few leaves, throwing them over the unconscious men at the edge of the water and shifting to his bird form. He rose up over the oasis to see what was happening, and watched as the helicopter thundered overhead, heading west. He winged his way higher, and cast his gaze around the desert. As far as he could tell, they’d left no men behind. He trilled to himself, contented, and ducked back into the cover of the canopy. He had a pair of strange men to take care of, and he liked the feeling of usefulness that came over him as he went about checking on them, first on the smaller man, who seemed fine, only deeply asleep.

He turned back to the first man, and wavered for a moment. He wasn’t sure what to do with this one- he had no visible wounds, but something was still wrong with him, and the feel of it set Harry’s feathers on edge. Harry thought for a moment, and then switched back to his half-human form. Phoenix tears were a cure-all, right?

He stepped closer to the man, dropping to his knees, and reached out, placing one feathered hand on his forehead. The man’s face twisted in discomfort, and Harry frowned. Even he could tell that the man was burning up, and Harry ran hotter than he used to, now that he was half firebird. Harry turned the man’s head towards him, bringing up his other hand to open his mouth, and paused, his heart beating strangely in his chest for a moment. The man was handsome, he noticed, with a strong jaw, the beginning of a five o’clock shadow, and generous lips. Harry shook his head, flustered. Now was not the time to notice such things, he scolded himself fiercely. The man could be dying for all he knew.

He steeled himself and reached forward, tipping the man’s head backwards and his jaw down, opening his mouth. Harry leaned forward over him, turning his head to the side, and urged the tears to form, letting them drip down to pool in the man’s mouth. Once he judged he’d given enough, he pulled back, gently closed the handsome man’s mouth, and gently stroked down his throat, encouraging him to swallow.

He felt the throat move under his fingers, and then bright blue eyes snapped open, locking onto his. Harry flinched backwards with a shriek, losing track of his form and reverting to full phoenix. The man sat up slowly, rubbing his head, and stared straight at him.

A bemused smile tugged at his lips, and Harry couldn’t help but notice how adorable the man was when he smiled.

“Well, that mission clearly didn’t go very well.” The man said wryly. “Because I could have sworn you were just a person.” He paused a moment, as if he were giving Harry the option to answer him, and Harry debated just that for a moment, before he cocked his head to the side with a questioning chirp.

The man sighed. “Right, not a person. That’s not surprising.” He looked around, saw the other man laying on the ground, and groaned as he got to his feet cautiously. He stretched, the form-fitting tightness of his body armor moving with him, and Harry appreciated the sight a bit more than maybe he should.

“Or maybe it didn’t go as badly as I thought.” He reevaluated. “Because I feel awesome, actually.” He frowned in thought, and then turned to check on his teammate. Harry scuttled closer as he leaned down, patting the downed man on the cheek roughly.

“Bruce!” He called, but Bruce didn’t move. The man in purple turned back to Harry, who was now perched on a root a few feet away.

“Well, that's not unusual.” He said, conversationally, and Harry just looked at him, blinking.
“Sometimes he’s out for hours after the Big Guy comes out to play, which is how we got here, I assume. Though, I still don’t know where you came from.” The man squinted at Harry, and Harry shifted, unsure of how to respond.

He was saved from replying, however, when a groan sounded from behind the man.

“Clint?” Bruce said, sitting up and dragging a hand over his face. He looked exhausted. “Where in the world are we?” He asked. Clint’s shoulders sagged, and Harry watched his face fall.

“I’ve no idea.” Clint answered. “I just woke up, and it looks like the Big Guy brought us here for some reason. Last I remember, we were on the mission in Cairo.”

Bruce looked around. “Well.” He said wryly. “I suppose we can safely say that we aren’t there anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

I promised we'd hit the crossover by chapter 6, and here we go! I'm hoping the characters will cooperate with me and we can start earning that relationship tag sometime soonish, but I've learned better than to make promises!

I felt very James Bond and Q with all of Hermione's gadgets here. I hope I didn't overdo it!
Harry flexed his talons gently, puncturing little holes into the tree root he was perched on, and watched the two men he had found. Now that Bruce was awake, he was frowning and rubbing at his temples, pinching his nose as if he had a headache.

“The Other Guy is still pretty active in here,” He said. “I’m going to mediate a little bit. We’re not going anywhere soon, are we?”

Clint rolled his shoulders and stretched an arm across his chest, limbering up. “I’m going to take a look around, see if I can figure out where we are.” He said. “Do whatever you need to.”

Harry shifted, watching Clint as he strode off towards the tall rock face that shaded the little oasis. He looked back at Bruce, who was now sitting cross-legged on the ground, eyes shut. The harsh desert sunlight was fading as the sun dropped lower in the sky, and the dim rays were filtered through the lush foliage, speckling his face in different degrees of shadow. Now that he was awake, that deep, simmering anger was back, but muffled somehow. Harry squinted at the man, confused. As Bruce sank deeper into mediation, Harry felt an artificial calm gather and draw over that anger like a flimsy curtain, dimming the intensity but leaving the anger intact. Harry fluffed the feathers around his neck, shivering a bit in the intensity of that anger, and turned after Clint, launching himself into the air. Bruce didn’t seem so bad, but Harry didn’t understand the depth or cause of that anger. And he’d thought Ron’s temper was hard to deal with.

He caught up easily and watched as Clint scooped up a handful of sand, rubbing it between his palms. Harry cocked his head to the side, noticing for the first time that Clint’s armor was asymmetrical, with a full sleeve on the right, but a strange glove on his left that only covered his lower forearm, the front and back of his hand, and the first two fingers of his left hand. As the man began to scale up the rock face, it gave Harry a lovely view of the muscles in his upper arm and
upper forearm bunching and relaxing.

Harry shifted, fluffing his feathers a little, and wrenched his attention away. Pervert bird, he scolded himself. He had better things to do than watch this man’s (admittedly gorgeous) arms as he climbed the vertical rock face. Harry launched off his branch and circled up, sailing easily past Clint with a snap of his wings. Clint stilled for a moment, watching him, and then resumed, making his way up the 30-foot rock face with admirable ease, scrambling over the lip of the rock and pulling himself up to standing, peering around himself while he pulled a slim black case from a pocket. Harry winged closer, watching as Clint pushed a few buttons on the device and the screen lit up, a series of blue holograms rising above it.

Fascinated, Harry winged closer, reaching out a talon. Were those projections? Where they as incorporeal as they looked? Unfortunately, as he neared, the display flickered and vanished, and his talon went through empty air. Harry let out a sad chirp, and startled as Clint pulled the device away and instead offered his leather clad arm. Harry examined his face for a moment, and then landed on the offered arm, sidling his way up to his shoulder.

Clint, moving slowly, lowered his arm. “Well, you’re a strange fellow, aren’t you?” He said, conversationally. Harry cocked his head, trying to look innocent. “Clearly, you’re used to people.” Clint said, lifting a hand cautiously towards him. Harry ducked his head a little, pushing forward into Clint’s hand. “But I’ve no idea what you are, or what you’re doing out here. From the looks of you, you’re not a bird meant to live out in the desert. With this gorgeous coloring, you look like you belong in a jungle somewhere.” Harry trilled contentedly. Clint had found a particularly itchy spot right at the base of his skull, and it felt heavenly, and he should keep complementing Harry on his beautiful feathers. He let his wings flare out a bit and fanned his tail, showing off in the red rays cast by the setting sun. He had an odd thought for a moment that he should switch forms, and see if Clint found that form pleasing too, but rejected it instantly.

Harry felt a moment of guilt for his subterfuge, and it cut through his pleasant haze. But despite his large green friend, Clint seemed to be purely Muggle, if a somewhat odd Muggle. He carried a Muggle weapon, though outdated, and had musculature that Harry had never seen on a wizard. Relying on magic to solve most physical challenges left most wizards anywhere from stout to slender, but typically without developed muscles. While Harry’s gut was telling him that he could trust these strangers, his mind was unsure. How would they react to a person who turned from a bird to some half-bird weirdo? For now, it was safer to wait and see. It was probably safest to continue with his journey now that they were safe, but Harry didn’t want to. He was curious to see what they were up to, so far out in the desert, and the incessant tugging had finally stopped. The idea of flying further south was unappealing, and the idea of company tempting.

He chirped unhappily as Clint stopped petting him, and the man chuckled but otherwise ignored his protests, and picked up his device again. Harry shifted, getting more comfortable on his shoulder, as Clint tapped at the screen. Nothing happened. Clint sighed. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected. Really, we’ve had terrible luck on this mission. It was supposed to be a simple in and out...” Clint trailed off, and Harry shifted, giving an impatient trill. After that what?

Clint turned his head to look at Harry again, his eyes narrowing. “It sure seems like you understand me.” He said slowly, testingly. “What exactly are you?” Harry stilled, his feathers slicking down in panic, and at that, Clint’s features changed from friendly and open to closed and dangerous. Harry leapt off his shoulder and vanished into a ball of flame as Clint made an aborted grab for a weapon, leaving the archer standing atop the rock face alone, startled, and blinking furiously to try and get rid of the afterimage of the red and gold bird vanishing into flame.
Clint clicked his tongue. Whatever the bird was, it was clearly intelligent, and either highly technologically advanced or supernatural in some way, given that pyrotechnic vanishing act. He wasn’t sure exactly what it was after, but it seemed like a big coincidence that the bird’s appearance had coincided with them getting lost in the middle of a vast desert. With a sigh, he turned to descend the rock face and return to Bruce, but a gentle blue glow from his StarkPad interrupted him. He swept it up, typing rapidly into the interface. While he was sure he and Bruce could make it out of this desert, outside assistance would surely make the process easier!

.xOx.

Harry blinked into existence above the waters of the oasis, all the feathers on his body bristling with indignation. Clint had tried to ATTACK him! After he’d helped the two of them make their way to safety. The absolute nerve! Harry opened his beak and gave voice to his discontent with an earsplitting screech, and circled the oasis once, skimming low and close to the water, before darting up into the sky, reveling in the rowing of his strong, stunning wings. He continued upwards, clawing his way up until the air around him grew thin and strange, and then did an about face, diving back down, letting the rush of air through his feathers and past his beak calm him somewhat. Clint was a soldier of some sort, obviously, from the armor he wore and weapons he carried. Soldiers had enemies, and Clint didn’t know Harry, or even what a phoenix was. Maybe his suspicion was forgivable, Harry allowed, but he was still upset that the man had tried to attack him.

The waters of the oasis loomed in front of him, and Harry snapped his wings out, turning his headlong dive into a shallow glide, darting through the trees and back to where they’d left Bruce, who was now on his feet and looking around. Harry, still in high dudgeon, swooped past his head, close enough that the very edges of his wings buffeted Bruce’s head, and perched in the broad green foliage of some tropical plant near him, keeping his back to Bruce and flipping his wings back pointedly.

“Well, aren’t you a handsome fellow?” Bruce said wonderingly, and Harry felt his footsteps coming closer. Harry felt his damaged ego calm a little bit, and he arched his neck to the side, eyeing Bruce over his shoulder. He wasn’t sure when he’d become so vain- he didn’t remember it being a trait when he was human, but Harry was beginning to realize that his bird form was extremely susceptible to praise. Irritated by this and everything, Harry clacked his beak, and again turned away from Bruce, wagging his tail in irritation.

Behind him, Bruce paused, apparently familiar with the body language of birds, and then made some shuffling sounds that Harry couldn’t place. Harry, curious, glanced back again. Bruce had settled himself cross-legged in the pale dirt of the oasis, unconcerned by the fact that the only article of clothing that had survived his transformation to Big and Green was a pair of ratty boxers. The aura of rage that had hung around him before was much diminished, but Harry could still feel hints of it as if it were only hiding behind something. Besides the rage, the only thing he felt from the man was admiration and curiosity, which served to further calm his ruffled feathers. Harry turned sideways on his leaf so he could watch the man out of one eye, and Bruce smiled.

No longer distracted by Clint, Harry ran a critical eye over this man. He was older than Clint, that was sure, but not as old as Harry had first assumed. His brown hair was graying, and he had a scruff of brown-gray beard across his chin, but Harry revised his estimate of age from somewhere in his sixties to somewhere in his forties.

Bruce smiled at him. “You know, I usually don’t get much from the Other Guy.” He mused, “but he’s quite adamant in this case. He insists that you are the pretty bird that brought him to this oasis. So for that, you have my thanks.” Harry turned fully to face him, and they both sat in silence for a
moment, before Bruce spoke again, carefully.

“You know, before everything went down in Cairo, I remember that something happened to Clint. I don’t... remember quite what.” Here, Bruce squinted and rubbed his head, eyes confused. Harry ran sharp eyes over him, recognizing the classic signs of someone fighting against an Obliviate. Had Bruce and Clint run afoul of wizards, somehow? It was rather feasible, actually- they’d learned in Muggle Studies class that when Stupefy was used against a Muggle, it could leave them with internal damage and sometimes a fever as the magic overwhelmed a system not meant to interact with magic. It would explain what had been wrong with Clint when they’d come in.

“But now, he’s fine.” Bruce continued. “I’ve heard rumors- myths, really, when I was living in Calcutta- of a legendary firebird, colored red and gold, like you, that could appear and disappear in a flash of fire, like you just did, over the oasis. And these birds, supposedly, could cure just about any disease, and appeared to soldiers fighting for a worthy cause. I assumed they were a legend, a myth, but after this last year... well, I guess I’m a little more open to the idea of myths, now.”

Harry fluffed his feathers out, deliberating, and then let out a liquid trill, intentionally infusing the sound with a sense of affirmation. Bruce grinned, reaching out a hand to him, and Harry hopped forward towards him, only to flinch away as the bushes next to him rustled and Clint dropped down out of a nearby date tree.

“So he is magical. Which also explains why he understands what we say.” Clint said, dusting his hands off on his legs and making a reluctant decision to trust the strange bird, for now. Harry turned his head and hissed, still angry at the archer. “Whoa, whoa, buddy! I’m sorry I made you mad, but I wasn’t gonna hurt you.” In a fluid motion, Clint drew an arrow, knocked it, and shot it out over the clearing. It struck a nearby branch and erupted into a net. “See? I was just gonna catch you, I promise.” Harry hissed again, wings mantling, almost as offended at the idea of being trapped as he was at being attacked. Pointedly, he turned away from Clint and hopped, with an exaggerated twitch of his tail, onto Bruce’s shoulder, where he studiously preened a flyaway curl from Bruce’s hair off his forehead and back into place.

He felt a bright flare of amusement from Bruce, and intentionally neglected to read Clint. He didn’t care what the man thought. He peeked over the back of his shoulder as the man rolled his eyes and climbed up to retrieve his arrow. He didn’t care what the man thought, he reiterated to himself, even if he quite enjoyed watching the man climb things. With a clack of his beak, he launched off Bruce’s shoulder in favor of a higher branch.
.xOx.

It was only a few hours later, but deep into true night, when the rumble of a motorized vehicle thundered up from the desert surrounding them, and Harry jerked upright from where he’d been nibbling on a date up in the branches. Clint had explained to Bruce earlier that he’d managed to get into contact with someone he called “Nat,” who was coming to pick them up. This must be their ride.

Harry peered down after them, pondering. Should he follow along? Or should he just go down and join them? Undecided, he stayed in the treetop, watching. He hopped along through the branches, keeping his tell-tale red feathers hidden behind the largest leaves he could, as Bruce and Clint walked to the edge of the oasis warily, also keeping to the shadows. When they got close enough, they exchanged a few coded phrases with the driver of the vehicle, and then the driver’s side door opened, and a woman stepped down. Harry felt a blast of affection and relief from the woman, and an echoing fondness from Clint. Bruce was mostly just relieved, which only escalated as the woman threw a bundle of clothing at him. He wasted no time in getting dressed.
Harry peered down suspiciously from the tree as he watched them all interact, catching the bright gleam of red hair from the woman when she stepped in front of the headlights of the vehicle, which drew a spike of irrational dislike from him, as he instinctually felt the need to flare his wings and tailfeathers out, to show her that his red-and-gold feathers were prettier than her paltry red hair. Stupid bird, he chided himself, managing to keep the urge in check. That wasn’t the way to keep hidden, and didn’t even make sense. Why would he care about being prettier than her hair?

He ducked further behind his leaf as Clint turned and looked back into the trees of the oasis, and Harry wondered briefly if he were looking for him. He flicked his wings. Too bad, he thought snidely. Harry hadn’t forgiven him yet, and while he intended to follow them, he didn’t need to make it too easy on the man.

They all piled their way into the truck, both men giving one last glance around the area, and then the truck rumbled to life, pulling away from the oasis. Harry took off, slipping between the canvas drapes covering the back of the vehicle, and pressing himself up against the back of the cab, where a window was conveniently open to allow for air circulation.

“-after we got separated. I was able to keep my head down, and they didn’t catch me.” The woman was saying. “I saw you go down, though, Clint, and then they tried to hit Bruce and we all know how that ended. The Other Guy grabbed your body and ran out, even with them all trying to take him down. Apparently, even magic rolls off that thick green skin. Once you made it out into the main city, the local authorities noticed you and took chase.” Underneath her teasing tone, Harry tasted an odd combination of emotions, which seemed to be some mix of fading fear and growing admiration. Harry’s feathers bristled at the odd combination.

“Wait, magic?” That was Clint, overlayed with confusion.

Natasha sighed. “Yes, I was afraid of this. Do you remember the briefing with Fury?” There was a long pause, interspersed with confusion and annoyance from both Bruce and Clint. Natasha resumed. “Here, I have the files. In short, yes, magic exists. It’s a big, high up secret. People who use it are not to be messed with- thankfully, they seem to see us as some sort of lesser being, and tend not to meddle into what we’re doing. Seems short sighted, but I guess it works. SHIELD got reports of some sort of energy reading that looked like the Tesseract being detected in Cairo, specifically, in the areas of Cairo where these magic users live. They sent us in to investigate, see if we can recover it, because the Cairo magical authorities weren’t willing to help us out.”

If Harry could have snorted, he would have. Imagine, any wizarding authority willing to work with Muggles? In the best case, most wizards viewed Muggles as dim and in need of protection, like small animals. In the worst, they actively tried to kill them. He wasn’t surprised that they’d refuse to cooperate in something like this.

“Why don’t we remember this?” This was Clint again, his emotions oddly clouded.

“They used a spell.” The woman replied, her voice gentle. “It removes memories of a particular thing. I think they took your memories of anything to do with magic.” Clint’s emotions spiked momentarily- guilt, shame, dislike, disgust. Harry tilted his head, curious. This action by the Cairo Ministry (was it a ministry? Harry realized that he didn’t know much of the state of the wizarding affairs outside of Britain) made sense to Harry- it was what most magical authorities did when faced with a Muggle who knew too much. Why did it bother Clint so much? And what, exactly, did these particular Muggles want in Cairo’s magical district? What in the world was a tesseract? And why were they taking orders from a shield? Harry had questions.

Silence fell over the vehicle, interrupted only by the soft shuffling of paper rustling against paper, as Clint and Bruce apparently read over the details of the mission. Lulled by the darkness of the truck,
and bored by the lack of conversation, Harry nodded off to sleep.

.xOx.

“There you are!”

Harry woke with a start as the tarp over the back of the truck was pulled off and sunshine poured over him, and he was greeted with the nonplussed face of the red-haired woman, a smile from Bruce, and a stare from Clint that he couldn’t interpret. With a squawk of alarm, Harry flailed and shot skyward, wheeling up and landing on a sheet of corrugated metal atop a roof and carefully peeking down at where he’d left the three humans. They looked different, now, he noted. Clint had pulled on loose blue jeans and a white shirt over his armor, and he’d donned a pair of sunglasses. Bruce was fully dressed, which was a change, and the beautiful red-haired woman wore casual clothes as well.

Clint was scanning the sky, using his hand as well as the sunglasses to shade his eyes against the harsh sunlight, and the woman—Nat?—was tugging them both away from the truck, towards a shaded alleyway between two tall buildings that looked like apartments. She held an odd object in her hand ahead of them, and the three vanished from view between one passing crowd and the next. As surreptitiously as a bright red bird could, and trusting his illusion enchantment to protect him from the crowds of Muggles clogging Cairo’s streets, Harry made his gentle descent towards the alley.

He recognized the broken-egg feeling cascading down his spine as he passed through the ward, and blinked dazzled eyes as the drab, dusty alley transformed, opening out into a massive courtyard ringed with tall arches. He wasn’t sure of the name of the shopping district, but the streets were thronged with people, even more than had been outside, and the crowd was a roaring polyglot of tongues. Harry recognized Arabic, English, and French amongst the words that he picked up, and hastily threw up his best shields as the emotions of the crowd tried to overwhelm him.

He peered around, trying to find his particular people in the seething mass of people below him, and finally found Nat’s red hair. He dove down towards them, willing to forget his fading grudge against Clint in order to keep track of them in the press of the square, and realized that he was not the only one who’d noticed the Muggles in the crowd. Somehow, Cairo’s equivalent of Aurors had been notified already. Unlike England’s Aurors, these wore bright blue robes, but they could be nothing else, dressed in uniform, closing in on the three Muggles in the marketplace. Harry saw the leading Auror raise his wand at Clint’s back, and let out a ringing, crystalline call that pierced through the noise of the market, drawing attention from all corners. He folded his wings and dove, holding the sound, reaching down with his talons as if he was an eagle stooping for prey.

As if he’d read his mind, Clint raised his left arm into the air, bracing himself against Harry’s dive, and Harry landed neatly on his arm, his talons finding an easy grip on the black leather brace that was still there. The Aurors froze for a moment, and Harry mantled his wings with unmistakable protection and let his call drop into a threatening hiss.

The crowd in the market had quickly grown silent, watching the spectacle, but at the hiss, a gentle murmuring rose up from the crowd. Most of the Aurors stopped, but one continued his approach, and Harry reared back, opening his wings fully, and called a flame to play along the edges of his wings, limning himself in fire. The intrepid Auror dropped his wand, and, unexpectedly, dropped into a bow. As if this were a signal, the rest of the Aurors melted back into the crowd, and slowly the sound level in the square rose again.

Preening at his success in protecting his Muggles, Harry flicked his wings back and shifted proudly, eying Nat out of the side of his eye. She might have red hair, he thought pettily, but she
hadn’t been able to protect them.

“What the hell.” Nat deadpanned from next to them, sounding very unimpressed. Harry bristled, turning to her.

“What do you mean?” Bruce said, turning to her.

“What just happened?” She asked. “Those men were going to attack us again, somehow. And then, that bird just appears from the sky, lands on your fist, and flaps its wings. And then they leave? Why?”

Harry’s crest rose, and he growled low in his throat. Did she not see how lovely he was? How shiny his feathers were? Of course they would stop attacking, if they had to attack HIM.

“Natasha, what exactly do you see when you look at the bird?” Clint asked.

“Well, I’m not an expert in desert birds.” Natasha said, drily. “But it’s a large, brown bird. I think it’s a hawk?”

Harry’s head whipped around to stare at her, and then he warbled a laugh deep in his throat. Oh, he’d forgotten about the illusion! What had Hermione said? Physical contact was enough to break it?

Harry launched off Clint’s arm and circled once around Natasha, letting the leading edge of his primaries brush over her cheek, and then wheeled around in front of her, strategically putting his back to a ray of sunlight, letting the golden light from the sun highlight him and sparkle in his golden feathers, as Bruce explained what he knew about phoenix, including their status as near-legendary, and what exactly Harry had done. Natasha’s eyes widened, her lips parting a little in awe, and Harry felt his attitude towards her soften a little. He wheeled around and took up his perch on Clint’s shoulder, settling in, and glanced at Natasha.

“I thought they were legendary among the people of Calcutta, but from the reaction that we just got, and the stares we’re still getting, it seems that they’re well respected even here, in the magical world. Enough, at least, to let a group of non-magical people walk in a magical marketplace.” Bruce flicked his eyes around, taking in the way that the crowd was parting seamlessly around them, leaving them a little bubble of space that no other group was afforded.

Harry ruffled his feathers, content. He was ready. Where were they going?

.xOx.

Harry let out a derisive squawk. THIS was where they were going? They had followed SHIELD’s intel to the front of a small, dark hotel, and here they paused, the three humans exchanging glances. The front of the hotel consisted of the small, dark door, and one dingy window that showed a dirty sitting room, with couches that looked as if they had once been white. They’d discovered not too far into the magical district that their technology was less than reliable with all the magical interference, which had Clint raising an eyebrow at Harry, remembering the malfunction of his StarkPad the night before. Harry had chirped innocently at him. Was it so bad that he had wanted to touch the pretty blue interface?

Bruce stepped forward, knocking at the door, to no response. He stepped back. “What’re the rules on breaking and entering in a magic alleyway that looks like a city?” He asked, rather rhetorically. Natasha smirked, slipping a set of lockpicks out of a pocket and stepping forward. Harry cocked his head at the motion. Should he warn her? He cocked his head to the other side, and decided not
She slipped the first pick into decorative, sphinx-shaped lock, and it stirred, coming to life, and biting the lock pick from her hand. It opened its mouth.

“THIEVES! INVADERS!” It yelled, the sound booming down the street. The three shared a terrified look and bolted, taking off down the street, as the doorknob continued behind them. “CROOKS! INTRUDERS!” Harry, disliking the wild bouncing of Clint’s running beneath him, flung himself free, flying over their heads, trilling in amusement.

They gradually slowed to a stop as the yelling behind them faded, before exchanging glances and bursting into laughter. Harry hovered over them for a beat, then resumed his perch on Clint’s shoulder. It took the three adventurers a moment to recover, but then Bruce frowned. “We still need a way in.” He pointed out, and Harry sighed, letting out a trill flavored with a tinge of exasperation.

“What, do you have an idea?” Natasha asked him, somewhat exasperatedly. Harry sent her an arch look and nodded, and suddenly all three of them closed in around him. Harry reached out his head, nudging Bruce’s hand until he placed it on his back. Natasha followed suit.

Harry closed his eyes, and all four of them disappeared in a ball of flame, appearing next to the yellowish couch inside the dingy window from before. Natasha jumped, swearing, reaching down to beat out the flames, and Harry warbled a laugh at her as the flames evaporated without smoke, doing absolutely no damage. She gave him a dirty glare and stepped deeper into the shop.

“How may I help you?” A smooth voice echoed from behind the counter, and a tall, pale man stepped forward to the counter, leaning his elbows against the smooth wood. Natasha stepped forward.

“We’re looking for something.” She began, carefully. “We’ve been tracking a certain... artifact. And we’ve detected it in this area.” She gestured with her hands. “The object- it’s about this size, and powerful. It’s bright blue, and it glows. Have you seen anything like it?”

The man’s eyelids flickered over dark eyes, and a sleazy, pleased grin grew on his lips. He steepled his hands in front of his face. “So, it’s information you are after?” He said. “Well, you have come to the right place. But tell me, foreigners, do you expect this information to come cheaply?”

Natasha squared her shoulders, and then the door behind them opened with a bang. A woman with dark hair came in off the street, dressed in black robes, and Harry flinched, snapping his empathetic shields as closed as they could go. This woman... she didn’t have emotions, just a gaping chasm that threatened to consume his. Harry shivered, slicking his feathers down, and drew back as she passed. He only realized he’d tucked himself up and under Clint’s chin when he felt a warm, comforting hand come up and land on his back, and looked up to see Clint looking concerned.

The man at the counter chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a phoenix so cowed before.” He said, his voice somewhere between oily and delighted. Harry narrowed his eyes at the man. Even with his empathy tucked away, he could clearly tell that this man was a dark wizard, and Harry doubted he’d ever seen a phoenix at all, before. His presence was uncomfortable, like a buildup of oil under his feathers, making Harry twitch, but it was nothing like the gaping nothingness that the woman had possessed. Harry looked up the stairs after her, wondering. What in the world could produce emotions like that?

Clint stirred, turning his shoulders slightly so that Harry was further away from the man. Harry rubbed his head against Clint’s cheek briefly in thanks, and forced himself to unfold from his
The dark wizard laughed, delighted. “Oh, splendid.” He said. “I have the perfect solution!” He raked his eyes over their small group, and sneered. “Not that Muggles like you would know this.”

Harry felt Clint tensing under his claws, likely reacting to the sheer amount of venom that the man had infused into the word. “But the tears of a phoenix are one of the most valuable commodities in our world. They are a panacea, you know, and beyond that... they have uses in several potions.” He produced a vial from under the counter, and held it up. Unlike the rest of the hotel, it glimmered with cleanliness.

“Phoenix. If you fill the vial with tears, I will tell your companions what they wish to know.”

Harry shrank back, lifting his hackles up. Everything in him rebelled at the thought. Phoenix tears were a gift, something given by the phoenix to someone worthy. This man... this man did NOT deserve his tears.

Bruce, Clint, and Natasha looked at him, and then back at the wizard who held out the vial with a hungry smile. Clint stepped forward, still shielding Harry. “I don’t think so.” He said, smoothly. “What else might you be interested in trading for?”

The dark wizard tsked. “I’ve named my terms. So easily met, too. But if you don’t want to comply...” He began to take the vial away, and Harry sighed deeply, straightening up. Clint looked up at the motion, and Harry gave a single, deliberate nod.

“Splendid!” The wizard said, thrusting out the vial again. Clint took it, holding it delicately between his thumb and finger as if it may contaminate him. He held it out to Harry, who looked from him to the wizard and back, and then closed his eyes, willing the tears to well up.

Nothing happened.

He squeezed his claws in frustration, grumbling under his breath, and then shifted his weight again. Maybe, maybe if he imagined...

He imagined Hermione, her arms wrapped in bandages. Ron, injured after an Auror raid. Clint, laying still and silent on the ground of the oasis, and finally, they were coming. He tilted his head over the vial, and wept in silence.

“That’s enough.” Clint said, his voice rough. Harry blinked his eyes open in time to see the last drop fall from his beak, falling into the vial with a splash. Even in the dim light of the dirty little hotel, the vial shone, the pearlescent tears slowly shifting in prismatic patterns, giving off their own white, clear light. The three Muggles seemed stunned by the beauty of the liquid. Reluctantly, Clint held the vial out to the dark wizard, who snatched it hungrily, hastily capping it with a spell. Harry couldn’t quite stifle a mournful cry as the tears were taken, feeling his instincts roil sadly, angrily, in his breast.

Bruce and Clint shifted, clearly uncomfortable.

“Oh, don’t worry so, little birdie.” The dark wizard said. “I’ll be sure they’re put to good use. As for your information...” He trailed off teasingly. “The woman you just saw go upstairs? She’s been experimenting with a new potion ingredient. Her name is Elisha Degnolaten, a Potion’s mistress from America.” Mockingly, he repeated Natasha’s gesture from earlier. “It’s not a cube, like you described, but it is a glowing blue liquid. She’s upstairs, room 215, and you might want to hurry...” Right on cue, a muffled boom came from upstairs. The wizard spread his hands in mocking apology. “Oh, dear me. Looks like you might be too late!”
Cursing, they tore up the stairs, only to find a smoking hole in the wall that led to the outdoors, with the woman from before standing on the lip of the hole. From the street outside, they heard screaming begin. She turned to them, a dangerous smile on her lips, and waved. Harry felt a shiver run through him at the feeling of her empty heart, and was relieved as she lifted her wand and apparated away with a pop, leaving behind the smoking hole, an overturned cauldron caked in some sort of tarry, black substance, and crystal vial slowly leaking a blue, viscous liquid in to the floorboards.

Assessing the scene in an instant, the Avengers dismissed the room as unimportant and ran for the wall, looking down over the street. Harry cursed under his breath as he saw what was below them. The first, most obvious threat, was a pair of cadaverous dogs. He could smell them from here, an awful combination of rotting meat and sulphur, and as they prowled down the street, he wanted to screech at the pure wrongness of the magic that infused them, lifting off their bodies in writhing gray tendrils. But even worse, in the shadows of the market he could make out three different patches of shadow that were thicker than they should be, and as he watched, one shadow leapt from the ground and engulfed a passerby, unnoticed in the crowd. Harry lost sight of the lethifold momentarily as members of the panicking crowd ran in front of the man, and then when the view cleared, he saw that the lethifold was noticeably thicker. Now, it was creeping closer to another person, a young girl, who stood shakily over the prone body of a boy, who’d clearly been knocked over and trampled in the rush and was now unable to run. Harry shrieked, indignant, and launched himself off Clint’s shoulder, beelining for the girl. The fire in his breast was strong. He was fire and light, and no creature of death and darkness would eat an innocent in his presence! He made it just in time, throwing himself between girl and lethifold and throwing his wings wide, casting a sheet of fire between creature and girl.

He heard a thump as the girl fell to her knees behind him, and cast an eye back to see her grip hands with the boy. She took a deep breath, squeezed his hand, and lifted her wand, her eyes sparkling determined in the light of Harry’s fire.

“Expecto Patronum!” She intoned, clearly, and a small puff of formless white smoke came out of her wand, quickly dissipating. Harry trilled approval. Lethifolds hated heat and light, so his fire was an effective barrier, but to drive it away completely, they would need a Patronus. The girl bit her lip, her face pale, and the boy squeezed her hand. She lifted her wand again, and this time, Harry took some of his attention away from his fire barrier and sang for her. This girl... she was young, pure light, her magic perfectly aligned with his own. She was a joy to sing for, he realized, as he poured all the memories he had used to make into his own patronus into the song. The song poured out of him golden and sweet, light and airy, and the girl grinned as the joy and confidence infused her, her white teeth contrasting strongly against her dark cheeks, and cast again.

With the power of Harry’s song behind it, the white mist poured from her wand, coalescing eagerly into a great, hulking creature, with tall, strong shoulders sloping into powerful hips. A hyena.

Harry let his fire barrier fall, and the silvery hyena leapt for the lethifold. Harry redoubled his song, and the girl rose, stepping forward after her patronus, her eyes shining in its silver light. The hyena pounced, strong jaws closing around the wisps of shadow making up the lethifold, and everywhere that the hyena touched, the lethifold began to fade, vanishing in patches like paper catching fire. A second lethifold came forward in a rush, screeching in a low, subvocal shrill that had Harry’s feathers trembling, and the ghostly hyena shifted its attention to the newcomer, shredding this one too. Harry caught the last lethifold from the corner of his eye as it shivered, undecided, in the corner, and then it turned, fleeing, skimming across the ground like a cursed shadow. Harry leapt after it, caught up in the chase, and hardly realized how quickly they were moving as he turned the corner, leaving behind the girl, her hyena patronus, and the three Avengers.
Clint barely noticed as the phoenix launched off the shoulder, busy cataloguing the threat before him. His mind whirled into action as he analyzed the beasts in front of him. He didn’t like not knowing the rules of magic in this place—these looked like reanimated corpses, to him. Was that possible? Is that something that magic did?

While he pondered, he reached back, snagging a net arrow, and nocked it, drawing the bow smoothly back until his knuckles brushed his cheek. Wait for it... he sucked in a deep breath and held it, forcing himself still. Wait for it... There! An opening in the crowd, a safe moment. He shot. The arrow took the beast straight in the head, blossoming open into a net. He watched with keen eyes as the monster turned and bit at the net. Clint was hardly surprised as the net, made of vibranium-enhanced fibers, melted like sugar under its teeth. These things were never that easy.

He took his eyes off the action for just a moment, and looked over at Natasha, who was standing with Bruce, surveying the scene. Bruce’s skin was rippling alarmingly green.

“Nat.” He said. She turned to look at him. “We can’t afford the Other Guy coming out here.” He said. “And it looks like these things have some sort of venom. Long-range will be better. Will you see to Bruce?” She nodded tightly, and Clint snapped his attention back to the fight.

He noticed a sheet of flame coming from the phoenix out of the corner of his eye, and a strange, ghostly hyena attacking what looked like a living shadow, but dismissed it. They seemed to have whatever it was under control, so he would focus on his own fight.

He grabbed another arrow and leapt down into the fray as the two zombie-dogs focused their attention on a hapless man who had managed to get himself stuck in a doorway. He had a wand in hand and was busily throwing spells, splashes of color that just flickered and died against the coats of the monsters.

“Bombarda! Confringo! Incarcerous! Reducto!”

Clint nocked a new arrow, and drew back and fired in one motion. This was a simple, razor tip arrow. It sunk, with deadly accuracy, into the side of the smaller of the hounds, right into the liver. Any normal animal would be down. This hound made a high-pitched yelping sound, and the two wheeled about, leaving the wizard behind to focus on him.

The larger beast leapt at him, jaws open, and Clint dodged backwards, snatching a brick off the ground and tossing it into the beast’s maw. He didn’t want to risk his bow being melted by whatever was in the creature’s saliva. He was right to be worried, he noted, as the monster stopped, jerked its head, and bit straight through the brick, spitting chunks of gravel. The smaller dog slunk to the side, getting in position to flank. Clint backpedaled, nocking another arrow. Well, if hunting tactics didn’t work, maybe there was some truth to the zombie legends. He sighted carefully down the length of the arrow, and as the corpse dog lifted its huge, hairless head, he fired, the razor-tipped arrow punching straight through the staring, white, pupil-less eye and sliding straight into the brain. The dog threw its head back with a howl, and the smaller animal took that moment to attack, teeth coming together with a sickening crack right where Clint’s arm had been moments before.

Clint drew and nocked arrows in quick succession, pin-cushioning both dogs with feathered shafts, and besides making them angrier, it didn’t seem to be doing anything. He bit back a growl of frustration. Why wouldn’t these things die? He leapt forward, falling into a roll over his shoulder to avoid the smaller dog, and came up right in the face of the bigger one. He swore and zig-zagged to the side as it swiped his leg with a paw, and crashed into a nearby shop front. His fall knocked
over a display of oil-and-paper lanterns. The oil inside spilled, and the lamps lit up in flames. The advancing dogs stopped, baring their teeth in a growl. Clint narrowed his eyes, and grabbed another arrow, this one with a red tip. He dipped it in the fire spreading at his feet until the tip ignited, drew back, and fired. The arrow sunk deep into the flank of the smaller dog. It wasn’t a killing shot, but the beast yelped like nothing he’d heard from them yet, and its hind leg went out from under it. It limped up to its partner, and Clint dipped another arrow in the fire. Before he could fire it, the two dogs leapt forward, one high, one low.

Clint paused, stuck. He had nowhere to run- the shop behind him was wreathed in flames, and already the smoke stung his eyes. There was a stone wall to his left, the big dog was in front of him, the little dog to his right. He eyed the stone wall, but it was smooth- nothing to be used as a hand or foot hold. He feinted left, and then jumped backwards, gritting his teeth against the pain in his thigh, and landed behind a barrel of some sort of grain that was crackling merrily away. He lashed out with a strong kick with his uninjured leg, and the barrel went spinning away from him, towards the bigger of the two dogs. He heard it yelp as the flaming barrel impacted the dog, bursting open at the second impact, covering the creature with embers. It yelped and spun, trying to put out the smoldering cinders.

Clint saw movement to the right, and flinched. His attack on the big dog had left an opening for the little dog, and he was about to get those acidic teeth in his gut. He rolled as best he could to the left, but fetched up against the stone wall. He threw up his bow in between himself and the snapping teeth, but with a flash of red, they were gone. Natasha was there instead, wielding a wooden pole that she must have stolen from some merchant’s display. She’d wrapped one end in rags and lit them alight, and was fending off the little dog with it. Clint sat up, looking around. The big dog was down, a smoldering lump on the ground, and as Natasha shoved the little dog back into the burning shop front with a particularly skillful stab of her pole, Clint shot one last arrow, targeting one last oil lamp hanging from the ceiling of the shop. It fell between the dog and entrance, and ignited with whoosh and a sheet of flame that engulfed the creature.

He limped up to Natasha’s side, and they exchanged glances. “It’s probably time for you to get out of here. We should probably split up.” Natasha said, lightly, and Clint nodded as blue-robed wizards flooded into the area, spouting water out of their wands and gathering wounded wizards. Clint gave a tired smirk. “Hey, it’s just like home.” He said, mockingly. “Here come the police, right after all the fighting is over.” Natasha gave him a droll look, and then leapt back up into the window. Clint strained up to peer after them, and saw Bruce, sitting in the back of the room, meditating. So that’s what she did with him, Clint thought, ripping his shirt and binding the wound in his thigh. Well, Natasha’d take care of Bruce, and they’d regroup at the truck. She was right, too, to split them up- Clint, with his blue jeans ripped and bloody, his white tee shirt stained with soot and smoke, and his leather arm guards peeking out from under the sleeves, looked like trouble. Natasha and Bruce, on the other hand, were spotless, clean. They’d have a much easier time getting out without him, and he would have a much easier time sneaking or fighting his way out on his own.

He heard someone shouting in Arabic behind him, and turned. Time to get out of here! He loped away, ignoring the yells behind him and the warmth in his thigh that told him the wound was actively bleeding. With an easy shot, he tossed a grapple line up onto a nearby roof and rappelled himself up, catching sight of a red blur zipping around a corner in front of him. Was that the phoenix? What was it chasing? Clint lengthened his stride, curious, and followed after the phoenix along the rooftop.
For those of you who wanted more Phoenix!Harry, here he is! Poor lil' fellow just can't bring himself to show off his hybrid form quite yet. I wonder how long that will last? And is it just me, or is Phoenix!Harry getting more and more vain as he spends more time as a bird? Wonder what that's about, hmm?
Hey guys! Here's the next installment, earlier than expected. The plot thickens! Today, we get to learn a little something about our leading villain lady, bring in something that was hinted at earlier, and surprise! Clint actually gets to meet notPhoenix!Harry, face to face! That's sure been a long time coming.

Warnings: Minor violence/horror at the beginning? More creepy than violent, and entirely bloodless, but people die. Also, minor non-consensual touching between our baddie and Harry, which is icky but not sexual.

As always, I'm loving the feedback. Thank you all for the lovely comments and kudos -they feed the soul!

The lethifold was fast, darting around corners and under crates, its dusky body merging and breaking with the shadows of the market. Harry was faster still, keeping pace with it so that his own shadow was lost in its inky darkness. Harry pumped his wings fast, glorying in the chase, his talons itching to rip and tear and destroy the lethifold, as its very existence offended something at his very core. This too, Harry thought, must be a phoenix thing. It made sense. As a phoenix, he was an avatar of fire, light, and rebirth, and lethifolds, like dementors and whatever those horrid undead dogs had been were the opposite, creatures of undeath and darkness.

The lethifold made one more, last-ditch effort to avoid Harry, pooling in an oily smear on the doorstep of a nearby store, and reversing direction. Harry flared his wings and cupped air, braking hard, managing to turn in time to see the last wisp of the lethifold disappear through a crack in a nearby stone wall. Harry climbed hard, feeling the strain in his shoulders as he struggled to regain his speed, and scanned the ground intently as he crested the wall.

There! Harry spotted the moving shadow halfway across the clean, tiled courtyard, cutting between a picturesque, white-tiled fountain set into the wall and a rectangular planter filled with some broad-leafed, tree-height plant. Heedlessly, Harry dove after it.

He screeched in surprise, trying vainly to stop his momentum, as the turn left him barely 10 feet away from the woman from earlier, who stood, arms akimbo, a small, coy smile playing over her lips. As Harry beat his wings frantically, trying to keep his altitude while backtracking, she raised her hands, and with a lazy flick, sent a net of writhing gray tendrils towards him. Harry dodged desperately, but they curled around him, twining around his legs and up his chest, over his wings and around his barrel, and pulled, inexorably pinioning his wings and forcing them to fold.

Idly, she waved her right hand, slowly lowering Harry to the ground. He opened his beak to screech his displeasure, and another tendril of smoky gray curled around the tip of his beak, pulling his head down. Harry struggled, trying to free his wings, trying to teleport away, trying to do anything, but his magic stayed frustratingly beyond his grasp, the fiery heat that usually accompanied it draining away into the grey tendrils wrapped around him. For the first time since he’d come into his new body, Harry felt cold.
He glared up at the woman, feeling pinned and vulnerable, his bird instincts raging at being
grounded, and shuddered at empty feel of her. The feel of her hungry, empty soul matched the feel
of her magic, wrapped so securely about him. Her magic was draining his away slowly, just as the
empty void where her emotions should be threatened to swallow his.

She ignored his glare, and knelt down. The lethifold was pooled around her feet, its shadowy form
quivering as she knelt into it. The woman, Elisha Degnolaten, if the dark wizard was to be
believed, reached down, stroking long, bone-white fingers over the shivering creature. Harry
blinked as the lethifold’s shuddering increased, rippling out from where she touched it as if she had
dropped a stone in a pool of water. Suddenly, Degnolaten thrust her hands forward, slipping into
the lethifold. The edges of the monster stiffened and it let out a sub-vocal scream. The woman
ignored it, her hands wrist-deep in the creature, groping about for something. The lethifold
fluttered pitifully, the darkness of its middle shuddering and contracting, and Harry felt an
unwanted pity for the creature, which was so clearly in pain.

Degnolaten withdrew her hand, and Harry felt his eyes widen. Clutched in her long fingers was a
white, snitch-sized ball of light, trailing wisps of pearly light. A soul. She lifted it up to eye level,
inspecting it critically, before bringing it close to her lips. She sniffed at it, and Harry gagged,
horrified, as she inhaled, pulling some of that pure bright light up and into her nostrils. She smiled,
her grin somehow too wide, and Harry felt his entire body jolt backward in shock and dismay as her
grin continued to widen until it made up half her face, a sucking black hole that Harry recognized
with horror as the mouth of dementor. Like a child eating candy, she tossed the soul up and her
head back, sucked the soul in with an inhale, and swallowed. Harry watched the glow of the soul
travel down her throat.

Degnolaten closed her mouth and smiled, her human lips somehow back, and looked at Harry with
blue-violet eyes. “Did you know that they have flavors?” She said, conversationally, reaching back
into the lethifold. It moaned and fluttered, but Degnolaten kept her eyes on Harry. “Souls, that is. I
don’t imagine that these animals-” here, she gave a particularly hard jab into the lethifold, and its
edges swirled in agony- “really notice, but I do. Unlike you’d expect, they improve with age. Like
wine, I suppose, not that I can taste that anymore.”

She ripped another soul free, and swallowed it. The lethifold fluttered weakly, its mass decreasing.
“Children’s souls, they’re sweet, but bland. Like sugar water. Age, experience, it adds a depth. But
too much experience- that makes a soul bitter.” She picked out another soul, placed it in her
horrific mouth, and made a face. She spat it back out, and it flickered, floating next to her, its
bright white glow somewhat sullied. “Like that one. Old, bitter. Tastes like vinegar.” She shot a
bolt of grey magic at the orb, and it popped, like a soap bubble. Harry groaned, horrified.

She withdrew her hand, grasping two souls this time, and stood, releasing the lethifold. Slowly, it
gathered itself together and slipped into the shadow of a nearby pot, much smaller than before and
clearly injured, more tatter than cloth.

Degnolaten swallowed the last two souls, licking her fingers clean of the faint pearly glow that
coated them. “Acceptable.” She decreed, and then propped her hand on her hip and looked straight
at Harry, who watched with horror, unable to do anything. “Dementors can’t sense animal souls,
you know. Not even magical ones. That’s part of what I was researching, you know.”

Harry didn’t know. This woman was insane. What had the wizard said about her? There was no
way that this woman was a potioneer.

She snapped her fingers in front of his beak, squatting down in front of him. Harry jerked
fruitlessly, trying to escape his bonds, and she laughed, a bright little tinkle of a sound. As her
mouth opened on the laugh, Harry briefly glimpsed the dark tunnel of the dementor’s mouth behind her own.

“You’re different, little bird.” She said, reaching out and lifting him up. Harry recoiled- he did NOT want this abomination touching him. He squirmed, and she frowned, tightening his bonds with a thought. Harry wheezed as they started to cut down on his breathing. “That’s rude, you know. I’m trying to talk to you.”

Harry glared up at her, stilling in his bonds. “That’s better.” She said, her lips curving up into a smile and her violet eyes crinkling with a deceptive pleasure. She was a fantastic mimic, but he could feel her, and there was still nothing going on emotionally inside. He wondered if it was what a dementor would feel like, though he’d never seen or heard of a dementor taking human form.

“As I was saying,” She began again. “You’re different. I shouldn’t be able to see your soul, but I do. It’s faint, almost like an outline, but it’s there. I want to know why.”

She lifted him up, fixed her dead, violet eyes on his, and whispered “Legilimens.”

Harry flinched, scrambling to protect his mind, but she tore through his shields as if they were paper, barreling into his mind. Harry shrieked and turned his attention within, following her into his mind. With desperation born of the revulsion he felt at her touch, her presence in his very mind, he threw up a field of fire, forcing her from her perusal of his memories and into familiar ground.

Harry stood between his soul and the monster, the world around them made of the fire he’d lived in for all the years between his death and rebirth. He clenched his hands, determined to keep the invader out of his soul, and she laughed her tinkly, crystalline laugh again. Harry shuddered at the juxtaposition.

She clapped her hands together. “Oh, very good!” She crowed, the flames around her slowly fading, black, scorched earth appearing beneath the soles of her boots, as if she was consuming even the magic of his flames. Harry squinted, trying to focus on her face. It was difficult, as the flickering of the flames around them threw her in and out of focus, and her features seemed to be shifting between those of the woman he’d seen and the scabbed, blind face of the dementor.

She took a step closer, and Harry took a step back, bring hands full of fire up in front of him. “You’re like me!” She exclaimed. “Human, beast, being, all mixed up. Something new. Something powerful. Oh, I bet your soul is delicious.” She licked her lips, and Harry growled.

“I am not for eating.” He said, firmly. “And you are not welcome inside my mind. Get. Out.”

He threw a handful of fire at her, sure it would work, unsure of how he knew. She knocked it away with a careless flick of her hand.

“Oh, I know you’re not for eating. Not yet, at least.” Her form flickered, and suddenly she was right in front of him, her hand on his cheek, her long fingers curled behind his head. He tried to pull away, but she was strong. She inhaled, and horrifically, Harry felt his soul, deep in his chest, pull at its tethers, and a single, red, smoky wisp left his mouth. He pressed his lips together and swallowed desperately, trying to keep his soul in his chest. She sucked in the wisp, and then released him, returning to her safe distance. Harry fell to his knees, clutching his chest as his soul slowly sank back down.

He missed his magic most all the time, but right now, he wished more than anything for the ability to cast his patronus.
Degnolaten licked her lips slowly, demonstratively. “Oh, yummy. I could just eat you UP.” She mused delightedly, drawing a finger over her lips. “But your soul is young. You are no innocent, Harry Potter.” Harry flinched at the mention of his name- clearly, she’d gotten into his memories before he’d stopped her. “Your human soul- It would have been bitter, tainted and torn by suffering and pain. Torture does that. But the soul you have now is barely a month old.” Her eyes fluttered shut, a beatific smile on her lips. “But soooo tasty, nonetheless.” She crooned. “I can’t imagine what you’ll taste like once I give you time to mature. Oh, we’ll see each other again, little songbird. And maybe I’ll be back before then, just for another taste.” Slowly, obscenely, she licked the hand that had touched his skin, moaning. Harry wanted to vomit.

She turned to go, her black robe flaring out about her, and again her form flickered, her skin momentarily gray and scabrous.

Harry surged back to his feet. “What are you?” He called, finding his voice. “Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

Degnolaten wiggled her fingers over her shoulder, and with a disorientating twist, they were once again standing in the courtyard, Harry laying trapped and tied in her hands. She grinned down at him, and bent down to whisper in his ear.

“Did you think you were the only special one, Harry?” She purred his name. “You might have been gifted with the soul of a phoenix, but me? I earned this. I found a way to consume a dementor, and together, we will be unstoppable. I’ve only been at this for a few months, and already we’re controlling the lethifolds and the necrocanids. The more souls we consume, the stronger the souls we consume... Just you wait, little songbird. We will turn this world into a wasteland before we’re done. And then... then we’ll be back for you.”

She set Harry down on the ground with a jarring gentleness.

“Oh, and I wouldn’t use too much magic for a while, sweetling. I’ve taken quite a bit- you wouldn’t want to run out, would you?”

She snapped her fingers, and the bonds surrounding Harry fell away. He staggered to his feet, spreading his wings out, ready to take her on, and she tsked at him.

“Oh, none of that now. Isn’t he more important?”

She pointed to the rooftop behind Harry, and from her finger, a bolt of sickly grey magic erupted. Harry spun to see a smudge of purple watching them, and panicked, vanishing in a burst of flame, laughter like bells jangling discordantly in his ears. He reappeared in front of Clint, his only thought to protect, and crossed his arms in front of him, feathers spread, blocking the death magic with everything he had. That power was not touching Clint, not on his watch.

“Oh, I hear that there’s a god in New York City!” The woman yelled from the courtyard as that gray magic washed over his wings. “I think at god’s soul might be even tastier than yours, little songbird!” She waved up at them and vanished with a crack.

.xOx.

Clint stood from his defensive crouch as the creature in front of him made a disgusted sound, shaking his wings as if trying to flick something wet off of them. The palm-sized, bright red feathers covering his body were standing straight up, and so were the long, red and black and gold crest feathers atop his head, buried in black hair. Even the small, fingernail-sized feathers flecked over his cheekbones and forehead were standing straight out, giving him a fluffy, disheveled look.
that Clint couldn’t help but find adorable.

“So...” Clint said, as the bird-man looked up. “Is this something all phoenixes do, or are you special?” He gestured vaguely at the bird’s humanoid body, recognizing the face as the one he thought he’d imagined in the desert. Teach him to doubt his initial perceptions, he thought wryly.

Huge, bright green eyes looked up at him, the pupils expanding and contracting rapidly. Clint took a step backward, giving him space. They’d had parrots in the circus, and he knew that look. The eye pinning, the crouched stance, the puffed feathers... the phoenix was frightened, overwhelmed.

The bird-man looked away, opened and closed his mouth, and Clint’s eyes were drawn to the unusual golden shine to his lips. They looked almost painted, and stiff, from the way they moved.

“Shite.” The bird muttered, and Clint’s lips twitched.

“I take it that’s a no?” Clint ventured, and something in his tone caused the bird to relax a bit, his feathers smoothing down slightly. The bird man sighed, then reached up to adjust a feather in his hair.

“Yeah, it’s a no.” Clint’s skin prickled a little at that voice. It was smooth and melodious, and under the words was the faintest hint of a trill. “Is it... is it ok?” The bird-man asked, tentatively. “Because I just tried, and... it looks like I’m stuck this way, for a while. I think I used up the last of my magic teleporting to you, right there.”

Clint cocked an eyebrow, filing that information away for later. The bird-man could run out of magic? And he’d chosen to use his last reserves to protect him? Clint felt oddly flattered.

“Is what ok? You are the phoenix that’s been following us around, right?” Clint clarified.

Bright green eyes swung back to him, the pointed face almost offended. “Of course I am.” He exclaimed. “What, how common do you think phoenixes are?” His crest rose again, but this time Clint recognized something in his stance as offended pride. “I’ll have you know that we’re one of the rarest, most sought-out creatures in the Wizarding World.” The crest drooped a little, and his overall posture fell. “Well, real phoenixes are.”

Clint frowned. “Are you not... a real phoenix?” He asked.

The bird man brought his stubby, pseudo-hands together in front of him, clicking them together in a nervous gesture. “Well, I suppose I am...” He trailed off. “But most phoenix, you know, stay birds. All the time. And before I was a phoenix, I was...” Green eyes swept up to Clint, taking in Clint’s keen attention, and the boy shifted. “Well, that doesn’t matter right now. Hi. My name’s Harry.”

He offered a stubby hand-talon. Clint took it in his own hand and shook.

“Harry?” Clint said, amused. “You’re a magical bird-man, and your name is Harry?”

Harry’s feathers poofed out in offense, and those green eyes glared at him.

“What’s wrong with my name?” He spat.

“It’s just... such a normal name.” Clint paused, wondering if he should be more surprised by something other than Harry’s name. He was talking to a bird-man, who could turn into a bird. Or a bird, that could turn into a man-bird? It was unclear. But honestly, he worked with a super soldier who’d been frozen in ice for 60+ years, a man who turned into a giant green rage monster, and
Thor, the mythological Norse God of Thunder. Not to mention Tony, who was supernaturally annoying. It took a lot to surprise him these days.


Clint held up his hands in a peace offering. “Hey, it’s fine. I’m just teasing. My name... well, you would have already picked it up, I guess. I’m Clint, but when I’m in uniform, most people refer to me as Hawkeye.”

It was Harry’s turn to snicker, now. “Wait, Hawkeye? What, do you have like... super vision or something?”

It was Clint’s turn to hunch defensively, and Harry’s eyes widened. “Sorry, sorry,” He said, ducking his head. “Sensitive topic?”

Clint waved a hand, pushing down the deep-seated insecurity and giving a small, entirely fake smile. “Nah. I mean, I work with a team of superheroes, but I’m not anything special. I get that a lot.”

Harry didn’t look completely convinced, but let it slide. His gaze wandered for a moment, and then those green eyes were pinning again, this time in worry. “Your leg!” He said, gesturing to the slapdash dressing that Clint had applied. “What happened?”

Clint shrugged. “Occupational hazard.” He said lightly. “I’m fine. More importantly, we probably should get outta here- we made a bit of a commotion back at that hotel, and last time I made a mess here, I got my memory wiped.” Clint said it lightly, but inside he shuddered. He didn’t like how easily these wizards could mess with his mind- he’d had his fill of being brainwashed with the whole Loki incident. He’d had many, long conversations with Nat about it, but still, the experience featured heavily in his nightmares.

Harry sighed heavily, looking dejected. “I should be able to help you with that, actually.” He muttered. “If I could just turn back, I could fix your leg, escort you out of here. Having the favor of a phoenix is like a golden ticket to the wizarding world, even for a Muggle. With me around, no one would bother you. Well, as long as you’re around light wizards. Dark wizards are more likely to try and cut me up for potions ingredients.” He pouted a little. “But a little bit ago, I tried to go back into my bird form, and it didn’t work. Hell, if my powers were working, I could just teleport us out of here, but...” He sighed, frustrated.

“Well, I was planning on walking, anyways.” Clint said. “So it’s no change of plan for me. But...” He eyed Harry. “Sorry if I’m wrong, but I didn’t see any beings that looked like you when we were walking here. Are you going to be able to get out of here without drawing attention?”

Harry shook his head, and then looked around, spying a line of laundry flapping in the corner of the roof they stood on.

“Hold on a second.” He said, walking over to the laundry line. He pulled down a sand-colored robe and threw it to Clint. “Put this on. It’ll disguise you better than the Muggle clothes you’re wearing.” Harry stepped behind the cover of the laundry line, and Clint heard a clink of glass on glass.

He stripped out of his jeans and t-shirt, and pulled the robe over his head. “You’ve said that a few times. Muggle. What does it mean?”

“Muggle? Well, it just means... someone like you. Non-magical.” Harry, still hiding behind the
laundry, responded.

Clint frowned. “When the man who ran the hotel said it, it sounded like an insult.”

Harry came around the side of the laundry, pulling another robe over his head. “Well, it can be used as an insult.” He clarified, tugging at the robe. “It’s not always meant to be- it’s just easier than saying ‘non-magical folks’ or somesuch. But dark wizards, well. They think muggles are no better than animals, would rather kill the whole lot. So I guess from them, it would be an insult.”

Clint opened his mouth to respond, and froze, as Harry successfully found the neckline of the robe and shoved his head through. His messy-haired, non-feathered, completely human head. Clint stared, shocked. Harry caught his look, and ducked his head shyly.

He raised a hand self-consciously to his hair, and on second look, Clint noticed a few dark black feathers hiding amongst the messy strands. Other than that, he looked completely human, and rather young, with the robe he’d stolen hanging off his slim shoulders and dragging on the dusty roof.

“I assume this is another... not-typical phoenix thing?” Clint found his voice.

“Something like that.” Harry muttered, drawing up his hood as if to hide from Clint’s eyes. “So, that woman.” He said, changing the topic. “Did you hear what she said as she left? Something about New York, right? We need to get there. She can’t...” He shuddered.

Clint frowned. “She can’t what? She said something about a soul, right?”

Harry looked up, visibly distressed, and Clint saw that whether he was human, half-human, or bird, the phoenix still possessed those startling green eyes. “Yeah, she said she was going to go find a god and eat his soul. We need to make sure she doesn’t. I don’t know how much power she’d get from it, but it could be bad. Really bad.” Harry said.

“Wait. That woman eats souls?” Hawkeye said, eyes wide. “Is that... a wizard thing?”

“No!” Harry said, horrified. “No, no, no. There are monsters... creatures, beasts in the wizarding world. They prey on wizards, muggles too. They eat souls. But that woman- somehow, she figured out how to replicate the ability. Why she’d want to, I’ve no idea. She’s collecting souls, making herself more powerful. We need to stop her- she told me she was going to turn the world into a wasteland.”

He turned determined green eyes up to Hawkeye. “We need to stop her. What she’s doing- its despicable. When people die, their souls are supposed to move on. Not be eaten. Not be... stuck inside someone like that.”

Clint blinked. Before today, he wasn’t sure he’d believed in souls. Souls, the afterlife- they all seemed to be the realm of religion. He’d been raised in a circus, around all the different acts and actors, and between the bearded lady who had tried to drag him to church every Sunday, the contortionist twins who believed in Buddhism, and the ringmaster, a devout Hindu, he’d been inundated with competing beliefs. He’d eventually resorted to agnosticism just to avoid committing to anything, and in the years since he’d left he hadn’t revisited the idea. But he’d seen the glowing orbs the woman had held down in the courtyard, and Harry seemed so sure they were souls. Regardless... “If she’s talking about a god in New York City, I think I know who she’s talking about.” Clint said, gently. “First of all, he’s not there right now- he went home. Secondly, even if he came back, I doubt she’d be able to take him down.”
Harry looked at him skeptically. “You know a god?” He asked.

Clint snorted. “Where have you been these last few years?” He asked. “This has been all over the news.”

To his surprise, Harry flinched and looked away. “It’s not like we watch the Muggle news in the Wizarding World.” He muttered weakly.

Just then, they heard shouting in the street below them, and Clint ducked down behind the lip of the roof, dragging Harry down with him. Harry tripped over the edge of his robe and fell to the ground after him with a bitten off curse, and Clint shushed him, carefully lifting his head and peering over the edge.

The street below was full of blue-robed wizards. One of them, his blue robe fancier than the rest, was giving directions in Arabic, a language that Clint held only passing familiarity with. He caught enough to realize that they were looking for them, that they hadn’t managed to catch Nat and Bruce yet, and that they hadn’t realized they’d split up. With a barked order, the head wizard sent the others off in pairs, to comb the market.

“I should go.” Clint said, rolling to his feet as the street cleared. He looked back at Harry, who was sitting on the roof, draped in the too-big robe, and watching him with big eyes. Clint wavered. The bird-boy was clearly trouble- he seemed mixed up with this soul-sucking woman, he had suspiciously found them in the middle of the desert, and he was a being from a world that certainly wasn’t Clint’s. Clint’s initial response was to wave, say goodbye, and leave him where he belonged. But on the other hand- he’d been helpful, and Bruce was insistent that he’d saved them from something- the Other Guy wasn’t too clear- in the desert. And the phoenix had helped them in the marketplace earlier, when the blue-robed wizards had closed in and they had been about to have their memory wiped again. And it just seemed wrong to leave Harry sitting on a roof, in a stolen robe, stuck in a form that seemed so vulnerable.

“We’re actually headed home to New York.” Clint said, making up his mind. “We can give you a ride, y’know, since it seems like it’d be a long way for you to go if your teleport-powers or whatever aren’t working.”

Clint was rewarded by those green eyes lighting up and a huge smile as Harry clambered to his feet. “Really?” He said, excitedly. “You don’t mind me tagging along?”

The rest of Clint’s reservations melted away at the painfully genuine response, and he smiled down at Harry. “Nah, it’s no problem. It’s just a ride, after all.”

With another glance at the empty street below, Clint vaulted smoothly over the rim of the roof, landing in a practiced crouch on a stack of crates below, and then bounding to the ground. From the roof, Harry watched, mouth gaping.

Clint waved him down, and Harry gulped, looking from side to side, before he sat on the rim of the roof, swung his legs over, and inched forward. He reached his foot down as low as it would go, and pushed himself off the roof, landing heavily on top of the crates. They wavered under his graceless drop, and with a startled screech, Harry toppled off the first crate, squeezing his eyes shut in anticipation of contact with the hard, paved ground.

Instead, warm arms caught him around the middle before he could hit the ground. Harry snapped his eyes open to see Clint’s face, inches away from his own, and smirking. “Not so graceful in this form, are you?” Clint asked.
Harry shoved away from Clint, his cheeks burning red, and brushed off the front of his robes. “It’s been a while since I walked.” He said, primly, and strode away from Clint.

Clint walked after him for a moment or so, his eyes constantly scanning the street. Harry slowed after a while, allowing Clint to come up next to him. “Relax.” Harry said. “Wizards can’t just look at you and tell if you’re magical or not. The Aurors- that’s the wizard police- found you earlier because of your clothing, and the way you were staring. Unless they remember what you look like, we’re safe now.”

A shout rose up behind them, and Clint twisted, seeing the face of the young Auror who had bowed to them in the main courtyard. The Auror had his wand raised, red sparks jumping from the tip and spraying up into the air. Harry grimaced. "And of course that one found us- he remembers what you look like."

Clint swore, grabbed Harry’s wrist, and took off running, dragging the bird-boy with him. They pounded down the empty alley and into a main street, heedlessly cutting between shoppers, forcing various people to jump out of their way.

Clint risked a glance behind them, and saw the young Auror on their heels. He veered toward the right, where he saw a large, open barrel, and pulled Harry past it, turning to push it over into the street. It fell, black, glistening, gooey orbs pouring out of it, and Harry began to laugh. Clint slapped a hand over his mouth and tugged him back into the shadow of a nearby building, turning his back to the street and looming over Harry.

“Hush, and hide.” He whispered urgently, and Harry bit his lip, amusement still dancing in his eyes, and his breath coming hard from their impromptu sprint. Clint shifted a little, uncomfortably aware of how close he was to the birdman. Harry had ended up with his back to the wall, and Clint was leaning over him, his left hand braced on the wall over Harry’s head, his right still covering his mouth. Harry’s human form was really small, Clint mused, that messy head of hair not quite reaching up to his chin. If he moved forward an inch further, their chests would be touching.

Harry shifted, and seemed to realize this too, his cheeks flaming a bright red. The flush traveled down his neck, and momentarily, Clint wondered how far it spread. He shook his head hard- now was not the time- and moved his right hand up to join his left. During the movement, his hand brushed back the messy fringe of black hair covering Harry’s forehead, and Clint’s eyes caught on an old, silvery-looking scar in the middle of it, looking for all the world like a jagged lightning bolt.

“How’d you get-” Clint started, and then a flash of light erupted to his right, and his whole body seized up, causing him to keel over slowly, unable to move even an inch to regain his balance. Harry caught him and slowed his fall, before looking up.

A wizard stood there, a young man with dark eyes and hair, dressed in a rich white robe. He stared at Harry, specifically, his forehead, openmouthed, and lowered his wand. He whispered something in Arabic, and Harry shook his head, uncomprehending. Clint fought to move his lips and translate, for the wizard had murmured “Savior.”

A moment later, Clint’s translation was unnecessary as the wizard snapped to attention and dropped into a courtly bow, directed to Harry, who was crouched over him. “Savior.” He repeated in accented, though clear, English. Clint watched, confused, as Harry flinched back. Harry glanced from Clint to the young wizard, and then sighed.

“I wish they wouldn’t call me that.” He murmured, resigned, and stood. “That’s not my name, you know.” He said to the wizard, and extended a hand. “Harry, please. And you?” The wizard looked
from Harry’s face to Harry’s hand, and deepened his bow.

“I am Sadiq, Savior. And I could not possibly refer to you by name.” Clint watched, confused, as Harry reached up uncomfortably and scratched the back of his neck.

A shout from the main street rose, and Harry flinched, looking out. Sadiq followed his gaze. “Do you seek to leave the city?” The man inquired politely.

Harry glanced down at Clint, and nodded. “Yes, my companion and I need to leave. So if you could just- release him? Then we can go...” Harry made a complicated motion with his hands, seeming to signify them walking or running away.

“Oh, my apologies, Savior! I thought he was harming you.” The wizard, flustered now, pointed his wand at Clint again, muttering “Finite.” Clint leapt to his feet, pulling Harry behind him, and dropped into a defensive crouch.

“What are you and what do you want?” He barked, as the wizard replaced his wand up a voluminous sleeve.

“I am Sadiq, Friend of the Savior.” He repeated, unphased. “And if you do not want to go with the Aurors, you might wish to follow me.” He turned and vanished into a nearby doorstep. Harry stepped past him to follow, and Clint caught his sleeve.

“What is going on?” Clint barked.

“It’s a long story.” Harry hedged, and then looked up into Clint’s face. He sighed. “In a nutshell, I used to be a wizard. And then I died taking out a really bad wizard. It turns out that while I was dead, they made a bit of a cult about me?” He shifted, uncomfortable. “But regardless, I can feel this guy’s emotions. He’s for real- he just wants to help us.” He tugged his sleeve free, and followed after the wizard. Clint stood still for a moment, processing, until another shout from the main street had him running after Harry and their new friend, into the cool shadows of the doorway. Again, he felt like he should be more concerned about what he was hearing, but it was really no stranger than some of the stories he’d heard from his teammates.

He wiped his face on his sleeve, the cool of the doorway making him realize how hot and sticky he was from running about in the hot desert air outside. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw Harry and Sadiq walking down a hallway, and rushed to catch up. Harry might be alright with all this, but there was never anything good about cults, in Clint’s experience. He shuddered at the thought, and shouldered his way between his small friend and the cultist.

Harry gave him an exasperated look, but Sadiq just stepped graciously to the side. “It is good to see that the Savior has such a devout protector.” He observed. Clint chose not to respond. He’d offer his protection to anyone who was being targeted by a cult, he rationalized. It’s not like he was specifically protecting Harry, even if the bird-man was currently powerless and grounded, unable to fly away. It’s not like he felt responsible or anything. It had been Harry’s choice to use up the last of his magic protecting him. Clint swung his eyes back to Harry in alarm. Wait, had it truly been the last of his magic? Was Harry stuck without his bird form forever now?

Harry squinted at him. “I can feel your worry, you know.” He said, softly. “What are you thinking about?” Clint thought for a moment about how to phrase this. “What you said earlier,” he said carefully. “On the rooftop. Will you be able to...” He glanced at Sadiq, who was calmly walking next to them, his eyes fixed forward. “Will you be able to find your wings again?” He finished.

Harry blinked, surprised, and then smiled softly. ‘Oh, that. Yeah, it’ll come back. It’ll just take
some time, likely. I already feel better.” Clint exhaled, strangely relieved. He had seen how happy
Harry was when flying. He’d hate to be responsible, even indirectly so, for the loss of the ability.

Sadiq paused, turning towards them. “Savior. We are happy to escort you back into muggle Cairo,
but before we do, my brother would like to meet you. He is the head of Cairo’s chapter of the
Covenant of the Savior. Would you deign to meet with him?”

Harry stiffened beside Clint, and Clint ground his teeth. This is what happened when you trusted
cults, he thought to himself.

“And if I would rather not?” Harry asked, carefully. Sadiq frowned.

“Why would the Savior not wish to meet with one of the Speakers of his Word?” He drew his
wand from his sleeve. “Perhaps you are not truly the Savior...” he said, sadly. “There have been
many rumors that the Savior had returned over the years, but all have been proven incorrect.
Perhaps you are just another impostor, drawing a false Cursed Scar upon your brow?” Clint shifted,
reaching for the knife on his belt, below his robe, and Harry placed a gentle, quelling hand on his
forearm.

“Of course not, Sadiq.” He said, soothingly, unconsciously matching the formality of Sadiq’s
speech. “I just wished to know your response. Please, take us to your brother.” He squeezed Clint’s
forearm warningly, and Clint frowned. Harry was right- without Harry’s bird-powers, they stood
no chance against even one wizard, especially one who had already completely incapacitated Clint
with a single word.

Silently, they followed Sadiq deeper into the compound.

Chapter End Notes

So? What do we think of out Clint/Harry interaction? And goodness, this cult seems
like bad news, don't they?
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Flashbacks to torture, with some kinda grim stuff thrown in there.

A/N: Wow, guys. This chapter got way out of hand... It was just going to be a brief in and out for Harry and Clint, but this happened instead, and everything else got pushed back. So, I hope you enjoy? A bit of character and relationship building, but no touching quite yet, a shit-ton of exposition on this cult that really, really wanted to be written (and was not taking "no" for an answer), and some pieces of plot slotted into place for later. Enjoy!

Also, holy cow guys. Last chapter broke 200 subscriptions, catapulting us to 215, last I checked. I am blown away that so many of you actually want to read this story. You all make me incredibly happy! Keep the love coming, please and thank you!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry followed after Sadiq, Clint a silent, comforting presence at his back. Harry felt a brief smile touch his (gloriously human) lips at the thought of the man. They’d barely known each other for 24 hours, now, and he already trusted Clint to watch his back. Moody would have been livid.

The hallway they were walking down was surprisingly clean and well maintained. He would have thought the headquarters of a cult would be stereotypically dark and dreary, with mossy, rough-hewn stone walls lit by flickering torches. This was nothing like that— the walls were made of the same creamy white stone as the rest of wizarding Cairo, the same as the historic buildings in muggle Cairo. He was amused by the similarity of wizard-kind everywhere, clinging hard to their oldest traditions in spite of the growth in the muggles around them.

High on the walls were tall, narrow arched windows that let the desert sunlight stream in. Cubbies along the walls held small fountains and clusters of greenery, breaking up the whiteness of the hall, and the tinkling sound of falling water was everywhere, soothing and peaceful. On the right, an arched doorway with a heavy wooden door loomed, but Sadiq led them past it without a word. They had gone maybe ten steps past when a low, somber bell tolled, and the room erupted with noise. Sadiq, still the picture of tranquility, motioned for Harry and Clint to step back against the wall as the wooden door opened with a bang, and a crowd of screaming children came boiling out, dressed in a uniform that looked much like a miniature of Sadiq’s white robes, though clearly of lesser quality, with a blue patch emblazoned on the chest. Harry, eyes sharper in human form than ever before, even sans glasses, saw that the design on those blue patches was a lightning bolt striking a spreading tree, and blanched. Did the lighting bolt signify him? Were these children being indoctrinated by this cult as well?

He stole another glance at Sadiq, and probed deeper into his emotions. They were unassuming— serenity, a slight suspicion of Harry, and a certain warm fondness for the mass of young witches and wizards that were now tripping past. They were certainly magical, Harry noted, though very young, and wielding strange, stubby wands. In the back, one waved his wand in the air and produced a shower of golden sparks, startling another child into bursting into tears. Neither could be more than five years, Harry noted. Another white-clad adult swept in, a middle-aged woman
this time, with her hair bound up strictly on her head and the billowing sleeves of her robe wrapped in blue ribbons, keeping them out of the way for her work with the children. She swept the crying child into her arms, scolded the other, and chivvied the whole herd of them forward and past Harry, Clint, and Sadiq without a glance.

Harry and Clint exchanged a look. “Why are there children here?” Harry asked.

Sadiq gave him an arch look. “Would the Savior truly not know why?” He murmured, fingering his wand again. His suspicion grew stronger, tasting almost sour to Harry.

Harry scowled, his temper rising. “If by this “Savior,” you mean Harry Potter.” He hissed. “Then no, he does not know. Because he died before whatever this is came into being.” He made an encompassing gesture, including Sadiq, the classroom, and the entire facility into this.

Sadiq blinked, startled. “But, the original Speaker said that this is what the Savior would want. Do you mean to say that the Savior did not leave instructions?” Harry felt his face flush in his anger, about to explode, and shifted aggressively forward. This time, it was Clint who quelled him with a heavy hand on his shoulder and a warning look. Harry took a deep breath, and felt again for his magic. The flames were growing, but still small. Without his powers, they were still vulnerable. He let his aggressive stance fade, and tilted his head.

“I am sorry.” He said, forcing his voice into tranquility. “Coming back to life is... disorienting.” That was putting it mildly. “Please, I would like to continue. My friend and I really are in a hurry to leave.” He flashed his most winning smile at Sadiq. He felt the feathers in his hair trying to raise from his carefully masked agitation, and lifted the hood of his robe over his head to hide them. With an suspicious glance, Sadiq continued, taking them down the corridor in the wake of the boisterous group of young wizards. The sour feel of his distrust did not fade, to Harry’s annoyance.

Sadiq finally stopped next to another sturdy wooden door, knocking three times, and then stepped to the side with a bow, letting Harry and Clint precede him into the room. They did so cautiously, and the first thing Harry noticed was that his bare feet sunk into a richly woven red carpet instead of slapping on the bare stone of the corridor. He felt a brief flare of contentment at the idea of sullying the expensive cloth with the pale dirt that clung to his bare feet and the edge of his too-long robe, and dug his toes in with relish. Besides the floor, which was carpeted with a pile of rugs in varied jewel tones, the room was much the same as the hallway- lined with open-air windows, filled with natural light, and decorated again with water features, tall bookshelves, and healthy, green plants. In the middle of the room was a sturdy wooden desk, a handful of wooden chairs, and a brazier glowing with sullen flame. Sadiq followed them inside and closed the door gently behind them.

“Speaker.” Sadiq said respectfully, as he bowed low to the man in the desk.

Behind the desk sat a middle-aged wizard with severe, black eyebrows and a hooked nose that reminded Harry of none other than Severus Snape, and the frown he gave upon seeing Harry only reinforced the comparison.

“Hmm.” He sniffed, looking Harry up and down. “I suppose you do look somewhat like the photos.” He stood, walking to Harry with the assistance of an elaborately carved cane, and lifted it, using the handle to push aside Harry’s fringe. Harry controlled his urge to bat the cane away with great effort. The man viewed Harry’s scar, and sniffed dubiously. “We have a protocol.” He said. “I must call the Head Speaker so that he can meet you, though I’m sure you’re just another fake. The French Branch had another false Savior arise few months ago, but it turned out to be just some insane man who had cut a lightning bolt into his own head.” He glared at Harry, as if expecting him to break down into tears and confess. Harry said nothing, and the Speaker waved his wand in a
A complicated privacy spell that settled over the room, blocking all sound from moving between the room and corridor.

The Speaker proceeded to pull a handful of floo powder from a jug on his desk and fling it over the brazier with a murmur, and the flickering flames perked up, turning emerald green. Behind him, Clint mumbled something, and Harry tossed a quick smile over his shoulder. He owed Clint a large explanation at some point, he thought wearily. The Potter luck strikes again—he’d hoped to leave this part of his past behind, if just for a while, and instead, here he was, pulling unsuspecting muggles into it instead. He just hoped that whoever had started this cult was reasonable. He’d really prefer not to have to fight his way out, and if it was really awful, he’d have to do something to eradicate it. He couldn’t stand the thought of a cult formed in his name doing harm, and if it had already spread from Hogsmeade to Wizarding Cairo, and apparently France as well, it would take some doing to control. He reached for his magic with growing anxiety, and swore under his breath when he realized that it was still depleted. He couldn’t get himself and Clint out of here if need be, and that made him nervous. Though maybe he had enough for one fireball, if he stretched it, he thought, flexing his fingers. The green flames in the brazier twisted and turned, resolving into a face, and Harry tensed further.

“Wow! It IS you! And you look like you haven’t even aged a day.” The floating head squeaked, and Harry blanched.

“Colin?” He asked, incredulous, and the green head nodded so fast that Harry was afraid he’d knock his head against whatever fireplace he’d shoved it in. And indeed, the head belonged to little Colin Creevey, though after 16 years had passed, he wasn’t so little anymore. The last time Harry’d seen the boy was during DA meetings in his sixth year—Colin’s fifth. Voldemort had delighted in telling Harry about his efforts to “cleanse” wizarding Britain of muggleborns during the month he’d been in captivity. Harry had tried to remember each and every name, but between bouts of the Cruciatius and his attempts to protect the information that Voldemort had been trying to pry for him, he knew he was missing some. Though Colin had never been his favorite Gryffindor, it was good to see him alive. Harry felt his stance relaxing.

“Oh! I just knew you’d be back.” The floating head continued, though Colin was calming now, and his voice was returning to a register more typical for a 30 something year old man. “Now, we do have a protocol, here, because people keep trying to pretend they’re you. So, I have a few questions. But I’m sure you’ll pass them!”

Harry sighed, his initial incredulous response fading. If anyone were to make a cult about him, it would have been Colin, after all. He was surprised he hadn’t thought of it before. If it was Colin behind all this, then maybe it wasn’t as bad as he had feared? Colin, at least, had been part of the DA, so Harry trusted him to some extent.

Clint leaned forward, over his shoulder. “Wait, you know this guy?” He asked, lowly.

Harry nodded. “We... went to school together.” he said. He felt Clint’s incredulity rise behind him. “I swear, I’ll explain everything in a bit.” He said, turning to meet Clint’s eyes. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but trust me. I think I can get us out of this.” Clint looked at him searchingly, and nodded.

“As soon as we get a chance, you’re answering some questions.” He said, making it a statement and not a question. Harry agreed and turned back to Colin, who was waiting patiently.

“First question!” He said, brightly. “What was the first spell you taught in the DA?”

“Expelliarmus.” Harry answered easily. “And Zach Smith was not pleased.” He added, with a roll...
of his eyes.

Colin’s floating green head smiled. “Correct! Second question- What happened to my camera during my first year at Hogwarts?”

Harry frowned. “It was destroyed when you saw the Basilisk through it.” Harry said, slowly. “Hey, that one’s kind of easy, don’t you think?”

Colin flapped his hands at him. “You’d be surprised, actually.” He said, sounding ruffled. “Almost nobody from Hogwarts even remembers that I was Petrified with the others.”


“And lastly!” Colin said, triumphantly. He gestured to Sadiq, behind Harry. “Would you lend him your wand?” He asked. “Harry, I believe it’s you. But the last proof we need is to see your patronus, since that can’t be faked."

Sadiq offered his wand to Harry, handle-first, and Harry frowned at it, shoulders slumping. Shit. Of course, they’d ask him to use magic. He held up a hand in refusal to Sadiq, and turned to Colin. “Unfortunately, I can’t. As part of the process of coming... back to life, I’m unable to use magic now. I can tell you that my patronus was a stag, but I can’t summon it.”

Colin’s sunny face fell, and Harry winced.

“Well, that’s no good.” Colin said. “That means that I going to have to come see you myself, you know. I cam be there in about two hours... Speaker of Cairo, would you keep the potential Savior comfortable and contained for me? I’ll be right there.” With that, he vanished from the flames, and Sadiq and the Speaker brandished their wands. Harry held his hands up in the universal sign of peace, and felt for his magic. Still no good- a single fireball would do them no good here.

He took a step away from Clint, drawing their attention, and flicked his eyes at Clint. The wizards were focused on him, after all, and would probably ignore the muggle. They had no way of knowing that this muggle wasn’t quite as helpless as they might think.

Sure enough, the Speaker turned and shot an *incarcerous* spell at him, and Harry dodged to the side, further away from Clint. Both wizards turned to follow Harry, Sadiq firing off a body-bind that he could not evade. It hit Harry with a burst of color, and then dripped away. Harry blinked for a moment, and then broke into a sharp grin. He’d forgotten that his phoenix form was impervious to magic- and apparently this body was as well. Well, impervious to all magic besides Degnolaten’s, it would seem. He tucked that thought away for consideration later, and stood, pacing closer the wizards, who were firing spell after spell at him now. Each one hit and slid off him like colored water off wax, and they were getting frustrated.

Over Sadiq’s shoulder, Harry caught Clint’s eye, and nodded.

While the wizards had been focusing on him, Clint had drawn an arrow, and now he let it fly. It hit perfectly on Sadiq’s shoulder, and burst into the same net he’d tried to use to capture phoenix-Harry. The wizard went down with a yelp, and Harry darted in, using his distraction to quickly pluck his wand from his fingers.

As he straightened, he froze. The Speaker of Cairo had switched targets, and had his wand pointed aggressively towards Clint. Harry darted forward to intervene, but he was too late, and the Speaker jabbed his wand aggressively forward with a shout of “*Expelliarmus!*”
Clint’s bow flew out of his fingers, and the Speaker cast it aside. Clint took a step back, crouching and drawing a bowie knife from the holster on his thigh. At some point, he’d ditched his wizarding disguise, and Harry absentmindedly admired the long, lean line he made as he crouched low the floor, poised and deadly. Unfortunately, a knife was no match for a wand, and a second *expelliarmus* sent the knife to join the bow on the ground. With a hiss, Clint shook out his hand, and Harry winced. *Expelliarmus* stung.

“Would-be Savior.” The Speaker said, his wand still pointed at Clint as Harry tried to sidle behind him. “Join your friend, unless you wish to see what a *stupefy* does to a muggle.” Harry flinched, and came around to join Clint, his hands once more held up in surrender. He’d already seen what *stupefy* had done to Clint, and he did not want a repeat occurrence. Clint caught his eye, and Harry shook his head. Without Harry’s powers, they were trapped.

“Now, walk.” The man said, backing them towards a corner of the office. As they approached, Harry noticed that there was a metal door that had been previously covered by the fronds of a potted palm, and he grimaced. Surely enough, the Speaker instructed them to open the door, and with his wand firmly trained on Clint, he forced them inside before slamming the door.

As soon as it closed, Harry rushed up to it, and heard through the thick metal the sounds of the Speaker casting several high-level locking charms, followed by the incantation for another privacy spell, and then absolute silence. Harry felt the hairs on his arms prickle in something like fear, and he turned to investigate the room they’d been locked in.

As far as prisons went, it was very comfortable, Harry realized with surprise. The cell was clean and bright, still made with that same yellowy-white stone. The high, arched windows were still present, but this time they were lined with a closely-woven wire mesh instead of open to the air, and the architectural nooks in the walls were bare of fountain or plant. The floor, too, was bare of rugs, but warm, Harry noticed, as he wiggled his bare toes against it. He took a deep breath, trying to keep himself calm. He’d always been mildly claustrophobic, but this... He shoved the rising panic down, and turned to Clint. Clint. “That’s not how I wanted that to go.” He said ruefully, proud when his voice came out evenly, and to his surprise Clint tilted his head back and laughed, a warm, joyful sound that had Harry joining him in seconds, though he didn’t know what was so funny about the situation.

“Do these things ever go as we want?” Clint asked rhetorically, and shrugged broad shoulders. He began to absentmindedly explore the cell, running his fingers across stone and knocking every so often, placing his ear to the stone to listen to the vibration. Harry watched him, and did not help. This cell was wizard-made, and most likely enchanted to be unescapable.

With that thought, Harry felt the terror of being imprisoned claw at the back of his mind, and his hands began to shake. He took a big breath and shook his head to dismiss it. He was fine. It was fine. He leaned on a nearby wall, and slid down it, pulling his knees close to his chest and probing inside at his magic. Still no good. He groaned and let his head thunk back on the wall, closed his eyes, and imagined himself somewhere else, anywhere else.

It wasn’t working. He opened his eyes with a huff, and surged to his feet, tucking suddenly clammy hands in his armpits and pacing. It took him five steps to reach the far wall, just like it had *there*, and suddenly, in his mind’s eye, the wall was different. Instead of smooth white stone, it was rough and dark gray, stained with some horrific combination of blood, vomit, and other fluids Harry didn’t wish to consider. Etched into the slimy dark of the wall were the tickmarks, endless silvery-white scratches lining the cell, reducing the last days of all the prisoners who’d languished in that cell before him to groups of five on the wall. He flexed his fingers, remembering the sharp bite of the stone he’d used to make his own marks, sometimes drawing blood on top of blood in the
process, and remembering the panic that he’d felt when he thought he might have lost track of the
days. That had happened when he would pass out after a session with Voldemort, waking in pain
and darkness in that awful prison, unsure whether minutes or days had passed. The silence of the
privacy spell was interrupted by his memories of the awful drip, drip, drip, of the wet corner where
the rust-red moss had been growing. He remembered falling asleep near it, comforted by the sight
of a living plant, and waking in horror to feel the reddish moss moving over his left hand, leaving
pinpricks of pain and streams of blood in its wake. He’d jerked back, tearing it with a yelp that
had drawn his prison guards to him. They had laughed at him, laughed at the stupid, muggle raised
boy who had let blood moss touch him, laughed as they told him that a potion could remove the
threads of the now bright-red moss growing hungrily in and out of his skin, slowly spreading up his
arm. They’d even laughed when they’d severed the infested hand at the wrist with a casual
diffindo, laughed as he’d screamed in shock at the loss of his hand...

“-arry! Harry!” Harry snapped back from his memories, his gaze locking with Clint’s worried blue
eyes as he realized he’d been rubbing at his left hand hard enough to make it ache. “Breathe with
me, Harry.” Clint was saying, exaggerating the sounds of his breath, and Harry realized absentl
that he was hyperventilating, the edges of the world fuzzing around him. He breathed with Clint,
and time bent and stretched, taffy-like, for a moment or an hour as he managed to calm himself.

He took a final deep breath, coming fully back to himself, and realized that he had collapsed to his
knees on the floor. Clint was crouched in front of him, speaking to him soothingly, rubbing
calloused thumbs over the back of his hands.

“Sorry.” Harry said, offering a tremulous smile. “I guess this bird doesn’t like to be caged.” He
offered, a weak joke, and Clint frowned at him. Harry held his shields shut- with his own emotions
running wild, he did not need the input of another’s to confuse him.

Clint tapped the back of Harry’s right hand, where Clint had been stroking. “This is an interesting
scar.” He said, carefully, eyes still concerned. Harry looked down, for some reason surprised to see
I must not tell lies written there in his own chicken scratch. The Polyjuice he’d taken was from his
own hairs, collected before he’d been captured, so of course he still had those scars. He was just
thankful that it was from before, and not after, his capture, as the injuries he’d accumulated from
his month with Voldemort would have had Clint looking much more concerned than this. He
flinched at the thought, his breath coming quick again, and reached down to reassure himself that
his left hand was still there.

Clint snapped his fingers in front of Harry’s nose.

Harry flinched, but broke out of the gathering panic attack. He rose to his feet, pulling his hands out
of Clint’s, and winced when he realized that they were cold and sweaty. He tucked them back into
his armpits and turned away from Clint’s concerned look.

“So! I think I owe you some answers.” He said, forcing his voice to be so painfully, falsely bright,
that even he grimaced at the sound of it.

Clint sighed. That topic change was as transparent as they came, but he’d allow it for now. He
watched Harry as the boy pulled away from him and hugged himself, head bowed. He looked
ridiculously young in his too-big robe, with his bare feet and messy hair, and the first question
popped to Clint’s lips without conscious thought. “How old are you?”

Harry’s head jerked up in surprise, and he laughed, a fragile sound, but it sounded more genuine
than before. “Really?” He asked, amused. “That’s your first question?” Then, he frowned, tapping
a finger against his ribs. “Well, actually, that’s kind of a complicated question.” He mused.
Clint raised an eyebrow, amused. “How is that a complicated question?”

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, to begin with,” Harry said wryly. “I was born on July 31st, 1980.”

Clint felt his mouth drop open. “What?” He said. “No way, that would make you older than me, and you don’t look a day over 18.”

Harry snickered. “Well, that’s because I died sometime in September of 1997. I was a bit over 17 at the time.” Clint took a moment to process this. Harry had said something like that earlier, but he’d assumed that the boy was just joking or something. He’d really died? And he was laughing about it?

“When I died, I left behind a phoenix egg.” Harry continued, and Clint snapped back to the conversation. “And about two months ago, it hatched. And here I am.” He gestured down at himself. “Oh, and technically the body I’m in right now— it’s a copy of me right as I turned 17.”

Clint blinked, sorting through all the information to the piece that was relevant to his question. He’d address the egg thing later. “So, right now, you’re basically a 32-year-old in a 17-year-old body?” He clarified.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe? I’m not sure. I’m not really sure what happened in the 15 years that I was... an egg? So, I don’t know if it counts...”

“OK.” Clint sighed. “Ok, so can you explain how and why you died, how you came back, and maybe why there’s a cult built around you?”

Harry flinched. “I can only guess about the cult, but as for how I died... well, when I was born, there was a prophecy made about me, that stated I would defeat Voldemort, who was an evil wizard who was focused on blood purity.” Clint raised an eyebrow, and Harry paused. “Think Hitler, but with wizards.” Clint blanched, and nodded.

“So, when I was about a year old, he attacked my parents and I.” Clint saw the shadow growing in Harry’s eyes. “He killed my father and my mother with an illegal spell that kills on contact, and then he tried to kill me.” Harry said this all with a clinical sort of dryness, and Clint realized it as the tone of someone who’d repeated this story numerous times.

“For some reason, no one really knows why, it didn’t work on me. Instead, it destroyed him, sent him to wander as a ghost. The whole world thought he was dead, and credited me with his defeat, calling me the “boy who lived.” Turns out, he wasn’t dead, and he came back to life sometime when I was 14. The next few years were pretty rough, and he ended up taking down the wizarding government just after I turned 17. He captured me the same day. A month later, I used a spell that killed him for good. The cost of it, though, was my own life.” Here, Harry shifted uncomfortably. “There’s an old wizarding legend that says when a wizard or witch dies in a heroic fashion, intentionally sacrificing their life for the good of others, that magic responds and creates new life to replace the one that was lost. I don’t know about that, but when the fire that my spell caused died down, the entire building that we’d been in was destroyed by the flames, and there was a phoenix egg sitting in the middle of all the ashes. 15 years later, I hatched into a baby phoenix. As for the rest of the world— they changed my title from “boy-who-lived” to “savior,” and that was that.”

Harry rubbed his temples. “The cult doesn’t know about the phoenix thing, as far as I know.” He said, wryly. “Which is probably a good thing. Though somehow they seemed to know that I’d come back in one way or another, which is weird. But Colin— really, he’s a friend. And he was one of the people that Voldemort was trying to kill, so he fought with me. I’m hoping I can settle
everything peacefully when he gets here.”

Clint raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. The green man in the brazier had set the two wizards on then, after all. But for the sake of gathering more information, he let it drop. “And Hogwarts? This ‘basilisk?’”

Harry shrugged, a crooked grin on his face. “Hogwarts was the magical school I attended. We had lots of adventures there, including facing a basilisk, which is a giant snake.”

Clint nodded slowly, letting silence fall as he put the pieces together in his mind. Obviously, there were parts of the story that Harry wasn’t telling him, and as Clint stood and made his way to the wall, sitting at the base and leaning against the stone, he thought about other questions he could ask.

While he was thinking, he saw Harry shiver again, reaching down to scrub unconsciously at his unmarked hand. Clint sucked in a breath as something clicked. Harry had been held captive by an evil wizard for a month, and if his description of Voldemort as a wizarding Hitler held true, it likely had not been a pleasant experience. No wonder he was having panic attacks, held captive again, and here Clint was, asking probing questions about his past and stirring up old memories. Clint knew what he needed to, now, and he couldn’t deny that he’d trusted Harry long before he had explained any of this.

He blamed it on the fact that Harry had been a bird first in his mind, and only human for the last few hours. He’d always trusted animals more easily than humans. Clint watched as Harry’s green eyes got that far-away, terrified look again, and cleared his throat.

Harry jumped, and focused on him. “I grew up in a circus.” Clint offered, in an attempt to distract the poor boy who was obviously trying to stifle some sort of traumatic flashback. Harry’s green eyes grew wide.

“No way!” he breathed, coming to sit nearby Clint. “I always wanted to go see a circus, but my Uncle... well. What did you do?”

Clint smiled. “Well, at first, I cleaned up elephant poop.” He said. He was rewarded with a bright laugh from Harry as the boy uncurled a little, leaning towards him. “Then, when they noticed I was pretty agile for my age, I started helping out with some of the shows. I met this man, went by the name Trick-Shot, and he taught me everything I know about archery...”

Clint regaled Harry with stories of growing up in the circus for the rest of their wait, and Harry responded with some stories of the wizarding world. Clint absorbed as much information as he could- after all, he was at heart a government agent, and no information was a waste. He’d determined in the first few minutes of exploring their cell that there was no escape, and their best bet was stalling until Harry’s magic had enough time to replenish. And to meet that end, he had to keep the poor man functional, and so. Here they sat, discussing all the different acts at the circus, tales from Harry’s days at Hogwarts, and silly anecdotes about Clint’s teammates, and Clint found himself enjoying the conversation much more than he’d thought he would. Harry was young, but he’d fought in a war. He was a wonderful ball of contradictions, naïve in some ways, overly mature in others. He kept Clint guessing about how he’d respond to any given topic, and so the two hours easily passed in conversation until the silencing charm at the door fell, and Harry and Clint dropped into silence as they heard scuffling beyond the door.

The door flew open with a bright flash and a poof of violet smoke that left Harry and Clint blinking spots out of their vision. Clint recoiled, reaching for a knife that wasn’t there, but Harry just stood and placed his arms akimbo.
“Colin!” Harry scolded, in something that sounded like exasperation to Clint. “We’ve talked about taking photos without permission.” He said, and the short, blond man in the doorway chuckled, letting his giant camera fall to rest on the strap around his neck. He strode forward into the room and pulled Harry into a hug that had Clint blinking.

“Yeah, it’s you.” The short man said, thumping his fist on Harry’s back. Harry returned the thump, pulling back with a smile.

“I’m glad you’re ok.” Harry said, voice thick. “I never got a full list of the casualties; I’m so glad you’re alive.”

Colin’s beaming smile fell, and he sucked in a pained breath. “They got Dennis.” He said, sadly, “And our parents.” Harry made a wounded sound and pulled Colin into another hug, whispering apologies.

Clint stood by awkwardly. Clearly, Harry was right- these two were friends, friends who fought in a war together. That bond went deep. However- this was still the man who’d ordered two wizards to lock them up.

Colin pulled back, wiping at his cheeks to remove the few tears that had escaped, and took a step back. “I am so sorry about Sadiq and Hadal- I honestly meant for them to just keep you comfortable until I got here. I was not expecting them to lock you up.” Here, he shot a glare over his shoulder, and the two white-clad wizards shuffled awkwardly.

Sadiq dropped into a low bow, his face distraught. “I am so, so sorry, Savior! I did not fully understand my actions. Please, forgive me.”

Next to him, the Speaker also dropped into a bow, though it was not as low as Sadiq’s. “I, too, apologize, Savior.”

Harry held his palms up awkwardly. “It’s fine, I guess.” He said, letting out an uncomfortable chuckle. “I mean, don’t run around attacking people without cause, but it’s fine...”

Clint stepped up next to Harry, frowning. It was not fine, he wanted to say. With the door open, Harry was much better, but he’d seen the look on his face when he’d realized they were trapped. These two had done some serious psychological harm. But he wasn’t about to tell these guys about Harry’s emotional health (or lack thereof), so he said nothing, only glowered.

At his glare, Sadiq squeaked and sunk lower, face flushing.

Colin nodded to the two men. “If we could have the room?” He asked politely. Both of them nodded and fled.

Colin waved Clint and Harry to the seats by the desk, and plopped himself in the third wooden chair in front of the desk. Clint, instead of sitting, went and reclaimed his knife and bow, and then stood behind Harry’s chair, arms crossed.

Colin sighed and rubbed his nose, and the excitable, boyish attitude he’d been wearing dropped away like a mask.

“Well, this is unexpected.” He said, and fixed Harry with a stern look. “And a little awkward. How in the world are you alive again? And you look like you haven’t aged a day.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s a long story.” He said. “But from what Sadiq said, you were expecting this? How?”
Colin fidgeted. “Well, I told everyone I was expecting it. It made a good story, at least?”

Clint’s eyebrows went up. Harry sat up in his chair. “Colin, what’s going on?” Harry asked, sharply. Colin sighed, leaning back in his chair and toying with his wand.

“I never thought I’d have to explain this to you, of all people.” He said, wryly. “Well, I supposed it all started in Hogwarts, around my fourth year. Me and Dennis were talking with Hermione in the library, and we ended up with a whole group of muggleborns. We got to talking, and it’s just not fair that there’s no resources for muggleborn wizards coming into the wizarding world. I mean, we have our parents, and Hogwarts at least usually sends a professor to give us a quick orientation, but that’s it. One visit, a trip to Diagon Alley, a couple of books, and boom, welcome to Hogwarts. So we wrote up a list of how we thought it should be instead- how we wanted it to be, y’know?”

Harry nodded cautiously.

Colin continued, encouraged by Harry’s nod. “So what we thought would be better is if there was some sort of bridge- like an elementary school for muggleborn wizards, where we could teach them everything the purebloods already knew. And we could teach them to watch out for each other, y’know, and what pureblood families to watch out for, so that they’d be safe, and which ones are ok.”

“That’s as far as it went, in Hogwarts. But after the war, when everything settled out, and Dennis and mum and dad were dead, I thought, well, who’s going to do something about this? I thought it would have been Hermione, but she married Weasley instead. I mean, at least he’s the right sort of pureblood, but still. The old purebloods- they’re stagnant, weak, prejudiced. The way of the future is muggleborn, y’know, and we’re going to change the old laws, the ones that are unfair. We’re already trying to overturn some of the more prejudiced laws right now, the ones limiting job advancement for muggleborns.”

Colin shook his head. “Sorry, got ahead of myself there. But as I said, I was thinking, after the war, about what was going to happen next, and no one was stepping up to change things. So, I wrote up that list, the one we talked about, of changes to the system to make it easier for muggleborns, and I took it to the Ministry.” Here, Colin smiled ruefully. “I was young, stupid, didn’t do my research. Did you know the Ministry in Britain is almost entirely staffed by purebloods? The remainder are mostly halfbloods, with the occasional muggleborn just to keep up appearances. Which is ridiculous, as muggleborns make up at least two thirds of the magical population around the world. As you might expect, they chucked me out on my ear right quick. I knew that I had to do something to gather political support if I wanted to change things.”

Clint shifted. He could see where this was going- and it wouldn’t have been a bad thing, if Harry was truly dead. It actually made a certain kind of sense.

Colin continued, confirming Clint’s guess. “I started with the DA, and the Fan Club that we had for you back in Hogwarts.” Colin shrugged at Harry’s sharp glance. “Oh, just because you didn’t know about it, doesn’t mean it didn’t exist. I was young, and surely you remember how obsessed I was with you back then? There were others, less obvious about it than me. But I gathered them up, and this time, I told them that the list was your idea. Oh, don’t give me that look- I knew you, Harry, and nothing on this list is something you wouldn’t have approved of.”

He fished around in the pocket of his white robe, and pulled out a white book. Clint rolled his eyes. They were putting the white-purity-goodness schtick pretty hard with this little religion of theirs. Colin opened the book to the first page, and passed it to Harry.

“See? We had to make it a little flowery to get people to buy in, but it’s a pretty basic manifesto.
Equal rights for muggleborns. The provision of grade-school level education for muggleborn students, at the cost of the ministry. Early notification for families, compulsory family meetings with a qualified mediwizard to make sure the muggle families are adjusting well- you wouldn’t believe the new statistics they’re releasing, by the way! Did you know that muggleborn students are more than 15 times more likely to be abused by their muggle families than their wizarding counterparts?"

Colin didn’t notice when Harry flinched at this, too busy explaining, but Clint did.

“And of course, care for orphans or those removed from muggle families because of abuse. And it spread, so quickly. We have branches in Britain, France, Cairo, America. Why, in this center alone, we have over 50 students between the ages of 3 and 10 who are learning the basics of potion brewing, history, magical government, charms theory, herbology, and care of magical creatures. Can you imagine how different Hogwarts would have been if we’d known the difference between a gnome and a hinkypunk before day one? Or if we’d known the basic laws and beliefs of the wizarding world?”

Harry nodded reluctantly, looking over the manifesto. “Honestly, it makes sense.” He allowed. “But why did you turn this into some sort of religion? Could you not have just used my name as a rallying point?” He asked.

Colin frowned. “Well, that’s how it started.” He allowed. “But these things have a way of growing and twisting out of control, and people started trying to change the tenets I’d written down. There was this man, who started telling everyone that you had been visiting him in his dreams, and telling him all sorts of things, including that he was the next Savior, born to lead the people. And people believed him. I had a choice- I could either let it happen, and lose all the momentum I’d gained to a madman, or I could take control.”

He sighed explosively. “As you can tell, I took control. I denounced the man as a false prophet, and with the aid of some friends and some fast talking, I established myself as the true prophet. The Speaker, I called myself. People were so ready to believe, Harry, they made it so easy. The organization we’d created morphed almost seamlessly into a religion, and we named ourselves the Covenant of the Savior. With your name tacked on like that, it began to spread from Britain to other countries, as more and more people wanted to be part of it, and as we grew, more crazies turned up. We had so many people pretending to be you, that I finally announced that you would, indeed, come back someday. I made a rule that each and every aspirant Savior had to come to me first, to pass a test. I never believed that it would actually happen someday, but here we are.”

Colin stopped fidgeting with his wand, and held it loosely in his right hand. He sat up, and Clint tensed as the absent look in his eyes transformed. This man sitting in front of them had managed to build a continent-spanning religion in under 15 years based off a conversation he’d had with a handful of teenagers, using nothing more than the end of a war, the legacy of a famous hero, and sheer force of will. It was that will that he now focused on Harry and Clint, and it made his brown eyes glint dangerously.

“So this is what I’ve built.” He said, his voice low, dangerous. “We currently have 17 facilities world-wide. We educate over two thousand muggleborns, which is about one eighth of the muggleborns out there between the ages of 3 and 10. Of those, we provide housing and food for 483, and we provide additional resources for those who’ve gone on to traditional magical schooling, including summer housing. Our students are entering the magical world more prepared than ever, and we are going to change things. Muggleborns are most of the population, and we will NOT be ruled over by pureblood prejudice anymore. And right now, the biggest threat to what I’ve built, is you.”
He locked eyes with Harry, gripping his wand tightly. “Do I need to be worried about you destroying what I’ve built?”

In turn, Harry leaned forward, ignoring the implied threat. Clint squeezed his hands into fists behind him, feeling impotent. He didn’t know how helpful he’d be, but he was ready to move if the tense tableaux in front of him exploded.

“I have two questions.” Harry said, in a low voice. “Firstly, do you truly wish to create equality in the Wizarding World? It seems to me as if you simply want to replace pureblood tyranny with muggleborn rule, which they will never accept. Secondly, what exactly do you require from your students in repayment for your services?”

Colin licked his lips, opened his mouth, and Harry felt an oily slickness rise over the bright passion and determination that had dominated Colin’s emotions until now. “Stop.” Harry said, his voice grating. “I won’t tell you how, but I know you were about to lie. Do NOT lie to me, Colin.”

Colin closed his mouth and let out a breath. The oily feel to his emotions subsided as he reworded his response. “As to your first question. I’ve been accused of such before, mostly by purebloods. It’s not that I want to disenfranchise the purebloods, but I can’t say that I’d do much to prevent it. But truly, it’s a matter of numbers. It is not FAIR that one third of the population, the privileged third, nonetheless, controls everything. It is especially not fair that within that third, it is those who are the richest, those with the oldest blood, that control the most power.” He flicked a glance up to Clint. “Your American friend there should understand why this is a problem.” He added. “As for the students- I teach all my students to help other muggleborns, especially those who haven’t yet come to us. I suppose, if anything, that is my price. I teach them what I want to know, and encourage them to support each other. Perhaps, when they are older, I may ask for donations from them, but it would never be mandatory.”

Harry folded his arms over his chest and leaned back, thinking. Colin stayed perched on the edge of his chair, wand out. They sat there for a tense moment, before Harry waved a lazy hand at him. “Oh, stop with the posturing.” He said. “I’m sure the others told you already, but I seem to be immune to magic.”

Harry continued to think for a moment, and then sat back up. “Ok, I propose a deal.” He said. Clint rocked forward on his toes, ready to be done with this conversation. “Firstly- I do not want the wizarding world to know that I’m back. I’m not ready for that, and as I’ve told you, I’m currently unable to use my magic. I don’t want any Death-Eater wannabes coming after me, or any of the attention I might get for being the ‘Savior.’ You will talk to Sadiq and the Speaker, and you will ask them to tell no one of this. You will also do your best to convince anyone who may ask that I am not, in fact, returned from the dead. This benefits us both- you keep your control over this religion of yours, and I stay dead to most.”

“Secondly, you will adjust your curriculum- I want you teaching all your students to help anyone, regardless of blood purity, who needs their help. I also reserve the right to review all your curriculum and change it, if it does not truly reflect my ideals. This is the cost of using my name to create a religion. If you do not acquiesce, I will have no choice but to come forward and admit that I am back, and destroy what you’ve built here.”

“If you do this, and I am discovered anyways, then I will do my best to mitigate the damage done to your organization. I will likely never join you, but I will do my best to reinforce your authority here, regardless.”

“Do you agree to my terms?” Harry asked.
Colin tapped his chin with a finger, deliberating. “In regards to my curriculum,” Colin responded, “I will allow you the right to change it, but first you must discuss the change with me and allow me to try and persuade you otherwise. Is this acceptable?”

Harry nodded decisively, and stood from his chair, offering a hand. Colin clasped it in his, and Clint blinked, astonished, as a golden swirl of magic erupted from both their hands to coalesce about them, coalescing into two golden scrolls, each containing the agreed upon terms. Colin and Harry each collected their version, Harry tucking his into a leather pouch around his neck, and Colin tucking his into a pocket of his voluminous robe.

Harry reached up to scratch at his head ruefully. “This is a good thing you’re doing, Colin.” He said, awkwardly. “I mean, I could do without having my name all over it, but it really is a good thing.” He offered, and Colin clapped him over the shoulder. “I’m glad you think so, Harry.” He said, and then cocked his head to the side.

“So you need assistance leaving?” He asked, and Harry grinned at him, abashed.

“Yes, please.” He said. “If you can have someone escort us to the edge of magical Cairo, by the main markets, that would be lovely.” He tapped deep into the magic deep inside, and grinned. “And if you can provide a disguise for my friend here, that might be helpful, since the aurors were looking for him earlier.”

“Well, that’s easy enough.” Colin said, waving his wand and transfiguring a nearby quill into a white robe that matched his own. “Do you need one as well?” He asked, as he handed it to Clint and stepped into the corridor to summon them a guide. Clint pulled the robes on over his armor.

“No, I have it handled!” Harry said, with a mischievous wink to Clint. He switched from human to phoenix with a swirl of flames, and launched himself to perch on Clint’s shoulder.

Clint smirked, stroking his fingers over Harry’s crest. “Lazy thing.” He said, fondly. “You just don’t want to walk there, do you?” Clint followed Colin out of the doorway, stifling his smirk when he saw the man’s jaw fall open at the sight of Clint with a phoenix on his shoulder.

“Y-you... Harr-?” He started, before Clint cut him off with a shush.

“Secrets, remember?” He said, and Harry chirped amusedly from his shoulder. Clint turned with a swirl of robes that was quite impressive for someone who’d worn them for all of one day in his life, and stalked down the corridor, the phoenix content to perch on his shoulder, and with a hurried bow to the flabbergasted Head Speaker, their guide ran off after them, intent on seeing them safely to muggle Cairo. Colin shook his head, a smile playing on the edges of his lips.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” He said, rubbing his chin. “I suppose he is the boy-who-lived, after all.” He chuckled to himself, and turned away. Time to get back to work- religions didn’t run themselves, after all. At least, not his.

Chapter End Notes

So, who saw that coming? I sure didn’t. This /was/ going to be a nasty cult with bad intentions, but I suppose new, politically active, and mature!Colin just couldn't jive with that. So instead, we get this... and it may or may not be important for later chapters. hint.
Clint shaded his eyes with a wince as he stepped out from the doorway and into the bright sunlight. He flicked his eyes up, and gauged the time as somewhat after noon, though not yet edging into evening. Bruce and Natasha must be worried about him by now, he thought, though by mission protocol, neither would leave the rendezvous point before dark. Well, Natasha would be worried, though she’d never admit it. He hadn’t really worked much with Bruce on these types of missions before- SHEILD didn’t tend to send the scientist on many missions. He’d been brought in from the Avengers this time for his knowledge of the tesseract. Clint tugged the hood of his cloak forward, putting more of his face in shadow, and the guide wizard accompanying them paused and slipped out his wand diffidently.

“In the interest of not drawing attention.” He said, carefully, “Would sir be interested in a disillusionment charm?” Clint, having no idea what this meant, looked at Harry, who nodded.

“Yes.” Clint said, and held still as the wizard carefully lifted his wand and tapped it on the crown of his head. He held back a shudder as the magic dripped from the wand and down his body in what felt like cold, gooey strings, and he watched in wonder as the white cloak he was wearing shimmered and took on the pale yellow-white of the building behind him. When Clint raised his hands to look at them, they mimicked the street. He turned his hand back and forth for a moment, wondering if he had become transparent or if the spell had given him awesome chameleon-powers.

“This would be SO fantastic during a stealth mission.” He muttered under his breath, before collapsing his bow and storing it under the cloak. Harry trilled in amusement and wriggled his way under the fabric of the hood, compacting himself into a very warm and well-hidden ball of feathers at the back of Clint’s neck.

Their guide gestured for them to follow and turned to step into the street. Clint followed, keeping
his movements to the shadows and corners out of habit. He had a feeling that just because they were functionally invisible, didn’t mean that they’d be unnoticed if they actually ran into someone. Luckily, the streets were far less populated than they had been earlier, likely due to the overwhelming heat of the sun pressing down from above and the baked stone radiating heat from below, and it was child’s play to avoid the few stragglers still going about their business. Clint easily ghosted after their guide, taking the time to really appreciate the city that he’d run headlong through just a few hours ago. Wizarding Cairo was spacious, surprisingly so when the entry way was between two highly-populated apartment buildings. The streets were wide and paved in the same creamy stone as the buildings, and the white tile planters lining the streets boasted date palms, leafy green bushes, and a riot of flowers that Clint couldn’t identify. The palm trees cast pillars of shade along the street that did nothing to ward off the heat. Drifts of sand and dust mounded in corners and against walls, stirring in the hot breeze, even though he’d seen people whisking it away with jabs of wands earlier, and stone benches and small fountains lined the walkway. Shops were set into the open archways along the promenade, everything from perfectly normal shops full of groceries or spices or rugs or books to fantastical shops full of caged birds of prey, brightly colored fruit he’d never seen before, or piles of cauldrons made of differing materials. Each store carried its own scent, and in the street they all mingled into an amalgam of spices and dust, cooking meat and pungent smoke, leather and fruit. Everywhere he looked he could see traces of magic—store signs hung in the air, free of support or tether, goods rotated lazily on invisible displays, and a shop on the corner was giving demonstrations of honest-to-goodness flying carpets.

Clint couldn’t help but grin like a boy at everything, even as he hurried after his guide. Maybe he could talk Harry into giving him a proper tour at some point? Magic looked AWESOME.

Clint’s stomach rumbled in displeasure as they passed a stall selling something that smelled particularly mouthwatering, and Clint pressed his hand against his stomach. They’d eaten field rations in the truck the night before, but those were always less than satisfying. Clint was just pondering whether the invisibility spell would allow him to snatch a skewer unnoticed when their guide paused, and he looked up to see that they were only meters from the entrance. With a sigh, Clint abandoned his plans of stealing food and moved forward, alerting the white-robed wizard to their presence with a touch to his elbow. With a bow and a murmured word that sounded like finite, the man removed the spell and waved them onward. Clint mourned the loss of the camouflage spell as he crossed the square. He had liked it, dang it! He passed through the shimmering gate back into normal Cairo, biting back a sense of loss as the world around him changed, motor oil and gasoline replacing the intriguing scents, the honking of horns and music playing from a dozen competing radios replacing the polyglot murmur of shoppers and shopkeeps that he’d left behind.

Clint removed his white robes before they could attract any attention and bundled them into a loose ball that he left behind a dumpster, jostling Harry in the process. The phoenix grumbled in protest and resettled himself on Clint’s shoulder as the man looked about for the truck they’d arrived in. It wasn’t parked in the same spot as it had this morning, which made sense. Nat was too paranoid to leave the vehicle in the same spot for long.

Clint drew his StarkPad out of its padded pocket, grimacing when he saw that the prolonged exposure to Magical Cairo had drained it of all battery. Without technology, that left him searching on foot for the others.

Moments later, Clint was scaling a rickety old fire escape. Harry, unsettled by the activity, had sullenly taken wing and was waiting on the top, and when Clint popped over the side of the building he gave a derisive caw, mocking his slow ascent. Clint rolled his eyes. “Yes, well. We can’t all be glorious and winged.” He responded. “And since you are, why don’t you go make yourself useful? I’m looking for the truck we arrived in. Do you remember what it looked like?”
Harry gave him a scornful look and took off, banking hard to the right. During their chat earlier, Harry had explained how the phoenix’s personality differed from his own- he’d said the bird body made him more vain and distractible. Clint made a note to tell him that he was also quite the brat, and turned to the left, dodging clotheslines and rooftop gardens to make it to the other side of the building. He’d picked the tallest building he could, and now he scaled the low safety wall around the perimeter and used the added height to scan for the beige truck.

It was only the work of a minute to scan what he could see of the streets, and then he settled down onto his haunches on the railing for a moment, watching the cars that were driving through. None of them were that distinctive beige-brown of the oldstyle military truck.

He slipped back down onto the roof, ready to check from another corner, when a familiar piercing whistle came from above him. In what was quickly becoming muscle memory, Clint threw up his gauntleted arm just in time to catch the talons of the phoenix as Harry stooped, buffeting Clint’s head with his wings as he landed.

Clint frowned at Harry as the bird settled and reached up with his other hand to smooth his windswept (or was it wingswept?) hair. “Was that really necessary, bird?” He asked, and the phoenix gave an amused chirp before bobbing his head in a complicated gesture. Clint’s eyebrows rose. “You found them?”

Harry nodded, looking pleased with himself, and gestured with his head, guiding Clint to the other side of the rooftop. Sure enough, there was the beige truck, a few streets over. Harry looked so proud of himself, all fluffed feathers and flashing eyes, that Clint smirked a little, and launched him into the air with a hard thrust of his fist. Turn about was fair play, after all, and Harry wasn’t the only one who could be a brat. Harry flailed a bit at the unexpected push, flapping hard to avoid falling, and he glared at Clint as the archer vaulted over the side of the roof and gracefully descended.

Once his boots hit the floor, Clint looked around at Harry, who had landed on a railing nearby and was sulking. Clint chuckled and walked up to him. “Sorry, man.” He said, humor clear in his voice. “You mess with me, I mess with you. It’s the way this works.” He offered his arm to Harry, a conciliatory gesture, and Harry narrowed his eyes, looking between Clint’s face and his arm for a moment before he stepped delicately from railing to arm, sidling quickly up to his preferred perch on Clint’s shoulder as the man set off.

Harry sat there woodenly for a moment or two, and then sighed gustily, a strange action for a bird. Perhaps Clint had a point- he had started it, after all. He reached out with his beak and groomed a loose curl of hair back off Clint’s forehead, and the archer responded with a gentle skritch of his head. Harry let out a contented mumble. He supposed he could forgive the archer.

They reached the truck without further incident, and Clint was relieved to find Bruce napping in the passenger seat while Natasha, clad impeccably in a white blouse and tan trousers, lounged against the car, pretending to be engrossed in her StarkPhone.

She looked up as they approached, narrowing her eyes at him. “Took you long enough.” She sniped. Translation- she’d been worried.

Fine red eyebrows drew together as she took in the phoenix on his shoulder. “You still have the bird?” She asked. Harry bristled. Clint jostled him a little. Antagonizing Natasha was not going to help.

“Yeah, Harry’s coming with us to New York.” He said.
Long experience with Natasha let Clint see the tiny twitch of her lips. “You... named the mystical firebird Harry?” She asked, a hint of humor in her voice.

Clint flushed. “No! His name was already Harry, he told...” Harry’s beak closed around Clint’s ear, hard enough to be an unmistakable warning, and Clint held up a finger. “Hold, on, give us a second.” He told Natasha, and ducked around a corner.

“What is your problem?” He asked, reaching up to remove the phoenix from his ear. Harry sulked. “You don’t want me to tell her we talked?” Clint guessed. Harry nodded. “Why not?” Clint asked. “She’s my partner- I tell her everything. And she’s going to know if I lie to her.”

Harry looked down and ruffled his feathers, shifting from foot to foot. “Why don’t you want me to tell her? Does it have something to do with magic? Will you…. Vanish or something, if too many people know?”

Harry gave him a very unimpressed look, then shook his head.

Clint shrugged. “Well, it was a possibility. But seriously, Harry. Can’t you just change and tell me?”

Harry looked around. They were in the middle of the street, passerby moving back and forth, and he shook his head miserably. He didn’t know how to tell Clint that he couldn’t shift straight back into his human form- the Polyjuice burned off as soon as he transformed into the bird form, he’d tested it. And he couldn’t just pop into his in-between form in the middle of a muggle street. He was still hiding from wizarding authority, by Merlin, and breaking the Statute of Secrecy that flagrantly would get him lots of attention he didn’t want. He also didn’t know how to explain to Clint the fact that he didn’t want people to know about his other form just yet. It was weird and awkward, and while Clint had been fine with it, he could just imagine anyone else’s response. He didn’t want people thinking he was a… freak, or anything.

Clint looked down at the phoenix’s bowed head, and suddenly felt bad for Harry. The phoenix just looked so sad and confused, wings and crest drooping, his feathers slicked down to make himself as small as possible. He sighed. “I’m probably going to regret this.” He said, wryly. “But fine. On a few conditions.”

Harry perked up. “I’ll give you the plane ride.” Clint said. “But as soon as we land in New York, you and I need to find some time to talk about this. I’m guessing you’re still too tired to turn back, so I’m going to trust you for now.” He frowned down at Harry, and Harry shivered as something dark and protective grew in his gaze. “But if you do anything to hurt any of my friends, or if I find out you have some motive to staying like this besides protecting yourself, and we’ll be having words. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded jerkily, grateful. He hadn’t expected Clint to back down, and for some reason he was already attached enough to the man that he didn’t want to be separated for the flight back to New York. Once they were in private, he could use his potions, and then he could introduce himself to the others. It would be fine.

Harry crooned sweetly in gratitude and ran his soft, feathered head under Clint’s chin, to which Clint’s misgivings melted. He ran two fingers over his crest, scratching the spot that Harry liked. Damn, Clint thought wryly. He always was weak to cute animals, and that seemed doubly true of cute animals that turned into cuter men...

He raised his eyes to meet Natasha’s where she was standing, blending almost seamlessly with the shadow from a nearby building. She narrowed her eyes at him, but nodded, accepting his
compromise. He felt vaguely guilty for allowing her to follow them, but he hadn’t actually promised Harry anything in particular, and Natasha would have found out anyways. She always did.

Clint spent a few minutes fussing over the bird, offering pets and scratches, which Harry happily accepted, and then returned to the truck. He wasn’t surprised to find Natasha back in position at the car, pretending like she’d never left.

“I ran into someone in the street.” He told her. “They told me his name was Harry.”

“Right.” She said, her gaze flickering between Harry and Clint. “Well, we have to go. We’re already behind schedule as it is.” She turned and climbed into the truck, and Clint winced. From the look on her face, Natasha was still irritated by the situation, and he knew he’d be hearing about it later. He hoped Harry had a decent reason for wanting to stay hidden.

Clint circled the truck to the passenger’s side. He opened the door and nudged Bruce awake and over to the middle of the truck, where the scientist promptly fell back asleep. Keeping the Hulk back always took a lot out of him- Clint never knew whether it cost him more energy to Hulk out or control himself.

He slipped into the car, settled Harry in his lap, and pulled the door closed behind him.

“That thing better not shit in the car.” Natasha said acerbically, and Harry’s head shot up, offended. Clint slumped back into his seat with a groan. Hopefully, this wouldn’t be too long a car ride.

.xOx.

Fortunately, they didn’t have far to go, and it only took half an hour for Natasha to wind her way out of the city and to the nearby private airfield where they were catching their ride. Natasha and Clint moved the gear from the truck to the small passenger plane, courtesy of Tony Stark, and then nudged Bruce awake to move from truck to plane.

He climbed up the stairs with a yawn, and Clint was happy to see nothing but brown in his sleepy gaze, which sharpened as Bruce spotted the phoenix. “Oh, is it coming home with us?”

“He is!” Clint said, choosing not to elaborate.

“Clint’s picked up another stray.” Natasha said, drily. Clint knocked his shoulder into hers playfully. “Oh, don’t be jealous.” He said airily. “You’re still my favorite stray.”

Natasha flipped him off, some of the tension melting off her shoulders as the airplane steps rose after them, marking the transition from public to private space. With the ease of long partnership, Clint and Natasha did a quick sweep of the plane, finding it to be clear of human presence, and Natasha went to the front to talk to Jarvis, who was flying the plane remotely.

Clint rubbed his hands together. “Is anyone else starving?” He called, as he walked into the small kitchenette. He loved Stark’s technology- being an Avenger was so cushy. SHIELD picked up their operatives in military style helicopters, loud things with hard seats and nylon belts. Stark’s private plane had comfortable beds, couches, swanky décor, and a kitchen. Clint was sure there was a hidden party mode too, with stripper poles and black lights, though he’d never been able to talk Jarvis into letting him see. Speaking of which…

“J! My man.” He said, opening a cupboard at random and peering inside. “What’ve we got for eating?”
“We have what we always do, Mr. Barton.” Jarvis’ overly formal voice came over the speakers in the kitchen, tinged with what sounded a lot like exasperation, if an AI could be exasperated. Clint allowed himself a quick moment of giddiness. It wasn’t his fault his life was cool. Magic was cool, Stark’s crazy high-tech life was cool. Clint was a person who appreciated the cool things in life.

On his shoulder, Harry had flinched at the disembodied voice, and craned his neck around, looking for the source.

“That’s Jarvis.” Clint offered, feeling himself relaxing much like Natasha now that the mission was behind them. “Harry, Jarvis. Jarvis, Harry.” He said, gesturing between the nearest speaker he could see and the perplexed bird on Clint’s shoulder.

“Per Mr. Stark’s rules, pets are not allowed on Mr. Stark’s personal transport.” Jarvis said.

“Well, it’s a good thing Harry’s not a pet, isn’t it?” Clint said absently, rooting around in the cupboard and coming up with a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. On his shoulder, Harry gave a delighted shriek and hopped down his arm towards the jar.

Clint watched with amusement. “Harry, are you a peanut butter fan?” He teased, setting bread and spread down on a nearby counter. Harry hopped after them, ignoring him completely, and Clint grabbed a jar of grape jelly from the fridge and a plastic knife from the rack on the table while the bird tried to wrestle the lid off the jar.

“Bruce?” He called. “PB&J?”

The scientist gave an affirmative grunt from the armchair he’d claimed, and Clint quickly threw together a plate of sandwiches, deftly keeping the peanut butter jar out of Harry’s reach as the plane beneath his feet rumbled to life and started to taxi down the runway. Harry shrieked at him and snapped his beak, his impressive crest rising well above his head as he tried and get his favorite food away from the obnoxious archer.

“Patience.” Clint scolded, neatly sweeping the peanut butter jar out of Harry’s reach once again and avoiding his snapping beak. “You can have it once I’m done and we’re in the air.” He said, screwing the top on the jar and scooping it all- bird, plate, and jar- into his arms, claiming his own seat on the couch a few cushions down from Natasha right as the wheels of the plane left the runway and the entire cabin tilted back, the small plane juddering with the effort of gaining altitude.

Harry, thrown off balance by the motion he hadn’t expected, flailed his wings to try and catch his balance, and only managed to whack Clint in the head with his wing until the archer caught him and tucked him securely against his body as the plane rose.

Clint looked down at his pinning eyes, and shook his head. “Flying’s a little different when you’re not using your own wings.” He told the bird, who only shuddered and promptly turned around, hiding his beak and face between Clint’s arm and body, all interest in the peanut butter gone.

Clint patted him gently on the back and took a sandwich, offering the plate to his teammates. Natasha took one and devoured it with quick, neat bites, her white teeth flashing. Bruce took two. They ate in silence, the chewing and swallowing helping to offset the pressure building in their ears, and soon enough the plane leveled out and stopped vibrating so hard. Harry didn’t move, so Clint unscrewed the lid of the peanut butter jar and waved it behind him. “It’s safe now, Harry.” He called. “Didn’t you want some of this?”

With pure force of will (and encouraged by the lovely smell of peanut butter), Harry pulled his
head out of Clint’s side. He had known, of course, that Muggles flew in giant metal airplanes. He’d seen them often enough on the Dursley’s TV and in movies, and he knew that Hermione had flown in one. He himself never had, though, and between his instinctual distrust in anything besides his own wings carrying him through the air and his lack of experience, that ascent had been terrifying. The plane had jerked and shuddered worse than the Weasley’s old Shooting Star, and that was saying something. He wasn’t sure how much of the decision to hide against Clint was Harry and how much was terrified phoenix instincts, but he’d felt much safer tucked into that dark shadow with Clint’s own personal smell filling his nostrils.

But speaking of smells- he let out a delighted chirp and pounced, easily knocking the jar from Clint’s hand and onto the floor. He wanted that peanut buttery goodness, damnit. Unfortunately, without fingers or a utensil, he was finding it rather difficult to get the peanut butter out of the jar. He barely thought about it for a moment before he abandoned his dignity, stabilizing the jar with one claw as he drove his head into the mouth of the jar, undoubtedly smearing peanut butter residue all over his head feathers. He didn’t care, not when he had a beak full of sticky sweetness.

Clint let out a surprised laugh as he watched the phoenix abandon all poise and go after the peanut butter, and turned to Nat and Bruce.

“Did you guys manage to get out fine?” He asked, rather belatedly scanning over Natasha and then Bruce for any injuries. He’d seen Nat move, and she looked fine, but she could be sneaky when it came to hiding injuries.

It was Bruce who answered him. “We did, and beyond that, we even managed to get a sample of that blue fluid that was registering like the tesseract. Hopefully there’s enough there that Tony and I can do some analysis and figure out what it is. Other than that, our extraction was smooth. Unlike you, our civilian clothes weren’t damaged in the fight.” He teased gently.

Clint gave him a lopsided grin. “There’s a first.” He shot back. “I thought you were always the one who ended up conspicuously unclothed.” Bruce winced and rubbed a hand through his hair.

“What about you?” Natasha asked. “What happened after you went running off?”

Clint cast an eye on Harry, who was busy on the floor, and offered an abridged version. “I found Harry facing off with that Degnolaten woman. She was doing the good ole’ supervillain rant and rave, but she didn’t say anything about the fluid. She was talking about eating souls or some shit like that, and then she said she was going to New York next to eat the soul of a god. That’s why Harry wanted to come with us- he doesn’t seem to like her much. Then we made some new friends and got an escort outta there.”

Natasha frowned. “She was… eating souls?”

Clint shrugged. “I think it’s a magic thing. Maybe Fury will know something about it during debrief?” He said. “Hey, Did you know these wizards have a spell to make you invisible?” He added, sitting up straight and gesturing with the half of a PB&J he was holding. “They cast it on me and it was AWESOME. Hey, since Fury apparently knows all about these guys, do you think he can get one in here to cast that spell on gear for us? It was GREAT.”

Natasha chuckled and got to her feet, snagging another sandwich. “You could always ask.” She said. Clint pouted. That was Natasha-speak for “I sincerely doubt it.”

She rounded the couch and crouched down by a bookshelf, eventually selecting a thin leather-bound volume and settling back down in an arm chair, feet tucked up underneath herself. Bruce had found some uncollated papers somewhere, and Clint amused himself for a moment trying to
decipher them without getting any closer, but he quickly identified them as chemistry papers, and frowned. That was no fun. Bored, he got up and plugged in his StarkPad to charge, before draping himself over the couch with a dramatic sigh that both Bruce and Natasha ignored. Spoilsports.

He turned to his side and watched Harry for a while. He’d finished gorging himself and now looked perfectly content, his crop bulging and the feathers on his neck and face absolutely plastered with sticky brown spread. He looked ridiculous, and Clint watched lazily as Harry hopped up on the arm of a nearby chair and began grooming it away. It was a curiously soothing thing to watch, and lost himself in watching for a while, before growing bored. He flopped to his back.

“Jarvis, what’s on TV?” He asked the ceiling, and Jarvis responded by turning on the massive flatscreen TV and flicking the channels to the Night Show, one of Clint’s favorite talk shows. The host was happily mocking the news of the day, and Clint watched halfheartedly until it switched to a photo of the Chitauri Invasion, one of the main news shots that had managed to capture all six of the Avengers. Admittedly, Clint was just a silhouette in the background, perched atop a fallen bus and shooting arrows into the masses, while the other five were front and center, but it was one of the only shots that featured them all.

He flipped around and sat up, suddenly paying much more attention.

“And New York is wondering what exactly is going on with the Avengers.” The man said. “The Alien invasion pictured ended on May 4th, and since then, New York hasn’t seen the whole crew together. I mean, what is it? Taking out an entire alien army a bit too much bonding time?” The reporter smirked at the screen, and the laugh track played. “But seriously, the past few days we’ve seen an uptick in Dr. Doom activity, and the only Avengers who’ve arrived to beat back him and his Doombots have been Captain America and Iron Man!” A few more photos spiraled onto the screen, and he continued, on a roll. “I mean, we were promised a team, not a duo. Where are the rest? I’m missing my daily dose of Black Widow, that’s for sure.” He lewdly wiggled his eyebrows. Natasha scoffed as the laugh track played. “The Avengers also haven’t pulled out the big guns, even if they could have been useful.”

A few more photos flickered over the screen- some rather close-up shots of Iron Man and Captain America getting pummeled, one of sparks flying from Steve’s shield as he strained to hold back a bot. Or Dr. Doom. It was always so hard to tell.

“Where’s Big Green? And what’s the superteam without our very own resident god? Thor has been missing in action for quite a bit longer than the Hulk or Black Widow.” He smiled for the camera. “I suppose it’s to be expected- I couldn’t even commit to my wife for a full year, and we never had anything quite as stressful as Doombots to deal with!”

Cue the canned laugh track. Clint edged forward on his seat, eager to see what the caustic man would have to say about himself, but with one last crack regarding the supposed dissolution of the Avenger’s team and the three missing Avengers, he moved on to another topic, and Clint felt himself slump forward, acutely disappointed.

He knew he wasn’t anyone’s favorite Avenger- he wasn’t big and flashy like Thor or Tony. He didn’t change colors like Bruce, and he didn’t have that corn-fed picket-fence charm that Steve did. And no one could ignore Natasha unless she wanted them to, with her crazy acrobatics, deadly strikes, and ability to stay drop-dead gorgeous throughout the fight. But Clint? He was a good enough SHIELD agent, he thought despondently. But he was just missing the flare to stand up next to his teammates and get noticed, and that hurt. Though he supposed he could just count his lucky stars that the media hadn’t gotten ahold of the information that he’d been whammied by Loki and
fought on the wrong side of the whole business for far too long- another failing of his. Moodily, he stood from the couch and retreated into one of the back bedrooms, ignoring Natasha’s heavy gaze on his back as he went.

Harry looked back and forth between the TV screen and Clint’s retreating back. He may not know all the details, but from talking with Clint today, it was clear that he considered himself a part of the team called the Avengers, and the man on the TV had just failed to include him in the lineup. If Harry were human, he would have winced. He’d heard enough from Ron about how painful it could be to be overshadowed by your teammates, and Harry could already tell that Clint was a loud person who habitually sought the spotlight, so it must be hitting him especially hard. When he cracked open the shields over his empathy, his guess was confirmed. Clint was definitely heading off to sulk. He shifted, getting ready to fly after him, and Natasha spoke up quietly, her eyes flickering to him.

“Don’t.” She said. Harry startled, and gave her his best innocent look. “Don’t go after him.” She said, not deceived in the slightest. “He likes to be alone when things like this happen- he’ll just get mad if you go after him.

Harry shifted his weight and resettled, refusing to acknowledge Natasha. He still wasn’t sure of what to think of her. Her emotions were odd- artificially smooth and distant, almost uncomfortable to be around. He sealed his shields again- it was uncomfortable to have them open in a room with Bruce, whose perpetual anger was roaring away beyond that odd curtain of calm, and Natasha with her uncomfortably muffled emotions. He much preferred Clint, with his bright, clean sparks of joy and mischievousness. Even his melancholy after seeing the news clipping was soft and gentle against his senses.

“Harry.” Bruce said from behind him, his voice soft and kind. “Would you mind very much if I sketched you? I want to look more into the legends about phoenix around the world, and I’d love to have an image to show. I imagine you’d prefer I didn’t take a true photo, though.”

Harry turned to him and bobbed his head, a blanket agreement, and stood tall on the armchair, arching his neck gracefully. Bruce laughed. “You don’t have to pose for me.” He told Harry. “Just, hang out, and I’ll do the rest.” Harry shrugged, and returned to grooming, sneaking glances at Natasha as he did so. He still wanted to go after Clint, but the protective gaze she was sending at the door he’d vanished through told Harry that she wouldn’t let him, so he reluctantly gave up the idea and settled down, pulling one foot up into the cover of his breast feathers and letting himself doze as the cabin quieted, the only sounds the soft skritch-scratch of Bruce’s pencil and the quiet rustling of Natasha turning the pages of her book.

.xOx.

They were almost to their destination when Jarvis spoke up.

“Avengers, Steve and Tony have been called to a situation downtown. We’re close enough that I could do an airdrop, and I’m sure the backup would be appreciated.”

Natasha closed her book with a snap and stood, heading for the back of the jet to gather her spare suit. Bruce groaned and rolled his shoulders, removing his borrowed t-shirt and pants until he was down to the pair of stretchy purple shorts he’d had when Harry’d found him in the desert.

The plane banked hard to the right, and Clint and Natasha emerged from the back, Natasha now wearing a sleek black suit that looked like a feminine (and less purple) version of Clint’s, all tight fabric and carbon-fiber plates. Each grabbed a small backpack from next to the emergency exit and strapped them on, and then Jarvis was opening the door and Natasha jumped, much to Harry’s
consternation.

Clint shot him a look over his shoulder, some of his usual spark back in his gaze, and shot a finger gun at Harry. “You coming, bird boy?” He asked. “We’re gonna fly!” He dropped backwards out of the plane with a wink, and Harry took off after him, clearing the doorway right as Bruce jumped past him. Harry could see Clint and Natasha down below, each sporting a narrow parachute and guiding themselves through a city full of skyscrapers with the ease of long practice. Bruce, on the other hand, was simply plummeting, and Harry shrieked in alarm and dived after him, though he wasn’t sure what he could even do to save him.

His wings couldn’t keep up with Bruce’s increased bulk, and Harry watched with dismay as the gentle scientist slammed straight into the concrete ground in a cloud of dust and concrete chunks. Harry had to work quickly to dodge the debris, and when the dust settled, his great green friend from the desert stood where Bruce had fallen, a crater of broken concrete around him. Harry trilled in relief and flew a loop around his head.

With a whoosh of blue flame, a man-shaped red and gold robot (Iron Man, Harry identified from the news) swooped down from above, hovering around the Hulk’s shoulder, and a man dressed in what looked like (of all things) a bastardized American flag launched himself into a crouch at Hulk’s feet, catching a shield with the same pattern as he landed. That must be Captain America, Harry thought. Clint and Natasha were the next to arrive, Natasha landing gracefully on Bruce’s green shoulder, Clint on a nearby pile of rubble.

“Hey, hey, the gang’s all here!” Tony said drily.

“Minus Thor.” Clint pointed out.

“And plus… a bird?” Steve asked, confused.

“Pretty birdy!” Hulk corrected with a frown.

“We’ll explain later.” Natasha said, tersely, as a ray of blue light beamed in, scattering the team. “Maybe after we take out the new threat to New York?”

“You’re such a spoilsport.” Clint whined, as he drew an arrow from his quiver and shot it into the face of the foremost doombot. “We were bantering.”

Chapter End Notes

Lots of dialogue, and the set up for some action. A bit of a shorter chapter today, so sorry about that. Hoping to get the next one out rather soon! Let me know what you all think! I’m always tickled to hear from you all.
XI

Chapter Notes

AN: Hello friends! As I hope everyone saw, I updated my update schedule to the much abhorred “sporadic.” Sorry guys, but this quarter at school is much more intense than expected and I’m also moving house. I’m not going to make any promises, but I hope to return to a more regular update schedule in late August. For now, I’ll try and update as possible.

A tiny bit of a longer chapter for your patience. Also, Foxtron, I hope my Tony/Harry interaction meets your expectations! I know it’s short, but I thought of you.

Chapter Warnings: Genre typical violence. Getting the tiniest bit steamy (it’s barely anything don’t get excited.) M/M! DLDR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Last Time on Burning Bright:

His wings couldn’t keep up with Bruce’s increased bulk, and Harry watched with dismay as the gentle scientist slammed straight into the concrete ground in a cloud of dust and concrete chunks. Harry had to work quickly to dodge the debris, and when the dust settled, his great green friend from the desert stood where Bruce had fallen, a crater of broken concrete around him. Harry trilled in relief and flew a loop around his head.

With a whoosh of blue flame, a man-shaped red and gold robot (Iron Man, Harry identified from the news) swooped down from above, hovering around the Hulk’s shoulder, and a man dressed in what looked like (of all things) a bastardized American flag launched himself into a crouch at Hulk’s feet, catching a shield with the same pattern as he landed. That must be Captain America, Harry thought. Clint and Natasha were the next to arrive, Natasha landing gracefully on Bruce’s green shoulder, Clint on a nearby pile of rubble.

“Hey, hey, the gang’s all here!” Tony said drily.

“Minus Thor.” Clint pointed out.

“And plus… a bird?” Steve asked, confused.

“Pretty birdy!” Hulk corrected with a frown.

“We’ll explain later.” Natasha said, tersely, as a ray of blue light beamed in, scattering the team. “Maybe after we take out the new threat to New York?”

“You’re such a spoilsport.” Clint whined, as he drew an arrow from his quiver and shot it into the fast of the foremost doombot. “We were bantering.”

Chapter 11: Meet the Avengers

A clear, cloudless dawn was just breaking over the city as the Avengers landed, and Harry was grateful to notice the complete lack of non-combatants on the street as the Hulk roared and ripped
a chunk of concrete off a nearby building. Either the citizens were wise enough to evacuate at the first sign of trouble, or someone had forcefully evacuated them earlier.

Despite Clint’s earlier whining, he settled into the fight with a vengeance, wading through Doombots side by side with Natasha, who flowed through enemies’ guard like silk through water, the both of them felling bots left and right with sparkling electricity and arrows precisely placed in vulnerable spots.

Harry wheeled above, sharp eyes dissecting the combat. He wanted to help—specifically, he wanted to help Clint, to dazzle him with his skill and acrobatic flying. He had enough experience at this point to recognize that this urge to show off was coming straight from his phoenix instincts. Even so, Harry was inclined to listen—there was nothing wrong in offering a little assistance, was there?

Only, Harry wasn’t sure the best way to help. He wasn’t inexperienced with combat, but he certainly had never fought a robot before, which was his best guess as to what these weird things were. He had also never fought alongside a muggle, though he was starting to doubt that the Avengers truly fit into that category. Clint had called them superheroes earlier, and Harry had just assumed he was joking, as he tended to do. But perhaps not, he thought, as he observed the team. They truly did fight like the brightly-colored characters from some of Dudley’s more ridiculous comic books.

Natasha and Clint were clearly used to working as a pair, and they did it well, protecting each other in a tight swirl of black and purple leather, shining knives and dead-accurate archery. Further down the street, the Hulk raged, scattering bots like so many tin soldiers, and even further still, Iron Man and Captain America fought side by side. As Harry watched, Iron Man shot a beam of blue energy through a cluster of the robots, scattering them, and Captain America stopped to catch the beam on his shield, directing it into an unsuspecting knot of bots and taking several down.

The Avengers were handling it well, really—Doombots were falling in droves, covering the street in metal and oil, silver masks and green cloaks, but where the bots lacked in skill, they made up for in number. It seemed as if for every bot the Avengers cut down, there were two more to take its place.

Harry wheeled closer to Clint. Three bots were closing in on the fighting pair, and as Harry watched, Natasha and Clint burst into what was clearly a well-practice maneuver. Clint drew an arrow and dropped to one knee as Natasha flung herself into a summersault that took her over his shoulders, neatly switching places, and the bot aiming for Natasha found itself with a face full of exploding arrow while the one prepared to dodge an arrow took instead a devastating kick right in the throat. It reeled back, wires exposed by the kick sparking fitfully, and jerkily collapsed in a heap.

Together, Clint and Natasha turned to face the third bot, and Harry called out a ringing shriek of warning as a bot, who had been playing dead on the ground, reached out and snatched at Clint’s foot. Clint stumbled despite the warning, and the bot rolled them over, its hand spitting sparks as it prepared for an electrical attack.

Harry dove, furious, and hit the bot as hard as he could with talons clenched into fists. The bot pitched forward with the attack, losing its grip on Clint, and Harry hurtled past it with the momentum of his dive, hitting the ground painfully with one outstretched wing as he turned as hard as he could. He managed it before the bot recovered and lashed out with a targeted burst of fire right in front of its face. He’d noticed Clint employing an arrow throughout the fight that seemed to do nothing more than create a very bright flash of light, and it seemed to disorient the bots. Hopefully, Harry’s fire would do the same thing.
Harry’s distraction did the trick, and behind the bot, Clint leapt to his feet, doing something with his bow that transformed it into a long black staff, and stabbed one end straight through the back of the bot’s skull. Harry crowed victoriously as it jerked and fell to the ground. He burst upwards with a strong surge that tugged unpleasantly at the wing he’d hit during his dive. He ignored it— he could still fly, for now, and that was what mattered.

Harry surveyed the battlefield and took a moment to appreciate the long rest they’d gotten on the plane. His magical reserves were still far from restored after his run in with Degnolaten, but they were doing much better.

He swooped down low over one of the approaching bots and dove, grasping the green cloak in his talons, and imagined himself high above the battle. The flames rose up around him obediently, and as they cleared he was high in the sky. He released his grip on the bot and watched with glee as it fell through the air and directly into another bot, both of them tumbling end over end into a pile of exposed wiring and dented metal. Neither stood again.

Diving down beside Clint and Natasha again, he threw a lazy sheet of fire at a nearby Doombot with the flick of a wing, and the green cape it was wearing obligingly caught fire. Unfortunately, smoke and fire seemed not to bother the bot, as it simply continued attacking.

Annoyed, Harry conjured a bright flash of flame right in the face of an approaching bot, sending it reeling backwards, optic sensors overloaded with the light. Natasha hissed, shadowing her face with a hand.

“As helpful as you are, bird.” She snapped, “If you could warn us before doing that, it would be nice.” Harry warbled in apologetic agreement and preceded his next flare with a shrill whistle.

Harry lost himself in the rhythm of it— locate a bot, mark it with a curl of flame to warn Clint and Natasha, and blind it with a bright flash. Occasionally, when a bot got too close or when they threatened to overrun Clint and Natasha, he would teleport it above the battle and drop it on an unsuspecting comrade, though he could feel the effort of teleporting these large, heavy objects eating away at his newly-recovered stores of energy, and mostly stuck to blinding bots.

.xOx.

Early morning bled into mid-morning, and by the time the sun was almost straight overhead, they had weeded out most of the bots, though not without cost. Harry had stayed mostly with Clint and Natasha, and both fighters were singed and tired, Clint limping again on his leg where the wound had reopened, Natasha nursing a wrist that was beginning to swell. Harry was grateful when the remaining bots turned and fled on some sort of unseen signal, and he whined under his breath when the Avengers followed after grimly. He understood the principle of wiping out the last of the enemy, but he hadn’t asked his body to do anywhere near this much acrobatic flying ever before, and the muscles of his chest and wings were twinging with pain and fatigue as he winged after the Avengers and the remaining Doombots.

They easily kept their distance from the Avengers, though never dipping quite out of sight, and a sense of unease rose in Harry. It was almost as if the bots were leading them somewhere, he thought, and spiraled down lower until he was flying level with where Clint was loping determinedly after the rest of the Avengers. He cursed his lack of a human body again— he had no idea how to communicate his worries to the man, or to tell him to slow down and tend the injury to his thigh which was now seeping dark red blood that even Harry’s sharp eyes had trouble seeing against the black of his tactical gear. Harry wondered if Natasha had noticed the injury yet.

At the front of the chase, the last of the Doombots took a sharp turn into an alley, and one by one
the Avengers followed, with Clint and Harry bringing up the rear. As they rounded the corner, Clint had to hop to the side suddenly to avoid Natasha’s back, and Harry shot upwards with a grumble to avoid him in turn, and promptly faltered in the air as a dark mist rose around him, blanketing him with sadness and despair.

It was the work of a moment to shake it off- his empathy might be inconvenient at times, but he was learning how to identify which emotions were his and which were foreign, and this was most definitely foreign. He pushed himself higher into the air to scan the alley, and then he saw her. He recoiled, slamming his shields as shut as they could go, and winged his way higher.

He did not want another encounter with Degnolaten again so soon, when the last time they’d met she’d drained him of so much power.

She caught sight of him easily, and wiggled long, bone-white fingers in his direction with a grin. Her human façade was firmly in place, and surrounded as she was by Doombots, she appeared discordantly small and fragile, though Harry’s mind was replaying visions of her swallowing defenseless souls. The creeping mist was seeping out from under her robes to rise and twist, trailing despair through the air, tendrils of visible sorrow waving and moving in a seething roil before the ends dissolved into the mist permeating the alley. The effect was like standing in a crowd of dementors.

His eyes widened. She wanted powerful souls, didn’t she? Was she here for the Avengers? He cast an eye over the team and was hardly surprised to see them wan and pale, their breath puffing white in the sudden freezing cold, clearly more affected than he by the miasma Degnolaten was spreading. The dark mist was creeping along the ground and coiling between their legs, and even with his shields as high as they could be, Harry could feel the despair and apathy rising in the Avengers in response.

Hulk groaned and clutched his head, staggering, before he turned and roared at Degnolaten. Harry winced as that terrible rage surged and pushed away the influence of the despair-inducing mist, and then Hulk turned and punched one giant fist through the alley wall before bracing himself against the ground and leaping away. Harry watched with awe as he crashed in the side of a nearby skyscraper and pushed off again with a flex of his incredibly powerful muscles, lurching off into the night.

Degnolaten watched him go and then turned her gaze back to the Avengers. She took a threatening step forward and the tug in Harry’s chest that had abandoned him back in the desert of Libya returned with a vengeance. Before he knew it, he was sweeping down, despite his fear, and releasing that particular ringing screech that he’d used in the marketplace of Cairo. Clint, despite being unsteady on his feet and looking like he was experiencing all his worst memories at once, threw his arm into the air, and Harry felt a fierce fondness for the man, and admiration for the rest of them too. The weight of despair was heavy in the air, but all four Avengers were still on their feet, weapons in hand, refusing to back down. He stooped, landed heavily on Clint’s upraised arm, tucked his wings back, and opened his beak to let out the song that was pressing against the back of his throat.

The song took all his attention, rising bright and powerful out of his chest, packed with all his confidence and admiration of the bravery the Avengers were showing, and just like it had with the girl in Cairo, he felt his song resonate strongly with these strangers, these Avengers who so clearly embodied the virtues that his phoenix espoused. The mist wreathing the ground stopped and trembled, and with the tiniest corner of his attention not locked into the song, Harry saw Degnolaten flinch backward as if struck, her pale, long-fingered hands coming up to press over her ears. She took one step backwards, and then another, and then the mist was pouring back out of the
alley and up into her robes, and Harry saw Captain America shake off her influence with a full-body shudder. He lifted his head and his shield and stepped forward threateningly. Natasha slunk up next to him, all her weight on the balls of her feet and her strange electric weapon clenched in her hand. Iron Man clanked up next, and then Clint stepped in front of them all, advancing on Degnolaten and brandishing Harry, who balanced on his arm, and cast his song now towards Degnolaten, forming a shield of triumphant song between the Avengers and her creeping despair.

With an angry screech, Degnolaten stepped back in the face of the phoenix song and vanished in a crack of apparition. With her departure, the last of the despair she had engendered lifted, and the Avengers burst into action to take out the last of the Doombots, now clustered in the back of the dead-end alley like so many fish in a barrel.

With a full-body shudder that left all his feathers standing on end, Harry let his song trail off and sidled up Clint’s arm until he could duck his head and snuggle under Clint’s chin. The archer chuckled and obliged him with head scratches.

“Thanks, Harry.” He said. “That was... that was amazing.” Harry crooned at him and let his crest rise. Of course it was amazing. He’d done it, after all.

“What in the world was that?” Tony interrupted, his voice tinny through his speakers, and Harry glared balefully at him. Clint had been complimenting him, and it really wasn’t necessary for that to be interrupted, was it?

“This is Harry.” Natasha offered in explanation, before offering a small smile at the bird. “We’ll explain more at debrief.” She told Tony, “But suffice to say, Clint picked him up during our mission, and he’s clearly proven himself a useful addition.”

Harry fluffed his body feathers, irrationally pleased. This was the first time Natasha had said something nice about him! He eyed her speculatively. Perhaps he could admit that her red hair was almost as pretty as his red feathers. Almost.

“Speaking of debrief,” Clint said. “We have some rather important information to share, I think. And by we, I mean Bruce. So... maybe we should go collect him, and then tell Fury about the mission?”

“You found something on the tesseract readings?” Steve asked.

Clint nodded. “A lot happened. But really, Bruce is the one who was examining the sample we took, so we sort of need him.”

Harry watched curiously as Tony made a motion and the red and gold armor covering him folded back and down, compacting until it formed into a briefcase in his hand, leaving a slender, dark-haired man in tailored pants and a casual shirt. He rolled his eyes heavenward and gestured expressively with his free hand. “Well, unfortunately, Bruce is kinda big and green at the moment, and with how angry he seemed... well, hopefully he went to the park to work it off, and not downtown. He seemed more ‘Hulk Smash’ than not.”

Clint sighed. “I always feel bad just leaving the guy...” He muttered, and Natasha placed her hand on his shoulder. He looked over at her and caught the microscopic frown on her face. He knew she felt the same. Bruce hated the damage he did as Hulk- Clint had caught him reading damage reports before, a grimace on his face as he took in the costs he’d incurred as the Other Guy. Clint felt that it was at least their responsibility to watch over him when he was like this, which was not an attitude that Stark shared.
Harry gave a determined trill from his shoulder and launched off, spiraling into the air above them and vanishing in a sheet of flame.

Tony looked up after him. “Huh.” He offered. “Did anyone else see that?”

Steve looked relieved. “That was weird for you too? Good. I wasn’t sure if teleporting birds were a thing, now…”

Clint and Natasha shared a long-suffering look.

.xOx.

Harry vanished in the fire, holding an image of the Hulk in his mind. He popped into being over Hulk’s shoulder and was surprised to find him sitting at the edge of a rooftop, his huge legs dangling over the side. The big man let out a soft snort at Harry’s appearance.

“Pretty birdy.” He said, and offered a hand, but made no efforts to catch Harry this time. Harry winged closer, and throwing caution to the wind, landed on his thumb, noting with incredulity that it was larger under his talons than even Clint’s shoulder. He carefully lowered his shields, and this time ignored the deep well of rage that immediately tried to suck him under. He was starting to realize that the emotion was just part of Bruce and didn’t actually mean he was angry. Or he was always angry? He wasn’t sure. Either way, he was learning that the rage didn’t tell him anything about the emotional state of Bruce or Hulk. And what he found when he ignored the rage this time was a deep well of sadness and frustration that had clearly been building long before Degnolaten had tried to overwhelm him.

Harry fluttered his wings and chirped questioningly, and the Hulk let out a deep sigh.

“Hulk sad.” The big man said, and Harry cocked his head to the side. “Hulk always mad.” He clarified. “But Hulk sometimes sad.”

Harry blinked at him, nonplussed, as he subsided into silence. From the way the others spoke about him, and the stories that Clint had told, the Hulk did not do feelings. Harry’d come with the intention of using his song to calm Hulk back into Bruce and bring him back, but that… just seemed rude. How long had it been since the Hulk had gotten to talk to someone without the need to fight? Harry shifted uncomfortably for a moment, and then took a deep breath and let go of his phoenix form before he could think better of it. He supposed he felt safe showing the Hulk his feathery little problem- this man turned into a giant green monster. He had no grounds to judge Harry for a few feathers, right? And clearly, he needed someone to talk to.

The change in mass left him wobbling dangerously on the Hulk’s hand before a second green palm came up to stabilize him, and Harry looked up to lock eyes with a set that were as green as his own.

Harry offered him a small, shy smile, and sat down in those gigantic palms, feathers and all.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Harry asked, and those huge green eyes got wider still.

“Pretty birdy talk?” He said, flabbergasted.

Harry shrugged. “Sometimes! Only when I look like this, though.”

Hulk nodded sagely, accepting this at face value. “Hulk only talk when green.” He agreed, and Harry smiled up at him gently. “Why are you sad, Hulk?” He repeated.

Hulk let out a great breath that ruffled through Harry’s feathers like a hot wind, and frowned. Harry
was vaguely surprised that his breath smelled of nothing more than the second batch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches they’d eaten on the plane, just minutes before Jarvis had called them to land.


Harry nodded. “You protect Bruce and the rest of the Avengers.” He said, and watched as the Hulk sat up suddenly, his shoulders straightening out of their slump.

“How protect?” He said, clearly turning the idea around in his head. Harry simply smiled at him, and almost fell off those giant green hands when the Hulk suddenly beamed back at him. “Yes! Hulk protect. No smash- protect!”

“Does that make you feel less sad?” Harry asked, and the Hulk nodded vigorously, his black hair flopping with the emotion.

“Protect good!” He said enthusiastically. “Smash bad. Smash make Bruce sad. Hulk tell Bruce that Hulk no smash anymore!” He said, and rapidly began to shrink.

Harry, still seated in his hands, fell with a startled shriek as they shrunk out from under him. He caught himself with a flutter of his wings that took him up and over the side of the building, where he caught the pale and mostly naked scientist as Hulk shrank back into Bruce. He made note to think about the implications of that later- he could fly in his hybrid state? That was handy- and focused back on the Hulk. Harry was glad that the idea of protecting the others cheered him up so much, but the conversation they’d had was far from over. He wasn’t sure that the Hulk even knew why he was sad about it, but Harry did. It was cruel for the scientist to only call Hulk out for the bad things, he thought, and he couldn’t help but make the correlation of himself in his cupboard, only pulled out by his relatives for the bad things. In his case, it was more ‘Harry cook’ and ‘Harry clean’ and ‘Harry hurt’ than ‘Harry smash’… but still. He could relate.

Bruce moaned, and Harry hurriedly shifted back into bird form, hopped onto Bruce’s chest, and thought of Clint.

.xOx.

A bloom of heatless fire was the only warning Clint had before a semiconscious Bruce and a rather alarmed Harry dropped into his lap and slid down his knees to the floor of the limo in a tangle of limbs and feathers. Clint swore and grabbed at his leg, and Harry fluttered up into his lap with a concerned croon.

The rest of the Avengers stared in shock as Harry grumbled unhappily and began to pick at the bloody, makeshift bandages around Clint’s leg with his beak.

“He’s back. And he brought Bruce.” Tony stated. “Where did you say you found this bird again?” He asked, running a critical eye over the large scarlet-and-gold bird. He was amazed that he hadn’t noticed his bright colors at the very beginning. When the bird had arrived with the reinforcements, he had thought it was just a large hawk- unusual in the city, sure, but not impossible. But then it
had started singing in that alley, and when it landed on Clint’s arm it was suddenly, unmistakably, a very different creature than he’d first seen.

Natasha sighed. “In Cairo. Short story- he’s magic. He teleports. And burns things. I told you, once Bruce wakes up and we get Fury here, we’ll tell you the whole story. It’s long. And Fury has to give you clearance to hear parts of it.”

Tony frowned grumpily. “I can just hack into SHIELD again and get the information I want.” He sulked.

Steve frowned at him. “It won’t kill you to wait an hour or two. Besides, our teammates need some rest. They’ve just flown from Cairo, Bruce is barely conscious, Clint is injured, and we all could use a shower and a moment to catch our breath before debrief.”

A silvery glow from the corner of the limo caught everyone’s attention, and Tony and Steve whipped around to see that Harry had, with Clint’s help, removed the bandage. He now had his head cocked over the wound and was crying, letting great, luminous silvery tears run down his beak and into the wound.


“Look!” Steve hissed, and Tony looked. The nasty gash was fading under his eyes, closing into a red line that quickly silvered over, and when the bird lifted his head there was nothing there but a faint line to show for the wound that had just been leaking blood all over the upholstery.

“Shit.” Tony whispered, and he could have sworn the bird laughed at him.

Clint stretched out his healed leg with a groan, careful not to upset the bird still perched in his lap and lifted a hand. Harry wasted no time in shoving his head under the hand, half-closing his eyes in bliss as Clint carefully scratched down and between the feathers.

“Pretty awesome, isn’t he?” Clint said, somewhere in between awe and pride. “Harry’s a phoenix. And he saved our collective butts in Cairo.”

Bruce groaned and sat up, holding his tattered pants up around his waist with a hand, and Harry chirruped at him from his seat. Tony reached into a cupboard set under the limo bench and came out with a bathrobe, which he tossed to Bruce. The scientist took it with a murmur of thanks and settled it around his shoulders as the car slid smoothly to a stop, and then the door eased opened in the hands of a large man clad in a black suit.

Bruce was first to debark, looking completely unbothered by his apparel, a short white cotton bathrobe that only came down to the middle of his hairy thighs. The rest of the Avengers filed out after him, Clint carrying Harry on his shoulder, Tony stepping out last. He clapped the chauffeur on the shoulder and shared a grin in thanks, and followed the rest of the Avengers through the garage and into the spacious elevator.

.xOx.

Once at the tower, the Avengers split off to their respective rooms and floors. Tony said he would set up the debrief with Fury, clearly to get his questions answered as soon as possible. He had invited Harry to come to his labs with him, intrigued by the scientific puzzle he presented, but Harry refused, clinging to Clint instead. Therefore, Harry ended up in Clint’s rooms, deposited on the back of a rather comfortable looking couch while the archer went to take a much-desired
shower. The entire apartment was comfortable-looking, actually. At its bones, the apartment was beautifully, modernly finished, the kitchen with stainless steel and glass, the walls starkly white, the floor paved in cold gray tile. The furniture softened the place, and clearly came from Clint himself. Soft, worn leather couches, one with a patchwork quilt thrown over the back. Scuffed, gold-varnished wooden furniture that clashed terribly with the floors, but clearly came in a set, finished out the look, and every surface of the apartment was in use holding something or another. Books, newspapers, old trophies, even a crystal ball in a corner. Even the kitchen counter was in use, cluttered comfortably with a toaster and more newspapers, an empty fruit bowl, and a few used dishes that made Harry chuckle. He decided he liked the room almost immediately, in the time between when he was left on the couch and Clint vanished behind the door of his bedroom.

Once the Avenger was out of sight, Harry took a moment to stretch, first one wing, then the other. He knew the quivery, heavy feeling in his muscles quite well from the time before he’d been a bird- he’d used his muscles, and used them hard, and as soon as he let himself sit still for long enough, he’d be paying for some of those acrobatics. If he’d been human and at home, he’d be seeking out some of Madam Pomfrey’s fantastic muscle balm and taking a long, hot bath.

He peeked at the door to Clint’s bedroom, listening to the sound of the shower behind it, and lost himself for a moment imagining the scene. Clint would be naked, of course, just dunking his head under the spray. The water would turn his blond hair dark, make it cling to his face, maybe curl around his ears. It would sluice down his face, beading in his eyelashes, emphasizing the blue of his eyes, and then it would be dripping down, over the wide expanse of muscle in his chest and shoulders, the divots of muscle in his abdomen. Further down, sliding over strong, narrow hips, powerful thighs and strong calves, plastering his fine, downy leg hairs flat against his skin. He’d be shampooing his hair, soaping his body, running his hands down that sculpted abdomen and into the vee of his legs…

The sound of the shower cut off, and Harry jerked, embarrassed, out of his daydream. He would have flushed bright red if he were human, he knew, at the thoughts that had been coursing through his head. It was a good thing that he’d already had his sexuality crisis years before. It had been horrible at the time, a painful realization sandwiched between his guilt for Cedric’s death and that appallingly wet kiss with Cho, but he’d come out the other end with a new understanding of himself and his bisexuality. If he hadn’t… well. Clint was enough to make even a straight man question his leanings, and Harry had enough of an identity crisis going on through his confusion over his very species right now.

Harry turned his attention very deliberately away from his attraction for the (funny, strong, amazing, gorgeous) man in the other room, and went about setting his own hygiene to rights. He, just like the others, was ruffled and a little bloodied, though luckily unscorched through his immunity to fire.

He was working over a particularly stubborn primary for what must have been the seventh time when Clint stepped out of the doorway to his room, sweatpants slung low over his hips, t-shirt in his hands. He was, once again, extraordinarily thankful for the feathers that hid his flush as he stared. His daydream was nice, but as he watched Clint’s abs roll and flex as he pulled his shirt over his head, he realized how little justice his imagination had done the man. He almost whimpered as the white cotton t-shirt came down and blocked his view, and shifted uncertainly as Clint stepped into the room, snagged a jacket from a hook on the door, and placed his hands over his hips.

“You and me, birdy-boy.” He said. “We’ve gotta talk.”

Harry’s feathers slicked back and he ducked his head, huddling under his own wing. Oh no! Had
Clint realized Harry’d been perving on him? Did he not like it? Was he mad at Harry? Or… oh shit. He probably wanted to convince Harry to come clean with the rest of the Avengers, and that might even be worse.

Clint watched as the bird sank into himself again, pulling himself into the tiniest ball of fluff he could, and sighed. Clearly, there was something going on with Harry, some deep-rooted issue he was having that made him unwilling to talk about his human form. Clint didn’t know exactly why, and he was realizing that he didn’t like that. He wanted to know more about this mysterious bird-boy, more about where he’d come from. Their time in Cairo had been interesting, their time in the cell intriguing, and Clint found himself with more questions than answers about Harry. And he wanted those answers. He hadn’t been this interested in another person since Aaron at the circus and… He forced his mind away from that thought. Aaron was in the past, and Clint intended on keeping him there.

He stepped forward instead. “Hush, Harry.” He said, soothingly. “I’m not going to hurt you, I just want to talk.” He cast an eye upward at the ceiling. “I don’t really trust that Stark’s not eavesdropping on us. Can you take us somewhere where you’d be comfortable switching over?”

Harry pulled his head out until one green eye was warily regarding Clint, and then a little further. Clint didn’t look angry, and least. He gathered his infamous Gryffindor courage and pulled himself together and upright, and Clint shrugged into his jacket and rested a hand on Harry’s back. Clint wanted a place that they could talk? He could do that.

A thought later, they landed on the rooftop where Harry had meet with the Hulk, barely an hour before. Harry looked out over the city, noting that noon had come and passed, and the shadows were growing again, lengthening into evening. He clicked his beak. Clint hadn’t eaten since breakfast. Shouldn’t they be taking care of that instead of talking about him?

“Harry.” Clint’s voice came from behind him, heavy and patient, and Harry ducked his head. Fine. If Clint wanted to talk, they’d talk.

He closed his eyes and focused on his vocal cords, and when he opened them again he was eye level with Clint’s sternum. He glanced up defiantly, daring Clint to comment on the return of his weirdly feathered face, and was thrown off by the small, sincere smile Clint was giving him. He felt an answering smile tug at his own, hard lips, and wondered what exactly a smile looked like when it came on lips that were half beak.

His smile died at that thought, and he reached into his pack to fish out a potion, dropping in a hair and draining it. He didn’t bother to hide from Clint this time as his body bubbled and changed, crimson feathers fading into caramel skin. He wrapped his arms around his bare torso protectively as goosebumps rose in the cool of the early autumn evening.

“What did you want to talk about?” He asked, and his voice came out flat and wary.

Clint frowned and stripped out of his jacket, dropping it on Harry’s head. Harry squawked indignantly and struggled out from under the folds of fabric, and Clint shrugged.

“You looked cold.” He offered. “I’m really not trying to make you uncomfortable here.” He continued, as Harry pulled the jacket over his thin shoulders. Clint had to suppress a smirk at the sight of Harry swimming in his jacket, with the hem coming down to mid-thigh and his hands buried completely in the sleeves. “I just want to know a bit more about why you’re hiding in your bird form.” Clint said. “I’m not the type to keep secrets from my teammates, you know, and you never did tell me why. And I think you know things about Degnolaten that could be useful for us. I honestly didn’t think she’d really come to New York, but that was her earlier today, wasn’t it?”
Harry fiddled with the too-long sleeves of Clint’s jacket and sighed. “There’s a few reasons.” He said slowly. “First of all, it’s quite illegal for me to change forms in front of a muggle… in front of a person with no magic. There’s a law- the Statute of Secrecy- that keeps witches and wizards from exposing our world to someone isn’t in the know. The first time I did it in front of you, it was by accident. And from what I overheard during the journey, you and Natasha and Bruce may be exempt from that law, but Iron Man and Captain America most likely are not. And the people in the street in Cairo definitely weren’t, so I couldn’t talk to you there. I can’t get to this human form without going through that… other form first.” Clint frowned at the disparaging comment, but Harry continued before he could say anything.

“Beyond that, I’m afraid I’m a bit of a familiar face in the magical world, and there’s nothing keeping witches and wizards from being in the muggle world, or from looking at pictures. Colin and his barmy crew caught me less than 20 minutes after I showed my face. What if someone else notices me? Besides the fact that I promised Colin that I’d keep low, I’d really rather avoid getting noticed as their ‘Savior.’” He gave the cuff of the jacket a particularly violent twist.

“Ok.” Said Clint. “So you’re hiding your bird-boy form because you don’t want to break the law, and you’re hiding your human form because you don’t want people to recognize you. That’s easy enough, y’know? We’re meeting with our boss tonight, and while he’s not exactly a wizard, he certainly can work miracles. He already knew about wizard things, and got permission to tell us. Say we get him to claim you as an Avenger and explain your shapeshifting that way. And making a new identity for you would be easy as pie- you’re already 17 years younger than you should be. We’ll just whip up a new name for you, cut your hair, and boom.”

When Clint said it that way, it sounded so simple… “I guess I could take my mother’s last name. It was Evans.” He mused, and then his mind caught up to the rest of what Clint had said. He jerked his head up. “You’d want me as an Avenger? But in order to be helpful, I’d have to switch in and out of that janky hybrid form. I still don’t want people to see me like that. Bad enough I’m not a real human anymore, but to let people see me when I look like that…”

“What are you talking about?” Clint cut in. “That in-between form is kick-ass cool, y’know? You look like some avenging Fury out of Greek mythology, all talons and fire. You’d scare the pants off some of the baddies we fight. You’d be a fantastic addition to the team. D’ya know how much time we spend waiting every time someone gets hurt? How much we worry about them? And that teleportation ability you have is ridiculously useful.”

Harry frowned. This was starting to sound familiar. Harry was special. Harry was gifted. Harry could do things everyone else couldn’t. It was like Hogwarts all over again, with everyone expecting him to do something amazing. Maybe Clint just wanted him as part of the team for his oddball powerset, not for himself. But still, there was a little bit of a silver lining in what he’d said. “Really? You don’t think this form is… freakish?” Harry asked, pushing down the niggle of worry that was rising in his chest.

“Of course not!” Clint said, and Harry, checking with his empathy, was surprised to feel the sentiment ring true. “At least, not in a bad way. Have you met my teammates? None of us is quite what you’d call normal, but it’s a good thing! Nat has all that training, and she got the altered Super Serum. Tony’s got his suit and his brains, Thor’s a freaking GOD, Steve’s got the original Super Serum, and Bruce has the Big Guy. I’m just a glorified carny, y’know, but you?” Clint rolled his eyes and made a dismissive gesture when he mentioned his lack of power, and Harry felt his heart sink. The way Clint was acting was reminding him unpleasantly of Ron and how he’d get jealous sometimes, when Harry was struggling with the burden of the prophecy and everyone’s expectations and Ron couldn’t understand why he wasn’t enjoying the attention. Harry frowned. So much for thinking Clint understood him, a little. He was just like everyone else after all, wasn’t
“Honestly, Harry, you’re making this into a much bigger deal than it is.” Clint continued, heedless of Harry’s rising distress. “So what that you sprout feathers and look a little different? I’d gladly take that in order to have something special! I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat! Bring on the feathers!”

Harry’s temper flared, and the air around him hazed with heat. Clint stumbled backwards, surprised. “Bring on the feathers?” Harry said. “Bring on the feathers!? Do you know what I had to do to get these ‘feathers’? You want to trade places, Hawkeye? You want your parents to be murdered for the sake of some madman’s delusions of grandeur? You want to be raised by people who know just how freakish and unnatural you are, and are dead set on making sure you know too? You want to learn at eleven that you murdered a man, and then murder another with your bare hands less than 10 months later? You want to spend seven years alternatively loved and hated by a world that expects you to save them again and again and again, at the cost of your health and your heart and the people who loved you? You want to be captured by the same crazy madman you already murdered three times, be tortured for a month, and then give up your entire life at seventeen in order to kill him AGAIN to save a world that never raised a finger to help you since you were prophesied to save them? Huh?”

Clint stared at him open-mouthed, and Harry sneered at him. “Yeah, I didn’t think so.” He said, and vanished with an angry snap of flame.

Clint let out his breath in a huge sigh and rubbed his hands over his face. That had not gone as planned, he thought ruefully, though he certainly learned a bit more about the mystery that was Harry Potter. And now he owed the boy an apology. Though first… He eyed the area around him, realizing for the first time that he was stranded atop a skyscraper with nothing but the clothes on his back. He’d left all his gear, including his wallet and phone, in his rooms. It looked like it was going to take him a while to get back…

.xOx.

“Wait, so you’re saying he’s a phoenix? But where did you find him? Are the legends true? Does that mean he’s immortal? Do you think we can analyze his DNA and figure out how it works? Do you think his telomeres are longer than a human’s? Do you think he even HAS telomeres? What if he has something else entirely??”

Tony had managed to catch the milder-mannered scientist in the kitchen and was currently peppering Bruce with rapid-fire questions, unwilling to wait for the debrief later that afternoon. Bruce, backing away from the barrage of questions, had managed to corner himself between the kitchen counter, an ornamental plant, and the overly excited scientist. He held up both hands in a pacifying gesture, but Tony was too lost in conjecture to notice it until a flash of fire lit the area and the subject of Tony’s rant popped into being above the kitchen counter.

Tony wheeled, his attention well and truly removed from Bruce. “Bird! You said his name was Harry, right?” He asked, directing the question at Bruce without looking back. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Harry! You’re back. Do you understand me? Bruce says you’re very smart.”

Harry flinched and landed clumsily on the back of a kitchen chair, surprised by the attention thrown at him so soon after his appearance. His bemusement at the tableaux he’d interrupted superseded some of his anger at Clint. He’d teleported without thought beyond getting away from Clint, and it seemed he’d managed to come straight to Bruce. It made sense, in a twisted way. He’d associated the man with anger, and so this was where he popped to when he was angry.
He hadn’t been expecting Tony though, and when the energetic man reached out a presumptuous hand to touch him, he wasted no time in snapping his beak in warning and launching himself from the back of the chair to Bruce’s shoulder. He didn’t know Tony yet, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. He was no hippogriff, but an introduction and a respectful approach went a long way with any creature, magical or not. He did not appreciate Tony’s audacious hand, especially on top of the mood he was already in, and to underscore this, he mantled his wings and hissed from his perch, safely tucked behind Bruce’s head.

Bruce’s lips twitched at this, and he inclined his head slightly in greeting. “Hey, pretty bird.” He said mildly, and Harry chirruped sweetly in response, gentling his stance. After their rocky start, he had decided that he liked Bruce, just as he liked his greener half. If Clint was going to be a twat, then Bruce was his new favorite Avenger. He clicked his tongue in pleasure at this decision and turned magnanimously to groom Bruce’s hair.

**Take that, Clint Barton.** He thought viciously. **Who needs you? I sure don’t.**

Tony pouted, wilting. “Hey, why’d he run away?” He asked. Bruce rolled his eyes at his friend. For a genius, he could be rather stupid about some things; interacting with animals and women named Pepper Potts were the primary examples that came to mind. Bruce pondered pointing this out for a moment, but Tony truly was excited at the prospect of learning about the phoenix, and he really couldn’t blame the man. If Harry was the real deal, and everything seemed to be pointing towards the likelihood that he was, then studying him could lead to some truly impressive scientific discoveries. Beyond this, he knew that Tony had been the sort of child to dream of dragons and phœnixes, in-between his dreams of arc reactors and international accolades, of course. It was almost cruel to present him with proof that such things existed, and have that proof decline to interact with him. Bruce sighed, caving.

“He likes peanut butter.” He told Tony, and the engineer perked up, dashing into the kitchen to fetch a jar of peanut butter.

He returned shortly, bearing jar and spoon, and Harry craned forward on Bruce’s shoulder, nares flaring. Tony beamed at him. “Who’s a pretty bird?” He coaxed, digging a dollop of spread from the jar and waving it at Harry. Harry glared half-heartedly, somewhere between pleased at the compliment and miffed at the tone it was said in, and hesitated. Tony glopped the spoonful down on a clean plate and pushed it forward, and that decided things. Harry hopped to the kitchen counter, and Tony grinned in victory. Bruce hid a smile as he watched Tony’s infectious pleasure as the bird slowly warmed to him.

Five minutes later, Harry was crooning happily as Tony reverently stroked along the feathers of his back, and not long after that Tony had coaxed Harry into coming to his lab with him, all telomere experiments forgotten as Tony chattered excitedly to the bird about his plans to build a fire-proof perch so Harry wouldn’t have to cling awkwardly to shoulders and furniture and could let his control over his fire lapse. Bruce chuckled softly as he watched them go. For as obnoxious and single-minded as Tony could be, and for as bullheaded he could be when meeting new people, he sure had a knack for befriending just about anything he put his mind to. Hopefully he wouldn’t mind when he figured out that Harry was a bit more than just a bird, Bruce thought, as he mulled over the hazy memory the Hulk had gifted him with earlier that day. While Harry’s other form was certainly fierce looking, he thought, they could surely do worse than to befriend a being who would willingly (and competently) comfort the Hulk.

Deep in his mind, he felt a rush of deep green agreement.

.xOx.
Tony had ordered Indian for dinner, and Tony, Steve, Bruce, and Natasha had gathered around the long table in the common room.

“Has anyone seen Clint lately?” Natasha asked, concerned. “He’s never late for dinner, and Fury’s due in just a few minutes.” Her sharp eyes didn’t miss the way Harry’s head ducked in what might have been guilt at the question, but when she turned to give him a level look, he ignored her, instead delicately accepting chunks of mango rice kheer from Tony’s spoon as the engineer fussed over him.

Bruce offered a shrug and Steve shook his head. Neither had seen Clint since they’d all returned to the tower. Natasha picked at her vegetarian vindaloo, slightly concerned. It really wasn’t like Clint to miss free food. She pushed her chair back, about to go check at his room, when the elevator dinged and Jarvis’ soft voice announced Fury. The director entered with the characteristic sweep of his black trenchcoat, and edging in after him was Clint, who offered only a sheepish smile in response to her questioning glare. He was dressed in simple sweatpants and a white cotton t-shirt, and the soles of his bare feet were black with grime. Her glare deepened, puzzled. Why had he been running about the city barefoot?

With a wink and a muttered word to Fury, Clint ambled up to the table and took his customary seat to her right, pulling up a plate and loading it with rice and whatever dish was closest. He reached for her vindaloo as was tradition, and she fended him off with the tines of her fork. She let the set of her shoulders relax slightly- if he was playing at stealing her food, he truly was alright. She was sure he’d tell her what happened later, along with the whole story behind Harry. She caught the heavy gaze Clint sent across the table to where the bird had failed to greet him and frowned. Before the battle, Harry had seemed to prefer Clint over the rest of them, and then during the battle he’d dedicated all his efforts to protecting the two of them. Was it simply that the bird was fickle and had transferred his attention to someone else, or had the two of them fought?

Natasha didn’t know, and she hated not knowing. She narrowed her eyes at the phoenix.

Fury was the last to sit, pulling up a chair at the end of the table and nodding to them. He wasted no time in opening the conversation, granting Steve and Tony the same information and clearance that he’d already awarded the other three, and Natasha, Clint, and Bruce took turns explaining what they’d found. They described their unnoteworthy journey to Cairo, their first foray into magical Cairo and subsequent rout, with Tony muttering and paging feverishly through the packet of information the Fury had provided providing a gentle counterpoint to the story. Steve was accepting the news rather more gracefully, only a small furrow in his brow betraying his surprise. Bruce picked up the story with his hazy recollection of a rage-filled flight through the desert, chased by an unknown military force, and Clint described waking in the oasis and their discovery of Harry, to which Fury barely reacted. A this, Harry narrowed his eyes at Clint, who gave him his best innocent look- had he been telling stories already?

Natasha detailed how she’d been able to hide in magical Cairo, her sundress blending into local fashion much better than Clint and Bruce’s attire, and how she’d received Clint’s message and drove through the afternoon and night to reach them at the coordinates provided, and their discovery that their memories had been wiped. Clint told the story of their reentry into magical Cairo with Harry’s assistance, and their subsequent discovery of Degnolaten, the woman who had samples of a glowing blue liquid that greatly resembled the Tesseract.

Bruce provided a summary of the readings he’d done in the apartment while Harry, Natasha, and Clint fended off the animated dog corpses and the lethifolds, which Natasha simply described as “predatory shadows.”
“Wait a moment.” Tony cut in, his attention unwillingly peeled away from the document he was devouring with his eyes. “You’re saying that the liquid you found was almost definitely derived from the same power source as the tesseract?”

Bruce nodded grimly. “The field readings I did indicate that there’s a 79% match, and the equipment I had has a 15% standard error. So there’s a 64-94% match. I have more samples for the more accurate equipment in your lab, but I’m pretty confident that the samples are at least closely related.” Tony frowned, but nodded. “Ok, we’ll look into it. What happened next?”

Bruce and Natasha turned their attention to Clint, who bit his lip. “I can tell you what happened next, but I think it might be better coming from the horse’s mouth, so to speak.”

He turned and looked at Harry, who poofed his feathers out in shock. Shit! Was Clint really telling on him in front of everybody? He shook his head frantically, and Fury reached into his briefcase and tossed a few items on the table in front of the phoenix.

The first was a laminated New York ID card with a picture of Harry’s human face and the name Harrison Rowan Evans. The second was an official-looking document signed by the President of MACUSA, releasing the Stature of Secrecy for one Harrison Rowan Evans when working in his capacity as an Agent of SHIELD.

Harry gulped and looked at Clint.

Clint took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for what I said, Harry.” He said, gently. “I realize that I shouldn’t have phrased it quite like I did. But really Harry, you are special. And if you agree to work with us, you won’t be the only special one. You’ll be on a team where everyone has something to contribute, and if we do something good, we’ll share the credit, and if we do something wrong, we’ll share the blame. At least give us a chance?”

Steve and Tony shared a look, perplexed, but both sensing the importance of the moment. Natasha stilled like a predator, sensing that an answer to this miniature mystery was coming. Bruce offered a soothing smile when Harry looked at him, eyes pinning and crest rising with alarm.

Clint stepped around the table to where Harry was perched on the tabletop between Tony and Steve, and gave Harry a crooked grin before raising his forearm, just as he did when Harry stooped in from above and called for him.

Visibly distressed, Harry closed his eyes, clearly deliberating. The Avengers held their breath in anticipation. He didn’t move for a long, long moment, and then he heaved a great sigh and gravely hopped from tabletop to Clint’s forearm. Clint lowered him to the ground.

A gout of fire slowly, almost reluctantly rose from the knee-high bird, forming a cone of flames that slowly opened, petal by petal. When the blazing rose faded, Harry took a deep breath and opened feather-edged, bright green eyes. He offered a wan smile to the gathered Avengers, who stared back in varying degrees of shock.

“Hi.” He offered meekly, and ducked his head in a familiar motion. The long black-and-red crest feathers forming his hair sleeked back, showing his unease and making him look even shorter than before. “I’m Harry. It’s… nice to meet you?”
Chapter End Notes

Ta-DAH! Things are happening! Despite my lack of updates, I do promise I have the rest of this story outlined and we're still on track to wrap up in the next 9ish chapters. Thanks for reading, and please drop me a comment or a kudo if you're feeling kind!
Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings: None, really. This chapter's really just a pile of fluff, sorry.

A/N: Whoops, some factual errors/typos in the last chapter have been corrected. Reference to the “American Minister” has been replaced with the “President of MACUSA.” Also, you all are lovely, lovely folks. Thank you so much for your thoughtful comments and kudos! I am blown away by how many people are supporting this story!

A/N2: I had a bit of trouble with the beginning of this chapter. I knew I wanted to give you Harry’s POV of his reveal, and then half of me wanted to say “and thus, the Avengers met and got caught up on everything” and another half of me wanted to write it out word-for-word. So I rewrote it a few times and this is what we get. Still not terribly happy with it, but it serves its purpose. I suppose this is me saying you may want to skim the conversation bit at the beginning if you've just come from reading the rest of the story. Otherwise, it's a decent recap, and more action is coming next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The laminated card and signed release hit the table in front of him with a gentle clatter of plastic and the soft whisper of parchment-on-wood. Harry could barely process what he was seeing as his face (his face!) stared back at him next to stark black words reading Evans, Harrison Rowan. The world seemed to freeze about him- he’d known Clint had been up to something ever since he’d stepped in at Fury’s heels, but this? How had he even gotten it done so quickly? And how was Harry supposed to respond? He wasn’t ready for this, not at all. They’d even cleared the Statute of Secrecy, taking away his only real, though flimsy, excuse. Now there was nothing disguising the fact that his reluctance to reveal himself was stemming entirely from his own insecurity.

He gulped and looked desperately to Clint. The man was apologizing, he knew, but Harry could hardly parse the words. Something about working as a team, failing as a team. His mind was stuck in circles, repeating. The other Avengers knew now. Well, they didn’t know everything, but Clint was asking him to tell them. What would they say when they saw him? He could just imagine it. Bruce’s open, kind face would close, darkening with the realization that Harry had lied to them, that Harry was a freak. Sure, he probably wouldn’t say anything, not with his own little (big) problem, but he’d certainly think it. They all would. Natasha, who already seemed to dislike him, would no doubt say something cutting, something designed to make him bleed. He didn’t know Steve and Tony well, but Tony, who had just spent hours designing him his very own furniture, would be devastated, hurt. And certainly Steve would be disappointed- he had powers, just like Harry, but he was large and golden and beautiful with them, while Harry was just some twisted half-bird thing.

Maybe Harry could step in to the bathroom to change and take his Polyjuice? Then they wouldn’t have to see everything…
Clint stepped around the table and offered his forearm, just like he had three times before. Harry looked at him for a moment, probing frantically with his empathy, looking for an excuse, any shadow of doubt, but Clint’s emotions shone strong and golden. He was honestly apologetic for what he’d said before, he was confident and calm, and most of all he was shining with faith, both for Harry and for his teammates.

Harry couldn’t help but trust him, the phoenix inside attracted to the honesty and honor he projected. He squeezed his eyes shut and paused for a long moment. He had options. He didn’t have to change. He could leave, vanish, continue exploring the world, or even return to Hogwarts if he didn’t want to be alone. But even as he thought it, he discarded the notion. No, this was where he wanted to be. He was a Gryffindor. Time for that courage to shine paramount.

He stepped forward and let Clint lower him to the ground, where he called the flames. They rose around him sluggishly, reflecting his trepidation, and he forced himself to keep his eyes up and his gaze even as the fire cleared.

“Hi.” He said. “I’m Harry. It’s… nice to meet you?” His heart was beating a rapid tattoo against his ribcage, and no matter how he tried, his gaze refused to fix on any one face, skittering anxiously along the wall behind the Avengers instead.

There was a stunned silence for just a moment, and then Bruce spoke first.

“Hi Harry.” Was all he said. When Harry’s gaze shot to his face, he offered a warm, sincere smile. The breath escaped from Harry’s lungs with a whoosh as he stared, incredulous. Bruce… didn’t care? His head whirled around as Tony spoke next.

“It’s magic! I’ve always wanted to study magic. Think of what we could fix with it! How does it even work? It’s a puzzle, we’ve just never had any idea of what the pieces look like. And now we have Harry!” He turned back to Harry. “I mean, you’re going to let me do some experiments, right?”

He looked expectantly at Harry, who stared back, nonplussed. Clint glared from over his shoulder. Tony backpedaled. “I mean, of course you can stay here. Welcome to the team. Blah blah and bladity-blah, I’m sure we’ll be great friends. But seriously. I have so many questions.”

“Were you going to tell us?” Natasha cut in, her voice inscrutable, and Harry winced.

“I… Eventually.” He muttered in response, nodding to the papers in front of him. “There’s… there’s a bit of long tale behind why I needed those. I promised Clint that I’d tell you as soon as it was safe.” Clint stood solidly behind him, and Harry was tempted to lean back into his warm support.

Steve frowned at him. “I assume your story is relevant to the debriefing?” He said.

Harry knitted his feathered hands together in front of him, mindful of the long red primaries sprouting from the edges. He took a deep breath, settled himself back onto his heels, and met Steve’s even blue gaze.

“Yes, in a way. My backstory is long and rather complicated, and I suppose I’ll have to tell you some other day, but suffice to say that I started out as a wizard, like the people we were investigating in Cairo. When I was seventeen I died and was reborn as a phoenix. A short time
after, my friends and I did a ritual that was supposed to give me back my human form. It worked, but only partially, giving me the ability to switch between this form and the bird form.” He glanced up, and was astonished to see the Avengers following along, no doubt on their faces. What in the world had these people seen that had them so easily believing a tale that even a wizard would balk at?

“More applicable to this meeting, though, is what happened after Clint and Natasha faced down those necrocanids.” He continued, detailing his chase of the lethifold, and then his interaction with Degnolaten. He told them what he knew of lethifolds and dementors. When he got to the bit about eating souls, he was unsurprised to see Steve blanch and cross himself, and all the Avengers grew concerned when he discussed her stated desire to eat the soul of a god. He finished his tale with a short description of his escape with Clint.

Harry kept Degnolaten’s desire to consume his own soul to himself. They didn’t need to worry about his business, did they?

Steve laced his fingers under his chin. “So then, the woman we met this morning was the same one? Elisha Degnolaten?”

Harry nodded.

“And the general feeling of despair she was emitting- that was because she’s also a magical creature, like you.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, as far as I can tell she’s become some sort of hybrid between witch and dementor. Somewhat like me, though from what she said, I think she did it on purpose, whereas mine was unintentional. And of course, a dementor and a phoenix are incredibly different from one another, as magical creatures go.”

“So, we have a crazy magical villain who wants to eat our souls, can make us relive our worst memories, who likely is working with Doctor Doom, and who has access to some sort of energy source that mimics or was derived from the tesseract.” Tony summed up, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands over his stomach. “Lovely.”

Steve frowned and waved a hand at both Harry and Clint.

“Sit down, would you? We have lots to talk about.”

Harry blinked at looked over his shoulder at Clint, who gave him a dazzling smile. Was it that simple? Was he… part of the team now?

Clint shoved his hands in his pockets and ambled back to his seat besides Natasha. Harry pulled up a backless stool, uncomfortable aware of his tailfeathers and how they’d feel crushed against the seat of his chair, and glanced around. The Avengers had already moved on, discussing this new threat, and not one had made any comment about his less than orthodox appearance. He thought for a moment about excusing himself and retreating to the bathroom for a Polyjuice, but he realized that he’d used two doses in less than two days, and Severus had warned him to keep the vials for “special occasions.” He needed to count the hairs remaining before he took any more. He considered resuming his full-bird form, but just then Bruce pulled him into the discussion with a question about ways of repelling dementors and lethifolds.

“Well, here in New York we’re pretty safe from lethifolds, most likely.” He said, after a moment of thought. “As far as I remember, they’re only really prevalent in the tropics or subtropics, like in Cairo. Dementors are going to be the problem. I can’t say that I’ve studied this, but I would guess
that some sort of ward would be our best bet for keeping them out. But... I’m not going to be able to help there.” He said, thinking longingly of his holly wand, how it had felt cold and dead in his hand. “But I might know someone who could.” He added, remembering that Ron was somewhat of an amateur ward-setter for the aurors now.

“Can you contact them?” Tony asked. “Because I’d feel better knowing that we are aren’t going to get our souls eaten in our sleep.”

Harry nodded, focused on Ron, and pushed his magic into the teleportation, but this time something felt different. Instead of flaring up around him, his flames just built and built, until he realized with panic that he was losing control of them. He wheeled away from the table of Avengers and towards the large glass windows just in time for a huge ball of blue-hot flame to burst out of him. It melted through the window and shot into the dark, leaving behind a human-sized hole surrounded by a ring of molten red glass, and Harry blanched.

“Um.” He said, looking over his shoulder.

Clint raised an eyebrow. “I take it you didn’t mean to do that?” He said. Behind him, the rest of the Avengers looked shocked.

Harry offered a weak grin. “I...er. No, that was not what was supposed to happen. I meant to teleport to them. I think... I think they’re too far away. Or something.” He glanced at Tony. “I can pay for that.” He offered, weakly waving to the damaged window.

Tony, still a little pale-faced, shook his head. “Oh, don’t mind that. I’ve had a towerful of superheroes here for almost six months now- this is not the first window we’ve broken.” He stood and inspected the clean edge of the damage thoughtfully. “Though it’s certainly the first one we’ve melted.” He said, casting an appraising look at Harry. Harry ducked his head guiltily.

Fury cleared his throat, standing from the table. “Well.” He said. “You have your orders for tomorrow. Stark and Banner will finish evaluating the tesseract liquid. Agent Romanoff, you and the Captain are on call for any Avengers business. In the meantime, try to see what you can find out about Doctor Doom’s involvement with this new character. I’ll set some SHIELD people on that, too. Evans and Agent Barton, your job is to figure out how to get in touch with Evans’ contacts in the wizarding world. We’re going to need to look into this Degnolaten woman if we want to take her down, and if she’s targeting the Avengers we need to get these “wards” up as soon as possible. Harry, what are the chances that she’ll attack the tower tonight?”

Harry shrugged. “Hard to say.” He said. “Thought with the fact that she fled from my phoenix song earlier today, I would imagine that she’s not eager to face us again so soon.”

Fury nodded. “Sounds reasonable. Alright, Avengers. I’m proposing that we accept Evans, as a temporary consultant, at least until we’ve dealt with this new threat. We’ll re-evaluate his role after we take down this soul-eating woman. Any protests?” He swept a heavy, one-eyed gaze over the assembled Avengers, almost daring them to object. None did.

Tony gestured to Harry. “Come with me and I’ll get you set up in one of the guest rooms.” He said, and Harry followed, casting a look at Clint’s back where the archer stood talking to Fury. He’d thought, somehow, that he’d be sleeping in Clint’s room, and he was startled by the pit of discontent that flared in his belly at the thought of sleeping separately. He wondered at it a little. How strong, exactly, was the attachment he’d formed to this man over the course of two days?

He forced himself to turn away and catch up to Tony, who was monologuing enthusiastically about experiments he could do to discover the nature of his magic. He’d have time to talk to Clint...
tomorrow. After all, Fury had assigned them to the same team.

.xOx.

When Harry woke, the guest room he’d been given was painted in the dark grays and blacks of night or early, early morning. He grumbled and shifted to his other foot. He’d tried sleeping in his hybrid form, drawn by the softness of the sheets, but he’d been unable to get comfortable, his shoulder and tailfeathers bending uncomfortably underneath him when he tried sleeping on his back, the primaries trailing from his arms restricting his ability to sleep comfortably on his side or stomach. He had eventually reverted to bird form and had finally fallen asleep perched on the foot of the bed.

Now, he picked up his head and tucked it under his other wing, trying to convince his body to go back to sleep. His whole body was stiff and sore after his efforts yesterday, which made it difficult to find a comfortable position. He had only just settled when a highly distracting itch began right over his left shoulder. He sorted that, and then his mind was awake, busily turning over half-formed plans as to how exactly he was going to get ahold of Hermione and Ron. There was the time difference to consider, and if he couldn’t teleport he’d need to find some other way of communication. With them being in England it would require a transatlantic portkey or perhaps an international floo, if he could get his hands on one… And in order to find one of those, he’d need to find a wizarding district in New York without a map, a guide, or access to his wizarding magic…

He was quite lost in his planning when a determined knock rang from his window, coming from a small, brown-and-white banded owl with a slim letter clutched in its talons. Harry tumbled off the footboard, transitioned, somehow fumbled the window open even with his less-than-human hands, and relieved the owl of its burden. He cast a critical glance over the owl and frowned. The poor thing was exhausted, panting and hungry, and so he gathered it up along with its package and headed out the door to the kitchen, determinedly ignoring the click-clacking of his talons on the hardwood floor, so different from the dull thud his human feet would make.

The fridge yielded strips of cold, cooked chicken breast, which the little owl devoured, and Harry filled a bowl with cold water from the stainless-steel sink. He eyed the owl and considered using it to send word to Hermione and Ron, but quickly dismissed the idea. This owl was just too tiny—there was no way it would survive the flight across the ocean to make it from New York to Scotland.

He turned his attention to the letter. There was a limited pool of people who would be writing to him, he knew, as he was generally assumed dead. He popped the seal and opened the envelope, and squawked in surprise as a cascade of thick rolls of parchment pushed their way out, falling over the counter and mounding at his feet. The last item to fall from the deceptively slim letter was a simple piece of folded parchment that explained it all.

It was Colin’s promised delivery of his curriculum, sent from their USA East Coast branch in Rhode Island, and Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose and pulled up a stool. He may as well go over it now, he thought, when a glance at the blinking green light over the microwave pronounced it to be 3:17 in the morning. He wasn’t likely to get any more sleep tonight anyways.

The dark of the night was giving way to the gray-bright of false dawn as Harry finished the last of the scrolls. He’d sorted them into piles—acceptable on his right, problematic on his left— and was gratified to see that of the twenty something scrolls that had come through, he only took issue with three of them. He was glad to see that Colin truly did seem to be looking out first for the wellbeing of the muggleborns. With a sigh, he pulled the first of the troublesome scrolls onto the table and
unrolled it. He’d found a red pen amongst the general detritus of the kitchen, but as he tried to lift it in careful talon-claws, he realized that his limited dexterity in this form meant that writing was likely beyond him. He contemplated the pen for a moment, and then reached into his pack, pulling out the small vial of hairs that Hermione had sent with him. He carefully uncapped it and counted out the wiry black hairs within, and then recounted back into the vial.

Thirty-seven. He had thirty-seven hairs, which meant thirty-seven transformations left. He felt a brief feeling of panic flare inside him. That was so few! Each only lasted six hours, and if he transformed into a bird while on the potion, the effect was removed. If he used one a day until they were gone, he’d have less than two months. It wasn’t worth using these hairs to write his response to Colin. He’d just wait until Clint was up, and maybe he could talk the man into writing for him.

He began shoving the “acceptable” scrolls back into their envelope, and startled rather badly when Natasha slipped into his range of vision. He could feel the feathers on his head stand up in alarm and tried vainly to suppress the reaction, as he could tell by her tiny, smug smile that she had meant to surprise him.

“And what are these?” She asked, padding noiselessly up to the table.

“Curriculum notes.” Harry responded after a brief pause. It couldn’t hurt to let her know what he was up to, could it? “Remember the group that helped Clint and I escape Cairo? They have a school, and I was concerned about what they were teaching, since they… well, since they say that they are teaching according to my wishes. They’re not, by the way. I had nothing to do with the founding of the school.” Natasha raised a slender red brow, but said nothing. Harry continued.

“The wizarding world is not without its problems, and one of those is a rather backwards and outdated aristocracy system. There is a belief that people who come from long lines of magical people, Purebloods, are better than people who are born to those without magic, Muggleborns, and the Purebloods tend to hold positions of power in the government. This school is specifically for Muggleborn children. The founder of this group thinks that non-Purebloods should be in charge since they are the majority. I believe that in order to move forwards, the two groups have to work together, and accept one another. Nothing will change for the better if they just teach Muggleborns to hate Purebloods in turn.” Harry said, rather passionately. “So, I told them that if they were going to use my name for this, that they needed to let me look over the curriculum and make sure that they’re not just brainwashing these children to believe whatever they want them to believe, and are instead setting them up to make their own decisions.”

Natasha’s second eyebrow rose, and she sat down next to Harry. “That’s a noble goal.” She said. “So, we have issues with this pile?” She asked, picking up the red pen. She’d clearly been watching long enough to see his struggles with writing, and Harry felt his cheeks flush. “I have… a fair bit of experience with spotting brainwashing.” She said, with a dismissive smirk that hid layers of pain. “Perhaps I could offer some assistance.” She said, and it wasn’t a request. Harry offered her a tentative smile and scooched his stool closer, leaning gingerly over her shoulder. “Please.” He said, and pointed to the first section that he disliked. “What do you think of this bit?”

Harry and Natasha poured over the documents until the sun was well and truly risen, and Natasha felt herself softening towards the half-bird man. His harsh stance against even the most well-intentioned conditioning of children was endearing, especially with her background in the Red Room, and as they worked together to iron out the wrinkles in the curriculum she found him to be quite intelligent and well-spoken. It went a long ways towards amending her initial distrust for the boy who’d hidden his identity from her.

“Is that a Saw-whet owl?” Tony asked as he stepped into the kitchen, a sleepy-eyed Clint trailing
after him. Harry grinned at him as Natasha finished their last note on the last scroll, and began stuffing the amended scrolls back into the envelope. Tony and Clint watched with wide eyes as they vanished inside easily, despite the clear dichotomy in sizes.

“Maybe?” He responded to Tony, who was now creeping closer to the little owl with a clear intent to try and pet it. The owl watched with wary golden eyes, and Harry snickered. “He’ll probably let you pet him if you give him food.”

Tony smirked at him. “Is this something all birds have in common?” He teased, and Harry rolled his eyes, turning instead towards Clint, who had slid onto a stool next to the bar and was barely stifling a yawn with one hand. His blond hair was adorably tousled from sleep, and Harry felt an incredibly strong urge to groom it for the man. He took a few steps closer, raising one hand to fix it, and caught Natasha’s arch look. He blushed hard, ducked his head, and switched into phoenix form. As usual, the transition to full bird gave him the confidence he lacked in his hybrid form, and he hopped up to Clint’s shoulder and set about grooming his hair back to rights, ignoring the twitch of Natasha’s lips behind him, just as he ignored Tony, who had emerged from the fridge with both bacon strips for the owl and a jar of peanut butter for him. He’d rather stay here, with Clint’s sleepy smile and magical ability to scratch his head in just the perfect way to make him go all cross-eyed and melty. Yes, this was better than peanut butter by a long shot.

He was lost in his head scratches until a ceramic bowl filled with cereal and milk was plonked down in front of Clint, alongside a tall mug of black, black coffee. He looked up to see Natasha and squawked indignantly when she swept him off Clint’s shoulder and into her own arms.

“C’mon, Harry.” She said, ignoring his struggles and affronted dignity. “We have better things to do this morning than snuggle with Clint. I want to see what exactly it is that you can do.” Harry grumbled at her in irate bird-talk. He wasn’t snuggling with Clint. He’d just been reaffirming their friendship. Physically.

Natasha tucked him under one arm and headed for the training room, leaving behind a bemused Clint and a Tony who was still trying to coax the little owl into eating from his hand. Harry wasted no time in wriggling free from her football carry and climbing to her shoulder, where he violently groomed several displaced feathers back into place.

“If you’re going to be part of the team, even just temporarily, we’re going to need to know exactly what you can do.” Natasha told him, and he cocked his head to listen. “From what I saw yesterday, you can teleport yourself and something else, you can set fire to things, you can inspire courage with song, and you can heal with your tears. Is there anything else?” She asked, sliding open the door to a large gym. Harry sailed off her shoulder and onto the padded floor before shifting back into his hybrid form.

“He says, what do you call your forms?” Natasha asked, and Harry started. “I… well, I don’t know.” He said, frowning. “Less than a month ago I was dead. Before that, I was just Harry, a wizard. When I hatched, I was a phoenix, and then less than a week ago I gained this… hybrid form.”

Natasha frowned in return, and motioned for him to follow her as she stepped further into the gym.

“That seems a little clunky. We should work on coming up with a title or nickname.” She said, before spearing him with a glance that went right through him. “It’s hard to gain a sense of identity in a form that doesn’t have a name.” She said. “When I was young, my name was Natalia. When I chose to change my life, I gave myself a new name, and with it I was able to let go of some of my past and embrace who I wanted to be instead. With you, it is different. You were forced into a new body, and it seems to me that you are less than comfortable in it. Perhaps you can learn to embrace your other forms if they had names as well.”
Harry blinked, and when he smiled, he didn’t even notice the foreign feeling of smiling through hardened lips. He had not expected that this philosophically and emotionally astute woman lay behind the cold and collected redhead, and now that he knew... well. Perhaps they had more potential for friendship than he thought. “Several wizards in my family were able to take on animal forms.” He said. “And each form had its own nickname. I think you’re right. Maybe it will help to have something to call this body.”

Natasha nodded. “Yes. And when you get the chance, you should talk to Pepper. She knows a lot about this type of thing.” She said, and when Harry sent her a curious glance, she shook her head. “No, it is her truth to tell.” Harry tucked that away for later.

They stopped in front of what looked like an archery range. “Steve and I are in charge of creating workouts for the team.” Natasha told Harry. “So in order to do this, I need to know what you are capable of. How fast you can fly, how much you can carry, how hot your flames can burn. Eventually we will need to determine how wide your teleportation range is, as well. Would you rather start like so, or in your smaller form?” Harry wrinkled his nose- this didn’t sound fun. Begrudgingly, he shrunk down with a tongue of flame. He was more familiar with his phoenix body, after all.

What felt like hours later, he retracted his prior thought. Natasha was no gentle philosopher. She was a monster. He lay in a pathetic puddle of exhausted phoenix, beak open and panting, and he knew that if he was capable of sweating in this form, the puddle he was laying in would be more than metaphoric. She’d ran him through his paces as bird and hybrid and bird again, making bloody notes in her bloody notebook, and pushing him to fly faster, burn hotter, and try harder. They’d explored his speed in both forms, his lifting capacity, and ran the gamut of all the different ways he could use his fire.

“Alright...” She began, and Harry groaned, wearily raising his drooping head and giving her his best pitiful look. She cracked a grin at the pathetic sight, and closed her notebook. “That’s probably enough for the day.” She said, dropping into cross-legged next to him. “I think we’ve found your limits, and tomorrow we can start work on expanding them!”

Harry let his head fall back to the ground with a thump. And he thought he’d been stiff and sore this morning! Tomorrow would be awful, he mourned.

He pulled himself back up onto his feet, and noticed Natasha absentmindedly rubbing at her wrist. He frowned. Hadn’t she sprained that yesterday? Had she not gotten it fixed by now? A moment later, he realized his mistake. They were in the muggle world, and as heroic and un-muggle as these people appeared, they were still stuck with the limits of muggle medicine. There was no Madame Pomfrey here to wave her wand and fix a sprain in an instant.

He shifted back to hybrid form- and Natasha was right, it really did need a nickname- and stood, ignoring the weak wobble of his knees. There in the corner was a water cooler, complete with little paper cups. He grabbed one and returned, filled the receptacle with tears, and offered it to Natasha, who took it with a bemused quirk of her lips.

“If you drink it, it will help with your wrist.” Harry told her, suddenly feeling oddly shy. “It only works topically on open wounds.”

Harry wasn’t sure if she’d drink it- Clint had told him about how paranoid the spy was, and he couldn’t imagine that she trusted him yet. After all, they’d known each other for all of three days, and two of those were spent lying to her. Against his expectation though, she downed the glass and looked pleased as the swelling at her wrist immediately went down.
“You know that talent of yours is incredible.” She said. “You could do a lot of good if you chose to share that with the rest of the world.

Harry frowned, but said nothing. All through Hogwarts they’d discussed the good they could do in the muggle world, but dismissed it as unrealistic. After all, it took a single wizard multiple months to brew enough skelegrow to supply Hogwarts for a year, let alone the entire wizarding world. There was a shortage of potions masters and potions ingredients, and wasn’t the common wisdom to clean up your own backyard before you tried to help someone else?

But he had no such ready-made excuse. It took him barely a second to cry, and though his phoenix balked at the idea of mass producing tears that might end up in unfavorable hands (his mind went back to a shady hotel in Cairo), he could rather easily visit a few hospitals and grant some miracles.

Natasha must have seen the conflict on his face, and she stood, ruffling a hand over his feathered head. Surprised, Harry let her. “Of course, it’s up to you.” She said. “The only person who knows the right thing to do with your powers is you, after all.” She offered him a rare smile and left the gym. Harry blinked after her, nonplussed. Of all the people in the tower, prickly Natasha was not the one he thought he’d befriend next.

..xOx..

Clint swirled his spoon through the dregs of milk in his bowl and pondered going after Natasha and Harry. If he’d read her mood right, she was probably in the gym, putting him through his paces. He was surprised- It usually took Nat at least a month to warm up to strangers, and gym time with Natasha was as good as an engraved invitation to friendship from anyone else.

He was glad of it, though, especially after the nightmare that shook him awake this morning. In it, Harry had been flying, hovering in the air in that fantastical bird-boy form of his, throwing balls of flame, and then a red dot had appeared over his chest. Clint had tried to get to him, but in the way of dreams, it had felt like he was running through molasses, and the sharp report of the gun had rang out long before he’d reached the boy. Harry had collapsed in a flutter of wings and a pained shout.

His spoon dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers, and the sharp clang of metal-on-ceramic broke him out of his thoughts. He dropped his head into his hands. It was just a dream, he told himself. Nothing more. So why did the memory of it send cold shivers down his back?

He glanced up and checked the clock over the microwave. 10:00 AM. It had been three hours and four bowls of cereal since Natasha had whisked Harry away. That was long enough, right?

He shoved back his stool and stood, washing his bowl and grabbing a peanut flavored protein bar from the cupboard. If he had guessed right and Natasha was training Harry, he’d need the protein, and maybe even a helping hand to scrape him off the floor.

He passed Natasha on the way to the gym, and she smirked at him, eyes dancing mischievously as she told him where she’d left the boy. Oh yes, she’d decided that she liked Harry. And even more, she’d realized that Clint was struggling with some rather confusing feelings for the boy. Clint winced. Knowing her, she was plotting on how best to make Clint suffer before she took pity and played matchmaker.

He shouldered his way in through the gym doors and cast around for Harry, finding the poor boy in a crumpled heap of red, gold, and black feathers at the end of the gym. He smiled at the sight. Harry was growing more comfortable in his hybrid form if he was willing to rest in it.
“Harry!” He called, waving the protein bar in the air, and Harry groaned and sat up. Clint grimaced in sympathy. He knew the post-workout-with-Natasha pain. Still…

“We’ve got work to do today!” He said, jogging over to Harry and dropping into a crouch next to him. “Fury says today’s the day we have to figure out how to contact your friends, and truth be told, I’d rather proof this place against creepy-crawlies sooner rather than later.” He handed Harry the bar. “So let’s get moving! Any ideas come to you in the night?”

Harry peeled open the bar, clumsy with his feathered hands. “I have a few ideas.” He offered. “But they all revolve around one factor- I have to get into one of New York’s wizarding districts somehow, and I have no idea where any are. Beyond that, I’m going to have to go in my human form, and I’m a tad bit recognizable.”

Clint rocked back on his heels in thought. “Say, do we need to find another pair of robes?” He asked, and Harry shook his head.

“No, New York’s wizarding population tends to dress like Muggles.” Harry said. He remembered that, at least, from one of Hermione’s lectures.

“Great!” Clint said. “Then all we need to do in order to disguise you is a beanie. I have just the one. Do you have something to wear?” He asked, and at Harry’s nod, he beam. “Fantastic! Then why don’t we split up, get ready, and meet back in the common room in a bit?!” Harry agreed, and a dig through his pack for clothes, a merrily jingling bag of galleons, and a dose of Polyjuice later (thirty six hairs left, he thought with a grimace) and he met Clint in the common room, where Clint cheerfully crammed a gray knit cap over his head. Harry winced and readjusted the cap over the stubborn feathers in his hair, and peeked in the hallway mirror. With his distinctive black curls flattened, his scar covered, and his glasses gone (he hadn’t needed them ever since he’d become a bird) he barely even recognized himself. Clint, excited to see more of the wizarding world, hurried him into the elevator and out the door, Harry only resisting long enough to rescue the harassed owl from Tony and send off the curriculum edits.

“Ok!” Clint said, once they found themselves on the streets. “What exactly are we looking for?”

Harry had to smile at his enthusiasm. “Well, it could be any number of things.” He said. “One entrance I know is an old telephone booth. Another is in a train platform- if you walk into the wall between platform and 9 and platform 10, you go straight through. A few more are in plain sight to people like me, but muggles can’t see them or forget that they’re there.” He left out St. Mungo’s- it wasn’t very helpful to go peering into every abandoned storefront, was it? Their best bet was to find something like the Leaky or Platform 9 ¾.

Luckily, Clint was a long-time New York resident, and at that description he cocked his head the side in thought. “You know, I could have sworn I saw a whole group of people vanish on the corner of 10th and Riverside once, right in that old skatepark there. It bugged me so bad that I sat and watched the place for weeks, but every time I thought I tracked another group go to the spot, something would cut off my line of sight- sometimes a bus, or a flock of pigeons. One time a raft of balloons even floated by. I eventually chalked it up to a dream and moved on. Does that seem right to you?” Harry nodded, and Clint pushed through the early lunchtime crowds and hailed them a taxi.

A short time later, they tumbled out into Riverside Skate Park, a large concrete edifice with all the typical ramps, bowls, teenage angst, and graffiti. Clint grabbed Harry by the hand and tugged him through the crowd and over to a specific ramp. Clint’s hand was warm and callused, and large enough to engulf his own completely. Harry felt his cheeks heating with the unexpected contact.
Clint took them right up to the side of the ramp and released Harry, to his poorly-concealed dismay. “It was right about here.” He said, and Harry looked around, his hand already missing the warmth of Clint’s. Yes, he could see this being an entrance. All the other ramps had several users, and even more waiting their turn, but this particular ramp was the only one which was empty. He slowly walked around it, inspecting the graffiti for some sort of clue. Clint, seeing what he was doing, went around the other side.

A moment later, he called out, and Harry hurried over. “Hey, this doesn’t look like something you see every day.” Clint said, pointing at what looked like a stylized mountain lion with six pairs of legs.

“Oh!” Harry breathed, reaching out to trace the drawing. “It’s a wampus cat. Yes, Clint, this has to be an entrance. I think this is a reference to Ilvermorny. There should be three other creatures here…” He scanned the wall of graffiti, picking out a thunderbird, a horned serpent, and a pukwudgie, and touched each in turn. When he gently tapped with the pukwudgie, each drawing began to glow and send off strands of light that interconnected the four drawings. He reached back, and this time he was the one to grab Clint’s hand as he stepped forward, tugging the man into the portal.

When their eyes cleared, it was to the welcome sight of a magical alley much akin to Diagon Alley. A tasteful white curl of smoke hanging overhead pronounced the area to be Kalgilly Corner. Shopfronts and houses were built narrow and tall, like the rest of the city, and most were faced in brownstone. Unlike Cairo’s open market, all the stores in this alley boasted sturdy doors and solid walls in deference to New York’s capricious weather. Most were labeled with wooden signs. Clint gazed around greedily, soaking up what he could. While the magical wares weren’t quite as obvious here, there was still so much to look at. Over there, in a corner, a girl was playing fetch with a small brown and white dog that furiously waved its forked tail, using a brown stick (a wand, he assumed) to levitate and throw the ball. A pair of women in tall, pointed hats walked by, despairing quite loudly about how very thin the bottoms of the cauldrons were getting these days. Clint startled as a small brown frog leaped underfoot, and Harry reached down to catch it, handing it back to a young boy who’d been frantically chasing it.

“Clean that off before you eat it!” He told the boy, who nodded his head with a grin before viciously ripping off its hind legs. Clint turned to Harry, aghast, and Harry laughed at the look on his face. “Relax, it’s a chocolate frog.” He told the archer. “Not alive, just a piece of candy charmed to move like a frog.”

Harry turned to scan the storefronts while Clint digested that piece of information, and paused at one that looked promising. The sign pronounced it as “visitor information.” He gave Clint a slight nudge to get him moving and headed for the door. The woman sitting inside the visitor’s information booth brightened as they walked in, clearly bored, and Harry offered her a sheepish smile, slipping into his best ‘little lost boy’ imitation.

“H’illo, ma’am.” He greeted, intentionally laying his British accent on thick. He watched with amusement as the woman very nearly melted.

“Well…” Harry said, and spun a story of how he’d come to the United States on a poorly-thought-out whim, and how he was now feeling bad about leaving his mother behind, and couldn’t she please direct him to some way of connecting through to the British floo network? He’d rather floo, you see, as it was quicker than applying for a portkey or sending an owl. He finished his request with his best shy smile, and watched as the witch fell over herself to help.
They left the help booth with a highly amused Clint, a hand drawn map directing them to Hasselfort’s International Hotel, New York Branch, and a pamphlet for the same. The pamphlet boasted several glossy, moving photos and an advertisement for a room with an international floo connection to each major wizarding population center.

“What was that?” Clint asked, laughter in his voice, and Harry grinned up at him.

“My friend Hermione called in my ‘poor orphan Harry’ act.” He said. “It works best on women of all ages.”

“Hey, I think it’d work on me too.” Clint offered, and peered down at the map in Harry’s hand. “I think this place is right around the corner there.” He said, pointing at a nearby cross street. They turned the corner and found themselves standing on the doorstep of another tall, narrow brownstone, with a modest sign proclaiming it to be Hasselfort’s, New York. Clint looked at it with furrowed brows. “This is it?” He said. “Are you sure? It looks so… small.”

Harry chuckled as he opened the door and walked in. “You’d think. But not everything in the wizarding world is as it appears.”

Clint’s jaw dropped. In direct contrast to its exterior, the inside of the hotel sprawled out in front of him, all white marble with elegant gold trim and soaring ceilings, at least five times as wide as its brownstone façade. Harry smirked at him. “You’ll catch flies.” He teased, and walked forward across the marble floors to a long bank of desks, manned by identically dressed, professional-looking witches and wizards.

“I’d like to place an international floo call.” He informed the wizard at the counter, who looked down his long nose at him. “Wand and registration?” He asked, and Harry chuckled nervously, pulling his new New York ID out of his pocket and presenting it to the man.

“What about my wand…” He said, and the man frowned severely down at him.

“No wand, no business.” He said gruffly. “Unless your friend has one?” He said, looking from Harry to Clint.

Harry gulped, and then extracted a handful of galleons from his pouch. “Is the wand really such a big deal?” He asked, flashing the handful of gold at the man.

The scowl grew deeper. “No wand, no business.” He repeated. “Do I need to call for an Auror?”

Harry recoiled hastily. “No, no!” He said with a large, fake grin. “I’ll just head back to my rooms and find my wand.” He said, and quickly left the hotel, Clint following on his heels.

“Well, that could have gone better.” Harry lamented, and Clint shrugged, not in the least disappointed by the prospect of spending more time in this Kalgilly Corner.

“It was going so easily up until now. We were about due for a setback.” He said comfortably.

Harry groaned. “But this is a rather big setback.” He said. “I have a wand, you see. But it’s registered to Harry Potter, which means I can’t go using it to identify myself as Harrison Evans. Plus… I don’t even know if it still IS my wand. I certainly can’t use it…” He trailed off.

“Regardless, we either need to find someone with a wand who will get us past the counter, or we need to get a wand registered to one of us.”

Clint raised an eyebrow. “Well, we can ask around.” He said. “Maybe you can try ‘poor-orphan-Harry’ over there?” He said, pointing at a pair of older ladies who were standing next to the hotel,
Harry straightened his shoulders and went. He got as far as informing them that he’d misplaced his wand, and they shut down, just like the man at the counter. He tried the young lady with the crup next, with the same outcome.

The third person he spoke to squinted at him. “Hey, anyone ever tell you that you look kinda like that English kid who took out th’ Dark Lord about ten years back?” He asked. Harry disengaged quickly and returned to Clint, shoulders slumping.

Clint sighed, having watched it all happen. “Ok, then. What about buying us a wand?” He asked.

“Well, there’s a wandmaker’s right over there.” Harry said doubtfully. “But… I don’t know what’s going to happen if a Muggle and a magical creature in human form walk into a wandshop. Wizards who make wands… they know things that they’re not supposed to.” He said.

Clint shrugged, unconcerned. “Well, if it goes poorly you can pop us right back to the tower, right?” He pointed out, and Harry nodded reluctantly. “Besides, you said your old wand doesn’t work for you anymore, right? Maybe you just need a new one.”

“I suppose so.” Harry allowed through a suddenly dry throat as he tried to beat back a spark of hope that was flickering to life. What if Clint was right? Hermione had said she thought that he couldn’t do magic anymore since he was a phoenix, with a phoenix’s soul and magical core… But what if she was wrong? What if his magical core just changed? Maybe all he really needed was a new wand, and he could do magic again?

His heart beat hard in his chest as they walked towards the wandmaker’s, and he stopped trying to pretend. A new wand could fix everything. Why, if he had a wand, he could probably even cast a self-transfiguration to gain his true body back! True, no one else’s magic worked on him, but surely his own would be different?

With a bright grin to Clint, he ran the last few steps to the wandmaker’s shop and pushed the door open to the bright, cheerful chime of a bell.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Harry. Just when he's starting to accept things, he has to go and get hopeful about something else...

As I said! Lots of fluff and dialogue in this one. I had planned to get a bit further with this chapter, but I decided to cut it here and give it to you now rather than making you all wait for a beast of a chapter. So, apologies.
“Just a minute!” A voice called from the back of the store in response to the ringing of the bell, and Harry took a moment to look around the shop. It was different than Harry expected- he’d only ever been in Ollivanders before, and that shop had been dim and dusty, smothered in velvet drapes and full of darkened corners, populated with haphazard towers of wand boxes and a single, dilapidated chair.

This shop was bright and clean, all fresh white paint and bright windows. There was a large, pale wooden counter in the middle of the room with several piles of glossy brochures tidily stacked in the corner. There were no boxes, and instead large glass cases with neither doors nor locks lined the walls, holding row upon row of neatly organized wands, each nestled on a long, thin pillow. Each case was neatly labeled by wood type; each row by core type.

Harry stepped further into the shop, fairly buzzing with excitement. He hardly needed to read the label to find the holly wands, so familiar was he with the color, and he trailed a reverent finger down the glass. Perhaps one of these would be his new match, he thought, his eyes wandering wistfully down the row of holly and phoenix feather wands. None was identical to his old wand, of course, for every wand was different somehow, be it in length or width or level of detail in the carving of the handle.

“Dragon heartstring?” Clint read aloud, his voice somewhere between awed and uncomfortable. “First of all, I totally knew dragons existed, for the record. And secondly… that’s poetic, right? Or do you actually rip the hearts out of dragons for wands?”

A door behind the counter clicked open, and a bespectacled, middle-aged woman dressed in a sensible, calf-length beige robe stepped out, wiping her hands with a rag. “Actually, we harvest our heartstrings only from recently deceased dragons.” She corrected. She looked tired and stressed, with deep bags under her eyes and slumped shoulders. “We here at Galliando’s believe in using only ethically sourced wand cores, and we believe that our products are more powerful as a result. After all, how can we expect a wand to bond with a wizard if the source of the material was killed by a wizard?” She placed her rag down on the counter and looked up, assessing Clint and Harry with sharp, weary eyes as both men approached the counter.

She straightened up and placed her hands on her hips. “Well. It’s not everyday that I find myself with a pair like you in my shop. I’m Susan, Susan Galliando, owner of this shop. And you are a squib.” She said to Clint, much to his confusion, and Harry startled. Clint was a squib? Since when? “And you…. You’re like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” She said as she turned her gaze to Harry,
lips pursed like she’d bitten into something sour. “What is it that I can do for you?” She asked, a distinct lack of enthusiasm in her tone.

Harry cleared his throat and shifted, startled by her assessment of them both. Well, he had told Clint that wandmakers had a tendency to know things they shouldn’t. He wasn’t sure why he was surprised that she could tell he was a little... unordinary. *Freakish, you mean.* A little voice whispered inside his head, and his left hand ached. He rubbed it gently, ignored the stray thought, and met her gaze.

“Well, ma’am, we would like to purchase a wand.” He said, opening the shields on his empathy to get a better read on why she seemed so unenthused to see customers. He was surprised when he was unable to read her, his probe slipping by like water off wax.

The woman flapped her hands at them tiredly. “Sit, sit. Of course you are here for a wand, you’re in a wandmaker’s shop.” She said, as a pair of high-backed chairs popped into being behind them. “I can help him.” She said with a sigh, gesturing at Clint. “But you...” She frowned again at Harry, and Harry felt his high hopes drop somewhere into the region of his toes. He’d known it was a long shot, and even still, he’d let himself hope...

“Well.” She continued with a dark frown. “You’d be complicated, even if I had the right materials.” Harry’s heart reversed direction and leapt into his throat, the rapid change dizzying. Complicated? Did that mean she could make him a wand that would work, after all?

“Wait, really? You’d sell me a wand? But I thought...” Clint said.

“You thought what?” Susan said tartly, her sharp gaze swinging to Clint. “Someone told you that just because your magical core is blocked off that you can’t have a wand? Some people.” She said, shaking her head. “Some people believe that just because the most you’ll do with a wand is shoot sparks and do parlor tricks, that you don’t deserve one. I say pshaw to that. Wizard or squib, you were born with a magical core and you can bond with a wand just fine.”

“What’s a sq...” Clint started, and Harry stepped on his foot to silence him. Clint being a squib neatly solved the problem of why, exactly, he was here in Kalgilly Corner, and it wouldn’t do to blow that cover so quickly. He leaned forward further and beamed at the woman.

“See, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell him, ma’am.” Harry said. “We were just trying to check into Hasselfort’s, and they turned us away since he didn’t have a wand! I told him that we should just march on over here and get him one, if they were going to be that way about it.”

Susan frowned at him. “Well, given what’s been happening here in Kalgilly, I’m hardly surprised. Haven’t you heard?”

Both Harry and Clint shook their heads.

“It’s been all over the news.” She said, pointing to the glossy pamphlets on the desk. Between the brightly colored “Wassaily’s Wand Polish: Because a Wizard’s Wand is his Greatest Gift!” and the more sedate “Twenty-seven Spells for Proper Wand Maintenance” was a drab black-and-white handout with the seal of MACUSA on the front.

“It’s a bulletin.” Susan explained, her voice quiet enough that they both had to strain to hear her. “There have been 15 missing persons and five confirmed murders in the last three days. There were a few witnesses that described the perpetrators as a man and woman, her with purple eyes and dark hair, him with dark hair and dark eyes, both pale. Neither used a wand during the attacks- she uses wandless magic, and he appears to prefer muggle methods.”
Harry’s eyes widened at the description. The woman sounded a lot like Degnolaten. He shared a meaningful look with Clint, and then turned back to Susan. “Well, as we’re two men, and neither of us have dark colored eyes…”

He met her gaze directly for a moment, and wondered if she was using occlumency to check his intentions. At the moment, he hardly cared. He just wanted to get on with the conversation, get Clint his wand, and figure out if she could help him with his feathery little problem or not.

With another heavy sigh, Susan waved her wand. Just like Harry remembered from Ollivanders all those years ago, tape measures began buzzing about like large, angry insects, swooping in to measure every part of Clint that they could. Clint met the invasion with a surprised yelp that subsided into wondering silence, only broken by a chuckle as a zealous piece of tape coiled tightly around the bones of his hip.

“Sorry.” He said sheepishly. “Little ticklish.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin. He couldn’t begrudge Clint for the wonder that was filling his eyes and making him grin like a boy. After all, he’d had the same reaction on that long-ago first trip to Diagon Alley. Harry sat on his impatience and watched as Susan pondered her results for a moment, before rapping her own wand smartly on the edge of her desk. Four wands appeared on the table in front of her with a puff of azure smoke, and she waved her hand at Clint.

“Go ahead, pick the one that feels right.” She instructed, her gaze already back to Harry, something wary in her gaze as she squinted at him.

It took Clint forever to choose, but he finally settled on a long, dark wand made of dark mahogany and, coincidentally enough, dragon heartstring. As he lifted it, it gave a halfhearted sputter, belched out a puff of pungent smoke and two fat amber sparks, and Clint grinned wider than Harry’d ever seen. He sent a small smile back at Clint, counted out the requested seven galleons, and then leaned forward as Clint occupied himself in admiring his new toy and the small, laminated wand permit that Susan had provided him, the word “Squib” prominent across the top.

“You said you could do something for me?” He pressed, and the woman flinched back for a moment before composing herself. Harry instinctually pushed forward with his empathy again, though he met nothing but that strange glassy wall.

“I…. ah, yes.” She said. “I may be able to do something for you. Am I right in supposing that you once had a wand, and then something… drastic happened to your magical core? Something… that gave you another form?”

Harry nodded tersely.

Susan frowned darkly and tapped the rim of her glasses. “I could tell when you came in that your core is unusual. I believe that I could make you a wand, but I’ll need something from you.” She gave him a long look, and at his enthusiastic nod, the skin around her eyes tightened. “Do you have a remnant of your other form handy?” She asked, and Harry raised an eyebrow.

“A remnant?” He echoed. “Like what?”

She shrugged. “Something from your other body. A tuft of fur, a toenail clipping, a scale.” She looked him straight in the eye, and something in her gaze made him shiver. It felt like a warning. “Or a feather.” She said, and his skin prickled with goosebumps at her knowing glance. How did she know so much, he wondered. Still...
“So if I give you this, you’ll be able to make a wand that will work for me?” He asked, and Susan nodded slowly. Harry paused for a moment. Somehow, giving away a feather just seemed... wrong. But then again, if it could get him his magic back... He dismissed the uneasy feeling. How could giving away a feather harm him?

Decided, he reached into his bag and pulled out a long red and gold primary, one of several that he’d shed and tucked away. Susan took it from him almost reluctantly, folding it carefully into a conjured white cloth and settling it into a pocket of her robes.

“I’ll work on it.” She said, standing and ushering Clint and Harry out into the street. “I’ll contact you when I have anything!”

She slammed the door shut and turned the sign in the window to “Closed.” Obligingly, the window drapes swung shut, and Harry turned to Clint.

“Well that was strange.” He said, gesturing to their ignominious dismissal, and Clint glanced up from his new wand.

“Wha?” He said fuzzily, and then glanced back at the shop. “Oh, weird. We left already? I thought she was going to do something for you.” He said, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Were you even listening to our conversation?” He asked laughingly, and Clint ducked his head sheepishly.

“Well... not really.” He said. “I mean, I was thinking about everything that just happened to me, and you seemed to have it under control... what’s a squib anyways?”

Harry paused, looking back at the doorway. Her dismissal so soon after she’d got the feather was odd, wasn’t it? And she’d never actually said how she’d contact him. And he’d been unable to read her at all with his empathy. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to leave a feather with her, after all...

He was about to lift a hand and knock, when Clint interrupted his thought process. “Harry! Why are you staring at the door?”

Harry jumped and turned to Clint, feeling a bit ridiculous at his paranoia. Everything would be fine, he told himself, and forced himself to walk away from the door, explaining to Clint what a squib was as he did so.

“I was supposed to be born with magic?” Clint said, clearly delighted with the prospect. “I always knew I was missing something! This makes total sense. I was supposed to be a wizard all along... I just got skipped over. Typical...” He told Harry, thought his wide grin showed that he was delighted with even this tenuous connection to the wizarding world. “I knew I felt at home in magical places like this!” He continued as they returned to Hasselfort’s, and Harry let his increasingly ridiculous prattle distract him and eliminate his unease about leaving his feather behind. It was worth anything to get a chance to use his magic again, he assured himself firmly. Anything at all.

.xOx.

From behind the closed door of Galliando & Sons, Susan Galliando let her weary shoulders slump and pressed a clammy hand to her chest, where her heart beat rapidly behind the amulet that they’d forced her to wear. She felt awful, deceiving those poor boys like that. She hadn’t been expecting that the blond one would have been a squib, and usually she’d never sell a wand to a
squib. He’d never be able to do more than produce sparks, and he had looked so damn hopeful at 
the thought of being part of their world, and she ached for the time when he discovered that even as 
a squib he had no place here. If they hadn’t insisted, she would have simply turned him away and 
let him continue thinking of himself as a muggle; it was kinder. And the plans that those people 
had for the black-haired one in the gray hat... well. She pushed him from her mind. She’d had no 
choice. It was either him or Allen, and there was no question as to who she would pick between her 
brother and a stranger.

She pulled the feather from her pocket, took a deep breath, and walked into the back of the 
store. “I have it!” She called, and shuddered as the words left her mouth on small white clouds in 
the cold of the room. From the shadows in the very back, a dark mass moved, and then the 
unnatural woman with violet eyes was stepping forward, her mouth twisted into a too-large grin. 

“Let me see, then.” She said, and Susan shuddered as the temperature dropped another ten 
degrees as the woman came closer. She held out the feather and unwrapped it with shaking hands, 
and Degnolaten’s awful grin widened, the dementor’s maw hidden inside her smile peeking around 
her teeth and gums. “Oh, very good!” Degnolaten crowed, and snatched the feather from her hands, 
careful to hold it only by the white cloth. “And the amulet?” She said, and Susan unclasped the 
strange stone from her neck with trembling hands and passed it over.

Susan straightened as Degnolaten turned away. “Wait!” She said, her voice only wavering 
slightly. “I held up my end of the bargain. Give him back!”

Degnolaten looked back over her shoulder with dead violet eyes, and then shrugged, lifting 
the hem of her robes slightly. Black shadows rolled out, deeper and blacker than should exist in the 
room, and when they receded, the form of a man lay huddled on the ground, covered in white frost 
and too cold to even shiver.

Susan rushed forward, wand out, cast the strongest warming charm she knew, turning the 
collapsed man to face her. Her gaze was so focused on him that she never noticed Degnolaten 
twitch her fingers in command as she turned away, and likewise she never saw the man behind her 
approach until his iron dagger found its way under her shoulder blade, between her ribs, and angled 
perfectly up to pierce her heart.

She died with blood on her lips and a horrified look on her face as she realized that the man 
in her arms was more than merely cold. His eyes were vacant and blank as he stared into her own 
and watched her die; his soul already consumed.

“Come, Iain.” Degnolaten called, and handed the rewrapped feather and the amulet to the 
man as he turned away from the two corpses. “Hold onto this for me, will you? And put the amulet 
on, I don’t want him to feel what you’re feeling. And clean up this mess.” Degnolaten ordered, and 
the man withdrew a chestnut wand and flicked it at the two bodies with an overpowered Evanesco. 
Both the bodies and the growing pool of blood vanished, and Iain slunk out the door after his 
mistress, tying the amulet around his neck as he went.

.xOx.

Properly equipped with their new wand, it took no time at all for Harry and Clint to bypass 
the front desk. With one hand clutching a bag of floo powder, Harry knelt in front of the red-brick 
chimney that marked the international floo to Scotland. Clint stood guard behind him, his new 
wand tucked securely away so as not to distract him, and Harry tossed a handful of powder into the 
flames. They turned green with a whoosh, and he shoved his head into the fire, called out 
Hermione and Ron’s floo address, and waited anxiously.
He’d checked the time already- it was three o’clock in New York, which meant it was 8:00 PM in Scotland. Hopefully, either Ron or Hermione would be home by now, and as the green flame in front of him wavered and parted, the green light giving an odd, solemn cast to Hermione’s features, he let out a relieved breath.

“How is it going?” She asked cheerfully. “I was just wondering when you were going to check in again.” She said, and Harry was momentarily surprised by her blasé tone until he realized that for all that had happened, he’d only been gone a little over a week. It had felt like a lifetime. He settled back on his heels, and the tale of the last several days came pouring out again, though he kept the wand bit to himself. He wanted to see the look on her face when he showed her that he really could still do magic. As he spoke, Hermione’s cheerful smile faded until all was left was a wry twist of her lips.

“Harry!!!” was loud enough to make him flinch.

“No matter where you go, there’s always something exciting happening, isn’t there?” She asked when he was finished, and Harry snorted. 

“Something like that.” He agreed. “So, basically, I’m hoping that you might know something about how to keep dementors out of a muggle building, and that you might know something about this Degnolaten woman.”

“Besides that, I’ve never heard of this woman, Elisha Degnolaten. I’ve also never heard of a human-dementor hybrid, though before you I had never heard of a phoenix-human hybrid, so there’s that. I can certainly look into it.”

Here, she frowned. “Also, I should tell you that we’ve made no progress in figuring out exactly what went wrong with Givengook’s potion. We’re still exploring different avenues, but as far as we can tell it should have worked just fine.”

Harry shook his head. “Actually, I think I may have a lead on that.” He told her, thinking of the feather he’d left at the wandshop. “I’ll let you know if it pans out.” He promised, and Hermione frowned.

“We might be able to help you if you shared what you knew.” She pointed out, and Harry shook his head mischievously. He wanted to surprise her.

“Nah, it’s not anything you can help with.” He said. “I’ll let you know if it even works.”

Hermione sighed, giving up on the argument. “Well, let us know if anything comes of it.” She said, and then glanced over her shoulder. “Rose, what are you doing up?” She asked, and then glanced back at Harry. “I need to take care of Rose, but if you hold on a moment I can send the mirrors across the floo. Also, WWW has a contract with a US chain store- a chain called a Penny and Knut? If you can find one around, it should sell the wardstone set. They’re branded as Weasley’s Wondrous Wardstones.”
With that, her face disappeared from the flames momentarily, before she came back, thrusting a slim silver pocket mirror at him through the flames.

“Harry, be careful.” She warned through the flames, her brow knit in worry. “I don’t like the sound of this Degnolaten woman, and it sounds like you’ve made some friends that attract the wrong sort of attention. Just... make sure you’re safe, would you?” She requested, and then pushed forward enough to leave an ashy kiss on his cheek.

Harry smiled at her. “Don’t worry about me, Hermione.” He assured her. “The Avengers are pretty dang tough- they’ll watch my back for me. And I’ll do the same for them.” His grin grew rueful, and he chuckled. “Besides, you know me. I’ve got that saving people thing- I wouldn’t be able to walk away from this even if I tried.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and closed the floo connection with a final goodbye, and Harry rose to his feet, shaking out the stiffness in his knees and slipping the pocket mirror into his bag.

“Hey Clint.” He asked as the taller man turned to him. “Have you seen a store called Penny and Knut? That’s our next stop.”

Clint shook his head. “Nope, but I saw a directory right next to the visitor’s information building. If there’s one around here, it should be listed there.”

.xOx.

Sure enough, Penny and Knut was listed on the directory right where Clint had remembered, and luckily it was less than a block away. As they stepped out into the street Harry cast a wary eye up at the sky, taking in the pearly gray cast to the clouds, and frowned. “Looks like rain.” He pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s New York in October for you.” Clint replied. “Half the time it’s sunny and warm, and the other half it’s cold as shit and raining.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, that’s still better than Scotland.” He pointed out. “There, I think the ratio is more like 80-20. Still, I didn’t bring a jacket, so I hope it holds off until after we’re done.”

Clint hummed in agreement, and let a comfortable silence fall between them as they walked. He was still nursing his wonder from earlier that day- who would have thought that Clint, of all people, was born from magical parents? Sure, he was a little extraordinary in his own right- he was the World’s Greatest Marksman after all, and he could mostly keep up in combat alongside the likes of the rest of the Avengers, all of whom had some sort of advantage. But still, he was the only purely human, non-genius-millionaire Avenger, and it rankled at times, especially when the others used their skills so regularly. He’d gotten used to biting back envy every time Steve would lift the common room couch one-handed so he could vacuum underneath it, every time Tony bounced in excitedly with some new tech-gadget he’d invented on a lark that had cost millions of dollars to design, every time Bruce would Hulk out with a long-suffering sigh to end a battle that the rest of them were struggling with. But this- this was a claim to fame that was his, and even if he was somewhat of an outsider due to his status as a “squib,” at least it put him on equal footing to his new teammate, who used to be a fully functioning member of this society but was now, for all societal intents and purposes, a squib as well.

He glanced down at his shorter companion and reached a hand into his pocket to finger the smooth length of wood that they’d purchased. The wand felt warm and alive under his fingers, and he felt his lips twisting into a smile. Magic was SO COOL.
He nudged Harry with his shoulder, and the smaller man stumbled to the side before glaring playfully back at him. “Hey! What was that for?”

Clint grinned at him. “You were being too quiet.” He said, and Harry rolled his eyes at him.

“Well, luckily, we’re here.” He said, gesturing across the cobblestone street to another brownstone storefront. A sign in the window proudly announced that Penny and Knut sold ‘Everyday Odds and Ends for the Odd and Magical!’ A stack of copper cauldrons sat outside the door, floating, flashing rainbow words repeating ‘Blowout Cauldron Sale!!!’ in twists and turns over the stack. On the other side of the door was a rack of robes, and as they ducked inside Clint noticed that it looked much like any other dollar store, except for the obviously magical wares. The floor was cheap linoleum, the lighting bright and artificial, and while he couldn’t see the loudspeakers, a scratchy recording of a woman’s voice warbled away just a shade too loud in the cramped space.

Harry promptly vanished into a messily stocked aisle in the back labeled ‘Household Wards,’ and Clint paused for a moment, torn between the ‘Tricks and Treats’ aisle and an aisle labeled ‘As Seen on Solomon’s Satellite,’ which had to be the wizarding version of as seen on TV.

He finally chose Tricks and Treats, and had to laugh when the first thing he came across was a classic pair of glasses complete with mustache and rubber nose. A small plastic mirror hung above the display, and the plastic tag boasted that the mask was just the thing to “Trick your friends and scare your siblings!”

He slipped it on, tags and all, and made a face at himself in the mirror. He almost fell over backwards when instead of himself in the rubber glasses, he saw a mustached, red-faced man staring back at him. He reached up a hand to touch his face, and it went straight through the bristly mustache to touch his own, smooth-shaven upper lip. He grinned, and the red-faced man in the mirror grinned back.

Just then, Harry came around the corner, a violently purple cardboard box with WWW emblazoned on the side clutched to his chest, and Clint waved to him. “Harry!” He called, and Harry did a double take.

“Clint?” He asked warily, taking a step closer, and Clint pulled the glasses off his face.

“How’d you know?” He pouted, and Harry laughed.

“That’s a terrible illusion.” He pointed out drily. “It does nothing to hide your voice, and your body and clothes are still the same.”

Clint looked back in the mirror, and sure enough, the illusion of the red-faced man stopped halfway down his neck, the ruddy color of the illusion making a stark line with his own goldish-brown tan. He laughed.

“Hey, hey, how about this one?” He asked, swapping the rubber nose with a headband with a purple-and-star-spangled cap. This time, the face in the mirror was old and wizened with a long beard and long white hair. He turned to grin at Harry, who doubled over in laughter.

“Oh, Merlin.” Harry laughed. “You’re Merlin!”

He joined Clint at the station, and promptly became a creature with gray skin, long-tangled hair, and pointed teeth that he identified as a mermaid, which looked nothing like any mermaid Clint had ever seen. The Clint became a beautiful, dark-haired woman that neither of the men recognized, and then Harry became a handsome man with dark skin and close-cropped hair.
“You’re Obama!” Clint crowed, and shoved his hand forward. “Oh, won’t you shake my hand, Mr. President?” He said, batting his ridiculously long eyelashes and tossing the heavy brown tresses of his illusory feminine hair, and both men cackled loudly enough to draw the attention of the cashier.

“If you’re not going to buy anything, could you please leave?” She called from the front, and Harry and Clint ducked their heads, abashed. Still, Clint grabbed a pair of disguises- the red-faced man he’d become at first, and another generic man whose skin tone matched his better. Humorous they may be, but those disguises could really help if he ever had to lose a tail.

They trailed down the aisle, picking up a package of something Harry called Ice Mice and another that held a miniature maple tree, its leaves blowing in an invisible breeze. It was labeled as a Vermont Maple Sugar Tree.

“I’ve heard of these!” Harry said. “One of my friends in Hogwarts was from Canada. He said these are fantastic.”

Arms full, they returned to the cashier. Harry paid as Clint got entirely distracted by the brightly colored potion bottles in a rack by the counter, promising things such as ‘Sleakeasy’s Hair Potion- to Tame the Wildest Curls!’ and ‘Halitosis Heal- 24 Hours of Breath that Smells of Lilacs and Roses!’

“Don’t bother.” Harry told him when he picked up a golden bottle that simply said ‘Liquid Luck.’ “If that’s real, I’ll eat my hat.” He said solemnly. “I’ve seen Felix Felicis before, and that is definitely not what that is. Also, it’s nothing you want to mess with.” He said, a shadow falling over his face and wiping away the glow of good cheer that their wander through the curio store had lent him.

Clint frowned at the reminder of Harry’s tumultuous past, and gently put the potion back as the cashier handed Harry a blank paper bag after he refused the one with the moving logo of the company with a murmured explanation that they were headed to Muggle New York after this stop.

He wandered after Harry as the man headed back up the street to the entrance they’d used to get into Kalgilly Corner, his expression still shadowed. Clint sighed and threw his arm over the smaller man’s shoulders, trying to cajole him into a smile and getting only a pale imitation of Harry’s real smile for his efforts. For all that he’d only known the man for a few days, and known he was a man for even less of that time, he found that he really liked Harry. And found him quite attractive, his subconscious whispered, though he shoved that thought down. He liked making him smile, making him laugh, and he really didn’t like it when Harry got stuck in his memories of the war that he’d died in.

He tugged Harry in tighter to his side as they exited into the skate park, and pointed to a nearby café. “How about a snack before we head back?” He proposed, and tugged Harry after him before the other had a chance to protest.

The little café was warm and cozy in contrast to the cold air outside, and Clint grinned when he saw Harry’s nose come up to sniff the air. His grin widened when Harry’s eyes lit up at the sight of all the goodies behind the glass counter.

“Clint.” Harry hissed, tugging at one of Clint’s sleeves, his mood forgotten. “Clint, they have peanut butter cookies.” Clint tipped his head back and laughed, ordering Harry his peanut butter cookie and himself a blueberry scone.

“Tea or coffee?” He asked Harry, who just shrugged, his eyes fixed on where the barista was slipping his peanut butter cookie into a brown paper bag. With this lack of input, Clint settled on a
pair of hot chocolates, and soon he and Harry were ensconced in a little booth at the end of the café, Harry taking worshipful nibbles of his peanut butter cookie.

“It’s so good.” He moaned, and Clint’s cheeks tinged red as his traitorous imagination provided him with another scenario that Harry might make that sound in. He cleared his throat and started in on his blueberry scone to hide his flustered face, and managed to catch Harry in a light conversation to make him laugh.

It had started as a way to make Harry feel better, but as they finished their treats and gathered up their trash, Clint realized that it was also a procrastination tactic- He was enjoying this time spent with Harry, and he didn’t want to return to the tower just yet. Still, there were things to do-wardstones to put up, if he had overheard right, and plans to be made, and here they were, out playing in a dollar store and going to a café. He chuckled to himself- put that way, it sounded like a first date, not a SHIELD supported mission. He almost felt guilty about using his SHIELD card to pay for treats.

Outside the café, Harry turned to him with quizzical eyebrows, clearly about to ask a question, and Clint smiled fondly to see the smear of whipped cream from the hot chocolate on his right cheek.

“You have something right here.” He told him, pointing to his own cheek, and Harry echoed him, wiping at the left side of his mouth. “No, other side.” Clint said, and laughed when Harry wiped the right side of his lips, missing the smear completely, and looked up with a questioning glint in his eyes.

“Here.” Clint said, and reached out to cup the side of Harry’s cheek, wiping the smear away with his thumb. As he did so, Harry froze, his emerald eyes widening in shock, his lips parting slightly. Clint’s eyes dropped to Harry’s lips at the motion, and unbidden, his thumb traced along Harry’s cheekbone once more as he leaned in closer. Harry’s cheeks pinked in response, and his eyelids fluttered closed as Clint got closer.

A cold drop of water fell on the crown of Clint’s head, followed by a dozen more, and then the steely clouds overhead burst open in a rainstorm that had both Harry and Clint shrieking and running for the dubious cover of a nearby taxi stand. They were, luckily enough, the first pedestrians to reach the stand and were summarily ushered, damp and panting, into the backseat of a taxi and whisked along back towards Avengers tower.

Clint let his head thump against the side window, studiously looking away from Harry. What was he doing, trying to kiss the kid? He might be gorgeous, but he was seventeen, for crying out loud. He was born in 1980 a traitorous voice whispered in his head, but Clint shoved it down. He was seventeen, and anyways, he’d only known the boy for a week. And Harry could do so much better than Clint- Clint was a squib, unworthy of magic, with no claim to fame beyond some talent with a bow. Harry, on the other hand, was a mythological creature with powers he still didn’t understand. Clint let out a sigh, his breath fogging the window, and closed his eyes. Stupid, he berated himself. Harry probably hadn’t even want to kiss him, anyways.

.xOx.

Harry was confused, and he shot a look at Clint as they rode the elevator up Avenger’s Tower. He could have sworn that the man was about to kiss him outside the café, and Harry had been anything but opposed. In fact, he was shocked. He’d been admiring Clint since he met him-first for his body, as shallow as that may be, and then he found himself growing fond of the man’s upbeat, silly personality. He’d known for ages that he would be more than happy to start something with the man, but for all that Clint was kind to him, he’d never expect someone who looked like Clint to be interested in someone who looked like him, especially with the fact that his
body was apparently more at home with feathers than with skin.

But now, the man could barely look at him. Clearly he’d misread the situation. He’d probably made Clint feel uncomfortable, going all pink-cheeked and starry eyed when the man was just trying to help him get food off his face. He felt his face heat up again. What had he been thinking? First kisses like that didn’t happen outside of movies or really bad romance novels.

The elevator dinged as they hit the common floor, and with an awkward murmur of farewell, they split, Clint of to who-knows-where and Harry off to find Tony to place the wardstones.

Tony was more than willing to help, energetic as always and full of questions that Harry had no answer to. Why use stones and not wood or metal? Why did the wardstones need to be placed at the cardinal directions? Did it matter if they weren’t equidistant? What would they protect the tower from?

That last question was the only one he had an answer to- he pointed to the box. “It says it provides maximal protection against any magical beast, creature, or non-human categorized as a Dark Creature crossing the wardline.” He read. “And moderate protection against anyone with negative intentions doing the same. Specially designed for use for wizardkind, squibs, and muggles alike.”

That information sent Tony into another whirlwind of questions and speculations, mostly about how rocks could be enchanted to understand something as insubstantial as intent, and Harry realized that Tony hardly expected an answer, just an ear to listen to him ramble.

Placing the wardstones and keying them to Tony as the master of the house (a thumbprint of blood on each stone and a passphrase was all it took) took them well into dinnertime, which was a free-for-all of mixed Mexican and Thai takeout with the whole team. Harry spent the entire time stuffing his face with peanut Phad Thai, keeping his gaze down and away from Clint besides a few surreptitious glances, and gladly took the first excuse to escape to his quarters.

.xOx.

The next week rolled by in a haze of training, planning, and a complete lack of any progress with finding out what Degnolaten was up to. Clint and Harry managed to work and train together with absolutely no acknowledgement of their almost-kiss, and Clint managed to produce three different colors of sparks with his reluctant wand, while Harry heard absolutely nothing from Galliando’s in regard to progress on his own. He was going to give it another day, he’d decided, and then go check in on Susan. He might have been more concerned over this, if not for the frankly ridiculous training schedule that Natasha had put together for him- years of being reliant on his wand had left Harry sadly deficient in the use of his body, and they were still exploring the different facets of his powers. Why, just last week they’d discovered that he could lift incredibly large loads (specifically, a gleeful Hulk) as long as said load was holding onto his tailfeathers.

Seven days past their trip to Kalgilly Corner, Harry was the middle of a rather intense game of hide-and-seek with Natasha and Clint- a game that only sounded fun and innocent if you didn’t know Natasha’s penalty for when she found you- when Tony caught up to him.

“Harry!” He called, jogging up to where Harry was skulking behind a wall on an unused floor of the tower. Harry flinched and shushed him automatically, and Tony took in his tense form and bristled feathers with a quiet laugh.

“Natasha?” He whispered, and at Harry’s jerky nod, Tony beckoned the feathered boy to follow him. “Here, come with me. If you’re willing, we’d like to run some tests on your magic. She
probably won’t look in the labs.” He said conspiratorially, and Harry eagerly followed him down a set of stairs that he’d never seen before, and down into a lab that smelled of engine oil and looked like a bomb had gone off. Across the room, in the only clean corner of the space, was Bruce, hunched over a microscope and scribbling intermittently in a nearby folder.

“I found him!” Tony sang, and Bruce looked up, rubbing wearily at his eyes. Harry frowned at the bags under his eyes and picked his way across the lab.

“Have you been sleeping?” Harry accused as he got closer to the man, who had become tied with Natasha for his second-favorite Avenger. He liked Bruce for his calm smiles and quiet presence, even if he didn’t spend as much time with the man as he did with Natasha. Also, Natasha might be higher up in his list if she didn’t insist on training him into the ground every morning for the sake of “improving” his physical skills.

Bruce offered him a small smile. “Oh, here and there.” He offered vaguely, before looking at Tony. “Did you ask him already, or did you just kidnap him?”

Tony shrugged. “I helped him escape from Natasha.” He said, and wandered away to fuss over a pile of metal shavings and a gleaming silver object that looked somewhat like a boomerang.

“We’re still analyzing that sample that we took in Cairo.” Bruce told Harry. “For the most part, we’ve confirmed that it is, in fact, a fluid based off the tesseract. We still have no idea how this happened, and it has unusual properties when I look at it under the microscope. Tony is convinced that it’s because the fluid is magical in nature. The only other thing we have to test it against is you.” He looked up. “Well, more specifically, your blood. And your saliva, if you don’t mind. And maybe some tears?”

Harry flinched. “What do you want with my blood?” he said, taking a half step back.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “To run tests on it.” He said slowly, clearly surprised by Harry’s reaction.

Harry eyed him warily. “I don’t suppose you’d know, but there’s a lot of pretty nasty magic that can be done if you have a blood sample from someone.” He told Bruce.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “Sympathetic magic, huh?” He asked. “Well, I guess that myth had to come from somewhere. Still, I’m no magician, and I promise any samples we take won’t leave this lab. Do you mind?”

Harry debated for a moment, but Bruce made a good point. Harry had already decided to trust this team. He agreed, and moments later Bruce was rubbing the inside of his cheek with a cotton swab, and then offering him a slim glass test tube to fill with tears. Lastly, he tied a rubber tube around Harry’s feathered bicep and inserted a needle into his cubital vein to draw several tubes of rich red blood. He offered a piece of gauze and instructions to hold pressure over the puncture wound for at least four minutes, and then he offered Harry another weary smile.

“That’s really all we wanted.” He told Harry. “You’re welcome to hang around for a while, if you like, but unless you want to watch us run tests on your blood, we aren’t doing anything exciting.” He said, neatly racking the tubes and swirling the cheek swab into a vial of saline.

Tony chose that moment to curse and fling a piece of scrap metal halfway across the lab. It landed with a giant clang, and Harry flinched. “Ah, I think I’ll head out.” He said, and let himself out of the lab to an absent wave goodbye from Bruce and dark mutterings from Tony.
He was in a section of the tower he wasn’t familiar with, but that was nothing new. The tower was ridiculously huge and could easily house the entire Avengers team (plus tagalongs like Harry) ten times over. As it was, it was easy to get lost in the endless hallways and rooms, though Harry never had this problem- it was easy enough for him to pop wherever he wanted to be.

“Jarvis, what’s the time?” He asked the air around him, and almost as if he’d cast a Tempus Jarvis obligingly informed him that it was thirty minutes past noon- fifteen minutes past the deadline for hide and seek, and just about time for lunch. Harry vanished from the hallway in a ball of fire and reappeared a few yards off the kitchen- he’d found that randomly teleporting into the main living quarters had repercussions when you lived in a tower full of superheroes- and started striding towards the kitchen. As he walked, he slowly became aware of a quiet dripping sound, almost as if someone had left a faucet open, and he looked around himself curiously before realizing that he’d left his little gauze pad behind when he’d teleported, and the puncture where Bruce had drawn blood had reopened. A little trickle of blood had run from elbow to hand, and the bright red droplets extended behind him in a trail, back along the path he’d walked.

Another drop of blood fell with a quiet plip, and Harry flinched, grabbing his arm and staggering back against the wall.

Shit, he thought, and tried to take a deep breath. Breathe in for one, two, three... breathe out for one, two... Drip.

Harry sunk against the wall, head between his knees, and the world around him folded down and in and suddenly he was back in that cell again, the drip-drip-drip of water driving him mad as it slid down the wall in the neighboring cell. He would have done almost anything for a drink of that water. His cell was damp and mossy, but for all that, there was no water he could get- even dragging his tongue along the damp wall would get him a merely a mouthful of dirt and the sharp taste of stone and iron across his tongue. They had provided him with enough water to keep him alive through his captivity, but no more than that, and when Harry passed his tongue across his lips now they felt dry and cracked, his tongue swollen and fuzzy.

He had no idea how long he had spent, crouched against the wall in the hallway, stuck in the cell inside his head, when enough of his awareness returned that he was able to hear a voice. It was rambling and male, and something in the timber and strain of it told him that the speaker had been talking for quite some time, and it did not belong in Harry’s cell under Malfoy Manor. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and let the voice ground him, following it up out of his memories and into the hallway, where his arm hurt from how hard he was gripping it with his taloned hand, and his knees were protesting their crouched, cramped position, and where the hallway smelled of wood polish and a hint of pasta from the kitchen, not like iron and stone and damp.

He brought his head up, finally, bleary eyes opening and focusing, and found Steve seated against the wall across from him, arms folded on his knees, head leant back, in the middle of a story about someone named “Bucky” and what sounded like three different women. When Harry stirred quietly, extracting his talons from his arm, Steve looked up and smiled shyly.

“Hey.” He said quietly, and twisted the top from a plastic water bottle sitting next to him. “Water?” He asked, tilting the bottle towards Harry, and when Harry nodded, he shifted to his knees and shuffled closer, every movement small and contained and designed not to startle. Harry took the bottle and guzzled it, washing away the memory of thirst and moss.

“Flashbacks.” Steve said softly. “I get those too, you know.” He said, still resting on his knees, his broad shoulders hunched down to be non-threatening. Harry eyed him thoughtfully. He hadn’t spent much time with Steve- of all the Avengers, he was the least social, retreating to his suite of
rooms for most of the day and often skipping team dinners. Harry could easily say he’d spoken to even Pepper more than Steve, and Pepper didn’t even live with them. Harry had thought that maybe Steve just didn’t like him, but Clint had told him that the super soldier was this way with everyone. Clint called him standoffish. Natasha had told Harry he was complicated. But for all that... Steve had just talked Harry out of a flashback with all the grace and confidence of long experience.

Harry offered Steve a tremulous smile, and the soldier leaned back, relaxing slightly, and offered another shy smile. “You know what helps me after an episode?” He asked, and Harry raised an eyebrow, not quite ready to speak, and eyed the second water bottle next to Steve. Steve handed it over without prompting, and rocked back onto his heels. “I paint.” He said. “Well, I painted long before Bu... the war, but it helps now. Care to join me?” He asked, and pointedly did not offer a hand, content to leave Harry his space. Harry appreciated that more than he could say, and with a nod, he levered himself to his feet and followed Steve.

Steve’s studio was set up in the second bedroom of his suite, and he waved Harry in with a sheepish smile. “It’s a bit messy, sorry. I wasn’t expecting company.” He said, and Harry raised an eyebrow. The studio was almost excessively neat—paints sorted by type and color stood on a stand by the door, canvases sorted by size leaned against the wall, and the only thing out of place was a palette and a few brushes left strewn over a chair. Nonetheless, Steve fussed around and tidied up a few invisible messes like a self-conscious housewife, and Harry soon found himself gently herded in front of one of the three easels in the room, a palette with red, white, blue, and yellow paints set in front of him, a cup of water, and a brush.

“Go for it.” Steve encouraged with a smile, gesturing to the blank canvas.

“What should I paint?” Harry asked, clearing his throat after his voice threatened to break on the fist word.

“Whatever you like!” Steve said. “Paint anything. Paint nothing. Sometimes just getting color on the canvas can help.” He said. Harry stared at the canvas, nonplussed. “Just start mixing paint until you have a color you like, and start there.” Steve prompted, and Harry looked down dubiously at his palette. A color he liked? Well, he was always fond of Gryffindor red, he thought, taking a big dollop of pure red paint and smearing it across the canvas. It mounded and dripped, and he went back over it a few times until it absorbed into the canvas, the bright red of the paint fading into an awkward peachy-pink. He frowned, and scooped up more red.

Red was followed by yellow, which mixed on the canvas to form a dark umber-orange, and then he was furiously mixing colors on the canvas, pulling streaks of dark umber through fields of bright yellow, pairing sunflower orange with hibiscus red, forming petals of bright yellow-orange up from embers of red and dark orange. He painted until his arm was almost sore from the amount of force he was putting through it and the brush he’d been using was bent and squished-looking, some bristles poking out the wrong way and some left behind in the whorls of paint.

He pulled back from the canvas, panting slightly, and looked at his creation. It was nothing concrete, simply swirls of red and orange and yellow, but as he stared into the colors he was suddenly reminded of his flamescape, of that sixteen year dream he’d spent inside the shell of a phoenix, and when he gazed at it he was surprised to realize that his heart felt... empty, almost cleansed, and certainly not near as terrible as he’d felt crouched in the hallway.

He looked up to thank Steve, and found the man had uncovered one of the other canvases and was adding details with a fine brush. Harry leaned over his shoulder to watch, and realized that Steve was painting the view out the window, a scene of the Brooklyn Suburbs and the lower bay beyond.
While Harry’s painting was a mess of color and brightness, Steve’s was careful and precise, black and white and blue, and was incredibly well-executed and almost-precise. As Harry compared it to the view outside, he realized that some of Brooklyn’s high-rise buildings and parts of the waterfront were missing in Steve’s painting, replaced by brownstone townhouses and a shambling dock that looked like it belonged to a New York of a hundred year ago.

Harry paused. A New York of a hundred years ago? No, more like a New York of 60 something years ago... the New York of Steve’s childhood, if he understood the soldier’s backstory correctly. And as he looked closer, he saw that the water around the dock was less water and more jagged spears of ice, angled up and encroaching on the city like they were about to grow and engulf the entire city entirely in ice. Harry opened his empathy shields and focused in on Steve, and realized that right now, the man was achingly, paralyzingly, bone-numbingly sad, with a heavy sort of sadness that spoke of grief and loss, and of a sense of displacement so profound that Harry almost staggered. He reached out involuntarily to Steve, wanting to comfort, like simple contact might help chip away at the grief he was feeling, and forgot that his hand was still holding a half-ruined paintbrush loaded in flecks of yellowy-red, and that he was sneaking up on a super-soldier.

Steve flinched at the unexpected contact, a strong hand coming up to knock Harry’s hand back, and the impact sent the brush flying end over end, flecks of yellowy-red paint arching from the flying brush and covering Steve’s beautiful landscape with a fine mist. Harry’s mouth dropped open in horror as the brush fell to the ground with a wet splat, and Steve’s head cocked to the side as he studied the unintentional addition to his painting. Harry’s eyes widened as he felt some of Steve’s heavy grief and guilt break apart and a soft shiver of amusement run through it, right before Steve grabbed his own brush, still loaded in icy-blue pain, and intentionally flicked it right back at Harry, covering his chest feathers and the toga-like wrap they’d invented as an improvement over his illusory loincloth in a spray of paint.

Harry’s lips quirked into a grin. “Oh, it’s like that, is it?” He asked, grabbing his palette and scooping up a glob of green pain, which he flicked right back at Steve. Some of it flew over his shoulder to spatter across the reaching sea behind Steve, and then the paint war was on, volleys of crimson-red and cerulean-blue answered by saffron-yellow and salmon-pink.

When the battle ended, Harry and Steve were covered from head to toe in a rainbow of colors, and Steve’s breath caught in his throat as he turned to see what had become of his black-and-white landscape. Miraculously, no large, disfiguring globs of paint had landed- instead, the entire painting was covered in mists and drops of paint that made it look as if New York was standing, black and white, under a rainbow rainstorm.

“Wow.” Harry said, coming up next to Steve.

“I’ve never done surrealism before.” Steve commented with a smile, and as he rested a large hand on Harry’s shoulder, Harry realized that quite a bit of the icy sadness in his emotions had melted away, a soft, happy glow emerging.

Harry smiled. He’d have to work on getting Steve more integrated with the rest of the Avengers-Steve was entirely too good at faking normalcy. He doubted any of the others realized that the super soldier was operating under an almost-crippling amount of PTSD and survivor’s guilt.

.xOx.

“Harry!” Clint called, running down the hallway after Harry the next morning, and Harry turned towards him. Clint was unusually glad to see him- it probably had something to do with his newest repeating nightmare, the one in which Harry got shot. He’d had it again last night, the third time he’d had it in a week. He pulled up as he approached Harry and took his first proper look at
“Hey, what are you doing in your human form?” Clint asked, entirely derailed by the sight of a fully-human Harry, clad in a pair of stretchy yoga pants and a loose black tank top that must belong to Natasha, judging by the fact that they actually fit him instead of being three sizes too big.

Harry shrugged. “Bruce and Tony are trying to figure something out with the tesseract.” He said. “They took blood samples from me in my hybrid form, and they didn’t get the results they wanted, so they asked if they could try this form as well.” He looked down at his outfit and frowned. “And Natasha said my other clothes are still dirty from last week, so she gave me these. Also, she told me that you were going to be my sparring partner today?”

Clint winced. Of course she had. She was far too observant, and she’d noticed the tension between him and Harry after the bakery incident almost immediately. She’d wheedled the whole almost-kiss story out of him and was willfully ignoring Clint’s assurances that nothing was going to happen between them, choosing instead to plot and matchmake like the mother hen she was.

“I’ve still got another five hours left on this transformation. Do you want to wait until I revert back to do training?”

“Nope!” Clint said, mouth moving before brain. “No, no, this is great, I mean it would be good to practice in my human form.” Clint babbled, silently cursing himself for his slip of the tongue and Natasha for being a devious bitch. Did she have to put him in yoga pants for this?

“O-Ok.” Harry said, giving Clint an odd look, and Clint hoped he hadn’t heard him. “Natasha wanted me to work on hand-to-hand today.” He added with a small frown. “Which is odd, because she told me just yesterday that my strengths are going to be long-distance fighting and support roles, with my powerset.”

Clint wasn’t sure whether he should murder Natasha, or send her flowers. She’d clearly manufactured this scenario with his attraction to Harry in mind, which would have been very kind of her, if he’d intended to act on it. As he’d firmly decided that Harry was Not Interested in him, though, it was just setting him up for torture. He let out a very manly squeak as Harry took his silence for assent and turned back towards the gym, giving Clint a fantastic view of the muscles flexing in his glutes and thighs through the tight pants as he walked away.

Clint cleared his throat and hurried to catch up, deciding that walking next to Harry was safer for his blood pressure than walking behind him. “Hey, did you hear that radio broadcast from yesterday?” He said, and at Harry’s headshake he elaborated, filling the silence with chatter so that he didn’t have to think about his reaction to Harry’s collarbones as they played hide-and-seek under the skimpy cover of the tank top.

“Yeah! It was all about you, actually. Well, you as a bird. Well, you as a not-phoenix bird, because apparently the glamor bracelet you were wearing before works on cameras too. The media got ahold of some footage, and there’s a ton of gossip about the Avenger’s “mascot.” Everyone thinks that you’re my bird, too, some hawk or falcon or something that I trained, because someone got a rather fantastic photo of you coming in for a landing on my wrist.” He rubbed his nose. “Actually, I think this is the most I’ve heard my name mentioned on the radio in a while.” He said with a laugh. “They were trying to name you, and it was terrible. Take my advice, and NEVER let the media give you your superhero name.” Clint continued. “I mean, they were trying to match your name to mine, but it was all Hawkfeather and Hawkwing and Hawkeye’s Hawk. They gave your arch nemesis a name too- the Reaper. It seemed fitting, though I don’t know how they knew that.”
Harry grimaced. “Yeah, Natasha told me I should come up for a name for my in-between form.”
He offered. “I’ve been asking the others for their input. They’re no help. Bruce thinks I should just
go with ‘the Phoenix.’ Tony’s best try was ‘Birdman,’ though I’m hoping that he was kidding.”
Harry said. “Natasha’s tried a few. She’s thinking something like ‘Redwing’ or ‘Firefeather,’ but so
far nothing’s been good. I asked Steve and he laughed, told me he didn’t even name himself.”

Clint snorted. “Well, that’s better than calling yourself ‘Captain Bird.’” He offered, and Harry
punched him lightly in the arm.

“Be nice!” Harry scolded with a snicker. “It’s not like you have any better ideas, you know.” He
pushed open the doors to the gym and made a beeline for the mats on the other side of the room.
“So, fair warning.” He told Clint as Clint slipped off his shoes to follow. “I’ve really not done any
sort of hand-to-hand, so you’ll have to start with the basics.”

Clint sighed, and pushed thoughts of yoga pants and pink, parted lips from his mind as he squared
off against Harry on the mat. “Ok, so the first thing to keep in mind is that you’re small.” He
laughed at Harry’s objection. “No, seriously, you’re what, 5’7”? That might be respectable for
most, but you’re up against supers. We have this thing where most all of us- the men, that is- are at
least 6’2’, don’t ask me why. So you’re going to have to use a different style of fighting, more like
Natasha’s than mine or Steve’s. Her style is all about dodging and using the opponent’s strength
against them, see?”

He showed Harry how to stand and the basics of grappling, how to read the direction of a punch or
a grab, and how to get his hips under his opponent’s center of mass to topple them.

“Good!” Clint said as Harry slotted his slim hips neatly under Clint’s pelvis and sent him rolling
over his back with a heave and a twist. “And what do you do when you’ve got them down?” He
asked from his position on the ground, and Harry grinned at him.

“Run like hell?” He offered cheekily, and seemed surprised when Clint nodded.

“Exactly! See, if you’d run, you could have gotten away before I managed to do this!” Clint said,
bouncing back to his feet and catching Harry in a bear hug that lifted him from his feet, and
refusing to let him down even as the boy twisted and struggled, beating his heels against Clint’s
shins.

Harry laughed. “Ok, ok, point proven.” He said as Clint let him down. “But really, if that ever
happened I’d just teleport away.” He pointed out logically, and Clint frowned at him. “Maybe. But
you should always train every weapon in your arsenal. You never know, you might just get stuck
like this sometime, and then where would we be?” He said, and Harry frowned.

“You mean like that time in Cairo.” He said thoughtfully, and Clint nodded, letting him ponder for
a moment before bouncing onto the balls of his feet.

“Again!” He declared, and laughing, Harry obediently assumed the position he’d been taught; feet
shoulder-width apart, knees bent, hands low, open and ready. Clint pounced, and Harry
successfully tossed him again.

“I wish I’d known this before.” He told Clint musingly. “I would have loved to be able to do this to
my cousin when he came after me.” Clint frowned darkly. This wasn’t the first time that Harry’d
alluded to his relatives, and everything Clint heard just made it sound worse. At the very least,
they’d been neglectful. At the worst... well. Clint knew just how bad people could get. Most
people didn’t just run off to join the circus on a lark. He’d heard plenty of tales of abuse and
neglect there, and Harry showed all the hallmark signs, mixed with a healthy dose of trauma from
his war.

That was partially why he had such a hard time convincing himself that Harry was too young for him. The boy was so rich in experiences that had aged him beyond the face he was wearing, and he wondered, not for the first time, whether a human face that was truly Harry’s would look older than the 17-year-old fake body he was wearing now. Harry had explained Polyjuice to him, after all, in their frequent conversations of magic and how it all worked, and Clint liked to imagine that he saw more mature angles and less wide-eyed innocence in Harry’s hybrid form.

Harry took advantage of his moment of abstraction to barrel into him at hip height, successfully tackling him to the floor in a flurry of startled Clint and laughing Harry. They rolled a few times, coming to rest with Harry sitting perched on Clint’s chest, much like the bird he was, and Clint wheezing to regain his breath after Harry’s bony shoulders had knocked into his diaphragm on the way down.

“Gotcha!” Harry crowed, and ran agile fingers down Clint’s sides to his hipbones, and Clint laughed helplessly and squirmed, hands coming up to grab Harry’s wrists to make him stop, but Harry was slippery, the little shit, and squirmed free to continue, and Clint finally had to roll them over, pinning Harry’s slim hips under his knees and holding his devilishly dexterous hands pinned to the mat.

Harry was pink-cheeked and laughing beneath him, and Clint froze. “Shit. Get up, get OFF, stupidClintMOVE! He thought, but his body hesitated for long enough that Harry’s laughter faded and those bright emerald eyes looked up to lock with his. Clint felt absolutely stupid, frozen between desire and the fact that he knew better, and he almost choked when Harry’s eyelids fluttered and his pink lips twisted into a small, teasing smile as he pressed his hips upwards, where evidence of Clint’s interest was making itself known against the placket of his tactical suit pants. “Why Clint,” he teased. “Is that a banana, or...”

That was as far as he got before Clint flinched and flung himself backwards as if burned, apologies spilling from his lips. Harry sat up, his entire face flaming red. “Oh Merlin Clint I am so sorry.” He swore, and Clint looked at him, incredulous. Why was Harry sorry? Clint was the one perving on him. “I totally though that was a... a flashlight or something, Godric, I would have never done that if I knew that was... well.” There was an awkward pause in which Clint stared and Harry wrung his hands, until Harry couldn’t take the silence anymore. “Clint, would you say something? Anything?” He pleaded.

Clint winced. “I’m sorry.” He said, his voice low. “I’m so sorry. Here, I’ll get out of here and get Natasha in to teach you.” He started to get up, refusing to look at Harry. “Shit, I thought I had it under control, I know you’re probably not interested in me like that, you probably don’t even like boys, and even if you do...”

Harry cut off Clint’s ramble by the simple expedient of placing a hand on his wrist, and Clint’s gaze shot up to lock with emerald as he fell back to sit on his butt, shocked by the touch. “Clint.” Harry said slowly, wonderingly. “You mean... you’re actually interested in me? In... that way?” He asked, and Clint stared at him.

“Uh. Yeah?” He said. “I mean, of course. Have you missed the fact that you’re gorgeous? Or the fact that I almost kissed you outside that café?” He asked, and Harry flushed a pleased pink. “Wait.” Clint said, realization starting to dawn. “You mean, you... you’re not offended?” At Harry’s quiet head shake, Clint dropped his head into his hands.
“Oh, Christ.” He swore. “I swear, I’m usually so much smoother than this.” He said, and Harry chuckled.

“Yeah, sure.” He said. “I’ll believe that when I see it.” He said, and Clint rolled his eyes and reversed their grip so now it was his hand on Harry’s wrist. With a quick tug, he had the slighter male tumbling forward into his lap, and he settled a hand at the curve of Harry’s waist. Harry shuddered at the contact and Clint saw goosebumps rise on his arms. He grinned to himself. See, he could do smooth.

“Harry.” He said, leaning in close enough that his breath touched warm on Harry’s cheek. “May I kiss you?” He asked, and watched as Harry’s pupils widened. Instead of answering, Harry pushed up into the kiss, eagerly slotting his mouth over Clint’s own. Clint reached up with a pleased grumble, sliding his fingers into the hair at the back of Harry’s head, and tilted his head for a better angle. He kept it soft and slow at first, until Harry let out a displeased sound and reached up with both hands to grip the collar of Clint’s tactical suit, pulling him more firmly into the kiss and flicking the tip of his tongue across the seam of Clint’s lips.

Clint consented happily, letting Harry control the kiss from his lap as he let his hands explore the young man in front of him, learning the curves of his waist and the angles of his shoulder blades, playing up the knobs of his spine and rasping his fingers through his hair. He found that Harry shivered when he cupped his hip with one big hand and stroked the hollow of his belly with his thumb, and that he arched into the touch when Clint tugged gently at the hairs at the base of his skull.

Clint also learned that he liked it when Harry left little nipping bites along the column of his throat, especially ones that left little red marks. Clint learned that he let out a choked breath when Harry shifted his weight just so in Clint’s lap, and he learned that when Harry bit Clint’s lower lip he couldn’t help knocking Harry to his back and taking control of the kiss, hands wandering down to the curve of Harry’s waist and then lower, teasingly skirting over prominent hipbones and scratching lightly with his nails.

He was just about to slip his fingers under the waistband of Harry’s borrowed yoga pants (flowers for Natasha, definitely flowers) when the shrieking of an alarm and a flashing red light interrupted, effectively breaking the flow.

“Avengers!” Jarvis said, his voice simulating worry quite effectively. “There is a disturbance in Times Square! It looks like Dr. Doom and possibly the Reaper! Black Widow and Dr. Banner are already in route. Mr. Stark will assist the Captain.” He announced.

Harry flopped back against the floor, hair messy and lips swollen and red. “Merlin.” He groaned. “Does that thing always have such impeccable timing?” He complained.

Clint grimaced at him and offered a hand to pull him to his feet. “Usually.” He commiserated, reaching down to adjust himself inside the tight confines of his leather tactical suit and informing Jarvis that he and Harry would be along shortly. He ruffled Harry’s hair, returning it to its typical messiness and erasing some evidence of their recent activities. “Raincheck?” He asked with a crooked smile, and Harry reached up and fisted the material of Clint’s shirt, pulling him down for a long, slow kiss.

“Raincheck.” He agreed, breathing the word out against Clint’s lips, and with a whisper of fire, he vanished into his hybrid form and teleported himself and Clint straight to Times Square.

.xOx.
The battle was going well—almost too well, Clint thought. The Doombots were there as Jarvis had said, but the Avengers were plowing through them at a steady rate, mostly because of the addition of Harry. Dr. Doom hadn’t yet tweaked his bots to appropriately deal with Harry’s firepower, and all the time Natasha had spent with Harry was paying off. He was sending out fireballs, hotter and more condensed than those he had been able to create just last week, and more accurate as well. It only took him one hit to down a ‘bot. Clint slowed to watch him, drawing and shooting arrows on autopilot as he admired Harry’s form. His (friend? boyfriend? briend with benefits? He wondered, feeling a bit giddy at the thought) teammate was a joy to watch, all fiery determination and golden beauty as he hovered in a sunbeam, picking off Doombots one at a time with each well-aimed fireball.

Clint grinned. Yeah, they were going to have to come up with a good superhero name for Harry, because if he had his way, Harry would stay around for quite some time.

And then, Clint saw something that made the smile drop from his face.

It was the scene out of his nightmare, that horrid dream he’d had a week ago and then had repeated throughout the week. A red dot was shining, bright and steady over Harry’s forehead, and Harry hadn’t noticed. He was just hovering there, focused on his fireballs.

Clint panicked.

It was a stupid move, a stupid, dangerous move, but even as he realized it, he was jumping, leaping. Because it was Harry up there, bright and bold and alive, and if he didn’t get there in time the bullet would take him square in the gut and Harry would crumple, black and crimson feathers in disarray, and that mouth that he had just kissed, less than an hour ago, would open in a surprised "o" at the pain. So Clint jumped, even though it was dumb, even though it was dangerous, because in that moment it was the only choice.

The gun went off with a sharp crack.

Clint’s jump was aimed to take him right into its path, to shield Harry from the incoming bullet. He closed his eyes, waiting for the pain to punch into his stomach, and then he felt bright heat bloom in front of his face. He opened his eyes, and there was Harry in his bright red-goldness, wings spread in defiance as he took the bullet that Clint had tried to take for him.

Clint made a sound that didn’t even sound human as the bullet took Harry high in the chest, the caliber large enough that it exited his back in a gory show of white chipped bone and wet redness, deformed from the impact, and bored partway through Clint’s tactical vest before its kinetic energy ran out.

In the background, Natasha took out the sniper and the rest of the Doombots melted away into the side streets as the attention of the Avengers turned to Harry. Too late. Clint thought bitterly.

He hit the ground and ran for Harry’s still form, scooping the wizard-turned-phoenix into his arms with a cry. Green eyes were already blank and glazed—no final words or dramatic last messages from Harry, just death. Clint’s eyes brimmed over in tears as he held the body close for a moment, and then lowered him down, crossing feathered arms over his chest and using the gentlest of touches to close those staring green orbs.

At least the red feathers hid the blood, muttered a coldly logical part of his brain, and Clint wanted to be sick.

“Is he...?” Steve was the first to arrive, and from the pain in his voice Clint knew that he already
knew the answer to his question. Natasha said nothing, just laying a hand on Clint’s shoulder as she arrived. Iron Man and Bruce arrived just as the tears in Clint’s eyes spilled over and he turned into Natasha’s shoulder. “Shit. Shit.” He muttered into her while she shushed him, her own voice thick with distress. “Why does this always happen to people I love?” Clint said. “First my parents. Then my brother. Then Aaron. Now Harry.” He said, and Natasha pet the back of his head and shushed him, rocking him like a child.

“Clint.” That was Bruce, a trace of urgency in his voice. Clint ignored him viciously. The Big Guy could have easily taken the bullet for both of them, and then Harry would be alive.

“Clint.” That was Natasha, her voice shaking in something between sorrow and awe, and Clint peeled his wet face away from her shoulder to look. And a moment later he saw what she and Bruce had seen.

The edges of Harry’s feathers were smoking, the long primaries curling inwards as the smoke turned to little flickers of flame, sparks growing into tongues of fire as they moved up proximally from the edges of the wings inwards. Clint gave a choked cry as the flames rose up into a burning pyre that obscured Harry’s face with an audible whoosh of flame and the smell of incense and myrrh, and then died out, leaving behind a ring of soft gray ash.

It took him a moment to realize why that seemed wrong- he’d smelt burning bodies before, and they were no different than burnt meat.

Burnt bodies didn’t smell like incense.

He pulled away from Natasha and scrambled forward on a wild hope, digging through the pile of ash until he found it- a tiny baby bird, covered with a light coat of ash, that cheeped frantically when it saw him and beat its stubby little wings. He scooped it up and turned back to the team, uncaring of the gray ash smeared all over his suit and face, and held the chick out to them.

“Of course.” Bruce breathed, coming up to peer at the baby bird as it did the best to shake the thin coating of gray off itself, leaving behind fluffy, downy red feathers and gleaming golden beak and talons. “He’s a phoenix. The mythological bird of death... and rebirth.”

“Death and rebirth.” Clint said, looking down at the puddle of ash around their feet, his lips stretching into a relieved grin as he processed the fact that Harry was alive, that Harry was okay. “Harry, how do you feel about Nova? For your superhero name.” He said. “It means new, like rebirth, and it also can mean supernova, like fire and explosion.”

Harry chirped from his cupped hands and ducked his head in what was unmistakably a nod, and Clint grinned, stroking a finger over the crown of his head and surreptitiously wiping the edges of his eyes.

Steve stepped to the front of the group. “I think I speak for all of us when I say that the probationary period is over. Unless there’s any dissenters,” He looked around, and was only met with nods. “Well then.” He said, smiling. “It’s official. Welcome to the Avengers, Nova.”

Harry chirped happily and beat his stubby baby wings in vigorous acceptance.

Chapter End Notes
So... thoughts?
Chapter Notes

Chapter-Specific Warnings: 1) Discussion of body dysphoria, especially as related to sex and relationships. If this is a hot topic for you, might want to steer clear. 2) M/M content (don't like don't read) 3) Genre typical violence.

A/N:
-Hey all! I'm settling back into real life now that summer is well and truly over. Update schedule SHOULD be returning to bimonthly from here till the end of the story, which should be rather soon.  
-As always, thank you to my lovely reviewers. I've been wrestling a little with my motivation to get chapters written and posted in a timely manner, and your positive reviews really help get my ass in gear!  
-Timeline-wise, since someone asked, this story is taking place between “The Avengers” in 2012 and “Iron Man 3” in 2013.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Elisha spun the fragile glass vial in her fingers, watching as the movement caused the fine gray ash to swirl against its walls like the tiniest of tornados. She was lounged bonelessly across the couch in the middle of her temporary quarters, her wealth of black hair carelessly sprawled over the arm like an oil slick. She didn’t bother to raise her gaze from the vial as the door opened and Victor Von Doom stepped through with all the deference of a battering ram.

“You came to me with promises of results, and I have seen none.” He said in his ponderous voice, crossing metal-plated arms over his chest and looming over Elisha’s sprawled form.

She flicked violet eyes up to him. “Victor.” She purred. “You are losing faith in me so quickly?”

Doom’s metal face allowed no show of emotion as he answered. “Our deal was that I would provide you with shelter and manpower. In return, you were to remove the Avengers from New York. Not only have we made no progress, the Avengers have in fact increased by a team member; one who is quite adept at ruining my bots beyond repair. Your arrangements to have him disposed of were for naught- my sources tell me that he is alive and well.”

Elisha smiled as she rolled to her feet. “All according to plan, my dear.” She said, slinking closer and allowing a long, pale hand to trail over Doom’s arm and shoulder in a poisonous caress. “Harry is my toy to play with, and for him to ripen I must allow him time to... to bond with these Avengers, to think himself one of them. I allow him to think that he has the advantage, and then... we snatch it away from him.” She fisted one elegant, pale hand in illustration, and turned, stalking across the room to her desk.

“True, as he is now, he is more than capable of standing against us.” She said. “His ability to reverse the depression that I spread- it is annoying, and it is getting in the way. But I have a plan for that.” She placed the vial she held down with a clink, and then walked her fingers over the other two objects on the desk. “I know how to disable his advantage. He is, unfortunately, immune to most traditional magic, and the state that my magic is in- I can bind him temporarily, drain some of his power, but nothing more. However.” She said, lifting a second vial, this one filled with a
pearlescent liquid. “I happen to know of a way to create a wand- a wand that can bypass his pesky little... immunity, though it is fragile and difficult to obtain. It requires that I collect a very special set of ingredients.”

Her long, pale fingers danced over the items on the desk. “The tears the phoenix in question, and ashes from his first Burning Day,” she said, tapping the two vials, “when mixed together properly, can become something much like clay. For a single-use wand, they can replace the wood. His very own phoenix feather,” she stroked the gleaming red feather, still mostly wrapped in its protective cloth, “becomes the core, and I simply need to acquire one or two drops of blood for the binding. A wand made entirely of his own body will be able to affect him, though it will only last for a single spell. You see, Victor, it is completely under control. You simply must be patient with me for a while longer.”

Doom tilted his head down, and shadows gathered in the metal pits that covered his eyes. “My patience is endless, when it is deserved. You have not earned it yet. However, my attention is required elsewhere for now. If you do not eliminate the Avengers within the next few months, I will do it for you, and I will expect repayment for the boons I have granted.”

Elisha stood on her tiptoes and brushed a mockery of a kiss over the cheek of Doom’s mask with a bright titter of laughter that failed to brighten her eyes. “Oh, such a charmer, Victor.” She teased. “Don’t you worry your shiny little head. I’ll take care of this for you so that you may concentrate on more important things.”

As he turned to leave the room, Elisha let her smile fade. She watched him leave with dead violet eyes, one pale hand clenched in a fist.

Once she was done with her important things, then it would be time to deal with Victor Von Doom as well, she vowed.

.xOx.

Dying really had a way of putting things into perspective, Harry thought, as the Avengers fluttered around the common room, attempting to create a safe, comfortable space for a tiny baby bird. Being shot through the chest had been incredibly painful, and it wasn’t as if he had weighed his options rationally at the time- he’d seen a teammate in danger, (seen Clint in danger, a little voice whispered in his head, and he ignored it with the ease of long practice) and he’d reacted, throwing himself in the path of the bullet in a spectacular demonstration of his tendency to save everyone he possibly could. In hindsight, it made sense that he’d survived, being a phoenix and all, but at the time, he hadn’t expected to come back to life. When he’d seen that bullet heading right for his chest, he’d thought that was the end for him.

Clearly, death just wasn’t a thing for Harry Potter, he thought wryly. The Boy-Who-Lived, indeed. He’d survived the Killing Curse as a baby, and then come back after his fiery sacrifice, and now he’d survived a high-caliber bullet to the chest. In a way, he was pleased. He hadn’t truly wanted to die. But on the other hand... it was another check in the “freak” column.

Wizard, not muggle. Check. Boy-Who-Lived, not ordinary wizard. Check. Parselmouth. Those were bad enough. Then had come the whole phoenix thing, which blew all the rest out of the water. And now he was immortal, for all intents and purposes. Check-freaking-check.

Clint appeared in front of him, carrying a cardboard box lined with a soft, flannel shirt. He lifted Harry and gently settled him into the fuzzy shirt, and Harry’s eyes half-closed as he snuggled into the soft, warm material. His feathers fluffed a little in pleasure at the smell of Clint, leather and cloves from his bow-oil and the faintest tinges of gunpowder, smoke, and blood.
Perspective, he reminded himself, watching Clint as the archer fussed with a small bowl of water that he was trying to place in the box with Harry. As he was falling, after the bullet had torn through his chest, he’d told himself that maybe it would be better for Clint, for Harry to be dead. After all, Harry had never told Clint that his access to his human form was limited. In fact, he hadn’t told any of the Avengers. He’d never found the right time, and really, he hadn’t even accepted the fact, always hoping that Hermione would come out of left field with a cure, or that the whole wand thing would pan out. As he was dying, he’d realized just how far-fetched those hopes were. All he had was his Polyjuice, and at this point, he had 35 hairs remaining. And here he was, pursuing a romantic relationship with someone. And it wasn’t just romantic- it was also sexual, and Harry only had thirty-five sessions of being human left. Not that Clint minded his Nova form, for the most part- he treated Harry much the same regardless of form, teasing and flirting and training together- but Harry minded. He was human. He was born human, and even if Clint was ok with it, Harry wasn’t even going to consider engaging in a sexual relationship in his in-between form. He’d come a long way in accepting Nova, but everything... down there functioned entirely differently, and he felt a little nauseous just thinking of it. He could live in his hybrid form, if he had to. But his sexual identity did not jive with internal sexual organs and cloacae, and he forced his mind away from contemplating avian sexuality before the crawling wrongness of that thought sucked him down.

All this thinking only led to one conclusion, and it was a conclusion that made Harry incredibly sad; he needed to call this developing thing with Clint off, before one of them got hurt. There was no way that this relationship was going to end well, not when they already had so much working against them.

Harry settled his head down on the flannel shirt again, cuddling into Clint’s smell. He’d enjoy it for now, he decided guiltily. After all, he needed to be both awake and in possession of human vocal cords in order to have the conversation, and he’d forgotten just how hard it was to stay alert for long periods of time when he was inhabiting the body of an infant.

.xOx.

It was a good thing that he reacted well to surprises, Clint thought darkly, as he watched Harry attempt to scale the couch with his beak and talons, unfledged wings extended for balance. The phoenix was almost four times the size he’d been when they had pulled him out of the pool of ashes two weeks ago, covered in long red pinfeathers that were quickly becoming true feathers, and thoroughly sick of being a baby. Subsequently, he was getting himself into everything he possibly could, and Clint found it cute in a way that he knew he probably shouldn’t. Harry had yet to shift into his Nova form, either unwilling or unable, and so the other Avengers had taken to treating him like a semi-sentient pet while he grew, which included a rotating roster of supervision.

With the assistance of the Ouija board from the closet, (previously unused and still in its plastic packaging, because Steve was, perhaps unsurprisingly, incredibly superstitious), they’d determined that Harry, for all his diminutive size and penchant for getting into absolutely everything, retained all his memories and all the reasoning capabilities that he possessed as an adult. Which, Clint thought with a bit of a glow at the phoenix, now wobbling precariously across the back of the couch, were not necessarily great to begin with. Clint’s tactical suit was meant to take bullets, for God’s sake. He’d have been hurt, sure, and badly, but unlike Harry, he wouldn’t have died. Probably. Unless the bullet found a weak spot in his armor.

(That’s why he’d jumped in front of the man when he saw the bullet, he told himself. Because he had known that he’d survive. He ignored the little voice that told him that he’d thought no such thing- he’d just moved to protect Harry.)
And sure, for Harry, death apparently wasn’t permanent, but Clint had his doubts as to whether the wizard-turned-phoenix had actually known that before jumping in front of Clint. Harry’d been exasperatingly vague on that point, and he point-blank refused to communicate with Clint one-on-one through the board. The fact that the phoenix seemed to be avoiding him was starting to grate on Clint. All the Avengers were taking turns babysitting the phoenix, and Clint had walked in to see Harry sleeping on Bruce’s shoulder, preening Natasha’s hair, and using the board to talk to Tony or a nervous Steve.

He did none of those things with Clint, despite the fact that before the incident, he was found more often with the archer than not, regardless of form. Clint desperately wanted to know why, but every time he’d done so Harry had refused to respond.

He’d gone through every reason he could think of. Was the phoenix mad at him for jumping in front of him? Perhaps he was upset that Clint had reacted so strongly to his death. Maybe he was just shy after their make-out session in the gym? He certainly hadn’t seemed shy at the time, but perhaps he’d just gotten carried away in the heat of the moment. Clint certainly had.

Whatever the reason, Clint knew that he wouldn’t understand until Harry finally deigned to talk to him, and Clint was determined to make that conversation happen. Regardless of the form Harry was in, he had found a rapport with the wizard-turned-phoenix that he’d not had with any of his other comrades. He was hesitant to label it, but he absolutely refused to let their growing closeness die without a fight. Eventually, he would get Harry to talk to him about what was bugging him. And if it was the sexual aspect of their relationship, if Harry was just not that into him, he was happy to let it die to keep his friendship with the man.


.xOx.

Harry leaned against the wall next to his bed and thumped his head back against the wall, letting out a frustrated breath. Today had been his first day back in his Nova form after he’d finally matured to the point of flight yesterday, and he was hoping that no one had looked closely enough at him to realize that both his phoenix and hybrid forms were currently in mid-adolescence, where they had been in young adulthood prior to his untimely-death-and-resurrection. The difference was only in a smidgeon of height and depth of the muscle in his chest, but he was pretty sure Clint had noticed. Still, three weeks as a baby bird was more than enough for Harry.

He scrubbed feathered hands over his face. Clint. He’d still not started the conversation that they needed to have, mostly because he was an absolute fucking coward. Clint had been so happy when Harry had appeared in the common room, boasting two almost-hands and a set of vocal cords, and Harry had taken one look at him, choked out an excuse, and bolted to his room. He’d left quickly, but not quickly enough to miss the pained look that crossed Clint’s face as he watched Harry flee from him.

He slid down the wall and dropped his head into his hands. He needed to get a handle on this situation, and right now, because he had problems to deal with. The first thing that he’d done once all his powers had returned had been to flash down to Galliano & Sons to investigate why he hadn’t heard from Susan. He had found himself in a deserted shop, crime tape marking off the door and his feather nowhere in sight. Eavesdropping had revealed that Susan had vanished the same day that he’d given his feather, and that a woman with purple eyes and no wand had been seen leaving the scene.

He needed to call Hermione to tell her what had happened with his feather, see if she could figure out how to reclaim it, or at the very least what Degnolaten could do with it, as its loss was sitting
heavy in his stomach. Also, he had to let her know that he was alive, as he’d missed their last two
scheduled mirror calls, and had skipped the one before that in favor of having Clint tell her that he
was indisposed for an indeterminant amount of time.

She had probably been worried, but if she had realized he’d had a burning day because he’d thrown
himself in front of a bullet, she would have arrived in a fit of fury and chaotic curls, and that
wouldn’t be good for anyone. Also, he was an absolute fucking coward and didn’t want to face her
quite yet, especially if he had to tell her that he’d given away his feather like a moron and it was
now missing, most likely in the hands of Degnolaten, and a huge liability if his instincts were right.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, the enchanted mirror on his bedside table began to glow and
chime softly. Harry ignored it. He wasn’t ready to talk to her yet; he was far more content to sit in
his corner and force himself to breathe slowly and pretend that everything was fine.

The mirror continued chiming, and finally Harry reached out to grab it, intending on stuffing the
damn thing under the mattress to muffle the sound. His clumsy, feather-slippery talons missed,
though, and the mirror fell off the bedside table, popping open with a clatter and a crack like
breaking glass. As Harry fumbled to pick it up, Hermione’s face stared back at him, reflected
twice, once in each side of the broken mirror.

He gave her a smile that looked more like a grimace, and she scowled thunderously at him, worry,
relief, and exasperation warring for dominance over her face. “Harry James Potter!” She scolded.
“Where in the world have you been? We were supposed to speak almost a full month ago, and all I
get is a stranger telling me that you’re indisposed and then absolutely NO CONTACT for...” Her
voice trailed off as she got a better look at his face, and her expression settled on worry. “Harry?”
She asked, her voice softening. “Are you ok?”

Harry pasted on his best fake smile, looked up at her concerned face, and felt the corners of his lips
tremble. And just like the last time he’d spoken to Hermione, he let everything come tumbling out,
starting with the way Clint made him feel light and bubbly inside, like laughing every three
seconds, and how they’d had that moment in the gym that still sent shivers of pure want down his
spine when he thought about it. He told her about his spectacular leap into the path of the bullet
following Clint’s leap into the path of the bullet, and his resurrection, and his realization that Clint
didn’t know about the Polyjuice and how he couldn’t scrape up the courage to tell Clint about it.
He told her about Susan Galliando and the errant feather, and how he’d been stuck in phoenix form
for the last month, and when he finished he looked up pleadingly. Hermione always knew just
what to do. Maybe she could fix this for him?

Hermione closed chocolate brown eyes in exasperation, and then fixed him with her best maternal
glare. Harry felt his feathers poof sheepishly in reaction, and he stifled an inappropriate laugh at
how much she looked like Molly Weasley at that moment.

“Nothing’s ever easy with you, is it, Harry?” Hermione said, half wonderingly, half despairingly.
“First, you’re right- it wasn’t a great idea to get into a relationship without telling this Clint fellow
about your limited ability to be human, and I’m afraid I don’t have any news at all for you on that
point. You really should tell him at the first opportunity. You said he’s a muggle, right?” Harry
shrugs and nods. Clint’s a muggle raised squib, actually, but the difference isn’t meaningful
enough to point out. Hermione frowns. “Well, you don’t know how he’ll react until you tell him.”
She said philosophically, but Harry could see her doubt from here, and heaved a sigh. That’s what
he thought as well. “As for the other bit... Harry, it’s perfectly reasonable to feel out of place in
your body, especially when you’re thinking about sex. Before all this, you very firmly identified as
a male human, and a bird’s body... well. It is very hard, psychologically, when your inner identity-
be it species identity or sexual identity- doesn’t match your outer, and it might be a good idea for
you to talk to a professional about that at some point. I mean, there are ways— we can find someone willing to let you use their hairs, and Severus can make more Polyjuice, and that way you can be at least human, though you won’t be you.”

Harry turned that over in his mind, and started to smile. “Hermione, you’re a genius. I never thought of that… I mean, it’s not perfect. I’d much rather be me, but… that could work. It really could. It’s better than being a bird.”

Hermione shot him a quick smile. “We’ll talk about it more later.” And then her smile fell, and Harry flinched as her eyes all but sparked in worried fury. “But the rest? Harry, how could you be so stupid?” She asked, and Harry bristled.

“Yeah, yeah, I know…” He started defensively, but Hermione cut him off.

“No, you really don’t.” Hermione said, her voice rising into a shout. “First of all— giving away a phoenix feather? There are all sorts of dark magics that someone could cast on you through it. Why didn’t you ask me first?” She asked plaintively. “Is there any way that she has ahold of anything else of yours? Toenail clippings, hairs from your human form, blood?” Harry shook his head mutely.

“Well, at least that’s a relief. But really, Harry. Just giving a feather away was careless and reckless.” She took a deep breath, and the wrath in her eyes doubled. “And jumping in front of a bullet?!” Her voice went up several octaves, and Harry winced. Here she went. “Harry, we just got you back, and you go and sacrifice yourself AGAIN? That’s even more careless than giving up a feather! Do your friends mean nothing to you, that you’d risk dying again and making us lose you again?”

Harry bristled at that. He was willing to take her criticism for the rest, but... His friends meant everything to him. That’s why he was always trying to save them! “It had nothing to do with you!”

“Of course you weren’t, that’s the point—”

“Don’t make this about you, Hermione—”

“I’m not making this about me! I’m making this about your saving people thing! Harry, you deserve to live just as much as the next person, you have to stop sacrificing yourself for—”

“HERMIONE!” Harry bellowed, and Hermione blinked and paused. “I don’t want to argue with you right now.” He said. “I’m tired and I’m stressed, I’m alive, and I need to deal with some stuff. I’ll talk to you later.” He reached out and closed the mirror, much to Hermione’s affront, and stuffed it under his pillow (successfully, this time) as it began to chime again, mercifully muffled by the pillow.

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm. Hermione meant well, he knew, but he hated it when she got after him for putting himself in danger for others. She was convinced it was because of the Dursley’s— she thought they’d taught him that his life was somehow worth less than others, and therefore he was willing to sacrifice it for his friends. He thought she was reading too much into it. He just wanted his friends to be safe.

.xOx.

Harry was pacing inside his quarters, wrestling with himself. Part of him wanted to just go, go out
into the common room and talk to Clint. He’d thought that isolating himself from the archer would make the inevitable break-up easier— that he’d somehow forget how much he liked Clint’s broad frame and easy smile. Instead, he just felt guilty for avoiding the man, and no matter how he tried to distract himself, his thoughts circled straight back to contemplating the endlessly cheerful glint in his bright blue eyes, his boisterous laugh, his easy kindness. Not to mention the way his strong thighs had felt under his own when he’d been perched in his lap, and his lips... 

He was grateful when Jarvis’ alarm went off with a wail and a flash of red light, and Jarvis crackled to life over the com system. “Disturbance at Coney Island!”

Harry flashed into the common room as the message continued, rattling off locations and arrival times of the Avengers. As he’d been asked, Harry snagged both Natasha and Bruce from the common room and pulled them along through the warp of his fire, dropping them into the sand at the edge of the boardwalk, the steely October ocean growling behind them.

Steve, Tony, and Clint rushed to meet them, and Harry leapt into the sky for a better look at the situation. There hadn’t been enough warning this time for an evacuation, and civilians were screaming, stampeding away from the beach and out of the crowded amusement park. To the west, the thin autumn sunlight was glinting off hordes of silver-and-green Doombots as they waded through the crowds.

The air to the east felt colder than the middling October day called for, and as he turned to look he saw his breath cloud on the air. Degnolaten, then, he thought, scanning the beach for her, and he found her at the base of the Ferris wheel, escorted by a sizable host of figures in fluttering black cloaks. There were people, *children* on the Ferris wheel, he realized in horror, stuck there and unable to get down as the carnie operating the wheel was nowhere to be seen. He darted back to the Avengers and relayed this information, and Steve wasted no time in sending Harry, Tony and Clint to the Ferris wheel, an order that Harry gleefully accepted, snatching his assigned teammates away from the beach in a swirl of fire. Steve’s orders were clear— Harry was to distract, Tony to protect, and Clint to use his circus knowledge to try and unload the passengers without tearing the wheel apart.

Harry came out of the teleport fighting, two of his hottest fireballs clenched in his fists, and he shot them one after another at the knot of Dementors, forcing them back and away from the control tower and the soulless corpse of the poor man who had been the operator. Degnolaten leapt after them with a curse, and turned her dead violet eyes to him with a delighted laugh.

“Harry!” She crowed. “You made it!” She raised hands crooked into claws, and gray tendrils rose from the shadows under her cloak, rising behind her and twisting into a pair of immense, clawed hands that imitated her own. Degnolaten raked a hand forward through the air, and the hovering hand followed her motion, scything through the air towards Harry and sucking all the heat and happiness from the air as it moved. Harry flashed into full-phoenix form and dodged between two grasping fingers, darting in and over Degnolaten’s head and tossing a hastily-formed fireball as he went. Behind him, Harry heard Clint whimper, and then the crinkle of a candy wrapper.

He’d remembered his words about chocolate, then, Harry thought, and redoubled his efforts on forcing Degnolaten away from the unfortunate folks trapped and terrorized on the Ferris wheel. As predicted, Degnolaten turned to follow him, and with her came most of the Dementors, though some stayed back to harry Tony and Clint.

Harry checked in on them, and found that Tony was successfully fending them off with a flamethrower he’d built into his suit with the purpose of fending of the dementors. Harry was glad to see it was working, even though the armored man was moving slow and sluggish under the
influence of the Dementors. Clint, whey-faced and staggering, was also clearly affected by the Dementors, but he had reached the control panel for the Ferris wheel and Harry crowed with delight as the great metal wheel shuddered into motion.

The sound brought color back into Clint’s cheeks, and all the dementors flinched, and so Harry followed it up with a short trill that was quickly cut off as he resorted to aerial acrobatics to avoid the spears of gray tendrils that Degnolaten was throwing up into the air after him, the attacks coming too quickly for him to toss a counterattack or gain the breath for a vocalization. The dementors were gathered around, scabrous faces turned up to watch him, and though they were unable to follow him into the air, he could feel the insidious creep and crawl inside his head as they tried to latch onto him. He blinked the green flashes from his eyes and pretended that they weren’t burning with repressed tears as somewhere in the recesses of his mind his mother begged and pleaded to the sound of a high, cold laugh. He tried to ignore the way his lungs and muscles burned and ached as he continued to avoid Degnolaten’s attacks, locked in a stalemate where neither side could land a meaningful blow.

The wheel continued to turn, and between attempts at dodging Degnolaten, Harry watched as Clint managed to unload more passengers, who were now huddled in a wary group at the base of the wheel, unwilling to venture out into the chaos that was Tony and Harry vs Degnolaten and the Dementors.

Distracted by counting the number of cars left to go, Harry missed the gray tendril rising behind him until it smashed into him, knocking him from the air. He twisted in the air, instinctually reverting to his less fragile Nova form, and crashed into the tracks of a rollercoaster with the screech of protesting metal and a wet popping snap where his shoulder hit metal at a bad angle. Harry grimaced in pain as he skidded down the ramp of the rollercoaster, the jagged edge of a metal rung tearing a deep cut into the skin of his thigh as he hit the base of the ramp with a jarring thump that set his dislocated shoulder throbbing.

He pushed the pain away and took in a deep breath, letting it out in a peal of golden song that had Clint and Tony shaking off the effects of the dementors and the nearest dementors cowering back. Even Degnolaten flinched back, and Harry held the note as long as he could, forcing the enemy to a standstill as Clint unstrapped and ushered out the last of the Ferris wheel riders. Harry held out until black spots were dancing in his eyes, and then dropped the note, taking a heaving breath to recover.

It took him a beat too long, and before he could even think to move his injured body, a ragged flap of black cloak fluttered over his hand and then he was being swarmed with dementors, close enough that he could smell their rot-sweet breath and feel their rough, cadaverous hands scrabble greedily over him, pulling roughly at the ends of his feathers.

He called up a weak sheet of fire to push them back, but it flickered and failed as his determination to fight began to fade into bleak, paralyzing despair. And then Tony was there with his flamethrower, adding in his firepower to Harry’s, and together, they pushed the dementors back a few steps.

Now, with Tony’s assistance, the tide of the battle changed. For all his agility and dodging ability, Natasha had been right when telling Harry that he functioned best as a support, lending his voice to bolster his teammates and his firepower for backup. Even though he was injured and now stationary, he could focus on pouring everything he had into his song, punctuating it with powerful, well-aimed fireballs.

With Harry’s song counteracting the effects of the dementors, Tony was back in full fighting form,
hammering the group of dementors with fire and blue energy beams, and behind them, Harry saw that his song had been enough to revive the frightened carnival goers, and Clint ushered the last of the group safely to the edge of the combat zone. There, they were taken in by a group of men who looked like Muggle police officers but wrapped the dazed men and women in warm blankets and pressed mugs of hot chocolate into their hands, and Harry was wryly impressed by the subtle support of America’s wizarding population. He doubted that any of the wizards back home could have accurately replicated any muggle uniform as well as these wizards were.

Civilians safely disposed of, Clint entered the battle, and with his trick arrows added to Tony’s firepower, they managed to push the dementors back into a huddle, their black cloaks even more ragged than before, now covered in soot and burn marks, and Harry was momentarily elated until he realized that he’d lost track of Degnolaten.

His song cut off as he whipped his head around, and she giggled from where she was perched above him in the wreck his fall had made of the roller coaster. The sound was incongruously light and childlike and made him shudder. She wiggled long, pale, blood coated fingers at him in a mockery of a wave.

She caught his gaze in hers and slowly dragged a too-long, too-pale tongue up the side of her hand, the startling red of his blood painting her lips momentarily in a macabre imitation of lipstick.

“You should be more careful with things like this.” She said lightly. “Thought, I suppose it makes my life easier that you’re not.” She waved goodbye and vanished with the crack of apparition. Tony and Clint let out identical, surprised yelps as the dementors facing them also vanished.

“Nova?” Clint called worriedly, turning back to where he’d last heard Harry’s voice.

“Jarvis says that the others are almost done with their battle.” Tony said. “Hawkeye, you’ll take care of Nova?” Tony asked, and at Clint’s confirmation, he rose up into the air to go and help mop up the rest of the Doombots, confirming with Jarvis that the Reaper had fled.

“Nova?” Clint called again, and Harry shifted from where he had collapsed at the bottom of the rollercoaster ramp.

“Here!” He called, and Clint leapt over the barrier fence at the edge of the rollercoaster and came to find him, his face creasing with worry as he took in Harry’s position. Harry struggled to sit upright, his shoulder and hip screaming and other, minor pains making themselves known as he tried to move.

Clint reached down to help him to his feet and off the metal rungs, lowering him gently to sit in a patch of mostly soft grass, large, gentle hands exploring Harry’s shoulder. He frowned at it, and Harry twisted his head to see what he was looking at. Harry grimaced at the sight of his shoulder hanging lower than it should, an obvious dimple between his collarbone and the ball of his shoulder telling the story quite plainly.

“I should relocate it before it swells.” Clint says, and Harry grimaced.

“Yeah, do it.” He grunted as Clint grabbed the arm, and Clint smiled down at him, his constant cheer dimmed a little by worry as he arranged Harry on his back and gently moved the arm to point straight out, one hand gripping the arm by the elbow and the other braced firmly in Harry’s armpit.

“I’m going to pull, ok?” He told Harry, who nodded and forcefully relaxed his body as Clint began to gently pull straight out until the shoulder made a grating, sliding sound that set Harry’s feathers on edge, and the shoulder ground back into place. He let out a relieved sigh as the pain lessened
considerably, and Clint grabbed a pair of abandoned sweatshirts and fashioned him a sling to hold the arm motionless and a makeshift bandage for Harry’s leg.

Harry eyed his leg mournfully and wondered how mad Hermione would be when he told her that Degnolaten now had both a feather and his blood.

Speaking of Hermione...

He turned to Clint, only to find that the archer was watching him with wary blue eyes, and sighed unhappily. “I... need to talk to you.” He told Clint, and watched as a blond brow arched.

“Oh, now you want to talk?” Clint said, and though it was said teasingly, Harry could see the hurt in his eyes. He grimaced.

“I’m... sorry.” Harry said. “I should have talked to you right away, but I was... well. I didn’t think we could have this conversation over Ouija board.” (also, I’m a absolute fucking coward. He thought, but didn’t say.)

Harry paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts, and Clint waited for him, his bright blue eyes dimmed somewhat in worry. Harry took a deep breath. “I haven’t been... totally honest with you, about the Polyjuice.” Harry stated, and Clint cocked his head.

Harry looked away, not wanting to see his face for his next statement. “I have plenty of Polyjuice, but... I only have 35 hairs left. I only have 35 transformations to human left.” He snuck a glance at Clint out of the corner of his eye, and the man looked slightly perplexed. The archer opened his mouth to say something, but Harry cut him off, forcing the words past a lump in his throat.

“When I... died, I came to the realization that it wasn’t fair of me to start a relationship with you, when there’s already an expiration date on in like that. I can only be myself 35 more times. That’s 210 hours, a little over eight days straight.” Harry could hear his voice crack a little and tried to modulate it a little as he continued, staring down into the dirt. “I only have one week of being human to offer you, and that’s not fair. Hermione was working on it, but she doesn’t think that she can come up with a solution, besides taking Polyjuice to make me into someone who isn’t me, but I don’t know. I... Clint, I really like you, and if it weren’t for this, I’d love to continue what we started, but...”

“Hey,” Clint said, cutting off Harry’s rambling. He caught Harry’s chin in a big, warm hand and tilted it to face him. “Hey.” He said again, warmly, and Harry dared to raise his eyes to meet Clint’s. He was surprised to see warm affection in them. “Is that all?” Clint asked, chuckling a little, and Harry bristled.

“It’s kind of a big deal.” He said sulkily, and Clint laughed out loud, scooping Harry into his arms and depositing him into his lap, mindful of his injuries. Harry let out an offended squawk and grabbed onto Clint’s shirt with his left hand to stabilize himself.

“No, I just... I thought you were mad at me, or regretting what we did in the gym that day.” Clint shook his head, and locked eyes with Harry. “Harry, I don’t care what you look like. Bird, human, Harry, Nova, I like you no matter what. I’ve been interested in you since we met. We’ve known each other for over a month now, and you’ve used 3 hairs. At that rate, we have what, almost a year to figure out another solution? And it’s magic, so it has to work out, right?”

Harry huffed at him, but a small, relieved smile was playing on the sides of his golden lips. “Magic... I think it breaks more than it fixes, Clint.” Harry said, and Clint laughed again, pulling an unresisting Harry tighter against him and settling his chin on top of his head.
“No, I don’t think so.” He said. “If it weren’t for magic, you’d have died three times over. But instead, magic saved you and you’re still here. That sounds like it fixes things.” Harry considered correcting him- if it weren’t for magic, he wouldn’t have been in a position to die for any of those three times, but he let Clint have it as he burrowed a little closer into Clint’s leather-clad arms.

“Besides.” Clint rumbled from over his head. “It’s not like we’re getting married. If at some point this doesn’t work anymore, we can re-evaluate. But for now... I’d really like the chance to keep getting to know you, Harry. Would you let me?”

Harry nodded sheepishly against his chest, and Clint chuckled, gently prying Harry out of his chest and dropping his head to brush a kiss over beak-hard lips.

Harry and Clint both flinched, Clint at the odd feeling of kissing cool, hard keratin instead of soft human lips, and Harry at his intrinsic disgust of anything sexual in his Nova form. Clint redirected his kiss to the soft, human skin of Harry’s cheek, and Harry tolerated that better, but still pulled away as soon as was polite.

“I really... would rather not do anything like that in this form.” Harry said tentatively, and Clint backed off immediately.

“Oh, sure, that’s fine.” He said, and though Harry looked close for any sign of irritation, Clint didn’t show anything. “Is this ok?” He asked, gesturing to where he was holding Harry in his arms, and Harry nodded, cuddling deeper into Clint’s arms.

“Yeah.” He sighed, closing his eyes. “This is nice.” He said, clinging tightly and blessing his hollow bones as Clint easily levered himself to his feet. He held Harry close to his chest as he worked his way out of the rollercoaster pit to catch up to the rest of the Avengers, who had just finished their battle and were coming back to fetch them.

Natasha took one look at them and cooed, her delighted expression at odds with the streaks of soot and oil highlighting her pale features, and wasted no time in snapping a picture of the two of them with her StarkPhone.

“Natasha...” Clint groaned, and the redhead grinned at him cheerfully.

“You’ll want this for the wedding.” She informed him, and against his chest Harry squirmed unhappily. Clint rolled his eyes.

“We’re taking this one step at a time.” He told her.

Natasha laughed at him. “Sure you are.” She said teasingly.

If Clint’s retaliatory kick was halfhearted, it had everything to do with not aggravating Harry’s injuries, and nothing to do with the fact that he really wanted to see what that photo looked like.

Honest.
Kudos and reviews please? Tell me what you think!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!