Tom Riddle received a thorough education in magic, cultivated an influential following, and secured his immortality. He then disappeared into the Muggle world and was quickly convinced that, left unchecked, Muggles were certain to doom the entire planet. Tom returned a decade later with a careful strategy for world dominion. He succeeded.

By the time a young Harry Potter, Heir to his Name and ward of the Malfoy family, is handed a wand at the traditional age of eight, he stands to inherit a modest territory of 25,000 square kilometers and eight thousand restless Muggle subjects.
The Wand of Yew

Chapter Summary

In which Harry turns eight, selects a wand, and intrigues a dark lord.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One: The Wand of Yew

“…nations will be happy, when either philosophers become kings, or kings become philosophers.”

Thomas More, Utopia (Book I)

July 31, 1988

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

Lucius Malfoy considered Harry Potter on the morning of his eighth birthday with a frown. From his seat across the long dining table, awash with sunlight and excitement, the child was lit with a glow that made his magical aura sparkle, easily visible to a wizard with Lucius’s trained eye. Draco, always slow to wake, was almost comically neutral in contrast. He was nudging his scrambled eggs around his plate without much interest, until Narcissa leaned over and murmured something to him, and then smoothed a hand over the pale silk of his hair. In his better moments, it was clear Draco was respectably powerful, and Lucius’s line had always had the fine mind to maximize their magical potential. But still, Lucius was vaguely envious that such raw ability should manifest in his ward and not his son.

Harry watched Narcissa and Draco with unconcealed envy. Narcissa was always kind to their ward, whom they had raised alongside Draco since the boys were two, but she and Lucius were careful to treat only Draco as a son. There were many reasons for keeping Harry at arms-length, but the most self-interested one was the very real possibility that one day their Lord would demand they toss Harry in their dungeons, if not publicly execute him in the square. It was best not to become too attached.

Still, Lucius was fond of the boy, so he cleared his throat to distract him and smiled as soon as those familiar, wide green eyes met his.

“Are you looking forward to seeing your parents this afternoon, Harry?” Harry’s parents visited him each summer for his birthday and each winter for Yule. They were not permitted to stay more than a few hours and could not leave the bounds of the anti-apparition wards. Harry nodded with a shy smile. His perpetually messy hair flopped into his eyes and he brushed it back impatiently. Narcissa had finally given up on trying to keep it tidy and short, and insisted that if it grew out enough, they might be able, at least, to bind it away from his face. A rather mature style for a young boy, but better than appearing constantly unkempt. Narcissa, attention caught by their
conversation, saw that Harry’s plate was empty and sent the fruit bowl and two slices of toast, accompanied by a knife hastily spreading a pat of butter over each, sailing toward him with a wave of her hand.

Normally Harry’s birthdays were rather quiet, affording him the most time with his mother and father, with a separate date set aside for a small party with a handful of suitable children his and Draco’s age. However, this year, Harry was eight, and among their Lord’s traditions was presentation of an ancestral wand to an eight-year-old Heir. That meant that the occasion of his birthday held particular significance, and representatives of several lordships would arrive later that morning for the ceremony. Draco had the honor the previous spring of the attendance of their Lord himself, though no one expected him to attend for Harry. He was only a Potter, after all.

“Draco, finish your eggs, then you and Harry may play in the garden for an hour before it’s time to change into your robes.”

Draco perked up a little at the prospect of play, as though he had expected to file off to tutoring as soon as he cleared his plate, as the boys would on a typical day. Possibly Draco had forgotten that it was Harry’s birthday. He was a rather spoiled child, though essentially good-natured. At some point Lucius would need to take him in hand, but eight seemed a bit young for that.

Harry was nibbling on his toast. He had a healthy appetite, and was a rather tall boy. James Potter was nearly of a height with Lucius, and his son showed signs of being taller, still. Lucius tried not to experience any sympathy when he thought of how much changed the Potters would find their child since Yule; he had grown at least four inches, and was leaner, too. Not to mention the hair, though he couldn’t think they would care overmuch about that. It was just long enough now for Harry to tuck it behind his ears, though it wouldn’t stay put.

“May we go, mother?” Draco looked expectantly at Narcissa, having inhaled his eggs, and at her nod, he all but leapt from his chair. “Come on, Harry! Let’s race to the gardens!”

Harry set down the slice of toast and looked at Narcissa to confirm he had permission to abandon his chair. When she nodded again, he got down with more grace than Draco, then the boys sprinted with identical disregard for their noble bloodlines toward the morning room, the fastest route to the garden.

“We should probably start expecting them to behave less like a pair of crups,” Lucius mused aloud, pleased when Narcissa smiled. He was very fond of his wife. Their families had arranged their marriage, but Lucius was sure he couldn’t have chosen better for himself, and he thought Narcissa might feel similarly, though she wasn’t the type to say.

“They know when to elevate their manners,” she said, unconcerned. “They’re only boys.”

“By this afternoon, they’ll be anointed Heirs, both,” Lucius reminded her, loathe to lose the smile that their teasing had elicited in his wife, but feeling the sudden need to make a point. “Not boys.”

Narcissa bowed her head in a display of deference. He was the head of their family, after all. But he knew when her heart wasn’t in it, and it wasn’t now. He caught the edge of her gaze, and it was sharp and watchful. He had a feeling the most difficult part of their marriage was ahead of them, as Draco got older and the differences in their approaches to parenting him inevitably and sharply diverged. If Narcissa had her way, Lucius mused darkly, Draco would never face a single trial or hardship. But Lucius knew that was no way to raise any wizard, let alone one who would one day wield the considerable power of House Malfoy, and who must court the favor of their short-tempered Lord.
A house elf appeared in the room. It bowed. “Lord Lucius, Lady Bellatrix is having arrived in the apparition chamber. Lady Bellatrix is not liking being in the apparition chamber.”

Lucius sighed, exchanging a look with his wife. Narcissa stood. “I’ll attend to her, thank you, Smiel,” she told the elf, striding from the room as hastily as she was able without giving the appearance of being in a hurry. Lucius admired her unconscious elegance as she left the room, while also preparing himself for the chore of Bellatrix’s company. She was his wife’s sister, the wife of a Head of family, and arguably, their Lord’s favorite. Lucius had mastered the skill of pretending to like her out of necessity, but that did not mean he did not struggle with it on occasion. At least he’d had breakfast. Bellatrix on an empty stomach would be a challenge on par with certain battles in the last war.

Predictably, Lucius could hear his sister-in-law long before he saw her.

“Honestly, Narcissa,” Bellatrix drawled. “The indignity of it! Why have the Potters here at all, if it means this degree of absolute inhospitality. Even a few minutes in there was nearly unbearable. Barbaric. Oh, Lucius. How lovely to see you.”

Bellatrix always managed to smile in a way that Lucius interpreted as a sneer, and speak to him in a way that Lucius interpreted as mocking, without technically doing or saying anything impolite. She had the same thorough instruction in manners as Narcissa, and her demeanor was just as controlled, yet manifested in a way as unlike Narcissa’s as Lucius could conceive.

“Good morning, my dear,” Lucius said with feigned warmth, standing as she approached him and taking her cool hands as they each kissed the air around one another’s cheeks.

“It is, isn’t it,” Bellatrix breathed, turning slightly to take in the views of the grounds visible through the enormous, freshly polished windows adjacent to the dining table. A portion of the lawn had been given over yesterday to an airy magicked canopy that hovered, crisp and white as a bed linen, in midair, sheltering a collection of tables and chairs staged for Harry’s anointing.

“Outdoors today, are we?” Bellatrix’s brows were up. She released Lucius’s hands and moved closer to the window, curious. “I assumed you would entertain the group in the ballroom.”

“It’s a smaller assemblage than we had for Draco’s ceremony,” Narcissa said quietly. “And it did not seem appropriate to perform within the walls of the Manor,” she added, somewhat uncertainly. Lucius knew it was difficult to express without inviting impolite commentary regarding their ward, but their Lord’s traditions stated that an ancestral wand should be presented in the ancestral home. However, their Lord had strictly forbidden Harry Potter setting foot in the Potter territory, let alone its seat, the Peverell Ridge. Removing the ceremony to the outdoors had been Lucius and Narcissa’s attempt to reconcile the conflicting edicts. Months before, Lucius had sent a carefully worded letter to his Lord describing their plans, and never received a reply. It was his uneasy conclusion that his Lord’s silence on the matter could be interpreted as approval.

“I assume you came early to help me dress,” Narcissa remarked, both a change of subject and an indirect message to Lucius that she hadn’t invited Bellatrix at this early hour. He hadn’t thought she would, but he appreciated the confirmation, nonetheless. Bellatrix turned with a sly smile for her sister that indicated some secret Lucius was happy to be ignorant of, and the women left the room with polite excuses to Lucius.

When they were gone, and he could no longer hear the voices, Lucius looked down at his untouched plate of food and cup of tea. He was excellent at compartmentalizing his emotions, so much so that he sometimes didn’t realize he had the inclination to worry or rage until he stumbled upon the feeling, neatly tucked in a corner of his mind. Loss of appetite was a sure sign he had
shuffled something of significance onto a mental shelf somewhere in the recesses of his brain. Frowning, he thought back over the events of the morning, and remembered his earlier observation, watching Harry Potter’s magic burning brightly, lit up by the sun.

There it was. A deep, almost prophetic unease. He had felt it before in association with Harry, beginning that distant night when Sirius Black, stiff, silent and emotionless but for the tears falling freely down his cheeks, had passed Lucius his sleeping godchild. And their Lord, standing nonplussed beside Black at the Manor’s gates, had instructed in his silky voice that Lucius was to rear the boy as his ward.

It was weeks later before Lucius deduced his Lord’s purpose. He meant to free or execute all prisoners taken during the war, and had taken pains to keep every old magical family intact when possible. Placing his enemies’ children in the homes of his most faithful was a way to ensure their obedience while raising their Heirs with the proper ideals. Lucius had thought it a brilliant solution, even later, when it came out the practice was borrowed from the Muggles’ histories. Sometimes wizards were too committed to solving their problems through magic.

Lucius spent a moment in the thrall of this powerful feeling, before he forced it back into storage. He didn’t have time for distractions. The day would be long, and difficult enough, without a clear head. Beyond the windows, Lucius heard laughter. When he looked up, he saw that Harry was in hot pursuit of Draco, who shouted in glee, his shorter legs almost a blur as he struggled to outrun his longer-strided friend. Lucius’s heart softened at the sight, especially when it became obvious Harry was holding back, letting Draco outrun him. They circled the canopied area before disappearing from Lucius’s range of vision, and for the second time in as many minutes, Lucius struggled with his emotions.

That first night, taking the small, warm body from Black, he had looked down at the pale, pink-cheeked face, the slack mouth and the tousled hair of his new ward, and known somehow that his heart was in danger. Since then, he had lived in fear of the Potters’ inevitable transgressions. Because Lucius had not managed to be completely detached with respect to the dark-haired boy who was such a dear complement to Lucius’s own son, and though he would be his Lord’s obedient servant if the order to punish the Potters ever came, it would leave Lucius with an incurable wound of his own.

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Harry and Draco were completely flushed and breathless by the time Narcissa called them in. Harry, looking up at the sound of her voice, was startled to see Draco’s Aunt Bellatrix standing there, too. He knew that his parents would give him a wand today, and he remembered Draco’s aunt was there when Draco had his ceremony a few months before. But that was the ceremony for the Malfoy heir – of course it was a big deal. Harry didn’t expect – or desire – anything so extravagant for himself.

Maybe Lady Lestrange was there for another reason, Harry thought, but hung back and let Draco approach the two witches first. Draco bowed informally to his aunt, then laughed when she knelt and kissed his cheek noisily. She was very pretty, which Harry expected since she was Narcissa’s sister and Narcissa was very pretty. But Lady Lestrange also had dark, curly hair and black eyes, and where the angles of Narcissa’s face were rather fine and pointed, Bellatrix had high cheekbones but a soft, heart-shaped face, a small round chin and lips that were full and lush. She really didn’t look like Narcissa at all. Once Harry had told Draco that Narcissa looked more like Lucius than she did Bellatrix, which had made Draco wrinkle his nose and give Harry an odd look.

“Harry, Harry,” murmured Bellatrix, her dark eyes suddenly fixing on him in a way that made
Harry’s throat go dry. “How pretty you look. I cannot wait to see whose wand you take.”

Harry smiled and bowed more deeply than Draco had, but couldn’t help shooting Narcissa a nervous, confused look. She smiled reassuringly and reached out to touch Harry’s shoulder and draw him closer to her.

“You had better shake off that shy attitude,” Narcissa said, but her tone was gentle. “You’ll have to tolerate much fiercer adults than Bellatrix today.”

Harry was familiar enough with the noble families to doubt they had anyone to offer fiercer than Bellatrix, but he didn’t say so. He could see from Narcissa’s expectant look that she wanted him to say something, though, so he cleared his throat and managed, “I didn’t know that there would be any guests. Except for my mother and father, I mean. My Lady.” It was always hard for Harry to remember to speak to Narcissa and Lucius with deference when there were other adults present, particularly because if he maintained the pattern in private, they were so quick to chastise him for unnecessary formality. It was so easy for Draco, Harry thought, glancing at the other boy and noting that even in that moment, he had adopted a pleasantly blank expression in the presence of his aunt, when certainly, were she not there, he would be bragging to his mother about outpacing Harry in their race around the garden.

Draco, Harry thought carefully, was a real pureblood. Maybe that was why manners came so easily to him.

“Oh, Harry. Of course there will be. We have received RSVPs from sixteen families.”

Harry paled. He remembered Lucius proudly remarking to Narcissa that all forty-one families were represented at Draco’s ceremony, and even a third of that number would be overwhelming to Harry. It was difficult enough just seeing his parents. He never knew how to behave around them. Another thought occurred to him.

“Even Lord Black?” he asked, his eyes wide. Narcissa frowned down at him for a moment, then seemed to realize why he was asking. Before she could speak, Bellatrix did.

“Your godfather? But of course he will be in attendance, child. Even the promise of my company couldn’t keep him from your side on this special day.” She winked at Harry, and he felt his face get hot and his breath turn uneven.

“It will be all right, Harry,” soothed Narcissa, but she looked troubled. “Why don’t you boys go upstairs. Dobby knows where I put all your things.”

Feeling numb, Harry followed Draco inside and toward the stairs. They hadn’t gone far when Draco took his hand, tugging him to a stop. When Harry looked up, Draco was smiling softly.

“It will be okay, Harry,” he murmured, edging closer and squeezing Harry’s hand. While Draco was very capable of affection and perceptive, too, Harry didn’t often see that side of him. He smiled gratefully. Draco remembered the horror of his parents’ visit the Yule before, during which Lord Black had dropped by with a gift for Harry, inadvertently running into James and Lily in a disaster that had almost culminated with Harry’s father and godfather dueling in the floo foyer.

“They’ll be expecting to see each other, won’t they?” Harry asked hopefully, well aware Draco was as ignorant of the details of the invitations and guests’ psyches as Harry himself. Draco immediately nodded, and they smiled at each other again before starting back toward the stairs. Harry felt better, and Draco didn’t release his hand until they were up the stairs and Dobby was opening the doors to their shared dressing room.
The Malfoy colors were a bright sky blue and deep silver, and Harry was never permitted to wear them, except in a silk neckerchief or sash to indicate his status as their ward. In formal company, Harry wore Peverell colors: black and gold. He touched the hem of the robes suspended in midair in the center of the room while Draco extended his arms and Dobby, their favorite house elf, snapped his fingers twice: once to spell off Draco’s shirt and trousers, damp and mud-streaked from their play in the garden, and once more to spell on Draco’s robes. Then Dobby turned to Harry and repeated the process, and Harry looked down at himself with a frown. The black felt very austere, especially in contrast to the cheerful blue of Draco’s garments.

“Will it be a scarf, or a sash?” Harry asked Dobby absently, toying with the silky cuffs on his sleeves. They felt pleasantly heavy and smooth, and despite the cut and dark color, Harry knew that he would be perfectly comfortable on this summer’s day.

“Neither, Master Potter,” the elf said, looking up from his position near Draco’s left knee, where he was correcting a wrinkle.

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“It has to do with the ceremony, I guess,” Draco said, with a thoughtful look. “You’re just a Potter, today.”

Harry knew that Draco didn’t mean to be mean, but the way he worded his observation still stung. It erased some of the comfort Harry had taken from their camaraderie mere minutes before, and he felt himself retreating back toward a sulking state by the time Dobby was satisfied by the condition and fit of every square inch of their clothing. The elf coaxed them into the uncomfortable dragonhide boots with their pointed heels that they both found so uncomfortable, and waved at them in dismissal.

“Be having a happy Wand, Master Potter,” Dobby said cheerfully, beaming at Harry, then he disapparated.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Harry asked the empty air where the elf had been, bemused.

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“I don’t think Dobby understands the ceremony, Harry. He’s just an elf, after all. Elves don’t even have wands.”

But Dobby’s parting words had gotten Harry to thinking, and once his mind started down a path, it was always hard to abandon it. “Does your wand have some sort of feeling to it?” Harry remembered Draco’s very brief deliberation at the table, draped in blue silk, where every surviving wand borne by a Malfoy was displayed for the purposes of the ceremony. Draco’s hand had hesitated over several wands, bypassed even more altogether, and he had dropped it to brush his fingers against one, then two, before returning to the first wand he’d touched, and raising it with an excited smile and absolute confidence. Silver sparks shot from its tip. Later Harry learned the wand had a Unicorn hair core, carved of rowan wood, and it had been last wielded by Draco’s three-times-great-grandfather.

“It feels…happy, I guess,” Draco said, laughing as though surprised by the thought. “Father only lets me practice every once in a while, you know that. But each time I pick it up, I want to laugh a bit.”

Harry smiled. That sounded nice. Maybe Dobby had given good advice after all. From what Harry’s father had said, there were just a few ancestral wands for Harry to choose from. His father had seemed worried, as though he wasn’t sure about the ceremony at all. But Harry was used to his parents seeming uncomfortable with their Lord’s traditions, and Harry knew that was probably because they were not true followers. Their likely disloyalty was, however, not something Harry
liked to dwell on, especially not on a day like today when he was already anxious. He followed Draco back downstairs. Narcissa and Bellatrix weren’t there. Harry supposed they had gone to dress themselves. Relative to two eight-year-old boys, Narcissa usually needed rather a lot of time to select jewelry and style her hair. As a result, Lucius was alone in the drawing room when they entered. Some time during their short absence, he had changed into robes the same color as Draco’s, but wore them open over a white shirt, silver-gray trousers and a matching vest. His hair was tied back with a black ribbon, and his belt, boots and tie were also black.

Sometimes Harry thought Lucius was even prettier than Narcissa.

“There you are, boys. You look quite suitable.” His gaze roamed approvingly over Harry, then Draco. “Come. We will be greeting your parents any moment.”

Harry followed Lucius toward the floo foyer, another subtle reminder that his parents were far outside their Lord’s inner circle, not being permitted to apperate. The floo foyer was a large, rather grand room; grander than the apparition chamber, in truth. As Harry knew, only the floo foyer was part of the original house. The apparition chamber was a converted sitting room, crafted in recent years as part of their Lord’s apperation restrictions. Harry looked around at the floo foyer, a room he rarely saw, and admired the complex mural on the wall facing the three fireplaces, the first thing a visitor would see as they stepped out.

Following his gaze, Lucius smiled. “There was a magical incident in this room a hundred years ago, and the original paintings were destroyed. My father painted this mural himself.” He sounded proud and a little sad. Harry’s gaze left the painted figures – dragons soaring above a wide green valley, backlit by a blazing orange sunset – and looked at Lucius’s profile curiously. He couldn’t remember Lucius ever mentioning Draco’s grandfather before.

“He was very good,” Harry said solemnly. Lucius’s mouth quirked in a brief smile, and then they both turned as the floo activated.

James and Lily Potter walked out of the floo. As he always did, Harry experienced a surge of feeling, equal parts nervousness and pleasure, at the sight of them. His mother reached out to him at once, while his father greeted Lucius and Draco. Harry knew that the Malfoys didn’t approve of lapses in manners, but he couldn’t help going directly into her arms, even though he should be reserved in the presence of unrelated adults. It was worth it to feel the strength of her embrace and smell the soft perfume of her hair, which Harry never forgot, even though he had only spent two days with his parents in each of the years he could remember. He knew he had lived with them when he was a baby, and though he couldn’t remember that time in the traditional way, he thought that might be why they still felt familiar to him.

“Harry,” said his father, and Harry turned his head, still pinned against his mother’s side, to smile at his much taller parent. James smiled back, and touched Harry’s shoulder warmly just as Lily bent and kissed Harry’s forehead.

“Your hair is long,” said his mother, stroking his head and smiling down at him, her eyes bright like she was about to cry. She always looked that way, at the beginning and end of their days together. Harry leaned into her touch happily.

“Narcissa thinks I should be able to tie it back in a few more months.”

His mother nodded, then looked up at Lucius and Draco as though she had forgotten they were there. She gently moved Harry away from her so that she could bow. Harry watched her, frowning. His parents were the only guests that he had ever seen bow to the Malfoys. The only time he’d seen any bowing by adults, come to think of it, were the Muggle subjects. The realization made Harry
uncomfortable, so he tried not to think about it.

“I will greet the attendees as they arrive, then send them to the lawn for you to receive them,” Lucius was explaining to Harry’s father. Harry shuffled closer to his mother, content when she reached an arm around him and cupped her hand around his opposite shoulder, rubbing gently with her thumb. They walked that way through the house and toward the garden. Harry had curiously observed the canopy while playing with Draco before, but he frowned at it anew while Lucius described the arrangements. There seemed to be an awful lot of chairs.

“Will the…will our Lord be in attendance?” Harry’s father asked, getting Harry’s attention. He was looking uneasily at a chair, more lavish than the others, which was set on a kind of pedestal near the front of the arrangement, surrounded by a barely-visible magical barrier.

Lucius shook his head. “I do not believe so. But it is our Lord’s tradition that at any gathering of his society, his place be made should he deign to join us.” Lucius’s tone indicated that he should not have to remind another adult wizard what their Lord’s traditions were, but if Harry’s father minded the rebuke, Harry couldn’t tell.

“I must ask,” Lucius said, tone slightly changed, so that even Harry’s mother, who had been smiling down at her son, looked at him and listened carefully. “Do you request any special accommodations with regard to Lord Black?”

Harry watched his parents exchange a brief look. It pained him that he was more likely to interpret a shared glance between Draco’s parents than his, but he was accustomed to such feelings, and it only took a moment to pass. His father smiled tightly at Lucius.

“We request only your forgiveness, which we do not deserve, for my behavior at Yule.”

Lucius’s grey eyes gleamed in the same way they did when Draco or Harry correctly answered a particularly difficult question. He nodded.

“Narcissa and Bellatrix will be joining us momentarily,” said Lucius, “and then I will excuse myself to the apparition chamber.”

Harry’s parents both nodded, acknowledging what was unspoken: they couldn’t be left alone with Harry, and Draco was not an appropriate chaperone. Harry smiled at Draco, who was shifting impatiently from one foot to another. Harry thought that if he was already having this much trouble holding still, Draco might be just as miserable as Harry by the end of what was sure to be a lengthy day of uninterrupted good manners and behavior.

The silence that fell was rather awkward, Harry noticed, though he couldn’t help but enjoy every second with his parents, anyway. Still, it was something of a relief when Narcissa and Bellatrix strolled out into the sunlight, resplendent in Malfoy blue and Lestrange hunter green, respectively. Their robes were covered in intricate silver patterns that did not match but complimented one another in a manner that couldn’t have been accidental. Harry’s parents were both wearing black robes like Harry’s, though his mother’s were open over a black and gold afternoon gown that made her eyes more green and unnatural even than usual. Harry had thought his black robes rather dull and severe when he was the only one wearing them, but standing there with his parents dressed in the same way, he decided with pride that they were quite striking and elegant.

“Lord and Lady Peverell,” Bellatrix said brightly, as the witches drew close. “It’s been too long.”

By the strained looks on his parents’ faces, Harry couldn’t help wondering when, exactly, they had crossed paths with Bellatrix before.
This time, Harry was relieved to see, his parents did not bow; nor did Bellatrix seem offended to be greeted with only nods. For some reason, he really did not want to spend what was left of the morning watching them bow to people while Harry did not. He searched his not-inconsiderable knowledge of etiquette for an explanation as to why his parents had bowed to Lucius in the floo foyer, but still didn’t know.

“Please,” Narcissa interjected, “allow Harry to show you the gardens.”

This was what Narcissa always said during birthday visits, and it meant that while she would not let them out of her sight, she would follow at such a distance that they could talk more easily to one another. Harry beamed at her, grateful, and Narcissa only allowed the barest of nods in return. Harry’s mother and father, just as familiar with the routine, directed Harry toward the gardens, walking on either side of him and each touching his shoulders.

“You’re getting tall, Harry,” said his father. “You’ll be taller than me, I think. My grandfather was over six feet.”

“How are you, Harry?” asked his mother, and he could tell she was more worried even than she sounded. Harry smiled at her reassuringly.

“I’m all right. A little nervous about the ceremony. I didn’t know so many people would be coming.”

His father snorted softly. “A new tradition, isn’t it? I still think you should have your own wand…”

At a particularly loaded look from Harry’s mother, his father fell silent. They walked for several moments without speaking, and came upon Harry’s favorite part of the garden: the maze-like low hedge with its stone-paved path. He led them toward it simply by walking that way, and they followed like magnets. Harry nearly vibrated with the happy sensation of their love and attention, and as always, tried to soak it in as much as possible so he could savor it in their absence.

“I think it’s rather exciting,” his mother said lightly, as though she hadn’t just glared daggers at his father. Harry was willing to suspend his disbelief, though, so he just kept smiling as though he thought she was sincere. “As for the people coming, I’m sure you’ll know most of them. Didn’t you say you knew most everyone at Draco’s ceremony?”

Though direct contact was twice yearly and letters were limited – and, Harry suspected, reviewed by Lucius – Harry did exchange monthly letters with his parents. They took advantage of the fact that letters were restricted in number but not length, and wrote letters so long his mother occasionally divided them into chapters.

“Oh, Harry. Before I forget.” His mother paused and reached into the pocket of her robes. Her hand emerged with a silver locket on a chain. She held it before Harry and popped the clasp with her thumb. When it sprang open, a small image of Harry’s sister sprang up, quite clear and three-dimensional, if noticeably transparent. Still, Harry could easily make out eyes the same clear green color as his own and his mother’s, a smooth cap of black hair that Harry envied for its neatness, and facial features Harry knew well from dozens of photographs shared by their parents. The image turned toward Harry and waved excitedly, then stood still and smiled at him. A few seconds later, it waved again.

“I love it,” Harry said, meaning it. He carefully reached out to take the locket from his mother, and then grinned at his father, who was watching them with an absent smile.

“Elspeth was very clear that we would never be forgiven if we forgot,” he said. “Happy birthday,
Harry looked back at the sight of his sister, as though hypnotized. Though they wrote to one another, they had never met. “This is much better than a photograph,” he told his parents. His mother’s eyes were wet again, but she smiled nonetheless.

“We love you, Harry,” she said in a small voice.

“I know,” Harry assured her.

Draco caught them up, having clearly seized the opportunity to run in order to deliver a message. “Your guests are arriving, Harry,” he said, pointing back the way they’d come. Harry turned with a frown, and sure enough, four new arrivals, Weasleys and Longbottoms according to their robes, were waiting expectantly near the canopy. Harry sighed, and leaned briefly against his father before heading in that direction, Draco keeping pace.

“It’s Bill Weasley, who we’ve not had before. It’s always been their father,” Draco whispered to Harry. Harry could tell that his parents overheard, anyway, and gave Draco a quelling look. Narcissa and Lucius would be furious if they knew he was gossiping within earshot of Harry’s parents. Draco didn’t seem to notice. “And Frank and Alice Longbottom,” Draco added, with distaste. “Longbottom, Harry.”

Harry didn’t remind Draco that Longbottoms and Potters occupied a similar state of dishonor. Draco thought of Harry too much as a Malfoy ward and not enough as the Heir to a enemy family. Feeling suddenly lonely, Harry crossed his arms over his chest and looked down stubbornly while his parents greeted their earliest guests, only glancing up through his lashes to briefly sate his curiosity with respect to Bill Weasley, who resembled his father Arthur very little, except for the shade of his red hair. Catching Harry’s eye, Bill smiled, broad and easy, and extended his hand to be shook.

Surprised, Harry took it, feeling very grown up.

“I have a brother your age,” Bill told him. Harry had been vaguely aware of that. Harry’s father cleared his throat, and Bill shot him a quick glance before looking back at Harry, still smiling. “He’s back home with us now,” he added, in a way that had Harry thinking that even though he was looking at Harry, he was speaking to Harry’s father. “It’s lovely to have him back where he belongs.”

Harry glanced at his father and found him smiling at Bill, seemingly pleased.

“Was he not at home before?” Harry asked curiously. Bill shook his head, a shadow passing briefly over his blue eyes.

“He was a ward of the Nott family,” he said quietly. “But our Lord chose to reunite him with our parents this past Yule.”

Harry experienced a long moment of shock. He knew that he was the Malfoys’ ward because it was their Lord’s wish, but it had never occurred to him that their Lord could or would change his mind. Harry felt a very confusing combination of emotions at the thought of leaving Malfoy Manor and going home with his parents.

“I’m Draco Malfoy,” Draco declared suddenly, quite capable even at eight of commanding an audience at will. All the adults looked at him in surprise, and Harry watched him with weary affection. “Harry is my family’s ward in perpetuity,” he said with utmost certainty, stepping closer
to Harry and laying a possessive hand on his arm. “Our Lord has assured my father of that.”

The brief, warring hope and fear in Harry’s heart went still. Well, that’s that, he thought, avoiding his parents’ faces, sure he didn’t want to see the pain in them. Harry gently shook off Draco’s hand while Bill nodded and changed the subject, and after a few more minutes of more standard small talk, Bill moved on by and new people in colors Harry didn’t know began walking up from the Manor. Every time someone new arrived, Harry tensed, so much so that he was almost relieved when at last one of the new arrivals was a dark-haired, silver-eyed man in the Black colors of black and emerald green. Lord Black, who was also Harry’s godfather and who, unlike Harry's parents, was able to visit Harry at will, shot Harry a friendly smile then nodded cautiously at Harry’s mother and father.

"James, Lily," he said quietly. Not for the first time, Harry wanted desperately to know the source of the rift between them. He had overheard enough of their argument at Yule only to know that they had once been friends, and Harry's father considered Lord Black a "vile, poisonous liar."

Those and other words seemed to hang in the air between them until Harry's father nodded stiffly and Lord Black, looking sad but relieved, stepped back and moved on. Harry noticed that his mother had never acknowledged Lord Black; in fact, he was almost sure she had refused to look at him at all.

After what felt to Harry like days but was in reality only two hours, and then the guests were settling at their seats beneath the canopy, Harry’s father was headed off to arrange the wands he had brought from the family’s collection, and Harry’s mother was trying to smooth Harry’s hair, which he was beginning to suspect was just a ruse to disguise her urge to touch him constantly. Harry didn’t mind. He was smiling at her, listening to her fondly berate the genetic legacy of his father, when a few gasps punctuated a sudden silence in the crowd.

Their Lord was there. Harry knew it right away, as he had known it the day of Draco’s ceremony. On that day, in the lavishly decorated ballroom inside the manor, their Lord had been an expected guest. Still, every witch and wizard had gone still and quiet upon his arrival, even those Harry thought must spend regular time in his presence. Their Lord arrived alone, distinct from all present in every way, though he wore plain slate robes trimmed in white. It was his height, his bearing, and of course his bright red eyes. Harry and Draco, who had never seen him before, momentarily forgot every bit of their training in manners and composure and gaped at him with open mouths.

This time, Harry was less susceptible to the shock of his Lord’s presence, but much more susceptible to the general shock of him being there at all. He had apparated directly onto the lawn in total silence, as only he was permitted to do. He held out his wand and murmured something too quietly to overhear, and the protective magic in which he constantly veiled himself sprang to life, visible for only a moment but somehow tangible even as it settled.

After a full second of silence, Lucius seemed to regain his senses and walked toward their Lord. Harry fought the urge to hide behind his mother, whose hands had dropped to his shoulders at some point and tightened uncomfortably. She abruptly released Harry and walked toward their Lord and Lucius. Harry could see his father approaching from the canopy, too, and Harry knew that if it was right for them to approach, it was right for Harry. He had never felt more reluctant, but he trailed after them, wide eyes fixed on their Lord with the closest thing to terror he had ever felt whirling in his heart like a trapped bird.

When they were still several paces away, Harry’s parents stopped and bowed. Harry did the same. When he looked away from his Lord, and down at the bright green grass, he felt his lungs burning and realized he had been holding his breath. Panting, he blinked through a starry spell and only
chanced a glance up when his vision had cleared.

“...and this must be Harry,” his Lord was saying as Harry blinked up, seeing blurry gray robes and the inhumanly beautiful wizard beneath them looming near. His Lord’s head was cocked to one side, as though he was studying something curious. Lucius stood to one side, looking more tense than Harry could recall seeing him, and Harry saw that his parents were still apart from Harry and still knelt. His mother’s shoulders were trembling, he thought.

“Yes, my Lord,” Harry breathed, because he thought his Lord looked expectant that he should speak. “I am Harry Potter. Ward of the Malfoy family and H-Heir to my Name.”

His Lord’s mouth curved into a smile. It was not a happy expression. “You may stand, my young friend,” he said. Harry did, feeling very conscious of his parents, still kneeling and unacknowledged on the grass. “Do you know your woods?” His Lord asked curiously. Harry, wholly unprepared to answer such a question, simply shook his head and then, almost feeling Lucius’s glower even from feet away, hastened to speak again.

“No, my Lord.”

“There is a wand of yew, long kept in the Peverell line,” said his Lord. “It would please me to see whether an Heir yet lives who is worthy to bear it. I had to see for myself.” His smile eased as he turned from Harry, and Harry felt his entire body wilt in relief after being held taut by the force of his Lord’s direction attention.

“Stand, subjects,” his Lord said coolly, and Harry realized only after his mother and father got to their feet to whom his Lord was speaking. Harry’s heart churned. He looked down rather than at their faces. “Lord Malfoy has clearly taken care in raising your Heir. His magic is obviously considerable. I maintain my hope that your family might gain my favor if young Harry meets his considerable potential.”

Harry trembled. Those words would imbue his dreams for years to come.

“Let us not delay,” his Lord continued. “Lucius, I see where I am to be seated. Please, continue in conducting the ceremony.”

After the briefest pause, Lucius inclined his head deeply. “Yes, my Lord.” Lucius had not intended to conduct the ceremony, Harry thought desperately. The Malfoys had been careful to allow Harry’s parents that privilege. But their Lord likely knew that. Harry couldn’t name the emotion that rose up in him in protest, but he wrestled it down and followed Lucius toward the canopy, in the wake of their Lord, whose robes flared behind him and revealed a crimson lining. Everyone still beneath the canopy was silent and bowing, and their Lord gestured magnanimously and bade them all rise, rewarding them with a benevolent smile as he took his seat.

Lucius steered Harry toward the fore of the arrangement, a step they had discussed in detail many times in the days leading up to this one. Harry forgot it all in the series of shocks in the past hour, but Lucius seemed to understand. He gently guided Harry into place with a casual hand on his shoulder, then welcomed the attendees.

“Harry Potter, Heir to his Name and ward of my family, House Malfoy, is on this day eight years old. Our Lord’s tradition informs us that he is thus entitled to bear a wand of his ancestors, and he shall be guided to that wand which is his match. The Potter family is the last maternal line of House Peverell.” He looked down. “Harry, it is time for you to go to the table,” Lucius said more quietly. Harry nodded, feeling far away, and turned in that direction.
The table with the wands displayed lay directly between Lucius and their Lord. Harry felt Lucius’s eyes on his back and his Lord’s eyes on his face and thought the combined pressure might undo him. But instead he felt a solid heat take shape in the center of his chest, and it anchored him. He inhaled deeply, once, through his nose, and looked down at the wands.

There were four, each one distinct from the other, and arranged in no discernible order. To his far left was a wand that was nearly black, gleaming as though polished. The wand beside it was dark brown-red and slender, longer than the first. The next wand was longer still, pale but with a darker grain pattern and a rounded handle. The wand most to the right was a medium golden brown, average in length, more primitively carved than the others. And it sang to Harry.

Harry did not know his woods, but he knew in an instant that the wand nearest his right hand was the Wand of Yew. He heard in its call that it was ancient and ageless and had long waited to be placed in Harry’s hand. It was strong and solitary and promised him a long and perilous journey with unimaginable rewards along the way.

It was not happy, Harry mused, considering all of a sudden Dobby’s advice, and what Draco had told him about his own hawthorn wand.

Harry lifted his hand and held it above the dark colored wand on the left, the first one he had studied. It felt like less than nothing, as though it was ducking away from him, repelled. He moved his hand over the next wand, and though it felt alive, even eager, it wasn’t quite right. Harry held his hand above the long, pale wand and hesitated for a long moment. His fingers twitched. He had a strong, clear sense that if he were to pick up this wand, it would spark and Harry would be filled with the urge to laugh.

Unbidden, Harry’s eyes rose from the table and met his Lord’s, still trained on him from the elevated chair. Lord and subject studied one another, a silent engagement that Harry had never experienced with an adult.

Harry did not recall making a decision, but suddenly, the wand of yew had leapt into his hand, and its handle was warm and familiar on Harry’s palm. Harry’s eyes had not left his Lord’s. Harry’s wrist twitched and the wand emitted a startling stream of sparking light, at which point, Harry broke eye contact and looked down. To Harry’s surprise, the light from the wand was red.

Chapter End Notes

Yes? No? Hell no?
The Matter of an Heir

Chapter Summary

In which Sirius and Narcissa make plans for Harry’s future, and Bill Weasley has a rendezvous with an ally.

Chapter Two: The Matter of an Heir

“We are like chameleons, we take our hue and the color of our moral character from those who are around us.”

John Locke

July 31, 1988

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

No one lingered long after Harry selected his wand. And no wonder, mused Sirius, as he watched James and Lily stare at their son, his own face twisting into a sympathetic grimace that he tried to hide as soon as he became aware of it. The birch, the birch - it should have been the birch. A light wizard’s wand for a boy upon whom so many had pinned their secret hope. Instead, it was the yew wand, an artifact that made James pale at the mention of his Peverell heritage. Sirius was rather surprised the wand hadn’t gone convenient missing, or been destroyed in some accident. But then, his old friends would be even less likely than Sirius to suspect the yew wand would find favor in Harry.

Their Lord, wearing one of his more thoughtful smirks, gave a brief bow to the witches and wizards still collected under the canopy, and disapparated. For several long moments, Harry stared at the chair where their Lord had been sitting, and then Lucius approached him and said something Sirius was too far away to overhear. Harry smiled at whatever it was, and then held out the yew wand with obvious reluctance. Lucius took it, gingerly to Sirius’s eye, and laid it carefully in a case.

Sirius wanted to speak to Harry, but he knew James and Lily had very little time with him, and Sirius wouldn’t deprive them of so much as a moment. He would see Harry in a few days, when the Malfoys would have a small, informal dinner to celebrate his birthday more comfortably.

Sirius didn’t want to dwell on his bad luck, but it felt like an omen that he had seen his Lord twice in the span of as many days. Just yesterday his Lord had appeared unannounced on Sirius’s doorstep, escorting a bushy-haired Muggleborn girl. How his Lord found such children before Sirius was a mystery Sirius was still trying to solve. It had something to do with Hogwarts, Sirius supposed, which remained a favorite haunt of his Lord, though he kept such a low profile most students - and their parents - didn’t even realize he was there.

Sirius’s territory was relatively small in size but large in populace, encompassing, as it did, nearly all of London. Of course, where there were once millions of Muggles, there were now just a few hundred thousand - but Sirius tried not to think about that.
He did, however, have to think about the girl. Other Muggleborn children he had divvied up among the wizarding families that made up his magical subjects, but this was the first time his Lord had hand-delivered one to Sirius, and she was a bright enough child. She was also the same age as Harry. For some reason, Sirius had yet to call a childless couple to come take her as their ward, or adopt her as an Heir. Instead she was tucked into an opulent guest chamber at 12 Grimmauld Place, which had transformed over the past several years into a sprawling palace, its magic powerfully fueled by his Lord’s favor and Sirius’s magical subjects’ vows of allegiance.

Aside from being showy and obnoxious, the big house was rather lonely for a single man. It might be nice having a child about.

Rather dismayed by this train of thought, Sirius gave himself a mental shake and wandered back toward the manor, not wanting to join the crush of witches and wizards at the door, all rushing the apparition chamber. Narcissa stood at the doors with a blank smile, reminding anyone who was disoriented where they meant to go.

Catching sight of Sirius, her lips compressed in a moment of unveiled expression, and Sirius dropped his own mask for a breath so that they could silently commiserate. Narcissa and Sirius has grown close again in the past few years, and without ever having discussed it expressly, Sirius knew they agreed on the danger of their Lord’s attention. The Lestranges and Notts might want to strive to exceed their Lord’s expectations, to impress him, but Sirius believed the wiser course was to keep him merely satisfied. A failed effort to do more could be seen as disobedient; a failed effort to impress could backfire and disappoint.

“Lord Black,” Narcissa said, and he could see that they were being watched, because her neutral smile was back in place. “Leaving already? You should join me for tea.”

Sirius hesitated. One the one hand, he had limited opportunities for adult interaction with someone around whom he could relax his guard. On the other hand, there was an eight-year-old Muggleborn girl loose in his ancestral home with only the house elves to supervise her.

“Most of our guests will have left us within the hour. You would be welcome to peruse the library until I am no longer needed here.”

Sirius relented, nodding, and wove through the stream of people making their way toward the apparition chamber in order to find the library. All he could remember was that it was in the east wing; he might wind up summoning an elf to help him with the exact route. Sirius bumped into someone, hard; he reached out, unthinking, to steady the other person, and found that his hand had closed around the bicep of Callum Avery.

Their eyes met, and Sirius stepped away, releasing Callum at once. They hadn’t seen one another in several years, and in the interim Callum had grown a neat beard. It looked good on his long face, Sirius mused despite himself, and it was one shade lighter than his nearly black eyebrows and hair. He felt Callum’s almond-shaped brown eyes roaming over Sirius as Callum followed Sirius’s movement away from the crowd.

“Lord Black,” Callum said. “You look well.”

“As do you,” Sirius said tightly, wishing it wasn’t true. “Your brother sent you, did he?”

“Ah, well,” Callum said, with an absent gesture. Because he was Callum, he didn’t remark to Harry Potter’s godfather that deciding who to send as an Avery delegate had doubtless been a complicated affair. Send the Heir, and they might appear too interested. Send no one, and they might insult the Malfoys. Sirius fought the urge to bounce on the balls of his feet, distressed by the
silence as soon as it fell between them.

“Our Lord seemed intrigued,” Callum said, obviously just as uncomfortable and trying to keep the conversation alive and general. “Your godson could do very well, if he gains our Lord’s favor. Peverell Ridge is a smaller territory, but it would be nicely complemented by a holding overseas.”

Their Lord had not yet divided the bulk of North America nor much of Asia. Of course, there was chaos in the Muggle population, still, in both places, and likely would be for some time. On the days Sirius felt most overwhelmed by his responsibilities in the Black territory, he reminded himself that he was lucky his Lord wouldn’t perceive him as under-burdened and send him to the Americas for some short-term administrative work. It was where idle or disfavored families were routinely stationed for stints up to several months at a time. Much as Sirius longed to reconnect with James and Lily, he doubted that being thrown into those particular trenches would do anything good for his prospects. What kind of bonds were forged or repaired in the midst of a nightmare like that?

“How are the sea levels?” Sirius asked, smiling wryly. “Back where they belong?”

Callum looked at Sirius, his smile wry, and the eye contact sparked a familiar warmth in Sirius’s stomach, sudden as a punch. “On their way,” Callum said archly. “If only it was so simple.” He hesitated. “You don’t really care, do you?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Of course I care.” He didn’t, really. “What is more important?” Nothing, probably, but Sirius knew himself to be a selfish creature, chiefly concerned with instant gratification. And he thought he might be able to convince Callum to steal away to an empty room for just that sort of thing. Narcissa had said she would be a while, hadn’t she?

“No,” Callum said. The note of humor in his tone had disappeared. Sirius blinked at him, and found that Callum was frowning and looking down. “I’m not going to…” he glanced left and right, and lowered his voice. “I’m not going to fuck you in the coat closet, Sirius.”

“I’d envisioned a sofa, actually. Possibly a desk.”

Callum looked up with a scowl. “I’m not going to fuck you here at all.”

Sirius had forgotten how thrilling it was to hear this mild-mannered man cursing. So thrilling that he got rather carried away, licking his lips. “We could go elsewhere.”

Callum bit out a laugh, his face suffused with color. It looked good on him. But he still wasn’t looking directly at Sirius, and he was still frowning, his brow furrowed. “I forgot how obtuse you can be. I’m not sleeping with you here, or anywhere. Now, or ever again. I really can’t believe you, honestly.” And now, instead of angry, he sounded hurt. That emotion dissolved Sirius’s bravado as nothing else could. Callum glanced up, then quickly away. “It’s not as though you don’t know why.”

An unpleasant wave of guilt and shame passed over Sirius bodily, feeling much like nausea. He nodded, taking a quick backward step and pressing his hands into his pockets. “I suppose I do. I’m sorry. You just…you really do look good, you know.”

This time Callum rolled his eyes. “I’m sure I’m very flattered. Take care, Sirius.” He nodded politely, turned and walked away. The crowd was gone, the way to the apparition chamber clear. Maybe Narcissa would be free more quickly than she’d thought. Sirius paced slowly toward the east wing, and the library, wherever it was. The manor was excessively large, really, and no elves seemed to be loitering about. Sirius’s own elves took no special care to remain unobserved, but the
Malfoys seemed to have a “neither seen nor heard” expectation that he found rather severe.

“Sirius,” came Narcissa’s voice, and Sirius turned to find her walking toward him, her stride so flowing that, with her legs concealed by her floor-length robes, she seemed to glide. Now that they were alone, he reached out a hand and she took it, squeezing his fingers for a moment before letting go. Her smile was sincere but tired.

“Quite a day,” Sirius observed. “And it’s barely noon.”

Narcissa breathed a soft laugh. “It’s not over yet. Lord and Lady Peverell will likely stay at least another two hours. Lucius is with them for now.”

Sirius nodded. “It’s kind of you to allow them so much time.”

“It’s only Harry I’m interested in granting kindness,” she said coolly. “Here we are. The cockatiel room.”

Sirius had been in the cockatiel room before, and was still trying to figure out how it had gotten its name. It contained no cockatiels, live or otherwise, and like most of the Manor, the furniture was largely white and gold and the floors were a dark, polished wood where they weren’t covered by green-patterned Persian rugs.

“I see your sister left early,” Sirius said. He hadn’t spoken to Bellatrix, but he’d seen her and Narcissa, arm and arm and whispering, around the time he’d arrived. He and Bellatrix had an uneasy relationship, but he did his best to amuse her since she was the closest thing their Lord had to a friend, and her displeasure could have a high cost.

“Your cousin did leave early,” Narcissa said, seating herself on a white fainting couch with a faint green pinstripe. She snapped her fingers and when an elf appeared, already bowing, she said, “Tea, Nargy. I imagine she was as surprised as the rest of us by our Lord’s appearance, and wanted to speak to Rodolphus about it.”

Even when they were alone, it was unlike Narcissa to be so frank. Perhaps she was even more tired than she looked. Sirius worried his lower lip for a moment, sinking slowly into a wingback chair so that only a little round end table separated them. When the tea tray appeared there, Narcissa poured out by hand.

“If we can keep him alive until then,” she said lightly, “Harry will be at Hogwarts in only a few years. It will be important that he conduct himself carefully there. Draco will help, but my son is not anyone’s keeper but his own. It’s time to cultivate new friendships for them both, but especially for Harry. He is not as easily guided by rank in his interactions. Even with the house elves, his instinct is to kindness, not detachment. He must learn to behave as an Heir behaves.”

Sirius looked at her with wide eyes, and when he didn’t answer and Narcissa gave him an impatient look, her teacup in midair and her brows raised, he swallowed and laughed uneasily.

“I’m sorry, cousin, but I don’t recall you being so direct.” He winced and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I think it’s too much for me. I’m getting a headache.”

“I know you well enough, cousin, to speak to you in your own tongue.”

Sirius wasn’t sure, but he thought he was being insulted. He found he didn’t care. “You’re right. At least about Harry. He’s a good person,” he said sadly. “It won’t serve him well in this world.”

“Don’t be sentimental,” Narcissa said primly. “He’s intelligent, and protective of those he loves.
He will be fine, but he must be educated. Lucius cannot do for Harry what he can do for Draco, and James Potter cannot do for Harry what he should. Harry should be learning what it means to be a Peverell, so he understands his place, and what is at stake.”

“Perhaps our Lord could be petitioned,” Sirius said slowly, but Narcissa cut him off with a shake of her head.

“He’ll refuse. He is far too cautious, and what’s it to him? It doesn’t matter to our Lord if he must keep Harry under his heel all Harry’s life. He doesn’t care about Harry. And we…” she stopped.

“We do,” Sirius finished softly.

“Despite ourselves, in Lucius and my case,” Narcissa said tonelessly. They both sipped their tea, the room very quiet around them.

“I...have no Heir,” Sirius started, and then stopped. He swallowed. “I could name him. I could teach him, in the Black territory.” He looked at Narcissa, and found her looking at him thoughtfully, and quite without surprise. Sirius laughed shortly. “Nicely done, cousin. I almost thought it was my idea.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Narcissa said. “But yes, what you described sounds like a solution. You could renounce him, when you marry and have a child. Until then, as your Heir, he could visit you – surely our Lord would permit that – and you have...greater opportunity, in your territory, to demonstrate our Lord’s true plight. I say this not in complaint, but Wiltshire has one of the most settled Muggle populaces.”

“To your credit,” Sirius said automatically, and wasn’t sure whether he meant it. He knew what Lucius’s strategy had been, and it made him ill. But in ten years, or fifty, or one hundred, Sirius thought the Wiltshire Muggles would be better off than the Londoners. Maybe they would even forget.

“We can discuss everything in more detail when Lucius is not otherwise engaged,” Narcissa said, as though they were making plans for a day trip to the seaside rather than the fate of Harry and Sirius’s House besides.

Sirius nodded, his head still pounding. He wasn’t ready to go, yet, though, so he said, “Our Lord found a Muggleborn girl in London, and brought her to me. She is Harry and Draco’s age.”

“That happens from time to time, does it not?” Narcissa asked evenly. The Malfoys had a much more vast geographic territory, but there were so many fewer Muggle subjects there than in the Black territory, that if they had any Muggleborn children demonstrate magic in the past year, Sirius would have heard about it. He hadn’t.

“Rather often,” Sirius said lightly. “But this time our Lord collected the child himself, and brought her to me, personally. I can’t fathom why.” He paused. “I think my Lord might mean for me to keep her.”

Narcissa looked amused. “You sound like you’re talking about a pet.”

“Well,” Sirius said, shrugging. With her haunted brown eyes and hunched shoulders, she behaved more like an elf than a witch, but it felt wrong to say so. “I have, so far. Kept her, that is. But not like a pet, I don’t think.”

Something unreadable settled on Narcissa’s face. “I didn’t realize those were your tastes.”
Sirius stared dumbly for a moment, before he realized what she meant. “Narcissa!” he exclaimed, horrified. “I don’t… I mean, I wouldn’t! Merlin, she’s eight.” He shuddered.

Narcissa blinked, nonplussed. “There’s no need to be offended.”

Sirius thought there bloody was, but there was no point arguing with Narcissa about anything. “Anyway. I know nothing about children. But she seems well-behaved enough, and I can’t think of a family for her. I thought, maybe, when things settle down, our Lord might permit me to send her home.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“Yes, but our Lord has said that the Muggles will be allowed to raise their magical children one day, when they earn the privilege.”

“I rather think he meant generations from now, not months or even years.”

Sirius frowned. She was probably right. “Still. It can’t hurt to… well, I don’t see the point in being hasty.”

“Surely there’s the odd Weasley who could take her on,” Narcissa suggested. “You like them, don’t you?”

Sirius snorted. He did, but it wasn’t reciprocated. “It would look strange, not to keep her within the territory.” Narcissa didn’t say anything, though she nodded, acknowledging what was unspoken. Sirius had lobbied to keep the number of Muggle subjects he had purely due to the resulting higher likelihood of Muggleborn witches and wizards being born within his territory. It would be rather transparent if he didn’t keep those Muggleborn children close.

“What made you think… that, about me? And the child?” Sirius looked somewhat askance at Narcissa, still disturbed by the very idea.

Narcissa arched a brow at him in momentary puzzlement, then her expression eased when she deciphered his question. “That? Oh, I don’t know. You’ve rattled quite happily around Grimmauld all on your own for these past few years.”

“Never mind, I don’t even want to talk about it.” Sirius decided. “I’ll find some place for her,” he added. The idea that anyone would have the same passing thought as Narcissa made him feel nauseous. It would be better if the girl was with a family somewhere, and then he could focus on Harry. That settled, Sirius stood up. “I was going to ask if I could bring her to Harry’s birthday dinner, but after what you said, I think I shouldn’t.”

Narcissa nodded, agreeing. “There’s no need to give him the impression that she’s a peer.”

Sirius sighed, recalling his own childhood friends with more pain even than was typical. “These are different times,” he murmured, to himself as much as Narcissa.

“Better times,” she said, and set down her teacup. “I’ll walk you to the apparition chamber.”

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Harry felt too emotionally exhausted to do much more than sit beside his mother on a bench in the garden, leaning against her and letting her card her fingers through his hair. Then, when he realized she and his father would have to leave in only a few minutes, he was furious with himself for wasting time in silence that could have been spent talking to them.
“I’m sorry,” he said, trying not to cry, as he hugged his father. James Potter looked puzzled, and put his thumb under Harry’s chin to tip his face back for inspection.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” James asked softly, smiling at Harry. “No one in our family has been worthy of the Peverell wand for as long as any of us can remember. I’m very proud of you, Harry.”

Harry wasn’t sure how to feel about that. He hadn’t really known what he was apologizing for. Maybe the weakness of tears – Malfoys, at least, did not cry, even in front of one another – or maybe that he had spent the past hour staring at the rose bushes and not speaking. It hadn’t occurred to him to be sorry about the yew wand. But now he could think of nothing else: should he be sorry?

Confused, and therefore more miserable still, Harry clung to his mother like he was four years old instead of eight. He was harangued by one of his oldest memories, when he saw his parents for the first time since the Malfoys had taken him in. The leadup and immediate aftermath of the moment were hazy, but he could clearly remember clinging to his mother and screaming at the top of his lungs until Lucius resorted to magic to part him from her. He felt the same impulse now.

“How about we write our letters right away? It will be like we never left each other.”

Harry knew if he tried to speak he would cry, so he just nodded against her hip, and she patted him gently and made him step back so they could begin walking back toward the manor. The canopy had been vanished and the chairs were gone; the lawn was a perfect, blank green, as though the events of the morning had never happened. The only evidence were the memories spinning in Harry’s head on a loop: the deep, clear red of his Lord’s eyes perfectly reflected in the sparks from the yew wand; the yew wand, almost hot in his hand, as though alive. If it had a voice, Harry thought it would have told him, in tones of triumph, “You and I, child. You and I.”

When Harry thought he could speak, and half in an effort to delay the moment when his parents would go, he tugged on his father’s hand until both of his parents stopped walking and looked down at him questioningly.

“Do your wands have a…feeling?” he asked them, carefully. “Like, Draco says his wand is happy.”

Harry’s father frowned, and his mother’s grip tightened briefly on his shoulder, but her smile didn’t waver.

“We are the only people to ever use our wands, so it’s probably not the same.” She paused. “Our wands grew up with us, I guess you could say. Does your wand have a feeling, Harry?”

“I…” Harry had been about to say I don’t know, but it didn’t seem entirely honest. He thought it over, then said carefully, “It feels strong. And…sure.” Sometimes Harry couldn’t find the words to describe what he meant, which was probably his least favorite thing about being only eight.

However, his parents seemed to understand, or at least, to be satisfied by his description. They smiled at him again, and walked very slowly toward the manor. Lucius had been waiting out on the grass, always watching but unobtrusive, and he fell silently into step with them as they drew near.

“You might write your sister, and thank her for the locket,” said his father. “It was her idea, and she wanted to be sure you knew that.” He winked, and Harry grinned.
“I will. I wonder…” he stopped, and cleared his throat, glancing briefly at Lucius, who understood. They had discussed the subject of Harry’s sister several times, most recently and definitively just the week before.

“Our Lord would permit the young lady to visit Harry,” Lucius said, in a tone that could sound like he didn’t care one way or another, but Harry knew he thought it would be a good thing for Harry and Elspeth to spend time together. It had been his idea in the first place – such a luxury would never have occurred to Harry.

Harry could see that his parents were very surprised. “Thank you,” his mother said, stiffly, after a too-long pause. “We will…consider it.”

“We might bring her at Yule,” said Harry’s father, but he was obviously uncertain.

Lucius shook his head. “You misunderstand me. Your daughter may visit any time when Narcissa and I are able to accommodate her.”

Harry looked back and forth between his parents, trying not to let his excitement show too obviously.

“No, I understood,” Harry’s father said. He nodded stiffly at Lucius. “We will consider it.”

Lucius’s puzzled frown cleared into a more forced expression than Harry was familiar with. “I see,” Lucius said crisply. “Well, advise us if you decide in favor of getting the children together here.”

Harry knew that there was something being communicated that he couldn’t grasp, and for the second time in as many minutes he wished desperately to be grown up. They had reached the floo foyer, and with Lucius there, Harry couldn’t bring himself to risk tears by hugging his parents again. They each kissed his head, and smiled at him sadly. He thought his father had to tug rather hard on his mother’s hand to get her to step after him into the floo. And then they were gone, until Yule.

“I’m sure you’re hungry, Harry,” Lucius said lightly. “Come along.”

Harry followed him, trying to keep his chin up. “Are you keeping my wand with Draco’s?”

“Yes,” Lucius said. “I will keep it quite secure, I promise you.”

“Well, what I meant was…will I practice with it, like Draco?”

“Mmm,” Lucius said. “You will be taught magic at Hogwarts, I expect.” He glanced at Harry, and must have seen the way his face fell. “It is not customary for young wizards to practice magic before school. Draco should have been more discrete.”

“I’m sure he thought I knew it was a secret,” Harry hurried to say. “I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad at him.”

“Calm yourself,” Lucius said mildly. “I only mean to remind him. Harry, you know we’re all very fond of you, and trust you implicitly. Just because things are done in a traditional way, in your case, doesn’t mean that we think less of you. Do you understand?”

Harry thought he probably didn’t, really, but maybe well enough. He nodded, and before Lucius had to prompt him, he added, “Yes, sir.”
“Very good. Go on to the kitchens, then. I imagine Draco is already there, but the elves may have a few scraps left.” Draco was infamous for an enormous noon meal, since he could rarely be bothered at breakfast.

“I’ll see what I can wrestle from him,” Harry promised, with an answering smile, and when the hallway intercepted the landing to the stairs that led directly to the kitchens, he went down while Lucius went up.

Harry didn’t go find Draco in the kitchens. His stomach was still tight and uneasy and his thoughts were in greater turmoil still. He wanted to be alone, and it wasn’t hard in a place as vast as Malfoy Manor to find a place for that. Harry knew its nooks and crannies nearly as well as Draco. Harry barely had memories of any place beyond the manor’s grounds, but, as was always the case when his parents had recently visited, it didn’t feel like his home.

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Bill Weasley tried not to appear to be in too much of a hurry as he waited his turn to pass into the apparition chamber at Malfoy Manor. He made polite conversation with the other family representatives in line, staying away from the dangerous topic of their Lord’s attendance, and when the time came, he apparated to Weasley House because he was fairly sure the Malfoys had kept the tracking mechanism in their apparition chamber, and he was inclined to play it safe.

Then he took the floo to Hogsmeade and waited a half hour at a table in the Hog’s Head for Albus Dumbledore.

When the man himself arrived, he was expertly glamoured to appear as a middle-aged witch. Bill might have suspected polyjuice if he hadn’t personally taken such pains to eradicate three of the key ingredients from even the blackest market. Dumbledore lowered the hood of his cloak casually, revealing shiny, dark red ringlets the same color as the lacquered nails he drummed against the tabletop.

The twinkling blue eyes were impossible to mistake.

“You were right. It was nearly the birch wand, but our Lord did something. The wand went to Harry, as though summoned.”

Dumbledore raised a silent brow. Bill shook his head. “It wasn’t Harry’s accidental magic,” he said firmly. “I watched our Lord. The way he focused…I know it was him.”

Dumbledore still looked skeptical. Or maybe it was just the shape of the glamour’s arched eyebrows. Hard to say.

“I saw James and Lily. They looked…” he didn’t know how to finish. Across from him, Dumbledore’s eyes went sad in the glamour’s otherwise serene face. “I met Harry, too. He seems much like them. I was only there with him a moment, but he has an obvious sort of kindness. Strength, too.” When Dumbledore smiled, Bill waved a hand and rolled his eyes. “I know you think I’m just seeing what I want to see. But it was all very clear. You weren’t there.”

They sat quietly – no adjustment, of course, for Dumbledore – when a barmaid arrived, dimpled at Bill, and rattled off a summary of the special meal that afternoon.

“How is my father?” Dumbledore frowned, shrugging one shoulder, and looked away. Bill bit the
inside of his cheek and couldn’t say more until the barmaid was back with the ales. He’d bought them as a pretense for sitting there with Dumbledore, of course, but he was glad of them now. He drank most of his pint in one go, hating the pitying way Dumbledore watched him.

“This isn’t the way it’s going to end,” Bill said, quietly, fiercely. “If it isn’t Harry, it will be someone.”

Dumbledore still wouldn’t look at him, and Bill knew the old wizard disagreed. How many times had he said it, before he was unable to speak? *Harry Potter is our only hope.* Bill marveled at the trust they all felt toward Dumbledore. Even Bill himself, while noting that it was extraordinary to do so, never doubted him at all.

He cleared his throat. “No, you’re right,” he said, apologetically. “It will be him. I just wish I knew the right way to help him, for now.”

Dumbledore raised three slender, surprisingly long fingers, and the glamour’s blood-red fingernails shone in the dim lantern light that characterized the Hog’s Head even in midday. Bill’s brows furrowed for a moment, then he nodded and sighed.

“Three years. I know. Nothing can happen until he’s out of *that place.*” He finished his pint and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It has to happen at Hogwarts.”
Chapter Summary

In which Tom visits the former US and ruminates on the burdens of absolute power.

Chapter Notes

There's sexual content in this chapter. Nothing E-rated but probably Mature by anyone's measure.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three: The Consequences of Delegation

“Government is an institution which prevents injustice other than such as it commits itself.”

Ibn Khaldum

One day, Harry will ask Tom, “Why didn’t you execute John Bearheart the first time?”

Tom will be naked and half-asleep, the way he often is when Harry initiates an interrogation, as though trying to catch Tom off guard. Tom will find it adorable. As though such a thing is possible.

Tom will reach up with a lazy hand and move Harry’s long dark hair out of his face, noting that Harry’s eyes are bright as ever even in the shadows of their bed, as though it isn’t refracted light that gives them color, but some inner force lighting them from the inside out. If anyone can defy physics, Tom will muse, it would be Harry.

“I thought he would learn from his punishment. Even I cannot predict everything.”

“But he deserved it,” Harry will insist.

Tom will raise a brow. “Just deserts? Is that your new ethic?”

Harry will shrug, and he will bat away the hand roaming up his bare thigh to distract him. “He deserved it, by any ethic.”

Tom will not care any more about ethics for their own sake then than he ever has before.

The North American region formerly known as Kansas
The strong disillusionment charm Tom typically wore, and the protective magic he had tied to his ring, were inactive in the throes of longer-distance apparition, so he chose a destination where he was fairly confident he could arrive unobserved. He emerged from the disorienting sensation of instantaneously moving from one half of the planet to the other on a flat, empty plain. The same one he’d walked as a young man, frustrated by the incomprehensible nonsense a Native American elder wizard had offered in response to a perfectly straightforward series of questions. Tom had an academic approach to magic that had never meshed with the native cultures, and meant they had certain abilities he had yet to unlock. Just one goal on a long list to keep him occupied for the balance of eternity.

As always, he was soothed by the near-silence of an ancient, undisturbed landscape. They called the state Kansas and it had once been a sea. The Muggles had unearthed countless fossils of bizarre aquatic creatures from the rocky subsurface, many of them magical and requiring MACUSA to spend much of its earliest days after organization thoroughly obliviating Muggles so inexpertly they had caused damage some of the Muggles had passed onto their children.

This part of the prairie was rough with hills formed from flint, showing silvery in places where the soil was worn away, a stark contrast to the vibrant green grass that carpeted everything else. The hills fell to meet one another in recesses of varying depth, sewn together with rows of trees fed by small, slow-moving streams and sheltered from the occasional fire that would destroy the woody growth everywhere else, keeping the high and flat portions of the landscape smooth and clear, stretching toward an unbroken horizon where a cornflower-blue sky rose to form a dome that Tom was sure was somehow disproportionate to the vista, larger here than anywhere else.

Tom was not sentimental, exactly, but he wouldn’t argue with the fact he had a feeling in this place, and it was one that he liked. So much so that when he had apparated here to dissipate a sudden rage, roughly twenty years ago, to discover some enterprising Muggle had erected a home and paved a driveway over Tom’s refuge, he had immediately cast an incendio so strong the house seemed to vanish, swallowed by the burst of unnaturally hot flame. Later Tom had wondered whether anyone had been inside. By that point in his life, he was acclimated to bloodshed, but he had never caused it without forethought before. If there had been any occupants, their end was swift. They might not have even had time to register surprise, let alone pain.

After the vacuum of the apparition had fully eased, Tom cast his disillusionment without so much as a gesture and pressed his thumb into the surface of the ring to activate the shields. Then he walked at a leisurely pace toward the base of his presence on this continent, which had begun as a camp but had grown into something semi-permanent.

Tom was determined that in the near future his base would be removed to a location less personal to Tom. The sight of the grass, broken and trod by human feet, and the structures sunk into the soil and breaking the line of the horizon, still made him itch. Much of the camp was still tents, all wizarding and well-appointed on the interior, but in the center of the semi-circle of canvas silhouettes was a Muggle-built, two-story structure made generous with wizarding space, so much so that once the idiots had collapsed the second-story floor by overloading the seemingly sufficient space with bodies and furnishings. It would have angered Tom more if a total disregard for the limitations of magic and physics wasn’t so widespread as to be nearly universal in wizarding kind.

Naturally, no one looked Tom’s way as he approached the camp and walked through the wards. He felt the magic in the barrier, but like anything created by a sworn subject, he was impervious to it. Tom glanced disinterestedly at the witches and wizards he passed, most of them wearing Fawley colors. The family was lost to Europe, but Tom’s blood tracing spellwork, his first elaborate
magical invention which had taken him twelve years to perfect, had identified Muggleborn
descendants in the Americas with various last names. When he’d offered them territory in Britain,
they hadn’t wanted it, which amused him. But it seemed fitting to let the American fiasco be led by
those most interested in resolving it, so after the Canadians had thoroughly disappointed Tom, he’d
given the Fawley tribe their turn.

When Tom Riddle first named himself Voldemort and chose to seek immortality, he had his eternal
life might become boring when his initial work was done. He thought when he was at the apex of
the power structure, loved and feared in equal part by his inner circle, that he would lay his many
burdens at their feet and become an advisor rather than a direct administrator. He had never
enjoyed the tedium of managing people. Yet no amount of study and planning could prepare him
for the ineptitude of virtually everyone who wasn’t Tom.

He, who had rarely been impressed by anyone in his life, hadn’t thought himself capable of
constantly overestimating those who surrounded him. How could his relatively low expectations
go so frequently unmet?

Tom put his hands in his pockets as he neared the central building, the sun warm on his shoulders.
It was a brick structure, since that type of construction responded well to magic, with a spelled
wooden frame. While architecture was not one of Tom’s interests, he had instructed certain, more
passionate subjects to produce research on the topic. Among the wizarding community’s
misguided but long-held beliefs was that Muggle construction was superior, but that Muggle
structures were incompatible with expansion charms. Tom’s experts had experimental spellwork
that, if applied during the Muggle construction process, yielded good results. Homes built entirely
with magic tended to be in near-constant need of structural reinforcement and could react
unpredictably with the use of magic indoors. Their first serious effort had been with the building
here at the Midwestern former-MACUSA base, and it had performed well in the five years since
its construction.

Tom mounted the wide stairs that led to the entrance, sidestepping a few witches as they emerged
from the doors, chatting with one another about their dinner plans. Inside, Tom experienced the
unpleasant chill of a cooling charm and frowned. He liked the heat and always had. Besides,
magical interference with the atmosphere always left him with the sense he was breathing
something he shouldn’t. But he knew there was no danger, so he spent a moment pausing in the
doorway to adjust, then walked into the entrance hall and noted with approval that the Fawleys had
finished installing the massive structure that was the international floo. Built to particular
specifications based upon the design of some shockingly intelligent Parkinson whose name Tom
hadn’t bothered to note, it would allow ten travelers at once, preferable for security purposes.

The Fawleys were doing fine. Well, even. It was the Bearhearts Tom was here to correct.

Earlier in his life, Tom had learned that while he was a tactile person, and quite interested in sex,
emotional attachment beyond absent fondness was at best unlikely, and very possibly impossible.
Tom didn’t like to think of himself as incapable of anything. But because he noted with disapproval
how romantic love – which he thought was a cultural term for affection combined with lust – could
leave otherwise intelligent and reasonable people stupid and useless, he couldn’t mind being
immune.

Still, he liked having someone close to him, not merely for the purpose of receiving their physical
worship – though it had its appeal – but for the pleasant effects when he reciprocated. He thought
of his companions as pets of a sort, and they were always pretty and charming. Sometimes male,
sometimes female. Sometimes a pair of them, but usually just one. They had never kept their status
long, and until recent years, he had carefully and successfully selected them for their ability to
return to their ordinary lives of dedicated but platonic service after he lost interest.

He suspected that pattern of success, as was inevitable, had been broken by John Bearheart.

He walked up the staircase, which was handsomely embellished by slabs of white marble with a pale silver vein, paneling the walls to a wainscot height where they were topped with an ebony molding. On the second story he found John’s office easily, though he’d never been inside it before. The door was open and John’s voice wafted out; Tom couldn’t hear another speaker, so he assumed he was hearing one half of a floo call, and as he stepped noiselessly through the doorway, that assumption was confirmed. All buildings associated with Tom’s governance had a floo for fire calls that was roughly the size of a portrait and conveniently positioned at eye-level, so that one needn’t crouch on the floor like an animal to receive it. The major offices had a separate floo in the event someone was using floo travel, though Tom wasn’t sure yet whether that was a practice he should encourage. Restricting floo travel to the more public areas would be far more traceable and secure.

The office was sparsely decorated and held only the standard-issue furniture: a plain wooden desk, a handful of wooden chairs with pale green upholstered seats, a coat rack upon which John still had a winter cloak, though it was late summer. His robes were thrown haphazardly over the back of the larger chair behind his desk, which looked Muggle. Ergonomic, Tom thought they called them. John wore only a shirt and trousers. His back was to the doorway, his head was close to but not inside the floo, so he must be the one receiving the call. His tall, broad frame was relaxed, one knee bent, one brown hand resting on the carved bar installed beneath the floo for that purpose. His hair was still quite long, hanging nearly to his waist.

Tom leaned in the doorway and dropped his disillusionment, casting a shield that would block the room’s occupants from being overheard or interrupted much more effectively than any door. He waited until John stiffened and turned in his direction, and then he smiled and drew his wand.

John dropped to his knees, but the look Tom observed on his face was indignant in that breath before he bent his head and his hair fell forward like a curtain. He had a handsome face, the classic beauty of his race and perhaps an especially strong brow, eyes black as pitch. “My lord,” he said.

“Yes, your lord.” Tom murmured, unmoving. He had not planned the details of this encounter, but he hadn’t expected the way his pulse would quicken at the sight of John Bearheart. Once discarded, his companions rarely recaptured his interest. But there was something very appealing about John, kneeling there with his dark head bent. It would be indecent, though, Tom thought, to ravish someone he might have to kill within the hour. Exciting, but…indecent.

Still, he walked forward until his toes were nearly touching John’s knees, which meant that his subject’s forehead brushed his thigh. If John relaxed his neck, it would be resting there. John was as tall as Tom, which was unusual and generally not to Tom’s tastes, but he had enjoyed the novelty. For example, it was no strain for John to receive him from his knees.

With that thought in mind, Tom absently brushed that smooth black hair behind John’s left ear, feeling the wizard shudder at his touch. “You’ve been behaving badly,” Tom murmured. “I trusted you with some significant responsibilities, John. And look what you did.”

John’s breath caught, as though surprised. Impatience surged through Tom and his right hand fist, pulling sharply at the hair between his fingers to jerk John’s head back. Their eyes met, red and narrow to dark and wide.

Tom’s left hand touched the wand in his pocket. “Legilimens,” he incanted.
John is on his knees before his lord, just like this, for the last time – though he doesn’t know it yet. Now it is just the most recent of countless times before, yet his hands still tremble eagerly as he parts his lord’s robes and wrestles with the buttoned fly –

Impatiently, Tom pressed on, knowing this variety of occlumency when he saw it. “Your misdeeds, not your service, John. Show me that I may judge,” he said aloud, though it was quite obvious that John was too distressed to be listening. There was pain in Tom’s knife-like legilimency, he knew, and while he thought it likely he could temper it with effort, he had never bothered to try before and did not care to now.

John wakes with a gasp – he’d been dreaming of his lord, but wakes with a Muggle woman draped over him. John always chooses women. He hadn’t even looked at another man before his lord, not that his preferences had mattered overmuch. He knew bad things could happen if he refused his lord’s interest, but also, he hadn’t wanted to. His lord’s allure overwhelmed his sexual preferences, if he had them. But since, the idea of letting another man close had disgusted him, had –

Tom snarled in displeasure and grasped John’s hair tighter. John’s magic was quite powerful. It was a requirement in Tom’s companions, after all. John’s particular talents had kept Tom interested longer than most. But now that the same abilities were working against Tom rather than for him, he considered resorting to Crucio to destabilize John for a better Legilimens. There were other, untidy side effects to that combination, though, and Tom wasn’t sure yet whether to kill John. If Tom meant to let him live, he ought to preserve as much cognitive function as possible. A lord did not damage his subjects needlessly.

Then Tom found what he was looking for, sure of it when John’s mouth twisted and he cried out a vain protest.

The Muggles are marching, and the Bearhearts and Sparrows are watching. It might have been ironic, since the Muggles are mostly white and their present masters are mostly native, but John doesn’t have a sense of justice as he watches them, starving and stumbling, many barefoot and ill-clothed. It is spring, but one of those days in this season in Kansas that feels like winter revisited. There’d been frost that morning and he doubts the temperature is forty degrees now. Some of the smaller children are carried.

“Where are they sending them?” John’s brother Roman asks with a frown. The Bearhearts are on horseback, something they haven’t done together since they were children. The Canadians had sometimes taken issue with the tribes’ preference of using horses, but the Fawleys don’t concern themselves with details immaterial to their work.

“Nowhere,” John answers. “They call it exercise, but they’re trying to weaken some of them so that they’ll sicken and die. The Fawleys don’t want to execute any of them, but the Yaxleys were clear they’re following the Benetian model which means they only want a hundred thousand subjects in the entire territory.”

Rowan’s frown deepens, and his horse, picking up on his unease, stirs under him until he speaks quietly to calm her. Then he says, “What’s he like, our lord?”

Rowan’s tone is light, but John is still startled. His prior attachment to their Lord is the one topic that no one in his entire family ever broaches. His brother Neil out of some kind of lingering homophobia, John is pretty sure, closely followed by the more universal paranoia that any discourse about their lord will somehow reach him and earn his wrath. Their lord not only punishes those who use his unutterable Name in vain, but also those who discuss frivolously the concept of him. Of course, the consequences for the former are far more immediate and sure,
while the latter can only be enforced upon discovery, which is unlikely with no one to overhear them but the hills and their horses.

“Brilliant,” John says after a moment, and knows he sounds wistful. Hates himself a little for it. It isn’t being had, in every way, by a man that is demeaning, it is to be had in every way by someone to whom he was wholly devoted, then cast aside like trash. Yet worst of all, he would undo none of it. He would go again, swiftly, if called. “Terrifying,” he adds more quietly, because it’s equally true.

Rowan nods, a little pale, but he seems determined not to overreact. His horse continues to dance, betraying his tension, and because they are horses, eventually her nervous energy infects John’s horse, and he sighs and picks up his reins. “Let’s ride along a mile or so,” he says, feeling the need to punish himself with the sight of the Muggles in their sad march.

As a child, his mother had forced him, crying, to carry a rooster to the block of wood in the barren little backyard behind their battered trailer home on the reservation. She’d snapped at John when he’d averted his eyes so as not to see her part its head from its body with a fast stroke of her little hatchet, dark with rust from many years of its task.

“If you can’t watch, you don’t deserve to eat it,” she had said soberly. Meanly, he had thought then, but now he realizes she was right.

That night, John goes to the barracks and meets the eyes of a silent, watchful Muggle woman, who he might have mistaken for nothing but a girl, if it weren’t for the hard lines bracketing her mouth. When he gestures with his chin, she follows him back to his tent, looking around at the disproportionately vast and well-appointed interior not with wonder, but with a sort of sad resignation. Further evidence, he supposes, of the hopelessness of her plight. He speaks to her the way his lord once spoke to him. An inferior being, graced with his presence. At first startled by his gentle touch, she is soon lulled by it, so that she doesn’t even protest when he takes her swiftly from behind, envisioning a different and much more forbidden tight heat, one he was certainly never permitted to enjoy outside his imagination, when he comes.

He lets her sleep in the bed, not hating himself, exactly, but far from proud. After a period of sleeplessness, John goes outside again and stands under the stars, thinking. If something must die or suffer for your purposes, he thinks, prolonging the inevitable is the worst sort of cowardice. It’s a thought – no, a certainty – that has been keeping him awake for months.

He apparates to the Muggle encampment, which was a small University campus before. As a teenager, John had attended a graduation there, the sister of a Muggleborn girl he’d been dating. Now there is a net of wards so strong it’s visible, a sparkling dome over the entire thing. The existing magic makes it easy.

He lifts his wand, touches the tip to that transparent barrier, and speaks the incantation he invented himself. “Virulent.”

Tom released John and continued to stand over him. John gasped, doubling over, even – and Tom found it a bit excessive – retching. Tom wrinkled his nose, and took a few steps back. He’d liked the idea of John wretching on his boots, but he always disdained vomit, easily vanish-able though it was. One of the side effects of torture that kept Tom from ever developing a true connoisseur’s delight in the art.

Tom waited until John, still breathing heavily, was at last able to lift his head, though his eyes remained carefully downcast.
“How did you think of it?” Tom didn’t bother to hide the admiration in his voice. He had never seen anything quite like it, but the structure of the spell was nearly obvious, now that he had seen it, in its simplicity. The way the most brilliant innovations always are.

Apparently this was not the reaction John expected, because his expression was tense, and his voice small, with surprise. “I was…” he stopped to clear his throat. “I had a Muggle upbringing.” Of course this was no explanation at all, but before Tom could express his impatience, John hastened to elaborate. “My mother had work computers, at the university. They’re a machine that…”

“I know what they are,” Tom interrupted. “Go on.”

John nodded. “The computers were all connected, invisibly with electricity and such, called the ARAPNET. Every once in a while one of the computers would get what they called a ‘virus,’ another invisible…code, or something like that, that passed through all the computers connected in the ARAPNET. I always thought, a comprehensive interwoven ward is like that. It could carry one specially designed spell, instantly, throughout its perimeter.” He swallowed, and hesitated. “Are you going to kill me?”

Tom cocked his head, giving the question sincere thought. “No,” he decided, watching John wilt in relief. “While your insubordination is unacceptable, you have also demonstrated a magical achievement worthy of recognition. I will send you to the spell study center at Durmstrang, and you will never speak to a member of your family, or any other resident of this continent, ever again.”

John put his head down, and Tom expected he was crying, if not now, then imminently. Tom rolled his eyes. “You have your life,” he snapped. “Such as it is.”

John began to nod, and managed to say, “Thank you, my lord.” Then he looked up, abruptly, and wet his lips. “May I please you, my lord?”

It was the way John had initiated intimacy, on the rare occasion he did. Humbly, and with gratitude. Tom considered it, and then stepped forward and loosened his trousers, letting John use his eager mouth on Tom’s slack flesh until it filled and hardened and stretched down his throat. John had always been good at this, even though he obviously had no experience in advance of serving as his lord’s companion. Today it was better even than Tom remembered, worshipful and eager. But Tom wanted something else.

He placed his hands firmly on the back of John’s head and thrust into his throat, pleased when he gasped and choked. Then he drew back, looked down into those black eyes, which were strained and wet, and grunted approvingly. “Lay on your stomach, and spread your legs.”

It didn’t take long. Tom left John crying on the floor in his office and reflected on his memory of the virulent spell, so absorbed in his fascination that he forgot he was walking through his foreign offices without a disillusionment, and nearly tripped over a knot of people who had fallen to their knees at the sight of him.

Recognizing one of the white-streaked brunet heads, Tom told them all to rise. The familiar head, surely enough, belonged to Reginald Fawley, and by the look of them the three other witches were some close relation to him.

“We did not expect you, my lord,” Reginald said, bowing deeply at the waist. Seeing him do so, the witches nervously followed suit, trying to keep their eyes down but quite obviously unable to stop themselves from sneaking upward glances at their Lord. One of them, Tom noted, had a hint
of green in her hazel eyes and a very appealing mouth.

“I received word of the incident with the Muggle encampment,” Tom said. “I came to conduct my investigation.”

Reginald Fawley stood a little straighter. He was not Lord Fawley, but he was the Heir and Lord Fawley was quite elderly. He generally represented his family to their Lord. “We shall do whatever we can to accommodate and assist you, my lord.”

Tom couldn’t contain a brief smirk, amused. “I have completed my investigation. Your culprit is John Bearheart.”

Tom had rare occasion to use the term poleaxed with accuracy, but thought it fit Reginald Fawley’s look in that moment. The witch – the interesting looking one – was the first to speak.

“But he has no access to the wards, my lord. We were sure it had to be someone charged with securing and monitoring the encampment…”

“It wasn’t,” Tom said, studying her. “Who are you?”

Reginald Fawley was sufficiently recovered for introductions. “Pardon, my lord. These are my two daughters, Elaine and Paulette, who are my trusted advisors. And our subject Corinne Banks, a cousin off the Fawley line.”

The witches all bowed again. Elaine, who had spoken, met Tom’s eye and blushed.

Reginald Fawley had not missed the direction of his lord’s attention, and seemed tense as a result. “We should detain John, then, my lord?”

Tom shook his head, and looked away from the witch. “Call for an escort from Durmstrang in spell study.”

Looking confused, Reginald Fawley frowned. “My lord. Respectfully, my lord, but the magic exercised over the encampment wards killed every occupant. Two hundred thousand of my lord’s Muggle subjects, exterminated in less than a minute.”

The witches whose names Tom had already forgotten looked like the mere reference to the incident made them ill. Elaine appeared unaffected, pleasing Tom further.

“I will require Elaine Fawley’s presence in Paris,” he said. Earlier in his service, Reginald Fawley might have been confused by his lord ignoring a question, but now he knew it for the answer it was.

Reginald cast a stricken look at his daughter before nodding and murmuring, “If it is your wish, my lord, she will go immediately.”

Rather than afraid or giddy, Elaine Fawley appeared thoughtful, securing Tom’s opinion of her potential as his next companion. He wasn’t sure, but he thought she might respond well to a little pain, which was a former interest of Tom’s that he had enjoyed revisiting in John Bearheart’s office.

For now, he apparated without further comment to his North American residence on the Gulf of Mexico. Even he could not apparate halfway around the world twice in one day, and frankly, after the earlier apparition, even this distance was a strain. But he didn’t like to remain too long in one place; it was the kind of habit that got leaders assassinated throughout history, even magical
history. He looked out over the water for some time, standing on the floating deck with a transparent floor, beneath which there was only clear water, unblemished by fish or organism. The extra-strength Fidelius under which Tom kept all his residences had a certain effect on all living things.

As he knew they would, Tom’s thoughts turned to the Potter Heir, the Peverell wand, and the assorted implications. He had felt the magic on the child when he had attended the ancestral wand ceremony for the Malfoys’ son. When he identified its source, a reedy youth with unearthly eyes and the solemnity of a mature adult, no one had to tell him who he was seeing. Peverell, he had thought, thinking of the Potter couple – James Potter, who was very nearly powerful enough to be interesting, and the Muggleborn wife, the pure venom with which she’d looked at him when their side was forced into a surrender during that penultimate battle of the violent phase of the longer, colder war.

He closed his eyes to better remember.

“Sirius Black has your child,” he told them, after they were magically restrained and forced to kneel in the long line of their comrades. He observed their shock and horror with pleasure, that he would know where they were keeping their only child. Then he added, “And Sirius Black is mine.”

James Potter had protested, fought the restraints as though by freeing his body he would be freed of that fact, too. Betrayal, Tom knew, was among the most intense pains. He let them suffer it without comment, until James went still, head bowed and shoulders a line of defeat. The woman didn’t change posture or expression, though tears had begun to streak her cheeks. Her eyes, a steady, clear green, watched Tom.

“You are James Potter, heir to your name, and your name is Peverell.” Tom spoke the words in the manner of his tradition, ignoring the Potters’ confusion. Someone would explain it to them later. “Your ancestral territory will be restored to you, and you shall be granted a portion of my subjects who will swear secondary fealty to you but who will remain ultimately obedient only to me.”

“You’re going to kill a few hundred thousand Muggles in my name, and enslave the rest, you mean,” James said bitterly. His wife continued to remain very still, but Tom though he saw her eyes flash briefly with the urge to silence her husband. Tom understood he was meant to be affected by James Potter’s words, but he was not.

“Yes,” was all he said. Then, “And I will place your child in the care of Lord and Lady Malfoy, so that the rifts between your noble families may be repaired in the generation to come.”

Again, James Potter snarled and fought, until his wife snapped, “James, be silent.” Then her eyes returned to Tom’s. “Thank you, my lord,” she said, and lowered her gaze, then her head, in an attitude of perfect subservience. Her husband watched, first in horror, then in understanding. He grimaced as he swallowed whatever he had been about to say, as though it tasted bitter, and mimicked her posture.

“Yes. Thank you. My lord.”

Tom smiled down at them, as he might his wayward children, had he the slightest inclination to have any.

In the present, Tom opened his eyes, presented once more with the stillness of this fragment of the ocean, brought inland and becalmed. The warm air that rushed past had the scent of salt. While not without its charm, and while it belonged to him as surely as every other corner of the world, this continent was not his home, and he could not be content here.
In the back of his mind, Tom recognized that his ability to find contentment at all was under increasing strain. But then, there was still much to do – Muggles to settle and subservients to train, an Order of the Phoenix to vanquish in total once and for all – and then, surely, he could not be discontent.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a little nervous about this chapter! What did you think?
Chapter Summary

In which Harry makes a new friend, Ron Weasley adjusts to life after the Nott wardship, and Sirius considers taking a ward himself.

Chapter Four: The Things We Know To Be True

“Ask no questions, and you’ll be told no lies.”

Charles Dickens

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

August 29, 1988

"Harry, wake up."

Harry became conscious of a voice in his ear, solid weight on his back, and two knobby knees digging into his shoulders. Draco was too slight to make it hard to breathe with the full weight of him on Harry’s rib cage, but it wasn’t exactly comfortable, either. Harry squirmed.

"Geddoft," he mumbled into his pillow. “Gonna squish me.”

"Then get up!" Draco insisted. Harry got one arm under his body far enough to abruptly jerk to one side, grinning when Draco pitched sideways and had to scramble to keep from falling off the bed.

"I thought I was the morning person,” Harry grumbled, squinting at Draco while his vision charm came into focus.

“You’ve been asleep for ages,” Draco sniffed.

Harry hadn’t been asleep all that long, actually. He’s been out in London with Sirius until very late, causing Sirius and Lucius to argue in loud whispers in the drawing room after they presumed Harry had obediently marched off to bed.

“...our Lord was very clear, he’s to spend each night at the Manor...”

“...this is the night, we just got caught up...”

"If you think I can keep him safe, you know nothing about our Lord...”
Unfortunately, their conversation then devolved into furious overlapping whispers that Harry couldn’t make out at all from his vantage point, so he trudged upstairs, exhausted. He’d followed Sirius around during a day-and-half-the-night long caucused negotiation between two Muggle interest groups to arrive at a strategy for structuring their self-government, which Sirius had constantly reminded them could be only advisory, but they seemed to think it to be of the utmost importance.

The tedium exhausted Harry and the dynamic between Sirius and his Muggle subjects still confused him to a point of weariness also. He’d only been Sirius’s named Heir for a few months, and he was still accustomed to Lucius’s style of leadership, which was to be attentive but unyielding. Lucius would never ask the Muggles to create a forum to air their concerns; he’d consider it his responsibility to deduce and meet their needs, and stifle their desire for what he perceived to be luxuries as efficiently as possible and as harshly as need be.

“It’s Weasley day,” Draco said, bouncing a little on his hands and knees. He said it with a sort of horrified delight. Harry scratched his head and yawned.

“Oh, that. Do you think I have to go?”

Draco glared at him. “Unless you convince them you’re sick!” He paused, then added, “Your parents may be there.”

Harry brightened, trying not to think about the flash of darkness his reaction garnered in his foster brother’s bright grey eyes. “You think so? They’re never allowed to go anywhere, I thought.”

“They’re nobility,” Draco said, shrugging. He never liked to dwell long on the subject of Harry’s family’s dishonor, though Harry didn’t think it was for Harry’s sake. “The Weasleys are doing well, my father says. One of them has impressed our Lord so greatly he’s asked for him in Paris.”

Harry was startled. He wasn’t always - okay, ever - in tune with the social hierarchy the way the Malfoys seemed to be, try though he might, but even Harry knew the Weasleys were the source of more scorn than respect in the Pureblood circles. To be asked to join the ranks of their Lord’s seat of power in Europe was a significant honor.

“I guess I’d better come along then,” Harry said reluctantly, elbowing Draco out of his way so he could slide out of bed, then paused to stretch languorously with another jaw-cracking yawn.

Draco watched him with interest. “How late were you?”

Directing a strong note of envy in the question, Harry shot Draco a wry smile over his shoulder while he opened the wardrobe which hummed consideringly for a moment then produced a suggested outfit of high-waisted black robes and trousers.

“Not those,” Draco said scornfully, and the wardrobe hummed again - sullenly, if a charmed piece of furniture could be said to have an attitude - then suggested more traditional full robes in navy blue with some gold thread embellishing a v-neck collar. Draco’s frown eased and he nodded.

“So what did you and Lord Black do, then?” It was obvious Draco was trying to be nonchalant, but Harry could tell he really hated Harry having an experience of any kind without him. Harry wasn’t sure he cared very much if Draco felt left out, considering how well-acustomed Harry has become to staying behind when Lucius and Narcissa took Draco somewhere for an event to which only their true family was invited; or Lucius took Draco into the wizarding and Muggle villages in their territory on ruler’s errands; or Narcissa took Draco to places Draco found routine and to which Harry yearned to go - the homes of their other friends, or Diagon Alley just for tea and an
afternoon of shopping.

Now that Harry had something of his own, he was inclined to keep the details to himself. Sometimes Sirius’s work as Lord Black was taxing even just to observe, but it was still fascinating to Harry just to be somewhere new, surrounded by people he didn’t know. He also couldn’t escape the gravity of a Lord’s task, which was so obvious in unsettled London. It made Harry wonder nervously about the challenges in his family’s territory, though his subtle inquiries to his parents in his letters always went unaddressed in their replies.

"Lord Black is sure to marry and have a real heir,” Draco said sharply. “I hope you don’t really think you’ll rule his territory one day.”

Draco had also pointed out once that Draco was the one closely related to Sirius, not Harry, and Harry had only shrugged and said nothing, the very best way to get under Draco’s skin.

This time he said, “Yes, I know. There’s no need to be such a brat.”

"I am not a brat!” Draco cried. “How dare you!”

"I didn’t say you were a brat, I said you were being a brat.”

Draco sputtered. “There is literally no difference! Don’t you know anything about grammar?”

Harry wanted to make a scathing remark, like that he knew as much about grammar as Draco because their education was identical, but in truth Draco’s retention was better and they both knew it, which meant he was probably right.

“I’m sorry. It’s just annoying when you’re mean. Annoying, and, well, mean.” Harry, cheeks flushed, ducked his head and distracted himself with putting on the robes Draco had approved.

When he glanced up again, Draco had colored further. “I don’t like it when you go and do things without me. It isn’t right. We’re family.”

"You do things without me all the time,” Harry pointed out, but kept his tone gentle. Generally Draco would accept these arguments when presented to him carefully, even if they would never occur to him spontaneously.

“I’m sorry,” Draco relented at last. “It’s good that you have Black’s heirship, even if it’s sure to be temporary. It’s very good for your reputation, and.” He stopped and swallowed. “You don’t deserve to be...” Draco paused again, glancing at the door and lowering his voice. “Punished, you know. Because of your parents.”

Harry’s thoughts had briefly touched on the unfairness of his circumstances from time to time, but he’d never dared linger there long, let alone expected anyone else to agree, much less say it out loud. Impulsively, he hugged Draco, and the other boy hugged him back, a little stiff and surprised but with a bright laugh. Draco was always pleased by displays of affection, and they were out of character for Harry.

That minor rift patched over - for now - Harry tugged on his boots while following Draco out of the room, which meant that he was hopping and stumbling the first several steps down the hall. The Manor was cool and quiet, as it always was in the late morning, when Narcissa was typically in the garden and Lucius was in his study, reviewing the post and drafting replies.

“Tell me again what’s happening?” Harry hissed to Draco, after his boots were in place – though still unlaced – and he’d closed the distance between them. Draco glanced up at Harry and rolled his
“If you’d just pay attention the first time,” he started with a sniff, then caught Harry’s scowl and grinned. “It’s a garden party, Harry. It’s just a bit of food and a chance for the adults to circle one another for a few hours. But there’s never been one at the Weasleys’ before.”

Harry had never been to another estate, except for a brief tour of Sirius’s which curiously had not been repeated. However, he categorically loathed formal parties. Malfoy Manor was the situs of many a garden party through the summer, and they were always terrible. Still, Harry was excited at the prospect of seeing Theo, Pansy and Daphne, their other friends Draco and his age, and though it was slight, the chance of speaking to his parents would have been enough to brave the much worse circumstances than a garden party.

“I hear that the Weasley House is quite new,” Draco was saying, as though he was privy to all sorts of gossip and hadn’t merely overheard the same conversations between Lucius and Narcissa that Harry had. “Their ancestral home was willfully abandoned due to the costs of upkeep a hundred years ago. Can you imagine?”

Harry admitted with a shake of his head that he couldn’t. A whole house, left behind? He glanced almost unconsciously at the fine wallpaper, delicate fixtures and high, arching ceilings of this corner of the Manor and tried to imagine the house closed up and lifeless. He had always thought of the Manor as having a distinct presence, though his bases for comparison were limited, and the idea of it abandoned seemed a kind of death.

“What kind of costs?” Harry asked. “Isn’t everything…well, magic, or done by elves?”

Draco looked surprised by the question, and then shrugged. “I’m not sure. Maybe other places are different.”

They fell quiet, both thinking this over, then Draco suddenly bolted toward the kitchens with a shout over his shoulder challenging Harry to a “race,” safely after he’d already ensured a considerable head start.

Harry still caught him up and won.

Weasley House, Devon

Ron Weasley sat, stiff and uneasy, on the edge of his bed while his mother fussed with his robes. He was still unaccustomed to Weasley House, which was very different than Nott Court, and distinctly not the place he’d been born and of which he had fond, if foggy memories, with which he had often comforted himself during dark and lonely nights and days in the Nott family’s custody. Neither was he particularly accustomed to his mother, brothers or sister, having seen none of them since he was little more than a baby, barely three years old.

Several months earlier, when he was initially returned to his parents and walked up the steps with their hands on his shoulders, he had wanted to cry at the sight of the big, stately house standing where once the ramshackle Burrow had been. For several days he had wondered if what he had thought were memories of a cozy, whimsical home had actually been his imagination, until Bill had gently asked him if he remembered their old house, and they had then spent a companionable hour discussing just that.

“You look very handsome,” said Molly, Ron’s mother, studying his face and blinking rapidly as
tears took shape in her pale blue eyes. Her lip trembled and Ron looked away. He was overwhelmed by all of the attention she constantly lavished on him. If anyone had asked him, even a year before, whether he could resent being coddled by a loving parent, he would have scoffed. But after a childhood spent in solitude at best or ever-watchful in hostile company at best, the bustle of his family and the constant looks and touches were suffocating.

“Just one more thing,” she murmured, letting go of him as though aware of his discomfort. Then her hands were back and she was awkwardly tugging a pair of dark gloves on to his hands.

“What are those for?” Ron asked, surprised. “I don’t need…”

“Gloves are a nice, formal touch,” she interrupted, and he could see that she was struggling with her tears more than ever. His hands always upset her. Ron realized that she was hoping to cover them up with the gloves so that no one would notice them, but he rather thought that wearing gloves at a garden party in August would have the opposite effect.

“There you are, now,” Molly said, determinedly cheerful. “You’re going to meet some of the children that will be in your year in Hogwarts today, Ron. Won’t that be lovely?”

Ron hesitated, then nodded obediently. “Yes.”

“I need to go get dressed myself,” Molly said. “They’ll be arriving before we know it. Will you go find Bill, and see if he has anything to tell you?”

Ron nodded, perking up a bit at the prospect of Bill’s company, and when his mother pulled back he all but bolted from the room.

He found Bill in the garden, which was very modest and obviously new, though Bill had called in a few favors with herbologists he knew to create something fairly elaborate considering the short amount of time in which it had been put in. There was a row of Dragonsnaps that swayed toward Ron on their long stems and reached for his robes with questing jaws as he passed, making Ron laugh, then beyond the entrance the path forked to form a large circle with a fountain in the middle, decorated with large but immobile statues and spraying multicolored water in several small fans, an interesting effect.

“Oi, Ron,” Bill said, smiling warmly at the sight of his brother. Ron smiled back, shyly, trying not to blush as he watched Bill glance at his gloved hands then quickly back at Ron’s face, as though catching himself. When Ron drew near Bill clapped him so hard on the shoulder that it stung, but Ron liked it, for some reason. It made him feel adult and connected.

“Oh, Ron,” Bill said, smiling warmly at the sight of his brother. Ron smiled back, shyly, trying not to blush as he watched Bill glance at his gloved hands then quickly back at Ron’s face, as though catching himself. When Ron drew near Bill clapped him so hard on the shoulder that it stung, but Ron liked it, for some reason. It made him feel adult and connected.

“Whomping willow saplings,” Bill explained. “They’re quite rare, and rather entertaining. Watch.” Bill picked up a brightly colored ball from the ground at his feet and tossed it into the midst of the trees, which abruptly came to life as it sailed within reach, branches swinging wildly until one tree connected firmly and the ball shot back toward Bill, who scrambled to catch it, laughing.

“Funny, aren’t they?” he asked Ron, who smiled agreeably, even as he took a cautious half-step further away from the violent little trees. Observing this, Bill smiled. “They’re much too small to do much more than bruise you, though as they get larger they can be a real hazard. There’s one at Hogwarts, of all places. I’m surprised it hasn’t murdered a kid yet.”
“The Notts had some,” Ron said quietly. “Bigger ones.”

Bill looked down, his smile falling away at the expression on Ron’s face, his blue eyes, the same shade as their mother’s, suddenly darkening like the sky in a storm. The expression made Ron uneasy, and he looked away even as Bill opened his mouth for a response that didn’t come.

“Bill, Ron!” It was Percy’s voice, so Ron swallowed and turned back toward the house to watch another brother jog down the steps and out amongst the Dragonsnaps. Percy was much smaller than Bill in stature, and had a generally stiffer demeanor, but less…emotional range than Ron had noticed in his other relatives. Also, Bill was more reserved with Percy around, a fact that presently made Ron grateful. He didn’t really want to talk about whomping willows.

“Charlie come with you?” Bill asked after giving Percy’s hand a rather formal clasp. Percy grinned briefly down at Ron, touched his head a little awkwardly, then squinted back up at Bill and shook his head.

“He couldn’t get away. Bit sunny out here, isn’t it?” He drew his wand and waved it around, encanting under his breath in a language Ron didn’t know, and an umbrella spread above them, then shook a moment and surged out in all directions to form a massive canopy. Bill looked to be caught somewhere between annoyed and impressed. Ron missed the hot sun. There had been so little of it in the persistently rainy Nott territory.

“Here are the twins, anyway,” Percy said with an absent gesture, and Fred and George materialized in the doorway of Weasley House as though conjured, closely followed outside by Molly.

Steeling himself for the force of all their company simultaneously, Ron managed to make it through the rest of the early morning through a combination of emotional compartmentalization and counting his deep breaths, which no one seemed to notice. They were used to him shrugging, nodding or smiling where possible and avoiding speaking unless given no choice. And none of them were eager to force him to do anything – which he couldn’t help but appreciate, boisterous and overbearing though they were. He knew they just loved and worried about him.

And feel sorry for me, his subconscious couldn’t help but add, an all too frequent thought that always made Ron’s stomach turn.

He was rather relieved when guests began arriving. While that did mean more people, and they were often curious enough about Ron to seek him out for introductions, it did force his family to break ranks and mingle, and their attention was more disconcerting than that of any stranger. Especially since strangers wouldn’t intervene when Ron snuck off to find a hiding place, as he did at the earliest opportunity as the garden filled up, giving the whomping willow orchard a wide berth as he circled the central garden and found the original gardens he remembered from his childhood, burgeoning with herbs and vegetables and surrounded by an untidy fence.

It was there, crouched behind a pumpkin vine and provoking a gnome into an incoherent rage by repeatedly poking him with a stick, that Ron first met Harry.

“Oh, hi there,” said a boy’s voice, startling Ron so much that he dropped the stick, and was therefore defenseless when the gnome darted forward and bit his hand. Naturally, all that resulted was that the gnome broke a tooth and, swearing more vehemently than before, retreated into its den.

Ron stood up too fast, turning to face the interloper, and knocked his head hard against a bright blue pumpkin, in turn startling a cloud of amber magic flies out of a large hole near its stem. Ron had only a brief impression of bright green eyes and messy hair before the boy grabbed him by the
arm and hauled him bodily away from the vine before the flies could start to bite.

When they were a safe ten feet away, the boy let go of his arm and they faced one another.

“I’m really sorry about that,” said the dark-haired boy, looking upset. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Ron confirmed, smiling wryly. “Don’t worry. Surprised me a bit is all. I’m Ron Weasley.” He stuck out his hand and the other boy shook it, looking relieved.

“Harry Potter,” he said. Ron vaguely recalled the name from Theo’s obsessive lectures about European wizarding families, but that was all. Harry looked past Ron nervously as the flies buzzed more loudly, still swarming. “Maybe we’d better get out of here.”

Ron nodded, and together they ducked through a hole in the fence and came out of the vegetable garden on the side furthest from the new formal gardens and the house, to Ron’s relief.

“So you’re hiding at your own party?” Harry asked, with a tentative grin.

Ron laughed, shrugging. He hadn’t laughed in a long time, but for some reason he felt immediately at ease with Harry. “I didn’t know anyone would go snooping around the vegetable patch,” he said, but made sure Harry could see his face and know he wasn’t being serious. Still, Harry blushed a bit, following Ron toward the reed-choked pond, where Ron was pretty sure none of the guests would venture, since Harry was obviously a rare exception to the average garden party attendee.

“I don’t really like…crowds,” Harry said, frowning.

Ron nodded. “Neither do I.” He bent and prodded at a toad, frozen by their shadow, with his right hand until it startled and hopped off the path. He felt Harry watching for a moment, then he crouched down beside Ron. Ron kept talking, surprising himself. He had barely said more than a few words at a time since coming to Weasley House. “I’m not used to parties. I mean, I know they happen, but when I was the Notts’ ward I never went to them.”

Harry looked curious, but not pitying. “I know what you mean. I’m the Malfoys’ ward, and this is the first time they’ve taken me anywhere like this.” He looked out over the pond with real interest. “Don’t the Notts live in Canada? What was that like?”

“Um, I’m not really sure,” Ron admitted. “I didn’t really leave Nott Court. We weren’t even allowed out on the grounds.” He had a flash of a mental image of dark walls and shadowed corners and brittle laughter and sucked in a breath, hard. When he glanced up at Harry again, Harry was still looking at the pond, but his expression had shifted, as though he had been deliberately pretending not to see Ron’s moment of panic. Feeling grateful and oddly vulnerable at once, Ron rose back to his full height and moved his arms restlessly. He never seemed to get used to their unnatural weight. This time he caught Harry’s glance and held his hands up, turning them this way and that with a small smile.

“You can ask, if you want. It’s okay.”

Harry swallowed and blushed, then met Ron’s eye curiously. “What happened to them?”

Ron hesitated, then lifted his left wrist to his face, seized the cuff of his sleeve in his teeth, and dragged it up to his elbow so Harry could see where his arm ended and the prosthetic was adhered with a charm.

“Lord Nott cut them off when I was five.”
Harry looked for a brief moment as though he would be sick, and then he swallowed and looked slowly up from Ron’s arm and back at his face. “Why would he do that?” he murmured, his shock obvious.

Ron shrugged. It had been so long ago, he couldn’t really remember it any more. He couldn’t remember much, just a brief flash of pain, and dizziness. Theo told him he had screamed for hours, and either the other boy was exaggerating or Ron had blocked most of it out.

“Our Lord told him to,” Ron said quietly, “when my father spoke his name.”

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When they returned to the Manor, Draco was cross with Harry for disappearing during the party and the adults seemed to be wearied by spending their morning in a setting they felt unequal to their status. Harry had liked Weasley House, mainly because it was so different from the Manor, so much simpler in its construction and surrounded by rather wild, open country. He had noticed that there were no elves, only Muggle subjects, and that had made him uncomfortable, but otherwise he found the Weasleys intriguing. Especially Ron, of course, though Harry shuddered whenever he thought about what the other boy had told him about his father and their Lord.

“All right then, Harry?” Narcissa asked gently before he could follow Draco to the kitchens for an informal lunch while Lucius and Narcissa dined in the conservatory. Harry glanced at Draco, and when he was far enough away Harry didn’t think he’d overhear, Harry dared to ask the question that had been plaguing him since Ron’s revelation.

“I met Ron Weasley at the party. He said that…that his f-father spoke our Lord’s name.” Harry did not even know their Lord’s name, and didn’t care to. He did know that it’s utterance was forbidden, so he didn’t think he would ever have the opportunity to learn it.

Narcissa’s expression had become very cautious, but she nodded, putting her hand lightly on Harry’s shoulder.

“I believe that is true,” she confirmed.

“And he said…” Harry stopped and swallowed, inadvertently staring down at his own, whole hands, and unable to go on.

“The bad acts of one’s parents can cause pain to their children,” Narcissa said softly.

Harry could hardly breathe. “What if…would Lord Malfoy, if my father…?”

“Oh Harry,” Narcissa murmured, and when he risked a glance at her she was smiling gently. She touched his cheek, brushing his hair back with her fingertips. Harry looked into her eyes and started to relax, but then she said, “Of course he would.” She patted his head and walked away.

When she was gone, Harry knelt and threw up the meager contents of his stomach on the cool tile floor. Luckily, he hadn’t had much of an appetite all day, Harry reflected weakly. He rested his forehead on his knee and tried to remember how to breathe. A house elf appeared to clean up after him, and then it, too, was gone, and Harry was left alone. When he felt he could, he staggered to his feet and went to look for Draco, willing to apologize for having done absolutely nothing if it meant Draco would fill the ringing silence between his ears with idle chatter.

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12 Grimmauld Place, London
Sirius still had a Muggleborn girl loose in the house.

He didn’t know what to make of her. She was quiet, but she wasn’t shy. She kept her chin up and always met his eye. She was magically powerful, that was palpable, and she was smart, too. But she was also nine years old and missed her parents. As she adjusted enough to Sirius to not go totally still and watchful every time he entered a room, he recognized that she was starting to sulk. He imagined she was lonely, though she had cultivated the loyalty of all of his house elves in short order, and made them her friends. She read voraciously, taking notes on the parchment he’d finally thought to offer her but for which she certainly hadn’t asked. She didn’t ask for anything.

Her name was Hermione, she was nine, and she wanted to go home. This was the extent of the information on offer. Sirius didn’t feel like pressing her, so he performed daily, one-sided small talk, always concluding by asking if she was okay, to which she always responded with a shrug then a nod.

He’d thought several times of bringing Harry to Grimmauld to spend some time with Hermione, but he knew Narcissa wouldn’t approve, and he half agreed with her. Hogwarts was no longer an egalitarian school. A muggleborn like Hermione and a twice-titled Heir like Harry wouldn’t associate. It seemed unwise to lay the foundation for either of them to misstep and pay a price.

That being said, Hermione was one of Sirius’s subjects, and by the estimation of some, that made her Harry’s subject, too. If the dynamics between them could be properly taught, it might be better than leaving Hermione without any contact with children her age at all.

Of course, there was a more obvious solution, which was to install her to foster with some wizarding family, where she could be brought up by people who actually knew something about children, unlike Sirius. For some reason he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

When Sirius returned from the last day of the Muggles’ talks about their internal leadership, worn out and frustrated, he found Peter Pettigrew lounging in his private study with a half-finished bottle of firewhisky set beside an empty decanter.

“Sirius,” Peter said, his eyes bright but his speech clear. He really held his liquor. “Finally.”

“Peter,” Sirius greeted cautiously, reaching past him for the bottle and an empty glass. “I thought you were in the States.”

“I was,” Peter said, nodding. “Had to escort someone to Durmstrang. Now I’m back.”

“Obviously,” Sirius returned. He and Peter remained close, though their childhood friendship was so skewed from its origins he wasn’t sure it still qualified as a friendship at all. Still, he sat down on the sofa across from Peter’s and sipped his whiskey, enjoying a brief and companionable silence after the day he’d had.

“How is everything going with Harry?” Peter’s tone was light, but his eyes shone with real interest that made Sirius uneasy for some reason.

“He’s learning, I think,” Sirius said. “He’s awful young for it though.”

“The earlier the better,” Peter said grimly. Sirius nodded thoughtfully. That was probably a fair opinion.
“Did you…see James, and Lily, while you were abroad?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You’ve obviously never had the misfortune to visit North America, Black. The place is enormous. It is the place you’re least likely to simply bump into someone. No, I didn’t see them. Probably for the best, since I imagine Lily’s still a real talent with a hex.”

Sirius snorted. “I was only asking. Besides, from what I understand the region is quite… depopulated. It may be big but there are only so many places you could have been sent, and it’s not that high a number, now.”

“Don’t be maudlin,” Peter scolded. “Anyway, I already said I didn’t see them. I was in and out, really.” He reached over with a questing gesture, and Sirius put the firewhiskey in his hand and watched him top off his glass.

“So are you keeping your stray until she goes to Hogwarts?” Peter’s tone was amused, but his expression was not. His slightly beady brown eyes were dark.

Sirius swallowed. “Perhaps.”

“That seems out of character, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know. Does it?”

Peter laughed, shaking his head. “Isn’t having one child about to worry over more than enough? You and I, of all people, should know the danger of having people close.”

The hair on Sirius’s arms stood up for a moment. “Not all of us can detach ourselves so easily from the rest of humanity, Pettigrew,” he said quietly. If Peter was offended, he gave no sign of it.

“It’s a gift,” Peter said instead, holding his glass up to admire the color of the whiskey in the light. “Is this your last bottle?” Then he turned his head toward the door and spoke in another tone. “Why, hello there.”

Sirius sat up, startled, and followed the line of Peter’s gaze to find Hermione standing cautiously in the doorway, her enormous hair sticking out every which way, her face expressionless save a slight narrowing of her eyes.

“What’s Hogwarts?” she wanted to know.
Chapter Summary

In which Hermione forms an unlikely alliance, and Elspeth acquires a secret.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Five: The Wisdom of Children

“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”

Socrates

August - October, 1988

12 Grimmauld Place, London

Hermione Granger grew up reading fairy tales. So she thought of herself as a character in a story during most of those first years at 12 Grimmauld Place. Hermione’s mother once wrote down all the old stories she could remember from her own girlhood, into notebooks that her friends had filled with sketches to illustrate their favorite scenes. They passed them around in the neighborhood with the secrecy of contraband - while not technically forbidden, they all worried that such luxuries would be banned if the wizards caught wind of them.

That was what had happened with the dress code several times - when first the colored bracelets were discovered to be coded for messages and commerce, and then when the height at which one wore their socks developed political connotations. Hermione’s parents did not shelter their daughter from these practices. They raised her like a young warrior, ready to fend for herself should the need arise despite how fiercely they always protected her.

She loved them desperately. Especially when they discovered her secret, and they still loved her anyway.

Which made her internment at 12 Grimmauld Place all the more terrible.

On the other hand, lonely though Hermione was, the place was enormous, luxurious, and filled with talking portraits, books and small monsters. It reminded her most immediately of her mother’s tale of Beauty and the Beast (a tale Jean Granger, a lifelong feminist, revised in her retelling to emphasize the bravery, compassion and resourceful traits in Belle and left the relationship with the Beast explicitly platonic). Of course, her Lord Black was neither physically monstrous nor tragic nor trapped, but she was almost certain he could turn into a black dog that was shaggy and large, so there was that.
If Hermione was meant to be Belle, she faced a moral dilemma. She would have to overcome a deep-seeded hatred of her captor, and embrace their similarities - embrace her secret, a secret no longer - and from her new position, help her real people as best she might. Because Hermione knew that she was a witch, despite the prayers and hopes she’d nurtured since that first, terrible demonstration of her true, dark self, a few years before. The memory still made her shudder. She had managed not to let it happen again, or any version of it, until a few weeks into her lonely stay at 12 Grimmauld Place, when she awoke to a ring of twinkling light surrounding her on all sides. Confused and horrified, she had nearly clawed the skin from her wrists before it had stopped. Hurting herself had been the only way to end those little happenings, before. It was harder now, but it still worked. More nights than not, she woke up to the light, and a strong, contented feeling that fled as soon as she realized what was happening and that she was the source. If she made herself bleed, just a little, she could extinguish the light and leave the room dark and ordinary once more. Or as dark and ordinary as it could be, in a magic palace.

She’d been mostly alone for most of the summer when she stumbled on Peter Pettigrew, on his own, for the first time. She had met him that night several weeks before in Lord Black’s study, and seen him coming and going with Lord Black or several wizards and witches in meetings or consultations or something that she wasn’t allowed to attend. But never before has she come tumbling into the library, winded from chasing the youngest House Elves up the stairs - for diminutive beings, they were swift and tireless - to discover Peter Pettigrew at ease at the desk beneath the north window, three books open in front of him and a self-writing quill hovering in midair over a sheaf of parchment.

"Hello, girl," said Peter Pettigrew, as though he didn’t remember her name. Hermione thought it unlikely. Not everyone liked her name, but they nearly always remembered it.

"I’m Hermione," she said.

“So you are,” he agreed, and made a flicking gesture with his hand. The quill dropped back to the paper as though it hadn’t been animated a moment before. Hermione couldn’t help looking, reluctantly fascinated, as ever, by the sight of someone manipulating magic.

"Are you lost, or did you come to the library on purpose? Odd place for a child, isn’t it?”

Hermione shrugged. “I like books.” The degree to which that was an understatement made her voice wobble. Books were more magic than magic - out in the neighborhoods they were rarer than nearly anything else, and closely guarded and regulated besides. When she’d first seen the library in Lord Black’s castle, she’d stood in the doorway and wept.

"Not a lot here for young readers, it doesn’t seem,” Peter Pettigrew said, watching her with interest. “But you do have a rather sage look about you. Perhaps you’re one of those odd children who prefers books to reality. Wise beyond your years. That kind of thing.”

Hermione shrugged uneasily, wishing very much that she hadn’t come to the library at this particular time. There was something about Peter Pettigrew she didn’t like at all. His quiet, animal watchfulness, perhaps, or the way he appeared in libraries without warning.

“You may ask the elves whether someone is about, when you wish to be alone,” Peter Pettigrew said. Hermione thought, flushing, that he seemed to have read her mind. It was something wizards could do, and one reason why rebellion was so difficult for her people. Hermione swallowed and met his eye.

"I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”
”Oh, there’s no need to call me sir,” said Peter Pettigrew. “I’m not a lord. Just one of Lord Black’s humble subjects, like you. You may call me Peter, or Mr. Pettigrew if you absolutely must.”

”Mr. Pettigrew,” Hermione agreed, because she certainly wasn’t going to call him Peter.

”You aren’t just a subject,” she added. It wasn’t a question. His brows rose, very pale above watery blue eyes.

“Oh?”

”Not just anyone can show up here whenever they want. You’re his friend, or something.”

”Or something,” Mr. Pettigrew echoed softly, his face growing soft and thoughtful. “You are not an ordinary child at all, are you, Hermione?”

”I’m a Muggle child,” she said, with a proud tilt to her chin, though as soon as she said it her heart began to hammer. It was foolish to be bold. How many times had her father told her that?

But Mr. Pettigrew just threw back his head and laughed. He laughed and laughed, and when he stopped he did not chastise or ridicule or analyze Hermione. He just shook his head, still smiling, and turned back toward the open books on the desk. He found his place, flicked his wand to activate his quill, and began dictating notes about plumbing repair charms to the quill in a low monotone.

Hermione heeded Mr. Pettigrew’s advice about asking the House elves if anyone was in a room before she entered it, but instead of avoiding Mr. Pettigrew, she sought him out. She told her favorite of the working elves, Gorney, whose sons were her erstwhile playmates Tab and Gib, to tell her when Mr. Pettigrew was in the house and alone. Which was how she came to learn he was at Lord Black’s library every other Thursday and either Monday or Wednesday in the off weeks.

Though Mr. Pettigrew could be chatty, he was usually quiet and all but ignored Hermione. But he always had something indulgent for her to read. Not good reading - nothing classic, or challenging, or provocative - but entertaining reading. Satisfying reading. Comics and what were obviously wizarding children’s books. Characters her age, simple plot dynamics, a promise for a happy ending. Only fairy tales, but she let herself take comfort in them anyway.

It was October when Mr. Pettigrew first took Hermione along with him beyond the rooms and grounds of Lord Black’s quiet palace. They had been reading together on a Thursday, per their unspoken routine, when Lord Black appeared, taking in Hermione’s presence with raised eyebrows, then cleared his throat and addressed Mr. Pettigrew.

”Pete, I need you to fill in for me at the meeting about that downtown project,” he said vaguely, but Mr. Pettigrew seemed to follow. He nodded, said “Of course, my Lord,” in that way of his that Hermione didn’t think sounded sincerely deferential, and Lord Black, ignoring the slight in that way of his that Hermione thought not wholly oblivious, turned to go.

”May I take your ward along?” asked Mr. Pettigrew. Lord Black froze in the doorway.

“Hermione?” he asked carefully.

Mr. Pettigrew looked amused, Hermione thought, her own heart pounding with shock and excitement.

”Yes, Hermione,” he said. “She’s been cooped up here rather a lot, hasn’t she? And someone ought to mentor her a bit. She knows very little about the real wizarding world, though she’s done her
best to inform herself with half the books on culture and recent history in this library.”

The way he put it, it was almost a compliment. Unsure where to even look, Hermione but her lip and fixed Lord Black with a hopeful look, the closest she could bring herself to pleading.

Lord Black glanced at her with furrowed brows, then looked back at Mr. Pettigrew with a frown that went a little deeper still. “You’ll be quite careful, I’m sure.”

"I’m sure,” Mr. Pettigrew agreed. So Lord Black nodded and left.

"Come along then, Hermione,” said Mr. Pettigrew, shelving his books with a spell that sent them floating toward their various places on the shelves like leaves in the breeze. Hermione’s heart was still beating so fast she felt breathless as she followed him out of the library and down the stairs.

"Have you side-along apparated before, girl?”

Hermione hesitated. She had, though she hadn’t known what to call it at the time. Her Lord had brought her to Lord Black’s doorstep that way, and at the time she’d been practically faint with fear and anxiety, and the trip had made her see stars. “Yes,” she admitted.

"Didn’t care for it, did you? It’s something of an acquired taste, apparition, and what with the risk of splinching, however small, I really prefer the floo myself, especially when I have company. Shall we?”

He gestures toward the floo foyer instead of the apparition chamber, and Hermione, dubious, obediently preceded him into the long, dark marble hall she had always privately compared to a mausoleum. An elf, anticipating their need in the mysterious way elves did, was lighting one of the three fireplaces for them. They were enormous - Mr. Pettigrew could walk into one without even ducking. But first he instructed Hermione about the floo powder and their destination - “the London Seat” - and watched her steel herself against every instinct and walk into the cool fire.

There was a whoosh, was all Hermione could think. One that she heard and felt and a strong sense of falling. Then she bounced off the soles of her feet and walked rather steadily, considering, into a broad hallway lined with floo places beneath a towering ceiling. Even compared to Lord Black’s palace, it was terribly grand.

"The former Ministry,” Mr. Pettigrew said, having joined her moments after she arrived. “Safest place to floo in to this part of the city, but a regular ghost town these days. Only the ghouls down on level nine left, and our Lord, Of course, when he has use for it.” He began walking toward the far end of the hall, where a wall had been parted - with magic, Hermione thought, based upon how the materials seemed to be somehow blurred but not broken, the marble bunched like parted curtains to either side of the opening, through which a steep spiral staircase led upwards. It was dark metal, sturdy but plain, at odds with the grandeur of the rest of the building that Hermione could see.

"Up we go,” said Peter, stepping onto the staircase with Hermione close behind. As soon as they mounted the first stair, the entire structure abruptly stretched and unwound upward like the stem of a flower grown in fast-forward, propelling Hermione and Mr. Pettigrew up so fast that her stomach flipped and churned. Mr. Pettigrew grasped her arm to balance her as they walked off of the staircase onto a platform marked by a single door. This he opened by raising his wand, and they were swallowed by hot sunshine.

Hermione blinked, staying close to Mr. Pettigrew as her vision adjusted to the change in light. They were on a familiar central London street, lined by the shuttered buildings Hermione thought of as
characteristic of all but a few of the neighborhoods in the city. Windows were lit with a hazy red light, the signal for non-magical persons to stay out, if they happened to wander near. Hermione followed Mr. Pettigrew closely, anxious and immediately beginning to sweat. She wished for her old clothes. She had a sudden fear of someone seeing her on the street, wearing dark robes, so unmistakably a witch.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Pettigrew just a short walk later, gesturing toward a building that Hermione realized, suddenly, had been a library. She remembered her mother pointing it out to her once before The windows were lit yellow, and a huddle of Muggles, chaperoned by a bored-looking older wizard, stood at the base of the steps up to the entrance. It was a grand building, befitting its contents, and Hermione’s nervousness vanished to be replaced by an almost paralyzing surprise.

Mr. Pettigrew, she realized, was watching her. He was not impatient. She wasn’t sure he could be impatient – but his steady waiting manner was nearly worse. She swallowed and turned her wide eyes up toward him.

“Lord Black has decided to create an education centre for the Muggle populace,” he said, his tone betraying no opinion on the decision whatsoever. Hermione’s heart hummed excitedly. She didn’t recognize anyone in the group of Muggles, but she knew her parents had been negotiating desperately for this concession. Even if they weren’t here, physically, it was the closest she had felt to them in months. “The purpose of this meeting is to begin working through the details. Insofar, all that has been made final is the location.” He nodded toward the building, continuing to give nothing away. But Hermione thought of the reading he had brought her over the last few weeks, and how he seemed curious, sometimes, when their brief exchanges touched on her earlier, Muggle life.

“That is a good development,” Hermione said carefully. As was often the case, Mr. Pettigrew appeared suddenly amused, and Hermione had no idea why.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “Come along now.”

They walked past the Muggles by the steps, and Hermione felt her heart pound and her ears burn, some species of guilt that she had not felt before warring against her effort to remain composed. The wizard escort greeted Mr. Pettigrew as “sir,” and bowed a shaggy gray head in their direction, a dark, beady eye landing briefly on Hermione. The Muggles did not so much as glance up.

Inside, the conversion was mostly complete. Where Hermione could easily have imagined electric light fixtures (though she could not remember having ever seen one actually lit up) there were instead chandeliers with candles, sconces with strangely unwavering flames, and here and there, the supplement of a ball of light on the tip of a wand, as the hallways were rather crowded with witches and wizards. She tried to rein in her interest at seeing even this simple spell. She let herself be delighted by the magic of house elves and the ancient palace at Grimmauld Place, but it felt different to see the witches and wizards manipulating magic. Darker. A reminder.

In a big, long room that Hermione expected had held books at one time, a few long tables were arranged in a semi-circle around a podium. The ceiling was high here, reminding Hermione of the ballroom at Lord Black’s palace, which she had stumbled upon one day and taken just a few steps inside before losing her nerve. Unlit, the room in the palace was a vast dark oblivion, but here in the library building floating candles and a series of hovering mirrors refracted so much light the room was awash in it, as though the sun were shining from the ceiling.

Seeing her look, the way he saw everything, Mr. Pettigrew smiled at Hermione. “I was just your age when I learned *Lumos* with a practice wand. Those wands borrow a bit of the magical intent of
a child’s guardian, but my mother didn’t tell me that.” His expression was briefly, unmistakably
wistful. Hermione had never asked an adult a personal question, except her own parents, but she
wanted to ask Mr. Pettigrew if his parents still lived. And if they did, why he seemed to miss them.

But she didn’t ask, and the moment passed. Mr. Pettigrew sat in the center of the table directly
opposite the podium, and indicated Hermione should sit beside him. As though this was a signal,
the witches and wizards came in from the hallway and some of them sat at the tables as well.
Finally, Hermione heard a spike in the murmur of voices and twisted around to see that the
Muggles were being escorted in. None of them had a seat at the tables, but one woman strode up to
the podium and stood there watching Mr. Pettigrew attentively. She was wearing a long wool skirt
that was terribly unseasonal, blocky low heels and a shapeless beige shirt under a navy blazer that
was a bit large for her. The sight made Hermione uncomfortable, and when she stared down at her
lap and was confronted with her own crisp robes, she felt even worse.

Still, the woman’s voice carried clear and confident when Mr. Pettigrew indicated with a gesture
that she could speak. In the even tones of a speech that was rehearsed, but not memorized, she
made her argument that the Muggles should be permitted unrestricted access to Muggle literature
and the ability to generate new works to replace those that had been lost in the “troubled period,”
and free access to the library, which would be staffed, maintained and monitored exclusively by
Muggles, with the expectation that Lord Black or anyone to whom he delegated the duty would
have the ability to make unannounced inspections at any time.

Despite being a rather precocious child, and an advocate of books besides, Hermione was still only
eight years old – nine in a few more days, she remembered bleakly – and debates only held a
certain degree of interest for her. After the woman had been speaking for several minutes, she
couldn’t help scanning the room, catching the expressions of the other seated witches and wizards,
which ranged from expressionless and steady to openly derisive. One wizard with a rather orange
shade of red hair which stood out in a halo around a shiny bald place on the top of his head kept
snorting disdainfully every time the woman said the word “Muggle.” Somehow it had no effect on
her composure, and eventually the witch sitting beside him said something in a harsh whisper and
he was thereafter silent, though he continued to roll his eyes.

For his part, Mr. Pettigrew simply watched the woman speak, calm, quiet, and wearing a very
slight smile that was not really a smirk, but unsettling just the same, Hermione knew from
experience. The speaker would glance at him from time to time but never for more than a moment
before her eye moved away to scan the rest of the audience. It wasn’t until she finished speaking
that she cleared her throat and looked directly at Mr. Pettigrew steadily, then inclined her head to
indicate she had said all she intended to.

Mr. Pettigrew didn’t move for a moment, he simply held the woman in his assessing gaze. Then
his smile widened noticeably as he looked around the tables at the rest of the assemblage.

“Does anyone have any questions for Miss Paine?”

The red-headed wizard nodded as though he had thought no one would ever ask. He didn’t look at
the woman as he bit out, “What kind of ‘reasonable limits’ are proposed here? From what I heard
there are no limits at all! As I’ve said repeatedly, these…people…do not understand that these are
not negotiations, but concessions made for purely indulgent purposes, and…”

“Thank you so very much, Mr. Avery,” Mr. Pettigrew said quietly, and the wizard he had just
interrupted – Mr. Avery, presumably – turned bright red with obvious rage. His eyes, which were
small, pale brown, and surrounded by damp red rings, widened as he all but shouted at Mr.
Pettigrew.
“I beg your pardon, Mister Pettigrew, but please recall to whom you are speaking…”

“Norville Avery, Heir to His Name,” Mr. Pettigrew said. “I assure you, I recall. I am present as Lord Black’s proxy, so in these proceedings I may enjoy his social privilege.”

Somehow, Mr. Avery grew redder still, but he was silent, fixing Mr. Pettigrew with a lethal glare that made Hermione squirm and look away. Mr. Pettigrew was nonplussed. He looked around the rest of the room with the same polite smile.

“Anyone else? No? Well, then, I will list Lord Black’s concessions.” He drew a small scroll from the inner pocket of his robes, opened it, and listed numerous statements that were in direct opposition to those that Miss Paine had proffered. Hermione suspected that was the extent of the “negotiations,” and was disappointed to find that she was not wrong. Miss Paine, who seemed to be wearing a deliberately blank face, hesitated for just a fraction of a moment before bowing shortly at the waist.

“We…accept Lord Black’s terms,” she said stiffly. “With gratitude.”

And that was that.

Hermione, plagued by questions she dare not ask, tucked her chin into her chest to hide her furrowed brow and followed Mr. Pettigrew out of the library and into the bright street, back the way they had come toward the empty former-Ministry building corridor at the bottom of the staircase. He turned to her at length but without breaking stride.

“Do you have any questions, girl?”

Hermione glanced up at him, then down again quickly, and shook her head.

“Hmm, I don’t believe you,” said Mr. Pettigrew, and he sounded pleased. “Let me guess? What was the point of all that ceremony, when Lord Black had already decided what was to be done? As the self-important Mr. Avery pointed out, if impolitely, the Muggles have no leverage. They have no choice but to do what they’re told. So why pretend to listen to them?”

These were dangerously close to the questions Hermione was certainly not going to ask. Frozen, she didn’t know what to do or say, but Mr. Pettigrew simply laughed, as though she couldn’t anger him. Maybe she couldn’t, she thought furiously, feeling helpless and useless and small. Not yet, a small voice said, startling clear in the back of her mind and giving her pause. Hermione watched Mr. Pettigrew turn to the nearest floo in the big dim corridor and light it with a murmured spell. But one day, she promised herself, before she obediently followed him into the fire and back to her captivity.

That night, Hermione lay awake replaying the day over and over in her mind. Of all the sights and people, the moment that stood out the strongest for her was Mr. Pettigrew’s mention of learning a spell at her age. She didn’t know exactly what a practice wand was, but he had said that it was something that his mother could feed magic through, as well as Mr. Pettigrew’s younger self, so that when he made a bit of light, it was not entirely his doing. Yet he had sounded proud and nostalgic, recounting a story fondly, rather than confiding a weakness in her. It must be unusual for a child to do magic without a wand. “Accidental magic,” she remembered the witches and wizards saying when she was first found out. But it had never felt accidental, not really.

Curious, terrified, Hermione steeled herself, lying there on her back and studying the slope of the ceiling. Then, when she felt ready, she reached deep into the part of herself she had long fought to silence, and the ring of light rose around her on demand. This time, she fed it, as it grew stronger
and brighter and filled the room with a lavender glow and Hermione’s mind with a new certainty –
that she could be powerful. Would be, one day. That she would master this weapon that the
wizards had used to master the world, and when the time was right, she would turn it back upon
them.

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Peverell Ridge, the Welsh region formerly known as Gwynedd

December 29, 1989

On the ninth day of Yule, Elspeth Potter turned eight years old sometime in the very early morning
hours, while she was asleep. Before the sun rose, she woke to the feeling of a hand on her hair, and
when she opened her eyes she saw the familiar warm smile of her father. He knelt beside her bed,
his chin in his other hand.

“Good morning, baby,” he said quietly. “Happy birthday. I have a surprise for you.”

Elspeth’s bed was warm and her body was still soft and loose and sleepy, but at the promise of a
surprise, she eagerly slid out from under her blankets and took her father’s hand. He led her silently
through the rooms of the castle where Elspeth had lived as long as she could remember, and which
she loved so well. Peverell Ridge had few hallways; its spaces led from one to the next and had
been known to rearrange themselves from time to time, so that you could be never sure how long it
would take to travel from one room in the castle to another. Tonight Elspeth’s bedroom door led to
the third-floor sitting room, where the book her mother was reading was still open on the table
beside her favorite chair, to the sixth-floor observatory, its windows bright with starlight, to the sun
room off the kitchen, where the thick growth of Yew trees and vine ensured there was rarely any
sun at all.

“For warmth,” her father murmured, and produced his wand for a moment to clothe Elspeth in a
fur-lined cloak and boots. When they joined hands again, she saw he was wearing gloves, too, and
he picked her up to carry her outside. She was nearly too big, but not quite; she nestled close to him
and looped her arm around his neck, feeling the reassuring heat of his body even through their
clothes.

Outside, a light snow was falling, and the moon was full and the stars were unimpeded, casting a
sparkle on every tree branch and stone. When Elspeth realized they were going to the gods’ house,
hers curiosity spiked.

“Dad…?”

“It’s a surprise,” he reminded her, smiling. “Not much longer, now.”

The gods’ house was older even than the castle, and built of the same silver stone. It sat at the end
of a path, part way down the Ridge at a steep point, so that its entrance and main level were the
highest of four, descending and anchored to the cliffside. It was one of the few places where
Elspeth was not permitted to play, but she had spent part of each day there during Yule all her life,
including the last nine days. But instead of the flickering, real flame candles in long rows along the
stairs and the wreaths of vine and herbs, the gods’ house was empty. Changed.

“Do you see?” Her father sounded breathless – excited. His eyes shone as he looked around them.
The gods’ house was just four vertical rooms, not large, set atop one another and anchored by a staircase, which wove back and forth from floor to floor. There was room to sit in each space. During Yule they prayed and her parents expressed magic on each level and it was all a bit boring, if Elspeth was honest. But today her father walked down the stairs without hesitating until they came to the lower floor, where a stream bubbled out of the rough rock wall, across the uneven stone-paved floor, and pooled at the far end of the room before a rounded window.

There, above the water, hovered three wands.

“Do you know your woods, Elspeth?” her father asked, still sounding so unlike himself. But Elspeth was too fascinated by the sight of the wands to worry about him. She had grown up surrounded by magic, but no one was immune to the lure of wands, especially when they were as old as these.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes roaming between the three wands – one dark as the night air, one pale as the moonlight, and the other, in the light there above the water, cast in a deep red that resembled nothing so much as blood.

“Does one of them speak to you?”

Elspeth nodded. She hesitated, glancing at her father, and at his encouraging nod, she removed the cloak and boots; it was warm in the gods’ house, always. In her bare feet and with her nightshirt trailing, she waded into the pool, which was deeper than she expected but didn’t rise above her waist.

Elspeth Potter reached out, and without thought or hesitation, she seized the birch wand. A pure white shower of sparks, an echo of the stars gleaming brightly beyond the window where the gods were said to watch, streamed from the wand and then settled all around Elspeth in the water where, doused, they died in tiny puffs of steam.

James Potter, mesmerized by the sight and by the knowledge he had been right, began to plan what he would say to his daughter to ensure the secret of this evening remained just between them. Lily, above all, could not know.

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is my fuel! If you have feelings let me know about them!
Chapter Summary

In which Draco grows up, Harry meets a dragon, and Tom visits Platform 9 ¾.

Chapter Six: The Gilded Cage

“It is not only fine feathers that make fine birds.”

Aesop

June 5, 1990

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

Every year on Draco’s birthday (with the sole exception of his eighth, when the ritual was delayed until the following day) the Malfoys Portkeyed to Romania to see their dragons. Harry, despite enjoying a fairly permissive life in the past few years, had certainly never left Britain. He wasn’t sure whether he even could, magically speaking, since he had all the magical anchors typical of a Ward that rather literally shackled him to British soil. Once he had nearly disemboweled himself when he and Draco had snagged real brooms from Lucius’s collection and attempted to fly them under the cover of the arboretum.

So, while Draco’s birthday was a day of general extravagance to which Harry was privy – he got to eat the decadent breakfast where everything contained chocolate and most of it was animated; he got to meet the celebrity guest (the last two years, Quidditch players) who indulged Draco’s incessant questions with patient answers for at least an hour; he got to see their mutual friends who would stream in for a party with games so complex and creative no one would stop talking about them for months. But in the evening, when the guests left and he and Draco were too sick on excitement and sweets to even contemplate dinner, Harry would be gently sent to bed and the Malfoys would go to Romania, and sometime around midnight Draco would wake Harry to excitedly recount every detail.

Harry never managed to properly enjoy Draco’s birthday. It shamed him, that a day designed to please Draco shouldn’t please Harry for Draco’s sake. Draco loved nothing more than to be celebrated and pandered to, and loved above all else the excuse of “his birthday” to shamelessly encourage it. It might have been annoying in anyone else, but Draco was so direct and unashamed in his desire to be loved that it was hard to hold against him. It was simply charming, like everything else about him was.

The morning Draco turned ten, Harry and Draco arrived in the dining room to find the long, broad table blooming with chocolate flowers on chocolate trees, chocolate leaves stirring in an artificial breeze. Chocolate birds flitted from branch to branch, singing cheerfully, and a chocolate centaur eyed them cautiously from the edge of the chocolate forest, pawing one foreleg.

“It’s the Hogwarts forest!” Draco exclaimed. Narcissa, standing by, smiled a pleased smile, watching Harry and Draco circle her creation – because only Narcissa had the magical power and
attention to detail to create something like this, Harry was sure – while Lucius stood up from the head of the table, bemused, holding a folded *Daily Prophet* in one hand.

“I’m glad you like it, since there’s absolutely nowhere for my teacup to land,” he told Draco, who had given Narcissa a quick but fervent hug and was now trying to catch an elusive chocolate unicorn that kept darting back into the trees and out of reach. Finally he settled for simply uprooting a tree, it being largely stationary and thus easy prey. Draco bit into a branch with a pleased sound, a little shower of crumbled chocolate soil falling back onto the table, then Draco offered the tree to Harry.

Harry, though, was too busy studying the forest intently. If it was such a recognizable replica, he couldn’t help being intrigued. Draco had visited Hogwarts before, but of course Harry had not. Narcissa, casting another fond smile at Draco, crossed over to hug Harry lightly around the shoulders. “Would you like presents now, or after breakfast?”

Draco dropped the tree at once. “Now, please, mother,” he said eagerly, leading the way into the Golden Room, where presents were always presented. Harry leaned against Narcissa a moment before following Draco at a brisk walk, while Lucius and Narcissa adopted a more sedate pace. It had been years since the boys had been permitted to run indoors, but they were both adept at achieving maximum speed while technically obeying the rule. And Harry was taller, so he caught up to Draco even though Draco had a head start.

This morning, however, the Golden Room wasn’t piled high with brightly wrapped packages. Instead, a dozen solemn-faced Muggles were assembled there.

If he wasn’t so thoroughly shocked, Harry might have laughed at the crestfallen look on Draco’s face. Instead, he just turned to watch Lucius and Narcissa coming through the doorway, at the same time drawing away from Draco, sensing that something was about to happen which did not involve Harry.

“Draco, these are, as of this morning, your Muggle subjects. They have sworn an oath to you, second only to their oath to our Lord, and their fates now rest in your hands.”

Draco’s face was perfectly blank, a skill perfected by a decade in the presence of Lucius and Narcissa, who were chagrined by involuntary displays of emotion. Harry knew he too wore a similar mask. Draco, however, had the slightest tremble in his jaw that gave away his disappointment. Lucius frowned.

“You will be going to Hogwarts in just over a year. Your primary home will always be here, but soon you will be out in the world, making choices every day for yourself, when before your mother and I have made them for you. What to eat, what to wear. Who to speak with, and whether to study. When you are making those choices, I expect you to recall your responsibilities.”

Draco’s voice was sour. “Father, you can’t mean...you mean a few *Muggles*?” he asked, shooting the men and women silent and motionless in their neat row a disdainful look. Harry looked at them, too. Like all the Malfoys’ Muggle subjects, they were neatly dressed, clean and well-fed, with a careful gleam in their eyes. They couldn’t be more unlike the Muggle subjects he had seen in London with Sirius, in part because they were all so alike, so uniform with one another, as though Lucius was further along in a process Sirius had just begun.

“Watch your tone,” Lucius said coolly. “One day, you will have witches and wizards who are subservient to you as well. But Muggles, while lower beings, are also our genetic cousins who may have the honor of bearing you a magical subject. You know very well, Draco, that our Lord expects us to tend to our Muggle subjects with the same care we exercise as stewards of all the
beasts, magical or otherwise, and the land itself.”

Harry thought he saw one of the Muggles, a man with sandy hair, flinch at the word “beasts.” But it might have been Harry’s imagination; something in Harry’s chest had clenched when Lucius said it.

“Yes, father,” Draco said calmly, looking at the Muggles more thoughtfully than he had a moment before. Then he hesitated. “What do I…do with them, sir?”

Lucius smiled, his impatience of a moment before vanishing. “House, feed, and clothe them, to start.”

Draco’s face was blank again, though Harry suspected this time it wasn’t on purpose. “Literally?”

Narcissa and Lucius both chuckled at that. “Yes, literally. It will be an interesting challenge for you. I’ve even designated ten acres for you to construct the necessities for them on the south side of the Manor walls. Marvin Goyle and that cousin of his will be on hand to assist you if you have need.”

This was never the sort of activity that had interested Draco, and Harry watched him fight the urge to frown, barely winning. He directed a tight smile at Lucius, who was surely no better fooled than Harry.

“Thank you, father,” he said. He looked at the Muggles and raised his voice slightly. “You all may…go.”

They didn’t move. Draco looked questioningly at Lucius, who put a hand on Draco’s shoulder, his smile indulgent. “Come, then,” he said laughingly. “I’ll show you how best to instruct them. If you’re too general, they don’t understand, and they’re far too well behaved to guess.”

“Harry,” Narcissa said, “why don’t you come with me to the garden? I’d like your opinion on something.”

“Mother,” Draco called, looking over his shoulder at her in distress. “Will I still have a party?”

“Yes, of course, my dear,” she said warmly, and Draco’s tense expression eased. Then she added, “A formal garden party, fit for a rising Heir.”

Harry and Draco exchanged a horrified look. No games, no puzzles, no wild magical scavenger hunts or Pegasus rides? What was the point of birthdays anymore?

Harry was still asking himself that hours later, wearing formal robes and trying to exchange pleasantries with a Travers cousin he didn’t know, when he suddenly found himself looking up into the leering, pockmarked face of Norville Avery, who was the sort of person one learned to hate in their first acquaintance, and the situation was made worse in Harry’s case by the Avery Heir detesting Harry’s parents for undisclosed reasons. He also incited in Harry the odd, trapped feeling that made him recall Narcissa’s warning, once, to him and Draco not to let themselves be caught alone with strange men.

“The Potter and Black heir, all in one scrawny package, if I’m not mistaken,” said Avery, his foul breath hot against Harry’s cheek. Harry looked down, in part to escape the smell and in part to school his expression. While not a Lord, Avery was the nearest thing. He was as close to impatient over their Lord’s delay in transferring the Lordship from his father, one so old that everyone called him simply “Old Avery,” as anyone with a sense of self-preservation could be. And Old Avery being unfit for the everyday activities of rule, it was well known that Norville Avery made the day
to day decisions and therefore wielded the majority of his family’s power.

Heir or not, Harry was also a Potter and a Ward with magical tethering strong enough to kill him. He had no political capital at his disposal.

“It is a pleasure to see you, Lord Avery,” Harry said, even though Norville Avery wasn’t a lord yet, those who couldn’t afford his ire called him one. Harry certainly fell into that category.

“A pleasure, he says,” Avery said in a slightly mocking tone, so close the air from his mouth tickled Harry’s hair in a way that made Harry’s skin crawl. Then he reached down and put his hand under Harry’s chin, tilting it up so that Harry had no choice but to look into his pale, damp eyes. “I don’t think I believe you, brat,” Avery said, but without rancor. “Where is that little blond lordling of yours? Too busy for his Ward on his birthday, I suppose? With all these superior friends about?”

In fact, Harry had earlier engaged in a complex maneuver to escape Draco’s grasp, feeling a little suffocated by the strain of supporting Draco’s mercurial temper through countless mundane exchanges with countless faultlessly polite guests. He had been rather proud of his success, but of course he fervently wished, now, that he was still alongside Draco, nodding numbly at someone whose name he couldn’t remember while they told Draco what a rising star he was.

“I’m sure that’s right, my Lord,” Harry said, almost too clipped to be polite. The constant, coiled rage in his stomach which he had begun to notice a few years ago was usually easy to ignore; he had near-daily practice. But something about Avery’s hand on him had Harry’s heart hammering as fast as a rabbit’s, and he wasn’t keeping as firm a grasp on his emotions as he usually could.

“Uncle,” came a low voice, and Avery released Harry so fast that Harry stumbled backward. Looking up at the newcomer, Harry saw a wizard with a kind, bearded face who looked nothing Avery, though he’d addressed him as “uncle,” except that they were both rather tall. Harry felt a pair of hands land on his shoulders, and so soon after being in Avery’s shadow, Harry flinched and jerked his head around before relaxing enough to stay still. It was Sirius. His Lord Black was giving Avery a look that was equal parts disdain and anger, which didn’t make a lot of sense to Harry. But then Sirius’s bright grey eyes moved to the other wizard, who had a restraining hand on Avery’s shoulder.

“Callum,” Sirius said, a cautious but friendly greeting. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“It seemed… prudent,” said Callum, his voice calm but his eyes serious, though he didn’t seem to want to look at Sirius. He looked at Harry instead, and a smile curved above his beard. Harry smiled tentatively back.

“Hello, Harry. I’m Callum Avery. I saw you select your wand. Almost two years already, hasn’t it been?”

Harry nodded politely. “It’s very pleasant to meet you,” he said, trying to resist the urge to lean against Sirius. Sirius still had his hands on Harry’s shoulders, but his grip wasn’t as tight as it had been at first.

“Mr. Avery,” Sirius said tightly, addressing Norville Avery, and Harry took faint pleasure in the tiny scowl that flashed over Avery’s face before he could school his expression. While the Avery territory abutted the Black territory, Sirius had far more subjects – Muggle and magical – than Old Avery, and far more magical power as a result. The Averys weren’t subservient to the Blacks by any means, but they were certainly not on equal footing either.

“Lord Black,” Norville all but growled, bending his neck briefly so that the bald place on top of his
head bobbed into sight, gleaming with a sheen of sweat.

“We should be moving along,” Callum said, bending at the waist to bow politely to Sirius. “My Lord Black.” He cast Harry a friendly parting smile, then nudged his uncle off toward a cluster of elderly witches.

Sirius turned Harry around to face him, brushing his hair back, his expression concerned. “All right there, Harry?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said, still feeling confused, but not sure how to explain. “Avery’s nephew seems nice.”

Sirius’s mouth quirked. “He’s very nice,” he agreed, glancing over Harry’s shoulder in the direction where Norville and Callum were walking off. His look lingered a moment before he looked back at Harry again. “You should avoid Norville Avery, Harry. Do you understand what I mean?”

Harry nodded slowly, aware this was something like Narcissa’s more general warning. “I shouldn’t be alone with strangers.”

Sirius nodded, his jaw tight. “It may be time to talk Lucius into a little wand access,” he muttered, and Harry, unsure whether Sirius was talking to Harry or himself, tried to tamp down his excitement.

“I’d really like that,” he said carefully. Sirius smiled, the furrow in his brow clearing as he tousled Harry’s hair, which was now long enough to be too heavy to be in such a state of constant chaos, but still. It didn’t need any encouragement. Harry scowled at Sirius halfheartedly and stepped back to lift a hand and pat it back into place.

Sirius was grinning. “So fussy. I hear there’s a chocolate forest around here somewhere. Care to show me?”

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Later, when the guests had left and Narcissa sent Harry and Draco off to dress for dinner, as though it was any other evening, Harry elbowed Draco companionably. “A lot of people came to your party,” he pointed out, not sure what else to say. A reminder that Draco was socially advantaged usually pleased him, but this time Draco just shrugged and made a sort of huffing sound. A little impatient with his moping, Harry gave up on cheering him more easily than he usually would have. He noticed Draco was quiet and frowning in the dressing room, and when Harry made to lead the way back downstairs, Draco reached out and grasped Harry’s arm gently, which was unlike him. Then he hesitated before he spoke, which was very unlike him. Curious, Harry waited him out, and eventually Draco met his eye and said, “Harry. Don’t you ever…worry, a bit? About going off to school. And growing up.” He swallowed and his eyes darted around as though the walls could be listening, then he stepped closer to Harry and lowered his voice until he was almost whispering, their faces so close Harry felt the ghost of Draco’s breath. “About…our Lord?”

Harry felt almost trapped by the moment – these were the last questions he had ever expected to be asked, and Draco was the last person he would have expected to ask them. The answer was obvious – of course Harry did. Of course, and constantly. But even though Harry knew Draco loved him, and trusted him, Harry also knew that he would never be able to trust and love Draco the same way. So Harry lied.

“There’s no reason to worry,” he said, putting his hand over Draco’s on his arm and squeezing.
Your mother and father know how to please our Lord, obviously, and they will always help you. If you obey them, you’ll always be safe.”

Draco still seemed distracted by his own concerns, and not particularly reassured. “But one day I won’t have them there to ask,” he insisted. “One day soon.”

“Then you’d better ask more questions now,” Harry said. He had never wanted a conversation to be over so badly. “We’re going to be late to dinner.”

He had to half-drag Draco downstairs, and for a confused moment they stood in the doorway of the empty dining room. The chocolate forest was gone, and the table was set, but Lucius and Narcissa weren’t there.

“In here, boys,” called Narcissa’s voice, amplified and routed to the room by one of her eerily complex Sonorous charms. Draco put his hands in his robe pockets and stalked toward the Golden Room, Harry behind him. Because Draco was looking down, and Harry could easily see over his head, Harry was the first to come up short at the sight of Narcissa and Lucius on either side of what looked like an enormous golden birdcage topped with a green velvet bow. Inside the cage, curled on a perch with its tail lashing in agitation, was a small white dragon.

“Happy birthday, my love,” Narcissa said, her voice thrumming with excitement. Draco looked up, frozen to the spot for a moment, and then he raced forward with every bit of his typical exuberance that had been absent all day.

“A dragon!” He exclaimed.

“It’s one of Persistent’s hatchlings,” Lucius explained. His smile was slight but sincere as he gazed down at Draco, who had crouched before the cage to examine the dragon as closely as possible. “Our Lord has granted us permission to bring the dragons back to the grounds, and the dragon masters say the hatchlings are most adaptable. Do you like her?”

“Of course I do!” Draco exclaimed, bouncing upright so that he could hug Lucius and Narcissa both. “Harry, come and see!”

Harry did, eagerly. He had never seen a dragon before, after all. But he knew from Draco’s stories that all the Malfoy dragons were white, and that Persistent was a rare black-eyed female that was so tame Lucius could feed her by hand. The hatchling was cowering a bit on its perch, looking miserable, and Harry’s excitement disappeared abruptly at the sight.

“Does she miss her mum?” Harry blurted, before he could help himself. Draco, startled, looked up at his parents with concern.

“Does she? Should she…be there, with her?”

“Dragons don’t raise their young like other creatures do,” Lucius assured them. “She may be small, but she is perfectly capable of caring for herself, and would do, even if her mother was about. We have a larger enclosure for her on the grounds, we’ll show you tomorrow. She’s just growing accustomed to humans, still. If you want to have the strongest bond with her, Draco, it would be best if you keep her close and feed her yourself.”

Draco was nodding eagerly. “I will, I will!”

Narcissa beamed at the scene. “What would you like to name your dragon, my love?”

Harry smiled to himself. He knew Draco wouldn’t have to think that over for long. He’d been
calling his dragon steed by the same name in every make-believe game Harry could recall throughout their childhood.

“Magnificent,” he said firmly, and Narcissa and Lucius smiled more broadly still.

“A fine name,” Lucius said. Harry, still smiling, peered closer into the cage at little Magnificent. The dragon turned its head toward him and their eyes met. Harry had expected the experience to be more like looking into the eye of a crup, but he was surprised by the sense he had of consciousness in the small dragon. She snaked her neck out and seemed to sniff the air around Harry, then tucked her head beneath a white wing so pale it was nearly translucent.

Draco was watching Harry carefully. “Isn’t she beautiful, Harry?” he asked.

“Very,” Harry agreed. He tried to lock up his more complicated feelings about the dragon, and express only that he was impressed. It seemed to work, because Draco took on a visible glow in his contentment, crouching beside Harry so they could study his pet together.

“Yes, very,” Draco said. Harry couldn’t help but notice that Draco’s worries whispered upstairs, all the same fears that Harry had and could never shake, seemed to be fully banished by this dragon, a pretty distraction. Harry might have felt scornful over the fact, but there was no room in his mind for any emotion but envy. Not of the dragon itself – even if someone presented Harry with the same gift, Harry knew it wouldn’t vanquish Harry’s shadows as it had Draco’s. He was beginning to suspect nothing could.

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One day, Harry will turn to Tom, radiating a delightful fury, and ask, “How can you want someone you have to force to be with you?”

Tom will consider his answer. “I can’t say I’ve had a companion who was with me entirely of his or her free will. Who could ever feel free to refuse me?”

This fact won’t bother Tom, but Harry’s face will contort in a confusion of pity and outrage. Tom will, as always, find the idea of anyone pitying him to be very amusing.

“Though I generally prefer those who at least believe themselves to be choosing, and eagerly at that.” Tom will lean back on his hands, watching, and happy only to watch. Though Tom’s hands will itch with the need to take hold of Harry, it will not yet be time for that.

Then Harry’s face will darken with a different brand of color, a fascinating flush he will hide by turning his head so his riot of long dark hair falls forward.

“And what do you prefer, Harry?” Tom will inquire, before he can stop himself. “To be asked, or told?”

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September 1st, 1991

King’s Cross Station

Tom always watched the children board the Hogwarts Express on September 1st. He had never been able to resist, not that he tried very hard. Why shouldn’t he go? On a planet of people constantly motivated by sentiment alone, shouldn’t he be granted a single day of sentimentality?
Once, Tom believed he could be content with an academic’s life. He found comfort and security at Hogwarts castle that no other place had offered him. When the Muggle war gained momentum, returning to the castle had been quite literally a taking of refuge.

Now, seeing an echo of that wonder he felt on hundreds of young faces was...bound to induce more than a little nostalgia. He sat on a bench, so saturated in powerful disillusionments and repelling charms as to be invisible, and watched children part from their families and rush the platform to board the train. He recalled the early days after he had taken Britain, when the Ministry was abolished and Azkaban stuffed to the brim with bureaucrats, and he had stood with Severus in the empty Great Hall at Hogwarts after naming him interim Headmaster, not a feat when Dumbledore having fled like a coward to whatever hiding place he still kept.

"Tell me your vision for Hogwarts, my Lord, and I will make it so," promised Severus, although Tom knew perfectly well that Severus detested children to an almost abnormal degree.

"My vision is that it shall be the best version of what it has always been. Dumbledore's more heavy handed curriculum decisions must be undone, but that won't be a momentous task."

Severus had betrayed surprise - unusual for him. "Forgive me, my Lord. I thought you might wish, for example, the Houses..."

It was Tom's turn to be surprised. "The four great houses, of the four great founders? I wouldn't dare to intervene." He was almost offended by the suggestion that the most ancient traditions at Hogwarts wouldn't be upheld, and for a moment second guessed his decision to leave Severus in charge. Then he calmed himself. "Revisit the choices of the more modern Headmasters, perhaps, and nothing more," were his instructions. Severus was obedient, of course, and several months later Tom rewarded him by releasing him from his position at Hogwarts and installing someone slightly more interested in children.

He had plenty of other purposes for that select servant among servants that was Severus, after all.

Now Tom watched the students thoughtfully, wearing their robes that distinguished them by noble family, where applicable, and Hogwarts House as well. With these indicators, and the odd physical similarity, he made a game of identifying their nearest adult relatives. The year before, he had dropped his veil of magic long enough to engage the Diggory boy, just so his father, jaw agape with horror, could be reminded that all he held most precious was ever within his Lord’s reach.

But there were no messages in need of delivery today, and so Tom had no intention of making himself known. Which was why he was doubly startled when the Potter child, flanked by a gangly creature in Weasley colors and Draco Malfoy, nearly sat in his lap.

Tom reached out on impulse to shove the boy away from him rather hard, and the child stumbled back while turning to glare hard at Tom - or whatever he was seeing, which had to be mostly nothing, Tom knew. Setting aside his surprise, Tom spent a moment studying Harry Potter, a child to whom he’d given little thought in three years.

A Peverell indeed - descended from the Peverell sister Nadine who was so famous a master of mind magic they called her the Clear-Eyed; she could shrug off imperious or worse, trap a legilimens in a mental maze fraught with binding vines; she also, like her cousin Salazar Slytherin, was believed to speak to snakes and dragons.

But this boy was only eleven, and Tom was the most powerful wizard of any age; he adjusted his cloak of magic with no more than a thought and a twitching of his fingers, and Harry blinked and stared around as though - precisely as though - whatever he’d been seeing had now completely
disappeared from sight or sense.

"What in Merlin’s name is wrong with you, Harry?" Draco Malfoy’s voice was a bit high, his build a bit slight, but he still resembled Tom’s schoolmate Abraxas rather a lot. Tom had never liked Abraxas. Arrogant and disdainful directly up until the moment he suddenly became simpering and cowtowing. All strategy and no principle, like so many of the entitled children to sort Slytherin.

"I tripped," Harry explained, somehow sounding unconvincing and yet thoroughly convinced.

"We should go ahead and board the train, anyway," said the Malfoy boy. "Father says one shouldn't dawdle if he wants to get an empty compartment."

Harry nodded, and with a final puzzled glance in Tom's direction, he followed his friends.

Tom watched him go, recalling what he had been swiftly forgotten soon after the boy had chosen the yew wand. There was something about him, something more significant than his lineage, than the flavor he had of idle power. It was so rare for Tom to take an interest in anyone or anything for its own sake that he remained on the bench, lost in his thoughts, long after the train had left the station and the last of their parents left the platform. Quiet and empty, platform nine and three-quarters (still so named even though it was no longer hidden from Muggles or anyone else) became a surprisingly peaceful place to think. Tom did not like children, but they grew into real people, sooner or later. And what was a few years to Tom, who had escaped the constraints of lifetimes altogether? What kind of adult wizard would this child be, with his wand of ancient power and - Tom now recalled - heirship to two titles, a bit of information that Tom recalled as rather displeasing when it had first come to him those many months earlier. He had never fully trusted Sirius Black's representation that ties with his old friend James Potter were wholly severed. Pettigrew claimed otherwise, but it had the characteristics of a scheme, Black naming the boy his heir. At some point, the nobles' assumption that they had unfettered freedom to decide who inherited their titles would have to be corrected, but Tom knew he could not strip the Pureblood families of all their traditions at once. It had to be done slowly, over time, or they might put up more than a token amount of resistance, and that would be bothersome.

Eventually he disapparated; he was needed in Greenland. And again the green-eyed boy with the Peverell wand left his immediate thoughts, though it took a bit longer this time.
Chapter Seven: The Sentience of Things

“Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.”

Socrates

Hogwarts

September 1, 1991

When Horace Slughorn set the hat on Harry’s head, Harry thought for a moment the lights had gone out in the Great Hall in the same moment.

But no; it was the shroud of the hat over his eyes, and also the shroud of the hat over his mind.

Hello, Harry Potter, said the hat. Harry knew at once it was the hat. Lucius had told him that the hat would speak to him, and to listen carefully, and to respond more carefully yet.

Hello, Harry said.

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Horace watched the hat tremble on the still form of the Potter boy with a furrow in his brow. He did not frown or fidget or gasp. None of those expressions of unease would be appropriate. He was very conscious of the staff table, behind him: the Carrows and Sinistra and Vector, too, of course, though he knew she was not the pure-hearted Death Eater she pretended to be. That he pretended to be, too, in fact. It wasn’t that Horace was particularly adverse to his Lord, but he hadn’t the nerve for blind allegiance. It made him fretful, wondering what he might be asked to do or witness. All Horace had ever wanted was his potions and his books and his company. Once, that was the extent of what his position at Hogwarts required of him, and those days were bitterly missed.

Remaining still became more difficult the longer the hat deliberated. He felt sweat began to bead along his receding hairline, and fought the urge to dab at it.

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You’re not quite what one expects, are you, Harry? asked the hat, while combing through Harry’s mind in a businesslike way that felt like nothing Harry had ever felt before, but was somehow not unpleasant.
It’s a skill, to render this process ‘not unpleasant,’ remarked the hat, sounding amused. And it did sound; Harry experienced the voice like noise, directly in his ear, though he thought that was probably an illusion, also.

Yes, agreed the hat. Bright child, oh my. I make every effort, you realize, not to leave trauma in my wake. But it cannot always be avoided.

Harry did not like the sound of that, but he kept his silence, Lucius’s warnings in mind. Which meant, of course, that the hat knew about those warnings too.

My task is far more delicate than you – or he – can fathom, said the hat. Something hastily or thoughtlessly spoken will not sway me.

I have heard you let people choose, said Harry, thinking of the last conversation he’d had with his mother.

The hat sniffed. A misconception, it assured Harry. There is no choice, only a fate, which I must uncover.

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From the Slytherin table, Draco watched Harry sit, the Sorting Hat still on his head, as the excited murmur of voices in the Great Hall gave way to a tense silence. Draco had never doubted that he and Harry would both sort Slytherin. They were as close as brothers, and best friends besides. Pansy Parkinson, on his left and the newest addition to the Slytherin table, reached over to pat his arm with a reassuring smile. She liked Harry, even though she had once hissed to Draco that Harry’s parents were traitors and he would probably be hung as one, too. Draco hadn’t spoken to her for almost a year, but even at the time he knew she was just repeating something she had heard her parents say. Draco had heard similar things in hushed tones, too, but that didn’t mean they bore repeating.

Draco had thought, in the past year, that when he was a grown wizard like his father, when he wore the Malfoy signet and commanded the respect of his peers, things could be different. Draco would have the ability to make things different, in small ways, and it began now. The children in Slytherin would one day be adults at parties and functions and ceremonies and meetings, and if they listened to him now they would listen to him then.

But this would all be so much easier if Harry didn’t do something stupid, like end up in Gryffindor.

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At other times, this is much easier, said the hat, and Harry thought it was beginning to sound frustrated. Harry wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but he couldn’t remember the hat taking so long with anyone else.

It has been less time for them than it has for you and I, the hat assured him. I perceive time in a certain way, which I share with you while we are together. You have no interest in mystery, do you, child? That is, I have come to believe, the essential ingredient in every Ravenclaw. Will it be Hufflepuff, then?

Harry controlled his surprise, or so he thought, considering he had believed there were only two significant possibilities for his sorting, neither of them Hufflepuff.

Children always think they know themselves, said the hat snidely. Slytherin, you? Honestly, Harry.
Elsewhere in the castle, Tom and Severus were watching the sorting from Tom’s appointed chambers, courtesy of the surveillance charm Tom had modified himself from one traditionally used by parents to monitor their infants. Even for him, it put a strain on his reserves, but he rarely found it appropriate to announce his presence at Hogwarts. Better if next to no one knew that he spent any time there at all. It wasn’t his interest he wished to conceal, but rather his accommodations. He was painfully careful with personal security, and still had a close call now and then. He hated to think what could happen if he relaxed. He was immortal, but resurrections were inconvenient. And unpleasant.

Severus’s face was inscrutable, his tone less so. “Trust a Potter to cause a hat stall.”

Tom cast a glance at Severus, feeling the closest he ever did to fondness at the sight of the deep, bracketed frown, the hooked nose, the narrowed midnight eyes. If the rumors of a divine creator were true, it was as though that being had crafted Severus out of pure spite.

“And I thought he took after his mother,” Tom said with deliberate cruelty, pleased when Severus’s mouth tightened with fresh pain. “Steel yourself, Severus,” he added. “It has been close to twenty years, hasn’t it?”

“I cannot limit the term of my spite, try though I might,” Severus said stiffly.

Tom rolled his eyes, and returned his attention to the pensieve-like scene before them, three-dimensional and vivid, which presently showed them a gangly boy sitting still in a chair, still wearing the Sorting Hat.

The Malfoys were Slytherins, and their Lord was a Slytherin, and Harry’s parents, the enemy, had been Gryffindors. So Harry had thought…

*The landscape is ever changing, child,* said the hat, sounding patient again, as though it had worked through whatever snarl in its process had aggrieved it in the minutes before. *What held one meaning at one time holds a different meaning now.*

Sirius was a Gryffindor, Harry remembered. And some of Ron’s brothers, too, but while Ron’s family had begun to make amends with their Lord, Harry remembered vividly the sight of Ron’s strange, still hands. The idea of being blatantly positioned in opposition to their Lord made Harry’s heart race. He recalled his resolution, the day he received his wand: to please his Lord. To restore his family. That purpose had been somewhat confused in the years since, as he became increasingly confused by his parents’ deliberate distance, and closer to Sirius - even named him the Black Heir.

*There is no dichotomy,* said the hat. But Harry was eleven, and didn’t fully understand its point. (The hat, considering its occupation and how long it had held it, was surprisingly poor at communicating with eleven-year-olds.)

From her place at the Gryffindor table, Hermione watched Harry Potter sit under the hat as curiously as everyone else. Perhaps more, because Hermione had all but shared a house with Harry, yet never seen him so much as in passing. They were kept separate, of course, the Heir and an unofficial muggleborn ward. Peter told her things would be different at Hogwarts – “though
“some things will be the same” – and Hermione could see already that it was so. She was at a table with magically-raised children, most of whom knew she was not, and yet she had experienced little awkwardness and even less scorn. She brushed the bit of cloth on her right wrist in the Black family colors, and wondered if it was the cause.

Harry Potter was a Malfoy ward but twice a Pureblood heir. His mere presence was bound to stir gossip, that much she understood. But under the hat and in the Hogwarts robes he could have been any of them. He could have been Hermione.

For some reason that thought made her feel very strange, and she stared down at the table, determined not to look back up until it was the next child’s turn to be sorted.

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You do, remarked the hat, have a strong desire to prove yourself. Perhaps you could do well in Slytherin.

Harry couldn’t help himself – he spoke without thinking. But you just said…!

I didn’t ‘just’ anything, the hat corrected. I have been at this an age. We have been here forever. The circle has opened and now it is closing. But where to put you…

Harry shut his metaphysical mouth and permitted himself a sulk. This hat was crazy and a liar, and he couldn’t believe it was entrusted with any responsibilities whatsoever, let alone one this grave.

I heard that, the hat said dryly.

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The Headmistress fought the urge to cast a discrete *tempus* in her lap and confirm that they had been waiting for Harry Potter to be sorted for nearly an hour. The children had moved from shock to restlessness, and she was becoming concerned that Horace Slughorn would faint on the spot. She could not recall a hat stall of this length, though she had heard Peter Pettigrew’s was comparably lengthy.

Minerva was resisting the hope that the boy would sort Gryffindor. The houses didn’t carry the meaning they once had, perhaps, but seeing the boy anywhere else would wound her somehow, she was sure of it. Just as she grasped her wand, at the trailing ends of her patience and unable to keep herself from doing something, the hat livened and opened its mouth.

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Did you know there was a time, asked the hat, when few, if any, children I sorted had seen the thestrals earlier in the evening?

Harry thought that over. That seems strange.

In times of war, it was what I learned to expect: that children would come to me aged, their hearts already tarnished. But in all my existence, in times of peace, most of the children were blind to death when I met them.

Do you mean to say that these are times of peace? Harry asked bitterly. When he thought the word, he imagined the landscapes of his dreams, where he walked anonymously down a crowded London street flooded with muggles, holding his sister’s hand while they trailed after his parents. It was a specific, dear figment of his imagination, one he clung to so tightly he could summon it at will if
he closed his eyes. It was so often revisited he felt he had made it real. He could feel the sweat-damp clasp of his sister’s hand, the way she tugged impatiently to be free. But he wouldn’t allow it. Keeping her with him in this crowd was the bearable, doable way in which he could keep her safe. That was his dream-self’s thought, clear and certain. Sometimes, if he watched his parents long enough, they would turn to see Harry and Elspeth following, and his mother would smile and his father would wink.

The hat was very quiet. Then, at length it said: *Well, that’s settled then.*

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“**GRYFFINDOR!**” cried the hat, in the same tone and at the same volume it had announced every house for every child, but after the long strained silence, it seemed deafening; joyous. Standing at the end of the line of first years waiting their turn, Ron’s heart pounded hot and loud in his ears. There was a smattering of applause from the students, the way there had been for everyone else. The Gryffindors bade Harry a hearty welcome as he walked to their table, not appearing to be phased by his interminable session with the hat.

All the children to sort after that seemed to require only seconds of the hat’s time, so that it was Ron’s turn before he could believe it. He had never had a stronger desire, or a more fervent wish. He missed his hands in moments like this, when he thought something so hard he felt the burning need to clench his fists.

Ron had the feeling that he had been born for Gryffindor, but he had lost that element of bravery, that potential for strength; that it had been shorn off with his hands on that distant, forgotten day. When the hat dropped over his eyes, he was paralyzed.

*Don’t concern yourself, boy,* said the hat, gently. *Of course you’re a GRYFFINDOR!*

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Harry and Ron had their own rooms, as the children of the forty-one families, and through some achievement of ancient magic, one door from their dormitory led to the Gryffindor common room, and the other door led to a shared common room for all noble children. It was there that Harry found Draco.

Unthinking, the boys embraced as though they weren’t surrounded by their peers. Then, shyly parting, Harry darted a glance around them.

“I thought it would be Slytherin for us both,” Draco said, his face suffused with color, the way it was when he was wrestling with his emotions, but his voice and smile were steady. “But you are a Potter, I suppose. And a Peverell,” he added, diplomatically.

“And a Black, to hear them tell it,” added a long-faced, dark-haired boy who had been speaking to Ron, but who now turned to Harry and Draco.

“This is Theodore Nott,” Draco supplied, having met Theo at the Slytherin table during the feast.

Harry glanced at Ron, wondering if seeing Theo would upset him. But Ron was wearing a pleased smile and had warmth in his gaze when he looked at Theo. Taking that as all of the evidence necessary for his own goodwill, Harry smiled at Theo as well, and then they shook hands in the traditional way, which was the first time Harry had formally greeted someone his own age. It felt strange, but all right. All evening, except for that odd, timeless time beneath the hat, Harry had felt a pulsing heat from the yew wand that fortified him.
Introductions were made, though most of those present already knew one another, Theo knew no one but Ron and the Slytherins, coming as he did from North America. There were also two girls, unrelated but with oddly identical blond hair, who were raised in France and were obviously close with one another: Daphne Greengrass, Slytherin, and Lavender Brown, Gryffindor.

“This common room is only available on evenings and weekends,” explained Cedric Diggory, who Harry had met at parties in the past couple of years, but who was too much older than he and Draco to have interacted with them overmuch. Harry felt a little awed by the sight of so many older students, in fact, and also very young in contrast. He clutched his wand, which had been channeling him a vigorous confidence since Lucius had handed it to him on the platform before he and Draco and Ron boarded the train. It was the same feeling it had given him on the handful of occasions he had been permitted to practice with it since selecting it three years before, but it felt stronger today than ever before, as though it knew that their time together had finally, truly begun, and would not be interrupted again.

“If you need something from one of us at another time, you can pass a message to someone who has a class with us, or another member of our house,” added Marcus Flint.

“Similarly, if asked to pass a message, do so,” said Cedric.

“If you need privacy for a meeting, those arrangements can be made as well. If the common room is unavailable to you during an evening or weekend, that means it has been reserved for a meeting, but no meeting will last more than an hour and there will be no more than one meeting per day, to ensure fair access here.”

Harry noted, looking around, that the common room was far more opulent than the cozy Gryffindor equivalent. He felt very much at home, considering his home was Malfoy Manor; even more so than he had in the attractive but fairly small bedroom in his dormitory. He found he regretted that he wouldn’t be able to use this common room at will. Among all the other reasons, the idea of being separated from Draco was painful. While it didn’t happen often, they still occasionally crawled into bed with each other if one or the other had a nightmare.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” said a seventh-year Harry recognized but couldn’t name, and then the older students applauded the sentiment. Harry forgot to be afraid or worried about himself or Draco or the future – the sudden mood in the room lifted his spirits too high for any of that. He was finally here at Hogwarts. He was finally in a place where he could start to be himself.

As soon as he figured out who that was.

Chapter End Notes

A bit shorter than the standard chapter length for this story, but anything more seemed extraneous. Thank you for reading, and if you choose to leave feedback, please know it is appreciated!
Chapter Eight: The Fiery Bird

“Any one who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light.”

Plato

September 1, 1991

Hogwarts Castle

On Harry’s first night at Hogwarts, he remained awake, whispering, in the common room until well past the time Narcissa would have sent Dobby to put him and Draco to bed by any means necessary. Professor Vector had the sort of dour, still-faced countenance that made even the Gryffindors who had only just met her go tense with apprehension at the sight of her in the common room doorway. She pointed mutely to the dormitory doors, and vanished again in a swirl of black robes.

“A bit dramatic,” observed Lavender Brown, but she sounded nervous. She had somehow adhered to Harry in the course of the past hour, which Harry, accustomed to having a posh blond pureblood close to him at all times, had hardly noticed and until it was in full effect. She tossed her shiny hair and looked a bit mournfully in the direction of the shared common room. “I wonder if Daphne and the other Slytherins are still up.”

Some of the other first years had gone to bed long before, and the rest were getting up off the sofa and the thick carpet, stretching, and heading that way. Among them were Ron Weasley, and Harry began to fall into step with him almost without thinking.

“G’night, Harry,” said Lavender, surprising him with a quick hug. Her shiny blond hair smelled so strongly of some bottled fragrance, Harry had to suck back a sneeze.

Ron, quietly amused, noticed this. When Lavender had set off toward the girls’ dorms, he elbowed
Harry and waggled an eyebrow.

“Already have a girlfriend? You work fast.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he blushed, even though he was pretty sure Ron was joking. Oddly, all evening Ron had seemed more relaxed than Harry remembered him being in the presence of his family, but the joking manner still surprised Harry, who would always first picture Ron as the quiet boy he had met hiding out from the party at Weasley House.

Harry had absolutely never entertained the idea of a girlfriend. The frivolity of it was nearly astounding, not to mention that he was only eleven, for Merlin’s sake, and rather doubted he would live to see puberty. Or at least he wouldn’t tempt fate by assuming he would. He tried not to look at Ron’s hands, and worked up a smile instead.

Ron, though, was nearly impossible to fool. Harry knew that without knowing him very well. Harry thought they had a lot in common; they were both raised under the threat of death, after all. Harry still had trouble imagining Lord Nott as anything but a monster, but Theo, his Heir and therefore of the same blood and origin, was confusingly ordinary. Also, when Harry pictured Lord Nott in an uneasy, recurring daydream where he wielded a blade above a younger Ron’s proffered wrists, Lord Nott had silver-blond hair and Lucius Malfoy’s face.

Harry’s daydreams could be rather vivid – but they were, Lucius and Narcissa always insisted, mere daydreams, and not the hallucinations Harry suspected. He was having one now, and even though it wasn’t real it distracted him and he knew he wasn’t hiding his reaction well. Ron looked concerned. Harry blinked rapidly and bit his lower lip almost hard enough to draw blood, and the spectre of a figure poised behind Ron vanished.

Harry, feeling ill, swallowed. Ron bumped their shoulders consolingly, keeping his hands carefully to himself in a way that made Harry’s heart seize in sympathy.

“Good night, Ron,” Harry managed, before escaping into his room and dropping onto the neatly made bed. His head felt clear, but he had an uneasy relationship with reality, so it took several deep breaths before he trusted himself to look around the room properly, since he’d been rushed when he’d seen it for the first time earlier that evening.

Upon the ceiling, there were fine cracks in the plaster. The room was semicircular for no architectural reason. A coat hanger with the face of a roaring lion which had previously been affixed to the wall near the door had migrated across the room, and was rather too high to be within Harry’s limited reach. The wardrobe contained a single, angry doxie in the top middle drawer. The only other pieces of furniture were a wobbly chair that was by all appearances nonmagical, and the desk shoved under the window was far too small even for eleven-year-old Harry. The unruly nature of the room and its contents would drive any of the Malfoys spare. But it was growing on Harry; it felt right, more so than the opulence of his room at the Manor.

Harry thought he might have trouble falling asleep. He had literally never spent a night anywhere but the Manor, barring that forgotten first year with his parents. Anticipating that and preparing to exhaust himself to the greatest extent possible, Harry sat down at the crowded little desk, wondering when he would learn a good enlargement charm to make it more useable. He wrote Narcissa the letter he had promised her, and then he wrote his family the letter he had promised them. Just as he wondered when he would get a chance to find the owlery, a bright-faced little barn owl appeared outside his window and tapped on it twice, making Harry wonder how it knew it was needed, or whether it was trained to lurk outside the tower just in case. He opened the window, found an owl treat, and began to tie the scroll addressed to the Malfoys to the owl’s leg. Then he paused.
Narcissa had given very direct instructions that he write immediately. His mother’s last letter had asked diplomatically for word at his earliest opportunity. Harry looked hopefully out the window, but another owl was not to be seen.

In a moment of impulse, he set the Malfoys’ letter down and gave the owl his family’s letter instead. Then he lay in bed and closed his eyes, and fell asleep so quickly that when he woke to streaming sunlight and an impatient rapping on his door, he thought for a moment he hadn’t slept at all.

Lavender was on the other side of the door. “Honestly,” she said in dismay, taking in Harry’s sleep-rumpled state with particular concern for his hair. Harry hadn’t stopped at a mirror en route to the door, but he knew from experience that his hair, usually tied back in a relatively neat tail at the nape of his neck, was in its usual pre-morning-routine disarray.

“There are potions for that, you know,” she said, with a last wary look at the altitudinous waves, and then she blinked and focused on Harry’s face with a wicked smile. “And hexes. Ritual sacrifices might be called for, in your case…”

Harry was too sleepy to laugh, but his glare was halfhearted. “Isn’t it Saturday?” he asked. He knew that it was. He had lamented to Draco the absurdity of moving into Hogwarts just in time for a weekend for weeks after Draco eagerly circled the date on every calendar in the Manor.

“Breakfast hours are the same on the weekends,” Lavender informed him cheerfully, willfully oblivious to his mood. “Come on. You don’t want things to be all picked over.”

Harry privately thought that, if the welcome feast was any indication, the combined magical intelligence of the table and the staff of house elves would prevent any such thing, but he knew from experience that when confronted with a talkative blond, one should judiciously select one’s battles.

“Let me get dressed,” he said, waving her backward, but instead she forged ahead into his room and sat on his bed, swinging her legs and looking around.

“Of course. What are you going to wear? Just school robes? We can wear personal robes on the weekends, you know.”

Harry did know, and Narcissa had predetermined his outfits for the foreseeable future, using the advanced charmed wardrobe built into his trunk, muttering all the while about the primitive furnishings on offer at the school. At that thought, Harry glanced ruefully in the direction of the doxie’s dresser, which he had determined would remain solely its domain. Narcissa was almost always right.

Then he registered Lavender’s words. “Aren’t you…I mean, you’re a…well, a girl…” Harry stammered. Lavender blinked at him, face blank, for a long moment. Then she burst out giggling.

“Honestly, Harry,” she managed eventually. “I have four brothers. But if you’re too delicate to change in front of me, then…”

Harry, blushing furiously by now, nodded adamantly, and, still chuckling, Lavender returned to the hallway to wait.

A bit later, hair in better condition and robes slightly wrinkled but donned, Harry followed a chattering Lavender into the common room, and watched her nearly collide with a girl with dark, unruly curls, who was leaving the hall to the girls’ dorms at the same time they emerged from the
The girls paused, looking at one another awkwardly, Lavender momentarily silenced. Harry didn’t recognize the other girl, except that she had been among the first years and the hat had dwelled on her a bit before calling her a Gryffindor. She had a bit of a long, angular face, and her pretty brown eyes were wary in a familiar way. She reminded Harry, in her demeanor and expression, of the muggle subjects Draco spent an obligatory hour per day ordering around the last year or so. Sometimes he took Harry with him, so that Harry could stand by uncomfortably while Draco oversaw the construction of their primitive dwellings and their method of cleaning their murky water.

It was not a pleasant association to make with a year mate, and before Harry could think of the right way to introduce himself, the girl had ducked her head and hurried away.

Lavender took a backward step, then linked her arm through Harry’s and led him more slowly in the direction the girl had gone – the common room exit, and presumably the Great Hall for breakfast. “That’s a Muggleborn girl,” Lavender murmured, the same way one might describe an encounter with a dangerous magical creature. “Best keep our distance.”

Clearly Lavender and Harry had a version of the same lecture upon setting off for Hogwarts, but Harry wondered if Lavender was as confused as Harry was. If their lord didn’t want them associating with Muggleborns, why were they sharing a school at all, much less a common room and dormitories?

There was a puzzle there. Harry didn’t like puzzles; they were just another thing to worry over, on a list that in Harry’s case was already overlong.

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September 2, 1991

Peverell Ridge

the Welsh region formerly known as Gwynedd

Elspeth was in the old stables when the owl found her. She went there sometimes when her parents were gone and she found the empty house upsetting. Remus had been at her bedside when she woke, an apologetic smile on his perpetually tired face. He hadn’t needed to explain; she always knew what it meant when he was there: that her mother and father weren’t.

The stables were almost lost in a tangle of nonmagical plants, which made them among the safer of the many unmaintained reaches of the Ridge. Her father had explained that horses were famously averse to magical plantlife, so charms were embedded deep in the foundation of the stables, so deep that even unmaintained this past century, since the last Peverell horse had grown old and died, still no magical thing would grow.

Elspeth wondered if that old spellwork dampened her riotous magic, too. She felt it, sometimes, eager and testing the boundary of her bones and skin. Wild magic, her father called it proudly, ignoring her mother’s worried frown. But in the quiet of the forest that had grown up where the formal garden was supposed to be, or in the dim abandoned box stalls like the one where she now sat, it seemed to be eased.

“Hello,” Elspeth said to the owl. It hopped closer to her and extended its leg.
Catching sight of the address on the outside of the scroll, Elspeth’s heart quickened with excitement. She recognized Harry’s spiky handwriting at once.

Dear mom, dad, and Elspeth,

I’m here at Hogwarts – specifically in Gryffindor Tower, I thought you might be particularly interested to know. I’m still not sure about that hat, but Ron Weasley is with me too, and somehow I’m already friends with a girl named Lavender Brown.

Nothing is like I expected, but I like it here so far. I have my own room, the way they have it set up now, and there is a second common room where I can still hang out with Draco, which is the only reason he might forgive me for not sorting Slytherin like he did.

We have our time tables, and I have Potions, Civics, Charms, Transfiguration and Herbology. So maybe the curriculum is about the same? I remember mom told me you had a dark arts class, too, so I’m not sure about that. I think all the classes are interdisciplinary with light and dark magic, but I guess I’ll find out as I go and let you know when I do.

Elspeth, not to spoil the surprise or anything, but I know how you like magical creatures. (“Like” is really not a strong enough word, but I know how you get when people use words like “obsessed” or “nutter.”) The carriages we take into Hogwarts are literally drawn by thestrals. I know you remember what they are, because you’re the one who wrote to me all about them (even though I’m still not convinced you didn’t just copy the chapter straight out of Scamander, but I’m trying to give you the benefit of the doubt).

It’s hard to believe in just two years we’ll be together. Maybe my being a Gryffindor kind of comes as a surprise, but obviously that’s where you’ll be, so we’ll finally live in the same house. Kinda cool if you think about it.

Love,

Harry

Elspeth read the letter several more times, almost unconsciously brushing her fingertips against the page. Despite Elspeth’s suspicion that the Malfoys wouldn’t mind, Elspeth had never gone with her parents to see Harry. She had some photographs, and a botched version of her charmed locket that showed a comically warped version of Harry’s smiling face, but she had never hugged her brother or heard his voice except once through the floo. That was long ago, when she’d been so little she could hardly remember it. She had heard a clamor downstairs, and when she snuck down in her nightclothes, she’d found her mother crouched by the floo, trying not to cry, while a five or six year old Harry babbled incoherently about how badly he wanted to be with them at the Ridge.

Elspeth had never told anyone about that. She supposed Harry wasn’t supposed to use the floo for calls, because she had a few more memories of the aftermath of that night, when her parents went gaunt after weeks with no letters, then nearly collapsed against one another in relief when one finally came. Looking back, Elspeth realized they thought Harry might have been killed for contacting them without permission, and she wondered how close he had come.

Faintly, Elspeth heard Remus calling her from the house. She assumed he knew exactly where she was, but was doing her the courtesy of pretending not to. She wasn’t sure whether to be offended that he thought she was just a little kid who wouldn’t figure that out, or fond that he was trying to respect her mercurial temper. Getting to her feet, letter clutched tight to her heart, she stretched and crawled out the window, the pane broken out so long ago not even a fragment of glass remained to threaten the palms of her hands or her knees. She had that odd feeling, at once, of her magic being
unsettled as she strode out into the sunlight, so much so that she threw a wistful look over her shoulder at the old stable, swallowed by ivy and young trees and ropes of tall grass to so great an extent it was easy to miss altogether if you didn’t know what to look for. You could look right at it and think you were just seeing another little part of the forest, which was creeping steadily up the ridge from all sides, like it had been for as long as Elspeth could recall. As though the Peverell castle would one day, too, be lost to the land.

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September 3, 1991

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

Harry’s letter arrived, almost exactly twenty-four hours after Draco’s, while Lucius and Narcissa were having breakfast. A house elf brought it, of course, since the owls weren’t allowed anywhere but the owlery, and handed it to Lucius with a wary eye. Lucius had been known to arbitrarily vent his wordly frustrations by clubbing the elves, though it upset Harry so much he had all but broken the habit in the past several years.

“Harry?” Narcissa asked quietly, her gaze fixed on him from the other side of the table. Lucius nodded, unrolled the parchment, and read with a frown that deepened the longer he read.

“Well, your theory about Draco’s allusions were correct,” he said, rolling the parchment back up and levitating it toward his wife with a wave of his wand, stroking his chin with the other hand.

“Surely not!” Narcissa said, giving him a sharp look, but her eyes widened and her hand went to her mouth as she scanned the message herself. “Gryffindor,” she muttered, as though still in disbelief. Lucius sighed.

“It’s in his blood, we’d do well to remember. And it’s not the only undesirable thing there.”

Narcissa looked up at him for a moment, face stiff with resignation. “Is that still what you believe?” she asked softly. Nothing she had said had ever shocked Lucius more. But then she seemed to shake herself, looking at her lap, and the moment passed. More or less.

Lucius spent a moment tidying his mind. Yes, raising Harry had led them to second guess a few assumptions central to their philosophies, as he was obviously powerful, even-tempered and intelligent, despite being what amounted to half muggle by blood. But the exception didn’t disprove the rule.

When he felt calm enough, Lucius spoke to Narcissa again. “Our lord has devotees in every Hogwarts house. Harry mentions the Brown girl as a fast friend, and the Browns are a loyal family.”

Narcissa was nodding without meeting his eye, the closest she ever came to being meek.

“All will be well,” Lucius said to his wife, and the room, and the elves standing in the corner in an effort to be available but invisible. One of them, he noted, was Dobby, the youngster that had been demented with anguish ever since the boys had left for school. Even now the tips of his ears were bright red as though freshly ironed.

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On Sunday evening, Professor Vector summoned all the Gryffindors to the common room, which Harry was fairly sure had expanded in order to accommodate them all. Their head of house
levitated herself so that she could look sternly down upon them, and the few older students who had been whispering to one another were silent at once.

“Good evening, students,” she said. “Welcome to Hogwarts, first years, and welcome back to Hogwarts to the rest of you. I trust you had an enjoyable summer, and you are now prepared to focus on your studies.” She arched a brow at some tittering from the back row that Harry thought might have originated with Ron’s twin brothers Fred and George, who he could just make out in his peripheral vision, two matching orange blurs.

“You have had an opportunity, I trust, to review your time tables. If you have questions regarding your courses, you may direct them to me, or to Deputy Headmistress Carrow.”

Harry, who had known on sight that the Carrows were two of the most terrifying people he would ever have the misfortune to take classes from, shuddered involuntarily. Lavender, already wedged against him on the overfull sofa, burrowed a little closer in sympathy.

“The initiative this year is passive magic, which includes charmed objects and wards.” Harry wasn’t really following, but he saw the older student, who was sitting on his other side at a more respectful distance than Lavender, nod thoughtfully. A few other students groaned.

“Passive magic has been called the great equalizer between magical might and magical delicacy,” said Professor Vector, ignoring their reactions. “It is a valuable initiative,” she added firmly, “and has the support of our Lord.”

The room went a bit quieter than it had been before. It was one of those loaded silences that carried a physical pressure, and Harry found himself glancing around to see the range of expressions on the other Gryffindors’ faces: from thoughtful agreement to barely masked fear or even a flicker of spite, in the case of Ron’s brother Percy, though he averted his faces quickly when he caught Harry looking.

“Fourth years, I expect your independent study reports to be turned into me by tomorrow afternoon, if they haven’t been already.” She paused and her face twisted oddly a moment. “I am not at liberty to offer extensions,” she said after that, in the measured way someone speaks when they are carefully choosing their words. Harry, reminded of Lucius, wondered what the penalty was around here for a late report. The Gryffindors were a fairly undisciplined sort, and he wondered if the impression of Hogwarts culture he had after a weekend spent largely in the Gryffindor common room was an accurate one.

“You may all go, except the first years.”

At this dismissal, the older kids sprang to their feet and filed off to the dormitories. As they cleared, Harry noted the muggleborn girl with the dark hair, sitting apart from the other first years on the rug with her arms looped over her knees, very deliberately looking at Professor Vector and no one else.

Ron Weasley sat next to Harry in the newly vacated seat, and Professor Vector went on.

“First years with older siblings at Hogwarts may know some of what I’m about to share,” she said, “but I would appreciate your patience, as not all of you will. The curriculum at Hogwarts has been constantly evolving since the years when all of you were born. While you may have expected a general curriculum, the movement each year has been to gradually customize the instruction of each student, to focus on your areas of strength and not spend undue time on your areas of weakness, which is not only inefficient, but can be frustrating for the student. For example, few of you will have the focus and serene aura compatible with brewing potions well, and so after a year
of basic information, you will never take a potions course again. The same can be said of the other branches of magic, for various reasons.

“By the time you are a fourth year, the majority of your studies will be independent, with a faculty mentor assigned to you. If you have a particularly rare area of strength, then our Lord will assign one of his subjects who is adept in the art to mentor you. Are there any questions, based on what I’ve said so far?”

Lavender raised her head, and at Professor Vector’s nod, she asked hesitantly, “What about the firstie bowl?”

Harry wondered if he had misheard, since the words she’d just used didn’t sound like real ones, but a glance at Professor Vector’s stormy eyes told another story.

“While that question exceeds the scope of my lecture insofar,” she said with calm impatience, “I will answer it, nonetheless. Now that it’s been asked, none of you will listen to another word I say on any other topic.

“All first year students will be ranked, weekly, based upon their overall performance in the general curriculum. Point values are calculated equally from each course for a total ‘score,’ for lack of a better word and it being my regrettable experience that Quidditch metaphors are the most effective communication tool for eleven-year-old witches and wizards.” She smiled, a brief flash of a warm expression that made Lavender, Ron and Hermione all laugh.

“To extend the metaphor,” Professor Vector continued, “there are additional scores which may be earned through the year which are something of a ‘snitch,’ if there can be more than one snitch in a game. They are organism conjuring and animagery. Generally, no one achieves these goals and the high average score is the prevalent student. Those top several first year students will be granted all the privileges enjoyed by members of the forty-one families for the duration of their time at Hogwarts.”

“But what if we’re already getting those privileges?” asked a girl with tidy raven hair that reminded Harry for a half second of Elspeth. Then she glanced sideways, shyly, to reveal slanted brown eyes and a square chin, and his sense of recognition vanished.

“In that case, Miss Moore,” said Professor Vector wryly, “you will have to settle for the approval of your school and our Lord.”

Harry’s attention piqued at that. He liked to read; his wand was sure to be good at magic. His natural inclination toward self-doubt aside, he thought he might have a chance at making that list. He remembered, as he often did, how it had felt the day he had received his wand. Bowing at his lord’s feet, and looking up into the unburnished brilliance of his direction attention. The memory, three years old, was as vivid as the day it was new.

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Transfiguration was Harry’s first class. All he knew about animagery and conjuring were that they were types of transfiguration, so after paying particularly careful attention to Professor Maloney’s lecture, he hung back after class until all the other students had left and approached her desk.

“Professor,” he said, and then, feeling suddenly awkward, gave a brief formal bow. Professor Maloney had dark amber skin that had an appealing dewy glow, and he was among the youngest professors, of an age perhaps with the Carrows but much less frightening to behold. In fact, Harry thought with his shiny dark brown eyes and dense curls, he was quite pleasant to look at.
“Harry,” said Professor Maloney, startling him. Harry wasn’t sure he had ever heard an unrelated adult call him by name, except Sirius and the Malfoys, of course, but he tended to think of them as family too, though he knew he shouldn’t. “What can I help you with? Questions about the lecture?” His smile was kind but curious, probably because no one but an idiot could have misunderstood the lecture, which mostly consisted of orientation, including where supplies were kept and the titles of the books on reserve in the library on the subject.

“No, not really. Only I wondered...well, you see, Professor Vector told us that we would earn the most points for the rankings if we were successful at animagery or organism conjuring.” He frowned thoughtfully. “Or maybe it’s ‘and.’ I suppose if you could do either one, you could also do both.”

Professor Maloney looked more amused yet. “They are each advanced magic, and extremely time consuming to learn,” he said kindly. “It took me almost a decade to master animagery, and I am a transfiguration specialist.”

“Oh,” Harry said, frown deepening. “And what about organism conjuring?”

“That came a bit easier to me. Just two years of concentrated study, but I was sixteen at the time with most of the Hogwarts curriculum under my belt.”

Harry fingered the wand in his pocket, but he did not draw it. He knew that it was his advantage; what could set him apart. He had seen Professor Maloney’s wand and he knew that it was like Harry’s parents’ wands: new, wielded only by Professor Maloney. Young. When Professor Maloney was learning animagery, and organic conjuring, and all his magic, his wand was learning too.

But Harry’s wand already knew. He could sense it.

“Would you recommend a course of reading on the subjects?” Harry asked politely. He tried not to read Professor Maloney’s persistent amusement as condescending, as the wizard dutifully spelled out a few of his favorites for Harry.

“That last one isn’t available in the Hogwarts library, though,” he said. Then he hesitated. “You’re...well, Harry, I won’t pretend I don’t know you’re associated with Sirius Black. He’s, among other things, a talented animagi. One of the more natural demonstrations I’ve seen, really.”

If Harry had known about that, he’d forgotten. He tried to conceal his surprise, embarrassed by it for some reason, and only nodded.

“Well, the Black family has always prided itself on the talent. The family library is purported to be unparalleled on that topic, among others, though some of the theories are a bit...controversial.”

Harry was nodding eagerly. “I’ll ask him, then. Thank you!”

He had to rush to get to potions, his hand all the while on the wand, which had felt so alive and eager all through his time in Professor Maloney’s classroom. But oddly, Harry thought, as he rushed into the potions room so that he wasn’t late, the wood seemed to go chill and lifeless as soon as he seated himself before a cauldron.

If Harry had a sense of his wand’s aptitude for transfiguration, he had an equally strong sense of its abhorrence for potions. If a magical device could pout, the yew wand was doing it all through class. Also, Professor Carrow – the she-bat, as the more daring students referred to her, and a reference that, once planted, wouldn’t leave Harry’s mind – had none of Professor Maloney’s
inclinations to make the first day a soft one for her first year Gryffindors. She lectured them through a complicated brew that was so finicky it would explode at the merest midstep and coat its brewers in a thick layer of slime, then evaporate. There were no adjustments or recalibrations to be had, and by the end of the two hour period, every cauldron was empty and every student’s face was slightly pink from the effects of Professor Vector’s mercilessly thorough cleaning spells.

“If you learn nothing else today – and I expect you won’t – then learn that potions is a fine art, and you are none of you artists. You disgust me. Now leave.”

Harry clutched his wand, and felt an echo of his own relief when he was out of the potions room and back in the hallway.

“Blimey,” Ron said, his hair sticking up with static. Most of his head had been doused in the goo, so he’d had a worse time than most of them with the cleaning spell. “I never knew a Scourgify could feel like a slap to the face.”

Harry, still stunned and exhausted by what they had just endured, shuddered sympathetically. “I guess I don’t like potions.”

Fred and George materialized in the hallway, not by magic but just in that way they had and which Harry had yet to get used to. Nor had Ron, Harry thought, seeing the other boy tense at the sight of his siblings.

“Potions are brilliant,” Fred said.

“It’s the she-bat you don’t like,” George said.

Harry could tell them apart somehow, though he couldn’t articulate it. He had also noticed that Fred usually took his turn speaking first, though they otherwise kept an almost mathematical balance between how many syllables they each contributed to a conversation.

“Fred and George are quite good at potions,” Ron said, looking at them with reluctant respect. Harry understood the sentiment. All he knew about potions after two hours of Professor Carrow was that they were volatile and dangerous. So, he thought faintly, I learned that lesson she was after.

“Be nice and we might give you some tips,” Fred promised.

“What’s next on the firstie’s list?” George asked, reaching out to pluck Ron’s folded timetable from his pocket.

“Civics,” Fred said darkly, looking over George’s shoulder. George made a face and gave Ron the timetable back.

All the first years had civics together, which Harry had already known from comparing time tables in the shared common room. He briefly feared for his bodily integrity when first Lavender, then Draco, seized one of his arms and began literally pulling him in opposite directions. Fortunately, Ron intervened, shaking loose their grip and reminding them that Harry was not a toy.

When Lavender and Draco both withdrew, Ron winked at Harry and leaned close.

“A boyfriend and a girlfriend. Now I’m really jealous!”

The room was too crowded, and Harry was far too flustered, to form a response before the moment passed. But he couldn’t ignore Ron’s smug smile when Draco directed Harry to a seat beside his,
and Lavender immediately took the one on Harry’s left. Ron went on to take a chair next to Theo, and Harry watched with interest as they interacted, putting their heads close together, and sitting so near their shoulders touched.

It shouldn’t have seemed odd, accustomed as he was to having Draco, and now Lavender, hanging off of him at all times, but for some reason Harry found the sight strange. He knew he didn’t know much about the situation at all, but it seemed somehow Theo’s fault that he and Ron could both be raised in the same place, and only one of them emerged maimed.

“Students,” called a voice from the center of the room. A plump witch of indeterminate age with bright purple hair was standing in the middle of the room. Unlike the other classrooms where desks were arranged around a podium or teacher’s desk, this classroom gave the impression of an amphitheater, with raised seating in a semicircle, and a sphere of empty wooden floor where their apparent instructor stood. Harry didn’t recognize her from the Great Hall or anywhere else, and she spoke with a faint accent.

“I am guest Professor Godeaux, and I will be your civics instructor for your European unit. Let us begin by discussing the present structure of our Lord’s presence throughout the continent. Can anyone tell me the hierarchy of nobility, beginning with the inner circle?”

Harry sat back in his chair, prepared for a boring hour, though presumably if this was a European unit, subsequent units would be about other parts of the world, and he was interested in learning about that. He knew the forty-one families, but that was really all on a more international stage. On Europe, though, especially the inner circle, he considered himself something of an expert. After all, he’d had breakfast, luncheon and dinner with Lucius Malfoy nearly every day of his life.

“I don’t know what Fred and George meant,” Harry said to Ron as they left the classroom an hour later. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Ron gave Harry a long, searching look, then managed a half smile. “Right,” he said, flatly. It wasn’t agreement, but it wasn’t argument, either. Harry wondered what exactly he had missed.

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The week passed quickly, and Harry was quickly convinced that his only hope, meager though it was, to top the firstie bowl was by feats of transfiguration that would be made possible by his wand if at all, which felt a bit like an unfair advantage. Though when he dwelled on that, a fierce voice rose up to argue back: if you finally have an advantage, you’ve earned it.

He wrote to Sirius to feel out the subject of animagery and the Black library, but didn’t hear back. He received a terse response to his letter from Narcissa, and a delighted response to his letter to his parents and Elspeth (written and signed, strangely enough, by Elspeth alone, though she insisted ‘mom and dad send their regards’). The little Hogwarts owl had gone in and out his window so many times that by Thursday, when Harry heard tapping on the glass, he reached up to open the window without looking up from the open book on his desk.

Instead of an owl, an odd, grotesque bird, showing patches of vibrant pink skin in as many places as it had rather lifeless dark red feathers, hopped onto the sill. It looked at him with a shrewd eye and made a shrill, plaintive sound, and then tumbled to the floor where it lay in a heap.

For a moment, Harry simply stared, motionless with amazement. Then he knelt on the floor – he had a diluted form of the gene that made his sister a servant to all creatures, after all – and nudged the bird cautiously.
“All right there?” he asked tentatively. “Not dead, are you?”

The bird squawked again, as though to respond in the negative, then closed its eyes and went slack against the floor once more. Harry hesitated a bit, then gingerly scooped up the worryingly cold little body and set it on his bed.

More than anything else, the bird looked like a chicken, though Harry had never seen a chicken that could fly as high as his window in Gryffindor tower, nor one with feathers quite this shade of red. He noted their color while also observing that a small heap of feathers remained on the place on the floor from which he’d retrieved the bird, and as he watched, they were gradually turning gray and shriveling into ash.

Not a chicken, then.

The magical birds Harry was familiar with – academically, not personally – was short. It all but began and ended with phoenixes, but this could not possibly be…

The bird abruptly burst into flames.

With an undignified shriek, Harry leapt backwards, then watched in dismay as the bird disappeared in the conflagration.

As quickly as it had gone up, the fire went down, and from a pile of ashes identical to what the feathers on the floor had become, a smaller, and fully pink version of the bigger bird poked out its head.

“A phoenix, I suppose,” Harry said aloud, still experiencing some of the symptoms of shock. The bird – the phoenix – stepped gingerly out of the pile of ash and eyed Harry with a brighter expression than it had worn before, though its physical appearance had not improved in the course of its apparent rebirth.

“I should probably notify Professor Vector,” Harry said, as though addressing the bird, and then blushed. Phoenix or not, the thing was simply a creature, and speaking to it as though expecting a response was barmy.

The phoenix made a pleasant trilling sound, then hopped over to Harry’s pillow, which it studied a moment, before darting its head forward and piercing the silk pillow cover with its sharp beak. Before Harry could protest, it had ripped open the pillow to its satisfaction and was busily forming a nest from the exposed feather contents.

Professor Vector looked at Harry narrowly, as though anticipating a prank, but willingly followed him back to the room. Harry was half afraid the phoenix would be gone, perhaps no more than one of his daydreams, if a particularly vivid instance. But the bird was there, now comfortably settled in the remains of Harry’s pillow, little piles of ash on the bedspread and floor to further corroborate Harry’s story.

Professor Vector turned her blank, assessing look on Harry, and sighed. “Well, Potter,” she said, in a grudging tone. “It appears you have a familiar. Congratulations.” She glanced at the phoenix with some combination of respect and caution. “Can be a bit more trouble than they’re worth, I’m told. Best of luck.”

Harry hadn’t known he had been hoping for a more maternal figure in his Head of House, but supposed the sinking feeling in his gut was attributable to that shortcoming in Professor Vector’s character. Feeling at as much of a loss as he had before asking for adult assistance, he sat down to
write his sister another letter. She probably knew more even than Professor Vector about phoenixes, based upon the encyclopedic knowledge of magical creatures that had been their parents’ favorite anecdote about their daughter since she was four.

That done, and the sky black and seamless beyond the window, Harry was faced with no other choice but to go to sleep. He carefully laid his spare pillow at the foot of the bed and curled up there, mindful of the phoenix, which, familiar or not, had a perilously sharp beak he’d rather not be nipped by. The effort of holding his body away from the bird’s space on the narrow bed made Harry think of a story Lucius used to tell Harry and Draco about wizards of old questing for magical objects in perilous caves, sleeping on sheer ledges with only their subconscious to save them from rolling to their deaths in their sleep.

A tense hour later, Harry was asleep and the dream came over him. He sat across a large desk from a man in fuschia and violet robes and a tall conical hat that had been out of style for several decades. Harry had Narcissa to credit for his knowledge of wizarding fashion trends. The man was very old, with a long white beard tied into a tail at his breastbone with a bit of sparkly string. Various gadgets ticked and whirred on the desk and in other parts of the room.

“Good evening, Harry,” said the man. “I see you’ve met Fawkes.”

Chapter End Notes

I delight in your feedback - so much I’m not ashamed to beg for it! I do not have a beta and I am an impatient proofreader so if you catch any errors, I am always grateful to have them pointed out.
Chapter Summary

In which Tom is given cause for concern, and Charlie makes new acquaintances.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Wolf_of_Lilacs for the kind and quick beta on this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nine: The Nine Disappearances (One)

“What worries you, masters you.”

John Locke

Their second kiss will be months after their first. Tom will come into the house uncertain of how he will find Harry, the closest thing to fear he has known in a long time, and then be nearly knocked over by the force of Harry hurtling into his arms.

They will kiss there, by the stairs. Harry will seize Tom by the collar with his usual half-violent intensity, but his mouth will be gentle, and afterward, he will rest his head against Tom’s shoulder.

“What have you been?”

Tom’s hands will move wonderfully over Harry’s shoulders, blaming the past weeks and all their uncertainty for the way they tremble. “There was another one,” he will say. “There’s been a tenth disappearance.”

October 17, 1991

The day Tom first heard of the Nine Disappearances, which would be the near exclusive source of his vexation for decades to come, he was watching Bellatrix torture a common born magical subject with her usual relish.

The Lestrange dungeons were nothing like classic dungeons. They had thick carpet, excellent lighting, and a number of fine antique furniture pieces. Including the brocade fainting couch Bellatrix was perched upon, waving her wand with the careless ease of an expert, while her subject, sobbing quietly, spun a slow circle in midair, his wrists firmly affixed to his ankles with shimmering magical binds.

Tom was not well-versed in kinships. But even he knew that taking an interest in one’s fellows’
interests was part of the ever-puzzling social contract, so he occasionally let Bella talk him into following her downstairs. Her subject coughed and spat a great deal of blood and two teeth onto the once-pristine white carpet. Tom turned his head away, his jaw tensing as he swallowed a yawn.

Very little escaped Bella, however. She turned to him with a slight pout. “Surely I’m not boring you, my lord?”

“Hmm,” Tom hummed noncommittally, and was pleased that coincidence chose that moment to send an elf, standing primly near Bella’s elbow with a piece of mail on a silver tray.

“Thank you, Leyo,” said Bella to the elf. Tom had rarely seen anyone so polite to elves. Blacks placed value on nothing so highly as loyalty, from Tom’s observations, and that extended to other species. Even certain muggles had been the recipients of Bella’s brand of fondness.

“My lord,” Bella said with a puzzled frown, rising and crossing the room to hand him the parchment. “This is for you.”

She studied him with interest as he read, his brow furrowing, then snapped his fingers and watched thoughtfully as the parchment disappeared. He toyed with his wand, so rarely needed now, but still close at hand at all times in his pocket, its familiarity a material comfort he allowed himself.

“Bellatrix, would you suspend your present activities and accompany me on an errand?”

Of course, Bella was delighted to do so, which was how they came to be standing side by side in London, across a corpse from Sirius Black, whose bracketed frown deepened still at the sight of his cousin.

For her part, Bella tittered a bit, always delighted to get under anyone’s skin. Perhaps especially this cousin, Tom had found, which was the primary reason he had invited her along. Social contract, and what have you; but also, it pleased him to please her, and he hadn’t even had to maim someone to do it.

“Who?” asked Tom.

“Someone muggle,” said Bella, wrinkling her nose.

Sirius glowered at her. “How would you know?” He glanced at Tom and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, my lord. But we don’t know.”

Bella leaned forward. The body was male, anatomically at least, and what was left of its legs were obscuring what was left of its head. Tom thought of Bella’s subject, left suspended in the dungeon, and wondered if she was getting any ideas.

“Definitely muggle,” she said, sniffing like a dog. Tom remembered, amused, that Bella was one of those who claimed to be able to smell the differences in magical and nonmagical blood. In fact, it went further. Once at a party she’d claimed she could determine forty-one family lineages by tasting a drop of blood, and had managed, blindfolded and wandless, to correctly identify a Nott cousin, two Greysons and her own brother-in-law based upon the drop of blood they deposited on her tongue, and nothing else.

At the time Tom had thought she had engineered the situation somehow. Maybe she was better at wandless magic than he thought, or she had organized the volunteers. Now he wondered. In a serious setting such as this, with her lord to displease, he didn’t think she would guess.

“My talented girl,” Tom told her, and she blushed and stared at her feet. “Let us see what other
evidence there might be to convince Lord Black, shall we?”

He drew his wand and knelt. They were in the luxurious gardens outside the Black palace, and the grass formed an eager cushion under his knees, as magical as everything else that sprang from this soil.

Tom had long since dispensed with traditional spells; his magic was a purer union of intent and manifestation than that, at this stage. But he murmured a few phrases of Latin, anyway, since he wasn’t interested in illustrating the nature of his power even to such a limited audience. The time hadn’t yet come.

Bella made an uneasy sound when the magical signature took shape above the wrecked remains, and Tom sat back on his heels and looked up at Sirius Black.

“How did you find him?”

“Just this way, my lord. I walk every morning. The wards did not sound. The elves” – he gestured behind him at a few cowering house elves – “say they know nothing, and they also keep assuring me it’s impossible that the body could be here at all.”

“These sorts of mysteries were our friend Lord Nott’s specialty, my lord,” said Bella. She was still frowning at the body, as though it had personally offended her to be wrong, but there was a gleam of intrigue in her eyes as well. She seemed to have particular attention for the sight of the magical signature, a faint line on her brow, a sure sign of consternation. Bella was rarely uneasy, and her face was perfectly unlined as a result. “Certainly my lord’s spell shows there was something magical about this creature, but his blood does not smell of magic.”

Between the blood and the gore, there was little that could be made out of the fabric on the body that had presumably been clothing. Tom looked at Bella. “My dear, study the scene a bit, if you please.”

Bella nodded, and did, knowing without asking why, or if not, knowing better than to ask. When she had taken a careful study of the body from every angle, she looked at Tom and inclined her head.

“Repario,” he said, and gave his wand a cursory wave, pouring a near-excessive level of energy into it. The familiar satisfaction at the shock on Bella and Black’s faces filled him, even after all these years. A very whole body, clothed in robes, lay on the grass as though sleeping.

Not so whole, Tom thought, cocking his head. Four fingers and most of the right leg were missing. The bloodless holes left in the body were neat, as though created by something sharp, or an efficient spell.

“This is Rosario Wells,” said Sirius faintly.

“What?”

“The muggle representative they elected to their government.” He cleared his throat, and broke his disbelieving stare. “He went missing. Not a…not a job without enemies, as it turns out.”

“Muggles, and their cannibalism. So predictable,” Bella sighed. Then she seemed to realize, as did Lord Black, that their lord had just uncovered a magical signature in a man who had passed as a muggle, and became very solemn and unreadable at once.

In the brief violence of their otherwise tidy coup, as Bella had accurately recalled, their Lord Nott
had unraveled problems with the determined focus of a muggle bloodhound. But, as Bella should know, Lord Nott had subsequently displeased his lord, and Tom had never regretted sending him to the remotest parts of a distant continent to reflect on his failings.

“Bellatrix, you shall assist your cousin in uncovering this odd little mystery,” he said, standing. “My spell was true, but it seems Bellatrix’s…observations were not wholly inaccurate, if Lord Black is correct and this…individual was not magically functional.” He frowned. “There have been such cases. The Squib spectrum is its own problem.”

“We shall bring you an explanation, my lord,” Bellatrix said, playfulness forgotten. She was casting a stasis charm on the body and summoning the elves to take it inside for more secure storage.

“It would benefit Lord Black most of all to know what occurred,” said Tom mildly. “It was his wards that were breached and his property that was trespassed. You’re a bit fortunate, perhaps, that it isn’t your body we found.”

Black, looking a bit pale at that, nodded shortly. “You’re right, of course, my lord.”

“Of course,” Tom agreed. “I’ll anticipate your update.”

But he was losing interest, already. What did he care if the muggles were sussing out and murdering the odd Squib? And what did he care if one of them hacked a few fingers off of Lord Black in his sleep? He knew Bella had her eye on the family title, and it would make it easier to give it to her if Black would suffer some monumental failure.

Then Bella made a choking noise, and screeched at the elves, who were conducting the body away, and terrified them into renewed cowers. The body, abruptly released from Bella’s spells, dropped to the ground with a displeasing heavy, wet noise. Bella turned toward Tom, trembling, her eyes enormous.

“My lord, if you would, please…please, cast the spell again.”

Tom did, not really recalling exactly what Latin he’d invented to use before, but neither Bella nor Sirius were paying enough attention to notice. This time, Bella’s fervent stare when the signature materialized was closely chased by recognition, and horror. She reached out blindly to grasp Tom’s sleeve. It had been a decade since she’d dared to touch him, but she was obviously in such a state, Tom couldn’t bring himself to correct her.

“Andromeda,” she wailed. “It’s Andromeda’s signature, my lord.”

Then it was Sirius Black stepping over to take his estranged cousin in his arms. Tom watched them in puzzlement. There were some things, he remembered, that brought people together despite their dislike for one another, and apparently evidence that their long-missing shared relative was likely dead was one of them.

“Are you surprised?” Tom asked archly. Andromeda had gone missing early in the war. Like so many magicals with muggle ties who tried to stand with the muggles, presumably the very people she sought to defend had turned on her. It had been a long time, though, since muggles had successfully perpetuated any violence against wizards. There were nine disappearances still technically under investigation, a body never having been recovered, and if he recalled correctly, Andromeda’s was the oldest of those.

Sirius gave Tom the closest thing to a glare he could dare, then blinked and looked away. “It’s
never easy to lose a sibling,” he said stiffly, patting Bella’s shoulder as she sobbed.

Tom was skeptical. He had heard Bella say some rather horrible things about her sister, but then mitigating her emotions with scorn and random torture was one of Bella’s most transparent tendencies. He thought about the implications here without pleasure. Separating a magical signature from a body was, supposedly, impossible. There were a few historical examples, with no way to know whether they were true, and generally involving prolonged possession or soul bonds gone awry.

Tom looked at the body again, his detachment of a moment before forgotten, turned in an instant to the purest fascination he had felt in years. He knelt again. The body’s eyes were half-open, and for a moment, seemed to meet Tom’s with recognition. Tom almost started, but then, no – they were dead eyes, as blank as an Inferi’s. But, Tom thought, secrets could be pried out of the dead. Lord Nott had proven that, and perhaps his long absence had prepared him for a particularly rigorous return to service.

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November 3, 1991

Spinnett Estate

outside Cologne, Germany

Charlie had never learned to like Paris. The French were all right, he supposed. Accents aside, he wasn’t sure what distinguished them from the people anywhere else in Europe. The cultural tapestry or stewpot or whatever the old metaphor had been was giving way toward homogeneity, everyone scrambling to be the way their lord wanted them to be. Charlie couldn’t bring himself to be disturbed. He had felt like he was floating for most of his adult life, insulated from strong feelings, save those brief moments of horror that punctured his bubble and left him reeling for days.

Charlie had never learned to like Paris, but he found himself much more comfortable in Germany. The likely reason for this, he suspected, was that he spent less time in any sort of proximity to his lord, whose notice had terrified him ever since that day back in third year when he’d first earned it. In his family, there were those who were loyal to their lord and those who pretended to be, almost convincing even each other. Charlie had always been of the former kind, though before he’d looked into his lord’s eyes it had been out of some child’s imagined love and respect. Since then, it had been out of an adult’s fear. Once, this fear might have shamed him. But Charlie was not a child any longer, and he had spent enough time with dragons to know when it was smart to be wary.

He was sent to Germany at the same time as one Elaine Fawley, an American witch that had been chiefly employed with the task of shagging their lord since coming to Europe a few years before. He had gradually stopped collecting her for visits, Charlie – and everyone else – knew, and the transfer to Germany would be her final dismissal. She had spent many of their first days in Cologne crying – rather a lot, and with no regard for who heard or saw – and Charlie, possibly the most reserved person ever to have the last name Weasley, was made thoroughly uncomfortable every time.

Oddly, Charlie and Elaine were set with no specific task, though by letter they were directed to attend society parties and visit with certain people. Gradually Charlie identified a pattern, and well into their third week, he leaned close to Elaine to share his discovery.

“Cousins,” he hissed. “He has us meeting all the cousins.”
Elaine blew her nose. She had just finished one of her quieter, briefer crying sessions, triggered by watching an affectionate couple laughing with one another and holding hands as they walked past Elaine and Charlie’s corner of the dining room. The meal was over, and the party was trickling out to the gardens.

“Cousins of whom?”

“The forty-one families,” Charlie said. He didn’t know what it meant, but it had all come into focus when they had arrived tonight at the least swanky wizarding dinner Charlie had attended, when he realized that the people with unrecognizable names they were there to rub elbows with with maternal cousins in the dwindling ranks of the old Degraff family. That made sixteen obscure branches on sixteen famous family trees. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

“I wonder if he’s planning to strip titles,” Charlie said, so stunned by his discovery that he forgot himself entirely. As soon as he’d said it, he colored and swallowed convulsively. Elaine was looking at him like he had gone mad.

“Our lord values only certain kinds of curiosity, Weasley,” she said, her eyes clear and her voice steady, for all the world unlike the demeanor one would expect of someone who had been crying a few minutes before. Then she saw something over Charlie’s shoulder, and he watched her mask fall away entirely for a baffling moment. “What the…?”

Charlie looked over his shoulder, and saw that a tall, striking Native American man, about forty years old and wearing rather a lot of beads and natural animal hide, considering the median dress code of the room, which was austere black robes from throat to ankle. Charlie hadn’t even seen a witch wearing earrings.

“I want to say, ‘that’s John Bearheart,’ but since he’s the only man of his ethnicity I’ve ever met, I’m afraid that would be racist,” he hissed at Elaine.

She twisted in her chair and fixed Charlie with a long, searching look. He met her stare with interest. Gone was the weepy, jilted lover of their lord and here was a formidable, ambitious young woman who had her lot thrown in with Charlie’s through some combination of coincidence and their lord’s whim.

“Wave him over, Weasley,” she murmured at last, her eyes bright and unreadable, effortlessly commanding. She leaned back in her seat and lifted her wine glass toward her mouth, so that not only was Charlie the only one who could hear her, but he was the only one who knew she was speaking at all. “I certainly can’t be seen to do it.”

Did he appear so lacking in sincere devotion, Charlie thought faintly, that she could be this obvious? His heart was thudding in his chest. It was the first time he had recognized a sign of life in his human body in as long as he could remember. Without thinking it over any further than that, Charlie looked back toward the doorway and raised his arm sharply to draw John Bearheart’s attention.

He was more handsome and imposing up close. One of the taller wizards Charlie had seen, taller than his brother Bill, perhaps as tall as their lord. Charlie introduced himself, and John Bearheart gave him a cautious nod, then looked past him at Elaine with undisguised curiosity.

Everyone remembered when John Bearheart was romantic with their lord. He had been their lord’s constant companion for almost six years, longer than anyone else, and more deeply entrenched. Since Bearheart, their lord’s companions had been seen with him only occasionally in public, and rotated every two years or less. Still, everyone knew Elaine had been the most recent liaison, and
so she and Bearheart must both recognize their shared experience. After a moment of their fixed stare, Charlie grew restless.

“Sit with us,” he blurted, for something to say, and then when he realized what he’d said, he blushed. Bearheart looked at him with a wooden expression that was impossible to read, and Elaine gave a startled laugh.

“Excellent idea, Weasley,” she said, voice still thrumming with amusement. She gestured to the empty chair and Bearheart remained still for a long moment, then folded himself gracefully into it.

“Shouldn’t we be going to the garden,” Charlie said, still standing by his own chair, realizing how idiotic he must sound since he had been the one to bring up sitting down. The dining room was empty but for them.

“What are they going to do, come back and pry us from our chairs?” Elaine looked around for an elf. Seeing one, she snapped her fingers a few times. “More wine,” she called, and the soft pop of the elf disapparating signaled its obedience.

Slowly, Charlie sat down again, looking curiously from Bearheart to Elaine, who had resumed staring at one another.

“So, we have something in common,” Elaine said. She sounded on the verge of laughter, or hysteria. Charlie narrowed his eyes, looking past the perception he had constructed for himself of a crying castoff, and saw it was laughter, certainly. She was not hysterical. Charlie knew he was being trusted with something, but the reason why bewildered him.

Bearheart broke eye contact to look cautiously and pointedly at Charlie, then back at Elaine.

“He’s harmless. This is Charlie Weasley, you know.”

Bearheart’s brows rose, and this time he looked at Charlie with real interest, even making eye contact. “The dragon boy,” he said shortly. “I remember you. You’ve grown.” His gaze flickered up and down Charlie’s body, warming with amusement. “A bit,” he added.

Charlie rolled his eyes. He was a petite wizard; it was what it was.

“You can’t embarrass him that way,” Elaine said tritely. “You haven’t seen it, but I have.”

Bearheart looked at her, brows going higher still.

“You have?”

“Sure. He can’t go more than a few days without a fix. Hang around with us long enough and you’re bound to see it too. In fact, I predict he’ll be quite jumpy by midnight, and we’re deep enough into the middle of nowhere that there has to be a remote place for it.”

“Are we discussing the same thing?” Bearheart asked.

They never did go out to the garden, and as it turned out, they were pried from their chairs after two hours and a third bottle of wine. Their hostess did so in the politest manner possible, clearly unsure what to do with them if they were too inebriated for the floo.

“I’m not drunk,” Charlie pointed out. He wasn’t. He had never felt comfortable abandoning his senses. He wasn’t sure the label fit his companions, either. They had begun to lean against one another a bit, but Bearheart had the bodyweight to drink a bottle or two himself without great
cognitive impairment, Charlie expected, and though Elaine had the look of someone loose-limbed and relaxed, he kept seeing a glint of something sharp and perfectly sober in her eyes.

“Weasley, we don’t need the floo,” she said, elbowing Bearheart and winking broadly.

Charlie knew what she meant, after a moment, and began to scowl at her. “We didn’t even meet the cousin,” he mumbled, sure he should be more worried about that. But that heartbeat was still strong in his ears, drowning out reason.


John Bearheart was visiting Cologne, as it turned out, to present Durmstrang research. Charlie had only heard rumors about the reason he was banished from the old MACUSA, but a banishment it certainly was, if their lord could be said to banish someone from one of his continents but not all the others. It had something to do with muggles, and disobedience, and Charlie thought he’d heard something about a new spell…

“Excellent,” Elaine was saying as Charlie emerged onto the terrace after them. She was leading Bearheart through the garden toward the lawn. Charlie cocked his head to one side, then sighed. It was large enough, and the sky above was sufficiently clear. He cracked his shoulders.

“Go along then, Weasley, we’ll wait.” Elaine linked her arm through Bearheart’s. Charlie, aware he was being treated like a parlor trick, for some reason didn’t mind. It had been a few days. He did need a fix. He strode away from them, out onto the barest part of the grass, took off his shoes, and turned into a dragon.

Charlie had not been a natural animagus. But like every Hogwarts student, he committed himself to the study with all the boundless optimism of someone who is eleven years old and newly armed with a wand. He’d thought, why not me? He had never felt joy of the sort he had when he touched the mind of his inner animal, and realized what it was.

Since then, Charlie’s relationship with the dragon had grown much more complex. It was his wings, literally; an escape from the bounds of the earth; the only time he felt unshackled and powerful. But it had sprung a trap on his entire life, that moment when he’d changed for the first time, going into a panic and nearly braining himself on the ceiling of the transfiguration classroom and sending a dozen students to the infirmary. Their lord had known within the hour. And their lord was a collector of useful people. Who could have such unique usefulness as Charlie, the only dragon animagus in charted history?

Charlie shook out his vast wings, black-speckled red, with a sound he knew felt to human ears like the sails of a ship snapping in a stiff wind. Back on the stairs of the large, but shabby house where they’d had dinner and all that wine, their hostess stood slack-jawed. The dragon wanted to preen, and Charlie wanted to leave immediately. The impulses sat uneasily against one another, then Charlie gave into the dragon, as he almost always did, and arched his graceful neck and purred.

“All ego, when he’s like this,” he heard Elaine whisper to Bearheart, who for his part, looked markedly unafraid as he regarded Charlie from far below. Charlie crouched, his wings skimming the grass and making him ticklish. Elaine, for all her bravado, had an undercurrent of unease in her scent, as she always did when Charlie was a dragon. But she scrambled onto his back without hesitation, and a moment later Bearheart followed.

Flying with passengers had made Charlie very uneasy at first, but he was used to it now. It meant he couldn’t do any of the best kinds of flying – not too high, not too fast. Passengers perpendicular
to the earth at all times. But it was flying, still, and after an hour lost in the dragon, Charlie’s bubble of calm would be reinforced for days.

Most people didn’t understand dragons, or know much about them at all. The dragon heard everything: insects buzzing two hundred yards below, the hearthfires crackling in the houses just below them, the thousand changing signals in the near and distant winds. So when John Bearheart, sitting behind Elaine on Charlie’s back, hissed into her ear, “You said we have a lot in common,” Charlie heard it as clearly as if it had been spoken in a quiet room.

“How?” said Elaine, turning her head to speak into his ear in turn.

“All I’ve heard of you is how heartbroken you are,” said Bearheart.

“How?” said Elaine again.

“And I have the feeling you are quite the actress.”

“How?” she said once more, almost laughing, now.

“Then,” said Bearheart, the words slow and weighted, “we have less in common than you think.”

Even the dragon knew this was the sort of thing that shouldn’t be discussed, and Charlie was relieved when they were back in Cologne, settling in the big park where Charlie had been going for his changes. He changed back, expecting to feel his usual, near-euphoric calm in the wake of the dragon and the sky. He hadn’t accounted for John Bearheart, or how Elaine would bring him into their company near-constantly in the following days.

Charlie waited for a reprimand to come, but it didn’t. Their usual eagle owl showed up each day with their social calendar and a cousin’s name, but if word had gotten back to Britain and Paris that they were socializing with John Bearheart (and Charlie had to believe it had; there weren’t secrets of any kind to be had, certainly not open secrets) then no one cared to forbid it. At least not yet.

Then, a week later, the eagle owl arrived in the morning at Charlie’s window. He shared quarter with Elaine officially, and Bearheart, less officially. They each had their own bedrooms and bathrooms in the big complex that was their lord’s seat in Germany, a repurposed government building in Cologne that had been reimagined into luxurious accommodations in an entire wing for transient bureaucrats like Charlie and Elaine. Their separate rooms were joined by a common sitting room, where Elaine and Bearheart were still enjoying breakfast. Charlie had just left them, looking for a shower.

Charlie parted the seal and unrolled the parchment. As it always did, it had an address and a name. But the address was the one he knew to belong to the seat, including these rooms where they were staying. And the name was John Bearheart.

Charlie’s protective buffer, that membrane, that bubble, rose up around him on instinct. It dulled the immediate emotional response that threatened, that fear so absolute it had a flavor. But it didn’t come fast enough to protect Charlie from that flash of images he always saw when he thought about their lord. It was the last time he had been at Weasley House, when his mother’s cries woke him late at night. He had tumbled down the stairs, nearly colliding with Bill. But at the sight of what was puddled there in the foyer, Bill had flown down the remaining steps to kneel at its side, while Charlie had seen stars and almost collapsed against the railing.

It was their father, much of his throat missing, holding what was left of it together with his hands. “Arthur, Arthur, Arthur,” his mother was crying. In these waking nightmares, she never stopped
until he slapped his own face or bit his tongue until it bled. “Arthur, Arthur, Arthur.”

Charlie had let Elaine bring him to this. Elaine, with her puzzling masks – all of them, he thought bitterly, very pretty – with her way of drawing him out without trying, with all her technicolor habits that injected a heartbeat back into his human body, after all these years of leaving it with the dragon where it belonged.

When the taste of blood was in his mouth and his mother’s voice left his ears, Charlie carefully rolled the scroll back, and went into the sitting room to show it to Elaine.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re still here, I'd love to hear from you.
Chapter Ten: Interspecific

“In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.”

Thurgood Marshall

November 4, 1991

After several weeks with no letters from Sirius, Harry thought his eyes might be playing tricks on him when he turned a corner in the corridors outside the Civics class room and saw his Lord Sirius Black leaning casually against the wall, legs crossed at the ankle, a portrait of casual elegance. He straightened at the sight of Harry, and his generally tense expression gave way to the brief, bright grin that Harry had missed.

“Thought it was time I popped in for a visit,” Sirius said by way of greeting. “I’ve been traveling a bit.”

“Traveling?” Harry frowned. He’d never known Sirius to travel. He’d only known him to spend long days embattled in the politics of his Muggle subjects and, based upon the rather distinct smell of hangover potions that clung to him at all times, drink heavily in the evenings. Alone, Harry suspected.

“Yes,” Sirius said vaguely, then reached out to grasp Harry’s shoulder fondly. “You’re getting taller. Hogwarts puts something in the food, I’ve always suspected. I can’t stay long, but I thought I’d speak with you, seeing as how I read your letter.”

Harry perked up. “Did you bring me some books?” He looked at Sirius’s pockets with interest, but saw no sign of shrunken books.

A shadow passed over Sirius’s eyes, and his lips quirked. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He looked around them, then steered Harry around a corner into a lesser-used hallway. “Harry, animagery is…well, did you know it was illegal, not so long ago, to study it without permission, and expert guidance?”
Harry frowned. “I’m sure it isn’t illegal,” the word sounded awkward on his tongue. A reference to a past time, one Harry had never known, where there were laws and codes other than those unwritten and dispersed by their lord.

Sirius gave him a narrow look, and seemed to realize Harry was being facetious, because he frowned and sighed. “What I mean is, it’s dangerous, and not to be undertaken lightly.”

Sometimes Harry thought about how different it would have been had he spent more of his formative years with Sirius than with the Malfoys. Usually, he thought he would have had a less sheltered, structured, and regulated upbringing, which had its own pros and cons, certainly, and an undeniable appeal. But in this moment, he knew that Sirius was urging caution where Lucius would have urged boldness. It was disorientating, but after Harry recalibrated, he narrowed his eyes at Sirius.

“I was told you are an Animagus.”

Sirius looked at Harry cautiously. “Yes,” he allowed, shortly.

“A real natural,” Harry added, targeting Sirius’s not insignificant ego, but instead of smiling Sirius’s mouth just tightened into a thinner line.

“I don’t know about that. Perhaps.” He shrugged one shoulder uneasily.

Harry pressed on. “Presumably you learned when you were in school.”

“Yes, but…”

“When it was ‘illegal,’” Harry reminded him. This time Sirius didn’t reply, but he was glaring a little. Harry’s confidence wilted in the face of an adult’s obvious displeasure, but he knew he could push Sirius further than anyone else, so he went on. “Now, it’s allowed. It’s encouraged. So what would possibly be the difference?”

“I’d like to think,” Sirius said calmly, “that I can use the power of perspective to learn from my own mistakes, and help you avoid them.”

Harry studied him. “So, it was a mistake, then?”

Again, something complicated happened in Sirius’s expression, and his wide grey eyes hardened to solid silver for a moment before it passed.

“No,” he said quietly. “But there were extenuating circumstances.”

Harry’s brows raised. “As there are for me,” he said pointedly.

Sirius looked at the wall past Harry’s head and sighed. “I’ll think about it,” he said. “That’s all I can promise for now.” His wand vibrated in his pocket, a reminder charm that Harry had seen Narcissa use before, and Sirius touched it to stop it, then smiled at Harry ruefully. “Best get going. Behave yourself,” he added, a common instruction, but with an underlying seriousness that Harry hadn’t heard him use before.

Harry hesitated half a beat, then nodded, and watched Sirius turn to go, heading toward the main staircase that led so many places, Harry couldn’t be sure where Sirius was going. Harry didn’t believe for a moment that seeing Harry for five minutes in a hallway was the primary purpose of his visit. Traveling, he’d said.
Better not to dwell on it. Harry noticed most of the students had cleared from the hallway and muttered under his breath when he realized his odds of making it to Herbology on time were slim to none. It was a mad rush to get to Herbology from Transfiguration even with Lavender herding him along from the moment Transfiguration let out. She was gone this week for some family member’s eighth birthday in Indonesia, and Harry had barely made it on time to Herbology without her.

Harry also looked forward to Herbology because it was a shared class with Slytherin, and he always partnered with Draco. Most of the children of the forty-one families didn’t bother with the class once it became an elective, and the first year curriculum largely consisted of cultivating a basic edible garden that could put food on the table. Not an essential skill for those who would not, in their lifetimes, be expected to so much as poach their own bluestem milkweed eggs, let alone worry about where they were coming from. Draco, however, was eager to impress his father by improving his Muggle subjects’ diet. Harry thought it was a wise prioritization on Draco’s part. They weren’t starving, but they were hollow enough in their cheeks and rangy in their limbs to make them hard to look at. Harry had been relieved when Lucius had allowed them to temporarily assimilate back into their old villages until the summer holidays when Draco would be available to resume his grand experiment.

“A wizard need never go hungry,” Professor Sprout was saying, when Harry burst through the doors. He’d run across the lawn, and now he was a bit breathless, his cheeks flushing from both embarrassment and the exercise when Professor Sprout went quiet and the majority of the students twisted in their seats to see him come in.

Harry mumbled an apology to the professor and started toward his typical seat next to Draco near the front of the room, then came up short when he realized that another Slytherin, one he didn’t recognize, was already sitting there. He froze, doubly flustered, until he heard a soft voice just to his right.

“This seat’s not taken, Harry.”

Harry looked over to find Theo Nott gesturing toward the empty bench beside him. There was no way to so much as hesitate without drawing even more attention to himself, so Harry immediately sat. He flashed Theo a quick smile of thanks and apology, and Theo inclined his head in return, not smiling but with a friendly, curious look in his eye.

“I’ve heard Lord Black was visiting the castle today,” Theo said quietly while looking at Professor Sprout. Harry did the same, though he first glanced quickly at Theo in surprise.

“I’ve heard Lord Black was visiting the castle today,” Theo said quietly while looking at Professor Sprout. Harry did the same, though he first glanced quickly at Theo in surprise.

“Word travels fast,” he said, mood soured further by the reminder that nothing was private anywhere, and certainly not here.

“Remember,” Professor Sprout went on, “that if you imbue the runes in your garden perimeter with six drops of multigenerational magical blood from a direct ancestor and at least one descendant, they’ll proliferate at a higher rate equal to the square root of the number of days since the full moon, to the third exponent.”

Harry halfheartedly made a note. Theo’s quill was writing without Theo’s active involvement, though he kept his hand curled near it on the parchment so that it would be hard for Professor Sprout to tell from her vantage point.

“Some say that Squib tears are also a good treatment, though there’s some disagreement about that. Extra credit to anyone who wants to review Chapter 4,322 and write six inches on the theory.”
Harry wrote down that statement in more detail. He could use a bit of extra credit. This was not one of the yew wand’s favorite classes. Or at least, the first year curriculum didn’t stir any enthusiasm in it. Harry was learning, slowly and mostly in Charms, that though most rudimentary work vexed the wand, if Harry applied his will with enough concentration, it would yield to him. He was gaining confidence in his role as the wand’s master, instead of holding it out in his mind as a thing to be awed and obeyed. It was a thing, he often had to remind himself. It was a tool.

When Professor Sprout had finished her lecture, she distributed a pile of ordinary rocks for them to convert to garden runes using their own blood. In the back of the room, the common born students were apparently squeamish about spilling their own blood, because Professor Sprout wound up standing in the center of the room to deliver a second lecture just to them, in a practiced voice, about the basic principles of blood magic. She also promised to cast an Episkey herself on anyone who wasn’t confident in their own.

At the manor, Harry had rarely let his own blood, though Narcissa and Lucius did it for him often enough. He struggled with the angle for a moment before he felt a cool, dry hand reach out and take his wrist in a loose hold. Harry blinked up at Theo and found the other boy bent over his hand, touching his wand very delicately to the pad of Harry’s thumb. He didn’t even have to encant before Harry felt a faint prick, and a tiny drop of blood coalesced on his skin. Theo turned Harry’s hand over so that gravity could do its nonmagical part, and the drop of blood fell onto the rock, which darkened for a moment before absorbing the magic and evaporating the remainder with a tiny puff of dense steam.

Harry blinked when Theo let go of him, then held his finger in front of his nose curiously. There was no lingering pain, and clearly no need for an Episkey, though the yew wand was more than capable. He smiled uncertainly at Theo.

“I haven’t seen that spell,” Harry murmured, watching Theo turn his wand on his own thumb without fanfare.

“It was the first one I learned,” Theo said, matter-of-factly. “Everything in my father’s castle was keyed to blood. Ron and I went around like a couple of pincushions before we turned eight. Muggle plasters all over us.” He looked up with a quick, wry smile after he had activated his own rune. “Of course, while we were getting it right there was a time or two one of us nearly bled out on the rug.”

Harry couldn’t quite conceal his alarm. “You just…got your wands, and…?”


Not sure how serious he was being, Harry made a mental note to feel Ron out on the topic later. After several minutes of working on their runes in silence, Harry sensed Theo was looking at him, and when Harry at last caved and turned to look, he indeed caught Theo’s eye. The other boy smiled, almost nervously. Harry continued to feel as though he couldn’t figure Theo out; he was like objects at a distance when Harry’s vision charms were wearing off. He could only guess at what he was seeing, and every time it moved, it looked like something else.

“I have a few good texts on organism conjuring, if you would like to have a look.” Misinterpreting Harry’s surprise, Theo hastened to add, “Not that you don’t have access to your own, but mine are here with me, at school.”

“Um,” Harry said, drawing a blank. “Sure, thank you. That’s very…nice. Considering it’s a competition.”
Theo’s face went perfectly blank, the way Harry had always wished his could do. After a few moments, Theo adjusted to a polite smile. “You’re quite welcome,” he said. “I’ll bring them to you in the shared common room this evening.”

The phoenix tended to shred all his spare parchment and spread it about the room if Harry was gone for more than four hours, so he went by his room periodically during the day to check in. After Herbology, Harry had a free period, so he headed for Gryffindor tower, trying not to think too hard about Theo Nott. Why couldn’t he just let himself believe that Theo was simply nice?

Harry had yet to interact much with the phoenix at all, really, except to spend the better part of an hour watching it roost on its perch in his room in the evenings. The poor creature looked almost as ridiculous as it had when it was totally bare-skinned, as it had grown an all-over fuzz which would have been exactly what Harry associated with baby chickens, except that it was bright red and uncomfortably warm to the touch. The elves had taken pity on Harry and brought the phoenix an elevated nesting box into which the remains of Harry’s shredded bedding had been transferred, so at least he was no longer trying to share his bed with the bird.

Harry didn’t know very much about familiars. It had never occurred to him to want one, and he privately doubted Professor Vector’s conclusions about the phoenix meriting the title. Yes, it preferred Harry’s company, obviously, and had sought him out. It was a magical creature. But it hadn’t enhanced his power or made itself available for any useful tasks. He was honestly unsure how it was even as useful as an owl, and for some reason he was reluctant to draw attention to the phoenix from his family, so he hadn’t mentioned it yet in his letters. From the bit of extracurricular research he’d found time for, the most common familiars were unicorns and cats, leaving him torn between coveting the unicorns of wizards past, and just feeling grateful he had a familiar with more potential utility than a cat.

At the common room entrance there waited a tall, black-cloaked figure who looked as unlike Sirius as someone could while still having pale skin and black hair. Harry nodded politely and began to walk past the man, but was stopped by a quick, sure grip on his forearm.

“Potter, I assume?”

The cool tone told Harry that this person already knew who he was, but Harry, mindful of the hand on his wand arm while the yew wand emitted a furious energy from its holster, nodded cautiously and made no sudden moves.

Seeming to realize that he was holding Harry’s arm, the man released it abruptly and took a half step back. He was lean, his skin colorless and clear, his nose long and a bit hooked. Something clicked in Harry’s brain.

“Are you…” he cleared his throat, recalling his manners. “Hello. I am Harry. Are you Master Snape, by any chance?”

Surprise registered briefly in the man’s black eyes before his expression shuttered again. “I am the only living man of that name, yes,” he said evenly. “May I ask how you knew?”

Harry felt indignation flare briefly in his chest. He hated it when adults acted like he should be held to some separate standard because he was still what they called a “child.” He personally felt if he was old enough to face execution, which his lord’s traditions assured him he was, he was old enough to be afforded the same social courtesies that adults expected in return.

“My mother has a photograph of you,” Harry said, watching the man carefully. “May I ask how you knew who I was, then?”
The man had gone preternaturally still, but after a moment he eased, nodding. “That would be
commensurate, I suppose. I was told you reside in Gryffindor tower, and you have a particular
resemblance to your…parents. Who I once knew, when they were your age.”

Harry nodded uncertainly. “And what do you…er, why were you, um, looking for me?”

“Our lord sent me,” said the man flatly, but showed emotion (to wit: amusement) for the first time
in their short encounter when Harry went flush with surprise. It was a slight quivering at the corner
of his mouth, and it reminded Harry, absurdly, of his mother. “It has come to his attention that you
have acquired a familiar. The phenomenon is a rare one, and therefore worthy of a closer
examination.”

Harry noticed that although Master Snape was no longer holding his arm, Harry’s wand continued
to pulse in a way he sensed was intended as a warning.

“Very well,” said Harry, and Master Snape followed him through the common room, which he
looked over with a snort, then into Harry’s room, where the phoenix sat on its perch, trilling to
itself. At the sound of the door, it stopped, tittered in delight at Harry, then went abruptly silent and
cocked its head at Master Snape.

Harry had spent rather a lot of time thinking of the phoenix as a glorified chicken, but something
about the quality of the silence in his room as the bird and Master Snape studied one another
reminded Harry that phoenixes were immortal. And that no one had ever seen a phoenix lay an
egg, or hatch; and therefore the common thought was that the phoenixes alive today were the first
and last generation of their kind, born in some unwritten age of prehistory.

It was the last time Harry would think of the phoenix as a chicken, even though the sense of the
bird’s energy, age, and wisdom began to fade almost at once when it broke eye contact with Master
Snape, stepped itself around on its perch to face the window instead of the door, and calmly
defecated on the rug.

“Um,” Harry said uncomfortably. “Usually it goes out on the window ledge.”

“I see,” said Master Snape. His gaze had sharpened, which was unsettling for Harry, who had
already found Master Snape’s stare in the hallway uncomfortably close. Now he felt like Master
Snape might be able to see the blood in his veins and the thoughts in his head. Harry strove to make
them all quite blank.

“Have you named your familiar, Potter?”

Harry frowned and shook his head. *Legilimency*, he thought. The Malfoys were one of the families
that thought it to be crass, and Sirius hadn’t the knack for it. But this was it, Harry thought, unable
to break eye contact with Master Snape and feeling, in a profound way, his own transparency. Then
the yew wand was suddenly in his hand, and Harry was stumbling backward and blinking.

Harry was confused and more than a little afraid. He knew that adults expected obedience, and
here was someone purportedly sent by their lord, and Harry, unwittingly or not, was not
cooperating. He looked at his wand, which was still lively but more contented now that he held it
and had apparently cast a Legilimens from his mind. Then Harry looked up at Master Snape.

Master Snape’s eyes were so narrow they were only slits, the bright blackness of the irises like
shards of glass, his whole face something hard and carved. It was one of the more fearsome sights
Harry could recall.
“I see,” said Master Snape. His gaze moved from Harry’s face to the yew wand. “I see.”

Later, when Master Snape had gone and Harry had struggled to catch a word of his Civics lecture, handling his wand constantly, Harry returned alone to his room and regarded the phoenix. It looked back at him in its expressionless way, but now Harry recognized that its blank stare was not the result of animal dumbness, but simply because its body was that of a bird. Its eyes stared in one way, its beak sat unmoving in the center of its head. He walked forward and rested his hand cautiously on its left wing, considering the heat of those soft new feathers. The bird preened Harry’s wrist affectionately.

“You should have a name,” he said to the phoenix. It cocked its head at him and trilled rapidly, then bounded off its perch toward the window, which Harry opened so it could walk out carefully onto the ledge and do its business in a more polite way than it had demonstrated in Master Snape’s presence.

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

The phoenix walked back inside and walked toward its nest. Harry closed the window. “Girl?” he asked, “or boy?”

As soon as he said “boy,” the bird looked over its shoulder and trilled.

“A boy, then,” Harry said. “And I expect you have a name already, or at least dozens you’ve been called.”

This query did not merit a response, apparently. The phoenix had settled into a sleeping position, as was his way, in which he resembled a ball of red fluff. Harry, inexplicably tired himself, forced himself to go to the common room instead of his own bed. He had to get the books from Theo.

As soon as he walked into the common room, Harry spotted Draco, speaking to the Slytherin who had appropriated Harry’s seat in Herbology. Now that he wasn’t flustered by being late to class, or distracted by the odd company of Theo Nott, it occurred to Harry that his feelings were hurt. The boy was very appealing looking, with dark skin and light brown eyes and an easy laugh that carried across the room and made Harry want to grind his teeth. Especially when Draco threw his head back and laughed along with him.

“Harry,” said that soft, distinct voice that Harry now knew, even before he turned, belonged to Theo Nott. It was a little strange to find Theo materializing like a Weasley twin at his elbow all the time, but he tried to chalk it up to coincidence in combination with Harry’s tendency toward obliviousness, and set it aside for now.

“I wasn’t sure whether you’d come out before curfew, but I brought them in case,” Theo said, handing over a stack of slim volumes. Their bindings rippled in the way of a text magicked to contain a thousand pages of content on the physical scale of one. Harry wasn’t a bookworm by any means, but even he could appreciate how rare and valuable the works must be to justify such intricate spellwork. He accepted them with a nod toward Theo, running his fingertips over the cover of the book on the top of the stack. Interplanary Summoning was its title.

“I know I said so earlier, but thanks,” Harry said earnestly. “I am trying to get a few on Animagery, and if I do, I’ll pass them along.” It wasn’t guaranteed reciprocity, but… “And if I can’t, I’ll think of something else,” he added.

Theo’s smile was smooth and calm. “I’m not concerned about that, Harry.”
“What was that, Nott?” Draco’s voice was sharp and close to Harry’s left ear. A moment later, he felt Draco’s arm link through his, a gesture that was familiar but which Harry hadn’t experienced since they left the Manor – at least, not from Draco. It happened to be one of Lavender’s favorites also, and not for the first time this week, Harry caught himself missing her.

“I was just telling Harry,” Theo said evenly, “that he needn’t worry himself over quid pro quo, when all I’ve done is loan him a couple of books.”

Harry had the stack of books tucked against his side, so Draco probably couldn’t tell they were anything special, but his eyes narrowed, still. “I see. Harry, is it? And here I thought when you sat next to each other today, it was the first time you’ve exchanged more than a couple of words.”

“It was,” Theo said, still unruffled.

“Just fast friends,” Draco went on, stiffly, his ears turning red. Harry looked back and forth between them with a raised brow.

“Calm down, Draco,” he murmured. Then, because he couldn’t help himself: “I did need a place to sit, thanks to you.”

Draco’s head turned toward Harry so fast his hair flew into his face and he spent a startled moment brushing it back behind his ears, which were redder still. “Harry,” he said at last, darting a glance at Theo. “Let’s speak in private. See you later, Nott,” he shot toward Theo with a sneer. Theo’s responding smile was placid, turning slightly brighter when he looked from Draco to Harry.

“Good evening, then, Harry.”

Draco jerked Harry after him across the room, muttering inaudibly all the while, and when they were apart from the various clusters of other people there, he stopped and brought his face close to Harry’s.

“What are you thinking, exchanging books with Nott? Or should I say, Theo?”

Harry studied Draco in sincere confusion. “I think it’s harmless, Draco. And it was his idea. You do know that…”

“He’s a Nott,” Draco insisted, cutting him off. “Weasley is one thing. They’re practically Lord Black’s subjects, and making a concerted effort with our lord, but Nott…”

“I haven’t heard one thing or another about Theo,” Harry said, his turn cutting Draco off. “It’s all about his dad, and it all happened practically before Theo was born.” He couldn’t believe he had to be this heavy-handed with the parallels between Theo Nott and Harry Potter, but what left him completely incredulous was that even that allusion went over Draco’s head.

“He’s still a Nott,” Draco hissed. Harry stared at him. There was nothing subtle left to say, so he said the least subtle thing he could think of.

“And I’m a Potter, Draco. Maybe you should be careful about associating with me.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. He looked like he’d been slapped. Harry felt guilty for a moment, then shoved the feeling aside. He clutched the books Theo had brought him and wished he was holding his wand instead. It always made him feel…well, it always made him feel more, in every way. And lately conversations with Draco made him feel less.

“I think I had better turn in,” Harry said quietly. “Good night, Draco.”
Back in his room, Harry leaned heavily against his desk, which was still much too small, but his wand hadn’t condescended to cast the *Engorgio* Harry had tried to practice from a borrowed third year Transfiguration text.

The desk having been a poor candidate for studying, Harry had formed a habit of reading on his bed. He lay there now and opened Theo’s books, his earlier tiredness forgotten, and read with greater studiousness than he’d felt before. His entire life, dating back to the days of his earliest awareness of his name, Harry had known he had something to prove to most of the world. But he had, stupidly, never realized that Draco was on that list.

It was easier without him, Harry insisted to himself. He remembered the day he received his wand, staring up at his lord, how he had memorized his lord’s words from that day the instant they were spoken: *His magic is obviously considerable. I maintain my hope that your family might gain my favor if young Harry meets his considerable potential.*

At around two o’clock in the morning, immersed in theory and six fascinating case studies and perhaps more than a little affected by the supplemental charms that made some of the illustrations spring to three-dimensional life on the page, Harry stroked his wand and his lips moved over one of the simpler incantations he’d read. The wand stirred, and Harry paused and reread, this time aloud.

“*Anima, animal, minuo.*”

Nothing happened. Then the wand sparked, Harry yelped, and a tiny wound that resembled nothing so much as a paper cut opened on his wrist. The moment the blood welled there, the phoenix leapt awake with a cry as loud as an eagle’s, and all hell broke loose.

The window banged open, and a wind swept in, carrying a black fog and howling like a banshee, dousing the room in darkness and curling through Harry’s hair like a cold, insistent hand. He closed his eyes on instinct and shielded his face, clutching his ears as the pitch of the noise grew higher and higher, then pain-inducing.

Then the noise and the wind and the cold disappeared, and Harry, after a moment of shock, slowly lowered his hands and opened his eyes.

The window stood open, still, but the room was otherwise unchanged, except that Magnificent stood near Harry’s desk, wings spread, looking as bewildered as Harry felt. She snaked her head left, then right, then abruptly unhinged her jaw, coiled her tongue at the back of her throat and shot a burst of fire at the desk, promptly incinerating it.

Her unease thus vented, she folded her wings and sat back on her haunches to look at Harry, who remained frozen in the middle of the room, his wand somehow still in his hand and all but purring in contentment.

“What…” Harry managed, wondering how to go about not setting off the young dragon the size of a pony who had just murdered a desk without apparent forethought. She was a bit larger than when Harry had last seen her, and while he had always enjoyed spending time with her when Draco decided to share her, in the past he had always been coated in so much flame-retardant magic it made him sneeze.

“What…” Harry managed, wondering how to go about not setting off the young dragon the size of a pony who had just murdered a desk without apparent forethought. She was a bit larger than when Harry had last seen her, and while he had always enjoyed spending time with her when Draco decided to share her, in the past he had always been coated in so much flame-retardant magic it made him sneeze.

“Hello, girl,” he said, tentatively, trying to relax in the way he had noticed she liked, but it was difficult when he felt like she held his life in her young, unpredictable claws. For a moment, Harry tried very hard not to hold his breath, and Magnificent continued to look at him, then the room, then him, as though making up her mind about something.
Then she flopped onto her side, her tail tapping the floor in a familiar gesture. Harry, almost boneless with relief, walked forward and patted the silky, fine scales on her tummy, a stark contrast to the armor-like hide on the rest of her, and she started the faint, rhythmic hissing that was her expression of contentment, the volume rocketing up when he curved his fingers and gently scratched instead.

“Draco is really going to kill me,” Harry told her. But with the adrenaline fading, he found a smile begin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He gazed down at his wand, twirling it in his fingers the way he had taken to doing of late. Harry was quick with his hands; he’d learned to juggle before he could speak. The disintegration of organized Quidditch was one of the great disappointments in his life. But sometimes he felt like the energy for this twirling, this dance between his hand and the wand, came from the wand; a memory, maybe, of an old master. Maybe, Harry mused, the same master who had apparently grown quite adept at organism conjuring.

Something was nagging at Harry, though. Still petting Magnificent, he summoned the book, which he had, thankfully, been reading on the bed instead of his late desk. He found a page he remembered reading earlier in the night, scanned for the paragraph he was looking for, and went still when he found it.

*The quality of a conjuring is the ability to bring to this plane a being or object of the conjurer’s design. The universe being limitless, all things which can be imagined must exist, and a true conjuration shall be that which does not exist in the conjurer’s plane, and therefore appears with at least one of the three fundamental qualities of conjuration—translucence, radiance, or monochromism.*

Harry’s heart sank and his hand went still on Magnificent’s scales, until she squirmed impatiently against his hand and, recalling himself, he restarted.

“I’ve summoned you,” he told her. Her eyes, which had been half-closed in pleasure, opened wide to regard him as though she understood.

Exactly as though she understood, considering she then spoke to him. “I did not enjoy it.”

Harry vaulted to his feet and halfway across the room, the hair on his arms standing on end. Magnificent rolled onto all fours and stood, eyeing him curiously, her tail lashing like an irritated cat’s.

“You…what…”

“Calm down, Harry,” she said, and Harry, more prepared this time, noticed despite his thundering heart and the turmoil of his head that her mouth did not curve and move, and she didn’t make an ordinary sound. The noise, which she emitted through the sides of her mouth just as she might growl or purr or hiss, the three types of vocalization he recalled her making before, was not words. Yet, somewhere in the space between her throat and his brain, that’s what they became.

“Scratch,” she instructed, walking over then dropping to the floor with a loud thud to present her belly to him again. Harry, recalling the desk, obeyed, but he was so aggrieved it was disrupting his vision charm, and the resulting, intermittent blurriness of the room was going to make him sick.

“How can I hear you? Or rather, how can I understand you?”

“Don’t know.” She opened her eye again, gave him a pointed look, and closed it again. “Don’t care.”
Harry made a strangled sound, but continued to scratch her while searching his memory for an answer. “Can anyone else?”

This time she snorted impatiently, and a curl of steam shot from between her teeth and nearly scalded Harry’s forearm.

“Hey, watch it!”

“Where is Draco? He scratches better,” she complained. “I smell him on you. Must be close.”

Since none of her claims could be denied, Harry was faced with the inevitability of Draco finding out that Harry had unwittingly summoned his most prized possession from the safety and security of the Manor and was keeping her in his dorm. He didn’t like what his imagination did with the thought of sharing this information with the closest thing he had to a brother, especially given how their last interaction had just gone.

“There has to be a way to send you back,” he muttered, scratching more determinedly in an effort to keep her content and hopefully not breathing fire in the immediate future.

The phoenix trilled helpfully from the corner, and Magnificent lifted her head again, interested.

“Prey?”

Harry thought that being eaten by a dragon might be one of the few ways one could kill a phoenix, and hurried to correct her. “No. No, Magnificent. Fawkes is not food.” A moment later, he looked at the bird, confused. Why had he called him “Fawkes”? It wasn’t like his subconscious had simply proffered it as a good fit, since he was sure he’d never heard the word “Fawkes” before, let alone as a name.

“Maybe this is just an odd dream.”

“No,” said Magnificent, still watching the phoenix. Then she looked at Harry and blinked. “Hungry.”

Harry scratched harder, desperation increasing, and fortunately this served to distract Magnificent for the present moment as she relaxed happily into his ministrations. Harry turned hurriedly back to the page in the book where he’d found the incantation, and then waited for his vision to sort itself out for several seconds. When it did, he read on.

*The conjurer may dispel the conjuration by disrupting the strain of energy generated by the spell which tethers the conjuration to this plane.*

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, miserable. He had no desire to untether Magnificent from this plane, or whatever. Obviously she wasn’t a conjuration, so the text that had given him the conjuring spell – which he had obviously botched – wasn’t going to help him send her home.

There wasn’t really anything to be done, except to consult with Draco. He would know the best way to get her home – hopefully in the way least likely to conclude with Harry being murdered by Lucius for incanting a random spell from a random book without so much as a house elf about to contain any resulting chaos.

“Will you stay here while I go get Draco?” Harry looked nervously at the phoenix, deciding he would have to take the bird with him, and just hope the phoenix would willingly stay under his cloak.
“Maybe,” said Magnificent, and Harry reflected on how he had always thought her to be a rather shy and sweet creature, before he was afforded this window into her psyche. Left with no other option, he scooped up Fawkes and cradled him in one arm, which he then tucked into his cloak, holding it awkwardly closed with his other hand.

He thought he could not look more suspicious if he tried, but it still seemed stealthier than openly displaying the phoenix, which would probably be mistaken for a bright red, overgrown baby chicken, but still.

Draco wasn’t in the shared common room, and the phoenix, which had been sleepily preening Harry’s wrist, had begun to do so more aggressively, in a manner which more closely resembled a peck. Grimacing, Harry smiled briefly at the people he accidentally made eye contact with, putting his head down and hurrying back toward Gryffindor. Then he hesitated when he saw Theo Nott and Ron Weasley sitting close to one another on a sofa, laughing quietly and certainly paying no notice to Harry.

Harry never had a chance to decide whether to approach them for help, though, because someone flung open the shared common room door – one of the older Gryffindor girls; a subject of the Fawley cousins, the part of Harry’s brain dedicated to the forty-one families supplied, unhelpfully.

“There’s a dragon in the castle!” she cried.

The phoenix pecked hard enough to make Harry’s eyes water.

Chapter End Notes

Please forgive Tom's absence in this chapter. It won't last long. :)
Chapter Summary

In which Hermione thinks she’s come to understand everything, and then must guess again.

Chapter Notes

Wolf_of_Lilacs worked beta magic on this chapter and therefore has my thanks.

Warnings here for sexual harassment and, arguably, sexual assault. Nothing graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eleven: Ratiocinative

“The mark of an educated mind is the ability to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

Aristotle

August 31, 1991

Black Palace, London

Hermione tipped the book closer to the fire so the flames there better illuminated the page. Lord Black was gone, and he had taken half the elf population with him. Unfortunately, it was the half that tolerated Hermione, leaving in charge Kreacher, a particularly ancient specimen and, curiously, a staunch Blood Purist. His approach to Hermione's care was to vanish into whatever dwelling place belonged to the elves, and to leave the palace dark, cold—and possibly shrinking? Hermione couldn’t be sure—and with bare kitchen cupboards. Fortunately Hermione had made herself familiar with enough of the library that she knew where to look for spells to combat hunger, and it gave her motivation to practice with her wand, if nothing else.

The floo chimed, and Peter walked in without waiting, his measured smile disappearing into a blank stare when he saw the state of the library.

After a moment he burst out laughing. Hermione slowly closed her book and watched him, unwilling to join in. Even if the spells kept her from feeling it, she suspected she was slightly starving.

Peter seemed to note her solemnity, and sobered. “I’ll be back in a mo,” he said, and disappeared into the floo. Hermione tried not to hope too desperately, but nonetheless felt, distantly, her stomach growling.

Sure enough, when he reappeared, it was with half a loaf of bread and two jars of butter and jam.
He put them on the coffee table and Hermione descended upon them with a minimum of grace. For the next several minutes Peter left her alone to eat, and Hermione did so with relish, noting with the fragment of attention she could spare that Peter was brightening the lamps, dusting and cleaning the tables and banishing spiders and mice with a series of quietly spoken spells. In addition to losing square footage, the library had rapidly taken on the look of abandonment in Lord Black’s absence. Including what Hermione found to be an excess of cobwebs, heavily clotted with dust, in the corners of the bookshelves and a layer of grime that darkened the wallpaper three shades.

“Never was much for making someone welcome, our Kreacher,” Peter said cheerfully, when he was done. “I don’t suppose the rest of the place is any better?”

Hermione licked a spot of butter from her thumb and shook her head, still mute with chewing, as she constructed a third sandwich.

“Hogwarts tomorrow,” Peter said. “Our Lord Black asked me to take you to the station. Have you talked to him about the school?”

Hermione shook her head again, swallowing, and then immediately took another large bite.

Peter gazed at the fire, then absentely lifted his wand to buoy its foundation, which Hermione had assembled inexpertly without magic. She watched with interest; the elves always laid the fires with their seemingly fathomless, instant magic. Hermione had not learned how to build a fire well by nonmagical means. Years ago, her mother had shown her, but Hermione had not caught on quickly enough.

“It will be hard for you there,” Peter said, as casually as he said everything. He put one hand on his hip and looked at the fire, his thumb absentely stroking his wand as though it was a pet. “The school is intended to let students compete freely. A self-made Muggleborn or common wizard can rise in the Hogwarts hierarchy by proving their magical and intellectual might.”

He looked at Hermione then. “Do you know the story of the white wolf?”

Hermione shook her head.

“In the land of brown wolves there was one born white. It had strange eyes as well as its strange white coat, and the other wolves disdained it. The white wolf grew up knowing its place, until the brown wolves stopped growing, and the white wolf grew still. It grew and grew, until it was twice the size of the oldest and strongest of the brown wolves. Chagrined by how ill-treated it had always been, the white wolf challenged the alpha and won its title, and thereby ruled over the brown wolves. Once a week for twenty weeks, a strong brown wolf challenged the white wolf, and lost. But the brown wolves could not be content with their leader; it was different, and had been set apart, and its strength frightened them. So one day twenty brown wolves challenged the white wolf, and though it fought valiantly, the white wolf fell. It was badly injured, but plotted its revenge. Yet when it was only half healed, the group of wolves returned and fought it again. This time its defeat was swifter still. Again and again the white wolf fought to heal but could not, not before the brown wolves returned. And it lived this way until it died an old white wolf, laced with scars, without a moment’s peace.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide. “That is a horrible story,” she said.

Peter inspected his fingernails.

“You made it up, just now, didn’t you?”
He shrugged. She thought he was smiling, but his face was turned away in a manner that made it impossible to tell.

“You’re telling me not to stand out,” she muttered, folding the last bite of her sandwich in half and shoving it in her mouth. Peter didn’t answer, and after she chewed and swallowed, Hermione sighed. “I’m not an idiot,” she said. “Even if I could stand out, I wouldn’t try.”

“I’ll fetch you in the morning,” Peter said, striding toward the floo. Without breaking stride he added, over his shoulder, “And I’ll bring breakfast.”

October, 1991

Hermione thought, at times, that she had forgotten the sound of her own voice. She went days sometimes without speaking. If she was alone in the showers, sometimes she spoke just to hear the unfamiliar pitch, a bit low and hoarse from neglect, echoing eerily off the wet tile. She did not speak in the dormitories and she did not speak in the Great Hall. She spoke when spoken to, but only if the other person’s speaking required a spoken response, which they rarely did. It was a game for her, sometimes, to count the hours since the last time she had said anything. It had been ninety-one hours that afternoon that she collided with Lavender Brown in the dungeon corridor leaving potions.

Lavender was alone, which was uncharacteristic. If Hermione was solitary and never spoke, then Lavender existed at the other end of the companionship and communication spectrum, with an excess of each. Hermione gave her a guarded look and murmured an apology, but before she could dart away, Lavender stepped in front of her and put her head to one side, as though regarding something puzzling.

“Something could be done about your hair,” Lavender said. “Come with me.”

If speaking was foreign, touch was almost too much. In the girls’ bathroom (the one with the ghost, which as a result hardly anyone used) Lavender brushed Hermione’s riotous curls back from her forehead with her thumbs, studying her, still, with that quizzical look. Hermione felt heat and pins and needles wherever Lavender’s fingers touched her skin. Then Lavender shook a bit of clear liquid from a vial, rubbed it into her hands, then smoothed it into Hermione’s hair one heavy lock at a time, leaving Hermione’s scalp alive with sensation that seemed to travel to every party of her body. Hermione held herself very still, and after a few moments found it was all much easier to bear if she closed her eyes.

“There you are,” Lavender said after a while, and nudged Hermione in front of the mirror. Sure enough, Hermione opened her eyes to find her face reflected there, pale and stiff with shock, framed by perfectly straight, silky tresses.

“My mother always says we have two toolboxes, and the one of subtler powers is often the more effective.” Lavender set the vial on the edge of the sink.

She left Hermione alone again after that for a few weeks. Then, late one night just before Halloween when Hermione slipped out of the dorm to use the toilet, Lavender came in a few minutes after her. Hermione was at the sink, her hands still wet. Lavender appeared behind her with her face lit by the glow of her wand, her hair a golden halo. Hermione felt a lump in her throat.

“I know they’re stealing all your ink,” she said quietly, and pressed a key into Hermione’s lax, damp hand. She squeezed Hermione’s fingers briefly then let go. “That’s for my supply trunk, the little one I keep under my bed. You can borrow from it at any time.”
On Halloween, in Potions, Hermione realized five minutes into the lecture that she no longer knew how many hours it had been since she spoke. She searched her mind, a bit frantically, for the comfort of that knowledge, but it was missing. There was only one solution. She had to say a word to herself – any word would have done – but in the heat of the moment all she could think of was enough. She had intended to whisper, but it came out choked and loud. “Enough!”

“Yes, Miss Granger?” snapped Professor Carrow. “Have you broken your vow of silence, at last?”

There were a few laughs in the room. Hermione looked up and around. She blinked. Professor Carrow’s face was in the midst of a slow transformation as she began to grin, eyes flashing. The shark scented blood in the water, Hermione thought faintly. In its cauldron, Hermione’s potion was perfect. She had not been paying enough attention to subtly set her brewing askew in a way that could appear to be an honest mistake.

“Oh perhaps it’s a psychological break,” Professor Carrow crooned, looming closer. “Has yet another delicate brewing art escaped your heavy hand, or…”

She stopped speaking, staring at the contents of Hermione’s cauldron, which shimmered a perfect, glittering sky blue. Then her gaze rose slowly and fixed on Hermione’s, bright with the deep flame of knowledge. Hermione swallowed.

“I was speaking to myself,” Hermione said. Her voice was still rough, and still rang in her ears with strangeness, but she had watched long enough to know what to say and what to keep. She kept the rest. Even when Professor Carrow let the silence stretch like a lure, the way Hermione had seen her do with other students, until the misery of waiting forced words from them that she could turn back to hang them with, Hermione kept silent still.

At last Professor Carrow sighed, glancing at the cauldron again with something like resignation. “Even the broken clock is correct twice a day, as they say,” she muttered.

By the end of Potions, Hermione had not spoken for exactly one hour. She held the number close, comforted for a moment, but then made herself forget it in the next. She felt no panic. She had watched and waited long enough. The watchfulness would not end, but the waiting must.

November, 1991

Hermione slept from ten o’clock until midnight and then, beneath curtains spelled dense and imperturbable, lit a lamp and studied until four. If she then slept another three hours, she remained reasonably sharp all day.

She had worked it out carefully. It was a balance between maximizing the time she could spend in front of her books, and ensuring she had sleep sufficient to allow her to learn. She did better with more sleep, but not enough to justify the lost time.

She had browsed the Black library so thoroughly she could almost picture the shelves bearing the books that would best supplement her education, but she would not have access until the holidays. So her current objective was to internalize as much of the Hogwarts curriculum as possible. It was easy enough, beginning with what remained of the first year, since she was expected and allowed those books. Odds and ends of the other years could be found in the library, but not all.

Fortunately—in hindsight—Hermione had once been caught by Lord Black reading a tome on the ninety-nine known methods of exsanguination. After receiving his lecture and watching him stalk away with the fascinating book in hand, Hermione had searched for and found a charm for disguising things, which she continued to perfect until Lord Black, glancing in on her on occasion
as he did, would never again catch her reading anything which appeared less innocuous than a
collection of bedtime stories.

The charm wouldn’t hold up on extremely close inspection, nor could it bespell more than the
cover, but Hermione had tasked herself with observing her housemates to such an extent that she
was certain of at least one second year and three third years who had never actually opened their
books. They depended exclusively on their friends’ notes and dumb luck, apparently, and carried
their texts just for show.

Hermione had, as a result, collected an incomplete set of second and third year texts and had her
eye on the missing ones, and hadn’t so much as a close call in the process.

She had, at first, not thought much of the target skills of the most optimistic of her year mates:
organism conjuring and animagery. Though she had clinical interest, they seemed arbitrary powers
to have assigned, and since she was not interested in securing any ranking besides one firmly in the
lower third, their mastery was no more relevant than the mastery of countless other magical feats.

But the longer she considered, the more she doubted that first assumption. She had a reluctant
respect for their lord, drowned out though it generally was in her mind by hate. He did not seem the
sort to do anything arbitrarily. If there was some special benefit or if these skills served as an
indicator of something more meaningful, it would make more sense than if they had been selected
due merely to their difficulty.

So Hermione leant extra study time to Transfigurations, and just before the debacle with the
dragon, she had grasped the second year curriculum and begun the third. Hermione was sleeping
when the cry of “dragon in the castle” went up all over the school, and after weeks of steady
emotional detachment, she felt a flare of excitement that had only a small part of fear.

It was that distance that kept her from the rapid evacuation of her peers, that had her lingering in
the hallway. She returned to herself enough to duck behind a suit of armor when whispers, made
loud by the acoustics of so much stone, rang out. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy came into sight a
moment later, walking on either side of an adolescent dragon.

They continued to whisper furiously to one another.

“…father will kill you…”
“…he doesn’t have to know…”
“…how can’t he know. Hush now, Magnificent, you’re going to be all right…”
“…didn’t mean to…”
“…can’t believe you…”

Hermione thought, for a moment, that although the two young wizards were painfully oblivious to
her presence, the dragon had seen her. It blinked a giant, surprisingly intelligent eye and looked
directly at Hermione’s hiding place, but still allowed itself to be led off as quietly as a child’s pony.
When they were far enough away Hermione couldn’t hear them, she allowed herself a long, shaky
exhale.

She didn’t know why, but when Harry Potter or Draco Malfoy, along with certain other well-
connected students, were anywhere near her, her very blood sang out at the danger. It was a
response she needed to learn how to control if she were to have any hope of achieving her longer-
term purpose.
December, 1991

Hogwarts

One day in the Great Hall a seventh-year Ravenclaw reached out and plucked Hermione’s plate from the table in front of her, and for a long moment kept her in the cage of his arms, breathing on her neck and not speaking.

Later, when Hermione was vomiting up the bit she’d eaten before the encounter in the girls’ toilet, she jerked at the feeling of cool hands holding back her hair.

“It’s a good sign,” Lavender said solemnly. “It means your tools are sharp.”

Hermione leaned her forehead against her forearms, still bent over the toilet. “It wasn’t the first time.”

Lavender hummed and stroked her back, but Hermione did not turn around until she had left. It was easier that way. It was confusing enough when Lavender dropped in and out of Hermione’s path, without having to look at her while it happened.

She was almost caught a few days later replacing her ink from Lavender’s stores. Eloise Midgen followed Hermione back out of the dorm and into the common room, hissing insistently.

“Then why were you rummaging under Lavender’s bed? Answer me!”

With her head down, Hermione almost bumped into the boy, but at the sight of his shoes she pulled up short. By the time her gaze had traveled nervously halfway up his body, she froze again. Ron Weasley. Dangerous, though not one of the worst. Caught between him and Eloise, she froze and thought over her options with the cold rapidity of a trapped animal.

“Oy, let it go, Midgen,” Ron said in that soft, authoritative way he had. Hermione was more flustered yet, enough so that she accidentally jerked her head back and looked Ron in the face. He didn’t miss it; he was watching her steadily, kindly. It almost made her ill.

“All right there, Granger?”

She nodded and nearly tripped over herself to step backward and away.

The only true peace were those sacred hours behind the curtains in the depths of the night. Just before Christmas, Hermione finished and returned the last few in her cycle of fourth year texts. The fifth year Gryffindors were a statistical anomaly--every one of them being basically studious. She would have to take the books at the beginning of the night and return them the next. She didn’t doubt that she would do it, but her strategy was taking time to build.

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were once again thick as thieves, she knew by watching. Lavender and Draco were in constant competition for Harry’s attention whenever the three of them were in the same place, which appeared to alternatively leave Harry bemused or annoyed. Once, Lavender caught Hermione watching and gave her a broad wink. Hermione looked away. Lavender hadn’t acknowledged her for months, though the same day Hermione emptied the vial of hair potion, a fresh one appeared at the foot of her bed.

December 20, 1991

King's Cross Station, London
Hermione returned to King’s Cross station for Christmas holidays after her first term with a fourth year curriculum, which was the last year before independent study, and therefore as far as she could go under her present strategy of self-education via textbook. In reality, she was likely more well-rounded than the average fourth year but lacked the insight into each specialty a Professor’s lectures would afford. However, she also hadn’t known which chapters they would assign, so she had simply internalized them all. She had brewed potions in the dormitory lavs and cast charms behind her bed curtains largely without event, though she had once or twice had to vanish her potions supplies, including her cauldron, when another girl stumbled in to use the toilet in the middle of the night.

Fortunately, Sirius had not seemed surprised or displeased when she owled him for replacements. She explained that she was prone to botching potions, and he commiserated. It was the rare student who held out Potions as a favorite subject, and she knew by the tone of his letters that he was familiar with the Carrows and had expected them to sabotage Hermione’s education if they could.

In truth, the Professors rarely expended any energy on Hermione one way or another. With the exception of the day of her outburst in Potions, she could not recall a Professor ever calling on her, or even looking at her, save for the occasional sympathetic glance from Professor Maloney, as though he recognized her plight but was helpless to intervene.

Hermione wondered how detailed the vow was, whether they were all truly as helpless as they seemed. She tried not to think ahead to her seventeenth birthday, and what would happen then if she hadn’t made ready beforehand.

She sat alone on the train after daring to cast a complex locking charm that the fourth-year text had alluded to but not described. Hermione hoped that meant most of the students might know what it was but would be ignorant of its details, including its counterspell. The train had too many confined spaces, and in addition to lessons in magic, Hermione had also learned this term many lessons in the art of protecting oneself. Chief among them was avoiding places with too few exits and too many people, including train cars--but sometimes one’s circumstances couldn’t be helped.

Sometimes one’s circumstances couldn’t be helped.

She was quite surprised to find not Peter, but Sirius himself on the platform. In theory she thought of him as Lord Black, and that was certainly how she referred to him, if she couldn’t avoid it. But the sight of him always felt like Sirius to her. Not that she was particularly fond of him, but he was one of the more human wizards she spent time around, and it was clear he wore his power restlessly. In another world, Hermione was well aware that Sirius would have been content to shed all the expectation of his title, and might have done. She had spent time on more than one occasion contemplating what he would be like if he had, which was silliness. This was not another world, and in this one if Lord Black had insisted on living merely as Sirius, he would not have lived long. Sometimes he could seem a bit foolish, but he was clearly smart enough to understand that much.

Someone brushed past Hermione, and she went taut until she realized that it wasn’t an attack, merely the careless, glancing contact of Harry Potter, his robes flying out behind him as he ran indecorously up to Sirius. Sirius, seeing him, grinned, and Hermione cursed herself for a sense of disappointment. Of course his chief object had not been to collect Hermione, but rather to see Harry. His Heir.

How it was possible to feel jealous of someone for being heir to a title that, if Hermione had her way, would be nothing – would be not Lord Black but Lord of Ashes, Lord of a corner of the Wizarding World laid bare and wasted – she did not know. But she seethed with it, nonetheless, until the Malfoy Lord called to Harry and he and Sirius parted.
Only then did Hermione approach, unsmiling and watchful. Sirius smiled carefully back, and took her to the palace.

Recalling its state when she had seen it last, Hermione thought “palace” to be a generous term, but of course with its Lord and its full staff of elves in residence, it was as gleaming and vast and grand as in Hermione’s earliest memories, when she had been younger and still vulnerable to awe. Now all she saw when she looked around was the potential for filth and darkness that clearly reflected the place’s sentiments about Hermione, and she felt the least she could do was regard her erstwhile home as the dank prison it was, its usual outward appearance notwithstanding.

December 23, 1991

Black Palace, London

“I have a few last minute gifts to pick up,” Sirius said. “Would you like to go to Diagon Alley and have a look through Flourish and Botts? I know you’re particular about your supplies, and if you wanted a few extra books…” he shrugged, his smile abashed. “Well, it is nearly Yule. You’ll choose your own gifts better than Pete and I could.”

Hermione looked at him blankly. In a world that had never afforded her much luck, she found this turn of events difficult to believe. She had already inventoried the books on Animagery and organism conjuring in the palace that she intended to have in her trunk at the end of the holiday, but there were other topics that had interested her in her studies that weren’t well represented in the Black collection. Including anything with a publication date after the death of Sirius’s father, which seemed to be the last time anyone had deigned to add a book.

“That would be…thank you,” Hermione said stiffly. Sirius looked at her as though he was even more surprised than she was.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “We’ll leave in about an hour.”

Witches and wizards in Britain had stubbornly maintained Diagon Alley as the heart of their commerce in London, even though it was not in London, but tucked into wizarding space and anchored in London, like many of their erstwhile hiding places. Now that they had free reign to expand across nonmagical territory, they seemed reluctant to do it.

The place was bustling with holiday traffic, boughs of evergreen beneath every window and wound into wreaths on every door, made colorful with flower blossoms in every color, quick to fade but easily charmed, Hermione now knew, from simple seeds.

In the crowds Hermione might have been just another witch, but since she was with Lord Black and everyone recognized him, she was instead identified as his not-ward and a Muggleborn by everyone they passed. The last time she had been there with Sirius the unfriendly stares, and in some cases the open recoiling as though incidental contact could infect, had unnerved her. After a term in the halls of Hogwarts, however, she found she barely noticed. All she felt was a slight increase in that steady stream of bitter fluid in her veins, which fueled the quiet, constant part of herself that was planning, adjusting, and planning more. In less than five years, she would turn seventeen.

“I’ll leave you here. I’ll have to step in at the bank,” Sirius said at the doorway to Flourish and Botts. As soon as she nodded, he turned away toward Gringotts, and Hermione went in the shop. It wasn’t as busy as the rest of the stores, since parchment and books tended to rouse less excitement than clothing and toys. Hermione felt an eagerness broaching happiness as she combed through the nonfiction sections, absently wondering how much Sirius would let her spend. A lot, she assumed.
He always seemed eager to give her anything that she ventured to ask for.

The bell at the door chimed, and Hermione glanced up while moving around a shelf and out of the direct line of vision of someone standing at the door. A habit of the hunted, to at once observe and conceal. But she didn’t recognize the new arrival, a fairly slight, dark-haired girl with an alabaster complexion and Harry Potter’s green eyes.

His sister, then. Hermione knew he had one. She knew quite a lot about Harry Potter. Still, the sight surprised her, and before she could move fully out of sight those green eyes met hers and held.

Elspeth Potter had a lovely, easy smile. She held herself with confidence, but nothing about her was ostentatious. Yet the sense of danger that Hermione had grown to trust was sounding such an alarm it was like real noise in Hermione’s head. She dropped all the books she was holding and stumbled, weak-kneed, against the shelf at her back.

Immediately, the younger witch was before her, kneeling and gathering up the books, so that when the shopkeep came around the counter, prepared to be furious at the nobody who had mussed a stack of his wares without paying for them first, he instead encountered Elspeth’s apologetic smile.

“I’m so sorry about that, Mr. Bott,” she murmured, and Hermione found her voice oddly melodic. Maybe her eyes were the only thing she shared with her brother.

“Oh, well, Mistress Potter, it’s no real bother,” he said, stroking his beard and looking from Elspeth to Hermione uncertainly. “Is there something in particular you were looking for?” He put his head to one side and seemed to take in the specific books that were being collected with recognition. “Rather, ah, advanced reading?”

“For my mother,” Elspeth said smoothly. “For Yule. A great reader, my mother, you know.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Bott, bobbing his head. “Well. Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.”

He retreated, and Elspeth stood up. She was quite tall for someone who had to be two years Hermione’s junior; they were nearly of a height. She held the books towards Hermione, and Hermione saw that Elspeth was smiling with apparent sincerity. Hermione had an uncomfortable memory of this look on Lavender Brown’s face. But never in the presence of others and certainly not in a public place. Taken aback, Hermione at last realized that several seconds had passed while they stared at one another, and she hurried to take the books and step away.

“My mother does like books,” Elspeth said. “She has some of those. Shall I show you another one of her favorites, since you seem to share her taste?”

Hermione didn’t say anything, which Elspeth seemed to take as assent, and as she turned and walked across the shop, Hermione found herself following. This was a young child, yes, but Hermione was conscious of a field of energy around her. That formless, nameless energy that surrounded the charismatic and drew everyone else into orbit around them.

It was not off-putting, trailing in Elspeth Potter’s wake.

After Elspeth set a couple more books on top of those already in Hermione’s arms, something seemed to catch her attention beyond the windows. Hermione followed her glance, but all she saw was people in the street. Boughs and wreaths. Bright flowers.

Seeing Hermione’s look, Elspeth smiled. “My mother is talking to Lord Black. You’re Lord
Black’s ward, aren’t you?”

“No,” Hermione said, unthinking. She bewildered herself, but then, the one thing she had no practice at this term was talking.

Elspeth did not smirk or startle, but she did laugh a clear, short laugh, and she shrugged. “My mother called you that, and my father said that was only the polite word for it, and I was trying to be polite.” Her smile faded into a thoughtful frown, and Hermione, through her own shock, realized faintly that Elspeth Potter had been insofar raised in such a way that she did not truly understand what she had overheard her parents saying. It had been so long since Hermione had been in the presence of someone with a legitimate claim to naiveté, she didn’t know how to feel.

Searching for somewhere to look, Hermione narrowed her eyes on the tea shop across the street, and sure enough, could just make out Lord Black on the other side of the window at a little table set there. The woman across from him, mother of Harry and Elspeth Potter and, according to the gossip, the daughter of Squibs, had long red hair and a serious expression.

“You don’t have any books about animals,” Elspeth said, drawing Hermione’s attention back to her fully as she drifted toward the wide shelves on the subject beneath the window. “Don’t you like them?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. Were these the only words she had left, she wondered? “Yes” and “no”? “Then you should buy this one. It’s my favorite. Or do you have it? Mother says everyone has it.”

*Fantastic Beasts*, Hermione noted. “I have it,” she admitted.

“This one, then,” Elspeth said, selecting another. “It’s the one I came to get. I can’t wait to read it.” She took a second copy from the shelf and placed it on Hermione’s teetering stack.

At the counter, the shopkeeper charged Elspeth’s book without asking, then looked down his nose at Hermione.

“I can’t believe Lord Black said you could buy whatever you wanted,” Elspeth said. Hermione stared at her. Her expression was so convincing, Hermione began to wonder if she had, in fact, said something to Elspeth and then forgotten it. But, no; she remembered all her words in the past hour: “no”, “yes”, “I have it.” She watched Elspeth smile wryly at the shopkeeper, then wink at Hermione when he turned away, with new respect. Not perfectly naïve, then.

“We should go out on the street where they’ll see us, and know that we’re done,” said Elspeth. “That’s what my mother told me to do.”

*But everyone will see us*, Hermione thought faintly. But of course as Elspeth walked outside, she was helpless but to follow. And it seemed that passers-by, if they recognized Elspeth Potter at all, assumed that her companion would be a suitable one, for the little notice that the two girls attracted in the street was of a friendly character. Elspeth continued to speak with ease of various creatures, magical and non, which she intended to one day study in their natural environments. Hermione listened, lulled into distraction, until she caught herself smiling. The realization drew her up short, and rendered her momentarily deaf to whatever Elspeth continued to say about moon calves.

“All right, Hermione?” Elspeth asked, and Hermione realized with a jolt that Elspeth’s mitten hand was generating a spot of warmth on her forearm.

“Yes,” Hermione said, looking at Elspeth’s hand. Then she looked up and into Elspeth’s face. There was a band of freckles across her nose. Her skin was otherwise smooth and unmarred, her
eyes depthless. “Yes,” Hermione said again.

They stood on the street, close together, for several more minutes. During that time Hermione’s smile and occasional chuckle began to feel natural to her mouth. It was, perhaps, the most shocking aspect of the entire encounter, and the ghost of that spoonful of honest mirth would haunt her that night and many nights after.

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Sirius and Lily watched the children absently, Lily keeping one hand cupped around her chin and her face averted, as though she was afraid of looking at Sirius accidentally.

“Will Elspeth mention our conversation to James?”

Lily’s expression sharpened, but still she didn’t turn to him. Sirius should be used to being treated like a basilisk during their meetings, but oddly he still wasn’t. He and Lily had never been as close as she was with the rest of their friends. Not that he’d ever planned to compete with James or even Remus, but he had never understood how she could be so easy with Peter but not Sirius. Still, she had once been kind and warm, and her cool disregard was a painful contrast.

“My daughter is a product of these times,” she said bitterly. “She understands that her mother and father have separate politics and she remains neutral.” She leaned back in her chair. “Your Muggleborn girl is...what, a pet?”

Sirius stiffened, familiar discomfort washing over him just as it had when Narcissa had asked the same question. He didn’t think either Narcissa nor Lily would appreciate that he drew a single parallel between them.

“No.” He remembered something, and frowned at her. “You are one of a handful of people who should know better than to ask.”

Lily looked down, abashed, but then seemed to recall that Sirius deserved no consideration and cleared her throat. “I don’t pretend to have ever understood or known you, Sirius,” she said, matter-of-fact.

Sirius felt his chest grow tight, and breathed through it until he could speak. “She’s not,” he said. “Are you ever going to start, or why are we even here?”

Sirius sighed. He hadn’t dared try to make any kind of small talk with Lily for years. She’d made it clear during their first meeting that if he said a single word to her having to do with anything but Harry, she would go. Over the years he’d learned how far he could bend her rules, and he’d never gotten any further with her than this.

“He’s doing well at school,” Sirius said. “No issues with his performance or behavior. Takes after you a bit,” he added, “at least, that way. But he isn’t quite as dedicated to the primary curriculum as he seems to be the supplemental.”

“Organism conjuring and Animagery,” Lily supplied. “We’ve heard that since Charlie Weasley, there’s been a greater emphasis placed on early development of metaphysical magic.”

Sirius wasn’t surprised. Eventually what happened at Hogwarts would make its way through even the disgraced segments of society, and Charlie had graduated years before. Besides...

“In touch with the Weasleys, are you?”
He felt how badly she wanted to turn her glare on him directly, but she fixed her jaw, and didn’t.

“Let’s not veer off course,” Lily said through gritted teeth.

“He’s gained a familiar,” Sirius said obediently. This time he had shocked her enough she almost looked at him, but only almost. “A phoenix.”

Lily upset her tea cup, gasping when the hot liquid tumbled into her lap.

“If you make light-- if you joke--” she hissed.

“I do not,” Sirius said. “A newly burned bird, and a male.”

“They’re all male,” Lily muttered absently. “Or that’s how they like to be called. The Headmaster used to say that they are one sex, and because the early human generations they first interacted with considered female to be derivative from a primary sex, the birds decided the closest concept we had to what they actually are is ‘male.’”

Of course, she was not talking about McGonagall when she mentioned the “Headmaster.” It wasn’t enough to trigger the taboo, but it came close enough that Sirius felt latent magic spark in the air between them, and he shuddered.

Sensing his reaction, a smile ghosted over Lily’s face, gone as fast as a shadow. “Don’t worry, Sirius. I’m very good at this. Now go on.”

He did. Out of kindness-- to whom Sirius wasn’t sure, though he thought had Harry known of this meeting, he would have wanted Lily to know-- Sirius mentioned Harry’s friendships and successes in Charms in more detail than he otherwise might. Sometimes in these meetings Sirius found himself full of spite instead, telling Lily only of Harry’s punishments and fears. But today he felt no urge to needle her, and a strong resignation to her always-averted eyes.

When he finished, and silence fell between them and Sirius was preparing himself to collect Hermione and go, Lily spoke again. This time her voice was softer, nearly gentle.

“James has finally found a grey hair,” she said. “You’d think we were back at war, convinced as he is it’s the result of some dark curse and in no way attributable to simple age. He won’t say, but he’s desperately sad that Elspeth is going to school. They’re close as can be, if you hadn’t guessed. James always wanted to be a father. He’s very good at it.”

Sirius was stunned. He realized he was gripping the edge of the table so tightly he could no longer feel his fingertips. He carefully unclenched them.

“Lily,” he began, a bit breathlessly.

“No,” she said firmly.

Sirius shook his head. “I only wanted to thank...”

But she had already stood and was walking away. He watched her approach the girls and rest her hand on Elspeth’s shoulder. He watched Hermione’s shoulders hunch, but then Lily leaned close to her and spoke, and Hermione relaxed a bit.

Sirius’s face was wet. He wasn’t sure when he had started crying, but it bewildered him. He hadn’t allowed it, not for years. Once his mother had caught him crying at eight years old and hexed him into silence for a week. He had controlled the urge then out of instinct, though sometimes he woke
to salt tracks, dry but irrefutable on his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Tom and Harry return to center stage for the next chapter. Thanks to everyone who left feedback on the last chapter. Like everyone else who writes, I am fueled by feedback and it helps me improve. <3
Deconstructed

Chapter Summary

In which Tolliver pays a toll and is readmitted to the fold.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by my dear Wolf_of_Lilacs.

TW for violence, though it's not described in detail. If you want to avoid it altogether, you can skip the portion at Nott castle and read the summary in the last "chapter" to get filled in. There is also a mention of the past torture of a house elf in the first portion, set at Spinner's End.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twelve: Deconstructed

“One day, Tom will realize he is in love with Harry in the middle of the night and half a world away. He will walk out into the darkness of this foreign place and wish he was at home. His sole ambition was to own the world, and now that he has it, his long-dormant heart will have the audacity to stir and distract him.

The timing will be abysmal. The unrest will be swelling. The Order will be sending its messages. Yet another Muggle corpse will have turned up in a Pureblood’s garden with a missing wizard’s magical signature left on it like the tag on a gift.

But Tom will gaze into the dark forest beyond the primitive cabin where they have made their secret camp, and think of Harry. He will mean to think of the absurdity of it— that he, of all people and at this of all times, is besotted with a wizard so young he’s technically a teenager— but instead he will think of Harry as he saw him last. Turned away, his hair grown so long it reaches his shoulder blades. The groove down his spine, and the flare of his robes at his hips. The way, in those last moments before they broke apart, the wild energy of Harry had a flavor, distinct and lingering on Tom’s tongue. The way Harry’s dark stubble rasped against Tom’s palms and Tom’s blood fired as it had, hitherto, only at the discovery of a particularly thrilling spell.

There was sex, yes; he will know of sex, and physical attraction, and will understand those aspects of his desire for Harry. But the rest…

“These fixations pass,” Severus said. Tom will doubt him, but then, what does Tom know of the heart? That ignorance, un lamented in the past, will now keep him still.
The sunrise over the forest will be particularly glorious, and the dew-wet leaves will reflect it in golden-green.

November 4, 1991

Surrey

Tom met Severus at Spinner’s End, which was still one of the least pleasant places Tom had been prevailed upon to visit. Severus was powerful enough, and his mother had been too, so freed of the need for secrecy, as an ancestral home the house had remodeled itself into something of a Gothic parody, though Tom suspected Severus, with his flair for the dramatic, preferred it that way. When Tom appeared on the walk, a flurry of bats burst out of an open upstairs window. Tom rolled his eyes.

Severus opened the door himself, though a house-elf hovered below his right elbow tugging at its ears at the sight of its master doing even this small thing for himself. Tom had never liked elves much, though they had less of a tendency to throw him into an unprompted rage than they once had. The elf, seeing who was on the other side of the door, gave a startled cry and disapparated.

“My Lord,” said Severus, not even flinching at the sound, which Tom knew to be nearly deafening at such close proximity.

“Severus,” Tom replied, urging Severus out of his bow so that Tom could walk past him. “Let’s dispense with propriety and move along directly to tea.”

Tom might own the world, but he would always be British.

In a rather narrow room with onyx walls and a vaulted ceiling, tea had been laid before a fireplace. The elf polishing the fireplace mantle bowed to Severus, noticed Tom, and disapparated. This time, Tom frowned and Severus, noticing it, bit his lip.

“I did tell them you would be coming, my Lord, with the expectation they would make themselves scarce.”

“They don’t offend me,” Tom said, shrugging one shoulder. “The apparition would be easier to bear if there was a curved or cushioned surface in sight,” he added. “This place looks like it’s carved from black ice. It’s even more ridiculous than the last time I saw it.”

Severus sniffed. “I’ve spent a bit more time here of late.”

Tom was delighted to be proven correct. “So this is the inner sanctum?” He looked around with a wry smile. “Do you sleep in a coffin, and is your Animagus a bat?”

Severus tolerated Tom’s teasing out of faith and respect alone, Tom understood, but clearly had no idea how to do so with any grace. So Severus stood stiff and mute until Tom exhausted his sense of humor for the moment, and conjured a chair that didn’t look like something constructed in the middle ages before seating himself. Severus perched on the edge of the carved-ebony settee and, rather than making Tom ask when they both knew perfectly well why Tom was there, Severus began to speak.

“It was certainly a phoenix, and there is a palpable familiar bond. New, but fairly strong already.”

“Well,” Tom said thoughtfully. “It seemed unlikely, but not less likely than the Headmistress being
mistaken.”

Severus grimaced a bit. For him it was a kind of smile. He clearly had confused emotions regarding McGonagall which he had never volunteered to explain to Tom, and Tom could never quite care enough to be curious.

“And?”

“If it’s Faw—Dumbledore’s bird—then he doesn’t know it.” Severus’s expression went from blank to reluctantly amused, then back to blank, in the course of a second or so. “I was able to legilimize him, but not deeply. He cast me out.”

Tom thought of his encounter with the child on Platform 9¾, and wasn’t surprised. “‘How much the wizard and how much the wand?’” He quoted to Severus in playful query.

“It’s his wand, so I’m not sure it matters,” Severus said dryly, deliberately ignoring the reference. “So. That is all I can say.”

Tom hummed, settling back in the green wingback chair that was an exact replica of his favorite in his Hogwarts apartment. Neither wizard said anything, and they proceeded to have tea. Tom had never exactly understood Severus's appeal, but it pleased Tom to spend time in silence with his potions master. Sometimes, the constant chatter of an adorer was even worse than the nervous chatter of the cowed. Severus was one of a small handful of Tom’s subjects whose regard struck the proper balance between love and fear, and with whom a silence could be companionable.

“Will you be staying for dinner, my lord?” Severus asked after a time, and while his tone betrayed no distress, Tom couldn’t help chuckling.

“You’d probably lose several elves to a stroke if I did.”

Severus said nothing, arching a brow in silent inquiry.

“They recall a younger and more volatile version of their lord, I imagine,” Tom said, idly straightening the collar of the shirt he wore under his robes.

“My mother told me you boiled one of them.”

Tom snorted. “That is an exaggeration.” He thought upon the events in question, intending to give Severus a more accurate account than his mother had apparently related, but the surrounding memories distracted him. He looked around the room thoughtfully. “This is a bit like the old Prince library, you know. I see many of the books were part of that collection.” He glanced at Severus, whom was once again determinedly blank-faced. He couldn’t, however, quite conceal the flicker of interest that lit his dark eyes. Orphans of any age were always hungry for stories of their parents, Tom noted bitterly.

“She was quite like you,” Tom decided out loud. “I don’t always see it, but of course you’re older now than she was when I saw her last. Perhaps she would have learned when to hold her tongue, eventually, but it would have been rather a tragedy to see.”

Severus’s father had murdered Severus’s mother in days of unrest leading up to the war. Tom had shouted her name along with the others, a long list by then, at the rally that generated his first war party. He vaguely remembered Severus having killed his father himself, but perhaps not. Tom rather liked his version of how that bloodbath-called-a-battle had borne out, however, so hated to risk asking Severus outright.
It had mostly been politics that made Eileen one of Tom’s talismans against the Muggle threat, the first stage of his campaign. But he hadn’t had to feign the way his voice rose and sharpened when he reached her name on that list. Tom had liked Eileen, with her odd, ancient parents and their home that stank of kneazles and mold, despite having one of the healthiest house-elf populations he had personally witnessed before or since. She let him shelter there the summer after their first year, and never told a soul. She met him in the Slytherin common room their first night at Hogwarts and known he was not some Muggleborn orphan, worse than filth on her shoe. She was the only year-mate he could credit with that degree of foresight.

“You should thank me,” he said eventually. Severus’s brow went up again. “For this immaculate home,” Tom explained. “If I’d never dipped that first elf in the acid, the others never would have learned the importance of their responsibilities.”

He rose from the chair, winking at a bemused Severus. “Now, I have to go to another meeting. A meeting that would have been much more conveniently held in conjunction with this one, but some children can never learn how to make nice.”

Severus pulled a face. “I will tolerate anyone if it will please my lord,” he said stiffly, and Tom chuckled.

“I must be growing fond of you as the years go by, Severus. It hardly sounds amusing to put you in a room with Sirius just to see you squirm, and there was a time when few things delighted me more.”

“I am grateful for your regard, my lord,” said Severus, unreadable. “And I am also grateful for my immaculate house.”

When Tom apparated into London, he was seen before he could cast his disillusionments. It was always a risk in the more populous locations, but he was, for some reason, certain that the young wizard standing just inside the alley and smoking a Muggle cigarette didn’t recognize him. It was bound to begin happening sooner or later. Tom had removed himself from the media, such as it remained, and let the lords and ladies be seen as the governors of their territories, so long as they maintained the concept of dual sovereignty in their subjects’ collective consciousness.

Curiously, Tom did not have the impulse to set his disillusionments at once. His protective magic was intact, so there was no real risk he could perceive from a single startled boy in threadbare robes with his wand stuck in his back pocket. He and the boy looked at one another, and the boy began to look thoughtful.

“You can get in big trouble for that, you know,” he said knowledgeably. He had a certain accent that Tom couldn’t place, which meant he was Muggle-influenced in his culture. Half-blood, presumably, since he showed none of the designators of a Muggle-born ward.

“Is that so?” Tom found the anonymity, in his own form, oddly exciting. He put his wand in his sleeve and walked closer to the boy, looking him over more carefully. Perhaps he was Muggle-born, and old enough to have his independence. There were steps in place for that. Tom had no reason to keep the Muggle-born under his heel, other than the matter of Pureblood politics, of course. The boy had very blond hair and muddy green eyes that might have appeared brown in certain light, something sharp and aristocratic in the angle of his chin incongruous with his slouch and attire. Tom was intrigued.

“Do you intend to trigger the alarm?” Tom leaned against the opposite wall, and the boy held his eye with a quick, wry grin, before he occupied his mouth with the cigarette again. After a quick,
deep inhalation, he shrugged.

“Nah. If someone wants to live a little, it’s hardly my place to judge.” He ground out his cigarette against the brick wall, needlessly, before Vanishing it. Fascinating. “As far as I’m concerned, I never saw you.” He smoothed his hair back with one hand and stepped back out into the street. Tom watched him walk a few buildings up and go inside some sort of shop. Tom made a mental note, cast his disillusionment, and walked the four blocks to the palace.

Wizarding homes were funny things. While the Snape home on Spinner’s End had molded itself after its master, the Black house seemed to have a self of self-aggrandizement apart from anything to do with Sirius Black. But it was very old, and its magic had more to do with the family as a whole than its present title holder, Tom supposed. One day, when the time allowed, he would study House Magic for the decades it would take to become an expert. For now, though, he had less pleasant business.

“My lord,” murmured Bella as he let himself in. She had been kneeling on the foyer beside a body, suspended a foot above the polished marble floor. “We brought it inside, for security reasons, but I put the whole scene in the Pensieve.” She looked up at him with her teeth set against her lower lip. Tom recalled her horror the last time they had a dead body between them, when he had called her sister’s magical signature out of the corpse.

Tom looked around awkwardly. “Good. Where is your cousin?”

“Canada, my lord.”

“Still?” Tom worried absently about what he would be forced to do should Bella require consolation again, then sighed and told himself he could play it by ear. “Well, then.” He cast the spell, and this time it was Bella who looked on without recognition, and Tom whose breath caught. He took a step back, and the magic faltered. But he knew what he had seen.

“My lord?” Bella was frowning. “Did you know it?”

“Yes,” Tom said, smoothing the sleeves of his robes and carefully holstering his wand. “It was the magical signature of Eileen Prince.” He gave the body a cool look. It was certainly not that of his one-time friend, who, as far as he knew, had been dead for going on twenty years. It was less mutilated than the one before, and the face was intact, with its staring pale blue eyes and lax features. It was female, but there any likeness to Eileen Prince, a tall, willowy, pale-skinned creature with black hair and eyes, ended.

“Is it a Muggle?”

Bella nodded. With sudden impatience, Tom breathed in fast through his nose. “And your cousin has yet to complete his errand, I take it? Or is he taking in the sights while he’s abroad?”

“I believe Lord Nott has declined the invitation, my lord.”

“Then I must extend it in person,” Tom said, feeling a fleeting desire to murder someone, but the older he got the more quickly these feelings passed. It was almost regrettable, how the briefly-stoked fire cooled, leaving him with no emotion stronger than irritation and resignation. The spell he had just cast was a complex one, and he would need to rest if he desired to apparate directly to Nott’s territory. He mulled that over while Bella stood quietly nearby, eyes averted as though unaware of the turmoil in her lord’s mind.

“I expect you to…take care of this,” he said at length, gesturing to the fresh body, which
inexplicably bore a witch’s energy, though he did not look at it again. Bella nodded solemnly.

“Whatever you did with the last one, do the same with this one. When Nott arrives, he will need immediate access.”

“I understand, my lord.”

Tom nodded, and apparated to his secure residence off the coast of Wales, where Muggles saw only a single, treeless island, and wizards saw nothing at all. It was old magic, proof of even the earliest wizards’ understanding of how the same magic could not be applied to both breeds of the human mind. He had won it in a duel at seventeen, a quirk of ancient house magic and his first introduction to the topic. It was small—no more than a few rooms—but opulent, seeking to please him by covering everything in green fabric and serpent motifs. There were no elves. Above the mantle hung a portrait in crude black and white, its frame crumbling under the pressure of the centuries despite the layers of preservative magic applied with care by some witch or wizard long-dead.

“Hello, Leo,” said Tom to the subject, which startled out of a doze and leaned forward in the frame to peer near-sightedly at Tom, as though there was anyone else he could be.

“Home again? And so soon?” Leo said at last, in the heavily accented and slightly stilted language of which he was capable. Someone had taught him English, but it was clearly a language the subject had never known in life.

“I find myself in need of a brief respite,” Tom explained. “Anything interesting transpire in my absence?”

“The house has made you new pillows,” Leo said, pointing past Tom to the wool-upholstered sofa, where indeed, new silk pillows had been arranged, sporting coiled black cobras with barely visible fangs.

“Very nice,” Tom said, raising his voice slightly the way he did when he intended to address the house. It was going a bit senile, and in whatever consciousness it had, Tom was forever the teenager whose sole image of a home was the Slytherin common room. He had never bothered arguing with it, and there was something to be said, still, for green silk and snakes.

”Are you here for the ladder?” Leo asked, his eyes closing in a long blink, betraying his sleepiness in a way the coarse lines of his face could not.

Tom bristled. ”No,” he said definitely, and didn't so much as glance toward the trap door beneath the thick loomed rug. The ladder was an indulgence, and he should avoid developing a dependence. When he looked back at the portrait, Leo was asleep again. Tom did not know whether a portrait could die, but he had never seen one as deteriorated as Leo. It made him wonder how old the portrait was—Leo had been drawn in leggings and a coarse tunic, and his frame was rough-hewn—but one day, when time allowed...

Annoyed and not sure why, Tom arranged his new pillows and leaned back against them. He thought the riot of his thoughts would keep him awake, but they didn’t. Sleep was closer than he had known, and the house had this effect on him. More so than the others, and perhaps because it was the first.

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November 5, 1991
Nott Estate

Calgary Region, formerly known as Alberta Province

Sirius stowed the two-way mirror through which Bella had used to assure him their lord would arrive any time, and looked around the corridor cautiously before beginning to walk through it. Nott’s damned castle was crawling with ghosts, which Sirius, having lived at Hogwarts, could have accepted with grace. However, these particular ghosts were clingy and invariably soaked in blood, which, while technically as incorporeal as everything ghost-related, felt oddly tangible when it dripped onto his skin. He was tired of hearing them lament how “cruel were their deaths” and that “justice should be visited upon their murderer.”

Sirius was a firm believer in the idiom that what’s done is done, and there was no use in him dying, too. The only good thing about being around Tolliver Nott, the absolutely mad and creepy old wanker, was that the ghosts avoided him. Therefore, in his barely endurable stay in the castle, Sirius had sought Tolliver out at nearly every opportunity, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not. He had a feeling that wherever the Lord went when Sirius couldn’t find him, Sirius would rather not follow. It was, presumably, where the ghosts were generated.

Sirius rounded a corner and bumped into the housekeeper, Perpetua, who was slightly better company than Tolliver Knott, ghost-aversion notwithstanding. Perpetua was either not entirely human or something like one thousand years old, closely resembling the house-elf whose role she supplied in the castle. She had a thick accent that Sirius had convinced himself was old English or something of similar ancientness, time had stooped her to a height of roughly three feet, and she was nothing but loose skin over sinew. Her ears, which Sirius had strained to glimpse to confirm they were pointed, were always tucked into her hair and a fitted knit cap.

She took in Sirius's vaguely anxious expression and smiled in understanding. It was a surprisingly sweet smile, given the face that made it. "The Lord is in the hall." She indicated the double doors at the end of the corridor with her chin. In her wiry arms, she was holding a basket, inside of which something appeared to be straining against the lid.

Rather than allow his curiosity to dwell on the contents of Perpetua's basket, Sirius nodded to her politely and walked on.

When he opened the doors to the dining hall, Sirius saw that Tolliver Nott was indeed present there, engaging in a favorite pastime which Sirius had the misfortune to become familiar with over the course of his stay. A hog, hopefully dead but possibly merely stunned, was levitated by wand magic performed by Tolliver’s right hand, while he gestured with his left in a wandless, wordless spell that dissected the creature into bloodless segments. The next phase of the game was to reassemble the pieces creatively, a macabre puzzle. For a moment Sirius did consider taking his chances with the ghosts and Perpetua's basket.

Then Nott saw him, and the window of opportunity closed.

Tolliver Nott was old even by wizarding standards, but like all dark magic, necromancy tended to have a beautifying effect. Therefore, he was a strangely enigmatic figure, grinning at Sirius with unnaturally white teeth, the sleeves of his dark robes rolled back, his hands covered in blood that presumably belonged to the hog. He let his wand arm fall at the sight of Sirius, also, which meant that the hog pieces fell to the ground with a series of heavy, wet sounds. Sirius grimaced.

“My dearest Lord Black,” called Nott in his deep, rumbling voice, as nightmare-appropriate as everything else about him. “Would you care for tea?”
Sirius had opened his mouth to respond, when one of the bells above the dining table rang out, signaling someone was at the door.

Sirius had the vague thought, accompanying the sheer relief he felt at this indication that their lord had arrived, that ten days earlier he had never before been pleased by the prospect of their lord’s company.

Nott did whatever it was he did with animal parts—he seemed to value them too much to just Vanish them, so Sirius assumed that when they disappeared they went into storage somewhere—then fairly bounded toward the doors. Sirius stepped aside.

“I suppose your lack of surprise is telling, Lord Black,” he said slyly as he walked past, still covered in rather a lot of blood. Sirius wrinkled his nose and took an involuntary backward step, then tried to smile blandly.

“We knew he would become impatient sooner or later, Lord Nott.”

“Indeed,” Nott said. He did not seem to be afraid.

Their lord stood at the door, his face smooth and expressionless, while Nott and Sirius bowed. Sirius stood to one side, in case curses should be exchanged, but Nott and their lord simply regarded one another, then Nott gestured with another, shallower bow.

“Please, come in, my lord,” he said, his graciousness very nearly believable. Sirius moved a little further out of the way.

“I called you, Nott, and you did not come.” His tone was casual; conversational.

“My lord,” said Nott, the first hint of uneasiness in his tone, “I am in the midst of important work here. My lord’s work,” he added, hastily, when something moved in their lord’s eyes.

Sirius took advantage of how completely focused their lord was on Nott to observe the wizard that ruled them all, and meant to rule their descendants until the end of the world. He was tall, of course, and oddly ageless, almost human in his undeniably good looks, unlike Nott’s magic-heightened appearance. Except for those eyes. Clear red, the sole indicator of how completely he had immersed himself in all the forbidden magic that made him unprecedented and unbeatable.

Sirius looked away.

“I will organize your priorities. It is my privilege,” said their lord. “Now. Will you obey, or will I be forced to elevate your punishment?”

Nott made a sort of strangled, interrogatory sound, and their lord cocked his head, eyes steady on Nott’s.

“Oh, yes. You didn’t think you could go unpunished, did you, Nott? I am here not because of my own will, but because of your excess of will. It cannot be abided.”

Nott was pale now. The blood was drying to ruddy brown on his arms.

“I have heard Ron Weasley has adapted to his impediment—as much as can be expected. Would your child fare as well as your ward without his hands, I wonder?”

“I will obey,” Nott said, rather hoarsely. “Of course I will obey, master…”
“I am not your master,” their lord snapped. “I am your lord, and your god, and your magic’s lord and god.”

Nott hung his head, nodding so hard his chin struck his chest. “Yes, my lord. My god. Please.”

No one spoke for a moment. Even Sirius, with nothing at stake of his own, barely breathed.

“One hand then,” said their lord, reasonably. “Yours, or the boy’s. You may choose.”

Nott did not hesitate. He held out his left hand. He averted his face, but his hand did not shake.

For the second time in the quarter hour, Sirius watched, dazed, as flesh was parted by wandless magic. The hog, however, had not screamed.

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November 16, 1991

Hogwarts Castle

Scotland

Ron had woken early that morning, a Saturday and therefore without classes, and slipped from the dormitory while his dorm-mates slept on. He donned his robes, missing, as he always did momentarily, the bit of sash he had always included over his left shoulder during his wardship. Lord Nott had rarely taken them out in public, and couldn’t care less what they wore at home. But when they did go out amongst the subjects, they wore robes. And when they wore robes, Ron wore a ward’s sash.

Theo was at the arboretum already, spelled against the cold. Ron had never been as good at that magic, so he stood close to Theo to enjoy his spell’s heat, and Theo smiled at him, hard to see even up close like this with the late fall sunrise coming late and weakly.

“This used to be the Quidditch pitch,” Theo said. He linked his arm through Ron’s and drew him closer. They leaned against one another as they walked down to the gates, which opened automatically at their approach, releasing them onto the road to Hogsmeade.

They were halfway to the village when a figure appeared in the center of the road, eerie in that first blush of dawn, and unmistakably Lord Nott. Theo and Ron both knelt at once, with their heads bent as he approached.

“Enough of that, now, Master Weasley.” Lord Nott’s voice still sounded like stones in a tumbler. The sound made Ron shudder, but he obediently got to his feet, then looked over at Theo’s motionless form. Then looked, at last, directly at Lord Nott. He was the same, his teeth too sharp, his skin too bright. Ron had never met a vampire, but in the early days of his wardship that was what he had been sure Lord Nott must be. Until he realized he was something altogether worse.

Lord Nott circled Theo like a vulture, looking down at him with a sort of raw, indecipherable expression that made Ron want to look away, and also made it impossible for him to do it. He swallowed, and when Lord Nott put his left hand on Theo’s head, Ron noticed that the fingers of that hand were slightly crooked, the skin slightly grey, a contrast to the vivid pallor of the Lord's face and throat.

“My boy,” Lord Nott murmured, and Ron realized with a start that Lord Nott was looking at Ron, not Theo, as he spoke. But that strange sickly hand still rested on Theo, the fingertips carding
gently through his hair. “You answered my summons. Does that mean you still belong to me?”

“Of course, father,” said Theo. But Lord Nott watched Ron. Ron opened his mouth, and Lord Nott’s mouth tightened. His head twitched, the barest shadow of a shake. Ron closed his mouth again, then, very slowly and infinitesimally, he nodded.

Lord Nott smiled his sharp smile. His shark’s smile. He tugged once on Theo’s hair, hard, and released him only as he began to get back to his feet.

“I will see you at Yule,” he told Theo. “Make ready.”

When they were alone again, Ron put an arm around Theo and Theo rested his head heavily on Ron’s shoulder. They stood like that until the sun was fully risen, and only then did they start back toward the castle. Before they got to the gates, Ron’s curiosity got the best of him.

“What did he mean?”

Theo was even better than Ron at drawing back into himself. Ron had once thought that he, Ron, had the upper hand in that skill set, but perhaps during their separation Theo had surpassed him. Ron wasn’t sure. He had certainly had more opportunities to practice at Weasley House than he would have liked. Theo looked at his boots and shrugged.

Ron considered, then spoke. “You didn’t see him, but when he was talking to us, he was looking right at me. Like he…like he meant to tell me, as much or more than he meant to tell you.”

“You always were his favorite,” Theo said, in the deadpan he always used when he wanted to be funny. Ron glared at him. His hands were dead and heavy.

“What…what was wrong with his hand?”

Theo looked up at last. “The one he touched me with?”

Ron nodded, and Theo looked thoughtful for an instant, then went back into hiding in his own head. “Maybe he was just cold.”

Ron had no idea what that meant, but though he felt he understood nothing of their meeting with Lord Nott, he also knew that this was not the moment to press Theo. Theo could be stubborn if pushed too hard. So Ron started back for the gates, and Theo followed. After several steps, Theo took his arm again, and they matched strides to the castle and then the Great Hall.

By now, most of the students had let hunger win out in the war against an extended lie in, and Theo and Ron broke apart to go to their respective tables. Ron saw that the most convenient empty seat was next to Harry, but he almost didn’t take it. While he hesitated, Fred saw him and gestured him over.

“Please, sit down before Brown can arrive and attach herself to Harry. I swear, she’s an utter barnacle.”

Harry looked at Fred sharply. “Oi! Does that make me a whale?”

George looked him over with a playfully critical air. “Perhaps a light raft.”

“A light raft,” Harry echoed. “This is a stupid metaphor. I should probably just be a bigger barnacle.”
Ron reached for a tray of hard boiled eggs and drew it toward him with the curve of his wrist. He tried not to notice the way Harry and the third-year girl across the table tried painfully hard not to stare.

Ron ate slowly, a consequence of his condition, and many of their house mates had finished their meal and left the table by the time he began to feel full. Still beside him, his own plate long emptied, was Harry. Ron watched Harry a moment, noting that he was staring across the room toward the Slytherin table where Theo, coincidentally, was still working through the contents of his plate as well.

“Ron,” Harry said, and Ron saw with alarm that Harry was blushing, “is Theo your…boyfriend?” He murmured the last word so quietly Ron almost couldn’t make it out. But he did, and his brows rose.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “He’s more like a brother.” Harry’s brow furrowed.

“But with your…ah, other brothers, you aren’t so…”

“Affectionate?” Ron smiled ruefully. “Well, I don’t know them very well.”

Harry winced. “Of course, I’m sorry. It’s stupid, and I understand. I mean, I have a sister, but I’m much closer to Draco. He’s like a brother, but…I mean, we don’t…or, we aren’t…”

“As affectionate?” Ron repeated. When Harry just blushed harder and nodded, Ron gave him a reassuring smile, then shrugged. “I don’t know why it’s so strange. I mean, every friendship is different, and I hardly think we hold hands or snuggle any more than Daphne and Lavender.”

“But they’re girls,” Harry blurted.

Ron, torn between weary and amused, set down his fork and leaned against the table, one elbow propped on the surface. “So?”

Of course, there wasn’t anything to say to that, so Harry just cleared his throat and changed the subject. Sort of. “So do you think you could like a wizard? You know, marry one?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Harry. I’m twelve. Why? Is this something you’re thinking about? I thought you couldn’t be really sure until after puberty or a period of experimentation or whatever it is those new age books go on about.”

Harry looked confused. “I don’t think I’ve read those books. But that’s…well, you know, Lord Black. He likes other wizards. But I haven’t met anyone else, I don’t think, with those, um, preferences.”

Ron thought about patting Harry on the shoulder, but though Theo would have liked something like that, Ron knew his hands could sometimes make an unhappy person unhappier yet. But he did lean low over the table until Harry had to meet his eye, and then he smiled. “It’s not like anyone cares either way. You know that, right? Maybe once they did, a bit, but it would be hard for anyone to say anything, given our lord’s example.”

For no reason that Ron could fathom, Harry blushed scarlet, muttered something unintelligible, and fled the table. Ron, uncertain where the conversation had veered off course, got off the bench, too, but didn’t pursue Harry. He thought Harry was a bit young for a gay crisis, but Perpetua had once told Theo and him that every soul grows old at an independent rate. Perhaps Harry was outpacing the rest of them.
December 20, 1991

Malfoy Manor

Wiltshire

Lucius could not say he was surprised to walk into the second-story conservatory and find his lord there, alone, hands clasped loosely behind his back and facing the window. Lucius had gradually, beginning with the first war and continuing until that day, lost the ability to experience surprise as he once could. All information seemed to pass through a barrier before reaching him, a furious and brief interplay between his perceptions and his subconscious.

“My lord,” he said, therefore, in a very even tone as he bowed. He had not seen his lord in some time. He knew from the other families that there was something sufficiently awry on the continent to cause their lord to press Tolliver Nott back into service. Lucius was curious, but also willing to be ignorant. He had his own concerns, and his books and his wife and his home and letters from Draco and Harry, and he preferred it that way.

“Lucius,” said his lord, without turning. “I wonder if you know the reason I am here.”

Lucius shook his head, then remembered his lord was facing away, and cleared his throat. The barrier would not let him be truly nervous, but he was uncomfortable. “I do not, my lord.”

“Your ward,” said his lord. “Made Sirius Black’s heir.”

Lucius was, now, too confused to be anxious. “Yes, my lord. Two years ago,” he added, uncertain. What was he missing?

“Your ward, made Sirius Black’s heir, and the Peverell heir by birth, has a phoenix familiar.”

Lucius was very glad that Harry had never told him. It made the tickle of Legilimens easy to surrender to when one had nothing to hide.

“Interesting,” said his lord. He turned then, and appeared merely curious rather than vengeful. Lucius, who had not felt himself tense, did experience the sudden ease when his body relaxed.

“Children do not even tell their parents everything, let alone their guardians,” Lucius said, beginning to worry again for new reasons. Just because his lord wasn’t angry didn’t mean he wouldn’t rationally arrive at the decision to punish Harry. “He likely thought it a harmless secret.”

“It is not a secret,” said his lord. “He told his Head of House at once, and she diligently told the Headmistress, who diligently told my designee, who diligently told me. It never had the cover of secrecy from anyone save, apparently, you.”

“I see.”

“The child is powerful, and tangentially connected to Lord Black, perhaps, but that doesn’t explain the heirship.”

Lucius had hoped this conversation would never be required of him, but now that it was occurring, he had no choice but honesty. “I believe my wife’s cousin wished to please her. And, as you said, he has some connection to the child of his own, and no heir by blood.”
“But still. It seems that as his lord, I might have been consulted.”

Lucius was careful, here. “The matter of an heir is considered to be quite personal, my lord.”

His lord seemed, though not amused, fortunately merely irritated. “The titles are mine to bestow. Whether at present or in the future.”

Lucius still could not quite bring himself to experience surprise, but he did not know what to say.

His lord looked at him knowingly. At some point, Lucius had begun to appear older than him, he realized. His lord still looked as he had when Lucius, then just a child, had seen him for the first time. It had happened in this very house. This dark-haired man, captivating a room full of the haughtiest Pureblood lords—all Lucius’s father’s peers—his eyes that inhuman red. How curious, that this lord, once a peer to Lucius’s father, would see the generations of Malfoys that followed long after Lucius was gone. Considering that way, Lucius thought he better understood his lord’s argument. Even so, honest words were required.

“Certainly, my lord. But you may meet resistance.”

“But not from you,” said his lord immediately. “For you have one heir by blood, and he shall be the first I approve. In exchange, you will help me convince the others.”

“Thank you for your generosity, my lord, but perhaps…”

“He should not be the first,” his lord said thoughtfully, before Lucius could. Lucius frowned and took stock of his own mind, but he was quite sure that his lord was not exercising *Legilimens*, though he had the ability to linger, undetected and seemingly otherwise engaged, as Lucius had noted in previous encounters. But that knowledge made Lucius doubly vigilant and as proficient in the mind arts as the Malfoys’ ancient library could render him, and he could sense even his lord’s subtle touch.

“He will be third, perhaps, or fourth. So that it is less evident why you championed my edict.” His lord smiled. “Very well, Lucius. Very well. I trust you will enjoy your holiday.”

And his lord disapparated on the spot, which caused the wards to recoil so forcefully that all the alarms linked to Lucius’s magic, as the manor’s Lord, sounded at once in a splitting pain in the center of his skull, so intense he thought it might blind him.

He wondered if his lord, certain to know this side effect of his mode of departure, had triggered it as his central aim or simply because he did not care. And Lucius thought, a moment later and without emotion, that he did not prefer one possibility over the other.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! This one was hard to write, for some reason. What did you guys think?
Recondite

Chapter Summary

In which Charlie and Elaine are tasked with the search for something long hidden, and the journey charts a peculiar course.

Chapter Notes

Eternal gratitude to Wolf_of_Lilacs for the beta and for helping me overcome some concerns with this unwieldy chapter.

Just a heads up that this chapter contains sexual content, and not the lovey dovey kind. TW for suggestions of pedophilia, though not acted upon overtly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen: Recondite

“It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop.”

Confucius

March 20, 1992

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

Harry and Draco were home for spring equinox, and it was terrible.

All they had done was argue, which had drawn Lucius’s irritation and Narcissa’s concern. Draco wouldn’t even let Harry visit Magnificent, insisting she was his dragon and Harry was a “bad influence,” whatever that meant. It was all, in short, ridiculous, and terrible. Harry was torn between caving and giving Draco the apology that he so clearly wanted, or holding out due to stubbornness and a desire to earn Draco’s respect. He was tired of always catering to Draco’s moods.

Most terrible of all, Lucius had informed them that morning that the Notts were joining them for the feast—which worsened Draco’s foul mood, and the Averys were coming too—which worsened Harry’s.

Tiring of their bickering, Narcissa sent them outside to collect beadyroot, which was an herb that made drinks fizzy and to which house-elves were allergic. The muggle subjects usually came to
They fell silent as soon as they were alone. It was easier to argue with other people around; when it was just the two of them, they tended to go quiet, lodged somewhere between sullen and awkward. Things hadn’t been right between them since the first day at Hogwarts, Harry thought, when Harry was sorted Gryffindor. Finally, Draco couldn’t mistake the differences between them, and their lives and futures—or Harry couldn’t, at least.

At Yule, Narcissa had fawned over him a little extra, which made Harry flush in embarrassed pleasure. That was the sole high point, however. Lucius had given Harry lots of thoughtful looks when he thought Harry was too distracted to notice, and Harry knew from experience that meant Lucius was building toward some sort of confrontation that Harry was unlikely to enjoy. He had seen his parents for a briefer period than usual, and spent so much time answering generic questions about Hogwarts that he didn’t feel like anything meaningful was said at all before they had to leave. It didn’t help that Lucius and Narcissa had hovered a little nearer the Potters than they would have at one time. Harry had hoped he might see Elspeth, but once again his father told him—while his mother averted her eyes—that she had not been feeling well enough for the floo.

At Yule, Harry had felt distanced throughout that brief homecoming, and back again for the equinox, he knew that experience hadn’t been a fluke. He had been leaving the phoenix at Hogwarts, and though he still knew very little about familiars (why wasn’t there more written about them?) he suspected the distance was a strain on them both. It was necessary, though, because Harry still didn’t know how to explain it all to the Malfoys. He fervently wished he had told them right away. Now, it wasn’t the truth that he thought would displease them, but the fact of how long he had kept it from them.

But even with the phoenix there, Harry knew he would have felt eager to leave. His bit of independence at Hogwarts, and the privacy of his room where he could study Theo’s books and the Black library’s books he had found visiting Sirius over the Yule holidays (the shelves had distressingly little on the subject of animagery) made the vast elegance of the Manor stifling in contrast.

“So you’re going to make me do all the work, then?” Draco snapped. Harry, stirred from his reverie, looked over at the place where Draco was bent over in the herb garden, cautiously stroking the beady fern in front of him until it shuddered in delight, tipped over, and thus exposed its roots. While it was dormant, Draco hurriedly pruned the thick orange roots with a small pair of scissors, and moved on to the next plant.

“Magnificent clearly misses you,” Draco said after a while, when they were almost to the end of the row of plants, and the first few Draco had approached were sleepily drawing themselves upright and pressing their roots back down into the soil. “Perhaps you should see her before we go back to Hogwarts tomorrow.”

“That would be nice,” Harry said quietly. Draco glanced at him sharply, as though assessing his sincerity, then relaxed visibly, though he didn’t smile.
“In the morning, then.”

“Thank you, Draco,” Harry said. It was not an apology, and it seemed all right to say. Even though Harry was beginning to doubt whether Magnificent should belong to anyone any more than the Muggles should. He immediately closed his mind against that thought. He wasn’t sure when it began happening with such frequency, but his inner dialogue really went to dangerous places sometimes.

Back at the kitchens, the elves cried out in dismay, as they always did, at the sight of the beadyroot, and apparated away in such close succession it felt like someone had set off fireworks in the room. Dazed, Harry and Draco blinked at one another until a moment later when Narcissa arrived, rolling her eyes as she took in the various kitchen work stations, where approximately a dozen delicate culinary tasks had been abruptly abandoned.

“You two,” she said, but seeing them standing a bit closer together and not exchanging glares, her disgruntlement vanished. “Take those to Warty in the cellar. Obviously. I can’t believe I have to say it.” She left.

“How does she expect us to get to the cellars without going through the kitchen?” Demanded Draco, leading the way to the cellar entrance and lighting the torches there with a touch of his hand. They went downstairs into the progressively cooler air, and the hair rose on Harry’s arms as it always did at the knowledge he was underground.

Warty was strange even for his species, with unnaturally large ears that were freckled with small holes from untold accidents and maladies in his lifetime of service, and unnaturally small eyes for one of his kind, which were further skewed by the thick-lensed goggles he always wore.

He also wore more conventional clothing than any elf Harry had observed, which was not saying much. Today his protective apron and elbow-length gloves were formed of some sort of glossy pink rubber, and he was, predictably, stooped over an enormous cauldron with the aid of a rickety looking stool.

“We’ve brought beadyroot, Warty,” Draco called, gesturing toward Harry, who held up his cupped hands demonstratively. Warty muttered something at the cauldron and then descended from his stool, looked at the contents of Harry’s hands critically, then snapped his fingers to conjure a large glass vial. He held it out and Harry, carefully even though Warty was wearing gloves, funneled the root through his fingers and into the vial without dropping any.

“The young masters should be dressing,” Warty observed. “Warty will prepare the beadyroot.”

Since they’d begun school, Narcissa and the Manor, in unknown parts, had apparently decided they were too grown up to share a closet. So the boys parted ways in the halls with an awkward, but more or less friendly glance, and Harry ambled toward his own rooms, absently wiping his dirty hands on his trousers and not paying much attention to his surroundings. He could have found his way with his eyes closed, after all. Unfortunately, this was how he wound up colliding with Norville Avery.

He looked exactly the same as Harry recalled, wondering vaguely how someone could be technically impeccably dressed but also seem filthy. It was as though a sheen of oil coated his entire person, heavier in his slicked-back hair and the shiny bridge of his prominent, hooked nose. To either side of it, his eyes looked down at Harry, narrowed with delight.

“Just who I was hoping to bump into,” he said, seizing Harry hard by the upper arms. “Steady there, boy,” he added more softly. “Wouldn’t want you to take a tumble.”
Harry, who had never been in danger of falling, tried to take a step backward but the Avery heir held him tight, so that they were just five or six inches apart.

“I’ve lost my way in this ridiculous house,” said Avery. “You’ll show me to Lucius’s study, won’t you, boy?”

“I could call an elf…” Harry began, but Avery shook his head gravely.

“That won’t do. Call an elf to keep a guest company. What would Narcissa say?”

She’d say, Harry thought faintly, not to be alone with strange wizards. But perhaps she didn’t count Avery as strange. And Harry…Harry had…

His arms, while not entirely free, were not so confined that he couldn’t grasp his wand, which he dare not do unless things were rather dire. Drawing a wand on the heir of a favored family was tantamount to a declaration of war, but it comforted him to know that he could. Yet the wand, so temperamental and reactive when Harry was agitated, was curiously dormant in its holster.

“Yes, I’ll show you, my Lord,” Harry managed at last. “If you would, um, let me go, I can show you.”

“Of course,” Avery said smoothly, his grasp loosening, then lingering. As he let go of Harry, his fingertips trailed lightly over Harry’s sleeves, and it was almost worse than when he had held Harry tight.

Rushing backward, Harry nearly did stumble, but converted the momentum into a pivot and started walking fast down the corridor, so conscious of Avery right behind him that he felt sweat begin to gather between his shoulderblades. He touched the wand, but it was as lifeless as a fallen tree branch. What in Merlin’s name…

Lucius’s study had never seemed quite so far away. Especially when Avery lengthened his stride to catch Harry up and walk beside him, and rested a hand on the back of his neck that could not have felt less paternal. It was a soft touch, like before, but Harry felt the rasp of Avery’s overly sharp fingernails against his skin and had a startling image of a rabbit held aloft in the talons of a condor.

He couldn’t name his uneasiness. He was too caught up in the shock of all of it to know. But it was like seeing Ron’s hands the first time, the suspicion his parents didn’t want him to know his sister—didn’t want her to know him—and the specter of his family’s dishonor, and every secret he had ever kept, all piled together. It was helplessness, he thought, the worst kind of helplessness, and his wand wouldn’t help him…

Except it did. There, as Harry nearly tripped over his feet in haste rounding the last bend in the corridor to Lucius’s study, gripping his unanswering wand in growing desperation, throat closed with animal panic, Harry felt the wand finally answer his delayed call.

As it happened, in what might have been mistaken for coincidence, as Harry and Avery rounded the corridor, Lucius’s study doors opened to reveal Lucius with the one companion sure to startle Avery. It was their lord, in his standard charcoal robes, with his unchanging, fiercely handsome face and his untroubled posture. Lucius’s brows rose at the unpleasant sight of Norville Avery with his hands on Harry, but Lucius saw only a glimpse of contact before Norville’s arm fell back to his side in surprise and Harry, turned so far inward he hadn’t realized he wasn’t still alone with Norville Avery, pressed past reason and into the realm of instinct, Harry…
Harry turned into a raven, and flew out the windows the elves had left open to admit the early spring breeze.

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April 1, 1992
Cologne, Germany

“I still don’t get it,” Charlie said.

There had been a time, early in their unusual partnership, when Charlie was obviously too intimidated by Elaine (and everyone else) to speak. Then, his silence had frustrated her. Now, she longed for it.

“Then maybe you never will,” she snapped, shoving the last of her belongings into the haphazard travel bag she had expanded so many times she thought the charm could rebound and crush her. She had seen that happen once with a closet in wizarding space, and the person trying to shove in one last pair of shoes had been crushed by the weight.

Fortunately, the charm held, and she let out the breath she had been holding.

Charlie was staring at her with wide, hurt eyes, but Elaine could not have cared less. She tossed her bag to him and he caught it reflexively against his chest. She had lightened it, of course, but Charlie still sagged a bit under its weight, and his wounded look turned incredulous.

“What do you have in here?”

“Sex toys and knickers,” she said, but it barely pleased her to see him blush. It was too easy to make him do it. “Now come on.”

“I don’t know why you’re in a hurry,” Charlie grumbled, even as he obediently went to the door and opened it for her. “We know exactly where it is.”

“Because we still have to look.”

“For a year,” Charlie added, petulant.

Elaine rolled her eyes. She didn’t know what Charlie had planned for his life other than doing what he was told, but she had always known better than to bother.

“A whole year,” he went on, “so why are we hurrying?”

This earned him a cold look. “If you think our lord won’t be counting the days, then you are an idiot.”

“Hmm,” Charlie said. Because what was there to say to that?

Something, apparently.

“Will Bearheart come with us, then?”

“Merlin, Weasley,” Elaine wailed. “Please, for the love of all the Goddesses and whatever dragons worship too, shut up. Just for five minutes.”

Charlie was quiet for four minutes.
“Well, is he, then?”

John Bearheart was not coming, as it turned out. Elaine had the sense, receiving their most recent task, that bringing along an extra would be frowned upon. No one wanted to earn their lord’s frown. Elaine thought of cold red eyes and a sharp smile, and a shudder passed through her. His smile was bad enough.

They began their search where they knew its object wouldn’t be. Far away, in the opposite corner of the world, where it was said to have been originally forged by a brilliant, mad distant cousin to Merlin himself.

“Magical objects are best stored in places significant to their creator. Some theorize that there is no location more specific than the site of creation.” Elaine read aloud to Charlie, lounging on the very comfortable sofa in their well-appointed tent in the middle of the Chilean jungle. It was one way to shut him up when he tried to interrupt her research with inane questions. He had been better, though, since they began traipsing around in the middle of nowhere. His dragon loved the absence of mankind in all directions, and the abundance of prey, and as a result he had spent entire afternoons in the suffocating heat under the guise of searching, while Elaine napped in the tent under a blanket of cooling charms.

“Maybe we should take a break,” Charlie said. She was so surprised she looked up from the book.

“What are you on about? You love it out here in this Goddess-forsaken swamp.”

“You miss the city,” Charlie said simply.

Elaine glared at him, and looked back at the book. She did miss the city. She was designed to work people, she had known it her entire life. Wistfully, she recalled the thrill of manipulation, a skill well-honed by the time she was three years old, and hoped she wouldn’t get rusty with only Charlie to sharpen it against. He was so easy it was pathetic. He was so easy she was very nearly comfortable with him, and it wouldn’t do.

“Stop being selfless,” she ordered. “It’s the kind of thing that will get you killed.”

Charlie sighed. “Elaine…”

“The last bearer,” Elaine read loudly, “is also magically linked to such objects, and a location of personal significance to the bearer, particularly when linked to the magical nature of the object, generates excellent storage.”

Charlie sighed more, but didn’t say anything else.

“The last bearer,” Elaine thought aloud. “Hmm. It isn’t time for that yet of course, but we know that the goblet was made here and then re-spelled in Athens.”

“This spell is stupid,” said Charlie, helpful as ever.

Athens did nothing for his attitude. Sometimes Elaine wondered if she could just shake him and go on herself. He clearly wasn’t cut out for the task, or at least, he understood his commitment was unnecessary since Elaine’s commitment was absolute, and therefore helped her not at all. But she was attached to Charlie, unfortunately, as she once had been to the family crup. And that crup had none of Charlie’s unrealized potential, potential she had half a mind to cultivate. She saw the way Charlie looked at her. Elaine never took that for granted. She was pretty enough, but her nature as often repelled men as it attracted them. Even in this merit-forged society enabled by their lord, so many people preferred women remain soft and kind. It was an act Elaine couldn’t bear to maintain
for longer than an evening.

She saw the way he looked at her, but Elaine was never casual in her dalliances. She was a creature of strategy, and with Charlie, that strategy was still taking shape.

She had indulged with Bearheart. It was pride and curiosity that started it. Her emotions had never been at risk with her lord, but her pride was. When she was so easily left behind, she had become obsessed with the concept of John Bearheart, this man who had held their lord’s attention for so unprecedented a time. She wouldn’t let herself believe it was simply that he was a man and she was a woman, though she knew for some people that there was a stronger preference for the physiology of one over the other. That was too simple; that was too easy. She felt she needed to face an opportunity for self-improvement. Manipulation was her trade, and every manipulation was a seduction on some scale.

It had become something else very quickly. She understood Bearheart’s allure both more and not at all by the end of their time together. It was his mystery, perhaps. His unstudied distance from someone even when he was naked and begging. It had something to do with beauty, too, she knew. He was more beautiful than Elaine, but there was nothing she could do about that. But the rest…it was within her grasp, that last night. He was beneath her, where she always put him, because she knew without having to wonder that their lord had always had him that way. He was bracing his arms against the bedpost where she had tied his wrists.

Lust could be like a drug, especially when combined with the physical exertion of athletic sex. There, in that euphoria, Elaine had known she was close to the key to Bearheart’s mystery, the source of his allure. It was in the way he cried, silently. It was in the way he felt everything so very deeply, and generated a dizzying pride in Elaine for being the fleeting source of so much feeling in another person. It was the brink of connection. Elaine did not reach it that night, but it was the closest she had come.

Did their lord want that? To know and resonate within the deepest recesses of someone else? If that was so, it was best that he had cast her off. If Elaine could open herself like that, she thought, she would be left broken forever, like Bearheart. Unable to close again, vulnerable to every subsequent lover, even a curious and uncaring stranger, as Elaine had been to Bearheart.

John Bearheart thought they were the same. He didn’t say it. But it was the way he looked at her. The way he put his hands around her face and kissed her forehead when they said goodbye. Elaine, though uncertain, thought she disagreed.

Still, the arsehole could send her an owl on occasion.

“Elaine,” Charlie said, walking beside her through Athens in glorious cool sunshine while a group of someone’s Muggle subjects hastened to bow to them as they passed. Charlie was frowning at his map and hardly noticed them. Elaine hated the sight of them. If she never saw a living Muggle again, it would be better for her blood pressure.

“It’s here, I think. The House of Cerebreaux.” He pointed to the few crumbling columns that remained of the ruin. There were restoration efforts in historical sites throughout Europe, but progress was slow. Elaine recalled their lord telling her, in a moment of rare passion for him, of his plans to recreate every lost artefact of the ancient world. He hadn’t seemed to mind that Muggles had likely been the original builders of most of them. In fact, in all their acquaintance, she couldn’t recall a private conversation where he had seemed to mind the Muggles at all.

“Was he really Plato’s lover?”
“I cannot think of a single reason it would matter.”

“Why claim to be, if he wasn’t?”

“At that time, Muggles were seen as...acceptable companions.” She bent to move a few stones with her wand, thinking she had seen a recess that could have been stairs long ago. “Probably because the population of wizards and witches was minimal. Fewer options, you know.”

“That’s still true now,” Charlie pointed out.

“They were harmless then,” Elaine said absently. “Weasley, come over here and help me.”

It had been stairs. Elaine cast the few restoration spells she knew, then wiped sweat from her brow and let Charlie steady her against his side. They watched in silence as the stones shifted and knit, as dust reformed into rock sharp-edged as though fresh from the quarry. She had directed the magic down, and it flowed through its work of reconstructing the staircase while leaving the upper portion of the building leveled, then as it ran through the former lower story, she and Charlie were abruptly jerked several inches upward as the structure reformed below.

When the magic settled, Elaine stepped away from Charlie and walked down the stairs herself, casting *Lumos* to see her way. It was a Muggle building, and always had been. No latent magic touched hers.

“Surprising,” she said. “Maybe Cerebreaux was a Squib.”

Charlie looked stunned on behalf of the long-dead historical figure. Elaine was amused.

“Some Muggle sympathizer you are.”

“Squibs aren’t Muggles,” Charlie said. “And I’m not,” he added, looking around them as though someone might be listening. Elaine rolled her eyes though, facing forward and ahead of him, he wouldn’t be able to see.

“Wait, I do feel something,” she murmured, slowing down. The restoration spell had only been structural, and not complex enough for architectural detail or really anything not crafted of basic stone, so the entire level was a single blank room. But a sudden flare of old magic had wafted past like a scent.

“So do I,” Charlie agreed. She saw him turning slowly in her peripheral vision, his eyes half closed. She did the same, trying to turn herself over to the part of her that felt-saw-smelled magic, that extra sense missing from a nonmagical body and...there...

She and Charlie had drifted closer together and were facing one another when they both snapped back to attention. Their eyes met, then slowly they both looked to their left and right, respectively, at the wall they were now so near their shoulders brushed it.

A large round stone was set into the otherwise ordinary rectangular stack of the foundation. Charlie glanced at her, and when she nodded, he lifted his wand and touched the tip of it to the stone.

As it sometimes did, the magic, asleep for centuries, woke with a sound. It was the sound of bones cracking, of ideas sparking, of blood pumping. Sometimes magic felt so very *alive*.

Caught up in the moment, forgetting the annual spell and its implications, Elaine’s gaze was riveted upon the stone that slowly faded to nothingness under the touch of Charlie’s wand, sure that the space behind it would hold a gleaming golden goblet, untouched by time.
But when the stone was gone, there was nothing there but a dark, empty space. As empty as it had surely been for several thousand years.

“For a second, I thought…” Charlie swallowed, and laughed roughly, stowing his wand.

For once, Elaine had no urge to tease him. “I know.” She brushed her damp hands against her robes as though dusting them off. “Let’s get out of here. I hate the dark.”

Of course the goblet wasn’t there. They already knew where it would be—or, they knew where it would be in just under a year.

“‘The quest must be sincere, and ongoing, for the requisite one-year period,’” Elaine read aloud, for no real reason this time, when they were back in their quarters on the coast. “Maybe it’s too soon to give up on Cerebreaux. Maybe he didn’t like his house. Maybe the most significant place, for him, was the brothel.”

Charlie looked amused, then thoughtful. “Didn’t you say the place should be significant and, ideally, linked to the nature of the object? Where did Cerebreaux learn his magic?”

Cerebreaux studied under the Roman Tertius, according to a combination of lore and very timeworn texts that their research led them to in the interplanary catacombs of wizarding space in Greece. The spells were growing unstable in their ancientness, and Charlie and Elaine were both ill for three days when they came back out.

“I can’t believe I might die for the sake of a fake fucking quest. I feel like I’ve read the last page already and now I’m being forced to start at the beginning anyway, and act surprised by every chapter.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Weasley.”

“Everyone reads the occasional novel, Elaine. You don’t fool me.”

He was growing too comfortable with her, Elaine thought. The looks…the looks he was giving her now weren’t quite right, any more. She didn’t have time for that side project, though, until they left Greece. Sincere effort meant that when she could, she had to remain dedicated to the quest. But when they exhausted all leads with Cerebreaux and moved on to the bearers, she had plenty of time with nothing to do but think while they waited for the full moon to open a sacred cave in a Nepalese mountainside.

John Bearheart’s look was because the lord had put him beneath him, and opened his soul there. Charlie would be adequate, wearing that look. If Charlie would look at her like that, she would keep him beneath her forever.

The cold was too much for Charlie’s dragon, so they huddled together and waited. There wasn’t even enough room to erect their tent in the designated cave where the batty old magic insisted they sit for the twelve days preceding the full moon, in order to step inside the cave of a wizarding philosopher which they well knew would not contain the goblet.

After the full moon they came down out of the mountains, and it was July.

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July 31, 1992

Harry was in Dumbledore’s office, which meant he was asleep, and that he would not remember
anything they spoke about when he awoke. On his perch by the window, Fawkes trilled a greeting. Harry looked at Dumbledore, who always looked the same. The rhythm of his noisy gadgets never changed either. All that changed was Harry—but only here, not out there. Out there in the waking world, *that* Harry went on as though nothing was different.

“You’re frustrated, I see,” said Dumbledore.

“I’m…” Harry paused. It was disorienting at first, arriving at these meetings. He had to assimilate the two lives lived by his body, the long days in the waking world and these brief hours here, asleep. He had seen Dumbledore countless times over these many months and still, Harry was not willing to trust him. How could he, when the artificial universe where they met was entirely under Dumbledore’s control, and Harry could verify nothing that he said?

“I’m wondering if there is any point,” Harry finished.

“So you haven’t given my offer much thought?”

Harry blinked. “No. How could I? The only place I can remember it, and therefore think about it, is here. And you only made it a moment before I woke up, last time.”

“Very true,” said Dumbledore. “For me, it is not quite the same.”

Harry looked at him. “I know.”

Dumbledore, supposedly, remembered their meetings very well when he awoke. Only Harry, for vague reasons, was not granted the same courtesy by their Fawkes-implemented bond.

Dumbledore was their lord’s enemy, in some way. Harry knew that. Although the waking version of Harry had never heard Dumbledore’s name to confirm it, it was obvious by the way Dumbledore talked about their lord. He did it in a way no ally would dare. It was almost impressive, if one placed much value upon bravery, and Harry hadn’t decided whether he, Harry, did.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “It’s hard for me to believe you’re already twelve. That so soon, you’ll start your second year, and we met at the beginning of your first.”

Dumbledore had a way of talking only about things that Harry already knew, but phrasing it all as though it was supposed to reveal something more. It aggravated Harry, so he only shrugged moodily.

“Fawkes tells me you’ve kept him hidden.”

Harry glanced up. “Isn’t that what you’d prefer?”

“He may be less of a secret than you believe,” said Dumbledore.

“There’s no way for me to remember that,” Harry said carelessly. “I never remember anything.”

“You do not have to remember in order to be changed,” Dumbledore said. But that, too, was something he said a lot in this place, and as far as Harry could tell it wasn’t true.

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July 31, 1992

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire
When Harry woke, of course, he believed he had nothing but vaguely unpleasant dreams.

As always, Harry’s birthday was on track to be a quiet affair, and as always, what he chiefly looked forward to was seeing his parents.

He had spent most of his summer with no human companionship but Draco’s, and that had been all right. It had felt, after the first several days, as though they had eased slowly back into the way things had been between them before they went to Hogwarts, except now Magnificent was as large as a small horse and they suspected Draco might be able to ride her.

“I don’t know, Harry,” Draco said uncertainly.

“It’s like riding a broom, I bet,” Harry offered. They were in Magnificent’s enclosure, which was a sort of vast greenhouse with spells instead of glass, but she was permitted to fly free of it if they kept her on the magic tether that Narcissa had given Draco the previous Yule. It was as thin as silk and magically contracted and extended without visible change, but with a word it would force her back to the ground no matter how far and high she had flown.

Draco scowled at Harry. “That’s easy for you to say, since if you fall off, you can turn into a bloody bird. I would just die.”

Harry tensed a bit, though he didn’t argue. In fact, Harry’s animagery was far from that advanced. He had been a raven only once, and it was as terrifying as it was exhilarating, and he was convinced the transformation would never be within his control. If his accidental transformation had occurred before anyone less significant than their lord, he would never have been able to get credit for it at Hogwarts. As it was, he had, and he was the top of their class a result. An outcome Draco had only barely forgiven him for, and which had earned him an unpleasant level of notoriety around the school.

Magnificent, who had the appearance of being deeply asleep where she was sprawled on her favorite rock, lifted her head to peer at the boys.

“I would not let him fall,” she told Harry.

Draco watched her curiously. “She’s always making sounds at you. It’s funny.” He reached out to scratch her wing, and she purred a bit, going lax again. “You obviously annoy her, whereas she never has anything to berate me for.”

“Hmmm,” Harry hummed. The bane of the summer had been keeping his various secrets while growing increasingly relaxed around Draco, and wanting to fall into the old habit of unguarded behavior. For example, there was a restless phoenix living in his school trunk, where Harry could only hope even the elves wouldn’t sense him.

Abandoning the topic of dragon riding for the day, they opened the wards for Magnificent (after carefully securing her tether) and watched her fly until she seemed to reach the clouds and fly past them, which Harry hadn’t known was possible. Draco grew concerned when she was out of sight for a full ten minutes, and called her back. She came grudgingly, giving Draco a sullen look until he began cooing apologies and feeding her the fresh fish that were her favorite treat.

“I’d better go in,” Harry said. Draco nodded, untethering Magnificent and going to the little structure where her food was all kept in stasis. In their moment of privacy, Harry bid her farewell in her own language.

“I wouldn’t let you fall, either,” she said, unresponsively.
“Do you want us to ride you?” Harry was both pleased and surprised by the idea. Magnificent was generally ambivalent about everything nonedible, but she did seem a bit stuck on the topic of a passenger.

“I am meant for it,” she said, seeming to meet his eye significantly. But then Draco came back and Harry couldn’t ask more.

He changed out of robes that had the smoky smell of a dragon on them, along with the less pleasant aroma of fish, and was hurrying down to the floo foyer when he heard voices. He readily identified his mother’s and father’s, but froze on the staircase at the sound of a third.

“Elspeth?” he asked no one, still alone on the stairs. Then he rushed the remaining distance, turned into the foyer, and stared at the sight of his little sister, looking around the floo foyer with a curious furrow in her brow. She was nearly as tall as their mother, with hair as black as Harry’s but otherwise unlike his in every way, forming a smooth, neat cap on her head. Her eyes were sparkling green. She looked just like the image in Harry’s locket, which had grown over the years to match the changes in the person it was spelled to imitate. By the time their eyes met, Harry was grinning.

“Elspeth!” he cried, and considering they had never technically met, they rushed to embrace one another as though they had, many times before.

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October, 1992

the unnamed district of the African continent formerly known as South Africa

“I may die now,” Charlie said, lying on his back on the grassy knoll above the cliffside where they’d landed, a man again. The dragon curled up calmly somewhere near his heart and slept, sated for once.

Elaine didn’t answer, as outwardly unconcerned with his well-being as ever. He turned his head to look at her, dispelling the protective charms she had applied before they took flight, and wondered at her erect posture and tidy hair. She wasn’t one with a lot of raw power, Elaine, but her magic was detailed, painstakingly planned, like everything else she said or did.

He rolled onto his stomach and propped his chin in his hand. “I think we should check the underwater caves first.”

Checking for nothing, of course, but he was so used to it now that it all almost made sense. The story had taken hold of him, too. He felt the excitement of the long journey of something so many had sought, passed thrice around the world and then hidden with the expectation that no one would ever find it again. When he thought of the fact they were halfway to the annual mark, his heart sped up at the prospect of finally seeing the goblet for himself.

Of course, that also meant that this at-times-thrilling, at-times-excruciating shared time with Elaine would end, too. Charlie knew, helplessly, that he would regret that.

Elaine was silhouetted against the ocean and sky. The wind was brisk and salty; it had made landing smoothly a chore. The cliffs descended sharply to a rocky shore noisy with waves. And Elaine—Elaine had a good figure. She looked strong, facing away from him, steady on long legs that should be trembling from the strain of a flight that bridged an ocean. When she turned suddenly and caught him staring, Charlie blushed and averted his eyes.
Instead of torturing him (as she certainly would have a few months before) she only chuckled. “We’ll check the burial site first,” she said. And since Charlie never argued with her, that’s what they did. They searched sincerely for the Goblet from the south coast to the north, up rivers and through deserts and ancient places, facing a myriad of creatures and magic including a circle of sphinxes so bloodthirsty they wouldn’t have escaped them if Charlie hadn’t transformed.

And then it was December.

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December 21, 1992

Harry wasn’t sure what to expect, but his biannual visit with the rest of the Potters included his sister once again that Yule. By the time his family left, Harry’s cheeks were sore from his constant grin. He came down to a dinner that included the Averys somehow not having lost the spring in his step. Sirius had arrived early (though safely after Harry’s other visitors departed) and followed him all around the house, chatting amiably, as though it was ordinary behavior not to let Harry alone. It seemed he needn’t fear a repeat of his interlude with Norville Avery in the corridors at the equinox if he was going to have an escort for all their future visits. Harry had convinced himself he had misinterpreted that whole confusing experience, but he was glad for Sirius’s company anyway.

They were just sitting down to dinner when their lord joined them.

He seemed to appear near the chair that was always prepared for him, and after a moment of stunned disbelief, everyone struggled to their feet. Harry could only think that he had missed his chance to see their lord the last time he was at the manor – when Harry had, so very briefly, been a bird. He had caught sight of his lord but only after the change, and the raven couldn’t comprehend the significance. Its sole focus was to be out the window, in a blind panic; then, it was confronted with all the chaos of the open sky for the first time for several glorious, seemingly eternals seconds, before Harry’s Ward tethering activated. After a long period of confusion he found himself partially gutted on the lawn, bleeding less than one might expect, and spent the next week in St. Mungo’s.

Their lord’s robes were darker than usual: black accented with grey, instead of the reverse. As always, he seemed amused by their discomfiture, and waved a hand with a dancer’s casual elegance, taking his seat while they clattered to their feet.

“Be easy,” he ordered, and after everyone had bowed they sat again. “As you were saying, Norville?”

Their lord used first names almost exclusively, Harry had noticed, in his very limited observation. Norville Avery had been talking at the group about his plans for the wand ceremony for his oldest child, soon to turn eight. She was not in attendance and Harry had never met her, but the idea of belonging to Norville Avery made Harry shudder in sympathy for that nameless, faceless girl.

So Norville Avery talked, stiltedly, about his expectation that there would be representatives from all forty-one families desiring to attend, and to expand his guest quarters as a result. His daughter was fond of swans—black swans—but they had not located a flock of them to capture as of yet.

“She will make us very proud,” called Lord Avery in his high, loud voice, so typical of the very deaf, and looked around the table with rheumy eyes before lapsing back into silence.

Norville Avery was socially tone deaf, which made Narcissa’s increasingly pinched expression amusing to observe as the meal began and wore on. Harry and Draco had a game of guessing when
she would interject to redirect a rude guest, but the novelty of having their lord at the table made such antics slip their minds altogether. Harry went through the motions of eating without tasting a thing, and Narcissa, similarly affected, permitted Norville Avery to go on and on.

Eventually, the house elves brought the dessert course, and the soft percussive sounds of objects appearing by magic was the only noise in the room for a few protracted moments.

Then: “no,” said their lord. All eyes were immediately trained on him. Harry, who had already been looking out of the corner of his eye for the duration of the meal, now did so more openly. Their lord was relaxed in his chair, what Narcissa would have scolded Draco and Harry for as a slouch appearing somehow elegant when their lord adopted it. His elbows rested on the arms of his chair and his fingers met before his chest, steepled together, strangely long, pale and unmarred, as though carved. His gaze was steady, and his expression was serene, because of course creating uneasiness in a tableful of powerful people cost him nothing.

“M-my lord?” Norville Avery murmured, looking supremely nervous, which Harry was ashamed to note he found rather amusing. He managed to look away from his lord in order to smirk, very slightly, at the way Avery’s mouth opened and closed without making any sound, eyes bulging like he had choked on something. Harry must not have been the only one with that impression, for Old Avery squinted at his son and then pounded him helpfully on the back, so forcefully the younger Avery bent abruptly forward over the table and upset his wine glass.

Harry ducked his head when he realized he was about to laugh, glancing automatically toward Narcissa who he knew would have his hide for rudeness, and then his heart stopped when he found that while Narcissa was exchanging a frown with Lucius, and paying Harry no attention at all, someone else was.

Their lord was looking directly at Harry, with a particular smile that Harry didn’t recognize and could not place. Forgetting himself in his shock, Harry stared back, wondering vaguely if he looked as stupid as he felt, his lips still parted with the phantom of a smothered laugh, locked in place and his eyes as wide as they had ever been.

His lord looked away, and Harry blinked and looked down, trying to compose himself, listening with half an ear while someone told Old Avery to settle down, and that Norville was merely surprised, and not in need of Old Avery’s assistance.

It was Lucius who next addressed their lord—calmly, though Harry, sure enough of his schooled expression to look up, saw the slight concavity in Lucius’s left cheek that he always had when he was tense.

“If you object to Lord Avery’s choice, my lord, then I am sure he will not displease you.”

Lucius then turned his face pointedly in Avery’s direction, and Avery cleared his throat loudly, then stammered, “Of course n-not. N-naturally not, my lord. Isn’t that so, father?”

Lord Avery did not look up from his tart.

Avery swallowed and looked back at their lord. “But it would assist my father in making a satisfactory choice, perhaps, if you would be so good as to instruct him…”

Lucius’s eyes flashed briefly, the way they did when he was annoyed, and Harry’s mind raced. Of course, their lord was not one to offer instructions. He wanted to be studied, interpreted. It was his subjects’ demonstrations of ingenuity and perceptiveness that impressed him, which was why Lucius was a favorite. Harry glanced at Draco and saw that his friend was watching the
conversation with the same silent fascination as Harry.

“No,” their lord told Avery. Avery, if it was possible, became paler still. “What I will deign to do for you, Avery, is tell you that the only manner in which your family can be a source of pleasure for your lord is by strengthening the unity of our magical community. That community is made stronger by the creation of alliances and by the cultivation of young magical people in order to increase our magical populace. When your father makes a choice in his capacity as Lord of those subjects and lands which I have granted to him, the first question he should ask himself is how it might please me.”

Their lord rose in one fluid movement, his chair somehow pressed back from the table as though of its own volition so that he stood, his fingertips resting on the surface of the table and without having made a sound. Automatically, everyone at the table bowed their heads. Even Harry, with little experience in their lord’s presence, gave over to the compulsion to do so without thought.

Their lord’s voice came over them. Maybe it was the effect of his voice without the counterbalance of the sight of him, transfixing and still, but Harry felt its sound roving over Harry, making the hair on his arms stand on end, impressing each word firmly on his senses.

“It is my tradition that the noble Houses shall seek their lord’s blessing when naming an Heir.”

“Yes, my Lord,” they all said. The words seemed to come unbidden from Harry’s mouth, toneless but unforced. A moment later, somehow, Harry knew his lord was seated once more, and he unbent his neck to find everyone at the table returned to ordinary posture in their chairs, and watching their lord carefully. Their lord once again sat at ease in his armed chair, his hands now relaxed on the arms, a single bright ring glinting on his right hand, strangely difficult to make out in detail, but shining.

“In the founders’ days,” Narcissa said evenly, “I am told it was traditional for Heirs to be selected from all blood relatives of a House, though some would adopt an unrelated Heir of particular magical power.”

“Either approach is a respectable one, depending on the particular circumstances,” said their lord, giving Narcissa a brief smile that was a sure signal of his approval. “But few young witches and wizards have fully come into their own before the age of fifteen. Which reminds me.” He steepled his fingers again. “It is my desire to revive the Triwizard Tournament, beginning next year and on a regular basis thereafter. I have improvements in mind that I know will please you.”

For the second time that evening, even the Malfoys couldn’t hide their shock. Harry perceived the smallest measure of amusement in his lord’s eyes, then had the repeated experience of direct eye contact with his lord, this time for only an instant, though Harry was left no less unsettled.

None of the adults seemed to have the energy to discuss their lord’s announcements any further. They nodded in a manner ranging from weary acceptance on the part of the Parkinsons, silent in their group around the foot of the table, to numb shock on the part of Norville Avery, to the Malfoys’ unreadable cool. Harry and Draco gave one another speaking looks that amounted to what in Merlin’s name is the Triwizard Tournament?

The answers to their questions would not come that evening, as it turned out. Their lord left shortly after the last course—which he studied, but left untouched, as he had anything edible that was set before him—but Avery and Old Avery, miserable with shock and impenetrably obtuse, respectively, insisted on staying to consult with Lucius and Narcissa as to the “situation” concerning their Heir. Narcissa sent Draco and Harry to bed with a look they knew they could not argue with.
That didn’t stop their imaginations from running rather wild. Draco snuck into Harry’s room to lie beside him and whisper until midnight, as they hadn’t done since before Hogwarts. The company gave Harry a warm, peaceful feeling that eventually defeated the buzz of excitement in his veins, so that he fell asleep more easily than usual and his peace thereafter was, to his knowledge, uninterrupted by a single dream.

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April, 1993

London

As Elaine had suspected it would be, the last leg of the quest was the most difficult. They faced increasingly virulent spells, since the goblet’s last bearer was a thief who intended to keep it hidden, rather than safekeeping it between periodic uses, and her every semi-ancient place of significance was riddled with traps. There was an alarming and recurring theme of fire, which meant that Elaine stayed up late in the evenings brewing burn salves, then setting out at twilight to search another place as thoroughly as possible. She had fallen so deeply, in that almost-year, into the pattern of the annual spell’s commandment, that she was often surprised to find nothing in the hiding places she ferreted out.

It was wearying, so much so that she forgot to strategize with Charlie, and let him prop her up when she was tired and fling himself in front of her when a fireball coursed their way. Something about his dragon made him, if not flame retardant, at least not so afraid. So he was quicker with the shields.

The last night snuck up on her. Charlie, easing into her bed and, when he was sure she was awake, pressing up against her and kissing the back of her neck. It wasn’t the first time, and just like the other times, she didn’t throw him out and it went no further than that: his gentle kisses, like questions, on her neck and her shoulders and the middle of her back.

It wasn’t until the morning, after restlessly dozing in his arms, that Elaine turned around, her strategy returning to her in a sudden wave, and then rolled over him and put her knee in the center of his chest. She leaned close to his ear.

“I’m going to fuck you,” she told him. And because he never argued, that is what she did. His silence was a kind of consent, she thought, though she wavered in the middle of it, when his thighs were braced against his chest and her hips had found a rhythm. She thought by his wide eyes when she changed the angle that no one had ever done this to him before, and felt a thrill that the claim she staked now was the first one, of a sort. But he looked uneasy, too, until Elaine picked up speed and saw the moment when he couldn’t think or doubt or hesitate, or do anything but feel. He looked just like she had hoped he would. Like she had planned he would. When he came, she crawled up his chest through the mess there and he gripped her thighs and put his tongue on her and it didn’t take long. It felt very good. But then it was over and Elaine was not sure anything had changed.

“I didn’t know that women did that,” Charlie said, sounding shy and pleased. Elaine, limp beside him and trying to keep her mind blank—trying and failing—snorted.

“Women do everything,” she assured him.

They washed and dressed and said nothing to one another about the fact that their year was the same thing as over. Elaine cast the protective magic they had worn ever day of the search out of habit, though she doubted it would be necessary. Then they made the string of apparitions to
Cologne, then to the complex that was their lord’s German seat, and looked precisely as they had left it.

Elaine wasn’t surprised to see their lord waiting for them in the oddly empty courtyard, but apparently she should have prepared Charlie for the possibility. He inhaled sharply, and without thinking, she reached out and touched his arm for a fraction of a moment. He shot a look at her that she didn’t meet, but seemed easier as they made their way to the requisite distance from their lord and stopped to bow, Charlie a half-step behind Elaine.

“Subjects,” said their lord. Elaine had worried she would feel something, standing there before him, but was relieved to find she did not. At least, nothing apart from the familiar concoction of fear and respect. She straightened and met his eye. He seemed to approve of what he saw in her face, and smiled, gesturing to the large wooden box resting on the flagstone surface between them. “Let’s see what the annual spell thinks of your sincerity, shall we?”

Elaine hesitated for perhaps the first time in her life, then reached down and lifted the box’s worn lid. For the past year, a thousand times, she had unveiled a hiding place knowing that nothing would be there, yet expecting to see something. This time, she had the disorienting sense of a reversal of knowledge and expectation. So much so that for an instant, she saw an empty box. But then she blinked, and there was a massive goblet there, resting on its side, and, to Elaine’s surprise, carved entirely from wood.

“I thought it would be gold,” Charlie blurted from over her shoulder. He sounded disappointed.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! This was a big one. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your comments, and learn from your criticism!
Chapter Fourteen: Agnate

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."

Maya Angelou

August 27, 1993

Hogwarts Castle

Scotland

Minerva McGonagall awaited her lord in her office, staring around at the bare walls almost unseeing. She never came to feel comfortable in this room. Even without the collection of ancient, useless charmed objects he had proudly amassed, or the violet draperies, or the particular furniture (for it had all been Vanished within hours of her being named Headmistress) the room would always seem to belong to Dumbledore.

Before Dumbledore, it had belonged to Dippett. Minerva had sat in the Headmaster’s office in her later years as a student when she was a prefect. But even then, if Dumbledore was in the room, the energy of the place had seemed to lean into him. Magic had a philo for magic of its kind, and the castle had always known whom was the strongest witch or wizard in the room.

Minerva was quite a strong witch, and Headmistress besides. Therefore she tended to know, whether the wards were triggered or not, when their lord arrived on the grounds. The castle, silent and close around her at all other times, like an obedient familiar, attentive to her bidding, would stray toward him.

So, she did not have to pretend to be unsurprised at his appearance inside her door. She did sometimes wonder how he did it; fools believed him capable of silent apparition, and the lore obviously amused him too much for him to correct it. Minerva knew that even he could not break the rules of physics. Apparition broke the sound barrier, and the noise was its cry of protest. She had never liked apparition. Her art was a quiet one, practiced in harmony with the other energies.
He looked so very much like he had in school, and smiled in the same way too. But Minerva was no fool, and she understood that their lord had no peer. As a girl she would have returned his smile automatically, but as a grown witch she stood and bowed and the perpetually downturned corners of her mouth had no urge to lift.

“Minerva,” he said warmly. “Do sit.” She did. “I think I may anticipate the topic of this meeting,” he went on, untroubled, as he seated himself. He did everything very smoothly, with the unstudied grace of a dancer; as haplessly as did the rest of his subjects--whether they loved, feared or loathed him--Minerva found him beautiful.

“The topic of conversation is whatever my lord should choose,” Minerva said, and then she hesitated. The steel in her was too stubborn to bend fully, so she added: “But our agreement…”

“That the children are to be safe, while they are here,” he said. “Yes. The first clause.”

“And,” Minerva insisted. “The second: that I may do as I believe to be right. The tournament was invented at a time when children were not seen as children, past the age of eleven. That is not…we now know better.” She forced herself to meet his eye. “You, my lord, have always been a champion of progress, reason and rationality. Surely…”

“I am progressive, reasonable and rational,” he agreed. “And realistic, and pragmatic. The tournament had a long history of quelling the aggression of the commoners. And muggles have always been terribly interested in organized violence.”

Minerva was confused enough to be distracted. “The muggles, my lord?”

“Yes, I’ve decided to grant one of their incessant requests – the wireless only, for now, not the moving pictures they call television.”

“Television?” Minerva echoed. She was privately sympathetic toward the muggles, but knew nothing about them. The school kept her busy, and had even before the second war.

“It’s as though you recorded a play in a pensieve, but then observed it in a portrait.”

It made little sense, but Minerva felt slightly less ignorant, so she nodded. “But they aren’t getting their te-le-vision,” she said, enunciating carefully. “Only their wireless.”

He nodded. “They may cover the tournament, and play a bit of music, to start. Besides, the Pureblood families will like it, which is important, because they will not like the other thing I am about to do.”

She nearly asked, then decided not to. “I see,” she said instead, and supposed that she did see. As well as was necessary, anyway. She wasn’t sure what her lord could do to lose her cooperation. She cared too deeply about the students not to do what she could to stay, whether her lord respected every clause of their agreement or violated them all. It was not something she could hide, and so her lord knew it, too. A flicker of grudging admiration lit within her as it always did at the thought that, despite this knowledge, he did not often take advantage.

But sometimes he did. Like when they implemented that ridiculous shared common room and encouraged eleven-year-olds to experiment with advanced transfiguration…

“The events will take place off school grounds, and fatalities will not be a certainty,” her lord was saying.

“Only a likelihood,” Minerva said, before she could stop herself. Then she bent her head, because
she knew well that while a certain amount of candor amused her lord, she had a tendency to go too far.

“It will be open to students over fifteen according to sworn lordship.”

Minerva looked up, but she wasn’t particularly surprised. The last time the Triwizard Tournament had been run, they had based the contestants on country of origin, but in the years before countries when the first hierarchy of power by blood was followed as it was, again, today, contestants competed on behalf of their sworn Lord. Then, of course, there hadn’t been one lord over them all. Minerva frowned and her lord, seeing her expression, nodded approvingly.

“You wonder how the magic will sort, with the two oaths,” he said, and he was correct. His ability to read minds the Muggle way had never sat easily with Minerva, but she was accustomed to it, so she was not surprised.

“I’ve had the goblet in Durmstrang a year now, and I am confident in its calibration.”

“I was told it could not be corrupted,” Minerva said slowly. “But I suppose most of the lore around it is fiction, after all this time.”

He looked at her reprovingly. “It cannot be corrupted,” he agreed. “It is wooden, after all. But it wishes to rectify with the world as it is. Its original purpose was to evolve, at least in that respect.”

She could not deny a degree of academic interest, but the line where an object passed from Charmed or Cursed to an Artefact had always worried her. What was the implication, when old magic made that metamorphosis from a reversible spell to a purer expression of its caster’s, and subsequent bearers’, combined (and sometimes conflicting) intent?

It was too much like creation and far too much like sentience. Even the Sorting Hat left Minerva’s heart a bit cold if she thought on it too long, and it was as benevolent as something of its age and power could possibly be.

“I’ll see you on September first, Minerva,” said her lord, and smiled at her before vanishing abruptly from his chair, by some means that could not possibly be apparition, though neither did Minerva know what else it could be.

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August 28, 1993

Malfoy Manor

Wiltshire

“It’s rather important that you say nothing to your peers about the Triwizard Tournament,” Lucius said, for the eleventh – no, twelfth – time, but in his defense it was almost impossible to tell whether or not Draco and Harry were listening, since Narcissa had been casting wardrobe spells noisily around the room for the past two hours. At the moment Harry was suspended in midair in the ballroom, surrounded by a semicircle of dress robes arranged by color into a muted rainbow. It put Lucius in mind of a small army of fashionable soldiers stretching twenty feet in every direction, while Narcissa pointed her wand seemingly at random to call one up to hover under Harry’s chin. Generally she would then shake her head and cast the garment back toward whichever manor closet it had been summoned from, though occasionally she would give a short
nod of satisfaction and the robes would instead soar into the depths of Harry’s open trunk.

Draco, trusted with slightly more freedom to exercise his own taste, was studying his reflection in a sphere mirror that Lucius knew from experience was sound-inhibiting, and though he had glanced over at his father with the occasional nod while Lucius spoke, Lucius suspected it was the automated response of habit and had little to do with active listening on Draco’s part.

“Can’t the packing be done tomorrow?” Lucius asked his wife, exasperated. “They don’t leave for the better part of a week.”

“I could ask the same question about the lecturing,” Narcissa replied, and nodded approvingly at the slate gray robes her spell had presented, before gently releasing Harry from his levitation and generating a tiny tornado in the ballroom when she let all the remaining dress robes go at once. Wincing at the racket of wind on so much silk and the disruption to the state of his hair, Lucius glared impotently at the side of his wife’s head and stalked out of the room.

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August 29, 1993

Black Palace

London

Peter, predictably, was installed at the palace with Hermione, due to another extended absence by Lord Black and his discovery, roughly one year before, that Hermione was at significant risk of perishing under the care of his house Elves whenever he left.

“It will not select you,” Peter said. Hermione stared back at him patiently, wondering who he was trying to convince. Catching her bemused look, Peter repeated himself, then added: “I have made sure of it.”

What that meant, Hermione could not fathom. But within the carefully mediated geography of her mind, she was unnaturally patient, and she did not beg Peter for an explanation that she knew she would have soon enough.

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August 30, 1993

Weasley House

Devon

It was late morning, but most of the occupants of the house were still asleep, save Ron and Theo, who had yet to go to bed. Extended time together seemed to throw them back into the patterns of their years together in Calgary, and they had, then, been vigilant at night. The castle had kept no clocks, but darkness was the time when Lord Nott was busiest in his work, and considering what his efforts sometimes released, the boys would have been foolish to be completely vulnerable in sleep. So they were nocturnal, from Ron’s earliest memories, racing blindly through the black corridors before they had wands. Even afterward, when Lumos was within their abilities, they
tended out of habit to chart the darkness through their other senses. Ron remembered times in winter when he went weeks without sight of the sun, or much else besides. Now those years felt like a long dream, and not as unpleasant a dream as he might once have thought. At least there was a simple focus to living in impersonal physical peril. His temperament was better suited to that than politics, he was sure.

That thought made Ron sigh. They were seated on a garden bench by the hedge maze, and Theo had been leaning against him, his hand over Ron’s and his head on Ron’s shoulder. Now he straightened and gave his friend a curious look.


Theo hummed. “Water flower rock,” he agreed, and they both laughed.

Another thought made Ron feel like weeping. He preemptively dashed a hand across his eyes. He wasn’t ashamed to cry in front of Theo, who had seen him in every way and every feeling, but the physical act of crying always took his breath away, and he wanted to speak. “We’ll have to behave more normally together, like we said.”

Theo rolled his eyes. But Ron knew he agreed; it had been more Theo’s idea, after all. It was only that Theo, so much sharper and easier in his own head than Ron, could turn on the skillset involving manners and people and behavior more easily. Ron had to do it gradually, and knew he should have begun already, as he had the previous summer. Easing himself out of the pattern with Theo and back to the new normal over weeks, not days.

“You are right, of course, Ron,” said Theo, sitting up straight and smiling as he spoke in a way he would if someone had been listening. Ron had heard Fred and George converse the way that he and Theo did, but no one else. Half phrases and words that they had begun saying as toddlers with no one to match meaning to sound for them. Certainly Lord Nott expended no effort to teach them language, or even to locate them more than once every several days to ensure none of his creations had carried them off. And all of those years took place before Perpetua came to civilize them, at least to the extent of her limited abilities.

“This will be an interesting year,” Theo added, putting an arm around Ron’s shoulders as he might do on a bench somewhere in Hogwarts, with other students milling around. Then he squeezed Ron’s shoulder and released him. “This will be our last summer.”

Ron was not surprised. It was why he had indulged himself so long in the charade that no time had passed. It was why he wished, as he would not have fathomed he ever could, that he and Theo were back in the old castle with no threat more serious than a thousand wronged ghosts.

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August 31, 1993

Peverell Ridge

the Welsh region formerly known as Gwynedd

“Elspeth?” called her mother’s voice.
“Down here,” Elspeth called back. The Ridge’s cellars were expansive and complex, but with the wandless magic Lily always insisted was mere maternal intuition, she found Elspeth almost at once after descending the stairs.

“Honey, we already gathered all your Potions ingredients,” Lily protested, finding Elspeth bent in front of a shelf of vials of Runespoor scales, studying each one with a critical frown.

“Abbott knocked a few off of the shelf,” Elspeth admitted, after a slight hesitation. “Don’t tell dad!”

Lily chuckled, squatting beside Elspeth to look over her shoulder. “That’s the best of the lot,” she said, pointing to a vial containing scales faintly freckled with grey. Elspeth frowned.

“It looks tainted,” she said, though not in argument. Lily was the nearest thing to a Potions Master one could become without a formal apprenticeship, and sometimes their lord’s own Potions Master wrote her for her opinion on this or that obscure or experimental ingredient or combination.

“Runespoors mottle as they age, and their scales gain potency over the years too. One with this much color must have been a thousand, at least.”

Tucking that bit of information away, Elspeth reached out for the indicated vial and turned it around in her fingertips for a final study before tucking it into her pocket.

“What else did Abbott defile?” Lily asked, still smiling.

“Just a bit of doxie venom,” Elspeth said. “I already got it, though.” She patted her pocket as mother and daughter got to their feet. As it had a tendency to do, Lily’s hand had found its way to Elspeth’s head, and her fingertips were gentle and comforting on Elspeth’s scalp, parting the smooth dark locks.

“Uncle Remus is here to say his goodbyes, since we’ll leave so early in the morning.”

It took two floo stops to get to London when you weren’t permitted to apparate, Elspeth recalled from her very few ventures beyond the Ridge. She wanted to see Remus, but the reminder of her impending departure made her grasp her mother’s unoccupied hand, almost desperately.

When she looked up, confused by her own emotional response, Lily was frowning quizzically. Her hand flexed around Elspeth’s, a press of reassurance. Elspeth tended to feel closer to her father, but he wasn’t the emotionally intuitive parent in the family. With him, Elspeth would have had to try to explain feelings that she couldn’t begin to name, but with her mother, she just had to maintain eye contact for several long moments and leave her expression transparent.

Lily’s brow smoothed. “Oh, honey, it’s going to be fine. Just focus on school, and stay close to the friends you already have until you get a sense of the rest of the students.”

Of course, there was another level to Elspeth’s anxiety that only her father had sufficient information to understand. In that moment she came dangerously close to telling her mother about the birch wand. The impulse had grown stronger ever since they went to Ollivander’s for her “first” wand, and though the long and flexible willow wand that had responded to her there felt comfortable enough in her hand, it was nothing like the birch and every time she touched it she felt the lie in a way she never had previously.

“When will dad be back?” Elspeth tried not to sound too desperate, but she needn’t have bothered. Her mother expected her to miss James whenever he was long absent; they were notoriously codependent. The high note in her voice could be mistaken for that anxiety alone, and not the fear
that he wouldn’t exchange the wands as he had promised to do before she boarded the train to school.

“Late tonight. In plenty of time,” Lily assured her. “Now, let’s go see about reinforcing the locking charms on the cage of that enterprising kneazle of yours.”

“Abbott just likes his freedom,” Elspeth said, but she was grinning as they climbed the cellar stairs.

Elspeth’s father was not back that night. When her mother woke her in the darkness to dress and step into the floo, her face was drawn with badly concealed worry.

“He’ll meet us in London, he says,” she assured her daughter. Elspeth, not reassured, ignored her pounding heart and hoped that wherever he had secreted away her wand, he had retrieved it before leaving on this last bit of business. It made her look wildly around the rooms they crossed through en route to the floo foyer in a way she wouldn’t have otherwise. Was it there somewhere, soon to be parted from her? She had always liked to think of it as being on the Ridge, and near her, but maybe it had been in London all along, in their Gringott’s vault, perhaps?

“It will all be here when you get back,” said Lily soothingly. Elspeth could not recall ever wanting so badly to cry.

For once, she was relieved that the floo had a tendency to make her sick, since nausea was a distraction from her guilt-driven urge to blurt out her single deepest secret to her mother and alienate each member of her family from one another for the rest of all their lives. They rested in the public foyer in Bristol until Lily determined that Elspeth’s pallor was no longer alarmingly green, then made their second trip to the old Ministry. The last time Elspeth was there it had been eerily empty, but this time it was overflowing with other families bound for Platform 9 ¾.

Elspeth leaned into Lily while a wave of dizziness crashed over her, then let herself be steered over to an out-of-the-way bench while voices rang off of the high ceilings and marble walls. The place was nicely illuminated in anticipation of the irregular amount of traffic, and Elspeth found her gaze resting curiously on the large sculpture in the center of the chamber. It had the slightly blurred appearance of artwork that had been hastily transfigured, and rose in a misshapen lump toward the ceiling. Elspeth wondered what its subject had been, and why it had so offended their lord.

“I’m going to check on Abbott,” said Elspeth, then repeated herself into her mother’s ear when Lily frowned at her, not hearing her above the hubbub.

“Are you sure you’re up to it,” Lily called back across the scant inches between their faces. Elspeth nodded resolutely, opened her trunk, slid the opening under her feet where she sat on the bench and slid inside.

The expansion charms were expertly applied to her luggage with all the associated spells also, so the interior was immediately warmer and quieter than the exterior had been. Without a noise canceling charm, expanded space had an unsettling effect on noise outside its confines, or at least the books said so. Elspeth had always been surrounded by witches and wizards who knew how to cast magic with ease and accuracy. Unless, like her Squib cousin Dudley, they couldn’t cast any magic at all.

Abbott was curled on top of his roomy cage, clearly seeking to make a point, feigning sleep with the reinforced door ajar and the faint scent of mangled magic on the air. The Ridge had a host of indigenous magical creatures on its grounds, but the family of kneazles was the most infamous. Abbott was magically strong even for one of his line, and so determined in his naughtiness that her father had despaired of her taking him to Hogwarts where the degree of trouble he could get into
was directly proportionate to the lack of patience most occupants there would have for him.

But Elspeth trusted Abbott to be wary. Her father just didn’t know him like she did and besides, he was a self-declared “crup person.”

Elspeth stroked Abbott’s large, squashed orange nose with a fingertip and grinned at him when he opened one large green eye approximately the same color as Elspeth’s. “I see you’re doing fine,” she observed aloud. Even as intelligent as he was, Abbott could not speak or understand human language to Elspeth’s knowledge, but he must have gleaned something from her tone because he yawned uncaringly and closed his eye again.

Elspeth reached up to the lip of the trunk and pulled herself back up, ignoring the wooden ladder rungs built into the side of the wall for that purpose.

Lily was looking around them with a growing resignation in the eyes she had passed down to both of her children. “I thought we’d see your dad here, but maybe he went ahead to the station.”

Elspeth bent her head and took extra care with the leather straps and brass buckles involved in closing back up her trunk. “Are you ready?” her mother asked after she had finished.

Elspeth’s fingertips brushed the wand holster in her sleeve, but avoided the willow handle. “Yes,” she lied.

Of course, James was not on the platform. But Elspeth’s plummeting heart rose inevitably at the sight of a very similar, and equally dear figure, standing quietly among the three white-blond Malfoys like a raven among swans.

“Harry!” she called, unthinking, and her brother swiftly turned, his face lighting up with a grin she had memorized in their two meetings, the more recent on Harry’s thirteenth birthday just a month and a day before.

“Elspeth,” he said back, not at the same volume but no less enthusiastically, and with a quick glance at Lord Malfoy presumably for permission, he loped over to catch her up in a hug. Harry’s arms were wiry and strong, and he was oddly warm, just like their father. “Mum,” he added to Lily, more shyly, but was flushed with pleasure as he let go of Elspeth so Lily could embrace him.

“Where’s…well, I thought dad might be…” Harry looked around hopefully.

Lily smiled in a way that was more like a grimace, Elspeth thought, but Harry didn’t seem to notice. He didn’t know her well enough, Elspeth thought fleetingly. Lily was very good at controlling how she presented herself, which meant that Elspeth had gotten very good at picking up on the subtlest signs of unease, a skill that also seemed to translate to reading people other than her mother.

Over Harry’s shoulder, Elspeth saw Lord Black shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other before stiffly patting a pretty girl with glossy dark curls on the shoulder. Hermione Granger, Elspeth thought, and started to lift her hand in a wave, but the girl had already stepped onto the train, clearly eager to conclude whatever exchange had been ongoing with her benefactor. Lord Black turned, saw Elspeth, and smiled uncertainly before turning away.

“All right then, Elspeth,” said Lily, visibly – at least to Elspeth – restraining herself from touching her daughter’s hair. “Your dad will send his love in a letter, I’m sure. But you’ll need to board the train now.”

Harry smiled at Elspeth in reassurance. “You won’t even have to worry about not having anyone to
sit with. You can come with me and meet some of your future house mates.”

Elspeth, already self-conscious about the expectation that she would sort Gryffindor, made a face. She reached out to shove Harry playfully, and because he was a head taller than her he didn’t budge an inch. He did grin, though, and make as though to muss her hair, which made Elspeth giggle, giddy with the ease with which they had fallen into the habits she had always associated with other siblings when wishing particularly she could be close to hers.

Lily gave a very faint cry and intervened to wrap an arm around each one of them. Harry was as tall as her, so she had to wrestle his head down a bit to kiss his head the way she did Elspeth’s, but Harry didn’t mind, if his laughter was anything to go by. Then Lily was nudging them onto the train, Elspeth clutching her lightened trunk, Harry empty-handed, presumably having already loaded his.

As the compartment’s doors closed, Elspeth saw Harry stare through the smudged window, as though he saw something puzzling. Elspeth followed his gaze, but from what she could tell the only thing in his direct line of sight was an empty bench.

“What is it, Harry?”

“Nothing,” he said, stirring and turning to her, his smile back on the corner of his mouth. “Let’s go find some Weasleys.”

“I thought you were going to introduce me to Gryffindors,” Elspeth said.

Harry, already walking down the aisle, shot her a quick look over his shoulder, brow playfully arched. “Same thing.”

Some time later, Elspeth had met various Weasleys, a slight, handsome boy named Theo, and a conventionally pretty blond whose name Elspeth had immediately and deliberately forgotten who leaned against Harry with a proprietary hand on his arm.

After the initial flurry of nerves and new faces, things grew quiet. The group of friends, reunited after a summer apart, had enough conversation fodder to last the seven hour trip, but Elspeth ran out of things to say after repeating her name and smiling automatically a dozen times, trying to commit names and faces to memory – not one of her skills, she soon learned. She had managed to rescue an awkward lull in her conversation with a fellow first year, a grey-eyed girl with her hair cropped close to her head, revealing the entirety of her delicate, slightly pointed ears, by producing a sleepy Abbott for her inspection, but when he began to wake up in earnest and growl testily, she hastily put him back in her trunk.

Without distraction, Elspeth’s mind inevitably wandered back to the subject of her wand. Not the one in her sleeve – it was hers, too, in a way, but it wasn’t the same. The birch wand was out there like a missing limb, and Elspeth couldn’t account for her father’s inability to bring it to her, so her imagination ran wild and none of its suggestions were comforting. Perhaps something had happened to her father – terrible. Perhaps the wand was lost, and he was delayed as he haplessly searched for it – terrible. Perhaps he had simply forgotten – selfishly, she thought that might be the most terrible possibility of all.

“Hi there, little sis,” said a newly familiar, lilting voice, and Elspeth frowned before she could help it. The blond girl had detached herself from Harry for long enough to slide onto the bench next to Elspeth and pluck at her hair with a familiarity that made Elspeth want to claw and spit the way Abbott might.
“Hello,” Elspeth bit out, refraining from adding *I’m not your little sis.*

“Nervous about your first term, then?” the girl asked pityingly, but thankfully put her hands back in her own lap and only leaned toward Elspeth, too close for comfort but at least not touching her any longer. Elspeth had really never been asked to tolerate physical contact from anyone but her parents, and she found it made her uncomfortable.

“A bit,” Elspeth said. It was as good an explanation as any for her silence and atypical antisocial behavior on the train ride insofar, she supposed. “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your last name. I’m not very good with names.” Two truths and a lie – a game that she used to play with her friends in the village, before they got old enough to resent the fact their playmate was the heir to their families’ sworn lordship. “Your hair is so pretty,” she added, in the spirit of that old pastime.

The girl beamed. “Aren’t you a darling. My last name is Brown. Lavender Brown,” she added with a wink, startling Elspeth. “Here’s a good trick for names.” She drew her wand, a knotty pine piece with a fine tapered end, and a handle dark with wear. An heirloom, Elspeth realized with surprise.

“Nom,” Lavender encanted, slowly and slightly drawing the tip of the wand along the palm of her opposite hand. To Elspeth’s surprise, her own name appeared on Lavender’s hand in Elspeth’s handwriting, before slowly fading away.

“Wow,” Elspeth said, impressed. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“It’s a variation on an old auror spell,” Lavender said matter-of-factly. Elspeth, who knew about aurors but also knew that her parents spoke more freely of the past than was generally encouraged, only nodded and said nothing else. But she studied Lavender thoughtfully while the older witch stowed her wand. Don’t underestimate the deliberately vapid, she told herself firmly.

Her father had said she would learn more lessons on the train than in her first month of class. Frustrated with him though she might be, he was usually right about that sort of thing.

Elspeth sorted Gryffindor, to no one’s surprise, and after settling into the seat Harry had saved for her to his right, she was as surprised as the others when, after all the first years were sorted, the Headmistress rose from her seat at the staff table.

“Students,” she said. “Now that we have welcomed our first year class to Hogwarts, I have more new faces to introduce you to. As you may know, it has previously been each family’s choice whether to home educate or send their child here to us at Hogwarts, or to any of the other fine schools in Europe and elsewhere. But in his wisdom, our lord has determined that all magical children are meant to learn in a community, and therefore, beginning this year, it shall be his tradition that all eleven-year-old children offered a position at one of his schools shall accept it.

“Further, those children home educated until this time shall join the classes of the similarly aged. Which means we have a nontraditional sorting to engage in.” She turned her head and gestured to the doorway. While she had been speaking, Professor Slughorn – the rotund old man who had put the hat on Elspeth and the other first years’ heads – had gone out into the corridor and was now shepherding in two dozen witches and wizards of various ages, all wearing closed or dazed expressions and dressed in Hogwarts robes.

A titter rose up among the existing student body, but they all fell reluctantly silent again when Professor McGonagall raised a hand in a sharp quelling gesture.

“Let the sorting re-commence,” she called, and it did.
With one exception, the new students sorted Hufflepuff, which was rather unprecedented (Elspeth was given to understand by the furious whispers being exchanged between Harry’s friends). There were two exceptions, and they both went to Gryffindor. One was a sort of pudgy blond boy who could have been Elspeth’s age but she thought might be a bit older, and who barely looked up from his shoes and whose name was so distinct Elspeth thought even she might remember it: Neville Longbottom.

The other was a boy who had to be a seventh year, nondescript in his height and build but with a striking face, and a watchful expression in his eyes, which seemed dark across the room but, when he came to sit at the Gryffindor table, happening to slide onto the bench across from Harry and Elspeth, were distinctly green up close. Not the clear green of the members of Elspeth’s family, but mottled with brown like the jade stones that paved the creek bottom in the most magical part of the forest on the Ridge.

Philip Something – Elspeth had forgotten his last name, if she had ever known it – studied the boy. Not exactly recoiling, but reestablishing some room between them on the bench.

“I don’t believe I know your name,” Philip said, sounding polite to Elspeth’s ear, but the resulting chill in the air, which she perceived at once, belied his tone.

That was silly, because even Elspeth could remember his name. Professor Slughorn had just called it out: “Riley Wilhelm.” And then the hat had said, “Gryffindor!” with no more hesitation than it had given before giving Elspeth the same result.

Riley did not answer Philip, but he did look back at him steadily, and then Harry quietly interrupted them.

“Relax, Farley,” said Harry, in a light, almost teasing tone. “It’s just his first day.”

Riley pivoted in his seat to look at Harry. Elspeth thought she felt her brother stiffen. Then Rylie inclined his head slightly in deference. “Riley Wilhelm, master Black,” he said, somehow giving the impression of bowing, without seeming at all awkward and without moving from the bench. When he straightened, Elspeth glanced down to see that Harry was clenching his knee very tightly, and the hair on his arms was standing on end.

“We don’t really worry about things like that at Hogwarts,” he muttered.

Lost, Elspeth cast a look around the table, and saw that Hermione Granger, from the other end of the table furthest from the staff table, was staring at them intently. When she found Elspeth looking, her eyes immediately went downcast.

“Longbottom,” called Philip. “Here, have a seat.”

Neville Longbottom had been hovering around the mostly-full table, clearly unwilling to ask anyone to budge over, but after he cautiously approached Philip, it left Riley with no real option but to make room on his end as well.

Elspeth leaned toward her brother. “Harry,” she murmured hesitantly. He glanced at her, still frowning, and shook his head minutely.

“Later,” he promised.

But there was no opportunity; the prefects had taken Elspeth to the Gryffindor common room, then the shared common room, and then she was shuffled off to her dorm before she could even attempt to find Harry. When she got there, the impersonality of the room left her a bit hollow. She had a
room to herself her whole life, but at home the house itself was a friend. Here, she had hoped for a
dorm-mate, which her mother had fondly recalled having during her Hogwarts years.

When someone knocked, Elspeth’s heart leapt at the thought it could be Harry – then, just as she
answered the door, she recalled that boys weren’t permitted in the girls’ dormitory although,
perversely, girls were permitted in the boys’. Lavender was on the other side of the door.

“This reminds me of my first year,” she said, walking past Elspeth into the room without waiting
for an invitation. “You wouldn’t know it now, but Harry was like you. It took him a while to settle
in, too. I can’t take all the credit for that, but I do deserve some.” She winked at Elspeth. “It seems
I’m destined to do the same for every Potter I meet. Homesick? Hungry? Bubbling over with
questions?”

By this time Lavender had settled comfortably on Elspeth’s bed, which Elspeth herself had yet to
touch. She did find her trunk and occupied herself with digging out Abbott, who yowled in his put-
upon way, but grudgingly emerged and slowly began to inspect the room by scent, his tail
twitching to remind her that he was still aggravated.

“What a darling kneazle,” said Lavender, her voice high and unconvincing, then sneezed.

“Are you allergic?” Elspeth asked hopefully. Maybe that would keep Lavender from barging into
her room in future.

“Yes,” Lavender said, but before Elspeth could feel any relief, the other girl reached into a pocket
of her robe and produced a small vile of a shiny pink substance. She ingested its contents and
immediately her expression eased and her pale cheeks regained their former rosy color. “But I’m a
Brown. The unofficial family motto is ‘there’s a Potion for that.’”

“Hmm,” said Elspeth, who while not at her mother’s level, had always had an interest in Potions.
Unwilling to admit she and Lavender could have something in common, she searched for a change
in subject.

“Umm, what happened? At dinner.” She wanted to know, and she knew Lavender wasn’t going to
be particularly judicious with information, so how could it hurt to ask?

Lavender looked at her thoughtfully. “A lot happened. But you must mean with that Wilhelm boy,
and what he said to your brother. I could see you were confused at the time. Has no one ever
formally greeted your father as their sworn lord?”

Elspeth thought about what to say. She wasn’t willing to lie about her family unless it was really
necessary, but knowing when it was necessary was something she was still working out. “I’m not
my father’s heir, so I don’t really go out amongst the subjects with him. I always spent most of my
time at home.”

Lavender seemed willing to accept this. “Well, a common subject should bow and greet by title
even the heir of his sworn lord. So he did that, rather prettily.” Lavender’s mouth curved briefly in
a different kind of smile, then she seemed to shake herself and refocus on Elspeth. “The fact that he
had manners enough to do that, but still sat in the midst of the nobles at the table is quite telling.
But what exactly it means is…hmm, hard to say. Time will tell. But that mystery is likely to pale in
comparison to what will happen next week.”

“What?” Elspeth asked immediately.

“Oh, I really can’t say, if you don’t already know,” said Lavender, getting to her feet. “Time for
sleep, little sis,” she said.

This time Elspeth couldn’t stop herself. “I’m not your little sis,” she pointed out, then blushed when Lavender laughed.

“As good as,” she assured Elspeth, and left.

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September 6, 1993

Hogwarts Castle

Scotland

The announcement of the Tri-Wizard tournament was met with shock and confusion by all the commonborn students, and also Elspeth and Ron, and no surprise at all by all the students of noble birth, except for Elspeth and Ron.

Harry tried not to think about why that was, instead leaning over the table to fill his little sister in on the essentials. He had kept her close to him all week, surprised to see the girl he’d always thought of as independent and bold so willing to follow him around so meekly, but he figured she would spread her wings soon enough.

All students who were sworn through their families to a Lord or Lady put their name in the flames, and some of the noble students submitted their names, too. They tended to be the older and magically stronger set. It probably wouldn’t look good to submit the name of an heir or other child of the house, but have a commoner chosen instead, Harry supposed. Sirius and Lucius had given Harry strict instructions not to feed his name to the cup, but he supposed he could have on behalf of his bloodline. He was embarrassed to have to ask Elspeth which of their fellow students were sworn to Peverell, and it was a small handful. The oldest of them was a witch in Ravenclaw who was a third year like Harry. Not likely to win, then.

“You can put your name in next time, Harry, I’m sure,” Ron said, observing Harry’s somewhat wistful look at the goblet, its flames steady and bright for the third day in a row. The tournament would be held every three years, giving most current students and all future students more than one pass at submitting their names.

“Have you decided we’ll live that long, then?” Harry asked, reviving an old joke between them.

Ron grinned. “I have, and therefore so shall it be.”

“So shall what be?” asked Theo, sliding into the bench between them. It wasn’t exactly forbidden that the students intermingle houses at the tables, but Theo, who did so regularly, was in the minority.

“Harry and I shall live to be old and grey,” Ron explained. “Are you putting in your name?”

“Yes,” Theo said shortly, and the conversation froze over for a moment.

“You probably won’t die,” Harry offered into the silence. “Especially not if you ask Ron to declare it.”

Theo smiled slowly and turned to Ron with one brow arched expectantly.
Ron rolled his eyes, but then sat up very straight and cleared his throat. “Thou shalt not die in a children’s tournament,” he pronounced. The three of them chuckled, then all seemed to realize at once how close they were coming to being irreverent, and silence fell again.

Lord Nott did not have many subjects, and neither did Lord Potter, which meant that two third years were nominated by the goblet for the tournament: Theo Nott and the third-year Ravenclaw who was apparently sworn to Harry’s father. Her name was Beatrice Claymore, and she was the first to die.

It wasn’t anyone’s intention. The field was chaos, and she was caught in the crossfire of two nonlethal spells which, taken together, overwhelmed her before the professors supervising the combat could intervene. The Gryffindor common room was as silent and depressing as a tomb that night, and when Harry went to the shared common room for respite, he found it empty but for three weeping Ravenclaws who must have known the girl, so he beat another retreat and wound up on the stairs to the astronomy tower almost without deciding where to go.

He wasn’t alone there, either. But the person who leaned out over the parapet was both the last person Harry had expected, and one of the few whose presence wasn’t repellant: Riley Wilhelm. He was, of all things, smoking a cigarette, though he drew it away from his mouth as he turned to look at Harry.

Since the night of the welcome feast, Riley hadn’t spoken a word to Harry. He had seemed willing to be relegated to the outskirts of Gryffindor with other commonborn students; apparently being selected as a Triwizard contestant was distinction enough. There was still something interesting about him, though Harry couldn’t put his finger on what.

There on the tower, Riley looked at Harry and Harry looked back, then Riley looked away and dropped the cigarette near his right foot, then ground it out beneath the sole of his boot. Harry had only seen one person smoke before, in this Muggle way, and they had Vanished the cigarette rather than bothering to physically destroy it.

“Can I help you, master Black?” Riley said everything in this particular way, where you couldn’t take offense exactly, but something phrased as deferential sounded derogatory instead. Or maybe it was just the fact that someone older and infinitely cooler would be in a position to express deference at all.

Squirming, Harry shrugged and looked away. Why had he come out here?

“Want one?” Riley asked, and Harry’s eyes shot up. Riley’s gaze was unnerving when met directly, so Harry looked away after a few moments and shook his head.

“All right then. If you’ll pardon me, master Black.”

He started past Harry, who suddenly didn’t want him to go. He couldn’t be sure how he knew it, but he was sure Riley was the most interesting thing going on at Hogwarts.

“In the first task,” Harry blurted, unable to think of anything to say and therefore saying the one thing he couldn’t stop thinking about but had sworn he wouldn’t ask. “How did you do it?”

Riley paused, his broad shoulders back and his posture easy, as though he’d never been asked a question that vexed him, and this one bothered him least of all.

“Magic,” he said, and winked before disappearing down the stairs.

After a frozen moment, Harry laughed. By then there was no one else on the tower to hear him.
December, 1993
Hogwarts Castle
London

Harry sat with Sirius for the second task. Sirius, who had been harried and absent as ever, and whose trademark good humor was increasingly hard to unearth. Watching him stare vacantly across the old Quidditch pitch for a full minute, Harry finally elbowed him.

“Sirius,” he said when the man startled and looked at him inquiringly. “What’s going on?”

He’d been asking less direct versions of this question for so long he had stopped expecting a real answer, so he was past being disappointed when he didn’t get one this time.

“Oh, you know,” Sirius said with obviously forced levity. “Lord stuff.”

“You don't make it sound like much fun,” Harry said. “Maybe I should renounce your title.”

Sirius looked truly worried for a moment, until Harry smiled wryly and bumped their shoulders together. “I’m joking.” Though the thought often crossed his mind, it wasn’t in him to disappoint Sirius—or anyone else—so completely.

“Prat,” said Sirius, but his expression had gone soft and fond, which had been Harry’s primary goal. “What do you think? Money on that slick witch of Mulcibers’?”

Harry found laying odds on a contest infamous for its fatalities of minor witches and wizards in poor taste, so he just shrugged.

“So Elspeth was saying that you were part of a pretty legendary crowd when you were my age.”

This earned him a perfectly blank stare, as though he’d been speaking Parseltongue.

“Elspeth Potter,” Harry clarified. “You know, my sister.”

“I’m familiar,” Sirius said stiffly. “I don’t really like thinking about all that, Harry. It’s...hard.”

Harry thought that over. “You know what else is hard? Not knowing very much at all about why the two people who call you heir can’t be in the same room as one another. Then finding out they were inseparable once.”

“You knew we were friends,” Sirius mumbled.

“Inseparable,” Harry repeated, folding his arms.

Sirius sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose as hard, deep lines appeared all over his face. Harry felt pressure build unpleasantly in his chest. He hadn’t meant to make Sirius sad. He hadn’t meant to have a serious conversation at all, but...

A moment before Harry could let him off the hook, Sirius started talking. They didn’t have a lot of attention to spare for the second task.

Riley won the Second Task, using a charmed object and impeccable aim, without ever drawing his wand.
Chapter Summary

In which Riley faces the third task.

Chapter Notes

Beta genius Wolf_of_Lilacs gets the credit and I get the blame. I needed lots of help and hand holding while figuring out what to include (and exclude) from these last two chapters. Hope you like it!

If you’ve been watching the outline, this chapter is a new addition, as what I had planned for Chapter 14 sprawled into 15,000+ words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen: Illusory

“Official truths are often powerful illusions.”

John Pilger

June, 1994

Hogwarts Castle

Scotland

In the darkness of the very early morning of the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Riley snuck out of the dormitories as planned to rendezvous with Peter Pettigrew.

As he had throughout the year, he utilized the enchanted map to ensure a clear path, and when unavoidable knots of students passed close, he ducked into doorways or behind suits of armor until they passed. He was, unpleasantly, stuck in a half-crouch for half an hour while a handful of first-year Slytherin girls exchanged gossip in which Riley played a rather central role. If his knees weren’t killing him after five minutes, he might have been amused.

When they moved on, he darted into that corridor, rounded a few more corners while obsessively checking the map, and then passed through the secret entrance to the secret exit that would deposit him behind a large mossy boulder in Centaur territory.

So far he hadn’t seen a centaur, but he assumed that if he did, it would kill him. There wasn’t much he knew about Peter, but on that short list was the sure knowledge that Peter didn’t care very much whether Riley lived or died.
Fortunately there were no centaurs in sight, but the night was warm and the forest was dense at that spot, so Peter Pettigrew, waiting there, was sweaty and unpleasant.

“You’re late,” he observed.

“Hmm,” said Riley. He really hated rhetorical questions. They were commonly spoken by those who liked the sound of their own voices a little too much.

“So, I don’t know what the third task will be. But it will probably involve problem solving, and something that can kill you.”

Riley stared. “How am I supposed...?”

Peter looked back at him steadily, and Riley felt a rough laugh escape him, unbidden from his chest. The kind that hurt your throat and made your chest tight. “I’m not supposed to get through it, am I? I see.”

“If you do, you’ll win a lot of money. Worth a try.”

“Why even bother meeting me?”

“I have a message for you to carry.” He handed over a charmed envelope, and Riley thought very seriously about not taking it. Or taking it, tearing it in half, and shoving it down Peter’s throat. Ultimately, he took it and looked down at it.

“Who for?”

“That’s not material. Leave it by the loose stone you and I have used.”

“What makes you think I’ll do you any favors, after this conversation?”

“Because you’re a cocky little bastard, and you expect to come out of all this on your feet. And you know, if you do live through whatever the tournament has in store for you, that you don’t want to be my enemy.”

Riley snorted, and put the envelope in his cloak pocket. “Wish me luck?” Now who was asking rhetorical questions?

Peter just raised an eyebrow. “You should get back to the castle. The longer you’re gone the greater the risk, and all that.”

“I’m keeping your map,” Riley said suddenly, feeling childish but needing to say or do something that might disrupt Peter’s fucking composure, telling Riley that there was nothing he could do but sort of hope that Riley died in the final task.

“That’s fine,” Peter said, drawing his wand to Apparate. “I have several copies.”

Because it was something to think about other than his likely impending death, Riley hid out by the loose stone to see who came for the letter. He was less surprised than one might think to find that the Granger witch was the recipient, nor that she seemed to have one of Peter’s maps, also, based upon how she whirled around to glare into the recesses of the alcove where he was hiding behind a moldering tapestry.

“Go ahead and take your letter. I already know it’s there,” said Riley, preparing to exit the mortal coil having, apparently, loosened his tongue.
“Come out,” she ordered. He did, and they looked at one another, her with suspicion and him with curiosity.

“How do you know Peter?” she said. “Is he the one who caused you to enroll in Hogwarts?”

“I don’t know Peter,” said Riley bitterly. “But yes, or at least, he was the only person involved in the plot who I spoke to.”

“Plot,” Hermione echoed, sounding doubtful.

“How do you pretend to be bad at magic?”

Hermione colored, and she bent swiftly to dislodge the stone and extract the letter. “I think we’ve talked enough.”

“If I were you, I’d show it off.”

She gave him a dark look. “Obviously. Because you’re a show off.”

Riley laughed, liking her. “Yeah.”

“Not even bothering with your wand in the second task,” she grumbled. “You could have died.”

“Well, it is kind of a death tournament,” he said lightly. He didn’t like to think about little Beatrice.

“Well, you’ll have your chance to defy death again tomorrow.” She looked at him thoughtfully. “Shouldn’t you be resting or meditating or something?”

The field had been narrowed to three. Riley wondered where the other finalists were, and if they were scared. How laughable, if they were. Considering what they had, and he didn’t. But it made him feel powerful, too, to think that a witch and wizard, identified as the strongest in the school (by that fucking goblet which apparently was all-knowing or something) would fear him.

Maybe he was a cocky bastard. Because suddenly he thought: they should fear me. Maybe he could win this death tournament. If he had one skill, it was staying alive. Learned the hard way since, what, birth, or as good as? Peter never sincerely helped him, really. It could be said that Riley had gotten this far despite Peter. So maybe he was better off entirely on his own.

“How long have you known Peter?” Riley asked Hermione. She raised a brow.

“I don’t know Peter.”

Riley snorted, looking at her in the new light of commiseration and wondering if they would ever speak again, or if he would die first.

“Be well, Hermione.”

Several hours later, Riley was vibrating with nervous energy that had something to do with fear, something to do with excitement, and something to do with Pepper-up. The first time the champions had assembled on the old Quidditch Pitch, which had been treated like a vast, minimalist garden since their lord took power, there had been forty-one of them. Now there were three.

Riley, Lord Black’s champion.

An Ilvermorny student named Persephone with ebony skin, enormous dark eyes, and dark hair in
tight cornrows on her head. Her wand was as long and slender as a sword, and irrational cockiness aside, Riley had his money on her. She was the Farleys’ champion.

And Marcus Flint, the only noble, and such an enormous prick that Riley, who had never considered himself violent, half-hoped that the task would give him an opportunity to murder the bastard and pass it off as an accident.

“Gentlemen, and lady, your wands please,” said a tall, hook-nosed wizard who stepped forward from the line of officials and other Important People that had filed down to join them in the pre-task ceremony.

Riley only hesitated for a moment. Before the weighing of the wands, Peter had assured him that there was nothing that would raise any eyebrows about the stand-in wand, which felt as dead and lifeless to him as any other stick, but he supposed he’d have to take the wizard’s word for it that it would pass a second look. He handed it over with less reluctance than the other two, especially Persephone, who looked oddly naked when left empty-handed. Riley wasn’t sure he had ever seen her without her wand in hand, like an appendage, even when he passed her in the Hogwarts halls on an ordinary day.

“The third task,” said the hook-nosed wizard, “shall test your ability to utilize the artisan’s magics: potions and runes.”

Riley was consumed by the mortifying urge to laugh. He big the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood, and managed to hold it back. He had never believed in the gods, really. The only forces he knew to be manipulating the forces of the world were presumably human, like Peter Pettigrew, who had been whatever the opposite of a fairy godmother was since Riley was born, rejected by his parents, and left out in the woods to die a ceremonial death.

He shook himself. Reflections on his early life could possibly reverse the giddy feeling from the Pepper-up, and wands or no, the other competitors had abilities that he simply did not.

“You will each brew a potion with a distinct toxin, and then you each will ingest one another’s potion. You must brew an antidote before you may proceed to the next phase. Clearly, the more virulent the potion you brew, the more delayed your competition will be in their efforts to brew the antidote, and the greater advantage you will have. The first witch or wizard to complete the second phase shall win the task.”

So they were poisoning one another. Riley was, at this point, immune to surprise and fairly resigned to dying today, so he just began cataloguing what he knew about poisons while allowing himself to be herded to one of three oversized desks which had appeared on the old pitch. He knew that outside the energy field that neutralized sound and also kept a champion from abandoning their sacred honor and fleeing the premises, the audience was cheering, and probably hoping at least one of them died or suffered some kind of permanent disfiguration.

Society apparently hadn’t evolved much since Roman rule.

At the big house, they had spent a lot of time on potions. In fact, brewing poisons was a rather common pastime for a while. When Riley was four, Jane Craft had slipped Acromantula venom into the Christmas hot chocolate and half the residents were seizing before the matron figured out what Jane had done. And Jane was not even the most sociopathic of Riley’s foster siblings.

*The antidote to Acromantula venom is strawberries.*

Or at least the one Riley was aware of. There were probably more of a magical variety.
The hook-nosed wizard ensured that Riley was seated at one of the empty desks, and moved on to escort the other two to their own. Riley looked at the faint pattern of the wood grain and thought about poisons some more.

There was any kind of reptile venom, which Peter, actually, had once dosed Riley with when Riley was ten and Peter had appeared for one of his sinister visits. “An experiment,” he’d said. “I think your Muggle blood might protect you.”

His Muggle blood didn’t. He had begun vomiting up blood, but the antidote was, counterintuitively, one part the venom, one part hot water with lemon, and one part powdered Erumpet horn or, even better, a strand of unicorn hair, if you had it.

It wasn’t always a hapless Riley being dosed with poison. He and Bailey Coughman had gotten Jane back a few years later, when the Christmas hot chocolate was once again compromised, but this time with a poison that made you almost instantly sleepy, though it would take several days to kill you. Jane had become sleepy so instantly, in fact, that Riley thought she could have died after all, had Riley and Bailey themselves not begun feeling guilty and brewed and administered the antidote themselves.

A dozen multicolored vials and an hourglass abruptly appeared on Riley’s desk. Across the pitch, a fourth, far more enormous table appeared, laden with various traditionally edible things, like fruits and vegetables, and as many non-edible things that for unfathomable reasons made for common potions ingredients.

“Begin!” called the hook-nosed wizard.

Riley continued to sit still, staring at the vials. Jane had become sleepy so instantly that she could not possibly have brewed an antidote herself, even had she known exactly what it was.

What had that poison been brewed from? He remembered the magical ingredient: pixie venom. Normally it wouldn’t do much more than sting you, but if combined with the right ingredients…

What was the additional ingredient?

Riley scanned the other vials but they only contained other magical ingredients. Common toxins with commonly known antidotes. Just as the doxie venom had a commonly known antidote: a bit of whiskey on the back of the tongue.

The hot chocolate, Riley recalled, had barely masked the flavor of the additional ingredient. As it was, Jane had wrinkled her nose and looked down at her cup in the few seconds before she lost consciousness.

“Why does this taste like oranges?” she had asked.

Riley went to the fourth table, collected an orange, and began. It was a simple potion, so he was done well before the time ran out, and then the hook-nosed wizard was incanting some spell that made Riley’s potion disappear and another take its place. He wondered who had brewed it, but recalling from class that Flint was too ham-handed for even intermediate potions, and the brew was a delicate, balanced pink, he thought with some trepidation that it must be Persephone’s work.

“Imbibe,” called the hook-nosed wizard, before anyone could speculate overlong as to the ingredients. Riley breathed in deeply through his nose and emptied it in one swallow.

It wasn’t Acromantula venom, and it wasn’t reptile venom either. Its effects began to spread through Riley like someone was brushing him all over with a cold lifeless hand. He shuddered.
From the back of his head where the potions memories were coming from lurked other, bleaker thoughts that Riley strove to keep from the forefront of his mind, but they were dragging themselves forward. Summoned by the potion, or because his will was weakened by it? Riley had the sense of walking down a dark tunnel toward something he knew would harm him, but being helpless to turn back.

Perhaps he hadn’t been the only one to choose the doxie venom for its psychotropic potential. Oranges, they’d added to the brew meant for Jane. But there had been another conversation.

…when Riley was born, his parents put him out in the woods to die from exposure. It was a traditional thing, people would tell him later. Not personal. Just what was done when a baby was born without the central traits that made him human and valuable to the people who had made him…

No, no, don’t go there, brain, Riley thought faintly. He was thinking about a conversation with Bailey Coughman, when they were both seven. In that conversation, Bailey had said, “Damn it, we only have oranges.”

…when Riley was six, and living at the big house, the only place he could remember living, the dark lord that had been called Voldemort ascended. He was the ubiquitous lord, and no longer required a name. Some of his foster siblings had cried. The matron had told them stories from infancy forward wherein the dark lord ate them for staying up too late or wandering out of line at the big house. Riley had not cried in front of anyone else in his life, but for years he had nightmares where a colossal black serpent hunted him until he was too exhausted to flee further, then came at him with a gaping hungry maw…

Bailey had said, “Damn it, we only have oranges.” Riley had said, “Isn’t an orange basically the same thing?”

Bailey had stared at him. “You’re such a fucking idiot,” he said, the curse word rolling off his tongue the way it only could when spoken by a six year old. Or perhaps by then Bailey was seven, but since no one knew his exact date of birth, it was only an estimate.

“It’s a saying,” Riley insisted, stung. “‘Like apples and oranges.’”

“That’s because they’re not alike,” Bailey snapped, and snatched a green apple from the bowl on the countertop. “You’re such an idiot,” he added again.

…when the big house was raided, not everyone made it out. Of the kids that were part of the original group that Riley had been a part of, only little Jane got away and she didn’t make it for long on the streets. When she died from hunger and exposure, trying to hide out from a war wherein neither side welcomed them, Riley had thought that it would have been kinder if he and Bailey had just let the potion run its course…

“I need to get to the table to pick up an apple,” Riley said out loud, because just thinking things wasn’t enough, apparently. But his feet started moving, as though stirred by the verbal order. “All the way to the table,” Riley told them, a distant part of him wondering how ridiculous he looked and sounded. “There you go. Keep on moving, feet.” Pretty fucking ridiculous. But it was a small price to live to go to sleep in the Gryffindor dormitories tonight and wake up the next morning alive. Hell, it was a small price to pay just to get to live to see Peter fucking Pettigrew again and possibly punch him in the throat.

Riley really had never considered himself violent.
He reached the table, but couldn’t remember what he was looking for. He took a heavy sideways step, aware he was reaching the end of his wits, and his hand fell on an apple. For a moment, he looked down at it in delight, then the fog in his head parted for a split second.

Whiskey, not an apple.

The problem with potions is that without sufficient magical power in the one on the receiving end to buoy the body’s biological defenses, the effects were swift. The head of a table, at which Riley stood at the foot, had never seemed so far away. On that portion of it sat, tantalizingly on display, a decanter of whiskey and three glasses.

The apple in his hand, at that thought, became a small vial, hot to the touch, which even capped gave off a hint of a scent of whiskey. Firewhiskey, presumably.

“Mistress Granger is saying we should be helping,” said a distinctly inhuman voice from an invisible source near Riley’s left knee. He wondered where in the depths of his imagination the toxin had reached to concoct this particular delusion.

Riley smirked, uncapped the vial, and held his hand to his mouth. His senses took a rather long time to clear, while he attempted to stay on his feet, blinking rapidly as his blackened vision began clearing from the periphery inward, revealing a still-blurry, frowning Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor House.

“A wandless transfiguration,” he heard Vector mutter to McGonagall. “You never said he was such a prodigy.”

“Wild magic,” McGonagall replied firmly. “And no wonder, with his life at risk. Come, Mr. Wilhelm. Professor Vector will see you to the second phase.”

Riley had never had much of a chance to get to know Professor Vector, but he thought her scowl looked less deep than usual, which could signal her approval of Riley being, well, alive in general, and also—a quick glance at the other tables confirmed—the first to begin the second phase. And probably the first of only two, since he noted with satisfaction that Marcus Flint was slumbering soundly with his head pillowed on his arms.

Of course, he’d had help. He thought of the voice he’d heard. Not goblin, and not human, so—house elf. “Mistress Granger,” it had said. So Hermione had sent him an elf?

Or more likely, Peter’s missive had instructed her to send Riley an elf. He should have known that little psychopath was lying to him, or as near as, even about this. Why was one of those questions that had no discernible answer, so Riley didn’t bother with it.

The tent that he and Professor Vector had been walking toward was suddenly before them.

“Wish you’d taken runes as an elective, I imagine,” she said, her mouth becoming very straight instead of downturned at the corners. Aw, a smile.

Riley grinned back dopily, possibly still metabolizing traces of doxie venom. “Oh, it was something we were taught at home.”

Of course it was. It was the master’s-level art of the big house. Second chronologically to the general curriculum of con artistry and deflecting the mind arts, but no less emphasized. Riley had graduated with honors.

“Here are your pre-inscribed stones,” said Vector, handing him a small velvet bag that looked, felt
and sounded like it was full of marbles. She seemed to hesitate. “Good luck, Riley.”

Surprised, he looked up from the bag to frown at her, but she was already turning away. “For Merlin’s sake, stop dawdling,” she snapped over her shoulder. “Your competition is going to close your lead.”

Sure enough, Persephone’s escort was hurrying her toward another of the tents. Spurred on by the sight, Riley turned and ducked through the flaps, unthinking, and promptly fell into a pit.

But of course in the fucking hell that was, with various levels of specificity, Hogwarts, this death tournament, and the entirety of the wizarding world, it wasn’t just a pit.

Riley fell for a while. While he fell, he tried to remember that this part of the tournament was unlikely to be designed to summarily kill him, or leave him falling perpetually in a bottomless pit (although leave it to the intellectuals to feel the need to create such a thing) because of the low entertainment value.

His velocity—which he had estimated to be terminal, gauging by his sense of no longer accelerating, increasing lightheadedness and the way his stomach was coming to be lodged in his throat—abruptly slowed. It did nothing for his head or gut. By the time he was landing softly on what felt like sand, Riley was throwing up magnificently, and luckily to one side, since without his wand he wasn’t going to be able to clean himself up.

It was sand. He heard water. How long since he had been to a beach?

Riley sat up, grimacing at the sour taste in his mouth. A night sky was above him, pure black and Star-spangled, the moon hovering close. It all looked — off. Beautiful, but not quite right. Was the moon ever so large, from any vantage point on earth?

Interested in establishing some distance from his puddle of vomit, Riley got to his feet, still unsteady from recent poisoning and pit-induced euphoria. The charm that was woven into his robes to link him to the monitoring system everyone was watching in the stadium was humming faintly, as though under strain.

So, maybe no longer on earth, then.

The only thing Riley had been given was the bag of stones, and indeed it contained only stones, with no instruction. What the fuck was he supposed to do? What was the task?

Could house elves travel interdimensionally? He no longer felt any shame in cheating, presuming he could avoid being found out.

Even with the sky awash in milky light, all Riley could see was the foam-tipped surf ahead of him, the water dark and indiscernible from the sky beyond that. Over his shoulder he could see a stretch of beach but no more of the land. Before he could become truly frustrated, however, a terrible roar emanated from the direction of the water, and if instinctive terror really could make one’s hair curl, Riley would have a head full of ringlets.

As it was, he obeyed the firm instruction of his lizard brain and sprinted into the abyss that stretched in the opposite direction of the sound.

As he ran, somehow not stumbling, one hand before him in case there was something to collide with, Riley’s brain clicked into a gear found only in a survivalist’s. On one side he was mindlessly reacting-running, feeling ahead for obstacles, listening intently for sounds of pursuit, nostrils flared on the off chance there was something olfactory of significance—and on the other side of his mind
he was calmly thinking through his options.

Confront an unknown monster, weaponless, in the dark, on unfamiliar terrain. Hard no.

Find a hiding place. Possibly, but if one was on offer, short of digging a burrow in the sand, he hadn’t found it yet.

Use the runes. Yes, but difficult to accomplish while running.

Stop and use the runes. Based upon the sound of a wave crashing and another blood curdling roar, not a realistic option.

He had been clutching the bag to his chest, well aware of what it could mean to drop it in this place while on the move, and now cautiously brought his other hand inward and felt for the cinch-closed tie at its mouth.

The ground began to vibrate in the rhythm of a shuffling stride. The monster was on land, and it was large.

The calm part of Riley’s brain processed the delicate sensory feedback from his fingertips, which had eased inside the bag and were feeling over each stone to identify its engraving.

Fortune. Ironic, and no.

Enemy. Possibly, but too great a risk.

Chaos. Only as a last resort.

Friend. A long shot, and unlikely to be worth the risk. It might be that the only being in this dimension was the monster, and Riley its only guest.

However...

Riley tripped, the bag sailed out of his grasp, and he knocked his head hard on a large rock that was part of the sudden, sharp incline he had sprinted directly into.

The portions of his mind conflated. He was only human, after all. A distant, small voice cried out, and it was his, helpless and wordless as every creature was in its moment before death.

But there was something in his hand. A stone. He brushed it with his thumb. Friend.

Rolling his eyes and hoping for the best, Riley put the runestone in his mouth and swallowed it. It felt terrible, like swallowing a rock always did, and he tried to relax so that it wouldn’t lodge in his throat and anticlimactically kill him, as the monster beared down on him.

It was so close, Riley thought, breathing slowly through his nose and fighting the urge to sputter and cough around the stone that was slowly making its way down his esophagus.

The monster was preceded in body by its hot breath, which smelled like rotten meat and therefore did little to help Riley meditate on the task of swallowing.

The world had become a single jarring vibration as the monster neared, but as it neared it also slowed, then stopped. Something nudged Riley’s foot, and he looked blearily down his body, sprawled prone against the incline, to see the deliverer of his fate before it ate him.

For a confused moment, Riley thought he was seeing a dead thing, waterlogged and dismembered,
and not all that large. Then he realized that beyond the soft gray tubular nostril that was scenting his boot, was the rest of a vast muzzle, disappearing into the dark oblivion of this place at the bottom of the pit in the tent on the old Quidditch pitch. The monster, whatever it was, had its odd, tentacle like nostrils pressed to the ground and its head lowered like a hound on a scent. Presumably a proportionately vast body was attached, invisible in the dark, and it was roughly the size of a sperm whale.

The runestone suddenly dropped out of Riley’s throat and into his stomach, and he disappeared with the same loud crack commonly associated with apparition.

He arrived in a pool of yellow lantern light in some sort of shelter, and found a man’s face hovering before him, so wizened as to be inhuman. He might have been frightening if not for the natural comparison that Riley made with his erstwhile monstrous companion. All things being relative, and knowing that sentiment had directed the runestone (and him with it) to this creature’s company, Riley counted the shriveled face with its glassy black eyes as one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

“Interesting,” said the man, in a choked wheeze that made Riley wonder if he wasn’t the only one to have been swallowing rocks of late.

“I bet.” Riley looked around. “I take it you weren’t expecting me?”

The man’s mouth had caved into itself at some point in what was either a very long and/or a very difficult life, so it was hard to tell, but Riley thought he was trying to smile.

“Was indeed thought certain I should die here, without accompaniment,” said the man. He reached into his robes and produced a handful of rune stones. “Were the power stones bestowed also upon you, as an element of the task?” He looked sadly at them. “Had I been a seer enrolled I would have been in the elective study of runes.”

Riley, both horrified and fascinated, stared. “How long have you been here?” Seeing the black eyes go misty with confusion, he hastily rephrased. “What year was it, when you were sent here?”

“One thousand four hundred eleven, after Christ,” said the wizard, adjusting his posture so that his legs, as white and bare as sticks, or just bones, were briefly visible. “Often I have surmised that better served would I be had the toxin taken me, but too great is my cowardice to go willingly to death. Were it not long since would I have let the creature make me its meal.”

1411 AD. Horror filled Riley, but only briefly. An eternity in the dark would not be his fate. He would certainly let the creature make him its meal before it came to that. As it was, he was alive now, and clearly better than this poor sod and erstwhile champion at the study of runes.

Another thought occurred to him, though the similarity in the task his apparent Friend described and his own made him doubt he’d get the answer he wanted.

“You don’t happen to have your wand?”

The crumpled face peered at him. “I do naturally retain my wand. Deprived thereof how possibly could I survive the creature?”

Fuck if Riley knew, but he couldn’t restrain his delight. With the wizard as an energy source, he could amplify the runes. He had Chaos and Fortune, so the set likely contained Direction and Ties, which meant...

“What’s your name?”
“Sol.”

“I’m Riley. Can I borrow your runes?”

Sol thought he might die if he left the realm, which had clearly extended his life in some way, or time passed differently there, allowing him to be alive a few hundred years past what would have been the end of even a wizard’s natural life had he been a teenager in the fifteenth century.

For a moment, Riley worried Sol wouldn’t cooperate, being adverse to being left alone another five hundred years, but he was surprisingly cooperative. Riley tried not to think about the fact that had Sol been better at runes and successful in his own task, it would be Riley left to rot on a deserted island, pursued for eternity by a sea monster.

When Riley, on a tide of Sol’s generously donated and considerably powerful magical force, soared back through the dark pit and out of the tent to land neatly on the turf, the tumultuous applause immediately signaled his victory.

It was likely Marcus Flint’s good fortune that he had been assigned Riley’s potion and slept through the second phase, because wherever they had sent Persephone, she was apparently as entombed as Sol. After a day’s waiting period, the officials packed up her tent and awarded the runner-up title to the Farleys via their lost champion, posthumously.

If it had been Flint, Riley overheard some students saying carelessly, someone probably would have gone in after him. As it was, it wasn’t worth the risk.

A sad truth, some might say. But it didn’t bother Riley to know that no one would have dived into his tent to rescue him, either. He had always known that there was no one interested in taking care of him but himself, and allotted his trust accordingly.

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Riley Wilhelm was the uncontested victor of the third Task, and thus the Tri-Wizard Championship was declared for House Black. Sirius was called in for the awards ceremony, where he awkwardly shook Riley Wilhelm’s hand, their lord looking on. Elspeth watched from a tangle of first years of various houses who she’d befriended through a study group.

“He’s very handsome, don’t you think?” The short-haired girl from the train was named Astoria Greengrass, and though she was in Slytherin, she was one of the closest things Elspeth had so far to her own friend.

Elspeth looked at Riley Wilhelm consideringly. “Sure,” she decided, trying to be objective. Astoria gave her a strange look, and Elspeth looked away. Not for the first time, Hermione Granger was a magnet for her attention. It seemed that the more evasive the older witch proved to be, the more fascinated Elspeth became. How was it that they were nearly at the end of her second term, and she hadn’t had a single opportunity to speak to another person in her own house?

With this in mind, she followed Hermione at a reasonable distance after the students left the Great Hall following the awards presentation and feast. It was only when Hermione turned out of the primary corridors and the crowds thinned that Elspeth realized that while she, Elspeth, was following Hermione, Hermione was following someone else. Namely, Riley Wilhelm.

Elspeth paused to ensure she was unobserved, then briefly stole into an empty classroom to put on her father’s cloak and get out his map. She wondered why she hadn’t thought of doing this before, noting the thrill she had with the combination of secrecy and pursuit. But her excitement changed
in character when she emerged from the classroom and drew near enough the now-still dots on her map labeled “Hermione Granger” and “Riley Wilhelm” that she could overhear their conversation.

“…lucky you weren’t killed,” Hermione was saying lowly.

“Less luck and more skill and determination, I like to think.”

“I don’t understand how you made it through the weighing of the wands.”

“Well, that wand was an ordinary wand,” said Riley, as though explaining something, though of course without context Elspeth couldn’t fathom what.

“I can’t believe Peter put you up to it. Or how you could pass…as magical, all this time. It’s…”

“Look, Granger, I don’t know you or pretend to know you, but you seem all right, as witches go. And you also seem smart enough, so I don’t think I should have to tell you not to trust Peter. He’s not on anyone’s side but his own.”

“I don’t trust anyone,” Hermione said bluntly. “And I wouldn’t think you would trust him, after he basically arranged for you to be killed.”

“Yet here I am,” Riley said, wry.

“Right,” she said quickly. “I know that. You were brave.”

Riley snorted. “It’s not bravery when you don’t have a choice.”

They dispersed, leaving Elspeth’s mind whirring. From what she had heard, it had sounded like…

But no, it couldn’t be. Surely…

Surely Riley Wilhelm, unanimous Tri-Wizard Champion, couldn’t possibly be a Squib?

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December 1994

Malfoy Manor

Wiltshire

Harry hadn’t truly seen his lord (he thought he did, sometimes, but chalked it up to Seeing Things, as he often did) since Yule two years previously, and hadn’t dared to hope he’d appear at Malfoy Manor for the holiday again. But he did exactly that.

Harry literally stumbled upon him coming downstairs for dinner, running late and trying to hurry and cast a buttoning charm on himself at the same time, a challenge to even his dexterity. As a result, he only glanced up in time to sacrifice himself to the forces of velocity and gravity in a bid to avoid actually running into the Wizard who was liege to every person and creature in every corner of the planet. Crashing into an oversized and likely ancient vase and falling hard on his right side seemed a reasonable alternative.

“Harry Potter,” his lord was saying as Harry clambered back to his feet and then immediately into a bow. He was woefully unprepared for the sound of his lord speaking his name. He almost stumbled again, even holding still.
“Gotten taller, I see,” said his lord as Harry cautiously looked up. His lord’s face was the same as it had always been and would always be. Harry knew he should feel awe, and he did, but he was also thirteen and his fixation with his lord existed on a new level that horrified him.

He was just so beautiful. Harry didn’t know that word could be the right one for another person, especially a man wholly capable of vanquishing a continent without a thought, but it was.

With all this on the forefront of his mind along with the knowledge of his lord’s reputation for free exercise of a wandless and wordless _Legilimens_, Harry kept his gaze fixed on the center of his lord’s chest. It was rather easier on Harry’s heart, also, to keep his lord’s cheekbones and eyes and jaw in just his peripheral vision.

“But then,” his lord went on, as Harry’s participation in the conversation was so obviously unnecessary, “the last time I saw you, you were a bird. How is your practice of Animagery progressing, Harry?”

It was not possible to have hurt feelings that his lord had seen him at the dinner table the Yule before very much a human and not a bird. There was a single available emotional response when his lord said his name, and it was nearer joy than offense.

“It’s, ah, not going very well, my lord,” Harry admitted. “I have...that is, I wear your tether.”

“I see. Dangerous, to surrender to the form of a bird, with the tether active.” He sounded thoughtful, and when Harry helplessly looked up at his lord fully, he found his head tilted to one side, considering.

“Hmm,” he said, gaze flickering over Harry’s face, and he snapped his fingers.

Harry gasped, and awoke an indeterminate time later lying in the corridor, alone if one didn’t account for being surrounded by house elves wringing their hands.

“Master Harry!” cried Dobby as Harry struggled to sit up.

“Harry!” Narcissa’s voice came from further away, and then she was kneeling at his side.

Harry felt as though his magic had been under a blanket, and was now shown light. As though it had been starved and was now fed; denied water and was taking its first deep drink of something cool.

In its holster at his hip, the yew wand sang.

“What in Merlin’s name...” Narcissa was murmuring, laying her hand on his forehead and then his cheek, before waving her wand and incanting for basic diagnostics.

“I’m fine,” Harry said. Was sound even different? His voice felt new and changed in his own head, at least. “I saw our lord,” he began, but didn’t know what else to say, still dazed.

Narcissa leaned back on her heels and inhaled sharply. “He’s removed your tether,” she said faintly. Harry had never seen her express shock, but her eyes were wide for a long moment before she composed herself. It was fascinating to watch, and had Harry been less distracted he would have marveled at how quickly and efficiently she did it, then rose to her feet and gestured for Harry to do the same.

“It’s almost time to dine, Harry. We can’t make our lord wait.”
The Malfoys had planned to dine alone, an unusual but not unprecedented event on a holiday, but naturally their lord’s place had also been made. He had already taken it by the time Narcissa and Harry joined the small party, and when they stopped in the doorway to bow he made an impatient noise.

“Consider me sufficiently greeted and honored. Sit.”

They sat. The first course arrived and as he always did, their lord studied it without touching his knife and fork, and everyone else pretended not to notice while they addressed their own plates.

“I had expected a bigger crowd,” said their lord. “But no matter. If but one loyal subject hears my pronouncement, presumably word will spread.”

Lucius’s cheek ticked as it did when he wanted to sigh and wouldn’t permit himself. “Of course, my lord. And here you have four loyal subjects.”

“And two more on the way, I’m given to understand.”

It took a full second before Harry realized their lord meant Harry’s parents. Lucius and Narcissa exchanged a very swift look.

“Yes, my lord. After nightfall, we expect the Potters.”

Their lord folded his arms. “Very good. The larger the party, the better.”

“I believe my sister and cousin would be honored to join us in that case, my lord,” Narcissa said smoothly, and at their lord’s nod, she left the table to instruct the elves to carry her messages to Bellatrix and Sirius.

Bellatrix naturally brought her husband, and Sirius naturally brought no one, and with their party nearly doubled, they sat for the first course.

If Harry’s appetite was quashed before, the knowledge that their lord wanted, for some reason, to see or speak to his mother and father made his stomach tight and miserable. Even the feeling of buoyancy in the wake of the tether couldn’t cheer him. And every time he looked directly at their lord, he felt like something electric had passed through his entire body, a sensation too overwhelming to subject himself to in the dining room.

The Yule feast was traditional and therefore complex, eleven courses long, and especially interminable under he circumstances. And then when it was over, Harry felt a fresh wave of panic as the party relocated to the drawing room, Lucius and their lord casually discussing Muggle irrigation systems and Draco staring at Harry, clearly aware something had changed about him but unable to discern what exactly it was.

“My tether,” Harry whispered when they walked close together through the drawing room doors, and Draco jerked away from him, his expression stunned.

“Does that mean...?”

Harry just shrugged, glancing at Narcissa, but she had — rather deliberately, Harry suspected — looked the other way.

Harry was relieved to see that only two Potters were visiting him for Yule. Elspeth had said she intended to opt out, giving him more time with their parents since they saw one another daily at Hogwarts, but Harry had thought she might change her mind in the end. For some reason he didn’t
want her anywhere near their lord unless she had to be.

James went pale and Lily’s slight smile in anticipation of seeing Harry cleared immediately, but they otherwise didn’t react to the sight of their lord, leaning against a chair, the Malfoys and Lestranges and Sirius and Harry arranged behind him and palpable tension in the air.

While they bowed, their lord came forward around the chair and sat in it before bidding them to rise.

“I deny that Harry Potter should be the Black Heir, and the Peverell Heir at once. It is not my wish that the titles and holdings be conflated.”

Harry’s gaze traveled from his parents’ blank faces to Sirius’s, which he could only see in profile from where he stood.

“As a result, Harry must choose.”

Harry’s hammering heart was in his throat. His parents, pinned by their lord’s gaze, could hardly offer him a signal. He looked over at Sirius, with mounting desperation, and saw the wizard’s face grow haggard but most of all, wry.

Choose them, Sirius mouthed.

If he’d had the ability and time to think clearly Harry might have chosen differently. He might have thought that he was actually taking something that could be Elspeth’s, and leaving Sirius all alone in a new way. But all he could clearly think was that he had never felt like anything but a Potter, and his wand tied him firmly to all that was Peverell.

So he walked toward his parents and then bowed to his lord, and gripped his wand for composure, which it lent him with a pulse of pure heat.

“I choose Peverell, my lord,” Harry said in a voice that sounded level and still new in the untethered space of his mind. Maybe it sounded differently to everyone else, too, because he thought he saw something flash in his lord’s eyes. Something like intrigue, but gone too quickly for Harry to label with confidence.

“Of course you do,” said his lord. “And without my tether, your ward status is naturally rescinded. So home you shall go.”

Lily made a strangled noise and by the time Harry had stumbled backward into her embrace, his father had his arm around her and her face was streaked with tears.

“Thank you, my lord,” Lily breathed. Harry could feel her heart thundering against his back.

If he was listening at all, their lord appeared not to hear hear. He was rising, straightening his robes, and watching Harry with a small smile. And then, Harry’s racing thoughts went suddenly blank and still because his lord extended a hand and placed his smooth, cool fingertips beneath Harry’s chin.

“Enjoy this interlude, child. For it shall be brief.”
...crickets?
In which Harry begins his sixth year and captures Tom's interest yet again--but this time he keeps it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixteen: Salient

“Don’t let your special character and values, the secret that you know and no one else does, the truth – don’t let that get swallowed up by the great chewing complacency.”

Aesop

On the last night, the weight of a gaze will wake Tom. But the attention that disturbed him will be Harry’s, so he will relax as he turns his head to find his lover there, on his stomach, chin propped on his hands. In the dark room, Harry’s eyes should appear black, but they will be their usual burning green instead.

“We should get out of bed tomorrow,” Harry will say, his voice rough. That quality will make Tom’s stomach clench, reminded of why Harry’s throat is sore.

Tom will want to growl, and grasp Harry, and roll Harry’s warm body beneath his, but he won’t. “That’s what you said yesterday, and the day before.”

Harry, still sleepy, will only manage a hoarse chuckle.

Tom will reach out, eager as ever to touch, and he will feel a different, nonphysical thrill when Harry does not resist. When instead his warm, lithe body moves willingly flush against Tom’s. When Harry presses his face into Tom’s chest, and leaves a soft kiss on Tom’s collarbone, and falls back asleep.

If he had been born capable, Tom would have felt regret; but he was not, so he will feel only uneasy anticipation. They will get out of bed tomorrow, he will know, but not by Tom’s choice. The forces which Tom set in motion will drive them there, and part them for some time. He will fiercely promise himself that it will not be for long.

Harry, he will think--stroking the untameable hair, gripping one lean shoulder gone lax in untroubled sleep--Harry is his. He will be angry, but he will not stay away long. Because Harry is his, and Tom is Harry’s.
There were things about living at Peverell Ridge that had taken some getting used to.

For example, life without the tether—which was, of course, more coincidence than circumstance; it would be gone even if he still lived with the Malfoys. But closely linked thereto was flying, and Harry knew that the Malfoys would consider the amount of time that Potters spent in the air distasteful.

“Harry!” cried Elspeth, just before he heard the whir of the bludger careening toward his head. Harry bent so low over the broomstick to dodge it that he bumped his chin on the handle. The broom, obedient solely to a literal interpretation of his body movements, went into a steep dive that was so abrupt and vertical, Harry had to throw his legs over to one side to level it out.

Somewhere above him, James Potter was laughing again, which had taken getting used to. Once Harry might have taken offense, but now he just grinned to himself, swung himself back astride the broom, and started looking for a quaffle to launch at his father, preferably toward his back. There was no honor in backyard Quidditch.

The old family pitch was paved with unfriendly sharp rocks and the goalposts were the size of regulations two hundred years out of date. The airspace was crowded with various Weasleys and every member of Harry’s immediate family, even his mother, which was a testament to the gravity of the occasion.

It was Harry’s sixteenth birthday.

Lily, who had been mainly keeping to the sidelines and averting her face every time someone was nearly maimed—which was often—observed Harry flying at Seeker’s altitude, and flew up to join him, her trajectory forming a large loop to give the heart of the action a wide berth.

“Looking for a stray quaffle to deck your dad?” she asked, raising her voice to be heard over the shouts below them and the increasingly brisk breeze.

“You know me so well,” Harry said, smiling at her.

They both laughed softly, then fell into companionable silence.

“It’s kind of a silly game,” Lily said after a few moments, catching Harry’s eye. He blinked, and before he could argue, she went on, smiling. “You know, I used to think your father was an idiot for playing at all. I had a lot of reasons for thinking he was an idiot, mind, but that one ranked high.”

Harry had heard a bit of this relationship history from Sirius, but his parents themselves had never talked to him about their youth. He held very still, as though she could be spooked out of her reverie and flee before showing him anything but the carefully managed facade he had gotten to know so well in the past two summers.

“But after a while I realized it wasn’t the sport he loved, the game I found so silly. He just loved flying. Your sister has always been that way, too.” She put her head to one side, a gust of wind lifting her braid from her shoulder and stirring the shorter waves that had come loose to frame her face. “You’re more like me, though.”
“I am?” Harry was startled. He looked so much like James that he was accustomed to being compared principally to that parent and not the other.

“Yes. You don’t mind flying, and you’re even rather good at it, but it isn’t an escape for you.” Her smile twisted, turning a bit wry. “It isn’t that easy for you to get out of your own head.”

Harry couldn’t help but acknowledge how true that was. And though he felt bitterness over it, it had a softer edge than it might have if his mother hadn’t drawn it as a family trait, rather than yet another way Harry didn’t fit in at the Ridge.

“Time for cake, I think,” said Lily, putting two fingers in her mouth to whistle so sharp and loud Harry almost fell off his broom. Seeing his reaction, she grinned. “I learned that at Hogwarts. Most useful part of flying lessons. C’mon, birthday boy.”

In addition to most of the underage Weasleys, Neville, Lavender and a few Gryffindors in Elspeth’s year had flooed in for Harry’s day. It was a far more casual and intimate affair than Harry had been accustomed to at Malfoy Manor, and while he was at ease in this company in a way he never had been with the Malfosys’, a part of him missed the pomp and circumstance. A very significant part of him just missed Draco, with whom things had never been the same after Harry moved home, and Lucius and Narcissa, who while not forbidden from visiting him, certainly weren’t warmly welcomed. When Harry visited Sirius, as he made a point to do for a portion of each holiday, he also visited Malfoy Manor or the Malfosys came to the palace in London.

Sometimes Draco came along, but usually he didn’t. Draco seemed to blame Harry for being absent from Draco’s company, or at least that was Harry’s strong impression.

“It’s been good having you home, Harry.” Lily spoke as they coasted slowly to the ground, and put her arm around his waist when he stepped off his broom.

While she was always tactile, Lily rarely spoke so directly, so Harry looked at her, touched, and then impulsively bent the short distance necessary to kiss her cheek.

“It’s been good being home, mum.”

And it had.

Harry had grown up in a beautiful place, but the Ridge had a distinct, far wilder beauty that was particularly on display descending from the pitch toward the castle in late summer. The slope was long and gentle, and the Peverell castle drew a whimsical, distinctly magical silhouette against the backdrop of the ever-creeping forest, and a clear, vivid blue sky.

On the lawn, the elves had laid out fluffy white blankets laden, picnic style, with cake as well as a variety of other snacks and drinks that were among Harry’s favorites, tending universally toward sweet and colorful.

“Sugared pickles?” Ron asked, peering at a tray of the pale pink gherkins crusted with icing.

“Really, Harry?”

“I thought that no one over the age of five ate sugared pickles.” This remark from Fred, probably.

“Not that they’ll admit. Don’t torture him on his special day.” George, probably.

Harry rolled his eyes, but his ears were a bit warm.

“I told them to bring a variety,” Lily murmured, frowning at the elves’ handiwork.
“It’s alright, mum,” Elspeth interjected hastily. She was very nearly as tall as Harry, which still took him by surprise even though she’d had her freakishly rapid growth spurt that spring. “Don’t let them hear,” she added in an undertone, a surreptitious glance confirming that there were no elves in earshot.


There was laughter, though as it turned out, no one found he spread so sugary as to be inedible, and Harry gave the sugared pickle platter a smug look when he found it half empty before he got around to snatching one from the pile.

By the end of an inarguably idyllic birthday, the guests had gone and the four Potters were picking at a dinner in the cozy formal dining room when the cold fireplace flared green.

To everyone’s surprise, Remus stepped out onto the hearth. After a moment’s recovery, surprise unanimously gave way to pleasure, and they took their turns hugging him, though Harry’s embrace was rather shy. Though a frequent guest at the Ridge, they never really knew when Remus would come and go, an undiscovered consequence of his living arrangements. Greetings thus dealt with, James manhandled Remus into a seat at the table over his protestations.

“I thought you’d be done with dinner,” Remus complained halfheartedly. “It’s late.”

“Harry’s disgusting birthday tea soured all of our stomachs,” James said cheerfully. “We didn’t dare attempt it ‘til now.”

“Hey!” Harry protested, laughing, and then unsuccessfully tried to dodge his father’s hand when James reached over to ruffle his hair.

“It was okay,” Elspeth said diplomatically. Then she added with a sly smile, as though she couldn’t help herself, “I think there are leftovers, if you’d like some.”

Remus smiled his rare smile. “I think what’s on the table will be well enough,” he assured her solemnly, apparently unwilling to tempt the elves with more sarcasm. As it was, a series of hushed pops signaled listening ears, poised to fetch anything a favored guest might desire. Satisfied by their characteristically literal interpretation of his words, they departed once again with the same sounds.

The elves on the Ridge had taken some getting used to. Unlike the Manor, where the elves were ever-visible and painfully polite, as well as downright conversational, relatively, the Ridge elves were what Lily had once quietly and politely described as “rather feral,” and went about their work with borderline invisibility, terrifying efficiency, and a sort of omnipotence and omniscience that had been eerie to live under for the first few weeks.

They were rather like the Hogwarts elves, which some students didn’t realize existed until well into their tenure at school. But unlike Hogwarts elves, which could be summoned and engaged and clothed themselves in rags, the Ridge elves were quite inhuman, narrow-eyed, and their vocalizations sounded like angry gibberish. Harry had talked Elspeth into cornering one with him during his first week back home and had been terrified of them for months after the sighting.

But now he knew them to be generally benevolent and was touched by their individualized care. They knew he adored sugar and catered his tea accordingly. They knew he liked the bed warm and charmed it to reach the perfect temperature when he came through his doorway at whatever hour, so that it was pure bliss from the first moment he tumbled into it.
And best of all they were part of the Ridge, which Harry felt he belonged to, in a way he hadn’t felt about the Manor or even Hogwarts. In his inexplicably circular tower bedroom, tall windows gaped in every direction, uncurtained and featuring the sky beyond them. The ancient glass contained some sort of spell that eliminated any cloud, meaning that the stars and moon were never inhibited in their glow each night, and the daylight was always golden and warm in between.

While Harry worried sometimes whether his wand was influencing him more than it should, it pleasantly radiated contentedness whenever they were on Potter land. The Peverells had been a part of the territory a long time, Harry knew, but the reminder was humbling. No one had borne the yew wand for a thousand years until Harry chose it—or it chose him, he was never completely sure—those eventful eight years before.

He tried not to overthink it.

The elder Potters stayed up late into the night with Remus. Elspeth excused herself after she fell asleep for a second time, sitting on the sofa with her feet curled beneath her. Harry was barely more attentive than she had been, but something about hearing his parents laughing with their oldest friend warmed him from the inside out and he was loathe to surrender the feeling.

That was his last thought before blinking awake into a dark parlor, a blanket drawn up around his ears doubtless by his mother, and low voices speaking nearby but almost inaudibly. At once he knew that he was not meant to overhear what was being said, and of course the burst of guilt he felt at eavesdropping was easily overwhelmed by his curiosity. His parents loved him and treated him well, he doubted none of that. Just as surely he knew they didn’t trust him, and open discourse in his presence was not done.

“Peter is planning something, we just have to wait.”

“That’s what he’s claimed for years. I don’t think I trust him any more, Moony.”

“He’s our friend, Prongs. If you can’t trust him, you can’t trust me.”

“We believe he’s our friend,” Lily corrected softly. “We’ve been wrong before.”

Sirius, Harry thought, heart loud in his ears. They were talking about Sirius. Harry was sure one of them would sense he was awake, but they kept talking.

“Every time they go back, I spend ten months with my heart in my throat.” Lily. Then silence for so many long moments Harry thought one of them might have gotten wise and cast a Silencing charm, but then Remus cleared his throat.

“It will happen there,” he said, as though apologizing. “We always knew that.”

After that, the mood between them had gone so low that they drifted off to their rooms, but not before Harry felt his mother press her palm briefly against his shoulder and kiss his hair. He would know her touch anywhere.

“No,” said Lily. “Let him sleep. He had a long day.”

When he thought he had waited long enough, Harry sat up, checked the time, then slipped out of the castle. Elspeth had once complained to him that the house seemed to conspire with her parents to contain her; that when she had tried to sneak out against their wishes, she had turned down every corridor only to find herself back at her bedroom door. But the castle had always seemed to
conspire for Harry. If he wanted to reach the conservatory, as he did now, the first door he touched opened directly to the room.

Casting the best locking charm he knew behind him, Harry closed his eyes briefly to visualize, and then opened them again. There was a noise, still, but it wasn’t deafening; and an unnatural wind seemed to rise off the polished tile floor, stirring the plants in their ornate pots and elevated beds, but it was subtle compared even to Harry’s most recent effort, and unnoticeable compared to the very first.

Magnificent arrived, still asleep, curled into an oblong ivory shape like a very large, warm statue. The ambient temperature in the conservatory immediately rose several degrees, before the charms in place to protect the plantlife could compensate.

Harry, recalling ancient maxims regarding the foolhardiness of waking sleeping dragons, nonetheless reached out to give Magnificent a hesitant pat, past experience guiding him to stay very near her body all the while and out of the way of her fire-producing head.

Her head jerked up, but she didn’t seem surprised by her surroundings, and Harry relaxed and stepped into her line of vision, allowing himself a smug smile.

“I didn’t even wake you up,” he observed, folding his arms.

“I was pretending,” she said mildly, and he rolled his eyes at the obvious lie, but he also knew better than to get into arguments with her. Like all dragons, Magnificent was a sociopathic narcissist, and he loved her anyway.

“Well, then, you’ll be able to tell me exactly how your trip was,” Harry said, absently rubbing the underside of her wing which he knew was hard for her to reach, and therefore perpetually itchy. She purred.

“It was bearable,” she said. “You could do better.”

“Of course,” Harry said agreeably, yelping when she nearly crushed him by abruptly rolling over to present the same place on her other wing to his ministrations. As it was, her tail took out a decorative column and sent a small tree sailing across the expansive space. It crashed into a window pane which cracked but didn’t break.

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” Harry chided halfheartedly. She’d done worse on previous visits, and so far he had been able to cover it up.

“It’s good for you to have problems to solve.”

Magnificent was large for her age, and growing fast. Each time Harry summoned her, he worried the conservatory would no longer be large enough to house her. Looking around, he bit his lip. By the Yule hols, surely she would be too large to bring here without exhausting even the castle’s ability to disguise the signs of her presence. Planting a tree and fixing a window was well within its abilities, but Harry didn’t want to push their bounds any further than that.

“Let me fly, Harry?” she asked plaintively. Harry looked at her, hesitating, where she lolled against the floor, glowing like an opal in the moonlight, her large black eyes fixed on him imploringly. He sighed, glancing upward, and the hinged uppermost components of the conservatory’s glass ceiling slowly parted, as though the castle doubted Harry’s decision as much as Harry did.

With a happy exclamation, Magnificent bounded to all fours (heedlessly crushing a flowering bush in the process, which began emitting a burst of hot, foul-scented steam in defense) and assumed the
powerful crouch that would allow her to launch into flight with almost perfect verticality. She stretched, flexed, and then beat her wings, which to Harry always seemed deceptively delicate, the membrane transparent in places, like something built of breath and frost, yet able to bear her increasingly enormous body skyward, as they did just then.

Magnificent was allowed to fly at home, of course, but there was something about the tether she always wore there that ruined the experience for her. Here, she knew Harry could summon her back if she wouldn’t return voluntarily, but it still wasn’t the same, she insisted.

Harry thought of his own tether, and the still-novel sensation of its absence. He then thought of all the remaining barriers around him at all times, and sighed. They were nonphysical, but impermeable all the same. Still, he understood the distinction as well as Magnificent. It was why he couldn’t deny the dragon her own, brief semblance of freedom, when it was within his power to offer it.

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August 30, 1996

Spinner’s End

In his Hogwarts years, Tom had been the head of a group who, while certainly not his equals, he had considered to be his friends. They had all been friendly with one another, with the exception of the odd spat. The camaraderie was something he had taken for granted, and sometimes missed, especially when compared with the frosty regard his present two favorites bore one another.

Sometimes it was amusing to watch Bellatrix mercilessly needle Severus, untiring in her effort to get him to do more than turn red and silent. Or to watch Severus drawl scathing criticisms—typically regarding Bellatrix’s “juvenile lack of restraint”—though he had to know well by now that even the most apt insults would never affect her. Her skin was not merely thick, it was impenetrable.

But Tom missed the easy familiarity of that distant time when he last felt something like ease in a group. When the rapid-fire conversation could ignite all of them in laughter with a single word or phrase that referenced some shared experience but would have been meaningless to an outsider.

Too thorough a review of memories of his Knights was unpleasant, ending as it did with the lot of them - everyone whom he’d once held half-mocking court in the Slytherin common room – dead. On a single, bloody battlefield in the early fall of 1981. Better to focus on the present. The part of himself which Tom had always acknowledged as more animal than man and more reptile than mammal was good at living in the moment, and by now he was very good at putting it in charge.

“…let young Whitman have a turn, since he’s a seventh year,” Bellatrix was saying, when Tom returned to the present. “That still gives Wesley his chance in three years, when he’ll have more experience and therefore a better chance at the win.”

Tom was amused. “The Tournament, Bella? I thought it was silly? A waste of resources?”

“A potential waste of resources,” Bellatrix said, watching him carefully to assess the sincerity of his mirth, and reassured by whatever she saw, she grinned in her sharp-toothed way. “A potential unrealized, my lord. The Tournament was a delight to me in its last incarnation. I only lament that the charms cast on the American girl didn’t last a bit longer.”
She referred, of course, to the post-results feedback from the surveillance charm, which had produced an increasingly feeble feed on its associated devices for ten or twelve days. The girl had somehow survived that entire time, though Tom doubted she had outlived the spell by much, and her slow trek toward the inevitable had not engaged Tom, but it had fascinated Bellatrix and a few others among the most bloodthirsty of his citizens.

“Such a strong girl,” Bella said, her frown going dreamy and regretful. “A bit of a loss to the populace, for her to get herself stuck in that pit. I had higher expectations.”

“One might think,” purred Riley, entering the room with a charmed tray containing each of the party’s preferred drink sailing along in his wake, “that I didn’t have your unwavering support from the outset, my Lady.”

Bella, who was fond of Riley – because everyone was – turned to watch him come in with a broad grin. “Boy,” she said fondly, giving him a thorough once-over that took in his tight-fitting clothes and lean, but broad-shouldered frame with approval. “You needn’t ever doubt it.”

Riley rolled his eyes prettily, and served her drink by hand, catching her fingers for a quick kiss that made her laugh in delight again. Then he turned to Severus.

“Brandy,” Riley declared, plucking the tray out of the air and extending it to Severus.

“Quite,” said Severus, then stiffly added, “thank you.” Because everyone was fond of Riley.

Even Tom. Tom perhaps liked him more than he should. Riley was a bit young, after all. He’d pictured Riley trussed up on Tom’s bed with increasing frequency after Riley had come to London. The young man was constantly in the public eye on the tide of his victory, and Tom had waited until just a few months ago before making his decision. He had moments where he still wasn’t sure. Having someone close always sounded appealing in theory, then quickly grew tiresome, and there was the added complication of Riley’s secret, which only amused Tom for now but would have to be dealt with eventually.

Riley sat in Tom’s lap, a tendency he had that Tom did not hate, but also did not fully approve of. Riley knew this, and was inviting retribution. Which Tom did approve of. Bellatrix’s glance was far too knowing, and she hid a smile in her elf wine, appropriately the exact hue of fresh human blood.

“It will be the Potter child, if he will enter,” said Severus, peering into his brandy thoughtfully. “He is an Animagus, and his tutor says his shielding is nearly unparalleled among living witches and wizards.”

“Nearly unparalleled” probably meant “unparalleled”; no one wanted to offend their lord by suggesting he could be bested even in a single spell, but his shielding, though more than sufficient, was not an area he had taken particular time to hone. Charmed objects worked very well for him, and he had never had much interest in extending a protection over anyone else.

“A raven animagus isn’t of much use in a tournament that is characterized by brawn and raw power,” Bellatrix scoffed. “It will be one of those Weasleys, I expect. The dragon boy’s brothers.”

“Isn’t Lord Nott’s son in his sixth year, as well? Won’t he be up for it?” Riley asked. Tom observed over his shoulder that the tumbler Riley was sipping from contained only water.

“It’s hard to say. The families don’t like to admit there’s a better champion than one of their own, of course, but two deaths in the last tournament will make them mindful. Lord Nott is just as likely
to offer up one of his sworn subjects who has no choice but to volunteer.”

Sometimes Tom thought Severus would have made a good teacher if Tom had left him at Hogwarts. He had a skill for explanation, though when he remembered himself he would compensate for being helpful with insults or general disdain.

But even Severus couldn’t quite bring himself to be outright nasty to Riley, so though his follow-up was cutting, it lacked true spite. “I suppose with your upbringing, you wouldn’t understand the value of an heir.”

“Oh, all of our lord’s subjects understand the value of an heir.” Riley stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankle, leaning back on his elbows on the arm of the settee. Reminded of the nonchalant attention-seeking habits of a kneazle, Tom idly patted his thigh.

“Who’s communing with the Goblet, my lord? Have you decided?”

Tom inhaled through his nose. “Lord Knott has that honor.”

There was a moment’s surprised silence. Then Bella said, “Oh. Well, that will be…interesting.”

“There will certainly be a theme,” Severus said, a chill note in his tone the closest he dared come to disagreeing with Tom’s judgment.

“I’ve told him that he may apply his particular skills to only one task,” Tom told them. “The rest must be varied. And I doubt the goblet would allow all tasks to feature the same specialty.”

“He’s back in London, then, I assume?”

“Yes. He opened Nott House.”

“So the Nott heir won’t enter the tournament, then. Surely someone so closely connected to the goblet communer shouldn’t…”

Tom cut Severus off with a wave of his hand. “The goblet will demand the blood of the forty-one families, or a pledged subject. There is none but the heir who meets the age criterion.”

Severus frowned. “Even Nott will be tempted to go easy on the contestants, then, if not offer some sort of advantage to his child. The boy is the last of his line.”

“Not all bloodlines are sacred,” Tom said carelessly. “There is nothing unique or exceptional in the Nott gene pool.”

“Except magic,” Severus insisted, but Tom could sense he was consciously yielding the point against his will, avoiding, as he should, a prolonged disagreement with his lord. Tom gave him a knowing look.

“Except magic, of course.”

Riley had taken on a curious, quiet stillness during this exchange. He was generally inclined to interject wittily to diffuse tension between Tom and a third party, but the topic seemed to have thrown him off balance.

“But as the last tournament so nicely demonstrated,” Tom said, unable to refrain from striking at Riley when he was in such a transparently vulnerable state, “pureblood lineage alone has very little influence on magical ability.” He stroked Riley’s inner thigh, very aware of the tension there, and
put his head to one side to force Riley to look at him and meet his eye. “Isn’t that so, pet?”

“Hmm,” Riley said, and to his credit, his absent smile barely looked forced. Slowly, the young man relaxed against Tom’s touch. The façade was so expertly crafted, Tom thought anyone but him would have been fooled.

“The boy has heard that observation so often in the past three years, it can’t flatter him anymore, even from you, my lord,” Bellatrix observed, her cheeks having grown pinker in inverse proportion to the level of wine in her glass, which was now empty.

“Perhaps,” Riley said, winking at her. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t like hearing it.”

Bellatrix laughed, Severus grimaced a bit, and Tom chuckled. Though the ever-restless part of him was awake and unquiet, it was a relatively pleasant evening. Yet he was distracted by the mounting sense that had grown, over the past several months, toward a crescendo that now felt near. Something of significance was finally about to happen, a victory or a threat, it hardly mattered. Anything to penetrate the tedium of rule. He would not have thought, as a power-thirsty child in Slytherin, clothed in the next thing to rags and armed with only his ambition, that he could tire of world dominion, but he found himself in precisely that position.

Nudging Riley off his lap, he went outside without excusing himself. The conversation only faltered for a moment; all of his companions were accustomed to his abrupt exits. Severus’s atrocious castle was no comfort; the man had amassed a collection of orphaned portraits that crowded every hallway with their vaguely confused countenances. On a whim, Tom apparated to the island in Wales. He hadn’t visited in some time, and inspected Leo’s portrait closely for signs of death, but the figure seemed to be merely asleep, occasionally twitching, as though deep in unpleasant dreams.

Tom opened the trap door and descended the long ladder that had so intimidated him that he hadn’t explored it until he had perfected his protective charms. As it turned out, they hadn’t been necessary, but upon his first venture, he had wondered if the ladder’s descent into a blank void ended on the other side of the earth. Now, he was soothed by the mere anticipation of what lay at its end. It still felt like being swallowed whole, but perversely, he felt safe instead of claustrophobic.

He was halfway down when it occurred to him to wonder why he was driven to this, the ultimate taking of refuge and one he rarely allowed himself, by an evening of not unpleasant company in Spinner’s End. But Tom had resigned himself long ago to the interminable length of a quest to fully understand oneself, even for him. He had eternity; he needn’t rush.

Usually, reminding himself of his immortality calmed him, but now, it just made him descend the ladder faster.

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September 1, 1996

Platform 9 ¾

Harry anticipated going to the platform to board the Hogwarts Express with roughly the same level of anxiety he’d had as a first year. He had, after that year, felt a steady decrease in unease leading up to September 1, and by the year before, he had actually been eager to see his friends and,
guiltily, to escape the friendly but very close scrutiny of his parents. Fawkes did not accompany him to the Ridge, either, for his own reasons which curiously went unexplained. He had deigned to go to Malfoy Manor every time, but after a myriad of attempts to transport the phoenix with him to his family’s home, Harry had given up. The final straw was ended with the phoenix apparating by fire as soon as Harry called out the Ridge and tossed his floo powder. A departure that left a fireball in its wake was probably the clearest communication a nonverbal creature could likely make as to its displeasure—and it also set Harry’s favorite casual robes afire. Lesson learned.

Harry had no idea where Fawkes summered. It could be the Gryffindor dormitory for all Harry knew, since by the time Harry arrived back at school last September first, Fawkes had already settled in and was lining his nest with a fresh harvest of strips of cloth from Harry’s bed linens.

Harry’s nerves had to do with a realization over the summer regarding his tendency to see things, and the resulting connotations to be drawn as to Harry’s most consistent feat of the imagination. Every September, his lord could be seen sitting on a bench on the platform—watching the crowds but unheeded by them in return, as though no one could see him there but Harry.

Harry’s first year, the sight hadn’t been entirely clear. There was certainly a person on the bench, and Harry’s heart leapt at the proximity as though it was someone familiar, but he couldn’t make out its identity. It came into tentative focus his second year, and seeing that it was his lord, he’d been frightened into giving the bench a wide berth ever since. It wasn’t that he thought it possible that his lord would be among them and only Harry would notice, only that on the infinitesimal chance that it was possible, he clearly didn’t expect anyone to see him. And knowing Harry did seemed like the sort of surprise his lord wouldn’t welcome.

It was easier to chalk it all up to being over-imaginative. Harry, accustomed to seeing things other didn’t and not discussing them with anyone, which had been Lucius and Narcissa’s firm and unanimous instruction in his early years, was good at tamping down his own vexation and moving forward. But that summer, out in the forest with Elspeth looking for the family of griffins she had befriended but which never showed themselves to anyone else, they had stumbled across a gaping pit and each reached out to stop the other at the same time.

Eyes wide with shock, Elspeth had studied him intently. “You see it?”

“Of course,” Harry said, taking a few cautious backward steps and towing his younger sister along with him. The pit looked freshly dug, and at the bottom it was lined with sharpened sticks. He shuddered to think what might have happened if they fell in.

“It’s a deninvag’s trap,” Elspeth said, still staring at him. “A deninvag cloaks its trap in one of the strongest known disillusionments. The magic is what our own disillusionment spell is based off of. Harry, you shouldn’t be able to see it.”

Harry looked back at her. “But you just told me that you did,” he pointed out.

Her eyes really were unnervingly like his; he watched them light with recognition and wondered if his did that. It made them go burning green, and lit two points of color in her cheeks. “You carry it too, then,” she murmured. “The blood of Nadine the Clear-Eyed.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He only meant to look away from her, but wound up staring back at the pit. Now he saw the air around it had the quality his illusions always did, as though it shimmered, the way distant objects did in bright sunshine.

Elspeth stayed quiet as Harry worked it out for himself. When he turned back to her, she was still intent, but her expression was softer. “Mum and dad told me all about it. You should talk to them,
Harry. They did a ton of research when they found out I had it, and…Harry?”

His thoughts had been racing over ever strange thing he had seen; specters and scars and even wounds that the bearer didn’t seem to be bothering to conceal; objects carried to set about as though they were mundane but visibly steeped in curses or dark magic; a beautiful man on a bench every September 1st.

“I don’t want them to know.” He said it without thinking, but was surprised how much he meant it. He reached out and gripped his sister’s hand. “At least…not yet. It’s…”

“I know it’s meant to be a secret, but not from our parents,” Elspeth insisted gently, but when Harry’s insistent stare was unwavering, she sighed and squeezed his hand in return, then pulled away.

“Fine, Harry. It’s not my secret to tell, but if you ever do want to talk about it…well, I’m here.”

He hadn’t. But he began to observe Elspeth more closely, and wondered if he had a stronger case of the “Clear-Eyed” than she did. His confirmation came when they entered the platform and passed close to the bench, and she took an unnatural path that arched around it. Harry felt no such compulsion beyond his own fear of revealing more than he should.

He couldn’t help it. He looked. And somehow, knowing—really knowing—that his lord was there, made the secret observation both exhilarating and terrifying in a way the mere suspicion never was. Harry was transfixed, buffeted by the crowd but his attention unwavering, for a few moments too long. His lord’s eyes, which had been casually scanning those present with a bemused expression, lit on Harry’s, and held.

Harry was aware of little except the sound of blood rushing in his ears. It was the same sensation he had when he put his head underwater. As though every note of the noise above the surface was swollen into distortion, and the changed pressure inside his skull rendered thoughts oddly focused and slow. His lord stood from his bench and walked toward Harry, and the crowds parted around him without the individual people seeming to understand why they were abruptly stepping and pivoting and breaking toward the train.

There was a perimeter of impermeability around his lord that moved with him, until suddenly it included Harry, as well. Elspeth’s hand, which had been resting lightly on Harry’s forearm, fell away.

“Harry,” said his lord. His voice was warm, and cleared Harry’s mind at once, leaving him blushing and speechless and more than a little afraid. “I see that you see me. Is this a new development?”

“My lord,” Harry breathed, then cleared his throat. “I only realized this summer that it…that I do really…er, rather, that it isn’t my imagination…” he trailed off helplessly when his lord lifted an elegant hand in a quelling gesture, then stepped nearer Harry still.

His lord had a clear, clean scent, unmuddied by the faintly metallic odor that cleaning spells left on clothes and the skin. His black hair, though always neatly arranged, looked thick and soft, and his eyes were fathomless and, seen this close, his irises were ringed in a darker shade of red.

“A Peverell trait,” said his lord. “I suspected it was one you might grow into, from the day I watched you find the yew wand.” He cocked his head, with a sudden full smile that made a painful lump form in Harry’s throat. “But in so many other ways, you are a surprise. Now, run along. We shan’t have you miss the train.”
His lord disappeared, and in his absence, several people at once stumbled into Harry, and gave him
varying looks of surprise or accusation as though it was his fault. Harry felt like the sun had been
Vanished, or a tray of food snatched away when he was unbearably hungry. He felt forlorn all the
way to Hogwarts, confusing his friends and alarming his little sister.

This was his lord’s danger. Harry had known it since he was eight, and come to understand that
while few were immune, it was a danger to which Harry was curiously and increasingly vulnerable.
To be in his lord’s presence at all meant to be persistently tormented by his absence afterward.
Maybe it would be better not to have ever known the drug of his proximity at all.

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October 1, 1996
Hogwarts Castle
Scotland

Elspeth used the invisibility cloak for the first time all term late in the evening on the first of
October, breaking a briefly kept promise to herself that she would reserve it for emergencies after
she had very nearly been caught out with it toward the end of her second year. She didn’t like to
think what her parents would think if it was confiscated, and she also knew there was a chance her
family wasn’t supposed to have it at all, posing as they did a perceived threat to the aristocracy, or
whatever. Only Harry seemed to be smiled upon wherever he went, and though attitudes toward the
other Potters had visibly thawed to some extent since Harry had come home, there was still a
distinction in attitudes that kept Elspeth on edge.

But really, this was kind of an emergency, Elspeth insisted to herself. She recalled the harsh sounds
of Roberta Kimmery crying herself to sleep, audible even from outside the door of the
commonborn girls’ dorms, and steeled her resolve. She fingered the slip of paper in her pocket on
which she had written her name, and headed for the Great Hall. The Marauder’s Map (also, her
father’s voice pointed out in the back of her head, only intended for emergency use) was held tight
in her other hand, and showed serendipitously empty passageways along the entire route.

The goblet sat beneath its steady flames on the stand in the Great Hall where it had been positioned
at the beginning of the term. The implications of its presence there had ruined Elspeth’s appetite
for a week, and she saw plenty of other people staring at it, pale with dread, also. None so much as
Roberta Kimmery, sixth-year and eldest of the handful of common-born Peverell subjects, who had
dutifully submitted her name on the very first night.

Roberta was shy, slow on her feet, and weak enough magically to be the subject of relentless taunts
from students in other houses. Elspeth had even heard the odd Gryffindors snickering behind her
back. Elspeth squared her shoulders and advanced toward the goblet, reaching out with the scrap of
parchment toward the cool fire, and fed it in.

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October 2, 1996

Harry had lectured Elspeth ad nauseum about the foolhardiness of adding her name, reminding her
of how strictly their parents had forbidden either of them to enter the tournament, and she had
pretended to be convinced. In retrospect, Harry had backed down too easily. The next morning,
after he stared determinedly at Elspeth until she could no longer avoid his eye, he raised a brow at her and got up from the table.

The people around them fell quiet. Harry leaned forward over the table to scrawl something on the bottom of the letter he had been reading, and then instead of giving it to one of the owls still dining on the leftover breakfast in the center of the table, he tore it off and started toward the goblet without looking left or right.

“Harry,” Elspeth hissed, starting to stand up, but beside her Ron Weasley closed his hand firmly around her forearm. At her desperate glance, he shook his head. Of course he was right; there was no way to stop Harry and making a scene wouldn’t deter him. She had never been good at lying at all and despite their long separation, Harry seemed to read her even better than most. He knew what she had done, so he matter-of-factly put his name in as well, not bothering to make it a secret. There was applause in the hall, some of it polite and all of it originating from Gryffindor borderline raucous. Only Elspeth sat stiff and unresponsive until Harry settled back on the bench, looking totally unconcerned.

“I’m the competitive sort,” he told Elspeth, winking at her, but there was no mirth in his eyes.

“Just don’t kill Nott,” Ron said, tone deliberately light. “I’ll tell him not to kill you either.”

Harry snorted. “I doubt there’s a task where we’ll be expected to kill each other.”

“Only poison one another,” Elspeth said bitterly, not controlling her emotions well at all. Harry looked at her again, and then he opened his mouth to say something, but before he could there were hushed exclamations around them as someone else got up from the Gryffindor table.

It was Hermione Granger. Just looking at her made Elspeth blush for reasons that were not exactly a mystery to Elspeth, but which she tried not to dwell upon. Hermione’s hair, longer than ever, hung in loose waves down her slender back. It was all Elspeth could make out, that and her steady, confident stride, as the sixth-year girl strode up to the goblet and gave it her name. A much more dubious version of the applause that Harry had received flared briefly in the room, then faded.

“Why would she even bother? We all know Lord Black doesn’t make anyone submit,” muttered Philip Farley. “She’s good looking enough, but a waste of magic if I’ve ever seen one.”

Still too raw to keep her head down, Elspeth leaned over the table and turned toward Philip, her hands gripping the table like claws. “God, Farley, would you shut up? The more you talk about the tournament the more you draw attention to the fact that you’re too big a coward to ever submit your own name.”

Philip, a pasty-faced person, went paler yet, his cheeks taking on the pallor of dough, a nice match to their shape and consistency. He narrowed eyes that Elspeth had always spitefully thought too pale and much too small, and she thought smugly that he had never looked fouler.

“What’s it to you, Potter?” he spat, but left it at that. He was just a Farley cousin, after all, and while his family was in their lord’s good graces and Elspeth’s was not, everyone knew that would change when Harry took the oath.

Before Elspeth leaned back, she realized someone much further down the table was looking at her, golden brown eyes a bit wide. It was Hermione Granger, and Elspeth’s blush turned more furious. She hunched her shoulders and stared determinedly at her plate, and the sight of the untouched food there just made her ill.
“Els,” said Harry softly, nudging her foot with his own under the table until she glanced up. His smile was crooked, but his eyes were serious. “I would have done it anyway. Don’t be mad, or silly about it, okay?”

She was sure he was lying, but she knew he thought it was her job to comfort and protect her, which was patronizing but also vaguely sweet. “Okay,” she said, then smirked. “Merlin, mum and dad are going to kill you.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and she realized he thought she would sulk longer than this, which was a forgivable assumption on his part. Elspeth was a little surprised at herself, too. When he recouped, Harry grinned with his customary cockiness. “Nah. It’s about time Lord Potter had a healthy chance at some positive press,” he said.

“Who am I supposed to cheer for?” Ron complained.

“Me, obviously,” Harry said, as though affronted, but he was still smiling. “I’m your best mate.”

“Well, if that’s settled, who do I lay my wager on?”

Harry clutched his heart, as though cursed, and Ron continued to look thoughtful, his deadpan as impressive as always. “Fred, what do you think?”

The twin Ron had turned to mimicked Ron’s look. “Nott is an Animagus, isn’t he?”

“Not until fourth year,” Harry pointed out, still grinning. Fred looked doubtfully at Harry. “Your happy first year accident isn’t fooling us,” he said, tapping his chin. “You didn’t have it down completely until first term last year, we’ll all recall. George? Anything to add?”

“Well, maybe Nott can raise the dead, or whatever, but our Harry is all try.”

Harry’s brows rose, the ongoing joke momentarily forgotten as he leaned toward the Weasleys, interested. “Can he really?”

The twins shrugged, smirking, and looked at Ron. Even Elspeth couldn’t help her curiosity, half forgetting her unease as she turned to Ron for a response, or some outward sign that would give him away. But Ron’s expression was smooth and unreadable.

“I guess you’ll find out,” he said, and reached over to snag Elspeth’s sausage from her plate with a twirl of his fork.

As soon as the students broke up from the table to go to class, Elspeth caught Harry’s arm. “How did you know?” she murmured.

Harry sighed, and cupped her cheek a moment, the way their father might. “You’ve been looking miserable for weeks every time you so much as glance at that Kimmery witch. Also I heard you sneak out last night. Also, you wouldn’t look at me all morning, and you wouldn’t look at the goblet, either. Whereas up until this morning, you have been staring at it like it’s so terrible you can’t look away.”

“Like you’re such a good liar,” Elspeth muttered. Harry looked briefly stricken, then he smiled and kissed her forehead.

“Better than you, anyway.”
October 25, 1996

Of all the people that Harry didn’t expect to see when he was leaving his last class on a Friday afternoon, Lucius Malfoy was high on the list. Lucius appeared, by his frown, unprepared to see Harry also. They stood in the otherwise empty hallway for a moment, before Lucius reached out to briefly clasp Harry’s shoulder, as close as he ever came to familiar behavior.

“Harry. It’s nice to see you.”

“It’s nice to see you, too,” Harry said, hesitating before adding carefully, “Lord Malfoy.”

Lucius’s lips quirked, the slight smile a sure sign of approval, but his eyes were soft as he looked Harry up and down. “I wish we’d been able to have you at the Manor for a day or two this summer, but it was a busy time, politically.”

Harry, of course, wouldn’t know. All the information to which he’d been privy while formally associated with both the Malfoys and Lord Black was unavailable to him now, and rather than missing it, he had found it was better for his level of latent anxiety not to know. And what his parents did know they didn’t share, he thought, with only a faint trace of bitterness.

“I’m looking for Draco, but…” Lucius studied Harry uncertainly. It was a novel thing to see on Lucius’s face, and it startled Harry. “Later, perhaps, you might visit with my son.”

“All right,” Harry said slowly.

Lucius gave a swift nod, briefly seized Harry’s forearm, and walked on.

Harry waited for Draco in the shared common room, and wished they had spoken more in the past few months. Instead, an awkward silence fell between them after Draco appeared, looking paler even than usual, and he and Harry exchanged cautious salutations and retreated to a small table crowded by two chairs in a far corner away from everyone else.

“My father wanted you to know,” Draco said quietly, “that our lord is reviving Maxime Proxime.”

Harry, who had been braced for a weighty revelation, frowned. “I…don’t know what that is.”

Draco bit his lip, looking away. “I didn’t either. But it’s, apparently, the old way that titles were passed. It has to do with blood magic and soul magic and it’s…um, I guess it’s sort of complicated.”

Harry tried not to feel annoyed, but he very much wished Lucius had simply given Harry this news himself, since Draco’s version was so confusing it was like having no information at all.

“It’s the way that an heir is selected,” Draco said, “sort of. It’s also a sharing of power, and a loyalty oath. My father said it’s a vow and a soul bond, and more. And the magic has to approve your selection, and your selection must be sincerely offered, and accepted.” His gaze was growing increasingly steady and significant, and Harry, beginning to understand, frowned more deeply.

“That sounds like a marriage,” he said.

“My father said the Maxime Proxime is like a spouse, and an heir, and more. It’s not…um, it’s not complicated for us, because I’m the only choice, but the magic has to approve. So it could…I don’t know, it could frustrate a lot of families.”
“And it has to be sincerely offered,” Harry said. Something hollow was forming in his chest. Draco was looking at him with too much understanding.

“Harry, I, um…” he was biting his lip again. “I’m sure it will all be all right.”

Harry offered the ghost of a smile, and shrugged. “It’s not like I don’t know who they like better. And I haven’t ever really wanted it, anyway.”

“But the magic has a say,” Draco added. “You’re very powerful.”

Harry shrugged again. The silence between them lengthened and grew awkward again.

“Did you, ah, have a good summer?” Draco said. Harry looked up swiftly, startled into laughter.

“I thought you were less emotionally clueless than that,” he said, before he remembered that he and Draco weren’t on easy terms any longer, and he couldn’t go about saying whatever was on his mind.

Draco scowled. “It can’t have been too busy, since you had plenty of time to steal my dragon.”

Harry, honestly shocked, felt his mouth fall open. “I…”

Draco grinned slowly. “What, you thought I wouldn’t know?”

Relaxing a little, Harry laughed harder than the exchange warranted, but it eased the tight feeling in his chest considerably. “Did she tell you?”

“Never trust her with your secrets,” Draco said mildly, and they both laughed more quietly together.

“I have to get back,” Draco said, indicating the Slytherin dorms with a jerk of his head. He hesitated, then added, “Take care, Harry.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Thanks, Draco.”

The following week, when the time came for the goblet to indicate the champions and their lord was at the high table, Harry knew that he was there to announce his new edict about Maxime Proxime, which Harry had read up on and now understood well enough to be unsure whether he or Elspeth was the lucky one in the end. He had no doubt that his parents would be unable to sincerely elect Harry over Elspeth, and the role of the family magic was unclear, but in history had always done its part to confirm a selection when the candidate’s magic was above a threshold strength. Elspeth was certainly strong enough to pass muster.

But the idea of not being an heir left Harry feeling oddly free. He trusted that Elspeth would raise the family’s esteem in the eyes of their lord. She was sensible and hard working; she would take her role seriously and wear it with grace. Harry could assist her, and spend more time at the Ridge. He had always felt he was a better supporter than a leader.

The Headmistress read out the names from the Goblet just as pudding was served, and there were very few surprises. But those few surprises were great.

Everyone assumed Theo Nott would be chosen, and he was. Everyone assumed that they would
hear various unknown names of various wizarding youth living internationally, and they did. There was casual, muted conversation over many of the Headmistress’s announcements, until midway through when she said, in the same tone she had used throughout, “Hermione Granger for Lord Black of House Black.”

Sirius’s territory was vast, and though he didn’t require names be submitted, he offered a healthy sum to whomever was selected the champion whether they won or not. He did this, Harry knew, out of guilt, but it naturally had an adverse reaction of encouraging the submission of names. Harry had lost count of how many respectably strong sixth and seventh year students had put their names in for House Black.

Like everyone else, he looked down the table at Hermione Granger, who was sitting very straight in her place at the bench among the other commonborn Gryffindors, though he thought there was a disproportionate amount of space to either of her sides. Had she always been so set apart? He couldn’t recall many specific memories of Hermione Granger at all, but was struck now by how alone she seemed, and how firmly she kept her gaze trained on the table in front of her, as though she had never seen anything as fascinating as the tray of rolls.

Off kilter in the wake of that selection, Harry began to wonder at the integrity of the goblet. If it would select a witch so talentless Harry couldn’t remember a single time she had been praised in class in going on six years, was Elspeth as safe as he had assumed? Harry held himself tense at the last moment, at once certain that Elspeth’s name would not be called over his and terrified that it would be, and relaxed when the Headmistress caught the last, smoking parchment belched from the goblet and read out “Harry Potter for Lord Potter of House Peverell.”

Then there was no time left for anything but their Lord’s edict. Harry finally let his gaze rest on the seat at the center of the staff table. Between the distraction of the tournament and the distraction of the edict, Harry was more composed in his lord’s presence than he could ever recall being before. He had made it through the meal without staring, and even tasted some of his food.

Their lord did not often appear in public. Harry had heard some shocked gasps earlier in the evening when a few commonborn students who did not recognize him on sight learned who he was. The wizard was as cool and relaxed as ever, looking over the room benignly, his knife and fork untouched on either side of his empty plate.

When their lord got to his feet an immediate quiet fell over the Great Hall.

“Good evening, Hogwarts students and staff. It is always a pleasure to dine in the Great Hall, seeing that the tables where I once sat as a student are more full than ever, and to know that so many young people are brought together for an unparalleled magical education. While I care equally for all divisions of the wizarding populace, there is no place, nor group of people, in which I feel more at home.”

His voice sounded differently than it had at the station. His tone was more measured and precise. His face was serene, with none of the intensity of focus that Harry recalled so well from that morning.

“I have wrestled with the best way to shape our society for the benefit of your generation, and future generations. We must always be willing to change when a better way is revealed to us, and also to reconsider the wisdom of abandoning traditions that once served us well.

“I have granted new titles with old names, and as a result, I believe my subjects have grown confused. I have let you call yourselves Lords and Ladies, but I have given these titles a new and expanded significance. Yet you cling to the notion that these titles pass in the way the old titles
once did. To your direct descendants or, barring that, a relative of blood which you have chosen, only recently and at my demand seeking so much as my approval.

“But the magic to which we all are obedient is not interested in bloodlines or family relationships. It seeks power, and complements in power. Our ancestors once understood that, and bonded themselves to the heirs to their power at the behest and approval of the magic in their blood.

“With this in mind, after careful thought, it is my desire to reinstate Maxime Proxime, which will best ensure that the legacy of each family is protected, preserved and, over time, even improved. I know well the difficulty this may create in families that are particularly attached to the existing customs, but trust that our forefathers knew best how to build the strongest foundation for each house.”

Because anyone who knew what Maxime Proxime was knew it because someone in a position to know had told them about it days before, the faces in the Great Hall were confused or grim, but not shocked. Save a few of the professors at the staff table, who were expressing shock enough for everyone else. Professor Slughorn in particular looked downright green, and as he was the closest thing at the table to a Pureblood, Harry supposed he understood why.

“I anticipate that this edict will be met with doubt, consternation – perhaps even anger. But, I trust, no resistance. I know that my subjects trust in my sincerity, but to leave them with absolutely no doubt, I shall not exempt myself from my own edict. While I have no need of an heir, I am the last representative of a family, nonetheless. And by selecting a Maxime Proxime I will create a forty-second family, albeit a family of only two.”

Now there were sounds of shock and stirring, though no one dared to speak while their lord was speaking. Harry thought frantically about what he had read, with only his own situation in mind. At the same time, his lord’s eyes, which had been moving around the room to equally treat the large audience, stopped on Harry.

Harry.

“With full knowledge of the great consequence of my choice, and faith that the blood magic of house Slytherin will confirm my choice, I select Harry Potter.”

Harry had often seen things, but hadn’t known himself to hear things. Still, he was too shocked to trust his ears, not until he became conscious of everyone in the room staring at him. The ones who knew what Maxime Proxime was were identifiable by their especial signs of shock. Then, before he could reinvigorate his doubt, Harry felt something that he could only compare to the sensation of his old tether, except where the tether had smothered his magic, this tie to his power was reciprocal, and flooded him with such a shock of fresh energy he briefly saw black.

That was it, then? Harry, blinking furiously as his vision refocused, looked helplessly up at his lord, who continued to watch him without any outward sign of interest, and certainly not as though he had just voluntarily bonded himself to the son of traitors to his name, a boy he had barely exchanged more than a few words with. Bafflingly, Harry’s subconscious and the magic in both their veins had concurred.

Before Harry could even begin to have an emotional response to what had just happened, there was a deep, sparking noise from the direction of the goblet, and another piece of parchment shot out, then, with no Headmistress on hand to catch it, drifted slowly to the floor.

Harry’s mind, perhaps eager to grasp something other than the incomprehensible thought of a new magical bond which he still didn’t fully understand and the equally unfathomable connotations of
the same, understood at once what had just happened.

The goblet was calibrated to choose a candidate from each noble family. It had chosen Harry, who was now part of a forty-second family of two. The goblet had insofar selected only forty-one names.

Harry jerked his head around to look at Elspeth, who sat, as always, across the Gryffindor table from him. His little sister, the person he had wanted to protect long before he had seen her face, when he only knew her name.

“As Harry Potter shall be the champion for our lord and House Slytherin…” the Headmistress called out, her voice understandably tinny after the combined shocks of the past five minutes. She cleared her throat and went on more firmly. “Elspeth Potter is nominated champion for Lord Potter of House Peverell.”

Chapter End Notes

That...was a lot! I am excited to outline Part III and resume posting some time in December. Like everyone who posts things on the internet, I so appreciate your feedback. <3
Transformative

Chapter Summary

Hermione juggles the new challenge of being in the spotlight, but there is someone whose attention isn’t new. Harry and Tom have breakfast. The house champions engage in the first Task.

Chapter Seventeen: Transformative

The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.

Albert Einstein

October 31, 1996

Hogwarts Castle

There wasn’t an opportunity to discuss what had just happened with anyone; not that Harry was particularly interested in that. He was getting shocked looks from everyone who knew him at all and half-suspicious ones from those who did not. No one was asking questions yet, but he knew they would come. Draco in particular seemed to be practically vibrating with the urge to ask, but by the time the feast dispersed it was curfew and they were all herded by their prefects toward their respective dormitories.

In the quiet of his room, Harry sat on his bed and studied the change in his magic more carefully. He knew the basic nature of all bonding magic, and that there would be something of a flow of thoughts and feelings between two Wizards who shared such a bond. But he could not feel the beginning or end of the connection that had felt, momentarily, clear in the Great Hall.

Fawkes was trilling insistently, which while not typical, wasn’t unprecedented. Sometimes when Harry had been away too long, he would demand attention as soon as Harry came in the room. But when Harry looked at the phoenix now, he saw that the bird was at the closed window, perched awkwardly on its sill and giving every indication that he wanted to be let out.

Harry, come to think of it, had only seen Fawkes use the window a few times since he reached physical adulthood after his rebirth the night they’d met. Fawkes disappeared with a soft sound when he wanted to be elsewhere, and Harry had adjusted quickly to the fact that Fawkes required very little from Harry except his company.

Perplexed, Harry went to the window and studied the bird. Fawkes went still and his eyes, bright
and spherical, met Harry’s. His plumed head cocked to one side. Harry felt something – stir, for lack of a better word – in the back of his mind. At the same moment Fawkes pecked at the window several times, hard.

“All right, all right,” Harry said, frowning at the feeling of energy and confused by Fawkes’s behavior. He opened the window and Fawkes, again, froze and looked up at Harry. Harry, again struck by a distant feeling that something significant was happening, looked back. After several moments, Fawkes leapt out the window, dropped a few feet then spread his wings and flew off into the midnight darkness, quickly disappearing from the limits of Harry’s sight.

The evening was cold and windy. Harry closed the window and sat by it, thinking Fawkes might soon be back. But just a few moments later a face appeared opposite Harry in the window, causing him to shout in dismay before relaxing into simple surprise.

“Sirius, what the bloody…”

Sirius had opened the window from the outside and was in the process of stepping off of his broom and onto the sill. Harry reached out a hand to help balance him, and Sirius handed the broom to him, grasped his forearm and jumped more nimbly into the room.

“I wanted to talk to you, as soon as I could,” he murmured. Harry could see he had come in a rush; his hair was mussed and his breath was coming short. Harry, setting aside his dismay, turned to close the window again only to find the unmistakable silhouette of his father on a broomstick rushing in their direction.

Harry looked at Sirius with open dread, but there was no time to do anything but assist his father through the window in the same way he had Sirius, then look uneasily between the two of them.

James and Sirius regarded one another with watchful expressions so similar it was easy to believe they had grown up as close as brothers. Then James looked away, and spoke to Harry as though Sirius was not there at all.

“What do you know about the bond, Harry?”

“Um,” Harry said, scratching his head and blushing.

James’s expression softened, and he reached out and touched Harry’s head. They were nearly the same height, but James was an inch or two taller yet. “I’m sorry to get straight to it Harry, but we don’t have much time. We can talk more about…everything…soon, I hope. But this is the most important thing.”

Haplessly, Harry caught himself beginning to look at Sirius, then he blushed and looked down. He felt the pregnant pause after his father noticed, then James turned back to Sirius and cleared his
“I imagine Sirius agrees, and that’s why he’s here.”

Harry glanced up through his eyelashes. Sirius’s guarded look was undershot now with a naked sort of hope that was painful to see. Harry noticed James’s jaw tense, but he didn’t say anything or look away. Finally Sirius sucked in a breath through his teeth and turned to Harry.

“I do agree, Harry. You need to be able to keep certain…um, things, to yourself. Don’t you?”

Harry still wasn’t sure what they meant by ” things,” but there were certainly ideas in his head he didn’t want to share with his lord, so he nodded, blushing hotly and hoping that neither Sirius nor James could guess why.

“Harry, it’s meant to be easy. Bonds can’t be open all the time, or no one would ever enter into one,” James said, and Sirius nodded. “Imagine a door that leads from your mind to somewhere else. Can you imagine something like that?”

Harry nodded again, less confidently. But he did feel the bond, he knew, and dreaded to think what might happen if when it settled he lacked any control.

“He should be explaining…” Sirius began mutinously, and James silenced him with a single sharp look, then refocused on Harry.

“Lay your hand on your side of that door, Harry. Do you feel something there, something you can touch and control?” His father’s face was unbearably gentle -- and concerned, and pained, and despairing. Harry closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see it and James grunted approvingly.

“Yes, it could help to close your eyes. Focus on what’s inside, not out here. Do you feel it?”

Harry did feel the opening, leading elsewhere, a warm and intriguing path – and then the familiar parameters of his own mind. He felt where that path began and inspected it. He had no sense of hands or access to anything physical here, but he knew he didn’t need it. He willed the opening to close, and it did.
Harry’s eyes opened and he exhaled hard with the force of his relief. James reached out and pulled him in for a brief, gruff hug, then leaned back to look the few inches into Harry’s face. “Be careful,” he said, and released Harry. “We’ll owl you tomorrow.” He looked over his shoulder at Sirius, but said nothing to him or about him. And then James and his broomstick were back on the other side of the window and lost to the dark.

“Remember I’m here too if you ever need me,” Sirius said. Their hug was lengthier and easier. When Sirius pulled free he had to dash tears from his eyes, and Harry’s heart, battered by an evening of emotional chaos, thudded hard with love for him.

“I’ll be fine, Sirius,” Harry said, smiling encouragingly at his friend, and Sirius eventually smiled back. He reached out and grasped Harry’s shoulder briefly, then let go to bend over and pick up his broomstick.

“You’re a good man, Harry. You’re right. You’ll be just fine.”

Harry hoped he’d done a better job convincing Sirius than he had himself. Harry wasn’t at all sure he’d be fine. In fact, he couldn’t imagine how he could be.

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Hermione knew that Elspeth watched her.

She’d noticed it at first when Elspeth was a first year, and ascribed it then to the stereotypical, morbid Pureblood fascination with the Muggleborn, and thought nothing more of it. She had firmly put that strange encounter from years before in Diagon Alley out of her head. She assumed Elspeth wouldn’t cross class lines to do anything like that at Hogwarts, and she was proven right when months passed without them ever acknowledging one another.

Not that Hermione would even know if Elspeth had tried. She kept her head down to such an extent she couldn’t remember the last time she’d made eye contact with someone, and she had memorized every vein and uneven tile in the stone floors of the castle.

In some ways, being chosen champion was a source of excitement to Hermione. It was a relief to finally give herself permission to be noticed.

And the more attention Hermione got, the more aware she became of the one person who had noticed her from the start.

Elspeth was just a fourth year, but she was tall. She still looked enough like her brother to make their relationship obvious, but mostly because they shared a hair and eye color. Elspeth was more slender, finer-boned, and had a band of freckles on each cheek and skin the bright, milky color of a fine opal.

She was pretty, but not in an obvious way. Her limbs were long and coltish, she had a tendency to hunch her shoulders and slouch so her shoulder blades protruded like little wings, and her luminous green eyes overwhelmed the subtler features on the rest of her face.
“Harry’s sister,” Lavender remarked one evening when they’d locked themselves in the girls’ bathroom, late enough they didn’t expect anyone to even attempt to interrupt them. “The heir. Can you believe it?” Lavender was stroking Hermione’s bare arm, and if she hadn’t been talking, Hermione might have been able to believe Lavender was thinking of her.

“I haven’t given it a lot of thought,” lied Hermione. She thought about little else except the various political landscapes under the various lords. Pretending to be moderately challenged in class no longer required an effort. She had plenty of time and energy for more worthwhile pursuits, and she knew there was no one who would pose a legitimate threat to her in the tournament. If she won it, she thought Sirius might be shocked into making her his heir. And Peter, who had been rather absent the previous summer, had maintained contact well enough for Hermione to feel assured he wanted her to win.

She didn’t like to think about Peter’s involvement in the last Tri-Wizard Tournament outcome; but, while Hermione refused to trust anyone, she thought her motivations were likelier to be aligned with Peter’s, for now, than anyone else’s. Both of them wanted her to break into Sirius’s confidence, a position she felt she’d been on the cusp of for over a year, but still couldn’t secure. Hermione knew her reasons, but wondered at Peter’s.

“I can hear your thoughts from all the way over here,” Lavender murmured, rolling over onto her side and rubbing her thighs together in a way Hermione could never resist. They had a full softness that Hermione liked. Lavender hadn’t a single sharp angle. She was everywhere curved, luxuriously rounded, smooth. “We have a bit more time. Let’s not waste it.”

November 12, 1996

At the weighing of the wands, Elspeth was watching Hermione even more obnoxiously than usual. Hermione, with Lavender’s counsel – confidential, of course – had worn her hair braided and wound into a knot at the nape of her neck. She always wore it loose and long, but Lavender was recrafting her. Hermione didn’t mind. She thought it made sense to shock them however she could. She was also wearing a few of the higher-end cosmetics that Lavender had been giving her as little gifts for years but she had never bothered with before. Subtle gloss on her lips, a flare of dark eyeliner at the corner of each lid, her brows sharpened with a pencil.

Hermione noticed that while Elspeth watched Hermione, her brother Harry watched Elspeth. Then, he looked curiously at Hermione, as though he wouldn’t have seen her standing there if it wasn’t obvious she was the center of his sister’s attention. As they wandered back to Gryffindor the Potters tipped their heads toward one another and spoke inaudibly, until Hermione focused her hearing with a wordless spell she’d learned in fourth year.

“I think you just need to remember to keep your head down,” he was saying. “There’s no real point in winning. You should play it safe.”

“Hypocrisy isn’t charming, even when you do it,” said Elspeth, deadpan. Hermione hadn’t expected her to be funny, or clever. She stopped listening.

Peter sent one of his missives. Hermione turned the mirror shard over in her hand for a few minutes, partially because she had real hesitations about seeing him again and receiving whatever it was he had to tell her. And partially because Lavender had her fingers inside Hermione off and on for the past hour, and now she was lying between Hermione’s sprawled legs with her cheek and
her spill of golden hair on Hermione’s thigh. When Lavender got like this, it always meant that she would be putting Hermione at arm’s length for a while. Cultivating one of her targets, as Hermione thought of it, since Lavender never bothered to explain. Hermione didn’t mind, but she did let herself savor the companionship a little more when she knew she would soon be without it.

Eventually, she rolled over Lavender to seize control, and when they peaked – Lavender with a cry and Hermione with a deeply bitten lip, Hermione cast the spells to clean them both up, careful to use her wand and to make the one on Lavender slightly less thorough than it should be.

She met Peter out in the Forest, of course. They nodded to one another and then Peter turned into a rat.

Hermione rolled her eyes, took her own Animagus form, and followed. He set a faster pace than such a small body should be able, and Hermione, longer-limbed, was slowed by the challenge of the underbrush, and avoiding certain trees and plants that she had learned through past experience were unfriendly. When they reached Peter’s destination, she was still so focused on staying on Peter’s tail that she nearly bumped into the human version of him when he transitioned again.

Hermione followed, looking around. They had passed the point where it would be possible for a human to go undetected. The forest had wards that were older than the school to keep non-creatures on certain paths, at risk of alerting the centaurs at best and a more hostile populace at worst. Now they stood before a stone well structure, buried in moss and a climbing vine covered in oversized white flowers, and Hermione knew at once they were far off the permitted route.

A crucial skill in Hermione’s life was concealing her surprise, but it failed her totally in this instance, and her mouth fell open. “Is this…?”

“Yes,” said Peter. He was looking around cautiously, and seeing him uneasy was a sure indicator that they were in a dangerous place. Hermione watched him until he seemed satisfied by whatever he took in from their surroundings, and she relaxed, marginally, when he did. “It’s a last resort,” he told her, meeting her eye. “But now that you’ve found it, your fox should be able to do it again.”

Hermione thought her fox had been primarily focused on Peter’s rat, actually. Her Animagus form was a perpetually hungry creature. But Peter knew considerably more about this than she did, of course, so she nodded, and when they transitioned to go back, she was sure to take in every detail of the sight and sense of their surroundings.

They were human again for a few minutes at the rendezvous point, and Peter launched into one of his seemingly irrelevant anecdotes, which Hermione would later unravel to reveal some kernel of relevant insight into her circumstances. Usually she was unmoved by what she found, but she appreciated Peter trying, in his way, to connect. And she was deeply suspicious of it too.

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November 19, 1996

That morning Harry left the common room and found his lord leaning against the wall as casually as if he were a housemate waiting on Harry to walk to class. No one else saw him, of course. Only Harry. Their eyes met through the throng of bodies and Harry froze, then managed to mumble a believable reason for hanging back.

When the other Gryffindors were gone, his lord smiled indulgently and turned to walk off without a word. Harry, knowing he had to follow, stumbled a bit before his feet would fully cooperate and function.
In an empty classroom, a simple breakfast was laid out. Harry expected it would go untouched. A pity, since it was obviously prepared with more thought than the typical food that appeared in the Great Hall on weekday mornings. There were elaborate patterns in the icing on the pasties; the various meats were so exotic Harry couldn’t identify them, and a dozen types of fruit had been sliced into random shapes and formed a complicated mosaic over the entire surface of a vast tray. The food was arranged on a sideboard adjacent to a small round table set for two.

“I thought it would be good for us to visit, now and again. I don’t want to distract you from your friends and studies, or the tournament, of course. But we should get to know one another.”

His lord seated himself with the economical grace that Harry had always admired, and then looked expectantly at Harry. So Harry walked over, drew out his own chair, and sat also. He had never felt more self-conscious completing so basic a task. His hands trembled on the back of the chair when he grasped it, and his knees vibrated beneath the table when he sat until he clutched them tightly with both hands.

“Don’t you agree, Harry?”

Harry looked directly at his lord, because he knew he would have to get used to it. Today his lord wore his robes open, revealing surprisingly ordinary fitted black trousers and a pale blue knit shirt. The casual clothing made him seem younger. Harry wondered what age an immortal person was meant to look. He thought his lord appeared younger than Harry’s parents, but Harry had never been good at guessing ages.

“Whatever you wish, my lord,” he said eventually, thinking it seemed like a safe answer.

His lord chuckled. “Oh Harry, we’re beyond that, surely.”

Harry had no idea what his lord meant, and let it show on his face.

“Hmmm. Harry, you must call me Tom.”

Harry knew his lord was human, and had once had a name, not a title. But in truth Harry hadn’t ever given it much thought. Now he was overwhelmed by the idea of an entire past, a whole life, beginning several decades before with a magical family, nearly erased -- now revived by the inclusion of Harry of all people -- and their child. A child they named Tom.

In all his life and in all the interpersonal relationships he’d had, Harry had never so badly wanted to know all he could about another person. He was baffled by the desperate force of his curiosity. Harry’s magic was brushing up against his thoughts; he recognized the bond. He cautiously tucked them away and confined the bond to the perimeter of his mind.

“I see you’ve learned how to keep your thoughts to yourself,” his lord observed. He didn’t seem angry, exactly, but watchful. Harry recognized the question that wasn’t asked.

“My father,” he said.

He thought declining to lie or evade might please his lord, but received no sign of an emotional response of any kind.

“Unsurprising. I don’t begrudge you your uncertainty or your privacy, Harry. But as you’ll soon discover, you have no need to hide anything from me.”

“And what about you, my...Tom?” Harry’s mistaken phrasing made them both become suddenly
still. His lord’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and lowered to fix on Harry’s throat when he swallowed. It was Harry who, tentatively, reached for the bond where it lay taut between them and let it focus on the quality of his lord’s regard for Harry. His lord’s brows rose, in acknowledgment, but he made no move to conceal what Harry was trying to find.

It was very strange to explore feelings that belonged to someone else; the purest sort of voyeurism, Harry thought with a shudder. His lord was startlingly human, distracted by the food, though under no circumstances would he think of eating it, because he hadn’t had a meal in too long. Interested in Harry but also cautious about the burden he represented. Curious about the way Harry’s fair skin bloomed with embarrassment and carefully distant from the unspooling train of thought that led from there.

He felt the way his lord breathed, deep and steady, measured. How his blood rushed from his heart to his fingertips and back again. The sensation made Harry dizzy, so he moved away from it. The bond didn’t guide or force; it had no current. Harry freely navigated it, astounded by its implications.

Also, for less than an instant, Harry thought of his lord truly as Tom instead. With the bond in his grasp Harry could reach out body and soul. He had spent his entire life feeling alone, and now he felt buoyant with closeness; oneness. That feeling caused him to lose his grasp of the bond, overwhelmed by it in a way he hadn’t been by much more objectively grave realizations.

They looked at one another again. Harry bit his lip, and knew as he hadn’t before that it was difficult for his lord not to closely watch the way his teeth raked against his skin.

“I think that’s enough for today, Harry.”

Harry flinched at the sound of his lord’s soft voice, nodded, and made to leave the room. As he’d predicted, the lovely food wouldn’t be eaten. He wondered dazedly what elves did with leftover food -- eat it themselves, vanish it? How could he have lived seventeen years with plates and platters, still half full and being whisked away two or three times a day, and still not know?

“Oh, and Harry,” said his lord. Tom. Harry turned with one hand braced against the doorframe, the other on the door handle.

“Best of luck today.”

Harry recalled those words very clearly later in the morning. He stood on the old Quidditch pitch, which was the way everyone still referred to it, even though no one had played Quidditch there in an entire cycle of Hogwarts students. But the official word for it, the Stadium, never seemed right. Harry understood better after a few summers at home with his family playing Quidditch. A Pitch of any age, no matter how it was repurposed, retained a certain shape and atmosphere.

Harry was looking at his sister, because if he did that at least he wouldn’t be tempted to look at his parents. James and Lily were pale and, though the circumstances didn’t permit them literally leaning on each other for support, they stood without any space between their shoulders and upper arms, united by worry. On the dais, with the Lords and Ladies of the lower houses below him, standing, his lord sat on a simple elevated chair, veiled in his protective magic. Harry also saw Riley Wilhelm among this throng of elites, which was puzzling. Harry hadn’t seen him since he finished Hogwarts, but Riley was clearly watching Harry now. When their eyes met, Riley smiled humorlessly, and touched two fingers to his forehead in a tiny salute. Harry nodded back.

To Harry’s relief, Lord Nott was not someone with whom Harry had much occasion to interact. Lord Nott was charismatic enough, tall and objectively pleasant to look at, but there was something
about the planes of his face, and the flawless skin, and the bright brown eyes and glossy chestnut hair, that revolted more than it attracted. He looked like Harry had imagined a vampire would, though of course in his lord’s world Harry would never know for sure.

The middle of a crowd was a position suited to Lord Nott, who had a knack for showmanship that Harry had certainly never observed in his son and heir. Years of closeness with Ron and Theo had taught Harry to fear Lord Nott. Not because they had ever told him anything awful outright, but because they were notorious for their black humor, but never spoke a lighthearted word about Lord Nott. In fact, when he came up their expressions shuttered at once and they could be morose for hours.

But today Lord Nott was smiling, raising his white-gloved hands. The gloves were totally inappropriate in summer in the present style, but seemed glamorous somehow, as did his white densely embroidered in gold. His robes were open from throat to navel, revealing a red silk shirt that looked very much like blood. Harry shuddered while the audience applauded.

“Welcome to the Tri-Wizard Tournament!” he exclaimed, his voice amplified with the amplifying spell Harry hadn't learned but which made the target noise sound like it was coming a centimeter from every audience member's left ear. Harry winced; it had never been his favorite. It also didn’t help that he kept seeing something bleeding through the white glove – not blood, but the thick yellow pus of decay. He was fairly sure it wasn’t real, since no one else seemed bothered, but doubted the connotations were positive.

If Harry could interview an ancestor, it would be Nadine the Clear-Eyed. And if he could ask her one question, it would be how she’d dealt with seeing more than she wanted to, but never enough to know anything more than anyone else.

“Contestants,” said Lord Nott, turning. He folded his hands together; one glove was now saturated and misshapen to Harry’s eye, and still no one else spared it a glance. Harry supposed that was his confirmation that he was seeing things again, and tried to ignore it.

The forty-two teenagers stood at attention in a perfect arc, their Lords and Ladies facing them nearer Lord Nott and across a stretch of grass, so the overall arrangement was a spread fan from the elevated cylinder upon which Lord Nott stood. Harry was in the center, with an empty place among the Lords directly in front of him. He spared a moment’s thought for whomever had planned this part of the ceremony; how they must have stressed about where to orient Harry. In the hallways, no one knew whether to meet his eye and nod respectfully as they when he was only destined to be Lord Potter, or pause and make some sort of bow now that he was — well, whatever he was to their lord. Everyone was carefully instructed in how to treat their lord, but no one knew what to make of Harry, and so far their lord hadn’t enlightened them.

The thought that his lord had deliberately declined to put Harry, or anyone else, at ease as to Harry’s status, annoyed Harry. It was startling to realize he could be annoyed by his lord. Harry had never felt anything toward him but awe or half-ashamed lust. Harry, still overly sensitive to the bond, felt it come alive for a moment; the metaphysical equivalent of a nudge. He blinked, seeking out his lord’s face at the forefront of the audience. He was smiling — if barely. Harry felt his lord’s amusement, clear in Harry’s mind and at the same time obviously not Harry’s own, and Harry’s heart kicked into a new gear. He looked away and closed off the bond from his end.

He wasn’t the least bit ready for any of that. And certainly not now, when Lord Nott was giving instructions that Harry had already mostly missed.

“Remember your history of magic,” was all Harry heard, and then, “Best of luck!”
The bond was pressing more insistently and Harry, flustered, let it open. Then he nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt clear, unfamiliar thoughts inserted directly into his mind. It was not quite like being spoken to, but near enough that he had the impression of his lord’s voice. *He said a Goblin guard will reveal your challenge, and that you shall wear a shrinking tether to guide you to your goal so you shall not shirk the pace.*

The thought of a tether filled Harry with enough dread to distract him from what his lord had just done, one of what he was sure were many features of the bond that Harry had yet to discover. He was accustomed to a degree of privacy in his own mind, and while his father had shown him how to secret his gravest thoughts, the idea of someone peering into the mundanity of his mind seemed almost worse.

A grey-bearded wizard Harry had seen at the Malfoys’ parties but whose name he couldn’t remember applied their tethers. Harry rubbed his throat uncomfortably, but he couldn’t feel any physical sensation yet.

Harry listened to the three American contestants with half an ear while they were shepherded to the start of the course.

“The first task is easy. Just meant to weed out the slow gazelle,” a witch, taller than the two wizards with her, was saying in reassuring tones.

“What’s a gazelle?” asked the wizard that was clearly the youngest. His voice was high with nerves.

“A non-magical animal native to the African plains,” said the other wizard, in the tone of one who enjoys answering questions and does so often.

“Never heard of it. Are you sure you aren’t making it up?”

Two short port key leaps later, they were standing before a rocky steppe, with various passageways leading into it and then presumably below ground.

The Americans were still whispering loudly.

“I’m a slow gazelle. Does the slow gazelle make it?”

"The analogy is meant to compare the champions who fail this task to the gazelle that is too slow to outrun a predator, so..."

"Hush, Toby. Adam, you're not really a slow gazelle. It was a bad analogy. Merlin…"

“One at a time,” called Lord Nott, marking the end of Harry's eavesdropping. As everyone lined up, Harry stole one last glance at Elspeth, then a briefer one at Theo. Neither of them were looking at him.

Harry agreed with the American witch. The first task was likely to be introductory; difficult but unlikely to be fatal. Harry twirled his wand absently and watched a few unhappy spectres launch themselves at Lord Nott, fingers curved into talons, teeth bared. They passed through him harmlessly, and if he noticed them he gave no outward sign. Neither, of course, did the forty-one teenage witches and wizards or the members of the press, the Hogwarts faculty taking position to monitor and intervene if need be, or anyone else.

There were, Harry soon realized, forty-two rather small points of entry into what he presumed were caverns. Theo wound up just ahead of Harry in line. Harry watched the set of his shoulders,
painfully squared, as he approached his father and inclined his head.

“Your starting line is here, my Champion,” said Lord Nott, and Harry had the sense he was laughing about something. The glove on his left hand had rotted through to Harry’s clear eye. The fingers had melted together to form a curled stump. He could imagine the smell so easily he held his breath when it was his turn to step forward.

Lord Nott’s gaze pierced Harry with much more interest than he’d shown toward his own son. “Harry Potter,” he murmured. “The Slytherin Heir. Or is one an Heir when the opportunity to inherit is certain never to come?”

Harry waited patiently through the speech with his best neutral expression. He couldn’t keep his gaze from drifting past Lord Nott to the tunnel he was about to crowd into. He’d have to squat down, round his shoulders, and lower his head to fit through. Harry wasn’t generally claustrophobic, but the conditions would unsettle anyone, and did him.

“Walk on then, my Lord,” said Lord Nott, without mockery. Harry didn’t look at him again: he kept his attention on the dark opening. When he didn’t walk forward at once, he felt the tether tighten infinitesimally, and half-stumbled in his haste to follow it before it could go taut.

At the entrance, Harry hesitated again, trying to figure out the best way to get inside a space that was roughly the width of his shoulders and circular besides, while gauging its steepness. A foul odor wafted out, and Harry wrinkled his nose and coughed. Then he grasped the rock above the opening to lever himself up, eased his legs in first, and scooted through on his feet and the palms of his hands and his bum.

To Harry’s relief, just past the opening the corridor widened at once. He felt the telltale tingle of wards, and saw three white doves fly past, translucent as jellyfish. He desperately wished he could go with them, but got to his feet and walked down the tunnel instead.

The cavern pass became steeper after a brief stretch, and Harry had to lean his weight almost entirely on his heels to ensure he didn’t misstep. The smell that he’d noticed when he first began the descent was stronger now.

When Harry had entered the tournament for his father’s house, he hadn’t intended to aim for anything but a respectable effort—elimination, maybe, in the second round, but late in it. Winning the tournament seemed like a useless reason to subject himself to physical risk. He only wanted to keep Elspeth from competing at all.

But now, of course, everything was different.

The smell resolved itself when Harry came upon the first guard.

As promised, a goblin in leather armor waited for Harry in the corridor. He was easy to see, illuminated by firelight from a set of three torches in sconces that appeared to be giving off the heat and making all the noise of non-magical flame. The goblin was scowling, or possibly it was the neutral arrangement of his face. He had a narrow, hooked nose, dangling earlobes, and a dozen
visible and sharp incisors.

“Champion.” The goblin scowled at Harry and spat the word with absolutely the least amount of
deference possible.

“I am,” Harry confirmed cautiously. The goblin sniffed.

“Come with me.” The goblin went first, taking a torch from the wall.

The goblin smelled very bad. Harry tried not to choke on the air in its radius, and wondered how he
would function if the smell grew significantly worse. A distant corner of his mind was puzzled. He
didn’t remember mention of the odor in goblin lore.

“It’s a repellant,” the goblin said after a while, without having to so much as glance at Harry to
pick up on his discomfort. “You’ll get used to it,” he added, censorious. Harry tried to breathe more
quietly through his nose and rubbed the moisture gathering in the corners of his eyes away with his
sleeve.

“What do you know of goblins?”

The answer, of course, was “nothing,” because Harry’s information about goblins all came from
the same dubious texts that assured him Muggles had difficulty remembering anything that
happened more than a few weeks before, had a remarkable pain tolerance, and functioned quite
well after the loss of their thumbs, which were useful in Potions ingredients.

The goblin took Harry’s brief silence for an answer, and snorted again. “As I thought. You exile us
to the bowels of your miserable realm and within a tenth of a generation, you forget us. Well, you
would remember us at once if we left our post.” He sneered over his shoulder at Harry. “As you
shall soon see.” He paused to light a second torch with a growl and a bit of saliva. So the book had
been correct, at least, with respect to the two of the sources of goblin magic.

The goblin thrust the torch toward Harry, and when Harry took it, handed him a small vial filled
with a clear substance. “Light spells won’t work in these caverns,” he said, jerking his chin
disdainfully at Harry’s wand. “And that’s repellant.” He nodded at the vial Harry now held,
growled again, then disappeared, instantly as a house elf but in total silence.

Harry was impressed, and also annoyed, since he still had no idea what the repellant was, or when
or where he was intended to use it. He cast a spell to reinforce the vial in case it didn’t have one on
it already and slipped it into his pocket. His eyes had stopped watering and the smell seemed more
tolerable, which he supposed had something to do with the goblin leaving.

He walked down the corridor, holding the torch in front of him. Harry wasn’t completely sure what
the goblin meant by “light” spells either. Some creatures categorized magic into “light,” and
“dark,” but also *Lumos* was literally a spell that generated light. Harry experimented with a few
other simple spells with different effects, not wanting to needlessly drain his reserves, and was
reassured when they all worked properly. *Engorgio* enlarged a stone, *Reducto* shattered it into a
dozen fragments that struck hard against the wall, and its remnants *Vanished* properly also. Then
he tried to cast a simple, isolated *Incendio*, without effect. Harry looked at the natural flame in his
torch and wondered if it was because *Incendio* produced light or because it produced fire.

*Remember your history of magic.*

The clue was resonating differently for Harry now. He did know that there were branches of
magic, and that certain academics were very passionate about categorizations and
subcategorization, and also on the history of particular spells. He remembered that the early magics were based on emotions, a slightly less crude variety of accidental magic. He remembered that in some cultures a channeling agent, such as a wand or staff, were never used. He recalled, also, that incantations had four purposes, but he had happily forgotten what they were.

For the past two years, Harry hadn’t been taking traditional classroom lessons. He spent most of his time in the library or the spell labs in the dungeon. He had less specialization than some of his friends - Lavender, for example, was relegated almost entirely to potions at this point - but clearly no one expected him to chart new territory in Arithmancy, let alone spell creation. His theory, as a result, was remedial.

Harry had considerable raw magical power, and of course, he had the yew wand, which was a talented ally, if overly opinionated. But that wasn’t going to be any use if his magic was inhibited. It would be a sadistic sort of challenge, he supposed, to send magical champions somewhere their magic wouldn’t work.

But some of it did. Harry had walked a hundred feet further into the penetrating darkness, and cast a few more spells just to take inventory. He levitated a stone. He transfigured it in midair into a feather. He tried and failed to transfigure it back to a stone. Frowning, he tried again, but the feather, which had at this point fluttered to the stone floor to lay inert, remained a feather. He transfigured several more stones into various objects but could not reverse the transfiguration.

A howl boiled up from the darkness beyond Harry’s torchlight, and the hair on his arms stood on end. He remembered watching Riley Wilhelm through the monitoring screens when he had been left on that moonlit island to outrun a monster on foot, and numbly reflected upon the significance of the similarities between that task and this one.

Harry had always thought that, in life, if confronted with a monster he would apparate away, rather than slay it. He was struggling to see what kind of life skills he was applying to this task. Gritting his teeth, he did all he could do: he walked on, with his torch and his stifled wand, in the direction of a sound from which he should certainly be running away.

And he tried hard not to spare a single thought for his sister.

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In another part of the caverns, Elspeth picked her way over the stones after her own goblin guard, torch up, the odor stinging her eyes though she vowed not to show an outward reaction. She was fascinated by the goblin and wanted it to like her, though she was dubious about her odds since it hadn’t said anything to her since it had confirmed she was a champion, unless one counted the words it was speaking to itself in its own language.

“Um, how did you, that is, become involved in the tournament?” Elspeth asked conversationally, and the goblin’s shoulders hitched closer to its pointed ears.

“Conscripted,” it said eventually.

“Oh,” Elspeth sighed. “Well, that’s me, too, sort of.”

The goblin snorted, which coming from a goblin, was a horrifying sound that made Elspeth jump. She blushed, relieved she was behind the goblin, and therefore it likely hadn’t noticed.

“You’re a volunteer. I know that much.”

“Well,” Elspeth said, thinking it over. “I mean, it’s really dangerous, and someone had to do it.
And it seemed like the fairest thing would be for all of us to have an equal risk of being chosen.”

She surprised herself. In her mind, it had been all about the Potter subject with the weak magic -- that particular subject, very specifically. The way she looked blankly at her plate in the Great Hall, and how she’d cried behind the curtains in her bed in the dormitory. But now Elspeth realized it wouldn’t have mattered who else had been considered. Even if Harry had put his name in before Elspeth could, she would have done it. How could she have lived with seeing someone else risk themselves, otherwise? It had been bad enough in her first year, when no one could have expected anything of her, including Elspeth herself.

“I see,” said the goblin, sounding skeptical but after a moment it spoke again in a gentler tone. The tone was still sharp and condescending, but relative to the few words the goblin had spoken insofar, it was practically kind. “Gather your luck, then. You'll be needing it.”

The goblin gave Elspeth a vial of something it called repellant, and Elspeth looked up to ask what it repelled, but the goblin was already gone.

Continuing into the darkness, Elspeth clutched the vial in her wand hand, just in case she needed to keep it handy.

There were only a few potion repellants with which Elspeth was familiar. Most repellants were created as spells. Muggle repellants, for example. She recalled a few chapters on repellants in her books about garden gnomes, which she showed to her father only to be told her father and uncle Remus enjoyed de-gnoming far too much to deploy them. One, though, was a potion. Elspeth at last insisted on the potion's use in their garden, sobbing after a particularly traumatizing experience of witnessing a traditional de-gnoming. Walking herself back through the details of the memory, she recalled its smell well: lilacs.

Elspeth paused, elevated the torch with a spell, tucked her wand under her arm and with both hands freed, she uncapped the vial. But before she could consciously sniff, the odor hit her like a wall.

It was a very concentrated version of what the goblin had apparently worn, because the smell was the same and yet infinitely worse. She hastily stoppered the vial, wiped her eyes, and clutched her wand to steady her startled magic. But not fast enough; the torch toppled to the damp stone, hitting a puddle with a splash, doused.

In the complete darkness of its absence, Elspeth’s throat went so dry she could barely incant Lumos, and when she did nothing happened.

Elspeth’s mouth went dry. She cast again, and again nothing happened. Also, that was when she heard the howl. Instinctively, she backed away and the magical tethering designed to prevent a champion from evading a task tightened around her throat like a noose. Swallowing, she forced herself to take a few steps forward until it eased, and tried a different spell.

“Accio torch,” she whispered, and the torch came at her in the dark like a weapon, striking the side of her face before she could catch it awkwardly in her non-dominant left hand. The darkness and the fear were so great she felt little pain even as blood heated her right cheek.

Elspeth never considered herself particularly afraid of the dark, but this was more than just darkness. It was a burial; a subversion of a hunt. She knew the creature was coming, fast. The terror was primordial.

Then she remembered the repellant, and hoped it worked against monsters, as she upended the vial over her left wrist then conjured the biofluorescent moss that she’d unsuccessfully tried to produce
— plants being the easiest organism to conjure and the moss being pretty — throughout her first year.

It worked. Something snarled, a blur of a shadow in the periphery of her furiously adjusting vision, moist heat on her chest, and then there was silence.

She stood within the moss, which formed a ring around her, and in its foggy light she observed her pursuer.

It looked exactly as it had in her battered copy of rarest beasts. The irony made Elspeth smile, then she remembered the facing page of the same text, which promised certain death to anyone below the ground with an uncertain supply of repellant, and the flash of humor disappeared from her head. She had lost the contents of the vial that she wasn’t wearing, and she’d only managed to apply a tiny amount. She felt the tether, not yet taught but growing snug, leashing her to the beast as it retreated.

Elspeth had read *Rarest Beasts* dozens of times. On the page discussing the multi-headed dog, sweet singing was urged. The beasts were categorized together based upon “style of defeat,” which had always frustrated Elspeth, who would sooner slay a classmate than an innocent beast.

But for once the feature came in handy, because when she hummed experimentally, she heard the creature sigh and come nearer.

It resembled nothing so much as a large centipede, which made it unattractive in the traditional sense, but it was just furry enough that the animal lover in Elspeth was triggered and thought, *Awww, fluffy.*

She began to sing, and with slightly more confidence. She’d been raised by a woman who sang well, and the effects were mixed. Elspeth loved music but was too intimidated to try. Here, without human audience and with her life dependent on her efforts, she was pleased when her shaky notes emerged with a pleasant tone.

The Centibeast came closer, and Elspeth spared a thought for the worry that attracting might not be the same thing as subduing, and then suddenly several of its pairs of legs were crossing the mossy barrier with a faint hiss, and its snout was brushing her fingertips inquisitively.

It had a hard shell, which resembled the tile shingles on the stable roof at home. The reminder helped Elspeth sing with a little more happiness. The moss was fading fast, starved by the unnatural place she’d put it, and the difficult magic had taxed Elspeth’s reserves. Desperately thinking of something else that produced light, sure she would choke on her fear and the beast would make short work of her if the light went out again, Elspeth did something else she’d practiced but never quite managed.

She cast her Patronus. Her song faltered at the sight of it, iridescent, light-footed. A stag.

The Centibeast hissed and the Patronus bent its head to charge, then feint, but the beast wouldn’t startle. Elspeth didn’t have the will to hurt it, so of course, neither did her stag. It was ironic that the magic could take the shape of her father’s exactly, but resemble its energy in no other way.

Elspeth followed the tether, singing herself hoarse, her Patronus walking slowly ahead of her to light the path. The Centibeast followed meekly, and at the end of the corridor three goblins waited for Elspeth. One of them was the same one that had escorted Elspeth to the mouth of the corridor where the beast had been waiting. The repellant on them was strong, and the beast recoiled from them, scurrying away into the darkness, and Elspeth let her song fade away. Her throat burned.
One of the goblins sneered at Elspeth, female by the silver ornament she wore in her left nostril.

“Goblins can do most things, but we cannot sing so sweetly as certain human witches.”

The third goblin curtly handed Elspeth a stone, which she accepted. It was warm to the touch.

“That will activate when you speak the word ‘darkness,’” it said. Elspeth nodded. Now that the task was done, she began to worry about the other contestants. Harry. Even Theo Nott, who was Harry’s friend if not hers, and was always polite. She said, “Darkness.”

But the pork key didn’t take her to the finish line. It took her to another cavern, without any goblins, but there was at least torchlight. The tether was tight as a noose around her throat. She couldn’t speak, let alone sing, and she heard the now-distinct sound of a Centibeast – no, many Centibeasts – drawing near.

She had her wand, of course, but her wordless magic was clumsy. She did manage a Protego, and the Centibeasts hissed and withdrew from it when they brushed against it. There were many — dozens — and the tether was so tight that Elspeth couldn’t determine what direction it was pulling, except that it was now tight against her jaw and the nape of her neck.

She looked up. Directly above her, dangling from the cavern ceiling, was a glass sphere with her house’s crest inscribed on it and glowing brightly.

She’d never been good at levitating — why bother, when she had a broomstick? — so it would have to be conjuration. She imagined a rope, knotted to one of the sturdier-looking stalactites near the object, and dangling down to the place where she stood. She forced the incantation past her lips, which were surely turning blue from lack of air, aware that the Protego had just failed but not allowing the rush of eager Centibeasts to break her focus.

The rope came into shimmering existence and she grasped it tightly and climbed as fast as she could with her vision blackening to a single narrow point and her breath a wheeze. She couldn’t imagine better motivation than the Centibeasts and their snapping, pinscher-like mouths, one of which closed on her boot and nearly yanked her to her doom, but she wrenched it loose and climbed, hand over hand, arms on fire, out of their range. The tether loosened slightly as she climbed, and she gasped precious air, wrapping her legs and left arm tightly around the rope and closing her right hand around the sphere.

This time, the port key delivered her into the sunlight pouring over the grassy Quidditch pitch. She heard applause and saw roughly a dozen additional witches and wizards around her looking similarly shocked and some of them bleeding, clutching wounds, staggering to their knees.

Harry appeared in front of her, his fingertips gentle on her throat, his face worried but showing no signs of substantial damage. He hugged her tightly and she let him prop her up for a moment. Over his shoulder, and probably for the first time she could recall, Elspeth caught Hermione Granger watching Elspeth, and not the other way around. The witch’s robes were immaculate and her braids were still perfectly neat, as though she’d just been out for tea and not wading through lethal monsters in a toxic underground cave.

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Lavender left a sign for her that night, so they met in their usual place. Lavender unbraided Hermione’s hair and combed it out with her fingernails.

“That was brilliant. The Imperius Curse. How did you learn it?”
Hermione had mastered the Unforgiveables – on rodents and insects, only – as a third year. She remembered the way the goblin’s eyes had seemed to grin as she cast. But of course that didn’t make sense.

“I won’t get that lucky again, I don’t think. They’ll put protective spells on any guides.”

Lavender hummed, still fussing with her hair. Hermione was tired of waiting for Lavender to say some variation of “I have to tell you something,” so Hermione said it.

“You’re going after Harry Potter.”

Lavender’s hands went still, then dropped away. She was behind Hermione, still, so Hermione had to imagine her face. Lavender was very good at masks, and all of hers were pleasant. Hermione wasn’t sure she’d ever taken it off. Not when they were naked together; not when Lavender came on Hermione’s tongue; not when she was purring approvingly in Hermione’s ear. There were moments Hermione thought it might be an unguarded Lavender there with her, but she could never be sure and they never lasted long.

“You make it sound like a hunt,” Lavender said eventually, her voice as light and pleasant as a bell.

“Well, he’s suddenly quite a prize, isn’t he?”

Lavender didn’t answer. Hermione felt warm pressure on the crown of her head: a kiss. Then Lavender squeezed her shoulders, and Hermione heard the bathroom door open and close. When she was alone, she leaned over her knees and breathed in deeply. She held the breath, and thought about the goblin. She hadn’t been sure she could use the Unforgiveables on something thinking and feeling and real, but it had been frighteningly easy. She had felt feather-light with the power of commanding the goblin to tell her the objective, the route, and the manner of repelling the Centibeasts. She had him walk ahead of her, stinking of repellant, and she passed, un-accosted, through the corridors.

When she seized the sphere, laughing internally at the thought the Black crest should mean anything to her, the cheering audience had made her heart swell with such a toxic combination of pride and loathing that she thought her magic could expand like a poison cloud and kill them all.

Hermione swallowed, pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, and composed herself. When she left the bathroom and passed students who parted to let her pass, murmuring her name to one another, she sorely missed the lack of notoriety that she had resented all her previous Hogwarts terms.
Chapter Summary

In which Harry, Tom and Riley have an eventful Yule.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! I plan to resume my update schedule until the whole fic is posted, without another break. I haven't written the whole thing (not even close, honestly) but I HAVE outlined it, which means that I can now let those who have experienced past anxiety over the question know: I've chosen my ending, and the major character death tag will not apply to either Harry or Tom.

Thank you, thank you, thank you as ever to friend and beta and sounding board Wolf_of_Lilacs for hanging with me through this monstrosity. And to any of you still reading -- <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eighteen: Celebratory

"The best way to find out if you can trust someone is to trust them."

Ernest Hemingway

One day Tom will catch them through the open door to the chamber he sometimes shares with Riley. They will make a fetching picture, the bright gold head bent toward the dark. He has never considered himself a voyeur, but he can't deny that the two of them have a certain aesthetic. He won't have been able to avoid certain thoughts with regard to Harry, the bond will have that consequence, but always before they have originated on Harry's end. Tom has never been drawn to shyness or inexperience, and Harry will still be quite young.

But now he will see the way Harry's reddened mouth sets off the points of color in his cheeks; his green eyes hazy with the certain distraction of desire.

And Tom will feel it, for what will be the first of many times. A wave of something deep and sinister, equal parts longing and fierce possessiveness, that will make him reconsider his decision not to murder Riley just yet.

November 28, 1996

Hogwarts Castle
“You did tell me to push them,” Lord Nott pointed out, but his tone was deferential even if the words were not, so Tom did not immediately demand his remaining hand.

“You’re smarter than that,” he snapped. “Don’t bait me, Tolliver. Apologize.”

Nott was seated at a desk and Tom was leaned against the next one in the row, an amusing an unintentional parody of teacher and student. The classroom was long empty, as so many were, remnants of a time when the castle had hundreds more students. Tom didn’t like to dwell on that thought, so he studied Nott more closely. He had animated his hand and reattached it with magic, but it didn’t live. Tom wondered how it affected his casting.

“I didn’t realize they would all be so ignorant of the categories,” Nott said eventually. “My own child was among them,” he added, as though that would mitigate Tom’s assessment of his stupidity rather than aggravating it.

“As though his death wouldn’t serve you in its own way,” Tom muttered, rolling his eyes. Nott looked surprised for a moment, then his eyes were downcast.

“My lord, the other tasks will be less hazardous. A failsafe, perhaps, to…”

“No,” Tom interrupted. “I don’t mind the fatalities. The population is up, overall, now that the Squib-spectrum Muggleborns have been transitioned. A little more danger in the Tournament is good for the contestants. They will push themselves harder. The Potter witch, for example, wouldn’t have shown a bit of talent if she hadn’t been forced by the stakes.”

Nott nodded, but still seemed cautious.

“I felt differently directly after the last contest. But the climate was different at that time, also. It’s time people prepared themselves to die for me. The war is a storm and we’ve occupied its eye, but the calm will soon end.” Tom paused as his attention roamed over the room, taking in the breadth of the space, the perfection of its stasis. The castle lived and breathed with the energy of innumerable intricate spells -- ancient magic that was forgotten now, if it had ever been understood at all.

Recovering these mysteries were his life’s ambition. Yet he could only spare the greater goal an insignificant shred of his time because they all refused to simply obey him.

“However,” Tom continued, looking down at Tolliver once more. “I had not shared my change of heart with anyone. Certainly not you, Tolliver, who instead of earning my favor these past years since I called you back, insist on disappointing me. And so, you have pleased me out of luck. You have pleased me despite yourself.”

“If my lord sees a need to punish me…” Nott bent his head, as though preparing for a beheading. Tom rolled his eyes.

“No. But I do ask that you strive to make less pathetic progress in your principle task.”

Nott nodded, his head still down. Tom let him stay that way a while, inspecting his fingernails.

“Fortunately for you, I’m in a rush, an encumbrance to my ingenuity. I will see you before long, though, Tolliver. Mind yourself.”

In their little-used office elsewhere in the school, Severus was waiting. If he was offended by his latest assignment, he gave no sign, other than the vaguely pinched, put-upon expression that always lurked around his eyes when he hadn’t brewed a potion in too long.
“Well?” Tom asked, by way of greeting. Severus arched an eyebrow and pointed to the desk, where a scroll was held open by temporary sticking charms, its surface alive with images. Tom admired the spellwork.

“A variant of the surveillance charm we developed for the tournament,” Severus explained. “This version I worked on personally.”

Tom smiled sidelong at his favorite as Severus preened. “Admirable work,” Tom allowed, seating himself so that he could more comfortably study the parchment. The remnants of a large building were visible there, in a copse of trees. Tom angled his head and his smile disappeared at once. “That’s all that’s left?”

“With the potential you’re looking for,” Severus said, guarded. He came over to stand at a respectful distance, but near enough he could see what Tom saw.

Tom touched the corner of the parchment, and the image dissolved and regenerated in another view. There was a blanket of green grass dotted with flowers, sloping gently, and an unrolling landscape beyond that, pristine.

“The setting is adequate, but the building…” he touched the parchment and another view of the ruin was visible.

“The alternative,” Severus began, in a measured tone, “Would be fresh magic.”

Tom frowned and sat back in the chair, lips pursed in thought. He recalled Harry standing over a dozen slain beasts that by all rights should have devoured him. His hair fought the containment of the bit of magicked leather holding it tied at his nape and the strands around his face were in his eyes. He was panting with effort, his eyes bright and watchful for the next threat. At the memory, the corner of Tom’s mouth twitched upward. He wanted his champion to have a pleasant Yule.

“Very well,” Tom said. It was not the cautious choice. “The claim should restore it, yes?” He looked at Severus, who appeared mildly surprised that his opinion would be sought, but Tom hadn’t the time to do his own research.

“Yes, but without predecessor loyalty.”

Tom shrugged. He wasn’t concerned about that. The bond would keep Harry in line, whether the house was on his side or not.

“If we begin today, we should be able to bind the elves in a few weeks,” Tom said, thinking aloud, and Severus did not respond, though he was frowning in a communicative way, so Tom sighed and looked at him directly. “What?”

“I just wish I understood, my lord. You know what plans the Order has for the boy, and yet.” He waved his arm at Tom’s head, as though this explained something. Tom glared, and Severus blinked, but did not retract his statement or his gesture.

“You think I chose him to spite Dumbledore?”

Severus flinched at the name, then nodded.

Tom gave the idea some thought. Did it please him to deprive the Order of their symbol, and in such a blatant way? Yes. Was that the impetus for his decision? Not consciously. He had thought the boy a candidate since he saw him transform to his Animagus form, a burst of powerful magic that sang out to Tom’s. At that time, he had almost forgotten that it was this nervous ward upon
whom the Order had pinned its hopes.

“I had separate reasons, and the magic confirmed them,” he reminded Severus. The other wizard, who learned nothing from this statement, nodded again and averted his eyes.

“He’s attractive enough, I suppose,” said Severus dubiously, and Tom was startled into a laugh.

“Oh, Severus,” he said, still smiling. “Don’t be so transparent. The boy favors his mother in more than just his eyes, doesn’t he?” He winked at his companion and laughed again when Severus grimaced. “But no, I’m not thinking with my cock.” When Severus blushed, Tom composed himself, lest he laugh again. That wouldn’t do. “I seldom do, and never on matters of my rule.”

Severus didn’t seem tempted to argue, which was good. Tom knew he had been concerned about Riley initially. Tom wasn’t sure how much longer Riley would be near him, though he had noticed that he had some familiarity with Harry. It might make sense to have someone nearer Harry’s age and with whom Harry was already comfortable, since Tom would have his periodic absences. In fact, he planned to spend a minimum amount of time on this property, wherever it was. He preferred the residences he already had, boltholes though they were. The idea of spending each night in a known location...no. The potential danger, even with wards, was too great.

Particularly if he decided to keep Riley close.

He filed that thought away for later and stood up from the desk. “Make the arrangements, Severus,” he said, and Severus bowed his head in acknowledgment, his hair combed straight away from his face and held there with that potion that performed this function admirably but had the unfortunate side-effect of making Severus appear perpetually greasy. Tom assumed that as a Potions master, he had the ability to brew something without that consequence, and refused out of the kind of childish obstinacy that plagued some men all their days.

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Riley would have been happy never to see Hogwarts again, but when Tom sent him to collect Harry, he had no choice but to obey. Some tasks he evaded by appealing to Bellatrix or even Severus, but he couldn’t cite his weak magical core as a reason to avoid a couple jogs through the Floo and the walk to and from the castle from Hogsmeade.

He remembered that day he’d first made the trek, the specter of Peter and his threats, and how sure he’d been that he’d be found out, if not by the wizards then by his own kind. As usual, he didn’t know which outcome to dread more. On the one hand, the wizards had Azkaban and the Kiss; but, on the other, his people were highly creative, terribly sadistic, and would want to make an example of him. The familiar internal debate kept him occupied for the rest of the walk at least.

“Good morning, Mr. Wilhelm,” said Pomona Sprout, looking deeply tired, as she always did. It was especially laborious for someone of her character to persist in their lord’s reality, Riley had always thought. But she smiled her automatic, sincere smile anyway, rolling her eyes when a few students lingered in the greenhouse doorway to giggle and stare at Riley.

“You’ll be late to your next class, Graves, Stern,” she reminded them, and they bobbed their heads, blushing, and rushed off.

“It’s very nice to see you again,” said Sprout.

“It’s nice to see you, too,” Riley replied, surprised to find he meant it. He looked down at the toxic tomato plant she was carefully de-sluggling and frowned.
“Aren’t those…?”

“Banned?” she asked, then glanced up at him with a wink. “No. These slugs are perfectly legal.”

Riley chuckled and watched her work for a few moments. The slugs were plump, purple creatures and had excellent restorative health properties when incorporated into grape jelly. The plants were toxic, as advertised, and had been known to spore where regular tomatoes grew, causing fatalities.

“You know, in my day, we appreciated garden gnomes for their intended purpose. Such as demonstrating which plants had the toxic tomatoes. A gnome will rob your good tomato vine bare but leave the toxic one untouched. Or you can just wait for the slugs.” She popped another slug loose with her thumb and caught it neatly in a vial.

“Everything has its purpose,” Riley agreed comfortably.

“Besides, a toxic tomato vine won’t spore if you mist it with warm seawater during the full moon.”

“Of course not.” Riley hadn’t known that, but there were many things triggered by the lunar cycle that could be intensified or nullified by seawater, sea salt, or sometimes seashells.

“What brings you here today?”

“Our lord’s work,” Riley mumbled, and noting his tone, Sprout shot him a very fast, cautious grin, then hid it with her bent head. “I’m to collect the young heir, so that he can enslave a few elves.”

“They’re already enslaved,” Sprout sighed. “But I do hope young Harry will encourage our lord to treat them respectfully.”

“I suppose we’ll soon learn what kind of an influence Harry shall or shall not be.” Riley was curious, too. The idea of their lord putting someone in a position to be thought of as his equal was, if not mind-boggling, a definite surprise. It was probably the extent of his arrogance that he didn’t realize that was how Harry could come to be seen, with Maxime Proxime invoked.

“Hmm.” Finishing, Sprout stoppered the vial, set it in its stand and met Riley’s eye. “I hope you’re being careful, Riley. I’ll ring the Headmistress for you.”

Riley was relieved he hadn’t had to ask. He worried sometimes that Sprout might suspect, or even know…but no. Witches and wizards never guessed. Even the most well-meaning were not truly enlightened. It would be best if he didn’t forget that.

Technically any adult wizard could summon the Headmistress from within Hogwarts, but portraits didn’t even notice Riley most of the time, and if he mounted a staircase alone, it stopped dead in mid-pivot. He didn’t like to go in the building at all without an escort. Unnecessary risk. Sprout called politely for an Elf, which didn’t mind Apparating to the Headmistress’s office and back to relay Riley’s need to see her and then confirm she was available.

“Can you side-along me?” Riley asked the elf. It gave him an assessing look, and he wondered if he’d just made a grave error. Then it reached out its knobby-knuckled hand to him with a tentative smile, and Riley smiled back and took it.

The Headmistress and Riley had few occasions to interact when he was attending Hogwarts, but she had always seemed reasonable and polite; as worn-thin by reality as Professor Sprout, but less uneasy with it. He looked around her office as she bade him to sit, glad he had budgeted the entire morning for getting Harry and returning to Hogsmead to rendezvous with Snape. It was already almost ten.
“You’ll need to sign Mr. Potter out,” she said, searching her desk drawer for something, and her hand emerged clutching a scroll. She tapped it with her wand, and some words appeared upon it.

Riley stirred in the chair. “I don’t know that I’m authorized…”

“You’re a member of our lord’s household, Mr. Wilhelm,” said McGonagall, with a thin-lipped, mirthless smile. “You are authorized to do almost anything.”

Almost anything at Hogwarts, she must mean, he thought numbly, trying not to follow the path of his suddenly racing thoughts. He managed to lean forward over the desk and take the parchment from her without his hands visibly shaking. He struck off his signature on the blank, and surely enough, the scroll absorbed the ink, sparked once, and then a large rubber stamp levitated from the opposite corner of McGonagall’s desk to enthusiastically press a green-inked message over most of the scroll that read: APPROVED.

“We generally ask that students return before supper time in the Great Hall, but if you’ll be running late, you can owl Professor Vector and she can make other arrangements for Harry’s meal and escort him to the Tower after curfew.”

Riley nodded. He felt like he was getting a library card, or something. Not that he’d ever had one, but the thought triggered a few uneasy memories of filing into the public library on field days away from the big house. Covetously side-eyeing the cared-for children being guided down the aisles by their parents while he and Bailey snuck slim volumes into their trouser pockets to steal.

“I’ll have him back by then,” he assured the Headmistress, then hesitated. “Could someone show me to Harry’s classroom? I’ve a terrible sense of direction.”

The Headmistress nodded absently and reached into her drawer again. This time she withdrew what looked like an oversized coin, and spoke to it.

“I need a prefect, please.”

The prefect that showed up was a bespectacled, brown-haired witch who was impressively tall, and totally unfamiliar to Riley, though his attendance at Hogwarts must have overlapped with hers. He followed her out into the hallway and she glanced over Harry’s timetable, which McGonagall had handed her, then frowned and cast Tempus.

“He’ll be between appointments,” she murmured, with an apologetic grimace for Riley. “He could be revising somewhere. Or at Gryffindor Tower. You likely know the way to the library or the Tower?”

Riley had no admissible excuse to not know the way to either of those places, and so that vacant sense of panic that he lived with most of his days built in intensity while he gave an outwardly relaxed smile and shrugged.

“I reckon.”

The wizards, he reminded himself, would literally remove the soul from your body, and let you roam the floors of Azkaban until your body gave out, with less agency than a rat. His people might toss him in a pit to starve, and invite everyone to watch, but they were more likely to throw a wild animal or another betrayer down with him to speed things along. That solution had its appeal.

At least the students were between class periods, so Riley could wind his way toward Gryffindor Tower by falling in with one group and then another at various points along the route, unbearably relieved when he saw a familiar, deep russet head through the crowd ahead of him.
“Oi, George,” he called, and didn’t have to feign his grin when George looked around and, seeing him, laughed aloud.

“Riley fucking Wilhelm,” George said, elbowing through the handful of young students between them who were trying to continue on their way through the hallway. There were a few irked calls but for the most part the crowds willingly parted, as they always had for the twins, and within a few moments George had put his arms around Riley in a familiar, cinnamon-scented embrace.

“Missed you, mate,” Riley murmured, smile becoming embarrassingly lopsided. George squeezed his arm and rolled his eyes. His freckles were denser over his cheekbones than his brother’s, but the difference was only visible from very close. “You look good,” he added, because it was true. George had filled out in all the best ways. When he realized he was ogling, Riley took another step back and rubbed at his blush-stained cheek to hide his reaction.

“Says the head turner of all head turners,” George drawled, and chuckled. “We haven’t heard from you since you graduated, but we hoped you were well. Especially when we heard…”

Riley nodded, but avoided George’s worried brown eyes. Riley had the bad habit of forming attachments when he could least afford them. It had been easier to cut the twins off altogether than to try to walk the knife’s edge of keeping in touch without giving away too much. Not to mention it took most of his energy just to survive from one day to the next without spilling his secret, especially since his lord, of all people, had entered his bedroom.

“I’m supposed to be picking up Harry.”

The worried look disappeared from George’s eyes and he nodded perfunctorily at the change in subject. “Does he know to expect his stepdad?”

Riley was startled into a laugh. He’d forgotten how brazenly blasphemous the twins could be about things that were intended to go undiscussed – especially George. “I didn’t owl ahead,” he admitted. “Do you know where he is?”

“Is it stepdad, or are you all going to share one another?” George went on, deadpan, his brows high in an excellent imitation of innocent curiosity. “Harry is rather pretty, but I always thought you liked redheads.”

Riley was still snorting with laughter when the portrait swung open, and then Fred was leaping over a sofa back to hug him – too hard, Fred overdid everything – and slap him on the back repeatedly so that he couldn’t manage to put together a few words for Harry, who was sitting on the floor with a few open books with a smile.

“We finally dragged this one out of his room. He’s been closeted away for days. Can’t handle fame,” George explained, but he was still studying Riley almost hungrily, so Riley put a more polite distance between them and looked anywhere else.

“Oh, of course, you’re not here for us,” Fred said, clutching his heart. “It’s Prince Slytherin you’re after.”

Harry flinched at the jibe and looked like he might be sick. He’d come a long way since the scrawny kid he’d been when Riley was at Hogwarts, but without his game face on and his wand out, performing with ruthless proficiency on the monitors in the Stadium, Riley was a bit startled by how young he looked.

“I’m here to take you to Severus, Harry,” Riley explained, thinking much too late that he should
have sent an owl ahead so that Harry would have been prepared. But Harry looked oddly unsurprised to see him, and he was nodding.

“Yeah, um. Our lord said he would send you.” He was gathering up his books with an apologetic smile. His hair fell forward over his cheekbones, which were pronounced, like all the planes of his face. He really was the sort of person that was more interesting to study the longer you looked. Riley hadn’t thought the boy was really his lord’s type, though he knew Severus thought the Maxime Proxime announcement had its origins in lust. Though he still didn’t think so, he could see now where Severus had gotten the idea. The only thing obviously pretty about Harry was his eyes, but he was a very appealing-looking boy. He saw Fred grinning at him and rolled his eyes.

“Maybe we should chaperone you and your chaperone,” George said with mock seriousness, dodging Riley’s elbow when Riley aimed it at his waist, then again at the forearm he was trying to shield himself with.

“What?” Harry asked, sending his books soaring back toward his room with a spell. “What about chaperones?”

His puzzled frown made Fred giggle. Riley rolled his eyes. He had missed these two. Harry’s frown had shifted to thoughtful. “I guess I didn’t know all of you were so friendly.”

Fred met Riley’s eye and winked, standing at an angle that assured Harry couldn’t see. George looked briefly wistful. “We were.”

On their way out, Harry waggled his eyebrows at Riley. “Both of them?”

Riley was surprised by Harry’s friendly demeanor, as well as his perceptiveness. He remembered him being shyer, more withdrawn. But then, that was three years before and now Harry was positioned to inherit the earth. Riley laughed, sure to sound comfortable, and shrugged.

“I was young and wild, what can I say.”

Harry’s exaggeratedly lascivious look faded while his smile stayed. “Well, they’re good blokes.”

Riley hung back just enough that Harry wouldn’t realize who was leading the way toward the exit. The silence that fell between them was companionable at first, but got increasingly strained as they passed more students in the hallway, some of whom literally stopped and stared at Harry – and, to a lesser extent, Riley.

As they neared the main doorway in the yawning corridor off the Great Hall, Harry had practically drawn his shoulders to his ears.

“Not sure what to do with our lord’s heir apparent around, eh?” he asked lightly. Harry shot him a swift, closed look, then laughed, but it sounded forced.

“I guess not.” As they stepped outside, Harry paused to tie his long dark hair away from his face. He looked good like that, Riley thought. He had the bone structure for long hair. Then Riley resolved to stop noticing things like that before he got himself into trouble and walked faster than was really necessary down the Hogsmead path, considering they were still almost an hour ahead of schedule.

“So you’re, um, friends with our lord?”

Riley was surprised into stumbling and nearly jostling his wand out of its holster. He stopped walking to grapple with it and looked up at Harry uncertainly. “No, we’re not friends.” When
Harry continued to look politely interested, Riley cleared his throat. “My lord…um, Lord Potter, I am our lord’s companion.”

A procession of reactions passed through Harry Potter’s very pretty eyes, beginning with surprise, then curiosity, then embarrassment, and then speculation, and more embarrassment yet. He was terribly easy to read. It made Riley want to look away to give him privacy, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to do it.

“Oh,” Harry said, and cleared his throat too. “Call me Harry, please. And should I call you – ?”

“Riley. Riley is fine. You really didn’t know? I thought everyone knew these things.”

Harry’s blush was fading, but it left his cheeks stained appealingly pink. He started walking again and Riley fell in a half step behind him. He was a hair shorter than Harry, though Riley thought of himself as rather tall at just under six feet, but Riley probably had twenty or thirty pounds on him, as he had always carried quite a bit of muscle without putting in much effort, and Harry was lean.

“I don’t follow…that stuff,” Harry explained quietly.

“A sophisticate, I like it,” said Riley, trying to lighten the mood. But if Harry heard, he didn’t relax. Or say anything, either, until they were nearly to the Hog’s Head, and then he stopped and turned into Riley purposefully, catching his elbow to ensure he’d look up.

“I didn’t mean to act weird,” he said. “I knew there was probably someone.” He looked briefly, intensely miserable, and Riley’s mind cleared to make room for a solitary, but overwhelming thought.

Oh.

He supposed it made sense. Or at least, infatuation did. Gods help the boy if he didn’t soon get over that, though. If he let his feelings lead him into what their lord would interpret as disobedience or presumption…

Riley shouldn’t care, but it was too easy to like Harry. He remembered him as a troubled and well-meaning third year, and now he seemed a decent enough sort, nice enough, at least, to associate with the Weasleys, who barely had one leg out of the pit of disgrace their father had plunged them into, and to be amiable with someone who seemed to be nothing more than a Muggleborn consort.

There was nothing to be done at the moment, but Riley promised himself he’d stay watchful and patted Harry’s forearm.

“I’m not offended, I promise,” he murmured. “We’d better go in. We’re still early, but I’m sure Severus will be, too.”

Riley was right. Late morning was a very slow hour at the Hog’s Head, so Severus was easy to spot. He loomed moodily in the corner, his eyes snapping to them when the doors opened, but offered no other acknowledgement. Riley, who was used to him, smiled cheerfully anyway, and Harry looked uneasy again.

“I presume you’ve met, or shall I introduce you?”

Harry swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing visibly. “We have met. Hello again, Master Snape.”

They nodded cautiously to one another while Riley watched, amused. Some people were destined not to get along under any circumstances. And in Harry’s defense, most people were destined to
never get along with Severus under any circumstances. Riley didn’t mind Severus – liked him, even, as much as he could like a wizard. They were like crocodiles, all, and he knew on the inevitable day it was his blood in the water, they’d all turn on him. But Severus was a bit of an outsider, and had no talent for artifice, which Riley found refreshing.

It was obvious how badly Severus wanted to brush Harry off, as he did everyone but their lord. Instead he cleared his throat, wincing as though he’d swallowed something foul, looked at some point beyond Harry’s right ear and said, “My lord Slytherin,” and then pointed to the floo.

Harry paled further. Riley assumed that was the first time he’d been so addressed. Riley hadn’t spoken to him that way – it had been obvious that it wasn’t what Harry wanted. But was it what their lord would want? Severus was very good at anticipating these things. Riley’s ever-shifting ground with respect to Harry Potter adjusted once more. He deeply wished to be forgotten for a few days, so he could lock himself into his cottage and sleep.

But he already knew there was some significance in his being sent on this little errand. Was he performing his task of being his lord’s companion too well? He had dared to hope that by now, his lord would have tired of him and he could rest in obscurity, at least for a time. He knew that his post-tournament fame was a tool his lord would want to weaponized until it faded, but the near-constant attention of the past two months was unparalleled, even in the early days of their interactions when, in his experience, the newness of one another made things most intense.

And the attention hadn’t been more or less sexual in nature than ever. His lord utilized him for those acts, and Riley tried not to feel too ashamed by how much he enjoyed it, three or four nights per week. Occasionally he was called at odd times of day for something brief and borderline terrifying, but regrettably he enjoyed that a bit also.

No, the changed dynamic was related to these strangely domestic tasks. For example, though he hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with Harry until today, he had known all his tailor’s measurements and shoe size so he could fully stock a wardrobe. He’d compared the spells Harry had used in the tournament to the customized curriculum he’d enjoyed at Hogwarts and interviewed his tutors, then been painstakingly debriefed by his lord.

It was all surreal. And someone less acquainted with his lord might think there was something romantic, or otherwise endearing, about it. Especially knowing, as he did now, the nature of Harry’s feelings. But Riley knew it was nothing that simple. Though his lord did tend to get distracted by the occasional shiny object, he rarely spent much time on something or someone that didn’t have a role in his larger purpose, which he never forgot.

Also, Harry still had two tasks to survive, which was much easier said than done.

Riley stepped in front of Severus when he would have followed Harry into the Floo, under the pretense of meeting his stare and then rolling his eyes, as though to say, what a chore this is.

Severus’s mouth quirked in amusement and a bit of the tension left his narrow shoulders.

On the other side of the floo, Harry was dusting at the knees of his trousers and straightening his robes. Riley recognized it as a symptom of him having fallen through, and politely pretended not to notice. Severus came through behind him with all of his usual, unhurried composure, and they struck off through the abandoned square and past the abandoned buildings, which Harry looked at curiously.

“Our lord’s letter said there was a village,” he ventured at last.
“There was,” Severus said snidely. Riley shot him a half-smile and an arched brow. He sighed, looked away from Harry and added, “At one time. The village has been abandoned since the estate became inactive, but is likely to repopulate.”

“Do you understand how community magic works, Harry?” Riley asked gently, because it was obvious Harry had no idea what Severus was talking about. Riley had a particular expertise in house magic, as did all of his people, since it was one of the veins most hazardous to them. Also, he’d brushed up in light of his lord’s feverish house hunt, just so he could better avoid all the little latent traps that would be waiting for him.

“No,” Harry said, the beginnings of annoyance in his eyes when he glanced at an oblivious Severus. Then he smiled at Riley. “I’d love to learn more.”

Riley smiled back, holding eye contact a beat too long before looking away and clearing his throat.

“Magical communities depend on a level of environmental magic, which is drawn out and grows in the presence of a familial residence of particular power.” He didn’t add that Salazar Slytherin’s familial residence had created a considerable reservoir; Harry could surely figure that out, just as he’d understand that there would be substantial overflow should their lord establish a familial residence. In fact, Riley thought, looking around at the ruins, the village that was likely to emerge from this rubble could easily be twice its original size.

“There aren’t many magical communities, are there?” Harry ventured.

“There are more than there were before our lord’s ascension, and fewer than there were in the earliest days of our society,” said Severus. They were passing through the outskirts of the old village and into open, hilly countryside. The setting was serene, quiet save the hush of the breeze and their voices.

“I like it here,” Harry said, breathing in deeply through his nose and out through his mouth in a gust. Then he grinned at Riley, who smiled back.

“So do I.” To Riley’s surprise, it was the truth.

Their lord waited for them in his shirt sleeves, with wind-ruffled hair and a bright smile for Harry.

Bemused, Riley watched a flustered Harry receive a one-armed hug. Their lord gestured out over the smooth point amongst the hills where a few towers, loosely spiraling in their shape, rose from a cold mound of crumbled stone.

“Unfortunately, wizarding structures are quite physically dependent on a steady magical flow,” explained their lord, one arm still loosely slung over Harry’s shoulders, which was obviously impeding Harry’s ability to pay attention.

“But we can...bring it back?” Harry looked around doubtfully. “And the elves, also?”

“Oh, yes. Shall we begin? I know you have revising to do.”

Harry nodded, their lord released him, and Harry shoulders slumped with visibly mixed emotions. “What do I...?”

“I’ll tell you exactly what to do,” their lord promised. Riley looked at him thoughtfully, aware of Severus’ sputtering on his other side.

Severus wandered away from Harry and their lord, and Riley followed. Harry seemed surprised to
see them going, but his attention was helplessly drawn back to their lord. Riley’s frown deepened, and when he glanced at Severus’ face, he saw one to match.

“Do you think he’ll get tired of him?” Riley murmured.

Severus gave him a sharp look, then was thoughtful. “I don’t know. I’ve never observed him...quite like this. But presumably, yes. There’s nothing noteworthy about that child; it can only be his...magic, which appeals to our lord.”

Riley nodded thoughtfully, well aware that Severus thought there was more than mere magic attracting their lord to Harry, but he understood Severus’ discomfort with the other elements of their lord’s fixation. Particularly when their lord seemed to be oblivious himself.

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The Day of Yule

Peverell Ridge

Sirius had practically lived at the Potter House during summers after age 11, but the Peverell Ridge was nothing like the rambling, yet stately and traditional, residence of his memories. The Ridge put Sirius more in mind of his own family’s various ancient haunts, instead. When he tolled the wards at the gate, he almost expected a Rosier country aunt to answer, maybe the particularly hermetic one with the missing ear.

Instead it was Remus, whom he’d expected not at all.

“Sirius,” Remus said quietly, and Sirius knew better than to take that as a good sign. Remus only lost his reserve out of positive emotion, never negative. He scuffed his boot against the cobblestones, too cowardly to meet Remus’s eye.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t let me in,” Sirius muttered.

“Wouldn’t you?” Remus asked. “The last time I saw you all I heard was how you could explain.”

Sirius glanced up, startled, and then noticed how Remus blinked and inhaled through flared nostrils when they made eye contact. It made him hopeful, that Sirius had any affect on his composure. “I could explain that. I thought I was saving them.” He sighed. “It’s everything since then I’m unsure of.”

Remus’s jaw tightened the way it did when he wanted to say something, but wasn’t ready to yet. He nodded and opened the gate.

“I couldn’t keep you out, anyway. It’s not my house.”

“Castle, you mean,” Sirius corrected him absently, looking past him at the towers and stone and oversized windows, all snow-dusted and glittering in the warm light of the sunset.

“I suppose,” Remus said, and fell into step beside Sirius as they walked on.

“I didn’t think you’d be here.”

Remus heard the question and looked thoughtful. “Nor did I. I could scarcely have imagined it, when James told me. Coming would have seemed too much of an...endorsement. And I don’t endorse whatever James thinks he’s doing.”
Sirius winced, but what would have been agonizing to hear a decade ago seemed bearable now. Not that it was easier, but he was tempered. What vulnerability his early childhood hadn’t sloughed off, his years serving their lord apparently had.

He thought Remus noticed, because his lips twitched and he rubbed his forehead as tiredly as if it was the day after the full moon, instead of—

“A bit early to be looking so peaked,” Sirius said, before he could stop and think. “Two and a half days early, to be more specific.”

Remus shot him a look, surprised out of his hostile attitude. “Keeping track of the full moon now, Sirius? Lunar cycles are only significant for creature magic.”

Sirius shrugged, wishing he hadn’t said anything, but it was too late. He may as well have spelled it out: I’ve been tracking the full moon every month since that night in second year.

Remus made a gruff sound that was more canine than human and lengthened his stride so he walked ahead, expression hidden, the rest of the way.

The three remaining Potters were assembled outside, James and Lily standing side by side, each with a hand on Elspeth’s shoulders. She wasn’t a little girl any more. Sirius knew that, of course; he’d watched her enter the goblin caves and emerge practically unscathed just a few weeks earlier. But in his mind’s eye she would always be the way he’d first seen her in Diagon Alley, practically vibrating with an energy that was easily visible even from across the street, trying to befriend a stray Muggleborn as earnestly as her father had once drawn out shy Remus.

The girl shrugged off her parents and walked forward with an easy grace that was more like Harry than James. In fact, the siblings were unnervingly similar, down to the faintly amused glint in the green eyes that met Sirius’s under an arched black eyebrow.

“Lord Black,” she said, with a neat curtsy. “Welcome to Peverell Ridge.”

He bowed at the waist, glancing past her to Lily and James’s wooden expressions.

“Let’s go inside before the elves lose patience with us,” Lily said. She held out her hand and Elspeth hesitated, then walked back and took it. Lily led her inside, and Sirius was left with Remus and James, a painful echo of old, better times. James cleared his throat.

“Look, Sirius,” he said. “We’re all trying.”

Sirius blinked. “I’m not complaining. Really, James. Thank you. I can’t...thank you enough.”

Remus made another choked sound, but Sirius fought the urge to look at him, holding James’s eye instead. His first friend, James. He recalled him easily as a freckled, scrawny child, who could have been mistaken for an orphan, he was so unkempt as he waited for the train that morning. Except his clothing was all ostentatiously expensive, if haphazardly thrown on and wrinkled.

“You must be a Muggleborn,” Sirius had declared excitedly, seeing the opportunity he’d been looking for since toddlerhood to spite his parents and hopefully get disowned in some permanent way.

James looked puzzled, but unoffended. “Oh, no. Pureblood,” he said, almost apologetically. “What House will you be in, d’you think? I reckon it’ll be Gryffindor for me. I’m a legacy eleven times over.”
Sirius, briefly crestfallen, perked back up at that. A Gryffindor. It was surely the ticket, more certain even than association with Mudbloods. A slow smile spread across his face. “Gryffindor,” he murmured, inching closer to James. “Tell me all about it.”

Now here they were, more awkward than strangers, a stolen child and a war standing between this day and that one. Sirius was overpowered, briefly, by the might of it.

Then James flashed his crooked smile. The one he managed even when he was sad. The one he’d shown Remus the night he told them his secret.

“Glad you’re here,” he said. “Now let’s go eat. The elves here are...um, very talented.” He glanced around as though the elves might overhear and assassinate him. Having known a few country elves, Sirius realized he could be right.

“I’d love to,” he said earnestly, and glanced at Remus, an unspoken question in his cautious eyes.

Remus’s jaw was twitching again. He looked at Sirius, then James, then the sky, and then the ground. “It’s not my house,” he said, lamely, at last. Sirius didn’t know what he’d expected, but it was something else, at least subconsciously, because his heart sank.

“That’s because you don’t have a house,” said James matter-of-factly, and Sirius could have died of love for him. “You’re a vagrant.” He looked over at Sirius as though he hadn’t noticed a single emotion. “He won’t even borrow a tent. And we have six.”

“Flaunting your wealth is unattractive,” Remus muttered, but he was smiling as he stalked past James toward the house. James had that talent.

“Says the vagrant, who sleeps in my castle and eats delicacies that no one can identify at my table.”

“You’re a barbarian,” Remus shot over his shoulder, already halfway through the doorway. “I always know what the delicacies are.”

“Liar,” James said fondly, and not loud enough for Remus to hear. He jerked his chin toward the door, looking at Sirius. “Go on.”

Sirius hesitated for a long moment, drawing in a breath of the crisp early winter air, and went in.

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The Day of Yule

Slytherin Estate

“Well, Harry,” Tom said magnanimously. “What do you think?”

Harry looked around and wondered how wise it would be to give an honest opinion.

“Er,” he tried, and fortunately Riley chose that moment to enter the hall, which was so filled with enormous evergreen trees it could have been a forest. Except, each tree was densely laden with decorations: ornaments, tinsel, candles lit with magic flame, garland, and in certain cases live butterflies or songbirds.

“It’s very unique,” he said, “Isn’t it? Remarkable, in fact.”

“Yes,” Harry said shortly.
Tom frowned and looked around. “Is it? I was told that more and larger are best in the case of Yule decor.”

“I’m sure that’s a popular sentiment,” said Riley. Harry tried not to gape at him. He was good. Harry, on the other hand, just nodded mutely, watching a cardinal drift away from its designated tree only to bounce off of some sort of barrier and flutter morosely back. It was wearing a small plaid scarf.

“Did you do the spells yourself, my lord?”

Tom laid a hand on Harry’s arm, and Harry jerked in surprise and instantly blushed. But he knew what was being communicated. “I mean, did you do the magic yourself, Tom?”

Riley’s eyes bulged. Harry didn’t dare look directly at him, but it was obvious even in his peripheral vision.

“No, Harry. I did very little of the work here with my own magic.” He turned and smiled sharply at Riley. “We have Riley to thank for all the Yule spirit.”

“I was carefully instructed,” Riley reminded their lord, almost dissenting, which made Harry tense. But Tom wasn’t bothered.

“Don’t try to escape the credit you’re due,” he said with what might have passed for warmth among company who knew him less well. “Come. We’ll show Harry his rooms.”

“Rooms?” Harry echoed. He hadn’t thought he was even staying the night, let alone long enough for... rooms.

“Of course. This is your home, Harry. Our home.” Tom still held his arm, and now threaded it through the crook of his own elbow, drawing their bodies so close their hips brushed. Harry felt so overwhelmed he was sick with it. Riley came along behind them, and the idea that someone else was seeing Harry so miserably awkward made everything worse.

The Estate was different than it had been when Harry saw it last. It had expanded, as organically as a plant unfurled leaves and flowers, to stretch sinuously in every direction, its curved towers lengthening, its snake motifs now densely occupying every bit of carved wood, embroidery and wallpaper. Most wizarding homes were more modest on the outside than in, but the Slytherin Estate reminded Harry of the Muggle palaces that took up blocks. From outside it seemed to go on forever, and on the interior the network of rooms would have been unnavigable without a map—or, of course, magic. Its domed ceilings soared, its marble floors shone, and textiles and furniture had taken up elegant residence in every room, corridor and landing. Invariably Harry liked what he saw, and made a mental note to tell Mabi exactly that.

But he didn’t want to traumatize her by summoning her into their lord’s presence, so for now he just followed Tom in what felt like a circle around a hallway as broad as a street, a bemused Riley behind them, and eventually they came to a curtained entryway which swept back to admit them to an oblong room with deep pile carpet and, everywhere, the muted reds and golds of a much more stately version of Gryffindor Tower.

“Very welcoming, isn’t it?” Tom patted his hand and released Harry to explore, meanwhile wandering over to lean against a small dining table by the fire, which was lit and roaring. “Slytherin’s house, yet it makes itself a Gryffindor Tower replica in its master’s honor.”

Harry couldn’t read Tom with his back to the fire. His face was shadowed, though the light
elsewhere in the room did cast his left side bright in points: the broad, pale plane of his cheek, the
curve of his lower lip, the hint of teeth.

“That was probably more the elves,” Harry murmured, but he couldn’t help smiling to himself as
he picked up a heavy brass paperweight in the shape of a sleeping lion.

“There’s no difference, in essence, between house and elf. They are all an extension of the will of
the house’s master. And here I thought Riley had been tutoring you in house magic.”

Riley was leaning in the doorway of the room, his golden curls tousled, and at this he tried
unsuccessfully to smooth them back from his forehead. “I have been answering his questions, my
lord.”

But Tom was finished scolding. “What shall you wear to dinner, Harry? Do you often let the elves
choose?” He glanced at Harry as he straightened and crossed the room toward the wardrobe. “I
know how Malfoys utilize their elves in matters of aesthetics.” He opened the wardrobe doors and
then stepped out of the way when three robes in three different color schemes swept out of its
interior.

Red and white, green and black, and green and gold.

“Why don’t you choose?” Harry asked, bewildered when the robes hovered in front of him one at a
time, the way he’d seen people suspend clothing beneath their chin in front of a mirror to assess the
effect. Tom smiled lazily, waved a hand that sent the clothing racing back to the wardrobe, and
reached inside to file through the contents by hand.

“This will do,” he said presently, drawing out black trousers, a black waistcoat, a green shirt that
was startlingly near the color of Harry’s eyes, and a chartreuse-accented set of open black robes.

It closely resembled what Harry had worn the day he selected his wand, he thought, except that
instead of black and gold…

A wave of longing washed over him so quickly it threatened to penetrate the locked door to the
bond, so Harry tried to distract himself with the task at hand. But since that was changing into the
robes his lord had selected, that meant he had undone half his shirt buttons before Riley’s rather
shrill “Harry!” made him pause and reassess.

Their lord, unfazed, was watching Harry blush with eyes that glittered with amusement.

“We’ll leave you to settle in. Won’t we, my lord?” Riley asked, quietly but deliberately. After a
moment, their lord shrugged and turned away from Harry, sauntering past Riley and pausing there
to kiss his cheek.

“You’ll keep him company?” he murmured, and Harry’s blush darkened at the sight of them
standing close together, his lord adjusting Riley’s collar.

“As you wish,” said Riley, and Harry looked away when his lord leaned in to kiss him a second
time.

“He’s gone,” Riley volunteered a few moments later. “You could change in the bathing chamber, if
you like. Or I can also go.”

“I do go to boarding school,” Harry said uneasily, toeing out of his shoes and returning to his shirt
buttons. “I’m not shy.”
“This isn’t...that is, we’re not...”

“Housemates?” Harry glanced at him with a smile and a raised eyebrow, but if he looked too long he found himself imagining where and how else their lord kissed him, so he abruptly decided to take Riley’s suggestion and went in the bathing chamber for the rest of it.

When he emerged, Riley looked up with a startled smile. “Oh. You look good in that.” His smile twisted into something more like a grimace when he added, “He does know what will suit you.”

Harry hesitated, not sure what he was observing, but Riley’s expression cleared after a moment and he was gesturing toward the door curtain, which swept back in anticipation of their exit. “Shall we? I can show you where we’re headed.”

Harry nodded and fell into step with Riley, conscious of the other wizard’s even stride and perfect posture. He was graceful, though not like their lord. Where he gave the impression of natural self-carriage and ease, Riley had unabashedly cultivated manners, which reminded Harry more of the Malfoys. He did wonder, though, where Riley came from, that he was so adapted to Pureblood culture, and he also wondered if it was rude that he didn’t already know.

“So, Riley, do you have family you’re close with?”

Riley was unperturbed, but did seem surprised by the question. “I don’t,” he said. “I am in touch with some of the people who raised me, but as far as actual family, no. I’m an orphan.”

For some reason, the thought of someone growing up truly without familial connection had always resonated with Harry. He supposed it had something to do with how each person was calibrated, that what left him so deeply disturbed might not faze someone else. He didn’t say what immediately came to mind -- that that sounded horrible; or that he was sorry -- because Riley continued to look approximately pleasant, with no sign that the topic distressed him. Harry supposed that to Riley, his own circumstances were quite normal, at least at this point. He probably didn’t sob with self-pity every time it came up.

Still, Harry couldn’t help saying, quietly, “That must be hard.”

Riley shrugged, granting Harry a quick, absent smile. “Not...most of the time,” he said, and then turned sharply into the next corridor so that he was a few strides ahead of Harry, and Harry couldn’t see his face. He was looking at Riley’s back when he said, “The dining room is just up here.”

The dining room was shaped more or less like a coiled snake, which was to say circular, and with the highest part of the ceiling at the center. A few transparent places in the roof let in the starlight, and what had to be hundreds of floating candles illuminated the long, food-laden table in all its splendor. Conjured snow was falling into fluffy drifts, which Harry, prodding the snow-like substance with a finger, discovered to be faintly warm and spongy. It glittered like ordinary snow, though, refracting all the light and giving the room a muted glow.

Harry, who had lived with Malfoy-level extravagance for most of his life, was stunned.

Riley was smiling again, and reached out and cupped Harry’s elbow to lead him the rest of the way into the room. Harry, grateful for the support, stepped nearer until he felt the warmth of Riley’s body along his whole right side. And then he felt a supplemental warmth that puzzled him and started in a tingling wave up his spine and radiated from there.

“Um, thanks,” he murmured, glancing up at Riley. “I’m, um. Glad you’re here.”
Harry hadn’t meant to say it, and he was surprised to hear it come out of his mouth. If he’d been asked to name his leading feeling toward Riley, it probably would have been resentment. He resented that there was someone between him and his lord, in this time when Harry felt it was vital that they grow closer, or Harry would never understand what Maxime Proxime was supposed to mean to either of them.

But Riley was a very human touchstone, despite their very basic acquaintance, Harry felt much more comfortable with Riley than he did with their lord. The thought of facing the evening with only the two of them—Harry and his lord—made Harry feel vaguely faint.

“Where…er, when will he join us, do you think?” Harry asked, more for something to say than because he thought Riley would know. Harry assumed that with respect to Riley, their lord was approximately the way he was with everyone else, also: on his own schedule, subject to only his own expectations. But Riley frowned thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. I assumed he’d be waiting for us. But sometimes he likes to be the last to enter a room.” Riley’s smile became a bit forced, and Harry tried not to get distracted by the thoughts that spurred.

“Do you think…?”

But Harry couldn’t finish that thought, because the sensation of having something tunnel into his brain and emit a deafening noise directly in his eardrum made him double over in shock and pain.

“Harry…?” Riley looked ashen, but insufficiently agonized considering he would be feeling what Harry did, according to the elf who had helped them key the wards. “What…?”

“Something breached the wards,” Harry gasped. “Can’t you…I mean, what else could it be?”

Something inscrutable passed over Riley’s face, before his expression became troubled and stony, the way Harry recalled him looking on the monitors when he’d competed in, and handily won, his bid for the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

But Harry didn’t have time to think about that. Something was pulling him insistently toward the second story veranda, which was basically an orchard. He could picture it in his mind’s eye: all shadows and silver shapes, trees and silent branches, a few carnivorous orchids stirring in their sleep, all clear in his mind’s eye though until that moment he’d not even been aware of that part of the house.

“Come on,” he murmured tersely to Riley, and Apparated to the spot he was imagining, wondering at the last moment whether he was going to splinch himself by spontaneously Apparating somewhere he’d never been and which possibly existed only in his imagination.

But Harry arrived, whole and breathing heavily, and the scene was exactly how it appeared in his mind’s eye. Including the motionless figure on the grass, which Harry hadn’t been able to identify in the flickering image in his head. Standing over it, he knew at once it was a corpse.

There was a dull pop that made Harry jump. His lord made no sound when he Apparated, so it had to be Riley. No one else could Apparate on the grounds. He bent his knees to look more closely at the body, but he didn’t recognize the woman, whose blank expression was oddly peaceful, her body otherwise shrouded in black robes as though she’d curled up for warmth.

“What do you…” Harry began, then glanced over his shoulder and went mute.

Riley wasn’t standing behind him. The man who was, Harry didn’t recognize. He was medium
height and build, his hair was dark red and curly, and he had the lightest blue eyes Harry had ever seen. There was only the slightest difference between the iris and the white of his eye, which made his direct, solemn stare doubly unnerving.

Harry scrambled back to his feet and spun around with his wand drawn. The man carried a staff. Harry hadn’t seen one outside of a textbook, but recognized it at once, glittering in the moonlight where a thousand shards of gemstone were melded to the smooth wood.

“Harry Potter, of recent infamy. What an honor.”

“Who...how did you get in? Are you...a friend of our lord?” Harry badly wanted to cast *Incarcerous* first and ask questions later, but couldn’t risk offending one of his lord’s allies on his first day at the Slytherin estate.

The man chuckled, though he didn’t smile. Between them, the corpse emitted a sudden, wheezing sound, and Harry swore and pointed his wand at it instead of the staff-bearer. Perhaps it had never been a corpse at all?

The cloak writhed as though it covered a nest of snakes instead of a body. The woman’s eyes, which had been brown and vacant, were now the same icy blue as that of the man with the staff, and she was rising from the ground.

“You…” Harry gasped, then realized that he was pointing his wand in the wrong direction when the man lifted the staff, sang a low note that rang out in the night air, and Harry’s world went dark and still before he could so much as exclaim.

But before he could panic, he was in Dumbledore’s office, slumped against the chair across the desk from him, still breathing heavily.

“What was...?”

“You’re quite safe,” Dumbledore said. “The intruders have gone.”

Harry no longer bothered trying to figure out how Dumbledore knew the things he did about Harry’s life. He was apparently honest, though, if one didn’t count lies of omission, so Harry relaxed marginally at hearing that he wasn’t being absconded with as he slept. Looking around the office, he took note of a few of the things that were different since his last visit, including a small, golden hourglass, tipping in midair as though someone had begun to turn it over and cause the sand to pass from one side back to the other.

“It’s been a long time,” Harry said. “It almost seems like you intended not to visit me anymore, in light of the...circumstances.”

“It was necessary for us to be cautious, but I would not give up on you so easily, Harry. In fact, it is my belief we should release these memories into the rest of your mind, so that you may recall them in your waking thoughts. But until we can be sure that your reaction will not be...adverse, I must still hesitate.”

“You mean,” Harry said, “until you’re sure that I won’t immediately tell someone about you.”

Dumbledore looked at him with exasperated fondness. “Yes. That is what I mean.”

“And when you say ‘we,’ you mean your Order of the Phoenix.”

Dumbledore nodded gravely. “If it was only me, I would risk it. But I cannot speak for the others
without their approval.”

“Did your Order have anything to do with the man at the estate, just now? And that...woman, who...?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “No. I do not know that man, or that woman, and cannot explain how she appeared to have risen from the dead.” True to his claim, Dumbledore seemed disturbed. “I am old, and well-traveled, but there is more in this world than one person could explore even should he live a thousand years. It does not surprise me to observe something unfamiliar, but it does surprise me that any faction would be so bold as to confront Voldemort in his...home.”

Harry thought of his lord—Voldemort—and his many hours in this office with Dumbledore. Over the past few years, in particular, they’d developed an ease with one another, and despite Harry’s lingering suspicions, he liked the old man. And he wanted to trust him.

“I didn’t know if this would work without Fawkes,” he said, drumming his fingertips against the tabletop. “You implied, once, that he was the one connecting us.”

“He still is,” Dumbledore said. “But in a different way than you’re thinking. Fawkes was the vehicle for my initial spell, you see, and permitted my magic to link us, when usually the wards wouldn’t permit it.”

Harry often felt like he didn’t understand magic at all, particularly when he was speaking with Dumbledore or with his lord—Tom—Voldemort.

Harry massaged his forehead, wincing. “This is getting harder.”

“I’m sure it is, my boy.” Dumbledore said sadly. “The more different your perspective becomes, here, the more strain you’ll experience. And at this point there is a significant divergence.”

Harry frowned. “Is there?” He thought of his lord—Voldemort—and even knowing what Dumbledore had told him about his rise, he thought in a way it made sense. Because he was stronger than the rest of them, and the thought of him standing above them all felt right...

But then there were the Muggles. All their suffering, and the wizarding citizens’ too. And most of that, Harry had known painfully well without Dumbledore showing it to him. Families pulled apart as Harry’s was. Ron’s hands. Students dying in the Tournament, and Elspeth still at risk too.

“We don’t have much time. Keep your eyes open, Harry.”

“But where is Fawkes?” Harry insisted. Dumbledore smiled sadly.

“Fawkes can’t help you now, Harry. He’s a creature of the soul, after all, and yours is now indiscernible from Voldemort’s.”

Harry felt a thrill at that, and then looked guiltily at Dumbledore, who had noticed his reaction and was looking woeful. “Charm and charisma are not superficial attributes. They are powerful indeed.”

“Yeah,” Harry said quietly. Somewhere, his body was waking up. He’d learned to recognize the feeling. “Give him a few of the nastier Bott’s Beans from me,” he added. “He especially likes the ear wax flavor.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I’ll be sure he gets them and knows whom they’re from,” he promised.
“Harry, open your eyes,” murmured a voice near Harry’s ear. His eyes fluttered open obediently to find his lord looking down at him with a furrow between his brows that Harry had never seen before, in all of his lord’s moods he’d had the opportunity to study.

“Ah, yes, there you are,” he murmured. “You’ve been unconscious, but you’re not injured.”

“What do you remember, Harry?” asked a second voice, over their lord’s shoulder. Riley looked merely concerned, and Harry had to press back a surge of irritation when he remembered Riley hadn’t been there. The wards, which were keyed to them both, had unmistakably identified the veranda. But instead of going with Harry to help, or at least watch Harry’s back, Riley had presumably fled.

Harry knew that most people weren’t brave, but every time he personally observed cowardice, a part of him remained shocked and offended. Still, he made his expression neutral and said only, “Not very much. But perhaps you should legilimize me,” he added, though the thought made him anxious. He was lying on a chaise lounge in some kind of sitting room; where a fire burned in a circular fireplace in the center of the room, its chimney welded iron and stretching up to meet the vaulted ceiling.

“That won’t be necessary,” said his lord, his eyes dark in the firelight, an almost-human black with only a vague hint of deep red. Two embers in the pale sculpture of his face. Harry had to look away.

“You mean the bond,” he said quietly.

His lord leaned away. “I do. But I won’t go where I’m uninvited,” he added in a tone that was definitely amused, but gentle.

Harry didn’t think for a moment he really had a choice, but appreciated the pretense. He reached into his own mind as his father had taught him in that hurried, first and last lesson the night the bond was born. But this time, instead of closing the point of entry, he opened it. His lord was waiting just on the other side, and immediately joined Harry in his own head.

It was a startling sensation, something like an ache, though it was too metaphysical to be painful. But it was a strain, and made Harry’s every instinct rise up and object.

Don’t worry, came his lord’s amused voice. I remember my promises, especially those I’ve made within the last minute. Where is the memory?

Harry hesitantly thought about the memory, beginning with walking into the dining room with Riley. It was as easy as that. The space in his mind filled with all the senses of that recollection so vibrantly he almost felt he was reliving it, but with no ability to deviate from the exact way he’d spoken, moved, even breathed.

The wards took hold of him and pulled. He looked at Riley and told him to come. He Apparated, and thought in that fraction of a moment wherein he was nowhere that he was an idiot to Apparate instead of sprinting up the staircase. But then it was all fine, except for the body. And the man with the staff. And then the body rising up with changed eyes.
His lord left his mind without having to be asked, and Harry resealed the connection with only a moment’s pause.

“Curious,” he murmured. “Riley, take Harry upstairs, please. I need to call Bellatrix and Lucius to see about reinforcing the wards.”

Harry winced at the thought of interrupting the Malfoys’ Yule, but he supposed under the circumstances it made sense. He wanted to object to being sent to his rooms like a child, but he didn’t dare; despite all the tactile behavior, indulgent smiles, and instructions to call his lord “Tom,” Harry hadn’t forgotten that his lord was his lord.

Harry sighed, looked at Riley with lingering uncertainty, and made to obey, swinging his legs off the chaise and standing slowly. When there was no dizziness or nausea, he relaxed and made to walk over to Riley. But his lord, who was still standing close, caught his wrist.

Harry looked at him curiously, but his lord’s eyes were downcast. He was taller than Harry by a couple of inches, and so Harry rarely had the opportunity to notice, but his eyelashes were the same color as his hair, just long enough to be visible as he studied the hand he’d captured, turning it gently in his long, cool fingers. Then he lifted Harry’s hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. The touch of his mouth was as cool and dry as his hand, but Harry felt the barest moist heat of his breath when he said, “Happy Yule, Harry.” Something small and soaring rose from the pit of Harry’s stomach and into his throat.

Chapter End Notes

I’d love to hear your thoughts!
Penultimate

Chapter Summary

In which Harry faces the second task, and Tom is moved to intervene.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to Wolf_of_Lilacs, Supreme Mugwump of the International Coalition of Beta Wizards.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nineteen: Penultimate

“We must be our own before we can be another’s.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The German Region formerly known as Bavaria

January 15, 1997

Tolliver Knott descended the rickety spiral staircase into his laboratory precisely at sunset. He was weary, but dare not allow himself a moment’s delay. He had been receiving increasingly impatient requests for progress from his lord over the past several months, culminating with a scathing round of Crucio the morning after Yule. He understood, grudgingly, his lord’s frustration, given the invasion at Slytherin Manor.

Now he knew that the solution, which had so long evaded him, must come to him soon or he would too far overtax his lord’s patience. If matters devolved to that point, he could lose much more than a hand.

At the bottom of the stairs, in the cool silence of the cavern, the bodies lay on their stone slabs in repose. The female had begun to badly decay but the males were mostly intact, and from this distance could have been mistaken for the slumbering living.

But Tolliver fed them magic, and they each opened their eye.

“Did he who made you bear a staff?” he demanded without his usual preamble, and the dead ones jerked into sitting positions and turned their heads to him hastily to answer.

“Yes,” the males said in unison. The female did not speak, due to the fact Tolliver had impulsively harvested her jaw, but she made a breathy clicking sound and waved her tongue.

“And his name?”

But the question was fruitless; he’d asked them before and they could not lie to him.
“Empowered,” said the males, and the female’s tongue tapped her teeth.

He sighed. “Follow me,” he murmured, leading them deeper into the cavern. Behind him their steps were dull and muted on the stone; the male with the missing foot dragging the stump in a sustained scraping, punctuated by the heavy thump of the intact leg.

Earlier that day, Tolliver had prepared for the evening’s experiment, so everything he would need awaited them in the adjoining chamber. For the massive, conjured pool, he’d had to prevail upon his Avery cousin, so as to spare his own magical reserves. To fill it with sparkling, natural water, he’d used an actual, enormous hose, which Malfoy had on hand to water his Muggles. To feed it into the cavern and down to the pool, he’d employed a crowd of the wild-eyed Muggles themselves, who couldn’t quite bring themselves not to study the bodies as they passed them on their slabs.

But the Muggles came from the Lestranges, not the Malfoys, so they minded their manners and didn’t dissolve in shock and terror. Tolliver appreciated their usefulness; it almost made him reconsider his decision not to bother training his own Muggle subjects.

Now he turned to the dead ones without enthusiasm. When all this began, he’d had such confidence that they would reveal their secrets to him. He’d taken their right eyes for the ritual that would let him see what last they’d seen; he’d interviewed them for hours; he’d even used the murky version of Legilimency that applied to the meat of a brain no longer alight with electricity.

These were the most powerful tools of his specialty, and again and again they failed him.

“Go,” he told them, pointing to the pool, and they ascended the little wooden staircase, which the Muggles had built with lumber and nails and noisy hammers, and they stepped one by one into the pool. After they slipped beneath the water, they drifted toward the bottom in the manner of heavy, lifeless objects.

Tolliver walked up the stairs also. He had done little animating in this fashion. Inferi were hungry creatures, and he preferred his pets to be lower maintenance. But he had an inkling. Only Muggles could be made into Inferi, after all. The magic was gone from these three, now, if it had ever belonged to them in life. Only the mismatched signatures remained, that which had caused their lord’s favorites such consternation. But had the magic been placed upon them before their deaths, or afterward?

He thought, if they’d died Muggle, they’d take the water’s magic and be made Inferi.

He put his wand-tip in the water, observing the distorted faces of the dead ones looking up at him with their remaining eyes, expectant.

Tolliver chanted the incantation under his breath, drew the ground thestral hoof from his pocket, and sprinkled the silvery powder into the calm water. As it made contact, it built into a faint red foam, burrowing through the water toward the dead.

Tolliver stopped chanting when the decay left the bodies, and the missing limb and eyes regrew, and their faces lengthened and their maws fell open.

“Interesting,” he murmured, for one remained unchanged. That male gazed at Tolliver while his erstwhile companions reached for him with their consuming instinct, until Tolliver stirred his wand in the water to get their attention. They looked at him with cloudy eyes, a different brand of attentiveness. They were now fully inhuman; the last, lingering bit of soul gone at last, spirited wherever such things went for the remainder of time. That particular secret even one such as
Tolliver didn’t know.

All three of them filed out of the water when Tolliver gestured impatiently, and stood dripping on the platform at the top of the stairs, the Inferi taking wet, rattling breaths. He pointed to the corpse.

“To your place,” he said, meaning the stone slab near the spiral stairs. The corpse went.

He looked thoughtfully at the Inferi. There were many ways to do it. They’d practically evaporate in direct sunlight, for example. But he’d rather dispose of them now than leave himself a chore for later.

“Incendio,” he said, and the female burst into flames. The male shrieked and raised its bony arms, and Tolliver cast again, and the male was quiet also. He watched them burn thoughtfully. The stairs were their pyre; they went up also. Tolliver Vanished the pool and its water, then Vanished the pile of smoldering refuse that had been human bodies, and then monsters. He felt their metaphysical remains whispering over his skin: two more weak but discontent ghosts.

Tolliver was unbothered. He had plenty of practice ignoring wraiths.

He was not precisely energized by his determination. Rather, he couldn’t puzzle out how it could matter one way or another in resolving the mystery of the stolen magic. But it was something, after months of nothing. He went up his spiral staircase after reclaiming the bit of his magic he’d used to animate the remaining corpse. The ghosts came up with him, as close as a cloak.

London
March 7, 1997

The only international Floo point in Britain was in the old Ministry. Bill clutched the owl post he’d received notifying him of Charlie’s arrival time tightly, uneasy in the dank corridor, which had the musty air and closed-off feeling of the entire place. Bill supposed there weren’t that many people using the international Floo on any given day, or any other part of the old Ministry, for that matter. He heard the scuffle of shoes on tile from time to time, but, unnervingly, no voices or bodies seemed to accompany the noise.

Before he could work up too much anxiety, the Floo chimed and filled with fire. Bill’s grin was immediate and broad; he didn’t have to force it, the way he might have if it had been Percy or Ron stepping out in a faint cloud of ash. Even though Charlie had been off doing their lord’s errands for years, to Bill he was still the boy he’d grown up alongside, close enough in age they were constant playmates, but enough younger that Bill felt a fierce protectiveness and pride.

They embraced. Charlie felt slight and lean, and was several inches shorter than Bill, which compounded Bill’s sense of lost balance. He’d wanted to shelter Charlie, not send him into the heart of enemy territory. He hastily blinked back the threatening tears, and didn’t think Charlie noticed anything was amiss when they parted.

“You certainly aren’t getting fat,” Bill observed. “I suppose that means they haven’t put you behind a desk?”

Charlie’s smile was faint but playful. “You won’t get me to spill my secrets that easily,” he said, looking around the corridor and wrinkling his nose. “Let’s get out of here. This place is creepy.”

They walked in companionable silence up the stairs, but made it quick, and when they were back out in the weak sunlight of a late-winter morning in London, Charlie paused to unshrink a scarf and wind it around his neck. Watching him, Bill noted a distinct suntan—or the Weasley version,
anyway—a slight darkening in skin tone and a marked increase in freckles. Bill wondered, but didn’t ask.

“We’ll go straight to Hogwarts, I think,” Bill said, glancing at his wristwatch. He saw Charlie looking and rolled his eyes. “It’s one of dad’s, alright?”

He thought Charlie flinched at the mention of their father, but if he did, it was quickly masked with a grin. “I like it. Very eccentric. I don’t mind going straight there, if you think I look alright?” He plucked at the robes he was wearing, which were the equivalent of dressy day attire, Bill thought, though he was never sure about these things. “Elaine told me which ones,” Charlie explained. “But they seem too fancy.” He studied Bill’s clothing curiously. “About like yours, aren’t they?”

Bill was trying not to let his negative reaction to the mention of Elaine show on his face, which meant he wound up agreeing with Charlie even though he thought Charlie was probably making Bill seem rather underdressed.

“Worst case scenario, we can ask mum to transfigure things a bit when we arrive,” Charlie said, and Bill hesitated.

“It’ll just be the two of us, actually.”


“Malfoy’s letter,” Bill clarified, unable to keep a certain tension from his tone, “just said that representatives of each family were ‘encouraged.’”

Charlie bit his lip. “Elaine thought…”

“Elaine isn’t even Pureblood,” Bill snapped, then blushed. “I mean, she isn’t from an old family. She doesn’t know the culture.”

Charlie’s eyes were wide, but he didn’t argue, only nodded mutely. Bill, still feeling a lump in his throat, tried to swallow it without success. “I don’t mean there’s anything wrong with being a Half-Blood,” he clarified, and Charlie nodded hastily.

“I know you didn’t.”

The silence for the second leg of their journey was less companionable than outright strained. Neither of them suggested using side-along Apparition, which meant they had to take turns arriving at the Point in Hogsmeade.

While Bill waited the few minutes for Charlie to follow him, he caught sight of Sirius Black, and made the mistake of waving before he noticed the man behind him. Peter Pettigrew.

Bill’s breath escaped him in a frustrated rush, because the wizards were making their way toward Bill before he could think of a way to look busy, and then it was too late. Charlie had come through the Floo, immediately tense but trying to smile. Sirius was smiling awkwardly and talking fast, as though that would camouflage the palpable tension in the air.

“We all know each other, I think,” Sirius said, his voice slightly too high. The other three wizards avoided one another’s eyes, though Peter Pettigrew wore a faint smile, as though the entire situation was vaguely amusing. It made Bill’s hand itch to draw his wand.

“Exciting day,” Sirius added. “Interested to see what Nott and that Cup came up with this time. The last task certainly narrowed the field, but his son is still in it, isn’t he?”
“Theodore Nott?” Charlie asked. “I didn’t realize he was the Heir. I wonder if he was trying to prove something? Other than the boy who lost a leg, I thought even the kids who were eliminated got pretty lucky in the first round. Those centipedes kill what, three or four people per year?”

“If you include goblins,” Pettigrew put in.

Charlie cleared his throat. “We’d better keep going, or we might not make it.”

They were still at least an hour early, but no one mentioned that. They headed through town toward the path to the school.

Charlie was frowning, looking left and right. Bill caught his eye. “What is it?”

“I just smell...well, dragons, actually,” Charlie murmured, glancing surreptitiously at Sirius and Peter, who were murmuring to one another a few paces ahead.

Bill’s brows rose. “You think they’re going to involve dragons in the task?”

Charlie nodded slowly. “What other reason could there be to have them here?”

Now that Charlie pointed it out, Bill thought he could sense a vague hint of brimstone in the breeze. Probably just his imagination. Unlike his younger brother, Bill wasn’t an Animagus. His senses were merely human.

They joined a steady stream of people on their way to the Quidditch Pitch, which wasn’t exactly a surprise to Bill. People were going to strive to attend each and every one of Harry’s public appearances until their lord expressed a different expectation.

“Let’s take an extra walk,” suggested Bill to Charlie, attempting an apologetic-looking smile toward Sirius. “For old times’ sake.”

Sirius shot a glance at Pettigrew that seemed involuntary and nodded. Charlie and Bill started off. Bill’s relief was instantaneous.

“So,” he murmured to Charlie as they reached the path that wound around the Great Lake. The crowds were behind them and the cold, sunny morning felt invigorating, suddenly, instead of oppressive. “Anything I should know?”

Charlie blinked, looking at his shoes. “You know they don’t tell me anything,” he muttered.

“But what have you been doing? Surely you’ve seen enough to have suspicions of what’s going on at Durmstrang, at least?”

“Our lord is very curious,” Charlie said, quiet and terse. “Is it so surprising that he’d be a benefactor of spell study?”

Bill’s eyes narrowed, and before he could stop himself he said, “‘Curious’ is an interesting choice of word. I’d opt for sadistic, narcissistic, or possibly, I don’t know—evil.”

Charlie continued to look determinedly down and ahead, but Bill saw that the tips of his ears had turned bright red, a signal of distress they’d all inherited from their father. That reminder of their shared blood inflamed Bill’s already unsteady temper.

“So, this is what our family bought with its sacrifice? What George bought?” he all but snarled, and Charlie froze midstep, stumbling to a halt and staring up at Bill incredulously.
“You think I don’t understand sacrifice?” he breathed.

“What, because you have to literally fly around doing errands? Or is it the chore of fucking that Farley girl? Ah, wait, it’s the other way around, isn’t it?”

Answering anger finally flashed in Charlie’s eyes. He strode closer so that he was up under Bill’s chin, which might have seemed humorous if Charlie hadn’t been almost trembling with fury. Something cool and reptilian occupied his eyes, making Bill blink.

“What is it you’re asking, exactly?” Charlie hissed. “Whether I hate every second of my life or if I forget, sometimes, to feel guilty if I eat dessert or have a laugh—or a fuck, if that’s what you’re so fixated on?”

“Yes!” Bill growled back, reaching out to shove Charlie back, hard enough his brother stumbled and had to rebalance. This time he kept his distance, his expression somewhere between hurt and disgusted. The sight of it made Bill’s skin crawl. He knew he was being ridiculous, but he couldn’t bring himself to stop. “Yes, you should feel guilty! We should all feel guilty for every moment we could be helping, and aren’t.”

Charlie’s shoulder slumped, and he shot a last black glance at Bill before turning away and heading back toward the Pitch. Bill watched him go, and when he eventually followed nearer to the commencement of the task, he sat next to the excitable twins and didn’t meet Charlie’s eye again.

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Sirius had begun looking for Harry without any particular urgency, but as the start time for the Task drew nearer, so did Sirius’s uneasiness. When, fighting the flow of the student traffic out of the Great Hall, Sirius saw Harry’s distinctive messy head, he called a bit too loudly. “Harry!”

Several of the students nearest Sirius jumped and hurried away. “Harry!” Sirius called again, just as loud.

Harry turned his head, a wan smile already on his face, since apparently he’d recognized Sirius’s voice. They made their way through the crowd toward one another, taller-than-average height coming in handy, and embraced when they reached one another. He hadn’t seen Harry since Yule, and restrained the urge to tug on his plait.

“You know where dragons are vulnerable?” Sirius asked conversationally, and blinked exaggeratedly.

Harry looked confused, but to his credit only for a moment, before he rolled his eyes and shoved Sirius playfully. “This is cheating. You’re cheating!”

“How so? You’re not my champion,” Sirius reminded him, and then realized what he’d said and frowned. It hadn’t occurred to him to find Hermione, wherever she might be, and impart any advice. Harry, who seemed to have followed Sirius’s train of thought, sighed.

“I think I know where Hermione and Elspeth are,” he said. “In any case, I’ll see them just before. If you want me to level the playing field, that is.” His smile faded and he winced. “Dragons? Do they want to kill us?” He managed a weak chuckle, then rubbed his forehead. Sirius watched him a moment, wondering if Harry had heard the rumors that their lord did want Harry dead. It would be convenient, if his gesture toward holding himself to the same standard as the other Houses ended in such a way.

But Sirius didn’t think so. He’d been an observer of their lord long enough, now, that he thought he
could trust the instinct. Their lord was interested in Harry, and with the magic confirming that they had some sort of compatibility, Sirius thought his interest was likely to last. He wasn’t sure whether Harry seemed safer as a result, or in still greater peril.

Grimacing, Sirius cuffed Harry’s arm to get his attention and smiled grimly when Harry looked at him again. “Be careful, eh?”

“I will be,” Harry promised. “I’d better get going though.” He quirked another grin. “Any good spells for the eyes, off the top of your head?”

Sirius shook his head, wrinkling his nose. “Nothing stronger than the *Conjunctivitis* I used to cast on Snape between classes at Hogwarts.”

Harry looked at him incredulously and Sirius blushed and shrugged. “He was a git.”

Harry laughed quietly, walking off, and Sirius refused to panic over his godson being pitted against a feral dragon. Maybe that wasn’t even what was going to happen. Animagus or not, how much trust could someone really place in Charlie Weasley’s nose?

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There were fifteen of them left to assemble for instructions in what had once been a locker room for Quidditch players, and was now clean and bare. They made up a much smaller field than had begun the second Task in the last tournament. Harry stood close to his sister, who had passed along the tip about dragons to Hermione before Harry could. He wasn’t sure what was going on with the two of them, but he had seen something go soft in Hermione Granger’s face when Elspeth bent down the couple inches necessary to speak into her ear. Elspeth’s arm had hovered in the air over Granger’s forearm, as though she wanted to touch the other girl, but couldn’t quite bring herself to do it. And Granger’s eyes were latched onto Elspeth’s hand, willing her closer or further away, Harry wasn’t sure.

For a moment, Harry had seen them both coated in blood, clinging to one another, but when he blinked the image was gone. He tried not to let the vision mean anything more than it did; rather than portentous, most of his visions seemed to bear no ties to reality. But under the circumstances he couldn’t keep himself from riding a brief spiral of panic before he got himself back under control.

Visions or not, he clearly needed to spend more time with his sister. The thought made him feel deeply guilty, because Elspeth was constantly nearby. But he took her closeness for granted. And was it a superficial closeness, now, with all that had happened in the past weeks and which they had yet to discuss?

“Champions,” murmured Severus Snape, who had appeared in the doorway noiselessly, and was looking at them with a vaguely spiteful stare and uptilted nose. “Your task is to cross the field, from one barrier to the next. You may Apparate only once, and no greater than a distance of ten feet. To travel a greater distance or to Apparate a second time shall disqualify you. The barriers may move, and if they do, the map will adjust.” He reached into his sleeve, presumably to touch his wand, and a small scroll appeared in Harry’s hand, as well as that of each of the other champions. Harry looked down in surprise, and when he unrolled it, found a map. It showed the silhouette of the old Quidditch Pitch, a black dot labeled “you,” and a green dot labeled “barrier” not far from where they stood.

“You will not be permitted to exit, except at those barriers. Should you choose to withdraw from the competition, you may exit at the first barrier. Should you experience undue distress and wish to
withdraw, you may of course fire red sparks, and a representative of your Lord or Lady will be permitted to retrieve you.”

Harry blinked. That was far from a promise to have a “distressed” participant withdrawn. He looked uneasily around the room, his gaze resting on Hermione Granger, who as always looked completely unaffected by what was going on around her. He wondered if Sirius would risk a “representative” by sending them in after her, for example. He didn’t have to worry about his sister in that regard; he had seen their parents’ faces in the crowd of nobility milling around in the stands, and closer to the turf, a hood had briefly lowered to reveal Remus, who winked at Harry before receding back into the anonymity of the cowl.

And Harry—well, he’d heard the rumors. He could hardly help it. If his lord wanted him dead, he supposed no one would rescue him. But behind the door in his mind, where the cord of the bond resided, Harry could detect the barest, emanating benevolence. The physical equivalent of the weight of a curious stare. Harry had decided to trust it.

It was time to go out onto the old Pitch, where a witch activated the monitoring charms on their lapels as they filed past, and a barrier, fuzzy in the characteristic way of a portal’s magic, awaited them.

The first Champion to approach it happened to be Theodore Nott. He gave a quizzical look over his left shoulder, then his right, and stopped. On a dias in the center of the Pitch, much as he had for the first Task, Theo’s father was giving a speech that echoed dramatically through the surrounding air with the aid, Harry suspected, of a multilayered Sonorous. Harry didn’t bother listening. He was studying his map, and wondering how he, of all people, didn’t have a bit more insight into dragons. Unless one of them wanted to roll over and let him scratch its belly, he wasn’t sure he had any especially relevant skills. Elspeth probably knew more than he did.

“Let us begin!” cried Lord Nott in a particularly booming voice, and his son squared his shoulders and filed through the barrier without breaking stride. The others followed with similarly grim but unflinching expressions. When it was Harry’s turn, he followed their example. But as soon as the barrier broke over his face and he emerged, blinking, on its far side, he came up short.

He wasn’t on the Pitch. He was on a tower of black rock, similar to the dias Lord Nott had stood upon to make his speech, except much wider and much taller, and one of a series. Fifteen, to be exact, Harry knew without taking a precise count, because he saw the figure of Theodore Nott, Hermione Granger, and Elspeth among others, a hundred yards from one another stretched over the landscape. The ground seemed to be formed of the same black stone, all laid out stark below a pale grey sky.

And then, the unmistakable cry of a dragon rang out, and Harry’s heart began to pound.

He searched the horizon, stumbling as he pivoted on the uneven stone and briefly windmilling his arms before he regained his balance and forced himself to move more slowly. There, he saw it, glinting in the sunlight: the barrier. Fumbling for the map, he saw that it had revised itself to show the setting wherein Harry now stood, and though he immediately questioned its general reliability, it did seem to depict the same orientation to the barrier that Harry could confirm with his eyes. So he took a deep breath, cast a cushioning charm at the ground far beneath him— large for good measure—and leapt.

Though Harry trusted his magic, falling a great distance toward what visually appeared to be a hard surface without panicking was, if not impossible, at least beyond Harry’s abilities. He closed his eyes, pulled his knees toward his chest in a loose grasp, and tried to point his back at the swiftly approaching ground. The impact sent a shock through him, and the ground groaned in protest as it
sank beneath his weight as though made of firm rubber, then gently bounced him back upward. Harry landed on his feet, one of those accidents that could happen to someone born with a degree of natural grace.

Harry adjusted his grip on his wand and took stock of his surroundings from his new vantage point. The ground was thick with a powdery grey dust, which made the footing even more uncertain than the bare rock might, and between the natural topography and the obstruction of the other champions’ pillars, the destination barrier was totally outside Harry’s range of vision.

Nearby, a few more champions dropped to the ground with varying levels of success; one seemed to miss her cushioning charm somewhat, and cried out and cradled her right arm, which hung askew from the shoulder. Harry winced, but she wasn’t suffering from anything fatal, so he tried to ignore her whimpers and, after confirming that Elspeth had landed—neatly, and on her feet, arms barely outstretched for balance—he stopped worrying about everyone else for a moment and followed the direction indicated by his map at a medium jog.

The dragons called again, and they were closer this time. Harry saw a burst of red sparks and thought it shouldn’t surprise him that at least one of the Champions couldn’t bring himself to jump.

The cushioning charm hadn’t put a dent in Harry’s reserves, but he knew he had a greater one than average, and wondered what sort of dragon battling most of the competitors could manage.

He gritted his teeth, breathed steadily through his nose, and ran faster.

A dragon cried out again, closer yet. When Harry dared an upward glance he saw not one, but six of them, flying in a tight formation, dark green and studded with dull spikes all down their backs.

Then another peal of noise from behind him. He jerked his head around, still running, and saw six more coming from the opposite direction.

And then, in his peripheral vision, four more descending at once on a champion Harry recognized as Theo Notte. Harry hesitated, then sucked in a deep breath and changed course.

“Nott!” He called, running as fast as he could toward the other wizard. Theo had erected a powerful shield over his head and was casting through it, impressively demonstrating a one-way barrier, but the offensive spells were weak and were doing little to deter the dragons, which kept diving at him and hissing when their claws brushed the shield.

Every time they made contact, the shield shuddered and visibly weakened. So Harry swallowed, stopped abruptly to ensure his wand movement was precise, and cast a shield of his own directly over Theo’s.

Theo looked over, obviously startled, and then smiled ruefully at Harry. Harry grinned back, but a half moment later he saw Theo’s eyes widen in horror as he looked over Harry’s head. Harry impulsively apparated exactly ten feet to his left. The rush of air accompanying the attacking dragon swept back the stray hairs around his face, and the dragon’s claws raked the empty earth. It snarled in frustration and rose back into the sky with heavy beats of its enormous wings.

But...enormous was relative. There wasn’t a dragon in this sky more than half Magnificent’s size. Knowing it wouldn’t be long before Harry was set upon again, he ran to the first shelter he saw; a shallow alcove at the base of the nearest pillar. The shield he’d cast for Nott was taking a bad battery from the arsenal of dragons in that group. Harry wasn’t shocked when Theo paused a half moment in his furious defensive spellcasting to throw up red sparks.
The red sparks seemed to mean something to the dragons, because they flew off, abruptly heedless of Theo, and headed straight for Harry. He cursed colorfully, blushing at the thought the monitor would pick up every word, and flung a blasting curse so wide and strong it took his breath away, and also rebounded the approaching dragons like quaffles off a beater’s bat.

Still gasping for air, Harry began to run for the barrier before the dragons could completely regroup. He hadn’t gone far when someone else winged by, too fast for him to recognize, balanced on a large flat rock netted in levitation and velocity Charms. Harry’s way to the barrier struck him abruptly. He too could fly, swift and agile, as a raven.

Harry avoided anything that could be seen as showing off his Animagus form, generally, but he thought modesty was a lost cause in his life at this point. So he summoned all of his magic into a tight hard place in his chest, and called for the bird.

Immediately, Harry’s vantage point was lower, and his senses had shifted into a different key, then sharpened to almost painful clarity. His vision swarmed with information, and a thousand more signals came to him through his slotted nostrils and even his tiny pebbled tongue.

He had learned something advantageous from all his time spent with Magnificent, Harry realized. They often flew together, and Harry knew the depth of a slope her wings couldn’t make, and the way her vision deceived her when he angled his wings against the sun. And that was the direction Harry flew: into the sun, which was not a straight trajectory to the barrier, but would put him near enough.

Harry was so honed into the task at hand, he might have forgotten about his sister altogether, if he hadn’t almost flown into her. She’d levitated her boots, which was a terrible way to fly but something he knew she’d stubbornly been practicing anyway, and she shot past him with the minimal amount of steering and the eye-watering velocity which, coupled together, made the tactic inadvisable.

But Harry saw why she’d resorted to it when a dragon barreled past her, not even noticing Harry. The wind off its wings sent the raven tumbling toward the ground.

Harry coordinated enough to avoid injury in the last several feet of the fall, managing a soft of glide that allowed him to land clumsily. Immediately he rolled over and reassumed his human form, lying on his back and squinting up at the dwindling silhouettes of his airborne sister and her pursuer. She was casting fairly well and accurately, considering the circumstances, but nothing crippling. The dragon was near her, and gaining; close enough that if she cast a simple cutting curse, she could take the dragon down. But the curses were probably stinging hexes, judging by the color and consistency of the jets of magic. Harry couldn’t understand it.

But a moment later, he realized what should have been obvious from the start: Elspeth wasn’t going to do anything to the dragon that could cause it real harm.

Before he could decide what to do, the champion on the flying stone soared by, quite in the opposite direction of the barrier, which he or she must have already reached before doubling back. As the stone angled upward to follow the steep climb that the dragon and Elspeth had taken, Harry saw unmistakable brown curls torn loose from their long braid by the wind in the sky, and knew it was Hermione Granger he was seeing come to his sister’s rescue.

Harry got to his feet; he’d be little use as a bird against a dragon, and couldn’t even offer a good distraction without making himself a meal. In his panic, he had only one recurring thought: he needed help, in order to help Elspeth—and why wasn’t she sending up red sparks?
But then Hermione, who apparently had no qualms about maiming dragons, severed the dragon’s entire right wing. She had the perfect opportunity, as the beast flew single-mindedly after Elspeth and didn’t even see Hermione coming. Dragon and detached wing tumbled from the sky, the dragon keening, and Harry’s heart started beating again and his breath left him in a rush. He hadn’t realized it, but he’d been stricken by helpless terror until that moment, a part of him sure he was about to watch his sister die, his visions finally proven reliable in the bitterest possible way.

Hermione must have tapped her reserves, because her stone was coasting down toward the ground faster than Harry thought was advisable. But before he could bring himself to worry, Elspeth cruised past and snatched the other girl off the rock, and they flew clutched together toward the barrier. Harry wiped the last of the sweat from his brow and gathered his magic to become a raven again and follow them.

But then the sky lit up a bright, electric blue, and the barrier, which had been a short distance from Elspeth and Hermione, disappeared. It reappeared nearer Harry, though not close enough for him to reach it easily. At the same moment, a pod of at least a dozen dragons descended on the two witches, apparently having disposed of the other competitors either by forcing them to fire red sparks, or by some grimmer means.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry ran as fast as he could toward Elspeth and Granger, though they were too distant for him to reach them before the dragons did. He needed help, he thought again. Someone faster, and stronger, and...

Harry wouldn’t—couldn’t—have done it merely to finish the Task himself, but from this distance, and with that many dragons, he didn’t know how else to help Elspeth.

So he Summoned Magnificent.

Harry had forgotten how much magical effort it took, and underestimated how taxed his magic was. He stumbled forward, catching himself on his hands and knees, to wheeze through a dizzy spell. When he looked up, his sister and Hermione Granger were still running in his direction, the dragons in hot pursuit, but now Magnificent lay where he’d imagined her, on one of the obsidian outcroppings nearest the witches.

Please help them, Harry pleaded. He felt an exasperated sigh vibrate in his eardrums, and in answer, Magnificent uncoiled the black rock. The contrast was eerie and perfect: her living, glowing white against the matte stone as she gathered her hindquarters beneath her to launch into the air. The dragons already in the sky cried out as she intercepted them midflight, her claws raking the throat of her smaller, dark green dragon in the lead, her tail lashing toward the eyes of another. And then Harry tore his eyes away because he had to make risking Magnificent worthwhile.

Elspeth and Hermione were getting nearer; Harry ran to meet them, which was senseless, but he badly wanted to be at his sister’s side instead of helplessly at a distance. “Come on,” Harry shouted as they reached each other, which was, again, meaningless; they were already running. Harry pivoted to follow them in a sprint for the barrier.

The air was dense with the sound of the battling dragons, drowning out all thought and competing noise. Harry wasn’t as fast as Elspeth but she seemed to be holding back, watching Hermione to be sure she was sure footed beside her on the difficult terrain. Harry vowed that he would, one day soon, give the sum of his observations of those two the thought it deserved. But now—dragons howling in mortal combat just a hundred yards away—obviously wasn’t the time.

When there was enough distance between them Harry thought them out of range of a stray burst of fire, he took a few extra steps in a burst of speed and grabbed Elspeth’s arm. Hermione turned,
also, when the witches’ clasped hands pulled tight.

“Elspeth is going to win,” Harry said, looking quickly from his sister’s blooming expression of outrage to meet Hermione’s eye instead. But she only met his defiant stare briefly and then she was looking at Elspeth, with raw and unguarded emotion, and she nodded without argument. He battled his surprise a half moment then attempted to propel Elspeth ahead of them toward the barrier. She refused to be shoved, and she gave Harry a close approximation of what he thought their mother’s glare would have looked like in the same situation. It was daunting.

He’d known she would dig in her heels, but he found he had less patience for her stubbornness than ever before. “Elspeth, go!”

“I can’t,” she said, and from her angle she must have been able to see more of what was happening with the dragons, because her expression fell and she grasped Harry’s hand and reached again for Hermione, but the other witch was too far away. Again, to Harry’s fascination, he watched Hermione quickly advance a few steps so that she could tangle her fingers with his sister’s.

“Let’s all cross together,” said Hermione, and Elspeth looked pleased but unsurprised. Harry assumed this was an idea that had come up between them before. It sounded exactly like something his sister would propose.

“I don’t know,” Harry stalled, but he was worried about Magnificent; every cry the fight tore from her seemed to be carving something into his heart. He knew that this moment of unity would probably not impress Tom, but he couldn’t help it. He nodded shortly to his sister. He barely saw relief and excitement bloom in her expression before she was turning away, half-dragging both Harry and Hermione with her, through the barrier. But at the last moment, when Elspeth was nearly through and Harry’s knuckles were brushing the barrier’s sizzling energy, he heard Magnificent’s angry call turn shrill, and broke free of Elspeth’s hold.

Spinning around, Harry saw her, dropping like a stone from the sky, her white hide riddled with streaks of blood and the air around her forming a cloudy pink mist as her hot blood evaporated in the atmosphere. Unthinking, he sprinted toward the melee, even as the smaller dragons who weren’t pursuing Magnificent to finish her off turned and flew toward Harry. Absurdly, he ran to meet them, his wand high and his legs carrying him over the stone-littered, uneven path as though nothing could impede him.

"Bombarda!" he shouted hoarsely, and the Yew wand jerked at the force of his command and then obediently sent a coil of explosive energy at the nearest dragon. Then he let the Yew wand choose the next one, which gave him the heady moment of hearing an unfamiliar ancestor’s voice incant. He repeated it: “Ventriliqua Maxima!”

The dragon that met this curse jerked like a puppet on a string. Then Harry swung his wand toward the third approaching dragon, and the spell hurled the dragon under his curse at the target like a projectile. The two crashed to the ground in a tangle, hitting hard and going still on impact.

He couldn’t see Magnificent—she was beyond the crest of the ridge—but he could still hear her.

Hang on, he called through their bond. I’m coming!

Harry, she replied, faint with weakness, distraction, or both. You are such an idiot.

He ran harder, somehow, his lungs burning and his breathing so harsh he wondered if he’d
managed to wheeze out another spell when the time came. His magic was fretful after the unfamiliar spell, but he couldn’t spare a moment just yet to question the Yew wand’s advice.

Reaching the summit of the incline, Harry stumbled to a standstill, blinking against the sweat streaming from his brow and into his eyes so he could assess the scene before and below him.

They were circling her. She was dragging a hind limb. Her head was low and blood was forming a hard black clot around her neck, where she must have sustained the worst wound. It was hard to tell what minor injuries littered her body, as it was now almost entirely red and black with fresh or drying blood, except for a swipe of pink-tinted white over both eyes where she must have hastily cleaned herself on a wingtip.

Her wings were tightly folded, and he could see why: they were the target of the smaller dragons’ darting attacks, now, so they could ensure she wouldn’t escape. But to Harry’s eye, she was far too weak to fly, anyway.

His heart sank. His magic depleted, his body weaker still, he could think of no way to help her.

Harry felt something pounding in his head, and it wasn’t his own pulse. After another moment filled with the dull, defeated feeling that arose from seeing Magnificent bleed and being helpless to assist her, Harry realized that the pounding sensation was emanating from the bond with his lord.

As though someone was knocking desperately on a door with their fists. And of course there was only one someone it could be.

Harry let him in, and immediately said, Help her, please.

You need to get out of here, Tom snarled back, and that’s who he was to Harry in that fraught moment. Tom, angry and human. The only outcome of facing three dragons when you’re this weakened is death.

One of the small dragons slunk closer to Magnificent’s flank and she spun with gaping jaws to chase him back, in the process spreading her wings slightly for balance. This, of course, left her vulnerable to the airborne attacker who glided in and latched onto the fragile juncture of her wing joint. Its jaws clamped over the delicate claws with which she was fond of tousling Harry’s hair. Her cry was like breaking glass, and before he knew it, Harry was moving again.

“Well, I won’t leave her,” he said out loud. He didn’t have the energy to slam the door on the bond, but he could ignore a voice that was only in his head.

Harry, you are not free to disobey me!

Harry shouted, “Over here, you pathetic scavengers! Oi!”

Harry, I will punish you for this. I’ll tear apart that dragon myself. Get back to the barrier.

“Yes, that’s right! Over here!” Harry waved his wand and his free arm over his head, fumbling for an ounce of magic, which rushed feebly into his fingertips but cost him all the breath in his lungs. Fortunately he didn’t need to shout anymore to get the dragons’ attention. The three small ones were now winging toward him, and beyond them Magnificent looked as incredulous as a dragon could look. When she tried to stretch her wings and fly to him, the injured joint seized and she cried out and collapsed.

Harry was running toward the dragons, a terrible rendition of a game that he’d played on broomsticks with a few Gryffindors once when they’d had too much to drink and snuck out of the
castle. They’d fly toward one another and the loser was the one whose nerves failed them, and who swerved off course in the moment before a collision.

Harry’s nerves never failed him.

Of course, they were far more sorely tested by the sight of the dragons’ extended claws, the snapping-sail noise of the short beats of their wings, and the way the air became hotter the nearer they drew. Harry found the same well of strength that is normally reserved for people running from dragons, poured it into his aching legs, and ran harder. He had only one idea, and it wasn’t even his.

_I hope you’re watching, Sirius_, he thought, as the dragons, which no longer appeared small in the least, bumped into one another in their eagerness to be the one that would have him within reach in the next moment. At the last second, Harry dropped to his knees, filled his burning lungs with air, and pointed his wand at the nearest dragon’s head.

“Conjunctivitis!” he incanted, and watched the dragon’s eyes instantly become red and weepy, then in a half moment so swollen they weren’t visible at all. The dragon barked a cry and thrashed frantically, disturbing the two flying close to either side, but also making it difficult for Harry to take aim again. His magic was barely affected by such a simple curse, he realized numbly, and so he fired off a string of stinging hexes in the general vicinity of the next dragon’s face, and it fell as well.


The dragons hit the ground in quick succession, as thoroughly dead as sacks of meat, steam rising from their bodies where their hides split on impact. Harry, wheezing for air, vision blurred, flopped back on his back with no care for who had rescued him. Then he remembered—

“Magnificent,” he breathed, and tried to stand up without success. A long-fingered hand was extended to him, and to his surprise, he met the dark eyes of Severus Snape, though his customary scowl was gone, and where it should be his features were twisted into a combination of anger and concern.

_Tom?_ Harry wondered, taking the hand, and was drawn to his feet so gently he had his confirmation. His lord reached out and terminated the monitoring spell on Harry’s lapel with a touch.

“As far as anyone knows, no.”

“Have you saved me just to let me die slowly?” Magnificent moaned. Harry, still leaning on Severus Snape’s unfamiliar, bony arm, instinctively took a step in her direction, but his knees crumpled beneath him.

“Moron,” murmured Tom, sounding quite like Master Snape. “Come on.”

Tom’s wand was still drawn, and as he did every kind of magic, he performed healing magic precisely and efficiently. But even so, Magnificent had lost blood and strength. When Tom scoured the blood from her skin, she lay so quietly Harry might have thought they were too late, if it weren’t for the occasional weary comment she made out of the corner of her mouth.

“This is a very noisy dragon,” Tom noted when she paused in her commentary. Harry, who was leaning against the curve of her neck and stroking her brow, looked over at him with a faint smile.
“She’s talkative,” he agreed.

“I’m in a state of delirium,” Magnificent complained. “Harry, that petting is very nice, and would
feel even better under my wing.”

Harry walked around her limp foreleg to obey, conscious of Tom watching him through Severus
Snape’s eyes, and he glanced over at him cautiously. “You won’t really hurt her, will you?”

“Well,” Tom said sourly, crossing his arms and narrowing his eyes, “I should. Otherwise you
might think I don’t mean what I say. But as you’re bonded to her, and fond enough of her to let her
tell you exactly where to scratch her, that doesn’t seem like the right way to begin our
relationship.”

Harry felt a renewed dizziness, which probably was mostly physical, but doubtless had something
to do with Tom casually referring to their “relationship.” So he turned fully toward Magnificent to
hide his expression, lest it betray him, under the pretense of rubbing circles under her wing with
both hands.

“Sleepy,” Magnificent murmured.

“Let her fall asleep. She can’t very well fly now, anyway. Can you return her from whence she was
summoned?”

“How did you know what she…?” startled, Harry turned around, and at Tom’s knowing smirk, he
recalled that he hadn’t thought to close the bond.

He hadn’t noticed Tom’s continued presence in his mind, though now that his attention was drawn
to it, it was evident. The sensation was not uncomfortable; in fact, it was something so subtle that
Harry was sure that once he grew accustomed to it, he could forget about it entirely. But it did
signal to him that the bond was being used, and through it, Tom understood Magnificent as easily
as Harry did.

“I suppose, by the same token, you might be a Parselmouth,” Tom added thoughtfully. “But we’ll
have time for experiments later. Congratulations, by the way. You have thoroughly failed this
Task.”

Harry studied Tom’s borrowed face for signs of real disapproval. His tone, at least, was matter-of-
fact, but his expression was hard to read. “Are you angry, or…disappointed?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I’m not your father, Harry.”

Harry blushed, and realized with frozen horror that the bond was open, and he couldn’t quite keep
himself from reacting with aversion to the idea of Tom as his father, or why the idea was incredibly
uncomfortable.

Tom chuckled, but he was still very like Severus Snape, so Harry didn’t react as he might have
otherwise. “I’d like to be alone in my head, please,” he found the strength to say, and after a
moment of silence, Tom nodded.

“Very well,” and without any apparent effort, he left Harry’s mind and closed the door on the bond
behind him. Harry blinked.

“You can…? Well, I guess you can,” he mumbled.

“With the charm deactivated, people may be assuming you’re dead,” he told Harry crisply. “So, if
you care for the emotional health of your loved ones, you might not tarry overlong.”

Harry bit his lip and looked down at Magnificent. “I suppose I could let her go back. She’ll be safe there.”

“By ‘there,’ you mean the Malfoys’ lands, presumably? Her color is distinctive.”

Harry nodded, biting his lip. “They don’t know about…me and her. Well, Draco does. But only Draco.”

Tom looked amused. “Well, know now,” he reminded Harry, who grimaced and nodded.

“Yeah, I guess they do.” He rubbed the back of his neck, where his braid had come loose and his hair was tangled with blood and dirt. He flexed his hand to check his magic, but the Yew wand specialized in this sort of thing, after all, so when he cast the spell to spirit Magnificent home, he did it with confidence.

“When I reactivate the monitoring spell, I’m sure you understand that I will be Master Snape, not Tom,” said Tom, reaching out to straighten Harry’s lapel, his knuckles grazing Harry’s throat and making Harry very relieved the bond was safely closed once more.

“Yeah,” he said, managing a steady voice. “I get it.”

“Then let us go,” said Tom, pressing his thumb against the fabric and muttering something, then immediately his arm fell back to his side. “Come along, Lord Slytherin,” he called, starting off without offering Harry a supporting hand or arm.

Harry thought, bemused, that at least now everyone would know what they were supposed to call him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Your comments energize me!

P.S. I’m "hiredhorse" on tumblr!
Chapter Twenty: Conversion

“Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.”

Sun Tzu

As soon as Harry’s hand pulled free from hers, Elspeth made a noise not dissimilar to the fatally wounded dragons and nearly ran right back through the barrier. The only thing stopping her was the fact that Hermione held her other hand, and wouldn’t let go.

Around her were a blur of faces, including her mother and father. The politics of their champion just completing the second Task compelled them to smile, but like Elspeth, they couldn’t tear their eyes from the monitors showing their son racing toward the fallen white dragon.

“Let me go,” Elspeth said, looking over at Hermione. Her hair was still in braids, but they were mussed. Even spells couldn’t keep Hermione’s hair reined in entirely on an ordinary day, let alone through a battle and two tele-portals. Surrounded by flyaway hairs and smudged with dirt, her face was so uncharacteristically full of emotion that it brought Elspeth up short.

“No,” Hermione said. She was holding Elspeth so tightly the bones in her knuckles felt like they were grinding together. But under the circumstances, Elspeth didn’t really mind. She tilted her head back to look at the screen. When her father placed his hands on her shoulders, Hermione abruptly released her. Elspeth would have looked over, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop watching her idiotic brother.

“Pardon me,” said Severus Snape, walking calmly past Elspeth and her parents and through the barrier as though he was out for an evening stroll.

“What…?” Elspeth looked up at her father, then over at her mother. James looked pained and Lily looked deeply confused.

“The—our lord must be sending him in to get Harry,” James said, but he was looking back at the screen already. Harry was blinding a dragon with what was obviously close to the last of his reserves.
And then Severus Snape was in the view; he must have Apparated, though curiously Elspeth hadn’t noticed the sound. The amplifiers were functioning properly, evidenced by how faithfully they projected Harry’s colorful swear words. Master Snape killed the dragons in quick succession, demonstrating a chilling mastery of the Killing Curse. Elspeth had never seen anyone use it before. She’d begun to wonder whether it existed at all, but here was her proof. Despite everything, she gave a ragged little sob on the dragons’ behalf as their terrifying, beautiful bodies dropped to the ground, lifeless.

Master Snape bent over her brother, and the monitors abruptly went out. After a moment of silence, a few shocked cries and then general commotion erupted in the stands, and one of her father’s hands left her shoulders so that he could pull her mother close to him.

Elspeth just kept staring at the open air where the monitor had been, well aware of the implications and unwilling to accept them. Her whole life she had been warned—if not outright then through a thousand moments of tension and words cut short and tears dash hastily from her father’s eyes—Harry isn’t safe. Harry could die, at any moment. She’d stubbornly thought him invincible; maybe that was the younger sibling’s fate.

“Did he send Snape to finish him off, then?” James’ voice was strangled. He wasn’t even bothering to speak in a tone Elspeth couldn’t overhear, which was how she knew how afraid he must be. “Just to make sure the job was done?”

“James, be silent,” murmured Lily. Suddenly, Elspeth’s skin crawled where her parents were touching her; she wanted to be anywhere else, but most of all, wherever Harry was. Would they bring him back? She thought of the contestants last year, their bodies left to the hellscapes where they’d been sent. This was all her fault…if she hadn’t put her name in, Harry never would have submitted his. If she hadn’t been so loathe to harm the dragons that were trying to kill them all, they all could have made it safely through the barrier.

“Where’s Hermione?” she asked, turning to her parents. Her voice was a little too loud, and a little too high. The question hadn’t been planned. But through her shock, Elspeth realized how right it sounded. She didn’t want her parents, arguing with one another as though she wasn’t there. Clinging to her as they always had: the child they overprotected because they had the luxury of protecting her at all.

“Where’s Hermione?” Elspeth asked again, her mind clearer this time. She looked past them, around them, for Hermione’s distinctive silhouette. For years Elspeth had honed her ability to find Hermione in any crowd. It was almost second-nature, from the earliest days of her juvenile crush until now, when Hermione was better known to her yet more mysterious than ever. She saw her standing at Sirius’s shoulder, and she was watching Elspeth too. When their eyes met, Hermione bit her lip, and Elspeth slipped free of her parents and was about to break into a run when the monitor came back to life. The entire audience gasped, and Elspeth spun around, dreading what she would see.

But it was Harry, alive and well, if limping slightly and covered in blood and dirt. Elspeth let her mother grab her up in a hug and collapsed against her shoulder, weak with relief.

****

Gryffindor was in an uproar; of course, it was down to two—or possibly three, depending on whose theory you bought—of their very own for the Tri-Wizard Championship. Even Hermione was being shuffled into the common room like an old friend, which seemed to be unsettling her, though she would no longer meet Elspeth’s eye.
Of course, they had an agreement about this. Their friendship, or whatever it was, was just between the two of them. It consisted mostly of notes and clandestine meetings in the common room. The secrecy wasn’t what Elspeth wanted, but she was willing to take what Hermione offered her. It seemed like they’d broken that rule in the most public way possible during the Task, but Elspeth helplessly followed Hermione’s lead by falling back into their old dynamic.

It helped that she had a strong desire to cling to Harry’s arm and never let go. He’d allowed the healers to give him the same restorative potion they’d given Elspeth, then shook off further interrogation and inspection with a smile and a little wave of his hand. He didn’t seem to notice how quickly that simple gesture had the healers backing off, but Elspeth did. It was a chilling reminder of how much power and influence had been handed to her brother, and how he still didn’t seem to realize he had it.

“Let’s start this evening off properly,” called Fred Weasley, clambering onto the low table before the fire in the common room, which George then helpfully levitated until Fred towered well over everyone else. The assemblage included not only Gryffindors, but also friends thereof. The sanctity of the Tower was apparently forgotten in the name of celebration. “There will be safe but, strictly speaking, illicit substances in the bay window, and contributions are welcome. But before we start the music—a dramatic retelling of the Task’s highlights!”

Elspeth took advantage of Harry’s allergy to the spotlight; he allowed her to tow him into a corner, his expression resigned.

“I really can’t believe you!” she hissed into his ear after she yanked his head down a few inches to her level. “You’re an idiot.”

“I’m an idiot?” Harry echoed, incredulously. “You almost got killed because you didn’t want to hurt a dragon!”

“This,” Elspeth bit out testily, “is one of those pot-and-kettle scenarios.”

Harry hesitated, then smiled slowly. “Maybe. But it’s not the same. Magnificent isn’t just any random dragon, she’s…”

“A familiar?” Elspeth filled in, eagerly.

Harry frowned. “I don’t think so. More like a…friend.” His frown deepened. “The more I think about it, the more I think maybe you’re right. Those other dragons are probably quite like her, once you get to know them. They shouldn’t have been part of the Task.”

Elspeth automatically looked left and right, since criticizing how things were being done was never advisable. But no one was listening to them. Ironically—but unsurprisingly, knowing the twins—Fred and George had stolen the champions’ spotlight via a story about the champions. Fred was, in that moment, pantomiming casting a spell on his boots while the crowd laughed in anticipation.

“It’s been too long since we’ve talked,” Harry said when Elspeth glanced back. He was speaking more softly, and context and a bit of lip-reading were all that made him understandable when he added, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me too. And, er, you too,” Elspeth agreed, and they smiled wistfully at each other for another long second before Elspeth scowled again.

“Harry,” Elspeth said, in a very calm tone that only raised Harry’s alarm because it was the same one their father used when he was about to spring a trap. Harry tensed.
“You aren’t getting let off the hook this easily,” Elspeth continued, deliberately slow and steady. “Did you really think you would?”

Harry studied her cautiously. “I don’t think I understand…?”

“The dragon, Harry. You’ve had a dragon all this time, and you haven’t introduced me?”

Harry laughed, startled. “That’s what this is about?”

“Well, at least partly,” Elspeth said with a slow smile. “So? Will you?”

“Of course,” Harry said. “But she’s probably going to like you better than me, which will be a whole...thing.”

“I didn’t realize you were the jealous sort,” Elspeth drawled, dimpling.

Harry scoffed, and, curiously, blushed. “You’d be surprised,” he murmured, then continued in ordinary volume. “But in this case I don’t mean me.” Harry grinned. “I’m talking about Draco.”

****

That night—or early the next morning, depending on how you looked at it—while Elspeth was getting ready for bed in her room, Lavender Brown came in.

It had been a while since Lavender paid Elspeth any visits. She wasn’t missed. Elspeth held a pillow over her chest and glanced at her wand, even though she knew it was ridiculous to be this intimidated by a Housemate who had by all appearances only ever wanted to ingratiate herself with Elspeth’s family. It didn’t make her easy to trust, but it made her easy to understand.

“Congratulations,” Lavender said, in that tone of voice that should have sounded sincere, with that smile that should have assured Elspeth she meant it, with her soft golden curls piled over one shoulder in a way Elspeth should have found beautiful. Instead Elspeth just felt tense, and knew without a doubt she was in the presence of a skilled predator.

“Thank you,” Elspeth said politely. “Did you enjoy the party?” Demanding to know why Lavender was there wouldn’t get her anywhere; she’d stopped bothering to ask the other witch direct questions years ago.

“It was exciting, but very long,” Lavender said, with a wry smile. Elspeth leaned against her headboard, still clutching her pillow.

“Yes, it’s been a very long day,” Elspeth said, then pretended to yawn, covering it politely with her hand.

Lavender looked amused. Of course, she was a much better actor than Elspeth.

“I’m very sorry to interrupt you so late. It’s only...I couldn’t help but notice that during the Task you seemed quite close to someone.”

Of all the things Elspeth had expected, somehow, this wasn’t it. It just seemed too obvious an interest for Lavender to take. Lavender knew everything and everyone, but she didn’t concern herself with straightforward gossip. She was always gathering information on a different, more over-arching level.

“I have a lot of friends,” Elspeth hedged, recalling her agreement with Hermione. She hated to say
anything but the truth, because the thought of her hesitation being mistaken for shame wrenched her heart. But she supposed that it was better to do what Hermione told her she wanted, than to assume she knew better.

“I see,” said Lavender. She looked troubled; a wrinkle in her brow, a pout on her polished lower lip. “It’s only that I thought I should say something…what with me being so close to Harry, and knowing how much he would hate to see you hurt.”

At least she wasn’t trying to pretend that she was Elspeth’s friend, Elspeth supposed, but the idea of her being close to Harry almost rankled more.

“What is it?” Elspeth snapped. She hadn’t meant to, but her mask was worn thin by the long day and the long night.

Lavender blinked prettily. “Hermione Granger. I just don’t want her to…take advantage of you.” She looked down, as though Lavender could ever be shy. “Not that I feel like she took advantage of me, not at all, but it didn’t…” she bit her lip and glanced up at Elspeth through her lashes. “It didn’t end *nicely*, either.”

“Hermione…and you?” Elspeth wanted to be dismissive, but there was something about the story that held a grain of truth. She’d watched Hermione a lot; she’d seen her and Lavender exchange the occasional glance when they clearly thought no one would notice. She’d wondered, but never actually suspected.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” Lavender hastened to say. Elspeth’s heart was beating fast, and she no longer felt like she could see a façade in each of Lavender’s words and gestures. Maybe Elspeth had misread her all along. “She wouldn’t want them to know.” She paused and said in a slightly smaller voice, “She never did, even when it was going on.”

“Oh,” said Elspeth, staring at her crossed legs. “I see. Thank you for telling me, I reckon.”

Lavender hovered another moment by the door, as though she thought she should linger, or say something else, but couldn’t decide. Then she nodded and smiled a strained half-smile.

“Sorry, really,” she said softly, and let herself out.

****

Contrary to the unkind rumors, Tolliver rarely killed anyone all the way. His subjects came to him—or he to them—when they were already what most people would call “dead.”

Aside from necromancers, few people understood the many steps a soul took, how gradually they left the body. Let alone how the echoes of the self lingered longer still, long past the hour that most were interred in their graves.

His lord asked for something quite specific, and it was up to Tolliver to negotiate something close in his communion with the Goblet. Tolliver was personally responsible for several hundred ghosts and had inherited several thousand more from his mother. He was born in a room so choked with their visages he was four or five before he realized they weren’t a host of grizzly nannies.

But the Goblet frightened Tolliver. He was wizard enough to know what was worthy of his fear.

Still, he had no choice, so he put his hands on the device and closed his eyes.

YOU AGAIN.
“Yes, me.”

WELL?

“Our leader would prefer a maze. The two participants—”

THREE.

Well. There was that debate settled. “The three participants would face terrors therein. My particular talents…”

INFERI.

Tolliver sighed. “That’s actually a common misconception. While I certainly know the magic to create an Inferi, it’s not true necromancy, as they are not the reanimated dead but a magical creature…”

INFERI.

The texts had really explained the process as more of a collaboration. Perhaps the Goblet liked those authors better, or it hadn’t aged with grace. Tolliver was preparing his own volume to put with the others and he intended to be frank with his successors.

“Inferi, then.”

THE MAZE WILL BE OF OUR DESIGN.

And just like that, a diagram in three thoroughly-drawn dimensions popped into Tolliver’s mind. In the same moment, he forgot the fourteen ancient runes required to safely open a Roman tomb.

“May I present these to our leader and…”

NO.

And that was that.

****

The morning after the second Task, Harry opened his eyes and thought for a long moment that Fawkes was back, though he didn’t understand why.

It took only a moment of wakefulness to know it wasn’t true: the fluttering against the window was only an owl. It clutched a scroll tied with a green and red plaid ribbon, which meant it was from Tom.

Harry slid out of bed immediately, wincing when his bare feet hit the cold floor, and opened the window to absently stroke the unfamiliar bird. Tom wrote him almost daily, and Harry, if he was lucky, could send a few quick words back with the bird to wherever it had come from, though sometimes it wouldn’t make it back before Tom decamped to wherever world dominion demanded he go next.

It was curious, that Harry had never thought very much about the mechanics of Tom’s rule. He had
to do more than make appearances at ceremonies, or startle all the attendees by showing up at
dinner parties, of course. But the more he thought about it, the more impossible it seemed, that
there were hours enough for Tom to keep an entire planet in a state of relative control.

Harry unwound the scroll and the owl left without waiting for a reply. All the note said, in a
familiar, clear script, was “Astronomy Tower, 8 a.m.”

Harry blinked, cast Tempus, and hurried into his clothing. He only had ten minutes.

As it turned out, Tom was already waiting when he arrived. Rushing had left Harry pleasantly
winded, as though from a brisk flight. On second thought, it might have been faster to fly from one
window to the other. He hardly thought he’d get in trouble for it now. No one seemed willing to
upset him these days, except his lord, himself, of course.

“Well,” Tom said by way of greeting, “the Goblet has determined that you completed the
Task. It won’t proceed without you.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. He wasn’t sure he minded one way or the other whether he was included
in the Tournament, except that he had a feeling it mattered to Tom. And perhaps he’d be slightly
more use to Elspeth inside whatever arena the Goblet and Lord Nott came up with next than he
would be simply watching from outside.

“I don’t think the officials will like that,” Harry said. The officials had seemed to take a perverse
delight in tentatively declaring Harry disqualified, Hermione in first place, and Elspeth in second.

Tom made a little flicking gesture with his fingers that eloquently described how much he cared
what the officials liked and didn’t like. “It goes without saying,” he added, “but I would prefer you
win.” Harry laughed nervously, but Tom looked very serious. “I’m very serious,” he said.

Harry sobered and rubbed his neck. “Right.”

The wind in the Astronomy Tower was particularly vigorous today. Harry shivered, wishing he’d
brought his cloak, and Tom sighed in exasperation.

“Can’t you cast a warming charm when you need one?”

“I don’t like them. They make my hair stand on end.”

Tom grumbled and transfigured a clean, folded pocket handkerchief into a cloak, then stepped
chest to chest with Harry to put it around his shoulders. He did it so quickly, Harry couldn’t prepare
himself or savor it. But when he stepped back, Harry could smell Tom in the fabric, which was still
warm from his pocket.

“Don’t die, or be heroic, and if possible please win,” Tom said in summary. “Listen to your wand,”
he added lowly, Harry had been studying the hem of the cloak, but looked up curiously at that.

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew my wand.”

Tom snorted. “I do know it.”

Now that made Harry curious. “What do you mean?”

Tom leaned against the parapet and shrugged, nonchalant. “I carried it, for a time.”

“What? But you aren’t a Peverell…”
Tom looked faintly amused. “We’re not as unrelated as you might think. But the spirit of your objection is correct—I interviewed wands from all the families with a collection, regardless of attachment.”

Harry’s mind was still reeling at the thought of Tom, his lord, bearing Harry’s wand. “But...wands are passed down in families...”

“Well, the Slytherin estate being what it was, I’m sure you can imagine there was little to salvage by way of familial Wands. Besides, why should I restrict myself? When I realized the benefits of wands with a long history of strong bearers, I wanted to cast the widest possible net, so to speak, and as is my right.” The emphasis on the last three words was low and menacing.

“Yes,” Harry rushed to agree. “I just didn’t know. What was it that made you exchange my wand, then?” He felt almost offended on its behalf; he couldn’t imagine a better wand. In fact, he couldn’t help thinking that the wand might have been better suited to Tom, altogether. In a way, they reminded him of one another.

“I nearly kept it, but the wand I use now is...covetous.”

Harry looked at the sleeve he knew concealed Tom’s wand holster. “I see.”

“Hmm,” said Tom. A breeze ruffled his hair. He kept it short, which was unlike the style of the day. It was much shorter than Harry’s as well. Though Harry knew well that if his hair was cropped close, it would be chaos. He looked at Tom’s face and realized that he’d long thought of his lord as being the age of Lucius and Narcissa, or his parents. But some time in the last few years they had all visibly aged past the point of their lord, who was poised at the moment of maturity before the beginning of any decline. His lustrous hair was jet black without a hint of the grey beginning to show at James’ temples. Narcissa had fine lines around her mouth and eyes, but Tom’s face was flawless.

One day, Harry realized with alarm, Harry would look older than Tom did. Harry would wither and die, and there would be his lord, unchanged. He could imagine it: Tom, perpetually perfect, looking down ruefully at Harry in his deathbed.

“I’ll try not to die for now,” Harry said, thinking the silence had gone on too long.

Tom snorted.

“And I’ll win,” Harry added, meeting Tom’s eye. The intent red eyes made him blush, warm all over, but he held Tom’s gaze anyway. “If that’s what you want.”

Tom stood erect and straightened his sleeves. The movement brought them close enough to touch, though they didn’t. He looked at with one side of his mouth tightened so a dimple appeared in his cheek—it was an expression that Harry had only recently realized was a smile. “It is,” Tom said.

Harry swallowed. “I—okay.”

Tom reached out and touched the collar of the cloak that had been his handkerchief. Harry stopped breathing. “I’ll see you afterward, my champion.”

He Disapparated in his silent, sudden way, leaving Harry alone, breathing heavily in the wind, beneath the shelter of the cloak.

****
It didn’t come as a total surprise to discover Lavender sitting on the edge of Harry’s bed, wearing her nightdress and an expectant look.

She had been dropping hints. The friendly flirtation that she engaged everyone in had shifted in its focus, in Harry’s case. She was always close by, sweet-smelling, laughing, tossing her shiny hair. Harry hadn’t really known whether he wanted to encourage her or not, so he had settled for lots of polite smiles, and explored his desires indirectly through some very confused wanking sessions, in which Lavender sometimes made cameo appearances alongside his lord.

“Good evening, Harry,” she purred from her perch, as Harry hastily closed the door behind him.

“Lav,” Harry said with much more composure than he felt. “Can I...help you?” He was fairly sure why she was there, but at the same time, drawing that conclusion seemed unforgivably presumptuous.

“Oh,” she said, batting her eyelashes in an exaggeratedly coquettish way, but Harry still felt helplessly intrigued. “I suppose I was hoping you’d give me a hand.” She ran her own hand across her lap, then grinned and held it out to Harry in invitation.

Signs of her sense of humor put Harry slightly more at ease, so he smiled back, cautiously, and walked over to her. Her fingers were small and warm. He hadn’t spent a lot of time thinking about whether he liked girls, but now that he was in this position, he was quite sure he did. All the physical indicators were in order, and when Lavender noticed, Harry found he wasn’t even embarrassed. He just let her stroke his fingers and looked at her expectantly.

“Hmm, I thought so, but I wasn’t sure,” she said, looking pleased with herself, and released Harry’s hand so she could scoot backward on the bed.

“I…” Harry started, then stopped. But he forged ahead, thinking that in this instance, as in most areas of life, it was probably better to confess and sacrifice his pride now than to proceed and inevitably lose it in short order, anyway. “I’ve never done this before.”

Lavender smiled, uncaring, and slid beneath Harry’s blankets so that she was only visible above her collarbones. The blankets proceeded to stir intriguingly until one of her golden-brown hands emerged holding her nightdress, which she then tossed to the floor.

Harry swallowed.

“Won’t you join me, Harry?” she murmured, sitting up slightly so the blankets dipped and he could see the high, round curves of her breasts. The lines of the bones in her shoulders and cords of muscle in her neck were silver in the low lamplight.

Harry thought that no one could be expected to resist her, and certainly not him, still thrumming with all the frustrations of the past weeks. And what was he going to do, anyway? Spend the rest of his life wanking to the thought of his untouchable lord? He shed his clothes, cheeks flaming but refusing to let his embarrassment stop him, sucking a breath of air through his teeth at the feeling of the cool air in the room on his hot skin.

Lavender folded back the blanket. When Harry slid in beside her, abruptly shy, and unsure when and how to touch her, she nudged him onto his back with a warm knee on his hip.

And Lavender, of course—and to Harry’s deep, grateful relief—took care of everything from there.

****
Hermione met Peter in the forest. He was sitting on the edge of the well in the clearing which had become their usual meeting place. As always, Hermione felt the threat of the Forest very keenly in that spot. She had traveled there as a fox, and without its fur and talent for seeing well in the shadows, she felt more vulnerable yet.

“The time has almost come,” murmured Peter. “Is your spirit still with the cause?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. Her voice didn’t waver, and if she briefly saw Elspeth Potter’s face, well… Peter needn’t know.

“Do you recall the saying, amongst your people, that ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’?”

“Yes,” Hermione said more quietly.

“That isn’t true for us. We are friendless.”

Hermione nodded.

“Well,” said Peter, sliding off the well and bouncing on the soles of his feet, his rare smile making him look almost feral. “The fun will soon begin. I trust you know the importance of your success. The outcome of this Task is paramount.”

Hermione nodded and swallowed. “I won’t fail.”

****

The Task began at nightfall, which was particularly sadistic, Harry thought, because it meant the three remaining champions had to spend all day in anxious anticipation.

Harry and Elspeth were shoulder to shoulder, and though she wasn’t near, Harry was very conscious of Hermione Granger’s sharp attention. After they both spent lunch in the Great Hall moving their food around their plates and little else, Harry brought it up. Partially because he didn’t want his curiosity to distract him during the task, and partially—selfishly—desperate for a distraction in the hours leading up to it.

“Hermione Granger,” he said bluntly. “What’s going on there?”

Elspeth looked at him with her lower lip between her teeth. “Nothing?”

“Really?” Harry demanded with unrestrained skepticism. Elspeth’s cheeks became pinker.

“She’s...a friend? But she doesn’t like for us to talk about it. What’s going on with you and Lavender?”

Harry frowned. It said quite a lot that Elspeth’s first thought at mention of her and Hermione was to mention Harry and Lavender. “What do you mean, she doesn’t like for you to talk about it?”

“She’s a private person?”

“Hmm,” Harry said.

“What does Lavender think?”
Her tone was pointed, but Harry couldn’t figure out why. “I don’t think she knows? I only noticed because I’m your brother. I notice things.”

Elspeth rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes, you’re terrified observant.”

“Just,” Harry interjected, “look after yourself tonight. Let her take care of herself.”

Elspeth patted his arm. “Same. Mind your own business—let me take care of myself.”

Harry’s brows rose. “That, I can’t promise.”

She sighed, but didn’t seem sincerely frustrated. “I know, but I still had to ask.”

****

“You may Apparate only once—a maximum distance of seven feet. You may not exit the maze in any way, including vertically. A barrier will prevent you. There will be no second and third place, in this final Task,” said Lord Knott. “The first to locate the Goblet of Fire in the center of the maze and take hold of it shall be the winner. The hazards in the maze will retreat immediately when a victor takes the Goblet. Red sparks are our signal that you wish to withdraw, and if you issue them someone may assist in extracting you from the maze. Are there any questions?”

The three champions just looked back silently at Lord Knott, and then there was nothing left to do but begin.

Hermione had won the last Task, according to the officials, so she went into the maze first. Harry stood by his sister and watched Hermione enter, the sun setting in a blaze of red-gold over the east-facing stands. Hermione’s posture was straight and she moved unhurriedly, and Harry hoped he would look half as confident.

He glanced at Elspeth, trying to be subtle, and assessed her expression. She looked resolved, and unafraid, which didn’t surprise Harry. His sister was good at channeling her emotions under pressure; she and Harry had that in common.

Too soon, it was Elspeth’s turn to go. She smiled bravely at Harry and struck off, wand ready but walking with long, confident strides. Harry heard the dull sound of an explosion from somewhere deeper in the maze; a blasting curse, maybe. He swallowed and drew his wand. It practically leapt into his hand, and as he often had since meeting Tom in the Astronomy Tower, Harry wondered how much of the wand’s enthusiasm for danger it absorbed during its time with their lord. It felt playful, as though eager to see what awaited them in the darkness between the hedgerows.

And it was dark—the last of the sunlight had gone, sealed out of the dusky sky, as Severus Snape and Lord Knott gestured him forward. It really was Master Snape, too; no one could imitate their lord, whom Harry was very conscious of in his central, raised seat in the stands with the Lords and Ladies. There were no monitoring charms today; the viewers were all assembled as though to watch Quidditch, high above the ground level of the old Pitch. Most of them were holding magnifying glasses to their faces, and though he couldn’t make them out now, when Harry had looked up earlier, when they’d first walked out of the old locker rooms and the light was better, he saw the waning sunlight refracted off dozens of the Charmed lenses.

Trying not to think about all those eyes, Harry entered the maze, the yew wand tightly in hand.
It was dark and silent, without immediate hazards. He saw the distinctive marks of the others’ passage, footprints edged in a pale gold, and pale blue mist, respectively, from the third-year Charm for leaving a trail. Harry cast his own, and added a set of pale red to those he was already crossing. But at the first intersection in the hedge, the signs that Hermione and Elspeth had preceded him disappeared.

Harry spent a moment frowning over his shoulder, then he turned the corner, choosing left at random, and watched his trail. It followed him.

He didn’t have time to worry about it, probably, so he kept walking, wand ready. There was a faint, foul odor that was growing stronger with each step, and no noise except a stirring in the leaves of the hedges, as though there was a faint breeze, though Harry felt nothing on his skin. He knew there would be something terrible here, if the last Tasks were any indication, and this one was meant to be the most challenging yet.

By the time he reached the next blind turn in the maze, he was sure that he would see the first obstacle on the other side. He held his breath, keeping the hedge close on his left shoulder, and swung through the corner with his wand leveled, his eyes rapidly scanning the next leg of the maze. But there was still nothing except the cloying odor, which was so strong now his eyes were watering.

Then he noticed on the ground, a wide, viscous puddle, deep enough to be reflecting a bit of moonlight. As he slowly bent over it, it was obviously the source of the smell, and he almost expected something to leap from it and attack. But it wasn’t doing anything suspicious. Harry assumed that it was the remnants of something which had attacked Hermione or Elspeth, gave it a wide berth as he passed, and moved on.

He began to be sure he was traveling in circles, yet he hadn’t crossed his tracing spell. At the same time, he wondered if there was something in the maze repelling that sort of magic, which would explain why Hermione and Elspeth’s trails had disappeared. He reached a dead end, doubled back, and found that indeed his red footprints faded and then disappeared after a certain distance.

It made sense. It couldn’t be that easy, or why bother with a maze?

If he leaned near, he thought he might be able to feel the vines breathing; they certainly seemed to be watching...or was that sense of being closely observed coming from the audience so far above him in the pitch darkness of early night he couldn’t make it out?

The smell was coming back as he neared the place in his retracing where he’d seen those foul, liquid remains—but the puddle wasn’t where Harry expected it to be. He paused at that corner, fingered his wand, and stepped around swiftly. After so many moments expecting to see something around each curve, it was almost more of a shock to find something, at last.

But for some reason he hadn’t considered an Inferi.

It was a hulking, startlingly naked, wet body coming toward him. It had a somewhat limping gait, and when Harry looked down he saw that its ankles were bound with some sort of seamless metallic shackles, hobbling its ankles ten inches apart. Its face was a vision of carnage: where its jaw and mandible should be there was a gaping hole, dark with rot, and above it the eyes seemed quite intent and alive.

The eyes unnerved Harry most of all. He hadn’t spent a lot of time around dead things, but never before had something dead looked at him, as though there were vague thoughts moving in a brain that should be totally vacant. The sight made him freeze for a long moment, before he shook
himself and raised his wand.

“Incendio!” Harry cried, more vehemently than necessary, and a jet of fire burst from the yew wand but glanced harmlessly off of the Inferi’s chest and fell to the ground where it flickered and began immediately to die out.

The creature paused, and looked down at itself. Harry’s heart was pounding. Fire was famously the only thing that worked on an Inferi, and the conjured flame had no effect. But then, something was happening; with a wet, wrenching noise, the creature seemed to split, its head and chest stretching apart, elongating, and then separating with a loud, dull booming noise. It was the noise, Harry realized, which he had overheard before he’d entered the maze. Then there were two Inferi, identical, naked, mouths carved away, and shackles gleaming dully in the dying magical fire.

“Incercous,” Harry cast at the original. The ropes flung from his wand didn’t seem to know how to connect. He hadn’t expected it to work, but his heart still pounded with panic when the only inhibiting effect was a momentary one: the Inferi paused, stretched through its center again, and with another dull explosive noise it divided in two once again. Now three Inferi were stumbling toward Harry, eager despite their shackles, and he could only turn and run in the opposite direction.

Would any magic make its target double in this maze? If so, his only hope was to outrun them, and also to avoid being cornered in a dead end...the thought made him nauseous. He wasn’t sure how dangerous they were, defanged, but the idea of even brushing up against the clammy, decaying flesh turned his stomach.

Harry skidded around a corner and regretted lamenting the empty and monotonous maze he’d been wandering. Before him now was a field of sharp spikes spanning the width of the maze and set too close to one another for him to simply weave around them. He hesitated, but hearing the shuffling Inferi about to catch him up while he waited, he couldn’t bring himself to linger. He cast Repelio and bounded off the suddenly springy ground with enough force to leap neatly over the spikes.

Immediately, an Inferi shuffled around the bend of the maze ahead of Harry, just as the three he’d already met came in from behind.

Like the others, this one was naked, soaking wet, and shackled. She had been female in life, though, and instead of cut away, her mouth was crudely sewn shut.

She was also, somehow, familiar.

Harry couldn’t place her, but at the same time he knew they’d met. When she was alive, of course. Even with her grey pallor and mutilated face, there was no mistaking it. It made Harry hesitate.

Now was certainly not the time to get squeamish about using violence, particularly as his target was technically quite dead already. Harry held back the urge to use his wand, and instead aimed his shoulder at this more petite Inferi’s sternum, dug in his heels and sprinted the few strides between them.

The impact sent a wave of jarring pain through Harry’s bones, and released a putrid odor from the Inferi, as her hide split where Harry had struck. The Inferi stumbled backward and Harry kept running, trying not to gag, eyes stinging from the fumes off-gassing from the body. The next turn was an intersection; Harry, who had done so every time, began to turn left, but the hedge silently and swiftly rearranged itself so that right was his only option.

Blinking, Harry slowed; a quick glance over his shoulder showed the four Inferi making their slow way after him, but he had enough breathing room to pause a moment and acknowledge that the
maze trying to steer him was probably not a good sign. He wasn’t left with any real alternatives, though, so he went where he was herded. Meanwhile, he thought furiously through the reasons why the Inferi were impervious to the fire spell. It wasn’t anything they wore—obviously, because they wore nothing—but…

There was another stretch of spikes, this one significantly wider than the last. Harry reached out and tried to dig his fingers into the hedge, thinking he might be able to cling to it and climb laterally along the wall to get past the spike field, but the twigs and branches slithered away from his grasping hands as though repelled.

The Inferi were almost there, so again Harry abandoned the effort to think up a non-magical solution. He conjured a bridge and raced over it, then Vanished it the moment he was across.

Of course, that meant two more Inferi rounded the curve in the maze ahead of him, but the ones on his trail were hampered by the spikes. The first to reach it stepped unflinching onto one that penetrated the arch of its foot and came through on the dorsal side, but it didn’t seem to notice until it had impaled its second foot in the next step and couldn’t move forward freely. Harry watched a half-moment, horrified, as it wrenched its mangled foot loose and kept coming—but at least they were slowed down.

He turned to face the two newcomers, one a bit ahead of the other, tall and lean and probably male in life, and a shorter plumper creature that seemed to have been chewed up one side, its flesh hanging in strips like bits of rag. These two had hanging-open jaws like ghouls, but the dark emptiness inside showed bare gums; all their teeth had been pulled out.

Skin crawling, Harry assessed them. He knew he couldn’t pull the charge he had previously; between the two of them, and with their arms slightly extended, there was no path between them. They were bigger than the one Harry had managed to simply overpower.

At least they seemed to be stunned, somewhat, when they were doubling, so…

Harry cast two blasting curses, which flung them out of his way, and while they squelched and bloomed into four instead of two, he raced between their convulsing bodies and into the black emptiness of the maze ahead.

They wore no clothing which could be Charmed to protect them from fire.

But they were all wet, or at least appeared to be. Some substance covered them, making them flame-proof? Harry remembered the odious slime that he’d seen in the earliest part of the maze, before encountering an Inferi. Had Elspeth or Hermione figured out a way to remove the covering and kill the Inferi? If so, he hoped they were nearing the Goblet and this would all end soon. He wanted to win—he’d told Tom he would—but more than that, now, he just wanted the Task to be over.

The maze formed a T ahead, and Harry could hear the rhythm of running feet. He froze. Were there more than Inferi in the maze? He could hear the four following him coming, and when he looked, sure enough, they were only a dozen feet away, and also closing in were the original three, dragging their shredded feet. Their staring eyes seeming to glow white in the darkness, and again, it was somehow the eyes that bothered Harry most of all...

While Harry was again, inconveniently, frozen, the runner appeared around the corner and he exhaled hard in relief. It was Elspeth.

She took in the Inferi behind him, barely breaking stride, but she held out a desperate hand. “Harry,
come on! There’s...there’s a lot of them behind me!”

Harry sprinted forward, took her hand, and started to look back the way she’d come.

“Don’t,” Elspeth snapped, panting, and dragged him after her. “You don’t want to know.”

Of course, Harry couldn’t help it then. He looked.

The maze was packed with Inferi. They were coming at the same even pace that the ones chasing him had adopted, their shackles clinking, but there were so many they were shoving one another up against the hedgerows, straining against one another to be in the lead.

“What...did you do?” he managed, starting to breathe heavily, too.

“A lot of magic,” Elspeth said grimly. “Have you seen Hermione?”

“No,” Harry said. They were coming to another turn in the maze, and as they did, Harry broke stride slightly while Elspeth ran on. His hand slipped loose from hers before she turned back.

“It’ll be more spikes,” she said grimly, then stopped in the intersection and nodded back at him. “Yep. More. A lot more.”

Harry jogged to her side and gaped. There was a long stretch of maze which culminated at what had to be the center. There, on a pedestal under a faintly glowing light stood a familiar wooden goblet.

“We’re almost there,” Elspeth breathed. She looked at Harry with the same fearless determination he’d seen when they were playing pick-up Quidditch. In that context, Harry had teased her for being disproportionately serious, but in this moment, Harry was awestruck by her fearlessness.

“Only one of us needs to get over there.” She jerked her head to indicate the Goblet. “They said that when someone takes the Goblet, the ‘hazards’ in here will go away. That must be the Inferi.”

Harry’s skin prickled, but they didn’t have much time to spare. “I’ll levitate you across,” he said, and Elspeth immediately made a face.

“Obviously, you have to win,” she said. “Everyone will just make the wrong kind of a fuss if I do. And neither of us can levitate the other. To sustain the spell, we’d have to focus, and we couldn’t hold back the Inferi or defend ourselves. I have a better idea.”

She turned around, pointed her wand at one of the advancing Inferi, and Accio’d it. The body hurled toward them—one of the ones that had its face half cut out—and then his little sister reached out with a Seeker’s reflexes to grasp the monster’s arm. Leveraging the momentum from the spell, she swung it in a semicircle and released it at the precise moment so it soared six feet into the field of spikes. The Inferi landed with a horrible wet noise, face-first and pinned by the spikes piercing its front in several dozen places.

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

“What are you waiting for?” Elspeth demanded, pointing her wand at the hoard again. “Jump!”

Harry hesitated for a half-moment, and then he jumped.

Landing on a body and not falling backward, forward or sideways into a field of wickedly sharp spikes was easier in theory than in practice, but after a moment of windmilling his arms, Harry found his footing on the Inferi’s wriggling back. As soon as he did, another Inferi sailed past him
and landed to his left and ahead of him, like a very disgusting and horrific stepping stone. Except
this one was face-up, and though one of its arms had snapped back and was lodged in four or five
spikes, the other was free and waving in the air.

Harry hesitated, but he could feel the body he stood beginning to morph into two, and he couldn’t
count on the clone being pinned like the original. He couldn’t stay, so he jumped again, thanking
Merlin for his father’s natural athleticism, and landed on the second Inferi, which was fortunately
near enough the hedge barrier that he could half-fall against it when the Inferi grasped his calf with
its free hand. It sunk its ragged fingernails into his trousers with such strength, it popped the fabric
beneath its index finger and scraped Harry’s skin.

Something about its touch, and its staring eyes, paralyzed Harry for a moment, until he felt its nail
burrow so deeply into his skin that blood ran down to his ankle. Then he lifted the leg that wasn’t
caught and stomped on the Inferi’s shoulder, which weakened its grip. He stomped again on its
elbow, which pinned the arm, and he was free.

“Harry! Go!” cried Elspeth from behind him, and when he chanced a glance he saw that she was
flinging Inferi as fast as she could, but she couldn’t get them any further than the one he was
standing on now. From the body of the first one he’d jumped onto, the double had clawed loose.
But in advancing toward Harry, it had landed on its knees and seemed fairly stuck. Another two
had landed in the spike field one atop the other, and the second was fairly mobile. As Harry
watched, a newly thrown Inferi landed on its feet, uncomfortably close. And of course the one on
which he stood was in the process of splitting now. Its writhing would have bucked him off if he
hadn’t had the hedge wall to steady himself upon.

He could either conjure another bridge or red sparks. If he did the latter, he wasn’t sure a rescuer
would arrive in time. The Inferi were bearing down on Elspeth, doubling so rapidly they were
beginning to pile up on one another in the bottleneck of the narrow maze.

Harry conjured another bridge, stepping onto it just as the brand new, carved-open face of a new
Inferi burst out between his feet and nuzzled his bleeding leg, as though desperate to bite.

When he was halfway across the bridge, he saw Hermione enter the center of the maze. She stood
near the Goblet, and Harry could have collapsed in relief. He heard Elspeth still incanting, so she
must be all right for now.

But Hermione was not reaching for the Goblet. She was turning in place, looking down each
corridor of the maze, until she turned about and saw Harry.

“Take it!” Harry shouted as loud as he could. “What are you waiting for?”

Looking past him, Hermione seemed to see and hear Elspeth: her eyes widened and her lips parted
in dismay. She shot out a hand as though to take the Goblet, but in the last moment Harry saw that
she was Levitating it toward him instead.

Harry was terribly confused, but at this point he didn’t care to examine Hermione Granger’s
motives. He ran toward the Goblet as it floated closer. Behind it, slightly out of focus, was
Hermione’s faraway face. Strangely, as Harry reached out wound his fingers around the handle, he
thought he heard Hermione say, “I’m sorry.”

Though in all the chaos, he couldn’t be sure.

Harry hadn’t been expecting the Portkey that hooked him by the navel and jerked him away, but he
wasn’t exactly surprised by the theatrics, either. What did disorient him was to arrive on a
threadbare rug in an unfamiliar room, the only light feeble and emanating from a small fireplace to his left. An old man peered down at Harry. He had a long, white beard, light blue eyes, and wore half-moon spectacles. He had a remarkably familiar face, though Harry couldn’t place him, an odd recurrence of the moment he’d seen the Inferi.

The man held up his hand and, like Tempus, but with letters instead of numbers, a message appeared in the air between them.

*Hello, Harry. It's nice to truly meet you, at last.*

Chapter End Notes

This was a crazy, anxious chapter for me to write — incredibly anxious to hear your thoughts...
Singular

Chapter Summary

In which Harry acquires an open mind.

Chapter Notes

Here is the chapter summary from Chapter 20, in case you need a refresher! All the chapter summaries are in the next work in this series. <3 I can't thank Wolf_of_Lilacs enough for their ongoing tireless beta reading efforts, even as these chapters seem to get longer and longer!

Chapter 20
Conversion

We see the end of the second Task from Elspeth's perspective, and learn that she and Hermione have been getting to know one another better. When Harry returns safely, there is a big celebration in Gryffindor Tower, and Harry and Elspeth have a moment to unburden to one another a bit. Elspeth, particularly, would like to be introduced to Magnificent, and Harry would like to know more about what he's observed between Elspeth and Hermione.

After the party, Lavender comes to Elspeth and tells her that she should watch herself around Hermione. She implies that she and Hermione had a secret relationship at Hermione's behest, and that it didn't end well for Lavender.

Lord Knott communes with the Goblet. He knows that his lord has a maze in mind, and the Goblet fills in the blanks and selects Inferi as the hazard inside said maze. It also tells him that Harry did qualify for the final Task by touching the barrier, though he didn't pass through it with the other champions without assistance.

Harry and Tom meet on the astronomy tower. Tom tells Harry that he will be competing in the third Task and he'd like for him to win, and also to stay alive. Harry is confused and pleased at this offhand show of concern, and promises he'll win.

Lavender and Harry begin a sexual relationship.

Hermione and Peter meet, and Peter urges Hermione to remember their plans and carry them out no matter what. She says she will.

The Task is a challenge for the Potters, who barely make it to the center of the maze where the Goblet waits. Elspeth sends Harry ahead, assuring him that the politics will be simpler if he wins, and holds off the Inferi. Harry sees Hermione reach the Goblet first. Seeing that Elspeth is in trouble, she rushes to Levitate the Goblet to Harry, and at the last moment he thinks he sees her say she's sorry. Then Harry grabs the Goblet, confused by Hermione bowing out but determined to end the Task and avert the Inferi.

The Goblet is a Portkey, and takes Harry not to the finish line, but to a dark room
where Albus Dumbledore is waiting for him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Chapter Twenty-One: Singular**

“It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.”

Joseph Campbell

*One day Harry will stand in the sun, unsteadily stepping out of the boat and into the shallow water of the beach, laughing in surprise at its warmth.*

*Tom will move forward without thinking. He’ll have his arm around Harry’s waist before he realizes he decided to move. He’ll put his hand on the back of Harry’s head and kiss him, tripping together with him in the surf.*

*Sunlight; the rush of the warm seawater on his calves; the curve of Harry’s smile under his. This will be the memory Tom keeps close as a talisman when Harry leaves.*

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**Hogwarts**

When he realized Harry was gone, Tom Apparated to Wales.

The House was as he’d left it. But then, he had been there just a week before. He checked the time. Twenty minutes, he’d told Bellatrix and Lucius. Now there were fifteen minutes left before they’d be waiting for him.

He walked through the quiet room, not bothering to Vanish the unnatural amount of dust on everything. No matter how often he cast the spells, it seemed to reappear within a few hours, coating even the objects and décor the House had just conjured—today, a massive vase in the shape of a snake, bottle-green glass almost as bright as Harry’s eyes—as well as what had been there since Tom’s first visit so many years before, like the upright desk, the wood veneer black and gleaming with age, the carved handles of its drawers worn smooth by centuries of use.

He opened the trap door and started down the ladder at once.

He should have foreseen this particular insecurity. In hindsight, perhaps what had happened at the Slytherin estate had Harry as its target more so than Tom. They believed that Harry was some source of weakness for Tom.

They weren’t wrong. It wasn’t that he thought the boy irreplaceable—for, surely, given time enough, one who complimented him so well would arise again—but he was rare. And Tom, though able to wait when given no alternative, had never been truly patient. He wanted Harry back.

In the darkness at the bottom of the ladder, he heard running water, smelled damp stone. He shucked off his robes, folding them in quick movements, and set his boots beside them. He felt a clock was ticking in his head at an accelerated pace already, but when he cast *Tempus* again, it showed only two minutes had gone since his last check.

He walked through the darkness down the slippery stone slope. The water went from
his feet to ankle-deep, then rose to his knees, then his hips, and then he dove forward and swam.

The pool was cylindrical, with a high southern wall of unnatural smoothness. He dove down to the root of that wall, and through the channel where a rush of current carried him eagerly, so he barely had to move his limbs. That was fortunate, since the upside-down, inside-out sensation of emerging on the other side, when north was south and up was down, always disoriented him too much for effective swimming.

But it passed. Tom surged to the surface, guided by the shock of sunlight.

The cave rose around him as he waded out the way he’d come, though here there was no house to block the light, and the clothes folded by the ladder were a shirt and trousers, not robes. He laced the low boots up to his ankles and grasped the rungs of the ladder, climbing again toward the sun.

Fortunately, the boat was still docked where he’d left it. It wouldn’t have been the first time it was torn loose in a storm or borrowed and unreturned by some other island visitor, and he could either swim to shore, which was perilous, or risk Apparating. Apparating was even worse—the last time he’d splinched off half a leg and his left ear. Healing magic did function properly for him even before he’d settled in, fortunately.

Anyway, it was more pleasant to use the boat, if time-consuming. But of course, here there was never any need to rush.

He unwound the mooring rope and stepped into the craft, then conjured a current with the wordless magic that functioned best in this realm. The boat slipped into the water at once, rushing away from the island over the placid surface of the little sea that separated it from the foggy shore of the more vast landmass which was his object.

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**The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix**

Location unknown

Harry sat up. “Dumbledore,” he said quietly.

Looking around a second time, he still discerned nothing familiar about the room or anything in it, save his companion. Where was the Headmaster’s office, where he and Dumbledore had spent all their previous, countless rendezvous?

He thought about what Dumbledore had written in the air with his magic: *nice to truly meet you...*

“What do you…” Harry began, looking sharply at the old man, then froze. Slowly, Harry rolled onto his knees then lifted himself off the floor. It seemed better to face this realization on his feet. “I’m...not asleep.”

Dumbledore smiled kindly, raised his wand, and wrote *No. I hope you'll forgive us, but we've borrowed you, Harry.*

Harry felt cold all over. He’d wondered through years of dreams whether he could trust Dumbledore, or whether the wizard wanted to weaponize him to some perverse end, or whether it was a ploy to draw Harry somewhere he’d be vulnerable to a swift elimination.

But if Harry's abduction really was sinister, why now? Surely Dumbledore had those chances before. Surely?
“Why am I here?” But then, wasn’t it obvious? “He doesn’t even like me that much. Tom—our—our lord, that is.”

Harry’s head hurt. In fact, he had the strong sense of a gear lodged somewhere, of grinding, or pieces meant to fit together but which had warped and shifted unrecognizably.

Dumbledore touched his shoulder, and though he flinched, Harry felt too wretched to pull away. So the old wizard settled both his hands on Harry’s shoulders with a light but steady grip.

It was the only comfort he could offer, Harry realized, since he could not speak and Harry could not open his eyes to read his written words. And it was comforting, if intensely awkward.

After several long moments of his brain wrestling with itself, it was over. Harry felt like he was thinking clearly for the first time in Dumbledore’s presence. He lifted his head, and Dumbledore stepped back after giving Harry’s shoulders a final gentle squeeze.

*I’m very sorry, Harry, but this transition should be the last time our visits cause you this distress.*

Harry blinked at the words. “Does that mean…?”

Dumbledore continued to watch him with a grave nod.

The barrier that had stood between Harry’s dreamscape with Dumbledore and his waking life had gone, and from what Dumbledore was saying, Harry deduced that it wouldn’t be back.

“What changed?” Whenever they’d discussed letting Harry remember their time together, Dumbledore had behaved as though his hands were tied on the subject. And really, a part of Harry had been relieved. Before, he hadn’t been able to blame himself for continuing to live his waking life without disruption. Now, he was well-aware Dumbledore would expect him to do *something*, and even without knowing exactly what it was, Harry was sure that he would be torn.

*The Order of the Phoenix must make its move now. We have exhausted the last of our hiding places, and our supporters have been hunted to a perilously scarce population. Our time has nearly run out.*

Harry looked around the room again. They were somewhere which was not the finish line of the tournament, and this wasn’t a dream. Harry was truly gone, snatched by the Portkey in the maze. His parents would be *terrified* and Tom—Voldemort—

Harry’s hand flew to the side of his head as though he could touch the invisible anchor point where he should feel the bond, and his lord’s furious energy demanding admission. But there was nothing; Harry was perfectly alone. “What did you…?”

Dumbledore looked faintly apologetic. Then his moustache twitched in a sad smile when he added, *Can you really blame us?*

Harry couldn’t, of course, but his immediate distress over the definitive separation from Tom alarmed him. Voldemort. He rubbed his forehead in dismay. He’d thought he had been able to put his feelings for Tom in perspective, but they’d been growing stronger, and much faster than he’d realized.

Harry met Dumbledore’s solemn stare, reminding himself he was closely watched, and not free to wear his emotions on his face.

“So it isn’t that you trust me, only that you have no other resort.”
He saw Dumbledore wince, and supposed that admitting weakness to Harry would seem dangerous to Dumbledore’s Order. If Voldemort knew they were this weakened, it might inspire him to double down on his campaign against them and finally snuff the flame of resistance out entirely.

*You have just faced the Task, and this shock, but before you rest I must ask you to come with me,* Harry. Dumbledore gestured toward a door that Harry was sure hadn’t been there before, but now swung slowly open on the other side of the room. The place where it led was illuminated by its own feeble source, slightly brighter than the fire Harry had awoken alongside. He could hear voices, speaking lowly, but which abruptly fell silent as though the speakers had noticed the door opening, too.

Harry looked at Dumbledore as something occurred to him. “You do not speak.” Harry was taught, like every magical child, to associate muteness with disobedience to the vow. It shouldn’t have surprised him that Dumbledore suffered from it; after all, in their meetings he’d always called Tom “Voldemort.” He had come to expect Harry to do the same. Harry touched his own throat, alarmed, and Dumbledore nodded slowly.

*I do not advise speaking the name ‘Voldemort’ aloud any longer. In the physical world, his curse will indeed steal the voice from your throat should you do so.*

“Still?” Harry wondered, now, if he was only putting off the inevitable. For some reason, he did not want to go through the door. Maybe it was because he already doubted himself. Maybe it was because he was afraid that at his first chance he would tell Tom everything, and he really didn’t want to be responsible for all the death which would swiftly follow.

*The curse has not weakened with age. Though it is fed infrequently relative to the time of its inception. Now, there are many, like you, who are not even taught the name Voldemort, and never know the temptation. Come, if you will?* He gestured again toward the door, then walked in its direction.

As though he had a choice, Harry held his ground for a stubborn moment. Then Dumbledore lifted his wand, and without turning lit up the air between them again. His words hung there, suspended in place, while he walked through the door and out of sight.

*You may stay in this room, or you may come with me. It is up to you. Either way, no one will harm you.*

It wasn’t petulance that almost kept Harry still. It was the concern still looping through his mind that it might be better for everyone if he had nothing to tell. But after a few long moments where he could hear nothing but the fire breathing and the pops and crackles of the logs upon which it fed, Harry stirred himself and followed Dumbledore through the door.

**Hogwarts**

Lucius had beheld the last moments of the tournament from his seat beside his wife, in a tangle of their lord’s favorites that included his sister-in-law and her husband. They all knew that the winner was to appear in the cleared area at the foot of their lord’s dais—a dramatic presentation of the victor. While Lucius had heard some say dismissively that it would certainly be Harry Potter who had that dubious honor, Lucius had reserved his judgement. He had been watching the Granger witch throughout the prior tasks; if his peers were going to embarrass themselves by willfully ignoring her gifts, that was their purview. She was the best practitioner of the three, and in a fair game Lucius supposed she would win.
For a moment, staring down into the maze with the Charmed magnifying glasses that had been distributed to Lucius and all other interested spectators as they entered the stadium, Lucius thought he would be proven correct. But then the witch Levitated the Goblet to Harry, instead of taking it for herself.

Lucius reviewed the logical conclusions to this action in the second or two it took for the Goblet to reach Harry. Was it a political statement? A gesture of goodwill toward Harry and their lord? Of subservience? The crowd was not sure how to react, Lucius thought; they wanted Harry to win, but they also wanted to be able to tell themselves he’d won because he was the strongest. Not the Mudblood, whom they were sheltering and educating out of the goodness of their hearts and whose impurity should limit her talents; not the traitors’ child, whose strength could be a threat; but Harry, the gift of a bright future, all the warmth and goodness their lord lacked conveniently acquired in one ritual and confirmed by magic. Who could dispute his worthiness?

They wanted Harry; it should be Harry, but not this way.

Lucius was vaguely aware of the Potters, still watching the maze when so many others had turned their dazed attention to the place where Harry would soon appear. The Potters were at the far end of the seating section, the least honorable of this most honorable set, and when they too relaxed he knew that the Inferi had obediently turned tail when the game ended and their daughter was safe.

But Harry did not appear.

Portkeys could take some time when the distance was great or the magic was inexpert, but neither circumstance was present here. Lucius watched their lord carefully, as his expectant look cleared to one of perfect blankness, and then he snatched the magnifying eyeglasses back to his face, looked into the maze again, and swore viciously. It was the most unguarded display of emotion Lucius had seen from him since the war.

His lord rounded on him, stepping swiftly off his dias. “Lucius, find that girl. Bring her to me.”

Lucius squeezed his wife’s hand and nodded solemnly, drawing his wand to Apparate.


Lucius departed, himself, a moment later. He met his wife’s eye in the last moment and without speaking, they reached an understanding. He knew she would find Draco and stay with him at the Manor until Lucius could check in with them. Things were likely to be unpleasantly chaotic at the school until Harry was found. If Harry was ever found.

The list of likely culprits was short, and it all stank of the Order to Lucius. Only they would dare it; only they were made so brash, in the tradition of—the worst of the Gryffindors; their favorite martyr—Dumbledore.

Down in the maze a handful of people, all newly-arrived as Lucius, stepped gingerly over the slime to which the Inferi had dissolved. Lucius wrinkled his nose but otherwise permitted no outward reaction, his boots squelching as he passed Pomfrey and Snape and the Potters without so much as a glance and strode to the center of the maze where the Granger Witch had been standing.

“Point me,” he murmured, and his wand obediently spun in his grip to guide him down a stretch of maze carpeted in clean, if trodden grass. The darkness between the hedges was eerie, though Lucius knew the threat was past.
Unless the threat was the Granger witch herself.

It made sense that one of the Muggles’ children would be the Order’s asset. Black would pay a steep price for missing it, if it was true.

Lucius’s wand guided him swiftly from the maze, past a few more patches of slime but nothing that indicated where she had gone. Then there was an empty meadow, and since she wasn’t there, presumably his spell was telling him she was in the Forest beyond…

A large black dog slunk from the meadow into the Forest’s deep shadows, where it quickly disappeared.

Lucius’s thoughts were narrowing to a grim conclusion. Animagery was one of his wife’s special talents, and she’d often mentioned how the men in the Black line had a penchant for turning into canines.

The spell wouldn’t work in the Forest; it was like searching for someone with the compass-based spell inside Wizarding space: distance, direction and orientation were in constant flux. But it didn’t really matter, Lucius realized; why should he chase after them when he could go directly to their destination, and await them there?

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix

Location unknown

Five people sat at a scarred wooden table. Like the room where Harry arrived, this one was dimly lit. Harry could barely make out the walls, where a few oversized portraits dozed in their frames. Instead of firelight, a magical lantern on the center of the table was the sole source of light in the room.

The people at the table—save Dumbledore—all looked unfamiliar and exactly alike. They appeared as a tall, ordinary-looking middle-aged witch with silver hair beginning to thin at the temples and a stern frown, and light brown eyes with thick black eyelashes.

Only, they didn’t look exactly alike. They each held themselves differently. The occupant at the head of the table sat very erect and with his or her arms tightly crossed. The witch or wizard at the foot of the table was slouched with a bored expression.

And if Harry looked long enough at any one of them, he saw a different face hover over the disguise, shimmering and faintly transparent, like a ghost’s. He tried not to let his reaction show on his face when he saw a flash of red hair and blue eyes on the face to Dumbledore’s left.

“Polyjuice,” Harry guessed. Dumbledore smiled kindly at Harry in answer. The others remained solemn, but one of them, who was an unfamiliar young witch under her disguise, drew out the chair to her left in invitation.

“Thanks,” Harry murmured, and took it.

“Mr. Potter,” said the witch, “We are the leadership of the Order of the Phoenix. We have followed your life very carefully, and most closely since you first met Albus Dumbledore in the dream-walk.”

“I see,” Harry said stiffly. No one had ever called him “Mr. Potter” in his life, but it wasn’t the sort of thing he’d ever object to on principle.
“To be honest with you,” the witch continued evenly, “we did not think the time was right to truly reveal ourselves to you, but as Dumbledore has already said, we were left without a choice.”

From the head of the table, the wizard there, who had a rich ebony complexion and the bone structure of someone much broader and taller than his disguise, spoke in a deeper version of the first speaker’s voice. “There is no reason to shirk from the truth,” he said. “The Order is failing. You are literally our last resort, and we have so little to lose that we can overlook the very legitimate questions as to your loyalties.”

Harry sat up a little straighter. “The only loyalty I’ve ever been asked to bear was toward our lord,” he reminded them, and saw how they all recoiled from the way he spoke of Tom with casual deference.

“That changes today,” said the witch grimly. Every time he looked at her Harry could make out more detail. She was only a few years older than him, if that, but he had never seen her before. While he was at Hogwarts, had she been a soldier? Had she spent her childhood that way? Harry searched his heart for that level of dedication to any person or any cause, and he worried that there was only one person who could lay claim to it.

Across the table and to Dumbledore’s right was a wizened old man whose face was clearer than any of the others’, though this was the first time Harry looked directly at him. “It begins with you and I, Harry Potter,” he said, rising from his chair in the stilted way of the very elderly. Harry stood up, too, with a curious glance at Dumbledore.

_We shall see you again presently, Harry._

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**Hogwarts**

“Elspeth, love, you need to tell me everything she said,” said her father, _again_.

Elspeth looked him in the eye and said for the third time, “She didn’t say anything.”

Elspeth could sense her mother’s gaze, and flushed with the sheer effort of not meeting it. But they’d been too far away to _know_ she was lying, surely? And it wasn’t as though Hermione had said anything which could help or explain. It would only distract everyone with the wrong questions and unrelated suspicions.

“Alright,” James murmured, his hazel eyes intent on hers. He leaned in quickly to press a kiss to her forehead. The feel of it made her want to cry.

“We’ve been asked to go home,” Lily said quietly, still standing a short distance away. Still looking at Elspeth, Elspeth was sure, though she didn’t look to make sure.

“Then that’s where we’ll go,” replied James without pausing. “But we won’t be staying there long.”

Lily didn’t argue, which seemed to surprise James. But he didn’t question her; he only gripped them each by the hand as they left the maze, which was receding into the soil at a fast enough pace, it made finding the way out quite simple. When they were clear, and making their way toward the perimeter of the grounds, Elspeth grimly noted the waves of other people similarly intent on getting away from the school before their lord tore it apart.

Elspeth couldn’t ignore that her parents, though grim, didn’t have the unmasked terror on their faces as they had after the second Task. It made her wonder whether they knew something Elspeth
The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix

Location unknown

Harry followed the old wizard’s Polyjuiced body toward a closed door in the shadowed wall. When it opened, it revealed a narrow and steeply-sloping wooden staircase. When the wizard stepped back and motioned for Harry to go first, he braced himself and walked through.

There was a faintly musty smell there, and the walls were bare except for bits of peeling wallpaper, as though it had lost its adhesion in damp conditions. Harry climbed the stairs toward another dark landing while the hair rose on his arms in sudden certainty.

“We’re underground, aren’t we?” The thought made his heart pound with instant claustrophobia.

From behind him on the staircase, the wizard’s voice floated up, sounding like a woman’s but with the diction and faintly old-fashioned accent of someone much older than whomever had donated their hair to the cauldron of Polyjuice.

“Yes, and quite deep below. Like saltwater, magma has a diffusive effect on magic. It’s difficult down here to maintain so much as a *Lumos*, but counterbalancing the inconvenience is the relative safety. Detection spells and the sort do not function properly here.”

“It looks like a house,” Harry murmured, reaching the top of the stairs and waiting for his companion to join him and open the closed door that awaited them there.

“It is.”

Harry huffed a sigh. “I mean, it’s strange that it looks just like an ordinary house, but it was built...here. Wherever we are. Underground, I mean.”

“Oh, it wasn’t *built* here. It was *moved*.”

That, of course, made *less* sense, but Harry supposed there were more important matters to be concerned with. The man opened the door and Harry tried not to look directly at him as he brushed past; the contrast of the body he wore and the one that wanted him back was too confusing up close.

The wizard looked knowingly at Harry out of the corner of his eye. “I see that you *see* me, Harry Potter. Dumbledore and the others insisted on disguises, but there is no reason for me to conceal myself from you. I am an Ollivander, and I am here to help you find your wand—or rather, to help your wand find you. Come.”

“Ollivander,” Harry murmured, following Ollivander through. “I know that name. You made my parents’ wands.” They had stepped through the door into a single, large room crowded with floor-to-ceiling shelving filled with long wooden boxes, some of them protruding alarmingly. The entire place gave the impression of teetering, as though a gust of wind would bury Harry and Ollivander beneath a mountain of wands and their dusty containers.

Because they *were* wands, undoubtedly. Harry felt the yew wand tremble in its holster, as though it perceived a threat.

“I already have a wand,” Harry said, drawing the yew wand to demonstrate. Ollivander was
crossing from the door to a space in the midst of all the shelving where a small table stood. It was the only clear surface in sight.

Ollivander looked at him askance. “Yes, the yew wand of Cadmus Peverell, then carried by his brother Ignotus, from time to time, after Cadmus’ death. Then held by the Dark Lord, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. But in truth it is only Cadmus’ wand, and will always be.”

The yew wand filled Harry’s head with a dozen creative curses, and he rubbed his thumb hard against the hilt as a small outlet for the urge to yield and make the wand movements it imagined.

Ollivander watched calmly. “You see how it fights your natural inclinations?” He looked grimly amused. “The ‘tradition’ of heirloom wands prevents each witch or wizard from seeing himself or herself, and the world, with objectivity.”

Harry holstered the yew wand. “I don’t know what kind of a wizard I’d be with a different wand.” The thought of leaving the yew wand behind, of losing it somehow, made Harry feel ill. He shuddered. “I...wouldn’t like to know.”

“I once heard the loss of a wand compared to the loss of a limb, and see the truth in it. A union with a new wand is painful, and never quite like the previous connection, but not because it is inherently worse or better. Only fundamentally different. Each wand brings out certain things in its wielder.” He looked at the sleeve where Harry’s wand was now concealed. “Some people resist that influence better than others.”

Harry shrugged, not sure what to say. He recognized at least a grain of truth in what Ollivander was saying, but it was his wand they were speaking of. The idea of replacing it—when Harry was almost sure he never would have accomplished a single magical feat without it, and it had certainly saved his life at least twice—seemed absurd.

“All I ask is that you meet the wand which speaks to you, and has known no other master. If you do, and you are unfazed, then no one here will force you to take the object from this room. You have my word.”

“Allright, then,” Harry said slowly, stepping away from the table and toward the shelves. He tried to estimate how many wands were lying in wait all around them, but could hardly fathom it. “You made all of these?”

Ollivander laughed. “Merlin, no, I didn’t make them all myself. Some of them, yes, but just as many were crafted by my cousins, or my father, or my cousins’ fathers and grandfathers. Ollivanders make wands, you see. As varied and as fine as possible, with no expectation a wand we create should necessarily find its match during our lifetimes.” He looked wistful. “Particularly when, as things are, no one has legally purchased a wand from me since the war.”

Harry nodded, leaning in to study the end of one box. It was inscribed with several symbols that meant nothing to Harry, except that one of them was a tiny hieroglyph of a dragon.

“Apple, 10 inches, Dragon heartstring core,” said Ollivander. “The labeling system predates written English, you see.”

That thought was too mind-boggling for him to dwell upon, so Harry just nodded and moved along.

“When I spent my days pairing young witches and wizards with wands, I would hand them one to try, to get a sense of their magic and energy. But your magic is known to me, and your current
wand, also known to me, chose you also. Therefore, I may make an educated guess.”

He reached for a teetering ladder, and ascended it halfway at the center of the shelf that Harry had happened to wander toward. Ollivander drew out a box which resembled all the others, but held it so Harry couldn’t catch a glimpse of the label.

He went to the table and Harry followed, feeling his heart beating hard despite his decision that this was all a waste of time. There was nothing wrong with Harry’s wand.

Or was there? The yew wand had first belonged to Cadmus, and as Ollivander seemed to know—though how?—it had also been carried by Tom. What was the significance of that? Was the wand the reason their magic had been sufficiently compatible for Maxine Proxime, or was it their compatibility which had drawn Harry to the wand?

He remembered that moment, how the wand had seemed to reach for Harry, before he reached for it…

Ollivander cleared his throat. He had opened the box and set it aside. The wand lay on the bare wood table, a bright, raw color, which reminded Harry of the second wand that had drawn his eye the day he’d chosen the yew.

“Is it birch?” he asked.

“No,” Ollivander murmured, his eyes gleaming. “Holly. Give it a wave.”

Harry hesitated another moment, then picked up the wand with his fingertips. Its weight was indetectable; picking it up felt like lifting a quill. It rolled into his palm with a familiarity that felt friendly instead of presumptuous.

“Holly?” Harry held very still, the wand unmoving, and studied it from pommel to tip.

“A material long prized for its magical significance, but less common in wands than you would think. It takes a wizard or witch of pure spirit, they say. A wave, Harry.”

Harry let the wand fall back to his fingertips and met Ollivander’s intent stare. “It’s too late for this, I think. I am who I am.”


Harry pursed his lips, still filled with reluctance—fear—which he couldn’t explain. And then, Harry felt the wand connect to something in the pit of his stomach, and his fear was gone.

He twisted his wrist and the wand made a short, swift arc, and gold sparks spread several feet all around as fine and glittering as a mist in sunlight.

Ollivander was grinning.

“There you are, then. You have your wand.”

Harry felt like the wand had fused to his hand. He couldn’t imagine putting it down. But a sudden suspicion stole over him and he looked quickly at Ollivander.

“You did something to it?” He could have swore—the wand could be cursed for all he knew, and probably was. What else could explain how Harry felt connected to it at once?

But then, he’d felt similarly at eight when he’d been introduced to the yew wand.
Ollivander said nothing, only waited for Harry to work through his thoughts with a keen stare.

“Thank you,” Harry said eventually.

“You’re quite welcome. There’s someone else who would like to speak to you, now that we’re finished here.” He gestured back the way they’d come. From here the door was oversized with a large glass pane. In fact, looking around, the whole space was commercial in character: there was even an ornate, gilded cash box in one corner.

“Are we still in the house?” Harry asked quizzically. *The house that was somehow buried underground and in close proximity to magma*, Harry’s subconscious added unhelpfully.

“We were never *only* in a house, Mr. Potter,” said Ollivander cryptically. “We are in an amalgamation of places which once belonged to order members and relocated for security purposes. For example, this space long sat in a prominent spot on Diagon Alley, where my ancestors sold wands for two thousand years.”

Ollivander looked, if not precisely wistful, at least solemn, as he stared around at the walls. Then he looked back at Harry and smiled, no more than a brief, subtle curve in the narrow line of his mouth.

“I had best return you to the committee,” he said, and stepped past Harry to open the door to the staircase.

After a moment, Harry followed, still holding the holly wand. He didn’t know what to do except carry it in his hand, because of course the holster he wore was already occupied.

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**Hogwarts**

Draco was still sitting in his seat in the stands after most of their friends had cleared out. Pansy alone remained, hovering nervously nearby. When Draco’s mother arrived she was easily shooed away.

Draco turned listlessly toward his mother, and Narcissa took a long look into his eyes before she said, soft but firm, “We’re going home, Draco.”

“Did Harry win?” His voice sounded small and cold, but that didn’t explain why his mother’s eyes narrowed with concern or why she put her hand against his cheek in public.

“Harry is missing, and we’re going home to wait for your father.”

Draco blinked. “Missing?” He felt slightly more alive. The numbness he’d felt since he saw the first Inferi cleared and his heart pounded hard. “What do you mean, missing?”

“I don’t know very much, but we can talk about it at home. Come.”

Draco allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, staring back down at the maze as it began to sink into the spoiled turf of the old Pitch. “Missing?” he repeated stupidly, and then his mother pressed him against her side and turned them both to the left.

In the Manor, Draco pulled away from her uneasily and rubbed his arms.

“The Goblet had been spelled as a Portkey. It was meant to bring the winner to our lord’s dais. But it must have been tampered with, and at the moment, we do not know where Harry is.” Her voice
was a bit unsteady.

Draco blinked. Harry, missing. It was a confused accelerant to his already riotous emotions. But he couldn’t quite bring himself to focus on what danger Harry, the closest person he had to a brother, might be in. All he could think of were his subjects when he’d last seen them over the Christmas holidays, when he’d proudly imbued the foundations of their cottages with a Potion that would keep the interiors comfortably warm all winter without the aid of a fire.

The Apparation chamber had always made him feel claustrophobic. Draco headed for the doorway with his shoulders hunched.

“Draco,” his mother called sharply. “You aren’t the only one who is concerned. Don’t act like a child.”

Dumbfounded, he stopped and turned to her abruptly. “I know you’re worried about Harry—as much as you’re able to worry about someone other than yourself, and father, and me. But that’s not...” Draco’s vision blurred, and for a moment he was seeing it all happening again: their distorted faces, their staring eyes, their clawing hands. “Are you pretending you don’t know?”

Narcissa’s worry was giving way to irritation, which didn’t surprise Draco. He couldn’t recall ever speaking to her so disrespectfully. He was full of spite and ire, and he was sure they would sustain him forever after this betrayal, that every warm feeling in his heart must be gone forever. He wanted to hurt her, with the most poisonous things he could think to say. But he was still far too flustered for creative insults or scathing remarks.

“The Inferi,” he snapped. “I suppose you didn’t even recognize them. You never go out to the settlements with father.”

Her perplexed expression finally cleared. “Oh, them?” She actually laughed, as though relieved. As though he was a child throwing a fit over broken toys. “Darling, I thought you’d be relieved. You were so distressed over the whole assignment.”

“Assignment?” Draco roared, perversely pleased when his mother flinched and her smile disappeared. “They were my subjects! How could you?”

“Calm down,” Narcissa said quietly. “I had nothing to do with it, but had I, I would have supported your father. If our lord asked for some spare Muggles, what do you think would have happened if we refused?”

Draco stared at her. “They are—” his voice cracked, and he went on in a ragged murmur. “They were my responsibility. They trusted me. They...” He blinked against the threat of tears; he had little hope of making an impact on his mother at all, but it would vanish altogether if he behaved like a child. Still, he couldn’t find any words. All he could see was the watchful look in his subjects’ eyes which he’d tried so hard to banish. He had been so determined to prove to them that they were fortunate to be in his care, and in the end their suspicions were proven correct in the worst way.

“I’m going to the pastures,” he said, and Narcissa didn’t protest when he turned and stalked off.

He felt hot, so he struggled loose from his outer robes, barely hearing the pop that announced Dobby’s arrival. The elf snatched up Draco’s discarded clothing, then trotted after him through the halls.

“Is the young master being alright?”
“I’m fine, Dobby, but please leave me be.”

He jogged out into the garden, then ran faster toward the distant forest and meadow where they kept Magnificent. The further he got from the manor, and the nearer he got to the dragon, the more the fury and the disgust brewed into a dizzying energy. So far he had only half-seriously ridden Magnificent on her short tether, low enough he was unlikely to die if he fell and hit the ground, but he’d dreamed of setting her free to soar as high as she wanted to go with him clinging tightly to the ridged spines at the base of her neck.

What better way to get far away, quickly and untraceably? He would go, Draco thought, and whatever place he found to be, he never wanted to come back.

Magnificent had heard him coming, as she tended to. She was outside her shelter and stretching when Draco appeared. She always seemed to glow faintly at night, and though Draco knew it was just the pearly color of her hide, it also made him think of her magic shining through from within her. The tether was barely visible in the dark like this, its light so faint it was invisible in any other light. It had never seemed uglier to Draco.

“Hello, girl,” he murmured. It had been years since he’d bothered with the flame-repelling spells or any protective magic around her. He might not be able to speak to her, as Harry could, but he trusted her anyway. His father would have scoffed. The thought made Draco’s resolve redouble. He had never been brave, but he felt far outside his own limitations right now, as though he could do anything, even ride a dragon out into the open sky.

“I’m going to take your tether off, do you understand?”

Her eyes watched him closely. She probably didn’t, he knew. Harry had said she understood intentions, but not words. So Draco thought very clearly about what he intended, and reached out and broke the magical clasp on her tether with the side of his wand.

Her eyes widened, and she stretched her wings as though a weight had been lifted from more places than her neck. Then she stretched up to her full height, towering over Draco, and breathed a short jet of fire that dried the air all around them both and left them hot.

“I want to go with you,” he said, his voice small but his intentions, still, as clear as he could make them. “I want to get away from here.”

Magnificent tilted her head back down to Draco, and he reached out boldly and pressed his hand against her haunch, which was all that he could reach. He didn’t think of her as so large; in some ways, in his mind’s eye, she was always the size she’d been the day they’d met, looking forlornly through the golden bars of her cage.

“May I?” he managed, knowing now his voice was too soft for her to hear, but also aware it didn’t matter. He could almost feel her in his mind, searching for the meaning that was lost in the spoken word. After a long moment, she crouched low to the ground and folded back her right wing.

Draco didn’t hesitate. He scrambled up onto the place where her neck met her shoulders. It wasn’t difficult; the position of her foreleg seemed designed to assist him, and when he found his place astride, the angle of the dull spines that formed a ridged armor over her chest and shoulders also created the perfect space to brace his knees for security.

It was a lucky thing, because when she straightened and lumbered forward in a sprint, Draco was nearly unseated. He grasped for the hard scales over the crest of her neck and his hands found firm hold there; he ducked his head, thinking too late he should have tied back his hair when the long
strands whipped into his face. She ran like an erumpet, lumbering, and he thought if he fell she’d step on him by accident and kill him at once…

But then she spread her wings, and with one enormous flap they lurched into the air, and everything became easier.

The force of each wingstroke was powerful, launching her body forward and up and Draco with her, but the rhythm was also slow, and gravity was in his favor, so it became instantly natural to surrender to the massive, capable body beneath his. It didn’t take strength, only balance, and in another life Draco might have been a Quidditch athlete as good as Harry. He had a natural mastery of his body that was conducive to flying, whether on a broomstick or a dragon.

By the time they were skimming through the sky higher than the highest parapet of Hogwarts, Draco’s fear was gone and only the thrill of it all was left. Flight, riding a dragon, escape, all of it made his sore heart swell with triumph, and he let out a whoop as Magnificent turned and angled upward as though she intended to take them all the way to the low-hanging moon.

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix

Location unknown

Harry’s next escort was the witch who had seemed to lead the conversation when he’d first sat down at the table, but she was eerily mute as she led him through the rooms of the house. Now that he knew stone lay beyond every wall, Harry felt vaguely dizzy, particularly when he looked at the curtained windows, or wondered how far below the surface they had to be in order to be “close to magma.” Further, how safe was it to be “close to magma”? He couldn’t help a vivid daydream about lava spilling through the walls and filling up these rooms, burning away any trace they had been there at all.

Harry considered what the world would look like without him in it. Would it change at all? His parents and Elspeth had one another—Harry’s time with them had always felt like a stolen season. The Malfoys, he was sure, had always expected Harry to die young, possibly at their hands. Draco was the exception, but it had been a long time since Harry and Draco knew one another’s every secret. His friends at Hogwarts would be sad, then move on. Sirius might be sad longer than anyone, but his tentative reconnection with Harry’s father had healed him in a way that no amount of closeness to Harry ever could.

That left Tom. What would his lord feel, if Harry was gone for good? Harry felt himself prodding the bond, as if it would answer, but it continued to lay inert beyond the sealed space where it used to connect so intimately to Harry’s every thought and feeling. He should have been relieved, but instead he was bereft. It had been more than he could comprehend, too overwhelming to dwell upon long, having that bond with his lord. But its absence taught him its value. He felt a clawing longing to have it back, even as the holly wand in his hand suggested that Harry might have walked a path not his own every day of his life until now.

“Here,” said the witch, pausing at a door to let Harry precede her. Expecting another staircase, he opened it to find, instead, a large empty room directly on its opposite side.

Only, the room wasn’t entirely empty. There were cabinets all along its walls, stretching to its ceiling, which was an ordinary height overhead, eight feet or so. There were closed cabinets and drawers all along each cupboard.

The witch produced a wand and pointed it so suddenly at Harry’s face, he instantly pointed the
holly wand back at her. Unlike the yew wand, though, the holly wand seemed willing to let Harry make up his own mind. He lowered his arm at once at the witch’s quizzical look.

“I’m just canceling your vision Charm,” she explained, and before he could object, she did it.

The magic that let Harry see without glasses was very foreign, very complex, and had required an expert from west Africa to cast.

“Hey!” Harry cried in panic, clutching his face as though he could grasp the fleeing magic in his hands.

“Ridiculous, really,” tutted the witch. “Anyone could have done that to you at any time. It could have been devastating in the middle of a battle.”

Harry had worn glasses before, and thought with longing of where his old pair were nestled in a trunk in the rear of a Malfoy closet. They may as well have been on the moon. The room, and the witch, were blurry, and suddenly Harry wanted his yew wand instead of his holly wand. He wanted the comfort of something that knew more, had seen more, than he had. He wanted the faint connection to his lord he now recognized whenever he held the wand.

But he refrained. It was only the panic speaking. He heard the sound of a drawer opening and closing, and then a second one, and then a third one which opened and did not close again. Turned toward the sound, he blinked as the witch came into slightly better focus, walking toward him and holding something out in front of her in her hand.

“Glasses,” he realized when she got close enough.

“Try them on,” she suggested, and Harry cautiously plucked them from her palm, unfolded the legs, and slid them into place.

“Vision is a funny thing,” said the witch, and as Harry looked at her, he realized she no longer appeared as the Polyjuiced body she pretended to be. He saw her as a young woman, only, not much older than Harry. “Do you see me, Harry?”

He blinked, then nodded cautiously. She flashed a small, grim smile.

“We thought you might. A boy who speaks to dragons must have quite a lot of his ancestor Nadine in his magic, mustn’t he? But no one you could tell will know my face, so I had the honor of being your optometrist.”

“The vision charm was—interfering, somehow, with…?”

“Yes. Not deliberately, I don’t expect. It’s imperfect magic, but I don’t think it conflicts with Sight deliberately. Besides, glasses suit you.”

“Thanks,” Harry said dubiously, touching the bridge over his nose self-consciously. He thought over what she had said. “Now that I can see you despite the Polyjuice, I suppose I’m not going back to the, um, table?” He left out the fact that he had been able to see them, though not clearly, even before she removed the Charm. It didn’t seem like information he should volunteer, though Ollivander might share it anyway.

“No,” she said, her smile gone and a dark look in her eyes. “We’re supposed to send you home.”

Harry’s stomach did a flip, and he swallowed hard. “You’re supposed to. Will you?”
“It’s not like I have much choice,” she murmured. Harry didn’t totally understand what she meant by that, but he nodded again, trying not to get ahead of himself, though hope made his thoughts race.

“You don’t want to, though. You think I’m going to tell our—the Dark Lord—about you, and he’ll come here.”

“Maybe. I don’t know that he’d be surprised that we’re concealed underground. In fact, he probably assumed as much, long ago. He would be furious to know for sure that Dumbledore is alive, and that he’s been trying to ‘groom’ you all this time. He might even take it out on you.”

Harry mulled that thought over, but he didn’t think so. “Then why don’t you want to let me go?”

She looked irritated, like he wasn’t as smart as she’d thought he was. “Because while we have you we have leverage, obviously. And I don’t think that you’re on our side. Maybe if you stayed here long enough, and decided to actually listen, you’d realize how fucking evil ‘your lord’ really is.”

Harry frowned, avoiding her eye. He scanned the cabinetry, finding the drawer she’d left open, filled with glasses in slim cases. He wondered how many random rooms of gear and equipment were strung together in this strangest of warrens.

“I know,” he said stiffly. He did. The word “evil” didn’t feel quite right, but it was close enough he wasn’t going to argue.

She snorted. “Then the fact you’re still on the fence says a lot about you,” she spat. “Come on. I’ll be happy to show you out.”

Harry followed her, suspicious he’d been misunderstood, but certain he didn’t know his own heart well enough to try to describe it.

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**Hogwarts**

Sirius turned the reins over entirely to Padfoot, and the big dog sprinted like a greyhound after the fox. It was, strangely, some sort of hybrid of the challenge he’d faced in these very woods as a student, trying to keep track of Wormtail and occasionally being distracted by the impossible task of racing Prongs.

The fox was much faster than it had any right to be, and it had the advantage of being much more familiar with its route. Padfoot had every advantage in sheer speed and stride, but kept getting tangled in the underbrush or having to leap a log that the fox could sprint beneath without changing pace.

Then, Sirius realized where they were, and where Hermione must be intending to go.

He left her to continue her evasive maneuvers, believing he was chasing her, and adjusted his course. He ran hard down the narrow path the Centaurs apparently still kept fairly well-tread, their fresh scent alarmingly strong in Padfoot’s nose, and broke away at the mossy boulder that protruded slightly onto the path, a landmark unchanged by the past twenty years.

There was a tangle of young trees that hadn’t been there before, and the water was higher than usual in the snaky streambed, but Padfoot managed the obstacles, weaving swiftly through the trees then clearing the stream in a leap.

He reached the clearing just as Hermione was transforming, and got between her and the well
before transforming himself.

She looked wild-eyed, fierce. He had never seen her so much as discomposed. How could he have bought that careful facade? How could he have overlooked the powerful, vengeful witch who he’d practically raised?

He had an idea, gnawing at the back of his mind insistent as a mouse. Or a rat. After all, someone had to have shown her the clearing.

Sirius pointed his wand at her nose. They were still several paces apart, but he heard her breath hitch softly. “Where is Harry?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said. “All I knew was that he was supposed to get the Goblet.”

At that, Sirius did a double take. He hadn’t expected candor now, from this girl who’d been deceiving him for so long.

“Who gave you your orders?”

The left corner of her mouth twitched like he had disappointed her. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

Sirius swore, his hand tightening on his wand, but the thought of cursing her made him feel ill. “Please don’t make me hurt you, Hermione,” he said evenly. And he would, too, sour stomach or not. He’d let Harry—and James and Lily and Remus—down once, but he couldn’t do it again.

She looked at his wand, then his eyes, then past him at the well, then back. “Who do you think?”

It was Peter. He’d known that since he’d realized she was going to the clearing. She saw the knowledge in his face, and warily stepped forward and to her right, half-circling Sirius to bring herself nearer to the well.

He held his wand on her, if less steadily. “I don’t believe you.”

“I haven’t said anything,” she reminded him quietly. The Forest was still and waiting around them. Sirius thought he heard something large moving in the trees, but he dare not look away from her, or she’d disappear through the well for certain.

“When you realize what’s happened,” said Hermione, glancing quickly in the direction of the noise then looking back, “you may regret what’s about to happen.”

“And what’s about to happen?”

“One of two things. You stop me, or I go. But depending on whose side I’m on, and whose side you’re on, you might regret either.”

“And whose side do you think I’m on?”

She smiled faintly. She was still walking, very slowly, and he was still holding his wand on her and not using it. With every step, she was closer to the well. “I don’t know. That’s why I can’t tell you which thing you’ll regret.”

“Did Peter…” he paused and swallowed. “Who took Harry?”

“You’ll know soon enough.”
She was within a few paces of the well. “Stop!” Sirius called. “Stop.”

She listened, her own wand hand low but obviously tense, as though it cost her everything not to lift it. “If I let you go, and something happens to him, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“In my experience, a wrong action is much more likely to spur regret than mere inaction.”

Sirius felt himself pale. The blood rushing from his face made his heart pound harder. “Hermione—”

“I can’t help or hurt Harry at this point,” she said, meeting his eye steadily. She took another step toward the well.

“Incar—”

The thunderous crashing of something very large hurtling through the trees behind him interrupted Sirius. He swung around just in time to step out of the way of the troll, which howled in outrage at the sight of Hermione kneeling on the lip of the well.

She aimed her feet downward and hesitated a moment too long—when she slid through the opening and began to drop the troll swung out its hand—but the hair it grasped tore loose and though Sirius heard the girl cry out, the troll was otherwise empty-handed.

Sirius had hastily rolled back his sleeve to show the tiny dark mark of his oath just as the foul creature lumbered around to face him with its yellowed teeth bared. It inhaled, taking in the scent of the mark, and made a face at its odor. Sirius understood—the brand’s old-blood perfume, though too faint for a human nose to detect, had taken Padfoot years to get used to.

“Go,” it snarled, turning to saunter back into the trees, and Sirius sped back toward the school. At least he knew where to go next.

**Hogwarts**

Ron and Theo were together in the audience. They saw everything happen. Harry vanishing, and the flurry in the esteemed seating around their lord. Lord Knott on the turf, his handsome white face upturned. Ron swiveled his magnified glasses toward Lord Knott and saw his expression, clearly and uncharacteristically grim. Then he transfigured himself into a bat and winged from the Pitch. Ron dropped his glasses and looked at Theo. They made eye contact, and there was no need to say anything aloud; they agreed with a look.

At once, they rose and started for the staircase that wound its way from the stands to the turf. But before they could reach it, Bellatrix Lestrange appeared on the top stair.

“Your father will surely be easier to find when we have you,” she murmured, dark eyes locked on Theo. Theo’s hand tightened painfully on Ron’s wrist—a quelling gesture—and he went with her willingly, leaving Ron frozen in the stands blinking at the space from which they’d just Disapparated. No one was supposed to be able to do that within the Hogwarts grounds except their lord, but apparently his favorites had special privileges.

They’d kill Theo, Ron thought distantly. Harry might be alright, however unlikely that was, but Theo’s fate was sealed. They would cut him apart piece by piece to lure out Lord Knott. Anyone would think the father would appear to spare the son. Anyone, that is, except for the two who knew him best: his son and his ward.
And Ron had just let Theo go, without making any effort to intervene. He could have retched, he was so suddenly and unbearably disgusted.

He stumbled down the stairs, not sure where he was going, only that he had to try to help Theo.

“Ron! Ron, stop!”

Charlie caught Ron by the arm and spun him around. Fred and George were there too, looking more serious than he’d ever seen them.

“We’re going home,” said George. “No one knows what happened to Harry, but they’re going mad trying to find out.”

“It’s not safe,” Charlie said firmly, seeming to understand the wild expression Ron was making no effort to conceal better than the twins. “C’mon, Ron.”

“Lady Lestrange came for Theo,” Ron murmured. He pictured Lord Knott, gazing up at Theo as though gauging the distance and, finding it too far, fleeing without him. “They must think Lord Knott had something to do with all of it.”

“It’s not our concern, Ron,” Charlie said quietly. The twins exchanged a glance.

“It’s my concern,” Ron said hoarsely, tugging free of Charlie’s hold. Charlie wouldn’t let go, and Ron fought him in earnest; Charlie’s grip slipped and suddenly Ron was stumbling backward and Charlie was holding his prosthetic, staring down in shock.

Ron turned and ran into the crowd.

It was easy to lose them. Or Charlie, anyway; it wouldn’t surprise Ron if the twins were helping slow him down. He didn’t think they’d put Ron’s own safety above letting him make any effort to help his friend. They knew him better than Charlie could be expected to.

He didn’t know where he was going, except that he vaguely thought if he shook off his brothers, he might be able to pause and think about where they might have taken Theo.

As it turned out, he bumped hard into a group of third-year witches, interrupting and overhearing their furious whispering.

Cold all over, Ron disentangled himself from one of the girls, stammered an apology when she shrieked an objection, and finally found the edge of the human traffic. He ran alone through the stretch of grass toward the castle, the empty cuff of his left sleeve flapping and the girl’s whispered words on a loop in his ears.

“They’ve strung up Theo Knott in the Great Hall.”

Chapter End Notes

OH NO, A CLIFFHANGER! I'm so sorry, but at 10,000+ words this chapter just had. To. End.

P.S. Every time I finish a chapter, I can't imagine starting the next one. But then I get a couple of comments and slowly build up the strength to do it anyway. Thanks for your
feedback, it means so much to me! <3

P.P.S. You can say hi to/yell at me on tumblr!
Amalgamation

Chapter Summary

In which Harry forms an attachment.

Chapter Notes

TW for descriptions of torture and an allusion to off-screen noncon.

I'm still here! If you are too, here are a few things that might help you remember where we're at:

At the end of the third task, Harry was Port-Keyed not to the finish line but to a strange house where he met several members of the Order, and left with a holly wand and a pair of glasses.

Hermione fled the maze in the Forest, and Sirius pursued her. Lucius saw them go in and decided to intercept them elsewhere. In the clearing with the well, Hermione and Sirius stand off, but ultimately he doesn't stop her from going.

Draco recognized Lord Knott's Inferi in the maze as the Muggle subjects he was granted sovereignty over on his tenth birthday. He confronts his mother and then, furious, leave the Manor and (perhaps without thinking it through) untethers Magnificent and crawls on her back.

Bellatrix Lestrange collected Theo Nott on her lord's orders after realizing Lord Knott was nowhere to be found.

(Thank you to Wolf_of_Lilacs for beta reading.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”

C.S. Lewis

Hogsmeade

Harry’s surroundings were something of a blur as soon as he arrived in Hogsmeade. The Floo was congested and there was a line of people outside the public Apparation chamber. He was immediately claustrophobic in the press of bodies, and when someone Floo’d in behind him, he was barely off the hearth and was shoved into the crowd by the body just behind his. But most people seemed more intent to leave than to arrive, and when the middle-aged wizard who’d come behind him in the Floo struck off into the crowd with his wand raised, Harry followed the path he was clearing his his head bent.
But as people made to brush past Harry, inevitably a few here and there, despite their haste, recognized who he was. He gave them stern looks that discouraged engagement, which, fortunately, seemed effective.

In the middle of the main street in Hogsmeade, Harry heard someone say, “It’s been two hours.” He glanced over at a group of students he vaguely recognized but didn’t know by name. He thought they were Ravenclaws.

“How long can he...?” one witch murmured to another, who shook her head.

“I don’t know.” Turning away from the first girl’s anxious face, the second one met Harry’s eye and her mouth dropped open.

“Harry—Lord—that is…?”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked her. He spoke sharply, and she went a shade paler, making a clumsy effort to bow.

Harry summoned all his patience. “I’m sorry I raised my voice, but I have no idea what’s going on.”

She relaxed, but just marginally, and bit her lip. “Our lord has summoned Lord Tolliver, but he hasn’t come. So, his son…”

She looked ill, and Harry couldn’t wait to hear more. He started up the road from Hogsmeade, where the crowds weren’t so thick, and he could run through the prickling, still, warm air. His breath came slow and easy, as though his heart and lungs were separate from his body, his mind and magic powering him instead of muscle and bone and blood. He felt the holly wand in his pocket. Maybe it wasn’t just his imagination. Maybe he was different now—more—than he had been without it.

He wished he’d hurried in the Order’s headquarters. A wand, a pair of glasses; what a ridiculous price to pay for Theo’s life. He should have known that Tom would grow murderous the moment he knew Harry was gone. Not because of Harry, particularly, but at the gall of anyone daring to snatch their lord’s Maxime Proxime.

When he reached the castle gates he saw a few lingering students around the gates, no doubt waiting for further instructions from their families, but it seemed like an odd place to congregate.

Seeing him, one boy dropped to his knees, and the others followed suit with no signs of stopping to think.

Patience, Harry he reminded himself, and gestured them back to their feet.

“Go into Hogsmeade,” he advised. Not that he thought the threat would be sustained after Harry revealed himself, but because standing in the open made no sense. Harry had a horrible vision of Lord Knott standing in the Quidditch Pitch with an army of Inferi at his back, appallingly vivid with nothing to refract it but the glasses’ ordinary lenses. It almost made him stumble, but he ran forward instead, breaking through the row of hungry, long faces and scattering the lot of them into a faint, blood-red mist.

He ran on, but he was beginning to feel it in his legs, from his aching calves to his stinging thighs. His breath burned in his lungs. He didn’t slow at all.

Somehow, he hadn’t outrun word of his arrival. There was a crowd at the doors when Harry got
there, among them Fred and George Weasley, ashen under their freckles, and each one clinging to one of Riley Wilhelm’s hands. When the three of them saw him, they let go of Riley in the same moment, by unspoken agreement, and he half-tripped down the stairs to take hold of Harry’s forearms, then run his hands up to Harry’s biceps, ghosting over his hair, taking stock.

“You’re all right,” he concluded after a moment. Harry, red-cheeked from running, felt his skin heat up a little more.

“Yeah,” he confirmed, stepping out of range of Riley’s hands, which felt strangely warm, maybe from being clenched by the Weasleys. “What’s going on?” Looking around Riley toward the doors, he saw they were barred. He didn’t even know that was possible, but a massive golden beam seemed to be fastening them firmly together, blocking the handles, and, eerily, preventing anyone from coming out as neatly as from going in.

“He thinks Lord Knott knows where you are, and he’s…” Riley rubbed his hands over his face. “I don’t know. He may have killed him by now, but last I saw he was still torturing Theo Knott.”

Harry did what he should have done at first. He seized hold of his end of the bond and pried it open with all the force his magic could muster. He fainted from the impact, like an echo in his head that bounced off his skull a few times before everything—his magic, his senses, his thoughts—settled back into place. When they did he was being held up by the twins and Riley was pounding on the door.

“Harry, are you alright?” Fred murmured. He couldn’t tell which hands belonged to Fred, and which to George. There were two supporting him, one stroking his hair, another rubbing firm circles on his back as though to revive him.

Harry shuddered and stood of his own volition.

“Fine,” he said, gasping as, after a moment of inactivity in the bond, Tom flew into his head. Harry was still unaccustomed to that strange feeling of a companion with him in his thoughts, and he staggered back into the twins’ arms. The golden beam over the doors broke into waves of light, and a quick-thinking student grabbed Riley’s arm and jerked him out of the way just as the doors burst open.

The Great Hall looked as though some giant hand had picked it up and given it a firm shake. Tables and chairs lay broken like rubble, or in a couple cases showing signs of having burst into flame. The House banners were shredded and strewn about in streams of bright fabric, except for where a few tattered shreds clung to the walls nearest the sticking charms.

In the midst of all of this chaos, Tom stood in the center of the room facing Harry. There was no particular expression on his face, but his raised wand betrayed the fact he’d been the one to blast open the doors. And inside Harry’s mind he had the strangest sense of being—patted, all over, like a medic might check a body for injury, except it was happening from the inside out. The thought made him shudder pleasantly, but the comforting sensation was quickly overcome as he took in the other people in the room.

Bellatrix Lestrange stood beside the slowly rotating body of Theo Nott. He dangled by one ankle from a rope connected, somehow, to the ceiling. His body was still, limbs splayed unnaturally, like a broken acrobat’s. The deafening silence that seemed to have fallen over the room, and the corridor full of students, and over Harry and Tom, was broken by the faint sound of dripping water.

No, Harry realized, all the air leaving his lungs. It was the drip of blood, from Theo’s saturated hair onto the stone tile of the floor beneath him, where it joined a sizable pool of glistening red.
“My lord,” Harry said. “I’m...fine.”

He looked from Tom’s face, very slowly and deliberately, to Theo.

In his head, Tom was beginning to speak. It was incomparably confusing, in a life full of strange experiences, to be looking at Tom’s motionless face and hear him practically babbling, but only in Harry’s mind.

*Where were you? Who took you? What happened? Did they hurt you, and heal you? It was the Order, oh, of course it was. What did you see? What did they say of Knott? Or was it the girl? Did they think their decoy would hide the true threat? Did they hurt you? You—glasses, really?*

Harry blinked, incredulous. That’s *what you’re asking me about?*

The closest thing to a telepathic huff answered him. Harry tried not to smile. Then he didn’t have to try, because he was looking, again, at Theo Nott.

*That’s my friend,* he told Tom carefully. *I hope you didn’t kill him.*

Tom turned toward the boy—the body?—with a thoughtful expression. “As my Maxime Proxime has returned, the situation is markedly less urgent. Heal him, Bellatrix, and bring him down. That we have him at all should be enough to entice his father, surely.”

Harry swallowed and hoped that he didn’t betray his intense relief. He couldn’t openly be seen as oppositional or critical, he knew that from growing up with the Malfoys. Still, he was inwardly appalled by what swift havoc Tom had wreaked, and of course, inside his mind his honest thoughts were plain.

*I thought his father killed you,* Tom said, matter-of-fact.

*You* thought. *But here I am.*

*In any event, he took you.*

*Maybe his father had nothing to do with it.*

*Unlikely.*

*But still.*

Bellatrix had collected Theo. Voldemort looked at the people beyond Harry, who were, presumably, still watching with dropped jaws. Harry couldn’t hear so much as a whisper, and he dare not turn and look himself.

*“Come with me, Harry,”* said Tom, holding out a hand. Harry immediately walked forward, picking his way over the splinters of wood and other refuse, and as soon as he was clear of the threshold, Tom made a beckoning gesture with his hand and the doors slammed closed. Harry flinched at the loud crack of wood on wood as they struck their frames.

Tom smiled and walked forward, meeting Harry part way. He reached out and turned Harry’s face one way, then the other, his smile growing slowly larger and brighter.

*“They suit you. The glasses.”* He decided.

Harry stared back at him, speechless.
“You’d think they would obscure your eyes, but instead they’re fetching. How do you like it, seeing without the Charm?”

Harry found himself fingering the holly wand, but he wasn’t ready to show it to Tom yet. He couldn’t believe that he’d been kidnapped and the first thing that was occurring in his debriefing was—well, Harry wasn’t sure what this was. His face felt prickly and hot wherever Tom touched it. And then, when Tom stopped touching him, Harry missed the sensation at once.

What was wrong with him? The Order had been right to think he was compromised. He knew better than any of Tom’s subjects what Tom was, and here he was, blushing over a compliment.

“It’s much better,” he said.

“I imagine so,” Tom said mildly. He looked around them as if he was noticing the state of the Hall for the first time, and then drew his wand to cast a series of targeted *Reparos*. Two chairs reassembled themselves and a crushed chalice spun in a semicircle and then dropped into the crook of Harry’s elbow, good as new and gleaming as though freshly polished. He fumbled to catch it as it nearly slipped to the floor, and when he was cradling it in his left hand, Tom filled it with *Aguamenti*.

“Now, he said, nodding toward the chair nearer Harry and sitting in the other one himself. “Tell me everything.”

****

Peverell Ridge

Sirius was out of breath when he arrived, and stumbled into the wards, which lashed at him and sent him reeling backwards with a shout.

But they’d been waiting—if not for him, then for someone—so James and Lily appeared a moment later with twin cracks.

“What is it?” Lily demanded tersely. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know,” Sirius panted, “but he’s back. He’s all right.”

James leaned against Lily so hard and suddenly, she half-stumbled, then managed to wedge him back upright, her arm clutching his waist reflexively.

“So,” Sirius breathed, looking between them, “it wasn’t…?”

James’ expression, slack with relief a moment before, snapped closed like a book. He straightened and narrowed his eyes. “Before you finish that thought,” he murmured, consider all of our oaths.”

****

Hogwarts

Harry and Tom looked at one another for a long moment. Harry wondered how he looked to Tom. He wondered whether Tom realized how changed he was to Harry.

Tom had always defied Nadine’s gifts. Harry hadn’t seen any portent of fate or future hovering above or behind or upon him. He hadn’t seen the ones who haunted him following like hungry hounds. But with the spells gone, there was something else Harry noticed.
There was a hollowness to Tom, the slightest absence of substance, as though he was the ghost. Harry had learned that his sight would confuse more often than it illuminated, and he'd more or less come to terms with it, but now...when it was Tom about whom he had a message he couldn't quite decipher...

Tom, who was waiting expectantly for Harry’s report, and with visibly dimming patience.

“I can’t tell you,” Harry said, because what use was there in hedging?

Tom simply looked at him, his eyes seeming brighter, somehow, and the bond trembled between them like a taut line in heavy wind.

“Did you know,” Tom said calmly, when he was ready, “that your parents defied me three times?”

Harry hesitated, then nodded.

“Did you know,” he added, leaning back in his chair and resting his arms on his thighs, “that I do not take an Animagus, or conjure living things?”

Harry shook his head. He had the definite thought that there was a deeper significance to this conversation he was missing.

“You are of singular importance to me, Harry,” said Tom, “but though I would never harm you, that promise does not extend to all the people for whom you care.”

Harry grimaced. “You wouldn’t.”

But his answer was in the ringing bond, and the slow curve of Tom’s smile. “I would. With pleasure.”

****

Black Palace

Lucius waited in the foyer. He recalled a troll’s foot umbrella stand which was no longer present. His wife’s aunt had particular tastes. But now the space was expansive and elegant, without a single elf’s head in sight.

When Lord Black came through the door, Lucius drew himself up in triumph, only to wilt again at once.

The girl wasn’t with him.

Lucius snapped his wand into position, pointed directly at Black’s nose. “Where have you hidden her?”

“Who do you mean?” His eyes widened when Lucius’ lip curled and he lifted his hands in supplication. “Hermione? She’s not with me.”

“Because you already turned her over to our lord?”

Sirius shook his head. “I don’t know where she is.”

Lucius gritted his teeth. “Legilimens.”

Black was unprepared, and Lucius sneered in satisfaction when he broke through before Black
could make a concerted effort at Occlumency. He didn’t have long before Black’s shields arose and forced him out, but it was long enough.

“You let her go!”

Black was panting. He jerked his own wand from his robes.

“Now that you know she’s not here, may I suggest you get out?”

Lucius smirked. “Yes, we’ll both go shall we? I’ll escort you before our lord and he can decide what should be done with you.”

“I didn’t let her go,” Sirius insisted weakly. Lucius had seen, after all.

“Why are you here? Everyone should be on hand at Hogwarts.”

Sirius hesitated.

Lucius’ eyes narrowed. “Do they have her, then? The Potters? It shouldn’t be possible, given their oaths. But few things are impervious to circumvention.”

Sirius simply shook his head, and when Lucius incanted Legimens a second time, unable to stop himself, Sirius broke his concentration instantly with a Stinging Hex.

That left then each with wands ready. An impasse.

“My wife is fond of you,” Lucius said bitterly.

“And my cousin is fond of you,” Sirius replied.

They holstered their wands at the same time, but continued to study one another warily.

“What will I ever have to do to convince you I’m not a turncoat?”

Lucius snorted. “I’m quite convinced. Don’t you see that’s the problem?”

The Floo in the adjacent chamber flared and they both turned immediately at the sound of Narcissa’s voice, slightly distorted by the crackle of flames.

“Draco is gone!”

****

Hogwarts

“I assume they intend to turn you against me?”

Harry frowned, but couldn’t deny it. “Yes.”

You must let me see.

No. I’ll answer your questions but—

I AM NOT ASKING!

Tom sprang to his feet and Harry, instinctively, stood as well. They glared at each other, almost eye to eye. Harry still had to look up a couple inches. He felt Tom’s frustration ringing in the bond
and met it with his own stubborn resolve. He could feel Tom’s urge for violence, frightening in its intensity, but tempered by his aversion to forever jeopardizing the Maxime Proxime bond by harming Harry. In fact, Harry thought with surprise, he wasn’t sure the bond would even let him try.

“I’ll answer your questions,” Harry said, voice strained. “I’ll tell you what I can. But that’s all. I can’t show you what I saw there.”

“If you would tell me everything, then you shouldn’t hesitate to show me.”

“I’ll answer the questions that I feel I can answer.” Harry felt his glasses slipping, and pushed them up on his nose a bit self-consciously. Tom watched the gesture, then reached out and pressed his fingertip to narrow metal nose piece and said something under his breath. His hand fell away as Harry raised an eyebrow.

“A rudimentary sticking charm,” Tom mumbled, turning to stalk halfway across the hall and then back. “You think if I see, I’ll know where they are,” he decided at last.

Harry nodded.

“If you don’t want them dead, Harry,” Tom said quietly, “then we are at odds.”

The bond was taut and uncomfortable. But it wasn’t causing any agony, Harry realized tentatively. “I don’t think we are,” he said slowly, feeling along the bond. It was like wading deeper into a sea of unfamiliar feelings. A sea of Tom’s feelings. It was dark and treacherous and suddenly it was over Harry’s head. It could have drowned him. But he plunged on anyway, fully into a space that was all Tom’s and not Harry’s.

What are you doing?

If I was truly at odds with you, how could I be here? Would the bond let me in?

There was a tremor of uncertainty. I don’t know.

No one living, after all, could describe the nature of a Maxime Proxime bond. It lived in the journals of those long-dead.

Tom forced him back out, but gently. Harry’s eyelids fluttered; he hadn’t realized he’d closed them. When he could focus again, Tom’s face was close and stark. He was holding Harry steady with one hand behind his back, and another on his shoulder.

Before Harry could react to their proximity, and the strange sensation of seeing the Tom’s clear red eyes from a handspan away, there was a thudding sound on the door.

Tom turned, pulling Harry closer unconsciously, so the fronts of their bodies made the barest contact. Harry held his breath, paying no attention to the muffled voice that called from the other side of the door until a stray word drowned out the considerable distraction of Tom’s embrace.

“...Inferi! A hundred of them!”

“Oh,” Harry said, somewhat faintly. “Lord Knott must be...?”

“Yes,” Tom said. His hand flexed on Harry’s waist, then he let him go, stalking toward the door. Harry saw the protective spells spring into place when he touched his ring, then he flung the doors open with a wave of his hand.
Harry followed him, and stood just behind him and to his left to look out onto the grounds.

As Harry’s sight had predicted, there was a slow-moving tide of Inferi advancing from the gates, and hovering above them on a very unfortunate-looking, but apparently functional magic carpet, knelt Lord Knott.

“This argument will have to wait for another time,” Tom said quietly, without turning to Harry. “Return home, and await me there.”

For a confused moment, Harry thought he meant that Harry should go to the Ridge. But of course he meant the Slytherin Estate.

“Take Riley with you,” Tom added. His voice was low, but not with concern; no, it was practically glee Harry heard. And his eyes shone as he studied Lord Knott, like a predator who’d gone far too long without a decent hunt. Before Harry could think of something to say, Tom flew off the step to meet Lord Knott. Harry, who’d heard rumors but hadn’t witnessed the feat himself, watched Tom glide through midair with helpless admiration for a full second before he shook himself and looked around for Riley.

He was there with the twins. Ron was gone and Theo was nowhere to be seen, either.

“You heard him,” Harry told Riley grimly.

Riley looked from Fred to George. George and Fred made eye contact, then nodded in unison. George, who’d been holding Riley’s hand, released it slowly.

“Ron…?” Harry asked Fred.

“We’ll watch out,” Fred said, but Harry wasn’t convinced. It wasn’t as though Fred and George could stand between their lord and Ron, if Ron decided to intervene for Theo. But then again, Harry couldn’t do much, either. Tom knew that Ron was close to him, and he just had to hope that was enough.

Harry took Riley’s hand; it was still warm from George. Just as he Disapparated them, he had a horrible sense of unease, like he wasn’t actually in a state to Apparate safely, but they arrived each in one piece.

“Okay, Harry?” Riley asked, squeezing his hand.

Harry nodded uneasily, even though the competing memories of all he’d learned those countless nights from Dumbledore, and his regular waking life, jerked him from one feeling to another too quickly for him to keep up. He also felt an unpleasant conflict between the wands like disagreeable crups snapping at each other. It was wearying, and he wanted nothing more than to rest.

But then, he couldn’t imagine doing that with Tom fighting some sort of battle in a new war Harry should have seen coming. Not when Harry’s loyalties were so thoroughly divided, he wasn’t even sure who he hoped would win.

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Over the Atlantic Ocean

Draco had known flying on dragonback would be terrifying, but he hadn’t quite imagined how much.
There was nothing to hold except a few of the smaller, softer and more flexible spines on Magnificent’s ridged back, and fortunate there was a hard protrusion in the ridge of scales near each of his knees for him to brace against. Still, by all rights he should have fallen to his death a dozen times at least as Magnificent soared away from Wiltshire.

Somehow, he stayed on instead. Magnificent assisted him; she seemed to sense when he was nearly off balance, and get back underneath him. When Draco at last relaxed a bit, he realized he had a sense of her body beneath him, and the particular ways in which it defied gravity and absorbed the forces of her wings. Her wings beat in rhythm with her breath and her back arched with each pulse of her tail.

Draco wasn’t like Harry; he couldn’t speak to Magnificent, or whatever it was Harry did while Draco pretended not to notice. But he knew that she was aware of thoughts and feelings to some mysterious extent, so he focused on his own mind as though she could read his messages there.

Please take us far, away from any people. I’m sorry for ever locking you up. And thank you for not killing me so far.

He had no idea whether it was working.

At least Magnificent was taking them far, whatever else she was doing. The ground was distant beneath them, and Draco could hardly make himself look down to try to assess how high they were or what they might be flying over. But when he finally summoned the courage, all he saw was vast pale blue, and for a confused moment he thought they were simply too high for him to see anything but sky. Then he realized what he was seeing was water. Seamless and stretching to every horizon.

Magnificent was taking him very far indeed. The thrill had fully worn off and regret was setting in. If anything went wrong now, there was only one way it could end for Draco. He’d never thought of himself as impulsive or a fool, but he’d just done something more reckless than any Gryffindor. Then he remembered the dead faces in the maze, and gritted his teeth and laid his cheek against the warm, supple scales encircling Magnificent’s neck. Anywhere he could be had to be better than the world his parents had helped their lord make. Technically, the whole world belonged to him now, but Draco knew enough to be aware of the uprisings, the stirrings of rebellion, and the countries where it was rumored some had even been known to openly speak their lord’s name, and not fall mute. If there was any way for Draco to escape his life as his father’s servant, surely it was on dragonback.

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Slytherin Estate

Harry woke on the sofa in the parlor nearest the Floo foyer. His last memory was of agreeing to Riley’s offer for water, then deciding to rest his eyes a moment. Now he was lying on his side, a blanket up to his chin, and his boots set neatly together on the floor. He also heard voices, but he felt much too exhausted to pay attention to them, and drifted off again.

When he woke again, he was in his bedroom and there was birdsong and the buttery light of morning coming through his window. He got up, blushing at the thought of being Levitated to bed like a child, and relieved that he hadn’t been changed into pyjamas to add insult to injury. He still wore the trousers and shirt from yesterday, creased from sleeping.

He found shoes in the closet and went out into the corridor, listening. He heard nothing, so he went downstairs. Still, the house was quiet.
“You’re awake,” said Riley, and Harry jerked around to find him leaning in the hallway that led to the kitchens. He looked pale and there were shadows under his eyes.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “What happened with…?”

“All is well,” Tom answered from the other direction. Harry turned again, wondering how many times they’d have to take turns speaking before he was dizzy. If Riley looked worn out, Tom looked perfectly rested. He was freshly dressed, all in white, with pale green robes open over his shoulders. The trousers made his legs seem impossibly long. Even the boots were creamy white, like the surface of an opal.

“But what happened,” Harry pressed. Tom’s mouth curved into a mirthless smile.

“Isn’t it frustrating, to desire knowledge which you are denied?”

Harry would have rolled his eyes, but there was a charge in the air that kept him cautious. Also, something smelled wonderful, luring him toward the kitchen. When he was a few steps closer to Riley, he noticed a thin band gleaming brightly around his neck, like a necklace. But tighter.

“What is this?” Harry asked, though his instincts seemed to be a step ahead of him: he felt his stomach tighten with dread. The thin silver band was taut against Riley’s skin, almost indiscernible, and though it was delicate and lightweight, it was unmistakably a collar.

“Riley has been keeping things from me,” Tom explained quietly. “That bauble makes it easier for me to know what he is doing and to whom he is speaking.”

Harry snorted, trying to meet Riley’s eye, but Riley’s head was bent, his face hidden behind his curls. “Don’t worry about me, Harry,” he muttered. Those words alarmed Harry as few others could.

“What has he been keeping from you?” Harry demanded of Tom, who hadn’t moved; he continued to stand with his hands in his pockets, untroubled.

“Many things. But primarily, the fact that he is a con artist and a Squib, though it doesn’t seem he could quite help himself, on either count.”

Harry’s face felt numb with the effort it took to control his expression. He was very conscious, also, of the bond, but true to his word Tom wasn’t trying to manipulate it.

“Go ahead and ask him. I don’t think he’ll bother denying it, considering he has much more to fear from me, and made no effort to argue.”

But Harry didn’t need to ask. As soon as he heard it, he knew it was true; it was the missing piece of that puzzle that had been persistently unsolved in his mind since he first caught Riley smoking on the Hogwarts terrace.

“Now that we have all of that settled,” Tom continued—if he was surprised by Harry’s reaction, he didn’t let on—“Riley, please go upstairs, and I’ll join you in a moment.”

Riley lifted his head, then, to look blearily at Tom. The look on his face made Harry’s blood run cold. He took three fast steps toward Riley without realizing he’d decided to move, then turned to glare at Tom with his hands in fists at his sides.

“What in Merlin’s name do you mean by that?”
Tom smiled. “Ah, Harry. Concerned for Riley’s virtue, are you? I assure you, I don’t expect him to suffer anything he hasn’t consented to before.”

“That…isn’t the point,” Harry managed, so scandalized his voice came out hoarse and the hair on his arms was standing on end.

Tom put his head to one side. “Oh, I understand your point. Consider it—considered. Entertained and dismissed.”

Harry looked at Riley, who had put his head back down and was heading for the stairs, and though he knew it was hopeless he couldn’t let it go. He turned back to Tom; his primary objections hadn’t resonated, but he could think of another. “How can you want someone you have to force to be with you?”

Behind him, he was conscious of Riley going up the stairs, while Harry and Tom stared into each other’s eyes, Harry incandescent with outrage and Tom unruffled as ever. After a few long moments Tom seemed to have prepared an answer.

“I can’t say I’ve had a companion who was with me entirely of his or her free will. Who could ever feel free to refuse me?”

It wasn’t the answer Harry had expected. And while it excused nothing, it got under Harry’s skin in that old, familiar way, where Tom could twist something that made sense into something that didn’t, and throw Harry completely off balance.

Tom crossed his legs at the ankle and leaned against the wall. “Though I generally prefer those who at least believe themselves to be choosing, and eagerly at that.”

Harry was blushing, he knew. He thought of Riley over the years he’d known him: the bruises and marks, the way he shook his head and his quickly-hidden reaction to their lord entering a room: a shiver, a stare.

“And what do you prefer, Harry? To be asked, or told?”

Harry’s head and heart were a storm of confusion, that unwelcome fixation on Tom roaring back to life from the place where he could usually keep it contained and half-dormant.

“Asked,” he said at last, and almost meant it. He went to the kitchen, not because he had any remaining appetite but because he couldn’t help but flee.

Chapter End Notes

This. Chapter. I wrestled with it and it won. So I wrestled with it again, and it won. So I wrestled with it again and when it won I got tired and sent it to beta. I hope it was better than nothing. XD
Resolve

Chapter Summary

In which Hogwarts closes for an extended holiday.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as ever to Wolf_of_Lilacs for the beta. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Desire is a pain which seeks easement through possession.

Jack London

Peverell Ridge

Knowing that Harry was alive and back with their lord was a relief to Elspeth, though she noted with interest that her parents’ reactions were more mixed. When they got back to the house and collapsed onto the sofa next to one another, it was plain to see on their faces. Further proof, Elspeth thought bitterly, that they’d known where Harry had gone, and while it must not have been into purely safe circumstances, they hadn’t thought he was at any immediate risk while he was there.

Most people assumed the Oath was a perfect mechanism for obedience and loyalty. Certainly it was never openly discussed as otherwise, much less debated. But Elspeth had always known that wasn’t the entire story. She had her parents’ constant example to study, after all, and though they would never speak a word against their lord, nor take any overt action, Elspeth knew that in some hidden way, they defied his will. She had just never figured out exactly what that was.

With one exception. She knew for certain that when her father had taken her to choose the birch wand, now hidden somewhere out of her reach, he’d done so in the purest defiance. That knowledge was one reason she kept the secret so jealously, even from her mother. When it had disappeared from wherever he’d hidden it, she’d been terrified that someone had discovered what he’d done and was waiting to spring a trap. Eventually, though, he’d told Elspeth that the wand must just have moved itself. Magical objects did that, on occasion.

“Did they catch Hermione Granger?” she asked after a short silence, unable to contain the question any longer.

James looked at her with a wrinkled brow, distracted by other concerns. “Who?”

“Sirius Black’s champion,” Elspeth murmured tersely.

“I don’t know,” James said, and when Elspeth looked anxiously at her mother, Lily shook her head.

“Neither do I.”
“But would Lord Black have said?” Elspeth pressed.

“I don’t know that, either,” Lily said. “Is she a friend of yours?” she added, looking thoughtfully at her daughter.

Elspeth’s cheeks flamed; her body was always betraying her. She looked down to hide her reaction. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

Elspeth got up after a while and left the room. That way, she thought without rancor, her parents could discuss whatever they wanted to without worrying she’d overhear. She’d spent plenty of time as she grew up eavesdropping determinedly on their conversations, but she had no spirit for it right now. More than ever, she realized that if her parents were loyal to their lord’s enemies, then they were loyal to Harry’s enemies as well. It felt unconscionable, and yet, at the same time Elspeth hated their lord’s order. She had done so out of obedience to her parents’ indirect teachings as a child, but now she had seen enough to have a disdain for his rule all her own.

As though to confirm the accuracy of her opinion, she had the image of what Theo Knott must have looked like, dangling from one leg in the Great Hall, forever in her imagination. What had he done but have the wrong father? What had anyone in the world done, but commit that guiltless crime?

Leaving the room wasn’t enough; Elspeth wanted out of the house altogether. The castle indulged her, so that when she opened the door from the study where her parents were already huddling together, she was spilled straight into the back garden. Her mother’s rows of potions ingredients lined the raised beds. Elspeth walked down the slope toward the treeline, not really thinking, just going where her gut led her.

She saw the patches of stone through the climbing vine and realized she had walked directly to the abandoned stables, her old hiding place. Elspeth climbed through the empty place where a window had once been, as she used to almost daily before Hogwarts.

It was a much tighter fit than she recalled; the top of the frame grazed her back. When she slid to her feet inside the dim, mossy space, she was surprised to find it hadn’t changed much in the years since it last occurred to her to visit.

Or had it? While before Elspeth had always felt a reassuring sense of safety and solitude in this hideout, now she felt its magnetism as restlessness. She paced a circle, then two, and then felt a tingling in her right hand.

She looked down at it in surprise, wondering if she’d been stung or brushed past some kind of toxic pollen in the garden. But her skin looked ordinary; the energy, coursing from the heel of her hand to her fingertips then back in a rolling loop, was her own magic.

*Accio*, she thought, or maybe said, though she wasn’t sure.

There was a tremor in the half-buried stone tiles underfoot, and then, from the center of the room, a few of them loosened and burst out of the ground as though punched from below. A spray of soil accompanied them, and Elspeth stepped back in surprise just as a slender, pale wand erupted from the ground and sailed into her waiting hand.

She looked at it in shock. That insistent pulse in her magic immediately subsided, leaving Elspeth’s ears ringing in its sudden absence.

Her wand had been here, waiting for her, so patiently it hadn’t called for her once. Not until today.

She flexed her hand around the handle. What did the wand know about the significance of this day
That evening, her birch wand beneath her pillow and her willow wand on her desk, Elspeth wrote a letter.

There was probably no point, but the exercise of writing it felt important, so she did it anyway.

_Dear Hermione_, she began. It felt strange, to write it. While the words were merely formal, they felt intensely personal instead. She forced herself not to cross out the greeting right away, and moved on.

_This letter may not reach you, and if it did, you likely could not return it. But if there’s any chance it will, I have to send it, just so that you know how much I wish you well. And that, if there is ever anything that you need from me, you just have to find a way to ask._

The salutation was more difficult than the greeting. But at last Elspeth settled for the only one that felt right.

_Yours, Elspeth._

She considered which owl to choose from the roosts in the garden as she folded and sealed the parchment. Perhaps the old tawny owl, her mother’s favorite. Merlin knew he’d transmitted a forbidden message or twelve in his lifetime. But before she could rise from her chair and go down, a flurry of wind rushed through her open window, and she found a golden eagle resting there, his wings still half-spread.

Elspeth had never seen an eagle up close, and based on the eagle’s disgruntled expression, he had never seen a person up close, either. He barely fit on the window sill, so Elspeth moved back to let him hop comfortably onto the back of her chair. He did so, with what she perceived as a grateful look in his sharp eyes, and then looked very pointedly at the letter she clutched in her hand, half-forgotten.

She was reminded of her brother’s story of a Phoenix arriving in his room at Hogwarts, and how he was always careful to keep a window open in his rooms, weather permitting, as though the same kind of thing could happen again.

“Hello,” Elspeth said to the bird. “You’re...here for my letter?”

The eagle bobbed its head and stretched out its leg. Elspeth dubiously stepped forward to tie it on. As soon as she had, the bird flapped awkwardly back over to the window, squeezed through, then tumbled from the sill on the far side and quickly caught itself on its spread wings, rising back above the window frame and out of sight in a moment.

The only concrete evidence it hadn’t all been a figment of Elspeth’s imagination was the fact her letter was gone, and the long, dark-bronze tail feather resting on the desk in its place.

After a night’s sleep, and with both her wands close to her, Elspeth went down early in the morning and heard voices when she was halfway down the stairs. At first, the sound of Remus’ low murmur along with her parents’ made her want to run and greet him, but she paused instead, her old eavesdropping habit resurfacing in an instant.

“What about the ceremony?” Remus asked. He sounded strange—stiff—which was how Elspeth knew a moment before she heard the fourth voice that there was another person there.
“It will be held at the normal time. It takes too long to reconfigure all the spells, so it can’t be delayed,” said Sirius Black.

“The school won’t re-open, though?” her father asked.

“Not before fall,” Sirius answered.

“That is, assuming the war goes according to our lord’s plans,” James asked, just bitterly enough that everyone fell silent. Elspeth could imagine their pained expressions. She’d always thought of moments like this as everyone taking a beat to soothe their fractious Oaths.

“Is that what it is, then? War?” Sirius asked. He sounded sincerely curious.

“That’s what it’s always been,” Lily murmured. “We’ve been at war all along.”

The Floo chimed in the room, making Elspeth flinch, but no one came her way. She heard her parents speaking to one another, low voices receding as they went to answer the call. Then, Sirius’ softer, nearer voice.

“How are you?”

The question seemed strange to Elspeth, and apparently to Remus, too.

“That’s an odd question.”

“Is it?”

A strained silence grew between them, wherein Elspeth could hear her father’s voice in the background, but not whomever he spoke to.

“We’ve never really talked about what it’s like out there.”

“We haven’t talked about much of anything in sixteen years.”

“No,” Sirius agreed. They were quiet again, and Elspeth was sure she was hearing something she shouldn’t. But she also thought if she moved now, while they were tense and alert, they could find her out.

“Do you ever wonder…” Sirius began, tentative.

“Yes,” Remus said, almost angrily. Then again, quieter. “Yes.”

“Do you two want breakfast?” called Lily. “I’ll go get Elspeth.”

And then Elspeth had no choice but to back away as silently as possible, so she could pretend she had only just come down the stairs.

Slytherin Estate

By the time Harry got to the kitchens, the smell of the food that had enticed him before now turned his stomach. But he didn’t know where else to go, so he sat at the long, low wooden table in the middle of the large room while the elves hastily set a place for him and piled several plates with foods which were ordinarily his favorites.

Harry could hardly bring himself to acknowledge the elves; instead, he found himself studying the
table. It was scarred and ancient-looking, though he knew for a fact it hadn't been part of what was left of the castle's ruin when he'd come with Tom, Riley and Severus the day they bound the elves. This obvious age was characteristic of so many of the things that furnished the rooms. They often had the look of things which were quite old, or stirred Harry's sight with their layers of magic. There were several drawers, for example, which were determined to go unnoticed. When Harry, invulnerable to their tricks, opened them anyway, he had found some of the strangest things. Most affecting had been a stack of old love letters, unsigned and written in such a frantic scrawl they were difficult to read.

Where had these things come from? When the house manifested, it was full of furniture, decorative objects, loomed rugs, tapestries, anything you could think of to fill a sprawling magical residence. (Except, notably, portraits.)

The table made Harry think of the tables in the Great Hall. Supposedly you could find the kitchens in Hogwarts, too, but no one had ever revealed the way to Harry. He wondered if there were places in the Slytherin Estate molded by Harry's preferences, and if that was true, it baffled him. He had never had a particular appreciation for buildings or floor plans; what appealed to him was the atmosphere of a place. The sense he had, in certain ancient structures like Hogwarts, that he was in a place already worn-in by generations upon generations of people before him.

No one disturbed Harry. He wasn't sure why he had half-anticipated an interruption, since surely Tom and Riley would be—occupied—together for some time in another part of the house. The thought made Harry restless, and he pushed aside the food so he could plant his hands on the table and lever himself to his feet, then stalk off the way he'd come without eating a bite. He couldn't spare a thought for how baffled and distraught he'd be leaving the house elves.

Harry wasn't surprised to find the Floo powder missing from all the dispensers on every mantle in the estate. Nor was he surprised to find the Apparation chamber locked, or the front door magically barred.

Well, the door surprised him a little. He gave it a stern look, the way he had with obstacles around the house and grounds in the past, which had often resulted in the house hastening to accommodate his wishes. But today nothing happened, as if he was no one to the place after all. Or, more particularly, as a demonstration of to whom the house was ultimately loyal if Harry chose to put himself at odds with Tom.

It didn’t surprise Harry to be locked in, but it made his skin crawl.

He wandered the house over the course of the morning, inspecting rooms he hadn’t spent time in yet and avoiding the upstairs, not that he imagined that Tom would allow them to be overheard while they did—whatever it was they were doing. But rather because Harry thought he might struggle not to press his ear against the door.

To his shame, the thought of Riley, head hanging, wearing his collar, commanded Harry's imagination more so than his outrage. And to imagine Tom, strolling up the stairs after him, locking the door to his dim bedchamber behind him...

Harry grimaced, summoned his broomstick, and spent an hour in the ballroom flying circles and making deep, perilous dives before he happened to catch Tom leaning against the wall just inside the doorway, watching him.

Harry, eager for any opportunity to vent some frustration through belligerence, dropped down to the floor and let the broom fall with a clatter. He folded his arms and met Tom’s stare.
“You locked me in here.”

“For safekeeping,” Tom agreed. “I spent this morning patching wards around the grounds, so you’ll be able to go as far as the gates.”

“Generous of you,” Harry muttered, trying not to betray his surprise that Tom had not, actually, spent the last several hours with Riley.

Tom shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t want to have to wade through all your despair every time I need to check on you.”

Harry thought that over a moment. “You mean through the bond.” Tom nodded. “So, you’re leaving?”

“I’m needed,” Tom said simply. He must know how it pained Harry to be ignorant of what was going on outside the estate, because he had a sadistic look in his eye when he said, “You could join me, if you were to assure me of your allegiance.”

Harry steeled his jaw and said nothing. Before Dumbledore had melded the two hemispheres of his mind—the one that knew Tom, and the one that knew Voldemort—he would have had a singular reaction to the idea of accompanying Tom into battle, or standing at his right hand while he strategized. It would have been either excitement or horror. Now it was both, in equal measure.

“Since you won’t do that,” Tom continued as though unsurprised, “I’ll leave you here with what entertainment a vast and well-appointed estate can offer. And you may keep Riley.”

“Keep Riley?” Harry echoed. Tom sounded like he was talking about a pet, and it made Harry’s stomach turn again.

If he’d heard Harry he gave no sign. “I’ll have time to deal with both of you more effectively later,” Tom said. Then he straightened from his slouch against the doorway and looked expectant. Harry, confused, looked back.

“What?” Harry asked eventually.

Tom held out his hand, and the bond tugged in an unmistakable command. Harry folded his arms again. “I don’t have on a collar,” he snapped, and then realized the additional implications of what he’d just said. His neck prickled with heat.

Tom smiled slowly, unmoving, his hand outstretched. Harry rolled his eyes and walked over, but slowly. When he was near enough, Tom’s smooth palm slid over his elbow, cupping it, and Harry stopped so they stood a handspan from each other. Tom lifted his other hand and touched the tail end of Harry’s hair, which he’d tied back that morning in the usual way and without much thought. He felt a faint sting in his scalp as Tom’s fingertips deftly unraveled a tangle.

“The occasional doubt is inevitable,” Tom said conversationally. “It’s the natural side-effect of a rational brain, which I’m pleased to know you possess.” He stroked the inside of Harry’s elbow with his thumb, stirring an instant and illogical heat that spread through Harry’s entire body in a rush. Tom was watching the snarl in Harry’s hair, his eyelashes heavy on his cheeks. “But do not let doubt override your rationality,” he added, releasing Harry’s hair and elbow at once and placing his hands behind his back. “Doubt is not the central inevitability between us, you know.”

Harry was having a hard time following, whether because Tom was being deliberately cryptic or because he was distracted by the close warmth of Tom’s body, he couldn’t say.
“We will speak when I return,” Tom said at last, and took a backward step so that he didn’t brush against Harry when he turned and went, leaving Harry alone inside the ballroom doorway.

Eventually, he went in search of Riley.

Though Harry had always lived his life in semi-ignorance of the world’s events, he’d never felt such a painful curiosity until now. He imagined the Hogwarts grounds, swollen and seething with advancing Inferi, and Lord Knott above them. The fact he didn’t know how it had ended (aside from, presumably, with Tom triumphant) let alone seen it all play out for himself, rankled.

It wasn’t hard to locate the only other occupant of the vast house. Riley was in the same drawing room they’d favored when Harry had been there for Yule. He showed no signs of distress over the events of the day before. He was leaning against the arm of the sofa, a book open on his knees, his hair clean, bright and freshly-combed. The collar gleamed on his throat.

He looked up as Harry came in. “Hi,” he said, scanning Harry’s face with visible caution.

“Hi,” Harry replied, fidgeting in place then nodding toward the other end of the sofa. “May I…?”

Riley hastily moved his feet and set his book on the end table. “Yeah, sure.”

Harry sat down and rubbed his knees. “So we’re…”

“Cellmates,” said Riley with a rueful smile.

Harry was surprised into a smile. “I guess.” He bit his lip. “I’m sorry. I should have stopped him.”

Riley seemed confused for a moment, then his cheeks went faintly pink, but he was still smiling the slightest bit. “I know you’re sorry. But you couldn’t have done anything. And it’s…” he grimaced at last, but it was fleeting. He shrugged one shoulder like they were discussing bad weather, and not...this. “I guess it could be worse?”

Harry found that attitude rather bleak, but he could hardly argue with Riley about his own state of affairs. “So you’re—okay?” Harry asked. He tried not to look at the collar and failed. Riley nodded, still seeming mostly unperturbed. But then, Harry remembered, Riley was a very good actor. “And he’s gone for a while,” Harry added, not exactly a question, but Riley nodded again in answer. “When do you think he’ll be back?”

Riley shrugged again. “Dunno.”

“Does he go away a lot?”

“Yes,” Riley said. “He’s never here.” He looked around the room as though its familiarity was unwelcome. And it must be, Harry thought. He imagined Riley, virtually locked in before, and completely locked in now. It made Harry’s skin crawl.

“So, how do you pass the time?”

Riley leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out in front of him, then crossed them at the ankle. “I don’t know. Read.”

Harry made a small sound of distress, and Riley laughed. “Walk the grounds?” Harry sighed, and Riley laughed again. “Sometimes I brew potions.” When Harry shuddered, he snorted. “I guess we don’t have many interests in common.”
“Are you really interested in potions?”

“I think so. It’s one of the things I’ve always known a lot about.”

Harry couldn’t hide his surprise. “Really? But you’re...”

Riley gave him an even look. “A Squib? Don’t you know we have a long tradition of making trade in potions? There was a time when Squib potions were seen as inherently superior. Witches and wizards rarely brewed.”

“I didn’t know that,” Harry admitted. “I don’t know that I know much history.” He didn’t add that he knew plenty, if Dumbledore was to be trusted, about the limited history of Tom and his wars, and that was all.

“I guess you wouldn’t,” Riley said, but didn’t seem bothered. “And you don’t like potions.”

“It’s never come naturally to me.” Harry’s constant focus had been the flashier magics. He’d always wanted to impress Tom, on some level, even when he was only a first year seeking the passing favor of a distant lord. And now...

*Did you know I cannot take an Animagus, or conjure a living thing?*

“Well, maybe we do have something in common, then,” Riley was saying, sounding amused. Harry flopped down into the chair across from him. “Can you fly on a broom?” he asked shyly. He thought with longing of the open sky, and wondered if they could find a second broomstick somewhere.

“Presumably,” Riley said, “depending on the broom.”

“You’ve never tried?”

Riley shook his head, his small smile still in place, but he looked perplexed. “I’ve never really been tempted. And before you act incredulous, keep in mind that if I fell from a considerable height, I wouldn’t have any magic to cushion my fall.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “That makes sense.” Since the subject didn’t seem to be making Riley uncomfortable, Harry let himself ask, “How did you do it? Trick everyone?”

Riley looked slightly more guarded, but he answered, “A lifetime of practice, I guess. But we always try to stay out of sight. I didn’t intend to become so visible. I might have managed a lot longer otherwise.”

“Hogwarts,” Harry said slowly, “and the Tournament.” It made sense, as he thought about it, that Riley would have been wise to lie low. He couldn’t stop the Goblet from choosing him, but he could have quietly been eliminated in the first Task rather than making it all the way to the third, let alone winning. “Then why did you?”

“I can’t answer that,” Riley muttered, swallowing and looking away.

Harry nodded hastily. “Right. Of course not.”

Riley glanced at him. “It’s understandable that you would ask. Trust me, you’re not the first person who has.”

Harry didn’t have to ask to know that Riley was talking about Tom. “Did you tell him?”
“No,” Riley said lowly. “I literally can’t. Imagine an Unbreakable Oath, but worse.”

“Oh.” Harry looked down.

“I meant it when I said I was alright,” Riley insisted. “We could go out on the grounds and I’ll watch you fly, if you want.” It was ridiculous, Harry thought, that under the circumstances it was Riley who was trying to make Harry feel better. Still, the idea of flying and company, even if he wasn’t flying with someone, was too appealing to resist. He slid off the chair to his feet.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

As it turned out, being a prisoner was less terrible than Harry had thought. Still, he couldn’t keep himself from taking a restless turn around the grounds in the late evenings as the sun set, testing all the gates, just to be sure. On the third evening, he was sufficiently frustrated to give the main gate a halfhearted kick. It had a face carved into the stone above the lock, so it was easiest to anthropomorphize.

“You’re supposed to be my home, too,” he told the face. It didn’t react.

Back in the house, he flopped down across from Riley, who was shuffling the deck of cards they’d been amusing themselves with from time to time. But now Harry shuddered at the sight of the battered stack.

“Please, no more,” he pleaded. “I can’t believe we can’t find a single set of Exploding Snap cards around here,” he added moodily. But then, if they did play, it would probably just leave him worrying about Ron, who had always taken a particularly sadistic delight in the game.

“There are a few other options,” Riley said, placidly cheerful as ever, and went to the chest at the foot of the bookshelf. “Our Lord, in his infinite kindness, wanted to give me what non-magical toys he could round up.” He pulled out a long rectangular box. “How do you feel about Monopoly?”

“Never heard of it,” Harry said, but sat up with interest at the sight of the brightly-colored images on the lid. “It’s a Muggle game?” The idea held a forbidden allure.

“It’s just a game,” Riley said, but brought it over and sat it on the low table in front of the fire, unpacking the various pieces, the board, and a tray full of colored paper that baffled Harry most of all.

“What’s that for?”

“It’s money,” Riley said. “The one who winds up with the most wins the game.”

“Money?” Harry echoed doubtfully. The game had obviously been played with a lot; the bundles of papers were curling at the edges and some were discolored. There were cards, too, and a little pile of silver figurines. “You know how to play?”

“Not really.” Riley laughed. “I’ve only played a couple times as a kid. But there’s instructions. It takes ages, so even if it’s kind of boring, we’ll be occupied for hours.”

It wasn’t boring, but if it was a testament to Muggle principles of economics, Harry didn’t know how they’d ever maintained their own societies. When he mentioned this to Riley, he laughed and also looked vaguely offended.

“I don’t know if it’s a Muggle problem so much as an American one.”
“Were they really different, then? Muggles from one place to the next?” Harry knew there were differences in wizarding cultures, too, but economics had always been global, as far as he knew. It was part and parcel with being able to easily bridge continents with Floo travel or public Apparation stations.

“I think so,” Riley said, looking vaguely uncomfortable. “I mean, I’m not old enough to remember, or anything.”

Harry badly wanted to ask about Riley’s people. Had he grown up with Muggles? Squibs? Either way, how had he found an inroad into society? How had he been sent to Hogwarts? By whom?

Then Harry was distracted from his maudlin thoughts by Riley landing on a railroad and buying it.

“Not fair!” Harry insisted. “You can’t have all four!”

Riley laughed harder yet, brushed tears from his eyes, and shot back, “That is literally the aim of the game. Don’t you even know what a ‘monopoly’ is?”

Riley won, of course, but Harry clung ‘til the bitter end and was oddly morose seeing his few dollars packed back into the tray. At least the game had distracted him long enough that he thought he could sleep. Stretched out on the floor by the fire, he realized he had wound up just a few inches away from Riley, his elbows near the other boy’s knee.

“Are we going to be here forever?” he wondered, before he could stop himself.

Riley glanced down, then reached out to grab the dice and toss them in the box. “We won’t. He’ll come make amends with you. Probably sooner than later.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, his chest tight. “He doesn’t really need anything from me. I’m just...I’m just around because of the magic.” He meant the bond, and the accident of their magical compatibility, but he didn’t know how to put all of that into words. Riley didn’t ask any questions, though. He just went quiet, twisting a little to face Harry. Feeling suddenly awkward, Harry lifted himself up and sat, too, his legs folded and his back to the fire. It had just gotten chilly enough in the room for the Charms to light the logs, a sudden, soft burst of warmth against his shoulders and a golden light cast on Riley’s face.

“Harry,” Riley said calmly, and Harry looked at him, surprised by his quiet, serious tone. “You really don’t see yourself clearly at all, do you?”

Harry looked back at him thoughtfully, rubbing his right hand up and down his left forearm as a way to orient himself. It seemed like he’d noticed all at once how close they were to one another, how the firelight picked up all the gold in Riley’s curls and the warm light brown rings in his eyes. Harry’s thoughts traveled that path in which they’d worn a clear trail in the past few days. Riley and Tom, tangled up together, doing all the forbidden things that Harry didn’t even know how to want.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, only half-sure it counted as a response to Riley’s question.

“Well, I see you,” Riley said, voice still gentle. Then his mouth curved and there was a teasing lilt in his tone when he added, “I see you looking at me.”

Harry hung his head with an involuntary groan. “Oh, Merlin. That’s...I’m sorry.”

Riley chuckled. “Don’t be. I wish you could pity me a little less, but I’m also flattered.”
Harry looked up through his fringe. “I don’t pity you.” His gaze caught on the collar. “I’m...I just...I hate him,” he managed at last, with vehemence.

Riley snorted. Harry, startled, saw that wry smile Riley always seemed to wear.

“No you don’t,” he said quietly. Harry started to object, but found he couldn’t.

It was true, wasn’t it? Harry didn’t hate Tom. It was the root of most of his problems.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Riley murmured. He reached out and tucked a lock of Harry’s hair behind his ear, and Harry shivered. “You think you can be a little closer to him by being with me.” He looked sad, and Harry didn’t contradict him, which made him look sadder yet. Then he sighed, looked Harry in the eye, and leaned forward to kiss him.

It was quite like kissing Lavender, as it turned out. She had been direct, like Riley, and had the same aura of experience and a clear objective. But instead of Lavender’s perplexing softness and the scent of flowers, Harry inhaled the grassy scent of clean male skin, and felt the rasp of stubble from Riley’s lower lip. When Riley’s hands cupped the side of Harry’s face, they were strong and long-fingered and made him whimper.

“This is how he’d like you,” said Riley in a rough murmur, drawing back enough from Harry’s mouth to look at it, tracing his thumb over Harry’s slack lower lip, pulling it down to press into the wetness of the inside. “Soft and willing, just like you are.”

Harry had a feeling he wasn’t meant to say anything, which was fortunate since he had no words. He’d thought it might be uncomfortable, kissing another man. That somehow, his fantasy of Tom would contrast and interfere. Instead, he found himself drawn to the things that were simply Riley.

His golden-green eyes were warm, his mouth pulled taut, betraying how affected he was.

Harry scooted closer, trying not to let the awkwardness of the movement distract either of them. He leaned in and did to Riley’s neck what Lavender had once done to his. Riley seemed to like it even more than Harry had; he fisted a handful of Harry’s hair tight enough to hurt.

Harry moaned involuntarily. Riley laughed and tugged harder, forcing Harry’s head back so that they could look at each other, and for some reason the sting of his scalp and the way that Riley looked down his nose at him made Harry feel weak.

Riley sucked in a breath and very abruptly let Harry go, disentangled himself and got to his feet. He took several steps away as Harry slowly rose to his feet as well, watching Riley’s shoulders rise and fall forcefully. Harry could hear his harsh breaths too.

“Did I...you can tell me if I did something wrong.”

Riley laughed once, then turned, raking both hands through his hair so the curls became looser and fuller, making him look thoroughly debauched. How had Harry failed to realize how handsome Riley was? It was impossible to ignore in that moment, with his shirt riding up to reveal a strip of tanned bare stomach, his eyes gone dark with the excitement of what they’d just been doing, his color high and his mouth red from their kisses.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Riley said. He brushed his hands over his own chest absently, straightening his wrinkled shirt. “You were perfect.”

This answer did nothing to resolve Harry’s confusion, but he still nodded shortly, because Riley seemed to be waiting for an acknowledgment. He hesitated, then thought he had to ask. “But you don’t want to...um, do...that kind of thing? With me?”
Riley chuckled rather bleakly. “Oh, Harry. I forget sometimes that you’re just a kid.” He must have seen Harry’s hackles start to rise at that because he sighed and walked forward slowly to carefully take his hands. “You are. You’re still at Hogwarts, for one, and most relevant to our present circumstance, you’ve never…well.”

Harry lifted his chin. “I have,” he informed Riley, then blushed at Riley’s skeptical look.

“Well, I thought I could, um, indulge you.” Now, to Harry’s fascination, Riley was the one to blush. “But I can’t, as it turns out.”

Harry still didn’t understand this explanation, but he nodded anyway.

“I’m sorry, really, but there must be someone at Hogwarts...”

Harry bit his lip, wondering what would happen to someone if Lavender found out he was doing anything like what they did with anyone else.

“There kind of is,” he admitted slowly, and watched Riley to gauge his reaction. He didn’t look surprised.

“The witch, you mean,” he said, and when Harry nodded so did Riley. “That was never my thing, really, but plenty of people like both. So long as you’re happy, Harry. That’s what counts.”

Happy. The idea of it was baffling. He tried to think of someone he knew who was happy. He was still thinking and didn’t have a name when Riley jerked his head toward the door.

“I’ll be going up to bed, then,” he said gently. Harry bit his lip and nodded.

“Yeah, okay.”

As soon as Riley was gone, Harry went up to his own rooms. He slid under his sheet, kicked out of his trousers and didn’t psychoanalyze himself. For the first time in as long as he could remember, his fantasy had a definite object who was not Tom. He imagined Riley’s smell, the taste of the warm skin on his neck, and imagined one of those large, gentle hands was on Harry’s body. That and the sure rhythm Harry set meant it didn’t take long.

He felt the bond stir as though with interest, and really tried not to think about that.

Chapter End Notes

Behold my adherence to my posting schedule! I'd love to know your thoughts. <3
Sway

Chapter Summary

In which plans culminate.

Chapter Notes

I’m still here!

Enormous thank you to Wolf_of_Lilacs for hanging with me, and the beta. ❤

When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.

Maya Angelou

Cologne, Germany

Elaine was in America, where John couldn’t follow. He had expected to miss her, despite her razor tongue and her delight in drawing blood with it. He’d expected to wander the German flat alone and drink too much. Loneliness was bad for him.

Instead, when he woke up at two o’clock and sat up in bed, he wasn’t alone. There was Charlie, tousled hair in a shiny red pile on John’s pillow, which he’d snatched at some point after they’d fallen asleep, the other one wedged between his thighs.

Since John, Elaine and Charlie met, they’d all been drawn together, again and again. Maybe they were apart for weeks or months at first, but when the opportunity presented itself, they fell back together without discussion or negotiation. Eventually it stopped feeling strange. John understood his attraction to Elaine and her sharp edges, her scathing brand of affection. He understood there was something broken in him that would always gravitate toward someone like that.

Charlie was more of a puzzle. He was sweet, unconsciously generous, and oblivious to all of his own charms. He was the sort of person to whom people were drawn, and even cynical John was no exception. But why Charlie stayed was beyond John’s understanding.

Elaine had thawed toward Charlie a bit, and he clearly craved her dominance. Yet he always had a thoughtful reserve with John. John had assumed that with Elaine gone, even temporarily, Charlie would absent himself too.

Instead, here he was.

John leaned over him to make sure he was asleep, then got out of bed and walked, naked and barefoot, to the single window in the flat. The room was wedge-shaped, comprising one-third of one level of the First Tower, a famous conical wizarding structure transplanted from old German
wizarding space. Each of its stones was lined with carved runes in an alphabet no one remembered, but which kept it stable and upright for at least a thousand years. John felt their pattern under his thumbs when he pressed his hands into the windowsill and put his face close to the glass.

Maybe he’d imagined the sound of an owl knocking?

But no, there it was, a blurry shape against the cloudy night sky, circling back. There was nowhere for it to land on the exterior side of the wall, so it had apparently hovered as long as it could then flown off to rest elsewhere. This time, as it approached John opened the window, and it settled onto the sill in the opening. Its variety wasn’t familiar to John, but it was a large bird with grey and white feathers, and it held out its leg impatiently so John could collect the post, then flew off at once.

John closed the window behind it, breaking the seal on the envelope and straining to make out the very familiar, fine handwriting in the dark room.

*Oath-taking to be held as-scheduled despite school closure.*

The bedclothes rustled, and when he looked up, he saw Charlie squinting at him, one hand curled over his mouth as he stretched his jaw in a yawn.

“What is it?” he asked.

Before John could answer, he reached the second and last line of Elaine’s unsigned note.

*Don’t tell Charlie.*

He folded the letter back up and set it on the table by the window, shrugging. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, which wasn’t exactly a lie. What did anything matter? He kneeled onto the bed and then dropped to all fours and crawled over Charlie’s warm, pliant body, bracketing him with his hands and thighs. Charlie was so guileless—he didn’t suspect a distraction—only let his legs fall open beneath John.

“Not a summons, then?” he asked, quirking a smile. They’d been hiding out in this rare lull between assignments. Well, it wasn’t a lull for Elaine, of course, but usually at least two of the three of them were occupied, only able to steal a night here and there. John and Charlie had managed to spend almost three full days in bed together, only interrupted by the occasional ducking out for supplies. It had been rainy, too, which had been their excuse.

“We have nowhere we have to be,” John promised, kissing him.

Everything was gentler when it was just the two of them. John could take his time, without Elaine’s instructions driving everything into a frantic pitch. He could look Charlie directly in the eye as he went from grinning to open-mouthed and breathless. John knew Charlie’s body well, and could coax certain noises from him at will. A whimper when he bottomed out and ground down. A low cry when he leaned forward to adjust the angle. A moan when he closed his hand around Charlie and tugged in the same rhythm as his thrusts.

Charlie fell back asleep afterward, his head on John’s chest. Usually John would be drowsy too, at least for a few hours. All his life he’d had to patch together a couple hours here and there in the course of a night, punctuated by stretches of waking. Coming usually helped. But tonight all he could think of was Elaine’s note, and the order he wouldn’t have questioned once, but which now didn’t sit well with him.

Why didn’t she want Charlie to know?
At an ordinary hour, Charlie woke up, nuzzling sleepily into John’s chest.

“What are we going to do today?” he murmured.

John stroked his hair. “Are you complaining about yesterday’s agenda?”

Charlie shook his head, laughing, and propped himself up on his forearm, braced over John’s chest. “No, but I’d like a little fresh air.” He looked almost shy. “Would you fancy going flying?”

John was surprised. Usually Elaine had to tease Charlie into “volunteering” his animagus.

“Do you really want to?” John couldn’t conceal his interest. There was something shamefully sexy about watching Charlie’s transformation. It wasn’t that John wanted to fuck a dragon, exactly, just that he liked remembering that the person he wanted to fuck could become one, at will.

“I like it,” Charlie confessed, blushing. “It feels...freeing.”

“Then let’s go.”

They got dressed for the public, as they had to find a place with sufficient space for Charlie to transform. While they walked, John slung his arm around Charlie’s shoulders, and Charlie leaned into him. There were few people out and about, and John wondered uneasily whether it was because of the Oath-taking, or merely a coincidence. Their lord did like his ceremonies well-attended.

Charlie didn’t seem to notice, leaning his head against the crook of John’s shoulder and studying the sky, his lips pursed.

“It’s a good day for it,” he said, yawning. “Clear. Still.”

“What’s it like?” John asked, not concealing a wistful note in his tone. “Becoming something that...big, and strong?”

Charlie laughed ruefully. “Well, in addition to being impossible to explain, it’s probably different for me than it would be for you. Since you’re, you know. Already big, and strong.” He winked and John was startled into his own laugh.

“I’m immensely flattered you’d compare me to a dragon.”

Charlie shook his head, pulling away but still walking close to John’s side so their arms brushed. “I just mean, I’m not used to intimidating anyone. I was a little more smug about it when I was younger. Now I just think it’s...I don’t know, it doesn’t surprise me, now. The form isn’t about similarities on the outside, I guess. Obviously. It’s about how you’re like the form on the inside. And it’s always been there, even when I didn’t know what it was.”

He caught sight of John’s frown and grimaced. “Does that not make any sense?”

“No, it does,” John said slowly. “It just makes me wonder...you know, what everyone who can’t change wonders. ‘What would mine be?’”

Charlie nodded understandingly. “I get that.” He paused mid-stride and turned to face John, who stopped too, surprised. They were near the grassy park where Charlie had changed before, and which he assumed to be their destination.
“I think you’d be something quiet,” Charlie decided, crossing his arms.

John smiled. “Oh? Quiet like a mouse?”


For some reason, John’s cheeks warmed at the statement, and he avoided Charlie’s eye. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Something steady and smart.” He slid his hand into John’s and began walking again, through the open gate into the park.

John looked at his feet. “Like what?”

“Maybe a tortoise,” Charlie thought aloud.

“What!” All feelings of flattery vanished at once and John gaped. “A...tortoise?”

Charlie looked up at him and laughed again. “Oh no. Did I offend you?”

John snorted. “I would not be a tortoise.”

Charlie shrugged, carefree, and rolled his shoulders. He let go of John’s hand and jogged several yards away, his arms lifted like he was already ready to fly. The sun came down on his red-gold head and John’s thoughts faltered. He wasn’t sure he wanted to watch Charlie turn into a dragon, not anymore. He’d rather walk the park hand-in-hand, hearing him laugh. The idea of anything interrupting the past few moments was so unwelcome he felt ill.

It was just a side-effect of an unnatural three-day-long period of intimacy, he was sure. He’d come to his senses soon enough.

*

That night, John fell asleep before Charlie. That was how he missed the second owl.

He woke to the sounds of drawers slamming and a chair toppling over when Charlie jerked his robes from where they’d been slung over its back and began pulling them on, swearing under his breath.

John sat up, feeling like he’d woken in the middle of a battle. “What…?” he demanded, squinting at Charlie as he groped beneath his pillow for his wand.

“I have to get to Hogwarts,” Charlie snapped. “I’ll have to...I can’t Apparate to the Floo, probably, but I could fly...if I leave now…”

“Of course you can’t take the Floo,” John said tersely. The oath would turn him inside out if he tried to anyone under the oath who Apparated outside of a registered travel point, unless they were one of their lord’s favorites. There was a scroll on the floor near the window, as though Charlie read it as soon as he’d taken it from the owl, and then thrown it aside. John already knew what it would say, but still he summoned it to him and skimmed the hurried scrawl across the parchment.

The oath flared at the message there and an ache radiated through his head, so strongly it made him grit his teeth.
“How could your brother even write something like this?” he hissed, rubbing his forehead. “Isn’t he sworn?”

Charlie shot a hunted look over his shoulder, his gaze falling to the letter and then directly back to John’s face, guarded.

John rolled his eyes, crumpled the letter, tossed it in the air and aimed a quick Incendio at it so that it drifted to the floor in chunks of ash.

“I’m not...I can’t…” Charlie dragged his hands through his hair. “I have to get to Bill. Tell him, somehow. I…” He made a pained face.

John got up, his worry peaking. Charlie let him grasp his forearms, but he felt rigid as stone under John’s hands.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Charlie closed his eyes tightly and said the words in a rush, just disassembled enough the oath wouldn’t carve a hole in his throat or his heart, but clear enough in context that John could parse their meaning.


“Oh,” John said breathlessly. “Oh.” He tried to pull Charlie closer, but Charlie fought him with a dragon’s strength, getting away and nearer the door.

“You’ll get yourself killed!” John growled. “You can’t go there. Why would you? So you can watch? There’s nothing you can do.” He thought of something else. “It could be fine. We don’t know.”

Charlie shuddered. “I remember it. Don’t you?”

John did. The oath’s settling had been like having lead poured over him. A moment of death before his magic had flared back and burned through the tiny porous places in the oath’s suffocating fabric. A second layer seemed unavoidably deadly, but maybe the magic worked in a way that John didn’t understand.

“I’ve got to try something,” Charlie said brokenly. “I’ve got to.”

John didn’t know what to say. “I can’t help you.”

A shadow passed over Charlie’s expression, then he tightened his jaw. “I wasn’t asking you to,” he said, dangerously quiet. Then he looked at the ceiling a moment before his gaze landed back on John. “Good bye, then.”

John put his hand over his mouth, then ran it over the back of his head. His braid was fuzzy from being ground into the pillows earlier, when he and Charlie had…

“Good bye,” he said quietly. Their eyes locked for a short moment before Charlie nodded, grim and decisive, and went out the door. John didn’t stop him, and though the oath made his teeth ache, he didn’t go to the desk to pen a letter to anyone warning them a dragon might be coming for the oath-taking. The only way he kept from doing it was reminding himself over and over of a critical and agonizing fact.

Charlie couldn’t do anything affirmative in opposition to their lord. Charlie was sworn. The oath
would take him down if he dared to try, and he seemed determined to so dare.

Weasley House, Devon
May 29, 1997

It was evening. The official summons was unrolled between the twins and Bill on the little table in the study. They had all taken turns reading it, and were now staring at it with the same troubled frown.

“We thought we’d dodged it, with the school closure,” George murmured. He kept looking at Fred, who had his arms folded, his expression pensive.

“It could be all right,” Bill said slowly.

“We have no way of knowing,” Fred said, shrugging, “until we do it.” He was avoiding George’s eye. It was strange, seeing them off-balance with one another. In fact, Bill was sure he’d never seen them act that way before. Fred looked at him, still with a frown. “Where’s Charlie?”

Bill snorted. “Off doing our lord’s work, I assume. I don’t know.”

“The oath only cares about blood,” George murmured. “Right?” He looked between Bill and Fred while Fred looked down.

“It won’t come to that,” Bill said firmly. “It’ll be fine.” He did his best to sound sure, though how could he be? “Mum should stay at Shell Cottage. She hasn’t been out in public for years, and no one’s said anything.” He rolled the wand that had belonged to Septimus Weasley before him back and forth in his palm. “Besides, I don’t want her leaving father alone so long.”

“What about Percy?”

“They don’t expect him. Maybe he can stay with her too.”

Fred said thoughtfully, “There’s not much we can do about Ron. He has to distance himself from the Notts. He’ll have to come. But I hope Charlie is able to stay away.”

“You’re being quite negative, Fred,” Bill admonished. “It’ll be fine.”

“Where is Ron?”

“Sitting with dad.”

Fred finally seemed to snap out of his distant attitude and stared at Bill. Bill shrugged uneasily. “I think they both like the...quiet.”

They all took a breath.

Bill shook off the strained silence. Negativity wasn’t going to do any of them any good. “Why don’t you two go do...whatever you feel like doing. I’ll get your robes made and your wands registered.” He held out his hand and the twins finally looked directly at one another in a demonstration of their typical symbiosis.

“We’ll hold onto our wands for now,” Fred said after a half-moment, with a mischievous smile for Bill. “Never know when we’ll need them.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “I was going to offer you one of the spares, but fine,” he allowed. They filed out of the room toward the Floo and he wondered idly where they were going. He half-hoped
they’d come back and half-hoped they wouldn’t.

* 

Ron wasn’t actually sitting with their father. He’d been using “keeping Dad company” as an excuse to be left alone, but in truth he spent most of his time walking. He walked the beach, he walked the sparse little forest, and he sat by the feeble stream fed by some source embedded in the central, rocky hill.

He could have roamed the outdoors all night, too, but instead he forced himself to go inside, though the walls felt like they could drop in and crush him at any moment. He ate food he couldn’t taste. He thought about Theo.

In fact, he thought of Theo so often and so vividly that when their lord brought him, he thought he was imagining it at first.

It happened late in the evening, when the house was asleep. Lady Lestrange and Master Snape came first to check the wards, and to make sure there wasn’t an errant Weasley lying in wait to attempt an assassination. So by the time their lord arrived himself, the commotion downstairs had already woken Ron and he was poised on the middle of the central staircase.

As always, their lord materialized without a sound. Like every other home of a sworn citizen, the ancestral wards at Weasley House were keyed to accept him. He was holding the Knott Heir tightly by his right forearm. Theo looked pale and there was a long, thin scar looping through his left eyebrow and disappearing into the hair at his temple, but he looked alert and mostly whole. Ron’s throat went dry at the sight of him.

Bill greeted their lord with a stiff nod, and their lord adjusted his grip on Theo so that he could position him in front of him, hands on his shoulders. “I’ve brought you a Ward, Lord Weasley,” he told Bill, and gave Theo a firm push in Bill’s direction. Caught off-guard, Theo stumbled, then gained his balance and walked forward to bow his head to Bill.

“My Lord Weasley,” he said quietly, in a voice that was uncharacteristically rough. Ron had a strong impulse to say or do something that would attract Theo’s notice, but his baser instincts kept him motionless.

“Thank you, my lord.” Bill paused, and then as though he couldn’t help himself he added, “Is he an orphan, then?”

Their lord’s eyes gleamed. “He is Lord Knott. But your house shall hold his property and his subjects in trust until I determine he has reached the age and maturity necessary to manage them.”

Bill bent his head.

Ron thought hollowly of Lord Knott as Ron had always known him. Fierce and exceptional, terrifying and powerful, but in the end no match, it appeared, for his lord. That was the implication of the Oath, which Ron had always understood in theory. To see and feel it in reality, though, made his stomach turn and his jaw tight. He looked at Bill and knew they wore similar expressions. But like Ron, Bill said nothing.

“I have another matter to attend to before I leave you to get to know one another,” said their lord. He turned toward the dark staircase, his eyes landing on Ron’s immediately and without surprise. “Ronald, isn’t it? I require you. Come here.”

Bill’s head jerked up. Theo turned slowly in Ron’s direction. Ron was only peripherally aware; his
lord’s attention had commanded him, and he couldn’t look away. He nodded and hoped he could navigate the stairs without stumbling, though even his living hand felt nerveless on the bannister and his feet were awkward and heavy. When he reached the landing, their lord was waiting there. He had drawn his wand.

“My lord…” murmured Bill. “May I ask, as his brother—his Lord—what..?”

“You may not,” Lady Lestrange said coolly. She’d been standing aside but now stepped out of the shadows and pointed her wand matter-of-factly at Bill. He made a low noise and said nothing more.

“To signify the extent to which your family is granted my favor,” said their lord, “I shall restore your brother, Lord Weasley. Provided he is prepared, now, to take his Oath. Ronald?”

Ron had been preparing himself for many things, but the Oath-taking wasn’t among them. He was supposed to have a year to decide how to become prepared for that.

“He’s not yet seventeen,” Bill said quietly weakly.

“Age is arbitrary.” Their lord looked only at Ron, intent but impassive. “Will you swear to me, Ronald Weasley, that your magic is mine, that you will not weaponize your voice or your actions against me, that you shall only ever advocate for my advancement and that the only name I shall bear to you is lord?”

There was nothing to do but say, “I swear,” so Ron said it. He hadn’t realized, but Master Snape had stepped between them to bind the oath with a raised wand and a murmured bit of Latin Ron couldn’t make out through his ringing ears.

For a moment he only felt the natural tension of standing before their lord and the dizzying shock of having Theo in the house and as close to safe as anyone could be in this world. Then it hit him, a surge of energy that churned inside him and boiled into a hot and stifling energy, like every cell in his body and every bit of his magic was rejecting the oath. He thought it felt like death. And just when he became terrified, it was over.

Or at least, the worst of the sensation. But the itchy aftertaste was still coating him, so he’d never forget.

“Now, Ronald, your hand?”

Not understanding, and still lost in the shock of the sudden oath, Ron held out his living hand. Then he saw their lord’s mouth compress, as though torn between irritation and amusement, and he slowly let it fall back to his side and held out his prosthesis.

Their lord reached out without preamble and wrenched the prosthesis from its harness. The stump was always sensitive, but though Ron’s eyes watered at the pain of the rough handling, he didn’t move. Their lord tossed the prosthetic hand carelessly aside, set the point of his wand tip on the throbbing, scarred-smooth flesh around Ron’s wrist bones, and incanted.

“Apologia.”

*

Slytherin Estate

Harry wasn’t sure what he’d expected when he came downstairs to answer the Floo chime, but it
wasn't Fred and George Weasley, uncharacteristically mirthless, shoulder to shoulder like they were ready to duel whomever appeared in the doorway. Seeing it was Harry, they relaxed.

Sometimes they were so similar to one another, not just in looks but in each and every mannerism, Harry was sure he was seeing double and there was only one of them after all.

Still, he knew it was Fred when he spoke. "Harry, we're looking for..."

"Riley," George breathed, looking over Harry's shoulder. Harry turned, too, to find Riley standing behind him in the doorway with a stricken look.

"Fred, George," he said slowly. "What..."

They were advancing like a unit, gently pressing past Harry so they could surround Riley. He was half a head taller than them so Harry could easily make out his expression over their heads. He looked anxious.

"Don't..." he started to say, darting a look at Harry. Fred glanced over his shoulder at Harry, then shrugged.

"It's okay, we trust him."

"For no good reason," George added, briefly squeezing Harry's arm.

"That's not it," Riley went on tersely, and lifting a hand, jerked down the neck of his shirt.

At the sight of the gleaming collar, Fred and George were quiet.

"Is that...?" George began hesitantly.

"Yes," Riley confirmed.

They both stepped back. “Well, don’t feel ashamed on our account,” Fred said smoothly after a moment of strained silence. “We’re taking our Oaths tomorrow. Thought we’d visit first, since you’re accepting guests.”

“I am?” Harry realized that the purpose of this fortress was dubious if people could just waltz in the Floo at will.

“Yes, by appointment,” Fred said with a sly smile. “To those of a house in good standing. Doubt
our magic will work, though.” He drew his wand experimentally, gave it a wave, and grimaced. “As I suspected.”

“Do we really have time…?” George murmured. Fred looked thoughtful.

“I’d like to spend some time with Harry and Riley, regardless.”

George, ashen, nodded. Harry rubbed his furrowed brow. He’d never really figured out how to track the twins’ conversations, though he’d always been better than most, even among Gryffindors.

“Anything I can help you with?” Harry asked pointedly.

Fred shrugged, and George glanced at him then gave an identical shrug a moment later.

“I don’t think so,” Riley said quietly. “Let’s just hang out.”

Fred and George insisted on a tour, loudly ridiculing every aspect of the house the entire time. *Who needs four ballrooms? Is that a snake pit?*

Somehow they all wound up on the roof. The curvy exterior design had a mostly-flat roof with only a slight dome. It felt like standing at the top of a high plain, the landscape spread out around them and the sky bold and fathomless above.

“It’s strange, to be without magic,” Fred said, stepping closer to the edge and observing the sheep drop beyond his toes. “If I fell, I’d die.”

George made an impatient noise and pulled him back. “That’s melodramatic, even for you,” he said sharply. The twins stared at each other.

Harry, surprised by this break in the twins’ typical irreverence for all things serious and especially one another, shot a quizzical look at Riley. Riley was looking at the twins but with a distracted distance in his eyes, and he was stroking his collar in a quick rhythm, as though unconsciously.

“Our lord could return any time,” Riley said stiffly. The twins looked at him, their eyebrows drawing together into identical expressions. Normally seeing that sort of response from them would make Harry smile, but despite the forced levity of their visit, he couldn’t find any humor in the moment.

“We’ll need to let Bill tailor our robes, I suppose,” Fred said, glancing at George, who nodded. They embraced Riley, keeping their arms slung around him, one on either side, as he walked them back toward the Floo Foyer.

Harry trailed behind, feeling ignorant and helpless. Was this how everyone who lived under the oath always felt? The bond was its own, deeper version of that magic, he imagined. Just as deeply tied to his magic and thought and intent. It was the tether, all over again, horrible in its ownership.

But there was more to it than that, a small but fierce inner voice reminded him.

“See you tomorrow?” Fred asked Harry, nudging his arm. Harry looked up, surprised to find they’d already wandered down the twisting staircase and through the open double doors into the foyer, and the twins were poised to leave. George held a handful of powder.

“Right,” Harry said, then grunted in surprise when Fred seized him in a brief, strong hug. George smiled at Harry, but looked uncharacteristically solemn. Then he threw the powder and Fred called,
When the twins were gone, Harry turned to Riley, whose expression was so stricken, Harry was taken aback.

“What is it?”

Riley shrugged, blinking rapidly. “Nothing. Or, you know, nothing that anyone can do anything about.”

That statement made Harry look at the collar. “Is it…”

“Nothing,” Riley said firmly. He touched the collar again, confirming Harry’s suspicion. Not that Riley would say anything even without the collar, not to Harry. Harry wasn’t objective, or apart from Tom, and it was obvious that the twins had come here needing something adverse to their lord. Needing it so badly they risked coming to his house, coming to Harry. But what could Riley have done for them?

There was no way to ask, and Riley’s hands were shaking, so Harry reached out and held onto one of them. Riley looked at him in surprise. His eyes were wet with tears that hadn’t broken free, a lens of moisture that made them look more green than brown.

“Maybe it’ll be okay,” Riley said, squeezing Harry’s hand.

Harry still had no idea what they were talking about, but he smiled reassuringly. “I think everything is going to be fine,” he said firmly.

Riley laughed, dashed at the tears in his eyes and walked toward the doorway from the Floo foyer and back to the rest of the house. “Let’s get drunk,” Riley suggested. “How about that?”

Harry followed, towed by their linked hands. “Whatever you want,” he said, distractedly. He was thinking about what he’d just said — that everything would be fine — and he realized he believed it, somehow. He knew it was perverse, but he thought he and Tom could sort things out. That though Tom had done and caused horrible things — though he’d been Voldemort — Harry saw a part of him no one else did. He’d been inside Tom’s mind, after all. Where things were bright and swirling and limitless. It was a frightening but beautiful place and it made Harry believe, perhaps foolishly, that Tom’s version of the world could be beautiful too. He was different than everyone thought. Or, he could be different.

Harry was sure of it.

* *

The bond opened some time in the night. The feeling of it woke Harry. Like someone had laid their hand on his sleeping back. A presence where there was none a moment before.

He’d fallen asleep on the sofa, Riley’s head on his thigh, their forgotten whiskey glasses on the side table. The fire burned on, steadily. The house elves wouldn’t let it falter until they were given another order. Or maybe the house kept it burning. The thought of the house catering to Harry’s wishes made him think of Peverell Ridge with a burst of longing.

He felt Tom prodding along the bond before he heard him. You’re not angry.

Harry’s hand had been buried in Riley’s hair. Now Riley’s scalp was sweaty and he seemed to be drooling on Harry’s leg. Harry curved his fingers and raked through Riley’s curls to cool him.
I’m not not angry.

Hm.

Harry leaned his head back and watched the fire. *I want the world to be good and fair.*

Amused. *I know.*

*I want you to be good and fair.*

A flare of irritation.

*But, Harry added hastily, I’ll settle for you just being a force for goodness and fairness.*

A long thoughtful pause that Harry might have mistaken for the end of the conversation, if he hadn’t felt Tom there, with him in his mind, inspecting all that Harry left open, gauging Harry’s sincerity.

*Why do you think I care what you want?*

Harry smiled. This time he was the one to sail through the bond, feeling a moment’s instinctive resistance from Tom before he broke through. There it was. The warmth without temperature and the color without light. All the parts of Tom that language had no words for because it was only by magic that Harry could experience them at all. He felt oddly, painfully grateful. He pulled his hand from Riley’s hair and pressed his fingers against his closed eyes, leaving his fingertips wet with tears.

*I know you care. And you — you know. I care, too. You know that.*

Hm.

*

Weasley House, Devon

Fred woke to the sound of wingbeats and thought for a moment that Charlie had come.

But it was just an ordinary owl, bringing something to another window in the house. Fred turned onto his side and faced the wall that he’d been staring at most of the night.

Fred thought Charlie would come. That Charlie would somehow fix everything. If he’d known he wouldn’t, he might have done more. Planned more. George was worried, but George didn’t realize how worried they should be, and Fred didn’t tell him. Keeping something from his twin was alien, and yet, he couldn’t bring himself to share this aspect of his old secret. That meant that Fred was alone in his mind, too. He was used to sharing every thought he had with George, whether it was conveyed in words or simply a glance or gesture. Now he guarded himself as though George, too, was a being apart from him, and he was surprised by how untethered he felt. Floating, already gone.

Maybe he was being morbid or cynical, but he couldn’t imagine surviving a second ceremony. He remembered the first oath-taking, standing beside Charlie to wait, and how strange it had felt, being in Bill’s body. How he was taller than Charlie, whom he’d logically assumed he’d outgrow one day, but not in an instant, with the foul taste of Polyjuice lingering in the back of his throat. He remembered how, despite himself, he was vibrating with fear when his turn came to walk up on the dais. The way their lord’s icily beautiful face looked upon him calmly. How he’d raised his wand
and Fred felt sick. All he could think was that this was the magic that had torn his father’s voice from his throat, and he was about to invite it into his own body.

He remembered the way the oath had blanketed him like an invisible wave. Before it settled he couldn’t see or hear or think or breathe, and he’d emerged from its veil gasping, feeling like an hour had past, when it had been less than a moment. Not even enough time for him to do more than stagger for balance where he stood.

He couldn’t have explained it to George even if he’d wanted to. And he didn’t want to. George would try to intervene. George would tell Bill. They’d sworn to Charlie and to one another that they wouldn’t tell Bill. It wasn’t a magical oath of course, but it felt all the more important for it.

Still, he had thought Charlie would come, somehow. Save him the way he’d saved George, when Bill had told them the plan and Charlie had at first agreed. “We need to be free to fight,” Bill had said seriously, looking from one twin’s face to the other while, over his shoulder, Charlie looked pale with doubt. “You two understand, right?”

Charlie pulling them aside. “I can’t ask you to do this for me,” he’d said brokenly to George. Then to them both, “I won’t ask you two to lie to one another, but will you both lie to Bill?”

They said they would, and they had. From that day years before until this one. Charlie had said he wouldn’t ask them to lie to one another, but Fred supposed it was always inevitable that it would come to this. They had been born identical, their magic a shared thing they passed back and forth. The first thing to truly divide them in their lives was the oath, and over the years it had done its corrosive work.

There was a firm knock on the door. In the bed next to Fred’s, George sat up and they turned to one another in the dim light. Fred knew he would be faceless to George, but there was just enough light coming in the window behind him to illuminate half of George’s face. He looked like he’d slept even less than Fred.

“Ready?”

“As ever.”

They got up, dressed in the robes Bill had fetched them. George caught Fred’s wrist.

“If…”

“I can’t,” Fred said firmly. He took George by the opposite wrist so they mirrored one another. “Right now, anything will tempt it.” He meant it. The oath felt like it had laid him under a guillotine, blade hovering above him, the rope strained with splitting force. And he didn’t want George to corner him and force a lie.

“Will you say?” George’s eyes were intent on his, locked despite the darkness, or because of it. Their pulses were synchronized.

“If?”

George nodded.

“Only maybe,” Fred said, and they both laughed at the old joke. Their hands slipped from each other’s arms as they went out the bedroom door and down the stairs.

They left Weasley House in the early morning darkness and arrived at the temporary Floo in
Hogwarts as the sun crawled over the horizon and poured molten red light over the dew-wet grass. Fred blinked and shielded his eyes. The fabric of his robes still smelled starchy and new; the collar itched.

Bill looked at them. “Just remember, when it happens,” he tapped his ear.

Fred didn’t assume Bill thought they would knew what he was talking about, but the confusion worried him. He glanced quickly at George and caught his nod. Bill, assuming they’d agree, had already started off toward the seating, terraces of tents creating a small stadium around the still-empty dais on the lawn where their lord would presumably seat himself.

“Last we saw,” George began in a determinedly bright voice, “the grass was red-wet.”

“Now it just looks fertilized,” Fred agreed, looking down at the lawn. The battle between their lord and the inferi had been bloody and decisive. The bodies pulverized by the reversed wards he cast into a fog of red mist that fell to the ground and became a red wave. Above them, Lord Knott on his carpet, reeling in the magical ricochet but his wand arm steady as his stream of multicolored curses shot toward their lord.

“Still smells,” George noted, tipping his head. He looked at Fred and then toward the audience. “Riley?”

“May be,” Fred allowed. “To show off the leash.”

They both grimaced. In some ways Fred had never felt closer to George than when they’d had Riley between them. He wished they’d been able to speak freely when they’d gone to him. Of course, Fred couldn’t have, but the plan had been that he’d distract Harry and George and Riley could brainstorm. But at first sight of the collar their last ditch efforts had dissolved.

Well, their shared plan had, anyway. Personally, Fred had still been holding out for Charlie. He glanced at the sky, not really expecting to see anything, and true to his expectation there was only the sun-soaked horizon and above, an empty gradient of pale silver to stubborn dark blue.

All the others in their year were already there, shivering in their light robes, too flustered to have remembered how to cast a warming charm. Annoyed, Fred cast them as they wove through their year-mates. He received many surprised looks and scattered, absent thanks in return. George watched him, an eyebrow raised, and Fred met his stare when he’d finished.

Eddie Carmichael seemed surprised to see the twins. “Thought you’d make a run for it.”

“Shut up, Eddie,” Carter Warrington snapped. He smelled like Muggle cigarettes, which Fred found both ironic and idiotic. Couldn’t he cast an episkey, just to be safe? Fred thought of doing it for him but his fleeting magnanimity had apparently run its course. “Weasleys have been back in the fold what, a decade? Besides, they’re close with Harry Potter.” He sniffed and looked at the twins expectantly, like they would praise him for his support.

“Just saw Harry last night,” Fred agreed, pleased when Warrington’s eyes widened. “He showed us his snake pit.”

A complicated expression overtook Warrington’s face, and Fred realized with delight that Warrington was trying to cypher whether “snake pit” was a euphemism.

“They have a snake pit?” asked a Hufflepuff standing behind Warrington, sounding torn between horror and fascination.
“Look smart,” hissed someone else, and Fred turned with the others to find Bellatrix Lestrange was approaching. This was it then. This was really it. He felt all of his composure evaporate, but when his heart leapt into his throat, George’s hand closed tightly around his, hidden by the crowd around them, and Fred forced himself to relax again.

She mounted the dais and looked down on them. “Good morning, and congratulations on your invitation. It will be your honor to serve our lord with fidelity and loyalty.”

She hadn’t used an amplifying spell, but every word she said rang in Fred’s ears at a painful volume. Was this fear? He’d always wondered. Not that he’d thought himself above it, just numbed, the usual reaction to anything you’re fed from birth.

She turned to where the audience had settled in and raised her arms, then spoke with the booming resonance of a magicked voice. “Welcome to the tenth oath-taking!”

The sun had risen in earnest. It felt warm on the top of Fred’s head. Then a shadow fell over him.

The audience had only applauded quietly in response to Lady Lestrange’s declaration, but now there were louder cries and shouts. She swung back around and sheltered her eyes with one hand, staring straight into the sun.

“Is that a dragon?” she murmured. Fred only saw her mouth move around the words; there was too much commotion around him to properly hear her.

With the light behind it, all Fred could make out was the silhouette, but his heart leapt eagerly. Charlie, he thought, and when he caught George’s eye he knew he thought the same. But the beast was advancing swiftly and when a coil of fire jetted from its gaping mouth, the students around them began to run.

“Clear the area,” Lady Lestrange shouted, then disappeared with a crack.

Inspired by her example, several more of their classmates apparated away, and George’s grip on Fred’s arm turned wrenching, painful.

Fred put his hand over George’s. “Don’t worry. He won’t hurt us. He must be trying to scatter them.”

“How...how could he?” George insisted, incredulously. “He’s sworn, Fred! It might not be him!”

They both looked back up just in time to see the dark underbelly of the dragon. Only.

It wasn’t dark. It was silver-bright. The entire dragon was white, in fact, gleaming like marble, and with glittering ivory wings spread it was obvious. It wasn’t Charlie. It was Harry’s dragon, Magnificent.

Fred felt a thrill of adrenaline, not sure whether this was good news or bad news. There was a rider on the dragon’s shoulders, and though Fred couldn’t make out much detail as the vast dragon hurtled nearer, he did see that instead of Harry’s unruly dark hair, the rider’s streaming tail of hair was nearly as white as the dragon’s hide.