A Long Time Ago

by GreyFey

Summary

Pursued by Death Eaters while the Wizarding war rages on, Harry is thrown a thousand years into the past, leaving his friends to lead the fight against Voldemort's growing forces. Lost in an unfamiliar world, he meets a legend. He discovers the man behind it. And from there, everything changes.

Notes

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Running Under the Rain

Chapter Notes

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Harry Potter was used to running.

Until his legs burned and shook, until his chest was ready to burst with the frenzied beat of his heart, each gasp for air like molten fire down his lungs.

As he understood it, normal people ran to stay fit, to avoid being late, to unwind after a stressful day. They didn't know the gnawing fear of an enemy's breath down their necks, that blind desperation to outrun death, to push past the stabbing pain in their side, the agony that crawled up the spine, to the skull, reverberating in every bone each time their foot hit the ground.

But Harry knew. Oh, did he know.

Running was a constant in his life, something he had learned he needed like food or sleep at the age when children took their first stumbling steps. At the age when they first discovered how to close their hands into fists.

Harry almost missed the bygone days when he ran only to avoid his cousin's beatings.

Specially now.

The sky above his head was filled with dark, angry clouds. It was raining buckets, the downpour blanketing the world, thick and clammy. Rainwater was ice-cold against his flesh, rivulets down his matted hair, blurring his surroundings to a senseless mass of drenched-grey and sogged-green. He could hardly see the slippery ground, wet earth dangerously slick under his used trainers. His jeans were caked with mud and his shirt was so plastered against his body that it felt like a second skin.

He could hear the Death Eaters in the distance, hollering like a pack of rabid dogs closing in on its preys, wild and blood-crazed, loud even over the roaring rain.

Harry didn't know how Voldemort's minions had managed to find them. Not once had they gotten so close to being caught in all their months of Horcrux-hunting. Their frustrating, terrible months living like shadows, like tracked pariahs fighting a war that felt long lost. Success had kept evading them, especially after Ron's departure, but they had found new ways to survive, Hermione and him, to stay out of the Dark Lord's reach, even after the blood-soaked horror that had been Godric's Hollow. Hope was a stubborn, traitorous thing that snarled in defiance and refused to die easily. So they'd kept safe, had kept going, flirting with Voldemort's forces but never touching.

Until now, that is.

They had been careless, in the end. A blotched ward, it was all it had taken. A spell they had performed countless times before. Heads buzzing from lack of food, limbs lead-heavy from the
lassitude of their fruitless quest, and a misplaced strand of magic had sealed their fate, had led them here.

Merlin, he was so very **tired of it all.** Exhausted to his core, sick of this endless war.

They both were.

Despite her efforts to be quiet, Harry had heard Hermione cry herself to sleep every night for days and days. He had not found the words to comfort her. How could he have? He felt like some kind of fading ghost himself, weak and lifeless. He had feared he would lose her to depression, but she had stopped. Stopped crying, stopped laughing. Ron's absence and the understanding that he could not come back had brought a new shadow to her eyes, a kind of ruthless determination he felt mirrored under his own skin.

They had held on, together, had dealt with the fear, the violence, the daily news of people they loved suffering. For over six months.

And now, they had been found and were running.

Harry did not hear the yelled Cutting Hex over the loud thrum of the rain, but the strength of it hit him like a racing train, knocked the air from his lungs, exploded over his back in shards of sharp, jarring **agony** that blinded his vision, filled his mouth with the churning tang of blood, viscous and coppery.

"**DID THAT HURT, BABY POTTER?!!**"

His heart was loud, so loud in his ears, rushing with a sound like the waves of a demented sea, *drowning him,* but –

He didn't fall. His knees trembled, threatened to give out, his head spun, nauseating, but he kept going, locked his muscles and ran, faster, because stopping now would mean death, and everything in him revolted at the very idea, growled in protested, clawed at him and rebelled. Rebelling against the slow trickle of blood down his back and the tearing, bone-deep pain of its open wound. Against the other injuries he could hardly feel in comparison, and his burning muscles, and his ragged breath. . .

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. Even if he had lost already, if nothing save for a miracle could save him from being either killed or captured in a matter of minutes –

He surrendered to his will to live and ran.

A *Crucio* hissed past his ear and his pace faltered as he threw himself to a side, firing a few Stunners over his shoulder while he regained his balance, the handle of his wand rough and familiar against his palm.

It was the middle of the day, but he couldn't see five steps ahead of him. The world had been swallowed by the heavy rain, soaked under the falling skies. He had just lost sight of Hermione.

He saw her again moments later, her form vague and bleary in the distance, when she slipped on a patch of damp grass and swayed, body tipping forward. She didn't fall, somehow kept moving toward Stonehenge as fast as she could. She had almost made it.

Harry wondered what had made her choose this location, in the broken second they'd had to Apparate. Maybe she thought they would have better fighting chances within the protection of the ancient stones. Or maybe the single-minded purpose of reaching the historical site – currently
devoid of tourists thanks to the weather – was the only thing that kept her going, that drove her onwards the way sheer bullheadedness drove Harry.

And maybe –

The thought struck Harry like a bolt of electricity through the heart. It was him who the Death Eaters wanted, his head that Voldemort wanted to mount on a spike.

Maybe he could save her, give her enough time to escape.

Somewhere behind him, Bellatrix Lestrange laughed, maniacal and victorious, and Harry's guts twisted at the sound of Sirius' murderer's voice. He felt hatred at the very thought of her, heavy and acidic in the pit of his stomach.

Rain was coloured green as an *Avada Kedavra* flew. Harry's blood froze in his veins. He heard himself yell a warning, and Hermione jumped aside, just in time. The Killing Curse didn't hit her on the back, brushed her shoulder instead, but another curse caught her in the legs, threw her against one of the large bluestones that made Stonehenge first circle. She scrambled back on her feet immediately, pressed up against the towering boulder for support.

Almost there. Harry had nearly joined her. He was running so fast to avoid the spells being fired at him that his feet were barely touching the ground, draining the last of his strength to go faster still, until he could see Hermione clearly in spite of the rain.

She was trapped and trembling against the grey rock. Her brown eyes were feverish with desperate defiance, creating a sharp contrast with the livid, stretched skin of her face. She seemed to brace herself as she readjusted her grip on her wand.

Harry stumbled and lost several precious seconds to regain balance.

Hermione's wand-arm rose. She struggled visibly to muster up the strength to cast a spell.

*Come on 'Mione. Faster.*

Her complexion turned ashen.

As she swayed on her feet, Death Eaters hollered.

*Shit.*

Harry glided to a stop, turned around and conjured a *Protego Maxima*. Hexes rebounded against the shield, a deafening crackle of colliding magic that strained his every nerves.

Bellatrix's gleeful cackle was getting louder.

"Run, Hermione!" Harry yelled without turning around. As he'd thought, the Death Eaters no longer dared to cast Unforgivables now that he was in the line of fire. Voldemort wanted him for himself, the psychopathic bastard. "Disapparate!"

He could see black shapes moving through the thick curtain of rain now, but Hermione seemed frozen in place. Harry could still feel her behind him, and for the first time since he had started to run, cold, heart-stopping panic sized him.

They were coming and she wasn't moving.

Head snapping around, Harry's green eyes, glowing with the power he was summoning to maintain
the shield, found hers.

"NOW!"

Despair tainted Hermione's features, but finally, finally, the words seemed to pierce through her exhausted daze, a primal part of her brain reacting instinctively to the order.

Her eyes fluttered close and she Disapparated with a loud crack. Slytherin's locket, shining against her throat, was the last thing Harry saw before she vanished.

Harry did not have the strength or the concentration to follow her, not anymore. Already, he could feel his shield weaken under the onslaught of dark spells, his breath coming out in short, harsh pants that tore at his throat.

But it was fine. It was all right. Hermione was safe.

Breathing hard, he waited until he could see each of the Death Eaters' faces to break the Protego, throwing an overpowered Blasting Curse in the same motion.

There were enraged cries and swearing. Harry didn't wait for the Dark Lord's henchmen to regain their footing before he ran into Stonehenge, keeping low to the ground.

Orders to surround him were shouted.

He crossed the two circles of stone unhindered before Death Eaters appeared in front of him, herding him to the center of Stonehenge, death-white masks mocking among the watery greyness of their surroundings.

Harry ran a hand over his eyes, pushing strands of wet hair away from his face in a vain attempt to clear his blurred sight. His head swivelled from side to side, looking for an escape route. There were none.

He backed to the middle of the circles, and Death Eaters followed, smug and unhurried now that they were certain of their success. He walked until his calves bucked against an uneven surface, hard and unyielding that nearly sent him sprawling in the dirt. There was a fallen monolith lying at the center of Stonehenge. Harry stumbled on top of it, his back screaming in protest. It offered a vantage point if nothing else, highlighted the number discrepancy between him and them in merciless relief. His right hand tightened, white-knuckled around his wand.

"Ready to die, Potter?" a man sneered, and Harry almost smiled.

He felt – calm. Not resigned, or defeated, just calm. Detached. He had done his best, given everything. He had loved and suffered for it, had been scraped raw to save his friends, and it had been his choice, to end up here today. Not Voldemort's, not the Ministry's. His. He was alone, bruised and bloodied and hurting, but he'd never been one to cry over his fate, and he couldn't muster up regrets about how his life was going to end. There was only one resolve pulsing through him, strong and steady as the earth beneath his feet: That if he were to die, he would do so fighting. Like his parents and Sirius, Hedwig and Moody, Dumbledore and so many others.

He raised his wand, gathering himself in a tight coil, magic pooling under his skin, bottled lightning at his fingertips.

"Stun him!" someone shouted. There was fear in their voice.

With perfect synchronisation, the Death Eaters took aim and fired and –
Time slowed.

Heart in his throat, pulsing in a painful, shattering rhythm, Harry watched, wand still raised to defend himself, as different curses flew toward him in slow motion. Even the relentless pounding of the rain had slowed to a near-stop, droplets suspended mid-air, glittering, crystalline, like a million fragments of the world. Harry tried to move, but his body wouldn't respond, sluggish as though engulfed in thick honey and what the hell was happening?

Had it been a simple matter of time slowing, he would have thought of a trick played by his adrenaline-filled brain, stretching out his last moments to let him live an eternity in the half-heartbeats he had left. But then, spreading like wildfire, like the sun breaking over the horizon, white, blinding Runes appeared at the Death Eaters' feet and rushed toward him, easily outpacing the curses, circling and twisting in odd arches and deep curves, a flower blooming in the midst of winter.

They crawled on the stone upon which he stood and reached his skin, and Harry's mouth opened in a silent scream because it hurt, oh God it hurt, more than the Cruciatus, more than anything he had ever felt before, electricity seeping through his body, down to his very bones, rattling and rasping and tearing, and Harry could feel, feel everything, flesh and blood and life, with more acuity than he had felt before and it was much, far too much, please stop.

The air around him grew warm, a voracious furnace that bent and contorted like an angry snake, that turned rainwater to thin smoke and curled around the Death Eaters as they cried in agony, fell on their knees, hands raised to protect their eyes against the violent light, transfixed as magic left their bodies.

Time stopped.

Harry's heart missed a beat. Something snapped, tearing open as the earth stood still. Then, in a brilliant explosion, he felt himself fall. His mind shuddered one last time before his world was swallowed by darkness.

Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived, disappeared on January, the 3rd of 1998, to the great despair of the Wizarding community.

And rain continued to fall long afterwards over Stonehenge, washing over the bodies of some of the most feared Death Eaters of the Second War.
Harry came to in the sweet-smelling twilight, to night-cool air on his face, the taste of blood lingering on his tongue.

Pain.

Searing, burning, etched into bone and sinew, an overload of sensation that wrung a moan from his lips, low and distressed. He could feel the ground sway under him, rock like the deck of an old ship lost in a seastorm. He was dizzy and nauseous and his whole body ached. There was a pebble digging into his back each time he breathed, a keen needlepoint of pain, sickly warmth spreading all over his skin because –

Oh.

He'd been hurt, hadn't he?

Thinking was hard, thoughts and ideas drifting freely in his head, unravelled like strands of overused cotton, frayed and weak to the touch. Thinking was, in fact, too hard to manage, so Harry tried to move instead. His body was slow, listless, and the faintest twitch sizzled up his nerves in bright flashes of agony, but he rolled on a side anyway, wriggled around until the pebble wasn't digging into his flesh anymore and it didn't feel like each breath was flaying raw his entire back.

The pads of his fingers brushed against rough stone, and Harry pressed his hand against it, felt blunt edges burrow into his skin, solid and very much there, a foothold to his ebbing consciousness. His breathing was ragged and loud and the only sound he could hear, aside from the disturbing hammering of his heart.

He was alive.

The realisation was enough to have his eyes fly open, incredulity and euphoria wedging themselves a place in-between all that pain.

Alive, alive, alive.

Gem-silver stars like the scattered embers of a dying fire winked down on him, opalescent in the pitch-black curtain draped over the sky, their brightness outshone by that of the moon, which dipped quicksilver his surroundings, laughing and ethereal from where it hung high overhead.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Dry wind whistled between Stonehenge's worn monoliths in an soft song, age-old and otherworldly. Harry was completely, utterly alone, and though the feeling wasn't an unpleasant one, it was – odd.

The pain of his back receded in waves, allowing his thoughts to coalesce in a simulacrum of reasoned thinking. Harry frowned. He had left the conscious world in the middle of a rainy day. How was it that he could see the stars? There had been Death Eaters after him, after Hermione, joyful in the exaltation of their hunt. Where were they? Why had they not killed him yet?

Nothing made sense, but his ears were ringing and his heart was racing and focusing was difficult.
Teeth gritted hard enough to grind up his skull, Harry struggled into a sitting position. He wanted to throw up, but the thought of bending over to empty his stomach was enough to lace livewires of pain down his spine. Breathing deeply, throat working, he forced himself to stillness until the urge went away.

His shirt was damp with rain and fresh blood, smelled like mud and brimstone. It clung to his skin, stuck uncomfortably, wet and chilly. Harry tried to pry the garment off his chest in spite of his trembling fingers. He wished the world would stop darkening at the edges, swaying in and out of focus in a way that rendered the exercise of taking clothes off a lot more hazardous than he felt it had any right to be. It was infuriating and maddening and –

He blinked and the shirt was in his hands, a burnt, torn and dirty mess much like himself.

"Ugh," Harry muttered coherently. He could feel blood slither down his back. He shivered, whole frame shaking from the ice that was steadily settling into his very marrow. He was cold. Why had he taken the damn shirt off again? "Bandages," he said, and, as the answer felt like the right one, he forced his slow, clumsy hands to tear the clothe to shreds, large strips he then tied around his mid-section, resolutely pushing past the pain of it. He had survived this far; blood-loss could not be what did him in. It was a gradual, ridiculous end for a wizard, death crawling towards him drop by drop. He couldn't die like that, but –

He was tired. There was a cold, numbing lethargy in his limbs, and the ground looked so inviting from where he sat. Surely, a few hours of sleep would make him feel better?

It was shaking from exhaustion that he lowered himself onto soft grass.

Soft, dry grass.

*Weird*, he had time to think before darkness claimed him once again.

{ . . . }

He burned.

There were flames in is blood, liquid, scalding their way to his skin which cracked and withered at the sweltering heat. Harry could feel fire take root deep inside his chest, roar and burn, burn, burn, press against his head, press and press until his bones were creaking and groaning, crushed under the weight. He wanted to shout for help, but his lung were tight, his throat was parched, and there wasn't enough air, it was all consumed by the inferno trapped under his ribs. All he could do was gasp and writhe and pray.

*Merlin, please make it stop. I can’t – can’t take anymore. I'm too battered now, frail and about to break. Enough, please, enough.*

But he burned. Burned like his ancestors at the stake, motionless and impotent, except that there wasn't any smoke to make him cough and faint, acrid and suffocating, and he could feel everything, the inescapable, searing pain of his limbs, and the world was red, scarlet like fresh blood and slanted pupils were watching him, darker than night, shadows moving and snarling in their depths.

*You shouldn't be here, they hissed. This is not your place. You should've died, boy. Why aren't you dead?*

And Harry could not breathe, he was drowning, burning, someone was screaming, far, far away –

Hands found his face, carded through his hair in a careful caress, and a string of soft, whispered
words ran over his skin like cool water, clear and soothing like melting snow from a mountain's lake, battling off the intolerable heat.

Harry sank.

{...}

He was lying on his stomach, buried deep in something soft and comfortable that smelled of summer sun and wildflowers. The world felt strange, muddled as though reaching for him from a length of empty space. It chafed insistently against his senses. Wind was whispering across his skin, interwoven with muted birdsongs. He was naked and shivering. His head was pounding, his back was hurting, every fibre of his being was stretched taut and aching.

He wished he had stayed unconscious.

There was a tinkling noise beside him, a rustle of clothes, the only warning before sure fingers brushed against the raw skin of his back, prodding at the wound that laid there. Harry tried to evade the touch, but there were stones hanging from his unresponsive limbs, and an arm had sneaked around his waist, was pulling him up against someone else's warmth, to the soft cadence of foreign words into his ears. His head was heavy, so he let it roll backwards, to rest on a shoulder that wasn't his.

A cool vial was pressed against his lips, and a thumb stroked his throat until he swallowed the foul-tasting mixture it contained. The action was repeated with two other potions, until one of them sent him back to sleep.

{...}

Harry woke from heavy sleep to a trickle of sunlight on his face, deep crimson bright against his eyelids. Slumber scattered away as gravity pulled at him, merciless and disorienting.

Pain was a slow pulse that radiated from his back, sick and itching, but easy enough to overlook. He stretched tentatively, muscles rippling, sore and twinging but devoid of any heart-wrenching ache. His skin felt uncomfortably taut, his entire left arm was tingling, his limbs were stiff from lack of use, but he was – fine. His breathing was slow and even, his head clear and grounded.

He kept his eyes closed as sunlight warmed his face, feather-light and reassuring, a world away from drowning rain and choking mud and cloying fear. Even now, he could almost feel the downpour drumming on his flesh, could almost hear Death Eaters chortling in the distance, see Stonehenge loom ahead, timeworn and imposing, before everything dissolved into a mess of fever-clouded hallucinations.

Harry didn't know how he had gotten away, vaguely remembered searing agony burning into him, acute and all-encompassing; the feeling of falling down, down through the earth, down to where lava was formed and tectonic plates shifted, his every cell about to burst. Then, he remembered coming to in the night-blue of Stonehenge, the world shining moonsilver in the obscurity. He'd been hurt, broken and barely able to move, but someone had found of him, had taken his hand and pulled him back from where Death was running its chilled fingertips over his blood-wet skin.

Some remaining member of the Order, perhaps? It would make sense, no one else would dare to take him in, but –

Something felt wrong. Bits and pieces of information were jumbling around his head in a mismatched bundle, and something felt very, very wrong.
Worry twisted his insides in a vice-like grip that shot up to his heart. Gasping, Harry sat, pushing back the bedsheets that were covering his chest. A bolt of pain reverberated through his head, carefully ignored as he squinted at his surroundings.

He didn't have his glasses, didn't need them to function anymore, not ever since bad eyesight had threatened to get him killed one time too many and Hermione had forced a gooey-like potion down his throat a few months back, but there was a slight, indistinct edge to the world, the kind of annoying blur that morphed into a pounding headache at the end of a tiring day. Harry blinked, willed his sight to focus.

He was lying in a narrow bed, inside a small, rudimentary wizarding tent. The furniture was Spartan; another bed facing his, a wooden table littered with Potion-making tools, a pile of chopped wood in a corner, and nothing else. He was alone, and –

A shadow fell over the shaft of light that had been filtering through the entrance of the tent, elongated by the sun and distinctly human-shaped. Harry's heart jumped in his chest, fingers feeling the bed around him to locate his wand, but it wasn't anywhere to be found, of course it wasn't, dammit, why hadn't he prepared himself sooner?

Cursing his weakened state, he tried to sling his legs out of the bed, but the limbs took their time answering, bunched up under the blankets, slow and useless, and then it was too late.

In the entrance stood a man Harry had never seen before. Tall and lean, all fluid grace as he walked, silent strides faltering at the sight of Harry sitting on his bed. Surprise flashed, lighting-quick, over a pale, aristocratic face, high cheekbones, a narrow nose and chiselled jaw that screamed of high birth. Long black hair cascaded down his back, a few strands spilling from the loose braid that held it back.

There was a strange, angular beauty to him, sharp and foreign, brought out by breathtaking silver-grey eyes that trapped and ensnared, timeless like the depths of the ocean, and he could be any age at all, from late twenties early forties.

"Alecgan baec gnapa, feran aet aebaere wundian," he said, and Harry recognized the smooth timber of his voice as the one that had guided him from the strangling grip of endless nightmares.

"Who the hell are you?" Harry breathed, his heart echoing, loud, over the confused buzz in his ears.

The man shook his head with a faint grimace. "Donna astyrian," he said slow and measured, and it sounded like an order. He raised his hands in the universal gesture of surrender before taking a deliberate step forward, then another, long legs closing the distance separating him from Harry's bed.

And between a breath and the next, he was there, right there, far closer than Harry should have let him get, and his were hands on Harry's shoulders, on his chest, pushing him back against the mattress, firm and unyielding but studiously delicate in their motions. Frozen in place and light-headed, Harry let the man manoeuvre him back on the pillows.

"I don't – " he rasped, voice rough and broken from disuse. "I don't understand. What – ? Where – "

The man raised a hand. "Ic donna forstandan," he muttered, almost to himself. His gaze was sharp, pensive, gauging quietly while Harry held his tongue. "Geagan beufan – " A wand appeared in his hand, held aloft but still a threat. Before Harry could stiffen in alarm, the man reached out, bending
over as his left hand slipped under Harry's head, his touch deft and secure just above the back of
the young man's neck. "Wéþan," he said, dark grey eyes pinning down startled green.

There was a touch of cool wood under Harry's jaw, a whispered spell over his skin. The air flashed
pale blue before he could scramble out of the way, magic rattling up his skull before he could
react. Vertigo sized him, unpleasant but not painful. Harry relaxed minutely when it appeared to be
the sole after-effect, his racing heart slowing by degrees.

"Can you understand me now?"

Breath catching, he looked up. The man was pocketing his wand, observing him, silver gaze intent.
Numb and quite a bit confused, Harry nodded. "Y-yes," he replied, pressing a hand against his
temple. "But how –"

The stranger's eyes glinted. He looked amused. "You need to focus on your words," he said.
"You're still speaking your language."

Like the floor opening under his feet, the vertigo from earlier came back full-force, throwing Harry
back onto his bed, gasping, a dull ache growing at the base of his skull. Something clicked into
place, his vision blacked out, and in a rush, he found himself knowing a whole set of new words
that tore through his brain in a blinding spike of pain, violent and iron-sharp and –

A cool liquid slid down his throat, bitter and ice-cold, a sweet relief that shackled his headache,
allowed Harry to think again. Breathing hard, he forced his leaden eyelid to blink open.

The silver-eyed man was crouching beside the bed, one of his hands on the small of Harry's back,
tracing small circles against his skin. "My apologies," he said, genuine regret in his tone. "I didn't
think – This spell has never worked before. I didn't think it would cause you harm."

Harry did not answer, focused on the way hundreds of new words were shifting inside his head.
The process, though was no longer painful, was highly unpleasant, like feeling the slick slide of a
needle under his skin, sewing shut an open wound just after anaesthesia kicked in. The man's hand
was warm on his bare back, the contact light and unobtrusive, but – close. Too close.

The thought had barely crossed Harry's mind that the stranger was rising on his feet, standing
promptly and stepping away.

Harry's headache returned with the distance, a faint throb behind his eyes. Deep breaths. He needed
answers. "I'm fine," he found the strength croak, not even surprised to hear foreign words roll off
his tongue as he wrestled into a sitting position. "Do you – how long was I out?"

The man went to lean against the tent's central pole, arms crossed loosely over his chest. "Three
days," he said, casual like Harry's stomach didn't just plummet like a stone.

Harry's ears were ringing again. "Three days," he repeated blandly. He could feel his head spin as
he processed the enormity of that number. Three days. Anything could have happened in three
days. Hermione could have been captured, friends could have been killed, Voldemort could have
won.

A soft hum. "Thereabout, yes. It's quite remarkable, that you should wake so soon, actually. There
was barely breath left in you when I first found you."

Harry stared numbly at the man. Remarkable? He wanted to shout. To grab that stranger by the
shoulders, shake him up until he understood the gravity of the situation. How could he look so
calm? There was a war out there, people were dying and he had let Harry sleep for three entire
days? Was he *daft*?

Harry forced himself to take a slow, careful breath, biting his tongue to swallow back the words. More than anything, he wanted to know where Hermione was. He wanted to know that she was safe, wanted to know whether Voldemort had shouted news of her capture from the rooftops. He wanted to know who had died, during these three long, long days, and who hadn't. He wanted to know what had happened to him, to the Death Eaters. He wanted to know, but he couldn't ask. Because he did not know this man, did not trust him with any speck of information concerning his friends, who the Wizarding world thought either ill or expatriated.

Feeling sick, Harry leaned back against the headboard of his bed. "How bad was it?" he settled for asking between gritted teeth.

The man, who had yet to look away, something like intent fascination swirling in the depths of his eyes, took his time to answer. "You lost a lot of blood," he said at length. "From that cut on your back. It was spell-inflicted, yes?" Harry nodded. "It will leave a scar." The words were blunt, honest, but Harry didn't flinch. He wasn't surprised. It wouldn't be his first battle wound, nor would it be his last. A satisfied smile curled the corners of the other man's lips, disappearing when he spoke again, "There were burns on your left arm, nothing too serious. You had a sprained ankle, four broken ribs already on their way to being healed," for which Harry had Nagini to thank, from his visit at the Hollow, "and a nasty fever that only abated last night."

That sounded – bad. Not enough to warrant three days of unconsciousness – Harry had had Quidditch injuries with worse effect, and he hadn't missed a day of class – though he supposed magical exhaustion could have done the trick. The man hadn't mentioned anything rune-related, had said nothing about blinding power hurtling Harry into a near coma, but then again –

Three flagons were pressed into his hands. Startled, he blinked up at his rescuer.

"Drink," the man ordered.

Harry eyed the content of the vials suspiciously. He thought he recognized a pain-killer, as well as something commonly used against infections, but he had never seen a potion such as the third one before. Its bright yellow looked rather poisonous.

Somewhere at his right, a stranger snorted in amusement. "It's not poisoned," the man assured him, three part exasperated, one part approving. Harry glanced up to see him smile. "Had I wished to kill you, I would not have done it so."

The younger man snickered. "Was that supposed to reassure me?" he retorted, moments before he realised he was, in fact, reassured. Dammit.

Grey eyes sparkled, mocking and noticeably smug. Harry glared back, but recognizing Madam Pomfrey's tempered steel under the man's nonchalant façade, he sighed, braced himself and drank the draughts.

He did not drop dead in the following seconds.

"See?" the man said, sweeter than sugar, sarcasm hidden somewhere in his courteous tone. He plucked the empty vials from Harry's fingers before wandering back to the tent's pole, hands buried in the pockets of his trousers. "So," he began with a smile that was all teeth. "Do you have a name?"

The hand that flew to his forehead was automatic, smoothing over the locks hair that were
concealing his scar. That were supposed to conceal his scar. Harry's hair was a greasy, disgusting mess of sweat and crusted blood, pushed away from his face in matted lumps. He swallowed, alarm tingling along his arms.

"Don't you – " know? His voice trailed off. He breathed in. Out. Get a grip, Potter. "Show me your forearms."

The man blinked. "Excuse me?" But something must have shown on Harry's face, because he gave a light shrug, rolling the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows.

Harry reached for him, grabbed his left arm and turned it around. He nearly sagged in relief. No skull had been inked on that white skin. "Sorry," he muttered, releasing the other man. "Had to make sure you weren't a Death Eater."

That earned him a frown. "A Death Eater?"

He nodded. "Yeah. A bunch of them were after me." Which brought back the question of where this lot had ended up. Harry ran a hand through his hair, briefly-forgotten worries springing back to the forefront of his mind. "I don't suppose you know what happened to them?" he asked.

"Well," The silver-eyed man waved a helpless hand. "Perhaps I would, if I knew what they are?"

Harry looked at him, thrown off. Very pointedly ignoring the sharp stab of foreboding in his guts, he asked, "You're not British, are you? Where d'you come from?"

" – I was born in the Isles."

The Isles? Where was that? Had Harry been sent to another country? That would explain quite a few things. He cleared his throat. "And, er – Where are we?"

If his rescuer found the question odd, he did not let it show. "I think the locals call this place Stonehenge," he replied.

Oh.

Nothing was adding up.

Harry felt dizzy. His heart was ramming against his ribcage. "How do you not know what Death Eaters are?" he asked from a place far, far away. "Even foreign papers talk about Voldemort."

"About who?" Now the strange man looked concerned, arching a dark brow at him. He pressed a hand to Harry's forehead, checking for fever.

Harry let him, the touch barely registering. He inhaled sharply. "I'm Harry Potter," he declared in a leap of faith, and –

Nothing.

No recognition, no looking at his scar. The man didn't react at all. His frown deepened and he looked at Harry as though re-evaluating the state of his mental health.

Lost and a bit desperate, the young man let his eyes wander in an half-hearted attempt to find answers. Firewood, jars and bottles full of Potion's ingredients, a cauldron emitting wisps of purplish smoke, a sword hanging from the man's belt –

Wait.
The aimless hunt came to a screeching halt. With growing alarm, Harry's eyes travelled up and down the other man's body, noticing for the first time the clothes the wizard was wearing. Black breeches tucked into brown, knee-high riding boots, a dark-green, well-fitted tunic that fell a little past narrow hips, with a laced-up collar and fine silver stitchings on the sleeves. . . The whole attire was probably of the latest travelling gear.

During the Middle Ages.

Harry felt blood drain from his face.

No.

No, this could not be. He was mad. This man was mad. Death Eaters had bashed his head against one of Stonehenge's boulders. He was still hallucinating, or this was all an elaborate trap, or –

*Oh, Merlin.*

Nothing was adding up.

*Nothing was adding up.*

Anxiety settled in the pit of Harry's stomach like a crushing weight. Black dots danced across his sight.

"Who – who are you?" he heard himself ask. Not what he had meant to say, but he feared that the alternative would have been along the lines of, "*Please, please, I'm begging you, please tell me I'm still hallucinating and the date's January 1998. . .*"

Comprehension dawned in the stranger's eyes, as if he'd heard the thought.

"Salazar Slytherin," he said with a small bow, and Harry's heart *stopped.* "At your service."

Chapter End Notes

As you might have guessed, I don't actually speak Old English. If you spot any hair-pulling mistakes, feel free to correct me. Reviews are most welcome, I'd love to know what you thought of the chapter!
Trapped Traveller

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Salazar Slytherin. At your service.

Harry looked at the man and heard white noise. Salazar Slytherin. Which Salazar Slytherin? The Salazar Slytherin. No. No, it couldn't be. That man was dead. Long dead. A footnote in History books, a memory dredged up from times long past. It couldn't be.

The air in the tent was stifling. Bearing down on Harry, closing in from all sides. He couldn't breathe. His skin was too tight. He had to get out.

He stumbled his way out of the bed, his legs catching in the sweat-damp sheets in his haste to move. His knees gave out, thumping on the dirt. He was naked save for a pair of underwear. A spasm shook him, but he couldn't feel the cold. He couldn't feel much of anything. A shaky breath and he was back on his feet, not quite realising he had risen until the ground moved away from his face.

One step. Two. Brushing off the hand – whose hand? – that reached out to steady him, Harry wrenched open the flap of the tent, the canvas coarse on his shoulders.

Dawn was shimmering over the horizon, white gold glowing over lush, thick grass. Under its soft peach undertones, the sky was of a deep, fierce blue, magnificent prelude to a burning summer day.

Summer.

Inside Harry's head, details fell into place, rushed at him in a great hunk, limpid and unrelenting.

Fresh dew glittered over the plain, small prisms that sunlight had yet to evaporate. Black, wet earth clung to his bare feet. There was no dew in winter, only ice, mud or frozen ground. It had been winter, Harry remembered. It wasn't anymore.

Because something was wrong.

Salazar Slytherin.

Stonehenge stood alone, the long shadows of its imposing monoliths playing with the rising sun. The barriers surrounding the site were gone. The signboards were gone. The bitumen road was gone. There had been barriers and signboards and rumbling cars, Harry remembered. There weren't anymore.

Because something was wrong.

Salazar Slytherin. At your service.

He wished the ice crawling through his veins would melt back into blood. The high-pitched noise in his ears was really annoying.

Hogwarts was founded a thousand years ago by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. Godric Gryffindor. Helga Hufflepuff. Rowena Ravenclaw.

"And Salazar Slytherin," said Harry. He knew he was the one who had spoken, but he could not
remember forming the words. They sounded strange on his lips. They didn't sound like they were his, actually. They were just hard, bland facts he couldn't get his head around.

Stonehenge was swimming.

"Mr Potter?"

A thousand years ago. Ten centuries. That was a lot of time, wasn't it? Was it even possible to go as far back as this? Three hours to save Sirius from Azkaban had been tricky enough, even with Hermione there to help. Hermione was not there now. What was he going to do? He couldn't –

Couldn't focus. His head felt severed from his body. His chest hurt. His stomach ached. His throat burned. He couldn't think. Couldn't – could not even, he was –

The slap was loud as a clap and stung his cheek. His head snapped back from the strength of it, stinging pain like ice cubes on his neck. Bemused, reeling, Harry staggered. Someone grabbed him by the arm, spun him around, long fingers digging into his flesh. He blinked. Black hair, grey eyes, angular face. Salazar Slytherin.

At your service.

"Ah."

He fell.

Slytherin stepped close and caught him before he could hit the ground, an arm pressing on the small of his back, the other curling around his shoulders. His clothes felt warm to Harry's chilled skin. His face was a hair's breadth away. Harry had to crane his neck to look at him. He stood on tiptoes, most of his weight balanced in the other man's hands.

"Easy," Slytherin murmured. His breath tickled Harry's ear. "Let's get you back to bed, yes?"

No, Harry thought, because if this man was who he said he was, if any of this was true –

But in a motion that looked effortless, Slytherin shifted on his feet, steered him back into the tent, and Harry didn't have the strength to push him away, his arms like two useless strips of wet rags. He was nudged to sit on the edge of his bed while the grey-eyed man went to fish a dark-orange potion from his worktable. Harry downed the thing without a second thought, wistful for the burn of Firewhiskey, and a few moments later, he was feeling very, very calm. Nothing was crushing his airways anymore, or digging into his heart.

A chair materialised in front on him. The weirdly-dressed man sat on it.

Harry stared. The man stared back.

Salazar Slytherin. At your service.

Good Gods.

"You're not from this time."

Harry chewed on his tongue. He could feel the urge to giggle at the absurdity of it all bubble up his throat. "I'm really not," he managed once certain he could talk without looking like a complete moron.

The other man's expression didn't change. It was – blank. Like a slate. But there was a fixed
intensity in the molten silver of his eyes, staggering and near-violent in its focus, and only then did it truly occur to Harry who it was that was sitting in front of him. The realisation hit him in the guts with the delicacy of a ton of bricks, stole his breath in a way no Calming Draught could have prevented.

Salazar Slytherin, Founder of the House of Snakes. A man whose power and genius was recognized throughout the Wizarding world, admired even from the throws of his shady reputation. Salazar Slytherin, ancestor of the Dark Lord who had been trying to kill Harry since birth. Salazar Slytherin, who was looking at him with thoughtful suspicion while Harry was wounded, wandless and in his care.

He was very screwed, wasn't he?

Standing up to run away seemed like a good idea. Harry tried to do just that, pushing to his feet and putting weight on his legs, but Slytherin stood with him, his quick reflexes the only things that kept Harry from biting the ground.

"Must you insist on injuring yourself?" the man muttered, and Harry was shaking, half-expecting a spell, or a blow, or –

Cool fingers closed around his chin. "Look at me," Slytherin whispered, and his voice was deep and soothing and Harry let his head rise from the gentle pressure under his jaw, mesmerized like a charmed snake to the sound of a flute.

Then, there was the soft brush of a consciousness against his own, and he was dragged to the recesses of his mind, sinking, boneless into the pathways of his thoughts.

Harry had never been a diligent Occlumency student. Too wild, too chaotic, his brain reared up at the very mention of order, and Fifth year had been hell to learn anything. He wasn't good, didn't even understand the basics, but he still fought against the intrusion with all he had; a few hastily thrown defences, a desperate attempt to clear his emotions and –

Power radiated from Slytherin. A tsunami behind thin glass, held at bay, just short of overwhelming, of crashing into him and leaving nothing but broken ruins behind. The Founder could destroy him on a whim, in the bat of an eye. He could breach his mind and level what was left of his sanity, and it would be easy, but –

He wasn't.

He wouldn't, would not storm the privacy of Harry's mind because he only wanted proof, a proof, just a proof of Harry's claim, a proof that he wasn't delirious and Salazar could trust him.

And that was simple enough, wasn't it? To Harry, whose thoughts always overflowed, swift as they spilled from his head, eager, almost, to lay bare his darkest secrets for all to see. He didn't even need to push, hardly had to think about it; he just relaxed and let associations of ideas run free, interlock and reach out.

Muggle London, white stone buildings rushing up to the skyline, rain-slick and monochrome, the claustrophobic press of too-large crowds, life and movement and noise. Murky brown waters of the Thames, the loud loud loud roar of a hundred cars, tires eating up the asphalt in soot-black clouds of gasoline. White-blue glare of a computer screen, the choking pain of Dudley's fist hitting his stomach because he wasn't allowed to look, let alone touch, smooth-cool keyboard under his fingers, and dozens and dozens of screens, flashing bright in Piccadilly Circus, huge and towering. A red telephone booth in the distance, stark in the dull greyness, and he was underground, damp-
mold smell of closed spaces like his cupboard, tight and confining but the Ministry was grand, dark tiles gleaming off the glow of the Atrium's gold statue where two formidable wizards battled, magic an electric, tangible blaze around them, but Harry couldn't feel it, its fire-hot heat blistering his skin, because there was grief/vengeance/hatred at war inside of him, devouring his heart, which he wished to rip out of his chest to keep from hurting so fucking much. Agony from his scar, the Dark Lord ravaged his mind, slit him to pieces and danced on the ashes but Harry didn't care because Sirius, Godfather and family was dead, dead and never coming back and it was all Harry's fault –

Stop! was said-screamed, non-voice echoing in his head, and there was a wrenching pull inside his skull, and –

Silence and loneliness.

Someone – Salazar Slytherin, Harry knew for certain now, had felt the name branded on that man's soul as his – was gasping the same air as him, close but not-quite touching. Harry opened his eyes to the pitch-darkness of the Founder's pupils, eclipsing silver-grey irises to thin rings near the whites of his eyes. None of them moved, Harry panting but dry-eyed, Slytherin silent but deafening in his presence.

"Harry, I'm sorry– "

"Don't." The young man shook his head. He was too weary, too tired for apologies. He was past caring. One thousand years was too much, the man beside him was too much. He just wanted to sleep. "I've had worst anyway" he muttered. Back in Fifth year, each of Snape's attacks on his mind had felt like a knife slicing through his brain. Slytherin's touch had been mild in comparison, skilled and measured.

"Yes, I imagine you have," Slytherin whispered, eyes falling shut as he leaned away from Harry's space, and Harry drank in the sight of him now that he could, unhindered and intrigued in spite of his better judgement.

He had always pictured Salazar Slytherin as a bitter, hateful man with serpentine features that reflected his brewing madness. What he had in front of him could not be further from this description. If madness there was, it was well hidden. Under the faint lassitude that lingered over the arch of his shoulders, in the black-green shadows bellow his eyes. Under the slight quirk of his mouth when he smiled, the silk smoothness of his voice. Under –

"Time travel," Slytherin said, jerking Harry back to awareness. When the Founder's eyes fluttered open, it was to shine with ravenous curiosity. "You must tell me, then. What year do you come from, Mr Potter?"

"Nineteen ninety-eight," Harry answered. What wrong could it do?

"One thousand years," breathed Slytherin. He sounded incredulous.

His words sank in, solidified this situation into something real and happening, and Harry buried his hands in his hair, wrenched until a spike of pain made his eyes water. He felt that he was falling down a rabbit hole and was watching light diminish in the distance, the earth swallowing him whole and not letting go.

He was caught between mindless panic and utter disbelief. This was insane, even by his standards. Utterly and completely insane. What was he supposed to do? How could he get back? He didn't know a thing of the intricacies of time travel. How could he get back if he didn't know a damn
thing? Also, the odds of landing right into Salazar Slytherin's arms? Risible. Of all the days, of all the years he could have been sent to, it had to be the precise moment when Lord Voldemort's murderous ancestor was in the vicinity. Just in time to save his life. What the hell? Now Harry was indebted to the man.

Somewhere, somehow, a cruel, cruel deity looking down at him and laughing at his fate.

A hand brushed his shoulder, drawing back as it startled him.

"Will you let me look at your injuries?"

Harry breathed deeply. He looked at Slytherin, head cocked to one side. That was a strange question. Madam Pomfrey had never given him a choice in regards of his multiple recoveries. "Would you leave me alone if I said no?" he asked, curious.

The other man considered him quietly for a moment, expression unreadable. "Of course," he answered with a nod. "Your body is yours to do with as you wish. And I've already encroached on your privacy without your consent." He paused. "Though you should know, the risk of infection – "

"Why?" Harry interrupted, rude but too baffled to care. "Why are you doing this? Why are you so – " kind? You're not supposed to be kind, or patient, or understanding. Who are you, Salazar Slytherin?

The Founder arched a brow at him. "What kind of a man would I be, to walk away from my wounded kin? Would you rather I'd left you to die of bloodloss?"

"No, of course not, that's not – " Harry ground his teeth in frustration. He couldn't articulate his thoughts into words, couldn't say that he knew, intimately, that there were always hidden motives to anyone's actions, a price to pay, benefits to reap. He head was filled with cobwebs, so he gave up, stomach swooping as he jumped ahead and said, "Just – fine. Alright. You can – check." He didn't trust Slytherin. The man came across as too poised for that, too perfectly composed, regardless of what Harry knew of his reputation. But he had saved his life. Harry had no reason to question his abilities as a Healer.

"Turn around," Slytherin ordered. "Stay on your knees. I'll keep it quick."

Harry complied, facing the dark canvas the tent, braced on his bed. Feather-light touches ran over his side, unknotting the rough cloth that made his bandages. He felt vulnerable, like this, his skin being exposed a layer after another. He wished to turn around and look at what Slytherin was doing, but that would be an admission of discomfort he was not willing to give.

The dressing fell away, fully unwrapped, and Harry glanced at his bruised torso. It wasn't a pretty sight. The skin around his ribcage sported an interesting array of colours, ranging from bright purple to faded yellow, the abused flesh like an apple gone bad. There were small, angry blisters, some of them oozing pus, all over his left arm from the first spell he had deflected to protect Hermione. His chest was gaunt, sickly-looking in a way it hadn't been in year.

Slytherin set to work with quick, efficient strokes and barely-there touches. "Your back is healing well," he told Harry, tone short and conversational. He was smearing something that smelled of cloves over the wound. "The scar won't be too deep."

"I don't mind scars," Harry replied. They were history etched on skin, testaments that he'd fought and lived to see another day. Scars had punctuated his life since he was one year old.

Behind him, Slytherin hummed. He started to redress the cut on Harry's back. "Do you know what
sent you back in time?” he asked, voice quiet over the hiss of the wind.

The young man rolled his shoulders, chasing away the tension that knotted his muscles. "Does it matter?” he muttered. "I'm stuck now."

Being done bandaging his chest, Slytherin slid away for a moment, changing angle to start on his arm. "Solving a problem often requires to find its cause,” he said, wand drawing small patterns over Harry's burns.

"I – “ Harry turned and glanced at the other man. Was he – offering help? He cleared his throat. "Er. I think it was Stonehenge. I'm not sure what happened.” But it didn't matter, because tiredness was engulfing him in a heavy shroud, and his eyes were closing on their own accord and –

"Sleep, Mr Potter,” a soft voice whispered. Harry fell into blissful oblivion.

{...}

He woke to complete darkness, to the loud thuds of his heart and the ghostly hoots of a night owl. The room was swaying under the cool touch of a summer breeze, quiet and lovely.

*It wasn't a dream,* was Harry's first thought, and the world settled in his bones like lead, crushing him to the ground. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, hard enough to have fireworks explode behind his eyelids. He would not cry. Crying never solved anything.

Wide-awake now, urgency tightening his stomach and sparking along his limbs, Harry pushed back his blankets, balanced his legs out of bed. The ground was uneven under his feet. He didn't have any particular destination in mind when he stood, nowhere to go and no one to turn to. He just needed air.

He made his way across the tent with silent steps. He could distinguish the outline of Slytherin's bed, the curve of the man's back, but no sound came from the Founder's side. Harry hoped he was asleep.

The night was matte charcoal, cloudless, the vastness of space specked with thousands and millions of bright, burning stars, patterns of light vertiginous in their complexity. The air smelled of cooling dirt and dewy grass. Stonehenge was one clean flat shape a few yards away, its roughness smoothed out in the velvet blackness. Harry was walking towards its large bulk without making the conscious decision to move, evening air fresh, toying with the edge of cold, crisp on his bare skin. Moonlight lit his path.

He did not know what he was expecting to find. What he was expecting to feel. Runes seared into the ground, perhaps, or a shiver of power down his spine. Something – anything – to prove that what he had lived was real, more than just half-remembered pain tucked into his memories.

But there was nothing. Nothing at all.

Cold grey stone rasped his fingers when Harry moved to the center of Stonehenge. Last time he had gone this way, he had been ankles-deep in mud, ravaged and torn open, and Death Eaters had been cackling at him, skull-white masks ghastly in the pouring rain.

He sat heavily on the fallen boulder where he had nearly died. A faint metallic tang wafted up to his nose. Blood. His blood. He felt empty.

*Why?* he asked the sky. *Why do this? Why here? Why now? Why this man? Is there even a reason for it, or is it just another way to fuck with me? Should I die here instead of in my own time? What*
do I do now? How do I not give up? How much more can I take before I just – break?

He wrapped his arms around his waist and closed his eyes. He felt fragile, like a child trapped in a nightmare, trembling and terrified, overwhelmed at the thought of a world much greater than he could comprehend. He was half-expecting to wake up in the cramped, dark space of the cupboard under the stair, to the sound of his Aunt hammering against the thin door. Get up, boy! What is taking you so long?

He stayed immobile a long while, listening to the pregnant silence of the night, feeling its chill sink under his skin.

The sky was still pitch-black when he opened his eyes, but the moon had moved, crawled its way over the constellations, with its even, unhurried pace.

Shivering and having nowhere else to go, Harry walked back to the tent he shared with Salazar Slytherin. It shone fire-red in the darkness. He entered to find the Founder sitting on his bed, dressed and fully awake, book in hand. A ball of witchfire burned overhead, casting a golden glow over the slant of the man's cheekbones, flickering welcomingly across the small space.

Harry went to his own bed, sat cross-legged on the covers. Slytherin closed his book with a soft snap.

"I thought – " Harry began haltingly, speaking to free himself of the weight of words on his tongue. "I thought there'd be something." He pressed a hand to his mouth. He was trembling.

The Founder's eyes were on him, sombre and considerate. "What will you do now?" he asked.

Harry turned away from the strange swirl of his gaze. He looked at the globe of light revolving above their heads. "I don't know," he whispered.

And wasn't that terrifying.

He curled his hands into fists, nails digging small crescents into his palms. He wasn't even supposed to be here, in this world he knew nothing about. The future was like a chasm, a plunging cliff in front of him, deep and deadly, and invisible hands were pushing him toward the void.

"I have – " Slytherin's voice trailed off. He looked pensive as he considered his next words. "I have a proposition."

Harry blinked. Oh, why not? "I'm listening."

The other man gave swift smile. He slid on his bed to better face Harry. "Does the name 'Hogwarts' evoke anything to you?" he asked, and there was no way he could miss the sudden stutter to Harry's breath.

"Hogwarts. Harry hadn't dared – hadn't dreamed – but – "Yes," he replied through the lump clogging his throat, the faint pulse of hope burning his eyes. "Yeah, I have."

Slytherin's fingers twitched on his thigh. His lips were parted, mouthing silent words like a prayer, and the gleam in his eyes had grown into a full, vivid blaze, tense and fierce.

Harry swallowed. "Hogwarts is – was... It was my school for six years." My school, my home, the one place where I belonged, where I was safe and happy.

"It worked," Slytherin whispered, and it was breathless, full of barely-repressed joy. A smile curled
his lips, softened the lines of his face, wild and free and elated and Harry –

Harry stared.

This – this was the Dark wizard whose obsession for blood purity had shattered Hogwarts peace? The madman, renowned for his hatred of Muggles, who had put a giant snake in a school full of children? Who had built a House for the ruthless, the power-starved, the arrogant? Whose legacy was discord and black magic? This?

It was like having his world turned upside down all over again, and Harry found himself wondering, dazed, just how much damage ten centuries could do to a reputation. Because that smile, these eyes... Dammit, if the man in front of him was who he pretended to be, then these eyes alone belied many stories.

Slytherin sprang on his feet, all feline grace and untamed energy. He was still smiling. "Will you come with me, then?" he asked, pacing. "And be part of my House? I was looking for students, you see. This is our first year. We've just finished the school. It would be perfect. You'd have a place to stay. We could work on a way to help you back to your time –"

"Wait," Harry interrupted. "You – you want to help me with that?"

Slytherin looked at him as if he were a bit dumb. "Of course I do," he snapped, rolling his eyes. "Time travel is unheard of. A new field of research. The implications alone – Rowena would kill to get her hands on you." He shook his head, gaze focusing, sharp and intent. "So. What do you say?"

"Okay."

The word was out of Harry's mouth before he could think to stop it. Slytherin House. And accepting had been easy. He almost groaned. The irony. He wasn't the small boy who, all these years ago had begged not Slytherin, please, anywhere but Slytherin anymore, but still.

This is a bad, bad idea, he thought as he shook Slytherin's extended hand, sealing his fate.

{...}

Harry lived the next three days in short bursts of consciousness. It was as though the evening he spent talking to Slytherin into the early hours of the morning had drained him from all strength. Fever made a reappearance, nowhere near as violent as before, but enough to leave him sweat-soaked and bleary-eyed. At times, it felt like his mind was on fire, the after-effects of Slytherin's language spell racking through his brain along with the new mad turn his life had taken. These three days were interspersed by the meals the Founder encouraged him to eat, the food tasteless on his tongue but pleasantly heavy on his stomach. In one of his most lucid moments, Harry requested a bucket of water to scrub himself clean by other means than Scouring Charm, which scrapped off the skin but never seemed to wash away all the dirt he'd accumulated. The feel of cold water on his scalp, down his neck, had been heavenly. He got better in leaps and bounds, his injuries fading into mere inconveniences as he gained some much-needed weight. Slytherin was a regular presence at his side, a strange, colourful spirit that glided in and out of the tent, murmuring soothing words to his ears when he was at his worst, talking about Stonehenge and old legends when he was coherent enough to hold a conversation.

When Harry woke on the fourth day, it was to a weight on his chest and silence in the tent. Wisps of half-remembered dreams drifted through his mind, Hermione's haunted eyes, Ron's snarling lip, Sirius' last barking laugh and –
The weight on his chest. It moved.

*What?*

Breath catching, alarm like a shock in his gut, Harry opened his eyes, blinking fast against the fogginess of sleep.

There was a snake on his stomach.

A large, *large* serpent, smooth scales a gradient of dark slate and clear mist and bright silver, body a long column of sleek armoured muscle, diamond-shaped head resting on its numerous coils, beady black eyes shining with intelligence and looking right at him.

Harry looked back. He didn't have his wand. He had left it on the worktable the night before.

The snake's forked tongue tasted the air. One time. Two. Its mouth opened. It had very sharp fangs. Sharp enough to tear into Harry's throat and rip him open, no doubt. Sharper than Nagini's. Possibly more poisonous. Harry could remember Voldemort's pet coiling around his lungs, squeezing and squeezing until he could feel his ribs crack and break, until his lips turn blue and he couldn't –

'Breathe, boy,' the snake hissed, a sibilant sentence that sounded one-part worried and three-parts amused.

Harry filled his screaming lungs. Slytherin chose this moment to join them, entering the tent with a leather bag thrown over his shoulders. He saw the snake and froze, bag falling on the ground with a dull thump. Harry wondered, a little morbidly, what was going to happen if that reptile wasn't his.

'Sila?' the Founder called, pale eyes narrowing to furious slits. The snake turned toward him, weight gliding over Harry's stomach. *What do you think you're doing here?*

The serpent's tail quivered. Harry held very still. *You told me to come back when I was done hunting,* said the snake tartly. *I am done hunting, so back I came.*

'And you thought using my student as a mattress would be a good idea?' Slytherin looked to be grinding his teeth. Anger suited him. *For fuck's sake, he has enough bad dreams as it is. If he'd panicked –*

'He didn't.' A pause. *Much.* The snake – Sila? – did its race's version of fidgeting. *I was digesting a full rabbit,* it whined. *And the boy smelled warm.*

'That's not – you're impossible.' Slytherin turned to Harry. "I see you've met Sila," he said in a tight voice. Traces of the sleek hiss of Parseltongue lingered on his words. "I apologize on her behalf. Despite appearances, she's not usually stupid enough to sleep on people she doesn't know."

'What did you just say?'

Harry snorted. "It's, uh – it's fine." His eyes flickered down to Slytherin's snake. *She was nice.*

There was a sudden stillness in both the Founder and Sila's movements, startled silence falling down between them.

'I like this one,' Sila declared. *We're keeping him.*

But her master was not listening. He was looking at Harry, his whole body strained towards the
younger man, the faintest widening to his storm-grey eyes, and Harry couldn't quite remember what this conversation was all about. 'Well,' the Founder whispered after a small eternity. 'A Parselmouth. You are full of surprises, Mr Potter.'

"I –" said Harry, but Slytherin was stepping closer, peering down at him with an odd expression on his face, and the rest of that sentence died away in Harry's throat. He tried again. 'I'm not – it's – " Complicated? Complicated did not even begin to cover what this was. What could he say? That ten centuries from now, Slytherin's descendent tried to murder him, used an unstoppable Curse that Harry, a one-year-old baby, stopped anyway, resulting in his inheriting abilities from Slytherin's bloodline? No, that wouldn't do. What did he want to say, then?

"We're not related."

Slytherin threw his head back and laughed, a clear, charming thing that rang through the tent, light and surprised. "Oh I know that, Mr Potter," he said, and he was smiling still, all tension gone from his frame, eyes gleaming from a joke Harry did not understand. 'Get off of him, Sila.'

'No thanks,' the snake retorted, and Harry felt her wriggle on his stomach as though fluffing out a feathered pillow. 'I told you, he's warm.'

'So am I, you cold-blooded nightmare. Get off now.'

It was with much grumbling and long-suffering sighs that Sila slithered from Harry's chest to Slytherin's waiting arm. Harry watched as she coiled around the Founder's torso. She was too large to fit on his shoulders alone, the end of her tail curling lazily around the man's hip, body wrapping over his waist, a last fold around his throat as her head rested on his shoulder. Slytherin raised a hand, petted the tender scales beneath her chin. The two of them made a striking pair.

They turned around, discussing among themselves, and Harry slung his legs out of bed. He went to put on the clothes he had half-Transfigured, half-Conjured with the Founder's help. The attire consisted of a loose, dark-green shirt, a leather jacket, black trousers and ankle-high dragon-hide boots. The clothes he had been wearing upon his arrival were completely ruined; the T-shirt in tatters, the trainers holey and more mud than fabric, and Slytherin had happily set fire to the jeans when Harry had mentioned they might be savable.

Once dressed, seeing Slytherin busy sorting through the contents of the bag he'd previously abandoned, Harry grabbed his wand and set to prepare breakfast, lighting a small fire with a careless wave. He cooked some eggs, fished around for decent bread, found some peaches that were still fresh and a piece of cheese that wasn't too hard. He placed the lot on a corner of the Founder's worktable, careful as he pushed away a few potions.

"Where did you find that bread?" Slytherin asked, joining him at the table. "I thought we'd gone out yesterday."

Harry handed him a plate of scrambled eggs. "It was in your other satchel. That's all that's left, though."

"That's alright." The Founder gestured at his bag, grabbing a slice of bread as he went. "I travelled to the nearest town last night. Got us some supplies. Food and another horse." He looked at Harry, pensive. "How does the wounds feel?" he asked.

Harry shrugged, swallowing a mouthful of peach. "Better," he replied. "Good, even."

"Good enough to travel?"
"I think so. Are we leaving?"

"The sooner, the better." Slytherin grimaced. "A couple of Muggles tried to follow me here. It won't be long before they find us."

Harry gave a slow nod. He took what was left of the bread. "Let's go, then."

Chapter End Notes

Something I forgot to mention: Everything is canon up until when Harry and Hermione went to Godric's Hollow in the Deathly Hallows, and Nagini never broke Harry's wand. On another note, we know next to nothing about Salazar Slytherin, beside the fact that he's a Parselmouth, a skilled Legilimens, and his row with the other Founders about Muggle-borns. Let's just say that I've had fun filling the gaps.
Summer, Harry mused the next day, was a terrible time to live through. The sun, which had been soft pink and orange just a few hours ago, had turned to a yellow inferno, a bright, blinding thing that robbed the world of its softness, rid it of its shadows, until all were condemned to be cooked under its sweltering gaze. Every flat surface reflected the glaring sunrays, painting their surroundings in vivid, unrelenting shades. The ground smouldered and sent up a disorienting haze. The vegetation stood still, trees and flowers and blades of grass, and birds had long since silenced. It was too hot to move, too hot to sing.

Harry could feel sunfire on his skin, heavy as it pounded down his neck. After spending months huddling for warmth in ice-glittering forests, frosting breaths over cold hand and snow sleet sticking to his hair, it was like stepping in a blazing oven, heat slamming into him like a brick wall. He swayed on the saddle of his horse, barely aware of the growing burn in his thighs from hours of riding, as sweat pooled on his back, plastering his sleeveless shirt to his chest.

"You should drink," Slytherin called beside him, the man's voice jostling him from doziness. 
"Before you fall off your horse."

"Hn." Harry fumbled with his water skin. It was empty. "Of course it is," he muttered, patting down his pocket to find his wand. "Aguamenti." He drank, water from the spell fresh and crystal-blue. Feeling marginally better, he dumped what was left on his hair. It helped clear his head.

"Aguamenti," Slytherin repeated. "'I grow water with my mind'. Rather straightforward, isn't it?"

Harry blinked at the other man. He was riding a few steps ahead, at ease as he swayed with the gait of his horse. Sila was draped over his shoulders, basking in the heat. "You speak Latin?" his student asked.

"You don't?"

An hour later, Harry could chant the first and second declensions in one breath, and had acquired a basic understanding of nouns structures and meanings.

"There is power in words," Slytherin told him when he grew weary of the rather dull exercise. 
"You can't hope to control magic if you don't understand the roots of the spells you use."

"It's worked so far," Harry protested. "What difference would it make from what I can do now?"

"It would makes all the difference between talent and mediocrity." There wasn't any rebuke in the Founder's tone, only the flat enunciation of blunt, clear facts. "Words are the bridge between your body and the outside world. To bind them to you is to strengthen that bridge. You can cast some non-verbal spells, can you not? Are you any good at it?"

Harry thought of Hermione, of the absent-minded way with which she used magic, all clean control and sheer brilliance. "Not really," he admitted.

"Of course not, if you don't hold the spells' meanings in mind. You're hurtling your powers into the void, praying they'll reach the other side intact. To you, verbal speech a crutch, one you've yet to learn to walk without." Slytherin smiled then, sharp and full of promise. "But when I'm done with
you, you will fly Mr Potter. Again, from the top now."

Hours later, when the sun started to decline at the west in shades of red and amber, and an earth-
warm wind swirled among blinking fireflies and floating dandelions, Harry flopped down on a
blanket of long, dry grass, and asked, "Will you tell me about your world?" because Slytherin had
made it clear that questions were welcomed and Harry was beyond curious.

The other man settled in front of him, long legs stretching. "What do you want to know?"

"I – Everything? I mean, this is – what I know about this time comes from History books. This is
like a children's tale. I want to know how people live? What they do?"

Slytherin chuckled. "Well," he began, sitting more comfortably as he looked at the sky. "Those of
us who have come in their powers live much differently from Muggles. We have access to lands
and knowledge they can only glimpse in their dreams. I've travelled for many years before coming
back here. To learn from other people's gods and traditions. But I'm assuming you'll want to hear
about the Isles first?"

Harry nodded. "Please," he said, and the Founder smiled at the eagerness in his tone.

"The country is divided in about five separate kingdoms that Celts, Britons and Northerners fight to
rule over."

"Five?" Harry repeated, stunned. "England is divided into five kingdoms?"

Slytherin nodded. "Ten, if you don't count those that belong to the same people. Each is led by a
man who calls himself High King."

Harry let out a low whistle. "Which are they, these kingdoms?"

"Britons hold two," Slytherin replied easily. "One south that goes from Wessex to Mercia, and
another far north, called Northumberland. The two are divided by the Kingdom of Guthrum, ruled
by Danes. Celts have the other two, also separated. The Wales west, and Strathclyde beside
Northumberland. North of that, you'll find Pictish clans, that no one really wants to disturb."

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "That sounds – Unstable," he said.

Slytherin snorted. "Oh, it is," he answered. "The only time when Danes and Britons don't squabble
within their own ranks is when they're at each other's throats. I've stopped counting how many
times war nearly broke their lands apart."

Harry frowned. "Are they at war now?" he asked.

"They always are. The Northerners keep trying to invade what kingdoms they don't yet hold."

"Northerners. Do you mean Vikings?" The Founder nodded. "I never knew any of that," Harry
confessed, shaking his head. Binns had been a dreadful teacher. "The Isles are unified in my time.
The last war that affected the land directly happened about sixty years ago."

The other man cast him a curious glance. "I had thought your injuries came from a battle," he said
mildly.

"Ah – That's different," Harry replied. "I was talking about wars that Muggles know about."

There was a beat of silence.
"Are Wizards fighting each others?" Slytherin's tone was blank.

Harry swallowed. "It's complicated." It was fear of his own people, friends torn apart over their parents' ideologies, pure-bloods hunting Muggle-borns, Slytherins against Gryffindors. It was a hoarse voice twisting destiny from spun crystal, and the weight of a nation's expectations on his shoulders. It was a madman raving for his head, and killing to survive. Someone else's blood on his hands, Death walking in his steps. Harry cleared his throat. "Wha – what kingdom are you from?" he asked, and there was nothing subtle in this change of subject, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He just wished his hands would stop trembling.

Slytherin's eyes on him were like a physical touch. "Wessex," said the Founder. The soft timber of his voice broke the tension that had been encasing the two of them, thick and suffocating.

Harry looked up. "What about the others?"

"You do know about them, then." Slytherin smiled, reaching from their food bag. "Godric is from Wessex as well, though he was born in Mercia. Helga comes from the Wales, and Rowena is a Scot."

"Hm." Harry let his eyes travel to the wild, endless plains surrounding them. Yellowish grass undulated under the summer's wind, giving the illusion that they were lost in the middle of a rolling sea. "And where are we now?" he asked.

"A few miles from Mercia, I should think," Slytherin replied.

A resigned sigh. "We're not arrived, are we?"

The Founder cast him a smile. "Not even close."

{...}

"Merlin, I hate this," Harry murmured.

A few days of travel, and he had become acquainted with muscles he had no idea existed. Hippogriffs and Thestrals notwithstanding, he had never ridden anything resembling to a horse before. The result, added to his not-quite-healed wounds, was a painful one, jarring up strained limbs with each motion.

His legs buckled the moment his feet touched the ground. Harry clutched his saddle to keep from landing face-first in the dirt, muttering all the while. Face pressed against the crisp-smelling leather, he breathed slowly, patting his mare's dark bay mane when she snorted in discomfort.

Unfortunately, Apparation had yet to be discovered, and the anti-Portkey wards surrounding Hogwarts would only be lifted for the arrival of the students. The only option left was to travel on horseback, which, Harry was certain, asked for more energy than he had needed to get his OWLs.

The monotony of the last days had been broken by the discussions he had been having with Slytherin. He was much better company than Harry had expected – but then again, blithely destroying expectations seemed to be something of a hobby to the Founder. On top of a few improvised lessons in Latin, the man had taken to put Harry's magical knowledge to the test, sneaking Transfiguration questions in the middle of random conversations, asking Harry to perform small tasks that he could very well have done himself – snuff out fires, fill water skins, and oh, would you mind lifting that tree trunk from the road, Mr Potter? On one memorable occasion, he had even chucked a freshly-sharpened dagger at Harry's chest while he'd had his wand in hand. The Protego had been instinctive, thank Merlin, and no one had been hurt, but the Founder had
been anything but repentant about the fright he had given him.

"You'll be staying, m'lord?"

Startled out of his musings, Harry blinked at the lanky, acne-scared man standing in front of him. He hadn't heard him approach.

"Sorry?"

"You'll be staying or not?" the man repeated patiently. Understanding him was difficult.

"Ah, er – " Harry glanced over the other's shoulder. Slytherin was speaking to a bunch of children huddled around a game of knucklebones. As Harry watched, a boy whose face was half-covered in dirt gave the Founder a toothless smile, and gestured at something further down the street. "Yeah, I think we will," he answered.

Slytherin had said that they might need to spend the night in this small town – Baal? Badab? – to buy some more food. It was getting late, and there would be no point in heading off after dusk.

"May I take yer horses then?"

"Please do," said Slytherin before Harry could answer, and the stable boy jumped a feet in the air, startled. The Founder tossed him a coin. "Make sure they're saddled at dawn." The young man bowed low and hurried off with their horses. "Apparently, the Rising Sun is where we should spend the night," Slytherin announced as he disappeared into what had to be stables.

Harry glanced at him. "As long as they have decent beds," he said with a wry smile.

The tavern reminded Harry of the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade. Cool and dark despite the heat outside, it had few shady wooden tables, laid hazardously on the dirt floor, and an impressive collection of barrels behind a counter that seemed to have known quite a few animated nights. Harry stepped behind Slytherin as the man walked to the counter, seemingly unaware of the curious stares the two of them were garnering from patrons already nursing pints of ale.

A cheerful woman appeared as if summoned, and Harry listened with a distracted ear while Slytherin asked for a room. Her accent was so terrible that the younger man hardly understood a word she said, but it did not take much time for her to hand the Founder a key in exchange for some money.

They went up a flight of creaking stairs, reached their room, and Harry stifled a groan.

There was only one bed.

"I don't suppose we can Transfigure another one?" he asked Slytherin, gesturing at the piece of furniture.

"Not a risk worth taking," the man approved, setting down his bags. "It's already a chance that we won't have to share this room."

Harry nodded, then proceeded to search for his blankets.

"What are you doing?"

He glanced at the Founder. Wasn't it obvious? "Setting my bed?" he replied.

He thought he heard Slytherin chuckle.
"I'm sure this one is big enough for us both, Mr Potter." Harry inadvertently dropped his bag. "Unless you'd rather sleep on the floor of course," the Founder continued, "but considering the state of your back, I wouldn't advise it."

Slytherin's face betrayed nothing but his eyes were amused. Harry cast him a puzzled glance.

"But I thought it... I mean, isn't it... ?" Inappropriate? Indecent? Suspicious? Yet another boundary Harry would rather not cross with that strange man to whom he owed his life?

"As I said," Slytherin interrupted, gentle as he put him out of his misery. "We're lucky to have a room for ourselves. It isn't uncommon for strangers to share a bed in such establishments."

"Oh." At loss for words, Harry nodded. "Alright, then." He stuffed the blankets back into his bag, studiously ignoring the way his arms were tingling with something that wasn't quite apprehension.

The two men left shortly afterwards.

Back in the streets, Harry was overwhelmed. The roads were nothing more than irregular paths of dirt tucked between low stone houses with thatched roofs. The stench of leather being treated, of unwashed bodies and horse dung made his eyes water and his stomach churn. Chickens scuttled underfoot, cackling as they went. Stomping feet, ringing metal, laughing children. Men dragged a wooden carts filled with vegetables behind them. Farther away, potters shaped clay with an ease that came from practice. Women, hair hidden under rough cloth, walked by with jars of water. Old and young mingled, speaking a language Harry barely understood, and everything they did was unfamiliar, from the way they dressed to the way they moved.

He had known, objectively that he had been sent to a time that was very different from his own. But it was only now, for the first time since he had arrived, that he truly felt out of place. That he found himself thinking I don't belong here, and it – rattled him. Jarred like pieces of who he was had come loose and were jumbling in his sides.

Slytherin led them to the market place of the town. The man struck an odd portrait, with the foreign elegance of his clothes, the mindless confidence in his steps, among the dirty, ragged townspeople. He didn't seem to belong any more than Harry did, and the young man caught himself trailing in the Founder's shadow, cautious of the stares the two of them were attracting. He wished he could reach for his wand.

The market place was surprisingly crowded, a dense flow of people shouting and haggling, pressed together as they cleaved their way from stall to stall. There were piles upon piles of fruits and vegetables, apricots and lemon and strawberries, onions and lettuce and carrots, the sweet scent of beetroot and garlic mingling with that of roasting meat, pork and pheasant. It was a multicoloured mess of beans green and apple red and leather brown.

Fascinated and a bit dazzled, Harry followed behind Slytherin without paying much attention to the man's actions. He watched the people, the lines on their sun-weathered faces, the laughs in their tired eyes.

The Founder was buying slices of dried meat when the crowd parted, cleaved like a receding wave, Harry saw them, at the end of the place. The hanged bodies of two middle-aged men. Necks twisted, mouths open, they hung limply, reminding Harry of broken dolls. For a moment, he didn't understand what he was seeing. The image of such grotesque deaths seemed at odds with the livings bustling all around. No one but him was sparing the corpses a second glance, as if such a display was commonplace, because, in fact, it was.
Disgust tinged with horror left an acrid taste in the back of his throat. He was familiar with death. Had lived with its presence draped over him like a cloak. He knew the losses of war, friends and family leaving and never coming back. He knew the rush of a Killing Curse hurtling at him, the stretched heartbeats of duels to the death. But he'd never seen – this. Light-hearted indifference in the face of lifeless bodies. It turned his stomach and –

A jolt along his back, the impact winding air from his lungs and reawakening the pain of his wound.

"Sorry," he mumbled with a wince, turning to face the man he had stumbled onto.

He was tall, with brooding features carved on rough skin. He glared, sneering and furious. "Watch where you're going, boy," he snarled. "You clumsy fu – "

"Piss off, mate," Harry snarled back. He was hurt and tired and he loathed it when people called him 'boy'. "Wasn't my fault. I don't have eyes behind my back to warn me off arseholes."

There was a moment of stunned silence, the towering man gaping at Harry as though floored by the cheek of him. Then, his eyes darkened, his face twisted, and he took a step toward Harry, a hand reaching for his throat.

"What do you think you're doing?" The voice was cold, snapped through the air like a whip, effectively freezing the man before he could grab Harry by the collar, and Harry before his hand could close around the handle of his wand.

He felt the quick pressure of two fingers on the back of that hand as Slytherin appeared beside him, all the weight of his dark eyes directed at the villager, cold and almost cruel. For a second, Harry felt sorry the other man.

"I – "

"No, wait," Slytherin cut before the other could speak. "I don't care. Unless you want me to take offence for you raising a hand on my ward, you will get out of my sight. Right. Now."

The man's face underwent an interesting change of colours, going from angry puce to sickly pale in a blink. His eyes darted to the sword on the Founder's waist, to his rich clothes, to his icy eyes, and without another word, he stepped back and disappeared into the crowd. Slytherin's stance relaxed immediately, the sense of danger surrounding him vanishing into nothingness. "I think it's time for us to head back," he declared lightly. One of his hands found the small of Harry's back and gave a soft push, prompting the young man to start moving.

Left somewhat dizzy by the abrupt change of attitudes, Harry let the Founder guide him back to the tavern, where they went to their room to deposit what Slytherin had bought, leaving the purchases under the guard of his familiar – hidden under a strong Notice-Me-Not – who gave a lazy flick of her tail before they went back out for an early dinner.

"Why was he so afraid of you?" Harry asked after the two of them had settled at one of the tables farthest from the counter.

Slytherin didn't ask who he was talking about. "Why do you think?" he retorted, leaning back against his chair.

Harry bit his lip. He replayed the scene in his mind. "I don't know," he said. "But he didn't seem like the kind of man who'd let it go just because you threatened him." And yet.
"And yet," said Slytherin with a faint smile. "Would you have ran?"

"I wouldn't have tried to strangle me in the first place," Harry replied, rolling his eyes. "But if I'd been him... No, I don't think I would have."

"Not even with your life in the balance?"

The young man frowned. "How would my life have been in the balance?" The frown cleared. "With the 'taking offence' thing? Does that mean you'd have... Duelled him?" The thought felt strange, spoken aloud, as well as a little ludicrous.

"Yes."

"Oh." Harry blinked. "But he could've won."

"No, he really couldn't have," Slytherin said, arching a brow at him.

"No?" The man had been all hard muscles and brutish strength. Slytherin – not so much.

"He was unarmed, untrained, and he wouldn't have survived winning, even if he'd had the skill to defeat me." A pause. "Which he doesn't."

"Even if he'd – I don't understand."

"The advantage of nobility, Mr Potter," Slytherin replied simply. Seeing that his puzzled look had not left Harry, he added, "For a commoner to hurt or challenge a lord is punishable by death."

"That's ridiculous," Harry blurted. He didn't even stop to note the fact that Slytherin was from nobility. It hardly surprised him – he had yet to see the man move with anything but innate elegance. Not everything could be explained away by practice. "If you challenge him and he accepts, he'll die regardless of the outcome." Harry shook his head, incredulous. "That's more than ridiculous. It's unfair."

"I never said it wasn't. That's how it has been for centuries." There was a calculative glint shining in Slytherin's eyes. One Harry overlooked.

"Longevity doesn't make it right."

"It does not," Slytherin conceded.

"I –"

Harry was interrupted by the arrival of a serving girl. Slightly startled to remember there were people surrounding the two of them, his mouth snapped shut while she approached, a precariously-balanced tray in one hand and a pitcher in the other. The colour of her hair was indiscernible under the grease matting the curls, and her long dress had seen better days. She disposed bowls full of a kind of thick stew in front of the two wizards, along with a loaf of bread and two pints of something that looked like sweet ale, all the while keeping her head ducked.

"Thank you," Slytherin said, grey eyes fixed on Harry.

The girl jumped out of her skin. The wine in her pitcher sloshed dangerously close to the edge, and Harry's quick reflexes were the only things that kept her tray from toppling over. Eyes wide – and she had lovely eyes, Harry noted distractedly; a soft shade of baby blue – cheeks flaming red, she looked from Harry to Slytherin – the Founder, still observing his student, did not so much as glance
at her – with something that could only be panic.

"It's alright," said Harry, hoping to placate her.

It didn't work. If anything, she blushed an even deeper shade of red. Then, she curtsied awkwardly – some wine did escape the pitcher this time – before hurrying away.

Harry had not understood half of what had just happened. "Alright," he said, turning toward Slytherin. "How does it work?"

And the Founder explained. Kings who shared the power with the clergy, Lords who ruled over lands in their name, helped by knights who owed them fealty, serfs whose only rights were to plough the earth and pay taxes. There was more freedom in big cities, scholars and independent women, but life was hard as it was short. Some of these things Harry knew, most he did not.

"How?" Was the only thing he could think to ask afterwards. "How can this work?"

Slytherin merely looked at him, waiting for him to finish his thought.

"I mean, this is little better from slavery," Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "Serfs are the first to die, aren't they? If there's a war, they won't be a priority to protect. If there's a famine, their food will be taken. They pay to live like this." He made a vague gesture with his hand, enclosing the entire tavern. "While a handful of others – no offence – laze around and just have to ask to get what they want... That's not – Just, how – ?"

Slytherin rested his forearms on the table, meal untouched. "How do you think?" he asked, and there was a rapt sort of enjoyment shining in his eyes, something sharp and intent that looked like a challenge.

"I don't know!" Harry growled. "Why would anyone accept to live like this? They're being exploited for the sake of people who don't give a shit. It doesn't make any sense. The nobles are a large minority, aren't they?" At Slytherin's nod, he continued, "Then why doesn't anyone rebel? If every serf was to turn against his master, the lords wouldn't be able to protect themselves, would they? They would all fall."

"There'd be blood on both sides, but they definitely would."

Somewhat startled by the easy admittance, Harry shook his head. "Then why – "

"If," Slytherin interrupted. "You had lived this way all your life. If you had been told that your place was knees in the dirt since birth. If stories whispered in your ear since before you were old enough to understand them told you to fear and obey your master. If corruption kept you from trusting your own family – Would you not bow as they do?"

"No," Harry replied with the absolute certainty that he was telling the truth. Because the Dursleys had tried to mould him since the day he had appeared on their doorstep. They had tried to tell him he was a freak, a worthless thing that costs good people their money and aren't you ashamed boy, to exist and stain our happiness? And it had hurt, had riddled him with scars the naked eye couldn't see. But Harry bent and never broke, never gave in. He clung to the tight spark inside his chest that told him this wasn't right, that he deserved better, and lived.

Slytherin was looking at him, that strange gleam in his eyes burning brighter. "And if," he said, voice soft over the hubbub of the bar, but the only sound Harry could hear nonetheless. "If you had children to feed. Friends to protect. If living on a leach achieved those ends. Would you not bow then?"
That froze Harry, pint hovering in front of his lips. What price would he be willing to pay to keep his friends safe? Would he give up freedom, his and theirs? Would it be such a bad thing, if they could live without it, if bowing to a powerful, unjust man allowed them the right to breathe? Would he, Harry, kneel and accept this?

"No." The word, barely above a whisper, rang with the same absolute certainty as before. Because twisting people's minds, taking their rights with fear and desperation and war, that was what Voldemort was trying to do. That was what Harry had been fighting to keep from happening for years. Something he would die rather than see come to pass. Yes, he had been forcefully thrown into this war against the Dark Lord, but nothing could have kept him at its very center if he had not wished it. "No," he repeated, looking up and letting his eyes find Slytherin's. "Because I wouldn't want my friends to live in such a world. I'd fight to change it, and so would they. I don't... I can't understand why these people," he jerked his head toward the villagers around them, "won't fight as well."

Slytherin leaned closer, the planes of his face thrown in sharp relief with the flickering flames of the candles. Harry could feel his heat against his skin.

"Neither can I," the Founder breathed in a soft voice, as if divulging his most precious secret.

Harry's breath stuttered.

"SAY THAT AGAIN AND I'LL KILL YOU!"

He jumped. The tavern reasserted itself in a rush, the sticky smell of spilled alcohol, the uncomfortable warmth of body heat, dirty floors and firelight. Patrons, most passably drunk, were yelling encouragements and growling in anger.

"I saw her!" a man snarled, getting on his feet with such speed that his chair went crashing behind him in a great clatter. "She healed that boy! He should've died, and she healed him! That snivelling bitch is a witch!" The last word was spat as if it were the foulest insult. Harry flinched at the venom in the man's voice.

A young man with straw-coloured hair screamed in rage and threw himself at the man, fists raised, punching everything he could reach. They tumbled to the floor, flesh and bones and blood, among the cheers of the others, and soon, the fight was hidden from view by a press of drunken bodies. No one seemed inclined to try and break the brawl. The air was buzzing with excitement and bloodlust. Harry's stomach rolled uncomfortably.

"Keep that in your pocket," Slytherin hissed in his ear, startling him. He had not noticed the man getting up to keep him from reaching for his wand. "Come," the Founder ordered, a hand brushing Harry's elbow as if to offer him his arm. "Before we overstay our welcome."

The two wizards made their way out of the room unnoticed by the jeering crowd.

"You would do well to keep from advertising your powers around Muggles, Mr Potter," Slytherin informed him the moment they reached their shared bedroom. "As you can see, our kind is far from appreciated."

"Yeah, I figured," Harry muttered, shaking his head. He had heard, of course, of the reasons why Sorcerers had gone underground before and after the time of Merlin. Being hunted and put down like dogs did not do well for sociability.

Bone-meltingly exhausted, Harry slumped on the bed, wishing nothing more than to sleep despite
his growling stomach.

"You should rest," Slytherin said, echoing his thoughts. "Tomorrow will be a long day."

Harry could not agree more. He washed up quickly and changed into his sleeping clothes before slipping between the sheets. His mind was strangely alert despite his tiredness. Perhaps because of the fight that had just ceased downstairs, but more likely because he knew that the chances of his sleeping beside a man he didn't trust were rather slim. He feared he wouldn't get much rest tonight.

He was proven wrong when, a few minutes later, the other end of the bed dipped under Slytherin's weight and his own body unwound reflexively.

After a mumbled, "Good night," he slept.

\{. . .\}

That night, Harry dreamt.

He was running and jumping, never fast enough, never high enough, there were runes seeping through his skin, tying him down, just on the wrong edge of painful. . . Ron and Hermione were looking at him with accusatory eyes, from the pillory on which they hanged by the neck. . . He could not reach them, the runes had wrapped around his limbs, and he was falling, down, down, down into a pool of silvery water, sinking deeper and deeper. . . But he was not drowning. He felt startlingly alive, even, each of his nerve endings flaring and dancing with awareness. . . Words were being hissed against his skin. Burning after the touch of the water, they moved with him, on him, but he could not understand them, not even one. . . He could not, but he longed to, so much that finding his breath was difficult, and his chest was aching and. . .

He woke with a start. Remnants of a phantom ache disappeared along with slumber. For a moment, he could not remember where he was. Bedsheets were coarse on his skin, the mattress was hard against his back. People were shouting in the street, their voices filtering through an open window along with pale rays of sunlight. Slytherin was lying beside him, fully dressed on top of the covers, legs crossed at the ankles, a leather-bound book in hand. He was not paying the text any attention. He was looking at the window with narrowed eyes, and there was a small frown scrunching his forehead.

The soft light was making the silver of his eyes shimmer.

"Good, you're awake."

Harry blinked, startled to find that the Founder's focus had shifted to him.

"Get ready," Slytherin ordered as he closed his book. "I've the feeling that we should have left hours ago." He rose quickly and walked to the window to look down the street.

"Something wrong?" asked Harry. He got out of bed and began searching for his clothes.

"I'm not sure," Slytherin murmured, almost to himself.

Harry hurried to shrug on his shirt, trousers and boots. The hubbub from the street sounded more distant now. He put the oddity in a corner of his mind before he grabbed his bag and followed the Founder down the stairs.

The common room of the tavern was deserted. Slytherin did not seem surprised. Noting the tense set of his shoulders, Harry refrained from asking questions as the two of them strode across the
silent room. There was no one in the street either. A faint scent of fire-smoke was lingering between the buildings.

"We have to leave," Slytherin declared, voice devoid of inflections, a tone Harry had yet to hear from the man.

They found their horses already saddled inside nearby stables. Their hooves were pawing the floor nervously, as impatient to leave as the Founder was.

The smell of smoke grew stronger as they approached the market place of the town.

"Sir, do you – " Harry's question got lost in his throat at the closed, expressionless mask set on Slytherin's face.

The first scream had all the surreality of a nightmare. Surely, it was impossible for a human being to express such agony through a simple sound? It went on for ages, shrilling, tearing through the air, freezing Harry into place until he realised that it was, in fact, real.

It faded away and Harry ran.

"No, don't!"

Slytherin's words were lost to the rush of blood in his ears as Harry retraced blindly the path he had taken yesterday, sprinting through the streets as quickly as he could, feet flying over the ground.

The market place was packed. It seemed that the entire city had gathered there, among the asphyxiating scent of smoke, to listen to those inhuman screams of pain. Yells and insults rang across the place, shockingly loud in their insignificance. Hundreds of feet pounded the ground like discordant drums. The crackled of fire was soft, barely audible over this cacophony.

Harry's eyes were drawn to the end of the place.

Where yesterday had been hanged corpses, now stood a bonfire.

Upon which were two writhing bodies.

"No."

Nobody heard the quiet, pleading whisper that left his lips.

Harry began to push his way through the mass of the crowd, barely aware of the annoyed growls he received in return. An uncooperative man was thrown away from him, far away, father than Harry's body was capable of throwing, but he ignored that, too. Everything was muted, drowned under all that smoke.

The woman strung up on the burning wood was not moving anymore. Neither was the child beside her.

The child.

The scent of ashes and burnt meat was choking now, filling Harry's throat, cloying his lungs and leaving an acrid taste on his tongue.

There was something growing inside him. Something that inflated in his chest, roared through his veins, pressed against his skin. . . The straw-haired man Harry had seen fighting in the tavern the night before was yelling, and several guards were struggling to keep him away from the fire. The
people around him were yelling. That thing inside him was yelling, and perhaps Harry should let out that scream. Perhaps it would snuff out the fire, clear away the smoke. Perhaps he could start moving again. . .

A hand closed over his mouth, an arm snaked around his chest, pressing him tightly against another body, and both restraints shackled the wave of power threatening to spill out of his skin, if only just.

"It's too late."

Even through his daze, Harry recognized Slytherin's voice. He bit hard into the hand over his mouth until the pressure vanished. He tried to move, but the Founder's hold didn't waver.

"Let me go."

"No."

"LET ME GO!" he yelled, trying to hit Slytherin in any way he could, elbows and fists and feet, but none of his blows seemed to find their target.

"No," Slytherin repeated, into his ear this time, and there was a dangerous edge to his tone, an assured calm that drained Harry of all the hapless rage that had taken hold of him at the sight of such a waste of life. He was left panting, with nothing but the Founder's arms to keep him on his feet. "We have to leave."

Only then did Harry become aware of the stares trained on the two of them, none of which were friendly.

Slytherin's hold on him tightened. The Founder forced him to move, guiding his steps.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Out of my way."

Harry blinked at the man blocking their path. A nasty scar was running down the side his face. Slytherin took a step to get past him, but the man matched the move.

"Does he feel sorry for the witch? She only got what she deserved. Just like her brat."

Harry wanted to throw up.

"Out of my way."

He felt tendrils of magic escape Slytherin, and he realised that it was only pure strength of will that was keeping the Founder's powers from lashing out entirely. He could feel that the man was almost shaking under the strain, a hair's breadth away from just letting go.

The scarred man stepped away.

Somehow, the two wizards made it back to their horses. Despite the frank hostility in the eyes of those surrounding them, the crowd parted to let them through, preys cowering under the threat of violence.

Harry shrugged off the Founder's hold, got on his horse, and both men galloped out the the town without looking back.

They did not stop for a long while.
"I should have expected it," Harry said quietly, hours later, when they'd had to stop lest their horses collapsed from under them. "The witch-hunts. That's partly why Hogwarts was created, wasn't it? So that we could have a safe place."

Slytherin did not answer, but he gave a slow nod. He had not spoken since the two of them left the city, lost in thoughts of a darkness to match Harry's.

The young man observed him from the few feet separating them. The Founder returned his gaze evenly, waiting for him to gather his thoughts.

"What do you think of Muggles?"

The question burst from Harry's lips without his full consent. It had been lingering at the edges of his mind for days, but a small, irrational part of him had been reluctant to ask. Now, he just had to know.

He did not miss the darkening of Slytherin's eyes.

"Muggles," the Founder repeated softly, as if tasting the word on his tongue. "They fear power, perhaps as much as they fear the countless things that defy their understanding." A joyless smile twisted his lips. "We have a power that they don't understand." He closed his eyes for a brief moment. "For the most part," he said, letting his eyes find Harry's once again. "They are a bunch of idiots barely capable of ensuring their own survival. Few live peaceful, honest lives, and fewer have achieved greatness, but these I respect."

"And the others?" Harry asked just as softly.

Slytherin smiled. It wasn't kind. "The others I would kill without remorse."

Harry felt the words like a sharp blow in the stomach. His eyes closed, just like Slytherin's moments ago, under a pain, blooming in his chest, that he did not understand. He buried his head in his hands, hiding his face from the other man.

"Why?" he whispered.

"Because..." Slytherin's voice was soft, but Harry heard it with frightening clarity. "They have the blood of thousands of us on their hands. Because they threaten the people I love."

Suddenly, Harry understood, and the realisation was perhaps even more terrifying than anything he had lived today. That cold, ruthless resolve to keep his friends safe no matter the price, no matter what he had to give or tear away – That ferocious thing he could sometimes feel pulse through him to the rhythm of his heart – He'd always attributed it to one of the Gryffindor traits the Sorting Hat had seen in him, but – Hearing it echoed tenfold in Slytherin's silken tone begged him to reconsider.

"Is there anything you would not do for the people you love, Mr Potter?"

"Harry."

Silence. He looked up in time to catch surprise flickering through Slytherin's silver eyes. Their gazes met and held.

"You can call me Harry."

Slytherin smiled, a small secretive thing to share. "Only if you call me Salazar, then."
"I'll try," Harry promised.

[...]

The soft drizzle slid, liquid and languid, over the dull greenery of the Scottish mountainside, with all the warmth of a summer rainstorm. Droplets clattered with an audible rumble on blunt grey rock as sheets of water fell from the sky, bouncing off tree leaves, fracturing on the ground, multiplied a hundred fold to better catch cloud-dimmed sunlight.

Harry closed his eyes, tipped his head back until rainwater soaked his hair, glided down his throat and drenched his clothes. The air was fresh with the scent of wet earth and green things, dusty dirt turning warm brown under his feet, and grass donning a glossy sheen that stole his breath.

He loved Scotland.

They had ridden hard these last days, Salazar and him, under the sweltering August sun, towards the call of home, stopping only for a few hours at a time, when one threatened to faint from exhaustion. They were almost there. Harry recognized these mountains, rising proudly in the fading light, rock-jagged peaks swallowed by swirling clouds. He recognized the shape of the trees, tall pines creaking in the wind, and the rich scent of their sap. He knew Hogwarts was nearby, could feel the castle's pull in his bones, and it was taking all of his willpower to keep from running towards it.

He glanced at Salazar. Like him, the man was on foot, helping his horse trudge through the slope of the hill with some difficulty. All he could see of the Founder was his back, but he thought he could detect some of his own restlessness in the set of the man's shoulders and in the briskness of his long strides.

Learning to call him by his given name had been – easy. Easier than Harry thought it would be, like learning to fly for the first time, the hiss of the wind loud in his ears as he watched the ground move farther and farther away with an elated feeling in his chest. Something had shifted, after their stop at the small town, after a woman had burned at the stake and Slytherin had pulled Harry close to his chest to keep him from levelling the market place. It wasn't trust, exactly, what danced between them in silence, but – something akin to it, complicity from sharing the same burden, bearing the same secrets. Harry no longer stiffened when the Founder came close to him, and Salazar, thought still his usual, charmingly polite self, had stopped to observe and analyse his every move.

Had he had the time or will to stop and reflect on it, Harry was sure he would find beyond strange the fact that he was, somehow, getting along with the Lord of Slytherin.

Slippery ground gave way under his feet, nearly sent him rolling down the hill. Biting back a startled gasp as he regained balance, Harry shook his head, dislodging droplets from his hair. He had to focus or –

He glided to an abrupt halt, just in time to keep from colliding with Salazar's back.

He looked up. Stopped to breathe.

Hogwarts was perfectly visible at the mountain's foot, all high towers and graceful arches, glowing, haloed in the rain. It was beautiful. It was home.

They had made it.

Harry was the first surprised by the choked, delighted laughter that escaped him, but he couldn't
help it, didn't care if he looked like a madman because –

Hogwarts was here. A thousand years away from his time, the castle still stood, ready to welcome him home, one unchanging point to his eventful life, and Harry felt something unknot inside him, a pressure he had not been aware existed ease and disappear.

"Shall we, then?"

He turned to Salazar at the words, to find the Founder already looking, a faint smile on his lips, something akin to understanding dancing in his eyes. His skin was slick with rainwater, his hair was falling around his face in drenched, messy locks. He looked –

Expectant.

"God, yes," said Harry.

Two hours later, two soaked wizards were crossing the castle's gates.

Hogwarts looked different. Its stones were not yet polished by time. Several towers seemed to be needing a few finishing touches. In Harry's era, its aura was tainted with the nobility that comes with age, but now, the castle was just brimming with joyful, untamed energy.

The two men led their horses to the stables – where, in Harry's time, Hagrid used to nurse back to health his harmlessly misunderstood friends. They flung their bags over their shoulders and were off to the Great Hall. It was around dinner time; Salazar expected the other inhabitants to be there.

The hallways were grand and silent and familiar. There weren't nearly as many painting on the wall, or suits of armours standing guard in small alcoves, but all of the castle's sweeping, ornate curves were there, hitting Harry with a pang of bittersweet homesickness. By the time he was in front of the heavy wooden doors of the Great Hall, his heart was hammering in his chest, painful but reassuring. Salazar, a hand flat against the doors, cast him an interrogative glance. Harry gave a tight nod, and the doors swung open.

The ceiling was not yet enchanted, Harry noted with some surprise, and the tables scattered around the vast room were round and lantern-lit, bright in the watery gloom. There were four of them, and only one was occupied. At the sound of wood scrapping stone, the people around it turned as one.

After a beat of astonished silence, a woman with honey-blond hair stood up, dark eyes dangerously narrowed, and she was making her way toward Harry and Salazar before anyone else thought to react.

"You," she growled, "where the hell have you been?!

Chapter End Notes

That chapter turned out to be a lot more important than I'd planned. I'm not going to complain, I love it when they write themselves.

About history: Witch-hunts actually started in the 15th century, not in the 10th, but I figured that in a universe where witchcraft actually exists, hatred for magic is bound to get an early start.

Also, Aguamenti. Not actually conjugated at the first person, but it sounded better that
way. And in any case, Rowling never conjugates spells properly, so I extrapolated.

Let me know what you think, I love reviews!
Long angry strides rebounding in the cavernous silence of the Great Hall, dark furious eyes blazing in the crackling light of floating candles. The woman exuded determined ire, marching toward Salazar with all the focused rage of a vengeful goddess.

Harry thought it prudent to take a step back.

"Weeks!" she hissed, voice a vicious growl as she jabbed a finger in Salazar's ribs. "Without. A. Single. Word." Her other hand went to fist into the man's waistcoat, giving a forceful pull that brought them nose to nose. "Would it have killed you to write?"

"Listen, I –"

The words earned Salazar a jab in the stomach. He grunted but didn't move or flinch away, facing down the the Erinys in front of him like one would a dragon startled out of sleep.

The woman released him, drawing back as though to gather momentum. "Do you have any idea how worried we were?" she breathed, seething with emotions Harry could not name.

Slytherin caught her wrist before another fist could find his chest. "I'm sorry," he said in a low voice, his gaze holding hers. A slow smile curled his lips. "I've missed you, too."

And he tugged on her wrist, pulled her against his chest into a tight embrace, hands splayed across her back. She went without without hesitation, pulled him to her with just as much strength, wrapped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes, shoulders sagging in relief. Neither moved for a while, uncaring of the droplets of water that pooled at their feet, Salazar smiling in the woman's hair as she stood on tiptoes to better bring them together.

"Don't think that puts you off the hook," she murmured, quiet but firm. She did not sound angry anymore.

Salazar shifted away. "I wouldn't dream of it," he replied, which seemed to break the spell that held still the people standing at the end of the Hall.

"Uncle!"

Harry startled when a red-headed boy appeared out of nowhere and attempted to jump on the Founder's back the moment he untangled himself from the woman in his arms. Salazar danced away half a step, deft, and the boy missed him by an inch, stumbling when his extended arms met only empty air.

Salazar caught him by the scruff of his neck before he could go sprawling on hard stone floors. "Good evening to you too, Meic," he said, amused. "How's my favourite Godson doing?" He raised a hand to stop the child when he made to jump in his arms with a blinding grin. "I'm soaked, young man," he told the boy. "We wouldn't want your mother murdering me because you caught a cold now, would we?"

Meic looked undeterred by the rejection. "Where've you been?" he asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Father wanted to go looking for you, and – "
The blond-haired woman stepped within Harry's line of sight, effectively shielding him from the conversation between Salazar and the young boy, liquid black eyes trailing tracks over his body, swift and assertive over his skin, still livid despite days of travel in the pounding sun, the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead, angry red under the damp mess of his hair, the purple-black shadows bellow his eyes, bright green dull with exhaustion, the gauntness of his shiver-racked frame, sickly thin with near-starvation. The inspection lingered for a few heartbeats, but before Harry could start feeling self-conscious, the woman's demeanour changed.

She smiled, something warm and open the young man had forgotten existed.

"Where are my manners?" she wondered, advancing toward him. "I'm Helga Hufflepuff, please to meet you."

Harry felt his eyes widen at the name, his pulse skip a beat. Helga Hufflepuff. Another name heavy with the weight of History, synonymous with kindness and loyalty, a steadfast anchor that had held Hogwarts together, a voice of reason and tolerance among raging chaos. The Founder was a beautiful woman, outshining the description Salazar had made of her. She was younger than Harry had imagined – in her late twenties at most. Barely taller than him, she was slim, with a heart-shaped face framed by a cascade of honey-coloured locks that enhanced the fullness of her lips and the dark, velvety shade of her eyes.

"You must be one of Salazar's students, Mr... ?"

"Harry Potter, ma'am." After a second of hesitation, he gave a shallow bow, something he had seen Salazar execute several times with a thoughtlessness he knew came from ingrained habit, bending at the waist with heartfelt respect. "It's an honour to meet you," he whispered, barely reigning in the sincerity of his words.

She looked both amused and pleasantly surprised by his manners. "The honour is mine, Mr Potter," she replied graciously. Then, with a quiet chuckle, "I can see why Salazar chose you."

Harry smiled in return, shoulders easing at her light-hearted tone, hands clasped behind his back.

"Well-mannered, isn't he?" Salazar appeared at Hufflepuff's side. He threw Harry a small, sardonic smile. "Not all of them will be, I'm afraid."

He offered the woman his arm. Helga rolled her eyes, but drew her wand to dry his clothes along with Harry's before slipping a hand in the crook of the Founder's elbow. Harry followed, feeling as though he was walking a step beside his own body, watching everything unfold from an outside perspective.

"Won't they?" she replied, arching a brow at Salazar. "And here I thought you said something about not accepting street urchins?" A shred of reproach had seeped into in her melodious voice.

"I believe my exact words were 'not any street urchin', darling. And I really didn't."

"Salazar!"

The both of them blinked, looking up. Helga stepped back to let a man approach her companion.

An inch or two smaller than Salazar, he was all broad shoulders, powerful muscles and golden skin. An infectious grin dimpled his stubble chin and short, dark-red hair danced around his face with each assured step. He walked with the mindless fluidity of a hunter, hazel eyes set on Salazar.

The other man met him halfway.
"Godric."

Harry's brain promptly short-circuited.

The two men clasped forearms.

"So you are still alive, then." The disappointed tone was refuted by a small, relieved smile curling the man's lips. He slid a hand on the back of Salazar's neck, brought their foreheads together with an audible sigh.

Salazar smiled, leaning into the touch, eyes closed. "Surprised?" he asked, his lips the only part of him that was moving.

A derisive snort answered him. "Hardly. You're not that easy to kill. I bet good money that we owed your lateness to a new sweetheart." Hazel orbs drifted toward Harry before darting back in silent interrogation. "Will I have to get Rowena a new set of daggers?"

Salazar smirked, grey eyes fluttering open. "You should know better than to bet against her, Godric," he replied, laughter in his voice. "I'd never elope on you. You'd miss me too much." He finished with a wink that sent Harry into a coughing fit.

"I would," Gryffindor retorted, solemn, mouth quirked in a crooked smile. He clapped Salazar's shoulder one last time, falling back a step. "Meic, get off your Godfather, he's tired."

The red-headed boy – his son, Harry realized from the depths of his daze – had climbed on Slytherin's shoulders, clung to him like an overexcited monkey. He shot his father a rebellious glare before relenting and releasing the man.

Hardly had he moved away that Salazar's arms were full again, as a pale woman with dark auburn hair, sky-blue eyes and sharp, elven features stepped forward, airborne grace in her movements. She dropped a kiss on Salazar's cheek and drew away, a soft smile on full red lips, clear gaze startling in its alertness, alight in the flickering glow of the Hall.

"It's good to have you back, Salazar," she said, words rolling with an undertow of Scottish accent, the soft blur easy on her tongue. "I told them you wouldn't pull a Gryffindor and get on a pyre."

"Glad I met your expectations, my Lady," Slytherin replied with a mocking bow that belied the innocent sincerity of his words.

"He did get sentenced to the stake," Gryffindor muttered. "More-so than I."

"Twice," Helga specified.

Salazar arched a brow at them. "Yes, and whose fault was that?"

Gryffindor winced.

Before he could retort, Salazar gestured at Harry, and the young man forced himself to focus. He found it a difficult feat to manage. His breathing was too quick, reeling as he took in the scene in front of him. He felt very small in that moment, swept away, dwarfed beside the giants that stood close enough to touch.

"– Introductions are in order," Salazar stated beside him, Grey eyes slid against drowning green, a steady contact that eased the pressure building inside Harry's chest. "This is Harry Potter. He agreed to being my student." Salazar cast Harry a sideways glance, clear and teasing. "Harry, meet
It was with the sensation of living a dream that Harry bowed in turn to the red-headed man and to the blue-eyed woman, very aware of the fact that he was greeting legends. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Harry had grown up and educated himself in the shape of the former, a role model whose name was an identity he had been proud of claiming for himself, of incorporating into his nascent understanding of the word family when he'd first arrived at Hogwarts. It burned, almost, to have Godric Gryffindor within easy reach. To have to resist the desire to take him in the way Harry had once looked at Salazar. To have to hold himself back and pretend that this man's shadow had not attached itself to Harry's skin. He kept his eyes on Ravenclaw instead, noting the woman's aerial beauty, the near-violent blaze of intelligence storming behind her eyes, a tempest trapped in human form.

Breathing deeply, he glanced away, forced himself to regain his bearings lest the incongruity of it all slammed into him and took him away. He had never understood the manic frenzy that surrounded celebrities, although it was something he had been subjected to more times than he cared to count. But now, meeting the people who had single-handedly created the first ever school of magic, who had changed the tide of the world with sheer will and mad, mad dreams –

He understood all right.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr Potter," Ravenclaw told him, pale eyes piercing through him. "I see you've had quite the eventful journey."

Harry blinked, freezing when the words reached through the strange haze that had overtaken his thoughts. Eventful? She couldn't mean... ? How could she know... ?

"Yes well, that's what happens when you travel with Salazar," said Gryffindor with a clear laugh that broke the tension bunching Harry's body. "Remember Rome?"

"Nothing would've happened in Rome if you'd known to keep quiet," Salazar shot back.

"Nothing would've happened in Rome if you hadn't had half the land's witch-hunters looking for us in the first place!" Godric sounded indignant.

Salazar caught Harry's questioning gaze. "Rowena asked for a distraction," he explained with a nonchalant shrug.

"And I cannot believe that you thought pissing off these men would work," Gryffindor muttered.

"Well," Salazar retorted, unfazed. "It did."

"Godric," Hufflepuff interrupted, gentle but firm, before the man could protest any further. The underlining steel in her voice had Gryffindor swallow back what he had been about to say. "We got away, it's all that matters. Now, shall we? I'm sure the both of you must be starving," she told Harry and Salazar with a smile.

Although Harry had lost his appetite to the jolts and knots his stomach had been performing for the last ten minutes, he nodded hurriedly when the woman's dark eyes settled on him.

"Tell us, then," Ravenclaw said once they had taken place around the table, head angled toward Salazar. "What took you so long?"

"A number of things," the man replied as he eased a piece of meat pie into a plate. "I was already running late when I came upon Harry." He slid the plate across the table, pushing it in front of..."
Harry with the silent order to eat. "I've been out of touch with our people for too long," he explained, glancing at Helga when she made an interrogative noise in the back of her throat. "I had to track down old contacts. Gain back their trust. They heard me out, but few families accepted to let their children into our care."

"That's not surprising," Rowena muttered, humming pensively. "They want to test us. We'll have to prove ourselves before they entrust us with their heirs' lives."

Salazar nodded. "My thoughts exactly," he agreed, grabbing the first dish he found and filling his own plate. "They'll be watching." He breathed slowly. "It's a setback. But things are going to change now that the word is out."

There was a beat of silence. Harry found himself tensing with the restlessness that buzzed through the air like the promise of a violent storm.

"Spreading the news took time," said Gryffindor, clearing his throat. "But I can't imagine that's all you did in all four months we've been apart."

Salazar gave a light shrug. "I had to find students, same as you. And Harry was hurt." That seemed to be enough of an explanation.

"Hurt?" Helga repeated slowly, worry in her tone. She cast Harry a sideways glance. "What happened?"

The young man swallowed his mouthful of pie, coughing in his haste. "I, er – " He looked at Salazar before he could help himself, vaguely alarmed. Tell the truth? Lie? He didn't... What would be convincing enough...

"His Master was killed." Slytherin's voice cut through Harry's mounting panic. "Muggles found the both of them and left Harry for dead."

Inquisitive stares turned sympathetic.

"I'm very sorry for your lost, Mr Potter," Hufflepuff told him softly.

Harry could only nod around the guilt unfurling in his chest at the lie. He averted his eyes from the too-comprehensive face. What Salazar had said was not too far off the mark, unfortunately. He had lost so many people by coming here, and although he knew he would fight and give everything he had to find his way back to them... They were not here. An all-too familiar stab of grief pierced his chest. They were not here, and the definite possibility that he might never see them again –

Was not something he could afford to contemplate.

A hand brushed the small of his back for a fleeting second, driving away the ghosts lurking at the edges of his mind.

Again, Harry unwittingly searched for molten silver, only to find Salazar already looking back, silently asking whether he was fine. He gave a terse nod and a wan smile he hoped did not look as fake as they felt.

"You're safe now, lad."

Gryffindor was looking at him gravely, a quiet promise burning bright just behind the gold dust of his eyes. "You're safe," he repeated with ferocious conviction, and Harry found a small part of him believing him, easing with the intent etched in the other man's pledge. It was childish, irrational,
but he felt better for it all the same.

"Did you find many students beside him?" Ravenclaw's crisp voice dissipated the respectful silence, drew attention away from Harry.

"A few," Salazar replied, grey eyes flickering toward Godric before shifting to the woman beside him. "Half a dozen, if all of them show up." He reached for a pitcher of sweet wine. "What about you?"

Harry dug into his meal, momentarily distracted from the conversation. It was delicious, warm and solid, a far cry from the fruits and slices of dry meat he had survived on for the past days. For the past months, really.

A burst of laughter startled him from his food-induced haze, knife halfway to his mouth. He set back the cutlery, frowning. There it was again. Something was nudging at the edges of his awareness. Something that had caught his attention, stirred in surprise since the moment Salazar had walked through the Great Hall's doors. It was obvious, simple, nagged at him, just out of reach —

Hufflepuff laughed, clear and radiant, head thrown back while Slytherin watched her, a sly smile on his lips, something almost soft in his eyes. Ravenclaw's fingers drew arabesques into the air, quick figures only she seemed to see, but Gryffindor answered her invisible numbers with a broad grin. Hufflepuff ran a hand across Ravenclaw's arm at something the woman said, forcing Gryffindor to shift in his chair, and Slytherin moved with him, unthinkingly, a mirror image —

And it clicked.

The Founders were friends.

Harry choked on a mouthful of bread, earning a curious glance from Gryffindor's son.

He knew some legends about the Founders of Hogwarts, of course. He knew the story of their disputes, on the subject of Muggle-borns amongst others, impetuous personalities clashing and straining to breaking point. He knew how these disputes had grown and festered, a rotting wound that had infected the castle from the inside, until Slytherin walked away from the school like a dark wraith, driven out by his former friends' resistance to his plans, leaving his House isolated and betrayed, with only the Chamber of Secrets buried deep to ensure his legacy.

All in all, not a considerable amount of information. But what Harry did know extensively, intimately even, was House rivalry, which he had experienced every day of every school year at Hogwarts, icy glares and petty squabbles and sneered insults. He knew how Gryffindors and Slytherins hated each other on an instinctual level, mocking and fighting one another for no other reason than the name of their respective Houses. He knew how aloof Ravenclaws could be, keeping to themselves with an air of complacency towards all the others, especially Hufflepuffs. He knew how the latter were considered weak for their kindness, mocked and overlooked, but keeping their heads high with a pride that held an edged of conceit. He knew how Slytherins were shunned for being stuck-up bigots, how Gryffindors were scorned for their self-righteous brashness. Acquaintances were made inter-Houses, but true friendships were rare, far in-between, and often short-lived.

Harry remembered thinking that the Sorting Hat must have been let into Dumbledore's liquor cabinet the night it had sung about how fierce Gryffindor and Slytherin friendship had been, about how only Death had separated Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. But now —
Now he was there, and what he saw stunned him.

Because amazingly, impossibly... The Founders were friends, fitted together like puzzle pieces. Jagged and sharp-edged perhaps, but still very much in their right place by each other's side. It was apparent in every line of their body, in every word that left their mouths. They talked and laughed and bantered, hands reached out, eyes shone with shared complicity, and it felt right, all of it.

This was how Hogwarts was supposed to be, and how Harry had never seen it in all six years under its roof. It was staggering a revelation, humbling a thing to witness, this bond that thrummed between the Founders with all the appearances of indestructibility. Harry found himself wondering what conflict could possibly tear it apart, what could go so very wrong that it could shatter the obvious care these people had for each other. A seed of distrust and hatred that centuries would be powerless to root out.

The doors of the Great Hall scraped open in a great rumble of creaking wood on uneven stone, startling Harry from his reverie. He stared at his plate, bemused to find it empty, before twisting around along with his table mates.

A woman walked through the doors, two young girls by her side. She was clear-eyed, her hair a coppery shade of auburn held up in a knot at the back of her head. Harry arched a brow at the trousers she was wearing; she was the first woman he saw who sported something other than flowing dresses that fell over the ankles. Two small blades hung from her belt, worn with a carelessness that spoke of years-long practice.

Harry pushed to his feet when the Founders rose to greet her, and watched as Gryffindor left the table to join the woman. He took her hand to kiss her knuckles.

"Good evening, my love," Harry heard him say in a low voice.

Before she could answer, Meic ran into her legs with a cry of, "Mother!"

Harry turned away, faint unease leaving a bitter taste on his tongue at the sight, an instinctive reaction the Dursleys had beaten into his skull that told him familial happiness was something he could only watch from afar, as an outsider undeserving of such regard.

"Salazar. You're back."

He glanced up to see the couple approaching the table, Godric holding his wife's hand like someone threatened to make him let go of her. The woman did not seem to mind.

"Marya," Salazar replied, polite with an undercurrent of warmth that sounded forced to Harry's ears.

"I'm glad," said Marya with a small smile. She gestured at her husband. "You can keep an eye on him for me, then."

The look the man cast her was an utterly smitten one, the beatific kind Ron gave Hermione when he thought no one was looking. Harry thought he heard Rowena huff an amused laugh.

"You're leaving," Slytherin said. It was not a question.

The woman nodded. "Tomorrow," she agreed pleasantly. "I won't be in your way much longer, not to worry."

"Intruding is hardly something I could reproach you." Although Salazar had spoken with the same
detached politeness, Harry was certain there was a rebuke underneath his words.

Helga cleared her throat. Slytherin glanced at her. She looked back pointedly, and he rolled his eyes.

"Would you care to join us?" he asked, a little too cordial, motioning toward the table laden with food.

"No, thank you," Marya answered. "I have to finish packing. I only came to say goodbye"

'Consider it done,' Salazar hissed, too quietly for anyone but Harry to hear. He looked at the Founder interrogatively, but the man shook his head. *Don't ask.*

Helga and Rowena stepped forward to talk to Gryffindor's wife in a chorus of "Be safe," and, "Good luck".

Of the two girls that had come with her, Harry could safely assume that the hazel-eyed, auburn-haired one was her and Godric's daughter – if only from the way she was attempting to tickle the life out of Meic – but he had his doubts as to the other one. Pale, black haired and eyed, she was standing slightly apart, observing the scene with an unreadable gaze. Doubts that were shattered when Rowena turned to the girl as she prepared to leave along with the other women.

"Come, Helena," she said.

To which the girl answered a quiet, "Yes, Mother."

"Shall we go as well?" Salazar asked Harry.

The young man nodded. He could feel fatigue creeping up on him. It had been a long day culminating a long week, and now that he was finally some-place safe, he craved for some well-deserved rest.

He let Salazar guide him to the dungeons after the Founders parted. Both the corridors and the secret passages were exceedingly familiar. Despite knowing that this was not *his* Hogwarts, not strictly speaking, Harry felt some of the nervous tension that had been with him since he had started Horcrux-hunting drain away, absorbed into the walls of the castle. Everything was dark and quiet, in the peaceful way of a bedroom after nightfall, wind whistling against sturdy stone and footsteps fading in the obscurity.

Salazar stopped in front of a bare wall deep within Hogwarts foundations, hissed a word that had brick and mortar slide away without a sound, melt and disappeared obediently into a sweeping archway that opened on the Snake's Pit.

The common room was somewhat different from what Harry remembered of his second year. Despite being located beneath the Hogwarts lake, the air was dry and smelled faintly of new books, clean leather and freshly-cut wood. The place was lighted by silver lanterns, hanging from the ceiling in pools of pale brilliance. High windows showed the depths of the Black Lake – dark at this hour, sloshing water undulating, ghostly, across the vaulted ceiling. Bookshelves and tapestries lined the walls, pieces of art twisting and arching in convoluted patterns. Stone floors were covered with dark-green, black and silver Persian rugs that looked soft as silk. Several well-crafted, darkwood desks and chairs stood in front of the windows for the students to study individually, along with rounded tables for common studies. Armchairs were scattered near the bookshelves, heavy paddings an alluring call to sink into. Harry counted four fireplaces, here to fight off the cold of the dungeons. In front of them were black, button-tufted leather sofas. There
were tunnels on the sides, no doubt leading to dormitories.

The result was soothing in a strange, sombre way. Elegance and comfort, though lacking the warm, exuberant cosiness of the Gryffindor common room.

"I like it," Harry heard himself say, wincing at the surprise that coloured his voice. Rude, Potter. "I'm not all that fond of green," he added, shrugging apologetically.

A wry smile answered him. "I am," Salazar replied, looking at him in the eyes, his tone suggesting that he was laughing at an unsaid joke. "It happens to be one of my family's colours." He gestured at the windows. "And it suits the light."

"The light," Harry muttered, looking at the swaying shapes darting into the backdrop of the Lake. He shook his head. "Could you have found a trickier place to build dormitories?"

"No," Salazar answered with some satisfaction. "Believe me, I looked."

Harry resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. He wandered deeper into the common room, fingers brushing over smooth wood. This was to be his new home. The thought settled in his chest, a new reality that wasn't entirely unpleasant, another construct to the man he would have to become. A man whose story Slytherin had started to shape. "You lied," Harry said, glancing over his shoulder, turning away from his inspection of the bookshelves to look at the Founder. "About me."

"I did," the man replied, calm and even, eyes following his movements across the room. He cocked his head to a side. "Does it bothers you?"

"Doesn't it bothers you?" Harry retorted. It was for his sake that the Founder had looked his friends in the eyes and spun falsehoods without a breath of hesitation.

"Not particularly." Salazar sat on an armchair, legs crossed. "It is hardly the first thing I keep from them."

Harry sank in a sofa in front of him. "Don't you trust them?" he asked with a frown. "They're your friends."

Slytherin cast him an amused smile. "They are. And I trust them with my life. Not necessarily with every secret I bear." He chuckled at the look on Harry's face. "They know I don't tell them everything, Harry. That is the extent to which they trust me." He propped his chin on a closed fist.

"You seem surprised. Is there nothing you keep from your own friends?"

Of course not, died a quick death on Harry's tongue. Because he'd kept plenty of things from his friends, hadn't he? Bits and pieces of himself he did not want them to see, the wreak he was under the painted mask of normalcy. His crappy childhood, the bleakness of a life neither of them could understand. His casting the Cruciatus on Bellatrix Lestrange a couple of years ago, the red-hot rage of a haze of self-hatred that burned bellow his ribs, tore him to shreds with patient claws. All the barricades he had built over the frayed chunks of his soul, darkness simmering between them, just shy of showing through the cracks. Harry knew himself to be flawed to an extent he didn't want to acknowledge, let alone bare for his friends to see.

He cleared his throat, forcibly returning to the conversation at hand. "Don't you think they could help send me back, though? The others?" he asked, averting his eyes from Salazar's knowing gaze, uncritical in a way that sent shivers down Harry's spine, because it felt as though this man, a near stranger who he had just met, understood.

Salazar did not answer immediately, unobtrusive silence falling between them. "I think," he replied
at length. "That you and I are meddling with matters we cannot hope to understand. We stand on a knife's edge. Everything you do with the knowledge you brought with you, every event you change, voluntarily or not... It has – will have – repercussions on a scale that neither of us can predict. Perhaps your presence here was always supposed to happen, and maybe it started the chain of event that led you to this exact spot at this exact time. Or maybe it is just a fluke, an anomaly in which each of your actions may result in you destroying yourself before you were even born. What would happen then?"

Harry ran a tired hand through his hair. A dull spike of pain blossomed in the back of his skull. "I don't know," he admitted softly.

"Me neither."

He observed Slytherin for a quiet moment. The Founder's gaze was unfocused, lost to distant thoughts. "You've thought about this a lot, haven't you?" he asked.

Salazar blinked at him. He snorted. "Why do you think I haven't asked any question about your world?" he retorted. He grimaced, lips set in a thin line. "It hasn't been easy."

"I don't imagine it has," Harry laughed. His eyes slid shut, tightly enough to block out firelight. "So," he summarized, "you don't want to tell the others to... Minimize the potential catastrophes I might create?"

"Broadly speaking, yes."

"I see," Harry murmured, head swimming at the logic that made Slytherin's point. Absolute logic to an absurd problem. He wanted to laugh.

"But either way, it is your secret to tell. I won't stop you if you feel you might benefit from their assistance."

That was enough to have Harry's eyes fly open in shock. Choice. Slyth—Salazar was giving him a choice. It was all Harry could do not to stare, stunned and open-mouthed. He had never been given a choice before, not really, on anything of importance concerning his life. People told him he was too young, too fragile, too stupid to understand the gravity of a given situation, from Dumbledore to Molly Weasley to every adult he'd ever met. They all declared what was best for him and forced him down that path. Staying with the Dursleys to protect him from murderers with blood-magic. Shutting him away from the reunions of the Order of the Phoenix to keep him from grasping the reality of a war that threatened the lives of everyone he held dear. Hiding and tempering because they thought he couldn't take it, because they wished to alleviate a burden he was already carrying. Only Sirius had tried to give him a voice, in his own brash, defiant way, but he was long dead.

And now, this.

Salazar thought that his talking to the other Founders might lead to the unravelling of time itself. And he was willing to let him do it regardless, if only Harry thought it the right thing to do.

"I – " Harry cleared his throat, hoping to dislodge the lump that had taken residence in his airways. "Do you think they could help?" he asked.

Salazar smiled, a hint of fondness in his eyes. "I think they'd ask a lot of questions. Helga would coddle you, Godric would keep an eye out for you, and Rowena wouldn't leave your side until you gave satisfying answers to all she'll think to ask. And she thinks a lot. But otherwise, their knowledge of time-travel is equivalent to my own. Which is to say, null."
"I'd better not tell then."

"I don't think so, no."

There was a moment of peaceful silence. Then, "Why did you tell them I had a Master?"

Salazar stretched lazily. "Because they are going to notice your capacities. Now, they won't wonder where they came from."

"My cap – what does that have to do with a Master?" asked Harry, puzzled.

The Founder looked at him with a frown, then seemed to understand the confusion. "Not in the sense of slavery," he said. "But in that of an apprenticeship."

"Oh." Harry nodded. He'd heard of this. "Is that how you learned magic?" he asked, shifting to rest his forearms on his thighs, curious.

"It is how most of us learn magic," Salazar replied. "I did have a Master, and he taught me whatever he could."

"But not enough," Harry guessed from his tone.

"Never enough," Salazar approved with a crooked smile. "He was a good man. A brilliant man. One of the best in his field, but unfortunately with little interest towards areas of magic that had nothing to do with either healing or potion-making."

Harry hummed. "How did you learn, then?"

The Founder gave a light shrug. "By myself. I was fortunate enough to have access to a sizeable library. Few have that chance."

"Isn't hiding a problem?" Harry asked, thinking of firesmoke and strident screams, fingers drumming against his knee. "I mean, I know for a fact that learning magic isn't particularly inconspicuous."

Salazar cast a wry half-smile, tired and melancholic. "It can be, specially if the teacher doesn't have the skills to stop their ward's powers from exploding. But it's a two people partnership, easy to move and keep low." He sighed. "It's a system that works well for many, but there's a disparity in what can be taught, as there was with me. It's dangerous, unstable in the best cases, and it doesn't let anyone to discover their true potential."

Harry looked at the other man, head cocked to a side. "You're hoping to palliate that with Hogwarts."

"We're hoping to erase that with Hogwarts," Slytherin retorted. He settled more comfortably into his armchair with all the negligent grace of a large cat. "Would you care for a drink?" he asked after a moment of quiet.

Harry shook his head. "No, thanks," he replied, stifling a yawn. "Merlin knows all I want right now is to crawl into a bed and sleep."

"Merlin," Slytherin repeated slowly. "It isn't the first time you've mentioned him."

Harry froze. "Shit – I'm sorry," he groaned. "He was – Will be – " Sorted into your House. A fact the Slytherins from Harry's time loved to advertise. " – Important. Please, forget I said that. I don't
even know if he's **born** yet." Another piece he'd have to shift, another shard to his new self. He felt tired in a way that wasn't just bone-deep, a heavy shroud of exhaustion that had nothing to do with his days on the road.

"I see." Salazar's lips twitched in what might have been a smile. "As long as you know not to repeat that name in the future." He stood. "Let's get you settled, then. Do you know the way, or shall I show you?"

"Tell me which corridor and I'll be fine," Harry replied, standing as well, a slight wobble in his legs.

"Down this one, then on your right."

Harry nodded, giving the other man a grateful smile. "Thanks," he said, walking away. "Goodnight, Salazar."

"Goodnight, Harry."

Harry grabbed his bag and entered a short hallway which had windows panelled on the entire lengths of the walls. The sound of his footsteps was muffled by a thick rug covering the floor. It led to a circular room with a large glass ceiling, that had, he counted, seven entrances, each leading to a different corridor. One per year, Harry realised. Deciding he would explore later, he followed the Founder's instructions, and went to the one on his right.

The hallway was narrower than the previous one, and had wizard's lights floating around instead of windows. Built in the walls on either side of him were half a dozen wooden doors, regularly spaced. Understanding that each door led to an individual bedroom, Harry picked one, at the end of the corridor.

The room had a window framed by heavy curtains; several lamps; a four-poster bed with green silk hangings and bedspreads embroidered with silver thread; a desk, a chair and a wardrobe of a wood that looked like ebony. The stone walls were lined with tapestries and empty bookshelves, and the floor was covered by a green carpet with silver patterns. Harry had never had such a room to himself before.

He stripped, _Scourgify-_ed, and slumped into the bed, asleep before his head hit the pillow.

{. . .}

He was running. The dark hedges of the maze were brushing his shoulders, scratching his skin... Colours ran past his feet, a sharp contrast with the black leaves closing in on him. They assembled and disassembled, forming strangest shapes, pulsing like the regular rhythm of a heartbeat... His breath was short, cold sweat trickled down his back, his head spun with the glow swirling beneath him... He ran and ran and ran, there was something he needed to find, and something he needed to escape... His feet betrayed him, an eternity later. He stumbled. His hands, his arms sank into the ground. Colours crept up on his skin, a choking myriad that overtook his shoulders, his chest, his throat... The ground opened under him, and he was swallowed by darkness.

Harry woke, gasping for breath, with his heart hammering in his chest.

Struggling against his sweat-soaked sheets, he hurried to sit up, looking around him until he recalled why his surroundings were green and silver instead of red and gold. He closed his eyes and ran a hand over his face, breathing deeply until his legs stopped tingling with the urge to move.

He was used to having nightmares. They were a depressingly recurrent feature of his life.
Even as a child, before he was burdened with the mantle of the Boy Who Lived, his sleeping hours had been filled with monsters, green lights and loneliness.

Things had gotten both worse and better after he had entered Hogwarts. Worse because new, vivid images inspired by the death and horror of his daily life had begun to plague him, and better because he’d had friends to help him through the nights, whether they knew it or not. Better because he no longer had to fear being deprived food for waking his family with his screams, because his Housemates' steady breaths had been there to assure him of the surreality of what he had dreamt. A couple of times, Ron's voice had even broken the quiet darkness with a murmured, "All right, mate?" to which he inevitably answered, "Yeah, fine," before working on convincing himself that all really was fine.

Voldemort-induced visions were different. Painful on a physical level, they left him wrecked, shaking with the cold clarity of the Dark Lord's thoughts, and feeling sick with the intimate understanding of his organised madness. And they felt real, in a way that none of his other dreams did.

They felt real the same way the one he'd just had had felt.

Harry pressed a fist against the scar on his forehead. It was not hurting. It had not hurt since Stonehenge had swept him away from his time. Voldemort could not have caused this.

"He can't have," he said aloud, hoping to anchor the belief into the world outside his head.

Tom Riddle did not even exist yet.

But then, if not him, who? What? Or had it just been an ordinary dream? Harry doubted it. He could still feel the leaves of the hedges of the maze carving shallow cuts into his skin, he could still remember the dizzy weightlessness of his falling.

Shaking his head, he got out of bed. This was no use, and he knew from experience that heedless speculation was liable to drive him positively bonkers.

He threw open the curtains, letting a pale, blue-green light fill the bedroom. A shoal of fish swam by, a few inches from his face, a multi-coloured blur into the watery majesty of the Black Lake. He turned around just as a gust of artificial wind blew from the inside of the Lake, tickled his neck and disturbed a few tapestries on the walls.

Harry blinked, surprised, when one of them moved to reveal the outline of what was unmistakably a door.

He approached after grabbing his wand from his night-stand. The tapestry melted away into the wall at his touch, leaving the door, clearly visible, decorated with its complex patterns. Harry put a hand on its handle. Locked.

"Alohamora."

Still locked.

"Huh."

Tapping his wand against his chin and accidentally producing a few spark in the process, Harry frowned at the door. Now he was intrigued. He tried a few more spells, which proved just as inconclusive as the first, before being hit by another idea. His eyes found a small snake, engraved into the door leaf.
'Open,' he hissed in Parseltongue. There was a muted, satisfying click.

Lake-filtered light gleaming against bare stone was the first thing he noticed. The room, smaller than his bedchamber, was round-shaped. Carved pillars arched up to the ceiling between its two windows, and between them was tucked a cabinet filled with towels and unmarked bottles. Most of the space was taken up by a... Was that a basin?

Harry stepped into the room, leaving the door open behind him.

It was. A rectangular pool had been dug into the stone. It was rather deep, and certainly wide enough to fit someone like him about three times over, with room to spare. Its floor was of clear, veined marble. Into the wall beside the pool, something that looked suspiciously like a tap had been hung.

"Revelio," Harry muttered, pressing his wand against the contraption. The charm informed him of the existence of a network of pipes right behind the wall, into which had been seared several spells and wards. Some to clear the water of the Lake, others to warm it up.

The Founders had invented *bathrooms*. Something told him that he should be a lot more surprised about this than he actually was.

He did not hesitate long before deciding to make the best of this discovery. He had not had a proper shower in months.

Washed up and dressed, he made his way out of the common room. He found the Great Hall with little difficulty. Although a few secret passageways were missing, the layout of the castle was similar to that of his time.

The four Founders and their children were already eating when he walked into the Hall. No one commented on his late arrival as he took the open seat beside Salazar. The silver-eyed man greeted him with a smile before his gaze drifted back to Godric Gryffindor.

"So, a Poltergeist?" he asked, resuming the conversations the two had been having.

Harry reached for a steaming pot of tea and served himself a large mug, motions mechanic until the sweet herbal scent filled his nose and froze him into place. *Tea?* He blinked at the simmering liquid, white fog warm on his skin. He hadn't had tea in weeks. How come he was drinking tea now? He'd figured the beverage was one of the amenities he had left behind in his time, along with countless others. Muggles would not discover tea before centuries. Right? Was it just a convenience for Wizards, then? Silently cursing his inattentiveness in History class, Harry bit back the questions burning his lips. Professing ignorance on a subject that, as far as he knew, could be common knowledge, was as stupid a way to out himself as it could get.

"A nasty one," Gryffindor was saying. "He broke every window on the third floor before we noticed him."

"So I've heard," Salazar replied. "Particularly violent. He doused you in yellow goo, did he not? There's some of it stuck in your hair."

Hufflepuff hid a snort behind a cough that did not fool anyone, and Ravenclaw grinned into her mug of tea.

"Yes, well," Godric grumbled, a hand ruffling the back of his skull. "I'd have liked to see you deal with it."
Salazar smiled, impishly amused. "Come now, Godric. We've hunted far worse than low-level spirits. It was about time I came back. You're getting rusty."

The red-headed Founder looked indignant. "We didn't have any salt left!"

Salazar's smile grew. "I'm sure," he replied, tone soothing in a way that was anything but. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

Gryffindor muttered something unintelligible under his breath, to which Slytherin answered with a guileless smile, at odds with the way his eyes were smirking. "Tell me, then" he said suddenly, turning away from Godric. "I can feel that the wards have settled at last, but you haven't told me if you've had time to finish anything else."

"Dormitories, Astronomy Tower, and Covered Bridge," Hufflepuff replied, straightening in her chair. "Not without difficulties, but Godric was stubborn enough to make it hold. The Hospital Wing is almost done." She took a distracted bite of her scone. "I've also finished the plans for the Greenhouses. I think I'll start building next spring."

"Good," said Salazar. "They will give us a bit of a safeguard once they start producing."

Helga raised her cup in a fanciful salute. "And produce they shall."

"They're not a priority," Godric put, his hair still a mussed mess. "The furniture – "

"Can wait," Rowena completed, sharp and dry, blue eyes flickering toward the other woman, whose face had fallen minutely at the rebuttal.

"No it can't."

"We have twice as many desks as we shall have students, Godric."

"Magical students, Rowena. I'm willing to bet ten coins half of it'll be broken by the end of the month."

A beat.

"Considering my abilities, it would be unfair of me to – "

"Ten gold coins."

"You're on."

"It's too early for this," Helga muttered.

Ravenclaw broke her staring contest against Gryffindor to hand her a pot of tea. Harry held back an incredulous chuckle when her dark glare turned into something softer as she accepted the peace offering.

"Aren't you tired of losing?" Salazar asked Godric in a vaguely puzzled tone.

The man answered something that came alarmingly close to a growl.

"I certainly don't mind his continued obstinacy," said Rowena regally. Helga giggled, and her haughty poise was momentarily broken by a surge of warmth in her clear eyes. "We still have a few classrooms to finish, though," she said after the sound had faded. "Nothing urgent, but we'd fare better if they were done."
Salazar nodded. "East wing?"

"The same."

The man sighed. "We still have quite a few things to do in little time, then. What about the staircases?"

Gryffindor grimaced. "Still moving I'm afraid, but the girls added a few runes in their structure. They won't try to throw anyone to the ground now."

"I don't think we'll ever succeed in controlling them," Rowena said pensively, eyes distant in thought. "The castle likes them as they are. I do too. They have the most fascinating patterns."

"So long as we don't have a reiteration of last winter's incident, I suppose we might as well leave them be," Salazar approved. "Very well, then. Classrooms, furniture and– Are the kitchens done?"

Helga shook her head. "Not quite, but I should be able to help the elves keep on schedule."

The silver-eyed man bit into a toast, frowning. "The North Tower?"

"– Needs finishing as well."

"Dammit," Salazar muttered.

"Quite."

Harry took a scalding mouthful of tea and cleared his throat. "So," he said. "Where do you need me?"

Salazar threw Helga something that looked like a Stinging Jinx when the woman started coughing for reasons unknown. Rowena dispelled the charm before it could reach her with a practised flick of her wand.

"Nowhere," Slytherin replied, smooth as though nothing had happened. "You're still recovering."

Harry shrugged. "I feel fine."

And if there was any chance that he might help with the building of Hogwarts, even if his only utility was to hand out tools, then he was going to do just that, and no one was going to stop him.

"That is very thoughtful of you, Mr Potter," Gryffindor told him. There was a something contemplative lurking in his tone.

"Godric."

The man shot Salazar a smile that was all teeth, too predatory for comfort in answer to the quiet warning. "Very thoughtful," he repeated slowly. "I'm sure I can find you a place –"

"No."

Harry startled at the flatness of Salazar's tone, but the man ignored his silent inquiry, grey eyes focused on Godric, more serious than the young man had seen him before, coiled tension in his shoulders.

"... My tower needs a bit of –"
"I said 'no', Godric."

"He's offering."

"Well, I'm not."

Gryffindor smirked, teeth bared in a playful challenge. "Because you're afraid to lose."

"Because it's incontestable."

"Not to me."

Salazar shrugged. "Can't help the fact that you're an idiot."

"I'm an – " Godric spluttered. "You're ridiculous."

"I've had days with him, Godric. Trust me, he's mine."

"Ah," said Harry, finally understanding what the two Founders were bickering about. He nearly snickered at the thought. Gryffindor and Slytherin fighting to have him in their House seemed to be something of a common denominator, whatever time period he was in. "I already said yes to Lord Slytherin," he told the table.

While the thought of going back to Gryffindor House had its appeal, Harry found that he did not wish it. Beside the fact that Salazar was the only man alive who knew his true story, he had changed too much since he was that lost eleven-year-old boy who had first wandered into Hogwarts, desperate to fit in and make his dead parents proud, to want to go back to the carefree rowdiness of the Lion's House. He had changed. The war had changed him, and after several days in the company of Salazar Slytherin... He thought it may be time for him to explore another side of himself.

And perhaps he could, if either of the Founders deigned to listen to him.

"And you don't want to give me any time with him?" Gryffindor was saying, ignoring him completely. "What have you got to lose, if you're so sure of yourself?"

"My time."

"Oh, please," Godric scoffed. "Besides, I'm not going to steal him – "

"I'm not anyone's to be stolen," Harry stated, loud but blithely overlooked.

"– Only to borrow him for a bit."

The air was growing heavier by the second as magic coiled around both men, tense and electric on Harry's flesh.

"You will do no such thing," Salazar retorted. Temperature plummeted at the mere sound of his voice.

"For God's – " Harry muttered.

"I wouldn't try to interfere, Mr Potter," Ravenclaw said beside him. "Fighting over students is a bit of a tradition, you see."

"These two," Hufflepuff simply murmured, shaking her head.
The plates started shaking, but neither women seemed particularly worried.

"How do you decide who goes with whom, anyway?" Harry asked, making sure to be heard over the sound of rattling cutlery.

The words had their intended effect.

Gryffindor brightened visibly. As he turned away from Salazar, the air stopped buzzing like a swarm of angry bees. "Well, you see Mr Potter, we've each established a set of qualities that we value and wish our students to have."

Pointedly ignoring Salazar's raised eyebrow, Harry smiled back. "And what would those be?"

"Salazar values cunning, wits and ambition. Helga goes for loyalty, kindness and hard-work, Rowena is after intelligence, thirst for knowledge and wisdom, and I – " Godric winked. "I value bravery, gallantry, honour, chiv – "

"Brainless idiots," said Salazar in a loud whisper.

"Why, you little – "

"Boys," Helga said, voice low in warning.

Harry chuckled.

"Oh, Godric?" Salazar said with a sugary smile. Gryffindor met his gaze. "Harry already knew all of that."

Silence greeted his words. Godric turned toward Harry, an assessing gleam in his green-flecked eyes. After a few moments, the gleam cleared, and he heaved a dramatic, heartbroken sigh. "Fine," he ground out, throwing up his arms. "He is yours, then."

Slytherin smiled indulgently in answer. "Only you doubted that."

"But," Gryffindor continued as if the other had not spoken. "I will be borrowing him."

Chapter End Notes

Hello there! Just a few words on this chapter, something I think I should precise: Despite that bit about House rivalry, there won't be any House bashing in this fic. I am a Slytherin, my best friend's a Hufflepuff, my partner a Gryffindor, and I mostly hang out with Ravenclaw. As I value my continued existence very much, I will try to represent each as fairly as I can.

I'm also aware that my physical description of the Founders is as cliché as it gets, but I couldn't help myself. To me, they all are the perfect incarnations of their respective Houses, and it has translated into their appearances. I apologise for nothing. Also, I made Salazar sexy. I couldn't not do the same to the other three.

Thank you all for your reviews, they are very appreciated!

xx
The marble under him was pleasantly cool against his flushed, overheated skin. Summer was in full blast, cutting into the castle and its countryside, brazen and searing to the bone. There was little anyone could do to escape the fever of the hottest days.

Harry was sitting on the ground, sweat cooling along his back, a leg drawn to his chest, the other dangled over the railing. He ached with cramps and kinks, his body strained from exertion. He had been there a while, tracing with his eyes the cracks and ridges in the white wall across from him. He wondered whether he'd be able to jump far enough to touch it before tumbling down. Probably not; it was a large stairwell.

Stone dust and rubble wafted from under the door that he had slammed closed moments before, the scent choking in the afternoon heat.

The topmost room of the North Tower, which sat at the very end of its endless spiral staircase, was in dire need of finishing. Bit of a safety hazard, Godric had said. The windows had gone missing. No one could seem to find them. "Think you can manage?" Godric Gryffindor had asked, hazel eyes glowing gold in the brightness of the sun. "Yes," Harry had answered, like the idiot he clearly was, because there was no way he could refuse that man anything. He'd watched Gryffindor wander off and disappear with an approving nod, and hadn't once thought to ask the man for a bit of help. He'd battled Dark Lords and monsters his whole childhood. How dangerous could a couple of windows be?

Quite a bit, as it turned out. Stumbling about in the dark, Harry had woken up a nest of Doxies. He'd recognized the sound of their beetle-like wings flapping in alarm just in time to avoid a bite. He wasn't sure what spell he'd used. Whatever it was, it had been effective. He'd blasted off both the Doxies and a chunk of wall with a wave of his wand.

He glanced sideways. Puffs of smoke were still filtering past the doorway, particles shimmering grey and amber in the light slanting from the stairwell's arrow slits. He'd have to wait for the air to clear before going in and cleaning up the mess he had made.

"Good job, Potter," he muttered, eyes closed against the anxiety knotting his stomach, twisting and turning uncomfortably. "Bloody brilliant."

Shifting uneasily, he tapped his wand against the ground. Faint echoes of the happenings in the room next to him travelled up his arm in small electric shocks. He grimaced. It was going to take a while to repair. At least the Founders were too far away to have heard the explosion. Small mercies. He hoped he'd be able to hide the damage before any of them came across the pandemonium.

He hadn't done it on purpose. His magic had just acted. A curl of his wand, half a thought, and power had burst out of him, ground solid stone to fine dust. He couldn't remember when he'd last lost control like that. Even now, he hummed with magic and restlessness.

Fear and frustration and rage he could deal with. All three had gnawed away at his chest since the moment Voldemort had come back from the dead. But uncertainty? Indecision? That had never happened before. Not for long stretches of time anyway. He had always had a plan. Someone to save, someone to stop, something to seek, win or lose. He had always known where he was going, what he was supposed to do. The choice had always been evident, no questions asked. Protecting the Philosopher's stone, rescuing Ginny from the Basilisk, killing Sirius Black, saving Sirius Black,
stopping the Dark Lord, killing the Dark Lord.

But here and now, he felt that he was lost in the middle of a thick fog that was robbing the world of its stark, clear lines. Colours were blurring, shapes were melting away. He was stuck, trying to find his way in a place that had no concept of left, right, up or down.

He didn't know why he had been sent a thousand years into the past. He didn't even know whether there was a reason for it. Maybe he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe it was just a freak accident. Another one. And as far as he could see, there was little he could do to change his situation. Time was not an enemy that he could fight. There was no one else around to take the blame. He had nothing to go on. No fact upon which to base himself. No all-knowing being to turn to. No plan. He had nothing, and it felt like a constant itch behind his ribcage.

For a little while, he had entertained the thought that Voldemort was responsible for his predicament, before discarding the idea as ludicrous. After all, had he not owed Salazar a life-debt, Harry might have decided to kill the man before he could father children. He could have ended the war centuries before it even started. It was too big a bet, too great a risk for the Dark Lord to take. Not to mention there had to be quicker, cleaner ways to get rid of an enemy than to send them spiralling through time.

Harry laid awake at night, trying to give a semblance of sense to a situation that didn't have any. Wondering whether he would have killed Salazar if he'd had the chance. He hoped not. The war had left him a little more jagged, a little more ruthless than he used to be. But the day he killed in cold blood was the day Voldemort won. If not the war, then Harry's soul.

So he had blown off a wall without meaning to. The explosion, the sound of stone fracturing, still rang clearly in his ears. On the plus side, he supposed the hole he'd made counted as a window of sorts.

"Did you do something stupid?"

Harry jumped so badly at the question, asked in a high, innocent voice, that he came close to tipping over the few inches between him and certain death. Hissing quietly, he steadied himself against the ground and hurried to get on his feet.

"How did you get here?" he asked, catching sight of a mess of bright red hair perched atop a windowsill. It took him a moment to recognize Godric's son, Meic.

The boy gave a light shrug, curious blue eyes riveted on the door of Harry's room. He jumped to the ground, swift as a cat. "Dad said I could come," he said airily, kicking up dust with a booted foot before asking again, "Did you do something stupid?"

"Didn't seem like it at the time," Harry muttered.

The young Gryffindor blinked up at him. He gave Harry a wide smile. "It's alright," he said sagely. "Dad and Salazar do stupid things all the time. Aunt Rowena says so."

"I believe you," Harry laughed. "You think I should try again, then?" Meic nodded enthusiastically, red hair switching around his face. "You promise to stay behind me?"

"I promise."

Harry grabbed his wand, pushed the boy a few steps away, and opened the door. He slipped back inside the room, nose and mouth buried in the crook of his elbow. Thankfully, most of the dust had settled, and the only Doxies he could see laid in dismembered bits across the floor. The damage to
the wall wasn't too bad. The hole was just wide enough to let a ray of light the size of Harry's head trickle in.

The wall was easy to deal with. "Reparo," he intoned, sweeping his wand over the damage. Dust rose in a great swirl, debris rolled on the floor, chunks of stone glued themselves back together, and in an instant, everything was whole again. He summoned a blob of fire-red light, sent it floating to the ceiling. Salazar had taught him that spell not long ago. Harry found it a good variation of the usual Lumos. Another spell washed up the Doxy remains.

"You can come in!" he called, and Meic peered through the door. "I don't suppose you know how to make windows?"

The boy sauntered in, a look of concentration on his face. "You can change the wall," he suggested after a moment of reflection.

"Change?"

"Change," the boy repeated, fingers tapping the wall for emphasis. "Like Salazar does all the time?"

"You mean Transfigure." Harry smiled, a wry, weary thing. He'd gone through six years of magical education. He should've thought that up by himself. Still. "Good idea," he said, and Meic beamed.

Now, to the difficult part. Harry was sure he'd known a spell that turned solid matter into glass at some point, but he couldn't remember the incantation. Transfiguration was a complex art that twisted the fabric of nature, rearranged its shape and property with a touch of will. It had to do with energy transfers, burned away any and all Muggle law of conservation and danced on its ashes. It was possibly the most difficult field of magic to master, asked for more precision than anything else taught at Hogwarts. The backfire of a messed up spell could be disastrous. Harry didn't fancy the thought of rebuilding the whole room again.

He closed his eyes. Wand motion: three taps to turn an animal into stemmed glass. Incantation – did he need one? Intent was all that mattered, in the end. Every single Transfiguration feat he had witnessed through the years couldn't have had a specific set of word to go along. Surely, the caster had to extrapolate from what he knew, and work from there. Harry's experience was limited, but he was getting good at thinking on his feet, being opposed to the day-to-day trials that came with a life on the road.

Casting and praying was probably not the wisest thing to do, but Harry had never pretended to be a wise man. He preferred action to reflection, instinct to logic. It wasn't always the best way to deal with a problem – the alarming number of detentions he had gotten through the years was proof enough of that – but it was a way. Sometimes, it even worked.

He opened his eyes. Holding the Latin word for glass and the image of a window to the forefront of his mind, he tapped his wand three times against the wall. Nothing happened.

So he tried again.

And again.

Half an hour and a near-collapsed ceiling later, sunlight was streaming down the top of the North Tower.

Harry looked at his work in amazement. His windows were a bit crooked, none of them were the
same size, the glass panes were far from translucent. But he'd done it. Usually, Hermione was the one who managed such feats, and he was the one who stood back and watched her. He had never given much importance to his education before, magical or otherwise. He'd never had anyone to impress with good report cards. On the contrary, the Dursleys got pissed and accused him of cheating every time he had brought home better grades than Dudley. Uncle Vernon had locked him up in his cupboard for a whole week the first time it had happened. As a result, Harry had never seen the point of focusing on something that gave him nothing but estrangement from his relatives, hours alone in the dark, weak with hunger. Then he'd grown up, and there had been madmen looking to murder him, monsters and tournaments and people dying. He'd had more pressing preoccupations than doing well in school.

Maybe he should try and change that now.

Meic bounced up to him. The boy had been quiet, had kept out of Harry's way the entire time, save for a few joyful whoops when he'd managed his first window. "Can we go exploring now?" he asked, giving Harry's sleeve a small tug. "Dad say we can go exploring if you say yes."

"Explore what?" Harry asked, ruffling the boy's hair.

A grin that curled Meic's lips was full of mischief. "The Dungeons."

Harry grinned back. The child's excitement was communicative. He felt a bit like a child himself. For all that his situation terrified him, he couldn't help but marvel at the chance he had been given. He got to see Hogwarts, his home, beloved beyond reason, within months of its completion. He knew a few wizards who'd happily give a kidney or two to stand in his shoes.

"Let's go then," he said.

{. . .}

"I think it's a skull."

"What? Where?!"

Harry dodged Meic when the boy made a dash to his sister. Alma covered her finding with her cloak, had it hidden from view before the child could reach her.

"It's not something to show little boys," she quipped in a good impression of a stern grown-up.

"I'm not little!" Meic protested. He jumped to try to get the bundle of cloth the girl was holding above her head, with little success.

Helena snorted.

"I'm not," he insisted.

"You're six," the black-haired girl retorted bluntly.

"So? I'm a boy."

"So?" Helena parroted.

"So I'm in charge."

The young Ravenclaw blinked. "Your mother's a mercenary who hunts monsters from all over the world for a living, and your Godmothers, the best witches of this age, built a secret school of magic
in a place crawling with witch-hunters," she said incredulously.

"Remember what her mum did to the merchant who insulted Aunt Helga last summer?" Alma asked, gesturing toward Helena. Meic shuddered. "Exactly. You don't want her to hear that. Could be the last thing you ever say."

Helena frowned. "Wasn't it Salazar who cursed that idiot mute?"

The other girl shook her head. "No. He's the one who made him bald."

"You're not funny," Meic muttered, pouting.

His sister pinned him with an unimpressed glare. "I'm not trying to be."

The boy went to kick her in the shin. Alma side-stepped easily, looped an arm around his neck, and proceeded to make of his hair a mess to match Harry's.

The young man had long since gotten used to the two Gryffindors' antics. He rolled his eyes at the two bickering siblings and turned back to the makeshift map of the Dungeons that they'd been trying to draw up. Salazar had pointedly refused to hand out one of his own maps. What was the point of planing out an underground labyrinth, if not to see people get lost once or twice, after all?

"The Triwizard maze wasn't so bloody difficult," Harry grumbled to himself, tuning off Meic's shrieks.

"Gross! It's a rat skull!"

"What did you think it was? Human?"

"I don't think we've gone there yet," he told Helena, pointing at a dark corridor that glimmered with the same pale green light as the Slytherin common room. He could hear water lap at the stone walls.

The girl glanced at the map he was holding out to her. "You're right," she said with a nod. "We must be under the lake."

Harry shook his head. "Why did Salazar bother building this?" he wondered aloud. From what he had seen, the lower levels of the castle didn't host more than a handful of classrooms. The entire layout seemed like a waste of time and energy.

"It's in case we're attacked," Helena answered. "We can hide down here, and no one will find us."

"A bit counter-productive if we get lost as well, isn't it?" He had stopped counting the number of hours the four of them spent down there with no idea of where they were. It had taken days before they figured out a way to get back to the surface from the first level of corridors.

"There are hidden rooms," Helena explained. "Safe rooms where we can hide. Anyone who doesn't know to look for them could walk right past and not even notice. For instance, Salazar's common room is around, is it not? I'm sure it is, but I've not seen it."

Harry gave the girl a lopsided grin. "You know I can't tell you that."

"Give it back!"

"Finder's keeper, little brother!"
"It's mine!"
"It was."

Clang!

Both Gryffindors froze, Alma still with an arm around her brother's neck while the boy was trying to elbow her in the ribs.

"That wasn't us," she said tersely.

For a moment, no one moved.

Ca-clang!

This time, it was unmistakable. The sound echoed down the corridor, sharp and loud, like a door slamming shut.

"What was that?" Helena asked.

They waited a moment in bated breath. Nothing else came to pierce the silence. The children relaxed progressively, but because he had lived through a war and had stopped to believe things such as coincidences existed a long, long time ago, Harry slipped a hand inside the pocket of his jacket, fingers on the handle of his wand.

"I think it's time we head back, yes?" he said. "Your parents will think we got lost again."

The proposition was met with approving nods.

"D'you have something to do this afternoon, Harry?" Alma asked over her shoulder as the four of them began to retrace their steps to the surface. "We're going to the lake. See if we can find Merpeople."

"I thought you were supposed to study today?"

The girl grinned. "That's why we need you."

"I'm not sure I'm the one you should ask for help," Harry told her, vaguely embarrassed. "I – " The back of his neck prickled with awareness. He whipped around on instinct. He could have sworn he heard a laugh, low and guttural. He whispered, "Lumos."

The corridor was bathed in bright bluish light that forced its shadows to wither away, take refuge behind nooks and crannies. Nothing.

Nothing that I can see, Harry corrected somberly. A sense of unease crawled on his skin, told him they weren't alone anymore. The silence was too perfect. The air was too still. Something was wrong.

He wondered what kind of creature could hide down in Hogwarts' Dungeons. He'd already dealt with Doxies, had helped take care of a couple of Boggarts who'd made their homes in brooms cupboards. Salazar had talked a nest of Ashwinders out of the stables before they could burn down anything. Nothing too dangerous.

"Maybe it's just a rat," Meic pointed out hopefully.

Harry doubted it.
They walked on, followed the intricate twists and turns of the dank, darkened hallways, their footsteps echoing ominously in the roughly hewn stone tunnels, ears straining to catch any suspicious sound. Harry could no longer tell whether the shivers running down his spine were caused by the chill in the air or by the way his instincts were whispering 'danger' into his ears.

For a while, nothing happened. Had he not been made somewhat paranoid by his past years at Hogwarts, Harry might even have hoped that the strange sounds from earlier had really been caused by some skittering animal.

Then, the door they had been about to go through slammed shut.

*Bang!*

The following silence was deafening.

"Harry?" Meic whispered from his sister's side, blue eyes wide with a fear that begged to be appeased.

Harry gestured for him to keep quiet, eyes scanning their surrounding. Still nothing.

"The door's locked," Alma announced.

"Did you try the Unlocking Charm?" Helena asked.

"Yes."

Neither girls seemed particularly fazed by these strange happenings, but Harry could see the white-knuckled grip Alma had around her brother's hand, the slight shake of Helena's shoulders.

"We're going this way," he declared, gesturing toward the corridor across from them. "Quickly now."

Without prompting, his companions started to run.

Harry let them get a headstart. He looked over his shoulder. The corridor had gotten darker, light leached off unnaturally. He did not pause to wonder what might have caused this. There was no time for this now. Experience had taught him that quarters of seconds could make all the difference between life and death. He ran.

The air grew cold.

They rushed through the poorly lit corridors. Left, left, right, then left again. . . Helena stumbled. Harry caught her around the waist before she could fall over. The girl was out of breath. He could feel her heart race under the palms of his hands. He pushed her in front of him, forced her to keep going. They had to be strong now, or they would have to stand and fight. Alma was pulling her brother behind her. The boy struggled visibly to follow her pace with his shorter limbs. Harry could see the way his chest was heaving, the way his legs were trembling.

They were slow. Far too slow.

"Well, well, what do we have here. . . ."

Harry felt a putrid breath blow over his ears, carrying a few raucous words. Without looking back, he threw a Stunner over his shoulder. He heard the spell crash against a wall, rebound once against the stone. The corridor glowed carmine-red.
A mocking laugh.

Half-carrying her brother, Alma staggered up a flight of stairs, closely followed by Helena. The three of them burst into a hall that was just above ground-level and disappeared from view.

One, two, three steps... Harry pelted up the stairs. The burn of his legs was easy to ignore, lost under the urge to escape whatever was after them. Ten, eleven, twelve... He could see steam come out of his mouth with each panting breath he took... Fifteen, come on... Something cold and vice-like grabbed his ankle.

With a soundless gasp, Harry tripped. He went down, stomach plummeting like a stone. Stars exploded before his eyes when he crashed on the hard steps. Air fled his lungs under the force of the impact. His head spun from the sharp pain that blossomed on his knees and ribs and elbows.

"Harry!"

"Slow. Far too slow, little wizard."

Unthinkingly, Harry rolled aside. "Protego!" he yelled, whipping up his wand.

The blue shield came sizzling into life, a protective bubble just a few inches above his body. Pushing back the throbbing pain in his limbs, to be dealt with later, Harry let his eyes roam the darkness, searching and looking... Until he found something looking back.

Clamping his jaw shut to keep from shouting in alarm, he forced himself to move. One of his hands gripped the rough, damp stone under him, and somehow, he heaved himself up another step. The creature was looking at him with a too-wide grin, just outside the protective magic.

"HARRY!"

Hurried footsteps, getting closer.

The thing in front of him smiled, its large, blackened mouth pulled back to reveal razor sharp teeth.

"No, stop!" Harry shouted. He wasn't sure who to. The footsteps faltered. "Get back! Get back, now!"

"Har – "

The creature – not quite a ghost, but clearly some kind of spirit, grey-skinned, with colourless eyes gleaming with malicious jubilation—shook its head from side to side.

"DO AS I SAY!"

Up another step.

The spirit cackled. "Humans," it wheezed between two giggles. "Funny little things, aren't you?"

Then, to Harry's horror, it extended a clawed hand toward him. After a brief resistance, the limb went through his shield, a hair's breadth from the young man's face. "Depulso!" Harry cast the spell without a second thought.

With a grunt, the creature was thrown back a few feet.

Without quite knowing how, Harry stood and leaped over the few remaining steps. The children
were still there, frozen and wide-eyed at the center of a church-like room.

"What are you waiting for?" Harry growled. He took Helena by the arm, pushed the girl in front of him. "Go. GO!"

But he knew it was too late even before the words left his mouth. Doors slammed shut. Their only exit. There was a whoosh of displaced air near his ear. Harry barely had the time to push the children aside before something cold and surprisingly heavy collided with his back. Groaning, he let his body roll on the ground to absorb the shock while his friends gasped in alarm.

"Reducto!" he bellowed as he staggered back on his feet.

The creature side-stepped the spell easily, laughing in delight. A great 'boom' rang through the room when the spell crashed against the nearest wall, sent dust and rubble flying around. From its position near the ceiling, the spirit clapped its hands, a look of pure joy on its face at the sight of the destruction Harry had wrought. Next, Harry cast a Patronus. Prongs leapt from his wand, silvery and majestic, and rushed away with the order to go find Salazar. They needed help.

"Ooh, you're a good one, aren't you?" the spirit exclaimed happily.

Harry took a step forward, placing himself between the creature and the children. "What are you?" he asked coldly. "What do you want?"

The creature laughed. "Your people keep changing the way they call me, little wizard. Hard to keep track, really. As to what I want."

It smiled, something hungry and wicked that had Harry tighten his grip on his wand. "Food would be nice."

Harry had the feeling that the two of them didn't have the same definition of the word 'food'.

"What is he saying?" Helena whispered behind him.

Harry frowned. Why couldn't the girl understand the creature's words? He was almost certain it wasn't speaking Parseltongue; he had come to recognize the slight hissing tones of the snake's tongue from listening to Salazar discuss with his familiar. But this monster's words sounded like plain English to him. And it could not be plain English, because the dialect would not come to light before centuries.

Right?

The spirit giggled.

Harry threw another Stunner, just for the sake of it. The being moved out of the way with preternatural speed.

"Magic tricks don't work on me, silly boy."

"Well then, tell me what does," Harry muttered between gritted teeth, gaze following the creature's moves across the room. Instead of attacking, it seemed content to observe them with manic eyes, idly floating above their heads. Harry did not trust this false passivity. He had to find a way out.

"No one is going anywhere, my dear."

The young man froze.

"So, what do we have?" the spirit wondered out loud, twirling on itself. Its eerie stare focused on

Harry felt his heart give a painful twist.

"Do you know how rare it is to encounter people like you?" The spirit grinned, wider than ever, a shock of rotting, blackened flesh. Harry felt sick to his stomach. "I mean, the others are far from, ah... Stable, but you." It cackled again. The sound was starting to grate on Harry's nerves, like nails scraping a blackboard. "You're this far from shattering, aren't you?"

"What do you want?" Harry repeated, as calmly as he could.

"You fight and rage and try so, so hard..."

"Diffindo!" The spell went through the spirit without leaving a mark.

"...All for nothing. They all die, don't they?"

Harry felt blood drain from his face. His heart was hammering in his chest. His legs felt like jelly.

"One after the other, no matter what you do, no matter what you give... They aaall die."

*It's a mind reader,* he realised with a start. Breathing deeply, he turned his attention inwards.

"They look at you for guidance. They put their hopes in you. They think you're going to save them. You."

He couldn't though, could he? He was Harry. Just Harry. Just as overwhelmed as they were by the sweeping strength of their enemy. Sometimes, the weight of other people's expectations felt so heavy that it crushed his chest, squashed his lungs, and all Harry wished was for it to stop. He was a seventeen-year-old with average grades, average powers, no redeemable skills, and they wanted him to take out the mightiest Dark Lord of the age? *Him?*

"It's madness, isn't it? You're not good enough. Never have been. Even your mother's kin couldn't stand the sight of you, you little freak."

He remembered the first few years of his life all too clearly. Bringing his Aunt gifts only to see them thrown in the bin. *Worthless.* Being locked up without food for days at a time because of the strange things that kept happening around him. But he never meant for any of it to happen, it wasn't his *fault.* How could it be? Magic didn't exist, right? His Uncle said so. He had learnt to hide his tears, his scrapes and bruises very quickly. Showing weakness only ever brought him disdain or worse, indifference. He had learnt to outrun his cousin, to keep his mouth shut, to duck his head and mask his thoughts. He knew his worth, but it was fine. Someday, he was going to fly away from Private Drive, never to return, he knew it in his *bones.*

Harry was shaking. His wand, clutched into a tight fist, was trembling so badly that he could not hope to fire a spell and have it meet its mark. Reality swayed in and out of focus. He was trapped between painful memories and that damned, blackened smile. It had gotten alarmingly closer, he could each of its sharp teeth now. It was eating him up, swallowing rational thoughts, and it was all spiralling down into the inevitable *losing* of his *mind.*...

"They think you're mad, don't they? With your visions, your loss of control. They think you've finally lost it. And they're right, aren't they? No one can survive what you did and not be *broken.*"
Something in Harry snapped.

"Expelliarmus!"

The blast of the bright red spell dislodged dust from the ceiling. With a muffled Oof, the spirit was thrown away from him. Panting, Harry shook his head, tore away the last shackles that had taken hold of his mind. He was not broken. He had lived with these memories for years and even though he often wished that he did not have to carry them, he had come to accept them as part of himself. And he would be damned before he started apologizing for existing.

"Get ready to run," he ordered the children huddled behind him. To his relief, none of them seemed hurt. The creature had been solely focused on him.

A snarl, high and furious, and the spirit pushed itself away from the wall. Its face was twisted into something ugly and hateful.

"Stay away," Harry warned when it made to lunge at them. "Or I swear I'll find a way to kill you."

The creature smirked. "I'd like to see you try."

It attacked.

The next few minutes were a bit of a blur in Harry's mind. He fought. He parried every move, every blow the creature tried to land. He cast spell after spell, created quite the ruckus in an attempt to trick the spirit, to give the children a chance to go near the closest exit. He brain felt as though was stuffed full of cotton. He felt sick and wobbly. Then, finally, a door was blasted off its hinges, flew in over his head. He nearly dropped his wand in relief. The momentary distraction almost cost him an eye.

"Ventus!" he snapped for what felt like the hundredth time. A small whirlwind erupted from his wand, pushing the creature away. He risked a glance at the newcomers and froze.

The Founders looked pissed.

"Oh, no you don't," Ravenclaw hissed when the spirit made to attack again. Her blue eyes, narrowed into slits, looked like ice chips. She whipped up her wand, and the whole room shook when the creature was all but embedded into a wall.

There was a flurry of motion. Helga strode to them and started asking questions. Were they hurt? What had happened? Where had they found the creature? The children answered, speaking over each other in their precipitation and relief. Meic started crying. Harry let it all happened around him, the flow of words a comforting buzz inside his head. He felt detached, as though he weren't standing in the Dungeons, but he'd flown somewhere far away. Behind Helga, Godric held up a long metal chain, links clinking and rasping in his hands. The creature – a Moroi, Salazar called it – was fighting and snarling, eyes bulging, scrawny limbs strained against the magic that held it prisoner. Its words were the only ones that made it past the fog in Harry's mind.

"Filth! Sorcerers!" it growled, and Harry reeled with it. "You let your own people burn! Not even your beloved Master survived, how do you expect to do better, snake-speaker?! He begged for death in the end, didn't he? And you're the one who – "

Salazar waved a hand and the Moroi fell silent. It kept mouthing words for a few more moments before it realised it could no longer speak. It screamed without sound, all rage and madness. It was awful. The silence inside Harry's head was like white noise; static and confused.
"Mr Potter? You can lower your wand now." Someone called to him, a hand on his arm, squeezing lightly. The pressure was welcomed. "Mr – Harry? Harry, I think you should sit down. You're pale as a sheet."

He tried to focus on Helga, blond hair and worried eyes, but couldn't. Godric had chained up the Moroi, held it in tight bondage. It could hardly move. It was furious.

"How do we kill it?" Salazar asked Godric and Harry's head spun.

"It's more a matter of banishing, at this point. This thing is already dead."

"He fell down the stairs earlier," Helena told someone, but Harry felt fine. He couldn't feel any of the bruises that littered his skin, though the curse wound on his back had given a painful twinge earlier. Meic and Alma had rushed to their father's arms, clung to him with their faces buried in his chest, but Helena had stayed by his side, made no move to seek comfort from her mother. Harry wondered why that was.

He could smell stale air and dust and sweat, the stinking grime that coated his cupboard's walls like tar after he'd spent too many days locked inside. He could feel his Uncle's hand in his hair, pulling and tearing until his eyes watered and he cried out. He could see the look on Aunt Petunia's face when he brought home gift cards and poems for mother's day, scorn and disgust as she shred them to bits. He could hear Dudley laugh, mocking and joyful, taunts about the weirdo parents he'd never known. He –

He blinked up to find Salazar standing in front of him, both the man's hands cradling his face. "Took you long enough," he muttered.

"I'm sorry," Salazar said, and sounded like he meant it. His face changed into something wry and amused. "I should've known. If anyone can get attacked by a Romanian ghost in a warded castle, it's you."

"Yeah," Harry replied, eyes closed. He leaned into the man's hands. The ground was slipping under his feet. "It's an art."

Next thing he knew, he was being pinned against a wall and Salazar's eyes were all that he could see. Salazar had weird eyes. Beautiful, but weird. Harry had never noticed the outer ring of dark, storm-grey that lined the man's irises before. Fascinating discovery.

"Harry!" Salazar snapped, brusque and loud, his hands two burning brands on Harry's arms. "You're the one the bastard latched on to, aren't you? You need to focus. You're bleeding out. Focus!"

The word was like a discharge through his brain. Harry inhaled sharply. He could feel the roughness of the stone behind him, the warmth of Salazar's body in front, the pulsing ache in his limbs. The world was keen and clear, painful to look at.

"Good," Salazar told him. The man looked relieved. Though his face rarely ever betrayed his thoughts, he had very expressive eyes. "Come now lad. Let's get you to bed."

That sounded like a wonderful idea.

{...}

August wheezed by at a frightening speed.
It took Harry a full day to get back on his feet after the incident with the Moroi, trapped in nightmares from his childhood he thought he had grown out of. He never saw the creature again, never asked what had happened to it. Days blurred together in an easy pattern. All four Founders were in a frenzy, worked from before dawn to after dusk on last-minute lesson plans, polished up a part of the castle or another. Harry found himself roped up with the task of looking after the children. "You fought off a Moroi," Salazar told him with a roll of his eyes after Harry questioned the wisdom of the choice. "I'm sure you'll handle the three menaces just fine."

Oddly enough, the man was right. Harry helped Meic, Alma and Helena perfect their reading and writing skills in the mornings. Ran off with them to play various Muggle and wizard's games in the afternoons. He made sure that they ate, forced them to sit when they got tired, kept them out of harm's way. He found that he was rather good at it. Although they occasionally moaned in protest, the children obeyed him without much resistance, and seemed happy enough to seek out his company.

Before Harry noticed, September the 1st was upon them.

He went to bed early the night before. He expected the following day would keep him busy. The children had been impossible today, abuzz with excitement. He tossed and turned in bed for hours before falling in restless sleep in the small hours of the morning. He dreamt about mad runes and spinning time and dying friends. He woke, panting, his mind muddled with sleep, to a touch on his shoulder and a dark back-lit figure leaning over his bed. Death Eater was all that he could think. He thought, horrified, that he'd been found. He couldn't hear Hermione. Where was Hermione?

He reacted instinctively. He grabbed his aggressor and pushed him away with all his strength, a strangled cry working its way up his throat. A hand tighten around his biceps, pulled him up from his bed. Gravity claimed him. He landed, in a mess of tangled limbs and bungled sheets, atop something warm that moved under him.

A sliver of pale green light pooled on the ground from a crack in his curtains, glimmered over long dark hair, brushed the top of a pale, handsome face. Harry was straddling Salazar Slytherin's hips, a hand closed around the man's throat, the other braced on the floor near his head. Salazar laid still under him, a look of contemplation on his face. Harry could feel the rapid stutter of his pulse against his fingertips, the warmth of his skin under his thighs. He felt locked his place, suspended in time between fear and confusion and the hiss of air that slid out of Salazar's lips.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in the stretching silence, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Salazar moved his head further back, exposing more of his throat, relaxed and pliant. Making himself less of a threat. Harry couldn't pry his fingers away. His heart thumped up his ears.

"I intended to poison you," Salazar said, low and calm and entirely serious. "I need someone to test my potion before I can slip it in Godric's cup."

Harry barked out a startled laugh. "Didn't work out very well, did it?"

Salazar smiled up at him. His eyes raked the length of Harry's body, slow and deliberate, light grey eyes glittering with contained mirth. "That depends on your point of view," he said, and Harry took his hands away as if burned, scrambled up to his feet in an instant, cheeks flushed with shame. Salazar laughed at him. "Awake now, are we?" he teased.

"I'm so sorry," Harry groaned, hands pressed to his burning face. "I thought you were –"

"I know." Salazar followed him to his feet, rising up gracefully. "I apologize as well. I should
know better than to startle you." He straightened his mussed clothes. Harry wanted to disappear through the floor. "You have ten minutes to shower and get dressed."

Salazar swept out of his rooms, left Harry staring after him. His parting words caught up with him a moment after he'd closed the door. Unsteady on his legs, Harry stripped out of his pajamas and jumped into his bathtub. He showered quickly, the cold water washing away the flush on his skin. He donned a set of fresh clothes; a loose white shirt and leatherskin trousers Salazar had given him. He entered the common room and found the Founder lounging in a armchair, Sila draped over his shoulders like a big grey scarf.

‘– My familiar, not my caretaker, my friend,’ Salazar was hissing. 'I swear, you're worse than Helga when you put your mind to it.'

'Stop avoiding the subject. You're the most stubborn two-legged I've ever encountered, Master.'

'You've been with me since the day you hatched, Sila. How would you know?'

'Stop avoiding the subject. You're the most stubborn two-legged I've ever encountered, Master.'

'You've been with me since the day you hatched, Sila. How would you know?'

Harry made his presence known. He'd rather not get caught eavesdropping on a private matter. 'Good morning,' he greeted, a hand raised to pet the soft scales under Sila's chin.

The snake slid from Salazar's shoulders to Harry's, dry scales cool against his skin. 'I'm staying with the reasonable one today,' she declared.

'Of course you are,' Salazar muttered.

The three of them made their way out of the Dungeons and into the light of the higher levels. The day was bright and sunny. Wind whistled between the castle's archways, brought with it the sweet scent of pines cones and lavender. Helga accosted them the moment they stepped foot inside the Great Hall. She took Salazar's arm and propelled him right out of the door

"You've been stealing my clothes again," Salazar told her, part amused, part indignant as she pulled him after her, away from the Hall.

"Borrowing," Helga corrected with a sweet smile. She was wearing black breeches with a light yellow tunic, tied at the waist by a leather belt. "I couldn't very well take them from Godric, could I? I love him, but that man has no fashion sense to speak of."

Salazar made a noise of assent. "He once tried to convince me plum was a perfectly fine colour to wear," he said, grimacing at the memory. "I haven't let him buy his own clothes since."

"A wise decision," Helga approved, lips twitching into the beginnings of a smile.

The woman led them to the castle's kitchens. The high-ceilinged room was bustling with activity. Roaring fires diffused the rich smell of meat being cooked, boiled or roasted. Heaps of vegetables were cramped atop various work tables, from salad to carrots, potatoes, onions and cabbages. House-elves were running around, carrying brass pots and pans twice their size. Helga dismissed most of them, sent them away to help prepare the dormitories, her wand an indistinct blur as she ordered the kitchen's tools around. A passing house-elf squeaked when a flying saucepan came dangerously close to his head. She set Salazar to work on the vegetables, which the Founder agreed to with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man walking to the gallows, while Harry was put in charge of the desserts, a cake with fresh mangos she pulled out of a drawer.

"It comes from Southeast Asia," Helga told him when he expressed his surprise at the sight of the exotic fruit. "Salazar has a lot of convenient friends who get them for us."
Which answered the question Harry had been asking himself about tea. Wizards had found their way to the far reaches of the world centuries before Muggles even knew their existence. He remembered Hermione telling him that the first wizarding colony in America had been founded long before the Muggle Columbus sailed across the Atlantic.

Harry was halfway through collecting tools and ingredients when the fruit bowl painting of the kitchens' entrance opened again. Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw walked through arm in arm.

"We hear you're traumatising house-elves," Godric said by way of greetings. "Something about flying pans?"

One of said pans made a beeline for his head. The man jumped away before it could knock him out, nearly taking Rowena with him. The witch gave him a withering glare. He narrowed his eyes distrustfully at the ceiling.

"How can we help?" Rowena asked crisply. She gathered her dark curls into a simple knot, turning away from Godric who'd had to dive down to dodge another saucepan. She was directed to Helga's side while Gryffindor approached Harry.

"What are we making?" the man asked, peering curiously at his table. His expression turned into a frown when he spied the slumbering snake curled on Harry's shoulders. "Salazar?" he called. "What's your familiar doing around Mr Potter's neck?"

"Sleeping," came the sarcastic reply.

"Are you all right with that?" Gryffindor asked Harry in an undertone.

"It's fine." Harry smiled. "I don't think she'd let me take her down. She says I'm warm."

The other man looked at him in surprise. "You're a Parselmouth," he said, and it wasn't a question. He shook his head, though there was no reprobation on his face. To Salazar, he said, light and teasing, "Isn't he a bit old to be your son? I mean, how young did you start – "

"Don't be crass Godric," Rowena cut from Helga's side.

"Who – me?"

Both women rolled their eyes. Godric went back to the fruits he was cutting with a chuckle.

"I'm not Salazar's son," Harry thought fit to clarify.

"Who – me?"

The man gave him a lazy smile. "I know," he replied offhandedly. "Salazar, is it? On a first name basis, are we?"

Harry sputtered at the unmistakable leer in his voice. He thought about the warmth of Salazar's skin under his hands, looking down at him in the soft darkness of his bedroom, pale skin and red lips sprawled under him.

Gryffindor flicked some flour in his face. "Only joking, kid," he said with a clear laugh.

The next moment, an egg crashed on the back of his head, spilled shell and yolk on his dark red hair. He yelped.

"I told you not to be vulgar," Rowena said, voice smug, some more eggs near her hand.
Godric took hold of a handful of flour.

A knife embedded itself in the shelf near his head.

"Stop it, both of you," Helga ordered, reaching for another kitchen knife. "There's no time for this."

"I thought we had an agreement about food fights," said Salazar, idly twirling his wand between his long fingers.

"You're no fun," Godric grumbled just as Rowena whispered, "Sorry, dear," to her blond-haired friend.

Hours later, Harry escaped the kitchen miraculously unscathed and utterly exhausted. Gryffindor was a menace that should not be allowed anywhere near anything heavy, pointy, or likely to catch fire, he was sure of it. How the two of them had managed to bake their cakes on time without blowing up anything was a feat Harry felt was as noteworthy as that of a twelve-year-old killing a full-grown Basilisk. The man had spent the entire morning, and the better part of the afternoon, antagonising either Salazar or Rowena – it seemed that Helga's disappointed glare was enough to dissuade him from trying to rile her up – while the two Founders had had an easy access to well-sharpened knives.

It had taken Harry a while to understand that the Founders were behaving like bickering children as a mean to alleviate some of the stress they were under. As Gryffindor teased and badgered, the tight lines around Salazar's mouth disappeared, the terseness of Helga's shoulders eased up, the restless glint in Rowena's eyes faded, and by the time they put the food on stasis and walked away from a mess that would no doubt have quite a few house-elves pass out in horror, they were all somewhat relaxed and composed again.

"Well, that was. . ." Salazar trailed off, at loss of word for once.


"You know you love me," said Godric unabashedly.

"I was going to go with 'tedious', but traumatic works just as well."

"You wound me, Salazar."

"How you ever found yourself a wife is a mystery to us all."

"Good looks and a keen sense of humour, my friend. You should try it sometime."

"What good looks?" Rowena asked with a snort.

"Ahh, my heart, Rowena, my poor heart – "

"What time it is?" Salazar asked above the sound of the other male's exclamation.

"Around four thirty," Helga announced. "We have a good two hours left before they arrive."

The Founders agreed to meet up in an hour's time and parted ways. Harry followed Salazar back to the dungeons, thinking he was in dire need of a long shower. The smell of fruit, sugar and woodsmoke clung to his skin.

"Will I see you in an hour?" Salazar asked after the wall of the common room had closed behind them. "You're welcome to join us."
Harry felt a smile tug the corner of his lips as an unexpected warmth filled up his chest. He shook his head. "Thanks, but I think I've had enough of Godric for a while."

Salazar observed him for a moment. The sharp gleam in his grey eyes softened. "As you wish," he said.

Harry took his leave. Reaching his bathroom, he shed his dirty clothes, uncoiled Sila from his waist where the snake had slithered after a carrot had flown too close to her head, and let her snuggle on the bundle of clothes. He took his time to bathe. The hot water did wonders to his tense body, unknotting muscles and washing away the filth that hours in the kitchens had glued to his skin. As he was washing his back, his fingertips ran across his latest scar. It crossed his back, a perfect line from his right shoulder blade to the middle of his waist on the other side. It was thin, faultless in a way that only magic could produce. Another scar to add to his arsenal.

Other than his small size and a tendency toward scrawniness, the Dursleys had not managed to give him any permanent souvenirs for his years under their roof. Muggle scraps tended to fade from wizards' bodies. His years in the Wizarding world, however, had left their mark, from the lightning-bolt on his forehead to the sentence 'I must not tell lies' on the back of his hand.

Harry had long since resigned himself to the fact that he was never going to be a particularly handsome man. Not like Ron, whose athletic build had begun to show from under all the awkward teenage lankiness. With his easy grins and relaxed manners, the boy had started to garner appreciative once-overs before he left Hogwarts. Harry would not even be as good-looking as Malfoy who, despite being an utter git, had a certain aristocratic grace working for him.

No, Harry was too slender to be called athletic, and too ruffled for cool elegance. His skin was pale in a way it wasn't supposed to be, his cheek-bones too high, his jaw too narrow, his hair too wild. The bright bottle green of his almond-shaped eyes disturbed many, though he rather liked their shade. The scars weren't helping much to improve his looks.

Shaking his head, he tied a towel around his waist. Enough vanity for a lifetime, he decided. He grabbed Sila, his dirty clothes, and padded to his bedroom.

Salazar had given him a few sets of clothes, spelled to fit his stature, but Harry felt that tonight called for something special. He wasn't very good with Transfigurating clothes, but he only needed to make a few small changes to get what he wanted. After a few minutes, he was the happy owner of a white shirt, a black waistcoat, and equally black trousers. After a moment of hesitation, he also turned a blue scarf into an dark-green neckerchief with silver strips. He could not afford a tie as the garment did not exist yet, but this was the next best thing. He completed his attire with the traditional black, hooded robe lined with Slytherin green, and a pair of black, ankle-high leather boots.

He put Sila around his shoulders – the snake had been observing him with half-lidded eyes, occasionally commenting on his strange behaviour – and found he was ready. He grinned.

The first students of Hogwarts were on their way.
Out of the four of them, Helga was incontestably the most patient.

Godric liked waiting the way house-elves liked offered clothes. Wailing, moaning, begging. Occasionally challenging Giants into drinking games. The end result was often bloody and disastrous.

Rowena wrote. Spells, runes, mathematics, whatever caught her mind. Rowena writing was a dangerous thing. The woman had a peculiar likely for things that exploded. A single stroke of her pen could cause great mayhem. It was an exceptionally dull week that had had them jog through Rome with a bunch of stolen plans in hands, an angry Minotaur breathing down their necks, and half the country's witch-hunters on their heels.

Salazar was the worst. Not because of any dramatics of his own. Nothing was ever so simple with him. He was like a child pushing around strange bugs with the end of a stick. He whispered into Rowena's ears to help her make her creations all the more lethal. He poked at Godric's limited restraint to see how far he had to push before the man started to climb on walls – in the literal sense. Helga once spent a whole evening trying to convince Godric to get down from the ceiling while the other two guffawed in the background.

Yes, she was definitely the most patient of the four.

But that did not, by any means, make her a patient woman.

Building Hogwarts had taken years. Years of running and hiding. Of fighting and waiting. Years hearing people tell her to just give up. Because that dream of theirs was simply ludicrous. It would never work. They had to be mad to even consider its possibility. They were going to get themselves killed, along with everyone around them.

She had trudged through cold and hunger and loneliness. She had watched her people suffer the mindless hatred of the world, felt the dull ache of helplessness twist her stomach as lives were lost and hope faded. She had survived on next to nothing, hanging by a thread that was slowly being pulled apart, allowed to talk only in the dead of night, quiet whispers swallowed in the darkness for fear of being discovered. Her heart had sunk a little more each day as she watched resolve flicker in her friends' eyes like suffocating candlelight.

For years and years.

To say her patience was wearing thin was be a sweet, sweet euphemism. Helga rather thought the last shreds of it were gleefully devouring each other the way baby Acromantulas did their mother.

She shuddered at the memory that particular image evoked. Truly, Helga loved Godric from the bottom of her heart, but for all his strategical genius, there were times when that man got all sorts of stupid ideas into his thick skull, and needed to be stopped with a blunt blow to the head. Pulling them along on a one way trip to an island full of massive spiders had been one such instances.

Having reached the end of the Hall, Helga twirled on herself, dress flaring around her ankles with the whisper of cascading silk. Hogwarts hummed under her feet, strong and steady, made alive by the strength of their blood and magic combined. She let her fingers run across the smooth stone, smiling when it all but vibrated at her touch. Her skin tingled with the weight of memories.

They had come so far, given so much. To think that they had done it, in spite of everything they
had faced. It felt surreal. Surreal to the point that a faint sense of disbelief had shrouded her thoughts for the better part of the day. A cloud in front of the sun, distressing for all its inconsistency.

It all seemed so improbable, after all. There was something almost indecent about the chance she'd had. Really, what were the odds? They had to be infinitesimal. For her path to cross the others', for them to come together and find that they matched. For their patched family to hold in spite of contrasting personalities, with the sheer strength of shared hopes, joys and sorrows alone. For having a dream and seeing it come true. For standing here today, on the verge of change, all four of them alive and well –

No one could be that lucky. And yet here they were.

Helga felt her smile widen into a grin as warmth filled her chest, sweet and golden, pulsing alongside the slow beat of Hogwarts.

The arm sneaking around her waist didn't come as a surprise, somehow.

"Well, someone's unearthly happy tonight."

Laughing, she let Salazar spin her around, the dance long since familiar between them. "I think there are reasons to be, don't you?" she asked lightly, a little breathless even as he put a hand on her hip to steady her.

Salazar gave her a faint smile, something soft and secret that rarely ever showed and made the silver of his eyes glitter like moonlight on the sea. "I do," he said, lowering his voice as if confessing to some outrageous sin.

Helga laughed again. The stone under her feet buzzed along. The air was charged, sparkling with giddy anticipation; she felt drunk with it, and she could see in the swirl of silver in Salazar's eyes that he felt it, too.

"We're going to change the world, Helga," he stated, brimming with quiet confidence.

"Oh, Salazar," Helga murmured, shaking her head with a fond smile.

Changing the world had never crossed her mind. All that mattered to her were the lives Hogwarts was going to save. She rejoiced at the thought of the children they were going to protect. Nothing was more important. It seemed ambitious enough, purposeful enough to her. But not to Salazar.

The Parselmouth was always thinking ahead, never satisfied with the smaller picture. The young wizards they were going to teach mattered greatly to him, of that Helga had no doubt. But they weren't paramount to his vision for the school. To him, Hogwarts was a mean to achieve several ends. It was a practical frame of mind Helga could never understand, though it was something she could accept.

Most people mistook Salazar for a ruthless and uncaring man, and most people were wrong. He was not the self-sacrificing kind, that much was true. He rarely ever did anything for a single reason. He was the kind of man who would make hard choices that some would call cold-blooded, only to get results. He would kill innocents without blinking if it meant saving himself. But he was also passionate to the point it consumed him. He cherished magic, its tortuous mysteries, its uncharted depth, with reverent care. Helga knew first-hand that there was nothing he wouldn't do for those he truly cared about, few though they may be. More than once, his ambition had been the only thing that had kept them from giving up on Hogwarts entirely. His determined drive had given
Godric strength, Rowena belief, Helga hope. Without him, they would not have any of this.

"Are you well, Helga? You seem pensive."

Helga focused back on the man in front of her. She had zones out on her thoughts. "Sorry," she said, tucking a hand in the crook of Salazar's elbow. "I'm afraid I'm a bit dreamy tonight."

"I can see that," Salazar replied amusedly as he shifted to accommodate her weight against him.

Helga rolled her eyes at the dryness of his tone. "I'm fine," she assured him. "More than fine, even." She glanced out the nearest window. The sun was setting, delicate peach turning dark red. "Did you check the wards?"

"Yes," her friend answered. "Everything Portkey-repelling is down. All that's left to do is wait."

Helga held back a grimace. She was sick of waiting.

"I know," Salazar said, rubbing her shoulder. "Shouldn't be long though."

Helga glanced at him, eyes skimming over his face with nagging suspicion. Salazar catching stray thoughts without meaning to was rarely a good thing. It meant he was either ill or troubled. He seemed fine. There were no shadows below his eyes, no hint of stress clenching his jaw. He seemed at ease in his black, well-tailored tunic. Calm, collected. But then again, he always did.

"Salazar, are you – "

The Great Hall's doors swung open, shattering the peaceful quiet, and Godric strode in, steps light and silent. Helga stiffened in alarm. The man's face was set in a tense mask. His eyes were hard and distant. His body was taut with a terseness usually reserved for the eve of battle. Something was wrong.

"Oh, dear," Salazar muttered.

She agreed silently, pushing her worries for her friend in a corner of her mind for the moment.

Godric had been on tenterhooks ever since his wife had left for her new mission, but not to the point of reverting back to his more predatory self. A herd of Erumpents in Africa was hardly a threat to someone of Marya's calibre. Maybe the perspective of the year ahead and the responsibilities it entailed was getting to him more than he had let on. It would very like Godric to bottle up his emotions until he reached his breaking point for fear of bothering anyone with them.

"Leave him to me," Salazar whispered into her ear, arms tightening around her waist when Helga made to step toward the redhead. "I'll take care of him. You know how he can get. Leave him to me."

After a moment of hesitation, Helga nodded, and he planted a kiss on her temple before walking away. She watched as he went to put a hand on Godric's arm, stopping him mid-step. The man startled at the touch, left hand flying to his missing sword, only to relax when his eyes found Salazar. Some restlessness bled out of his frame at the sight of the other wizard.

"Leave him to me," Salazar whispered into her ear, arms tightening around her waist when Helga made to step toward the redhead. "I'll take care of him. You know how he can get. Leave him to me."

Helga smiled to herself. As far as she knew, no one could calm Godric as efficiently or as completely as Salazar. She had seen him appease fits of blistering rage with little more than a word, soothe bone-deep sorrows with a touch. There was an edge in Godric's eyes that only ever left when Salazar was by his side. Something wild and dangerous that didn't allow Godric to relax unless his brother-in-arms was with him, shoulder-to-shoulder. For most of their lives, Godric and
Salazar had been each other's sole lifeline. It showed in moments such as this.

Helga could remember how hard it had been for her and Rowena to find a place to fit in the tight bond the men shared. Godric had been fiercely protective of Salazar for all his good-natured acceptance of the two women, while Salazar was always guarded, always cautious for all his charming manners. The two of them had been wary of strangers.

They had stuck together because Salazar and Rowena had been taken by each other's brilliance the moment they had met, because Godric and Helga had found in each other kindred spirits. Their first night together had been alight with possibilities.

Helga remembered leaving Rowena's side at some point. She and Salazar had gotten lost to their world of abstract calculus and philosophical debate. She'd felt it wasn't her place to interrupt. She had gone to sit by Godric, asking for his jug of ale with a smile. They had gotten reasonably sloshed, had argued over food supplies and itineraries with all the vehemence of drunk people.

Helga had learned that, like her, Godric loved the world for all its simple beauty. He revelled in the warmth of the sun on his skin without having to wonder how this heat came to be. He could accept another's kindness without pondering over ulterior motives. Like her, he felt more at home in the wilderness with twigs in his hair and mud on his clothes than in the sophisticated confines of a castle. They both loved to get hands dirty where Rowena and Salazar preferred to use their minds and magic. They were counterpoints to the other two's refined beauty, the strength that kept them anchored.

Salazar had come after her the moment she had gotten too close to Godric for comfort. Suspicious, distrustful, hiding it all under layers of charisma and social grace. He could enthrall ballrooms full of seasoned politicians with disconcerting ease, had used every one of his skills to try and warn her away. But Helga could read people, too. It had felt as though the both of them were worlds apart, but she had gained his respect in bits and pieces.

Trust had come later.

It had taken a particularly violent round of witch-killings, Godric and Salazar nearly dying, burnt at the stake along with a string of innocent Muggles and a couple of harmless Druids. The two men, grogged and beat up, had kept the flames at bay long enough for Helga and Rowena to save them. They had fled to the sound of agonized screams, the scent of fire and blood clinging to their very skin. All of them had been sickened to the core, but there had been a broken edge to Salazar's silence, something in the tight coil of his shoulders that had prompted Helga to reach for him when night had come. The man had lashed out like a wounded animal. Masks had fallen. Helga had glimpsed some of the darkness she had long since guessed lurked behind his perfect composure.

She hadn't flinched. Not at the sight of the raw, barely-controlled rage. Not under the sheer weight of the secrets kept behind quicksilver eyes. She had seen Salazar at his most dangerous, and she had reached for him.

Even though it had taken some time for their relationship to fall into place, the two of them had loved each other with all the fierceness of blood siblings since that moment, and their quartet had become truly inseparable.

Godric's clear laugh startled Helga out of her thoughts. She shook off her reflective mood to focus on the two men. The tense line of Godric's shoulders had unwound, warmth had seeped back into his eyes. Salazar caught her gaze and gave a small nod. She nodded back, relieved. Godric in a temper was always something to worry about. For all his bright grins and easy manners, Gryffindor was a deadly force when enraged.
Trusting that Salazar had the situation well in hands, Helga looked for Rowena.

The woman had cleared a corner of the dining table – enlarged and turned rectangular for the occasion – and had laid out a roll parchment which was already dark with scribblings. Her thick hair was tied back in an intricate braid. A single lock had escaped to brush the corner of her full lips. She wore a simple navy dress that hugged her waist and showed the pale column of her throat. The colour highlighted the slant of her cheekbones, the vibrant blue of her eyes. She seemed utterly lost to the swift flow of her thoughts. She was beautiful.

"Rowena?" Helga called quietly, stopping at the edges of the other woman's personal space.

No response. She wasn't surprised; Rowena cut herself off from the world entirely when she dived into the whirlwind of her mind.

Helga pulled up a chair and sat beside her, content to just observe for a while. She had always found there was something fascinating in watching Rowena think. Emotions danced across her face in the frown of her brow, the wrinkle of her nose, the curl of her lips. Frustration, elation, relaxed calm. It was terrifying, almost, the sense of peace and rightness that took hold of Helga in those moments.

Carefully, because she could never quite help herself wherever Rowena was concerned, she reached out to warp her fingers around the woman’s free hand. Not so long ago, Rowena would have shied away from the touch, lost in thoughts or not. She would never have turned her hand over to link her fingers with Helga’s, absent-mindedly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Helga could never help the quiet wonderment that swelled in her chest every time such a thing happened.

It took a few moments before Rowena reeled in the half-formed ideas raging behind her gaze, a few more before she sighed and put down her quill. There was a smear of ink at the corner of her jaw. Helga wanted to wipe it away with a thumb.

"Back with us?" she teased instead when sky blue eyes looked up at her.

"Is it time already?" Rowena asked, rolling her head to ease the tension of her neck.

"Not yet," Helga answered. "But it shouldn't be long now. I'm sorry, did I interrupt...?"

Rowena shook her head. "Never apologize for dragging me from my thoughts, Helga," she said firmly. She gestured at her abandoned parchment with a grimace. "I wasn't getting anywhere. And I'd much rather wait with you in any case."

"You hate waiting."

"As do you."

Helga smiled, closing her eyes for an instant. "It feels different, tonight, doesn't it? It's as though the castle is thrumming."

Rowena nodded. She looked thoughtful. "I think it might just be. I can't tell how many detours I had to take to get down here. The stairs were hellish."

Helga chuckled. "Well, you're the one who chose the highest tower for common room. Ground level is much more practical."

"Practical," Rowena repeated. Helga could hear the full-body shudder in her voice. "No thank
Companionable silence settled between them, broken only by the murmur of Salazar's voice and the occasional bout of laughter drifting from the side room the children had ducked in to play in peace.

"I feel like I'm dreaming, Rowena, " Helga confessed quietly after a few moments. "After all this time, it's finally happening. We've done it. I can hardly believe it."

"I can," Rowena replied with a faint smile. She tightened her grip on Helga's fingers. "But then again, my imagination always did get the better of me. For all I know, I'm dreaming all of this."

Helga laughed. "Well, I feel very real if it can reassure you," she said with a wink. "But if it turns out that we're both quite mad and making up all this, let us hope never to wake up, yes?"

Rowena nodded solemnly. "Indeed."

They both held their mock-seriousness for about half a heartbeat before exchanging matching grins.

"What would I do without you?" Helga wondered with a fond smile.

"You'd get on quite well, I'm sure," Rowena replied wryly. "You'd be out there, working to become the best healer of the land. Possibly married to that blond-haired Viking who used to lurk around your house."

Helga let the thought play in her head for an instant. She could see it all too clearly. A loving husband, a family. A life most would call honourable. She would have been a parody of herself, having to conceal her abilities constantly. The lies, the deceit alone would have killed her, eventually.

"Perhaps I would be," she agreed. Her gaze found Rowena's, an easy slide of velvet-black against sky-blue. "But that's not a life I regret missing, Rowena."

"Good," the other woman replied with a prim nod of the head. "Because I wouldn't have let you go anyway."

Another kind of warmth unfurled in Helga's chest. Yielding to the impulse, she brushed a thumb against the ink on Rowena's cheek, wiping it away. "Thank you," she murmured past the emotions stifling her throat.

Her friend's nose crinkled in confusion. "What for?"

For turning my life over the day you stumbled into the lifeless shack I called home. For asking me to come with you. For giving me strength when I had none. For believing in me when no one else would. For being there for me and letting me be there for you. For saving me in more ways that I can name. For the warmth and constancy of your friendship. For your smiles, for that gleam in your eyes, for your trust. Thank you my love, for making me a better woman just by being yourself.

"I'm glad you are here," was all she said.

Moments later, Godric and Salazar approached the two of them, the two men close enough that their arms brushed when they walked. Godric laid calloused hand on her shoulder, the touch light and warm.
"You alright sweetpie?" he asked because he knew her too well and had no regards for his own life.

She shoved an elbow in his stomach, right under the ribs. "Call me that again, and I'm emasculating you," she promised over the man's exaggerated groan of pain.

"That's what you said last time," he muttered, rubbing his bruised chest. "And the time before that."

"She did?" Rowena asked sweetly, eyes gleaming with wickedness. She could never resist an occasion to torment Godric. "Helga, you should have said. I'd hold him down for you."

In a rare display of self-preservation, the redheaded man edged away from Rowena, swiftly placing Salazar between the two of them. Salazar moved him back in front of him without missing a beat. At the look of wounded betrayal on Godric's face, he said, "Do I seem suicidal to you?"

Helga could not help laughing. Such a typical thing for Salazar to say. It was rather humorous, considering the number the dangerous situations in which Salazar had willingly flung himself to keep Godric from harm. Surely, many of them had seemed suicidal at the time.

"You're an awful friend," Godric declared, looking every bit of the kicked kitten.

"I am sorry Godric. But I'm exactly the friend that you deserve."

Godric's smile turned soft and just a shade sad. He took his hand away from Helga's shoulder to press it to the back of Salazar's head, forcing the other man to meet his eyes. Something deep passed between them, left unsaid, wordless expressions of affection and care. Salazar bowed his head into the touch, some emotion Helga could not name crossing his face before being carefully tucked away. He took a step back, away from Godric, sliding from his grasp.

"You'd never have survived to adulthood if you weren't so good with a sword," he murmured, shaking his head, shattering the strange mood that had fallen over them.

"I'd never have survived to adulthood if it weren't for you," Godric retorted with a snort.

"You're not wrong."

Helga smiled as the two men started bickering. She had missed this, these past few months. Between the castle and the students, the four of them had been kept too busy to have much time for each other. In moments like this, she missed their time on the road. She missed the boundless freedom, the easy companionship. The jokes traded back and forth to pass the time, the good-natured banter. She missed falling asleep with her back pressed against Rowena's, to the sound of the other woman's deepening breaths. She missed that time when it was just the four of them and life was simple. It had been great, in some ways. It was about to end.

Salazar glanced at her, leaving Godric hanging in the middle of their argument. "This isn't the end, Helga," he told her quietly.

"I know," she assured him. She did know. What they had built here, the result of years of hard work, was huge and wonderful and a little scary, and however much she was going to miss their time before Hogwarts, she was never going to regret what they had done, all that they were going to save.

Salazar gave her a satisfied nod. His eyes fell on the piece of parchment spread out in front of Rowena. "Are you trying to summon an Elemental?" he asked after a brief pause.
Rowena hummed. "I'm not sure yet."

"Did you try Egyptian binding Glyphs? They should help stabilize the third layer."

"We are not summoning Elementals," Godric cut while Rowena shot her work a speculative glance. "These things have been known to level out whole cities."

Rowena sniffed. "Because they were called by amateurs."

"Fulbert was no amateur. He drowned in his own tears."

Rowena's eyebrows met her hairline. "He was a spineless wimp. They used to call him 'The Fearful', did you know?"

"Stop it you two," Helga ordered gently before Godric could retort. Both he and Rowena turned to her with matching sheepish expressions. She held back an amused huff. Usually, she didn't mind their arguing. These two always seemed to be at each other's throats, but she knew they'd never harm one another, no matter how heated things could get. They cared too much about each other for that. But their duelling could look rather terrifying to untrained eyes. She didn't want to risk the students appearing to see two of their teachers try to blast each other from this plane of existence. And as Salazar was always more likely to fuel mayhem than to try and tame it, peacekeeping had been her responsibility from the start. "Nothing overtly senseless until the children get used to us. We agreed."

"She's the senseless one," Godric muttered most maturely.

Rowena's eyes narrowed into slits. The fingers of her free hand skirted closer to her wand. "Say that again, you overgrown house cat – "

"Is, er – is everything alright?"

All four of them startled and turned toward the entrance of the Hall, tension suddenly draining away. Harry Potter lingered hesitantly by the doorway, observing them with careful eyes.

"Harry," Salazar said, and Helga did not have to look at him to know he was smiling. "Come on in. We're only going over some last ground rules."

The boy glanced at him, a flash of vivid deep green, before taking an hesitant step forward. "I can wait outside if there's something you'd like to discuss alone," he offered slowly.

"Nonsense," Helga cut in, and Harry's attention focused on her. "You're right on time. I'm sure they'll behave more sagely now that your here." Salazar certainly would.

Both Godric and Rowena scowled at her. She ignored them completely.

The boy gave a faint smile. "I doubt that, ma'am," he said wryly even as he joined them at the table. He was wearing a strange attire, some kind of formal wear Helga had never seen before: a matching mix of green, black and silver that brought out the startling shade of his eyes. Them were Salazar's colours she realised. They suited him quite well.

As always, there was an air of something foreign around the boy, a sense of strangeness Helga had not been able to shake off, despite having had weeks with him.

There was something off about Harry Potter. In the way he walked, in the way he talked. In the way he sometimes looked at the Founders with faint secretive smiles. More than once, Helga had
caught him observing them silently, with rapt attention even when the moment did not require such focus. There were times when he seemed to be drinking in the world around him, as though it was something new and a little destabilizing. And maybe to him it was. He frowned in confusion over the simplest things. Though he wielded magic with an ease that spoke of years of practice, he did not know a lot of the most basic spells. He often turned to Salazar with questions in his eyes, which the man answered with an air of fascinated curiosity that was just as baffling as everything else. More worryingly was the way he sometimes looked at Salazar; with an edge of caution, as if expecting the man to turn into some kind of monster at a moment's notice.

He was a walking paradox, but Helga could easily forgive the boy his bizarre behaviour. Harry addressed both her and Rowena with the utmost respect; no trace of scorn or contempt to be found in his manners, though women were often treated with disdain. These past weeks, he had taken care of the children with a patience and a maturity that belied his years. He smiled easily, though she had seen his eyes darken with the shadows of pains and burdens none so young should have to bear.

There was something here, some heavy secret that hung between Salazar and him, Helga was sure of it. And if Salazar did not feel like sharing just yet, it was fine. She could wait.

An exclamation went up from the room next door. Alma and Meic emerged from their refuge, bounced up to Harry with excitement written on every line of their body, Helena following at a more sedate pace. Meic made a beeline for Harry and started tugging on his sleeve, a habit he had taken up after the incident with the Moroi. He disturbed Sila in the process. Salazar's snake hissed disquietly from the young man's shoulders.

"Harry! We thought you'd gotten lost."

The boy shot them a grin. "That's your thing," he replied lightly. "I get around just fine."

"Cos you cheat, I'm sure of it," Alma declared, scratching the underside of Sila's chin in apology for her little brother's behaviour. "You have a map hidden away somewhere, don't you?"

But before he could answer, Helga felt the press of magic against her skin, a tingle of awareness in the back of her head, and the air bent, twisting for a moment. In the space between a heartbeat and the next, the students were here.

{...}

It was a mess.

Harry had forgotten how dangerously unstable Portkeys could be.

He felt the prickle of magic down his spine, its storm-like taste on his tongue, blinked, and the Great Hall was invaded with a mass of sprawled limbs, flying suitcases and groaning youths. Most were face-down on the floor, others were on their back, blinking owlishly at the ceiling, and all were breathing deeply, gripping the stone under them or the handle of their luggage as though they lives depended on it. The few who had stayed on their feet were running distracted hands down their bodies, checking that no limb was missing. They looked around in fear and amazement.

Helga was the first to react. In two quick steps, the witch was down the dais, reaching for the first child – a young girl, shaking with nerves – with a string of reassuring words. The other Founders were quick to follow.

"Let's go give a hand," Harry told their children.
"Must we?" Helena muttered.

But she went along easily enough when Alma took her hand, going after the girl while Harry and Meic approached someone else. The first child they helped was a wide-eyed boy struggling to get on his feet. He was small. No older than nine, with curly brown hair and clear eyes.

"Hello," Harry said, grabbing his arm to keep him from falling over. "You okay? I know Portkeys aren't the smoothest transportation." The boy blushed brightly and gave a terse nod. "I'm Harry," the young man offered. "This is Meic."

The boy made a visible effort to shove down his nervousness. "Jarvis," he mumbled. "Lord Gryffindor invited me."

"That's my dad!" Meic exclaimed, pouncing on the frightened boy with a bright grin. "It's very nice to meet you!"

Jarvis gaped at his enthusiasm, but Harry could see he looked reassured. "Y – you too," he said, giving Meic a small smile.

"You can leave your stuff here, Jarvis," Harry told the boy. "And go sit at the table over there. Meic, could you show him – "

Meic was already pulling the boy after him, looking as happy as Harry had ever seen him. He supposed the boy must have missed the company of children of his age.

Harry moved on to the next student alone, and then to the one after that. After quick presentations and sometimes a reassuring word, he sent the new child to the dinning table, where they had to present themselves all over again as they were subjected to Meic's eager greetings. Harry watched the proceedings from the corner of his eyes, and saw that, as time went by, the students' forms unwound at the sound of the redhead's constant chatter. Many of them had looked pale with fright, some were even shaking in fear. Harry understood their nervousness; none of them had known for sure that they were going to be safe in Hogwarts. He made sure to speak softly and appear as reassuring as he could after that.

It took a while before he found his first Housemate. The girl, not much younger than him, had gotten on her feet by herself, and the assessing gleam in her eyes told him everything he needed to know about her House.


"Audra," she replied, tucking a lock ginger hair behind her ear.

"Pleased to meet you, Audra. I believe we are to be in the same House."

Audra inclined her head even as she stole a covert glance at the Hall, eyes widening imperceptibly at the sight, breath catching in her throat.

"You get used to it," Harry promised with a smirk.

The girl quickly recomposed her expression into something less startled. "I'm sure," she said dryly as she bent down to retrieve her rucksack. She straightened, throwing Harry a curious glance. "Are you a teacher?"

"I'm really not," Harry replied, "Though I will be with you in Slytherin."
Audra curtsied deeply in response, sending one of Harry's eyebrows upwards. Despite her poor attire, it seemed that the girl had received some education. Behind her, a boy – part of those who had stayed on their feet upon landing – coughed pointedly.

"Hi," he greeted with a friendly grin, pushing a few locks of white-blond hair away from his sharp features. "Glenn Ford." His pale eyes fell on Harry's shoulders. "I hate to have to state the obvious, but there's a snake on your shoulders mate."

Harry gauged the boy for a moment. "You were invited by Lord Slytherin as well, weren't you." The boy nodded his head. "I'm Harry Potter. The snake is Sila, Salazar's familiar."

He felt Sila shift at the sound of her name. Her coils tightened around his chest. *Many humans here,* she hissed into his ear. *Fear and power. Very strange. Should I bite them for you?*

Harry ran a hand down her scaled body. *Of course they're afraid. They're young and away from home,* he explained quietly. *You can't bite them, though. They're our new –* "He struggled for a moment to find the right word; there was no expression for 'Housemate' in Parseltongue. *Our new nest-mates. Salazar explained, remember?*

"Again, sorry for the obvious, but are you hissing?"

Harry replied with a smirk he knew would do nothing to quell the boy's curiosity.

It didn't take long for the Founders to check that none of their students had suffered from their abrupt landing. Buoyed up by the perspective of a warm meal, the children were quick to get over the peculiarity of their mean of travel, and by the time everyone was seated around the the Great Hall's table, none of them seemed quite so afraid any more.

Out of habit, Harry took a seat beside Salazar, next to a golden-haired boy who was observing the other students with detached interest. Harry found himself doing the same.

These sorcerers made an interesting bunch. Young children, teenagers, some alarmingly thin, others with bodies toned with years of manual work. Skittish glances and bold grins, hunched shoulders and confident poises, patched-up rags and well-tailored robes. They looked to have come from every possible horizon of society. Some of it was familiar to Harry, a lot more was not.

The Founders greeted them properly, introducing themselves and welcoming the newcomers. Then, food was called up from the kitchens and everyone dug in. Conversation started, hesitant at first, before gaining in volume.

" – I blew up an antique vase the first time. Thought my mother was gonna strangle me for a moment."

"You should've seen mine. She was so glad she nearly rattled us out to the neighbours."

"You live with Muggles?"

"Well, yes. What other choice is there?"

Seeing that his blond-haired neighbour was part of the few who seemed too shy to talk, Harry leaned toward him without his noticing. "The food won't bite, you know," he said in a conspirational whisper.

The boy startled and tensed, the material of his doublet stretching over the expense of his shoulders. Cerulean eyes darted away from their inspection of a plate of cauliflower cheese – one
that had nearly ended up all over the ceiling, if Harry recalled well.

"Though I'd watch myself near that rabbit stew," Harry continued with a frown. "It did try to jump at Godric's throat."

"That is, ah – unfortunate," the boy said prudently, edging away from the table. "Any other harmful foodstuff I should be aware of?"

Harry smiled. "You're a Slytherin, aren't you?"

The boy inclined his head. "As are you, I assume?" he asked, eyes grazing over the snake on Harry's shoulders.

"What gave it away?" Harry asked, dry as dust. "I'm Harry."

"Alfric."

They shook hands.

"Have you been with Lord Slytherin long, sir?" Alfric asked politely. "He never mentioned a fifth teacher."

Harry had to bite his cheeks to keep from laughing. "There's no fifth teacher," he answered, swallowing back his amusement. "Please, call me Harry." He paused. "That's the second time someone said something like that tonight. Do I really look so old?"

The boy blushed. "I apologize," he said quickly. "I never meant to imply – " He froze, eyes going wide over Harry's shoulder.

"Do I really look so old?" Salazar asked in Harry's ear, throwing his words back at him and pulling him off balance in the same sentence. The young man had not noticed the Founder listening in on their conversation. He still wasn't sure what to think of the man; though Salazar had certainly been courteous and helpful to him, Harry couldn't help but remain wary of Voldemort's ancestor.

He shook himself, grasped at his composure before facing his Head of House. "I've no idea how old you look," he told him quite sincerely. Salazar seemed young enough to him, there wasn't a line on his face or a grey hair on his head, but Harry had learned that wizards aged oddly. Dumbledore hadn't looked anywhere close to being one hundred and fifty years old, still quick on his feet and with his mind. For all Harry knew, Salazar could be well into his forties and it simply didn't show.

The Founder considered him quietly for a moment, a flicker of amusement burning deep in the grey of his eyes. "I have a few years yet before growing senile," he said smoothly, which did nothing to answer Harry's silent question.

"You do?" the young man grumbled, feeling rather snappish, and a look of surprised delight flashed over Salazar's face, his lips twitching into a smile. There was mischievousness in that smile which made Harry very nervous in an instant.

"Do you want me to prove it to you?" Salazar asked, the question leaving his lips in a low purr. He'd leaned in close to Harry's face, marginally closer than he had been moments before, close enough that Harry could feel the warmth of his body on his skin. He was almost as close, in fact, as he had been this very morning, when Harry had landed on top of him, and he had that same crooked smile, that same playful glint in his eyes, and Harry's brain, for some reason, stopped.

Salazar turned away with a clear laugh that said he had won, though Harry could not for the life of
him figure what it was exactly that he himself had lost. His heart was pounding in his chest, his blood buzzing through his veins with a riot of emotions he could not name.

"You really should eat, Mr Barden," he heard Salazar say, back to his usual detached tones. "You'll be needing your strength tomorrow."

"Yes sir," Alfric replied, something akin to disbelief dulling the blue of his eyes. He served himself a large piece of chicken pie – a safe bet, Harry thought distractedly. This one had not caused too much damage to the kitchens.

"Barden? I know that name," a voice called just as Salazar turned away to whisper something in Rowena's ear. "Like merchant guild?" The white-haired boy from earlier – Glenn? – was leaning toward them from the other side of the table, pale eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Is that your family?"

"Bit nosy, aren't you?" Harry told Glenn when it became clear Alfric would rather not respond, head ducked to hide his face.

Glenn flashed him a grin. "One of my most redeeming qualities."

The boy beside him scoffed. "Nosiness isn't redeeming, you moron." he informed his neighbour. He was a black-eyed boy with chin-long hair and a pale face with a nose that looked to have been broken before.

"I'm aware, idiot. That was kind of the point."

"You two know each other?" Harry asked before either of them could lob another insult.

"Unfortunately," Glenn muttered.

The dark-haired boy stole a piece of bread from his plate in retaliation. "I'm Bradley," he said with a slight bow. "Lord Slytherin picked me out as well." He looked at Harry with open curiosity. "I saw you earlier. You were here before everyone else. Are you a relative of Lord Slytherin?"

"No, I'm not," Harry replied easily. "I just didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Why didn't he send you to the Druids then?" At Harry's puzzled frown, he added, "Like these two," gesturing at Audra and the boy sitting beside her.

The girl was eating silently, occasionally piling food on the plate of the boy at her side. Harry spared him a curious glance. Beside Meic, he was the youngest child around the table. His delicate features were marred only by twin frayed scars near his dark eyes. They ran up his temples to disappear in the tawny mess of hair on his scalp. The both of them were wearing an assorted set of ample robes, not unlike some garments Harry had seen on wizards before, dark green and light brown, with a few runes etched on the helms.

"I've only been here a month," Harry said, at a loss. He knew Druids were wizards who viewed magic as some kind of religion and lived as deep in forests as they could go, far away from civilisation. Their kind was just about extinct in his time, but he remembered Hermione telling him about them. Why hadn't Salazar sent him away to live with them, if that was his way of doing things?

They moved on to other subjects. Harry met two more members of his House, a dark-skinned girl a few years younger than him whose name was Gytha, and a boy with dark hair and sunken eyes named Dallin. While the girl looked a bit worse for wear, with clothes of rough, ill-fitting wool, the
boy clearly came from a place of privilege. Though he didn't say much, he sneered when the others admitted to having received next to no education, be it wizarding or Muggle. Harry feared he'd have to keep an eye on him. He showed Harry some manner of deference. Harry suspected the boy mistook him for being some sort of nobleman. He did nothing to disprove that notion.

The rest of the feast went by pleasantly. Harry talked to a few other students, including the scarred boy eating with Audra. He spoke only to give his name: Ashton. Another Slytherin, the last of seven. After everyone had eaten their fill, the four Houses parted ways to head to their respective common rooms.

Salazar led the way, followed by a couple of boys eager to ask him questions while Harry brought up the rear. A murmur of unease went up the cluster of Slytherins when they headed down the stairs and poorly-lit corridors that led to the Dungeons. A few of them looked distinctly nervous, glancing enviously in the direction where the Gryffindors had disappeared, up to the higher levels of the castle. Perhaps they had seen enough castles to guess where they were going from the layout.

"It's alright," Harry assured them all. "You're going to like it." He certainly did, to his great surprise. He had caught himself thinking of the Dungeons as home over the course of the last few days, something he would never have thought possible in his Hogwarts years.

"How much lower do we have to go?" Dallin asked, eyeing the darkened corridors with a frown. "I'm not sleeping in some dank underground cell."

"You'll sleep wherever you're told to sleep," Gytha told him coldly. "We're lucky enough to get to live in a castle. I wouldn't care if I had to sleep on the ground."

"Of course not. You're used to that, aren't you."

The girl's dark eyes flashed dangerously. Harry put himself between the two of them when it looked like she was ready to lunge at Dallin's throat. "Listen mate," he told the boy, just low enough that no one else could hear him. "I don't know what sort of ideas you have in your head regarding the rest of us, but you've got to understand. We're all equal here. I get that you're not used to that, but you'd better adapt fast. No one will stand down to let you insult them. Not anyone, and certainly not your own Housemates."

The boy looked furious and betrayed at Harry taking sides. He stepped closer to Harry, mouth open to retort, when Sila reared up on Harry's shoulders, snarling threateningly, fangs bared.

'Mine,' she hissed in warning. 'He is mine, little man. Step away or else you'll die.'

'Sila!' Harry exclaimed, alarmed that the snake was going to bite the boy. He didn't know how poisonous she was, but he'd rather not find out over a young boy's body. 'Calm down, he won't harm me.'

The serpent settled down with a forlorn flick of her tongue, fixed eyes still watching Dallin attentively. The boy was frozen in place, looking both small and scared.

"You – you can talk to snakes," he said in a shocked voice. "But I thought – " He cut himself off, an odd expression crossing his face. "I apologize if I spoke out of turn, sir." Though he didn't so much as look at Gytha, Harry supposed this was the best reparation she was going to get. The boy hurried off after the rest of the group, who had kept walking without them.

They caught up unhurriedly with the others. Gytha thanked Harry and the two of them chatted
along the way. Though Harry had hesitated to call the girl a Slytherin at first, he could see why Salazar had chosen her now; in the span of a short conversation, she proved to be a shrewd young woman, fishing for answers without making it look as though she knew what the questions were.

They reached the Dungeons. The children looked at each other in bafflement in front of the blank patch of wall that hid the common room. Salazar uttered the password, and perplexity turned into awe. Harry stood back, oddly proud to watch their reactions, as though he’d had anything to do with it.

"Well, shit," Glenn breathed, the first to break the stunned, breathless silence. "Sorry sir," he amended quickly. "But are we under the lake?"

"Yes," said Salazar.

Harry bit the inside of his cheeks to keep from laughing. There was a distinctly satisfied glint dancing in the Founder's eyes. 'You're enjoying this,' he hissed quietly.

Slytherin winked. 'As are you,' he replied. Then, in the common tongue, "Please, get in. Unless any of you wish to spend the night in the hallways?"

His students hurried inside.

"This is for us?" Alfric asked incredulously.

"Yes," said Harry.

"All of it?"

"All of it."

Harry was tasked with showing the boys their room while Salazar went to help Audra and Gytha get settled. It took a few tries before he could stop the Snakes from gaping and ushered them through the corridors that led to the dormitories.

"You each get a room," he explained over his shoulder, the Slytherins trooping close behind him, looking a bit overwhelmed. "The house-elves already brought down your stuff, so you'll have to look around to find which room is yours. Each bedroom has a bathroom attached to it." He explained how the bathroom worked, hot water and all. Even Dallin dropped all presence and looked suitably impressed at that. "I sleep over there," he added, finishing with the instructions. "You're welcome to come to me if there's anything you need. I already now how things work around here, so don't hesitate to ask."

It took a while to get everyone settled.

"Harry, my wardrobe won't open!"

"Harry, I can't find my second bag!"

"We don't have to bathe every day, do we?"

"Good gods, Cleveland. How many clothes did you pack? Is that an actual cauldron? How did it fit inside that bag?"

"I swear on my family's name, if you don't get out this instant. . ."

"Harry, how do you snuff out these lights?"
"Guys? I think I saw a Mermaid."

"I can't believe this. You even brought food. Did you think they were gonna starve us to death or something?"

"Out. Now."

"Who's got food?"

"Did someone say Mermaid?"

"Hello? Do you know how to snuff out the lights?"

"OUT!"

Fortunately, Harry was familiar with start of term debacles. Things always got out of hand in the Gryffindor Tower. The rowdy Lions celebrated the end of summer and the start of a new school year all through the night, with plenty of noise and Butterbeer to go around. He endured the commotion and the flowing questions with ease. He helped Ashton unpack his clothes – the boy was too small to reach the top of his wardrobe – before poking his head inside Dallin's room, where all the boys had congregated in the meantime.

Dallin seemed moments away from murdering his Housemates.

"Get out of here, guys," Harry ordered, drawing their attention. "It's late. You should try and get some rest, if you don't want to sleep through your first day here."

The threat was effective enough. They all filled out without protest.

"Need some help?" Harry asked Dallin after Glenn had left, throwing a cheerful "G'night!" over his shoulder.

The sour boy shook his head. "I don't need any assistance," he said stiffly.

Harry shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He went back in the corridor to check on the others. Ashton had already climbed into his bed, asleep despite the lights above his head. Harry turned them off for him, and made a mental note to look after the boy in the future – he was very young, compared to the others. Bradley had already stored all of his possessions away by the time Harry found him; a pewter cauldron had been put in a corner of the room, and a few book had been lovingly ordered on the shelves. Harry thought it better to leave Glenn to his own devices. The white-haired boy was waving his wand around when Harry walked past his room, and he'd rather avoid getting jinxed by accident. As for Alfric, he was looking out his window when Harry knocked on his door.

"Do you like the view?" Harry asked when the boy gave no indication that he'd heard him. Alfric startled. "There are Selkies that live down here" Harry said when the boy looked at him. "A whole colony of them. Friendly people, so long as you don't bother them."

"Do you ever get used to this?" Alfric looked rattled, something lost and fragile bleeding through his composure.

"You're going to be fine." Harry caught his gaze and held it. "I promise. I'm here to look after you. You're not alone in this." A flurry of emotions went over the boy's face. His throat worked soundlessly. Harry nudged his shoulder, spared him from having to answer. "Get some sleep. I'll
Harry slipped out of the boy's room and into the corridor. The lanterns along the walls sputtered a soft, silvery light. Along with the soothing clapping of water against stone, Harry could almost see himself being in some sunken ship, a lost wreck left to rest at the bottom of the sea. He was surprised to find Salazar waiting for him in the shadows, the Founder having obviously followed the exchange. He did not comment on it, looking at Harry with an intent gaze that did not betray any of his thoughts.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Harry asked, not sure he could stand the man's silence a moment longer.

"I wanted to thank you," Salazar said at last. "It was not your place or duty to help my charges. Tomorrow, you will be among them, in effect as well as words."

Harry frowned. He wasn't certain he understood what the Founder was saying. He had been helping the man for a while now. Why point out that Harry would be his students in every sense of the word come tomorrow? Did he mean to reassert Harry's place in the castle, assure him that no special treatment would be delivered, regardless of what they had lived together? Harry had never expected anything less, though he felt a flare of irritation at the thought Salazar would believe him to be so petty.

Carefully, he said, "There was nothing else I could have done. You saved my life."

"You owe me nothing."

Harry laughed, dry and bitter, barely recognizing himself. Was Salazar truly so blind as that? Or did he mean to imply that Harry's life was worth nothing to him? "I owe you everything, my lord." The title slipped from his tongue without his consent, fitting comfortably inside his mouth. "From my life to the very clothes I'm wearing. I would've died God knows how many times if it weren't for you. You even brought me here instead of sending me to live with the Druids so I wouldn't be too lost."

"There was nothing else I could have done."

It was the second time that night that Salazar threw Harry's words back at his face. The young man was caught off-guard all the same. He could feel his heart pound against his ribs, so loud he could hear it all the way up to his ears. The silence between them was thick and heavy. It was the first time they breached the subject of their strange relationship. The solemnity in Salazar's eyes made it difficult for Harry to find his breath.

Whatever the Founder thought, whether he accepted it or not, Harry owed him, more than he could say. He was indebted to the neck and painfully aware of it. A bond tied him to Salazar Slytherin now, something made of magic that was older than this world. A lifetime would not free Harry of it. And it scared him, in the rare moments when he allowed himself to dwell on it at all.

Salazar looked like he wanted to say something else, but it was too much. Harry wouldn't hear it. He escaped to his rooms, fled and did not look back. He pressed his forehead against the wood of his door as soon as it closed behind him. The coolness of the wood was welcome on his burning skin. He felt feverish. Classes had not even started yet, and he was already a mess.

What a year this was going to be.
Six o'clock the following morning found Harry wide awake in his bed, breathing deeply to slow his fluttering pulse. His chest felt heavy, filled with lead. Slight tremors were shaking his limbs.

He felt as though he was emerging from deep water, mind still caught up in his latest dream. Hermione chasing after a green snake that looked like the one on Slytherin's Locket had turned into a dark maze with hedges that hurt his skin while he ran and ran and fell. . .

Giving up sleeping as a bad job, he swung his legs out of the bed, grabbed the first clothes he could find, and hurried to the bathroom. Half an hour of scalding water later, the sensation that his body was covered in shallow cuts finally faded, and he was able to push the memories of the night in the back of his mind, far away enough to allow him to ignore their existence. He was getting rather good at that.

The Lake was still ink-black by the time he emerged, liquid darkness moving against his windows, muffling every sound, giving the appeasing impression that he was sheltered from the world, safe in a sanctuary of warm witchfire light.

For a moment, Harry indulged in this illusion of peace. He sat on a windowsill, an arm pressed against the cool glass separating him from the watery depths, and watched algae sway sluggishly, disturbed by the passage of the occasional creature, like so many dancing ghosts. He let his thoughts wander, carried away by the soothing sound of water lapping against the translucent pane.

He was about to start a new school year as a Slytherin pupil. As Slytherin's pupil. He was going to go back to class, something he thought he would never have the opportunity to do, to learn magic from the Founders of Hogwarts. There was something vertiginous in that notion, so great was the divide between his current situation and the mess he had been into just a month ago. So much had happened in so little time.

Just a month ago, he had been traipsing through Great Britain, searching for Horcruxes in a desperate attempt to destroy Lord Voldemort. He had been a hunted man, a pariah, a criminal. He had been at war. It seemed like a lifetime away.

He wondered what had happened to Hermione. Had she managed to escape? Had she come back to look for him? Did she think the Death Eaters had captured him? Killed him? Had she figured out what Stonehenge had done to him? Had anyone else noticed his disappearance? What would Voldemort do if he found out? Would he attack his friends? Would he win? *Had* he won?

A shiver of apprehension ran down Harry's spine. Closing his eyes, he forcibly reminded himself that none of this had happened yet. None of this would happen for centuries, in fact. The prophecy, the war, his birth even. . . Voldemort could not have won. He would never win, never kill, because Harry was going to figure out a way to go back to his rightful time.

But what if he couldn't, though? What if there was no way to reverse what had been done to him, and Harry was stuck here for the rest of his life? What if he died, of old age or otherwise, before ever getting back to that senseless war? Would the Order stand a chance, without anyone on their side to fulfil the prophecy?

He felt helpless.

There was a blur of movement outside the window. Harry watched the black shape melt into its
dark-blue surroundings until it disappeared from sight. Sighing softly, he willed his hands, which had curled into fists, to relax by his sides, a finger after another.

One step at a time. He couldn't afford to wallow in self-doubt and misery. He would figure out how to propel himself through time or die trying. But first, he was going to get through this day, then the one after that. One step at a time.

Shaking his head, he rose from the windowsill.

Now, what was he going to need today? He had no idea what the Founders had planned for the first day of school. He should have asked Salazar. He scowled, remembering their conversation the night before. Not his brightest moment. Harry simply didn't know how to behave around the man. Warring instincts fought for dominance inside of him, and Salazar was doing nothing to help make the situation any clearer. After a second of consideration, he shrugged and fished out parchment, a quill and an ink-pot from around the bedroom. He tucked his wand into his pockets before making his way to the common room.

He was greeted by the murmur of conversation. Glenn and Bradley were talking in low voices, heads bent together over the space between their armchairs. Audra and Gytha were huddled on a sofa, listening in, while Ashton was slumbering, curled up on a love-seat.

"Morning," Harry said as he approached. He sank into an armchair near the fireplace.

The boys looked up, mumbling their own greetings, the girls gave polite nods, and Ashton slumbered on.

"You're up early," Harry said in the following lull.

"We didn't know when we ought to be up," Gytha told him, brushing a strand of curly hair away from her face. "And didn't want to be late."

As it turned out, they had gotten very little sleep last night, and had been up when the first splash of light touched the surface of the Lake. No wonder Ashton had dozed off. They were all running on nervousness and exhaustion, a dangerous mix. Harry reassured them the best he could and then left them to work out their anxiety.

He flicked his wand to summon a book. It was an old untitled volume about Earth-bound magicks that Salazar said had been written by an old witch who thought she could talk to trees. Despite its rather dubious source material, the manuscript was full of fancy spells and theories about timeless monsters that lived in the cracks of the world. Harry had started reading a few days ago, in the rare moments of free time he had been given. Not in the hopes of finding anything that could help him figure out how he had been sent back in time. He doubted anyone had ever written about such things. Not even because he was particularly fond of reading; he wasn't, though he tolerated it. But, now that Quidditch wasn't there to do the job, reading kept his mind from wandering too close to that place inside his head where he stored his mounting pile of worries. The exercise was certainly strenuous enough; the texts were hand-written and the language, convoluted to the extreme.

He flicked the book open, quickly finding the page where he had left off. He wasn't halfway through the first line when Glenn let out a loud, slightly pained sigh.

"All right then, I'll ask," the boy muttered. "Harry?" The young man looked up interrogatively. "What is it that you just did to that book, and can you do it again?"

Harry spent the next half hour explaining what he understood of the magic he knew. None of the
children had had much contact with their powers, even the ones whose parents were wizards. Practising their gifts wasn’t a pastime worth risking their lives over. Harry was hesitant to be the one who introduced them to such concepts, but he yielded in front of their over-eager eyes. He answered their questions the best he could. He levitated random objects around the room, turned books into paper cranes into birds, lighted fires mid-air only to douse them with water, and cast the occasional hex at his Housemates just to hear them laugh. Alfric joined them eventually, golden hair dripping wet from the shower – Harry obligingly dried it for him – along with Dallin, who seemed reluctantly impressed by the demonstration of magical skills.

"Is that my copy of _Ars Moriendi_ I can hear chirping?" the sentence cut through the animated chatter, low and amused. Salazar was eyeing Harry's book-turned-bird with narrowed eyes.

As they all watched, the creature flew to the nearest window, twittering happily, and knocked itself out. Harry winced.

"Quite dumb, for such a well-written book," the Founder muttered. "Harry, would you mind turning it back?"

_Finite Incantates_ went flying around. The book returned to its original state, floating tables settled back on the ground. All the while Harry could feel Salazar's eyes on him, and once again he remembered their conversation the night before, the weight of it, and his skin tingled at the memory. . .

"Ow!"

"Sorry sorry," he said quickly. A candlestick had hit Dallin on the chest on its way back to its rightful place. The boy glared at him, bent over his bruised stomach, but Glenn's compassionate tap on the shoulder distracted him from further complaints.

The last objects returned to their respective shelves, setting down or skittering away with the legs they had sprouted unexpectedly.

"Harry." The young man looked at Salazar rather reluctantly. "Did your former teacher get you started on Human Transfiguration?"

"Yes." Harry had a fond memory of an afternoon in McGonagall's class spent snickering with Ron over the state of their respective eyebrows. "We only got started. Some Conjuration, too." Seeing the look on the other man's face, he asked, "Something wrong?"

Salazar did not answer, a strangely contemplative glint in his eyes. It wasn't the first time Harry saw this expression on the man's face. He was growing weary of it. The Founder turned away first, sweeping a look at his students. Under his stare, they all hurried to find a seat, cramming into the nearest sofas, just about sitting on each other's knees in their precipitation. Harry followed after an instant. Silence fell.

"First of all, good morning to you all," Salazar said. He summoned a chair and sat in front of them. A chorus of 'Good morning’s answered him. "I know yesterday has been a bit hectic, so I'll take this moment to explain a few things." The Founder's pale eyes looked at each of them in turn. "You all know why you're here. You have been gifted with extraordinary powers that, left untrained, would most certainly get you killed. You're here to learn to control those powers, and I'm here to teach you how to do it. My name is Salazar Slytherin, and I will be your primary Master for the duration of your stay in this castle." Salazar paused, and Harry marvelled at the silence surrounding them. No one was moving. No one was even breathing. The air felt heavy with implications.
"Now," Salazar said softly, the sound almost painful in the perfect quiet. "You are embarking on a journey that will change you in ways you cannot yet comprehend. You will learn to read, write, dance and fight. You will learn to wield magic like the part of you that it is." He paused to give them time to absorb his words. "I will give you the tools you need to become great, in the true sense of the word. What I ask in return is your complete dedication. I shall never ask more than you can give, but I will not tolerate that you do anything other than your very best while under my tutelage. Is that clear?"

Backs straightened. A few, "Yes sir," were whispered.

Salazar gave an approving nod. "Good. Now take a look at those sitting next to you," he ordered after some tension had faded. His students glanced around. "You will have these people by your side for the next years of your life. As wizards, you share the same burdens, the same suffering and the same responsibilities. From now on, you also share the same House. Make of that what you will."

Harry felt something shift around them, pieces falling into place.

"Don't hesitate to come to me with any question you have, or with any problem you encounter." Salazar gave them all a small, crooked smile that achieved to break the tension he had previously instated. "Though I cannot promise I will tell you the entire truth, know I will always help you to the best of my abilities." He glanced outside. The lake had lightened considerably while he was talking. "Come now," he said, rising to his feet. They hastened to do the same. "There's much to do. We don't want to be late."

Salazar led them to the Great Hall. They were the last to arrive. The other Houses were already eating breakfast, each at their respective table, which had made their reappearance during the night. The excited buzz of conversation filled the space alongside the clink of cutlery.

Once his students were seated, Salazar left to join the other Founders, gathered by the Great Hall's doors, talking in low voices.

"What d'you reckon they're whispering about?" Glenn asked, serving himself a large portion of scrambled eggs.

"I'm sure we'll find out soon enough," Harry replied dryly.

They did. Harry had started his second cup of tea and was considering another toast when a small man walked in. His skin was paper-thin with age and a cloud of white hair crowned his head, but there was a surprising briskness in his steps. He strode straight to the Founders, shifting the leather bag that was tucked under his arm to shake their hands.

"Delightful to see you again, Mr Ollivander," said Salazar, and Harry choked on his mouthful of tea.

Ollivander?

"And you, Lord Slytherin. Have you decided to buy one of my wands at last, or would you rather keep using that self-crafted stick of yours?" There was no doubt as to what the little man thought of that choice from the tone of his voice "Snakewood and Basilisk horn indeed."

"The self-crafted stick suits me perfectly well, thank you Geraint. I appreciate your concern. Our pupils are in dire need of a wand. I'm not."

"Yes, I suppose they are," the wandmaker muttered, glancing around the Hall. Harry saw the pale-
grey of his abnormally wide irises shine eerily in the shadows of the large doors. "I dared not believe the rumours were true," the man said, seemingly to himself. "Wondrous. Truly wondrous, what you have achieved here. It spells well for the future of our community."

"Thank you, Geraint," Hufflepuff said, smiling warmly. "Do you want something to eat, or shall we get started?"

"I would appreciate a cup of tea, my Lady. It's a rare commodity for those of us who don't have Chinese merchant guilds in our pockets." He gave Salazar a pointed stare. "But I'd rather we crack on right away. Stars knows how long it'll take to get everyone fitted with their match."

The morning went away quickly. The wandmaker – Geraint Ollivander, as the Founders formally introduced him – set down his innocent-looking bag, and to the students' amazement, boxes upon boxes came flying out, long and thin, filling up an entire corner of the Great Hall. The young wizards who had yet to be chosen by a wand rushed to line up behind the old man, and the familiar process of taking measurements, asking questions, trying out wands and judging the resulting havoc began.

After a Gryffindor boy blew up the pitcher of pumpkin juice sitting next to his plate, Harry grabbed some scones, a pot of tea, and retreated to a more secure corner of the room, as far away from the proceedings as he could manage. He tried to read some more, but, general noisiness notwithstanding, the spark of excitement that had lit in his stomach at the mention of the wandmaker's name made it hard to concentrate.

Ollivanders, makers of fine wands since what's-the-year B.C.

Harry had forgotten that the Ollivander family had been in business during the Dark Ages. But now, he remembered. . . He remembered the golden flames erupting from his wand when Voldemort had attacked him. . . He remembered the Dark Lord capturing the other Ollivander to try and find a way to counter this effect, Priori Incantatem, which had thwarted his attempts to kill Harry more than once. . . He remembered killing Gregorovitch from his nemesis' eyes after interrogating him. . .

He looked at his wand, holly, hiding a phoenix-feather core, and wondered. What made it so special? How did twin cores work, exactly? Why had it acted on its own, months before, while he had been flying on Sirius' motorbike, drunk with pain, seconds before Voldemort could take his life?

He barely noticed the other Slytherins settling around him, one after another, fingers tracing the shape of their newly acquired wands with something akin to reverence. Harry had never had the chance to ask anyone about his own wand's strange behaviour. Voldemort had gotten his hands on the world's foremost experts. Everyone else thought it was Harry who had defended himself the night he had left Private Drive for good. But they were wrong. They had to be.

Minutes blurred into hours and the queue in front of Ollivander did not seem to shrink, so slow was its progress. Lunchtime rolled around with only a couple of tables set on fire and a few explosions to be accounted for. Harry was on his feet before the Founders announced it was time for a break.

"Mr Ollivander?" he called over the hubbub of students rushing to the tables upon which food had just appeared. The wandmaker looked up from where he was organizing his supplies, measuring tapes wrapped around his arms like hissing snakes. "Can I talk to you, sir?" Harry asked, coming to a stop before the man. "I have questions about, ah – wandlore."

Ollivander looked at him, pale eyes glimmering faintly, and Harry felt his stomach drop as he
feared the man was going to refuse his request.

"But of course, mister –"

"Potter, sir. Harry Potter."

"Mister Potter." One of his measuring tapes snapped in front of Harry's face, apparently intent on knowing the width of his nose. The wandmaker batted the tool away with an apologetic smile. "Sorry about them. They're a bit excited – it's not everyday we get so many customers. I'd be delighted to answer your questions, young man. Though I trust you understand I won't be revealing the secrets of my trade. Family business, you see. . ."

"Of course sir."

The man gestured for him to sit, conjuring a plush armchair for himself. "Well then, what do you wish to know?"

"I – " Harry cleared his throat, trying to organize the many thoughts pressing against his lips. "My wand has a twin," he started hesitantly. "Another wand shares –"

"– A core from the same creature," Ollivander completed for him. "I know what twin wands are, Mr Potter. Rather uncommon, I must say, but not unheard of."

"Right, well. The possessor of the twin is a Dark wizard who's been after my head for years. So far, he hasn't been able to kill me because of the protection from the cores. From what I've heard, twin wands can't harm each other."

"You heard right."

Harry nodded. "But he's been trying to overcome that protection. The last time he confronted me, he used another's wand. It didn't work."

Ollivander blinked slowly. "Excuse me?"

"It didn't work," Harry repeated, remembering the searing pain of Voldemort's rage after his plan had failed. "It didn't stop \textit{Priori Incantatem}."

Ollivander straightened in his chair. The measuring tapes fidgeted uneasily on his shoulders. "That's impossible," he declared.

"Yet it happened," Harry replied, meeting the wandmaker's gaze steadily, willing the man to believe his story. "I was almost passed out, but my wand moved by itself. It fired something that looked like \textit{Priori Incantatem}. It saved my life."

"Are you cert –"

"Yes," Harry cut. "Yes, I'm sure. It wasn't me. It can't have been."

Ollivander's eyes were still wide with disbelief.

"Please," Harry said, voice low from the desperation building in his chest. He had been wondering for so long, unable to ask. . . And now that someone was here with answers, the man refused to believe him. He was about to lose his last chance. "Please," he repeated. "I need to know. I understand why you wouldn't believe me. I know it sounds crazy. But please, tell me. . . I heard wandmakers talk about wands as though they have. . . Feelings. As though they're alive, somehow.
Wouldn't it be possible for one of them to act on its own?"

"I – " Ollivander cleared his throat. His eyes had gotten marginally wider while Harry was talking. "The wand chooses the wizard, Mr Potter," he said finally. "It is a well-known fact in my trade. You will be able to use another's wand, but not with the same result. It is a fierce partnership, a powerful bond, that exists between a wand and its chosen wielder. It grows in strength as each learns from the other." The man shook his head, protuberant eyes looking at something over Harry's shoulder. "But what you speak of. . . I have studied wandlore my entire life, Mr Potter, and I have never heard of it."

"Right." Harry said, jaw clenched to fight against a sharp pang of disappointment. "Well, thank you for your time, sir. I'm sorry to – "

"Perhaps," Ollivander muttered as though he had not heard him. "If I could examine your wand. . ."

Harry, already about to rise from his seat, slowly lowered himself back on the uncomfortable chair. "I don't. . ." he said hesitantly, reluctant to hand over his only weapon, which had hardly left his side since he was eleven years old.

"Not for long," the wandmaker said soothingly. "A few moments would do."

After another moment of indecision, Harry fumbled with his jacket and presented Ollivander with the handle of his wand. The man reached out, long, spidery hands warping around the warm wood. His face slackened with shock.

"Where did you get this?" he asked harshly, all genial curiosity gone from his face, something threatening and not quite human taking its place.

Harry frowned in confusion. "What – "

"Where did you get this, boy?" Ollivander barked, waving Harry's wand in front of his nose while his measuring tapes reared up like angry snakes. "I remember each and every wand I made and – "

"Is there a problem, Geraint?" Poison dripping from silken tones, just over Harry's shoulder.

The young man, who had just understood his mistake – of course Ollivander would recognize his own craft, why did he not think of that? – took notice of Salazar's presence by his side with a startled jump. The man, stance relaxed, was observing the wandmaker with a polite tilt of the head, but there was a coalescence of shadows in his eyes that spoke of cold danger, something that froze Harry's breath in his lungs and made his heart miss a beat or two. Sila was hissing from the Founder's shoulders, fangs bared and tail whipping the air as she followed the movements of Ollivander's tapes on his arms.

"Yes, there is a problem, as a matter of fact," Ollivander said, turning toward Slytherin with unexpected speed. "Where did you find this one?" he asked, jabbing a finger in Harry's direction.

Salazar's smile did not lose any of its politeness. "That is none of your business Geraint."

"I want to know how he came by this wand," Ollivander said, once again waving Harry's wand, in front of Salazar this time. "This craftsmanship. . . From whom did you take it?" the man asked, pale silver irises flashing, stretching over the white of his eyes until they obscured it completely.

Salazar took half a step forward, not quite in front of Harry, but effectively placing himself between the young man and the wandmaker nonetheless, the protectiveness of the gesture clear in the suddenly tense lines of his body, in the way his eyes seemed to glow for a troubling moment, in a
manner that was no more human than Ollivander's.

"Do not threaten my students, Geraint," Salazar warned softly. "You and I both know what would come of this altercation."

Ollivander's irises shrank back to their normal size. The man observed Salazar for a moment, humour back in his gaze. "Ah," he said with a faint smile. "Yes, I suppose that wouldn't bode particularly well for me, would it? My apologies. I never meant to threaten one of your own."

"I didn't steal my wand," Harry said, finally finding back the usage of his voice. "It chose me, I bought it, and I want it back."

The old man turned to look at him, looking faintly startled to find him there. He frowned. "You mentioned a Dark wizard."

Harry clenched his jaw to keep from swearing aloud. Salazar turned to glance at him, eyes unreadable.

"He is of no threat to you, Geraint, I assure you," the Founder said smoothly. Harry wasn't sure who he was talking about; Voldemort or the strange young man who carried a wand from a thousand years in the future. "Nor will he ever be. The wand, if you please."

Ollivander handed him back his wand. "That wand is powerful, Mr Potter," he said just before Harry could take it. "Surprisingly so, for one with a phoenix-feather core. Use it well, and I shall expect great things from you." He nodded, eyes clouded over in thought. Harry used the occasion to tug the wand out of his grip. "Great things indeed." Harry shuddered at the familiar words. Ollivander looked from Salazar to Harry. "Now if you'll excuse me my lords, I'm going to grab something to eat. I've the feeling I'll be needed my strength this afternoon." After a curt bow, the wandmaker took his leave.

"Someone is trying to kill you," Salazar stated the moment he joined the Hufflepuff table and took a glass of wine from Helga.

It took Harry a second to understand the words. "Caught that much, did you?" he asked with a snort.

The Founder inclined his head. "You weren't being particularly discreet," he replied with a faint smirk. His expression sobered up. "Why are you so adamant to return home, if there's a man – and, from what I understand, his army – trying to kill you?"

"I thought you said asking questions would be unwise," Harry retorted. This was a dangerous conversation for him to be having. With this man more than anyone. It made him uncomfortable to think about all that he was keeping from Salazar. The man had saved his life, had given him his home back, and Harry was fated to try and murder his only descendant.

He looked at his wand. It had almost been destroyed, that day in Godric's Hollow, after he and Hermione had stumbled upon the Dark Lord's pet snake. After Death Eaters flooded the small village and Voldemort appeared. Harry could still remember the heart-clenching panic that had taken hold of him in the few terrifying second when he had thought his wand had gotten crushed. The mindless helplessness of it.

"Harry," Salazar said gently, and his thoughts stopped spiralling at once.

"Sorry," the young man muttered. He breathed deeply, chased away the feeling of Nagini's coils squeezing his chest until his ribs cracked and he couldn't breathe. "I'm so sorry. There's a man who
killed my parents. Who wants to kill many more people. I can't tell you why, but I'm the one who has to stop him."

Salazar looked at him in silence, his face betraying nothing of his thoughts. "You've suffered much, haven't you?" he said quietly. He was watching Harry as though he had never seen him before. The sharpness of his eyes made Harry feel as though he was being pulled apart, pried open for Salazar to see. Salazar smiled. There was nothing gentle in the expression. "You're used to this," he said. "To having your world turned over. To holding on where most would crumble."

Harry felt something like awareness trickle down his neck, a thrill in his blood that kept him frozen in place. He should have looked away, he knew. Closed his eyes, taken a step back, told Salazar to stop reading him like an open book. He should have.

He did not.

"You meant it when you said you would have war and freedom rather than peace on a leash," Salazar said, quieter still, words a mere whisper that ghosted into Harry's mind, delicate but definite. "You won't stop fighting until the man who threatens those you care about is dead and buried." He gave Harry a faint smile, head tilting infinitesimally. A show of respect. "You have very lucky friends, Mr Potter."

Before Harry could find an answer to that, Rowena appeared at Salazar's elbow.

"Do you two intend to stay standing there long?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "Your students have been staring at you for a while, Salazar."

"Remind me to teach them subtlety, would you?" Salazar asked with a sigh.

"I'm sure they'll catch up soon enough." Rowena linked their arms. "Come now. You haven't eaten all day, and you know Helga will come after you if you miss another meal. We wouldn't want that now, would we?"

Salazar smiled sweetly. "Are you threatening me?" he asked. "Because I know for a fact you've hardly slept in two days. Constructing blood-wards can be time consuming, I hear."

The woman smiled back. "I won't tell if you don't, darling," she replied, leading them toward her table. "Eating isn't optional for you either, Mr Potter."

Harry acknowledged that with a distracted nod. Though he wasn't hungry, he joined his Housemates at their table. The young snakes were indeed making a bad job of sneaking glances in his direction.

"Don't ask," he warned before Bradley could open his mouth.

The rest of the day was spent fitting the last students with a wand, getting to know the other children, asking questions, and listening to Salazar's answers. The man explained in depth how classes were going to be held. The students would attend up to four classes a day, most periods being several hours long. Harry was familiar with most subjects that were going to be taught – Potions, Herbology, Charms, Transfiguration and Defence for instance – but a few others he had never taken before, such as Healing, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. The pattern of navigating the castle to meet with different teachers broke on Fridays. Salazar told them that each Founder would spend that day with their respective House, and teach whatever they saw fit. The two remaining days of the week also belonged to them, though the general consensus would be to let the students rest, if they were up-to-date with their classes.
They all went to bed early that night, most of them all but sleepwalking to their room.

Then it began.

{ . . . }

The first weeks of class went by in a confusing blur.

Though the Slytherins were all quick to adapt to the new routine, not all students were so fortunate. While some understood the concept of attending lessons with a certain discipline, having been taught before, the idea was completely foreign to most pupils. It took a few days for them to find their footing and learn to live in a castle in the company of other wizards without impromptu bursts of tears. It took a few weeks for the look of disorientation to fade from their eyes. The Founders did a remarkable job coordinating these lost children, though Harry suspected the strain was getting to them more than they let on. He helped however he could, but as a student himself, there was little he could do beside look after his own Housemates, who were rather adept at looking after themselves. He taught Gytha and Ashton to read and write when Salazar was too busy to supervise them himself. He sometimes gave a hand explaining how certain spells worked. But everything was new for him as well, and he could not deal with others' troubles while keeping up with his own.

He was exhausted.

Nightmares aside, the pace of his lessons soon proved challenging to follow, even for him. The most tiring of all was surely Godric's class. The man taught Defence, though not the way Harry was used to.

"How many of you can handle a sword?" the Founder had asked on his first lesson. Only a couple of children had raised their hands, which had not seemed to surprise him. After eyeing their thin frames critically, he had given a decisive nod. "I'm going to teach you to defend yourselves," he had declared, hazel eyes serious. "With magic, with Muggle weapons, with both. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be able to duel your way into the title of warlock, should you wish to. You won't be invincible, but few shall dare stand in your way. It won't be easy. It won't be pleasant. But if you wish to survive, if you wish to protect yourselves, your families. . . If you have that will, I'll make warriors out of you yet."

The Founder had then proceeded to set everyone up with a sword fitting their stature and had had them practice a few basic moves, to get them used to its weight, to its balance in their hands.

"You'll have to learn to use your non-dominant hand as easily as you do the other," Godric had told them. "A wizard's true weapon is his wand. You can't afford to have your wand-arm wielding a sword. Dexterity is paramount. We'll work on that. But first, we'll have to strengthen your bodies. None of you is in good enough shape. I hadn't planned to do that, but I'll be expecting you in the Middle Courtyard every morning before breakfast. Get up an hour earlier than you normally would, and don't be late."

And so every morning without fail, they all got up before dawn and went up to the Middle Courtyard. To run, jump, crawl, do whatever Gryffindor ordered them to do, before rushing to have a shower and make it to their first class on time. Only the youngest children were spared.

But Defence was hardly the only subject giving them troubles.

Ancient Runes and Healing, both taught by Helga Hufflepuff, turned out to be the classes Harry struggled the most with – partly because he only had a passing acquaintance with both topics.
"Fehu for luck and abundance, Uruz for strength and speed, Kenaz for knowledge and creativity. . . Runes hold power. Wielded wisely, they can build impenetrable defences, enhance one's capacities, and even influence fate," Helga Hufflepuff had said as an introduction to Ancient Runes. "Rune mastery takes years of strenuous learning. I will never sufficiently stress how important it is to be cautious when dealing with that kind of magic. A badly drawn circle can have disastrous consequences. Which is why, before getting to design anything of your own, you will have to study each Rune carefully, starting with the alphabet of Futhark. You each have an exemplary on your desk. We'll begin with Fehu. . ."

Each class left his head pounding with new concepts. Though Harry had never enjoyed memorizing pages upon pages of lessons, he applied himself in both Healing and Runes. The first for its obvious practical use – knowing how to stop a bleeding or how to bind broken bones were skills he regretted not learning sooner, considering how useful they would have been during the Horcrux-hunt – and the second because he thought Runes might have something to do with Stonehenge. His memory of the event was blurred at best, but he could remember seeing arrays upon arrays of runes surround him before his world had been drowned in white light.

Arithmancy, the study of the magical properties of numbers, was new as well, but did not ask nearly as much memorizing. Rowena was a merciless teacher, almost as demanding as Salazar, but her explanations were always clear and to the point. After having her students take a test to judge their counting skills, the Founder separated her class into different levels so as to teach according their individual capacities. While Harry had not done anything resembling mathematics since primary school, he fared rather well. He was surprised to find he rather enjoyed the class, despite its difficulty. His first years at school had been a nightmare, with Dudley and his cohorts doing everything in their power to make his existence a living hell. To rediscover such subjects without constant fear in the pit of his stomach was nice.

Thankfully, Charms, Herbology and Transfiguration were easy enough for him to follow. While each Founder did their best to keep him challenged, he had solid enough bases in each class to keep up without too much effort. Whenever the professors could not find the time to give him advanced exercises to perform, Harry ended up assisting them – usually as a guinea pig to demonstrate the point they were trying to make. The respite was a welcomed one, though he had the feeling it was not going to last.

The biggest surprise came with Potions.

Salazar's approach had not seemed much different from Snape's, at first.

"Potion making is a subtle art few of you will learn to appreciate. It asks for patience and precision," the Founder had told his silent class. "The magic of Potions might not be as blatant as that of your others classes, but it is just as potent. It can bring a man back from the brink of death. It can enslave a mind, draw luck, simulate love. The possibilities are infinite, and you shall explore many of them." He had smiled then, soft and a little wicked. "But," he had said, voice lined with quiet warning. "You won't start to brew before I allow it. Not before you understand the inerrant properties of the ingredients you'll be messing with."

The silver-eyed man had then handed them several commonly-used magical ingredients, a few tools to go along, and had ordered cut, dice, crush as they wished, with the only condition to pay close attention to the way the ingredients reacted to the treatment inflicted. Harry had noticed before, under Slughorn, the difference between dicing and crushing Sopophorous Beans, but he was startled when his piece of Mandrake root let out a shrilling scream when cut, or when saltpetre refused to break, but turned purple under water.
"You've done this before," Salazar had told him at some point, observing the result of his work with thoughtful eyes. "Was my predecessor any good?"

The burning flare of hatred in his guts had startled Harry. Even then, the mere thought of Snape, of his betrayal, was enough to make his blood boil, his hands curl into fists.

"I'll take that as a 'no'," Salazar had muttered amusedly. "Not overly fond of Potions, are we?" He had shaken his head before Harry could answer. "Well, then. Let's see what I can do about that."

His classes turned out to be nothing like what Harry had come to expect from Potions. After a few lessons focusing solely on theory – which, somehow, Salazar managed to make anything but boring, accompanying each lecture by an experiment that never failed to be in some way spectacular – they started preparing their own potions. Salazar was a patient teacher. He never sneered at his students' failures, never laughed at their questions, and the obvious passion he harboured for the subjects he taught – both Potions and Transfiguration – spurred his pupils' interest. The Slytherins always made a point of working hard in his classes, intent on proving their worth.

Harry found himself looking forward to his lessons with the Lord of Snakes, Potions included. He even came to enjoy the subject, under Salazar's tutelage. He would have laughed at the very thought just a few months ago.

Four weeks in, it all caught up with him.

He had cramps from Godric's class he feared would never go away. Homework was slowly but surely piling up on his desk. For reasons he could not fathom, he kept catching Slytherins glancing at him, waiting for him to answer whenever someone addressed them as a group, following his lead when Salazar was not around, and the chasm between him and them seemed to widen because of it.

And so when after a particularly taxing day, with his arms aching from the weight of his sword, with the headache building behind his eyes since Arithmancy growing into a full-fledged migraine, his Housemates began to debate custom duties, his tolerance threshold gave a metaphorical snap.

"Hey, can you feel that?"

"Why are the shelves shaking?"

"Harry?"

He walked away, out of the common room and to the closest exit, which happened to be a window, before his Housemates could think to follow. He jumped over the low wall, cursing when his booted feet landed in a puddle of water, and had to struggle to regain his footing without straining an ankle.

The clouds were dull grey that day, streaking the opalescent blue of the sky, a startling contrast with the bright orange of the setting sun. An occasional raindrop hit his forehead, quickly dried away by the cool wind that bent the tall grass surrounding Hogwarts.

Harry let his feet carry him to the banks of the Black Lake. The dark water was churning, distorting the warm light reflected on its surface, a kaleidoscope of colours he found strangely soothing. It took him a moment to realise that his eyes were searching for the beech tree he, Ron and Hermione often went to when they wished to escape the shadows of the castle in warm spring afternoons.

It was not there.
The pang of loss hit him like a blow across the face, the pain awaking anger in his chest, an ugly monster that tore at his guts and filled his mouth with the coppery taste of blood. Had there been a wall around, he would have punched it, used the stinging pain of his fists to chase the one in his heart. Nails bit into the tender flesh of his hands, fingers turned white and bloodless under the pressure. He wanted to scream at himself. To stop being so weak, so fucking fragile. What right did he have to let details such as the absence of a tree affect him thus? There was a war being waged, and he was stuck here, useless, staggering at the sight of bushy hair, at the sound of roaring laughter, caught off guard by simple conversations.

Breath short, he sat on the ground, dropping on the wet grass without a care for the dirt that immediately seeped through his trousers.

And he waited. For the pain to fade, for the rage to abate, for the self loathing to stop.

He did not know how long he stayed there, watching the lake play with the wind, observing the slow setting of the sun, thoughts clearing until all he could feel was crushing emptiness. At some point, he became aware of Salazar's presence behind him, the taste of his magic tangible in the midst of swirling elements. The Founder sat beside him in silence, without so much as a nod of acknowledgement, the heat of his skin shocking against the cold caress of the wind.

"Are you all right?" he asked after several minutes disturbed only by the whispers of the grass, the lapping of water against the shores.

Harry did not answer immediately. Lie, false reassurances breezed through his mind, but he could not find the strength to utter any of them. He wished he could that yes, of course he was fine, he just needed some air because his Housemates, people of his age, had started to talk about things he did not understand and he had thought it wiser to step away for a while. But he was tired. He felt about to burst, to crush under all that he kept locked away, and Salazar was the only person who knew the truth, to whom he could talk.

"I don't know," was the whisper that left his lips, heavy and honest, lassitude letting the words roll off of his tongue unhindered. "Sometimes, I think I am. Everything's so peaceful here. So normal. We go to class, we learn, we rest. Sometimes, I forget where I am. When I am. I turn around and I expect to find Ron laughing over my shoulder. I think Hermione's gonna appear 'round the corner, talking about some book she's found in the library." He paused, bitterness sour in the back of his mouth. "Then I remember."

Salazar said nothing when a silent sob shook him, a dam breaking inside of him, doubts and pain and exhaustion welling up in his eyes. The Founder did not offer flat words of comfort when Harry hid his face in his hands, choking against the lump in his throat. He moved only to press his shoulder against the young man's, a solid line of warmth against the strength of his sorrows.

The two men stayed like that, unmoving, for what might have been hours. Harry let the strange grief created by the absence of his unborn friends wash over him, allowing himself, for the first time since he had been sent into the past, to process the hole they had left in his sides. He allowed himself to acknowledge the loss of everything familiar, the constant worry plaguing his mind. He cried like a child, and it felt freeing.

"Come," Salazar whispered after he stopped trembling, and only then did Harry realise that his head rested on the Founder's shoulder, that the man had warped an arm around him and was holding him steadily through his last shivers. "Let us get back before we catch a cold."

Without a word, they trekked back to the castle, guided by the last lights of the day, the sky a watercolour of dark blues and soft purples.
"This way, Harry," Salazar said, guiding the young man away from the common room when he made to step toward the Dungeons. "I have something for you."

The man led him down a part of the castle Harry had never seen before, walking through several walls as though they were made of air, and taking a few secret passages the former Gryffindor was sure did not appear on the Marauder's Map. They came to a stop in front of an archway, which morphed into a door at Salazar's touch. The Founder pushed it open.

"After you."

Harry went in.

The room, despite being located in the dungeons, was lighted by small windows near the ceiling. It was round. Its walls were entirely hidden by shelves full of books, jars and bottles containing ingredients that would have Potions Masters turn green with envy. Only a few patches of stone broke through the clutter. They were covered with delicate gold trimmings that gleamed softly with protective magic. Several work tables littered with scrolls, filled the space with a sense of organized chaos. Harry guessed that this was Salazar's lab.

The Founder closed the door behind him. With a wave of his hand, he erased some formulas that had been floating mid-air. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Tea would be nice," Harry said after a second of consideration. He still felt shivery, fragile as though about to break apart like glass. He was grateful that he didn't have to go back to the common room just yet.

He wandered closer to one of Salazar's desks while the man called for a house-elf. The small creature disappeared, replaced by two cups and a steaming teapot on a silver tray. Harry accepted the cup Salazar handed him with a smile. The familiar scent appeased him. Warmth seeped back into his numb fingers.

"Earth Magicks?" he read aloud, spotting a book in a midst of the Founder's writings. "I didn't know you were interested in Herbology."

"I'm not," Salazar replied, gesturing for him to sit. "No more than Potions require me to be, anyway. That's more of Helga's area. This is a treaty about ley-lines. Completely different from the one you read a few weeks ago."

"Oh." Harry nodded slowly. "Ley-lines are the energy fields that run through the ground, aren't they?"

"More like rivers, but yes." Salazar looked at him over the rim of his teacup. "We built Hogwarts over a nexus connecting four of them. I was checking whether there were any under Stonehenge."

Harry's breath stuttered. He cleared his throat. "Are there?" he asked, glad that his voice stayed steady.

Frustration flashed in the Founder's eyes. "Not that it says here, but the author focused on the north of the Isles. He didn't go very far south. I'm trying to calculate whether one of lines listed here could go all the way to Mercia. It's not easy."

Harry took a sip of his tea, enjoying the scalding burn. "You really are going to help me, aren't you."

"I told you I would."
Harry bowed his head, conceding the point. He didn't tell Salazar that he'd learned not to put much stock in the promises of the adults in his life. Salazar had done nothing to challenge his trust so far. Harry suspected there was an honourable streak a mile long running through the middle of that man. But he was a Slytherin to the core and Harry wasn't a boy any more, though there were times when he still felt like one. He wasn't so naïve as to believe there weren't ulterior motives hidden behind the man's offer to help.

"Harry." He looked up at the heaviness in Salazar's tone. "You have to know. It might be years yet before you and I find a semblance of solution. We might even find nothing at all. You have to prepare yourself for that."

The young man lowered his head, letting a strand of hair hide his eyes. He had come to the same realisation over the course of the last few weeks, as the routine settled in, despair drowned under classwork, terrifying in its finality. But now... Now the thought of being stuck here didn't feel quite so damning any more. He could adapt to his life. He had to.

"I know it's not going to be easy," he said softly. He looked up with a teasing smile. "I'll be fine. Living here isn't so bad. I could help you teach or something in the meantime."

"I'm glad you find the arrangements to your liking," Salazar replied in the same tone.

Harry felt his cheeks flame up. "I mean, I don't presume that I'll stay here forever. It's just – I'll help you while I do. If you want." He stopped talking, biting his tongue to keep more words from blurring out.

Salazar let him stew in silence for a moment. "I think we crossed that bridge the day I invited you into my House, don't you?" he said after a while, quietly amused. "And you're welcome to join me here anytime you'd like. I could use an assistant."

Their eyes met. A thousand answers rushed on Harry's tongue, none quite fit enough to get past the thing pressing against his windpipe. He settled for nodding. He downed what was left of his tea, willing the charged moment to go away.

"You said you had something for me?" he said, setting down his cup.

"Ah, yes." Salazar stretched out to grab a flagon from the nearest desk. "Here," he said, pushing the flagon into Harry's hands. "It's a Sleeping Draught."

Harry blinked down at the small bottle.

"You've been having troubles sleeping, haven't you?" Salazar asked. "Don't lie," he cut when Harry made to speak. "You look exhausted. It won't keep you from having nightmares, but it should help stave them off. I intended to better the formula before I gave it to you, but you look like you need it now." He gave Harry a considering stare. "Do you want me to ask the others to slow the pace with their lessons? I know they haven't been going easy on you."

"No, please don't," Harry hurried to say, shaking his head. "I never put much effort in my schooling before," he explained. He could tell Salazar that much. "I've got a lot to catch up, if I want to..."

"Be on par with Voldemort when next I see him. "Be of some use."

"Flight of Death," said Salazar, head tilted to a side.

"Sorry?"

"Flight of Death," the Founder repeated, looking politely intrigued. "'Vol de mort'. Is your Dark
Lord from the Kingdom of France?"

It took a few seconds for the words to register. They hit Harry like a bucket of cold water down his neck. "Are you reading my mind?" he asked, leaping to his feet, fear and fury fighting for dominance in his voice. Something painful that felt like betrayal growled in his chest. How was it even possible? He hadn't felt Salazar breach his mind. How long had this been happening for? How much did he know...?

Salazar leaned back against his chair, unperturbed by the outburst. "It's sometimes harder for me to block out thoughts than to catch them," he said calmly. "And you're not exactly trying to keep me out. Your Occlumency shields are deplorable."

"Depl – " Harry felt his anger wane into incredulity. "Harder to block out?" he repeated blankly. "Do you expect me to – "

"I'm not lying, Harry," Salazar interrupted, eyes narrowing imperceptibly, the first sign of anger he'd ever displayed in Harry's presence. "I was born a Legilimens. Trust me, I never encroach on anyone's privacy if I can help it."

Harry clenched his jaw, eyes firmly riveted on his lap. Why hadn't Salazar told him before, then? Why hadn't he mentioned that he could read people's thoughts without them noticing, if it wasn't a big deal? He heard a sigh. Then, two fingers were closing around his chin, tilting his head up until his gaze was forced to lock with the Founder's.

"I never purposefully looked into your mind since the day we met, Harry," Salazar promised, their position a stark reminder of that particular incident. "I told you, I have no wish to know the future. What I glimpsed were thought that you sent me, consciously or not. You have my word."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "I believe you," he heard himself say just before realising the truth of that statement. If he had learned one thing about Salazar Slytherin these last two months, it was that the man was true to his word, in the rare instances when it was given. "I didn't know that one could be born a Legilimens."

"It's almost as uncommon a gift as Parseltongue." Salazar released him. "And I stand by what I said about your Occlumency. You'll have to try harder than that to keep me out." A sly glint entered Salazar's eyes. "It almost feels like an invitation to dive into your mind, really," he said, matter-of-factly. "The way you scream at me."

Harry's heart chose that moment to give an odd bird-like flutter. "I don't scream," he protested, the words sounding weak to his own ears. He cleared his throat. "I just – I never got the hang of Occlumency. I don't think it's made for me."

The Founder smiled. "Nonsense," he said. "Whoever taught you was just terrible at it."

Harry snorted. "He was terrible at a lot of things." He gave Salazar a suspicious glare. "You're trying to talk me into Occlumency lessons, aren't you?"

"Is it working?"

The young man sighed. God, he needed to sleep.

A soft chuckle. "Yes, you do." Salazar sprang to his feet. "Up now, young man," he ordered, taking Harry by the arm and pulling him out of his chair. "You're going to miss dinner if you don't hurry. Tell me if there's anything wrong with the draught. The dosage should be adapted to your needs, but if you notice anything strange – light-headedness, loss of balance – come to me at once." He
gave the small of Harry's back a light shove. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Harry dug his heels into the floor before the man could push him out the door. His fingers tightened around the flagon of Sleeping Draught. Salazar waited for him to speak, head tilted in invitation.

"Thank you," Harry said. He was not just talking about the potion, and they both knew it. Then, without waiting for Salazar to answer, he left.

{...}

Later that night, turning Salazar's potion in his hands, Harry could not bring himself to sleep. Though the idea was more than tempting, the thought that the Sleeping Draught might keep him from waking from his nightmares was a discomforting one. On the other hand, falling asleep had been nearly impossible for him these past few days. There had been too much on his mind to allow his body to rest.

Tossing the flagon on his bed with a sigh, he got up, thinking he'd decide later, and wandered to the common room. He had Rune homework to complete anyway.

It was late, not long before midnight. Warm firelight wavered into the darkness. The other Slytherins had gone to sleep a while ago, muttering about crazy Gryffindors and lack of uninterrupted rest. Harry startled, right hand flying to his concealed wand, when a strange, choked noise rang through the muffled silence of the common room. He approached carefully, his view obstructed by a large settee.

Gytha was crying, sitting on the thick rug in front of the fireplace, arms wrapped around her knees. The girl's face was hidden by a curtain of curly brown hair, but there was no mistaking the sporadic shake of her shoulders.

Harry's wand-arm fell away from his belt. Without thinking he walked around the black couch and dropped on his knees beside her.

"Hey," he called softly when his Housemate didn't react to his presence. Alarmed, he reached to put a hand on her shoulder. "Gytha. What's wrong?"

The girl tensed under his touch. He hurried to back away. He had noticed that, aside from the Founders who had no qualms touching each other heedless of their respective genders, the rest of the student body avoided skin-to-skin contact when at all possible. There was always a respectful distance between male and female students, which Harry found rather ridiculous, considering that they all shared the same classes, and the girls were more than capable of defending themselves.

"Sorry," he said, electing to settle beside Gytha, back resting against the front of the couch, far enough to avoid touching her. He hesitated. Though he had comforted Hermione several time after the girl had had a row with Ron during their Hogwarts years, he was no expert on dealing with distressed girls. "Did anyone hurt you?" he asked quietly, a part of him already thinking about the measures he would take if someone had dared... .

Dark eyes, red from crying, perked up from behind the girl's drawn knees. Gytha offered him a shaky smile. "N-no," she whispered, wiping her tear-stained cheeks with the sleeve of her sleeping gown. "I'm sorry. I'm just being stupid."

Harry held back an amused smile. He had come to know Gytha these last few weeks, while he was tutoring her with her homework. The girl was anything but stupid. The sharpness of her mind had
quickly become apparent to all looking after a few days under Salazar's teachings.

"I very much doubt that," Harry informed her lightly. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Gytha's eyes darkened. Her lips trembled.

Unsure what to do, Harry remembered the warmth of Salazar's body against his. How comforting it had been to draw from someone else's strength. The contact had caught him by surprise. He wasn't used to anyone touching him like this, with such care. It had felt nice, and he'd felt better afterwards. Perhaps he could try to comfort Gytha the way Salazar had comforted him. Slowly, to give the girl time to shy away if she wanted to, he put an arm around her shoulders, drew her closer to his chest. She went easily enough, tucking her face in the crook of Harry's neck. He held her in silence while she cried harder, until the sobs eased up.

Eventually, she said, "It's my family. I just realised I can never see them again. I thought – I thought I was doing fine but. It hurts. God, it hurts." She shuddered. Harry held her a little tighter.

"Why can you never see them again?" he asked softly.

"Oh, that's right," Gytha murmured. "You don't come from a Muggle family." She cleared her throat. "Two witches got caught in my village last spring. I knew them. They were nice women. My parents knew them too. We were neighbours. Then they got caught, and the next day we hung stones from their feet and took them to the lake behind the smithy's house. They drowned. My father pushed them into the water. He knows I have magic now. If I go back home, he'll do the same to me."

Listening to her, Harry felt sick to his stomach. Though he had no doubt the Dursleys had wished him dead many times, he had always known what they thought of him. He had never loved them the way a child could love his parents. He couldn't begin to imagine what it must feel like, to be so completely rejected by people who you thought cared for you. He wondered how heavily that story must have weighted on Gytha's mind these last few months. It was good that the girl was talking now, like draining poison from a festering wound.

Gytha said, "When Lord Slytherin found me, he gave me a choice. Come with him and never see my family again, or stay and risk execution." The girl shook her head, a look of disgust on her face. "I didn't even say goodbye. I just left. I left my own family."

"Listen to me," Harry said, shifting away to get a better look at her. "I was raised by Muggles too. I was with them for years. They were awful, but it's taught me one thing. It's taught me that you don't owe your blood anything, Gytha. Family isn't who you're born with. It's who you'd die for." He gave the girl a small smile. "You're a witch. You belong with us now." He paused a second to consider his next words. "Be honest, if you were given a choice. If you could go back to your old life safely, without your magic. Would you?"

"No." The answer, swift and assured, seemed to surprise even Gytha. She blinked, all tears gone from her eyes. "Oh," she said, looking a bit startled.

Harry squeezed her shoulder one more time before letting go. "There you go," he told her with a crooked smile. He rose to his feet. "Come on. It's late. You should try and get some sleep. We've got Defence first thing tomorrow."

"Shit," Gytha grimaced. "I don't think my legs will stand it." She got up as well, observing him, eyes sharp with familiar shrewdness. "You should rest, too," she told him casually. "You look dreadful."
"Thanks," Harry said with a snort, preparing to leave. "Sweet dreams, Gytha. I'll see you at dawn."

"Harry?" He turned around, humming interrogatively. Gytha smiled, black eyes glinting in the firelight. "I'm glad I met you," she said softly. Her expression turned severe before he could so much as think of an answer. She pointed at the direction of the boy's dormitories. "Go sleep now. As you so aptly pointed out, we've got Defence first thing tomorrow."

"And they tell you I'm the oldest around here," Harry muttered. Gytha's eyes narrowed. He raised his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. I promise I'll be well-rested."

Gytha gave a satisfied nod and they parted ways, each heading to their respective dormitory. Harry found himself smiling on his walk back to his room. He felt lighter, somehow. It was as though his heart could beat more freely now, having shaken off some weight he had not known had been there. Whether he had to thank Gytha, Salazar, or the both of them for the change was debatable, but in any case, it felt... Good.

Reaching his bedroom, he picked up the Founder's potion from where he had thrown it earlier. He worked the stopper open, took a sip, and slept.

{...}

Life went on.

"It's LeviOsa, Mr Barden, not Levioissa. And don't jab your wand like that. You're trying to make that feather fly, not to scare it into submission."

"Stop sneering, Dallin. It doesn't befit you."

"Matches into needles? How the hell do we turn matches into needles?"

"Here, I'll show you."

"Circe, I hate homework."

"Huh, ma'am? I think this plant just mov– ahh!"

"What do you mean, it just happened? How does a closet just explodes?"

"A month and twenty-four missing desks. Twenty-four. This universe just hates me, doesn't it? One more and I'd have won."

"I don't see how that surprises you, Godric. You never win."

"Since when do these paintings talk?"

"Watch your left side, Mr Potter! Were this a real duel, I'd have cut off your arm! And you need to be quicker on your feet. Stay still and you're dead. Come on, again!"

"How on Earth did you get your mattress stuck on the bloody chandelier?"

"Watch the class while I deal with this, Harry. Make sure they don't blow anything up. And keep Glenn away from those Ashwinder eggs, why don't you?"

It was chaotic. It was wondrous. It was staying up late with his Housemates, teaching or studying in the warmth of the common room, parchment sprawled everywhere, the smell of ink, fresh wood and leather around them, the quiet scratch of quills, the occasional whisper when silver shapes
swam by the windows. It was cold air down his lungs in the mornings, the pleasant burn and stretch of his muscles as he ran along the other students, frost sparkling in clear wandlight. It was water cascading down his body, washing away nightmares and exertion. It was fresh pots of tea sneaked into class, shared when no one was looking, invigorating bitterness warming his stomach. Simmering cauldrons, sparkling bursts of power. It was rolling clouds reflected on dark waters, sharp laughter ringing with the crackle of burning fire.

It was the smooth feel of scales on his shoulders and swirling silver eyes gleaming with quiet mirth. It was silken words in his ears, cool fingers on his arms, sly smiles that felt like victory.

It wasn't perfect, sweat-soaked sheets with vivid nightmares and food pushed aside with worry-knotted stomach, snide comments and baleful glares, but it was good.

From there, it only went downhill.
There were moments when the world held its breath and waited in suspense. Turning points in the life of a Man where instant decisions changed the turn of events. Some paths fell into shadows, others emerged from a convergence of choices. Shards of possibilities cut through the fabric of time, and the universe shifted.

She did not know when her universe had started to shift, when the wheel of fate had started to thread reality into a different shape. A shape that growled and snarled and pulsed with the echoes of war drums. There had been no gut-wrenching sense of impending danger, no tolling bell ringing in warning. Only the vague awareness that came with standing on the brink of a precipice with her eyes closed. Everything had started to feel unstable, the ground slipping under her feet to leave her to dangle over the edge, ready to fall with the tipping of scales.

It all happened so quickly, in the end. She chose.

She fell.

{...}

The landing was rough. Twisting darkness rearranged limbs in a dizzying rush. Flesh and bones snapped back into existence in a painful hurtle. Scraped hands, bruised knees, skull vibrating from the pain of everywhere. She did not feel it. She could not feel anything but the air that gurgled down her lungs, liquid rather than gaseous; the deafening lurch of her heart that shattered her thoughts with each vicious beat. The rest of the world was blurred. Distant, cut off by a thick invisible glass that clouded shapes and muffled sounds. Bodies were moving at the edges of her consciousness, dashes of colours and light and life, remote, drowned under the shrill hissing in her ears.

"Oi, watch where you're going, sweetheart!"

"What's wrong with yah?"

Voices. People. Why were there so many people here? So many indistinct features, none of them right. All of them wrong wrong wrong wrong. They parted before her like water, wariness in countless stares, driven away by the blank shock in her eyes, by the scent fire and war that clung to her frame like a blood-stained cloak.

There was thunder in her ears, a persistent buzz that fogged everything else. There was a lump in her throat that kept her from breathing. There was a hand on her arm, pain spreading at the touch like a tidal wave. She had been hit here, she thought. It hurt, but not as much as the gaping hole by her side where should have been.

"Are you all right, love?"

The old woman looked nice. A kind, wrinkled face with soft green eyes – not the right shade, not right at all – and long white hair held back in a loose bun.

"Oh my – is that blood? Did you have an accident, darling? You should sit down. It'll be fine, just let me call an ambulance. . ."

"No!" Someone shouted – was that her? It sounded like a broken parody of her voice. She was stumbling away, evading the gentle touch, the startled leaf-green eyes wrong wrong wrong looking
at her in alarm, and would her heart *stop pounding*, she needed to *think*. "Ah – I'm fine. I'm fine. I just need to find –"

*Harry, oh God, where's Harry?*

"Who's Harry, love? Does he need help too?"

Her mind cleared. Ice chasing the veil of shock, world coming back into focus, cold rain in her hair, blood oozing from a scratch on her head, sharp and merciless. Hermione breathed deeply once, twice, hands closing into fists to keep from shaking.

She was standing on the side of a road with no idea of how she had gotten there. Stone buildings stood on either side of the street, smooth glass and stainless steel reaching up to the darkened skies. The pavement was slick with rain and melting snow, splashed onto the bustling crowd by roaring cars.

"Where am I?" she heard herself ask, the detached calm of her voice foreign to her own ears.

"I – Tottenham Court Road," the old woman said. She had taken a step back at Hermione's outburst, but she was reaching for the girl, arms raised, ready to catch her.

Tottenham Court Road. Hermione felt herself pale. Nausea was rolling in her stomach. The persistent pounding of blood was back in her ears, a loud thumping noise that overwhelmed her mind. She was in Central London. She was back where the hunt had started, all those months ago. She was miles away from Stonehenge.

*Oh, God, what had she done?*

The woman was talking again, but she couldn't make out her words. Black cabs rushed by, Muggles hurried away, coats drawn up to their ears against the biting rain, and Hermione staggered.

*What had she done?*

"Can you hear me, love? You're white as a sheet. You should –"

"*Run, Hermione! Disapparate!*"

" – a moment. Did you hit your head? Can you tell me your name? Do you remember today's date?"

The date? How did today's date matter? Time was all wrong anyway. It stretched infinitely to turn seconds into decades of agony. It sped up to turn moments of peace into faded memories. All crumbled to dust, with time, as inevitable as the revolution of the Earth. So no, she did not remember today's date. There were other things she remembered, though. She remembered the screams – *they found us 'Mione, run run! RUN!* She remembered the black-clad shapes, the bone-white masks. She remembered the heart-wrenching panic, the fear humming in her blood. She remembered Harry pushing her in front of him – *don't let them get the Locket!* She remembered running, blood-red and death-green bolts of light hissing past her ears. She remembered the shortness of her breath, the burn of her legs. She remembered the mud, the rain, the stones.

"*Run, Hermione! Disapparate!*"

She remembered her frantic pulse, so quick she had feared her heart would burst out of her chest,
and emerald eyes glowing with formidable power.

"NOW!"

She remembered leaving.

Slytherin's Locket was cackling around her neck, the gold chain cold and heavy against her skin, chanting an uninterrupted string of you abandoned him, left him to die, you ran you left he's alone now, poor little Hermione, so scared, so lost. . .

"I have to go back," she whispered.

"Go back whe – "

The last words were lost to the hubbub of the crowd. Hermione walked away, ducking into the flow of passers-by before the old woman could stop her, trying to melt into the mass of bodies as though her trousers weren't splattered with mud, hoping no one would notice the red stains on her torn jumper. She was painfully aware of the seconds ticking by, now. How many had there been since she had Disapparated? Two hundred? Three? How long could Harry hold up against a dozen Death Eaters? How long before Voldemort was called? How long before she was too late. . .?

Please, don't let me be late.

Panting, the young woman wobbled into a narrow alley tucked between two brick walls glistening with rainwater. Hidden from sight, she braced herself against the rough stone, cold and wet and real against her bare skin. She was shaking. From the cold, from the dread squeezing her heart, from the bone-deep exhaustion in her limbs.

Water trickled down her bent neck. The tumult of the busy street was more distant here. The purr of engines, the pound of footsteps, the murmur of voices. A flurry of movement, signs of peaceful normalcy. Now more than ever, the few steps separating Hermione from Muggle life felt like light-years. The balance of the world was shifting in this very moment. She could feel it in her bones, but none of these people knew. They had no idea that the course of a war that would decide their fate was inverting as they walked on, as they drove by. Their last hope was fighting for his life, and they ignored his very existence.

He's fighting alone, all alone, left to die by his very best friend. . .

She dug her nails into her wounded arm, the stinging pain a focus point to her spiralling thoughts.

Get a hold of yourself, Granger, she ordered herself, digging harder, mind racing to shake off the clogging hold of despair. Lips pressed in a tight line, she breathed slowly through her nose, willing her body to hold on, just a little longer. There was no time for weakness, no time for sentiment. Breathe in, breathe out, put it all aside, solve this mess.

She needed a plan. There's no time for a plan. She needed back up. There's no one to turn to. She needed to be strong. There's no strength left in you.

"Oh, do shut up," she hissed to the Locket. "I don't have time for you."

She detached herself from the wall. The poisonous whispers were right. She had nothing.

"Right, then," she muttered. Strangely enough, the admission of helplessness had given her thoughts the clarity she needed. Desperate times called for desperate measures. She grabbed the beaded handbag from where it hung around her waist. "Accio Potion case," she enchanted, holding
out her wand. A great ruckus echoed from the depths of the bag – she really ought to find a way to store the books away from the rest – and a leather pouch came soaring into her waiting hand.

The turquoise blue of the Invigoration Draught gleamed in the shadowed street right before Hermione swallowed it. Warmth seeped back into her limbs. She stopped shaking.

Then she was gone.

Now, power-wise, Hermione was nowhere near as strong as Harry. She wasn't weak by any standards, but she did not kid herself regarding her abilities, specially since her best friend was all but brimming with magic. She was above average for sure, but children with wizarding parentage tended to be stronger than her, power-wise. It had always irked her. She accepted nature's limitations – for all the arguments of philosophers, Men were not born equals, not by any stretch of the imagination – but the thought that her genome could keep her from becoming whatever she wanted had never sat well with her. She firmly believed that when you want, you can, and willpower had never been something she had lacked of. She broke expectations because she believed she could. A lot of teachers mistook her for a genius – she wasn't. Sheer stubbornness was what got her to the top of her classes. She had wished to prove wizard-borns she was every bit as good as them when it came to magic, and so she had; eyes sore from hours spent reading and head swimming from lack of sleep notwithstanding. She had come to understand the intricacies of her powers better than pure-bloods understood genealogy. What she lacked in strength she gained in control.

Thus, the fact that she was dead on her feet did not stop the sound of her Apparation from being an inaudible crack.

It saved her life.

"What happened? What the hell happened?!"

Hermione flattened herself against the ground, dropping behind a large boulder the moment she appeared, a hand pressed against her mouth to keep from crying out.

Stonehenge was crawling with Death Eaters.

"You! Take care of the Muggles. We don't want vermin messing around. I don't care what you do, just keep them away! Goyle, you call Snape and Malfoy right now! Someone tell me if they're alive. And for fuck's sake, stay away from those god-damn stones!"

"Sir! They're breathing, sir! They're alive!"

"Oh, thank Merlin. I want a perimeter around this fuckin' mess. Hurry, you bloody idiots! It's your arses that'll be in the line of fire if anyone shows up. Get them talking as soon as they're conscious. If we don't have an explanation by the time the Dark Lord hears of this, heads are gonna roll. Our hea – What are you doin' here, Goyle?! I don't care if the pricks are busy, call 'em now!"

Orders were shouted, bodies moved around. Hermione curled up behind her rock. Too close, they were far too close. Why were they so close? Why did they sound so alarmed? Where were the others Death Eaters, those who had attacked them? Something had happened – was happening, and she couldn't stay where she was. There were footsteps approaching. Ignoring her hammering heart, she dug around her bag, careful to avoid jostling the books.

"So, what d'you reckon happened to them?"

"Not sure I wanna know, mate. Whatever it is, it took out Lestrange. I'm not goin' any closer to
these stones than I have to."

Where was it, why hadn't she taken the time to reorganize that bloody bag?

"Hey, is that a footprint?"

Her fingers brushed against a silken piece of fabric. Hermione draped the Invisibility Cloak over her shoulders just as booted feet went around the boulder hiding her.

"Anything?"

"Nah. Some tourist probably left it here."

She waited, holding her breath despite her screaming lungs, for the two men to walk away. Although they were wearing the usual black robes of the Death Eaters regalia, their masks were missing. No need for that, now that their Master had taken control of the Ministry, she supposed. Hermione had never seen either of them before. Both were males, one with a jutting jaw and bushy eyebrows, the other with mousy hair and sunken eyes. Voldemort had been recruiting, it would seem.

Once certain they would not notice her, Hermione stood slowly, keeping the Cloak firmly tucked around herself.

The first thing she saw were the bodies. They laid haphazardly on the muddy ground between Stonehenge's monoliths, limbs sprawled at odd angles, unmoving. Puppets whose strings had been cut. There were the Death Eaters who had attacked them. Their masks were still hiding their faces, giving the impression that their skin had taken the pallor of Death, from afar. Their comrades were casting protective wards over their prostrated forms. There was no point protecting the dead. Passed out, someone had said. There was breath left in them.

The next thing she noticed froze her where she stood. The ground between the stone circles was scorched. Puffs of billowing smoke were still rising from the earth. The grass that used to grow between the monoliths had been burned to a cinder. Hundreds of soot marks marred the soil, curling designs that ran all the way to a lonely boulder at the center of the two rings of stones, complex arrays overlapping, forming a strange layout that could not be accidental... Runes, Hermione realised. There were runes all around Stonehenge.

But more important than the unconscious Death Eaters, than their confused colleagues, than these mysterious marks, was what she could not see. Harry was not there.

Harry was not there.

Alarm sent a clean shock through her veins as she kept looking around, hoping against all hope that the young man had escaped the Deaths Eaters' scrutiny, that she was going to catch a glimpse of messy black hair, a hint of reassuring smile, half-hidden in protective shadows... 

"What are you doing here?!"

She startled, biting back panicked gasp. The man who had just shouted looked familiar. Thorfinn Rowle. She knew him. They had fought before. He had almost succeeded in capturing her, Ron and Harry after Bill and Fleur's wedding. He was a huge mountain of a man, with a broad chest, heavy features and light-blond hair. He was also looking right at her. Right through her, Hermione reminded herself firmly, and because she was a Gryffindor and bravery was stopping one's fears from taking over one's actions, she locked her muscles into place to fight every instinct that told her to go for her wand and run...
"Think there's time to dawdle, do you?" Rowle growled, teeth bared into a snarl. "Go help Selwyn with the Muggles, or I swear you'll be the one calling our Lord when we're done here."

"Y-yes, sir," squealed a voice behind Hermione. "Sorry, sir. I was just wondering, these marks. . ."

"No one's asked you to wonder, boy," said Rowle. "Go do your job if you don't want me to do mine."

The owner of the high voice waded away.

"GOYLE!" Rowle bellowed moments later. "Where's Malfoy, you – "

_Crack!_

The man was interrupted by the sharp, whip-like sound of air bending to adapt to an abrupt arrival.

"For your sake, I hope there is a good reason for this summon, Rowle," drawled a cold, clear voice behind Hermione.

The young witch closed her eyes and forced a slow, controlled breath down her lungs.

The hem of Lucius Malfoy's richly-embroidered cloak brushed her thigh as the blond Lord strode past her. A tall, slim woman was following him, white-blond hair held back in a perfect French braid. His wife. Though Hermione had only ever seen the infamous Narcissa Malfoy from afar, there was no mistaking that pale, diaphanous skin, those delicate features. Severus Snape was standing by her side. Greasy-haired and sallow-skinned, the man looked thinner than usual, the flowing black robes he wore aggravating the tight lines of his angular face. The scowling mask the Potion Master adorned failed to hide the weary air in his coal-black eyes, Hermione noted with a sense of vicious satisfaction.

All three wizards froze at the sight of Stonehenge's strange spectacle.

"What in the name of – " Malfoy muttered.

"What happened, Mr Rowle?" his wife asked, pale eyes narrowed.

Hermione was glad she asked.

"Don't know," Rowle replied gruffly. "We got a Patronus from Travers. Told us to get our arses here. Supposedly, they were after Potter and his mudblood. Found them like this." He jerked his head toward the stones.

"Potter was here?"

Hermione edged away, closer the rune-etched circles, before Rowle answered. The man was obviously as befuddled as she was. She stopped at a respectable distance from the unconscious Snatchers, hovering between a man curled on the side like a child and a towering monolith.

So. The soot marks were not soot marks. The runes scribbled across Stonehenge had not been laid on the ground like ink on parchment. They had been _seared_ into the soil, great lacerations that ran several inches deep, a brand carved into the earth by a skilful sculptor with a fondness for white-hot chisels. Three concentric circles of varying width ran around Stonehenge, a seven-point star linked as many of its monoliths, a triangle three others, two more circles surrounded the fallen boulder at the center, all of it interwoven with runes and symbols. Some she thought might have Druidic origins, some she remembered from an Alchemy book, most she had never seen before.
Had Harry done this? How could Harry have done this? Was it a ward that had backfired? Was it a trap by Voldemort? More ancient than that, perhaps, old Magick activated by the waves of power that had been pouring out of the fighting wizards? More importantly: *What the hell had it done?*

Her fingers brushed against the rough stone beside her, and a shiver crawled on her skin, the last echoes of a memory imprinted into the rock. Ghostly heat of a dying star, simmering sapphire of ocean depths, the musky scent of wet earth, and it was all spinning backwards. . .

"Bella," someone breathed behind her.

Hermione wrenched her hand away with a soundless gasp. Black dots danced before her eyes, the ground tilted toward her face. . . She fell on her knees, her legs like two strings of melted rubber. *Don't pass out now, not now, come on, please please please.* . . It took a moment for the sensation that she was turning on the spot to fade, for her vision to clear. Breathing heavily, she looked up, and had to bite back another gasp.

What first caught her eyes were nerveless, delicate fingers holding a bone-white mask. Narcissa Malfoy was kneeling on the ground, complexion made pale with worry. Her hand which was not holding the mask was busy tracing the features of the woman lying next to her. Heavily-hooded eyes, livid skin, a strong jaw, the remnants of a past beauty, tarnished by years of imprisonment. Even in unconsciousness, there was something that reeked of madness in Bellatrix Lestrange. Her lush black hair fanned out behind her sleep-slack face like a pool of the darkest ink. She looked like a slumbering panther; wild and dangerous, bloodthirsty for all her languid slouch.

The second thing Hermione became aware of – which should really have been the first, had she had half the survival instinct she needed – were unfathomable eyes, narrowed with suspicion, boring into her. Snape was looking at her, the intensity of his staring far too focused for comfort. Hermione tasted blood from her bitten lips, the coppery tang nauseating in its familiarity. The ground was tilting again, but she was rooted on the spot, limbs seemingly sinking into the mud, dragged down by the lead in her muscles. With an odd sort of empty detachment, she waited for Snape to see her. The man was an accomplished Legillimens, surely he could hear the desperate scream of her thoughts, feel the flicker of her exhausted magic. . .

"I need your help, Severus," Narcissa Malfoy said without looking away from her sister's form. "She's very weak."

Dark eyes darted away. Hermione sagged in relief.

"Something is wrong with her magic," Narcissa murmured. "I can hardly feel her." She glanced at Snape as the man crouched beside her. "Her body is barely holding up."

Snape's wand appeared in his hand, and the Potion Master began casting spells under his breath. A few feet away, Lucius was ordering Death Eaters to get their unconscious partners ready to Disapparate. The man kept glancing at Stonehenge, an uneasy glint in his mercurial eyes. Hermione could relate to the sentiment. Although she did not understand the meaning behind those runes, she could *feel* it. The air tasted like ashes and rain and lighting and everything felt alive, vibrant with significance. There was something *important* humming around them. Something sacred.

She was shaking again. She did not know what to do. Nothing made sense, but it felt as though everything *did.* She felt so very out of her depths she feared she might just drown right here.

And somewhere, somehow, she knew. She had felt the penny drop, the path lock around her feet in that instant between two breaths, between two places. Her body was being stretched and crushed
by the pull of her own magic and she had known. Something had changed, and there was no turning back, not any more.

The sound of a long, shuddering breath entering damaged lungs brought her back to the moment present as surely as if she had been slapped across the face. There was a second when all activity stopped, Death Eaters freezing where they stood, eyes riveted on the twitching form of Bellatrix Lestrange, waiting in bated breath to see whether the witch was regaining her bearings.

"Bella?" Narcissa whispered. "Can you hear me, sister?"

Another shuddering breath, heavy eyelids fluttered, and Lestrange was gasping her way back into consciousness. "Cissy?" she rasped, her hands clawing the ground around her, looking for a non-existing anchor.

Narcissa clasped one of her sister's hands between hers, whispering a string of appeasing words.

"We have to get them all to St Mungo's," Snape told the Malfoys in an undertone. "They need professional care." A delicate pause. "Urgently."

Lucius gave Rowle a pointed stare. Hermione ignored the ensuing snap of orders in favour of focusing on the Black sisters. Lestrange was attempting to prop herself up on her elbows, arms trembling from the effort.

"What happened, Bella?" Narcissa whispered. "What did this to you?"

Lestrange blinked up at the other woman, her gaze bleary and feverish. "Where's the brat?" she muttered, shaking her head. The hand that wasn't shackled in Narcissa's hold began patting down her pockets to search for her wand. "Where's the filthy half-blood?"

The Malfoys exchanged a glance. Hermione's breath quickened.

"Was Potter here, Bellatrix?" Malfoy asked, cold and demanding. "What happened to Stonehenge?"

"St – " Lestrange's eyes drifted to the center of the stone circles, confusion etched on every line of her face. A violent shiver shook her.

"Bella?" Narcissa asked, a note of worry in her tone.

"Potter," the other witch muttered, crazed eyes fixated on the lonely boulder at the center of Stonehenge. "He was here. The mudblood escaped but he was here." She shook her head. "He was here," she repeated, the bleakness of her voice sounding nothing like herself.

"Are you certain?" Snape snapped harshly. The man seemed seconds away from slapping Lestrange to get answers. "Where did he go, Bellatrix?"

"He was right here," the woman merely repeated, still fixated on the boulder in the midst of Stonehenge's runes. A snarl curled her lips. "Where is he?" she growled. "Where – let me up, Cissy. We had him. I want to present the Dark Lord with his head. . . WHERE IS HE?!"

Narcissa gripped her sister's shoulder to keep her from rising to her feet. "Did Potter do this, Bella?" she asked calmly, gesturing at Stonehenge. "Did he do this to you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," her husband snorted. "The boy doesn't have the power to conjure such magic."
Narcissa looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Yet he escaped once again, my love," she told Malfoy sweetly. "And he stood up to the Dark Lord many times. I recall that you yourself thought he may—"


"He disappeared," Lestrange muttered suddenly. "It all stopped after he disappeared."

"What stopped?" Malfoy asked.

A nervous twitch agitated the corner of Bellatrix's mouth. "The burn."

"Sir!" someone yelled in the distance. "They're waking up, sir!"

"We have to report back to the Dark Lord, Severus," Malfoy stated, giving the Death Eater who had spoken a distracted nod. "He'll want to know what happened here. If Potter really did disappear—" His voice trailed off. The implications were too heavy to be put into words. "He'll want to interrogate you, Bellatrix."

Everything happened at once. There was no real transition from the moment Hermione was listening to Malfoy speak in his precise, aristocratic tones, to the moment she was fighting for her life.

The world was clouding at the edges when she tried to rise to her feet. She was past the point of fear, past the point of sorrow. She should have left minutes ago, she knew that, but her thoughts were frayed, unravelled strings drifting away on a capricious sea, the only semblance of coherence being the soul-crushing ache that pulsed through her to the rhythm of the Locket's litany. He's gone, gone gone gone, taken away where you can't follow, your fault, all your fault, what will you do now, poor little Hermione, he's gone gone gone...

The Cloak slipped from her shoulders. A ferocious spark lit up in Lestrange's eyes. Glowing wands. Pressure against her skin, the feel of wards breaking. Blurs of movement. A sound like gunfire echoing all around. Red hair, familiar faces appearing like colourful ghosts. Screams and lights. She did not remember moving or diving for cover. Death rushed at her in the wake of sparkling emerald.

Strong arms closed around her waist, and darkness swallowed her whole.

She could not breathe, could not see, could not hear. Iron bands constricted her chest, her head. She was pressed into a tight rubber tube, unable to move, to do anything. Then she was spat back, dizzy, panting, with nothing but the arms supporting her to keep her on her feet. The man holding was shaking, she realised. Great tremors were wrecking his frame, merging with hers. He was not holding her so much as holding onto her.

"You're alright," a voice breathed near her ear, a soft whisper full of relief.

She knew that voice.

"Let me go," she ordered, the cold steadiness of her tone a poor reflection of the scream she felt was building in her throat. "Let me down right now."

The arms unwound from her waist. Cold air went to replace comforting body warmth.

Hermione shifted her weight to her left foot. Then, spinning on her supporting leg to gain momentum, she whirled around, pulled up her right fist, and punched Ron across the jaw with
everything she had.

The boy stumbled away with a surprised grunt, eyes wide with shock and hurt but not pain, and because he deserved it and she was so angry she could hardly see straight, Hermione followed him and punched him again. It wasn't fair, it wasn't rational, but she no longer cared about justice, about logic, all of the tiredness and despair and hopelessness of the last few months condensing into pure, burning fury that she clung onto for fear of collapsing.

"You," she growled, fist raised behind her head. "How dare you –"

"Mione –"

"Shut up!" She hit him on the chest, heedless of the pain that flared in her knuckles. "You left, Ronald, you utter – How could you?!"

Ron was looking at her with an air of resigned desolation, anguish clear on his face. She wanted to wipe off that expression with her fists. He had no right to feel sorry. He had abandoned her. He had abandoned Harry. If he hadn't left – If you hadn't left, Granger, whispered a poisonous voice in the back of her head – perhaps things would have gone differently. He was too late – you were too late – and he thought he could just saunter back into her life as if nothing had happened, as if nothing was wrong.

"I'm sorry, 'Mione, I'm so sorry –"

"Do you have any idea what it was like?" she whispered, unable to keep a tremble out of her voice. There was something pleading in Ron's eyes she could not bear to see. For days she had hoped he would come back after storming off on them. Days and days which had turned into weeks, into months of barely sleeping and surviving on stolen food. Months spent looking over her shoulder, wondering how long she had before being caught, tortured and executed. It had been hellish, and Ron had not been there to make Harry laugh with his sardonic jokes, to make her smile with his surprising attentions. He had not been there to plan their next move when they most needed his strategical genius. And now.

She hit him one more time, just because she could, vaguely wondering whether she should start looking for her wand and spare her hand the damage. However, a delicate cough startled her before she could start searching her pockets.

"Far be it from us to interrupt this lovely reunion –"

" – and stop your beating up our little brother –"

" – very far indeed, Fred –"

" – But we seem to have a slight problem, dear Hermione –"

" – Where on Earth is Harry?"

Dumbfounded, Hermione blinked around. The entire Weasley clan was standing around her in a large circle, along with a few members of the Order of the Phoenix. Remus Lupin was here, as well as Tonks, whose face was turning back into her preferred features, and Fleur Delacour, whose silvery-blond hair was sprouting over the bland, nondescript cut it had been hiding under. The Burrow stood in the background, glorious in its own homey, crooked way.

"Huh," Hermione enunciated.
"Did anyone see Harry back at Stonehenge?" Lupin asked, looking around the gnome-infested garden as though hoping the Boy Who Lived might spring from behind the frozen Flutterby bushes.

"I thought you had gotten hold of him, Remus," Mr Weasley replied with a worried frown. "Anyone – ?"

But each of his children shook their head.

"And we're all here," Bill added, rubbing a bruise forming on his forehead. "I think we should go back. We can't let You-Know-Who have him."

"N-no," Hermione whispered.

"We've got to hurry," said Ron, who seemed ready to turn on the spot and disappear.
Hermione grabbed his wrist to keep him from leaving. "No," she repeated, louder. All eyes turned to her. Her throat constricted painfully.

"Hermione?" Lupin called quietly. "Where is he?"

"Gone," she whispered in an exhale, the word leaving her mouth like a dead, pitiful thing no one could quite stand to look at. She swayed on her feet. Harry was gone. He was gone, and the realisation crystallizing in her mind would have brought her to her knees, had Ron not stepped close to loop an arm around her waist.

His face had lost all its colours, and there was horror growing in his eyes. "G-gone," he repeated shakily. "What – Merlin, please tell me he's not – "

Hermione shook her head. She allowed Ron to carry more of her weight as she felt she started to lost her grip onto consciousness, her senses shutting down one after another. "Not dead," she mumbled. "Can't be – part of me would've died too. Stonehenge took him 'way."

The next thing she knew, she was lying down a wide, comfortable couch. A quilt had been laid onto her, warmth seeping into her limbs in a way she had forgotten was possible. Although the mother of all headaches was pounding behind her eyes, there was no more pain emanating from her wounded arm. Aside from a few cuts and bruises, she had received no other injury from the chase to Stonehenge. Harry – that bloody, selfless idiot – had shielded her the whole way.

"Hey. Back with us?"

Loose-limbed with sleep, Hermione had some difficulties manoeuvring herself to find the owner of the melodious voice. Ginny, a leg thrown over the arm of her recliner, was watching her patiently, fiery hair shining like glowing embers in the light of the nearby hearth.

"Hey," Hermione murmured, glancing around. She was in the Burrow's living room. The low-ceilinged, cluttered room was silent save for the regular ticking of an ancient clock, the crackles of a burning log, the whispers of the wind against the sturdy walls. Night had fallen outside. Shafts of clear moonlight pooled on the rug-covered floor, trickling from the stained-glass windows. The only other source of light were the dancing flames of the fireplace, trembling across the floorboards. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Hermione sat up slowly, noting the grogginess of her muscles with an annoyed frown.

"Remus said you might feel drowsy waking up," Ginny said as if she had heard her thoughts. "Apparently, that's what happens when you keep yourself going on Invigoration Draughts alone."
Hermione propped herself against the couch, legs drawn up to her chest. Someone had taken the time to take off her shoes and to rid her of her blood-stained, muddy clothes. She was left wearing a loose, white T-shirt and a pair of sweet-pants she suspected belonged to the girl facing her.

"How long was I out?" she asked quietly. Her stomach twisted in a series of complex knots as she waited for the answer. Dread was back in her blood, humming to dissipate the shroud of sleepiness.

"Just about four hours," Ginny assured her. "Mum patched you up the best she could, and seeing the state you were in..." The girl gave a light shrug. "They thought it best to let you sleep."

The youngest Weasley looked tired, Hermione noted with a concerned frown. Her cheekbones were jutting out on the tense lines of her face, their sharp slant aggravating the bruise-like bags under her eyes. Her lips were pursed with worry, and there was a stiffness in the set of her shoulders that gave the impression she was ready to pounce at any suspicious sound.

Hermione cleared her throat, breaking the comfortable silence. "Did I miss anything?" she asked.

"Wouldn't know if you had, would I?" Ginny said with a scowl. "They locked themselves up hours ago." She cocked her head towards the kitchen. "Under privacy wards," she added as an afterthought. "I imagine they'll want to talk to you soon, though."

*With good reason,* Hermione thought grimly. She remembered muttering something about Harry not being dead – which he very much was, damn it, and she was going to find him no matter what it took – and she could only hope they had understood her ramblings.

"Hermione – " She looked up to see Ginny run a nervous hand through her long hair. "Tell me he's alright?" An apprehensive plea more than an actual question.

Hermione wished she could answer in the affirmative and not be lying. As it was, every time she closed her eyes, she saw blood gushing out of a torn back. She saw bruises on protruding ribs, burnt flesh on shaking arms. She saw an emaciated face, the too-sharp outline of high cheekbones, the grim downturn of snarling lips. She saw green eyes gleaming with ferocious determination, feral and implacable.

Ginny put her head in her hands at the prolonged silence, more damning than anything Hermione could have said. And for that reason alone, because he was the greatest moron to have ever lived, incapable to see that there were people willing to die for him as much as he was willing to die for them, because he was selfish enough to sacrifice himself as though it wasn't going to hurt worse than flesh wounds, Hermione was going to kill Harry with her bare hands the moment she found him back.

"Why does it *always* have to be him?" Ginny whispered, low and rough with anger and helplessness.

Hermione wished she could answer that, too. Wordlessly, she shuffled on the couch to reach for Ginny's hand. She held it for a brief moment, knowing that Ginny, strong and independent and raised with six brothers, would see anything more as a mark of pity. "Do you still love him?" she asked, because there was a frayed edge to Ginny's voice and she couldn't quite tell whether it came from a healing scar or from an open wound.

The girl huffed a broken laugh, a wry, bitter sound that felt wrong, coming from someone so young. "Of course I still love him," she said with a joyless smile. "I've loved him for the better part of my life, Hermione." She shook her head. "The idea of him, rather."
"Ginny – "

"Don't," Ginny told her. "We've talked about this before. You know it's true." She had always been bluntly honest with herself. "Last year's taught me to love him. The real him." She drew in a sharp, trembling breath when Hermione prompted her to finish her thought. "And I can't. I just can't – You know how he's never really here?"

"Yes," said Hermione, implicitly understanding what she meant. Because the one thing more amazing that an entire nation putting their hopes on a seventeen-year-old to win a quickly-escalating war was said seventeen-year-old endorsing the responsibility without breaking from the weight of it, she understood all too well. Harry joked and laughed and managed the antics of people their age rather admirably, but none of the masks he adorned held up to close scrutiny. Hermione had known him since he was an eleven-year-old boy with wary eyes too big for his face and clothes better suited for someone twice his size, and she was anything but stupid. Harry may have convinced himself he was like the rest of them, but she had seen him, bloody and victorious, after he killed the Basilisk. She had seen him protecting Sirius from Dementors, facing down Voldemort over and over again. There was a strength in him, a gravity that set him apart, no matter how hard he fought to hide it, how dearly he wished to belong. Hermione had long since accepted the risks that came with loving him like the brother she never had. But to have his heart... That was another matter entirely. She imagined it would be rather like holding onto fire. Bright and burning and dangerous and impossible with human hands. "I know," she murmured, aching for Ginny, for Harry, for the unfairness of it all. "I'm sorry."

Ginny shrugged. "It's alright. I'll be alright. I was stupid for not seeing it sooner, anyway. He deserves better than someone who's not strong enough to stand beside him no matter what shit comes knocking. I deserve better than someone who can't love me fully because they're busy bleeding for everyone else."

Hermione smiled. "Yeah, you do," she approved.

Silence fell between the two of them, light and peaceful.

"Tell me about Hogwarts," Hermione asked after a while, when it became clear that the kitchen's door was not going to open anytime soon. "You still on Winter Break?"

Ginny nodded, tearing her eyes away from the fireplace. "Term starts back tomorrow," she said. "I'm not looking forward to it." She sighed, shifting to better look at Hermione. "You know Snape's Headmaster, right?"

"Yeah, I've heard."

"Well, you're lucky you dropped out, 'Mione. Hogwarts has changed. Snape's changed it. We have a Muggle Studies teacher who says Muggle enslavement is the natural order of things, and a Defence professor who wants us to Crucio First years."

Hermione felt her eyes widen. "Merlin," she breathed, horrified. She had known Hogwarts would suffer from Snape's reign, of course, but to the point of condoning torture? Hogwarts was supposed to be a safe place, a haven where young witches and wizards could learn to control their gifts, somewhere they could feel safe among their own people. The old school was a symbol of strength and protection for the entire Wizarding community, stretching far beyond the borders of Great Britain. It had been the first spark of hope for their persecuted kin. An entire world had been shaped in its shadows. The idea of Voldemort stomping on that legend with pureblood ideology..."

Ginny chuckled darkly. "Yeah," she said, seeing the look on Hermione's face. "I feel the same.
Believe it or not, even the Slytherins don't seem so happy with the change of administration." A pause. "Not that the bastards say anything about it, mind you."

"Do you?" asked Hermione. "Say anything about it?"

"We do what we can," Ginny replied. "We've reformed the DA, Neville, Luna and I. It's – not easy."

Hermione bit her lips, musing over Ginny's words. "Why don't you stay home, then?" she wondered. "Why does anyone go back? Parents know what goes on there, don't they?"

"We don't have a choice, Hermione," Ginny explained. "Sending your kids to Hogwarts is mandatory now. To do otherwise is considered a treason to the well-being of Wizard-kind, according to the Ministry. Good people got sent to Azkaban because they refused to obey."

"He is taking hostage," Hermione murmured thickly. Which meant that there was going to be a battle over the control of the ancient castle in the near future. Hogwarts would have to be taken back before the resistance could move against the Dark Lord. With their community's most powerful children at his mercy, Voldemort had effectively ensured the docility of each and every Wizard. That was... Worrisome, to say the least.

Ginny hummed approvingly. "It's not all bad, though," she said. "McGonagall and the others do what they can to help. And we get to give Snape hell." She smiled with an air of dark satisfaction. "Totally worth getting detentions."

"You have to be careful –"

"– Don't you start, Ronald! I'm not letting my sons risk their lives on a wild goose chase, Remus!"

"Well, what do you suggest, then?! This is war, Molly, we don't have a choice!"

The door leading to the Weasley's kitchen banged open. Light and voices came pouring into the living room, startling both Ginny and Hermione. Ron stalked out, looking tense and furious. He froze at the sight of Hermione.

"Oh." He blinked, and promptly turned back where he came from. "She's awake," he said over the sound of the degenerating shouting match between the kitchen's occupants.

Lupin appeared over his shoulder. "Hermione," he said, a touch of relief in his voice. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better," Hermione lied. "Thank you, Professor."

Bracing herself, she did not wait for an invitation to walk into the kitchen, Ginny following after her. The Weasleys and their guests were crammed around the large wooden table that occupied most of the room. Several chairs had been added to give everyone a seat. The air was warm with body heat, stifling with sombre faces. Great gatherings were usually a joyous affair in the Weasley household. Not this time.

Hermione sat in Ron's chair, which the boy had hurried to pull up for her.

"Ginny," said Mrs Weasley when she saw her youngest ostensibly drag a chair from the living room to sit beside her wounded friend.

Ginny glared at her. "Harry is my friend, Mum," she said simply. "This concerns me as much as
any of you. Hermione will tell me everything anyway, even if you shut me out."

She definitely would.

"Let her stay, Molly," Mr Weasley told his wife, pressing a hand on the small of her back. "She's old enough. You know she's involved, no matter how much we wish she weren't."

Thankfully, Lupin chose that moment to close the door, perhaps with a little more strength that was strictly necessary. "All right, then," the former Professor said, striding to his own seat without, miraculously, bumping into anyone. He sat. "Why don't you start at the beginning, Hermione?"

The beginning? Hermione was not quite sure where the beginning was, exactly. When everything had started to feel wrong. Godric's Hollow, perhaps? The Dark Lord had first caught their scent on that Christmas Eve night, after all. Visiting Bathilda Bagshot had been a terrible idea. They had gained no Sword that day: Only bruised ribs, along with a pack of determined Death Eaters. Hermione only remembered what had happened at the village in bits and pieces. The clear starlight over their heads, cold and magnificent. The icy bite of the December air, pierced by strident screams. The scarlet sprays on the immaculate snow that glowed with the flames of the burning houses. Harry and Nagini, man and snake so intertwined they seemed like a unique entity. Ruby-red eyes glowing into the night; the heady, pernicious slide of Black magic against her skin. Hermione knew she had gotten hold of Harry, at some point. He had been writhing with agony on the frozen ground. She had escaped to the sound of Voldemort's cry of rage.

"Shit," Ginny whispered, strangled horror in her voice.

Hermione blinked at her, surprised, then realised her throat was sore from talking. Well. Four hours of unconsciousness had not been enough to recuperate from last week, she supposed. Someone – Ron, probably, but she was doing her very best not to look at the boy at the moment; she couldn't deal with that particular mix of pain, anger and relief right now – pushed a steaming cup of tea in front of her, and her hands wrapped around the warm china just to have something to hold onto. She rather felt as though she was losing her footing, her mind oddly detached from the outside world. The anchor was a welcomed one.

She narrated what was left to say in the same state of detachment, editing her story to avoid mentioning Horcruxes. She told them about the track. About not being able to stay in one place more than a couple of hours because Voldemort's men found them no matter how well they hid. She told them about all the near-misses, which became more and more frequent as time passed. She told them about Stonehenge. About the runes, about leaving and coming back.

"How did you find me?" she asked after she was done, because the heaviness of the silence was sucking the air from her lungs and no one else seemed willing to break it.

"I was stationed at St Mungo's," said Tonks. Her hair had taken a sad, grey tint, far from her preferred gum pink. "We already knew something was happening – Death Eaters have been in a right state since your visit at the Hollow – so we were prepared to act anytime. When Rowle and his lads burst in the hospital, yelling about needing help at Stonehenge 'cause Undesirable no. One had struck again. . ." The woman shrugged, eyes sliding to Remus, who was sitting at the other end of the table. "Well, we were ready," she finished.

"I'm glad you were," said Hermione sincerely.

"We need a plan," said Lupin, resting his forearms on the table, cord-like muscles pulled taut under scarred skin. "We have to find out what Stonehenge did to Harry, exactly."
"There are loads of old legends around this place," said Bill, the Curse Breaker talking for the first time. He put a strand of red hair, an escapee from his ponytail, behind his ear. "It's been subject of speculations for ages, among Curse-Breakers. Some say Merlin himself built it."

"Stonehenge was built thousands of years before our age," Hermione pointed out. She had visited the site with her parents, as a child. She remembered some details, dropped by their guide, but she had been too fascinated by the enormous stones to care much about the man's ramblings, at the time. "Far before the time of Merlin."

Bill shook his head. "The first stones were laid out long before him, yes. But it took centuries to complete. And besides, he could have enchanted the stones without laying them out himself."

"Were there ever any proof of that?" asked Mr Weasley.

His son grimaced. "No, actually. We've been sending people to poke and prod every other decade, but no one's ever figured why anyone would bother dragging tens of tons of rock through hundreds of miles, if not for the hell of it."

"Well," Lupin muttered. "We might just discover that mystery ourselves."

Thoughtful silence greeted his words.

Hermione took the occasion to look around the table, observing familiar faces. She had not realised just how much she had missed familiar and friendly, these last few months, even though what she found now was different from what she had left then. It was fine. She had changed, too.

Drawn, tired faces, haunted eyes, nervous hands. Although Fleur was as beautiful as ever and the twins were making a good show of appearing carefree as usual, the war had taken its toll on them all. There were new age-line at the corners of Mrs Weasley's mouth, near Mr Weasley's thinning hairline. Both looked stressed and worried, no doubt over the safety of their children.

Tonks seemed to have aged as well, even though the witch could not be older than twenty-five. With the droop in her shoulders, she looked to be carrying a weight too great for her. Hermione did not remember seeing her this sad since before she and Lupin had gotten together. Which might actually explain the werewolf's seat: There were several Weasleys between him and Tonks. Hermione wondered whether they had broken up for good. Their relationship had always been a tentative one. As far as Hermione could tell, Lupin had always kept Tonks at arm's length. For fear of hurting her with his Lycanthropy, because he thought she was too young for him – whatever the reason, Tonks had probably seen that forceful distance as a lack of trust in her ability to take care of herself. Hermione knew she would have, had their situations been reversed.

Lupin himself was perhaps the most worrying of the lot. He was wearing a shabby set of clothes that hung limply on his lean frame. He was all bones and sinew, which gave him the appearance of an underfed greyhound. There were fresh scars gleaming on his sickly-pale skin, no doubt the result of the last full moon. His face was a study of sharp angles; stubble over hollowed cheeks and tawny grey-flecked hair over protruding eye-sockets. There was a focused tension in the way he held himself, a feral glint in his amber eyes. . . More than ever, Hermione thought she could see the wolf that lurked under the human form.

"Hermione?" She startled to find Lupin looking back, a gentle smile curling his lips. "Do you think you could reproduce the arrays you saw at Stonehenge?"

She nodded after a moment of hesitation, closing her eyes to better picture the scorched ground she had taken the time to memorize. "I think I can," she confirmed. "If you could just give me some
A scroll and a quill were pushed in front of her.

She got to work.

\{ \ldots \}"

"Can I talk to you?"

Ron sounded shy and hesitant, nothing like Hermione was used to hearing from the young man. She almost refused. Because her eyes hurt from hours spent drawing arrays that made no sense to her and she had not slept in weeks. Because it felt like this day was dragging on and on and several lifetimes had gone by since Harry had yelled for her to run. Because thinking about Ron still hurt like a knife between her ribs.

But turning on her heels to hide in Ginny's room would be cowardice, and avoiding Ron now would only put off the inevitable.

She gave a terse nod.

Relief flooded Ron's eyes. "My room?" he suggested.

They climbed up the uneven stairs leading to the top floor of the Burrow, Ron's shoulders hunching more and more as the ceiling lowered. The rooms they walked past were all empty as the others were still in the kitchen, pouring over Hermione's notes and discussing the best course of action. Mrs Weasley had ushered Hermione out of the room when she had seen the young woman sway on her chair in the middle of the meeting. Hermione's protest had been half-hearted at best. It had felt freeing, to have someone take over and say: "It's all right, now. We'll take it from here. You've done enough, go get some rest." Hermione had been forced into adulthood months ago, when she had chosen to wipe her parents' memories to keep them safe from Voldemort. She had had to learn to look after herself in the most trying way possible, thrust at the heart of a raging war. For all her maturity, she felt like a child, at times. So even though she knew reality would soon come crashing down, she allowed the illusion of being safe and mothered with no small amount of relief.

Ron pushed open a door labelled 'Ronald's Room'. Hermione followed him into the small, welcoming space, with its burnt-orange walls, its sloping ceiling, its clustered furniture.

"Er – would you like to sit?"

She flopped down unceremoniously, the floor feeling like one big mattress to her aching legs. Ron sank in front of her, back resting against the foot of his bed. For the first time since he had rescued her, Hermione allowed herself to look at him. A couple of months had gone by since she had last seen him. He was no longer the gangly teenager she remembered. His shoulders had broadened, muscles filling out all the right places, which gave his poise an air of strength and confidence only found in grown men. The freckles dusted on his long nose stood out against his pale skin. There were bruises under his eyes. It hurt, just a little, to see the sky-blue orbs obscured by doubt and misery.

"You've cut your hair," Hermione blurted out.

"Ah – yes," Ron replied, looking a bit baffled. Hermione could hardly blame him. She was a bit startled herself. "It kept falling into my eyes, so I asked Fleur to cut it for me."
"Fleur?" Hermione repeated.

"Uh." Ron swallowed. "I went to her and Bill's cottage after I – after I left."

" – I see."

"I mean, I didn't stay long," Ron hurried to say. Hermione bit back a smile at his embarrassment. He had always been obvious with his emotions. "I wanted to come back as soon as I left," he added earnestly. "But I couldn't find you. Couldn't bear to go home, either. So I went to Bill's. I knew he wouldn't give me too much trouble for what I'd done. I mean, he didn't approve, obviously, but he didn't give me hell, either."

"Yeah, I bet it must've been hard for you too, Ron," Hermione said without bothering to hide the bitterness of her tone.

The boy flinched as though she had hit him. "I looked for you," he protested. "I looked and looked. I heard you call my name, one night." Hermione raised a sceptical eyebrow. He hurried to elaborate. "The sound came from Dumbledore's Deluminator. I clicked it, and this ball of light went right into my chest." He pressed a hand against his heart. "I packed my things and I Apparated to the Forest of Dean. I knew you two were around, but I couldn't find you. Figured you were warded, so I waited, but you never showed up. Then the Deluminator took me to another location, and to another one. . . Snatchers almost caught me, too. I led them away from you a couple of times."

Hermione didn't quite know what to answer to that. Near-misses again. She did not want to consider how differently this disaster might have played out, had Ron found them before they were attacked.

The young man cleared his throat. "So, did you find anything, with the Horcruxes?" he asked with forced casualness.

Hermione dug Slytherin's Locket from under her jumper. Gold and green glittered in the light of the small ball of fire floating above their heads. "Not really," she said laconically. "With Vold – "

"Don't say his name!" Ron hissed.

Hermione threw him an annoyed glare. "Come off – "

"It's cursed," Ron interrupted. "You-Know-Who figured only Dumbledore's supporters said his name, so he cursed it. Kingsley nearly got caught because of it."

"Oh," Hermione murmured weakly. She cleared her throat. "Thanks."

Ron waved a dismissive hand. "I hoped you'd find the Sword," he said, throwing the Horcrux a dark glare. "That thing – I could hear whispering to me, back when – you know. . ."

"I can hear it as well," Hermione admitted. She tugged the Locket back under her shirt, shivering when the cold metal settled against her skin. It never seemed to warm up, no matter how long it spent sucking body warmth.

She heard Ron take a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered, quiet and guilt-ridden.

"I know. I'm sorry too."
Ron lowered his head. "I should never have left," he murmured. "I should – "

"Ron." The boy looked up, a world of anguish in his eyes. "You're not the only one who left," she said, because bravery was also assuming your mistakes without seeking to shift the blame to someone else. "I failed him, too."

There was a second of incredulous silence. "You didn't fail him, 'Mione," the young man exclaimed, sounding vaguely scandalized. "You would've gotten caught if you'd stayed. But me? I left because I got tired. Maybe if I'd stayed – "

"Don't," Hermione cut firmly. "You can't – neither of us can dwell on 'what ifs'. It wasn't your fault."

"My best friend's missing, Hermione," Ron growled. "And I wasn't there to fight because I was a jealous prick. I've been looking for you for weeks, and I couldn't be arsed to find you before. . ." His voice broke. "Don't ask me not to blame myself for this. I can't."

Hermione felt her heart break at the raw pain in Ron's voice. She could feel the same self-loathing gnaw at her stomach, but to see Ron – funny, fierce, steadfast Ron – shake with silent sobs. . . It felt wrong. Even more that anything she had seen today.

Wordlessly, she moved to close the distance separating the two of them. She pulled Ron into her arms, and he pulled back just as desperately, arms curling around her waist, head in the crook of her neck. They clung to each other like two drifters in the middle of the sea. Neither moved for a long time.

"We'll find him, Ron" Hermione promised, pulling back to press their forehead together.

"We'll find him."
There were maps everywhere. The library was covered in them, wedged in place under books, pinned to the ceiling like cobwebs, stacked on desks and chairs and canvassing the floor in thick sheets of parchment. They made the whole room groan and crackle with the barest whisper of wind, made it flutter like the walls were alive, the stomach of some great beast seen from the inside.

Cadmus brushed his fingers on the dry, wrinkled paper as he walked between the familiar aisles. Crushed charcoal and pigments clung to his skin. Even his hands looked like maps now, smeared with forest-green, smudged river-blue.

Sunlight streamed in from windows hidden behind the rows of books, thin rays slanting through the dusty confines in colourful prisms. People were laughing outside, the chime of their voices bouncing against the wooden panels. "Look," they said, so loud they might as well be in the room with Cadmus. "The Peverell boy's locked up with his maps again. Poor kid. Mother won't let him out with the other boys."

It was a little weird, Cadmus mused, pressing his fingers against harsh peaks of mountaintops. Everyone kept telling him it was, anyway. Shouldn't spend all his time alone with mouldy old books. Should be out there with everyone, learning to fight and ride and hunt like a proper boy.

But, well. His mum had insisted. And in any case, Cadmus didn't actually want to be with the other boys. The other boys were mean and stupid. All they knew was how to whack people round the head with pointy sticks. They made fun of him 'cos got sick all the time. Wasn't his fault, though. Some people weren't meant to get all muddy everyday. They caught the sniffles. Some people didn't like to be outside, where it was cold and wet and there were bugs. Just wasn't s'posed to be. Cadmus didn't care what everyone else said, they were wrong.

Everyone else bothered him only when they said stuff about his mum. Strange woman, they said. Made her son study maps like that. Disruptive influence on the Good People of Tadfield. Kept slinking off to the forest, as well. Husband let her get away with indi – in-discent – with bad attitude. Wasn't right, they said. Wife wasn't seen for hours and hours, came back with all sorts of useless roots and stones and flowers, which was just fishy.

Cadmus didn't know what was so fishy about it. His mum never brought him any fish. Only tadpoles which sometimes grew into frogs. He liked frogs. He bet people were just jealous of all his great frogs. He fed them with his mum and she hummed nonsensical songs to them, to make 'em better. Sometimes, she even danced too, twirling Cadmus in her arms for no reason at all, even when there was never any music.

His mum was awesome. She smelled of grass and flowers when she hugged him to her chest. The hum of her voice lulled him to sleep. She made the rocks and sticks do funny things, like fly. He bet most mums couldn't make rocks fly.

Still, the maps were a bit annoying. They were so dull and hurt his eyes and Cadmus didn't understand why he was the only one studying them. Antioch didn't have to. He was gonna be a knight some day. Knight didn't hunch over boring maps. Ignatus was too young anyway, he couldn't even read proper. Cadmus was bored and alone with his old tutor all day. His old tutor's
skin was so wrinkled Cadmus couldn't see his nose from the rest of it. Cadmus didn't like him. He had a voice that droned on and on and on and never stopped. Like a ticking clock. Sometimes, it was so flat Cadmus forgot he was talking at all. Also, he stank like old people and fell asleep a lot.

His mum smiled when he begged to study something else. Anything else, even Latin, though Cadmus hated Latin. She smiled and Cadmus stopped asking, because her smile was all wrong, hollow like the dead oak by the butcher's shop, all mouth but no eyes. That smile made Cadmus's belly squirm every time.

Disgruntled, Cadmus paused his meanderings, tapping his chin in consideration. The old man wasn't there and neither was his mum and there were way too many maps in here. He didn't know where they'd all come from, but they just loomed over him, like they wanted to drop on him and not let him breathe. He could sneak out, though. Just this once. Just for a moment.

Decision made, he nudged aside the maps clogging the door and sidled out the corridor. Parchment fluttered behind him, poking his back like it didn't want to let him go. Shivering, he let the door slam shut, hurrying off.

He had always hated their home. It was a cold, drafty stack of grey stones that were always moist, which was disgusting. The whole thing was held together by wood joists that squeaked at night. It was grim and dreary, full of ghosts. Even worst today, specially since no one was there –

The thought jarred, had Cadmus frown at himself in consternation. Why was no one here today? He couldn't remember seeing anyone, which was weird, because the house was never empty. People were always dashing about, working and talking and knocking into Cadmus 'cos they were so busy they never saw him scuttling round.

Where was everyone? Why had they left Cadmus all alone? He didn't like being alone.

Everything was very quiet. The crackle of parchment had gone. The voices outside weren't talking. All that was left was thick, oppressive nothingness. Cadmus was starting to choke on it, squirmy ache growing in his stomach.

"Mum?" he called, hopeful. His mum was always there when he needed her. When he was scared or had a nightmare. He was very scared now.

"Mum?"

Except – oh. His mum wouldn't answer, would she? Cadmus had forgotten something.

His mum was gone, wasn't she?

Head spinning a little, Cadmus blinked down his colour-stained hands. He felt like he was about to be sick. He blinked again, and to his horror, the blue-green stains on his hands swirled, darkened. Something warm and slick dripped down his fingers. It was red.

He saw movement from the shadows lingering at his feet, just before a hand emerged from the sticky blackness. It grabbed his ankle, pulled him down before he could react. Cadmus hit the ground hard, heart thudding in his chest, a scream caught somewhere in his throat, torn from his lungs with the shock of the impact. He tried to kick but the hand was too strong, clutched tight and painful.

"Oh no oh no lemme go please – " He stifled a sob, feeling his eyes well up. He tried to kick again but couldn't, hands feeling for a loose floorboard he could heave with but finding none. He twisted around, desperate to escape, he –
He came face to face with his mother.

Her eyes were huge, her lips were blue, her skin was very, very white.

Cadmus froze, struck, quivering with panic, mute with it. His heart was pounding very loud in his ears, but when his mum opened her mouth to speak, he heard her anyway.

"North," she rasped. Her voice wasn't soft any more. It was croaky and scratchy and she winced in pain with each word. "Go North, Cadmus." There were purple-black bruises around her neck, swelling livid skin like a necklace.

"P-promise, Cadmus. Promise me."

He was gasping and trembling and his hands were red and dripping blood.

"Go with your brothers. Say you'll g-go. Say it!"

"I'll go, promise mum, I promise – "

He could go North. He knew the way.

His hands were wet, sticky with shocking, vivid red. Everything was spinning and spinning and his father was here, appearing out of nowhere, without warning. He looked mad, wild-eyed, yellow foam spitting from his mouth. His face was was twisted up in a sickening rictus, ugly in a way that had nothing to do with looks.

"Witch!" he boomed over the ringing in Cadmus's ears. "You filthy witch, what have you done to my sons?!"

He advanced toward them, a giant with giant's fists and Cadmus whimpered, looked at his mother so she'd make it stop, all of it, but she was not moving any more, and her eyes were huge and empty and...

A sharp, stinging pain on his cheek. Cadmus gasped awake to the sound of his brother's voice.

"Wake up, you bloody idiot!"

Breath short, he struggled to sit up, felt his balance tip to the right, he couldn't move, his whole body weighed, sluggish. Antioch caught him around the waist before he could fall off the horse, pushed him back to the centre of the saddle.

"Bloody hell," his older brother muttered. "Told you not sleep up here. You could crack your head falling down."

"S-sorry." Cadmus rubbed sleep from his eyes, gulping around the after-images seared behind his eyelids, his mother's body, disjointed in death, grey and not breathing. He chewed his tongue 'til he was sure he wouldn't cry. His face felt itchy, but thankfully dry of tears. He cleared his parched throat.

"M thirsty."

Still grumbling, Antioch rooted around his bag. "Do not drink everything. 'S all we have," he ordered, stern from all his fifteen years of age. He tossed the waterskin.

Humming his assent, Cadmus caught it. Careful not to disturb Ignatus, who seemed heedless of his surroundings from his place at the front of the horse, Cadmus unscrewed the cap and drank deeply.
The water tasted like stale leather after several days spent macerating in his brother's flask, but he drank anyway, pinching his nose to keep from gagging it up.

Grimacing, he looked around for a distraction. The landscape hadn't changed much since before he dozed off. Endless fields stretched ahead of them, with the faint shimmer of a river in the distance.

"We're in Pictland now," he said to no one in particular. He pointed at the river. "That's Moray Firth."

Antioch snorted. "If you say so. Don't care, really. Doesn't matter, so long as we're as far from home as far away goes."

A few hours later, the thin rope of blue water had grown into a river, larger than Cadmus had ever seen. It was huge, like, like those Dragons mum used to tell him about, but bigger. Its muddy banks were covered in reeds, sprouting from between the stones of the riverbed. At the middle, brackish water turned clear enough to see the bottom, which had been rendered smooth and sloppy by the ceaseless caress of the current.

They left their horse behind before crossing. Antioch went first, a rope slung around his waist, waddling in the murky water with a log of driftwood to keep afloat. Cadmus feared he'd be swept off to the sea where the river threw itself, but he ploughed on, breaking through the eddies. On the other side, he tied the rope to a tree. Cadmus and Ignotus followed together, clutching the piece of braided cord for dear life.

Then they walked.

Cadmus felt as though he had been tramping through a swamp ever since they had fled their home. Each step pulled him further down into stagnant, mud-like water. He'd been drowning slowly for hours and hours, lungs filling until he was gurgling around stinking bogwater. 'Twas alright. He was too tired to care all that much. Let the swamp gobble him up, never to be seen again. Perhaps it would make the pain go away. The swamp could cradle his body, blunt the shards of glass jangling around his heart. The world had come crashing down around his ears anyway. He had nothing to keep himself afloat, no piece of driftwood left for him. Everything had collapsed, red and empty-eyed at his feet.

Something tugged his wrist, insistent, and he startled, heart fluttering like a frantic bird. Ignotus had flopped against him, leaving all his weight for Cadmus to pick up.

"I'm t-tired, brother," the boy whimpered, face scrunched up. He looked about to fall over. He was waxy-pale, except for the skin beneath his eyes, which was purplish and seemed to eat up his face. A sheen of sweat plastered his hair to his forehead in messy lumps.

Cadmus was tired, too. His stomach was twisting and aching with hunger cramps, a clawing pain that was tearing through his flesh. His legs were stiff, sore like the day after he had run from Alan Gerrol, who'd wanted to ram an arrow-head in his eyes. He wished the three of them could stop and rest for a bit. They could curl up between the roots of a tree, lay down on a bed of red and gold leaves. Sleep. There was nothing in the world he wanted more and longed for and craved, but –

"P-promiss me. Promise me."

"We got to keep walking," he told Ignotus, voice a raspy whisper that grated his throat like sandpaper. "Mum said to go North, remember?"

"I remember," Ignotus murmured, like a blow across the face, lips trembling.
Ignotus did remember. He'd been there with Cadmus when it had happened. They'd tucked themselves up in a mouldy room by the attic. The room was stuffed full of old furniture, every surface coated in thick mounds of dust. Cadmus had shown Ignotus how to make the dust swirl without touching it. They'd been shrieking with laughter. A few butterflies had swooped in from a crack in the ceiling. They'd dangled in their hair, powdery wings like kisses against their cheeks. Butterflies always flocked around Ignotus, gravitating towards him like his smile was sunlight made flesh.

Their father had not known that. Cadmus reckoned he'd not seen Ignotus smile very often. He'd stormed in, slapped Ignotus again and again, until the butterflies had lain dead at his feet and the boy was crying and sorry for calling them in the first place. Then their mum had appeared and – Cadmus bit the inside of his cheeks. He did not want to think about what had happened after that.

"We got to keep walking," he repeated, firmly. "We'll be fine, you'll see."

"Right," said Antioch. The older boy was walking a few feet ahead, sword and bags slung over his shoulders, a tense, angry line. "Go North and all will be fine, eh? That's hogwash, is what it is. Mother couldn't be more precise, could she? I bet she didn't even know what she was saying."

Cadmus scowled up at him. "She – "

*She couldn't speak 'cause Father closed his hands 'round her throat and squeezed. Couldn't speak 'cause there was blood in her mouth and on my hands. She couldn't speak. Besides, she's gone now, so it's not her fault she can never, ever tell us and –*

And Cadmus could feel his skin and bones fracture into a thousand pieces, cracking along the seams of him. A pit was opening in his stomach, gaping wide because she was *gone*, gone and never coming back, and he just couldn't *do it*, couldn't make himself take another step, he just wanted it to stop. It had to be over now, it was *enough* –

He was crying. His whole body heaved from the strength of it, racking, heavy sobs closing fingers around his throat.

Then, miraculously, there were arms sliding around his shoulders. Antioch – stubborn and fierce and whose hands had been red as Cadmus's after he'd driven a sword through their father's back – was pulling him against his chest, to the smell of crisp leaves and wood smoke. Perhaps if he held on tightly enough, Cadmus would not bleed out where he stood. Two more arms closed around his waist, scrawnier but just as strong. Ignotus was crying with him, face buried against his side. Perhaps Cadmus would not crumble down like a cracked statue, so long as his brothers were here. It was only the three of them now.

They were all he had left.

"Come on," Antioch murmured once tears had dried on their faces, salt pulling at their skin in a comforting ache.

They ate bread and apples, stolen from the kitchens before they ran away, and walked on, Antioch close enough to touch, Ignotus clinging to his hand, a little more steady on his feet.

"Say, Antioch," Cadmus called after a while, because silence was stretching between them and he *hated* it when things were quiet. "D'you reckon they're still after us?"

The other boy shrugged, jet-black hair falling across his face. "Dunno," he said. "Probably. They always give chase to people like us, don't they?"
People like them.

Cadmus swallowed hard. There were words stuck on his tongue. Words that had been festering in his mind for days, gnawing at him like an infected wound. "Did you know?" he asked, shaky.

"About mum?"

"No one knew about mum."

Cadmus felt his breath hitch. Her throat had looked ugly, matted with blood and bruises. She had been broken and purple, red all over his hands.

He wanted to be sick.

"We're witches too, aren't we?"

Antioch did not answer. He didn't have to. Cadmus knew all the same. He had always known, in a way. Weird things happened around him and his brothers all the time. Broken toys repaired at their touch. Candlelight flared up on its own. Alan Gerrold tripped down the stairs. But – still. Cadmus had never thought these things made monsters out of them.

Fear felt heavy and acrid in his chest. He wished they could walk faster.

Hours went by. Grassy flatlands glittering with morning dew turned into rolling hills with rock-jagged sides. Mountains, half-hidden behind low, threatening clouds appeared on the horizon, their slopes bare save for some burnt vegetation that seemed on fire with the moving light of the sun. When they reached the forest, the sky was being painted in shades of scarlet and amber. Threads of light were playing with the roiling clouds, grey tinged with rich periwinkle. Gnarled, twisted tree trunks loomed ahead, their distant canopy forming a thick foliage where the sun fractured and slanted, cascading down on the root-laced ground in small, perfect circles.

The three brothers stepped within the woods without breaking their strides.

The scent of decomposing leaves assaulted Cadmus's nose. It hung low in the cooling air, along with the heady fragrance of crushed pine needles. Wind tickled his skin, damp, biting. Branches swished in its lazy embrace, adding to the rustle of life around him – scattering paws, flapping wings, creaking twigs. It was like stepping into another world, where sounds were muffled yet heightened, sights shadowed yet vibrant. Spongy patches of green moss stood out vividly in this rust-coloured realm where everything, from weathered bark to wrinkled leaves, could be declined in degrees of brown, red or yellow.

Moss grew on the north side of trees. Walking North was easy.

They trekked deeper and deeper even as darkness descended and birds quieted, halting only a long while later, at the edges of a small glade still illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun.

"We'll sleep here," Antioch declared as he advanced in the open space. "Can't keep moving in the dark, anyway." He dropped their bags and weapons to the ground. "Get us some firewood, Cad. It's gonna be cold tonight."

Cadmus nodded. "You stay here," he murmured when Ignotus made to follow him. "Get some rest, okay?"

For a moment, he thought Ignotus had not heard him. His brother looked at him with fever-clouded eyes, swaying where he stood. Cadmus was about to repeat himself when the other boy gave a small nod. He went to fold himself against the smooth bark of a dead tree, half-unconscious before
he even landed. Cadmus pushed down a twinge of worry and went to his task, making sure to stay within sight of the glade as he filled his arms with fallen branches. He came back to find Antioch laying out their provisions, a frown on his face.

"Something wrong?" he asked, stumbling back into the clearing. The frown smoothed out.

"Put the wood here," Antioch replied, ignoring the question. "Let's see if we can light it up." They made a quick job of building a campfire, but the damp wood was reluctant to welcome the sparks Antioch struck out of his sharp-edged flint. "Come on!" he snapped after several minutes.

And the wood brunt up. Flames crackled merrily, a white-orange burst of startling heat that cast dancing shadows across the dark trunk of the trees. Neither boys moved, momentarily taken aback by the sudden explosion of moving colours.

Antioch was looking at the flames with something like horrified comprehension. Cadmus glanced at the fire, then back at his brother. Words of reassurance formed in his mind, but refused to fit on his tongue. It's all right, he wanted to say. We'll be monsters together, brother, and no one will hurt us ever again.

"I'm hungry," was what made it past his mouth, and Antioch turned toward him, eyes unseeing for a moment.

"Here," he muttered after a while, handing him bread and dry meat.

Cadmus wolfed down the food. "D'you think we should wake him?" he asked between two bites, partly to distract Antioch, partly because Ignotus was dead to the world and had yet to eat.

Antioch glanced at their slumbering brother. He shook his head. "Let him sleep. He'll eat later."

Cadmus hummed. "I reckon he's not well," he said, lowering as his voice to make sure Ignotus wouldn't hear him. "Reckon he's sick."

"I checked his injuries," Antioch replied with a small shrug. He was staring at the flames, lips pursed, body tense, ready to spring up. "It's nothing serious. I think he's just tired."

Cadmus thought back on his brother's glazed eyes, stretched skin, clammy hands. Tiredness did not do that to people, he was pretty sure. But Ignotus was warm and alive, and for now, that was all that mattered.

"We should sleep too," he stated, proud of his conclusion. He was cold and wet and he wanted sleep.

Antioch made a noise of distracted acknowledgement. Together, they made sure the fire was well-fed before tucking their travelling cloaks around their frames. Cadmus curled up on the leaf-covered ground. It was cold and uneven despite the padding of dead leaves, but strangely comfortable after another day walking.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He only knew that he woke some hours later for no apparent reason, sinking back into consciousness with a strange sense of detached clarity in his mind, a sliver of uncomfortable awareness down his spine. Cadmus shrugged off his cloak to sit up, holding back a shiver. He was cold.

The campfire had burned itself down. Only a faint red glow came from the blackened charcoal. Puffs of ashes rose in the wind, forming whimsical arabesques that glimmered with soft silver in the light of the winking stars. There were no sounds around him. Nothing hooted in the black
curtain of the sky, or scattered across the forest ground. Only the quiet rustle of dry leaves could be heard. The night was still and silent.

Too still. Too silent.

Cadmus breathed slowly. Shadows seemed darker and thicker all of a sudden. He wanted to pull his cloak over his head to hide from their depths.

"Brother?" he called quietly, voice barely above a whisper. He did not wish to shatter that silence, fragile like spring ice on a lake.

No one answered him.

"Bro – "

A hand covered his mouth, muffling the scream of alarm that sought to escape him.


Cadmus knew. He felt it too. There was a terseness in the air, a prickling on his skin. His eyes roamed their small campsite, looking for anything out of place, a sign of what had disturbed his slumber. Their bags on the ground. Antioch's empty scabbard. The dead tree against which Ignotus slept –

Alarm washed over him, ice-cold in the pit of his stomach.

"Ignotus's not here," he breathed.

A twig snapped, and events dissolved into a dream-like haze.

Two eyes gleamed in the shadows clinging to the surrounding trees, glaring like polished steel in the sun. The ground groaned under the weight of invisible hooves. Then, a form, tall, monstrous, taken right out of Cadmus's worst nightmares, burst from between the trunks, bare muscles tense under the weak light of the moon, teeth and claws and. . .

There was a sharp tug on the collar of his shirt, and Cadmus was flying backwards, away, weightless in a way that defied all logic. Pain flared all over his back when he crashed on the hard ground, several feet away from where Antioch had pushed him. Movements turned frantic with fear, he looked up. . . Wished to scream. Wished to run and hide to the other end of the world, because, dear God, what was that thing. . .

Antioch dived under its inhumanly long arm, sword a shivery flash of silver behind him. "GO, BROTHER!" he yelled, the echo of his voice like thunder to Cadmus' ears. "GO!"

Paralysis left Cadmus' limbs in a rush; ugly, gaping horror turned into mindless, primal urge to escape, and. . .

He ran.

{ . . .}

It felt like a dance.

A strange, ridiculous dance to the sound of clashing steel and broken breaths. Two bodies moving together, synchronized, flowing motions that could almost pass off as graceful. Quick, agile steps
ruled by the melodious hiss of swinging metal.

Harry ducked under the sword swerving for his throat, cutting edge grazing tender skin. He moved. Tried to move. His feet missed the next stump of wood and he went down, breath short, body shaking with the pounding of his heart. A hand miraculously landing on a pole, the other white-knuckled around his blade, he pushed himself up, away from the sword looking to sink into his flesh. One step, two, not quick enough and he had to parry the next blow, arm taking the hit with a painful spasm. Staying up was a struggle, his balance constantly shifting for lack of space to center itself.

"C'mon, Potter! You can't win a fight on defence alone!"

Harry jumped back, narrowly avoiding a slash to his legs.

"If I – " he panted, ducked, lunged. "Ah – If I attack, you'll have me on my arse in seconds."

Godric grinned, sharp and wicked. "I'll have you even faster if you don't."

Groaning, Harry dodged the next strike. His legs had started to quaver. Gryffindor followed effortlessly, moving on the wood bollards as though walking on solid ground. He had the look of someone greatly enjoying himself, a cat eyeing the neighbour's canary cage with just the wrong side of gleeful contemplation.

"Don't lose focus, Potter! Mind your surrounding but don't take your eyes off me." Godric winked, happily. The smug bastard. "I mean – look at me." How he managed a flourish down his own body while standing on one foot, balanced on a scant inches of wood and swinging a sword, Harry would never know. "I'm gorgeous."

In spite of his better judgment, Harry wheezed out a laugh. "Sure you are," he panted, gathering himself, sparing a second to study Gryffindor's posture, to rectify his guard, weight shifting as best he could. A smile he'd learned from Malfoy at his most contemptuous bled on his face, shy of a mocking jeer. "For a redhead."

A dozen moves later, there was a hand on the back of his neck, calloused fingers rough against his skin, a sword poking his stomach, ready to gut him like a fish at the slightest pressure. Harry held very still.

"Dead," Godric pronounced, shaking him a little. "Again." The hand on Harry's neck loosened, slipped, threatened to let him fall. "Now. What was it you were saying about my hair?"

Harry's breath was short, puffing thin clouds in front of him. He could feel sweat cooling on his brow, slick and clammy. He smothered a snicker, trembling with mirth and receding adrenaline. "Nothing at all," he said, casting Gryffindor a bright smile. "Love redheads, me. Used to date one. Lovely people, do not piss off. I'd never do anything to piss off a redhead. 'M not stupid."

"Good lad." Godric patted his cheek in satisfaction. He waltzed back, away, hauling Harry up to keep him steady. He paused, looked him up and down with something like approbation. "You're getting better," he said, and before Harry could recover from the compliment, "However. You keep wanting to be quick and clever. Don't. Swordplay's not about being quick. It's about being just on time. You need to pace yourself to your opponent. Flow with him 'til you can break him."

"Yes sir." It wasn't the first time Harry had heard that argument. He didn't get what Gryffindor was talking about. Rotating his wrist to ease cramped muscles, he watched Godric sheath his sword, a shock of blood-red gems and silver-cold steel. He had to grit his teeth, look away from a blade he'd
once longed to find. "I'll do my best."

"I don't doubt it, kid. Ah – you're done for today." Godric's gaze had drifted over Harry's shoulder. Without looking away, he wiggled fingers at Harry's sword-arm. "I'm going to need that sword."

Puzzled and a little wary, Harry handed him the blade. Gryffindor took it, gave an experimental swing, and chucked it at Harry's head. Somewhat used to surprise attacks by now, Harry dove down instinctively, cursing. The weapon sailed past him in a perfect curve, fell out of sight. Eyes narrowed at Godric, Harry waited to hear it thud on grass. No metallic clatter came to punctuate its fall.

"Uh." He frowned, torn between the urge to spring around in case the blade was being hurtled back at him, and the knowledge he'd get his arse handed to him if he so much as glanced away from Godric. "What – "

But Godric wasn't paying him any attention.

"Good morning Salazar," he chirped. "Delightful to see you lurking outside so early in the day. A rare sight, that. Dungeons didn't finally collapse on you, did they?"

A startled gasp got stuck in Harry's throat. A careful breath, another, just enough for his mind to settle. He whirled around, pivoting on a single leg to face his Head of House.

Salazar was leaning on the sword Godric had flung at him, resting the flat of his palm on the pommel as though the weapon were a walking stick. His hair was held up in a careless bun, loose strands flapping in the wind. He stood a few feet away from the training ring, had been for Merlin knew how long, the picture of cool elegance, a jarring sight in the backdrop of wild countryside.

"I am not fighting you, Godric," he snapped in greeting, levelling the other Founder with an unimpressed eyebrow.

Gryffindor hopped down from the wood stumps, deft and assured. "You'll die in an alley at the hands of a drunk Muggle who can't wield a stick to save his life, and I won't be the one to blame for it."

"I'm sure I will. Still not sparing," Salazar replied, archly amused. Grey eyes flitted up, crinkled into a smile. "Good morning, Harry."

Harry followed Gryffindor to the ground, tottering down a lot less gracefully. "Morning, Sal – sir."

He caught himself short of uttering the Founder's name, earning a sharp glance, storm-grey light and mocking. Harry looked away.

These past few week, he and Salazar had danced over the fine line between student and teacher and something else entirely. Harry had taken to addressing Salazar as formally as he could outside the Dungeons, for reasons he could not grasp himself. Not quite embarrassment, although there were nervous giggles and raised eyebrows every time he slipped. Not for the sake of fairness either – the Founders treated each of their students differently, had singled him out from the start anyway.

He found calling Salazar by anything but his first name difficult, and it – worried him. Just a faint nagging at the back of his head, an alarm that was easy – too easy, perhaps – to ignore. Maybe denying intimacy with a man who had held his life in his hands and found it worth saving was supposed to be hard. Harry didn't know, wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

Either way, he was desperately trying to keep some sort of distance between the two of them in public. A reassuring barrier that bled through to their private life. He clung on to formality like a
lost child, and Salazar – let him. Each time he followed Harry's lead, called him 'Mr Potter' in class, the words, glaringly mocking to Harry's ears, never failed to make him wince. It was a strange standstill that lingered between them, unspoken and unacknowledged whenever it was just the two of them and they were back to 'Harry' and 'Salazar'. It was very much here nonetheless, weighting down on every moment of stretched silence.

" – pity," Godric was saying. Harry focused on the conversation. "The indignity. The great Salazar Slytherin, beaten to the ground because of sheer laziness."

"I hardly need weapons to fight," Salazar replied with calm confidence. "Being out of practice certainly won't keep me from surviving Muggles."

"Maybe not. But it won't keep me from mopping the floor with you, either."

Neither men moved, Godric with a playful smile on his lips, Salazar with an air of quiet aggravation in his eyes. Then –

"Becoming a bit of a braggart, aren't we?" said Salazar, and Harry knew him enough to recognize the cool, precise detachment of his voice, tinged with an inaudible shard of disdain, as the tone he used to rile Gryffindor up, words getting to him like well-aimed arrows through his flesh. It was blatant, lacked the usual subtle bite that left people wondering whether they'd been insulted at all when he spoke, but –

Godric attacked. A burst of unrestrained energy, speed and strength, nothing like the careful moderation he showed with his students. Half a step back, and Salazar met him with the screech of grinding metal, deafening in a courtyard that had fallen silent. For a breathless moment, Harry thought Salazar a match for Godric – and dammit, how had he missed the way Salazar moved before, that economy of movement that came from a lifetime of training? – right before Gryffindor struck and Salazar fell, eyes half-lidded in pain –

Harry's wand was in his hand, raised at Godric's back before he made the conscious decision to move, a spell on his lips, he did not care which, so long as it kept the other man away, far away from Salazar who he would not see hurt. . . But then, a muffled curse and Gryffindor was dropping his sword to the ground, the razor-sharp focus on his face giving way to horrified concern.

"Salazar!"

He bent down, a hand brushing the other man's shoulder. Hoovering close, but not quite touching. Salazar did not let him. In a blur of motion, the man moved, lunged, quick as a striking snake, a foot sweeping Godric's legs under him, a hand fisting on his shirt, bringing him down, bodies twisting until Gryffindor was on the ground, wide-eyed and breathless, Salazar on top of him, laughing, holding a knife to his throat.

Harry's heart was racing, roaring in his veins.

"I can't," huffed Salazar, "believe you fell for that trick again."

A few students cheered, Slytherins hooting happy whoops.

"Way to go, sir!" Glenn yelled, startling Harry with his proximity. He'd not seen the white-haired boy approach, closely followed by the rest of their House.

"I think you can lower your wand, mate," Alfric whispered beside him, a hand on Harry's elbow.

"Wha – oh." Harry lowered his wand, sheepish, a surge of magic crackling, dying in flowing
sparks. "Thanks Alfric."

The boy patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. Gytha looked ready to rip Gryffindor's throat open with her nails, too."

"I didn't want to *slit his throat* — " Harry muttered, appalled.

The look his friend cast him was one of profound scepticism. Because he was a complacent bastard at times, Alfric gave a non-committal hum that somehow conveyed the right amount of disbelief to masquerade as a polite sound.

"Shut up," Harry told him.

A quiet laugh, a wink, and the boy walked away.

Salazar was still straddling Godric.

"Since when do you carry weapons around, anyway?" Godric grumbled, squinting at the blade in Salazar's hand.

Salazar twirled the dagger with a flourish, taking it away from Godric's throat. "This is yours, I believe. I wasn't certain that you still carried it inside your boots."

"I never go without it," Godric retorted. "It's a gift from a deceptive jerk of a friend. Complete bastard, but he's got his moments."

"I'm not above kicking a defenceless man, Godric." Salazar rose in one fluid motion, letting the knife bounce off Gryffindor's chest. "Up, Gryffindor. I've come to fetch you. Some matters require our attention."

Godric sprung to his feet. "Something wrong?"

There was a pause in activity, students abandoning all pretence of discretion to eavesdrop openly.

"Rowena isn't well."

About to put his knife back in his boot, Godric froze. "Is it – ?"

"We think so, yes. Helga is looking after her."

Some tension eased from Godric's shoulders. He straightened, gave a terse nod. Flicking a glance at his class, students who'd been steadily creeping closer, he barked, "DISMISSED!" making a few jump in fright. "Go shower you miscreants. We meet in the Great Hall in half an hour!"

The children ebbed away reluctantly, muttering among themselves. They headed for the Dungeons, where all the bathrooms resided – as Harry had learned, the Founders had yet to figure how to get water flowing above the surface of the lake, meaning that the Slytherin common room was the only one equipped with plumbing. Other accommodations had been made for the other Houses.

About to join his Housemates, Harry caught Salazar's gaze. The man motioned for him to stay with a minute shake of the head.

"Someone's up for tutoring duty again," Gytha singsonged, swanning past him, all laughing dark eyes and teasing grins.

Harry rolled his eyes at her, which she ignored skilfully. He lingered behind as everyone slunk off
to the cool shadows of the school, swallowed up one after the other. Godric and Salazar had their heads bent together. Harry went gather his discarded bag and clothes, letting them talk. Sighing, he flopped on a bench, stretching his neck, the stiffness in his back, grateful for the crisp breeze playing on his skin.

It was a beautiful morning, sunny and radiant, a rarity at this time of the year, where days were a monotonous succession of low, grey skies and suffocating mist. Dawn was breaking over the mountains, glimmering on abandoned sword blades, blinding reflections that caught the eyes. Pale gold clouds ambled away, morphing to the will of a gentle wind that carried with it the first biting notes of winter.

It was breathtaking.

Harry wished he could enjoy it. Wished he could join in on his Housemates' conversations, quiet whispers kept between them, smirks and silent mirth, basking in the wordless complicity they had found in the course of the past weeks. He wanted to close his eyes and take, take it all, the beauty, the companionship, with the same delighted carelessness, but –

The world was whispering, words like bright sparks across his skin, dancing and alive, enough to set him on edge. The wind, the trees, the earth, all rustling with secrets. It was a sensation that had a taste of familiarity to it, the taste of something he had known for a long time but forgotten, faded memories like blurred photographs on a bookshelf. He'd had similar intuitions before, he was sure of it. Go after this girl, strike now, not that path, wrong place, run run run – but never had it rattled his nerves without immediate danger around. Never had it been quite so potent, spinning his focus to a distracted search for threats. It felt like vague –

Annoyance. Sour and constricting, something that had his lips thin in a scowl without his consent.

Godric had an arm slung over Salazar's shoulders, was pulling him close, knocking their bodies together, two fitting pieces.

Frowning at himself – or at the Founders' backs, but who was to tell – Harry approached the older men, or was about to, when something moved at the corner of his eyes, indistinct, near the treeline, some feet away from the training field.

Whispers across his skin, hissing louder.

He froze. Another motion, more distinct, and he turned slowly, facing the Forest with narrowed eyes, right hand seeking his wand from his pockets.

A silhouette, small, frail, came stumbling from the trees.

Harry knew many of the creatures that inhabited the Forbidden Forest – either for having studied them in class, or faced them during his visits. Most were dangerous, others were friendly, but none stood on two trembling legs to stagger their way towards Hogwarts with a velocity that defied their apparent exhaustion.

Harry was walking – run run run – running to them without much of a thought, following the impulse murmured in his ears, eating up the distance because it felt important, crucial even, and he could not let them crumble down all alone.

They met half-way. The silhouette was a child. A boy, with dark hair, greasy and knotted, dark eyes, fearful and desperate. He stood, heaving, shaking, mouth opening silently, words failing him as his body was.
"Help," he rasped after an eternity.

Harry caught him when he fell. He could feel the boy's heart hammer against the palm of his hand, pulsing up his arm in a frenzied tango.

"Help," the child said again. The look in his eyes was stubborn and relentless, sheer will fighting bone-deep exhaustion.

"Hey, it's alright," said Harry, reigning in his mounting alarm. He didn't know what to do. Where had the boy come from? What had happened to him? How could Harry help? "I've got you," he heard himself whisper. "You're safe now. You're safe, I promise."

"Promise," the boy muttered. "I promised – my brothers – "

"I don't – Someone's with you? Where – "

"Harry." A long-fingered hand brushed his shoulder, gentle reminder that the world was not narrowed to the small body in his arms. Salazar's voice was very soft, a tone Harry had heard him employ only twice. To sooth Ashton, the youngest Slytherin, after a nightmare that had wakened the entire House. To sooth Harry in the depths of his fevered hallucinations, months ago. "Harry," the Founder repeated, "let him go." The brush of fingers turned into a firm grip on his shoulder, warm and grounding. "Lower that shield. We have to take him to the Hospital Wing."

Salazar reached over, going through the shield Harry had conjured on a whim, without even noticing. The ward resisted, gave, let Salazar lean through, onto Harry in something that felt like an embrace, hard chest pressed against Harry's side. He took the child from his arms. He let go with no small amount of relief.

"Come on Potter," Godric told him, a hand on his shoulder to pull him to his feet. The Founder was scrutinizing the obscurity creeping from the Forest, sword in hand. "Best not stay here."

"My brothers," the child kept whispering, "please."

The trek to the Hospital Wing was interminable. Salazar was walking ahead, steps light and silent, whispering to the boy who clung weakly to his clothes. Harry followed, eyes fixed on the pair, nerves and thoughts jumping under his skin. Godric brought up the rear. None of them talked.

"Helga!"

"No no no, my brothers, please – "

"HELGA!"

The heavy doors of the Hospital Wing burst open. Helga ran up to them, golden hair tumbling across her face. She looked anxious and tired, but her arm was steady when she raised her wand, casting spells before reaching them, seeming to understand the situation without having to ask. Harry thought of his Housemates, the twin scars near Ashton's eyes, Audra's mutism her first weeks here, the way Bradley sometimes flinched away from touch. He wondered how often Salazar had brought home broken children for Helga to heal.

"Where?" Helga asked.

"The Forest," Salazar replied. "Just now. Looks like he's been on the run for a few days."

Harry took in the familiar sight of the Hospital Wing as they rushed inside, its white, polished
stones, its smell of clean linens and pungent soap. Salazar lowered the boy on the first available bed while Helga vanished his rag of a shirt. Harry bit his tongue and tasted blood. Small cuts littered the child's throat and arms. He was unhealthily thin, each of his ribs standing out under paper-thin skin.

"On the run?" Harry repeated, faint. He felt light-headed, an odd rushing in his ears.

"From Muggles." The shadow of a snarl curled Salazar's lips, quickly smoothed away. "The boy is one of us. He wouldn't have gotten past the wards otherwise. These injuries –"

"Salazar." Helga put a hand under the man's chin, calm and unflinching, forcing him to meet her eyes. "I need you to get out," she said, so quietly Harry barely caught the words.

A muscle ticked at the corner of Salazar's jaw. The rest of him didn't betray any of the tension Harry could feel coiled around him, a dangerous beast hissing quietly, barely kept in leash. Helga's hand moved to the back of the man's neck, ink-black eyes pleading, and though nothing changed in the way Salazar held himself, there was a shift in the air, voluntary and controlled, a pressure easing. The Parselmouth nodded.

"Of course."

"No, can't, please, I promised –"

The child was still whimpering. Salazar tensed again.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Helga whispered, pressing a hand on the boy's forehead.

He calmed at her touch. "My brothers, they're with the m-monster. I've to find them. Promised. I p-promised." He was crying.

"He's telling the truth," Salazar said. He had taken a step back, but his eyes were riveted on the child, intent. "He has two brothers. A creature attacked them in the forest."

"Are they alive?" Godric asked.

"Godric," Helga snapped when the boy whimpered again. "Not here. Get out, all of you. Find the others if you can. Let me care for this one."

They were unceremoniously shoved out of the Infirmary. The doors banged shut behind them.

"Are you certain about the brothers?" Gryffindor asked, turned to Salazar before they stopped in the middle of the corridor.

"Yes." Salazar's eyes wandered in the distance, gazing unseeingly at the wall over Godric's head. "The child couldn't see what attacked them. Some sort of creature. I can't tell whether they survived." His voice was void of emotions. A faint ache pulsed through Harry's chest.

Godric crossed his arms. His eyes were hard, lost in the general direction of the Forest.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Godric," Salazar whispered.

The other man looked back at him. "We have to try. If only to find the beast who did this. Make sure it won't threaten any of our kids. We should've gone into that forest months ago, Salazar."

Salazar sighed, head bowing in defeat. "What do you propose?"
"I go in, follow the boy's track, find the creature, kill it, possibly rescue the brothers, get out. Easy enough."

"Our plans never hold up to confrontation, Godric."

"I'm aware." A wry smile twisted Godric's lips. "Why do you think I rarely bother following them?"

Salazar moved a step closer to the other man. "You can't go alone."

"We can't go together. Rowena can't get out of bed. Helga's looking after everyone. She can't protect the castle as well. Someone needs to stay, and we both know I'm a better hunter than you are."

"I – "

"I could go," said Harry. Could go. Needed to go, rather, intent whispers that breathed warnings on his skin, but he wasn't about to tell them that. The two men faced him, surprise flashing over their features. "I could go with you. I've been in that kind of forest before."

Salazar's expression was inscrutable. Grey eyes gauging quietly, with no indication as to whether he had heard Harry's silent plea. It wasn't a punch to Harry's guts so much as a step back, another one. He wished he knew why he felt like the two of them were suddenly spiralling away from each other, whisked off by invisible hands that pushed and pulled at once. Jaw clenching, he looked at Gryffindor, who was observing them silently, shades of worry in hazel eyes.

Godric touched Salazar's shoulder. "He's one of yours," he said, stepping away, as if to let the other man decide.

"He is," Salazar said.

Again, Harry tried to catch nuances in his voice, anything to know the Founder's thoughts. Not to avail. He had become somewhat proficient at reading the play of emotion in Salazar's eyes, when they were alone and Salazar let him, but Harry could never fully understand him, especially not if he put effort into concealing his thoughts. And it hurt, jarred like glass shards in his side. It hurt in a way Harry knew it shouldn't.

A sigh, silver eyes fluttering close. "If there's so much as a scratch on him – "

"You'll string me up by the ears and hang me on a Whomping Willow." Godric waved the threat away. "I know. Harry, you have ten minutes to get ready. Meet me at the entrance as soon as you can." The Founder left Harry and Salazar with a curt nod, disappearing behind a tapestry that led to the Gryffindor common room.

"I'd better hurry," Harry murmured, preparing to follow his example.

Salazar grabbed his arm before he could move, stepping close. Closer than he had been for days.

"Wait."

Harry had not forgotten what it was like to have Salazar's undivided attention. He couldn't have, not with the way everything narrowed down to the single-minded intensity of his eyes. Not quite melting away, just becoming – less important. Secondary, and entirely irrelevant. He'd simply forgotten the strength of it could be so staggering.
"I have to –"

"I know. I just have a question, before you go."

So have I, Harry thought savagely, all other concerns momentarily fading to the background. Why, Salazar? Why have you been avoiding me? Why have I been avoiding you? Does it amuses you, to keep me off-balance? To speak everything but your mind, leaving me to guess what you mean, what you don’t? We talk, you and I. For hours on end. You learn things about me. I don’t learn anything about you. I’m trying though, do you know that? Why do I care to try, Salazar? Why does it matters so much? Sometimes, I think us friends. But that’s not what we are, is it? You’re friends with Godric. I know friendship. I don’t know what this is. Do you? What I am to you, Salazar?

"Are you all right?" Was that worry in the other man's voice? "You seem distracted."

"I, uh – " Was he all right? There was a sense of unease grating on his nerves, a soft, perpetual hum across his skin, like magic waking in his veins to whisper warnings to his consciousness.

"I see," Salazar muttered.

"Stop reading my mind," Harry snapped. His thoughts had escaped him again, spilling out of his head, a cup left out in the rain to overflow. The daily Occlumency exercises Salazar had him perform kept the Founder from inadvertently glancing into his mind, but maintaining the required focus took effort. Harry slipped regularly.

"Stop leaving it unprotected," Salazar retorted evenly. He started walking toward the Dungeons. "Do you always feel the approach of Samhain so acutely?"

Harry fell into steps beside him. He frowned. "The approach of what now?"

"Samhain." Seeing the expression on his face, Salazar elaborated, "The day that marks the beginning of winter for Muggles. Magic is always more potent this time of year. Legends say it's caused by the thinning of the veil between our realm and the next."

A spark of memory, years old and faded with time, sprung to Harry's mind. The bluish glow of black candles, death-cold air and translucent ghosts dancing.

"Do you mean Hallowe'en?" he asked. "That's tomorrow, isn't it?"

Salazar cast him a sideways glance. "The name may have changed with time," he said. "But the dates match. Does it always affect you so?"

"I – no," Harry admitted. "Hallowe'en has never been a pleasant day for me, but I never felt this before. Is – is it normal?"

"Define 'normal'." Harry rolled his eyes. Salazar smiled with his. "Do you know what this day stands for?"

The young man shook his head. Somehow, he doubted the Founder meant a night of trick-or-treating for children, and there stopped Harry's knowledge of the traditions of Hallowe'en. Giant pumpkins, live bats, jiggling skeletons, and the occasion for a memorable feast.

"It symbolises a time between death and rebirth. The descent of darkness that precedes daylight. It’s a period of change where we may glimpse at beings not of this world." Salazar quirked a smile at him, green and silver locking for a heartbeat. "You're not exactly from this world, are you?" he said. His voice echoed quietly in the silent corridor.
"You think –"

"I don't know, Harry. This is a mere conjecture." Salazar pressed a hand to the small of Harry's back, pushing gently. They began walking again.

"How is Samhain an unpleasant day for you?"

The wool of Harry's shirt felt rough against his skin. Salazar's hand stayed on his back, accompanying rather than leading, a flare of heat in the chilled dungeons.

"Bad memories," he heard himself answer, words tumbling out on their own accord. "My parents were killed on Samhain night."

They did not speak for the rest of the way to the common room. The silence was only troubled by the sound of their footfalls on the stone-ground.

"I share your grief." Salazar's voice stopped him before the wall glided away, soft. Heavy as lead. "Be careful."

When Harry turned back, the Founder was gone.

A breath, cold air rushing into his lungs, loud and desperate as a drowning man's. Another, more controlled, deliberate. Harry opened his eyes. He couldn't. Couldn't let his thoughts stray, not now.

The Forest awaited.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while since I last read that chapter! I've taken the time to edit previous chapters, but I've not gotten to that one yet, though I'm sure I will, once I find the strength. I can't quite tell why, but it bugs me the way it is.

Anyway, I'm very grateful for all the kudos and reviews you've given me, each and everyone of them makes me squeal like a twelve-year-old!
The Bounds of Blood

For the first time in almost two years, Harry stepped on the narrow, winding earth path that disappeared within the thick trees of the Forbidden Forest.

The woodland realm felt alive with the scent of green things, damp earth and rotting wood. Wind had picked up after he and Gryffindor set off, and the dry rustle of leaves, coming from all sides, churned and roiled like waves on thin sand, the sound interwoven with the quiet chatter of invisible birds. Dark shapes lingered just out of sight, elusive ghosts that glided away at the merest glance, melting in the shadows of the trees.

Shadows in which Godric weaved in and out of, silent as he strode ahead. He was following a trail of broken branches and small footprints, making his way through the dense undergrowth with all the fluid ease of a hunting feline, footfalls soundless on the dew-soaked leaves of the Forest's floor. Harry trailed a few steps behind, not as used to trudging through the twisting network of roots coiling around his ankles as the other man appeared to be.

The aching familiarity of his surroundings set him on edge.

While Hogwarts had undergone a number of changes in the span of a thousand years, dulling the throbbing pain of homesickness, the Forest had been spared from the erosive touch of turning time, a universal constant that remained brimming with whispered secrets and sombre glory, indifferent to the spin of the Earth. It left Harry with the acrid taste of loss in the back of his mouth, the raw awareness of his own ill-timed place in the pit of his stomach.

They walked for a long while. Harry kept his wand at the ready, blood humming under his skin, wariness stunting his every breath. He had decided against taking his training sword. He couldn't yet carry the blade without feeling the weight of tempered steel at his side, hindering his range of motion. He was wary enough as it was. With every step, he felt that they were creeping deeper in the belly of a dormant beast, whose silence was a ploy to lure visitors into complacency.

Eventually, Godric's shoulders eased and his focus on the path wavered, having found the tracks that followed the boy's journey through the woods.

"Do you know what we're walking into?" Harry asked then, because going monster-hunting unprepared was just calling for trouble.

Godric glanced at him, a little startled, eyes the colour of dark earth in the muted light of the Forest. "Could be anything, really," he replied, leaping out of the way as a hare vaulted over his feet. "Places like this aren't exactly human-friendly. You said you found yourself in similar situations before?"

"Hm." Harry thought about poisonous-green scales adorned with fangs the size of his arms, rattling despair clothed in putrid cloaks, lonely, vicious howls in the pearly glow of leaf-shafted moonlight. He bit back a bitter smile. "Yeah," he said, dry as dust. "I wasn't lying."

That earned him a swift smile. "I never doubted it," Godric replied, stepping over a fallen log. "What do you think we're walking into, then?"

Harry let his pace falter, mind flashing back to Remus Lupin's teachings. "An Erkling, maybe?" he suggested. "They have a taste for children." He grimaced. "Though I suppose that accounts for a number of beasts, doesn't it?"
Gryffindor laughed over his shoulder, bright and carefree. "Look lively, Harry," he teased. "Most don't care they're children. They're just hungry. So as long as it's edible – "

"You sound like Hagrid." Of course Harry had run back in here with another monster-loving lunatic. Of course he had.

"Who?"

"A friend whose idea of fun is to raise dragons." Pointedly ignoring Godric's approving hum, Harry bit the inside of his cheeks. It did little to alleviate the pang of pain in his chest. He could hardly remembered when was the last time he'd seen the half-giant, didn't know whether he'd ever see him again. But the thought spurred another, and he said, "Maybe it was an Acromantula?"

The look Godric cast him was full of alarm. "You've seen those things before?"

"Yeah. Came upon a whole nest once." One of the most terrifying nights of his life, too. Not because of the swarm of eight-legged, eight-eyed creatures clinking pincers at him in a dome of thick, whitish web that stuck to his skin, but because Ron, pale as a ghost, with his deep-rooted fear of spiders, had been right there with him. Harry had led his friend in a death-trap. There had been stones in his stomach, ice in his veins, all of it his fault. It had been the first time he'd felt so visceral a fear, though it hadn't been the last.

"You've been to Asia?" Godric swivelled to look at him, surprise lightening his eyes to soft amber. Walking backwards, he barely dodged collision with an old oak.

Harry blinked. "Sorry?"

"Asia," the man repeated, as though it made any more sense the second time he said it. "That's where you'll find Acromantulas. On an island, South-east of the coast."

Shite.

"I, er – " Harry tripped on his own legs, got tangled with a small shrub for his effort. Cursing, he wrangled with the plant, which had started to lash him up in vines. Grateful for the distraction, he bit his lip, thinking fast. He couldn't answer Godric's question, could he? There were no conceivable reasons for him, supposedly a tenth-century British boy, to have been to Asia. On that note, he had known the Founders had travelled as far as Egypt, but Asia? What had they been doing in Asia? "You've been to Asia?" he asked, straightening up with only a few tears to his clothes.

Godric nodded. "Where did you think we found tea leaves? We were helping Salazar with – " His voice trailed off. "That's not where he picked you up, is it?"

"Ah – no." Harry carefully stepped around a patch of blueish grass that sought to curl around his calf. "He found me south of the Isles." Frowning in thought, he added, "Er – In Mercia, I think? Close to Londonium."

The Founder hummed. "Half-dead, was it?" he asked, not unkindly. At Harry's nod, he continued, voice distant as though musing aloud, "Wasn't the first time you ended up like this. You've faced your death before. Fought someone else for it."

It didn't sound like a question.

Thrown off, Harry stumbled, almost stepping on a large toad, who turned wounded protruding eyes on him. "What makes you say that?" he asked, wincing at the accusatory croak that sounded
Godric halted, eyes narrowed pensively at twin trails of crushed branches. "The way you fight," he said after a while, looking up from the path. "Like someone who's learned to trust his instincts, because sometimes there's nothing else to do." He blinked, green-flecked eyes sliding to Harry. "Like you know what it's like to move with the possibility of dying at every step."

At loss for words, Harry cleared his throat. "Well, it didn't always end with a death," he felt the need to justify. "They wanted to kill me, but I just wanted to get away." Except for Bellatrix Lestrange, who he had wished writhing in agony for taking away the last of his family, tearing to the ground the frail promise of love and belonging he had found in Sirius. He had wanted her screaming, begging for it to stop, so she'd feel some of the pain that had been devouring him alive.

"This way," said Godric. He gave Harry a smile before starting to walk again. "I'm not judging. I was born and raised a soldier, you know. It'd be ill-placed of me to condemn anyone for fighting back. Careful." He held out an arm, forcing Harry to a stop. A twist of his wand, and he Vanished a bush of brambles with thorns that looked sharp enough to shred flesh like paper. He cast Harry a sideways glance, gaze open and curious. "Why did someone want to kill you?"

Because of spun-glass with swirling mist that told of wars to come and fated enemies bound to kill to live.

"Something about my family," Harry replied.

Godric snorted. "You sound like Salazar," he muttered, holstering back his wand. "Cursed blood that shadows your steps. You fight like him, too, now that I think about it."

_Cursed blood?

Asking aloud was tempting. For all that he had come to know Salazar in their months together, Harry had yet to hear a mention of friends or family beside the Founders. Curiosity was eating at him, scratching its way up his throat in a constant inkling to learn more, but –

Salazar was an intrinsically private man. To him, secrecy was more than a way to keep an edge over his interlocutors. That much was clear in every silence that lingered, in each smile he gave. It was something that ran deeper, as much a part of who he was as his ability to speak Parseltongue. It was something Harry would respect. Because he owed Salazar his life. But also because the man's trust had much more value than the fickle satisfaction of idle curiosity.

That being said, Harry was a Slytherin now. Letting a bit information slide from his fingers didn't mean he couldn't ask for the rest of it, specially when it was offered without condition.

He fell into steps with Godric, ducking under a low branch that dragged on the ground under its own weight. "Salazar can fight, then?" he asked. Despite the morning's show, he couldn't help the note of scepticism that crept into his voice. It was difficult to imagine Salazar, who was all languid grace and mindless elegance, sly smirks and smiling eyes, dirty and bloody and hurt, carving his way through a battlefield. The man struck as someone who played with minds and words and shadows, not as a soldier who met his enemies in open combat, snarling, bared-teethed.

Gryffindor huffed a mirthless laugh. "Oh, he can fight just fine. He simply doesn't care for it all that much." He gave Harry a crooked smile. "Is it really so inconceivable?"

That made the young man pause.

Inconceivable?
He thought of Salazar's hands, ink-stained and long-fingered. Fit to handle delicate Potion's vials, smooth glass cool to the touch, rather than sword hilts, rough leather that smelled of sweat. Harry had always pictured the man as a scholar, a politician, a philosopher. Learned and silver-tongued and refined. Not a warrior, fire-wrought and blood-splattered.

But –

He thought of Salazar's eyes, darkened to storm-grey. Harsh and grim and ruthless. He pictured the planes of his face in the waxing light of the moon, shadows flickering under every sharp angles. He heard scathing word like poisonous silk biting into an unknown man. The soft cadence of his voice when he talked of killing without remorse, and –

And suddenly, picturing Salazar cleaving down an army was not so difficult anymore.

"Ah," Harry said, a bare whisper on his lips.

Salazar could fight, another piece to a puzzle that refused to slot itself into place.

Godric's hand brushed his shoulder, a knowing glint in his eyes. "Come on," the Founder said. "There's a clearing ahead."

There was. The trees had grown gnarled and ancient. Deep grooves slithered up their moss-covered trunks, which reached up to the distant sky with abundant, coppery leaves that swallowed the weak sunlight, leaving darkness to linger on the root-laced ground. The small clearing appeared as an oddity out of this suffocating greenery, an open space bathed in the wan, golden hues of Autumn. There were remnants of a campfire at its center, a mound of ashes and charred wood.

The two men advanced slowly, on guard, ears straining to catch any suspicious noise. Harry had the nasty feeling they were being watched.

"The boys made camp here," Gryffindor noted. He took a step closer, stopping short of leaving the shadows. Brown smudges of dry blood painted the wild-flowers, sun-flaked. The contents of a backpack were spilled on the ground, the bag itself torn to shreds.


He had not made three steps into the glade that something moved among the trees, branches rippling and twigs creaking. The sound of hooves pounding on soft dirt crept closer and closer. Godric had his sword unsheathed in one hand, his wand poised at the trees in the other, faster than Harry could see.

"Who's there?" he called. "Come out – I'm armed!"

After a moment of consideration, into the clearing came a creature who was a man to the waist, with wild, black hair and a beard set on a face with jutting cheekbones. Below the hips was a horse's powerful ebony body, tail switching behind him. It had been a while since Harry last saw a centaur.

"Good afternoon," said the creature in a deep, melancholic voice. "I am Hexo."


The centaur stared with unblinking eyes, head tilted in direction of Hogwarts. "You stand among
those who build the castle, do you not?"

Godric nodded wordlessly. His wand-arm fell by his side. "We didn't know centaurs resided in these woods."

Hexo smiled. It wasn't kind. "My herd has grown since your kin began hunting mine," he said. "Our paths would not have crossed before. But times have changed." He closed his eyes. Wind ruffled his unbound hair. "Many creatures found refuge in this Forest. As have you, wizard. You are threatened by your own people, are you not?"

The Founder bowed. "We came here to teach our young."

Another smile, white teeth stark against dark skin. "So you have. But you should not leave your student to linger in darkness, Godric Gryffindor. It has overtaken much of his path already."

When the centaur's night-black gaze found him, Harry left the cool shadows of the trees, cautious, right hand hoovering close to his wand. Just in case. Last time he had seen centaurs, there had been snarls and arrows and eyes full of killing intent. For all their love of stars and freedom, Hexo's was a warrior race, proud fighters who were deadly on the battlefield. "Hello," he said, stopping by Godric's side. "I'm Harry."

Hexo nodded in greeting. "There have been disturbances," he said, unblinking stare never leaving the young Slytherin. "Strange things have been happening in the Forest. Pluto has been unusually bright lately." He inclined his head. "Cracks and tears put all manner of creatures of the dark on edge." He turned to Godric. "That is why you are here, is it not? To save those of your kin who ventured in this Forest and have not found a way out."

"Do you know where they are?" Godric twitched, left hand absently resting on the pommel of his sword. "We're looking for two boys. They made camp here recently."

Hexo half-turned towards a path that led deeper into the Forest. "I would hurry," he said. "Strength comes with nightfall." He took a step back in a curt bow. "My herd's greetings to your people, Godric Gryffindor." On that note, he disappeared within the trees, lean legs carrying him out of sight before Harry could blink.

Godric glanced at Harry with a faint grimace. "Shall we, then?"

And deeper they went.

...\n
Antioch woke to the taste of blood in his mouth and the smell of mold in his nose. He was cold and sore and his head hurt like a dagger was drilling through his skull. Water was dripping down his back, a soft torture on his chilled skin, the drops shattering on the hard, uneven ground under him. Rocks were poking at his chest, digging into his flesh.

Groaning low in his throat, he rolled on his side –

Tried to roll on his side.

His arms were twisted behind his back, a length of rope chafing his skin. His legs were bound together, limbs stiff with cramps.

What...?
A sharp breath had him choke on the coppery tang in his mouth, on the staleness in the air. A rush of panicked awareness cleared his mind, the world all stark contrasts and fear and pain.

The night before came to him in disjointed fragments, shards of memory that cut into his chest; the empty space where Ignotus should have been sleeping. Cadmus trembling in his arms. The moon, ethereal above his head, holding the whole Forest still with its pitiless glare. Two eyes gleaming like gold in the sun. Then that thing –

*That thing.*

There was an empty pounding in his ears. Feeling sick, Antioch gasped for air.

*What the hell was that thing?*

He jerked against his restraints in blind frenzy, pulled and pushed and felt his muscles shake and tear. His heart was bruising his ribcage, distraught, and he could not move, could not *breathe* –

A sob, quiet and terrified and not his own, rang through the fear cloying his mind. He froze, cold sweat, panting breaths and trembling limbs. Warm, viscous blood, trickled down his wrists. His fingers curled into fists. He stared at the rubble in front of his nose, dull, grey stone smudged with mud. His racing heart slowed by degrees. Except for those quiet whimpers and the murmurs of wind in Autumn leaves, everything was silent. Calm and peaceful, but for the sliver of dread down his spine. With all the strength of the childish belief he wouldn't be seen by what he could not see, Antioch didn't want to look up. He did not want to see again, feel his stomach drop in pure, unadulterated horror. Curling up, closing his eyes and praying to wake up from this nightmare felt like the best course of action, but –

But Antioch was fifteen and a man now, and he would have recognized the sound of his brother crying in a screaming crowd.

He looked.

He was in a cave. Deep and dark and dank, jagged rock glistening with water, bearing down on him with the weight of a thousand pounds of earth, sucking air from his lungs. Thin rays of sunlight pierced the shadows on a few feet before fading into smothering blackness, slanting down from an entrance that stood over an avalanche of broken stone.

Another sob and he startled, muscles jumping under his skin, head pounding painfully. Twisting around with slow, clumsy movements, he rolled on his side, scanning the semi-darkness for a sign of his brother.

Ignotus was prostrated against the wall opposite him. He was slumped against the rock, knees drawn to his chest and arms held up by a length of cord that had been nailed to the stone. He looked ridiculously young like this, small and brittle as a blade of grass, eyes huge on his pale, tear-tracked face. His skin was shining with sweat. His breathing was laboured.

"Brother?" Antioch called. His voice was rough from disuse. He cleared his throat. "Ignotus!"

The boy barely reacted. He looked up, eyes dark and feverish and empty of recognition.

Fear flooded his veins. Cursing, Antioch tested the strength of the ropes binding him. They bit into his flesh, unyielding, and a new wave of panic crushed his chest, iron bands around his lungs that blurred his vision.
He was scared. More scared than when Cadmus had fallen from a bookcase ladder, only to bounce on the ground without a scratch. More scared than when Ignotus, who he'd been supposed to look after, had almost drowned in the pond near their house. Water had parted to let Antioch pull him to safety.

He was terrified as the day he had come from training to a silent home, to brothers half-mad with grief and covered in their mother's blood, his father, who had fed and clothed and housed him his entire life, pulling up a fist to hit Cadmus. Cadmus, pale and thin-shouldered, who fell sick easily. Who was all books and quiet enthusiasm, sweet and smart in ways Antioch could never be. Antioch had been scared to death, back then. His mother had been dead, Ignotus had been hurt, Cadmus had been terrified. Antioch had known what to do anyway, how to protect his brothers. He was the oldest. That was his job.

He didn't know what to do now.

There was something befuddling in the fact that he was alive enough to breathe and hurt. There had been teeth glowing in the night, horns darker than the starless sky, and nothing in his mind but the faint hope that Cadmus, at least, would escape with the time Antioch could buy him. He had seen nothing but moonlight and blood and death, and one inevitable ending.

But he was here, impossibly. There was air rushing in his lungs, pulse fluttering in his chest. He lived. Ignotus lived. Questions would come later. For now, he had to get them both out of here before the – the monster came back.

He took a deep breath.

Working his fingers, numb though they were, around the knots tying him down, stole his breath, cracked his nails. The knots were too tight. Crawling to the entrance of the cave and its jagged-edged stones bruised his ribs, tore his clothes. His fingers ached and bled, white-knuckled against a sharp shard of rock he found to saw through the ropes at his wrists. The rock broke and crumbled in his hands. Tying to summon fire, like he had done the night before, left him dizzy, without so much as a flame.

All the while, the sun moved, rotating inexorably, high and bright in the sky before declining West, a slow dip, fading into shades of burnt orange. Shadows lengthened until, from the depths of the cave, where light flickered and died, came the echoing sound of approaching footsteps. A sharp clatter that had Antioch's blood freeze in his veins, Ignotus put his head in his knees with a whimper.

Too soon. It was too soon, he hadn't had time. . . Had he survived that long to die now, on his knees in a cave? It seemed too cruel. He had outlived his father, and a country who wished him dead. He had woken up after thinking his last moment had come. . .

All for this?

A silhouette emerged in the dark. The shape of goat's horns, the curve of bare shoulders, a trail of hairs down a gaunt chest that hid wiry strength. Hips and legs like a horse's, thin and powerful, ending in a pair of hooves. Another step and Antioch could distinguish its face. Blank eyes, a goat's muzzle and ears and hair.

Antioch felt bile rise in his mouth, sweat pool on his back.

Because the worst torture he could think of would be to watch his brother die before him, he forced his ankylosed limbs into action. He didn't quite manage standing up, but he straightened as much
as his bindings would allow.

"Stay away from him," he growled between gritted teeth.

The beast, who had been approaching Ignotus, stopped in its tracks. Blank, yellow eyes turned to him. Antioch bit his lips to keep from begging for mercy. He had never asked for any in his life, and had never received it. He wasn't about to die like a coward.

"Come on," he said in a voice that barely shook. "You hungry, you ugly piece of shit?! I'm right here!"

The creature's mouth pulled back into something that was either a smile or a snarl. A blur of movement, and it was right here, bringing a stench of crusted blood and putrid musk, and Antioch felt his heart jump in his throat in one last, desperate beat. He screwed his eyes shut, praying he wouldn't feel himself die. . .

There was a sound like lightning, a word that made his ears ring, a furious screech. A blast threw Antioch to the side, rocks and debris falling all around him. He curled up instinctively, moving despite the nausea brought by his swimming head. Breathless and confused, he cracked an eye open.

The monster's grotesque face was no longer filling his field of vision. Instead, standing half-hidden in the swirling dust was a man, back turned to Antioch as he faced the creature.

"GODRIC!" he yelled over his shoulder even as he dived to a side, narrowly avoiding to have his throat ripped out. "GODRIC I'VE FOUND THEM!" He raised his hand, in which he held what looked like a stick.

A stick.

The fucking idiot was going to get himself killed.

Antioch watched in muted horror as the fool stood his ground, brandishing his piece of wood as though it were a terrible weapon, looking utterly unconcerned in the face of a half-goat, half-man monster that had a good two feet of height on him, horns pointed enough to eviscerate him without trying.

The beast moved again, teeth bared. It attacked before Antioch could shout a warning. An arm struck out with inhuman speed, going straight for the young man's chest –

But instead of the blood and gore Antioch was expecting, the stranger muttered a word under his breath. Something blue shimmered to life in front of him, bathing its surroundings with crackling light. The creature's clawed hand impacted with the awful sound of bones breaking.

Sorcerer.

Antioch watched with mingled fear and fascination as the monster howled in pain, stumbling back. It growled, low and ferocious, and was moving again, too fast for the eye to follow. The young man dodged the horn looking to sink into his stomach, hopping out of the way with a steady confidence that came from hours of weapon training. He wasn't quick enough to avoid a gaping laceration on his hip. Blood welled up immediately, dark red against white linen, but the boy – man? – barely blinked at the pain, crouching low to let another blow fly over his head. Two bolts of light burst from the stick in his hand in quick succession, purple and white. The second burst hit, a deep gash appearing on the monster's torso, throwing it back against a wall. The whole cave shook from the strength of it.
The beast shook its massive head, pushed against the rock behind its back. It lunged, muscles tensed taut, snarling –

It never reached its prey.

A shape burst from the dwindling light of the entrance, a flash of sleek golden fur and lean muscles. A four-legged animal landed on the monster's chest, forcing it down, tail switching, wickedly-sharp fangs bared. The beast hadn't hit the ground that the feline's form blurred, shaggy mane shrinking back, yellow-brown eyes darkening to hazel, until a man, red-headed, sword in hand, stood in its place. Face hard, he swung his blade, drove it through the creature's chest in a fluid motion. The beast spasm against the weapon, once.

It didn't move again.

For a breathless moment, no one twitched. Numb and hazy, Antioch could feel the world rub against his senses from a far away place.

"You're a lion Animagus!" At the sound of his voice, Antioch glanced at the man who had saved his life, the one with the mop of messy black hair atop his head. He was grinning like the lunatic he clearly was, looking at his companion with delight on his face.

The redhead rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to ask how you even know what lions are," he muttered, wiping blood from the blade of his sword.

The next thing Antioch knew, there was a hand on his shoulders, another cupping his face, words spoken into his ears.

"Hey, can you hear me? You alright, mate?"

He blinked, and into focus came a handsome face, smooth skin brought out by jet-black hair.

"Uh," Antioch managed. The other man had the greenest eyes he had ever seen.

The boy smiled with white, straight teeth – and who even had teeth like that past the age of two? – looking relieved. "You'll be fine now," he stated with the calm certainty of someone who knew himself to be right. With a thrill that made his stomach swoop, Antioch found he almost believed him. "Your brother's with us. He's safe. There's a healer looking after him."

Inhaling sharply, Antioch reached out to grip the other man's shoulders. Moving his arms almost tore a moan from his throat. They were stiff and sore and every movement hurt, but –

He could move.

Worry about Cadmus momentarily forgotten, Antioch stretched, delighting in the resulting ache. His legs had been freed as well. Relief swelled, sweet in his chest.

"Ah." He looked up to see green eyes wince in sympathy. The wizard gestured towards Antioch's hands. "That looks painful," he said, stick of wood making a reappearance. "Let me – " And before Antioch could react, deft fingers were closing around his hand, rolling up his sleeve to reveal the bruised, bloody mess that was his right wrist. A tap of cool wood on the back of his hand, and the torn skin was knitting itself back together, angry welts fading and cuts closing, until the wounds looked several weeks old.

Breath hitching, Antioch scrambled away, taking back his hand.
The other boy looked confused. "Wha – oh." He ran a hand through his hair, which did nothing to tame the mess it already was. "Sorry. I should've warned you. It's just a healing spell." He jerked his head at Antioch's other hand. "You should let me treat that before it gets infected."

"Who the hell are you?" Antioch hissed, hugging his freshly-healed hand closer to his chest. He could feel hysteria bubbling up his throat.

"Harry Potter," the boy replied, rocking back on his heels as though to give Antioch space to breathe. "Students of Hogwarts, school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Slytherin House." Antioch vaguely wondered whether any of that sentence was supposed to make sense. Harry gave a small smile. "Your brother came to our doorstep this morning. We've come to give you a hand." He extended an arm, fingers spread out. "We only want to help. You have my word."

Antioch was reaching back, presenting his injured wrist in blind trust before he could think better of it. Green eyes found his, corners crinkling. A word, a tap of wood on skin, and pain was replaced by a soft tingle, wounds resorbing into nothingness.


The red-haired man stood from where he was talking to Ignotus, the child snuggled in his arms, face hidden in the crook of his neck. "We have to hurry," the man – Godric – said, face grave. "The boy isn't well."

Which was enough for Antioch to find the strength to rise to his feet. The ground swayed, but an arm sneaked around his waist, steadied him before he could fall over. "What's wrong with my brother?" he demanded, stealing a glance at Ignotus, who did not respond. A chasm seemed to open in Antioch's stomach. He couldn't remember when he had last heard his brother's voice.

"I don't know," said Godric. "Either Helga or Salazar will have to have a look at him. I've done what I could with his injuries, but – " He shrugged, apologetic. "Healing was never my calling."

Remembering that the man could turn into a giant cat at will, Antioch made to take Ignotus from his arms, but Harry held him in place. His withering glare had the other boy roll his eyes.

"You're too weak to carry him," the green-eyed man said, voice even, as though Antioch was the unreasonable one here.

"Heal your side before you bleed out, Harry," Godric said before he could snap back. The man looked at Harry with an expression appropriate to a mourning house. "Salazar's going to gut me," he muttered morbidly. He sighed. "Hurry, please. We have to head back quickly."

"My side – ?"

Antioch looked down. He grimaced. The idiot had forgotten to tend to his own wound. Blood was still oozing from the gash on his hip. A muttered curse, and Harry raised his stick, stopping the haemorrhage with a flick of his wrist.

They got going.

The patches of sky visible between the thick branches of the trees darkened as they walked. Rich red and amber faded to night-blue. The occasional cloud hid the burning stars. The damp, cutting cold of Autumn descended along with the sun, creeping through Antioch's torn clothes with ease. Harry, who he was still leaning onto, whispered something he didn't hear when he started shivering, and warmth seeped through his limbs, like stepping in a hot bath in the midst of Winter.
The Forest rustled with night life, owls and deers and rabbits. At some point, Antioch caught Harry waving at the trees, a friendly smile on his face. "Centaurs," the man said as though it explained anything.

After a while, Antioch lost track of time. Exhaustion was weighting his every steps. He felt he was walking through a dream, hardly aware of his own body, mind pleasantly detached from it all. He thought he lost consciousness several times, but he never seemed to stop walking.

A shake on the shoulder roused him from one such sleep-like states.

"We're almost here," said Harry. His breath tickled Antioch's face.

The trees had grown thinner, younger-looking. There weren't as many roots underfoot. One last turn, and the path opened in front of them.

Antioch's breath got stuck in his lungs.

A castle, tall and proud, stood against the backdrop of the sky, turrets and towers piercing the silver clouds. A handful of windows were lit, spilling welcoming warmth into the night, grey stone all but glowing in the darkness.

"Home," Harry whispered beside him. There was pride and sorrow and something else shining in his eyes. He hardly looked human in the soft shine of the moon. "Come on," he said. "Let's get you inside."

Fully awake now, and all too aware of the chill of the wind, of the heat of Harry's skin, Antioch let the other man guide him through the starlit grounds.

Two massive oak doors burst open when they approached, fickle candle fire washing over them. A lone figure came through, long strides eating up the distance. A man, tall and lean, his hair a spill of ink down his back. Antioch felt Harry's grip around his waist tighten minutely.

"Missed us much, Sal?" Godric called when the long-haired man came to a stop in front of them. He was superbly ignored.

A glance in Godric's direction, and the newcomer turned to Harry. The colour of his eyes, something dark and liquid, was indefinable in the weak light of the moon. There was no expression on his aristocratic face, but it didn't feel as though there should be. He just stood there, arms crossed loosely over his chest, looking, and the silence that shrouded him felt loud, somehow. Heavy.

Antioch risked a glance in Harry's direction, to find the young man enduring the scrutiny without flinching. He didn't seem bothered at all, like being stared at with an intensity that could melt stone was something that happened every other day. There was a small smile on his lips, a pleased glint in his eyes, a new ease on the lines of his face.

Antioch had to fight the sudden urge to giggle like a maniac.

He had seen that kind of look before.

"Good evening, Salazar," Harry said, re-adjusting his hold on Antioch, which seemed to be the other man's cue to notice his existence. "We've found the brothers. I think they both need to stop by the Hospital Wing."
Antioch was allowed into the castle.

Harry knew something was wrong the moment the youngest of the three brothers was lowered on a bed. Salazar's eyes widened in something that could only be shock, breath hitching and hands freezing over the small body.

Helga was already busy taking care of Antioch, who sat on his bed, glaring with the fierceness of a thousand suns, Cadmus tucked against his side. Rowena hoovered close by, out of the way but within reach of the Potion's cabinet, looking pale but eager to assist. Godric was talking to the four students – one for each House – standing in the doorway of the Infirmary. No one but Harry noticed the change to Salazar's expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked worriedly, reaching out to lay a hand on the other man's shoulder.

Salazar looked up at the touch. "We need to get everyone out of here," he said, fingers latching onto Harry's wrist, his grip a tad too tight for comfort. "Now."

Harry stiffened at the alarm in his tone. "What – ?"

But Salazar had already turned away. He caught Helga around the waist. "Get out of here," he ordered, loud enough to attract everyone else's attention. He glanced at Ignotus, who had curled up on a side, breathing hard. "Before he losses control."

Helga seemed to understood something from his tone. She paled under her tanned skin, a hand coming to clutch her stomach. "Oh," she breathed. Her eyes narrowed immediately, voice turning even, full of steel. "What are you going to do?"

Salazar looked at her. "With family members – "

"Salazar – "

"I can at least try."

"Would someone please explain what's happening to my brother?" Antioch demanded. He had disentangled himself from Cadmus to get up from his bed.

Salazar spared him a glance. "He's cannibalized his own magic. What he's becoming will kill us all before killing him, if it's not stopped."

Harry's hand twitched towards his wand. He had heard of such children before. Children whose distress was so great they tried to suppress their own magic, turning themselves into a creature that could not be contained within their frail human form. Both the child and the nefarious magic died shortly after the transformation, leaving death and destruction in their wake. Harry sometimes marveled at the fact that he hadn't turned into an Obscurial himself, due to his treatment at the Dursley's. He thought he had felt tendrils of darkness, decayed and venomous, latched onto his soul, gnaw at his chest, trying to take root in his body, back when he was a child. He didn't know what had kept him from turning. He only knew that shivers of dread ran down his spine at the thought of what had nearly happened, every time one such creature was mentioned.

Antioch, who had been sickly pale before, turned livid. "Do something, then," he snarled, pushing away from the bed, hands curled into fists. "You're Sorcerers, aren't you? Use your magic!"

Harry caught him before he could lunge at Salazar. "It's not so easy, Antioch," he murmured in the
other boy's ear, tightening his grip when he struggled to escape. "We deal well enough with non-
magical illnesses. But that's different." He looked at Salazar. "Is there anything we can do?"

The man gave a thin smile. "Yes."

"No, there isn't." Gryffindor had talked this time, leaving the Infirmary's door to stalk into the
room. He looked furious. "I won't let you risk this. Not again."

Slytherin faced him, expression unreadable. "Do you suggest that we let him run rampage, then?"

Godric growled. "I suggest that we contain him while we still have the chance."

"That's equivalent to a death sentence." There was something almost cruel in Salazar's tone. "I
have an idea, Godric. If you would, for once, trust me with – "

"Trust you?!" For a moment, Harry thought Godric was going to punch Salazar with all his
strength. His hands went to cup the Parselmouth's face instead, fingers tangling with his hair. "God
damnit, Salazar! He's been like this for hours. He's lost already." The words seemed torn from his
throat, but his voice never wavered. "You almost died, last time," he grit out, eyes riveted on the
other man. "You would have, if I hadn't gotten you out in time. I won't risk losing you again."

Salazar's hands went to rest over Gryffindor's, linking their fingers together. "I don't need your
approval for this, Godric," he said softly. "I've learned since last time." He ducked down, forcing
Godric to meet his gaze. "He's the same age as your son."

The red-haired man flinched as though he'd been burned. "Damn you," he whispered, letting his
hands slide from Salazar's face. "Damn you, Salazar." He closed his eyes. Stepped away. "If you
die, I'll find a way to bring you back and kick your arse myself."

"Can't wait," Salazar muttered. "Out, all of you. Get everyone away from the corridor as well."

"We're not leaving." Antioch planted his feet apart. Cadmus stayed close to his side. "He's ours.
We're not leaving you alone with him."

"Kid – " Godric started.

"You're right," said Salazar, turning his full attention to the dark-haired boy. "You're not leaving.
I'm going to need both of you."

Antioch looked surprised at the easy acceptance. He stuck out his chin and gave a prim nod.
"Good."

Helga put a hand on Salazar's shoulder, eyes worried as she looked at the brothers. "Are you sure. . . .?"

"Yes, I am." He glanced at Ignotus, who had yet to move, but had started to shake, the air around
him groaning, about to tear. "Go now."

Harry, along with everyone but the brothers, was pushed out of the Hospital Wing, as far as the
Entrance Hall. Godric stalked off without a word, all contained rage and worry, a military cadence
in his steps.

Harry turned to the two remaining Founders.

"It's going to take a while, Mr Potter," Rowena Ravenclaw told him quietly.
Harry cleared his throat. He opened his mouth to say he would go and wait in the common room, sit with his Housemates to let them know what was happening, but –

*You almost died, last time*, echoed emptily in his mind, and dread buzzed in his stomach, an ice-cold fear that overtook his muscles, forced him to stay in place. Somehow, somewhere along the way, he had come to care for Salazar Slytherin to the point that the very thought of going a step farther made him *sick*. Harry knew it was stupid. He was hungry, he was tired, there was nothing he could do to help. But the idea of eating made him nauseous, and sleep was but a distant, ludicrous concept.

It was laughable, really. Salazar Slytherin, renowned Muggle-hater whose bigotry led to the implosion of the Hogwarts Houses. Salazar Slytherin, whose Basilisk sank its fangs in Harry's arm, whose descendent murdered his family. Salazar Slytherin, who had saved his life, given him a place to stay, helped him find his footing in an unfamiliar world. It was a paradox Harry had long since given up trying to wrap his mind around. All he knew was that he cared for the Founder enough that the thought of losing him was too painful to bear. Salazar may be someone he was supposed to hate, but Harry had never been good at doing what was expected of him, anyway. He was incapable of walking away, and right now, nothing else mattered.

"It's alright," he said, rubbing the crook of his right arm. "I'll just wait here."

Sky-blue eyes searched his face. Rowena nodded. "Very well. I'll have a house-elf bring you something to eat." She gave him a smile. "We don't need anyone else falling sick."

"Speaking of which." Helga appeared at her elbow, an arm wrapping around the other woman's waist. "You're not climbing all the way to your tower, my dear. You're coming with me." She nodded to Harry. "I'll be back, Mr Potter," she said, dragging Rowena away despite her friend's half-hearted protest.

Harry was left alone with his thoughts. He sat on the steps of the marble staircase, listening to the whispers of the wind outside, the conversations of the few portraits hung on the walls. The fire from the torches dwindled down, leaving moonlight to swarm the Hall in great patches of silver brilliance, reflected on the white stones around him. The night was long, at this time of year, as the sun set early. It made the wait seem even longer.

Helga came back with a meal for two. She didn't try to make him eat, silently pushed the food on the step between them and let him be. She looked tired, with shadows under her eyes and lassitude in the set of her shoulders. Harry wondered when was the last time she'd slept. He forced a few mouthful of cake down his throat to get a smile.

The night ticked away. Moonshadows moved and swayed with the passage of capricious clouds. Harry closed his eyes and let himself drown in silence. There was a sense of unrest in the castle, a tension that vibrated through the still air. Several times, he thought he heard a distant scream of rage and pain, but the sound always faded when he stiffened, focused on it. He would have accused a dream, if not for the deepening lines of worry at the corners of Helga's mouth.

He was resting his head against the cold marble of the stairs' railing when the woman sucked in a sharp breath, startling him back to consciousness.

"Come on," Helga said shortly, rising to her feet, already angled toward the Hospital Wing.

Harry followed without question, heart hammering erratically with anxiety, and they ran, footfalls echoing loudly in the large hallways.
The doors of the Infirmary had been blasted off their hinges. Claw marks grooved the wood, splinters littered the ground. Venturing closer, Harry smelled blood. The air was heavy with that revolting, coppery stench. He shivered, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

Helga went in first, wand drawn, moving carefully through the remains of what used to be the entrance. Wandlight shone bright in the obscurity. Harry saw the black burns on the walls, the gutted beds that had spilt feathers everywhere. At the back of the room burned the weak flame of a candle, creating a circle of light around a bed that had been spared from the devastation.

"Good. You heard me." Salazar stepped into the light. Harry felt the tight coil of his shoulders ease minutely. The man looked fine, unharmed if somewhat weary. "The boys are safe," he said, a small, victorious smile dawning on his face. He gestured beside the bed, where Antioch and Cadmus were slumped together, deeply asleep. "They passed out half an hour ago. I think bed-rest is in order."

"The youngest?" asked Helga.

"Alive."

The boy laid on the bed, small chest rising and falling at regular intervals. His shirt, which had started out white, was black with blood. Even in unconsciousness, pain lingered on his agitated brow, on his frowning eyes and his parted lips.

Helga glanced around the wrecked Infirmary. "I'll take these two to my common room," she declared, gesturing at the mass of limbs that were Antioch and Cadmus. "And look after them tonight." She looked at Ignotus. "Can he be moved yet?"

Salazar shook his head. "The bleeding has stopped, but I still need to bandage his wounds. They won't let themselves be healed by magic." He sighed. "You go ahead with the oldest. I'll take Ignotus with me."

Helga slid an arm around the man's neck, brought him down in a half-hug to kiss his cheek. "I'm glad you're alright," she murmured, eyes closing when Salazar returned the embrace. Harry sank back into the shadows, turning away from the scene as the two Founders kept talking in low voices.

The woman left shortly thereafter, two small bodies floating after her. Harry was left alone with Salazar.

"Are you going to keep hiding all night?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not hiding," he retorted, sidling closer. "I'm looking after you."

Salazar made an odd noise with the back of his throat, between surprise and laughter, which was probably a testament of how tired he was. "How thoughtful," he said in a drawl to put Snape to shame. "Give me the Wound-cleaning potion, why don't you?"

Harry handed him the bottle with a huff. Which turned into a gasp when Salazar Vanished Ignotus' shirt, revealing a lacerated torso, deep cuts criss-crossing over pale skin. "Shit," he breathed, blood draining from his face at the spectacle. He wasn't exactly squeamish. He'd seen plenty of bad injuries before, bloody limbs and broken bones. But this had him want to close his eyes and clutch his stomach. "Will he be okay?"

Salazar began applying generous amounts of purple liquid on the open gashes, the potion smoking on contact. "It's hard to say," he replied. "Physically, he should be fine. Eventually, at least. But I
can't yet gauge the mental and magical damages half-turning into an Obscurial may have caused."

Harry went to gather bandages on a nearby shelf. "The Obscurus is gone, then? I didn't know that was even possible."

"It wasn't." Salazar sighed. "It isn't. The boy hadn't turned yet. I could've done nothing if he had." He looked tired for a moment, weary with exhaustion. Harry suppressed the urge to reach out, touch him, hands fisting at his sides. Salazar's face rearranged itself in something more neutral. "Godric never told me what creature it is you killed today."

Harry allowed the change of subject, coming back to the bed. "A Phooka," he replied. "Big, ugly thing. Midriff of a man, head and legs of a goat. And fast." There was a twinge of pain in his side. Harry rubbed a hand against his badly-sewed wound. He'd have to take a better look at it, to make sure it was closing properly. "Very fast. Nearly gutted me with those horns."

Salazar's eyes followed the movement of his hand. "A Púca, you mean," he corrected, starting to dress Ignotus' wounds.

Harry frowned. "No," he replied, shaking his head. "I'm positive Godric said 'Phooka'."

Salazar snorted derisively. "Púcas are nature spirits that originate from Ireland. Godric isn't Irish. He never could pronounce anything properly."

Harry held a gauze in place, careful not to apply too much pressure to the wound. Salazar secured the bandage on Ignotus' waist. Harry was watching him work when his words sunk in.

"Wait," he said, slow and careful. "Godric isn't Irish? Meaning that you are?"

He almost didn't catch Salazar's hands faltering in their work.

"Ah," the Founder said, softly. "Not what I told you, was it?"

Harry shook his head. "You said something about Mercia. Which is, as I remember it, England. Not even the same island."

Salazar hummed. "Yes, I am Irish," he said, and his voice changed as he talked, silken tones deepened by an accent foreign to Harry's ears, rougher vowels, lilting consonants. He shivered. "I can't remember when was the last time I didn't lie about it."

"Why?" Of the few things Harry knew about Salazar, his birth country had been one of them. One certainty he could fall back on. He couldn't tell whether it was anger, betrayal or a mix of the two that sprang up his chest. Merlin. Another lie. Harry had been lied to all his life, truth twisted and manipulated, supposedly for his benefit, to spare him the rattling starkness of life, as if he didn't know it already, in all its cruel ugliness. He was sick of being lied to, coddled like a child. He hadn't been a child since he was one-year-old. He wished people would stop pretending otherwise. "Christ, Salazar," he breathed, past the awful tearing in his gut. "Why would you even lie about something like that?" Is there anything I know of you that's the truth? What else have you been hiding? How can I trust you, Salazar Slytherin?

From the start, Harry had implicitly trusted Salazar to tell him the truth, blunt and honest. He'd thought the man had known there was no need to treat him like something fragile, something that couldn't handle the world as it was. What a fool he'd been.

Salazar didn't look at him as he answered. "You were wary of me, when we first met," he sighed, gently cleaning blood from an oozing wound. "You still are, sometimes. I can see it in your eyes."
He wrung the cloth clear of blood, eyes darting to Harry, daring him to deny. Something wry twisted his mouth when nothing went forthcoming. "My family has a – reputation. Even here, across the sea. I didn't want to add to your mistrust by mentioning what's left of them. You were very sick. I figured there was no need to worry you any more." His ever-expressive hands stilted, twitched. Keeping from closing into fists, or perhaps from reaching out. Shoulders drawing back, a determined set, Salazar met Harry's eyes. "Actually," he said, something sharp, self-directed pulling at his lips. "That's not entirely true. I didn't want your opinion of me influenced by my estranged blood."

"Oh, Salazar." Harry shook his head, at loss for words. You have enough of a reputation on your own, Salazar, he did not say. Nothing you could've said would have influenced the way I saw you. But that would be revealing too much, so he pursed his lips and stayed silent, rolling Ignotus over so that they could do his back. Two fingers startled him, brushing the underside of his chin in a fleeting caress.

"I was wrong, for what it's worth," Salazar told him, like that wasn't worse.

Salazar hadn't told him the truth because he hadn't trusted Harry with it. Harry knew what happened when you gave pieces of yourself for someone else to keep. You made yourself vulnerable to them. You put yourself in a position where you could be judged, and found lacking. It took courage, handing out the ability to be hurt this deeply, exposing your throat, hoping you would receive lips instead of teeth. Harry had kept plenty of things to himself for that very reason. Dark jagged shards not even Ron and Hermione knew about. He couldn't begrudge Salazar for keeping himself safe from Harry, not really. Not when Harry had been lying to him since the day they met. Not when Harry hadn't given him anything in return.

"I'm from Surrey," he blurted out. "It's about forty miles west of London. Lived there with my aunt and uncle since the night my parents died."

When he found the strength to look up, Salazar was staring at him, eyes too-wide, lips parted as though words had forced his jaw open, refusing to come out. Under Harry's gaze, the man seemed to get a hold of himself, soften. He inclined his head, bowing around a smile Harry couldn't decipher.

"Thank you, Harry," he said, the way he might have done had Harry given him a precious gift.

They finished off in silence, wiping the sweat and dirt amassed on Ignotus's skin with broad stokes. Harry brooded over what Salazar had told him, replaying the words in his head, working out the tangled meaning of them. You were very sick, Salazar had said. Harry was pretty sure he'd implied that Harry's mental and physical welfare had been his responsibility. He'd needed Harry's trust so he could heal him. The thought didn't sit right with him, churned disquietly in the swooping darkness of the Hospital Wing.

"Is this what I am to you, Salazar?" he asked, encompassing the scene before him with a sweep of his hand, Salazar bent over Ignotus's bedside, tending to the broken boy, the gesture stretching beyond, all the way to the Dungeons where his Housemates slept. "Am I another child whose life you saved?"

Salazar took his time answering. He put away the dirty rag he'd been using. Dried off his hands. He leaned against a table with a deep sigh, looking at the ground as he contemplated the question. Harry couldn't take his eyes off him, heart thundering his in throat and ears and wrists.

"You were never a child, Harry," Salazar said at length, carefully, loud in the silence of the Infirmary. "I don't think you've ever had the chance."
Harry's eyes closed on their own accord. He exhaled a shaky breath, though he couldn't tell where all the fading trepidation had come from. He felt relieved. He felt confused about feeling relieved. He didn't have time to process the lightened beats of his heart that Salazar's voice sounded again, stark in the darkness.

"Is this what I am to you, Harry?" he asked, mirroring Harry's gesture, head tilted to a side. "A stranger who picked you up from the road, yet another teacher?"

"You were never a stranger, Salazar."

The words sat between them, world-heavy. Salazar's eyes were the colour of the ocean in a rainstorm in this swaying light. Harry could feel himself tip forward, teetering over the depths of them. The air felt thick enough to be carved at knife-point. Neither of them spoke or looked away, the standstill fragile as splintered glass.

"I see," Salazar said, and perhaps he did see, heard all the words Harry wasn't saying. He sighed, pushed away from the table. Harry let him edge closer, walk around the bed between them when he himself couldn't move. Salazar stopped in front of him, a dry crook to his lips. "Pull up your shirt," he ordered, at the exact moment saliva decided to desert Harry's mouth, his heart doing an odd, twisting jolt behind its breastbone.

"I – Sorry?" he sputtered, his cheeks tainting faint pink.

"Pull up your shirt," Salazar repeated, honey-sweet. "It's your turn, Harry; I'm all yours. You know I can't let you go to bed without checking."

When Harry didn't react beyond blinking dully, catatonic, vaguely wondering when the world had stopped making sense, Salazar pressed a hand to the center of his chest. He pushed, kept pushing until Harry staggered back a step, another, until cool smooth stone rasped against his back, his head thrown back against the wall. Then. Then. Then Salazar was sinking to his knees, right there on the hard ground in front of Harry, his long clever fingers on Harry's clothes, working to roll up his shirt and expose skin and Harry's brain was buzzing, ringing blank with incomprehension but for the absurd, roaring thought of yes, yes please and –

A sharp, tearing pain bloomed on his right hip, startling a gasp from his mouth. Harry bit his lips and tasted blood, swallowing on the noise, high and keening, that was crawling up his throat. His heart rammed up his ribs; he'd forgotten to breathe.

"Good grief, Harry," said Salazar, who was kneeling between Harry's legs and pushing up his clothes. He sounded aggravated, amused, Harry wanted to shout at him. "Your job on Antioch's wrists was decent enough. How come you can't be bothered to treat yourself properly?"

He didn't wait for an answer, not that Harry had intended to give him one with his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth. Salazar called his wand with a flick of his wrist, tapped the wood along Harry's skin, the soft cadence of murmured spells tumbling from his lips. The sting of a Cleaning charm, the tingle of a Healing one, and he was done, was smoothing Harry's shirt back in place, rising to his feet –

Falling.

Harry yelped in surprise, coming to life. He caught Salazar before he could hit the ground, arms locking around the small of his back, hauling the Founder up, flush against his chest, secure and where he should be, warm breath stuttering against his neck, lean angles fitting against him, slumping with weight.
"Shit, shit, shit," Harry chanted. Salazar's breath was laboured, a wretched rattling near his ear. He shook in Harry's arms, violent tremors rocking his frame, rippling between them. Harry tightened his hold, instinct-driven, palms resting flat against Salazar's back, pressing him close in an effort to ease him through it, lessen those great shivers. "Salazar," he called, alarmed, urgent. "Merlin, you're shaking. Tell me what's wrong, what do I do – "

Salazar huffed a laugh against his ear, a low, pained thing. He didn't say anything, folding himself against Harry who was freaking out. Though he was taller than Harry by a good margin, he wound up with his head tucked in the crook of Harry's neck, breathing shuddering breaths at the base of Harry's throat. After a moment, some bunched, nervous tension seemed to seep out of him, left him lax, pliant in Harry's arms. Harry wished he could see his face.

"I'm fine," he said eventually, pulling back a fraction, as if to test his strength. "I stood up too quickly."

But something was off in the timber of his voice, in the faint lines around his eyes. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, Harry bunched a hand in the back of Salazar's tunic, forced him to stay in place, to look at him.

"Lumos," he enchanted, fumbling for his wand, bathing the room in white-blue light. "Merlin's balls, Salazar," he cried when the Founder's face came into view. His skin had taken the grey, sickly tint only severe blood-loss could cause. Black-purple bruises circled his eyes as though he hadn't slept in weeks.

"You look dreadful," Harry informed him through gritted teeth, furious, trembling with it. "You should've said something, you raging moron – No, you don't get to speak," he snarled when Salazar opened his mouth with a noise of protest. "I'm the one who can't take care of myself, am I? What the bloody hell happened to you?!!"

Salazar considered him for a moment, then rolled his eyes, as though Harry was the one being overly dramatic here, when clearly he was, flopping in Harry's arms like a damned princess. Wordlessly, perhaps to respect Harry's wish, he pushed himself away, rolled up his sleeves. Thin, curling scar spiralled down the inside of his hand, stretched to his wrist and forearm in the precise, merciless way of magically-induced injuries, straight and deep. Harry stared, horrified. Murderous.

"Who did this," he asked, flat, a beast screeching for blood in his stomach, pacing down his spine, tearing at the line between vengeance and protectiveness.

"Myself," said Salazar, but the words had no meaning. "I needed to tie the boys with my blood. It's – old magic. Blood magic. I – "

His eyes closed in pain, face growing pale, chalk-white. He swayed on his feet, pitched forward again, his own weight too much to carry. Harry didn't think twice before closing the distance between them, opening his arms. Salazar sagged against him, shaking and panting and –

Darkness and screams and blood. The child was trashing against the bed. Yelling. Screaming. Garnet-red stark against pale skin, sliding down his arms, sickeningly warm as it seeped away his strength, searing knife-pain splitting flesh. Magic howled against him, an unnatural wind that was as enticing as it was dangerous, a honeyed trap of power that called to him, sweet in all its lethal beauty. Quicksilver thoughts flashed across his mind, lightning in a stormy sky, runes and arithmancy, absurd barriers to stop the monster taking life before him –

A gasp, a shove, Salazar tore himself away, far from Harry's offered warmth, mind and body snapping back, leaving Harry to stumble at the loss, empty, bereft. Cold.
"Ah – I'm sorry." The Founder shook his head, eyes huge, startled, disbelief lacing his tone. His skin had taken the colour of old ashes, deathly pale in the light of Harry's wand. "I can't... I need... Harry, I'm very –"

Harry caught his wrist before he could stagger further away, as much to steady him as to assure himself of the strength of the Founder's pulse. Harry's heartbeat sung a slow, regular rhythm in his chest, a contrast with Salazar's stuttering beats. He felt calm. The limpid, eerie kind of calm that overtook him before a battle, gave artificial clarity to his thoughts. Salazar could barely hold himself together, so Harry would do it for them both.

"What do you need?" he asked, and Salazar fell silent. His fingers tightened reflexively between Harry's, tugging lightly, a subconscious reassurance. Jaw clenching, Harry breathed in. Out. "C'mon," he ordered, coming to a decision. "I'll get you to the common room."

A flick of his wand, a whispered spell, and Ignotus rose in the air, body cradled in Harry's magic. The young man didn't let himself pause before he snaked an arm around Salazar's waist. The Founder didn't resist, sliding a hand around Harry's shoulders, leaning against him after a second of hesitation.

"Go on. You're not that heavy. I won't fall over," Harry promised, which seemed to be all the incentive Salazar needed to rest more of his weight onto him, sighing inaudibly.

"You're infuriating," the Founder muttered, too exhausted to sound anything but exasperatedly fond.

Harry started to walk, a careful step after another. "It's a quality I learned from my Head of House," he retorted.

"Brat."

They tiptoed around the trashed pile wood that was the door of the Infirmary, out in the night-cool corridor, wind chiming against old stone. They ventured across the great swathes of silvery light shivering across the grand, deserted hallway. The rotten, decayed magic of the Obscurus faded in the distance, the air growing crisp, clear, a balm for fevered skin. Harry breathed deep, shuffling forward, Salazar a limp, wobbly line of warmth against his side. As they passed the marble staircase, glowing ivory in moonshine, he focused inwards, feeling along the seams of his fledgling Occlumency shields. He nudged, pushed, a sliver of will batting the thin protection away, his thoughts rushing forth like the sea contained, expanding inside his skull, reaching out –

Beside him, Salazar came to an abrupt halt. His fingers dug in Harry's shoulder, bruising flesh, white-knuckled. A low, incredulous chuckle rose up from the depths of his throat, torn and hollow.

"You have no idea what you've just offered, have you?" he asked, amazement colouring his tone. He looked at Harry as though he couldn't believe he existed, breathed his name like a prayer. Fingers skimmed Harry's temple, skittered down to the ridge of his cheekbones, the sharp turn of his jaw. "I am a selfish man, Harry," Salazar told him, like a secret or a warning. "Some things you shouldn't present so readily. Least of all to me."

I might just take them, he said, pushing against the openness in Harry's mind, curling in it, but the voice was clear, coherent in a way Salazar hadn't been moments before; his body no longer ached with strain, Harry could feel it, the sweet relief of it, all the way from where their thoughts were touching, blending into one. So he contented himself with a smile, soft and satisfied, and let his mind stretch wide, welcoming. Salazar made a noise, deep in his chest, low and a little broken and not entirely human.
When Harry pressed against him, urging him without words to start moving again, Salazar followed.

All the way to the common room, there was the faintest echo of foreign thoughts against Harry's own, a soft, delicate friction where the edges between their minds meshed and blurred. Broken fragments of memory, sights, smells, sounds, surfaced like fishes coming up for air, emerging from deep waters. Both their steps were all the steadier for it.

{...}

Some miles away, deep in a forest of ancient trees, midnight crept onto the world, shook the woods and tore the earth, coalescing into a single tear into the night-still air.

A sliver of darkness came wafting through.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Godric was five years old the first time someone pushed a sword in his hands.

Five and young, five and a child. Soft and bright and without strength to hold up the blade. He'd looked at the length of steel that made his arms tremble, the blunt edge that reflected faint sunlight. The hilt had chafed the tender skin of his palms. Shiny metal had looked back at him, a jagged mirror of blood-red hair and gold-flecked eyes. "That's what you are, now," someone had told him. He couldn't remember who; father, brother, trainer. An ageless voice that had given him a function and an identity in the same sentence. "You're a sword that fights, a sword that strikes and little else."

But he'd been a little boy who couldn't lift the sword he was supposed to be in a family that had no use in it for a child, a family that lived for war and needed a weapon. So he'd made himself learn to be someone else, something else. He became the burn of overworked muscles that strained up from stone-hard grounds, the hiss of steel that slashed through fire-warm air, the grind of bone-white knuckles that punched and punched and punched.

He was eight years old when his mother died.

Eight and proud, eight and trying. Black and blue and heart-bruised. His father had been away fighting someone else's battles. Their house had been full of death and of life, newborn wails and old whispers. He had taken his sword, no longer too heavy to bear, too rough to his skin. He'd gone to his training field and raged. Grieved the only way he knew how, pushed everything that hurt and mattered into the blade and struck.

Someone had given him his mother's wand that day. He couldn't remember who, couldn't bring himself to care. "This is yours," they had told him. "And that's what you are now. A wand that destroys, a wand that curses and little else."

But he'd been a wizard who couldn't do magic in a family that no longer had a witch in it to teach him, a family that was different from what he was and needed a protector. So he became the heat of power that rushed through his veins, the spark of lightning that pooled under his ribs, the burst of spells that crushed and razed and shattered.

He was ten years old the first time he killed a man.

Ten and lonely, ten and angry. The back-alley had been dank, had reeked of stale water and alcohol. Mud sucking in his boots like slimy quicksands, darkness weighing on his shoulders like chain-mail made of lead. The man had been drunk, had had a knife in one hand and a girl in the other. Godric hadn't know him. He hadn't known the girl either. He hadn't even been on assignment, just wandering through the darkened cesspool of the city, letting his feet take him where they would. He'd seen the knife gleam silver in the night, the girl's eyes – green, like his mother's – slide shut in fright, and he'd just – reacted. Unsheathed his sword, the grind of metal familiar as his own voice now, dodged the first clumsy swing of the other's blade, the second, bent his knees, readied his stance. Thrust, up in someone else's body.

It had been easy. His sword had slipped between two of the man's ribs, splitting soft flesh and yielding muscles, frail body weak against tempered steel. The drunkard had choked, had coughed
up dark, dark blood, lost and surprised as life bled from his eyes. Godric had watched him fall with
his heart in his throat and his arms steady, horror growing in his chest as Death descended on the
narrow street, cold and final.

This is what I am, he remembered thinking. Flesh and blood and steel. Death for a speck gold, fire
for who can buy it. Little else.

Then he met Salazar.

He had been eleven. A bit broken at the seams, rough and unpolished, hard the way the world had
taught him. His father and older brothers had killed their way into nobility with dubious services to
the crown. He'd watched from the sidelines, too young yet for his hands to be as blood-slick as
theirs, but far from innocent nonetheless. He'd watched and listened as they talked of murder and
theft, felt terribly confused because they were family and yet it all felt so very wrong. Lacking any
kind of moral compass, with few relatives and even fewer friends to turn to, he'd clung to that
feeling with all he'd had, going with his guts because he hadn't had anything else to trust.

He'd been steel that shed blood and magic that slaughtered, the breath that caught in his enemy's
throat in the heartbeat before death, the fright in their eyes before they knew nothing more. But
he'd also cared, felt a warmth in his chest that pushed him to share food with other street rats, walk
home old women, the divide between who he had been and what he had felt a gaping chasm,
slowly crushing him from the inside, a star collapsing on itself.

Salazar had crashed into his life like a tidal wave, overwhelming, sweeping everything in its way,
leaving a sharp tang of change in its wake, crisp as sea brine. He'd been a storm-eyed boy with a
snake on his shoulders and shadows in his steps, silent as a ghost but riveting in the way of a
tempest that gathered on the horizon, burdened the air, bruised the ocean. There had been
something both utterly foreign and achingly familiar about him.

The two of them had collided with all the strength of racing warhorses, had dug their nails under
each other's skin and not let go. It had hurt, this meeting, this shared life, had torn them both to
to pieces and glued them back together differently. It had been inevitable. Godric wasn't one to
believe in fate or destiny, but he knew with absolute certainty that he and Salazar would have been
drawn to each other's orbits, no matter how far life sought to separate them, how many obstacles
pushed them away. They were polar opposites with striking alikeness, two entities that shouldn't
coexists but lost meaning without the other. The sell-sword brat who posed as a squire and the
beggar boy who hid the poise of a king.

They had become friends in a violent, all-encompassing relationship that had bared Godric's heart,
had pulled him back from the abyss he'd been falling down to. The mad wilderness in Salazar's
eyes had tamed to something softer, more caring. They used to meet up in the dead of night and
before daybreak, whenever Godric could escape his duties. He'd always gone with his sword,
pushed the blade in Salazar's hands in an excuse to teach the other boy how to fight. "Look,
Salazar," he had never said as his friend went through well-practised exercises. "That's what I am,
and it's yours now."

For his part, Salazar had met him with whispered stories of faraway realms that didn't revolve
around pain and grave-dirt. "Look what the world could be," he had seemed to reply, mesmerizing.
"Not everything is death and betrayal, my friend. Look all we could do together, look all we could
be."

They had taught each other magic, had laughed and played and lived. Godric had given Salazar
everything he had been, had let the boy see and do as he pleased, because it had felt right to trust
him, to love him like he had never loved his own family. In return, Salazar had revealed himself in
bits and pieces, keeping some parts hidden, but it hadn't mattered, it didn't matter still, because they had had each other it had been enough.

While he'd been climbing up the army's ranks, his name and reputation recognized among his men, Godric had watched Salazar charm his way from the sludge of the streets to the polished halls of the royal court, from ragged vagabond to prodigal apprentice of the kingdom's most respected sorcerer.

They'd been fine, for a long while. If not happy, at least content, each pursuing his own ambitions with the other's help.

It had been nearing their sixth or seventh year together when a Norman warlock stormed the city, nearly succeeded in assassinating the king. Within a night, the fragile peace they'd found had given way under their feet. The Great Purge had begun, vague suspicion and grudging acceptance towards their people turning into mindless hatred in the space of a few hours. Soldiers, some of whom Godric had known since childhood, had ransacked the city in search of anyone with magic in their veins, ripping apart families, tearing homes to the ground. Blood had run down the streets, fire-smoke had choked up the air.

Salazar had found him in this midst of screams and confusion, grim-faced and determined. "Come with me," he had said, and there had been soul-deep grief and age-old sorrow in his voice. "They've killed everyone, Godric. Everyone. They're all dead except us. So we have to live. We're the only ones that matter now." He'd taken Godric's hand and Godric had followed, left it all behind and never looked back.

It had been the two of them against the world. They'd gone far, far away, travelled and found work. It hadn't been easy but they had been free and together and life had been worth living. But now –

Now Salazar was locked up with an Obscurial, could be dead for all Godric knew, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Drawing breath was difficult but Godric managed it all the same, filling his lungs with a familiar fragrance of red apples and firewood that eased the hot irons constricting his chest.

The night was pitch-black outside the stained-glass windows of his tower, mist and shadows plunging the room in cushioned semi-darkness, the warm glow of a lonely candle bleeding crimson and gold against heavy drapes of soft bedsheets that rose and fell to the slow cadence of his son and daughter's respiration.

The two children were dead to the world, faces slack in sleep. Nothing short of a landslide would succeed in waking them before mid-morning. They had exhausted themselves waiting for him to return from the Forest, had only gone to sleep after hearing a watered-down version of the truth.

Godric hadn't told them about Salazar. Salazar who was their Godfather, Salazar who they loved like family. Salazar who was arrogant enough to think he could toy with forces as old as time, who was likely to die before sunrise.

Padding across the room with lithe steps that, out of habit more than necessity, didn't betray the slightest whisper of movement, Godric bit back a surge of magic that tingled his fingertips, body tight and thrumming with restlessness. He reached the end of his chambers, whirled around, fingers tapping the empty air that should hold his sword hilt. The lack of weight at his side was unsettling, throwing off his balance like a missing limb, but Godric always left his weapons behind when he met with his children. War had sharpened him like a whetstone to a blade, had made him look at the world and see threats ready to pounce, had given him reflexes ingrained too deeply to be rooted
out. And it was useful, had saved his life too many times to count, but he didn't want Alma and Meic to grow up looking behind their backs, thinking that hesitation could shove a knife between their ribs, that inattention could sneak up on them to cut their throats. It was selfish, perhaps, to want to protect them from the life he'd had, but Godric knew how dark a place it could be, and it was something he would shield them from to his dying breath.

Hogwarts hummed around him, wards groaning like a creaking ship, unease seeping in the back of his mind in a soft warning.

Fine, then. It wasn't as though he was going to sleep any time soon anyway.

Four long strides and Godric was out of his chambers, halfway down the stairs leading to his House's common room. It was silent at this hour, disturbed only by the crackle of burning logs. Firelight trembled across thick rugs, painting red and amber the round, cosy room, outlining squashy armchairs and wood tables. Godric weaved his way around forgotten bags slumped over the floor and abandoned books lying open, pages fluttering behind him. He went to the stone hole that served as an entrance to this hideout.

A thought had his sword fly to his hand, smacking against his palm just as his Great Aunt's portrait swung open, the old woman grumbling about inconsiderate relatives jostling her awake.

Hogwarts was dark and quiet, silver and night-blue, with nothing but swirling dust to break the perfect stillness of witching hour. Godric breathed in the smell of crushed stone and wet wood, the rush of air deafening in the thick quiet. He found it unnerving, this tomb-like silence. It grated on his nerves like blunt nails on dark slate, threw him in month-old memories, when success was but a faint, desperate hope in a corner of the Founders' minds, uncertainty scraping all four of them raw. He'd gotten used to clear laughs echoing down sun-bright corridors, to the chatter and chaos of his students. The contrast was all the more jarring tonight, with fear and restlessness thrumming just behind this illusion of calm.

A few shortcuts and cooperative staircases later, Godric glided around a suit of armour in an alcove near the Great Hall's doors. The entrance was grand and stately, majestic in its architecture, vaulting ceiling disappearing into high shadows and smooth marble gleaming ivory in the brilliance of the moon. Helga and the Potter boy were seated on the large staircase off to the side, unmoving as the statues surrounding them.

Helga's gaze zeroed in on him the moment he slipped closer, eyes alert, assertive, a hand flying to the handle of her wand.

Anything yet? Godric asked with a tilt of the head, stepping in a shaft of moonlight to see her shoulders ease in recognition.

Helga gave a tired smile, but the worry etched in the curve of her lips was enough of an answer. Forearms cramped from the tightness of his fists, Godric took a few careful breaths, clamping down the panic rising in his chest.

There was no reason to worry just yet. It had taken hours, last time. Hours of waiting, excruciating, for Salazar to get away from the little girl's bed. Hours for Godric to feel himself unravel with every passing heartbeat, worry thick and heavy in the pit of his stomach. It was Sila who had warned him of the danger. The grey snake had convulsed around his shoulders, a broken, furious hiss rolling off her forked tongue, and Godric hadn't cared that interrupting a ritual of this magnitude could level out the small village they'd been visiting, hadn't cared it could kill him, because Salazar had been slumped on the floor, mouth and nose and ears gushing blood, eyes open and pupils blown wide as the Obscurus ate its way to his bones, power so dense in the air that it
had hit Godric like a tangible thing. He had run a dagger through the girl's heart without a second thought while Sila sank fangs deep in her throat. The three of them had fled, left the village as fast as they could, Salazar fading out of consciousness long before arrows started raining down on them.

Salazar hadn't talked for days afterwards, shutting himself off to the recesses of his mind, close enough to touch but miles away from Godric nonetheless. He'd dragged himself back from the depth of this torpor to say, "I misjudged the side-effects of the energy transference," like it was supposed to make sense, like it was enough of a justification for almost dying. Godric hadn't answered then, knowing better than to speak when fear for his friend turned to red-tinted rage that burned away in his guts. He'd bitten back the urge to yell, to grip Salazar's shoulders and shake off the glazed fascination in his eyes. His friend had always been like that, entranced by odd curses and obscure bits of magic, mesmerized to the point of obsession, dancing over the brink between dangerous and lethal without much of a care for the damages that ensued.

Today was no different. Godric wanted to punch something because he knew that saving the boy – Ignotus – was only one of the reasons why Salazar had locked himself up in the Infirmary, under wards too thick for Godric to push through. The Parselmouth had an experiment to finish, curiosity was too beseeching for him to resist. And if he got killed in the process and left Godric alone, well –

There was a murmur of falling silk when Helga moved, half-rising to her feet, looking wary as she reached for him. Godric stepped back and shook his head. I'm fine, he lied with a smile, hands raised, urging Helga to sit back. She looked lovely in this wan, cloud-filtered light, golden hair spun with moonsilver and tan skin glowing in its shroud of darkness. Don't worry about me. I'll wait outside.

The woman didn't seem convinced, but she settled back on the stairs, motions slow and measured. Alright. Don't do anything rash, she said with a parting wave, and Godric shot a mischievous grin that had her smother a smile.

Potter didn't budge when Godric strode past him. The boy had his eyes closed, forehead resting against the staircase railings. His dark hair fell across his face, hiding his expression. He looked asleep but for the tight set of his shoulders, the white-knuckled fist on his lap. He whole body was coiled tight, tense in the focused way of a beast preparing to spring. Not for the first time, Godric wondered what kind of relationship tied him to Salazar, what earned this dedication. This devotion. He wondered about the way Salazar sometimes looked at the boy, as though he were an intricate spell for him to unravel.

Potter intrigued Godric, too, raised his hackles because something was different about this boy. There were hidden depth to him, things that were off, that didn't fit, from the disparities in his knowledge to the steel in his eyes. He knew things he shouldn't, didn't know things he should, and everything that he was screamed of troubled past, of jagged scars that weren't just skin-deep. Godric had met countless men like him before, death-stained and world-weary. They were the kind who he had seen raid villages for a handful of coin, kill and rape just because they could.

But –

But Godric had been trained since childhood, honed and sharpened into a perfect weapon. He could look at a man and tell if he was a threat by the shift in his eyes, the way he held himself. He could act, move in for a kill, all in the half-instant after they met. And Harry –

Harry didn't register as a threat. He was lost and disoriented perhaps, but for all that his eyes sometimes hardened to uncut diamonds, he was kind. A hard-working student who threw all of
himself in his classes, who was always there to offer his Housemates a helping hand. He had trudged through the filth of the world and come out unbroken if a little frayed, and that was something Godric could respect, if nothing else.

Another shadowy corridor and Godric vaulted over a windowsill, knees bent to smooth his landing. Torches flared to life around the courtyard, driving away the cover of night, scintillating off sword-steel and cobblestone. Cold air slid down his throat, crisp and bracing like melting ice.

The spell was quick and easy, something he had created in the lonely years following his mother's death, a hopeless cry for guidance; a sigh, a touch of will, and glittering rocks were rolling on the ground, assembling like a wind-shaped fog gleaming with moonlight. Quicksilver for the blade, shiny and lethal, coal-black for the face, changing and featureless, and eyes like forge-fires, intense and burning.

Godric drew out his sword, scabbard clattering out of sight. He bowed low to the coalesced shade. "Would you care for a dance?" he asked, and his creation bowed back, sword lifting in a graceful arch.

It was like fighting a warrior made of mist, fast and deadly, that skimmed just out of reach, twirled and danced like wildfire. Godric became flowing motions that blurred into one another, familiar as breathing, the sleek pull of his body that bent and twisted on a whim, the feel of air whistling against his sword like the softest music. He lost himself, let everything fall away, drown in the night cradling him until he was loose and breathless and he could feel himself settle back inside his bones.

He could live without Salazar, even though sometimes it felt like he'd forgotten how to. He could live and be complete, no matter how much it'd hurt. He had followed this man to the end of the earth and back, would do it again without a heartbeat of hesitation, but for all that their lives were intertwined and better for it, who they were didn't stop where the other started. Salazar was his best friend, cherished and precious beyond words, but Godric wasn't accountable for the choices he made. He could only accept and live with them, pick up the pieces afterwards, move on with what was left.

One last step, a downward slash that aimed true and Godric spun away, let the construct shatter on the ground, scatter like stardust.

"Good show, Gryffindor," a voice called from the darkness, soft and amused, and Godric didn't startled because he had felt her there, hidden in clouds and shadows, and he'd let her slid into place, welcomed in his solitude.

"Hello Ravenclaw," he said, half-turning to face the woman. She lingered in the doorway, opalescent in the starlight, eyes burning bright in the vastness of space, fey-like and beautiful. A cascade of night-black hair spilled freely over a deep-hooded winter cloak that fell over her thighs, leaving bare tight trousers and knee-high boots. "Out for a stroll?"

She gave a tight smile, stepped out into the courtyard. Torch fire washed over her, glimmering bronze on her skin. "Busy doing property damage?" she snapped back, because bantering was just about the only way they knew how to communicate.

Godric rolled his eyes. He resented that accusation. "Coming from the woman who nearly blew up the West Wing - "

"That was an accident and you know it, you obnoxious twat." But Rowena was smiling, swift and lovely.
Godric huffed a laugh. He set down his sword. "What are you doing up, then?"

It wasn't uncommon for Rowena to seek him out early in the morning or late at night, blade in hand, asking for a spar. Of the four of them, she was the only one who hadn't had combat training when they had met. Both Godric and Salazar had had weapon masters teaching them since childhood, and Helga had grown up among Vikings, where they taught girls to defend themselves the way they did boys. But Rowena, heiress to an important Pictish clan, had never been allowed to wield a sword, or hold bow, as was proper to her people's customs.

"Would you like to learn?" Godric had asked her on a clear summer night while they watched Helga give Salazar a run for his money with twin axes she swung around in a most frightening manner. Rowena's eyes had shone brighter than the sky above their heads. She'd taken the blade he presented her, never gave it back. What she lacked in years of experience she made up with in dedication, devouring every bit of information Godric gave her, every single motion, never forgetting a thing and throwing it all back at him with precise ruthlessness.

But tonight was not a night to spar, with Rowena too weakened by her illness and Godric too frayed by Salazar's stubbornness.

Rowena moved, hands unwinding from behind her back. Dark lacquered wood glittered in the dark, the round, inviting shape of a large bottle. "Up for a drink, firehead?"

Godric blinked, a slow, delighted smile curling his lips. "I love you, you hag," he declared, and it was heartfelt.

Rowena rolled her eyes, hopped on a windowsill, back against Hogwarts' stone, a foot braced on the ground. Godric joined her moments later, a leg crossed under the other's thigh, their knees touching. Rowena wasn't one for physical affection, and Godric knew better than to impose on her space, had learned to reign in his own habit to reach and touch around her, but though she wasn't one to cling, she didn't flinch away from small contacts anymore. Genuine warmth danced in her eyes when Godric was done settling comfortably on the narrow strip of rock.

She handed him the bottle. Godric took a swing, liquid amber burning as it glided down his throat, warming him up. The night was cold, rustled through dead leaves with its bone-dry fingers. Darkness was thick, held the world in a suspended breath as it bit through the layers of their clothes.

"There'll be snow soon," Rowena murmured, taking back the bottle. She drank. "Will your wife be back in time for winter? Won't be easy to travel once the roads freeze over."

"I don't know," Godric sighed. "The last letter came to me a month ago. She's headed into the desert."

He wasn't – worried, exactly. Marya was a capable witch, an admirable fighter, and her Company was one of the few Godric trusted. Falling behind the surface of the Earth for months at a time wasn't all that unusual for her. She was always moving, could never stay still. It's a big world, she said. Too much to see.

Godric missed her. A piece of his heart travelled with her, the absence pulling at him like a hook to his gut, but it was a pain he was willing to bear, an ache he could live with, better than the alternative.

He knew wanderlust sang to her the way it once sung to him, before he'd found a place worth calling home. He knew how tantalizing the cry of the unknown could be, how desperately alluring.
He never tried to make her stay. She craved freedom, the endless burn of African deserts, the vertiginous infinity of rolling oceans. These weren't entities Godric could hope to compete against. No that it mattered; he loved her. Had loved her since that first night in the heart an Iberian plain, when she had smiled at him under the stars, bright and impossibly beautiful as she took his hand, brought it to her hips, their clothes pooling at their feet.

She always came back; Godric always waited.

They had tried settling down, once. When they were young and in love and foolish enough to believe they could twist both their natures into making their marriage work like any other. As though she could become insensitive to the pulse of adventure in her veins, as though he could ignore the claws Salazar had latched into his soul. It had lasted a year. Before they were both nerve-frayed, miserable shadows of who they were supposed to be. She had gone back into the wild, Godric had watched her go with relief.

His only regret was their children. They had lived nomads' lives before Hogwarts, balanced between two parents that ran after dangerous dreams. Now that Godric had put an end to it, had built them a home and refused to force them back on the road, they rarely ever saw their mother. Only in short bursts, a few days here and there. She rushed into their lives smelling of ancient sands and foreign flowers, bringing strange gifts from faraway places. She loved them, but even they were not enough to hold her in place. She was less of a mother now, more of a crazy aunt whose visits were pleasant surprises.

Something must have shown on his face, because Rowena's foot nudged his side, merciless as her heel dug in his ribs.

"Ow!" Godric groaned in protest, rubbing at his abused flesh. He cast the woman a wounded glare. "Must you always be horrible to me?"

"Stop worrying, idiot," she growled, hitting him again. He grunted. "She'll be fine. She's a lot tougher than you."

Godric snatched the alcohol from her hands and organized a strategic retreat by means of a bottle-shaped shield. "I know she is," he grumbled, hugging the flagon closer to his chest. "Stop hitting me, woman! By the gods, did you come here only to torment me? Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Rowena scowled but relented, setting the talon she called a foot across Godric's legs. "Helga wasn't there," she replied, tone short. "I'm sleeping with her."

And that was just too precious to let pass, wasn't it? Godric gave his brightest shit-eating grin. "Are you, now?" he purred, grin widening when her cheeks flamed up, becoming rouge visible even in the obscurity. Sweet was the taste of revenge. "My, my, Ravenclaw! And you didn't even tell your best fri – oof!" The pointy end of her boot found its way to his sternum. Choking for air, Godric continued, "You know I'll love you no matter wha – AH!" He ducked out of the way of a sickly-violet spell. It exploded against a wall. Solid stone fractured. "Dammit you old harpy, control your strength!"

Rowena smiled. It looked sinister. "I do," she replied in a sugar-coated tone that had had lesser men quaking in fear for their lives. Godric could feel cavities start forming at the sound. "Why aren't you the one battling an Obscurus? Salazar keeps much better company than you."

"Of course he bloody does," Godric muttered. The man charmed snakes with words. Sighing, he uncapped the bottle, which had miraculously survived Rowena's assault, and took another swing. "Seriously, though," he said, a little worried because Rowena's love for Helga was glaringly
obvious to anyone who knew her, with the exception of the woman it concerned. "How are things?"

Rowena blinked a puzzled frown. "Fine – ?" she replied, a note of interrogation in her voice.

And it was good, would have fooled just about anyone, but Godric had lived with Salazar Slytherin since childhood, and Rowena's acting talents had nothing on the man's. Hints of tension knotted her shoulders, alarm darted in her eyes. "Suit yourself," Godric murmured, drinking again and handing her the bottle. He'd have to talk to Salazar. Godric was self-aware enough to know the other male could handle sentimental conundrums with a lot more tact than he himself was capable. And besides –

Rowena stiffened beside him, and his trains of thought shuddered to a stop at her sudden alertness. "Ro –"

"Did you feel that?" she asked, gaze turned to the general direction of the Forest, hand a tight fist around her wand.

Godric scanned the darkness from his defensive crouch. He couldn't feel anything. Ear the distant sway of tall trees in the wind, smell rotting leaves at his feet, see shadows twist into the night. Nothing else. "Feel what?" he asked.

"I – just – " Rowena shook her head. "I'm not sure," she whispered. "Something that burnt cold? I – it's gone now." She sighed, head falling against the wall at her back. "Maybe I'm just tired."

"Right," Godric muttered. Rowena was the most magic-sensitive of the four of them. He grabbed his sword. "How about we head back? Helga will have my head if you're sicker tomorrow because of me."

His friend stood from their perch, and together they slipped back in the castle, unhurried.

"Shall we wait with Helga?" Rowena offered.

Godric nodded. The girls were terrifying in their own right, but he didn't feel like leaving them alone tonight. He was a guardian, a protector, his every instincts rebelled against the thought. None of them was going to sleep anyway, not while Salazar was in danger.

They walked to the Entrance Hall, their footfalls rebounding lightly in the cushioned darkness around them. The deep, drowning blue of Hogwarts didn't feel as hostile with Rowena at his side, a serene presence that kept his worst instincts in check. She had that strange influence on him, on everyone she approached, an innate capacity to broaden minds, to make people dream beyond their stark realities. She was much like wind descending from mountaintops that way, storming expectations in great chilly gusts and leaving upturned ground to build upon in her wake.

Potter and Helga had left the stairwell.

"Something's happened," was Godric's first thought. Worry tightened his stomach, shivered along his limbs. He could perceive his surroundings in great details, the coarse friction of his clothes with each breaths, the cool caress of air on his face, the lazy dance of particles in the moonlight, and he knew his eyes had turned yellow, the lion in him surging to the surface at the threat on his pride, sleek and dangerous. If Salazar was hurt. If Salazar was dea –

Voices.
Godric whirled around, wand half-raised, and –

Froze.

Potter and Salazar stood alone at the end of a hallway, Ignotus' unconscious body floating on mist a few feet away. The two men faced each other, their skin glowing silver in the light spilling from a high window. They looked intangible like this, two timeless ghosts waking to dance together in the slow pulse of the night that cradled them. They seemed to have stopped their music-less waltz mid-beat, Harry's hand on Salazar's waist, Salazar's hand on Harry's shoulder, one looking up and the other down, twilight standing still over motionless features.

"Oh," Godric breathed, soft and surprised. Salazar was alive, he was well, and that was good, it was a crushing weight lifting from his chest. But the sweet, knee-melting relief that swelled in him to the beat of his heart wasn't what locked him in place, what kept him from running to his friend. It was the wondrous smile curling Salazar's lips, the tenderness gleaming in his eyes.

Godric knew where Salazar's interests lay, had found enough naked, boneless men in the other's bed to understand all-too well.

He had been fourteen – fifteen? – the first time it had happened. He had kissed a few girls already, had known what having them against him felt like, the swell of their breasts, the softness of their skin, excitement sparkling in his veins. He had never seen Salazar with a girl, but hadn't asked about it. It had felt out of bounds, somehow, so he had kept his silence, vaguely intrigued but atypically respectful.

Then, one day, he had gone to their usual meeting spot to find Salazar pressed up against a wall, hands bunched up in the lapels of another man's jacket. Godric had almost killed that stranger on sight, blood boiling with rage because Salazar was his friend, and he'd gut that man for touching him, before he'd realised Salazar was pulling him close, not pushing him away, angling his head so that their lips could meet and merge.

"Are you mad at me?" Salazar had asked hours later, after sneaking in a deserted corner of the castle's rose garden to see him. Godric remembered the honeyed smell of the flowers from that spring day, the redness of Salazar's lips. "Of course not," he had answered, because Salazar was his, and he was Salazar's, so what did it matter who the other boy liked to kiss anyway? "Aren't you afraid, though?" And Salazar had laughed at him, quiet and mocking. "Why should I be?" he had replied. "I can't help who I like. And I'm already one thing that'd see me dead, what's another? It's either stake or stones for me. At least I have some choice." "Fair enough," Godric had told him after consideration, and there had been that.

For a while, anyway. There had been other boys afterwards. Godric had watched from a distance, careful to step away when they made an appearance because his fingers always itched for his sword at the thought of them, those nameless men he didn't trust with his friend's heart. He'd made sure Salazar was safe, that no one could find him, because if Godric had a right to spend time with women, then surely Salazar had a right to this, too. He had erased a few memories, led astray a few guards. Everything had been fine.

But he'd wondered.

One night that Salazar's master had been out of town and the two of them could afford a whole evening together, talking about magic in that small room with curious herbs, creaking floorboards and floating candles, Godric had caught himself observing the play of light on the angles of Salazar's face, the slant of his cheekbones, the bow of his lips.
Salazar had closed his book, had set it aside, straightening from his slouch on the floor by Godric's legs. "You can kiss me, you know," he had said, and Godric remembered feeling his heart stutter, his stomach drop like he'd fallen from a tree. "You've been thinking about it all week." Salazar had slid into a sitting position, slow and languid, until he'd eased himself between Godric's knees as though he'd done it a hundred times before, a hand high on Godric's thigh. "Kiss me, Godric," he had ordered before fitting their mouths together, gentle and deliberate, the teasing sweep of his tongue against tingling flesh, the tantalizing scrap of his teeth with the barest suggestion of heat behind it.

Godric had kept his eyes open even as he'd kissed back, as a long-fingered hand carded through his hair, tilted his head to a side, a demanding strength in the motion that had been different from anything he had felt before, though not entirely unpleasant.

He had kept his eyes open because it would have been easy – oh so easy – to close them and imagine softer lips against his own, fuller curves under his hands, and that wouldn't have been right for his friend. It wouldn't have been fair. To Salazar, with his long hair, his careless disregard for gender expectation. Salazar who had lingered in that time between boy and man without all its awkward gawkiness. Who, before his shoulders broadened and his face hardened, had been all slender waist and lithe limbs, a kind of attractiveness that had toyed with the edge of what people called pretty.

It hadn't been right, or fair, or a good idea.

Salazar had smiled against his lips, spit-slick and amused. "There you go," he'd whispered, drawing back. "Glad we got that out of our systems."

They had gone on with their lives, but to this day, Godric found himself asking what if? What if he hadn't drawn back, what if he'd wished to take Salazar to bed and Salazar had let him? What could they have been, as lovers? They already pulled each other apart as friends. Would it have built them back as better men? Would it have destroyed them both completely? Godric would never know. But now that he was watching this –

The way Salazar looked at Potter wasn't entirely unfamiliar, except that it was. New and unfamiliar and entirely unexpected. He had seen Salazar look at his partners with affection, with lust, with passion, but never with this. This was intimacy. This was –

"Interesting, isn't it?" Rowena whispered beside him. Harry and Salazar started to walk away, arms intertwined. The woman was watching them go with pensive eyes. "Want to take bets, Gryffindor?"

Still reeling, Godric turned to her, mind elsewhere. "Sorry?" he mumbled.

"Bets," Rowena repeated with deliberate patience, making known with her tone what she thought of his mental faculties. "About how long it's going to take Salazar to have Potter in his bed."

"What?" That was – Salazar was his friend and Harry was his student, he couldn't put a wager on their relationship.

"You heard me. I'm guessing before half of the next school year. And I want the dragonscaled cloak you bought two summers ago." Rowena shot him a smirk. "Unless you're too much of a chicken to want to play?"

Now, that was just laughable. "Are you crazy, woman?" Godric scoffed. "Harry is from his House. Won't happen before eight months into next year. You shall weep and give me the explosive tags
you stole in China. *All* the explosive tags. Even the dragon you sneaked out when you thought Helga wasn't looking."

Rowena scowled at him. "You'll choke on your words, Gryffindor. Deal."

"May the best man win, then."

"May the – *come back here you little shit!*"

Godric cackled all the way back to his tower.

{...}

The common room was dim and quiet, silver lanterns burning low from the ceiling, dying embers ghosting in large hearths, shining faintly in the gloomy darkness. Windows cast a dark green, watery glow to their surroundings, wavering over rug-covered stone floors and ornate blackwood tables. The Lake was sloshing gently against glass-panes, the sound comforting and familiar, a heavy shield from the night outside.

Harry set Ignotus down on a leather couch, Salazar on another, an arm sliding around the man's waist to help him sit. Worry nagged at him when the Founder did not protest the manhandling. He hadn't talked all the way from the Great Hall to the Dungeons, lost deep in thought, away from Harry's reach for all that he'd been pressed against his side. Harry wondered if he should find Helga to make sure he was all right.

"Please don't," Salazar muttered, head falling back against the couch as he stretched, arms over his head, languid and careful. His thoughts were a muted buzz in Harry's mind. "Let me escape this incident with some of my self-esteem intact."

"You won't need self-esteem if you're dead," Harry pointed out reasonably. He conjured a quilt with a flick of his wand, tucked the warm wool around Ignotus. The child slept on, sighing in contentment as he burrowed deeper under his blanket. His face was no longer contorted in pain. Harry brushed a strand of dark hair away from his thin face, fingers skating, delicate, over soft skin. He felt oddly protective of that boy. He had fought a monster for him, had almost lost Salazar to him. A bond existed between them, forged out of fear and blood and darkness, a strange sense of familiarity that shook Harry to his core. "What are you going to do with him?" he asked Salazar, voice quiet. "With his brothers?" He didn't want to see them being sent away.

"I won't send them away," Salazar answered. A pause. "I can't."

Harry frowned. He went to sit beside the Founder, kicking off his boots and crossing his legs. "You can't?" he repeated. "What d'you mean?" There was a flash inside his head, a glimpse of silver-cold steel biting into pale flesh, carving a precise curling rune despite pain shocking up his nerves, sharp but well-known. Blood, liquid blackness in the moonlight, welled up in graceful arches, encased the small bodies in front of him, sank down –

A breath, deep and startled, and Harry dragged himself free of Salazar's memories, vivid bursts part of him wanted to drown in, dive down to and never come back for air. He shook his head. "Wait," he said, comprehension dawning on him in a sudden, dazing flare. "Wait, Salazar. Did you – Are you – "

"Don't say it," Salazar muttered, eyes closing as though he were in pain.

"Are you a *dad*?"
"Fuck you," the Founder growled. "I'm not. Their father was an abusive prick who deserved the sword Antioch shoved in his back. I just – "

"Blood-adopted them," Harry finished for him. "Oh God." One of these kids would father Voldemort's bloodline. Harry was reeling. He wasn't sure what to feel. "Can't say I was expecting that. You have children."

Salazar mouthed something in a foreign language, gaze going skyward. "I need a drink," he declared. His mind stirred with bone-deep exhaustion, and the faintest glimmer of uncertainty.

Oh, Harry thought, startled. For all that he'd come to understand that Salazar was very much human, to know that this poised, confidant man could feel something as mundane as doubt came as more of a surprise than it likely should. "Don't freak out," he ordered, thinking quickly. "It's not like they're babies. Antioch already thinks himself an adult. It can't be very different from what you're doing with the House. And you won't be alone. The others will help. I'll help, too." And he was not going to reflect on that spontaneous offer, thanks very much.

Salazar chuckled, soft and low, shadows shifting with the curl of his lips, accentuating the curves and slants of his face. His eyes were storm-black in the fuzzy gleam of the fireplace. Harry looked away. Algae were swaying with the swirls of black-green waters, shoals of fish swam by the widows, spectral shapes gliding out of sight.

"You should go to bed," he told the Founder, quiet.

A non-committal hum. Harry glanced sideways. Salazar had closed his eyes, head bent backwards to rest on the couch's padding, his hair a waterfall of dark strands on his shoulders. Harry went to touch his arm. Stopped.

"I can't sleep yet," Salazar murmured without opening his eyes. "Not with Ignotus still unstable. Tell me something, Harry. Anything. Keep me here."

"I – " Harry swallowed. The Founder was a tenuous caress in the back of his mind, evanescent, fading like a tide receding to distant shores, muted as sleep crept on him, heavy and inviting. Anything, he had said. What story could Harry share? He didn't know many fairytales, had never had anyone to read him bedtime stories. A story of his own, then? Samhain was thick, smelled of ripe apples and fresh pumpkins, just outside the sheltered circle of the common room, all grotesque smiles and black burning candles. Harry knew what to say.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my friends and I took out a mountain troll?"

He wasn't used to telling stories. He was used to living them, to having them etched into his nights, into his every haunting nightmare, but the whole world seemed to know his life better than he knew it himself; he rarely needed to talk. Rarely wanted to as well, because once the words were out of his mouth, they belonged to everyone else to twist and slander as they pleased. But Salazar was a calm presence brushing against his consciousness, grounding and intrigued , and Harry found himself thinking that telling stories could be something to enjoy rather than fear. He spoke halting at first, slow and hesitant, before gaining confidence as Salazar's interest grew with each sentence, a little more awake with each word he uttered.

He told the man about Ron, his bright red hair and pale blue eyes and long freckled nose. His fear of spiders, his tactlessness, his will to step out of his brothers' shadows. How he joked, trumped Harry at chess, waited for him after detention. The unwavering support of his friendship when they were boys, his brash willingness to follow Harry in combat before their relationship crashed and burned.
He told Salazar about Hermione. Her bushy brown hair and shining brown eyes and large front teeth. The nervousness she shielded under piles of books, the know-it-all attitude that alienated her from the House. How she reasoned Harry down from his high horses, pushed him to do his homework, always knew when he wasn't feeling well and gave advice without his needing to ask for it. The level-headed brilliance of her that kept Harry from losing his mind, the loyalty to stuck by his side through grim and gore, to the very end.

"She was with me at Stonehenge," Harry told Salazar, who was looking at him fixedly from his end of the couch. "She escaped before it went crazy." He closed his eyes, a shudder of apprehension lacing his spine. "I hope she's alright." That was his most fervent wish. Sometimes, fear for her fate, for Ron's, for the world he'd left behind, was so potent Harry could not even breathe. Its choking hold on his throat kept him awake at night, drove him from his bed and towards his books, his sword, his wand.

"You love this woman," said Salazar, his tone soft, his face guarded.

Harry blinked. It didn't sound like a question, but he answered anyway. "Yeah, I do," he said, because it was true. "She's my best friend."

He told Salazar about their first months at Hogwarts, before they were friends, when everything was still new and confounding but already tasted of home. He talked about Ron's grumbling annoyance at the friendless girl who outsmarted him in Charms, about how he made her cry and miss the Hallowe'en Feast. The smell of caramelised sugar and candied squash had made them forget, until a bumbling fool of a teacher burst into the Hall, yelling about dungeons and mountain trolls.

Harry talked about taking Ron's hand, running through empty corridors echoing with the fading rumble of a hundred feet, their hearts loud in their ears, night-dimed candle flames lighting their way. The stinking grey-green mass of the troll, his smell of old socks and public toilet, Hermione trapped in a lavatory with that club-wielding terror. The rest had been broken porcelain, cutting screams, a yelled spell, and the start of a friendship that would survive pride and loss and war.

Salazar was silent after Harry's voice had faded, his gaze calm and inscrutable. He pushed to his feet, went to check Ignotus' pulse, the state of his wounds. "You've had a movemented life, haven't you?" he said at length. "I wish I could ask about the stories you don't want me to know."

"I know you do."

Salazar smiled at him, wry with a bitter edge, a hand pressed to the youngest Peverell's forehead. "Yet you resent my lack of truthfulness," he said, detached, and the words, though devoid of hurtful intent, were like a blow to Harry's face. "You and I are more alike than you realise, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes in the pregnant silence that followed, the gurgle of lack water and Ignatus' deep breath the only noises he could hear. Salazar was right. He felt betrayed at all the things the Founder hid from him, at his unreadable eyes, at the disconcerting ambiguity of their relationship. But that was hypocritical of him, wasn't it? All Harry had been doing since being hurled to Medieval times was lie. Lie and deceive and lie again. To his Housemates, to Salazar. Bits and pieces of his past regulated his every interactions with the man, kept him on edge despite how much Harry trusted him, tainted every word exchanged with the weight of all that was left unsaid. In retrospective, Salazar keeping his distance wasn't very surprising. How could Harry expect to be trusted with unimpeded honesty, if he didn't trust as well? It wasn't fair for any of them, but –

But what could he say? You're a monster in my time, Salazar. A scary story parents tell their children at night. The man who betrayed his friends, his school, for the sake of a bigoted ideology.
that's tearing our world apart. It all started with you, you know. The war and Voldemort and me. You made me, Salazar. Forged me out of fire and death. That why I don't trust you, not as much as I should. You hide because I do. But if what you hide are the seeds of what History has made of you, then you can never know. Who I am, what I am. Because you could destroy me, Salazar, if I gave you any more of myself. You could destroy me, and I can't let that happen, for the sake of the people I left behind. You are right, in a way. You and I are very much alike.

"I know we are," Harry whispered in a trembling breath. "I'm beginning to understand that." And it scares me out of my mind.

"Oh, Harry." Salazar stepped away from Ignotus, closer to him. His mouth opened, then closed again without a word rolling from his lips, the echoes of half-formed thoughts skimming the surface of Harry's mind.

Won't you talk for the both of us? But Harry knew the man would stay silent even as the sentence drifted between them, lost in the space that separated their bodies. Salazar shook his head in puzzlement or denial. Took another step. Harry could not remember getting on his feet until his head was tilted up to look at the Founder that stood just a breath away, sharing the same air, the few inches between them like a cliff plunging into the ocean, dizzying and vertiginous, its pull irresistible as a Siren's call.

Salazar nudged Harry closer to its brink when he raised a hand, slowly, deliberately, a question and the possibility to step back and away in his eyes. But Harry didn't move. Could never bring himself to move, shake his head and refuse, not when faced with risks and dangers that would reduce most men to tears, and not now.

Long fingers brushed his skin, threaded through his hair, traced the reliefs of his scar, lingered on the damaged flesh, delicate and impossibly soft, an air of utter concentration on Salazar's face. Harry released a shuddering sigh he hadn't realised he had been holding, his heart a low, heady beat in his chest. It was all over between a breath and the next, ephemeral like a green flash of sunlight before nightfall, gone before Harry could start to comprehend what was happening. Salazar fell back, hand and warmth and thoughts, drew away in every way possible like nothing had transpired. He left Harry to stumble at the loss, confused and unsteady in a way he hadn't been before.

"Go now," said Salazar.

And so he went.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter's title is from Barns Courtney's eponymous song <3
He was standing in a graveyard, the smell of rain and recently turned earth heady in his lungs, the chill of wintry evening air a damp caress on his skin. Rows upon rows of tombstones stood silently on either side of him, stretching as far as the eye could see, rough bulks emerging from pallid mist like so many contorted shadows, some of them brand new, smooth marble gleaming in the obscurity, others crumbled from the weathering of centuries, a sea of the dead.

It was a strange, halted moment, frozen in-between breaths. It felt as though the world would shatter if he were not careful, splinter at the seams like thin glass. He walked with the caution of a funambulist, all tight focus and mindful steps, but leaves crunched under his feet in spite of his best efforts, the dry rustle like that of bones snapping, deafening in the oppressive stillness of the night. He was the only moving, living thing that he could see, and his blood felt all the louder for it, rushing in his ears, flush and warm under his skin, an oddity in this necropolis.

He walked, and walked, and kept walking, between the tombs and the night and the silence, cold down to his bones but never tiring. There was no purpose to the motions of his limbs. He walked because he could, because he had gone so far, was so very lost, that there was nothing else left for him to do but to go deeper still, until, perhaps, he found the point where the world could no longer take his weight, cracked open from under him. He walked. That was all he was – breath and blood, moving.

Then he stopped.

The realisation came to him in increments, the vague sense of a foreign presence worming its way to his awareness, insidiously, so that it did not startle him the way it should. He had thought himself alone; he was not.

From the corner of his eyes, shadows had twined themselves into a shapeless knot, writhing until they condensed in a solid form that fog curled around like the most delicate cloak. It stood about as tall as he was. When he moved, stepping closer in a great rustle of dead leaves, it moved also, in utter silence.

Perhaps he should have stayed still, let the status quo remain unchanged, but walking was all he had to distract himself from the cold, and he had been alone with rotting corpses beneath gravestones for what felt like a full lifetime. He was intrigued.

He raised an arm, bare skin going through a thick curtain of mist that felt like running water, and a strand of darkness reached for him. They touched.

It tore him apart.

{. . .}

Alfric couldn't sleep.

He watched water-green shadows dance and twist on the ceiling to the gurgle of the lake against his room's windows, very much awake despite the late hour. Well – Late. He didn't actually know what time it was, but it certainly felt late. Heavy from the blackness of the night outside, its eerie stillness weighted down with centuries worth of untold secrets. Something prickled along the back
of his neck, kept him from sleeping.

That, and Dallin snoring something awful.

Truly, Alfric had been raised with half a dozen brothers, had shared their bedroom for most of his life and should be used to noisy nights by now, but this –

A bitten-back groan, and he rolled on a side, an arm coming over his ears in the vain hope it'd stifle the bloody clangour. His bed was tipped sideways in a way it usually wasn't, the soft slope just enough to have him sag an inch too far to the left at the motion, his bare shoulder brushing against sleep-warm skin. Gytha growled something that was either a threat or a greeting. Alfric held his breath as she shifted in her sleep, eyelids fluttering with creeping awareness. She laid on his bed in a graceless sprawl, the blankets bunched up across her thighs, fuzzy hair peaking from under the hood of the woollen cloak she'd taken from his wardrobe earlier in the evening.

It was – odd, this feeling, Alfric mused, watching her. The warm sort of satisfaction that unfurled in his chest at the sight of her, soft and relaxed near him, with Glenn curled up against her side, their legs tangled. The blond-haired brat was a cuddler, for once looking perfectly at peace, his face buried under Gytha's arm. Alfric was never going to let him live that down. He was going to relish telling him, look at him blush and splutter. But – later, though. When the sun was shining and they were out under its glare, away from the mellow tranquillity of this moment. For now, they were all pressed together, the bed hardly large enough to be a comfortable fit for the three of them. There was no room for banter or hard edges.

Alfric released a quiet breath, the puff of air trembling over his tongue. It was almost scary, this ease, how his chest felt at times, like he was going to burst from the fullness of it. He would never have thought it possible, to care so much, with an intensity that was bordering on painful, just two short months ago. When he'd had nothing but indifferent brothers, all six of them too busy running the family business to pay him any attention, parents who he barely knew and didn't know what to do with him. He'd had powers though, bubbling just under his skin, always a hair's breadth away from spilling out of him, the energy it took to keep them contained staggering, a constant weight crushing his shoulders.

Alfric hadn't been unhappy like Bradley or beaten up like Ashton, but that was because he hadn't been anything at all. He'd just – existed. Like a ghost or a spirit, invisible and inconsistent. Empty in the worst possible way because he'd told himself so many times it was all right to be alone that he'd come to believe it. He'd had turned himself into little more than a desensitized shell. His life had been turned upside down since then, so much so that he struggled to recognize himself at times, but –

"Christ, Alf," Gytha groaned, nosing at the pillow she'd stolen from him at some point during the night. "Either go back to sleep or fuck off. Watching you think is physically painful."

The girl was blinking at him, dark eyes heavy with sleep, and managing a scowl was difficult but Alfric made the effort for appearance's sake. "This is my room," he pointed out peevishly, careful to keep his voice low. "And Dallin snores." As if to help drive home his point, the boy let out a particularly gravely sound Alfric thought could be likened to the snort of a horse with pneumonia.

Gytha, because she was merciless and completely insensitive to common sense, kicked him in the shins and said, "Be a gracious host and suffer in silence. It's your own fault for agreeing to let us stay."

Alfric couldn't remember agreeing to anything, everyone having trickled into his room shortly after night had fallen, when it had become clear that Harry would not be coming back from the Forest
anytime soon, but Gytha's glare promised blood, so he held his tongue. Besides, a traitorous voice in the back of his head whispered, it wasn't as though he truly minded Dallin's snores, or every inch of his floor being covered by sleepy Housemates. Better that than having to wait out the night alone with nothing to do but let worries eat him up.

Alfric, being the mature fifteen-year-old that he was, pulled a face at Gytha for the smugness gathering at the corners of her mouth. She rolled her eyes. "Go, idiot," she told him even as the smirk playing on her lips deepened, turned into something warmer, more genuine. "You clearly want to. Let Harry know I plan on killing him for being an inconsiderate shit if you see him?"

Two months of practice kept Alfric from wincing at the too-sharp grin the girl sent his way, but he was scrambling to the edges of the mattress long before she was done talking anyway. Behind him, someone snickered. Alfric ignored whoever it was – only a fool would stay within arm's reach of Gytha working up a temper, and Alfric was many things, but suicidal was not one of them.

"Of course," he whispered, swinging his legs out of the bed, feet sinking in the pile of blankets strewn over the floor. It wasn't as though he hadn't been considering heading out for information anyway.

He got up, grabbed a discarded jumper, turned back just in time to see Gytha stretch out on the space he'd just vacated with a contented hum. "You're a dreadful friend," he informed her, pulling the jumper over his head and fumbling for his shoes.

"Perfect for you then," Gytha shot back with a lazy smile, busy burying herself deeper into his bed. Alfric threw a bundled shirt at her head. He missed, the garment flopping down like an amazingly dim-witted bird. Smoothing out the creases tomorrow was going to take ages, but Gytha was smothering giggles against Glenn's shoulder, so. There was that.

Smiling to himself, Alfric stepped over Audra's legs, navigated around Ashton, fast asleep with his head pillowed on her stomach. He had to nudge Bradley aside to reach the door. The boy wiggled closer to Dallin's slouched mass without waking, rolling closer to the warmth instinctively, unperturbed by his Housemate's steady snores.

The strange feeling in Alfric's chest was back, light-heading and heavy all at once, but it no longer felt like it might crush him with every breath. It felt settled. A permanent fixture, a new part of himself coming to light, like a muscle stretching out for the first time. Because of them. Thanks to them. For them.

He wasn't quite sure how it had happened, but at some point in the past months, these people had become his siblings, had wormed their way behind his lungs and burrowed there, just over where his heart was beating. And Alfric might not like what it said about his blood family, for what it meant about him, the fact that he would choose the six lunatics currently invading his bedroom over his actual brothers in a heartbeat, but it was – good. It felt good, and real, and there was nothing in the world Alfric would want in exchange for the strange ragtag family he had found in the Hogwarts Dungeons.

He slipped in the coolness of the corridor without a sound, the door clicking quietly behind him. Globes of light flared to life above his head, the pale glow bouncing off grey stone. He was halfway to the common room when a noise startled him, muffled, but ringing loud in the surrounding listlessness, a crash, something falling to the floor.

Something in Harry's room.
A blink, a breath that didn't make it past his throat, and Alfric turned on the spot, rushed without quite knowing why, shoes slipping from his fingers onto the padded rug. Harry was back. Was Harry back? Since when? Why hadn't Alfric heard him cross the corridor? Was he hurt? Was he –

Down. A hard push, another, the door to Harry's bedroom swung open. The first thing Alfric saw was Harry, down on the floor, a mess of limbs and blankets, heaving flesh and sweaty fabric, too tangled together to discern where one ended and the other started. Head thrown back, rolling on his shoulders, the boy was gasping great, rattling breaths as though he had been underwater for too long, his lungs now screaming for air.

"Harry?" Alfric called. The other boy's head snapped up at the sound, and Alfric felt his heart trip over itself, surprise the only thing that battled off the sudden, very strong urge to take a step back, get out of this room, lock the door on his way.

He looked at Harry, tried to think of another word than wild. Bottle-green eyes stared back at him, past him, with no hint of recognition, untamed things that shone with too many bundled emotions for Alfric to name.

"Harry!" he said again, louder, loud enough to make Harry blink, the half-snarl on his lips morphing in a puzzled frown. Alfric did not move from his place near the door, knowing better than to step closer while consciousness took its time crawling up his Housemate's spine.

"Alf?" Harry asked after a moment counted in ragged breaths.

"Yes," said Alfric. "It's just me." Then, because he wasn't sure whether the other boy knew it yet, "You're home safe."

And Harry – laughed. A dry, humourless thing that caught Alfric by the throat and held him there. "I haven't been home in a long while," Harry said, so quietly it might just have been to himself, lips twisted, eyes full of bitterness.

Oh, Alfric thought, at little stunned. Oh, that hurt. From Harry, of all people. Harry, whose smile had slipped behind the ice in Alfric's chest, reaching deep without effort, making him feel for the first time in too many years. Harry, who had always looked at ease within Hogwarts walls, so mindlessly comfortable among moving staircases and secret rooms that he had pulled the other Slytherins into this life, had made them fall into step with him without even realising it, sure as gravity. He had carved a place for them in this world, his world, had led them by the hand and shown them what belonging felt like. Alfric had never realised the boy had forgotten to carve a place for himself as well, had never stopped to consider that the sentiment might not be reciprocated.

The thought took a beat too long to process, but Alfric did not let any of it show on his face, breathed deeply instead and said, "Bad dreams?" Again?

Harry blinked at him, eyes blank as though he couldn't understand the question, unaware he was lying on the floor near his bed, skin shining with cold sweat. "What are you doing here?" he asked, the misdirection a far cry from the other clever escapes Alfric had seen him manage.

"Heard a noise," he replied, moving within reaching distance to offer Harry his hand.

The other boy let himself be pulled to his feet, bedsheets pooling to the floor. "You should go back to sleep," he said, and Alfric had to clasp his hands behind his back to keep them from closing into fists. "It's still dark."
Alfric looked away, dragged his gaze from the bandage that sat low on Harry's hipbone, from the bruises under his eyes. "It is," he said. "When did you get back?"

"I don't know. Late." There was a faint rustle of clothes, then silence again. "We found two more boys and a monster. The monster's dead. The boys – they're going to stay I think."

A Grindylow wobbled by the window, slime-green scales shimmering in the murky waters, its spindly fingers closed over a dead grey fish.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked in the stretching silence.

"I'm bloody furious," Alfric snarled, and realised it was true after the words had climbed their way out of his throat. He swallowed. "We waited for you. You should've come to us."

Outside, the Grindylow had stopped and was looking at him, flabby limbs sloshing lazily against the current. It tore a chunk of flesh from its dead fish and munched, sharp little teeth on display. Alfric glared. The creature pulled a face at him before darting back into the depths.

"I didn't want to wake you up."

"I know."

"It was really late."

"I know."

"Alfric. Look at me."

He didn't.

_I haven't been home in a long while_. Try as he might, Alfric could not shake the echo of these words from his mind. They gritted against what he had caught himself thinking mere minutes ago.

_I haven't been home in a long while_. What did Harry mean by it? Did he not know he was family, had brothers and sisters here, at Hogwarts? Was that not what home was, by definition? Did he not regard them as highly as they regarded him? The boy had always been a bit distant, shutting them off with cheerful smiles that were like coats of fresh paint, pretty façades, as effective a deterrent as stony silences. They teased him about it. They poked and prodded, because that was what friends did. Alfric had assumed Harry was reserved for the same reasons Ashton dressed up like a boy, or Bradley needed his room organized precisely the way it was. Because it was part of who he was.

Not because he didn't trust them.

Harry huffed soft sigh, barely audible. His hand settled on Alfric's shoulder, a warm pressure that startled him. His throat felt tight. He turned away from the window.

"Tell me," Harry said, expression open and honest, a stark counterpoint to the careful, shaded front Alfric had seen him put on since the day they had met.

It was something he could recall having seen a handful of times, whenever Harry encountered a social rule that evaded his comprehension to the point where communicating with him grew difficult. He reached out, in those moments, asked questions, made an effort to understand and be understood. And that, the sight of him _trying_, more than anything, untied Alfric's tongue, words getting away from him, rolling off his mouth, small, leaden things.
"You can't see it yet, can you?" he blurted, and it wasn't really a question. "I don't know – none of us know – what it is that's living inside you. What keeps you awake at night, or pushes you so fucking hard at everything you do. I'm not gonna ask. I'm not sure you know yourself. But – " He forced himself to look up, into Harry's eyes, the dark green of his irises almost as liquid as the lake swaying behind them. "But we're all here, now. Whether you like it or not. We're here, we're staying. We'll kill anyone who tries to get in our way." Harry's lips were parted, something halfway between incomprehension and astonishment written all over his face. Alfric swallowed again. His breath felt stuck somewhere deep in his chest. He'd never been brave, or bold, or self-assured, more of an observer than a speaker. He remembered why that was in this moment. He felt exposed, frail and brittle, a nameless miasma clogging up his throat to keep him from finishing his thought, but –

But there was dark red blood seeping through the bandage that covered Harry's hip, and Alfric was just. Done.

"You have to see this," he said, pleaded, squared his shoulders and pushed forward. "You have to – you're too smart not to see this. You –" He shook his head. "You've made us care. We had nothing, and now we've got each others, and we care. Because of Lord Slytherin. Because of you. You say you haven't been home in a long while? That's. How can you –?" A breath, deep and steadying. "Most of us – we didn't have a home before. Now we do. This is home. And you – you're ours. We'll make Hogwarts your home, too. So whatever's holding you back, whatever makes you bleed and lie all the fucking time – it doesn't matter. You're ours. We're gonna follow you around until you accept that."

"You can't."

"Watch us."

"Alfric," Harry said again, softly, the hand resting on Alfric's shoulder sliding to the back of his neck. The wilderness in his eyes had faded into something raw and sad and Alfric could hear the rapid thuds of his heart in his ears, feel the weight of Harry's hand on his neck. "I won't – maybe I should've made that clear sooner. I'm sorry. I hadn't realised. I won't be staying here. I'm leaving. I don't know when yet, but – once I do, I won't come back."

Alfric was breathing hard. Something ached, low in his belly. "We'll come with you," he heard himself say.

The fingers curled around his neck tightened. Harry's mouth was twisted in a grimace, as though he were in pain. "Not where I'm going you can't," he gritted out, but Alfric shook his head.

"No," he said, closing a hand around Harry's upper arm, either to keep the other boy from leaving or himself from falling. "No," he repeated, and felt resolution grow inside him, clear-cut and diamond-hard. "We'll – we will get stronger if that's what it takes. Stronger than you. Than anyone. You'll come back."

Harry gave a small, lopsided smile. "You'll do just fine without me, Alf." He pulled back a step. Alfric swallowed the scream of frustration he could feel building in his throat. He had to stay calm. Regroup, plan for what to do next. "There's still time. Go back to sleep."

"Are you?" he asked, letting the young man slide from his grip. "Going back to sleep?"

"Yes."
Alfric bit the inside of his cheeks. Harry – Harry was good at lying. Had gotten better at it in the months that Alfric had known him. He constructed half-truths for reasons Alfric failed to grasp, pulled stories out of thin air to protect gods-knew-what. A shady past, going by his scars, or a place of birth, seeing the strange words and mannerisms that surfaced in every other conversation. He had most of the castle fooled, Alfric was certain. They bought into the easy smiles, the offhanded friendliness, the good-natured offers to help. Never questioned the way he leaped through his studies with grim focus, or the hours where he disappeared from sight along with Slytherin, the air between them full of secrets.

But Alfric had been raised by salesmen, merchants whose wealth influenced several royal courts throughout the Isles. He had been taught to lie the moment he had first drawn breath, to spin reality with the tip of his tongue the way other people learned to walk. Harry was good at lying. Alfric was even better at catching liars.

His friend had no intention of going back to sleep.

Huffing a soft sigh, Alfric nodded, hiding his expression. He cast Harry a smile from under the strands of blond hair that had fallen over his face, something he knew did not reach his eyes. "I'm glad you're back," he said, just to see Harry's shoulders inch closer to his ears, a reflexive motion to ward off sentiments the boy did not know what to do with. "See you tomorrow, yes?"

"Of course. Sleep well, Alf."

Though Harry looked vaguely suspicious, he did not say a word when Alfric waltzed out of his room, escaped quickly as he could keep himself contained, back into the corridor. He grabbed his abandoned shoes on the way to his bedroom, closed the door carefully behind him, and set the strongest Muffliato he could manage after fumbling for his wand. The ward shimmered into sight before fading against the walls, settling in with a pressure against his eardrums.

He faced the sprawled mass of his unconscious Housemates. "WAKE UP, you lazy slugs!" he shouted, pitching his voice to carry. Over the confused groans and menacing mutterings, he said, "Time for a war council."

Somewhere near the back, Dallin stopped snoring.

{…}

Harry had forgotten, somewhere along the way.

The cold, strangling grip of nightmares around his throat, under his ribs, waking up to a racing heartbeat and the feel of invisible eyes tracing his skin before reality could assert itself back into place. He had forgotten the eternity it took for his scattered thoughts to push past phantom pain and blind panic, leaving him to linger in the world that stood between dreams and wakefulness, where his mind tilted sideways, each gasped breath feeling like getting a lungful of water.

The concept had dulled in his memory like an old photograph left too long in the sunlight, dark, flowing lines blurring away into yellowed paper to the general indifference of its owners. Salazar's Sleeping Draughts had made finding peaceful sleep easy for him, as had the lack of Voldemort's presence in the back of his head. Falling into bed not to wake before the next morning had become a habit, a simple fact of life that had ceased to amaze him after a few weeks.

He glanced at the flagon of potion he had emptied before going to sleep, held in a closed fist to lessen the tremors shaking his hands. He remembered chucking down the bittersweet sludge, craving respite from his own thoughts after he had left Salazar in the common room, his scalp still
burning with the imprint of the Founder's fingers on his skin. He had closed his eyes, and woken up in a graveyard.

It had felt like waking up, rather than sinking into sleep, everything he had lived up until that point fading away, dream-like, brushed aside to make place for a gaping lack of identity, of anything that stretched farther than his flesh, chilled to the core. He had been – he had –

Merlin, he was cold.

Letting the flagon drop on the bed, Harry got up, dug around for warm clothes, and dressed quickly. Every one of his muscles felt tight, sprung for action, screaming at him to break into a sprint and alleviate some of the pressure gathering around his lungs, messing with his heartbeat. On impulse, he called for his sword, his boots, strapped the former at his belt, the latter on his feet, and headed for the door.

The common room was empty, lighted only by cherry-red embers, spilling warmth from under the mounts of ashes in the hearth. There was nothing to indicate Salazar had been here at all, no indentation of his body on the cushions, no book left open on the low table. Harry strode through the quiet room without letting himself glance at the space the other man had occupied, the heels of his boots clacking faintly against the stones steps leading up the common room's entrance.

He ran all the way to the courtyard, ran against the cold crystallizing his bones, the wind howling at his side, just for the sake of it, yielding to the foolish hope that the things growling in his head could be outpaced, if only for a moment.

Outside, the night was biting, carried the crisp tang of the rotten, frozen leaves that clattered along the castle's stones. Thongs of fog hung low on the whispering grass. Moonlight quivered over turbulent, moody clouds. Harry could hear trees creak and rattle in the distance. Nothing was standing still, all motion and life. He caught himself gulping down great lungfuls of that nippy, icy air, relishing in the beating of his clothes against his skin, the whipping of his hair on his cheeks.

Setting himself to move did not take much effort. Harry let his scabbard slip from his grasp, minus its blade, the length of steel and leather a comforting weight in his left palm, shivering like glass in the wan light. He proceeded to lose some of the restless buzzing lining his body to the familiar rhythm of the drills Godric had taught him. His heart picked up speed until he no longer felt cold, until the sweat pooling on his brow was caused by honest exertion rather than voiceless fear.

And until the faint, pulsing pain radiating from the front of his head inwards became easier to ignore, and some of the violence that churned heavily inside him had found its way out through the edge of his sword.

He was holding onto his world with both hands, fingers digging hard enough to draw blood, but still he could feel it start to slide from his grasp, closer to the floor. Fragile glass about to shatter into a thousand pieces.

His sword whacked noisily one of the training dummies, blunt edge driving a deep groove in the already abused wood.

Fuck.

Harry hadn't had a nightmare this vivid since Voldemort was hammering his way through his scar, onto his skull, the white-hot pain of his mind being ripped apart was driving him mad. Except –

Except that wasn't entirely true, was it?
Frowning, panting, Harry pulled his blade free of the dummy. Splinters tumbled on his boots. He'd had other dreams, similar dreams, shortly after he had been sent into the past. He had dreamt about maze hedges smothering him, about burning, about drowning. He'd forgotten them, though. They had stopped bothering him after he'd started taking Sleeping Draughts. Perhaps they were only nightmares. A glitch in Salazar's potion, nothing more. They probably were; what else could they be? There were no Dark Lords here to give him visions. No one even knew who he was, not truly.

Then why was he still terrified? Why was he –

The world tilted, lurched to a side in a way that left him dizzy. The wind died down, the trees stopped creaking, and Harry could feel mist curl around his ankles, his waist, a new kind of cold seeping into his bones –

The ground rushed at him, punched against the bruises on his right hip, forcing the world back into motion. Harry sucked in a startled breath when his whole body went swinging backwards, the roiling infinity of the sky overhead the only thing that he could see. He landed flat on his back, head and arms tucked in, air whooshing out of him at the impact.

"Jesus," he muttered, biting back the self-deprecating laugh that wanted to bubble up his throat. His head spun. He could feel the erratic pounding of his heart in his temples. He was going to be sick. Swallowing hard, he let his head drop against the yielding grass under him. At the East, the sky had started to lighten with the barest brush of indigo, a splash of liquid blue ink to mar the dull charcoal of the night. Harry looked at the endless pool of stars above him, and felt as though he had fallen again. Perhaps it was his spinning head, or the overlapping of dreams, but for an instant, he half-expected to be dragged skywards, to plunge and drown into those bottomless depths. He could sense the curvature of the Earth along his back, his legs, sense its mad revolution around the sun. He thought, wildly, that he would not be surprised, in that moment, to hear rise up from below the low groan of machinery adjusting to effort, the grind and groan of old listing sailing boats cutting through the sea. Hands scrabbling for anything to hold onto, he made to move, but found that a strange heaviness in his limbs kept him in place, cradled against the ground. Overly conscious of his own weight, he felt delirious. He felt –

He felt –

"You!"

Hissing his surprise between his teeth, a habit he had taken from spending too much time with Sila on his shoulders, Harry swung his head to a side, firmly keeping his hand from jumping to his wand. A slim figure emerged from between the castle's archways, into the courtyard, igniting its torches on his way. Antioch marched toward him with long, determined strides, mouth pinched in a tight line, dark eyes blazing. Harry rolled on his feet to meet him, willed his shaky limbs into action, immensely grateful for the interruption.

"Where's my brother?" the boy demanded, looking up at Harry with his shoulders drawn tight. "And what the hell is this place? There's – I saw – the stairs – " He was trying so very hard to keep himself together that Harry could see him shake under the strain.

Bringing up his hands, Harry took hold of both of the boy's arms without thinking. "Your brother is with Salazar," he said, and felt Antioch sag against him. "What he had inside him – it took its toll. He's resting. He'll be fine." He caught the other boy's eyes. "I promise."

"Why should I believe you?" Antioch ground out, but it was half-hearted at best.
Harry forced a grin. "Saved your life, didn't I?" He stepped away from the dark-haired boy. "No one will harm you here – any of you. But you don't have to take my word for it. You'll see for yourself, should you choose to stay."

"- Choose?" Antioch crossed his arms over his chest. "You'd let us leave?"

"Of course. This is a school, not a prison." Harry cocked his head to a side. He had to tread carefully. Antioch looked ready to bolt. "You could walk away right now, if you wanted to."

Dark eyes narrowed. "Are you implying that I don't?"

"I'm implying I don't think you have anywhere else to go." Harry raised a placating hand when Antioch reared back as though struck, a snarl on his lips. "It's alright," he said, and something in his voice seemed to startle the scowl from the boy's face. "I don't have anywhere else to go either. Besides," he continued with a smile, "aren't you curious? Think about it – everything you've seen so far. Everything you've heard, and felt. Don't you want to know?"

Antioch's eyes grew wide. Hopeful. For the first time, he looked his age, young and fragile. "You – you'd teach me?" he asked, and it was all Harry could do not to pull him into a hug at the vulnerability in his voice.

This is Salazar's son, he remembered, and the thought struck him right in the stomach, stunned him without his knowing why. *Salazar's son.* The words had an odd taste to them, though not an unpleasant one. *Salazar's son.*

He cleared his throat. "I'm just a student," he said. "But I'll be here to help." A gust of wind blew hair into his eyes. Antioch shivered. "There." Harry Summoned his cloak, tucked the heavy material around the younger boy's shaking frame. "Before you catch a cold."

Antioch stared at his wand, something like hunger showing on his face. "What do I have to do to get one of these?" he asked, hitching the cloak higher up his throat.

Harry snorted. He slung an arm over the other's shoulders, steered him back inside. Antioch relaxed against him, followed without protest. "How about I tell you all about it over a cup of tea?" Harry suggested. "You hungry? I can't remember the last time I ate. I'll show you where the kitchens are."

...}

Time began to dissolve within itself. Winter descended over the castle and the surrounding countryside. The rich gold-red hues of Autumn gave way to the stripped bleakness of the year's coldest months. Rain-drenched days turned snow-cloaked. Frost sparkled over every window, icicles flourished down the edges of the roofs, and the lake froze overnight, donning the solid colour of chilled steel, a mirror to the bank of clouds loitering above its surface. Dry, biting cold wiggled inside the castle's walls and made itself at home. Students were seen lumbering along the corridors huddled in as many strategically-arranged layers of clothing as they could get their hands on. The few who dared venture outside were always quick to rush back in, red-nosed and dripping wet from the waist down for having ploughed through feet-deep snow.

Harry had never lived through such a dramatic drop in temperatures. Having a limited wardrobe, he took to carrying around a bottle full of Hermione's warm blue flames, shoving the glass against his skin whenever he lost feelings to his extremities. He watched with some fascination as the world disappeared under a thick blanket of white, glimmering powder, lending an air of fluffy softness to the Scottish landscape. After the third snow storm, which lasted for two days, the Founders gave
up any attempts at clearing the courtyards, let themselves be snowed in. Defence classes had to be
moved inside, to Godric's obvious chagrin. For each lesson, the Great Hall's tables were pushed
against the walls, and the castle echoed with the screech of clashing swords and fizzle of whistling
spells.

Nature shuddered to a standstill, overtaken by a comfortable sense of numbness that did not fail to
affect its human tenants. The Founders slowed the pace in their teaching, giving their pupils some
much-needed time to breathe.

This torpor took Harry by surprise. For the first time in many more months than he could recall, he
had more free time on his hands than he knew what to do with. Nothing was asked of him but to
sludge along through the sheltered days of the cold season. There were no relatives to demand his
labour, no sinister plots to center his attention, no wars to claim his life, and he found himself
unbalanced by this absence. Unsettled.

It was small things, at first. Grinding his teeth. Walking with his shoulders hunched a pinch too
tight, his hand hovering an inch too close to the handle of his wand. Tensing for no particular
reason. At the sound of loud voices, at the pound of loud footsteps. A feeling like a warm knot in
his chest, like his blood was prickling him from the inside out, rebelling his inactivity.

His temper grew short. He did not know why, and fought to reign it all in, his tongue, the urge to
snap, to spur those around him into something. Most days, he managed just fine. Up until the day
he didn't. There was one night too many with too little sleep, and his wand was in his hand and his
hand was around the throat of the kid who'd startled him. A tall boy, few years younger than him,
Gryffindor. Of course, Gryffindor. It lasted two, three seconds. Long enough for the damage to be
done. For the kid to look terrified, for Harry to see that terror, bright in his too-wide eyes. It lasted
two, three seconds before Harry realised what he'd done, and stepped back, and apologized.

It lasted two, three seconds too many.

Salazar took him aside that day, laid a long-fingered hand on his shoulder and kept it there, even
after they'd gotten away from the crowd and there was nothing around them but air and stones and
quiet. He stood close and looked at Harry with even, solemn eyes.

"I'm so sorry. I – God. I could've hurt him." Harry ran his hand through his hair. His left hand. His
hand whose fingers had pressed against the warm pulse fluttering inside of that boy's neck. His
hand that was trembling. "I didn't mean – I don't know –"

Salazar didn't move an inch. His hand stayed were it was on Harry's shoulder, and he looked, and
waited, listening. He listened for a while after words were done spilling from Harry's mouth. To
his slowing heartbeat, perhaps. Two fingers brushed the side of Harry's temple, fell to the outline
of his cheekbone, to the corner of his jaw, then back on his shoulder. Harry pressed against it, a
point of warmth in this ice-sheathed castle, and wished Salazar would hold harder, so he could feel
his each of his fingers dig in his flesh, leave bruises behind.

The Founder pulled away instead. "It's alright," he said. "It's going to take time. You'll figure it
out."

And Harry did, a little. Eventually. It took weeks, and came to him in bits and pieces, but he had all
the time in the world to put them together, and the world was frozen.

In the span of those few weeks, he sat for hours with his legs crossed under him, and made more
progress in Occlumency than Snape had guided him through in a whole year. Sometimes, Salazar
sat with him. He sussured suggestions in the soft hiss of Parseltongue. Taught him new exercises.
Told him to stop when he forgot himself to the meandering maze of his own thoughts.

For what was maybe the first time of his life, Harry turned inwards, and it was nothing short of a revelation. It felt like he'd been underground, buried beneath fathoms and fathoms of mud, for years and years. It felt like coming out for air, breathing in so deeply it burned, all the way down to his under-used lungs, stretching for the first time.

He was no one. In this place, in that moment he found himself in, he was no one that he recognized. He wasn't a freak, a monster, a hero or a saviour. He wasn't demented, or delusional, or dangerous. He wasn't an enemy that needed killing, or an asset that needed protecting. He wasn't Harry Potter, even, because Harry Potter came with a history, with burdens and expectations he was no longer asked to carry. He did not understand the man he saw reflected back at him in the eyes of those around him. That man's narrative had changed, and he wasn't imposed as the mooring point on which Harry was required to base his identity.

_Harry_ was all he had now, and he was left with no idea as to who that was.

He felt adrift. He felt naked.

He felt _good_.

Perhaps it was the Occlumency, the new clear, smooth running of his mind. Perhaps it was the conversation he'd had with Alfric the night he'd come back from the Forest with a new scar to show for it. Or perhaps it was one of Salazar's veiled pieces advice, the kind that left him reeling for days trying to understand what the man had meant. Either way, Harry started to look, _truly_ look, at what was around him, and _who_, and he wondered how it was that he had not seen sooner.

His Housemates rarely left his side, specially after the incident that left most of Gryffindor House scowling at his back. They glanced at him for instructions, let him speak for them when someone addressed them as a group. They granted him authority over them. A responsibility that gave him a new sense of purpose. A power Harry did not know what to do with.

So he learned.

He carried himself in a way they could follow. They looked out for him, and he looked out for them. He taught them spells they struggled with. He helped with their homework. He bottled blue flames for those who were comfortable having fire in their pockets. He made sure they ate, and slept, and had someone to talk to, laugh with, a shoulder to cry on. They were young, and relied on him, so Harry made sure he could be relied upon.

There were good days that were light and teasing, bad days when they closed ranks and glared as one at the rest of the world.

Harry had nightmares. Vivid things no amount of magic or potion could shield him from. He did not know where they came from, what they were for. Some nights he woke up in a graveyard, others in a maze, or some-place else entirely. Then he woke up again, in his bed, in the small hours of the day, gasping, skin wet with cold sweat. Somehow, the other Slytherins always _knew_. They never asked, never pressed, but Gytha leaned her head on his shoulder, Glenn rattled off a story after another, Alfric stayed a steady presence guarding his back.

On those days when he was dazed from lack of sleep, they became silent spectres trailing in his wake. On those days, Harry's head hurt, and they shook with it.

When Occlumency wasn't enough, when his skin felt stretched thin over his bones, he ran. Up
Hogwarts' stairs, into one of its unused wings on the seventh floor. He found a room there, large and bare, filled with pale light from outside, and nothing that would break if he pushed. He stayed holed up until daybreak and beyond, practising new spells to perfection, wielding his sword until his chest heaved, his muscles ached, his head was empty, and it felt like he could function again.

Two weeks of this, maybe three, and Godric found him. Harry pivoted in the middle of a tricky drill, both hands on his sword, and saw him there, leaning against a door that pretended to be a tapestry, watching in silence with his arms crossed and consideration in his eyes.

The two of them looked at each others until Godric uncrossed his arms, straightened from the door. "You're making yourself strong," he said, and Harry could not hear anything from his tone. "Why?"

With his blood pounding in his head and the impression sand was shifting beneath his feet, Harry answered. Heard himself answer, "There's a man I have to kill."

Back home. In a reality I'm not sure I want to return to. There's a man who wants to kill me, and who everyone else wants me to kill. I'll die if I don't. People I love will die if I don't. I want them to live. I want to live, too. It's funny, isn't it? The things we're driven to become for the sake of others. For our own sake. I'll be a murderer some day, or I'll be murdered.

And that was the ugly truth of it, really. Harry had stumbled through the war like a clumsy child. A clumsy child who'd had no idea of what he was doing, who'd let circumstances push and pull him around, to the brink of self-destruction. Luck had kept him alive, as well as friends who'd suffered for it. He hadn't had any control over his own life. He was ready for that to change.

The words weighed on the long silence that followed, sitting between Harry and Godric like so many anvils, until Godric gave a slow nod, as though he'd heard everything Harry hadn't said, and it made perfect sense to him.

He stepped forward, his ruby-etched sword sliding into his hands. "Then kill him," he said, and his blade came swinging for Harry's throat.

It became something of a game between them. Every night that Harry woke with bugs crawling up his legs and fled from the common room, Godric found him within the hour. Wherever he was in the castle, the Founder followed, until Harry gave up trying to switch locations, went to his room on the seventh floor instead.

They sparred. They fought. Godric was rough, violent and unrestrained in a way he never was during his lessons. He hit hard, kept hitting until Harry was choking on his own breath, until his whole body vibrated with the strength of each blow and he had to lay face-down on the ground, his nose against the freezing stones, panting for some measure of mastery over himself, finger clenched down hard enough to bleed.

One night, Godric didn't show up. Harry heard the door flutter open, and saw Helga slip inside in his stead. Dressed in supple leather, her hair done up in a tight braid, a short sword in one hand, a round shield in the other, she faced him with a gentle smile.

"We can start whenever you're ready," she told him.

She was ruthless, but never cruel or inconsiderate. She let him collect himself when he needed it, explained what he did wrong, praised what he did right. She taught him how efficient a weapon a shield could be. How defence was sometimes the best kind of attack. Her clear, firm voice filled the soft lull of the night, steadied him until Harry found himself joining in, the two of them conversing over the grind of steel against steel.
The next night, it was Rowena. Harry slipped and stumbled, seeing her there, rid of the sophisticated dresses she liked to wear but no less beautiful for it. She looked at him with one sharp eyebrow raised, a half-smile curling the corner of her red-painted lips. "I hear you're putting up extra hours," she said, and proceeded to tell him about speed and momentum and how to turn one's adversary's strength against them. She told him there was no place for pride or sentiment in a fight. She told him to go for the throat the first chance he got. She showed him how to do it, and though Harry had always been intimidated by her, shyness and censure soon fell out the window, trampled over as he scrambled to keep up with her.


Salazar never said a word.

He first met Harry in the midst of a snowstorm, eyes unreadable in the surrounding darkness, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to his elbows, but unbothered by the cold. He'd had a sword held loose in one hand, a sharp, thin blade that glowed in the light of the moon, but no scabbard. They'd faced each others in the dead of that night, fought while the castle slept, without so much as greetings being exchanged. Harry never questioned the other man's silence. Never tried to break it, not that night, nor any night that followed, simply because it never struck him as odd, or became uncomfortable. It blended seamlessly within the secrecy of these stolen moments, the easy intimacy where whatever had happened during the day was put aside, forgotten, if only for an hour.

Salazar never spoke, but he talked nonetheless. He taught by example, by swordpoint, the chilled edge of his blade pressed into Harry's skin, into his chest, his back, his legs, inviting him to either move in the correct position or break his skin refusing. Fingertips tapped against his wrist, dug in his spine, scratched along his arms. Salazar fought dirty, viciously, striking wherever Harry was weakest with a savage kind of abandon that left Harry bruised and aching come morning.

He took punches. Godric broke three of his ribs with a mild Blasting Curse that should never have found its mark. Helga knocked out five of his teeth with the edge of her shield. Rowena burst both his eardrums with a flat-handed slap to the side of his face. Salazar cut through the meat of his shoulder, down to the muscle above his heart, with the sweep of a dagger he'd concealed somewhere Harry had yet to find.

That particular wound gushed more blood than the others. It stained red Salazar's hands, his white shirt, his face. After he healed himself, Harry ran a thumb over the crimson specks lingering on the man's chin, just because. Certain boundaries crumbled to dust at night, and he'd wished to wipe off the sombre downturn of Salazar's lips.

With a sense of grim satisfaction he was careful not the examine, Harry let scar that particular wound, groove in a swollen, jagged line that stretched inches from his left collarbone.

Speculations were muttered behind his back at the sight of the purple and yellow discolourations on his face, the brown scabs flaking his knuckles, but he ignored them easily. He'd had far worse, after all.

Yule tide came and went without a fuss. They decorated the castle with wreaths of evergreen, ivy and mistletoe. On the shortest day of the year, Hogwarts was filled with mellow fairy lights. They had a feast, ate roasted meat and drank thick, spicy wine. The Founders told a stories about the renewal of time while Harry's head buzzed pleasantly from where he was tucked between his Housemates, loose-limbed and delightfully warm. At the beginning of the evening, they'd put a log in one of the Great Hall's hearths, a heavy, bulky thing that was to lead them through the long night. Its roaring heat battled the wintry air with remarkable dedication.
Helga caught him looking at the flame-licked wood. "You can help us select the right log, next year," she told him with a smile, her hand brushing his shoulder, and Harry did not correct her.

He hummed, swallowed *chances are I won't be here next year* with a mouthful of wine, and let his head loll back on Alfric's lap. Ignotus, still thin and pasty, but well on his way to recovery, was blinking against sleep, curled under Harry's arm. Antioch, who had insisted he and his brothers should join Slytherin House, was grinning at something Audra said at the other end of the couch they'd Transfigured out of a stone bench for the occasion. Cadmus was playing Exploding Snaps with the gaggle of younger students spread out on the rug. Everyone was safe. Harry wanted nothing more than to indulge in the fantasy that they would *stay* safe, all of them. He wished he could freeze this moment, preserve it in amber, stand guard to it for the rest of his life. The future was a distant notion he had no interest in considering.

Not that he was given much choice on the matter.

"You have a place here, you know," Godric told him some time later, his sword at the juncture between Harry's shoulder and his neck. "You'd make a good teacher."

"Don't," Harry growled, pushed against the blade, landed a fist in the man's stomach.

*Don't. Merlin, please don't. I'm being pulled in two opposite directions, about to split in the middle. Please, don't aid in that. Every day that passes here, that I don't spend in the time where I'm supposed to fight – Every single day, I can feel my connection with this place grow, and my obligations towards those I left behind diminish. I'm not doing enough. I should be doing more. To find my way back to them. But – a teacher. Me. I –*

*I think could be happy here.*

He didn't sleep for days after that.

Chapter End Notes

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Diamonds and Dust

_Breathe_, Lily used to tell him whenever the pain was too great, whenever it was vast and blind-siding, bright flashes of agony across his vision at each pull of taut muscle, tendons twisting like snakes in protest of the human flesh settling back over raw, exposed nerves. _Breathe_. And her hand stroked his back, his hair, and James was at his side, jabbering away at the two of them, voice full of warmth, neither of them caring that he whimpered like a beaten dog. _Just breathe, Remus._

He remembered to breathe now.

A fraction of heartbeat to brace himself before the Cruciatus caught him full on the chest, and white-hot knives were piercing his skin, sinking deep and tearing everything in their path. He flew backward under the strength of it, crashed into something that gave and shattered under his weight. There was a broken howl that his throat wanted to let out. His brain told him it had had _enough_ now, it was all too much to take in in too little time, maybe they should finally consider madness as their next viable alternative. Remus ignored them both, forced air into his lungs, out of his nose, mustering up just enough clarity to fire a spell.

It landed. Or maybe it didn't. Either way, the curse lifted, and Remus slid to the floor, getting his feet under him before he could go sprawling face-first on the dark tiles. Something sticky and clammy was slinking down his back. If not blood, then the contents of one of the jars he'd just crushed. He was trembling, spasms shaking his muscles sporadically. A worry for another time.

He ducked, just barely dodging the burst of magic hurtling at him. Teeth gritted, he twisted, bracing himself against what remained of the cabinet he'd just splintered. Glass shards cut gashes into the flesh of his back. Not enough to hinder his range of motion. Easy to ignore.

Fire-smoke and stone-dust filled the air, coated his tongue with the coal-grey, effervescent smell of blistered wood and crushed gravel. Faint, ghostly silhouettes swayed into the swirling veil, transient shadows too quick to follow. His eyes watered and his throat closed up. His ears were still ringing from the Blasting Curse that had gone off near his head earlier. There was nothing for him to see or scent or hear. No means for him to perceive the battle raging around him. But he had to, or else he was dead.

So he focused. Closed his eyes, stopped breathing, focused, and –

There.

Under the whistle of his damaged eardrums, a heartbeat. Erratic, frenzied, reeking of fear. Thirty degrees to his right and moving.

There was no burst of light in the wake of his quiet _Arresto Momentum_, only displaced smoke. A Charm designed to slow the velocity of its target. Remus targetted a beating heart, eyes closed to better listen to the dwindling of its pulse. To the stopping of its pulse.

The Death Eater collapsed without a scream, fell to the ground like a broken doll, with nothing but a dull thud. Dead. Dying.

There was a monster curled around Remus' bones, chortling behind the cage of his ribs. Moony grinned in savage satisfaction, all pointed teeth dragging along the seams of Remus' skin. His lips wanted to smile. He bit them instead, and tasted copper-red blood.

He had to move.
The smoke and fumes had started to clear. Though not to much benefit. The confusion it unveiled Remus would have rather not seen. Debris littered the ground. Wood. Tiles. Glass. Bodies, bathed in blood. Bellow the heady tang of salt and iron, the wet-brown smell of underground rooms was emerging. Cold oppressiveness lurked on the ninth floor of the Ministry.

Remus hated the Department of Mysteries with passion. Everything about this place repulsed him. From the looming black-tiled walls, to the guttering candles spitting weak, gloomy light, to the echoes of past lamentations etched into its very air, all carrying wretched memories to his ears. Sirius had been tried a few doors over, some sixteen years ago. Tried and sentenced while Remus drowned in grief, let Moony bite into a larger chunk of his soul, because that kind of pain, at least, he was familiar with. That kind of pain he understood. Sirius had died here, too. He had fallen through a veil and failed to stumble out of the other side. Remus could still feel the numb shock of it as he staggered to his feet. His arms ached with the phantom pain of Harry's trashing body, yearning to join his Godfather in death.

Shaking himself free of the past, he looked around. None of the corpses on the ground was theirs. They had come well-prepared into this fight. The Death Eaters and Ministry employees had not. To his left, Fleur was finishing the last of them, a lanky-haired man who looked terrified, perspiration shining in his forehead. As Remus watched, he slipped on a pool of one of his comrades' blood, eyes growing wide, then resigned, in the half-second it took for Fleur to grab his head and slam his skull against the nearest wall. Bones cracked, a sharp, wet sound.

The woman was pivoting on her heels before his body hit the floor, silvery hair cascading around her shoulders, soft as silk. Her gaze met Remus' and she grinned, a savage, blood-sated thing, the pull of her allure tugging at his core with a strength like gravity. Somewhere in the back of Remus' chest, Moony howled in acknowledgement.

Fleur stepped over her opponent's sprawled limbs, crossed the room in long, assured strides. "You are bleeding," she informed him, clinical. She stopped a few paces away from him, just close enough for Remus to catch a whiff of her skin, brine-blue under the fire and smoke and sweat, dangerously enticing.

"It can wait," Remus said, and she nodded without protest, as though she had been expecting this answer.

"Others will come," she said, eyes flickering to the door.

Three minutes, they had estimated they would have, between the moment they took control of the room and the moment reinforcements flooded over, Aurors and Death Eaters alike. Three minutes to crack open one of the best-warded safes in the Ministry, take what they could from it, and escape. Weeks and weeks of planning, all of it to reach this very instant, where success rested partly on skill, mostly on luck. They had exactly one shot at this. Failure today would not come with the possibility to try again later. Wards would be reinforced, security would be increased. The flawed layer of spell Bill had unwoven to grant them access to the Ministry would be made whole again. They would not be able to move forward with their research, and Harry would remain lost to the limbo of time.

"Let them come," Remus said. *We will tear them all to pieces*, Moony crooned.

Together, they turned to the rest of their party. Bill and Hermione were already kneeling in front of the chest, a plain, old thing covered in dust, muttering between themselves, wands drawing arabesques into the air. Ron stood beside his brother and lover, facing the room with his fists clenched, a silent guardian. Tonks and the twins were in the Hall of Prophecy, wreaking as much havoc as they could, destroying what little remained of the room to divide Voldemort's forces.
Kingsley and Arthur ought to be up in the Atrium, securing their alternative escape route.

Remus thrummed with the urge to move. A few floors above his head, people were running. The faint vibrations of their pounding footsteps rattled his teeth.

"One minute," he announced. "Whatever it is that you're doing, you better hurry finishing up."

"Almost there," Bill replied without looking at him, voice tight and shoulders tense. His long red hair was plastered on the back of his neck with exertion. "This – this thing. It's a mess. The warding’s been layered over time. It's – shit!" Electricity sparked between his fingers. The skin on the back of Remus' neck prickled.

Beyond the room, a crash rebounded down the corridor. The ragged hiss of several people breathing, the sound quick and choked even from the distance.

"Someone's coming," said Remus, and Fleur cursed, something in French that didn't need translating.

Ron following after them, they moved to stand between Bill and Hermione and the door. Someone had taken the time to barricade it. Their only exit.

They were deep underground, but Remus felt as though he was standing on top of a mountain, the oxygen rarefied, air trickling down his lungs with only the greatest reluctance. Moony was pawing up his spine. Looking for a spot were his skin was thinnest, a weakness he could tear into, use to claw his way out to freedom. Neither of them liked small spaces.

Let me out let me out let me out.

Breathe, Remus.

He thought of glowing red hair that smelled like fresh apples and dark chocolate, of kind green eyes smiling as they caught the fading light of a warm Autumn day, and did just that.

A loud bang on the door, flesh pounding against wood.

"It's us, open up!"

"Ron cries when he sees spiders because we turned his teddy bear into one when he was three!"

"I fucking hate you," said Ron, and he unlocked the door.

The twins came piling through, tripping over themselves, closely followed by a dishevelled Tonks and a smell rotten eggs pungent enough to make Remus' eyes water. The boys' faces were grime-tracked. George, missing ear still a shock months after he'd lost it, had an arm looped around his brother's waist, pulling the boy after him none-too gently. Fred was grinning over his twin's shoulder, eyes frighteningly unfocused.

"What's wrong with him?" Ron asked. He threw Fred's free arm over his own shoulders, helped George move him further into safety.

"Don't know," George replied, jaw working. "Got hit with a couple of jinxes. Didn't see what." He nudged his brother in the stomach. "Hang in there you stupid sod."

"We gotta move," Tonks said before Ron could ask any more questions. Her eyes, yellow and slanted like a cat's for the occasion, found Remus before flitting away. "Now. They're coming."
She rounded on Bill and Hermione, who had yet to look up from their work, the air around them crackling and groaning, weighted with the promise of troubles to come. "Oi, you two! Snap out of it, we're leaving!"

"We can't," Ron said, grim-faced, when neither Bill nor Hermione gave sign that they'd heard her. "We can't leave without that stone."

"We can't leave if we're dead," Tonks snapped back, and Fred wheezed out a sound that was either approval or amusement.

She was right, of course. They were in no shape to confront reinforcements and hope to come out on top. Fred was out of the equation. Ron was favouring his left leg, trying hard not to show it. Bill and Hermione were vulnerable, not meant to fight anyway. Remus could feel the muscles of his back spasm sporadically, fighting back whatever it was that had entered his bloodstream. They were weak and diminished, while their enemy was still strong and numerous.

But Ron was right, too. Last chance, the back of Remus' head whispered. Last chance, last time, then it's all over. If they left here today without what they'd come to find, well. They'd be back to square one, with little hope for resolution. There was a strong chance that they would all die if they stayed, forever trapped under black stone and packed earth, and Remus hated this place, despised every inch of it with every fibre of his being, but the alternative –

The alternative was losing Harry, which wasn't an alternative at all.

Only one of them needed to make it out of this place, after all.

"Give them one more minute," he told Tonks, and the woman's hair turned black. "We can spare that much. Kingsley is still out."

"Kingsley isn't fit to fight off an army." And there was fire in her eyes, acid in her voice, and Remus' heart gave a pang, a twist of half-forgotten pain and regrets and what-ifs.

"I know," he said, a little wry. "Just –"

A wave, something warm and electric sweeping over his skin, taking the words from his mouth. Across the room, Bill slumped forward with a soft grunt, head resting on the side of the chest he'd been working on, eyes closed, hair falling around his face, while Hermione wrenched the lid open with victory on her lips.

"Alright, let's move!"

They all scrambled for the exit. Hermione stuffed her bag with the chest's contents. Fleur helped her husband stand. Fred went to give a hand, and was firmly held back by his brothers.

All the while, Moony growled at the back of Remus' throat. They were slow. Too slow.

"We have to split," Remus said, loud enough to be heard over the confused din. He stepped forward. "Hermione, Ron. You circle back. Find Arthur and Kingsley, take the long way out. We'll cut them off."

"Fred should come with us," Hermione said. From the tight pinch of her lips, she wanted to resist the whole plan. Plant in her heels and fight with the rest of them. But she knew what they had come here for. Who they had sworn to protect, no matter the price. She needed to make it out of here, above all of them.
"He'd slow you down," said Remus.

"He'd slow you down."

"'Ermione is right," said Fleur. "We cannot defend him. He would make us weak." She looked at him, pale blue eyes burning quietly in the low, guttering lighting of the room. "So he would make them weak."

There was no time. No time for any of this.

"Alright," he said. "Just go. Go!"

Ron and Hermione pressed themselves against Fred's sides.

"See you later," Ron said over his shoulder, exuding the unassuming confidence that would some day make him a great leader to follow.

Then they took off, trotting to the opposite end of the corridor. They would find a way out. Remus was sure of it. Hermione had spent so much time poring over the few maps of this place they had managed to find that she probably knew the layout of the Department of Mysteries better than any Unspeakable at this point.

"Good," said Fleur. She kissed the corners of Bill's lips. "Let us buy them some time, yes?"

And so they did.

It didn't take long for fresh Death Eaters to find them. For battle to begin anew.

It was gruesome. Blood-slick floors under his feet. Smoke-filled air into his lungs. Light bursting from every unexpected corner, brushing his skin, multicoloured sparks that seared his flesh.

It was exhilarating. Remus hated how alive it made him feel. His muscles were pulled tight, thrumming with inhuman energy under their very human shell. Moony was peering out of his eyes, smelling out of his nose, silent, giddy for the first time in an eternity, the two of them working together, synchronized in a way they hadn't been since Sirius. It felt as though he were settling back into his own body, whole for the first time in months.

It was good. Bones cracked under his fists. Blood coated his hands, splattered across his face. Pushed into his veins. He moved, allowed all the speed and ferocity he kept locked away to surge to the surface, blending into the saltpetre-red scent of combat. He caught himself short of sinking his teeth into a woman's throat. Stunned her instead, with so much strength that her heart missed a couple of beats.

Fleur followed a step behind him. He could feel her against his heightened sense, fey-like and lethal. The two of them led the dance, Tonks, Bill and George covering their backs.

They made it.

Impossibly, they made it. They fought off two patrols. Took another one by surprise. Carved their way through the Department, through one sinuous tunnel after another, until they reached one of its most remote corners. A dingy broom cupboard where the Ministry's wards were weak, were they flickered inconsistently enough for Bill to cut into them, strands of enchantments unravelling under his fingertips.

"Let's go home," he said.
And with a crack, they turned on the spot and disappeared.

They landed just outside the Burrow's garden. Tonks fell on her knees. The left side of her face gushing blood. Her arm a torn mess. Bill collapsed in Fleur's arms, passed out before he touched the ground. George breathed heavily, hands on his thigh, looking like someone about to throw up.

It was alright. They were alive.

{...}

Remus used to wonder about the morality of his attending Hogwarts. For all that he trusted Dumbledore's judgment and wisdom, he'd wondered about whether the old wizard knew what it was that he had been allowing near his students. Something worst than an animal, because animals were not inclined towards violence outside of their direct need for survival. A monster, famished, blood-crazed, trapped in human form but for one night every month.

He'd been a shy boy, back then. Turned inwards, an eye always focused on what was stirring behind his breastbone. He hadn't known what the world looked like, outside the tight confines of his home and the forest around it, the bright-burning smell of silver and the fear in his father's eyes. He hadn't had anyone to play with, no friends to talk to. He had been so very touched-starved that when Dumbledore had extended him a hand, he had taken it blindly. Desperately. He had held on as though he'd been drowning, Hogwarts his only lifeline.

He had started questioning his place sometime during his Second year. After the overwhelming life and brightness of the castle had stopped to make him shake, and he'd grown confident his transformations would stay secret. After James' leaf-brown smell, Sirius' rain-blue touch and Peter's butter-warm voice had seeped under his skin, and the four of them had become friends.

Pack, Moony used to murmur when they were sprawled over one another in one of their blanket forts. Ours. And for the first time of his life, Remus had agreed with him.

The boys had pieced everything together, eventually. James and Sirius had been bright boys, brilliant men, dipped in magic and its history since they were in their mother's wombs. They had started to notice things. Quirks in his behaviour. Thought he was being abused by someone, possibly his father, and hadn't been too far off the mark. They had followed him one night, all the way to the Shrieking Shack, and seen him for what he was. Amazingly, heartbreakingly, they had stayed by his side. They had taken to walking him to the Infirmary before full moons. Keep him company while he was a barely-coherent mess of torn skin and broken bones, his voice too raw for him to speak. They hadn't been afraid. So Remus had started to feel all that fear that should have been theirs.

Fear of rejection. Fear of the stigma that would have befallen them, had anyone ever learned of their association to a Werewolf. Fear that James' parents would disapprove, that Sirius' would beat him up more badly than usual.

He had thought about running away. From the school, from civilization itself. But he'd been weak, back then, and selfish. He still was. There had been people who cared about him, something not unlike family to be found in the Gryffindor Dormitories. So he had stayed, and the knowledge of what he was, of what he could do to them, had eaten him from the inside.

Until Lily.

She had been a smart girl. An even smarter woman. James' repeated taunts had meant that Remus, the quiet, temperate one of the group, had been left to intervene, to ask for peace between the two
of them before she could curse him into oblivion. They had become friends, long before James could manage conversation where she didn't end up looking like she wanted nothing more than to strangle him with his own gut. Remus fell in love, a little bit. Everyone fell for Lily Evans, some way or another. She burned too brightly for there to be any other choice.

They had been study partners. She had studied him.

"How long have you been a Werewolf?" she had asked him one day, looking nothing but politely curious. Being Muggle-born, she had kept herself wilfully ignorant of the bigotry of their world.

So Remus had told her. They had traded stories. He had told her he could hear her heartbeat, every slight variation of it, from across the room. She had told him about her slow falling out with her sister, which she hadn't known how to stop. He had told her about being afraid, about wanting to run far, far away. She had called him an idiot, called him friend, called him beloved, until he'd believed her. It had been with her that he had felt himself become human, for the first time since he had been a little boy and the moon hung low in the sky, his blood, black on the grass.

Her death, James and Peter's, at the hands of the man he loved, whose life he had shared, had destroyed him. Utterly. Completely.

Then Sirius had come back, innocent, only to be yanked away again, into the cold embrace of Death.

And now, Harry.

Remus had made the mistake of letting Sirius go, all these years ago. He had let the agony of grief blind him to what was so very wrong about the whole situation. The lack of trial, the rushed imprisonment. He hadn't questioned any of it. There had always been madness showing between the cracks in Sirius' eyes, coiled tightly around his bones, an illness not unlike what affected Remus once a month. So he had limped away from it all without a second glance, content to let Sirius rot for his crimes, long before their bed had stopped smelling of him. Away from England, from the war, from too-familiar places that twisted in his gut like a knife. A animal desperate for a whole to die in.

He would not make the same mistake again. Sirius was forever lost to him, but Harry, James and Lily's son –

Harry he would not give up on even in death.

"Tell me this is going to help," he said, quietly.

Hermione smelled of sweat and blood and ashes. Her left wrist was wrapped in bandages. A faint, exhausted tremble travelled along the curve of her spine, to the base of her neck, rippling across dark skin, a continuous back and forth. She looked about as ready to sleep as Remus felt; eyes too-wide, sharp enough to cut, alert enough to burn.

All around, papers quivered, the crunch of parchment loud in the deep silence of the night, disturbed by a cool draft spilling from a badly-closed window, night-sweet air drifting between them. The Burrow's foyer had been overtaken by scribes, covered in runes, arching diagrams, ink and charcoal. The warm, orange shine of oil lamps plunged the space in a flickering game of light and shadows.

Hermione took her time to answer, the splatter of rain against blue-darkened glass stretching, indefinite, in the meantime.
"We are better now than we were this morning," she said, the words careful, weighted. "Better than we were yesterday." She raised her injured hand, fingers shy of brushing the small, inconspicuous stone that sat on the mantelpiece. It was a clear, clean-cut crystal of some sort that looked utterly inoffensive, facets reflecting off the light in dazzling rainbows.

Remus felt uneasy being in the same room as this thing. It was buzzing. A soft, barely perceptible buzz, as though the stone had been stuffed full of magic, all of its edges about to burst from the pressure of all the power it contained. It wasn't a particularly hostile presence. It was just so very much there that it was impossible to ignore, that Remus would swear the air around it was twisting, curving to accommodate its existence. It was said to have belonged to Merlin, pulled by him from the center of the Earth, torn away from the place where all magic took its source, to the surface, where it should never have seen the light of day. It was said to have been passed down from generation to generation, poked and prodded without anyone ever figuring out its use.

Hermione looked fascinated. Reverent, almost. "I felt something not unlike it at – at Stonehenge," she said, haltingly. "Etched into the stones, but more – I don't know. More diluted. It's a good sign. If our hypothesis is correct, if Harry was sent back in time, well. This is the power source we'll need to pull him back."

"Provided we find him first."

"Yes. Provided we find him first." Her hand fell away, dark eyes sliding to their research, pinned on the walls. "If only this – this fucking mess could start to make sense – " Frustration, self-directed anger, all condensed into a single sentence.

"You should get some rest," Remus said, the teacher in him surging up from under all the grit cloying his soul. "You've done enough for today. We'll try again in the morning, with clearer heads."

But Hermione shook her head. "I don't think I can sleep."

I don't sleep anymore, Remus heard. He wasn't surprised. Hermione had lost weight, since her coming here, soft tissue melting away from her bones, outlining the shape of the war-hardened woman she had become. She pushed herself harder than any of them, Ron shadowing her steps. The two of them made good team, one rarely out of sight of the other, two snarling wraiths brought close by a common cause, dedicated to bringing their best friend home.

"Let's go over the notes one more time, then," he suggested. "And Bill will take a closer look at that stone tomorrow – "

A soft hiss, shrill to his ears, and the hearth burst into flames, bright, dancing green exploding before his eyes. At the center of the light, a face, young, long hair falling across a familiar face.

"Guys," said Ginny, voice hushed and hurried. She was breathing fast and loud, eyes wide and mouth parted. "There's something you need to see."

{...}

Rusty links of metal, frayed with age but still strong enough to hold, clinking and shifting against soft human skin. Ugly purple bruises on thin wrists, weeping blood. Choked breaths, silent tears.

Ginny wanted to scream. She wanted to wrench these chains from Hogwarts' walls, use them to strangle the Carrows. See their necks turn blue, turn purple, give them a taste of the suffering they caused.
She grit her teeth instead. Bit her tongue and forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

The lock was tricky. It was an old design, downright ancient, nothing like what Fred and George had had her work on when she was younger. The mechanism was jammed, the tumblers groaning at every touch. The kid they had captive held very still, barely breathing with trembling tension. On her chest, the Hufflepuff coat of arms gleamed soft yellow in the greasy darkness of the Filch's office.

What kind of a sadist locked up First Years Hufflepuffs?

"We're getting you out of here. Don't worry," she said. She allowed herself half a second of respite, just long enough to wink at the girl with more confidence than she felt. "By tomorrow morning, their hands will be so full they won't have time to put you back here. What's your name?"

The girl wet her lips. It took her two tries before she could talk, voice so hushed Ginny barely heard her, even with her head just about touching her mouth.

"Lena."

"Nice meeting you, Lena." Steps shuffled around her, murmurs rising and falling like the sea. Ginny didn't bother looking around. Whether she was screwed or not, she was ridding that girl of her chains. "You're a First Year, aren't you?" Lena nodded. Her breathing was still shallow, but some fear had left her eyes. "Well - " A faint click, tumblers betraying the first sign of weakness. "I'm very sorry this was your first taste of Hogwarts." The locks clanked open, handcuffs releasing a pair of small arms. "I promise, usually it's just a lot of fun."

Lena stretched her arms in front of her. She looked at her bleeding wrists, the torn flesh an ugly mess on her dark skin.

"T-thanks," she said. Her eyes were glassy, swimming with tears the girl wasn't yet allowing to let fall.

Anger wasn't an emotion Ginny much cared for. It was yelled words that cut like blades, fists that hurt more than flesh-deep. It made people stupid, stripped them of all restraints. It was a foul, hurtful thing.

She wanted to hurt, now. Wanted to draw blood from the adults whose job it was to look after these kids, and who tortured them instead. It was a roaring, snarling thing that breathed behind her breastbone, that burned red with all the heat and fury of a summer's grassfire. She smothered it down behind a smile that had too much teeth.

"No problem," she said. She bent down to catch the girl's gaze. "We'll take you somewhere safe for the night. And we're gonna clean up these nasty cuts. We've got potions for that. Do you think you can hold on 'till then?"

Another nod, sharper this time. Lena wiped her eyes with a dirty sleeve.

"Good."

"Gin!" A hand tapped her shoulder. Seamus was standing beside her, mouth twisted in grim satisfaction. His sandy hair was sticking up in odd places. His cheeks were smudged with dirt and ashes. She hadn't heard him come into the room.

"Everything good with you?" she asked.
"Yeah. Ernie's almost done rigging the staircase. Man, I cannot wait to see the Carrows' faces when it goes off." He glanced behind him, to the other side of the room, where Neville was finishing extracting a Third Year Ravenclaw from his restraints. "I, uh. I think we got a problem, though."

He stepped to the side and raised his wand. The merciless blue-white of his Lumos burned like a star, had shadows shrink back into the walls, wither away until the entire room came into view. It was a dingy, windowless cell that smelled strongly of mold, fried fish and stagnant air. A thin layer of grease and grime coated the walls, glistened like sweat. The floor was dusty, splattered with brown stains that looked suspiciously like crusted blood, so deeply soaked into the stone that centuries had failed to flake it away. A single oil lamp hung from the low ceiling, casting a gaunt, cadaverous light to its surroundings. It was a bare, Spartan room, save for the chains adorning the walls like Christmas tinsels, but still felt crowded, small and oppressive.

There was a third student who Ginny had not seen, tucked away in the farthest corner, where the light of the oil lamp didn't reach. His arms were held up high above his head, wrists scraped raw from the manacles shafting his skin. He looked young, his thin face shrouded in brown curls, dark, serious eyes wide open, riveted on Seamus and Ginny.

His clothes were lined silver and green.

"Fuck."

"Yeah," Seamus agreed.

Neville looked away from his work, turning to face them with a hand on the Ravenclaw's shoulder. His eyes fell on the Slytherin boy, widened like saucers. His mouth went to form a perfect, round 'o'. In any other situation, Ginny would have laughed, teased him about the way he always wore his emotions clear on his face, bare for all to see.

Not tonight, though.

"So," Seamus said. "What do we do with him?"

Neville stepped up, shadows shifting on the sharp slants of his face. He had much changed in the span of the few months they had been at school. Baby fat had melted from his cheeks. He was the only one of them whose body had not been diminished by the treatment it had endured. Where other students had shrunk, shrivelled down to make themselves smaller targets, Neville had grown. His shoulders had broadened, his jaw had squared. He had been stripped of his shyness, drained from any trace of the meek boy he had been. Ginny had yet to see weakness in him, anything beyond the warmly confidant smiles he wore like so many armours everyone was welcomed to draw strength from.

"What d'you mean?" he asked Dean, coming to a halt beside the other boy.

"Well – " Seamus gestured at the Slytherin, the lapels of his cloak flopping around with the motion. "We can't exactly take him with us, can we? I don't remember the Carrows punishing any Snake before. Could be a spy for all we know."

Across from them, the boy had yet to utter a word, eyes jumping back and forth between them. He was breathing deeply. Evenly. In through his nose, out through his mouth.

"Do we – ? I suggest we leave him here."

"No," said Neville, predictably. "He's just a, what – Second Year, tops?"
No nod of acknowledgement or denial. The continued silence was starting to grate on Ginny's nerves. They had to decide quickly, and there was something off about the way that that boy was looking at them. She couldn't put her finger on what, exactly, but it was very much there. The feeling she got on the back of her neck right before getting hit by a Bludger.

"We can't take him with us," Seamus reiterated. "Once he gets back – half his House's got Death Eater affiliations. We can't risk it."

"I know that." There was a frown, deeply set between Neville's eyebrows. If he held it any longer than that, Ginny feared it would stay stuck.

"Maybe we should wipe his memory? You any good with Obliviates, Gin?"

And there. There it was. The faintest widening to the boy's eyes, a hitch in his breath, wrists pulling at their chains, not hard enough to make them clink, but noticeable nonetheless.

"Gin?"

Fear. The Slytherin was afraid of them. Had been since the moment they broke into Filch's office, which was why he had kept quiet even though they had come to free these kids, not torture them any further.

"I'll take him," she said, because she would not sleep tonight thinking about the frightened boy they had left to rot in a humid, airless cell. "You go. I'll be along."

"Absolutely not."

"You sure?"

She looked at Neville, because he was the one they all followed, with Ginny right behind him. The unofficial leader of their resistance, holding the fort in Harry's name. In this moment, Seamus's opinion didn't matter. He would fold rather than go against Neville's judgment.

Not that Ginny would have let that stop her from doing what she wanted.

"Yes. I'll get him to his House. I know the secret passages better than any of you. I'll be fine."

Neville gave a single nod. It was a new feeling, something she was struggling to get used to, to have her word be trusted without question. Raised in a household with six older brother, Ginny was accustomed to being treated like the little one. The fragile one, to be protected. All her life, she'd had to snarl and fight twice as hard as any of her brothers to be heard. Though she cherished their love with all her heart, there were times when she could feel herself suffocate from under the weight of it.

_I am here. Let me speak. Let me prove myself._

She'd never had to prove herself in Neville's eyes. To him, her worth and capacity to defend herself were established facts, just as his were to her.

"Go," she said. "You don't have long before they come 'round for the next rotation. Be careful."

"You, too."

They parted ways. The boys slunk back into the dark, steps quick and silent.

And Ginny was left alone with the chained Slytherin.
"Alright," she said, facing him with her arms crossed over her chest. "Let me get one thing clear. I'm going to get you out of these, then I'm going to get you back to your own. I'm won't hurt you, or cast any spell on you. Do you understand?" After a moment of hesitation, the boy gave a slow nod. "Good. Now, you should also know, if Seamus's right and this is some kind of ploy that's supposed to make my life this much more difficult – " she smiled, all teeth, "I'll have you answer for it, and it won't be pleasant. You behave yourself, and so will I. Deal?"

Another nod.

"Splendid."

She set to work. The lock was easier to pick this time around. She understood its mechanism, and had both the boy's wrists freed in under a minute. Good thing the Carrows were just as stupid as anyone else when it came to the Muggle way of solving problems. Though the chains were warded against just about any and all enchantments, they were defenceless against a good old lock pick.

The boy stumbled free, rubbing his wrists with detached care.

"C'mon," Ginny said. They were running late. "We gotta go. C'mon."

She had to keep from rushing through the corridors. She had to. Precipitation was when you made mistakes. Precipitation got you chained to a wall, and tortured by your friends. They set off at a light jog, neither of them speaking.

The castle was empty. Filled with nothing but the creeping darkness from the outside, bleeding into the walls like tar. It felt cold and gloomy in a way that had nothing to do with the winter. A funeral house, turned into a cooling corpse itself.

A corpse whose secrets Ginny knew like the back of her hand. She took the boy into winding tunnels, hidden behind doors pretending to be tapestries. The air was warmer there, solemn with the scent of old things, mysteries laughing out of the corners of their eyes. Getting to the Dungeons wasn't very difficult. Ginny sent Mrs Norris after an enchanted Ice Mice, the damned cat trotting after the bait and out of sight.

She wasn't very fond of the Dungeons. They were always cool and damp, no matter how cold or hot it was outside. There was a strange sense of quiet down there, the weight of the castle compelling a placid kind of stillness.

Beside her, the Slytherin boy – whose name she still didn't know – blew a soft sigh. Something in his composure unlocked, nervous tension sliding from the thin set of his shoulders. Fingers dragged against aged stone, rasping as they went.

Ginny knew the general direction of the Slytherin common room. Harry had described it to her, one lazy spring day, his head on her thighs, her fingers in his hair, with nothing but his voice and sunlight, the sound of the Lake lapping at the grass. In the calm before the storm; stolen, precious moments that felt like a lifetime ago.

They pressed deeper into the Dungeons, parts of the castle she had only seen a handful of times. The boy stopped walking before her, haltingly at the top of a flight of stairs, steps bowed and weathered from the sweep of too many feet.

"What is it?" Ginny whispered. He didn't appear to be in any kind of pain. "Something's wrong?"

He held a finger up to his lips, a shushing gesture, head cocked to a side. Listening.
Footsteps.

Shit.

Heart hammering all the way to her throat, her wrists, Ginny took a step back, away, motioning for the boy to follow her.

He didn't. Cut a sharp look in her direction, a hand shooting up to grab her sleeve. Holding her in place.

"What are you doing?"

*Could be a spy for all we know.*

She was trapped. It was too late. Even if she broke free now, there'd be no way for her to flee without being seen. She'd be strung up in the Hall by morning, today's practice dummy for whatever Dark spells the Carrows would have their classes perform. She –

The footsteps grew closer, and Pansy Parkinson round up the corner, froze at the sight of them, short dark hair dancing around her face. Her eyes widened in an almost comical expression of surprise, not unlike Neville's, before being wiped off of her mouth in an instant.

"What are *you* doing here," she asked none of them specifically, voice a furious growl, but. A hushed one.

The boy let go of Ginny, stepped towards the girl. The little bastard was smiling, a small, relieved thing. He pointed at Ginny, hands flying up in a complex series of gestures.

Parkinson snorted. It was loud, and quite rude, nothing like the high-pitched giggles she was in the habit of uttering. "Did she, now?" she asked, dark eyes darting up to look at Ginny, baleful and filled with suspicion. "Why?"

Another series of gestures, a flurry of motions, too quick to follow.

"I was going to get you." The boy shrugged, and signed something else. "Right. I was held up. The vote – you know how it gets."

She closed to short distance separating her from the boy, looking at him with critical eyes. She extended both her index fingers, brought them together before twisting them towards him. He shook his head.

"Good," she said. "That's – good."

This was – this was too many informations to process at once. The weirdness of the whole scene – Ginny cleared her throat.

"How come you – " She hesitated. There was no delicate way to put this. "How come you can't speak?" she asked. It was something she'd heard of, wizards born deaf, or without a voice, or both. But the situation was usually remedied within days of their births, if not sooner. She wasn't sure what this boy being mute suggested about his past, and was even less certain she actually wanted to find out.

The boy signed something to her.

"Doesn't have a voicebox," Parkinson said. She spared her a glance. "We're – working on it."
"You're what?"

"Working on fixing it. Who the fuck do you take us for? And Merlin's balls, Weasley. Keep your voice down. I'm throwing you to the Carrows as peace offering if your screeches bring them here."

"You would," Ginny sneered, much quieter. "Why doesn't he – " She forced her voice into something softer. Being the youngest of six oafs hadn't robbed her of all tact. "Why don't you have a voicebox? Was it cursed off?"

The boy answered.

"You don't have to tell her anything," Parkinson told him. He signed again, gestures broader. His own way of shouting. His Housemate grimaced. She said, "He was born like this," and that –

That did not make any sense. Health care was free for underage children. Any mid-witch would have given him back his voice, any doctor who he'd seen during childhood. They hadn't.

Which meant the boy was Muggle-born.

Which also didn't make sense. Parkinson had taken a step closer to the boy, dark eyes narrowed in her direction. Protective.

"You breathe a word of this to the Carrows," she said, an oddly cheerful note to her voice, "I'll make you regret every decision you've ever taken in your life."

And that. That was just ridiculous.

"Parkinson," Ginny said, talking around a sudden, very strong urge to warp her hands around the other girl's neck and squeeze. "You're a git. The only decision you could ever make me regret is that I've not yet cursed you six ways from Sunday." Deep breaths. The mute boy was grinning. "But. I'm gonna put the Carrows' heads on spikes. What the hell makes you think I'd want to talk to them?"

A perfectly plucked eyebrow went up to Parkinson's hairline. "Gryffindor," she said pointedly, nodding at the lion on Ginny's cloak. She tapped her Prefect's badge, a small silver snake, shining on her chest. "Slytherin."

"I hate them more than I hate you." Then, because she didn't want there to be any misunderstanding on the matter, "And I hate you a lot."

"I'm hurt."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

The boy tapped his foot against the ground, twice. He tugged at Parkinson's sleeve, towards where the Dungeons disappeared into shadows.

Parkinson rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, yes. We're going. Relax. It's not like there's anything they can do to us down here." Ignoring Ginny completely, she turned around and started walking away, still talking. "You and I are going to have a nice, long conversation about the idiocy of sneaking out and getting caught." She paused at the bent of the corridor, half-turned to Ginny, her eyes and face cast in darkness. She gave a single, slow nod that looked like it took a lot of effort to produce. "Weasley," she said between tight lips.
Then she was gone.

{...}

Weird things that had nothing to do with the menagerie of origami animals stalking the halls started to happen the very next day.

Ginny went back to the security of the Room of Requirement to find half the madhouse shouting at the other. Thank Merlin they'd made the walls soundproof. It took some time and one of the twin's Wildfire Whiz-bangs before everyone quieted down. They sent the younger kids to sleep, held a briefing in the sparkling, wheezing light of winged, pig-shaped fireworks that lasted another hour, before she could finally crash in her hammock and go to sleep.

Except that she didn't.

Her mind kept conjuring up Parkinson's face, the bronze of her skin, the venom of her tongue, the silent boy pressed against her side.

*If you breathe a word of this to the Carrows –*

*Who the fuck do you take us for?*

*Weasley Weasley Weasley.*

She had let the others believe that she'd taken the boy back to the Dungeons without seeing anyone. Her head was pounding with the beginnings of a migraine. The last thing she wanted was to spend another hour explaining that she'd had a semi-civil conversation with one of Slytherin's top dogs, specially before she could make sense of it herself. She didn't know Pansy Parkinson very well, had only heard of her through the insults she used to hurl at Ron, Harry and Hermione, cruel taunts uttered from Malfoy's side about wealth and worth and beauty. Not exactly the best of impressions to make. As far as Ginny knew, she was a superficial, self-centred girl, heiress to a pure-blooded line that had been suspected of associating with You-Know-Who during the First War, though never condemned. But then again, as far as Ginny knew, just over an hour ago, she would never have pegged Parkinson as someone who'd risk getting caught out of bed after curfew to go look after a young Muggle-born child.

She fell into a light doze in the early hours of the morning, dreamt about dark hair and school dynamics, shifting under her feet.

She woke up, and found exactly that, waiting at every turn.

She went to the Great Hall, dragged herself out of bed with only the greatest reluctance to slunk down to get coffee and start feeling human again. She ran into a couple of Fifth Year Slytherins. Nearly sent one of them tumbling down the stairs. The youngest Greengrass girl, Astoria. Her friend, a tall, black-haired boy, caught her by the elbow, steadied her before she could break a bone.

And neither of them said anything. The boy didn't so much as glance her way, busy straightening Greengrass's clothes. The girl blinked at her, looking vaguely offended by the world in general, which was a rather common state to find her in, and that was it. No hissed insult, or snide remark, or whispered curse.

Ginny muttered something she hoped sounded like an apology. Staggered away with her head buzzing.
"The hell was that?" Seamus asked between gritted teeth, tense as a bowstring.

Ginny wished she knew.

It didn't stop there.

Breakfast was spent in subdued silence, as it had been since the start of the year, with only the clink of cutlery and the papery flaps of the Pterodactyls' wings the Carrows had failed to marshal out of the school above their heads to break the morose quiet.

Between chugging down two cups of coffee, Ginny looked up, and found Parkinson staring back, dark eyes piercing even from across the Hall. There was an embarrassed downturn to her mouth, quickly wiped away. She sat straighter on her bench. Daring Ginny to look away first.

Naturally, she did not.

She had slept a grand total of four hours the night before. There was sand in her eyes, kinks in her back. She felt old beyond her years, tired in a way that had nothing to do with exertion.

So she looked back. Took notice of the planes and arches of Parkinson's face for the first time in her life, the proud tilt of her chin, the stubborn frown between her brows. Then she nodded. Once, coffee cup raised in a mocking salute. And Parkinson nodded back. It was barely there, a small, stilted motion she managed to make look sour and half-hearted even from a distance. But it was there.

What a strange world she now lived in.

Things were different in classes, too, in the few of them that Ginny shared with Slytherins. Small things. Less of them raising hands to volunteer answers to Amycus Carrow's questions in Dark Arts' studies. Spells they used to execute perfectly flickering out before ever leaving their wands. Smirks and snickers dwindling down to near extinction. Professor Flitwick almost bounced off of his desk one day that Morag handed Ginny her book, so that they could read it together. They still avoided punishment at all costs, saved their skins when it came down to it, but there was a noticeable air of *something*, floating around the castle. A tentative, fragile sort of truce that had Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws and Gryffindors frown suspiciously at Slytherins' backs.

Ginny was baffled. Seamus and Neville were baffled. The whole castle was in a state of general bafflement.

"It's all getting tied back together, isn't it?" Luna told her one rainy afternoon, the two of them tucked in a secluded windowsill, rainwater pattering delicately against the glass. "That's nice."

"There's Muggle-borns among them. Did you know?"

The watery light swayed over Luna's pale hair, made it look soaked through in the dimness of the dusty corridor. "Of course. Dad wrote an article where he proves Salazar Slytherin was a Muggle himself. He had a lot of technical skills, to build the castle. Would you like to read it?"

Which did not much help.

A few weeks in, Ginny found another Slytherin chained up in Filch's office. She freed the girl without a second thought, sent her on her way through a secret passage she'd so far kept to herself, and went to help Colin and Luna turn the marble staircase to un-meltable ice.

Ginny wasn't much one to wait and observe. She found direct approaches easier to manage, rather
than to let a situation linger in some uncertain half-life, rotten with unsaid things. She kept to herself for as long as she could, watched in silence and was watched in return.

She spied the mute boy – Nathan, she later learned – several times between classes, always half-hidden in a mass of green and silver cloaks, belonging either to his year-mates or to older Slytherins. He showed no sign of distress, or of being anything but comfortable among a mostly pure-blooded crowd. Which was, apparently, a thing that Slytherins did. Travel in groups, all ages mixed up. She kept catching Parkinson's eyes. She'd turn around in crowded corridors, and find the girl, standing still in a sea of sounds and moving bodies, watching. A hard, calculating stare. It became a game of sorts, the two of them holding eye contact for as long as they could. Willing the other to either nod in acknowledgement or look away.

It lasted a while. She let it last a while. Let her Housemates mutter their confusion, let the Slytherins do whatever it was that they were doing. Let it grow, or fester.

"Her," Amycus Carrow said one grey morning, pale, dim light slanting from the large windows of the classroom he'd appropriated. He leered at her, lopsided and disgustingly happy. "Her next."

Because of course. Of course he would notice something, eventually. For all that he was a doughy-faced, sadistic bastard, the man was a former Snake to boot, and not a complete moron. His tiny eyes had to have picked up on the slide in alliances, the subtle shifts in his House's behaviours. He had to have identified her as the center of it all.

The classroom held very still. No one was making a noise. A wall of impassive faces, soldiers standing straight, resigned to their fate. Ginny could feel the accumulated tension buzz along her limbs, tie her down to the floorboards under her feet.

"Make it snappy," Carrow said. He said, "You do it. Chop chop."

Not that. Not again.

Please, not again.

She stepped forward. Three paces, the way she was supposed to. Facing the blackboard, a handful of heartbeats to brace herself before she spun around. Colin was staring at Carrow, livid with rage, the bruises on his face standing out on his pale skin. The other students were a blur of grim-faced ghosts beside him.

Morag detached herself from the crowd, the only moving being among these statues. Two steps forward, until she was standing near Ginny, her lips pinched in a thin line, her eyes riveted on the floor next to Ginny's shoes.

Ginny could not remember what spell it was that they were studying today. Something about electrocution, muscles sizing up. Not that it mattered. What was one more, after all? She could take it. She had so far.

She closed her eyes and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Morag wasn't moving, or doing anything. The moment she made eye contact, she bowed her head, a small, apologetic tilt. She raised her wand.
Ginny didn't even hear the incantation over the crack of lightning that filled her ears. A pale-yellow bolt of light came rushing her way, sizzling through the air in a hungry curve, and –

She woke up in the Hospital Wing, staring at a crack in the whitewashed ceiling, to the scent of clean linens and antiseptic. It was dark outside. Shivery moonlight dripped from the wide windows, pushed back the comfortable obscurity of the bed-lined room. Oil lamps were lighted around the walls, casting warm orange glows around them. Cake, sweets, and a bottle of pumpkin juice were gathered at the end of her bed, a small pile of get-well presents.

She hurt. It was faint, manageable, a burn in her muscle, as though they had all been pulled at the same time. She could almost smell the scent of ozone and cooked flesh lingering on her body. She sat up slowly, overly aware of the stretch and shift of every bone under her skin. She felt strangely lopsided.

"Oh, good. You're awake." Madam Pomfrey came bustling by her bedside with all the contained fierceness and disapproval of a lioness disturbed in her sleep. Her nightcap hung loosely on her greying hair.

"W-what – ?"

"Baubillious Spell," she said crisply, taking Ginny's arm by the wrist and tapping her wand along the underside of it. "You went into shock right away. Small mercies, your Housemates were sensible enough to bring you straight to me." She looked up at Ginny, eyes losing some of their ferocity. "There's no lasting damage. Although you'll have to stay the night."

Ginny could only nod. Pomfrey finished her examination, gave her a couple of stomach-wrenching potions to swallow, and shuffled away, back to her chambers, muttering what were probably insults aimed at the Carrows under her breath.

Ginny waited another half hour before kicking off her blankets and shimmying out of bed. She shrugged on her cloak, grabbed her shoes, and crept out of the Infirmary, bent low to stay out of sight of Madam Pomfrey's windows, the floor cold and smooth on the soles of her feet.

She had accounts to set straight.

The corridor was cool and silent, obscured with whispering shadows the way it always was at night. Ginny put on her shoes. She was used to traipsing through Hogwarts by the light of its moon-glowing grey stones, behind the bulk of its suits of armour and statues. It was soothing and familiar, blending in to the castle's curves, made only slightly more difficult by her aching body.

She turned her back to the marble staircase, to the warmth and comfort of the Gryffindor common room, only a few floors away. She ducked around Paracelsus' likeness, tickling the end of his beard to descend into a narrow, winding tunnel, full of dust and cobwebs, that slid down to the Dungeons, just a few corridors away from the Potion's classroom. It took her awhile to find back the place where she'd met Parkinson all these weeks ago. From there, it was all guesswork and instinct. She wished she had her brothers' map with her, had asked Harry to lend it to her before he went away. The Dungeons were a fucking maze. Whoever built them clearly had had some mental health problems.

There were unexpected pockets of madness within Hogwarts' bowels, she found. She burst into wide, vaulting passageways that had nothing to do in the cramped, low-ceilinged Dungeons, church-like rooms where her steps echoed off of intricate engravings, rock twisted as though it had once been liquid. On and off, she swore she could hear the soft, wet clap of water against stone, and wondered if it was possible that the Dungeons reached as far as the Black Lake. Intermittently,
windows appeared, splattering moonlight on the floor, even though they were too far underground to see the sky. The walls became coarser, less polished than the rest of the castle, roughly hewn stones catching her fingertips. She felt that she was walking back in time, to some primitive state in which Hogwarts had remained, untouched by the shafting of centuries.

She was completely, undeniably lost.

She kept on wandering, let her feet carry her further down. Brain disconnecting, floating pleasantly in-between sleep and wakefulness. She felt calm. Her lungs filled with damp, lukewarm air with steady regularity. She was light and heavy at the same time, childish curiosity pushing her forward. There were no threats here, this much she knew.

She stopped when her legs started to ache from too much walking, intending to lean on a patch of wall, to slide against it like a wet rag. She paused when she noticed markings along its edges, although an archway had once stood there, and been erased. Intrigued, she tapped the wall with her wand until some jammed mechanism groaned into action. The gap she had to slide through was ridiculously small, but she was nothing if not stubborn, managed it after a few tries. She tripped on a hidden step at the end of the passage, tumbled down to the ground in a cloud of dust. She shook her head, sputtering. Wherever she was, no one had strolled these floors in a very long time. She didn't imagine she was anywhere near the Slytherin common room.

"Lumos," she murmured, lifting her head. Light shone off of the end of her wand, made whirling particles shine like glitter. She did not recognize anything of the wing of the castle she was in. The silence was soft, with the mellow, sleepy quality of a bedroom in the early hours of dawn. Here and there, random pieces of furniture had spilled into the labyrinth of corridors, long since forgotten relics.

She got up on shaky legs, weary from exertion. Her heart was a beating tattoo in her chest. Excited like a kid on Christmas Day. This - this was new. Terra incognita, invisible depths to explore. It had been a while since she had indulged in this. The need to wander, to get lost. To unveil some of Hogwarts' secrets. She had gotten this far; might as well carry on to where it led.

That was when she heard voices. Faint, like a rustle of dry leaves on a forest floor, flowing whispers that froze her where she stood.

What she should do: Turn back, climb her way to security, to known grounds stripped of the weight of all these secrets she really, definitely shouldn't get involved in.

What she did: Edge closer, wand raised high, pulled in by the same urge that had led her to pick the broomshed lock in the dead of night when she had been a child, to go flying while everyone else slept soundly.

Heart in her throat, she reached the bend of the corridor. The voices had grown louder, the words rasping and foreign, with intonations and catches that had her think she should be able to understand, but couldn't because she'd forgotten, somehow.

She rounded the corridor, peeking around the corner.

Ghosts. Two ghosts were floating a feet above the ground, conversing quietly, silver and mist glimmering in the obscurity. She didn't understand a word, but it felt like something she should not eavesdrop in.

*Walk away,* she thought, backing up a step. *Don't make a sound and walk away.*
She banged against a cupboard, elbow smashing into cankered wood.

The temperature dropped, numbing her fingers, the tip of her nose.

"What are you doing here?" asked a deep, gravely voice.

Ginny recognized the Bloody Baron, a gaunt specter wearing chains, silver bloodstains thick on his aged clothes. She had never heard him talk before. Beside him stood a woman. She was beautiful, dark hair falling to her waist in gentle waves, dark eyes shining faintly in the surrounding gloom, a proud, if haughty face. The Grey Lady, ghost of the Ravenclaw Tower. Another spirit whose voice Ginny had never heard before.

Tonight was a night of first times, it would seem.

"You should not be here, girl. How did you find this place?" the Baron asked, gliding closer.

Ginny's breath had started to fog in front of her face.

The Grey Lady stopped him before he could touch Ginny, a vaporous hand grabbing his shoulder with the assuredness of someone confident that her wishes would be obeyed. "You are Ginny Weasley," she said, voice rich, full of deep vowels and rolling 'r's. "Harry Potter's former lover, are you not?"

Ginny wondered vaguely whether she was dreaming. Ghosts held no interest in the affairs of the livings. They roamed the Earth, eternally locked in the self-made prison of their lament, indifferent to the rise and falls of Empires.

'Lover', the woman had said. 'Former'.

*Harry Potter.* Ginny had long since gotten used to the twist in her gut at hearing his name. Mixed fear and worry, the old hurt of a love that could have been, a knife curling around a badly-healed wound. Merlin, but she missed him. Missed his arms, his hair, the way his eyes glinted when he laughed, deep green an ensnaring trap. The two of them would never have worked, not as a couple. She had known this the moment he had kissed her for the first time, in the middle of the common room, cheers and catcalls drowned out under the warmth of his lips. She had known this every time that they had talked about the war, about the faint, flickering hope of a future where they were both alive and well. There wasn't a world in which she could have held onto him, or him to her. The weight that crushed his shoulders, the troubles that smouldered away in his eyes would never have allowed for it. She had let him fool himself, fool the both of them, into believing otherwise. Clinging to what little happiness they had been allowed before the world came crashing down around their ears.

"Yes," she said, shoulders squared and voice steady. "That's me. What is this place?"

Neither ghosts answered. The Baron turned his mournful, melancholic eyes on his companion, the two of them talking without words, centuries worth of history lingering between the two of them.

"Is this wise, my love?" the man asked, whole inconsistent body angled towards the Lady.

She smiled. A wry, bitter twist of her lips. "Nothing either of us has ever done has been wise, Baron. But I believe this is as it should be."

He bowed, chains clinking, hair tumbling across his face. "As you wish." He faced Ginny, the pained, bland look in his eyes making her shiver. "Lean into this wall," he ordered her, a hand gesturing behind him. "If you are who you say you are, it will let you through."
He offered the Grey Lady his arm.

"Wait," said Ginny, too late. Together, they disappeared, fading away like mist under the sun.

She was left staring at the wall, with little idea of what to do.

'Ginny Weasley,' the woman had said. 'Harry Potter'.

"Alright," she murmured.

A deep breath, and she was pushing against the wall, hands raised in front of her. There was no resistance. Just like at King's Cross, her arms went through without encountering any obstacle. She wiggled her fingers. Still firmly attached to her hand. What a relief. The wall was an illusion.

"Alright," she said again, respiration short.

She stepped through.

She lived. She opened one eye, then the other. The room wasn't very large. It was an office. Bookshelves, groaning under the weight of books and potion's jars, had been pushed against the round walls. There was a desk, and several work tables, not unlike the ones in the Potion's classroom. Golden runes had been etched into the walls, some sort of protective magic.

"Merlin," she breathed, walking forward. There was a carpet on the floor that muffled her footsteps. She spun around slowly, taking it all in.

She went behind the desk. Cracked open a few of the books, the bindings frail-looking but holding strong. The pages were brittle, smelled of mold and old parchment. They were written in some archaic language, not Latin, though the alphabet was familiar, the ink watered down with time. There was a single volume on the desk, a thin notebook with a green, leather cover, unmarked and unremarkable but for its position.

Its script was different from the others. Slanted and elegant. Ginny flipped the pages, tasted under her palms the strength of the Conservations Spells imbued in the paper.

'Salazar Slytherin,' she read.

'Harry Potter'.

{...}

She stumbled out of the corridor. Out of breath. Covered in dust and dirt. The green-leather book clutched close to her chest.

She needed air. She needed time to think. She needed to contact her family.

She had no idea where she was. She –

Muffled a scream into the hand pressed against her mouth.

"Quiet Weasley," said Parkinson against her ear. "If you don't want to get tortured again, keep quiet and follow me."

The girl's fingers dug painfully into her arm. She backed them up three steps, into a darkened alcove. A few paces away, Ginny could hear footsteps. Voices. The Carrows conversing, shrill voices grating her nerves. Her back was pressed snugly against Parkinson's front. She could feel...
the girl's breath stream down her neck. She was a few inches taller than Ginny. She could feel her breasts just above her shoulder blades.

Everything was a little out of focus, straining sideways.

"What are you doing here?" Parkinson breathed. The words slid down Ginny's skin.

She moved away. She could not hear the Carrows anymore.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Parkinson asked. She was frowning, an expression that looked like worry.

"Why do you care?"

"Answer the question, Weasley."

"I was looking for you."

The other girl crossed her arms. "Why? Coming for your pound of flesh, were you?"

Ginny wasn't sure why she had come all the way from the Infirmary any longer. Inside the pocket of her cloak, the green-leather book weighed a ton.

"I want – I wanted to talk to you. I want explanations." She wanted to lie down and sleep for a week, for her head to stop spinning so she could think properly. She wanted to know why Harry's name was in a book alongside Salazar Slytherin's. She wanted for him to come back, for this war to end, for the pain and uncertainty to lift. The width and breadth of what she wanted were boundless, she could feel herself drown in their immensity. She was off-kilter in a way she hadn't been since Tom Riddle had insinuated himself within her soul, too exhausted for anything but blunt honesty. She said, "We're at war, Parkinson. There's no room for anything between true friends and mortal enemies. You know this. Your House knows this. So why – " Why did Morag knock me out when the spell was supposed to keep me conscious? Why aren't we all insulting each other like always? Why did you just protect me from getting caught? Why why why.

Parkinson closed her eyes. She breathed deeply, as though to calm herself. "Weasley," she said. "Come with me."

"What? Where?"

"Just – come. Before I change my mind. You can't go back upstairs anyway. Please?"

So Ginny followed. It was only a few corridors over, twists and turns Ginny hadn't tried on her way in. Parkinson stopped in front of a patch of blank wall, with only a small, almost invisible snake engraved at the bottom. Ginny was fast getting tired of blank patches of walls hiding secrets.

This one, as it turned out, opened on the Slytherin common room.

It wasn't exactly how Ginny had pictured it. Not exactly as cold and bleak as she had thought it would be. Fancy, luxurious furniture. Dark-wood bookshelves and tables. Stone padded with thick rugs and silky tapestries. Bright silver lamps hung from the ceiling. Wide, translucent windows showed the insides of the Black Lake. She had been right about that, then. The Dungeons did spread into the Lake, and the view was astounding, dark-green and wobbly and otherworldly.

Slytherins were all insane.
There were a few students still awake, sprawled on the black-leather couches, piled together on the rugs. Ties off, sleeves rolled up. Relaxed and comfortable, up until the moment she walked in. Conversations died, a hush falling within seconds. She had to resist the urge to slap a hand on the lion roaring on her clothes.

"She's with me," Parkinson said, loud and clear. One of her hands was on Ginny's shoulder, holding her in place. She gave a light push. "Walk," she ordered. "They're not going to bite."

Ginny let herself be pushed deeper into the common room. Parkinson was right. They weaved their way through the scattered groups of students. None of them protested to her presence. None of them made a move to curse her while her back was turned. Eyes followed her, but conversations started back gradually, if quieter than before.

"Have fun, Pansy!" someone shouted from one of the windows. A dark-skinned, handsome boy. Blaise Zabini if Ginny remembered correctly, a book lying, spine up on his chest, a leg swinging near the ground.

Parkinson flipped him off. She walked Ginny to a small, individual bedroom, a large trunk of varnished wood lying at the foot of a queen-sized bed.

"Sit," she said. "You look like you're about to pass out, and I'm not picking you up if you do."

"Don't tell me what to do," Ginny said. She sat, distractedly wondering what she had done wrong to end up in a Slytherin's bed.

On. On a Slytherin's bed.

Merlin help her.

Parkinson loomed above her, still standing, arms crossed as though she was about to give a lecture. "You said you wanted explanations. What about, exactly?"

"I want to know what's been happening. Don't – try to deny it." Parkinson closed her mouth. "I may not be one of your sneaky lot, but I'm not blind. I want to know where we're standing. Where your House and mine are standing with each other."

Parkinson sighed. "There's one thing you need to understand about my House, Weasley." She closed her bedroom's door, locking the two of them in the small room, away from stolen glances and half-gestures. "We don't take lightly to others interfering with our affairs. We don't take lightly to one of us being very publicly punished. Chained up like a dog. They would have made a spectacle of Nathan, and that's simply not something we can afford. We would've found a way to free him. Bribes. Exchanges. Blowing up the whole wing, if that's what it would have taken." She smiled, more teeth than humour. "But you got there first. Some of us felt we owed you for it."

"Some?"

"Enough of us. They made a good case."

There was something else here. Something Parkinson was not telling. Would refuse to tell. Hidden motives, warped in layers of truth. Ginny would figure it out later. For now, there was one more thing she wanted to know.

"How many Muggle-borns do you have?" she asked.

"Thirteen, at the moment," Parkinson replied. "We had more before, but they had the sense to
leave the country after the Dark Lord was seen in the Ministry."

Thirteen. An unlucky number for some. It was less than there were in Gryffindor, but a lot more than Ginny had expected. "Since when – ?"

Parkinson sneered. "There's always been Mudbloods in my House, Weasley," she said. "We just make sure they don't look or act like it."

It had been a long, long day. Mudblood, Parkinson said, and Ginny saw Hermione, war-worn, thin in a way that spoke of starvation, shaking so badly she couldn't stand, bruised and bloodied, but still gasping for words, digging in her heels until she bled, to hold on just a little longer. She saw Colin and his exuberant smiles, and Justin, and Harry. She –

She fisted her hands in the lapels of Parkinson's uniform shirt, pushed her up against the wall, hard enough that she yelped, startled, and winced at the impact.

"Don't call them that," she said. She growled, teeth inches from Parkinson's throat. The girl flinched, like she was expecting a fist to the nose. Ginny could feel herself tremble, red-hot rage painful in her fingers. "Don't you dare call them that, you bloody hypocrite."

The sound of their panting breaths was obscenely loud in the quiet of the room, a harsh contrast with the tranquil lapping of the Lake. Ginny could feel in her chest the burning need to scream. The need to tear Parkinson to pieces, strip her of all masks and faux-semblants. The need to make her scream, understand the violence that was storming behind Ginny's breastbone. The need –

Parkinson dipped her head to the side, exposing more of her throat, the skin pale and delicate and soft-looking. Fluttering with the beating of her pulse. Her lips were red, darkened with lipstick, shining wetly, just inches away from Ginny's own, and Ginny's world narrowed down to that deep shade of red, to the feel of silken hair gliding on her shoulders, to Parkinson's eyes, dark with something that wasn't fear, night and charcoal and promises. The girl dipped her head further, slowly, deliberately, testing the waters with cut-off breaths, nose brushing Ginny's cheek, her intent unmistakable, and –

They kissed. Hard and graceless and desperate. Mouths fitting together, mindless with need. Ginny pressed in and took, because it was the only thing she could think to do, Parkinson pulling her the rest of the way in, until she was standing between her legs, fingers squeezing her neck, urging her closer, demanding more more more, and it felt good, felt like closure, like it had been a long time coming, and a hand was cupping her breast, rubbing small circles over the material of her night shirt, and Ginny didn't much care for the noise she made with the back of her throat, something starred and satisfied.

It took an alarming amount of time for her to come back to herself. She was kissing Pansy Parkinson, Slytherin Prefect, anathema of everything Ginny stood for. Pansy Parkinson, who she had been a hair's breadth away from punching in the jaw just moments before. Pansy Parkinson –

"Please, stop thinking," Pansy groaned. She was impossibly gorgeous like this, tussle-haired and swollen-lipped. She bit down on Ginny's lips, slid her tongue into her mouth. "I didn't mean to insult your friends," she said, pulling back just enough to breathe the words against Ginny's skin. She smiled, coy and sly, and Ginny felt it low in her stomach, heat curling at the base of her spine. "However could I make it up to you, I wonder?"

That was almost enough to distract Ginny for good, have her toss Parkinson on her own bed and see where things went from there, but –
"Actually," she said, leaning away to catch Pansy's eyes, shaking her head because she had to *focus*, damn it. "You – you could point me in the direction of a fireplace that's connected to the Floo?"
"Really Salazar," Helga said reprovingly, though the beginnings of a dimple on her chin meant she very much wanted to laugh. "Was this necessary?"

Salazar glared at her from across the room, something that would have been a lot more effective if he hadn't been dripping water all over their rather expensive carpet, his black hair still soaked through, sticking wetly to the skin of his back. "Yes," he said, shaking his towel for emphasis. "I'm going to have him beg for mercy before the end of week, that traitorous, flea-bitten cat."

"That's hardly fair," Helga said, and she was definitely messing with him now, biting the inside of her cheeks to contain the smile that wanted to curl her lips. "It's just a bit of water. One would think that you, in particular, would not much mind. I'm sure he meant nothing by it."

"Darling," Salazar said in a voice that was at least two tones too sweet because he was nothing if not an overdramatic idiot. "That was a lake worth of water. And you and I both know he meant to have war with it. It'll be a pleasure for me to deliver."

Rowena rolled her eyes at that, because, really. Men. "Can the bloodbath wait until after we've had the meeting?" she asked tartly, forcing Salazar's focus away from his plots of revenge. "Surely, the two of you can be civil to each other for another hour?" Helga snorted, loudly, a hand shooting up to cover her mouth. Rowena chose to ignore her, because at least one of them had to try and behave like an adult here. "Where is Godric anyway?"

"He was held up," Salazar said, looking far too innocent with his face smoothed out of all expression, a trick of his that hadn't worked on her since he was a boy.

"Salazar."

This time, he was the one to roll his eyes, as though she were the insensate one in this relationship. "I'm sure he'll be along shortly," he said, in a tone that suggested he wished for the exact opposite. "He's just a bit tied up at the moment."

"Oh Jesus Christ," Rowena muttered while Helga burst out laughing, the sound warm and lovely. Salazar threw his towel at her.

She sidestepped neatly and left them both to it, glided away to the nearest window, dress switching around her legs. It was a beautiful day, spring glowing tender greens and yellows with a first, early taste of summer, the view made all the more magnificent from one of the castle's topmost towers. The grounds sprawled bellow her in a multicoloured patchwork, grass and moss creeping up across dark-brown soil. Hogwarts stood atop a rocky promontory, the castle rising seamlessly from the jaded rock, tucked between Scottish mountains that towered over them, ice-capped peaks shrouded in coiling clouds, their sides streaked with reddish turf and wildflowers that swayed like waves under the wind. The sun slanted down from its crown of bluff, slabs of light and shadows glittering on the ground. From the distance, the waters of the Lake looked black and sleek, the river that fed it glimmering lazily, a jewelled, undulating serpent stretched across the meadow. The sight left her breathless.

Rowena had always loved heights. She found there was something exhilarating in being perched alone, on the highest branch of a tree or on the edge of a roof, left to contemplate the inches between her and empty air, with nothing to keep her from the open, boundless blue of the sky. Feeling the pull of the Earth tug at her chest, call her down to the ground, like an invitation to
jump, to let herself be sway forward, feel the rush of the wind on her face, the weightless freedom of the fall.

God, but how she longed for it at times. The escape, the peace of it, the noise in her head drowned out to the rush of wind in her ears.

Building Hogwarts, a stack of stones on a bed of mad dreams, reaching for the skies in its cradle of mountains and wilderness, was as close to that sensation as she knew she'd ever get. As close as she'd get to peace and freedom in a world that didn't have either, a world where people like her were renegades, castaways pushed into the dark for fear of how bright they could burn. Hogwarts was every roof, every tree she'd ever escaped to as a child, all condensed into one. The perfect haven where the storm forever raging in the fragile confines of her skull could be let loose, let to grow and take form into existence, protected from society's rules, all these leashes cutting the air from her throat.

They had attained something great and beautiful here, something meant to weather wars and storms and centuries. Something good where she could breathe.

Unfortunately, in Rowena's experience, good things weren't made to last.

A soft hand brushed the small of her back. The smell of earth and honey derailed her train of thoughts. Helga stood beside her, close enough that body heat draped itself over Rowena's skin. Dark eyes, warm and patient, danced with quiet joy in the gold of the sun.

"Black mood?" Helga asked, because she'd always had the preternatural ability to sense Rowena's state of mind. It used to make her shy away, retreat within herself and clutch at the unravelling strands of the cold indifference that had helped her survive to adulthood, back when she hadn't been able to believe that anything so intrinsically good as that woman could possibly exist.

It hadn't taken Helga very long to cure her of that habit, though. She'd never been able to hide from her friend, never could hold on to the air of affected disdain she'd worn like an armor all her life. She'd never even truly wanted to.

Rowena loved height, had never felt the nauseating spin of vertigo that she could remember. But it scared her, a little, just how fast and hard she'd been falling since the day Helga had first gifted her with a smile.

"Rowena?"

"I'm all right," she said, carefully tucking away the sweet, throbbing ache in her chest that wanted lean against Helga's hand on her back, trace the shape of her cheekbones with her thumbs, slide a hand through her hair.

She truly was alright. Settled, safe and free, after year of struggling and suffocating under the yoke of a society she'd never fit in. Being in love with a woman, with someone she could never measure up to have, was an agony she could very well live with. She forced a smile.

Salazar was watching her from the other side of the room, grey eyes glowing silver from across the distance, flitting from her to Helga, then back again, something not unlike pity bleeding through the masks on his face.

Don't you dare, she snarled with all the strength of her mind, and he blinked, water dripping from the corner of his eyes, glinting across his wet skin.

Do you truly know her so little that you believe she could bear the thought of hurting you? The
words whispered through her mind, swift and smooth as water, Salazar's consciousness brushing the edges of her own.

*Out of my head, Slytherin,* she whispered back, and he went away with little more that a sigh.

In a squelch of soaked clothes, he straightened from his slouch against the wall. "Gryffindor's on his way," he said, head cocked to a side, listening to the sound of spells cracking. He sponged off his forehead with a sodden sleeve, effectively sliding even more water onto his skin.

"You know you could break that enchantment and dry off," Rowena told him, entirely unamused at the thought of sitting beside a walking puddle for the next few hours. "You're a Ward's master for God's sake."

He flashed her a smile that was just shy of the wrong side of a smirk. "That I am," he said.

Godric swaggered through the door, barely out of breath for all the stairs he'd climbed but visibly fuming, and Salazar plastered himself against his side, pounced on him like a great, wet cat, both arms coming up to trap the other man against his chest.

"So glad you could make it," he purred, and Rowena watched with some fascination as Godric sputtered, all water draining from Salazar's clothes to darken his own.

"I hate you," Godric informed him, quite calmly. Salazar ruffled his hair until water dribbled down his chin. "I truly do."

Somewhere at Rowena's right, Helga snickered.

Despite his declaration of abhorrence, Godric did little more than drive an elbow in Salazar's ribs to shake himself free of his friend's embrace, a weak blow that wasn't meant to achieve much of anything.

It was a strange relationship that these two shared, a bond that ran so deep Rowena never fully understood the reaches of it. It walked the line between friendship and brotherhood and something much more complex than either of these. It had been born out of strife and hunger and desperation, linking two boys in a mangled, misshapen kind of love that bordered on co-dependency.

Looking at them now, bantering like ten-year-olds as though they didn't have a care in the world, Rowena almost wished they'd ceded to the temptation and tumbled together into bed while they still had the chance. It would have solved a great number of problems, she was sure. Quelled some of the violence they worked so hard to keep contained. They both struggled to recognize themselves through each other's eyes in times of peace. So when pranks and teasing were no longer enough, Godric would snag Salazar by the wrist and drag him off to fight. Until their faces were bruised and their fists glistened with each other's blood, as close to physical intimacy as they'd let themselves get. And Salazar let him, every single time, encouraged him even, for the same reasons Rowena suspected he hadn't resisted to taking part in Harry Potter's training.

It was a convoluted, complicated mess. Rowena often wondered how long they believed the situation could hold, when they both so adamantly refused to acknowledge it even existed. She was far from an expert when it came to sentimental matters, but she knew human nature well enough to understand that two predators couldn't share the same space indefinitely before going for the other's throat.

Helga clapped her hands. "How about we get started?" she said, the sentence barely phrased as a question. "I believe we have work to do, yes?"
Salazar consented to drying Godric's clothes and everyone grabbed a seat. Rowena had designed this room herself, as she had most of this section of the castle. She was rather proud of it. It was a wide, sun-lit office that arched up to the ceiling in clear curves of polished stone. Twin staircases followed the rise of the engraved bookcases she'd pushed into the walls, leading up to a balcony where one could read in peace. Bellow was their table, guarded by four chairs.

"Order of business?" Godric asked once they'd all settled down, draped in what was left of his dignity.

"We need to set up exam schedules, now that almost everything's in place," Helga said. "Agree to a date to send the children back home. Decide who'll be covering what ground this summer."

From the corner of her eyes, Rowena saw Salazar sit straighter in his chair, posture shifting until he was lounging with all the grace of the lord he used to be, eyes sharpening in a way that meant he had a point to make, one he believed he would have to fight for. That look rarely announced anything good.

"About that," he said, voice smooth as silk. "There's something I feel we ought to discuss." Helga, who they had always implicitly trusted to take the lead any and all serious talks, gestured for him to continue. "I've received news. From Mercia, Northumbria. Wessex." He leaned his elbows on the table, looking at each of them in turn. "While we've been sheltered here for the past months, there's been unrest among Muggles. Witch-hunts and trials. Drownings, burnings, hangings. Just last week, a whole family was executed for possession of Mandrake roots. There are rumours going around. About us. About how we've made a habit out of kidnapping children and turning them into monsters."

"Your point being?" Rowena asked. She rather feared she knew where this was going.

Salazar looked at her, grey eyes intent. "We need to stop taking in Muggle-borns."

Rowena hated every moment of the silence that followed, the air tensing to its breaking point, thick enough to be cut with a knife.

"We can't do that," Godric said, softly. "You know we can't."

"We absolutely can. Who's to stop us? We're the ones making the rules here. No one else. We only need to agree to it." Salazar breathed deeply, searching for a foothold among them and finding none. "These children make for our greatest liability. Taking them away from their families and sending them home for summer is a mistake. You can't expect a child to hold on to all the secrets we share with them. One of them talking to their parents could result in armies marching here. Just the one, and everything we've built falls to dust."

Godric faced him. "So you suggest we leave them to deal with their powers alone, in an environment where the smallest slip could get them killed? That would be as good as murdering them ourselves, Salazar. They'd die by their parents' hands, or their community's, or even their own. Having Obscuri forming left and right wouldn't help us any. We'd be sacrificing children."

"A handful of them," Salazar agreed without blinking. "The truly powerful ones, that's inevitable. For the sake of keeping safe hundreds more. Besides, most of them would be fine. They'd probably even lead better lives than with our interference, with no one to widen in them the divide between their world and ours." He tilted his head to a side. "That's a calculation I can live with."

Salazar. Ever the practical. Forever willing to do what was necessary, even when that meant disregarding what was right. She had seen him cut down countless men to keep her, and Helga, and
Godric, safe. She had seen him take stupid decisions, rip himself apart, for the sake of what he cared for. He had always been the one to push them harder, farther, driven by the side of reality he could perceive. The lenses through which he saw the world had long since been obscured by its horror and cruelty. Sometimes, Rowena suspected darkness was all that he could see. He had learned to make himself blind to the rest of it, to keep from getting hurt any more than he'd already been. There was a dangerous, vicious voice in him that whispered away in a corner of his head. Saying that no price was too high to pay. It was a little voice that hid rage and desperation and fear under the guise of rationality.

Rowena had known Salazar too long and too well to let that voice fool her into being manipulated.

"Salazar," she said before Godric could say anything else. The man subsided to let her talk. "I understand." She did. She truly did. He and her were similar in many ways, including how their pasts had shaped them into being wary of Muggles, into wanting to hide away from the world. "And you do have a valid point." She raised a hand before Helga could interrupt. "But you're wrong. The legacy we leave behind is paramount to what our people are to become. This school is going to influence them for centuries to come." No one opened their mouth to question her. They knew better than to contest her grasp of future events. "Refusing asylum to Muggle-borns would do us a lot more harm than taking them in. We cannot build the foundations of a new wizarding society on rejection and mistrust. We'd be no better than those we just escaped from."

"For us to have a legacy, we need a piece of this to survive," Salazar said, cool but for the restless thrum of his fingers on the tabletop. On his chest, his snake tightened her coils, a warning to keep him contained. "I would take a bad reputation over no reputation at all any day. My way of doing things can guarantee some of our kids will live to become adults. I'm not sure that yours does."

"There are Muggle-born in your House," Helga told him gently. There was no accusation in her voice. There never was. Only a deep-seated desire to understand and help. "Even those three boys to whom you gave your blood. I don't get why we're arguing over this again. I thought the issue had been resolved."

"My Muggle-born students are orphaned," Salazar said. "Or disinherited. There isn't a child in my House who is going to go home to a Muggle family. I made sure there wouldn't be. I thought I'd made that clear." He bowed his head, dark hair spilling from its tie to frame his face. "If this castle falls, it won't be by my doing."

Godric's anger was a palpable thing. Rowena could feel its heat against her skin, a mix of fury and betrayal she didn't fully understand. Godric angry was always something to be wary of, especially when he grew quiet. For all that the man played at being a tamed kitten around them, showing them his throat and never his teeth, he was a lion, capable to tear out a man's heart with his bare hands. He killed and burned with a smile on his face, like it was nothing.

"We've always disagreed on the way to select our students," Helga said with a sigh. Helga, who had never been afraid to trace her own path, who had never bowed in front of other people's prejudices, strong in ways Rowena could never be. She had stood up to all three of them when they'd listed the qualities they sought in their students, selfish things that would bring them prestige and influence. She had refused to discriminate the way they all had, digging in her heels and promising to accept and care for any child who'd wish to learn.

Helga amazed her. Rowena laughed to herself when people mistook her kindness for weakness or stupidity. Blind fools. Helga was the best of them, always had been. She was the mortar that held this whole enterprise together.

"Some things, I think, we will never agree on," Helga said. She put a hand on Godric's arm. The
man visibly unwound at the touch, the room's temperature going down by a few degrees. "Do with your students what you will, Salazar. But don't expect us to follow you."

The flexing to Salazar's jaw meant he very much wanted to protest. He held his tongue. He'd made his case and they'd heard him. He was a skilled enough politician to know when to stop pushing. He eyes grew distant. Plotting and planning. Rowena had never known that man to give up on anything he'd set his mind to achieve. She was sure he'd find a way to bring the subject up again.

They talked about end of year exams and summer plans. About what they'd need to buy to make it through another school year, food and furniture and repairs to be done. They stirred clear of the word Muggle-born, until the air lightened and they were talking with their usual ease. House-elves brought tea and Salazar Summoned wine. The sun crept its way across the sky.

"And what do we do about Harry Potter?" Godric asked, busy balancing his teacup on a stack of old maps. "How old is he? Over seventeen, yes? We can't keep him as a student. He's too old. None of the other children treat him like a peer."

"Damage these documents in any way and I'm pulling out all your teeth one by one," Rowena said when tea sloshed dangerously close to the rim of Godric's cup.

The man waved her away. "We'll have to change his status if he's to stay any longer. To avoid confusion. Do you know what he plans on doing next year, Sal?"

Salazar replied with a vague shrug, lost to the contemplation of the red wine swirling in his glass. "I can't say I do," he said slowly. "I assumed he'd be staying here."

"He has his reasons not to be."

"Any you feel like sharing with the class?" Rowena asked, not bothering to hide the dryness of her tone. She already knew the answer. Salazar was a private man who hoarded information and kept it close to his chest. Even if the Potter boy had confided in him, he'd go to the grave carrying his secrets.

Salazar looked up. "What do you propose to make of him?" he asked Godric. "We'll soon be needing more teachers, but I don't believe that's what you have in mind. You'd like to keep training him."

Godric made a noise of agreement. "I'll get back to you on that."

They called the meeting off shortly thereafter. Rowena lingered in the tower while Godric regained his own and Salazar wandered down to the cool darkness of his Dungeons. Helga picked up two cups of tea, added a good measure of honey in each, and joined her on the windowsill, rearranging her skirts in a rustle of fabric. They watched the bright blues and oranges of the sky together, wind humming against the glass pane.

"Do you want to tell me what's been bugging you?" Helga asked after a while, gaze lost to the countryside.

"Preternatural ability to sense Rowena's moods indeed. There were pieces shifting inside her mind, a senseless puzzle shuffling into place, one painful chunk after the other. It was something she'd always had, tucked away in a remote corner of her brain. The capacity to perceive the road ahead. Out of an infinity of possible futures, she could always see the path she was most likely to travel, sense the turns and twists on the road. She'd even had the occasional vision before, past and future
combined, whenever something big was about to happen. There was a blurry, web-like map sprawled out in her head, forever scrapping for her attention. She could sometimes feel the changes in direction, taste the dread of imminent danger in her mouth.

She could taste it now, acid and copper on her tongue, knotting her stomach.

"Do you remember the day we met?" she asked, half-turned to watch the sun play on Helga's skin.

The woman huffed out a laugh. "Difficult to forget," she said. "You broke down my door and swooned right into my arms."

"I do not *swoon,*" Rowena scowled, and very carefully ignored the beats her heart missed, hope and alarm stabbing like knives. "I *passed out* from bloodloss. I had an arrow in the thigh."

Fear and panic and soul-deep, choking exhaustion. The fabric of her clothes soaked with blood, warm and sticky. Wood protruding from torn flesh. The dazed wish to just *stop,* lay down where she stood, on mud and stones and go to sleep, because what was even the point anymore? Why keep moving forward when it seemed like her life had come full circle, when she had *nothing?*

Helga had caught her when she'd started to sink to her knees, soft hands brushing her hair, like the sun bursting from behind the clouds, warm and glorious, moulding all the greyness to yellow and gold.

Some people fall in love at first sight, Rowena had been told. By poets and storytellers, wizened old women and restless youths. She had never believed them, up until that moment. When she had felt her world tilt on its axis, readjust to spin around a new center of gravity.

Helga nudged her with her foot. "I hardly noticed," she replied, dry as dust before growing serious. "Has the scar been bothering you? I can have a look if you'd like."

Rowena shook her head. "The scar's fine," she said.

"And you rarely speak without reason. I'm afraid I don't yet get the point you're trying to make."

Rowena wasn't entirely sure she knew herself. "Does it ever scare you?" she asked. At Helga's questioning tilt of the head, she forced her thoughts to assemble into something her friend could understand. "The – the randomness of it all. Of life. I took hundreds of choices before I found myself at your door. I chose to escape. I chose a direction to escape to. I chose your village. Your house. *You.*" She shook her head. "I think about all that could have gone wrong. All that I could have chosen differently that wouldn't have resulted in my being here today."

"And it terrifies you."

"Yes."

"Rowena." She looked up to see Helga smile, softly and without derision. "Life stands somewhere between choice and hazard. What led you to me was made of a thousand choices that didn't depend on you. You can't take responsibility for everything that could have happened. That's just selfish."

"I *am* selfish."

"I don't believe you are."

Rowena breathed out slowly. Bit down on her tongue. Helga was always willing to see the best in people. She saw beauty in ashes. She wasn't so naïve as to be blind to their darker impulses, but she
lived to nudge them closer to the light, to trust that no soul was ever too lost.

Rowena was too weak to try and prove her wrong.

"So." Helga set down her teacup, leaned in to catch her eyes. "Is there a particular choice you perceive is coming up?"

Gods, I love you.

"Something is coming. I'm not sure that it's a choice. I can't quite put my finger on it. I dream about it, I think. I hear it scuffling about in the dark."

"Last time you had that kind of nightmares, we found Godric," Helga hummed, tranquil and light-soaked.

"Half-dead," Rowena pointed out. "Salazar about to run rampage. Not exactly a good sign. We barely avoided slaughter."

"But we did." Helga winked. "And look how far we've come. Have you talked to Helena?"

Startled at the non-sequitur, Rowena took a moment to answer. "About the dreams?" Her daughter shared her gift, though to a lesser degree. Helga nodded. "I have not."

It hadn't even occurred to her. Communication with Helena was difficult, always had been. For all that Rowena had hated the father, she loved her daughter with a strength and ferocity that left her breathless. But the girl was halfway to adulthood now, and growing more and more boorish by the day. With no parental model to base herself on, no example to emulate, Rowena was lost. Human interactions had always been delicate for her to understand. The storm and rage of other people's emotions was a foreign language; confusing background noises that wouldn't compute. She dealt with Helena the only way she knew how, and gave the girl her space. She had no idea how to bridge the gap she felt was widening between them, old resentments and things unsaid holding her back.

"Rowena." Helga's hand took hold of hers, warm and firm. "I think you should lay down."

Rowena opened her eyes. She couldn't remember closing them. There was a pull just behind her retinas, a hook stabbing through her eyelids to her brain. Odd that she was only noticing now. She felt light-headed.

"Helga," she managed, panicked, and the world was spinning, Helga's face and the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the stones, and she –

She's six and headstrong, six and different, six and staring down the edge of her old oak tree, at a boy who's sneaking up the neat stone path that leads away from the castle's entrance. His clothes are rich and delicate, glittering with deep greens and silver leaves, entirely unsuited for creeping about unnoticed. He skips from stepping stone to stepping stone so that he won't get mud on his shoes, and shadows skip along with him, twist away from the castle's protection to curl around his frame like some weird cloak. The boy's a wizard and she would call out to him if he weren't so intent on being invisible. She wonders if he's slipped away from his lessons like her because they're so slow and boring. He stops in front of her old oak tree, looks up at her like he knows she's hiding there, and smiles. It's an odd smile, she thinks. Carefully curious, and just a little bit delighted. Hello, she hears inside her head. I'm Salazar, and I'm very pleased to meet you.

She's sixteen and learning, sixteen and broken, sixteen and running away from a place she could never call home, from a bed she could never sleep in. There's wind in her hair and pain in her body.
Tall grass whips her legs in time with her horse's strides. The sun bears down on her neck, burns pale skin that's spent too much time indoors, bent over thick books in the dusty quiet of the library. The sky is blue and boundless, and for the first time in her life, she is free. Her entire being pulses with the joy and terror of it. She's heading west, she thinks. She hopes. There are villages there where she might find help. Villages full of people like her, where she might find refuge. She's dreamt of hair blond like wheat and eyes dark like the space between stars and smiles that burn like the sun. She has to be quick, to get away before anyone catches up with her. Perhaps she'll find Salazar on the way. She hasn't seen the boy in ages, since they were both children. He's probably forgotten her. She never forgets anything.

She's twenty-six and hopeful, twenty-six and happy, twenty-six and drunk on stiff ale and cheap wine, her stomach warm and her head buzzing. Tomorrow brims with possibility. Tomorrow she'll find the daughter she loved and lost. Tomorrow, a new life begins for all of them. A bonfire that's taller than she is sparks and flickers orange and gold in the lukewarm sweetness of the night. The sky is black and purple and silver-white, and their castle glows against its darkness, a work of art in all its unpolished glory. She dances with Salazar to enchanted music like they're kids again, spins and twirls neither of them has practised in a long, long while. Godric kisses her because he's just kissed Helga and Salazar and that's what he does when he's drunk and euphoric. His lips are warm and pliant when they move on hers. She laughs against his mouth. Helga stumbles, trips into her, giggling, her body a solid weight against hers, her arms pinwheeling for balance. Rowena wants to kiss her, too, but there's a spell bursting from Helga's wand, a blurry, bouncing shape that looks vaguely like a pig. Salazar, who's clearly a lot more intoxicated than he lets on, makes a grand, sweeping gesture at it, and it morphs. Godric's next to wave his wand. Rowena follows suit because she can't think of any reason not to, and the result is positively atrocious. It's a misshapen boar that's got wings it can't seem to use, and a snout that looks like it's been crushed against a wall. She has the feeling that that monstrosity is going to stick around. Her chest is so full she can't find her breath.

She doesn't know where she is, or when, but she knows she's not herself. Hills roll around her, whistle with the summer's wind. The sun is low on the sky, about to set. Everything looks like it's on fire. There's a weight on her shoulders, on her chest and arms and legs. Metal clinks and rattles every time she moves. Voices ring around her, laughs and conversations, falling and rising to the sound of cadenced steps and pounding hooves. She's been on the road for a while, moving north as fast as she can. She's not tired. She's used to this. This is just another job. The men are just a little louder than usual, a little more on edge. She understands. She's not the superstitious sort, but even she knows sorcerers are not to be taken lightly. She climbs to the top of the hill and stops. The mountains part before her, slide down to a wide valley where fat streams ooze lazily. Nestled between a shining lake and a mountain's foot is a castle like she's never seen before. It's tall, reaches impossibly high toward the sky, bridges and archways and towers strong and sturdy. For the first time since she started walking, she feels doubt. A horn sounds in the distance. It's time.

{...}

It happened like this:

The day was warm and lovely, the glow of June only just washing away the last dredges of the dank, rain-drenched winter days that Scotland liked so much. The soil was soft and smelled of wet grass. Wildflowers bloomed in earnest under the mellow heat of the sun.

For once, Harry minded his own business. There were no classes to be had today, or secret training to undergo. When confronted with the radiant weather, even Salazar had relented and given his House the week-end off, free of any homework. Probably more to his own benefit than theirs, Harry suspected; asking a bunch of adolescents to hold still and study when the sun was shining
after months of blind dedication was simply bending the laws of nature a bit too far.

The Founders had all eaten at the same table the night before, and Harry had been invited to join them. The four of them were lagging behind in their schedule, too taken up by their charges to have much time to meet. More often than not, meal times were now used to discuss the practicalities of the coming school year. The subject of the night had been about breaking up the students in groups that reflected their skills rather than their House. Everyone had agreed to set up a series of tests for this year’s batch. Thinking about the only decent Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher he’d ever had, Harry had suggested an obstacle course as a practical exam. The idea had been met with four approving nods.

He’d spent the whole morning and most of the afternoon helping Helga put up her quarter of the track. The woman had been called away at some point after two to deal with a sprained ankle, leaving Harry to complete the work. He had been exonerated from having to prove his talents on the course, since the Founders lacked the time to prepare a set of tasks that would measure up to his level.

He was alone by the lake, the sun at his back, content to work outside and let the light seep under his skin, clear and golden. He could hear the plash of water beside him, and the laughter of children from afar. Playing a wizard's version of hide-and-seek, he thought, judging by the shrieks and occasional explosions. He was lifting wooden logs at wandpoint, cutting and carving them into the right shape before lowering them to the ground, to fit into the trenches he'd dug out earlier. The construct would stand near the end of the track, that only the best students could reach. It would look like a wooden tunnel, low and dark, where one could only move on all fours. It stretched over a great many feet. Helga planned to let a Devil's Snare take root somewhere in the middle, along with some other surprises.

Harry admired and respected that woman, he truly did, but there were times when she utterly terrified him.

It seemed to him that the Founders were going to walk their students through fire – literally, in Godric's case. Though a lot of the tasks looked perfectly reasonable to ask from children, some of them were decidedly not. There were going to be tears and blood, Harry was sure of it. But he understood. He understood all too well. The Founders had been pushing all of them faster and harder since the moment spring had made its timid reappearance. The end of the year approached. Soon, the children would leave the castle to go back to their families. To the Muggle world, where their kin was hunted and murdered. Strong with new powers, learned in a way few people had the chance of being. A lot of them were going to stand out among their peers. The way they walked, and talked, and acted, had been transformed by their year in the castle.

So the Founders drilled and shaped them to survive summer. Harry knew that a lot of the new stress lines crinkling their eyes were caused by a new, nagging fear. Telling them some of their charges would not make it. And it would be their fault, for pulling them into their lives, for taking them in and then proving incapable of protecting them.

He pushed another log into place. The air was thick with the scent of wood and pine sap. He breathed out slowly. A dozen other logs were floating above his head in various states of readiness. He could feel the strain of them on his body, in the way in muscles tensed in response to the steady flow of magic leaving him. He was aware of them, but he was fine. He was fine. Not six months ago, he would have shaken and struggled to lift off a third of that weight.

"Harry!"

Alfric was sprinting toward him, face flushed bright red from exertion, golden hair glinting in the
sun like a crown on his head.

"Hide me," the boy hissed, taking hold of both of Harry's arms, a manic glint in his eyes. "Quick!"

Harry snorted at the state of him. For all his patient, friendly nature, Alfric loathed losing with passion, and became downright vicious when games pitched him against Gryffindors. "I'm pretty sure that's against the rules," Harry said, but he tapped his wand once, hard, on top of the other boy's head. The Disillusionment Charm worked its magic, painting him to the colours of his surroundings. "Don't move," Harry told him. He went back to work just as a gaggle of students, led by a Gryffindor, rounded the corner of the castle and came pelting toward him.

"Where is he, Potter?" the girl asked in-between pants, wand half-raised in a most threatening manner. The other children skidded to a stop behind her, out of breath but grinning like mad.

Harry blinked at her. "Where's who?" he asked, and she dashed off with a wordless growl, the couple of Slytherins she'd already caught cackling in her wake.

Harry waited until she was well out of sight before breaking his spell. Alfric shimmered into view.

"Thanks," the boy said, smile oozing with satisfaction. "Girl's a bloody hell hound." He peered up at Harry's floating logs. "What are you working on?"

"Your next nightmare," Harry told him, not completely sure he was joking. "Don't tell anyone you've seen it."

Alfric hummed. "One last test before going back into the fray," he said, something grave and sombre crossing his face. "What will you be doing this summer? Will you be staying with someone?"

"No, no one. I haven't really thought about it yet."

Alfric nodded, unsurprised. "You should come with me," he said, serious as Harry had ever seen him. "If my parents notice you're here at all, they'll be delighted."

Harry smiled at him. "Thank you," he said, and meant it, heart swelling with affection. "But I don't think I can do that. I think I'm going to travel for a bit. There's some stuff I need to check on."

He thought he'd go back to Stonehenge, have a look around. His research with Salazar had stalled, both because the man was too busy to have time for any side-projects and because they'd ran out of avenues to consider. They had scoured every book they could get their hands on, with little to no success. There was nothing left in Hogwarts' Library that could help Harry go back to his time. Since he didn't have the skill or brilliance to figure out a way by himself, he thought he might as well tour the world, see if anyone else had answers.

"Stuff," Alfric repeated, a wry downturn twisting his mouth. He sighed. "You know you can ask us for help, don't you? Any of us. We just want you to come back." He pinned Harry with a hard glare. "You are coming back next year, aren't you?"

Harry winced at that. "Well, I – "

"POTTER YOU FILTHY LIAR!"

"Bloody hell," Alfric cursed, and Harry had time to suck in a startled breath before a small body barrelled into him.
"Got you," Ignotus chirped happily, face buried in Harry's middle, indifferent to the seething Gryffindor girl following behind him.

"Oof," said Harry, grimacing exaggeratedly. He mimicked trying to shake off the boy's hold just to hear Ignotus giggle against his stomach. "You certainly do, little man."

He wrapped his arms loosely around the boy's back, holding him close. Ignotus melted against him with his usual ease. It had taken many weeks for the boy to build up a semblance of good health, and many more before he started smiling and acting like a child again. Harry had helped him through it the best he could. He knew quite a lot about scars and nightmares, had talked the boy out of the horrors that plagued his nights. Though he had worked to include all three brothers into Slytherin House, he had given more of his time and attention to the youngest. Antioch was too wild and wary to let himself be approached without showing his teeth, while Cadmus preferred his own company. The boy was of the quiet, introverted sort that Harry thought would have fared better in Ravenclaw than Slytherin. But Ignotus, Harry couldn't help looking after. The strange protectiveness he had felt for the boy since the moment he had laid eyes on him had not faded with time. If anything, Harry loved him a little more fiercely with each passing day.

Harry tuned off the animated banter beside him, Gryffindors and Slytherins debating over whether or not there had been foul play. "You got caught?" he asked the child in his arms.

Ignotus groaned, looked up at Harry with a pout. "Yes," he said. "But only coz Brad wouldn't let me go with him."

"That's alright then." Harry ruffled his hair. "Though you should try hiding on your own next time."

The boy nodded gravely, as though Harry had just told him a very serious secret. He stayed glued to Harry's side even as the young man glanced up. Salazar and Godric were trailing behind their arguing students. Either keeping score or making sure no throats were slit. Harry would bet good money on the former.

"All I'm saying is, it's all Harry's fault," Alfric said, loud enough to silence the general din. 'Sorry mate,' he mouthed behind everyone else's back while Harry glared at him. Looking sheepish wouldn't help the boy when he next came running for protection.

A dozen contemplative stares and three traitors to their House pivoted to face Harry in unison. In the back, Godric was whispering furiously in Salazar's ear with a grin full of mischief, just about bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement. Salazar watched Harry, wearing half a smile and an inquisitive eyebrow. Harry rolled his eyes in response. He set down his work, logs of wood thumping gently on the ground. He detached Ignotus from his side, pushed the boy a step away. Just in case.

"Well then," he told the assembled children, wand held aloft in his hand. "What are you going to do about it?"

"GET HIM!" someone yelled, and Harry had a heartbeat to shift in duelling stance before he was assaulted by a mass of children screaming war cries.

Laughing, he dodged three hexes hurtling at him. Nothing major, small spells invented for pranking purposes. That'll teach him to show the enemy his own tricks. He shot a few curses into the mix, Hair-Dyeing spells and Bat-Bogey hexes. Ignotus squealed happily and joined the melee, taking up Harry's side with an impressively bright Lumos that blinded the person whose face he shoved his wand into.
Refusing himself the use of anything stronger than Levicorpus, it became quickly apparent that Harry wouldn't be able to resist long against the other side's numerical superiority. The results didn't fail to show. Within a few minutes, all of the children had their hair painted in bright, eye-catching colours, but Harry was cornered against a promontory that threw itself into the Lake. He was considering levitating all the kids as though they were logs of wood, but a blast of air caught him square in the chest before he could so much as raise his wand, the push strong enough to have his feet leave the ground. Strong enough that he felt himself rise into the air, thrown back hard. Too hard.

Falling takes forever. Harry had learned that from the few times he'd fallen from his broom during Quidditch practice. Time went weird, slowed down to the beats of your heart, to the blood pushing through your veins. It stretched absurdly between the seconds that preceded the landing.

Before he went down to the sound of victorious whoops, Harry spied Godric sliding his wand back into its holster. Bastard. He saw Ignotus' face scrunch up in consternation. He saw Salazar move, his hand close around Godric's forearm, the both of them too far away for Harry to see the look on their faces.

Then he saw nothing at all. He went into the water, body impacting the surface at an angle that wasn't quite right, that felt like a slap across his thighs and back. He closed his eyes on instinct, nose and mouth filling up. Cold water washed over him like a shock. For one terrible moment, his limbs seized up, seared as though on fire. The Black Lake took its source atop the mountains, fed by the ice and snow that coated their bluff. Even in early June, the water was freezing. Harry didn't remember it being that freezing when he'd gone in for the Triwizard Tournament. Silence pressed upon his ears. His clothes dragged him down, deeper under the Lake. Everything was drowned in watery darkness. His mind was numb.

There was a rush beside him, a swirling wave that rocked him to the side. He opened his eyes to a myriad of silvery bubbles darting up, a blurred shape swimming toward him. A hand on his biceps pulled him up, against another body, and there was heat, and Harry finally remembered how to move. He tried to wriggle free, but a pair of arms squeezed his chest, kept him close, pressed up back to front.

Coughing and sputtering, he was still struggling when his head broke the surface and air rushed in his screaming lungs. His ear were ringing, his sight was slightly white and fuzzy. Godric's spell must have hit him harder than he'd thought. The man rarely held back his strength with Harry nowadays.

"Harry. Harry! I've got you. You're not drowning. Stop fighting, it's me!"

Harry stilled, heart hammering away in his chest. His head remained comfortably above water. He forced himself to relax. Salazar was behind him, holding him up with apparent ease. The entire length of his body fit snugly against Harry's, shocking in its warmth, the contrast in temperatures jarring with the icy water. He had folded one of Harry's arms across his torso, his own hand gripping Harry's wrist to keep it there. Harry's head rested on his shoulder. If he so much as moved the wrong way, his cheek would brush Salazar's.

"I'm going to pull us back to shore," Salazar said into his ear. Harry shivered at the coolness of his breath along his throat. "Breathe deeply and stay still."

Harry shook his head, keeping the motion as slight as he could, lest Salazar's lips touched his skin. "I can swim," he said. The Dursleys had been forced to let him follow his school to the local swimming pool, back from before he went to Hogwarts. Though Harry had never been comfortable in the water, he had learned how to swim. Dudley pushing him off the deep end and sitting on his
shoulders until he saw stars and tasted chlorine in his mouth had helped nicely along the way.

Salazar released him, sliding away smoothly. Satisfied that Harry could, in fact, swim on his own, he took off toward the shore, head sinking under without a ripple, black hair floating ghostly behind him. The man was an excellent swimmer. He cut through the water swiftly and fluidly. It seemed he didn't need to breathe as often as common mortals did. Harry followed him with a shake of the head, his own breaststroke a lot less elegant.

Thankfully, he did not have too long a way to go. By the time Salazar pulled himself up and out of the Lake, Harry was shaking with cold. His clothes made for an uncomfortable weight that kept hindering him. Salazar knelt on the promontory when Harry reached it. The water was still too deep for him to find his footing, so Salazar offered him a hand. Harry clasped his forearm and was lifted out, noting with some surprise the easy play of the man's muscles under his soaked shirt. The material stuck to his skin, left very little to the imagination. As it turned out, robes hid a great deal. Salazar was broad-shouldered, with a toned, tapered waist and slender hips, suggesting he led a far more active life than Harry had imagined. He wondered what the man did to keep himself fit; surely, the late nights and early mornings he spent teaching Harry the sword could not account for all of it.

Salazar pulled back, and Harry realized he had been ogling the man. He turned away in embarrassment, the sodden leather of his shoes becoming quite interesting to look at, grateful that his suddenly burning cheeks could be explained away by the cold of the water, which was still making him shiver uncontrollably. He felt shame like a low, twisting burn in his gut. What was wrong with him anyway?

He almost missed Salazar's eyes raking over him, moving swiftly from head to toe, an odd expression on his face. "Are you all right?" the Founder asked him, voice quiet enough that only Harry could hear him.

Before Harry could answer anything more than a nod, Godric was beside them. The redhead levelled him with an unimpressed stare. "You should have seen my Blasting Curse coming," he informed Harry, brow furled in a reproving frown. "You should never focus on an opponent to the point of neglecting another."

"Yes, sir," Harry answered, head bowed in acknowledgement. "Sorry sir." The man was right; he should have either seen or felt the curse coming. Or at the very least, he should have expected Godric to make a move. The man had beaten into him that he should always expect the unexpected. He had been merciless with Harry ever since the night he had told him about Voldemort and the threat on his life, the necessity to kill or be killed. In and outside of the classroom, Godric had taken to attack Harry at every occasion, tripping him in the corridors, cursing him during lunch. Harry had become better and better at predicting the other man's attacks, and more than once, a simple blow to the shoulder had turned into full-fledged duels in-between classes.

Godric gave him a nod, squeezing the back of Harry's neck affectionately. He looked at Salazar, a teasing glint lighting up the gold-flecked hazel of his eyes. "As for you," he told his friend, voice loud over the respectful silence of the flock of students behind him. "You should have seen that coming."

And in a move that was too quick for the eye to follow, his hand shot out, wand tapping the center of Salazar's chest. There was a flash of white light, and then nothing that Harry could see.

Salazar heaved out a soft sigh. "I'm going to skin you for a hearth rug," he told Godric, so very
calm and composed that Harry almost took a step forward to get between his mentors.

But Godric only winked. "It's your own fault for being so distracted, my friend," he chanted, side-stepping the hex Salazar sent his way. "See you back at the castle. We have a meeting to attend, and you know how Rowena gets when we're late. I've no wish to lose anymore clothing to that woman's ire."

He sauntered away with the firm command for his students to behave.

"What has he done to you?" Harry asked, bewildered as they watched him disappear around the bent, taking a good chunk of the children with him.

"Spelled my clothes so they won't dry off," Salazar replied, lips pinched in a tight, annoyed line. A drop of water was gliding down the line of the Founder's throat.

Harry shivered in sympathy. "Speaking of," he said, smiling at Salazar. "I think I'm due for a hot bath. You'll excuse me for keeping out of your way while you go murder Godric."

Harry headed off to the Dungeons along with Alfric and Ignotus while Salazar went up to hunt Godric down. He stripped out of his wet clothes and jumped into streaming water. The heat did wonders to his nerves, which had been a little frayed lately. He'd been having more and more strange dreams that left him feeling more and more dread come morning. It was still odd to him, to have visions that weren't caused by the scar on his forehead. He wondered what they were all about. Salazar was as much at a loss as he was. The man had suggested that perhaps Harry had some Seer's blood in him, though he didn't believe that that was the case.

Harry put his questions to rest and got out of the bath. There was nothing he could do to answer them just yet, anyway. Dressed in fresh clothes, he went to the common room. Most of his Housemates were there, a handful of them catching up on their homework while the others were engaged in a game of cards. Harry joined the game, seated on the floor between Cadmus and Audra. Unable to focus with a bad feeling at the back of his mind and the vague impression that Salazar's hand had left a visible imprint on his wrist, he lost almost every round. Alfric talking in a sweet, cajoling tone to try and be forgiven did not help him concentrate.

It was getting late by the time the common room's entrance opened to let Salazar in. The light from the Lake was pale, a dusty green that meant the sun was setting. Harry looked up at Salazar and knew at once that something was wrong. It was written all over the man's body, fear and anger and resignation warring over his face.

"Get up," he ordered them all, face hard as steel. "All of you. We're under attack."
Harry tried to calm his racing heart as he moved through the throng of Slytherin students rushing in and out of their rooms, clumsy in their terror. He had to reach Salazar. The man's voice still rang clearly in his head, full of steel and concern. They were under attack. How could it be? Hogwarts was warded against intruders. This could not be happening. Not here, and certainly not now. Not if Harry lived to have a say about it.

Salazar knelt in the middle of the tight corridor, busy clasping a cloak over Ashton's shoulders, talking to the boy in a soft voice. The rest of the students navigated around the two of them, often glancing in either his or Harry's direction for reassurance.

"Salazar," Harry called once he reached the man, careful to speak quietly so no one else would hear him.

Salazar finished securing Ashton's clothes, fingers deft and assured, before he glanced up at him. Face overcast with shadows. Harry watched without a word as he rose to his feet, deliberately calm. His composure did not fool him. Salazar's eyes burned with rage and helplessness. To Harry, he looked about to burst, consumed in a self-made inferno.

Because there were too many words pressing inside of his mouth and he could think of nothing else to do, Harry reached out, took Salazar's hand in his. The man's skin was feverish against his palm. Feeling as though he were moving through honey, he pulled Salazar after him, away from all the commotion. The man followed him without resistance, sliding smoothly through the hush that had overtaken his students, his gaze a tingling weight on the back of Harry's neck.

He took the man to his bedroom. The door closed behind the two of them, sheltering them away in a bubble of green light and watery silence. Detachedly, Harry took note of the mess. Rumpled sheets on the bed, books and parchments strewn over the floor, clothes lying on the chair by the desk. He had burrowed himself into this room, had made himself at home here. He closed his eyes. Breathed in deeply the scent of ink, soap and wood that permeated the air, centering himself before rounding on Salazar.

The Founder was looking at him, eyes roaming his face, so very intent that Harry feared they would leave visible imprints on his skin, red as hot iron.

"Talk," Harry said.

"There's no time –"

"Then make time." Harry curled his hands into fists. He hadn't let go of Salazar's hand, was probably pushing bruises into his flesh. He didn't care. "Tell me what it is we're facing."

Surely, surely there had to be a way out of this. A way to fight it off, brush away that look on
Salazar's face. Harry knew how to fight. He would fight today if he had to.

"There's an army at our door," Salazar said, expressionless, and Harry's stomach plummeted. "Rowena Saw them. They'll be here within minutes."

Harry shook his head in denial. "We wait them out, then. Hogwarts is warded, isn't it? They won't find us here. They can't."

"They can. They have. We think there are traitors among them, paid or tortured into showing them the way. We think they're here because of the three boys. Because of what they did."

Harry felt cold panic wash over him at Salazar's words. The three boys. The three brothers. Harry had pieced their story together from the bits they had confided in him. He knew the boys came from a noble family, that they had escaped after their mother had been killed for the crime of being a witch. He knew Antioch had murdered their own father on the way out. These boys had known enough horror for a lifetime. Harry didn't think he could stand it, if anything happened to them.

"Do we stand a chance to fight them off?" he asked, tucking his dread away.

Salazar's silence was more telling that anything the Founder could have said. Harry's heart jumped in his chest, hammered heavily in fright. Salazar was one of the strongest men he knew. Nothing ever seemed to phase the man. God, how Harry hoped he was wrong about this.

"Then we run," he said urgently. "We lose them in the Forest. We'll reclaim Hogwarts later. I know we will."

"Harry."

"No," he growled, suddenly furious. He could feel the bones in Salazar's hand grind together, couldn't make himself let go of the limb. Not that Salazar seemed to mind. "You do not get to do this," he said. "You don't get to give up. We'll figure something out. We'll fight. We'll – "

"Harry!" Two hands went to frame his face, long fingers curling over his cheeks, his temples. Digging painfully into his flesh. "You won't be fighting with us. Listen to me." The both of them were breathing hard. Salazar had a harsh, wide-eyed look about him that killed Harry's words before they could leave his throat. "The boys outside that room need you."

"If you think I'm going to stand by and watch –"

"They need you. I can't be there for them. Neither can Godric, or Rowena, or Helga. You have to guide them to safety."'

"There's no need to guide them anywhere. They'll be locked up in your saferooms, won't they? They have no use for me down there."

"If we fall and the castle is breached, those rooms will be found eventually. The wizards outside will find them. You have to take everyone to the Forest. I'll tell you the way."

"No."

"Damn it Harry, you will do as you're told!" Harry's ears rang with the strength of the command. He could hear Salazar's voice echo inside his head, but he was skilled enough in Occlumency that it could not influence him any more. Salazar pressed their foreheads together, grey eyes closing. "You have got to look after them. They'll rely on you to get them home if we die." The man breathed out a soft, trembling sigh. "Please, Harry. I need you."
Harry swayed at that. There was nothing he could refuse Salazar, not truly. The man had too great of a hold over him. Harry knew that. Had been vaguely aware of it for a while now. Ever since he had stopped to follow in the Founder's steps out of obligation for all that he owed him, and started to see him as a friend instead. As someone unbelievably precious to him. Someone he trusted without question.

Harry was shaking, fear and adrenaline tearing through his veins. Slowly, painfully, he nodded his assent.

"You do not die today." He fisted his hands in Salazar's shirt, holding him close. "Do you hear me? Today is not the day that you leave me. I don't care what it takes. I don't care what you have to do. You come back."

Salazar did not answer. His hands slid to the back of Harry's head, thumbs brushing his cheekbones, fingers locked around his neck. He leaned in with deliberate care, pressed his lips to Harry's forehead in a warm, lingering kiss.

"I will see you on the other side," he said, and that was as good as any promise he could make.

When he stepped away, Harry let him go, his heart pounding in his ears.

Without another word, Salazar swept out of his room, the door slamming shut behind him with all the definitiveness of a knell's mournful chime.

Harry shook himself and hurried to gear up. He put on his best boots, the leather chest plate that served to protect him during his Defence classes, a heavy cloak. He strapped his sword at his waist alongside his wand and rushed back into the corridor. Salazar had gathered his students in the common room. He had donned an armour in the minutes that Harry had been away, a supple, flowing ensemble of hardened leathers and warded fabric, light but resistant, built to allow for speed rather than anything else. It was entirely black. Salazar held a long black scarf in one hand. Sila was coiled around his torso, clearly agitated, tail whipping the air.

He looked at Harry when the young man took position behind the other Slytherins, gave him a curt nod of the head.

The meeting was brief and to the point. Harry barely followed any of it. He caught the glances thrown his way, the nervous shifts in demeanour. They were moving before long, ushering through the darkened corridors, silent as specters.

They met up with the other Houses halfway down to their destination. The children and their mentors had gathered in the Dungeons, buried in a grand room that looked like a cathedral's entrance hall. Both Godric and Rowena were in chain mails and metal plates, while Helga's armour more closely resembled Salazar's. All of them had various blades and weapons strapped on their bodies. Harry watch the livid, gleaming metal with trepidation.

None of the students were talking. The silence was tomb-like, claustrophobic. Everyone looked grim and worried, some faces were tear-tracked. Godric stepped up to talk about war, and it was almost a relief. The Founders would man the castle's gates to cover an escape to the Forest. Harry was in charge. Harry would show the way, protect against all harm.

Harry was terrified.

Not for himself. He knew what to expect from battle. He had had blood soak through the soles of his trainers before, had had the mad, twisting agony of torture rattle his bones.
What he had never had, though, was the responsibility of so many lives resting solely on the palms of his hands. He could feel the weight of it press down on his shoulders, press until it crushed the breath from his lungs. Saddled with looking after so many lives in such a way, he felt dread curl at the pit of his stomach, acidic and sickening. The Founders had to be mad, to trust him with so many lives. Children's lives. Harry had tried to take care of the Slytherins like an adult would these past months, but this was entirely different. Different from taking a stand in the War back home. Different from anything he had ever done. His friends had known what they were getting into when they'd chosen to follow him. They could defend themselves, had never relied on him for protection. Though he had led them, they had been his equals.

A blur shifted at the corner of his eyes. As if sensing his distress, Salazar had moved, a slight amongst status. The Founder caught Harry's gaze and held it from across the room. Liquid silver was alight with promises upheld, with strength. With trust. And suddenly, the task at hand didn't seem so daunting any more. It didn't matter whether Harry felt ready or not. He owed it to Salazar to do his best. If he kept his promise, walked away from the battlefield against his every instinct, then maybe Salazar would keep his.

*It's too soon,* he thought. Far away in the distance, carried over by some enchantment, a horn sounded, a dull, mournful sound. Harry's breath stuttered around the tightness in his throat. *It's too soon, we barely even got started.*

Salazar gave an imperceptible nod, head bowing a fraction as though under some great weight. Harry broke eye contact, freed himself from the turmoil of emotions conjured in him, feeling as if he were bleeding out.

In no time at all, Godric finished doling out instructions, and it was time to leave. The students turned to Harry with hesitant eyes, the room suddenly alive with the rustle of their clothes. Harry forced the coil of his shoulders to unwind.

He gave a crooked smile. "If you'd be so kind as to follow me, ladies and gentlemen." Amazingly, his voice never wavered, and he won a few weak smiles.

One last glance at the Founders, skirting away from Salazar's eyes so he wouldn't walk over to the man's side and stay there, and Harry strode to the front of the children, gesturing them to follow after him. It was possibly the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. With each step he took, the pain in his chest grew more terrible. It was as though his ribcage were being pried open, baring his beating heart for all to see.

Behind them, the Founders got ready to leave. They drew swords and wands from their sheaths, faces grave with silent understanding. Harry listened to their retreating footsteps with a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach. They were going to be fine, he kept telling himself. This was not how Hogwarts ended, or where any of them died. He would have heard about it if it were, he was sure of it.

He marched up, cutting through the small crowd of frightened children that parted before him. His Slytherins pushed their way to stand behind him, falling into his steps with ease, showing the other Houses the example to follow. Harry checked everyone else had scurried up after them, and sunk into the depths of the Dungeons.

He had gotten familiar with their disconcerting layout over the last summer, while he was exploring with the Founders' children. He had no trouble finding the way through the maze of corridors, running Salazar's instructions in his head. Aside from the sound of shuffling footsteps, nothing could be heard along the winding stone corridors.
He conjured blobs of witchfire to push back some of the surrounding darkness. The students' faces gleaming like ghosts in the bleached light. A few twists and turns later, a change in air pressure told Harry they had gotten under the lake.

He traced the moist stone walls with his eyes, wondering how long it would be before the battle began. He figured the army had to be right around the corner. Maybe it would be a handful of minutes. Maybe several hours, if anyone had the mind to negotiate. Would they hear the clash of steel from the Forest, he wondered. Would they hear the cries of men fighting and dying to the resounding agony of warfare? How long would Harry have to stay still, listening to other people's distress? How long before it drove him mad?

He shook his head. The Founders were very powerful wizards. They could certainly take care of a Muggle army.

*We think there are traitors among them.*

Harry tasted blood in his mouth.

They marched on, quick and silent. Soon, the neat stone corridors dissolved into uncut tunnels that turned and sloped down randomly, little more than earth paths dug out of the mountains. After a few miles, a Hufflepuff boy fell to his knees, crying and trembling, his breathing made chopped and uneven by fear. He couldn't stand small spaces, and the tunnels were dark and stifling. Under the careful eyes of the boy's Housemates, Harry crouched beside him, rubbed his back and talked to him until he calmed down, until his sobs eased up and he could breathe again. Harry tapped his wand on a pile of pebbles, turned them into a stuffed black and white badger that he gave to the child.

"Here," he told the boy who gazed at the toy in amazement, running his hand through the soft fur. "He'll protect you from the dark."

They trekked deeper under the mountains. The air grew progressively cooler and lighter, less encumbered by the Dungeon's underground clamminess. The weight of the castle above them lifted, as the passage curved in a soft upward slope.

They walked for a long while before Harry could feel a trickle of wind on his face, sneaking under his clothes to brush his skin. The rich scent of pine sap, rotting leaves and wet earth rose up to meet them. The exit of the tunnel grew wider in the distance, a splash of dusky red light in the white starlight of their wands. Harry stopped then, pivoting the face the children amassed behind him. He drew himself up to his full height, noting with an ounce of surprise that he towered over the tallest of them.

"Listen carefully," he called, voice echoing gloomily off the jagged rocks. "This Forest is a dangerous place. I need you to obey me without question while we're in there. Pair off with someone you trust. Never lose sight of that person." He waited until his charges were done shuffling around. "You stay behind me at all times. You don't wander off, no matter what. Stay close, and keep your wands ready. Understood?"

"Yes sir," they intoned in unison.

The Forest was awash with the colours of the setting sun, warm red light seeping everywhere, shattering on branches and leaves, pooling on the earthy floor. The tree trunks were wide and ridged deeply with the passage of time. They were deep in the Forest, where the trees were gnarled with age and their thick roots twined over the soil.
Harry strained his ears, heart stuttering erratically. They were upwind; he could hear nothing but the low groaning of the trees, the delicate shudder of their leaves. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

What now? What on earth was he supposed to do now? The Forbidden Forest wasn't a place where he could set up a camp. Staying still for too long would attract the attention of the many creatures that roamed the woods.

Without giving himself too long to hesitate, Harry set off in a direction that would drive them further away from Hogwarts, running parallel to the battle raging there. A full day's walk or two should lead them safely out of the woods. Once there, he could loop back to Hogwarts, assess the situation. And then –

Best not think about what he would do then. Because if the Founders lost and these Muggles murdered them, Harry wasn't entirely sure he'd have the sense to double back, sink silently in the shadows and return to his charges. The very thought twisted his stomach with cold anger. He could feel a growl in his chest, a tearing, burning sense of dread. If Hogwarts fell and Salazar with it, he feared he would lose his mind. He would track and kill every last one of these soldiers, then turn to their masters if he survived the fight.

He breathed deeply through his nose, inhaling the cooling scent of the Forest. The sun was quickly dipping behind the horizon, leeching away the last of the warmth. Shadows lengthened, swallowed every last drip of light, until the Forest was plunged in a deep, velvety darkness that rustled with life. It was a moonless, eerie night, the stars burning with diamonds light above their heads, far out of reach. The Forest seemed to hold its breath in anticipation. Harry conjured more blobs of witchfire when some of the children got tired of maintaining their Lumos, taking comfort in the familiar, sputtering light. From behind him, he could hear the crunch of earth and gravel under the students' boots, and nothing else.

Gytha sidled up to his side. "What are you thinking?" she whispered, sliding a hand in his, twining their fingers together.

"That if Salazar doesn't make it out alive, I'm going to murder him."

The girl laughed, a soft, lilting sound, at odds with the ghostly quiet of the Forest. "You really care about him, don't you?" she asked, dark eyes gleaming in the fire of Harry's wand. "They're going to be fine though, aren't they?"

"Of course they are," Harry lied, squeezing her hand reassuringly. Gytha gave warm smile, as though she believed him.

They walked on for a long while. Long enough that Harry lost sense of time. Gytha left his side to be replaced by Alfric, then Glenn, then Audra, then someone else, always a Slytherin. Harry wondered whether they were keeping an eye on him, making sure he didn't do anything stupid, like Apparate on the battlefield. He couldn't say he hadn't considered it. There were bugs crawling under his skin. He was restless, uneasy. About to burst like a swelled balloon. He glanced behind him. Could any of the children feel it as well? That itch at the back of the neck, a vague impression of vertigo, as though something awful and life changing was about to take place?

They just looked tired and miserable. How long could they keep going before their feet gave out from under them? Though no one was complaining, some were very young. Harry didn't believe they would all make it to sunrise. He'd have to find a way to keep them safe, somehow. He'd have to find shelter in a Forest that didn't have any.
A sound nearby in the woods caused all of them to stop in their tracks. Harry's hand tightened on his wand. Despite the cold bite of the air, he could feel sweat pool at the small of his back. Beneath the sputtering of his fire spells and the rush of the wind, he could hear something rustling through the leaves. He tried to catch a glimpse of what might be out there, but he could see nothing. The dark was too deep, the trees were too thick.

"What is it?" someone whispered, a soft, frightened voice. Everyone was looking around nervously, eyes scanning for threats, huddling closer together in some primal instinct to seek protection in numbers.

"Stay quiet," Harry ordered. "Push the youngest to the center."

He was obeyed swiftly, Slytherins jumping to the task, quickly followed by all the others. The older students formed a loose circle, surrounding the more vulnerable amongst them, pale and anxious in the glowing red light of Harry's fires. He hoped to God this was nothing. He wasn't sure he could protect them all. They were too many, and he wasn't strong enough.

The sound came again, closer this time. Branches snapped in half under some unknown weight. A low, rumbling growl rose up from between the trees. Harry saw a flash of bright yellow eyes in the blackness of the Forest, and between a moment and the next, they were surrounded, dark shapes leaping at them without warning. The silence shattered to the sound of vicious snarls and alarmed cries, the students around him surging to meet the threat, knocking him from side to side.

Harry saw teeth and claws and sleek muscled bodies shining in the cold light of the stars and before anything else registered, he shot his first spell. The burst of magic hit the great beast aiming for his throat, and it went down in a spur of blood, black and disgusting on his face. Within moments, the creature had died with a high-pitched whine. It was a hound, some kind of war-dog, a huge bulk of a beast with short fur and long fangs. Harry stared in horror as more beasts prowled forth, swarming them and lashing out with furious screams.

He shifted his stance and drew his sword, steel singing as he pulled it free. He buried the blade in another dog's neck before it could rip his side open, knocked two more against the towering trunk of a nearby tree. They crashed with the wet, sickening sound of bones breaking and did not rise again. A few more hounds laid dead on the ground, killed by someone else. Around him, he could hear the screech of metal against flesh and bones, the cries of poorly aimed spells. The pack had formed a half-circle around them, and Harry attacked with everything he had, using the most deadly spells he knew. He cast a blast of fire that caught a beast in the chest, lifted it off the ground and flung it away at great speed. At the same time, he blocked bared teeth aimed at his stomach, distantly aware of a spray of blood splattering his clothes, soaking his skin.

There was a momentary lull in the battle, a breath where nothing moved, the pack retreating a few steps, its numbers greatly diminished. Panting, Harry did not dare lower his guard or even look behind him to check that everyone was all right, wary that the last dogs might attack again. By the time he realized the men were here, it was too late.

"NO!"

A single, gurgling cry rang through the Forest just outside Harry's field of vision, and his blood ran cold. He turned around, though he was unaware of doing so. It took him forever to lose sight of the hounds, his body moving through syrup, his ears deaf with the roar of his blood. He was breathing in short searing gasps. People were shouting and crying but he could not hear them. There was movement going on around him, nothing but pointless bustling. Someone was lying down on the Forest's floor, still as stone. Someone who Harry knew instantly would never rise again. Blood oozed out of a gaping wound, seeped and soaked the dark earth beneath. A lance was stuck deep in
Gytha's chest, still vibrating from the strength of the impact.

A handful of men stood a little way off, just at the edge of the trees. A small scouting party no doubt, who had stumbled upon them while sneaking up to the castle. Dressed in dark colours and light fabric, none of them was in armour, though they were all armed. One of them had an arm raised for having thrown the lance and Harry was off, scrambling through the crowd, pushing students out of his way and he could not hear the screams, he could not feel the hands reaching out to touch him, he could feel nothing but anger and rage and fury, the tip of his wand already glowing green with the curse he barely held in check. The lancer looked at him and his eyes grew wide with fright. Harry looked at him and for the first time in his life, he realised he wanted to kill someone. He wanted to rip the life from that man's eyes, hear him scream with it.

He watched in detached horror the tip of an arrow pierce through the lancer's throat in a spray of flesh and bone. The man fell down, burbling around the blood flooding his throat, clutching desperately at the steel and wood protruding from his skin. Behind him, his companions shouted in alarms, their voices muffled to Harry's ears. More arrows appeared from the dark, all aiming true, sinking into thighs and hearts and lungs. Soon, all the men were dead, sprawled out in the dirt without a breath left in them, bodies twisted absurdly in their fear and agony.

As suddenly as it had started, the battle was over. For a long moment no one moved, stunned by the echoing silence. Harry took in the scene around him. Centaurs were emerging from the woods, bows held aloft, calm in front of the massacre. Many of the children were hurt, though no one seemed in need of urgent care. A few had claw and bite marks on their arms and legs and stomach, the cuts bleeding profusely but not life threatening. They pressed their hands to their injuries, several students already rushing to their side to quell the gush of their life with a flick of their wand. Some had fallen to their knees, either sobbing or numb with shock. In the middle of them, Gytha was dead. She had been his friend. She had held his hand and walked with him just a few heartbeats ago. Now she was dead.

Dead.

Harry tried not to look at her, but his eyes were drawn to her prone form against his will, to all the blood that had soaked through her shirt, to the unnatural paleness of her skin. The other Slytherins had gathered around her. Alfric knelt by her head, clutching her hand in both of his, insensate to his own injuries. Glenn stroked her hair, pale blue eyes dulled with grief. The others stood as silent vigils, faces wet with tears.

It was Harry's fault that she was dead. It was all his fault for not being good enough, strong enough to look after her the way he was supposed to. He stood still, too shocked to move. His ears rang with noise no one else could hear. His whole chest felt like a mess of ripped rags of flesh. He was bleeding out from wounds that didn't show. He could taste blood at the back of his mouth, salt and copper overpowering on his tongue. He thought he might throw up. His sight was blurred, he could not see properly.

"H-Harry?"

Ignotus was looking up at him with eyes that swam with tears, face scrunched up in pain and terror. The boy reached out to him with trembling arms, hands held out in supplication. Quickly, without thinking, Harry gathered him up in his arms, lifted him off of the ground and pressed him close to his chest, tucking his head at the base of his neck. Ignotus went to him with a sob, full body shaking from the strength of it. He clung to Harry's shoulders hard enough to bruise.

It wasn't true, of course. No one was alright. Gytha was dead.

"Shh," he said again, and muffled a sob into Ignotus' hair, nose filling with the scent of soap and sweat and warm skin.

Merlin, would it ever stop? Gytha was dead. He had been supposed to look after her, and she was dead now. Laying still on the ground with a lance in her chest and mud in her hair. She hated mud. Someone should wash it off her. Harry wish he could join her in the ground. The soft weight in his arms was the only thing that kept him from falling down, and wait for the elements to bury him alongside his friend.

Gytha was dead.

"You will come with us, Harry Potter."

One of the Centaurs had approached him, weapons hidden out of sight. Harry recognized Hexo, the black skinned and coated man he had met when he'd gone into the Forest with Godric, looking for the three brothers. Hexo stared at him calmly, not once glancing at Gytha's mangled, lifeless corpse. Harry thought about lashing out, tear out Hexo's face with his nails and teeth. Did the man not understand what had been lost?

"Many roam the Forest tonight, Harry Potter. You are not safe here. Neither is your kin. I would help you protect them."

His kin. Harry looked at his kin. All these children he had failed. They looked back at him. Traumatized. Awaiting his orders. In his arms, Ignotus seemed to weigh a ton.

He had to keep the boy safe. He had to keep them all safe. He had no choice; they relied on him.

"For what price would you help me?" he asked Hexo, his voice hoarse and wretched.

The Centaur smiled, a flash of white teeth bright against his skin.

"Follow me."

Chapter End Notes

That - that actually hurt to write. I really, really liked Gytha. I hope you enjoyed the chapter anyway?

Validation gives me life.
It took another half hour to get the children moving again. Harry pushed aside how nauseous he felt, the trembling burn of shock suffusing into a sense of empty horror that allowed him away from the edge of hysteria. He went from student to student, knitting back gaping lacerations, quenching wells of blood, whispering encouragements. Murmurs urging them to stand up and move. Eventually, his efforts paid out. Several of the older students took to trailing after him, helping out however they could. None of the Slytherins reacted, and no one sought to approach them. They stayed where they were by Gytha's body, pale like death, looking as numb to the world as Harry felt.

Alfric snatched him by the wrist when he walked by, his grip tight and painful. "We can't leave her here," he said, voice barely louder than the whistling wind. His eyes were feverish, almost mad under their cloud of grief. "Harry. We can't leave her to rot with them. She deserves better."

Harry nodded wordlessly. He couldn't bear to look at him. At any of them. Dallin's lips were bloodless. His hands were curled into fists; arms shaking visibly. Audra's cheeks were wet with silent tears. Pressed against her side, Ashton's eyes were huge, staring fixedly at where the lance had pierced Gytha's chest. Glenn's head hung low over his chest. From all of them, Harry could hear a single, raging cry hurtled at him. An accusation. 

*You were supposed to protect us, Harry Potter. You were supposed to protect her. Why didn't you? Why did you let this happen to us?*

He freed his wrist from Alfric's bruising grip. He raised his wand and pointed it at Gytha's corpse. "Mobilicorpus," he intoned. Obeying his command, she rose horizontally up off the ground, held together by his magic. Her dark curly hair fell in waves behind her head. Harry was grateful his stomach was empty, he feared he would have thrown up in that moment, if it had not been.

"Let's go," he muttered, looking at Hexo. The Centaur had been watching him, liquid dark eyes impenetrable in the red witchfire lights.

The creature inclined his head, almost a full bow. He uttered some short orders to his people in a language Harry didn't recognize before taking the lead, sinking deeper under the trees. Guiding Gytha's body at wandpoint, Harry fell into steps behind him after a backward glance insuring everyone was following.

"Where are you taking us?" he asked in a low voice. Hexo's only answer was an eerie smile.

As they walked, the adrenalin from the battle wore off fully and Harry was left with cold sweat lathered on his skin, a deep, permeating chill that froze him to the bones. Blank emptiness descended upon him, the thick buffer the only thing that kept him putting a foot in front of the other. Overhead, the sky darkened even further, oily and ink-like. Branches snapped like bones under the students' feet, the only sound to trouble the heavy padding of the night.

They crested a hill and Harry saw campfires burning in the hollow below. The flames and embers smouldered high and bright, illuminating the still blackness of the Forest, bathing the basin in glowing golden light. Harry could see Centaurs guarding the edges of the camp, all armed with
bows taller than he was. Behind them stretched a moving, swaying sea of tents made out of animal pelts, where many more Centaurs evolved, going from tent to tent, cooking over firepits or talking animatedly. It seemed that no one was sleeping in the Forest tonight.

Harry felt a tinge of awareness spark up in his chest at the sight of the soldiers pacing back and forth the entrance of the camp. Centaurs were renowned warriors, quicker and stronger than any human, famously skilled with a bow and arrows. There had to be something he could do or say that would make them fly to the Founders’ help.

As they came closer to the camp, a horn blared to signal their approach, shattering the soft bustle of the night. Harry winced at the sound, the Centaurs' activity ceasing abruptly to look at the approaching humans. Around them, the warriors tightened ranks. Harry wondered whether he had just walked his people into a prison cell. Wariness had him curl his fingers more securely around the handle of his wand.

The gazes trained on them were far from friendly. Harry spied several Centaurs snarling their way, while others just looked worried. Whispered followed in their wake, a low, threatening buzz.

Hexo marched them to the center of the camp. A large bonfire stood there, stretched out defiantly into the darkened sky, bursting with cherry reds and pale yellows. Even from the distance, Harry could feel its heat on his skin, wafting off in powerful waves, along with the scent of charred wood and ashes. Clumps of Centaurs were cluttered around the fire, the flames dancing off their skin and coats, making them look like statues of molten bronze.

"Wait here," Hexo told Harry. He wandered off to one of the larger assembled groups, half a dozen Centaurs standing in a loose semi-circle, apart from the others. They all bore some mark of authority, faces or flanks painted with broad patterns, necks or heads adorned with jewellery.

"Harry," Alfric hissed into his ear the moment Hexo was out of earshot, voice full of fear and urgency. Awaiting orders, begging him to act.

"Wait," Harry whispered back. The boy shifted behind his back, coiled tight with restless energy. Blindly, Harry reached with his free hand and gripped his forearm, forcing him to stillness. "Wait," he repeated more firmly.

To his relief, Alfric subsisted. Harry could feel the boy's gaze stare down in neck. Looking for the first sign of tension, for a signal to attack. He relaxed his arms by his side, forced his screaming body into an air of calmness. They were surrounded by warriors. No way for them to fight their way out without more casualties. Harry would not risk it. Not with Gytha's cooling corpse hovering just at the tip of his wand.

Hexo came back, gestured for Harry to step forth. Harry planted his feet in the ground and did not move. Alfric sidled closer, a wordless show of support. That, or the boy was just aching for a fight.

"We do not harm younglings, Harry Potter," Hexo said, low baritone rumbling in the tense quiet. "Not unless we have to."

Harry ground his teeth hard enough to hurt his jaw.

Several hands brushed his arms and back when he took a deliberate step forward, away from the students.

"It's alright," he told them. They let him go.

He followed Hexo to the half-circle of warriors he'd been talking to. Each proud, impassive face
watched him approach in silence. Quietly gauging him, the way he stood and acted. Finding him lacking.

"This is the Counsel of Clans," Hexo announced. "You stand before the representatives of each of our tribes."

Not knowing how else to respond, Harry bowed at the waist. He wished Hagrid had taught him more about Centaur's culture.

"Welcome, Harry Potter," one of the females greeted. Dark warpaint obscured her eyes, running from temple to temple, accentuating the strange, savage beauty of her angular face. "Hexo tells us you speak for your people."

"I do tonight, my Lady." Fighting down the bile rising in his throat, he added, "I am in your debt. Your warriors helped save my charges."

"And now you have come to pay off that debt."

Harry shot a glare at Hexo but the Centaur ignored him. What had he been telling them? "I am here because I have no other choice. My people were attacked by Muggles. We had to flee." He took a deep breath. "Our teachers are fighting as we speak. I would – I'd beg you to assist them."

One of the oldest males stomped the ground with his hooves. "You brought about your own doom, child," he said. His white, braided hair shone brightly in the fire light. "We owe you nothing."

Harry's heart was in his throat, trashing against his skin. "Please," he said, hating how wrecked he sounded. "They need you." Gulping down the cool night air to calm himself, "And you need them."

That elicited a chorus of snorts and angry snarls. "Our clans have lived here since before your kind roamed this land, boy," the old Centaur told him. "Your presence is the only thing that has caused us trouble. You are the reason why the Forest rings with steel and fire tonight. We'll be glad to see you gone."

"Listen to me," Harry growled, surprised by the strength of his own anger. "Do you really think these men are going to stop at Hogwarts? If they take the castle, you'll be vulnerable too. They'll come by the thousands. Hunt you down like animals." He looked around, eyes pointedly lingering on the Centaur's children he could see were watching him. "You can't fight them off forever."

The clan's chiefs were unmoved. "This is our Forest," one of them told him. "They won't find us unless we want them to."

"So you'd let us die?" Harry was shaking. The pressure on his chest made it hard to breathe.

"You ask that we commit warrior to protect your people. That would weaken us," the female with warpaint told him. "If you cannot defend yourselves, why would we defend you?"

The words were out of his mouth before he could think to stop them, spilling from his lips on their own accord. "Because," Harry said, and his voice rang with all the fury and desperation gnawing at him, "Because one thousand years from now, there's going to be a war that'll shake this whole country. A war so great you won't be able to hide from it." He watched the Centaurs shrink from his words with some kind of wild satisfaction. He was speaking the truth; they could hear it imbuing in his tone. "If you don't help us tonight, I'll leave you to burn with it."

The silence that followed was thick and absolute. Belatedly, Harry remembered the Centaurs' grasp of the future, their unique ability to read the twists of fate from the shine of the stars.
From the corner of his eyes, he could see Alfric looking at him with his mouth hanging open. The shock and fear mingling across his face were the last things that registered before Harry felt a spearhead press against his back, and the entire camps roared to life. Shouting voices overlapped, drowning the sound of weapons being pulled free; three of the clan's chiefs had naked daggers clutched in their hands, all were yelling at each others. The Centaur's children were ushered away, food was left to burn as the entirety of the camp congregated closer to the bonfire.

"SILENCE!" shouted the war-painted female, rumbling voice blanketing all others. She was obeyed swiftly. Everyone quieted, though restlessness lingered in the air like storm clouds. She turned to Harry, the whites of her eyes gleaming against black war paint. "You," she said softly, and the spear against Harry's back pushed deeper into his skin, the blade starting to draw blood. "You do not belong here, boy."

Harry felt blood drain from his face, his knees turn to cotton. He had said too much; there was finality in that woman's voice, some kind of deep-rooted certainty that had the hairs on the back of his neck stand on ends.

_You do not belong here, boy._

No. No, he did not. But he had never felt it so acutely before. God, he felt _sick_. Diseased and feverish. It was as though there were wasps trapped inside his chest, buzzing and stinging behind his breastbone, spreading through his veins. His skin was stretched too tight over his bones, like it was about to split from the effort of containing his soul, and all the souls of the dead he carried with him. There was _wrongness_ in him.

He wet his dry lips. "I – "

"We will help you," the woman interrupted before he could speak. "We will keep your younglings safe tonight."

The relief that washed over him almost brought him to his knees. "And the battle . . . ?"

At a sharp nod of her head, the warriors surrounding the bonfire retreated toward the trees, the rest of the camp moving aside to make way for them. Harry saw them gather just beyond the circle of light in a whirlwind of shouted orders and pounding hooves. In a matter of minutes, a small battalion had formed, ready for war.

"They will fight for you. Protect what there is to salvage of your land."

"T-thank you," Harry whispered, weak and light-headed. "Thank you, I can't – "

"As for you." The women advanced toward him until they were inches apart, silencing him with the intensity in her eyes. "You will help us as well. In exchange for the lives your name will reap."

He could only nod in agreement. "Anything," Harry promised. It didn't matter what the Centaurs asked of him. Whatever it was, he would do it.

"Dark Magic has seeped into those woods. It pollutes the air, kills everything it touches. Hexo will lead you to its source. You will correct it, or die trying." A pregnant pause. "In which case it will correct itself."

Harry's head spun. The insistent buzzing in his chest grew louder, just about rattling his bones. Dark Magic? What was she talking about? What –

"Harry!" He turned around in time to see Alfric be restrained by his guards. The boy kicked and
struggled against their hold. "Harry, don't!" He growled at the arms pushing him back, the other Slytherins trailing behind him, hands tightening around their wands. "They just said – they mean to let you – " He breathed deeply. "Stay," he pleaded. "Whatever this is about, just. Stay. We'll figure out another way."

Harry set down Gytha's body as gently as he could. She laid still and unresponsive on a bed of twisted roots and fallen leaves. Harry worked his words around the lump in his throat. "I will do as you ask," he whispered, Alfric's furious shouts drowned out under the thundering noise of Centaurs marching off to war.

He didn't look back at his friends; he feared he would never find the strength to leave their side if he did. They were safe, and if he wanted to see the Founders again, he would have to keep his word to the Centaurs. The ease with which Harry pushed all thoughts from his mind, steeled himself for whatever this was to come, should have worried him. Would have worried him, in another life. One where friends rose from the grave and loved ones were forever safe. Exhaling softly, he looked for Hexo. The Centaur waited patiently for him to get his bearings, bow slung over his shoulder.

"We have a long walk ahead," the man told him.

"Let's get to it then," Harry muttered.

Together, they sunk behind the trees. Hexo set off in a direction that seemed random to Harry, but the Centaur moved with the assuredness of someone who knew where he was going. Very soon, they lost the light spilling from the camp, the hubbub of life and voices. The Forest closed over Harry like a heavy shroud. It felt lonely without the other students at his back.

For a long time, he kept catching himself scanning the surrounding darkness for the slightest threat, for any sound of distress coming from behind him. He was twitchy, left over-sensitized by his previous trek through the Forest. It took a while for this hyper-awareness to fade. It had been born out of a need to protect others; its absence found him numb, his mind and body safely cocooned from the world, a trance-like state. For the most part, Hexo respected his silence. The Centaur walked ahead of him, the muffled stomp of his hooves lost to the quiet rustle of the Forest.

When the ghosts sitting on Harry's chest started to scream too loud for him to ignore, when stress and worry and soul-crushing grief started to clog up his throat past the point where he could think, he said, "So, tell me. What am I walking into?"

Hexo looked back at him, liquid eyes blinking slowly. "Do you have any idea how many Creatures there are in this Forest, Harry Potter?"

Harry shook his head, startled at the non-sequitur. "No," he admitted. He took a moment to think about it. "A few hundreds, maybe a thousand, counting you and your clan?"

But Hexo chuckled. "Harry, there are well over two thousand Centaurs in these woods. Tens of thousands reside here beside us. Hundreds of species."

"But – " Harry frowned at Hexo's back. He'd had no idea that the Forest was large enough to house so many people. "All right," he said slowly. "I didn't know."

"You don't understand." Hexo glanced back at him, long hair switching over his shoulders. "This Forest is one of the last few refuges for Creatures of magic. Your kind has driven us from our lands. You killed many of us before we could find places to hide."

Harry's eyes widened at that, outrage momentarily chasing away his gloomy mood. "My people
"have done no such thing!" he exclaimed. "We've been hunted too. We're being persecuted just like you. That's the whole point of Hogwarts!"

"Not all of us see it that way." When Harry just kept staring at him in disbelief, he added, "You look human, Harry. It is easier for you to conceal yourself."

"Tell that to all the children who've died – " Harry huffed out, gnawing at the inside of his cheeks to control himself. "What's your point, anyway?" he bit out. Hexo still hadn't answered his original question.

"This Forest is the last home many of us will ever have," Hexo explained. His voice carried easily, drifting over to Harry like a soft gust of wind. "We would fight to the death to defend it." The man's shoulders heaved, as though bowing under an invisible weight. "But we do not have your powers, Harry Potter. We are vulnerable in many ways to things which do not affect wizards. And you have made us visible by coming here."

Harry wanted to sit down. Behind his eyes flashed images of the Centaur's camp. The bustle of normal, peaceful life, happy couples and growing children. All the signs of a working, thriving society. He feared he finally did understand what Hexo was getting at. It was no wonder Centaurs were a reclusive people, if they were truly vulnerable to magical threats. Or if magic shone a flashlight in their direction, brought armies clad in steel at their doors, enemies they couldn't hope to defeat. There were more children and old people among them than warriors, after all, and it was Hogwarts' fault that they risked extinction.

Harry's shoulders dropped. The Slytherin in him had thought about running away, once Hexo had led him deep enough into the Forest. Rather than take the chance that the man might rush back to camp to alert his people of Harry's failure, should he prove incapable of completing the task set for him. Though Hexo would no doubt make for a remarkable opponent, Harry was confident he could overpower him, wait out this storm while keeping everyone safe. Now he knew he could not do that. That door was closed to him. If innocents - and men and women who had saved his life - faced a threat they couldn't defend against but that he could help with, well. That didn't leave him with much of a choice, did it?

He swallowed. "What do you need help with?"

Hexo grinned at that, grim and terrible. "We can handle the army at your doors. But there is something amiss in the world that we don't know how to protect against. The stars have stopped making sense since the equinox. Many have felt it. Some Dark magic has been set free. Several of my herd have already passed away at its hands. We ask that you right this wrong."

"I'm not sure I'm the best person you could ask for that," Harry muttered, thinking that if this was some sort of spell gone wrong, Salazar would be a lot better at dealing with it. The man had a knack for creating and unravelling all sorts of wards.

Hexo hummed non-committally. "I believe you are wrong," he said. "There is great power in you, Harry Potter." Then, "We're almost there."

Alarmed, Harry looked around, searching for signs of the wrongness both Hexo and the woman at the camp had been talking about. To his surprise, he found them almost instantly.

It was as though something black and oily had crawled between the thick, groaning trees of the Forest, sucking the life out of everything it had touched. The wide, ridged trunks were streaked with strange markings, discoloured, dying from the roots up. There were no bushes growing near the ground, though dead branches littered the ground like thickets of dry bones, all of them the
colour of dull, matted silver. Harry could not hear the usual hum and patter of nocturnal wildlife; there were no owls hooting in the velvet of the night, no insects crinkling against the dark. Everything smelled foul, suffused with the sweet, nauseating tang of rotten things.

And it was cold.

The air was icy, crystalline. Each lungful scraped Harry's throat raw. As he stayed still, the unnatural coldness bit deeper and deeper under his flesh. He shivered and pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

Whatever had caused this, it couldn't be good.

His breath was fogging up in thick clouds in front of his face. Leaves and branches crumpled and cracked under his feet, and for a moment, he thought he was back in the middle of one of his nightmares, standing alone in a cemetery or in a maze, the only living thing left in the world, and he was so, so cold... 

Hexo walked to him, shocking, living warmth wafting off of him in waves, and the illusion was broken in an instant. It left Harry befuddled and light-headed, with the sensation that he was standing in two places at once, torn in the middle.

"I cannot go much further," Hexo told him in a low voice. The Centaur was pale under his dark skin. He looked drawn, as though staying where he was was taking up every ounce of his strength.

"Keep walking up ahead. You will find it soon enough."

"Find what?" Harry asked, but Hexo had already stepped back a few other paces, lips pinched tight, shaking his head. A pained grimace twisted his features.

Hesitantly, Harry edged away from him, going in the direction Hexo was trying to avoid. He stepped over dead plants and withered roots. Between them, nestled snugly, he saw the decaying carcass of a rabbit. Gripping his wand tightly in one hand, the other resting on the pommel of his sword, he went further still. With each step, the air grew colder, and the damage done to the trees became more apparent. Aside from his own breathing, everything was very silent. It reminded him of his dive into the Lake, just hours prior, watery silence pressing upon his ears while cold sunk under his skin.

It appeared without warning, after an odd twist on his path, trees suddenly vanishing as though they had been blown away by an explosion. Harry froze, incapable to breathe. On some deep, instinctive level, he understood what he was seeing, and it filled him with horror.

In the middle of a small clearing devoid of any life, there was a crack. It was only visible because its shadows were somehow deeper and heavier than those of the surrounding trees. Its jagged, blurred edges stretched obscenely through the air like the swelled split of a bloated knife wound. Within its depths, unknown nightmares writhed like coiled snakes. It howled with wordless hunger, a hunger that could devour the world before it was satiated. Harry felt sick just looking at it, primal terror overtaking his limbs.

It shouldn't be here. It was wrong, its very existence an abomination that violated every natural law there was.

As though sensing Harry's presence, the crack pulsed into the night, the single beat of a monstrous heart, and wispy tendrils of darkness came spilling out, slithering quickly across air and mud, animated by a life of their own. Harry could not move, he was choking on his own dread, because he knew this. He had dreamed this, lived this before, a hundred times, a thousand, and he knew
how this story ended; with him panting and trembling on his bed after feeling his mind and body being pulled apart. He was dreaming. He had to be.

The icy air had settled into his bones. He felt like he could shatter at the slightest touch, like he was about to jolt awake. Any moment now.

Paralysis didn’t leave his limbs even as cords of darkness warped around his ankles, slipped around his waist. It was foul and sick. The mere brush of that thing against his skin made him want to vomit; he could feel rot spread through him faster than he could think. His entire body wanted to bow and bend and run, but he couldn’t move.

Darkness moved up his chest. It was agony, pain like he had never experienced before, worst than the Cruciatius, worst than anything. It was soft and insidious, and he was aware. Each and every inch of his body was decomposing, turning to ash, his skin rotting to become grey and thin, his organs putrefying as though he’d been dead for days, for weeks. He tried to scream but couldn’t, he tried to move but couldn’t. He was so cold.

From far, far away, he thought he heard Hermione call his name, her voice tired and strained, but gliding against his consciousness like warm water. His body heaved, rocked forward as though electrified, his thoughts cleared away some of their mindless panic. There was – there was a spell. He knew a spell, though he’d never had the chance to practice it before. He’d read about it somewhere. Among Salazar’s books perhaps? He’d found a book that talked about cracks in the fabric of the world and of the monsters that simmered beneath. It was a spell that was supposed to close those cracks. Harry had to close this one; it didn’t belong.

He was dying and beyond pained, beyond terrified, but he found his voice, and the hand that held his wand was steady. His entire being shuddered, shaken loose. He felt magic surge inside him, felt it wrack through him, up the ground and into his veins.

He choked on air and shouted, ”Egredere Mundi Comedenti!”

A blast of blinding light burst out from his wand, bathing the Forest in silver-white streaked with green and gold, bright and ghostly and otherworldly. It found the crack, struck at its heart, and instantly, Harry felt a pull at his core, a burning strain in his muscles as they bucked up under the formidable effort it took to cast this spell. He grit his teeth and kept his magic flowing, fighting back every instinct that told him to cut off the quick draining of his life. And soon, the darkness that had taken hold of him shrieked away from his body, thick ropes letting go of him to crawl back in the abyss they had come from. Inches by painful inches, the crack started to close.

But it wasn’t enough.

With growing despair, Harry watched the slow shrinking of that – that wound, and he knew he would never have the strength to see it heal. Already, his breath was coming in searing, wheezing pants; his heart was pounding too fast and too loud. Black spots whirled across his vision in a disjointed dance. His head spun with the pain of it all, a sickening, dreadful lurch.

He had to do it, though. It was his duty. His responsibility, his weight to bear. People would die by the thousands if he failed, he just knew it. He would have their souls strung up around his neck for all of eternity. He had to do this if it killed him.

Only vaguely aware of his own actions, wands held firmly in front of him, Harry staggered a step forward. His foot sunk deep into the ground as if he had grown heavy beyond imagining. Shaking so badly he could hardly stand, he managed another step before falling to his knees. He could hear Hermione's voice again, calling his name, shouting it at the top of her lungs, urgent and desperate.
"I'm here, 'Mione," Harry mumbled, shaking his fuzzy head. ",M right here."

She didn't seem to catch his words. Maybe she couldn't hear him because she was so far away. Maybe Harry could reach her, if he just got a little closer –

Groaning, Harry planted one foot into the ground, then the other, pulling himself up, feeling as though his spine was about to break under the weight of him. Miraculously, magic was still pouring out of him like blood from a gushing blade wound – just like the one Salazar had carved into his shoulder. His wand-arm seemed to have developed a consciousness of its own, past needing any input from Harry to keep pointing at the ever-shrinking crack.

Two more steps and his knees threatened to buck again. He couldn't get enough air into his lungs and back out again, his whole body was one big, throbbing bruise. The world was slipping away and the crack wouldn't shut and Hermione was still calling his name and he was going to die here, his heart was going to give out –

Somewhere deep inside of him, there was a great, resounding click, like something snapping into place, or perhaps being shattered open, and suddenly, suddenly. He could do it.

Harry didn't understand where that reserve of power came from; he didn't care to know. It came to him like a blessing, vast and sweeping like the sea, and it felt easy, it felt obvious to simply reach out and take hold of what was his. More magic rushed through his veins but didn't burn. The Forest was awash with it, it glowed from his touch so much that it became painful to look at, to keep his eyes open. He did it anyway, to watch the crack heal and mend, the world sewn back together the way it was supposed to be. He felt elated; he felt infinite.

Distantly, muffled under the flux of energy in his ear, there was a howl of ageless rage, a shuddering boom like thunder.

And it was over.

The crack was gone. Gone. Harry couldn't hear Hermione any more, silence had fallen upon the Forest, draped itself over his shoulders, a familiar cloak.

He blinked, and was surprised to find the ground much closer to his face than it had been moments before. He could smell the musk of wet earth and dead leaves, a dark coating on his tongue. The world was greying out at the edges, tunnelling down. He blinked again, and –

He came to to the gentle sway of powerful arms under his back and knees, to the scent of warm, pine-soaked skin. Breathing deeply, fully, he opened his eyes to a slanted vision of Hexo's face. The Centaur looked odd, all serious and solemn. Harry must have stirred, because the man glanced down at him and didn't startle at seeing him awake.

"We are here," Hexo told him. He set him down before Harry could so much as ask where 'here' was, each motion slow and careful, like Harry was something precious he had to take care of. Hexo nodded at something behind him, hands clasped loosely behind his back.

Wobbly, like his limbs had been lined with rubber, Harry turned around to see what all the fuss was about, and oh. How could he not have known? How could he have forgotten? Hogwarts. Tall and proud and perfect, bridges and turrets arching off into the star-sprinkled sky, glowing to the brim with life and magic. Candles burned behind many windows, yellowish warmth the most beautiful thing Harry had ever seen. Hexo had brought him home.
"It is safe to return," Hexo said quietly. When Harry turned to him, he gave a soft, strange smile. "May we meet again, Harry Potter." And he bowed, deep and respectful, waist and knees bent, presenting Harry with his open palm as though his heart rested on top of it and it was Harry's to take. He had slunk back behind the treeline long before Harry could think to utter an answer.

Harry shook himself, mind and body a churning mess he could barely reach, and, bracing himself, he started toward the castle.

Chapter End Notes

And now i caught up with my writing! Next chapter is already started, but engineering school (school of engineering? however you English speakers call it) is taking up a lot of time, so it's slow work. In the meantime, I'm beyond touched by all the kudos and comments you guys have given me, they mean a lot!

See you soon and lots of love <3
Between the Shadow and the Soul

Chapter Notes

WARNING(s) for violence and some sexual content at the end!

It was said that the world would die wrenched and racked with war, fathers slaughtering sons, brothers drenched in one another's blood. An axe-age, a sword-age, and wind and wolves would leave Midgard wrecked. Vaguely, morbidly, Helga wonder whether the end of times would look anything like this.

Driving her left arm upwards to block the sweeping blow of a spear, she pushed her sword into the juncture between two armor plates, short blade grinding past metal and muscle, deep enough that she felt the fluttering tremor of a heartbeat all the way to her palm. A single, agonized howl rose up from the cavernous depths of a helm, ending quickly in an awful, wet gurgle. She was tearing her sword out long before the man – boy – hit the ground, broken, lifeless. The blade came back covered in gore, red flesh and thick blood sluicing down the hilt.

Deflecting the gazing edge of a sword with her left hand, blue shield sizzling with life in the confused clamour of the night, she let herself fall back a step, boots sinking in the battered mud below. Tasting death and copper in the back of her mouth, she gathered herself in a tight coil, magic singing beneath the thin stretch of her skin. She preferred to fight with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, the way she had been taught as a girl, but had no choice other than to break habits now. Cutting off the steady strength of her Shield Charm, she drew a sharp Rune into the air, deep purple flickering in the wake of her wand.

At her command, the earth cracked and shattered, great gouges splintering the ground. Around her, dozens of men perished, impaled on rocks and roots, filling the air with their dying cries.

Panting harshly, her body weighted down with all the stones she'd just pulled up from the dirt, Helga staggered back, vision greying out, lurching dangerously to the side. All that she could see were dead men, dismembered, twisted corpses sprawled around like discarded dolls. The smell of carnage, of split, blood-soaked flesh already starting to rot was so pungent she thought for a moment she was going to vomit, chest heaving once before settling.

A hand grasped her arm, a shoulder pressing against her back, hauling her up before she could drop down knees first. She startled, badly enough that spikes of alarm cleared her sight, and she was swivelling under the constraining grip without a thought, free hand holding up her sword, ready to strike –

She had time to glimpse at dark red hair and yellow eyes before Godric batted away her blade, sweeping it aside with ease. "HELGA!" he yelled at her, voice hoarse in a way suggesting he had been shouting for a while.

"Godric" she growled, "I could've killed you." She drew her weapons back, careful to let die the Cutting Hex at the tip of her tongue. She kept here eyes trained in the distance, weary that the sudden lull granted by her spell wasn't going to last long.
"They're going to regroup," Godric grunted, squeezing her arm before stepping away. "See?"

Helga followed the direction he was pointing to. The hills no longer crawled with warriors, metal armours shining like carapaces under the guttering light of the sliced moon. Clutters of soldiers were wobbling away, shouting and limping as they congregated somewhere out of sight.

"What happened?" she asked, taking a moment to enjoy the clear line of horizon.

"Salazar killed most of their sorcerers. They won't be so well-warded now." The grin that split Godric's face was savage, sharp as a blade. The side of his face was dark with crusted blood. A long, thin cut ran up his cheek, oozing out fresh, sluggish red. He was vibrant, blood-soaked, as full of life as Helga had ever seen him.

Shaking her head, she asked, "Where is he? Where's Rowena?" Vaguely, she remembered fighting beside the two of them, before the ebb and flow of battle had driven them apart.

Wordlessly, Godric nodded off to the side. The twin shapes of Salazar and Rowena stood alone against the backdrop of the sky, just about invisible in the surrounding gloom.

"Let's go," Helga said, and together, they dashed back across the battlefield, Godric leading the way.

Half-drunk with exhaustion, Helga kept tripping over the uneven terrain. Bent, mangled limbs got under her feet. Some were twitching weakly, not quiet dead but about to be. Flesh and steel were pressed together in a revolting mixture, poking out of the earth like the plants of some macabre garden. Helga wondered whose bones it was that she was trampling.

Soon, they had trudged up atop the soft hillside. The vantage point offered a sprawling view of the battlefield and the desolation below. Corpses stretched far across the wide hollow. So many dead.

Godric had had them build Hogwarts in a way that they could protect, using the terrain to their advantage. There was only one clear side from which enemies could come screaming, being otherwise tucked between a mountain, a lake and a forest. The damage they had inflicted was significant. Still, the field was large, difficult to defend with only the four of them. Helga hadn't gone into this fight expecting to come out alive.

Rowena and Salazar stood still and silent, gazing upon the distance. Rowena's hair had come undone during the fighting. It tumbled down her back in heavy waves. Her face was grime-streaked, pale skin made dark with mud and ashes. Otherwise, she looked unharmed. Relief swept over Helga at the sight of her, had her stagger on her feet, heart soaring in her ears.

Salazar didn't so much as glance their way when they approached. He was covered from head to toe in dark fabric, his face hidden away from the world, his eyes the only things Helga could glimpse from under the scarf he had wrapped around his head, two thin slabs of hardened steel. He wasn't hurt in any way that she could see.

"Helga." The first to notice their presence, Rowena came to her, two quick strides bringing her within arm's reach. Her eyes roamed Helga's body, fingers skimming Helga's cheekbone, thumbing gently at the bruise blooming there. "Are you all right?" she asked softly, blue eyes shinning like the stars.

"I'll live," Helga promised, smiling in spite of herself, so full of pain and love she thought she was going to burst with it. "How about you?"

Rowena pressed a hand to her hip, fingers massaging the flesh beneath. She shrugged. "Nothing too
There was a hint of motion behind the hillsides, the rustle of shifting chainmail like the rocks of a riverbed.

"They're back," Godric announced, eyes flashing yellow, a feline's stare. "Let's go hold the fuckers off."

Helga let her head fall back on her shoulders, working off the tension knotting the muscles of her back. She breathed in deeply, gulping down the cool stream drifting off from the mountain tops, the air pure and clean, free of the charred, cadaverous sweetness that came from the dead bodies below. Behind her, Hogwarts' wards pulsed and hummed their swaying songs, and far above, the night's sky was magnificent, cristal-sharp stars burning against the fluid dark blue of depthless space. For one breathless, suspended moment, she felt the world's beauty ring in her bones, deep and true, in tune with the steady beats of her heart.

Then she breathed out and pulled out her sword, wrist rotating to ease off the abused nerves. Beside her, Rowena did the same, steel shinning like glass. She moved with mindless grace, deft and practised. Dappled moonlight shimmered pale silver on her skin. She met Helga's gaze, stern and solemn, black as the sky above. Firmly, decisively, Helga clamped her mouth shut on all the words that rattled against her lips.

Salazar brushed past her, a gargoyle coming to life. She blinked after him, startled, truly seeing him for the first time since the beginning of the fight.

Where Godric had filled out with animalistic energy, ferocious and colourful, Salazar had become a ghost, leeched out of all life. He moved carefully, without a sound; his skin was pale and grey against the black of his headscarf. His eyes were translucent, bleached like the moon. Death clung to him like a cloak.

Helga had wondered before, at what his gift of Legilimency might do to him in battle. His mind lashing out to the men around, tasting their thoughts and lives in the fraction of eternity before the spark drained from their bodies. How intimately could he feel their agony, their fear and resignation as he ripped them apart? How much closer to madness did it drive him?

Watching the tight, drawn set of his shoulders, Helga thought she had her answer.

The clamour of men and horses was growing louder in the distance, shaking the dirt beneath her feet, rumbling all the way to her chest. In front of her, advancing like a surging wave, the army crawled out from beyond the hill, blackening its sides.

Their enemies' numbers had diminished in the span of the last hours. Their ranks were sparser, more haggard-looking. But the warriors that remained, that hadn't deserted out of fear for their lives, were coming at them with all the righteousness of their hearts, a deep-rooted conviction that they were doing something good, something holy. They screamed in unison, the terrible howl of a gigantic beast.

How could the four of them have instilled so much hatred in the hearts of so many men? How scared must they be, to lay down their lives so readily, by the hundreds? Helga understood that the three boys Salazar had claimed as his own had led the soldiers marching here. But the swiftness of the reaction, the literal army at their door, spoke of something deeper, more visceral than the murder of a Lord by his sons. The senseless, mindless fear wizards inspired in Muggles had always
puzzled her. Even amongst her own people, where magic was recognized as a natural thread to the fabric of the world, Helga had felt out of place. When all she did was heal and create, still she had been regarded with caution, with mistrust, set apart by the forces strung along her bones.

She remembered being a girl, pressed against an old silver tree in the snow dusted ground, red and yellow leaves smelling of raw, rotten things in the breeze, the distant whoops and cheers of men making sacrifices to the gods echoing in her ears. Ecstatic in the giving of themselves. The slow-moving pulse of magic rocking through her, everything bright and alive with ancient rituals. She hadn't been welcomed then, set apart from a ceremony whose significance she understood instinctively, down to her very marrow, and certainly better than anyone else in her village.

All she'd ever wanted, all any of them had ever wanted, was a place to belong, a place of peace and safety, where they could grow and age, seeped in their culture without having to fear for their lives. Without having to look in from the outside. Would mankind ever stop snarling at what was different from its norm?

Rowena pitched toward her, something wild blazing in her eyes. "Let's go and dance," she said, lips half-curled into a snarl.

As their horses had died some time ago, they went on foot. Helga conjured and maintained a shield, soft golden, like a soap bubble around them. A few arrow shafts clattered uselessly against her magic, forlorn warning blows and little else.

Rowena and Salazar were chanting under their breaths long before the inevitable clash, hummed incantations falling and rising from their lips like water. Rowena was rushing ahead before any of them could think to stop her, the air around her charging with power, crackling and heating. A wrench, a pull, like gravity had shifted forward, and dozens upon dozens of lances made of lightening sizzled to life on either side of her extended arms. A flick of her wrist, and they barrelled toward the incoming soldiers, groaning, whirring in deadly arches.

The first lines fell, burned to the bone, skin blistered beyond recognition, screeches of pain drowned out under the sound of thunder. Under the smell of storm-charged wind, sharp and suffused with ozone, the stench of charred, twisted flesh rose up, coating Helga's lungs, turning her stomach.

Salazar followed next, the stream of his words ending abruptly, definitively, with ringing silence. Arrays of runes flared above his head like a cloud, too thick and intertwined for Helga to discern meaning in them, spinning madly at his command. He threw his head back, unhinged eyes half-lidded, a hand opened in front of his clothed mouth as though he was blowing at the cloud. Directed by an invisible gust, the runes scattered, dipping the black sky in shades of blue silver, unfolding above the army's head. At a twitch of Salazar's fingers, they plummeted down, unperturbed by the pained, begging cries below. Helga watched as each rune attached itself to a different man, too swift for them to dodge, though they tried, causing great ruckus among their ranks. One after the other, the soldiers fell. Their cheeks hollowed out, their skin turned the colour of ashes. They sank down, clutching at their throats, mouths opening and closing soundlessly, life dripping out of them like blood. The foul, polluted feel of Dark magic crept over Helga like oil.

Rattled, it took an instant for the advancing men to recover. For one wild, hopeful moment, Helga thought they might take fright and dash away. They didn't. Whoever led them was a skilled general; there were shouted orders and the army was closing in again, ranks knitting back, closer than before. Trampling over the corpses of their fallen comrades, crazed with dread and awe, past the point where they could back away, the men marched on.

Helga steeled herself, and stepped forth into the melee. The first men clanged against her shield
with a grunt. She punched them back with a blast of wind that threw them away several feet, ribcages cracking wetly under the impact. She swung her sword, let it catch against the tender skin of a collarbone, *wrenched*, and another body hit the ground, quickly replaced by several others.

Before the men could overwhelm her under the onslaught, Godric stepped close, taking up her side with his usual skill. The man was by far the best of them in combat, had always been a sight when fighting. His sword became an extension of his arm, rearing and striking at the speed of thought, almost too swift to follow. There was an easy fluidity in the way he moved that was riveting to watch; his entire body tuned to the drums of warfare. He looked nothing short of beautiful, steel and spell a whirlwind around him, even as corpses accumulated at his feet. He would be the last of them left standing tonight.

With Rowena and Salazar on her other side, giving death with savage ruthlessness, Helga felt out of herself, the four of them moving in perfect synchronicity, condensing together in a single entity. There was something exhilarating in the grim and gore of the moment; she hated how alive it made her feel, more grounded inside of herself than she'd ever been.

Minutes ticked away, dissolved into the blood-slick ground under her boots. It couldn't have been very long before the strain of exhaustion caught up with Helga. Her arms clamped and shook every time her sword encountered resistance, with each curse she fired. Sporadic shakes rocked her whole body; every breaths burned her lungs, almost too searing to take. Her heart pounded furiously, so loud a tattoo she feared it might fracture her bones. She could see, *feel*, that same fatigue overcoming the others, as though their slowed reflexes were her own, as though each of the blows they failed to dodge landed on her own body. Whenever one of them fell, the others would soon follow to the ground, overcome by the pain of it.

Not long now.

It all happened suddenly, at the same time, fractioned events bursting forth from the void. Her foot slipped on a pool of blood. Or maybe she tripped on someone's corpse. Either way, the world pitched forward, slow and unhurried, like time didn't matter now that it had come to an end. She saw the jagged edge of a stranger's blade glint dull, liquid silver in the moonlight, saw it come down in a sweeping arch, knew she wouldn't have the strength to keep it from sinking into her gut. The world exploded.

It was remade in-between one heartbeat and the next. Sudden, staggering *power* washed over her, punched through her core, burning like lightning and *too much*, she was gasping, trembling under the surge, vast and devastating and –

She tasted mud on her lips, breathed it in deeply, hands clenched into the sludge, *alive*, like all her nerves had been exposed to the open air. Hazy, confused, she looked up. Above her, a man stood with his sword held limply in one hand, mouth gaping open, no more understanding of the situation than she was. He glanced down at her, a furrow between his brows, as though he hadn't expected to find her there. He was a moment too slow to react. Helga leaped to her feet, over her burning muscles, drove her sword up and into his stomach, raking it up in one clean motion. The man coughed up blood, died before splattering into the muck.

A resounding roar rose up from the distance, shattered between the dark outlines of the trees. The ground trembled from a heavy pound. Shaky, Helga thought another wave of magic was going to drown her on her feet. She braced herself for the impact, the enticing spur that would fill up her skin, on the sharp edge between pain and pleasure. She was thrown off-balance when Centaurs came charging in instead. The Creatures pooled out of the Forest, airborne, howling war cries, wood spirits thirsty for vengeance. The thunder of their hooves overcame the cries of the dying.
She staggered at the sight of them, clenched muscles easing down.

"What – " she muttered, shaking her head. Everything was fuzzy, clouded over, worse than being drunk. Her skin tingled something awful.

She could only watch, stunned and out of it, as the Centaurs flitted over the remaining men, cutting them down like wheat. Her back was pressed against Godric and Rowena, with Salazar behind, the four of them standing in a tight circle. They stood only through the strength of each other's inertia.

The respite they allowed themselves was short. Godric was the first to detach himself from their small cluster, pulling away with more strength than the rest of them combined, mind already working out the tangles of their predicament, body tensed hard enough to shatter. His capacity to jump into action and cajole them into following was one of the reasons why Helga loved him so much.

Bracing herself, she gripped her sword, and fought on.

It was all over in a matter of minutes. The last men were picked out, hacked down without mercy. Helga fell to her knees, coughing up her lungs, too drained to stand even as the last soldiers were hunted down. Rowena was beside her, both hands braced against the ground, arms shaking. Godric joined them next, slumping on Helga's left with a grunt, sword clattering away. Without a word, he reached for her hand. She reached back, twining their fingers, silently grateful for the warm scrap of his callouses under her palm. Panting, Rowena leaned her forehead against the side of Helga's neck, moist, ragged breath on her skin. Over the woman's head, Helga saw Salazar shift closer, swaying on his feet. There was something feverish in the grey of his eyes, half-mad and fierce. He stayed where he was, a few feet away, gazing at them with all the desperation of a drowning man at the sight of a lifeboat.

"Just come here," Godric growled, voice a low rumble pressed against Helga's back. He too had seen Salazar, was staring at the man with tired exasperation. He bared his teeth when Salazar hesitated, glancing at them, rooted on the spot. "Come here, Salazar."

The man moved at last, two jerky steps and he folded himself beside Godric. Eyes glazed. Immediately, Godric's free hand went to clasp the back of his neck, a firm grip that Salazar didn't protest.

They stayed like that for a long while. Eventually, a Centaur approached them, a fierce-looking female, black charcoal across her eyes, chest and arms drenched in blood. No one made to stand, not even when she stopped in front of them, though she didn't seem to mind.

"Your students are safe," she told them, flicking off coagulated blood stuck on the edge of her poniards. "They are being returned here as we speak."

Helga knew she should feel relief, should be violently grateful, but her own reactions were coming at her through muffled mist. In the end, it was Godric who found the will to speak.

"Why," he said, flat, without energy left for an actual question.

The female smiled. She was strikingly beautiful under all the paint and gore. "A pact was made," was all she replied. "We are honouring our part in it."

With a nod of her head, she trotted away.

"What just happened?" Rowena asked, voice muffled against Helga's skin.
"I don't know," Godric replied.

Salazar stayed silent.

Helga wondered whether the others had felt what she'd felt, a surge of magic that had brought her to her knees, something old beyond reason roaring through her blood. How far across had that tremor echoed? Had it been localised near Hogwarts, or if it had spread, stretched like a great earthquake, shaking every confines of the world?

She pushed her questions to a corner of her mind. They had to move. The Centaur had promised the safe return of their students, but they weren't there yet. They were wandering through a Dark Forest in the dead of night.

"We have to go," she managed through parched lips. "The children –"

Behind her, Godric shifted. "Oh," she heard, the low tenor of his voice shuddering in the air between them. "They – they're here!"

She looked at where he was pointing, and saw something flutter in the distance, shimmering into view at the gnarled edges of the trees. One after the other, the children trickled out of the Forest's shade, clinging onto each others, steps unsteady with weariness.

Thank the gods.

{...}

Afterwards, Helga weaved her way in-between mattresses and sleeping bodies. Most of the students were dead to the world, sprawled out on the Great Hall's floor. The slow rise and fall of their chests made a reassuring cadence under the gentle flicker of floating candles.

It had taken a while to get the children to settle. Several had broken down at the sight of the four Founders, dissolved into hysterics. They'd had to be carried back to the castle, their legs refusing to support them any longer, pale and panting with shock. It was a miracle the Centaurs had managed to lead them all to safety.

Harry Potter was missing. One of Salazar's student, Alfric Barden, a blond-haired, harried-looking youth, had recounted their ordeal in the Forest, from the attack by a scouting party to their stay in the Centaurs' camp, his words chopped and stilted, suffused with quiet horror. The children had been escorted home by a few Centaurs, who had supplemented their own details to the story, talking about sinister happenings in the Forest, about how they'd needed Harry to accomplish what no one else could. They wouldn't explain why they'd needed to ask the Potter boy specifically, rather than come look for the Founders' help.

For a moment, Helga had feared for the Centaurs' lives. Salazar had made to lunge at them, a sharp curse hissing past his lips in Parseltongue, fist poised to strike at the closest Centaur's heart so he wouldn't have to stand the weight of his own. Godric had seized him around the waist before he could kill anyone, whispering urgently into his ear. He hadn't let go for the whole walk back to the castle.

Helga looked at Salazar's students, crowded close together at the far end of the Hall, apart from the other Houses. Isolated in their grief. Even in sleep, they looked old beyond their years. Forced out of childhood in the worst possible way. They shared beds and pillows, so tightly strung together it was hard to tell which limb belonged to whom.

They had set Gytha's body down in an adjacent room, cleaned her up, closed her eyes. Refusing to
let anyone else care for her. Refusing to leave for hours, each child insisting to see their own funeral rites respected. They had lit incense near her bed, weaved flowers through her hair, shrouded her in white linen. Some had sung in their native language, soft words of lament. Several had prayed to their God to let her rest in peace. A boy who had been raised with Helga's customs had closed the girl's hand over the pommel of her sword. They had kept vigil until they couldn't stand anymore.

Something cracked open in Helga's chest. She closed her eyes, breathed through it carefully. She knew loss, knew the stabbing, drowning pain of it, but *gods*. To lose a child so young, in such a way –

How could they have failed so completely?

Helga's gods were great and terrible. They hungered; for food, for sex, for blood. They *took*, unrestrictedly, because such was their nature. They demanded sacrifices, lives and loves lost to battle with their names on warriors' lips. They raved and raged with a fury that burned hotter than the sun.

Helga thought she could feel some of that fury, now, beating away in her chest. She felt awake, something buried having stirred in the deep recesses of her self. She longed for the chaos of battle, longed for revenge, for compensation of what had been taken from her. She wanted the bloated bodies on the field outside to rise up again, so she could offer them up to the crows once more.

From what she understood, the girl had died by a coward's hand, a cheap shot being town at her from the dark, striking true only because of bad luck. That she'd had her weapons held high was of little comfort. She was too young to have to enter the Halls of the fallen.

A noise, a scrap of leather on stone had her look up on instinct, nerves alight. In the Great Hall's threshold, standing in-between deep shadows and glowing light, was Harry Potter, his face all sharp angles in the sputtering candle fire. Even from the distance, Helga could see the green of his eyes shine in the darkness. He made no move to step forward, to join the rest of them. His head was cocked to the side, a curious motion rocking him back and forth.

He must have felt her eyes on him, because he turned to her, a vague, vacant smile brushing his lips. Fleetingly, behind her eyelids, Helga saw the swaying waters of a depthless lake, gold and silver coalesced together in a crown of thorns, the deep, ageless thrum of bells ringing up from sacred caves. She tasted sharp ozone and rich wine on her tongue, heard the distance crackle of thunder. She remembered being on her knees in the battlefield, mud on her lips, the world bursting anew, earth and sky collapsing together.

He nodded to her, head dipped in respect. Light and shadows twisted around him, curling around his frame. The clean, fresh smell of the earth before a summer rainstorm rose up to Helga's nose.

"He made it back." Helga startled to find Rowena beside her, staring after the boy. She gave a sharp nod. "Good."

By the time she looked back, Potter had disappeared into the Hall. Thinking about blood on snow and booming laughter, time wasted away before the heat of battle, a beast growling in her chest, Helga reached for Rowena's hand, squeezed until the woman looked at her questioningly.

"Will you come with me?" she asked, tilting her head toward the double doors, her heart hammering away in her throat.

Rowena nodded, didn't even ask where they were going before she let Helga tow her away.
Gesturing at Godric, Helga lead the way out of the Hall. Outside, the night was still thick and absolute, thrumming with age-old magic. Hogwarts' wards hummed and pulsed with with, leaving a taste like wet earth and hot metal in the back of Helga's throat.

She took Rowena to the closest room she could find, pushed open the wooden door and closed it behind the two of them. It was a classroom, with desks and books and a blackboard, white with Charms formulas, arching stones pillars in the middle. Everything glittered black, blue and silver from the moon hung outside, pooling in from wide glass windows.

Helga turned to Rowena. She too glittered under the light of the moon, head cocked to a side in silent interrogation.

"You want to talk?"

Helga's people lived hard and fast, laughing, fighting, fucking with wild abandon, too conscious of the fleeting nature of their existences not to bite into the world with everything they had. They were quick to anger, quick to hate, to love, living with exacerbated intensity. Helga wondered where along the road she'd forgotten these principles, the simple wisdom in them.

Rowena could have died tonight.

"I want to kiss you," Helga said, easy as walking to the edge of a cliff and then taking one more step. She felt calmer than she'd had in years. "Is that alright?"

Rowena's eyes caught the light, space-deep, her entire body shuddering with something like fear. Quick, clever Rowena, a mind that raged like a storm. Rowena, who was looking at her like she couldn't believe she was real, like she thought Helga might disappear if she so much as blinked.

She cleared her throat, once. Twice. "What?" she asked, voice thick with the consonants of her native tongue.

"I want to kiss you," Helga repeated, biting down on everything else she wanted with that woman. I want to feel your skin under my hands, to thread my fingers through your hair. I want to have you in any way I can, to take you until your voice breaks. I want you writhing under me, clutching at damp sheets for purchase. I want to see you come undone, to make you mine as I am yours.

The beast in her chest was pawing down the seams of her ribs, snarling. Tearing. Everything was sharp and sheer, magic thrumming down her fingertips. She swallowed.

"Can I?"

Rowena gave a jerky nod, chin dipping a fraction, and it was enough. Helga closed the distance between them, dizzy, shaking. She pressed her lips to Rowena's, a closed-mouthed thing with little pressure, something sweet and soft just to test the waters. Rowena's lips were so very warm under hers.

She sucked Rowena's bottom lip into her mouth, felt the woman gasp, respond eagerly, fingers sinking into Helga's hair, raking up her scalp even as she stumbled back a step from wanting to take on too much of Helga's weight. Helga had closed her eyes at some point, but she felt Rowena thud against a wall, or a desk, the door, something she really didn't give two fucks about.

She drew away only to press in harder, bruises screaming in protest, whole body a torn mess, but she didn't care. A scrap of teeth against full lips, and her tongue was slipping into Rowena's mouth, to meet hers in a wet tangle. She wrapped a firm arm around Rowena's waist, fingers skimming up,
under steel and clothes to find soft, glorious skin. She pressed a thigh between Rowena's legs, and the woman shuddered with it, a bitten, broken moan slipping out of her lips only to be caught on Helga's tongue.

"Helga," Rowena kept murmuring in-between breaths, like a prayer, "Helga – " and her hands were scrambling, pulling at Helga's clothes, wrenching at straps and buckles, febrile, urgent. A frustrated growl had fabric fall open, making Helga shiver at the cool stream of the night's air.

Fingers skinned her skin, a look of focused wonder on Rowena's face. Her lips were red, swollen, pupils swallowing up the blue of her eyes. Her hand fit neatly against the swell of Helga's breast, hesitant, tracing small circles over the layer of cloth binding her chest.

"I've never – I haven't – "

Helga kissed her again, just because she could, mouths slanting together, hungry, desperate, and Rowena lost whatever she'd been about to say against her lips.

"It's alright," Helga whispered when breathlessness forced her away. Sex had never been an issue to her. Her people had never been restrained by the punishing views of Muggles, though they held their own prejudices. Helga had been with both men and women before, had enjoyed every moment of it, but she understood that Rowena hadn't had the same chance. Married off too young to man she neither knew nor loved, Helga didn't think she'd had the occasion to understand what pleasure meant.

"Is this too much? Do you want to stop?"

But Rowena shook her head. With a shuddering breath, she leaned her forehead against Helga's, the two of them sharing the same air, alone in the world. "I don't," she said, words glancing Helga's neck. She hummed. "Helga, you have no idea – " She swept a thumb at the base of Helga's throat, lips gliding against her skin, enough to make gooseflesh rise. "You have no idea for how long I've wanted you, my love."

Helga huffed out a laugh, bright and delighted, fingers tracing the divots in Rowena's spine.

"I love you, you know?" she asked, and meant every word. Rowena had a dumbstruck look on her face, so Helga kissed her again, laughing against her lips. "Let me take you to bed?"

Rowena's arms tightened around her, and this. This felt right.

"God, yes."

Chapter End Notes

I was sincere last time when I said Salazar ought to make an appearance in this chapter. I simply didn't know Helga's bit was going to take 6k words instead of 2. I just love her so much, she needed to get her shit together and ask Rowena out already, because, honestly.

On a side note, in my head, she looks like Lagertha from Vikings, while Rowena's pretty much Katie McGrath. Lord, is that woman hot.

But I digress. Salazar will, in fact, talk, next chapter (this time I'm sure).
Chapter's title comes from Pablo Neruda's sonnet xvii.

Happy Christmas to you if you celebrate!
Hearts and Hurts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of his footfalls against the smooth white stone walls rang back to Harry's ears, barely muffled by the cushioned darkness dipping the castle. Hogwarts during witching hour had always been his favorite. The ancient castle felt peaceful in a way it never did in broad daylight, as though the night beckoned its ghosts and secrets to come out and play. There was no one around to see him, to point at his scar or whisper at his back. He was free, as inconsistent as the scattered dust that swirled in moonlight, glittering along empty corridors to the swell and sway of the castle's enchantments.

Idly, he wondered about the low, pleasant thrum along his skin. It wasn't the first time he noticed the strange shivers along his flesh; usually, he only felt them near Hallowe'en, or, once or twice, near Dumbledore when the old Headmaster let his magic loose. They felt different tonight, exacerbated, more pronounced than ever, though he couldn't think of a reason why. His head felt thick, woolly.

Rowena had told him, during one of her lectures, while they fought at dawn in the castle's courtyard, soft pink and peach light gleaming off slabs of ice, about how Hogwarts was suffused with magic, bound to the Founders' blood and the earth below. She had told him about how some wizards – not all wizards, but some – could feel magic wherever they were. It could manifest in many forms, she'd told him, her wand digging under Harry's jaw. Most people didn't even notice, couldn't even notice, not even if they focused with all their might.

Impulsively, Harry tried to reach out, see if he could sense any disturbance in the air. Almost at once, vibrant energy pressed against him, bright and pulsing with life. Hogwarts felt young and unspeakably ancient at the same time, each stone laced with spells, magic running through its core in a steady stream. It was mischievous, protective, inscrutable in its own way. For a moment, Harry understood the magnitude of what the Founders had accomplished, the scale of it. He had known, objectively, that they were witches and wizards of legend, gifted beyond reason, but to feel the breadth of what they were capable of was humbling.

Intrigued, he stretched further away, wishing to see if he could sense anyone's magic. He turned his focus to the Great Hall, just a few corridors away. He felt the Founders first, beating in time with Hogwarts' heart. There was a sluggish, exhausted feel to them, which was to be expected, he supposed. Still, they shone like beacons in the night, burning brighter than the students around them. Though he couldn't see them, Harry recognized Godric, blazing with fiery heat, dangerous and searing even from a distance. He also felt Helga, strong and steady, with a grounding pull like gravity. Rowena was nearby, fresh and sharp like a breeze before a hurricane, with all the mercurial, sweeping strength of an oncoming storm.

Salazar, Harry noted, was nowhere to be found. Pulling away from the warm, sleepy pulse of the students above, he came back to himself, a little disoriented. The thrumming on his skin had gotten worst, like he was about to burst out of himself.

His feet had taken him to the Dungeons. He stood at the top of a flight of stairs, staring down the faded darkness beneath. Outside, a breeze rustled along tall grass, summer-sweet. Vaguely wondering at which point the Dungeons had turned into a place he went to instinctively, for comfort, Harry stumbled down the roughly hewn stones steps, setting out to find Salazar.
He didn't remember seeing the man in the Great Hall, which meant Harry hadn't failed to sense him earlier, he simply wasn't there. He hadn't seen him outside either; all that was left on the field were corpses being picked at by scavengers. Which left the Dungeons. Salazar had to be in the Dungeons. He had to have made it back from the field, alive if not whole. Harry would know otherwise, he would have felt it. The other Founders would be grieving, nursing over deeper wounds than they already were. Harry would have seen it.

Right?

Worried now, pulse fluttering painfully at his wrists, he walked quicker, half-running the rest of the way to the common room. The alarm helped clear his head of some of its cobwebs, stringy blackness making it hard to think. The cool dampness of the Dungeons greeted him like an old friend, his footfalls dimmed now, muted by the low arching ceiling and narrow passageways.

He skidded to a stop in front of the common room's entrance, nondescript wall with a snake engraved at the bottom. He scrambled for the password but came up blank.

"Let me in," he ordered finally, exasperated. The small snake blinked at him from its low-hanging shadows, hissing its disapproval, but the wall glided open without delay, perhaps sensing Harry's impatience.

The common room was dark and silent but for the gentle slosh of the lake. None of the silver lanterns were lit, leaving nothing but deep obscurity, barely lifted by thin shafts of watery moonlight. Harry thought the place felt hollow, forlorn even, without the vague awareness of the other students sleeping nearby.

"Salazar?" he called, already knowing there would be no answer.

Just to be sure, unease a heavy pound in his chest, he ventured further in, eyes scanning the shadows for Salazar's silhouette. If not here, where could the man be? Harry doubted he would go to his lab on such a night, just as he thought it unlikely the Founder would seek out sleep. Could he be tending to his wounds in some secluded corner? Had he been badly hurt? Perhaps he was passed out somewhere, weak from blood-loss. Perhaps Harry was wrong and he had never made it back from the battlefield.

"Damn it," he muttered to himself, ignoring the way his hands had started to shake. "Think."

But all he could see behind closed eyelids was Salazar's broken body. He had a sword in his gut, or a spear in his lungs. He was choking on his blood until growing still. Harry could see a pillory, the great blaze of a fire, searing pale yellow too bright in the falling dusk, Salazar lingering in the air like smoke. A mob was watching his charred remains being reduced to ashes. The same mob Harry had seen months ago, around the bodies of a woman and a child. Except the Muggles were silent now, torches held high, grim, disgusting satisfaction on their bland faces. Salazar burned from the fire they had lit. Fuck these men, thought Harry. Fuck the men who held all the torches.

He wrenched himself away from the vision, left shaky from its clarity, fire heat warming his skin. He thought about Salazar's eyes in the falling gloom of Harry's bedroom, his lips on Harry's forehead and I'll see you on the other side. He had promised. He had promised that he would come back. Harry would hold him to that promise, no matter how empty the words might have been.

When he turned back around, pivoting on his heels with a bitten-off curse, Salazar was there.

Harry grew still, everything in him freezing in shock. Relief tore at him in a raging, silent cry, jolting surprise the only thing that kept his knees from buckling.
Salazar just stood there, a breathing shadow. He seemed to see nothing, focused inwards on the empty air, unaware of Harry's presence, eyes so pale they looked achromatic, colorless. His fingers were curled taut over his holstered wand and sword. He was all in black, flowing armour blending so seamlessly into the night he was almost invisible, melting into the dark, one of its many stalking specters. A scarf hid his face, leaving visible only his eyes. It muzzled his mouth and nose. Now that Harry had adjusted to the stifling gloom, he could see the fabric rise and fall in time with Salazar's rattling breaths. He was reminded of Dementors, cold, despairing decay rotting away under black robes.

"Salazar?" he asked, softly, and received no answer. Though Salazar was standing right in front of him, Harry had a feeling he might as well be thousands of miles away.

Slowly, so as not to startle him, Harry stepped into Salazar's line of sight, instincts whispering to proceed with caution. He had never seen Salazar like this, gone so far inwards he could just as well not be there at all. The man felt more dangerous than he'd ever had in Harry's presence.

He approached carefully, not just because exhaustion was sawing through his bones. He made sure to keep his hands opened and relaxed at his sides. Salazar didn't react, made no sign that he'd seen Harry edge closer, not even when Harry stood less than an arm's length away.

Up close, Harry could sense the tightness of Salazar's body, the unforgiving rigidity in his posture. A man about to shatter. The scarf on his face rose and fell wetly with his cadenced breaths. It looked suffocating, a dark gap that sucked moist air in and back out again, so Harry went for that, first.

Slowly, so agonizingly slowly Harry thought the world might turn to dust before he could reach the knot on the side of Salazar's jaw, he raised his hands, brought them up to the man's face. Harry's heart was thundering up his ears, hectic, so loud he thought it would echo out of his chest and against the walls. Dazed, breathless, he realised he was afraid. He went to remove the scarf gently, loosening the knots until it fell from Salazar's mouth. The man was impossibly warm under his hands, flesh and bones thrumming with life. He was there, solid and real. It was a relief in and of itself.

"Salazar," Harry tried again, voice quiet even in the oppressive silence. "Are you alright?"

He pulled the mask away from Salazar's face, and perhaps Harry had been right, perhaps it had been muzzling him somehow, because the moment it was gone, Salazar swayed on his feet, rocking forward, toward Harry, until Harry could feel ragged breathing on his cheeks.

"I couldn't find you," Salazar said, so soft Harry barely heard him. "You were gone, I couldn't find you."

Inside his head, Harry saw flashes of memories not his own, clapping the forefront of his mind like thunderbolts. He was at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, scanning the pale, haggard faces of his students as they emerged from the trees. He was rearing back, coiled and ready to strike the nearest Centaur, mouth open in a snarl no one could see, something cold and calm like Death descending upon him, a curse on his lips that could rip out someone's heart.

"I'm here," Harry said, breathing deeply to regain some sense of himself. "I'm here now. I'm alright."

"You were dead," Salazar told him, and his eyes were sightless still, looking at Harry without seeing. He leaned his forehead against Harry's, head cocked to a side so his lips were brushing Harry's cheek. "You were dying. I couldn't find you."
This time, Harry felt him, his consciousness pressing against Harry's, soft and faded, slipping against his Occlumency shields, seeking entry. The memory that drifted between them was more ancient this time, dating back a few months. He was being hefted up into someone's arms, the cracks inside his mind gaping wide to let darkness simmer through. Most of his weight was balanced against someone else's body, warm hands around his waist, pressing him close, from shoulder to hip. Someone else's soul was snug against his own, open and so blindingly bright it hurt to look at. The boy didn't understand what it was he'd laid at his feet for him to take, what it meant to Salazar's people, the complete giving of one's self. He was weak, half-drowned in the Obscurus' Dark magic and wanting, so he didn't resist the allure of the boy's mind, allowed it inside his own, and basked, slowly gluing back together the broken pieces of himself.

'Salazar,' Harry said, and felt the exact moment when Salazar came back to himself, body tensing even more, like a thin, frozen knife about to break, questing mind stilling at the edges of his own before being yanked back, vanishing without a trace.

Salazar pulled back, stumbled away a couple of steps. His face was drawn, gaunt, so pale Harry feared he might evaporate into mist.

"I'm sorry," he said, eyes wide, translucent with the pearly reflection of the moon. "I didn't – I thought – I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Harry replied quickly, reeling and not sure what had happened. "I was just – uh. I was trying to help you take off your clothes." He waved the dark cloth in his hands for emphasis.

Salazar froze at that, growing pointedly still, face smoothing out of expression. At least he stopped looking so wretched, Harry mused, moments before his own words caught up with him. He sputtered.

Oh God.

"I mean. I mean, you weren't moving, so I thought." Harry cleared his throat. "Are – are you hurt?"

Salazar stared at him for a moment longer. Turning over Harry's question. "I don't think so," he said at last, and Harry had to bite his lips to keep from hissing his disapproval, because Salazar wasn't sure. Another, shorter pause, and then –

"Might be worth checking, though."

"Yes it might," Harry muttered, taking Salazar's arm.

He didn't let himself hesitate before guiding the man further into the room, closer to the moonlight. He nudged Salazar to sit on the edge of a desk by one of the windows, pushing him against it with an open palm on the center of his chest, dropping the scarf down on the tabletop with the other. Salazar's heart beat a steady rhythm against his hand, pulsing just beneath his ribs, almost close enough to touch. Harry took his hand away.

It came back glistening red.

He swore, the words coming out in English. Running Healing Spells through his mind, he forced himself to calm down, eyes roaming Salazar's chest for signs of injury. He couldn't see any tear in the man's armour.

"It this yours?" he asked, voice controlled. He showed Salazar his hand, the sheen of blood coating it.
Salazar frowned at it like he couldn't understand what it was.

"Merlin," Harry muttered, and he started groping for the straps holding Salazar's armour together, fingers skimming the light fabric, working out the mess of knots and buckles.

Salazar watched him in silence. Harry eased off his bracers, heavy and reinforced with steel, let them drop on the ground. The chest plate went next, light leather thudding down beside the bracers. He pulled on the layers of black, airy fabric that made up the rest of Salazar's armour, tasting the strength of their wards under his fingers. The magic laced through felt weak, little more than a flicker. The enchantments had nearly exhausted themselves.

Next, Harry tugged Salazar's shirt out of his trousers, grimacing when the fabric stuck to the man's skin, tacked with blood. He was about to lift it off when he became aware that Salazar was still watching him, eyes boring in the side of Harry's face.

Embarrassed though he couldn't say why, Harry backed away a step.

"Take that off," he ordered, pointing at the shirt, half-turning on his heels to escape the man's eyes. He swore the lake outside the window wasn't as dark as it had been. Dawn would break soon.

Salazar obeyed without protest, shrugging off the shirt and tossing it away with clean efficiency. As an afterthought, he also pulled off the thin gauntlets covering his hands. His knuckles were red, tender-looking, dried blood adorning the cartilage.

"You hit someone?" Harry asked, because focusing on Salazar's hands felt vital in this very moment.

The Founder hummed. "Bastard caught me by surprise."

Harry tried to make it fit, the image of Salazar punching someone with his bare hands, violent and dirty, smashing their face to a fine pulp. He didn't quite manage. "Forgot you were a wizard, were you?" he grumbled instead, and he let his eyes fall to Salazar's chest.

His skin was dark, ugly purple along his ribs and low on his stomach, near his right hip, where someone had landed a fist or a kick. Mottled bruises ran down the length of his arms, sick discolored patches stretching against pale skin, an overripe fruit. And underneath that, well. Salazar was built like a fighter, or a dancer, all lean muscle and corded sinew, with an undercurrent of lithe strength that was more practical than aesthetic. There were a few, jagged silver scars criss-crossing the expanse of his skin. Harry made himself look away before he could start following their patterns with his eyes, wondering, not for the first time, about the kind of life Salazar must have lived to be marked the way he way.

"Don't move," he whispered.

Not trusting himself to cast any Healing Charms, Harry fumbled to find his wand. He Summoned the first-aid kid Helga had had all her students put together. Moments later, the leather pouch came soaring into his hands.

"Does anything feel broken?"

Salazar shook his head but Harry checked anyway. He had two cracked ribs, and his muscles had been badly torn, pulled and stretched, nearly snapped. He was going to hurt something awful come morning.

Tucking his wand back in his pocket, Harry rummaged around the leather pouch, fingers closing
around a vial of ointment. The paste inside was pale green, wholly unappealing, but it would do its job. He uncapped the thing, let the lid clatter away. The strong, pungent smell of arnica rose up to his nose.

And Harry – wavered.

The smart thing to do would be to hand Salazar the jar. Let the man tend to his own wounds in peace. The smart, safe thing to do; the alternative was nothing short of stupid, and besides, Harry wasn't sure he'd be allowed. There were only so many boundaries one could cross before trudging through dangerous territory.

But he could still feel cold decay seep through his flesh, tendrils of darkness pulling him down into the earth to rot. He had felt Death creep over his limb. Wasn't entirely sure, even now, that he'd evaded it. Salazar was blood and warmth and life, and looking at Harry with his hands braced against the desk, observing him without moving, easy and unthreatening as he could make himself.

Harry dipped his fingers into the jar, gathering a good lather at the tips. He had never played smart or safe in any case, not once in his life.

Salazar hissed at the first touch of Harry's fingers on his skin, flinching away hard enough to rattle the desk, and Harry froze. But Salazar caught his hand before he could snatch it away, pushing it back to his chest and then letting go.

"No," he said, somewhat hurried, grey eyes fixing the point where Harry's hand met his skin. "It's just – the cold." He looked better already, his gaze still pale, but sharper. Focused on Harry.

"Alright," Harry whispered. He pressed down lightly, to settle himself as much as Salazar. He began to rub the ointment in, hands sweeping over hard, battle-weary muscles, the dips of Salazar's ribs. He tried hard to be gentle. Salazar never flinched again, holding studiously still.

"Tell me," the Founder ordered after a while, voice soft, flowing like the lake behind him. "Tell me what happened."

And so Harry talked, hands sliding over Salazar's skin, watching blood rush around the bruises on his limbs. He told Salazar about the attack, about the dogs, monstrous hounds pouncing from the darkness. He told him about how Gytha had died, his words catching in his throat, stifled against the hard lump of his own failure. Salazar interrupted only once, to ask about the scout who'd taken Gytha's life.

"Is he dead?"

"He is."

"Good. Did you kill him?"

"No. I wanted to."

He told Salazar about the Centaurs, and the Centaurs' camp, the deal they'd struck, the crack deep in the Forest. He told him about the black rot poisoning his veins, about nearly dying and fighting back. He described the spell he'd used, taken from Salazar's own books, and Hermione's voice calling to him, shouting his name. Talking felt good, like pus being drained out of a purulent wound.

Salazar had closed his eyes when Harry had started to talk about the fissure, something on his carefully blank face speaking about repressed pain. He showed no surprise when Harry mentioned
Hermione, letting him finish his tale, as though he knew Harry wouldn't have the strength to start up again if he interfered.

"I'm sorry," Harry concluded. "I'm so sorry I couldn't – that I haven't – "

His fingers had begun to drift lower, sliding over the jut of Salazar's hipbone, to the red angry bruise marring the skin. The bright splash of color sank down beneath the the top of Salazar's trousers. Harry wondered how far it spread.

"Harry," Salazar said, low and laced with warning. Looking up at him and then down to the mindless patterns he was tracing on Salazar's skin, Harry saw Salazar's hands gripping the edge of the desk so tightly his knuckles had gone white, the brown scabs reopening and weeping blood.

His breath stuttered to a stop, mind going blank, filled with white noise. He could feel his heart beat just below his mouth, an odd, cramping pain twisting his stomach. He stumbled back suddenly, thrusting the jar of ointment at Salazar.

"I'll just – erm. I'll get something for your hands."

He turned away, asking himself what the hell he was doing. He felt light-headed, vaguely nauseous. He and Salazar never touched, not even when the man was training him to use a sword, where he nudged Harry into place with hard pokes of fingers in his ribs. There was always a safe distance between the two of them, something Salazar instated and Harry cultivated, wary, even after all this time, of getting too close to a man he knew would one day lock a Basilisk down in Hogwarts' belly, instructing the beast to kill Muggle-borns. Why was the Founder allowing this tonight?

Harry thought about the touch of Salazar's mind against his own, pressing in, looking for something to hold on to. He thought about his own desperation to feel life against his skin, to assure himself that he'd survived, using the beats of Salazar's heart as an anchor. Perhaps, like him, the man needed to be tethered tonight. Perhaps he needed to make sure he had kept existing outside of the horrors awaiting on the battlefield, a pile of bodies too high to see through.

Harry dug a clean rag out of his first-aid kit. He turned a pencil into a bowl with a tap of his wand, filled it with fresh water. He dunked the rag into the bowl, wrung it out, and faced Salazar again. The man let him approach, face back to its usual placidity.

"It wasn't your fault," he said once Harry was close again. "Her death isn't on you."

Because he couldn't quite stand to look at him just yet, Harry ducked his head, avoiding Salazar's heavy stare. He took the hand Salazar wasn't using to rub paste into his wounds, dragged the rag over the bloodied knuckles. He set about cleaning the filth and gore lathered on like a second skin.

"Her death isn't on you either."

Focused on the task at hand, cleaning out the grime from every line of Salazar's skin, until it was spotless and the water in the bowl had turned murky brown, it took a moment for Harry to realise Salazar had stopped moving, was just watching him hold his hand. Harry stopped moving too, self-consciousness stilling him. Salazar looked like he was debating saying something, mouth parted around a drawn-in breath.

Harry's gaze was dragged in, against his consent, to the soft shape of his lips, the hint of white teeth beyond. With a jolt, something like a shock, Harry realised that Salazar's lips existed.

He had known before, obviously. He had been aware that Salazar had hands, and eyes, and lips.
But now, he noticed, watched the red flesh shift with Salazar's exhales, transfixed, a sense of mounting dread rising up in his chest. His throat felt clogged up, tingles raced down the length of his arms, he could not look away, and, oh.

*Oh.*

Of course.

Of course he wanted Salazar.

"God," Harry muttered, and he felt himself stagger, muted horror mixing up with the awe of realisation, making it hard to stay up. "I'm a fucking idiot."

"Harry?" From far away, he felt hands on his skin, pressing against his waist, steadying, and his blood burned.

Under the roar in his ears, a small, vicious voice started whispering. *Kiss him, sink your teeth in his neck, claim him as yours, fuck him before your time's ran out and it's too late.*

How the hell had he not noticed before? How blind could he be? *Of course he wanted Salazar, who else?* For how long had this been going on? Weeks? Months? Since the moment they had met?

The magnitude of his mistake fell over Harry like a hundred stones. He felt like crying, like pulling at his hair. Of all the people he'd met, past and present. *Of all the people.* Of course it had to be Salazar Slytherin he was attracted to. A man. The one person he could never, ever allow himself to have. A man whose life had shaped Harry's. Who had planted the seeds of a war that would ravage the world long after his death. Harry wanted him. Like floodgates crushed open, he could see now, with painful clarity. He understood the confusion, the stolen glances, the shame he had felt at looking. He wanted Salazar's skin on his, slick with sweat, wanted to know the taste of his mouth, see what he would look like with Harry's thighs on either sides of his hips.

Harry was so very fucked he wanted to scream.

"Harry!"

A hand on the back of his neck, gripping his hair. Salazar forced him to look up, worry etched on every line of his face, but Harry found he couldn't think beyond the press of his fingers on his scalp. He wanted him to grip tighter, to slant their mouths together, kiss him until he couldn't feel his lips, he –

He had never been more grateful for the strength of his Occlumency shields.

"What is it? Can you hear your friend again?" Salazar shook him lightly, grey eyes sharper than they'd been all night, wide with alarm. "Talk to me, Harry."

But Harry was shaking his head, frantic. He bit down on the urge to laugh, unhinged, hysterical giggles bubbling up his throat. He oscillated between wonder and terror, though he couldn't, for the life of him, understand why he was so afraid for. Everything that had happened was suddenly too much for one night, and he just. He couldn't.

"I can't," he muttered, half-aware he was babbling nonsense. "Oh Merlin I can't, I just can't, I can't –" 

He pitched toward Salazar, unable to help himself, feeling like the man had acquired a tangible mass, one that was pulling Harry forward by the chest. He was falling. He kept falling until his
head was tucked at the crook of Salazar's neck and he could breathe against his skin, panting hard. Air wouldn't get in his lungs properly, there were black dots dancing across his sight. Salazar stank of ashes and sweat and mud, with the sharp, coppery tang of blood below, but Harry didn't care, he couldn't breathe, why couldn't he breathe?

"Shh," he heard Salazar say, voice rumbling against his ear, his chest. He had closed his arms around Harry, was cradling him against his body, hands rubbing slow, soothing circles over his back. "You're all right, Harry. It's just a panic attack. Breathe through it. You're all right."

A choked, broken moan and Harry was embracing Salazar back, holding on for dear life, as hard as he could. It had to push against Salazar's cracked ribs, would probably add to his collection of bruises come morning, but Salazar didn't protest. His embrace never faltered. He kept murmuring soft reassurance against Harry's hair, half old English, half Parseltongue. He kept running hands down his back, until Harry's breathing eased up a little and the world stopped spinning like it had gone mad.

With a shudder, Harry pushed himself away, willing his reluctant, traitorous body to tear itself from Salazar's warmth. He felt shaken loose, his skin too tight a fit over his bones.

He needed fresh air.

He needed to go.

"I have to, I need, ah." He shook his head; now that he knew what to do, a thousand reasons to leave were tumbling through his mind. He could not stay here, not one moment longer. The walls were caving in, Occlumency shields shivering under the strain of keeping him sane. "I need to go. I can't – I've got to find – I have to go."

"Slow down, Harry." Harry very nearly reached out to press his thumb against the frown on Salazar's brow. "What do you mean, you have to go?"

"I have to leave. I've delayed too long already. I just – I can't stay here. I need to find Hermione. She was shouting, and I don't belong here. Can't you feel it? I'm full of fissures. I'll shatter if I stay. I'll break apart."

Salazar's hand hovered at his elbow, not quite touching, but God, how Harry wanted him to. He took a step back, just to be sure he wouldn't yield to the impulse. He felt wrong and sick, a freak. How damaged he must be, to crave what he craved.

Another step. Cool air slithered against his skin, replacing body warmth, and Harry ached with it. He walked back another two steps.

"You – " Salazar began, an odd expression on his face, something guarded, like he was bracing for a blow. "Harry. I promised you I would help send you home. You can't leave now. It's the middle of the night. You're exhausted. Sleep. We'll talk in the morning, with clearer head."

Harry could taste blood at the back of his mouth. His heart hurt, felt like it was being torn off of his chest. Already, he could feel Salazar's words burrow under his skin, his opinion start to shift. He forced himself to shake his head.

"If I stay the night, I'll never find the strength to leave. I'll never find the strength to leave you. I'll be stuck here forever, because I feel like I could fit, like I could settle and find peace. And people would die. They would die by the thousands. Because of you. "I need – distance." He needed out. He needed space, or else he would suffocate. The decision might be a stupid one, borne out of his
addled mind, but there was nothing else he could do. "I'll try to write. I promise."

Gently, he reached for Salazar's hand, intertwined their fingers. He let a single thought through the barriers in his mind.

*Goodbye, Salazar. May we meet again.*

When he turned to leave, Salazar let him go.

**Chapter End Notes**

I can't believe this chapter's already done?? It was so easy to write, I kinda emphasise with Harry's feelings it's ridiculous. I've been writing for the past, oh, four days straight and I'm a bit tired, so. I can't be arsed to edit as strictly as usual, I apologize if anything's burnt your eyes.

Will Harry leave for good and never come back??? Who knows, I certainly don't.

Next chapter I finally, finally get to write Salazar. Past two chaps have been character development mostly, but p l o t should start back soon not to worry. Harry's going to have lots of feelings about his recent revelation. He's not even close to being out of the woods, poor dear.

Also, some people have asked about a plot hole, regarding Harry's blood relation to Salazar. Early in the story, Harry says he's not related to Salazar. He's wrong, but he believes it to be true when he says it. He doesn't know he's Ignotus' descendant, let alone Salazar's (though their blood relation is very, extremely loose; Harry's probably more closely related to Ginny than he is to Salazar). And Salazar agrees that Harry can't possibly share his blood because he's gay as fuck, and didn't at the time, expect to ever have kids.

TL;DR: the unreliable narrator is unreliable.

Finally, someone has asked whether I've got any real people that look like Salazar and Godric. Unfortunately I don't. I've looked, but I can't find them. I think I had someone that made a decent match for Godric at some point, but I can't remember who (I'll sent you the pic if I ever find it again starlightscrown). So, if anyone's got suggestions, feel free to send your picks.

Good night my loves, enjoy.
His mother used to tell him about sea-monsters and the drowned gods that rest on ocean floors, creatures sunk so deep under the cold crush of fathomless abysses that the world had all but forgotten their faces. As a child, he would trail after her on long deserted beaches, surf lapping at his feet, sand between his toes, following flutter of her sea-soaked dress, breathless with crisp night air, listening to her stories.

She would tell him about formidable gliding beasts that roamed the depths, a thousand teeth gleaming in the dark. The steady cadence of her voice, rising and falling to the swell of the sea, stayed with him as he dreamt, of underwater serpents lying in wait, of Krakens pulling ships down to be lost and feasted upon.

Those times were gone, moonlight-dappled waves long since tainted red, but there were nights where Salazar could still hear her stories, the distant ressac of the sea.

He did not hear her in the nights following the battle.

Fresh like blood just spilled, fragmented of memories that weren't his lurked the forefront of his mind, sharp as glass shards. He heard dying cries by the thousands. He died by blade and he died by magic, around a sword in his stomach, gurgling through the collapse of his lungs. He died afraid and cold and crying for his mother. He died without knowing how, or why, or from where, great endless void welcoming him in darkness between two heartbeats. He died, a little, to fingers skirting his skin, dancing over wounds and bruises, unexpected tenderness almost breaking him after so much violence.

He woke shaking, heaving for breath, tasting salt on his lips, teeth tearing at his heart.

{...}

Three days later, they buried Gytha under an oak tree by the lake. The girl was of Muggle descent, so they followed the way of her people, put her six feet under the ground, swaddled in white linen and fresh flowers.

Everyone lined up to lay some token at her feet. Strips of coloured cloth, toys, drawings. Things from home she could take with her. They stood still and silent as a student, familiar with her God, recited passing rites, praying for safe passage, for peaceful rest. Salazar had long since lost faith in anything but the terrible, bloody scramble against death that animated all living things, so he stayed silent throughout.

He closed the earth over her still body with Godric at his side, and thought, I did this.

He may not have killed the girl himself, but he had been the one to take her from her home, to bring her here. To make her his responsibility, and fail, in the worst possible way.

He watched dirt swallow up a child's corpse, and thought, never again.

Yards away, hidden outside the castle's reach, was a pit of flattened mud, where they'd gathered up soldiers and peasants and horses, the pitiful army put together to slaughter them in their home. Salazar had piled all those bodies there, the morning after, his whole body screaming in protest. He
had thrown every last hacked limb into a hole deep enough to contain the carnage, and he'd set it aflame, let wind wash away the smoke.

Sila had squeezed his chest until his bruised ribs jarred his sides, bad enough that he couldn't breathe. She'd set her fangs against a pulse point in his throat and bitten him. Not even her poison, sizzling along the sluggish flow in his veins, had succeeded in shaking him off of apathy.

{...}

He wondered, sometimes, if perhaps this wasn't simply inevitable. Perhaps it was some inviolable law of nature that good things should to be destroyed, that humans were meant to hurt, in their flesh and in their hearts. Perhaps it was fate, that precious things should break or scar or be damaged beyond repair in Salazar's hands, that he should be left clutching the lifeless, worthless shells of what had once been beautiful, sure as the Earth's spin around the sun. Perhaps Hogwarts was one such things, too big, too much, hubris meant to fail no matter how much they bled for it. Perhaps there truly was a God, and He'd decided that this was not His design.

Perhaps perhaps perhaps.

Salazar had decided, at all of eight years old, that he didn't care. He would not give fate, or the gods, or the men who'd murdered his mother, the satisfaction. He would rage and snarl with bloodied teeth, and he would survive, he would live, because fuck them. Fuck all of them and their ignorance. He would not let them break him. He would not give up, or let go of what mattered.

{...}

Harry had put him back together, afterwards, with fingertips on battered skin and mind a siren's song, bright and guiding Salazar's out of the dark. But the boy had gone now, had left as he'd said he would. It was fear that Salazar had seen on his face, just before he had fled. Pure, genuine panic, and awe, and horror. He had felt Harry pant that fear against his skin, and his thoughts, for once, had been silent, shielded from Salazar's touch. He didn't know what had set the boy running. Gytha's death, the soldiers, the crack he'd faced, the ageless monsters swarming behind, or something else entirely. Salazar hadn't seen, hadn't been able to help him curb his terror. Now he was gone.

"Do you know where?" Godric had asked, hours after they'd searched the castle, rounded up everyone and found a student missing.

"I don't."

"That boy has had a foot out the door since the moment he stepped inside, Salazar."

He knew. He had known, within moments of meeting him, that Harry would never be tied down, pacified into abandoning his search for his home. Salazar had seen the day he'd have to let him go the first time Harry had spoken of his friends, and his duty, old beyond his years and fierce and heartbreakingly beautiful in the half-light of a dying campfire. He hadn't cared, at the time.

Something must have shown on his face, then, because Godric's had twisted in sympathy.

"Maybe he'll come back," he'd said. "Once he's done what he has to."

Salazar hadn't bothered to correct him.

{...}
They set to work, after their dead had been cared for.

Classes started back up, none of the students having shown any inclination to head back home early, despite the circumstances. Alfric stepped up to take Harry's place, talking for Salazar's Snakes, being the eldest and an obvious choice. He did his best, calm and gentle by nature, but clearly overwhelmed by the task at hand, the weight of the responsibility.

The boy cornered him one evening, eyes summer-blue, hesitant, betraying the firm set of his shoulders.

"Do you have any way of contacting him?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I don't. I'll be sure to let you know if that situation changes." Then, because it was Salazar's job to look after these kids, no matter what had happened, and he didn't want them to linger in fruitless hope, he added, "His leaving had nothing to do with you, Mr Barden. Words won't persuade him back here."

"Perhaps not. It doesn't mean I shouldn't try." The boy looked at him then, hard and angry, at Harry and Salazar and himself, shaking with it. "You should try too, sir. He's always listened to you."

Salazar kept a close eye on his children after that. They had always been somewhat isolated from the other three Houses, pushed further apart by Harry's influence, their reverence for him taking up too much room to allow for outsiders. That divide was even more pronounced now. Now that they had shared grief, over Gytha's death and Harry's perceived abandonment, something too deep and visceral to be understood by someone not their own.

He hoped it would pass.

When Salazar was not giving classes or looking after students, he began working to improve Hogwarts' wards. Clearly, the protections already in place weren't enough. He would make sure no one else could find them, no Muggle, no uninvited Witch. No one else would harm his people. He was sick and tired of losing them, of having broken corpses thrown in his arms every time he felt like he'd finally gotten his feet under him.

So he enlisted Rowena's help, worked on making Hogwarts safe again. For Gytha, whose memory he would not desecrate through negligence. For every child under his protection. For Harry, and whatever future he sought to return to.

Rowena met him halfway, and together, they threw themselves in spell graphs and equations, forgoing sleep, forgoing everything. They filled blackboards with white chalk in the pale, pre-dawn hours of the day, tireless. Insomniac.

Whenever their heads filled with white noise past the point where they could think, past the point where they could sleep, they talked the night away. Rowena told him about her Pictish Clan, growing up among wild rolling hills, to the quiet wing-beats of crows, the whisper of tall grass in the wind. Salazar told her about living by the sea, swathes of sand he used to explore at midnight, looking for mermaids. He never asked about her Clan trading her off for money to Helena's father. She never mentioned the slaughter of his family, his being thrown out into the waves to die.

It was an arrangement that worked for the both of them.

"I never congratulated you," Salazar told her one night, loose with spiced wine, gesturing at the red bruise Helga had sucked in the skin at the base of Rowena's throat. "I'm happy for you."

He watched the tip of Rowena's ears blush red, watched defiance crystallize in her eyes, her mind
tasting of storm, the red of kiss-swollen lips, fingers twisted in wheat-gold hair tangled with sweat, the delirious pull of wet skin, and underneath it all, the lightning strike of fear.

"Rowena," he said, caught her gaze and held it firm. "I am happy for you. If it's judgement you fear from me, don't."

Breath and fight shuddered out of her in a sigh. She snorted, at him or herself, reached for his wine.

"Sorry," she said, and drank deep. "Sometimes I forget."

"It's alright."

Rowena was brilliant and beautiful, burning with a kind of genius only found every other century. She had been singular since the moment she had first drawn breath, even among the scholars of her people. She stood out, bright and blazing like the North star, had done so all her life. So of course, her gifts came with seething jealousy everywhere she walked. She had known spite and anger from her first moment of awareness, even from her own parents, her being a woman only adding to the offence.

Salazar was clever, had wit and intelligence of his own, despite what recent events might imply. Even after he had learned to hide his brains, he had felt alone, isolated from his peers, and he couldn't hold a candle to the woman beside him. He could not begin to imagine what Rowena had to have gone through, the things she must have shaped for herself to survive.

"It's all so new," Rowena said, low like a confession. "And Helga is – "

"Helga," Salazar agreed. There was no other way to describe the force of nature Helga happened to be. "She won't let you fucked this up, you know."

Rowena cast him a smile, quirked and grateful. She handed him back the wine, stood without a wobble.

"Let's get back to work."

{ . . . }

They set the new cornerstones one balmy summer evening, while June was drawing to an end. The air was rich with the scent of pines and warm earth, the setting sun casting deep orange shadows among long dry grass.

The blocks of granite glowed bright with interlaced runes, magic pulsing through them to the steady beats of four synchronized hearts. As they sunk under the ground, the wards around the castle flared up, twisting lines of blue, red, yellow and green, then settled back with a faint crackle.

Salazar stood watching the whorls of magic long after the cheering students had gone to dinner. Godric stayed with him for a while, but he too left eventually, back to the army of stone he and Helga were putting together.

Salazar kept watching until a dull ache began to pound behind his eyes, his head swirling with gleaming lines. Looking at magic was like plunging head-first in a slow-spinning tornado, an impossible knot of meshing colours, sparking with energy. He had been careful to design Hogwarts' warding network with no discernable pattern. It made it harder to crack, to find flaws in. Spellwork layered over charms and enchantments, a tight weave that could still allow for new threads. For change.
He could sense the stronger, sturdier spells they had used to grow Hogwarts out of the mountains, the teasing quirks that had given life to its staircases, the simple currents meant to regulate temperature on colder months. He brushed over darker, more vicious coils that sang with his and the other's blood, lethal and powerful. It was an anarchy born of years of work, orchestrated chaos Salazar knew better than his own soul.

Still, it took him hours to find the glitch, a dip of empty space where there should be tangle. The wards had started knitting themselves back together again, shattered strands reaching out in delicate spiderwebs, but it was a slow, tenuous process, made all the more difficult by what had cause it.

A sudden noise jarred him back to the present, wrenched awake too fast, disoriented. He opened his eyes to see that night had fallen, last rays of sun long since bleached out of the horizon. The moon hung low among clouds and stars, a crescent bright enough to see by, pale yellow and shivery silver.

On a nearby tree, the owl hooted again, loud and insistent, a ghostly sound that prompted Salazar into action. He walked down the soft-sloped hill and into the Forest, ducking under low-hanging branches. The air was warmer under the trees, and the scent, darker, more pungent, a lush rain-green. Salazar breathed deep the smell of sap and rotting wood, making his steps lights, inaudible. There were things that stalked these woods, creatures he would rather not awaken.

He walked for hours, keeping to the shadows, around wide weathered tree trunks and thin pools of moonlight. The chitter of toads and crickets dogged his steps, alongside the occasional wing-beat. He walked to where the Forest grew deep and silent, solemn with the passing of centuries. There was magic here, old, vibrant like the sound of a church's bell. He glimpsed at some ancient beasts mounting guard, felt the whisper of their presence gliding on dead leaves, and held still until they let him pass. He carried no weapons, his wand was holstered at his waist. He meant no harm and they knew it.

Following the soft fizzle of fraying wards, he found what he was looking for. It was a small clearing, tucked at the bottom of a curved depression. Moss and lichens crawled on round wide stones, heavily-padded. Tall, time-wedged trees reached out to the sky with branches like long fingers, bared to the bone.

The air was ice-cold. Salazar could feel it shiver down his spine, biting, serpentine. Another kind of darkness lurked here, one that didn't belong, ageless and tearing and wrong. It made Salazar want to balk away. To turn around and run, run fast, run far, because even though that – that thing that had resided here, that abomination, was long gone, even though life was taking back its rights over this small, forsaken clearing, something in him screamed in complete, blind panic, screamed to flee, to never, ever come back and –

And Harry had been here. Harry had fought here. Harry had had that oily darkness cling to his bones, spread rot under his flesh.

"Gods," Salazar muttered, disgusted. With himself and his cowardice, with the hypocrisy of men, who would see a man like Harry and call him monster.

'I don't like it here,' Sila told him, forked tongue flicking his ear. Her coils were tight around his chest, curled defensively over his heart. 'It's break-thin and life-leeched. We should go.'

Salazar ran a hand down the length of her, smooth and familiar under his palms. 'We're not staying long.'
"The boy was here, wasn't he?"

"You can feel him?"

"Yes. Forests have long memories."

Salazar could feel him too, could taste him on his tongue, ozone and hot metal, crackling down his stomach, the only grounding thing in this nightmare of a place. The boy had left his mark in the very air, lingering like smoke even weeks after he'd last been there, another proof of how ridiculously powerful he had to be.

Not that this was news to him. Salazar had known Harry was powerful since the moment he had first laid eyes on him, half-starved and feeding the earth with his blood. The boy had a weight to him, world-bending, something that had rendered Salazar utterly incapable of taking his eyes off him from the very start. There were times when Salazar had felt the thrum of magic just beneath Harry's skin, and he'd had to bite fingernails into his palms just to keep from reaching out, pressing against his flesh, mesmerized.

Snarling at himself, he shook free of his thoughts, glided down the slanting terrain, to where moss had flaked, turned dark like scabbing skin, and the trees were discoloured, sick-looking.

He cast several spells, grasping for something, some clue as to what, exactly, had happened here three weeks ago, but his magic pinged back interrogatively, inconclusive. Whatever had been there had sucked life out of everything it had touched, had left black tar behind, but nothing that would help identify it. It had sucked on magic, too, had weakened Hogwarts' protections, made them frail enough to see through. And that –

Salazar felt something like rage spark at the thought, cold and deadly. Because that, more than anything else, more than the Peverell boys, was what had driven the army at their door. That thing, which had almost killed Harry, had made them vulnerable to an attack, as good as taking Gytha's life itself, and Salazar should have seen it, something this big, gnashing energy from his wards, why hadn't he seen it?

A noise behind him, twigs snapping in half, and he pushed to his feet, killing words on his lips, itching for a fight.

"Peace, Wizard." A Centaur Salazar didn't recognize detached himself from the shadows of the trees, dark skin moonlit, gleaming silver under the stars.

"You should be more careful when approaching unannounced, Centaur." Salazar lowered his wand, reeled himself back in before he could spill Centaur's blood on forest's floor.

"And you should not lose yourself to your thoughts, Salazar Slytherin. Especially not in this place."

"And what sort of place would that be?" he asked, bypassing the creature knowing his name.

That earned him a smile, half-hidden in moonshadows. "A forest that is host for many creatures older than men. It is littered with secrets and gateways through which none should thread. It is easy to get lost among the trees."

Gateway, Salazar thought, a flickering insight, the very edge of realisation and, she was screaming my name Salazar, over and over but I couldn't see her, I couldn't move, like I was choking on my own blood, and –

The thoughts connect, or they start to, and Salazar could feel cold sweat clamming up his hands,
could hear the disjointed beats of his heart in his ears, painful, frenzied, because the picture that was starting to form –

That. That wasn't good. Not at all.

He breathed deep before panic could start to set in, pushed the thoughts aside before he could get lost again. It was easy enough to lock them up in a small box at the back of his mind. He understood himself well enough to leave that box alone for the moment, let it thrive on its own before he rushed ahead, drew all the wrong conclusions. He'd come back to it later, after he'd slept more than a few stolen hours the night.

He had to be sure. He had to be absolutely, unequivocally sure, before going down that rabbit hole. The things he'd have to do if his instincts rang true –

The Centaur was talking again. Salazar forced him into focus, latched on with both hands.

" – what he accomplished here," the man was saying, strangely mellifluous. He tilted his head to a side. "May I enquire as to his health? I wished to see him."

It took a beat for Salazar to string together the meaning behind the words. "Harry left Hogwarts," he said, careful to ignore the sting behind that thought. "I don't know how he's doing. He left the night of the battle."

The Centaur shifted from leg to leg. "You do not know where he is? I am surprised you would let him out of your sight so easily."

"He isn't mine to look after."

Another smile, sharper, full of teeth. "Is he not?" the Centaur asked, and Salazar's heart, stupidly, twisted.

{...}

The thing was.

The thing was, Salazar had never meant to fall in love.

There had been Thomas, older and so very at ease in his own skin, Thomas with his wit and philosophy, his barbed tongue and unerring kindness. There had been other men, who he had loved but not loved, some whose name he could hardly remember. He had felt himself falling for them, each and every time, had felt the pull of attraction, sweet and an agony in and of itself. And it had been alright; he had been fine with that. With them.

But Harry?

Harry had burst out of nowhere. Harry had crashed into his life, through a portal of old stones and time and magic, starvation-thin, fever-bright, bleeding sluggishly from his back, his breath a raspy stutter. Barely alive.

Harry was all sharp edges, jagged and cutting, his lips full and his eyes too green. Which was ridiculous, and should have been his first sign, really, because how could a colour be too much? Salazar hadn't understood, then, hadn't let himself dwell on it, on this sharp-edged boy from the future, with his reserve, his obvious mistrust in everything Salazar had done, or would do.

Harry who spoke to Sila in his mother's tongue, who carried magic like a constant drumbeat just
under the stretch of his skin. He had a strength to him, a capacity for caring, for loving, in spite of the pools of unbroken darkness he carried inside. Or perhaps because of them. Salazar, from the start, had been fascinated, the way exotic, complex things had always fascinated him. Harry had been a puzzle, his to crack and look after, and he'd fooled himself into thinking that that was the end of it.

He had noticed the boy's allure, of course, because he was neither a monk nor blind. Though Harry wasn't typically handsome, he possessed a singular beauty that was impossible to ignore, verdant eyes and messy hair, a slender frame that food and exercise had sharpened in a swordsman's build.

Noticing had been alright, or so Salazar had thought. It wasn't as though he'd intended to do anything about it; Harry was his student and much younger and clearly lacking experience. He would be his teacher, something like a friend, a confidant if he needed to, some mooring point for Harry to lean against while they devised ways to send him home. Nothing more.

Wanting Harry had come as a quiet, insidious thing, now that he reflected on it. It had been a stray thought lingering on the shape of Harry's mouth. On the curve of his neck. Faint exasperation at the state of his hair, which, frankly, was just begging to be smoothed back with the thread of fingers. He had followed with his eyes the play of sunlight on the boy's bare arms as he wrestled Godric. He had been too preoccupied by the ringing aftertaste of his laughter to care about the catch of his breath at the sight of a collarbone he'd found himself wishing to bite.

Loving him had slotted into place all on its own. He had seen Harry bleed and fight and rage; he'd seen him cry and laugh and shy away. Every one of his expectations had shattered. He had felt Harry's mind tug at his, an invitation to dive inside, take what he needed, bright and guiding like a lighthouse, and Salazar's world had shifted like sand underneath his feet, strong foundations crumbling to dust only to be remade differently.

Harry had taken up his life, from one horizon to the next, a slow, inevitable landslide. And so, by the time Harry was wide-eyed under him, breathless, skin slick with sweat from their sparring session, his magic a low thrum Salazar could feel from everywhere their bodies were pressed, crushed together, Salazar had known he was already lost. Hopelessly. He had found himself wanting, like only he could want, with greed and selfish desperation and something else –

By the time he'd realised how deep he'd fallen, it had been too little, too late.

{ . . . }

They started sending the children back to their parents within the first week of July. Some took Portkeys and were off, their families having been notified beforehand, but most had to be accompanied back. Rowena and Godric spent some time writing up cover stories to feed Muggle parents, though Salazar had no use for them. None of his children had Muggle relatives to go home to.

The week flew by in a haze of lies and summer heat. They said goodbye on the seventh day, the sun shafts of burnished gold, descending from spun glass down into the Hall, made cavernous in its emptiness. Dust particles swayed lazily in warm gusts of evening wind, carrying hints of fresh grass and lavender inside.

"Don't do anything stupid," Godric whispered in the shell of his ear, his grip tight on Salazar's neck.

"I've never done anything stupid in my entire life," Salazar shot back, easing out of the embrace.
He hugged Helga, kissed Rowena on both cheeks, and didn't wait to see the gates close behind him before he let his Portkey sweep him away, a wrenching pull behind his navel, then he was gone.

He spent a month roaming the southern coast, from Anglia to Cornwall, scrying for children powerful enough to attend his school. He had found over a dozen by the time he reached Devon, scrawny things with burning eyes some parents all but thrust into his arm, relieved to be rid of them, the burden of caring for a child that was different. Salazar talked them through the pain of it, out of their loneliness. He told them about Hogwarts, about a castle that stood between a lake and mountains, beautiful and safe, where they wouldn't have to hide, where they would belong. He took them from their cities, crowded cesspools crawling with rats and cockroaches, hungry places where dirt stuck to sweaty skins. He took them from their villages, wild and isolated, where people were rough, worked to the bone. He brought them to Druid camps, to be looked after before the next school year.

In Cornwall, he set camp in a small leeward cove, the Irish sea lapping at polished rocks, seagulls skirting the waves, ablaze in the pink glow of the setting sun. There were stagnant pools of saltwater slowly drying in stone cracks. He used the largest he could find to scry for the next child, water turning smooth like a mirror, images gleaming inside. He saw a girl pelting through a busy street, ducking around other people's legs, a loaf of bread tucked in the crook of her arm. She leapt, took a sharp turn, plastered herself against a wall, where she laid, breathless, until her skin tinged rock-grey, invisible.

Salazar broke the illusion. He had seen enough. He knew where to find that girl.

'What is it?' Sila asked, lazy with sun, a cool rasp on his shoulders.

'Looks like we're going home.'

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There once was a boy who lived in a house by the sea, whose whole world stood between the land and waves. He swam flanked by fish, his hair knotted with salt and seaweed, looking for sunken gold, for kelpies and mermaids. He had no family but his mother and his snake, silver like sliced moonlight, but he was happy.

The boy was magic. The boy was songs of whispered words in the dead of night, the sparks that danced on fingertips, fey-like, star-bright. He was ink-smeared skin and quick sly smiles, the cool glide of shadows on ballroom floors.

The boy, you see, was not meant to stay by the sea. The boy was cursed-blood, bastard son of a mighty king, fruit of a love that never should have been. His mother heeded from a far-away land, where women shed their skins and turned to snakes. She was fair and beautiful and a witch, with a voice made to tell stories. She had caught the king's eyes, fled with his child before the king's sons could slip poison in his drink, or poignard in his heart.

She ran and she ran, but the king's sons knew magic. They found the house by the sea.

The boy drank sand and salt, the sea red with his mother's blood. He drowned and wished to die, but –

'Live, my son,' his mother had told him, and so he did.

But he wondered, sometimes, at what sputtering, miserable creature had risen from the ocean that night. Because fairy tales were ripe with princes and monsters, and he couldn't know which he was,
the monarch's son, or the beast that would see the kingdom asunder.

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It took him a day and a half to build a boat and sail across the Irish sea, good wind at his back to push him through choppy waters. He arrived at night, anchoring off the coast of Dublin, slipping past the gates through its one unmanned door.

The city hadn't changed. It stood tall and weathered, steadfast walls and sturdy towers lined with watchers, quiver and arrow ready to fly. Its narrow, twisted alleyways spread out between looming thatched houses, cramped and leaning on one another for support. It stank of fish and packed earth, and Salazar hadn't missed it. It was a city rife with ghosts.

He had grown since last being here, enough that no one recognized him. The town appeared smaller, ruddier than he remembered it. When he'd first come here as a child, broken at the edges, the sea still clinging to his skin, he had thought the buildings great and towering, overwhelmed by the press of so many people, foreign thoughts tearing through his mind, countless voices screaming in unison. He could see with clearer eyes now, and he wasn't all that impressed.

He spent two days combing through the lower town, looking for residues of the girl's magic but finding none. He circled the docks and markets, the street of steel, twice, without success, before resigning himself to heading higher up, to the cleaner, wider streets, where nobility resided.

It happened by accident. He made sure to avoid attention, treading only where wandering eyes wouldn't notice him. He was careful. Or rather, he tried to be. One evening, the sun a faint rim of gold and violet on the horizon, torches blazing bright against the elongating gloom, he was drawn to one of the city's main arteries, to the sound of cheering and music. A crowd had gathered, held at bay by two rows of armoured guards. Rich and poor were throwing flowers off of balconies, onto the cobblestones below, the sweet scent enough to cover the omnipresent stench. People were pressed close, shouting for attention.

A perfect opportunity, Salazar thought, for thieves to pick numerous pockets, and therefore for him to locate his elusive student.

He was busy scanning the crowd, off to the side so he wouldn't be trampled to death, keeping a distracted eye on the procession of knights and nobles parading down the street, when a glint of gold caught his eyes, and he looked up, and saw the face of a ghost.

"Shit," he muttered, too low for anyone to hear.

Like a dream, he could only watch, frozen, a sense of growing foreboding in his gut, as Thomas turned on his saddle, as though magnetised, as though he could feel Salazar among all those people, a frown between his brow. Unnervingly, the man found him, as he'd always had, and Salazar saw the exact moment when his presence registered, Thomas' eyes growing wide, his mouth slack with shock.

"Salazar," he mouthed, and Salazar closed his eyes, breathed through it, the too-loud thumping of his heart.

When he opened them again, Thomas had slipped off of his horse and through the crowd, anonymous enough that none of the guards had sought to stop him. And Salazar could have moved, then, could have disappeared before Thomas reached him, but –

He didn't.
"Salazar." His name shook on Thomas' tongue, trembling with disbelief. It hurt, in all the good ways, to hear his voice again. A hand touched his elbow, soft and hesitant, the way one might touch an apparition, to make sure it wasn't a figment of the mind.

"Salazar," he said again, with something like blooming joy, his fingers tight on Salazar's arm, eyes a clear, tropic blue.

"Not here," Salazar told him, gently disentangling, pulling Thomas after him and away from the crowd.

He retraced his steps to the tavern he was staying at, not once looking behind to make sure Thomas had followed him, feeling like Orpheus leading Eurydice out of the dark, through the choking heat of chthonian depths, fearful to look back and find her gone. The night was deepening around them, humming with the first winds of a summer storm.

"My God, Salazar. I thought you were dead. I thought they'd killed you."

I was dead, Salazar wanted to say. For a long while, I existed with a step in my grave and blood on my tongue. You would not have recognized me then, Thomas. I hardly even recognized myself.

"I'm not so easy to get rid off," he said instead, and heard Thomas draw in a sharp breath.

"Stop. Just. Christ, just stop."

Wind was ruffling Thomas' hair, playing with pale-blond strands. Salazar could see the beginnings of crows' feet at the corners of his eyes, twinkling blue brought out by soft laugh lines. Life had carved care and worry in the slants of his face. He was no less enticing for it. Salazar had forgotten how quickly Muggles could age.

Thomas approached him, closing in at arm's length. He didn't try to touch Salazar again.

"What happened?" he asked, gentle. Pleading. "Did you find them?"

"I found them." He hesitated, then, warring with himself. Truth or lie, the eternal question. There was only so much Salazar was comfortable revealing about himself, but –

But the truth was, Thomas was owed a piece of his heart. He had offered Salazar friendship, and something much more precious, back when he was a boy and the world wasn't making sense. He'd grown, aware of all the ways he was different from the masses, and he hadn't cared, exactly, but Thomas had been the one to teach him acceptance, to show him it was all right, to be attracted to the people he was attracted to. Salazar had loved him for it, had been loved in return, and he'd left without so much as a word.

If anyone was owed this story, it was the man standing in front of him, all soft lines and elegance, half-forgotten warmth Salazar had missed more than he could say.

"I can show you," he offered, because that was the best he could do. Words, which had always been his great strength, his best weapon, wouldn't fit on his tongue, but this –

This he could give away.

Thomas searched his face, and whatever he saw etched there made him nod, fragile, a little shaky. Salazar looked into his eyes, opened up his thoughts.

He was young, barely a man, a willowy silhouette cast in shadows. A deep hood was pulled over
his hair, his face barely visible underneath. He knelt facing the sea, atop a plunging cliff, foam beating at white stone. The clouds were roiling deep purple in the falling dusk, the colour of a fresh bruise, wind howling through his cape with unrepentant violence. Behind him were the charred remains of what had once been his home.

Silent as death, three men were creeping closer, wands drawn at the ready. All three were richly dressed with thick travelling clothes, moving swiftly with all the lethal grace of trained hunters.

A thin smile of wretched delight stretched Salazar's lips, grey eyes drifting shut for an instant, as though to better revel in the moments to come.

"I had hoped you would find me, brothers," he said, pitched to carry. "It is fitting that we should meet here, for the last time."

The three men had paused at his words, exchanging quick glances. One of them spoke up, stepping closer, his chin held high.

"We thought you might be sentimental enough to come back to this place," he said, his gaze piercing. "That you might seek death where your beloved mother fell. We learned what she was, you know. Such a shame, for someone like her to perish so pitifully."

"Won't you stand, brother? It is unbefitting of a Slytherin to die on his knees."

A soft, terrible laugh rose up from the depth of the hood.

"I was told you were an idiot," Salazar said, and he jumped, lithe, feline, a spell striking the earth where he'd been kneeling heartbeats after he had moved.

He bent, dodging another spell, too quick to he touched, even as the other two men took up arms, fired their own curses, each more vicious than the last. Salazar plastered himself against a rocky promontory. One hand snagged a dip in the stone, and he heaved himself up, out of reach, climbing with surprising agility. He ducked behind the rock, protected.

A quiet command hissed past his lips, inaudible. The ground opened under two of the men's feet. They fell to their death screaming, the earth closing over their bones.

"Coward!" the survivor snarled, his leg a shredded mess. "Traps, really? You would kill your own blood with trickery. Without honour. Our father's blood must run thin as water, you cowardly little shit."

Salazar rolled out from behind his hiding place, rising up to his feet with graceful ease.

"Coward?" he repeated, head tilted in consideration. "Yes, I suppose I am a coward. Gladly, if it means I survive to watch you die a pathetic death."

And before the other wizard could react, he drew a dagger, plunged the short blade in his heart, a slick slide between two ribs. The man whimpered, a stunned, fearful sound. His eyes grew dull, he swayed backwards, dead before ever hitting the ground. A boot pressed against his chest for support, Salazar tore his dagger free of death-stiff flesh, leaning forward to contemplate his brother's face, frozen in a last expression of pain and horror.

"Goodbye brother," he breathed, a fist pressed against the other's heart. He stood and left, and behind him, the wound kept weeping blood.

The memory faded, bringing the alleyway back into focus, Thomas' breaths, the shake of his limbs.
His face, cradled in both Salazar's hands, was wet with tears. Salazar brushed them off with both thumbs.

"You should have come to me. You didn't have to face this alone. I could have helped."

"You could have died."

"For you my love, I'm not sure I would've cared."

Salazar couldn't help the soft laugh that hurt as it shuddered out of him. It had been years since he'd last seen Thomas, but the man, like the city, hadn't changed. He had met Thomas many years ago, through a mutual acquaintance, someone who had suggested they should work together. Thomas had had the mind to reintegrate magic users into the city, arguing for rights of citizenship, for how beneficial an alliance between their two people would be. Salazar had been active among his community back then, working silently to help refugees. Sorcerers had known to come to him for shelter, for assistance, and word-to-mouth had brought him to Thomas. Thomas to him.

The man's unwavering idealism had stricken him as naïveté, at first, in a time when peace between the magic and the mundane had seemed even more ludicrous than it was now. But Thomas was an accomplished politician, sharp-tongued and long-teeth, he'd pulled Salazar in his orbit, had dragged him along his insane plans. Salazar had been helpless to resist.

He felt just as helpless now, scars of an old love tearing open behind his breast.

"I should have left a note," he said, soft with regrets. "I'm sorry. It's been too long."

"Yes. Yes it has."

Thomas straightened, taller than Salazar by a few inches, taking hold of his hand and not letting go. He gave him a smile, wondrous, with that same boyish, imprudent charm Salazar had first fallen for.

"Did you have a particular place in mind, or were you planning on taking me on a tour of my own city?" he asked, glancing pointedly at their surroundings, the claustrophobic street, the mud under their boots. His eyes were heavy when they settled on Salazar, an invitation lying somewhere in all that blue, and Salazar –

Salazar remembered how good they had been, together. Thomas hadn't been the first boy he had trifled with, but he was the first he had fucked, properly, Thomas' position and experience affording them the luxury of time. He remembered watching light play on the muscles of Thomas' back, sweat beading his forehead as he pushed inside, half-crazed with the ecstasy of it, and it had been almost too much, too tight and too hot and too much, but he'd been careful, worried about pain, until Thomas had made a sound under him, panting, desperate, his legs spread out, a roll of his hips driving Salazar further in. He remembered being on his back, Thomas' fingers on his hips, holding him down, gentle, encouragement whispered against his ear as he breathed through the stretching burn, light-headed that he trusted Thomas with this, with himself, and he'd buried his hand in golden hair as Thomas adjusted the angle of his thrusts, liquid lightning pooling at the base of his spine, and he'd let go, completely, arching off damp sheets, his throat scrapped raw, undone.

Salazar's heart was a stubborn, careless thing that craved with great avarice and gave itself away no matter how many times it had bled. He was Harry's, now, madly, unreservedly. All the man had to do was ask, and Salazar would open his ribcage to present him with proof of ownership, but –

A piece of him was Thomas', always would be. And Harry wasn't there. Harry was long gone, not
his to claim to begin with.

"I can't stay," he warned quietly.

"I don't care."

When Thomas brought him up into a kiss, he rose to meet him.

Chapter End Notes

*cough* sooo. There's my take on Salazar's story. Part of it, anyway. Boy, is he a hot, hot mess.

Did I take Thomas from Black Sail's Thomas Hamilton? Why yes. Yes I did. If you haven't watched Black Sails yet, I highly recommend it. Just do yourself a favour and don't stop at season one. It's gay and wonderful and will tear your heart out of your chest and stomp on it. Repeatedly and with great malice.

Our second hot, messy mess is back next time for his solo adventures! I'm sorry it's taken so long to get this chapter up, engin school is insane.

Thank you all for your reviews and support, I love each and every one, they mean a lot.

Also, thendra has made a wonderful moodboard about Slytherin House which you should definitively check out!
Harry was only marginally aware of what was going on around him. Night had fallen a while back, he thought, and the air had been sweet with woodsmoke and ripe fruits. He knew there was a great fire burning nearby. He could feel its heat on his face, a contrast with the cool dewy grass under his fingers. Bursts of golden orange flickered up the silver-specked sky, dancing like fireflies.

Muted as if coming from under water, he could hear voices and laughter, the heavy thrum of drums. He breathed deep and felt the stretch of his lungs, heard the rush of air like the sea, refluxing with his blood. Rough, ridged oak bark dug into his back, and his body felt heavy resting against the old tree. He could taste sage and nutmeg rolling on his tongue, sharp and earthly. His head spun in time with the beats of his heart, with the pounding of the drums.

The woman sat cross-legged, just at the corner of his peripheral vision. The brown, ample robes of her people pooled around her. She had given him her name, Harry remembered. Gwenshlean. She was the most accomplished magic user of her camp, a founding pillar to the Druids. She was older than him by a dozen years, but they had danced together earlier. She had glowed with sweat in the firelight. Harry had lost himself to the sway of her body, shedding shame like skin.

She leaned toward him until he could feel her heat along his side, more real that the fire's. Harry had no desire to move, his limbs weighted down, his skin buzzing pleasantly.

"If you want to remember, Harry," she told him, "You have to let yourself go."

It should not have made sense, Harry thought, but somehow it did. His heart slowed down, thumping loud enough to overwhelm everything else. He could feel it in his neck and in his toes, in his belly and on his cheeks. He swayed back, further against the tree behind him, and he could feel himself sink, slipping away, a stone into undisturbed pond-water.

{...}

Yesterday

"Bloody flaming arrows, really?" Nick hissed, skidding to a stop beside Harry. "What's next, they're gonna bring out the ballista? Get down Potter."

The other boy grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, forcing Harry behind an overturned cart. Arrows wheezed past their heads.

"Look at it the bright way," Harry retorted, elbowing Nick in the ribs until he let go of his shirt. "We could still be dining on tripe soup at the arse end of Hungary."

"Must you remind me of that incident every other day?" A very visible shudder ran the length of Nicholas' body. He looked faintly green at the gills.

Harry rolled his eyes at the theatrics. Sure, the soup had been terrible, but it had been food, and they'd all been starving at the time. Beggars truly can't be choosers, he'd found. He shifted away from Nick, straightening from his half-crouch. He waved his wand at the stack of hay, putting away the smouldering beginnings of a fire before smoke could clog up his sight.

Those archers at the top of the church's tower were going make themselves a nuisance, he could tell.
"How far are the others, do you reckon?" he asked, carefully peering over the edge. There were soldiers approaching.

Nick gave a shrug, a hand resting on Harry's shoulder for support as he eyed the other end of the street, lips thinned in calculation. "Dunno," he replied. "Marya said they'd be right behind. I imagine they got caught up."

"Right," said Harry, an idea beginning to form at the back of his head. They had to be quick about it, not much time left before the soldiers reached the cart now. "Well, listen." He nudged Nick for good measure, making sure the other boy was paying attention. "Nick, listen. I'll draw them out. You go round behind them. Then we run for it."

Nick shot him a look. "Harry. No. You are not using yourself as bait. You can die just as easily as the rest of us, as I'm sure you know. Besides, I promised the boss I wouldn't let you make a repeat of Sardinia. The bit with the angry candlesticks was plain stupid."

"Well if you've got a better plan, now's the time," Harry growled out. "We've gotta get to the boy before they do."

Nick stayed stubbornly silent, scowling at the distance as if it had personally offended him.

"That's what I thought."

There were steps approaching, booted and heavy, a shout. Harry rolled out from behind the cart, coming up with his sword raised defensively. Behind him, Nicholas let out a curse, something vicious about Harry's mother, but Harry wasn't listening. He caught the first man under the knees, brought him down with a clean smack on the temple, sword-pommel smashing soft flesh. He stunned the second before the unconscious body hit the ground. He caught a blur of motion out of the corner of his eyes, shimmied out of the way of a falling blade. Steel sliced through air. He parried a slashing blow at his stomach, flowing with it, then a thrust for his heart. The soldier seemed slow, clumsy compared to Godric's swift grace. Harry dodged his sword, came up against him, back to chest, and rammed his elbow into the opening of the man's helmet. There was the satisfying crush of broken bones. The soldier reeled away from the impact, howling.

"Potter, duck!" Nick called, and Harry dropped, sweeping another man's legs from under him. Daggers soared over, each enhanced blade meeting its mark.

"You didn't have to kill them," he snarled at Nick, watching the men from the church's tower fall like flies, accompanied by a shower of blood and unused arrows.

"You're welcome," Nick snapped back, sounding sour. His eyes flashed from amber to yellow before settling again. "We need to go now."

Together, they pelted across the square, Nick running headlong, much quicker than Harry despite all his training. It wasn't a big town, thankfully, more of a fortified hamlet, rickety houses pressed together on hard-packed earth. It didn't take them long to clear the open space, none of the villagers daring to leave the safety of their homes. Harry glimpsed a few of them squinting at him from thick doors open ajar.

"Let's try left," Harry panted. He could feel sweat sticking his hair to his forehead, sliding along his back. "The church's bound to have a basement. If there's anywhere they'd keep the kid – "

Nick grunted in acknowledgement. He swung left without warning, veering swiftly in a narrow alleyway. Harry followed without much elegance. He ran into a wooden stall, swearing when the
impact jarred his hip. He could hear cries of alarm, the grating blare of a horn.

They rounded the street's corner, huffing in the afternoon heat. Harry barely registered the discordant clank of metal, the sound of hooves on muddy ground, before he came face to face with mounted soldiers. He called up a shield, large enough to cover Nick, before a spear could take his head off.

"Merlin's balls," he swore, staggering to a stop. He took the situation with a quick glance; half a dozen men, all armoured and mounted, wielding weapons with an ease that came from well-honed habit.

"Halt!" one of the men shouted, voice oddly muffled by the muzzle of his helm.

"Give us the boy and we'll be on our way," Harry shot back, with little hope.

"Like that ever works." Echoing his thoughts, Nick jumped past the shield before Harry could stop him, an explosive blur of speed and strength. He'd already unhorsed a man, smashed his head up against the wall when Harry joined in, casting three spells in quick succession.

They made a quick work of the men, Harry catching most of them with magic, throwing them down into unconsciousness' tender arms. They blasted open the church's heavy doors. It was a rundown, shabby church, its air cool and moist despite the blazing heat outside. It smelled strongly of mold and cankered wood.

Nick raced ahead, head tilted to a side in a decidedly canine manner, looking for any straggling soldier. Harry closed and locked the door behind him, mixing up a few charms just to be safe. He set to finding the boy they'd been instructed to track, muttering a locating spell under his breath. Magic flickered, coalesced at the tip of his wand, before shooting off in coloured ribbons toward a half-hidden backdoor, which was bolted from the outside.

"Hello?" he called, pressing a careful ear against the door. The wood was too thick; he couldn't hear anything. Speaking as loudly as he dared, he said, "We're here to help. Don't be afraid. I'm going to open the door now, all right?"

He nudged open the rusted, dirty bolt. It came loose with a reluctant creaking noise. Harry peered inside. He couldn't see anything at first; the room was too dark. Only thin rays of sunlight flitted through the boarded windows, the light muddied by all the floating must. Squinting, he discerned a vaguely humanoid shape huddled against the far wall. It didn't stir even as Harry stepped further into the room.

"Hey – can you hear me? I've come to get you somewhere safe. Lumos."

Star-bright light filled the room, forcing Harry to blink against the sudden shine. There was a boy hunched on a bed of stale straw, dark hair matted with filth. He seemed fast asleep, completely insensate to the world, gangly limbs sprawled out in an uncomfortable-looking heap. Harry felt a twinge of worry when he didn't twitch at his entrance.

He laid a hand on the boy's waist, another on his throat, looking for a pulse, his own heart constricting in alarm. He found a slow, steady stutter under his fingers, allowed his shoulders to unwind a little. A quick spell told him the boy had been drugged up, some Muggle mixture of plants he didn't pause to identify. He drained the poison from the child's body, chanting softly until the boy's eyes fluttered open, drowsy with sleep.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty," he teased, keeping his tone light and friendly. "How are you
feeling?"

The boy groaned. "M'Alright," he mumbled, arms flaying around in a valiant effort to straighten up. Harry sneaked an arm around his back to help manoeuvre him in a more comfortable position. The boy's ratty shirt was ripped in several places, revealing swathes of pale, dirty skin, though thankfully free of any visible injury. Harry's hand accidentally brushed against the boy's bare back, and a curious shiver ran down his spine, a frisson of something not unlike electricity. Recognition flashed in the boy's eyes – which were a peculiar shade of dark, marine blue, deep like the night's sky.

"Who's you?" he croaked, shaking his head like a dog. He leaned more of his weight against Harry, breathing deep, ragged breaths.

"My name's Harry. I'm a wizard just like you." To demonstrate, he waved his wand, let a swirl of green and silver sparks come together to form a miniature dragon. It earned him a quiet gasp, full of wonder. He guided the illusion in a full lap of the room, then left it to its devices. "Me and my mates heard you might be in a spot of trouble, so we've come to help you out, if you'll let us."

"Uh." The boy blinked at Harry, staring with enough intense focus to be unnerving. He nodded earnestly, long curls bouncing around his face. "Uh, yes please?" Then, though that odd, knowing glint never left his eyes, his face broke into a grin, and he said, thoroughly upending Harry's world, "I'm Merlin, by the way. Say, I don't suppose Harry's short for Arthur, is it?"

And Harry – Harry was –

{ . . . }

Harry could feel the thundering pounding of the drums rock through him, he could feel the old oak tree against his back, hear Gwenschlean's voice in his ear, honey-sweet.

"Further, Harry. Close your eyes, you must go further back. Tell me what led you to the boy."

{ . . . }

A week ago

"This is fine," Harry muttered, going cross-eyed through the head-rush. He thought he might have broken his ankle. The rope was tied tight around the joint, growing tighter by the minute for supporting his whole body weight.

Somewhere above his head – or his foot, as it were – tree branches groaned in a most ominous manner.

"This is fine," he repeated, wiggling around in the faint hope he'd shake the trap loose, gritting his teeth when chafing, grinding pain jolted up his leg. "Just perfectly bloody fine."

As if in agreement, the boar snorted, pawing the ground in preparation to lunge. The beast was a mound of coarse hairs and corded muscles, beady eyes fuming with malicious rage from the deep set of its mud-caked face. It was big, bigger than Harry thought a pig had any right to be. The two curved, pointy tusks that poked out of the sides of its jaws stood, by Harry's most optimistic estimate, just high enough to gut him like a fish, given his unfortunate position.

And because it was just this sort of a day, Nicholas had pick-pocketed his wand again, the bastard.
"Guys?" he called. He'd lost sight of the others a while ago, but he lived to hope. The boar was taking short, trotting steps away, ostensibly to gather momentum.

At least, Harry thought in a fit of morbid merriment, there'd be poetry somewhere in his dying under the blows of Hogwarts' mascot. Voldemort certainly wouldn't top that, the unimaginative loon.

"GUYS!"

And amazingly, from the depths of the forest came a shout of, "POTTER?!"

"NICK I'M GOING TO KILL YOU AND FEED YOU TO THE PIG, YOU THIEVING ARSEHOLE!"

He heard a distant crash, the rattle of crushed underbrush and rustling leaves. The boar snorted, started running. Harry couldn't help the whimper that left his lips. His ankle was hurting something fierce. He swore he could feel the broken bones grinding together beneath his skin. He thought he was going to pass out, too much blood rushing to his head, making his vision go fuzzy, and who would've thought that boars could run so fast, this couldn't be right –

A low, menacing growl rose up from the nearest thicket of trees. Nicholas surged into sight, lips pulled back from his teeth in clear warning. He pounced on the boar, quicker than Harry could see. The animal whined in alarm, but could do nothing to escape him, driven by its own weight. Within moments, Nick had slit its throat. It collapsed on the grass, gushing blood.

"Guess what we're having for dinner?" Nick turned to him with a quirked smile, tawny, flyaway hair glittering gold in the sun.

"Just cut me loose please," Harry panted. He was having troubles breathing, his lungs wouldn't expand properly.

Nick grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pulling his head away from the ground so he wouldn't break his neck upon landing. A swift swipe of his dagger severed the rope holding Harry. He hurtled down, hissing when his vision whited out from the impact of his own weight on his injured limb.

"Wand," he gritted out. Wordlessly, Nick pressed his wand into his palm, held him steady as he bent down and whispered, "Episky," swearing when his bones popped back into place with a wet, audible crack. He rested against Nick while the pain receded in waves, which the young man weathered without a sigh of protestation. "Where the hell have you been anyway?" Harry asked, pulling away carefully.

"We've found the cave, while you were busy gallivanting with a pig." Nick ducked smoothly, dodging the fist Harry had aimed at his heart. "Bran and Marya went on ahead. Hopefully they'll have killed the trolls before we get there. Then we can go off and get paid."

"Hopefully," Harry repeated, making no effort to hide the dubiousness from his tone. In the months since he'd joined Marya's Lowswords Company, not a single one of their jobs had gone according to plan. Harry couldn't say he had been enjoying mercenary life, but at least it paid good money.

"Cheer up, Potter. We'll be feasting tonight." Nick jerked a thumb in the direction of the boar bleeding out behind him.

"Feasting my arse," Harry retorted. "You people eat like a herd of Thestrals. There'll be nothing left before the sun is set."
Still, he pointed his wand at the carcass, agreeing to lugging the body all the way back to their camp. He followed Nick through the forest, trailing boar's blood in their wake.

"You alright, mate?" he called after a while. Nick was never silent for too long. He was always dropping comments about his surroundings, acerbic remarks about people's smells when they were somewhere inhabited, speculations about animal tracks otherwise. From what Harry could see of his face, the young man looked tired, dark circles under his eyes, a jerky nervousness in the usually easy glide of his steps, in the sharp angles of his drawn face. "You seem tetchy."

Nick cast him a quick glance, something unfathomable passing over his eyes.

" – Nick? You've not blown up Archie's cauldron again, have you? You know how hard it is for him to get a new one every time – "

"Archie cauldron's fine."

Harry frowned at the other boy's back. "Well, what is it then?"

Nick stopped walking abruptly. He didn't turn to face him, but Harry could see his jaw clench and unclench in sporadic spasms. He opened his mouth, breathing in as though preparing to speak, but no word went forthcoming.

Harry felt himself grow tense with alarm. "Gods Nick, now I'm worried. No one's died, have they?"
The boy shook his head, the motion stilted. Harry touched his arm, willing to offer comfort but unsure whether it would be well-received. "Tell me," he urged quietly. "Whatever it is, maybe I can help."

"Tomorrow's the full moon," Nick grated out at last, like the words had been snatched from somewhere deep in his throat.

Harry blinked at him in confusion. Now he understood why his friend looked like death warmed up, at least. "I didn't now that," he admitted. "Is – "

"No, you don't get it," Nick cut in. "Tomorrow I'll – I'm – I w-won't be there. I'll have to leave."

"Yeah, I should hope so," Harry huffed out, dumping his shoulder against Nick's. "What's with you turning into a hungry, slavering wolf and all. I was gonna ask if there's anything I can do to make it better?"

Against him, Nick was stiff as a board. "What," he articulated.

"What what?"

"How do you – You know that I-I'm – "

"A werewolf?" Harry thought he could see where the problem was now. "It's kinda hard to miss, mate."

Nick was looking at him in stunned amazement. As though Harry had spoken a language he couldn't comprehend. Harry put a steadying hand on the small of his back when it looked like Nick might keel over.

"You – don't you mind?" He'd never heard Nick sound so small before. So fragile, tentative, the first ember of hesitant hope. It broke Harry's heart, just a little, to think about the kind of rejection he had to have endured in his life, to get that naked look on his face.
"I don't mind," he assured the other boy, slinging an arm over his shoulders for good measure, dragging him in a quick one-armed hug. "One of my Godfathers is a werewolf. And he is the kindest, strongest man I know."

"Oh," said Nick meekly.

Harry shook him, teasing. "C'mon. We need to get going, or the others will leave without us."

They began walking again.

"Where's your Godfather now?" Nick asked, voice stronger though still slightly dazed.

"Uh." Thinking of Remus was like being dumped in ice-cold water. Harry hadn't seen the man in ages, and he knew how he could worry. Sirius' death had been a hard blow to him – he'd had a drawn, harassed-looking air about him ever since. It was some bone-deep fatigue Harry hadn't known how to help him shake off, because he could feel some of it himself. Harry couldn't begin to imagine what the wolf might do to Remus when it realised that Harry had disappeared as well. "I – he. He's gone," he settled for saying, as close to the truth as he could get.

A tentative hand brushed Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry," Nick told him, grave and solemn the way people were around the dead. "I'd like to have met him."

Harry sniffed, resolutely pulling himself together. He'd take better care of Remus if he got back, he promised himself. When he got back. "Yeah. You'd have liked him, I think." He squeezed Nick's hand on his arm, then let go before the moment could turn any mushier. "I wish there was something I could do to help," he told the boy. "With your moon, I mean. My father used to turn into an animal to keep Remus company through his. Keep him from hurting himself. But I don't know how to do that. It's very complex magic." He gave a pensive hum. "I should ask Godric to teach me, if I ever go back to school."

"You – " Nick shook his head, a wry downturn to his lips. "You're something else, Potter."

They covered the rest of the way quickly. The air was pleasantly warm under the trees, away from the dry, scorching heat of Mediterranean summer. The sun was bright-gold as it drizzled down from its copse of leaf. The trees were lean, twisted in absurd shapes by the salty brine constantly blowing from the sea. Birds and cicadas chirped out of sight, persistent background noise. It was a very different forest from the ones Harry was used to, interlaced with rocky valleys of clear stones and babbling streams. It didn't toll with the weight of rain and ancient secrets like the Forbidden Forest. Instead, it sang to a lighter, eclectic tune that set Harry's nerves alight.

"There you are!"

Harry looked up at the sound of Marya's voice. Godric's wife stood atop a crag of jagged stone, split open in the middle by the gaping opening of a large cave. Her hair was bound in a tight braid. Her arms were bare, muscled and littered with a few scars. Harry could see dark blood coating the entire length of her sword. She flicked off the worst of it with a negligent shake.

"Sorry boss," said Nick. He gestured at the boar still floating morosely in Harry's wake. "We thought we'd bring dinner along."

"Good lads," she proclaimed. "I'm afraid you missed all the fun, though. Bran has already gone to collect the bounty."

"Anything of interest down there?" Harry asked, curiously peering down the dark opening of the cave.
"See for yourself."

Harry glided down the soft, earthly slope, trailing fingers against the stone of keep his balance. It was pitch-dark down there. It smelled strongly of old socks and stagnant sewer water, a foul stench he remembered from his first year at Hogwarts, when he and Ron confronted a mountain troll. He gagged, pressed a sleeve against his nose, and resolved to breathe through his mouth. He conjured witchfire with a flick of his wrist, relieved to see that the trolls' carcasses had already been cleaned out. The cave stretched out under the ground, farther than his light could reach. The floor, a mix of sand and hard-packed earth, was strewn with dirty bones, gleaming dully in the artificial light. While some clearly belonged to animals, others were decidedly human. Harry even spied a couple of skulls, one of them still specked with old flaking blood. It was no wonder the Muggles had hired wizards for the job; though trolls were immensely stupid, they wielded their own kind of magic, which made them very hard to kill. They also had a taste for raw human flesh. Those had obviously taken a swipe at the nearby villagers, rendering them desperate enough to call Marya for help.

Harry trudged further into the cave, unsure as to what drove him forward. A niggling feeling at the back of his head, a whispering instinct, told him to venture deeper and deeper, bypassing the nauseating stink. The cave branched out in several smaller alcoves that the trolls might have used to store their food or meagre possessions. Mostly, they were filled with yet more bones, a few ragged animal pelts, a handful of shiny rocks. One of these rocks caught Harry's eyes, his entire focus zeroing in on a soft green glimmer, tucked away in a dark corner.

The stone was no bigger than a chicken's egg. It was cool and smooth to the touch, as though the years had polished it to perfect lustre. It was made of a dark-green grain or mineral that caught the light, reflected it in soothing river-green shades. Its ever-changing, wavering colour reminded Harry of the lake sloshing against the common room's windows. Delicately, he lifted it from its bracket, stuffed it in the pocket of his coat. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with it, but he knew he couldn't leave it to rot alone in the dark.

He hurried back to the surface, relieved to breathe in fresh, clean air again.

"Found anything?" Nick asked. He was busy skinning and carving the boar into cook-worthy pieces.

"Just a weird rock," Harry answered with a shrug, fingers curling around the small weight in his pocket.

Later that night, the Company gathered on the beach to celebrate a job well done. Archie cooked up the boar, glazing it with honey and its own juice, until the meat was tender, falling off the bones. Bran had procured enough potatoes to feed a small army, using a portion of the price money they had earned from killing the trolls. They roasted the potatoes under the hot coals of a bonfire, lathered them with a generous amount of butter, until the sweet scent filled the night's air. Harry had gone into town, spending his own money to buy mead and beer, a sweet Greek blend that fizzled on the tongue. They drank their fill as the setting sun skimmed the waves, blazing rings of deep pink and purple.

Harry felt good, lazy with meat and alcohol. The Company was in excellent mood; Hayden had taken up a rowdy song, booming voice warming the cooling air, cheered along by the other men. He could get used to this life, Harry thought. Living by the day, travelling the world, getting work where he could, accompanied by good friends who enjoyed the simple pleasures of life. Who did things because they felt good, unburdened by worry or responsibility or fear, who didn't overthink their place in the great scheme of things. This had to be what freedom looked like. Harry thought he could learn a thing or two from these men's philosophies.
Nick flopped beside him with a thud. "What's the long face for, Harry?" he asked. The werewolf looked clear-headed, alert, even though he had drunk at least as much as Harry had.

"M'okay," replied Harry, slurring his words only slightly. "Just thinking about – " He gestured grandly at the stars, which were only just blinking into sight, pale-silver against vibrant violet. "Stuff."

"'Stuff,'" Nick parroted. Harry could tell the other boy was laughing at him.

"Uh-uh. 'bout life and going home." He looked up at Nick. The fire played with the angles of the man's face, gliding his skin rich honey. "I'm not sure that I can, y'know," he said. "Go home I mean. Sometimes I don't even want to, 'cos it's good here. And that's just terrible, innit? But there's war and so many of my friends are dead now. It's all just blood and hunger and, and – and torture, like knives scrapping your skin. A lot of people want me dead, too."

Nick had frozen at some point while Harry was talking. Something stalked behind his eyes, golden-bright, glowing yellow in the red light of the fire. "Harry," he said slowly, hands clenching convulsively in the thin sand below. "Stay," he uttered at last. "I don't know what you're talking about, but, just – stay. Nothing bad will happen to you here. I – we can protect you. I promise."

Nick looked dead serious, his lips pressed in a thin line, earnest and determined. Harry was overtaken by the sudden urge to coax away the frown on his mouth with his lips. He wanted to lean up and kiss Nick, chase after the taste of mead on his tongue.


A wordless growl of frustration sounded near his ear. "And you're a bloody idiot, Potter," Nick informed him, voice rough. Harry could almost hear his eye-roll.

"'S not my fault. It's hard to keep up with things. Like – like time. How the hell am I supposed to get the right time, heh?"

"It's the middle of August, Potter. You don't need to be a damned wizard to know that."

August. The thought sparked firecrackers in Harry's fuzzy brain, made his heart thump louder. August. If the month was August, then that meant – that meant –

"I'm eighteen!" he exclaimed, bewildered by the unexpected knowledge. He frowned, did the math in his head. He'd left his time at the beginning of January, some six months after his seventeenth birthday. He had spent a year in the past. "Nay," he corrected, dazed. "I'm eighteen and a half. Bloody hell. I didn't even notice."

"God, you're so weird." Harry hummed in agreement. A light kick landed in his side. "Move Potter. Looks like the boss wants to talk to us."

Harry had no choice but to follow when Nick grabbed his arms, hauled him up with inhuman strength. Not sexy, he told himself sternly. He is your friend and this is not sexy, though he couldn't help leaning against Nick's warmth as they scuttled their way across the camp, Harry's arm slung over Nick's shoulder.

Ever since he'd had his epiphany over his attraction to Salazar, Harry had been noticing things. About men. It was as though he'd cracked open Pandora's box. Everything he'd kept carefully buried had come spilling out, impossible to ignore. He found himself wanting. Looking at people
his own gender in a way he never had before. Or maybe he had. He wasn't sure. Maybe this wasn't the first time his eyes lingered on the tense line of a pulled-up shirt, the defined muscles shifting beneath. Maybe this wasn't the first time he found himself transfixed by the sight of stubble-covered lips lifting in a wry smile. By the dramatic dip of a collarbone. He thought he might have noticed before – before Salazar.

But he had never noticed himself noticing, and that made all the difference. Now he caught himself wondering what it would be like to run his hands over the flat expanse of a hard chest. He wanted to fit the angles of a sharp jaw in his palms, curl his fingers in shorn hair.

He couldn't say whether it was normal. He knew what his Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia thought of people like him. He'd seen them sneer at women holding hands in the street, full of scorn and venom. He'd heard his Uncle call *freak* and *pervert* and *unnatural*, *aren't they ashamed*, *parading themselves like that, I don't want these degenerates near my Dudley*, a couple of men who had made a life together in Private Drive. Maybe that was why Harry had never noticed himself noticing before; he hadn't wanted to make himself more of a freak. He hadn't wanted to be any more different from his estranged family. He hadn't wanted to know the kind of punishment Uncle Vernon would dish out if he ever found one more truth about his wizard of a nephew. Salazar had stripped him of his illusions, standing half-naked in front of Harry. He'd made Harry *see*, had made him look, because Salazar would not be denied or ignored. Harry respected him too much for that. He'd had to shake the comfortable carcass of the boy that night, all its blindfolding pretences, to don the body of a man.

As if to make matters even more puzzling, Harry had realised that being attracted to men hadn't diminished the appeal of women. He'd thought about his time with Ginny, about the light-heading warmth of her kisses, how good it had felt to have her pressed against him. He used to love carding fingers through her hair, feeling the soft, smooth skin of her thighs, of her breasts. He remembered the white-hot lightning sparks of pleasure as he moved with her, inside her, watching her eyes roll back, her mouth part open as she pulled him closer, her skin damp with sweat, breathtakingly beautiful.

In short, Harry was confused. He'd never had to question sex or his sexuality before. He'd never had the time for it like the other boys his age, with his life being under constant threat since he'd turned eleven. He found these new feeling disorienting, though he'd been sure to keep them for himself, even when he'd been paralysed by fear.

There was a faint hum against his ear, Nick squeezing his waist in warning.

"Boys," Marya greeted, sitting on the sand with the rest of her men, parchment strewn around her, fluttering in the breeze. An owl stood on her shoulder, golden gaze staring fixedly at Nick, hooting uncomfortably at the werewolf's presence. "Please, sit down." Both Harry and Nick flung themselves beside her, an inelegant jumble of limbs. Marya's lips quirked upward. "I've received news from my husband," she told them, gesturing at one of the letters she held. "Apparently Hogwarts wishes to hire our help in retrieving a wizard boy. They can't spare the men."

"That shouldn't take too much time," Nick muttered.

But Marya shook her head. "Godric tells me the situation might be more complicated than that. Rowena thinks the boy will be discovered soon. We need to spirit him to safety before he can be executed." She shot them a critical look. "I'd like you both to come with me. Specially you Harry. You'll be better placed to reassure the boy. You're good with children from what I hear."

Though Harry couldn't say he was delighted at the thought of going back to England, he nodded his assent. He couldn't refuse Marya after everything she had done for him. Besides, he felt responsible
for Hogwarts students. He would go regardless of his reluctance.

"That's settled then." Marya stroked a finger down the owl's plumage. "I'll inform Godric. Pack up your things; we leave at dawn."

She was gathering her documents when a flint-strike of inspiration pushed Harry to say, "Actually, boss – I was wondering if I could borrow your owl. I'd like to send a letter to someone."

She cast him a curious glance but nodded without question. Harry scrambled to his feet, feeling abuzz. Alive. His stomach squirmed with anxious trepidation. He cursed himself for it; he felt like a teenager with his first crush. He whistled for the owl to follow him, ignoring the painful tinge of his heart when the majestic barn took off gracefully, reminding him of Hedwig.

He was going to write to Salazar. He had promised, hadn't he? Though his memories of the Night were blurred at best, he remembered mumbling a vow to keep the man informed. Besides, to be honest, a part of him longed to hear from Salazar. He had felt the man's absence keenly over the past few months, even though he churned with contradictory emotions at the thought of him. Lust and guilt overlapping everything he had felt before – friendship and respect and wariness. Being apart from Salazar had been both a relief and a curse. Harry felt like he could think clearly again, distance having given him the advantage of perspective, but he ached, longed for someone he couldn't reach. It was as though his connection to Salazar physically pained him, stretched taut by the separation, pulling Harry in by his heartstrings.

He walked away from the camp while Nick joined a cluster of men in an arm-wrestling match he was sure to win. He moved far enough that no one would come bother him, though he made sure to keep the Company in sight. He conjured ink and parchment out of sand. The ink turned sea-green rather than black, and the parchment was pale if a bit grainy, but he thought it would do. Salazar wouldn't mind. Besides, Harry wasn't sober enough to do any better.

He tapped his quill against his lips, wondering what he could write, coming up blank. Hey, Salazar, he thought, I'm sorry I ran off like that. I know it wasn't the best of times to up and disappear on you. You probably could've used my help. I'm sorry. But in my defence, Gytha had died because of me and I was hurt, and I'd just realised I fancy you, which really freaked me out.

He snorted. That would go down just fine, he was sure.

Hello Salazar. I'm fine and I hope you are as well. I've been travelling with Marya Gryffindor recently. I know you don't like her much, but she's offered me work. I'm a mercenary. No luck finding a way to go home, but I least I have money now. How are things for you?

The very thought made him feel queasy. There had never been space for small talk or pleasantries between him and Salazar. The man had found him bleeding to death, had tasted Harry's thoughts within moments of meeting him. With Salazar, abiding by the rules of etiquette that constricted formal relationships had never crossed Harry's mind. It had always seemed superfluous. Unneeded. The thought of starting now repulsed him.

He went through a few more ideas, crossing them out one after the other. He considered writing the truth. Pouring his heart out. What did he have to lose?

I didn't know it was possible to feel for someone what I feel for you. It occurred to me, while I was washing your wounds, that I want you like I've never wanted anything or anyone in my life. I felt that knowledge expend from where it had been coiled up in my chest. It squeezed around my heart, then it grew and grew until I feared I might explode from the hapless strength of it. Because you see, Salazar, the thing is. The thing is, wanting you could be the most dangerous thing that has
ever happened to me. That's why I left. I needed to get away from you before you could consume me. I've tried to get home, these past few months. Desperately. I've scoured the four corner of England without success. All of it in a bid to escape you, the hold you have on me. I'm so scared of what might happen to me if I stay. If I linger for too long. But still. Still, fear isn't enough. And I hate myself for how relieved I am at not having found a way to return to my time.

He burned that piece of parchment to cinder, watched the ashes blow away in the breeze. Feeling like a coward. As he was sitting back down, he felt a lump against his thigh. He rooted around in his pockets, extracting the strange, green stone he had found in the troll's den earlier. The colour made him think of Slytherin. Of home.

He drew up another piece of parchment. A careful spell stuck the green stone to the paper. Another lightened it up. It didn't take Harry long to scribble five small words on the space he had left.

*I thought you might like it.*

Then, because he couldn't help himself,

*Yours, Harry.*

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Harry's head was spinning badly now. The world whirled before his eyes. His skin tingled, his breathing was short, raspy. He could hardly feel the air against him, or the scrapping of his clothes. He thought he saw Merlin looking at him with wide, worried eyes, the boy's presence like a physical thing, his magic causing Harry's to stir restlessly. Or perhaps that was the drums, which had picked up the pace.

His memories unravelled faster and faster. They rose up from the depths of his mind, clamouring for attention. He felt as though he was being pushed under water. His lung filled with something thick, syrupy, and he –

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*Months ago*

He spent a miserable month roaming England like listless ghost. He felt out of his mind, blank with shock. He left Hogwarts that night with the clothes on his back, his sword and his wand. He Apparated to Stonehenge to moment he stepped outside the gates, taking a looping detour around the battlefield. He could smell the stench of blood and rot from the distance.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed at Stonehenge. He threw himself to work with the grim dedication of a man with problems to avoid. He examined every inch of the stones. He fed them his magic. He poked and prodded, then he begged and begged and begged. He begged to be swept back home. He pleaded to every god that would listen. He'd had enough of this time, of getting attached knowing full well he would lose everyone he met. He was tired of caring. Tired of wanting. Tired.

Tired.

The reality of Gytha's death caught up with him one balmy evening as the sun was setting, his stomach churning painfully with hunger. It was like losing Sirius all over again. His chest felt like a raw, gaping wound, and he couldn't stop bleeding. He curled up against an upturned stone and cried. He cried like a child, until his cheeks hurt with salt and his eyes were gritty with sand. Until he had no more tears to shed, and all he could do was ride out the great shudders that tore through
him. It lasted all night, when finally he collapsed from exhaustion.

Afterwards, he woke up to watch the sun rise, soft red and pale peach. He talked to Gytha, even though he knew she wasn't there to listen. He reminded himself of all the good memories he had of her. Teaching her to read and write. Hugging her as she grieved the loss of her family. Pulling pranks on Gryffindors. Hearing her complain about homework. All those quietly joyful moments in the common room. He asked for her forgiveness. He said his goodbyes.

By the time the sun had risen, he felt at peace. His throat was desert-dry, his body hurt with hunger cramps, but the throbbing pain in his chest had changed. He wasn't alright, not by a long shot, but he was healing. Slowly. Painfully.

That same day, he gave up on Stonehenge. He could think of nothing else to do with it. He wished Hermione were there with him.

He Apparated a few miles off the coast, praying he wouldn't materialise inside of a tree that hadn't been there the last time he'd been around.

He found odd jobs to do, drifting from one town to the next. He spent two weeks helping a farmer with his fields. He bartended for a while, which he liked better than cutting down wheat. He had to beat a hasty retreat when he cursed a costumer for having harassed Emelind, one of the women he worked with. He hitched a ride to France, serving as deckhand on a merchant ship owned by Alfric's family.

There was nowhere he needed to be, so he wandered. He stumbled his way to southern France. He got acquainted with the magical community of Toulouse, an old, convoluted city of red bricks and cramped, timbered houses, tumultuous with activity. A vampire Duke, a tall, wax-skinned man, lean as a greyhound, who, it seemed, enjoyed the town's clogging heat, gave Harry full access to his library. He spent some time lurking by the vaulting, stretching aisles, copying a few texts he thought could be of interest. He discussed his time-travelling situation with Ambroise, which the vampire found endlessly entertaining. He proposed to Turn Harry, arguing that immortality was a way like any other to rejoin his timeline. Harry politely declined.

He continued on, crossing the Pyrenees and then to Spain. He walked alone under the swollen blue skies, on golden-plains spread level, golden-tawny grass swaying in mystic patterns as wide as the world. Somewhere on a flatland tucked between mountain peaks and a powerful river, feeling utterly lost, utterly alone, Harry took what felt like the first true breath of his life. He felt the stretch of freedom in his lungs, and it was water-sweet, spiced with a haze of lavender, of warm earth and the faint whiff of pine needles. Which each day that passed since, he felt like he was meeting a little more of himself.

He was deep in Andalusia, glimpsing the sea, aquamarine-blue so clear he thought it looked like glass, when he happened upon Marya and her people. An incident involving hungry Hippogriffs and heart-shaped fireworks found him with an offer for a job. And then he -

He –

{...}

He was dimly aware that the memories were flashing quicksilver-fast before his eyes, slipping away from his control. He didn't know where he was, or who he was with. Urgent voices tried to coax him back to himself but weren't enough.

He was tending to Salazar's wounds, feeling like a fret train was about to bear down on him. He
was confronting the crack in the Forest, revolting, death-cold, Hermione's voice screaming his name, magic leaking out of him like blood. There was something wrong with him. Something wrong wrong wrong with him, he was wrong –

He saw Runes flaring, searing into his soul. He saw time twist, bend, fracture, and it was terrible, and he, Harry, was right there in the middle of it all. Cause and consequence looping back on each other, infinite. He heard the rumbling shift of the earth's plates, saw red-gurgling magma, he looked deeper and deeper to where the world cracked and was made of shadows, he saw inside of himself and he saw.

He Saw.

Harry broke away from his transe, screaming.
The day Melin was invited to Hogwarts was the happiest of his life. It hadn't started so great, what with soldiers storming his home, forcing him to gulp a nasty concoction that made his brain go foggy, but he'd been doing fine since then.

He hadn't known what to expect from school. Stuffy old teachers that preached about rules and discipline. Dank, uncomfortable dormitories with rancid food, because he couldn't imagine how Hogwarts could afford any better. He had been fine with that, though. He had come fully prepared to endure whatever was thrown at him. If that was the price for learning magic, he would pay it a thousandfold.

As it turned out, he'd never been more wrong. Most teachers were neither old nor stuffy. He had never slept in a more comfy bed. The food was to die for. Better than all of this though, better than finally being able to sleep soundly, feeling safe, than having his stomach full, was the magic. It seemed to Merlin as if the castle was made of it. There wasn't a stone that didn't sing with power, that wasn't humming with intricate spellwork. He had gotten a few odd looks from his schoolmates at first, because he had kept staring in the distance, unable to focus on anything but the soaring, light-heading feeling of being surrounded by magic. He had feared he would burst from excitement.

The newness had faded now, the first weeks of school having passed in a wonderful blur, a flurry of lessons and things to learn. The only notable thing that happened, after Merlin had grown comfortable in the Slytherins Dungeons, had been when one evening he heard students mention Harry's name.

"Harry Potter?" he had called, and was immediately bowled over by the Second years, who proceeded to swamp him with questions. How did he know this name? Had he seen Harry? Where? How was he? Did he seem alright? Did he say anything about coming back? About them?

Merlin had been a bit overwhelmed. Though the Second years always seemed to be keeping an eye on the newcomers, they formed a tight-knit group that hadn't allowed for new additions, even though a few had tried to get in their good graces. Merlin didn't know what pressed them together like this, what made them seem so close to one another. They were much better at magic than the rest of the school, but he didn't think academics were what set them apart, not truly. He wondered what they had gone through together, whether it had anything to do with Harry.

He had answered their questions the best he could, watched with bewilderment as a mixture of relief and disappointment passed over their faces. The freckled boy that acted as their unofficially-elected leader had had a look of deep worry about him.

"He got me back from the Muggles," he'd told them, shuddering at the memories. "Barrelled right through the soldiers and all."

He didn't mention what had happened later, after Harry had brought him to the Druid's for safekeeping. Even Merlin wasn't sure what had gone wrong that evening. There had been a party, Harry had seemed happy, dancing with his mate Nick, and then with a honey-skinned Druid woman. Then he had felt an odd tremor in Harry's magic, had felt it spike violently, as though the man was fighting or hurting. Merlin had been peculiarly attuned to Harry's magic from the start, so the feeling had nearly brought him to his knees, bent over in pain. Afterwards, the fear and awe on the Druids' faces had been a strange thing to witness.
"He looked okay," he assured his House-mates, only half-lying. Harry had been fine the day after, when he'd left with the Company, ruffling Merlin's hair in goodbye.

All in all, life was good. Classes were difficult, but Merlin managed the best he could. He couldn't help but notice he was a little different from the other children. While magic came easily to him, he found it hard to make it behave according to his wishes. It was always doing too much, like it was wild but eager to please. Everyone else seemed to be struggling with the exact opposite, which frustrated him to no end. It was as though he was reading from the same book as everyone else, but the language was different.

Lord Slytherin seemed wryly amused when Merlin tried explaining it to him. Merlin couldn't shake the absurd thought that his Head of House had known something of the sort would happen to him.

"No one has the same perception of magic," the man told him, sitting him down with a flick of his wrist. "It isn't uncommon for powerful wizards to experience the same problems as you. I'll talk to the others, see if something can be arranged to suit your needs."

Merlin wasn't entirely convinced Slytherin had told him the whole truth, but he'd found himself reassured nonetheless.

Life went on. Merlin found himself flourishing under Slytherin's tutelage. He basked in Hogwarts' presence, delighting at every quirk the castle had to unveil. He spent hours exploring its nooks and crannies, getting in a few scraps. Though he was by himself most of the time and a little lonely, he was content.

October had rolled by with its cooling winds and rain-heavy clouds when he made his first friend. Having a friend, Merlin found, was the most wonderful experience in the world. Cadmus was a sullen, quiet boy, but he and Merlin bonded in the library over their love for books. After a few hours sitting together in silence, Merlin plucked up the courage to start a conversation, all stilted words and awkward smiles. Before he knew it, he had a friend. He'd never had friends before. He was too different from the other boys his age, always having to be careful not to let his magic bleed through. He didn't know how to reach out to people, too scared of rejection. Scared of being discovered, even after his mother had warned him to be prudent, always.

Cadmus seemed to understand him without Merlin needing to say much of anything. They took to sitting together at lunch, to helping each other studying, and even, after a while, to swapping stories. Cadmus didn't laugh at him when Merlin talked about growing up poor as dirt with just his mother, until the flu took her and he had to fend for himself. Merlin felt his chest twist in sympathy when Cadmus told him snippets of his own childhood, of his witch, fey-like mother and abusive father. Of how it all came crashing around his ears in a nightmarish haze of blood and loss.

The air grew crisp, cloying with the scent of musk and rotting leaves belonging to late autumn. Trees were painted yellow and vermilion-red, vibrant with the earth's blood. One morning that October was drawing to an end, Merlin woke up with a peculiar sensation in the pit of his stomach. Like it was coiling into knots in breathless anticipation. He always felt strange around this time of year, his magic even more erratic than normal. Usually, he took care to stay at home, safely locked up where no one would see him.

Everything felt alive, groaning with static awareness. Merlin swore he could feel the grind and shift of the earth underneath his feet, heavy with deep, ageless magic. He could taste old enchantments on his tongue, a metallic tang, while the chilling wind brimmed with secrets. It was especially bad this year, surrounded by magic-users in a magic castle.

He dragged himself out of bed, tired and cranky, then staggered to the bathroom just as his dorm-
mates started stirring. He showered quickly, feeling vaguely more human as he staggered back out to the bedroom, yawning widely. As had become his habit, Cadmus was waiting for him in the common room, curled up on an armchair facing the depths of the Black Lake. He jumped up at the sight of Merlin, a grin splitting his face, an uncharacteristic display from the reserved boy.

"Morning," he chirped, falling into steps with Merlin. His eyes gleamed with excitement. Merlin couldn't remember seeing him in such a state before.

"You seem cheery," he remarked, then smiled to make sure his friend knew he meant no harm. Like him, Cadmus was full of insecurities, and needed reminding sometimes.

"It's Samhain," the boy replied, as though that explained everything. His eyes lit up even more in the face of Merlin's incomprehension, mischievous and delighted. "You'll see," he said, so Merlin shrugged and let it be.

He did, in fact, 'see'. It seemed that, during the night, someone had gone to great lengths to decorate the whole castle. Tinsels of wheat and holly hung along the walls and staircase railings. Suits of armour wore crowns of late-harvest flowers. There were red, orange and black candles floating everywhere, compensating for the low, watery light drifting in from outside. The smell of pumpkin and caramel permeated every room. Merlin understood why when he stepped in the Great Hall for breakfast. Carved, grinning pumpkins, big enough for three men to sit in, swaggered by the cloudy ceiling among the usual floating candles. The House tables were littered with bouquets of dry flowers, one last remanence of summer. The tabletops shuddered under the weight of candied fruits, which had joined the customary breakfast foods. Low, dark and purple silk banners draped the walls, giving a ceremonious air to the Hall. Great fires roared in each of the chimneys, crackling brighter than usual.

"What's all this?" Merlin muttered, Cadmus tugging his sleeve, urging him to the Slytherin table.

Salazar Slytherin took the time to explain the meaning of Samhain to his students. It was a day of witchcraft, where the world of the dead was rumoured to touch that of the living, the veil between the two stretching thin to its tearing point. It was a time-weathered tradition for their kind to celebrate this day, which also marked the end of the harvests, the time to usher cattle back from pasture.

The day slipped away from Merlin. He was too distracted by the swirls of magic, curling around him in delicate tendrils, to pay much attention in class. The teachers struggled to keep their lessons orderly, overwhelmed by the bubbling chaos of excitable teenagers. Of the three professors Merlin had that day, only Ravenclaw kept them in check, masterfully manipulating them into learning Samhain rituals. Both Bartholomew and Fortinbras gave them up as a bad job, let their pupils have free reigns over their time-slots.

By the time classes ended, Merlin was as impatient as everyone else for the Feast, which he'd been told had been spectacular the year before. He stampeded to the Great Hall along with his House-mates, listening to the flow of their chatter. Most of the other students had had the same idea, and were hurrying to dinner, fuelled by the urgency of adolescent hunger.

"This so, so good," he crowned, tearing a chunk of meat. He didn't know how they'd cook that duck, but it melted on the tongue in a burst of spices he couldn't identify, the faint tang of red wine lingering beneath.

"You're disgusting," Audra informed him, breaking off from her conversation with Ashton, a slender boy with curling scars stretching from his eyes. She made a grab for the roast pork lying in Merlin's plate, but he batted her away.
"G'roof," he munched, "The dish is right there."

He shoved the plate toward her, focusing back on eating. Cadmus was telling him about a spell he'd found, that would allow for instant, long-distance communication. The other boy was so enthused he'd barely touched his plate, gesturing wildly as he walked Merlin through the specifics. More food for me, Merlin thought, though he wasn't sure even his ravenous-self could eat through the ridiculously massive pile cooked goods laden on the House tables.

He was considering second servings of dessert – the crepes looked gorgeous, fluffed up golden-brown, but the cherry pie had already stretched his stomach to the limits of its admirable capacity – when the back of his mind pinged with awareness. He dropped his arm back down, crepes forgotten, frowning in concentration.

"You alright Merlin?" Cadmus asked, brows furled in worry.

"Ssh," Merlin replied, chasing after the feeling, a frisson curling around his spine, crackling down his nerves, pleasant and familiar, where had he felt this before – ?

Merlin jerked up, eyes sweeping through the Hall, anticipation tightening his stomach. He cursed himself for having eaten so much, making himself slow with food. He couldn't pinpoint the exact source of the shivers, but he could tell it was close, getting closer. Nothing hostile, he didn't think, dying to figure what, exactly, it was, recognition skirting the edges of his syrupy brain. On his second pass surveying the Hall, he spied a shadow gliding by the heavy double doors, and suddenly, like star-light exploding behind his eyes, he knew.

Harry.

"HARRY!" he yelped before he could think better of it, his heart giving a joyous whoop. He'd been wanting to talk to the boy for months.

Around him, all conversations died abruptly, the Second years' attention snapping to him quicker than if he'd stripped and started belly-dancing. Their silence spread like grassfire. Cadmus was looking at him with wide, faintly alarmed eyes, as though worried Merlin had lost his mind.

"What are you on about, Merlin?" Alfric asked, harsher than Merlin had ever heard him, and his stomach sunk like stone, because nothing was moving by the Great Hall's doors anymore. What if Merlin had been wrong –

After another moment of soul-crushing silence, the Great Hall's doors swung open, wood grinding on stone, deafening.

Harry Potter stood in the threshold, half in swaying candlelight, half in a silvery moonbeam. He lingered there, watching and being watched, an indecipherable expression on his face, and Merlin hadn't known silence could thicken. Even from the distance, he could see the way the young man's shirt clung to his skin, sodden with rain. It looked like summer-wear, a layer of thin, white linen, almost translucent with water, dark-bronze skin showing through. Down his chest, a patch of shirt had the reddish-pink tint of diluted blood. Merlin shivered in sympathy.

There was the scrapping sound of a chair being pushed back. Merlin glanced at the Head table to see Slytherin getting up. Because Merlin was the closest to the end of the Hall, he could see the man's hands curled in bloodless fists.

Harry took half a step in the Great Hall, expression morphing in something sheepish. Addressing everyone, though his eyes never left Salazar, he said, voice rebounding in the numb, cavernous
Harry hadn't really known what to expect when he'd decided to return to Hogwarts some five months after leaving like a thief in the night. He'd come to the conclusion, somewhere in a small village hugging the Black Sea, in the middle of a country that would one day become Turkey, that he had to head back, no matter how he was received. If only for the sake of his own sanity. He was in desperate enough need of counsel to overcome his urge to run away.

He'd tried for a quiet, discreet arrival, half-hoping he'd be able to get in and out of the castle without anyone but Salazar knowing he had been there.

As if.

"I'm going to kill you," Alfric seethed, and Harry thought he just might, given how hard the boy was squeezing him. He could hardly breathe.

"Alf," he heaved out with what little air was left in his lungs. "Alf, you're strangling me." He couldn't help hugging the boy back, hard, arms winding up around him to press him even closer, a bruising embrace. Something in him seemed to ease, relax for the first time in five months. He'd missed his friend. Seeing him well was a relief he couldn't begin to articulate through the lump in his throat.

Alfric was mumbling nonsense against his ear, snarling, furious. Harry could feel him shake in his arms, feel something wet drip down his skin, from where Alfric had buried his head in the crook of his neck.

"Sorry sorry sorry," he muttered back, adjusting his grip, shifting so the boy could rest more comfortably against him. "I'm so sorry I left like that. I had to, Alf, I just had to and I'm sorry."

"You're an arsehole Potter," someone told him. Harry looked up, shooting a watery smile at Audra who'd just spoken, the rest of the Slytherins nodding emphatically behind her.

"Don't squish him to death, Barden," Glenn said, looking reluctantly amused by the whole situation. "We only just got him back."

"Fuck off."

But Alfric let go of him, sniffling. Harry pretended he couldn't see him rub tears from his eyes. Immediately, the others took that as an invitation to approach.

"Harry!"

Harry braced himself just in time to pick up Ignotus when the boy flung himself at him, clinging like an affectionate octopus, babbling happily. The boy had gained some much-needed weight since they'd last seen each other. It felt good to have him back in his arms. Everyone started speaking at the same time, asking him questions, telling him what they had done during the summer, what he'd missed of the new school year. He didn't get much of anything, snippets of sentences here and there before the words were swallowed by others, but he didn't care. Gods, they've grown, he caught himself thinking, the lump in his throat growing bigger and bigger. All of the Slytherins had shot up like weeds during the summer, all knees and elbows and teenage lankiness. There was something different in the way the held themselves as well, a new gravity in
their posture. They had matured, having been given a glimpse of the adult world, a chunk of childhood forever lost to Forest's floor.

Harry chanced a glance at the rest of the Hall, unsurprised to see the other three Houses ogling the spectacle. The room was a lot more crowded than it had been last year. Harry counted at least a dozen new Slytherins, and just as many fresh faces for each of the other Houses, all peering at him with open curiosity. The House tables had been turned rectangular, the way they were back in his own time, with a Head table dressed at the end of the Hall for the teaching staff. He spied a few new additions there as well; evidently, the Founders had been recruiting help to deal with the growing student's population. The new professors looked baffled by the proceeding, shooting uncertain glances at the four Founders.

Once again feeling like he'd found his footing, Harry met Salazar's eyes, carefully tucking away his churning emotions, the thundering of his heart. When tendrils of Legilimency ghosted the edges of his mind, cool and feather-light, he opened his Occlumency shields a crack, enough to get a point across. We need to talk. Salazar gave a small nod.

"And that's when Bradley decked the idiot across the face. You should've seen it, it was brilliant – hey, is that blood?"

"Mm?" Harry had forgotten the stinging pain in his side. He waved a dismissive hand. "It's nothing," he assured his House-mates. "Just a scratch."

Alfric snorted. "Yeah, 'cos we've never heard that one before."

When Harry glared, the boy glared right back. Fondness welling up in his chest like a wave, Harry pounced, caught Alfric in a headlock. He proceeded to muse up the artistically groomed hair, ignoring the other boy's shirks.

"Right," he said when Alfric broke free, muttering insults under his breath. "I'll let you eat now."

Ignotus squeezed him around the waist, looking up with puppy-dog eyes. "You're not leaving are you?" he whined, lower lip jutting out in a pout.

Harry stifled a groan. He knew he was being manipulated, but Ignotus was too pathologically cute to resist. "I just need a bath, shrimp," he said, rubbing the boy's shoulders. "I'll see you in the common room, all right?"

Ignotus frowned, but consented to releasing him. One last smile at his House-mates, and Harry turned to the Head table. He dipped his head in a bow, sweeping a look at the four Founders, who had been observing the scene with amused interest.

"Excuse me, my ladies. My lords."

"Welcome home, Harry," Helga told him, sweet and beaming, speaking for all of them.

Harry shot her a grin, glad to see her again. He sneaked out the Great Hall, the buzz of conversations starting up behind him. Outside the doors, he paused, resting against a wall. He let out a shaky breath, an arm covering his eyes. A hollow laugh wanted to tear past his throat. Exhausted

Great Godric, here he was again. He couldn't believe he'd come back. It had felt like a sensible idea, at the time. To mount up the Thestral whose herd he'd helped set free, ask the skeletal horse to dash here. Home. He hadn't known what else to do. Weird things had been happening around him, more and more frequent and glaring as the pull of Samhain settled in his bones. Harry had
feared what would have happened to the Company if he'd stayed with them during that day. Hogwarts, at least, was well-warded.

Groaning, he detached himself from the wall. He started toward the Dungeons, his feet moving on their own accord. He had mixed feelings about being back. He ached with relief and stress and tiredness. He couldn't begin to make heads or tails of what he was feeling. For once, Occlumency wasn't helping.

"Let me in, please," he asked the snake guarding the Slytherin common room. The little carving rolled its eyes at him, but let him through without delay.

Harry stumbled, assaulted by the familiar smells and sounds of the place that had been his home in the past year. He had missed the soothing, water-green light sloshing in from the large windows. The scent of wood, leather, parchment and damp stone that floated through the air. The common room was a little less tidy than he remembered it being. There were clothes and school stuff strewn all over, enchanted paperplanes wheezing around, sparkly purple fumes wafting up from a simmering cauldron. A few pieces of furniture had been added. The room looked lived-in, homey for all its innate refinement.

Harry clamped down on the wave of homesickness rising up in this throat. He forced himself to breathe deep, to ease the clench of his fists when he realised the delicate silver instruments lining a nearby bookshelf had started rattling. He gave himself a moment to take it all in, get himself back under control. Then, hesitantly, he made his way to his old bedroom.

He pushed open the door, ready to close it again if it appeared to have been passed on to a new student. He fought off tears when he saw it hadn't. His cauldron and potions tools were still tucked in the corner where he'd left them. A couple of books he remembered reading were still lying open on his desk, along with a few parchment scraps of notes he'd taken. His cloak was draped over the chair, the rest of his clothes hanging neatly in the wardrobe, house-elves courtesy. Even the Slytherin banner he'd made as a joke was still hanging from the wall. The Christmas fairy lights his House-mates had given him hadn't budged from where they coiled around his bedposts.

Harry let his rucksack and sword drop on his bed, then slipped in the adjoining bathroom. He opened the hot-water faucet to as hot as it could get, then stripped of his clothes, relived when billowing steam started fogging up the room. After spending five months in summer-hot countries, the Scottish weather nipped him to his freezing blood.

He eased himself in the warm water, hissing when soap bubbles seared the cut in his side. He hadn't taken the time to heal himself on the way home, too anxious to even notice the pain. Thankfully the wound had stopped bleeding about halfway through, though his jostling around had succeeded in reopening it. It was weeping a sluggish red trickle. Harry ground his teeth, frustrated with himself. He was about to reach for his wand when the damaged skin below his ribs started tickling. He froze, half-risen out of his bath, and watched, bemused, as torn skin knitted itself back together, leaving only a faint, silvery scar behind.

"Bloody hell," he swore. Was it another bout of accidental magic? It felt like it. Harry hadn't had so much troubles controlling himself since he'd inflated Aunt Marge like a monstrous balloon in Third year. Something was definitely wrong with his magic, had been since that night in the Forest, power he hadn't known he possessed bursting out of him.

He washed quickly, cheering up at the thought of feeling clean again. It had been months since he'd washed with anything more than cleaning spells. While the magic did its work, it left an itchy sensation afterwards, and was never as good as an old-fashioned shower. He rinsed off, sighing in contentment.
As he was getting out, he caught a glimpse of himself in the body-length mirror. For one dizzying moment, he couldn't identify the man facing him. He thought he was seeing his father, someone having gotten a picture of James Potter, and stuck it to Harry's bathroom mirror as a joke. The illusion went away when Harry squinted, noticed the green almond-shaped eyes, the chiselled cheekbones he recognised from his mother's face. He blinked at himself, the mirror throwing the stunned expression back at him.

Good Gods, Harry thought, straightening to his full height. He had grown. He towered a few good inches above what he remembered from the last time he'd seen himself properly. He had resigned himself, many years ago, to being smaller than average, the Dursley's treatment having stunted his growth. But while he would never be as tall as Ron or even Malfoy, Harry thought no one could call him small now. Muscles had filled out his scrawny frame, lean and work-defined. His skin, which had always looked sickly to him, had darkened with a healthy tan after months in the sun. He was only a few shade lighter than his father had been. From under his mess of black hair, the pale, lighting-bolt scar on his forehead stood out sharply against otherwise bronze skin.

Harry rubbed a hand on his chin. A faint dusting of stubble covered his cheeks, making him look older, more mature. His jaw had squared, sharpening the line of his face.

He looked like an adult, Harry realised. Like a full-grown man. He wondered, a little perplexed, where his childhood and teenage years had slipped off to. They'd been sucked to war and the weight of duty, he supposed, a sudden necessity for strength in independence.

Shaking his head, Harry padded out of the bathroom. He dug out a pair of trousers and a warm jumper from his wardrobe, shrugged them on, and braced himself to go searching for Salazar.

Cast under a heavy Disillusionment Charm, he edged back to the common room. Several students lingered there, including all of his friends, huddled together on the room's fluffiest rug, Alfric and Audra propped up on a windowsill. Clusters of newcomers were talking together. A few were hunched over their homework while others played an early version of Exploding Snap, if the alarmed squeals and smell of burnt hair were anything to go by.

Someone cleared their throat behind him. Harry whirled around, coming face to face with Salazar. His heart gave such a loud thump Harry was sure the Founder heard it. Case in point, the man was looking at the exact spot where Harry stood, though the young man knew for a fact he couldn't see him. Sila was coiled around his waist and shoulders, hissing happy greetings. Salazar bent his head in clear invitation, then stalked out of the room. Harry followed a few paces behind.

They didn't go very far. Salazar led him down the next poorly lit corridor, their steps echoing ominously in the stone hallway. He walked through an archway, disappearing from sight behind grey rock. After a pause, Harry went in after him, the tingle of enchantments washing over his skin.

Like the Slytherin common room, what Harry guessed were Salazar's private quarters were well-furbished, though the primary colour scheme of green and silver wasn't as obvious here as it was there. Candles and oils lanterns lit the place in a warm glow, now that the Lake was night-darkened outside the windows. The main area was wide and welcoming, a sofa facing the depths of the Lake, plush armchairs on either side of a roaring fire, a low table set on a thick silver-threaded rug. The walls were covered in rich, foreign tapestries. There were even a few portraits who eyed Harry with deep suspicion when he shimmered into sight. Bookshelves groaned under the weight of old-looking books and journals, and an odd assortment of exotic objects Harry thought Salazar must have found while he was travelling the world.

Salazar strode toward a sideboard glass cabinet, full of bottles of multi-coloured alcohol. He poured two glasses of amber liquid, handing one of them to Harry before knocking back his own in one
gulp. As he went for a refill, Harry took the opportunity to cast another glance around. He spied a varnished wooden door off to the side. It led to Salazar's bedroom, with a private bath off of that – though Harry was careful not to let his eyes linger in either of those directions. There was another door atop a flight of steps, which appeared to lead to a spacious office, complemented with its own library.

"So," said Salazar, causing Harry to jump guiltily. The man kept his back to him, staring at the algae growing against his windows. "I didn't think you would come back."

Something in his tone incited Harry to choose his words with great care. I missed you, he almost said, catching himself just in time. It wouldn't be a lie, but rather a truth he would prefer to keep to himself. Besides, it wasn't why he'd decided to come back, though the intensity of his response surprised him. There was a warm, fuzzy feeling growing in his chest, taking shape. It uncoiled from his heart, deliciously painful, before dropping and filling his whole body with vicious, tingling heat.

I didn't think you would come back.

And the truth was, "Neither did I."

At long last, Salazar glanced at him, eyes taking him in before snapping back to his face, dark storm-grey. "What changed your mind?"

"I – " Harry stuttered. He cleared his throat, vaguely wondering where his speech ability had fucked off to. Remembering the tumbler in his hands, he raised it to his lips, downed a large gulp. The alcohol burned down his throat like liquid fire, making his eyes water. "Well. It's a long story. Mind if I sit?"

"Please."

They settled on the couch. Harry kicked off his shoes to sit cross-legged while Salazar angled himself toward him. Another swallow of liquid courage, and Harry started talking. While he steered clear of the reasons why he'd left, he gave Salazar a rundown of his months abroad, detailed in a way he'd never been in his letters. He told Salazar about Stonehenge, what he'd tried with it. He told him about wandering all the way to France, about Ambroise, the standing offer to be bitten into Vampire-hood. He talked about Marya and Nick and the Company, the work they'd done together. He described their mission to retrieve Merlin, his suggesting to take to boy to the Druids.

"There was this woman – Gwenshlean. I wanted to remember what had happened to me. Y'know, how I got sent to the past. Thought I could learn something useful from it. So she offered to practice some sort of ritual on me. She gave me something to drink. I don't think it was a potion, not really. It made me – shrink in my own brain. I started seeing things. Memories. They spun backwards until I was in the Forest that night. Then I was living through the school year. I met you for the first time." Harry shuddered, finishing off his drink. The burn didn't make him wince anymore. "Then I was – there. Back home. My back was bleeding. Death Eaters were all over. And time was – time was. God."

He put his hands in his hair, closing his eyes. Without a word, Salazar got up from the couch. He rummaged around his liquor cabinet, coming back with the bottle of Firewhiskey they'd been drinking. He poured Harry another glass, then did the same for himself.

"Time was what?"

"Fractured."
The word sat between them, world-heavy. Harry sucked in a deep breath, hating the way it trembled on the way out, Salazar's scent all around him.

"Time was splintering like glass, with me at the center. It looked like – like veins going out of my body. And the cracks – they were all the same as the one in the Forest. The things I could see beyond them – Jesus. Salazar, I think. I – things have been happening around me. Since that night. Weird things. People have been hearing voices. Objects have vanished without reason." Harry worked around the tightness in his throat. "I think it's all my fault," he whispered at last. "I don't know what to do."

He glanced up, catching a strange expression flickering over Salazar's face. Unsurprised resignation.

Harry stiffened. "You knew," he said, a statement rather than a question.

"I suspected."

"For how long? And why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Harry," Salazar warned, and Harry realised that the low table, along with most of the room, was levitating several feet in the air, pushed up by the anger bubbling up his belly. "Harry, calm down."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" Harry repeated through ground teeth, feeling his hands shake, a dreadful tearing in his chest. "Bloody hell. This concerns me much more than it does you. How could you not tell me?"

"Because I hoped I was wrong." Salazar passed a hand over his face, an expression of deep pain and anguish crossing his features before vanishing again. Harry would have missed it if he'd blinked. But he saw, and slowly, the low table eased back to the ground. His heart was lurching, aching, against his breastbone when Salazar spoke again, "Stars, Harry. Don't you understand what this means?"

Harry sprung up, pacing. Dizzy with restlessness. He didn't want to know. He felt sick. Dirty. From what Harry knew of Salazar, the tidbits of information the man had let slip through, the things Harry understood from guesswork and instinct – the Founder of the House of Snakes wasn't what he'd call a squeamish man. He'd had his fair share of hardship in life. He'd faced down an Obscurus and won. He'd gone into battle expecting to die – and he'd won that, too. Whatever made him look desperate, Harry was pretty sure he didn't want to know.

But it was Harry's responsibility to make sense of this mess. He loathed that simple truth with all his heart. No one else would right the world for him. He'd learned that a long time ago.

"What does it mean?" he asked, sipping another mouthful of Firewhiskey, bracing a hand against the cool window behind him.

"It means." Salazar looked away, then sought Harry's eyes and held him in place. "It means it's not going to stop. There's a reason why wizards don't time-travel great distances, Harry. It's simply not supposed to happen. You're an anomaly that shouldn't be here. It's just as you saw in your vision. You're a rock thrown on a sheet of thin ice. The ice is splintering around you. The longer you stay, the more splinters there will be. Soon, the ice is going to break, and everything that's been sleeping beneath will be free to come up to the surface."

About as bad as Harry had feared, then. Slowly, he sunk to the ground, sitting on the floor, his legs two useless tubes of melted plastic.
"What happens if the monsters break free?" he heard himself asking, so far away he thought he might have stuck his head out the window, in the Black Lake.

"You know what happens."

*Death,* Harry thought, dimly remembering the Night in the clearing, a terrible crack in the Forest. *Death and rot and ruin.*

"All right. How do we stop it?" When Salazar's silence lingered, crushing and infinite, Harry looked up from his drawn knees, feverish with the wish to know. "Salazar. What can be done?"

The other man's face was blank, wiped clean of emotions. "I don't know," he said, cool and measured.

"Liar."

"Harry –"

"You're *lying.* Do you really think I can't tell? Fuck, Salazar." Harry stood up, stumbling with shock and drunkenness. He went to Salazar, put both hands on the couch by the man's back, effectively trapping him between his arms. "Salazar," he said again, softer now that they were inches apart. "Please."

Because they were so close, Harry saw the exact moment when Salazar gave in. The subtle cracks in his façade, helpless rage leaking through, seeping all the way to Harry's mind.

"I don't know for certain. But I believe – should the disturbance be absorbed back by the fissures. I think they would heal themselves."

Harry's knees gave out. "The disturbance being me."

"Yes."

"Oh."

*Oh.* He was going to die. Not in a war. Not by Voldemort's hands. Harry was going to die to appease the eldritch gods that lurked between the cracks of the world, a sacrificial lamb to slaughter. Would it be quick? he wondered. Would it hurt? He could remember the awful, life-sucking pain of the crack latching on to him, worst than the Cruciatus, worst than Dementors. Yes, he reckoned it would hurt quite a bit.

*I'm never going to go home,* he realised, distantly aware of the roar of magic around him, the trembling of his body. The hands on his face, in his hair.

"Harry. Oh, Harry. Of course you're going to go home." Salazar bent down, Harry bracketed between his thighs, until their foreheads were touching. They breathed the same air, frantic gasps for Harry, deep, steady as clockwork for Salazar. "Listen to me." Salazar pressed harder against him, forcing him to focus, the grey of his eyes encompassing the whole of Harry's world. "*Listen.* We have some time still. We'll find another way. We *will.*"

*And if we don't, this damned earth might as well burn to the ground.*

Harry swallowed, his thoughts clearing. Sila had warped a loose coil around his shoulders, a comforting weight of cool scaled flesh keeping him close to her master. He was still kneeling between Salazar's thighs. He felt completely helpless against the flush of arousal that tightened his
stomach when he took stock of their position. Apparently, impeding death was nothing on
eighteen-year-old's hormones. He didn't think he'd ever been more disgusted with himself. More
lost. More tired, or frantic with restlessness.

"I need a drink," he said, and, absurdly, Salazar laughed.
A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal

Chapter Notes

WARNING, horniness *cough*straight*cough* ahead.

Seriously, if you're not comfortable with sex/mention of sex/masturbation, skip the first bit of this chapter. It's not as graphic as it could get, but still.

Harry very carefully levelled up an eyelid, then hurried to shut it again. A merciless sunbeam, a thin slice of lake-dimmed golden-green, had slithered through a crack in the curtains, straight to the bed, was making his brain bleed. It felt as though the inner surface of his skull was being pounded on with roofing nails. Electricity crackled along abused synapses – cells shrivelling in a cascade of lightning sparks. His mouth was blotter-dry, stuffed with cotton balls, tasting as though something foul had crawled on his tongue to die during the night.

Drowsy, sleep-slack, he rolled on his stomach with a low groan, face nuzzling at the pillow in a vain attempt to meld with it. The pain of hangover, intent as it was on squeezing all his grey-matter in a tight, fist-sized pellet, was tempered by the lazy, mellow warmth pulsing down from between his legs. He frowned at the sensation, the strange demanding ache of it. Dredging up the attention of his last braincells, it was easy enough to focus on, let it drown out everything else.

He was hard.

Full and sensitive, pleasure licking at his belly in sleepy, swelling strokes.

Harry made a soft, surprised sound with the back of his throat. His skin tingled all over, twinged in the most delicious way, blood rushing down in a heavy throb. God, he couldn't even remember when was the last time he'd been this aroused. He'd been stressed, famished, exhausted for the better part of the last few years. It had done wonders on tamping down teenage hormones, but now –

Panting wetly, he pressed his face harder against the pillow, his hips giving a mindless, shallow thrust, then another, more pronounced. The pressure felt light-heading against the throbbing length of his cock. Hesitantly, he did it again of his own accord, seeking more friction between the sheets and the hardness lined against his stomach. He stifled a moan, a hand coming up to grip his hair, the other skating down his chest, utterly unable to help himself, nerves jumping at the light touch.

His mind, addled, sluggish, kept playing flashes before his eyes, a half-remembered dreamy haze. Sleek muscles played under pale skin, sweat-slick, lips parted around a silent gasp, a fall of dark hair framed fevered eyes. A toned, male body moved with him, parting his legs, bracketing him between strong arms. It was no longer his own hand stroking him, fingers squeezed tight around hot flesh. A kiss-red mouth sank down, lower, shining with spit, maddeningly warm as he pictured it swallowing him to the root.

He came like this, half-asleep, still a little drunk, pressing down on the mattress with his hand moving between his legs, muffling the soft whimpers of his throat against the pillow. Orgasm, the sweet relief of it, washed over him in a sudden wave, leaving him heaving for breath, white bursts exploding behind his eyelids.
Harry laid still for a while afterwards, shaking slightly from the aftershocks, a lather of sweat cooling on his skin. The beating tattoo of his heart slowed by degrees. He rolled away from the mess, loose-limbed, an arm over his eyes. Getting himself back under control, his mind completely, blissfully blank. It didn't last very long. Growing trepidation plucked at the renewed fog of lethargy creeping up on him. He let his arm bounce beside him, eyes squinting open, grimacing at the light.

He froze, choking on the breath caught in his mouth, entire body sizing with horror, alarm like a cold sharp bolt through the chest. For one terrible, confused moment, he didn't understand where he was, or how he'd gotten there. Then he remembered.

"Oh no," he breathed, mute with panic. "Oh no no no – "

He was in Salazar's room. In Salazar's bed.

How – ? How had this happened? How could this have happened? What had he done?

Staggering swiftly out of bed, he looked around wildly. Though he was alone in the room, his cheeks burned with embarrassment. He wondered at the sight he would make, should Salazar walk in now. With his hair mussed and his cheeks red, a damp, sticky patch drying at the front of his trousers. Utterly debauched.

Cursing, he dove for the bedside table, lunging for his wand, hands shaking notably. He shoved the bedsheets back, cast the strongest cleaning spells he knew before turning the wand on himself. In a matter of seconds, every trace of evidence had disappeared. Harry flopped back on the bed with a heavy sigh, head bent over his knees. Willing his heart to quit banging against his ribcage.

Groaning, he shook his head. He couldn't believe he'd just done that. God. He hadn't even known he was capable of it. He knew it was normal. He'd shared a dorm with four other teenaged boys. He'd heard just about every broom-polishing joke there was. His dorm-mates used to laugh about it, jesting whenever one of them pulled Silencing Charms on his bedcurtains. It wasn't the first time Harry had woken up hard and aching after a wet dream, even. But it had never been like that before. Mindless and dirty, pushing unthinkingly for the edge of release, no other thought in his mind but how good it felt.

Sweet Merlin. He'd done it in Salazar's bed, too. Where Salazar slept. The man's scent still clung to his skin, to the sheets he'd just left. Harry felt his whole body flush with something that wasn't all shame.

Where was Salazar, anyway? How had Harry ended up in his bed? Where had he slept? A dreadful though crossed Harry's mind, left him reeling with fresh panic. What if he'd done something in his sleep? He knew it wasn't unusual for him to speak or trash when he dreamt. What if he'd grabbed Salazar, pressed up against him? What if he'd moaned his name? Was that why the man hadn't been in his own bed when Harry had woken up?

Huffing out a deep, heavy sigh, he clambered up to his feet. He needed a shower, but didn't dare impose on Salazar anymore that he had already. He located his shirt, belt and boots, which he didn't remember taking off, or being taken off him. He dressed as slowly as he could, combing a hand through his hair in a half-heated attempt to make himself presentable. He strained his ears for any noise coming from the living room.

After spending a good half-hour fussing over his clothes, his hair, the bed, Harry came to the excruciating conclusion that he'd run out of ways to stall the inevitable. He couldn't just stand there and stare at the door forever. He'd have to face the music eventually, gauge the damage done. With any luck, nothing had happened as far as Salazar was concerned. The Founder remained blissfully
ignorant of any and all thought about him plaguing Harry's mind. And even if he wasn't, surely even he had had embarrassing dreams before? He couldn't fault Harry for something he'd done in his sleep, without being fully aware of his own actions, could he?

Bracing himself for a fight, for disgust, for having to apologize, Harry headed down to the living room. Internally, he prayed Salazar wouldn't be there. He could sneak out, avoid the Founder for a day or two, then they could both pretend nothing had happened.

"Harry."

Salazar was there.

Heart leaping in panic, Harry sought him out, body tense as a bowstring about to snap. His heart leaped again for a very different reason when he caught sight of Salazar. The Founder stood on the threshold of his chambers as though he'd just walked in. He was dressed as lightly as Harry had ever seen him; down to a loose white shirt with rolled-up sleeves that showed the wiry length of his forearms, a neckline that fell down his chest, leaving bare his throat, the dip of his collarbones, the shift of pectoral muscles. Salazar had his hands buried in slack trousers, hanging dangerously low on the jut of his hipbone. His hair was messy, undone, sliding across his face in heavy locks. He looked soft and casual, desperately human.

Harry was sized by the strange thought, I want to see him like this every morning of my life, darting through the murky waters of his mind before vanishing again.

"Hi," he said lamely, entirely at loss for words.

Salazar was the first to look away, standing there at the edges of his living quarters, as though he couldn't bear the openness displayed on his own face. "Did you sleep well?" he asked the wall beside Harry's head.

Harry flushed, his cheeks burning. Was this a reference to his dream, a hidden quip lurking behind the inquiry? Or was he being paranoid, Salazar was simply being polite? "Fine," he said, aiming for nonchalant and missing by a mile. "Er. Did you? Sleep?" A thought occurred to him. Where did you sleep?" And then, because he'd been a Gryffindor in another life, he braced himself and said, "Sorry I took your bed."

Though the Founder's expression never changed, Harry swore he heard Salazar draw a deep breath. For a moment, he thought he saw shadows shift around the other man, cloaking him in darkness, but the impression vanished like fog on glass after a blink.

"I put you there," Salazar said, mild as milk. "Let'sss just sleep. Everything's always better when you ssssleep.'

"Bloody hell, we were so drunk," Harry breathed, a touch hysterical. He couldn't even tell how
much he'd imagined, or whether any of it was real.

"How's the head?" Salazar bit out, heavily laced with sarcasm.

Harry's head was being split open with a rusted battle axe. Every noise clonked inside his skull like it was an echo chamber. It seemed the acid from his stomach was busy eating through his skin. It was a nauseating, squirmy ache. He wasn't sure he'd sobered up completely, feeling floaty-headed and heavy-limbed.

"Dreadful," he admitted. He cleared his throat, wincing immediately at the added ringing in his ears. "Hey, I don't imagine I – Y'know. That I haven't – Uh – " Tried to touch you kiss you lick you fuck you. "I haven't – Done – anything?" Inappropriate, anything I shouldn't even have thought about doing with you, a teacher, with you, Salazar Slytherin, whose great-great-great-great grandson I'll have to kill.

Salazar gave a considering pause. It lasted an eternity. "You went on for quite some time about something called a Ford Anglia? It's become sentient apparently. I'm not entirely sure. You kept switching tongues. You also mentioned a man who doesn't have a nose. Seemed to make you rather angry."

"Oh." Harry sagged against the doorway in relief. The wood dug in his back, solid, prompting another flash to flit behind his eyes. They're in the doorway, Harry with his hands on Salazar's hips, pushing him against the frame. Salazar lets him, pulls him in, eyes wide with an air of focused wonder. Harry rests his weight on him, thighs, hips, stomachs, chest's coming together in a single line of warmth. Arms close around waists, a fall of dark hair over Harry's shoulders, his nose brushing the delicate flesh behind Salazar's ear, lips hovering close.

The vision flickered, faded, no more real than a frayed strip of mist evaporating with the morning sun. Harry flushed, his heart was hammering through his chest. Surely, surely this was something he had imagined, made up from all pieces.

"Oh." He forced a smile, looking away to hide the thoughts lurking at the forefront of his mind. "Er. Nothing else?"

" – Not that I can think of."

Harry didn't immediately understand the pang of disappointment that tightened his stomach. Salazar hadn't looked disgusted or reproachful in his dream-memory. He hadn't looked at Harry as though he was a freak for what he was feeling. Harry would have liked that to be real.

"Right. Great." He straightened away from the doorway, ignoring the stories it whispered. "Sorry I imposed on you anyway."

He'd be alright, Harry decided. Eventually, he'd be alright. It would take him a while to shake off the confusing mix of feeling assaulting him at the thought of Salazar, but he'd manage. He had so far. He was a man now. He could deal with simple, clear-cut attraction. It was only logical. Salazar was a ridiculously attractive man. Being around him was going to be painful for a while, Harry was sure. But he'd grow out of it. It was pointless and hurtful to keep wanting someone he couldn't have. The sooner his traitorous body understood that, the better off he would be.

Because Harry was so busy reasoning with himself, he missed the way Salazar was looking at him. This story - and their morning - would have gone a lot differently if he hadn't.
Harry fled the dungeons after collecting his things. He didn't meet up with anyone on the way to the Great Hall. He didn't know what time it was, but he figured most of the students had to be up and about already. He was looking forward to seeing his friends, though he couldn't say what their reaction to him would be, now that they'd had the whole night to process the news of his return.

As he'd guessed, the Great Hall was crowded with students staring groggily down at their breakfast, with all the sullenness of teenagers who would trade their grandmothers for five more minutes to burrow back in bed. A few early-risers, more awake than the rest, were chatting happily, garnering dark glares from their neighbours. Once Harry's presence registered, most of them turned to look at him curiously, whispered words following his path across the Hall.

"Harry!" Ignatus beamed at him from the Slytherin table, gesturing wildly in greetings.

Harry returned the wave. As he neared closer, Alfric took hold of his arm, pulled him toward the bench, Audra sliding over to make place between them. Harry smiled gratefully at the gesture. Though he was used to it by now, he didn't like the attention he was attracting.

"You okay there, Potter?" Audra asked him, narrowing her eyes at the boy she'd just manhandled from his seat when he opened his mouth to protest.

"Fine," Harry assured her, settling between them.

"You sure mate?" Alfric nudged his shoulder. "No offence, but you look like crap. Long night?"

Harry choked on his tea, scalding his tongue. "You have no idea. "I'm fine," he repeated. "Bit of a headache is all."

"We looked for you last night. Couldn't find you."

Harry made a grab for a platter of scones, still warm and buttery. "Was with Salazar."

Alfric and Audra exchanged an odd look. "All night?" the girl asked delicately. "That why you look like a bit of chewed up cake Rosalind accidentally sat on?"

Harry didn't cough swallowing a piece of pastry, but it was a near thing. "Wha?" he asked, eyes watering. "They don't know, he told himself firmly through his creeping suspicion. "They can't know. This is the tenth century for goodness' sake. "Wait, who's Rosalind?"

Audra brushed the question away. "We know you never made it to your room. We had alarms set up. Thought you might've gone again."

"I haven't," Harry told them, voice a tad too high. "Didn't mean to leave in the first place. I was just – you know, after – I couldn't. Couldn't stay. Not after everything."

Alfric slung an arm over his shoulders, pulling him in a comforting half-hug. "Yea, we figured. It's been tough. Specially for you." He paused, chewing on his words, eyes flicking to Audra before focusing on Harry again. "You know it wasn't your fault, right? We never blamed you for any of it." He glanced around. Harry startled to find the other Slytherins listening in on the conversation. They all gave grave, empathic nods when they felt his eyes on them. "None of us did. You saved everyone back there."

"Not everyone," Harry whispered, his throat painfully tight. He set his jaw, drew in a shaky breath. "It's good to be back." He returned Alfric's embrace, felt some unnamed tension melt from the boy's frame.
After a few moments, his House-mate seemed to come back to himself. "Right," he said, looking suitably embarrassed by the mushiness of the whole thing. He scratched the patched beginnings of stubble on his cheeks as though to reassure himself of his own manliness, a blush flaming up his ears. "Well. Glad you're here. 'Twas growing dull without you."

"You men are such girls," Audra told them both with some disgust. She set a gleaming, malicious gaze on Harry. "Still doesn't explain why it is you didn't spend last night in your own bed, Potter. One might think you were up to nefarious deeds."

Harry gave her a cold smile. He'd been a Slytherin long enough to recognize a challenge when he heard one. Though by a common accord he'd been more or less forgiven for leaving without a word, it didn't exempt him from some measure of revenge. He'd gleaned a few snippets from Audra's childhood last year. She had punched a Ravenclaw boy after he'd called her mother a whore, insinuating Audra had also taken up the family business. The coiled, hurtful set of her shoulders afterwards had told Harry enough about the portion of truthfulness in that boy's statement. He figured if there was anyone here who wasn't blind to the ways of the world, who could perceive his attraction to Salazar for what it was, it would be Audra.

"Careful now, Audra," he warned her quietly, only half-jesting.

The girl flashed him an unimpressed look, but didn't push any further. Harry untangled himself from Alfric, only to wrap a loose arm around Ignotus, who'd somehow crawled in the small gap between them to climb on Harry's lap.

Harry was momentarily distracted when Salazar slipped through the Great Hall's door. He had dressed, a black waistcoat with silver volutes curling on the fabric over his white shirt. He had changed his slacks for dark ridding breeches. He had combed his hair back in a neat braid, looking every bit of the lord he had once been. He sat down at the head table, nodding at the other teachers. Harry glanced at him, feeling a little nervous, everything that had happened this morning churning up inside him. Salazar served himself some breakfast, nodding with a distracted air at the woman beside him. She was one of the new staff members, Harry noted. He thought there was an awful lot of fluttering eyelashes going on for someone engaging in a simple conversation. Perhaps she had some sort of eye condition.

Harry scowled down at his eggs when Salazar turned to her with a smile, angling toward her to answer something she had said. Did Salazar like her? She was pretty-ish, Harry supposed. Big nose, though. Reminded him of Severus bloody Snape.

"So," he bit out, stabbing his eggs a little more viciously than they deserved. There was a dark-red, ugly feeling unfurling in his chest, a beast with bare, gleaming teeth, tearing at his breastbone. "Tell me about the new staff."

Glenn happily launched himself in a full-blown, point-by-point essay on Why Things Were Better Last Year with a strong focus on What Is Happening To Our Proud And Noble School, and on How The New Teachers Were Not Up To Standard, But Particularly Mrs Burke Who Stank Like Fish And Wouldn't Find The Right End Of Her Wand If Given A Map. The others joined in to the bitching with unbridled enthusiasm.

After breakfast, Harry didn't accompany his year-mates to class. He wasn't sure what the Founders meant to do with him. He preferred to wait for instructions rather than risk imposing where he wasn't welcome. Besides, he didn't know that he wanted to go back to being a student. Somehow, he thought that that particular skin wouldn't fit him anymore.

He spent most of his morning meandering through the castle, reacquainting himself with Hogwarts
until he felt like he'd shaken off the stress induced by a life on the road. Getting his thoughts in order. He went to visit the Thestrals he'd brought home with him. He found the lead mare at the edges of the Forbidden Forest. A small herd had joined her during the night. Three foals were munching on the remains of several rabbits.

"Hello girl," Harry murmured, stroking the mare's long, skeletal neck. The lashes on her side were healing well. "You called some friends, eh?"

She snorted, nuzzling his hand in friendly greeting. Harry had helped get her out of a cage a fortnight ago. He'd seen the violence done to her and snapped. He'd almost killed her captors in a bout of accidental magic, a red haze descending upon him. Even his team-mates, Nick among them, had nearly gotten hurt. The look on their faces afterwards had been the last straw. Harry had known he needed help, needed someone who could contain him and his wild, screeching magic before he took a life without meaning to.

"How have you been, beautiful?" he asked, idly running his fingers through the Thestral's dark, leathery skin. "You like the Forest? You can stay as long as you like, you know."

He left her the slices of red meat he'd brought from the kitchens, making a note to bring more later. Though Thestrals were more than capable of hunting for their own food, Harry thought they could use the little complement while they recovered. He hadn't thought he'd find himself with a whole herd to look after. He stayed a while, content to lounge against tree bark, watching the dynamics of the herd, before crisp wind and heavy clouds drove him back inside.

His House-mates joined him in the kitchens for lunch, eager to forgo the Great Hall's noisiness. They filled him in on the new happenings in the castle. Harry traded a few of his summer adventures for their own. They steered clear of anything that had happened before last summer, the mood staying light-hearted throughout. After the meal, a few of the older students chose to skive class with him. They found a secluded spot in a corner of the Astronomy Tower, protected from the wind but with a dizzying, sprawling view of the castle's grounds. They conjured rugs, plaids and blue flames in marmalade jars to keep warm. They talked the afternoon away, getting full on sweets and laughter.

Harry didn't see Salazar again that evening, for which he was grateful. Ever since morning, the jealous flare in his gut had dwindled to a low, manageable burn, but a burn nonetheless. It hadn't truly left him all day. It felt as though the emotion was sucking up his life force, feeding on what little energy he had. By the time Harry staggered into bed that night – his own bed, thankfully – he was completely drained. He wasn't sure he'd be able to cast a Lightning Charm if his life depended on it. He was exhausted, lethargic as though he'd spent the whole day playing Quidditch rather than joking around with a bunch of friends. The world rocked from side to side when he closed his eyes.

In his sleep, the darkness that had plagued him for months was there to greet him.

{}{}

In the darkness, the world was like a dream, like smoke dissipating on fingertips. It might as well have been blown away by a freak storm. It might as well have never existed at all. The darkness he came to know wasn't like what lingered in the deep space between stars. It wasn't crisp and clean and endlessly beautiful. Instead, this darkness, the darkness that made up every corner of his life, was thick, liquid, pungent with the scent of rot and death and despair. When all other senses had been robbed from him and smell was all he had, that particular fragrance threatened to drive him mad. He suffocated, alone in yawning, sticky blackness.

Although, he wasn't completely alone. There were things living in the dark, he was sure of it. Not
lost, imprisoned souls like himself. No, there were times when the shadows seemed to come alive. Demon-like creatures scuttled in the dark, chortling at his misery with torn-up throats. Malevolent beasts smirked and stared and stalked him on silent feet, edging closer and closer the longer he was here. He was petrified at the thought of what they would do to him if they ever caught him.

So he ran. He pushed his way through that inky, oily darkness, retching up the acid that burned his belly. His heart threatened to hammer out of his chest. His eyes were dry, itched from constant searching. He could feel gleeful stares prickling his neck, but he never saw anything. The darkness was absolute; it was more than merely an absence of light, but was an entity of its own.

He didn't know how long he'd been there for. Time was meaningless, a non-concept. Perhaps this had always been his life. Perhaps he'd been born here, in the dark, and he'd die here too. Or perhaps he was dead already, and this was the afterlife. He didn't care. Even as he could feel himself dissolving, darkness starting to seep in the cracks of his mind, he continued on, scrambling away. He escaped the countless eyes, the shadows grinning hyena-smiles.

Then, one day or second or month or year, a burst of something appeared in the distance. He didn't know what something was, but he figured it couldn't be any worst than the nothing that had been surrounding him so far. He picked his way toward it, whatever it was, stumbling wobbling and sobbing.

Light, he realised, awed, forgotten memories stirring awake in faint recognition. Light, a breeze of cool grass, dirt after rain, people. There were people just within reach. He'd forgotten what people were. The light was calling to him, gentle encouragements. Something that might be a name. Didn't he use to have a name before? Could he find it again?

The shadows quivered with suspicion, possibly sensing the flare of hope kindling low in his gut. They were too late. He shuffled forward, one last lurching step, and he –

He jostled awake.

The sky was grey, tumultuous, rain-heavy, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Two ravens circled overhead, cawing after each other. Pebbles rolled under his hands, dug in his back. Painful. A relief. He could smell wet grass and dirt and the rich, wooden rot of Autumn. Wind sussured along his thin, touch-starved skin, hummed in his ears. His lungs burned like he'd never drawn breath before. Maybe he hadn't.

He was cold but not cold. He was shaking. Trembling like a newborn leaf under the influx of sensations. His eyes stung from too much brightness. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know –

Something warm and alive gripped his shoulder. He grunted. Too much pressure. Too much newness. Being born was a messy, harrowing business.

"Weorð mynd ēower rihte?"

He startled, air catching in his throat, he choked on it. His belly ached, squirmed, tied into knots. His heart rattled his teeth. He felt like he might throw up. He grappled for the jagged pebbles in his hands, squeezed hard, until a trickle of blood warmed his palms. The weight of the earth under him was crushing, pulling at his every limb, at his ribcage. His eyes sought the brightness of the sun. There were no shadows here. No demon-grinning eyes, chortling at him from the deep, deep dark.

The hand on his shoulder tightened. He could feel the grind of his bones beneath the stretched span of his skin. A mooring line. He breathed through his fading shudders, tortuously, delightfully
alive.

"Hwæt hwugu êow endeðræst ûpweardes hêr?"

He dragged his eyes from the sky, the ravens chasing each other in circles, wings batting against the stormy wind. He blinked against the light that lingered, clouding his sight.

"Mm?" he groaned, his throat raw, scrapping like sandpaper. How many months had it been since he'd last spoken?

The person beside him, a man, had a lined, wrinkled face, pinched with worry. He was dressed in a heavy woollen coat, the fabric rough, dirt-brown. Tufts of greying hair poked out from under the flaps of the flat leather cap that hung limply from his ears. Behind him stood a horse in a muddied coat, munching placidly on clumps of grass, glazing at the proceedings with benevolent disinterest. He drank in the sight of them like a man starving.

"Canne êow stand woruldbearn? ðe mærnes êower?" The old man's voice was deep, gravely. He couldn't understand a word of it.

Some of the panic tightening his chest must have shown on his face. The man sighed, softened. He pressed a hand against his own heart.

"Brock," he said, enunciating carefully. "Brock," he repeated, tapping his chest, other hand extending toward him.

Brock. A name. A gift. He wasn't sure what to do with it. Repay it in kind, perhaps? It was probably the polite thing to do.

"I – I'm," he managed, each word scratching like a knife. He stopped, perplexed.

He didn't know who he was. Where his name and identity and life had once been, now stretched a gaping pit, full of nothing but black shadows. Above him, the ravens crowed a little louder.

"I don't know who I am," he muttered, weak, light-headed. He had begun to shake once more. "I don't know – I don't know who I am."

He stood on unsteady legs, swaying like a foal on ice. Wilderness spanned around him, bare, rolling hills whispering with wind, great mountain looming ahead, jagged peaks plunging in the morose clouds. Smoke rose in lazy plums in the distance. A small village was nestled in the crook of a wide valley, split in half by the slob of a babbling stream, the water sky-grey from his elevated viewpoint. The houses, a cluster of huts and hovels, looked like the pieces of a discarded child's game.

"Where is this?" he asked vaguely. His surroundings seemed off, didn't fit the way they should. Gusts of wind beat against him, as strong as his confusion, howling between the hills. The ravens were carried off, blown away. "Where am I?"

The old man edged away from him, worry morphing into wariness. The sucking void inside of him seemed to stretch with each backing step. He was gasping for breath.

"Who am I?" he growled. The sky growled back, thunderous.

"ænlic un læd ðæge pro, ðós læstan me, êow ðora – " Brock was stumbling away now. He looked fearful, as if he'd seen shadows. His horse was blinking after him in polite bewilderment.
"What's wrong?" not-Brock asked, feeling just as bewildered. The old man had seemed kind enough moments before. Now his face twisted with hatred. With disgust. Perhaps the shadow-monsters had crossed into life on not-Brock's back, visible for all to see.

Grumbling, Brock whirled away from him, tugging at his horse's bridle. He hurried away, casting warning glances over his shoulder. A clear threat not to follow.

He was left alone once more, shaky and confused. Nothing in the world made sense, but at least he could breathe freely now, without the death-stench of darkness. Besides, there was light, which was good enough for him.

Casting about for what he should do next, unsure as to what life was like when one didn't have to run from smirking monsters, he frowned in concentration. In his mind flickered a thought, the spark of a memory. A thousand candles burning a rich glow, floating airily in a wide, sweet-smelling room. Red and gold tapestries fluttering in a summer breeze, the distant echo of laughter on clear stone. Sun streaming down wide windows, warm wood the colour of dark honey. The flash of a smile, soft and mischievous, a weight leaning into his side, the dip of a bed. Home.

Nodding decisively to himself, he started walking.
The summon came the next morning at breakfast. Harry was half-heartedly stirring the thick brown mush that was his morning tea. He wasn't sure he wanted to risk drinking it just yet – he'd asked the house-elves to make it as strong as it would go. As a result, the mixture had consumed the first spoon he'd dipped into it with an alarmingly self-satisfied slurping noise. It had settled after attempting a few escapes oozing over the rim of his mug, now contented with belching out the occasional noxious fumes.

"Er – Potter. I think your tea is staring at me."

"Ngh?" articulated Harry. He blinked blearily at Bradley, squinting at him through the cloud of bad eyesight and sleeplessness. "Oh." He whacked the murky sludge with the flat of his half-liquefied spoon, forcing it to retreat back inside its mug with a dispassionate squelch. "Don't worry about it."

A few seats over, a knot of new students were eyeing him warily. Harry cast them a tired smile, which didn't seem to reassure them all that much.

Beside Bradley, Dallin gave a loud snort. "Scamper off newbies," he snapped, causing a few of them to pale and skitter away. He turned to Harry with a raised eyebrow and some sugar. "You've got dark circles the size of Saturn's rings," the boy informed him, dumping several sugar lumps in Harry's tea. "Do you ever sleep?"

"I certainly try," Harry told him darkly. "I don't think sleep likes me very much."

The truth was, he thought he'd gotten a good eight hours the night before. He couldn't figure why he was still so tired, aching with cramps as though he'd run through the night. His dreams hadn't been pleasant, but then again, they rarely were.

He had dreamed about Sirius. Not of his death for once, a sunken pit where an archway stood on its dais, the whole room ringing with Death Eater laughter, a flash of red light. The smile frozen on Sirius' face. It had taken him an age to fall beyond the ragged veil hanging from the arch, Harry remembered, body curving gracefully towards its death.

No, it wasn't his godfather's last moments Harry had seen in his sleep. He wasn't sure what he'd seen, exactly. Mostly, it had been dark, darker than night, a sense of Sirius-ness lingering in the distance. Harry remembered calling to the vague, hollowed spark that felt like his godfather – and then, nothing. He'd woken up in the Slytherin Dormitories, staring at the canopy, feeling as though he hadn't slept at all.

"Pot – I think we've lost him. Oi, Harry!"

A waving hand appeared in his field of vision.

"It's morning," Harry groaned, batting the offending limb away. "Just leave me alone."

The boys snickered. "Not a chance," Bradley told him, deadpan. "Wake up, there's a word for you."
Harry frowned at the piece of paper that had materialised in front of his plate. "How long has it been here for?" he grumbled, reaching for it.

On the folded scrap of parchment, in a flowing script of dark ink, he read,

*Dear Mr Potter,*

*If it is convenient to you, we should like to meet you in our office in order to discuss the continuation of your school year. We will be waiting for you at eight A.M. today.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Helga Hufflepuff.*

Alarmed, Harry glanced up at the ceiling. The sun was peeking through the eastern windows, pooling across the Hall in trembling pinkish rays. A quick Tempus confirmed what he'd feared: He was going to be late if he didn't hurry. Swearing, he downed his tea in two great gulps, grimacing when it sluiced down his throat, still bitter in spite of all the added sugar.

"Gotta go, see you later," he threw over his shoulder, stumbling away from the bench, already halfway across the Great Hall.

It was only in the corridor, staring up the marble staircase, that Harry realised he had no clue as to where the Founder's office was. He'd had no idea they even had an office. Sifting quickly through his mental map Hogwarts, he paused in hesitation before starting toward Dumbledore's office. Or rather, what would one day become Dumbledore's office. It made sense that the seat of power in the castle would remain the same through the years, didn't it? Harry certainly hoped so; he wasn't going to make it on time otherwise.

It took some sprinting and coaxing the staircases to behave, but Harry found himself standing before the gargoyle guarding the head-office with just a minute to spare.

"They're expecting me," he told it, which didn't elicit any kind of reaction from the stone statue. He waved the slip of parchment. "See? I've been invited. You don't need a password yet, do you?" Still nothing. Harry was sure the bloody thing was looking at him with an air of smugness. "Er – Sherbet lemon?" he tried, lips twisting. Impatience tightened his stomach, left his chest in crackling tendrils. "Look, I don't have time for this," he snapped. He didn't know what the Founders wanted from him – throw him out maybe, though he didn't think Salazar would let that happen – but he didn't want to be late finding out. "Just move."

Amazingly, the gargoyle jumped aside. There was a moment of floating consternation on both their part before Harry regained his bearing, hurried through the hole before the guardian could change his mind. He clambered up the spiralling steps two at a time, taking a moment to breathe deep before knocking on the office's heavy wooden door. Somewhere deep in the castle, a bell struck eight. The door swung open.

"Ah, Mr Potter. Right on time." Rowena cast him a swift smile before moving aside, opening the door fully.

"Good morning Ma'am." Out of habit, Harry gave a half-bow, smiling back at her. It had been a long while since he'd last seen the Founder. He hadn't thought he had missed her as much, but couldn't help the relieved happiness he felt upon seeing her.

He followed her inside, taking in his surroundings with a quick glance. He swallowed against the familiar pang of homesickness. Though Dumbledore's office had changed a great deal over the
years, there was no mistaking it. It was still a large and beautiful circular room, sun-lit from the top
of the castle. The funny little noises that used to fill it in Harry's time were silent, all the silver
instruments Dumbledore had collected through the years being absent. There were no portraits of
old headmasters and headmistresses snoozing in their frames on the walls, the first people ever to
inhabit this office standing before Harry in this very moment. A enormous claw-footed desk was
taking up the centre of the space, littered with books and scrolls. Behind it, a sturdy bookshelf was
embedded in the wall, arching with the curve of twin staircases leading up to a balcony where,
Harry assumed, would later be located the Headmaster's living quarters. The Sorting Hat was
conspicuous in its absence. Harry wondered when the Founders would go around creating it.

Salazar and Godric were sitting at the desk, conversing quietly over streaming teacups. Both men
looked up at Harry's entrance. Helga's back was facing him, the witch reaching for a book on
tiptoes, the volume located too high on the bookshelves. Harry heard a soft huff beside him.
Rowena left his side, went to Helga, a hand resting on the woman's hip, urging her back on the
soles of her feet. Wordlessly, she eased Helga's book from its position, handing it over. Helga
rolled her eyes, but a soft smile lit her face. She took the book in one hand, the other coming to rest
on Rowena's on her hip while she stretched, dropping a kiss on Rowena's cheek.

Harry's eyes widened at the gesture. Helga hadn't kissed Rowena on the lips, but it felt as though
she had, brushing the corner of her mouth, soft and intimate. Faintly alarmed, Harry looked at
Godric and Salazar. The men looked back at him, giving no indication that they cared about – or
even noticed – their colleagues' conduct. Godric pinned him with a narrow-eyed stare, as though
daring him to say anything derogatory. Salazar just seemed – intrigued. Waiting to gauge Harry's
reaction.

It took all of a few heartbeats for Harry to realise what his bewilderment must look like. He hurried
to ease his stance, soften whatever was on his face in something more neutral he hoped would
convey a delicate balance of I'm-Totally-Fine-With-This-No-Shock-Whatsoever and I-Don't-Care-
But-Good-For-Them. The protective glare vanished from Godric's gaze, the Founder easing back
against his chair with a friendly grin.

Internally, Harry was reeling. What he reading things right? Were Helga and Rowena together
together? Since when? Did anyone know? Why were Godric and Salazar reacting like it was
normal? Did they not care?

In all his years, Harry had never known the Wizarding world to be particularly tolerant.
Homosexuality wasn't something he'd heard talked about, which was part of the reason why it had
taken him so long to figure out his own feelings – he hadn't even known having them was possible.
He had been raised by people believing such relations were shameful, no one at Hogwarts having
ever done anything to disprove him of that notion. So. What did this mean? Did the Founders truly
find it – alright?

Heart thumping in his throat, Harry risked a glance at Salazar. The man caught his gaze, already
watching him. He raised a single eyebrow at Harry looking – amused? Teasing? What the hell?

"Why don't you take a seat, Harry?" Helga conjured a fifth chair with a negligent flick of her wrist.
"Tea?"

"No thank you. I've just had some." Harry sat. "You wanted to see me?" he hazarded.

The Founders exchanged a glance. Once again, Helga spoke for them, "We did. We wanted to clear
some things up. About your role here."

Harry held very still, not letting the sudden anxiety he felt show on his face. The Founders had
already done so much for him. If they wanted him to go, after he'd proven he couldn't be relied upon when he'd fled for the summer, then he would leave as gracefully as he was able, accepting their judgement without being difficult. He didn't know where he'd go, or what he'd do, but he was sure he'd find a way to survive. He'd done it before. He'd have to avoid populated places, to make sure he didn't accidentally hurt anyone. It wouldn't be easy, but he'd be fine.

Besides, he was getting too old for school anyway.

"We wanted to make you an offer," Helga stated, causing Harry to frown in surprise. It didn't sound as though she wanted him to start packing. "It's a bit of a bastard position, but we're up for negotiation if you're not satisfied with it."

"A position?" Harry repeated, more and more confused.

"Didn't know what do to with you, did we?" Godric told him, a sardonic smile curling his lips, the scars on his cheek. "You're too old to be among the student body. You've got too much sway on the kids. Wouldn't be right to keep pretending you're on the same level as they are, for either of you." He paused, considering Harry through a fall of red hair. "But we don't want to stop teaching you either. You've got potential, but you're still getting your arse swiped with a sword." Godric shot him a wink. "So you can't be a regular student, and you can't be a regular teacher."

"Just get to the point," Rowena told him, rolling her eyes. "I'm sure the boy understands the reasons why we're doing this."

"He does?" Harry muttered.

"We want to hire you," Salazar said, cutting through the noise. "As our assistant. Help us organise and give classes, grade homework. Look after the students. In exchange, we'll make time to teach you more advanced magic. Godric also insists we continue your combat training." Salazar considered him, the shadow of a smile playing on his lips. He inclined his head slightly. "If you'll have us."

Harry's head churned with a mixture of relief at the realisation he wasn't about to be thrown out, and mild panic at the thought of what was being asked of him. The Founders would trust him with more power over their students? They'd trust him with teaching them? It felt like an enormous responsibility. Harry found it difficult enough looking after himself, how could he be expected to care for others in such an official capacity? Although – he remembered what it had been like, having the DA back in Fifth Year. Harry hadn't been too bad at it, had he? He'd enjoyed it, even. Could it be possible he was being offered another shot at it here?

In any case, there was only one thing he could answer Salazar. Partly to hide his face, and partly to express how grateful he was, Harry bowed at the waist.

"I'd be honoured."

{...}

The Founders made the announcement at dinner the same night. Though most students didn't seem to know what to make of Harry, his friends rounded on him before the adults were done talking, hooting jokes and congratulations.

The celebrations progressed to the common room. Someone – Harry suspected Glenn – had obtained wine and ale crates, while others had sneaked out to the kitchens, coming back, arms laden with various snacks. Harry hesitated before putting on some music, bewildering everyone
with the Weird Sisters' famed song *Do the Hippogriff*. He got to know the new Slytherins better, though most of them did little more than stare at him with wide, slightly-dazed eyes, and, for some reason, *blush*, whenever he tried talking to them. Harry was completely dumbfounded by this state of affairs until his friends, snickering all the while, informed him of a bad epidemic of hero-worship debasing the castle. Harry didn't know what kind of story had circulated during his absence, but he certainly wished to remain ignorant.

It was well past midnight before he remembered to put an end to the party. Several students had already gone to bed, but most were still up. Making sure his House-mates went to sleep at decent hours had to be part of Harry's new job. Presumably. He figured he hadn't done too brilliantly when he put to bed several eminently plastered teenagers, wondering, disgruntled, if this was how Salazar had felt about him two nights ago.

The next day, Harry was put to work.

He presented himself to his first class twenty minutes before it was due to begin. It was going to be a mixed bunch of Ravenclaws and Gryffindors who were either new, or who hadn't made it to the more advanced level. No one Harry had interacted with before. He didn't know whether to be reassured or terrified. He'd be helping Mr Birdwhistle – a thin man with a perpetually vacant air on his furrowed face – manage the beginner's Defence curriculum.

As it turned out, Harry didn't so much 'help' as 'gave the whole lesson by himself'. He understood better why the Founders had insisted he attend most of Birdwhistle's classes. It appeared the curse on the DADA position hadn't started with Tom Riddle's scorned advances. Birdwhistle, though not a complete hack, clearly had no practical experiences of his own subject.

"I wanted to teach Charms," he confessed mournfully, staring down the practice dummies they were setting up with a dejected air.

From that moment on, Harry tugged aside his own nervousness, and promptly took matters into his own hands. Birdwhistle – please call me Brian – seemed content enough to leave him to it. He settled in a padded armchair to watch, evidently eager to wash his hands off the whole thing.

"Alright, listen up," Harry told the children amassed before him. God, they kept getting tinier every year. Small face looked between him and Birdwhistle in evident confusion. "You can take your quills away, you won't be needing them."

Doing his best to remember how he'd handled the DA back in the days, Harry walked them through the theory for the Full Body-Bind Curse. Though the spellwork was considerably more complex than what he'd been taught at the same age, he decided to emulate Godric's approach, have his students hit the ground running. The time these children lived in was very different from Harry's own – it was entirely possible they'd need to defend themselves against Muggles in a few month's time.

"And remember," he told them after they'd practised the spell a few times on the wooden dummies. "If ever you find yourself in a situation where someone threatens you – run for it as soon as you can. You don't need to hurt them, just make sure they can't go after you. Keep yourselves safe above all else."

He had them pair up, spread out across the classroom.

"Peri-ficos Totally!" a young Ravenclaw boy chanted, jabbing his wand wildly in his partner's direction. He only succeeded in having his own rather long hair stand up on end. It gave him the look of a very tall, very confused dandelion.
Harry bit back a laugh. "Remember Mr Wildsmith, the incantation is \textit{Petrificus Totalus}. Don't worry about your hair, it'll go down in a moment. Besides, it's rather fetching." Harry corrected his stance and wand movement. "Why don't you try again?"

The second time was a little better, sparks shooting off the boy's wand in an avalanche of bright stars. The Hufflepuff on the other end of the wand grinned delightedly at the light show.

"Keep trying," Harry told them both, ruffling a hand through the first boy's static hair.

"Yes, Professor."

He winced at the title, but drifted off to the other pairs, dispensing tips and advice. He dismissed his class for lunch, staying behind to answer a few straggler's questions while the rest of the children followed the call of their rumbling stomach, tramping off to the Great Hall, chatting excitedly. After setting the classroom in order, Harry followed at a more sedate pace. The sudden silence placated his aching head.

The Great Hall was already crowded with shrieking, laughing students. Huffing out in amusement at the pandemonium, Harry was making his way to the Slytherin table, spotting a seat on the bench his friends had kept open, when something bumped against his ankle, trying to get his attention. He blinked down.

'Sila?'

'\textit{Pick me up, human,}' the silver snake ordered, swinging her head from left to right in obvious agitation. 'Too many hatchlings here.'

Harry obeyed, bending down to gather her up in his arms. She nudged at his hands until he let her coil around his waist and shoulders. 'What are you doing here?'

'My wizard says you're to eat at his table from now on,' Sila informed him, sounding disgruntled at being used as a mere messenger owl. 'Please hurry. I'm hungry and will eat your arm if you do not comply.'

Hesitantly, Harry climbed the steps to the Head table, feeling the weight of the students' stares bearing down on his neck. He took a seat, wondering whether he was trapped in another one of his nightmares, nonsensical surreality. It didn't feel like a nightmare, though. It felt like a dream. His breath stuttered across his tongue, rushed and shallow. The Slytherins were shooting him looks that somehow conveyed both pride and aggravation. Harry swallowed, casting them an apologetic, helpless smile, his chest feeling light and heavy at the same time.

"I hear your first class went well," Salazar told him, leaning closer to be heard over the buzz. His hands brushed the scales of Sila's back before settling on Harry's shoulder, squeezing comfortingly. "Congratulations, Professor."

"I'm not a teacher." Harry ducked his head to hide the sudden weight lifting in his chest, breathless with the warmth of it. Unthinkingly, he brushed his fingers with Salazar's hand on his shoulder, grounding himself. "Thanks," he said, and had never meant it more.

{...}

The days blurred together in an easy routine – as much as things could settle in any given shape in a place like Hogwarts. Harry divided his time between teaching and being taught. Though he had been originally meant to assist various teachers with their day, his results in Defence classes left him working for Birdwhistle almost exclusively.
As promised, the Founders cut down on his free time to teach him advanced spells and techniques. He kept assisting to Godric’s classes as a students, not being exempt from the daily exercises the man imposed on the whole castle. He also chose to keep following a few courses he felt he didn't excel at, including Helga’s Healing and Ancient Runes classes. It didn't leave him with much time alone with his own thoughts, which he felt was for the best.

His peculiar status among the teaching staff was taken in stride by the students, who didn't treat him as formally as they did their other teachers, but made sure to address him respectfully when he mingled among them. His friends’ attitude didn't budge an inch, aside from the occasional ‘sir’ they let slip when addressing him in class. Harry was a little perplexed to notice no change in his relationship to them. He understood better why the Founders had taken the initiative to isolate him from his peers; he hadn't realised they'd been treating him differently up until that moment.

Though Salazar was still providing him with Sleeping Potions, Harry didn't sleep very well. Once again, he took to putting his late nights and early mornings to good use, escaping the shadows lurking under his bed to practice magic, trying to figure out what was wrong with his powers. Before long, Godric joined him for these silent hours where the castle slept, taking up Harry's combat training where he'd left off.

The one hitch in Harry's new life was Salazar.

In spite of his better judgement, Harry sought him out several times. His chest felt cracked open from an invisible weight that kept pulling him towards the other man. Harry craved him like a starving man offered a feast, but ever since their night of drunken debauchery, they hadn't had a moment alone together. Whenever they talked, someone else was in the room, and the subject, inconsequential. Either Salazar was deliberately avoiding Harry, or he was hiding something. Harry wasn't sure which he'd prefer. He thought he'd successfully hidden the restless want crawling under his skin, but -

The possibility that he was wrong terrified him. Salazar kept disappearing for hours at a time, more elusive than Ron before a Quidditch match. No matter how long he spent looking for him, itching for a confrontation, Harry never found him. The Founder sauntered back in the Great Hall at meal times, smelling faintly of rock dust, something weary on the lines of his face. He deflected Harry's questions with no small amount of skill. It frustrated Harry to no end, but he vowed to hold his peace for as long as he could, not wanting to encroach on the other man's privacy.

Harry stood by that promise for the whole length of one week.

It was early afternoon, and heavy storm clouds had turned the sky the colour of old lead. The weather was icy, windy, the kind autumn day that nipped at the skin with relentless dedication, kept you cold no matter how many layers of clothes you had piled on. It was the week-end; Harry didn't have any classes that day. He was bored to tears, feeling caged with nothing to do to occupy his spiralling thoughts.

He was wandering the Dungeons, happy to flee the upper level's draughtiness, when he caught sight of the end of Salazar's cloak vanishing around the corner. Two spells later, Harry was pelting after him on invisible, silent feet. The Founder was nowhere to be seen, but Harry frowned, focused on the sense of other that was a new constant at the back of his mind, letting himself become aware of the wisps of power surrounding him. He found Salazar within seconds, the man's presence suffusing the walls, feeling of brine, of crushing ocean depths, pillars of shining green salt breaking the waves, grand sunken palaces lying on shell-littered floors, sodden and unexplored, smooth-scaled sea-creatures looking on with timeless silver gazes. Harry gasped through the influx of sensation, willed it to dim, just enough to clear his sight of phantasmagorical visions.
He staggered after Salazar, wondering whether everyone's magic felt the way the Founder's felt, raw, encompassing. He wondered whether the drowned gods singing beneath Salazar's skin would mind Harry's intrusion in the man's life.

He never caught sight of Salazar again, but he followed the trail, the path of him, through the castle, up several flights of stairs, to where the sun shone fuzzy, watered rays onto the castle's stones. Harry had to stop, puzzled, inside a bare Second Floor room. Salazar had clearly been there, but there was no physical evidence of his presence. The room only had one entrance; he couldn't have gotten out without Harry seeing. Which meant, the room was more than met the eyes, concealed something from Harry's perception.

Harry took a moment to get his bearings, poking about the walls without expecting to find much of anything. The size and shape of this room was familiar; though there were many corners of Hogwarts he had never gotten to explore, Harry had been here before, he was sure of it.

It hit him like a brick wall while he was facing away from the narrow, slitted windows, looking at the room at large. His stomach sank like stone. He had to lean against a wall for support.

"Oh no," he breathed, horror-stricken, feeling light, detached from his own body. "Please, not that. Everything but that – "

As if in a trance, he walked to the circular stone slab that marked the centre of the room. He waved his wand in its general direction, politely asking is to please, move out of the way, and unfortunately, it did. Harry watched, something tight breaking in his chest, as the slab slid down with the rumbling of grating stone, revealing the opening of a tunnel wide enough for a man to squeeze through.

For the second time in his life, Harry was staring down the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets.

His knees didn't give, but it felt as though they should. His legs felt weak, listless, and he'd known, hadn't he? He'd known this would happen, sooner or later. He'd known, because he'd seen the future. He knew who would die from Salazar's doing, who would suffer the most. Myrtle still hadn't moved on from her murder, shock leaving her to linger in the air, a monochrome shell of the girl she'd once been. Harry had held Ginney through the night as she trashed, trapped in a diary, soul-sucking cold making her shake, golden eyes looking down at her, vicious, deadly. He remembered the awful look of deep terror on Hermione's stone-frozen face, the iciness of her skin.

Harry had known. Known what the man below his feet had done, would do. How deep his actions would scar his friends. Would scar Harry, in his flesh, right forearm forever bearing the damage done by Basilisk fang.

He'd known, but he'd hoped he was wrong, hoped every history book he had scoured in Second Year were wrong and it wasn't Salazar who'd done this terrible, life-ending thing. Salazar who had saved Harry's life, had turned it over, who'd become unspeakably dear to him. Hope, Harry had found, was a strenuous, dreadful thing.

Perhaps there was a good explanation for this. Salazar had to have had his reasons for doing this. Harry knew him, had gone to great lengths to understand him, all his little tells, his unerring patience, his kindness. The Salazar he knew wasn't mindless, or a monster. He wasn't.

He wasn't, but Harry could not longer ignore the voice at the back of his head that pointed out to everything Salazar was. Ambitious and cunning, and, above all else, ruthless. Driven. Harry didn't doubt for one moment that the Founder would do whatever he felt was necessary to keep his school safe. His life's work. Even if it meant protecting it against his own students.
"Fuck," Harry whispered, staggering, swallowing back the bile rising up in his throat.

_Fuck._ He didn't want to go down there. Not again. Not ever. He didn't want to find out what truths awaited him in Hogwarts bowels. Because, despite everything, Harry knew, deep down to the marrow of his bones, that nothing he would learn would change the way he felt towards Salazar. It was part of him now, irrevocable. Carved into his being like the lightning-bolt on his forehead. Salazar had clawed fingers through his chest, held his heart in a firm, fist-sized grip - and Harry's heart had been crushed many times already. He didn't want to feel it break once more.

Bracing himself, he swayed forward, a foot dangling over the gaping darkness that led down to the Chamber, and he –

He couldn't do it.

He stood there, frozen. Though he was flesh and blood, he wondered if he, too, hadn't been turned to stone. His heart certainly felt petrified. He could have stayed rooted on the spot, unmoving, staring down the edge of the tunnel, for a very long time, hadn't the door behind him swung open, groaning on its hinges.

Harry startled, whirled around, half-hoping the answer to all his questions would have magically materialised in the room. Instead, he was almost tilted forward, into the pit, by the sparkling tail of a spell. The coloured ribbon whooshed past him, rushing down the hole without ceremony.

It must have sensed Harry's presence, because as its last sparks sputtered and died, words assembled before Harry's eyes, leaving a message to glimmer in the stale air.

_Salazar, it read, Get yourself up here, someone's broken through your wards. Front gates by the eastern bridge. Hurry._

Another intruder? The thought was enough to shake Harry off of apathy. Last year had proven that uninvited guests never brought much good to Hogwarts. With battle was still fresh in his mind, Harry slid his wand in his hand, was running out, out of that damned room, long before the last glimmers of magic had faded down the Chamber of Secrets tunnel. He hated every bit of the shaking relief he felt.

The eastern gates were on the other side of the castle. Deciding the stairs would take too long to get there, alarm humming in his blood, Harry launched himself at the first window that passed him by. The fall from the Second Floor was high, but Harry was used to heights. He slowed his rush to the ground with a wordless spell, didn't stumble upon landing. He tore through the courtyard, vaulted over small walls and a few more windows. The ramparts loomed before him, fortified stone protecting Hogwarts' flank, two turrets bracketing its heavy, iron-wrought gates. There was a knot of people before those doors, shielding them from Harry's sight. From the distance, he recognized Godric, standing firm with his sword unsheathed, Helga and Rowena by his side. Students lingered behind them, chattering curiously, trying to peer over their shoulders. Harry felt his fear and fury harden at the sight of them out in the open, facing someone who shouldn't have found their home.

As he approached, Harry began to distinguish individual voices over the excited buzz of the children. Helga was trying to usher them away, without much success.

" – Can't let you in," Godric was saying. "Sir. I don't know who you are. I don't even understand what you say. I don't want to hurt you, but if you try to take one more step – "

The other voice, the intruder's voice, had Harry's steps falter, his breath catch, twist his lung,
something cold washing over him, though he didn't immediately understand why.

"My home," the man mumbled. "This is my home. It's got stone and light and no shadows. My h–
my– Why won't you let me in, you little–"

He sounded half-crazed. His voice croaked, broken in his throat, all the stuttering gravel of
someone who'd forgotten how to speak. Harry's heart gave such a loud thump at the sound of it he
feared he might fracture a rib. God, he thought, dimly aware he was pushing his way through the
crowd of students. He felt weak, but no one resisted him, clearing the path ahead without protest.
Something was creeping up the edges of Harry's mind—something big, like a storm or tidal wave.
He felt as though his brain had been cast in ice.

He knew that voice. He didn't know where from, but he knew that voice. Except that he couldn't.
Could he? No. No, that voice was dead. Belonged to a dead person. Someone precious who was
just a rotting corpse now. Harry. Harry had gone mad.

"Listen mate," said the dead man, and Harry staggered, fell on one knee, got up again. "Listen. I'm–
–uh. I'm from around here? This is where I live. I think. I–"

The rest of the sentence died to the rush in Harry's ears. Because. Because the man was speaking a
language that didn't exist yet. Because Harry hadn't been sure he'd ever hear it again.

God, it hurt.

Harry lurched forward, catching himself on the hem of someone's cloak. "Move move move," he
kept chanting, and people obeyed. He ducked past Helga. Pushed Godric aside. Finally, he caught
sight of the madman, and he looked and looked and his head was spinning, it felt like he couldn't
breathe. Only one word fell past his lips, lead-heavy, an orphaned, pitiful thing, trembling in the
space between two bodies.

"Sirius?"

Chapter End Notes

*cackles*
"Sirius?"

Breath tore itself from Harry's lungs, rasped soft tissue on the way out, left him to choke, airless, on a single word. The earth had open underneath his feet; he teetered over the edge of a gaping, howling chasm, seized with the nausea that preceded the fall. The world had cracked, was bleeding ashes over his death-frozen body. He felt like a corpse, like a drowned man, bloodless and bloated, gurgling around the pressure in his throat. His chest screamed in pain, split in two with awful hope. He staggered, senseless, mind ringing blank, twisting with emptiness.

"Sirius?"

A breeze swept over the field. Dark clouds churned across the horizon, full with the promise of rain. Between the earth and sky, stood a man who looked very much like Sirius Black on the night Harry had met him, fresh out of Azkaban. He had a gaunt, sunken face, lines harsh and sharp with starvation. His hair was long, dark with matted oil and mud, hanging limply down emaciated shoulders. His skin was waxy, stretched over his bones as though there was no meat left to his skeleton; he looked like a corpse whose marrow had been sucked dry by small, crawling things.

The rags he wore, flapping stripes of fabric that let show swathes of tattooed, thin grey skin, were torn and disgusting, foul even from afar, soggy with dirt and blood and excrements. They were the same clothes that Sirius Black, godfather and family and departed had died with.

"My God," Harry choked, staggering forward a step, stopping. The ache in his trembling limbs was incredible, encompassing. "Sirius."

The man who wore Sirius's face and clothes, Sirius who should be dead but wasn't, stared at him with sightless grey eyes that burned hunger-bright, feverish. He wet his lips, opened his mouth around a rattling breath.

"You understand – " he croaked, surprise-high, and pitched forward.

Harry caught him. He sized the man around the waist, fingers curled tight into his flesh, hauled him close, a shock of breath and hard angles. He couldn't tell which one of them was shaking the most, great tremors rolling through both bodies, an infinite loop. Arms wound around his shoulders, gripped him tight, clutching desperately even as Harry's legs gave, cut out at the hip.

They slumped down to their knees, into the wet mud below, holding on for dear life. A string of babbled words streamed past Harry's ear, swallowed by an overcoming high-pitched whine, the rush of fear-fuelled blood.

He thought he was going to be sick. He thought he was going to pass out, darkness gobbling him whole. He would wake up, everything a repulsive dream.

"How can you be here?" he gasped, gagging around the words. His heart rammed up his chest, filled his mouth, tore and tore and raged. "You're dead and gone, how can you be here?"

He wrenched himself away, heaving from the violence of it. He stared into Sirius's face, death-thin and beloved, tracing the shape of his faded beauty with his eyes, old aristocratic grace peering
through all the sweat and muck. He pressed a hand against Sirius' chest, past tattered clothes and onto skin, seeking pulse and finding it.

_Thu-thump._

"Please tell me this is real," he said, prayed, sobbed. "Please. Please, let it be real."

Fingers brushed his face, butterfly-soft. They tugged at his hair, moved over the dip of his cheekbones, the bow of his lips. They followed the sweep of his jawline, the line of his nose. Settled at the base of his throat, tapping along the mad rhythm of the blood pounding beneath.

Harry dragged his eyes open and up, shuddering through the searing reality of his tripping breaths. Sirius watched him with wide stormy eyes, his hand on Harry's neck pulling until their foreheads rested together and they were sharing air.

"James?" he breathed, glass-thin, focused wonder rasping through the gravel of his voice.

Harry bit on the sob that rattled against his teeth, feeling out of himself. "Harry," he corrected. He hefted his fingers from Sirius' hip, framed his face with both hands, pressing tight, desperate. "I'm Harry, James' son. I'm Harry. Don't you remember?"

Sirius blinked at him, throat working. Eyes never leaving Harry's face. "Harry," he repeated, slow, careful, as if tasting the word on his tongue like wine. "Sorry lad. Don't remember much of anything right now." He blinked again, sight focusing. "D'you know who I am?"

He looked serious and mad and untethered, so Harry told him, unthinkingly. "Your name Sirius Black. You're a Gryffindor and my parents' friend. You're a convicted criminal and an innocent man. You fell through a veil and _died_ and now you're here."

Something that was part-whine, part-sob pushed past Harry's lips. "You're here."

The smile Sirius cast him in answer was soft, roguish, containing a shadow of the boy he'd once been. "That I am, kid. That I am."

"_How?_" Harry asked as another great shudder rocked through him. Something was growing in his chest, taking up all the space between ribs and spine, bursting open and it hurt, and it was wonderful, joy and disbelief and crackling hope. The world was distant, foreign, unreachable and inconsequential, tunnelled-down to Sirius' living warmth, the wet squelch of the mud underneath their knees.

Sirius kept making soft shushing sounds, thumbs stroking Harry's cheeks and coming back wet with tears. Harry gasped, choked on racking sobs, tight and breaking open. He pitched forward, listing into Sirius's warmth, and Sirius was there to catch him, bony arms pulling him close, secure with his face tucked in the crook of his Godfather's neck. Harry leaned his weight into a living body he thought he'd lost forever, dead by his own foolishness, and he rested there, muffling his cries against skin, being held like a child.

"Shh," Sirius muttered against his hair, and he was shaking too, gripping Harry hard enough to bruise. "S'okay now, lad. I got you. I found you and I'm not leaving again. I got you now."

They stayed intertwined for a long while, clinging on like two drifters lost at sea, Sirius humming quietly, rocking Harry from side to side. Harry was insensate to anything but the man in his arms, everything else a surreal illusion. He listened to the beats of Sirius's heart, let himself be lulled by the devastating comfort of it. He was still listening when Sirius's breaths grew laboured, short and ragged, the strength of his arms starting to quake, slip from Harry's body.
"Sirius?" he asked, pulling back, dizzy with love and worry. "Sirius, are you alright?"

"M'okay Prongslet," said Sirius, giving a vague smile. His eyes were fluttering shut as though he didn't have the strength to keep them open any longer. Tension seemed to sag out of him with each passing heartbeat. Harry shifted his grip on him, supporting his slumping weight. "Just gonna sleep now, yeah?"

He folded himself on Harry's lap, limp as a ragdoll but for the breath stuttering in and out of him.

"Sirius!" Harry eased Sirius's head on his shoulder, holding him up, pressed back to front. Trembling, he brought fingers up to his Godfather's throat, sighing in relief when he found a steady beat drumming under the skin.

The world came rushing back with vengeance, all its merciless practicality. He became aware of the ache in his knees, for having spent so long on the dirt. A damp autumn breeze shivered along his unprotected skin, cold and ice-crisp, drizzling rainwater down his neck. His face itched with drying salt. Sirius was in his arms, breathing, alive, mumbling nonsense in unconsciousness.

Harry needed to get him to safety, get him warm, figure out what was wrong with him.

He pushed away everything question he had, every insecurity, locked them all up in a box at the back of his mind, wrapped the box in chains and gave it a kick for good measure.

"Harry?"

Startled, he twisted around, as much as he could without disturbing the man slumbering in his arms. He came face to face with what seemed like half the population of Hogwarts. Students stood on tiptoes to peer over shoulders, muttering curiously. The Slytherins were grave and silent off to the side, having elbowed their way to the front of the pack. Harry's eyes flitted over them, to the Founders, all four of them gathered close, watching the scene with caution on their faces.

"Harry," Godric repeated, advancing a step, only to stop when Harry stiffened at the motion. "You know this man. Who is he?"

"He – " Harry's voice rasped, grating on his lips. The words for everything Sirius was to him wouldn't fit on his tongue, heavy and awkward with helpless joy. "He's my, you know – he's – "

"I can't understand you Harry," Godric cut him off, soft and measured, as though Harry was either fragile or dangerous, about to break or snap.

Harry was still speaking English – his English, a language no one else would speak for hundreds of years. With a length of quavering shock stretching across his mind, he couldn't reach words that would make Godric understand, would make his sheath his sword. Blank, cushioned ringing filled his head, tilted the world sideways, everything coming at him from a span of black, starless space. Lost, Harry looked at Salazar.

The man stared back, silent, with cold dark eyes. His left hand was curled, white-knuckled, over the hilt of a small rune-laced dagger, the other holding his wand in a loose grip. Harry felt himself bristle at the open hostility, hunching over Sirius in a protective crouch, instinct-driven. He found Sila, coiled over the Founder's shoulders, focused on her like a lighthouse.

'What are you doing?' he hissed, brittle, break-thin, Parseltongue slipping out with practised ease, hating the way his voice cracked even in the snake's tongue. When Salazar didn't respond, Harry gestured at Sirius, careful to avoid looking at him lest he lost himself again. 'He needs medical help. He's not well at all.'
Finally, Salazar seemed to come alive, something moving behind his eyes. He didn't bother looking at Sirius, pinning Harry down with a hard stare. 'Who is he?' he asked, sibilant, water-smooth.

Harry bit down on a snarl, glared at him, hurting with uncomprehension. 'He's with me. There's no time for this. I need to get him inside. Tell them I vouch for him.'

"Salazar?" Helga touched Salazar's arm, drove him to look at her, past the unnamed tension bunching his shoulders. "What is he saying?"

Harry ignored them as Salazar relayed his words. He busied himself with arranging Sirius more comfortably in his arms, shifting his weight, soft and careful. He slid an arm under the man's knees, another at the small of his back, heaved up, a foot planted into the grass. He rose with most of Sirius's weight balanced over a shoulder, his arms flopping listlessly over Harry's neck and side.

Great plunging silence greeted him as he stood, facing the castle. From the corner of his eyes, he saw his House-mates tense, looking between Harry and the Founders with narrowed eyes. A few wands had been drawn. Harry realised with a jolt, intuition tightening his gut, that they would fight for him in an instant, raise wands to grant him passage back home.

It was Rowena who broke the standstill, casting a sharp glance at Salazar, a hand digging in Godric's sword-arm. "Let them through," she ordered, and they did.

The crowd parted for Harry like water around a rock. Huffing in relief, weak with it, he hurried through. His arms cramped from Sirius's weight, but he didn't care, relished the pain of it, a call back to earth. No one proposed to help him carry his Godfather, knowing better than to try. He crossed the courtyard with swift striding steps, as fast as he dared, all the way to the Hospital Wing.

The sight of the Infirmary was a familiar if unwelcome one. The long room smelled of soap and medicine, the watery greyness that filtered in from tall windows lightened up by soft oil lamps glows, glimmering off polished stone. Harry walked past rows of neat, iron-wrought hospital bed, clad in neutral white linens. White, flowing curtains hung between the beds from the ceiling, rippled from a gentle breeze, drafting in from a cracked glasspane.

He set Sirius down in a private room, wedging the door open with a foot to the frame. His Godfather looked even paler against the bedsheets, stretched skin tinged an unhealthy grey. Harry fumbled for his wand, cursing when it caught inside his pockets. There were – spells. Words he could use to make Sirius better, he was sure of it. He –

A soft hand snatched his wrist, stilted his wand mid-motion. Harry jerked back, away, too shaken to stifle the instinctive reaction. Helga met him with a sad smile, her hair a waterfall of honey-coloured locks, stunning in their shaded surroundings.

"Let me help you," she told him, eyes dark, full of compassion. "Let me help him, Harry."

Harry felt shaky, magic roiling like stormclouds under his skin, a sizzling ache. He nodded his assent; Spellcasting wasn't a good idea at the moment.

Ignoring the other Founders who had piled in after them, he rid Sirius of his dirty, stinking clothes, swallowing back bile at the sight of the man's chest. Each of Sirius's ribs poked through black-purple bruised, shallow skin, the dip where his stomach should be stretching deep and wide. Hipbones jutted out obscenely against the rest of his body. His skin was cut, blistered in places, but remained unbroken otherwise. It wasn't a pretty sight.
They got to work. Harry and Helga washed him down, layers of grime and dead skin flaking off. They cleaned the scabbing cuts, applied a paste that shrank bruises into non-existence. They checked for illness and broken bones. Helga chanted a long spell Harry didn't know, which left her grey-faced, swaying on the spot, but gave strength back to Sirius's wasted muscles. They fed him potions, one that would rehydrate him, another to give his body the nutriments it craved, stave off the damage done by starvation. It took a while, but by the time they were done, Sirius's heart beat a little easier. His cheek didn't look quite as gaunt, a slight flush giving him colour. He no longer looked like a walking corpse, swaddled in warm blankets.

"I'll stay here," Harry told Helga. He was helping her pack up ointments and potions. "Look after him through the night."

"He's out of danger, Harry."

"I know." He did. He simply couldn't leave, too scared Sirius would vanish into mist if he so much as looked away. He still buzzed with incredulity. "I'm staying all the same."

Helga didn't ask any more question, quiet understanding in her eyes. She wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders, comfort freely given, offering warmth before letting go. They were alone, the others having left some time ago, though Harry couldn't say when, exactly. He allowed himself to sag against her for a moment, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Call me if you need anything," Helga told him, and left him on his own, door clicking shut on her way out.

Harry conjured himself a chair, which turned out a little wobbly but wonderfully well padded. He sat by his Godfather's bedside, sinking to the knees in fluffy cushion. He stared and stared at Sirius's sleeping face, hard lines eased out in sleep, and he just – breathed through it. Practised his Occlumency until the weight crushing his chest lifted, the curls of panic unhooking their claws. His mind cleared in increments, the blank cottoned shell of shock receding to the dank place it had come from.

Inside Harry's head, the box locked at the back quivered in anticipation. Heavy iron door clanged open, spilling facts and questions, sharp and sheer.

Sirius was here.

Sirius was alive.

Sirius had been dead. Bellatrix Lestrange had killed him, a blow to the chest that had sent him careening back into a veil of death, vaporous and whispering. Except Sirius couldn't have died, not really, because he was here, now, chest heaving deep breaths before Harry's eyes.

Just to be absolutely, completely sure he wasn't hallucinating anything, Harry reached out, took Sirius's hand in his. It was warm, pulsing with blood. Alive.

Sirius was alive.

How could he be? Not that Harry was complaining, but it didn't make sense. He'd seen Sirius fall down, through the veil, and not come back the other side. Perhaps – perhaps everyone in the Ministry had been wrong. Perhaps the veil didn't ease people into Death's arms. Perhaps the veil was a gateway to somewhere. Somewhere that had eventually become here, now, tenth century England. He'd have to wait for Sirius to wake to get definite answers.

Harry shook his head. It did seem like a big coincidence, didn't it, that Sirius should find him in
such a place, three years after Harry had buried him. It was positively ridiculous, even. Mind-boggling. Utterly bonkers. *Merlin.* There was something else, though. Something impossibly more important, something that went above endless speculation over *hows* and *whys.* Ultimately, none of it mattered, because –

Because.

Because *Sirius was alive.*

Cursing under his breath, Harry bent down, head over knees, gasping for air. He clutched Sirius's hand in a too-tight grip, pressed his forehead against the flutter of life in his wrist. He was unbearably, overwhelmingly grateful; he thought he might choke on it, be crushed under the burn behind his breastbone. He'd raged and wept after Sirius had died. He'd yelled and broken things, because it was *enough,* now. He'd had enough. Enough of death and grief and being responsible for it all. Him, a fifteen-year-old boy. The world should find someone else to be its scapegoat, because he'd been *done.*

He had thought he'd bleed out from the pain of the Sirius-shaped hole in his life, sucking void where there should have been *family.* He hadn't even had a body to put to the ground, which had perhaps been the worst part in all this mess. The pain had stayed with him through the years, dulled but never gone. He hadn't grieved, hadn't mourned properly. The wound had festered, rotten black with bitterness, because it was Harry's fault Sirius had died, Harry's foolishness that had ended him, sure as Bellatrix's madness.

And now, Sirius was here. Impossibly. A new chance for Harry to get it right, to make amends. Beg for forgiveness.

Wrung out, he fell asleep like this, pondering over second chances and the insanity of it all, the sun dipping over the horizons in a bloody red glow. Some hours later, he woke with a start from confused dreams of blood and shadows, heart pounding in his chest, to whimpers just beside his head.

"What –?" he muttered hoarsely, struggling to wake. He scrambled for his wand, light pouring out with a thought, star-bright and golden, bathing the room in a warm glow.

Sirius hadn't budged, his hand still secure in Harry's hold. Dark spot danced before Harry's vision at the sight of him, trembling and heaving but *here.* He shook himself, shrugging off the blanket that had appeared on his shoulders while he slept, the material a comforting dark-green, warm and heavy. He spared a thought wondering where it had come from, vaguely remembering a moon-lit shadow standing over him, fingers stroking his hair, soothing him back to sleep.

Sirius's skin was drenched in sweat, shining in the glimmer of Harry's wand. His eyes rolled wildly behind closed eyelids; his head swivelled on his shoulders as though he was dodging imaginary blows. Nightmares, Harry thought, judging by the unhappy twist of Sirius's lips. He could deal with nightmares – he'd had enough of his own.

Muttering reassurances, he brushed Sirius's hair away from his face, the once-lustrous locks coming in wet clumps. Taking his hand away, he patted himself down for his wand, summoning a Fever-Reducing potion with a swift wave. He uncapped the stopper with his teeth, pried Sirius's jaws open as gently as he could. Sirius coughed the potion down, thankfully without waking. Within moments, his temperature had gone down a few degrees.

"You'll be okay Padfoot," Harry assured him, checking for infections and finding none. "We'll figure it out, eh? You're alright now. Nothing's gonna hurt you here."
Sirius's erratic movements eased, but his whimpering didn't stop, sounding like a dog given a kick. Snatches of sentences tumbled past his lips, a flowing nonsense about darkness and shadows, grinning shark-teeth from the depths. Harry thought about Dementors, Sirius being imprisoned for twelve years with rattling wraiths sucking at his soul. He wondered at what he might have gone through beyond the veil, the moving blackness he'd seen behind. No wonder Sirius was afraid of the dark.

An idea struck Harry, chased away the last remnant of slumber. "Alright Pads," he said, drawing up his wand. "Hang on, I got something that might help."

He closed his eyes, gathered himself in a tight coil, magic pooling, electric, beneath his skin. Happy thoughts. Sirius asking him to come live with him, offering asylum from the Dursleys, light-heading joy at the thought of it, someone who actually wanted him. Hermione crushing him to her chest, strong and fierce, Ron making faces in the background. Receiving his first Christmas presents, the feel of rough-spun sweaters and the scent of smoke, of candied apples.

Harry frowned, deep and troubled. Sirius had died and come back. Ron had left him, hurting words like knives. Hermione he had lost, left alone in warzone. Even Christmas, the childish wonder of it, felt tainted, corrupt. Dumbledore, who'd given him his father's Cloak, his bloodright, had died by a traitor's hand while Harry watched, helpless.

Groaning in frustration, he sought the calming touch of Occlumency shields to focus, ground himself. A different memory slunk up to the surface of his thoughts. It was a few months into the school year, he was sitting cross-legs in the common room, Salazar having assumed a similar position in front of him. Distantly, he could hear the babble of his House-mates, the gentle slosh of the Lake against the luminous windows, dappled green light soothing on his skin. They'd been at it for a while now, Salazar hissing instructions in the stretch of air between them, their minds twining, fighting, pulling apart. Harry was breathing slow and deep, serene despite the drowsiness creeping up his limbs. He'd been getting better and better at the whole Mind Arts things, resisting Salazar's intrusions for longer spans of time, poking back at the man's defences. The current duel had softened into something else, a playful test rather than an actual struggle, both their shields having lowered, relaxed. They shared thoughts, impressions, flickers of memories lighting up the other's mind in bright firelight sparks.

Harry felt the cool, bracing glide of the sea against his skin, inhaling mouthfuls of saltwater dipped in winter storm. He smelled summer-sweet air, mowed grass and fresh fruit, heard the cracks and groans of the Burrow after dark, the old house sighing in the hot dusky air. Book spines cracked open under his fingertips, dusty old parchment laying secrets before his eyes in the dim gleam of bubbling potions. He plunged after the distant golden glimmer of a snitch, swerving down, swift as the wind, giddy with elation, crisp air howling in his ears, drowning out the cheers of the crows, drowning out the whole world.

The back and forth between the two of them was smooth, easy, heartbreakingly intimate, though Harry didn't realise it at the moment. Something warm and fierce was unfurling in his chest, great and appeasing, bubbling over his entire being. Across from him, Salazar smiled, a soft, secret thing, and, looking at silver eyes, Harry thought he might choke on the new, steady weight pushing at his heart.

Harry huffed a breath, came back to himself with that warm glow still pulsing strong, making him dizzy.

"Expecto Patronum," he breathed, raising his wand in a broad swirl.

A silver wisp burst from his wand, blinding brightness surging forth. For a moment Harry could
not see, star-light washing over the room in a great, powerful wave. Even with his eyes scrunched shut, he felt his Patronus taking shape, and he knew, simply knew, down to where magic seared his bones, that something fundamental had changed, shifted inside of him.

Heart hammering with anticipation, he squinted past the silver-white glow, looking for Prongs among the coalescing swells of light.

He did not find him.

Something else unfolded before him, so very different from the familiar stag that Harry could not fool himself, even for a second, into believing everything was normal.

A snake stretched its coils, floating mid-air in the middle of the room, pulsing to the rhythm of Harry's heart. It wasn't an ordinary serpent, either. It was much bigger than any Muggle species, easily outgrowing the boa Harry had once set free in a zoo. It reminded him of a Basilisk, but for the leathery ridge rising up from its spine like fish fin. Two short, curving horns flared back from the top of its head, whose strange bone-frame seemed vaguely horse-shaped to Harry. It large, diamond-shaped scales shrank the closer they were to its underbelly, their colour undefinable in the silvery flare of Patronus magic.

Harry flopped back in his chair, stunned, a sense of impeding doom looming over him, some realisation niggling the edges of his conscious mind. The snake undulated around the room, slithering gracefully despite its size, much calmer than Prongs had been in assessing its surroundings for threats, long forked tongue flicking out in curiosity.

The pang of loss at its sight was so powerful Harry had to grit his teeth through it. He'd always taken Prongs for granted, his father guarding him from harm even in death. Prongs was gone now, swept off by the change in Harry's life, and it jarred, in a way it likely shouldn't. He should have expected this, Harry knew. Much had happened since his Third Year. He'd faced horrors, grown into a man. Besides, it was just a Patronus, for Merlin's sake. Harry had no right to feel so strongly about it, not with everything else happening in his life.

Flooding warmth enveloped him suddenly, and Harry opened his eyes to a frankly gigantic head resting on his lap, wide slanted eyes peering into his soul. His Patronus had wrapped around him in a protective coil. Though Harry couldn't feel it like a material, tangible thing, not really, he got the impression of smooth scales gliding against him, a weight grounding him down with overwhelming calm, humming with comfort and steadfast love. His sense of grief evaporated like morning dew.

"You're something else, aren't you?" he sighed, running a hand up the serpent's head, feeling the edge of its horns, giving slightly under his fingers, like touching a condensed cloud.

It had to mean something, Harry knew. Patronuses didn't switch forms for no reason; only a profound, life-altering change in their caster's very being could manage that feat. He'd seen it happen to Tonks's, turning into a wolf to match Remus. It could be caused by anything, a birth, a death, trauma or great joy, growing up or –

Or –

Harry sprang to his feet with such speed his chair went crashing down behind him. Out of breath, he dislodged his Patronus from his shoulders, and he looked and looked, that niggling feeling of doom flaring to life, some great cataclysm marching towards him with the swelling violence of a tsunami.

Swallowing heavily, he swayed on the spot. Sirius grumbled something in his sleep, drawing
Harry's attention back to him. He'd almost forgotten he was here, in pain, the reason why he'd summoned a Patronus in the first place. Shame slamming into him, Harry directed the serpent to his Godfather's chest.

"Look after him, yeah?" he said, and the snake – his snake, he'd have to get used to that – draped itself over Sirius like a giant's scarf. The effect was immediate. Sirius's face eased in something almost peaceful, tension melting from his shaking frame.

And Harry – Harry couldn't stay here. He needed air. He needed to run, to do something that wouldn't require him to think, something that would stop that creeping awareness of himself to crawl any closer.

Instead, he slipped out into the night-cloaked corridor, silent, and went to hunt down Salazar.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys!! Just popping in to tell you, im gonna try and get the next chap up before the end of the week. If there's nothing new before Sunday, then it's gonna be a looong while before I can upload anything - I'm off the spend July in Africa, in a place that doesn't have electricity, or, indeed, running water. Right after that I'm starting up a summer job, so writing might be difficult. I hope it wont come to that and I'll have time to post one more chapter before I catch my plane. I apologize in advance if that's not the case.

In the meantime, rainbows and kisses my loves, have a great summer!
The tunnel stretched deep into darkness, wide and gaping, an open mouth ravenous with wordless hunger. Staring down the lip of the ink-black shaft, Harry contemplated the odds of being swallowed whole and emerging back unscathed. He wasn't sure he liked the results, but forced a calming breath down his lungs, the air thick, smelling of dark and rotted things. Salazar was down there. Harry could feel him, the low, rounded rush of him like a receding wave, sea-sharp. The boy in him wanted to curl in that presence, rest in its fraying echoes. Wanted to be carried off far from shore on its back, pretend, for a few hours, that everything was sane and safe. He didn't want – didn't want to see Salazar like this. Didn't want to witness him paving the way to his blood-soaked legacy.

Unfortunately, what Harry wanted had no breathing space here. He wasn't a child who could pull bedsheets over his eyes to will monsters away. Not when the monsters were real, red and snarling in the hearts of men, blackness crooning in the cracks of worlds. He couldn't scrunch his eyes shut, wait out the storm – not with Sirius, impossibly alive, lying unconscious and vulnerable in the Hospital Wing. Harry didn't have the luxury of hesitation, anymore.

Bracing himself, he stepped forward, then down. Down. Down.

He had grown since his last slide down Hogwarts's plumbing; now wet, slimy stone scraped his hands and elbows and knees, shafted the broadened set of his shoulders, tore at bared skin. The tunnel seemed to contract rhythmically around him, the tightness of it squeezing his chest, like a rubber band squashing his lungs. It was like going down an endless sticky slope. He was being hurled in depths unknown, far below the Dungeons. Each bump in the sinuous pipe flung him against the walls. Harry gasped through the darkness, heart hammering double-beat at the panicked swoop of his stomach. It didn't last very long, a handful of heartbeats at most. A moment that stretched into eons, but failed to be nearly enough to prepare for what was to come.

Harry was spat back, grunting, in a shallow pool of stagnating water.

"Merlin," he muttered, gagging at the stench. Cool, decayed water seeped through his clothes. He supposed he should consider himself lucky – at least this time he hadn't landed knee-deep in rodent carcasses.

Shivering, he heaved himself up to his feet, drying his clothes with a distracted thought. The opening branched out to several more pipes, so many roots clambering for the Black Lake. Down here, the obscurity wasn't as absolute as it had been in the tunnel. A faint greenish glow emanated from those adjacent passages, though it was too weak to see farther than a few feet. The curved walls of crude stone were lathered with a layer of lake mud, made it smell of damp earth, a primal scent. The cave was low-ceilinged, heavy with the castle's weight. Harry had to advance bowed-backed, bent in two. Remembering the way, he shuffled down the largest passageway, wading noisily through the puddles that littered the ground. The flare of light from his wand projected hideous, elongated shadows on the walls.

Except for the slow drip of water on stone, everything was quiet as a grave. Rounding a familiar bend in the tunnel, Harry tensed, thrumming tight with apprehension, but the shed snake-skin that
had been there last time was nowhere to be found, thankfully. It made sense, he supposed. If Salazar was the one who'd hatched the Basilisk, the beast couldn't be all that big yet. It hadn't had ten centuries to grow great and terrible.

He walked on, the tunnel twisting on itself continuously. Several times, he hesitated over which path to take, halting at a crossroads. There had been more pipes the last time he'd been here, varying in size, lined with steel. The contrast with the rough-hewn stonework sprawled before him was disorienting. It seemed to have been carved out with great brushstrokes, efficient rather than refined. The quick work of someone pressed by time. Still, Harry let his first instinct carry him through the maze, eating up the distance. Each time he feared he'd gotten well and truly lost, an odd bend on the way would spark up a memory from his Second Year, urging him on, deeper under the castle.

His nerves were alight, stretched taut with hypersensitivity. He tried lightening his steps, but the watery, spongy ground made it impossible to stay silent. Every breath of brackish air slithering down the corridors made him shiver. Every noise wired his body in another knot. He wanted to reach the end of the tunnel, all the while dreading what he might find taking shape on the other side.

Finally, after one last curve, twisting down, Harry found himself before a wall that made him pause. He recognized the way the pillars supporting the entryway arched to the darkened ceiling. One day in the future, that wall would be engraved with two green snakes, intertwined. Large sparkling emeralds set in place of their eyes, gemstones that shone with such vivacity the snakes seemed alive.

Heart pulsing painfully below his mouth, his tongue desert-dry, Harry pressed trembling fingertips to cool stone. 'Open,' he ordered in a hoarse hiss.

Terribly, he was obeyed.

He stood at the entrance of a long, dimly-lit cavern. Its structure was familiar, well-remembered. Stacks of broken rocks and packed earth cluttered the farthest corner, suffusing the smell of crushed stone-dust. More pillars towered along the length of the room, sinking into the ceiling's low hanging obscurity. None of them were adorned with coiled snake statues, but Harry would never forget the way they loomed over him. Splashes of stark silvery light spilled from between them, pools of undying witchfires burning out of sight, a weird, unsettling glow.

Short for breath, Harry paused, ears straining for sound. The eerie silence endured, unbroken and motionless. Where was Salazar? Harry couldn't see him. Couldn't see much of anything, the room being made of darkness streaked with wan light. The Basilisk could be lurking by the shadows of any pillar, could be small enough to crawl in any nook, lying in wait for unsuspecting ankles. Harry didn't fancy getting bitten another time. Without Fawkes around, he wouldn't survive it twice. Coming here without thinking didn't seem like such a good idea all of a sudden.

His wand held high, ready to close his eyes at the first hint of motion, Harry edged his way into the room, anxious to the point of shaking, but nothing came bursting from the Chamber's depths. The place seemed deserted, abandoned. There were no signs of Salazar's presence, or anyone else's. Until there was.

In the time it takes to blink or breathe, the suspended place between one heartbeat and the next, Salazar came into sight with a shift of light, shadows retracting from where they'd kept him hidden in their folds. His back was to Harry, arms loose at his sides. His dark hair was held back in a long braid, plaited in a tight pattern Harry had seen on him only once before, a weave he'd learned Northmen wear before battle. He seemed lost to the contemplation of the wall before him, mud and
rocks stacked high, earth-wet.

Harry was halfway across the room. He stopped, struggling to regulate his unsteady breathing, with his legs parted shoulder-wide, ready to turn to the side, wand-arm first. Battle-taut.

"You found it here," said Salazar, quietly. His voice rang like a gunshot, powder-sharp, bursting flesh. "I'd wondered."

Salazar, Harry wanted to say in return and nothing else, in prayer or supplication, in relief, but the name stayed a lump in his throat, stretched down by the hollowness gaping in his chest, rattling the cavity where his heart should be. In his hand, his wand had gained weight, was excruciating to carry. He could end it here and there, Harry knew, if only his limbs could find the strength to lift up a damned wooden stick.

Salazar glanced over his shoulder, over at Harry, a half-smile quirking up his lips, dry and weary, softening his whole face. A single eyebrow ticked up, grey eyes taking in Harry's stance, keen enough to be felt on skin.

"Something the matter?" he asked, an inflection to his voice stuffing Harry's heart up in his throat, having his knees bend in anticipation, wariness an itch under his skin. Salazar's next smile sliced his face like a knife wound, a display of teeth that didn't reach his eyes. "Ah," he said. "I see."

And he – shimmered. The contours of his body wavered like summer heat, blurred together. Disappeared.

Illusion, Harry had time to think, when a sudden gust of wind tore through the rancid air, whipped his face, snuffed out what little light there was.

Sucking in a breath, he stiffened in alarm, the transition to complete darkness swift enough to throw him off balance. His eyes weren't given time to adapt. Something hard, like a stick or the blunt edge of a training sword, swiped at his ankles, the blow strong and sure, landing him on his arse, a sorry heap of clumsy limbs. Harry yelped, impacting with the unforgiving floor, teeth knocking together, heartbeat a loud staccato in his ears, ramped up by panic.

A whoosh of displaced air, crackling like a whip. Harry rolled away, training taking over, the long drills of Godric's lessons. He'd kept fingers curled tight around his wand, thankfully, raised it up in a swift jab, pointed at the ceiling. The blast swirled around him, folding him up in a bubble of pure stillness even as everything around him exploded, was pushed back, outwards and up.

Laughter rang out, full-throated, utterly devoid of humour. It made the hairs on the nape of Harry's neck stand up on end, even as warm breath ghosted over the shell of his ear.

"I've often wondered about that look on your face. You can't hide wariness when it cuts through your bones," Salazar breathed, the shape of his smile imprinted on every inch of Harry's skin, and Harry swore, rammed an elbow back, in the general direction of his voice but not impacting anything. "Alright, Harry. Show me how deep your anger runs."

The lights flickered back on.

Salazar stood before him, naked sword held loosely in one hand, thin blade gleaming dangerously in the trembling firelight. Several knives were sheathed along his waist and legs, with more hidden out of sight. Harry could guess the holster of his wand strapped on a forearm. For the first time in a long while, Harry looked at Salazar, and recognized how formidable a threat he truly was.

"Whatever you might have been taught," Salazar told him, his eyes bright, two silver coins left to
melt in the glare of the sun, "Anger, rage, fury – all make great tools if you know how to wield
them." His lips twisted in something strange, soft, almost a smile. "Letting violence loose, giving
yourself over, if only for a moment – there is nothing like it in the world. It offers all the relief we
so desperately seek. It may be ephemeral, but which of our pleasures isn't? Only fools refuse
themselves the thrill of release."

He took two steps to the side, sword soaring up in a graceful twirl. Harry matched his strides,
edging in the opposite direction, exceedingly aware of the space Salazar took up, the narrow strip
of air between them, stretched like miles.

"What is this," he said, not sure what he meant, the chamber or Salazar's words, or whatever it was
that moved between them, balanced on heartstrings.

Salazar bowed deep, arms spread like wings. "You tell me," he replied, and lunged.

This time, Harry saw him coming. He drew back a step, just enough to brace himself, pulling out
his sword in the breath before Salazar reached him. He blocked the first blow with the flat of his
blade, the strength swung behind making him grunt, surprised, the shock quivering along his arm.

Salazar grinned, inches from Harry's face, joyful, almost manic. "Come on Mr Potter," he spoke
into Harry's lips. "Do better. How can you expect to protect others, when you can't even defend
yourself? That man, in the bed above our heads. You've lost him before, haven't you. Are you so
eager to lose him again?"

Harry gritted his teeth, let his blade slide along the edge of Salazar's, metals grinding together. He
struck out a fist, and missed, Salazar bending out of reach. He shifted his stance, slashing at
Salazar's unprotected side, and missed. Missed. Missed again. Eyes narrowing, Harry forced
himself to breathe. To think.

"Good, that's good," Salazar told him, spinning them around in a wide circle. "Don't presume too
much of your own strength. You know where arrogance leads you. Don't rush in with your eyes
screwed shut. Not the way you did at the Ministry that night." He gestured at the ceiling, towards
Sirius, intent unmistakable. "The night you led him to his death."

The words hit Harry like ice water, punched him low in the gut, more painful than any blow. "How
do you know that?" he demanded, felt himself sway, physically sick, blood rushing from his
cheeks.

Salazar tapped the side of his face. "You showed me. It's a memory you've always struggled to
hide. It's eating you up, the grief and guilt of it. The deep dark hollow where the love you bear him
used to be." The expression on Salazar's face wasn't one Harry recognized. He looked at him with
eyes gone hard. "Tell me, Harry. Who is this man to you?"

Something dull like pain or anger began to throb behind Harry's breast. "You have no right," he
hissed, snarled, the words bumbling and awkward, his hand a tight fist around the harsh leather of
his sword. "No right to ask - to use - "

"You allowed me into your mind. I can do what I want with what you gave away so readily. Harry.
You opened yourself to me. Why shouldn't I make use of your weakness?"

Weakness. Harry stumbled away a step, numb. Was this what Salazar saw in him, then? A weak,
pathetic boy, who'd been naïve enough to open up his ribs and bare out his heart. He knew he'd
made himself vulnerable, had exposed himself at a time when they'd both needed it, fully aware of
the consequences but not caring. Harry had trusted, blindly, because he'd thought some things were
worth burning for. He'd been seen, and judged, and found lacking. Betrayal was a sour, bitter thing, a length of flesh tearing alongside his chest, but that had always been part of the deal, hadn't it? Giving a piece of yourself to someone else, it came with its own risks, a form of lethal beauty, holding out your hand to a sleek, dangerous thing, hoping you'd get a kiss instead of a bite. Sometimes, you could only hope for teeth, but it didn't matter. It was alright.

Salazar was wrong.

"You're wrong," Harry told him, and against his palm, the grip of his sword had grown hot to the touch, his magic bleeding from his body, shimmying into the blade. Focused, for once, razor-sharp with purpose. He padded softly across the room, keeping Salazar in sight, his steps light, measured. "I'm not weak."

"No, you're not. From the moment I first saw you, I knew there was no weakness in you. Only strength, a boundless well of it, made raw by all you've suffered."

Salazar's eyes were trained on Harry's sword, appreciation crinkling the corners. He eased his way around the room, lithe strides Harry followed. "That's it. Good. Can you feel it? It's a strange kind of clarity, isn't it. This communion between a weapon and one lethal goal. Control it. Let it out. You've been angry for so very long. It's high time you learned to use it. Go on - attack me!"

And Harry – laughed. Rattling and hollow, a grating sound. "You think it's you I'm angry at, do you?" he grinned, choking on a snort.

Salazar's answering smile glistened like a coat of fresh paint. "Of course not. But I believe self-hatred will tear you to pieces if you don't channel it towards the right individuals. Think - whose fault was it that you ended up here, really? Who is it that killed so many of your friends?" He bent at the waist, catching Harry's gaze. "Attack me," he ordered, eyes wide, mad, so Harry did.

They met in the middle of the Chamber of Secrets, swords and fists and teeth, the resulting clash resounding around them, multiplied, amplified in the extremes, but there was no one around to hear. Harry feigned a stab to Salazar's ribs, hacked at his legs instead, earning an elated bark. He dodged a slash to his belly, only to bruise his jaw on a raised fist. He measured the strength of his blows, overshot but kept his balance. Righted himself, parried, blocked, attacked again, the screech of swords making him shiver. His blade cut the air as if animated by a life of its own, smoothly guiding Harry through the steps of this dance. Harry felt as though he was about to thrum out of his own skin.

Salazar kept up with him with disconcerting ease, painted his body in long welts of red and purple. He wasn't even winded. Harry wanted to steal his breath with his tongue. He wanted to dig fingers into his flesh, make him pant with it.

"For the record," he snarled, gasping, flowing with the sudden swerve of Salazar's sword. "For the record, Sirius is my godfather, and the only family I've got left, you arsehole. And you – " He grunted, rolled from a stab that would have sliced his throat, surged up, bringing down his sword in a great arch, close enough to catch the dilation of Salazar's eyes, dark and deep. "You don't get to tell me how I feel about killing him."

His blow landed.

It would have opened Salazar from clavicle to hip, a clean diagonal stripe through bone and muscle. Harry saw it happen in his mind's eye, saw flesh split apart, blood start gushing, thick carmine red rising up like a flood, filling up his throat. A shield sizzled to life, fitting over Salazar's body like a second skin in the half-instant before contact. Harry felt it absorb the strength behind his sword, felt it take in the shock. Felt it grind, give, horrifyingly parting open for the edge of
Harry's blade with the sizzle of severed magic. A soft, huffing sound rushed out of Salazar's lips, his eyes growing wide, sword-arm falling limply by his side. His hand spasmed from the aftershocks, the inertia behind Harry's hit pushing through his side, painful but harmless.

He stumbled away, disarmed but no less dangerous for it. Harry saw the moment he regained his balance, centred himself. He rearranged his stance, a dagger appearing in each hand, braced for another round, but Harry was faster. He dropped his own sword, let it clatter away. He bend down, below Salazar's center of gravity. Punched him in the solar plexus, once, hard, fist exploding with the impact, pushing air from his lungs. Harry didn't look up at the sound of Salazar choking, wheezing for breath, didn't wait for him to get himself back together again before he swept his legs, brought him down to the ground. Flat on his back, Salazar's head smacked the floor with an audible thud, features twisting in a pained wince.

Harry fell with him. On him, pinning him down before he could reach for more weapons. Both their breathing came in harsh, stuttering pants. Salazar looked at him and didn't move. Harry looked at him and swallowed around the hapless rage that made his whole body burn.

"You shouldn't have done that," Harry spoke, calmly.

The smile Salazar gave him was crooked. Unbothered. "Shouldn't have done what?" he asked, growing lax in Harry's hold. "Given your anger focal point? You were about to self-combust, Harry. While you'd make a glorious blaze, now isn't the time. You needed that."

Harry watched the bruise gently starting to swell on Salazar's cheekbone, dark and tender-looking. He listened to the laboured rasps of his breath. "So did you," he said, knowing he was right. "God. You wanted that." He thought about his sword slapping the soft flesh at the juncture of Salazar's collarbone and his throat, digging deep but not breaking skin. "We're fucked up, you and I, aren't we."

Under him, Salazar hummed, archly amused. "Listen," he said, stretching slightly in Harry's grip, testing the strength of his arms. Harry squeezed his wrists tighter in warning, his lips curling to bare his teeth. Keeping Salazar close. It seemed safer. Harry didn't trust himself to let go just yet. Salazar levelled him with a strange stare but relaxed back against the floor, docile. Pliant. "Harry," he said, "I won't tell you that what happened to your godfather wasn't your fault. You've seen too much of the world to believe in empty words. But don't blame yourself for the actions you took as a boy. You were a boy at the time, weren't you? Scared and a child, worried for your kin. What you did, you did out of love. Whatever hardships that man has endured – at least he went through them knowing he was cherished by you."

A faint, broken sound trembled behind Harry's teeth. His shoulders hitched up, drew in, warding off the meaning of Salazar's words, each stabbing his gut like knives. He hated this man. Hated him, the easy perceptiveness of him, the quiet understanding he always bestowed upon Harry, a wordless, complete acceptance Harry didn't know what to do with, wasn't even sure he wanted. It was more than he could stand. He could feel his heart break from the softness in Salazar's voice.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he breathed, exhausted. "You have no idea what happened back then."

"Perhaps not. But I know you."

And Harry – sagged. He pitched forward, into Salazar, fight seeping out of him in a pained sigh. He pressed his forehead against Salazar's chest, feeling the indent of his ribs, the low pound of his heart beneath. He rested there, feeling himself tremble, thinking about Sirius and the Patronus coiled around his dreams. "You know," he said to Salazar's skin, because talking was easier in a
place where he could breathe, "There are times when I can almost see my life, stretched out before me. I have moments of clarity when I know I'm a dead man walking. I'm just – ticking away, caught in a moment of grace before the inevitable." In his hands, Salazar held very still, the rise and fall of his chest barely noticeable, as though he'd stopped breathing altogether. "Mostly, though," Harry continued in the silence. "Mostly, most days, nothing makes sense. Everything that happens to me feels ridiculous. Is ridiculous. A bloody joke. The world's disjointed and pointless and that's – well. Sometimes that's even worst. Having no meaning."

"Meaning?" Harry felt Salazar suck in a deep breath, holding air in his lungs and letting it out in a slow exhale, the soft, wry huff brushing the top of Harry's head. "There's no meaning to life, Harry. Living is meaning. Everything else is accessory. Superfluous. Strip yourself of any other purpose – it's nothing but a mirage. The only thing that makes sense is to claw for the next breath you get to take. To fight to keep what you have. Grab at it with both hands, let it hurt if you must. It's not always worth it, but it's what you have."

Harry looked up, into Salazar's eyes, only to find the man already staring at him, serious and focused, beautiful even in the greenish gloom. "You're killing me, do you know that?" he ground out through clenched teeth, utterly unable to push away the soft, warm thing uncurling in his chest, coiling down his limbs.

Salazar's eyes travelled along the length of him. Harry saw them follow the dip of his back, the stretch of his legs, before snapping back up to Harry's face, and then, quickly, to the ceiling. Salazar gave a snort, loud and disgusted. "Said the pot to the kettle," he muttered, almost too low for Harry to ear. He glanced back down at him, a flicker of self-deprecating humour shining through before his eyes flitted away rather pointedly, back to contemplating the ceiling. "Harry," he said, serenely. "You should probably stand up now."

And – yeah. Harry reckoned he probably should. Somehow, he'd ended up on his knees between Salazar's legs, holding down his arms by pushing weight in his wrists. He'd slid, at some point, had let himself slump forward, on his stomach, not curved above Salazar but propped against him, all hard angles and searing warmth, and he could feel the press of Salazar's thighs against his hips, and if Salazar moved, rocked up and into him –

"Oh shit," said Harry, and he let go of Salazar's wrists as if he'd been burned, sitting up on his heels which was a bad, bad idea because Salazar's back arched with the motion, spread legs spreading further and Harry was only human and going to lose his fucking mind.

Salazar's breath hitched, caught, eyes screwing shut in a flinch like pain.

"Shit," Harry said again, for emphasis. "You alright? You hit your head, didn't you? Am I hurting you?"

Salazar didn't answer. The noise he made with the back of his throat wasn't one Harry recognized. It sounded like the bastard offspring of a strangled laugh and a coughfit. Maybe the humid air was getting to him.

Because Harry had some sense of self-preservation left, he didn't ask him about it. He pushed himself up to his feet, bracing hands on either side of Salazar's hips to do so, resolutely ignoring the weight of Salazar's leg sliding off his back, the furious ache in his gut at the lost of body warmth.

"So," he said, even when talking around everything churning about his heart was difficult. He offered Salazar a hand up, an olive branch, which the other man accepted after a moment of hesitation. "We need to talk."
Getting the words out was difficult, though Harry's couldn't figure why. He was tired beyond reason. These last few maddening hours had sapped him of his strength. The whole world had been upended, was left hanging loose. As though someone had moved all of Hogwarts's furniture a few inches to the left. Nothing was as it should be, the solid ground under his feet splintering up with every step, threatening to give. Sirius was back from the dead. Harry was back in the Chamber of Secrets. He felt fragile, scraped raw, his every nerves bared to the open air. He didn't want to think about anything. He wanted to sleep. To crawl up in bed beside Sirius, drift off to the beats of his heart. He wanted to ease Sirius's dreams, marvel at the wonderful impossibility of his rasping breaths, bask in it and not have to worry for once in his damned life.

But he couldn't. Salazar had looked at Sirius with his hands on his weapons, had come down here to start working on one of Harry's most vivid nightmares, and it was Harry's job to worry. To protect Sirius when the man couldn't protect himself, because he was family and Harry owed it to himself to try and wipe out Sirius's blood from under his nails. Even if it felt as though he might break from it, might make his Patronus explode in a thousand sparks and never come back.

"Harry," Salazar said, and Harry closed his eyes against the sickness roiling in his stomach. He held up a hand, silencing Salazar with a shake of his head. Merlin, he didn't even know where to start. "I – listen. I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to answer truthfully."

Salazar's eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness, but his voice was gentle as he said, "You tread dangerous waters, Harry. Beware the creatures they hold."

Too late, Harry thought. He'd already felt the scrap of their teeth, forever marking his skin. "What is this place?" he asked, indicating the gloomy, cavernous sprawl carved out around them. "Why are you building it?"

"Why do you think? You've been here before."

"Just – answer the bloody question," Harry growled, and he didn't remember moving but his hand had fisted in Salazar's shirt, was holding him there, to him, and Harry couldn't tell whether he'd meant it as a threat or as a means to keep Salazar close.

"What happened last year," Salazar told him. His voice didn't shake but it felt as though it should, a thinness running within, a chink in the armour that suggested the pounding of blood beneath. "I can't let it happen again."

"So this is your solution, is it. A fucking cave with a monster to guard it. Have you lost your mind?"

"Wards can be broken, a rún mo chroí, but Muggles are superstitious beings. They will run from monsters." Salazar met his gaze, a slow, cold smile tilting up his lips. Harry's hand on his shirt was starting to cramp but he couldn't bring himself to move. "And if they do not run, they will die."

"Muggles," Harry repeated, latching onto that word as if air had been sucked from the room and he was offered an oxygen mask. "You – you intend this for Muggles."

One of Salazar's eyebrows ticked up in silent interrogation. "I do. Even they can make Hogwarts weak, if only from their sheer numbers," he explained. "We've seen that. Death came to kiss the side of our necks last year. We came close to melting the wax from our wings in hubris. Should her walls fail us again, I mean for this place to become Hogwarts's last refuge." Salazar paused, swallowed. Harry watched his throat work with the motion. He startled when a long-fingered hand closed over his own, eased the punishing grip of his fist, skin cool against his own. "Besides," said
Salazar, and it was soft, soothing, whispered like a confession. "Basilisks live very long lives." His hand left Harry's, travelled up his arm, lightly skimming the top of his shoulder, thumbing at the raised, jagged skin of the scar that dipped down to Harry's hip, the curse of ripped flesh Salazar had saved him from, so long ago. "Hundreds of years," he said, pressing down. "Thousands."

"No," said Harry. His legs might have bucked, if not for Salazar's grip on him, keeping him rooted on the spot, everything else falling into unspeakable abysses, tumbling in darkness. "No, you don't – you don't mean – "

"There is a legend among Vikings, about a great serpent that's curled around the world. It dwells under the seas, has long since grown so big it has to bite its own tail. The day it opens its jaws to bite something else is the day Ragnarök begins. With it, the world dies and is reborn anew." Salazar looked at him with age and magic in his eyes, stars died in-between each words, but Harry could not grasp their meaning, couldn't make himself understand. "I cannot give you something so terrible as Jörmungandr," said Salazar, a hand sweeping behind him and Harry saw a shred of shifting darkness, poison-green, golden-eyed, a silent promise. "But a Basilisk is capable of much havoc. It'll protect you in battles to come, even when all else has fallen to dust."

"It won't," Harry told him, something fragile blooming and shattering in his breast, bursting glass shards. "It won't protect me. It won't protect anyone. It's just a dangerous beast. Salazar. Please. Kill it. Find something else."

There was puzzlement written on every line of Salazar's face, as though Harry had given up on the languages they both spoke, was once again speaking a tongue of smoked chrome and burned asphalt, a tongue long lost to grind of centuries. "I don't," he began. Stopped. "You sent it to me as a gift. Why do you protest it now?"

"A gift? What gift – " Distantly, Harry heard his own voice trail off, sputter and grow silent, crushed under memory. The pine and lavender smell of the Mediterranean coast, rich but overwhelmed by the rising stink of a troll's cavern, decayed and pungent. The faint green glow of a precious stone, smooth as silk, too beautiful to stay buried under the cloying stench. Thin white sand sliding between his fingers, the distant roar of a midnight feast. He'd written a letter in sea-green ink, Harry remembered. Attached a jewel to it and sent it home, an expression of grief and care, a silent beg for forgiveness.

The stone, Harry realised, deep forest green, flickering with life in firelight, had been an egg, something coiled inside it, waiting to be breathed into being. The stone, he thought, had been the colour stagnating ponds or deep lakes, or poison coursing through a child's veins, sweet and sizzling. Basilisk-green.

"Oh," said Harry, stupidly. "I'm part of it."

He thought about Ginny thrashing against bedsheets, red hair a spill of dark blood on the pillows they shared, sticking to clammy skin. Her mouth, pressed wetly to the curve of Harry's shoulder, panting through the last tremors of panic, Harry tracing wide circles on the soft curve of her back, murmuring reassuring nonsense into her neck. She could still feel it sometimes, she would tell him. A malignant spirit seeping in her mind, ice casting a coffin over her body, each second bleeding away like death. The yellow-gold glare of monstrous eyes, other people's screams in her head, their skin hard and stone-cold, always, always screaming, anguish tearing through their throats, trapped against their teeth.

"I'm part of it," Harry repeated, and he swayed, teetering, balanced precariously on the edge of verdant scales, the slash of sharp ivory fang caving in the muscles of his arm. "I made it happen."
Cause and consequences, a continuous Möbius strip, half-a-twist and you've got one side but two, one boundary but none, an infinite loop, unorientable. Forever biting its tail.

"I made this," he said, nonsensical. "I made this, God, I wrote myself and fuck is it a shit story and it's entirely my fault, like that bloody snake, biting myself till the end of it. It's like Third year all over again but worse, don't you see? No of course you don't, how could you, I gave you means and opportunity and you're just trying to look after what's yours, Muggle-borns and all, but me. I. I saved Sirius back then, too, but no one — "

No one died for it.

The words and his tongue curled in his mouth, rotted there. Harry felt his lips being sewn shut, rough thread pulling from lip to lip, the sick slide of a needle under skin. He blinked and saw a hundred thousand fractures splintering out of him. Harry was ice being stepped on, crackling with too much weight, crooning beasts gliding beneath. He heard the groan of ice or glass, the distant chortle of twin crows. He was a shatter-point, bursting the seams between worlds.

He came to on his knees, breathing harsh and searing, wet stone and gloomy cave swimming back into focus, Salazar's hand in his hair, gripped tight, the man sinking down with him, eye-level and equal, equilibrium made flesh.

"Harry," Salazar breathed, his eyes a dark sea-grey that contained the world, a snake sleeping under the waves. "What happened."

The air tasted like hot metal and charred powder and ozone, the elemental bricks that made the lightning storms at the hearts of stars, power shuddering like heatwaves. Harry glimpsed the darkness that simmered between galaxies, binary weights resting on each shoulders, feathers brushing his cheeks, raven-black, caws speaking in foreign warnings. He couldn't make out words, but oh, he understood.

"I almost set the monsters free," said Harry, watching breath shiver past Salazar's lips, blood-red with life. "If I don't let some things happen, events unfold, I'll crack time open. There's stuff I can't ever say." He shuddered, feeling fissures ran up the length of him, tear and tear, stretched taut. "I feel awful."

Salazar sighed into Harry's lips, a thumb rubbing gently over the ridges of Harry's neck, digging in the skin behind his ear, and the next shiver that shook him started at the low curve of his spine, worked its way up in something that wasn't pain.

"It's alright," he told Harry, soft and even, reassuring even with lies. "I swore to you we'd find a way. I'm many questionable things, but an oathbreaker isn't one of them. We'll figure how to make it right. What happened with your – with Sirius as well."

Harry looked at him and thought, I think I'm in love with you, but he couldn't say that, either.

Above their heads, the snake curled over Sirius's heart burned a little brighter.

Chapter End Notes

Back in one piece, with a new chapter, and finally on summer break! Since a few of you asked, I've been helping out in Togo, which was both wonderful and an eye-
opener, with a side-taste of fuck capitalism.

Also, thank you. Coming home to all your responses to this story has been overwhelming in the best of ways. I hope you've had a great summer, and good luck to those starting a new school/work year!
Harry woke groggily from heavy, dreamless sleep, to a languid warmth sunk deep under his skin. He stretched, feeling as though he'd been dumped in a warm bath during the night, more comfortable than he remembered being in a long while. Stifling a yawn, he blinked hazily, the world made blurred through leaden eyelids, a soggy mesh bleary with receding lethargy. Recollection from the previous night poked at the edges of his consciousness – Sirius, his new Patronus, confronting Salazar in the Chamber of Secrets – and he screwed his eyes shut once again, holding the images close, huffing out a slow exhale.

It was all a dream, he told himself firmly. He didn't want to get his hopes up. I'm back in the Dormitories and nothing's happened at all.

But anxiety had an odd way to insinuate itself even through the best reasoned logic. It held the breath, shivered against the lungs. Pressed down hard until you either choked, or panted for air, until you certainly couldn't think. It twisted the belly in squirming knots. Made you aware of your heart, its alarmed thumping against the ribs, as though it was knocking on a prison door, shouting to be let out because it was a mess in there, something had caught fire.

But before the onset of grief could ramp up his pulse, Harry became aware of a small, rhythmic rise and fall against him, like the expansion of a breathing chest. Heat was suffusing his side, battling off the cool air he could feel against his cheeks. He swallowed heavily, keyed up with burgeoning hope.

Hesitantly, Harry opened his eyes. The day had dawned pale greyish pink. Soft sunrays slanted through the large Infirmary windows, warming the cool glass, scattering on the floor in delicate white-gold rings. Slowly, he turned his head to the side, body a tense, rigid line. His heart stuttered. On the pillow beside him was Sirius's emaciated face, his mouth slack in sleep. Despite the sick-looking pallor of his skin, he looked peaceful like this, brow smoothed out of worries, making him appear several years younger. For a long moment, Harry forgot to breathe, drinking in the sight before him until his lungs squeezed in protest.

"Sirius," he murmured, utterly unable to help himself, light-headed with disbelief. Though Sirius didn't answer, still deeply asleep, Harry reached across the space between them, touched his face with the tip of his fingers, gently so as not to wake him. Sirius's skin was warm, dry, grooved with years of hurt and worry, betrayal and imprisonment. Harry traced the lines of his forehead, lightly, pushed away a lock of hair from his face, feeling delirious with wonder. "You're really here."

Breathless, fearing he was about to choke on the hard lump in his throat, Harry sat up on the bed, his arms shaking. He made himself count to ten in his head, inhaling deep gulps of air until the burn behind his eyes faded, until he felt like he wasn't about to fall to pieces if he so much as moved, dislocating in a broken, wailing mess on the floor.

Slowly, softly, reality reasserted itself. Harry was in one of the Hospital Wing's private rooms. The herbal smell of medical potions wafted through the stillness of the air, undisturbed, along with a caustic whiff of the hard soap the house-elves used for laundry. The clean Infirmary bedsheets were rougher than the ones on Harry's own bed. He rubbed the fabric between his fingers, grounding himself – the exact coarseness of the texture wasn't something his mind could have made up. Logically, he couldn't be dreaming any of this, not even if he was hallucinating, drugged
to the gills. The thought eased some of the weight that had been pressing against his chest.

He had a vague memory of crawling in bed beside Sirius late last night, needing the assurance of his godfather's continued existence after his fight with Salazar. It seemed that nothing had come to bother them during the night. The heap of Sirius's dirty clothes was still piled in a corner of the room. The chair Harry had Conjured while watching over him hadn't moved an inch, the dark-green plaid lying bunched up on the padded seat. Even Harry's Patronus was still there. The great snake floated lazily in the air above the bed, the spread of its enormous coils curled over both Harry and Sirius, offering silent protection. It must have stood vigil all through the night, was probably the reason for Harry's uninterrupted rest.

The serpent was looking at Harry with a slanted, unblinking gaze, forked tongue flicking out to taste the air even though it had no need for it, being an inconsistent wisp of magic. Harry had the feeling it was waiting patiently for further instructions. Its glow had diminished while Harry was resting. Harry remembered it burning with a dazzling silver-white shine, as solid as tempered steel, gliding the whole room in bleached, pearly light. Now though, the snake was see-through, like a length of fogged glass. Its contours wavered inconsistently, made hazy, liquid with time. It had lost none of its magnificence though, was still as graceful as when Harry had first summoned it. The sight of it still jarred, both foreign and weirdly familiar. It reminded Harry of the loss of Prongs, though he couldn't find it in himself to resent his new Patronus for the bitter twist of sorrow at the thought. The snake had served him well so far. It wasn't its fault if Harry had changed. It wasn't its fault that Harry had – that Harry –

The room's door swung open, groaning quietly on its hinges, startling Harry. Helga shuffled in before he could react too badly. She was wearing men's clothes today, probably borrowed from Salazar's wardrobe for an indefinite amount of time, a black doublet cinched at the waist with a leather belt, dark trousers tucked in high boots. Her blond hair, held back from her face with the help of a network of braids, stood out with a solid golden sheen against the dark velvet. She cast Harry a swift smile the moment she caught sight of him, seemingly unsurprised to find him here. She made no comment about the fact that he was lying in bed with one of her patients, though her eyebrows ticked up curiously at the sight of the snake Patronus.

"Good morning Harry," she greeted him, approaching the bedside. Harry noticed she held several potions phials in her hands. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Morning ma'am," Harry replied. He couldn't help the answering smile that curled his lips, instinctively relaxing in the woman's presence. If she too could see Sirius, then surely Harry hadn't gone mad during the night. "I did manage to grab a few hours, actually."

Harry heaved himself from the bed, putting weight on his wobbly legs while Helga busied herself with checking Sirius's vitals. He made a half-hearted attempt at straightening his rumpled clothes - he'd gone to bed without bothering to take off more than his shoes, too wrung out to care about wrinkles. Combing a hand through his hair - not that it would be of any help - he sidled closer to Helga, looking over her shoulder at Sirius's results.

"He's doing better, isn't he?" he asked, watching the miniaturized, full-bodied representation of his godfather rotating in front of him, skin and muscles peeled off to show the beating of his heart, the organ pulsing its steady double-beat, pushing life through veins and arteries. "His blood pressure's almost back to normal."

Helga shot him a teasing glance. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Er – asking, Professor. I'm – I'd rather be sure."
"It'll be a while yet before he's recovered – but he is doing much better already." Helga cast another spell Harry didn't recognise. Thin blue ribbons wove themselves over Sirius's skin, sank down with a soft fizzle, making him glow from the inside. "We'll keep him on a steady course of restorative draughts until he is back to a decent weight," she continued, apparently satisfied with the results. "Hopefully we'll get him to eat solid food soon. It should help."

Harry closed his eyes, let the meaning behind the words wash over him. "Thank you," he breathed, resting both hands on Sirius's bed so Helga wouldn't see him stagger. "I – thank you."

"Oh, Harry." He felt the press of a hand between his shoulder-blades, an odd clutter of emotions painting Helga's tone, not half of which Harry cared to identify. "I don't have to thank me. I'd have healed him regardless of what he is to you."

"I know." Resolutely swallowing around the swelling in his throat, he caught Helga's hand, squeezed it and let it go. Made foolish with relief, he said, "I know, but. Thank you anyway. I've never – I didn't think there were people strong enough to be as kind as you are left in the world." He looked at Helga, so helplessly grateful he felt dizzy with it, tracing the slants of her face, committing it all to memory, earth-black eyes and upturned nose and full red lips, the spattering of freckles on her cheeks, the war-hardened steel running beneath. "I'd heard about you before we met, but I didn't believe half of what I'd been told. It takes so much work to be really, sincerely good that I didn't believe it was possible." Harry paused, glanced at Sirius, thinking about every Hufflepuff he'd ever met, thinking about Cedric, the streak of fairness embedded in every inch of him, how young he'd been when a flash of green light had snuffed it all out of him. He looked at Helga and thought You've been saving me since long after you died. He said, "Meeting you in person, seeing how much of it is true, and so much better than the legends – it's been a privilege."

Helga considered him silently for a moment, and Harry held still under her searching gaze, let her look and let her see. After a while, she huffed out a soft, quiet laugh, arms unwinding from around her waist. "Well, look at you," she said, vibrant with warmth. "Look how you've grown. Where has the shy boy who couldn't stammer two words without tripping over his own feet gone, I wonder?"

Harry snorted. "Buried under the Defence classroom, most likely. Godric's put him there with a good whack round the head."

"Maybe." Helga turned back to Sirius, thrusting several potions jars in Harry's hands. "Help me make him drink that, will you?"

Harry propped Sirius up against his shoulder, held his head and muttered encouragements while together, he and Helga pried his lips open to dribble the concoctions on his tongue. He watched as Helga renewed some of the spells she'd cast the day before, a long chant in a language Harry didn't recognise that laced itself through Sirius's muscles, seeped them in Helga's strength.

"Do you have an idea when he'll wake up?" Harry asked as they tucked Sirius back into bed, safely ensconced in a small mountain of pillows.

"Not before late tonight," Helga told him. "It's possible he won't even wake before a few days. He is – exhausted beyond anything I've seen. The more time he spends asleep, the better. He needs it. Besides, it gives him time to recover without interferences." She started clearing out her supplies, preparing to leave. "As for you, my young friend," she halted in her work, swivelled to pin Harry down with an unimpressed glare. "Do you want to tell me about where it is that you got all those bruises between now and last night?"

"Bruises? What – oh." Wincing, Harry thumbed at the soreness he could feel stretched out by the sharp sweep of his jaw, the skin swollen, tender under his fingers, where Salazar had landed a fist
last night. He hadn't thought to heal himself before he'd gone to bed, hadn't thought he'd be marked black and blue come morning. Glancing down at his arms, he glimpsed at more mottled discoulourations marring the flesh, wide dots shaped like fingertips, a mashed deep purple where Salazar had gripped him tight. No wonder Helga thought it looked suspicious. "Er," he said, rubbing a hand to the back of his neck, "I can explain?"

Helga's smile sliced her face like a shark's. "Please do," she replied, cheerful, and Harry blanched, taking an instinctive step away.

{...}

Helga kicked him out of the Infirmary shortly thereafter, under the threat to volunteer him as a live dummy for the First Years if he so much as thought about coming back before dinner this evening. The menace was effective enough. Despite wanting to protest, Harry beat a hasty retreat, remembering the kind of deformed mishaps he'd conjured up as a First Year itself.

He slunk down to the Dungeons unnoticed, the deserted corridors echoing ominously with his soft footfalls. Everyone was already sitting their first class of the day. He grabbed a quick shower, grimacing at the tackiness of his skin, the sweat lathered on from yesterday's fight sliding off of him with soap and steaming watersprays. He stayed in his rooms only long enough to put on a set of fresh clothes, hurrying back outside before the walls could start caving in on him. He couldn't stand the common room's quiet, his brain having long since kicked into overdrive.

At loss for anything better to do, he meandered all the way to the kitchens. The house-elves were always good company, and it had been a while since Harry last visited them. He arrived right in the lull between two meals. Though the place was always abuzz with activity during the day, the usual bustle was down to manageable levels. Harry had time to breathe in the sweet scent of tea and cooked breakfast pastries, dripping candied fruits, melted sugar, with the smoky tang of crisped bacon lingering under, before he was being pounced on by half a dozen elves, the creatures beaming delightedly at the unexpected visit. He was herded to a seat by the fire without being given the opportunity to protest, then dropped neatly at a small, round table piled with enough baked goods to feed four or five men like him, if they were particularly famished.

Realising he hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, Harry was surprised to find that he was, in fact, starving, stomach growling loudly at the sight of the hard-boiled eggs and oatmeal, ham, sausages, the platters teetering with jam-filled scones, honey-dipped waffles, gingerbread sticky with cinnamon. He stacked up his plate, attacking his meal with gusto under the house-elves's satisfied grins.

Having nowhere else to be, Harry stayed a while, chatting away with the house-elves on breaks, amusing himself by observing the constant ballet of saucepans flying overhead, burnished copper glinting richly against the arching brick ceiling. The elves told him about all the work they'd done in the summer while he was gone, from the improvements to the House's dormitories, to how they had finished furbishing the South Wing just in time for the new school year. As the small creatures kept nudging more food in his direction, seemingly unable to help themselves, bat-like ears flapping in excitement every time he sampled a new dish, Harry eventually elected to excuse himself lest he grew obese.

He considered heading back to the Chamber of Secrets for exactly two seconds before discarding the idea. Just thinking about the oppressiveness that lurked down in the sewers, all the bad memories stashed within, made his skin crawl with revulsion. Besides, Harry didn't feel like facing Salazar so soon, with their last encounter still raw like a fresh wound. Though part of him craved the man's company with a fierce sort of desperation – and precisely because of it –, Harry would
rather avoid him for the time being. He had enough to worry about as it was. Sorting through the tangled mess of emotions Salazar evoked in him wasn't at the top of his list of priorities.

Picking through his options, Harry finally made up his mind. Before going, he asked the house-elves for any meat offals they were about to throw out. Thanking them profusely for the food they'd fed him and for the bag full of red, bloody meat they dumped in his arms, he made his way out of the castle, to the Thestral herd.

The day was cold, roiling with the aftertaste of a rainstorm. Gusts of wind rippled through the long grass carpeting the rain-slick, treacherous slope that eased the way to the Forbidden Forest. Overhead, the midday sky was a clear, pale blue, streaked with wisps of shredded clouds, a dark menacing grey that played shifting shadows with the wan sun. As Harry pushed through the thick forest undergrowth, the wind was cut off, buffered by the dark green canopy of leaves and branches clattering in the distance. He gave his eyes some time to accommodate to the sudden gloom, the heavily filtered sunlight shining weak, shivery rays through the winding network of tree trunks. The musky scent of wet earth and crushed vegetation rose up to meet him, coating his nose and tongue with a sharp, green smell.

It didn't take him very long to find the herd, as the Thestrals preferred to linger at the edges of the Forest, where the trees were still young and sparse, giving them enough space to unfurl their leathery wings.

"Good morning beauty," Harry greeted, laughing when the lead mare trotted up to him, pushed her head into his chest, nearly toppling him over. He felt a tug on his left arm – the foals had already smelled the bag of raw meat, were sniffing it with impatient keening noises. "Alright, alright, bite off my arm while you're at it." He nudged them away, which only seemed to delight them. Whinnying happily, they propelled themselves back on their bony, shaky legs, and launched at Harry with renewed vigour. "Oof – Give me a moment you bloody brats."

He fed them the meat, noting with satisfaction that all of them had put on weight. Though their bones still poked through their black rugged skins, as Harry suspected they should, the creatures seemed healthy enough to him. The Forest had done well by them.

"Harry Potter," intoned a deep, mellifluous voice behind him.

Harry, who'd been busy fending off the foals trying to lick his fingers clean of the last drops of blood, jumped a foot in the air, heart thumping loudly in alarm. He swung around, wand falling in his hand, half-bent in a defensive crouch, before he recognised the owner of the voice.

"Merlin's balls, Hexo," he growled, easing out of his combative stance, clutching at his chest. Beside him, the foals whickered in agitation, sensing his fright, lips pulling back over sharp teeth. "Give a man some warning. You people are way too sneaky to be walking on four legs."

"Apologies," Hexo replied, dark eyes gleaming in amusement. He marched closer, hooves padding silently on the bed of dead leaves. "I did not mean to – sneak."

"And now he's mouthing me off. Will wonders ever cease?" Harry cast the centaur a quick grin, running calming hands down the Thestrals' flanks. "Fancy seeing you here. Did you want anything?" Worry tightened his stomach, twinged along his arms. "There haven't been any more – the crack hasn't come back, has it?"

But Hexo shook his head. "The Forest is safe, Harry Potter," he told Harry, a solemn cast to the sharp slants of his face. "I merely wished to welcome you back." Liquid dark eyes never leaving him, he inclined his head, a slight, respectful dip of the waist. "For the events of last summer, you
have my people's thanks."

Harry snorted at that, shaking his head. He wasn't sure he wanted to be reminded of the events of last summer. "There's no need for that," he informed Hexo, voice rough. "We had a deal. You've helped me as least as much as I've helped you."

"Perhaps," Hexo conceded, a curious tilt to his head. "Perhaps for all your prowess you do not fully grasp the reaches of what you've done. Every creature of magic felt the earth shake that night as you came into being, Harry Potter." And before Harry could so much as blanch at the words, the empty ringing behind them, Hexo ploughed right on, "However," he said, "you must know the situation cannot stand still for much longer. You are out of time."

Harry huffed out a soft, trembling breath, blindly resting against the warm weight of the mare behind him. Her wing flapped against his side, as though she wanted to unfold him in it. "You know, don't you," Harry said, feeling sick, light-headed.

"Your arrival rippled across the stars," Hexo replied, serene in the quiet of the Forest. "We would have been blind to miss it, or those you pulled after you. The Dog star circled back to us a few nights ago. Has it reached you yet?"

Though Harry had never aced Astronomy, he remembered the class well enough to know what the Dog Star was. "Sirius," he breathed. "Yeah, he's here. Do you – " He cleared the lump squeezing this throat, swallowing. "Did you see how he got here? I mean, I know what happened to land me in medieval Stonehenge." Rune-laced ground and searing magic, mud-caked trainers and blood-soaked shirt, white masks slick with rain, pale like death. "But Sirius, he – it can't have been the same for him. I thought he'd died long ago. We never even found his body."

Hexo looked at him, soft, almost reverent in the way he held himself. "You called him to you. He followed your voice through the land of shadows," he explained at length. His gaze flitted to the darker depths of the Forest, and Harry's eyes closed in pain, understanding what Hexo was looking towards, the lost clearing where Harry had fought the crack. This was where Sirius had been. Where the Veil had left him to rot, stapled with monsters. Hexo nodded, perhaps seeing the horror dawning on Harry's face. "Your parent is steepled in darkness," he said gently. "He'll need help to find his way back from it."

It was about just as bad as Harry had feared. "There are more than one breach, aren't there," he said, gritting his teeth against the unpleasant roiling of his stomach. "The one I closed in the Forest isn't alone. I – my presence here opened them. Is opening them. That's how Sirius escaped. Because I'm pulling apart the world's skin." He pressed a hand to his mouth, breathing deep. He couldn't stand the sudden oppressiveness of the Forest, the trees looming over him, smothering, curved in accusation. He thought about the creatures he'd heard crooning beyond the crack, simmering in darkness, awful and rotten, so many gleeful cackles. "God, Sirius," he choked, shaken, thinking about the things Sirius must have seen. His hands had curled into fists; he forced them to open before he could cut into his palms. "How can I help him?"

"I know not how human minds work," Hexo admitted. "But I believe – " His voice trailed off, head swivelling around, tilted to a side. Listening.

In the distance came a shout of, "POTTER! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU NOW?!" along with the dry snap of trampled wood, quiet curses when someone's clothes got ripped on bramble bushes.

"Huh." Harry winced, recognizing his Housemates's usual subtlety. "I think I'd better go. Sorry. They're not – they really shouldn't be here." He threw Hexo a weak smile, but the dark-skinned centaur seemed amused rather than offended by the intrusion. "It was good seeing you, Hexo."
Thanks for, you know. The information."

"Goodbye, Harry Potter."

After one last pat on the Thestral's neck, Harry hurried away, taking off into the trees at a light jog. Tracking down the other Slytherins was easy enough. They were about as discreet as Erumpents doing their mating dances. Harry crept up on them, biting down a laugh at their antics. Half of them were arguing about which Locating Spell they should use, a loud, pointless debate which the others endured with long-suffering airs that denoted long habits. Ashton was bouncing on the balls of his feet, looking ready to dart between the trees, only refrained by Audra's withering glare, while Bradley brought up the rear, complaining about hunger and low blood-sugar to anyone within hearing range.

"Guys," Harry called, stepping into view, effectively silencing them. "What are you –"

"Oh good. You're still here," Dallin cut him off, his voice a low drawl. "Had us worried here for a moment, Potter," he said, rolling his eyes at the others.

"LUNCH!" Bradley roared before Harry could think to answer that, and Alfric latched onto his arm, started dragging him back to the castle with an uncompromising grip, the rest of their House falling into step beside them, senseless with overlapping chatter.

Audra tucked an arm in the crook of Harry's elbow. Both she and Alfric towed him all the way to the kitchens, didn't let go until they deposited him on a chair in the midst of the house-elves's joyous welcome backs.

"Figured you wouldn't want to face the Great Hall just yet," the girl informed Harry, piling a plate with roast chicken and taking a seat beside him. She waited until everyone had settled around the small table that was quickly becoming theirs, the house-elves having saved it for them since the first time they'd eaten in the kitchens together, before talking again. "Alright," she said. "Spill. Who's the man from yesterday, and is there anyone's arse that needs kicking? The Lady Hufflepuff looked real pissed about something this morning."

Harry suppressed a wince, sending silent apologies towards Salazar. Telling Helga about his fight with the other man hadn't been Harry's brightest moment, but the woman was ruthless, had kept hounding him until she'd wrung the whole story out of him. Deciding to keep that bit of information to himself, Harry told his Housemates about Sirius, a twisted version of the truth. He told them he'd thought him dead. He told them Sirius had been hurt, badly, so Harry had forsaken the common room in favour of looking after him for a few nights.

"He's my godfather," he admitted at last, pushing food around the plate that had magically appeared in front of this nose. "And I – well. I didn't think I had any family left."

Alfric bumped his shoulder against Harry's, offering silent support. Audra snatched Harry's knife from his hands, stabbed a piece of fish with it, and frowned at him until he put it in his mouth.

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" Glenn asked around a spoonful of spinach. "I mean, 's not every day dead relatives come back from the dead. Personally I wouldn't be so thrilled about it, but it looks like that man – Sirius, right? – means a lot to you. So. We should probably drink to it, do you reckon?"

"You're an insensitive twat with early onset alcoholism," Bradley informed him, swatting the back of Glenn's head, causing the boy to choke on his food. Ignoring his sputtering protests, Bradley turned to Harry with both his eyebrows raised. "Is he going to get better, your godfather?"
Harry, who'd been asking himself the same thing since Sirius had collapsed in his arms the day before, took his time to answer. He'd been turning Hexo's words in his head since he'd heard them, trying to wrangle some sense from the centaur's cryptic warnings. "Helga says he should be fine," he said at length. "But I think there's something not right with his head. I think – I'm going to need Salazar's help to figure it out, but he doesn't seem too keen on Sirius." He gave a shrug, steamrolling past the faint ache knotting his stomach. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

"I'm sure he'll come around," Alfric told him, patting his back soothingly. Harry caught him exchanging glances with the others over his head. "We'll tell Lord Slytherin you're looking for him if we see him."

They parted ways shortly afterwards, the Slytherins dashing to their respective afternoon classes while Harry went back to his aimless meanderings, counting the minutes until Helga's wards would allow him back to Sirius's side. Left alone, he turned his attention to the numerous problems dogging his heels, casting desperately for a solution to his time-travelling conundrum. One that wouldn't involve anyone dying painful deaths. Unfortunately, he and Salazar had already circled the question back and forth last year, throwing down ideas until deep into the night. They hadn't come up with anything viable.

Harry's favourite suggestion had been to dose himself with Draught of Living Death. An idea which presented several issues, considering the potion hadn't been invented yet, and Harry had no idea how to produce even a pale copy of it. Besides, he wasn't even sure the Draught would be able to take him through a one-thousand-years nap without killing him in the process. Salazar had neatly shelved that idea aside, along with anything related to magically-induced sleep. Even if something powerful enough to keep Harry under for such a length of time existed, there were too many risks associated with leaving his body defenceless for centuries. Not to mention, layering him in nasty enough protective spells might result in missing his wake-up date altogether. Harry had absolutely no wish to visit the distant future any time soon.

They lacked data, all the leaps and bounds the Wizarding society had made through the years regarding time-travel. Harry would gladly sell both his kidneys to get in touch with the Department of Mysteries, the time room in particular. The fact was, they were stuck. Harry couldn't see the situation resolving itself. But it needed to.

It needed to, or Harry was going to die. He couldn't imagine a worst fate than lingering in the limbo between the worlds, being gnawed at by whatever creatures lurked in the dark. Besides, now that Sirius was here, now that Harry had pulled him to safety without even meaning to, he couldn't help but wonder what that meant for him as well. He was as misplaced in time as Harry was. Did that mean he'd have to be eaten too? Would Sirius have to be dragged back into the stinking blackness, all after having finally escaped its gaping horrors?

You are out of time, Hexo had said, and Harry knew he was right. He didn't know how long he had before the world threatened to crack open from under him, but he figured it wasn't all that much. He could feel it, if he focused hard enough. In the quiet moments of the night, when the only things to be heard were the disjointed beats of his heart. He could feel his time running out, like a rubber band tugging at his chest, stretching somewhere near his navel, growing taut until the moment it snapped, slammed Harry forward, into the abyss. He had a few months left, probably. Maybe a year with any luck. Not much more.

It was no surprise really, that Harry had caught himself thinking about goodbyes.

Shaking himself, he blinked out of the daze he'd fallen into. He smiled, a little wry, at the sight that greeted him. His feet had taken him to the seventh floor, to the training room he'd appropriated for
his lessons with the Founders. It had occurred to him at some point last year, that the room stood on the exact spot where the Room of Requirement would be. It had become the refuge of many sleepless night, had borne the marks of Harry's brooding.

He succeeded in killing a few more hours, training with spells and sword, before the wait became too much to bear. He needed to check on Sirius before he drove himself crazy. As chance would have it, the sky outside had darkened to the deep violet of a fresh bruise, the sun slipping behind the horizon in faint burnished orange rings. It had to be nearing dinner time.

Harry waltzed through the Infirmary doors unchallenged. He picked his way around Helga's office, peering up its half-open windows before darting past. The main area was deserted, the beds empty of patients. He made it to Sirius's room without being noticed, the door swinging shut behind him.

Sirius was still asleep. He hadn't even moved an inch since Harry had seen him this morning. He was breathing deep, regular breaths, the wet rasping gone from his lungs. Some agitation tightened the lines of his face, minute, nervous ticks crisping the tips of his fingers, but otherwise he looked fine, better than ever. For a moment, all Harry could do was stare at him owlishly, probably looking like a right moron. Distantly, he wondered whether a time would come when he wasn't left awestruck, speechless, at the sight of his living, breathing godfather.

"He has interesting markings on his skin."

"For the love of God," Harry groaned, bent in two, heart hammering furiously in his chest. "Would everyone please stop doing that." He shot Salazar a dark glare. The man had the gall to look politely befuddled, as though he hadn't just given Harry a minor heart attack, sinking forth from the room's shadows like a bloody ghost.

"Your Housemates told me you wanted to talk," Salazar informed him, swanning past Harry's outburst with far too much social grace for Harry's tastes. Salazar cast him a half-smile, his skin glided gold in the dying sunlight. "They were quite insistent."

"Uh." Momentarily at a loss, Harry floundered. He hadn't been prepared for this conversation, hadn't expect to see Salazar again before a few days. Long enough for the both of them to cool off. As it was, he felt helpless against the roiling wave that crashed into him at the Founder's sight, contradictory emotions throwing him off balance. He cleared his throat, thinking about Sirius and seeping, malevolent darkness, latching onto the thought with both hands. "I have a favour to ask," he said slowly, knowing full well how his words would resonate with the Head of Slytherin House.

"Then ask."

"It's about Sirius. I'd like you to look inside his head. See if anything's wrong with it. If there's something I can do to help. Yesterday – he had troubles remembering things."

Harry had half-expected Salazar to negotiate, to set up terms, specially since he'd made his mistrust of Sirius quite clear. Specially since Harry had opened himself up for yet another debt. Even though Harry thought the two of them could safely call each others friends, he held no illusions as to Salazar's nature. He was a politician to the bones – Harry had even heard that he'd spent most of his summer sweet-talking the great Wizarding Houses into lending Hogwarts their support. Tell me what you want, Harry wished to ask, burning with it, even when he dreaded the answer. Because the truth was, whatever Salazar demanded of him, Harry would gladly offer up on a silver platter, with his heart as a compliment. He expected Salazar would take full advantage of the situation. Harry was a Slytherin through and through, understood the workings of his House well enough to know that no Snake, Salazar least of all, would pass up on such a golden opportunity, readily offered. But as per usual, the man surprised him.
"Alright," he said, easily, and he walked up to Sirius without ceremony, angling himself so their faces were aligned.

Almost immediately, he jerked back, throwing himself away as though he'd been slapped across the face. Maybe he had. Harry, who'd been standing right behind him, found himself with a sudden armful of Salazar Slytherin. He put out steadying hands on the man's shoulders, and tried not to feel the warmth of the skin beneath, tried not to linger. A shudder ran the length of Salazar's back, which Harry found himself soothing, stupidly, without any conscious input from his brain.

Carefully, he let go of Salazar, stepped away.

"What happened?" he asked, and Salazar didn't answer right away, not facing Harry, rubbing a hand over his eyes, the motion stilted, tired. *What's wrong?* Harry wanted to ask, soft with concern, but he held his tongue. "Salazar?"

"He has – he can't remember much of himself because his mind is cutting itself on a handful of memories." Salazar glanced at him then, a flash of grey darkened to dull slate. "You know where he's been. How he got here." At Harry's nod, he said, pensive, "I have an idea that might help. We'll try it out in the morning, as soon as he wakes."

A minute nod of his head and he was sweeping away from the bed without another word, starting to retreat. Wishing for the conversation to be over, probably, about as eager to avoid another dispute as Harry was. Harry watched him go and thought about borrowed time and never getting to say goodbye to his parents or Sirius or his friends, about the ridiculousness of falling in love with someone you can't have, someone who doesn't want you back, someone you're bound to lose.

"Salazar," he called, and Salazar already had his hand on the doorknob but he halted at Harry's voice, a tightness to the set of his shoulders. Harry found himself counting the deep, measured cadence of his breathing. The moment stretched, and neither of them moved. Harry swallowed. He said, "All those debts I owe you. Don't wait too long before coming to collect them."

Just for a second, Harry swore he felt Salazar's eyes drop to his lips, a heavy gaze, but then he was pushing the door open, away from Harry, and Harry was left alone, heartbeat tripping over itself, in his wrist and in his stomach, in his mouth, tingling with life.

Beside him, Sirius let out a low moan, and jolted awake.

Chapter End Notes

Mostly exposition, but it had to be done. Obvsly we get a lot of awake Sirius next chapter

*grin*
"SALAZAR!" Harry shouted over his shoulder, both his hands flat on Sirius's chest, holding him down as he thrashed his way to consciousness. His godfather's breathing was harsh, broken. His eyes rolled to the back of his head, stark whites clamouring desperately for focus. Harry could feel the great, shuddering thumping of his heart against his palms.

Wildly, he thought the organ was going to burst out of Sirius's chest. Harry would be left clutching a red, beating heart, slick, and bloody, and forever broken. He had to do something. He. He had to do something. He had to – but he couldn't. Couldn't think. It was too hard, through the haze of his own panic. Sick worry before a loved one's pain, hands trembling with a child's helplessness.

Switching to English, he started talking to Sirius in urgent tones, vaguely aware of the door banging open behind him. He didn't bother glancing back. Couldn't. Sirius had started flailing, arching back and beating arms. He was going to hurt himself if Harry didn't restrain him. Harry caught thin wrists. Bore down on a caved stomach. He held onto Sirius as best he could, but Sirius was surprisingly strong. Starved limbs bucked with fear-fuelled strength. Strained. And strained, hard enough to snap sinew, or to break bones. Scared, pained howls tore through a shredded throat, the sound like a dog dying. Harry. Harry was lost. Frantic fingers and strangled words, he didn't know what to do –

Strong hands took hold of his waist, hauled him off of Sirius. Mindless, Harry struggled against the punishing grip. Elbows impacted soft flesh, prompting a grunt of pain he belatedly recognised as Salazar's. The pressure around him loosened.

A word, a flash of magic, renting the air. Glowing ropes appeared out of nowhere. They made a quick job of twining around Sirius, effectively tying him down, keeping him from moving. From hurting. Immediately, Sirius started pulling against his shackles. His eyes bulged with the effort, veins popping under wasted skin.

"Sirius, stop!" Harry cried, shaking off Salazar's hold entirely. He gripped his godfather by the hair, fingers tangled in the wild, knotted mess. Desperate, he forced Sirius to look at him. "You're going to hurt yourself!"

Panting, snarling, it took several long moments before Sirius focused on Harry, his breathing heaving. His eyes were feverish, but alight with the barest flicker of recognition.

"James?" he rasped, and Harry studiously ignored the way his heart sank at the name. "James what's happening? I don't know – I don't know where I am."

"It's alright, Padfoot," Harry told him, making sure to keep Sirius's eyes on him as Salazar moved around the room. "You're in Hogwarts. You're safe now, I promise. You've been very sick, but we're working on making you better. You need to calm down, yeah? Can you do that for me?"

Like a switch being flipped, some old humour shone through Sirius's eyes. It lit up the lines of his face with mischievous, boyish delight. "That why you're keeping me chained up, eh Prongs?" Sirius chuckled. "Kinky."

Then Salazar approached, and he was gone again, surging up against the ropes with a broken
growl. Dark eyes rolled madly in their sockets, raving nonsense flowed from bleeding lips.

"Here," Salazar told Harry, pushing a vial in his hands. "Make him drink this. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Before Harry could fully register the words, he had rushed from the room, leaving the door open behind him. Harry glanced down at his hands. He recognised the twinkling, swirling blue of a Calming Draught sloshing around the small flagon.

"Hey, Pads." Keeping his tone level through Sirius's mad ramble, he worked the stopper open, pressed the cool glass against his godfather's lips. "Drink that for me."

Surprisingly enough, when he tipped the vial back in Sirius's mouth, the man swallowed readily, without protest. Within moments, he had relaxed back against the sheets, appeased and pliant, humming appreciatively. He chased the last drops of potion from his lips. Harry caught himself hoping that perhaps, somewhere deep in Sirius's subconscious, remained some shards of the love the man had once borne him.

Shaken, he flopped back on his chair. He clutched at his hair, trembling fingers pulling at dark strands. From the shelter of drawn arms, he saw Sirius give vacant smile, just as unsettling as his earlier fury. His teeth gleamed blue in the faint glowing light of Salazar's restrains. Even through the placating sheen of the Calming Draught, fear and madness moved behind his eyes. Monsters peered out of dark storm grey, burned onto retinas like lightning.

Worry tightened its grip on Harry's stomach, a thousand pinpricks under his skin.

"You're not broken," he informed Sirius. Salazar's idea was going to work. It had to. "They don't get to have you. They don't get to win this. I'll figure it out. Sirius. You're gonna be fine."

Sirius smiled beatifically up at him. Harry took his hand, pressed fingers on the inside of his wrist. He counted the sluggish beats of the pulse pounding there, clocked his own breathing to the drugged-up pace. Together, he and Sirius waited for Salazar to come back. Sirius hummed Celestina Warbeck's *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love* under his breath.

They didn't have to wait very long. About twenty minutes later, Harry heard the distant snap of booted feet. Several pairs of them. The Hospital Wing's heavy double doors scrapped open, the screech of wood on stone. Salazar and Rowena sailed in Sirius's room, both the picture of aristocratic elegance. Cool and beautiful, at odds with the sickroom clutter. Harry resisted the urge to fidget in their presence, acutely aware of how scruffy he looked in comparison, with his hair sticking out at odd angles, his ill-fitting, rumpled clothes.

Self-consciousness vanished out the window when he saw what the Founders were levitating between them. A shallow stone basin hovered placidly in the air, light flickering over the dark ridges of carved runes, glinting off the few precious gems fitted around the rim. Inside was a thin pool of a cloudy, silvery substance that appeared both liquid and gaseous at the same time.

"That's a Pensieve," said Harry, puzzled. It looked exactly like Dumbledore's Pensieve. Harry remembered it well, for having spent a good chunk of his Sixth Year inside of it. "It's – *the same as from my time."

"We found it on the grounds before the castle was even built," Salazar replied, nodding his head at Harry's silent question. "It's always been there."

"Interesting that you should know what it is, Mr Potter," Rowena told him, greeting him with a
sharp smile. "Am I to assume you understand its many uses as well?"

"Yes ma'am." Harry rose to meet them, sketching a quick bow in Rowena's direction. "I've seen it used before. It's there to unclutter the user's head. Store their memories to be viewed at a later – " Realisation dawned on him. His eyes snapped to Salazar, seeking confirmation. "You intend to take Sirius's memories. From when he was in the dark."

Salazar cast him a swift smile, a small, pleased tilt to his lips. His eyes glimmered pale silver in the swirling Pensieve glow, bright and bottomless, listing gravity sideways. Harry had a hook dragging behind his breastbone, cutting off his breath. He staggered under a burst of sheer elation, making him want to shout, to bound forward. To press a clumsy kiss to Salazar's mouth.

This could work, he said instead, grinning, and the thought carried between them. Harry saw Salazar catch the words mid-air, saw him pull them in and hold them close. There was the barest shudder of an answer ghosting the swelled edges of Harry's mind. A breath that tasted of clear laughter, the sound rebounding on the still surfaces of moonlit forest ponds.

"I certainly hope it will," Salazar told him with a flourish.

"We have to call the nefarious memories forward," Rowena informed them both. "As you are the only one who speaks his language, Mr Potter, you'll have to do the honours."

Harry nodded, hurrying back to Sirius's side. He pulled his wand in one hand, yanked the Pensieve closer with the other. He stared at his godfather's vacant, placid face with great trepidation.

"Sirius," he called softly, running a hand through Sirius's hair to get his attention. "I need you to listen, alright? It's important to help you get better. Can you do that?"

Sirius smiled a sloppy smile up at him. "'O course Jamesie m'lad," he slurred. "An'thing you want."

"Do you remember where you were before you got here?" Harry asked him, his heart beating wildly in his chest. "You've got to remember it for me. Remember where you went after the Veil at the Ministry. It was a dark place, wasn't it? It was black with tar. Oily like dark magic." An uneasy frown creased Sirius's eyebrows. He shook his head a few time, as if to dislodge an annoying fly. Seeing this, Harry pressed on. "There were things in the darkness. Hungry things. Remember what they were, Padfoot? Remember what they felt like? The rot and putrefaction and decay. Cold like dead skin."

"S-stop that," Sirius moaned, and the shaking of his head had spread to his limbs. He trembled like a leaf, a sheen of sweat breaking on his forehead. His eyes were huge, wide, desperately seeking light. "Please stop – I – I don't want – I don't – "

"It's okay Sirius. Look at me." Harry cupped Sirius's cheek, forced him to meet his gaze. "They won't get you here, but you have to think about them. Think. Did they chase you while you were lost? Did they get you? Do you remember the bite of their teeth? The stretch of their smile?"

"PLEASE STOP!" Sirius hollered, and he strained against his glowing restrains, corded sinew bulging, thin skin weeping blood.

Swiftly, Harry pressed the tip of his wand to Sirius's temple. He felt something knock against the holly wood, felt the tip dip as though weighed down. He pulled, the presence of the Pensieve enough to complete the ritual. A long strand of memory came sliding from Sirius's head. A thousand frail, delicate filaments floated after Harry's wand, moving fluidly in its wake. The memory was unlike any Harry had seen before. It wasn't the usual, pulsing blue-white shine. It was
much darker, its colour closer to ashy ink, the sickening tone of blood poisoning.

With bated breath, his stomach painfully tight, Harry directed the memories over the Pensieve rim. He shook them loose, down into the swirling light. They sank, spread like an infection, before being diluted by the bright Pensieve glow.

Sirius looked at him with eyes lightened like the sky after rain, a wet, rattling gasp shuddering from his lips.

"Harry?" he breathed, and Harry felt himself break, a little.

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It got better, the long way around.

Sirius spent another week drifting in and out of consciousness, too weak to even leave his bed. His fever rose and broke, rose and broke until it didn't rise again.

Madness followed its own patterns. It nipped at Sirius's heels. Dogged his steps in every flickering shadow. He couldn't stand the sight of darkness. Harry learned every variation of Lumos that would ease his nights.

In-between episodes, Sirius had moments of lucidity. He knew exactly who Harry was. What had happened the last time they'd seen each other. He asked about Ron and Hermione, about Remus Lupin, about Harry's classes and whether he'd played any good pranks on 'that cat-fucking harpy Umbridge'.

Sometimes, he got confused. He went back to calling Harry by his father's name. Whined about being confined to his Infirmary bed, as though he'd just had a Quidditch accident that didn't deserve all the nagging about.

One time, he yelled at Harry to stop pretending to be his godson. He roared with uncomprehending fury, with a wealth of protectiveness for a boy long dead. Little Harry was a months-old baby. Did he think it was funny, pretending to be someone he wasn't?

How dare he wear Lily's eyes on James's face?

He worked himself into a rage, incandescent with the darkness of his blood. Even diminished, Sirius was of ancient curses and terrible knowledge. He was the Grim, death in dog skin, seeped in the blackness that lingered at the hearts of galaxies. He snapped hungry jaws at open skin, a touch of blood-stained bones on the living pulse in Harry's throat.

Harry had to restrain him again, vulnerable with red and salt smeared on shaky flesh.

Cut open on a parent's insults, he sought out the solace of Salazar's presence. The weight of serpents and secrets mattered little before the raw wounds of filial love. He knocked on the Founder's door with ringing ears, with waning strength. Questing asylum in the banked heat Salazar made sing under his skin.

After one look at him, quicksilver trailing fire in the hollow of a torn throat, Salazar let him in without a word. He cleaned skin gnashed on with cool fingers and careful words. He gave space for Harry to breathe in, soft guidance for shattered control. He had a friend's warmth and a teacher's wisdom. Harry wished he had a lover's touch, too, but he clamped hard teeth down on restless want.
"You shouldn't be alone with him," was all Salazar told him, a pinched, disapproving downturn to his lips, his fingers supporting the slumped curve of a weighed spine.

Harry just smiled at the worry in moonlit eyes, danced away from soothing hands. "It's alright," he said. "He's getting better. He just – he relapses some times."

He spent most of his time by Sirius's bedside. His duties were balanced, precarious, between students and family, teetered on uneven scales. Both pulled, one calling to his mind and the other, his heart. It was a rope drawn taut between two lives. Harry walked it with a funambulist's grace.

He sat with Sirius at meals, during breaks. Through early mornings and long nights, with a snake made of mist and devotion curled on youthful shoulders. He told the story of a boy who could turn into a great black boy. A boy who had denied a family of old riches for the sake of a friend. The boy was broad smiles and studied pranks, endless loyalty wrapped in layers of mischief.

Harry sat with Sirius, and watched him stitch together the tattered pieces of his soul.

Eventually, Helga's careful ministrations bore their fruits. Sirius put on weight. He stayed awake for longer periods of time. Though there were still moments when he lost himself to the darkness of his thoughts, more time went by between manic episodes of white-eyed fear.

Together, they learned to walk. Harry as a crutch, Sirius with a newborn's steadiness. They picked their way between rows of sterile beds with the lurching gait of the truly drunk. Sirius snarled every time he stumbled, and Harry laughed, and he laughed. At the hapless frustration of a grown man with a toddler's balance. At every quiver of his godfather's muscles against his side, redemption made life.

It got better. The long way around.

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The first time Sirius ventured out of the Infirmary, they talked. Godson and godfather, one supporting the other. Slow steps on shaky legs, the trembling expansion of lungs that had forgotten the bracing stretch of clean air.

Harry took Sirius to the sunlit grounds, everything awash with the taste of fallen rain. Sirius turned his face towards the sky like a man given a blessing. Around the tight fist of his heart, Harry wondered about life, and the miracle of second chances.

Laughter burst forth from Sirius's throat. Spilled from his lips, rose up to the distant clouds. Teeth and elations bared, he laughed from the crutch of Harry's shoulders, laughed at death and the freedom from it. It was a wild, mad sound, ringing with the wind. Harry grinned with it.

They walked to a beech tree by the lake. Harry helped Sirius to a seat of roots against the wide pale trunk. He sat with him, crossed legged. The ground was cold with melted morning frost, but they pressed close enough to share warmth.

"The Whomping Willow isn't here," said Sirius, looking at Harry with serene grey eyes. "Is this when you tell me why?"

"It's a long story," Harry warned quietly.

He leaned a little more into Sirius's heat, and spoke. He began with the years Sirius had missed. The tense hell of Sixth Year. Dumbledore dying. The world falling to pieces as he fell from the Astronomy Tower, betrayed by a man he'd once called friend.
He talked about Horcruxes, and the grind of war forcing him to flee from Hogwarts. He told Sirius about the Locket. About Regulus Black, and his sacrifice.

Sirius's eyes closed with pride and pain. "Oh, Reg," he breathed. "Always such a fool."

"He was very brave," Harry told him softly, and Sirius barked a hollow laugh.

"Yes. Yes, he was." Sirius's chin fell to his chest, grief and sorrow chasing each other across his face. Harry waited for him to collect his ragged breaths. When Sirius looked up again, the glint in his eyes was flint-hard. "What happened next?"

Harry talked about the game of cat and mouse he'd played with Voldemort. He talked about Godric's Hollow, and the blood, and the screams. It was a tale of grief, and fear, and violence, and Sirius listened with the gravitas of a dead man given new breath.

Harry told him about Stonehenge. About the agony of a split back, the disgust of mud-slicked skin. About the scorch of runes on hallowed ground, and the sear of lightning in weary veins. The Earth had spun the wrong way, around the bruised body of a young boy. I thought I would die, Harry did not say. I was sent back in time, he said. I woke on dry ground, to the loving kiss of summer winds. There, he faltered.

"I was lucky enough to meet someone who didn't think twice about saving me. When I realised how far back in time I'd landed – Well. It wasn't easy."

"But you still found your way here."

Harry gave a smile, hesitant and tremulous. "Yeah. Pulled you along for the ride, too."

Sirius snorted. "Wouldn't have missed it for anything," he said, winking. "How old does that make you, then? Seventeen? Eighteen? You look more like James every time I see you."

"I'm nearly nineteen, actually." Harry didn't miss the wry twist to Sirius's mouth, pulled down with bitterness. "What is it?"

"You've grown so much," Sirius told him, pinning Harry down with piercing eyes. "Look at you. You're a man now." He gave a sigh, weighted with tiredness. "I'm just sorry I wasn't there to see it happen."

Harry bumped their shoulders together, curled in living warmth and stayed there. "I'm just glad you're here," he said.

Sirius turned his head to the side, kissed the top of Harry's hair.

"I'm never leaving again, kiddo."

{ ... }

Breath caught in fragile lungs, danced on the edge of a sharp smile. Wreathed in moving green light, Salazar watched him with shadowed eyes.

Lovely, was the thought that crossed Harry's mind, swift and unbidden. He tried to speak, but couldn't around the soft weakness in his limbs. They sat in a room of water and shadows. It was full to bursting with quiet laughter and fond memories.

"Harry?" Salazar called in a voice kept low, the name shivering in the space between them.
It took Harry a second too long to remember what the two of them were supposed to be discussing. He blinked against the treacherous warmth pulling at his chest, straightened from the way his body had curved toward Salazar, bowed like an interrogation mark to a question he hadn't asked.

"Yeah," he said, and ignored the rough edge lining his voice. "I think we can definitely amp up the workload as far as they're concerned. Maybe split the classes in smaller groups like we did last year. Sort the kids by age and skill. Otherwise we're going to lose the ones lagging behind."

Salazar made a considering noise, leaning back against his seat with the poise of a king. "Forcing so much change mid-year is going to be difficult," was his assertion. "I'll talk to the others, but we'll probably contend ourselves with putting up extra lessons on week ends."

"I'm not sure it'll be enough." Harry's brows furrowed into a frown. With classes spanning over different age groups, working around every student's level was a nightmare. "Maybe we should try planning for another batch of exams 'round Yule," he said. "There should enough time for it. Besides, it'll give everyone a fair chance to – "

With a groan like the earth had cracked open, the common room's entrance slid to the side, cutting off any lingering, lazy morning chatter. Sirius strode in on steady legs and borrowed clothes, an alarmed-looking Antioch trailing in his wake. Spotting Harry within moments, grey eyes softened with relief.

It was time then, thought Harry. His body tensed for the conversation to come like it was a battlefield.

"Harry," Sirius said, breathless, fierce, a world of protectiveness packed in a single word. He brushed off Antioch's attempts at stopping him with a warning flash of bared teeth. Ignoring the curious stares of children's eyes, he took great marching steps across the room, quickly closing the distance between them.

Swallowing heavily, Harry forced out a trembling breath. Questing fingers closed around the pulse beating in his wrist, tapping silent interrogations along the pounding of blood. Harry looked up at the puzzlement in watchful eyes. He shook his head at Salazar's terseness, pressed two fingers to the top of his hand on Harry's wrist. Holding him down when he made to rise, reassurance and mooring bolt.

"Let me handle this," he murmured.

Salazar's eyes dropped to his throat, where dog fangs had broken skin. Long fingers tightened on a febrile wrist, but Sirius reached them before words could hiss past his parted lips.

A hand fell heavily on Harry's shoulder, pushing him back against his seat, away from Salazar's touch. Sirius made to step between them, whip-taut with misplaced fear.

"You," Sirius growled, and it was cold, suffused with quiet rage. Caring grey eyes had gone steel hard, riveted on soft fingers closed around an exposed wrist. "Let go of my godson."

"Sirius," Harry called, gently easing Salazar's grip from his hand. He pressed up against his godfather, firm palm on a thin chest, keeping Sirius from tucking him behind the protection of his back.

"What is wrong with you, old man?" Antioch snapped, skidding to a stop beside them, shattering mounting tension with the carelessness of a child's annoyance. He cast Sirius a furious glare, gave Harry and Salazar a half-bow in the same motion. "Sorry sir, Potter. Lady Hufflepuff just let him
out. Said to take him to you.” He gestured helplessly. "When I told him you'd be here, he – I tried to stop him, but he just – "

"It's alright Antioch" Harry told him. "Thank you."

The boy huffed at the dismissal, all petulant anger on drawn adolescent shoulders, but he backed away after one last sneer in Sirius’s direction.

"Thanks for the help, lad," Sirius called after him, casting a wide grin with too many teeth. Though he couldn't understand the words, Antioch snarled at him, only stomping off at the sharp jerk of Salazar's head.

The smile slipped from Sirius's face like late snows in Spring heat. "Come on, Harry," he said, fraught tension lining the words. "Let's get out of here."

He started tugging on Harry's arm, frail strength buoyed by urgency. Harry heard a rustle of clothes from behind, Salazar getting on his feet with the sigh of rich fabric. The strain in Sirius's body wound tighter at the sound, his grip on Harry's shoulders jarring bones. Harry dug in his heels and did not move. This was where he belonged; he would not be shaken from it.

"Pads," he said, softly, watching confusion bleed on his godfather's face. "It's okay."

"Okay?" Sirius shook his head. He kept wary eyes trained on Salazar, tracking every movement he made behind Harry's turned back. "Harry. Is that man not who I think he is?"

"He is," said Harry. His tongue felt leaden in his mouth. This wasn't a rope he knew how to walk.

Sirius hissed. "Merlin's balls, Prongslet. Don't turn your back to him."

This wasn't a conversation he should have postponed, Harry knew. Cornered against the wall of Sirius's worry and disapproval, it would be all the more difficult to talk. When Sirius yanked on his arm again, fevered eyes darting between Harry and Salazar, Harry could only brace trained muscles against nervous strength.

I trust him, he said, with an exposed back, with every inch of a body Salazar had seen grow to adulthood, had moulded at swordpoint, with firm fingertips on battered skin.

I trust him, he screamed without words, but knew it would not be enough.

Lost in a haze of racing thoughts, he felt, rather than heard, Salazar abandon his observer's position. A pale hand went to grip Sirius's upper arm. It dug into frayed nerves and bone-thin flesh, until the painful clutch of loving fingers eased from the bruises they were painting on Harry's skin.

His warning given, Salazar drew away from Sirius's touch, and sketched a graceful bow.

"Mr Black," he said, silk-smooth, edged with cautious respect. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

The lazy slouch curving Sirius's back straightened to ramrod straight. On his face, the miasma of emotion bled into cool disdain. From the proud tilt of his chin to the sneering curl his lips, he transformed before Harry's eyes. For the first time since Harry had met him, he saw the Moste Ancient and Noble House of Black etched in his godfather's soul, reaching deeper than the aristocratic beauty on his face.

"It's Lord Black to you," Sirius said, something hard and vicious twisting behind his eyes. Though
he couldn't speak the language the way Harry did, he touched the talisman wound around his neck, Helga's gift and Rowena's invention. The weight behind his words carried, was received and understood.

"Lord Black," Salazar amended easily. He was angled at a safe distance from Harry, a hand clasped to the small of his back. There was something careful in the way he held himself. An openness in his manners Harry had never seen before. He inclined his head, the motion formal, polite. "I am Salazar Slytherin," he said. "One of the Founders of this school."

"Trust me," Sirius replied, colder than frost. "I know who you are."

"And has who I am done anything to offend you, Lord Black?"

"Sirius," Harry called, weary. "Don't."

The crack running through his voice was heard, transcending the barrier of shared speech. Salazar turned to him with an expression of quiet concern. He reached out, automatically, curling a hand at the base of Harry's neck. In the second before he leaned in, Harry spared a moment to wonder at which point in the past month he'd come to expect Salazar's touch. When had contact become natural between them, the barest press of fingers on bare skin speaking louder than words. To tease, to soothe, to reassure. The habit had slotted itself between them without Harry noticing. There had been a time when Salazar always held himself at arm's length, Harry was sure of it. No longer.

I'm here if you need me, it said, but there were other voices in the room.

"I told you to get away from him."

A snarl, a hard push, and the warmth was ripped from Harry's neck. A wand had appeared in Sirius's hand. Harry smelled gathered power in the room, the tang Autumn leaves in the dark promise of moonless nights. He heard his Housemates's gasps, fear in children's voices. With a threat on Salazar's life by a man he loved like family, he did the only thing he could.

He offered himself up to the bite of offensive magic. He threw himself between two bodies coiled for battle, against the pressure of building spellwork and the poison on snake's fangs.

"Harry!" two voices shouted, at the same time, undistinguishable in their alarm. Two hands reached for him, seeking to push him aside, safely away from the sizzle of dying curses on beloved lips.

"No," Harry snarled. He fisted hands on the clothes over beating hearts. With a lowered stance and the equilibrium given by two loves balanced on white knuckles, he refused to be cast aside. "Stop that, both of you!"

Sirius had lowered his wand but not his guard, pale-faced at Harry's interruption. He shook with fine tremors, a fighter's tension racking a body barely recovered. "Move aside, Harry," he said tightly, in a language only they shared. "You know what that man has done. What he's done to us. You know it's his name that gave You-Know-Who power. His name, his ideology, his House. The bigotry. The fucking war. It all traces back to him. Trust me lad, I know. I heard my family spew out his rhetoric often enough." His eyes left Salazar just long enough to flicker down to Harry. It was a hard gaze, burning with a Gryffindor's determination in the face of a confrontation he couldn't win, not half-broken and unsteady, not with Harry standing in-between. He pressed against Harry's fist on his heart. "We can end it here, before it even begins," he said, and it was Harry's time to shake. "He's a Slytherin Harry, and we can end it here."
"Sirius," said Harry, voice soft with a child's weakness, but proud with an adult's love. "Sirius, I'm a Slytherin, too."

The words caught, wrenched, like the edge of a blade on a careless throat. Sirius blinked at Harry, startled. Uncomprehending. "Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed, though Harry could see the sliver of uneasiness running through his voice. "You're nothing like them."

Caught between two men he would happily die for, Harry pressed on. "I'm a Slytherin, too," he repeated, shoulders drawn back, bracing for a blow but unafraid of the pain. "Even back in First Year, I had to beg the Sorting Hat not to send me to the House that sheltered my parents' killer. I had to beg it." He breathed deep, feeling Salazar's stillness behind him, Sirius's heartbreak in front.

"I'm not begging anymore," he said, and though he never raised his voice, Sirius flinched away from the sound. "I – these people have been my family for the past year. Sirius. I fought and bled and grieved with them. For them. And I won’t – I can't let you hurt any of them." He tilted his head back, towards Salazar, leaning in the familiar thrum of sea-tossed magic, the pull of a body he wanted to lose himself in. "Certainly not him."

"He's Salazar Slytherin." Sirius looked appalled more than furious, with the wide-eyed alarm of someone whose world was upending. Harry had some idea of what that was like.

He grinned a mirthless smile. "Yeah, he is. Trust me, I am very aware of that. But killing him won't solve any of our problems." He searched for Sirius's eyes. Gently, he said, "It won't bring them back, Sirius. It won't bring back mum, or dad. They're gone. They died protecting me, and nothing's ever going to change that." When Sirius staggered, swayed like the new strength in his legs had deserted him, Harry reached out a supporting hand. His touch wasn't shrugged off.

Hey grinned a mirthless smile. "Yeah, he is. Trust me, I am very aware of that. But killing him won't solve any of our problems."

"Sirius," Harry said, needing him to hear. Needing him to understand what Harry himself had come to realise. "Sirius, none of it is Salazar's fault." He sucked in a trembling breath. "It's not his fault. He didn't make Voldemort. He's not responsible for the wars. Fuck, he's not even prejudiced against Muggle-borns."

Sirius barked a disbelieving laugh. "Now, don't push too far," he said, but resignation was lining his tone.

"It's been a shock for me too," Harry snorted. Sobering up, he touched the side of Sirius's face, thumbing at the frown between his brows. "Do you trust me, Sirius?" he asked, letting his hand fall away. The question was entirely heartfelt. It had been so long since he'd last seen Sirius. Who could say what his godfather thought of him? Of Harry, who was blood-soaked, Harry, who was a Slytherin.

A pressure eased in his chest at the quick, easy nod of Sirius's head. He allowed himself a small smile.

"Then trust me on this," he said. "Salazar saved my life. I'd have bled out on Stonehenge's grass if it weren't for him. I was alone and I was broken, and he thought I was worth saving. He's given me – God, you have no idea everything he's done for me. And I – " he choked on a handful of words, trapped them before they could burst free from willing teeth. "Well. I'm not asking you to trust him, but. Just, give him the benefit of the doubt. For me, if nothing else."

Sirius considered him for a long, quiet moment, sharp eyes on a gaunt face, seeing beyond the thin stretch of Harry's skin. It was a piercing stare. Harry met it with a back made straight with hard-won confidence. He held still and let Sirius search, let him see. He would open himself up for Salazar's sake. Would leave himself vulnerable before a parent's judgement.
Sirius huffed out a slow, ragged breath, wry and tinged with amusement. Chin falling against his chest, his lips moved around silent words, quick prayers addressed to dead friends. When he looked up again, repressed mirth danced at the corners of turned-up lips. Sparking grey eyes bypassed Harry, flitted over his shoulder. Whatever they saw there made the boyish smile stretch further across his face, speaking of bitten-down hilarity.

Harry watched it bloom with growing dread.

"I still don't like you," Sirius declared, jerking his head at Salazar, a hand curled against the talisman cored around his neck. He grinned, ferocious and threatening. "But I suppose you'll have to do."

Chapter End Notes

In my defence, life
They soared for long hours, cutting through glimmering mist in the quiet suspense of the night. The air was cold, made pure with frost, but they laughed at its crystalline bite, baring mocking throats before the sharp ice of its teeth. Storm clouds rolled in the distance, roaring with shattering fury and the crackle of blue lightning, but leather wings carried them swifter than the wind. They had walked through the world's skin and suffered a thousand tortures; tonight, they would reach for the pale glow of full-bellied moons.

Harry grinned a raptured smile, leaning back against the corded strength in bony arms. Behind him, Sirius held on tight, fierce with a dead man's love. He shook with healing scars and reckless mirth, laughing at the clear moon and all the space between them. Above thick fog and below bleached stars, they outpaced nightmares on Thestral's wings, untouched by darkened fate.

With a sharp pull and graceful twist, black wings flattened against frozen air, brisk snap turning to easy roll. Harry unbent from the Thestral's neck, dragging Sirius up with him. He felt wakeful and free, drunk on moonlit air and weightless flight. Mindful of the shifting muscles under his thighs, he turned to his parent with curling lips, with dancing eyes.

"What do you think?" he called over gusting wind. "How long has it been since you've last flown?"

"Too long!" Sirius shouted back, gaunt chest heaving with dying delight. His hands pinched Harry's sides. "But let's head down soon, alright? It'd be a shame if my extremities started falling off."

Snorting, Harry shoved back against him, but a gentle push of knees in the crease between two wings drove them towards hard ground. The Thestral glided with sinuous strength, smooth and unhurried. They drifted down like dead leaves, a lazy, swirling descent.

It was as they touched down, started shaking out numb limbs, that Sirius slung an arm around Harry's shoulders, pulled him close and said, "So. When did you realise you fancy Salazar bloody Slytherin, d'you reckon?"

It was said with the warm interest of a parent's teasing, with such flippant nonchalance that Harry's heart tripped long before his mind shuddered. Then, the words registered, were caught by burning ears and understood in all their crushing weight. It was as though the far-away lightning had found Harry after all, had torn through his chest with hollering anger.

He felt himself react, knee-jerk and helpless, body seizing up with the sick rush of fretful blood. He had paled, he knew from the empty buzzing in his ears, had taken too long to answer, too, but Harry had lived long years with lies cradled close. He pulled a smile on nervous lips, forced himself to meet grey eyes turned black in the cover of night. He willed words past the tight fist of his throat, willed them steady, willed them incredulous.

"Uh?" he said, a studied slump bowing anxious shoulders. "Fancy? What – er. Padfoot. I don't fancy anyone. Salazar is my teacher. I like him well enough, but I don't – I'm not – I – "

Words dried out in his mouth, wilted like dead flowers. There was only so big a lie even he could tell. Not even to protect himself from a wrathful father could he deny the love that had taken root in his chest, sank like a tree reaching for water. Harry. Harry did not know how to tear out such a
tenacious part of himself. It had grown too great for the trembling confines between ribs and spine. It spilled out of him like blood. There was no way for him to be free of this curse of restless want and broken tenderness. No words could leach it back in, under bones and far from sight.

Sirius looked profoundly unimpressed, frail weight pressing on Harry's shoulders.

"Lad," he said with a slow, measured tone. "I endured six years of your father mooning over one damned redhead. I know what you Potters look like when you want someone. Bloody dumbasses, the lot of you."

Easy words and careful smiles fractured, shattered. Harry felt his composure slip, was too slow to hold it back. He tried to wrench free of the crushing weight of a wasted arm, but found himself weak before Sirius's wan strength. The little panicked gasps of his breath rang loud in his ears, in the deep quiet of an ancient forest. His whole body felt as though it was crawling with insects, long-buried shame boiling up under his skin, hotter than he could stand. What could he do, he wondered numbly? What had he done?

Then, cutting through the mad spinning of the world, came a voice.


His head was tucked in the crook of Sirius's neck, against the scent of smoke and autumn leaves. Sirius showed him how to breathe, deep and even, running soothing hands along a trembling back. It took long minutes before the awful pinpricks left his chest. Before pressure eased from aching lungs, lifted off by tender words and careful hands.

"Do these happen often?" Sirius asked against his hair, tightening his arms when Harry made to leave, shaky with dizziness. He held on long enough for Harry to relax, melt against him like candle wax, soft with a child's reassurance before a parent's protection.

"Harry." With a sigh, Sirius pushed him away but kept him close, face grave with fierce worry. "Kid, to these happen often?"

Distantly, Harry took stock of the damage. They'd landed in a small clearing, at the edges of the forest. The surrounding bushes had been flattened by the weight caving in Harry's chest. Shredded bark littered the ground. A few small trees were uprooted, pushed clean off, bare-limbed and dying slow deaths. Harry could still feel the uneasy crackle of magic at his fingertips, growling power pooling under his skin, a sickly heat.

"Does what happen often?" he asked, careful to keep his breathing clocked to the steady pulse in Sirius's veins.

"Panic attacks."

_It has a name?_ Harry thought and he was relieved, and he was confused, and he wondered if the jackhammer of his heart would ever be anything but painful. Sirius's face darkened further with each lingering moment of silence, lips pinched tight and brow furrowed. Harry watched him close his eyes, suck in a meditative breath. His expression settled in something firm, resolute. He bore the focus of a warrior making battle plans.

"Harry," he began, softly, with great care. "I truly am a shit parent." He levelled a narrow-eyed glare at Harry when he made a noise of protest, silencing him. "Did you think I was going to beat
you up over being attracted to Slytherin? Or is it because he's a man?"

Harry swallowed, treacherous throat working around harmful words yes, yes of course, I beat myself up over it, why wouldn't you? He had learned to live inside his own skin, in long months of quiet wandering, but not even the burn of the Mediterranean sun could cauterize childhood wounds.

"Son," Sirius said with a sigh, snaring Harry back with trembling hope. "No one gets to choose who they want to take to bed. It's not something I'd ever blame you for." His smile turned bloody, turned ferocious. He trapped Harry with affectionate arms and a father's authority. "You and I," he said, gleeful, and Harry braced himself for what followed, "Are going to talk about sex."

{. . .}

It became a thing. Sirius found him in corridors between classes, sat beside him at lunch. With causal words and a neutral face, he dropped small bombshells at Harry's feet.

"Did you know, the reason why my mother finally kicked my out is because she found out I'd been dating Remus?"

"Wait, you dated Remus?"

Or, "Your dad was strictly Evans-centric, but Lily? She had a thing for Alice Longbottom back in Fifth year. You probably get it from her. She'd be so proud."

"They both would."

"I mean, I don't get what you see in Slytherin, but. If I didn't think Remus would gut me, I'd climb Godric Gryffindor like a tree."

"Oh my God Sirius, he's married."

Though most comments were innocuous enough, others made Harry very, incredibly grateful for the cover of foreign languages, preserving the innocence of children's ears.

"Sex should never, ever hurt," Sirius would tell him, stance relaxed but gaze intent. "You're doing something wrong if it does. Take it easy. Use more lube. Try something else. There doesn't need to be penetration for it to be good. Do not get talked into anything you're uncomfortable with."

"For fuck's sake, use protection. I don't care if no one can get pregnant, STDs don't give two shits about gender."

"First times are always messy. There are too many limbs you don't know what to do with. It's alright. Don't hesitate to talk about what you do or don't want. Now, if you want pointers about, say, giving head – "

For all that it left Harry feeling as though his face had caught fire, it helped. This avalanche of careless words, this nonchalance in Sirius's tone. The embarrassment of listening to a parent talk about sex never faded, but Harry stopped feeling like throwing up, like running away, like there were needles under his skin. The clench of shame and resentment he'd carried in the pit of his stomach loosened with every off-handed advice. You are allowed to want what you want, Sirius told him between merciless teasing and the affectionate press of shoulders. It is right, it is normal. Cast shame aside, my godson, and carry yourself with pride.

It helped, and in some ways, it didn't. The hazy, directionless want Harry had felt for Salazar found
new focus. It sharpened, took on clearer shapes in the dead of sleepless nights. What would it be like, Harry wondered, to urge Salazar forward from the cradle of his thighs? Would he let Harry suck bruises in the hollow of his throat, down the flat planes of his stomach? He wanted Salazar's mouth on him, wanted to know the stretch of his fingers, the slow slide of him inside his body.

He wanted, with great hunger and ramped up pulse. It was a dull ache that never went away. Where he had danced out of Salazar's reach before, he now found himself giving in. He watched the way Salazar moved, watched the curl of his lips. Harry had averted his eyes long enough; now he looked his fill.

Salazar caught him at it, once. He watched Harry watch him for long moments and held still under his gaze. Harry thrummed with rabbit-fear when the weight of shadowed eyes pricked the back of his neck, but there was challenge in the way Salazar met his stare. With a face that told nothing, Salazar arched back against his seat, chin tilted up to bare the vulnerable stretch of his throat. He looked at Harry, and he made his posture lax, and he wrote something defiant in the curve of his spine, in the spread of his legs. A dare, to look away.

Or, perhaps, an invitation, to come closer.

With his heart in his mouth and a mocking smile tracing the dips of his back, Harry fled and did not look back.

{...}

"You should tell him," was Sirius's advice, after he was done laughing, bright and raucous in the seclusion of his rooms. "If you think it's safe. We don't have long here, you told me. Don't deny yourself what little happiness you can find before it's too late. Harry. Better to live missing something you've had, than long for something you'll never know. Take hurtful memories over bitter regrets. Trust me on this. You don't want to look back, ten, twenty years down the road, and realise you've forgotten to live."

Perhaps, thought Harry.

Perhaps.

"Besides," Sirius added, with bare teeth and savage satisfaction. "If he doesn't treat you right, I'll gladly break his legs."

{...}

With an ease that came from the passage of too many tragedies, Sirius settled into his life at Hogwarts.

"It's strange," he told Harry one day, contemplating the Great Hall with haunted eyes. "How much has changed, and how much hasn't."

He spent the first few weeks following his release from the Hospital Wing glued to Harry's side. It was, Harry suspected, as much for Harry's benefit as his own. Whenever common sense started to slip from underneath his feet and Harry came to doubt his own sanity, he could reach out, for warm skin and building strength. Assuring himself of Sirius's presence. He lived. He lived, reached back for Harry with easy grins and crinkling eyes, until the taste of corpse-dust and the green glow of deadly spells faded from Harry's senses. He breathed with Harry when anxiety tightened his stomach; Harry guarded Sirius's mind from the monsters prowling in the dark.

With endless patience and the care that came from long separations, they bore each other's hurts
and did not bow under the weight.

Sirius moved in to the Slytherin Dungeons. Though he had come to a grudging acceptance of Harry's House of choice, there were limits to his concessions. Over two decades of prejudices would not vanish overnight, not with the stain of a rotten family, not with the burial of too many corpses still fresh in his mind.

"I am not leaving you alone down here," he snapped when Harry pointed out he'd be more at ease in Gryffindor Tower, where Godric had offered a place to stay. "Also, I want to keep an eye on your Lord Slytherin. You may be in love with the man, but I don't trust him as far as I can throw him. Specially not with you."

"Sirius, I don't need a bloody chaperon."

"Yes. Yes you do."

In Slytherin territory, Sirius dogged Harry's steps with a grim smile and watchful eyes. He treated Harry's Housemates cordially enough, contenting himself with playing a few harmless pranks the Snakes were all-too happy to learn from. He saved the burn of his hostility for Salazar. He only ever addressed the Founder with cool disdain or thinly-veiled threats. With Harry under the protection of his arm, he bared hungry teeth at the space between them, more Grim than human, made alive with the dark promise of untold pain.

*Look*, he seemed to say, from across the common room and the long stretch of empty hallways. *This boy who was your student, this boy who is your friend. He is mine now, mine to protect and look after. You will not touch him, or else I will tear out your throat.*

Salazar, to Harry's great surprise, did nothing in response. He bore Sirius's animosity with long-suffering grace, met snapping jaws with pleasant smiles. He greeted Sirius like an equal, or a better, with careful bows and polite words. *My lord*, he called at a studied distance from Harry, with hands tucked behind his back. *This is my House; be welcomed here, for it is your own.* It was an ostentatious show of respect, and Harry did not understand it.

"Bastard thinks he can make a good impression, does he?" Sirius muttered when asked, a dark glower curling his lips. "I'll crack him open like an egg."

Harry just sighed, and let Sirius play his part.

{...}

Sirius's first meeting with Godric Gryffindor went something like this:

"You must be Sirius Black," Godric said, blood-red and golden, moving with easy warmth and a hunter's fluidity. "It's good to finally see you on your feet, Lord Black. I've heard much about you."

"...," said Sirius.

"My name is Godric. Godric Gryffindor. I've had the honour of taking your son as my apprentice. He is shaping up to be a great swordsman."

"...!" said Sirius.

In the background, Harry guffawed.

{...}
Harry walked Sirius through the castle, pacing his steps to a convalescent's rhythm. Sirius had endless questions, listened to answers with the look of a starving man offered a feast. For the first time in his life, Harry talked without restraints, confidant in a loved one's acceptance. He talked about the Horcrux hunt, about last year's battle. He talked about Ron and his betrayal, about Gytha and the way she had died. He had words of fears, and doubts, and loneliness. He talked, and he talked, and Sirius let him.

"I missed you so much," Harry told him one day. "After you were gone. We hadn't spent a lot of time together. I know. But – "

"Speak your mind, lad. It's alright."

"But I felt your absence more keenly than I ever did my father's."

That day, Sirius embraced him hard enough to crack ribs, fierce with a living man's strength. "I don't want to replace James, or betray his memory," he whispered against Harry's hair, through the tremble in his voice. "But you have to know. Before. Before the Ministry. I wanted to ask – that is, we'd have to – once my name was cleared, but – I wanted – it's – ah." Harry kept him close as Sirius struggled for words, held him together as Sirius shook with emotions and too many regrets.

_I'm here_, he said, with a firm touch, with patient silence. _I'm here, and I will not leave. We spent long years apart Sirius, Godfather, family. I am done letting go of the people I love. Whatever you have to say, I will stay by your side._

"Blood adoption," Sirius blurted finally. "I'd found the ritual in my family's library. I was going to ask you, but. Never got around to doing it. Figured there'd be time later." Harry felt the dampness of tears against his skin, and couldn't tell whose they were. "I'm sorry I missed that chance, kid. I was reckless, and an idiot. Harry, I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me."

Harry laughed wetly, an ear pressed against the beating of Sirius's heart. "Well, you're here now," he said, pulling back with a shaky smile. "Ask me again once you get those papers back, yeah?"

Sirius pressed their foreheads together with unsteady hands and wondrous eyes. "Yeah," he said, hoarsely. "Yeah alright, I'll do that."

{...}

"Sirius," Harry asked, thinking about Remus, about Nick, about family. "Will you teach me to become an Animagus?"

"Ah, lad. I thought you'd never ask."

{...}

The boy found him some time after Sirius's recovery. He walked with weighted steps, the land and sky bowing before his dancing strides. The shadows of unnamed powers curled at his fingertips like tamed beasts, but his smile reflected only childish wonder. Harry watched him approach and saw the green depths of a sacred lake, the melted gold of a crown in the making. _Oh_, he thought through the sympathetic shivering of his soul. _Oh, I know you._

"Hello," said the boy, with the rage of a storm in his eyes, the echo of laughter lingering in throne rooms. "Do you remember me?"

"Merlin," said Harry in two voices that overlapped, and he was reaching out, thinking, _there you are my brother_, over the splitting of his chest.
Merlin clasped his forearm with a firm grip and a broad grin. "I've been waiting for you," he said. "I wasn't sure we'd meet again. It's been a while for you, hasn't it?" Then, head tilted to a side as though listening to voices Harry couldn't hear, "Arthur. Are you alright?"

There were phantom weights on both his shoulders, the taste of blood lingering on his tongue. Harry smiled from the foreign stretch of his own skin, spoke with a voice that rang deeper than it should. "You have me confused with someone else," he said. "Arthur you'll meet later. I'm just Harry."

Merlin looked at him with ancient eyes that could crack the world open. "So you've told me," he replied, terrible in his kindness. "Funny how destiny works out, isn't it?" He brightened, sudden as the sun coming over the horizon. "It's the first time we're here together though. It's great, don't you think? Magic everywhere. Harry, I have so many questions. I'm glad you decided to stay longer."

Merlin took his hand and Harry followed. It was right, it was wrong; his place was beside that boy, and it wasn't. He'd already stood there, Harry thought, though he had no memory of doing so. The pull of Merlin's magic tasted like lightning, like the groan of the Earth underneath their feet, like Harry's. If Harry blinked for a second too long, he could see red blood drip drip dripping down the edge of a sword, ear the gleeful cawing of crows, the snarl of rotten darkness. He breathed in the brackish waters of a lake, felt a weight upon his head, the weary curl of a bloodied smile on lips that had been his.

Merlin tugged on his hand. "Do you remember that time we went hunting for wyverns?" the boy asked, light, carefree, brighter than the stars.

They were passing a tapestry the size of a small house. The span of rich fabric was taken up by a roaring dragon, golden scales glinting in the sun. The beast was great and fearless, a lance piercing its heart. There had been mud, Harry remembered, and the touch of a fire that could melt bones.

"I don't," he said. "I don't remember. And neither should you. You haven't lived that yet."

Merlin cast him a smile, soft and full of mischief. "Does it matter?" he asked. "I haven't, but you have. It's really one and the same, isn't it? If you were to call me by your name I wouldn't be able to tell the difference." Then, "C'mon! I need to ask you about magic. You've been having troubles with control, haven't you? I thought we could help each other."

Merlin dragged him to an isolated classroom, a bare space with abandoned, broken desks. Harry thought about torn up trees and all the damage that had followed him through the summer. He'd felt unstable for long months now, hadn't known what to do about it. Hogwarts had helped, but not even the reassurance of home had been enough to tame the new thing shaking itself loose below his sternum.

"Alright," he said, facing Merlin with squared shoulders and steady hands. "Where do you want to start?"

Early morning faded to late afternoon. Neither of them took note beside uninterested glances at the gliding sun. Harry lost grip on his shaky sense of self. He stood on school-grounds, in lavish ballrooms, in the mud of battlefields. Merlin raised his wand, but it was his own voice that spoke. He moved, but it was Harry who waved life into being. He broke and came together; he fell and grew bruises. He thrummed to bursting, with cracks splintering wider under his feet, with a distant call pleading his name, a name, over here Harry, here is your way home, here is the voice to lead you out of the dark, a friend's voice, Hermio –
"Harry," they called him, with teasing words and light hands on sweaty skin. "There you are Harry. We've been looking for you for long hours. Come back, friend, mentor, brother, you are ours still."

Harry came to in a midst of Slytherins, deep green and glittering silver, sly smiles and studied postures. Alfric had an arm around his waist, Ignotus was tucked under his arm. Audra was scowling, swatting at a cackling Glenn.

"When did you get here?" Harry mumbled, and he could feel himself settle back inside his own skin, could feel the receding crackle of his magic.

"We just did," Alfric replied, shaking him gently.

"Since when do you hold study sessions we're not invited to?" Dallin demanded, with crossed arms and adolescent petulance. "I swear, we should give you a collar with a bell. Maybe then you'd stop sneaking off every other day."

"Possessive much?" Bradley asked him, snickering, earning a swift glare from the other boy.

"Sorry," Harry told them, keeping his tone bland and his manners unrepentant. "Mostly, I didn't want to see your ugly mugs for half a day."

He met Merlin's eyes over hollering laughter and indignant spluttering. The boy winked at him over Cadmus's head. See? He seemed to say. Isn't that much better now?

And it was. Even through the daze of exhaustion, Harry felt a new ease sink beneath his bones. The classroom smelt of ozone, the heavy tang of spellwork, and something like peace loosened the tense knots of Harry's muscles.

He let himself reach back for the strength in Alfric's shoulders, the warmth of Ignotus against his side.

"Now that you're here though," he told his Housemates, "you might as well stay. I didn't mean to make you worry."

"We know, Potter," Audra told him with a roll of her eyes.

"We know.""
slowness of the injured avoiding pain.

Harry inclined his head. "I think I do," he said, because he couldn't always tell the difference between delirium and reality, caught in visions of black wings and groaning ice, terrified of the dark lurking beneath.

"I am sorry."

If Harry hadn't spent careful months schooling himself in each of Salazar's micro-expressions, he might have missed the rawness of his tone. Something bled through the measure of Salazar's voice, something that spoke of helpless rage, of repressed sorrow, of deep regret. Harry's own breath stuttered, locked somewhere at the back of his throat.

"Salazar," he called, and stopped there. He thought about Greek philosophies, about pain and the avoidance of it. He held a restless tongue still between firm teeth, counted full breaths before he spoke. "Did you think I would blame you, Salazar?" he asked, and didn't wait for the damning confirmation only silence could bring. "Salazar, listen. I'd meant to thank you. For everything you've done. I don't know what's going to happen next. I want – I. I want you to know, in case I don't get the chance later. How much I – I value who you are to me." He was febrile, feverish with unrequited love, with a want that burned his skin, hotter than dragon-fire. He forced himself to stillness and said, "I won't ever forget it. I won't let anyone else forget, either."

A promise.

_I will fight for your reputation for as long as I draw breath_, Harry told him, with a heavy heart and the roar of blood, but Salazar could not hear him.

"I am missing half the equation," he said, low and frustrated, and Harry wanted to ease the tense set of his shoulders with soothing hands, with skirting lips. "We've made great progress, you and I," Salazar told him, with a broad gesture that encompassed the whole room, the arching lines of spell theory, the scent of chalk, shivering with too many questions. "It _could_ work. I could make it work, I am certain of it. But I cannot undo a spell without knowing its source. I would kill you."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Harry assured him. "Another man is already waiting on that honour."

"Do not," Salazar snapped, and there was nothing veiled about the desperate anger on his face, "Make light of your own death."

"I'm not." With a weary sigh, Harry propped himself on the table beside Salazar, pressing up against him, elbows to shoulders, a light touch, to ground and reassure. "There's been too much blood spilled in my name for me to go down without a fight, I promise you. To many sacrifices."

"Maybe there hasn't been enough, considering," Salazar murmured, a vicious whisper. He eased himself back on his feet, shifting from Harry's touch. "Regardless," he said, picking up his journal, quick fingers flicking through the pages. "I would like you to tell me again what you remember of the day you were sent back in time. Anything at all could be useful."

Harry had lost count of how many times they had gone through this particular dance, but the narrowing of Salazar's eyes dissuaded him from further protest. Bowing his head in defeat, he began his tale from where it had started.

{...}

Life, as it was wont to do, followed its course. Harry trained with Merlin, with Godric and Sirius.
He gave some classes, and attended others.

Away from Sirius's distrustful eyes, Salazar pulled him in for long hours of research. In turn, Harry followed him to the Chamber of Secrets, kept him company through restless nights. He never helped, kept still by Ginny's screams and a leaden tongue, contemplating the unyielding burden of set fate with each stroke of Salazar's wand.

Sometimes, the two of them fought, between walls that were water-slick, hanging heavy with the primal scent of wet earth. They fought with sharp swords and bloodied fists, coming together with light steps and unrestrained violence. It did not satiate Harry's desire for touch, for long hours spent in bed with nothing but bare skin and cut-off breaths, but bearing Salazar's bruises, marking the man's skin with his own, made the furious, snarling thing in his chest purr in contentment.

Life followed its course, draped itself in heavy snows and the bite of winter frost.

An early morning in December, Harry woke, for the first time in over a year, to screaming pain, splitting his skull along the edges of the lightning scar on his forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Happy (belated) Christmas and happy (soon to be) new year, if it's anything you celebrate! <3<3

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