Beyond the Curtain

by Bobika

Summary

Twenty years ago, Voldemort won the Battle of Hogwarts. Harry now guides the remaining resistance through the Magical Curtain that separates the rest of the world from Voldemort's Empire, where magic is out in the open and wizards reign free. Canon loyal, not dark. Adventure, not angst.
Prologue: 2000

PROLOGUE

November 2000 – Two years after the Battle of Hogwarts

"You cannot imagine how fascinating this is."

"Fascinating? Really?"

Harry Potter lay in the middle of a dark chamber, tied to the cold stones underneath his bare back with heavy chains.

Tom Riddle was there with him, sitting in a comfortable armchair. Floating around him were numerous parchments with quills scribbling notes down seemingly on their own accord.

"Yes, fascinating! I was doubtful at first, but now... I see the possibilities, now. A wizard's body, with all its instincts, as a Horcrux! It shows so much potential it's almost a shame I'll never share my findings with the public," Riddle remarked without glancing away from his scrolls, an amused smirk on his face.

"Oh for Merlin's sake, just admit you screwed up royally! You accidentally put a piece of your soul
into your enemy. That's not exactly some scientific achievement!"

"I'm going to make you immortal, Harry. The least you can do is to stay civil. As for your observations—some of the most important discoveries in history were the result of a lucky coincidence. I'm not ashamed to admit mine is one of them."

Harry Potter scoffed at that and then kept silent.

Tom Riddle looked up from his notes at the absence of a spiteful response.

"Ah. You still doubt me," he surmised, seeing the defiance in Potter's face. "After all the rituals we've been through, you still harbour hope that you'll be able to kill yourself." Riddle glanced sharply at one of his quills and it underlined the last written words with fervour. "How foolish of you."

Potter grumbled something unintelligible before he spoke up. "You've done a miserable job trying to kill me. You won't do any better trying to keep me alive."

Riddle chuckled. "And that, Harry, is where you are mistaken. Destroying one's Horcrux is no easy feat; you know that by now. After I've finally finished what I started on Halloween twenty years ago, you'll be as indestructible as any of my Horcruxes."

"The Horcruxes we've all destroyed?"

The quills stopped writing for a second. In the sudden silence, there was a rattling of his chains, and Harry Potter gasped in pain.

"That ends now. There's no chance you'll ever leave this accommodation, Harry. But I do not underestimate you anymore, nor your infamous luck. Even if you managed to escape, you would not be able to end your life. Even now there are but a few ways to destroy a Horcrux, and I plan to eliminate them all."

He paused in his speech, glancing down at his captive. When Potter didn't offer a reply, Riddle carried on.

"And even if you did encounter a basilisk or conjured Fiendfyre, the magic of the Horcrux would push you to prevail. Here comes the reason why a human Horcrux is so fascinating; a diadem could hardly ever defend itself against something as raw as Fiendfyre, but a human body with its instinct for self-preservation..."

That finally provoked a reaction. "You doubt I'd be able to kill myself? You have no idea what I'd sacrifice to defeat you, Riddle! My life is the lowest price I'm willing to pay."

"I don't question your willingness to die, Harry—I realised a long time ago what a fool you are. No, I doubt your ability to fight off one of the most powerful magics ever discovered."

They fell silent after that, the atmosphere tense.

"How does it feel?" asked Harry Potter eventually, his voice lowered. "To have your soul so shattered that a piece peeled off without you ever noticing? Are you even killing people these days, or are you too scared it could happen again? Scared you lose another shard with any of the cold-blooded murders you commit?"

"And how does it feel," the young man continued, his body tensed in anticipation of another dose of pain, but taunting his captor anyway, "to have the boy who annoys you the most, be the only
thing that keeps you alive?" Potter gave a harsh laugh. "One has to wonder where Trelawney made a mistake…"

The pain never came but when Tom Riddle looked up from his notes, his eyes were on fire. "Do not anger me, Potter. After all, you and I are going to live side by side for a very long time."

To be continued—19 years later.
March 2019—twenty years after the battle of Hogwarts, somewhere outside the Curtain

"Well, a Scotsman clad in kilt left a bar one evening fair…"

He was whispering the lyrics under his breath, desperately trying not to sing, but the words seemed reluctant to come from his memory without the melody.

His voice trembled under the stifling presence of the wards around him, but his pace stayed unwavering as he marched into the song, one step belonging to every syllable, the loud beating of his heart accelerating his rhythm. And whilst he sang, the forest path snaked underneath his boots, guiding him through the precariously narrow opening in the wards of the safe house.

"…about that time two young and lovely girls just happened by…"

Absently, he pondered who might have chosen this silly tune for a password. It was something his wife would have picked, but she hadn't been the one who'd built this place. Someone else would have to find it amusing.

"...Ring-ding-did-a-little-la-di-oh, Ring-di-diddly-eye-oh..."

He finished the song with a reluctant lilt, and came to a halt. His eyes quickly scanned his surroundings—trees, moss, more trees—until he spotted a particularly squared rock not even three steps away. Its shape looked just as Luna had described.

He let out a sigh in relief. He was safely through the wards.

Rolling the stone away, he uncovered a metal box underneath it. He smashed his fist into its lid. A mechanism snapped inside and the top opened to reveal a shallow space, empty except for one pair of round glasses.

He examined it for a moment, careful not to touch. At first sight, it seemed ordinary enough. He thought of trying a simple revelling charm to know for sure but he quickly reconsidered, still feeling the suffocating power of the wards he'd just passed.

With a heavy sigh, he steeled himself for the next part of the plan, the one he had been dreading since receiving his instructions.

No more stalling.

He rolled up the sleeves of his heavy duty coat and untied the wand-holsters on both of his forearms, his wands still secured within. He carefully placed them at the bottom of the box. The spare wand strapped to his left calf also went inside. He took off his bottomless belt pouch, his talkie-talkie watch, little Portkey-earring. Even the filling with bezoar from his second molar went into the box. After a beat of hesitation, he took off his wedding ring, too. Luna always said it had some magical potential, even if he'd never felt a single spark from it.

With all his magical possessions now abandoned in the box, he shot the precious pile one last longing look before he closed the lid, covered it with the rock and rearranged the moss on the
ground around.

He reached into his pocket and clasped the gun there. He weighted it inexpertly, frowning at its unfamiliar cold feel. Armed with just that piece of metal, he started walking to the edge of the forest where the sun was shining through thinning walls of trees.

Although there were no visible signs of its borders, he immediately recognized the moment he'd stepped inside the dead zone. The world suddenly seemed less colourful. Something was missing in the air; the part of him that always responded to ambient magic suddenly found itself quite palpably alone.

He hated dead zones.

A second later, there was a weak bang and a flash of light. Simultaneously, Neville felt two punches into his stomach.

He started frantically thumping his belly where the two small combustions had set his coat on fire. When the smoke subsided, he found two charred patches where his buttons used to be.

He swore under his breath. *Lovely*. Luna had been sure she'd sewn those on without magic. Apparently, she remembered wrong.

He started walking again.

Finally out of the forest, he found himself on a vast clearing, surrounded by trees from all sides. He could hear dogs barking in the distance; a small house sat a few hundred metres away, with an orchard and a garden on its remote side. Several satellite dishes were installed on its roof. Behind a wooden fence, two large dogs were barking threateningly at him. There was nobody else in sight, but he couldn't shake the feeling that someone had their eyes on him.

He was right. When he approached the fence, he noticed a face behind the curtains and a gunpoint aimed at his forehead. Then the face and the gun disappeared. Two seconds later the front door slammed open, and a woman stepped outside, a broad smile on her lips.

He had to smile back.

Hermione looked much better than the last time he'd seen her, some seventeen years ago. Back then, she was a poor copy of her former self; but the years of solitude and peace seemed to have agreed with her. She was now a forty-year-old lady but she looked closer to the spirited girl he used to know in Hogwarts, even with the telling wrinkles.

She stopped behind the fence and extended her hands as to embrace him. He awkwardly reached over the fence, hugging her back. The moment he touched her, the dogs finally stopped barking.

"It's good to see you again, Hermione."

She didn't answer, of course, she just hugged him tighter before she let go.

"Luna said you wouldn't mind if I dropped by," he said hesitantly when she let him through the gate. The dogs came to sniff his hands and then scurried away.

Hermione, still smiling, motioned him to the house and made for the door herself. He followed, talking nervously again: "I brought you something from Luna; it's not exactly a present, though, more like homework. She made me warn you to watch it before she visits next time; otherwise,
He fished in his pocket for a slim case, bringing it to the light. He vaguely recognized some of the faces on the cover of the DVD and scowled at them. "And please, for the sake of our marriage, convince her to stop watching that Muggle crap! We haven't had dinner on time for months, not since they started airing that perkele soap opera at six sharp…"

Hermione just smiled at him and led him through the entrance hall to a modest kitchen. Neville liked the inside even more than the outside; it was tidy and homely, with light flooding in through the wide windows. He hesitantly sat down at the table in the middle of the room and watched as Hermione put the kettle on. She turned to him with a questioning look on her face, a tea caddy held in one hand, and a coffee can in the other.

"Oh," he blinked after a beat of confusion. "Of course. A cup of tea would be nice."

And then he was at a loss for what to say. He'd never been a skilled conversationalist, and after seventeen years of not seeing each other, he was struggling to find a safe topic to start with. Hermione couldn't help him, of course. He knew Luna had a way to communicate with her just fine, having learned muggle Sign language for that purpose, but he was clueless without any magical aid.

He looked around the well-lived kitchen. "You have a lovely place here. How long have you lived here?"

Hermione turned to him with five fingers raised on her hand.

"Five years?" Neville deduced, surprised. The very first dead zones started appearing five years ago. "How did you manage to rent a dead zone for a safe house?"

Hermione looked up from the kettle and levelled him with a stare. Neville flinched, but he understood his blunder. He had no right to pry—they were nowhere near close enough to share the secrets of her hideout.

He dropped his eyes and the subject with it. After a moment, he heard the water running again and knew Hermione had turned back to her task.

Once again, Neville was at a loss of what to say next, awkwardly watching in silence as she prepared their tea. She'd had it bad; he mused, maybe the worst of them all. She had lost almost everyone and her magic as well, ending in this isolated place alone with her nearly catatonic mother.

"How is Mrs Granger doing?" he finally asked, considering it polite and safe enough.

Hermione just smiled at him again, nodding her head without hesitation, which convinced Neville it'd be okay to continue, "Luna mentioned she'd started drawing pictures. That's excellent news—the fact she's using her imagination again. It has to mean something. My parents never got so far."

She turned to him with another smile on her face, though it was a little less bright this time, and she pointed to a picture hanging on the wall. It wasn't anything more than childish doodles, but Neville thought he recognised three figures; one of them considerably smaller than the other two.

He'd always thought that he could empathize with Hermione better than most, with the childhood he'd had. But in truth, he had grown up with catatonic parents, and he couldn't remember them ever being anything other than vacant; Hermione, on the other hand, had watched her loving parents being tortured into insanity with her own eyes—as well as her baby sister, a toddler their parents
also named Hermione in the haze of Obliviation.

Hermione startled him from his reverie when she placed a Muggle tablet in front of him.

"How have you been, Neville?" the screen read.

Of course, that would have been the sensible question to start with.

"I'm good." He answered automatically, relieved that Hermione had provided a way to lead a two-sided conversation. "Life is good- uh, stable. Finland can get really cold, though." He struggled to elaborate, realising by Hermione's expectant silence that she wasn't just offering empty pleasantries, but actually inquired about the last seventeen years of his life. "Did Luna tell you what I do?

"You work with muggle police," she typed.

Neville smiled. "Well, that's essentially true, except that they don't know much about our cooperation. We use their files to search for cases where magic could have been involved."

She gave him a surprised smile. "I'm glad to hear wizards still help muggles."

That assessment threw Neville right off. He stared at her dumbly for a moment and then chuckled. "Half of my days at work are spent explaining to the public how exactly I'm not helping muggles." He shook his head and came out with his well-practised response. "Our department works for the safety of the wizarding world: to prevent future conflicts. We cover any trace of criminal magic in the muggle world. The muggles claim their insurance money and don't raise hell for being harmed by a wizard."

Hermione frowned. "You don't chase the wizards responsible?"

"We would hardly get the funding for that." Neville laughed at the idea. "My department is as unpopular as it can get right now, just because it already looks like we're helping muggles. We couldn't look like we're helping muggles and punishing wizards at the same time."

"But those wizards are criminals." Hermione looked positively peeved now, her sense of justice evidently insulted.

Neville remained cool. "Wizards and witches have always been stealing from muggles; that's nothing new. We've never been the sort to grow our own vegetables. As long as we help them back once in a while, most wizards consider us even where muggles are concerned."

Hermione didn't seem convinced. She was staring at him with her eyes wide, seemingly gathering thoughts for her counter-argument. Neville wasn't here to discuss muggle rights, though. He spoke up again before she started typing.

"You know, besides my day job, I'm still in touch with the Resistance," he said, looking carefully for a reaction.

She nodded after a short pause, allowing him to change the subject. "Luna told me."

"Did she?" Neville scowled. How much did Hermione know? "Did she tell you why I'm here?"

She shook her head although Neville did note that beat of hesitation preceding it. She knew something, or suspected at least; that much was obvious.
Neville decided to explain everything from the start, anyway, no matter how clued in she might have been. "A couple of months ago, we found a group of muggle families wandering through the forests just a few kilometres away from the Curtain. They claimed to have come through the Crossing from Europe. Since then, eight more groups have been smuggled through. They are the first refugees that managed to escape from the Magical Empire since the Curtain was raised seventeen years ago."

He watched her face, but her expression did not change. He carried on. "We spoke to them at length, we learned as much as we could about the Empire. They didn't have much to say, though. They'd lived sheltered lives in muggle slums, and most of the stories they told us about wizards are mostly muggle superstition. There was one thing that was clear enough, though."

He took a deep breath. "Some of them claimed that the person who helped them through the Curtain was... Harry Potter."

He was watching closely, waiting for some sort of reaction, but when she didn't offer any, he carried on. "We investigated their memories, and we have no reason to believe they're lying; Harry is alive, and living behind the Curtain."

Hermione's face didn't change one bit.

"You don't look surprised," Neville remarked.

Hermione bent over her tablet. "Were you?"

Neville hesitated.Was he?

"The last time we heard of him, he was entering the Amazonian jungle, alone and delirious due to his addiction to *Felix Felicis*," he pointed out instead of answering. "When the Curtain was raised, we thought he'd been buried somewhere in the Southern hemisphere. We certainly didn't think that he was alive and inside Europe."

He took a deep breath. "And that's not all. The refugees' reports are incomplete at best, but we now know at least something about the new regime in Europe. What we've learned is disturbing: Harry must have been living like a muggle to avoid detection and survive—or he must have joined the other side."

"If he switched sides and joined the Dark Lord, why would he be helping muggles escape?"

Neville nodded. "That's the only thing giving us hope."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at that. "What exactly is the Resistance hoping for, Neville?"

Neville took a deep breath. There comes the reason why he was here. "We hope that if he could smuggle muggles out, he could smuggle wizards in."

"The Resistance?" Hermione wrote after a moment of hesitation. "You?"

"I can't tell you much more than that, Hermione—I'm bound by oaths," and he did feel sorry about that. "I was hoping that you could help me find him, though."

"How?"

"You were the last one to speak to him before he left the Resistance."
Hermione's fingers trembled as she went to write a response. "That was more than eighteen years ago. How do you suppose I can help you contact him now? And through an unbreachable magical barrier, nonetheless?"

"It is not unbreachable anymore; there is a Crossing with trucks driving inside every day. We could send Harry a message—I just need to figure out how."

"You would only draw attention to him, and to your plan."

Neville shrugged, "We know it's a bit far-fetched. Our plan isn't based on his help, though. If he can help us, great. If not, we'll go ahead with it anyway."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Is your mission to find him, or to find out if he poses a threat to the Resistance?"

Neville sighed. "We're putting a lot of good people at risk here. We need to be careful."

When Hermione only grimaced at his answer, Neville unapologetically added, "You know well enough that Harry wasn't exactly popular in the Resistance just before he left. Most of his friends were gone by then. Killed under his command, Neville added in his head. "People are no less suspicious of him now than they were back then."

Hermione looked away, taking a sip of her tea. She must have known Neville was telling the truth. He used the moment to retake control of the conversation.

"Can you answer some questions for me?"

She took her time, but then she nodded slowly. With that hesitation, she practically admitted to Neville she intended to hide information from him. He needed to tread carefully.

"Were you in touch with Harry when he left the Resistance for America?"

"No," she answered readily. "He left everything behind, including his friends."

Neville knew that. "And have you been in touch with him since?"

This time, she hesitated for a second, and then she typed a simple, "Yes."

"When?"

She was looking into his face now; her fingers typing seemingly on their own accord. "He started regularly visiting when the Crossing was opened."

It took Neville a second to catch her meaning. "He was here?!" he breathed out in disbelief.

She nodded.

"Why hasn't he approached us? We could have learnt so much from him!"

"Harry has no reason to trust the Resistance; it was the Resistance that kicked him out, not the other way around."

"That was years ago," Neville argued. "And you know very well they had their reasons for it—Harry wasn't really in his right state of mind back then. Surely, the situation has changed since then."
"Has it? You said it yourself a minute ago. The Resistance doesn't trust him either."

Neville ran his palms over his face. This was unexpected. "How does he do it? Is he one of Riddle's soldiers, then?" That would explain how he could use the Crossing so often.

Hermione frowned at him harshly, not answering that question. "Drink your tea, Neville," she wrote instead.

He frowned at her non-answer but decided to award her the break she obviously wanted. He took one sip of his cooling cup before his head shot up in surprise. He sniffed his cup. He tasted the tea again to make sure he wasn't just imagining it.

"This is Elf Grey!" he proclaimed.

His grandmother used to serve it every morning. He'd recognised the smell anywhere even though it had been decades since he'd last tasted it. He'd been searching for the tea leaves for the past seventeen years, without much success. There was only one place where House-Elves were trained to grow and dry tea this way; and that was Britain, on the other side of the Curtain.

Neville easily put two and two together.

"So, Harry's a smuggler? Is that what you're trying to tell me? Does he smuggle both people and goods across the Curtain?"

Hermione nodded.

"And is he trustworthy?" Neville asked in a decidedly blunt manner.

Hermione was Harry's oldest friend and her opinion would hardly be impartial. But she was also fiercely loyal to the cause, and the smartest witch he knew. She hesitated before answering, which Neville noted down carefully. What she wrote next erased all his thoughts, though.

"You can be the judge of that in a moment."

Neville stared at the screen for a moment. "What?"

"Harry should be here in half an hour. You can judge his credibility then."

Neville blinked up at her. "You set me up?"

She did that thing again—her fingers were typing whilst she levelled him with a disapproving glare.

"I didn't set anyone up. You have thirty minutes to decide if you want to see him, or leave before he gets here."

"Does Harry know I'm here?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me right away that he was coming?" Neville asked.

"I had a decision to make, too."

Neville leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath in an effort to cool down, to think back on what she said.
He cocked his head, pondering her unapologetic stare. She could have just kept silent about this and asked him to leave before Harry's estimated time of arrival. Neville would have never known he had missed him. Instead, she decided to give him a chance. He must have passed some sort of a test.

He took a sip of his tea again. He grimaced; it was tepid now.

"Can I heat this up somewhere? I refuse to have my first cup of Elf Grey in years to be anything short of perfect."

She gave him a small smile, obviously seeing through his transparent attempt for a reprieve from the conversation. She took the cup back to the stove herself and left him to gather his thoughts alone.

When she returned a couple of minutes later with a fresh cup of tea, he had regained most of his composure and had a list of questions ready. He knew which one he wanted to ask first; to hell with professionalism, they used to be friends. "How's he doing, Hermione?"

Hermione's face softened, letting him know she appreciated that question. Her reply was coming slowly; she was picking her words carefully. In the end, she just wrote, "He's not taking Felix Felicis anymore."

"That's good," Neville said slowly. "That's very good. Is he completely recovered? I mean, does he still suffer from the… side effects?"

"I think it's been a very long time since his last dose."

"Good," Neville kept repeating. "And how is he, Hermione?"

"He's changed," Hermione typed. "But so have you and I. He's still Harry, though. He won't betray you to Voldemort, no matter what."

Neville involuntary shivered reading that name; it had been years since he uttered it even in his mind. The fear of the Taboo was still strong among wizards; although there was now an impenetrable magical barrier between Neville and any Snatchers.

He reread Hermione's sentence, focusing on the content now. "How can you be sure, though?" he asked. "How can you know what he's been doing all those years on the other side? How did he even find himself behind the Curtain? He was supposed to be in South America when the barrier was raised! And how did he manage to survive in the new regime? He wasn't a member of the Resistance anymore but I doubt that would stop Riddle and his Death Eaters from hunting him."

Neville barely took a breath as the flurry of questions rushed out. He stopped himself when he realised he hadn't actually given Hermione a chance to answer any of them.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I guess I'm in a bit of a shock; this is all rather insane. It's so- so Harry," he said with a small smile only to pause right afterwards, surprised at the expression popping out of his mouth. It was a popular phrase from times long forgotten.

But it seemed to capture Hermione's attention. She looked up from her tea and smiled fondly at him, nodding slightly.

Hoping to take advantage of the change in mood, he pressed on with the questions. "Do you know what he was doing before he became a smuggler? The Crossing opened only a couple of years ago."
Hermione touched the screen to type the answer, but she got interrupted by a loud bark from the outside. Neville looked up at her face but she didn't seem alarmed, not even glancing at her rifle by the window. Neville nervously drew his hand to the gun in his own pocket but didn't grasp it, not just yet. Judging by Hermione's calm reaction, it was an expected guess.

And surely enough, Hermione typed, "I guess Harry's early."

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**MAGIC IS REAL**


...the existence of a secret magical society was revealed yesterday when the whole European continent suddenly disappeared under a seemingly unbreachable barrier...

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**MAGIC ACTING STRANGE**

*Aug 2014: The Free Wizard. Published in Finland.*

...for years we have discouraged fellow wizards and witches from approaching the Magical Curtain, as it seems to influence the outcome of many charms and enchantments. Numerous studies have been conducted but none have determined the cause as of yet.

And now, a new oddity has emerged: just a few kilometres away from the Curtain, close to the Ukrainian city of Donetsk, an area of approx. five kilometres in perimetre seemed to have lost its ambivalent magic altogether. It is impossible to invoke any spells, and any previously charmed objects (including wands) self-combust. Teams of researchers from all over the world have been called to the zone, looking for an explanation as to why magic seems to die in that place.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: There will be guns in this story. I like and understand firearms as little as the wizards forced to use them. They'll never be the focus of the story, just a necessary tool. Magic still rules!
Old Friends

March 2019 - twenty-one years after the battle of Hogwarts, somewhere outside the Curtain

The barking stopped abruptly a short moment later. Hermione smiled encouragingly at Neville and got up, most probably to welcome the visitor.

Neville didn't follow right away. He finished his tea in one large gulp, the reheated liquid burning his tongue, took a deep breath and only then rose to his feet. He slowly walked to the front door, stopped right behind Hermione and looked over her shoulder.

On the ground in the dirt sat Harry Potter.

He was playing with the dogs, in the middle of a tug-of-war for his coat sleeves, it seemed. Between his very undog-like snarling, and without even looking up, he called to Hermione. "You should do something about their breath—it stinks!"

Hermione cleared her throat rather harshly in response.

"Yeah, yeah, I know I'm early—I've got a good excuse, though," Harry said and finally looked up, providing Neville with his first glance at Harry's face.

He felt his jaw drop.

Harry didn't seem to have aged a single day. He looked the same as Neville remembered him from nineteen years ago. They had both been in their prime back then—recently matured youths, at the peak of their physical strength. But where the passing of the years started to show in Neville's features, Harry seemed just the same with his unyielding black hair, a youthful face—not a single wrinkle in sight—and even his signature round glasses. His hair was the same unruly nest, and there was the famous lightning scar peeking through his fringe.

If it hadn't been for the fact that they were standing in the middle of a dead zone, Neville would have accused him of using some sort of glamour. No magical blood, not even Merlin's, would prevent anyone from ageing entirely; this wasn't natural. Harry must have reached for some serious magic; powerful magic which would have to be so ingrained into his body and soul that even the nature of a dead zone couldn't neutralize it. Neville instantly grew suspicious—magic like this wasn't taught at Hogwarts. At least not in his day.

"Neville!"

Harry called when he noticed him gawking behind Hermione. He didn't acknowledge either Hermione's annoyance nor Neville's astonishment, hugging them both tightly. "Of course that ring in the box was yours! I should have guessed it was Luna who would use goat horn for her wedding rings!"

Neville was taken aback both by the warm hug and the strange revelation, not able to react to either of them at first. And suddenly Harry wasn't there anymore. He was striding to the kitchen now, both hands full with shopping bags, each filled to the brim.

He was talking again, casually addressing Hermione. "I'm sorry but I couldn't get my hands on any Elf Grey this time. I think I got everything else, though."

Neville joined them in the kitchen, glancing curiously at the things Harry was piling on the table,
looking for any other treasures from behind the Curtain. When he spotted only groceries in plastic bags marked with a logo that looked vaguely familiar, Neville couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

"So, a goat horn?" he asked after a moment of silence, figuring that was as good a place to start as any.

Harry snickered. "Yes, a goat horn. Well, at least I assume it's your wedding ring, the one in the box at the edge of the wards? You didn't know?"

Neville shook his head. "Luna always said it was a magical stone."

"Well, I knew a wizard or two who thought of goats as magical," Harry shrugged, smiling fondly. "How is she, anyway? I haven't seen her for such a long time! Found any Snorkacks yet?"

"She's doing great, thanks," Neville answered, still mildly shocked and greatly flabbergasted by Harry's idle chit-chat. This was not what he'd been expecting. "And no Snorkacks, I'm afraid. She stopped looking for them years ago."

"Really? Luna, give up on the Krumple-Horned Snorkacks? Never!"

"No, nothing like that," Neville smiled through his haze. Talking about Luna was easy. "It's just that her focus changes all the time."

Normally, Neville would stop right there when talking about his wife's research. Other wizards didn't usually look too kindly on her current topic of interest. However, this was Harry and Hermione. He decided to elaborate. "She studies muggles now."

Harry was helping to put the food away but now he stopped to look at Neville from across the kitchen, one eyebrow raised. Neville couldn't read any judgement in his eyes, though.

He explained. "She finds them fascinating. Now that we live in close proximity, she's determined to find and study every kind of muggle there is."

"Kinds of muggles?"

"You know—the Muslims, Buddhists, Catholics."

Harry laughed at that. "Now I remember! Hermione told me Luna'd joined a religious group some time ago. The Mormons maybe? Everything for the proper research, eh?"

"Well, yes, but that was a long time ago. She's concentrating on the Jews right now."

"Good for her."

The food was all neatly packed away now, and Harry and Hermione finally sat down with Neville, both nursing their own cup of steaming tea. Neville stared at them across the table; Hermione was still looking mildly irritated for some reason, and Harry was absentmindedly playing with his cup. He looked relaxed, leaning contentedly in his chair; either ignorant or not caring about the awkward silence stretching out between them.

"How have you been, Harry?" Neville finally asked, learning from his blunder with Hermione, determined to find his manners. "It's been quite some time."

Harry turned away from the window, giving Neville an easy smile. "It has, hasn't it? Nearly two
decades. But I'm doing alright, nothing interesting to complain about. You? Still living in Lapland?"

"Yeah. It's a beautiful place, once you've used a heap of spells, or two. All of those wizards and witches from around Europe, suddenly living in one place—it can get interesting sometimes. We've got a nice house too, me and Luna. We both have good jobs… yeah. Nothing to complain about, either."

"Sounds good. What's the job? I heard you were some sort of Auror."

"I work in Law Enforcement, true, although we're a separate division from Aurors." He decided not to go into details. He wasn't interested in starting another muggle rights discussion. "It's boring most of the time, but safe."

"That sounds like something you needed. Have you seen anyone from the old bunch lately?"

Neville hesitated, trying to read into any subtext possibly hidden within Harry's question. "We visit Bill and Fleur's place every once in a while," he answered slowly. "And I'm in touch with Dennis and Susana."

"Susana?"

"The mediwitch from the IMRA camp in Madrid? She was assigned to our team for a couple of months, back in 2001. You must remember her—she was dating your second in command at one point. She was in your barracks all the time."

"Oh, Lee Jordan's Sue? Of course, I remember her. She was one hell of a picture back then." Harry smiled fondly.

"Still is."

"Yeah? She and Dennis are married?"

"Nah, they never tied the knot, but they have kids," Neville explained.

"Good for them. Anyone else?"

Neville hesitated again, sensing that Harry was clearly digging for something specific. He assumed Harry wanted him to admit how involved with the Resistance he was, and that he was here on their behalf. Very well.

"Look, Harry," Neville began frankly. "There's something I wanted to ask you. The thing is—"

"Of course there is, Neville," Harry interrupted, but not unkindly. "We both know you didn't show up to simply reminisce about the good old days. But I would like to do just that. You know, before the cat's out of the bag." Harry paused and then sighed. "I guess it's late for that now, though. I tell you what—I have a business meeting starting in a few; you can leave with me and we'll grab a beer afterwards."

Neville understood. They would talk when Hermione wasn't around; she was not going to be involved in their business.

Before Neville could confirm, Hermione started gesturing fiercely with her hands.

"She says that I was twenty minutes early," Harry dutifully translated the Sign language. "She says
that I messed up her plan and didn't give Neville a chance to leave before I got here. Well, Neville, if you had been given the chance, would you have left before I got here?"

Neville shook his head without a moment's hesitation.

"I thought so. I'm sorry for ruining your plan, Hermione. I just thought Neville would actually like to witness the meeting I've got scheduled. That's why I decided to come here first."

Hermione sighed and gestured. "She just didn't want you to feel cornered, Neville. Well, I'm sure he appreciates the thought." Harry dismissed her concerns without even glancing at Neville. Neville scowled but neither of the two paid him any mind.

"Let's get going. I'll be back for dinner, Hermione," Harry said.

Hermione nodded, quickly gesturing.

"Roast beef. Hermione, I love you," Harry declared dryly. She rolled her eyes at him, even as her mouth quirked into a smile.

"What meeting?" Neville asked belatedly.

"You'll get to see in a minute," Harry replied. He was reckless all of a sudden, quickly diving out of the kitchen.

Neville took a moment to collect himself and slowly stood up. "Thanks for the tea, Hermione, and for arranging this. I'm just... I mean- I guess I'm still in shock. I wasn't expecting to see Harry today, especially not like this."

Hermione's smile slid away.

"I meant that in a good way," he added quickly. "I've never seen Harry so cheerful."

She just carried on looking at him sadly.

"But I guess that's not all that's happening," Neville read from her concerned look. "Is there anything I should know?"

She stared at him for a bit longer before she finally picked up her tablet again, writing down a few words.

"Look after him for me, will you?"

He glanced up at her, surprised. She already assumed they would end up working together. Neville wasn't so sure, but he decided not to oppose her at this point.

He gave her a goodbye hug instead, embracing her rather awkwardly. "I'm really sorry I hadn't visited earlier, with Luna. It was really good seeing you again, Hermione. Say hello to your mother for me."

Harry was playing with the dogs again when Neville joined him in the garden. He stopped when he noticed Neville and they made their way towards the forest.

"So, little Dennis Creevey is having kids, and with Gorgeous Sue, nonetheless!"

Neville nodded. "She went through labour three times, and she's still as gorgeous as back then.
They've got two girls now."

"What happened to the third kid?" Harry asked.

"Betrayal Bombing happened. He was just a few weeks old."

"Oh."

They reached the box at the edge of the wards. Harry opened it and Neville glanced curiously over his shoulder, hoping to see what magical items Harry carried on his person. However, apart from Neville's things, there was nothing new in the box but one mundane looking wand. Harry took it out and placed his round glasses inside.

Harry was then stuck waiting, impatiently clapping his forearm with his wand as he watched Neville strap his three wand holders to his forearms and a calf, put the bezoar filling into his left molar, portkey-earring into his right ear, his belt pouch and his enchanted gun to his belt. Lastly, he put on his goat wedding ring and his talkie-talkie wristwatch. It was showing eight in the evening.

"You don't need your glasses anymore?" Neville asked.

"Nah, I got myself magical lenses. Bloody useless in dead zones though."

Neville looked inside the box once more, but there was nothing left. He didn't comment on the fact that he didn't see Harry put the lenses back in.

They started walking again. Harry was resolutely striding deep into the forest, seemingly without a care for the deadly wards surrounding them, while Neville nervously marched right on Harry's heels.

He noticed the lack of singing this time and felt like pouting that he had to go through that embarrassing experience when it obviously hadn't been necessary.

"So, you call it a 'Betrayal Bombing' now?" Harry remarked.

"Everyone always called it Betrayal Bombing," Neville objected, startled by the question. In March of 2002, the muggle army bombed all of the IMRA camps, killing every witch and wizard sleeping in the facilities; making it into the biggest massacre in the history of the wizardkind.

Neville and the rest of his team from the Resistance were one of the very few survivors, escaping certain death by mere coincidence. The night the muggles attacked, Bill and Fleur had a house party welcoming their firstborn daughter to the world. That's why Neville and Luna, Bill and Fleur, Hermione and her mother, Dennis and his Susana and a few other friends were still alive. Susana's son was too young to attend the party and he was left with a sitter at the base. He got burned to death in the fires.

"Where are we going?" Neville asked, his patience with this inane chatter suddenly running out.

"I've told you; I've got a business errand to run."

"I remember. Why should I be interested in going with you?" Neville asked bluntly. "Look, Harry, I have some important things to ask you, and I'd rather not wait any longer. Could you just stop for a-"

"The meeting can't be postponed," Harry interrupted. "And it's not going to take more than a couple of minutes. I promise, you want to see this. We can talk as long as you want afterwards."
Neville sighed. "Is this going to be dangerous?"

"Not likely."

Harry stopped abruptly, causing Neville to bump into his back.

"This should be far enough," Harry said.

When Harry turned around to face him, he was suddenly sporting thick stubble, his hair was trimmed to few centimetres shy of bald and there were shadows of wrinkles around his eyes. His famous scar was nowhere to be seen.

He must have used a squadron of self-transfiguration spells while they were walking, without Neville ever noticing the wand movements.

"Going for the older look?" Neville commented, thinking that might actually be a pretty accurate guess of how thirty-nine years old Harry should look like.

"We are going for a beer lately. No point in the barman asking for an I.D." He stretched out his arm. "This is going to be a long ride, so brace yourself."

Neville very much wanted to ask about the age thing, but figured this wasn't a good time. He grabbed Harry's arm, took a deep breath and nodded. Then the world went black for a long moment, much longer than what Neville was used to, before he was standing on solid ground again. Not the roughest side-along apparition he'd ever experienced, even if lengthy.

He immediately checked his surroundings. They were standing in a dark corridor of sorts, with no roof above their heads. When he gained his bearings properly, he picked up more details. The tall walls around them were made of shipping containers stock up on one another. There were no stars visible on the sky above, just a yellow glare, so they were in a city or close to one. He checked his watch. It showed nine now.

Harry was already striding away from him. "Come on, this way."

"Where are we?"

"In a harbour."

"Which city?"

"Cape Town."

"Huh. That's in South Africa, isn't it?" That was one hell of an apparition.

"What are we doing down here?" Neville asked nervously a second later. Africa became a very dangerous continent after all the influence from Europe had disappeared, and the rest of the world occupied with their own problems.

"As I said, conducting business. Make yourself ready, we should be there in a minute. Don't say anything. Try to look menacing; act like you're my bodyguard."

Neville's eyes narrowed, not liking the sound of that at all. He took a breath to ask more but by then, Harry was shushing him. They rounded a corner and found themselves in a small open area and in a company of five black-suited men. Four of them had machine guns pointed at them.

Neville stopped in his tracks but Harry didn't miss a beat and continued to the centre with the same
unnerved stride. He stopped only when he got right in front of the only unarmed man. "Good evening, gentlemen," he greeted cheerfully.

No one replied. Harry didn't look perturbed by that at all. "My order?" he simply asked.

The man in front of him motioned to the only open container around. Harry stepped closer to take a quick peek inside. He nodded, evidently satisfied with what he saw, and got back to the centre. He reached with his hand into his breast pocket. That made everyone tense up.

"Calm down, just going for your payment," Harry said with that damned cheerful voice. He came up with a small pouch. He tossed it to the man without a gun. The muggle looked inside, weighed it in his hand and then nodded. On that sign, his gorillas turned around and walked away with their boss in the middle. And just like that Neville and Harry were once again alone.

"What was that about?" Neville chortled out.

Harry didn't answer. Instead, he lifted his hand in a silent gesture, urging Neville to stay quiet. After one tense minute, he suddenly loosened up. "Yep, they are gone now." He disappeared inside the open container. "Come on now, time to pack!"

Neville wasn't about to relax so easily. He got his wand out and did one silent *Homenum revelio*. Thankfully, no streaks of light came out of his wand. He then proceeded to raise up a muggle-repelling ward, as well as a small perimeter alerting ward. Only then he started to breathe again.

He joined Harry inside the container. It was packed to three quarters with big white boxes. One by one, they were disappearing in the pocket of Harry's coat. Neville quickly approached the closest one and with ominous anticipation opened the lid.

"Pills?" he spurted out the next moment.

Harry nodded. "Antibiotics. And bandages, syringes, drops and ointments and other muggle medicine. All very valuable commodities on the other side."

"What did you pay them for all of this?"

"Gems."

"Real ones?"

Harry shrugged. "As real as conjured ones can be for a few months."

"Are you insane?!" Neville cried out when his suspicion was confirmed. "Have you seen these guys? They'll kill us!"

"Nah," Harry said, unconcerned; not even looking up from the line of boxes floating into his pocket. "Those were some amateurs, not even bringing their own wizard for the transaction."

"But they will hire one to find us. And then they'll hire some more to kill us!"

"Not happening."

"Ha! You can be calm; you didn't show them your real face! You even don't live on this side of the Curtain! But I have a family, a wife-"

"Geez, mate; rein it in a bit! I've put some juice into the gems; they will last for eight whole months, at least. By that time, they'll be scattered around the globe and no one will be able to track
them back to us."

Nobody used money anymore in these parts of the world, especially not when trading on the black market. Gemstones were the new currency. Neville knew Harry was right.

He stared at him for a moment. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Bet I did. Been doing it for years now, sometimes even twice or three times with the same guys. And it always worked. No need to worry at all."

Neville sighed at that confession. "Do you know what my job is, Harry? I'm obliged to arrest you right on the spot."

"Yeah, about that," Harry muttered under his breath. "You know very well this will never get reported. What muggle police won't be bothered about, you sure as hell don't have to be either, right?"

"You've used magic to deceive a muggle in a business transaction of considerable proportions. It's my job to bring you in for questioning."

"Oh, come on, Neville!" Harry exclaimed, finally glancing up from the quickly disappearing pile of boxes. "We both know you aren't really going to arrest me for this."

And for a short moment, Neville wanted to do exactly that, if only to make Harry take things seriously. This was not just a friendly reunion, Neville was here on a mission. He was tired of Harry tagging him along as Harry pleased.

He heaved a deep sigh, looking at the symbol of a big red cross on all the boxes. Humanitarian help, he realised after a second, probably stolen from the nearby hospitals. "Why haven't you asked some government or an NGO for all of this stuff? I'm sure they'll be willing to help. You don't need to steal."

Harry shook his head. "That wouldn't work. People from governments talk."

"What's the problem with that? It's not like there's something wrong about helping people?"

Harry laughed at that. "Letting the Empire know that someone's regularly smuggling muggle goods across the Curtain? Letting them know what kind of stuff so they could track it back to me? No, no, no," he vigorously shook his head. "What they don't know, they can't stop."

"But you're stealing, and big time," Neville didn't give up. "And I'm sure you don't do business only with evil criminals."

"Yeah," Harry reluctantly admitted. "That's why I brought you here. Hermione made me promise I'd tell your office about these little transactions of mine. She tried to explain something about you guys making it look like proper thievery, no magic involved, so the poor muggles can get their insurance money."

"How would we go about this cooperation?" Neville asked, resigned. "You'd give me a list of who you are going to steal from and then my office will cover up your tracks?"

"Oh, no, nothing so official, and definitely nothing in advance. Wouldn't want to give you any temptation to intervene, right? Well, I'll think of some proper system later. But when you're already here, I can tell you about the fourteen trucks with cigarettes in Montevideo, and then the old storehouse with DVDs and some film stocks from New Delhi. Both of these were quite big
dealings, you shouldn't have any problems finding the cases without much digging."

The container was almost empty by now, the few remaining boxes floating slowly into Harry's pocket. "And we are done here!" Harry announced with the last one disappearing. "We are good to go."

Neville followed Harry from the container. "DVDs and film stocks?"

"Oh yeah, they're selling like hot cakes!" Harry happily answered, shutting the door of the container behind them.

"But they aren't exactly your usual live-saving materials-"

"Oh dear Neville, you'd be surprised how many muggles would disagree with you. Films are one of the very few ways left to keep up with the rest of the world."

"But cigarettes?" Neville added, eyebrows raised.

"Ha, you'd have even more trouble winning that argument! I've heard about muggles risking their lives stealing tobacco from some wizard's estate. There's no cigarette production whatsoever in the Empire. So, any preferences for some pub around?"

Neville looked at him, incredulous. "Nothing that immediately comes to mind. First time visiting the country, and all that," he said dryly.

"That's all right, I don't know Cape Town that well either. Let's go somewhere else."

Harry extended his hand, clearly intending to apparate them. Considering that the last time they'd side-alked, Harry'd brought him to meet the African mafia, Neville was hesitant to take his hand again.

"Where are you taking us this time?"

"Ever been to Jerusalem? There's this lovely pub I'm quite fond of." Harry didn't seem fazed by Neville's distrust.

Neville sighed. That didn't sound too dangerous. He took the offered hand, trusting Harry to side-alk him once again.

Jerusalem wasn't packed with tourists anymore.

Harry's favourite pub turned out to be a cosy little place in the very historic centre. Twenty years ago, it'd probably been an over-priced tourist trap. Now, it hosted only a scattered group of locals, their faces hidden in the smoke of their water pipes.

"I didn't know it's possible to apparate across entire continents," Neville remarked when they folded down onto their pillows seats.

Harry chuckled. "I hadn't, either, until I tried it."

Neville grimaced. "I'm pretty sure I'd splinch my head off."

"With that attitude, you sure would," Harry readily agreed.

"Not everyone has the power to back up their crazy ideas."
Harry shook his head. "It's not power that makes the difference. It's your confidence."

He beckoned the waiter over. Before the boy got to them, he mumbled towards Neville. "And let's just say I'm pretty confident I won't die from apparating."

Neville raised his eyebrows at the sheer cockiness of that statement. Before he decided on a comment, the waiter was upon them.

While Harry asked for a beer, Neville ordered whiskey. He decided against revisiting the conversation; it was obvious Harry wasn't willing to provide any real explanation. Instead, they waited for their drinks in a tense silence. Harry seemed entirely comfortable with it.

When Neville took his first sip, feeling the potent drink ran all the way down his throat, he was ready to talk business.

"Have you been smuggling only goods through the Curtain?"

Harry didn't answer immediately. Instead, he stared at Neville with his head tilted in contemplation.

"No need to dance around the bush," he finally said, his tone casual; the same cheerful voice that he didn't drop the entire evening. "I know you know about me getting people out of the Empire. I figured my clients would mention my name somewhere along the way."

Neville nodded. "It was quite a surprise."

Harry laughed at that. "Thought me long dead, hadn't you all?"

"Yes." Neville paused. "How did you survive this whole time?" he then asked bluntly. "And in the new Europe, of all places?"

Harry shrugged. "Adapting, I guess."

"I need more than that, Harry. We need to know how exactly you managed to adapt if we're to trust you."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Who's we?"

Neville nodded, expecting that question. "I might have a job offer for you."

Harry's expression didn't change. "I figured as much."

Neville glanced around the half-empty pub, and checked the privacy wards around them. They were solid and intact as ever. "I'm going to need an oath, Harry, if I'm to tell you anything more."

As expected, Harry didn't look that excited about the prospect. "Oh, come on, I've trusted you with some pretty delicate things today, haven't I? Why couldn't the trust run both ways?"

Neville didn't cave in. "We can't afford that. It's a normal enough procedure, Harry, you must remember that."

"Alright, alright. What's the wording?"

"The standard one. I trust you still remember?"

Harry rolled his eyes but obliged anyway, putting out his wand. "I swear on my magic I will never reveal anything from what I am about to learn in this conversation to any living soul, until I'm
instructed from you otherwise," he said solemnly. At the same time, he extended his left hand with his pinkie bent in an imitation of a childish oath. "Satisfied?"

It wasn't the precise usual wording but it was close enough. Neville felt the binding magic despite the mocking gesture. He nodded.

"The IMRA got together again," he revealed. "I'm here on their behalf."

Harry waited for Neville to continue, unimpressed, sipping his beer.

"We're sending a team behind the Curtain. We want you to be a part of it, as a guide."

"The hell I'm joining your little club again," Harry snorted.

Neville had expected something along this line, but he still couldn't help feeling disappointed.

No matter, he had a proposition ready. "The refugees paid you to get them out," he not quite asked. Harry raised his eyebrows and beckoned him to continue.

"We want to hire you as our guide. You'll be paid for your services, and generously at that. You don't need to join the Resistance."

Harry didn't look particularly interested, as far as Neville could tell. "Guiding known war criminals through the Empire's entire districts is something quite different than my usual quick smuggling of muggles and muggleborns."

"We are aware. But only the best of us would go, offering you protection-"

Harry laughed at that. "Protection, you say?" He snickered. "I don't care about your protection. All I'm saying is that it would cost you much more than it's my usual fare."

Neville was honestly surprised by Harry's mercenary attitude, and a bit appalled, too. People do change, he thought but chose not to comment. "Are you interested, then?" he asked instead.

"It depends. What's the goal of the mission?"

"I can't tell you that. Yet."

"Well, how can I decide if I don't even know what you need me for? There's a big difference if you want that team of yours just to scout the land, or if you want to send them against Riddle himself."

"We will share more with you once we determine you trustworthy."

"Well, I've just sworn a bloody oath, haven't I?"

"Oaths are not enough anymore; they can be easily broken in dead zones. We need to know your true motivation, beyond an Unbreakable oaths binding your loyalty."

"Well, how do you want to go about that?"

"You remember the standard procedure. I need to bring you to the IMRA, where a Legilimens will determine your mindset."

"No way that's ever happening."
"Harry, you need to be proven trustworthy. Otherwise, we can never cooperate."

"Well, from where I stand it looks like you need my help more than I need the job. I'm quite content just carrying on with my ordinary smuggling, thank you very much."

Neville frowned at him. "The offer is off if you don't subdue to a legilimency test."

"Well, I wasn't that much interested to begin with, was I?"

Neville leaned back into his comfortable armchair and heaved a deep sigh. This wasn't going well. But he had his orders, and not a lot of space to bargain within. He couldn't budge on this condition. "It's just one small test," he said softly. "You know the process well enough – the Legilmens aren't allowed to look anywhere else than at the absolute minimum of what helps them determine where your alliances stand, that's all."

"I'm not going anywhere near any of the IMRA headquarters or their Legilmens."

"Why?"

Harry shrugged. "I still hold a grudge?" he proposed.

Neville ignored that. "You aren't exactly convincing me of your loyalty, here. Why is it such a problem to let someone inside your head?"

"Been there; not going there again. You are forgetting it's not me who needs help here. If this is a condition that comes with the job, then I'm simply not interested. Find someone else."

Neville reluctantly considered that suggestion. "Can you recommend anyone else?"

Harry snickered. "We aren't exactly a close-knit group, us smugglers, you know."

"You must have heard about someone else."

"I don't know anyone who would be willing to risk getting caught with a bunch of ex-resistance soldiers. That would earn you at least three weeks long dying."

"*Three weeks long dying?*

"Special treatment for the betrayers of the Empire. An ordinary death sentence isn't frightening enough; they prolong your suffering a bit," Harry explained matter-of-factly.

"I see."

They fell silent, Neville lost in his thoughts for the moment and Harry studying him closely all of a sudden. After a minute or two of uncomfortable silence, Harry grumbled something unintelligible.

Neville looked up at him but Harry didn't explain himself. "Do you mind me smoking?" he asked instead.

"Go ahead." Neville watched Harry take out a slim roll-up and light it with a practised snap of his fingers like many heavy smokers did.

Neville frowned when the sweet smell of the smoke got to his nose. "That's not tobacco, is it?"

Harry smiled slightly and shook his head. "Want some?"
Neville frowned. "I know that smell," he said, inhaling deeply again. "That's my plant!"

Harry looked genuinely surprised by that. "Your plant?"

"Yes, my plant! There's a hint of mimbulus mimbletonia; I'd recognize it anywhere. It took me months to make it mate with the weed!"

"Huh," was all Harry said at first. Then he smiled; but it was a bitter one. "Looks like Goyle's original isn't that original, after all."

"Goyle's?"

"Yes. Goyle's original smoking pot, the very imaginative brand, named after its very imaginative founder; the most popular smoke in the whole of Empire."

"He must have stolen it!" Neville shouted out. "I'd thought none of my plants survived the Bombings but Goyle must have found one."

"Quite possibly. It made him a very rich man, too."

Neville felt speechless. He felt like pouting, too. Harry must have noticed because he offered him his bag of dry buds. "Want some?" he asked again.

Neville shook his head. "I haven't smoked since that awful night in Barcelona."

Harry's eyes narrowed, trying to remember. He smiled brightly when he finally did. "The night when you puked on Luna's pet hedgehog, making him somewhat pregnant and deliver seven babies the next morning?" And then he smiled some more. "And then Luna's father making you swear a magical oath that you'd never puke on his daughter till she was at least thirty?"

Neville, now well over thirty as he was, couldn't fight off the blush. Some embarrassments didn't fade even with time.

He looked up, feeling Harry's suddenly intent glance. Harry sighed. "How involved are you in this mission? Are you actually part of the team?"

Neville sensed the change of mood and just nodded silently.

Harry sighed again, more gravely. "Who else is going? Anyone I might know?"

Neville hesitated before answering, knowing the next bit of information wouldn't help his cause any. "Bill's in charge of the team."

Harry choked up on his joint. "Bill? As in Bill Weasley? The Bill Weasley who hates every fibre of my body and soul?"

"Bill is too professional to let old differences get in the way. He's okay with the plan."

"Differences? I distinctly remember him swearing a bloody oath to kill me most viciously if I ever got close to him or any member of his family again."

"He never actually swore a magical oath. Those were troubled times, Harry. You can't take anything that was said back then seriously; I'm sure he never really blamed you for Ginny's death; no Weasley ever did."

Harry flinched, almost unnoticeably, but Neville was paying close attention; and he immediately
knew he made a mistake. Well, there was no way to take it back now, so he might as well continue. "The case was finally closed just few weeks after you were discharged from the army. Has anyone ever told you? You were cleared of all charges, of course; it was determined that it was a suicide."

Ginny Weasley died a month or so after Hermione's breakdown. Every proof pointed to the fact that she had committed suicide – the magical residue on the site, the fact she was the one to cast the magic, the witnesses; but everyone knew it couldn't be the truth. She burnt to a crisp by a cursed fire. No one would willingly choose such an agonizing way to go. The investigation found out that Harry was apparently present to the whole thing, not able to get the Fiendfyre under control before it reached her. Some people thought him crazy enough even back then to kill his own girlfriend but Neville and lots of others suspected that some foul magic was at play.

Neville was almost sure that Bill thought so too, but Bill still blamed Harry by proxy for what happened to Ginny, and to the rest of his family. He kind of freaked out when his little sister went down in one of the most horrible way imaginable, and cast Harry away from the Weasley family.

"Yeah, I've heard about the suicide bit," Harry answered neutrally. "But I suppose that hasn't made Bill forgive me, has it? He hates my guts, Neville, and that would not help us if I were to guide you through the whole of Europe."

"Bill is a good team leader: he will follow your advice if it gives us a chance to succeed. And for the record, I don't think he hates you."

"Hm," was everything Harry said to that. He appeared to be thinking some more before asking again. "Who else is coming? Anyone else from the old crowd?"

"There will be four of us in total but no one else you might know."

"Hm." Harry fell silent for a long moment. Neville let him think.

"Alright, here is what I propose," Harry spoke up, rolling his second joint. "You can show the memories from today to Bill and anyone else who's behind this, although they will be a bit blurry when it comes to Hermione's home. But as far as I'm concerned, this is all you have at your disposal to prove me trustworthy. I won't let any Leglimens near my mind, and that's my final word.

"But listen to this—you need me. You won't find any other guides; that I can guarantee. And you won't survive a minute in there if you go alone, no matter how well you think you are prepared.

"You need me, proven trustworthy or not. When your boss realizes that, tell Hermione. She'll let me know."

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**RESISTANCE ARMY FORMED**

**Dec 1998, L'Heure Magique, France.**

...the Ministries of Magic of France, Germany, Belgium, and Spain signed an international treaty yesterday, obliging them to provide one fifth of their Auror forces to the newly established International Magical Resistance Army, or 'the IMRA'...

...the IMRA is also accepting volunteers. Most of them come from Britain, fleeing the newly established tyrannical system. One of the wizards in training is known to be Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived...
IMRA CAMPS BURNED DOWN BY MUGGLES! Wizards Betrayed By The Ones They Were Trying To Protect.

18 March 2002, Berliner Zauberer.

-early this morning the IMRA camps in France and Spain were bombarded by muggle weapons of inexplicable power, destroying all their facilities. The total number of victims is yet to be determined as new bodies are still being found in the wreckage.

'This is the end of the war,' says Benjamin Smith. 'There must be something wrong with muggles if they're capable of this much evil. It seems that You-Know-Who was right the whole time.'
March 2019, Finland

He Flood to the very heart of the IMRA headquarters later that night, the password to the Fidelius charm in the forefront of his mind. At this late hour, there was only the night guard and a clerk cleared to work all the way up here. Neville stiffly nodded to the two guards when they approached him for the routine scan but he greeted the clerk wizard more casually. Arthur Weasley was with them from the very start of the IMRA, never joining the fight at the front but always loyal to the cause.

"Hi, Arthur. Working the night shift?"

"And the afternoon one too," grunted Arthur instead of a greeting but still managed a smile for Neville.

"You've been here all day?" asked Neville incredulously, walking to the coffee tap and charming it for a strong one. "Where are the others?"

"Doge is sick, so we've been covering for him."

"Still? I heard he got sick weeks ago."

"He's in coma now," Arthur sighed sadly. "Magically resistant hypoxia. The healers say he might not wake up."

"Gracious Merlin, I didn't even know!" Neville said regretfully. "Does he have a family?"

"No one I know of. He's over hundred and thirty, and he's been fighting with that disease for as long as I've known him, so no surprises here. None of us is getting any younger here, right?"

Neville gravely nodded, not knowing what else to say. Arthur fought in the very first war along with Neville's parents, some fifty years ago. "You should go home. It's not like there's some work that couldn't wait."

"Oh, like you would know!" Arthur laughed at him good-naturally. "What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you weren't to turn up until next week?"


"And when I risk my son's wrath for getting him away from his wife at midnight, can I tell him with all honesty that it's important enough?"

Neville seriously considered that question. "Go wake them up. I'll be in the office."

He didn't wait for Arthur's response, walking to the conference room, closing its door behind his back. He shortly considered inviting Arthur over for the discussion. He knew how important Harry used to be to the Weasley family. Neville himself had been invited to join in but even after years of friendships and comradery in arms, he could only watch from afar the special bond Harry used to share with the Weasley clan.
He shook his head getting out of his reverie and pushed down on the sentimentality, blaming the afternoon with Harry. Arthur needed to wait outside, he didn't have the clearance for this mission.

He grabbed a Pensieve from one of the numerous cupboards lining the walls and put all his memories of today's afternoon in it. The memory of going through the wards around Hermione's dead zone was very reluctant to leave his mind, just as Harry warned him, and after a minute of struggling with the haze he gave up. This part of his day wasn't that important anyway. He then sat down on the sofa and settled to wait for Jens and Bill with his thoughts and coffee as the only company.

Bill was the first to arrive, not even bothering to transfigure his pyjamas. "Were you just singing?" he greeted Neville, waking him up from his musings.

"I don't sing." Neville objected.

Bill was almost fifty now; but for a wizard from a family like the Weasleys that didn't even mean he was past his prime time. He was definitely in a very good shape, magically as well as physically; still, the powerful wizard who led Neville's team twenty years ago. And still led it, even if Neville was the only one from the old bunch left in the army.

"I think I even recognized the melody – some drunken song, wasn't it?" Bill pressed, amused; he seemed in a surprisingly good mood for someone who was just roused from bed. "Haven't heard that one in quite some time."

"Nonsense," Neville disagreed, although that comment startled him. It might very well mean that he actually was humming that bloody Scottish song that was the key to Hermione's wards.

Bill just smiled at him knowingly but dropped the subject. "So, what's this all about?" he asked.

"I've found him," Neville said simply.

Bill's jovial mood immediately disappeared. He knew who Neville was tasked to find. "So quickly?" he asked, amazed. "I thought it would take some time. Any means of contacting him across the Curtain?"

"You don't understand," Neville shook his head. "I've found him. Talked to him today."

Bill looked at him, eyebrows going up high. "How's that possible?"

Neville just gestured at the Pensieve. "Feel welcome. It's all there."

Bill's eyes flicked to the Pensieve but he didn't make a move to enter it. "Is Jensen on his way?"

Neville nodded.

"I'll wait for him then," Bill said, sitting down on the other side of the room.

Matthias Jensen arrived five short minutes later. Unlike Bill, he changed back from his pyjamas or maybe hadn't had the time to put them on tonight yet. His coat was all wrinkled.

If they were still a real international army, Jensen would outrank them all, being the one to sign the Foundation treaty for the German Ministry of Magic all those years ago. With the Resistance army dissolved and with the fight against Voldemort becoming quite unpopular, Jensen was the only one from all the higher-ups to stay loyal to the cause. As far as Neville was concerned, Jensen was still
his superior, army dismantled or not. He was the one to lead them for all these years.

They didn't salute him when he entered but Neville did sit up a bit straighter.

"William, Neville. I didn't expect you back so early."

Neville chuckled. Jensen was the third wizard in a row tonight to greet him so. It seems like today was a surprise for everyone. "I made quite a progress. It's all in the Pensieve. Shall we?"

Neville made for the stone basin, deciding to observe his day himself. He guided Jensen and Bill to the start of his memories, apologizing for the haze around Hermione's wards. He stopped talking altogether when she came out to greet him, not saying a word through the rest of the memories - when Harry turned up with shopping bags, dragged him to Cape Town or smoked a joint with him in Jerusalem.

He kept silent when they came out of the Pensieve, and so did everyone else for a few minutes, all lost in their thoughts. Neville's eyes flicked at Bill at one point but his face was devoid of any emotions.

"Well, this was quite a ride," Jensen spoke at last.

When neither Neville nor Bill seemed willing to come out of their silent brooding, he tried to gather their attention again. "Look," he spoke up sharply. "I have never been that close to Potter so I'm not going to pretend I know how you two feel about this. But we have to talk about what it means for the Resistance and our plans before you'll go and mope about reconciling with an old friend."

Bill nodded, looking slightly chagrined. "We can do that."

"Good, because this is big," Jensen said, his German accent just barely audible. "What is the chance of Potter changing his mind? Is there anything we can do to get him to a Legimimens?"

Neville started to answer but Bill beat him to it: "Not a chance in hell. Not when he gets like this."

Jensen obviously waited for him to elaborate further but when Bill didn't, Jensen just accepted it. He sighed. "I hate this - this special treatment for Potter. We've been there and how did it end up all those years ago?"

"Can we just forget about this?" Bill suggested, although he didn't sound much hopeful himself. "We've explored the option and nothing has come out of it. Let's move on and let Harry be."

"We can't simply ignore him now. Either we wipe his memories of the mission out or we change our plans to include him somehow. Now, I haven't seen him doing any proper magic in these memories but what do you think of our chances of sneaking an Obliviate at him?"

"Slim to none," Neville finally joined the conversation. "They would have been very slim all those years ago and they are even slimmer now when the only way to reach him is in a dead-zone."

"I thought so," Jensen nodded. "Well, that leaves us with only one option."

"We can't trust him," Bill injected. "He wouldn't listen to orders all those years ago and that was before he did who knows what to survive behind the Curtain. How did he end up on the other side anyway?"

"Don't get me wrong, Bill, I have no intentions of trusting him, not fully at least. But that doesn't
mean we can't use him."

"He was right about the fact that we won't find another guide," Neville pointed out. "At least not from this side of the Curtain, and it might be too late if we start hiring when we are already inside the Empire."

"You trust him already," Bill observed. "Or should I say still?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The way you talked with him, the way you let him order you around. You even let him bloody apparate you - you trust him."

Neville halted when he realized Bill was right. He thought back on the moments when Harry was just about to side-along apparate him and couldn't remember a whiff of hesitation. He stopped being this naïve and trusting years ago. He tried to identify his reasons for feeling differently with Harry but came up with only one argument. "It's Harry," he simply said.

However, Bill seemed to understand what Neville meant with that comment and nodded. "I used to know a Harry Potter; and I loved him like a brother. But that doesn't mean I'm going to entrust my team to this Harry who is not even willing to prove where his loyalty lies."

During the next four hours, they analyzed Harry's behaviour, mulled over every word he said and recorded all the magic he performed in front of Neville, from his unnaturally youthful face, his ability to apparate over whole continents to his mundane looking wand. To Neville, it seemed ordinary enough but Bill recognised it as Voldemort's. Apparently, Harry stole it during one of his unauthorised missions to occupied England.

They hadn't reached an agreement tonight, not beyond establishing that their plans needed to be altered and Harry needed to be in them, somehow.

Despite the dead of the morning hour, Neville didn't go straight home. Instead, he Flood to his office in Tirro, North Finland, The End of the World. He was not ready to go to bed just yet.

He looked at the world map hanging on his office wall, a wand in hand. One flick made all the known dead-zones appear on the map's surface. There weren't many, and all were properly registered and guarded, not to mention sought after by Muggle real estate agencies and governments alike. But apparently, Hermione managed to snatch one just for herself.

He waved his wand in complicated twirls, furrowing his brows in concentration. In a few seconds, clouds appeared hovering over the map as he conjured today's satellite images. Europe stayed blank where the Magical Empire lay. Apparently, not even satellite cameras could breach the Curtain from high above.

With the next wand flick, Neville let the time zones and their borders show. He remembered that his wristwatch jumped one hour ahead when they apparated to Cape Town. He trusted his watch.

He zoomed in over the Curtain in the European time zone. In the north, it went through the centre of Scandinavia, while in the South the line was cutting the Mediterranean sea in halves. Looking at the clouds moving, he stopped them for eight yesterday evening. He focused on the south, as he remembered the nice weather that prevailed on Hermione's meadow. He knew very well that the weather in northern Scandinavia wasn't as picturesque as that time of the year.

His search thus narrowed, he started sliding the map around the South Mediterranean sea and
North Africa in the European time zone, cataloging all three dead-zones that lay there. Not a single of them had cloudless skies above them today. None of them was Hermione's.

His observations might have been wrong. But they didn't have to be. Which could mean several things about Hermione's dead zone. She must have convinced a wizard to cover it up for her - which seemed quite impossible. It would have to be someone of considerable power and at the same time well-connected in the Muggle world to have the dead zone erased from public records. It couldn't have been Hermione herself, not after her breakdown all those years ago. She couldn't touch a wand without going into hysterics. But maybe that has changed? He hadn't talked to her in years. But if she could cast magic again, why would she be living in a dead zone?

She must have had some help; that he was sure of. The Crossing appeared only three years, ago, so it couldn't be Harry. Who else was protecting her? As far as Neville knew, Hermione didn't have any pull with magical or Muggle authorities left.

Neville jumped out of his musings when the office door flew open and in went his assistant.

"Oh, sorry Neville! I wouldn't have barged in like this if I knew you were already here."

"No worries, Jan," Neville said, trying to calm his thumping heart as much as his startled deputy. "Is it time for the morning shift already?"

He looked towards his window but it didn't show anything else other than dark sky and piles of snow.

"Oh, the Daylight charms must be deteriorating again," Jan noticed his glance. "It's half seven alright. Have you been here all night?"

Of course there's no light behind the window if it shows the real weather outside. There's never any light this close to the bloody North Pole.

Neville was woken up from his reverie when Jan cleared his throat, realizing he still owed his assistant a reply. "Sorry, I'm tired."

"Understandable if you were working throughout the night. I'll have someone get to your window soon. They always leave our department for last, of course."

Of course the maintenance did. His department wasn't exactly popular, not with them essentially helping Muggles, no matter how hard Neville tried to explain that was not the department's objective.

Jan was talking again. "You are spacing out. Go get some sleep."

"I will, soon. But I need you to have a look at something first," Neville said remembering Harry's latest dealings with Muggles that Harry confessed to. "I got tipped for two Confundus cases: a cigarette deal and an entertaining centre. I want you personally on it. Cover it up for the Muggles, and try to follow the leads to the wizard but do not attract any attention. I mean that - it requires absolute discretion. It's in South America, so take a few days out of the office to deal with it. I'll get a file ready for you while you pack."
the house. Neville always had enough of the constant chanting by the time only the necessary wards were strengthened and didn't feel like spending more time and energy on the additional charms. Luckily, Luna did.

Back at their Longbottom estate, his late grandmother had the charms redone once a year, maximum. The mansion was ancient, and full of magic. However, Neville knew that even a new house shouldn't have needed that much reapplying if it had been built anywhere closer to some magical loci.

As it went, magic feeds magic was apparently one of many Binn's lessons that Neville now wished he hadn't slept through. All of the important magical sites, where wand-wizards were suturing the air and the soil with their magic for centuries, were now encompassed within the new Magical Empire, and out of their reach. They had to make do with what they had, reapplying the rapidly deteriorating charms over and over.

Once again, he decided to postpone sleep and headed towards the greenhouses instead. The morning sun was especially bright there.

He wasn't surprised when Luna joined him on the bench with two cups of tea a few minutes later. He gratefully took one.

"You looked like someone have just thrown your long-lost friend at you, and put some painful memories on the top."

Neville chuckled. "That's essentially how I feel, yes." He leaned over and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Thank you for arranging it with Hermione. Again, I would have appreciated a warning, though."

"I did think about warning you. But then I decided it would only make you more anxious and not that much prepared."

Neville thought about that for a bit. "You might be right. I guess Harry would manage to surprise me no matter the warning."

"How was he?"

"He's pretty much the same. He hasn't aged a bit, which is one of the things that can't let me sleep. Quite literally now."

"But?" his wife knew him well.

"He's pretty much the same Harry, yes - but at the same time, he isn't."

Luna waited patiently while he gathered his thoughts. He took some time. "He lets people pay him for saving their lives. He steals from Muggles, he lies, he's bloody secretive - even more than before," he said in the end. "He's reckless and confident, or should I say careless? He's cheeky and he laughs a lot. He reminds me of the time he was on Felix high, which doesn't help the situation any."

"Do you trust him?"

"That's what it all comes down to, right? And yes, strangely enough - contrary to all those things I've just listed - apparently, I still trust him."

"Why do you think it's so?"
Neville had just spent the whole night pondering that question. Sighing, he went with the same argument he used with Bill hours before. "It's Harry."

And once again, Luna seemed to understand. She nodded. "Why does a wand have only one point? Because it's a wand. Why do we trust Harry Potter? Because he's Harry. We all grew up surrounded with the same beliefs."

There was a piece of wisdom hidden somewhere there but Neville didn't have any energy left today to try to wiggle it out. Luna seemed to recognize that. "And how was Hermione? Did you give her my DVD?"

"Yes, I did. We talked for a bit. Well, not really talked but you know what I mean," he flustered a bit but jumped on the change of topic. "Can you remind me- how long have you been in touch with her?"

Luna frowned at him. "If you are going to interrogate me, do it properly. This is more important than my sensitivities."

Neville knew his wife well enough to recognize there was no reproach in her voice, just a sincere advice. "Ok, then. How long have you been in touch with Hermione?"

"We have never been out of touch although it was rather one-sided at one point, just after the Resistance Army was dismantled. We came to live here and she disappeared somewhere in the Muggle world, sending an occasional letter or two to our post box with no return address."

"And then?"

"Hm?"

"What happened when you started visiting her again?"

"One of her letters came with instructions to get to her house. Back then I already knew Sign Language enough to communicate quite gracefully, although she apparently learned the American variation, so there was a bit of an exciting confusion going on at the start."

"When was that?"

"Hm, let me think. December, probably around four years ago? I just remember visiting her for the first time during Christmas shopping."

"Has she ever mentioned anything about how she came about to renting a dead zone?"

"I've never asked. She looked like she couldn't tell me much on the topic and I didn't want to make her uncomfortable."

"I wish you have," Neville sighed. Was it possible that Hermione was still being protected by the remains of the Resistance? It was unlikely - she had become a low priority when Harry disappeared. Was she protected by the Weasley? If so, why would Bill keep it a secret?

"You are spacing out, my dear," Luna interrupted his musings. "That's quite dangerous for this early in the morning, not to mention useless. It's time to go to bed. We can talk some more later."

Neville nodded, getting up on his feet.

"Oh, before I forget, Arthur called just before you came back. I'm to remind you that no matter
how late your night conference ran, you are still expected to come for your training this afternoon."

Neville groaned.

He hated working out. He hated it all those years ago when he started training for the army, and he hated it even more now when he had mistakenly thought this part of his life was long over. He had an office job.

No matter his preferences, he knew very well they needed to be on top of their game if they were to survive in the New Empire. Odds were they wouldn't be able to use their wands at all times, especially at the start of their journey. They needed to be ready to defend themselves without magic at their disposal.

Neville groaned one last time and started stretching.

"You are exceptionally cheerful today," said Gregory, the only other person in the room.

"Long night," offered Neville as an explanation.

Gregory nodded at that, ending the conversation. He was not one to talk much. There were times when Neville really appreciated it.

Gregory Danes was much younger than Bill and Neville but sometimes Neville felt like Gregory was the proper, experienced soldier here. He practically grew up at the IMRA facilities, his career path set for him the moment he walked onto his father's training session when he was five. Neville was there and he saw the boy's eyes shining when Gregory watched his father duel.

Gregory never had a chance to go to Hogwarts or any other formal school but he received an excellent education nevertheless, training under the best the Resistance and later the Exile had to offer. He was a good lad and Neville was glad he would have him by his side on the mission.

But now, when he was lifting his hundreds as if they were nothing, Neville wanted to have him very much out of his sight.

"Don't overexert yourself, old man," Gregory jabbed at him, noticing Neville's envious stare.

"Mind your own business, little boy."

"I mean it, Neville, take it easy today. We've got a session with Master Seakson after this."

Neville's next groan just got much more pronounced.

He saw the fourth, and the last, person on their team three weeks later at a mission briefing. By then, all their plans had been finalized. They sent a letter to Harry through Hermione, with instructions on where and when to meet them in the New Empire. The date was set two days into the mission, during which they would be on their own trying to assess the situation, and above all trying to judge if they needed Harry as their guide. Everyone was still hoping he would turn out to be just an unnecessary backup plan.

During the last three weeks, Neville resigned from his job, the task being strangely melancholic. He trained during days, he planned with Bill and Jensen during nights, he met with the refugees here and then, learning from their accounts about the New Empire and he tried to wiggle in between as much time with his wife as possible.
Now, they were just two days shy from the departure and Neville could feel the uneasiness slowly setting to the bottom of his stomach.

Annie Karlsson was a young Swedish woman of eighteen years old. Blond and tall, she stood almost as tall as Neville. She was a Muggle but quite an exceptional one. Remembering that, Neville brazed himself when coming closer to her. Several steps away, his magic was suddenly blocked. He immediately felt the emptiness and the following panic but he crossed the remaining distance without hesitation and hugged her tightly, knowing she would appreciate it.

"How are you feeling?" he whispered, sensing her relax slightly in his arms.

"Hated, tired and scared shitless," she whispered back.

He pulled her back slightly, resting his arms on her shoulders. "No one hates you here. Everyone is just a bit uncomfortable around you, that's all."

"Yes, but that doesn't help me make any new friends, does it? But that's fine, we'll be out of this place soon and I won't ever have to come back."

"You can still back down, you know? You don't have to do this."

She sighed. "Would I ever forgive myself if I left you alone in this? I appreciate your concern, Neville, I always do, but let's move on."

She stepped away from him and with that, his magic started responding to the outside world again. He couldn't help but sigh in relief. Annie saw it and Neville felt a wave of shame when he noticed her hurt look. But she was gone in the conference room before he had a chance to apologize.

"I'm pregnant."

It was his last morning at home and his bacon just slipped from his fork halfway to his mouth.

"Come again, please?"

"I'm pregnant."

His mouth gaping open, Neville jumped out of his seat. He stopped then, standing motionless at the table and not exactly knowing what to do next.

"What?"

"I'm pregnant," Luna kept repeating. "Really, darling, the concept isn't that hard to grasp."

Neville started pacing. "But what happened with the waiting? What happened with the plan to wait until the war is over?"

"I think this is the moment I was waiting for."

"This is the moment?! I'm just about to leave for a mission! Merlin, I have to leave in a few hours!"

"I thought with only few hours left, you could move through the panic phase faster."

"You planned this? How long have you known?"

"Hm, I've been sure for three days now."
"Luna!" He grabbed his hair, tugging forcefully. "We are supposed to make these decisions together, remember?"

Luna looked perplexed for the first time. "You always wanted children, it was me who was postponing. I thought you made the decision a long time ago."

"But what possessed you to change your mind now?!"

"You are about to leave and I didn't want to get lonely. I wanted someone for myself to talk to."

"I might never come back! We talked about that and I thought you understood! I thought you understood what kind of mission this was – I won't probably get back, Luna."

"Nonsense, you'll be back alright. Now you even have two reasons to come back to."

That deflated Neville's anger right away. He knelt down in front of Luna, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm hopeful, Neville. You are doing something for our future and I want to do something, too."

Neville's eyes dropped to the floor. "How can I leave you now?"

"You will walk out that door, and you'll do whatever you can to come back before eight months are over. If you think I'm going through labour alone, you are mistaken."

A few hours later, he was sitting in a dark storehouse, with Bill and Gregory at his side. Jensen was pacing in front of them and everyone was watching the clock that hung on the wall behind him. When it stroke one am, Bill, Gregory and Neville reached for their respective capsules with antidote, swallowing them quickly.

They moved to the truck parked nearby, climbing inside the four compartments that were carved out of the floor of its cargo. Annie was already in one of them, asleep with the help of Muggle sedatives to pass through the long uncomfortable ride. At her ankles lay all their magical belongings. Neville climbed into his tight chest, feeling the soft cushioning under his back and around his shoulders.

No one spoke a word, they didn't have to. But when it was Neville's turn to drink his flask of Draught of Living Dead, Jensen came over and clasped his shoulder.

That was the last thing Neville saw before the darkness took him. He wasn't aware of Jensen closing his compartment and the others', too. He didn't hear the thumping of Jensen's boots or the hum of machinery when he proceeded to load up the cargo - a few crates of pure ivory. Jensen put them precisely according to the plan so there was no chance the cargo would ever cover the breathing holes of their compartments.

Neville didn't hear the unsuspecting driver when he arrived to work in the middle of the night. He wasn't aware of the thousands of kilometres of Russian land they crossed in the early morning before they got to the Curtain and its only open Crossing.

Exactly thirteen hours after digesting, the capsule finally dissolved, letting the Draught's antidote flow right into Neville's stomach and thus waking him up with a start.

He immediately recognized he wasn't in the compartment any longer. The soft cushioning was
gone, he was lying on a hard floor, face down. He could feel ropes around his ankles. His wrists were bound behind his back and there was a rugged piece of cloth in his mouth.

And just like that he knew they were in deep shit.
28 April 2019, The Crossing, former Belarus

He did not dare open his eyes, keeping his breathing levelled, as not to reveal he was conscious. He focused on his other senses instead.

He could feel his magic numbed, which meant Annie was still somewhere near him - and alive. That was good. His left shoulder was touching something warm and soft, and that something just twitched slightly. Neville assumed it was either Bill or Gregory, waking up from the potion. It could mean they were all still together, which would also be good.

There was light coming through his eyelids. Someone undressed him all the way down to his t-shirt and boxers, not even leaving his shoes on, and he could feel the cold breeze grazing his naked skin. They were outside.

His body was all stiff and deaden after long hours of lying down. He could feel the occasional spasm travelling through his body, an aftereffect of the Draught. His mind was still hazy from the potion but the bounds of adrenaline pumping through his system now were making his head clearer by every second.

He tried to flex his muscles surreptitiously, getting more feeling into his limbs and less weight of his face. One problem at a time.

He startled when he heard someone speak up.

"What's causing the delay?"

The voice was deep, authoritative and carried around.

"It's the bloody car, sir, the charms are acting up again and the engine won't start."

"Start it the muggle way, then. Fill it up with as much fuel as you can find and put the rest of the cans inside the cabin."

Neville heard some scraping noises and then the floor underneath him shook. They were in a car then.

The same commanding voice rang again, this time from further distance. "Change of the route, we're taking the south road."

"But, sir," a different voice hesitantly replied, "that road was decreed a safety hazard. The Berezinsky dead zone's been unstable for-"

"Taking that road is still safer than arriving late with this particular cargo. No one would appreciate that, least of all us."

"Yes, sir."

More steps. The same commanding voice spoke up again, this time practically above Neville's head. "Have they woken up?"
"These three look like they just have, sir," a new baritone replied.

"Sit them up and watched them closely."

"Yes, sir."

Neville knew there was no point in carrying on with the pretence and finally opened his eyes.

They were indeed in a car, on the trail of an old army pickup truck. Strong hands grabbed his elbows, hoisted him up on his legs and then dropped him down onto his arse on a wooden bench at the side of the pick-up. His eyes frantically scanned their surroundings, at first landing only on tall evergreens all around them. The car was parked on a forest road. Another car, a jeep, stood in front of theirs. There were men standing around both cars.

Neville looked at the closest man - the one handling him. He was young, no older than twenty. He wasn't wearing a robe, rather a black uniform of some sorts, but Neville's trained eyes automatically slipped to his wrists, and sure enough, there was a wand point sticking out of his sleeve. There was also a gun strapped to his belt. Huh.

The wizard caught his stare and smirked at Neville. "Welcome to the Empire," he sneered in heavily accented English. And sure enough, looking up over the top of the trees, Neville could see the opaque barrier just scarce kilometres away, going all the way up to disappear into the clouds. The Curtain looked the same as all the times before when Neville got this close from the outside. If the situation had been different, he might have felt disappointed. Now, he was just gaping at the magic with his mouth open. They were inside.

Bill and Gregory were dumped on the bench next to him. Neville managed to share a quick wide-eyed look with Bill before two other wizards sat down between them and Neville lost sight of his friends. Annie was left lying on the floor of the truck, obviously still unconscious under the heavy sedatives.

Neville noticed four more soldiers guarding the perimeter of the car. He guessed there were some more behind him where he couldn't see.

Neville startled when yet another man appeared right in front of the car, carrying a jerry can in his hands. He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere; Neville suspected there was more to the forest than what met his eye.

The man proceeded in pouring petrol into the car tank.

"Hurry up," one of the wizard on the truck grumbled. "I want to be out of here."

"The place sure as hell feels weird today," Neville's guard spoke up again in his Eastern accent, "even weirder than normally."

Neville looked at him through the corner of his eye. The guard looked agitated but not freaked out. Neville glanced again at Annie lying on the floor. Was it possible that they hadn't figured out her influence?

Of course the magical car engine wasn't working, she was lying just a metre away from it. And Neville knew all the men in the car must have felt their magic being numbed, as he was sitting right in their midst and felt it too. Was it possible they just wrote it off as the influence of the Curtain? They didn't seem surprised about the car not working, like it was a normal enough occurrence. If they thought their magic felt wrong just because of the proximity to the Curtain, the mission wasn't lost yet.
But they needed to act fast and get out of this mess. Once they would get too far away from the Curtain, their captors would notice something was amiss. Most probably the moment they would try to apparate.

He looked up once again at the opaque Curtain in the distance. Even through the dread of the situation, he couldn't help but wonder how this had come to be. Their plan had been simple, but solid. They had learned all about the procedures at the Crossing from the handful of businessmen trading across. They'd known that security was tight, but mostly for the cars and people trying to get out of the Empire, not in. They'd known that complicated magic became unpredictable around the Curtain, so the guards could use only a small variety of simple detection charms, none of which should have registered their bodies in their deathly slumber under the Draught of Living Dead.

They had tested it hundreds of time.

Which left only two options. Either their information wasn't accurate, or someone ratted them out.

Not that many people knew about the mission and Neville didn't like the thought of any of them betraying.

The bench underneath him shook when the engine started.

"Finally!" his guard breathed out.

A new wizard appeared seemingly out of thin air. He was quite young as well, but his clothes were different - he wore a set of simple robes instead of a uniform. "Everyone, board!" he shouted in the same authoritative voice Neville heard before. He was the leader, then. Neville watched the officer sat down at the front seat of their pick-up.

All the other soldiers jumped onto the trail, making it quite crowded now. Neville counted seven wizards and two witches. Annie still rested at their feet.

"You're not riding with the first car today, sir?" Neville heard a surprised voice from the front of the car, barely understandable through the hum of the engine.

"I have a personal interest in this, I won't let you lot botch it up," came the imperious voice again. "Start driving."

They set off.

The ropes around his wrists weren't magical. They used to be - after some surreptitious exploration he recognized the knot as the simple *Incarcerous* spell. In Annie's proximity, they lost their magical potential. With enough time, he could probably loosen it up enough to wiggle his hands out. The problem was, he had a guard on each side and they would feel the movement of his arms. Instead, he put his knees as much apart as possible, to give enough manoeuvring space to his thighs and feet. He could only hope the knot around his ankles was from an *Incarcerous* spell, too. If so, he knew how to loosen the ropes. Mind you, he'd only practised it with wrists before, but they took his shoes and left his ankles bare - he could feel around the rope with his feet enough.

With some time, he could get out.

They were driving through the forest still, with a speed that kept Neville and his neighbours bumping around, further hiding the movements of his feet.

From the refugees' reports, Neville knew wizards didn't dare to apparate closer than fifty
kilometres to the Curtain. With the speed the cars were going now, Neville estimated they would cross that limit in less than forty minutes. That just might be enough. Hopefully, he'd be able to cause enough commotion when people start apparating away.

He couldn't see much of Bill or Gregory, but he hoped they were working on a plan, too.

Some fifteen minutes into the ride, Annie woke up with a start. One wizard hoisted her to the bench next to him and out of Neville's sight. He could only imagine the panicked look on her face, waking to a scene like this.

No one spoke a word the whole ride. Their captors were all tense. That's why Neville was quite startled from his focused ministrations working on the binds when a muffled voice came from the driver's cabin.

"Don't stay too close to the first car."

"Sir?"

"Just slow down."

Neville felt the car decelerate a bit, the inertia pressing him into the wizard on his right. He stopped wiggling his feet in alarm, but he got back to it again after a second, knowing his time was running short.

Several minutes later, his time ran out.

There was no warning apart from a sudden buzzing in his ears as the pressure drastically lowered.

And then, his magic turned deaf and unreachable. It wasn't only numbed like before in Annie's presence, no. Neville recognized the feeling right away - it felt like stepping onto a dead zone. However, he didn't step anywhere, and he knew better than to think the driver voluntarily drove into one. The dead zone came to them, either a new erupting or an old one expanding.

Either way, Neville knew what would come next and braced himself for it. And sure enough, the customary second and a half after the dead zone passed through magical objects, several explosions broke up at once. Only knowing what to expect allowed Neville to follow what happened: the magically run jeep in front of them blew up in a massive bang, killing everyone on board. At the same time, few smaller detonations ran through the wizards on the opposite end of the truck from Annie, when their wands and other magical items self-combusted on their bodies.

And when the screams started, when their pickup stopped and when the blast from the car explosion passed through their group, Neville was ready.

The rope around his ankles was loose enough by now to slide out of it in one smooth motion. He jumped to his feet and hurdles himself right at the witch across from him. In her shock, she didn't put up any resistance when Neville's body crashed into hers, flinging them both over the side of the truck, head first.

Neville managed to curl up enough for his shoulder to take most of the fall, but he still crashed hard on the road. Pushing the pain aside, he squatted and moved his arms down along his backside, sat on it and then threaded his legs through his still bound arms. With his hands now in front of his body, he turned to the soldier on the ground next to him, who just got her breath and bearings back. Neville was on her in an instant.
The witch's first instinct was to go for her wand. A mistake. The moment she reached for her useless wand, Neville smacked his elbow into her chin, grasped the witch's gun and pulled it from its case. Before he could aim at anything though, she swung a vicious hook into his chin. Neville's face flew upwards. Biting back a grunt of pain, he swayed his leg out and kicked the woman away from him, enough to aim the gun again. He shot at her torso and head.

And then proceeded to freeze, his eyes glued to the hole in her forehead.

It had been a while since he'd killed. And never before this crudely, with this cold contraption. One pull, a good aim and a witch was dead. As quickly as any muggle would be.

He really hated dead zones.

Gravel exploded into his face. Bullets hit the road right next to his head, the ricocheted stones scratching his cheeks and effectively waking him up from his ill-timed reverie. He instinctively rolled on his side, and then once more into the safety underneath the car.

"Bugger," he breathed out belatedly at his own stupidity.

By the intensity the car was shaking and the various sounds of pain, he surmised his team was putting up a fight up there, too. He crawled to the other end of the car, the grovel scraping his exposed skin. Taking one short breath, he crouched low and was ready to peak over the bumper of the car, when a pair of legs slit down from right in front of him. He pulled the trigger in shock, the bullet hitting the thigh from up close and splattering warm blood over his face. He felt the body slide all the way down, so he kept shooting, hoping to hit something more vital, whilst he tried to wipe the blood off with his shoulder. His ears were ringing from the gunshots.

The car above him stopped moving. He hoped for the best, but it was short-lived. A voice with a strong Eastern accent shouted out first.

"Everyone stop moving or I shoot the girl!"

Neville leaned on the tyre, breathing heavily in the sudden silence.

"You, under the car – throw your gun where I can see it!"

Neville looked at the gun in his hands. He didn't recognize the model, but he already shot seven bullets out and by the weight of it, there weren't many left, if any. He couldn't check for sure, the clicking would be too loud.

"I said, throw the gun away!"

Just then, he saw a movement out of the corner of his eyes. Feeling the gunpoint aimed at him more than actually seeing it, he bolted away from the tyre and out to the road right before bullets started raining at the spot he occupied just a second ago.

He was out in the open now. He quickly jumped to his feet and pointed his gun at the first person his eyes found.

It was his young guard from before, clutching Annie like a shield in front of him, his gun to her temple.

"I said drop your guns!"

Neville's eyes swept through the rest of the scene. There were four other soldiers still standing, all
of them pointing their guns on either Bill or Gregory. Neville's friends had a knife and a gun aimed back.

"Do you think I'm fucking kidding? I said I would shoot her!"

Then the guard pointed his gun downwards and shot Annie's thigh.

Mayhem broke out with Annie's scream.

Neville pulled the trigger but the gun clicked empty. A wizard swung himself at Neville from the car, pinning him to the ground and kicking the breath out of him. Placing his heavy boot on Neville's chest, the soldier pointed his gun right at Neville's forehead.

Neville couldn't see what Gregory and Bill were doing but there were sounds of a struggle and then, there was silence again.

"Do you take me seriously now?" shouted the guard, with Annie bent over in pain in his arms. "Or do I need to shoot her other leg, too? Now, someone bind them again-"

He was cut short when a bullet pierced his forehead. He buckled over, while everyone else traced the trajectory back to the shooter. Neville's eyes found the open front doors of the pickup and then the head of the young leader hiding behind them.

He took one more shot before he had to hide as his soldiers woke up from their shock and returned fire. His aim was off, though, and all four guns started firing at him.

And then there were only three of them, as the one above Neville suddenly dropped to his knees, a gaping hole in his torso.

Neville's eyes frantically searched around for the shooter, but couldn't see anyone friendly with a gun. Three seconds later, another wizard fell to the ground, with a similar exit wound in his stomach. This time, Neville was looking for it and could hear the muffled sound of a rifle from further away. There was someone else there, sniping the wizards off.

The two remaining guards tried to go for a cover, but in the few seconds of panic, another went down with a bullet taking half of his neck off.

The fourth one flung himself to the floor of the pickup, but his cover was short-lived as Bill was suddenly on him, driving a knife into his neck and puncturing his jugular.

Neville quickly looked away.

Everything went quiet, apart from the gurgling sound coming out of Bill's dying victim and Annie's painful heaves.

Neville's first instinct was to run out of the open space where any sniper could see them, but he rolled to his knees instead and grabbed the gun from the dead wizard lying next to him. He aimed it at the front of the car, where he remembered one last wizard hiding. He noticed Gregory do the same.

"Drop your weapon and come out!" Neville shouted.

"I will, once you start thinking and realize I've just shot at my own men and not you," came a calm reply, although rather strenuously so. A gun slit underneath the door towards Neville. "Do you realize what that means? Can I trust you not to shoot me when I come out?"
Neville looked at Bill, who now moved to Annie, crouching next to her leg. Bill nodded.

"We won't shoot you," Neville called back.

Two legs appeared under the open door as the young commander got out of the driver's cabin. With his empty hands held high, he stepped around the door into the plain view.

He struck quite a pose in his black robes and tall figure, not a day older than twenty. He had an army insignia on his left shoulder and few stripes on his sleeves that clearly marked his higher rank. Neville's gaze stopped at the army badge of two crossed wands. For a moment there, he stupidly expected to see a skull with a snake instead. He shook his head. He knew better from the refugee's reports.

"Who are you?" Bill asked, staring at the wizard with hard eyes, while his hands pushed makeshift bandages on the bleeding wound in Annie's thigh.

The wizard's eyes shot his way. He looked hesitant to answer at first, but then he seemingly came to a decision. "My name is Andrei Sadecki. I'm the commanding officer at the Curtain Crossing." He seemed quite sincere. His name sounded foreign, but his accent had been impeccable Queen's so far.

"Was this your doing?" Bill asked, taking in the scene around them into his question.

"No, I haven't planned this," the soldier answered simply, looking at Annie's crumpled form. Neville glanced at her, too. She was being brave, tightening a cloth around her upper thigh to cut off the blood flow, working through the silent tears tracking down her face.

"I packed a bag with muggle medicines. It's in the cabin," Sadecki said. Neville would swear he heard a bit of regret in the soldier's voice.

"Neville, go and have a look," Bill ushered. Neville put his new gun into his belt and walked very cautiously around Sadecki.

Truth to the soldier's words, he did find a small first aid kit in the glove compartment. He brought it back to Annie and took over Bill in addressing the wound.

"Who's out there in the woods?" Bill carried on with the questions.

"Your friend," Sadecki answered hesitantly.

"Friend?"

"I don't know his real name. He's probably on his way down, he'll be here soon."

Bill watched him carefully, obviously not satisfied with the answer. "Greg, stay on the lookout," he said when Sadecki didn't offer anything else. "What happens now?"

"I don't know. This is as far as I knew about the plan," the soldier answered, sounding nervous enough for Neville to believe him. "I suppose we'll have to move soon."

That was something everyone agreed on. Neville looked down to survey Annie's wound. It looked worse than it actually was, thank god. The bullet just grazed the leg, missing any bigger arteries. Still, there was a lot of blood. Neville didn't know much about muggle field medicine, getting only a crash course before this mission, but even he knew it needed to be sawn somehow. He opened the
"Look for some disinfectant," Annie directed him, her jaws clenched tight. "And bandages. I don't think we'll have time to stitch it right now, but we'll have to, eventually."

Neville looked up into her eyes and squeezed her hand. She was a brave kid and she had her training, too. She'd be alright.

Three minutes later, the wound was cleaned and bandaged tightly. In the meantime, Bill went through the corpses, gathering guns. Gregory stayed on the guarding duty, his gun aimed at Sadecki, unwavering.

Neville was slowly calming down, the adrenaline leaving his system. He knew that everyone was taking a moment of reprieve before they would decide what to do next.

"If you all look this way now, please," a familiar voice called from afar, "so no one goes trigger happy and accidentally shoots me when I peacefully approach."

Neville whipped his head in the direction the voice was coming from, but he closed his eyes in exasperation before he could actually see anyone. He recognized the voice, all right.

He should have known.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait. Life happened. But in the meantime, I managed to finish the whole first arc, e.i. the first nine chapters. They'll be appearing as quickly as we can correct them.

Speaking of which - my big thanks to Dylan Pidge for beta-reading this baby of mine!
Harry Potter once again looked very much like his twenty year old self, although this time he sported a short beard that made him look just a bit more mature; and he forsook his token round glasses for once, thank god. He was wearing various pieces of outdoor equipment, completed with hiking boots, a raincoat, and a big backpack; although the peaceful look of a hiker was somehow dampened by the big sniper rifle over his shoulder.

He approached their group carefully, taking in the bloodbath on the pickup and on the road around it. His empty arms were raised above his shoulders, and he was sporting a jovial expression. He nodded slowly to Neville when their eyes met, but it was Sadecki who addressed him first.

“You’re late.”

Harry shook his head. “No, you were too early. You passed me a whole mile back. I had to sprint to get to a shooting range again.” He once again roamed his eyes over ten dead bodies, including the driver that Sadecki must have killed without them noticing. “Luckily, you managed just fine. Is it serious?” he asked Annie, noticing her bandaged leg.

She shook her head negatively, obviously still a bit startled by Harry’s sudden appearance. Neville could sympathize, he knew the feeling.

“That’s good because we will have to move soon.”

Then he turned to look at Bill, whose face he seemed to avoid till now. “William.”

“Harry.”

Harry kept his voice carefully even when he stared at Bill. “I understand you have questions but they need to wait for now. We’re already behind schedule and that’s the last thing we can afford now,” his jovial expression was gone now, he was all business. Neville suddenly remembered that he used to lead his own squad once, too. “We’ll talk later, I promise.”

Bill took a moment but he did nod his assent in the end.

Harry acknowledged that with a nod of his own, turning towards Gregory now who had his gun still aimed at Sadecki. “You must be the young Gregory Danes. The last time I saw you, you were this tall. I’d love to catch up with you too, but later. Now, you can start by putting that gun down. I’m not saying you have to trust Andrei right away, but you have to know he can’t possibly get you into more shit than what he just got you out of.”

In his normal fashion, Gregory silently considered the words. Then he did as Harry suggested.

“Great. Now, gather all the bodies and put them on the truck. All of you, find yourselves some clothes and shoes that fit, we’ve got a few kilometres to walk and I can’t have you hiking barefoot.”

“We need to take the car, Harry, I don’t think Annie can hike anywhere now,” Neville spoke up.
“We can’t. Sorry about that, Love,” Harry turned to Annie. “We might have to carry you, but the truck stays here.”

“Harry-“

“Neville, just do as he says.”

Neville whipped his head towards Bill, surprised to the bone. Bill noticed the bewilderment in his face and explained, “He has a plan, we don’t.”

Nothing else needed to be said. While Annie moved to rest on the front seat, careful to stay in the vicinity of the magical engine to keep on nullifying it, the men piled all the bodies on the trail of the truck, taking the occasional pair of boots or piece of clothing. Neville changed his t-shirt as well, as his old one was soaked with blood and car oil. He rubbed his face off with it, coming up with more stains of dried blood. He felt his shoulder, sore from the fall and all the fighting on the ground.

“Playing the ninja, old man?” Greg snickered at him. “Didn’t know you had it in you.”

Neville frowned back and let go of his shoulder. He was not the best fighter in the team, he knew that; but he trusted his instincts still. “Watch your mouth, cub, and find me a pair of shoes.”

By the time Sadecki took out a jerry can and started pouring petrol all over the dead bodies, Harry’s plan became clearer.

“Is this really necessary?” Bill asked against his own orders.

“It is, if you want to keep Miss Karlsson’s ability a secret,” Harry answered without hesitancy. “We need to make it look like the pickup blew up exactly the same way as the jeep over there,” he pointed at the carcass of a car a hundred meters up the road that exploded when the dead zone hit it. “And the bigger the fire, the more traces it covers. With any luck, they might even assume you all died in the explosion.”

And then they finally realized what should have been clear right from the start. Both Harry and Sadecki obviously knew about Annie and what she did to the magic around her, as their whole plan was built around her ability.

“But how did you-“

“Later,” Harry interrupted Bill who apparently arrived at the same conclusion as Neville. “But speaking of which – how do you work exactly, Love?” he asked Annie.

“I’m sorry?”

“How does your ability work? When you walk away from the truck when does its magic kick back in?”

It was Gregory who answered. “The perimeter is two point one meters.”

Harry frowned. “And with the second and a half before the annulation field of the dead zone kicks in, you can get barely few meters away from the car before it combusts. That won’t be enough.”

He took down his backpack and started rummaging in it before taking out a heavy blanket. “Andrei, is there water left in the cooler? Try to soak this in. I’m afraid it’s the best we can do now. Gregory, will you carry her?”
Gregory seemed to understand the plan and didn’t hesitate to nod. It was his job to protect Annie before anything else, and he knew it.

“Okay, let’s do it then,” Harry said. Neville lost all expertise on reading Harry years ago, but even he noticed Harry was becoming more anxious with every minute they spent here.

“Wait,” Sadecki stopped them, coming to Annie with the partially soaked blanket in one hand and a familiar rucksack in the other. “I managed to save this.”

Half of the reservations Neville still harboured towards Sadecki disappeared the moment he saw the bag with their wands and other magical items safe and sound in Annie’s hands again. He thought it forever lost upon their capture.

Annie put the rucksack onto her back, knowing her role well. Then she calmly climbed onto Gregory’s back, holding the dripping blanket over her own back and head. While everyone else jogged a safe distance away, she and Gregory waited by the truck.

“Now,” Harry called back and Gregory started sprinting.

When they got some three meters away, the car started humming as the magical engine fired up. A customary second and a half later, the dead zone annulated the magic and the car exploded. By then, Gregory had sprinted a fair distance away, but the blast still hauled him off his feet, the heat wave so strong that it crushed forcefully into the faces of everyone else watching from a couple hundred meters away.

“I’ve got quads parked some two miles away. We need to get to them quickly and then speed to the edge of the dead zone,” Harry explained the next stage of his plan when they started marching through the thick forest, with Annie settled on Neville’s back for now.

The more he explained, the more questions arose in Neville’s head. But he knew better than to ask them now, so he stored them away for later.

“We need to get out of the zone before it stabilizes and the army puts up a perimeter ward around it. As long as the zone stretches and grows, they can’t close us in.”

“How much time do we have?” Neville asked. That was a question relevant enough to voice, he thought.

“Five or six hours at most, but there’s no way of knowing for sure.”

That seemed to spur everyone into a faster pace.

Sure enough, they got to the three quad bikes half an hour later. Harry gave them a very short crash course into driving the things, and before long they were speeding on a forest road southwest, following Harry and Sadecki on the first bike, while Gregory and Annie shared the second. Bill and Neville took the last one.

Neville left the driving onto Bill, opting for watching the surroundings for any immediate danger. He felt the quadbike twitch and shake under Bill’s inexperienced steering, while they roared their way through the forest. The quad bikes were loud, making Neville nervous.
Some half an hour into the ride, Harry suddenly stopped. Gregory was forced to dive with his bike into the bushes at the side of the road to avoid crashing into them. Bill managed to brake and swing the bike just a few centimetres shy from the back of Harry’s.

“What’s going on?” Bill growled, dazed from the close miss.

Harry pointed down at the road in front of his quad bike. “We’re about to get ambushed.”

And sure enough, Neville’s gaze found barbed wire stretched knee-high over the road just half a metre away. How the hell Harry had noticed that in his speed was beyond Neville but he was sure glad he had. This would catapult them all from their seats.

“The army?” asked Bill, looking searchingly into the surrounding trees while his hand grasped the gun in his belt. Neville did the same.

“I don’t think so.” Harry’s own hand was hidden in the pocket of his trousers, the sniper rifle secured to his backpack now. “Well, here goes nothing,” he shrugged and took a deep breath. “Hey, whoever is hiding around here, I’d like to let you know we have guns and we are not afraid to use them,” he shouted out.

Neville held his breath, waiting. When a ruff voice came from up the road, his arm with his gun flew from his belt towards the sound.

“Well, isn’t that a lovely British accent I hear! I think we caught ourselves some lost wizards!”

A tall man stepped out of the forest onto a road in front of them. He was followed by many more, twenty or some, and by the grunt of displeasure coming out of Gregory, who finally managed to reverse his bike up on the road, there were more behind them.

They were armed but most of them with knives. Only three were holding hunting rifles aimed at them. Most of them were women, too, and all were quite young. No one looked especially comfortable with the weapons in their hands. They seemed scared but strangely determined, too. This could get ugly.

“Well, your English isn’t that bad either, mate,” responded Harry. Unlike Neville or Bill, he didn’t take his gun out just yet.

“I slaved for your English wizards for nineteen years,” the man hissed, pointing his rifle at Harry. “But no more.”

“We are no wizards,” Harry lied smoothly.

“Eh, yeah? Then why are you running the wrong way? Trying to get out of the zone, aren’t you lot? Found yourselves defenceless without your precious wands, haven’t you?”

Harry raised his eyebrows, looking pointedly at the gun in Neville’s hand. “We are not exactly defenceless here. Now, get out of our way and we can all walk out of here peacefully.”

“I won’t let any wizard order me around anymore. This is our land now.”

“Look, I get that you are enjoying your newfound freedom here,” Harry said. Raising his empty hands, he stepped over the spread wire and started slowly advancing towards the leader. “But I’m telling you, this is not the place nor the time to exercise your vengeance. We all need to get to safety first.”
The man raised his rifle at Harry approaching: “This is our land now. We’ll deal with your scamp-“

“We don’t have time for this,” Harry interrupted him. “No one moves!” he cried out suddenly and launched himself at the man.

Neville didn’t know if his command was directed at their group or the Muggles. In any case, they all listened, their enemies inexperienced and shocked into inactivity when he took their leader down, wrenching the rifle from his hands and driving its butt into his stomach. When the Muggle leaned over in pain, Harry swung the rifle again, this time onto his forehead, hard, rendering him unconscious.

Harry dropped the rifle to the ground and looked up. “Now, will the rest of you listen to some sense?”

Neville was surprised that bloodshed hadn’t broken out yet. But Harry had read the group well: these weren’t violent people and they were frightened of their guns.

Harry turned at a young woman standing closed to him with another rifle. “Put that down, girl. And you, too,” Harry turned to Neville and his group. “No one is going to shoot anyone.”

The woman hesitated. “But you are wizards.”

Harry sighed. “Do you remember what happened to your masters when the zone hit them? Their wands exploded, right?” He rolled his sleeves up, raising his unscathed forearms for everyone to see. “You can’t see any wounds on us, right? We didn’t have any wands.”

“You are military, though, wearing their uniforms. He’s wearing robes!” the girl pointed at Sadecki who was still in his army robes, insignia and all.

Harry shrugged: “It was the best we could find; they couldn’t very well be strolling around in their underwear only.”

The girl didn’t look convinced at all, although the defiant look disappeared from her face. They knew they were outnumbered, at least when it came to the number of guns. “Why are you running the opposite way, then?”

“You got that wrong. It’s you lot who is running the wrong way,” Harry calmly corrected her. “Look, I know that you’ve heard all sorts of wonderful stories about dead zones becoming the Promised Land for all muggles, cleared away from magic and wizards. But those were all lies. What actually happens is that the Army swamps this place with mundane weaponry, blowing it to pieces. We all have to get out of here.”

He looked around at their distrustful faces and sighed once more. “But as I know you’ll never believe me, let’s just all go our separate ways.”

The girl looked relieved when she heard Harry suggest that. But then she seemed to remember something and appeared troubled once again. “We need your weapons, and those bikes, too.”

Harry shook his head. “No, what you need is gas masks and cover, because the first thing the army will do is to let mustard gas all over this place, killing everything that breathes.”

That seemed to make them nervous.

“As to our guns and bikes, we need them, too,” Harry turned pensive here. “But I make you a deal.
You cut that wire and I give you this little baby.” He swung his sniper rifle out of his backpack, reaching to a side pocket and taking out some spare clips, too.

“Harry?” Bill softly called after him, questioning that offer.

“I’m not planning on any more sniping and this is just getting in the way.”

“They can snipe us,” Bill pointed out.

Harry looked intently at the young woman in front of him. “No, they won’t. They have bigger problems to take care of.”

He offered his rifle to the girl, his hard gaze never leaving her eyes. She clasped it, but Harry’s other hand grasped hers before letting go. “I’m leaving you in charge of this lot. Head north, towards Čareja. Hopefully, someone in the town will know what they are doing and organize some defense.”

He suddenly tugged at the rifle, pulling the girl’s face closer to his. “But if you don’t get there before nightfall, you’ll find a house instead, and you’ll barricade it so no air - or poisonous gas - gets in and you’ll wait there before the sun comes out again. Do you understand?”

The girl managed only a slight nod under Harry’s intense stare. But Harry wasn’t done yet. “Get them to safety first,” he hissed, “and you can all put up a fight later.”

True to Harry’s words, no one shot them in the back when they finally set off again. Neville still kept his hand on his gun when he stared back at the group they were leaving behind. Even though they tried to ambush them, Neville couldn’t help but feel sorry for the Muggles if he was to believe what Harry was saying.

Harry’s pace became even more hectic with the latest delay. None of them were experienced drivers but they still pushed the bikes to their maximum speed to be able to follow him.

They got out of the forest some time ago, drove through a few meadows and neglected fields, before they entered another forest. They hadn’t seen a single person or a house, with Harry often changing roads to avoid them.

The sun hung high above their heads at first, but now it was in front of them. Neville’s body was once again all stiff.

When they suddenly flew out of the dead zone in the middle of an unsuspiciously looking meadow, no one prepared them for it. There wasn’t any visible barrier, nor any sign that they just crossed its limits, other than that their magic suddenly sang to them again. Annie on Gregory’s bike was a few meters away, so Bill and Neville could feel their magic freely flowing for the first time that day.

Neville felt the relief wash over him, as well. But in front of them, Harry hadn’t slowed down a bit so they probably weren’t safe just yet. So they kept following.

He did slow down some twenty minutes later, just to turn onto a side path, leading away from the main road they had been following for the last few hours. And then he finally stopped when the
path took them to a broad river.

Neville jumped up on his feet the moment their bike came to a still, taking the opportunity to stretch his body - no matter how short the reprieve was going to be. He needn’t have bothered, though.

“We’re getting rid of the quads here,” Harry explained. “Loud like this, they are too easy to detect. We could run into patrolling wizards any moment.”

“Can’t we just spell them silent?” Neville suggested.

Harry resolutely shook his head. “No spells yet. By now, the whole region will be under detection charms recording any use of magic.”

So they let all three bikes slide down from the high bank right into the river, with their engine still roaring. They got a few meters into the water before the mud and their own weight started to sink them. When the current took them, the only visible parts left were the handlebars.

They started on foot again, following the river south in a quick canter and taking turns with Annie on their back.

“Are we heading somewhere specific?” Bill asked at some point.

“Eventually,” Harry nodded. “But we need to cross the river first.”

“I guess all bridges will be guarded,” Neville quipped in.

“Yeah. But if we stay on the path, we should run into a boat soon.”

The path led them to an abandoned farm, the first sign of civilization they had approached all day. The buildings were slowly disappearing in tall weeds, and the wooden houses were rotting away, with rain getting through the collapsed roofs. It was obvious that no one had lived here for decades.

But the shed at the river bank was still quite stable, and the little barge in it looked old but reliable.

It was a close thing but they all fit inside. Harry seized the oars. “Here goes nothing,” he grunted for the second time that day and moved them all out into the open.

Four hours later, the sun had just set down and they were still on the move, running through another forest and squirming their eyes to see in the rapidly dimming light. They were exhausted from the long run and from carrying Annie on their backs. Everyone took a turn, even Harry and Sadecki.

“I hate being this burden,” she grumbled into Neville’s ear.

“Right now,” Neville heaved between his heavy panting, “I’m just glad… that it’s you I have to carry,” another breath, “and not Gregory.”

An hour later, when even the last light was long gone and left them stumbling in the dark, Bill finally hissed at Harry’s figure somewhere in the front. “We need a break, we can’t see shit.”

Harry didn’t slow down as he replied, “The moon will be out soon, that’ll be enough light”
Neville’s heart sunk. He didn’t know how much energy he had left.

“Annie’s leg needs to be taken care of,” Gregory grumbled and Neville could have kissed him at that moment because that seemed to finally work.

“Five minutes tops,” Harry said when they stopped, “we have to keep moving.”

He produced a bottle of water and a torch from his backpack. While the water got passed around, Neville finally addressed Annie’s wound properly, with Bill holding the weak torch over his shoulder. Through the hurried day, the blood seeped all the way through the bandages, and now the wound was bleeding again. They used the rest of the disinfection left in the first aid kit, but when the time came to use the needle, they both hesitated.

Harry was watching them. “Has anyone of you used that before?” he asked when he noticed their reluctance.

Neville shrugged: “At a dummy, during training.”

Harry sighed. “Right. Give me that,” he approached them and took the kit. “I’m no seamstress either, sorry, Love, but something tells me I’ll still do better than these two.”

Annie stared at him with apprehension but didn’t protest when he sat down over her bloodied legs. He applied the local anesthetics around the wound but gave her a stick to bite on, too.

He took the needle out of its protective package, putting the string through in one smooth movement. He carried on talking while he leaned over her leg. “It’s a nice wound, Annie, as far as bullets go. It will be just a few stitches, and I’m sure that as long as you take good care of it in the next couple of weeks, there will only be a small scar left to remember it by.”

Neville watched Harry’s fingers the whole time as they worked over the wound in practised movements. He had obviously done this before.

Watching him closely like that, he immediately noticed when Harry’s hands froze over the last stitch. “Everyone to Annie!” he barked.

Neville felt it just a second later. With no magic to surround him for the last day, his own got quite responsive and he could feel the wave coming at them in advance. Gregory slammed into his back just in time to get them both inside Annie’s annulating field before the detection charm hit them.

He could see the visible wave passing through the now illuminated clearing, and he could see a big hole appearing in it when it got two point one metres away from Annie. It passed them without the wave touching any of them, all encompassed in Annie’s negating bubble, and carried on into the forest behind them.

“They started with the scans,” Sadecki pointed out the obvious, whispering hurriedly.

“We need to move before they come to check the disturbance,” Harry urged. Apparently, while Neville was busy staring at the detection wave, Harry hadn’t stopped working on the wound and was now just finishing with the bandages.

They were running again just thirty seconds later.
After twenty minutes of panicked sprinting, they slowed down to a hectic jog. The moon did get out in the open, providing just enough light for them to stop stumbling around blindly. Harry was in the lead the whole time, hopefully guiding them with a specific place in mind. He did make Neville wonder sometimes though, when he abruptly stopped and completely changed directions.

They took breaks often, their bodies getting progressively more exhausted. Annie was being swapped every few minutes.

During one of these brakes, Sadecki crushed to the ground right next to Neville. He might have been the youngest of them, but he seemed to deal with the run the hardest. Neville assumed the Magical Empire army didn’t put much stress on the physical prowess of its officers.

“Why are you doing this?” Neville asked in between breaths.

Sadecki looked up, sweat dripping into his confused eyes.

“I don’t know how much Harry is paying you, but I doubt it’s worth all this,” Neville elaborated.

Sadecki face grew immediately harder.

“You were an officer, so I guess you must be from a good family too, with no blood issues impending your career,” Neville mused at loud when Sadecki wasn’t forthcoming with any explanation. “So why else would you do this?”

“Andrei here is a romantic,” came Harry’s reply instead and that’s when Neville realized the rest was listening, too.

“No another word,” Sadecki snarled through his clenched teeth.

Harry shrugged. “You’ll have to explain yourself eventually if you want them to trust you.”

“Let’s get moving,” Sadecki bark instead, getting onto his feet again.

Neville joined him. Sadecki didn’t trust them himself and that was fine, for now.

No more scan waves came that night, but at one point the sky on the north erupted in white light that kept growing into a wall so broad and high that Neville thought his mind must have been deceiving him and the shining walls must have been much closer than his eyes were telling him.

“That’s the perimeter ward,” Harry offered when they all stopped and turned to watch the barrier behind them, “they’ve closed up the dead zone.”

His voice was grave and Neville’s thoughts returned to the group of Muggle girls locked somewhere in there.

With the first morning light, they came upon an abandoned settlement. By then, Neville had grown numb to the burning in his chest and calves. He focused all his mind into keeping himself upright and putting one foot in front of the other.

Unlike the many times before, Harry didn’t avoid the houses but led the group straight through them. They grew immediately cautious, slowing down and observing the broken windows and doors. They needn’t to, though; it was quite apparent the place had been abandoned.

They stopped in front of a small bakery, the plastic pretzel still hanging over the doors. There was a caravan parked next to the building, with an overflowing cart attached to its back. Harry walked
to the door of the caravan and to the amazement of everyone watching, took out a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

“Welcome to my humble abode.”

Chapter End Notes

Proofread by Dylan Pidge - big thanks!
Scavengers

29 April 2019, Svetlaya, former Belarus

Sadecki was assigned the first shift behind the steering wheel whilst Neville, Bill, Gregory and Annie piled into the small sitting area in the middle of the caravan, all of them visibly flustered by the sudden end of their frantic race.

"Keep heading east," Harry gave him instructions from the passenger seat when Sadecki started the engine. "But don't push her over sixty; she doesn't take kindly to that."

"She?" Sadecki asked, his eyes glued to the road. He didn't look very confident behind the wheel.

"Caroline, my caravan," Harry explained, caressing the dashboard with his palm. "She's not the youngest anymore so if she starts shaking, slow down."

Harry spun his seat to face the inside of the caravan and everyone sitting in there. Neville could only imagine what sort of sight the four of them made: exhausted, sweaty and dirty after an almost twenty-four hour long chase through the fields and forests. Neville's arms and legs were shaking, his lungs were on fire whilst the sweat on his back was turning ice cold.

"We need to get your cover story straight first thing, in case we get stopped," Harry started. "If that happens, you are muggles and you are my property. You don't talk unless addressed first, and you speak broken English. You don't look into anyone's eyes, ever. Do you understand?"

He only got four dubious looks in reply.

"And what exactly are we to do for you?" Bill asked.

"There's only one kind of people wandering through these parts of the Empire," Harry explained, "and that's the scavengers, crawling through the abandoned muggle cities and looking for anything valuable. We'll have to do that for the next couple of weeks, staying low before we make our way out of this wasteland."

"Couple of weeks?" Bill slowly repeated, looking pensive.

"At least. Before they stop looking for you."

"That's your plan, then - moving around, playing muggles?"

"Yes."

But Bill was shaking his head now. "We can't do that. We have a plan to follow. We can't be wandering aimlessly for weeks."

"So what would you like to do instead? Apparate from here, the magic shining in this desolate place like a beacon, and your unregistered wand signature easy to follow?"

"Drive us to Warsaw. There's a man who will sell us some registered wands."

"Warsaw, you said? Are you talking about Jan Levy, then?"
Neville's eyebrows raised at the familiar name. Bill didn't confirm Harry's guess but he didn't have
to, Harry was confident enough to carry on with his assumption anyway. "Levy's reliable, true, but
only as far as the Army lets him. If you showed up in his office while they are on the lookout for
you, they'd be waiting for you when you walk out."

That came as a surprise. They knew about this Levy from the refugees, the same refugees Harry
apparently got through the Curtain.

Bill sighed. "Take us to someone you trust, then."

"I intend to."

"In a couple of weeks?"

"In a couple of weeks. When they give up looking for you."

Bill shook his head. "I appreciate what you've done for us so far, Harry, I really do. I had no
problems following you blindly last night but now that we have time to plan together, we need to
do just that."

Of all the possible reactions Harry could have, he chose to laugh. "Is that what this is about? A
power play? Do you need to establish some control over the situation, Bill?"

Bill's face went red but Harry wasn't done yet. "You think you've got the worst behind you, don't
you? Well, let me set you straight there: you are still in deep shit. You are even deeper now that
the army is on the lookout for you. You need me. Didn't I tell you that you wouldn't survive a
minute inside without me?" Harry turned his accusatory glance Neville's way. "And just remember
what happened when you'd chosen to ignore my warning. Merlin, don't you have any idea how
close that stunt was?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair, turning away from them. "I had only an hour notice to prepare
all this. You were just mere minutes away from being apparated to the capital when the zone hit
you! And imagine what would have happened if it hadn't been Sadecki's shift that morning! You
would have been having a private audience with the Emperor himself right now; I bet he'd make
time in his busy schedule for some old acquaintances like you.

"So, Bill, if you need to hear some assurance, I'm happy to say that you're still the leader of this
mischievous group of yours. But I'm the guide and in a place like this, you can't afford to ignore
your guide."

The caravan was way too small a place for a clash of two big egos, the inside growing even more
suffocating. But Neville knew Bill well and if there was a man who was not quick to lose his cool,
it was him.

Bill took one long breath and let the silence hang for a bit before he said in an impassive tone "You
promised some answers."

Harry seemed to take the change of the topic for the adjournment it was. He breathed out and
nodded. He kept his tone carefully even, too. "I did. Thanks for waiting so long. Let me get you
some food and blankets first, and then you can go ahead."

Neville only then noticed he was shaking - and so did the rest of them. Harry fished out some
sleeping bags and a duvet from underneath the mattress in the very back of the caravan. Neville
took his sweaty and cold shirt off and wrapped himself in one of the sleeping bags. He gratefully
accepted the apple Harry put in front of him.
"It's not much," Harry said, apologetic, "but we can't use the cooker when the engine is running. We'll warm something up later."

With everyone being more comfortable, there was no reason to postpone the discussion any longer. Harry sat back into the front seat and gestured Bill to go ahead.

"How did you know about Annie's ability?" Bill cut right to the chase.

Harry chuckled dryly. "You approach me with a plan to infiltrate the Empire," he looked at Neville, "and think I won't check it out?"

Bill took that in stride. "Who talked?"

Harry appeared troubled with that question. He hesitated for a long time, making Neville think he wouldn't answer at all. He relented in the end, though. "Your father."

The whole car shook when Bill slammed his fist into the plastic table between them. There went his famous cool. "You little piece of shit, you had no right to approach him! I told you to stay away from him! Don't you remember how much grief you brought onto that man? Five of his children, Potter, five!"

Harry's previous confidence wavered. He turned his face away from them.

Bill calmed down a notch, taking a few short breaths. "What sort of convoluted debt did you invoke this time to use my dad's misplaced trust?"

Harry flinched at that. Neville frowned, too. He knew Bill and Harry had some falling outs but this seemed unnecessarily harsh.

"I told him the truth; I told him I would protect you. And he was right to believe that," Harry said softly. "He couldn't say much, just pointed me in the direction of the base where Miss Karlsson was training. I followed the lead."

"Who else did you tell about her?" Neville asked.

Harry shook his head. "Even Andrei hadn't known until yesterday. He had a way to reach me in an emergency. I told him about Annie's ability only after you were busted."

"We had a solid plan," Neville argued. "It should have worked under normal circumstances."

He turned to the driver's seat. "Had you or your men been warned of a possible breach?" he called after Sadecki.

"The security for the incomings was upgraded a few weeks ago," Sadecki replied.

"So that's a yes," Neville assumed.

Bill agreed with a nod. "Someone must have talked."

The silence after that was loaded. Neville noticed how Bill's eyes observed Harry carefully but no one had to point out how absurd that idea was, not after what he'd just done for them.

"How did you get the zone to expand?" asked Gregory. That was a very good question, Neville realized.

Harry looked at Gregory. "What do you mean?"
"The timing was too convenient to be a coincidence, so cut the bullshit."

"The zones are quite easy to read once you know what you're looking for," Harry slowly relented. "This one was unstable for a long time so I knew it would blow up if prompted."

They waited for more explanation but it quickly became clear Harry didn't plan to offer any.

"You still didn't explain how you did it," Bill didn't let go.

Harry shrugged. "I've been studying them for years now, okay? I'm not going to share all my research with you just like that."

"It would be very useful knowledge back home," Annie spoke up for the first time, her voice weak.

"I know," Harry smiled sadly at her, "that's why we have to be extra careful with it, right?"

She didn't seem to have enough energy to argue with him now, her chin falling to her chest.

Harry stood up again and walked to one of the small cupboards lining his side of the caravan. He took a bottle of water and a few more apples out. They all greedily reached for them.

"Where are you planning to go, then?" Bill asked. "Eventually?"

"To the south; to Serbia."

"Serbia? That's where the muggle slums are, right?"

"Exactly."

They went to sleep soon after that, exhausted beyond words. Gregory took over the steering wheel for now, while everyone else found a surface to pass out on. There was a double bed in the back of the van where Annie and Bill laid down. Neville secured himself a spot on the bench in the dining area. It wasn't the most comfortable but he was still better off than Sadecki on the floor or Harry who volunteered to crouch on the front seat.

The moment he closed his eyes, someone was shaking him again. At least it seemed like it.

The car was still and the light inside looked much brighter than when he went to sleep. He guessed he had managed to get a few hours off, after all.

Bill was leaning over him. "You need to take over. I can't keep my eyes open anymore."

Neville slowly nodded, still very much drowsy. He got up, took a big gulp from the water bottle on the table, and then splashed some onto his face. "Where should I be heading?" he asked Bill who was quickly falling asleep on the newly emptied bench.

"To the south," came a mumbled reply.

Neville started the engine and did just that.

He kept the car on bigger roads mostly; the one time he took a smaller turn he ended up with the car violently thrashing as the road was falling apart underneath its tires. As a testament of how tired everybody was, no one woke up even through the rough ride.
He hadn't seen a single living thing, human or animal alike. The highway led a bit away from any buildings but he had seen many from afar. They all looked abandoned, with collapsed roofs and broken windows. Neville couldn't help but wonder what happened with the thousands of muggles who used to live in them.

They passed the occasional car parked haphazardly in the middle of the road, forcing him to zigzag through them slowly. Sometimes, they were so many cars that they blocked the way entirely, forcing him to leave the road altogether and passed around on the grass next to it.

The whole place was eerily silent, the inside of the car as well as the outside. It made him anxious, the residues of yesterday's adrenaline still very much in his blood. Although the scenery looked quiet, he didn't relax one bit. They were in the enemy's land now.

Fighting the long monotonous ride, his eyes started roaming around the front of the car to keep him awake. It was an old caravan, with very old-fashioned design. There were piles of folded maps all along the windshield, marked with notes and drawings all over them. There was an old mug, tinted dark brown from black tea residue, a high pile of music cassettes and a package of dried buds that Neville immediately recognized.

Harry was sound asleep in the passenger's seat next to him. He twitched occasionally and his face was clenched tense, but he breathed regularly, making Neville longed even more for his own reprieve.

He reached for a random cassette and put it into the archaic player next to the steering wheel. He put the volume down significantly. Soon after, a band of some kind started softly playing.

"That's a good choice," Harry mumbled next to him, his voice rough from sleep.

Neville twitched in mild surprise but his hands stayed solid on the wheel. "It was on the top of the pile," he shrugged indifferently. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"No problem. It was about time I did, anyway," Harry said, looking at the dark sun low on the horizon. "Take the next exit to the left. We need to refill the tank."

"Is there a petrol station?"

"Maybe," Harry shrugged, "but it would be empty, anyway; all of them are now. I've got enough petrol packed. There's a lake nearby, we can set up a camp there."

A mention of a break woke Neville up more than the music did. He was still a bit hesitant, though. "Are we far enough?"

"Who knows? But you need to change from the uniforms and we all need to eat."

Neville didn't argue that point.

"Go straight on the roundabout."

He followed Harry's instructions. "You know your way around here," Neville observed, glancing at the maps scattered all over the front of the car.

Harry chuckled in response. "Somewhat."

"Is this what you've been doing all these years then? Driving around in your caravan, scavenging the abandoned cities, hiding in this wasteland?"
"It's been the perfect cover for my smuggling activities, too."

"Something tells me there's more to the story."

Harry laughed out softly. "Of course there is. Would you say your work with the muggle police covered all the years we hadn't seen each other?"

Neville nodded, understanding. "You said you were studying the dead zones."

"I'm trying to," Harry said, suddenly hesitant, "but they are not forthcoming with information that easily. Take the left here."

Neville slowed down and turned the caravan onto a forest path. "You don't want to share what you found out."

"Do you trust me with all the Resistance secrets? With your big mission plan?"

"We will have to now."

"But do you?"

Neville sighed. He shook his head ruefully. "Not yet."

Harry nodded. "Not yet, then."

They stopped by a beautiful lake, with a sandy beach running into its clear water.

"Help me set up a camp, will you?"

Neville followed Harry outside the caravan and towards the cart behind it. It seemed to be filled with camping equipment, endless amount of jerry cans with petrol and tins of food. Neville was tasked to fill up the tank, while Harry set up the temporary kitchen.

"So I guess no magic still?" Neville said when he saw the gas cooker and pewter dishes.

Harry smiled regretfully at him: "Not for quite some time, I'm afraid. A simple spell or anything magical around here would switch on all sorts of red flags with the Army."

They took out six foldable chairs, setting them into a circle on the beach and started warming up some kidney beans.

Harry brought out a big duffle bag. "Find some clothes to change into," he explained. "I'll start a fire to burn the uniforms."

When he left to look for firewood, Neville went to the water's edge to wash from the blood and sweat of the previous day. The water was freezingly cold this early in the spring, but blissfully refreshing too. He put on a simple set of sturdy clothes he found in Harry's bag. They had an old clothes smell about them but they were serviceable. He put his new gun behind the belt and the spare clips into a pocket. He stared longingly at his bare elbows, painfully aware of the lack of any wands.

If Bill decides to follow Harry's plan, it will take them weeks before they get their hands on some registered wands and perform magic without suspicion.

When planning this mission, they had known they wouldn't be able to use any magic in the first
days in the Empire. The refugees had warned them. They told them about the Wand Register—a means the Army used to control the many wizarding nations now under Britain's rule. The Army constantly scanned the whole Empire, and investigated any wand signature that wasn't in their books.

So, the plan was to buy some wands on a black market as soon as possible. These wands were registered under someone else's name. They couldn't simply register their own wands—their identities would get noticed by the authorities.

Harry was now suggesting to wait for a couple of weeks and avoid using magic altogether until then. Neville didn't like that idea even one bit. He received some training with muggle weapons when preparing for this mission, but his skills didn't stand a chance in comparison with what he could manage in a fight with his wand. And also, guns were crude, greasy, and made fighting messy.

And then, there was the matter of playing muggles for weeks. Neville never had to go this long without the use of magic and charms for his daily tasks. It sounded intimidating.

He returned back to the caravan and sat down by the cooker. He started stirring the beans inside the pot slowly. Harry came back a minute later, carrying a load of dry logs in his arms.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"The weed you have in the car—"

"Be my guest, Neville."

"Thanks."

It was almost a peaceful scene the others joined to some time later. By then, the sun was setting down over the lake. Neville was resting in his chair, polishing off his can of beans, while Harry was just finishing with his makeshift crutches for Annie.

They must have woken each other up because they stepped out from the caravan at the same time. Gregory was once again supporting Annie. They washed, changed into their new clothes and sat down to dinner.

Annie gratefully accepted the crutches but she frowned when she couldn't find any shoes to fit her. "I'm sorry but I prepared as much as I could on such short notice," Harry explained. "We'll stop by at the first shop we see."

"There are some shops still open around here?" she jolted.

"Well, not exactly open open," Harry elaborated. "But some of the goods will be left to pick from."

She blushed when she realized what he meant and how naïve her question was.

They ate their dinner in silence after that, watching Neville slowly feed the fire with the incriminating uniforms. Sadecki looked hesitant to hand over his robes, looking uncomfortable in the jacket he was wearing now. Neville wondered if this was the very first time he wore muggle clothes. What sort of shock must he be going through? He was probably as scared and out of his depth as the rest of them.
Bill must have been thinking along the same lines because the next moment, he took pity on the man - he gave him the dead soldier's shoes and asked him to bury them. Away from the fire, Sadecki didn't have to watch his insignia on his robes burn.

Harry fished out two tents from somewhere in the cart and they set them up with the last vestiges of light. Although everyone was still very much tired, no one opted for climbing into the tents just yet. They gathered some more logs for the fire and sat down to it, wrapped in their sleeping bags to guard off the cold.

Harry rolled himself another joint and passed it around. Bill and Gregory refused, but everyone else went for it.

"Oh my, I remember that smell," Bill wistfully sniffed the air. "It really is your stuff, Neville."

"How much of a shit are we in, then?" Bill then came back to the conversation right where they left it this morning.

Surprisingly, it was Sadecki who answered him first. "They might assume we all died in that car explosion."

Harry didn't look so sure. "The army isn't exactly known for their muggle forensic abilities, that's true. Without magic, they'll never be able to properly investigate the scene. But even then, they might notice five bodies missing."

"They will know something is off," Sadecki agreed. "But with any luck, they'll assume you tried to apparate away when you felt the zone approaching and ended up splattered in pieces all along the Curtain."

"They will suspect treason," Harry carefully pointed out. "They'll investigate everyone present. And approach the soldiers' families."

Sadecki's jaw hardened. "My family won't give them a reason to think I betrayed the Empire. Our status will protect them. They might never even find out it's my body missing from all the soldiers there. Still," he went to drop the subject, "they will be on the lookout for you, for several weeks at least. But if you don't show up again, they'll decide you must have died."

"They are overly proud of their scanning abilities," Harry snickered, agreeing with Sadecki. "If you don't show up on their radars, it must mean you're dead."

"That's why you want us here," Bill assumed.

"Yes," Harry said with conviction, "if you do this right and stay low for a couple of weeks, they'll stop chasing you. If you do this right, you can get your wands registered with no suspicion. Once you can use your wands, you are pretty much free to do whatever you want."

Bill frowned. "Is it wise to register our wands? We were told to buy registered ones off the black market."

"I'm not talking about registering your wands under your true names. That'd be foolish. We'll fake your identity."

"That's not possible," Sadecki argued resolutely. "The wand is registered with your magical signature. You can't fake your magical signature."

Harry shrugged. "I've seen it happen. Stick around for long enough and you will too."
Sadecki frowned, obviously not convinced. Bill got the conversation back on track before Sadecki managed to say anything else, though. "How long would you have us hiding here?"

"We have enough petrol to last for three weeks of driving. If we take it easier some days, we could be here even longer."

"Three weeks is a long time," Bill muttered. He stayed silent for a minute, looking intently into the fire. Having made a decision a minute later, he looked up and nodded at Harry. "How do we go about this?"

"Absolutely no magic. Nor anything spelled or magical. Your wands have to be with Annie at all times. If a magical spark turns up anywhere in the wastelands near the Curtain now, the army will be upon us in a minute."

"Wouldn't it be better to hide somewhere more populated then, get lost among other magical traces?"

"And risk someone recognizing you? Even the slums are full of rats, tattling away to the wizards, and they would all be informed about you by now."

"Won't we meet anyone out here, too?"

"That can happen," Harry conceded. "We need to stick to the big cities if we want to put up a good pretense of scavenging - can't go wandering completely into the wilderness. There's a chance we'll meet other crews."

"What would happen then?"

"The sort of people travelling through these parts never ask many questions. Nor they are in touch with the Army. They won't be on the lookout for you. As long as you don't raise any suspicion, we should be fine."

"What sort of people?"

"Basically, two sorts. It's other scavengers, like us. These are always led by a wizard - often outlaws with their wands long broken, or half squibs, chased away from their families. They don't want the army's attention any more than us."

Harry hesitated. "It's the second group that worries me—I very much hope we won't run into those."

"Who do you mean?" Neville asked, alarmed.

"He talks about muggles," Sadecki explained, "runaways from the scams who decided to try their luck out here in the wilderness."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Wizards hunt them for sport," Sadecki shrugged. "Wherever the muggles run, you can be sure there are wizards on their heels, tracking them down."

"The army?"

"No, the army doesn't have to bother. Young wizards go here for holidays, or families take their children for hunting trips," Harry snickered. "I've heard that during the season the demand is so
high they sometimes have to kick some muggles out here to satisfy the clientele."

"Hunting trips?" Neville splattered. "For people?"

"Not in the wizards' eyes here, Nev."

Annie turned to Sadecki, her voice calm. "Am I an animal to you?"

Sadecki's eyes were unreadable. "I've just risked my life to save yours."

"Did your family take you for one of these hunting trips when you were a child?"

He stared at her for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Did you kill anyone?"

He chose not to answer which was an answer on its own. "I'm not going to apologize for the way my parents chose to bring me up. I had no control over that," he said instead. "I chose to be here with you now, though."

Annie didn't ask any more questions but she didn't look away from Sadecki either.

"What will you do now?" Gregory asked.

"I'll have Harry get me out of the Empire," Sadecki said simply.

"It might take some time, though," Harry pointed out. "I need to find someone new to bribe at the Crossing first."

"I know. I'll keep low with you until then - even if it means pretending to be a muggle - keeping my side of the bargain as long as you keep yours. But I won't be insulted or judged by someone who doesn't know anything about my life."

"Did you go to Hogwarts?" Neville asked out loud what he'd been wondering for quite some time now, what with Sadecki's perfect command of English and his high rank in the military.

Sadecki's face softened with the sudden change of topic. "Yes, I graduated three years ago."

"How is she?"

He blinked, amazed. "You attended Hogwarts?"

"The three of us did," Neville nodded towards Harry and Bill.

Sadecki's surprise seemed to have grown some more. "I thought—" he mumbled, glancing towards Harry, and then shaking his head. "I don't know what I thought."

He turned back to Neville, his eyes warming with a shy smile. "Hogwarts stands as powerful as ever. The castle keeps growing. New floors appear all the time."

It was Neville's turn to look surprised. "The castle is growing?"

"She is charmed to accommodate all of her students and there's more of them coming every year."

Neville was dumbstruck and it obviously showed. Harry winked at him. "Magic is thriving, Neville. I wished you would have entered the Empire on the other side of Europe and seen it for
yourselves. It's very much magical out there. Wizards have built wondrous cities, with houses floating in the air; you can see dragons flying above in midday, giants walking the streets, centaurs discussing philosophy in parks. And all of that is causing a wizarding baby boom."

He sighed. "For the fortunate few, the Empire can be a very beautiful place."

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks go to Dylan Pidge for proofreading this chapter!
Through the Wastelands

30 April, Sialiava Lake, former Belarus

They set off early the next morning, packing up their camp after only a quick breakfast and an even shorter wash in the lake.

Last night's discussion didn't leave Neville with much time for sleep, so he caught up during the morning hours on the road, taking the bed in the back for himself as the caravan shook on the crumbling tarmac. When he woke up in the early afternoon, it was to the stench of burning food. It was such a familiar smell that Neville got disoriented for a second, thinking of home and Luna.

When he opened his eyes, he saw only Gregory in the caravan's miniature kitchenette.

"Whoever thought it was a good idea to let you cook?" he grumbled.

Gregory smirked. "Don't you dare complain, sleeping beauty."

Neville only now noticed the caravan wasn't moving anymore. "Where are we?"

"In that city or another." Gregory shrugged. "The others went to look for Annie's shoes and some other equipment we're missing."

"In that city or another." Gregory shrugged. "The others went to look for Annie's shoes and some other equipment we're missing."

Neville stretched his back and arms, his eyes lingering at his wrists where his wands used to wait for his call. There was a crude looking metal ring around each wrist instead. Harry gave them the bracelets yesterday; apparently, they signified a muggle in property of a wizard. He assured them these particular pieces were not magical, although normally, they were heavily enchanted to kill the muggle most viciously on their master's command.

"Are we actually expected to scavenge around?" he wondered aloud.

"No, not really." Neville glanced at Gregory at his answer, and realised he must have slept through another planning and explaining session. "Apparently, Harry got some jewellery stashed in the caravan," Gregory explained. "We can disguise it as our contraband if need be."

As it turned out, Harry had more than that stashed in the caravan and the cart behind it. Neville spent the next few hours going through their inventory. The whole car seemed to consist of cupboards and compartments, filled with everything they needed to survive on the road: a never-ending supply of tinned food, foldable furniture, sleeping bags and pillows, cans of petrol, gas, water, clothes, lamps, books, beer, and board games.

None of it was magical. What little magical possessions they had, they kept at Annie's side at all times. Harry had never added anything to her small rucksack, leaving Neville to wonder where Harry's wand was. He found it hard to believe Harry would have left it far behind.

They weren't left entirely defenceless, though—one big compartment was filled with guns and rifles to the brink. They weren't wands, but they made Neville feel a bit safer, anyway.

Two days into their journey, they seemed to have shrugged off the adrenalin of their dramatic entrance into the Empire and started settling into their new situation. The boredom helped—there's only that much nervous sitting around you can do before you get bored.

Everyone dealt with it differently. Neville liked to keep his hands busy; he enjoyed cooking or
repairing the odd equipment. Everything was so much slower without the use of charms, it helped him pass long hours easily. Bill was going through stacks and stacks of Harry's maps, drilling Sadecki for information about the different districts of the Empire. He couldn't ask Harry—their guide quickly made a point of avoiding those long conversations. Harry would snooze a lot instead, often mumbling nonsense in his sleep.

Annie took over Harry's inventory of weapons, proclaimed them all to be in a horrible state of neglect, and spent hours cleaning and reassembling them.

Gregory asked Sadecki to spar with him to let out some steam. He was out off sparring partners, what with Annie's leg in bandages, Bill categorically uninterested, and Neville even doubly so. Gregory was patient with the Army soldier who obviously hadn't gone through a physical exercise once in his life. Sadecki was frustrated with being thrown around so easily but he was stubborn enough to keep on trying.

Over the next few days, they developed a routine. They drove through the day; sometimes for long hours, some days only to the next city. They set up a camp in the evenings for the cold April nights. They came up with a rooster of a sort, taking turns with driving, washing, and cooking, although Neville took over all of Gregory's cooking shifts after the first disaster of a lunch.

It all looked quite relaxed and peaceful, apart from the fact that it wasn't. No matter the time of the day, one of them always sat on the roof of the caravan, keeping vigil. They didn't speak much. They didn't venture away from the camp, opting to stay together in case another detection wave would sweep through the land and they needed to jump for cover in Annie's nullification field.

They watched the skeletons of houses pass by, the eerie silence of this wasteland constantly dumping their mood. In the first few days, they hadn't met a single living creature, human or animal alike, feeling very much alone and lost. At the same time, everyone was waiting for the silence to be broken at any moment.

Four days into their journey, they finally encountered some wildlife. Apparently, animals shied away from the Curtain, too. Here, further away from the magical barrier, there were aplenty.

They took on hunting every day to spice up their diet of canned beans, and to chase away the boredom. Harry obviously had some practise but it was Annie who was the best aim. Unsurprisingly, Sadecki was the most useless when it came to muggle weaponry. He told them guns were a standard part of a soldier's equipment at the Curtain Crossing, as magic tend to be unstable around the magical barrier, but no one ever deigned to teach how to use them.

On the fifth evening, Annie made Sadecki practised on empty cans with a silenced gun. Neville watched from across the small city park they had camped in for the night. As Annie corrected his grip, Sadecki shuffled on his feet, obviously still very much uncomfortable around her. Neville just didn't know if it was because she annulated his magic, or because she was a muggle, or because she was a girl.

Harry was sitting next to him, gutting the rabbits Neville had skinned. "How long have you known her?" Harry asked, nodding at Annie.

Neville turned away from her and reached for the next rabbit. "Couple of years now, I'd guess."

"Years? This mission's been planned for some time then."

"I wouldn't know about that." He pinched the rabbit's hide and cut it across the back of its neck, his movements still a bit unsure. With magic, this would have been done in a second. "Annie's been
with the IMRA for some time. She practically grew up with Gregory in the barracks."

"What's her story, then?"

Neville shrugged. "She's a portable dead zone."

"She's not," Harry readily disagreed. "Magical items don't self-combust around her, they just stop working. And secondly, being around her feels different than in a zone: she's annulling your magic but you still feel that it's there, just out of your reach. Have you ever studied her limits?"

Neville looked up at the sincere interest he detected in Harry's voice. It was a rare occasion for him to drop the blasé facade. He remembered what Harry said about researching dead zones and realised Annie's ability was within Harry's scope of interest. "Why don't you ask her yourself? It's not really my place to tell, anyway."

If Neville hoped Harry would get discouraged by that, he was sorely mistaken.

Harry didn't even hesitate; he nodded at Neville and called out loudly the next moment. "Hey, Annie!"

Annie whipped around to face them, and so did Sadecki next to her. Neville heard footsteps above him as Gregory suddenly stood up from his watch on top of the van and searched their camp for danger. Even Bill looked up from his maps, face alarmed.

Neville sighed at the unnecessary panic Harry'd caused whilst Harry himself carried on like he hadn't noticed the reactions. "What's your story, girl?"

Annie put her gun back into her case and slowly approached Harry, her limp still visible. She looked evenly at the rabbit carcasses on the table, Harry's bloodied arms and the bucket full of guts by his knees. "I'll tell you if you tell me how you made the dead zone expand," she proposed.

Harry turned pensive for a short moment. Then he nodded and offered her his hand. "You got yourself a deal."

Her eyes grew wide with surprise. She exchanged a quick look with Neville. He understood her bewilderment—Harry didn't usually volunteer information this easily.

Annie hurried over to them, accepting his hand quickly before Harry had a chance to change his mind.

"You'll go first," Harry said when they shook on it.

She shrugged her shoulders. "What do you want to know?"

"Were you born like this?" he immediately fired at her.

"I don't know. I hadn't met a wizard till I was in my teens."

"What happened then?"

"He attacked me," she shrugged. "He thought I'd cursed him. When his spells wouldn't work, he called in some Aurors. That's how the IMRA found me."

"Are there others like you?"

"As far as I know, no."
"Is anyone in your family magical?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"The IMRA looked. They said they didn't find anyone in five generations back."

Harry turned to Bill. "Did you check paternity?"

Bill was by now listening as attentively as the rest of them. "Yes. Everything fits."

"How about family bond potions?"

Bill shook his head. "All negative."

"What are they talking about?" Annie asked Neville.

"Harry's asking if you were adopted."

"Well, I could tell him right away I wasn't. I'm the spitting image of my mum."

"There are potions that could achieve that," Harry dismissed her comment, shrugging. "Where were you born, exactly?"

"Kiruna, in the North of Sweden."

Harry walked up to Bill's table full of maps and took out an enormous sheet showing the North of Europe. Bill grimaced at Harry's bloody hands; he left fingerprints all over the edges of the map. "Can you show me where?"

Annie took the offered pen and circled a town just a few inches above the bold line that signified the borders of the Empire.

"That's pretty close to the Curtain. Has your family always lived there?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. I was born in January 2001."

Harry looked up sharply from the map.

"What is it?" Neville asked.

"That's a whole year and a half before the Curtain spread to Sweden," Harry explained distractedly, obviously lost in his thoughts.

"Why is that important?"

"It means her ability is probably not tied to the Curtain or the dead zones," Bill explained when several seconds had passed Harry’d failed to.

That seemed to have taken Harry back to the present. "Have there been other cases like hers?"

"Not as far as we know," Bill said. "At least not on our side of the Curtain."
Harry's eyes narrowed at that.

"Is it my turn now?" Annie readily jumped in when Harry fell silent.

He smiled at her, not unkindly. "Not just yet. What happened when the IMRA found you?"

She rolled her eyes exasperatedly but she obliged him. "They tested me at first and then they started training me."

"And what were the results? What are your limits?"

Annie looked at Bill for permission and when he nodded, she carried on. "Spells, curses, enchantments and wards: I annul all of them."

"How powerful enchantments? How about Hogwarts wards? Or Unforgivables?"

"All of them," Bill repeated.

"And blood magic? Soul magic?"

Annie hesitated, looking at Bill for an answer. He sighed. "The results were a bit unclear for those, not unlike in dead zones. It seems like her ability is magical in its essence, too, no matter that Annie is actually a muggle."

"How about the Curtain? What happens when she gets close to it?"

"I get sick."

"How sick?"

"Like some bad food poisoning sick."

"But the barrier stands still?"

Annie just shrugged in assent and looked over at Bill who decided to elaborate. "As far as we can tell, Annie doesn't have any effect on the Curtain. That's why we think the barrier's based on blood magic."

Harry grunted, either in agreement or disagreement with the statement, Neville couldn't tell. Unfortunately, Harry didn't take Bill's bait to share his findings on the matter with them.

"You said they'd trained you. Trained you for what?" he asked Annie instead.

"To be a soldier. They'd always known I would be useful in their fight."

"Their fight? But not yours?"

"I was talking from the IMRA's perspective. Of course it's my fight, too."

Harry chuckled at that. "Oh yes, of course they've made it your fight, too. You have to ensnared the gifted kids early on. What did your parents have to say to this? To their child being trained to become a weapon?"

Neville grimaced at that but Harry wasn't paying him any attention. His eyes were locked on Annie. "They knew I'd always be in danger. They were glad I learnt to defend myself," she said decisively. It didn’t escape Neville’s attention she hadn’t contradicted Harry’s statement, though.
"And they were happy to let you on this mission?"

She looked away. "Of course not. But I'm eighteen now and it was my decision to go."

Harry carried on chuckling. "You've got spunk, girl, I give you that. There's no one more determined than a child soldier."

At this remark, Neville finally had enough. "Stop belittling her courage, Harry," he spoke up. "Don't you think it's rather hypocritical of you? We were younger than Annie when we fought at Hogwarts."

Harry turned to him then. Still chuckling, he pointed an accusing finger at Neville. "Yeah. And that's precisely why we should know better."

The image of Hogwarts's Entrance Hall flashed through Neville's mind, the stairwell covered with the bodies of the Dumbledore's Army. He flinched and stayed silent.

"So, is that the plan then, to walk through the Emperor's many wards with Annie as a shield and then shoot him with a muggle gun?" Harry asked then, after several moments of silence had passed.

Neville exchanged looks with Bill.

Harry saw that. "Oh, come on! Tell me that's not it. You can do better than that."

"That's not it," Bill confirmed. He didn't say anything further, though.

"It's your turn now," Annie decided, looking at Harry. "How did you expand the zone?"

Harry nodded. "I'll tell you in a few weeks."

Annie stared at him, a frown quickly hardening her features. "We made a deal. You promised to tell me."

"And I fully intend to keep my promise. I will tell you in a few weeks."

"That's not the deal we made and you know it."

"Yes. But you didn't specify the conditions and I decided to use it against you."

"Why are you being such a dick, Potter?" Bill asked exasperatedly, no sign of surprise in his voice. "How are we to trust your word if you act like this?"

"I've always kept my word," Harry said, his voice suddenly turning cold. "You must remember that." Harry glanced at Bill. Bill flinched. Neville took careful notice of the exchange.

"And I'll keep this one, too," Harry carried on, turning back to Annie. "I just cannot give you that knowledge now if you're to walk into the Emperor's mansion or something crazy like that in the near future."

"That wasn't a part of our deal; you promised to tell without conditions."

"I agree. I'm saying I'll tell you in a couple of weeks no matter what. For everyone's sake, though, I hope I'll know your plans by then."

Annie threw her arms up with an exasperated growl. "How many weeks, exactly?"
"You learn quickly," he smiled at her. "Let's say six."

"That's more than a couple."

"I'm giving myself a leeway. Six is my final offer."

"What if I die before you get the chance to tell me?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'll tell you anyway."

"You'll tell it to my corpse?" she laughed. "No, thank you. If you can create new conditions, so can I. If I die before you've had a chance to tell me—or if we get separated—I want you to tell Bill. Or Gregory or Neville. Is that clear?"

He didn't hesitate. "Sounds fair."

She offered him a hand to shake on the new deal. "You're one slimy son of a bitch—you know that, right?"

That wasn't the only time Harry'd got on everyone's nerves. With the last danger far behind them, his concentration seemed to have slipped—instead of a decisive leader giving them orders left and right, they were more often than not dealing with an aloof slob.

He wouldn't shy away from his responsibilities—he drove, he cooked and washed the dishes, albeit a bit grudgingly. He also gutted their prey, and thank Merlin for that because no one else was willing to help Neville and get their hands messy. When that was done, though, he only seldom joined them for dinner, opting to sit further away with his own lamp, drawing all over his maps and mumbling to himself. He changed his mind often, instructing them to drive south in the morning only to tell them to turn around one hour later. It made all this wandering feel even more pointless. He smoked a lot of weed, making the whole caravan smell like a college dormitory before the rest of the group organised an intervention and formed some ground rules on smoking inside.

Six days into their journey, Harry approached Bill with this. "It's time we speak about my payment."

"I was starting to think you'd never ask," replied Bill readily. "You've almost made me believe you were helping us from the goodness of your heart."

"Well, I needed to get creative. It's not like you're actually carrying anything valuable in Annie's little rucksack."

He was wrong on that account; they had a whole bag of diamonds stashed there. Bill didn't correct him, though. "Okay then, I'm listening."

"You'll simply owe me a favour. For every day I spend as your guide, I'll have an hour of your time helping me."

Bill clearly wasn't expecting that. Judging by his expression further, he also didn't like it. "Helping you with what?"

"I might need a couple of extra wands for a project of mine."

Bill frowned. "I'm not helping you with anything illegal."

Harry laughed. "Illegal according to whom? The Emperor?"
Bill swore. "We aren't doing anything morally wrong," he rephrased.

"That could work."

"And nothing dangerous."

"More dangerous than infiltrating the Empire?"

Bill ignored that comment. "And we have a right to say no," he added instead.

"That's not how favours work," Harry argued. "I promise that you won't be morally opposed to it and it won't be more dangerous than the situation you're currently in. You promise you'll do it when I ask you."

Bill looked like he was seriously considering offering the diamonds instead. In the end, he sighed and turned to the rest of them. "This isn't only my call. Everyone speaks for themselves."

It was with a heavy sense of foreboding that Neville nodded. He figured they'd probably need the diamonds to bribe someone they trusted even less.

Gregory shrugged. "Seems only fair."

Annie was frowning in annoyance but nodded herself.

They all looked at Sadecki when he hadn't immediately joined in. He shrugged. "I'm in Harry's debt already."

The conversation in the cramped caravan was rather stilted during the long hours of driving. They were some brighter moments, though.

Sadecki would get animated describing the wonders of the thriving magical communities in the west. He was curious about their lives outside of the Curtain, in the magical outcast, as much as they were curious about his homeland. They swapped stories, then. He told them about the new London, turned into the capital of the Magical Empire. In return, they described the settlement in the north of Finland where wizard from all across Europe built a new international community. Sadecki spoke of the veela tribes ruling over whole regions of France, whilst Bill talked about his diplomatic missions to Amazonian witches in South America or to the warlocks of Japan.

From what Sadecki told them, most of the East Region looked very much like what they'd seen so far—abandoned muggle cities, with only the occasional wizard loner settling down here and there. Throughout this region, magic tended to be unstable, influenced by the Curtain cutting across the land, with dead zones breaking out on regular basis. Not being able to control the land with their magic, wizards had forced muggles to leave their homes behind and move to the slums in the Balkans. Entire nations had been forced to march to the south and squeeze into improvised camps stretching across the entirety of former Serbia and spilling out into the neighbouring countries.

From what Neville heard about the Serbian slums, they didn't sound like a nice place to live in. It made him nervous that they were headed towards that place. Apparently, wizards had left muggles to fend for themselves there, not providing any governance, nor supplies. The only contact seemed to be the occasional raid.

Outside the slums, muggles faired a bit better. They still hadn't retained any rights but they had means to survive—land to farm on and resources to use. Some of these muggles belonged to wizards. Slaving on the fields or in mines, they had some protection to speak of — but only as a property of wizards.
The British Isles had been pronounced a sacred magical land, with muggles not being able to set foot on the island at all.

Seven days into their journey, they'd done some actual scavenging in a rundown shopping centre. They'd got better fitting clothes and some spare pieces, too. Annie had forced them all to a pharmacy, so they now had shower gels and deodorants, too. Harry asked them not to shave, though; he argued the beards would cover their features and help them look more authentic.

Opposite the crumbling shopping centre lay a square with polished marble floors. Something about it piqued Neville's interest—it seemed to be in a much better condition than all the buildings around it. None of the marble tiles were crumbling apart and no weed was growing in between them.

He pointed at the small obelisk that stood in the middle of the square, some hundred metres away from them. "What's that?"

Harry followed Neville's gaze. Once he saw the obelisk, he hurriedly looked away. "That's a mass grave."

That got everyone's attention.

"Of whom?" asked Bill.

"Muggles," Harry said simply. When all five of them shot frowns at him in unison, he let out a long sigh and finally resolved himself to explain further. "Not all muggles went peacefully into the slums. Some put up a fight. Some were used as an example against putting up a fight."

Neville looked at the vast square; it was a lot of space to bury a lot of bodies in.

"Who could have built it?" asked Sadecki, sounding positively incredulous, the intensity of his shock in turn surprising Neville and piquing his interest. "Wizards wouldn't care, and muggles wouldn't have how."

Harry sighed. "I did."

Five pairs of stunned eyes landed on him.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to face away from them. "It was during a particularly angsty period of my life. Building graves seemed like a properly dramatic way to mope."

"How many..." whispered Annie.

"I don't remember. I think the number is carved into one of the tiles."

"Fifteen thousand and sixty," Gregory said a second later. He had wandered over to the edge of the square and was looking down at his feet now. "It's written right here."

"Fifteen thousand?!"

They all hurried to Gregory's side to look for themselves. The number was glaring right at them, but it wasn't the only thing carved into the marble. Standing this close, they noticed names and dates in a smaller font, chiselled into the surface as far as they could see.

"How did you do it?" asked Sadecki, astonishment now written all over his face.

"Powerful summoning charms and a strong bubblehead spell. And lots of time on my hands,"
Harry said simply. He didn't join them on the square but kept standing a bit further away. They still didn't have to raise their voices; noise carried far in the silence of the abandoned town.

"How did you know which names to carve?" Sadecki elaborated.

Harry slowly shrugged his shoulders. "A body identification spell."

They stood silently over the accusing number, looking at the seemingly never-ending list of names. Then Annie asked, "How many graves like this one have you built?"

Harry looked over their shoulders, grimacing. The reluctance to carry on in the conversation was clearly written in his frown. "Too many," he finally replied.

Bill didn't take that for an answer. "Harry," he said slowly, "how many graves did you build?"

Harry still didn't turn to them. His shoulders sunk when he simply breathed out, "Twenty-nine."

Neville quickly did the math, and then he went through his calculation again, sure he must have gotten his decimals wrong; only to arrive at the same number. Harry could be talking about half a million bodies.

No wonder the marble of the monument was so beautifully carved, with this much practise.

He shook his head from his haze, meeting Bill's incredulous eyes. As one, they all shifted to stare at Harry, speechless.

And none of them looked at him the same since.

Ten days into their journey, Neville had realised this was the longest he had ever gone without magic. It was the same for every wizard in the group and they all missed their wands terribly. Annie missed privacy and civilization. Neville had installed a simple shower behind the caravan that day. She'd kissed him on the cheek in gratitude.

On the twelfth day, Sadecki had managed to knock Gregory out during their sparring session. The rest of them had clapped their hands and cheered Riddle’s soldier on.

Fifteen days into their journey, they were resting after dinner in a courtyard of what once had been a luxurious hotel resort, now overgrown with wild plants. Neville was putting their dishes away when Sadecki suddenly asked: "Why would you call yourself Harry Potter?"

All eyes locked on the soldier, and then they simultaneously moved to Harry.

Harry’d been in the process of taking his contact lenses off for the night, but now he paused and chuckled, seemingly unconcerned by the strange question. "Why not?"

"It's a stupid fake name."

It was Neville's turn to laugh. "Why would you think so?"

Sadecki looked back at him, incredulous. "Every wizard and witch knows that name. They would know right away it's a fake. When you first introduced yourself like that, I was of the impression you were being cheeky with me. Now I see the name goes way back with this whole group, too. Is it supposed to be a statement?"

Neville looked around. Everyone seemed confused, only Harry was now quietly rolling his evening joint, chuckling under his nose.
"Why would you think the name's fake?" Neville adjusted his question.

Sadecki raised his eyebrows. "What parents would name their child after a bogeyman for kids?"

"Bogeyman?" Bill repeated, humour creeping into his voice now, too. "For kids?"

"Oh," Sadecki breathed out in understanding. "You don't have that story in the outcasts. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, what with the Curtain separating us. That is your actual name then? It would explain why your parents didn't know the name would be such a taboo here."

"I grew up in England, Andrei, I know the story quite well," Harry corrected him. He looked at the confused faces all around. "But they probably know a different version. Can you tell them what yours is?"

"It's a story to threaten misbehaving children with. Potter's an irritating little poltergeist who wouldn't go away no matter what you do; the most powerful curses don't faze him, the strongest of wards don't halt him. He just keeps coming back—to hold you hostage in your bed, or to eat your sweets."

There was a moment of silence and then Neville and Bill burst into snickers. "I think that story's pretty accurate," Bill breathed out.

Harry joined in their laughter whilst everyone else just looked at them strangely. "Yep, it's quite amazing how much truth can one find in a tale for kids. Hey, Andrei, do you know the one about a Longbottom?"

Neville stopped laughing right away. "There is one?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "How about the names Weasley or General Shacklebolt, do they ring a bell, Andrei? Or Albus Dumbledore?"

Sadecki was frowning now. "Am I being mocked?"

"No, I'm afraid the joke's entirely on us. Can you just sincerely answer, do you know any of these names?"

Sadecki shook his head.

"You don't know who Dumbledore was?" Bill asked, his eyes wide with bewilderment.

"I'm afraid we didn't make it into the history books, gentlemen," Harry shrugged.

"How can you describe the war without naming people like Dumbledore?"

"Which war?" Sadecki asked.

Neville looked at Harry, flabbergasted. "Really?"

"They don't call it a war here," Harry explained. "It's described as an era of expansion. We're sometimes mentioned as the backward rebels who tried in vain to hinder the natural progress of magic. We really didn't deserve to be named in the textbooks."

Neville tried to wrap his head around it. "This is ridiculous," he failed.

"History is written by the victors, a certain muggle once said," Harry shrugged. "Riddle knows the power of a name—he's done well for our names to be forgotten."
"Yours isn't," Annie pointed out.

"Yes, I've become a bogeyman to threaten your children with. It's one of my biggest accomplishments, I must say."

"Are you saying that the stories are based on your name, rather the other way around?" Sadecki said. "But that's not possible. They've been around for ages!"

"Only for the last twenty years or so," Bill corrected. "We grew up with a different Harry Potter story."

Sadecki looked back between Harry and Bill. "But you're much older than Harry."

"Not by that much–I think it's only what, seven or eight years between us? And Neville here was actually Harry's roommate at Hogwarts."

Seeing Sadecki's now entirely confused face, Neville took pity on him. "Let me offer you a different history lecture than what you probably received from Binns- is it still Binns?"

Neville wasn't at all surprised when Sadecki nodded.

"The wizard that is your Emperor now, was once viewed as a dark lord. He killed many good wizards and witches who didn't agree with his views or the means he'd used to achieve them. We fought against him for many years, the whole of wizarding Europe united against the- well, the terrorist, in today's terms. We were even winning, at some point. And then we were betrayed, chased from our homes and pushed out of Europe, behind a barrier that we cannot cross back."

"We were always told the wizards who fought against the Expansion were muggle-loving traitors."

Bill tsked. "We preferred to call ourselves the Resistance, if you must. And we fought for the good of the wizarding world as much as for any muggles."

"Even now? Do you still fight for muggles?"

Bill winced. "No. Not since the Betrayal Bombing."

"It was our camps the muggles targeted, back then," Neville added in explanation. "They killed almost all of our fighters, and their families, too."

Sadecki still looked confused. "If not for the muggles then, what do you fight for?"

Bill took a moment to formulate his reply, long enough for Neville to realise he wouldn't have an immediate answer, either. It had been a while since someone had thought to ask him this question, what with how ingrained their cause had been in the lives of everyone he usually spoke to.

“For our beliefs,” Bill said eventually. “For the belief that a wrong shouldn’t go unpunished, shouldn’t get you rewarded. A wizard who usurped power by killing and torturing thousands of innocent people shouldn’t be left to rule.”

Sadecki was listening intently, a confused frown on his face. “The Emperor? Are you talking about the victims of the Expansion? Are you here to kill him, then?"

Neville and Bill shared a look.

"I think you're hitting too close to home there, Andrei. They don't trust us enough to speak on the
matter yet,” Harry spoke before they had a chance to muster up an evasive answer. "Ask them again when you have saved their lives once or twice more; maybe by then you'll have earned enough of their trust."

“Is that really it?” Sadecki insisted, paying very little mind to Harry’s warning. “Are you here out of vengeance?”

Bill sighed. “I’d be lying if I said vengeance has nothing to do with my fight. Your Emperor killed way too many of my friends and family not to take this personally. But I’d opposed him well before he hurt me and mine, simply because I didn’t agree with his principles, nor the way he’d gone to impose them.”

Neville noticed that Bill was doing a poor job explaining their viewpoint to the young soldier.

Bill saw it too. “I can’t possibly understand how this mixes with the education you’ve been given, Andrei. But even you have to see there’s a lot wrong in the Empire. In the Britain I grew up with, any type of torture was a punishable crime, especially from the hands of authority. Now, people sentenced to death are tortured by their jailors for weeks. We used to value privacy, and now you have the Registry that catalogues every singly spell you cast. And although I can’t say that everyone was equal, we valued life. There was no slavery, and every murder, be it of a pureblood or a muggle, was prosecuted. Was everything perfect? No. But I still refuse to have it taken away on a whim of a war criminal. That’s why I continue to fight.”

“Those rules are here for a reason,” Sadecki argued. “There’s never been a larger society of wizards than the Empire. The Emperor’s strong hand is needed to unite the various nations, to keep peace.”

Neville’s face turned sour at hearing the propaganda bullshit. He was about to share his precise opinion on the matter, but luckily, Bill spoke first, with more patience Neville could have mustered.

“Even if uniting Europe was indeed the way to go, there are other ways to skin a cat,” he offered diplomatically. “Others have managed well enough without tyranny.”

“Hm.” Sadecki didn’t look entirely convinced but he didn’t argue further, either. He was glancing at the people around the camp, probably realising he was outnumbered.

“Are all of you half-bloods?” he asked next.

What a strange question to ask. Bill also seemed confused, but replied anyway. “Only Harry is, actually.”

Sadecki turned his shocked face at Harry, who waved at him cheekily. “That’s right, Andrei. You’re listening to a group of purebloods badmouthing the Emperor. Isn’t that refreshing?”

“And their families?”

“Purebloods, too. Bill here is married to a part-veela!”

Sadecki turned back to Neville and Bill. "Well then, you’d enjoy a high status here, and a lot of respect. Why, then?"

“Hm?”

“Why would you sneak inside the Empire? Had you walked in, you’d have been pardoned. I know
that many other wizards from your Resistance group received mercy. You could have a good life here, and your family, too."

Bill was shaking his head before Sadecki finished speaking. “My beliefs aren’t going to change, Sadecki, certainly not just for a promise of a comfortable lifestyle. I’ve sworn I’d keep fighting the wizard who calls himself your Emperor until the day I die if need be,” he paused and shot a look Harry's way. “No matter if I’m reduced to a small thorn in the bastard’s side - he doesn’t deserve a complete peace of mind, not even for a second.”

With that last sentence, Neville finally, finally realised why Bill’s words had seemed familiar. He was quoting Harry, from ages ago, back from the times when Harry had still been fully with them, a good friend and a charismatic leader, no Felix Felicis, no hint of madness or a cloud of desperation clinking to his presence. A memory flashed through Neville’s mind, the interior of a French pub startlingly clear in his mind even after all these decades; Harry sitting across from the table littered with half-finished pints, and Ron Weasley, still his second-in-command, by Harry’s side. Back then, Harry had been haunted by newspapers, as the face of the Resistance, but despite that, he’d been surprisingly apt at avoiding reporters. That night, a guy had got lucky, catching Harry in a good mood. Neville remembered the journalist furiously scribbling notes away with the broken remnants of his Quick-Quotes Quill that Harry had snapped in half on sight.

If Bill was hoping to get a reaction out of Harry by quoting the subsequent article back at him, he would probably be disappointed. Whether Harry had recognised his words or not, he hadn’t given anything away, leaning back in his chair and slowly puffing on his smoke.

Sadecki was either oblivious to the expectations in the air, or he chose to ignore it, because he kept asking. “But what about your family? Don’t you want the best for them?”

Bill visibly bristled at the apparent accusation, but Neville thought he knew where the question had come from. He quickly spoke before Bill could. “I don’t know what you imagine our lives outside of the Curtain are, but it’s probably not even half as bad. Yes, they are inconveniences, and yes, it is not home. But neither would be Britain, if we should live there now.”

Bill must have calmed down by now because he nodded when Neville paused and looked at him. “I wouldn't like my daughters to grow up in the Empire as it is. They would grow up thinking that not every wizard matters the same. They would grow up not knowing who Albus Dumbledore was.”

Sadecki winced, knowing that the jab was aimed at him. He stood it stoically. "Who was this great Dumbledore, then?"

Bill gestured at Harry. "You knew him the best."

Harry smiled, looking wistfully over Bill's shoulder. "He was a meddling old man, genius to some, crazy to others, and the kindest man I ever knew. He was the Emperor's equal in magic, and surpassed him by miles in wisdom." He frowned at the tree trunk behind Bill's shoulder. "He also had an annoying habit of talking in riddles and wearing colours that made your eyes water."

"He was the best Headmaster Hogwarts ever had. He led the opposition against your Emperor for many decades," Bill added when it became clear Harry wouldn’t give away anything useful in his answer. “But he was killed too soon and we were rather lost without him for a long time.”

Harry nodded. "Yep, he left horribly unclear instructions on how to proceed afterwards."

Neville shared a glance with Bill. "What do you mean?"
Harry just shrugged his shoulders. "As I said, he talked in riddles."

"He left you instructions?"

"You read his will yourself."

"Oh," Bill remembered. "Yes, I did. I didn't realise there were instructions in there."

"You see! Exactly."

The campsite fell silent after that.

"You still shouldn't use that name," Sadecki said eventually, turning back at Harry. "It draws too much attention in your line of work."

"I need to keep the bogeyman alive, don't I?"

Five days later, their solitude ended rather abruptly.

Neville was brushing his teeth in the ice-cold water of that river or another, when his eyes caught a silhouette of a person on the opposite bank. He softly whistled to alarm the others but he needn't to—Bill was already standing by his side, staring across the river. Harry and the others joined them just a second later.

It was a small boy, not older than ten. The river was shallow at this point, and at least a fifty metres wide. However, even through the distance, Neville could clearly see the wide-eyed look on the boy's face.

A moment later, a man emerged from the wall of trees behind the boy, grabbing him by the arms and hastily dragging him from their sight. Neville crouched down, trying to see underneath the low branches of the trees where they disappeared. And there it was; he'd swear he recognised the movement of several other bodies.

"Muggles?" Bill whispered.

"Yes," Harry replied without hesitation. "Runaways."

Just then, different people stepped out from the cover of the trees: two men and a woman, stepping to the very edge of the water and looking at them defiantly. The woman raised her hand as if in a greeting.

Neville looked over at Harry. He had a deep frown on his young face, eyeing the three muggles intently.

"We should leave," Sadecki whispered in urgent, "a squadron of wizards can arrive at any moment."

Bill didn't move and neither did anyone else.

Harry finally turned from the muggles and spun Bill to face him. "Is your mission to help this group of muggles? Because if it is, we can stay. If it's anything else though, we need to start driving away from here, right about now.

Bill nodded. "Let's go."

It took them a minute to pack up, running around their camp in disarray, making sure they wouldn't
leave any signs of their presence. The whole time, the three muggles were watching them from across the river.
19 May 2019, Dnieper river, former Ukraine

“Drive her as fast as you can,” Harry instructed when Gregory started the engine. “But be careful - we can’t afford a flat tire now.”

Neville sat down by the window when the caravan started shaking. He was staring at the river they were leaving behind. He felt shitty - they just left people behind to die. At least one of them was a child.

They were only Muggles, though.

“Wait!” Annie suddenly shouted from the back of the van. “We can leave some stuff behind; guns, food.”

“No,” Sadecki interrupted her. “Keep driving,” he barked at Gregory. “Our things would be found: and wizards would investigate. They would start tracking us.”

“There must be a way to help them,” Annie insisted. “They were asking us for help.”

“They saw the Muggle equipment - they’d be running if they thought we were wizards,” Neville guessed.

“There must be a way we can help them,” Annie repeated, louder.

Sadecki turned to her, agitated. “Yes, there is a way; we can turn around and give them a lift back to the slums. Or, we could take them to the Crossing and try to smuggle them through the Curtain. In either way, we would surely be found and your bloody mission compromised.”

Annie growled at him in frustration. She looked over at her leader: “Bill?”

Bill was sitting next to Neville, staring out of the window at the disappearing river behind them. He sighed. “They are just a small group of Muggles, Annie. There are not more important than what we are trying to do here. We will keep driving.”

Neville looked away from him, his stare landing straight at Harry who stayed suspiciously quiet throughout the whole exchange. “What will happen to them?”

“They will die,” Harry said distractedly. He seemed lost in thoughts, his eyes half-closed.

Neville looked back through the window; the river was almost too far to see now. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forget their faces.”

“Oh don’t be so melodramatic!” Harry loudly exclaimed. “You will forget them—you will see many more Muggles die uselessly, and all their faces will blur together.” That statement was met by stunned silence.
Harry’s face softened when he thought back on what he said. “That was probably crude. But it doesn’t mean that it’s not true. You will see a lot of Muggles die and you won’t be able to help them all. All you need to do to feel better is remember they are just Muggles. And Muggles got us into this mess in the first place, didn’t they?”

“That child had nothing to do with the Betrayal Bombing some eighteen years ago!” Annie pointed out, her voice cold.

“Nor did many good wizards, and they still died in the flames,” pointed out Bill. “None of it matters now, though. We have our orders.”

Bill’s tone was clear: this was the end of the discussion.

Harry got up from his seat. “Let me drive from here,” he muttered to Gregory.

Three hours of hectic driving later, they were passing through the suburbs of one city or another, when Harry suddenly pulled up to the side of the road.

“We’re being followed,” he said into the silence left by the killed engine.

“The army?” Bill asked.

“I don’t think so. They’re tailing us—the army would have stopped us right away,” Harry said, walking to the cabinets with weaponry and opening one by one. “My bet is other scavengers.”

“What’s your plan?” Bill asked, watching Harry move purposefully around the caravan.

“I need all men outside with me. Put as many weapons on show as possible - but no wands,” Harry looked up into their faces. None of the men shaved in the days on the road, letting the beards hide their features. “Remember: you are Muggles, and you are my slaves. Don’t look into anyone’s eyes and don’t speak—at all.

“Annie—you need to stay inside. Don’t show your face.” Harry handed her a rifle from one of the cabinets. “Watch our backs but don’t shoot unless I tell you so—I mean it. If anyone dies here, our cover is blown.”

Neville quickly took off his jacket, showing off his gun belt with two guns on each side. He took a shotgun out of its holster, and put a belt with clips over his shoulder. He followed Harry outside and stopped at his side. Bill, Sadecki, and Gregory joined them a second later.

They were facing the empty road behind the caravan. Neville couldn’t see nor hear anything. “Where did you see them?” he whispered to Harry.

“Quiet,” Harry barked at him. “Have your weapons ready, but don’t point at anyone until I tell you.”

They stood in silence for another minute which seemed like a full hour to Neville. Finally, a faint roar of car engines reached their ears and half a minute later a moving van appeared out of the bend some five hundred meters away from them. It was followed by a jeep, and then another and then a massive tank track.
Harry swore under his nose. “Spread wider,” he hissed. “Guns down. When I tell you, point your guns at the man who’s talking. Don’t mind anyone else.”

Neville moved a few steps aside, his finger on the trigger. He longingly thought of his wand, stashed away in Annie’s backpack behind him.

The convoy stopped some hundred meters away from them. The doors of all the cars flew open and men started pouring out of them. Neville took a quick count: fifteen men, all but one armed.

They started slowly approaching, with a tall man in the lead. He was the only one without a visible weapon.

“Harry, my friend!” the man shouted from afar. “What a jolly little group of mutts you gathered this time!”

“Don’t aim before I tell you,” Harry hissed quietly one more time before he stepped forward. “Albert, what a coincidence,” he said evenly, meeting the leader in the middle of the road.

The man looked haggard; they all did. Obviously on a road for too long, they were unwashed, their clothes in tatters, their faces hollow and thin from hunger. The man in the front fared much better than the rest - he was clean-shaved and a bit plump - but his clothes were sweaty and dusty from the road, too.

He offered his hand which Harry accepted and shook twice. “You lot look like shit,” he said to Albert’s face.

“You wound me,” the man retorted in good humour. “We didn’t have much luck this run yet. This land is barren. But you all look fresh enough.”

“We’ve just started,” Harry shrugged. “Haven’t found much either, though.”

“Well, then I’m sure glad we’ve met. Let’s do some old-fashioned swapping!”

Harry chuckled. “What would you have to swap?”

“Come on, you know the common courtesy between fellow troops: I have a nice bird I’m willing to trade for that pretty face I see hiding in your van.”

The Albert guy pointed at their caravan. Neville didn’t have to turn to know he was pointing at Annie hiding behind a window. Neither did Harry. “Mine’s fresh. I bet your girl is hardly able to stand by now,” Harry said flatly.

“Nothing that a bath wouldn’t handle. But show me the rest of yours and I might be even persuaded to give you two of mine: after all, it’s the novelty that counts, right? Throw in a bottle or two and you’ve got ‘self a deal.”

Harry stayed silent for a few seconds. “Nah,” he dismissed the offer, “no offense, Albert, but I wouldn’t touch anything you’ve been in with a foot long stick.”

Albert’s eyes hardened. “You know the tradition, Harry—and I know you have your manners.”
“Look—I’m all up for tradition but I can’t be totally unreasonable.”

“Alright, alright,” the man backed away. “If swapping doesn’t work for you, how about some quick borrowing? We can camp together, share a meal and share the girls for a few hours.”

Harry stared at the man for a long moment, his face unreadable. “Not interested,” he said in the end.

Albert stepped away from him, his crooked smile disappearing. “You always thought you were something better than the rest of us,” he sneered at Harry. “Okay, if you don’t want to be friends, we don’t have to be friends. Pay up then, for crossing my territory.”

Harry laughed at that. “There’s no such thing as your territory, Albert. This wasteland has always been free for all.”

Albert’s eyes left Harry’s face and swept to Neville and the others standing behind. Neville quickly averted his gaze and looked back at Harry just when Harry started slowly raising his arm, stopping with his gun aimed at Albert’s forehead.

The reaction was immediate. The next second, all fifteen enemy guns were aiming at Harry. Neville’s arm twitched as it moved on its own volition but he stopped before he actually raised his shotgun, remembering Harry’s instructions.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” Albert whispered with false remorse, “you know better than trying to shoot me.”

Neville could see Harry’s calm profile smirk back. “One bullet wouldn’t probably get through that trinket of yours, but how about several at the same time? Gentlemen, would you care to join me?”

Neville took that for the sign they were waiting for and readily aimed his shotgun at Albert. He saw the enemies’ guns shift with the corner of his eye and he could sense some of them aimed at him back. He didn’t look away from Albert.

Sweat broke at his neck, running down his spine. His shotgun didn’t waver, though. The incantation for a shield charm was on the forefront of his mind. It wouldn’t do much without a wand but it was the only defence he had.

“You’ve trained your dogs well,” Albert growled, his eyes jumping from one gunpoint to another. When his eyes met Neville’s this time, Neville didn’t look away. “They will all die with you, then.”

“Probably,” Harry conceded. “But you will die for sure if anyone starts shooting.”

Harry left that sentence to hang in the air. Neville was watching the man’s eyes, seeing clearly all the thoughts that were running through his head. Albert was about to reach a decision but Harry didn’t let him.

“Drive away, Albert,” Harry said abruptly. “And keep on driving.”

And the man listened. He gestured to his men. “Get back to the cars,” he barked at them. “As you want Harry, we will get out of your way.”
The men jumped into their cars, started the engines and brought one jeep to a stop behind Albert. He didn’t speak again, slowly getting into his seat whilst guns were still aiming at Neville and others through the car windows.

They started driving away but no one from Harry’s group put their guns down.

“Bring the car around, Annie,” Harry suddenly shouted. They heard steps from the van and then the engine roared to life.

“Would you care to explain why that worked?” Bill asked Harry whilst Annie turned the van in a big curve. Everyone still had their guns raised and pointed at the disappearing cars in the distance.

“Once we’re in the car,” Harry nodded.

They quickly jumped in. Harry immediately headed for the driver’s seat. “Let me drive. Everyone to the windows. Shoot anything that moves.”

He didn’t have to tell them twice. Annie lied down next to Gregory at the back, rolling down the windows there. Neville and Sadecki took the sides. Bill sat down next to Harry who quickly put the van into motion.

“So it didn’t work?” Neville heard Bill asking.

“It worked for now. But they are coming back,” Harry said without hesitation.

“Right away?”

“If I have to guess, they’ll let us relax first. They’ll wait for dark.”

“Are you sure?” questioned Bill.

“No,” Harry briskly replied. ”That’s why I said kill everything that moves.”

“And are you sure they are coming back?”

“They are desperate and they see us as easy pickings.”

“He doesn’t know you are a wizard?” Bill guessed.

“No. I’ve worked very hard on my reputation as a useless squib.”

“I see,” Bill said. “And they outnumber us. Why didn’t they try to kill us already?”

Harry chuckled. “You surprised him. Remember those slaver’s bracelets I gave you? They can force a command out of a Muggle but the Muggle can fight the command off if it endangers his life. You looked like my slaves but you didn’t care about your lives: you kept aiming at Albert although you would be shred to pieces by the others’ bullets. He didn’t expect that.”

“So why didn’t we shoot him, then?” Bill questioned.

“We would be shred to pieces by the others’ bullets.”
“Reasonable,” Bill conceded. “And you mentioned he had a trinket? Some sort of enchantment?”

“He has an enchanted pendant that he thinks makes him invincible. It could maybe shield a bullet or two at best.”

Bill nodded to himself. “But we don’t want to activate the magic of it anyway, I presume. Does he have anything else magical?”

“I highly doubt it. He’s an almost squib himself. Also, he has a warrant over his head: if he ever had a wand, it’s broken by now.”

The van hit a big bump, shaking everything inside and silencing the conversation for a bit.

“There’s a very small chance he’ll ever report us to any authority but I wouldn’t like him talking to anyone about meeting us here, anyway,” Harry said afterwards.

“So you want to kill him either way?” Bill guessed.

“Yes,” Harry answered without hesitation.

“How do you want to do it?”

“Annie will have to do it. We might have to pretend to give her up so she can get close enough to annul the amulet.”

“Are you hearing this, Annie?” Bill shouted.

“Yes, boss,” she grumbled back.

“You okay with that?”

“Ecstatic.”

Harry actually laughed at her tone.

“And what about the other fifteen guys? How do you want to deal with them?” Bill carried on with the questioning.

“Hopefully, we won’t need to kill more than two or three of them. The rest should stop caring once their master’s dead.”

“How do you want to cover it up?” Sadecki chimed in from behind Neville. “If someone starts investigating, they’ll find out we were here.”

They all fell silent after that.

“A mutiny?” Neville suggested.

“All slaves wear the bracelets: there hasn’t been a mutiny since the bracelets were invented,” Sadecki pointed out.

Neville didn’t have any other bright ideas. He turned back to the window, watching the suburbs
past by. He had seen it before, he realised.

“Harry, are you driving us back to the river?” he asked.

Harry grinned at him, turning away from the road for a second. “You wanted to help those poor buggers. Now you get a chance.”

They had some three hours of driving in front of them before they would reach the river again. They spent the time devising their plan.

“How do you know where to find the Muggles? It will have been more than six hours since we saw them this morning,” Annie questioned Harry.

“They’re on foot and they don’t have a map. They’ll be following the river, and they can’t get too far.”

“How do you know they don’t have a map?”

“They wouldn’t be stupidly following a river if they had one.”

They arrived at the river bank just before sundown. Harry found a road to take along the river upstream and stop after another thirty minutes of driving. They parked the van at a small clearing right at the river bank, surrounded with pine trees from the remaining sides. They couldn’t give Albert a better place to ambush them.

Harry, Annie, Bill, and Neville were pretending to set up a camp as every other night. The only difference was that they were armed to the bone and wearing kevlar vests that Harry managed to dig out from under the bed in the van.

He also produced an inflatable boat. Sadecki and Gregory were just getting it ready at the bank.

“What if they won’t want to go?” Sadecki asked Harry before setting off to cross the water.

Harry laughed at that. “Oh, they will. But if you want to make sure, just drop the name Popović at the start of the conversation.”

“Who’s Popović?”

“Mafia scum from the slums,” Harry explained. “A true son of a bitch but the only authority the Muggles have left to listen to.”

Sadecki sat the boat on the river and Gregory climbed in. Gregory got a kevlar vest, too, and also a massive sniper rifle and a night vision scope. They started rowing for the opposite bank.

“Do you know this Popovich guy?” Bill asked.

“I do business with him occasionally. He’s also the one who’ll register your wands.”

“That’s why we are headed to the slums?”

“Yes.”
They stopped talking after that and started listening for any noises in the background. Harry went on cooking dinner, heating up way too much kidney beans for just a pretend meal. Neville was not in any condition to fake casualness and sat stiffly in his chair. Bill threw a book at him. “At least stare at that.”

Neville opened the book on a random page and put his feet up on the fallen trunk they dragged over for a possible cover. Neville hoped it would prove unnecessary.

Minutes ticked by and they didn’t hear anything strange. Their gas lamps were softly humming, illuminating them for everyone to see whilst the trees around them were buried in darkness.

And then Harry suddenly stopped stirring the beans and turned to the rest of them. “They’re here.” He turned off the gas cooker.

Neville looked up from his book, gazing into the black of the surrounding forest. The light of their lamps reached only the first row of the tree trunks and beyond that, everything lay in absolute darkness. Could Harry simple hear them?

A second later, a gunshot sounded. Next to Neville, Harry suddenly grumbled - a bullet hit his chest.

He fell from his chair onto the ground. “Told you they wouldn’t go for a headshot,” he wheezed out. “The stage is yours.”

Then he stopped moving entirely.

“Well, well, well, don’t you lot look a bit lost without your master?”

Albert’s voice came from their right, away from the river.

Neville, Annie, and Bill stood in front of Harry’s body, their guns aimed into the darkness of the trees around them, feeling utterly exposed in the lights of the lamps around them.

Neville could hear many steps approaching them. Breathe.

“But you look in good condition—Harry always had a good eye for his dogs. Drop your guns now, and I’ll let you join my pack.”

Bill put his weapon down and let it fall on the ground. Annie and Neville followed his suit. They waited for Albert and his group to enter the lit clearing. They did so ten seconds later, Albert first and then all fifteen of his men, cornering them in between their caravan and the river.

“Harry was right—you are very fresh indeed, my dear. And lovely, too,” Albert crooned, staring at Annie. She had her head bowed and her hands were shaking. If Neville knew her well, it was from anger. But to an outsider, she looked frightened and demure, playing her role well.

Albert didn’t approach her straight away. Instead, he came to stand over Harry’s body. “You’ve always thought you were better than the rest of us, you stupid squib. Well, it seems you were not that invincible after all.”
And then he proceeded to kick him. Hard. Several times. Neville winced just watching it.

“Oh, fuck it!”

The grumble came from low below. The next moment, Harry was moving again. He rolled on his back, grabbed Albert’s offending leg and swung him to the ground.

Harry’s sudden resurrection shocked everyone into stillness. Even their team - this was not going according to their plan. Bill recovered quickly, though. “Annie, now!” he shouted.

Annie was already moving, launching herself at Albert. Neville dropped to the ground, picked up his gun and rolled for the nearest cover: the front wheel of their caravan.

All that movement woke up their enemies and the bullets started flying. As Harry said, none of them were any good at aiming; the shots went all over the place. Neville was firing blindly back, with most of his body hidden behind the tire. The bullets were shredding it to pieces, the escaping air hissing into his ears.

Oh Merlin, how he missed a clean magical duel!

“Stop!”

Harry’s shout came from Neville’s left, going so loudly over the sound of the gunshots, it almost seemed like Harry used a Sonorus.

It didn’t stop their enemies, though. They kept on firing.

“I said stop or we will snipe every one of you idiots!”

That seemed to give them a pause. In that short silence, a single gunshot came over the water. Neville didn’t see if it hit anyone but that was beside the point.

Excellent timing, Gregory. Neville knew his friend was lying somewhere in the dark on the other bank.

“Now, that’s better,” Harry commented into the resulting silence. “Your master is dead and I have no reason to kill any more of you. Drop your guns, and help yourselves to some beans.”

It took them a moment but then Neville heard several thuds. He deduced it was the sound of their guns hitting the ground.

“Good. Come out, everyone. Time to clean this mess and leave.”

Neville took a moment to compose himself before he listened to Harry’s orders. When he rolled from underneath the caravan, all men were sitting on the ground in a half circle under Harry’s watchful eyes.

Neville assessed the damage: there were four bodies lying on the ground, one of them Albert himself. Harry wasn’t standing exactly straight—probably the aftereffects of the vicious kicks into his stomach—but he didn’t show any signs of other injuries. Annie and Bill were sitting on the ground behind the fallen trunk. This side of the log was shredded into splinters from the many
bullets but it obviously held true. Well, not entirely— there was a lot of blood on Bill’s shoulder.

“Just splinters,” Bill said when he noticed Neville’s concerned look. “In any case, I’m getting tired of my team getting shot at when Harry’s plans go awry.”

“Silence,” Harry barked at them. “When I need your opinion, I’ll ask for it, mutt.”

Oh, they were still putting up a performance. Bill’s face went red but he lowered his eyes.

Harry obviously had devised another plan by now because he was back in charge. “Annie, take care of Bill’s shoulder. Neville, go gather their guns,” he turned to the Muggles now. “You two, go fetch your women and anyone else that you left behind. Is anyone hurt? Annie, pass me the second med kit. You! You look like your hands are stable enough: go over your friends and clean any wounds you find. You two, drag the bodies away from the clearing. You—go heat up the beans. You three—there’s a spare tire at the back of the caravan. Change the front wheel.”

It was the promise of food and the mundane orders that turned a group of trigger-happy men into a meek lot. They all listened to Harry’s commands as it was the most natural thing to do. When everyone got up to their tasks, the clearing was suddenly full of movement. Only two men were left to kneel in front of Harry. Neville’s attention was split between watching them and searching for the fallen guns around the clearing.

One of the Muggles raised his arm towards Harry, palm up. The slaver’s bracelet caught the light of the nearby lamp. “Master?” the Muggle asked, his tone levelled with resignation.

Harry didn’t act immediately. Then he shook his head. “No. I have no need for you.”

The man looked confused. “I don’t understand,” he asked in very accented English.

“You’ll have a different task—and you don’t need to be bound to me for that.”

That only seemed to bring more confusion to the man’s face. Harry didn’t explain further, though. “How long have you been with Albert?” he asked instead.

“Almost a year.”

“Hm. He was not a good man.”

The muggle shook his head. “No, he was not.”

“Who was with him the longest?”

The Muggle looked around and pointed at two blond men moving the corpses away. They had similar features - probably brothers. Harry nodded his head in acknowledgment.

At that moment, two girls in shackles arrived at the camp.

Neville’s stomach clenched when he saw the condition they were in. They were clearly malnourished, thin and dirty, and very wobbly on their feet. They both looked terribly young although he couldn’t see their faces—their hair covered all their features. He was about to jump to their help when he saw one almost fainting. Harry stopped him. “Finish your task and then fetch the pliers for their chains.”
Harry put the girls to work on the beans and ordered them to serve everyone a bowl. Neville frowned at that—the girls needed to eat first. But he wasn’t to break their charade to argue with Harry about it.

And just like that, Harry turned a battle scene into an efficient camping site. In less than five minutes, the bodies were cleared to the side, the guns were piled underneath one of the lamps and the biggest wounds were bandaged.

Harry was watching the activity from the middle of the clearing and because Neville was carefully watching him, he noticed that Harry was paying close attention to the girls serving beans to Albert’s men. They shied away from all of them but when it came to the two blond brothers, they visibly shook.

When everyone had sat down with their dinner, Harry turned to Annie. “Take them down to the river. Help them as much as you can.”

She nodded, disappeared inside the caravan for a minute and returned with a packed bag - probably full of her clothes and toiletries.

“Bill, go check the engine for any gunshots. Neville, heat up some more food. We’re expecting more people.”

Two minutes later, the first inflatable boat arrived.

Sadecki had it packed to the brim with Muggles: eight of them piled out of the boat and onto the bank right next to their camp.

“Seven more,” Sadecki said simply and turned the boat back from where he came.

All the Muggles were adults, none of the children they had seen. There were men and women both, looking even more haggard and tired than Albert’s former crew.

A ripple went through the men now; they recognized the newcomers for the runaway Muggles that they were. A new unease settled over them. Harry paid them no mind, though. He gestured to the pot of beans and spoke to the newcomers. “We have enough food for everyone. Help yourselves.”

None of them moved at first, looking at a tall woman in their midst. Only when she gently nodded did they descend on the food. Neville filled up their very last dishes and went to collect some empty ones back from Albert’s men. He noticed the panic in their eyes—they were afraid to be here with the runaways.

Meanwhile, Harry started talking with the tall Muggle. “Have I seen you before?”

The woman nodded. “I used to have a car shop in the slums, in Belgrade. I’ve worked on your caravan once. I’m Petra.”

Harry nodded in remembrance. “You had a job—you must have been doing fine. Why would you run?”

Petra looked over at one of the men by the lamps. “Our daughter is an odmienie. We didn’t have a
choice.”

Neville got confused by the strange word but Harry obviously knew it. “Why didn’t you ask Popović for help?”

“I didn’t trust a Bosnian with help,” Petra said rather sheepishly.

Harry rolled his eyes. “That war ended thirty years ago. Since then, a bigger war has put you all into misery, Serbians and Bosnians both. Why don’t you focus on that one instead?”

Petra agreed. “I was a fool. I asked Horvat instead.”

“Horvat is a treacherous son of a bitch.”

“I know that now,” the Muggle sighed. “I had some gold saved so I paid him for cars and equipment. Both cars broke at the same time two days into our journey.”

“And the equipment?”

“All disappeared a day later: maps, our compass, rifles - all gone all of a sudden.”

“How long ago was that?” Harry asked.

“Five days now.”

“And you haven’t had any encounters since then?”

“We haven’t seen anyone until you this morning.”

“Hm. Whoever’s hunting you must be quite old-fashioned about it, otherwise they wouldn’t take this long,” Harry assessed. “They probably don’t even have a tracer on you, following your footsteps instead. That’s why they didn’t want you in cars.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know what it means or how it matters.”

“It means they like the sport of it, the adrenaline. And it matters because they will let you put up a fight.”

“We have no weapons to fight with.”

“I can give you weapons,” Harry said slowly. “And I will give you men, too.”

When Albert’s men realised what Harry’s plan for them was, they rose in an uproar.

“I’m not going to get myself killed for some runaways!”

“Let’s just kill them all and return to the slums.”

Harry didn’t try to silence their shouts. Instead, he calmly walked to the man who proposed the killing. He was one of the blond brothers.
Harry grabbed his hair, pulled him up to his knees and then shot him in the chest. He was dead the next second. Harry grabbed the man’s brother by his throat before the Muggle had a chance to launch at him. Harry put the gun to the man’s forehead.

“Anyone else has any bright ideas?” he asked into the resulting silence. No one answered. “Good.”

Harry turned his eyes back to the man in his grip. “You’ll find more peace where you are going.” And then he shot him too.

Harry turned to face the shocked crowd. “I was going to kill them anyway,” he explained to no one in particular. “They were brutes. I wasn’t going to let brutes travel with women and children.”

“Do I have your attention now, though? Good. The situation is simple - I have no use for you lot so I have to let you go free. Your best chance of survival in this wasteland is in numbers. Your best chance to get accepted anywhere afterward is with women and children. The way I see it, you can be beneficial to each other. Besides, you have a chance to help a fellow human being for once. How long time ago was it since you could say that?”

“There’s nothing behind this wasteland,” one of Albert’s men said. “We have nowhere to go.”

“You are wrong,” Harry said. “Come over here. And you too, Petra. I’ll show you where to go.”

Two minutes later, when the inflatable boat arrived with the second half of the Muggles and Gregory with his sniper rifle, Harry was standing by a bright lamp, a map in hand. Next to him stood two Muggles, listening carefully to his directions.

Neville didn’t hear their conversation; he was busy feeding the four newly arrived kids with as many beans as they could possible intake. He would ask Harry later.

Ten minutes later, they were ready to leave the muggles behind. All traces of their presence were erased. The site now looked like the runaways ambushed Albert’s crew and killed him for his cars and guns.

They gained much more than that, though: Harry left them with their camping equipment, food, lamps and several barrels of petrol. He also dug deep into his stash of weapons, leaving them with grenades and rifles. The Muggles packed it all into Albert’s van and jeeps.

Harry shook hands with Petra for the last time. “Pomoć će doći,” he said in some Slavic language Neville didn’t recognize. “Ostanite živi do tada.”

Petra grabbed his shoulder in what was clearly deep gratitude.

The next moment, Harry was ushering the wizards inside the caravan. Annie sat behind the wheel and started the engine. The car shot onto the road, considerably lighter than a few hours ago.

“So I guess we don’t need our camping equipment anymore,” Bill commented.

“No,” Harry agreed, “we don’t. Go left here, Annie. Once you get to the highway, follow the signs towards Serbia.”

“You think we’ve been hiding for long enough?” Neville asked hopefully.
“You’ve been hiding in this wasteland for long enough. It won’t be that safe anymore after tonight.”

“What’s your plan, then?”

“We’ll get your wands registered and let you get lost among wizards.”

“In the Serbian slums?”

“In the Serbian slums.”

Chapter End Notes

Beta-read by Dylan Pidge. He has my big thanks.
“What’s an odmieńce?” asked Bill a few minutes into the drive, once everyone settled down to eat some crackers. It was good to be alone in their caravan again—it felt comfortably familiar after the crowded evening they’d just had.

The atmosphere was far from relaxed, though. Bill’s voice was calm right now but Neville recognized its undertone well enough. Bill was unhappy about something and he was about to let them now. Neville had seen it before, been on the receiving end many a time himself as Bill’s subordinate. Bill was getting his facts straight before he started with the show.

“It means a changeling in Polish,” Sadecki answered before Harry could. “Why do you ask?”

“Why would that muggle called his daughter a changeling?”

“It’s what Muggles call Muggleborn wizards,” Harry explained.

“Oh,” Bill simply uttered. “They don’t really believe someone swapped their child for a fey wizard, right?” he inquired a moment later.

“No.”

Neville now remembered when he heard the word before—the Muggle woman described her child as an odmieńce to Harry. If their child was indeed a Muggleborn, they had a good reason to run.

“What is a ‘Muggleborn?’” asked Sadecki the next moment.

Four pairs of confused eyes looked at him. Only Harry seemed unfazed by the question.

“A wizard born from Muggle parents,” Harry patiently explained.

“That’s not possible,” claimed Sadecki. “Only magical blood can brood magical blood.”

“Why on Earth would you say such nonsense?” Neville blurted out. “There are thousands of Muggleborn wizards out there!”

The next moment, Neville’s eyes got wide open as he grasped what Sadecki’s ignorance meant. He looked over at Bill with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Harry’s next sentence confirmed what Neville just realised. “Don’t be too hard on Andrei, Neville—he’s never met a Muggleborn wizard in his life. As far as he knows, they don’t exist.”

“He killed them all?” whispered Bill in horror, his anger completely deflated now. “Riddle killed all Muggleborn wizards?”

“In his eyes, they are an abomination,” Harry explained carefully. “And they contradict everything
he teaches about the importance of magical blood. He can’t let them exist.”

They all fell silent. Neville felt sick.

“There was a book in Hogwarts,” Bill was remembering, “charmed to find any eleven-year-old wizard or witch in England. It wouldn’t be impossible to stretch the enchantments to the whole of Europe. Is this how he finds them?”

Harry shook his head. “They are usually found long before they reached that age. Their accidental magic shows and the neighbours tell on the family.” He took a deep breath before adding, “And that book is not in Hogwarts anymore. I took it.”

Neville and Bill exchanged glances. “When?” Bill asked.

“The night Charlie died.”

“I thought you went back for Riddle’s wand or something brazen like that,” Bill said slowly.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. “Those were the rumours. Everyone thought me crazy enough to venture back to England just to piss off Riddle. I did steal his wand, but taking the book was equally important.”

“What didn’t you tell anyone?”

“You were too busy kicking me out from the army to listen. And truthfully, I might have been a bit out of it at that time.”

Harry was not exaggerating. Neville was there when Harry got discharged for serious disregard of orders. He had been delirious from *Felix Felicis* overdose, laughing into their faces.

Bill was remembering, too. “Don’t you dare blame this on us! You were a soldier—it was your responsibility to report anything you’d done or were planning to do. But you were always above that, weren’t you? You always had your own agenda, always thought you were the only one good enough to fight our battles!”

“Who’s Charlie?” Sadecki asked softly, interrupting the shouting.

Bill took a deep breath. And then another. “Charlie was my brother,” he said in much more leveled voice.

Sadecki nodded. “And who is Riddle?”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Neville reached a decision. “Harry, how many hours before we reach the Slums?”

“Fifteen, at least.”

“Right. That should be enough time.” Neville turned to Sadecki. “Andrei, would you try to keep your mind open if we were to give you a different account of the last forty years?”

“Oh boy,” mumbled Gregory after hearing that. He got up for some more snacks.
Harry sighed and went to help him. He even fished out a bottle of whiskey from somewhere.

Neville settled down into his seat and contemplated where to start. He decided to go with a question of his own. “What do you call your Emperor?”

Sadecki frowned in confusion. “The Emperor, of course.”

“I mean, what’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have a name. He’s the Emperor,” Sadecki insisted.

Harry chuckled from across the caravan where he was busy pouring everyone a glass. “He’s planning to live forever. In his eyes, there will only be one Emperor, so why to have a name to distinguish oneself?”

“Oh okay,” said Neville slowly. “Well, he used to have many names. His first one was Tom Marvolo Riddle. He was born in England in nineteen twenty-six.”

“Oh god, how far back are you planning to go, Neville!” groaned Harry.

“As far as we need to. Stop interrupting now.”

So he told Sadecki about Voldemort’s first rise to power, about his circle of Death Eaters and the Order of Phoenix led by Albus Dumbledore who opposed them. He told him about Voldemort’s beliefs and about the violence he had used to promote them. He told him how Harry defeated Voldemort in nineteen eighty-one.

“How old are you?” blurted Sadecki, staring at Harry’s youthful face in shock.

“I was one year old when that happened,” Harry grumbled in annoyance. “It required hardly any action on my part. I just sat in my crib.”

“His mother offered her life for his,” Neville explained. “Her sacrifice protected Harry, the baby—when Riddle tried to curse him, the spell reflected and hit Riddle instead. Harry here was the first wizard to ever survive the killing curse; we all grew up calling him The Boy Who Lived.”

Harry started making muffled gurgling noises.

“Riddle was thought dead and Harry here was famous when we started Hogwarts together. The castle was different than what you are telling us now. Dumbledore was the headmaster and we had a half-giant and even a werewolf for a teacher once. The school was full of half-bloods and Muggleborns; and most of them were much brighter than me, a full-blood! Hermione Granger, Harry’s friend, was the most brilliant witch of our generation and she was a Muggleborn!

“When we were fifteen, Riddle returned back from the dead. He quickly took over the Ministry of Magic and had Dumbledore killed. The school changed much after that—it fell into the hands of Death Eaters. We tried to protect the Muggleborn children but there was not much we could do. They got abused severely. Many of them disappeared completely.”

Harry was distributing the whiskey around the caravan now. He even offered a glass to Annie who was driving. She refused.
“Meanwhile, Harry was on a run. Riddle’s newspapers called him *The Undesirable Number One* by then. We called him the *Chosen One*. When he snuck into Hogwarts one night and took it from the Death Eaters, Riddle and his army attacked the castle. Many students decided to defend her with the teachers. The Order of Phoenix came for help, too. It was not enough, though. More than a half of the castle’s defendants died that night. More than one hundred of them were younger than eighteen.

“The rest of us fled to France and Riddle took over England completely.”

Neville paused here for a second. Harry had placed a glass of whiskey in front of him and Neville gratefully took a sip.

“The rest of Europe was slowly realising that Riddle wouldn’t be satisfied with the Islands and would bring the war to their shores soon. The French government took us in, and other countries started talking to us. A couple of months later, we formed an alliance against Riddle: five magical nations put their best fighters together and created the International Magical Resistance Army—or the IMRA, or just the Resistance. Harry, Bill and I were all part of it, and Gregory’s father, too, training to be soldiers. I was on Bill’s team for years. And we were doing well, very well. In two years, we not only defended the shore but we took the offensive too—we took Ireland back.”

“And we managed to smuggle hundreds of good wizards from England, from underneath Riddle’s nose,” added Bill.

“And just when it all started looking hopeful, it all went to shit,” Harry concluded.

Neville frowned at that summarization but he couldn’t exactly argue with it. He nodded sourly instead. “My grandmother used to say that more dangerous than a victorious Dark Lord was a desperate one.”

“She was a very wise lady and one hell of a witch, your grandmother,” Harry said with a fond smile. “She joined the army in her eighties!”

Neville wasn’t really in the mood to dwell on the memories of his late grandmother. It wasn’t even a full year since she reached one hundred years and died the day after. He got back to his story. “Riddle only had a small number of able followers against the united forces of European wizards. He was formidable with a wand himself but even he couldn’t fight on that many fronts. He realised he couldn’t win in an open combat, so he chose a different tactic—his Death Eaters started targeting our families instead of the fighters.

“Many good people were still trapped on the Isles, behind the original Curtain around England and beyond the help of their relatives in exile. Riddle’s people started hunting them and putting them into Azkaban. They would torture them there for days—innocent people, many of them children. Afterward, they would send the memories of their torture to their families in France. It was soon forbidden to watch the mailed memories; nothing could break morale more easily. But even without watching them, it was enough to get the letter and know your family was being tortured. Many returned to England in those months, deserting us to save the lives of their loved ones.

Seeing how effective that tactic was, Death Eaters started kidnapping families from the continent, too. Before the Resistance could respond and get their families to safety, Death Eaters managed to snatch quite a number of them. Do you remember Hermione Granger, the Muggleborn witch from our class?
“She was regarded as a special case by the Death Eaters, being closed to Harry Potter and a brilliant witch herself. To protect her parents, she Obliviated them and sent them to start a new life in Australia. Death Eaters found them and brought them back, together with their one-year-old daughter who they had named Hermione too in their confusion. Older Hermione managed to watch the memory of their torture despite the orders. When she came out of the Pensieve, she was a different person. She hasn’t spoken a word since. She reacts violently to any display of magic around her, and she will never pick up her own wand again.”

Neville stopped there and looked apologetically over at Harry. He didn’t like bringing back these times but Sadecki needed to understand.

Harry just sipped from his glass and gestured Neville to continue.

“Harry then proceeded to watch the memory himself, and then a bunch of others, looking for clues how to get those people out. He did manage to breach Voldemort’s barrier, get to Azkaban and rescue some of the prisoners, Hermione’s mother among them. To do so though, he drunk what—four vials of Felix Felicis a day?”

“I might have gone a bit overboard there. Not the best of life choices, kids, not at all.”

Neville decided to gloss over the months that came after, when the addiction brought Harry to madness. “He was discharged from the army soon afterward and everyone got a bit depressed—he wasn’t the IMRA’s leader, but he was the face of the Resistance.

“None of it mattered in the long run, though, because several months later, the Betrayal Bombing happened. Do you know what I’m talking about, Andrei?”

Sadecki nodded.

“We came to Muggles for help. We wanted to cooperate, to form an alliance against Riddle’s England. But the Muggles got scared of the powerful magics we told them Riddle wielded and decided to get rid of all wizards instead—starting with the ones they knew. We gave them the means to contact us and through that, they somehow managed to find the IMRA’s location. That night, they attacked our camps from the sky and practically eradicated the whole Resistance. And just like that, we all lost the war and the Muggles doomed themselves. Not a single wizard has ever lifted a finger for a Muggle since then, letting Voldemort devour the rest of Europe without any more struggle, while the remaining Muggleborns and half-bloods fled behind the borders of Europe, living in exile since then.”

Neville finished his tale into a solemn silence.

“What if it wasn’t Muggles who orchestrated the Bombing?” asked Harry carefully after everyone had a quiet moment for themselves.

Bill shook his head. “I took part in the investigation. I’d wished for the Muggles to be Imperioed; I had clung to that hope till the very end. But we followed the chain of command back to the original idea—and our Legilimens found it in their leader’s brain. It was all there, the first thought and the motivation behind it. The decision was not planted and the Muggles were not under any charms.”

“Were they ever officially convicted?” Harry asked.
Bill frowned. “No. They were lynched before the trial started. But all the evidence had been gathered by then—and it would have been more than sufficient to prove them guilty.”

“And the wizards who lynched them—were they ever found?”

Neville could see Bill was getting annoyed by the questioning but he answered anyway. “No. By then, we were running out of France and didn’t have time to investigate further.”

“The whole thing is still not closed, then.”

“For me and any other wizard on the investigation team, it was closed the moment we entered the chancellor’s mind! It was all there: his fear, his confidence in their own weapons, his conviction that he was doing the right thing for his people—and even forgiveness for his own actions—for killing thousands of innocent wizards!”

Harry raised his hands in surrender. Bill’s powerful words washed over all of them, his sadness palpable.

“Is that what your organisation believes in?” Bill asked calmly after he composed himself.

Harry looked genuinely surprised. “What organisation?”

“Back with the Muggles tonight, you told them where to find help. You showed them a place on a map and you said the ‘People’ might be there.”

Harry nodded. “They call themselves People for People. It’s a group of rebels—wizards and Muggles alike. They will take the runaways in if they get to them in time.”

“Aren’t you one of those ‘People’?”

Harry shook his head. “No. But I’ve worked with them before.”

Neville put two and two together. “The Muggles you’ve smuggled out of Europe—that was organised by them?”

“Yes. They’ll most likely ask me to do it again. I won’t be able to, though, not unless I manage to bribe a new officer at the Crossing.”

They all looked at Sadecki who just shrugged. “I don’t think you’ll get lucky again anytime soon, Harry.”

“No, I don’t suppose so.”

“Would these People help if we approached them?” Bill continued asking.

Harry thought about it for a second. “It’s possible. Depends on what you wanted.”

“How much pull do they actually have?”

“Once again, depends on what you wanted. They have some people in higher places and a few able wands but they mostly have a bunch of Muggles in hiding to protect and even more to support. Because of that, they won’t be willing to do anything conspicuous.”
Bill nodded. “And once again, do they all believe that Muggles weren’t the ones who dropped bombs on the Resistance?”

Harry finished his glass of whiskey in one big gulp before answering that one. “I don’t think they all believe so. I know they all agree Muggles have suffered enough, though—no matter if some eighteen years ago one of their leaders decided to attack us or not. Maybe after you’ve been in the Empire for long enough, you might reach that conclusion, too.”

Sleeping in the caravan was not comfortable. There was only one double bed. They still managed to catch a couple of hours each, taking turns on the mattress. They made only the most necessary stops to stretch their legs and go to the loo.

By the evening, they were approaching the borders of Serbia.

“We are going to a place called Ruma. It’s some half an hour away from the capital,” Harry explained. “I wouldn’t recommend venturing to Belgrade just yet—not before you adapt a bit. And I wouldn’t recommend Annie to go there at all—it’s full of wizards of the more unsavory character and they would take the wrong kind of notice. If you want to enter the wizarding world, I’d recommend going through Hungary instead. It’s a poor region but you wouldn’t attract that much attention if you were to join the community there. The borders are a few kilometres away from Ruma.

“The man we are going to see is Popović. He’s as ruthless as the place he rules over. He will exploit you if you let him, hell, he will probably do it even if you don’t. But he won’t sell you to the Empire—which is more than what you can say about the bastards ruling the other districts.”

“What do we pay him for registering our wands?” Bill asked.

“I will have to reach into my own pocket - I still have some guns and medicine stashed from my last trip abroad.”

Once again, Bill omitted telling Harry about the bag of diamonds they brought with them in Annie’s rucksack. Probably a wise choice if Harry was already willing to pay for them.

It was completely dark by the time they finally reached the first signs of human settlements. They were driving through the familiar wastelands when suddenly their lights landed on a wall of tents, built right at the edges of the motorway. The tents turned into huts, built haphazardly from plastic and pieces of metal, supporting each other. And since then, that view hadn’t changed for the rest of the night.

Everything was dark, with no lights outside nor inside the structures. That was Neville’s first impression of the Serbian slums: no lights. And no trees. They drove across Serbia that night, entering it from the east and stopping almost at the western borders, and they hadn’t seen a single tree. It was quiet, too. There were huts literally built on their highway, but even with the car’s windows open, they didn’t hear a single sound from the outside.

Whilst they were driving through the eerie silence, Harry told them a bit more about the place. “The slums spread through six Balkan countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia in the north, Montenegro, Albania, and Macedonia in the south. The first camps were built in Serbia so that’s
why the name. No one cares about borders here anyway. There are more than fifteen different nationalities living here, with millions of Muggles forced to march here from Eastern Europe.

“There are no governments, no police forces and no armies. The only authority left are the bosses. These men rose to power for different reasons: some of them control the very little oil production that is left here. Or coal mining. Some have the only access to potable water. Popović’s power is in smuggling and trafficking.

“There are many wizards hiding among Muggles here. Mostly outlaws, with wands broken for some petty crimes, or wizards hiding from creditors or jealous husbands. They use magic around here so you will be able to too, without attracting attention to yourself. Keep it simple, though. And above all: no spells that are obviously intended to help Muggles. These get noticed pretty quickly. Sometimes, a good samaritan wannabe wanders in and starts cleaning wells and fertilizing gardens. Two days later, he’s lying dead in a ditch. Helping Muggles is not strictly illegal but that won’t stop the soldiers from making an example of you. If the need hits you, remember that there are less noticeable ways to help them.”

Harry led them to a place he called ‘Rusty’s lot’, his winter camp. “We can’t be driving the caravan around here and we can’t park it just anywhere: it would get gutted in a matter of minutes. That’s why I bought this yard and hired old Rusty to guard it. Rusty is a squib. I put some perimeter wards around the place and tied them to him. The ward responds to the innate magic in his blood and doesn’t die even if I’m gone for months on. But Rusty has no control over the wards—he can’t decide who to let through and I trust him enough not to take anything out.”

They finally stopped in front of a rusty gate.

“The ward is a very simple one, it wouldn’t stand against a semi-decent wizard. Anything fancier would get noticed, though. When you open the gate, you also open a hole in the ward—and it should be wide enough for you to walk through, Annie. If you walk through the middle of the open gate, you shouldn’t disturb any magic.”

Harry turned to them. “You don’t have to play muggles anymore. But keep your head down anyway. Come on now, let’s meet old Rusty.”

Old Rusty turned out to be a Serbian man in his seventies, with grey thin hair and a grey long beard. He must have heard the caravan approaching because he was waiting behind the gate when Harry opened the first wing. Rusty helped him with the second. Harry beckoned Gregory to drive the caravan in. And just when they were passing through the gate and through the wards, Neville felt a wave of magic for the first time in three weeks days. He closed his eyes for a second, savouring the feeling. It had been much too long.

They stopped in the middle of a courtyard. When Neville stepped out of the car, Harry was talking to Old Rusty. “…my friends. They can come and go as they please. They are new here: if they ask you anything, help them.”

“You owe rent,” the Squib said in response, his English heavily accented.

“Do I?” Harry asked. “Wait a minute, I’ll be right back.”

Harry left them to stand in the middle of the dusty lot and disappeared through one of the doors on the opposite end of the courtyard. Neville looked around. There were three cars parked in line to one wall of the yard, and next to them were four motorbikes. Three different doors led to small
structures that could be called cottages. There were no lights on apart from the beams from their caravan.

Harry was back before Neville finished his sweep of the yard. He looked different—his face had wrinkles now and his hair was greying around his ears. He transfigured his appearance to look like his older self again. Neville supposed a mature look made sense if they were to negotiate with the local mafia boss.

He also seemed somehow refreshed. His clothes were clean and his hair was shiny. Neville recognised the effects of a Scourgify and frowned in envy.

Harry noticed his glare. “I can let you settle in and clean up first,” he suggested, “or we can get your wands registered straight away.”

“Wands first,” Bill said without hesitation.

“Alright then,” Harry shrugged. “Pick a car.”

Bill turned to the assembly of vehicles. “Annie,” he said simply.

She pointed at a jeep. “That one.”

Harry nodded, reached into his pocket and made to toss her a set of keys. He stopped mid-motion. “Actually, I don’t think you should come, Annie. We will meet some wizards tonight and I don’t think you want to show your abilities to them,” he explained regretfully.

He didn’t wait for her reaction, letting Bill make the decision. He turned back to Rusty instead and reached into his pocket again. His hand came back clutching an enormous paper box. Neville’s suspicion was confirmed - Harry now had a bottomless pouch in his pocket. He squinted at the paper box—it had Marlboro written in red letters on the side.

Harry let the box fall to the ground with a heavy thud. “Is that enough?”

Rusty hesitated. “For past, yes. For future, no.”

“I’ll give you another box in a month.”

Rusty accepted that with a silent nod.

Harry turned back to them. “I’ll take a bike from here and show you the way.”

Bill decided to follow Harry’s recommendation and ordered Annie to stay behind. Gregory would stay with her. The rest of them climbed into the jeep Annie picked for them.

They watched Harry jumped on one of the motorbikes. He started the engine with a loud roar and immediately headed for the exit. When his light beam turned towards the gate, it landed on a man standing in the middle. Neville blinked, startled.

The man was leaning on a bicycle, watching them. Harry slowly approached him on his bike and stopped next to him. They started talking.

Bill turned their car’s lights on, illuminating the gate and the men in a bright glow. Harry and the
stranger turned towards them in annoyance. The guy was young, no older than seventeen. Harry said something else to him and the boy hopped on his bicycle and left through the gate. He took a right turn afterward.

Harry put his motorbike into motion too. He drove through the gate and immediately turned left. Bill followed him.

“We are loud,” Bill swore under his breath.

He was right: not only their engines were roaring into the dead of the night, but their lights were also quite noticeable. Neville was watching the huts they were passing, waiting for people to start spilling out to check the commotion. All the doors and shutters remained closed though. Apart from the boy on the bike, there didn’t seem to be anyone out on the streets.

“Where is everyone?” Neville wondered.

“Inside,” said Sadecki softly. “There’s a curfew.”

Bill turned back to look at him. “You’ve been here before?”

“Not here. A similar place, though.”

“We’re being followed,” Bill noted, looking into his rearview mirror.

Neville turned back to see another bicycle behind them. The man on it looked different than the boy before but there was no way to know for sure in the dark.

The man had no problems keeping up with them. The streets here were ridiculously narrow and the turns sharp. Bill had to drive slowly, his eyes glued to Harry’s backlight in front of them.

“Sadecki, turn around and keep your gun on the rider,” Bill ordered, not caring if Sadecki was part of their team or not.

Sadecki shifted on his seats whilst Neville took out his gun and started checking their right side for any more potential enemies.

They were in the slums for just a couple of hours but he already didn’t like the place.

Ten minutes later and nothing changed. The rider never got closer than twenty meters away from them, and no more of them turned up. Another ten minutes passed in silence and then Harry slowed down and pulled up in front of a hut that looked like any other. Bill stopped the jeep right behind him.

Bill started opening his door but Harry gestured him to stop. The next moment, the hut in front of them moved. Someone picked up the front wall and revealed the space behind it—a driveway that apparently led to another courtyard. Harry drove through and they followed.

There was a lamp standing in the middle of the yard, casting a dim light over the lot. It was the first light they saw in Serbia that wasn’t coming from their vehicles. It allowed them to see the twenty-odd men that were standing along the walls of the courtyard with machine guns aimed at them.

Neville swallowed thickly.
“They aren’t here for us,” Harry calmly said when they got out of the car. “And also, I have a wand and they know it.”

No one approached to greet them. Harry didn’t wait for anyone anyway and started marching towards an open door on their left. He obviously knew his way around.

The inside of the house looked much sturdier than its shabby exterior. They entered a bare room with wooden walls, and four more armed men guarding a door on the other side. It was dark in the room, with the only light coming through the door frame they arrived through.

Harry stopped in front of the men. “Dobro veče,” he greeted them.

The men nodded and stepped aside to allow him through. Harry opened the door and gestured Neville and others to follow him.

There was a fireplace in the room with a roaring fire—the only light in the room. There were also two men—a middle-aged man sitting behind a desk and a very old one sitting by the fireplace. The flames in it were magical.

Other than that, the room was bare. Planks of unshaved wood were marring the walls. There were no pictures nor windows to interrupt them. The surface of the desk wasn’t cluttered. There was no other furniture. Neville deduced this was not their usual place of business.

The men were both looking at them when they entered—the old one with polite curiosity, the younger with palpable annoyance. Neville stared at him back, studying him. He appeared to be in his forties, muscular and probably tall. The light from the fireplace was only partly touching his face, most of it stayed in shadows. His profile looked harsh though and his eyes looked even harsher.

The man started talking, his voice rough. “Dugo si bio-”

“English only, please,” Harry interrupted him. “My companions don’t speak Serbian.”

The man’s frown deepened. He obviously didn’t care for being interrupted. Harry didn’t mind him, though. He looked away from the men and drew his wand.

Neville noticed both men stiffened at the sight. They didn’t make a move though, waiting for Harry’s next one.

Harry simply conjured four cushioned armchairs.

Neville pondered over their lack of response. Did they know they were outmatched, or did they trust him? Or were they protected in a way Neville couldn’t see?

“You were gone for a long time,” the younger man said in accented English.

“Did you miss me?” Harry retorted cheerfully and sat down into one of the armchairs. He gestured to Neville and the others to join him.

“We have business to run,” the man all but growled.
“Me too,” Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry, I forgot my manners. Everyone, this is Popović, the mafia boss,” he gestured at the younger man, “and that is his uncle, Popović, the wizard,” he waved at the man by the fireplace. “Popović and Popović, these are my friends.”

He didn’t stress the last words but by the reaction of the two men, he might as well: their eyes zoomed on them in sudden interest. Neville realised that until then, they had been taken for Harry’s slaves—they still wore their bracelets. With his introduction, Harry just revealed them to be something else.

After a short moment of hesitation, the younger Popović acknowledged them with a curt nod. “Harry’s friends.” He turned back to Harry. “Why are they here?”

“They need their wands registered.”

Popović frowned, his eyes narrowing. “That’s simple enough; Uncle can do that for you for a few galleons. Why have you come to me with this?”

Harry smiled softly. “They need to be registered under a false identity.”

There was a sudden squeaking of a chair by the fireplace when the old wizard leaned forward. His face was fully lit by the flames, his eyes shining with new interest. He didn’t say a word, though.

The younger Popović glanced sideways at his uncle. He turned back to Harry, raising his eyebrows. “That’ll be very difficult to do.”

“I’ll lend you my hand again,” Harry said to the Muggle, but watched the old wizard, smirking at the excitement now clearly evident in the wizard’s eyes.

“Why don’t you just buy registered wands for them? It would be easier,” the Muggle inquired.

“They have perfectly fine wands already. We are not interested in buying a subpar match.”

Popović fell silent, watching Harry. “Three in total?” he asked after a moment.

Harry turned at Bill. “How many wands do you use these days?”

“Two,” Bill said quickly. “And the same goes for the rest.”


Sadecki hesitated. “I have a wand?”

Harry turned to face the Muggle again. “There you have it, then. We’ll need to register four wizards and seven wands.”

Popović frowned again. “That’s a lot.” He turned to his uncle. “Can you make that many entries into the Register at once?”

The wizard didn’t hesitate with his answer. “Not at once, not when they are all adults - that’s conspicuous enough on its own. But I can make the entries and simply file them gradually.
tomorrow.” His voice was smooth, his English perfect.

“It’s still a big risk,” the Muggle insisted.

Harry sighed. “I’ll make it worth your time. You know that well.”

Popović regarded him with calculating eyes. In the end, he nodded. “Okay.” He turned to his uncle: “Take them to your workshop and get everything ready. Harry and I will talk in the meantime.”

The wizard stood up, all smooth for his age. “Can I join you in your car, gentlemen? I will show you the way.”

Harry chuckled at that, pointing an accusing finger at the wizard “I see right through you, old man! We are perfectly fine apparating straight from here.”

“We try to limit apparation for emergencies only,” the man shrugged his shoulders.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, what do you think, Phil?” Harry turned at Bill. “Are you up for a car ride with the resident mafia wizard with some light interrogation on the side? He’ll graciously answer all your questions but remember that from every question you ask, he’ll learn two things about you.”

Harry talked long enough for Bill to recover from Harry’s sudden use of a fake name. “We can take him with us,” he said evenly.

“Alright, brave man,” Harry shrugged. “Drive ahead, then. I’ll catch up with you in a minute.”

“Left here. And then sharp right.”

Apart from giving them frequent instructions through the maze of houses, the wizard stayed suspiciously quiet. Minding Harry’s words, they stayed silent as well. Bill made Neville drive this time, obviously choosing to stay focused on Popović fully.

Ten minutes into the silent ride, Bill spoke up.

“So, is this the classic sham when your nephew looks like the one in charge whilst you orchestrate everything from the shadows?” he asked bluntly.

The man laughed. “Good gracious, don’t let my nephew ever hear you say that! Whatever gave you the impression?”

“You are a wizard, he’s a Muggle.”

“I might be able to cast spells, but my nephew possesses the ability to lead a group of desperate Muggles,” Popović patiently explained. He didn’t seem offended. That probably spurred Bill to keep probing.

“Why are you here, then? Why don’t you live among wizards?”

“I was here before the Muggles came,” Popović shrugged. “Why are you here, Mr Phil?”
Bill chose not the answer. The car fell silent again.

And it stayed like that for the remaining fifteen minutes until Popović finally signalled Neville to stop in front of a two-story building.

Unlike the rest of the architecture they’d seen so far, this house was made of bricks and was obviously taken care of. Its windows were dark like all the huts around it, though. Popović approached the front door with a wand in his hand, flicking it in intricate movements that Neville recognised as dismantling the wards around the property. When the doorknob clicked and Popović beckoned them closer, Neville felt the magic of the wards pass through him: they were keyed in now. They got out of the car, hands in their pockets, clasp ing their guns. Neville was looking at the dark cottages around them but there was no movement.

They followed Popović through the door.

Once inside, Popović switched his wand and turned on the many gas lamps and candles around, flooding the room with so much light it hurt their unaccustomed eyes. Neville blinked several times before he could take the rest of the room in.

When he did, Neville breathed out in surprise, “You’re a wandmaker!”

The room was utter chaos: there were several work desks spread across it, cluttered with piles on top of piles of wood shavings, scripts, and wax. High shelves and closets were lining the walls, filled with measuring tools and books. Any other surface was covered with crates of wooden sticks and other not that easily identifiable substances.

“I dabble in the art here and there,” the wizard said modestly. He flicked his wand one more time, levitating the numerous crates and sending them in an orderly fashion out of the room. Neville got a sudden crash of wand envy again. Not long now.

With the crates gone, the room got more spacious. Popović gestured to armchairs in the corner which were previously hiding underneath the wand-making material.

“I need to go to my shop to get the paperwork ready. Make yourself comfortable in the meantime.”

He turned his back to them. Instead of walking to the door on the other side of the room, as Neville expected, he approached one of the wardrobes along the walls and disappeared inside.

“A Vanishing Cabinet,” remarked Bill. “Clever.”

Neville agreed. It was an inconspicuous way to travel if one had to commute often. And not to mention comfortable.

Bill sighed and took a seat in one of the armchairs. Neville took it as a sign to allow himself to relax a bit too, sitting down next to him. Sadecki looked around nervously and chose to stand by the door.

“What is it?” asked Bill.

Sadecki shifted from one foot to the other, glancing around one more time before answering. “I still don’t know how they are planning to register us under a false identity. As far as I know, it’s impossible.”
“You’ve done this before, right?” Bill asked. “You’ve got your wand registered before.”

Sadecki nodded. “I was eleven. My whole family travelled with me to Warsaw to see it. There was a stage built for that purpose. A wizard ceremoniously touched my new wand and my forehead with his own wand, and made a list of parchment burst into flames. Then, there was a big banquet, and dancing and even fireworks,” he finished his story. “I doubt this will be anything like that.”

“That’s it? The wizard just touched your wand and your forehead?”

“I was eleven, I wasn’t focusing on the intricacies of the spells he used. And I haven’t seen a Registering since,” Sadecki shrugged. “Even so, I know the process is impossible to tamper with—there must be no intervention in the link between the entry, the wand, and the wizard. I have no idea how Harry plans on creating false identities for us without setting off all sorts of alarms.”

Neville and Bill exchanged a worried glance.

“They’ve done this before,” Bill argued. “They must have found a way.”

“Did you work with the Registry when you were in the Army?” Bill asked after a moment of silence. “How exactly does it work?”

“It’s a simple system. You can’t register a wizard’s magical signature as it is not tangible enough. You can identify and document the wands he uses though. All magic is being constantly recorded throughout the Empire. If a spell from an unregistered or blacklisted wand appears, it gets notice right away. There are teams of soldiers on standby to investigate anything out of ordinary.”


“They do appear on the radars but as long as their magic is not directly connected to a blacklisted wand, they are not investigated.”

“What do you mean, directly connected to a wand?” Bill asked in confusion.

“If it is a freshly enchanted object, like a Portkey, or a transfigured needle, the trace can lead to a wand that conjured the spell,” Sadecki explained. He went silent for a bit before turning fully towards them. “Can I ask something, too?”

Bill beckoned him ahead.

“Why do you have two wands each?” Sadecki spilt out.

Bill looked over at Neville, his eyebrow raised and a small smile playing about his lips. “Isn’t it always better to have a spare one available?”

Sadecki huffed impatiently. “You know that’s not what I meant. They taught us a new wand won’t work for you well if you are still using your first one.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Neville chimed in. “If you try to buy a new wand whilst you plan to still predominantly use your first one, you’ll never find a perfect match. A wandmaker once told me that the wands get jealous of each other. You see, he was a bit of an odd one but he understood
wands like no other. He explained to us that if you defeat a wizard in a duel, you gain certain respect from the wizard’s wand. In some cases, you can even gain mastership over the wand. It will never be in tune with you as a wand that has chosen you but it won’t resist you when you use it.”

Neville took out his second wand for Sadecki to see. “This used to belong to a Death Eater. It was one hell of a fight, if I can say so myself, and I won that wand fair and square. Almost everyone in the Resistance got a wand or two like that. A prize of war, if you want. We would wear them proudly, showing them off and sharing the stories of the fights.”

They all startled when the door of the Vanishing Cabinet suddenly opened. Popović stepped out, hands full with a weighing scale, ink pot and a stack of officially looking parchments. He nodded at them politely, settling all of it on one of his desks.

“Harry still hasn’t arrived?” Popović asked redundantly, his eagerness from before showing again.

Bill apparently noticed too, because in the next moment, he openly asked, “Why so excited?”

Popović looked up from his parchments, momentarily surprised. Then he chuckled. “Am I that obvious?”

“Yes,” Bill simply said.

Popović shrugged his shoulder. “It’s not that often that you get to watch someone perform the impossible.” He frowned. “Harry doesn’t share his secrets willingly. I take every chance I get to study his methods - who knows, one day I might crack the theory behind his magic.”

A minute later, they finally heard a roar of a motorbike approaching. It stopped outside the house and then Harry was opening the door. He didn’t knock, nor did he have to wait for Popović to key him into the wards—he had been here before.

“Let’s do it,” he said instead of a greeting. His face looked tired. “Who’s first?”

Bill got up after only a short moment of hesitation. He reached inside his pocket and took his first wand out. Popović beckoned him to place it on his weighing scale.

He touched Bill’s wand with the tip of his own and then shortly dipped it into the ink pot. He proceeded to rest his wand on one of his parchments. “Beech, twelve inches, dragon heartstring,” Popović dictated in an even voice. Spidery writing started to spread from the tip of the wand onto the list of parchment.

He turned to Harry with unconcealed anticipation. “And now, the wizard.”

Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation at Popović intensive stare. He raised his arm. “Hold my hand,” he asked Bill softly.

Bill did so but Harry shook his head. “With both of yours.”

When Bill’s hands were clasping Harry’s palm in between them, Harry nodded in satisfaction. He looked into Bill’s face. “This won’t be pleasant.”

Bill set his face in determination and gestured for Harry to proceed.
Harry closed his eyes. His body became still apart from his eyelids—they were softly fluttering as if he was reading something at the back of them.

He stood like that for a whole minute, not giving any indication that he was actually performing magic. Neville was watching Bill’s face but his team leader didn’t seem to be in any sort of discomfort.

Another minute passed. Just when Neville started getting fidgety, Bill suddenly crunched forward, almost crumbling to the floor if it wasn’t for Harry holding his hands firmly. He made a shortling sound.

Neville almost rose from the armchair but stopped himself in time before he could intervene. His skin rose into goosebumps, even though he couldn’t feel a single wisp of magic coming out from Harry or Bill.

“He’s ready,” Harry grunted. His eyes were still closed but there was sweat on his forehead now. Neville noticed how taut his arms were: he was clearly supporting most of Bill’s weight to keep him standing.

Popović quickly approached them. He raised his wand to Bill’s forehead and tapped it once. Then, he touched Bill’s wrist, this time drawing a drop8 of blood. Neville recognised the steps of an identification spell.

“Draw enough blood for two wands,” Harry reminded him through clenched teeth.

Popović closed his eyes in concentration and then return his wand onto the parchment. He took a deep breath and solemnly pronounced: “Gideon Prewett.”

Neville’s eyes went wide after that statement, his heart beating with excitement. Harry did it: he changed Bill’s identity—and with it his magical signature. Popović was right - Harry had just performed the impossible, right in front of their eyes.

Whatever Harry was doing, he broke the spell now. Bill took a sharp breath, gasping for air. His eyes flew open, meeting Harry’s gaze. They weren’t full of awe as Neville’s, though; in Bill’s eyes, there was fear instead.

Harry quickly clasped Bill’s elbow with his free hand. “We’ll talk about this later. Alone,” he implored.

Bill was still breathing hectically. Harry led him backwards to an armchair and sat him down. He freed his right hand, a wand suddenly appearing in his palm. He swished it imperceptibly, conjuring a steaming cup of hot chocolate. It floated in front of Bill. “Drink,” Harry ordered firmly. Bill was too shaken to break any arguments and immediately took a sip.

Harry reached into Bill’s pocket, taking out his second wand. He tossed it at Popović whilst still keeping Bill upright with his other arm. “Make an entry for this one, too.”

Popović prepared another parchment, touching his wand to it. “Gideon Prewett,” he declared again. His wand clearly still had enough of Bill’s blood left, because the next second writings appeared on
the parchment. Popović placed Bill’s second wand on the scale but Neville’s attention shifted back
to Bill when he felt him shudder next to him.

“Will he be okay?” Neville asked, worried about his friend.

Harry nodded resolutely. “Yes. The aftershocks will disappear soon. He just didn’t expect to hear
that name, that’s all,” he whispered so softly only Neville and Bill could hear. “You won’t
probably expect yours either.”

With that, Neville realised it was his turn now. That thought didn’t exactly excite him.

Resolved to the plan, he took out his wands from the inside pocket of his shirt. He looked at Harry,
noticing the sheen of sweat on his forehead. “Should we do it sitting down?”

Harry blinked. “I never thought of that.” His face turned sheepish. “I suppose it will make things
easier. Josef,” he turned to Popović, ”take his wands.”

Neville passed them to the wizard, leaned back in his chair and tried to relax his tense muscles
whilst Popović weighted his wands.

Harry sat down on his heels in front of Neville’s armchair and offered him his left hand. Neville
clasped it in both of his. Harry’s hand was cold and clammy. There was something solid in
between their palms, too—a ring, by the feel of it.

Neville watched Harry’s quivering eyelids. He tried to loosen his muscles but there were all
clenched in anticipation of pain he now knew was coming. He closed his eyes and focused on his
breathing instead.

A moment later, he got hit by a glacier.

At least that’s how it felt when his body went suddenly icy cold and frigid. He lost control of all
his muscles, even his lungs. For a few seconds, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see, he couldn’t
feel. Not even pain.

Oddly enough, he could still hear. “He’s ready,” Harry’s distorted voice sounded from a great
distance.

An eternity later, he heard Popović’s voice from even further away. “Hendrick Anthony
Macmillan.”

And then the cold was gone and air rushed back into his lungs. He choked on it first and then
started heaving. His limbs felt incredibly heavy and sore, as if he’d just been through a vigorous
exercise routine. He sunk deeply into his armchair, a shudder of cold going through his body.

Someone placed a warm cup into his palm. He obediently took a sip, relishing the feeling of
warmth the hot chocolate was leaving in its wake.

With the warmth came thoughts, and then memories.

“Hendrick Macmillan?” he repeated softly, his voice hoarse. Could it be a coincidence?

Macmillan was his mother’s maiden name. Hendrick was the name of her father. And Anthony
was his middle name. No, that was no coincidence.

Harry somehow managed to change his magical signature to that of his late grandfather.

He opened his eyes and looked up at Harry, his mind full of questions.

Harry was downing his own cup of chocolate. When he emptied it, he didn’t even look at Neville. Instead, he turned to Sadecki.

“One more.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas!
This is my belated present, beta-read by Dylan Pidge as usual - my big thanks!

Finally, we have some magic back! Let me know what you think of the magic Harry is using. There are some hints ;)
Until next time, ahoj!
Cherchez la Femme

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

21 April, the city of Ruma, inside the Serbian Slums

Three hours later, Bill, Sadecki, and Neville were back at Rusty's Lot. They sat around a kitchen table in Harry's apartment, each of them nursing a glass of whiskey. Officially, they were celebrating having their wands back. Unofficially, there were all still shaken by the experience of being under Harry's magic and were simply in need of a strong drink.

Harry wasn't with them anymore. He left shortly after Sadecki's wands were registered.

"I've got some work to do," he had said simply. "I'll be here tomorrow to register Gregory's wands but then I'll be gone for a few days. You're welcome to stay in Rusty's Lot as long as you want. Feel free to use whatever you find there."

He hadn't given them any more explanation than that. He had left them instructions, though. "If you need anything, come find Popovic here at his workshop. He can help you settle in. Trust whatever he says you shouldn't do; but verify everything he says you should do," he warned them, not caring that Popovic himself stood right next to him, listening. "His nephew will have you followed, probably claiming it's for your own protection. That excuse is actually quite valid, so try to tolerate it. I should be back in a week or two. If you decide to leave before then, that's your call."

He was gone after that, not giving them a chance to ask or complain about the sudden change of plans. His departure was abrupt but to tell the truth, it wasn't entirely unwelcome. Neville actually suspected Bill from drinking to toast the reprieve from Harry's somehow overbearing company.

"Who was Hendrik McMillan?" Bill asked Neville when they were on their second glass.

He asked who he was, not is. The way he shaped the question made Neville think Bill suspected the same about Harry's magic as Neville himself did. "My grandfather, from my mother's side. He died when I was a kid," Neville answered.

Bill nodded evenly like he expected an answer of that sort. He turned to Sadecki. "And who was Josef Vránský?"

Sadecki frowned. "I think he was our old butler. I never knew him by his whole name."

Sadecki's family was rich, then. Neville had suspected so for a long time.

However, it obviously wasn't that piece of information that caught Bill's interest. He looked surprised when he asked: "So he wasn't family, then?"

Sadecki shook his head in confusion. "No, why?"

"Gideon Prewett was my uncle. Neville here got his grandfather's name. I simply assumed yours would be a family member too," Bill explained. "Either way," he added after a moment, "Harry used some pretty dark magic to dig those dead names out."

"I didn't feel anything though," objected Sadecki. "I was standing right next to you but I didn't feel any dark magic coming out of Harry."
"Nor did I," Neville realised. "I didn't sense any magic."

Bill nodded, agreeing with their observations. "He must have been blocking it. Someone might have noticed and investigated otherwise."

"How do you think he did it?" Neville asked both of them.

Bill shrugged his shoulders. "I know it's possible to block one's magical signature. I've never heard of forging one, though. But the fact that all those names belong to dead men doesn't make trusting Harry any easier. He can be a sly son of a bitch when he wants to. I wouldn't be surprised to find out he's been dallying with necromancy now too, to get his way."

Hearing that word said out loud made them all fall silent for a moment. It also gave Neville an idea.

"Necromancy is based on soul magic, right?" he began slowly. "It could explain the magic Harry was able to do around Annie. And in the dead zones."

Bill looked up sharply at him. "What do you mean?"

"Harry's face," Neville pointed out. "Whatever magic is causing him to stay young, it doesn't get blocked in the dead zones, or by Annie. And the only magic the annulling field is ineffective against is blood and soul."

Neville didn't know much about necromancy, let alone how it was practised. And the little he did know was probably tinted by a lot of stigma against it. He learned a thing or two about dead zones, though. The Resistance did an extensive amount of testing when they first appeared. The same with Annie.

"That's not the only magic Harry's been using," Bill suddenly said. "For a while now, I've been wondering… His awareness of certain things, his confidence—it wasn't entirely natural. No matter how good of a scout you are, a naked eye can't spot a wire from fifty metres away. Not from a moving bike, at least."

Bill was right. Neville remembered that moment well. And there were others. "Last night, he knew when Albert and his men arrived to ambush us. I didn't see or hear anything, though. Did you?"

Bill and Sadecki shook their heads. "The forest was pitch black, and they were good at keeping silent," Bill commented. "I doubt anyone could have spotted them."

"He kept changing directions," Sadecki chimed in. When Neville and Bill looked confused, he elaborated. "When we were in the wastelands, he would lead us in circles, or sometimes turn us around completely. I thought it was just to keep our movements unpredictable for anyone tracking us. But now, I wonder. One morning, he told me to drive to this city, and ten minutes later he comes back and tells me to turn around. Was he avoiding someone? The place is full of other scavengers; it's not empty enough for us to be driving around for three weeks until we met someone."

"What sort of charm could let you be aware of what's kilometres away from you?" Neville questioned.

"It could be magic based on predictions," Sadecki suggested. "Some trinkets can warn you of danger the moment you decide on a cause of action."

"Divination?" Bill mused. "It could be. Has anyone actually seen him doing magic? Or any
behaviour that would cover it up?"

"His mumblings!" Neville realised immediately. "He was always lying around, mumbling to himself. I thought he was half-asleep. Couldn't he be chanting?"

Bill shook his head. "No. I went over to eavesdrop the first time he did that. I've heard only a sentence but he was having a dream, talking to someone who's-"

Bill's eyes grew wide when he stopped in the middle of the sentence. He looked up at Neville and finished slowly "...who's been dead for a long time."

Neville understood what Bill just realised. "Are you sure? What exactly did he say?"

Bill frowned in concentration. "I can't remember his words. But I remember thinking that it sounded like he was talking to Ron. I stupidly decided to give him his privacy afterward."

"What does it mean?" Neville wondered.

"The hell if I know," Bill swore. "There's very little I know about necromancy, and for a good reason. Have you ever heard of an honest person practising it? I haven't. And I sure as hell don't like the fact that he would use my brother of all people in his machinations. The next time I see that bastard, we'll have a long talk."

There was nothing else they could say on the matter now, not before learning more about the magic Harry could be using. Neville knew that the moment it was safe, Bill would be herding them to the nearest library to research the powers of necromancy. But for now, they sat in silence, nursing their drinks. The celebratory mood had disappeared completely, leaving a feeling of unease in the bottom of Neville's stomach.

"What happened between the two of you?" Sadecki turned to Bill. "You and Harry, I mean. Don't get me wrong, you have all the reasons to be mad at him. But I sense some bad history underneath all of this. I- I wouldn't mind understanding it better."

Bill and Neville both looked up at that, sharing a glance. Bill let out a grumble and waved at Neville. "Just tell him, please."

Neville was surprised to hear that. It wasn't like Bill to let someone speak for him. But given the topic, he could understand his reluctance.

He thought about his words for a bit, picking them carefully. Then he turned back to Sadecki. "Bill's from a big family. Harry used to be a part of it growing up: his best friend was one of Bill's brothers. It was that close connection that made them a target."

Neville paused for a bit, taking a sip from his whiskey. "Bill's sister was cursed and murdered in front of Harry—they were dating at that time. And two of Bill's brothers died under Harry's command—when he went to unauthorized missions back to Riddle's England."

Sadecki looked at Bill. "I'm sorry," he offered awkwardly.

Bill just nodded stiffly.

Neville looked away from them. The kitchen was dimly lit by candles and very sparsely furnished. Its walls gave the impression they would give in the moment you leaned on them. There was no floor, just dust. His eyes came back to Sadecki sitting in the middle of it all. A man who grew up
"Can I ask you a question, Andrei?" he started, hoping the wizard would feel like reciprocating the confidence Bill just given him.

"Hm?"

"Why the hell are you going through all of this?"

Sadecki regarded him with a pensive look. He didn't ask for clarification—he knew Neville was asking about Sadecki's bargain with Harry.

Sadecki leaned back on his chair, playing with his glass. He didn't answer right away but Neville knew by his expression that he was going to. In the end, he simply said: "I have a girl."

Neville and Bill shared a knowing look. They both turned back to Sadecki and nodded like that made everything clear.

"She's a Muggle. Harry got her out of the Empire."

"Why didn't you do it yourself?" Bill asked, confused. "You were the officer at the Curtain Crossing."

"I couldn't do it alone," Sadecki admitted. "It's—I guess it was more complicated than that. You see—" He took a gulp of his whiskey and visibly resigned himself to explaining his story in more than three simple sentences. "We met during my training. She was a slave in the army. There are always plenty of Muggle girls there and young soldiers are encouraged to take advantage of them—to breed. If the fetus proves promising, they'll let it live."

"They're breeding half-bloods?" Bill asked, astonished.

Sadecki nodded. "They don't receive a full education and they'll always be only second-class wizards but the Empire needs the manpower; Muggles still outnumber us by thousands."

That was news to Neville. Apparently, the Empire was killing all Muggleborns but they were breeding half-bloods.

"What happened to your girl?" Bill asked.

"She—" Sadecki hesitated. "She got pregnant. It wasn't me—I was always careful and I tried to protect her from others as best as I could without drawing too much attention to us. But it obviously wasn't enough. They took her away then—they always did with the girls who got pregnant. I knew they would let her live through the pregnancy but the moment the child was born, they would kill her. I couldn't let that happen."

"Harry broke her out of the facility, faking her death so they wouldn't search for her. Or investigate me. We smuggled her through the Crossing then."

Neville frowned, trying to remember the refugees the Resistance was harbouring back home in Finland. "I don't think I've seen a pregnant woman among the refugees."

Sadecki shook his head. "You wouldn't have. Harry found her a safe place on the other side and made sure she was all settled."

"Have you heard anything from her lately?" Neville asked, relating to Andrei’s story more than
either of them knew - what with his Luna pregnant on the other side of the Curtain, too.

Sadecki nodded. "Harry told me she had delivered the baby. It's a boy." His eyes were shining now. "I'm going to adopt him when I get to them," he said resolutely.

Seeing the proud determination in his eyes made Neville thought of his own future and the future of his family. It felt like it was the first time he allowed himself to do so since Luna spilled her news at him right before leaving for this dangerous mission. He felt a sudden urge to share it with someone.

"I have a girl waiting on the other side too," he said with a shy smile. "And she's pregnant."

Bill looked at him, shocked: "Luna is expecting?"

Neville nodded, his smile growing.

"Well congratulations, mate!" Bill exclaimed, patting Neville's shoulder. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"She sprouted the news on me on the very last minute," Neville shrugged, a bright smile growing on his face. All hesitancy was gone now. "I think I've been coming to terms with it for the last couple of weeks."

"Well, I think this deserves a toast. Let me see what else Harry has here," Bill shot up from his chair and started rummaging through the cupboards only to stop mid-motion after a few seconds. He took his wand out. "I forgot I can use magic now!" he said sheepishly. "Accio fire-whiskey?" he half incantated, half asked. But it worked—a bottle flew out of one of the shelves. Bill let out a pleased chuckle a poured everyone a glass. He raised his own: "To fathers and their children!"

Sadecki and Neville shared a look that was half determination and half trepidation. They repeated after him: "To fathers and children."

A minute later, Neville's wristwatch started buzzing - his alarm went off. He smiled down at the glowing clock face. "3 am. It's your turn, Andrei."

Popovic told them he wouldn't submit their wand applications all at once to avoid suspicion. Instead, he would do one wand every two hours. Bill and Neville already had one registered wand working each. Now it was Andrei's wand that got submitted. It was one of the reasons they stayed up this late - to share this moment.

"Your first spell after nearly a month," Bill smiled at Sadecki. "Make it count."

They'd been talking about it for days: the first spell they would cast once they'd have a chance. Bill's was a simple breath freshening spell—he claimed brushing his teeth didn't do the job properly and his mouth had been feeling off the whole time.

Neville immediately went and stopped the perpetual itching his newly grown beard was causing.

Sadecki's smile looked a bit inebriated when he took out his grey wand. It didn't shake when he flicked it, though. "Accio vodka!"

Neville woke up some hours later, really needing a piss. The light was still on in the kitchen when he walked through on the way to the loo. Bill was sitting at the table, staring into a wall.
Neville was confused. They decided to forgo patrols for once—they were behind protective wards for the first time in weeks. Bill had no reason to be still awake.

Then he noticed the half-empty bottle in front of Bill. "Liking the vodka?" he asked softly.

Bill startled - he obviously hadn't seen him enter. He chuckled. "Sadecki was right - it does slide in better than the whiskey."

Neville nodded and carried on his way to the loo. Bill obviously wasn't looking for company.

He was wrong about that, though. On his way back, Bill softly called after him. "Neville?"

Neville stopped in his tracks. "Yes?"

"That's not why I hate Harry."

Neville turned back and sat down opposite Bill. He was clearly drunk but Neville was sure it wasn't only the alcohol that was talking. He sounded serious.

"What you said about Ron and Charlie and Ginny: that's not why I hate Harry. It was their decision to follow him. They are victims of the war the same way Fred and George are, no matter how close they were to Harry when they died. If anyone is to be blamed for their deaths, it's Riddle and his Death Eaters."

"Okay," Neville said slowly. "I'll remember that."

"I can't have children," Bill said in reaction to that.

Neville frowned, surprised by that sudden declaration. "I didn't know that," he said carefully. Bill was probably drunker than he seemed at first. But if he needed the liquid courage to share this, Neville wouldn't stop him now.

"I have too much of the werewolf curse in me to be sure it wouldn't spread to my children and fester."

"So you blood adopted?" Neville asked, thinking of Bill's three children. They were all the spitting image of their mother.

"I can't even do that," Bill discarded the idea. "The blood transfer might infect their blood. But Fleur deserved to have children of her own, with her Veela blood running through their veins. We've used a Muggle treatment - with anonymous male donors. Dominique and Louis were conceived artificially like that. But Victorie—Victorie is Harry's."

Neville didn't expect that.

He reached for the vodka and took a gulp straight out of the bottle. "How?"

"We had a falling out, Fleur and I. I wasn't a good husband back then—the war was more important than my new wife. I was a selfish bastard, not ready to give up my independence. And then there was the kids issue - Fleur wanted to try having our own kids even with the danger of the curse. I refused. What I didn't know back then just yet though, was that Fleur always gets her way when she sets her heart onto something.

"After Ron died, Harry and I became close. We shared a lot - both of us led a team for the first time, and we both had lots to learn. And Fleur was there too, always alongside us," Bill carried on,
the words pouring out quickly now. "They were very good friends - and whilst I was too busy sharing drinks with my mates after every fight, they became more. Harry needed comfort and Fleur was ready to give it. She wanted to be a mother and Harry was only happy to oblige. I mean—I don't think he knew about her plans but he was very happy to go through the moves if you catch my meaning. When she told him she was expecting his child, he panicked like every nineteen year old ought to. He convinced her they didn't have any future together and she would be far better off with me. She came back, asking for forgiveness. And I gave it.

"Harry swore an oath he would never lay any claims on Victorie—she's my child in everything but blood. And I never told a living soul. Until now."

Neville's tired brain was only very slowly processing all of this. He had known Bill and Fleur and their children for decades. They had always been the picture of a perfect family.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Neville asked through his confusion. He didn't like hearing any of it.

Bill took a deep breath. "I need you to understand why I think Harry's honour can get screwed at times. But—" Bill stared at Neville with imploring look, "I need you to stop me if any of this ever clouds my judgement as the leader of this team. I can't let my personal problems endanger the mission. Harry might be a wife-screwing bastard. And he's obviously keeping a lot from us. But he got us this far into the Empire without stabbing our backs. I need to start trusting him at some point."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My thanks to Dylan Pidge for beta-reading.

With this chapter, we've just finished the first arc (out of three, there will be 30 chapters in total). I'm excited to have reached this big milestone - it seemed so far away at first. I hope I've answered some of your questions, especially about Harry, his history and his magic. The previous chapters were all about setting the scene. With that dealt with, we can move on with the actual plot. And there will be magic!
22 April, Ruma, former Serbia

Neville woke up with one hell of a hangover the next morning. It didn't matter much, though—he had a wand he could use now. So he did just that—he cleared the headache and the nausea away with two flicks. The spells weren't as effective as potions would be but that didn't dampen his mood any.

It was Annie who had woken him, banging on his bedroom door. "I'm making eggs for breakfast and I want a full report in exchange!" she had shouted.

He cleaned his mouth, he Scourgified the rest of his body and changed his clothes with exaggerated wand movements—just because he could. He was out of the bedroom in a minute.

"Where did we get the eggs from?" he called on his way to the kitchen.

The apartment wasn't exactly spacious but after being confined into a small caravan for weeks, it seemed like a palace. For the first time in a while, everyone had their own bedroom and a bed to sleep in. They had a kitchen that they didn't have to build anew every evening. They had a shower and even a bathtub. But more importantly, they have wards around to alert them to any danger and wands they could use to protect themselves.

Yes, it was a good morning.

Annie, Gregory, and Sadecki were already in the kitchen. Annie was busy at the stove, looking somewhat refreshed herself—a combination of privacy, a good night's sleep, and a bath, Neville assumed.

"Good morning," Neville greeted them. "Where are the eggs from?" he repeated his question.

"Apparently, Rusty breeds hens," Annie chirped happily. "He's overly protective of them but I managed to snatch some eggs anyway."

Neville hadn't had eggs for more than a month. "Do I smell bacon, too?"

Annie sent him a smug look. "That I stole from Harry's pantry. Where is he, anyway?"

"Gone," Neville said simply. "He left us on our own for now."

"Sadecki said as much. Do we know why?"

Neville shrugged. "We can make an educated guess. He had a private conversation with the mafia boss and had to take off immediately afterward. Probably got another job that he couldn't refuse."

"You don't sound too cross about it."

Neville shrugged. "I'm not gonna lie—it will be nice to be out of his company for a change. It's been a bit intense lately. And he gave us permission to use any of his stuff—it will be easy to start exploring on our own from here."
She placed a full plate in front of him. "Here's food. Now, start talking—what happened last night?"

So Neville told her about meeting the Popovic family, the mafia boss, and his uncle, the wandmaker. He told her about their wands—about the fact they can use them now under someone else's name. He didn't tell her much about the magic Harry had used to change their magical signature simply because he didn't know much about it. He didn't mention anything from Sadecki's story or Bill's revelation—they weren't his stories to give.

Annie had obviously heard most of the tale from Sadecki. She didn't look surprised by any of it. She probably loosened Sadecki's tongue with eggs too—there was an empty plate in front of him.

"So what happens now?" she asked when he was finished talking. "Can we finally move on with the plan?"

Neville nodded. "I don't see any reason why not. We can use wands now, we have fake identities and a base of operation. It might have taken us a couple of weeks longer to get here but I don't see a reason why our plans should change. But I'm not the boss here. We'll wait for Bill to wake up and agree on the next steps."

She scoffed. "Might be a while, then. I've knocked on his door twice already. Didn't get more than a grunt in response."

Neville winced for his friend. He knew Bill had drunk much more than him last night. And it wasn't a good type of drinking, either. "He had a rough night. I'll let him sleep for a bit longer and then wake him up with a sobering charm."

Neville explored the entirety of Rusty's lot and Harry's apartment before he got too impatient with waiting and woke Bill up as promised. Bill got treated with eggs and bacon too while Neville fetched their maps and notes from the caravan.

They all sat down over them.

Their next goal sounded easy—they needed to get Annie to England. But in practise, it was anything but. She could travel with Muggle means only—and between England and Serbia lay more than two thousand kilometres of magical land where upstanding citizens used Apparation, brooms, or Floo network only. They would stick out like a sore thumb if they simply tried to cross the continent in a car.

Which meant they needed a good cover story. They would have to split the journey into short legs and find many safe houses in between. All of that required days of exploring along the possible routes and weeks of establishing camouflage in several countries at once.

They had a somewhat safe base now. Bill confirmed he intended to stay at Rusty's Lot until they had the entire journey through the continent planned out. Harry left a lot of equipment behind—especially cars and petrol, but also food and Muggle weapons for Annie to use. They would be comfortable here behind the wards as long as they stayed low.

"I also plan to booby trap this place," Bill added. "Nothing fancy that would attract attention but something effective to give us the extra minute or two if we were attacked. I'll put together a scheme today. Annie, you'll have to learn where not to step."

Gregory had to go to Popovic the wandmaker tonight to register his wands as he was on guarding duty last night and hadn't gone with the rest of the team. Bill was planning to accompany him and...
ask Popovic to let them use his Vanishing Cabinet. It most likely led to a wizarding settlement. Bill and Gregory would explore the place and find a safe spot to apparate to later. That would be their point of entry into the Wizarding World.

Neville was tasked with interrogating Rusty today. Annie was to stay in the Lot until they determined there were no other wizards around.

When Bill was done instructing his team, he turned to face Sadecki. It hadn't escaped Neville's attention that the former soldier was in the kitchen throughout the whole discussion and thus privy to their plans. He must have gained some of Bill's trust, then. It also hadn't escaped Neville's attention that not a word was spoken about what they plan to do once they reach England. Apparently, Sadecki wasn't trusted that much.

Bill addressed Sadecki, "I suppose Harry's invitation to stay in his place very much extended to you, too. I'm ready to share the space and I'd be grateful if you could help us out here and there. But I'm aware you are not one of my team—I have no authority over you to give you orders. But I need to keep my team safe. For that, I need to know what your plans are."

Sadecki nodded, obviously not surprised by Bill's request. He had an answer ready. "I'm planning to hide in the slums until Harry gets the change to smuggle me across the Curtain. I can help you out here but I won't go back with you into the Wizarding World. I can't risk the chance of anyone recognizing me."

Bill accepted that answer with a nod of his own. "I understand. If you need any help from us, let us know—we'll be ready to give it."

Rusty turned out to be as morose as he previously appeared. His English was terrible. Neville suspected the old squib was playing his ability down so Neville would give up with his questioning. Neville was tempted to cast the translation charm to test that theory. However, the charm was a complicated piece of magic and Neville was aware of Harry's warning about keeping their casting inconspicuous. Confundus charm would go a long way too, but Neville didn't want to betray the trust of their host.

So, through a lot of cajoling Neville learned very little about the practicalities of living in the slums. There was a curfew from eight to five. Only the wizarding scum could go out at that time. There were no shops and no currency—people were bartering for anything they needed. There was no electricity, no heating. There was also nothing left to burn, apart from very little petrol. Clean water was sparse, too. Only the bosses had access to some of the remaining resources and they stroked a hard bargain to part with it. There was a lot of fighting among Muggles, mostly initiated by the bosses and their gangs, to let out some steam. And then, there was the occasional wizarding bastard, walking the streets like a king—taking whatever he wanted. They always got killed eventually—their throats slit open in an alleyway. Those wizards were outlaws and loners and no one ever came to investigate their deaths.

The raids were worse. Once every few days, a group of wizarding teenagers or their fathers got drunk and let loose in one part of the slums. They were untouchable—hurting them meant a shitstorm of retaliation.

The squib was even more tight-lipped about Harry.

"How long have you been working for him?" Neville asked.

"Too long."
Neville sighed. "How often does he visit?"

"Too often."

And then the squib turned his back to Neville and walked away. Neville shook his head in exasperation but didn't stop him. He went out himself, in desperate need for some fresh air. Whilst they talked, Rusty chain-smoked some ten odd cigarettes.

Bill was in the courtyard when Neville walked out. He was sitting cross legged in front of the main gate, staring at it with his eyebrows furrowed.

"I never realised how advanced every warding I do is," Bill complained when Neville approached him. "I'm trying to simplify things but then the result sucks."

Surprisingly, it was Sadecki who helped him out in the end. Apparently, he got an E from Ancient Runes during his NEWT, and was thinking of pursuing a career in curse breaking after his years of service in the Army. When he learned Bill worked on the Egyptian pyramids, his eyes bulged wide open.

"I've heard about those! They are supposed to be the most amazing warding structures in the world! The schemes are ancient—they are the predecessors of all the modern warding of these days! My teachers told me that if you want to understand curse-breaking properly, you have to go to Egypt," he rambled excitedly. "Gringotts tried to get a permit to cross the Curtain and relaunch the excavations there. I applied to join the expedition. They were denied, though."

Bill smiled at that, quite dangerously so. "They were, weren't they? That's one of the very few good things that came out of this mess. The goblins were separated from the sites and the spoils finally went to the curse breakers who did all the heavy lifting. My family got quite rich in the process."

Bill wasn't exaggerating—as far as Neville knew, the Weasleys lived a very comfortable life. Although their family house was in the colony in Finland, they owned several other properties in warmer climates, and their daughters apprenticed under some of the best known names around the world.

"This doesn't look like an ancient Egyptian scheme, though," Sadecki commented, looking at Bill's notes.

Bill chuckled. "No, it really isn't that. I've borrowed one of my brothers' designs. They were no curse-breakers but they were amazingly inventive with the little knowledge they had. I was thinking I could some inspiration from them."

"Were they spell crafters?"

"Of a kind. They owned a prank shop." Bill rolled his eyes. "It's a sign that I'm really at a deep's end if I'm borrowing something of Fred and George's. But beside the utter ridiculousness of most of their designs, they did think of some rather ingenious schemes every now and then. Have a look at this one—there's only one rune but if combined with any disillusionment charms, it combusts into quite a spectacular cascade of -"

Neville left them at that. It was astonishing they hadn't found about each other's fascinations during that three weeks on the road, enclosed in one small caravan. They obviously had some catching up to do now.
Annie and Gregory were in the kitchen when Neville walked in. They were standing by the window to the courtyard, talking in hushed tones. They stopped when they saw him enter and shared a glance between them.

"Can you close the door, please?" Annie asked.

There was a purpose in her question that made it more than a polite request. She had Neville's full attention now. He did as she asked and turned to face her. "What's going on?"

Annie spared one more glance to the window. Bill and Sadecki were clearly visible through the glass, hunched over some notes.

Neville realised she was checking on them. "Why don't you want Bill and Andrei to hear us?"

"Just Andrei," Gregory said simply. "We can't be sure he's not reporting on us to Harry."

"We were discussing the meeting with Albert and his men," Annie explained. "Gregory thinks Harry staged it."

Neville frowned. "Why?"

"We hadn't met a single person throughout the whole three weeks out there," Annie stated. "And then we run into a group of scavengers scarce three hours after meeting the Muggles? It's too convenient."

"The Albert guy said we were trespassing onto his territory. I think Harry knew the place was nearby and he drove us there on purpose," Gregory explained.

Neville sat down at the table, staring at Gregory. "He wanted to help the Muggles all along," he said evenly after a moment of silence. "He provoked Albert on purpose. He brought him back to the river so Albert and his men would provide cover for our help."

It was clear as a day now when Neville saw it.

Annie nodded. "Mind you, I'm glad that we could help them. But why didn't Harry say that was his plan? Why would he lie and lead us around by our noses?"

Neville didn't know the answer to that. But he did know someone who would be very angry when he heard about this.

"That secretive, manipulative, egoistic… son of a bitch!" Bill swore under his breath. "I can't believe I haven't seen it before! What a controlling bastard!"

"So you think Gregory's right?" Neville asked sarcastically.

Bill didn't catch Neville's tone through his anger. "I don't doubt it for a second," he angrily whispered. "That's exactly what the git would do. I'm going to rip him a new one when I see him tonight!"

It was the afternoon and they were outside the Lot, walking through the narrow streets of what used to be the town of Ruma. Bill asked Neville to join him for a walk. He planned to explore the surroundings of their newly warded safe house. Neville didn't hesitate and the moment they were alone, he told Bill about Gregory's suspicion.

"Why do you think Harry chose not to tell us?" Neville asked after Bill had taken several deep
breaths to calm down.

Bill didn't answer right away. When he did, the anger was almost gone, replaced by contemplation. "He's done this before," he started slowly. "This is the kind of a behaviour that got him kicked out from the Resistance all those years ago. He would go for a mission without telling anyone about it or explaining himself afterward. Back then, it was clear he had his own agenda—yes, he was fighting a war to stop Riddle advancing as the rest of us, but to everyone who was close to him, it was clear he was fighting other battles, too. There was something he knew and we didn't.

"The higher-ups had tolerated it at first but then he started going openly against their orders. And when they refused to give him more men for missions he wouldn't explain, he went behind their backs and asked the men themselves to volunteer. The soldiers followed him, of course, he was Harry Potter, the Chosen one. And when many of them died without seemingly achieving much in the war efforts, Harry finally got kicked out."

Bill paused here, in his speech as well as his pace which picked up progressively whilst talking. "Sorry for my ramblings," he said, "you probably remember all of this as well as I do. I guess what I wanted to say is that it hadn't always been like that. I remember when the IMRA was first formed. Harry got invited to the big table with the leaders. But it became clear very quickly that he was there as a honorary guest only. He was barely eighteen back then and his name didn't carry as much weight in the rest of Europe as it used to in England. I guess it was no surprise that the seasoned veterans ignored his input. Harry and I were both training to be officers back then and we talked a lot about how frustrating it was for him, to be ignored like that. He told me about some of his ideas—they were brilliant. He had an insight into Riddle's mind that they lacked, and he obviously knew something they didn't. Why he couldn't or wouldn't share it with them, I don't know. I wish he had explained himself. Instead, he started ignoring them back and went to fight his wars alone."

Bill stopped talking for a moment, looking away. "I hate to see that even twenty years later, he still does the same," he added softly.

Neville was silently contemplating everything Bill said. "We would have helped him, right? If he had told us about his plan to bring Albert and his crew to the Muggles, we would have helped him?"

Bill shrugged. "We'll never now know, will we? It's easy to see now that it was the right decision. Would we have seen it if Harry had given us the choice back then? It's pointless to ask now because he didn't." Bill looked back at Neville. "Don't get me wrong, I'm... livid that he went against my orders and lied to us all. But I hate even more the fact that he doesn't trust us to make the right decision. What a lonely life must he lead, fighting all the battles, thinking no one else will do it!" Bill stopped to chuckle humorlessly. "And you know what? In this world, he might be even right. Remember the graves he dug, all by himself because there was no one else to care? I'm still well aware of what Harry did to my family. But he was my best friend once. I guess I'm... sad for the man I used to know."

Neville realised it was the first time they were alone, the two of them, since Bill shared his family secrets last night. Neither of them mentioned it the whole morning, although Neville had done a lot of thinking, trying to wrap his head around Harry's and Fleur's betrayal. At one point, the idea crossed his mind that Fleur might have entrailed Harry. But that wouldn't completely liberate his childhood friend and at the same time, it would put unfair blame on his best friend's wife. Also, Harry was able to throw Fleur's charm off when he was fourteen. Neville doubted Harry's resolve would be any weaker when he was twenty. No, there were both willing participants in this.
His respect for Bill had grown another notch after hearing the whole story. He was never really aware of it but up until last night, he had thought Bill was being a bit petty towards Harry when he cast him away from the only family Harry knew. Now, when he knew the real reason, he admired Bill for being able to work with Harry at all.

"About last night," Bill said, his thoughts obviously wandering in the same direction. "I wanted to add that it's an old wound. Sure, seeing Harry now brings it all back, but Fleur and I are fine. We survived, might have even got stronger because of it. And I definitely got one amazing daughter out of it. Hell, half of our friends and family survived just because she was born when she was born—if you all hadn't been at our cottage, welcoming Victoire to the world the same evening Muggles dropped bombs on the IMRA's camp, you would have died in the flames. Lucky coincidence? Sure. But fate did always wrap itself around Harry in weird ways. All I'm trying to say is that you don't have to worry about me. My family is a happy one. And eventually, I might get used to having Harry around. I did miss him the last nineteen years." Bill paused and frowned. "But I can't make any promises, especially not if he keeps pissing me off over and over again."

The slums were indeed a sorry place to live in. After that conversation ended, Bill and Neville started walking again, finally paying proper attention to their surrounding. People around them were dirty, starving, their eyes empty. The huts were sorry excuses for dwellings, put together with anything that would keep the weather out. If they really had no heating inside, winters must have been harsh on everyone.

The worst thing was, the place seemed to never end. They walked for hours, but the scenery never changed—huts on top of huts. Only very rarely would they stumble upon anything that would break the monotony—a broader street that could almost be called a square, or a primitive well guarded by twenty armed men.

Everyone obviously knew them for wizards, and they all avoided them with a wide berth. Even after two hours of walking away from the Lot, Muggles would still scatter away when they approached, and hid inside their huts. Apparently, words travelled fast here.

Not everyone was avoiding them, though. They were being followed. There were at least two teenagers tailing them at any time. They weren't discreet about it—they knew Neville and Bill knew about them and apparently didn't care. They never approached them so Neville and Bill stopped caring, too.

When it was time to go back, Neville and Bill quickly realised they were lost. It was hard to orient oneself if every street looked practically the same. Bill activated the *Point-me* charm but it wasn't needed for long. When they stopped at a third crossroad, waiting for the wand to stop spinning on Bill's palm, one of their watchers waved at them and gestured for them to follow. They did, although Bill left the *Point-me* charm on, checking that the Muggle was indeed leading them home.

They were back at Rusty's Lot in less than half an hour.

When Bill and Gregory left for Popovic's wand shop to get Gregory's wands registered, Neville sat down with Annie in the kitchen. She found a bookcase in her bedroom, and they were slowly exploring its contents. There were almost no personal items in the house that would tell them anything about its previous occupants. The library was one of the few exceptions.

The titles were mostly textbooks though, quite close to Hogwarts' advanced curriculum. What these books were doing in a house in the middle of the Serbian Slums, Neville really didn't know. Most
of them looked untouched, too. The five sports magazines they also found looked much more perused. They were all dated from summer three years ago. Apart from Quidditch league standings, it didn't offer much of an insight into the wizarding society, though.

Sadecki joined them in the kitchen when the evening was getting late. He started preparing a meal for all of them. Neville realised that it would have been Sadecki's turn to cook tonight had they stayed on the road.

By the time Bill and Gregory arrived, the food was ready. It didn't look exactly appetizing. After Gregory, Sadecki was probably the worst cook in their team, being fed by House Elves his whole life. Neville doubted chickpeas and pickles were really meant to be in Polish goulash as Sadecki tried to convince them the last five times he made it. Actually, Neville was quite sure they were being had but it wasn't like anyone could call him up on that. They barely knew how a goulash should taste, let alone its Polish variety.

Gregory looked somehow pale when he walked into the kitchen with Bill on his heels. He did stand straighter, though. Neville looked at his wrists and sure enough, there was a tip of a wand peeking out of from underneath both of his sleeves. Which meant his wands were registered now, too.

They sat down to dinner whilst they quizzed Gregory and Bill on their visit with the wandmaker. Among the clatter of the silverware, Bill told them that Gregory's wands were now registered under the name of Adam Schmitz, the name of his godfather who died during the Betrayal Bombing. They should call him Adam in public from now on, the same way Bill was now Gideon, Neville was Hendrick and Sadecki was Josef.

"Popovic let us use his Cabinet. But in exchange, he forced me to accept an invitation to a dinner tomorrow," Bill said. "Harry didn't look happy with that but he didn't stop him either."

"Did you speak with him?" Neville asked.

Bill shook his head, obviously annoyed. "He barely said a word, and disapparated right after he was done with Gregory."

"Disapparated?" Neville repeated, surprised—Popovic asked them not to do so around his workshop if it wasn't an emergency.

"Yes," Bill confirmed. "He didn't have his bike with him. He… he actually looked dead tired. Whatever he was doing today took a lot out of him. I was surprised he still had the energy to go through with Gregory's registration. When I asked to have a word with him, he just shook his head and left. Didn't even spare me an excuse. He might have been in a rush but I got the feeling he was avoiding us."

"Where did the Cabinet lead to?" Sadecki asked.

"Budapest," Bill said simply. "Popovic gave us a very brief tour of the Wizarding district around his shop. I didn't want to linger without knowing anything about the place, though. We found a safe spot to apparate to later. We'll study the maps of the city and find out as much about the wizarding settlement there as possible before we'll go again tomorrow, before the dinner with Popovic."

By the time they went to bed, they had a rough plan made. Sadecki told them about the bathhouses Budapest was known for among wizards. Hopefully, it would be easy to get lost among the tourists that visited Budapest every day.
Annie found a pouch of galleons in one of the bedrooms. There were forty coins inside. Sadecki assured them it would be enough for a day in the city. However, they would have to exchange the diamonds they had brought with them soon to have some resources. Bill was planning to approach Popovic about that. The wizard was already suspicious about them. They didn't need to raise suspicion elsewhere.

They didn't leave for Budapest straight thing in the morning as Sadecki suggested to go in the afternoon when the place is at its busiest. Therefore, Bill got to finish his warding structure in the morning and Neville and Gregory decided to explore Ruma some more. They took motorbikes this time, aiming to cover more land.

They didn't discover much else than yesterday though. The biggest novelty was probably the latrine pitch. The foul smell had warned them from streets away but they foolishly followed it. After seeing the massive ditch filled with mountains of human waste, Neville found a new level of appreciation for their bathroom in Rusty's Lot.

They turned their bikes around to head back. That's when the screaming started.

Neville exchanged a glance with Gregory. The younger wizard just shrugged his shoulders and led Neville to decide.

He looked behind them. Their watchers, who steadfastly followed them on their bicycles throughout the whole morning, were suddenly nowhere to be seen. Neville swore and jumped on his bike. "Let's go see what's going on."

It was hard to follow the screaming through the maze of the huts. Not only did the streets stop them from keeping a straight course for long, but the noise also carried to them from different directions and confused them further. It wouldn't subside though—after ten minutes of frantic riding, they could still hear people screaming in fear, children and adults alike. There was the occasional boom of a small explosion, or a male voice bellowing a shout.

In those minutes of riding through the suddenly empty streets, Neville realised two things. Firstly, someone was attacking the Muggles with magic, most probably in one of the raids Rusty told him about. And secondly, the Muggles were not fighting back—Neville hadn't heard a single gunshot.

He slowed down—they needed to approach this with caution.

It was too late though, they had been noticed. After the next turn, there was a squad waiting for them, blocking their path.

It was the two teenagers who followed them on their bicycles the whole morning, plus five of their friends. Their machine guns weren't strapped to their backs anymore. They held them in their hands instead, pointing at the ground underneath Neville's feet.

Neville killed the engine of his bike and jumped off. He needed his hands free. Gregory did the same next to him.

"What do you want?" he called to the Muggles.

"There's a raid going on," one of them answered evenly. "We can't let you intervene."

Neville looked behind the Muggles' shoulders. He wasn't sure himself if he was about to intervene or not. But that was beside the point now. The Muggles were threatening them.

He was sure the two of them could stop the Muggles if they did decide to shoot them. Their guns
were not aimed at them. By the time the Muggles raised them, Neville and Gregory would have a shield ready. With that confidence, he decided to test the waters. "What are you planning to do to stop us?" he asked them evenly.

The armed teenagers exchanged looks, nervously glancing at the wand that Neville let slip from its holster into his palm.

Their leader stepped forward. "We can't hurt Harry's friends. But Harry's friends can't be stupid and go provoking an attack!" he barked at them.

"Provoke?" Neville whispered, incredulous. "Those wizards are attacking you now!"

"He's not lying, you know," a new voice interceded. "They won't hurt any friends of Harry's."

Neville turned towards the newcomer. There was a young man standing in the door of a nearby hut, a wand held loosely in his hand. Neville immediately shifted his wand point to aim at him. The wizard didn't change his leisure stance, though.

"I'll take it from here," he said towards the Muggles. "Leave us now."

The teenagers hesitated for a short second. Then the leader swung his gun back over his shoulder and jumped on his bicycle. He gestured others to follow. They left without another word. They all looked quite relieved.

The unknown wizard slowly flicked his wrist, returning his wand back to its holder. He raised his empty hands for Neville to see. He was in his late twenties, with blond hair tied into a topknot.

"Who are you?" Neville asked.

The wizard seemingly didn't mind their wands nor their question. He made a few steps closer and nodded towards the end of the street, in the direction of the screams. "The Muggles learned long ago that retaliation only leads to escalation," he said calmly. "And to more victims. The best defence is to hide or run and wait for the raid to pass. We can heal the injured and bury the dead but we can't go outside wand blazing and expect to actually help matters. We need to leave in case the raid moves this way."

"I won't repeat myself for the third time," Neville said tersely. "Who are you?"

The wizard finally looked at Neville and smiled. A second later, his appearance started to change. His chin got longer, his hair turned brown. In a blink of an eye, he looked identical to Neville.

"I've been told we met before, although I was too young to remember. I'm Ted Lupin."

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to Dylan Pidge for betareading.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Previously: "I've been told we met before, although I was too young to remember. I'm Ted Lupin."

Chapter 12: Becoming Wizards Again

23 April, the city of Ruma, inside the Serbian Slums

Neville remembered a four-year-old Teddy Lupin, riding on his godfather's shoulders while Harry ran through their barracks, laughing his ass off.

When Harry got discharged, Andromeda had no more reason to stay with the Army. She took her grandson and moved him a safe distance away from the war. To Canada, wasn't it? Bill would know—he stayed in touch with the Tonks throughout all those years. Neville remembered Bill mentioning it when Andromeda died a couple of years back.

What were the chances that Ted Lupin was suddenly inside the Empire, talking to Neville in the middle of the Serbian Slums? Quite slim. What were the chances that an imposter with rare metamorphomagus abilities would know to find Neville in the Serbian Slums and pretend to be Teddy Lupin? Even slimmer.

Neville decided to trust the wizard's word for now. If his trust proved misplaced, Neville was confident Gregory and himself could overpower one imposter.

"Let's get out of here," Ted repeated after Neville shook his offered hand. "We can talk more at Rusty's. Let me ride one Max. I'll show you the way."

Neville frowned at him in confusion. "Who's Max?"

"Sorry," Teddy mumbled and gestured at the motorbikes standing nearby. "That's how I named the bikes. They were my birthday present a couple of years back, and you see, their muggle name's—you know what, never mind. Let me drive one so I can lead you back."

Neville hesitated. "Can you change back?" He pointed at Ted's face that still looked like Neville's own. It was a bit disconcerting to stare at oneself.

Teddy blinked. "Oh, I'm sorry! I completely forgot." Whilst he was talking, his features started turning into the blond young man he appeared to be a moment ago. He tied his hair up with one practised move. "Can we go now? Everyone else left these streets ages ago."

Neville beckoned Teddy to get on one of the bikes. He sat down on the other one and Gregory climbed on behind him. Neville gave him an imploring look but he didn't need to bother—Gregory's eyes were already glued to Teddy's back and his wand arm too.

They turned on the engines and roared their way through the suddenly empty streets of Ruma.

The wards around Rusty's Lot recognised Teddy and let him through with no resistance—he was keyed in. That, next to his familiarity with the place, was another proof in his favour. He greeted
Rusty as an old friend when they met him in the yard. The squib just grunted back in acknowledgement. When he turned his back to them, Teddy fired a quick spell after him. Neville and Gregory immediately had their wands trained at Teddy in response. They watched Rusty hesitate for a second, but then he just carried on walking away from them.

"Harry cleans Rusty's lungs every chance he gets," Teddy explained with his arms half raised, looking at their wand tips nervously. "He smokes like a chimney but he's dead useful—we try to keep him alive as long as it's possible."

Neville nodded at Gregory and put his own wand back into its holster. "Give us a warning next time you're about to fling a curse at our host, please," he admonished Teddy.

Teddy gulped noisily and then nodded. He made to walk into the front door of the house when Neville grabbed his shoulder to stop him. "Bill boobytrapped that door," Neville explained. "We're using the back entrance now."

"I guess Bill's here, then?" Teddy asked, suddenly nervous.

Neville nodded slowly, carefully examining the young man's face. "He thinks you are still in Canada, doesn't he?" he guessed.

Teddy looked down at his feet and then nodded sheepishly. "I might have forgotten to mention the change of address in my last letters."

Neville frowned. "Did you have Harry smuggle those letters from Europe?"

Teddy nodded silently.

Neville shared a look with Gregory. "This won't go well with Bill," Neville predicted.

"He should change his face to normal," Gregory gestured at Teddy. "It'll be easier to explain."

"He's right, Teddy," Neville agreed. "If you want to convince Bill you are not an imposter, this will be the fastest way."

Teddy shrugged and with that, his features instantly morphed into an entirely different face that seemed slightly familiar to Neville. Teddy was young, barely twenty-one if Neville didn't miscount. He looked his age—a recently matured youth, barely grown into his strength. He would probably be considered good-looking, with that sharp bone structure and his mane of auburn hair, Neville mused, wondering how much of that was genes and how much was his metamorphing. Looking at his eyes which had now turned bright green, a colour strikingly reminiscent to that of his godfather's, Neville was confident Teddy was altering even his natural look. Remembering Tonks and her variety of hair colours, it was probably what every metamorphomagus tended to do.

Watching him closely now, he noticed a strange pattern to Teddy's coat. "Your pyjamas are showing," he pointed at the shoulders where the brown of the coat turned to green and blue polka dots.

Teddy swore softly. He flicked his wand twice, first to undo the botched-up transformation and then to do it again properly. "I was really in a hurry to get here," he looked up at Neville apologetically, almost like in an expectation of a scolding.

Neville just shrugged his shoulders. He beckoned Teddy towards the back door. "Let's go."
They found Bill in the kitchen, hunched over the magazines they had discovered in one of the bedrooms.

"Bill?" Neville called to get his attention. "Look who we've found outside."

Bill looked up from his readings, instantly alarmed. He froze mid-motion when he saw Teddy standing behind Neville.

When he finally started moving again, it was only to slowly fold his magazine and place it down on the table. Leaning back in his chair, he calmly stated, "You are supposed to be at university in Toronto."

"Hello, Uncle Bill," Teddy greeted sheepishly.

Bill sighed. "Your grandmother sacrificed a lot to keep you safe from this place."

"I did go to university as she wanted," Teddy replied defensively. "I lasted whole three months before I realised it was not for me. I decided to try being a proper wizard for a change. I know Gran would understand."

"You could have gone to us," Bill implored firmly, some emotion finally breaking through his calm mask. "I know Fleur and the girls would love to have you. You could have apprenticed in China with Victoire. I'd happily pay for your studies."

"I appreciate you saying that, Uncle, I really do. And I know how much Victoire loves China. But that is her calling, not mine. This is where I come from, this is where I'm home," Teddy argued, staring at Bill intensively. "And as much as I love your family, Harry is my own."

Bill grimaced at that. "Did Harry put you up to this?"

Teddy snickered. "Ha! He was categorically against it. I didn't give him a choice though—I told him that I'd find a way through the Curtain with or without his help. I'm glad he decided to help me in the end. On my own, I suspect I would have botched it as much as you lot did."

Neville frowned, hearing the clear jab at their capture at the Curtain Crossing. It was only Harry's swift actions that helped them from certain imprisonment and worse. Teddy obviously heard about that.

"It is a dangerous place, Teddy," Bill kept insisting. "You would be much safer on the other side of the Curtain."

"But my magic was stagnating there," Teddy argued. "And this place is not that dangerous if you don't have the whole army searching for you. I even did a year in Hogwarts, Bill—Hogwarts! The place where my parents grew up, the place from the stories I've been listening to my whole life! Imagine that!"

Teddy's eyes were ablaze when he said that. "I've registered my wand under a different name and changed my face and that was it—I was just another wizard from the Outcast who decided to go against his parents' views and join back the Wizarding World. I was welcomed. I've never been hunted, never even been suspected of being close to Harry Potter, or the Resistance." Teddy took a deep breath and finished, "I have a good life here, Uncle. I'm happy."

Bill sighed heavily. He got up from his chair and slowly approached Teddy. "Don't lie to me again, Teddy," he said evenly. "I can't say I would have supported your decision but I'd like to at least know which continent you are on."
Teddy nodded. "I prefer Ted now," he said meekly.

Bill raised his eyebrows. "Do you? Well, I guess I'd first get to know the man my friend grew into and then judge for myself. Come here, you big ball of fluff."

He grabbed Teddy in a quick hug.

"Why didn't Harry tell us about you?" Bill asked when he let go. "We were on a road for weeks and he didn't mention you!"

"He didn't?" Teddy asked before mumbling, "I guess that should have been obvious. Ehm- if I have to take a guess, I'd say he just wanted to avoid this conversation." Teddy gestured between Bill and himself. "That man hates confrontation. I mean, I've seen him face twenty odd men at once without even flinching but mention feelings and he runs for the hills."

Bill rolled his eyes. "Don't I know it. But that doesn't give him the right to keep things from us."

"Well, he sent me here now," Teddy shrugged, sitting down at the table. "The moment it was safe to approach you, he asked me to help you out. And it wasn't a minute too early either, otherwise you'd be bringing hell onto the slums right now."

Neville frowned. "We were just checking the situation. I don't think we would have interfered," he argued. Meeting Bill's confused face, he explained the nature of the situation in which they met Teddy half an hour ago. And the convenient timing of his arrival.

"So you were sent to keep us in check?" Bill asked, irritated.

Teddy resolutely shook his head. "No. The original plan was to meet you before tonight's dinner so I could go with you to Popovic's. Harry didn't want you to face the two of them alone. But I woke up to a message this morning, asking me to come right away to stop Neville from doing something stupid. I got here as quick as I could."

"A message from whom?" Bill asked. "From Popovic? Merlin knows his goons have been following us everywhere."

Teddy looked surprised by Bill's guess. "God no, I have nothing to do with that old bastard. It was Harry who told me to hurry over."

"Harry? Is he watching us, too?"

"Of course he is," Teddy simply answered. "Do you think he would leave you completely unprotected here?"

When it was clear Teddy wasn't going to expand on that, Bill huffed in frustration. "How is he doing it?"

Teddy shrugged. "If Harry didn't explain, I can't tell you much." He did look apologetic when he said it.

Neville knew they would be checking for tracking and spying spells later.

Bill took another deep breath. "So you work for him now?" he asked resignedly. "Partaking in his smuggling activities?"

"For Harry? No. I work for the army. Speaking of which—my shift is starting in half an hour. I
need to go back to Berlin. I'll be back in time for dinner."

He got up from his chair and made for the door. Bill reached for his arm to stop him. "Wait a minute there—you work for the army?"

Teddy nodded. "I'm just a tech guy, the lowest of the ranks. There's no chance I'll ever get out of the office to see some action. There's no need to worry about me."

Bill evidently did, though. "Is Harry making you spy for him? Is that why you've joined the army?"

Teddy opened his mouth as if to answer but nothing came out. He closed and opened it again but with the same result. He shrugged, looking apologetically at Bill.

Neville recognised that behaviour and Bill obviously did too; they had both seen it many times before. "He did, didn't he?" Bill snarled. "He made you join the army to spy for him and then he made you swear a secrecy oath not to tell anyone about it!"

Teddy shook his head vigorously and tried to speak up again. "I never ratted anything about work to Harry," he smiled in victory when that actually came out. He carried on, "The oath… is about something else that's connected to your questions. I really have to go now."

His face started changing into the blond guy again. He tied his hair into a bun in one practised move as before. "If you have to mention me, people here know me by the name Andrew Howell. Best to use just Andrew in the slums. I'll be here tonight to join you for dinner."

He turned to the door and made to leave just when Sadecki walked in. The two wizards stopped in their tracks just shy of colliding and stared at each other in surprise.

"Howwie?" Sadecki breathed in disbelief.

"Sadecki," Teddy nodded curtly. "I figured you'd be around." He turned back to the kitchen, effectively dismissing Andrei. "Later," he said to Bill and Neville and marched around Sadecki out of the room.

Neville raised his eyebrows at Sadecki. "How do the two of you know each other?" It didn't escape his attention that Sadecki knew Teddy by his fake name.

"I met him in Durmstrang, during our military training," Sadecki answered, still in shock. "What the hell was he doing here?"

Neville looked at Bill, beckoning him to decide how much to reveal.

"He's a friend of Harry's," Bill said after a short hesitation. "He didn't seem to like you that much," he prompted.

"No, I suppose he wouldn't," Sadecki admitted. "I was one year ahead of him," he said slowly. "I guess I wasn't particularly nice to him. We weren't really supposed to, not to the newbies, and especially not if they were just half-bloods or the tech-rats," he explained quickly. "Or both," he added sheepishly.

Oh boy. Neville translated everything Sadecki was saying in his head and asked. "Did you bully him?"

Sadecki shrugged. "Like I said, it was expected of me." He paused for a second, his brows furrowing. "Did you say he was Harry's friend?" He frowned when they nodded. "I guess I owe
They scanned the whole house, the yard, their clothes, the various vehicles and even the street in front of the Lot for spying charms. They didn't really expect to find any as they would be rendered useless around Annie. They checked for muggle devices, too. But they didn't find anything suspicious.

Harry might have charmed the teenagers who kept following them around and who were the only ones to see Neville and Gregory rush towards the raid. Or he had informants among the muggles. In either case, there was not much they could do about it other than sulk and try to sneak around under disillusionment charms next time they would go out.

Two hours after Teddy left, Neville was standing in front of a conjured mirror, looking dubiously at his reflection.

He had a rich green suit-robe on, with a bear fur draped over his chest. His shoulders and arms looked puffed up in the sleeves, making him appear more muscular than he really was. His skin was tanned and had a golden hue to it; his hair was shiny, twenty inches longer and tied into an impeccable braid.

"Explain it to me again," he started slowly, "how exactly is this going to make us blend in?"

Sadecki was standing next to Neville, carefully inspecting his handiwork. He sighed in exasperation as they had been over this several times by now. "Wizards like to look their best. Wizards can use charms and potions to look their best. Wizards do use charms and potions to look their best," he explained in clipped tones. "The wizards who don't care about appearances are the ones who don't need to care. They are either on top of the social ladder or at the very bottom of it. In either case, they attract attention. If you don't want to attract attention, you follow the fashion."

"And this is the fashion?" Gregory asked dubiously from the corner of the room. He was sporting a similar look to Neville's, looking very uncomfortable in his own deep purple robe.

Sadecki shrugged. "As long as it hasn't changed in the four weeks we've been outside of civilization, then yes, this is what your ordinary up-start wears for an afternoon in a spa town."

"I don't see you or Lupin wearing pigtails," Gregory grumbled.

By now, they explained to Annie and Sadecki who Teddy really was.

"We are military men," Sadecki shrugged.

Neville touched the fur across his shoulder. It had a very fake feeling to it. "How long are the charms going to last?"

Sadecki looked unsure for the first time. "I don't know. I never had to conjure any of this before," he admitted awkwardly.

Neville recognised this as one of the moments Sadecki felt uncomfortable for his upbringing in affluence. It made Neville chuckle lightly every time it happened. They really couldn't care less.

"Well, what did you get for your Transfiguration NEWTs?" he asked Sadecki after a moment's pause.

Neville nodded to himself in satisfaction. "An E means that your conjuration lasted at least for eight hours, otherwise they would deduct points. Well, as long as the requirements haven't changed since our time in Hogwarts."

"Eight hours is good enough," Bill assessed. "I'm planning to be done in less than four. Let's get going now."

He was also clad in colourful silk and fake fur and sporting a well-waxed goatee. Neville made a note to himself to show this memory to Fleur when they got back. She would have a good laugh at her husband's expense.

After the forlorn atmosphere of the slums, the shine and brightness of the magical centre of Budapest overwhelmed them at first.

The sun was out on a cloudless sky, reflecting off the polished marble of the city as much as off the see-through waters of the Danube river flowing through the centre. There was no smog nor the noise pollution Neville had always associated with big cities. Instead, there were magical loops in the air above the river and riders on brooms racing through them. There were no cars or roads, just paths, and walkways to stroll on for one's leisure. There was a lot of magical flora, too. He stopped to admire a blooming dirigible plums bush for a moment before he remembered he was here on a mission. He took a deep breath, shook off the haze of his bewilderment and started walking.

Sadecki was right. Their ridiculous clothing did make them fit into the crowds of wizards strolling the banks of Danube like a flock of colourful peacocks. The three of them apparated to a designated apparation point just off from the main shopping street and went their separate ways soon afterwards. Bill and Gregory broke off to shop and eavesdrop, whilst Neville's task was to gather intel.

He spotted a wizard standing right at the edge of the bank. He was busy painting the opposite side of the river on a canvas floating in the air in front of him. He would do. Neville approached him.

"Good day, sir," he addressed him with the poshest accent he could muster.

The wizard looked up from his painting and inclined his head in a silent greeting.

"I was wondering if you could point me in the direction of where one could find some peace and quiet from this mayhem? A library, maybe?"

The man turned to him fully, with more interest now. "Your first time in Budapest, good sir?"

Neville nodded, putting up a frustrated face. "Yes. I've been here for mere hours and the thought of more spa treatments is already too much to bear. The missus might enjoy it, but I have escaped the clutches of the bathhouses in hope for some solitude."

The wizard was nodding in sympathy now. He pointed across the river, at a colossal building of many sleek windows, columns, and spirals, and an impressive dome presiding over it all. "That's the Parliamentary Library. You can get lost there for days without seeing another living soul."

Neville carried in his pompous manner and clapped his hands in excitement. "I like the sound of that very much." He bowed slightly in gratitude. "Obliged to you, sir. Have a good day, sir."
The wizard was not exaggerating. The library was immense. And hard to navigate. Neville quickly realised that the building wasn't originally designed to house a library, noticing the dull bookshelves scattered over the numerous grandiose chambers. The place was most probably built by muggles and only recently usurped and remodelled by wizards with as little care for book cataloguing as for preserving the original decor. After several minutes of pointless wondering, he headed back towards the entrance hall and approached the counter there with a plan.

The receptionist behind it quickly scanned his appearance and put up a fake smile. "Are you lost, sir?"

Neville realised his clothes probably weren't as inconspicuous here as among the holiday strollers outside. He put up a fake smile himself. "I'm looking for your section about magical fauna. If you point me in the direction of magical tobacco especially, I'll be most obliged to you."

Luckily, there weren't many newly published books on the topic. He managed to find what he was looking for fairly quickly and returned to the counter with a book in hand.

"Can you help me one more time, good sir?" he asked the clerk. "I've found a mention of a gentleman here, a wizard called Gregory Goyle who managed to breed my favourite type of tobacco. Alas, there was not much information on the man itself. I was thinking I could peruse some newspapers from that year. Certainly, there will be more said about that marvellous discovery there. Can you please point me to your archive?"

The clerk led Neville through enormous halls and lobbies to a chamber filled with newspaper issues. Looking at the shelves upon shelves filled with papers, Neville faked a troubled expression and glanced down at his watch.

"My wife will be finishing her treatment soon. And I so hate leaving my questions unanswered," he started. "Say... if I were to copy the relevant papers to peruse at home later, would that be a problem with your fine institution?"

As Neville hoped, the clerk provided him with the copying charm allowed in the library. The moment he left, Neville quickly located the year two thousand and two, the year when the Curtain spread across Europe, cutting the Resistance away from the happenings in the Wizarding World.

He opened his bottomless pouch and started working.

"Annie? Where are you?" he shouted three hours later when he got back to Rusty's Lot. "I need to unload the pouch."

Her voice carried from the kitchen a moment later. "You're good."

Neville nodded to himself and entered the house, aiming straight to the only unoccupied bedroom. Whilst they were gone, Annie moved any possible surface they could spare into the room, and Neville began to place the stacks and stacks of copied newspapers on top of the various shelves and tables. He ended up putting several piles on the floor anyway, trying to keep them as organised as possible.

"I'm done," he called to Annie. A minute later, she appeared in the door, looking wide-eyed at the high stacks of precariously piled up paper. The moment she joined him, the enchantments on his skin and clothes gave in. The robe and fur changed back into his real jacket and trousers, his hair and beard got shortened into their normal unruly length. Last but least, the glow on his skin and the illusion of his wide shoulders got disappeared. He sighed in contentment when the consistent
itching instantly stopped. "Thank you."

Annie just smirked at that, not looking up from the newspaper. "Well, I guess I won't be bored here any longer," she commented dryly.

Neville patted her shoulder in sympathy. "Are the others back yet?" he asked.

"Yeah, drinking tea in the kitchen."

Bill and Gregory also looked their normal self when Neville joined them.

"All good?" Bill asked him.

Neville nodded. "All is good. And you?"

Bill passed him a steaming cup of tea. "Yeah, everything went fine. We've found several restaurants and coffee houses we can easily come back to for some more eavesdropping. What's more, we now know that it's not entirely uncommon for a wizard to move his whole household to the spa houses for an extended holiday. If we rent a house for a couple of weeks, we could mask Annie as our servant and let her follow us there. Muggles are only very rarely transported by magical means—she could travel by car to join us there and then travel further into the Empire later."

That sounded like a promising start to a plan they would ponder much upon later. Neville nodded in satisfaction and asked further. "And the shopping? Did you get the supplies?"

"We bought the robes but we had less luck with the groceries. Apparently, only house elves or servants shop for these. We might have to get ourselves an elf anyway if we are to pose as a wizarding family."

Neville sighed. "Canned beans it is then. Or have you found a magical takeaway? I don't know how much more of Sadecki's goulash I can take."

They talked more about their possible stay in Budapest until it was time to get ready for their dinner with Popovic.

Sadecki once again agreed to hold the fort and guard Annie whilst Bill, Gregory and Neville would go out socializing. It was the three of them that Teddy found pacing outside the Lot when he finally arrived, half an hour after they were supposed to leave.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he shouted from afar when he ran towards the gate to the Lot, sporting his blond top knot look again. "It was mayhem at work today and I couldn't get out earlier."

He turned to the boy standing with his bicycle just outside the gate. The muggle had been watching them nervously the whole time they had been waiting for Teddy to turn up.

"Go tell your master we'll be there in ten," he calmly said. The boy immediately left.

They piled up into the jeep with Teddy behind the wheel. He swiftly took off, taking them through the slum at a quick pace. He expertly navigated the streets, cutting the corners real close with practised ease.

He very quickly noticed their tense mood. "Are you expecting an ambush at any moment?" he asked cheerfully. When he got only wary looks in response, his smile disappeared. "You are, aren't
you? Well, let me calm you down here—Popovic would rather shoot half of his own men than insult Harry. There will be no treachery tonight."

"So are you saying this is just a mere social call?" Bill asked dubiously.

Teddy frowned. "Well, not exactly. I guess Popovic will be looking for some leverage over Harry. But he would never harm you." He paused for a second, glancing at Bill next to him. "What do you know about the man?"

Bill took a moment to answer. "We know he's trafficking muggles to wizards. Harry has dealings with him too—he sells him the goods he smuggles from outside the Curtain. And he warned us to be wary of him."

Teddy was listening intently, frowning at most of what Bill was saying. "Well, that's not entirely untrue but…it's not as bad as you think. I don't know why Harry didn't explain further but I guess that's why he sent me here now. Well, okay then."

He slowed down the car to a crawling pace. "Popovic is not in the slave business anymore, although it is true that's how he rose to power. Other bosses had access to coal, water or timber—Popovic didn't have any of that when he started. He did have his uncle though, and through him, he could do business with wizards, buying food and other supplies from them. And he paid with the only thing he had an abundance of—people. Highly trained and willing servants are worth a lot of gold. At least Popovic says the girls and boys did it willingly because they knew their sacrifice would feed many families for long winters. I choose to believe him, no matter how much I detest his practises. He's harsh, and he can be deadly practical but he's not cruel. It was only because of his actions that these people survived." Teddy let go off the wheel to gesture broadly to the huts they were passing.

"Anyway, that's all in the past. Now the only wizard he deals with is Harry. Harry supplies everything Popovic orders and in exchange, Popovic promised to stop his trade with slaves. He's kept his word so far. Harry would know if he broke it. He asks the occasional favour from Popovic, like registering our wands or looking after Rusty's Lot. And because Popovic is permanently in Harry's debt, he can't refuse anything Harry asks. That's why he's so miffed with the situation and that's probably why we are going for a dinner tonight—he's hoping you would provide anything he could later bargain with. So try to keep your mouths shut about anything sensitive. But I'm positive he's not going to do anything that would endanger his business with Harry. Not when he relies on it so much."

A minute later, Teddy stopped the car in front of Popovic's workshop. "Let's go eat!" he cheered rather forcefully.

There was no one on the street when they got out the car, although Neville could feel eyes watching them. No matter Teddy's assurance, he was on his guard. He knew Bill and Gregory were, too.

Popovic the wizard met them at the door. He was his usual polite self, not commenting on their delay at all. "Come in, come in. The meal's ready," he said warmly instead.

They were led to a dining room upstairs. Popovic the muggle was already sat at the table when they entered. He nodded at them silently, his face set in the same frown Neville remembered from their first meeting. Apparently, he didn't care much for decorum.

The meal was a simple one, red lentil soup with spinach. The conversation was stilted. The
Popovics obviously knew Teddy and they exchanged a few words but then the room fell silent again. For someone who invited them over, their hosts certainly didn't show any signs of wanting to start a conversation.

It wasn't until a servant girl came in to take away their plates that someone spoke.

"What's with all the teenagers?" Bill asked, looking at the young girl. "I haven't seen you employ anyone older than twenty."

"The young ones were raised in this world," the muggle answered readily as if they were waiting for them to ask a question the whole time. "They don't remember the good times. Their parents do and they wallow in the past. They'll never adapt as well as their kids have."

"Do they have any education at all?" Neville asked, watching the young girl for any sign of understanding. She didn't show any. "I mean—can they write and read, and count? Do you have anyone teaching them?"

"Yes," Popovic said. "We might not have schools but we have many teachers with many university degrees between them."

Popovic nodded at the girl. "Helene is fluent in five languages. She can recite Shakespeare from memory. She knows geometry, chemistry, and quantum physics."

Bill raised his eyebrow, exchanging a quick look with Neville. "And all of that just to impress her master during pillow talk?"

The girl hesitated for a second but then she just turned and left the room without any other reaction to Bill's words.

Popovic didn't look insulted either. "She was never trained for that purpose," he stated calmly. "That type of training was abandoned years ago."

Bill still looked sceptical. "Why then? Why teach her all of that in a place like this?"

"We don't have any land to farm. No factories to work in. No materials to craft from," Popovic listed. "But we have our minds and our knowledge. So we teach the young ones. Helena can also read notes and play the piano although she's never touched an actual instrument. She can write codes and algorithms although she's never seen a proper computer. Anything to store off the idleness. Idleness breeds unrest. Lack of purpose breeds depression."

Popovic was very forthcoming with information tonight, Neville observed. He suspected Popovic would soon start asking questions of his own and hope they would feel like reciprocating. He decided to test how far the muggle was willing to go.

"There was a raid this morning," he stated. "You didn't protect your people."

That finally seemed to have broken the calm facade. The muggle's eyes narrowed but his tone didn't change. "You are wrong. I protected most of my people. Only the dying were left behind to be preyed on. The rest ran away in time to survive another day, and the wizards were none the wiser."

"You have a plan in place for raids, don't you?" Neville surmised. "How do you get to decide who dies as the diversion and who runs away?"

"I don't," Popovic said simply. "People decide themselves. There are many who've given up on
"How did the rest run away?" Gregory asked. "The streets were empty when we arrive but we never saw anyone leaving."

For the first time, Popovic hesitated with the answer. Teddy stepped in, though. "The huts that you see from the streets are hiding courtyards and other buildings behind them. And there are the tunnels, too. People say that you can cross Serbia from west to east without stepping out on the surface. It's also where they hide in winter. But you'll never catch a muggle admitting it to a wizard. It's their most guarded secret and the most fragile, too."

"Humans have always been good at surviving," Popovic the wandmaker spoke up. "We share the ability to adapt, no matter if you are a muggle or a wizard. Wizards believe the slums are a place where muggles go to die. There's no reason to let them know we still have ways to survive even here."

The conversation died after that.

Neville looked around the room. The walls were bare, the old-fashioned tapestry faded into patternless grey, with a number of brighter rectangles where paintings used to hang. Helena came in again to serve tea. They stayed silent until she left.

"I met Albus Dumbledore once," Popovic the wandmaker said then.

Neville looked up sharply, meeting Bill's alarmed look. That came out of nowhere. Popovic seemingly didn't pay them any attention and carried on. "He was in Serbia to give a lecture on that topic or another. I was too young to understand what he was trying to explain but I know I managed to be impressed, anyway.

"It was only a few years before I got kicked out of my apprenticeship. I wasn't a very good student, mind you, so it wasn't a big surprise that Gregorovich grew tired of me. I didn't go back to wandmaking for many decades afterwards. It was only when I heard that Ollivander's is getting auctioned that I got interested in the craft again. I picked up all my savings and went to London. Mine wasn't the highest bid by far but they decided to sell me everything, anyway. I suspect they found it humorous that the wands and tools of the greatest wandmaker should go to a meddler who couldn't even finish his basic training. Ollivander was a traitor after all. They probably regret it now with the shortage of wands and a surplus of wizards in need of one. But alas, the tools are mine now and in this workshop they should stay. I should treat them with the utmost respect as I've always admired Ollivander's work. As much as I've always respected Dumbledore's genius. I understand you knew them both well."

Neville didn't look away from Bill, waiting for his reaction. Bill's eyes were furrowed in anger but he didn't rise to Popovic's bait, staying silent.

Popovic sighed. "I didn't wish to alarm you. We only wanted to let you know that we are aware of your true identities, Mr Weasley and Mr Longbottom. The connection between your fake names, your appearance and your friendship with Harry wasn't hard to make. We are confident we didn't raise any suspicion whilst looking into the matter. Your identities are safe with us."

Bill inclined his head to the side. When he spoke, his voice was icy. "And what do you ask of us to keep it that way?"

Popovic shook his head quickly. "You misunderstood. This isn't blackmail. There's nothing we ask of you. Quite on the contrary, if there's anything you can now ask of us given what we know,
please, don't hesitate to do so."

Teddy chuckled from across the table. Neville glanced at him—the lad looked surprised and maybe a bit pissed off but he didn't seem alarmed. "It's not you they want in their debt, Bill. They'll be asking Harry to pay the bill later. Pardon my pun there. Anyway, the more favours you ask of them, the better. But I guess Harry must be fine with this if he hasn't stopped you from finding out. Come to think of it, even I expected worse from the two of you. This is actually acceptable."

He got up from his chair. "If this is everything you wanted to tell us, let's wrap it up and leave. The rest of us have a lot of catching up to do tonight."

The ride home was a short one. Teddy went back to his frantic driving and was cutting through the distance to Rusty's Lot in record time.

"Can we really trust them not to sell us to the Empire?" Bill asked the moment they got in the car.

"In this regard, yes, I'd say you can," Teddy answered without hesitation. "I meant what I said there. If it wasn't so, Harry would have stopped them."

"How? Even if he was spying on them, you can't be sure he won't miss something. The wandmaker could block any tracking magic Harry sets," Bill argued.

"Hmm," Teddy replied to that, looking sideways at Bill. "What exactly did Harry tell you about... well, about his life in the Empire?" he asked carefully.

"Close to nothing," Bill replied tersely. "But we have our suspicions."

Teddy's eyes returned fully to the road. "Okay," he said with sudden purpose. "Let's get inside the wards and we'll find out how much of your suspicion I'm allowed to refute." He brought the car to a stop in front of the gate to the Lot and added softly, "Or surpass."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Uff, this took a lot of energy to write, don't know why. Typing has been more of a chore than usual lately, so it's sure nice to see this finished. At least Ted was fun to write - a bit of fresh blood thrown into the mix. I hope you enjoyed his personality, too. More on him in the next chapter, that's for sure. And on Harry as well, of course! As always, big thanks to Dylan Pidge for proofreading.
The Curtain Twitchers

Chapter Notes

Previously:
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

24 April, the city of Ruma, inside the Serbian slums

Sadecki was in the kitchen, finishing his own dinner, when Neville and the rest walked in. Annie was in the shower—they could hear the water running in the bathroom.

Noticing Teddy, Sadecki immediately jumped from his seat and approached the young wizard. Teddy took a step back, startled by the sudden movement. He recovered quickly, though, and raised his chin defiantly, facing Sadecki square on.

"Are you the reason Harry found out about my Tereza and the child?" Sadecki asked in way of a greeting.

Teddy didn't look surprised by the question. "I had a part in it, yes," he admitted without hesitation.

They stood there, a foot apart, looking at each other intently. Sadecki was the first to move, raising his hand in an offer of a handshake. "I was a prick," he said, "I treated you like shit without you ever giving me any reason to. I was wrong to do so. And I'm sorry."

Teddy's eyes grew impossibly wide, jumping back and forth between the offered hand and Sadecki's sincere face. All of a sudden, his blond hair turned to his natural brown. Sadecki's mouth opened in surprise but he remained standing with his hand raised and resolutely shut his mouth up without comment.

After another silent second, Teddy grasped Sadecki's hand. "You were a prick. And I'll reserve the right to repay you in kind one day."

Sadecki nodded solemnly. "I won't stop you. But in the meantime, I owe you for saving Tereza's life. Name the price and if it's in my power, you shall have it."

Teddy stayed motionless for a second, before shaking his head. "Nah, I haven't done enough to warrant a debt. You are helping Harry and the guys here, that's enough for me. Besides, I've done it for Tereza, not for you. She's a sweet girl."

Sadecki's eyes zeroed at Teddy with sudden intensity. Teddy immediately realised what he said and raised his hands in surrender. "I've never touched her! We just talked a couple of times. It was
pretty obvious she liked you."

Sadecki took a deep breath and visibly calmed down. "I meant it. My debt to Harry is independent of my debt to you. If it hadn't been for you, Harry would have never learnt Tereza needed help. No matter my deal with Harry, I'm indebted to you, too."

Teddy nodded in exasperation. "Okay, I'll remember. Happy now?"

"Yes," Sadecki simply said and went back to the table to finish his plate. With him out of his personal space, Teddy took a visible sigh of relief and turned to Bill and Neville. "Where were we?"

"You were about to tell us as much about Harry as your oaths allow you," Bill quickly supplied.

Teddy frowned in thought. "Actually, it works better if you tell me your suspicions and then I react to them. From my experience, the oaths allow more meaning to slip that way. Otherwise, I just end up opening and closing my mouth like a washed-up fish."

"Do you have much experience bypassing secrecy oaths?" Neville asked.

Teddy shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. "Only when Harry is being too secretive for his own good. He hasn't stopped me yet so I guessed he doesn't mind that much. Why don't you start with telling me why you are so miffed with him right now?"

Bill told him about meeting the runaway muggles in the middle of the wastelands, and how Harry staged a confrontation with Albert's group of scavengers so they could be a cover for their help. Without telling Bill's team about that plan.

"And when I wanted to confront him about it last night, he ran away," Bill finished. "That little coward is avoiding us."

"Well, to his defence, he has been busy. You can't expect him to disappear for more than three weeks on a road trip with you lot and not find the business in disarray," Teddy said absentmindedly, obviously mulling something else in his head.

"I'm sorry, guys, but I have to ask—why you are all so surprised?" he started eventually. "I know he should have shared his plans with you. But why on earth would you ever think he'd just drive away from the muggles without trying to help them? This is Harry Potter we are talking about."

Neville stared at Teddy, stunned. What was he on about? "It was Harry who let us believe there was no chance we could help them without compromising ourselves," Neville argued.

It was Teddy's turn to look surprised. "Really?"

"No, that was me," Sadecki interjected. "Back then, I was sure of it. I remember being quite vocal about it, too."

"But it was me who decided not to endanger our mission for some muggle children. I gave the order to drive away and left them to die," Bill added. He sat down at the table, his shoulders slumbering. "No surprise he didn't trust us with making the right decision after that."

Teddy patted his back once and sat down opposite him. "You know that Harry went against all odds and smuggled people out of the Empire, right?"

"But they paid him for it," Neville argued. "It's no testament to his character if he makes a profit
out of saving people."

"Paid him?" Teddy repeated, surprised. "How did you figure that out?"

"The refugees said... and we assumed," Neville hesitated, trying to remember the source of that piece of information and failing. He started over. "I've confronted Harry himself about it and he didn't deny it."

Teddy chuckled humourlessly. "I'm not surprised. You can accuse him of anything and he won't defend himself. Have you seen the graves he built?" When everyone nodded, he carried on. "He carved every single name himself, thinking he's to blame for all their deaths. That man has some serious guilt issues."

Neville looked away from Teddy, deeply in thought. How much has he misjudged Harry? Why did Harry let them draw the wrong conclusions?

"What do you know about that period of Harry's life?" Bill asked. "How long have you been here, anyway?"

"Four years now," Teddy shrugged. "I got here just a couple of months after the Crossing opened. I stayed with Harry here in Ruma for a bit before starting my school year at Hogwarts. And then I went to Durmstrang for my military training for half a year. I live and work in Berlin now. As to what Harry did before... I don't know. We don't talk about it. But I got the impression he was lonely. And probably smoked a lot of weed."

Bill rolled his eyes. "Yes, we've noticed that particular habit," he said dryly just as Annie walked into the room, hair wet from her shower.

"Oh," she startled when she saw a stranger in the middle of the kitchen, her hand twitching to her pocket where her gun most probably was. "Is this the godson I've been hearing about?"

"Annie, this is Teddy Lupin," Bill simply waved between them. "Teddy, this is our Annie."

"Hi," Ted said weakly, looking everywhere but at the girl in front of him. "I've heard a lot about you."

Neville frowned at the lad's sudden awkwardness. Then he realised what Annie was wearing—a small pyjama top and shorts. They had all grown very comfortable around each other over the course of the weeks on the road and they didn't care much about decorum anymore.

Annie translated Teddy's shyness differently, though. Neville noticed how her eyes hardened and he realised she probably thought Teddy was scared of her ability. She set her mouth in a hard line and offered Teddy her hand. "Pleased to meet you," she said evenly.

Teddy twitched when her annullating field hit him but he recovered swiftly. He shook Annie's hand, smiling shyly at her, his awkwardness momentarily forgotten. "Well, this is not half bad. Much better than a dead zone, I'd say."

Neville made a pot of tea and they sat around the table nursing a cup each.

"So, we've already established you've misjudged Harry in some regards. What are your other assumptions for me to diffuse?" Teddy asked.

Bill shared a quick look with Neville before he spoke plainly. "We think
Harry practises necromancy."

Teddy choked on his tea, splattering the table in between them with spit. "I'm sorry. What?"

"I guess we were wrong on that account, too," Sadecki commented dryly.

"We are positive Harry used magic in a dead zone, which means he could only be using blood or soul magic. Necromancy is based on these two," Bill explained defensively. "And besides, I think—I know I've heard him talking to someone who Harry addressed and treated as Ron. My brother Ron who's been dead for twenty-one years."

"Wow," Teddy breathed out. "He really didn't tell you much, did he?"

Bill huffed. "No, he did not. What's the magic he's been using then, if not necromancy?" he insisted.

Teddy shrugged. "If Harry didn't let you on that secret, I'm afraid my oaths won't allow me to say much. You can keep throwing your guesses at me and watch for my reaction but that's as far as I'll be able to help you. I'm sorry though."

Bill frowned at that. "Are Popovic's teenagers reporting on us to Harry?" he tried asking. "Is that how he's been watching us?"

Teddy opened his mouth but nothing came out of it.

"That secretive bastard!" Bill swore, throwing his arms up in frustration. "This is useless."

"But doesn't this mean it's true?" Annie asked. "If he can't speak about it, doesn't it mean we are too close to the truth the oath is guarding?"

Neville shook his head. He knew a lot about Secrecy oaths and unfortunately, that wasn't how they worked. "We can't safely assume that. He could be trying to say that we're completely wrong and his reaction would be the same."

"Well, he told us quite clearly that we were completely wrong about necromancy," Annie grumbled.

Neville nodded. "That's because that statement was vague enough. It didn't activate the magic of the oath because Teddy was able to interpret it in a way that didn't connect to the knowledge protected by the oath. We need to keep our guesses broad for him to be able to do that again."

Teddy looked over at Neville, clearly impressed. "You know a lot about oaths, too."

Neville shrugged. "I've been a member of a resistance movement for my entire adult life. I don't even know how many secrecy oaths bind me by now."

"Shoot away, then," Bill nodded at Neville.

Neville paused to think. "Doesn't it make you nervous?" he asked in the end, deciding to revisit the line of questioning that elicited a reaction before. "The fact that Harry's not aging? If it's not necromancy, there's different dark magic at play."

Teddy took a while before he replied. "Harry's never shared anything about this with me so at least I'm able to talk here. Mind you, it's only gonna be guesses." He took a deep breath. "Yes, I'm worried. But not for his moral integrity or anything like that. Just, worried for him. I… I got the
impression the lack of ageing wasn't his intention."

"Care to elaborate on that theory?" Neville prompted.

"I might be completely wrong," Teddy warned them, "but I think it's a side effect of the magic Harry's been using."

Neville immediately latched onto that. "And what magic is that?"

And once again, Teddy tried to answer and nothing came out.

Neville sat back on his chair, letting out one frustrated breath. This wasn't leading anywhere. He took a moment to consider a different line of questioning.

"Why do you think," he worded his question carefully, "Harry is being so secretive?"

Teddy rolled his eyes. "Harry says that a secret stops being secret the moment you share it with anyone." He shrugged his shoulders. "And although that approach usually drives me as crazy as it obviously does you right now, I see where he's coming from. There's a lot at stake here. But also," he carried on softly, "I think Harry simply doesn't see the need to share. Like I've said, I suspect he was living alone for a long time. He's used to dealing with matters on his own and doesn't see the benefit of sharing the load. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't tell you just because he couldn't be bothered to have a conversation about it. Actually, the fact that he sent me here to talk to you instead suggests that I'm right."

"Well, if that's true, I wish he hadn't forgotten to release you from your oaths when he was sending you here," Bill muttered. "This conversation would have gone much more smoothly."

Teddy shrugged sheepishly. "Is there anything else?" he asked. "Anything else you assumed about Harry?"

"We know," Annie stressed, "that he can manipulate the dead zones. He promised he'd tell me how he does that."

"Did he?" Teddy looked stunned. "That's a very, very closely guarded secret. You should never talk about it openly," he stressed. "It's one of the very few tools we can use against the Empire."

"Do you know how to do it?" Annie inquired.

"No. I've never asked. But many people have and Harry always refused to tell. You should cherish that promise and keep the knowledge safe," Teddy finished with an intense look.

Annie seemed to have caught the message and nodded.

Neville caught something else in Ted's answer, though. "Who's 'we'?"

"Hm?" Teddy looked at him in confusion.

"You said that 'it's one of the very few tools we can use against the Empire'. Who's 'we'?"

Teddy's face brightened. "Well, I meant the people, of course."

"The people?" Bill repeated. "You mean People for People, the organisation?"

"Yep," Teddy nodded. "Are you in touch? I've never actually asked why you are here but whatever it is, you know they would help you."
"Actually, we aren't so sure about that," Bill disagreed. "Harry's mentioned he worked with them before and that they might be willing to help—but not if it would pose too much danger for them. But if you are a member, you could lead us to them, maybe put a good word in for us."

Teddy stopped with his cup half raised, staring at Bill with his mouth gaping open. "What?"

Bill frowned at Ted's reaction. "Was he lying about that, too?"

Ted closed his mouth. "He wasn't lying, he just omitted some pretty important things," he growled.

He put his cup down resolutely. "It's official, Harry is avoiding you. I can't believe he spent three weeks with you in a small caravan and didn't tell you!" He cursed under his breath. "Well, nevermind. I guess I know now what my task here is."

He got up from his chair. "Give me half an hour. I'll get in touch with—with the secret keeper. I'm sure he'll want to meet you soon."

"Wait!" Bill called before Ted had a chance to march out of the room. "This conversation isn't over. You haven't really told us anything useful! I feel like we are more confused than when we started."

"Trust me, Uncle, you want to get in touch with the People as soon as possible," Ted implored. "You'll understand once you meet the secret keeper. And I know he'll be able to explain more than I can, anyway."

"Who is this guy?" Neville asked. "Do we know him?"

Teddy grimaced. "You do. But it would be better if you let him explain. I'll be back in half an hour to pick you up."

Teddy kept his word. He was back in less than twenty minutes.

Bill, Neville and Gregory met him in the courtyard, all suit-up for the occasion. Neville had both his wands safely strapped to his forearms, his talkie-talkie watch to his wrist and his bottomless pouch to his belt. His bezoar filling was once again clipped to his lower left molar and the emergency Portkey earring to his left earlobe.

He was ready to meet other wizards.

"I'm sorry but I can barely side-apparated two people, let alone three," Teddy said, looking at the three of them. "I suppose we could take separate trips but still, it would be far less suspicious if fewer of us went."

Bill beckoned to Gregory to stay. Neville half expected Ted to insist on Bill going alone but he did no such thing. Instead, he let them both out of the Lot, explaining the plan in a soft whisper.

"We are going to Prague. It'll take me three layovers to get there, so bear with me."

"Layovers?" Bill repeated in confusion.

"Yeah. I mean—the trip will take me four jumps. We'll be stopping at three apparation points in between."

Neville understood now. They heard about the apparation points before. One of Harry's maps showed them scattered across the continent. Sadecki explained that wizards knew their location and popped from one to another if they were crossing longer distances.
"Aren't those being watched by the Army?" Bill recalled what they heard earlier.

Teddy shook his head. "Only sporadically. If we get unlucky and a watch decides to stop us, just keep it cool and show them your wand. There aren't on the lookout for you anymore."

They walked for another minute or two before Teddy stopped. "This is far enough. Can you use some transfiguration to change your looks?" He already looked different himself, wearing a face they hadn't seen yet.

Unlike Sadecki, he didn't insist on ridiculous hairstyles and golden-hue skin. Thank Merlin. Once they changed the colour of their hair and beard, Teddy clasped their wrists and spun them into blackness.

From the dark streets of the slums, they apparated straight into a brightly lit platform, making Neville's eyes hurt. Before Neville managed to observe anything else, Teddy was once again apparating them away. The next layover was just as bright but this time, Neville wisely kept his eyes shut, already feeling the headache building. After the next jump, Teddy warned them he needed a minute to recuperate. Neville chanced squinting his eyes open to look around.

Although there was light everywhere around them, it wasn't coming from any obvious source. There were no other structures or buildings in sight either, just the platform they were standing on. After a second, his eyes adjusted, and Neville could see further. They were surrounded by tall trees from all sides.

Suddenly, he felt an invisible force moving him sideways. He pulled his wand out and looked for the source of magic before he realised the floor beneath him shifted, moving him to the edge of the platform. Less than a second later, a wizard appeared in the centre where Neville stood just a moment ago. Neville's wand traced the movement automatically and he only barely stopped himself from firing a curse. The stranger raised his eyebrows at the wand in his hand weirdly but popped away again a second later.

Neville slipped his wand back into his sleeve and shrugged sheepishly at Bill's look. Sadecki told them about the magic that prevented collisions here. He should have been prepared for it.

"Alright then," Teddy rolled his eyes. "I guess we need to go now. You ready?"

Even this late into the night, Prague was still very much awake. They apparated to a hill overlooking the many towers and spires of the city centre beneath them, still washed in thousands of lights.

Teddy led them through the gates of a castle and across the courtyard inside it. A massive cathedral stood on the opposite side and Ted was heading straight for its grand front door. He stopped and knocked on the richly carved wood of the portal.

The wooden figures of miniature saints sculpted into the door all moved upon the contact, staring intently at their faces. One of them reached for Teddy's hand, clasped his finger in its little palm and started pulling him into the wood. Teddy turned to Bill and Neville. "No worries, these are friends," he hurriedly whispered before he completely disappeared.

Neville shared a worried look with Bill. He watched as Bill took out his wand and faced the door.

"If I don't get back in five minutes, apparate back to Ruma," he instructed Neville and knocked.
Neville frowned in disagreement but didn't fight the order. Bill was pulled into the door by another wooden saint a moment later.

Neville looked at his wrist watch and resigned himself to a nerve-wracking wait.

Ten seconds later, Bill's head appeared through the door. He beckoned Neville to come in.

"Is it safe?"

Bill grimaced. "Define safe."

"Is this a brothel?!" Neville asked a moment later, incredulous.

They were still inside a cathedral. The gloomy but grandiose gothic architecture surrounded them from all sides, but between the decorated arches and columns stood red couches and bar tables. Scarcely clad women were lounging around, looking at the three of them through scarlet veils.

"I wouldn't say that word out loud here," Teddy whispered, looking around nervously for anyone who might have overheard them. He was leading them to a desk standing in the middle of the nave. "It's way too classy of an establishment to be called that. Not to say expensive."

Neville watched the amount of coins Teddy piled up on the counter. "You aren't kidding about that," he muttered under his breath.

"Three specials, please," Teddy said to the beautiful lady standing behind the counter. She was the only one without a veil in there.

Under her watchful stare, Teddy took out one more galleon and placed it carefully at the top of the pile.

She waved her wand at the coins, making them disappear to Merlin knows where. She nodded at Teddy and started walking to the arch on their left. She silently beckoned them to follow.

She led them up a spiral staircase to a gallery filled with more gothic-style stained windows covered in scarlet curtains, and statues of saints intermixed with red lounges. It was the perfect insult to muggles and everything their religion held dear.

Neville frowned at it all in distaste.

After some twenty metres, the witch in front of them halted, opening a door to their right. Teddy pushed Neville towards it. "Go ahead. I'll come to pick you up in a minute."

Neville looked around the bedroom he found himself in. It was red, very red. A massive bed dominated the space, and not much of anything else was in there. The privacy wards around the room were strong, though, humming with power in the air around him.

He walked over to the only window, looking at the city behind it. It lay low beneath the cathedral, with a wide river flowing through the brightly lit streets and ornate buildings. The lights became abruptly scarce a mile away from the hill. Neville figured that's where the magical centre ended and the muggle districts began.

He leaned his back on the wall, facing the whole room and the door. He cast another Tempus and started counting his breaths to keep himself calm.
Four minutes later, he felt a sudden shift in the privacy wards. An arch appeared in the wall on the left and Neville immediately aimed his wand in its direction.

Teddy stood in the frame.

"Why here?" Neville whispered the moment he saw him.

Teddy shrugged. "Absolute anonymity, strong privacy charms and no questions asked about human transfiguration spells," he answered simply. "This is where the higher-ups go cheat on their spouses. No one will ever authorise an investigation into this place."

Neville could see the logic in that. He let his wand slip back up his sleeve. "What now, then?"

"Let's go to Bill's room," Teddy beckoned him to the arch. "The two of them are already talking."

Neville let Teddy walk him through the adjacent chamber, and through a second arch to yet another bedroom. This room had two people in it. One of them was Neville's leader and best friend, Bill. The other was a tall ginger, too.

And if Neville's eyes were not deceiving him, the man looked suspiciously like one of Bill's late brothers, Fred or George.

Neville assessed the situation. Given the fact that Bill was not aiming his wand at the Weasley twin lookalike and instead was sitting at the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, Neville deduced the man didn't pose an immediate threat. Which meant it probably wasn't an imposter.

Neville looked at him properly. He appeared to be Neville's age, had the telling wrinkles around his eyes and greyish hair on his temples. The main features were unmistakably that of his old schoolmate, though. If Bill wasn't attacking the wizard, it meant one of the Weasley twins stood in front of him. Which was highly improbable, as both of them died at the Battle of Hogwarts.

Neville thought back at that fateful day and remembered whose body he actually saw lying dead on the floor of the Great Hall, and he ventured a guess. "George?" he asked tentatively.

"Hi, Nev," the wizard greeted him with a smile. "Fancy meeting you in such a fine establishment."

Sure enough, when the wizard turned his head slightly, his left ear was missing.

Neville shook his head with bewilderment. Not knowing what to say back, he nodded at Bill instead. "Is he alright?"

George turned to his brother. "He's probably in a bit of a shock," he said softly. He sat down next to Bill and put an arm around his shoulder. "Come on, big man," he shook Bill lightly. "It's alright."

Bill raised his head. His eyes were misty.

"We left you there," Bill whispered forcefully. "We abandoned you!"

"Nonsense," George said resolutely. "It was me who missed the evacuation portkey. That's all."

"We thought you were dead," Bill carried on as if George had never spoken. "We'd never heard anything from the Death Eaters, no blackmail, no taunting, so we assumed you hadn't been captured. The only other explanation was dead."

He stood up sharply. "Why didn't you contact us?"
George grimaced. "I couldn't, at first. It took me ages to sneak out of Hogwarts. And then… I was a bit out of it, what with Fred—When I finally started making an effort to get a word to you, it was too late. England was fully under Riddle's regime and the original Curtain was already standing around the Isles. When it spread through Europe later, I tried searching for you in France but the only thing I found was the burned down camp. I thought you all died during the Bombing."

Bill was listening intently, his eyes glued to his brother. "And when the Crossing was opened? When Harry started smuggling? He must have told you we survived. Why didn't you contacted us then?"

George looked troubled by that question. "I'm—" he started, only to fall silent again. He looked down at his feet. "I couldn't risk you knowing and trying to get back to me. I knew you and dad were alright; and I knew about Fleur and your three girls; and I knew—"

"But we didn't!" Bill suddenly bellowed. "Mum died thinking she abandoned you to die alone in Hogwarts. She thought I was her only child that survived!"

"And what would one letter solve?" George shouted back, getting on his feet, too. "Would you be happy to just leave it at that or would you try to organise a pointless rescue mission? Because I wouldn't go. I couldn't. I have responsibilities here as much as you have responsibilities to your family on the other side. It wouldn't be right to take you away from them. And I wouldn't like to weight on your consciousness if you did the right thing and decided to stay with them, either."

Bill shook his head vigorously. "But I would know my brother was alive! The only brother I have left!"

"You have a wife, though. And three daughters!" George pointed his finger at Bill. "They are more important."

Bill chuckled humorlessly. "So you decided to play the martyr? To live alone in exile from your family, basking in your sacrifice?"

"No," George said grimly. "I decided to stay where I was needed, where no one else was willing to help. I sacrificed my family's happiness to help strangers. I'm sorry for that, Bill. I'm truly sorry."

Bill's anger deflated with George's. Neville watched the two brothers staring at each other, taking deep breaths in unison, calming down at the same pace.

After a moment, Bill spoke up first. "You founded the People," he said with certainty.

George nodded.

"Are you still the leader? Are you willing to help us?" Bill asked.

A small smile appeared on George's face. "I've never said I led them," he said. "Actually, I've always answered to higher authority."

He looked pointedly behind Neville's shoulder. Neville hurriedly turned around and felt his eyes going impossibly wide.

The other Weasley twin was standing next to Teddy. Correction, Fred Weasley was floating in the air next to Teddy. And he was very much a ghost.

"Fred appeared right when the call for evacuation sounded," George started.
"I left half of myself behind, you see," Fred the ghost pointed out, nodding at George. "I couldn't very well carry on to the next adventure like that."

Teddy had conjured four plush chairs for the living people to sit down. Fred the ghost was floating cross-legged over the bed now, grinning at them all.

"Let's just say I was a wee bit surprised in that moment," George carried on with their story. "And then all the evacuation portkeys were gone and you lot with it. A minute later, Death Eaters started pouring into the castle. I ran. But halfway through the passage to Hogsmeade, I realised I lost Fred behind."

"There's magic around Hogwarts that keeps its ghosts inside," Fred explained. "It took us a while to find the counter."

"I was hiding in the castle for weeks, sneaking into the library in the middle of the night. It helped that we knew the castle much better than all the Death Eaters crawling through the halls combined. And Fred was always watching out for me."

"I have to say, a ghost body is an incredible look-out device," Fred commented in approval.

"But it still took us a couple of months before I managed to bind Fred to me instead to the castle. And by the time we finally got out, you lot were in France and there was the first Curtain that blocked any communication between us," George shrugged. "England was fully occupied, Death Eaters and Riddle had openly taken charge. I hid among muggles and searched for a way to reach you. We contacted wizards that we once knew to be on our side but they only sent Death Eaters after us in response. We tried to stay close to the places we thought the Resistance would target next, in hope of encountering any you. But we had no such luck. And then the war seemed to have stopped. The Resistance stopped their invasion of England. A few weeks later, I read about the Betrayal Bombing in the newspaper. We thought you all died in the flames."

George paused and Fred the ghost took over. "The Curtain spread to the edges of Europe soon after that and we could finally travel to France. We found the burnt Resistance camps and we found some of your things in there. It wasn't until several years later, when Harry contacted us, that we learnt otherwise."

"Those weren't good years," George remarked darkly.

"No, they weren't," Fred the ghost agreed.

"Muggles were being butchered at large, as a retaliation for the Bombing," George explained. "Back then, they were still organised and had some weapons to speak of, so it got bloody for a bit. Didn't last long, though. A few well-placed Imperios got rid of the organisation, and the weapons disappeared soon after when all wizarding nations put their minds to it. It was this common cause that allowed Riddle unite the whole wizarding Empire so easily."

George paused for a moment. "We were… indifferent to the massacre at the start. Almost agreeable, actually. Even I wanted revenge for my family and friends, after all. But then I saw the cruelty in it. The absolute unneccessity. Muggles were well and truly beaten by that point. There was no need to carry on with the violence."

"It wasn't a very popular opinion, though" Fred commented. "And George very quickly learnt he needed to be careful voicing it. We found similarly thinking people after some time though. And we found inconspicuous way to help muggles, too."
Fred the ghost carried on. "Did you know that you can grow an entire crop of wheat throughout the night if you have twenty wizards chanting nonstop? Well, I guess you did, Nev. We used to do that in the early days, pretending to farm food for wizards, whilst we yielded ten times as much to give away to muggles. That ended when the Wand Registry came about. All that chanting would be immediately discovered by the Army. It was around that time that Harry found us."

George nodded. "We didn't know about his training in the army. We didn't know he was best friends with you, Bill. He didn't tell us about Hermione's breakdown or the way Ginny died. We had no idea he went crazy from Felix Felicis and got kicked out from the Resistance. We just saw a broken man and thought he got stranded in this world the same way we did. We learnt differently only when this goofball arrived," George pointed at Teddy.

"Harry did tell us that Ron and Charlie both died by his side. He told us about Percy dying on a mission, too. But he told us some of our family survived the Bombing," Fred the ghost said softly.

"That was years before the Crossing was open and there was no way to contact you, though," George supplied. "When Harry first made to cross the Curtain, he offered to deliver a letter. I- I made a decision then to keep you ignorant. Too many people depended on me at that point and I made the decision to sacrifice your peace of mind for them."

"We've been here for nearly a month now," Bill spoke up, his voice painstakingly even. "We spent three weeks in one small caravan together. Why didn't Harry tell us about you two then? Or even before, when we were planning the mission? Merlin knows we would have appreciated knowing there's a friendly face waiting on the other side."

Fred and George both started chuckling.

"And face the music himself?" George asked. "Deal with someone else's emotional mess? Nah, that's not Harry's style. He probably had a good rational excuse prepared too, like the fact that you would have rushed over too soon if you had known about us. And he was right to keep you in the wastelands for as long as it was possible - it was some serious manhunt for you lot around here for those weeks."

"You have to give it to him, he sent Teddy to take you here the moment it was safe to meet," Fred added in Harry's defence.

"Harry didn't orchestrate this meeting," Bill argued, "it was only Teddy who organised this once he learned we hadn't heard about you."

George laughed out loud. "Keep thinking that, if you want."

Neville heard Teddy huff in annoyance next to him but the young wizard didn't protest that statement. Neville wasn't ready to let that comment go, and obviously, neither did Bill. "Okay, that's it," Bill growled. "I've had enough of these cryptic comments. Harry is watching everyone. Harry controls everything. Harry this and Harry that. What's his deal? I need some clear answers if we are to work with him!"

He was shouting at the end. George's answer, on the other hand, was strikingly casual. "His deal?" he repeated. "He's waging a war, of course."

"What war?" Neville asked stupidly before he could stop himself.

Fred and George shared a look before they both erupted in a roar of laughter. "The one against the Irish leprechauns, Nev," George managed to get out.
Teddy joined them after that, and Neville chuckled himself. Even Bill snickered. He recovered quickly, though. "Tell us everything you know," he ordered. "And start from the start."

George nodded. "I can tell you loads; that's why we are here tonight. Even you'll learn some new things, little man," George looked at Teddy, "so be ready to take a new oath with their lot."

"Wait," Neville interjected. "We haven't agreed to any secrecy oaths."

George raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you want to hear what I've got to say?"

Neville glanced at Bill who nodded after a short hesitation.

"Thought so," George said.

"You'd better order some refreshments before you get into it," Fred the ghost suggested. "It's been a long night for them and they only had food from that pinchpenny Popovic."

"Good thinking," George noted. He took out his wand and cast a Patronus, and sent the incorporeal coyote through the left wall. It was a very peculiar way to order food in any establishment let alone in a brothel where privacy was guarded above everything else. It cemented Neville's earlier suspicions that the People or George were closely connected with this place. But he refrained from any comments right now. They had more important things to discuss.

"Have you come across one of the graves in the wastelands?" George started with a question.

Seeing them both nod, he said. "Those are honestly the only thing I know about Harry's life between the moment he was discharged from the IMRA, and the moment he found me in—well, a decade ago now. I don't think he was doing much more than hiding from Riddle during those years, and I got the impression he was pretty miserable, with only regrets and dead people keeping him company."

George paused and looked shortly at their attentive faces. "When he turned up in my safehouse that day, I barely recognised him," he carried on. "He was… withdrawn. Didn't talk much but he was willing to help. And help he did. He was excellent with his wand even back then, and as stupidly fearless as he is now. We don't do open combat at People, we never have, but there were skirmishes. The biggest help, though, were the safehouses he set up. Their wards were stronger than anything else we'd ever built before. He still does that for me now. But what I wanted to say is that back then, he was helpful, but detached. He did what he was told, and then, he would eat and sleep. And that was all. Let me tell you, I was pretty worried. Luckily, it all changed when Hana came along."

George looked over at the ghost of Fred, who nodded in encouragement.

"She was one of Popovic's muggles," George continued. "Just a sliver of a girl. We found her half-starved after her master died."

"Hannah?" Teddy repeated carefully, failing to imitate George's foreign pronunciation of the name. "I've never heard about her."

"You wouldn't. It's not like Harry ever talks about her," George pointed out. "He's going to have words with me for mentioning her at all but the hell I care. She's part of the story he asked me to tell you so I'll bloody include her. There's not much to tell, anyway. They had a good few months together until one day, she just dropped dead. She had a stroke, you see. A blood clot travelled up her leg after a small injury. She probably felt some pain but not enough to complain. It was over
very quickly. Harry was heartbroken, of course, but even that was much better than the previous lethargy."

"It wasn't only the months they spent together that healed him," Fred interjected. "Our theory is that the manner in which she died also helped. No matter how hard Harry tried, he couldn't blame that death on himself. Must have been an epiphany for him."

George chuckled humorlessly. "Whatever the reason, I saw my friend coming out of his shell. He started travelling again, disappearing for days. He started putting ideas forward, even telling me what to do. The Harry Potter we used to know was back. He's the reason why People grew so much. He builds our safehouses, he moves muggles and supplies around without detection. He casts untrackable wards, he gathers allies. We have almost two hundred members now, we house more than ten thousand muggles and muggleborns and we feed twenty times as many."

George paused after that, smiling brightly at their faces. It was clear to Neville that he was proud of their accomplishments.

"That's it?" Bill asked after a moment of silence when it became cleared George finished. "That's your war?"

George smirked at Bill's disappointment. "No. That's one part of it. The only part we know the specifics of."

"Harry has other dealings that don't concern us" Fred the ghost explained. "We only know very little about those."

"Tell us everything you know," Bill demanded impatiently.

"You already know some of it yourselves," George shrugged. "Take his deal with Popovic, for example. What even Teddy doesn't realise, though, is the scale of it. Or the fact that Popovic is not the only slum boss Harry does regular business with. Once again, we don't know the specifics but we do know that Harry is the reason why starvation dropped down significantly and why wizards haven't discovered the tunnels underneath the slums yet."

"Your pal Sadecki wasn't the only officer Harry bribed, and certainly not the highest ranked," Fred continued, "He blackmails many more. It's the same with the politicians and the aristocracy. I'm sure you'll come to appreciate this soon enough once you brave to step out of the slums."

"You already know about Harry's smuggling activities," George carried on with the list.

"And they know about the dead zones, too," Teddy spoke up.

George appeared surprised. "They do? Well, there you have it. These are all pieces of a bigger picture. Only Harry knows them all and only Harry knows what the picture actually is. Somehow, you are now one of the pieces, that's why you are learning about the rest. It's very important that you don't go digging into the others thought."

Fred nodded his translucent head. "There's a very good reason why they have to stay separate. Why you haven't heard of any war being fought."

George was staring at them intently. "Harry is taken for a half-squib in the slums. For a low-life scavenger in the wastelands. In the eyes of the Army, he's just a common criminal. For wizarding kids, he's a bogeyman that comes to steal their sweets. For their parents, he's a half-forgotten story at best. Only a handful of people know better. It needs to stay that way as long as possible."
"That's not all, though," George continued. "You also need to realise that only a few wizards know that the slums aren't just a place for muggles to die anymore. Hell, even muggles themselves don't know it yet," he added. "They don't even know that we, the People, really exist. If there's no hope, there's no unrest. If wizards don't know there's a threat, they aren't trying to stop it."

"As for Riddle," George paused momentarily, "Harry tells me Riddle suspects. Probably knows some of it. But he's not feeling threatened enough to admit his failure openly and start a war against a bogeyman for kids. He hunts Harry wherever he goes but only as a criminal. He wouldn't move against him openly just yet. Of course it will happen eventually. But it's critical that it happens on Harry's terms and only when we are ready."

The food and tea arrived after that. They sat down to it in silence.

Neville felt overwhelmed with information. In his head, he was going through the last couple of weeks, viewing them in light of everything Fred and George were trying to convince them of.

Five minutes went by with only the sounds of their cutlery. After their modest meal at Popovic's, the plates they were given here seemed overly lavish. Neville was sure they were delicious, too, but it wasn't like he could appreciate it now.

"Okay," Bill said suddenly. "Let's say for a minute we believe you. Let's say Harry has such as much sway as you are trying to sell us. You still haven't told us how he would manage it all though," he impatiently noted. "I mean, I know how good Harry is with a wand. I fought alongside him all those years ago and I remember how... formidable he was, through his utter disregard of his own safety. But this has nothing to do with curses and duelling. Even if he was invincible in a fight, it wouldn't grant him this much influence. You are talking about political power, about intel gathering—a whole campaign that needs to be financed and organised. Where does Harry get all of that?"

George beckoned to Fred. The ghost smiled. "Okay. Let's see how much I'm allowed to say." He frowned in concentration, obviously choosing his words with care. "Harry has collected certain... tools. Tools that make him control all of this—more or less on his own.

"Even we don't understand it all, but... we know that one of them gives him the ability to break through enchantments and spells of others with ease. The second allows him to hide his magic even from the Wand Registry. But it's the third one that makes all the difference. Among other things, it allows him to effectively spy on many people."

Neville leaned forward, intently staring at the ghost. They were finally close to the answer.

"But how?!" Bill asked, when Fred paused.

Fred smiled broadly at them. "Do you believe that the dead watch over the living? Well, I can say with certainty that it's true, at least in some regards."

The ghost's smile grew mischievous. "And Harry knows a lot of dead people."

Chapter End Notes

There were so many tempting places to break the chapter, and left you with a cool
cliffhanger! But I decided to be nice and kept writing to the finish I’d set up at the start.
I tried to make you relate to Neville and Bill as much as possible in this chapter. If you felt frustrated or impatient whilst reading, I'd consider it a success. In any way, let me know how you liked the latest revelations.

As always, big thanks to Dylan Pidge for proofreading!
Where People Play, the Army Don't Stray

Chapter Notes

Previously: “Do you believe that the dead watch over the living? Well, Harry knows a lot of dead people.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

25 April 2019, St. Vitus Brothel, Prague

Neville’s mind went blank. What?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Bill barked out.

Fred the ghost didn’t reply right away. Instead, he took a moment to consider his next words. And in that moment, Neville knew they were going to get only an abbreviated version of the truth.

“It means that Harry has a very effective way to spy on some people,” Fred said at last. “It has made a considerable difference in our efforts.”

“By using dead people?!” Bill repeated. He pointed an accusing finger at Teddy. “You said Harry wasn’t using necromancy!”

Teddy raised his hands in defence. “He’s not!”

“Really? So what’s this talk of dead people, then?”

“No one is raising any dead.” George interjected. “There are certainly no rituals, no sacrifices. What Harry does is as far from necromancy as... as painting a magical portrait of a dead wizard would be, I’d guess.”

“What’s the magic he uses, then?” Bill pressured. “What are the tools you’ve mentioned?”

“They are Harry’s most guarded secrets. One of the few that Voldemort hasn’t discovered yet. Sorry, Bill,” Fred shrugged his incorporeal shoulders. “I can’t tell you the specifics. You now have an idea of what Harry is capable of. If you want the technicalities, you’ll have to ask him. I don’t know that much more than you do now, anyway.”

“Ask him? How the bloody hell can I do that if he’s avoiding us?”

“He’ll show up eventually,” Fred said. “Probably once you’ve calmed down.”

That got Neville thinking. “Is he watching right now?” he voiced his suspicions.

Both Fred and George snickered at him. “Neville is starting to get the hang of it.”

“Wait a minute,” Bill raised his hand. “Has he be spying on us? The whole time he left us alone in
the slums?”

Fred grimaced. “I understand there are limitations to his abilities. I don’t know the extent of it myself.”

Bill’s face was turning red. “That mean he has, hasn’t he? Well, if he intends to violate our privacy, we at least deserve the right to know how he does it!”

Fred didn’t answer immediately. He straightened up and floated higher in the air, towering over Bill now.

“What you need to understand, Bill,” he started slowly, “is that Harry is under no obligation to tell you any of this. He could have left you wondering as he’s done with the many others who asked the same questions. You should be glad he decided to tell you this much!”

“Harry guards his secrets very closely,” George explained in a pacifying tone, “probably because he can literally watch them spreading if he does let anything slip. He decided to break his rule in respect to your friendship. But don’t push it, Bill.”

Bill didn’t pay the warning any mind. “I’ve overheard Harry talking to Ron. Our brother Ron. I think I’m entitled to some answers regarding that, at least.”

The twins shared a tired look. “You are probably right about that,” George shrugged. “Bring it up with Harry when you see him.” He said with finality.

Bill ignored George’s tone. “Well, thanks for taking his side,” he grumbled. “A real family, we are.”

George sighed heavily. “I’ve learned to trust Harry’s judgement,” he said after a moment. “Mind you, I understand your frustration only too well. You were wondering about Harry’s abilities for days. It had taken him months to tell us, all those years ago.”

“As much as it pains me to say it,” Fred the ghost added, once again sitting cross-legged above the bed, “in many cases, Harry does know better. So yeah, we choose to trust him if he says that the power behind his abilities needs to stay secret, even from us or our own family.”

* * *

“What now, then?” Bill asked after a moment of silence.

“I think we should call it a night,” George suggested. “You need to go back to Ruma, show the rest of your team that you are still alive. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Neville cast a quick Tempus. It was almost four a.m.

“Let’s meet at our safehouse,” George carried on. “I’ll give you the secret to the Fidelius. Teddy will show you the way.”

Fred the ghost nodded. “Let’s talk and see how we can help with your plans.”
Bill nodded but didn’t get up. “Neville, you go to Ruma with Teddy. I’ll stay,” he turned back to George and Fred. “You might have known your brother was alive, but I didn’t,” he explained. “We still have lots of catching up to do.”

George nodded. He took out his wand and conjured a slip of paper. Neville barely had a chance to read the sentence on it — Where People Play, the Army Don’t Stray; in the Town Four Thousand Feet below Cieczyn — before George set it to flames.

“Let’s meet over lunch,” George suggested. “Teddy, take Neville to the town. Bill and I will wait there.”

“The town?” Teddy repeated, his voice excited.

“Yeah,” George confirmed with a smile. “I figured we could show them around a bit. Let them see.”

* * *

Now that Neville knew what to expect, he tried to pay attention to the apparation points in between Prague and Ruma better, in hopes of making the journey by himself later. His brain was too tired, though. It was obvious Teddy was knackered, too. He took his time at each layover but Neville didn’t mind. Better slow than splinched.

It didn’t surprise Neville that the kitchen light was still on when they got back to Rusty’s. Gregory, Annie and even Andrei were all awake, waiting for them.

Neville didn’t have the energy to rewind the whole conversation. Besides, there was very little of it that he could actually tell them. Most were now guarded by a secrecy Oath they swore to George before leaving the bedroom.

Neville did impart the most important bits, though. “They are friends, we can trust them. And they are ready to help us.”

They all went to sleep soon after that. Even Teddy, who took over Bill’s bedroom.

Tomorrow was going to be another busy day.

* * *

The next morning, Neville had a mild panic attack imagining his dead grandmother watching him in the shower. And then he pictured her reporting it to Harry.

He almost conjured a robe to cover himself right there underneath the spray of water, before he realised how ridiculous that reaction would be. He rolled his eyes and uttered a few choice words on Harry’s account, cursing him for leaving them without clear answers.

They got up so late that they decided to skip breakfast and head for lunch straightaway. Just like last night, they started walking away from the Lot, so Teddy could side-apparate Neville to the first layover.
“You should sign up for a tour of the apparation points soon, so you could travel alone,” Teddy said when they left Rusty’s.

“Isn’t it too dangerous to use them too often?” Neville doubted.

“It would be more dangerous to travel a long distance and avoid the points altogether. Someone would surely investigate that,” Teddy argued. “If you use the points, you might get pulled over for a random check but they won’t be very thorough. The manhunt for the lot of you is over.”

Neville decided to trust his judgement. “How do I sign up for a tour, then?”

Teddy frowned. “That might be a bit tricky. Students usually take a tour during their apparation training in their sixth year. There aren’t that many adult wizards who haven’t gone through it yet. We will have to disguise you as a teenager and then think of some cover story of a homeschooled—Actually, come to think of it, it might be better if I show you myself one day. At least the most important points.”

“Can you explain the basics now, at least?” Neville asked.

When Teddy apparated them from Ruma to their first layover a minute later, they lingered for a moment. Teddy pointed at the platform underneath their shoes. They were standing on a sign. It read ‘K11’, written in big black letters.

“It’s a chessboard,” Teddy explained simply. “Every apparation point is like a square on the board. Look at the letters carefully, print them into your memory. When you apparate, it’s enough to imagine the chessboard and think of the square you need to get to. If you picture its letter and the number, your mind will connect it to this place and lead you here. We need to get you to a map soon. You’ll need to remember where the magical cities are on the board and which routes to take between them.”

This morning, they were travelling from Budapest to Katowice in Poland, which apparently meant going almost straight up north, through the K10 point, to K9 and ending up in J8.

Except that they didn’t go all the way to Katowice. At K9, Teddy let go of his arm and looked carefully around. There were alone.

He took out a coin from his pocket. “A Portkey from Harry, untraceable,” he explained quietly. “No more magic from now on, please, until I tell you otherwise. Let’s go.”

The moment Neville’s finger touched the coin, Teddy whispered, “Up to no good.”

The Portkey activated upon the phrase, whisking them away from the platform.

* * *

They appeared in the middle of a courtyard of what looked like an abandoned factory.

“Where are we?” Neville asked, looking around at the desolated buildings, collapsed chimneys and rusty iron towers looming over them. Most windows were broken and there were weeds growing
between the red bricks.


He started walking towards the closest of the massive towers. It was an ugly structure, its iron frame bare. It stood on two legs, one vertical, one slanted. Neville could see a wheel on top of it, some hundred metres above their heads.

“It’s a mineshaft,” Teddy supplied. “Well, the head of one. We’re going down the pit.”

Neville’s eyebrows rose, looking dubiously at the rusting construction in front of them. Teddy paid him no mind, carrying towards the winding tower, so Neville had no other option but to follow. Twenty steps away from the shaft, he abruptly stopped, though.

There were wards in place, strong ones. He could sense them humming in the air with potency. They didn’t seem to react to him. “That’s the Fidelius?” he guessed.

Teddy was already at the foot of the tower, opening the railing of the mining cage there. “Yeah. Please, hurry up away from the open view,” he called after him.

Neville swiftly walked the remaining distance. Teddy was already inside the cage, beckoning him to join. Neville hesitated, his eyes zeroing in on the narrow slit between the floor of the mining cage and the ground beneath his feet. The mineshaft lay there in absolute darkness.

“How deep does it go?” he asked softly.

“More than a kilometre,” Teddy readily supplied. “You’d have plenty of time to cast an Arresto if we started falling. Which we won’t.”

Neville sighed and stepped into the cage. The whole thing shook ominously under his feet.

Teddy shut the two sets of doors of the cage and hit the big red button on the wall. They heard a groan from somewhere above their heads, and with a jerk, the cage started moving downwards.

After the rough start, the ride smoothed out. The cage wasn’t even shaking, going down with surprising speed.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Teddy said, looking at Neville’s surprised face. “They keep the place in good condition.”

Teddy leaned on the wall of the cage, obviously making himself comfortable for the long drive. Neville followed his lead. An electric bulb was humming above their heads and the mechanics of the lift in use were gently whirring somewhere over the roof of the cage. Other than that, it was peacefully silent.

“Years ago, someone found out that the Wand Registry doesn’t scan below a few hundred metres under the ground,” Teddy started. “If you go deep enough, you can use as much magic as you want without ever appearing on the Army’s maps.”

“This region is full of old coal mines,” Teddy carried on, “built by muggles throughout the last two centuries. Harry put several of the mine shafts under Fidelius charm. And then Fred and his friends started building safehouses in them. They grew over the years, so much so that at one point, they
just connected them into a big town.” Teddy grinned at him. “And that’s what we call it now, the Town. Very unimaginative, I know, but it’s safe, too. If anyone slips and mentions it in a conversation, it won’t attract attention.”

Neville noticed how excited Teddy seemed to be here. He commented on it.

“I haven’t visited in ages,” Teddy explained. “George tries to keep the traffic around the entrances as low as possible — people don’t leave much and don’t get many visitors, either. I was surprised he invited you over here instead of some of the safehouses above the ground. But I guess he wanted you to see.”

“Hmm,” Neville only said to that. Inside, his mind was whirring.

“Couldn’t the Curtain work in a similar way?” he asked after a moment. “If we dug deep enough, could we pass underneath it?”

Teddy chuckled. “I asked the same thing, the first time I heard about the Town. Harry explained that there is a big difference between the magic behind the Wand Registry and the Curtain.” He frowned in concentration. “Apparently, the Wand Registry is a very powerful and clever bit of spellcrafting, based on what used to be the Tracer, but magnified and adjusted to include everyone, not just underaged wizards. It has defined functions and it also has its limits, and we are exploring those to their fullest. The Curtain, on the other hand, is... What did Harry say? ‘An intent of one mighty bastard, powered by such magical force that you and I can’t ever comprehend, let alone conjure’ was the way he put it, I think. He explained that Riddle wanted to create an unbreachable barrier, and he had the magic and the sheer force needed to put that intent into reality. That’s why the barrier is just that — unbreachable no matter how high you fly or how deep you dig. The Curtain is as much a dome underneath our feet as it is over our heads.”

Neville was listening intently. “Has it been proven, though? Has anyone tried to dig deep enough?”

Teddy nodded. “Harry tried. And I know George had tried before him. They both notice the barrier scoping into an upside-down dome.”

Come to think of it, some wizards or muggles had probably tried the same from outside of Europe, Neville only hadn’t heard. He decided to drop that idea as useless.

“What more have you discovered about the Curtain?” he asked.

Teddy shrugged. “I haven’t discovered anything, never been close to that thing since I travelled through. If you want to know more, you have to speak to Harry.” Upon seeing Neville’s pained face, he quickly added. “Or you can ask Stephen, Harry’s research partner. He lives in the Town, maybe you’ll be able to talk to him before Harry shows up.”

The cage slowed down at that moment, marking the end of their descent.

“It’s safe to use magic from now on. We are almost there,” Teddy confirmed.

A second later, the lift stopped altogether. Teddy opened its doors and they stepped into the sunlight.

* * *
That’s what it was — the ramp in front of them stood in the middle of a park, lit in the same shy April sun they left behind on the surface. There were no walls in sight.

Neville carefully reached over the railings of the ramp with the tip of his wand. As he suspected, he touched a solid material where his eyes were telling him only air was. He recognised that illusion — it was a similar daylight spell to the one used on the windows of his house in Finland.

Teddy watched Neville prod the illusion. “They have real parks, too,” he said.

“The sunlight is not real, though,” Neville pointed out. “It won’t feed the plants and it won’t feed your skin, either.”

Teddy nodded. “That’s what the potions are for. Everyone and everything gets a dose regularly.”

“The Sol replenisher,” Neville’s memory supplied. “That could work. It can’t be cheap, though.”

“No, it’s not. And it’s not like we can buy the ingredients in bulk, either,” Teddy complained. “But we have lots of people figuring out the logistics.”

They started walking up the ramp, through an alley illusion of old chestnut trees.

“No guards?” Neville noted.

Teddy chuckled. “They know it’s us. Otherwise, there would be a welcoming party and they wouldn’t be polite.”

An illusion of a small cottage appeared in front of them. The ramp led to its doors. Teddy opened without hesitation, revealing a long corridor behind them. For the first time, it felt like they were truly underground. But even the hallway had windows on one side, showing rolling hills of young poppy seed fields.

“George’s flat isn’t that far away from here, we should be there in a minute,” Teddy said.

Neville was slowly following Teddy, his mind occupied by the spells in place. He realised the air was magical, the same way the sunlight was. It smelled funny but it was fresh. Maybe even too fresh. There were powerful wards around the corridor, giving him goosebumps. The wards didn’t react to their passing, though. They were welcome here.

The corridor opened into a hall after a minute. Neville felt his eyes going wide when they stepped inside the massive space and he could see it in its entirety. The hall was tall, really tall, and the ceiling was disappearing in the magical sky someone conjured up at the very top. There were numerous staircases along the walls and magical portraits hang between them.

Neville stared at it all, stunned. He recognised the architecture and it made his heart skip a beat. It looked exactly like someone put Hogwarts Great and Entrance Halls together.

“Many of the wizards living here are Hogwarts alumni,” Teddy spoke up next to Neville. “I guess they were feeling homesick when they were building this.”

As if it wasn’t enough with the similarities, a ghost chose that moment to float through the wall next to them. Neville’s breath caught when he recognised him. “Sir Nicolas?”
The ghost heard him, turning his wobbly head towards them. There was no mistaking him, it was Nearly Headless Nick, the resident ghost to Neville’s old House.

Nick must have recognised him, too, as his face broke into a smile a second later. “Young mister Longbottom, how fortunate! I didn’t know you dwell in this place.”

It took Neville a moment to find his voice. “I’m not. I’m… visiting.”

“Oh. Will you be staying long?”

“I-I don’t know,” Neville said, still struggling with his words through his bewilderment. Of all the people to meet here! “I guess we won’t.”

“A pity, then. I would love to catch up. I’ve always found it rather illuminating talking with the castle’s former students,” the ghost carried on conversationally as if they met at some scheduled reunion.

“What are you doing here?” Neville blurted out when he was finally able to form a sentence. “I mean- why did you leave Hogwarts?”

The ghost’s face darkened. “We were chased away from our home,” he said, his voice turning cold. “Our bond with the castle was violently broken, and we were left to wander around the country. It was then that young mister Potter found us, and graciously offered this place as a safe haven for a while.”

“Chased from Hogwarts? All of the ghosts, not just you?” Neville breathed out in surprise.

When Sir Nicolas nodded, Neville’s head started mulling over the implications. “Did Riddle do this? When?”

“It’s been six months now,” the ghost said mournfully, obviously enjoying being the centre of Neville’s consternation. “We’ve been missing our home dearly!”

Neville turned to Teddy. “He knows, doesn’t he? Riddle knows,” he said with certainty.

Teddy’s eyes grew wide with alarm. He didn’t answer Neville. Instead, he turned to the ghost. “George is expecting us, we should be on our way,” he said quickly. “I’m sorry, Nick, but we can’t stay to chat.”

The ghost didn’t seem offended by Teddy’s dismissive tone, although his eyes were watching Neville with curiosity now. He didn’t ask Neville to elaborate, though. Instead, he puffed his chest out proudly, and said, “I completely understand. I have an errand to run myself! Good day to you both.”

He disappeared through the opposite wall a second later.

Teddy nudged Neville’s side. “You shouldn’t have said that in front of him,” he admonished.

“I’m sorry,” Neville said sincerely. He looked around, making sure no one was listening. There were people walking across the hall, and some more using the stairs, and all of them were giving Neville curious looks. No one was in hearing distance but Neville decided to err on the side of
caution from now on. He cast a mild privacy charm around them.

“Well?” he asked Teddy. “I was right, wasn’t I? Riddle chased the ghosts out of Hogwarts because he knows about Harry’s ability.”

But Teddy shook his head. “He only suspects. Treats it as one of the possibilities. If he was sure, he’d take more drastic measures to stop Harry from spying on him.”

“And can Harry really spy through ghosts? Can he spy on Riddle himself?”

Teddy shrugged his shoulders. “I really wouldn’t have much to tell you about that even if I could.”

Neville rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Lead the way to George’s, then.”

He cancelled the privacy charm and they started walking again.

“How many people live here?” Neville asked a few moments later, when they started climbing up the staircases. They met groups of people of all ages, from parents with young children to elderlies. They all wore muggle clothes and they all looked comfortable around the magic around them, not giving Neville any clear hints if they were wizards or not.

“More than ten thousand,” Teddy readily answered.

That was a lot. “How big is this place?”

He remembered the Maintenance squad from his offices back in Finland. They were constantly behind schedule with reapplying the daylight charms on the building there. How many wizards had to repeatedly cast the charms here to keep the illusions up all over this massive halls?

“Big enough for thousands of people to lead a comfortable life here,” Teddy said. They entered yet another long corridor on the fourth floor. “This is no bunker—not only they have parks but they even have one lake and a forest. There are spa houses, cinemas, libraries. There are two schools, one for muggles and a smaller one for kids with magic.”

Cinemas? Neville’s brain picked that word out. “You have muggles and wizards living here together, don’t you,” he said, astonished.

Teddy nodded. “Yep. There aren’t that many wizards, mind you. Just a couple of hundreds, and most of them muggleborns. The wizards who can live outside without persecution, live outside and help as much as they can there.”

Neville was trying to wrap his brain around that image. He looked at a group of people passing them, realising they were all most probably muggles. And they were comfortable with the illusions around them. With the ghost of the Fat Friar crossing their path afloat. With the sky covering the ceiling. They were surrounded with all of that magic and there was no panic in their eyes, no distrust of the strange powers at play.

And suddenly, he wasn’t seeing the brightly lit corridor of the underground Town, but his mind conjured up the images of the streets of Ruma.

“Why don’t you take more?” he asked. “With this space, you could house much more than few thousand!”
Teddy next to him lowered his eyes. “You know why. George explained it last night.”

Neville didn’t. He said as much.

“If we took too many from the wizarding world, the wizards would notice. They would start taking us for a serious threat,” Teddy explained slowly. “If we took too many from the slums, the muggles would notice. They would run from the slums at large. And the wizards would notice. This place is well hidden but its protection isn’t foolproof,” Teddy kept arguing. “It’s best if the enemy doesn’t know it exists.”

Neville wasn’t fully convinced, though. “There are millions of people out there. Few more thousands wouldn’t go amiss.”

Teddy nodded his assent. “True. But have a look at it from the bigger perspective — in the long run, we aren’t trying to hide as many people as possible from the outside world. Our priority is to change that world.”

“Who do you take in, then?”

“All the muggleborns we can find. And then the muggles whose disappearance we can easily mask.

“We help the rest as much as we can,” Teddy carried on. “Everyone who lives here works almost every waking hour on supplies for the slums and the other poor districts. Food, clothes, candles, medicine—you name it. People here know how lucky they were to get out of that world. They are not forgetting the ones they left behind. Especially if some of them are their family. It’s their first priority, after securing this place, to send out as much help as they can.”

Their steps led them to a crossroad, a spacious hall with several corridors leading out of it. There was also a balcony overlooking the entrance hall they left behind. They were now six stories up but the skies of the ceiling were still high above their heads. Teddy stopped at the railing, and they stood gazing down at the people travelling between the levels of the underground.

They all appeared to be in a rush.

Teddy pointed at one particular group of four, ascending a staircase on the opposite side of the hall. Unlike in Hogwarts, the stairs didn’t move.

“That’s the mayor,” Teddy supplied. “They have elections every two years, proper ones with ballots and committees and whatnot. They try to keep it as close to the old world as possible. That lady,” Teddy pointed at the elderly lady that was leading the group, “has been elected three times in a row.”

Neville looked at her properly. She was over sixty, at least, with short stout figure and short blond hair. “She’s a muggle, isn’t she?” he took a guess.

Teddy shrugged in indifference. “She’s a better politician than any wizard here. The other muggles trust her; they know her from before. There’s a good system in place. George and the wizards take care of security and supplies, and she’s in charge of… domestic affairs.”

Teddy turned to the corridor to their left. “George’s flat is just around the corner. Let’s go; I’m
starting to get really hungry.”

Neville made to follow him, but he stopped after several steps. There was a whiff of a familiar smell. He took a deep breath through his nose, trying to identify the direction it was coming from. He pointed at the corridor on their right. “What’s through there?”

Teddy shrugged his shoulders. “Lots of things.”

“Hm.”

Neville turned and headed straight to his right.

“Neville?” Teddy asked, confused. “Where are you going?”

Neville paid him no mind, striding determinedly through the corridor. He followed the smell to the first open door, finding himself in a massive room that looked like a cross between a classroom and a junkyard. Blackboards were hanging all along the walls, with scribbled notes covering every inch. There were piles upon piles of metallic instruments, lab glass, books and parchments. The smell of mimbulus weed was strong here, hanging around the whole place. There was no one in sight, though.

“Harry?” Neville called. “Are you hiding here?”

“What the hell, Nev?” Teddy caught up with him, stopping in the doorway. “You can’t just barge into someone else’s rooms!”

“If that bugger’s hiding from us somewhere in here, I’m going to strangle him,” Neville mumbled in response, looking frantically around but he didn’t venture further, heeding Teddy’s words.

“I don’t suppose you are talking about me, then,” a distinctively British voice came from somewhere inside the room. “I’m not aware of hiding from anyone.”

A man on a wheelchair rolled from behind the nearest overflowing work desk. He was old, probably in his eighties, but the eyes behind his glasses were bright with sharp intelligence. He was looking up at Neville with an easy smile.


He belatedly realised how stupid chasing the smell was. There were probably hundreds of people smoking the same brand now.

“Oh,” the gentleman nodded in understanding. “I’m afraid I haven’t seen Harry in weeks. We do share the same bad habit, though. I’d like to say Harry corrupted me but alas, I didn’t put up much of a fight. The weed does relax my muscles wonderfully.”

“It’s good to see you again, Professor,” Teddy spoke up from behind Neville, sounding respectful. “Sorry for intruding. This is Harry’s old classmate from Hogwarts. Neville, this is Harry’s research partner I told you about.”

The man offered his hand to Neville. “I’m Stephen.”
Neville shook it. “Neville. Pleased to meet you.”

His was a hand that wasn’t used to holding a wand. He was a muggle, too. Neville’s eyebrows rose. “Teddy tells me you are studying the Curtain with Harry.”

Stephen nodded. “It’s a fascinating piece of magic, isn’t it?”

Neville hesitated with his next question. “This is going to sound all wrong but I need to ask. You are a muggle,” Neville half-asked, half-guessed. When Stephen confirmed with a smile, Neville carried on. “How can you study magic, then?”

Stephen shrugged. “I’m a physicist.”

Neville frowned at that answer. “But magic’s not physics. It’s not science.”

Stephen laughed. “You are absolutely correct,” he said after a moment. “It’s been what - twenty years since Harry introduced me to magic and it still completely boggles my mind.”

“Then how?”

“I’ve been told I’m quite good with theories and hypothesis,” the muggle said with a modest smile. Teddy chuckled at that, making Neville think it was probably an understatement. “That’s the part of his research that I can help Harry with,” Stephen explained.

“Right,” Neville said slowly, not fully understanding.

“And whilst it’s true that magic isn’t science, it does manifest in the world of physics,” Stephen added. “I might never understand the powers behind magic but I can observe its effects well enough.”

Neville nodded. “Would you be willing to answer a few questions? About the Curtain, I mean.”

As a muggle, Stephen had no magic that could bind his secrets. If he really knew anything substantial about the Curtain, there were no Secrecy oaths that would stop him from sharing.

“George and Bill are expecting us, Nev,” Teddy reminded him. “We are already late.”

“Later, then?” Neville suggested.

Stephen smiled. “You can stop by anytime. I’ll be here.”

* * *

George’s flat was small, and frankly, rather dull. A memory of the twin’s shop flashed in front of Neville’s eyes, the contrast with their current home painfully clear. Where the Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes used to be opulent in colours and overwhelming with drama, this place was just bare and uneventful in its efficiency. It spoke volumes about the changes in its owner too, Neville pondered.

The lunch was served in the kitchen. Although modest in size, the room was flooded with fake sunlight pouring from floor to ceiling windows. There was even an artificial breeze. By the time
they arrived, George and Bill had started eating. The ghost of Fred was there with them, seated in the air over one chair.

“You took your sweet time,” the ghost said instead of a greeting.

Teddy shrugged. “Neville had a lot of questions.”

Neville sat down across the table from Bill. “You alright?” he asked his friend.

Bill gave him a tired smile and nodded. He didn’t look like he got much sleep but other than that, he seemed fine.

“The place is really something, isn’t it?” Bill said.

Neville chuckled. “Yeah. Wasn’t picturing this when George said a safehouse.”

He paused for a second to regard the food on the table. There was plenty for the three of them and most of it were dishes he didn’t recognise. He decided to simply start from the left and piled something that looked like paprika stuffed with mince on his plate. “Have you talked about the mission?”

Bill shook his head. “No, we were waiting for you two.” He pushed his empty plate away resolutely and leaned back on his chair. “Let’s start. You eat, I’ll talk. One more thing, though,” Bill turned to Fred. “Are we to assume that whatever we say now, it will reach Harry’s ears?”

The ghost shrugged his incorporeal shoulders. “Yes.”

Bill scowled at that but frankly, it was no surprise to anyone anymore. He shared one careful look with Neville, but there was no hesitation when he started talking. They needed their help.

“I guess you know about Annie Karlsson. She’s our own walking magic nullifier. She annulates almost all magic in two point one radius around her body,” he explained simply. “We need to get her to Britain.”

George and Fred shared a look.

“It’s not impossible,” Fred the ghost said after a short silence.

George nodded. “The first part of the journey can be done quite easily. We can fake an order for muggle servants and ship you all to France. You could be at the coast in less than four days.”

Neville grimaced at the idea of travelling without magic again. It would speed up their plans considerably, though.

“But unless you are in a massive hurry, I wouldn’t recommend it,” George carried on. “Take it slowly, get accustomed and build yourself a cover story in the backwaters cities in the east that you can use once you get to England. The community isn’t that big—a new face always gets noticed and it’s good if it comes with a story that would stand up to scrutiny.”

“How slow are you talking?” Bill asked.

“The slower the better,” George said. “Three weeks at minimum, I’d say. It’ll give us time to put
Bill frowned in thought. “We aren’t in a hurry,” he said after a moment. Neville let out a small sigh of relief.

“That’s settled then,” George concluded. “Now to the hard part.”

He paused to take a deep breath. “No one ever travels by muggle means around Britain anymore. Getting Annie over the Channel and moving her around the islands without magic will be... dangerous. She’ll be attacked on sight.”

“What happens when you get her to England?” Teddy asked.

Neville looked up at Bill, his food momentarily forgotten. Was Bill planning to tell them everything?

Apparently, he was. “There’s an anchor for the Curtain somewhere in Britain. We need to find it and we need to bring Annie to it.”

That rendered the whole room silent.

“We know what you speak of,” the ghost said at last. “But how the hell do you?”

“You are forgetting what my livelihood is,” Bill reminded his brother. “I’m a cursebreaker. Wards are my expertise. And that’s what the Curtain is, if you strip it down to its very essence.

“We studied the original barrier when it first appeared around Britain in 1998,” Bill continued. “And we studied it more when it spread and enveloped Europe four years later. It’s the most powerful piece of magic I’ve seen, and rather complicated too, but we recognised the pattern well enough. For a ward like this one, there needs to be an anchor. And although the ward can be stretched or moved, the anchor cannot. It must have stayed in England.”

“What are you planning to do once you found it?” George asked.

Bill hesitated for a beat but he replied truthfully, nonetheless. “I’m going to dismantle the ward.”

* * *

Everyone sat there in stunned silence. Neville looked up to check their shocked faces but then he went back to his lunch. The sounds of his cutlery woke the others up.

“Let me get this straight,” George started. “You lot-” he pointed at Neville and Bill, “are planning to bring the Curtain down?”

Bill nodded.

“You are planning to start the war anew?” Fred asked.

“No, we are planning to end it, quickly,” Bill argued.
George laughed at that. “Isn't that the sentiment shared by anyone who ever started a war?”

Bill frowned at him.

“How, though?” Teddy breathed out in disbelief. “There aren’t even nearly enough wizards outside the Curtain to pose a threat.”

Bill looked down at the table. “You are right. But they are not needed for what we have planned.”

Neville watched when the understanding dawned on George’s face. “You got inspired by the Betrayal Bombing, didn’t you?” George asked. “Is that your plan then, to use muggles?”

“One swift attack on Riddle’s location the moment the Curtain crumbles,” Bill said. “He’ll be dead before he realises what’s going on.”

George and Fred exchanged glances, both of their eyebrows raised in doubts.

“Why do you think the same trick would work twice?” Fred asked.

“You don’t know what the muggles on the other side are capable of, Fred,” Bill argued. “They’ve been preparing for war for the past twenty years.”

“And what do you the wizards here have been doing? Twiddling their thumbs?” Fred immediately countered.

George cut in. “Let’s assume for a minute that your plan is really as good as you think it is, that you execute it perfectly and that by some stroke of luck, you indeed succeed in killing Riddle,” he said slowly. “What do you think will happen next?”

When Bill didn’t answer immediately, George pressed on. “Have you been paying attention at all? Muggles have been blamed, slaughtered and enslaved for the first Bombing. Do you think it will be any different if muggles kill the beloved Emperor? Riddle will be dead but there’ll be another wizard happy to stir up the hatred and rise to power through another war.”

“Even if that happens, no one is as powerful as Riddle,” Bill countered. “And we’ll be ready to fight them.”

George rolled his eyes at that argument. “Muggles got massacred seventeen years ago, Bill. Massacred.”

“It will be different this time. The Resistance will openly admit they were behind the attack, we won’t blame the muggles. We’ll be prepared to protect them if need be.”

“You would be seen as traitors!” George insisted. “It wouldn’t be a war between Riddle’s sycophants and the good guys, Bill. It would be seen as an attack on the empire, on the wizarding world—and all wizards in it would fight against you, no matter how sympathetic they were to Riddle’s policies or not.”

For the first time, Bill looked troubled. Once again, Neville got reminded how lucky he was that he didn’t have to make these kind of decisions. He trusted Bill’s judgement and he was ready to follow, happily leaving all the responsibility to him.
“Do you see another way?” Bill asked at last. “Riddle needs to be killed. We have this force at our disposal, and we should use it.”

“This is madness,” George only said to that. He continued after a short pause. “It would ruin everything I’ve been trying to accomplish in the last fifteen years.”

He turned to Fred. “Is Harry really on board with this?”

Fred paused for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. “He says you should help them.”

Neville felt his eyes widened. “Did you just talk to him?” he blurted out in shock.

The ghost just grinned at him in reply.

George didn’t pay the exchange between his brother and Neville any mind. His anger seemed to have deflated. When he spoke up again, he sounded pensive. “Well, I guess that’s settled, then. Let’s plan for how to get you to Britain. Hopefully, you won’t end up killing us all.”

* * *

Fred and George confirmed that entering the Wizarding World through Budapest was a good idea. The city saw many tourists visiting every day and no one would consider two newcomers a strange occurrence.

They devised the whole plan over the next half an hour or so. It was amazingly easy with George’s help.

“Our contact in Budapest is in charge of the holiday houses there. She’ll find you a place to rent. Her husband is the director of the Hungarian Research Institute. He’ll introduce you to society. I’ll give them a call the moment we are finished here.”

Bill was to be a scholar—a spellcrafter, and Neville his assistant. They were visiting Budapest’s Research Institute for a short holiday in the beautiful bathhouses to break their monotonous study routine. George’s friend, a researcher himself, would vouch for their credibility.

“Spellcrafters and academics are considered weird sorts. No one will pause if you seem a bit peculiar. It’s quite common for them to travel around the continent, too. You should carry on using that cover all the way to Britain,” George suggested.

Annie and Gregory would pose as muggles in Bill’s employ. Fred left through the kitchen’s wall to find trustworthy volunteers to join the household. They would help Annie and Gregory along the way.

Bill gave George more than half of their diamonds in exchange for a hefty pile of gold. “Not everything can be paid cash, though,” George warned them. “I’m going to set you up with an account but it will take time. The Gringotts are very good at holding a grudge and still hate Harry—or anyone named Weasley and Granger—with passion. I’ll have to go through several proxies to stay on the safe side. In the meantime, the money for the house will come from the Research Institute. I’ll compensate them plenty, so you don’t need to worry about being in their debt.”
And that was it. Their plan was complete and George was ready to start with it immediately. They would be moving out of Rusty’s Lot tonight.

“I’d like to talk to Stephen before we go,” Neville mentioned when everyone got up from their seats. “He’s Harry’s research partner. They’ve been studying the Curtain together,” he explained to Bill. “And he’s a muggle,” he added with a meaningful look.

“Suit yourselves,” George shrugged. “I’ll get in touch with my contacts in Budapest and meet you by the exit. Teddy, go with them.”

But despite his earlier promise, Stephen wasn’t at his workshop when they arrived a few minutes later. They searched the whole room and even the adjacent flat but the scientist was nowhere to be found. They did see an empty wheelchair, but it was very different to the one Stephen was using in the morning, with a high headrest, a screen and other electronics attached to it.

“Can you think of where else he could be?” Neville asked Teddy.

Teddy looked unsure. “I don’t know the Professor that well. And this is a big place.”

“Let’s go back to Ruma, Neville. There’s no point in searching for the man if Harry decided to hide him.”

Neville turned to Bill who was lingering by the door. “It could be a coincidence,” he argued weakly.

Bill sighed in tired acceptance. “I’m starting to understand there’s no such thing as coincidence when it comes to Harry’s affairs.”

* * *

Neville side-apparated Bill back to Ruma through the three apparation points he remembered from his journey to Poland with Teddy. They explained the plan to Annie, Gregory and Sadecki, and started packing. It didn’t take them long—by the time Teddy arrived two hours later, they were all prepared to leave.

He came back with three wizards, two girls and one boy. They were all young, barely out of Hogwarts if they’d ever gone. Annie and Gregory would fit right in with these three.

Bill regarded them with a scrupulous look when they met in the courtyard. “Do you three know how to fight?”

Neville understood why he would ask that. George promised them loyal volunteers but he didn’t promise them any bodyguards. And that was exactly how the three appeared—they looked the part of muggle servants, not magical muscle.

They all nodded without hesitation when Bill asked, though.

“And will you fight?”

They looked at each other and nodded again. “Good,” Bill said. “Because you might have to.”
He led them to the kitchen to meet the others.

Teddy introduced them as Tereza, Emma and Eric. Neville watched them all twitch when they entered Annie’s nullifying field. They didn’t shy away after the initial reaction, though. That wasn’t a bad start.

Teddy explained they were muggleborn and that they all grew up in the Town.

“When was the last time you were out on the surface?” Neville wondered.

“It’s been a couple of months for the two of us,” Tereza said, including Emma in that statement with a gesture. “Eric hasn’t been out since he moved in as a child. This is his first mission.”

Bill immediately hatched on that piece of information. “What sort of mission have you been on before?”

“This is not the first time we’ll be pretending to serve as muggle slaves,” Tereza replied with a shrug. “The last couple of times, it was either to kill the master or to spy on him.”

Neville grimaced. “None of that will be necessary this time.”

She turned to him, her eyes hard. “That’s what we’ve been told. We are to protect her,” Tereza pointed at Annie. “What’s that magic she’s using?”

For someone so young, she seemed quite pragmatic and straightforward. Neville’s respect for her grew an inch. At the same time, he inwardly chuckled. They would clash with Annie horribly. She was exactly the same.

“She’s not using any magic,” Annie remarked coldly. “She’s just killing yours.”

Bill cut in. “You are to travel with Gregory and Annie and protect them if need be. You are to answer to Gregory but you will also explain things that are strange to him. We’re all new here.”

“New here?” she repeated with her eyebrows raised.

Bill sighed. “Let’s get your oaths sorted first.”

They didn’t tell the three muggleborns much, just the parts necessary for them to understand their plan to get to the coast. George vouched for their loyalty but they hadn’t proved it to them yet.

“No one can learn about Annie’s ability,” Bill stressed one more time. “If need be, you have to protect that secret with your life.”

Tereza frowned. She turned to Teddy with her next question. “Fred said this is one of Harry’s missions. Is that true?”

Teddy nodded solemnly.

“In that case, we will,” she promised Bill.

Neville could see the annoyance over that assessment written on Bill’s face but he obviously
wasn’t going to protest any argument that would convince them of the seriousness of the situation.

Teddy brought with him equipment, too. He piled it up on the table then.

“Merlin, I hoped I’d never have to wear one again,” Eric the muggleborn spoke up softly for the first time. He was staring at the slave bracelets Teddy was now passing to Annie, Gregory, Tereza, Emma and him.

“They are not real,” Teddy explained. “They are Portkeys. The trigger phrase is ‘Running for the hills’. They are untraceable and they’ll transport you to a safe location in the Carpathian mountains.”

“I don’t need a Portkey,” Gregory spoke up matter-of-factly.

Neville understood. Using one would mean leaving Annie behind.

“Wrong,” Bill countered firmly. “You’ll use the Portkey if the mission failed and you need to retreat.”

Gregory nodded calmly and put the bracelet on. He didn’t object to Bill’s order—Gregory’s message was understood and that was obviously enough for him.

“Don’t use your two-way mirrors around here,” Teddy spoke up again. “Their charms are easy to track.” He grinned and took out several galleons. “Protean charms are much safer.”

Neville felt his face splitting into a smile. “I can’t believe you are still using that trick! Hermione thought of it in what, 1995?”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, she was the brightest witch of her generation. And you can’t beat the simplicity,” Teddy shrugged. “We got back to it only recently, though. George changes the way we communicate every couple of months because sooner or later, it always gets discovered. Anyway,” he turned to the rest of the people around the table. “These are all charmed together. If you change the numbers to a message on your coin, it will heat up the other galleons and change them, too. George has one, Harry too, and I’m going to take one, as well. Don’t use them too often, though.”

“And don’t accidentally spend them,” Neville added, feeling nostalgic.

“I’ve got Portkeys for you two, as well,” Teddy turned to Neville and Bill with an earring in each hand. “They lead to the same safe house in the mountains as the bracelets. If worse comes to worst, that’s where you’ll always find help.”

* * *

Unsurprisingly, Sadecki decided to stay at Rusty’s. As per his warning, he didn’t want to risk joining the wizarding society again, even in disguise.

They said their goodbyes in the courtyard.

Bill shook his hand. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for us. If you need help, just ask.”
Neville decided to go for a quick embrace. “Maybe we could see each other in Finland one day. I’d like to meet your family, together with mine.”

Andrei clasped his shoulder tightly. “I’d like that too, very much. Good luck.”

Neville and Bill walked out of Rusty’s Lot a minute later, all their possessions in pouches on their belts. They would move into their new house now, whilst Gregory and the rest of the team would join them later tonight, after some four hours of driving.

The address in Budapest that Teddy gave them was easy to find — the house was right by the river, still in the very centre of the city. Twenty years ago, it must have been a prime property, probably owned by a very rich individual, or maybe a government. With wizards in power, even a scholar could easily afford it, as long as he was magical.

George’s contact was waiting for them in front of the house. The witch was around forty, and she looked the very picture of immaculate perfection. She introduced herself as Nora Molnár, whilst Neville and Bill gave her the names under which their wands were registered.

The smile on Molnár’s face was as professional as the rest of her behaviour. Not once did she mention George or their strange circumstances, treating them as regular clients.

She quickly keyed them into the wards and gave them a brief tour of the house. The inside was as impressive as its surrounding, and could easily house two big families with its grand rooms and six suites upstairs.

“The rent is prepaid for one week. Should you decide to stay longer, just give me a Floo call. The fireplace is, of course, connected to the network. Questions?”

They didn’t have many. She left soon after.

They did a much more thorough sweep of the place then. “The wards are weak,” Bill surmised. “And she or the landlord could key anyone else at any time. They’ll cover the ones I’m going to put up nicely, though. Have you found any spying charms?”

“All clear. What about the fireplace? Should we block it?”

“No, that would be too suspicious. I’ll put up a ward around the living room, that should.”

He was interrupted by a knock on the front door.

They shared a look, both instantly alarmed. Bill gestured for Neville to stand by the door, out of the view. He did so, his wand drawn. Bill took a deep breath, reaching for the handle with his left hand, whilst his right was half hidden behind his back, only the point of a wand showing from underneath his sleeve.

When he opened the door, it was only Molnár’s voice that reached Neville’s ears.

“My husband just called to invite you to the library tonight. The Institute’s club has a meeting there every Wednesday, and today’s a Wednesday. I know it’s a very short notice but it’s too good a chance to introduce yourselves to miss.”

Bill paused for a beat to consider but then, he nodded.
“Excellent,” Neville heard Molnár’s say. “Do you know where the library is?”

“I’ve been there before,” Neville said, stepping away from the wall and showing himself to Molnár.

He startled her with that. She took one step back, her arm disappearing in her robe for a minute. She straightened up quickly, though, and she stopped herself from drawing her wand. However, her immaculate appearance from before was gone; she looked much more hurried than when they met half an hour ago. With her guard down for a second, Neville realised that the whole situation must have taken more of a toll on her than what she had let on.

“Excellent,” she repeated, finding her voice again. “He’ll meet you at the reception desk in ten minutes. Wear something appropriate.”

* * *

Bill refused to follow Sadecki’s instructions completely and they used only half of the charms he put on them the last time they were trying to fit into Budapest’s wizarding society. Neville didn’t complain.

He apparated them in front of the Parliament building which now housed the magical library. It seemed quite unbelievable that it was only yesterday Neville was here for the first time. So much had happened since.

The entrance hall was empty at this late hour, apart from one wizard leaning on the reception desk and nervously tapping his fingers on its surface. He was about the same age as his wife, clad in fancy black robes.

He straightened up when he saw them entering the hall.

“Come with me,” he said instead of a greeting.

Neville and Bill shared a look but followed the fastly retreating wizard.

“I need to key you inside the wards so you can enter the private chambers. That’s where the club meets,” Molnár explained in a hushed tone.

Neville noticed the wizard’s eyes constantly switch between staring at them, and checking the surroundings. He was nervous and he let it show. If their plan relied on this wizard’s acting skills, Neville didn’t like their chances if he didn’t pull himself together soon.

He led them up the impressive staircase Neville remembered from his last visit, through an ornate corridor on the first floor, to a spacious office. “I’ve got the key somewhere here, wait a minute,” he mumbled, stepping to the desk in the middle of the room.

Bill stopped Neville inside the open door, gesturing for him to stay. He was frowning deeply and his right hand was hidden in his pocket. Neville instantly became alarmed. He stood inside the doorframe, guarding their exit and looking at the empty corridor and the grand staircase behind them.
That’s why he didn’t see what it was that made Bill suddenly shout a panicked “No!”

He made to turn around, but that’s when the door suddenly shut into his face with a brute force. His nose cracked, he lost his balance and fell on his arse. Somewhere above him, he heard the latches clicking one by one inside the door, seven of them in total, locking them inside.

He was back on his feet a second later, wand drawn. He turned around to see Bill aiming his wand at Molnár. Or someone who pretended to be him. The wizard was standing behind the desk, holding a glowing key chain.

“Who are you?” Bill growled.

“My name’s Marko Nikolič,” the wizard said calmly. His wand was nowhere in sight. “I’m an officer of the Emperor’s army, stationed in Hungary.”

“Perkele!” Neville swore in Finnish.

“Give me that,” Bill snarled, snatching the key chain from the soldier’s hands. “Neville, watch him while I get that door to open.”

Neville stepped closer to Nikolič who now put his empty hands up, obviously not interested in fighting with them. Neville disarmed him anyway, stashing the soldier’s wand into his pocket. He sent a quick Episkey at his own nose and cleared the blood away from his face.

“How did you know we’d be here tonight?” he asked when his broken nose was healed.

“I told Molnár to send you here,” the wizard answered readily. “Right after I put her under the Imperius.”

He was too willing to talk. That wasn’t good. It meant he was stalling, waiting for reinforcements to arrive. Neville glanced at Bill. His friend was by the door, chanting with his wand aimed at the key chain. There was a smaller door on the other side of the room and two windows, but Neville knew that if Bill was focusing on the key chain, it meant there were wards in place that wouldn’t let them leave no matter which door or window they’d choose.

“What about the Portkeys?” Neville asked, thinking of the earrings Teddy gave them in Ruma, only an hour or two ago.

Bill shook his head. “Anti-portkey wards are up over the whole library. Anti-apparation too.”

Neville frowned at that. He glanced back at Nikolič. If they were truly stuck here, they might as well learn where the hell they’d made a mistake. “How long have you been following us?”

“Since last night,” Nikolič answered calmly. “You threatened another wizard with your wand at an apparation point on your way to Prague. He reported that incident right away.”

That was it? Neville remembered that moment. He panicked when the magic of the platform pushed him out of the way of another wizard apparating in. He aimed his wand at him minutely. That was all.

“He spoke of three wizards side-apparating in the middle of the night. How unusual. It wasn’t hard
to pick the trace of that side-apparation. I tracked your journey between Prague and the slums, and found a place in Ruma, not far away from your apparation, that glowed like a lantern on the Wand Registry scans. It was strange to see such a place in the muggle slums, saturated with many spells coming from not only one but several wizards. Very strange indeed.”

Neville’s heart sunk. The army knew about Rusty’s Lot. The others were in danger. They needed to get out of here and warn them.

“I followed your journey to Poland, but I lost you at an apparation point on the borders,” the soldier carried on. “You got back soon enough, though. After you split up and met with Molnár in Budapest, I apprehended her and put her under Imperius. She was-”

The wizard carried on with his tale for a bit longer but Neville stopped listening by then. Instead, he focused on the locks clicking noisily behind him. Flooded with relief, he turned to the door only to see Bill hastily backing away from it. It wasn’t his doing. The reinforcements have arrived.

Neville took two quick steps behind the desk. He levitated Nikolič and put him down in between himself and the door. A moment later, it opened to reveal a single man.

* * *

Neville immediately recognised him, although it had been twenty-two years since he saw his former classmate for the last time. Blaise Zabini stood tall, straight and proud in his black army robes, the insignia on his chest shiny gold, showing off his high rank.

He stepped inside, paying no mind to the wands following his every move. His cold eyes found Neville’s for a moment. There was nothing but contempt in them.


The door behind him closed before they had a chance to stop it. Neville waited for the latches to click but no such noise came. The wards didn’t go up. This was their chance.

Bill was ahead of him, flinging a curse at Zabini half a second before Neville sent his own. Zabini slapped them both aside easily, a wand appearing in his hand where there was none a millisecond before.

Neville didn’t hesitate with his second curse. He didn’t watch if it landed, instead he once again grabbed hold of Nikolič’s body with his magic, banishing it towards Zabini.

Zabini had put up a shield by now, fending off Bill’s curses with it. He raised the shield towards Neville minutely and stopped Nikolič a mere metre away from crashing into his body. In the meantime, Bill didn’t stop attacking but Zabini’s shield was there once again, moving in time to intercept Bill’s curses. That son of a bitch was fast.

“We’ll talk in a minute, Weasley,” Zabini said calmly, seemingly unaffected by their attack. “I have a question to ask the officer here, first.”

He didn’t even once look at Neville or Bill through the whole ordeal, his eyes focused at Nikolič in front of him. The disinterest in his tone gave Neville a pause. It didn’t stop Bill, though. From the
corner of his eyes, Neville saw Bill raise his wand, only to stop mid-motion. Bill’s wrist turned away from Zabini, his face grimacing in pain.

Neville immediately made to attack but there was already a bright shield posed between him and his target. He changed strategy, aimed his wand at the floor underneath the wizard’s feet, making the tiles sprout up in marble roots with one quick spell. However, Zabini countered the animation before the roots had a chance to wrap around his legs, with his shield still intact.

“I said, in a minute,” Zabini scolded in annoyance.

Neville didn’t pay him any mind, raising his wand again.

“Nev, stop.”

Bill spoke up from Neville’s left. Neville glanced at him. His friend looked free of the curse Zabini put him under but he wasn’t attacking anymore. “Let him talk,” he hissed at Neville.

Zabini smirked. “Finally, manners. Now... officer Nikolić, wasn’t it?” he turned his attention back to the soldier.

“Firstly,” Zabini started. “I must congratulate you on your fine catch today. However, would you care to explain why you failed to report this case to your supervisor?”

“Or let me guess,” Zabini carried on without giving the wizard a chance to speak. “Were you hoping for a promotion? Were you afraid your supervisor would steal the glory from you if you shared your findings with him? Are you as ambitious as you are foolish? Speak now!” Zabini barked.

“I was ordered to, sir,” the soldier mumbled in a rush, his eyes glued to the floor under Zabini’s shoes.

That gave Zabini a visible pause. “Whose order was that?” he growled.

The soldier gulped in face of Zabini’s anger. “The very top,” he said quietly.

Zabini frowned. “The very top?” he repeated. “Do you mean, the Emperor lowered himself to contact you, a mere patrolman...” he trailed off. “What was the order, exactly?” he asked a moment later.

“In case of a suspicious activity that could be connected to the five outsiders, I was to investigate on my own, without informing anyone else. If the suspicion got at least partially confirmed, I was to report to officer Mendel directly, and no one else.”

Whilst Nikolić was talking, Zabini’s whole demeanor started changing. His anger disappeared and with it went some of his confidence, replaced by confusion. “Mendel,” Zabini repeated carefully, obviously unfamiliar with the name. “I don’t know him,” he noted, surprise evident in his voice.

“Sir?”

Zabini looked up from the ground. “Who else got that same order?”

“I don’t know, sir.”
“Who do you suspect, then?”

The man hesitated. “My colleagues started acting secretly on the same day,” he said in the end.

“Bugger,” Zabini swore, making Neville’s eyes go wide with surprise at his choice of words. “So it’s possible every footman in the army got the same order without me ever knowing about it.”

His whole posture changed with that remark. Where once a proud man stood, his shoulders now slumbered. He turned to Bill then, leaning closer as if in confidentiality. “It looks like I’ve been outplayed.”

Zabini looked at the soldier again. “I suppose you couldn’t just leave them to me? Forget that this ever happened?” he suggested with fake politeness.

Nikolić was staring at him silently, a frown appearing on his face. His fear of Zabini was disappearing; his eyes narrowed in suspicion now. Neville saw his arm slowly moving and realised he was probably reaching for a spare wand.

Zabini didn’t pay him any mind. He summoned one of the chairs in the room and plopped himself down on it. He took out a rolled cigarette from his pocket. “But you can’t, can you?” he said to the officer. “Let me guess — you’ve called this Mendel guy already. You were supposed to stall these two whilst the army surrounds the library. That’s why you put this place into lockdown and that’s why I now see wizards crawling through the corridors.”

He lit the cigarette with one snap of his fingers, the practised movement awfully familiar to Neville. He took a short drag, and sighed resignedly. “Well, if Tom wants a spectacle, I’ll give him a spectacle.”

Just when the smell of weed hit Neville’s nose, Zabini turned to look at Bill and Neville, his eyes hard. “Get ready, gents. This will get ugly.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally, we are nearing a proper magical fight!
We have three more chapters to go before the end of arc two. I promise they'll be shorter than this mammoth of an update.
Your thoughts are always appreciated. I only have hints and implications to guide you with, so it's important to check you're still with me.
Previously:

When the smell of weed hit Neville's nose, Zabini turned to look at Bill and Neville, his eyes hard. "Get ready, gents. This will get ugly."

25 May, The Parliament Library, Budapest

Nikolič made his move then.

The moment no one was looking at him, he drew a spare wand from somewhere and aimed it at Zabini.

He didn't manage to finish his incantation before Neville's and Bill's silent curses hit him, rendering him unconscious and in ropes.

The wizard who obviously wasn't Zabini didn't even pause in dragging his joint. He slowly exhaled a puff of smoke before he spoke up. "Well, thanks gents, but I kind of need him awake for the next bit."

"Harry?" Bill wagered a guess.

Not-Zabini chuckled. "No shit, Bill, it is me! Were you expecting someone else to come to save your arses?"

Bill ignored that question. "We need to get out of here," he urged. "They know about Rusty's—we need to get Annie to safety."

"Teddy and George are already on it," Harry said distractedly, his eyes now closed.

"Well, shouldn't we get out of here anyway?" Neville objected, frowning at Harry's seemingly relaxed face.

Harry cracked one eye open. "No shit, Nev," he repeated.

"Shouldn't we hurry up?"

"I'm considering our options. If you give me a moment, I'll get on with it. In the meantime, you can wake Nikolič up. And Bill, I would recommend throwing your strongest locking charm on that door. We are going to need it in about forty seconds."

That got them moving.

Neville brought Nikolič back to consciousness with a silent Ennervate. He left the ropes in place, though. When his eyes returned to Harry, Harry had his wand aimed at his own—well, at Zabini's
face. He started casting one human-transfiguration spell after another, changing his appearance into that of… his true self.

Harry noticed Neville's questioning look and shrugged. "The Polyjuice will take ages to wear off. I'm not used to fighting with his gangly limbs."

They both turned to the door when they heard its locks click. Bill was standing in front of it, his wand leveled at the key chain in his left hand. Neville nodded in appreciation–Bill must have figured out the warding system that locked them inside the office in the first place.

"Good thinking," Harry commented sincerely.

He turned to Nikolić then. "Now, you." He pointed his wand and growled "Legilimens."

The soldier started screaming almost immediately. Neville winced, watching him thrash in agony. He knew only too well how painful it was when a Legilimens wasn't careful with his prod. Which Harry obviously wasn't.

"They're here," Bill spoke up next to Neville. He glanced over his shoulder at the door and sure enough, flashes of spellfire were shining through its keyhole and the slits next to its hinges. The door itself didn't even shake though. Yet. Neville shifted his stance, facing the door with his wand half-raised, whilst he still watched Harry with the corner of his eye.

Harry broke his spell five seconds later, leaving Nikolić panting and crying in the bindings.

"Was that really necessary?" Neville asked as much in distaste as in pity.

Harry nodded. "It was the fastest way to get to know him. If he needs to die tonight, I can at least make his death useful."

Neville's eyebrows rose at the unexpected peek into Harry's abilities. This was not a time to comment on it, though. "What's the plan?" He really hoped Harry had one.

Harry pointed at the main door. "I'll come out that way and make as much noise as possible." He turned and pointed at the door on the other side. "You leave through there. They are some wizards that way too but they'll all be called my way the moment they'll realise I'm here."

Neville looked at Bill, glad to find doubts written all over his face. "How many soldiers are that way?" Bill asked, gesturing at the main door.

Harry paused for a beat, before saying, "Right now, eighty-one."

Neville felt his eyes widen at the number.

"Right. That's no plan, that's you playing the stupid hero again," Bill grumbled. "Let's all leave the other way."

Harry shook his head. "Then there would be one hundred that way and we would take the fighting to the streets. I'd like to keep it contained to the library if possible; there's no need to include civilians in this."

"How about the windows?" Neville suggested.

"Wouldn't make much of a difference. They have us well and truly surrounded, we won't be able to sneak away." Harry paused for a moment, a dangerous smile growing on his face. "And if I'm
forced to fight, there's this gentleman named Mendel I'd like to meet."

"We are not running away while you fight everyone else," Bill objected firmly, getting the conversation back on track.

"Splitting up is a good plan."

"Not the way you suggest it," Bill countered.

Whilst they were arguing, the door heated up in front of their eyes, going orange all over from a blaze someone must have been throwing at it.

Almost simultaneously, Bill and Harry sent two identical beams at the door. Neville didn't recognise the spell but it seemed to have cooled down the wood somewhat.

"Okay, time to leave. Let me speak plainly." Harry's tone finally turned serious. "I know what's going to happen when I walk through that door. I know where every man is waiting. I know I'll get through them all in one piece. What I cannot assure is your safety if you follow me. That's why I'm saying—no, wait, let me rephrase—that's why I'm ordering you to go—"

Bill looked him straight in the eye. "You have no right to order me around, Harry. We are not leaving you to face them alone."

Harry swore. "You stupid bull-headed Weasleys. You are not helping anyone by staying, Bill, least of all me!"

"And you are going to kill yourself by trying to fight all the battles on your-"

"We don't have time for this."

Neville half-remembered Harry saying the exact same sentence a lifetime ago, in a dead zone along the Magical Curtain, just before he jumped at a muggle staying in his way. Only because of that memory did Neville instinctively knew to start moving when Harry's left hand raised towards him. It was how he avoided the Imperio that Harry threw at him from the wand that wasn't there half a second ago.

Neville and Bill both stared at him in silent shock.

"It was worth a try," Harry shrugged unapologetically. "If you die today, I'll be able to tell myself I've tried everything."

It was then that the door exploded.

Neville had a shield ready in an instant, conjured purely on instinct. It wasn't needed, though. Harry somehow moved even faster and froze the splinters midair before they got anywhere near them. He then released them back at whomever was standing on the other side. Before Neville could see anything through the cloud of dust, Harry conjured an opaque shield over the hole where the doorframe used to stand. Neville expanded his shield and let it join Harry's. His knees almost buckled under the barrage of curses that hit their improvised barrier the next moment.

From the corner of his eyes, he watched Harry point his second wand at Nikolič behind them. Without ever looking away from the door, Harry let the soldier's bindings disappear. He proceeded to throw another blind yet perfectly aimed Imperio at Nikolič. Apparently, he somehow acquired the skill to use two wands simultaneously. And the ability to aim without looking at his target. And the guts to use Unforgiveables on friends and foes alike.
Neville watched, impressed and still vexed in equal measures, as the soldier got up from the ground and mechanically walked up to stand in front of Harry.

"We're going to have a long-overdue conversation once we're out of here," Bill shouted over the noise of curses hitting their shields.

"I wouldn't threaten with that just now," Harry laughed. "I might change my mind and abort the rescue mission."

He started walking up towards the entrance with Nikolič in front of him as a human shield. "Don't get anywhere near me!" he shouted.

"Wait!" Bill began when Harry dropped his shield. "We still don't have a plan!"

Harry disappeared through the collapsed doorframe before Bill finished his sentence.

The storm of curses raining on Neville's shield immediately stopped. He kept it raised nonetheless. Listening to the shouts of incantations coming from the other side, he cursed the fact that he picked a non-transparent variety.

"Cocky idiot," Bill was muttering next to him. "I'm half-tempted to just leave him there alone."

Neville glanced at him. Bill was eyeing the back door with contemplation. Neville chuckled humourlessly. "You and I both know that's not what you're going to do."

Bill grumbled unintelligibly. "Do you know this part of the building? Is there a way we could get around the fighting and join Harry from the sides?"

Neville shook his head. "This is the first time I've been in this wing."

Bill swore under his breath. "Straight to their waiting arms it is, then." He opened his pouch and rummaged inside elbow deep. A moment later, he took out his potion belt and secured it around his waist. He opened a Pepper-up and downed it quickly.

"Your turn, Nev," Bill said, conjuring a shield behind Neville's. "Drop your shield."

Neville did so, and suit himself up in a similar fashion to Bill's. Once he felt the steam of the Pepper-up potion coming out of his ears, Bill spoke up again. "Right. Stay behind and on my right."

"—on your right," Neville finished in unison.

It had been decades since they'd got into a proper fight. But it had been only weeks since they'd last trained for it. Neville could hear his heart pounding in his chest but his wand arm was steady.

Bill looked intently at Neville. "Ready for this?" Neville nodded without hesitation. Bill's gaze lingered on Neville's face for a bit longer. Whatever he was searching for there, his friend must have found it a moment later because he nodded to himself and turned towards the collapsed door. "Disillusion yourself and stand by the wall. I'm going to drop my shield in three."

The corridor outside the office was empty, apart from five men lying motionless on the floor among the debris of the blasted door, a number of wooden splinters protruding from their chest. Their clothing was bloodied and torn but Neville still recognised the uniforms of the Magical
Army. The fifth body, the only one in mundane robes, was Nikolič.

Whilst Bill carried along the hall, his now disillusioned body discernible only by the shimmering of its silhouette, Neville stayed behind, firing off five cautionary \textit{Stupifies} in quick succession. He’d seen better wizards than him getting hit in the back by enemies playing dead. None of his stunners latched, though; the soldiers were well and truly gone. Quickly falling back into the old routine, he then tried to summon their wands. None of the corpses seemed to have one. That was good; if Harry had the time to gather their wands, he couldn't have been completely surrounded.

They could hear the sounds of fighting from up ahead. Among the occasional booms of spellfire, they easily recognised spell incantations and shouts of pain. Other than that, it was quiet in the corridors of the library; the adrenaline pumping through his veins now, mixed with the effects of the potion, made even the tiniest of noises stand out.

They carried on swiftly but carefully. Bill was in the lead whilst Neville walked almost sideways, watching the hall behind them. They didn't encounter anyone, although Neville did fire \textit{Stupifies} on seven more corpses they passed.

It was only when they entered the grand staircase a minute later did they learn where everyone was.

They stopped on the top of the stairs and looked down at the great hall in front of them. Neville remembered its splendid decor from their way up, the marble columns and golden carvings of the arched ceiling.

It was utter mayhem now.

Dust and debris and occasional flames were permeating the air. The fresco on the walls was scorched or scratched in places. Tens of wizards in army uniforms were milling on the staircases and on the two galleries up on the sides. Neville quickly scanned it all, his trained eyes taking note of the thick columns along the balconies that could provide excellent cover fighting outnumbered like they were.

However, Harry wasn't up there. Neville's eyes found him a moment later at the bottom of the staircase, in plain sight of everyone standing above him, and closely surrounded by wizards from all sides.

It took Neville two seconds to realise that those wizards were all the cover Harry needed.

During those two seconds, Neville watched as Harry made a witch trip over her own feet with a quick hex. He slid towards her, crouching low, and hurled her falling body over his back. She crashed into another attacker behind him. Simultaneously, Harry's other wand was controlling the red carpet of the stairs, directing it to rise in waves like an oversized ribbon. One of its coils scooped up a wizard and pushed him towards Harry. He stabbed his wand into the soldier's belly and banished him from point blank several feet high into the air.

Throughout the whole time, curses rained down on Harry from the galleries above his head. None of the spells reached their target, though. They hit the witch Harry conveniently hurled over his bent back, or the carpet that surged up in a timely fashion to intercede several beams, or the soldier that Harry hunched behind for half a second before he sent him flying.

One of the curses turned out to be a \textit{Bombarda}, and a \textit{Maxima} at that. Someone threw it at Harry's feet, with utter disregard for the lives of their comrades around him. Neville flinched as the floor exploded, stone and dust bursting five metres high. Some dozen bodies got caught in the blast,
Harry being one of them. Neville's heart clenched in worry for his friend, only to see a shield appear in front of Harry in time to fend of the debris. The red carpet swooped up to cushion his fall. It embraced him completely for a second and then sprung him back onto his feet. By then, Harry was flinging curses again, taking advantage of the lull in the fighting. He made a quick work of the dazed soldiers close to him, finishing three at a time with sweeping motions of his wand.

"Holly mother of..." someone breathed out. Neville wasn't sure if it was him or Bill standing to his left.

Either way, Neville could relate to that sentiment. He had seen wizards fighting with this level of efficiency only few times before, when soldiers drunk Felix Felicis as preparation for a battle. He didn't think Harry slipped back to his old addiction, though. His movements were fluid, calculated; there wasn't the potion's signature twitch when it prompted to interrupt the natural course of action.

Neville's eyes followed as Harry turned his wand at the settling dust of the explosion and made the whole cloud glisten bright red. He banished it towards the nearest group of soldiers. They put up shields in time but it didn't make much of a difference; the fiery dust slid off the curved shields, straight at their friends standing beside them.

This wasn't luck. This was skill and strategy.

Neville watched as the dust grains burned through their uniforms. They cried in pain, momentarily distracted, and then, Harry was upon them. He used an acceleration charm, prompting himself straight into their midst, attacking them with his two wands up close. It became obvious then that Harry was not surrounded. Quite on the contrary, he was pursuing the wizards, forcing them into close combat, using their bodies as shields against the curses flying at him from afar. Neville noticed soldiers backing away, trying to keep a distance; that's when the carpet ribbon coiled up behind them, pushing the wizards back at Harry in manageable groups. They were trying to dispell the animation, or destroy the fabric; and although they succeeded in places, Harry's magic held mostly true, the carpet shepherding his enemies as he pleased.

Neville raised his eyes to the wizards up on the gallery that didn't relent even for a second, flinging one spell at Harry after another, looking for a blind spot. Harry appeared to have none. In that moment, Neville realised it might be true. Harry was able to aim perfectly well while facing the opposite way. He was avoiding spells that his eyes couldn't possibly see coming.

Harry's words now came back to Neville. He hinted of an awareness of his surrounding that far preceded that of a normal wizard. Was it the same power that allowed him to spy on people? Was he using the same tool to gain this heightened perception?

Whatever the mechanics behind his abilities, Neville for the first time believed that Harry might be able to manage on his own, exactly like he told them.

"He can't keep up this pace for too long," Bill's disembodied voice reached Neville's ears. "Let's stop gaping and get useful. Go through the gallery on the right. I'll take the left. Meet me on the other end of the hall."

No one had noticed them, standing unmoving and disillusioned on top of the staircase. They split up now. Neville spelled his feet and breathing silent, planning to sneak up on the wizards on his side of the gallery. He managed easily enough with his first target: the wizard was standing alone, separated from the rest of the soldiers by a thick marble column. The silent curse rendered him unconscious without him ever noticing Neville's spell. Neville levitated the body to gently fall on the ground – although it wasn't strictly necessary to be this careful among the shouting and spellfire in the hall.
He grabbed the wizard's wand, ready to break it, but he paused at the last moment and hid it in his pouch instead. Popovič did say there was a shortage of wands. George might appreciate a couple for his muggleborns.

He chanced a quick look around the column; six soldiers were standing close to each other by the railing, all focused on Harry downstairs. He quickly crossed the distance to the nearest one and sent a silent stunner from up close to avoid the flash of the curse. He crunched low to grab the wizard's wand. Only that saved him from being hit by the beam that suddenly flew straight over his head.

He hurriedly threw himself back behind the column. He looked around carefully, searching for his attacker. The curse came from the other side of the hall. There, at the opposite gallery- there was a soldier pointing at him and shouting to alert the others.

Damn. He'd been spotted. More curses started flying in his direction, both from the opposite gallery and then sideways, from the wizards standing close by. He was still disillusioned, and none of the spells got too close. He refrained from conjuring a shield, crunching low instead, further chancing his luck. He knew his cover will be only short-lived, though. The soldiers were quickly approaching, he could hear them from behind the column he was leaning on. They sent a sweeping *Finite* his way. It hadn't touched him behind the stone of the column but it was only a matter of seconds before they sent one under a better angle.

He glanced at the opposite balcony. He couldn't see Bill but he had to trust that his friend will join the fray soon and keep the soldiers there occupied. Neville's bigger problem was the bunch on this side.

He sent a silent spell at a floor tile in front of him, transforming its surface into glass. He ripped it from the floor and tilted it upwards, so the mirror would reflect the wizards advancing on him.

With his eyes on their reflection, he grabbed his wand tightly and jabbed the floor with it, letting go off his favourite spell for the second time today. Eyes narrowed in concentration, he watched his makeshift mirror as small cracks travelled from the tip of his wand towards his attackers and underneath their boots. A moment later, marble roots erupted from the floor behind the wizards, catching the last one unaware as the animated stone immediately wrapped itself around his ankles and legs, dragging him down.

He shouted in surprise and pain. His colleagues spun around.

That was Neville's cue. He rounded the column, a banisher ready at the forefront of his mind. He let it fly from his wand with as much power as he could muster, the sweeping motion of his arm catching all five wizards in the spell. They had their backs to him and they were all thrown off their feet. Neville quickly followed with a series of cutting curses, rendering three of them out of the fight before the rest got their bearings back and turned their wands towards him. Knowing his time was running out, Neville sent his last spell, an *Imperio* of his own, and then quickly duck for cover behind the column again.

Only to stare at the tip of a wand waiting there.

Its owner was looking right at him, the disillusionment of no help here. Neville's arm lifted to conjure a shield, although he knew he'd be too slow.

But he wasn't. No curse hit him and after a second of waiting, no curse hit his raised shield either. He heard a quiet *thud* instead. He lowered the shield a smitch in order to see. There was a collapsed body on the floor, with a bloodied hole in its back. By the size of it, Neville was quite sure the
wizard was dead. The floor next to him had a hole too, some three inches in diameter with scorched edges.

The trajectory of the spell didn't leave any doubts about its sender. No matter how impossible it was for Harry to see what was happening up on the gallery, he still sent the curse through its floor with perfect timing and perfect aim.

Neville grunted in appreciation, of the skill and of the narrow save both, although he couldn't help but feel a bit annoyed, too. They were supposed to cover Harry's back, not the other way around.

In the shock of the whole incident, he felt his control over the *Imperio* slipping. He remembered his remaining enemies, and not a minute too soon. There was a whooshing of air behind him, a sound Neville recognised right away. He raised a shield to meet the approaching flames just in time.

It wasn't a very clever spell to use. Hidden from the enemy's sight by their own flames, Neville had a second to assess the situation and think of his next steps. He also chanced a quick look over the rest of the hall. Harry was still fighting amidst the soldiers on the staircase. Bill was visible on the opposite gallery, no longer disillusioned, and getting rid of the last soldier there. Good.

Neville got back to his attackers, a plan ready for whenever they'd drop the fire, when he did a double take and returned his eyes to Bill.

The column behind him was moving. Someone cracked its base and it was most certainly coming down onto Bill. His friend wasn't aware—he was facing the other way.

Neville's mouth moved to shout a warning and his arm moved to aim his wand. His shield disappeared and flames brushed the side of his face but Neville paid them no mind, focused only on saving his friend. He knew that he wouldn't be able to send a spell in time, though. His eyes flickered down, to Harry. Certainly, he was watching over Bill too, right?

And he was. One of Harry's wands was aimed towards the gallery and Bill. Neville saw the light of a spell forming at the tip, and relief flooded his body.

Only to see the wand snap on the last moment and release the spell in a wrong direction. It hit a wizard brandishing a dagger and stopped him inches away from cutting Harry's throat.

At the same time, the column collapsed down on Bill.

It crashed into the railing, the marble broke into heavy chunks and Bill disappeared somewhere underneath all of that stone and dust.

Neville growled in frustration. He sprung to his feet and jumped from the gallery, his adversaries completely forgotten. When he felt his body falling, he fired off an acceleration charm towards the ground that propelled him back into the air and over the remaining five metres to the opposite gallery. He landed ungracefully on the floor of the balcony, crunching into a roll. The hastily thrown cushioning charm only barely softened his fall and he rolled to a stop by the wall with a painful grunt. The bricks over his head immediately erupted under spellfire and a moment later, a cutting curse hit his right shoulder. He lost control of the muscles in the arm and let go of his wand.

He didn't let that faze him. His spare wand slipped into his left palm. Still crouching low on the ground, he aimed it in the general direction of the accosting spellfire. He released an overcrowered *Bombarda*, fuelled by the fear for his friend and his own pain. He watched the wall
explode, showering the wizard standing in front of it with bricks and mortar. Neville quickly finished him off with a non-verbal *Reducto*.

With that taken care of, he turned towards the spot where he last saw Bill. He quickly summoned his first wand back but his right arm was truly out of commission. Using his left, he awkwardly levitated some of the debris away, making it fall down over the edge of the balcony. He relied on Harry to keep the others occupied whilst he worked. He repeated the process and there- he saw Bill's legs sticking out from underneath a large fragment of the marble, the rest of the body wedged in between the collapsed column and the railing. Neville hurried over, levitating the rest of the marble away and firing off a simple scanning spell.

Bill was still breathing. His chest was almost completely caved in, his ribs were visibly broken, his spine was probably too and his organs most likely punctuated, but somehow, he was still breathing. Neville sighed in relief. Merlin bless the resilience of wizards.

Hidden from the happenings in the rest of the hall by the collapsed marble, Neville crouched over Bill's broken body and went to utilised all the field medicine he'd ever learned. Firing off a more complicated diagnostic charm, he frowned as he watched the hue of the spell go black above Bill's chest and neck. He cancelled the charm, stopped the bleeding he could see and put Bill's body into a stasis, trying to remember if he had ever been told anything more useful beyond *avoid mending charms and get the injured to a healer* if the diagnosis charm turned black.

He heard a rumbling noise above his head. He looked up in time to see the rest of the columns, all eight of them, crashing down towards them. Before he had a chance to start panicking, he noticed the fashion in which they were falling–rather organised and slow. He saw the red carpet then, wrapped around each of the columns in a way that almost looked like the fabric was gently laying the stone down, into protective walls around Neville and Bill.

*Harry's magic*, Neville realised. A moment later, the wizard himself jumped through the quickly closing gap and with a quiet *thud* and a small earthquake, the tons and tons of marble settled down behind him. They were now enclosed from all sides, with a barrier of horizontal columns in front of them, and the original wall behind them. The only light came from the hole in the wall that Neville punched with his *Bombarda* a minute ago.

He lit his wand and sent the ball of light to hover above Bill. He looked up–Harry had his back towards them, one of his wands tapping the stone barricade. The next second, a wave of magic spread from its tip. A wave so strong that it gave Neville goosebumps as it travelled past him. He recognised its feeling. He quickly closed his eyes and hid his face in his shoulder but the subsequent flash stung his eyes anyway.

Blinking the lingering lights away from his eyes in the sudden silence, he couldn't help but feel impressed. It had been a while since he had seen a wizard whip up a ward this powerful in the middle of a fight.

He forced his panting heart to slow down. He knew the ward would hold for a bit, at least long enough for them to catch their breath.

Harry spun to face him then. Neville flinched; he looked furious.

"I told you to go the other way," he growled. "I told you I couldn't protect you!"

He sent his own diagnostic spell at Bill's injured form. His eyes widened when it connected. "He needs a healer. I… I wouldn't know where to start."
Neville nodded absentmindedly, busy fishing for the right vial in his belt. There it was; the smallest of them all. He unscrewed the cork and levitated the three clear drops out towards Bill's mouth. He hesitated then, looking at his friend's destroyed chest. He changed his course of action, spreading the drops into one thin layer and levelling the tears straight over the injuries.

Harry slowly crouched down next to Neville, only to collapse the rest of the way to the floor, leaning his back on the marble. That was the first time he showed any signs of fatigue. He watched Neville administer the Phoenix tears. "That might have been a waste; the tears won't do much while he's in stasis."

Neville glanced at him. Harry was sweating through his robes, his face was flushed and dirty. He seemed unharmed, though. "Do you have any better ideas?"

Harry frowned. "Take care of your arm. I'll think of a plan in the meantime."

Neville didn't hesitate to listen. He applied a numbing charm at his shoulder. When it took effect, he followed with a crude healing charm that stitched the ripped muscle almost immediately. He stopped the bleeding and frowned at the messy result. It would have to be open again once he got to safety but it'd do for now. He took a salve from his potion belt, conjured a soft brush at the tip of his wand and applied a layer over the burns on his face and neck.

Harry was busy too, and Neville watched him with the corner of his eye the whole time. He exed a dose of Pepper-up, the vial seemingly appearing from thin air. He sent a more advanced stasis spell at Bill, making his body so frigid Neville could feel the bite of it from half a metre away. Lastly, he conjured a stretcher, gently levitated Bill to rest on it and secure him there with thick straps.

He turned to Neville then, his eyes hard. "Do you have the brooms Teddy gave you?"

Neville nodded shortly.

"There's a balcony a few rooms away. Hide there," Harry pointed at the hole in the wall, "and wait till I drop the ward. Once the fighting starts again, carry through a door on your left. The balcony will be in the fourth office you'll enter. Keep it quiet, there'll be soldiers in the hall next door the whole time."

He waited for Neville to nod before he carried on. "Once you are out, fly close to the building and then close to the ground. Use your Portkey as soon as possible. A healer will be waiting there."

Harry got to his feet. "I'll keep everyone busy in the meantime. But I'll have to wrap this up soon, too. Tom is considering to join us here and as much fun as that would be, I see no point in us having a go at it tonight."

Neville hurriedly got up himself and floated Bill's stretcher towards him. If Voldemort was on his way, Neville didn't plan to sit around and wait.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Hold on for a sec." Harry aimed his wand at the wall and sent two silent spells at in quick succession. The first one carved a hole through the bricks and the second one flew right through it.

By the surprised intake of breath Neville heard the next moment, it hit someone on the other side.

"You wouldn't happen to know the Fiendfyre curse, would you?" Harry called softly when a soldier mechanically climbed through the collapsed wall. "That would make my work here so much easier."
Harry sighed when the young wizard shook his head. Neville recognised the tell-tale empty eyes, a clear giveaway of a compulsion charm.

"Of course you wouldn't. Riddle made them all forget that spell ever existed," Harry explained towards Neville, only to go silent as a contemplative smile started growing on his face. He leaned closer. "But you remember it well enough, don't you, Nev?"

Neville's eyes narrowed. He didn't like where Harry was going with this. "I've never had much luck with that spell. The only time I conjured it, I only barely managed to contain it and that was when I had Minerva there helping me."

Harry's smile only grew more dangerous at that. "Containing it won't be a problem here."

Neville listened, dread settling in his stomach, as Harry amended the plan with newfound energy. "When you are standing on the balcony, I want you to turn back and send Fiendfyre into the building. A small spark will do. Let go of your control immediately and then flee."

Harry almost growled that last word.

"That's an order, Nev. Don't play brave and don't change anything. I have a plan and if you decide to mess with it, you most certainly end up killing Bill and yourself. When the Fiendfyre leaves your wand, let it roam freely, sit down on your broom and fly away. Don't linger. Don't turn back. I mean it. I'd really hate to see you burnt to a crisp by the cursed fire."

The image of Ginny Weasley flashed before Neville's eyes, brought forward by Harry's words. At the same time, Neville saw Harry flinch and look away with a pained expression.

Did he just... Neville's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Did Harry got reminded of the same, or did he just skim Neville's thoughts?


Neville stared at him for a short moment and then nodded. There would be a better time to ask his questions.

He walked past the confounded soldier. If Neville knew Harry's style at all by now, the wizard would be soon used as a human shield. Neville looked into his youthful face and felt nothing else but cold practicality. The years of fighting the Death Eaters honed any pity out of him and apparently, he was back to that setting now.

He looked back at Harry one more time before he jumped through the hole. The stretcher with Bill dutifully followed.

They didn't encounter anyone on their way out. It was dark and still in the rooms here, a stark contrast to the shouting and booms of spellfire only a thin wall away, where Harry had resumed the fighting.

They arrived at the balcony in less than two minutes. Neville opened its glass doors, stepping out into the night's air. It faced away from the river, and there was only a couple of lit streets between the library and the darkness of the muggle city that surrounded the magical centre of Budapest.

There was no one in sight.

He let Bill's stretcher float over the railing. He reached into his pouch and took out the trusty old
Nimbus that Teddy had given him together with their potions and other equipment only few hours ago. Holding it ready in his left hand, he aimed his wand back inside the library.

He took a deep breath, gathered his focus and willed the cursed fire to flare out of his wand.

It started as a small wisp of smoke but it quickly grew into a flame and then into a blaze. It flew from his wand in shapes that Neville didn't recognise from his viewpoint, and it attacked the wall on the other side of the room. Neville let it consume the frames hanging there and then the bricks and the mortar and then the tapestries and the books and the wizard- Neville couldn't see but he could feel all that the fire devoured, jumping from one object to another, wheezing in joy.

Something foreign roared in his ears and ripped the flames out of Neville's veins.

And suddenly, he wasn't the Fyre anymore. He was just a wizard staring at the cursed flames wreaking havoc inside the library.

Neville realised his mistake then. He forgot to let go off the Fiendfyre. His eyes widen as the flames seemed to notice him. They stirred in the air for a beat and then hurled his way.

Neville forewent mounting and jumped over the railing with the broomstick in his hand. The stretcher with Bill followed.

He heard the flames burst out from the door above his head.

He wasn't even nearly skilled enough to mount the broom midair. His free fall took him dangerously close to the paved courtyard beneath the balcony before he found his bearings and willed the broomstick to slow down and even up. The abrupt deceleration swung his body aside violently but he managed to hold on to the handle, hanging from it with both of his arms and wiggling his legs uselessly until his toes finally touched the ground. He quickly yanked the broom from the air and somehow got his leg over it. He was mounted and flying in less than a second. He shot away from the library with little care about who might see him, hoping that any possible audience would be preoccupied with the havoc the Fiendfyre was wreaking behind him.

His flight wasn't graceful but he managed to keep the broom in a straight line with a deadly grip; the rage of the fyre that kept pursuing him, watching him, propelled him into a nauseating speed. He checked on Bill several times but the stretcher was by his side the whole time, following the pull of his wand.

He crossed over several rows of houses before he remembered to breathe again. The flames gave up their chase by now, roaring in a distance. But only when he landed on a roof terrace, called Bill's stretchers closer and was ready to say the catchphrase to the Portkey, did he turn around.

The whole library was ablaze, its many wings and the dome drowning in green flames.

He watched it burn for a short moment.

"Running for the hills," he whispered then.

As the Portkey whisked them both away, a silly thought entered his mind. He hoped there were copies of all those books somewhere else in the world. Otherwise, Hermione would never speak to Harry again.
Chapter End Notes

You probably have some questions. Feel free to ask: so I can make sure Neville will, too.

And if you enjoyed the chapter, do let me know: every one of your comments is very precious to me.

My thanks to Dylan Pidge for beta-reading.
26 May 2019, Kriváň, former Slovakia

When the Portkey transported them from Budapest into the middle of the Carpathian mountains, there was a wizard and a ghost waiting in front of a cottage.

The wizard quickly snatched the control of the stretchers from Neville and without a single word hurried inside, Bill afloat behind him. Neville sluggishly made to protest but the ghost spoke first: "The healer's in Harry's debt. Let him do his work."

Neville immediately recognised her - it was the Grey Lady, one of the Hogwarts' ghosts.

She appraised him back. "I know your face."

Neville nodded absentmindedly, still a bit bewildered. The last time his eyes were open, they were staring at the inferno Harry turned the Parliamentary Library into. The image was imprinted into his eyes and he could still see its flashes whilst standing in the middle of the dark mountains. Only a few seconds ago, his ears were filled with screams of panic. Now there were only crickets to listen to.

He realised the ghost was still waiting for a reply.

"I used to go to Hogwarts," he said belatedly.

"Of course you did."

Neville blinked to clear away the lingering daze. He looked around properly. The one-storey cottage, or a log cabin actually, was standing on top of a low hill, surrounded by towering mountains from all sides. Their tops were covered with snow even this late into spring. The white caps shone against the dark sky and the black woods that the world otherwise seemed to consist.

The ghost was giving off a hue of light of her own.

"Are you..." Neville searched for words. "Are you here on Harry's orders?"

She quirked one incorporeal eyebrow at him. "Harry needs not to order. I'm his messenger."

She started floating towards the cabin, clearly expecting him to follow. He did. "How does that work?"

"He didn't ask me to explain that." And she clearly wasn't going to. "He did ask to explain the wards around this place. They'll cover simple magic from the prying eyes of the Army as long as you stay inside the clearing. I'm to warn you against venturing further. There are also perimeter-alerting wards in place, but nothing else. This place is supposed to be open for all people in
possession of Harry's emergency Portkey. Stay on your guard but know that they are sentries around this place and you'll be warned of any danger."

"'Sentries'? As in… Harry's kinds of sentries?"

"Yes."

They entered the building. It was a proper country cabin, with sturdy walls made out of aged dark logs and white sealing in between them. The Grey Lady led him through a dark hallway to a spacious room that probably served for a living room on normal days but now was turned into an infirmary. Bill was lying on a table in the middle, still unconscious and unmoving; with a globe of bright light hovering above him. The healer was leaning low over Bill's chest. He didn't acknowledge Neville's presence in any way, fully focused on his task. A well-worn bag floated in the air next to them, open wide. A number of potion vials were scattered around, most of them empty.

Neville rounded the table to see what the healer was doing. His eyes bulged open the next moment, when he saw Bill's injuries in full for the first time, in bright light and with his robes vanished. He quickly looked away, covering his mouth and barely suppressing the urge to throw up. He hastily changed his course of action, backed away from the table and sat down on a wooden bench by the window. He refrained from talking to the healer, letting him work uninterrupted, hoping he was good at what he did.

He was an old man with thinning hair and hunched back. His wand hand was steady as it moved over Bill's shredded frame without pausing, and that was good enough sign for Neville.

He allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment. It was then, leaning his head back against the wall and listening to the healer shuffling around, that he took a deep breath for what seemed like the first time since they left their rental house on the banks of the Dunai river in Budapest. They were most assuredly never coming back. How much did they waste on the rent?

Something cold brushed his hand. He started and opened his eyes. The Grey Lady was floating close, leaning towards him. "Ted Lupin just Portkeyed to the edge of the wards."

Neville immediately jumped to his feet and hurried out of the cabin. "Teddy?" he called softly into the dark night.

"Over here," a tired voice answered from his left. A moment later, Teddy stepped into the light off a window. He looked his true self tonight. And also dead tired.

"Where's Annie and Gregory?" Neville rushed to ask.

"In a safe house in between here and Serbia, staying there for the night. They are both okay."

Neville breathed a sigh of relief. "Were they followed?"

Teddy shook his head. "They were gone by the time the army arrived at Rusty's. George sent four more muggleborns to guard them, just to be sure."

"Where's George now?"

"Tying all the loose ends, I'd imagine."

"Rusty's Lot?" Neville assumed.
Teddy looked down. "Burnt to the ground with two whole streets around it. Rusty's dead."

Oh. "And Sadecki?"

"We're not sure. He disappeared before the Army got there, we know that much."

"How many… how many muggles died?"

"There's no way to know for sure. Let's hope Popović got most of them out when the attack started."

"And Molnar?"

"She was captured, and so was her husband," Teddy said gravely. "Hopefully, Harry'll be able to get them out before it's too late. How's Bill?"

It didn't surprise Neville that Teddy had already heard about Bill's injury. "Unconscious. The healer's with him now."

"What happened to him?"

"He got buried under several tons of marble. His chest is all caved in."

Teddy gulped audibly at hearing that. "But it wasn't a magical injury?"

"No, it wasn't," Neville confirmed, taking some consolation from that, too.

"Can I see him?"

Neville thought about it for a second. "In my experience, it doesn't help the patient any if you distract their healer."

They decided to let the wizard work in peace and sat down in a different room, an old-fashioned kitchen of a sort that could easily belong to a rural museum. Neville started a fire in the ancient wood burner, more for the comfort of the crackling flames than any necessity. He went searching for a kettle, planning to make a tea the muggle way to occupy his hands.

He only had too much experience with waiting whilst his friends lay in blood in the other room. He knew to welcome any idea that would help pass the time.

Teddy sat down by the table, staring into the darkness behind the window.

"Did you hear how they found us?" Neville asked softly.

Teddy nodded silently.

"It's always the small things, isn't it?" Neville had panicked momentarily and drawn a wand at a stranger. And now, people were dead.

Teddy looked up at hearing Neville's comment. "I shouldn't have led you through the Apparation points just like that. I should have explained first, should have told you more about how they worked. Or I should have followed the guy, Obliviated him on the spot, or at least-"

"Whoa- stop right there, Teddy. It was me who freaked out and drew attention to us, not you. If anyone should be beating himself over this, it's me," Neville firmly argued. "And trust me, I'm furious. At myself, I mean. But there's no point in crying over it. Let's be glad it wasn't a security
breach that caused all of this, or an ally betraying. It was just my stupidity, plain and simple. It
won't go as far as to hope that I can be cured of it but it'll certainly be easier avoiding the same
mistake than changing all the wards around all your safehouses or testing everyone with
Legilimency. I've had to go through that before, during the last war, and it was a real bother. It's no
fun, going around suspecting your friends of betrayal."

Teddy got successfully distracted from his pity party. "How long were you in the army?"

"From the moment it was established until it fell apart. What was it then, four years? I trained to be
a soldier long before then, though."

"What did you do when it became clear you wouldn't be one anymore?"

Neville noted down the strange follow-up question, spotting the personal interest behind it. Was
Teddy thinking of a change of career?

He chuckled softly for an answer. "To my eternal shame, I became a politician."

Teddy quirked an eyebrow at him.

"I had very little say in it, and it was only for a few months," Neville hurriedly added, as always
feeling the need to defend himself when it came to this chapter of his life. "After Riddle
disappeared under his Curtain with one whole continent, the world became absolute mayhem for a
couple of years. The Statute of Secrecy was broken, muggles were in an uproar and we had
thousands of European wizards uprooted and without homes to take care of. The ICW was after our
necks; we were the only European wizards available to be blamed for the breach of the Statute.
They quickly seized their chance for a power overhaul: it was the first time since its foundation that
Europe lost control of the Confederation. We had to fight hard not to lose representation altogether-
"

He stopped himself and glanced at Teddy. "Sorry, didn't mean to go off like that."

Teddy shrugged. "Actually, I wouldn't mind hearing this. I was too young back then to care."

"'You sure?"

"Well, it's not like we have anything better to do while waiting."

Neville conceded that point. He had many burning questions on his mind but Teddy wasn't the
person who could answer them.

"We quickly settled in Finland and established governments in exile there," he got back to his
story. "We found representatives from as many countries as we had nationalities within our ranks,
to take the vacated seats in the Confederation. I let myself be persuaded to take the seat for Britain.
We couldn't spare anyone better to waste their time at the farced summits: the truly experienced
were in Finland, organising the new settlement there, or leading peace talks with muggles."

Neville grimaced, remembering his short stunt in the ICW. "I've never seen a bigger bunch of
pompous, self-absorbed twats. To say we've been treated disrespectfully would be putting in mildly
- in their eyes, we were self-appointed laymen, banished from their homes. Still, the magic of the
treaties recognised our votes no matter their opinion. Very little good did that do to us - Britain was
found guilty for the breach of the Statute and as we took the seat for Britain, we also took the
blame for it."

"They blamed you for the Curtain?"
Neville looked away from Teddy and got back to opening the various cupboards in search of some tea leaves. "Back then... tempers were high. Riddle turned a lot of people's lives upside down with his decision to reveal magic. The warlocks of China, the Korean shamans, the Amazonians... They hadn't had a care in the happenings of the world before, but now they had been drawn out of their hiding. They weren't interested in the inner workings of our war; they only saw the Europeans who exposed them."

Neville turned to check if Teddy still followed; the young wizard was watching him with a fierce scowl. "For compensation, we had to found and finance a bureau that would hide criminal activity of wizards among muggles to keep the tension low. It wasn't really a punishment, all other nations got a similar task as part of the worldwide muggle relations plan. But try to explain that to people back home. As it was me who came back to Finland with that verdict, it was felt proper I should lead such a department. And with that, my political career was over: I became the most hated wizard in the new settlement, taking the rest of our very much depleted resources to protect muggles and persecute wizards. When the next ICW summit came about, no one even suggested I should candidate. You can't imagine how relieved I felt."

"If you had the votes, why didn't you make the ICW move against Riddle?"

Neville bowed his head. "We didn't have that sort of power," he said after a moment, the conversation taking him back to the months he considered some of his biggest failures. "The standing of the other countries was clear: the ICW's utmost goal was to uphold the Statute. With it now broken, the main responsibility changed to keeping peace with the muggles. Nothing within that duty bound them to intervene and sort our mess in Europe. They pulled back the support they provided to the Resistance and considered the case closed."

Teddy was frowning now, probably taking all of this in. Neville gave him a moment.

"Come on, though - they couldn't just ignore the fact that a whole continent fell to a Dark Lord. There must see the potential threat on their own security if nothing else."

"They see the threat alright," Neville said. "But you won't like the conclusion they've reached."

He watched as Teddy's eyes widen, the implication sinking in.

"We know they've been meeting with representatives of the Empire, closed doors negotiations and all," Neville confirmed.

"They're negotiating with Riddle?!"

"He might have been a Dark Lord once, but he's the Emperor now, with a powerful stronghold. A peace treaty is seen as the best solution by many wizards who haven't lost their homes or loved ones to him."

He hesitated then, considering the possible danger of Teddy knowing what he was about to add. He inwardly shrugged and continued. "There are certain provisions in the peace treaties the ICW signed with the UN, added there as a show of goodwill in those tense times. If the muggles attack the Empire, the ICW is obliged to provide aid."

Understanding flashed in Teddy's eyes. "That's why you want to bring the Curtain down. You want to force their hands."

Neville frowned at that assessment. "I wish it was that easy. The treaties aren't magically binding. The ICW could technically back down from their promises. The Confederation is fractured, though
some don't trust in a deal with Riddle. We want to provide them with an argument."

It took Teddy a long moment to ask his next question. "Where does Canada stand in all this?"

Ah, of course, Teddy grew up there. Neville didn't reply right away, assembling everything he knew, trying to give Teddy a fair answer. "When the Curtain rose, they offered to take us all in. There already was a community - lots of European wizards moved there in the same wave as your Grandmother did. And some of us took the offer. But the rest of us… We saw it as the ultimate defeat. Setting roots so far away from home, it'd mean giving up hope entirely. We decided to establish a temporary community, as close to our homes as possible. Even if it meant living in the frozen Lapland."

"And now?"

Neville ’s shoulders slumbered.. "You know better than me how the life of a European wizard looks in the Americas. Or anywhere else but home, for the matter."

"I guess you want me to say that it can get rather... bare, at times."

Neville found the simple word rather fitting. He travelled through various continents many times and found their indigenous magics beautiful, fascinating and completely incomprehensible. As for Europeans wizards living there, they struggled with the same problems Neville's community did in Lapland: they were away from their homes where their peoples had been cultivating their magic for thousands of years. Away from the safety of powerful wards, the comforts of complicated charm structures and the convenience of the native community.

"If you want to negotiate with the leader of the Latin-cursing, wand waving wizards, you wouldn't go to Finland. No matter our official political standing in the ICW, we lost the real stronghold: the cities, the schools and the ministries that our predecessors saturated with magic for centuries. It's only natural for other world leaders to speak with Riddle about the new."

The door swung open and the healer stepped in. Neville swallowed the rest of his argument; the healer had his full attention right away.

"Your friend suffered a severe contusion of his heart and lungs; both his spleen and liver were almost completely crushed; his intestines, kidneys and stomach were pierced through or even ground at several places. His ribs and spine were fractured many times over, further damaging the organs," he listed without preamble. He wasn't British, his accent had a southern hint to it. "I've stopped the internal bleeding and pulverize the other fluids in his cavity. The potions are regrowing most of his organs as we speak, and the same goes for the bones. It'll be a very slow process, what with the scope of the damage he suffered but he's responding to the treatment as well as could be expected. He'll need charms and more potions to support him for the next couple of weeks, but given enough time, he should recover from all of these injuries fully."

Neville recognised the inclination at the end of the last statement. He steeled himself for the bad news.

"I'm worried for his brain, though. The trauma already caused severe intracranial bleeding before you put him into stasis. I relieved the pressure inside his skull but the brain had been damaged considerably. It might have done permanent harm."

"I don't understand," Teddy spoke up. "He wasn't cursed. The injuries are not magical in nature. There shouldn't be anything permanent about them."
"There's still much we don't know about the wizard's brain, young man," the healer rounded on him. "The potions won't be much help to us here. It's a discipline I'm not well-versed in but even I know it requires incredibly complicated magic to rebuild someone's brain cells - if it can be done at all."

"What exactly are you saying?" Neville interjected.

The wizard sighed. "I'm saying that I'm out of my expertise here. If you wish for your friend to survive, you need to bring in a specialist."

The Grey Lady burst through the wall then, stopping only a few inches short from flying into the healer. He startled, taking a hurried step back from the incorporeal mass.

"Remember the debt owned, Cantalupi," she hissed at him, her usual impassive face giving way to irritation. "Do your duty and take proper care of the wounded."

After his initial reaction, the healer found some of his lost resolve. He straightened his back and looked the ghost in the eye. "I'm doing my duty by informing you I'm not familiar with the proper procedure here. I'm doing my duty by recommending the best course of action needed for your friend's survival."

The ghost stared at him silently for a couple of seconds. Neville noticed the healer gulp under that gaze and he could almost sympathize with him. It wasn't every day that you faced an angry ghost. They usually stayed detached from the happenings of the world.

"Do you have a name for us?" the Grey Lady conceded at last.

The healer hesitated for a beat but he obviously had someone in mind. "My colleague from Rome, healer Millefeuille. She should be on duty tonight."

The ghost turned to Teddy. "Change into Zabini and bring her over. Use whatever means necessary to make her cooperate."

Teddy nodded. Neville watched as he conjured a mirror. With his eyes focused on the reflection, Teddy started changing his appearance to the same one Harry wore earlier tonight.

"Should I go with you?" Neville asked Teddy.

"No," the ghost answered before Teddy could. "Zabini travels either alone or with a whole squat. Teddy, disguise it as a personal matter. Be short, be unrelenting. Neville, be ready to subdue her when they apparate in - if necessary. I won't be over for another half an hour, at least. You are on your own."

Neville was left staring at the ghost, eyebrows raised, as he realised it was Harry's words coming through her voice. Had it always been the case?

Teddy left a moment later. The Grey Lady floated out of the room, too.

"I need to go back to monitor your friend," the healer said. He frowned at Neville's burnt cheek. "Come with me, I'll address your wounds there."

Twenty minutes later found Neville nervously pacing in front of the cabin. His shoulder was newly sown and covered in anti-scarring gauze. The burns on his face and neck were mostly gone now, too.
"They'll be here in ten seconds," the Grey Lady spoke up next to him, making him jump in fright. "The healer is cooperating for now - but she's wary of the situation. Get ready."

Neville nodded. He rolled his shoulders in his new robes, transformed to look like the Army's uniform. He took a wide stance beside the door of the cabin and clasped his lit wand tightly at his side. A second later, two figures apparated some twenty metres away. Neville's eyes immediately landed on the witch. She wore a long coat of a healer on duty, her hair pinned into a no-nonsense bun. She was probably the same age as him, or twenty years older - you could never tell for sure with witches.

Teddy, still disguised as Zabini, nodded at him shortly. "This way," he barked at the healer and strode inside the cabin.

She didn't follow him right away, looking around with wide eyes. Neville twitched his wand hand and beckoned to the door, staring at her sharply. From his experience, it was important not to let the captives pause and think.

He marched right at her heels when she shuffled inside the cabin and then to the room where Bill still lay on the table. His head was propelled on a pillow, and a see-through balloon covered his mouth, pushing air into his lungs in short intervals. His upper body was covered by a damp cloth soaked in potions, hovering just above his chest. Neville noticed that the cloth seemed to be higher up in the air than even an hour ago: the potions were performing their magic, restoring Bill's chest back to its healthy proportions.

The witch's eyes landed on the other healer in the room. She stopped in her tracks.

"Danilo?" she asked. Neville didn't detect any warmth in her voice - they weren't friends. "What's going on?"

"You have a patient to take care of," Teddy barked before the healer could answer, his hand pointing at Bill. "That's all that needs to be going on, Ma'am."

She looked down at Bill. Neville followed her eyes and cursed inwardly - he realised Bill's self-transfiguration spells had worn off and they had forgotten to reapply them. He lay on the table without any glamours, his real face clean shaven for anyone to see. Well, maybe she wouldn't know his face- except that she did. Recognition sparked in her eyes almost immediately. When she glanced back at Neville, he knew the charade was over.

He didn't act immediately, deciding to wait for her response to the new situation.

Teddy didn't notice the shift in the room and carried on in Zabini's authoritative voice. "It's your duty to take care of the wounded. Get on with it. Now."

She shook her head. "Not when the wounded is the enemy of the Empire."

Wrong answer. Neville had her disarmed the next moment, her wand flying into his hand. Teddy stopped him from making further steps, though. "There's no need to Imperio her just yet. Let's offer her an alternative."

She visibly flinched when she heard the name of the curse, her eyes flicking between Neville's threatening wand and Zabini's imposing figure. She gathered some of her courage back a moment later, straightening up in defiance. Neville didn't let the brave front fool him; her eyes were still frantically skipping between every wizard in the room.

"The punishment for helping the enemies of the Empire is death," she hissed, glaring at the other
healer judgingly. "You've abducted me, you've dragged me over here. I'll never help you willingly."

Teddy accepted that, nodded sagely. "If that's the truth, you won't indeed give us another option than to *Imperio* you. Once we'd be done here, we'd erase your memories of this whole ordeal and give you a Portkey back home. But I'm afraid that's not where this would end." He shook Zabini's head ruefully.

"You see, this face has most probably been compromised. You've been seen leaving with Zabini tonight: your disappearance would be investigated, your mind scraped for the tiniest possibility of reversing the Memory charms. You are a brain specialist - I have no doubt you've seen what a treatment like that can do to your mind."

Teddy paused dramatically, letting that sink. "Or," he said softly after a moment, "you'll give us a reason to protect you from all of that."

With that last sentence hanging in the air, his appearance started to change. Neville expected to see the brown of his normal hair but instead, it turned raven black and unruly. Neville quickly schooled his surprised face back into neutral when the rest of Zabini's features didn't change into those of Teddy Lupin, but that of Harry Potter.

Neville had to stifle his chuckle when he realised Teddy didn't adjust Zabini's tall figure that much, leaving his impression of Harry stand much taller than his godfather actually did.

"Do you know who I am?" Teddy asked, looking intently at the witch who was now gaping at him in utter shock. Oh yeah, she recognised Harry's face alright.

"A ghost..." she breathed out. "... a story."

"No ghost. A wizard, from flesh and blood," Teddy argued firmly. He turned his eyes upwards, his head too; and the lightning bolt on his forehead flashed in the bright light above Bill's bed. "You know your field, you know that cursed scars can't be replicated. You are no feeble minded child, either; you won't let any Dark wizards dictate you your own history. You know who I am and you know what I survived."

She gulped and said the name voicelessly.

It was enough for Teddy. He nodded solemnly. "I'm offering to be in your debt. I'll protect you and yours from the repercussions of being here tonight with the same powers that kept me alive no matter how hard the Dark Lord tried to change it. Swear that you'll do your best to save Bill and I'll owe you a debt for that."

She was staring at him, her mouth gaping open; and just like that, Neville knew they had won her over.

She looked away after a second and turned to Bill. She narrowed her eyes, assessing him as a healer would a patient for the first time. She reached her arm towards Neville, palm raised upwards. He hesitated at first but then he floated her wand onto her hand. "Slow movements only," he warned her.

She nodded and grasped her fingers around the wand carefully, heeding his order. She sent a diagnostic charm at Bill next, a deep frown setting in her face when it rang the results in her head.

She looked up at her colleague across the table. "*Les avez-vous forcé à me traîner jusqu'ici car vous aviez peur d'annoncer vous-mêmes la mauvaise nouvelle?*" she hissed.
Neville's French was rusty but he still remembered enough to get the gist of her sentence. *Did you drag me here because you were too afraid to deliver the bad news?*

His heart skipped a beat.

The Italian healer shook his head resolutely and replied in English for their benefit. "I've sworn an oath that I would do my best to save him. As much as it pains me to say it," he added bitterly "that meant sending for you."

It was clear there was no love lost between the two colleagues.

She let out a long, shuddering breath, but her shoulders had now straightened, her posture showing resolve where there was none a moment ago. "What equipment do you have?"

The healer gestured at the leather bag by his side. "Everything. They keep me better stocked than the hospital does."

She sighed one more time, and reached into the bag.

---

Two minutes and one oath later, they left the two professionals with Bill alone. The moment the door closed behind them, Teddy changed back to his normal self, a huge grin plastered over his young face. "I've always wanted to do that."

Neville chuckled himself. "You were quite convincing."

"Watched Harry do it enough times. We got lucky she was this starstruck. It wouldn't have worked otherwise," Teddy admitted. "When Harry gets here, he can do his thing and convince her properly."

They decided to go back to their tea, knowing they wouldn't help anyone by breathing down the healers' neck. According to Teddy, Harry had much more subtle ways of keeping eyes on the witch.

The Grey Lady flew through the wall of the kitchen a minute later. "Harry's on his way."

Teddy immediately jumped to his feet and Neville once again dropped preparing the tea. They rushed out of the cabin, the ghost easily overtaking them both. It was her who greeted Harry first when he apparated to the edges of the clearing.

It was quite dark this far away from the lights of the cabin but the faint glow of the ghost illuminated the incoming wizard enough to safely recognise Harry's tired frown. Neville's eyes quickly scanned him over; he bore no visible signs of injuries. He had changed from Zabini's uniform into a checked flannel shirt of all things. The soot and the sweat had disappeared too, probably under a *Scourgify* charm or two. It made Neville realise he hadn't used one on himself yet. He probably smelled.

Neville watched from afar as Harry's frown gave away and he smiled a weary smile at the Grey Lady. The ghost returned it.

"Thank you," Harry said softly. He then raised his arm and clasped the ghost's forearm in a gesture of gratitude.

Neville felt his eyes gulping open as the ghost grasped Harry's hand with her own, imprisoning Harry's flesh in between her incorporeal arm and fingers. "My pleasure, as always," she replied.
fondly.

Teddy caught Neville's shocked stare and winked at him, not at all perturbed by the casual show of the impossible. Neville forced his gaping mouth closed and returned his eyes back to the ghost. She clenched Harry's hand firmly one more time before she floated away and disappeared through the wall of the cabin.

Harry turned to Teddy then and engulfed him a firm hug. That show of affection wasn't as shocking as touching a ghost was, but it still surprised Neville to the bone.

"You were quite brilliant," Harry said softly. "Although I'd say I'm not usually that dramatic."

Teddy chuckled into Harry's shoulder. "I respectfully disagree."

Harry laughed back.

He pulled away and clasped Teddy's shoulders to look him straight in the eye, completely serious again. "Are you alright?"

Teddy grumbled. "You've seen everything that happened tonight. You know I didn't get hurt."

Harry resolutely shook his head. "I've no idea what's going on in here," he said, tapping Teddy's temple with his finger. Teddy swatted it away, rolling his eyes in exaggerated annoyance.

"Are you alright?" Harry repeated.

Teddy looked down, and mumbled, "I'll be fine soon."

Harry nodded and took a step back. He finally looked at Neville. "I'd quite like that tea if there's some brewing."

Neville now remembered the kettle he left on the stove. He could hear its distant wheezing all the way from here. He swore softly and jogged back to the kitchen.

Harry and Teddy joined him inside a few moments later. They stopped in the hallway first. He watched through the open door of the kitchen as Harry casually leaned against the door to the living room. He closed his eyes and tilted his head as if to eavesdrop on the healers who tended to Bill on the other side.

He stood motionless for a long minute, and then two. Teddy was looking at him quietly, and Neville was looking at them both, searching for any signs of magic Harry was obviously performing.

He didn't see, or feel, any.

It did give him a chance to stare at Harry unabashedly, observing him in light of everything he had learned since the last time they saw each other. Back then, he'd considered Harry to be a mere smuggler. A resourceful one, but still a smuggler. He still looked the par now, what with the unassuming muggle clothes and his youthful face. But Neville now knew better. Come to think of it, he should have known better the first moment he saw him at Hermione's; shouldn't have been fooled by the casual appearance and aloof manners. This was Harry Potter, after all.

It took two more minutes for Harry to move. "Hmm," he commented softly, opened his eyes and walked into the kitchen. By that time, the tea had a layering of black skin over its surface. It'd be strong; Neville left the leaves there for too long. It was just as well. They still had a long night in
Teddy walked in behind Harry and closed the door. He put up a privacy ward next. "So?"

Harry sat down by the table, leaning back against the wall. He took out a bag of dried leaves and small white papers from his breast pocket. "We got incredibly lucky. I believe I found strong enough reason for her to help us," he said absentmindedly, busy with rolling his joint. "She's good people. We should be straight with her."

Neville brought the cups and the pot over. He didn't need to ask about whom Harry was talking; there was only one she in the house.

By some unspoken agreement, no one said another word until Neville finished pouring the tea and they all sat down, nursing a steaming cup each. The silence wasn't exactly comfortable - it couldn't be, what with the day they just had, and with Bill lying unconscious in the next room. But it wasn't awkward, either. Harry was puffing impatiently on his joint, the smoke disappearing the moment he exhaled. Neville observed the wizard as he lounged on the wooden bench, his limbs splayed wide, one of his legs bouncing.

There were many questions swimming in Neville's head and he contemplated which one to ask first. Before he spoke up, Harry beat him to it.

He addressed Teddy, his voice remorseful. "Your flat in Berlin was crawling with soldiers by the time I got there. They confiscated everything."

Teddy sagged deeper into his seat but he didn't look surprised. "That's... alright. I carry all the important stuff with me."

"Good. The Army also interrogated your friends, and your colleagues."

Teddy's eyes opened wide in panic. "Dean! Is he alright?"

"I got to him first; Portkeyed him to a safe house in Prague. He thinks he's been arrested for playing video games; probably cursing you for getting him that console in the first place."

Teddy frowned. "You don't want to tell him about the People?"

"I thought you should have the honours. Thought you'd like to see his face when he finally finds out you are a member of a secret rebel society."

That made Teddy grin. "Thanks, Harry."

The smile was only short-lived, though. "Where will I live now? What should I do?" he asked frantically a moment later.

Teddy wasn't thinking about a change of career. He was forced to abandon his life because his magic signature was found side-apparating known enemies of the Empire across Europe. The realisation flashed through Neville's mind with a sharp tang of guilt.

"I'm sure George will be happy to have you in the Town."

Teddy's frown got only more pronounced at Harry's suggestion. "I'm not going to hide in the Town. You know I'm useful to you up here."

Harry was shaking his head resolutely. "There are plenty of ways you could be useful in the Town,
"Bloody hell, Harry, we've been through this already! George has no need for a Metamorphmagus in the Town. But you do - you go through litres of Polyjuice potions every month."

"I'd rather spend Polyjuice on an experienced soldier than have my godson in danger."

"I'm a soldier, too! Do I need to show you the diploma from Durmstrang? Again?"

Neville got the distinct feeling that this was a recurring argument between these two.

Teddy took advantage of Harry's momentary silence and kept pressing. "You know I can hold my own, you've taught me loads yourself! Give me a chance to prove it."

"I have," Harry said softly. "I gave you a task - to show Bill and Neville around. And how did that turn out?"

Oh. Low blow. Neville frowned, watching as Teddy visibly twitched under the accusation. Harry wasn't done yet, though. "Rusty's dead. And so are tens of muggles. Molnar, too. St. Vitus in Prague might have been compromised. You can't go back to your home, and so can't many of George's contacts in Budapest!"

Teddy seemed to be getting smaller and smaller through Harry's list. At this point though, his eyes suddenly narrowed. He straightened up on his chair and jabbed an accusing finger back at Harry. "Ha! Nice try, Harry!"

Neville's eyes kept flicking between the two of them. He was confused by Teddy's sudden proclamation but he still didn't hesitate to come to his defence. "None of that is Teddy's fault, Harry, and you know it."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I do know that. But if Teddy's stupid enough to blame himself, there's no reason why I shouldn't use it against him and guilt-trip him to stay put, is there?"

Huh?

There was no real annoyance in Harry's voice when he said that. When Neville glanced at Teddy, the young wizard appeared only pleased with himself for seeing through Harry's poor attempt at manipulation. There was none of that crestfallen guilt in his face anymore. Neville returned his eyes to Harry to see the corners of his mouth twitching.

Hmm. Maybe Harry wasn't such an arsehole after all.

"You can't keep coddling me forever," Teddy returned back to the matter at hand, his voice much calmer now. "It's you who always says we should use all our assets."

Harry sighed, completely serious again. "You've drawn attention to yourself. If Riddle finds out who you are, he won't hesitate to use you against me. He knows what my weaknesses are. For what it's worth, though, I'm sorry."

Teddy wasn't giving up. "He doesn't know who I am yet, right? Let me help out until he finds out. If it happens, I promise I'll hide and you won't hear a word of complaint," he suggested.

Harry stayed silent for a moment, considering it. "I can't be sure anymore I follow everything Riddle's doing," he started slowly. When Teddy took a breath to argue, Harry raised his hand to stop him. "But I'll think about it. In the meantime, you can stay in Prague with George."
Judging by Teddy's smile, even this small concession was a big victory. It made Neville wonder what type of parenting figure Harry used to be.

Harry was talking again. "And by the way, Nev, it wasn't your stupidity that caused this, either," he argued, going smoothly back to a conversation that he hadn't been a part of. "The blame is all mine. I've grown too complacent, too confident in my abilities to keep you safe. I shouldn't have let you traipse into the wizarding world without proper instructions."

He turned back to Teddy. "I've seen the wizard at the Apparation point as clearly as you lot, and I've seen his reaction to Neville drawing his wand. I paid close attention to Army reports afterwards but when nothing came up, I assumed the guy hadn't told anyone about the incident." He shook his head ruefully. "I should have seen this coming from far away. Instead, I was confident I could watch Riddle's every move. I shouldn't have underestimated Tom like this."

He paused to drag a last powerful puff of his joint and threw the butt away. He glanced away from them both, staring into the wall. "After all we've been through, I really should have known better."

Neville watched the butt disappear before it hit the floor. He shrugged. Assigning blame was pointless. He didn't care who had a bigger part in it, as long as they all learned to avoid their mistakes. He had more pressing matters to discuss now when Harry was finally here and talking.

He took the opening. "Are you saying you can watch Riddle? The same way you watched us?"

"I'm saying that after tonight, Riddle has it confirmed that if he gives orders mentally, I won't be aware of them," Harry muttered. "That complicates things."

"So that means you can," Neville surmised. "Is it the same power that allows you to fight like you did in the library? To see... more?"

Harry looked at him, his eyes contemplative. It took him a moment to speak up, and when he did, it was to ask a question of his own. "Now that you've seen me fight, would you go the other way if I said I had it under control?"

Neville paused, surprised by that question, although he didn't have to think much about the answer - he had decided that would have been the right course of action hours ago, when he stood atop the staircase in the Library and watched Harry go against eighty soldiers and win. He didn't say as much now, though, because that wasn't the right answer. "I'd do what my leader would order me to."

Harry rolled his eyes at that. "Alright, then. What would you advise Bill to do?"

Neville glanced at the door, in the direction where Bill now lay unconscious. "You saved my life tonight when we were supposed to be covering your back," he said to Harry as a way of an answer. "Thank you."

Harry grumbled. "I consider us even."

When Neville looked at him in confusion, Harry added. "For that Imperio. I stand by my reasons why I cast it but even I understand it isn't entirely kosher to throw that curse at your friends."

Neville almost forgot about that incident. Now that it was out there, he frowned in annoyance. "No, that wasn't alright," he hissed but without any true vehemence behind it. As Harry said, he had saved his life since. They were even.

He wasn't above using Harry's rare moment of guilt to his advantage, though. He returned back to
his questions. "How are you doing it, Harry? What allows you to see what's behind your back, or what's happening to Riddle thousands of kilometres away? Can you teach anyone else?"

*Thump.* Harry slammed his cup down and the sound of the china hitting the table reverberated through the kitchen. "Oh, fuck off, Nev. I've had enough of this persistent interrogation."

Neville blinked in surprise. Harry's jovial aloofness was completely gone; replaced by very tangible irritation without a single warning.

"I'm not obliged to tell you more than I already have. We are allies: you know what you need to know in order to work with me. Stop asking for more as if you have a right to insist on these answers!"

*Allies, not friends.* Neville didn't miss that message.

He was startled by the vehemence of Harry's statement and it took him a moment to decide on a proper reaction. He knew that responding in kind wouldn't get him anywhere. Harry was correct - if he wasn't willing to give them the answers, they really had no ground to push for them.

When he finally spoke up, it was with a different line of questioning altogether. "It's considered common courtesy even between *allies* to let them know you are a Legillimens."

Harry seemed to be momentarily taken aback by the change of topic but he was quick to recover. "'Courtesy', you say?" He chuckled dryly. "The last time I did the courteous thing, I let Pansy Parkinson live after she surrendered her wand. The next moment, she's getting rid of her binds and throwing a dagger at Ron Weasley's back. It was her who finally taught me courtesy is not practical."

Neville remembered that story. That was beside the point here, though. "You are not denying it, then. You've been reading our thoughts."

"No. I'm in no habit of reading your lot," Harry argued casually. "I might skim the occasional superficial thought if I can't help it but that's all. They're harder to ignore when emotions are running high and you are practically screaming them into my face like you did tonight."

"There's no way I can confirm you're speaking the truth."

Harry shrugged. He was back to his usual nonchalant demeanour. "If you are that worried, have your Occlumency shields up all the time I'm around. The exercise would only do you good."

Neville frowned. That would be a real pain in the arse. He wasn't skilled enough to have his shields up without conscious effort. No, he'd rather do without. Come to think of it, there wasn't much left that he had to hide from Harry, anyway.

That didn't mean he was happy about it. "For someone who constantly invades other's privacy, you sure guard your own business closely," he grumbled. The hypocrisy of it irritated him.

Teddy spoke up, nodding enthusiastically in support of Neville's point. "Try to live with that through puberty!"

Neville ignored the attempt at levity. "We were stuck in a caravan with you for three weeks. Why didn't you tell us about George? Or Fred? Teddy? You could have told me about the People when we met at Hermione's. It would have made planning this mission so much easier."

Harry stared at him flatly. "You learned about them the moment it was safe to know."
Neville was waiting for Harry to elaborate but after a few seconds of silence, it became clear that he wasn't going to. Neville took a breath to push him further but then, he reconsidered. He forcibly pushed down on his irritation and leant back on his chair with a loud huff.

Harry was watching him closely. "You've decided to wait for Bill to lead this argument, haven't you?"

Neville took one more calming breath. "I thought you weren't reading my thoughts."

Harry chuckled. "I have no need for that. We did spend three weeks in a small caravan. Not to mention six years in one bedroom."

"Why Fiendfyre?" Neville asked then. "Why did you ask me to conjure the Fyre?"

Harry's eyes narrowed at another sudden change of topic. He didn't give Neville any other reaction, though. Bugger. It seemed Harry was no stranger to interrogation.

"It was the most effective spell for the occasion."

Neville stopped himself from rolling his eyes at the evasive reply. "Why didn't you conjure it yourself?" he rephrased.

Harry tilted his head, smiling slightly. "I never really mastered that spell."

Harry wasn't the only one who had learned to read the other well. Neville recognised that smile. Harry grinned like that when he was able to tell the truth for once. He would give them a thinly veiled truth and knew it would be understood incorrectly.

So from that smart-ass grin, Neville deduced Harry was indeed unable to conjure Fiendfyre but not from his lack of skills. There must have been other, less obvious, reasons. What's more, Neville was almost sure Harry could control the spell. He remembered with painful clarity the moment he stood on the balcony of the Library and the Fyre was wrenched from under his control. He remembered the murderous rage when the flames turned their attention to him.

He hoped it wasn't Harry's rage that fuel the flames but right now, he couldn't think of an alternative. Harry was the one who had asked him to use this particular spell. He was the one who had planned to turn the Library into an Inferno with the cursed fire. And he was the one who got out of the building unscathed.

Neville couldn't think of any other explanation to all this other than that it was Harry who controlled the Fiendfyre.

The similarities to the way Ginny died came to mind. He was careful to Occlud his thoughts, avoiding Harry's eyes for good measure. There was no point in confronting Harry about his suspicions right now. That would only lead to more evasive answers and even more distrust between them. That was the opposite of what they both needed right now.

"Is there any food around here?" Teddy spoke up in the following silence, effectively changing the topic. "I'm starving."

Come to think of it, Neville was too.

Instead of answering, Harry took out a casserole from the pocket of his jeans. The moment he raised its lid off, the salivating smell of baked meat filled up the whole kitchen.
"Is that Winky's roast beef?" Teddy asked, eyeing the casserole with a shine in his eyes.

"Winky?" Neville repeated in astonishment, recognising the name. "She's still with you, after all this time?"

"Not even severe arthritis can keep that elf from pestering me," Harry grumbled absentmindedly. His arm disappeared in his pocket all the way to his elbow, and he seemed to be rummaging in the space there in earnest. "Oh dear, I forgot to take the potatoes. I won't ever hear the end of this."

Teddy chuckled and whispered loudly towards Neville. "Winky's also the only authority Harry ever listens to."

Harry frowned at him. "Behave, youngling. And set the table for four. George will be here soon."

It appeared Harry had remembered to take the dessert at least. He took the box out and they sat down to a late dinner of roast beef with a turtle tart on the side.

Neville was helping himself to a slice of each when they heard the front door open. He looked up in alarm but seeing Harry's calm face, he assumed it must have been George. They listened to his quiet steps and then the squeaking of a door. Neville guessed he had gone to see Bill. They ate in silence until the door to the kitchen suddenly opened and a stranger walked in.

Neville dropped his cutlery and had his wand trained at him in an instant. The fork hit his plate with a loud *clank*.

The man raised his empty hands. "Polyjuice potion, Neville," he said calmly.

Neville glanced at Harry and Ted. Neither of them even looked up from their food. He let his wand slip back into its holster and grumbled, "This is getting old."

George shrugged the stranger's shoulders and sat down to the last empty plate. He helped himself to a hefty portion of the meat. "Molnar's dead?" he asked a minute later.

Harry nodded gravely. "Her interrogation started before I got to her."

"Oh," George breathed out. "She poisoned herself?"

"She bit the capsule right away. Didn't suffer much."

Neville winced. He met the witch only a few hours ago and technically, she was the one who sent them to the Library to get captured. However, she was under the Imperio when she did that. She seemed nice before then.

Harry continued. "I managed to get her husband out. He's a bit worse for wear but he'll live."

George took that in with a nod. "I pulled all their friends out of Budapest. No one else got taken. As for Prague - St. Vitus stays safe, as always. No one even approached the cathedral," he reported.

"Should I kill Zabini or do you want to have the honours?" George asked next.

Harry hesitated. "He hasn't been compromised yet."

"Yet. You know it's only a matter of hours. The investigation will reveal you wore his face tonight. I have enough mouths to feed, I don't need to care of useless prisoners, too."
"I know. Keep him alive for a few more days, I'll talk to him soon."

"You've tried to convert that arsehole before. I can't imagine he'll be more inclined to cooperate after months of imprisonment. He's more useful to you dead now."

"Few more days. I'll kill him then if need be."

Neville's eyes skipped between George and Harry, as the two of them discussed death and murder whilst munching on their beef, their appetite intact. He lost his, though. He pushed the unfinished plate away and leaned back in his chair. No one paid him any mind.

"What's Riddle doing?" George asked.

"Interrogating the survivors. He called the press over but he didn't release any statements yet."

George looked down at his wristwatch where planets floated across the dial. "The deadline for the morning print is in two hours. Is he trying to cover everything up?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "The whole of Budapest saw the fire. He has to give them a story. Otherwise, people would know something's amiss."

George scrunched up the stranger's face in thought. "Why's he hesitating?"

"I reckon he has a major decision to make. He can either spin it as an accident and we carry on as we did; or he'll out us to the public as the enemies of the empire."

George stopped eating and started drumming his fingers on the table in thought. Neville sat back, watching the two of them in silence, curious where this would lead.

"You could have gotten out of there without the big boom; Merlin knows you've faced worse odds and you've slipped away without anyone the wiser," George said slowly at last. "But you didn't this time. You wanted the whole city to see, you wanted it to be in the papers. Why?"

Harry smiled. "If Riddle blames it on us, he'll tell everyone what we are capable of. If he covers it up as an accident, we tell whomever we want."

George narrowed his eyes at Harry in understanding. "You want to start recruiting."

Harry nodded. "It's time we showed the public that there's another viable option out there than just following him."

"It's risky. If he decides to blame us, he can easily swing the public opinion against us. You did destroy a wizarding landmark. And probably killed a lot of someone's children."

"That I did," Harry conceded softly. "Forty-three, to be precise."

Harry's face was the picture of cool detachment when he said that.

His leg started bouncing again but he didn't light another joint.

"Hopefully, they will be the last ones," Teddy spoke up for the first time in a while. "You needed to show the stick for the carrot to work."

Harry shrugged in indifference. "Sure. We can hope for whatever we want. But that's not how wars usually go. Anyway, we don't have to worry about their parents. It was the foster half-bloods, again."
Harry turned to him before Neville had to ask for clarification. "Sadecki told you about those wizards and witches bred by the army; born from muggle mothers who were raped and killed after giving birth. That's why all the soldiers in the Library were so young and not that well trained. Riddle hopes I'll show mercy to them. Or, he just doesn't want to waste fullbloods, who knows. In either way, at least there are no parents that would take it personally. And as for the general public - if he decides to blame us, I'll call in some favours at the papers and try to mitigate the tone of the accusations."

"You would show the pull you have over the press. He'll most probably have everyone involved removed," George pointed out. "Is this really worth it?"

"Yes. We can't allow him to set the tone," Harry retorted firmly. "I'm not too worried for my contacts. They wouldn't do anything overt and they'd cover their tracks well enough," Harry waved that concern away. "No, if he truly decides to blame us, the journalists will be the least of our problems."

"Hm?"

"It would mean he finally feels threatened enough to move openly against me. It would mean he's recruiting, too - recruiting the public opinion to sponsor a war."

George stopped his drumming. "Oh," he breathed out. "Are you ready for that?"

Harry shrugged. "I hoped for a bit more time. But it was a risk I was willing to take."

"He'll know what you're doing," Teddy softly chimed in. "I mean - he'll recognise the change in your pattern, recognise that you upped the game tonight."

"Yes. And the way he'll spin it in the morning press will tell us how threatened he feels by it. If he decides to publicly admit his biggest failure and tell everyone that Harry Potter is alive, it means he's finally taking us seriously."

When no one seemed to see the obvious flaw in that logic, Neville decided to finally join in and point it out. "Why would he have to publish your name? What stops him from saying that it was just some group of muggle-loving terrorists? There would be no shame in publishing that; every regime has enemies. He certainly wasn't ashamed to launch the manhunt for Bill and me."

Harry grinned at him. "Of course he won't name me in the article." The grin kept growing, changing Harry's face into a rather manic show of teeth. He didn't add anything else.

George next to him rolled his eyes in exasperation and took pity on Neville. "Harry made sure that Riddle didn't kill his name completely, as he did with Dumbledore's and the others'. The name's powerful and still reverberates with wizards. If Riddle publishes tomorrow that some muggle lovers did this, it'll be a piece of piss to arrange that by the end of the week, the whole Empire knows that Harry Potter is alive and killing soldiers at large," George explained. "And Riddle knows it."

A knock on the door sounded in that moment, further punctuating George's line. It also made Neville, Ted and George jump in surprise.

Only Harry didn't look startled. "Come in, Vivia," he called softly. He got his limbs in order, quit the bouncing and finally sat up like a civilised person.

The door opened, revealing a wide-eyed witch standing in its frame. Neville realised she had probably been standing there for a while.
Harry confirmed it with his next words. "We are prepared to explain everything you've just heard. But can you tell us about Bill's condition first?"

She blinked once, then straightened up and stepped inside the room. "I've completed the procedure. We'll be monitoring him now, watching for any signs."

Neville shared a look with Ted. "Can you elaborate?" he asked. "What's wrong with him?"

"Oh. I thought you'd been given his diagnosis." She cleared her throat and started anew.

"He suffered severe bleeding into his brain followed with immediate swelling. It damaged his cortex irreversibly. And you see, the problem with the brain is that the potions can't simply restore the organ with the parts that are unique to each of us, without knowing the right formula. I mean… we can't just copy the cells that were unharmed without a... map off all the unique synapsis and circuits between them. These are responsible for his unique personality. Without knowing them, I can rebuild the organ and restart his basic functions and instincts, but you wouldn't get your friend back."

Neville was trying to wrap his head around this, he really was. But he was struggling and he wasn't the only one.

The witch saw she was losing them. She tried again. "Basically, our potions can't simply rebuild what houses his mind, his memories, his sense of self without the potions knowing his mind, his memories and his sense of self. But all of this was stored in the cortex that was destroyed. You see the problem now?"

Neville understood now. He swallowed dryly.

"However, a wizard's personality gets imprinted in our… magic, for lack of a better word, through our daily use of it. It exists independent of our brain. The best we can try to do is to... pousser- to prompt his magic to provide the formula to the potion."

"What results can we hope for?" Harry asked when she paused.

"If my spells work correctly, the potions can recreate his cortex together with his mind and even some of his memories."

"And if they don't?" Harry prompted.

"His magic won't respond. He'll stay the way he is now, unresponsive and able to perform only basic functions-"

Neville's heart clenched, remembering his parents in St Mungo. He closed his eyes, trying to push down the sudden panic rising in his chest. He couldn't bear the thought of Bill...

"-or his magic will react violently to my intrusion, and the backlash will kill him," the witch finished into a solemn silence.

"What are the chances?" Teddy asked, his face pale.

"Understand that this is all very experimental," she shook her head. "It's as far from scientific approach as healing can ever get - we are messing with the concept of what makes us magical, something that no wizard ever analyzed sufficiently. There are certainly no reliable statistics I could rely on here."
When that answer only earned her four unrelenting stares, she sighed. "Between the three options? Probably even. The spells work slowly. We'll be watching him constantly but I don't think we'll be able to see any reaction earlier than in an hour."

"Is there anything we can do in the meantime?" George spoke up, his voice carefully even.

She shook her head. "I've worked hard to create the right environment. Any interference would only disturb it."

"Thank you," Harry spoke up, his voice sincere. Neville quickly nodded in agreement.

Harry got up from the table and approached her. "There wasn't much time for manners before. Allow me to rectify that." He offered her his hand. "I'm Harry."

She gingerly took it. "Vivia Millefeuille. We met before, years ago, in-

"-in Hogwarts, during the Triwizard Tournament," he interrupted her. "I remember. You were quite upset when the Goblet of Fire didn't pick you as the Beauxbatons' champion." He didn't let go of her hand after they shook.

She looked shocked by this. "I'd never dreamed you'd…"

"I have a very good memory for faces."

She frowned now. "I cried like a silly girl that evening."

He smiled kindly at her. "You are ambitious. You must be, to get the position you hold now."

Neville looked at her properly, trying and failing to recognize any of her features. He was fourteen during the Triwizard Tournament and although his teenage self certainly paid a lot of shy attention to the new addition to Hogwarts, he admired a lot more other pretty faces since then. Millefeuille was still attractive, and Neville suspected that she could be even lovelier if she smiled.

Harry finally dropped her hand and turned to the rest of the room. "I believe you recognised Neville here. As for the other two gentlemen - I'd prefer not to say their names just yet. I hope you'll understand my reasons. I could give you fake names but I don't plan on lying to you tonight."

He gestured to the food on the table. "Would you join us for dinner?"

"I'm not hungry," she said slowly.

"Tea, then? Neville, would you mind?"

Neville looked at the kettle on the wood stove, considered making another brew the muggle way, and then conjured some instant hot tea inside the pot.

Harry sat back to the table and beckoned the healer to do so, too.

"What exactly did you get me into, Mr Potter?" she asked then. "Is my family in danger?"

"We're doing our best to prevent that," he assured her. "You've been seen leaving with Zabini by four different people. We've already altered their memories. The next step is to cover your absence. Can I ask for one of your hairs, for a Polyjuice potion? And your immediate schedule? I'll send someone to impersonate you for the next few hours. They'll watch for signs of surveillance. Once we've confirmed there's none, you'll be able to go back to your life."

She frowned at that plan, not answering his request right away. She glanced at the other faces
around the table. "What's going on here?"

Harry smiled gently at her. Neville watched, surprised and fully impressed, as Harry turned on his charm effortlessly, the uncaaring stoner persona he usually portrayed gone for the moment, giving way to a persuasive charisma. He made himself look slightly older tonight, leaving the misleading appearance of a teenager behind, too. His clothes didn't scream respect; quite the opposite, he looked like a muggle carpenter in that shirt. But the lack of care with which he wore it spoke volumes, too.

Neville remembered George's words from before. Harry was recruiting.

"You've probably guessed most of it already but let me sum up anyway: the Dark Lord didn't win completely. There are people who still oppose him. We work in hiding for the time being but we still have the power to help a lot of good people - like your nieces."

Her eyes opened impossibly wide at hearing that. "Comment as-tu..." she breathed out involuntarily before she paused. When she spoke up again, her voice turned ice cold. "You've done your research. How did you learn about my nieces?"

"From Madame Maxime."

"La Directrice? She's one of you?"

"Yes. We were the ones who created the false identities, Madame Maxime just communicated it all with your sister. She's a very public figure; she can't very well be seen forging blood certificates."

"Does she know? My sister, I mean."

"No. There was never any need to put her into more danger."

The witch shook her head ruefully. "We just wanted to give them a chance for a good life. They are both very talented girls, they didn't deserve to be shunned by society just because my sister fell in love with the wrong man."

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "We fully agree, they have a right to a good life, as much as the rest of us." He paused for a moment. "And they have a right to live it without fear of being discovered."

The volume of his voice dropped. "You know very well what the punishment for lying about your blood status is. They'd be both killed if anyone found out. Your sister would be punished, too, for falling in love with a muggle."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No," he said resolutely. "What good would that do? I'd only bring attention to Madame Maxime, and to my colleagues. You have nothing to fear from us: if your family was discovered, we'd be in danger, too."

He took a deep breath. "I'm saying that it's not right for your family to live with that fear looming over their heads every day. We are doing our best here to change that."

He waved at the rest of the people around the table. "I wanted you to know who it was that you helped today."

She heaved a sigh and then reached up with her hand. She pulled one of her hairs out and gave it to Harry. "I'd be doing the rounds just about now," she said calmly. "But it's not unusual to be late. I'd
finish my shift around six in the morning. None of my patients is an urgent case but I'd still prefer if you replaced me with someone who can recognise the difference between *mending* and *healing* charms."

Harry conjured a plastic bag and placed her hair inside. "I'll do my best."

"We are not finished talking," she warned him when he got to his feet.

"I wouldn't expect anything else." He nodded at the hair in his hand. "Let me get this sorted first."

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Bill lay in the exact same position as a few hours ago. Still unconscious and still not completely breathing on his own. His torso was covered with potion-soaked cloth and a shiny orb hovered over his mouth, pushing air and who knows what else into his mending lungs. There were no visible signs of healer's Millefeuille magic.

Neville watched as the orb compressed and expanded in even intervals. The predictability of the movement was mesmerizing, a stark contrast to the hectic night he was having.

The Italian healer was dozing off on an enlarged bench by the window. Millefeuille was still very much awake, her eyes on Bill's unresponsive form. Every now and then, she would glance up Neville. He'd noticed, and he knew she would speak up soon.

She took a deep breath. Here it goes.

"I saw your picture in the papers a couple of weeks ago. There were no names but I recognised both of you right away. There were quite a lot of stories about the Resistance published back in the day."

Neville knew. He remembered the campaign photographers chasing them around the camp, forcing them to pose.

"The article said that you infiltrated the Empire. Is that true? Have you been living outside of Europe all these years?"

He nodded imperceptibly.

"Oh." She paused for a short moment. "Is Fleur still with him?" she pointed at Bill.

He looked up at her with more interest. "Were you two friends at school?"

She snickered at that. "We were anything but." She sighed. "We were teenagers back then, and I'd like to think I've outgrown my jealousy. I'd like to know how she's doing."

Neville considered the consequences of letting her know and didn't find them dangerous. "They have three daughters now," he said. "Almost fully grown. The oldest is apprenticing in China now. They've done very well for themselves, what with Bill's curse-breaking in Egypt. They lead a very comfortable life."

She took that all in with one rather bewildered nod. "China, Egypt..." she repeated in astonishment, "it sounds almost unbelievable to me now, after all these years confined in the Empire. Don't get me wrong, life got so much better now that we are out in the open. But it's moments like these when you get reminded of the price we paid for it."

Neville stared at her, surprised to hear such a view on matters. She mistook his frown for
"I mean, we might be close to all the magical sights that matter, but we lost contact with other cultures, with the obscure and the exotic," she elaborated. "We have no one to learn from, to provide contrast to our standards. It's my belief that it'll leave us stunted, as a society, in some ways; and probably hinder magical development, too. It makes me wonder if this situation is even sustainable for too long."

She was on a roll now. "I was so excited when the Crossing opened. I thought we would be allowed to travel again, to communicate more with the outside world. I applied for a permit right away: and was denied as everyone else I know who asked. 'It hasn't been confirmed safe for wizards to travel beyond', was the only justification we were ever given. There's no authority you can appeal to. I tried four more times, once for every year the Crossing has been opened, and received the same letter back every time. They didn't even bother changing the automatic reply in those five years."

Neville contemplated what he could say to that. It was a problem he never considered. After all, he lived on the other side of the Curtain. Before he'd have to comment, the door opened and George walked in, still wearing the face of a stranger.

"Any change?" George immediately asked.

Millefeuille looked momentarily put off by the interruption, apparently not done with the previous discussion. She obliged him anyway, waving her wand at Bill.

Her spell brushed through his body with incredible softness, as not to disturb the healing magic at work. Neville had seen her cast it several times before, and it always only ruffled Bill's hair gently.

She shook her head when she read the results. "No response so far."

"It's been an hour," George pointed out. "What does it mean?"

She frowned. "It doesn't have to mean anything. The magic could simply take more time to respond. I'd wait for at least two more hours before we draw any conclusions."

No matter her words, Neville recognised it wasn't good. His heart sunk, and he reached to clasp Bill's hand.

"Wait a minute."

He paused and then grasped his wand instead. He aimed it at George's Polyjuiced form. "It's been more than an hour."

The wizard stared at the tip of his wand in confusion. "What?"

"You haven't changed back. Who are you?"

The wizard's alarm disappeared. He rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Calm down, Nev. I've taken several doses, we always do."

"That's not how Polyjuice works."

"It is if you take it in capsules."

Neville's wand didn't waver but he didn't start cursing, either. Instead, he beckoned the wizard to
"The capsules are each thick differently, calculated to dissolve in your stomach at different times. I've taken four: they'll be releasing a dose of the potion into my system every sixty minutes without anyone the wiser. We always do it these days: you don't need to do any suspicious potion drinking in front of the people you are trying to fool; and in case you're captured, your true identity won't show if they let you sit for an hour. Not to mention, you avoid the taste of the potion altogether, which I consider the biggest advantage by far."

George turned to Millefeuille. "I trust I don't need to say this is a very sensitive piece of information. It won't leave this room."

The healer was looking at him in fascination. "This is ingenious! The possibilities! These capsules, what are they made of?"

"Hold your horses, woman!" George glared at her. "That's a company secret. You can't share this with anyone, anyway. That includes your colleagues or the research facility-"

Neville zoned them out because in that moment, something started happening with Bill. Neville caught a movement with the corner of his eyes: there, Bill's right hand started twitching.

"Vivia," Neville called over their raised voices. When he had her attention, he pointed at Bill's hand. "What does that mean?"

She was by his side in an instant, wand already aimed. There was a glow to Bill's fingers now, their skin seemed to shimmer.

She cast her gentle scanning spell again. This time, it connected with a bang, energy frizzling in the air above Bill's body and sending a backlash at the healer. She stumbled back a few steps.

"Well, his magic is reacting now," she surmised. "And it doesn't like my intrusion."

"Do you mean…"

She looked at Neville with sad eyes. "It means it's fighting against the suggestions I've made to it. It won't heal Bill."

The door opened with a blast right after she said that. Harry stormed into the room, Ted right on his heels. He rounded on Millefeuille. "What else is here to do?"

She shook her head, looking at her feet.

Harry dismissed her, strode to the table in the middle of the room and reached for Bill's hand.

"Mr Potter," the witch halted him. "I really don't think any disturbance is a good idea right now."

"Can I make it any worse?"

He didn't wait for a reply. He clasped Bill's hand in between his two and closed his eyes in concentration. Neville watched his eyelids flutter but otherwise, he was completely still. And so stayed the rest of the room, even the Italian healer who woke up to the commotion a minute ago and now stared wide-eyed at the rest of them.

A minute passed without anyone moving. And then Harry's shoulders slumped down and his head fell. Neville saw his fingers go white as he clutched the edge of the table. He stayed like that for a
second before he looked up at Millefeuille. "Do your best to save him. I implore you."

He turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

"I already have," the healer whispered but Harry wasn't there to hear it anymore.

She approached Bill anyway, her wand blazing. Neville didn't know much about her field of magic but he recognised the dispelling movements of her wand well enough. He assumed she was cancelling her enchantments that were causing the air in the room to heat up and crackle with energy now.

The other healer rushed to help her. Neville moved out of their way and sat by the window. Teddy hurried out of the room after Harry but George stayed. He joined Neville on the bench now, sitting down stiffly.

They watched the two healers work in silence.

Three minutes later, Neville had to leave the suffocating room. George chose to stay but Neville walked out of there and into the kitchen.

Harry and Teddy were there, talking in hushed tones but still loud enough for Neville to hear.

"There must be something you can do," Teddy was just saying.

"I've tried calming his magic, tried talking to his mind. It didn't work; there was nothing I could reach."

Harry was standing with his back to them, leaning his hands against the wall on either side of a small window, staring into the blackness beyond. "I'm not a miracle worker, Teddy," he mumbled a moment later.

It took Teddy a long time to reply and when he did, his voice was small but determined. "I know exactly what you are, Harry. There must be something in your power to help him."

Harry looked up at that. He glanced at Neville standing in the doorway shortly and then dismissed him with a shrug. "Okay, Teddy. Tell me what you think I am."

Teddy gulped in the face of Harry's glare but he didn't relent. "I'm not completely blind, you know. I've read the Tale, and I've heard the stories. The Stone, the Wand, the Cloak. I connected the odds but I never approached you about it, because it never mattered. Don't worry, I've never actually done any research, never asked any questions. If you haven't noticed me snooping then no one else-"

"Teddy," Harry spoke up evenly, interrupting the budding rant. "What do you think I am?"

"Well, you managed to gather all the... Hallows, didn't you? If so, that would make you the- the Master of Death."

It was silent for a moment after Teddy's reverent proclamation. Then, Harry burst into laughter. It was an ugly laugh, bitter and cold.

Teddy looked stunned. "Are the stories lying?"

Harry was still snickering, a certain hint of desperation to it now. "Sorry. It's funny, listening to my
old naive hopes repeated by someone else." He rolled his eyes at Teddy's question. "The stories are... vague."

"Please, explain."

Harry once again glanced at Neville and then returned his eyes at Teddy's pleading face. He released a long breath. "What powers did you imagine a mastery over death would grant? What's death in that title? Is it the fleeting moment of someone's passing? Or the master's own death? Or is it some sort of mythical entity, as was the character in the fairytale?"

He didn't wait for Teddy to reply. "There's no such creature as Death; or if there is, I've never met it and I doubt it would take a human for a master, anyway. As for controlling someone's death: we all have power over that. Healers can postpone it, killers rush it. As for my own death... well, that's very much the last thing I've ever mastered. No, Teddy. Death is the state of being dead. That's what the Hallows grant power over: the mastership over the dead, over everything that opposes the living. Or at least that's my understanding of it."

"Isn't that just a... a technicality?"

Harry shrugged casually but his eyes were ablaze. "Sure. But take Bill lying in the next room. You're asking me to use my powers to save him. Well, there's very little I can do for him whilst he still breaths. But once he's dead, then sure, he's mine to command. Or at least what's left of him here."

Neville stumbled at hearing that, his knees threatening to give away. He clumsily sat down on the nearest chair.

Teddy finally seemed to have noticed him. "Are you alright, Nev?"

Neville looked up at that question. Alright? No, he supposed he wasn't alright. He watched Harry's face go ashen and knew the news had reached him. For Teddy's sake though, Neville still had to voice it.

"There was nothing the healers could do. Bill's gone."

Chapter End Notes

Next one's the finale (of the second arc). Coming out soon.

Share your thoughts with me. They're the fuel that keeps this story alive.
The Boys of the Prophecy

Chapter Notes

The last piece of this story arc. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

27 May 2019, Kriváň, former Slovakia

Evenings in the mountains were a tranquil affair. The sun was long gone behind the peaks and the forest around him seemed to have settled down for the night. There was still plenty of light left though, and the birds were singing loudly, almost obnoxiously so.

The pyre in front of him was dying out. It won't be long before it's all over.

It was down to one surviving flame now. Neville watched the blue fire spit for the last few times, each flicker weaker than the previous; and then it was no more. The embers were turning to ashes right in front of his eyes, the magic of the fire speeding up the process. It was Harry who had conjured it. Neville hadn't even known a spell existed for such an occasion. He was glad Harry knew better. The magical flames didn't let them see any of the gruesome details, making this more dignified. Yes, Neville was glad.

Cremation wasn't the wizarding tradition but Bill had left clear instructions. Neville always respected his friends' wishes no matter how strange they were. He wouldn't expect anything less from them in return.

The ashes rose from the stone bed where Bill's body had lain a moment ago. Neville surged ahead in a panic - he couldn't let the wind get hold of his friend. His wand and eyes lift up, only to notice Harry waving his own wand; he was conducting the ashes, ordering them to drift slowly into an open urn in his arms. Oh, alright.

He guessed that was it, then.

His eyes skimmed over the rest of the funeral party, his neck stiff from staring still for such a long time. George and Teddy stood next to Harry, the ghost of Fred floating behind their backs. Gregory and Annie stood by Neville's side. Their muggleborn guard remained respectfully aside, all seven of them watching from afar. And that was it. Both healers had gone back to their normal lives. Noone else got invited. There weren't many others who knew that Bill was inside the Empire and they'd decided to keep it that way.

Neville could feel Annie glancing at him through the corner of his eye. She and Gregory had arrived at the safe house in the early afternoon, weary after their long trek through the mountains. He knew they would want to talk soon, with the funeral being over now.

The moment the ashes had all disappeared in the urn, she spoke up. "What are we going to do now?"

She wasn't wasting any time. Neville looked at her expectant face, and then at Gregory who was eyeing him back with a slight frown.
"There's no point in carrying on to Britain without a curse breaker," Annie added softly when he didn't reply.

Neville glanced over the stone pedestal where Harry, George and Ted still stood in silence.

"Neville?" she urged in a whisper.

He finally turned to her fully. "We'll sleep here tonight. We'll make a decision tomorrow morning."

She frowned at that answer but nodded in acceptance.

He left them with that and walked around the pedestal to join Harry and the rest.

Harry placed the closed urn on the stone. "He told me he'd like to rest at the Shell Cottage," he muttered towards Neville. "He wanted his ashes to be spread there, that's it. Didn't want to turn the garden into a graveyard. This was the compromise he came up with."

Neville felt a cold shiver ran up his spine. "He told you that? Did you... did you speak with him just now?"

Harry shot him an exasperated look. "No. He told me so twenty years ago. Have his wishes changed?"

Neville quickly shook his head. "No. He gave me the same instructions."

"In that case, I'll take him there tomorrow."

Neville hesitated. That was supposed to be his task. He considered arguing the point but then thought better of it. It was safer for Harry to go. Neville knew he could trust him to do it. And Bill probably wouldn't mind.

Decision made, he nodded in gratitude.

"Someone should write Fleur, too," Harry said next. "I can make sure the letter gets delivered, but it shouldn't probably be me-"

"That's right," Neville mumbled, wincing. He looked at his hands awkwardly. "I'll do it."

"And are you..." Neville started a moment later, only to swallow the bulb in his throat and try again. "Are you going to? You know - speak to him?"

Harry raised his hand to stop him, glancing around the people standing nearby. "That's hardly a discussion for the here and now."

Before Neville could answer, George moved. He cast a privacy ward around the four of them, encompassing the ghost inside it, too. "Well, then." He stared at Harry expectantly. "Are you?"

Harry heaved a sigh and relented. "I wouldn't recommend it; not this soon. I've made that mistake in the past. It's... healthy to wait, to let the new situation sink in."

"What if I need to speak to him?" Neville asked with sudden urgency. "To ask for directions?"

Harry shook his head. "That's not how it works, Nev," he said gently. "The shade is not able to make any decisions for you."

"He can still give advice though, can't he?"
"It can't give you anything else than what's already in here," Harry poked Neville's chest. "And right now, your emotions are running high. You'd get a very skewed version of your friend like that."

"Your friend, too."

That came from Teddy. Neville glanced at the lad sharply. He was staring at the urn with empty eyes but he was obviously talking to Harry. His tone was full of accusation.

Harry *hmmed* indifferently. "I suspect Bill might have something to say against that assessment."

"But why?" Teddy pressed.

Harry didn't offer any reaction to that.

Neville realised he was probably the only one besides Harry who knew the answer to that question. He considered the wisdom of mentioning anything about Fleur and Victoire to Harry right now and reached the conclusion that there was most likely none.

They stood in silence for another tense moment. *To hell with it. What other time than now?*

"He was on his way to forgive you, you know," Neville whispered. "Actually, I think he already has. Forgiven you, that's it. He was just on his way to realise it."

Harry snickered. "Then, it's a real pity I got him killed before he got there, isn't it?"

"You know, Nev?" Teddy asked over Harry's mumblings. "You know what happened between these two? I've been trying to force it out of Harry for years."

"That's it, lad," George spoke up. He slunk one arm over Teddy's shoulders. "Let's get drunk together somewhere else and leave these two to talk."

Teddy looked at him with disbelieving eyes. "Bill was your brother! Aren't you at all interested?"

"I spent less than two days with Bill in that many decades. I'm not going to act like I was more important to him than either of these two," he said firmly. "They obviously have issues. And it seems like we can't move forward with anything unless they talk them through. So go on, talk," he commanded, glaring at Harry when he said that.

Harry only chuckled dryly in response, not affected by the glare at all.

George humphed in exasperation but didn't push Harry further. He walked away, dragging Teddy with him. The ghost followed, leaving Neville alone with Harry.

Neither of them said anything at first. Then the silence dragged into an awkward one.

As far as Neville was concerned, he said his piece. It wasn't his place to pry or preach to Harry about his personal life. There was very little he knew about it anyway.

He glanced at Harry through the corner of his eye; he stood staring at the stone pedestal he had conjured for the occasion, his face devoid of any emotion.

Neville took a deep breath. There were other topics that he postponed addressing throughout the day, given everything else that happened.

"So," he started softly. "*Master of Death*. Sounds awfully ominous."
Harry let out a long breath but otherwise stayed silent.

When he continued to ignore the prompt for another long minute, Neville decided to let him brood in silence for now and have this conversation later. He made to leave.

That was when Harry finally decided to speak up. Neville heard him mutter something unintelligible before he raised his voice and called after him. "Would you like to come over for a cuppa?"

Neville turned back, one eyebrow arched.

Harry glanced at the singed pedestal grimly. "Or maybe something stronger?" He offered his hand.
"It'll be a bit of a bumpy ride, though."

Neville eyed the hand for a moment before he lifted his eyes to stare at Harry's frown. And then he grasped it, blindly trusting Harry to apparate him once again.

Harry wasn't exaggerating. The side-along took a long time and felt even more suffocating than your usual apparition. Neville could sense them halting a few times, as if the rubber tube they were being forced through was blocked at several places. Neville recognised the pauses; they were going through powerful wards, Harry navigating them through one at a time.

When Neville finally opened his eyes, he immediately decided the journey was worth it. Harry seemed to have apparated them up in the sky.

That was his first impression. A moment later, he noticed that he was standing on a tile floor. Other than that, the world around him consisted of twilight clouds; and not that far below them, peaks of mountains. The setting sun was still very much visible in this new place, bathing the view in a warm light.

He blinked the haze away and looked around properly. They appeared to be standing on the top floor of a house, built on top of a mountain. There were no walls to hinder the magnificent views, not even a roof; just four columns in the corners of the floor. There were wards in place, though: they stood out in the open and yet, they weren't exposed to the elements. Neville couldn't feel the wind that must have been biting this high up, nor the coldness of the thin air. Strangely enough, he could feel the warmth where the tired sun touched his skin.

He shuffled to the edge of the floor and leaned over, only to straighten up instantly and stumble back. The ground below was awfully far. The house must have been built over the rim of the mountain; nothing but air stretched for what seemed like a whole kilometre between Neville's feet and the water surface below the mountain range.

Neville heard Harry chuckle behind him. "The wards won't let you fall. Well, not unless you want to."

Neville spotted a broomstick braced against the closest column, and hmmed without any appreciation in response. He stepped closer to the column. Gripping the stone tightly with one hand, he looked over the edge one more time.

"What lake is it?" he asked, looking at the vast stretches of water that disappeared behind the curve of the mountains tens of kilometres away.

"It's the sea, actually. A fjord. We're in Norway."
Neville turned around to look at his host. He took the rest of the room in, too. Or was it a terrace? No, it was a bedroom: there was a king-sized bed in the middle. Harry was standing next to it, switching his wand. Neville's eyes followed the effects of his charms: the cover on the bed wriggled, tucking itself in, leaving a pristinely made bed where a mess of sheets had been a minute ago. The books and newspaper issues scattered around the bed now stock up on each other orderly, landing on the bedside table in one precariously high tower. Parchments and parchments with notes scribbled on them folded themselves into a notepad, landing on top of the tower of books. Piles of clothes swished down the staircase on one side of the room. The few dirty dishes disappeared the same way, to whatever space lay below them.

Neville took that all in and made an easy assumption. This was Harry's home.

It wasn't an office, nor another safe house. It wasn't a place with facilities to entertain guests or allies, either. This was Harry's personal space. Apparently, not even his house-elf had permission to enter.

The invitation was as surprising as the place itself, and the significance of the gesture didn't pass by Neville unnoticed.

"Right," Harry spoke up when the frantic movement of the clatter around him ceased. "I'm going to have a look at what's in the kitchen. Make yourself at home."

He gestured at the back of a solitary wing chair by the edge of the floor and quickly descended the stairs, moving out of Neville's view. Neville decided not to point out Harry could have summoned anything from where he stood.

He didn't sit down right away. With Harry giving him the perfect opportunity, he went snooping. His eye immediately caught a detail he had missed before - the side of the column facing inwards was covered with pictures. There were dozens of photographs pinned to the stone along its entire height, with some newspaper cut-offs scattered in between them. He glanced at the other three columns and sure enough, they too were covered by photo clippings from top to bottom.

The newspaper cut-offs were portraits mostly; Neville recognised some faces right away, like Kingsley Shacklebolt or Madam Bones; some were only vaguely familiar, or not at all. His attention was quickly stolen by the photographs, though. They were taken at Hogwarts, and showed Neville's old classmates. Most pictures depicted the Gryffindor common room and its inhabitants, but there was the occasional shot from the Great Hall or the Quidditch stadium. He leaned closer to look at the half-forgotten faces: Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson, Ernie McMillan, Oliver Wood.

He glanced over his shoulder when he heard clinking noises. Harry was coming back with a bottle and two glasses in hand.

"This is Colin Creevey's old collection," Neville noted with certainty, astonishment creeping into his voice.

Harry nodded. "I had Denis gave it to me before the Bombing; that's why it survived."

Neville shook his head in fond remembrance. "Oh, how he used to bug me with that camera."

"Oh, trust me; it wasn't only you. Now, of course, I could kiss that boy for leaving all of this behind."

Neville raised his eyebrows in a question, but didn't voice it. There was no need to push Harry for
answers. Harry invited him here, which meant he was willing to talk. Neville was going to try to let him do it at his own pace.

Neville took the seat, while Harry conjured an identical armchair next to his. He placed the bottle on a small table between them. Neville eyed the golden liquid with a suddenly dry throat.

Harry poured them a finger each. "To Bill?"

Neville raised his own glass and repeated the toast. He closed his eyes and added in a whisper, "May he rest in peace."

The sun was setting down behind their backs, reflecting from the patches of snow that covered the landscape in front of them. They sipped their drinks in silence, looking at the unforgiving slopes below.

"He is in peace," Harry spoke up softly.

Neville looked up at the certainty in Harry's voice.

"There aren't many things in life I'm sure of, but this is one of them," Harry added a moment later. "Wherever he went, nothing can touch him there now."

Neville frowned in confusion. "But your ability-

Harry nodded sharply. "My ability is the reason why I'm sure of it. Even I can't touch the spirits that have moved on, and I'm pretty sure the Hallows got further to achieving that feat than any other magics. It's somewhat comforting - to know that we'll get a true break in the end."

Neville tried to let Harry's absolute certainty wash over him. It only provoked his natural tendency to argue. "He could be in peace from this world but he might still be suffering. Or he might turn to nothing. You've just said it: you have no idea what happens after death."

Harry shrugged. "I chose to believe that nature is not cruel. The other option would lead to fear. And I refuse to be afraid of death."

They fell silent again, Harry's last resolute statement hanging in the air between them.

"So what are these 'shades', if not the spirits called from the dead?" Neville asked when Harry let the silence drag for too long, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Harry fished a rolled joint from somewhere in his pockets. Neville watched as the smoke got whipped away almost immediately after exhaling by the non-existent wind, leaving only clean air in front of Harry's face. He shortly marvelled at the personalisation of the wards around this place; Harry must have put a lot of thought and effort behind them.

"Do you know Beedle the Bard?" Harry finally spoke up in between his sixth and seventh puff. "And his book of tales?"

Neville frowned at the non-sequitur but obliged him, anyway. "My grandmother used to read them to me as a child, yes." Only then he remembered Teddy mentioning a Tale last night. He wrecked his brain to recall a story that would contain three Hallows.

"He wrote a tale of three brothers, receiving gifts from a character called Death."

Oh. That did sound familiar. "Can you remind me?"
"Three brothers wanted to cross a river, and they escaped its dangers with magic. Death got crossed about it but as it was a cunning creature, it decided to give them three gifts. Gifts that were meant to backfire."

"The Hallows," Neville checked.

Harry nodded. "I believe the tale is an allegory. Beedle probably heard the old wizarding legend of the Deathly Hallows and made their creation into a story. There's very little written about the Peverell brothers beside Beedle's account of events, so his tale became the main source of information. A children's story. Makes their creations even more fantastical, wouldn't you think?"

"Peverells?" Neville repeated, trying to remember if he had heard the name before. He didn't come up with anything.

"Powerful wizards and sorcerers, as far as I can tell," Harry supplied. "They must have kept to themselves, though; and probably destroyed all their research notes before the last of them died because I couldn't find anything. And trust me - I looked everywhere. Anyway, their three greatest creations survived them."

Neville frowned in concentration, remembering the Tale. "The wand, the stone and the cloak," he listed with some difficulties.

Harry's face remained impassive, staring at the fiery landscape below them. "I inherited the Cloak of Invisibility from my father. Apparently, the Potters are descendants of the youngest brother and the Cloak has been a part of the family heirloom throughout all these centuries. Dumbledore… found the Stone and gave it to me in his will. He also had the Elder Wand, since his victory over Grindelwald in 1945. He lost its mastership to Draco Malfoy of all people, seconds before he died. I overpowered Draco in 1998 and the Wand recognised me as its rightful owner. It took me a long time to actually get my hands on it, but yeah, since then, I haven't been defeated in a fight. I had to surrender on several occasions, sure, but I've been careful to do so on my own volition: the Wand has not deemed it necessary to change masters. For more than twenty years now, I've had the mastership of all three Peverells' Hallows."

Harry's voice stayed devoid of any emotion throughout his whole account, but the last statement rang through the room without walls with powerful significance, nonetheless.

Neville remembered what Teddy said last night. "And that makes you the Master of Death." He pronounced the title tentatively, doubtful of the pretentious sound it made. No matter his common sense though, the name still echoed through his mind like a wisp of a long-forgotten fear.

"So the legend says," Harry casually gestured with his joint, the fiery point leaving red marks in its wake. The lines stayed hovering in the air, forming a triangle cut in half. Harry paused then and put the cigarette back to his lips. He exhaled a perfect ring of smoke. This time, the smoke didn't get whisked away by the wards, but joined the symbol already floating in the air; completing an image Neville safely recognised.

A cold feeling settled at the bottom of his stomach, seeing the symbol here. "That's Luna's necklace."

Harry nodded. "It used to belong to her father. Xeno was a strong believer in the Hallows; he was the first to explain the legend to me all those years ago."

"Does Luna know?"
For the first time since the start of the conversation, Harry's careful mask slipped away. He looked genuinely unsure. "I really don't know. We've never spoken about it but she makes me wonder sometimes. You know how she leads a conversation with creatures and things that were never meant to converse? Well, sometimes, she says something that sounds like it was meant for me."

Rather than being enraged by Harry's clear confession that he spied on his wife, Neville nodded slowly in acceptance, filing his confirmed suspicions for later on in the conversation.

"So, you've gathered all the Hallows," he gestured at the symbol floating ominously in front of them, prompting Harry to get on with his story.

"Yes. Back then, I believed in the legends, desperate for a way to get the Wand from Riddle; to have the promised powers of the Hallows at my disposal."

Neville was remembering those times, too. Something clicked. "You snuck into Hogwarts for the wand in 2002, right? That was the unauthorised mission that got you kicked out of the Resistance."

"I didn't even care back then. I had the three Hallows with me, I thought it was all over."

"You thought the Hallows would help you kill Riddle?" Neville guessed when Harry had fallen silent again.

"...Yes. I hoped they would be strong enough to overcome his magic."

Harry was taking his time telling the story, his long pauses making Neville fidget irritably in his seat. "But they weren't?" he prompted again.

"They are strong aplenty but they're just not the right tool for this particular problem of mine."

He paused again. Neville might have huffed out loud.

Harry glanced at him. The corner of his lips twitched slightly. "I'm not very good at this, am I? Well, for my defence, I'm very much out of practice."

"Out of practice of sharing?" Neville supplied dryly. "Yes, I'd say so."

"Well, it's been my default for quite a while, to guard everything closely. If you remember, I was still quite adamantly against telling you any of this only yesterday."

It was painfully clear to see what had changed since yesterday. "Bill?" Neville asked softly.

Harry nodded sagely. "Bill."

He refilled their glasses.

"I try to learn from my mistakes. It's rather clear Bill wouldn't have tried to protect me if he had known it was perfectly safe for me to walk out of that office alone. But because I treated your lot the same way I treat everyone else I work with, Bill's dead. I didn't account for how much he still cared."

He shot his drink down and Neville followed suit. The conversation turned difficult with all this fresh pain.

"We've never been that close, have we? And still, I suspect you'd have done the same thing Bill did. Just because it would have been the right thing to do. I wonder why's that, actually," Harry's voice turned distant, his mind obviously having wandered off. "We've got plenty of things in
common, we could have been great friends quite easily."

Neville's eyebrows rose at the strange statement. "Do we?"

"Oh yes, there's the-" Harry stopped himself. "I mean," he started anew, "look at our lives: we were born almost on the same day, spent most of our time in Hogwarts together, and then five more years in the same barracks. Afterwards, you got dragged into doing the right thing at work and everyone hated you for it. And I- I got dumped with a task that forces me to do things people hate, too."

"What I'm saying is that I've always considered you my friend but I don't think we've had a one-on-one conversation like this since our fifth year, when you told me about your parents."

Neville shrugged. "You've been surrounded with your friends, and I had mine. That's all."

"Hmm," Harry replied. "Never mind. As I was saying, I still suspect you would have done the same thing Bill did if you had been in his shoes; simply because it would have been the right thing to do. That's another thing we have in common. I also try to do the right thing. What was it that the old man used to say?" Harry raised his voice and turned to look over his shoulder. "'To do what's right, not what's easy'?"

Neville started to wonder if Harry was getting drunk, or finally stoned. His concentration was slipping and Neville was getting worried he wouldn't learn anything lucid from Harry tonight. He probably needed to stick to yes or no questions from now on.

Harry was talking again, having gone back to staring at the clouds in front of them. "I remember now what a man you grew up into. I realise that more effective than hundreds of promises of loyalty, it'd be better to convince you that following my orders is simply the right thing to do."

"The problem is, you remember me from before, from when we were kids. And I do, too. I've let my guard slip around your lot and you found what you saw lacking. No matter how hard I'll try to assert some respect back, you won't respond to shows of authority."

Neville's mind flashed back to last night, to the persona Harry had changed into when he talked with the French healer. Was Neville being recruited now?

"It seems that the only way for me to gain your respect back, is to let my guard even further down and show you the rest. That's what I'm trying to do here. But you have to understand this is highly unusual for me. It seems my natural defense mechanism is to evade and stay off-topic. I'm still willing to give you special treatment. But-" Harry's voice turned stronger and Neville found him staring straight into his eyes, Harry's hard as steel, "in return, you'll sit tight, listen patiently and do your best to weave the important stuff from the bullshit I'll apparently be spitting at you. Are we clear?"

Neville blinked at the scolding. Harry was still there, glaring at him until Neville nodded.

He refrained from his previous observations. Harry was lucid, alright. Actually, Neville didn't remember seeing him more focused than this. He also seemed genuinely annoyed. Probably as much with himself as with Neville, according to his little rant just then.

Neville leaned back in his chair and inwardly vowed to reign in his tendency to control the conversation.

Harry drew in a deep breath. And then slowly let it out. "Maybe it'd be better if I just showed you," he said, his voice calmer even if still irritated.
He reached his arm over the table between them. Neville looked at it dubiously. "Are we apparating somewhere?"

"No."

Neville clasped Harry's hand without further questions.

Only to let go off it almost immediately. There was something solid and cold in between their palms once again and it instantly brought him back to Popovic's office in the Slums. He turned Harry's palm upwards but he couldn't see anything.

"Was that the Stone? Where is it?"

Harry frowned at him in obvious annoyance. "I'm not going to let you see it. A clear image is more powerful than hundreds of words, and much harder to Occlud for it. I'm not risking the knowledge of the Hallows more than I need to and you're going to respect that."

Neville scowled back with disappointment but he understood the precaution and stowed away his curiosity. He still eyed Harry's hand with doubts though, and didn't make for it.

Harry must have recognised his hesitation. "It won't feel anything like during the wand registration. I just want you to see what I see."

Neville took the hand gingerly.

"Look around, Nev."

He did.

Seamus Finnigan was leaning casually against the nearest column, looking perfectly unharmed although he had been dead for the last twenty years. The barely grown up Colin Creevey was hovering in the air in front of them, lying on his back on the shaft of a broomstick. Dean Thomas was sitting on the floor, his legs hanging over the edge. Behind Neville's back, Ron Weasley was lounging on the bed, his limbs sprawled in all directions.

Neville heard himself gasp. His hand twitched to cover his mouth, but Harry didn't let go off him, grasping his palm firmly.

"You won't be able to see them if you let go."

Neville could only stare at the boys in answer, his heart pounding in his chest.

"This bunch is my usual guard. They always have my back," Harry kept talking. "Well, Ron has. I suppose Colin has my front and Seamus and Dean got the sides. They're the reason I'm aware of everything that's happening in some hundred metres radius. They're pure magic, their senses too, you see - so they're much more perceptive than what we could ever be."

Vaguely, Neville was aware of Harry looking at him, pausing for a reaction. He might have even offered a soft whimper but his mind was mostly blank, his eyes frantically jumping between his four dead friends.

Harry was speaking again. "When the going gets tough, I even let them control my body. You saw it in the Library when I was casting from two wands at once. It took me ages to learn and it still creeps me out most of the time. Feels too much like a split personality if you ask me."
"Can they speak?" Neville asked breathlessly, his voice rough.

Harry chuckled. "Oh, they speak. Sometimes even too much."

"We can also hear you, Harry," Ron's voice drifted from behind their backs.

"Were just giving you a minute, mate," Seamus said from his right.

"Didn't want to overwhelm you," Dean added from the left.

Neville's head was whipping from one side to the other, following their voices, the movement making him dizzy. A noise escaped his mouth, something that sounded embarrassingly close to a sob.

It woke him up from his daze.

"If you're not calling them back, what are they?" he asked softly.

"They're part of you, Nev," Harry said gently. "They've always been. The Stone just makes them exist outside of you for a moment."

Colin smiled and waved at him from his broom. Everyone else stayed blessedly silent.

"How?" he breathed out. "How is it possible?"

"Everyone you've loved, you've hated or felt strongly about in any other way leaves an impression on you. That impression molds you, your personality, even your soul; and such becomes a part of you. And once that happens, the imprint is independent of the fate of the person. It's yours."

Harry squeezed his palm tightly. "People say that our loved ones watch over us. Well, they stay with us for sure."

At the edge of Neville's vision, Dean was nodding enthusiastically.

"So-" Neville cleared his throat, "-it's not really them?"

"They're the memory you hold dear, Nev. For you, they're as close to the real thing as it could ever get."

"How can you be sure, though? How can you know the Stone is not pulling anything from them back here? Isn't it called the Resurrection Stone, after all?"

"There are many misconceptions surrounding the legends. I've had the Stone in my possession for more than twenty years. I've done my share of experiments." Harry paused for a moment. "Take the difference between the shades and a ghost. A ghost is a part of a soul that was left behind. It exists independently of anyone's memories; it can create its own ideas and store new memories."

"And the... shades can't? Can they think for themselves?"

"...To some degree, yes. They can make an observation, sometimes even reach a conclusion. That's why they're good guards, or spies: I don't have to judge everything they perceive, just their... well, reports, for the lack of a better word." He paused to take a breath. "But the important thing to remember is that the impulse, the decision to act, the opinions behind the observation: they always come from you."

Harry winced. "I've once called up Snape for a guard. Looking back, I realise I was fully expecting
him to make my life difficult. And sure enough, he failed to mention the black powder someone stacked into the cigarette. But that wasn't Snape's spirit bugging me from his grave, those were my own expectations of him. I've been using only the shades I fully trust for guards since then. And I roll all joints by myself."

"Bill heard you talking to Ron when we were on the road," Neville recalled. "We've all heard you mumbling. Is that... have you been talking to them the whole time? Have they been around us the whole time?"

"As I said, I always keep a guard around, although it's not always this bunch. I have a roster, of a sort, because... because that's the healthy thing to do." Harry paused and when he spoke up again, Neville would have sworn there was a tint of embarrassment in his voice. "I don't usually slip like that. But... being around you, around Bill, brought a lot of memories back. Made me agitated, and made the shades around me rather vocal with useful suggestions."

"We were only concerned, Harry," Colin quipped in.

Neville looked at the teen hovering in the air. He could still see the silhouette of the mountains faintly through his body; he wasn't entirely solid. But he was more substantial than a ghost, his skin and clothes having some resemblances of colours. He seemed somewhat younger than the Colin who had fought and fallen next to him in the Battle of Hogwarts. "If he's indeed a part of me, how can you make him spy on me?"

"Because I'm the Master of Death."

Neville frowned at Harry whilst his eyes stayed glued to the apparition, not quite willing to look away from his long dead friend.

Luckily, Harry for once deigned to continue without being prompted. "The shades are created from strong emotions. Love, hate, pain - but especially love. These are some of the most powerful forces in the world. The Peverrels managed to tap into that power with their Hallows. When I've gathered all three of them, it further enhanced their abilities. There's also the fact that I've always had a knack for this type of magic. There's this room in the Department of Mysteries back in Britain-"

Harry paused. "But that's a story for another time. Back to your question: the Stone works differently for me than for your average wizard. It creates the shade as a magical entity that's mine to command. A concept of the deceased person, if you'd like, which consists of all the impressions that person left on this world: on people, on paper, on whichever medium you can think of."

Neville frowned in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Take Dumbledore, for example. He's been loved and hated by many people. His shade allows me to perceive what's happening around each and every one of them. If you want to get to the bottom of it, it's a combination of mind and soul magic, because the Stone invades both. And at the same time, Dumbledore's shade can recite his thesis on the twelve uses of dragon blood to me, although I assure you I have absolutely no personal recollection of it, as I've never read it."

Neville finally tore his eyes from the teenager and looked at Harry, incredulous. "You've been taking lessons from dead people, haven't you?"

"I bet you wished you had your camera now," Seamus smirked at Colin.

Colin sighed dramatically. "Your face right now is sure priceless, Nev."

Harry ignored the exchange between the dead people in the room. "I've drained some of our
professors from every little piece of knowledge they deigned to write down, yes. You'd be surprised how little it was. There's almost no focus on publishing in wizarding academia. Fortunately, all professors taught some really clever wizards in their times. Some of them are still alive and even remember their lessons. It was their recollections that my shades have been drawing knowledge from.

There was something off with Harry. He didn't even once glance at Neville throughout his explanation. Instead, he was staring ahead at Colin with almost the same fascination Neville guessed was adorning his own face.

"What is it?" he gently prodded.

Harry sighed tiredly and gestured at the shades surrounding them. "I don't normally see them looking this bright. That's all you, touching the Stone."

"How do you normally see them?"

Harry didn't answer right away, and when he did, Neville had to lean in closer to understand him. He heard rustling of the sheets behind their backs - Ron was leaning in, too. "Your impression of someone is never permanent. Newer memories overwrite the old ones, powerful emotions make you forget the little moments. For the past twenty years, I've been seeing my friends as shades almost every day. I barely remember them from when they were alive."

"Oh."

"They fade away for me, their shape becoming blurry, their speech repetitive, the bodies more transparent. Or flat."

Seamus jerked his head upwards, drawing Neville's attention to the column the teen was leaning on. Realisation hit him. "That's why you have the photos here."

Harry nodded.

Neville almost wanted to ask Harry to let him see. He ignored his morbid curiosity. "I'm sorry," he offered softly instead.

Harry shrugged. "We all have a price to pay for our choices. It happens slower to me that it would to others. As I said, I have a roster in place, changing this bunch for someone else every couple of weeks. I'm doing fine."

Harry's sad eyes were telling a different story but Neville let it be.

"What of the other Hallows?" he asked next, moving on. "Did they become more powerful, too?"

His palm was getting sweaty in Harry's, but he didn't let go.

"The Cloak did. It's the definition of undetectable now. I barely have to hide with it anymore but I store things in it all the time."

Neville chuckled softly at the sacrilegious use of the priceless artifact. However, it would explain how Harry never seemed to carry anything on his person but always readily provided everything that was needed. He probably had the Cloak with him even throughout their road trip. It would explain his unwavering confidence if he had his wand within reach the whole time. Selfish git.

"The Wand... well, it was already more powerful than any other so there wouldn't be much point
in exaggerating it. It seems more loyal, though. I suspect I would have lost mastership over it on several occasions if it hadn't thought me more worthy for having the Stone and the Cloak, too. I'm mighty glad for that; the Wand proved invaluable when it fools the Registry and all the other Army scans."

They sat in silence for a bit, lost in their own thoughts. Colin made a lazy somersault in the air.

The sun didn't seem to have moved much, although it was getting really late. Harry's house must have stood quite far up north, then. It made Neville think of his own home in Finland - it'd be still light there too, even if it was fast approaching midnight.

A sudden sharp bout of homesickness made him cringe. An idea entered his mind and he saw Colin smile at him encouragingly, as if prompting him to voice it.

He turned to Harry. "Can you tell me how's Luna doing?"

Harry smiled gently and beckoned him to look back at Colin.

"She's positively glowing," the teen burst. "The little bump is only now starting to show but she's been talking to it nonstop for weeks."

"Pregnancy really suits her," Dean confirmed from Neville's left.

Neville closed his eyes, sagged lower into the chair, and let out a long, shuddering sigh. "Is she… are they safe?"

"She moved to a safe house the moment you were captured on the border. And so did the Weasleys," Neville heard Colin say in a reassuring tone. "They didn't stay long, though - the first thing next morning, Luna proclaimed the place too dreary for a pregnant lady. She dragged everyone to Hermione's right away."

"The company will do 'Mione only good," Ron commented from behind their backs.

Neville sighed again and let the last lingering worries be washed away with the warm air leaving his body. Hermione's dead zone was one of the best guarded places on Earth. His family was safe there.

He finally opened his eyes and addressed his dead friends directly for the first time. "Thank you."

They all smiled at him warmly.

"You'll be a great dad, Nev," Ron said. "No need to worry."

Neville wondered if the impulse to say that came from him or Harry. After all, they both had their hands on the Stone. He soaked it in, either way. He looked around at his friends one more time, the company taking him back to another tower in another lifetime.

He blinked the gathering moisture in his eyes away and printed their smiles into his memory.

Next, he was flexing his fingers in Harry's hand. "I'm ready."

Harry nodded and let go of his palm. The shades quickly faded away into nothingness, leaving the place suddenly bare. Neville noticed Harry wince but he quickly schooled his expression back to careful neutrality. The morbid curiosity to see what Harry saw was back but Neville once again stoved it away.
"You tired?" Harry asked.

Neville shook his head resolutely. "No. They were rather distracting. And I have more questions to ask."

Harry chuckled dryly. "I figured."

"I wouldn't mind something to eat, though," Neville added, realising he only digested two glasses of Firewhisky throughout the whole day and nothing else.

"That's a good point," Harry muttered, his tone turning rather sheepish. He reached into his breast pocket and took out an honest-to-god plastic lunch box. He opened it only to reveal four more lunch boxes that expanded the moment he took them out and placed them on the table between them. They each had a label on their lid: breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner.

Neville watched the whole proceeding with a raised eyebrow. "Really?" he asked when at last all boxes were open, attacking his senses with many different smells.

Harry shrugged unabashedly. "I keep forgetting to eat. This is one way to keep track."

Neville noted that all boxes were full, although it was already late evening. "Winky?" he asked.

"Winky," Harry confirmed and gestured for him to dig in.

Neville immediately reached for the meat pie. As the tantalizing smell promised, it was still warm, as if just taken out of the oven. For a moment, they ate in silence.

"Go ahead, then," Harry said then.

Given the fact Neville's mouth was full of meat by then, he assumed Harry wasn't talking about food anymore. He quickly swallowed his bite, pondering which question to ask first.

"Do you know who ordered the Betrayal Bombing?"

Neville watched as Harry stopped crunching on his toast momentarily. He got back to it a second later, only with much less vigour.

"No."

"You don't?"

"No, I don't. I looked everywhere, I tried everything and I still don't know for sure."

"You killed the muggle leaders, didn't you?" Neville asked with sudden certainty.

"I wish I had; I might have gotten some clear answers from their shades then. But no. I was lost deep in the Himalayas when the camps got bombed and it took several days for the news to reach me. By then, they had already gotten lynched and the tracks run almost completely cold."

"What does it mean?"

Harry swallowed the rest of his toast, sliding the box away from him. "There's still a chance I overlooked something and the muggles were influenced somehow. But all modesty aside - I'm usually quite good at digging up information. The fact I haven't found anything even after seventeen years of looking into Death Eaters' minds and following Tom even when he goes to take a piss, rather suggests there's nothing to find."
The sharp pang of disappointment that pierced through him surprised Neville to the bone. For seventeen years he lived with the certainty of the muggles' guilt but apparently, several days of doubts were enough to spark an inordinate amount of hope.

He closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. What was it that Harry had said in the caravan? *Muggles have suffered enough no matter what one of them decided years ago.*

He opened his eyes and looked at Harry levelly. "Boxers or briefs?"

Harry frowned at him in confusion before he registered the meaning of his question. He smiled next, something akin to pride flashing in his eyes, in what felt like the first completely unguarded show of emotion he addressed to Neville since they met at Hermione's months ago.

It was gone an instant later. Harry proceeded to dramatically scrounge up his features into those of long-suffering. "Neither, Neville. Neither."

"Why this farce, Harry?" Neville asked calmly several minutes later, when Harry cleaned the empty dishes away and reached for the bottle of Firewhisky again. "Why are you pretending you didn't know about our mission?"

Harry didn't pause and continued to pour, showing no overt reaction to Neville's accusation. "What finally gave me away?" he asked a moment later.

Neville let out a long breath, relieved that Harry wasn't going to deny.

He shrugged. Harry's casual reply kept him calm, too. "It's been slowly sinking in, the fact that you couldn't have been ignorant of our plans; not with your ability to spy on us. But I only realised it last night when George tipped me off."

He watched Harry's eyes going distant and he assumed he was looking back at Neville's past interactions with George. In the spirit of the honesty Harry was offering, Neville decided to spare him the effort. "He mentioned the capsules with Polyjuice potions. He made it sound like it was his invention but I've heard of them before, on the other side of the Curtain - the Resistance gave us the same capsules with an antidote to the Draught of the Living Dead, so we could cross the Curtain unnoticed and wake up on our own thirteen hours later."

"Hmm. That was sloppy of George. But I guess I can't blame him for not knowing any better. He doesn't know much about my dealings across the Curtain, after all."

Neville took that in with a nod. "I still had some doubts, not knowing if you can spy on people through the Curtain. But you've just cleared them all away when you told me you'd been watching Luna. I figured you probably hadn't been spying only on her."

Harry smiled cheekily. "I check on you all once in a while, yes."

"Why, then?" Neville urged. "Why did you pretend you didn't know about our plans?"

Harry stared at him knowingly, his lips sealed. It wasn't in a rejection, though, quite on the contrary - he looked almost encouraging.

So Neville ran his last sentence through his head again. A thought occurred to him then. The moment it was out there, he immediately knew it was right.
"It was your idea," he said with absolute certainty. "This whole mission, it was your plan all along."

Harry grinned at him. He raised his glass in a mocking toast. "Fifty points to Gryffindor!"

Neville was left staring, completely speechless for a moment.

"Why, then?" he barely managed to choke out. "Why this sham?"

Harry exed his whole glass and poured himself another. Neville's lay forgotten.

"I'm not the only one who's been keeping tabs on his enemies," Harry said bitterly. "I might know that Tom walks around commando but you can bet Tom gets reported the colour of your precious leader's morning piss."

"Are you saying Riddle has spies in the Resistance?"

"Why so shocked, Neville? How else would he know to catch you at the Crossing?"

Neville's eyes narrowed. "You had known we were going to get captured."

Harry nodded readily. "I wouldn't have been able to pull that rescue mission otherwise. It took me weeks to mold the dead zone."

"You let us walk into a trap," Neville hissed.

He jumped from his seat to confront Harry straight on, his palms clenched firmly. "Why?" he spat out, squinting at Harry's silhouette against the red sun.

Harry sighed calmly in the face of Neville's seething anger. "I did my best to keep the mission secret from Riddle but he got a whiff of it anyway. Not the detailed plans, nothing about Annie and thank Merlin nothing about my involvement. I had two options: either I'd let you carry on with the plan and let him capture you fully under my supervision; or I'd change the plans and make him aware I'm watching him and control you. As the latter would have been a complete disaster, I obviously chose the former."

Harry paused to take a sip. "I smuggled some people across the Curtain so you'd learn I'm alive. I let you approach me on your own, I let you walk into that trap at the Crossing, making sure you wouldn't be killed when it inevitably sprang. I got you out with a plan that seemed to rely on pure luck. I took you to hide in the wastelands, vulnerable without magic but in a place Riddle thought me wallowing in self-pity. All of this to assure him this plan was bonkers from the start like the rest of them and it survived this long on chance and good luck only - because that's what he needs to keep thinking my modus operandi is!"

As Harry's voice rose, Neville's own anger abated. This was too important. He lifted his arm, palm up, to stop Harry right there. "Let's back up," he said coldly. "Who talked?"

"About the mission?"

Neville's eyes closed in horror at the thought of what Harry was implying. "There were more traitors?"

"Of course there are. Tom understands the need to always cross check his reports."

"You knew about them and you let them spy on us?"
"Yes," Harry confessed unapologetically. "Sometimes, I fed them the reports myself."

Neville felt like cursing if he had to repeat that word again, but Harry gave him no choice. "Why?"

"Don't play stupid, Nev," Harry snapped in annoyance. "That's the only way to control the flow of information. Trying to stop it completely would only attract attention."

Neville let out a long sigh. "Then who?"

"I'm not going to give you the names of the mules. You'd only treat them differently and they'd be rendered useless."

Neville might have growled. Harry rolled his eyes at him, unaffected. "The guy who slipped my attention was Doge," he finally disclosed. "He got Confunded somehow. I first thought he was acting up because of his bad health. By the time I removed him from the headquarters, he had already displaced several memos."

Elphias Doge. He had the highest clearance for a clerk in the Resistance, working alongside Arthur Weasley. Neville remembered arriving at the headquarters a month or so before the mission, and learning Elphias was on sick leave. Was that what Harry meant by removing him? The more important question was, who got him with the Confundus? It had to be another spy stationed outside the Curtain. How many of them lived in Finland?

And why had Neville naively thought that all people there would be unquestionably loyal to the Resistance?

"Who else knows you're behind this plan?"

"No one."

Neville's eyes bulged open. "Not even Jensen? Did you Obliviate him?" Jensen organised this whole thing, there's no way he would have missed Harry's involvement otherwise.

Harry scoffed at that question. "Obliviation's messy, and detectable. No, I merely suggested the plan to him several months ago, anonymously."

"Mind-fucking anyone isn't much better than wiping their memory."

"Prejudice doesn't suit you, Nev," Harry snapped at him, annoyance breaking through his nonchalant mask. "The fact I'm a Leglimens doesn't mean I invade minds every time I want to propose an idea."

"Then how?"

"I merely arranged a meeting with your boss, dressed as an over-achieving clerk to some muggle politician. I pointed out the provisions in the Peace treaty that would bound the ICW to intervene on behalf of muggles and asked him if he had a way to bring down the Curtain. He laughed into my face. A week later, I made him stumble upon a UN budget meeting for their weapon programmes. It took him less than a month to infiltrate their facilities with muggleborns. I'm sure he now knows more about their weaponry than they do. And voilá, the plan was born. He required very little steering from me after that."

"What other 'steering' did you do?"

"Like I said, almost none. He'd been considering what to do with Annie for years. I knew he'd plan
the mission soon after she'd reach majority. Gregory would be the logical option for her guard: they practically grew up together. And of course, he needed his best curse-breaker to bring down the Curtain. Naturally, Bill wanted to have you by his side. I barely had to intervene to form this team."

"You wanted us specifically," Neville summed up. "Why? Because you can spy on us?"

"That was one reason, yes," Harry confirmed, obviously unconcerned about the accusation in Neville's tone. "We share a lot of dead friends. Apart from Annie, I can watch over all of you easily. That was crucial if this was to work."

"What were the other reasons?"

"We have history. Tom wouldn't find it suspicious when I stepped out of my self imposed exile to save your lot."

Neville felt his temper rising again. He couldn't help but attack. "Because he would find it odd if you helped a stranger?"

"Yes. After all, I didn't help anyone who came before you."

Neville gaped at that answer. "What?"

"The Crossing's been open for five years. You didn't really think you were the first ones the Resistance sent over?"

Neville returned to his armchair, crashing down onto the seat. He reached for his half-forgotten glass and downed it at once.

"They were other missions?" he asked when he was ready. Frankly, it wasn't that shocking. He didn't have high enough clearance in the Resistance to know about all their plans. The more unsettling thought was the fact that he didn't hear anything afterwards. It meant the missions had failed.

"Intel gathering mostly," Harry supplied. "They've never actually managed to send back any messages, though."

"Who was it?"

Harry shrugged. "No one you knew well. They hid among the wizards who accepted the Empire's invitation to return."

Neville recalled the letter that had arrived at their house in Finland a month after the Crossing had opened. He could still recite the official pardon word for word, and the invitation to come home, too. He also remembered the contempt he felt towards the wizards who had accepted it.

He felt shame now, for the words he had said to some of them.

Wait a sec- "Gregory's grandparents," he said with sudden urgency. "They left for the Empire. Was one of them a spy?"

Harry nodded.

"Does Gregory know?"

"Does he know that his Gran and Grandpa weren't deserters? Yes, he has always known. They
were allowed to tell their families."

"What happened to them?" Neville breathed out in fear of the answer.

"They got converted."

That gave him pause. "Riddle didn't kill them?"

"He couldn't; the magic of the pardon prevented him to hurt them for their previous crimes. And
since they never got a chance to send any information across the Curtain, they didn't commit any
new ones. So, he let them live. Under close scrutiny but he let them live."

Neville's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Even through the information overload, he was starting to
recognise a pattern between what Harry wasn't saying and the way he operated. And maybe, just
maybe, he was starting to recognise some pieces of the Harry Potter he used to know. "Were you
the reason they never got a chance to send any information across?"

Harry tilted his head at him, surprise clearly written over his features. Bingo.

"Impressive guess, Nev." Harry let out a tired sigh. "The Resistance was clever enough to send
purebloods. Tom's been hesitant to waste pure magical blood lately. I knew they'd be discovered
but there was a good chance he'd spare them if they didn't make him angry."

"So you saved their lives by thwarting their mission. Did you tell Gregory that his grandparents are
alive?"

Harry nodded.

Finally, some show of sympathy. "What was his reaction? Is he going to run after them?"

"I highly doubt so. Gregory's sense of duty is as exemplary as your every other child soldier's."

Neville grimaced at that figure of speech but he couldn't exactly disagree with Harry's observation.

"So, to sum, you've been feeding Riddle's spies information from the Resistance but you stopped
any information going the other way. You can travel through the Crossing to do grocery shopping
for Hermione, but you've never bothered to stop by Finland to share any intel with us."

"Riddle would find out I cooperate with you, and to what purpose?" Harry argued calmly. "The
Resistance couldn't do much with the information even if your spies risked their lives to send it
over."

Neville didn't say anything to that. He reached over with his empty glass, in need of some liquid to
wash away the bitter taste in his mouth.

By the time Harry refilled it, he had forgotten about the drink once again, his mind occupied with
another question. "Why didn't you tell us your plans after we crossed the Curtain? We talked for
hours in the caravan, far away from anyone listening, but you carried on pretending you weren't
part of this plan."

The last few weeks were coming back to Neville, painted in a different light. Harry's questions
about Neville's life in Finland, his interest in Annie's abilities, his insistence to know their mission
plan: all false, all pretense. Harry must have known it all.

"You didn't trust us?"
"I knew you wouldn't spill my secrets," Harry contradicted him casually. "Well, not intentionally. But we act according to what we know. That's how secrets are discovered; you don't need to read one's mind to guess what drives their decisions; sometimes, it's enough to observe them. I should know, I do it every single day," Harry added. "The plan was always safer when you didn't know."

"That's why you were avoiding us lately," Neville further deduced. "You knew we'd put two and two together soon."

"I know you're many things, but stupid isn't one of them," Harry grumbled in agreement.

Neville let out a long sigh.

"You are an excellent liar, Harry," he noted a moment later. He didn't stop the contempt seeping through.

Of all the insults he had thrown at Harry tonight, this one finally provoked a reaction.

"I have an Empire against me, Neville," Harry intoned darkly from beside him. Neville felt his harsh glare but he didn't turn to meet it. "Not just a Dark Lord and his group of sycophants. A whole fucking Empire. I can't afford to do things half way."

Neville got up and walked away from his chair and from Harry. He braced himself against the nearest column, the abyss behind him momentarily forgotten.

The colours of the whisky changed as he swirled the liquid around in his glass. The sun was completely hidden by now but the warm light still lingered.

Neville turned to look back at Harry. The wizard was seemingly lost in his own thoughts, his wide eyes turned towards the sky.

His jaw was clenched, and his leg was bouncing again. He was tense and probably watching Neville's reaction carefully.

"What are you terrified of, Harry?"

Harry's eyes flicked towards him whilst his face stayed turned upwards. He tilted his head. "What are you on about?"

"You've gone to extreme lengths to ensure that Riddle keeps a very low opinion of your abilities. You want him to see you as a depressed burnout, at odds with his former allies, hiding in the Wastelands."

"I get to save the occasional muggle or muggleborn. He finds my samaritan tendencies within character, and also entertaining."

"Okay," Neville nodded. "So you allow yourself to help openly once in a while. But what would happen if Riddle found out that your influence stretches much further than that?"

Harry's eyes looked at him as if the answer obvious.

"No," Neville resolutely shook his head. "This goes beyond some strategic advantage of your enemy underestimating you. You haven't only taken measures and precautions; your entire plan revolves around keeping Riddle ignorant. What happens if he finds out?"

He watched as Harry's nonchalance disappeared and he leveled Neville with a cold stare.
Good. He was done denying this.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I have gone to extreme lengths to ensure Riddle still takes me for a misbehaving child. All the more reason not to discuss it now. Or never."

Neville didn't waver under Harry's glare. "You wanted to convince me that following your orders without question is the right thing to do," he reminded him. He raised his chin in a challenge. "Now's your chance."

Harry's frown deepened and he continued to glare at him. Neville stood straight, determined not to back down.

He watched as Harry's eyes flickered over his shoulder before they returned to his own. He inclined his head slightly and Neville wondered if he was listening to someone Neville couldn't hear.

A moment later, Harry's shoulders slumbered and he sagged deeper into his chair.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I forgot how self-righteous you can be."

Neville let him grumble; he knew he had won.

Harry let out a long, shuddering sigh and looked back at Neville. "The simple truth is-" he started softly, his tone devoid of any of the previous harshness. "Well, if Riddle finds out what I can do, he'll figure out how I do it. And then he can easily cut me off. And I won't be able to stop him."

Neville took that in with a contemplative nod. He suspected something along these lines.

"Are you talking about the Stone?" he guessed although it didn't feel right.

"No. The Hallows are mine and mine only to command. I have safeguards in place, even if Riddle should capture me."

Neville stayed silent to give Harry the time to elaborate and offer the real reason. But he wasn't surprised when he didn't. Neville pushed him further than he had obviously been planning to reveal tonight. The fact that Harry gave at least part of the truth was enough for Neville.

"I'll need that memory back from you," Harry said next.

"Huh?"

"You've already assigned it a lot of importance. It'll be ringing like a gong through your mind, easy for any Legillimens to pick up. I can't have that."

"Are you seriously suggesting to Obliviate me?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "That would defeat the purpose of this entire conversation, wouldn't you say? Just give me the thought as if you were putting it into a Pensieve."

"That won't take it away."

"No, but it'll mull it somewhat. I take what I can get. And rest assured, you're never getting Leglimenced ever again. I'll make sure of that."

Neville remembered Molnar and the way she had killed herself before her interrogation could start. He wondered if he was getting his own poison soon.
A minute later, Neville watched as Harry took the extracted memory from the tip of Neville's wand. A flicker appeared and then the silvery wisp caught on fire. Harry shook the Elder Wand impatiently as if extinguishing a match, until there was no more smoke.

"What happens now?" Neville asked then.

Harry reached into his pocket and took out a rolled wad of papers. He handed it to Neville.

Neville straightened it out and immediately recognised the Daily Prophet. Oh. Right. He had completely forgotten about Riddle's anticipated reaction.

A teenager was staring at him from the front page. Beauxbatons' Golden Boy Predicted to Win the Triwizard Tournament! The third task is rapidly approaching and the goblin bookies are giving three to one odds...

He raised his eyes from the article back at Harry, surprised. "Riddle's trying to cover it all up?"

Harry shook his head. "Turn the page."

Ah. Here it was. The Library in flames was covering one corner of the next sheet. He quickly skimmed through the article that accompanied it.

Budapest's Library Burnt to the Ground! ...unknown assailants... believed to belong to an organised group of rebels... military operation... forty-six wizards dead... thorough investigation... under control.

"It's not the front page," he commented. "Was that your contacts' doing?"

Harry shook his head. "No. They had to mitigate some but this specifically was Riddle's order."

"What does it mean?"

"It could just be that he's trying to downplay the whole thing, showing to the public that we're not a serious threat. Or he's confident he'll deal with us without outright war. Or, it's a part of a plan I don't see yet. I'll have to observe his next steps to know if any of this is correct."

Neville looked at the article again. 'The safeguards were triggered and all original tomes were Portkeyed to safety in time.'

Good.

He turned back to Harry. "He still openly acknowledged you as a threat."

"That he did."

"You're not just an annoying brat anymore."

Harry let out a short laugh. "Oh, I think I'll always be that."

Neville pressed further. "Your strategy needs to change."

"That's always been the plan. It was imperative that it happens when we're ready, though."

Neville was beginning to understand. He was becoming aware of the net Harry was weaving. He didn't know many of its specifics but he could see now that their mission was just a small part of a
bigger plan Harry was following, and that it was all coming down together now.

He nodded resolutely, as much to himself as to Harry. "What will you have me do now?"

Harry raised an eyebrow as if that question surprised him. "You'll get Annie to Britain."

It was Neville's turn to pause. It took him a moment to clear up his confusion as to why. The sting of disappointment guided him; he realised he had started to harbour hopes Harry's real plan would be different than the idea he had sold to the Resistance.

"You really want to bring the Curtain down?" he asked to be sure, his doubts seeping through his tone.

Harry grimaced. He inclined his head upwards, gazing at the stars which now started appearing on the darkened sky. Neville shortly wondered if they would get to see the Northern Lights tonight.

It took Harry a long time to answer.

"I'll do whatever it takes to sort out this mess. I thought that would be rather clear by now."

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THE END
of the second part

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AN:

Chapter End Notes

There you have it, another milestone reached. Hurray!

Thanks a lot for all the support you keep showing to the story. Every one of your thoughts you've shared means a world to me.

What comes next? More. More magic, more wizards, more bad guys. Neville's cursory view of the Empire will widen, now that Harry will keep him closer. The focus will shift: from a mystery driven narrative to actual plot advancement. I'm finally done setting up the scene (after some 120,000 words, yay!) now's the time for the end-game.

This was always meant to be Harry and Neville's adventure. Hence the name of this chapter.
Let me know if you suspected the degree of Harry's involvement - I'm curious ;)

Yours, Bobika.
The Pieces on the Board

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait. I forbade myself to write, as they're important real-life projects to preferably spend energy on. Luckily for you, my willpower is nonexistent.

So, welcome to the third and final part of this fic! The pace has accelerated, Neville's cursory view has broadened, and we're finally getting into the thick of it. Enjoy!

Sunday, 2 June 2019
Bretagne, France

For a man he'd never actually met, Neallo Tjorsan managed to annoy Neville to unprecedented heights. Neville usually didn't think himself as quick to judge others, but it was surprisingly easy to make an exception for Tjorsan and his fashion choices.

His overgrown moustache constantly tickled Neville's lips, and the topknot wobbled every time Neville moved his head. There was very little Neville could do about it either. The hit-wizard had apparently worn his hair this way since the nineties. Should Neville change it, people would take notice. So, he complained in silence and wore the wizard's face as best as he could.

The iron bars in front of him suddenly twitched, making Neville twitch in response and Tjorsan's topknot wiggle again. The gate opened soundlessly, revealing a long alley of cypress trees and a Provence villa at its far end. He took a deep breath and started walking.

The estate wasn't as grandiose as one might expect from a pureblood nobility's residence, but it was beautiful and ancient nonetheless. It spread through several acres of vineyards, with the villa presiding over it all on the highest roll of the land. Neville would have been staring, marvelling at the sheer picturesqueness of the valley had he not seen it all before in Tjorsan's memories. Instead, he marched straight to the house as if he had visited many times before.

Soft laughter reached his ears half-way through the alley of the tall trees. His head whipped to the side, to a white gazebo standing in between the vines. Four witches were lounging on cushioned divans inside whilst a herd of hippogriffs grazed around it. Their faces were too far from Neville to recognise them but he felt their eyes on him nonetheless. He quickened his pace.

Maturity looked good on Draco Malfoy. He seemed to have finally grown into his smirks and sneers, and his threats were carried out with an actual presence behind them. More surprising, though, was the fact he had somehow developed a pleasant side: his smiles were smooth and his cajoling eloquent. At least Neville had gathered as much from studying him in Tjorsan's memories. As Malfoy's personal guard, Tjorsan watched him charm politics left and right, day and night.

So far, the real-life Malfoy just stared at Neville in silence, eyes furrowed.

Neville returned his glare with an impassive face. At least he hoped so.

Another long minute of scrutiny later, Malfoy finally moved. He leaned back in his plush chair and
placed his elbows on the armrests. He hadn't offered Neville to sit down.

"Tjorsan twisted his moustache the other way around. You have to finish the charm in an upwards spin."

Neville's eyebrows rose at that. Of all the ways to start this conversation, he didn't imagine Malfoy would lead with advice.

He drew his wand slowly and applied the hair charm again, this time ending the movement in an upwards spin. He looked at Malfoy quizzically, searching for approval.

Malfoy only closed his eyes.

"Have you done this before?"

If Malfoy was asking if he had ever stolen someone's identity, then the answer would be no, Neville had not. He had gone undercover in the past, he'd impersonated. But he'd never taken over a stranger's life this completely. However, he wasn't about to confess his insecurities to Malfoy.

It seemed he hesitated for too long, though, Malfoy's eyes hardened.

"If you fuck up, my family will be dishonoured at best. Most probably, my wife and I'll be summarily executed." He leaned over the desk between them. "Don't fuck up."

Malfoy didn't voice any threats but Neville still heard them loud and clear. His chin almost rose in a challenge before he managed to stop himself. He nodded instead, a barely visible twitch of his head, trying and failing to remember how exactly Harry'd managed to convince him this was their best course of action.

Malfoy lifted his arm, palm up. "I need your wand to key you into the wards."

Neville eyed the hand dubiously. Harry might trust Malfoy and Neville was now determined to trust Harry's judgement, but that didn't mean he always succeeded. He shook his head and kept his wand safely in its holster. "We'll wait for Harry."

Harry was late. He was supposed to arrive before Neville had. As it was, Neville didn't quite know how to deal with Malfoy. Being told he was an ally was one thing. Knowing how to talk to his old school bully - turned enemy, turned traitor - was a different matter altogether.

Malfoy left his arm drop. "There you have it - you fucked up," he hissed. "Tjorsan would never refuse an order. I don't tolerate disobedience from my servants."

Neville frowned at the blunt reminder of his supposed position. He felt his annoyance with Harry grow - this was precisely why he was supposed to be here for this conversation; to establish the dynamics. "We're behind closed doors. There's no one to witness this."

"How can you ever be sure?"

That was a good point and Neville was ready to concede it. Soon. "We haven't started yet."

He cringed inwardly, realising how childish that sounded the moment he said it. He wondered when exactly he'd regressed back to his school years' days.

Malfoy quirked a single eyebrow. "Really? Haven't you just walked into my home, stealing my guard's identity?"
Neville realised something then. Malfoy was quite clearly against this plan, that much was obvious. And yet, here Neville stood. Exactly how much influence did Harry hold over the pureblood?

That thought brought his confidence back. Malfoy wasn't the one in control, no matter the show they'd be putting up for everyone else.

He sat down on the empty chair across the desk from Malfoy.

"We'll wait for Harry," he repeated.

He watched as annoyance flashed through the wizard's eyes but Malfoy didn't argue further. It seemed he was being careful too, standing on an unfamiliar ground himself. No matter his previous brashness, Malfoy evidently didn't want to alienate Neville either. Good.

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Neville focused on halting his fidgeting leg.

"How did Potter make the Polyjuice last for more than an hour?"

Neville caught a hint of genuine frustration behind the question and smiled inwardly. Malfoy must have been wondering about that for a while. And he would be for a while longer. Neville certainly wasn't about to tell him he swallowed four capsules with the Potion before apparating here, and still had more than three hours of Tjorsan's itchy moustache and wobbly topknot to look forward to.

But he decided to be polite about it, in line of the tentative civility they had going on. "I can't really say."

Malfoy didn't seem surprised nor deterred by the negative answer. "Where's Tjorsan now?"

Neville wondered if he was just fishing for information or if he was genuinely concerned. Tjorsan's memories never showed anything else other than a strictly professional relationship between these two but it was still possible Malfoy actually cared about his employee.

"Only Harry knows. That was Tjorsan's condition, by the way; not ours."

"How much did you pay him to do this?"

Neville stopped himself from shrugging; Tjorsan never shrugged. He shook his head instead, a short left to right twitch and then back. "It wasn't in galleons," he quoted Harry from a couple of days ago.

Neville had wondered the same back then, hardly believing someone would willingly make this trade. Who would sell their identity, their name, their reputation to a stranger to do away as they pleased?

"Hit-wizards," Malfoy noted in a hiss.

Neville looked up sharply at him. *Has he just skimmed my thoughts?*

"...one should not find it surprising they'll risk their names for a bit of coin if they're ready to risk their life for it."

Malfoy finished his complaint and Neville realised that's all that it was, no matter the queer sync to his own thoughts. He steeled his mental shields just in case and schooled his face into a neutral
mask again, but not before Malfoy had noticed his alarmed reaction. Neville let him file it away to do with as he wanted.

For the umpteenth time since the start of the conversation, he wondered if Malfoy was aware of his true identity. Harry had promised he wouldn't give away Neville's name but the lack of questions in that regard made him wonder.

Harry chose that moment to finally arrive. He waltzed into the study looking his true self, not even a single glamour hiding his identity. How the hell he could manage that in a villa full of house-elves and portraits, Neville did not know.

"Apologies, I got delayed." Harry shed his outer coat, threw it at the last empty chair next to Neville's and walked straight to the decanter by the window. He helped himself to a glass of Malfoy's red, filling it up almost to the brink.

"Potter."

Malfoy's voice cut through the room, the name ringing like an accusation. His tone turned ice-cold, even more frigid than the attitude he took with Neville.

Harry's shoulders slumbered slightly in response. He turned back to the desk and sat down slowly. "Draco. I imagine you have questions."

"Is Blaise alive?"

"Yes."

"And will you keep it that way?"

"That depends entirely on Zabini."

Malfoy's jaw hardened. Neville sat forgotten for the moment, his eyes darting back and forth between the two wizards.

"How long?" Malfoy asked next. "How long were you harvesting him for Polyjuice?"

"Seven weeks."

Malfoy let out a low hiss at that. "You bastard."

"You know very well it was safer to keep you in the dark."

"Was it always you? Or were some of your friends wearing Blaise's face, too?"

"I made sure it was always me around your family."

Malfoy snapped his head away and stayed silent for a moment. To Neville, he looked like someone counting down from ten.

"Give me Blaise into custody. I'll swear you an oath I won't let him escape," Malfoy said after a minute. "And I'll forgive you for this."

Harry didn't answer right away. To Neville's surprise, he actually seemed to be considering Malfoy's suggestion.

"I can't do that," Harry said at last. "It'll put us both in too much risk."
Malfoy didn't look surprised by the rebuttal. "You swear the oath, then. Swear that you'll keep him alive whilst in your custody."

"I've tried to convince him to come to our side. He bluffed and tried to stab me in the back."

"Blaise's pragmatic. As long as he sees the Emperor as an uncontested winner, he won't move against him. Let me speak to him."

"Why didn't you do so before?"

"He had a promising career in the Army before. You took care of that."

"And he'll just find the kindness in him to forgive me, and follow me?"

"No. He'll follow me."

It was Harry's turn to stare out of the window in silence. This time, Neville was sure he was considering the proposition. Half a minute later, Harry leaned forward and tore off a corner from an officially-looking parchment on top of the desk. He grabbed Malfoy's quill and scribbled down a few words. He raised the note towards Malfoy but didn't let go of it.

Malfoy's eyes zoomed in on the writing.

"Got it?" Harry asked. He didn't wait for an answer and lit the parchment on fire with the same snap of fingers he usually reserved for lighting his smoke. They watched in silence as flames consumed the paper. When the ashes settled on the desk, Harry made them disappear with another flick. "I'll let you know when's the best time to visit."

Malfoy took that in with a sharp nod. "And I'll carry on pretending like this hasn't been your plan all along."

The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. "This is no evil plan of mine. I'm just trying to get you your friend back in one piece."

"And gaining an ally out of it."

"Zabini's no real use to me anymore. You're the only reason he's still alive."

"If you expect a thank you, I can provide you with one. It'll be as sincere as the moans of your favourite street-corner mudblood whore."

Harry chuckled with his glass raised halfway to his mouth. Filled with wine to the top, the red almost spilt over as it shook. "Duly noted."

They fell silent after that. Neville leaned back in his chair and away from the quick exchange. He watched Malfoy relax slightly into his own armchair, his features smoothing into a disinterested frown.

Neville recognised the body language easily enough - they were done with the matter. Just like that.

"What's the plan here?" Malfoy asked next, his tone rather civil now. He gestured towards Neville.

Neville twitched slightly, suddenly remembering he wasn't just a spectator.

Harry reached over and patted Neville's shoulder. "I need you to offer Tjorsan here to your
Rémy Brisebois was this year's Triwizard champion from Beauxbatons. The French papers weren't far from hailing him the winner of the whole Tournament, although the third and final task was still almost a week away from now. Surprisingly enough, even the English press grudgingly admitted Beauxbatons might finally have a fair chance of not losing. As far as Neville could judge from the newspaper accounts of the previous two tasks, as well as from Tjorsan's personal memories from the first row, the lad was indeed a competent wizard.

"He's a spoiled brat," Malfoy said.

Neville felt his eyebrow quirk at that. Next to him, Harry chuckled. "That's rather rich coming from you, Draco. Is he out of your influence?"

Malfoy grimaced, looking almost affronted. "He'll do as I say - eventually. He'll make a scene first."

"That's good enough for me. As long as you'll make it happen by Friday."

"Friday, you say? The final task is next weekend," Malfoy pointed out, his tone turning pensive. He glanced at Neville. "You want to get your man into Hogwarts with Brisebois," he stated next.

Harry didn't look alarmed by the correct guess. "The Triwizard's tournament's held only once every three years. We wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You're going, too?" Malfoy surmised. He let out an overly long, shuddering breath. "This plan's going to make my life difficult no matter the result, isn't it?"

Harry returned Malfoy's frown with a rather cheeky smile. "You're gonna learn everything in time, you know that."

Malfoy did that thing again with closing his eyes and presumably counting down from ten in his head. When he reopened them, he didn't go back to the topic.

He reached inside his breast pocket and took out two vials with misty liquid inside. Thoughts.

"I need to know everything of interest about these two witches."

Harry uncorked the vials and whirled the strands inside with the tip of his wand. "Friend or foe?"

"Remains to be seen."

Harry was about to reply when he was interrupted by the sound of steps coming from outside the door. The volume must have been magnified by a spell, warning them of an incomer well in advance before someone actually knocked on the door. Whoever it was, they didn't wait for an invitation and opened the door right away.

In walked Lady Malfoy.

In her maturity, Gabrielle was the spitting image of her older sister. Neville spent the last five days immersed in Tjorsan's memories, observing her and marvelling at the similarity of expressions and
gestures to those he was used to seeing on the face of the Weasley's matriarch. There were some glaring differences, though. Where Fleur grew to be kind and caring, Gabrielle hardened and developed a pose.

Remembering the sweet teenager of his army years, Neville resented it.

"My bottom hates you, Potter," Gabrielle said in way of a greeting.

She leaned down next, and kissed Harry on both cheeks.

"Ever heard of cushioning charms?" Harry quirked, fully unconcerned by her complaint.

"Ha! No amount of cushioning can prevent stiff muscles after so many hours in a saddle. Hours, might I add, that I'm forced to endure on behalf of your stupid request!"

Malfoy conjured her an armchair next to his own. She walked around the desk and sat down gracefully. "Thank you, husband."

Her piercing eyes finally landed on Neville. "I would ask Harry to introduce us but I was warned you wish for us to remain ignorant of your true identity. Considering that you are intruding on our home, I find that incredibly rude."

Before Neville had a chance to think of what to say in his defence, Harry spoke up again.

"Well? Is it working?"

He seemed to ignore Gabrielle's jab completely, going back to their previous conversation.

She rolled her eyes, very unladylike, and produce a roll of papers from somewhere inside her elaborate robes. "Like I'd ever fail you."

Neville glanced at the magazine she'd placed on the desk. The title page read Witch Weekly and pictured a woman flying on Hippogriff's back.

"There's no one more gullible about fashion than the British. That stupid cow would wear a troll's hide if it meant she'd outdo the French!"

After a closer look, the stupid cow on the cover turned out to be another former schoolmate of theirs, Daphne Greengrass. She looked absurdly young on the picture, her half-turned head winking at the reader.

"Good," Harry commented. "Did you confirm the numbers? How many hippogriffs were bought in Britain?"

"The journalist did the legwork for me. It's not only hippogriffs but thestrals, too. A rather distasteful addition to the trend, I'd say."

"Good," Harry repeated. "Mind if I take this with me?"

He grabbed the papers and put them into his pocket. "Let's get going. I'll key Tjorsan into your wards on our way out."

Neville's eyes shot up at that, surprised at Harry having control over Malfoys' wards, and equally as pissed that Harry could have keyed him into them all along by himself.
Harry was on his feet the next moment and almost at the door, Neville readily following him, before Gabrielle's voice stopped them.

"Harry? We've heard William was injured. Is he alright?"

Neville watched silently as Harry's shoulders slumbered. He turned back to the room, whilst Neville stayed facing the door.

"No, actually. He's not," Harry said softly.

He shared a short glance with Neville before they both looked away again.

"Oh."

It took Gabrielle a long time to speak up again. "Does Fleur know?"

Harry nodded.

"I'm so sorry, Harry. I had been hoping to speak to him again."

Harry shot her a dubious glance. "Really?"

"For all our differences, I'd never wish for Bill to… He was a good man. I know how much he meant to you."

Neville kept gazing at the plush carpet underneath his shoes.

"You had big plans for Weasley, didn't you?" Malfoy asked next. "What happens to them now?"

Through the corner of his eye, Neville saw Harry glancing at him.

"Plans change," Harry said softly.

Half an hour later found them in a very different room entirely. Where Malfoy's study was luxurious, spacious and full of early summer breeze, the barracks were crowded with cots, smelled of human sweat and had no open windows to let air in.

Neville shed all his outer layers, staying in his undershirt only. It didn't help much. He desperately wished for an air-freshening charm but he didn't dare to cross Harry's orders. With the number of raids the Army had been unleashing on the People's safehouses since the fire at the Library a week ago, they had a good reason to be extra careful. And besides, Annie stood right next to him, encompassing him in her negating bubble and making him feel even more smothered.

"Let me check if I understood correctly," she said. "You want me to fly across the whole of Britain on a winged horse?"

She'd arrived at French coast last night, together with Gregory and their guard of five muggleborns. Masked as a convoy of muggle slaves, they were housed and hiding at the winery that supposedly ordered them.

"How the hell did you get Daphne Greengrass climb on a hippogriff?" Teddy asked, staring at the magazine Harry had passing around.

"Daphne and I go way back."
"Really?"

"Uh-huh. She asked me to lend her my Potion notes back in our sixth year."

Teddy shot a pair of annoyed eyes at Harry.

Neville wondered about something else, though. "How do you know Greengrass?" he asked Teddy.

It might have been the poor lighting in the room but Teddy's cheeks seemed to have gone a bit pink. "My roommates at Hogwarts had her posters on the wall."

"Can we go back on track here?" Annie asked loudly. "Because it seems like your plan to sneak me through Britain involves sitting on a flying horse, up in the sky for anyone to see?"

"It's actually a horse and an eagle," Harry supplied.

Neville frowned at his useless reply. He turned to Annie, feeling it was time to show some support to the idea if they were to move on. "You can't carry on with the disguise of a slave; remember - no muggles are allowed in Britain. You'll have to pretend to be a witch. And witches don't travel by muggle means. Either we walk the whole way and try to avoid all the detection charms scattered through the country; or we hide you in plain sight. There are hundreds of witches and wizards riding hippogriffs these days," he nodded at the magazine, "you won't stick out."

Annie still didn't like it, that much was obvious from her frown, but she didn't argue further. She looked down at the map spread on the table between them. "And what was with the tunnel underneath the sea?"

"That's how we're getting you to the island," Harry repeated. He pointed at a line on the map, connecting Calais with Dover. "That's the Channel Tunnel."

That name rang a very distant bell. "There used to be muggle trains passing through, weren't they?" Neville asked hesitantly. "Are they still running?"

"No, not since 2003," Harry answered. "They disabled the rails so muggles could march out of the island."

Neville took that in with a nod. "Will we have to cross it on foot, then?" It'd be a long and dark hike through a narrow place with no escape routes.

Harry shook his head. "We'll drive."

"Isn't it being monitored?"

"It is," Harry admitted. "But not by the Army."

"Smugglers?" Gregory spoke up from the corner. All heads snapped to him, everyone most probably having forgotten he was standing there.

Harry nodded. "Yep. It's the main route for the black market goodies."

"I trust you'll be able to strike a deal, then," Neville said.

"Already have."

"Let's assume for a moment that all of this works out," Annie said slowly. "The tunnel and the flying both go well and you'll get me to Hogwarts in one piece. What happens then?"
When Harry had told Neville he knew where the anchor for the Curtain stood, and that it was actually stationed at Hogwarts, Neville's first thought was a rather dull of course. Somehow, it made perfect sense they would be heading back to the school. Talking about coming full circle and all that.

But also, damn. Of all the places to break into, the Hogwarts castle was at the very bottom of Neville's list of preferences. According to Harry, even the Elder Wand had problems breaching the wards around the castle. That was probably why he had planned this whole mission and dragged Annie all the way from Finland. From what Harry had told Neville, Riddle had augmented the defences considerably throughout the last two decades, making them virtually impenetrable even to the Master of Death.

"You just walk in," Harry answered Annie.

Neville was starting to suspect Harry was underselling his plans on purpose, making Neville work for their team's trust. But although terribly simplified, this was essentially the idea.

Annie frowned and looked at Neville in uncertainty. "Are we sure it'll work, though? After all, I couldn't walk through the Curtain."

"There'll be wards that you won't be able to effect, especially closer to the anchor," Harry admitted. "But we're prepared for them, too."

That was a very royal 'we' Harry had just used. He certainly didn't share any of his preparations with Neville.

"Will you all just walk in next to me?" Annie asked.

"Only Gregory will. And I'll get someone else to guide you, someone who actually knows the castle," Harry said. "Neville here will have his own invitation as the champion's bodyguard and will be covering you from afar. I'll be doing the same, for the most part."

That was news to Neville. "How are you getting into the castle, then?"

"I've been invited, of course," Harry readily answered, grinning.

Neville raised a single eyebrow. The way Harry said it, it almost sounded like he'd been invited-

"Personally? You've been invited to the Task?" Teddy asked before Neville had a chance.

"The past winners are automatically invited to all events. It had been a long-standing tradition even before Riddle reinstated the Tournament."

"Even you?"

Harry shrugged. "It's an honour thing, a general invitation. But the sentiment is enough for some of the castle's wards to let me through as a guest. How else would I have been able to map out the anchor that well?"

"And no one has seen the loophole yet?" Teddy wondered out loud.

"Riddle did his best for my name to be forgotten. I'm all for making it bite him in the ass."

An hour of planning later, they had most of the details ironed out. Before leaving the barracks, Neville took Gregory aside, into the corner of the adjacent room. Annie's muggleborn guard was
housed there. All five of them were currently resting on their bunk beds and pretending not to watch Neville carefully.

"Harry told me about your grandparents. I was really glad to hear they're both alive," Neville said softly for Gregory's ears only.

He was also glad to find out that they weren't the traitors he'd thought them to be for accepting Riddle's pardon and returning to the Empire. He didn't say as much out loud, though.

Gregory nodded. "I was, too."

"I wanted you to know that I'll come with you to search for them, the first moment we can."

Gregory stared at him for a short moment. "I'm not planning to run away after them."

Neville returned his steady gaze, deciding not to deny how well Gregory guessed what he was worried about. He searched for any sort of hesitance in Gregory's eyes but if there was some, he couldn't see it. "The offer still stands," he said.

Gregory accepted that with a sombre nod. "I know where they are, Harry told me. But thanks."

"Oh."

Harry himself joined them at that moment. Gregory nodded a silent goodbye and hurried back to Annie, apparently not willing to leave her alone for too long.

"Let's grab a bite together?" Harry asked Neville.

Neville readily agreed. He hadn't seen Harry much in the last few days. Harry had been busy fortifying the People's defences and leading Riddle's soldiers astray, whilst Neville was holed up in the catacombs of Prague's former cathedral, with only Teddy and George for company, getting accustomed to Tjorsan's memories. There were many things Neville now needed to talk about.

He made for the door only to realise Harry wasn't following. He glanced over his shoulder; Harry was crouching down next to a bed occupied by one of the muggleborns, speaking to him in low tones. Neville stepped closer.

"... your arm."

Neville's eyes followed what Harry was gesturing at; the guard was cradling his arm by his side. He now gingerly placed it into Harry's outstretched one. "I can't heal it, sir," the guard said softly. "They would notice if the cuts were gone tomorrow."

There were several angry marks across the back of his hand. Lashes, most probably. Neville winced at the bloody mess, suddenly remembering that whilst Annie and Gregory hid in the barracks, some of their guards had to go to the vineyards and carry on with the pretence of slaves. No wonder they were looking half dead now, sprawled over their beds, only half-heartedly trying to eavesdrop.

"Hm," Harry grumbled. "You're Eric, right?"

The guide's eyes went wide as saucers and he managed only a stunned nod.

"Well, Eric, I think I have just the thing for you," Harry said, sounding distracted, busy rummaging through the contents of his pocket, his arm disappearing all the way to the elbow.
A moment later, he came up with an unlabelled bottle with sheer liquid inside. "Ha! Here we go."

It looked like water but Neville very much doubted it was water.

"Feel free to drink it all with your friends but try to use some to disinfect the cuts first. Oh, and I think I actually have some dittany somewhere. Water it down properly, though. Make it weak enough and it'll only numb the pain and won't close the cuts."

Neville watched as the guy's eyes filled up with gratitude. He took a deep breath, most probably to thank Harry, but Harry waved him off he could, patting his shoulder. "Nah, it's you doing me the favour. Hold on until this weekend, and everything will change after that."

"Was it wise?" Neville asked once they walked out of the barracks. "To let him know this much?"

He was referring to Eric, but the question could easily apply to Gregory and his grandparents, too. Neville decided not to specify.

Harry didn't answer right away. They walked quite a distance before he spoke again.

"Remember that pub near Shell Cottage? La Mezcaleria? You could follow the beach for half an hour and it would stand right there, in the port?"

Neville did remember. They took that walk quite often with Bill, and sometimes even with Harry, to sober up a bit before they would crush on Fleur's couch. More pleasant than hitting oneself with a sobering charm, that's for sure.

"Remember the red-haired waitress?"


Harry nodded towards the barracks they left behind. "She was Eric's mum."

Neville felt his eyes going wide. "You mean, Eric's also your-"

"For Merlin's sake, don't even finish that thought. No. She flirted with me, true, but not more than with any other guy who tipped her. It was enough for me to remember her fondly, though. And so does Eric, obviously."

Neville was starting to understand where Harry was going with this. "Are you saying she's the… shade that watches over him? She's your link to him?"

Harry nodded. "Tereza, the other muggleborn in the barracks, grew up with this sliver of a boy. He once tried to steal from me in the slums. I went to see his family afterwards. They were killed in a raid two months later." He paused to take a breath. "Emma's grandma died right in front of my eyes when I was Polyjuiced as a Death Eater. Alois' father was a Death Eater I killed, although his mum lets Alois think he's a muggleborn. Gregory's father trained us both in the Resistance, you and me, and I bet neither of us will ever forget any of his gruelling lessons. Are you starting to see my point now or do you want me to carry on?"

Neville slowly shook his head.

"I still remember all their faces, Neville, each and every one of them. They become hazy with time but the feeling of failure, the guilt of being alive whilst they're dead - that remains as vivid as ever. I'll always be able to call forward their shades."
Harry fell silent and turned away from Neville in a rare show of vulnerability. Neville didn't quite know how to react to it.

In the end, Harry turned back at him with steel in his eyes again before Neville decided on a course of action. "And as long as I do, I can watch the people who remember the same dead. You just be sure that if I choose to trust anyone on this mission, it means I have a way to constantly verify them, too."

Neville thought about all of that for a moment. "What happens if you're not around to verify them anymore?"

"Hm?"

"You might have missed that none of your plans so far survived long into their execution. I haven't, though." The shootout in the dead zone; another one with Albert in the wastelands; hiding with the now-deceased Rusty in the slums - Neville was keeping a count.

Harry frowned at him but had the grace not to argue the point.

"I just want to know what's the contingency plan in case something happens to you, or you lose the Hallows," Neville added.

After a long moment of silence, Harry finally spoke up. "In case I get captured, you're to carry on with the mission. Report to George. Respect Malfoy. Get these two in touch."

Neville filed that away and nodded solemnly.

"Captured, not killed?" he asked next.

Harry snickered. "If I get killed, throw yourselves a good party."

Neville shot him a tired look.

"Alright, then. If I get killed, report to George, respect Malfoy, and make sure these two don't kill each other."

Neville's Polyjuice worn out just before the world turned black for their apparition. Shaking away the doubled disorientation, he hastily reached for more tablets.

Harry stopped him, though. "It's fine."

Feeling suddenly vulnerable with his own features out in the open, Neville eyed the wizards milling around them nervously. He glanced back at Harry, at his likewise undisguised but fully unconcerned face. "Have you put up Notice-me-nots?" He could feel a gentle buzzing in the air around them but his senses weren't even closely attuned enough to clock on the specific magic.

"Powerful ones. Come on, I'm starving."

Harry had apparated them onto the shore of Lake Como, in Lombardy. Neville knew the name because this time he'd actually remembered to inquire about their destination before he'd grasped Harry's hand to side-along.

Harry took them to a lakeside town, straight into the midst of what seemed like a food market, the port around them overflowing with stalls. Neville's eyes scanned it all quickly, realizing that instead of products, the sellers seemed to be offering ready-made dishes. He spotted fish - baked,
smoked and fresh; sauces of all colours, pasta of all shapes.

He immediately became overwhelmed by the battling smells of various foods but Harry didn't give him a chance to linger. He was already weaving through the crowds of wizards with ease and obviously a goal in mind, and Neville was left to stutter on his heels. A tray appeared by Harry's shoulder and as he navigated the narrow paths, it started filling up with the dishes they passed: seafood, salads, pasta, and a cake. Sellers readily flew the plates onto the tray, Harry only had to nod at them - his Notice-me-not charm apparently not applying to them.

When Harry finally seemed satisfied with the massive pile of food on their ever-expanding tray, he steered Neville to a wicker table on the stone pier itself. A postcard-worthy view of the lake and the surrounding mountains lay just behind it.

"What is this place?" Neville nodded at the stalls they now left behind, still a bit bewildered by their quick journey through.

"A lunch market," Harry mumbled, his mouth already full with prawns.

"Are we going to pay afterwards?"

"You don't pay at lunch markets."

Neville tasted the risotto in front of him. Were these truffles?

"Is the magical society here... socialist?" Even to his ears, the notion sounded ridiculous. Not to mention, he had just spent five days inserted in the Pensieve, watching Malfoy navigate the political scene full of pureblood aristocrats.

Harry chuckled. "Oh my, what a thought! No, just the food here's free." He twisted the claws of his lobster. "Right at the start, Riddle swore no wizard would go hungry again. 'It's beneath the magical folk to dedicate their precious time for something as pedestrian as sorting out their own meals...' or some other propaganda bollocks like that."

"It's good, though. Really good for free food."

"He has thousands of muggle slaves to prepare it, and no shortage of ingredients either," Harry shrugged. "And it's not like every wizard and witch goes. You'd be hard-pressed to find any of the old families here. It's a matter of status."

Neville surreptitiously glanced at the wizards walking around with their own trays. Their robes seemed simpler than the colourful promenade they had seen in Budapest but it might have been just that his eyes were getting accustomed to the ridiculous fashion of the Empire. Anyway, their robes still looked clean and in good shape. He guessed he'd be hard-pressed to find a magical beggar in the Empire, either.

"I'm surprised no one has called us out on the Notice-me-not," he wondered out loud, looking at the thick crowd of bodies they somehow weaved through without any commotion.

"Even purebloods get tempted by the offer of free food. It's not uncommon to hide under a charm here."

"What about the Army? They don't monitor this place?"

"Not today. And even if a soldier did wander in here, I'd be the first one to know," Harry shrugged, obviously unconcerned.
Neville decided to follow his example. He forced himself to relax back into his chair and started eating properly. Judging by the speed the food was disappearing from Harry's side of the table, he didn't have much time for his questions before their lunch was over.

"Can we talk freely here?" he asked, glancing around the closest tables. They weren't occupied, but still.

"We're good," Harry said right away but he still dropped his fork for a moment in favour of his wand, and put up a quick privacy charm. "Just in case."

"What's your pull on the Malfoys?" Neville asked without any preamble.

Harry didn't start talking right away, although he hardly looked surprised by the question. When he did, he began further back than Neville expected.

"When the Curtain was raised, Draco was the rising star of the new regime. Good name, good blood, a war hero very close to the Emperor himself. He had a bright future ahead of him."

"That's why Gabrielle married him, right?"

Harry hesitated. "Essentially, yes. Although when you say it like that, you make her sound more ambitious than desperate - and desperate she was back then. I'm the last person to defend her decision to marry that git. But, even I have to admit her other prospects looked rather bleak back then. When her parents decided to keep the family in Europe, it rather hurt their standings that the older daughter was a known blood traitor. They needed to make a stand. And Gabrielle always took her theatrics seriously."

Neville was more than happy to keep his mind open about her - he'd liked the girl well enough when she'd lived around the Weasleys. "So, was it her who changed Malfoy's mind?"

Harry chuckled. "Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"I guess not, then."

"Draco was in the spotlight. He made mistakes and pretty quickly ruined his name and future."

Neville wasn't even ashamed of the schadenfreude he experienced at hearing that. "How exactly did he mess up?"

Harry shrugged. "He made enemies from powerful people. They managed to dig up some old dirt on his family."

Morbidly curious, Neville urged Harry to specify.

"Believe it or not, it turned out that old Narcissa Malfoy was a good mother. Apparently, she cared for her family more than the Dark Lord's victory. In the nineties, when things looked bad for Riddle, she made inquiries and contingency plans. Ironically, it was these plans that ultimately led to her husband's suicide and the downfall of her son."

"They were hailed traitors," Neville surmised.

"Technically, Draco never was, but that didn't make much of a difference. He fled to France and didn't show his face for many years. You can imagine how excited Gabrielle was about that development."
"They seem to be doing quite well now," Neville pointed out.

"Aye, but it took a hell lot of work."

That sounded suspiciously like a complaint. Neville put two and two together. "You helped them. You helped them get their position back."

"I saw an opportunity. There's a lot of tension between the old families. The British purebloods have all the privileges of being Riddle's favourites, being his pet Death Eaters and all. The families from the continent want their way in. They love Draco's renegade status and like to throw him back in the Death Eaters' face. And what's more, he married a French. They eventually took him in and made him their figurehead."

Neville listened with his head quirked. "You're using him to stir up problems."

"I wouldn't call it that. Healthy opposition among aristocracy to balance things out, is more like it."

"How much power do they actually have?" Neville wondered. "The families? I know Riddle left the Wizangamot in session, but the newspapers won't tell you how much actual influence they have."

"Political influence?" Harry checked. "Very little. Almost none. Riddle's power is absolute. He delegates issues that bore him and he keeps the judicial branch seemingly separate, but that's as far as he tries to even pretend there's some balance of powers."

Harry reached for the dessert, a glass bowl of Tiramisu. Neville was pleased to notice a second one and quickly snatched it for himself.

"Is that what Malfoy is campaigning for, then? Political rights?"

"I can't have Malfoy go that radical; almost no one ever speaks openly against the Emperor. Yet. The continental families are just calling for the same privileges the British aristocracy holds. The ear of the Emperor. High rank in the Army. The honour to throw the most exuberant parties."

"What's your end goal here? Would the families follow if Malfoy urged them on your behalf?"

"They're still purebloods, Nev. And they live a happy life here. If a war breaks out, they'll defend the Empire as viciously as the Death Eaters would. But, they all have little personal agendas of their own. If we don't push them to go openly against the Empire, and promise the right price, they'll still be useful to us."

Neville inwardly rolled his eyes at the basic introduction to politics but he understood Harry had his reasons to be vague.

He asked about something else that was bothering him. "How can you be sure of him, though? Malfoy, I mean. I know you probably have plenty of shades watching him all the time, but still, spying on someone and allying with them are two different things."

"Draco didn't only reach his bottom. He had lived on that bottom for several years. I guess I got tired of watching him wallow there," Harry offered callously.

There was obviously more to the story but Neville knew it would be futile to pry. It was somehow comforting, to know that Harry was as good at keeping secrets as at stealing them. Neville could only hope his own secrets would get treated with the same respect.
He changed the topic. "Tell me about the Institute."

Wizarding Institute of Eclectic Research and Development, or WIERD, would be Malfoy's daily job if he could ever have such a thing. Most of Tjorsan's shifts seemed to be spent standing in the WIERD's offices in front of Malfoy's closed door, watching the memos come and go. Neville managed to spot the name on the parchments but he had very little idea what the place was actually about.

"The 'Eclectic' stands for muggle," Harry explained. "Everyone knows that but apparently, it's easier to pretend we don't need to study muggle technology to keep up with them."

Neville felt his eyebrows rise in surprise. "Wizards study muggle technology? Why hadn't I heard of it before?" In all the days spent reading through the last several years worth of newspapers, he'd never come upon a single mention of this.

"As I said, it's the best ignored public secret," Harry shrugged. He scraped the rest of his Tiramisu before he continued. "Even Death Eaters learned their lesson, Nev, after the Betrayal Bombing. Remember what George said, about the Empire not simply twiddling their thumbs for the last two decades? This is what he meant. The Army's no longer ignorant of tech advancement, they follow it. What's more, they're preparing magic for it when need be. That's what WIER is here for."

"Preparing magic? What does that mean?"

"Maybe I should have said adjusting. Mainly, they test charms and wards against muggle gadgets, like radars, sensors, sat navs and whatnot, making sure the spell performs sufficiently against the technology used. It only rarely doesn't, but if that happens, they tweak it - they broaden the intent, add another property to the charm, adjust a rune here and there."

Neville was slow to take this in, so Harry graciously offered examples. "Take the Muggle Repelling charm - it now safely repels their drones, too, and still with a perfectly natural explanation. Confundus can change algorithms without the software detecting anything suspicious. Fidelius works against all means of surveillance - we now have it confirmed that a protected site doesn't show on satellite images, either."

After a moment of loaded silence, Neville had only one question to ask. "And you still want to bring the Curtain down? Start a war between muggles and wizards?"

"None of this is news to me."

"What chances would muggles have, though?"

"Alone? None. With other wizards by their side? Little."

Neville heaved a long breath. Apparently, little is what they would be going forward with.

"And Malfoy's in charge of the Institute?"

"I wish. But no, he'll never get back into favour, not enough to hold such a position again. The dubious honour can only go to one of the old guard."

"You mean a Death Eater."

"Yep. Our old friend Rookwood in this case."
"Augustus Rookwood?"

Harry nodded. "He always had a bit of a fascination for-"

A shadow fell over their half-finished tray of food. Neville quickly looked up - there was a wizard standing by their table, very pointedly ignoring their Notice-me-not charm. Neville didn't see him approach - the man must have been hidden under a powerful charm of his own.

Neville quickly reached for his wand but Harry's calm and rather annoyed sigh halted him.

Whilst Harry languidly went to cancel the privacy charm around them, Neville took a better look at the man: middle-aged and tall, his grey robes and peppered hair immaculate.

"May I?" the stranger asked with a polite smile, gesturing at the last empty chair by their table.

Harry rolled his eyes and scraped the chair towards the newcomer with his foot.

The man took it, settling down comfortably. A tray of his own floated from behind his back to join theirs on the table. Neville quickly glanced down; spotting a bottle of red wine and a board of cut cheese, nothing else.

"Enjoying the fruits of your labour?" Harry asked, his congenial tone rather fake.

"As always, Harry, as always," the wizard replied conversationally, clearly not bothered by Harry's attitude. "It is Sunday, after all," he added with a short chuckle.

That prompted another eye roll from Harry.

"I see you brought a friend," the wizard said next, turning his eyes at Neville and affording him with another polite smile and a rather intense stare.

"I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Quite on the contrary," he assured Harry. "I've been wanting to meet Mr Longbottom for quite some time now."

A cold feeling settled at the bottom of Neville's stomach. He stared with his eyes widening in horrible suspicion as the stranger's smile changed and cold amusement entered his eyes.

"Would you care to introduce us, Harry? I don't think Mr Longbottom quite recognizes me."

"Right. Sorry, Nev, I forgot it's been a while since you've seen Tom here. So yeah, manners," Harry lazily gestured between Neville and the wizard casually leaning back in the wicker chair just scarce half a metre away from him, "Tom, meet Neville Longbottom, the other prophecy boy. Neville, meet Tom Riddle, the illustrious Lord Voldemort and Emperor of the Wizarding World."

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