Harry Potter returns for his fifth year at Hogwarts amidst an increasingly unstable political situation. And this year, for the first time, Hogwarts is no longer firmly under Albus Dumbledore's control. Threats inside and outside the school put pressure on some of Harry's closest friendships, and power struggles lie beneath the surface of every faction in the brewing conflict. At its center is the Potter family, and Harry's position is more critical, and more precarious, than ever.
A/N: Wormtail. A few people pointed this out in comments regarding the graveyard scene so I’d like to clear some things up about him as a character: reducing him to a squeaky spineless rat man was, imo, a mistake on JKR’s part. It says something really unpleasant about the Marauders in Hogwarts if they kept him around despite or because of his toadying and that’s a degree of unpleasant I don’t quite think they actually achieved. Also, honestly, the canon portrayal of young Remus, Sirius, and James is clever, charismatic, arrogant boys, and I think they’d have eventually gotten sick of Peter if all he did was lick their boots and tell them how awesome they were. He definitely wouldn’t have been considered a Marauder if that was the only role he played in their group and Peter was a Marauder as much as the others. Everyone can probably tell by now I’m changing Voldemort. Making his ideology less radical, insane, and patently ridiculous, making him sane, overall making the Death Eaters better antagonists, which means Peter himself can be something other than the spineless traitor. In my interpretation, young Peter wasn’t magically very powerful, but he was clever. Rats are smart, vicious when cornered, sneaky, nimble. Peter befriended the Marauders for… reasons we’ll explore later, he’s going to get more page time than he did in canon and some actual development (ha, what a concept) but he was their friend and he contributed more to the group than snacks, moral support, and freezing the Whomping Willow on full moons. Academically and magically he didn’t stand out compared to the others, but he was great at sneaking, great at planning pranks, great at problem solving. But he did always feel insecure and overshadowed by them (bc let’s face it, James and Sirius in particular were arrogant as hell as teenagers and most likely treated Peter pretty callously simply because they couldn’t fathom his insecurity) and so in the war Peter finally gave in to his cowardice and betrayed James. There’s more to this story that’s going to come up later but all this is to say Peter defeated Harry in the graveyard because he’s a clever, sneaky duelist who makes up for lack of magical power by being quick and going for unexpected attacks. He’s also a lot older and has a lot more experience than 14yo Harry who hadn’t been dueling with the Vipers for a year, and who grew up without magic.

A/N 2: To answer some FAQs regarding romance in this story: Harry is straight, there will be m/m and f/f relationships as well as m/f. I’m not telling any of them yet because that would be boring, everyone will have multiple experiences with dating because they’re teenagers and not likely to start dating their spouse at age 16. looking at you, jkr. that said, some characters might come back to someone they dated first or early. I’m still not going to focus too much on this aspect of the fic but it’ll be there.
Hermione

“Hermione! Hurry up, dear, they’ll be here in thirty minutes, and we’d like to speak with you before then!”

Hermione frowned at the door to her room. There was something off about Mum’s voice. She wasn’t as close to her parents as she used to be but none of the Grangers was stupid; they knew each other well. Well enough for Mum and Dad to know their daughter would’ve been completely packed two days ago save for the books and clothes she needed for the intervening time.

She had a point, though, about the Greengrasses being here soon, so Hermione was quick about stacking *Uncommon Arithmancy* and *Dark Wizards and Witches of the Twentieth Century* into her trunk—both illegal for Muggle-borns to own and both transfigured to look like generic history books before she left school—before she slammed the thing shut.

The first of the two books was her own interest. The second she’d been reading at Harry’s request. He was being his usual infuriatingly secretive self, and had only requested that she help him look into the actual details of the war. “Everyone calls it a war but they don’t talk about anyone actually doing anything,” he’d said tightly. Hermione had asked where his sudden interest came from and he gave her the look that said *stop pushing* and she promptly shut up.

As it turned out, there was a lot of fascinating detail to be found in the books Muggle-borns weren’t allowed to own and that Hogwarts consequently did not keep in the library. Augusta loved the brilliant Muggle-born Gryffindor who was her grandson’s closest friend in the lions’ den, so she responded to Neville’s letter with a magically expanded bag of books that made Hermione’s eyes gleam with hunger.

Merlin, she loved reading.

The only thing she kept out of the trunk was her journal and a self-inking fountain pen. Hermione jammed the pen into her hair—bushy as it had been at eleven since she couldn’t use hair charms during the summer and Muggle methods were too slow to bother with—tucked the journal under her arm, and hauled her trunk downstairs.

She deposited it in the entry hall. “Mum, Dad, I was wondering if—”

Hermione stopped dead in the door to the kitchen.

Professor McGonagall of *all* people was sitting at her kitchen table.

Several years of hanging out with Slytherins and Justin kicked in and Hermione smiled brightly. “Professor McGonagall! What a pleasant surprise,” she said, sitting down smartly across from Mum. The round table had four seats. Dad was on her left and McGonagall on her right. “I was working on the summer Transfiguration essay just last night, and I had some questions about the Morgothal Principles—”

“Those are sixth year subjects,” McGonagall said.

“I know,” Hermione said, squirming a little. She both hated and loved when teachers recognized how far ahead she was in class, and she’d been sitting on these questions for *ages*, since Harry and Pansy were insistent they not reveal themselves to be studying anything more than a year above their
current level. Harry’s self-transfiguration stunt in the second task blew that out of the water for him (ha) but that could be explained away as desperation and focused study and help from his similarly high-achieving friends. “But it can only help my OWL score to understand Transfiguration theory on a deeper level…”

“That’s our Hermione,” Mum said proudly. “Always working so hard.”

Hermione beamed at her. Mum and Dad didn’t understand her classes but they liked listening to her (edited) stories anyway, and it helped a lot since Daphne and Justin suggested that she phrase things in terms of Muggle concepts. She told her parents Potions was a combination of pharmacology and chemistry, Herbology was biology, Arithmancy was higher mathematics, and Ancient Runes was languages, and they’d gotten much more relaxed about her pursuing a magical career. Hermione couldn’t blame them for worrying that the magical world might not provide their daughter a good future, not when they had no way of looking into it themselves, and conversations about school had been infinitely easier since she started talking about it with the comparison angle in mind.

“So long as it is only theory,” McGonagall said.

*Oh, it is, at least until I get to Greengrass Manor where the bloody Trace can’t catch me.* Hermione opened her mouth to say something about how important the Trace was for responsible use of underage magic and how she’d never break the Decree.

“Hermione, dear, I don’t think we have time for academic questions,” Dad said, covering one of her hands with his own.

Hermione frowned. “They’re not here for another… forty-five minutes…”

“The Greengrass family is actually what I came to speak with you about,” McGonagall said in clipped tones.

Oh. Oh no. Daphne and Pansy had suspected this but Hermione didn’t think—

“Hermione,” Mum said hesitantly, “these people you’re going to stay with…”


“Right,” Dad said. “Well, Minerva explained some things, and they sound like, well—”

“Like their family belongs to the magical equivalent of the Klu Klux Klan,” Mum said. She was always the one who said hard things without flinching. Hermione got that from her.

Hermione could feel her hair starting to crackle and did her best to hold her magic in. Merlin, but she hated the Trace. Tossing small spells around at school kept it easier to manage; her magic seemed to get pissy in the summers when she couldn’t use it. “They are not.”

“Miss Granger, the Greengrasses were known to align with the Death Eaters in the war,” McGonagall said.

Hermione stared at her once-favorite professor. “Please, Professor, I appreciate your concern, but I’m fine,” she insisted. “Really. Daphne has never been anything but kind to Muggle-borns at Hogwarts —” aside from the first few months of first year, before Hermione and Justin proved to be more than gawking tourists— “and the Greengrasses have a potions laboratory I can work in.” Not to mention wards, a Floo, a proper pureblood library, and exemption from the Trace. And one of her closest friends. “Astoria—Daphne’s sister—she’s been really nice when I’ve talked to her, one of her best friends is a halfblood, and she looked out for the Muggle-born in Slytherin last year. I haven’t seen
any of that blood prejudice nonsense from them and I feel perfectly safe around their family.”

It was a good speech; Pansy had helped her figure out how to respond if this came up, and she saw her parents start to relax—

“Miss Granger, I don’t think you understand how Slytherins operate,” McGonagall insisted. “They play the long game—it’s entirely possible the children have been ordered to cultivate various Muggle-borns in order to make the family more politically acceptable.”

Her parents looked aghast. “That’s horrid,” said Mum. “Using children as political chess pieces—”

Hermione wanted to bang her head on the table. Or her wand. They’d be distracted if she turned it into a boar. But then again that was way above her level and she shouldn’t be able to do it. And the Trace. “I’ve spent four years friends with Slytherins,” she said. “It’s insulting that you think I’m not smart enough to figure out how they work.”

“They don’t sound like… the best sorts of people,” Mum said. “Lying, deceitfulness, cunning…”

“Ambition,” Hermione countered. “Resourcefulness. Loyalty to one’s friends and family. Those aren’t bad traits. And nowhere does it say Slytherins have to lie or be deceitful. And cunning isn’t any different from clever or wily but there’s no bad connotation on those words. Mum, Dad, you met Harry on the platform. And Blaise, and Theo, and Daphne.”

“I suppose,” Dad said. “They were all such charming children…”

McGonagall pursed her lips. “I’m only looking out for what’s best for you, Miss Granger.”

“I know,” Hermione said, trying to smile. It didn’t feel like it was working right. She really wished she could do like Harry and Pansy and Blaise and just hitch a perfectly charming, charismatic expression up on her face at will. “I just really want to do well on my OWLs so I can get into a good job later…”

“Yes, and do you know what job that is?” Mum said, with a quick glance at McGonagall. Okay, so she still had to do some work on her parents.

“Experimental charms,” Hermione said.

McGonagall frowned. “A dangerous field.”

Hermione turned to her parents. “It involves the use of complicated Arithmancy—maths—and magical theory—basically looking at physics and chemistry but with magic involved—to create new spells and techniques,” she explained. “It’s one of the most difficult and challenging careers, but also a well-paid and rewarding one. That, or go into the Ministry and push for improved rights for sentient nonhumans like centaurs and house-elves, restoration of full-human status for werewolves…”

“Big dreams,” Mum said, looking mollified. “Are such things possible, ah, Minerva? It was my understanding that—children with nonmagical parents sometimes have limited options…”

“That’s the other reason I want to go to the Greengrass’ this summer,” Hermione butted in. McGonagall shut her mouth, annoyed that she couldn’t talk over Hermione without appearing rude. “They’re an established family and they have really good connections. I know Daphne really well but it’s hard to talk to anyone else when we’re all the way up in Scotland for school…”

“Ahhh,” Mum said. “So staying with her will allow you to make some connections in the summer—
that makes perfect sense.” She grinned. “I went to science camps for the same reason.”

Dad looked at Professor McGonagall. “Are you sure these Greengrasses are so terrible? They’ve never been convicted of anything, have they?”

McGonagall looked like she was being force-fed lemon juice. “No. But the danger is worse now—”

“It’s like I told you,” Hermione said. She couldn’t lose control of the conversation, not now— “Things are really tense, politically, because the—You-Know-Who is back.” Damn. She’d almost slipped and said the Dark Lord. Only the Slytherins ever did that, and she was pretty sure it was a thing you used if you were sneakily in his camp, and she didn’t know what it meant that Harry used *Dark Lord* too, unlike Neville and Justin. It could just be him blending in with the Slytherins.

It could be something else.

“You-Know-Who… the one who caused the war, right?” Mum looked at Hermione. “Are you *sure* these friends of yours aren’t supporting him?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. No. She trusted the Greengrasses not to hurt her. And even if they did… Her fingers ran over a slender silver band on her right index finger, an emergency Portkey to Grimmauld Place. She didn’t even want to know how Harry got it.

“We spoke to them,” Dad said. “When we picked Hermione up. The seemed perfectly polite and reasonable people. None of this… anti-Muggle prejudice.”

McGonagall opened her mouth.

Someone knocked on the door.

“I’ll get it!” Hermione said instantly, dashing into the hall before anyone could move.

She hauled the door open. Daphne, Astoria, and Lord and Lady Greengrass stood on the other side. Hermione thanked Merlin in her head that they were all wearing fairly casual robes.

Daphne didn’t smile, but there was a welcome in her eyes. Astoria, who could probably charm a rock, beamed. “Hermione!”

“A pleasure, Miss Granger,” Roxanne Greengrass said with a smile.


“Thank you,” Mason Greengrass said, dipping his head as he led his family across the threshold.

“What for?” Daphne hissed.

Hermione gave her a look that said *what do you bloody think she’s here for?* “My parents are just here, in the kitchen, and another guest.”

She was first to go back into the kitchen, followed by Astoria, Daphne, and finally their parents.

“Mr. Greengrass,” Dad said with a smile. He stood up and offered his hand to shake. Hermione winced; it was the social superior who chose to extend a hand in greeting or not in such meetings, and Dad couldn’t have known that but—
Lord Greengrass dismissed the unintended snub with a return smile and a firm handshake. “Mr. Granger! Excellent to see you again. And you, Mrs. Granger.”

“I was delighted to hear Daphne and Hermione wished to spend more time together this summer,” Lady Greengrass said sweetly, shaking hands with Mum and Dad. “Daphne has so few female friends…”

Daphne, hidden behind her father, made a face only Hermione saw.

“And Professor McGonagall!” Lord Greengrass continued. “We certainly weren’t expecting to see you here.”

His voice had a bit of bite now.

“It is my duty as Head of Gryffindor House at Hogwarts to ensure the well-being of all my charges,” McGonagall said stiffly.

Hermione very deliberately slung an arm around Daphne’s shoulders, channeling Pansy or Luna. “She’s just been talking to my parents,” Hermione said.

“Lovely to see Hogwarts putting in more of an effort to look out for its Muggle-born students,” Lady Greengrass said.

Oh, she was good. Hermione bit back a grin. Slytherins through and through, this whole family. Now McGonagall was backed into a verbal corner.

“What’s this for?”

Everyone turned to look at Astoria. The tension in the room didn’t go down, exactly, but it changed targets. McGonagall was watching the Greengrasses closely.

“It’s an espresso machine,” Mum said hesitantly.

“Cool.” Astoria leaned in close, careful not to touch the buttons. “How does it work? What’s the cable for?”

“It’s… a plug,” Mum said. “It connects the espresso machine to the electrical wire in the walls.”

“Electric,” Astoria said. “I thought Romilda was pulling my leg about Muggles powering their homes with lightning! How do you get it?”

Hermione looked anxiously at her parents, but Dad was grinning and even Mum seemed charmed. Professor McGonagall stood helplessly next to the table.

Dad started talking about solar power and fossil fuels and hydropower and windmills and geothermal energy.

“Wow,” Astoria said. Her face was open and sweet and innocent. Hermione thought maybe someone had told her to be interested in the Muggle things to make a good impression but even if it was fake she was doing a fantastic job. “Are those powered by it, too?”

She pointed up at the ceiling.

“Yes,” Dad said.

“How do the… wires carry electricity?”
“Electricity,” Daphne corrected.

Astoria nodded. “Right, that.”

“You know how we talk about atoms and molecules in Transfiguration?” Hermione said. Astoria just finished her second year, they should’ve at least covered that.

“Yeah.”

“It’s in how the metals bond together,” Hermione said. “Metal atoms, when they’re not melted, bond together in a sort of stack, and the electrons—those are pieces of the atoms—they can move from one to the other.”

“Electrons,” Astoria said. “Electricity.”

“Exactly.” Hermione grinned at her. “Electricity is just putting energy in at one end and then electrons move along the wire and it comes out the other. It’s more complicated but that’s the gist.”

“I wonder if magic would work like that,” Astoria mused, peering down the garbage dispenser.

Professor McGonagall coughed. “Such things are considered alchemy, Miss Greengrass, and far above your level.”

Astoria shrugged like she didn’t care.

“Turning things into gold?” Dad said doubtfully.

“At its most basic, all matter is made of the same pieces, Mr. Granger,” Lady Greengrass said. “Alchemy is merely a matter of providing enough power to rearrange the pieces.”

“Like theoretical physics!” Mum looked delighted to have one of her pet interests come up. She and Dad were dentists but the shelves in their living room were covered with books on everything from psychology to rocket science. “Quarks and muons and electrons?”

“I believe alchemists have different terms, but they’re likely the same pieces,” Lady Greengrass said. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you more; it’s hardly my area of expertise.”

“Yes, you’re a fashion designer, right?” Mum said.

“Fashion and business. I run a clothing company,” Lady Greengrass said.

“And you, Mr. Greengrass?”

Hermione wanted to bury her head in her hands. How humiliating. Her parents were grilling the Lord and Lady of a Noble House on their jobs.

Mr. Greengrass, thankfully, didn’t do more than blink. “I’m a lawyer,” he said. “My law firm is one of the most prominent in our world.”

“One of the partners represented Harry last year,” Daphne said. “He needed legal assistance, so of course I asked Father to step in.”

“Ms. Tate is an extremely skilled lawyer,” Lord Greengrass said with a proud smile. “She started as an intern and worked her way up to partner. She’ll inherit the firm if neither of my daughters wants it.” Daphne sniffed; Hermione knew she had zero interest in becoming a lawyer. “I knew she’d handle the case well.”
That did it. Both of Hermione’s parents had heard, in detail, about the trials and Harry’s horrid relatives. They’d met him only on the platform and like every other adult he ever met, they were completely charmed by him in a few minutes flat. Hermione had no bloody clue how he managed it that quickly but they adored the quiet, slender, dark-haired boy who’d been one of their daughter’s first real friends, and learning that Mr. Greengrass had been involved in legally rescuing him went a long way.

“I’m so glad you were able to help,” Dad said. “We heard such awful stories about the boy’s aunt and uncle from Hermione…”

“I can assure you, they were not exaggerated,” Lady Greengrass said with distaste. “It’s a miracle Black was exonerated or Hadrian may never have escaped.”

“I don’t think much of this justice system of yours,” Mum said darkly.

“It is indeed corrupt,” Lord Greengrass said. “Much of the corruption can be traced to one man.”

Her parents probably thought he meant Voldemort. Hermione was quite sure he was referring to Dumbledore, and found herself in complete agreement.

McGonagall’s nostrils flared. She understood what Lord Greengrass meant.

“That’s why I want to go into the Ministry,” Hermione told her parents. Experimental charms and creature legislation—both areas in desperate need of reform. One speaking to intellectual property, one to equal rights for all. She honestly could not say which made her more passionate.

She’d just have to change both.

“Opportunities in the Ministry are limited for Muggle-borns,” McGonagall said, looking at the Greengrasses like maybe they’d leave without Hermione if they remembered her blood status. Hermione tried not to roll her eyes. They were standing in a Muggle kitchen watching their younger daughter poke at the toaster oven. It wasn’t like they’d have forgotten.

“Many Muggle-borns do not choose to pursue Ministry careers,” Lady Greengrass said pleasantly. “I’m sure if Hermione works hard, she’ll go far. I know Mason and I are fond of her and we’d be happy to provide letters of recommendation and such, just as we will for Daphne’s other friends.”

Daphne slid a smirk at Hermione when no one was looking.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Mum said. “I hear she’s looking forward to using your… laboratory this summer?”

“It’s a bit more Harry’s prerogative than ours,” Daphne said. “He’s the potions prodigy. Hermione and I have been doing some extracurricular work with arithmancy, but Harry’s projects involve arithmancy more often than not and we help out.”

Hermione grinned. They’d even gotten extra credit out of Vector for some of the work they’d done on the journals, except modified so it didn’t include the unconventional (to put it politely) runic arrays or the practical applications, since Harry insisted they keep the journals secret.

“Maths, then,” Mum said approvingly. “I’m sure you’ll have a lovely summer, Hermione.”

“I can’t wait,” Hermione said happily. “Thank you! I’ll write every week.”

“We’ll leave the upstairs window open,” Dad said with a laugh. “For the owls.”
Her parents thought the use of birds as a postal service was the funniest idea since the American intelligence people decided to try getting Hitler addicted to pornography.

“It was lovely to see you again,” Lady Greengrass said with a last society hostess smile.

“You as well,” Dad said. He put an arm around his wife. “We’ll enjoy the peace and quiet!”

“I am quiet,” Hermione said.

He grinned at her. “Don’t get into too much trouble, Hermione.”

She rolled her eyes. “Never.”

“I’ll watch her, Mr. Granger,” Daphne said solemnly.

Hermione nearly choked on the irony. Daphne keep her from breaking any rules? If you tallied up all the laws Daphne had ever broken, it would be a list as long as her arm.

They made it out the door with another round of goodbyes. Somehow Professor McGonagall ended up walking out with them; Lady Greengrass floated Hermione’s trunk down to the limousine (which made Hermione goggle until Daphne noticed and elbowed her) while McGonagall exchanged frosty pleasantries with Lord Greengrass.

“I’ll see you at school, Professor,” Hermione said, smiling. She was a little annoyed McGonagall had come here but the strict woman was still her favorite teacher. And she was just looking out for Hermione. Even if she was misguided about some things.

“Do owl me if you have any more questions about Morgothol’s principles,” McGonagall said. “I always like to encourage promising students.”

Hermione promised that she would and climbed into the limousine with Daphne and Astoria. McGonagall strode away, presumably to Apparate back to wherever she lived. Or possibly to Hogwarts to give Dumbledore a report.

“Your parents are lovely people, Hermione,” Lady Greengrass said as soon as the door closed (without anyone touching it).

The limousine was much bigger on the inside than on the outside. Everyone got a ridiculously comfortable leather chair and trays of drinks that never spilled floated between them. Hermione selected a crystal decanter of water. “Thank you, Lady Greengrass.”

“Surely we can do away with the formalities,” Lord Greengrass said. Daphne took after him, in her lean frame and light blond hair, but his eyes were brown like Astoria’s, and warm where his older daughter’s were icy. Especially when he smiled, like now. But there was still an intimidating aura around him that Hermione thought served him well in court. “You’re here under fosterage, after all. An honorary member of the family. Call us Mason and Roxanne.”

“Okay,” Hermione said, smiling and nodding politely. She was immensely relieved that they hadn’t asked her to call them Mother and Father. They were like… godparents. Magical godparents. Not her real parents.

Which she guessed made Daphne and Astoria her sisters in some way. Hermione glanced at Astoria, who was flipping through *Witch Weekly*, and Daphne, who sat in her chair with the kind of casual grace you saw in a jaguar right before it pounced.
“Tell us more about this arithmancy project you mentioned?” Roxanne said. “Daphne mentioned it…”

The girls shared a glance that was loaded with all their years of rivalry and friendship, and also a brief war about what Harry would want.

“We did some independent work with arithmancy and runes last year,” Daphne said.

“Harry and Theo have been taking extra languages with Professor Babbling for two years,” Hermione said. She still didn’t know why, but hopefully she could get it out of one of them this year. Harry and Theo weren’t the type to load up their plates with extra work unless they had a purpose for whatever they were learning. “And Justin—Finch-Fletchley—he and I and Daphne kind of focused more on the arithmancy side of it.”

Roxanne turned out to be quite skilled with arithmancy; apparently a lot of it went into the spells that her company used to process and manufacture wizards’ clothing. Hermione found herself fascinated by the process, yanked out her notebook, and flipped past the communication pages to those for private use to take notes.

“That’s a nice journal,” Lord Greengrass—Mason—said, nodding at it. “Daphne, you’ve got a similar one, haven’t you?”

Daphne smiled, thin and clever. “Yes, we’ve all got one. Matched set.”

“Very nice work,” Roxanne said, examining the one in Hermione’s lap.

Well, until they got a chance to talk to Harry about whether Daphne’s parents could know, then Hermione wouldn’t be telling. “Thank you,” she said instead.

They exhausted arithmancy. Hermione asked about the car, found out it was a courtesy vehicle shared by high-level Greengrass, Tate, & Morris employees when they had business in the Muggle world, and settled in to catch up with Daphne. Letters in the journals were nice and certainly faster than owl post but it wasn’t quite the same as talking face-to-face, and they’d been apart for three weeks.

Astoria set aside her magazine, eventually, and joined in. Hermione catalogued the irritable affection Daphne showed her sister, and the irreverent bubbly way Astoria just ignored it, which only seemed to irritate Daphne more.

Siblings were fascinating.

At least these two, unlike Jules and Harry, didn’t hex each other every five minutes. Hermione didn’t want to think what would happen if the Potter twins actually had to live together for an extended period of time.

Then the limousine pulled up outside a set of wrought iron gates half the height of Hermione’s house, and her jaw dropped.

“This is where you live?” she demanded.

Astoria grinned impishly. “Haven’t you been to Potter Manor?”

“Yes, but…” Hermione trailed off. She didn’t know what she was expecting. Hearing Greengrass Manor really should’ve tipped her off.
Mason and Roxanne were polite enough to hide their smiles in their own water glasses.

The drive was long and lined with trees whose leaves turned purple and trunks blueish-brown and shimmery once they got past the illusion spells on the gate and stone wall. It had the feel of a driveway not often used. More normal forest stretched out past the decorative trees, though Hermione had no doubt there were plenty of magical creatures and species out there. Manor homes were havens for the magical flora and fauna of the British Isles.

“There you are,” Roxanne said.

Hermione turned and looked out the window on the other side of the limousine. Her jaw dropped. “It’s gorgeous,” she breathed.

Greengrass Manor lived up to its name in every way. It appeared to be built of blackish-gray stone, more in the style of a castle than a really fancy brick house like Potter Manor, complete with a literal tower, albeit a small one. Seamless green fields surrounded it like an ocean. It was set in a bit of a dip in the land; the limousine crested the slight hill that had blocked it from sight and started down to the massive front doors.

“Greengrass Manor’s not the largest of the Ancient and Noble manor homes, but it’s among the oldest,” Mason said proudly. “Only the Ollivander and Black properties have us beat.”

“Something he never fails to hold over Malfoy at balls,” Astoria said with a smirk.

Hermione grinned. Draco was—less horrible now than he used to be but after hearing how he’d treated Dobby she was not fond of his father.

“We have acres of forestland,” Daphne explained, gesturing at the edges of the irregular grass-filled depression holding the manor, which were defined by a transition from fields to woods. “Have you ever ridden?”

“Horses?” Hermione squeaked. She didn’t like horses. They were big, and they smelled, and they had such large teeth—and she knew it was stupid and they were herbivores, but they were also prey animals that would lash out when cornered, and anything with teeth that size could make it hurt if it bit. Not to mention they kicked and usually weighed a lot more than she did.

“I’ll teach you,” Daphne said, smirking at her uncertainty. Hermione tried to school her features. “It’s quite fun once you get used to it.”

“We can all go riding!” Astoria said happily. “There’s loads of trails.”

“You girls go easy on Hermione,” Roxanne said with a Slytherin smile. “Horseback riding isn’t the sort of skill you can pick up easily.”

“Yes, Mother,” Daphne said.

Hermione glanced between them. Roxanne was curvier than either of her daughters, and brown-haired, but Daphne’s cold calculation came from her. You could see it in the way their smiles matched across the limousine.

“The stables are through there,” Astoria said, pointing. Hermione could make out another, smaller set of iron-banded oak doors around the curve of the manor to its right.

They were right, it wasn’t huge, in terms of floor space it probably wasn’t a whole lot larger than Potter manor, but it was way more intimidating. She craned her head back to look up at the walls as
the limousine pulled to a halt in front of the main doors. It looked like most of the exterior was just
the outer walls of the… manor, or castle, or whatever you wanted to call it, but that section by the
stables was a wall enclosing some kind of open-roofed area. The single miniature tower sat over to
the left.

The limousine door swung open of its own accord. Daphne gestured to it with a graceful, mocking
gesture. “Home sweet home.”

“My life is so bizarre,” Hermione muttered, climbing out.

“Here’s your room.”

Hermione looked around nervously. “Are you sure… I don’t need all this space.”

“But you’ll enjoy it,” Daphne said with a smirk, pushing her between the shoulder blades to get her
through the doorway. Hermione stumbled forward, and since she was levitating her own trunk now,
this had the effect of sending it shooting forward as well. She barely caught it before it slammed into
the bed.

“Oops.” Daphne followed her through.

Hermione carefully settled her trunk at the end of the bed. “Shouldn’t you save this room for more…
I don’t know, socially prestigious guests?”

“More socially prestigious guests get a full suite of rooms,” Astoria said, bouncing into the room. She
skipped past Hermione and Daphne like they weren’t there and threw herself out over the burgundy
covers on the large four-poster bed.

“Oh,” Hermione said faintly. Put like that, one bedroom, even this large and well-furnished,
wasn’t… horrible. It was half again the size of her room at home, with a large bookshelf on the wall
opposite the windows, which would be nice since the expansion charms on her trunk were reaching
their limit. The windows themselves had a gorgeous view to the north. There were several
comfortable chairs clustered around a low table in one corner of the room and a writing desk waited
next to one of the windows. Someone had even made sure the colors were light golden-brown wood
with burgundy and white upholstery and accents, like a more tasteful version of the Gryffindor
common room.

Daphne settled onto the edge of the bed with a lot more decorum than Astoria, shooting her sister a
faintly irritated look. “Really, Hermione, it’s fine. We’ve several guest rooms, and Pansy and Theo
have permanent rooms here. You could take up a lot more space than this and still not be an
imposition.”

Hermione turned over her question in her head a few times to make sure it was appropriately
Slytherin and subtle. “How often will you be having guests this summer?”

Okay, so maybe it could’ve been a little subtler, but she still thought she was getting better.

“We won’t,” Astoria said. “Not the sort you’re thinking.”

“Astoria!” Daphne snapped.

“What? I can be all Slytherin and sneaky when I have to,” Astoria said. “But we’re at home. I don’t
have to here. And she’s a Gryffindor. Easier to just spit it out.”
Daphne rubbed her temples. The gesture was eerily reminiscent of Harry. “Tori, leave.”

Astoria slid off the bed and whistled a happy tune on her way out.

“This,” Daphne said. “This is why we all thought she’d be in Hufflepuff.”

“That explains a lot,” Hermione said. She knelt and opened her trunk and started rooting around for a few books to leave by her bedside, as was her custom. It helped that she didn’t have to see Daphne’s face as she added, “Is my being here going to cause… problems?”

“No.” There was a rustle, and then Daphne’s face appeared over the trunk’s open lid. “None.”

Hermione didn’t believe her, but she let it slide. “Good,” she said brightly, holding up two books. “Because I’m really looking forward to poking around your library.”

Daphne smiled—thin, maybe a little uncertain, but true. “I’ll show you, then. Come on.”

Hermione dumped her books on the bed and scrambled after her friend.

Ginny

So far, her summer was measured in spells.

First: the Body-Bind, on the third day of summer, aimed at Ron to keep him from following her out to the Quidditch pitch when he wouldn’t stop yelling about how she should be decent enough to not wear her Slytherin gloves at home. The idiot never carried his wand on him and Ginny was too angry to care how long he lay there in the back garden before someone came and rescued him. Hopefully a gnome would use his head as a toilet.

Second: Finestra, the glass-shattering charm, carefully applied a week in to Percy’s collection of empty glass inkwells after he fought with Mum and Dad again and stormed out of the house. Ginny would’ve hexed him bald and toothless with a really nasty spell Alex dredged up from his father’s books for talking about Harry like that but her parents were right there so she couldn’t.

Third: one day after the incident with the inkwells, Ginny and Mum got into a wall-shaking row about Ginny flying with Fred and George and Lee. Her wand ended up in her hand thanks to three years now of petty common room squabbles and Mum yelled at her and it set off sparks that lit the table on fire. Ginny doused them just as quickly but then she was in trouble for using magic during the summer.

Fourth: a hair-braiding spell Luna taught her when Ginny finally got permission to leave home. Mum foolishly thought going to dotty Luna Lovegood’s house meant Ginny wouldn’t get up to any trouble. Ginny had no plans to tell her that Xenophilius Lovegood’s books were many and ranged from patently useless to lethal and long illegal, or that Luna, being a Ravenclaw, cared not one whit for what people told her she should or should not be allowed to learn. Ginny had an ancient tome with a cracked leather binding spread across her knees studying broom jinxes when Luna crept up behind her and started whispering spells. Because it was Luna, Luna with sunshine hair and stars for eyes, Ginny didn’t go on the defensive, and then she looked in the mirror and saw her hair braided in intricate spirals all over her scalp. “It never comes out the same way twice,” Luna said, touching Ginny’s braids lightly. “I’m tracking the patterns and it’s much easier to look at them on someone else’s head… Sit still while I draw them?”

“Of course,” Ginny agreed, and she happily went back to reading with the scent of lilac in her
nostrils and the rasp of Luna’s charcoal in her ears. It became a tradition, to trade interesting books and then Ginny would go through Quidditch magazines or write down spells to send to Evalyn and Nat and Alex and Finn in their spell swap bargain and Luna would draw whatever braided patterns showed up on Ginny’s head that day.

Fifth: Noctacies. Harry sent her a duplicated page from a book describing the spell when she complained about having to sneak out at night to fly and how she had goggles with night vision lenses but then she couldn’t feel the wind on her face. Ginny got really good at that one really quickly.

Sixth: her favorite, the Bat-Bogey Hex, also used on Ron. This time he’d gone off on a tear about Slytherins in general and Death Eaters’ children in particular. Jules and Ernie were over that day, but Ron wouldn’t listen when Jules tried to shut him down. After she hexed him, Ron’s friends turned on her angrily, but Fred and George popped up with unpleasant smiles on their faces and soot-blackened fingers.

Ginny, as a Slytherin, knew full well what it looked like when battle lines were drawn.

“Thanks,” she told her brothers, after the three of them had retreated.

“Don’t mention it,” George said.

“Seriously,” said Fred. “We have a reputation.”

“Also, little sister, when are you going to tell us how you’ve got the money for things like that wand holster?” Fred said, nodding at her arm where she’d tucked her wand away after nailing Ron.

“It could’ve been a gift,” she said.

George smirked. “But it wasn’t, or you’d have told us.”

“No Ron,” Fred said.

“Because he’s a jealous prat,” George added.

“But us,” Fred finished.

Ginny grinned. It was almost as good as having other Slytherins in the house. “Someday.” She hadn’t told anyone outside her Slytherin year-mates about the basilisk-funded vault in her name at Gringotts, but the twins of all people could learn. Eventually. Assuming Harry hadn’t already told them. Ginny couldn’t follow more than a third of Harry’s calculations. She was pretty sure even his closest friends like Theo weren’t told everything that went on in his head.

Seventh: adfero caecus. Ginny stared at the page in the book Evalyn sent her (with no explanation) while her stomach twisted. It was a Dark curse. In fact, pretty much everything in here was a Dark curse. Ginny had seen and practiced her fair share of Dark spells over her years in the snake pit, mild ones that Pomfrey could heal and mostly just aimed at the wall for fun. She’d studied books as Dark and illegal as this one at Luna’s before. But somehow it felt different to own it. To hold it in her hands and know it was her copy, not Parkinson’s or Kinney’s or Alex’s, not borrowed from the Slytherin shelves or Luna’s library. It was a gift. It was hers.

It felt like crossing a line.

Ginny learned the incantation and the wand movement and moved on to the next spell in the book, and the next. There was a war coming, after all. She’d be an idiot not to be prepared. Slytherin had
taught her to leash her temper but that didn’t mean it was gone and she knew herself to be a warrior and she knew there was no way she’d be sitting this one out.

(What side she was on, she wasn’t sure yet. Ginny knew what side her friends would be on… and she knew if someone tried to hurt Nat or Evalyn or Alex or Finn she’d shred them. But she would also shred anyone who hurt her family. Or Harry. Her people. That complicated things.)

Eighth: a basic broom jinx. Ron’s old Cleansweep dumped him into the duck pond three times before he took it to Dad. Everyone blamed Fred and George, who took the blame with a shrug and winked at Ginny when the rest of the family wasn’t looking.

Ninth: the midsummer ritual. Ginny went to Luna’s, where she’d been escaping to all summer, nearly every day (since Mum didn’t like Harry much at the moment what with all the rumors of him being a budding Dark wizard and made Ginny refuse all invitations to Grimmauld Place). Evalyn and Natalie had family things to do but Alex came, and Finn, and then Xenophilius led them all in the old rites.

Ginny frowned at the strip of paper with the Latin incantation on it. “What does it do?”

“It’s about life,” Luna said sweetly. “Light. Learning, truth, growth…”

“Also marking the beginning of the night’s return to power,” Finn said with a cocky wink.

Ginny kicked him and he danced away, laughing.

Finn with his freckles and the gap between his teeth, Finn the prankster of their Slytherin year, Finn the irreverent and goofy—Finn channeled ridiculous amounts of power that afternoon with the sun blazing high above their heads. Ginny watched him and Alex and Luna and Xenophilius chanting. They’d told her she didn’t have to participate unless she wanted too… but the air crackled with magic the way it did around Harry when he was pissed except a hundred times stronger (also less malevolent) and she wanted to join in.

So she did, reading the Latin aloud.

It stumbled in her throat and tripped on her lips but she found the rhythm soon enough and the paper fell away, forgotten. Ginny tipped her head back and kept softly chanting the words while the summer breeze danced in the grass around her ankles and magic flowed through her. It felt clean. It felt like a current.

The sun slipped out of alignment and the magic slid away and died, leaving Ginny feeling (for once) pure and good.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Luna said.

“…yes,” Ginny said. She usually wasn’t one for words like lovely but that was really the only thing she could think of. Peaceful. Quiet. Powerful. Lovely.

“It’s your heritage,” Alex said softly, like he said everything.

Ginny considered this. It was true. Purebloods did this kind of thing.

No, wizards and witches did this kind of thing. She’d gotten a letter from Astoria saying they convinced Hermione to join the Greengrasses in their private midsummer ritual, seeing as she was fostering with them this summer. And she’d heard through the grapevine that Sirius was teaching Harry about the old Black rites this summer, too. If Hermione and Harry could do it, one Muggle-
born and the other Muggle-raised, Ginny sure as hell could, too.

“Thank you,” she said with a grin.

“Anytime, m’lady,” Finn said, slinging an arm around her shoulders.

Ginny grabbed his forearm and twisted, tossing him over her shoulder and through the air. Alex lashed out with a Cushioning Charm and a laugh so Finn just settled lightly in the grass and then started rolling over and over and over, down the hill toward the Lovegoods’ odd, crooked house, and it looked so fun that Ginny dropped down and started rolling too. The world spun endlessly around her head and she was so dizzy at the bottom that she fell over when she tried to stand and collapsed in a hysterically laughing pile with Finn and Luna. Alex, the sensible one, walked down, and casually tripped them each in turn while they tried to get their balance back.

Tenth: mulco. A Dark spell and a painful one, that essentially landed a blow on a person when they were hit with it. Ginny was eating dinner with her family and enduring Ron’s awful friends—Seamus, Ernie, Susan, and Sophie that evening—when a disheveled and gasping Jules appeared in the fire.

He told them Ethan Thorne used a legal technicality to disinherit Harry. Harry’s trust vault was no longer his; he had no access to the Potter manor or elves or inheritance or anything. Jules was wide-eyed with shock and confusion. Ron, though—Ron gloated.

It was Sophie Roper who took the curse. Sophie the horrible sanctimonious Hufflepuff who tossed her hair and said snippily, “He deserves it, who’d want a Dark wizard like that as their Heir I don’t know… he finally showed his true colors, killing Macnair with that spell…”

Jules spun on her, half-panicked. “No—Sophie, he—he’s disinherited. He did it to—to save us—he—and now—he’s a noble Heir and Dad just…” Jules sank onto a bench. “He’s my brother.”

“Jules,” Sophie said, sympathetic, condescending. “That’s it exactly. No Potter should know spells like that—it’s the Slytherins who’ve led him—”

“Mulco,” Ginny hissed, wand snapping out.

Her parents’ horrified cries were drowned out by Sophie’s shrieks. Ginny rolled her eyes. She’d taken mulco loads of times in dueling club. It hurt like a bitch but a few episkys and you were fine.

“Ginny,” Fred said, and she’d never heard him sound so—so urgent. So serious. “Go.”

“Floo,” George added, unnecessarily.

Ginny was in the fireplace with a handful of Floo powder before anyone knew what was happening. “Ginny!” Mum shrieked.

Ginny threw the powder down. “The Rookery!” she shouted, and green flames sucked her into the Lovegoods’ kitchen.

“I need to not… see them,” she choked out, when she stumbled out into their kitchen.

Xenophilius was genuinely batty whereas his daughter was both batty and brilliant, but he had bad (or good) judgment and he returned her immediately to her parents. Ginny was grounded for the rest of the summer with no wand for that one.

She did her chores with a mutinous scowl and stopped talking to anyone other than Fred and George
and used reams of parchment swapping letters with friends she was no longer allowed to see and flew every night with her stupid night vision Quidditch goggles and basically became the twins’ research assistant in her spare time.

It was going to be a long summer.
There's been lots of questions in the comments about Harry's disinheritance, so I'll just clear a few general things up: he killed Crabbe Sr. in the graveyard. Ethan successfully pinned *Macnair's* death on Harry in an attempt to further paint Harry as the Dark, unstable, jealous foil to heroic, noble Jules. The Wizengamot ruled that Harry did it in self-defense and so he wouldn't be tried for murder. *However,* that ruling legally confirmed that Harry did in fact kill someone, in order to then clear him of all charges.

As an Heir to a noble house, Harry enjoyed protected status, and couldn't be disinherit unless he committed one of several crimes on a list. The list doesn't differentiate based on the circumstances under which you killed someone; it's cut and dry, and Harry took a life, which cost him his protected status. James then disinherited him. Right now Harry has no legal or magical claim to the House of Potter or any of its assets, heirlooms, or vaults. He can be technically adopted by another magical family, but true blood magic is illegal as of 1803 in this world, including the blood adoption ritual that would allow him to be adopted in practice as well. The Wizengamot and Gringotts magics, for entailed vaults and Wizg seats, would not recognize Harry if he was only legally adopted. Legally, he could be adopted and use another surname, such as Black, which a lot of you considered, but ""magically"" he wouldn't truly be one of that family.

Also, my update schedule isn't really a schedule right now. I'm going to be posting a chapter approximately every 1-2 weeks, but I just moved back to campus this weekend (which is why this one is late), and I have a varsity sport, full class load, and several other commitments this fall so I'm not sure how regularly I'll be able to write and post.

Harry

“Who’s that for?”

Harry barely looked up at Theo, concentrating on funneling potion into vials with his wand. Any spills would react in highly unpleasant ways if they came in contact with human tissue. “No one. Yet.”

“So you’re not fantasizing about pouring some in James Potter’s goblet?” Theo said with a smirk, walking into the Grimmauld Place potions laboratory with his hands in his pocket.

“You know me too well,” Harry said with an answering grin. It felt stretched and plastic.

The last of the potion disappeared into a vial. He flicked his fingers and sent the eleven vials soaring neatly into racks of completed potions beneath the window; a wave of his wand cleaned out the cauldron since he hadn’t mastered wandless Vanishing Spells yet.

Theo picked up one of the vials and held it up to the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the big windows. “Seriously, though, why are you brewing horrific potions? This feels really nasty.”

“Practice,” Harry said.
“Actually?”

“It was a recipe in one of the Chamber books, written in archaic Hebrew. I was trying to see if I translated it right.” Harry nodded at four cages of mice lined up along the counter under one of the windows. “Want to test?”

“Happily.”

Theo opened one of the cages, muttered “stupefy,” and pulled out a limp brown mouse. “Does this house seriously have this many mice?”

“Eriss has been ranging around the rest of Grimmauld Place.” Harry joined Theo at the stone countertop next to the cages and cast a scourgify to get rid of any cross-contaminants. Theo laid the mouse’s limp body on the stone. “She says it’s good hunting practice. The Muggles are probably wondering where their rodent problem went.”

Theo snorted and uncorked the vial. “You want to, or…”

“Go ahead.” Harry leaned on the edge of the counter and watched closely as Theo very carefully poured two drops of the potion onto the mouse’s side.

It jerked into life instantly. Theo yelled and nailed it with another Stunner, but the spell didn’t have any effect, which was fascinating in itself; the mouse’s desperation or pain or something was simply overriding the magic. Or maybe the potion itself had something to do with that. Further tests would need to be made.

The mouse staggered to its feet, agonized shriek-squeals pouring from its mouth that Harry hadn’t known mice could make, and tried to run, but it was already too injured. It only staggered six inches before it fell over and twitched for thirty seconds, and then it lay still.

“Well then,” Theo said.

Harry wandlessly flipped the mouse over so the side they’d poured the potion onto lay facing up. A hole just large enough for the first knuckle of his index finger to fit into had been bored into the mouse’s abdomen, except he’d not be sticking his finger in there, because it was lined with a soggy gray hissing goo.

“That bears experimentation,” Theo said.

Harry nodded. “Translation is slow going, but I’ve already found some fascinating potions. There’s this one, and another that seems to work like a standard Blood-Replenisher except instead of magically stimulating the body’s own blood cell production, it actively diffuses through the body until it reaches the bloodstream and then the potion itself changes on a molecular level to turn into the same blood cell type as the host person.”

“So the volume of potion ingested equals volume of blood replaced,” Theo said, eyebrows raised. “Impressive. What’s the acting speed?”

“Too slow to be any use, it looks like whoever it was gave up on it,” Harry said, grabbing the book and flipping it open to the potion in question, “but look here—if you changed the ratio of the water base to the solids, and used the Marchbanks stirring pattern—that wasn’t invented until at least three hundred years after the potion was originally designed, but it’s been crucial for the potion that targets thrugdal infestations in the bloodstream, so if you used it on the Blood-Replacer with modifications to the first and fourth phases of the pattern for the fundamental arithmetic calculations of the new potion…”
“It would accelerate diffusion to the bloodstream,” Theo finished. “Potentially a lot. If I recall right, they needed to make the thrugdal potion reach major blood vessels within thirty seconds of ingestion?”

Harry nodded. “Exactly.”

“And it wouldn’t draw on the body’s own reserves to replace the blood, like the Blood-Replenisher does, and it’d be faster-acting once it actually got to the bloodstream.” Theo’s eyes rose on his forehead as he spoke. “This could be a huge development.”

“This whole thing’s written in this weird archaic Hebrew dialect,” Harry said, “and I’ve only gotten through five potions so far this summer. The…” He looked at the mouse. “Whatever we call that thing is the second one I’ve tested. The potions might not all be as useful as these two but at least they’re interesting.”

“What are you going to do with this?” Theo said.

Harry shrugged. “Develop a new Blood-Replacing Potion, patent it, sell it. I can probably donate some to magical creature reserves where gore wounds are common to get attention and then catch medical professionals’ attention and then boom.”

Theo smirked. “If only Thorne knew how little taking the Potter vaults would affect you…”

“And he doesn’t even know about the basilisk payoff,” Harry said grimly. “Maybe I’ll slip some of that potion into his goblet. I could probably sneak into the Potter summer gala…”

Theo and Sirius were so far the only ones brave enough to mention Thorne or James around Harry. His as-yet-undiminished rage fought against his self-control like every other time he remembered opening the formal letter embossed with the Ministry crest, informing him of his new status. Hadrian Sirius No-name. He’d been tempted to kill Thorne and/or James outright but eventually decided that would be too easy.

Harry wasn’t sure what he’d do to them, or when, but it wasn’t going to be pretty.

“No invitation yet?”

Harry shut the book decisively. “What d’you think?”

“Point taken.” Theo cast a quick stasis charm on the mouse’s corpse and levitated it into the cabinet Harry used to store samples for later study. “I’ve been making some progress translating those Norse books on ancient rune magic you loaned me.”

“And?”

“When they say female only they really mean it,” Theo said. “I’ll need Daphne and Hermione to help me test that book. Maybe Luna if you trust her?”

Harry considered. “Eh… once we go back to school, introduce her to the concepts slowly,” he said. “And then see if she balks at the lighter stuff. I don’t think she will but when we’re messing with thousand-year-old texts swiped from a place that I’m not supposed to be able to access…”

“Can’t be too careful,” Theo agreed. “Point taken. I finished translating the other book; I’ll send duplicates out through the Floo tomorrow. Daphne and Hermione want to mess with it. They’re both pissed I won’t tell them where I got the book from.”
“We’ll bring them in on the Chamber this year. How’re they doing?” Harry hadn’t been going to the Greengrass, Nott, or Parkinson manors this summer, although he and Sirius had had warily polite dinners with each family at least once in various Italian and Bulgarian restaurants where seeing Sirius Black and Harry Potter out with Death Eater families wouldn’t hit the tabloids. He and his friends never talked about why they didn’t invite him over and why he didn’t ask. They just hung out at Grimmauld Place or Zabini’s mum’s London house or occasionally the Rookery. The Bulgarian restaurant had involved Hermione, the Greengrasses, Harry, Sirius, Viktor, and Viktor’s parents. All the adults ended up drunk, and afterwards, the teens left with Viktor and Niklas and a few of their friends to do the same in Niklas’ otherwise empty townhouse. Sirius had pretended not to know what they were planning.

“Hermione loves living full-time as a witch. Not that she’ll admit it,” Theo added with a smirk. “Last I heard they were finishing up that project to put tracking spells on the journals keyed to each one’s owner, and Astoria’s got her mum’s permission to design a fashion line or something with Natalie Nielsen this summer. They’re using Daphne and Hermione as models.”

Harry grinned at the thought of Hermione modeling anything.

“Astoria bribed her with books,” Theo said as if reading Harry’s mind. “The Nielsens have contacts who can get him things that are hard to find in England. Don’t worry, I already got Hermione’s word she’ll loan us anything particularly interesting.”

“Excellent,” Harry said. He glanced around the laboratory one more time to make sure it was clean and everything was packed away, and led the way into the hall, the Hebrew potions book still tucked under one arm.

Theo’s next words were careful. “You and Daphne…?”

“We’re talking,” Harry said in a tone that would shut down further inquiry.

Theo nodded and let it drop. They walked back down to the kitchens.

It wasn’t that Harry was emotionally torn up over Daphne breaking up with him. The mere fact that he wasn’t proved her point—they’d been friends who tried to date and generally were better as friends than a couple. He missed snogging in general but he wasn’t sure it was Daphne he missed snogging. But he hated and cursed this awkwardness that had sprung up between them. The thing he missed most was his friend.

Kreacher appeared on the stairs below them with a crack. “Post for you, Master Harry,” he croaked.

“Can you bring it to the kitchen?” Harry said. “I’ll read it over lunch.”

“Yes, Master Harry,” the elf said, bowing, and disappeared with another crack.

“Getting him on your side was the best decision you made about moving in here,” Theo said.

Harry nodded. “As a general rule, it pays to be nice to the help.”

“Ooooh, such pearls of wisdom,” Theo said, clamping a hand to his heart. “What other brilliant—”

Harry nailed him in the shoulder with a light impedimenta. Theo laughed even as he stumbled and caught himself on the wall.

“Here’s another one,” Harry said with a smirk. “Fuck off.”
“I am offended,” Theo said, hurling himself into a chair around the scarred old oak table. “Blaise coming?”

Harry sat across from him with a wider grin. “Nev is, not sure about Blaise. And Pansy.”

“Sweet,” Theo said, efficiently serving himself from the platters of food Kreacher left on the table.

“Your post, Master Potter.”

“Thanks, Kreacher,” Harry said with a grin. The elf bowed and trotted into the dining room after Harry took his letter.

Theo raised his eyebrows.

“Gringotts,” Harry said. “I’ve been a bit more active about investments since—I lost the Potter vault.”

“Right,” Theo said. “How’s that going?”

Harry slid the envelope with a spell and pulled out the single piece of parchment within, reading it while he ate with his left hand. He had to pause halfway through because the smile on his face meant he wouldn’t be able to chew politely.

“Must be good news,” Neville said, popping out of the fireplace. “You only smile like that when someone’s given you a chance to make their life hell.”

“How well you know me,” Harry said with a theatrical sigh. “I now own a majority of shares in a Muggle company called Grunning.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?” Theo said. “And why would you care about Muggle investments?”

“I wouldn’t,” Harry said, “except for that it’s the company where my uncle works.”

Theo laughed. Neville grinned and sat down at the table, helping himself to food. “Can’t wait for you to tell Pansy,” Theo said.

There was more post that night. The first was in the form of a letter waiting for Harry in his journal.

LL

Hello Harry

I dislike communicating in writing. I’m sending this only because I am worried about Ginny. She’s been very frustrated at home lately and her family will not permit her to go stay with a snake and my father has a rule against friends staying the night, but is there anything you can do to help?

Harry frowned at Luna Lovegood’s letter. He’d been exchanging occasional letters with Ginny, and so had Hermione and Astoria, so he knew she was on house arrest and wandless for the rest of the summer. He wondered what strings he could pull. For several reasons, it wouldn’t work to have
Ginny just come to Grimmauld Place, not least of which, her parents probably wouldn’t let her.

He reviewed a mental list of people and pulled out his journal, opening it to a silver page.

*HP*

*Luna wrote today, asking for a favor*

Neville responded about thirty minutes later. Harry set aside the mouse corpse from that morning he was studying.

*NL*

*What favor?*

*Does it have to do with the angry exclamation points covering Ginny’s letters lately?*

*HP*

*Got it in one*

*Doubt her parents would let her come visit me for an extended period of time. Black family house, with a Black and a disinherited Potter. Slytherins are out. Demelza’s on holiday with her parents in India.*

*NL*

*You want me to invite her*

*HP*

*It doesn’t help that at Grimmauld Place she’d be the only girl and certain influential people would throw a hissy fit if they found out*

*NL*

*I’ll ask my gran*

*HP*

*Thank you.*

He flipped back to Luna’s page.

*HP*

*I’ve got a few pieces moving.*

Luna responded with a line drawing of a strange pattern of what looked like braided hair.

*HP*

*It resembles Mayan runes*

*LL*

*It is Ginny’s hair*
Luna didn’t respond, so he shrugged and went back to the other letter in the journal. He’d tweaked the runes to keep it from fading while he tried to figure out how to respond. Technically, this letter had appeared two weeks and four days ago, right after it was announced that by taking a life, Harry had committed a crime that was grounds for disinheritance, and James had taken advantage of it. When it arrived he’d been too angry to look at it. He was still angry, but he’d come to realize that this was not Jules’ fault.

He looked at Jules’ letter for the umpteenth time.

**Harry**

*I swear I didn’t know this was coming. I know you didn’t kill Macnair. I tried to tell Dad that and he believed me but Ethan said—okay, it doesn’t matter what Ethan said but the short version is they know it’s a lie and they used it anyway.*

*I don’t understand you. We fought together against Voldemort and yet you’re still sticking with Death Eaters’ kids. I can understand that not all Slytherins are evil but seriously, most of them are—most of them at least have dangerous families. Can’t you see why I’m worried? We can help you. We can help the decent Slytherins. You and Ginny and that Muggle-born who just finished her first year and—isn’t there a halfblood a year below Ginny? Dumbledore has people he’s mobilizing in opposition. More than that I can’t say. Dad doesn’t want you involved. Ethan really doesn’t want you involved. Some of the others want to trust you. I want to trust you.*

*Write me back.*

**Jules**

Just like every other time Harry read the damn thing, he immediately felt a headache coming on. So many options. So many possibilities. It wasn’t hard to guess Dumbledore was reactivating the Order of the Phoenix, which was supposed to be a secret but cropped up in old *Prophet* articles on dusty library shelves. Harry firmly believed that knowledge was power. It was exceedingly tempting to join this… secret anti-Voldemort league just so he could figure out what was going on and have a better handle on events. On the other hand, then he’d have to deal with James and Thorne for the rest of the summer and Harry was in no way sure he could do that without adding another murder to his tally.

His tally.

Harry laughed a little, helplessly, as he dropped his face into his hands. He was not quite fifteen and he had a body count.

Webster Crabbe. A classmate’s father. Dead because of him.

Or because of Voldemort. Or Barty Crouch, or Jules, or Dumbledore, or you could go back farther and blame the Muggle father who abandoned baby Tom Riddle and his mother for creating Voldemort in the first place. Harry couldn’t even decide who the blame belonged to anymore, or even if he cared.
The spell crossed his lips. The spell was shot from his mind and wand and magic, and then it took a life.

“Staring at Jules’ letter again?”

Harry couldn’t even muster the energy to scowl at Sirius as his godfather-now-guardian dropped into one of the other ornate library chairs. “I hate this room,” Sirius said conversationally. “All this… old-timey Slytherin chic. Give me the workshop any day.

Indeed, he had grease streaking his shirt that he had forgotten to spell off, and his hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat. “Then why d’you keep it?” Harry said. “The… Slytherin chic.”

“You like it,” Sirius said, like it was obvious.

Harry’s heart reacted. He resisted the urge to scowl at his own chest. Stupid emotions.

“Look,” Sirius said quietly. “I can’t… I can’t work with him ever again. Dumbledore. Or around Jules and that bastard Thorne, not after what they’ve all done to both of us. Guess it’s the Gryffindor in me… but if you want to I won’t stop you.”

“You wouldn’t… think less of me?” Harry said hesitantly. He’d been wanting to bring this up—but they’d known each other only a year and he loved Sirius as much as he thought he was capable of loving anyone and whatever he could call their relationship it still felt fragile and precious and new. Nothing he was willing to endanger needlessly.

“Maybe a little,” Sirius said, lips twitching. “Or—not less, but it’d definitely change how I saw you a bit. I wouldn’t blame you, per se. Voldemort—fucked up your life.”

“No,” Harry said darkly. “Well, yeah, but Dumbledore’s just as bad.”

“But you’re considering this?” Sirius said, tapping the paper. His confusion was obvious. “Pretty forgiving for a Slytherin.”

Harry decided to be honest. “I… Knowledge is power. It would—I could keep track of what they’re doing. Both sides,” he added, since Sirius was smart enough to guess at the complicated politics of Slytherin House right now.

“Ahhh,” Sirius said. “And pass on that information to anyone?”

“You,” Harry said promptly. “No one else. I’m not—turning spy for anyone but myself.”

“I can get behind the independent game,” Sirius said with a grin. “Anarchy’s my middle name.”

“Thought it was Orion Corwin,” Harry said with a straight face.

Sirius pegged a pillow at him. Harry ducked it with a flashing grin. “Just because your family doesn’t do these ridiculous name conventions—”

Sirius broke off abruptly. Harry’s grin faded at the reminder.

“Sorry,” Sirius said quietly.

“It’s okay,” Harry said resolutely. “Can’t tiptoe around it forever. Hadrian Sirius No-Name.” He couldn’t quite keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Sirius opened his mouth and then closed it.
“What?” Harry said suspiciously.

“What?” Harry said suspiciously.

“Nothing.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You could at least do me the courtesy of putting some effort in when you lie.”

“A thing I’m working on,” Sirius said grudgingly. “I’m not saying anything yet. Not until I hear back from—some people.”

“What people?” Harry pressed.

Sirius mimed spelling his lips shut.

“I hate you,” Harry muttered.

“Nah, you don’t,” Sirius said with a smirk. “It’s not a prank if that eases your paranoid snake brain. Write Jules back. At least don’t leave him hanging any longer; it’s nearly August.”

“I suppose right before our birthday’s as good a time as any to make up,” Harry said, reaching for a quill. He’d write it on loose parchment and then copy it into the journal on Jules’ page.

The letter took only a few minutes to draft. He bit his lip and copied the letter into a page for just Blaise and Pansy. They were the best with word games and he needed outside opinions here.

They both responded promptly, and after maybe ten minutes’ back-and-forth, they had a final product that Harry copied over to Jules’ page.

Jules

As you can probably imagine, this has been a busy summer and it’s been... difficult for me. I appreciate you reaching out and trying to help.

For the record, there are at least fourteen halfbloods in Slytherin House of all years. Romilda Vane is the girl you mentioned, I think—she’ll be fine. Ginny... frankly it sounds like she’s on the outs with most of her family members at the moment. Veronica Butler is the Muggle-born in Slytherin. She is not the first we’ve had but she’s the only one at present. I’m keeping an eye on her and we’ve exchanged a few letters this summer. She’s fine. I’ll notify you if she needs any help.

I am willing to come to some kind of meeting or interview or however you control entrance to Dumbledore’s not-so-covert anti-Voldemort group. You seem to think me maintaining the friendships I’ve worked so hard to build the last four years counts as proof of me being evil. First of all, life in Slytherin would get really difficult for me if I just walked away from Theo, Blaise, Pansy, and Daphne at this point. Second, they are my friends and until they start—I don’t know, spouting enslave-the-Muggle-borns propaganda or do something terrible, I’m going to judge them by their actions and not what their parents believe. That said, I will be paying close attention to my House mates this year.

Harry

Theo and Pansy were smart enough to see what Harry was doing. The line he was setting himself up
to walk. Pansy asked, once, what exactly he thought he could give the Order. He knew she was
probing whether his veiled offer to essentially spy on the Slytherins for the Order was genuine or
false. *What they expect to hear,* he wrote, and *Rule one,* and that was that.

The last thing he did before he went to sleep was fire off a note to Fred and George in the journals
asking about this Order and dash out a letter to Ginny for Alekta to deliver in the night. “Secrecy,”
he told his Taiga falcon, stroking her sleek feathers. “You’re pretty recognizable and I’m guessing
Ginny would catch some flak for corresponding with me.”

Alekta *kreeeed* softly and nipped at his ear with her cruelly curved beak and disappeared in a flurry
of wings.

*FW*

*It’s a weird little group*

*We’ve seen them popping in and out of the Burrow a lot, Bones Manor’s the HQ but because Bones
is head of the DMLE her place comes under scrutiny. Mum feeds them so they come here instead*

*GW*

*You would not believe how much some of these people eat.*

*They outdo Ron sometimes*

*HP*

*Didn’t know that was possible*

*FW*

*Well, we’re pretty sure Mundungus Fletcher doesn’t have a job other than petty theft and black
market sales*

*So he doesn’t get regular meals outside of here*

*GW*

*Mum hates having him around. He’s a thief and he smells*

*It’s hilarious*

*HP*

*Are you in the Order?*

*GW*

*How’d you know what it’s called?*

*HP*

*Old Prophet issues from the last war. Wasn’t hard to figure out*

*FW*
Sneaky snake

GW

We’re not Mum won’t let us join
We’re of age but—she’s got clout

Dumbledore apparently balks at overtly using child soldiers

HP

Old goat.

FW

Yep. Why do you ask?

HP

Jules invited me to join

GW

WHAT

FW

What he said

Doesn’t he hate you right now???

HP

That’s my dear ex-father you’re thinking of. Jules is—riding his moral high horse in to rescue me from the evil Slytherin ways or something. I try not to pay too much attention to his sanctimonious bullshit. Gives me a headache. But I’m also very curious what the hell they’re even doing. So.

GW

Want us to try and join?

Also, punny

FW

Remember the little incident with Ginny cursing Roper? yeah Jules was trying to defend you, against the shit Roper was saying that set off Gin

HP

Ginny mentioned that

And thanks. I’d lay money you’re already eavesdropping on all their conversations that happen remotely near you

FW
Brother dear I think he’s onto us

HP

And if your mum says you can’t how would you get around that?

FW

Well we’d have Jules appeal to Dumbledore

HP

Oh that would actually work... Do you want to?

I’m assuming no or you’d already be in

FW

Not particularly

Do you want us in the Order

HP

Not much point is there

GW

Not particularly

And I just remembered, can we Floo over tomorrow to work on some stuff? We need to make owl order forms and packaging for Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes and Mum keeps vanishing it when she finds any

HP

Sure. Bring Ginny if you can. Want to use the potions laboratory here?

Find a way to hide the order forms. Spell them so they look like something else

FW

We most definitely would

Get your creepy experiments out of the way first

Also we’re looking into that

But as you might imagine

GW

She’s got a lot of experience with detection spells

HP

Yeah I’m sure you lot were a challenge to keep alive as children
I take it “creepy experiments” includes the mouse corpses hanging from the ceiling?

GW

Emphatic yes

HP

Just joking, no mouse corpses on the ceiling

I keep them in a cabinet under stasis charms.

See you tomorrow

Jules took two full days to write back. Harry kept telling himself he had no room to be irritated about slow response times.

Harry

Good news and bad news. You’re in but—okay mostly they don’t do interviews or… anything like that but they’re making an exception for you. Don’t get pissed. Leaky Cauldron, Monday, 1pm. Sirius can’t come. Dad was adamant on that one and Dumbledore agreed. None of them trusts him after the trials. I’m sorry.

Jules

“You shouldn’t trust me either,” Harry whispered to the journal. “Not even this much.”

He went back to the second of two research projects of the summer. The first was exploring archaic and forgotten runes and potions magic from the Chamber of Secrets. The second he hadn’t told anyone about, not even Sirius, not even Theo.

Harry was keeping his supplies on the second, even more secret project in the lockbox Sirius gave him for his last birthday. Magical copies of dusty old Prophet back issues. Various documents and laws requested from the Ministry archives under a carefully constructed false persona as a Californian student pursuing a Mastery in History of Magic and Magical Law, which Hazel Laurens assured him was a common practice. A leather-bound notebook of never-ending pages already stuffed with notes, references, lists, observations.

The picture he was slowly forming was informative if not pretty, but he wasn’t going to show it to anyone until he had all or most of the pieces. Until connections that were half-guesses formed into cohesive points backed up by evidence. He couldn’t even convince himself as it was, much less anyone else.

Barty Crouch had not written again. Harry hadn’t contacted him.

He also had not added the Death Eater’s name to the red page in his journal, or gone in and cut the extra notebook out of the spells on Harry’s journal entirely.
The Leaky Cauldron looked the same as it always did.

Harry supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. The Ministry had been embarking on a successful smear campaign of Jules Potter for almost two months now, since the conclusion of the Triwizard in early June, so no one really believed his “crackpot” stories that Voldemort was back. To Harry’s delight, this resulted in widespread speculation that James Potter was holding onto the Head Auror position only through his friendship with Amelia Bones, as well as several of Dumbledore’s positions and honors being revoked. He’d lost Chief Wizengamot a year ago but the Order of Merlin would be a blow to the man’s bloated ego if nothing else.

The result was that there was no aura of fear or suspicion in the Leaky. Just the usual dim ambiance and chatter, the clink of glasses and occasional *whoosh* of the Floo.

Harry stepped out, waited while a magical brush busily batted ash off his shoes, and tossed Old Tom the fare. “Butterbeer, please,” he said.

He was deliberately two hours early. A light Notice-Me-Not allowed him to slip through the crowd without attracting a whit of attention; people’s eyes skated off of him as just another patron in a crowded tavern full of people they didn’t recognize. He slid into an empty booth towards the back of the room and set his drink on it. “Ready?”

“*When you are.*”

Harry laid his right hand flat on the bench, concealed between his body and the wall. Eriss slithered up out of his pack and down his arm until she was coiled neatly on the bench next to him.

“*Here goes,*” Harr muttered, tracing runes down her back with his wand.

Eriss wriggled. Her tail twitched involuntarily. “*Did you change the invisibility spell? Those tickle.*”

“*More power in it now,*” Harry said. “*It would be not good for someone in here to spot you.*”

“*True.*”

“*Done.*”

She immediately climbed up onto the tabletop.

For a few minutes, Harry sipped his butterbeer and Eriss idly shifted around on the old, scarred wood. No one blinked at three and a half feet of deadly Loharian viper sitting in the middle of a crowded pub, so Harry thought it safe to assume his runes worked.

“All right,” he said. “*Time to check if there’s an ambush.*”

“I can scent a few other snakes,” Eriss said. “*Can I involve them?*”

“Will they listen?”

She did the snake equivalent of a disdainful sniff. “*Of course they will. I’m superior in the first place and I’m a Speaker’s familiar.*”

“All right, then,” Harry said, smirking. “*Have fun bossing them around.*”

“I will, thank you,” she said waspishly, and vanished into the crowded bar within seconds.

Harry fingered the antivenin in his pocket. He really hoped she wouldn’t get stepped on and
reflexively bite someone because then he’d have to choose between drawing attention by saving their life, or letting someone else handle it and possibly letting them die. Jules and the Order crowd would find it suspicious that someone got a snake bite in the Leaky the same afternoon a Parselmouth was known to be there… but then again, it’d make them even more suspicious if Harry just so happened to have the right antivenin on hand for the bite. St. Mungo’s would confirm it was a specific antivenin and not a general one.

He’d just have to keep hoping and make that call in the moment.

Eriss returned an hour later. “No ambushes that I can see. None of the people in this smelly building have scents I recognize. I didn’t overhear any conversations about you or this secret club nonsense or the stupid goat man.”

Harry loved her increasingly rude nicknames for Dumbledore. “Good news. Find those other snakes?”

“Six.” Eriss climbed up his leg under the table and coiled in his lap. “All of them eager to help the Speaker’s familiar. I’m politely not saying “I told you so”.”

“You just did.”

She hissed wordlessly at him.

Harry plastered innocence on his face.

“It helps they can feel from me that you are a powerful Speaker. It makes me powerful,” she said smugly. “They will keep track of who enters and who leaves. We have ways of passing scents on to one another, so they will know if the goat man or your bad copy or the wolf man or the teachers come. Or the ginger Weasleys.”

“Thank you,” Harry said with a grin. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Me neither.”

He laughed a little bit as he allowed himself to do only with her.

“Can I bite them when they get here?” she said after a few quiet minutes.

“No.”

“Just a little bit?”

“No.”

“You ruin all my fun.”

“It’s my goal in life.”

“I will bite you.”

“No, you won’t,” Harry said with a grin.

Grumbling, Eriss prodded him with her tail and settled down to sulk. He rolled his eyes and started scratching under her lower jaw. Within minutes she had quit sulking. “I still don’t like you,” she complained.
“Right.” He kept scratching.

He tensed minutely when the Floo whooshed and a familiar silhouette popped out—familiar because it was nearly identical to his own. They’d brought Jules, then. Bit surprising. According to the tabloids, Jules had been keeping a low profile this summer, leaving his family’s representation to Ethan Thorne. Harry snorted softly at the thought. He’d bet Dumbledore didn’t trust James and/or Jules not to do something idiotic and fuel the rumors of Jules being a spoiled prat making up lies for attention.

Someone should really tell the Prophet that only the first part of that description was true.

“Okay, into the pack,” Harry said, watching several more people pop out of the fireplace. All of them wore cloaks with the hoods up and went swiftly upstairs. Five adults plus Jules, one of whom was easily tall enough to be Dumbledore. They’d almost definitely brought Lupin as well, who Harry hadn’t seen all summer, though apparently he and Sirius had had several very tense lunches at public restaurants that Sirius refused to talk about.

“Why?” Eriss complained.

“We already talked about this,” Harry said. “I’m pretty sure Dumbledore can see through some or all invisibility spells with those glasses, I don’t trust the runes on you to hold up.”

He ignored her wordless grumbles as she disappeared inside, stuffed a hand into the bag and poured magical warmth into the nest of cotton shirts she liked to sleep on, and followed the Order people.

They were in the room number Jules gave him. 15 on the first floor. Harry had worn his silent shoes for exactly this moment: none of them even heard him walk down the hall or appear in the doorway. He had a precious few seconds to observe.

Dumbledore, the first to pull his cloak off. Jules, shucking aside the dark red fabric like it irritated him to hide. Thorne—damn. Lupin. Andromeda Tonks. A woman he didn’t recognize.

“Harry,” Lupin said, blinking owlishly in surprise.

Of the others, only Dumbledore didn’t twitch when they turned to look at him.

“Good to see you all,” Harry said. His face already ached from smiling and they weren’t even thirty seconds in.

He counted in his head.

The count was at seventeen when Jules cleared his throat. “Yeah, hi. Sit down?”

“Thanks.” Harry shut the door gently behind him and settled at the plain white-painted table. The others slowly sat down—thank Merlin the table was circular. They still somehow managed to arrange themselves in a sort of trial format, with the chairs on either side of Harry empty and Thorne directly across from him.

Clearly, this was going to be his weekly exercise in self-control.

“Thank you for coming,” Dumbledore said with a genial smile. “It means a lot, dear boy, that you are willing to work to overcome our past differences in the name of the greater good.”

“If it helps, I still don’t like you, Headmaster,” Harry said. “And I won’t pretend to. We all know it would be a lie. But as you said… some sacrifices must be made for the greater good.” He really
wished wizards read Muggle philosophy. If more people associated Dumbledore with utilitarianism, he might never have turned into quite this big a problem.

“Oddly enough, that is reassuring,” the unknown woman said. She stuck her hand across the table. “Hestia Jones. Hufflepuff.”

“A pleasure,” Harry said with a smile, shaking her hand. It was at least a halfway sincere smile. “One of my best friends is a badger, you know. Justin Finch-Fletchley, perhaps you’ve heard of him?”

“I have,” Jones said, still grinning. “Through the House grapevine—I’m sure you’d know better than I do about those, really—he’s some kind of Arithmancy prodigy?”

“His parents are businesspeople,” Harry said. “He grew up with Muggle maths. Likes economics. Arithmancy’s similar enough that he does quite well.”

“Muggle-born?” Thorne said, leaning forward like a hound with a scent.

Harry sighed. “If you actually think I subscribe to blood supremacy politics, maybe I should just leave now.”

“Not at all what I meant,” Thorne said with a warm smile. Harry never trusted people quite this polished. Thorne was so fake it hurt to look at him: brown hair in perfect order, square jaw, blue-gray eyes, robes just on the tasteful side of casual.

“Then what did you mean?” Harry said, still perfectly polite.

“Merely an inquiry.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You seem to be itching to whip out the legal references. Am I on trial?”

“Certainly not,” Thorne said at the same time as Andromeda Tonks said, “Yes.”

Jules dropped his head into his hands.

Harry spread his own hands magnanimously, the picture of openness. “Ask me what you want to know, then.”

“Do you support Voldemort?” Thorne said instantly.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Did me fighting against him last term not clear that up?”

“There have been… concerns,” Dumbledore said delicately. “Regarding your loyalties.”

You don’t say. “Why is that?” Harry said.

“You’re friends with several kids from Death Eater families,” Jones said bluntly. Thank Merlin for Hufflepuffs; if this was just him and Dumbledore and Thorne and Tonks they’d have gone around in verbal circles all day. “Most notably Theodore Nott and Pansy Parkinson, although Daphne Greengrass bears mentioning.”

“As I’ve told Jules on multiple occasions, none of them has ever said or done anything Death Eaterish,” Harry said. Maybe he should keep a tally of his lies… that could be entertaining. This made number one.

Lupin shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I… Harry, you must understand I attended school with the
ancestors or family members of several of those children. That kind of prejudice… it doesn’t just go away in one generation.”

“Can you point to any incidents of my friends bullying Muggle-borns?” Harry said, knowing Lupin couldn’t.

Silence.

He held in his smile with a significant effort.

“Why do you wish to join the Order of the Phoenix?” Dumbledore said.

“I believe in your mission,” Harry said with perfect insincerity. Two.

“To take down You-Know-Who?” Tonks said. She was one to watch, Harry decided—a fellow Slytherin, born a Black. Her dark eyes were inscrutable and every bit as incisive as Dumbledore’s. She’d know Slytherin politics better than him.

Then again, that could play to his advantage.

“Voldemort,” Harry said.

Lupin and Jones flinched.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, faking uncertainty, “was I not… Jules says it, so…”

And, of course, no Death Eater would dare speak his trumped-up name.

“You are welcome to say it here,” Dumbledore said. “Fear of a name increases fear of the person.”

“Wise words, Headmaster.” Whatever else you could say about the man, he was good at dropping clever aphorisms.

“I did worry that your Slytherin friends may have been… taking advantage of Miss Granger and Mr. Finch-Fletchley for their ability in class,” Lupin said.

Harry very carefully kept his wand hand from twitching. “Neither Hermione nor Justin would allow anyone to copy their work even if a friend asked. And frankly, it’s not like any of us needs their help.”

“And the Longbottom boy?” Tonks said. “He’s pureblooded but a weak wizard.”

“He’s not,” Harry said.

“Then why does everyone in his family seem to think so?”

Harry held her gaze and let the silence stretch for several seconds. “You of all people should know that families can be a lot more complicated than they might appear from the outside. That’s not my story to tell. Not to mention it’s irrelevant.”

“What do you want out of joining the Order?” Dumbledore interrupted.

“To help you fight.” Three.

Thorne scoffed. “Let’s all be honest here, shall we?” Too late. “It would be a very Slytherin thing to do to join the Order and spy on us.”
Okay. Fine. Kid gloves coming off. Harry leaned forward, braced his forearms on the table, and said very evenly, “I killed a Death Eater, Thorne. And you have the balls to sit there and accuse me of trying to spy? Gryffindor idiocy is worse than I thought.”

They waited for a long, long moment, staring at each other. Harry was pretty sure Jules didn’t know about Crabbe. Only he and his friends and the Death Eaters knew that Harry had killed Crabbe. Jules had been busy dueling Voldemort, and then he’d been passed out. Thorne could admit to what everyone here surely knew, if they’d heard Jules’ story—that Harry never killed Walden Macnair—or he could save face and in doing so move on from the issue.

Very slowly, Thorne smiled. It was an unpleasant expression but Harry had seen a lot worse. “True,” he said. “Very true.”

Harry, one. Stupid adults, zero.

“Anything else?” Harry said.

Lupin looked pained. “Sirius.”

Everyone got quiet.

Harry didn’t know about Hestia Jones’ opinion of Sirius but everyone else—known quantities.

Lupin: once a best friend, now barely speaking to him. Andromeda Tonks: estranged cousin thanks to the fact that she’d believed Dumbledore’s lies fourteen years ago and now refused to walk away from his Order. Dumbledore and Thorne—self-explanatory. Jules…

Well, actually, Jules was something of an unknown quantity there, too.

“Yes,” Harry said after almost a minute of no one daring to speak. “Sirius. My godfather. He won’t be invited, will he?”

“It didn’t work especially well the first time,” Dumbledore said delicately.

Harry settled back in his chair. “Yeah, not so much. I’m staying at Grimmauld Place. No way will I change my guardian.” Trace of the expected bitterness. “Not that I could.”

And oh, that reminder… it came so close to breaking the leash on his self-control. Thorne was right there. Harry had a dream the night after his disinheriting, and he remembered it now: the graveyard, except Thorne’s dead body lying where Crabbe’s had.

He shook that out of his head before it got too tempting.

“He’s good to you,” Jules said. “Right?”

“Yes.”

Jules crossed his arms and glared at Thorne. “Then I don’t see a problem.”

Thorne. Dissension in the ranks, then, though Jules’ blame was misplaced. Dumbledore and then James and then Thorne, in that order, were the problem. Jules was probably just psychologically incapable of blaming James or Dumbledore for anything substantial at this point.

“That can be arranged,” Dumbledore said. “And what will you bring to the table, dear boy?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Harry said.
Dumbledore twinkled at him.

Bastard. The old goat wanted to make him say it.

Well, Harry could bend in order not to break. “You could use an inside line on the Slytherins,” he said. “Children tend to be less… verbally cautious than their parents. Never know what one might hear in the snake pit.”

Dumbledore watched him cannily. Harry kept his Occlumency shields at full strength, felt a slight brush across them—Merlin but the man was subtle—and concentrated fiercely. He dredged up his hatred of Dumbledore and the thought of Voldemort and patched the feelings of the first onto the image of the second and held it at the forefront of his mind.

“It would certainly be useful,” Dumbledore said.

A bit of tension drained from the room. Thorne scowled briefly. Harry couldn’t wait to piss him off just by existing around the Order meetings. “You’ll have to stay friends with them, though,” Jones said. “Wouldn’t you?”

“He would anyway.” Tonks spoke with finality. “Slytherin politics are unforgiving. The… context… only makes it worse. He and the Weasley girl both will have to watch their step this year.”

Bingo. He’d been hoping she would bring that up without him having to go there; it looked so much better if she came up with the idea on her own. Harry smiled gratefully. “It’s never been easy,” he admitted, looking down at his hands on the table. “And… yeah, this year is going to be worse.” In so many ways.

“I vote yes,” Lupin said.

“Oh, is it a vote now?” Thorne said acidly.

More dissension. This meeting was already fascinating.

“Yes,” Jones said. She smiled at him. Harry returned an ever-so-slightly-hesitant smile.

Kind people were so easy to manipulate.

“I concur,” Dumbledore said. He beamed across the table. “Welcome to the team, dear boy.”

Harry smiled at him. His teeth ached. “Thank you, Headmaster. I look forward to it.”

“Jules will contact you with our next meeting,” Dumbledore said. “You may travel home through the Burrow… for secrecy purposes. And I understand you have friends there you might like to visit.”

“Of course. Thank you, Headmaster.” Harry stood up and pushed his chair in. “Ms. Jones, it was nice to meet you. Mrs. Tonks and Mr. Lupin, good to see you again.” Four. “Headmaster, Thorne… well, I’d say it’s been a pleasure, but I’d be lying. Jules…” He hesitated, as his brother’s eyes met his.

“I’ll be in touch,” Jules said.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. See you soon, then.”

In the hall, he pulled the door gently closed behind him, laid both hands to his head, and cast a wandless amplius auri. He was not very good at this charm wandless, despite having practiced it the whole summer, and it wasn’t the most powerful Hearing-Enhancing Charm he’d ever cast, but it
worked.

“…don’t trust him.” Tonks. “Every motion he just made down to the timing of his blinks was calculated. He’s a snake.”

“So are you,” Lupin pointed out.

“No,” Tonks said. “Not a snake in the sense that Hufflepuffs are badgers and Gryffindors lions. I mean that’s not a person, it’s a reptile wearing a skin suit. Something about him just… I don’t trust him.”

Dead silence. Harry had been right to be wary of her. Theo would get a kick out of that description, though.

“He is useful,” Dumbledore said very softly. “Remus, don’t look at me like that, you know it’s true… I do wish we did not have to make these kinds of decisions, but such is war.”


_Yeah, but not in the direction you want me to waffle._

“He won’t give us everything,” Tonks continued. “He’ll pick and choose what to pass on. Slytherin loyalty is—look, I respect all of you, but it’s not something you can understand without being a Slytherin. He’ll protect those friends of his however he can.”

“He wasn’t lying,” Lupin said, audibly reluctant. “About their behavior in school. I never saw them… going after Muggle-borns or… spouting—certain opinions.”

Thorne snorted. “They’re clever children, they wouldn’t do it where the Gryffindor teacher would hear.”

“Still. And he’s right. Finch-Fletchley and Granger wouldn’t let people copy off their homework and the rest of them certainly don’t need the help. They’re all bright children. Too bright in some cases.”

“Definitely not on the copying,” Jules said. “Granger’s an insufferable know-it-all sometimes, loves lording her brain and grades over everyone. No way she’d let them use her like that.”

“Ron and Ernie disagree,” Ethan said.

There was rustling, as if Jules had shifted in his seat. “I’ve argued with them about it,” Jules said finally. “I think they’re jealous. I mean, maybe I’m wrong, but I just don’t see Justin or Hermione agreeing to that.”

“It’s possible the others have something on them,” Tonks said flatly. “Slytherins won’t hesitate to use people who aren’t their friends—the worst use even those they’re closest too.”

“We’ll simply have to be cautious about what we give him in return,” Jones said diplomatically. “He’s not had it easy, poor boy.”


“I’m curious why he seemed not to be lying when he said he’s killed a Death Eater,” Tonks said. “When we all know how Macnair _really_ died, not the Ministry line.”

Silence for a few seconds.
“It was chaos,” Jules said slowly, pensively. “I mean… I was… I was fighting Voldemort. And—it was all I could do not to die. They couldn’t have been shooting to kill or Harry wouldn’t… be here. He fended them off for—a few seconds, at least. Bought me time. Us time. Blew half the graveyard to bits in the process. It’s possible something went wrong and I didn’t—notice. I mean… I was in the golden cage, and then I was unconscious, and then we showed up back at Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I’ll have Severus look into it. Shall we invite him to the meeting on the fifth?”

“I’ll let Amelia know,” Jones said.

They devolved into logistics and Harry decided he’d heard enough.

Eriss poked her head out of his pack as he walked down the stairs. “Sounded awful.”

He scowled as he flipped Old Tom a coin and grabbed some Floo powder. “I should get an acting award for that,” he said, and then: “Grimmauld Place!”

Albus

Spinner’s End never failed to depress him.

Albus picked his way delicately up the cracked sidewalk. Houses with cheap, old, synthetic siding squatted glumly in the glaring sun; trees and grass drooped limply under the weight of July. It couldn’t touch Albus, not with the temperature regulation runes woven into his purple-and-gold robes, but just looking at the plants and the sticky tarmac street made him feel like a nice cold lemonade. Not that Severus was likely to have any.

Popping a lemon sherbet into his mouth as a poor substitute, Albus turned off the sidewalk and up Severus’ front walkway. The wards on the house shivered over his magical sense like always—strong, bitter, guarded, like day-old coffee. Wards tied to a house often took on the character of those who lived there, even more strongly when there was only one magical inhabitant.

The front steps creaked. Albus frowned and waved his wand, vanishing several weeds that had started to climb the front railing. Severus really needed to take better care of this place—though perhaps he liked that the scrubby, unkempt front lawn and peeling paint and filthy windows helped blend in with the rest of the Muggle street. It might have been a nice place to live once but Albus wouldn’t move here for love or money.

Severus appeared in the hallway seconds after Albus opened the unlocked front door and stepped inside to wipe his shoes on the mat. “Let yourself in, why don’t you,” he said, more of a bite in his voice than usual.

“Perhaps you ought not leave your door unlocked,” Albus suggested with a gently teasing smile.

Severus made a rude noise and vanished back into what Albus knew to be his kitchen. Unless he was brewing illegal potions in the sink, it seemed Albus hadn’t managed to catch him in any sort of wrongdoing by popping in uninvited. Ah, well. It would seem to be only the dotty persona Severus knew he affected, and Albus preferred to live by the maxim trust, but verify when it came to dubiously reformed ex-Death Eater spies.

“Tea?” Severus said acidly, shoving a mug at Albus as soon as he entered the grungy kitchen.

“Thank you,” Albus said, accepting the cup out of the air and pushing magic into it until it cooled to
a drinkable temperature. “Severus, really, this kitchen is filthy, are you sure you wouldn’t like a house-elf? I can loan you one from Hogwarts, even if only for the summer, to smarten this place up.”

“No.” Severus didn’t even look up from the papers he was arranging on the kitchen table. The crisp black of his robes was stark and out of place against dingy linoleum floors, faded wood cabinets, and old, sad furniture. “I’ve said I will not tolerate another presence and I meant it.”

“As you wish,” Albus said, pleasantly, as though it didn’t matter to him in the slightest.

Severus set his stack of papers aside and glowered at Albus over his hooked nose. Albus didn’t dare brush his mind like he might have most people and instead glanced inquiringly down at the papers. “May I ask what you’re working on?”

“My research,” Severus drawled, as though it should be obvious. “As you well know, I hardly have the time for my own projects during the school year, what with drumming the bare bones of my art into your ungrateful brats’ thick skulls.”

“Education is a valuable pastime,” Albus said genially. Severus would undoubtedly be much happier holed up in a tower somewhere getting wealthy off potions patents, but until Voldemort was vanquished and his oath to Albus fulfilled, he needed to be at the school, where he was useful and Albus could keep an eye on him. Severus tended to get caught up in things and forget to look after himself.

Their stare-down lasted a few more seconds before Severus made a disgusted noise. “Did you impose your presence on me to deliver aphorisms about education or is there a purpose to this random visit?”

Albus generally had at least one purpose for everything he did, as Severus well knew, but Albus couldn’t blame him for wanting to move things along. “Mr. Hadrian met with several of us today, regarding his potential future with the Order.”

“I imagine putting him and Ethan Thorne in the same room was a smashing success,” Severus said, his tone drier than sand.

“The boy seemed surprisingly willing to cooperate with him, and us,” Albus said. “I so admire Slytherin self-control. He may hate Ethan but I daresay he hates Voldemort more.” Quick and superficial though it was, the quick pass he’d made at young Harry’s mind had confirmed that beyond a doubt.

“And Potter?”

“James was not there.”

Albus watched with interest as Severus’ jaw worked. “I was referring to Julian,” he said, barely moving his lips.

One of these days, Albus would work him into a place where he could say Jules’ name without appearing to be in pain. “There is yet hope for them, I think, though I’ve given up on a reconciliation between Harry and James. Jules, though, he seems to want to see the best in his brother… and you know I believe expecting the best from other people often makes it so.”

“I wish you luck,” Severus said, his expression saying the exact opposite. “Hadrian is as overconfident as his brother, though subtler, and Slytherin will have taught him to nurse his grudges like Pomona does her plants.”
“Perhaps,” Albus allowed, resisting the urge to shake his head. Severus was truly too biased about the Potter boys; he couldn’t even see the Slytherin twin clearly. The more he insisted they were arrogant and overconfident the more Albus tended to think the opposite. “But fraternity is not a bond so easily shattered. Harry may loathe Ethan and James, and distrust me, but Jules, I think, can reach him still.”

“What of his friends?” Severus sneered. “Do you mean to save them as well?”

“If I can. Severus, you know I will welcome any who wish to free themselves of their families’ Dark ties,” Albus reminded him. Of course, for those with something to give, he would gently request it of them once they’d left, once they felt an obligation to offer up information or connections, but even those with little to offer deserved protection. They were teenagers and some were most likely too indoctrinated in their families’ beliefs to save but he would turn away no child fleeing the Death Eaters.

Severus made an irritable jerk of his hand, as if brushing off a fly. “I’ve told you Malfoy is beyond your reach.”

“I don’t believe that,” Albus said, honestly. Draco Malfoy had a softness at his core; his parents could try all they liked to carve him into a Death Eater but clay would always crumble under pressure. Theodore Nott, on the other hand—Albus did not like how he’d wormed himself into a position so close to Harry No-name. That boy was cold, cruel, and too clever for Albus’ preference. He would be Jules’ greatest obstacle when it came to bringing Harry to the light.

“What am I here for, if you discount all my advice?” Severus spat, breaking Albus’ train of thought.

“You know your role is vital,” Albus said, gently. Severus required a delicate touch, always had. His self-control was formidable but underneath it he was brittle as glass. “Without you we would be as children stumbling about in the dark.” He sighed. “Without you I would not have known the truth about Crabbe’s death.”

Severus straightened a bit. “It came up today?”

“Indirectly,” Albus said. “Ethan pointed out that for Harry to join the Order as a spy would be clever and, if you’ll forgive me, a very Slytherin thing to do. Harry countered that he’d killed a Death Eater.”

“And forced Thorne to stick to his lie.” Severus’ lip curled. “Heavy-handed and overt, but effective.”

“Of Ethan, or of Harry?”

Severus paused. “Both… but primarily Thorne. I… suppose… Hadrian had little choice.”

Albus counted every instance of praise for either Potter twin, no matter how grudging, a step in the right direction. Severus had to move on, and though the war made that difficult, every bit of progress now was one less bit of progress he’d have to make afterwards, potentially without Albus there to help. “Andromeda noted that he did not seem to be lying about having killed a Death Eater, although no one there other than myself and Harry knows the truth, and Harry doesn’t know I know.”

“Listen to her, if you won’t me,” Severus said. “She knows Slytherins.”

“She cannot see this for what it is,” Albus countered. “She sees Hadrian as the opposite of herself, the child pushed away from his family into the other side’s waiting arms. She blames James and to some extent Sirius but I fear she can never trust him.”
“Shocking.”

Albus stroked his beard. Once an affectation, the gesture had since become an actual habit, albeit one of which he was conscious. “Should I tell her the truth about the boy?”

“No one will be surprised that he was using potentially lethal spells in that situation,” Severus said. “Nor blame him for it. I’ve told you before, I don’t see the harm in telling the Order, at least, the truth.”

“You’re certain he died of a *reducto*?” Albus said.

“Very.” Severus’ eyes didn’t flicker and Albus felt no trace of a lie with his passive Legilimency, which was as much as he dared exercise on Severus. As the only Legilimens living who was more accomplished than Tom, Albus was confident that this was, in fact, the truth. He’d torn through Severus’ mind, extracted an oath, and he knew concealing the true extent of his abilities as an Occlumens would break said oath to protect the Potter twins.

“Above his level,” Albus said, coming to a decision, “but it’s no surprise he studied ahead for the Tournament. Jules used that spell as well, if memory serves. It will do no harm to inform at least a few of the Order the truth of that night. Perhaps it may even convince them to give Harry a chance. The more we expect him to turn to the Dark, the more likely he is to do precisely that.”

“He’ll never trust you again,” Severus said.

Albus sighed. What he’d done to Harry No-name was a burden he would carry for the rest of his life, but it wasn’t one he could regret. Even now that things had gone awry and the wards he’d pushed so hard to keep were fallen. James had become more fanatical than Albus had anticipated, perhaps more than was safe… but Jules was healthy and happy and as well-adjusted as Albus could have hoped for in a savior. He was beginning to think independently of his father, too, which would ultimately make him cleverer and more malleable. Zealots were useful but dangerous, and Jules was not his father. Not yet and not ever if Albus had his way. “I know there’s no love or trust to be lost between me and Harry. If I can convince him to work with me, that will be enough… and someday, when this is over, I hope I can apologize to him.”

Severus’ sneer conveyed better than any words how well he thought that would go over.

“I know he won’t forgive me,” Albus said. He hoped, but it was unlikely. “But I would be remiss to not at least express that I am sorry for what he endured, and that I truly did not believe he would be treated so horribly by the Muggles.”

“I wash my hands of it.” Severus stared moodily at his untouched mug of tea while Albus took a sip from his.

“Severus,” Albus said, “the boy could perhaps benefit from speaking to you. A fellow Slytherin, likewise drawn to some aspects of the Dark, likewise raised by… less than pleasant Muggles—”

“No.” Severus went as still as a statue, as a mountain, as the air before a storm.

They’d been over it before but Albus had hoped—he cut off that train of thought. It would be counterproductive to push Severus any farther, at least today. “Very well,” he said. “It must be Jules, then. Best of luck with your research; do owl me if you have need of the Hogwarts treasury for any supplies.” The school benefited from Severus’ various patents and research grants, as his employer and place of study, not to mention his reputation. Albus considered this a fair trade for slipping some of Severus’ personal orders into the Potions budget.
He received no response, but it had been their arrangement for several years, so Albus cleaned his mug with a wave of his wand and saw himself out.

If anything, the street looked *more* depressing than when he’d walked in. Perhaps because it was once again hammered home that Severus *lived* here. Albus shook his head and made his way back down the sidewalk toward the fields and the forest, which he used as cover for Apparating in and out of this place. Poor Severus. Mired in the past, as much as James. Albus was glad that at least Harry No-name had managed to leave his poor origins behind. It was a pity he’d gotten himself so firmly under Sirius’ thumb but Sirius was too immature and damaged to be much of a danger to anyone, and if nothing else he hated everything to do with his family, so he at the very least wouldn’t push Harry closer to the Dark. And he knew what it was to have a brother, so Albus expected that he would at least understand Harry’s and Jules’ attempts to maintain some relationship.

It was not the best outcome, but it wasn’t the worst. Albus could work with things as they were. Harry was an inroad with the Slytherins, with the potential to provide valuable information. He could perhaps even bring some of his friends back to the Light as well, and while they were too young to have any strategic value to the Dark, it would be a blow to morale and Albus could use any wands willing to fight for the Order. This moment was particularly critical. The Ministry was worse than useless, the Order temporarily forced into subterfuge, and Jules’ and especially James’ reputations hung in the balance. The battle Albus was waging over the Defense position spoke of plans grinding into motion at the Ministry that would give him trouble; the whispers he’d heard indicated Fudge intended to interfere at Hogwarts, though Albus didn’t yet know how.

Albus needed everything he could get out of the boy whose name was no longer Harry Potter.
Daphne

Having another sister was weird.

Not technically a sister. There needed to be real family feelings there first. But the fosterage system was essentially adoption without all the paperwork. All the Greengrasses knew it, Hermione knew it, and in the time-honored tradition of Slytherins, no one talked about it outright.

Thank Merlin Hermione had picked up on some tact over the years.

“Is she in the library again?” Daphne asked.

Astoria looked up. “Probably. Mother wants us all for our opinions on some women’s dueling robes in an hour, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Daphne hesitated in the door of Astoria’s room, suddenly and uncharacteristically hesitant. She’d been meaning to ask this all summer… but Mother and Father were so busy, and she and Hermione never seemed to have time to themselves…

“What?” Astoria said.

Daphne took a deep breath. “Tori, do you… like Hermione?”

“Mhm.”

“No, I mean—” Daphne rubbed her fingers together, frustrated. “I mean, do you like having her here. Around.”

“Yeah. She’s fun. She doesn’t gallop off and leave me when we ride.”

“I don’t do that,” Daphne said, wrestling with a sudden spark of guilt that only a family member could bring out in her. She kind of did, sometimes. It just got frustrating, Astoria wasn’t as good of a rider and Daphne loved the freedom and the pounding hooves and…

Crap.

She really hated guilt.

Astoria shrugged. “Why?”

“Because…” Daphne went inside and sat down carefully in a white fuzzy chair. Astoria set her book aside and paid attention. “She’s… she’s probably going to be around a lot more. But—you’re my sister. I wanted to know if…”

“I like her,” Astoria said firmly. “She talks a lot and she likes riding and Mother and Papa love her. And she makes you happy, and she’s nice to my friends.”

“You think Mother and Father like her?” Daphne checked. It was hard to tell with her parents, sometimes. She loved them but everyone in this house was a snake. Mother most of all. There was
every chance they were falsely fond of Hermione in front of her and/or Daphne because they liked the social points they got from fostering a Muggle-born. Astoria, though—she was the baby of the family, and Mother and Father were a lot less guarded around her. Mother even hugged Astoria. She never did Daphne. Not that Daphne even liked hugs, but—

She cut off that train of thought. She was the Heir, and they were at war, albeit a cold one. There’d been no room for Mother and Father to raise her softly or kindly; Daphne had to grow up hard as ice so she could carry the family name. Mother married a magically powerful halfblood with two magical parents to keep the family from getting too inbred; they learned to love each other and they were faithful but it had been a calculated match. She raised Daphne in her own image, except—as she’d said once—colder. Tougher. Stronger, so Daphne would be able to maneuver and make room to marry for love instead of power should she find someone she loved. So Daphne could have what she didn’t.

Astoria was the one they got to love.

Daphne was the one they had to train.

She didn’t resent it. She accepted it. Some days it was harder to accept than others. Especially when Astoria flaunted their parents’ affection in Daphne’s face because she knew it pissed Daphne off.

“I do.” Astoria grinned impishly. “I was eavesdropping two weeks ago, right after the solstice. They were impressed she joined in, and by how well she did. Papa loves it when she slings questions at him about his cases—he says she thinks like a lawyer. And Mother is glad you have a friend you can trust.”

“Mother didn’t have many of those, growing up,” Daphne said softly.

Astoria looked a bit grim. “She won’t tell me about it, much…”

Well, that was a probe if ever there was one. Daphne wouldn’t be tricked into talking that easily. Mother sugarcoated some things for Astoria that she never had for Daphne. Then again, Astoria was thirteen now, and Mother never said Daphne couldn’t share.

“You know how we never talk to Grandfather since he abdicated Greengrass head to Mother?” Daphne said.

“Mother doesn’t like him,” Astoria said. “I know he wasn’t a kind father.”

Points to Tori for pegging that one. Grandfather had never been anything but lovely to them, and Mother and Father rarely spoke of him. “No,” Daphne said. “He—raised her to be the Heir and then the Lady who’d carry our family through anything. Cold and hard and ruthless.”

“Like you,” Astoria said, laughing.

Daphne almost choked.

“Don’t be like that,” Astoria said. “We both know it’s true. Sissy.”

“Don’t call me that,” Daphne said.

“Sissy! Sissy!”

Daphne smirked. “Okay then, Stick.”
Astoria threw a pillow at her. Daphne batted it away, smirking wider. Finn Sullivan used to call Astoria that when they were little, and she hated it.


“As I was saying,” Daphne said primly, “he taught Mother to suspect everyone of ulterior motives. Made it hard to have trusted friends.”

“Ouch,” Astoria said. “I mean, we do that with most people, still.”

Daphne nodded. “We do. But I have… a few people. Mother didn’t. Not really.”

Astoria watched her for a long moment. “Do you wish you weren’t the Heir?”

“No,” Daphne said immediately, because it was the expected answer and because it was true. Her emotional shields were already sliding back into place, though. This was enough honesty for one day.

“Why would she wish that?”

Oh Merlin, really?

“You said she was in the library,” Daphne accused Astoria.

“I was.” Hermione came farther into the room and sat down across from Daphne, looking at both of them. “Why would you wish you weren’t the Heir?”

“Because of the responsibility,” Daphne said shortly. Sometimes she wished she was like Theo or Blaise and had no siblings to ask her emotional questions. Emotions sucked.

Hermione frowned.

And now she had a Gryffindor to deal with who liked things spelled out. “Mother was raised on the belief that an Heir can never trust anyone,” Daphne said. “She married for politics, and she never had—trusted friends growing up.”

“And it was the same for you?” Hermione said.

Daphne looked at Astoria. Before Hogwarts, Tori was the only person near her age she trusted implicitly, even though they argued all the time. She’d never admit as much to anyone but herself, but—it was true.

Family before everything.

“More or less. Until Hogwarts.”

“That’s awful,” Hermione said.

“It’s politics,” Daphne said flatly. “It’s how this world works, Hermione. I have a legacy to protect and build upon, a family name to uphold, in a—fraught political situation. There’s no room for—weakness. Hesitation.”

“No wonder they call you the Ice Queen,” Hermione muttered.

Daphne sat upright. “They what?”
Hermione winced.

“Tell me,” Daphne demanded.

“Some Gryffindors, and Hufflepuffs,” Hermione admitted. “They call you Slytherin’s Ice Queen. It’s, um, a reference to a Muggle fairy tale…”

“What fairy tale?” Astoria said, interested.

Hermione hesitated.

“Not a nice one, apparently,” Daphne groused. “Of course they don’t like me. I don’t like them. I don’t even like some of Harry’s friends.”

“Who?” Hermione said.


“It’s about an evil queen who lures a boy into a forest and freezes his heart so he forgets the girl he loves,” Hermione said with a wince.

Daphne, honestly, could not blame them for that comparison.

Astoria laughed a little.

“I like it,” Daphne said with a smirk. “Ice Queen.”

“Would that make Harry the boy you stole?” Astoria said.

“As if I could freeze his heart,” Daphne said, laughing.

Hermione and Astoria joined in, but Daphne was pretty sure neither of them had realized the irony there, and she wasn’t about to point it out. She finished the joke in her head instead—as if Harry wasn’t already colder than I ever could be.

Harry

The letter from Jules came the next day.

Harry,

The next Order meeting is tomorrow. Floo to the Burrow at 10am. Bill and Charlie are part of the Order too. We usually meet there or at Bones Manor. Not sure yet which one it is so either you’ll stay at the Burrow or come to Bones Manor with the Weasleys who’re members.

Dad’s going to be there. And Ethan. Please don’t fight, okay? I’m also telling them to leave you alone but you know how—touchy they can be.

Jules
I’ll be there, and I won’t antagonize James or Ethan. I can’t promise not to react if they start anything.

Jules didn’t reply, so Harry shrugged and decided that was as good as he was going to get, and he told Sirius where he was going and wrote to his friends.

Be careful, Theo advised.

Don’t give anything away, Pansy added.

Don’t give them a reason, Blaise said.

Harry resisted the urge to call them idiots and tell them he knew all those things perfectly well and yelled “The Burrow!” into the Floo at nine fifty-eight a.m. the next day.

The swirling-down-the-toilet-bowl feeling spat him out in a familiar kitchen. He brushed ash off his robes by hand, since Mrs. Weasley didn’t approve of breaking the Trace, and smiled up at her. “Hi, Mrs. Weasley.”

Her smile was a little more strained than it used to be. “Hello, Harry dear, so lovely to see you again…”

“You as well.” He dialed up the charm a notch and she relaxed a little.

“Harry!” Mr. Weasley bounded into the kitchen with all the eagerness of a golden retriever. “Oh, it’s good to see you—I got this thing from a Muggle store a few weeks ago—a printing?—and I can’t figure out how it works!”

“Er… a printer?” Harry said.

“Yes! That!”

Harry frowned. “Haven’t you found someone else to ask?”

Mr. Weasley blinked—

“Not that I’m not willing to help,” Harry said hurriedly. “I just—if you got it a few weeks ago, you could’ve owled me, or asked a Muggle-born?”

“Oh,” Mr. Weasley said, the enthusiasm coming back full-force. “Oh—of course—well, there’s not actually any Muggle-borns or Muggle-raised halfbloods in the Order, and I feel a bit odd about finding a random Muggle-born in the Ministry, take up their time on the clock with questions, you know.”

It was Harry’s turn to blink, although a blink was the only expression of his shock that he allowed himself. “None?”

“No questions?” Mr. Weasley said.

“No—before that—no Muggle-borns in the Order?”

“It’s a very selective group, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, bustling around the kitchen. Based on the mass quantities of food being prepared, Harry was willing to bet the meeting was here and not at Bones Manor. He also would’ve bet they did it because he was here and no one wanted to expose
the Slytherin Potter to Bones Manor when he already knew the Burrow.

“Right,” he said, “but—that’s the group we’re fighting for, isn’t it? Partly? Shouldn’t they have a stake in this?”

“Recruitment has been hard.”

Harry grinned. “Charlie. How are the dragons?”

“Keeping us busy,” Charlie said, giving him a firm handshake. “Good to see you, Harry.”

He didn’t sound like he believed his own words.

“Why has recruitment been hard?” Harry said.

“Surely you’ve been reading the Prophet?” Bill Weasley said, following Charlie into the kitchen. Red hair in a ponytail, dragon-fang earring, practically oozing confidence.

Harry indicated that he had indeed been following the Prophet.

“Then you’ll have seen the excellent smear job they’re running on the Potters,” Bill said, helping himself to a piece of bacon before his mum swatted his hand away. “Loads of people have fallen for the line that Jules is unstable and James incompetent.”

“The trials last summer didn’t help,” Charlie muttered, glancing at Harry.

Harry ignored this. “So you haven’t drawn in many of the younger crowd?”

“No, unfortunately,” Bill said.

“We shouldn’t be recruiting from younger wizards at all,” Mrs. Weasley said huffily, banging a pot against the stove. “You’re far too young as far as I’m concerned.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “We’re of age, Mum.”

“So are the twins, and they’re a far cry from responsible enough—”

“Mum,” Bill said. “Not again.”

His glance at Harry said, not in front of him.

“Sorry, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, blushing slightly. She smiled at Harry. “Didn’t mean to air family laundry in front of you…”

“My family laundry’s been all over the Prophet for years,” Harry said with a shrug. “I can assure you, it’s worse than this.”

He delighted (secretly) in the awkwardness that washed over all four Weasleys. Harry just sat back in his chair at the kitchen table and blinked innocently like he hadn’t a care in the world.

“Yes, well,” Mrs. Weasley said. “They’ll be arriving soon… Harry, dear, would you mind going to fetch the twins?”

“Certainly,” Harry said, grateful to escape the kitchen.
He paused in the stairwell and cast a silent amplius audi.

“—disowned.” Bill. “Does he even care? Or understand what it means?”

“He understands.” Ronald. When did he show up? He must’ve been in the living room or something. “He understands just fine. He’s got all the pureblood nonsense down like he was born to it… Bloody weird.”

“Language!” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“Sorry, Mum.”

Harry ended the spell and slipped up the stairs.

The twins’ rooms were on the third floor. They shared a large room across the hall from the bathroom that they and Bill and Charlie used; the other bathroom, shared by Ron and Ginny and Percy, was up on the top floor across from Ron’s room. Harry ignored the bathroom door and knocked on the twins’.

“Hang on,” George called.

“It’s Harry,” he said.

“Oh.” The door flew open seconds later, and Fred smirked at him. “Welcome to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes, Mr…”

He trailed off.

“Call me Mr. Incognito,” Harry said solemnly, turning up the collar of his plain blue summer robe up over his face.

Fred grinned. The awkwardness dissipated. “C’mon in.”

Harry slid inside and collapsed on George’s bed. “How’s the diabolic inventing going?”

“Brilliantly,” Fred said with a wicked grin. “We’ve got Nosebleed Nougat down pat, at this point, along with a nastier form that causes nonstop internal bleeding for an hour unless you eat the other part, and even then you have to heal the damage. We’ve decided to call our debut package the Skiving Snackboxes.”

“I like it.” Harry picked up a box with said label and examined it critically. “Fainting Fancies, Fevered Fudge, Puking Pasties, Canary Creams… didn’t you start doing the canary ones last year?”

“Yep,” Fred said, kicking a large crate on the floor. “Got a load of ‘em in here for this year.”

“The order forms are all ready,” George said happily. “We used the profits off the Muggle pens smuggling to buy a shrinkable trunk, we keep all our wares in it. Mum can’t figure out where it’s all going.”

“It’s driving her spare,” Fred said, sniggering.

“I’d switch to Fever Fudge,” Harry advised, pointing at the box. “Bit better ring. And couldn’t you condense the pasties into a smaller form? Bit hard to eat a full-on pasty without being noticed, hm?”

“He’s got a point,” George said.
Fred opened another crate and held up a purple pasty critically. “Mmm, fair point. This is a little large.”

“How well do they work?” Harry said. He’d seen the formulae but not comprehensive testing results, and he’d been too occupied with his own summer research to spend much time breathing down the twins’ necks. They were perfectly competent on their own anyway.

“Not great,” George admitted. “We need to fine-tune the Puking Pasties… or whatever we rename them… and the purple end of the Fainting Fancies sometimes doesn’t wake you up. Fred spent three hours in a magical coma last week, I had to tell Mum he’d got a stomach flu and didn’t want to leave our room.”

“Thank Merlin for Ginny,” Fred said with a grin.

Harry quirked an eyebrow. “I can’t disagree, but why in this case?”

“She kept Mum off our backs once I asked for help,” George said.

“Ah.” Harry grinned.

“The Slytherin Weasley,” Fred said.

Footsteps crossed the landing above them.

“Speak of the lethifold,” George said, glancing up.

Fred pointed his wand at the door just as the soft footsteps hit the landing. It leaped smartly open. Ginny, on the landing, whipped around into a defensive crouch. Her wand hand flexed and came up empty.

She relaxed almost instantly. “Harry!”

“Good to see you, too,” he said with a smirk. “I hear you’ve been quite a devious little thing this summer.”

“I’ve no idea where you got that story,” she said innocently, leaning on the doorframe.

“You’ve corrupted her,” Fred said solemnly, glaring at Harry.

“Oh woe is me.” Harry flopped back on the bed and grinned at his favorite Weasleys. “Longbottoms wouldn’t take you, Gin?”

“Mum won’t let me go for more than a day at a time,” she muttered. “It’s still a blessing from Morgana to get out of the house for a few hours…”

“And now you’re sneaking off to eavesdrop?” he guessed.

She scowled, false innocence melting away into an expression that hinted at her famous temper. “Mum won’t let me anywhere near those things. You’re too young, Ginny. It’s not proper for a girl, Ginny. They’re letting Jules and Susan and Ron sit in on them! Ron’s brain would run faster if Errol powered it!”

“Wait, they’re letting other fifth years in?” Harry said, eyebrows raised. Jules didn’t mention that.

“Only to listen,” George said, rolling his eyes. “Since they’ll need to be politicking all year at school.”
“Well, we already do,” Harry said, gesturing at himself and Ginny. She grinned. “Slytherin’s quite a mess of politics.”

“I don’t even want to think about it,” Fred said.


Harry grinned. “Oh, yes. Neville owes me three Galleons.”

“Wait, you bet on that?” Fred said.

“You two run a gambling ring out of your dorm, don’t give me that shit,” Harry said.

“Why didn’t you?” Ginny demanded.

George looked at her like she was an idiot. “Be the first snakes in the Weasley family? ‘Fraid we’re not as brave as you, little sis.”

“Also, it wasn’t that strong an affinity,” Fred said. “More of a… suggestion that we’d do well there if we wanted it. Neither of us particularly did. Gryffindor’s got a lot fewer expectations.”


Harry pointed at her. “That’s why you took it, Ginny, and they didn’t. And you’ve done all right in Gryffindor,” he added to the twins, smirking at the crates of nasty sweets on the floor.

“We have, at that,” George said with a frankly rather evil grin.

“Good thing we’re not in Slytherin, too, or Mum would disapprove of us even more than she already does,” Fred said.

“Oh, like she’s been easy on me,” Ginny sneered.

“You at least have the ‘only daughter’ card to play,” George pointed out.

Ginny frowned, but nodded.

“As fascinating as I find this bit of sibling squabble, I don’t want to be late,” Harry said, standing. “Fred, George, your mom wanted me to fetch you for some reason, maybe she’s letting you at least sit in on the meeting?”

“Oh good, Bill leaned on her like we asked,” George said.

Fred grinned. “Knew we could count on him, he at least gets it… and he loves the joke shop idea.”

“Lucky Bill,” Ginny complained. “I don’t blame him for taking off for Egypt the second he graduated. Mum hates the international Floo.”

Fred tossed Ginny something long and fleshlike. “Extendable Ear, little sister. If Mum doesn’t slap an Imperturbable Charm on the door again, feel free to listen in.”

“Excellent,” Ginny said. “Can I keep it?”

George shrugged. “Long as you don’t get caught, Mum vanished four sets last week.”
Ginny smiled in a way that strongly reminded Harry of her rather nasty friend Evalyn Travers. “I won’t.”

*Trunk?* Harry mouthed at her.

She nodded very slightly.

Fred and George packed a few of their more sensitive projects into their own collapsible trunk, hid it in an ingenious spot they created by leaning out the window and prying up one of the slats outside the house and wedging the trunk into the siding, and trooped downstairs. Harry paused long enough to suggest that Ginny Summon her broom from her window and float down so she could eavesdrop from outside, as the adults were unlikely to Imperturbable Charm the windows, and went after the twins.

He caught up just outside the kitchen and walked in on their heels, remaining mostly unnoticed.

It had gotten a lot more crowded. Harry recognized a lot of the people present, but not all. Hestia Jones, Dedalus Diggle, Dumbledore—dammit—Ethan Thorne and James Potter—walking tests of Harry’s self-control—Amelia Bones, the real Mad-Eye Moody, McGonagall, Mrs. Figg for some unfathomable reason, Emmaline Vance, Andromeda Tonks, Remus Lupin, a purple-haired young witch in a Hufflepuff scarf enthusiastically trying to help Mrs. Weasley set the table, three men talking gravely to Arthur Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt from the Aurors over by James, a grungy, shady character skulking by the window, and—was that Oliver Wood?

Fred and George made a beeline for the shady one. Harry decided that must be Mundungus Fletcher, the thief and black market trader. Good on the twins to cultivate that contact; he’d undoubtedly be useful for whatever questionable substances they needed in their research, and also for sneaking things past their mum. Wood seemed spectacularly ill at ease, and for some reason, quite reluctant to approach his former Quidditch teammates, even kind of glaring at them from across the room.

None of the other teenage quasi-members were in sight, so Harry slipped over to Wood, using body language and careful self-discipline to maneuver through the packed kitchen without anyone taking particular notice of him. Other than Andromeda Tonks. He could feel her stiff gaze on him from the sink, where she was quite clearly not paying much attention to whatever Mrs. Weasley was talking about. He’d have to be careful not to slip up even at all; she’d be watching him closely.

“Wood,” he said pleasantly.

The older Gryffindor turned with a bit of a jerk. “Jul—I mean… Pot—er—”

“Harry’s fine,” Harry said with a smile that was only a little bit strained. It helped that he had his back to James and Thorne. The temptation to test some of his recently mastered curses on them was a lot higher when he had them in his sights. “How’ve you been? I thought you went to play for Puddlemere.”

“I was,” Wood said with a shrug, “but the call went out, and… well, here I am.” He shrugged, a bit awkwardly.

“Glad to see you,” Harry said.

He was opening his mouth to continue asking about pro Quidditch, but Wood beat him to it. “Wasn’t expecting to see you, actually,” he said, looking suspicious.

“Relax, I’m here by invitation,” Harry said with a rueful grin. “Not that I blame you, mind.”
“Oh,” Wood said, looking relieved. “Oh, that’s—good then. Guess that brings our snake total to two, ha!”

“Guess so,” Harry said. “I’m sure Mrs. Tonks is glad for some company… D’you mind pointing out some names for me? I don’t recognize the girl with the hair, or those three men by Mr. Weasley…”

Wood happily named the men with Mr. Weasley as Sturgis Podmore, Elphias Doge, and Caleb Jorkins; the purple-haired witch was Nymphadora Tonks, daughter of Andromeda; he confirmed that the twins were indeed talking to Mundungus Fletcher. Interestingly, Wood’s face darkened when he looked over at the twins.

“Thanks. What’s it like with Puddlemere?” Harry said, trying to find some sort of common ground.

It worked like—ha—like a charm. Wood perked up instantly and started chattering on about their plays and workouts and practice regimens and broom care seminars and Harry listened and nodded and smiled and asked questions in all the right places while his mind ticked over the various dynamics in this room.

A loaded glance between Diggle and Jones: those two were friends, then, of the kind that could communicate with a look from across a crowded room.

Bones and McGonagall discussing something in quiet tones that had to do with Dumbledore by the way they kept looking his direction.

Mrs. Weasley really hated Fletcher: she glared at him every chance she got, but the clumsy Tonks girl was a distraction and Molly couldn’t slip away to separate her sons from the thief.

Exasperation written large over Podmore’s face whenever Doge opened his mouth; exhaustion on Jorkins’ no matter who was talking.

James, Thorne, Moody, Vance, Lupin—the loudest group, and the center of attention. Dumbledore chatted amiably with Molly Weasley and Andromeda Tonks but his attention was on those five. They shifted around each other, respected Moody even as they exchanged conspiratorial amused glances that mocked his paranoia, listened to Lupin and James and Thorne with different levels of attention, teased and jostled and fit.

Harry’s eyes skipped over the stove, and then back to it: Andromeda Tonks was watching him, eyes narrowed.

She’d seen him watching, then, and putting pieces together. He smiled warmly in her direction and turned his focused, insincere attention back to Wood, who hadn’t noticed a thing.

Hm. Dancing with Tonks might actually prove to be worth sitting through James’ drivel at this meeting.

The Floo huffed, and people began stepping out, one after another. Harry raised an eyebrow. Jules, Susan Bones, Ernie Macmillan, Sophie Roper, Stephen Cornfoot. At least one from every House, if you counted him. They were planning some political maneuvering at Hogwarts.

“I believe that makes all of us!” Dumbledore called genially over the hubbub of the crowded kitchen.

People trailed off immediately. James clapped Thorne on the back one more time as everyone shifted to give Dumbledore their attention.
Ronald elbowed his way around his dad to stand with Jules. He and Macmillan both scowled at Harry.

“This will be the final official meeting we hold before our young charges depart for Hogwarts, so we’d best cover a number of things,” Dumbledore said, beaming. People began shifting around, conjuring chairs if they couldn’t get their hands on one of the limited Weasley set, jockeying for space. Harry managed to land a seat with the twins and Fletcher on his left and no one else to his right, perched on a stool he discreetly and wandlessly summoned before Doge could spot it. He couldn’t conjure without a wand yet and a wand movement would be tricky to hide in here.

“Sturgis, if you’d be so kind?” Dumbledore said.

Podmore stood up and moved, with some difficulty, to the kitchen area. Mrs. Weasley kept working on the food but some of her attention was on him; Andromeda Tonks had picked a spot that allowed her to keep Harry in her line of sight.

He listened to Podmore droning long enough to gather that the Order was sneaking into the Ministry to protect some object they didn’t want Voldemort to have, filed away that tidbit to research later so he could figure out what exactly said object was, and leaned over to George. “What went down between you two and Wood?” he murmured.

George and Fred shared one of those loaded glances that reminded Harry of everything he and Jules would never have. “He’s not happy with us for a lot of reasons,” George muttered. “Not planning on going pro, not officially joining the Order, we’re friends with Slytherins… list goes on.”

“Me?” Harry said skeptically. He’d never had a particular issue with Wood, as far as he could tell, and Wood had never been friends with any of the Gryffindors on Harry’s shit list, namely Pritchard and Creed and the recently graduated Emma Marks…

Fred whispered something Harry didn’t catch.

“Well, yeah,” George added, still so softly no one else would hear, “but also we’ve been friendly with Noah this summer since dueling club, and sometimes his friends come along, Iris and Celesta and Anita…”

Huh. Harry hadn’t known George and Fred were friendly with the now-sixth-year Slytherins outside of dueling club, but it was a good sign that they crossed House boundaries for more than Harry. Technically Iris was a Ravenclaw, but one of the nastier eagles, and most of her friends were snakes.

“His loss,” Harry said succinctly. George sniggered and Fred smirked.

Podmore finished his boring report. Harry raised his eyebrows upon hearing in Jones’ report that there was a security detail on Jules, which Jules did not look happy to hear.

“This is boring,” he hissed. “These people have no plan!”

“Why d’you think we didn’t want to join?” George muttered.

Finally, the interminable logistical rambling cut off. Most of the adults stood and stretched; a low murmur of chatter started.

“Want to come back to Grimmauld Place for a bit?” Harry asked the twins. “We can bring Ginny if your mum will let her out of the house.”
“Not happening,” Fred said instantly. He and George huddled up a bit. Harry caught Fletcher watching them interestedly and shot the man a glare that had sent seventh-year Slytherins with Death Eater parents scuttling out of his path. Fletcher’s eyes widened and he turned away so fast he slammed face-first into Emmaline Vance.

The resulting high-volume argument about why even keep Fletcher around provided excellent conversational cover.

“Mum’s on the warpath,” George said. “Since that last—episode—”

“The one where Ginny hit Sophie Roper with a Dark curse in your kitchen, right,” Harry said. He felt his lips thin. He’d sent her a letter about self-control and caution worded so that no Slytherin who knew him could fail to realize exactly how angry he was.

George winced. “Yeah, we read your letter.”

“Right charming, that,” Fred said.

Harry shrugged unapologetically. “She should know better than to toss *mulco* around in her *kitchen* for Merlin’s sake.”

“We’re not arguing,” Fred said.

“Yeah.” Harry went to rub his temples, remembered where he was and how many people were likely watching him, and stopped himself. “That incident. Still hasn’t the wand back?”

“Nope.” George popped the *p*. “Ginny’s fit to be tied.”

“I don’t blame her,” Harry said.

“Want to tell us where she’s getting the money for a shrinking trunk and a wand holster and those books?” Fred said.

“No.”

Both twins looked at him steadily. “So you *do* know where it’s coming from.”

“Yes.” Harry raised an eyebrow.

They stared at him. He stared back.

George was the first to break eye contact. “Okay, fine, keep your snakey secrets,” he said with a halfhearted grin.

“It’s not… hurting her,” Fred said. “Whatever she’s doing for the money. Is it?”

Harry cocked his head and considered how to phrase this. He’d been planning to bring some of his friends into the secret of the Chamber library anyway… so, really, this wasn’t *that* premature. He shifted so his back was to the rest of the chattering Order and traced a complicated wand movement, murmuring an incantation that took several seconds, holding runes in his mind’s eye.

“What’s that?” Fred said suspiciously.

“Sound ward,” Harry said. “Anyone who listens will hear a painfully mundane conversation, lip reading will match up. Let’s just say… Ginny deserved some sort of, ah, recompense for a particularly nasty experience her first year.”
“The Chamber,” Fred said.

“So you, what, gave her a vault?” George said incredulously. “Didn’t think to siphon off some of the Potter trust fund for yourself, did you?”

“Basilisks make good potions ingredients,” Harry said slowly.

*One. Two. Three. Fo—*

Fred swore.

“You *can* still get into the Chamber,” George breathed.

“You said you weren’t the Heir,” Fred said, glaring.

Harry shrugged. “I may have exercised some creative license when it came to letting Dumbledore back into the Chamber. And while we’re at it, I’m not nearly so pressed for funds as Thorne would think.”

“You sold the basilisk for parts,” George said. “What the bloody hell... Harry, that’s—I can’t even think how many galleons.”


“No need to ask why not the others,” Fred said with a nasty little grin.

George shook his head. “I don’t—how are you the Heir?”

“One of Slytherin’s descendants married into the Potters, generations ago,” Harry said. “Family inheritance magic is weird. I think it might have something to do with rampaging Dark magic hitting me when Jules did his Boy Who Lived thing in the cradle. Point is, that’s why I’m a Parselmouth, and yes, I can still get into the Chamber.”

“I want to see,” Fred said instantly.

Huh. This was going a lot better than he’d expected. Harry narrowed his eyes at them.

“What?” George said, rolling his eyes. “You’re not about to run off—”

“—on a killing spree.” Fred paused. “Right?”

“Merlin,” Harry said. “No, I’m not going to go off on a killing spree. Basilisk’s dead anyway.”

“See?” George spread his hands wide. “I fail to see why talking to snakes means you’re automatically evil.”

“Explain that to your brother.”

They all turned and looked at Ronald, who was engaged in stuffing as many grapes as possible into his mouth while Roper, Bones, and Jules cheered him on and Macmillan looked stuffy and pompous.

“I’ll pass,” Fred muttered.

“...okay,” Harry said. “I was going to take a couple more people down there, anyway.”

“More?”
He held up three fingers. “Theo, Neville, Blaise.”

“We are wounded, Harrykins,” Fred said dramatically, slapping a hand over his heart. “Mortally injured that you did not think to tell us—”

“Yeah, okay, that’s enough,” Harry said, smirking. He brought down his sound ward with a flick of his wand. “So how’s your summer homework going?”

They discussed mundane things for two minutes, which was long enough to give Harry the beginnings of a headache, and then he thought he should probably check in with Jules or Dumbledore about what exactly they wanted from him this year at school before he left—

“If those Order members who will be returning to Hogwarts this year could stay,” Dumbledore called.

Well. Fuck. Meeting part two, then.

“Ginny?” he muttered as he and the twins started to gravitate towards Dumbledore and the other teens.

“No fucking way,” George scoffed.

Fred rolled his eyes. “Even these little strategy meetings aren’t acceptable for dear little fragile Ginny.”

Harry glanced out the window. There was a tiny bit of flesh-colored string hovering near the top of the pane. He smirked and continued on with the twins.

The second meeting turned out to include all the teenagers who’d been invited plus Dumbledore, Molly Weasley, Mrs. Tonks, Nymphadora Tonks, James, and Moody. Harry plastered a pleasant, attentive expression on his face and took a seat between Roper and the twins, because of all the others Roper would irritate him the least. Everyone else started drifting out of the kitchen, either vanishing into the Floo or out to the garden where buffet tables groaned under Mrs. Weasley’s cooking.

“Well,” Dumbledore said with a delighted smile. “It’s wonderful to see your young faces here. Jules, my boy, congratulations on your successful recruitment.” James’ eyes cut over Roper, Macmillan, and then—Harry?

Oh, now that was comical. They were chalking recruiting Harry up to Jules’ cleverness. He wanted to laugh.

“We’ve got some big plans for you all this year at Hogwarts,” Tonks said. “It’s vitally important that we keep our fingers on the pulse of the students, and recruit people to our side. Inside Hogwarts, they’ll be distanced from their parents’ views, and it will be easier to convince your classmates to believe the truth instead of the Ministry’s lies.”

“Basically, to prove I’m not crazy,” Jules said with a frown.

“And to keep an eye on those students who won’t be convinced,” Tonks added.

Attention switched to Harry. He smiled brightly. “I’m sure I can think of a few.”

“Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said, radiating fake concern, “I know it may be very difficult for you in Slytherin this year.”
“Like it’s been easy any other year?” Harry said with a raised brow.

Fred sniggered.

James glared at him, which only made George join in.

“I don’t want you to do anything that would put yourself in danger,” Dumbledore said, a bit louder.

_Lie_, Harry wanted to say. He bit one lip and tried to project nervousness. “I’ll do my best, sir. I want to help.”

“Told you,” Jules said to Ronald, not nearly as quietly as he seemed to think.

Ronald scowled at Harry and his brothers.

“Keep an eye on those Slytherins,” Moody growled, magical and mundane eyes both fixed on Harry. “Lots of ‘em have Death Eater parents, which I’m sure you can guess because they tell me you’re clever, so watch ‘em and pass on _anything_ they slip.”

“To Jules,” Dumbledore clarified. “I know it will be difficult for you in Slytherin this year, more so in the past, but I’m sure the two of you can work out a way to meet and share information.”

“Of course, Professor,” Harry said. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Excellent, my boy, excellent,” Dumbledore said, still smiling.

_I’m not your boy_. The scream bottled up in Harry’s chest and his facial muscles started to ache from holding his pleasant expression this long in front of Dumbledore. He still hadn’t looked at James once.

If he did—

Harry was not sure his self-control would hold.

George and Fred were, thankfully, not as oblivious as most of the rest of their family, and they managed to hurry the meeting up and hustle him towards the Floo. Their mum was so distracted by cleaning up Nymphadora’s mess in the living room that she barely registered them leaving.

The Grimmauld Place wards knew Harry by this point, and they’d keyed his closest circle of friends in weeks ago so any of them could essentially show up anytime, so it was no problem for the three of them to escape to the relative peace of the London house. Sirius would be out with Hazel and Vanessa and their friends, Bryce and Christopher and Timothy and Analicia and who knew who else. Or in the shop. Either way the house was Harry’s.

“You guys can go use the laboratory,” he told the twins, who looked like Christmas had come early. “I need to figure out how to bushwhack a project I spent ages on so I can give Moody a half-assed version.”

“Cheers,” Fred said, clapping him on the back.

On his birthday, Harry went downstairs and found two Ministry officials in the kitchen.

His steps slowed. “Is everything all right?” he said, thumb running over the Nott Manor Portkey on his index finger. If this was something _else_ to do with his disininheritance…
Bloody fucking James Potter and Ethan Thorne. If they tried to take back everything he’d ever bought from the trust vault or some such nonsense—

“Harry!” Sirius appeared in the kitchen door behind him, eyes wide. “You weren’t supposed to be up for another hour…”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Harry said shortly. Sirius didn’t seem upset—rather the opposite, actually—so he relaxed a little.

“That’s what you get for drinking caffeinated tea right before bed,” Sirius said, padding into the kitchen.

Harry took a seat with him and the two people, a witch and a wizard in their fifties wearing Ministry robes, at the table. “Something like that.”

If it had been just Sirius, he might’ve been honest about his dreams keeping him awake again.

“You’re probably curious what’s going on,” the Ministry witch said.

“Do I need to leave?” Harry said, looking at Sirius.

“No,” Sirius shifted in his seat. “I, uh, wanted to do this when you came downstairs—like, all at once, but obviously that’s not going to work.”

The Ministry wizard rolled his eyes. “Do you need a minute?”

“Yeah, actually, that might be nice,” Sirius said. “Kreacher?”

The elf cracked into the kitchen. “Yes, Master Sirius?”

“Can you show our guests into the sitting room, please?” Sirius said.

“Yes, Master,” Kreacher said, bowing, and with a “This way, please,” led the Ministry people away.

Harry let a little worry show. “Is something wrong?” he said softly. With Ministry people here, he wasn’t about to go tossing spells around to muffle the conversation.

“Yeah,” Sirius said. “I mean, no, nothing’s wrong, it’s fine—damn, I was going to ask this once we’d cleared up the paperwork.”

*Paperwork?* “You’re worrying me.”

“I want to adopt you.”

Harry blinked. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I want to adopt you,” Sirius said, still rushed but with spaces between the words. “I mean, if you want—not as a birthday gift but—your birthday’s a good time to do it—the family magic will recognize you better if you’re not of age—and Thorne and James… just… it seemed like a good time—do you want to?” he got out in a garbled rush.

Harry stared at him.

This was. He had—no context for this. For—

“Yes,” Harry choked out. It was too good to be true but— “Yes. I—you—you’re sure?”
“I wouldn’t have offered,” Sirius said.

Harry sat at the table and closed his eyes and tried really hard not to cry.

Sirius shuffled and moved. The next thing Harry knew, Sirius had come around the table and sat next to him and was hugging him almost desperately. He went tense as a board almost instantly.

“It’s okay,” Sirius said softly, “it’s okay. I’m not—it’s me.”

Every movement was a struggle. Every inch felt like a mile. But Harry slowly managed to move his arms, not to shove away, but to wrap around Sirius in turn.

He couldn’t tell which of them was shaking. Maybe it was both.

They sat there like that until Harry’s arms started to ache with the strain of not tearing away, and then he slowly sat back. Relieved and disappointed at the same time when Sirius instantly retreated out of his personal space.

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“You shouldn’t have to thank me,” Sirius said darkly. “James should’ve done right—no, dammit, I told myself I wasn’t letting him in on this day…” He rubbed his eyes. “Harry, you—do you know what this means?”

“The Ministry considers me your foster son,” Harry said promptly. “More permanent than temporary guardian. I’ll be the Black heir in the eyes of Ministry law if not the—family magic or the Wizengamot seat.”

“Right,” Sirius said slowly. He glanced at the door, then cast a quick muffling spell with his wand. A very powerful one. “I can also arrange for a blood adoption.”

Harry almost choked. “A—those are illegal.”

“No shit,” Sirius said. “Since when do I strike you as a rule follower?”

“You don’t.” Harry narrowed his eyes and considered this development. Blood rituals, outlawed for almost two hundred years, and Sirius was willing to do one illegally. “The Black magic would accept me, then. The vaults, the family inheritance, the magic of the Wizengamot Charter, the wards on all the Black properties…”

“Yes.” Sirius grinned. “Yes. I’m the last directly descended Black and there’s no way in hell I’d let the whole mess pass off to Bella.” He paused. “Well, technically Dromeda, since Bella’s in Azkaban. She hates our family legacy near as much as I do, I can’t tell if she’d spite Cissa by hanging onto the lot or just wash her hands of it entirely, so the odds of it going to the Malfoys are decent if I die without an Heir. Not that I’d want Dromeda to have it anyway after… She won’t break with Dumbledore, you know. We got into a spat about the Order, and… I’d want you to have it anyway.” He fiddled nervously with his wand. “You’re… the closest thing to a son I’m ever likely to have, Harry.”

Harry’s hands were fists because otherwise they’d be shaking. “Sirius,” he said hoarsely. “It’s… your family.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, “which means I can do what I want with it. This family needs more decent people to carry on our name. Plus, it’s kind of like the Slytherin chic.” He gestured around Grimmauld Place with a smirk. “The Black legacy suits you better than the Potter one ever did,
anyway.”


“Anything,” Sirius said. There were tears shining on his face. Harry hadn’t seen Azkaban lose its grip on his expression this much in the whole time he’d known his godfather. “Anything.”

“How are you going to explain… the Black magic accepting me?” Harry said.

Sirius shrugged. “Your great-grandmother was Alvadora Black. The connection’s diluted but it’s there. In the absence of another Heir, it’ll work.”

“And the ritual?”

“I had to arrange... help,” Sirius admitted. “We’ll do it on the next new moon.”

“New life,” Harry said, thinking of what he’d read about ritual magic. “Rebirth, change, the beginning of a new cycle.”


Harry grinned.

“Let’s go greet our guests,” Sirius said. “It’s more comfortable in the sitting room anyway.”

The paperwork for the legal side of things took three hours to complete. Harry floated through all of it in a daze, answering questions and filling out the forms they told him to.

“Sign here,” the wizard said, “and it’ll be finished.”

Harry took the quill he was offered, an ostentatious shining purple thing even Malfoy wouldn’t use, and looked at Sirius.

Sirius grinned at him.

Harry signed his name with a flourish: Hadrian Sirius Black.

“Congratulations,” the witch said with a warm smile. “You’re officially the Black heir. Lord Black, do write the Inheritance Office when you determine if his great-grandmother is enough for your family magic to accept him, will you? We’ll need it to adjust our records, and notify the Wizengamot.”

“I’ll do that,” Sirius said. “Thanks for all your help.”

“Just doing our jobs,” the wizard said gruffly. He looked at Harry, fiddling with the sleeve of his robe. “It was a pleasure to come here today. Wasn’t right, what Dumbledore and Potter did to you.”

“Mark,” the witch said sharply, with a nervous look at Harry and Sirius.

“I can say what I damn well please, I’m two months off retirement anyway,” Mark said. “And I doubt they’re going to kick up a fuss about that particular opinion.”

Sirius shook his head reassuringly. “Hardly.”
The witch still looked hesitant. “I am sorry about him—no sense of tact…”

“Neither has he,” Harry said, elbowing Sirius in the ribs.

“Hey!” Sirius protested.

“Well,” the witch said, smiling for real. “It’s—not an uncommon sentiment, I can assure you… just not a good one to shout with a sonorous, if you know what I mean. Have a lovely day, both of you.”

“You too,” Sirius said.

Kreacher showed them out.

Harry looked down at the last thing on the table: a velvet-lined box holding a full set of cloak pins, robe pins, tie clips, cufflinks, and hatpins emblazoned with the Black crest instead of the Potter one.

“You don’t have to take them yet,” Sirius said. “If you’re not—”

“Nope,” Harry said, flicking his wand and summoning the box. He waved it at Sirius with a grin. “Mine now. You’re stuck with me.”

“More like you’re stuck with me,” Sirius said.

“What is going on? Why have you been happysad all day?”

Harry jumped. He hadn’t even felt Eriss nearby. “Where are you?”

“Sofa, idiot.”

He moved a pillow and found her curled on the couch.

“Has she been there all day?” Sirius said.

“Have you been there all day?”

“Just the last hour or so. I didn’t understand what you were saying,” Eriss said petulantly. “Not all of it. Parseltongue is easier.”

Harry picked her up and let her drape herself across his shoulders the way she preferred. “I’m explaining what happened,” he said to Sirius, and then switched to Parseltongue. “Sirius adopted me today.”

“Adopted… you are his now?”

“Guess so,” Harry said, smiling like an absolute idiot at the thought.

“Can you translate something for me?”

“Depends,” Harry said, grinning at Sirius. “Are you going to insult him?”

Eriss swatted him with her tail.

He let his affection for her pulse down the familiar bond at what she said next.

“What is it?” Sirius asked.

“She wants me to thank you,” Harry said with a smile. “For… giving me a family.”
“You both,” Sirius said, reaching out for Eriss with a half-nervous half-determined expression.

She switched to his arm without hesitation, winding it up and across his shoulders in a snakey hug, then hissed at Harry to take her back because she liked Sirius but he smelled like dog. Stifling a laugh, Harry did as ordered.

“What help did you get for the ritual?” Harry said, because he needed to focus on something logistical, rational.

Sirius smirked. “You’ll see.”

After all that, his usual assortment of books and sweets and clothes and weird magical artifacts seemed trivial.

Harry noticed the stone on his journal glowing green that evening. He rolled his eyes; his friends had left in the Floo less than an hour before and yet they still had to write him? It was probably Pansy or Blaise or Hermione, all of them had a tendency to talk too much—

But it wasn’t one of their pages waiting with a message.

It was not, in fact, from a person Harry would in any way consider a friend.

Mr. No-Name,

Unlike your brother, you never wish to flaunt your family’s fame, so I’m sure you aren’t happy that you having once been a Potter means your birthday is public knowledge. That said, happy birthday.

I’m also quite sure you wouldn’t accept any kind of birthday gift from me. An owl would find you but in the interest of not having whatever I sent cursed into ashes as soon as you see the label, as a birthday gift: My apologies for lying to you last year.

-Barty Crouch

His first instinct was to drop the journal. His second was to dash off a horrifically rude response that boiled down to “fuck off”. His third was to write something more or less reasonable that also boiled down to “fuck off”. Fortunately, Harry had very good impulse control when the other people involved weren’t his blood relations or Ethan Thorne, so he didn’t do anything to piss off the brilliant and honestly fucking terrifying Death Eater writing him with birthday wishes of all the bloody possible topics.

Crouch,

I appreciate birthday wishes from most everyone, even such unexpected sources.

Frankly, I trusted you about as much when you were Alastor Moody as I do now knowing your real identity, so it’s not that great a loss.

He took a deep breath and decided to ask one of the questions that had been rattling around in his
head like marbles for the last month. The marbles only got more numerous the more he read.

You said last June I could ask you questions. If that offer still stands—what was the objective of the March 1979 Death Eater attack on the convoy from Nepal?

“No-Name” is awkward. Use Hadrian if you have to use a name. And get in a curse for me next time you see my father, since I’m sure you’d enjoy it and I can’t legally do it myself.

Crouch responded in less than thirty minutes. Harry spun his wand around his fingers for several minutes.

Mr. Hadrian, then. A pleasure to hear back from you. I admit I wasn’t expecting a response.

Not one of Mad-Eye’s fans, I take it?

I’m sure you’re clever enough to work this out on your own, but I did say I would answer those questions I can. The convoy attack was to weaken the Ministry and to prove a point. They have a stranglehold on all incoming shipments of magical plants and substances, all trade with our counterparts overseas. It stifles our economy and allows the Ministry leeches to stay in power. We took the contents of the convoy for ourselves, weakened our opponents, and made a point about the side effects of the Ministry monopoly by creating a potions ingredient shortage.

We’ve no plans to go anywhere near your father anytime soon. I’ll keep your request in mind if that changes, however. I can think of several of my associates who’d be happy to step in for me if I’m not around to do the honors.

-Barty Crouch

It made sense.

He didn’t want it to make sense.

I wasn’t expecting to write back, either, but curiosity killed the cat, I suppose.

-Hadrian

Curiosity killed the cat, and satisfaction brought it back. Which could apply equally to those from both our Houses. I really doubt you don’t have any more questions.

-Barty Crouch

If only satisfaction was all your Lord needed, this conflict would have been solved years ago. I have
a lot more questions, I’m just not sure I can even believe your answers. Throws a bit of a wrench into this whole “communication” idea, doesn’t it?

Actually, here’s one. How did you figure out what the journals are for? And why are you even trying to communicate with me?

-Hadrian

Harry scowled at the page after he sent the brief letter off. It was possibly a touch more blunt and antagonistic than strictly necessary, but it would serve.

If satisfaction were all the Dark Lord needed, we would still have a war. Your Order would keep going without Dumbledore, would they not?

Of course trust factors in here, but we’ve got to start somewhere. It wasn’t difficult to determine the use of the journals. One of you would write in it in class and the others’ gems would light up and a few minutes later you’d be snickering and writing back. You might think about disguising them this year. There’s going to be... a less-than-friendly set of eyes on you. I can’t say more. I simply broke into your dormitory and took the journal while you were at breakfast. Most of my friends were Slytherins and exceptions were made to the Slytherins-only rule when it came to a certain social circle; I know how to get in, and the wards around your belongings were impressive for your age, but not enough to keep me out. And I think you know perfectly well why I’m communicating with you.

If it helps, I volunteered for the assignment. I’m not doing this out of mere obligation or duty.

-Barty Crouch

They’re not my Order.

What do you think of the Greengrass family?

Will this unfriendly set of eyes be in an official position or do you have someone living under an Invisibility Cloak the whole year? And are we talking unfriendly to me or unfriendly to your lot?

I have suspicions why you’re communicating with me. In fact, I can think of four potential objectives from opening a dialogue with the Other Potter—though I guess I can’t really claim that title now—so you more than likely have at least that many in mind. On the assumption that one possible outcome is turning me—James is fair game but I don’t want my erstwhile brother dead. If I went around wishing every stupid person death I wouldn’t have time to think about anything else.

-Hadrian

Fuck, he hated James for taking his last name. Harry scowled at the ceiling, threw his quill across the room, and summoned it back to his hand with a thought. He’d been drilling wandless summoning a lot over the summer; it took less concentration than his original wandless trick that he’d named telekinesis for lack of a better word, and getting his wand back to his hand easily in a fight was a
great skill to have.

Personally, I’ve met Roxanne and Mason Greengrass only a few times, at galas and the like, before my arrest.

So in other words, neither of them was particularly involved in the Death Eater movement even if they supported it politically.

If you’re asking because of your Muggle-born friend fostering with them this summer, the only one of us who had an issue is Antonin Dolohov. I say “had” because he’s been brought to see the error of his ways. Blood matters. Ability matters more. As this precise Muggle-born said to me in an irate rant last year, as it happens. I’ve not been to their manor; is she doing well?

Harry smirked. Just like Hermione to pick up a Death Eater phrase from the Slytherins, get pissed, and throw it back at a Dumbledore-supporting ex-Auror who was actually a Death Eater in disguise.

He stopped and thought about that mental sentence. His life was really getting weird.

_Hadrian—what do you know about why the Dark Lord attacked the Godric’s Hollow cottage?_

-Barty Crouch

Harry frowned. He… didn’t know, actually. No one would ever give him a straight answer. Not Dumbledore, not James. Jules didn’t know. They wouldn’t tell him something like that yet: he wasn’t nearly good enough at keeping secrets.

As far as I know, Hermione’s enjoying her summer. Daphne and Astoria have been teaching her horseback riding. She’s about as good at is as she is on a broom, which is “not at all,” but she seems to enjoy herself.

To be blunt, that’s not a question I’m comfortable answering.

-Hadrian

I’m pleased to hear Miss Granger is doing well. She struck me as a bright student and one of few examples of what Gryffindor should be, as opposed to what it too often actually is. I imagine she and Heir Greengrass have spent a considerable amount of their time practicing dueling this summer?

Fair enough. Without more information as to what you already know, however, I can’t proceed for fear of revealing something you didn’t know and therefore violating my lord’s orders, so it seems we’ll have to set aside this issue for the time being. Should you have other questions, I’m available to answer them.

-Barty Crouch
Harry smiled grimly at the paper. Quite a bind they were in—neither willing to impart what they knew for fear of giving something up. It was useful, though, this hope that the Death Eaters could turn him. He could leverage it for information. Leverage was always good, no matter how small a toehold. And it would definitely ease his way in Slytherin if people had orders from parents and relatives to not alienate the…

Ha. Well, he wouldn’t be the Slytherin Potter anymore, would he? Or the Other Potter. A genuine grin split Harry’s face as he realized fully that he’d be his own now. Harry Black. Hadrian Black. He whispered the name to his quiet bedroom and it sounded foreign and a little weird but also exciting. Other people wouldn’t define him by his father anymore.

He realized he should probably respond to Crouch.

_I really hope none of my friends is so stupid as to duel over the summer, since that would technically be illegal and we’re all good, law-abiding, model students. Daphne and Hermione are surely spending loads of time reading. I know for a fact Hermione has been greatly enjoying access to the Greengrass library._

_I do have other questions, as it happens, but none that I’m quite at the point of asking, so… Until next time._

- Hadrian

_Until next time._

- Barty Crouch

Chapter End Notes

apologies for the wait. if i’m being blunt, my grades suffered a bit last year because i spent too much time on fanfic, and i can’t let that happen again. i’ve barely written since coming back to school so my posting and writing pace is likely to see a drastic decrease compared to what it was last winter & over the summer. that said, book 5 will keep going up approximately a chapter every 2 weeks.

I read all your comments even if i don’t really have the time to respond right now--i will eventually, and thank you so much to anyone who’s left one! and all the kudos, hits, etc. you guys are great

Edit 11/22: thanks to those of you who pointed out my continuity mistake regarding Harry, Bill, and Charlie. this scene has been corrected to accommodate them having met before.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pansy and Blaise insisted on having a party to celebrate the adoption. “It’s a big moment,” Pansy said when Harry protested. “You’re getting a decent family, finally.”

“And you’re getting set up to inherit the vaults belonging to one of the richest magical families in Britain,” Malfoy said. “Not something to just blow off.”

Justin smacked him on the head with a pillow from the couch. Grimmauld Place’s sitting room was full of small pillows perfectly suited for hitting one’s friends. They’d all done it multiple times over the summer.

“What?” Malfoy said. “It’s true.”

“Yes, and you’re a git,” Hermione said. “Harry, why did you invite him?”

“So you could use him for target practice,” Harry said.

Hermione grinned. Malfoy scowled at both of them.

“Oh, are we dueling?” Daphne said. “I’ve been trouncing Hermione for weeks…”

Hermione kicked her. Daphne smirked.

“Later,” Pansy said. “Right now we have a party to celebrate! Harry, will Sirius let us do it here?”

“I’d imagine so,” Harry said.

“I hope Neville’s back from… wherever he is by then,” Blaise said absently.

“Mongolia,” Hermione supplied.

The Floo activated with a gout of green flame and Theo stepped out. “Sorry, got hung up talking to my father. Harry, didn’t you say Sirius is having a dueling chamber built in the basement? Can we go see it?”

Pansy dropped her head into her hands. “You are all hopeless.”

“Just a few, Pans,” Harry wheedled. “You’re better at party planning than any of us anyway.”

“Don’t think I don’t see through your transparent flattery,” she muttered. “Blaise?”

“I will gladly stay and help, my lady,” he said solemnly, winking at Harry.

Justin flicked his wrist and his wand slid down into his hand. “I’m dueling, thanks. Stupid Trace. I haven’t used magic properly in ages.”

“I’m so glad I’m staying with Daphne this summer,” Hermione said fervently. “For exactly that reason.”

“I thought it was because of me,” Daphne said, looking hurt.
Hermione blushed. “Well, yes, of course, you too, I didn’t mean—”

“Hermione, she’s playing you,” Blaise said with a faint grin.

“Oh—oh you little—that’s it, we’re dueling first,” Hermione said determinedly, already marching for the hall and the stairs down to the basement.

“I’ve been beating you all summer!” Daphne called.

Hermione’s voice floated back in. “Yes, but now I’m motivated!”

Daphne’s eyes flicked to Harry. He smirked back at her, and for just a second, everything was like it used to be—

But then one or both of them remembered and their eye contact got awkward and Daphne looked away.

Harry wanted to break something. Being a teenager sucked.

“Let’s do this,” Theo said, latching onto his elbow and practically dragging him out the door.

They trooped down to the basement, leaving Pansy and Blaise in the kitchen, neither of whom was especially fond of dueling. Harry had been working on his Occlumency and his silent casting a lot during the summer—the first directly helped with the second—and being able to throw nearly half the spells he knew without speaking gave him an advantage that none of his friends could match.

Well, Daphne might have. She won against Theo, Hermione, Neville, Justin, and Malfoy in turn, just like Harry. Their eyes kept finding each other and then awkwardly skipping away while the two of them sat on the sidelines and their friends dueled.

Yeah, Daphne might have been able to match him. But Harry didn’t know how to initiate a duel without it being as awkward as everything else between them.

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**Crouch—**

*What is your side’s opinion on the Muggle Protection Act?*

It wasn’t the first time Harry had written Crouch in the last week. Since the conversation on his birthday it had felt a bit like a broken dam. He didn’t know for certain what to think; he recorded every one of Crouch’s answers, neatly, and cross-referenced them with his research and with what he learned from inferences based on answers Order members gave to innocent questions—eventually he’d figure this out.

The only thing Harry was sure of was that nothing was so clear-cut as it seemed.

He supposed that was a trapping of childhood—black-and-white thinking. Childhood and zealotry. Harry had not had the luxury of a childhood for a long time. He smirked; that very probably had something to do with going in Slytherin. Rumors were wrong. Blind zealotry didn’t survive long in the snake pit.
Hadrian—

“Political faction” might be more accurate than “side”; surely you’ve noticed there’s many more than just two interests in this cold war of ours. I understand the views of them all—as any self-respecting Ravenclaw would seek to do—but the view I personally think is most correct, the one of my “side,” is that the MPA is a foolish endeavor. It vastly increases the power and budget of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department, which is hardly surprising since the head of said department wrote the bill. More than that—the act would make it illegal to defend oneself with magic against even a Muggle wielding a firearm. It’s reasonable to restrict the use of magical self-defense and pass laws against random torture sprees. It’s not reasonable at all to prevent wizards from using our best weapon against theirs. That’s just one of many, many issues in the bill, but it’s a good example of the general theme and why we dislike it.

-Barty Crouch

Harry actually paused. He had noticed multiple factions, he wasn’t an idiot… but if he considered it more closely…

The Ministry’s objectives didn’t align with the Order’s. Nor, for that matter, the Death Eaters’. The Order and the Ministry were at odds over the Ministry’s reactionary, stagnant policies; the Death Eaters wanted sweeping change and a massive return of power from the Ministry to the old families, and no government ever willingly gave itself a trim. Within the Ministry, of course, there were dozens if not hundreds of competing interests: Lucius Malfoy whispering in Fudge’s ear, Weasley and Shacklebolt’s coalition of covert Dumbledore supporters, the Auror Corps agitating to be given greater freedom, the Experimental Charms Committee insisting on its monopoly on magical scholarship, magical creature rights groups fighting the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, on and on ad nauseam. There were undoubtedly squabbles in the Death Eaters, too. Over Voldemort’s favor, influential positions, those who came from old families and prioritized protecting the Wizengamot Charter versus those from newer wizarding lines who most wanted the Ministry trade monopoly eradicated so they could expand the economy…

So the question involved where the Ministry would fall between Order and Death Eaters. They wanted to keep Voldemort’s return quiet, cling to power by preventing a panic, and it was one of the stupidest policies he’d ever heard of—sticking a finger in a dam and pretending everything was fine. He couldn’t disagree with the idea that the Ministry needed a good pruning. People would lose faith in them over this. That was an opportunity. Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake, he thought wryly, remembering a book he’d idly paged through the previous winter in the Slytherin common room. That put the Ministry at direct odds with the Death Eaters… but then again, they were not fond of the Order at the moment.

Dumbledore should probably have been trying to work with Fudge. Keep his confidence, come to some kind of compromise. Promise to stop spreading rumors in exchange for concessions that strengthened the Auror Corps, or something. It was too late now, but that would’ve been a good preemptive measure to make sure the Aurors were strong enough to handle it when the truth came out—which it would eventually; it was inevitable—

Harry realized he was pacing around his room, magic snapping in his eyes and hands with excitement. This was just like Slytherin but on a grand scale. No wonder so many Slytherins went into politics; he’d been training for this for the last four years.
I’m well aware of the competing factions. At least on a large scale. It’s a bit difficult to get accurate, detailed information when you’re barely 15 and trusted by neither side, I’m afraid.

Another question—this one about magic. I’m working with a potion at the moment; the author never completed it but the recipe that exists is promising. Would powdered evthiss root or nundu fur be a better stabilizing agent for the…

Kreacher appeared in the library with a crack.

Harry, deep in a Dark Arts tome the size of Kreacher’s entire body, took a few seconds to blink and switch his focus back to the real world. It felt a bit like pulling his mind out of heavy, cloying mud. This particular book really didn’t like attention turning away from it. If Harry hadn’t been a good intermediate-level Occlumens he wouldn’t have even opened the damn thing for fear of finding his entire conscious awareness trapped by it.

“Is Master Harry alright?” Kreacher croaked, visibly concerned. He’d been in spasms of joy to find that the Slytherin Master Harry would soon be adopted into the family. He tolerated Sirius and was grateful for the family relics Sirius happily let him keep, but Harry he nearly worshipped, Harry he got worried about.


“Master Sirius is in the kitchen. Master Harry’s letter from the school is being delivered.”

Harry put a bit of parchment in his book to mark his place, pulsed some magic into the thing through his hand to remind it not to piss him off, and stood. “Thanks, Kreacher. Oh, and I found some more old family portraits Sirius doesn’t want—left them piled over there.” He pointed at a table near the library door. “You can have them.”

“Master Harry is too kind,” Kreacher said, bowing so low his nose hit the carpet.

“No, no, you deserve it,” Harry said firmly, smirking on the inside. “You’ve served the House of Black loyally for many years.”

“And Master Harry is to be a Black,” Kreacher said rapturously, as he did in some form about five times a day.

“Yep,” Harry said, grinning like he always did when someone reminded him. A family. A real family, that wanted him, and accepted him, and—loved him. Sirius as his adopted father. Sirius, who he trusted.

Kreacher bowed again, very low, and trotted off for the portraits.

Harry nailed a couple of the nastier books he had out with freezing charms to keep them from running off while he was gone and left the library. He turned his wand on himself, cast a silent featherlight charm, and jumped over the railing, drifting all the way down to the second floor through the empty space at the middle of the stairwell.

When his feet touched the ground, he ended the spell, and walked normally down the grand staircase to the ground floor. “Sirius?” he yelled.

“In here!”
Harry followed the voice down into the kitchen and grinned. “You’ve got grease on your forehead.”

“Haven’t I always.” Sirius spelled it off and settled onto a chair. “Fifth year.”

Harry caught the envelope Sirius tossed him. “Wonder what ridiculous weenie books they’ll assign this year?” he mused, breaking the familiar seal.

“Fifth year,” Sirius repeated.

Harry looked blankly at him.

“Merlin, sometimes you are dense,” Sirius said. “Fifth year’s when they pick prefects, remember?”

“Oh,” Harry said, looking down at the envelope that suddenly seemed a lot heavier. Prefect. A badge. A tangible representation of all the work he’d put in. A way to say stick it to James and Jules and everyone who always told him he was nothing and dismissed him in favor of his birth family. An official position of power sanctioned by authorities instead of an unofficial one he carved for himself out of Slytherin’s internal politics.

“Had you really forgotten?” Sirius said, snickering.

“Shut up,” Harry said halfheartedly. “There’s been a lot going on this summer.”

“I think you’ve been studying harder this summer than you do at school,” Sirius muttered. “You never leave the bloody library unless you’re with your friends. And even then, Hermione and Theo are happy to hole up in there with you.”

Harry thought back on Hermione’s first time in the Black library with a smirk. A book tried to bite her fingers and she spooked and threw it at the wall so hard the binding cracked. Most of the other books left her alone after that, though Harry and Theo were careful to hex anything that threatened to get nasty when Hermione wasn’t looking. She didn’t need to know they were looking out for her. And neither of them wanted to shatter her tentative interest in learning about gray or Dark magic by letting the books frighten her off.

Luckily, she had a Gryffindor’s bravado.

“Someone tried to kill me last year,” Harry said. “And—Voldemort’s back now. I need to be prepared and I won’t have access to these at school.”

“You know you can take them with you,” Sirius pointed out.

“Yes, but not all of them,” Harry muttered. He took a deep breath and pulled out the papers from his envelope with a hand that he refused to let shake.

The school supply list.
Nothing else.

He tried to crush his disappointment and irritation. Tried, and failed. Spectacularly. He’d topped his year in Potions every year he sat the exams, and he was consistently in the top five of his year across the whole school and ranked higher based off of grades than any other fifth-year Slytherin. Even going by Slytherin politics he came out ahead. His only strong contenders had been Malfoy and Pansy. Pansy he allied with first year and befriended second. Malfoy he jostled with first year, terrorized second and third, and reached out to fourth. Bulstrode, Crabbe, and Goyle were followers and not leaders, and the others were all part of Harry’s circle. He’d accepted some time ago that it
was his circle and not just a group of friends he was part of.

However you looked at it—Slytherin Prefect should’ve been his.

Harry hadn’t realized how much he’d been expecting and wanting this until it was gone.

“No badge?” Sirius said incredulously.

“No.” Harry’s voice was even, normal, not hollow or furious. His face was blank and smooth when he looked up and handed over the envelope.

Sirius shook it, and then peered inside angrily, like the badge might be hiding invisibly in the bottom. “What! That absolute—I’m going to murder him.”

“Who?” Harry said.

“Snape!”


“No, he’s already on my shit list—Snivellus—heads of House choose the prefects!” Sirius conjured a quill, ink bottle, and parchment with an angry jerk of his wand and started writing.

Harry left him to his furious mumbling and went down to the dueling chamber. It only took up half the space in the lower basement, thanks to magical enlargements on the inside, but it was plenty large enough for a row of training dummies that fired back a limited repertoire of spells.

“Five opponents,” he announced to the room. “All spell options available.”

There was a bit of hesitation as the enchantments accommodated this uncommon request.

Harry gripped his ash wand as dummies trundled into place in a circle around him. He’d only done this exercise a few times and always got his ass handed to him, but it was as good a way as any to burn off some steam.

Four hours later, sweaty and exhausted, muscles burning and magical reserves nearly empty, Harry staggered back upstairs.

He stepped into the kitchen and froze. Snape. Snape was sitting there staring back at him.

It took quite a bit of willpower but Harry snapped almost instantly into a normal posture and blank expression. He didn’t bother with his Slytherin mask around Sirius anymore, but Snape—it’d be a long time before he trusted Snape enough to drop his guard. If ever.

Snape crooked an eyebrow at the shift but said nothing. “Mr. Hadrian.”

“Professor,” Harry said, letting no trace of his exhaustion show as he walked into the kitchen, and cursing James for taking away his legal right to use the name Potter. “Mr. Hadrian” just sounded awkward.

His eyes flicked to Sirius for cues. His godfather had a half-empty tumbler of firewhiskey in front of him but he didn’t look murderous despite Snape sitting in their kitchen, which was a good sign.

“He got my owl,” Sirius said. “Next thing I know, the wards are telling me there’s a Floo request
from Prince Cottage.”

Snape scowled. “You made me wait ten minutes before you let me through.”

Harry tried not to laugh at the power play. “Sirius, what did you write?”

“Nothing nice,” Sirius said.

Snape’s scowl deepened.

“Clearly.” Harry raised an eyebrow and sat down next to Sirius, across from Snape.

“Your—concern—centered around the choice of this year’s Slytherin prefect,” Snape said through almost unmoving lips.

“Damn right it did,” Sirius said.

“I admit I was… somewhat surprised to not receive the badge,” Harry said carefully.

Harry wouldn’t have thought it possible but Snape’s tone actually got tighter. “Mr. Malfoy has received the honor.”

“W—Malfoy?” Harry winced. Damn, he was more tired than he thought if he was letting exclamations like that slip.

“He has received adequate grades and is in good standing within Slytherin.”

This conversation was a bloody minefield. For the first time, Harry saw the appeal of Justin and Hermione’s cut-to-the-chase approach instead of Slytherin verbal tap dancing.

“His grades aren’t as good as Harry’s and his ‘good standing’ is half due to his family!” Sirius snapped. Good thing he had Sirius around to be direct, then.

Snape’s jaw tightened. “I am aware of both of these facts.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Cutting to the chase had appeal but with Snape it would only make him clam up and not tell them anything. The mere fact that he’d come here to explain the decision suggested it wasn’t a decision he liked, and he was dodging neatly around something that he didn’t want to say.

Oh. Oh fucking hell. Harry was pretty sure what was going on here—who had overridden Snape for the choice of male prefect. Now all he had to figure out was why.

Other than the fact that Dumbledore just didn’t like him.

“Was it personal?” Harry said softly.

Snape and Sirius’ attention both snapped to him.

“Personal how?” Snape sneered.

“Certain people in Hogwarts aren’t fond of me,” Harry said, “and would be pleased to deny me a position of power in my House.”

A flicker of approval crossed Snape’s sallow face.
“Bloody hell,” Sirius snarled, a bit of the grim creeping into his vocal cords. “That old goat—”

“Personal reasons may have been a factor,” Snape said smoothly, ignoring Sirius. “There is, of course, Mr. Malfoy’s temperament… and his likely behavior when given such a position. Which are both factors in choosing prefects as well as grades and House standing.”

Harry sorted through the implications of that in about two seconds flat. “Ah,” he said. This also explained why Snape came in person—he wanted Harry to get the situation under control, and this wasn’t something he could subtly explain and ask for via letter. And Harry was the one person in Slytherin who was in a position to pull it off. “Yes, I do see how Malfoy would be likely to react differently than myself when given the badge. Thank you for explaining, Professor.”

“It is my responsibility to ensure the best for Slytherin House and all its members,” Snape said. Translation: it was in Slytherin’s best interest for Harry to know this now, so he could crush any problems before they happened.

“May I inquire who the female prefect is?”

“Miss Parkinson.”

Harry nodded. It was logical. Pansy’s grades were good, but not fantastic—she was a mediocre witch when it came to wandwork. Politics, though, and people, and all the things a prefect needed to be good at—those she could handle, and well. “There was no outside interference in that choice?” he checked.

Snape smirked. “None whatsoever. Miss Parkinson, to those outside Slytherin House, would not appear to make a particularly powerful prefect.” Translation: Dumbledore didn’t meddle because he looked at Pansy’s grades and decided giving her prefect wouldn’t be putting one of the cleverer Slytherins in that position, but he wasn’t a snake himself and so didn’t notice that wand skill and academics weren’t the only determining factors in Slytherin politics.

“How foolish,” he said drily.

“Indeed.” Snape stood and nodded to them both. “Good day, Lord Black, Mr. Hadrian.”

“Black,” Sirius said.

Snape paused. “What?”

“I’m adopting him.” Sirius grinned proudly. “He’ll be Mr. Black when they all go back to school.”

Interest gleamed in Snape’s eyes. This would be making it back to Dumbledore and Voldemort both within a day or two, Harry would bet. He didn’t particularly care. They would’ve found out anyway; the Prophet was sure to report this.

“Congratulations to you both,” Snape said. “The Black family will surely flourish thanks to its newest member. And I am pleased that—you will have a family in the eyes of the law as well as in practice, Mr. Black,” he added.

Harry blinked at the unexpected sincerity. “Thank you, Professor.”

Snape seemed to struggle with himself for a moment before he admitted waspishly, “I am not unfamiliar with the familial issues myself, Mr. Black.”

Oh. Oh. That—actually made a lot of sense.
Sirius stared at Snape like he’d never seen him before, then barked out a laugh that made both Snape and Harry jump a little. “Oh bloody hell, none of us knows what it’s like to have a decent parent, do we?” he muttered, and knocked back the last of his firewhiskey. “No wonder we’re all fucked up.”

“Good day,” Snape said again, and disappeared into the Floo, presumably so he could get out of there before Sirius got any drunker.

“Ohhhkay,” Harry said, wandlessly summoning the firewhiskey bottle to his hand before Sirius could reach for it. “I think that’s enough. It’s just a prefect badge.”

“It is not,” Sirius said. “It’s one more thing added onto a heaping pile of the shit that old goat has done to us.”

“You realize that’s Eriss’ nickname for him?” Harry said, smirking. “Goat man? One of, anyway, she likes nicknames.”

“She’s got good taste in them, then,” Sirius said darkly. “Care to explain that conversation?”

Harry swirled the golden firewhiskey pensively. “So basically, Dumbledore leaned on Snape to appoint Malfoy prefect because Malfoy’s a power-hungry git who doesn’t think ahead very well. It’s no secret he’ll probably get excited about getting his pound of flesh from the Gryffindors, especially my stupid brother’s circle of friends, and probably abuse the ability to take points. That would alienate all the other Houses from Slytherin even more than they already are, and Dumbledore likes the snakes weak and isolated and hated. Snape came to explain in person because he wants me to lean on Malfoy to stop that before it happens, because more isolation is the opposite of the best thing for Slytherin House, and I’m currently top of the totem pole for my year, so it has to be me. That’s also faster than going through Lucius Malfoy because he’s a Death Eater and unpredictable and that would drag Death Eater politics into the mix between him and Snape, and I’d guess the politics in that group are worse than Slytherin House, and I’m currently top of the totem pole for my year, so it has to be me. Dumbledore didn’t bother to involve himself with the selection of Pansy because she’s not spectacular with a wand so her grades are good but not amazing, so he looked at that, and her lack of particular achievements, and decided appointing her would help him keep Slytherin weak. Also, he probably thinks another Death Eater’s kid would piss people off and go along with Malfoy’s schemes and further alienate the House. Too bad for him he doesn’t realize Pansy is excellent with House politics and people, and she’s actually who I would’ve chosen for female prefect.”

Sirius stared at him, mouth halfway open.

“Close your mouth,” Harry sighed.

It shut with a click. “You got all that—from that conversation?”

“Slytherin,” Harry said.

“I am so glad I went to Gryffindor,” Sirius muttered.

Harry dropped his head on the table. “Aaaand now I’m going to have to figure out how to lean on Malfoy… without pissing him off, or ruining our—tentative truce… or unnecessarily complicating my own position,” he complained. “I hate Dumbledore.”

“Just think how mad he’ll be when Malfoy doesn’t do anything stupid,” Sirius said, “and Pansy turns out to be brilliant at it.”

Harry grinned. “There is that.”
Crouch-

I still haven’t passed on your apology to Sirius. I will as soon as I can figure out how to explain the fact that I’ve been in contact with a Death Eater this summer. Rest assured that I will once I return to school.

Crouch would be smart enough to figure out Harry’s plan. It’d be easy enough to hint that the apology came by way of Harry’s friends with Death Eater connections once he was on campus.

It’s going to come out soon, I’m sure, so I might as well quit keeping the secret—Sirius plans to adopt me.

We’ve done the Ministry paperwork already. James Potter’s paternal grandmother was a Black, so the family magics will accept me to be one of the family.

-Hadrian

Hadrian,

I expected something of the sort would happen. Don’t endanger yourself with him on my account.

It’s really not my place to say this, but—congratulations. I’ve had to deal with a similar situation and finding (or creating) a real family when your biological one didn’t measure up is—Sirius seems to genuinely care. I am delighted for both your sakes that you’ve come to such an arrangement.

Has he spoken to you about a trust vault? One is automatically created by Gringotts for every child born into the direct line of descendants, but even if the wards and the Wizengamot enchantments accept your Black blood, the Gringotts magic might not have created one for you automatically.

-Barty Crouch

To put it bluntly, I’m pretty sure I could commit homicide without endangering Sirius’ opinion of me, but I appreciate the thought.

The connection wasn’t strong enough for the Gringotts magic. We have yet to test… any other aspects of my adoption. As far as the Ministry’s concerned, it’s finalized, but Sirius and I have a bit more work to do. The vault doesn’t matter so much. I had quite a windfall a few years ago that James doesn’t know about and several avenues open to me for income once I graduate, so money doesn’t concern me—but the Black seat on the Wizengamot very much does. Once we finish sorting things out I’ll be a Black in all but birth certificate.

Thank you. It—was something of a shock. I still can’t quite believe it’s happening.

I realize this is a personal question and I respect that you may well not want to answer. You mentioned last year that the Dark Lord is a surrogate father to you. Frankly, he doesn’t seem the type. How did that happen?
Sirius has always been like that. Those he considers family or friend, he will defend until his death, regardless of whether they deserve such loyalty. It takes something like Pettigrew or James’ betrayal to make him turn and even then, love turns not to indifference but to its close cousin, hate.

I see. Best of luck in your remaining “work”. I recommend *La Magie de la Vie*. Illegal since 1803, so perhaps avoid attempting any of its rituals outside a strong set of wards. If memory serves, the Black library has a copy in English. It’s quite a fascinating read and may have some insights you could use. Completely unrelated to the remaining loose ends of your adoption, of course.

Some things I’m not going to share, but as I did indirectly invite this question, here are the facts. My father, as you probably noticed, was not a pleasant man. He loved my mother and in my youth he was dedicated to the rule of law. Those are about his only redeeming qualities. He was the sort of parent who never seemed to find anything acceptable about Mum or me. He wore my mother down to a ghost; the pictures of her when she was young showed a vibrant woman but when I knew her she was quiet and meek and entirely subjugated to him. I didn’t go home over holiday breaks from Hogwarts. Many were spent at the castle; in later years I went to Grimmauld Place, because Walburga Black’s demented rages were far easier to deal with. She at least would respect me instead of arrest me for defending myself with Dark magic.

Regulus and I joined the Death Eaters over Yule break of his sixth year, and my fifth. My lord is always careful to look for rising talent. I was the most brilliant student to pass through Hogwarts since he himself attended, and the first to beat his records in OWL scores. Naturally, he took an interest. At first he had other Death Eaters train me, and eventually he began doing so himself. You can extrapolate from there. And no, he is not the type, but he recognized some of himself in me and he is not, as Light propaganda would have you believe, a genocidal, psychotic maniac.

-Barty Crouch

We do indeed have a copy of *La Magie de la Vie*. Quite fascinating, although it bears absolutely no relevance whatsoever to the remaining adoption loose strings.

Coincidentally, what is your political faction’s stance on the 1803 blood magic ban?

I begin to understand why you didn’t regret killing your father. A decade under the Imperius didn’t help that relationship, I’m sure. There will be no judgment from this quarter; I have some relatives of my own I’d happily relegate to “no longer a blight on humanity” status. Pity the law frowns on premeditated murder.

The Dark Lord did not seem quite as insane, on the occasions we met, as I had been led to expect. Then again, don’t insult me by saying your lot hasn’t engaged in propaganda just as much as Dumbledore’s.

-Hadrian

Glad to hear you’ve found *Magie de la Vie* as interesting as I did. Is there anything in particular that strikes you?
Many of my associates regularly flaunt the 1803 ban. Shocking, I know. If we could gain the votes we’d repeal it in a heartbeat but people become adjusted to the status quo. It’s most likely that, if we had the political power, we’d begin chipping away at it bit by bit in modifications to various statutes until the original law itself is essentially voided without ever doing so directly. Things that come readily to mind are the restoration of Muggle-born blood adoption to legal status and blood-based healing potions and rituals that we haven’t been able to use for centuries.

Yes, the trial reports made it quite clear you’ve some deplorable twigs on your own family tree. I thank Merlin for your sake that you’ve managed to be grafted onto the Blacks instead. They’re far from saints themselves but the really insane Blacks are all dead now, with the possible exception of dear Bella, because dementors rarely do good things for one’s mental stability, and I imagine the family reputation will benefit greatly from you carrying it on. If anything the Black legacy suits you better than the Potter one, based on my limited knowledge of your reading tastes.

Perhaps one day, depending on how things work out, you and I shall meet in the Wizengamot.

I wouldn’t dream of trying to tell you we don’t use propaganda. I helped write a fair portion of it in the last war. Every side of every conflict for centuries, both magical and Muggle, has used propaganda to support their ideals. The difference here is that Dumbledore has had thirteen years to spread his unopposed. The Dark Lord leads a group of interests pushed out of the political process long before I joined the movement. Is it any surprise we turned to alternate methods to achieve our goals than legal procedures when Ministry corruption and overreach made change impossible? We had our own propaganda, but the Ministry controls the press, and Dumbledore controls the magical education; your brother laid my lord low in 1981 and that only made things worse for us.

You can probably tell I have—strong opinions on this subject. I apologize; I didn’t intend to go off on such a tear. Your thoughts on the matter interest me, should you choose to share them.

-Barty Crouch

I won’t actually inherit any of the Black genetic predisposition toward insanity, and in many ways, yes, the Black legacy fits me nicely. Having access to the library the last two summers has been an interesting experience, to put it mildly. I’d give up the rest of the inherited assets for the sake of the library contents in a heartbeat.

At this point, the likelihood of me being alive in a world that pardons you and lets you on the Wizengamot doesn’t seem very high—but I certainly won’t rule it out. I would certainly enjoy the apoplectic rage on James’ face if he is still around to see it come to pass.

Thank you for the honest answer. Based solely on what you wrote—I can’t disagree with the broad sentiment of it. I’m currently collecting information from multiple sources thanks to a deep-rooted aversion to letting other people do my thinking for me. That’s all I’m willing to share at the moment.

Regarding La Magie de la Vie: the rituals in chapter 8 designed for the sharing of certain physical traits are fascinating but I don’t understand the runic arrays, or the importance of zinc as opposed to iron in the athame selected.

-Hadrian

Jules
This might qualify as the worst summer of his life.

It even topped the first summer, when he found out he had a brother only to meet a scrawny, skinny, quiet boy who disliked all his friends. And the summer of 1993, when Black was loose and everyone thought he was a murderer and Jules lived with a burning hatred second only to what he held for Voldemort. And the summer of 1994, when Dad got convicted of a crime and betrayed by his one-time best friend and the Dursley’s wards came down and Dumbledore lost a lot of political clout.

No, this was worse, because now, it wasn’t just James’ competence as Head Auror coming under daily press fire: it was also Jules.

“No,” Ethan said, flicking him on the head as he walked into the dining room. “Quit with the sulking. We are here to prove you are an emotionally stable, rational symbol of hope for our world, not an angsty self-obsessed teenager.”

“He is an angsty self-obsessed teenager,” Fred said.

“A textbook example, in fact,” said George.

Molly Weasley slapped them both upside the head.

“Wonder who assigned the Slinkhard book,” George continued, undeterred. “We’ve got it, too, except a more advanced edition.”

“He won’t tell me who the new Defense teacher is,” Jules said, frowning.

Molly clucked. “Well, I’m sure he has good reason. Oh, dear, the laundry’s done…”

She bustled out.

“Has he had trouble finding a new one?” Ginny said, coming into the kitchen. “Teacher, I mean.”

Jules frowned at her. The wild Ginny of his childhood, the one who hung off his every word and always seemed so cute, was completely gone. She was dressed in fancy pureblood-style clothes all the time now, usually in dark colors, somehow practical and pretty at the same time. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like her fiery hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail. He didn’t like the clever edge in her brown eyes or the smug Slytherin confidence in her stride or the biting sarcasm that lurked in her words all too often.

Slytherin did good things for no one.

“Loads,” Fred said. “Least from what we’ve overheard.”

Ginny sat down next to him at the Weasleys’ kitchen table.

“Where’s Ron?” Jules said.

“Here—sorry.” Ron skidded into the kitchen and Jules grinned with relief. He wasn’t nearly as close to Ginny or the twins as he used to be. It was awkward. Ginny was a Slytherin and the twins were Harry’s friends.

George flicked Ron’s letter at him.

“Why?” Ron said.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “One possessed and dead, one’s memory removed, one sacked for being a
werewolf and almost biting several students, one locked in a trunk for nine months and impersonated,” she said derisively, ticking them off on her fingers. “Is it any surprise no one wants to take the job?”

Ron scowled at her and ripped into his letter.

“I dunno who Slinkhard is,” Fred said with a frown. “Never read anything by him…”

“And I’m not encouraged by anything with theory in the title,” George said darkly.

Jules wanted to agree with them, but then again, Dumbledore was responsible for hiring practices. He was sure Dumbledore knew what he was doing.

“What’s up with you, Ron?” Ginny said.

Jules and the twins both turned to look. Ron was standing very still, gaping at his Hogwarts letter. He didn’t answer.

“Oh for the love of…” Fred got up and went around next to him, peering impatiently over Ron’s shoulder.

“Prefect?” Fred exclaimed suddenly. “Prefect?”

George’s head snapped up. He leaned over the table and snatched the envelope out of Ron’s empty hand, turned it upside down over the table, and stared at the scarlet and gold badge that fell out.

Jules felt rather like something heavy had just fallen into his stomach and dragged it down around his toes.

“No way,” George said.

Ginny clamped a hand over her mouth.

“There’s been a mistake.” Fred snatched the letter out of Ron’s hand. He held it up to the witchlight near the ceiling. “No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect…”

“Definitely not,” Ginny said around her hand.

Both twins looked at Jules in unison. “We thought you were a cert!” Fred said.

“Or, you know, if McGonagall figured out which of you lot has any sense, that it’d be Dean,” George added.

Jules’ jaw clenched. Somehow he’d actually forgotten that prefects were chosen this year. Temporarily. He hadn’t even been thinking about it, or worrying, because—

Well, because whenever it crossed his mind, he just assumed he’d get it.

“What d’you mean, Dean?” Ron said, finding his voice.

George rolled his eyes. “He’s the responsible one, isn’t he?”

“Prefect… ickle Ronnie the prefect…” Fred looked disgusted.

“Oh, Mum’s going to be revolting,” groaned George, shoving the badge across the table at Ron like it might contaminate him.
Ginny let out a snort.

All four boys turned to look at her.

She seemed to give up and dissolved into laughter. “McGonagall’s gone batty.”

“They all have,” Fred said. “First Harry, now this—”

“Harry’s prefect?” Jules said sharply.

“He’s not,” George said, “which makes zero sense.”

Jules had to agree.

“Since when has Dumbledore done anything logical as Headmaster?” Ginny muttered.

“Hey!” Jules snapped.

It might have degenerated but Molly came back into the kitchen just then, levitating a large pile of laundry. She dumped it on the table and started flicking through with a combination of manual labor and magic. “We can head over to Diagon Alley to get your books and stock up your potions kits this afternoon… Ron, I’ll have to get you more pajamas, these are at least six inches too short, I can’t believe how fast you’re growing… what color would you like?”

“Get him red and gold to match his badge,” George said, smirking.

Jules’ eyes darted involuntarily towards the badge in Ron’s hand. He could not for the sake of Merlin figure out what the bloody hell he was feeling right now.

“Match his what?” said Molly absently, rolling up a pair of Ron’s maroon boxers, to his obvious embarrassment.

“His badge,” said Fred, with the air of getting the worst over with. “His lovely shiny new prefect’s badge.”

Molly took a few seconds to process this. “His… but… Ron… you’re not…?”

Ron mutely held up his badge.

Molly shrieked. “I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it! Oh, Ron, how wonderful! A prefect! That’s everyone in the family!”

“What are Fred and I, next-door neighbors?” said George indignantly. Molly pushed him aside and threw her arms around Ron.

*It should be me.*

Jules hated the ugly thought—but it was honest.

Why would *Ron* get the bloody badge? He was—he was a good friend, yeah, and a good bloke, but—he hadn’t fought Quirrell, or the basilisk, or won the Triwizard—and he got just as many detentions as Jules, and Jules’ grades weren’t awesome but they were better than Ron’s—

And it was stupid that Harry hadn’t got it, either, he *should* have, being the best of the Slytherins his year. But a petty, selfish part of Jules was glad Harry wasn’t a prefect so he couldn’t lord his shiny badge over Jules.
“Wait until your father hears! Ron, I’m so proud of you, what wonderful news, you could end up Head Boy just like Bill and Percy, it’s the first step! Oh, what a thing to happen in the middle of all this worry, I’m just thrilled, oh Ronnie—”

She went on. Fred and George were busy making loud retching noises. Ginny appeared to be choking on laughter as Molly tried to kiss Ron all over his very red face.

“Mum… get a grip,” Ron muttered, shoving at her.

She let go and said breathlessly, “Well, what will it be? We gave Percy an owl…”

“What d’you mean?” Ron said hesitantly.

The twins let off retching and looked angry. Ginny rolled her eyes and went back to scanning her book list with distaste evident on her face.

Jules looked down and realized he’d clenched his own list so hard the paper was crinkled. He relaxed his grip.

“You’ve got to get a reward for this!” said Molly fondly. “How about a nice new set of dress robes?”

“James got him some for his birthday, remember?” Ginny said acidly.

Her tone went right over Molly’s head. Jules couldn’t figure out why Ginny was so upset about this. It wasn’t like she’d been passed up for prefect; she was a fourth year…

“Mum,” said Ron hopefully, “can I have a new broom?”

Molly’s face fell slightly.

“Not—not a really good one,” Ron hastened to add. “Just—just a new one for a change…”

“Of course you can,” Molly said with a smile.

“What, so he gets a new broom, and I don’t even get to fly anything other than the stupid Dragonflye?” Ginny said indignantly.

Molly frowned at her. “It’s dangerous, Ginny dear. Well… We’d better get going if we have a broom to buy too… I’ll see you all later. Little Ronnie, a prefect! Oh, I’m all of a dither! I’ll just go collect Arthur and then we can be off… he’ll be so excited!”

She kissed Ron on the cheek one more time and hurried out of the kitchen, already calling for Arthur.

“You don’t mind if we don’t kiss you, do you, Ron?” Fred said in a fake anxious voice.

“We could curtsey, if you like,” said George.

“No, no, don’t do that,” Ginny said, “that’s one of those pureblood manners things he’s been telling me I shouldn’t know for two years, you’d only piss his Royal Prefectness off…”

“Shut up,” Ron said, scowling at all of them.

“Or what?” Fred said, smiling evilly. “Going to put us in detention?”

“I’d love to see him try,” sniggered George.
“He could,” Jules said, feeling like he should stick up for his friend. “If you don’t watch out.”

Fred and George and Ginny burst out laughing.

“Look out, George, we’re going to have to watch our step with ickle Ronniekins on our case…” Fred said, pretending to tremble.

“Yeah, looks like our law-breaking days are finally over,” said George, shaking his head.

With a loud crack, they Disapparated.

“Enjoy your badge,” Ginny said, a bit viciously, to Ron. “Must be nice to have a taste of achievement for once in your life, instead of being the Boy Who Lived’s sidekick…”

She stalked out of the room. Jules heard her go up three flights of stairs and then slam a door behind herself. The twins’ room, then, on the third floor.

Silence reigned.

“Don’t listen to them,” Jules said, because he had to say something. “They’re just jealous.”

“I don’t think they are,” Ron said doubtfully, looking up at the ceiling. “They’ve always said only prats become prefects… Still,” he added more happily, “they’ve never had new brooms! She’ll never be able to afford a Nimbus, but there’s the new Cleansweep out, that’d be great… Yeah, I think I’ll go ask her if that works, so she knows before we leave…”

He dashed off.

Jules looked down at the table he was gripping very hard.

Words from last year came back to him. Words Hermione spat at him when he was feeling sorry for himself about Ron in November. *Ron’s got five older brothers to contend with and you’re over here, famous, loved by everyone, the spoiled only child born with a cornucopia hanging over your crib, and he’s your best friend but he’s always shunted aside when people see you…*

His stomach roiled. Jules hadn’t thought about it—but when he had, he’d expected to get the badge, not for it to go to *Ron*—

This wasn’t Ron’s fault. This was, if anything, McGonagall’s. Or Dumbledore’s. Or who knew what else, maybe Snape had some kind of leverage and kept Jules from getting the badge, he definitely hated the Potters enough—even bloody Harry, who’d sort of gotten a truce out of him, still didn’t make Slytherin prefect.

Either way. It wasn’t Ron’s fault. Ron didn’t ask for the stupid fucking badge.

Jules closed his eyes and counted to ten and decided that he wasn’t going to laugh behind Ron’s back with the twins. They were gits anyway, especially in the last year or two—and Merlin if befriending Harry didn’t have that effect on people, he was like an infectious disease or something—Jules didn’t want to be like them. He wasn’t going to join in just because Ron had beaten him at something for the first time.

And he definitely wasn’t going to air his suspicions about Snape using leverage to keep it away from Jules.

He straightened his round Potter glasses on his nose as he heard Ron coming back in.
“Just caught her!” Ron said happily. “We’ve got half an hour to pack and then we’re off for the Alley—she said she thinks she can sort it out—I can’t wait!”

“Cool,” Jules said, glad to hear his voice coming out normally. “Listen—Ron—well done, mate.”

Ron’s smile disappeared. “I never thought it would be me!” he said, shaking his head. “I thought it would be you!”

“I must’ve caused too much trouble,” Jules said. It sounded lame even to his ears, but Ron didn’t seem to notice.

“Young, I suppose.” He looked happy. “We’d better start packing or we’ll miss Diagon, won’t we?”

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Sorry about the accidental chapter. I definitely meant to post this one, but I was editing at the end of book 5 instead of the beginning and I was somewhat delirious with exhaustion when I posted it. Whoops. Sorry for the confusion!
Things might have been awkward between him and Daphne, but they had their friends as a buffer, so the annual shopping trip to Diagon wasn’t nearly as painful as it might have been.

They met in the Leaky at ten a week before they’d be heading back to school. Justin and Malfoy were the last to show up, arguing about something trivial that Harry completely ignored. Justin had been staying at Grimmauld Place off and on over the summer but he’d gone over to Malfoy’s the previous day for some reason Harry couldn’t fathom. Luna showed up looking like her usual air-fairy self until she handed Pansy a flower crown that fairly pulsed with magic, woven as it was into Aztec runes.

“It will keep scribblebugs away from your eyes,” Luna said solemnly.

“Er,” Pansy said, eyeing the crown. “Right, thanks, Luna.” She arranged it on her head. Somehow it worked perfectly with her black bob cut. “How do I look?”

“Stunning, as usual,” Blaise said with a flirtatious grin.

“Sod off,” she told him.

Harry noticed Theo and Hermione gravitating towards each other and raised a single eyebrow. That might be interesting, if it went anywhere, and if they didn’t blow anything up in the process.

He ended up walking with Blaise and Neville and Pansy, the four of them discussing Order things. Blaise snorted at the mention of Harry spying on the Slytherins.

“What, you don’t think I can?” Harry said with a smirk.

“You absolutely can,” Blaise said, sneering at a toddler who tripped into his robes. The little boy backed up fast and ran off towards his parents. “And you do. But pass on your intel to the Order? Pah.”

“Pity for them they don’t know you that well,” Neville said.

Harry glanced at him. It was hard to tell where Neville stood sometimes. “You don’t support the Order?”

“I don’t like Dumbledore,” Neville said.

He didn’t say anything else. The Slytherins had a fast silent conversation of loaded eye contact and Pansy turned the subject back to their textbooks.

“I’m interested in the Slinkhard book,” Hermione said, falling back once she caught wind of their subject. “I’ve never read anything by him—and I’ve read a lot—and why are we studying the theory of Defense?”

“I’m not optimistic,” Harry said. “Given Dumbledore’s track record with Defense teachers…”
Pansy frowned. “I haven’t heard anything. Dad knows, I think, but he won’t tell me.”

Harry told them, in a low voice, about Crouch’s warning that there’d be an unfriendly pair of eyes at Hogwarts. Everyone knew about his correspondence with the Death Eater. Hermione eyed him shrewdly, guessing that he was probably using Crouch for help on their private extracurricular study project, but she exercised tact and didn’t bring it up in front of the others.

“The unfriendly eyes might be the Defense teacher,” Pansy said, just as quietly. “If my dad knows who it is… He seemed like he was warning me, a bit, he said to watch myself around whoever it is…”

“Unfriendly to both factions, then?” Harry said.

Neville snorted. “Unless the Death Eater you’ve been talking to assumes you’re a budding Death Eater yourself.”

Harry winced. Neville, of all of them, handled the news that Harry was writing with Barty Crouch the worst. Only the knowledge that he’d stood by instead of participating in the attack on Alice and Frank Longbottom—and Justin pointing out that at twenty, Crouch hadn’t been in any position to take on Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange and stop it, anyway—made Neville accept the contact at all.

“I’ve made it clear that’s not the case,” Harry said diplomatically.

“Yeah,” Neville said, a little tightly. “How’s old Barty doing?”

An unexpected, and unfamiliar, wash of guilt hit Harry’s stomach. He slipped a little farther into Occlumency and examined the feeling dispassionately. Possibly he should have been more considerate of Neville’s feelings before corresponding with the man who’d watched Neville’s parents tortured into insanity. Then again, it wasn’t worth assuaging Neville’s justified anger to pass up the opportunity to get information, so Harry wouldn’t change anything even if he could go back and stop himself ever writing back in the journal. And, frankly, he enjoyed writing Crouch. The man was brilliant, and answered Harry’s questions about potions and wards and curses readily, and he’d recommended several fascinating books, and he had a dry and sarcastic humor that Harry appreciated.

Setting the whole Death Eater thing aside, Harry actually liked Crouch.

He could avoid talking about it in front of Neville if at all possible, though. And he wouldn’t be telling his friend that last bit at all.

That decided, Harry deftly smothered the feeling of guilt. Then he almost stumbled as it hit him that he probably shouldn’t be that good at murdering his emotions.

Better to have a clear mind.

“We don’t exactly exchange pleasantries,” he said, after that split second of mental calculation. “He’s alive, or he was as of… two days ago.”

“Huh.” Neville fiddled with his wand.

“We’ll just have to tread carefully in that class, then,” Pansy said, eyeing them shrewdly.

“Congratulations, by the way,” Blaise said, leaning over to flick a finger on her green-and-silver prefect’s badge. “Can’t wait to see you take points off the Gryffindors.”
“Excuse you,” Hermione said.

Blaise smirked at her. “Only when they deserve it, of course.”

“Right,” she muttered. “If you abuse your power, don’t forget I’ve got my own.” She pulled her own badge out of her pocket and waggled it at them.

Harry felt his expression strain and smoothed it out, but not before Blaise and Pansy noticed. They both shot him sympathetic looks. He’d temporarily blocked Malfoy from his journal and told everyone else about the conversation with Snape. Dealing with Malfoy was a thing to be done in person, one-on-one, and Harry was saving that task for the train.

Nearly everyone needed new school robes; they swung through Twilfitt and Tatting’s since Madame Malkin’s tended to be overrun with first-years. Harry barely paid attention. He valued nice clothing inasmuch as dressing well opened doors and helped make good impressions on people who mattered, but unlike Blaise and Pansy and Malfoy and, surprisingly, Luna, he didn’t like clothes shopping for its own sake.

Neville, Blaise, Pansy, Justin, and Malfoy split off to browse Wiseacre’s while the rest of them spent two hours going through the various bookstores along Diagon. Harry added seventeen miscellaneous books to his growing library, picked up a few self-heating rocks for Eriss, and watched with bemusement as Luna bought more books than she should’ve been able to carry.

“Knockturn?” Theo said in a low voice.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Hermione. “How do you feel about exploring the less legal selection?” he said with a challenging smirk.

She took the bait like he knew she would. “I’m not scared,” Hermione huffed, practically dragging Luna up the street.

“Nicely done,” Daphne said with a wink before jogging to catch up with the other girls.

“I know,” Harry called, a satisfied smile tugging at his lips as he and Theo followed the girls up the street. He wasn’t worried about Luna. She’d already said a few weeks ago that she and her dad had been shopping in Knockturn for books since she was a toddler.

He and Theo slapped Notice-Me-Not charms over all of them before the group veered into Knockturn. It wouldn’t do for the Order to catch Harry wandering around down here. Once they’d gotten into the bookstore, though, he quit worrying; none of Dumbledore’s campers would be caught dead in here unless they were pursuing a criminal. Which he… was, technically, but not as far as they knew. Or could prove.

Hermione was nervous for all of two minutes before Luna pulled a book the size of her palm off a shelf and asked Hermione about the runes inside, and then the Gryffindor’s curiosity and courage overrode her compunctions about what it was legal for her to know. She and Luna and Daphne disappeared into the shelves.


Harry examined one on mind-altering curses. “It did… not that I’m surprised, mind.”

“The law—” Theo held up one hand— “or her opinion that it’s amoral for the government to censor knowledge.” He held up the other and waggled both palms.
Harry grinned. “Her sense of right and wrong is so useful sometimes…”

They left Knockturn with their purses considerably lighter and their bags considerably heavier. Hermione’s face was still flushed from arguing with the cashier about some of the books not being legal for Muggle-borns to purchase. She thought she’d won the argument. Harry had no intention of telling her that he’d sent Theo and Daphne to stand behind her and basically threaten the man from where Hermione couldn’t see.

“We have a quick errand in Dyson’s,” Theo said, gesturing at Harry and himself. “Catch up with you guys at Flourish and Blotts?”

“What errand?” Hermione said instantly.

“A boring one,” Harry said.

Daphne elbowed Hermione. “Let’s go track down Blaise and Pansy before they start a war.”

“They might have trouble with that,” Luna said serenely. “They’re a bit young to lead an army, most people wouldn’t take orders from teenagers…”

Harry and Theo watched them leave. “I don’t understand that girl,” Theo said, meaning Luna.

“I don’t think anyone does,” Harry said. He smirked at his best friend. “Hermione, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“How eloquent.”

Theo flicked his wand threateningly in Harry’s direction.

Harry hit him with a silent and wandless Disarming Charm.

“I really hate you sometimes,” Theo said, taking his wand back with a scowl. “How many books d’you think it is?”

“Few thousand, give or take,” Harry said.

They walked into Dyson’s Luggage.

Mr. Watson recognized Harry the second they walked in. Most people had been, all morning. Harry looked remarkably similar to the Boy Who Lived, he’d been all over the papers in the trials last summer, and the tabloids hadn’t gotten sick of discussing his adoption by Sirius Black yet. “Mr. Black,” Watson said with a slightly nervous smile. “And…”

“Theo Nott,” Theo said with his usual Slytherin mask of boredom.

“Mr. Nott.” Funnily enough, hearing his name did not seem to put Watson at ease. “What brings you boys ‘ere today? Need new trunks?”

“A library trunk,” Harry said. “What’s your largest capacity?”

Watson blinked. “Er… ten thousand books.”

“Excellent, may we see that one?” Harry said briskly.

“It’s… five thousand seven hundred galleons,” Watson said.
Harry and Theo waited.

Watson coughed. “Yes, of course, this way, please.”

He led them along the right-hand wall of the store, where trunks of all shapes, sizes, and colors gleamed on shelves for people to examine. The school trunks featured at the front for Hogwarts students but he had a lot more options than that.

“This trunk isn’t the standard layout,” Watson said, “yeh go down inside instead of just opening it an’ finding the books there. It’s essentially one of the traveling apartments but for books instead o’ people.”

“After you,” Harry said with a sharp smile.

Watson opened the black trunk with silver fittings. It was about the size of Harry’s current trunk.

He listened with half an ear to Watson’s description of the password enchantments and protective wards on the trunk, all of which were top-end, and the built-in book sorting system, which could be easily customized by the buyer according to the instruction manual that came with the trunk. The shopkeeper stepped inside the trunk and climbed neatly down and in.

Theo and Harry followed.

It was a slightly disorienting experience. From above, the trunk looked empty and basic, but as soon as Harry’s foot crossed the plane of its upper edge, the true interior blinked into view. He and Theo descended a set of stairs so steep they were almost a ladder and joined Watson on the floor of the room. It was carpeted in soft, neutral beige, and the walls were lined floor to ceiling with varnished dark brown shelves. Four freestanding empty shelves of the same wood lined the center of the room. There was very little free floor space, save for an open spot near the base of the stairs.

“Fer an extra two hundred galleons, we can supply two reading chairs, a lamp, and a table to fill this spot,” Watson said, gesturing at said open area. “The ceiling’s standard white paint but fer another hundred and four galleons, sixteen sickles, we can enchant it to reflect the weather wherever the trunk’s located, or the night sky, whichever’s yer preference.”

Harry and Theo exchanged a glance.

“We’ll take it,” Theo said.

Watson blinked at them. “Er, which parts?”

“All of it. Night sky enchantments and the furniture,” Theo said.

“I, ah, that’ll be…” Watson floundered.

Harry did some quick math. “Six thousand and four galleons and sixteen sickles,” he said. “Minus tax.”

“Ah… okay,” Watson said. He looked like he simultaneously couldn’t believe his ears and also had never heard anything so exciting. Harry expected he didn’t make sales like this often. “If you gentlemen will come with me…”

Harry and Theo climbed out after him. Watson keyed the trunk to Harry’s wand, shrunk it, and accepted the payment from Harry, who willed it out of the Gringotts bag connected to the Black family vault. Sirius had given him unlimited access until they did the ritual and got his trust vault set
up, access that Harry had not *abused* per se but had definitely taken advantage of. Frankly, there were so many galleons in the main Black vault that this purchase wouldn’t even register. It made his basilisk funds look pathetic.

“Copybooks next?” Theo said, as Harry tucked the trunk into his pocket.

“Absolutely.”

They went back to Knockturn for this purchase, and went a bit farther down the street, to a vendor Pansy pointed them too when they asked about copybooks with only a slightly suspicious look. Geminio Charms made copyright law difficult to enforce to begin with, but copybooks were still illegal. They were plain black-leather-bound blank books that, when stacked underneath an actual book and tapped with a wand, turned into an exact word-for-word replica of the book in question. Geminio Charms weakened the original version of whatever was copied and required more magic to essentially create paper and leather matter out of air, whereas copybooks provided the paper and the cover and had the magic built in.

Theo led the way into the shop. It was farther into Knockturn’s various side streets and questionable corners than Harry had ever ventured. He looked around with curiosity.

The store had no name, but the inside resembled a junk shop—random things, broken or new, worthless or valuable, scattered seemingly randomly around the shelves. It was well-lit and quiet and smelled like dust and secrets.

“Good afternoon.”

“Well met,” Theo said with a half-bow in the direction of the voice. Harry copied the movement if not the greeting.

A tall woman stepped out of the shadows behind the counter, smiling at them. She looked like the sort of figure you’d see on a statue. Not beautiful, but—striking. Her bow was deeper than either of theirs had been, indicating that she was well aware she had two noble Heirs in her store. “My name is Melissa Snapdragon,” she said. “Welcome to my store.”

Another indication that she was following the old traditional manners; introducing herself first was tantamount to placing herself lower on the social ladder than Harry or Theo. It was their choice, then, to give their names or not, and their obligation to be polite and respectful in their turn. A give-and-take between seller and buyer, service provider and service purchaser.

“Heir Theodore Nott of House Nott,” Theo said. “And this is Heir Hadrian Black of House Black.”

Harry felt a fleeting grin cross his face. He still wasn’t used to the new name.

“An honor,” Snapdragon said with sharp interest coming alight in her eyes. “What can I do for you today?”

“We’ve recently come across a rather rare library,” Theo said. “And it really shouldn’t be moved from its location, but we both value the knowledge inside, and we’d like access to it when we’re not there.”

“Ah,” she said. “Well, if you’re looking for library trunks, I’m afraid that’s not my specialty. I can recommend you a store that would fill your request…”

Harry spoke up for the first time. “We’ve a trunk already,” he said softly. “Our aim here was something a bit more geared towards duplicating the books.”
“Surely such talented young Heirs could cast the Geminio Charm,” she said, amused.

“There are many drawbacks to that spell, as I’m sure you know,” Theo said. “Lots of the books are old and fragile, we don’t want to risk damaging them.”

“If you’re suggesting the use of copybooks, the Ministry has declared the sale and use of them illegal,” Snapdragon said, folding her hands neatly in front of her expensive-looking red-and-black robe.

“So you don’t sell them?” Theo said.

“To do so would break the law,” she replied.

Harry sighed theatrically. “Pity, and here we had it on good authority that this was the place to come…”

“Neil Parkinson mentioned you’d done business with him in the past,” Theo said. “For similar purchases.”

That piqued her interest. “Lord Parkinson sent you, hm? Is that all he said?”

Harry decided he liked her. “Grapefruit,” he said simply.

Her face broke into a broad grin. “I see,” she said with another, deeper bow. “Forgive me, I do have to observe certain protocols for security’s sake. We’ve had Aurors under Polyjuice come through before.”

“Of course,” Harry said, waving a hand. “No offense taken.”

“Trust me, we’re familiar with security protocols,” Theo said, smirking.

Snapdragon smiled. “Yes, I’d imagine so… This way, please, I believe I can help you.”

Harry and Theo followed her through the junk-item front and into the her office in the back, where, he presumed, the real business occurred. Powerful wards crawled over his skin. Harry made sure Snapdragon’s back was to him and flicked his wand, casting a few quick spells designed to interpret the runic bases of ward-spells, and raised his eyebrows. Sound wards, blocking of all scrying and tracking spells including blood-based location rituals, Notice-Me-Not components…

“Impressive wards,” he commented.

“Thank you, Heir Black.” Snapdragon sat down across her desk. Theo and Harry took the guest chairs across from her. “Copybooks, hm? How many?”

Theo and Harry exchanged a glance. “Allow for four thousand books…” Theo said.

Harry cocked his head. “Be useful in the library.” He did more mental math. “Twenty thousand, split down the middle?”

“Works for me.”

Snapdragon blinked. “They’ll be eleven galleons and five sickles per copybook, so…” She pulled out a wizarding abacus, shifted a few of the stones set into its face, and got an answer within seconds. “One hundred twelve thousand, nine hundred forty-one galleons and three sickles for each of you.”
“Do you have them here?” Theo said.

“Not that many. It’ll take me two weeks to move that quantity,” she said, eyeing them both. Clearly she was used to law-dodging purebloods with deep pockets, but two teenage boys buying mass quantities of copybooks was unusual. “I can have them delivered.”

“Whose place?” Theo said.

Harry cocked his head. Sirius might ask questions about twenty thousand illegal copybooks showing up at Grimmauld Place but if they shipped them to Nott Manor Theo’s dad would ask questions and the Death Eaters would hear about it. Plus, he had a Portkey that could get him to Grimmauld Place even through the Hogwarts wards, so they could store the copybooks there and get them from school.

“I’m thinking yours,” Theo added.

“Me, too,” Harry said.

Theo grinned. “Excellent.”

“Deliver them to the Black home in London, please,” Harry said to Snapdragon. “The address is 12 Grimmauld Place, Gringotts will know.”

“Both batches?” She was scribbling notes on a scrap of parchment.

“Yep.” Theo accepted an enchanted, tamper-proof Gringotts slip from her and signed it to authorize a Gringotts-facilitated trade of the money for ten thousand copybooks. Most who sold on the black market paid an annual fee to Gringotts for the service. The goblins were neutral and cared not a bit for Ministry trade restrictions, and it was a good way to ensure trust on both sides of any bargain. It was difficult to take someone to court for not giving you whatever you paid for when buying the thing was illegal in the first place. The goblins would make sure the seller delivered what they promised and the buyer paid the right amount for it.

Harry read over the contract, wrote down his basilisk vault number and delivery address, and signed his name on the line without hesitation, authorizing his own payment. The Black vaults made the basilisk payout look like a drop of water compared to a lake. This purchase was absolutely worth it.

Snapdragon collected both Gringotts slips and added them to a neatly organized file folder. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“You as well,” Theo said with a smile.

He and Harry each shook her hand over her desk, wished her a good day, and slipped out of the store.

Theo traced four runes in the air and muttered an incantation that would link a sound ward to his wand. Harry felt it snap into place and move with them. “You were thinking about the Portkey, right?” Theo checked. “To your library?”

“Exactly.” Harry frowned slightly. “I’ll have to come up with a story to give Sirius…”

“Not the truth?” Theo said.

“That I’m the true Heir of Slytherin?” Harry raised incredulous eyebrows at his friend. “Seriously?”
Theo shrugged. “He doesn’t seem like he’d care. He accepted Eriss, the Parselmouth thing, Crabbe dying…”

Harry flinched and then caught himself, appalled at the slip. It was the first time anyone had brought it up; he’d told his friends the truth and something in his tone or expression convinced them not to push farther. But Theo was probing.

“He does know about that?” Theo pressed.

“…yes.”

“My point exactly.”

Harry slanted a look at his friend. “You’re not…”

“I don’t blame you,” Theo said softly. “Or hold it against you. That’s what happens in a fight. If they underestimated you—their fault.” He paused. “I might be a little more pissed if it was my dad, but as I didn’t know Crabbe Senior…”

“Some people would question that moral outlook,” Harry said.

“Some people are naïve and stupid.” Theo rolled his eyes. “It’s human nature to be selfish, no sense denying it. Are you saying you’d be more upset if I killed Ronald Weasley in a firefight versus if I killed, say, Hermione with a stray spell?”

“Point,” Harry said. He paused. “Try not to kill Ronald, though, the twins might not forgive that.”

“I’ll do my best,” Theo said.

Harry counted fifteen steps before he could bring himself to speak the words. “Thank you.”

Theo bumped his shoulder into Harry’s.

“Last and least interesting errand,” Theo sighed. “Schoolbooks.”

Harry agreed. They were both on NEWT-level material in most of their classes; Hermione and Daphne, too, and most of their other friends weren’t far behind. Classes got more boring with every passing year.

He tugged out his journal and a fountain pen, checking that Eriss was still comfortable sleeping in the bottom of his bag, and scribbled of a quick note that he and Theo were on their way to Flourish and Blotts.

A few responses appeared, people agreeing to meet there in ten minutes, and Harry slid it away, satisfied.

“How’s the familiar bond?” Theo said.

“Developing. Slowly. I can feel what direction she is and roughly how far away if she’s within a kilometer or so,” Harry said. “And we can communicate really basic things.”

Theo nodded. “Useful.”

“Certainly was with Crouch Senior last year,” Harry muttered.

“Junior likes you.”
Harry almost tripped. “What?”

Theo smirked. “I hear things, Harry. He thinks you’re brilliant and wishes he could teach you officially, as himself, and without the Hogwarts curriculum getting in the way.”

“That’s… okay.” Harry genuinely did not know how to respond to that.

“Thought you’d like to know.” Theo sounded entirely too satisfied with himself.

And, shit, Harry couldn’t not ask— “Have you… seen him?”

“Once,” Theo said shortly.

Harry got the message, and quit pushing.

Everyone else was, predictably, in the history section of Flourish and Blotts by the time Harry and Theo got there. It was a horrifically dusty and forgotten back corridor and they frequently used it to sort through the books that interested them in a sweep of the shelves. Harry and Theo brushed through the Defense, Runic Magic, Magical Theory, Transfiguration & Alchemy, Charms, and Divination sections, found little of interest, and joined their friends.

Harry stopped and stared. “Pansy, what?”

His best female friend grinned impishly up at him. She was sitting cross-legged on the ground with her back to the shelves, Luna’s crown perched at an angle on her short hair. It was pretty normal for him to notice how pretty she was—he was a fifteen-year-old boy, after all—but this time the effect was somewhat diminished by the shock of a fox kit curled in her lap.

“You have a familiar,” she said, looking pointedly at his bag. “Hermione’s got that demon cat.”

“Crooks loves you,” Hermione protested.

“Course he does, I’m also a demon,” Pansy agreed happily. “And Neville’s still got the toad, and one of these days, Justin, you really need to bring that dog of yours to school, if you say it’s a familiar they won’t have a problem even if there’s not technically a bond… Point is I wanted one. So I went to the pet shop, to see if there was an animal I thought I might develop a familiar bond with.” She looked very pleased with herself. “His name is Astrych.”

Daphne cast a withering look her direction. “Because you couldn’t resist naming after a poison, could you?”

“Obviously not,” Pansy said, stroking the orange fox kit possessively. It yawned and snuggled into her hand, showing very sharp teeth.

“Great,” Theo muttered. “She’s got a minion.”

“It’s either going to get along with Crookshanks like a house on fire, or they’re going to kill each other,” Daphne predicted.

Blaise handed Harry and Theo two books each. “The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, and Defensive Magical Theory,” he said. “Both of which look about as entertaining as tree bark.”

“Fantastic,” Theo muttered, paging rapidly through the first book. “Merlin damn it, we’ve already taught ourselves most of this…”

“Here’s hoping,” Justin said.

“Ah, Hufflepuff optimism,” Blaise sighed. “So refreshing.”

Justin hit him in the leg with the Slinkhard book.

Hermione determinedly picked up her selection of books, which included five new choices on top of the school options. Harry and Theo each had the textbooks and two others; no one else was buying anything but the textbooks.

“This might be the smallest bookstore purchase our group has ever made,” Daphne muttered.

“A new record,” Pansy agreed, cradling Astrych in her left arm and clutching her books under her right.

“The other stores were a lot more interesting,” Hermione muttered.

The Slytherins swapped covert smirks.

They trooped out of the dusty back corners of the bookstore.

Harry stopped short upon seeing a cluster of familiar red- and black-haired people just coming into the store.

“Oh, delightful,” Blaise said.

“Can I not have one bloody day without running into them around here?” Theo snarled under his breath.

Harry had to make a fast decision between basically hiding from the Weasleys and therefore three people he counted as friends, versus greeting his friends and having to deal with the Weasleys he didn’t like.

Networking won out. With a sigh, he shifted so he was at the back of the group near Pansy and Luna.

“Harry!” Fred and George hurried over, identical wide grins on their faces. Ginny followed, quick as a whip, while Mrs. Weasley got distracted talking to Madam Bones and James. Harry saw Bones and Brown and Macmillan in the group, and made a face.

“Good to see you,” he said, with a genuine smile for the Weasleys he liked. “How goes the shopping?”

“Ron’s unbearable,” Ginny spat. She looked about four seconds away from hexing someone, never mind that her mum still hadn’t given her wand back, and wasn’t planning to do so until the platform on September first. “Mum got him a new Cleansweep for getting prefect—”

“Wait,” Harry said, not believing his ears. “Ronald got prefect?”

This drew the attention of Theo and Neville and Hermione; Blaise and Daphne were busy paying for their books and didn’t appear to notice. “What?” Theo said. “Him?”

“Yep,” Fred said. “And you know what Mum said? Also—the fuck, Pansy?”

“That makes everyone in the family,” George mimicked in a high-pitched but soft voice.
“Ouch,” Neville said sympathetically.

Fred cast a dark look over his shoulder. “No fucking kidding.”


George cautiously petted the fox. It made a mewling noise and nipped at his hand but then let him scratch one of its ears.

“I feel worst for you,” Ginny said to Hermione. “You’ll have to deal directly with him.”

Hermione scowled. “Trust me, I’m not looking forward to it.”

“Malfoy, me, Ronald, and Hermione,” Pansy said, ticking them off on her fingers. “Prefect meetings are going to be entertaining this year.”

“I almost wish I could watch,” Theo said.

The line moved up; Theo and Neville split to buy their books. Blaise and Daphne circled back and had similar reactions to the news that Weasley could take points off them this year.

People chatted about dorms and Quidditch tryouts and dueling club and classes and Defense teachers. Harry and Luna bought their books. Pansy. Hermione. Mrs. Weasley paused and said she’d grabbed her children their books. Harry managed to collect his friends and start them moving towards the exit, and he was just thinking they might get out of here without drama when—

“Black!”

It took a second for Harry to register that that was his name now, so he didn’t turn around in time to block the punch thrown at his face.

After Dudley, and a year getting tossed around and cursed by Slytherin sixth years, it didn’t even hurt. Harry’s head whipped around and he took a step back, and then he blinked a few times to shake it off, and then he stared at a Gryffindor he didn’t know as anything other than an absolute asshole from the year above his.

“Did you just—punch me?” he said incredulously. In a bookstore. In a public place. He didn’t even know this fucking kid’s name.

Theo and Daphne and Hermione had wands out and aimed at the bastard’s face, but Harry flicked his hand behind his back and they backed down.

“Yeah,” the Gryffindor said belligerently.

Harry felt liquid on his face and reached up and touched his lip. His fingers came away red. His eyes flicked from them back to the absolute moron who’d just landed himself on Harry’s shit list—

“Who are you exactly?” he said as derisively as possible.

—as soon as he worked out his name.

The lion looked offended. “Cormac McLaggen!”

“Ooohkay,” Harry said. “Care to explain why you punched me?”

“For being a fucking traitor, that’s what,” McLaggen spat. Harry squinted closer at the moron’s eyes
—was he drunk?

They were beginning to draw a crowd. Harry could feel his friends at his back, several of them vibrating with barely restrained violence, but Fred and George were closing in from behind, looking murderous and hands in their pockets, and the Potter hangers-on were looking their way from the stand of Hogwarts books, and Mrs. Weasley was bustling over with Ronald in tow looking very worried—

“And what, exactly, has he betrayed?” Justin snapped.

“He—bloody everything!” McLaggen had the audacity to look stunned, like he hadn’t expected someone to challenge him. Like it should be obvious. And oh, was it ever. This guy was Ronald but worse.

“Oh, he betrayed… St. Mungo’s, then?” Pansy said, falsely sincere. Thank Merlin she’d passed the fox off to Luna or this would probably have degenerated farther.

McLaggen blinked. “Wha?”

“You said he betrayed everything.” If Harry didn’t know better he’d have believed Pansy was one hundred percent confused. “That would include St. Mungo’s… let’s see… the Potion-Master Society…”

“I—bloody hell, no! He betrayed our entire cause!” McLaggen shouted.

Fred pulled something out of his pocket and held it where his approaching mother couldn’t see; Harry vaguely recognized the thing as a projectile prank-weapon. Fred’s eyes flicked to Harry, promising pain and humiliation for McLaggen if Harry would only unleash him.

The twins didn’t need more attention from their mum than they were already getting. Harry sent Fred and George a hard no sort of look and switched his focus back to McLaggen.

“This is ridiculous,” Blaise drawled. “Harry, come on, I’d like to have time for a butterbeer at the Leaky before Mum wants me home…”

“Oh, your mum, the serial husband killer?” McLaggen sneered.

Mrs. Weasley was close enough to catch the jibe. She stopped dead, one hand over her mouth. There was a collective intake of breath from Harry’s friends’ general vicinity.

That was never a good thing to tease Blaise about. Ever.

For two frozen seconds, McLaggen jeered, and no one in their corner of the store moved.

Blaise was first to unfreeze. Justin was the second, and his movement was an expelliarmus that snatched Blaise’s wand out of his hand before he could raise it all the way. Daphne was the third with a mild apathy jinx, whispered low enough for Mrs. Weasley to miss it, that allowed her and Justin and Hermione to bundle Blaise straight out the door.

“Bad subject,” Theo advised in a quiet, vicious voice. “Really bad subject, mate.”

Harry said nothing. Pansy had been to his left but she edged away with a nervous glance at him. Fuck. He called on his Occlumency and calmed the magic surging under his skin.

“We’re done here,” he said.
Luna flounced around him and patted McLaggen on the cheek. “That was a really bad idea,” she told him, sweet and earnest. “You’re probably going to regret it.”

Yes, Harry thought, he will.

“Harry, dear, are you quite all right?” Mrs. Weasley said, rushing over and recovering from her paralysis.

“Yes, fine, thanks,” Harry said, scrambling to get his composure back. “Really, he punches like he’s got no muscle—didn’t even hurt—the dragon was loads worse…”

A heated three-way argument brewed behind her with McLaggen making up one side, Ronald and Jules the second, and the twins the third. James and the Boneses and Macimillan were coming their way. He needed to go. Now.

“Harry, it’s nearly three!” Pansy shrieked. “We’ll be late, come on, you know how Vanessa hates waiting…”

“Sorry!” Harry called over his shoulder, letting her tow him out of the store.

“Thanks,” he said, once they were out on the street.

She smirked and straightened Luna’s flower crown. “Whatever would you do without me?”

“I’d be worse off,” Harry agreed.

The others clustered around them. Blaise had shaken off the apathy jinx—which was good, because it wasn’t legal for minors to even learn and explaining that one to an adult would’ve been tricky—and he looked somewhere between impassive and murderous. Theo just looked murderous. Hermione was ranting to no one in particular about how McLaggen had always been a wanker but this just took the cake.

“I’m fine,” Harry said, shaking off their worry. “I’ve taken loads worse—honestly—Luna, thanks, but I don’t think a kiss will heal it—Episkey,” he said finally, pointing his wand at his face, and the swollen feeling started to go away.

“Cut’s closing,” Theo said clinically.

“Better be,” Harry muttered.

Hermione’s rant wound down. “I’m going to be keeping an eye on him in the common room,” she said viciously. “Good thing he’s not a prefect—I can take points off him as much as I find excuses for.”

“He’s not very nice,” Luna said. “He calls me Loony. Most of the students who don’t like me do that…”

“He’s stupid, too,” Neville whispered. It was probably supposed to only be heard by Justin and Hermione, who were at the back of the group with him.

“Why?” Hermione said.

“If he hasn’t noticed what happens to people who piss Harry off,” Neville said softly.

A voice shouted Harry’s name from behind just then, and everyone paused and looked.
Jules stopped dead five meters away, hands shoved in his robe pockets and eyes flicking warily between them. Harry knew he wasn’t imagining Jules’ subtly duel-ready stance or the tension in his wand arm. His brother had been practicing.

“Go on,” Harry murmured, easing past Theo and then Justin. “I’ll catch up with you at the Leaky.”

The group shifted back into motion slowly and reluctantly. Harry did his best to give Hermione a reassuring smile.

“Yes?” he said, pausing in front of his brother.

Jules looked around; Diagon was bustling and they were off to one side of the street, luckily not drawing too much attention in the summer crowds. “I just… I’m sorry about McLaggen. He’s a prat like you would not believe—we all hate him.”

How unexpected. “It’s fine,” Harry said. “His actions aren’t yours to apologize for.”

“He’s still a Gryffindor,” Jules said.

“Golden Boy taking responsibility for the whole House again, huh?” Harry said, but his tone wasn’t edged.

Jules grinned, a little cautiously but still genuine. “Someone has to.”

“Otherwise you lot would’ve burned Hogwarts down,” Harry said with a slight smile.

“Yeah…” Jules shifted. “I, uh. Also wanted to say… sorry you didn’t get prefect. I don’t know what Snape was thinking, but it—should’ve been you.”

Harry blinked. “There were lots of politics involved,” he said slowly.

“Even I can tell that,” Jules muttered. “Still.”

“…thanks. For what it’s worth, you should’ve gotten it, too,” Harry said, and meant it. Jules wasn’t the most mature or sensible of his year’s lions, but for a lot of reasons, it really should’ve been him. And it really shouldn’t have been Ronald. He’d never in his life been a leader among the Gryffindors.

“I hoped,” Jules said, shoving his hands deeper in his pockets. He’d relaxed his stance and didn’t seem a hair from drawing his wand anymore. “But—I’m really happy for Ron, he deserves some recognition.”

As far as Harry could tell, this display of selflessness was even genuine. “Ronald will be good at it,” he said, as sincerely as he could manage. “I just hope he and Hermione can work together.”

Jules made a face. “Yeah… it shouldn’t be too bad, though. I mean, all they have to do is coordinate patrol schedules. If they’d rather not patrol together I’m pretty sure they can go with prefects from other Houses.”

“That should work,” Harry agreed. “Pansy and Malfoy will probably do the same.”

“They don’t get along?” Jules said, frowning.

Harry laughed. “Not as much, no.”

“Huh,” Jules said. “Good they can use that loophole too, then. Do you… need to get going?”
“We’re not actually late,” Harry said. “Just wanted to get away from McLaggen before things got worse. I probably should catch up, though.”

“Okay. See you later,” Jules said, his tone rising at the end in an almost-question.

“Yeah, later,” Harry said with a quick wave.

“What’d he want?” Theo asked, as soon as Harry rejoined his group.

“Apologized for McLaggen,” Harry said. “And something about how I should’ve been prefect.”

Malfroy looked offended, which everyone ignored. “That’s suspiciously decent of him,” Theo said.

“Probably shamed into it by his House mate,” Blaise half-snarled, gripping a mug of butterbeer. Harry eyed the slight tension in Neville and Daphne’s shoulders on either side of him and decided not to comment.

“Probably,” Justin agreed, “but it still counts. Maybe he’s finally growing up a little.”

Daphne laughed, short and sharp. She wouldn’t meet Harry’s eyes. “There’s that Hufflepuff optimism again, Justin.”

“Maybe,” he said unconcernedly. “But at least I have a hopeful outlook for the future. I’d rather life with hope than despair.”

“You do that,” Theo said. “We’ll pick up the pieces when you’re inevitably crushed by disappointment.”

Justin made a face at him. “Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and deal with whatever comes,” he said. “If anything ever comes along that actually crushes me, you’ll be lying in the dirt too, you pessimistic piece of trash.”


On the morning of August twenty-sixth, Harry woke up when a heavy weight landed on his chest.

He lunged, ash wand summoned to his hand from under his pillow as he shoved. He wasn’t wearing his glasses, he couldn’t see shit, but instinct took over and he hurled whatever it was away from him with a wordless banishing charm, kept his wand on the dark shape that hit the floor as he called his glasses to his other hand and jammed them on his face—

“Sirius?” he said, staring at the grim on the other end of his wand.

Sirius sat up and then transformed in a blink into his godfather. Grinning. “That was more entertaining than I expected.”

“Don’t do that,” Harry snapped, sitting back down on the bed. His entire body still hummed with post-fight adrenaline. Maybe he should have been warding his bed here.

“Why not? It was fun.”

Harry rubbed his temples. “What do you want?”

“Today’s the day!” Sirius said, bounding to his feet. His manic excitement was contagious but Harry
still didn’t remember—


“What day?” he said innocently, pretending to rub sleep out of his eyes.

“You know what day!”

Harry just blinked at Sirius, the picture of confusion.

“Adoption!” Sirius half-yelled.

“Ohhhh,” Harry said apathetically, “right.”

Sirius snatched a pillow and whacked him with it. “You brat. Hurry up,” he said, smirking, and switched back into his animagus form to bound out of the room.

Harry dressed slowly. Sirius had, for once, managed to wake Harry up before his ingrained mental alarm clock did it for him, which meant it was not quite six-thirty in the morning. He stifled a few yawns and tossed back a small dose of an Invigoration Draught. Shouldn’t have stayed up so late reading but he’d finally had a breakthrough on one of the four Chamber books he’d brought home for holiday translation work and it was fascinating.

The really hardcore rituals required nudity, supposedly, but Sirius’ as-yet-unnamed assistance said you could wear plain undyed hand-woven cotton or linen robes. The main issue was making sure absolutely no outside magical interference save for an Heir or Lord’s ring, which he didn’t yet possess, because the Alvadora Black connection hadn’t been enough for the finicky Black family magics. He was Heir in the eyes of the law only.

For the next fourteen or so hours, anyway.

“Fasting,” Harry complained to Eriss as he tugged on the simple cotton clothes. “A whole day of fasting and meditation and I’m not even allowed to use magic because it might get on the clothes. I’d like to slap whoever designed rituals.”

“That person also made it so Sirius can adopt you,” Eriss pointed out from somewhere under his dresser.

Harry chucked a shoe in her general direction. “Let me have my irrational complaining in peace.”

“Yes, Your Lordship,” she simpered.

“You’ve been spending too much time around Blaise.”

Eriss appeared on the floor as he adjusted the linen trousers. He picked her up and let her wind around his shoulders as he headed out the door.

“Your journal is glowing,” Eriss said.

Harry grinned and picked it up, flipping to the gold page.

TN

If you turn into a Squib today I’ll stay friends with you

Probably
BZ
I won’t

HG
You are awful!!

JF
Hermione, are you even surprised at this point?

Good luck, Harry, and if you turn into a Squib, my parents will adopt you. You’d make a hell of a businessman

PP
Justin, don’t joke about these things

NL
Good luck today, Harry!

DG
Double-check all the runes.

DM
Congratulations, Black.

HG
Stop being so bloody formal, Draco.

TN
He can’t help it

It’s just... ingrained

BZ
Inbred maybe

DM
Your family is just as pure as mine!

BZ
Not hardly. Italians only outlawed blood magic eighty-eight years ago and the Zabinis were smart enough to marry overseas every few generations.

HG
This is disgusting, you sound like you’re talking about breeding horses.
Some people look at it that way

Daphne have you not explained this yet

DG

I did.

HG

And it’s ridiculous!

As Harry got to the bottom of the page, the messages at the top disappeared and more ink faded into view at the bottom. It seemed they’d gone on for a while. Reading through his friends’ well-wishes and sniping commentary brought a smile to his face.

HP

Your overwhelming and unconditional support is greatly appreciated

I’ll be sure to double-check all the runes and not turn into a Squib.

When he closed the journal, the cover was still glowing. Harry frowned at it and laid a hand on the cover, pictured the runes in his mind and called on his magic…

Oh. Duh.

He flipped it open to the last silver page.

Hadrian,

Best of luck in any random extracurricular magic studies you embark on today. Which of course would all be one hundred percent legal and Ministry-approved. I would be interested to hear the results of your experiment from someone other than Severus.

-Barty Crouch

Harry read it out loud to Eriss, who could understand a good amount of spoken English but had never gotten the hang of reading.

“I like him,” she hissed.

Harry frowned at the page. “Me too… I wish I didn’t.”

Crouch,

As it happens, I do have a bit of an extracurricular project planned for today. My friends and I have been laughing for years at exactly how many frowned-upon activities can be called “extracurricular projects.” This one doesn’t quite top the list, but it’s up there. I’ll let you know how it goes.

-Hadrian

Good enough. He closed the journal and left it next to his wand on the bedside table. The journal because its magic would mess up the ritual and the wand to eliminate the temptation of using it.
“No need to look so excited,” Sirius said as Harry entered the kitchen.

“I need caffeine,” Harry said, reaching for the tea. He had to stop himself reflexively first summoning the mug, then summoning the jar of tea leaves, then lighting the stove with wandless magic. It was weird to realize how habitual it was to save himself two extra steps to the cupboard by just willing whatever he wanted into his hand.

Sirius eyed him. “Bad night?”

“…dreams,” Harry admitted.

“Remember any?”

“Nope.” Harry scowled while the water came to a slow boil the non-magical way. He hated not being allowed to use his magic. “Just that I woke up not very rested.”

“No wonder you jumped me,” Sirius said.

Harry grinned. “You deserved that.”

Sirius shrugged. “Probably. We’ve got the basement all set up, by the way.”

“Meditation?” Harry said.

“Should be cake if you’ve been keeping up on your Occlumency,” Sirius fired back.

“Of course,” Harry scoffed. “Every night. As if I’d go to a school with Dumbledore and Snape around and a Dark Lord on the loose without building mental walls to put China’s to shame.”

“Great Wall of China was partially built by wizards,” Sirius said smugly.

Harry paused. He hadn’t known that. “Interesting.” He’d have to read up on that and see if the information would be of any use to him—useful enough to warrant an actual investigation, anyway.

“Anyway.” Sirius looked longingly at the pantry, where all their food sat under stasis charms. Neither of them was allowed to eat all day. “Occlumens find rituals like this a lot easier than people who don’t know how to guard their minds. Meditation isn’t easy.”

Not the magical kind, anyway. Harry did a reflexive check of his Occlumency shields, since they were talking about it. The scan was familiar and took less than a second but he still relished his improvement. Only two weeks ago had he started doing active Occlumency. The early stages of the art involved meditation and exercises designed to make the practice acutely aware of what was them and what wasn’t. It drew on a bit of magic, especially when rebutting external attacks like dementors or phoenix song or Legilimency, but active Occlumency involved wrapping one’s mind with literal magic, constantly. Harry was still figuring out how exactly to do that, and then he’d work on drilling the habit into himself so he had a low-level active Occlumency barrier going at all times, but once he did, he’d be able to present Legilimens with false information instead of just batting probes away. Right now Dumbledore or Snape would feel him kick them out—assuming he even could. Harry smirked at the thought of guilelessly letting the old goat into his mind and replaying something stupid and inane for the man to suffer through.

Then again, that kind of mastery would take a while to obtain… Don’t get ahead of yourself, Harry told himself sternly. Overconfidence loses the game.

Sirius led the way down into the basement. The dueling hall took up half of it but the rest had been
emptied completely in preparation for the ritual. Harry stepped foot onto the basement floor and shivered as wards tested him, found nothing magical on his person besides his own magical core, and let him through.

“Tickles,” Eriss complained, shifting uncomfortably on his shoulders.

Harry ran a hand over her body. “Still?”

“No, it stopped.”

“This looks right,” Sirius said, gesturing at several concentric rings of runes on the floor. “Right?”

Harry eyed them. Two spots on the floor were surrounded by four circles of runes drawn in a potion he’d brewed himself two weeks ago. He recognized most of the individual runes and while the exact meaning evaded him, he could see and to some degree feel their intent: to bind, to change, acceptance, convergence…

“Feels right,” he said. “Do you have the diagram?”

Sirius passed over a sheet of paper.

Harry spent ten minutes going over the runes according to the paper. He trusted Sirius but it wouldn’t do to end up a Squib or something because a Tamil rune was drawn in a Futhark style. As he worked, he became more and more impressed; the ritual was a complex and finely balanced piece of work.

“Looks fine,” he said, handing the diagram back. “I assume your mysterious help will check it?”

“Probably,” Sirius said. “He’s finicky. Let’s do this.”

Eriss grumbled as Harry carefully picked his way into the middle of his rune circle. Each circle was a little different. The Black family magic was basically embodied by Sirius, the current Lord, and its only change was having something added. Harry, on the other hand, was the thing being added, one wizard’s magic tied to an inheritance of dozens of generations.

It was bloody complicated.

He and Sirius settled cross-legged into their circles, facing one another. Eriss slid down to pool in the triangle formed by Harry’s legs. He rested both hands on her, saw Sirius shifting around to get comfortable, and closed his eyes.

It was the longest he’d ever tried to hold Occlumency meditation. Harry’s magic pulsed to life and he wrapped it slowly around his consciousness one crepe-paper-thin layer at a time. His emotions needed to be examined in detail, studied, understood, carefully packed away. Every thought needed to be considered and laid to rest, every worry set aside, every bubbling half-baked scheme in his subconscious temporarily put on stasis. Complicated rituals took a heavy mental and magical toll. A disordered or chaotic or unsettled mind could interfere at crucial moments and make his magic lash out and disrupt everything.

If he had an itch, he lazily scratched it, and then let his hand settle back in his lap.

One foot started to fall asleep. Harry blinked his eyes open; everything seemed to be happening very slowly and also in no time at all. He held his layers of mind magic in place and shifted his weight. The tingles as blood rushed back into his foot were a little distracting; he examined the physical sensation, analyzed it, set it aside.
Harry started to feel the magical strain a few hours in. Nothing alarming, just a steady, light awareness that he was starting to make a dent in his core. Very distantly, he thought that he was glad he’d been spending so much time dueling and practicing active Occlumency this summer, or he doubted he’d be strong enough for this. It took discipline and practice to control a long-term low-expenditure magical working.

Surprise filtered slowly through his mind when Sirius unfolded his long limbs with a groan.

Harry took a deep breath and rolled his ankles and wrists, coming out of the meditation with a little bit of regret. To his delight, his mental barriers remained firmly in place even when he wasn’t meditating, thicker and stronger than he’d ever managed to build them.

“Just a minute,” Sirius said, disappearing up the stairs.

Aching muscles demanded attention. Harry ran through a series of stretches the Quidditch team used to warm up the day after particularly brutal weights workouts, feeling like he was still settling back into his body.

Sirius returned a few minutes later. A tall, graceful figure in a cloak followed him down the stairs, pausing right before the last step down to take the cloak off—

Harry almost blurted in his shock.

“Romesse Baresi,” he said, dipping his head respectfully as you would to the blood-bound vampire of a friend’s noble House. “Well met.”

“Ah,” Matteo said with a slight smile. “Well met indeed, Heir Black. I am pleased to see you remembered your lessons.”

“How could I fail, when I had such an excellent teacher?” Harry returned with the perfect degree of respect, gratitude, flattery, and amusement.

Matteo laughed. “Very good. You dance better even than when you were twelve… though that is to be expected.”

“Surprised?” Sirius said smugly.

“Very,” Harry said with a grin. “But I see why you wanted to surprise me. How did this happen?”

“I remembered what you said about the Zabinis having a vampire sworn to their House,” Sirius explained, stretching himself. “It’s not common in the UK. I remembered what you told me about the vampire sworn to the Zabinis instructing you and Justin, so I wrote Blaise, who put me in touch with his mother…”

“Vampires are exceptionally skilled at blood magic,” Matteo said, voice soft. His liquid dark eyes gleamed in the torches of normal fire burning on the walls. It was the first time in his presence that Harry realized why exactly people were so terrified of vampires. He had a feeling that down here, with both him and Sirius wandless, Matteo would have a really good shot at killing them both. “The runes, the rituals, the magic… It is our area of expertise. What British magicians consider long-abandoned secrets my people call common practice.”

“We’re in safe hands, then,” Harry drawled.

Matteo raised an eyebrow. “I would not say safe… but the safest that you are likely to find for this particular ritual, yes. You have spent the day in meditation?”
Harry nodded.

Not half a second later, a Legilimency probe slammed into his magic barriers.

He grimaced fleetingly before getting both his magic and his expression under control. It was bloody hard but he managed to draw the probe in through the top few layers of mind magic, wrap some memories in energy and throw them at the probe for it to find...

Matteo broke through Harry’s active Occlumency.

A bead of sweat rolled down Harry’s temple as he fell back on long-established passive Occlumency tactics. Matteo’s Legilimency slipped up next to his conscious thoughts and tried to nudge them in a certain direction but—Harry knew himself. Knew what was and wasn’t his own impulse. He resolutely fixed his mind on the ritual and the present, batted away waves of Legilimency—

All at once, the attack ceased.

Harry remained on guard, hurriedly weaving magic back into the layers of active barriers.

“Excellent work for your age, Heir Black.”

“You broke through in less than a minute,” Harry said with a slight frown. He’d thought he was doing better than that.

Sirius snorted. “Harry, I’ve heard of Matteo Baresi. I doubt Dumbledore could keep him out in an extended mental battle.”

“I have never had the pleasure of testing myself against Albus Dumbledore,” Matteo said with a sharp smile, “but I have certainly been training and studying both Occlumency and Legilimency for longer than he has been alive.”

“Oh.” Harry supposed that made it a little better… but still.

He needed to work harder.

“Lord Black,” Matteo said smoothly.

Sirius’ eyes flicked to the vampire reflexively and Harry smirked as Matteo instantly took advantage and launched an unannounced Legilimency probe.

Their battle lasted about fifteen seconds longer than Harry and Matteo’s had. He watched closely. Sirius’ shoulders were set and his face hard, a hint of a canine snarl tugging at his mouth. Matteo, by contrast, simply stood perfectly relaxed with his hands at his sides, eyes focused with unwavering intensity on Sirius’.

Harry saw the moment Sirius’ active Occlumency failed. His godfather’s entire body tensed and the fetal snarl grew until there was almost nothing human in his expression.

Matteo tested his passive Occlumency for several seconds before he finally blinked and broke the connection. Sirius slumped a bit.

“You both have admirably organized and well-protected minds,” Matteo said approvingly. “We can proceed with the ritual.”

“Yay,” Harry said.
Matteo smirked and Sirius laughed, although it still sounded like a bark or snarl. Something disjointed in his expression made him look unstable and wild but he took a deep breath and slowly rearranged his expression into something human.

“To begin…” Seemingly from nowhere, Matteo produced two silver bowls and a gleaming knife. Harry would’ve picked up on any magic used in such a magic-free area as the warded basement, and he felt nothing, so it must’ve been simple sleight of hand. “I will need enough blood from each of you to fill the bowls.”

“Great,” Sirius muttered, already rolling up his left sleeve. Harry copied him.

Sirius thrust out his arm, the inside turned up.

Matteo held out the knife, hilt first. “For maximum effect, it must be self-drawn.” He sounded entirely too pleased with Sirius’ obvious discomfort.

With a deep breath and a steady hand, Sirius took the knife and drew it in a single long slash down his arm. His face flickered a little but other than that he showed no sign of the pain.

Blood began to flow instantly. Harry watched as Matteo deftly held the bowl, which was probably just large enough to hold a football, under Sirius’ outstretched fingers. The blood ran down his arm and off his hand and collected in the silver dish. Several times, Sirius had to clench and release his arm muscles to keep the blood flowing.

“Enough,” Matteo finally said.

Sirius relaxed his arm with visible relief and clamped a hand over it.

Matteo produced linen bandages and neatly bound the wound. Harry didn’t like that they couldn’t put a salve or paste on it but even the latent magic in a healing salve would interfere with the ritual so they’d have to wait and do it later.

When Matteo offered Harry another, identical knife, he was relieved to find his own hand perfectly steady.

Harry’s pain tolerance was excellent but he still found himself wincing as he drew the blade down his arm. It was cold and viciously sharp and the feeling of it slowly parting his skin and flesh was—more disturbing than painful, actually.

He copied Sirius and watched as his blood fell into the bowl.

Eriss tightened her grip on his shoulders and right arm, shifting unhappily as she felt his discomfort.

“Peace, small one,” Matteo murmured in Parseltongue. “His pain is temporary.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” Eriss complained.

“Nor will he like yours,” Matteo said.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “What pain does she have to go through?”

“Only a slight nick.” Matteo shrugged, eyes flicking between Harry and Eriss. “A familiar bond complicates things. I shall need a few drops of her blood to ensure the bond remains intact when the Black family magic accepts you, Hadrian, as one of its own.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I’d have preferred that that be included in the papers you sent ahead
detailing the ritual.”

“It was in the calculations,” Matteo said.

“I’ll do it,” Eriss said, cutting them both off. “You’re my wizard, I’m your familiar, I would do a lot more than give a few drops of blood for something you want.”

“Thank you,” Harry said softly. His conversations with Eriss were private, and often the only time he expressed things like genuine gratitude. Matteo listening in on something that was his and his alone was… discomfiting.

“Enough,” Matteo said softly.

Harry quit clenching his own muscles and eased a slight sigh of relief when the blood flow slowed. Matteo bandaged Harry’s arm tightly, since pressure alone was all they had to stop the bleeding, and turned the bloody knife on Eriss.

Sirius’ attention focused intently on them but as neither Harry nor Eriss moved to interfere, he said nothing.

Matteo stayed true to his word and made only a small cut down Eriss’ back. The snake hissed wordlessly but she twisted and allowed the vampire to deftly squeeze a few drops of her blood into the bowl already holding Harry’s.

“It is done,” he assured the snake.

Harry bound a bit of linen around her body tightly and told her not to move too much until the ritual was over so it would stay in place.

“Have you any questions before we begin?” Matteo said.

“Who does the chanting?” Harry said instantly. “The papers you sent included the incantations but not who will do them.”

“I will.” Matteo shrugged. “Neither of you has close to the level of expertise with rituals that would allow you to both mediate and participate in one as complex as this.”

Sirius frowned. “Doesn’t that require magical consent?”

Harry suddenly understood one of the smaller runic spells he’d been confused by earlier. “It’s in the runes,” he said. “The consent.”

Matteo gave him an approving nod. “Indeed it is. The moment you step back into those circles once I’ve activated the runes, you give full consent to the ritual.”

“This ritual only?” Sirius said.

“Such shrewdness from a Gryffindor,” Matteo said with a raised eyebrow.

Sirius snorted. “I’m a pureblood and a Black as well as a Gryffindor. I’m not stupid about rituals. You could write consent for us to basically become your magic slaves into those runes.”

“He didn’t,” Harry said. “I’d have noticed something as big as a slavery clause.”

“Which is why it is prudent to have a trusted runeworker along for any ritual,” Matteo said. “In this instance, House Zabini wishes for me to deal honestly with you and perform the ritual in the spirit as
well as letter of your stated desires, which as their blood-bound I shall happily do. Heir Zabini thinks quite highly of you, Heir Black, and in turn, so does his mother."

Harry smirked, but said nothing.

“Of course he does,” Sirius said with a grin.

“One more question,” Harry said. “Why did we only get the papers detailing the ritual three days ago?”

“Surely you can determine that for yourself,” Matteo said.

Harry knew a challenge when he saw one, but he didn’t have to foolishly rise to the bait. “I want to see if I’m correct,” he said.

A ghost of a smile flickered over Matteo’s face, revealing, for the first time, four short, gleaming fangs where a human’s canine teeth would go. “Blood adoptions must be tailored for the individuals involved. Lord Black’s long exposure to dementors will have slight effects on his magic. You are an unusual case yourself, Heir Black, in that you are not simply a wizard with mundane parents but a member of another Ancient and Noble House, and that you have been magically and legally excised from it complicated things even further. Then there is your familiar to consider, and… other factors.”

His eyes flicked to Eriss on the last word. And suddenly, Harry’s blood ran cold—not with anger but with fear.

Matteo knew. Or at least he’d guessed. Hell, he might even have known Serena Potter and Vincent Gaunt. Parselmouths were rare, especially in Great Britain, where the Ministry and the general public opinion was very much not in their favor. Of course Matteo had gotten curious about Blaise’s Muggle-raised Parselmouth friend—and uncovered the secret of Harry’s other inheritance.

“You’ve been trusted with a great deal of our rather private situation,” Harry said with studied ease. Sirius didn’t even look at him, obviously fooled, but Matteo—his dark eyes gleamed with the amusement of a master manipulator allowing someone else’s act to go unchallenged.

“House Zabini’s secrets are my secrets,” Matteo said. “Heir Zabini has earned your trust, no? His House and all its sworn associates will show you the same degree of loyalty he does.”

Well, Blaise was a lot of things but a leader wasn’t one of them—Harry had long ago pegged that his desire for a circle he could trust implicitly and his fear of being surrounded by sycophants and backstabbers would keep him unfailingly loyal. As long as Harry showed Blaise trust and confidence and loyalty, Blaise would give them all right back. All of which meant he could probably trust Matteo with this secret.

Not that he had much of a choice. Matteo was clearly aware that Harry didn’t have a choice in the matter; he smirked as Harry gave an accepting nod.

“Let’s get going, then,” Sirius said, oblivious to the conversational subtext. “I’m getting wicked hungry.”

Matteo laughed, and the tension eased. “Indeed. Take your places, please.”

Harry took a deep breath and stepped carefully back into his ritual circle. Sirius sat down in the other and met his eyes with a wink. “It’ll be fine,” Sirius said with a grin.

*We’re doing a ritual that’s illegal and hardly been practiced in England in almost two hundred*
years, Harry thought but didn’t say. Instead, he mouthed back *Thanks* with his best approximation of a confident grin.

He’d never have admitted it but—his stomach was churning. Magic was—part of him. For this to fuck up and leave him a Squib…

It was terrifying. He was properly terrified.

Since he read the rune papers Matteo sent over a few days ago, and he figured out what the risks were, Harry had been waging an internal war. Family, versus risk of losing the only thing that set him apart?

For anyone other than Sirius, he wouldn’t have done it.

Part of him hated himself for the sentimental weakness even as he’d agreed to do it anyway.

Matteo started chanting.

The Latin rolled off his tongue fluid and unaccented. At first, nothing happened—then Matteo carefully lifted Sirius’ bowl off the ground, dipped a vial into it, and unceremoniously drank the contents of the vial.

Sirius’ eyes narrowed, but he didn’t move.

Matteo did the same from Harry’s bowl, closed his eyes, and let out a long, shuddering breath.

When his eyes snapped open, they were no longer dark and liquid but a pure, flat white that stood out shockingly against his golden-brown skin.

He started chanting again. The runes all lit up with a surge of magic and sickly white light. Harry smelled the potion as it began to slowly burn away with the force of the power the runes channeled. If they’d been drawn in normal ink, they’d have smoked away in a second.

Sirius choked very suddenly and sat rigidly upright. His pupils dilated to a ridiculous size and both of his fists in his lap clenched.

Matteo very carefully poured the rest of Sirius’ blood-bowl onto the runes circling Sirius.

Instead of running out at random and smearing the runes, the blood fell in a channel and ran around between the outermost rune circle and the one second from the outer edge, until a solid band of blood surrounded him.

The vampire turned on Harry. Something in the tone of his chanting changed.

An instant later, Harry felt what Sirius must be feeling. Massive amounts of magic pounded into his body. Every muscle went involuntarily taught and he had to jerk his hands away from Eriss before they clenched around her and hurt her.

The magic found his core.

He had never been so afraid in his *life*. His own power, a familiar source of energy and protection and safety and independence—it was completely out of his control. Gripped by a giant hand and no longer subject to his will.

If it hadn’t been for his Occlumency, Harry would’ve broken right there.
He trembled all over with the effort of staying in place. Active Occlumency failed with no magic to sustain the barriers and all he had left was the passive version. Harry shut his eyes tightly and concentrated on *this is me, this is me, this is me*, on controlling the fear and the chaos that threatened to overtake him.

No wonder you had to have an organized mind for this.

Wrestling with the fear took all his concentration. Time passed.

Very slowly, Harry’s control slipped back into place. He almost sobbed with relief. Blood trickled back into his fingers as he released his tightly clenched fists and relished in the sensation of having his magic back.

It wasn’t hard to imagine how something could’ve gone wrong and broken his connection to it or drained it away entirely.

Matteo’s slightly hoarse chanting stopped. “It’s done,” he said.

Harry rolled his shoulders and opened his eyes. Merlin, he was stiff. Sirius wasn’t in much better shape, judging by his grimaces. When he looked down at his feet, the rune-potion was black and smoking faintly, spent, corroded, and useless.

“Heir Black, in truth,” Matteo said, with a low bow in Harry’s direction.

Sirius clambered to his feet. “Welcome to the family, Harry.”

“Happy to be part of it,” Harry said with a slow but irrepressible grin.

“Does it feel any different?” Matteo asked curiously.

Harry considered. He’d always been more attuned to his magic than his peers, as far as he could tell, and… something *did* feel different. A little. “Yes, but I’m not sure how to describe it exactly.”

“Many of the old families have some kind of affinity,” Matteo said. “The Potters, for instance, have always been good with transfiguration and alchemy.” He smiled. “I wouldn’t have presumed to speak for the Blacks before today, but having tasted Lord Black’s blood and the family magic… Deception, concealment, shape-shifting.”

“My ancestors always were a paranoid lot,” Sirius sighed. Harry filed that away. Maybe it would help him learn the Disillusionment Charm, an extremely complex higher-level piece of magic not even NEWT students were expected to know.

“How does that work?” he asked. “Family affinity. And how does tasting a wizard’s blood tell you all that?”

“Family affinity is weird,” Sirius said with a shrug. “It’s one of those things we haven’t really figured out. What we do know is that practicing the same types of magic more than others for generations eventually has a small collective impact on the magic that gets passed down to children. Especially Heirs. Some abilities are straight hereditary—” Harry’s eyes flicked to Matteo; he knew they were both thinking *Parseltongue*—“while others are more just… trends. That’s more common. People tend to grow up practicing similar magic to their parents, they prefer to marry people with similar interests…” He shrugged again. “Over time, it adds up.”

“As to your second question…” Matteo rolled one of the bloody vials in his fingers, examining it carefully, before he handed both back to Sirius. “There’s magic in blood, Heir Black.”
“Hadrian,” Harry said.

Matteo inclined his head. “Hadrian, then. Blood carries information. Not merely the molecular genetic code the mundane can access, but magical information as well. Wizards can use it in rituals albeit with a lot more effort than it takes for me. Tracking, mainly, or exceptionally powerful compulsion spells. Diagnostic and healing potions and rituals. Vampires, or magicians with an affinity for blood magic, can get at that information much more easily than others. Magical blood is much more potent and nourishing for my kind than mundane blood, which is in turn better than that of animals, and so forth. I can also detect relative age, such things as your familiar bond, Hadrian… relative power levels.” He smirked. “Both of you are uncommonly gifted wizards. Though, Lord Black, I am afraid you will suffer from your family’s proclivity for short lives.”

Sirius grimaced. “Figured as much. That’s what happens after a couple of centuries of our family tree looking like the bloody Hapsburgs.”

“Will I have to worry about that?” Harry said with a bit of trepidation. He wasn’t entirely opposed to dying eventually but he wanted that eventually to be a long way away.

“No,” Matteo said instantly. “That’s a physical defect. The blood adoption changes only your magic, and even then, only subtly—the magical information carried in your blood. You retain the physical inheritances of the Potters—Lily Evans’ eyes, that atrocious hair—though I’m glad you make an effort to contain it, unlike Lord and Heir Potter—and Quidditch skills, reflexes, a fondness for flying, magical power…”

“Ah,” Harry said. “And will this affect Eriss at all?”

Matteo studied the snake. “It is possible… She is a magical breed, is she not?”

“Loharian viper,” Harry confirmed.

“In that case, it’s entirely possible her natural gifts will shift to include a new component,” Matteo said. “If it is in any way harmful, Heir Black, I invite you to write me and I shall do my utmost to correct the error.”

That’d have to be good enough. Harry bowed deeply. More deeply than was technically due, since as an Heir he had higher social standing than a blood-sworn of another House, but a debt of gratitude was owed and he rather liked Matteo. Of course, it also wouldn’t do to piss off a vampire as old and powerful as this one. “You have my gratitude,” he said softly.

Matteo’s eyes gleamed, obviously catching the gesture.

“And that of House Black,” Sirius said, laying a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “For making this family whole as it should be, we owe both you as an individual and House Zabini our gratitude.”

“It is only my duty to offer my aid where my Heir wishes it,” Matteo said softly. “And while we are on the subject… Heir Black, might I have a private word?”

Harry angled his head. Matteo wouldn’t kill him, and Loharian viper venom worked just fine on vampires; he’d checked a few years ago researching the extent of Eriss’ abilities. If he tried anything Harry could slam him away with wandless magic and Eriss could kill him with a bite.

“You may,” he said. “Sirius…”

“Right.” Sirius gave Matteo a hard look but retreated without any more questions.
Matteo raised an eyebrow. “If you might erect a sound ward, Heir Black? Mind magics are among the very limited magical abilities possessed by my kind, which do not include wards.”

“I haven’t got a wand,” Harry rejoined.

“I was under the impression you have some uncommon gifts,” Matteo said with a raised eyebrow. Harry smiled grimly and traced runes in the air with one hand, visualizing them as he whispered a brief incantation. He was tired and the long day immersed in Occlumency had his mental control feeling like rubber bands stretched to the breaking point, but he had enough left for this.

“Most impressive.”

“So I’ve been told,” Harry said, unconsciously stroking Eriss.

“You are, in fact, a rather impressive wizard on many counts,” Matteo said. His tone was not threatening… but heavy. Weighted with the importance he ascribed to this conversation. “So talented at such a young age, surrounded by loyal friends rather than vassals from various school Houses and noble families, Heir to one of the United Kingdom’s oldest and wealthiest families, uniquely positioned in the conflict brewing in your country…” His eyes bored into Harry’s. “And the Heir of Salazar Slytherin.”

“Technically not,” Harry said softly. “I’m just the Heir in Hogwarts.”

“Of course.” Matteo shrugged one shoulder. “Your position and lineages still grant you leverage, power. Influence. Especially in… some circles.”

Yeah, Harry knew exactly which circles those were. “I don’t see how my inheritance concerns you outside the boundaries of this ritual,” he said, a clear warning in his voice.

“It would not,” Matteo agreed, “if you did not number the Heir of my House among your friends.”

Ah. “I trust Blaise,” Harry said. “And I truly meant what I said two years ago… I have friends, not vassals.”

“You have both,” Matteo said. “Do not attempt a denial; I have seen Pensieve memories of your dealings with your dueling club, and the younger members of Slytherin. But that remains irrelevant. I know Blaise to number among the former group, not the latter.”

“You are bound to the orders of Countess Zabini over her Heir,” Harry said, mind churning through the angles. “I take it she is not aware of this conversation? Or… my other inheritance?”

Matteo smiled thinly. “Blaise would prefer that I not inform her of that particular secret, so until such time as she orders me to tell her of your secrets, I will not take the initiative.”

Harry raised his eyebrows to convey exactly how skeptical that made him.

“Countess Zabini has a very busy life,” Matteo said delicately. “She loves her son dearly but she did not hold with traditional maternal expectations. Blaise had very few constant figures in his life as a child. Among them, myself.”

“He referred to you as his uncle, once,” Harry said.

A flicker of softness crossed Matteo’s face. It could easily be fake; Matteo was certainly skilled enough, but Harry was inclined to think not. “And I regard him as more than merely the Heir and my
future Count,” Matteo said. “I see great potential in you, Hadrian Black, and great power. One day you may well be one of the strongest magicians the United Kingdom has seen in a very, very long time. The people around Slytherins with such potential, such aspirations… They frequently find themselves used as chess pieces. I wish to warn you to not betray the trust and loyalty and affection my Blaise has given you.”

Harry couldn’t quite hide that he was startled. Not at the concern; he’d seen that that was Matteo’s motivation for this fascinating little aside, but… was that really how he seemed?

“You are no doubt aware of the trials that led to Sirius gaining my custody last year,” Harry said softly. “Our childhoods were very different, but the commonality is that neither Blaise nor I had an abundance of people we could trust implicitly as children. My first friends were made at Hogwarts. Very few people have earned my loyalty but Blaise is one of them… and we both know my Occlumency isn’t good enough for me to lie to your face, Romesse Baresi.”

Matteo nodded very slowly. “It is not… Very well, Hadrian, I will take my leave, and I offer you my gratitude for setting my worries at ease.”

“Blaise cares for you,” Harry said simply. “And you for him.” He smiled thinly. “You have an automatic place in my good books.”

Matteo laughed. “From most magicians your age, for you to assume I should care what you think of me would be an insult. From you… mmm, we shall see where you go. I will be watching with interest. Good day.”

“Safe travels,” Harry said formally.

He and Eriss watched the vampire leave, swiftly and without a backwards glance.

They ascended the stairs and stepped out into the front hall just as Sirius closed the door, having seen Matteo out the front.

“What’d he want?” Sirius said.

Harry shrugged. “Warning me that Blaise trusts me and Matteo would be… you know, annoyed if I did the Slytherin thing and turned on him. Et cetera, et cetera.”

Sirius looked irate. “How dare—”

“It’s not unfounded,” Harry said. “Slytherins aren’t known for long-term loyalty. The general impression of my house is “would sell you out for a donut” and it’s not entirely inaccurate. We’re fiercely loyal… but only if people earn it. I assured Matteo that Blaise is one of those people I’m loyal to.” He smiled wryly. “It’s not like I could lie to him.”

“Suppose not,” Sirius admitted. “Merlin, he’s some Legilimens… Grandfather Arcturus went toe-to-toe with Dumbledore in the mind arts before he kicked it, and he trained me when I was thirteen to sixteen, and he had nothing on Matteo.”

“Yeah.” Harry rubbed his forehead. “I’ve got to work on that.”

Sirius’ lips thinned. “I’d say you’re young… but I get why you want to be better. I probably would if I went to school under Dumbledore.”

Harry snorted.
“Anyway.” Sirius grinned at him, wild and uninhibited and with almost no trace of Azkaban in his eyes. “Welcome to the family.”

“I like it a lot better than the last two,” Harry said with a smirk.

Sirius laughed. “All right, let’s go find your friends, I’m sure they’re excited to eat food and celebrate…”

“I made them put the celebrations off for tomorrow,” Harry said. “We can just eat here tonight. Family dinner.”

*Family dinner.* He’d never had one of those that he looked forward to before.

Harry smiled so widely and so happily that it hurt.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I did not realize that there’s a JKR-approved exchange rate between pounds and galleons. I wrote this chapter and did the math, and have been setting the prices for various purchases throughout the series, without considering that. I am not going to go back and reexamine every purchase anyone’s ever made. For the purposes of this story, a copybook (because of the spells on it and the fact that they’re illegal) costs about $40 or £29.

AN2: for anyone asking about update schedules, I'm sorry it's so irregular, my life is a mess. in a good way. i'm just extremely busy. but i'm alive and the story will go on!
Old Halls, New Battlegrounds

Crouch,

I did embark on some extracurricular studying today. Nothing I’ve ever studied before. I found myself fascinated—and immensely relieved that it worked exactly as hoped. Sirius managed to engage some outside help to answer a few of my questions; a source that’s helped me out in the past, actually. It made everything go much more easily.

Hadrian

Or, Heir Black, in full

Theodore Nott

TN

Harry, why the fuck is Father coming home asking about your blood ritual and your outside help?

HB

Crouch knows about it

TN

What compelled you to tell him

HB

…I like him

I hinted at it. Nothing I said could be taken as evidence even if he copied everything and took me to court.

TN

Of course you were careful. Don’t know what I was thinking

HB

Me neither

TN

I take it I can pass on the identity of your help then? And how you know Matteo?

HB

You haven’t already?

TN

My turn to be insulted
That ritual’s your secret. I wasn’t about to just roll on over because Father asked, and spill the details.

HB

Apologies.

TN

Accepted, no worries

I’ll be vague

HB

Matteo knows about the Heir of Slytherin thing. Caught on while he was studying my lineage in preparation for setting up the ritual.

TN

Is he going to be a problem?

HB

Doubt it. He’s bound to Countess Z over Blaise, but he’s got genuine affection for Blaise, near as I can tell. Unless she directly orders him to spill any of my secrets that Matteo knows, then I’ll be fine.

TN

And even then Blaise has blackmail on his mother. Remember, he mentioned it second year?

HB

You think he’d use it for me?

TN

You probably wouldn’t even have to ask, frankly.

HB

I’ll keep that in mind. I don’t think it will be a problem but you never know.

TN

Copybooks?

HB

Set to get here a few days after we leave for school. We can Portkey back first weekend. I told Sirius I’m sneaking copies of some of the rarer books out of the Restricted Section.

TN

It’s even partially true.

How’d he take it?
Laughed

He’s not one for rules

Excellent. See you on the train then

Once you’re done with your latest scheme, that is.

That should only take up an hour or two

Good, because if I end up trapped in a carriage with Malfoy the whole time and you’re not there, I might just test some hexes on him

I’ve learned some good ones this summer

Yeah, I’ll bet you have

Don’t worry, I’ll teach them to you.

Excellent

You are such a Ravenclaw sometimes

Oh like you can talk

Hadrian,

I am pleased to hear this. Extracurricular studies can be most illuminating. I take it the Alvadora Black connection was enough?

Barty Crouch

Indeed, I’ve been officially accepted by the Black family magics in every way. Wards, Gringotts, the
Heir ring—Sirius was overjoyed. As was I. And my friends. We had quite a celebration here at Grimmauld Place last night.

Hadrian

Some creative dodging on the platform meant Harry didn’t have to look at or deal with any of the Potters after he said goodbye to Sirius. They were surrounded by a cluster of Weasleys, Macmillans, and Boneses, the only families who’d remained loyal in the wake of the Prophet’s well-executed attack on their precious Boy Who Lived. Harry smirked at the many unhappy looks sent the Potters’ way. For once they could be on the receiving end of the wizarding world’s scorn. Truth had a way of coming out, and Voldemort wouldn’t stay sneaky forever, so it probably wouldn’t be permanent.

Unless someone interfered.

Harry set those plans aside for later and flicked his wrist, sending the ash wand into his hand. Ginny stood on the edge of the Weasley crowd, looking longingly in the direction of the train while her mum fussed over Ronald and Jules and the twins.

She jumped and turned with a glare when the mild stinging hex hit her ankle.

Harry smirked unrepentantly. He waggled his wand with a questioning eyebrow raise.

Ginny scowled and shook her head a bit, pointing subtly to her mum.

Harry frowned.

She held up two fingers.

Ginny’s entire bearing changed as she turned around, from sullen, irritated teenager to excited schoolgirl. Harry didn’t hear what she said as she tugged on her mum’s arm and distracted Mrs. Weasley from the boys, but her expression was pleading.

Mrs. Weasley sighed and dug around in her frumpy shoulder bag and drew out a wand. She handed it off to Ginny with a sour face.

A round of good-bye hugs ensued. George caught sight of Harry lurking in the crowd and elbowed Fred; both twins looked at him with identical mischievous grins. He winked back at them, saw James’ head start to turn his direction, and faded backwards, putting a family having a shouting match over a Hufflepuff third-year’s owl between him and the Potters.

He caught a glimpse of red hair hurrying away from the group and moved to intercept. “Ginny,” he called.

She stopped and grinned when she saw him. “Got my wand back!”

“I saw,” he said. Now that she was out of sight of her family, she shrunk her trunk and stuck it in her pocket. “What was your excuse?”

“Pretended I saw Luna in the crowd and wanted to snag a seat with her on the train,” Ginny said smugly.

“Nice.” Harry slid his own wand away. “Ready for this?”

“Where are we meeting up?”
“I told everyone to wait in the open seating carriage in the front,” Harry said. “We can work our way back. The prefects will be occupied for about an hour but we’ll start after Hermione, Justin, and Pansy get back to us.”

“Can I go find Evalyn and Nat and the rest before that?”

Harry grinned. “Be my guest.”

“See you,” she said, and dashed off, slipping through the crowd like smoke.

One thing down. Harry likewise headed for the train. His next step was a more direct middle finger at Dumbledore’s plans. A small, cold smirk played over his lips as he got on the train at the back and started walking.

Harry worked his way up the train, waving to various acquaintances as he went. Hestia, Adrian, Flora, Peregrine, and Everett held court in their own compartment. He popped his head in to say hello, learned that they were saving seats for Fred, George, Noah Bole, and Aaron Jigger, and kept moving with a smirk. If ever there was a group primed to cause trouble it was the twins and Noah and Aaron. Ginny had found the Slytherins from her year and they appeared to be well on their way to one of that group’s explosive shouting matches. Harry waved through the door and kept moving so he didn’t get dragged into the spat.

A compartment filled with smoke caught his attention. Harry paused and peeked in; no one had drawn the shades on the door, so he could just make out a Slytherin tie on one of the kids stumbling around in there.

He sighed. Technically he wasn’t a prefect and didn’t have the authority to step in, but Slytherin politics were separate from who had a badge on their robes, and frankly Harry didn’t care if the school gave him authority or not. He’d make his own.

“Alohomora,” he murmured, and the low-level locking jinx on the door dissolved. It slid open and he elbowed his way inside.

The smoke cleared at a wave of his wand, revealing a cracked set of Gobstones, two books that looked like nothing you’d be allowed to open on Hogwarts grounds, and four very embarrassed Slytherin second years. Malcolm Baddock, Graham Pritchard, Liam Eirian, and Veronica Butler.

“Enjoying your experiment?” he said drily.

“We were,” Eirian said, drawing his attention while Baddock and Pritchard tried to slide the books out of sight.

Harry fixed the two boys with a look. They froze. “Commendable effort, but I’ve been a Slytherin longer than you,” he said.

Baddock shrugged, but his shoulders were tense with embarrassment and nerves. “It was worth a shot, wasn’t it?”

“Let’s see, then,” Harry said, holding out a hand for the books.

None of them moved.

He sighed. A second later, both books shot through the air into his outstretched hand.

“How the—” Butler hit Eirian to shut him up. Harry hid his wand behind one of the books and cast a
quick, weak *amplius auri* on himself so he could listen to their whispered argument while he skimmed the first few pages.

“That’s *Harry Potter,*” Butler hissed. “Don’t piss him off!”

“Harry Black,” Pritchard corrected.

Butler blinked at him. “What?”

“Take out a Prophet subscription next summer,” Eirian said. “The Potters disinherited him ‘cause he killed that guy last year, so Sirius Black adopted him. He’s Heir Black now.”

Harry looked up and cut off the spell, giving no sign that he’d heard them. “I’m sure you’re aware this isn’t exactly Hogwarts-approved reading material?”

“…yes,” Butler admitted. She was a lot less nervous around him than the boys—she actually made eye contact, for one thing. Harry supposed it made sense; he’d been checking up on her somewhat regularly all last year.

“Where’d you get them?” he said. “Honest answers, please.”

“My family library,” Pritchard said, meeting Harry’s eyes challengingly. “Dad’ll never notice them missing, he says we’re not supposed to touch the books on that shelf and he doesn’t either, but he won’t get rid of them because they’re family heirlooms. He thinks I can’t get past the ward spells.”

“How did you?” Harry asked.

Pritchard shifted, but didn’t look away. “Learned some stuff in the Slytherin library,” he said evasively.

Harry grinned and handed the books back. “How clever of you.”

All four students stared at him, nerves forgotten. “What?” Eirian said. “You’re not…”

“For one thing, I’m not a prefect,” Harry said, ignoring their obvious shock, “so I technically can’t take points. For another, Slytherins tend not to respect the rules other people impose on us. If you want to study magic outside the bounds of Dumbledore’s washed-out curriculum… you wouldn’t be the only ones.” He smirked. “Surely you’ve noticed that we don’t stick to legal spells in dueling club.”

“We’ve only gone a few times,” Baddock said.

Harry shrugged like it didn’t matter to him. “Talk to me or Theo Nott sometime if you’d be interested. Miss Butler, if you could bring Mr. Pritchard when you join us in an hour or so?”

“Okay,” Butler said.

“All right.”

“See you then.” Harry winked at them. “One more thing… if you’re experimenting with questionable magic on the train, I recommend you learn some better locking spells, or at least pull the blinds over the door.”

All four of them blushed fire engine red. Smirking, he left, and cast a lock spell of his own on the door. Only those four would be able to open it for the rest of the train ride.

Whistling, Harry continued on his way. The train hadn’t even started moving yet; he had plenty of time…
Harry’s eyes fixed on a familiar head of white-blond hair. He wasn’t about to shout Malfoy’s name up the length of the now-crowded train, so he took careful aim and landed a light stinging hex on Malfoy’s shoulder.

Malfoy whipped around, scowling, looking for the culprit.

Harry caught his eye, raised one eyebrow, and stepped sideways into an empty compartment.

Malfoy showed up a few minutes later. “What, Po—Black?” he said.

“So rude, Malfoy?” Harry said lightly. “We’re technically first cousins once removed, now.”

“Unfortunately,” Malfoy said, but there wasn’t much bite to it. “What do you want?”

Harry let his eyes linger on the Slytherin prefect badge.

“Jealous?” Malfoy said with a smirk.

“I know you’ve got to go to the prefects’ carriage, so I’ll keep this short,” Harry said, giving that juvenile and ineffective jab the attention it deserved, which was none. “Dumbledore interfered. He’s hoping you’ll run around and piss people off by flaunting that little trinket’s limited authority and alienate the other three Houses in the process.”

Malfoy bristled. “You think I’d take points off for no reason?”

“I think you’d use it to rub Jules Potter the wrong way,” Harry said. “Or any Gryffindor or Hufflepuff you don’t like. Not that I blame you, mind. Piss Jules off all you like, with my blessing, but try not to shred Slytherin’s reputation in the process.”

Malfoy snarled. “He’s trying to tear the House down, isn’t he?”

“It’s bad enough he let two Death Eaters’ children be prefects,” Harry said softly. “Don’t look at me like that, we both know it’s true. That alone will be hard enough for people to swallow. Don’t give them an excuse to say you’re abusing your power, Malfoy.”

“Draco.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“We’re first cousins once removed,” Malfoy—Draco?—said with his chin proudly raised. “Family. And House mates. I think that rather warrants a first-name basis.”

Unexpected, but pleasant. “Harry, then,” Harry said, sticking out his hand with a faint trace of a grin. “I’ve never had a proper family before, so I apologize if I don’t have the hang of it just yet.”

Draco shook his hand.

For an odd moment, they stood there, on opposite sides of the compartment, with everything neither of them would or could say permeating the air.

“Just don’t use the Potters as role models and you’ll do fine,” Draco finally said with a sneer. “Welcome to the family.”

Harry watched him leave with narrowed eyes. It might actually be better to have Draco as prefect.
Dumbledore likely hadn’t counted on them moving past their differences—probably hadn’t even noticed Harry’s circle slowly shifting to accommodate Draco over the last year. It was also likely that he’d underestimated the importance of family. The Malfoys were even more rigid about that than most pureblood families, and Harry being Heir Black made him family. Harry could influence Draco from the shadows and if anything went wrong, Draco would be a perfect patsy.

Not that he wanted to throw his cousin under the bus. But he would if he had to. Unlike Draco, it took more than blood relation for Harry to consider someone family.

He sorted through those plans, organized them, and set them aside for his subconscious to chew on so he could focus on his next task.

The open-seating compartment at the front of the train was almost full, but Harry shot a narrow-eyed glare at some Hufflepuff second years in the seats he wanted and they scurried away.

Sometimes Slytherin’s reputation was useful.

Harry smiled thinly as he sat down. Or maybe it’s just my reputation.

Pansy, Hermione, and Justin would be busy for the next hour or so with prefect stuff, but Neville found him within five minutes of the train departing. Blaise and Theo and Luna would be holding down a different compartment—Theo wanted to avoid the glares he was sure to receive from Dumbledore’s supporters.

They fell to talking, although they kept it banal for the sake of the people sitting near them. People paused to say hello to Harry. He chatted with Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, Mason Goshawk, Iris Viridian, Lee Jordan, Celesta Fawley, and Jordan Harper, and before he knew it an hour had passed.

Pansy, Hermione, and Justin showed up at the same time. “We have two hours until we’ve got to patrol the corridors,” Hermione said.

“Perfect,” Harry said.

“Who’re the other prefects?” Neville asked.

“Padma Patil and Anthony from Ravenclaw,” Pansy said, cradling Astrych in her arms. Harry nodded; he could work with that easily. He and Anthony weren’t close friends but they got along well and Daphne was Anthony’s cousin by marriage. “Susan Bones from Hufflepuff along with Justin.”

“You should’ve seen Macmillan’s face when he realized it was Justin instead of him,” Hermione said with a grin.

Justin sat down with a smile. “He expected to get it, but he hardly deserves the badge.”

“Why d’you say that?” Harry asked. He’d much rather Justin be the Hufflepuff prefect instead of Macmillan, who hated Harry, but he hadn’t really expected Justin to agree.

“He’s not nearly as fair-minded as he likes to think,” Justin said with a shrug. “And he’s hyperfixated on grades. He used to talk about how he could finally take points off Gryffindors and Slytherins who’d rather goof off than study.”

Hermione sniffed. “As if it’s his place to tell other people how to study.”

Pansy and Neville burst out laughing. “Hermione, you write up study schedules for all of us every
year,” Neville reminded her.

“Yes, but—you’re my friends,” Hermione said, blushing furiously.

Pansy stopped laughing with an obvious effort. “Anyway—Gryffindor’s Ronald and Hermione, as you knew…and then, of course, Malfoy.”

“How’d he do?” Harry said.

Pansy shot him a knowing smirk and boosted Astrych up on her shoulder.

“Surprisingly, he wasn’t as obnoxious as I expected,” Justin said. “Rubbed it in Weasley’s face a bit, but it’s not like Weasley didn’t do the same.”

Harry nodded. His talk worked, then. He’d implied both that the badge would’ve gone to Harry if Dumbledore hadn’t interfered, and that Draco would have Harry to deal with should he step out of line. The Malfoy heir was clever enough to pick up on both. It’d deflate his ego a little bit to know he hadn’t been the first pick and whatever his faults may be, Malfoy wouldn’t knowingly hurt Slytherin House. It was nice to hear his manipulation had worked so far.

“Who are we waiting on?” Neville said.

“Veronica Butler, Ginny, Romilda Vane,” Pansy said instantly.

“I told Butler to bring Graham Pritchard along,” Harry said, checking his watch. Pansy would figure out why—pureblood Slytherin from a Gryffindor-Hufflepuff family—and the others didn’t need to know.

Ginny and Vane showed up five minutes later. They were still going around greeting everyone when Butler arrived towing Pritchard in her wake. Everyone had met at least once before in dueling club, so they didn’t have to go around with introductions of any kind. Harry let everyone chat and relax for a few minutes before he shifted into business mode.

“Right,” Justin said, picking up on the change in body language and grinning at him. “Operation Corrupt the First Years is a go!”

Butler and Vane snickered while the kids raised in the magical world looked at them like they were insane. Harry allowed himself a small smile.

The nine of them set off down the train. It was easy to see which compartments included first years; they were shy, obviously uncertain, and dressed in plain school robes with no House crests. Of course, not everyone in Harry’s carefully chosen group could fit into every compartment they stopped in, but it wasn’t that hard to get at least one Slytherin in each one. A few would pile in, usually including Harry, and chat with the firsties for five or ten minutes, and every time, Harry or Pansy would make an effort to present the best image of their House they could. Clever, driven, resourceful. A few people challenged them for being “evil Slytherins,” and every time, Ginny or Pritchard or Vane or Butler would jump in and point out that they’d all come from families or backgrounds supposedly hated by the evil Slytherins, yet they’d been accepted, they’d made friends. Harry had to work to keep from grinning like the proverbial cat with a canary every time he saw the Slytherin prejudice take a kick in the teeth. They’d never be able to eradicate it completely, not in the face of familial hatred and definitely not in five minutes per compartment, but at the very least, they could make some people hesitate.

He didn’t want to see potential Slytherins end up somewhere else because someone told them the snakes were evil, or those sorted Slytherin driven to the Dark by expectations. Especially Muggle-
borns or halfbloods who’d be actively warned away. If Harry had listened to Jules and James on that
count—he couldn’t imagine the horror of growing up in Gryffindor and trying to hide his Slytherin
traits from his House mates. It hurt Slytherin to hemorrhage potential snakes.

It took only a little longer than Harry had estimated to make it the length of the train. Ginny, Vane,
Butler, and Pritchard knew, more or less, what he’d been trying to do. All four of them grinned at
him as they said goodbye and left to find their own friends. The fifth years checked their notebooks
for directions to the compartment Blaise, Theo, and Luna were holding down.

Hermione fell back to walk by Harry. “I’m not stupid,” she said in a low voice. “Don’t think I didn’t
notice what you were doing.”

“Helping first years adjust by answering questions and introducing several prefects?” he said
innocently.

“I’m not stupid,” she repeated indignantly. “That’s what you said, but—the Slytherin Muggle-born, a
Slytherin halfblood, three Slytherins from families who reacted badly to their Sortings, and Pansy,
pureblood Slytherin who could charm the trousers off a rock? Befriending a Gryffindor from a Light
family, and two Muggle-borns from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff?”

Harry shrugged. He loved having intelligent friends. “Like I said. Prefects.”

“Doesn’t explain Neville,” she said. “Or you, or the younger snakes. You’re trying to stop them
hating Slytherin before they even get Sorted. Even the ones who end up in other Houses.”

“And if I was?” he said evenly.

“I don’t care,” she said. “We helped them out and answered questions, anyway. And you’ve quite
proven your point about the Slytherin prejudice. Not to mention it benefits all Houses if we can learn
to work together and see one another as people.” Hermione shot him a pointed look. “But I’d prefer
that you be up front in the future.”

Harry studied her for a second. She was probably right. He hadn’t been sure how she and Neville
and Justin would react—if they’d agree to go along knowing his real objective. This was a better
response than he’d expected.

“I will,” he said quietly. Hopefully she didn’t expect an apology, because she wasn’t getting one.

Hermione snorted. “You’re impossible.”

“So are you,” he said, grinning.

Harry stopped dead when he saw the carriages. Or, more accurately, the things pulling them.

At the end of last year, they’d opted to walk to Hogsmeade on the last morning to take advantage of
the beautiful weather and also so the Slytherins could get away from the scrutiny and hatred leveled
at them from all other quarters. He’d not seen the carriages.

These—things—looked like horses, kind of. If you starved horses mostly to death and injected them
with a bit of reptilian DNA. They looked like perambulating skeletons covered in a single layer of
skin that grew short, glossy black fur. White, staring eyes, draconian heads, and leathery wings
completed the sinister picture.
A few pieces snapped into place. Thestrals. They had bloody thestrals pulling what he’d always assumed were self-propelling carriages.

Theo paused by his elbow. “Creepy, aren’t they?” he said quietly.

Harry shot him a startled look. “How—”

“You have to witness and understand death,” Theo said bitterly, staring at the nearest skeleton horse. It huffed at them, obviously enjoying the attention. “I saw the Pensieve memory of Dumbledore killing my mother. That was close enough. I’ve been able to see them my whole time here.”

“And you never said anything?” Harry said incredulously.

Theo shrugged. “Most people get really uncomfortable around magical creatures they can’t see. Especially one associated with death and bad omens.”

“It’s a ridiculous idea,” Luna’s sweet voice said. She appeared on Theo’s other side, smiling at them. “They’re quite sweet, really…”

“You can see them?” Harry was starting to get a headache.

“My mother died when I was eight in an accident with experimental charms,” Luna said. “I was there.”

She seemed entirely unconcerned by this fact.

“They’re… kind of beautiful,” Harry said, stepping up to the nearest thestral and hesitantly offering one hand. Everything he’d read about them, which wasn’t much, suggested they were generally mild-mannered unless threatened.

The thestral huffed hot breath over his fingers and wrinkled its lips, revealing gleaming carnivore’s fangs. Now that he looked closer, their heads looked so different partly because of their forward-facing eyes. Another hallmark of predators—prey like horses and unicorns typically evolved with wide-set eyes for three-sixty degree peripheral detection of things hunting them.

It made an odd chattering noise and nudged at his hand. Harry took this as acceptance and ran a cautious hand down its bony neck.

“Why did you think I suggested we walk to Hogsmeade last year?” Theo said with a smirk.

Harry narrowed his eyes at his best friend. “They’re not that creepy.”

“You weren’t in the right headspace to deal with this last year,” Theo said unrepentantly. “Figured that could wait for this year.”

“Your care for my well-being is appreciated,” Harry said haughtily, drawing a snicker out of Theo and a bell-bright laugh from Luna.

They climbed into the carriage pulled by Harry’s new thestral friend. Neville stumbled a minute later, clutching Trevor in one hand—the toad didn’t try to run away anymore but it still displayed a lot more curiosity than you’d expect for such a dull species.

“What’s wrong?” Theo said.

“Pritchard being a prat, don’t worry about it,” Neville said.

“You Pritchard brother’s a decent bloke,” Neville said with a shrug, spraying Trevor with a bit of mist from his wand and letting the toad onto the floor of the compartment. It croaked and promptly hopped into the shadows under Neville’s bench.

“Why do you keep that thing around?” Theo teased.

It was supposed to be a joke, but Neville got oddly serious. “Algie gave him to me when I got accepted to Hogwarts,” he said.

Ah. That explained it. Trevor was Neville’s proof that he was a wizard, that he was good enough.

Harry could understand that—for him it was magic in general, it was Parseltongue and Eriss and his wand, but—that insecurity was something he knew all too well.

Theo obviously caught on, too. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“No harm,” Neville said easily.

Luna opened a copy of the Quibbler and flipped it upside down. Harry glanced over at her and his eyes widened. “Luna,” he said. “What runes are those?”

“Oh, it’s a new language Daddy’s friend Archibald found two summers ago,” she said breezily. “Most people don’t think they’re magical, but Daddy and Archie have been studying them, and they posted their first article…”

“May I?” Harry asked, holding out a hand.

“You don’t think they’re crazy?” Luna said, handing him the magazine.

Harry scanned the runes and felt a prickling excitement. “Certainly not—they’re the weirdest bloody runes I’ve ever seen, sure, but—Theo, look at this.”

He held out the magazine between them. Theo leaned across the carriage and bent his head over the magazine with Harry and Luna.

“They don’t need arrays,” Theo said, stunned. He and Harry shared a loaded glance. “They’re just… fluid. Luna, where in the hell did your dad’s friend find these?”

“Peru,” she said. “A cave.”

Harry pointed at a particularly weird section. “These are magic. No doubt about it.”

“What do they do?” Neville said.

All three of them tried to talk at the same time. Theo and Luna laughed, and then the boys let Luna explain that they thought the runic patterns they found painted in what looked like dried blood mixed with paint were supposed to be protective wards, but there was no history of magical communities in that area…

Before he knew it, the carriages were drawing to a halt. Luna packed the magazine away but not before Harry and Theo each made a copy using geminio. Neither of them would mention it in front of the Ravenclaw, but these runes resembled those used in several books from the Chamber that they’d had no luck in translating.

“Tonight?” Theo said in an undertone as they climbed out of the carriage.
Harry nodded minutely.

They headed up into the castle, nodded goodbye to friends from other Houses, and made for the Slytherin table. As fifth years, they sat nearer the doors than the staff table, for which Harry was immensely grateful. Dumbledore’s eyes tended to linger on him lately and he didn’t expect that to change this year.

“No Hagrid,” Pansy said gleefully.

That caught everyone’s attention. The whole Slytherin fifth year group turned as one for the staff table, and Harry’s eyebrows drifted upward as he realized Hagrid was not missing but replaced, by Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“Maybe he’s been sacked,” Bulstrode said.

“I’d know,” Malfoy said. “Father’s on the Board of Governors, they’re informed of all staff changes.” He scowled. “In fact, they should’ve been informed of this one. I’ll have to owl Father tonight.”

*Running to Daddy again?* Harry wanted to say, but in this instance Malfoy had a point. If Dumbledore was dodging his duties as Headmaster—hm.

“How the fuck,” someone said suddenly. “Umbridge?”

Harry looked down the table for the speaker. Hestia. She was glaring daggers at the staff table.

“Who’s Umbridge?” he asked.

She glanced his way and went back to glaring at the table. “Frog-face in pink.”

“New Defense teacher, must be,” Blaise said.

They all studied the short woman in shocking pink. Harry had seen her before; she came with Fudge the previous year at the end of Crouch’s interrogation. He pulled out his journal—*note to self, sit down with Theo and Daphne and Hermione and Justin tomorrow to disguise these*—and opened to Crouch’s page.

*Crouch,*

*I presume the new Defense teacher is indeed the set of unfriendly eyes you mentioned, based on Hestia Carrow’s reaction. I’ve seen her once before—last year, right before Wright helped you escape. Charming woman, seemed completely devoted to Minister Fudge-for-brains and eager to have you Kissed. Want me to hex her from behind?*

*Hadrian*

Of course, he was really asking whether the Death Eaters would prefer this Umbridge have an easy time of it here or not. She was obviously a Ministry plant of some kind, though how Fudge got her hired by Dumbledore Harry had no idea. The old goat wasn’t stupid enough to not notice her previous employers.

“Theo?” Daphne said quietly.
Theo shook his head. “No idea.”

He glanced at the Carrow twins, who appeared to be communicating in a silent manner similar to Fred and George’s. Harry watched the exchange with interest. The Death Eaters’ children weren’t aware of Umbridge, but there was something more going on here.

Crouch didn’t respond, so Harry slid the journal away.

His friends chattered, catching up with the fourth years to one side of them and the sixth years to the other, but Harry mostly ignored them. He was busy watching the Gryffindors.

Jules, for once, was not the darling of his House. About half the lions appeared to be shunning him. Including, to Harry’s great amusement, Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas, long his brother’s lackeys. He suspected Thomas was the sensible one who simply didn’t have the spine to step away from his year mates’ bullying. It couldn’t be easy to stand up to them when you shared a room and would undoubtedly be tormented for doing so. Neville had come to Theo and him last year asking for help finding ward-spells both powerful and legal. Neither Slytherin was so tactless as to ask why—but they knew perfectly well.

Finnegan was a narrow-minded git, but perhaps there was hope for him after all. Harry watched them carefully. Maybe now that they’d been split from Jules and Ronald, he could prevail upon Thomas… or perhaps have Neville and Hermione do it for him. Get Thomas’—well, likely not allegiance, but perhaps at least his neutrality in the Harry-and-Jules feud. He and Finnegan had always been closer to each other than to either Jules or Ronald. If he could get Thomas to split off and take Finnegan with him before the truth came out, when there was ready-made ammunition against Jules—

It was time to start peeling apart his brother’s power base instead of simply building his own.

“Harry?”

He blinked, realized he’d been staring predatorily at the Gryffindor table, and switched on his charming smile in an instant as he turned to Noah Bole. “Yes?”

Noah raised an eyebrow, probably at the switch in bearing, but didn’t comment. “Dueling club?”

“Same time as usual,” Harry said. “Password will be Horntail.”

Noah laughed. “Nice. I’ll pass it on.”

McGonagall appeared with a cluster of black-robed nervous first years, and the Sorting Hat sang.

Harry normally paid little attention to its song, but this time, he found his attention captured. Instead of simply going on about the House traits, the Hat sang of school unity, of four pillars of Hogwarts, of the dangers of fracturing from within.

“What?” the stocky girl said defensively. “I like history. It gives warnings when it feels like the
school’s facing threats from within or without.”

McGonagall sent a scorching look over the hall and silenced the whispering. Harry mentally shrugged off the Hat’s song. Divided we fall, and all that, but unlike some people, he wasn’t afraid of networking with other Houses. Harry’s only enemies in this castle were Dumbledore and some of the more bigoted students in other Houses. The Slytherins accepted him by this point, especially after he’d kicked a few of their asses at the start of the Tournament last year.

Slowly the line of first years thinned. He pulled out the page of runes from the Quibbler and started reading it again. Theo did likewise. Daphne shot them suspicious looks but didn’t ask. Eriss complained about hiding in Harry’s bag and he let her out with a whispered admonishment to stay out of sight. The snake slid down to the floor and prowled around under the Slytherin table, staying near Harry’s feet.

Finally, the Sorting was done.

Unlike previous years, though, Dumbledore stood up to address them before the food.

“Oh, come on,” Goyle complained. “Give us the food, already.”

Crabbe normally would’ve backed up his friend but he stayed silent. Harry looked at the boy whose father he’d killed, who no doubt knew how his father was killed, and waited to feel—something.

He didn’t.

He was actually grateful when Dumbledore started in on his very brief, very asinine “speech”, because it sucked everyone’s attention away.

Crabbe wouldn’t meet Harry’s eyes.

He sat back in his seat, kept his shoulders from slumping and his consternation from showing, packing everything away behind mental walls and a perfect, icy, Slytherin mask.

Fuck.

Harry tuned out Theo and Pansy as they picked up an argument, fueled by Blaise’s seemingly casual remarks that only added oil to the fire, and steadily ate his way through a steak and kidney pie and a healthy serving of salad. Protein, carbohydrates, vegetables, water. Balanced meals were important for his physical health. A childhood of malnutrition taught him that. Among other things.

By the time Dumbledore stood up again, Harry was thinking longingly of the dungeons, the heavy silence and the slight chill and the comfort of shadows and secrets around him. Of the Chamber far beneath the school, full of knowledge he couldn’t yet access, knowledge that would help him—make him great.

The image was a bit seductive. Theo at his side, armed with Slytherin’s library and the Black legacy and Wizengamot seats and family vaults. Influence. Not love—Harry doubted he was even capable of the kind of trust real romantic love required—but a woman he cared for and trusted to whatever extent he could at his side.

He could do it without Slytherin’s library, of course, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt to have that kind of knowledge and forgotten power at his fingertips.

Umbridge stood up, snapping Harry out of his thoughts.
He wasn’t the only student to be surprised. No one interrupted Dumbledore mid-speech, not even the Weasely twins, but Umbridge had stood up and gave a sort of affected cough clearly announcing her intention to make a speech. Even the other teachers looked shocked.

A subtle ripple of shared disdain, communicated with glances and barely-wrinkled noses, passed up and down the Slytherin table. Such a crude and see-through power play. This woman was ridiculous.

“Thank you, Headmaster, for those kind words of welcome,” Umbridge simpered. Even her voice was high-pitched, girlish, and affected. Harry felt a rush of dislike that he could tell his House mates shared.

She did the fake throat-clearing thing again and continued: “Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say! And to see such happy little faces looking back at me!”

Harry looked around. He could not see one happy face.

“Did someone forget to tell her she’s teaching teenager, not five-year-olds?” Daphne hissed.

“I’m very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I’m sure we’ll be very good friends!”

Pansy snickered, causing Astrych, sitting in her lap, to shift around in irritation. “So long as I don’t have to copy her fashion sense.”

Amusement spread around her, Slytherin style—quick, subtle, passed from one student to the next with the tiniest shifts of body language.

The new Professor went on, with much of the girly breathiness gone. “The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the Wizarding community must be passed down through the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.”

She paused and bowed to her fellow teachers, none of whom looked impressed. Harry was busy sifting through the deliberately opaque language. He didn’t disagree with anything she’d just said, but he suspected there was a lot more to it.

“Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress’ sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation, is necessary for the continued strength and success…”

Harry tuned her out. Looking around, most of his fellow students were doing the same. Hermione, across the hall, was staring determinedly at Umbridge and would probably have the speech memorized. Ernie Macmillan was still pretending to listen with a glazed expression that said he was retaining absolutely none of her words.

The speech was meaningless drivel. Her message contradicted itself at every turn and was worded to confuse anyone listening. But if you got past the surface meaning…

Harry tilted his head. The Ministry was indeed interfering at Hogwarts. Seemed like Dumbledore was fighting a two-front war then.
“…because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what out to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.”

She sat down. Dumbledore and the other teachers clapped, though the students and staff seemed disinclined to applaud for very long.

Dumbledore stood up again and started droning about Quidditch tryouts.

“How fascinating,” Pansy murmured, stroking her fox. “I didn’t see this coming…”

Translation: this wasn’t a Death Eater plan, or at least, it wasn’t one that had been communicated to their children.

“Two-front war for the old man,” Theo said viciously, echoing Harry’s thoughts. They all swapped sharp-edged smiles. Dumbledore would be too busy with the Ministry’s attempts to interfere to watch any of them too closely.

A light stinging hex hit Harry’s left hand, the journal’s magic. He glanced into his bag: the green stone was lit up. Crouch, probably. He’d read it later.

The sixth-year prefects stood up and called the firsties with them. Harry thought they all seemed very small. On the other side of the Hall, Hermione and Ronald stood up to summon the Gryffindor first years. Made no sense that the other houses had the students in their OWL years handle the new students. He watched a couple of them shy nervously away from Jules, and then Jules shoving his way angrily out of the hall, and grinned.

“At least no one booed our new snakes this year,” Theo commented as they stood.

Harry’s grin widened. “I think I made that clear last year…”

Ben Creed and Marion Flesher both flinched away from him in the entrance hall. Harry smiled warmly in their direction and relished their fear as they paled and hurried away up the staircase.

As soon as he got back to Slytherin, he whipped out his journal.

Hadrian,

_Clever. The charming Professor Umbridge will indeed be out for your blood and your ex-brother’s this year. Much as I’d like to see the woman used as a test subject for previously untried curses, it would be in your best interest to not antagonize her. She’s got the Ministry’s backing and Dumbledore in her sights._

So in other words, the Death Eaters weren’t going to complain that the Ministry was distracting Dumbledore from his campaign against them. Made sense.

_I wasn’t sure if you noticed Wright’s involvement. He thought you would—he speaks highly of you—but some of our number thought otherwise. It’s a pleasure to see you live up to your reputation, again._
Harry nodded slowly. If he was right about this, then Theo and Pansy and Draco and possibly Daphne would probably all get parental warnings soon not to piss off Umbridge.

He turned to a blank silver page, wrote Neville and Hermione’s names at the top, and shot off a quick message.

HB

See if you can befriend Dean Thomas while he’s on the outs with Jules. He seems like a decent guy and I’d hate to see him end up one of my ex-brother’s narrow-minded lackeys forever.

Without waiting for a response, he wrote Fred and George’s names on another silver page.

HB

Knights Room, 2 hours after curfew. Eriss will be there; follow her.

The twins chimed in with agreement not long after, obviously aware that they wouldn’t be able to pressure him into providing more information. He slid the journal away and joined the conversation flowing with his friends, keeping an eye on the firsties. Vane, Astoria Greengrass, Vasily Sitch, Butler, Baddock, Pritchard, and Eirian were introducing themselves and networking already, just as Harry had wanted them to. He grinned. It would come in handy to have influence with the younger Slytherins. Maybe he should split the dueling club in half, one for the upper years he trusted to practice dueling and illegal magic, one for the younger set he didn’t know very well. The second one could double as a study group to make sure even the new Slytherins got top marks, and he could begin to determine if any of them was worth cultivating.

Perhaps a different night of the week, and somewhere other than the Knights Room—he could find an abandoned classroom and ward it to the nines, even ask Hogwarts to help hide it from anyone who wasn’t invited along. No need to share too many of his secrets with everyone.

“Two hours after curfew,” he murmured to Pansy and Daphne before they went to their dorms. “Back exit from the dorms.”

They gave no sign they’d heard him, but that was to be expected. He joined Blaise, Theo, and Draco as the fifth year boys got ready for bed. Harry saw Theo pass the rendezvous on to Blaise and caught the subtle nod Blaise gave him a few minutes later.

Harry crawled into bed, flicked his wand to shut the curtains, and murmured a few spells. A decently strong ward with a Stunner built in, one that included his trunk and bedside table; a sound- and light-canceling spell; a proximity alarm; a tempus alarm. Then he tugged out the Defense book. He was far enough ahead that he’d been sure he could skim it the night before his first class and bullshit his way through. School textbooks were largely boring at this point and he had much more useful things
to study.

At first he thought it was a joke—that Theo had somehow gotten into his things and swapped the book out for a different one. Thirty minutes in, he was pretty sure it was no joke. This was real. And bloody ridiculous.

After an hour, Harry could feel a migraine coming on, and he angrily pegged the book across his bed. It hit the footboard with a thunk and fell open at his feet.

So not only was the Ministry trying to weaken Dumbledore’s position—a goal Harry supported wholeheartedly—they were trying to compromise his education.

That he would not tolerate. Defense was a cornerstone of any self-respecting witch or wizard’s education. Muggles didn’t understand magic and you had to be able to defend yourself with Shield Charms strong enough to block physical objects, Disarming Charms to snatch weapons, jinxes and curses that were debilitating, at the very least. And that was only to defend oneself against nonmagical attacks—with the tension brewing in their world, Harry was hardly going to ignore magical self-defense.

Defense hadn’t been a particularly useful class to begin with, but sitting through History and Astronomy wasted enough of his time—especially Astronomy, where he couldn’t read under his desk—and he didn’t want another bloody useless class. Harry snarled angrily at the book.

He’d just have to focus on independent study, then. They could take turns writing the essays. It was a time-tested Slytherin strategy: one person did the research and wrote theirs; trusted others got copies and tweaked and adapted so they could bust out an acceptable result in half the time. Astronomy was even easier; they took turns copying each other’s star charts and calculations. In Arithmancy and Runes and classes where they needed to understand the material, Harry’s group at least avoided the strategy, but it saved precious time on Binns and Sinistra’s assignments. They’d just have to use it for Defense this year, too.

Fucking Ministry.

At ten forty-five, his tempus alarm set off a soft chime contained inside the sound ward around his bed. Harry hauled his attention away from a mess of scattered paper, arithmetic calculations, and runes. He’d made what he thought was some very limited progress on the weird unnamed runic language Luna had in the Quibbler. It could be nothing, but he thought it was most definitely something.

He stacked it all in a pile organized by each paper’s relation to the one before and after it, hit the whole thing with two whispered geminos, and bound the second and third stacks of notes with conjured string. Carrying the two piles, he changed from pajamas into a plain dark gray robe and dismantled the wards around his bed.

His timing was perfect. Theo and Blaise were both getting up as well with practiced silence aided by the charmed shoes. They’d all outgrown the first set Theo gifted them years ago but he passed on the store he ordered them from so they could get more. Theo hit Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle’s beds with whispered silencing spells and the three of them slipped out of their dorm.

Pansy and Daphne were waiting just on the inside of the secret back passage from the Slytherin dorms. “Where are we going?” Daphne asked.

Blaise and Theo both smirked. They knew, or had guessed. “You’ll see,” Harry said.
All five of them stepped out into the dungeon proper. It was a little colder out here, and a little more exposed. Daphne and Theo both snapped off proximity wards tied to their wands so the wards would move with them. Harry led the group at a brisk walk and stopped outside the disguised entrance to the Chamber.

It looked like a plain bit of blank wall. “What’s going on?” Pansy said. Thank Merlin she’d left the fox in her room.

“We’re waiting on Fred and George,” Harry said quietly.

“They know where to come?” Blaise asked.

Harry focused on the familiar bond. Eriss was above him and to his right a little, and moving. “Yeah, they’re on their way. I sent Eriss to rendezvous with them in the Knights Room.”

They waited in comfortable silence. Harry went around and rested hands on his friends’ shoulders, pulsing wandless warming magic into their plain dark nighttime-sneaking robes.

Finally, the familiar bond told him Eriss was near. Harry straightened and turned toward the corner just as she appeared in the dim torchlight.

George and Fred turned the corner right behind her. They grinned when they saw the Slytherins waiting for them—sharp, knowing smiles.

“Well, well, ickle Harrykins,” Fred said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Going to show us one of your secrets tonight?”

“Yes,” Harry said with a dark smile of his own. He turned to the wall and hissed, “Open.”

It slid aside soundlessly.

Harry concentrated. A ball of cold white witchlight appeared over his head. He stepped into the dark passage with no hesitation, glancing back only once to ensure the entrance closed on Theo’s heels.

They descended single file. The passage was at first a gentle downward slope that got steeper until it turned into a tightly spiraling stone staircase worn by centuries of secretive feet. No one spoke as they descended for almost two full minutes.

The bottom of the staircase had another hidden exit that dumped them right outside the fancy entrance to the Chamber, the one engraved with mobile emerald-eyed silver snakes. “Harry,” Daphne said when she saw it. “Is this—what I think it is?”

He hissed “Open” again and grinned at her and Pansy. “Welcome to the Chamber of Secrets.”

Theo and Blaise were the first inside. They’d been down here before, albeit not often. Fred and George couldn’t hide their awe as they stepped into the Chamber proper.

It looked much better now than it had when Harry, Jules, Theo, and Ronald came down here second year. He’d cleaned it up, vanished the unusable parts of the basilisk corpse, set permanent white witchlights burning, and strengthened the containment charms so the water stayed in the long pools that lined both sides of the Chamber. Carved stone snake-heads spilled constant streams of water from their mouths into said pools at regular intervals. The witchlights hovered steadily at the top of each column along the sides of the Chamber, drawing magic from the natural power where Hogwarts sat on an intersection of three ley lines.
“You said you weren’t the Heir,” Pansy said.

“I lied.”

Both girls turned sharp eyes on him.

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t going to apologize. He didn’t regret keeping this secret.

“How?” Daphne said.

Harry told them the story of Serena Potter and Vincent Gaunt, both of whom recognized the name from when he told them about the ash wand at the end of fourth year. Their eyes were wide by the time he finished.

“Heir of Slytherin,” Pansy breathed. “And no one has a clue…”

“Matteo knows,” Harry said, glancing at Blaise.

Blaise waved a dismissive hand. “He mentioned it before the ritual. I made it clear it’s a secret.”

“Yeah, he made it clear he’ll keep the secret unless your mum specifically orders him otherwise,” Harry said.

“She won’t.” Blaise wore the kind of studied, elegant boredom that he used as a shield for his true thoughts. Harry got the message and didn’t pursue that line of questioning.

“Why are we here?” Daphne said. “Not that I’m not interested.”

“Theo and I had to come down here anyway,” Harry said with a shrug. “I was planning on sharing this secret in pieces this year anyway… it seemed as good a time as any.” He tossed Daphne and Theo each one of the packets of his work on the runes. “Luna was reading some really interesting runes in the Quibbler today. I was working on them this evening because, Daph, they match a couple books in Slytherin’s library that Theo and I couldn’t translate.”

“Library?” she said with an interested gleam.

Fred snapped his fingers. “This is why you and Theo have been doing those language studies with Babbling.”

“We thought you were just being swots,” George said with a smirk.

“Should’ve known better,” Fred added, sighing sorrowfully. “Ickle snakes don’t study things that don’t have a purpose.”

“Damn right,” Theo said, already heading for the statue.

Harry hissed the ridiculous password at it. The statue’s mouth ground open. He cast *ascendere* on himself and shot up into the air, then used a *ventus* charm to shove himself forward. He landed deftly just inside Slytherin’s mouth.

“Show-off!” Theo shouted from the Chamber floor.

Harry flipped him off and took the stairs up to the balcony of the inner Chamber, snickering.

The others caught up to him in the library. He’d already found three of the books in the weird runes and opened them on the no-longer-dusty desk. It wasn’t the exact same language as the one Luna’s
dad found but he’d been right that they were similar.

“This is incredible,” Daphne said, looking around. “I mean… the Ministry’s never touched what’s down here. Any of it.”

“There’s a first edition of *Hogwarts, A History*,” Blaise said. “Hermione will drool over that when we show it to her.”

Fred and George wandered curiously around the neat, straight lines of tall shelves, not touching anything. Good—they had sense. Some of those books were meaner than the twins could ever hope to be.

Harry and Theo and Daphne bundled up as many of the weird runes books as they could—there were only five that they could find—and stuck them in Harry’s expandable bag for the trip back up to the castle. He showed the girls and the twins the incubator where he got Eriss and the final room on the balcony, a dusty study empty except for a plain wooden desk and chair.

They were walking back across the Chamber proper when Fred said suddenly, “Harry, can George and I use this place for product testing?”

“Do it out here and don’t wreck any of the fountains,” he said, having expected a request of this kind. If they hadn’t asked, he’d have offered. “There’s another passage to right outside the Great Hall; I’ll show it to you tomorrow. I can key you lot into the passages so they’ll open if one of you speaks the password. Heir privileges.”
Threats Inside These Walls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Adrian sat next to Harry at breakfast the next morning. “So,” he said bluntly. “I’ve been made Quidditch captain this year.”

“And already caught the insanity bug, I see,” Theo said.

Adrian glared at him.

“When are tryouts?” Harry asked. “We need… a Chaser this year, a Keeper, and a Beater, right?”

“Noah’s trying out for his brother’s spot, but so is Celesta Fawley,” Adrian said. “Everett’s decent at Keeping, we’ll see if any of the younger set shows a talent. Know any good Chasers?”

“Ginny Weasley’s a demon on a broom,” Harry said. “Her mum doesn’t let her fly at home but she’s been creeping out at night for years to practice. I’ll see if she’s interested in trying out.”

Adrian brightened. The Weasleys were well-known for Quidditch talent; Bill had been a good Chaser, Charlie could’ve played for England if he hadn’t gone haring off to study dragons, and Fred and George were known in Slytherin as the “Weasley terrors” for more than their pranks. “Excellent news,” he said. “And you’ve been flying with her, I take it?”

Harry smiled. “A bit.”

“Good, if you’ve been training with her she’ll have a better shot of working well with us,” Pucey said. “We need to take Gryffindor down this year. Draco, I hope you trained this summer.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

“We’ll still let others try out for your Chaser and Seeker positions, mind,” Adrian said with a glower for each of them. “I’ll only take the best. Don’t let anyone beat you or I’ll kick your asses.”

He stood up and marched back to the end of the table with the other seventh years.

“I think they have jinxes on the Captain’s badge,” Draco said. “Literally everyone who gets appointed goes nuts.”

“It’s not unreasonable,” Pansy said, buttering her toast and slipping Astrych a bit of bacon. “If we fuck up a match, who gets blamed?”

“Captain,” Draco said with a nod. “Fair point.”

The post arrived. Harry had only the Daily Prophet—hardly surprising; he and Sirius talked in the mirrors and his friends all used the journals. Speaking of which, he had to figure out how to disguise them as—class notebooks, or something. Put a spell on them so the page would look like boring History of Magic notes if anyone else looked in them. That could work. He’d have to key it to magical signatures but that was already part of the runes, it wouldn’t be that hard to add a glamour charm…

“Wonder what that’s about,” Theo said.
Harry followed his gaze. Hermione, Fred, and George seemed to be arguing over something.

“Not my problem yet,” he said, returning his attention to breakfast.

They started out with Herbology that morning, which was reasonably interesting since reading about plants was not nearly the same as working directly with them. Harry would never love Sprout’s subject like Theo and Neville did but it was closely linked to potions. He’d need a garden of magical plants his own one day if he wanted to continue brewing so he always paid close attention. Sprout, like most of his other teachers, loved him. She awarded him fifteen points for successful pruning of a Chinese chomping cabbage and ten more for demonstrating a textbook Fire Charm for burning back particularly noxious plants.

“Suck-up,” Justin complained as they left the class.

Harry grinned and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I can’t help it if my teachers appreciate my charm and dedication…”

Justin smacked him on the shoulder. Harry responded with a Trip Jinx and then neatly caught Justin by the arm before he hit the ground.

“Was that really necessary?” Justin said.

“No,” Blaise drawled from his other side, “but it was funny.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Harry said with a smirk.

After Herbology was Potions. Yet again, they were grouped with the Gryffindors. Harry still couldn’t figure out if Dumbledore was naively hoping for more House unity, oblivious to the problems this arrangement caused, or trying to give Snape an aneurysm from dealing with the inevitable drama.

Each table was meant for four people. When they were younger they brewed in pairs, but now that they were competent enough to require a little less monitoring, they had four cauldrons going at each station instead of two.

Hermione, Pansy, and Daphne clustered up at one table almost instantly. Theo sat down next to Hermione; Pansy and Daphne shared a knowing glance while Harry grinned at them.

He took his usual seat near the back with Neville. Their truce with Snape involved the Potions Master ignoring both boys while they stayed quiet and Harry kept Neville from blowing anything up.

Neville caught Thomas’ eye and waved him over. Finnegan was nowhere to be seen.

Thomas hesitated, looking at the other Gryffindors, and then he resolutely marched over and plunked his cauldron down across from Neville. “Neville,” he said, and nodded at Harry. “Pot—er, Black. Fuck. Sorry…”

“No harm done,” Harry said with a warm smile. It clearly caught Thomas off guard. “I keep forgetting myself, frankly…”

Another cauldron landed on their table.

Draco didn’t smile, but he stayed civil as he greeted them all.
“Er,” said Thomas. He suddenly looked a lot shiftier.

Finnegan came in and scowled at Thomas.

Harry caught Blaise’s eye.

The Italian boy sighed gustily and put his stuff down on the table nearest Neville and Thomas. “Finnegan,” he said. “Care to join me?”

“…sure,” Finnegan said suspiciously.

Neville frowned and looked at Harry.

Harry gave him a small nod.

Neville shrugged and accepted it.

The rest of the Gryffindors shot looks their way as they filed inside that ranged from angry to curious. Thomas resolutely unpacked his potions kit. Neville made small talk about some second years’ drama in their common room. Harry stayed out of the conversation but Draco, surprisingly, made an effort.

“Settle down,” Snape said, closing the door behind himself.

The command wasn’t really necessary. Everyone had fallen dead silent as soon as he opened the door to the classroom. Everyone quit fidgeting. Jules and Ronald sent him unhappy glares, as usual.

“Before we begin today’s lesson,” Snape said, sweeping over to his desk, “I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an ‘Acceptable’ in your OWL, or suffer my… displeasure.”

His gaze lingered on Ronald and Jules, sitting at a table by themselves.

“After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me,” Snape went on. “I take only the very best into my NEWT Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye.

“But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell,” he said softly, “so whether you intend to attempt NEWT or not, I advise all of you to concentrate your efforts upon maintaining the high-pass level I have come to accept from my OWL students.

“Today we will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level: the Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. Be warned: if you are heavy-handed with the ingredients you will put the drinker into a heavy and sometimes irreversible sleep, so you will need to pay close attention to what you are doing.” Hermione sat up straighter, drawing muffled snickers from the Slytherins. “The ingredients and method—” Snape flicked his wand and they appeared on the board—“and you can find everything you need in the store cupboard.” Another flick, and the store cupboard jumped open. “You have an hour and a half. Begin.”

Harry used his own ingredients instead of the usually lower-quality stock the school purchased, so he stayed put. Neville had taken Harry’s advice and started buying or growing his own stock years ago, and Draco was the sort of snob who did that of his own accord, so Thomas was the only one from their table who ended up in the crush.
The Draught of Peace was a finicky potion as far as OWL-level tasks went. Harry had first attempted it in third year. He sighed and did Occlumency exercises as he brewed. Snape’s class was the only one where he didn’t bother to hide how far ahead of the curriculum he was, since Snape wouldn’t call him on it or make a fuss, so Harry added his own modifications to the potion. One to increase shelf life, another very minor change that would lessen the risk of side effects to people with heart conditions…

“What’s he doing?”

The hissed question snapped Harry out of his trance, a little. He frowned at Thomas as he finished stirring in an extra half Mercator measure of powdered Adder’s Fork leaves—if he paused, he’d ruin the entire potion. The other boy flushed. “You’re only supposed to add one measure,” Thomas muttered.

“Just go with it,” Neville advised.

Harry eyed the Gryffindor a little longer.

Thomas’ flush deepened and he looked down at his cauldron.

Harry slipped back into passive Occlumency and monitored the slight, steady flow of magic entering the potion through his hands and will. It was something he’d only become aware of through trial and error that summer and promptly started paying close attention to. Snape wouldn’t answer questions and Sirius admitted he’d always sucked at brewing—no surprise; you needed healthy amounts of patience and finesse—so Harry’s only recourse had been books. Apparently it was something that could be learned or taught but only with a lot of practice. All the work brewing in forgotten corners of the dungeons, with Mrs. Weasley, or later in the Knights Room had paid off.

His Draught of Peace reached its final stage with twenty minutes left in the class period. Harry checked it one more time, dispelled the fire under it with a poke of his wand, and cast a charm he’d found in the Black library this summer on his glass stirring rod. It would keep moving, slowing with the potion’s dropping temperature, and stop and glow red when the Draught of Peace was stable.

“Your potion should know be emitting a light silver vapor,” Snape called.

Harry glanced around. His cauldron had reached and bypassed that stage ten minutes ago, but the others weren’t quite so prompt. Jules’ cauldron was emitting copious clouds of dark gray smoke; Ronald’s spat green sparks. Hermione’s, he was pleased to see, looked perfect. Draco, Theo, Daphne, and Neville, by the look of their cauldrons, had also done well, although Neville’s vapor was more pale gray than silver.

“Add one counterclockwise stir,” Harry advised Neville under his breath. “It’ll help dissolve the powdered moonstone.”

Neville did so without questioning. The steam immediately got a bit more silvery. “Thanks,” he said with a quick grin.

Thomas stared at them both.

Harry glared again. Thomas looked back down at his own potion. It was in a similar state as Neville’s had been, only worse.

“Two counterclockwise stirs and one more Styx measure of powdered moonstone,” Harry told him.

Thomas looked at him suspiciously. “The board says…”
“Yeah, and you added the syrup of hellebore without waiting the full seven minutes of simmering after you added the moonstone, judging by the state of that,” Harry said, nodding at the cauldron. “The moonstone didn’t have time to dissolve right. You need a little more and then you need the stirring to slow down the rest of the reaction so it has time to balance.”

“Trust him,” Neville said.

Slowly, Thomas measured out another Styx of powdered moonstone. He hesitated only briefly before dumping it in his cauldron.

“Two counterclockwise stirs,” Harry murmured. “Then back to clockwise and keep following the board.”

Once. Twice.

Medium gray turned to light gray.

Thomas kept going. Gradually, his cauldron approached an acceptable shade of milky pink. It wasn’t quite the perfect rose silver of Harry’s cauldron but it was definitely better than he’d have managed on his own.

Snape looked down his nose at Hermione, Daphne, and Pansy’s cauldrons. He corrected Pansy on her stirring speed, snapped at Daphne for not shredding her fairy wings finely enough, and ignored Hermione’s completely, meaning he didn’t see anything to correct.

“Fuck, he’s coming over,” Harry barely heard Finnegan moan. He choked on a snicker as Blaise shot the Gryffindor a withering glare.

Snape paused by their cauldrons. “Utterly worthless, Finnegan,” he snarled. “You used far too much herbaria and—can you even read?—six Mercator measures of moonstone. This would put an erumpent asleep for a month. Passable, Zabini, though you’re stirring far too briskly.”

He whirled on Harry’s station. Swept his eyes over their cauldrons with a sneer of indifference. “Thomas—idiot boy, you added the syrup of hellebore too soon—although…” His eyes fixed on the potion, then on Neville’s, then Harry’s. “Your corrections were not altogether dunderheaded, Mr. Black. Mr. Malfoy—you are a credit to your House. Passable, Longbottom.”

Thomas stared at his potion, then at Harry, as Snape stalked away to torture the other Gryffindors. “He’s—never—he just complimented you, Neville,” he gasped.

“Told you to trust him,” Neville said with a grin.

“How’d you get this good at brewing, Harry?” Draco said shrewdly. “You lived with Muggles in the summers…”

“Don’t remind me,” Harry muttered. His stirring rod was slowing noticeably. The potion was almost done. “I’ve just been practicing on my own time. If you screw up enough, you start to get a feel for why things happen like they do, and then you can avoid errors, and eventually you can start fixing errors, and eventually you can start making things better.”

Draco eyed his own potion. “…any advice?”

Harry cocked his head and extended his magical sense. He still didn’t know exactly how he did this but if a potion was within arms’ reach he could get a pretty good read off of it, although it helped to be using Occlumency and it was dimmer for other people’s potions. “Eh… it feels a little thin… you
probably shredded the fairy wings too much,” he mused. “They’re supposed to be shredded, not powdered… if you get the pieces too small they dissolve too quickly. Throws things off a bit.”

“Ah.” Draco made a note in his textbook, then picked up a vial and started bottling a sample for grading.

“Thanks,” Thomas said, doing likewise. “I didn’t even know what I’d done wrong.”

“At least your potion isn’t doing that,” Neville said, pointing.

All four of them looked. Ronald’s potion looked like slowly bubbling cement. Snape was descending on him and Jules like a predator about to strike. Thomas and Neville both winced at the impending collision but Harry and Draco looked on with glee.

“Potter, what is this supposed to be?” Snape jeered.


“Tell me, Potter,” Snape said in a near-whisper, “can you read?”

Draco and Pansy laughed.

“Yes, I can,” said Jules, knuckles turning white around his stirring rod.

“Read the fifth line of instructions for me, Potter.”

Jules squinted at the board. “Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes, then add two drops of syrup of hellebore.”

Harry tried to focus on Jules’ cauldron. It was difficult; a haze of multicolored smoke hung in the classroom and all the different potions turned it into a near-incomprehensible blur of magic. Potions magic was subtle and subjective at the best of times—nothing like studying runes or arithmancy—and having so many potions in one place was confusing as hell. Still, he thought he could feel…

“Did you do everything on the third line, Potter?”

Jules muttered something.

“Syrup of hellebore,” Harry whispered.

“I beg your pardon?” Snape said nastily.

“No,” Jules said, loudly. “I forgot the hellebore.”

“I know you did, Potter, which means this mess is utterly worthless. Evanesco.”

Harry’s eyebrows twitched up towards his hairline as Jules’ potion disappeared. Was it fair? Probably not. His potion had been better than Ronald’s, which was giving off a yellowish smoke that smelled of rotten eggs, or Brown’s, which she was trying to gouge out of her cauldron with a cutting charm. Still, Jules received blatant favoritism from nearly all his other professors—even Fake Moody last year for the sake of appearances. He’d gotten better lately but it still wouldn’t do him any harm to have one class where the teacher knocked him down a peg.

The stirring rod quit moving. Harry pointed his wand at the potion, willed a stream of it to lift out of the cauldron and funnel into a bottle he held in his left hand, and corked the bottle when it was full. He used a Muggle Sharpie to mark his name on the glass instead of the easy-to-spill PermaInk most
students bought and set it with the others on Snape’s desk. He glanced over the rest with his eyes and his magic, and grinned. As usual, he was by a wide margin the best in the class.

Harry went back to his desk and started packing up, but before he could pour his cauldron into the sink that was covered in containment spells—Snape usually had them dump their potions in there and then vanished the lot at once since *evanesco* was a sixth-year spell—a hand stopped him.

“Yes, sir?” Harry said, looking from the two fingers on his arm to Snape. Thank Merlin Snape hadn’t full-on grabbed him. Harry’s reaction might have been—awkward.

“Keep it,” Snape said softly. “Stay after class.”

Fuck. If he was about to chew Harry out for modifying the potion—well, fuck *that*. It was never a rule that he couldn’t mess around with them a little bit and Harry knew his changes were correct.

Keeping a pleasant expression fixed on his face, Harry took the cauldron back to his station and packed up the rest, cleaning his top-end tools carefully and packing them away in the dragonhide case. It slid neatly into the mobile potions kit that had come with his trunk, which included customizable compartments for up to a third of the ingredients you could store in the trunk itself as well as space for a toolkit. The cauldron and potion remained on his desk.

“It’s fine,” he said to Theo. “*Fine,*” when Daphne and Pansy and Hermione paused by his desk. Hermione shot Snape a distrustful look. “We’ll be in the hall,” she said.

“I don’t think this will take long,” Harry said.

Everyone else filed out of the classroom until only he and Snape remained.

The professor loomed over the potion. Harry probably should’ve done the respectful thing and sat down, but he really didn’t like adults—especially men, because Vernon—looming over him to that degree. He stayed stubbornly on his feet.

“Tell me what modifications you made to this,” Snape ordered.

“I added the fairy wings while stirring instead of stirring afterwards,” Harry said immediately. “And an extra half Mercator of Adder’s Fork, and I think my powdered moonstone was a few grams too heavy; I had to let it simmer an extra thirty seconds before I added the hellebore.”

“Why?”

Harry took a breath. “Adding the fairy wings while stirring keeps the friction constant. They dissolve more evenly and the result is more stable, which increases shelf life. The extra Adder’s Fork would limit side effects that people with plaque build-ups in the cardiac muscle are susceptible to; it restricts the potion’s ability to bind with plaque, thus reducing the risk to people with heart conditions.”

“And how did you know it needed more simmer time?”

“I could feel it wasn’t ready,” Harry said. “The—magic. I can’t explain better than that.”

Snape stared at him, unreadable, for a very long moment.

“Tell me, Potter, have you learned a single thing in this class in the last year?” he said.

Harry paused while he figured out how to put this. “Brewing practice always advances my skills no matter the potion,” he said slowly. “I frequently happen across connections or facts or references in
my homework that I hadn’t thought of before.”

Snape snorted. “The truth, Black, no verbal gymnastics. I have other things I’d much rather be doing right now.”

“Not really,” Harry said. “I first brewed Draught of Peace in third year. The first attempt looked rather like Jules’ did today, but…”

“How far ahead are you in your other classes?”

“Sir?”

“I’ve been head of Slytherin nearly your entire life, boy,” Snape hissed. “That innocent act is nearly flawless and it might fool your other teachers but it won’t me. Answer. The question.”

Fuck. “And as Head of House, you are contractually obligated to keep all student information confidential until such time as it becomes a detriment to that student’s health or safety, or that of another student or staff member,” he said. “That includes not revealing anything to the Headmaster.”

Snape almost smiled. “Correct.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Under the confidentiality clause… I could probably sit my NEWTs in Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, History of Magic, Astronomy, and Herbology right now with an A average,” Harry said, looking Snape dead in the eyes. He was telling the naked truth. “Give it until the end of this year and I could sit NEWTs in Arithmancy and Runes with similar scores. Possibly also Spellcrafting and Warding.” Neither of which was a class taught at Hogwarts. “One more year at most and I’d average E or maybe O.”

Snape’s dark eyes were wide. Only fractionally, but Harry still caught it.

“And the rest of your… friends?” he sneered.

“They are indeed my friends, sir,” Harry said softly. “Hermione and Theo can match me in Transfiguration and Charms, Theo and Daphne can keep up with me in Runes, Hermione’s as capable as I am with Arithmancy if not better, although she lacks the—mental flexibility for spellcrafting. Theo, Blaise, Hermione, Daphne, and Justin all usually master new charms before I do. Everyone has at least been exposed to the sixth year curriculum by now; all of us can at least vanish and conjure small things.” Snape could sift through that and pick out what he was really probably looking for—that Harry was, overall, quite a bit ahead of even his friends, who’d been dragged along in his overachieving wake for several years now.

Snape rubbed his forehead. “You’d have to have lived in the library for the last four years to pull this off, Po—Black.”

Harry shrugged. “Several of my friends loan me things from family libraries, Professor, I don’t need the Hogwarts one.” Not that he’d ignored the incredible reserve of knowledge in the castle. “And—shall we say that the Trace is not a law I’m overly fond of.” There—even in Pensieve memory form he couldn’t be indicted with that. It was far from a confession.

“To think I considered your Sorting a fluke,” Snape growled under his breath. “If you were hoping for a Potions apprenticeship, you’ll be sorely disappointed.”

“I wouldn’t have dreamed of it, sir.” Not with you, anyway. Harry fully intended to get a Potions Mastery after Hogwarts. He’d need it if he wanted the credibility to sell his own potions.
Snape glowered at him.

Harry broke the silence first. “If I may ask, Professor…”

A nasty smirk crossed Snape’s face. “Why I began to suspect you of holding back?”

Harry nodded once.

“The staff discuss our students, Black,” Snape said. “Occasionally we even share Pensieve memories. As I said, I am a Slytherin, the only one currently on staff besides Vector, whose lectures you pay genuine attention to. Minerva, Poppy, Filius, Aurora—they may be fooled when you feign fascination with their lectures but I am not. I can also see you deliberately butchering pronunciations and wand movements the first few attempts you make at a spell. I have suspected since the end of third year, and confirmed it when you displayed a frankly ridiculous level of skill at self-transfiguration last year during the second Triwizard task.”

Well, damn. Apparently he needed to be a lot more subtle. Snape was good… and if he could notice, so could Dumbledore.

“And the Headmaster does not even suspect, which means you are clever enough to stay out of his way and good enough with Occlumency to not let anything slip to his passive Legilimency,” Snape finished.

Harry narrowed his eyes.

“No, you foolish boy,” Snape snarled. “I’m not such a doddering fool that I’d attempt Legilimency on a minor I know practices Occlumency. Speaking of which—how far have your studies come?”

“I’ve just begun active Occlumency this summer,” Harry said.

Snape nodded. “I thought as much—it would be required for the ritual.”

“I’ve no idea which ritual you mean, Professor,” Harry said with a smile that was mostly just a baring of teeth.

“Of course not.” Snape sneered at him. “I’ll be confiscating the rest of this potion, and bottling it for Madam Pomfrey. If word of a student potion being used in the infirmary escapes your little circle, I will make the rest of your time in my class… unpleasant.”

“Is that not allowed, sir?” he said respectfully. Reeling on the inside.

Snape sneered. “It’s certainly permissible, but I suspect that you have little desire for the true range of your skill to become common knowledge?”

Harry’s lips twitched. He didn’t like Snape and never would, but dealing with Slytherins on purely Slytherin terms was refreshing. He knew what he was getting into and what to expect—namely, self-interest, maneuvering, a verbal chess match. No smug pretensions to altruism or self-absorbed affected kindness or condescending pity. “Not as much, sir.”

“Out,” Snape said, waving his wand at the potion.

“Of course, sir.” Harry bowed once and caught a glimpse of his potion being funneled into a large flagon as he slipped out the door.

Neville, Hermione, Blaise, Theo, Pansy, Daphne, and Draco were all waiting in the hall. They fell
silent when he stepped out and raised expectant eyebrows.

Harry cast an anti-eavesdropping charm attached to his wand and relayed the gist of the conversation as they walked.

“Huh.” Neville was the first to speak. “I thought he’d hex you.”

History of Magic, after lunch, was every bit as boring as ever. Harry wanted to throw something through Binns’ head but he occupied himself with a preparatory book for the History of Magic NEWT, having gone through the OWL one in July to make sure his independent research had covered the right topics. The Slytherins kept a careful record of OWL topics dating back nearly the test’s entire history in the tiny private sitting room at the end of the prefects’ hallway. Fifth year prefects were responsible for those records staying secret and in the common room, and being returned to their shelves in between uses. Pansy had already wheedled last year’s set into showing them the OWL books at the end of fourth year. Harry would get himself through the OWLs and NEWTs in this class with self-study. Most of the Slytherins and Hermione were all copying his example, although he and Hermione were the only two in the NEWT book already.

He made a mental note to tell the Slytherin fourth years, and any fourth and fifth years from other Houses outside his circle that he liked, to start on the OWL-prep book during class.

Binns’ droning cut out exactly as the bell rang. There was a sudden rustle as books were packed away and sleeping students woken.

“What’s next?” Blaise asked as they filed out.

Pansy consulted her schedule and groaned. “Morgana’s wand, we have Potions and Defense with the Gryffindors today…”

“They are really stupid about scheduling,” Theo complained.

“Well, here’s hoping this Defense teacher’s better than her predecessors,” Blaise said in a tone that was the opposite of hopeful.

Theo and Harry made disbelieving noises. “Fake Moody was brilliant,” Harry said. “A bit of a maniac, but we still learned loads. I highly doubt the idiot who assigned the Slinkhard book will live up to that.”

The mood was pessimistic as they entered the Defense classroom. The Gryffindors were already there. Harry grinned at Neville and Hermione, who shared one of the two-person desks near the back of the classroom, and after a bit of hesitation, nodded to Thomas, who had one with Finnegan right in front of them. Thomas looked startled but nodded jerkily back.

Umbridge watched with a sweet smile from behind her desk as the Slytherins took their seats. Harry and Theo sat together, as usual, with Pansy and Daphne behind and Blaise and Draco in front. Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode hauled a third chair to the end of the desk at the front of the room and sat there. Harry, meanwhile, studied the teacher. She was still wearing that awful cardigan and had a black velvet bow sitting on her curly brown hair like a large fly sitting on a toad.

“Well, good afternoon!” she said when they were all seated.

A general rumble went around the class.
“Tut, tut,” said Professor Umbridge. “That won’t do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply ‘Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge.’ One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted back. Theo and Harry passed disdain back and forth.

“There, now,” she said sweetly, “that wasn’t too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please.”

Gloomy looks were passed around. Harry hadn’t had his wand out in the first place; he laid out an ever-expanding leather notebook and a fountain pen.

Professor Umbridge pulled her own wand out of her handbag—seriously, who kept a wand hidden uselessly in a bloody handbag?—and tapped the board with it. Words appeared at once.

Defense Against the Dark Arts
A Return to Basic Principles

“Well now, your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn’t it?” Umbridge began, hands clasped neatly in front of her. “The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your OWL year.”

Harry kept his amusement off his face. Just have the toad slap an OWL practice test in front of her and he’d show her how far below the standard he was. Him and all his friends.

“You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please.”

She rapped the blackboard again. More words replaced the previous set.

Course aims:

1. Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.
2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.
3. Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

For several minutes, the room was full of the sound of nibs scratching on parchment or heavy paper. Most of the Slytherins and Ravenclaws used fountain pens for practicality’s sake; the Gryffindors largely did not for some reason, with the exception of Hermione. Neville had grown up with quills and stubbornly stuck to his self-inking eagle-feather one.

When it was clear they were done, Umbridge said, “Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?”

A dull murmur of assent swept around the room.

“I think we’ll try that again,” said Umbridge. “When I ask you a question, I should like you reply ‘Yes, Professor Umbridge’ or ‘No, Professor Umbridge.’ So, has everyone got a copy of Defensive
“Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?”

“Yes, Professor Umbridge,” they chorused.

“Good,” the toad said. “I should like you to turn to page five and read chapter one, ‘Basics for Beginners.’ There will be no need to talk.”

Harry had already read chapter one. Thanks to active Occlumency, he had a near-perfect recall of the text preserved in his brain, although doing so for every book still gave him headaches. He pretended to read the desperately dull book. Theo did the same, though he hadn’t even bothered to finish the first chapter. Harry would definitely be bringing a copy of some other book spelled to look like Defensive Magical Theory to this class from now on.

Five minutes into class, he received an elbow to the side. Harry looked up and followed Theo’s attention to Hermione.

Oh, Merlin, Harry sighed internally. She was about to do something horribly Gryffindorish. She hadn’t even opened her copy of the doorstop masquerading as a book and had one hand straight up in the air.

Umbridge looked resolutely in the other direction.

Another ten minutes passed. No one in the class was reading; every single one of them was watching the mute, motionless struggle between Hermione and Umbridge. Harry found himself fascinated. Umbridge was unbelievably stubborn.

Unfortunately for her, Hermione had a harder head than anyone else Harry had ever met.

“Did you want to ask something about the chapter, dear?” Umbridge finally asked Hermione, with a manner as though she’d only just noticed.

“Not about the chapter, no,” Hermione said.

“Well, we’re reading just now,” said Umbridge, smiling in a manner that strained her face unpleasantly. “If you have other queries we can deal with them at the end of class.”

“I’ve got a query about your course aims,” said Hermione.

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows. “And your name is?”

“Hermione Granger.”

“Well, Miss Granger, I think the course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully,” said Umbridge sweetly.

“Well, I don’t,” said Hermione. Theo snickered very softly. “There’s nothing written up there about using defensive spells.”

The class paused, several people turning to look. Harry had already noticed this and resolved to just keep practicing on his own.

“Using defensive spells?” said Umbridge with a nasty little laugh. “Why, I can’t imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss Granger. You surely aren’t expecting to be attacked during class?”

“We’re four for four so far,” Hermione said, just as sweetly.
It was as if Umbridge had taken a brick to the face. She actually shifted backwards, blinking very rapidly; her saccharine smile fell away completely. Harry had to work to keep from coughing.

“I mean,” Hermione continued ruthlessly, still in a tone of voice sweet enough to match Umbridge’s, “just in my time here—our first Defense professor was a weak-willed power-hungry idiot possessed by a Dark spirit who tried to murder a student and steal the Philosopher’s Stone. The second was a fake who released Cornish pixies on twelve-year-olds with no preparation and then tried to Obliviate two of them so he could steal credit for finding the Chamber of Secrets and cover his lifetime of fraud. The third was a criminally negligent werewolf who also almost killed several students. The last one was a maniac living under Polyjuice all year who tried to kidnap and murder Julian Potter. I can think of a lot of reasons just based off our track record at Hogwarts that we’d need to know how to use defensive spells. Professor.”

Harry was full of unadulterated joy by the time she finished.

“Why—I—Miss Granger—implying that I am—are you insinuating that I am a Death Eater in disguise?” Umbridge snarled. “Or perhaps some kind of filthy half-breed?”

Oh. Wow, okay, that was… a vicious reaction.

“Not at all, Professor,” Hermione said. “I’m merely pointing out that, statistically, at least one person within the school has been a danger to Hogwarts’ students every year I’ve been here.”

“She’s right,” Thomas said loudly. “Besides, haven’t we got to pass our OWLs? There’s a practical portion of the exam, isn’t there?”

Perfect. This wave would keep on going… Harry glanced around the room. The practical portion of the OWL was the best ammunition they had to weaken Umbridge. He didn’t want her gone, necessarily, because she was a nasty bit of work and she’d keep Dumbledore firmly distracted, but if enough parents complained she’d have to teach at least basic practical defensive magic, and the class wouldn’t be so much of a waste of his time.

As long as no one made it political.

“Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr.?”

“Thomas,” Thomas said, thrusting a hand in the air.

Umbridge recovered her smile and looked away from him. “Wizards much older and cleverer than you have devised our new program of study. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way—”

“What use is that?” said Jules loudly. Bugger. “If we’re going to be attacked it won’t be in a—”

“Hand, Mr. Potter!” Umbridge sang.

Jules’ fist shot into the air. Umbridge ignored him.

“Regarding Miss Granger’s complaint about the previous teachers,” Umbridge said, “I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school—” yes you do—“but you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed—not to mention extremely dangerous half-breeds.”

“If you mean Professor Lupin,” Finnegan said angrily, “he was the best we ever—”
"Hand, Mr.?"

"Finnegan—"

Umbridge talked over him. "As I was saying—you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group, and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day—"

"No we haven’t," Hermione said, "we just—"

"Your hand is not up, Miss Granger!"

Hermione slammed a hand resolutely into the air. Her hair was crackling and bushy and showed no sign of the hairstyling charms she used nowadays. Umbridge turned away from her.

"It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, he actually performed them on you, with the Headmaster’s blessing—"

"Well, he turned out to be a maniac, didn’t he?" Thomas said hotly. "Mind you, we still learned loads—"

"Your hand is not up, Mr. Thomas!" Umbridge trilled. Harry raised an eyebrow; evidently he was not the only student who’d appreciated what Fake Moody taught them even though he was a Death Eater in disguise. "Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?" she added, staring at Patil, whose hand had just shot up.

"Parvati Patil, and are you really telling us the first time we’ll get to do the spells will be during our exam?"

Theo rolled his eyes. Harry shared the sentiment. It wasn’t like Umbridge could control what they practiced outside of class.

"I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough—"

"And what good’s theory going to be in the real world?" said Jules loudly, one fist in the air again. Umbridge fixed her pouchy eyes on him like a toad finding its prey. Actually, Harry decided, that was an insult to toads; he liked Trevor a lot better than this woman. A rotten fish in a skin suit, maybe. "This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world," she said softly.

"So we’re not supposed to be prepared for what’s waiting out there?"

Harry was simultaneously impressed by the woman’s baited trap and frustrated as Jules kept merrily stomping towards it.

"There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter."

"Oh yeah?" said Jules.

Blaise glanced incredulously over his shoulder at Harry and Theo.

"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?" said Umbridge in a honeyed voice.

"Hmm, let’s think," Jules said in a mock thoughtful voice, “maybe Lord Voldemort?"
Every single Slytherin save Harry flinched. Ronald groaned; Brown let out a little scream; Neville’s feet slipped off the rungs of his chair and hit the floor with a thump. Umbridge ignored all of this and stared at Jules with grim satisfaction.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter.”

_He is can be so damn clueless._

“Now, let me make a few things quite plain.” Umbridge stood up and braced her hands on the desk, stubby fingers splayed. “You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead —”

“He wasn’t dead,” Jules said angrily, “but yeah, he’s returned!”

“Mr. Potter you have already lost your House ten points do not make matters worse for yourself,” Umbridge said in one breath without looking at him. “As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie.”

“It is NOT a lie!” Jules said. “I saw him, I fought him!”

“Detention, Mr. Potter!” said Umbridge happily. “Tomorrow evening. Five o’clock. My office. I repeat, _this is a lie._ The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend.” _Oh, very good, invite people to come to you for comfort and in doing so recruit a bunch of unknowing plants... “And now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, ‘Basics for Beginners.’”_

“Harry!” Jules shouted, still standing. He looked wildly at the Slytherin side of the class. “Harry—you were there, you saw him—tell her!”

Fuck. Harry should’ve seen this coming. He looked from his brother to Umbridge, mind racing—alienate the ex-brother who already disliked him on one hand, or a powerful teacher and his House mates on the other?

He didn’t even have to think about it. “That night was chaotic,” Harry said slowly, “and confusing. I don’t think my memory constitutes a reliable record. There’s a reason minors’ Pensieve memories aren’t given the same weight as those of an adult in court.”

“You bastard!” Jules howled. He looked wildly between Harry and Umbridge. “Voldemort came back! He was there—him and his Death Eaters—that’s why Macnair died and you know it!”

His wand snapped out and fired off a hex.

Three shields blocked it—Harry’s, Daphne’s, and Blaise’s. Theo and Pansy both had wands out and trained on Jules, ready to retaliate—but Jules dropped his hand to his side. He was tense and breathing heavily like he realized how stupid that had been.

Umbridge stared at him for a few seconds. Her voice was soft and sweet and girlish when she said, “Come here, Mr. Potter, dear.”

Jules had the sense to thrust his wand back into his pocket and stomp up to her desk without complaining.

Umbridge pulled a roll of pink parchment out of her bag, stretched it out on her desk, and started
writing. No one spoke. After a minute or so she rolled up the parchment and tapped it with her wand
to seal it.

“Take this to Professor McGonagall, dear,” said Professor Umbridge, holding out the note.

Jules grabbed it and stormed out, slamming the classroom door behind him.

The rest of the class went back to their reading.

Harry really didn’t like the way Umbridge’s glittering dead eyes fixed on Hermione after that.

Neville and Hermione rounded on him the second they got out of class. “What was that!” Hermione
half-shrieked. “You just—rolled over for that Ministry hag! You know Jules was telling the truth—I
know you don’t get along but Merlin, Harry—”

“Hermione, stop,” Daphne said.

Hermione rounded on her. “I will not—”

“Stop and let me explain, please,” Harry said icily.

That, at least, caught her attention. Please was not a word he used unless he was pissed. “Explain,
then,” she snapped, crossing her arms.

“The second Jules brought up politics, it was a lost cause,” Harry said flatly. He held up a hand to
stop her when she opened her mouth. “Yes, Hermione, that was politics. You think the Ministry’s
not aware of the truth? There’s three big factions at play here, not two—Ministry, Order, Death
Eaters.” He glared at her. “The Ministry’s objective is to keep things quiet. She was baiting Jules into
that trap. He blundered into it. I’m not going to get on her bad side for the sake of a lost cause.”

Neville frowned. “I don’t like it.”

“That’s because your Gryffindor principles shudder at the thought of lying,” Blaise drawled. “Harry
didn’t say anything untrue.”

“But he didn’t stand up for the truth,” Hermione insisted.

“And I won’t.” Harry raised an eyebrow at her. “I will let the Ministry play their games and distract
Dumbledore while I self-study and ace my Defense OWL while that dead fish in a cardigan watches
in horror. You’re welcome to join me if you can get off your high horse long enough to recognize
my way is the better one.”

“Tactics,” she huffed finally, smiling a little and uncrossing her arms. “‘Ooooh, look at me, the big
bad Harry Black, master of strategy, Slytherin extraordinaire—”
Harry cracked a grin and Blaise and Pansy and Neville laughed, and the tension was broken.

**Jules**

He walked very fast along the corridor, mind spinning.

Harry. Harry bloody *turned on him*. He should’ve known not to trust his brother—ex-brother, *whatever*—lying cheating untrustworthy Slytherin he was—

“Why, it’s Potty Wee Potter!”

Jules snapped out of it and looked up. He’d almost run smack into Peeves, hovering in the middle of the corridor and juggling inkwells. He let two of them fall.

Jules jumped backwards out of the way with a snarl. “Get out of it, Peeves.”

“Ooooh, Crackpot’s feeling cranky,” said Peeves, pursuing Jules along the corridor with a leer. “What is it this time, my fine Potty friend? Hearing voices? Seeing visions? Fighting imaginary enemies!”

“I said, leave me ALONE!” Jules shouted, running down the nearest flight of stairs. It was bad enough having half the school turned on him—Seamus wouldn’t talk to him, Dean was running off with his friend, the Slytherins were shooting him nasty triumphant looks, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs flinched away from him in the corridors—and now he had this teacher and then Peeves on him—

Peeves slid down the bannister next to him.

“Oh, most think he’s barking, the Potty wee lad,

*But some are more kindly and think he’s just sad,*

*But Peevesy knows better and says that he’s mad—*

“SHUT UP!”

A door flew open. Professor McGonagall stepped out looking grim and harassed. “What on *earth* are you shouting about, Potter?” she snapped. Peeves cackled and zoomed away. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

“I’ve been sent to see you,” Jules said stiffly.

“Sent? What do you mean, sent?”

He held out the note. McGonagall unsealed it with a tap of her wand and read it, sighing.

“Come in here, Potter.”

Jules followed her inside her study.

“Well?” said Professor McGonagall, rounding on him. “Is this true?”

“Is what true?” he said belligerently.
“Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?”

“Yes.”

“You called her a liar?”

“Yes.”

“You told her He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?”

“Yes.”

Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, frowning at Jules. Then she said, “Have a biscuit, Potter.”

“Have—what?”

“Have a biscuit,” she said impatiently, indicating a tin of cookies on top of her desk. “And sit down.”

Jules sank into a seat. He was getting a nasty feeling of whiplash similar to the time he thought she’d been about to sic an upper year on him as punishment for flying and instead put him on the Quidditch team. He took a Ginger Newt.

Professor McGonagall set down the note and looked at him very seriously. “Potter, you need to be careful. Misbehavior in Dolores Umbridge’s class could cost you much more than House points and a detention. Professor Dumbledore cannot be seen as too close with you—” Jules knew that; Professor Dumbledore said as much before the school year started—“so it falls to me to pass on this warning.”

“What d’you—”

“Use our common sense,” McGonagall snapped. “You know to whom she is reporting.”

“The Ministry,” Jules said angrily. “Stupid Fudge—and Harry just—just caved, didn’t even try to put up a fight or anything—”

Professor McGonagall sighed. “Potter, once again, I ask you to use your common sense. Mr. Black cannot be seen siding with you—surely he made this clear when you discussed strategy with him at the Order meeting? Don’t flinch, of course I know, Albus keeps me informed—”

“She’s a Death Eater, then?” Jules said, horrified. It explained a lot—

“No,” McGonagall said angrily. “Haven’t we just said she’s with the Ministry? She’s here to interfere with Dumbledore, Potter, and the Death Eaters will hardly stop her from dividing Albus Dumbledore’s attention. I do not know to what extent they agree with her purpose but they will not protest. Mr. Black invites retribution from his House if he goes around supporting you at every turn.”

Jules slumped in his seat. It made sense. He didn’t want it to make sense. Bloody hell, things were so much easier without all this three-sided-war crap and Harry playing double sides and…

“Why d’you defend him so much?” he complained.

“Mr. Potter, I will not hear such things from you,” McGonagall said sternly. “Hadrian Black is polite and charming. I have never seen him be anything but respectful. He is on time to his classes, does his homework, and is consistently top of the class. All his professors find him a pleasant young man, if a bit quiet. I’ve seen nothing to justify the animosity you show him.” She hesitated. “It has not been
easy for him in Salazar’s house. It would become you to try a bit more sympathy.”

Jules wanted to scream at her that it was an act, he’d seen how Harry got sometimes, he knew it was all fake, but—it was useless.

“IT says here she’s given you detention every night this week,” McGonagall said, tapping the note.

Jules gaped. “But—Professor—Quidditch practice!” Angelina had come up to him just that morning—he couldn’t miss it—“Couldn’t you—”

“No, I couldn’t,” said Professor McGonagall flatly.

“But—”

“She is your teacher and has every right to give you detention. You will go to her room at five o’clock tomorrow for the first one. Just remember: Tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge.”

“But I was telling the truth!” Jules said angrily. “Voldemort’s back, you know he is, Professor Dumbledore knows he is—”

“For Merlin’s sake, Potter!” Professor McGonagall said, straightening the glasses that got flinched to the end of her nose when he said Voldemort’s name. “Do you really think this is about truth or lies? It’s about keeping your head down and your temper under control!”

He glared mutinously.

“Have another biscuit,” she said irritably.

“No, thanks,” he said coldly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped.

He gook one with a grudging, “Thanks.”

“Didn’t you listen to her speech at the start of term, Potter?”

“Er… yeah,” said Jules, who had done no such thing.

Professor McGonagall looked to suppress a smile. “It meant that the Ministry is trying to interfere at Hogwarts. Let your father and Albus deal with it, Potter. This is above your present skill level.”

In the hall, Jules angrily hit the wall, and then looked in his bag for his wand. It was there. He slid it up the wand holster on his arm and noticed that the journal from Harry was glowing slightly red.

He yanked it out.

HB

Be careful around her, idiot. She set a trap and you blundered right into it. I can’t back you up because of the thing we talked about at the Burrow—remember?? Stay quiet, don’t draw attention, and don’t try to change her mind. It won’t work.

So nearly the same as Professor McGonagall said. Jules shoved it back in his bag with a scowl and no answer.

Some stupid Ministry bitch wasn’t enough to scare him.
A/N: before anyone yells at me for Harry’s willingness to work with Umbridge—yeah, she’s a nasty piece of work, but so far all he’s seen is that she wants to throw wrenches Dumbledore’s agenda and brainwash the students so she can maintain the Ministry party line. The first he’ll give his blessing for; the second he will avoid with self-study. He doesn’t know yet that she’s a bigot as well as a narrow-minded bitch. He’s self-interested and morally flexible enough to put up with her as he’s seen her behave so far because in the long run it will help him.

A/N 2: interesting thing: in French, the word for “pain” is “la douleur.” I thought of this when thinking about the name Dolores Umbridge this chapter and went and looked it up. The name in Spanish and English means “sorrow” and comes from “Mary of the Sorrows”. Whatever else you may say about JKR’s worldbuilding and plot—which as you’ve probably all noticed by now, I have a *lot* of issues with—her names are often brilliantly chosen.
So! Looks like I'm actually back on a regular posting schedule, what a concept, because I'm done with my first term and my life feels manageable again. Three cheers. Have fun.

Everyone convened in the Knights Room after dinner without needing to discuss it.

Harry half-listened to them talking about the first day while he dashed off an essay for Snape on the properties of moonstones. Binns had assigned a foot and a half on giant wars; Daphne got started on that essay from the information in the textbook the OWL review guide recommended. They each finished in about an hour and started swapping around so Theo, Blaise, and Pansy could copy the essays’ main points while Harry and Daphne went over the Herboogy essay that Pansy just finished. Hermione looked on disapprovingly but didn’t say anything. Neville, Justin, and Luna never joined in the homework swap and Fred and George had their own NEWT work to do—not that they appeared to be doing homework.

They called it quits once everyone had the main points of each essay down. “We need to disguise the journals,” Daphne said, pulling hers out of her bag.

Harry smiled grimly and did likewise. “I’d prefer we not have a repeat of last year.”

“Except this year it might be Dumbledore stealing it,” Hermione finished. “Do we have the notes we used to make them last year or—oh, good thinking, Theo.”

Theo grinned at her and used *geminio* to duplicate his notes several times. Harry, Daphne, Justin, and Hermione each got a set and started spreading them out to refresh their memories of how exactly they’d made the complicated project work.

Luna drifted over. “May I see?” she asked.

Daphne and Hermione shifted to let her sit between them. “Here’s the first page,” Hermione said, sliding Luna the first section of the notes.

Luna hummed to herself as she read over them.

“Here,” Harry said at last, tapping one scroll. “Where we modified the standard runic array for recognizing magical signatures with the fourth form—we need to tie a glamour charm into that.”

“Anchored in the runes, though,” Justin said. “I’m pretty sure Dumbledore can see through a lot of standard glamour charms.”

“We could use blood runes,” Daphne said.

Fred and George glanced at them, shrugged, and went back to whatever they were doing in the corner. Neville flinched. “That’s Dark,” he said uncertainly.

Daphne snorted. “Use your brain, Neville, no it’s not.”
“Illegal and Dark aren’t synonymous,” Theo said, leaning forward. “This doesn’t even hurt anyone—it just means no one whose blood isn’t keyed into the runes would be able to see through the spell. The 1803 blood magic ban outlawed a lot of beneficial and useful magics as well as what you could call “Dark.””

“And you’ve technically been doing Dark magic in Defense for years, if you go by the definition that Dark magic is anything harmful to the caster or victim,” Blaise said without looking up from his book. “Whereas you’ve been going illegal magic with us all last year.”

Neville bit his lip.

“They have a point, Nev,” Justin said easily. “It’s not hurting anyone, and it’ll protect us.”

“And if we get caught?” Hermione said tartly.

Harry smiled. Pansy’s eyes widened a bit when she saw it; she knew that smile was the one that boded ill for people. “We say they were a gift. I’m sure we can find someone appropriate to take the fall. Perhaps… Ethan Thorne?”

Pansy grinned. Blaise turned his full attention away from his book. “How are you going to pull that off?” he said with a gleam in his eye.

Harry sat still for a long moment as the plan that had only just now occurred to him fell into place. “We’ll need the goblins,” he said slowly. “How do we feel about selling the patent rights to the journals?”


Harry leaned forward. “Half its market value,” he said. “To the Silvertooth clan—my goblin contact is one of theirs. In exchange, they sign a contract saying that all clan representatives will swear in court that Ethan Thorne bought the journals and had them illegally keyed to stolen blood samples from a bunch of students. We can forge the notes that came in them, his handwriting but pretending to be a distant relative of one of ours—the Lovegoods, maybe, they travel so much no one’s very sure about their family tree—and say we never had a clue they were using blood magic.”

Everyone’s eyes were wide. “Perfect,” Theo said. “So if we get caught—”

“Thorne takes the fall,” Pansy finished, eyes alight.

“And our defense will be that no one would expect us to be capable of this kind of work,” Harry said, smirking. “Especially not blood runes.”

“Daphne and I turned in part of it as extra credit with Vector,” Hermione said uncertainly.

Harry shook his head. “I looked that over; you didn’t discuss the applications and it was several steps removed from the final product. It didn’t even involve the runic aspects—much less highly illegal blood runes.”

Daphne nodded once. “I like it.”

“But… framing him,” Neville said with a frown.

“He deserves it.”

Everyone looked at Hermione.
She blushed. “It’s true, isn’t it? He abandoned you in that—that horrible place, Harry, for years… and he disinherited you from the Potters—if you hadn’t had Sirius—and the legal system is so corrupt it would never catch him—I’d rather this than him walk free!”

“Don’t look so surprised,” Theo said to Justin and Neville with a smirk. “This is a girl who’s keeping a woman as a beetle in a jar because she wrote nasty shit about Harry in the paper.”

Hermione’s blush deepened, but a small smile played on her lips.

Neville nodded slowly, face set. “Okay… yeah, okay, I see what you mean.”

“Are we sure goblins will agree to lie in court?” Justin said, frowning.

“They wouldn’t in a goblin court,” Blaise said.

Harry grinned. “But they don’t give two shits about wizard justice or law.”

“It’s as good a backup as any,” Justin said. “Okay, blood runes it is. I assume you guys know how to do those?”

“Of course,” Theo said with a smirk.

“What do we disguise them as?” Hermione asked.

Daphne cocked her head. “Notes? A different class for each of us. Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Potions, Charms…”

“We can take our actual class notes in them and just make it so that section is the only one people can see if they open the journals,” Harry suggested. “That way it’s up-to-date and we don’t get asked why we’re carrying outdated notes around.”

Theo started scribbling on his page. “So we keep the magical signature bit and just redo those runes with each person’s blood—and then anchor the glamour charm with the blood runes—”

“And instead of just making them impossible to open if the runes don’t recognize you, we just make parts of the journals unavailable,” Justin finished. He pulled out a Muggle gridded composition notebook and started doing lines of calculations based on the hasty rune array Daphne shoved his way.

“What about the stones on the front?” Hermione said.

“Keep them,” Harry said, already working on the runes on his own. “Just make it so only the owner can see when they light up. Or better yet—key them into the owner’s magic so you feel it when someone sends a message and there’s no light at all.”

Hermione paused. “Is that possible?”

“Like this.” Harry drew the last few runes to his array, a complicated and highly unorthodox one that Babbling would never accept as homework, and flipped it around so the others could see it.

Hermione and Theo caught on first, eyes widening. “It makes so much sense,” she breathed as Theo whistled.

Daphne made a face. “Someone explain.”
Two days later, Daphne triumphantly held up a journal that looked exactly as it had before. “Ha!”

“Are we done?” Fred said curiously.

“I think…”

“How are we going to test it, mind?” Hermione said tartly. “We haven’t got anyone here who’s not keyed in.”

Harry looked up from his makeshift potions laboratory in the corner of the Knights Room. He was still working on the Blood-Replacing Potion from the summer and he thought he was near a breakthrough. “Use Ginny.”

“What?” the twins chorused.

“I was thinking about giving her one anyway,” Harry said. “We don’t need to link her to the gold page, but it’d be useful to branch out a bit.”

“I need to go talk to Adrian anyway,” Draco said, standing from his seat next to Justin. “I’ll send her up if I see her in the common room.”

Ginny arrived twenty minutes later. “I was in the middle of an essay,” she announced, marching into the room. “Oh, hi,” she added to her brothers. “What is going on?”

Theo spun his journal around and opened it to the first page, which Harry saw was the gold-edged one. “What do you see?”


“It worked!” Theo announced loudly.

Justin kicked him. “Calm down, we need to test all of them.”

The disguises held across the board, even when they asked Ginny to throw her entire arsenal of secret-revealing and detection spells. The rate of cursed gifts had picked up in the last two years. Between that and living with George and Fred, she was well-versed in such kinds of magic, but she turned up nothing.

Harry mentally checked disguise the journals off his to-do list.

The teachers’ dire warnings about OWL year turned out to be only partially correct. Harry found himself bored with most of the classwork but the time required for his homework was just ridiculous. He should be spending it on his potions research, translating the Chamber library, or working on his active Occlumency, not writing useless two-foot essays for McGonagall on topics he’d studied years ago.

But he smiled, and asked insightful questions in class, and pretended to pay attention, and showed no hint of his frustration to any of his teachers. Even though Snape knew, Harry didn’t have to announce it on a bloody billboard.

The bright spot in his first week was a mirror-call from Sirius on Thursday night to tell him, among other things, that the copybooks had been delivered. “I had Kreacher put them in the library,” Sirius said. “When are you coming? I’ll be home so I can come up and say hello.”
“Saturday sometime,” Harry replied. “Probably right after breakfast. I’ll mirror-call you before we leave.”

Saturday dawned sunny and gorgeous. It was a nice change after a week of rain and leaden skies. “Pity we’ll be holed up inside all day,” Theo said over breakfast.

Pansy and Daphne gave them inquiring looks. Harry tapped his sternum, where the Black library Portkey hung round his neck on a cord, and they nodded understanding.

He and Theo slipped down to the Chamber as soon as breakfast was over. Harry’s new library trunk was in his pocket; Theo already had one from his family assets, old but still serviceable. Harry mirror-called Sirius very briefly to let him know they were on the way and jammed the mirror back in his bag with Eriss.

“Ready?” Harry said, fishing the Portkey out from under his robes.

Theo faced him and took hold of the end of it. “When you are.”

“Black Library!” Harry said.

A hook clamped down behind his navel. He fought nausea and slammed his eyes shut as they whirled around and around and around and—

His feet slammed onto a hard floor.

Harry managed to stay upright this time, even though he staggered. “Bloody hate Portkeys,” he grumbled. Eriss hissed complaints from inside his bag.

Theo laughed at him. “And to think you’re so coordinated on a broom.”

“Shut up,” Harry said, conjuring a bit of crumpled paper and flicking it at Theo’s head. “Unlike you I didn’t grow up around these things.”

“Your loss,” Theo singsonged, already making a beeline for the stacks of crates near the library door.

Harry put the Portkey back inside his robes, using a mild sticking charm to make sure it wouldn’t lose contact with his skin, and joined his friend at the crates. They used a series of opening spells to get the lids off and looked inside.

Stacks of identical black leather-bound books waited.

Harry picked up the top one and leafed through it. “Looks good.”

“Can I test one?” Theo said.

“Go for it,” Harry said absently. He was already running through detection spells over the copybook in his hand.

He turned to pay attention when Theo selected a book of the shelves. “We don’t have this one at home,” he said, smirking, and stacked it on a table on top of the copybook. “Here goes…”

Theo prodded the spine of the copybook with his wand.

There was a pulse of light and magic. Harry blinked. Theo shoved the top book aside and examined
the copybook. “Excellent,” he said. “Look at this—you can’t even tell the difference—”

Harry went over.

Sure enough, the copy was an exact duplicate of the original. They went through it, page by page. The cover, the title, the ink, even the smell had been perfectly replicated. The only thing that hadn’t was the faint trace of a faded ward cast on the original book.

“So they don’t replicate spells on the original, but everything else,” Harry said.

“Looks like it.” Theo flipped through the copy. “This is brilliant.”

“Exactly what we needed,” Harry agreed. “And the quantity’s right?”

“Ten crates, two thousand per crate,” Theo said, peeking into one of the boxes. Each was about a half a meter square and magically expanded on the inside.

Harry pulled his library trunk out of his pocket, expanded it, hissed the Parseltongue password he’d set, and threw the lid open. “All right, let’s do this.”

Theo got his own library trunk out and set it next to Harry’s.

Harry pointed his wand at the nearest crate. It floated up into the air and over the library trunk, and slowly began to descend. The crate warped as it went down to fit into the trunk until, with a faint pop, it snapped back to its proper external size inside.

He climbed down after it. The trunk was exactly as he’d wanted. Shelves bare and spotless and built of the same dark varnished wood that made up the walls behind them. Soft forest green carpet under his feet spelled to be the perfect temperature. Two padded comfortable reading chairs, each with a lamp that burned with steady white witchlight, on either side of a low table in the same dark wood. A stretch of night sky above him so real you couldn’t even tell there was a ceiling.

Part of him wanted to unpack the copybooks so he could see them all lined up on the shelves, but that made absolutely no sense since he’d just be taking them back out again in the Chamber, so he left the crate on the floor and climbed back out.

Theo was already grabbing his second crate. “Keep up, Black,” he taunted.

Harry summoned another crate with a flick of his wand, not even climbing all the way out. “You were saying?” he said with a smirk before disappearing back down into his crate. Theo’s “Hey!” was muffled by the second crate sliding into the trunk’s opening.

Sirius showed up when Harry was on the fourth of his five crates. “Hello?”

Both boys popped their heads out of their trunks. “Hey, Sirius,” Harry said with a grin, already pointing his wand at the fifth crate.

“Lord Black,” Theo said respectfully.

“Sirius,” Sirius said. “Honestly, how many times do I have to tell you?”

“Sorry,” Theo said with a grin. “Old habits.”

“Lord Black was my grandfather, they call me that enough in the Wizengamot,” Sirius said distastefully.
Harry left the last crate on the floor and climbed all the way out of his trunk.

“How was the first week?” Sirius said.

“Nothing exciting other than that horrible Defense teacher,” Harry said.

“And Sni—Snape calling you on working ahead?” Sirius said with a grin.

Theo laughed as he climbed out of his trunk and closed it. “We all thought he was going to hex Harry to bits, they’ve never gotten along.”

“Eriss would’ve killed him,” Harry said.

The snake stuck her head out of his bag. “Yes I absolutely would have. I bet he’d have tasted awful.”

He snickered and translated for Sirius and Theo, both of whom found her equally amusing.

“Harry… you did try to get Jules to calm down, didn’t you?” Sirius said uncertainly. “I mean—I know you two don’t get on but—he’s not James.”

“I know,” Harry said. “I wrote him in the journal—told him he needs to keep his head down and stay out of her way. He’s been quiet all week in class. Hermione says he’s always sullen as hell when he comes back to the common room after his detentions—hopefully he’s got the message…”

“He’ll forget it in a month,” Theo predicted.

Harry sighed. “Yeah, probably.”

Sirius frowned. “I don’t like this… the Ministry butting in.”

“It’s a pain in the ass to miss a year of Defense, but we can self-study,” Theo said with a shrug. “Not that big a deal, all things considered.”

“Just think of all the headaches it’ll give Dumbledore,” Harry added.

“There is that,” Sirius said with a smirk. “You lot heading back now?”

“Yep,” Harry said. “Got a lot of books to copy.”

“We only have three more years, counting this one, of access to the Hogwarts library,” Theo said innocently.

“True. Have a good week,” Sirius said. “Harry, Kreacher says hello.”

Harry coughed out a laugh. “Oh… yeah, tell him hi back, will you?”

“Sure.” Sirius laughed again on his way out the door.

“House-elf really loves you, doesn’t it?” Theo said.

Harry grinned and tapped his trunk to shrink it.

They took the Portkey between them, Eriss stowed in his bag and trunks in their pockets.

“Homeward!” Harry said.

Again the jerk behind their navels; again the world spun around them in a sickening colorful swirl—
The chaos ended abruptly, depositing them both on the floor of the Chamber.

Theo checked his watch. “Thirty minutes,” he said. “Right on time.”

“Ready for the others?” Harry said. They still had Hermione and Justin to introduce to the Chamber. Luna he’d bring in after another week or two, and maybe Draco after that, depending on how the year went. He had useful connections, he was a prefect, Hermione and Pansy both liked him well enough, and he’d seemed to be pretty friendly with Justin lately. Still, Harry couldn’t set aside who his father was.

“I’ll go get started,” Theo said, heading for the statue. “Open it up?”

Harry hissed the password at it and pulled out his journal as the stone mouth ground open.

A message from the twins was waiting.

FW

Ready to bring them down when you get back

HB

Go for it. Passage by the entrance hall will open for you.

He flipped to Blaise’s page.

HB

You lot can come down now if you’re interested. Use the passage in the dungeons. I’m bringing Hermione and Justin in.

That settled, Harry let Eriss out to hunt or explore and headed over to the Chamber’s main door. It opened at his hissed command and he sat down on one of the carved stone snake decorations around the door’s exterior.

He didn’t have to wait long. The Slytherins, who had a slightly shorter journey, showed up only three minutes later, the fox kit trotting unsteadily at Pansy’s heels. “Theo’s in the library,” he said, greeting them with a grin. “What’s all that?”

“Study materials,” Pansy said, holding up her school bag. “We might as well get some homework out of the way while we’re down here.”

“Ah, fair point.” Blaise and Pansy went ahead into the chamber.

Daphne hesitated.

Harry sighed internally. “What’s up, Daph?”

“Harry,” she said, and stopped.

He got to his feet and looked her in the eyes so she’d know he was being serious. “Look, Daphne, I know things have been—a little awkward.”

“Yeah, they have,” she muttered, glaring at him.

“We are probably the two worst people to have dated,” he said.
“Why?”

Harry raised both eyebrows. “Neither of us is what you’d call good at dealing with emotions.”

“Oh.” Daphne laughed and blushed a little. “Good point. I just—we were better friends than we were a couple.”

“You said that,” he reminded her. “When…” you broke up with me.

“Yes,” Daphne said. She met his eyes, cold and hard and sure. That was what he’d always liked about Daphne—she didn’t second-guess or hesitate. “I meant it.”

“You were right,” he said. “Just… it happened. We snogged a bit, we held hands and went to Hogsmeade, it didn’t work out—if I can move past Hermione’s stunt in second year we can work through this.”

Daphne nodded slowly. “I’ve been trying.”

“Me, too.” He ran a hand through his hair and rather savagely wished he didn’t have to deal with this. Emotions were stupid, relationships were stupid, but—he didn’t want to cut them off entirely. “Friends again?”

“Friends,” she agreed, and broke out into the brilliant smile he’d always liked, too. Whether hatred or affection or joy or revenge—she didn’t do things in half measures.

Daphne sat down next to him on the snake. “Waiting on Hermione and Justin, hm?”

“Yep.” Harry stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles. “Justin should be fine. I’m—not entirely sure how Hermione will take it.”

“Well, you’ll prove once and for all it wasn’t Malfoy,” Daphne said with a smirk.

Harry grinned. “True.”

They heard footsteps. “That them?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah, the passage from the entrance hall lets out a little farther up,” Harry said.

Fred and George were the first to round the corner, followed by Neville, Hermione, and Justin.

Hermione and Justin stopped dead when they saw the open door carved with snakes and the Chamber on the other side. Hermione squeaked.

“Harry,” Justin breathed, eyes wide. “Is that…”

“Welcome to the Chamber of Secrets,” he said with a smug grin.

Hermione’s wand hand twitched. “There’s no basilisk hiding in there. Right?”

“Nope,” Harry said. “No basilisks. Just a really good place for dueling practice, and a thousand-year-old library.”

Mention of the library worked just like he thought it would. Hermione’s face got steely and determined. “Slytherin’s library?”

“Theo and I have been translating it,” Harry said.
Daphne grinned at Hermione. “Just think, all those books, never touched by Ministry censorship…”

“I want to see,” Hermione said instantly.

“How is this possible?” Justin said, stepping cautiously over the threshold. Okay, better than Harry had expected, so far. “You… lied to Dumbledore, obviously, but…”

“He told Blaise and Theo and me at the end of second year,” Neville said. “No one else until now.”

“There was no point,” Harry said. “Theo and I have been doing language extracurriculars with Babbling for two years now just to understand the books, but we’re finally starting to make headway on that project.” He led the way down the center of the Chamber. It really was a nice place with the water cleaned up and the corpse gone and proper lighting near the ceiling.

“And you’re the Heir, then?” Justin said. He frowned. “Is it because you were there when You-Know-Who died, or what?”

Harry stopped at Slytherin’s feet and pointed up at the tablet in the statue’s hand. “Parsel runes, listing all the Heirs of Slytherin who found the Chamber.” He smirked. The last name on the list now read Hadrian Sirius Black. Clever magic. “In 1804, Vincent Odin Gaunt married Heir Serena Potter. The old Lord Potter didn’t approve and one of his conditions was that Vincent give up his inheritance as Heir Gaunt. Their children took the Potter surname and people forgot that a Gaunt ever married into the Potter line.” He looked at them. “Over half the names up there are Gaunts.”

Hermione put it together in a flash. “The Gaunts are Slytherin’s descendants.”

He pointed at her. “In one.”

“Doesn’t that make your—make James a Slytherin’s heir then?” Justin said.

“Magical inheritance is weird,” George said. “Magic is weird. That one person marrying into the Potters—that would have to be a really dilute inheritance by now.”

“Dumbledore may have been onto something when he said the magical energy did something to me,” Harry said with a shrug. “Or maybe it was random. I don’t know and I don’t particularly care, to be frank.”

“This is a pretty damn epic inheritance,” Justin said with a grin, looking around. “I thought it’d be creepier.”

“It was,” Harry said.

“Library?” Hermione prompted.

Harry grinned; she was so predictable. “Right this way.”

He showed them the climber’s way up the statue. Theo was already in the library and making good headway on copying it.

“I have a system,” he said as soon as Harry walked in. “Pull a book down, copy it, put the original back, copy goes over there.” He gestured at a stack of books on an end table; he’d gotten through about seventy so far.

“What are those?” Hermione said, snatching an unused copybook out of Theo’s hand.

He sighed and summoned another one from the library trunk at his feet. “Copybooks. Watch.”
Theo held it flat on his hand, put a thick cloth-bound tome on top of it, and poked the copybook with his wand. That flash went off. It became a perfect replica.

Hermione’s eyes got wide. “How does that work?”

“Flourish and Blotts has books on copybooks,” Theo said indifferently. “Order one.”

“Harry, can we go use the study?” Pansy asked.

He looked up from opening his own library trunk. “Yeah, go for it.”

Hermione and Theo were the only ones who stayed. “Why are you copying all the books?” Hermione said, eyes roving hungrily over the shelves. “Why not take them?”

_Gryffindors._ “Legacy,” Harry said. “Salazar Slytherin left this here for his Heirs to find and use. It’s his legacy; I’m not going to muck that up.” He pulled down the first book from the other side of the shelf from Theo and copied it. “But I’m also not going to leave it here since I won’t be able to access it once I graduate.”

“May I?” Hermione said, gesturing to his library trunk.

Harry nodded absently. He sent his first copy soaring through the air to settle next to the trunk with a wave of his wand, pulled down the next one, and summoned another copybook. The second copy stacked neatly on top of the first.

He’d gotten through nearly twenty books, ranging from the size of his palm to one he could barely hold in one hand, by the time Hermione climbed back out. “That is incredible,” she said. “And these books—you have way more—copybooks—than there are books in here?”

“You can buy them off of us,” Theo called from the other side of the shelf. “We’ll loan you lot anything you feel like, and of course any of you can buy your own copybooks, but we bought extra so you can make copies of anything you really want your own edition of.”

“How much?” Hermione said.

“Twelve galleons.”

She frowned. “Only if I see anything particularly exciting, then…”

“Come look at this,” Theo’s disembodied voice said.

Hermione disappeared around the shelf to where he was working. Harry smirked and fell into the rhythm of summon, copy, stack, replace, repeat. He could’ve cast _amplius auri_ and eavesdropped on them, but that wasn’t his business. Low murmurs of voices came from the other side of the shelf but he tuned them out and enjoyed the solitude.

Two hours was not enough to finish, not nearly, but Harry made good progress. He guessed it’d take about fifteen hours in total unless he could bribe someone to help him speed up the process, like Hermione did for Theo. The inside of his library trunk looked a lot better with books on the shelves. Harry spent most of his afternoon sorting and organizing the almost five hundred books he managed to copy today. He emerged a bit dusty and sick of sitting still but full of the pleasant tiredness that came from having been productive.

They all went up for dinner at the same time, Theo and Hermione talking animatedly about a book they’d found to the exclusion of all else. Harry and Pansy and Daphne and Blaise laughed behind the
He slipped back down to the Chamber on his own that night. Eriss brought him a rat.

Harry organized his mind. “Avada kedavra.”

There was a flash of green and the rat fell over, dead.

He got a headache almost immediately, but it didn’t have the slightest effect on his victorious grin.

“Harry—hey, leave off!”

Harry blinked and looked up. “Eriss, leave him alone. Adrian, what is it?”

“Control your bloody familiar,” Adrian snapped, and glared when Eriss hissed menacingly at him.

“She doesn’t like people sneaking up on me,” Harry said, grinning at Adrian with the same tone Eriss had used in her hiss.

Adrian didn’t even call him on the fact that Harry was sitting in the corner of the Slytherin common room, which was, technically, a public space. “Come on—the Gryffindorks have a new Keeper and you’ll never guess who it is,” he said.

Oh, excellent, needling the Gryffindors. “Not Pritchard, is it?” Harry said. “I know he flies…”

“Nope.” An evil grin overtook Peregrine Derrick’s face as he popped up at Adrian’s elbow. “Weasley.”

Harry almost dropped the notebook he was putting in his bag. “Weasley?”

“What?” Ginny called.

“Not you!” Peregrine shouted back. She shrugged and turned back to the fourth years’ study group.

“Oh, this will be good,” Harry said. He slung his bag over his shoulder. “Are we all going?”

“Whole team and anyone else who’s interested,” Adrian said.

It was Monday and their tryouts weren’t until Wednesday, so the team only included Adrian, Peregrine, Draco, and Harry. Flora stayed to work on an essay for Snape but Hestia came, probably because she and Adrian were sort of dating. Noah Bole and Celesta Fawley came from the sixth years and Theo and Pansy both set aside their work when they saw Harry leaving. Most of the younger years stayed behind but Harry glanced back right as they crossed the entrance hall and found Astoria, Ginny, Evalyn, Finn Sullivan, and Vasily Sitch in their wake.

“This is allowed, right?” he heard Sitch say.
Finn laughed. “Dumbass, who cares?”

“It’s allowed,” Theo said, smirking over his shoulder at them. “We’re only watching, not getting in the way.”

Finn flashed his gap-toothed mischief-maker’s smile.

There was no sign of the Gryffindor team on the pitch. Harry figured they must already be in their locker rooms. He sat down between Peregrine and Theo.

Angelina Johnson strode onto the field below, tying her long, braided hair back with brisk motions. The Slytherins immediately set off a round of mocking cheers. She looked up at them, shook her head, and went back to checking the weather.

“Pity they’re not all as decent as Johnson,” he heard Everett complain to Hestia and Adrian.

The team came out about ten minutes later. The Slytherins took up their jeers and catcalls again, voices echoing around the empty stadium. Harry yelled along with his teammates and laughed internally at the stupefied look on Ronald’s face. Fred and George both shot him we’ll-get-you-for-this looks as they mounted their brooms.

“Look at that, Weasley’s got a new broom!” Draco shouted in a sneering drawl. “Should you even be allowed to fly that thing, Weasel?”

Jules looked very angrily at the Slytherins and took off after Ronald, who was already turning red enough to rival his robes.

“This should be good,” Theo said in an undertone, grinning like a cat on the hunt.

Johnson ordered them into a standard warm-up passing drill formation. “Look at the Weasel shaking around,” Harry said loudly enough to carry to the Gryffindors. He’d avoid mocking Jules and the rest of their team, who had never landed themselves on his blacklist, but Ronald he considered fair game. “Wonder how he got on the team!”

“Must be nice to have a famous best friend!” Hestia jeered, smirking at him. Harry grinned back.

The Gryffindors spread out. The jeering died down as they started their drill. The Quaffle went Johnson, Fred, George, Jules, Ronald—

Who dropped it.

Harry laughed right along with his House mates. Including, he was happy to see, Ginny, sitting a few rows below with her year mates.

Ronald pelted for the ground, snagged the Quaffle, and pulled sloppily out of the dive. He passed it off to Spinnet and wobbled on his broom.

“How’re you feeling, Potter?” Draco yelled mockingly. “Sure you don’t need a lie-down? It must be, what, a whole week since you went to Pomfrey, that’s a record, isn’t it?”

Jules looked in their direction, clearly furious, but Bell yelled something at him that Harry didn’t catch and he stayed put. The Quaffle was passed along again—Fred, Johnson, Jules, Ronald—who dropped it again.

Johnson looked to be scolding him as he rose back up for the second time, but Harry couldn’t hear a
word of it over the howls of laughter coming from the Slytherins. His own laughter was fake, since he didn’t laugh in public and barely in private, but the Gryffindorks didn’t know that.

“He’s as red as the Quaffle!” Finn yelled happily, drawing a fresh round of laughter.

The ball passed around another few times. “Way to keep it away from the Weasel!” Harry shouted when he saw them overlook Ronald three times in a row. His comment had the exact effect he’d wanted: Johnson sent Ronald a soft, easy pass.

He caught it, turned around, and pegged it straight for Bell. The Quaffle slipped right between her outstretched hands and hit her in the face.

“He’s attacking his own teammates now!” Pansy shrieked. “Did they even have tryouts?”

“Nice one,” Everett said, laughing so hard he shook.

Johnson went back to upbraiding Ronald while the twins converged on Bell, who appeared to have a nosebleed.

They gave up the passing drill. Jules and the twins shot off for the ball crate, and appeared to have some kind of heated argument before letting loose the Snitch and a Bludger. Fred and George spun their Beaters’ bats as they took off again.

Ronald took up Keeper’s position in front of the goalposts. Bell, Spinnet, and Johnson started running Chaser drills; the twins rocketed around them after the Bludger; Jules rolled and accelerated through the Chasers, catching the Snitch—

The whistle blared. “Stop—stop—STOP!” Johnson screamed. “Ron—you’re not covering your middle post!”

“Look at that idiot, he’s got no clue what he’s doing!” Fawley shouted mockingly.

Johnson yelled something at Ronald and then got distracted by Bell, whose nose was bleeding profusely.

Draco and Noah set up a chant of “Gryffindors are losers, Gryffindors are losers” that the rest of them quickly joined.

This time the whistle sounded after barely three minutes. Harry had been busy laughing at Ronald’s awkwardness in front of the hoops and failure to block a single practice shot and he didn’t notice Bell until Johnson streaked for her.

Fred and George got there first, followed by Johnson, and then Jules and Spinnet. Johnson said something with urgent body language. The chant dissolved into laughter and dissolute jeers. The twins hurried off the pitch with Bell supported between them. Harry hoped they’d be more careful about which sweets they gave people in the future. That seemed like one of their nastier inventions, not the relatively benign Nosebleed Nougat.

The rest of the Gryffindors seemed to give up and trooped dully back to their common room.

“Good way to spend a Monday afternoon,” Theo said with a happy sigh.

Harry grinned. “Yes it was.”
TRESPASS AT MINISTRY

Sturgis Podmore, 38, of 2 Laburnam Gardens, Clapham, has appeared in front of the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic on 31st August. Podmore was arrested by Ministry of Magic watchwizard Eric Munch, who found him attempting to force his way through a top-security door at one o’clock in the morning. Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense, was convicted on both charges and sentenced to six months in Azkaban.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the Prophet. That was interesting.

“Isn’t he…” Blaise trailed off. Harry nodded slightly, looking across the Great Hall. Jules didn’t seem to have noticed anything yet.

Podmore had given a report on the shift changes for guarding something in the Ministry. Harry rolled his eyes and set the paper aside. The Order were fairly stupid sometimes. He doubted Podmore had been trying to break through anything. He’d probably sneaked in to guard whatever the Order thought the Ministry wasn’t adequately protecting and got caught. With the Ministry lackeys and the Death Eater sympathizers on the Wizengamot all looking to weaken Dumbledore, it was no surprise Podmore got convicted.

Harry went back to his oatmeal.

JP

I got word last night Fudge is afraid of us being “trained in combat” or some shit, and that’s why Umbridge is making us just work out of the textbook. It’s ridiculous!

HB

Yes, but there’s not much we can do.

JP

We can’t just lie down for her!

HB

Jules, get a grip. We are schoolboys. Let her play her games with Dumbledore and keep your head down and study on your own so you can pass the OWL.

While I’m thinking of it—everyone’s being really tight-lipped. Not everyone in Slytherin is a sympathizer—in fact probably only about half—so no one is talking. My immediate friends’ behavior hasn’t changed. Blaise’s mum isn’t involved at all, and he doesn’t give a crap, but Theo’s dad is involved to some extent. Same for the Carrows’ parents, I think, and definitely Goyle’s, he’s not the brightest and he keeps dropping hints.

Theo read over his shoulder. “Nice. Nothing he doesn’t already know.”

“Or could guess,” Harry said.

JP

Thanks, I’ll pass it on.
HB
What’s going on with Podmore?

JP
They don’t tell me much. Afraid we’ll slip up around Umbridge. He was guarding whatever the bloody hell is in there. I don’t get why they don’t just steal whatever it is.

HB
They probably can’t. There’s parts of the Ministry under wards that rival the set at Hogwarts.

JP
True.

HB
I wish they’d tell us what it is. I read a lot—I might be able to help…

JP
They were saying something about it a few days before we came back. I’ll let you know if we need research help.
And can you give me a warning next time your asshole teammates pull some kind of stunt like they did at practice?
I get you have to keep your cover or whatever but that was out of line.

HB
I didn’t have a chance. They roped me in on the way out of the common room. But yeah, I’ll try to let you know in the future.
Also—really? Ronald? Surely you have people who can actually catch the Quaffle in your House.

JP
Git. He was really good when we flew together last weekend. He just fell apart under pressure a bit. He’s actually a decent Keeper when he’s on his game.

HB
If you say so.
How’re you holding up under the OWL work?

JP
Snape’s a greasy slimeball and I could punt the hag off the Astronomy Tower but other than that, fine. You?

HB
As well as can be expected. See you in class
“So Weasley cracks under pressure, does he?” Theo said with an evil grin. “I’ll have to pass that along to Pansy.”

“I’m sure she’d be delighted to hear it,” Harry said with a matching smile as he slid the journal back into his bag.

Quidditch tryouts were eventful. Ginny flew like a demon and won the last Chaser slot. Celesta Fawley ended up the reserve Seeker; Noah took over his brother’s spot as the second Beater. Graham Pritchard showed up and displayed an uncanny ability to predict trick shots. Adrian gave Everett the Keeper’s slot and signed Pritchard on as the reserve, telling the second year he could train with them this year, grow a bit bigger and get some experience, and then take over from Everett next year when Everett and Adrian graduated. Fred and George were delighted that their little sister had taken up the family legacy, Molly Weasley sent a Howler that went off in the Great Hall about how dare Ginny go behind her back to try out, and Ronald and Toby Pritchard and Ben Creed made crude comments about Ginny and her male teammates. Harry, Adrian, Evalyn, and Celesta teamed up, and landed all three Gryffindors in the hospital wing. Pritchard had his knees reversed and four broken ribs, Creed took three days to get his full sight back, and Ronald had to have his tongue, three teeth, and all his fingernails regrown.

Classes, though, were as tedious the second week of term as they had been the first. Harry resigned himself to a year of neuron-killing homework assignments and started on a new project in his spare time. He had a collection of over a hundred books on potions going back over the last few years full of potions recipes with his own notations and changes in the margins. He also had several notebooks, all of which were stained, torn, and water-warped, detailing his various experiments and modifications. It was time to codify them into one place.

He used a large, beautiful journal bound in soft black leather and embossed with his name on the cover. It had been a collective gift from Justin, Neville, Hermione, and Daphne after his adoption. They told him it was charmed to only open for him, to add or delete pages wherever he wanted, and never run out of room while also never getting heavier.

He carefully recorded the title of each potion and the recipe, including his modifications. A charm found in Study Methods and Spells was applied to every page to make his handwriting regular and legible while still looking like his. At first he ordered them all by alphabetical order, but then he actually pulled out and stacked up all the books he’d be referencing and realized exactly how many potions he’d worked on over the years. After that they were ordered alphabetically within categories—Healing, Mind-Altering, Disguise & Physical Alterations, Poisons, Ritualistic, and Miscellaneous. His best estimate was that he’d finish sometime around Christmas. Yule. Whatever. Sirius had done a modern Christmas the previous year because it was what Harry was used to, but he was intensely curious about the “old rites” Theo and Daphne mentioned on occasion, and the midsummer rite had been amazing.

Umbridge baited Jules in class and leered horribly at Harry. He cast Notice-Me-Nots on himself and put invisibility runes on Eriss so the old hag wouldn’t see her in the halls or on his shoulders.
The Ministry made their move two and a half weeks in.


“Clearly can’t do jack shit,” Theo cut in briskly. “Hogwarts was founded and the Charter written and spelled before the Ministry even existed, Daph, they added the Ministry-Hogwarts rules later, of course there’s loopholes in the wording for tripe like this. Pass the butter, Blaise?”

Blaise slid him the butter dish.

“Looks like she’ll be going after the teachers,” Harry mused, scanning the article. “Hagrid, probably… definitely Trelawney if what I’ve heard about Divination is true… Merlin, is that a Weasley supporting this?”

“Percy,” Pansy said with a smirk. “Ginny told me he had a row with their parents, stormed out of the house at the end of June and hasn’t come back since—”

“The twins mentioned that, yeah,” Blaise said, “but still…”

Harry glanced down the table at Ginny. She was staring at the paper like she’d just been told to drink a glass of curdled milk.

“Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest,” Pansy read.

“Dumbledore’s,” Harry said succinctly.

Theo snorted. “How exactly do they think it helps them to give up their seats? All they’ll do is limit their side’s voting power.”

“No one’s ever accused that crowd of an overabundance of common sense,” Daphne sniffed.


He was pretty sure he could guess what those letters said.

Theo scanned his and passed it over to Harry without a word.

Theo,

If you have not already read the Prophet this morning, please do so before continuing with this letter.

Madam Umbridge is one of Minister Fudge’s most trusted people. I’m sure you’ve been clever
enough to realize why she was placed there. We didn’t know of her appointment until the first day of
term—no one on the Wizengamot was told. No one, in fact, outside the Minister’s office, all of whom
were bound by oath not to repeat word to anyone until the Prophet released the news.

She has the weight of the Ministry behind her and neither I nor the Wizengamot cannot effectively
check Fudge at this time should you do something foolish. Go with the current this year.

-Father

Harry nodded slowly. Short and to the point, unusually so. It wasn’t the Wizengamot Lord Nott was
really referring to, at least not only. The message: cooperate with Umbridge for now. More or less
what Harry had expected.

“Similar missives?” he said, not letting a hint of anything unusual appear on his face.

Theo nodded.

Pansy put her own letter down. She was a bit paler than usual. “Go with Umbridge, help her if she
requires it, stay out of her path otherwise. Let her keep Dumbledore occupied.”

“For my mother, that was blunt,” Draco said quietly. The blond’s knuckles were tight on his fork.
“That—toad.”

They all knew he wasn’t referring to his mother.

“She’s focused on the staff, anyway,” Harry said. “It shouldn’t be that difficult to stay out of her
way.”

Hadrian,

You probably noticed a deluge of letters arriving for your House mates today. The gist of them is to
stay out of Professor Umbridge’s way. We didn’t know Fudge was moving for this High Inquisitor
position but I will say it came as no surprise. She has the power to make life rather difficult for you if
you do the foolish Gryffindor routine I hear Julian pulled in class.

How have your studies with multi-object conjuration been going?

-Barty Crouch

Crouch,

Yes, I picked up on the letters. The Gryffindors are predictably outraged, even those who are
distinctly not fond of Dumbledore. I have no intention of stepping into Umbridge’s crosshairs.

Excellent. We’re currently studying inanimatus conjurus in class and I’m horribly bored, but I
recently found a book in the Black library covering Rusakov’s theory of conjuration. I can’t
understand most of the theory but she seemed to have been on track for a much more energy-
efficient method of conjuring multiple animate objects before she was executed. Have you read
anything similar?

Hadrian
Harry lingered in Professor Babbling’s room after class let out.

The vibrant middle-aged witch hummed to herself as she cleaned up her desk, braids flying. She turned around and jumped when she saw him standing inside the door. “Oh—Harry, you startled me! What can I do for you? Got a question on the Sanskrit—?”

“Oh, a sort,” Harry said, smiling a bit hesitantly. He weighed his every movement, expression, and word. This was a delicate moment. “I was doing a bit of— independent research on Sanskrit when modified in the fifth form using Gaelic runes—”

“Ahh,” Babbling said, looking delighted. “For bonding and mirroring spells—the basis of the Protean Charm, I’m sure you’re aware?”

He widened his smile and dropped a bit of nervousness—a student getting caught up in the pleasure of exploring knowledge. “Yes, exactly—Hermione, Miss Granger, she’s one of my best friends, and she was studying it last week, and it interested me, but... well, the Protean Charm’s hardly the only application of such binding runes, is it?”

“No, certainly not.” Professor Babbling boosted herself up on the edge of her desk and grinned at him, kicking both heels on the edge of it. “Sanskrit and Gaelic are the best for such runespells and charms, you’re absolutely right—although Arabic works quite well too, I had a colleague studying for a Runes Mastery at the same time as me who worked exclusively with Arabic and she invented a variation on the Protean Charm. Interested in a Mastery, Harry?” she said with a sudden wink.

“I’m certainly considering it,” Harry said, letting his smile fade and his expression turn pensive. “I love Potions, too—I was thinking of a way to combine the two, maybe—if runes were traced with a wand over the potion, if that would improve shelf life, or the potion’s strength? But I’m certainly interested in studying runes after Hogwarts.”

“Excellent! I was so hoping you would; you and Mr. Nott have always been a pleasure to have in class—is he one of Miss Granger’s friends as well?”

“He is,” Harry said. “The three of us tend to get really competitive on our homework, actually…”

Babbling laughed. “I should’ve known! You do tend to cycle through who gets the best marks on an assignment… Is either of them interested in a Runes Mastery?”

“Hermione’s interested in magical law, I think,” Harry said. “Theo… I’m not sure. His father has a Wizengamot seat that he’s interested in inheriting, I think, but it will be some time before Lord Nott abdicates.”

“Mmm.” Babbling raised an eyebrow at him. “And you? The Blacks have a Wizengamot seat, too, I seem to recall.”

“I don’t know that politics would suit me,” Harry lied, “academics is more my style… That’s what proxies are for, isn’t it?”

Babbling shrugged. “Very true, very true. Well, if you need me for any sort of recommendation for a Runes Mastery program, Harry, don’t hesitate to send me an owl. Your work has been exemplary.”

“Thank you,” he said, looking down bashfully. “I believe I have a few more years until I need to be considering Mastery programs, but I’ll certainly keep that in mind.”
“You’re always fascinating,” he said sincerely. Babbling’s class was one of few that still held his interest to some degree. “But—well, I came to ask—I’ve been doing a bit of reading on my own, and the binding and bonding runic arrays are fascinating—but I hit a stopping block a few days ago. I can’t seem to find any books that press farther into the subject than I’ve already gone and I just thought—it’s your subject, after all, and surely if anyone could point me in the right direction…”

“Well,” Babbling said, clearly lost in thought, “have you read *Protean Runes in the Modern Age*?”

“Yes, just last week, it was incredible,” he said with real eagerness. It had been a fascinating book. He didn’t need to be *completely* honest and tell her he’d actually read it at the start of fourth year and used it to help with the design of the journals.

“Ah, excellent!” Babbling’s smile returned full-force. “Well, that’s about the most advanced book in the Hogwarts library—at least the publicly accessible sections… You’re just pursuing an academic interest, correct?”

He arranged his face into the picture of puzzlement. “Yes, I—highly doubt I could even cast the Protean Charm, much less a more advanced variation on the same spell—” lie, he, Hermione, Theo, Daphne, and the twins could all use the Protean Charm— “I just find the whole subject fascinating.”

“How about this,” Babbling said with a conspiratorial wink. She flicked her wand and plucked a quill, inkwell, and scroll out of thin air, scribbling. Harry’s heart leapt in his chest but he showed no sign of his excitement. “I’ll write you a pass to the Restricted Section—all your teachers are fond of you, Harry, and you’ve been a model student your entire time here—otherwise Dumbledore would have kittens—actually, he might anyway but who cares, it might make our next staff meeting less dull.” She flashed an impish smile and handed him the sealed scroll. “Keep it academic and be careful in there; plenty of those books are better left alone.”

“Oh, I understand, Professor,” Harry said with calculated hurry. “I—my godfather, Lord Black, you know, his family used a lot of Dark magic, he ran away when he was sixteen to get away from it and he’s told me—I have no interest in dangerous areas of magic,” he said, thinking *earnest, sincere, trustworthy*. Eyes wide and guileless; shoulders and hands open and honest. “Are—are you certain you won’t get in trouble for this? I understand it’s—a bit unusual—”

“Unusual?” She laughed. “We’ve only had two students other than you who got an all-access pass before NEWT year in the entire time I’ve been teaching here. Unusual doesn’t even cover it. But don’t worry about it, Harry, I trust you’ll be intelligent about your research. And don’t harm any of the books. Madam Pince might actually kill you.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said gratefully. The gratitude was sincere, too. “You wouldn’t—mind terribly if I came to you with questions—?”

“Dear me, no!” Babbling looked horrified at the thought. “I’d be *happy* to answer your questions—after class if you please, I do have to deliver a curriculum—but I’d love to talk to you more about what you find. Runes is a difficult field and we really need more people willing to study it.”

He smiled and bowed his head respectfully. “Okay, I’ll do that. Have a nice day, Professor,” he said.

Theo peeled out of the shadows behind a statue not thirty feet down the hall as Harry passed him. “How’d it go?”

“Success.” Harry held the scroll up between two fingers with a smile very different from the one
he’d shown his teacher. “Restricted Section access coming right up.”

Madam Pince glowered at the note, then Harry, then the note again. “Professor Babbling?” she said suspiciously.

Harry kept his face pleasant. He’d never liked the vulture-like librarian. She didn’t seem to understand that while books were precious, the knowledge in them was intended to be shared and learned instead of displayed on a shelf and never touched. “Yes, ma’am.”

“For extracurricular studies in Runes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmph.” She peered at him over her spectacles with a bad-tempered frown. “I’ll be examining everything you check out, boy. Carefully.”

Harry fought back the urge to either cower or lash out when she called him boy. “Yes, ma’am, of course.”

“Go on, then,” she said bad-temperedly.

Hiding a smirk, he walked across the wards into the Restricted Section.

No alarm sounded.

Perfect.

Harry browsed the shelves for several minutes where Pince could easily see him, taking care to handle the books delicately and pull out titles that had only to do with runic magic and its various applications. Her eyes burned holes in his back but he pretended he didn’t notice the scrutiny until she turned away to berate a couple of Ravenclaw second-years for arguing too loudly. As soon as her attention slipped away, Harry ducked farther back into the stacks, out of sight of the library proper.

The farther back he went, the darker the books got, both figuratively and literally. He traced one black leather spine that practically purred under his fingertips labeled *Spelles Moste Fowle*. Theo had mentioned that once: it was almost impossible to get hold of a copy.

Harry pulled out his library trunk and got to work.

He left the library three hours later with almost eight hundred copied books squirreled away in his trunk. The originals were safely back in place on the shelves. Theo and any of his friends who were interested could copy Harry’s copies later. He had forced himself to not do more than skim any of the books, no matter how fascinating they looked.

Interestingly, unlike the ward on the book Theo tested in the Black library, what magic existed on these books seemed to transfer. Harry theorized it was because the magic was a bit insidious and sprang from the contents of the books as much from any spell cast on them. He had to hex three of them shut to keep them from snapping at his fingers or other books, and at one point, he had to hastily slice his finger with a small cutting curse and trace a silencing rune on one of the books to keep the copy from screaming.

Pince was true to her word and went over every one of the six advanced runes books Harry checked
out with an exacting eye. He waited with a pleasant expression while she flipped through them, studied the covers, cast detection spells, and logged each one. He’d read all of them before. They were relatively benign books placed in the Restricted Section only because they were advanced and the staff didn’t want students reading them before they could understand what they were reading. He’d go to Babbling in a week or so and stage some enthusiastic discussion of what he’d read, and keep doing so off and on before the holidays. And he could keep going back to copy more books from the Restricted Section now that he knew he could. It wasn’t nearly as bit as the Hogwarts library but it had more books than the one in the Chamber. He’d have to sift through and see what was worth taking, and maybe order more copybooks, but it was so worth it. A number of these books you couldn’t even buy anymore.

Hermione, Theo, Daphne, and Luna eagerly climbed down into the trunk with him in the Knights Room to go over his prizes. Daphne had dragged her heels about the risk at first; Hermione had gone on an impassioned tear about how knowledge shouldn’t be left to rot on shelves and Daphne caved. Harry watched Daphne’s ice queen mask slip as Theo and Hermione literally cooed over the books and hid a secret grin.

“This is incredible,” Hermione breathed. “What’s…”

“Don’t!” Harry stopped her before she touched an ancient book. “Don’t touch that one, it’s cursed to wither your eyes if you don’t understand the language it’s written in. Which is a weird dialect of Arabic that died out about six hundred years ago.”

Hermione paled.


“Thank you, Theo,” she said with a smile.

Daphne caught Harry’s eye. They both looked away quickly before they started laughing.

“Can I copy these?” Luna said, holding up a stack of books.

Harry did a double take when he realized which books she’d chosen. All of them were dark, and old, and not what you’d expect the sweet, ethereal Ravenclaw to read. “Ah… sure.”

“You—do know what those are, right?” Daphne said with a raised eyebrow.

“Mhm.” Luna examined the top one happily. “Daddy’s been searching for this one for years, he’ll be delighted I found a copy… Don’t worry, I won’t say where I got it.”

“…alright,” Theo said. “Harry and I have extra copybooks—”

“Oh, no, I have my own.” Luna didn’t even look up at them. “It’s a Ravenclaw house secret, we make them sometimes to share books with each other…”

“You… make…” Harry’s eyes were wide. “Luna, can you show me how?”

“Certainly, Harry.” She beamed at him.

Theo looked at Harry with eyes just as wide. They could buy plain leather journals with a good amount of paper inside, spell them, and make their own copybooks—for a lot less money.

Befriending Luna was turning out to be a better decision than he could’ve dreamed.
Snape handed back their moonstone essays two days after Umbridge’s appointment as High Inquisitor. “I have awarded you the grades you would have received if you presented this work on your OWL,” said Snape with a smirk, as he swept around the classroom. Harry barely glanced at the perfect O he’d known he would receive before shoving the essay into his bag. “This should give you a realistic idea of what to expect in your examination.”

He reached the front of the class and turned to face them. “The general standard of this homework was abysmal. Most of you would have failed had this been your examination. I expect to see a great deal more effort for this weeks’ essay on the various varieties of venom antidotes—” Harry smirked; he could probably write a book on venom antidotes thanks to all the research he’d done to brew antivenin for Eriss— “or I shall have to start handing out detentions to those dunces who get D’s.”

“Some people got D’s? Ha!” Draco said in a carrying whisper. He, Harry, Neville, and Thomas, who were sharing a table again today, all saw Jules hurriedly stuff an essay in his bag before Patil could lean over and see it. Harry smirked. He’d bet Jules was one of the D’s.

His Strengthening Solution was a perfect clear turquoise with just a hint of a shimmer. Hermione, Draco, Daphne, Patil, and Theo all brewed potions that he thought would get O’s or at least high E’s, while Neville, Pansy, Thomas, and Blaise all got probably in the E-A range. Jules at least ended up with something blue instead of the pink glutinous mess in Ronald’s cauldron or the roiling sulphurous concoction Crabbe managed to create.

At the end of class, Snape caught Harry’s eye. Harry deliberately took a while packing up so no one would notice Snape funneling his potion into a flagon and setting it behind his desk. Once it was done, he vanished the remainder with a wordless *evanesco* that had Snape staring at him, packed up his cauldron, and caught up to his friends on the way to lunch.

Umbridge inspected the Slytherins’ Charms lesson the following day. Harry had already heard about the disaster in Divination from Neville, in which Umbridge reduced Trelawney to tears. He went in half-expecting something dramatic but Flitwick seemed to barely notice Umbridge’s presence. He treated her like a guest and taught class like he normally would. The students all got the Banishing Charm review down by the end of class. Harry put a Notice-Me-Not on himself as soon as he saw Umbridge and successfully dodged her questioning, but he eavesdropped and heard Draco, Pansy, and Bulstrode all assure Umbridge that Flitwick was a great teacher and knew his subject, so he wasn’t too worried.

“Wands away,” Umbridge said smilingly, as she did at the beginning of every class. No one had theirs out; they knew better than to hope by now. Four of her classes had now gone by with no drama and Harry was praying that this one would follow the trend.

“As we finished chapter two last week, I would like you to turn to page thirty-two and commence chapter three, ‘Strategies for Passive De-Escalation.’ There will be no need to talk.”

This time, when Hermione shot her hand up in the air, Umbridge did not try to ignore her. Instead, she went over to Hermione’s desk and leaned down and whispered something to her. Harry, from the Slytherin side, could not hear Umbridge, but Hermione didn’t keep her voice down. “I’ve already read chapter two.”

“Oh no,” whispered Daphne, who was sitting with Harry today.
Umbridge said something else.

“I’ve read that too. I’ve read the whole book.”

Umbridge’s next words were just a little louder; Harry caught something about chapter fifteen and jinxes.

“He says that counterjinxes are improperly named,” said Hermione promptly. The entire class was listening by now. “He says ‘counterjinx’ is just a name people give their jinxes when they want to make them sound more acceptable.”

Umbridge stood up straight and raised her eyebrows.

“But I disagree,” Hermione continued.

Umbridge’s back was mostly to him. Harry leaned to the left, held up a hand, and slashed it horizontally side-to-side in a Muggle gesture for cut! Hermione’s eyes flicked in his direction.

Umbridge followed her attention but by the time she turned around, Harry and the rest of the Slytherins were staring dutifully at their books.

“You disagree?” she said in a cold voice.

Harry risked a glance over his shoulder. Umbridge was focused on Hermione. He glared, but his friend ignored him and kept talking. “Mr. Slinkhard doesn’t like jinxes, does he? But I think they can be very useful when they’re used defensively.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” said Umbridge, finally dropping any pretense at staying quiet. “Well, I’m afraid it is Mr. Slinkhard’s opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger.”

“But—” Hermione started.

“That is enough.” Umbridge waddled back to the front of the room. “I am afraid I am going to have to take five points from Gryffindor House.”

Several of the Gryffindors rustled angrily.

“What for?” Jules snapped.

Harry dropped his head into his hands.

“For disrupting my class with pointless interruptions,” said Umbridge smoothly. “I am here to teach you using a Ministry-approved method that does not include inviting students to give their opinions on matters about which they understand very little. Your previous teachers in this subject may have allowed you more license, but none of them—with the possible exception of Professor Quirrell, who did at least appear to have restricted himself to age-appropriate subjects—would have passed a Ministry inspection—”

“Yeah, he was great,” said Jules loudly. “There was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.”

The silence was heavy and pregnant.

“I think another week’s detentions would do you some good, Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge silkily.

Fortunately, Hermione flicked her wand out of her holster and hit Jules with a whispered silencing
charm, out of Umbridge’s sight, and kept him from costing any more points for his house. Harry had to admire Umbridge’s strategy of detentions rather than taking points. If she’d docked Jules points, the rest of Gryffindor might have rallied against an injustice done to all of them, but detentions kept Jules out of Quidditch and instead alienated him from potential allies. He’d no idea if she was doing it on purpose but if so—it was clever.

Johnson made such a racket at breakfast the next morning about her star Seeker having another week of detention that McGonagall had to wade down from the staff table and sort out the chaos. Harry watched with his delight well-hidden.

Neville

He had never thought of himself as a particularly violent or vindictive person, but Neville was pretty damn sure that he was going to hex either Jules, Ronald, or Umbridge by the end of the year. Especially after Jules just could not keep his bloody mouth shut in Defense. Neville didn’t like it, either, when she went off on their old teachers like that—but the Slytherins were right; this wasn’t a battle worth fighting. It wasn’t a battle they could fight. It felt kind of weird to be holding his words back instead of forcing them out for once but he couldn’t challenge Umbridge directly and win. He knew it, Harry knew it, Hermione even toed a certain line in that class, though no one blamed her for irritating Umbridge as often as she could. Hell, everyone got it except Jules.

His issue with Ronald had nothing to do with Umbridge and everything to do with him being an utter prat. Neville had been there when the Slytherins went after Ronald, Toby, and Ben. Harry had hesitated and looked at him before casting the spell on Ben that would temporarily sever his optic nerves. Neville very pointedly looked away. Those comments about Ginny were bang out of line and the justice system at school wouldn’t do a thing.

All told, Neville was in an uncharacteristically bad temper the day Jules got another week of detentions and cost Gryffindor ten points. He set his books down next to Hermione with more force than necessary and took his seat. Dean and Seamus sat in front of them.

She elbowed him, hard.

Neville looked away from McGonagall and realized Umbridge had just sat down in the back corner with a clipboard.

“Excellent,” he whispered. “Let’s see her get what she deserves.”

Hermione smiled a thin, nasty smile she seemed to have copied from Daphne over the summer.

Professor McGonagall marched into the room without the slightest indication that she knew Umbridge was there. “That will do,” she said, and silence fell instantly. “Mr. Finnegan, kindly come here and hand back the homework—Miss Brown, please take this box of mice—don’t be silly, girl, they won’t hurt you—and hand one to each student—”

“Hem, hem,” said Umbridge. Hermione made a face.

Seamus handed Neville his essay back with a more civil nod than he’d gotten from the other boy in—well, ever, actually. He took it and saw, to his relief, that he’d managed an A. Not his best, but he did better with Potions and Herbology than Transfiguration and Charms. He could always get Hermione or Harry or Theo to go over it with him later and show him what he screwed up. By the time OWLs rolled around Neville was confident he could get himself to the E range. He glanced
over at Hermione—unsurprisingly, she had an O.

“Right then, everyone, listen closely—Dean Thomas, if you do that to the mouse again I shall put you in detention—most of you have now successfully vanished your snails and even those who were left with a certain amount of shell have the gist of the spell.” Neville remembered getting the snail on the fourth try and grinning like an idiot. He hadn’t been as good as Hermione but both of them had been working on vanishing spells in the Knights Room for a while and snails weren’t a whole lot harder than the inanimate objects Harry conjured for them to practice on. The look on Jules and Ronald and Seamus’ faces had been priceless.

“Today we shall be—”

“Hem, hem.”

“Yes?” said Professor McGonagall, eyebrows snapping together as she rounded on Umbridge.

Neville grinned.

“I was just wondering, Professor, whether you received my note telling you the date and time of your inspec—”

“Obviously I received it, or I would have asked you what you are doing in my classroom,” said Professor McGonagall. Dean and Seamus both shared gleeful looks over their shoulders at Hermione and Neville. “As I was saying, today we shall be practicing the altogether more difficult vanishment of mice. Now, the Vanishing Spell—”

“Hem, hem.”

“I wonder,” said Professor McGonagall in a cold fury not unlike Daphne’s, “how you expect to gain an idea of my unusual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking.”

Umbridge looked like she’d been slapped in the face. She began scribbling very fast on her parchment.

Professor McGonagall went on about the complexity of vanishing vertebrates. Neville felt a bit of trepidation—okay, more than a bit. He’d studied the theory with the others of Harry’s circle, of course, but so far he hadn’t attempted vertebrate vanishing.

Calm down, he told himself. It’s about will, and intent, and magic. Feel your magic in your wand, will it to happen—

“Evanesco!” he said fiercely.

Nothing happened.

Hermione vanished her mouse whole on the third try. Neville got all but the skeleton on his fourth try. Hermione leaned over and reminded him to hold every part he wanted vanished in his head while he cast. He summoned another mouse from the box on McGonagall’s desk, did thirty seconds of Occlumency meditation, and tried again.

The mouse disappeared.

“Excellent, Mr. Longbottom,” Professor McGonagall said with approval and a trace of surprise. “Ten points to Gryffindor.”
Neville’s bad mood evaporated on the spot. Umbridge had got put in her place, he was the fourth in the class after Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati to get the spell, and he’d won House points.

“How’d you do that so fast?” Dean complained as they packed up their things to leave.

“I don’t know,” Neville said. Their studying ahead was a secret. “You just have to will it to happen, I guess…”

“Huh. Well, good one, mate,” Seamus said with an awkward smile. He nodded to Hermione and pushed on ahead, walking alone.

“What’s up with him?” Neville asked Dean.

Dean shrugged uncomfortably. “He, er… doesn’t know how to act around you two,” he admitted.

“Why, because he’s been a bully and an utter toerag to both of us for four years?” Hermione said with a touch of asperity.

“Ah… yeah,” Dean said with a wince. “That. I kind of… lit into him at the end of last term… for being a prat. And—I’m sorry. For—not saying anything.”

Hermione looked at him with a bit of astonishment. “Well, thank you, Dean. You might as well tell Seamus that apologies are an excellent way to jump-start the path to forgiveness.”

“And that if he backslides apologies mean nothing,” Neville added. “Just ‘cause he’s been better this year doesn’t mean it’s all swept under the rug.”

He’d been overlooked, underestimated, dismissed, bullied. Talked over and ignored. For years. Harry and the rest had seen something else in him and they’d taught him to speak up but also that it was okay to cut toxic people out of his life. They probably wouldn’t even give Seamus this much of a second chance. Neville wasn’t going to just up and forget all that. He wasn’t desperate for friends anymore. He had friends. He had people he trusted. Seamus deserved the opportunity to change, but if he and Dean expected him to just jump for joy that they felt a little bad without changing any of their behavior, they had another think coming.

“Er,” Dean said. “Right. I’ll… tell him.”

Neville and Hermione watched him hurry to catch up with Seamus.

“Did Harry say why he wants us to reach out to those two?” Hermione asked.

“He said something about eroding Jules’ power base,” Neville said.

Hermione snorted. “Yes, that sounds like Harry… You have Care after lunch, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And you’ve got Arithmancy?”

She nodded. “See you at dinner, then.”

“Wait, aren’t you coming to lunch?” he asked, startled.

“No,” she said with a brilliant smile. “Lord Malfoy finally got Winky’s paperwork through. I’m meeting a Ministry representative in McGonagall’s office during lunch to finalize the process.”

“Congratulations,” Neville said, grinning. “See you later, then.”
She peeled off to wait in McGonagall’s office for the end of whatever conversation Umbridge stayed behind to start.

Neville walked alone for a minute, relishing the feeling of being alone but not lonely. It had been years since he found friends close enough to dispel the nasty insecurity that reared its head whenever he didn’t have someone to walk with in the corridors but it was still a precious thing.

“Wait up!” he called, hurrying to join Dean and Seamus.

Harry

NL

Jules came up with some scheme to start a dueling club and train people to fight. So we don’t get behind in Defense and we’re prepared for—the war and everything.

HG

He invited both of us to join but we politely declined. We’ve already got dueling club—not that we told him that, obviously—and both of us could sit the Defense OWL right now and pass at least.

We’ll be fine.

TN

Wow, seems the Gryffindorks aren’t entirely useless

NL

hey!

TN

You’re a GryffinDOR, not a GriffinDORK. Big difference

PP

Do you know where?

HG

They’re still trying to work out a place.

HB

Would one or both of you mind terribly changing your mind?

HG

Keeping tabs on him, hm?

HB

Of course. And it’s a useful initiative, Jules is on the right track about the students needing Defense education
Parvati scared all of the fifth years into joining by talking about our OWL practical. Well, except for us.

At least Potter knows to listen to some clever people

Think they'd let a Slytherin in?

Not a chance. Dean actually asked if you were going to be invited, Harry, and Jules said no. He seemed guilty about it, wouldn’t give me a straight answer why you couldn’t come, but I think a few of the older Light students threatened to tell on the whole group if you showed up. Jules wouldn’t risk the whole group collapsing. If they won’t tolerate you…

Yeah, the rest of us would probably get cursed on sight.

Keep us posted?

We’ll do our best. They don’t like talking about some things in front of us, they know we’re friends with you, but you working with the Order, Harry, seems to have won Jules over a bit.

Pity that was a lie.

Thanks, guys.

“Mr. Black. Stay after class.”

Harry blinked at Snape. “Yes, sir.”

Theo and Daphne telegraphed worry at him. Harry shook his head subtly and bottled a sample of his Invigoration Draught for grading. The rest of the potion waited in his cauldron; he didn’t bother vanishing it since he knew Snape would want to keep it.

The rest of the class left, Gryffindors fleeing Snape’s presence and Slytherins leaving at a normal pace, until only Harry and Snape were still in the classroom.

He waited at his desk, poised and neutral, hands clasped loosely in front of him.

“I’ve found you a tutor,” Snape said without preamble.

Harry blinked. That—was unexpected. “Sorry, sir?”

“You are far enough ahead of your peers as to be ridiculously bored,” Snape said acidly. “I refuse to
allow one of my students to not achieve their fullest possible potential. I have neither the time nor the inclination to take you as my apprentice so I have found someone else to do it instead.”

“...thank you, sir,” Harry said. It was the only thing he could say, but there was a catch here. Snape’s posture was practically screaming ‘there’s a catch.’ “The Headmaster...?”

“Shall remain blissfully unaware of our arrangement,” Snape said with a curled lip. “Confidentiality clause of the Head of House position, Black. You do not yet present a danger to yourself or others. You may if you continue studying things from the Restricted Section without adult guidance.” He raised an eyebrow that said he knew perfectly well Harry wasn’t only looking at runic magic in there.

“How will this work, then, sir?” Harry said. “Logistically—if the Headmaster does not know...”

“There are ways to fool the Hogwarts wards,” Snape said with a twist of his lips. “As your Head of House, I can authorize a Potions independent study project twice a week, where you will meet him in the dungeons.”

“I see,” he said slowly. “Professor, you make it sound as though my... potential tutor... is someone the Headmaster dislikes.”

“That is indeed true.” Snape crossed his arms. “There will be oaths involved to protect the identities of master and apprentice.”

“I presume you won’t tell me his name before I swear an oath of secrecy, then,” Harry said, mind spinning.

Snape nodded tightly.

“An Unbreakable?” he said curiously. “Do you have a third to act as binder?”

“I do not,” Snape said. “However, an oath on your magic requires no binder.”

There was a sadistic glint in his eyes. Bastard, Harry thought darkly. Snape had to know exactly how the thought of being magicless hit Harry in the gut. Frankly, he would rather die than live as a Muggle.

“Can I think about it?” he said.

“Three days.” Snape’s tone left no room for negotiation. “You have three days. On September thirtieth, come to my office and swear an oath on your magic that you will not reveal the tutor whom I propose, either directly or indirectly, to anyone, no matter whether you accept the offer or not. If you decline, you may depart with no consequences. If you accept, twice a week, you will spend two hours under his tutelage under the guise of a potions extracurricular.”

“May I speak of the offer to my friends between now and then, sir?” Harry said softly. “Trusted friends only, of course.”

Snape scowled. “Only those you trust, Black. Be very careful. Playing games with Albus Dumbledore rarely ends well for anyone.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said deferentially. “Thank you.”
Theo and Daphne thought he should do it. Blaise and Pansy agreed, a little less forcefully. Draco said nothing. Justin just shrugged and said as long as he was careful, if he wanted more work, he could take it on.

Hermione, though.

“It sounds like he’s setting you up with a Death Eater!” she whispered anxiously.

Pansy glared at her. “So what if he is?”

Hermione glared right back, just as viciously. “It could be a plot to kill him! Harry—if the oaths aren’t perfect—”

“They don’t want to kill Harry.” Theo covered Hermione’s hand with his. “At worst, they want to abduct him, not kill him. And with the oaths, that would be difficult—they couldn’t just slap him with a Portkey and vanish. Not to mention it takes ridiculous magic to create a Portkey that can get through the Hogwarts wards.”

“He’d be careful on that count,” Daphne said. “We know him. And he’s not even leaving the castle.”

Her frown didn’t diminish.

“If he’s careful, I don’t see why not,” Neville said.

“You read those oaths,” Hermione said fiercely, rounding on Harry. “Every word. Try to get around them any way you can. I still think it’s a risk—that Snape or another old Death Eater or experienced Slytherin could outfox you—but if you’re going to do it—”

“I am,” Harry said flatly.

They all stilled.

“I didn’t want to keep it a secret,” he said, a little softer. “I don’t know if the oath will let me tell you who it is, or even let me speak of it in the terms of my—of tutoring. But I’ve made up my mind. And I’ll be as careful as I can, Hermione. Trust me.” It was an unprecedented opportunity to learn from a kind-of enemy. Both magic, and other things—hints dropped, information, methods, motivations—Everything he was trying to figure out by working with the Order. But from the other side.

“All right,” Justin said. “Don’t die. Draco, what were you saying about Gringotts?”

Hermione looked at Harry as the others gradually went back to over conversations. Part of his decision to tell them had been their argument about secrets on the train. He hoped she’d realized he could easily have just not said a word. He hoped she knew that he’d told them because he really wanted their feedback, wanted them to know.

Very slightly, Hermione nodded.

Harry steeled himself, settled his mind into clear, cold stillness, and knocked on Snape’s door.

“Enter.”

The Potions Master sat on the other side of his desk, grading essays. “Sit,” he said without looking up.
Harry sat down in a predictably uncomfortable chair.

Snape made him wait.

Harry rolled his eyes at the power play. He could wait. Patience was not his favorite virtue but he could exercise it when necessary.

He resisted the urge to stroke Eriss, draped invisibly across his shoulders. She was a last line of defense.

Snape set an essay aside, propped his quill in a stand, and looked up. “Yes?”

“I’d like to meet him,” Harry said.

Snape nodded, showing not a whit of surprise. “You will swear an oath on your magic that you will not reveal anything about your first meeting to anyone who was not already aware of it, that you will neither directly nor indirectly reveal the identity of your potential tutor, and that you will neither directly nor indirectly reveal my involvement in the entire thing.”

“Reasonable.” Harry drew his wand but did not offer it. “Will you in turn swear an oath of secrecy, and that you will prevent anyone from using this meeting as an opportunity to harm me, remove me from Hogwarts, or cast any kind of magic not directly related to my lessons?” He’d hate to basically hand Snape blackmail material. The canny Head of Slytherin could probably come up with a way to spin it that Harry was putting himself at risk if he had to and dodge the confidentiality clause.

Snape’s lips twitched. “I will.”

Snape flicked his own wand out of a holster and held it perpendicular to Harry’s with the tip just touching the ash wand. A light blue glow sprang to life at the point of contact.

“I swear on my magic that I will not reveal anything about my first meeting with my potential tutor to anyone who was not already aware that such a meeting would occur, that I will neither directly nor indirectly reveal the identity of my potential tutor, and that I will neither directly nor indirectly reveal Severus Snape’s contact with my potential tutor or role in arranging such a meeting, until such time as the binder of this oath releases me from it. So mote it be.”

He felt a rush of power leave him at the words. Binding him to the oath.

Snape pulled his wand away and set it crossways on the table, pointing to Harry’s right. Harry picked his own wand back up and held it to Snape’s, mentally casting the oath-spell.

Snape cleared his throat. “I swear on my magic that I will not reveal Hadrian Black’s first meeting with his potential tutor to anyone not authorized by the binder of this oath until such time as the binder of this oath releases me from it. I swear on my magic that I will prevent anyone from using this meeting as an opportunity to harm Hadrian Black, remove Hadrian Black from Hogwarts, or cast any kind of magic not directly related to Hadrian Black’s lessons. So mote it be.”

Magic pulsed.

Harry took his wand back and slotted it back into his holster. “May I know who you have in mind now, Professor?” he said. “And when I’ll be meeting him?”

“You may,” Snape said, leaning back in his chair with an unmistakably smug expression. He called loudly, “We’re ready.”
Harry didn’t have time to think through the ramifications of that before the door to Snape’s private chambers opened and someone stepped out.

Someone he recognized.


Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! sorry this is so late; i’ve been away from consistent access to internet and my laptop for a while. no promises but i should be doing once a week again? probably? it was a lie the last time i said that, so, please don't panic if updates are late again in the future. if i die i'll have a friend let you know and otherwise i do promise that I haven't abandon this fic.

also, enjoy the cliffhanger... i figured that would make a nice little pre-holiday gift
Harry was on his feet in a heartbeat, wand out and trained on Crouch, backing towards the door.

“Calm down, Black,” Snape barked. “He’s your potential tutor; I’ve just sworn an oath to protect you.”

“You said ‘potential tutor’ in the oaths.” Harry said tightly, eyes never leaving Crouch. He believed Snape, but that was no excuse to drop his guard. “No names. I’m no Legilimens to tell if you’ve just lied to me or not, *so forgive me* if I’m a bit cautious.”

Crouch snickered. “This should be fun.”

“You are the most paranoid child I have ever met,” Snape snarled. *With good reason.* Harry didn’t move.

Snape held his wand out flat across one palm. “Crouch, bind an oath,” he demanded.

Crouch flicked his wand out of a holster on his wrist and pressed it to the side of Snape’s.

“I swear on my magic that this man is the potential tutor I spoke of in my previous oaths to Hadrian Black. So mote it be,” Snape said irritably.

The light flared, magic pulsed.

Harry very slowly lowered his wand, but did not slide it back up into his holster. Eriss was a band of tension across his shoulders, invisible to everyone but him, ready to strike. Curses hovered on his lips, the most rapid-acting and hard-to-block spells he knew, because his only chance if one or both of them attacked was for him to hit them with something they didn’t expect him to know at the outset. He could maybe take a lower-level Death Eater out. Maybe. Definitely *not* Snape or Crouch, not in an extended duel. He’d have to end things before it actually got to the point of *being* a duel.

“Well met, Heir Crouch,” he said stiffly.

“Do you know, my father never properly disinherited me,” Crouch said disinterestedly. “I suppose I am still the Heir. Not that it matters, since technically I’m a fugitive wanted for multiple life sentences in Azkaban. I can’t claim a bit of my inheritance.”

“Surely the goblins would let you access your vaults,” Harry said.

“They would.” Crouch conjured a chair with slow movements and sat down. Snape settled back into the seat behind his desk. Harry felt a bit foolish as the only person on his feet but he didn’t allow their change in posture to force him to sit. “But the Ministry monitors withdrawals from accounts held by fugitives from the law if the charge is weighty enough. I’ve no desire to tip them off to my location. Even if I went to a foreign branch.”

Fair. “Why did you agree to this plan?” Harry asked.

Crouch shrugged. “I like teaching, my lord allows it, Severus seems to think you need teaching, and I suspect you would make an interesting student. Why did you agree to consider an apprenticeship?”
Harry almost smiled. “Professor Snape had a point that I’m venturing into areas of magic best explored with a guide,” he said. “My classes are for the most part somewhat boring, due to either material or pace or both. I’m not one to pass up any opportunity to get stronger.”

“Spoken like a true Slytherin,” Crouch said to Snape as an aside.

Harry slowly lowered himself into a chair behind him, keeping his wand in one hand. “I take it there would be conditions?”

“We swear reciprocal oaths to not use any information gleaned in our tutoring sessions against one another and respect each other’s intellectual property rights,” Crouch said immediately. “It’s a fairly standard master-apprentice precaution. Used to be the apprentice moved in with the master and was treated as a surrogate child. That often meant they’d be exposed to family secrets. Other times, the apprentice’s family wasn’t fond of the master’s, or vice versa, or the master is just trying to cover his own ass. Meanwhile, the apprentice and their family want to be given a degree of protection in return. This would mean, for example, that if you let slip you’ll be in Madame Puddifoot’s on a date this Valentine’s Day, I can’t organize a hit on you based on that information. Likewise, if I were to slip and reveal a bit of information that allowed you to potentially narrow down my location when not in the castle, you couldn’t feed it to the Order and have them come after me. I understand you like to modify your potions; if you create some kind of new potion and want to sell it, I can’t copy your work or reveal what you’re working on to anyone else except in general terms.”

That was reasonable. “I want a stipulation that you won’t reveal the fact of our arrangement to anyone who might use it against me,” Harry said. “Your lord would know, obviously, but no passing it off to the Order or Dumbledore or the Ministry. The Death Eaters keep it among themselves. And you swear not to use Legilimency, mind-altering potions or spells on me. Or to try and remove me from Hogwarts grounds by force.”

“Fair enough,” Crouch said. “You’ll have a say in what we cover. I’ll swear to tell you up front the full consequences of any spell I teach you for both the caster and the subject. If something concerns you, we can skip it. You, in exchange, will give your full attention and best effort every session.”

“What subjects can you teach?” Harry said, unable to quite hide the gleam in his eye.

Crouch snorted. “I had twelve OWLs and ten NEWTs, Black, after dropping History and Divination. Straight Os in everything except Astronomy, both times. I didn’t quite break my lord’s records but no one else has come closer than I did. I can teach you pretty much everything. And it won’t be separated by subject—at least, not as clearly as it is in your classes here. Dueling, Dark Arts, arithmancy, spellcrafting, runes, warding and wardbreaking, curses and cursebreaking, charms, transfiguration, potions, herbology.”

Fuck. Harry kept his face impassive and set aside his hunger and thought about this logically. The potential benefits were enormous. The potential costs were also enormous. If he miscalculated—if Crouch had an ulterior motive here—

Harry believed Crouch’s reasoning. Fake Moody had seemed to genuinely enjoy teaching last year. And he’d been brilliant at it. It also didn’t take a genius to figure out that the Death Eaters thought they could recruit him, and wanted to strengthen their ties. Put together, Voldemort had plenty of motivation to authorize this.

“Yes,” he said.
They spent two hours hashing out all the details. The oaths they swore, both parties on their magic, were the secrecy oaths from both of them, Crouch’s promise to keep mind-altering magic, forceful removal from Hogwarts, and other forms of harm off the table, and the master-apprentice protection clause. They each signed a written contract covering what Crouch was going to teach, Harry’s promise to give his best effort, and a stipulation that either of them could withdraw at any time with a week’s advance notice and suspend all future master-apprentice relations, although their previous oaths would still keep them bound to keep it a secret. Harry was allowed to tell his immediate circle of friends the truth of what he was doing—not a Potions independent study project but an apprenticeship with someone of Snape’s choosing—but not the identity of his master. They were to meet Wednesday and Thursday evenings from seven to nine p.m. with a third optional two-hour session from nine to eleven p.m. on Saturdays. Snape would sneak Crouch in and out of the castle.

“I look forward to working with you, Heir Black,” Crouch said when they were done, the contracts signed, and the oaths sworn.

Harry didn’t bother to stop a small smile from creeping over his face. “And I with you, Heir Crouch. Haven’t you been calling me Hadrian, by the way? In our… correspondence?”

Crouch smiled, too. It wasn’t warm or kind. “Hadrian, then. Call me Mr. Crouch if you must be formal.”

Oh, thank Merlin, because it might be traditional but Harry was *not* calling him ‘Master Crouch.’ It sounded too much like Winky. “I’ll see you Wednesday, then,” he said.

“You accepted, then?” Neville asked.

Harry nodded, meeting their eyes one by one. “I did. Can’t tell you who it is, but it’s Wednesdays and Thursdays from seven to nine. Hermione, Theo, can you guys take over the younger set’s dueling club on Thursdays?”

“Yes,” Theo said. “Right?”

“Sure.” Hermione fiddled with her wand. “Harry, you’re fine? Not—coerced or…”

“The oaths were all acceptable,” Harry said. “I’m fine. There’s a termination clause and everything.”

Blaise raised his eyebrows.

“Oaths?” Hermione frowned. “Wait—Daphne, this is what your dad was talking about—apprenticeship clauses—”

“Apprenticeships could get nasty,” Daphne confirmed. “Sometimes basically an indentured servant if the apprentice’s family didn’t read the contract well. A termination clause is a good sign.”

“And I get a say in what we learn, and they agree to tell me all the consequences of any spell for caster and subject,” Harry added. “I won’t be tricked into, I don’t know, losing my sanity casting a really nasty curse.”

Pansy nodded. “Another good sign.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “So you’re safe, and you like your—master, and you agreed to all the oaths and contract clauses?”
Harry nodded.

“Okay.” Justin clearly dismissed the whole matter as Harry’s business upon hearing that. Neville did likewise.

He was worried about Fred and George, but it turned out to be unnecessary. They only asked him to pass on anything he learned that could be useful for their burgeoning mail-order prank business and went back to blowing things up in the corner of the Chamber when he told them.

Classes seemed exceptionally dull that week. All Harry could think of was the impending session with Crouch on Wednesday night. He handed in essays, worked on his grimoire, practiced active Occlumency until his brain felt like mush, and finally finished copying the Chamber library. Babbling pulled him aside after class on Tuesday to ask about his research and he put on a good fascinated-student show for her. All the while thinking about his impending tutoring session with a Death Eater.

He scarfed down his dinner on Wednesday and left the Great Hall with Theo at his side for appearances’ sake. “Have fun,” Theo said with a smirk as they paused outside the common room.

Harry grinned and left him there.

Snape had picked a long-forgotten room deep in the dungeons and warded the living hell out of it. Eriss could’ve led him straight to the scent of the magic even if Snape hadn’t come along to show him the way. The Potions Master didn’t say a word the whole way. Neither did Harry.

He thanked Snape, briefly, at the door the professor showed him. Snape nodded jerkily and stalked away.

Harry took a deep breath and centered himself before he walked inside. Eriss slid in at his feet, poised in the shadows. She’d keep an eye on Crouch for him and sniff around in case there were any surprises waiting for him.

The room was completely empty. Stone walls, floor, and ceiling, as in the rest of the dungeon, but—no furniture, no paintings, and certainly no Crouch.

Harry blinked.

A jet of red light shot towards him out of nowhere.

He hit the floor and rolled. Another jet of light, blue this time, looked like a withering curse, slammed into the floor where he’d been a half second before. “Eriss,” he snarled, still rolling, flicking his wand out and casting a silent protego that instantly deflected three curses in quick succession. He pumped more power into it.

Someone yelled.

Harry waited, heart pounding, but no more curses came. Satisfaction thrummed down the familiar bond.

“Black!” a familiar voice said angrily, and then an arm appeared out of nowhere, sweeping aside an Invisibility Cloak.
“Oh fuck,” Harry said, dispelling his shield and striding forward. Crouch’s face was white; his hands shook and he seemed incapable of casting a spell. Familiar symptoms. There was Eriss at his feet, looking as smug as a relatively expressionless creature could look.

“Where’d you get him?” Harry said.

“His ankle.”

Good, he had a bit of time before the venom did irreversible damage. “What are you playing at?” Harry demanded.

“Not—playing,” Crouch said with a vicious grin, echoing something Harry had said once. “Testing your reaction times, Black.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Considered.

Nodded once and yanked the antivenin out of his pocket. Thank Merlin he always kept a vial on him. “Drink this,” he said, flicking the cap off and holding it to Crouch’s lips. “Antivenin.”

The man drank it without hesitation.

His tremors eased within thirty seconds, and within a minute, his breathing evened out and some color returned to his face. “Friends with the castle snakes, Black?” he said.

“Something like that.” Harry stepped back and waited carefully, wand at the ready. “Don’t bite him again for now,” he added.

Eriss felt sulky. Harry shoved gratitude at her for her quick reaction even though it hadn’t been necessary.

Crouch tossed his Cloak at the wall and sent a sticking charm after it to fix it in place. “Won’t make that mistake again. Good reaction time, by the way. I can work with that.”

“…thanks,” Harry said.

Crouch waved his wand. Two chairs and a table appeared out of nowhere, each crafted of plain wood. They sat across from each other, about a meter apart.

“Did you bring what I requested?” Crouch said.

Harry put his bag on the table. “Samples of my work, books I’ve been studying recently, potions experiments,” he said.

“May I?”

“Go for it.”

Crouch opened the charcoal gray bag that had served Harry well since first year and started pulling things out. The expansion charm on the bag meant that he got quite a stack of books and notebooks out by the time it was empty. Crouch started going through his books, scrolls, and notebooks while Harry snagged a Transfiguration essay he’d brought along to work on in case of a moment like this.

Twenty minutes later, Crouch closed Central American Theories of Potions, one of the most heavily annotated books in Harry’s collection. The Hogwarts curriculum tended to focus on Asian and European magical practices. Harry sensed the shift in the air and set his essay aside.
“Severus wasn’t exaggerating,” Crouch said, examining Harry like he might a chess piece that he’d thought was a pawn and now suspected to be something else. “This is excellent work.”

Harry inclined his head slightly. They didn’t need pretensions at humility here. He knew his work was excellent for his age.

“I can’t get this one to open without wrecking the runes on it, which I rather think you don’t want me to do,” Crouch continued, tapping the grimoire.

“Right,” Harry said. He leaned over the table, flipped it open, and pulsed a bit of magic into the pages to override the security measures and let Crouch read it.

Crouch flipped through the first three pages and looked up at him sharply. “You’ve created a grimoire.”

“Ten points to Ravenclaw,” Harry said.

A mild stinging hex hit his right hand. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Technically you’re my apprentice,” Crouch said, smirking. “Which means, technically, respect is owed.”

_Earn it_, Harry wanted to say, but frankly, Crouch already had, so he bit his tongue.

“What are you planning to do with these?” Crouch said, tapping the pages.

“Sell them,” Harry said promptly. “Mastersies in Potions, Runes, Spellcrafting, and possibly Dark Arts somewhere in the Americas to legitimize my name.” Where they didn’t give a shit about ‘Dark’ or ‘Light’ but more about what you actually did with your magic. He wanted to travel the States, Central America, the Brazilian schools of magic and the scattered magicals of Argentina and Chile.

“Add to the Black vaults?” Crouch said.

“Inheritances aren’t meant to be wasted,” Harry said. “The Lord has a duty to leave the coffers fuller than he found them, if possible.”

Crouch nodded slowly. “You have the business expertise for this?”

“I grew up listening to my uncle’s rants about his business,” Harry said. “Of which, incidentally, I now own a majority of shares. Not that he knows that. Anyway. Yes, and what I don’t know I intend to partner with Justin Finch-Fletchley for if he’ll agree.” He was pretty sure Justin would go for it.

“Good,” Crouch said briskly. “We’ll start with runes and potions, then, you’ve got some good ideas for combining the two in here. Some people have tried but it’s an immensely finnicky task that more often than not results in your cauldron blowing up. I presume you want dueling practice as well?”

Harry grinned. “Please.”

“Figures. Dueling for one hour a week, other subjects for three, then?”

“Works for me.”

“Excellent.” Crouch shut the grimoire and shoved it aside. “How about politics?”

“The Blacks have an entailed Wizengamot seat,” Harry said. “One day I intend to take it up, when
Sirius abdicates or dies. He’s young, so that shouldn’t be for a while—I want to finish my studies first, and do politics later.” He paused. “Not that I want to stay ignorant of what’s going on in the political world, mind, it’s just—a slightly more distant priority.”

“Plenty of Heirs do it that way,” Crouch said with a shrug. “My plan involved a proxy, I’ve never been much for politics myself, but you don’t spent half your life a Death Eater not knowing how the game is played. I can teach you political theory and science alongside history.”

Harry tried to hide his eagerness. Everything he knew about politics came from his own experience in Slytherin and watching his peers and hearing their stories about their families’ agendas in the Wizengamot. He’d read political science books, many of them borrowed or recommended from Pansy, but some things were just easier with a teacher.

“I’ll take that expression as a yes,” Crouch said, grinning. “One hour on that a week, one for dueling, two for other subjects as I see fit.”

“Perfect,” Harry said fervently.

“How about the Saturday session?”

Harry hesitated. “Can we hold off on that for now?”

“By all means. Let’s start with potions, then. This book—Towler’s translation of Mesopotamian Fieldmagicke. Your notes indicate you didn’t understand it.”

Harry frowned at the reminder of a persistent headache. “It seems like it’s similar to Gamp’s Laws but whoever wrote the original—I can’t pronounce their name—takes it in a whole other direction? I thought it might be the translation—”

“It’s not.” Crouch flipped the book open to a page about six chapters in and spun it around. “Read. Gamp’s eleventh law.”

Harry read it. “I don’t get it.”

“Not the elemental transfiguration,” Crouch said. “Here, and here, the points the author makes about observed discrepancies with conjuration of potions ingredients.”

“Oh,” Harry said, and then again, “Oh—so if you connected the two—?”

“Now you’re on the right track.”

His head was spinning like a tornado by the time they were finished. Crouch was hands down the most brilliant person Harry had ever met. “You were holding back last year,” he accused.

Crouch laughed. It was raspy and a bit hollow and somehow similar to Sirius’ laugh. Azkaban echoing out of them, Harry supposed. The shadows of that place just did not seem to fade. “I had to match Moody,” Crouch said, spinning a wand around his fingers in much the same way Harry did in moments of idleness. “Who is by all accounts a brilliant duelist and clever tactician, but not an academic powerhouse.”

“I think I learned more in the last hour and a half than this whole year in Snape’s class,” Harry said. Against his better judgment, he liked Crouch, just as he had via the journals. Brilliant and unaccepting of bullshit, he was nevertheless an excellent teacher and always willing to explain things or answer questions. He expected a degree of respect and deference but he was generally more relaxed than any of Harry’s teachers save Flitwick.
“Exactly why Severus brought me on,” Crouch said with a grin. He scribbled on a bit of parchment while Harry packed his books up and handed it over when Harry was done. “Reading for tomorrow, plus a list of books I think you’ll find interesting or useful. We’ll start with politics tomorrow for an hour, then duel. I swore an oath not to hurt you so I’d appreciate you keeping your reptilian friends from biting me again.” He paused. “Speaking of which, that was a very specific antivenin, not a generic one.”

Damn. Harry had hoped he wouldn’t notice that. “It was,” he agreed impassively.

“Got one friend in particular?” Crouch said with a raised eyebrow. There was a kind of predatory stillness to him now that reminded Harry of an owl, or possibly a jungle cat, that had just spotted its prey.

He considered for several seconds.

“Eriss,” he said.

She began climbing his leg almost immediately. “Does he get to meet me?”

“Are you comfortable?” Harry asked, giving no indication that his presently invisible-to-Crouch familiar was pooled in his lap.

“Yes. So long as he’s not angry that I bit him.”

“You’ll be fine,” Harry said. He lifted her onto the table and traced some runes on her back with his wand, canceling the invisibility runespell.

Crouch didn’t flinch, but his eyes widened fractionally as she faded into view. “Loharian viper,” he said.

“Yep. Mr. Crouch, meet Eriss, my familiar.”

Eriss lifted her head up off the table, eyed Crouch for several long seconds, and hissed a wordless expression of disdain in his direction.

“She says hello,” Harry said, straight-faced.

“It took my lord’s familiar four years to warm up to me,” Crouch said. “I highly doubt she said anything so polite as hello.”

“He’s clever,” Eriss said smugly.

Harry’s lips twitched.

“You have a quick strike and strong venom,” Crouch told her seriously. Harry had to choke on a laugh. Clearly, either Voldemort or his familiar through him had told Crouch how to talk to a Parselmouth’s familiar.

Eriss flicked her tail. “I know.”

“She says she knows,” Harry said with a faint smirk. “Painful, too, if memory serves.”

Crouch raised his eyebrows. “You’ve been…?”

“Third year,” Harry said. “She was trying to snap me out of dementor-fugue. It worked long enough for me to cast a Patronus, and then Theo woke up and had to force the antivenin down my throat.”
“A corporeal Patronus?” Crouch said, leaning forward intently. “May I see?”

Harry focused his mind. “*Expecto patronum.*”

His silver direwolf formed out of his wand and padded across the floor, sniffing suspiciously at Crouch’s hand before sitting at Harry’s side.

“Impressive,” Crouch said, eyes not leaving it.

“Can you cast it?” Harry said.

A bitter smile twisted Crouch’s thin lips. “Not since Azkaban. Eleven years under the Imperius after a year in Azkaban meant my Occlumency was pretty much shot to hell. If not for my lord, I’d be a gibbering mess. As it is I couldn’t fend off more than an intermediate-level Legilimens longer than it would take me to Disapparate. Patronus is out of reach.”

“No framing, then?” Harry said.

“My lord taught me the spell at sixteen. He has no patience for emotional crutches in spellcasting. For that matter, neither will I. Will that be a problem?”

“I haven’t relied on framing since I worked out what it was third year,” Harry said. “I—haven’t got a memory strong enough to power a Patronus, so it was either get past the framing crutch or risk my soul.”

“Motivation for anyone,” Crouch agreed. Harry quelled his rush of relief that Crouch showed no sign of pity whatsoever.

“What was your Patronus?” he said.

Crouch eyed him for a few seconds before deciding to answer. “An eagle owl.”

Not surprising. Harry looked down at the wolf, relishing its comforting presence, and severed the flow of magic. The Patronus dissolved into the air.

“Tomorrow, then?” Crouch said.

“Tomorrow,” Harry agreed.

He was as brilliant with politics and history as he was with everything else. On top of that, he was a better duelist than even Viktor, and that was with the limit of no spells you couldn’t heal, which took both of their best tools off the table. Harry walked out of his second session bruised and humming with adrenaline and exhilarated at the promise of getting stronger.

To absolutely no one’s surprise, Theo asked Hermione to accompany him to Hogsmeade on the first weekend of October. Blaise and Iris Viridian had an on-again off-again thing going but this was an ‘on’ period, so they went together. It was a bit of a surprise when Neville shyly asked Luna.

“I thought he had a crush on Ginny,” Harry said to Pansy in Scrolls and Tomes.

She shrugged, picking over a stack of fashion magazines and political science books. “Crushes change… Ginny’s here with Rowle today, did you know?”
“Ronald’s probably having kittens,” Harry said delightedly.

Pansy grinned. “Most likely.”

“Wait, wasn’t she having a thing with Finn Sullivan earlier this year?” he asked, a bit of drama from dueling club that he’d ignored completely coming back to him.

“They broke it off, ah, the day before your little negotiation session,” Pansy said.

He nodded and went back to scanning the shelves of history books for something that would hopefully help his and Hermione’s current research project. *Biased, biased, straight propaganda, biased…*

“How about you and Draco?” he said carefully.

Pansy made an irritated noise. “Dating? Kind of? I don’t even know. Our parents hope we’ll get married someday. I’m starting to think I wouldn’t make it two years without committing matricide.”

“He’s been… better lately,” said Harry, eyeing Draco. He seemed to have gotten into a passionate debate with Justin and Daphne about something over in the Defense section. None of them looked angry, just interested.

“Yeah,” Pansy said. “But there’s a difference between enjoying his presence in our circle and marriage. He sulks. All the time.”

Harry tried not to laugh and failed. “Ignore him.”

“Yeah, and since when have I been any good at that?” Pansy said.

He smirked at her. “Fair point.”

“How about you?” Pansy said impishly, smirking. “Any special girls?”

“Ha,” Harry said. “No. I just sorted things out with Daph and I’m not interested in trying that again anytime soon, thank you.”

“So date someone outside our group,” Pansy suggested. “That way if you break up…”

“Right,” Harry said. “Because I’m *totally* trusting enough for that.”

Pansy sighed theatrically. “I guess… still. You’re a teenage boy, it’s only natural—”

“Feelings,” Harry said disgustedly.

She laughed. “You are pretty fucking ridiculous, Black.”

“So are you, Parkinson.”

“Hold these,” Pansy said, dumping her stack of books and magazines into his arms. Harry staggered back a step under the unexpected weight as she crouched down to look at the bottom shelf and petted Astrych with an absent hand.

“Is this all I am to you?” he said in a wounded voice. “Your mobile book holder?”

“Yes.”
Harry shifted his grip on the books and hit her with a wandless stinger right in the spine.

“Hey!” she said indignantly, whacking his shin with a hardback.

He danced backwards, grinning.

“Prat,” she huffed. “Don’t you need those books you had recommended?” By your tutor, she didn’t add out loud.

“Owl ordered,” he said. “They’ll be here in the post tomorrow.”

“Mmm. It’s good to see you taking more of an interest in politics,” Pansy added, handing him another book without looking up. Harry rolled his eyes and added it to the stack. “After all, you’ll be on the ‘Gamot one day…”

“Be seeing you there, I presume?” he said.

Pansy glared at him. “Can you really see me as some simpering housewife?”

He made a face. “Hardly. Although I feel like I should point out that there are more options than politician or housewife.”

“Nah,” Pansy said. She stood up with Astrych in one arm and two more books in the other. The fox kit was growing quickly; in another month or two he’d be too big to easily carry around.

“Parental expectations?” he asked. “I know Daphne…”

Pansy shook her head. “My parents raised me to be a perfect society lady who can toss curses without getting blood on my robes but we’ve never been as—involved on the ‘Gamot as some others. I’m expected to uphold the family name and leave the vaults at least as full as I got them and pick a good proxy if I don’t take the seat myself, but that’s about it.” She laughed. “I told Dad when I was nine I wanted to be a Wizengamot lady. He’s still not over the disappointment—he hoped I’d be a Healer like Uncle Niall.”

A mild stinging hex hit Harry’s hand. “Okay, your turn,” he said, tipping the books back into Pansy’s grip, and tugged his journal out of his bag.

“What’s that smirk for?” Pansy said suspiciously.

“Would dear old Draco be angry if you accompanied me on a little adventure?” Harry said. “We have some chaos to create.”

Pansy grinned. “Just let me pay for all this.”

Neville

“The things we do for friendship,” Hermione said with a dramatic sigh.

Neville shrugged uncomfortably. He wasn’t confident in his acting abilities and he didn’t want to be here—but it made sense.

At least Luna had agreed to come along.

They were holding hands. It felt sweaty and a bit awkward—where should he put his fingers? Was
he holding too tight or too loose? How did you walk so your hands didn’t bump awkwardly with uneven gaits?—but Luna hadn’t pulled away yet so he was not going to, either.

Neville looked down at her. She reminded him of a fairy, always. The way her hair looked almost translucent in the biting autumn sunlight; her wide blue eyes that drank in the world and beamed everything back turned into something magic; the wonder she turned on the oddest things that made them special. Luna hummed a snatch of eerie music under her breath that made the hairs on his arms stand up.

“Here,” Hermione said.

He snapped out of it, and frowned. “Here? Really? The Hog’s Head?”

“That’s what Harry said when I told him,” Hermione said with a sigh. “Something like the best way to be overheard is go somewhere quiet.”

“Jules doesn’t seem sensible enough to be leading a covert defense group,” Luna said.

“Not really,” Neville agreed. “It’ll still be interesting…”

She hummed noncommittally. “I think our dueling club is much more so.”

Hermione paused on the Hog’s Head front walk. “Luna,” she said quietly, “if we join this club—you know you can’t use a lot of the spells your dad teaches you, right? Or most of the spells we use in dueling club?”


Go with it, Neville mouthed at her, and followed Luna into the pub with a stupid grin on his face that he couldn’t erase. Luna was amazing.

Fred and George were already inside, looking extremely bored. Their heads were the only bits of color in an otherwise overwhelmingly gray atmosphere. The old man behind the counter kept his face down and cleaned glasses with a filthy rag. Neville bit his lip and eyed a man with a mummy-bandaged head at the counter, two hooded figures by a window talking in Yorkshire accents, a witch in the corner wearing a head-to-toe black veil.

Luna flopped on the floor at the twins’ feet, sat cross-legged, and started braiding her hair in some kind of runic pattern.

“Hey, Moon,” George said with a grin. This was the twins’ latest nickname for her.

“Fiendfyre twins,” she said agreeably.

Fred choked.

Hermione laughed and sat between Fred and the wall. George shifted to let Neville scoot past him into the last empty chair at their table.

“Fiendfyre?” George said, eyeing Luna. “Us?”

“Oh yes,” she said, beaming up at him. Her fingers didn’t stop working through her hair with lightning-quick movements. “Chaotic. Burning. Creation, destruction. It fits, doesn’t it?”
Neville looked from Fred to George and back again. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen you two speechless,” he said.

“Don’t worry, won’t happen again,” Fred said. He and George swapped a grin. Obviously the nickname didn’t bother them too much.

The barman shuffled over. “What?” he grunted.

Well, he wasn’t very nice. “Five butterbeers, please,” Neville said, pulling out his moneybag.

“Ten sickles.”

“I’ve got it,” Neville said before anyone else could. He handed over the silver. The twins’ smuggling business was doing pretty well and their mail-order joke shop was doing even better, but they were putting all their profits back into product design. Hermione was never flush with pocket money and Luna spent all her allowance on books. Neville, on the other hand, had a bottomless Gringotts bag that he never knew what to do with. Buying his friends drinks seemed like a good way to convince Gran he was actually doing something other than hiding in the greenhouses.

“D’you know who all is coming?” George asked Hermione. “I know Harry wanted us to turn up but seriously, we have to pick some—things—up from a friend of ours…”

“You mean a black-market seller, don’t you?” Hermione said tartly.

The twins both pasted innocent faces to rival the Slytherins on their faces.

“I’m a prefect, you know,” she warned them.

Fred snorted. “A prefect attending a secret meeting for a Defense club being set up by the esteemed, estranged Boy Who Lived.”

Hermione frowned. “Point taken. No, I don’t know who’s coming, but I do think there’s more than just a few. Even as an unstable attention-seeking lunatic the Boy Who Lived has some pull…”

The door opened. A shaft of sunlight lanced through the dusty interior of the pub. Neville recognized Dean and Seamus first, both of whom waved to him; Lavender and Parvati and Sophie Roper, then Susan hanging off Ernie’s arm, then Stephen Cornfoot, Michael Corner, and Padma Patil from Ravenclaw. Rose Zeller and Christie Foster, two of the more annoying fourth-year Gryffindors. There were a bunch more people he didn’t recognize, mostly from Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. Anthony Goldstein, Sue Li, and Lisa Turpin waved when they saw Neville and Hermione and Luna and managed to snag a booth near them.

“Pritchard and Creed?” George hissed. “What was Jules thinking inviting them?”

“Harry’s going to lose it,” Hermione predicted in a low voice.

Neville frowned at the two Gryffindor sixth years. Their stupid vendetta against Harry would be enough for him to dislike them but on top of that they’d both liked to kick him around first year. Libby Borage from Hufflepuff and Ruth Annesy from Ravenclaw, also sixth years, came in with the boys. Bullies and holier-than-thou prats, all of them.

“I don’t know if I still want to be part of this group,” he said in a low voice. “Not if that’s the sort of person…”

“Think of it this way,” Hermione said, just as softly. “After a few years dueling with Theo and
Daphne, you can probably handle Toby one-handed.”

That helped. Neville felt a cautious flutter of hope. If he could take one of them down—well, that would mean he’d gotten better, wouldn’t it? Stronger, braver. Like his parents. Someone who could protect himself and others if he had to.

“Oooooh,” Fred said with an evil smirk. “It’s ickle Julie Toons’ girlfriend.”

Neville blinked. “He has a girlfriend?” he asked, looking at the door again. “Wait, that’s Cho Chang, isn’t she dating Diggory?”

“Was,” Hermione said. “Pansy was talking about this last week. She broke up with him over the summer, been dating Jules for a month now.”

“Pansy’s quite good at knowing things like that,” Luna said offhandedly.

Hermione grinned. “Yes, she is.”

“How mad d’you think they’d be if we wrote Harry and told him to show up?” Neville mused.

“Pretty damn mad,” Fred said.

Hermione looked at the twins. “No—no, I know that look, whatever you’re planning, don’t do it—”

“Do what?” George said innocently. Fred already had his journal out, flipping through the pages.

“Morgana grant me patience,” Hermione sighed.

“Who’s that with Chang?” Neville asked.

Luna looked up at him from the floor. Her braids were almost done. The pattern was pretty, and interesting, and somehow made his eyes hurt to look at for very long, so he focused on her face. “Marietta Edgecombe,” she said. “I don’t like her very much.”

“Well, you have good judgment, Moon,” Fred said solemnly. “If you don’t like her, then neither do we.”

“Mind, we wouldn’t anyway,” George added.

Neville examined the glowers they were sending Edgecombe’s way and decided not to ask.

Jules was the last one to arrive, walking into the pub with Ronald swaggering at his shoulder. He faltered a little when he saw the flock of chattering students but only for a second. Bastard was used to the limelight.

“Hey, everyone,” he said with a grin that was almost convincing. “Thanks for coming.”

There was a shuffle as students shifted chairs to focus on him. The barman had frozen, no longer cleaning his rag. Obviously listening intently. Neville sighed; there was no way this secret club was going to stay secret.

“You all know why we’re here,” Jules went on. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his robes; it was the only sign that he was nervous. “I—well—someone gave me the idea to self-study for the Defense OWL since that woman’s not teaching us a thing—”

“Hear, hear,” called Anthony.
Jules grinned at him. “—and I thought it would be good if we, you know, handled it ourselves. And
by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just theory but the real spells—”

“You want to pass the Defense OWL too, though, I bet?” Michael Corner said loudly.

“Course,” Jules said.

Ronald jutted his chin aggressively. “But we have to learn defense for other things, too. ‘Cause we
have to defend ourselves in the real world where passive responses won’t cut it.”

His ears were flaming at the end of that little speech, but he’d made it through without faltering. That
surprised Neville a little. Ronald never dealt with attention as well as Jules.

“Because…” Jules took a deep breath. “Because Voldemort’s back.”

Hermione’s grip tightened on her glass of butterbeer. Edgecombe slopped half her own drink down
her front; one of the Ravenclaws twitched violently; two people fell off their chairs. Neville managed
to turn his own noise of shock into a cough. Even after years of Jules and Harry saying it casually, he
couldn’t quite get over the ingrained reaction.

“What’s the proof of that, then?” said a blond Hufflepuff belligerently.

“Dumbledore believes it—” Jules said.

“You mean, Dumbledore believes you,” the blond kid said, scowling.

Jules frowned. “He believes me and Harry—”

“Yeah, your Slytherin brother you didn’t stand up for you to Umbridge,” Lavender said.

“He’s a coward trying to save his own skin,” Ronald spat. Jules elbowed him, hard.

Neville felt instant restrained tension radiating from the twins. Hermione poked Fred hard in the
spine. “Not here,” she hissed.

“He said—” Fred started hotly.

“Yeah,” Neville muttered. “And he’s a git, what does it matter?”

George scowled and Fred still looked twitchy but they settled.

He turned back to the room in time for the blond Hufflepuff to say, “Zacharias Smith, and I think
we’ve got the right to know exactly what makes him say You-Know-Who’s back.”

“Look,” Parvati said, getting swiftly to her feet, “that’s not really what this meeting was about—”

“It’s okay, Parvati,” Jules said.

Slowly, she sat back down.

Jules lifted his chin and straightened his spine. For the first time Neville sort of understood how
people could look at his lazy, arrogant, impulsive classmate and call him a savior. “What makes me
say You-Know-Who’s back?” he said challengingly. “I saw him. Harry did, too, and he’s got his
own reasons for not making a fuss about it—we’ve talked about it, and he was right not to stand up
to Umbridge. No sense in both of us spending our evenings on detention. We’re just two schoolkids;
we couldn’t have changed her mind, or kept her from getting us in trouble. The Ministry doesn’t
want this getting out. They’re the real problem—it’s not just Umbridge. But Dumbledore told the whole school what happened last year, and if you didn’t believe him, you don’t believe either of us, and I’m not wasting an afternoon trying to convince anyone.”

You could’ve heard a pin drop. Even the barman seemed to be listening in.

Smith snorted. “All Dumbledore told us last year was that you got kidnapped and You-Know-Who used some weird magic to bring himself back to life. Seems a lot more likely to me that Crouch lunatic did it and your brother saved both your asses when he killed Macnair.”

Neville very deliberately did not look at Hermione or Luna or George or Fred.

“If you’ve come to hear exactly what it looks like when Voldemort tries to murder someone I can’t help you,” Jules said hotly. “I don’t want to talk about what it felt like to see him use me to come back from the dead, so if that’s what you’re here for, you might as well clear out.”

No one moved.

“On the other hand,” he said, “if you want to learn some defense, I’m happy to help. We need to work out how we’re going to do it, and where, and how often—”

“Is it true you can produce a Patronus?” a Ravenclaw said interestedly.

“Alice!” Susan Bones hissed. “You weren’t supposed to tell!”

“Can you, though?” someone else called.

“Harry and I both can,” Jules said.

“Blimey, Jules!” said Seamus, looking impressed. “I never knew that!”

“Mum told me not to spread it around,” Ronald said with a shrug.

“Said you get too much attention as it is!” Fred called.

Jules shot them a look. Not angry, but not welcoming.

“And did you kill a basilisk with Gryffindor’s sword second year?” Terry Boot demanded. “That’s what one of the portraits told me when I was in there last year…”


The Creevey brothers exchanged awestruck looks. Hannah Abbott, sitting at the back of the group, looked at Neville with her nose wrinkled; she’d never been fond of Jules’ attention-hogging.

“And in our first year,” Ron said, “he saved the Sorcerer’s Stone from You-Know-Who.”

“You’re all forgetting the Triwizard tasks,” Chang said loudly. Jules looked at her and flushed. “Getting past dragons and merpeople and acromantulas…”

An impressed murmur ran around the room.

“I had a lot of help through the years,” Jules said. “I’ve had—good people around me—and I did lots of it with help—some bits on my own, some with my friends around me. That’s why I think—why I think this is so important. It’s like the Sorting Hat said. We’re stronger together.”
There was another ripple of approval and agreement. People were staring at Jules with wide, awed eyes.

“Is that why you didn’t invite any Slytherins?”

Everyone turned and stared at the speaker. Neville found himself surprised: Lisa Turpin.

She twirled her hair around one finger and didn’t back down under all the eyes fixed on her.

“We—er—didn’t have any Slytherins to invite,” Jules said.

“Plus they’re all gits,” Ronald added.

“That wounds me, Weasley.”

This time, when everyone flipped around to stare, there was not an interested murmur but a sudden, awkward silence. Jules stared at Harry standing in the door of the Hog’s Head.

Harry smiled brightly at them all.

“What are you doing here?” Lavender said angrily.

“Yeah, I want to know that too,” Susan Bones seconded with a glare.

Harry pulled a chair up into the group between a couple of Hufflepuffs and Cho Chang. “Well, I heard word of a Defense group, and I’m about as fond of Umbridge as any of you lot. I’d also love to pass my OWL this year.”

Jules frowned. “Harry…”

“Didn’t you listen to the Sorting Hat?” Harry’s eyes widened with perfect confusion. “We’ve got to unite from within.”

“Why didn’t you step up in Defense, then?” Roper demanded.

“Shut up, Ron,” Jules muttered.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I’d as soon not get a week of detention, thanks. Did you really think getting into shouting matches is going to change that woman’s mind?”

“He has a point,” Anthony said. He grinned. “Good to see you, Harry. Where’s Daph?”

“Arguing with Justin in the bookstore, last I checked,” Harry said with a return smile that turned genuine for about a second.

“We can’t have him!” Borage protested. “He’s a snake!”

Harry turned a warm, amused smile on her that made the other girl flinch back. Neville knew why. Harry had worn a very similar expression right before he cursed Creed during the Quidditch tryouts drama. “Why, how astute, Libby. Look, I just want to make sure I pass the OWL,” he added, looking around at the group as a whole. “I’ll only work with people who’re comfortable with it if that makes you feel better…”

“I’m not going to work with him,” Smith said angrily.

“He just said you won’t have to,” Fred snarled.
“Would you like us to clean out your ears for you?” asked George, whipping a long and lethal-looking silver instrument out of his Zonko’s bag. Neville looked at Hermione, a bit frantically, but the glare she had fixed on Smith was just as nasty as that stabby thing in George’s hand.

“Or any part of your body, really, we’re not fussy where we stick this,” Fred finished.

Harry held his hands up in surrender and stood. “No, it’s okay, guys—I can see where I’m not wanted. I wish you the best of luck anyway,” he said, and if Neville hadn’t been his friend since first year, he’d never have been able to tell Harry was lying. “Our educations are so important, after all. See you around.”

“Harry—” Jules called out, but it was too late. Harry left as quickly as he’d come.

“What was he thinking?” Hermione hissed furiously, her voice covered by the sudden interested murmur that sprang up around the group. “Marching in here like this…”

“Causing a bit of chaos,” Fred said happily.

George twirled the Zonko’s thing around his fingers, too busy glaring at Smith to join the conversation.

“Right,” Parvati said, obviously relieved that no violence had broken out. “Well, the next question is how often we want to meet. I don’t see a point meeting less than once a week—”

“Hang on,” said Angelina Johnson, “we need to make sure this doesn’t conflict with Quidditch—”

“Or our practices,” Chang said.

“Or ours,” Smith said.

“I’m sure we can find a night that suits everyone,” Jules said. “If not, we can shuffle it around one week to the next. Might be better that way anyway, harder to predict—but, you know, this is rather important, we’re talking about learning to defend ourselves against Voldemort’s Death Eaters—”

“Well said!” barked Ernie. Neville was surprised it had taken him this long to speak up. “Personally I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we’ll do this year, even with OWLs approaching!”

He paused and looked around as though expecting applause. None came, because the only people in here who actually liked him, as far as Neville knew, were Susan Bones, Sophie Roper, and for some reason, Jules.

“I, personally, am at a loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher on us at this critical period. Obviously they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give us a teacher who is trying to actively prevent us from using defensive spells—”

“Umbridge has some kind of mad idea that Dumbledore wants to use the students of this school as a private army,” Jules said.

“Well, he could,” Luna said. “After all, Cornelius Fudge has got his own private army.”

“What?” said Jules, frowning.

“Yes, an army of heliophaths,” Luna said solemnly.

“No, he hasn’t,” Parvati snapped.
Luna just looked at her, very steadily, until Parvati broke eye contact.

“What are heliopaths?” Neville found himself asking. Luna just said the strangest things but it was always so interesting.

“Fire spirits,” she said, beaming up at him from her spot on the floor. “Made of light so bright they blind people.”

“They don’t exist,” Parvati hissed.

“Anyway,” Katie Bell said loudly, “weren’t we deciding when to meet?”

“Once a week sounds good,” said Lee Jordan.

“As long as—” Angelina began.

“Yes, we know about Quidditch,” Parvati said tersely. She’d stood up to flank Jules, so he had Ronald at one shoulder and Parvati at the other. “The other thing is where we’re going to meet...”

The whole group trailed off for a moment.

“Library?” Katie suggested.

“I can’t see Madam Pince being too chuffed with us doing jinxes in the library,” Neville said.

“Maybe an unused classroom?” Dean said.

“That could work,” Ronald said, “McGonagall let us use hers when Jules was practicing for the Triwizard...”

Jules looked skeptical. “We’re not really supposed to be doing this, though, are we? They seem to want to just not cause trouble for Umbridge.”

“We’ll find somewhere,” Parvati said determinedly. “We’ll get a message sent around when we have a time and place for the first meeting.”

Hermione stood up abruptly, drawing all eyes to her.

“I fully support this idea,” she said, looking around at all of them. Somehow she was just as commanding as Jules. “And I think everyone ought to write down their names, so we know who was here—and so we agree not to tell Umbridge, or anyone else, what we’re up to.” She whipped a bit of parchment out of her bag and held it up.

“Er,” Jules said.

“Sounds good,” Fred said cheerfully, grabbing the parchment. He scribbled his name down and handed it to George.

Neville looked around. A number of people looked unhappy with this idea. Luna, on the other hand, was perfectly still and staring at Hermione with wide, unnerving eyes. Hermione was very determinedly not looking at her.

Huh.

“Er...” said Smith, not taking the parchment from George. “Well... I’m sure Ernie will tell me when the meeting is.”
Ernie looked hesitant too. “I—well, we are prefects,” he burst out under Hermione’s raised eyebrows. “And if this list was found... well, I mean to say... you said yourself, if Umbridge finds out...”

“You just said this group was the most important thing you’d do this year,” Jules reminded him.

“Macmillan, do you really think I’d leave that list lying around?” Hermione said testily. “I’m a prefect, too, in case you’d forgotten—and Anthony, and Padma, and Ronald, and Bones—we’ve got just as much to lose.”

“Right. No, of course not,” Ernie said, looking less anxious. “I—yes, of course I’ll sign.”

There were no more objections. Chang had to glare at her friend before she signed the paper, and Smith did it last with a gusty sigh. Hermione took the parchment back and put it carefully away.

“Well, time’s ticking on,” Fred said briskly. “George, Lee, and I have items of a sensitive nature to purchase, we’ll be seeing you lot later.”

The group left in twos and threes. Jules and Ronald came over to ask Hermione if she had any ideas for where they could meet so Neville lingered a little uncomfortably, wishing they could leave. He wanted to go for a walk with Luna on one of the paths in the safe, warded woods around Hogsmeade. She liked nature.

“Did one of you lot tell Harry about this?” Ronald said angrily, once Hermione admitted that she didn’t know any better than Jules where they could meet. “He wasn’t supposed to turn up—”

“No,” said Hermione coldly, “I expect it was Anthony or Sue, they’ve been friendly with him too, you know.”

“I certainly don’t understand why,” Ernie said.

“Not everyone finds him as intolerable as you lot, you know,” Neville said angrily. Seamus and Susan and Lavender stared at him in shock. He felt himself blush but held his ground.

“We can’t blame him for wanting to learn Defense. And I know he hates Umbridge too,” Jules said firmly. “I get why some of you wouldn’t have been okay having him around but he’s safe.”

“I hoped Ginny would come,” Luna said before anyone could react to this.

Ronald looked around as though expecting her to suddenly drop from the rafters and reveal she’d been there all along. “Yeah, where is she?”

“Probably in the Quidditch store with Alex,” Luna said.

“What?” Ronald’s head whipped around to look at Luna so quickly that he appeared to get a crick in his neck. Rubbing at it, he glared at her. “She’s—with—my sister’s—Alex Rowle?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, that Alex,” Luna said. “Neville, what do you think of my hair?”

Neville looked at the braid patterns. They hurt his eyes more this time around. “Really, um, unique,” he said honestly. “Never seen anything like it before.”

“Perfect,” she said.

“Hey!” Ronald glared at them. “Is she—is Ginny—going out with him?”
“Yes,” Hermione said.

“When did that happen!”

Hermione sighed. “About a week ago, after she broke up with Finn—”

“When did she date him?” Ronald demanded furiously.

“They got together at the end of last year,” Hermione said matter-of-factly.

“But—” Ronald looked accusingly at Jules. “I thought Ginny fancied you!”

Neville snorted before he could stop himself. Jules flushed.

Luna looked pityingly at Ronald. “She used to, before she came to school,” she said.

“Before she got Sorted, you mean,” Susan said darkly.

Okay, that was enough. “Luna, want to go for a walk?” Neville said a bit desperately.

Thank Merlin, she smiled at him. “Yes, that sounds lovely! Maybe we’ll see a heliopath.” Parvati made a rude noise.

“See you,” Neville said awkwardly, and followed Luna out the door. He heard Hermione begin to extricate herself and sighed in relief as he and Luna escaped the Hog’s Head.

_Harry_

“How did you get this?” Crouch said, when Harry slid a copybook edition of _Saharan Blodemagick_ across the table to him the second week of October.

“Restricted Section,” Harry said. “Babbling gave me an unlimited pass.”

Crouch raised a knowing eyebrow. “Tried and true Slytherin flattery?”

“Like you didn’t con your way into the Restricted Section.” Harry said, smirking back. He knew Crouch well enough after writing him in the summer and three tutoring sessions to make a few jokes.

His tutor grinned. “Late fifth year, got the pass from the Transfiguration professor.”

“And you were a Ravenclaw?” Harry said.

“Hat seriously considered putting me in Slytherin.”

Harry nodded. That fit.

“All right.” Crouch ran a reverent hand over the cover of the book. “This is an excellent starting place.”

The price of Restricted Section access was that Harry had to spend time talking to Babbling and pretending that he was actually using his library time to look up runes. He talked about books he’d studied a year and a half previously so she wouldn’t realize where he actually was. It wasn’t too much of a drag, though after only a short time working with Crouch, he found most of his other
Justin

“Hannah! Hey, how’s it going?”

Hannah turned around in the hallway and grinned at him, brown eyes dancing. “Justin, hey. Good, how about you?”


“Ouch,” she said. Hannah hadn’t really come to dueling club much last year, and when she did they toned down what spells they used, but she’d showed up once every couple of weeks for a half hour or so to say hello. She’d seen Theo duel. “He didn’t toss you too hard, did he?”

“Only into the wall once,” Justin said. “I beat Blaise, though.”

“Nice!”

“And Harry had Draco and Noah duel him two-on-one,” Justin said, not even bothering to hide the awe in his voice.

Hannah’s eyes widened. “Two on one? How long did he last?”

Justin looked at her sideways. “He won.”

She choked. “Well, damn.”

“It was pretty amazing.” Justin couldn’t tell her about Harry’s unnamed tutor; Harry had made them all swear not to reveal it. Mild oaths that would only leave them temporarily mute, not magicless or dead, if they were broken, and just as a precaution. He didn’t blame Harry in the least. If Justin was getting private tutoring from a probable Death Eater twice a week in Hogwarts with the assistance of a teacher, he’d be cautious, too.

“Malfoy, you say?” Hannah said with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re fishing,” Justin said.

“A little, yeah. You’ve been hanging out with him lately.”

Justin shrugged. “You know my parents are businesspeople, Hannah. So are his. We have more in common than I used to think. Not being an arrogant prat, so much—”

“Excuse you,” a sneering voice said.

“Oh, speak of the lethifold,” Justin said cheerfully, grinning at Draco. The Slytherin fell into step with him.

“Heir Abbott,” he said cordially.

Hannah blinked. “Er… Heir Malfoy, well met.”

“Where are you two off to?” Draco said.
“Care extracurricular,” Hannah said. “Professor Grubbly-Plank is letting me do a study on dryad habits.”

“There’s dryads here?” Draco said.

Hannah nodded. “They only show themselves to women, I’m afraid.”

Draco sighed. “Pity, I’d expect them to know loads about the magical plants…”

“You’re interested in Herbology?” Hannah said with an eyebrow raise.

“More Potions. Not as good as bloody Harry,” Draco said with a sneer, “but I like it.”

“I would, too, if Snape favored me that much,” Hannah said with a grin. “See you around, Malfoy. Justin, we’re still doing the star charts together tonight, right?”

“Yes.”

Justin watched her walk away, still smiling.

“I’m impressed. Your eyes didn’t drop below head level at all,” Draco said irritably.

“Some of us have self-control,” Justin fired back without thinking, falling in with possibly the last person other than Jules Potter he’d expected to befriend. They were both heading for the Great Hall for dinner. “Unlike you when Hermione walks by.”

Draco stopped dead and glared at him. “I told you that in confidence!”

“Yeah, do you see anyone around to eavesdrop?” Justin said, grinning over his shoulder. Draco was so easy to piss off, it was honestly hilarious. He needed to be more laid-back. Even Blaise wasn’t this big a drama queen.

“Why am I friends with you,” Draco muttered, catching up.

“My… scintillating…” Justin trailed off.

Draco cocked his head and heard it just after Justin did. “No,” he hissed, grabbing for Justin’s arm. “Justin—don’t—”

Justin dodged him and ran around the next corner.

“—soiling the great house of Salazar Slytherin with your dirty blood,” Umbridge said, sweet enough to make him sick. “I’ve no idea how you conned the Sorting Hat into placing you in Slytherin, my dear, but since it seems to be unclear, I shall have to ensure that you understand your place.”

“I didn’t con the Hat into anything, Professor,” Veronica Butler said. Umbridge had her back to Justin and Draco, and Veronica hadn’t noticed them yet, eyes fixed demurely on the floor. “It said—it said I had the traits that Slytherin valued—ambition—resourcefulness—”

“Salazar Slytherin also valued purity,” Umbridge said silkily. Justin got cold with horror when he realized she was fingering the pocket that held her wand, and that Veronica was cornered in a dead end.

Draco was swearing, softly and fluently, under his breath.

“I can’t leave her,” Justin whispered.
“Justin, let me—” Draco started.

Umbridge drew her wand. “—a lesson in your inferiority,” she was saying. “Ang—”

Justin’s dueling club reflexes kicked in. Before he knew what he was doing, he had his wand in his hand and “Expelliarmus!” flying from his lips.

Umbridge’s wand shot out of her hand. It spiraled toward him in slow motion and Justin realized with a sick feeling how stupid this was.

But he couldn’t just let her curse a student.

He caught her wand and marched forward. One glance over his shoulder confirmed that Draco was gone. No surprise.

Justin held Umbridge’s wand out to her, hilt first, and put his own away.

“Mr. Finch-Fletchley!” she said breathily, snatching it with her disgusting stubby fingers. “What is the meaning of this!”

“Apologies, Professor,” he said, putting himself between her and Veronica. One hand behind his back gestured frantically for the Slytherin second-year to stay put. “But I can’t stand back and watch a curse be used on a student.”

She drew herself up like a slowly inflating mutated amphibian. “How very… noble of you,” Umbridge said, voice full of sadistic glee. “But I’m afraid it simply won’t do to have a student assault a teacher… no, that won’t do at all… I think thirty points from Hufflepuff and a week of detentions should help you learn your lesson, oughtn’t it?”

Justin set his jaw stubbornly. He couldn’t argue—but he wouldn’t agree.

“And for our little Slytherin Mudblood—”

“I believe that’s an intra-House matter, Professor.”

All three of them spun around.

Draco Malfoy strutted into the dead-end corridor, dripping aristocratic arrogance. He raked his eyes over Justin with such sneering disgust that Justin forgot for several seconds that they were friends now. “Pity I can’t take points from a fellow prefect, Finch-Fletchley,” he drawled. “And you, Butler.” The look he gave Veronica was even nastier than the one he’d leveled at Justin. “Did I not make it clear you are to keep your head down and not interfere with your betters?”

Veronica ducked her head even farther. “Yes, Heir Malfoy,” she said in a near whisper. Clever kid.

Umbridge smiled horribly. If Justin were the type to get nightmares, that smile would feature in them. “Well! I am pleased to see that you’ve put the girl in her proper place, Mr. Malfoy… although perhaps a bit more discipline will be necessary in the future.”

“Of course, Professor. Butler, to the common room. I’ll deal with you later,” Draco said.

“Yes, Heir Malfoy,” she squeaked again, dashing away and around the corner.

Draco muttered something that sounded a lot like “Mudbloods.” “Do you require any more assistance, Professor?” he said.
“No, thank you, Mr. Malfoy,” Umbridge said breathily. “Although—do keep an eye on Mr. Finch-Fletchley, will you? We don’t want our undesirable students getting ideas above their station.”

Justin had to bite his tongue, hard, to stop himself whipping his wand out and testing an illegal Dark curse on her. She was exactly the sort of person he’d even learned such spells for in the first place.

“Gladly,” Malfoy sneered.

Umbridge waddled away.

They waited a good thirty seconds before Justin let the tension bleed out of his shoulders.

Draco slumped against the wall and ran a hand through his hair. “Fuck.”

Veronica slipped back around the corner. “She’s gone.”

“You’re all right?” Justin said.


“Ignore her,” Draco said quietly, viciously. “Old hag’s forgotten rule one. Slytherins stick together, Merlin damn her.”

“Can you cast a Notice-Me-Not?” Justin said.

Veronica shook her head.

“You go to the younger kids’ dueling club, right?” he said.

“Yes, on Thursdays, with Theo and Hermione,” she said.

“Have one of them teach it to you,” Justin said. “Harry’s been doing it since first year but he’s—busy Thursdays and Theo and ‘Mione are good with charms. Apply it during her classes and don’t say anything.”

Veronica nodded determinedly. “Malcolm and Liam and Graham have to pretend they don’t like me around her or she makes their lives hard,” she said unhappily.

Justin and Draco shared a glance. “We’ll work on it,” Draco said. “Go to the common room—I’ll have one of your friends sneak food down for you. Umbridge would know something’s up if you showed up to dinner after that display.”

“Okay,” she said. “Er—thank you, Heir Finch-Fletchley.”

Justin grinned. It felt strained. “I’m Muggle-born too, Miss Butler. No Heir title for me.”

“Oh.” She looked between him and Draco, plainly surprised, and shrugged. “Okay, then. Mr. Finch-Fletchley. Thank you.”

She took off at a quick jog.

“I thought you’d ditched me there for a second,” Justin admitted.

Draco frowned. “You know why I can’t…”

“Yeah, I know,” Justin said. Parental orders were hard to disagree with even when they weren’t
backed by a Dark Lord. “We need to talk to Harry about this anyway. Sneaking around behind her back to prep for Defense is one thing—we can deal with her shitty teaching—but cursing students?”


“Yeah.” Justin swallowed. “Like you said. We’ll work on it.”

Harry looked irate when Draco and Justin told him what happened, the kind of cold fury that tended to land people in the hospital wing. He swapped one of his tutoring sessions to a Saturday and came to help Theo and Hermione drill all the younger kids in Notice-Me-Not charms. They had a pretty good collection of first through third years from all the Houses coming, mostly kids who ended up bullied and outcast and had the kind of spine it took to learn the nastier side of magic. Justin knew perfectly well that the Slytherins liked the networking opportunities, but they were helping fight bullies in the process, so he didn’t say a word.

So far, they’d managed to keep everything a secret. The upper years were all committed, trusted people and the younger set usually got bullied by Jules’ crowd or its peripheries so as far as Justin could tell, Ernie and Susan and Sophie and Parvati and that whole crowd had no idea about the Slytherin dueling club that had been running for years under their noses.

And they thought Jules had had an original idea.

Albus

“Is everyone here?” Andromeda’s dark eyes scanned the room, trying to get a head count in low light and lower ceilings.

“Everyone that I heard was planning to come,” Kingsley called in his sonorous voice. He let the door fall shut and the limited light vanished.

Albus raised his Deluminator, and clicked it. Several balls of light of varying sizes and colors shot out and hovered around the room’s top corners for lack of habitable light fixtures. He could of course have accomplished the same effect with his wand, but the Deluminator contributed so much to his eccentric persona. And really, it would be such a shame to waste the fascinating little project. He’d spent months on it out of sheer curiosity and there was always pleasure to be had from inventing something that worked.

In the magical light the Order of the Phoenix looked eerie, almost inhuman, faces cast in sharp relief from above. So many familiar faces and stories staring back at him. Though they weren’t war-weary and haunted and grim, not all of them, not like last time. Not yet.

“Right,” Andromeda said briskly. “Kingsley, door’s locked?”

“Yes.”

“Why all the secrecy?” Hestia said. “I didn’t even know the Shrieking Shack had a basement.”

Alastor snorted. “It’s high time we’re stepping up security as far as I’m concerned.”

“If you had your way we’d all be Polyjuiced twenty-four-seven, and living in secret as Muggles,” Tonks said with a grin. Alastor glowered at her with no real force. As his former apprentice and
favored protege, she was on the short list of people allowed to tease him.

“We’ve increased security because my home and the Burrow are under watch,” Amelia said. “This is safer.”

“The Burrow?” Molly looked unnerved. “But our wards—”

“Keep them out, Molly,” Albus said gently. “And keep them from observing what you do inside. But they can still keep a watch of those who come and go, and that in itself is a risk.”

“We’ll keep the kids using the Floo,” Bill said to his mother in an undertone. “They’re not at risk, Mum, at least not any more than we all are.”

Molly still looked unhappy, and Arthur disconcerted. Albus made a note to reassure them later. Lovely people, and loyal, fierce members of the Order. It wasn’t right that their children lived with so much danger but such was the price of doing the right thing in a world that frequently fought against the Light.

“So we’re meeting in a dank dungeon?” Hestia pressed, looking around. “Seriously, we couldn’t have found somewhere better—”

“No one would suspect us here,” Alastor barked. “Shopping in Hogsmeade is as fine an excuse as any to see more than one of us in one place if we get sloppy. And we have an escape route to Hogwarts if we need it that’ll get us safe behind the school’s wards.”

“Not as much, with that harpy in there,” James snapped.

Ethan nudged him. “Easy, James, we can’t do anything just yet.”

James scowled. “She’s tormenting my son—they’re specifically targeting him for being the Boy Who Lived, it’s not right!”

“No, but Jules is strong,” Andromeda said with almost inaudible contempt. Likely only Albus could pick up on it. Well, and Ted, but he wasn’t here—the Healer was happy to patch up their battle wounds but he didn’t like the meetings. “He can handle it, and it’ll do him some good to learn how to control his temper.”

“How are things in the school?” Dedalus said, twisting his top hat around his hands.

Albus carefully did not sigh or do anything to indicate he had the situation less than perfectly under control. “Umbridge, and through her, Fudge, are working against us at every turn,” he said in a measured voice. “To maintain power they must make people believe there’s nothing to be afraid of, and controlling thought inside Hogwarts is a critical aspect of that strategy, as we knew going into this year. A small, dedicated group of students is fighting back from within—I’m sure you’ve heard, from James, about our Jules’ frequent resistance?”

A murmur of agreement, amusement, and worry went through the group. Albus clocked it and noted the patterns he expected—most worry from Dedalus, Remus, Molly, and Arthur; most amusement from Alastor, Ethan, Tonks, and James.

“I’ve also received word that the children have even begun a covert club to train themselves in Defense, since the Ministry refuses to teach them.”

Molly bristled. “They’re what? They could be expelled!”
“Better expelled and capable than safe in school and helpless once they leave,” Alastor growled.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on them, Molly, and I can assure you, they’re being very safe,” Albus said soothingly. “Taking appropriate measures for secrecy, and the ringleaders have done an excellent job, as far as I can tell, with choosing spells that will be invaluable but still within the students’ current abilities.” Dobby the house-elf was quite accommodating when it came to informing him what went on in the Room of Requirement, and had a greater degree of initiative than his fellows. Albus certainly didn’t regret the decision to hire him. “I’m sure this will come as a surprise to no one, but Jules Potter and Ronald Weasley are in command of the defense study group, with help from Parvati Patil.”

“This Patil, she’s a Gryffindor?” Alastor said.

“One of Jules’ good friends,” James said, and then added with a grin, “and maybe more at some point, he seems pretty taken with her.”

Ethan laughed. “James, wrong venue.”

“Sorry.” James didn’t look at all sorry. Albus suppressed a smile. He wasn’t the easiest Order member to manage but Albus had always been fond of him, especially in moments like this, when the boyish charm he’d never grown out of reared its head.

“Moving on from Jules’ dating prospects,” Andromeda said drily, “there is also the issue of our complete and utter inability to work out what exactly the other side is doing.”

Remus shifted his weight. Albus noted how young Nymphadora Tonks’ attention caught on him like taffy. “I’ve made a little headway with the wolves, but not much,” Remus said. His voice was hoarse, and he’d lost weight. Albus regretted that assignment as well but blending in with the werewolves of Britain required that Remus adopt their lifestyle, and they could literally sniff out a life of comfort. Remus had to truly live like one of them for the infiltration to work. “They distrust outsiders in general and the Muggle wolves especially are distrustful of magicals.”


“Is not actually very prominent among the wolves,” Remus interjected, with bite. Dedalus stopped midsentence, blinking. “The Muggle and magical werewolves blend almost seamlessly, with the exception of the… wild packs, mainly Fenrir Greyback’s. Werewolf politics are complicated but even magical wolves dislike magicals and the Ministry. Their affliction trumps blood.”

“Yet you’re struggling?” Andromeda said, with what looked like compassion. Albus knew it wasn’t. She was more like her sisters than she usually cared to admit. It had been her idea to send Remus in with the lycans. “You’re not an outsider.”

Remus shrugged, a little stiffly. “They don’t trust me, specifically. I’ve spent too long toadying to the “normal” magicals, as far as they’re concerned. Trying to keep my old life. Teaching, being in Jules’ and James’ lives… most wolves find it easier to sever all ties once they’re bitten. Many find themselves without a choice—the people in their lives cut them off. I’m working with a pack in Manchester at the moment. It… as far as I can tell, the Greyback pack is the only one actively doing the Death Eaters’ bidding, and they don’t associate with the council.”

“Council?” Ethan said.

“Wolves don’t have representation in the Ministry so they’ve formed an unofficial governance system of their own,” Amelia said briskly. “It keeps the packs in line and helps keep individual
wolves within the letter of the law, tries to take care of and distribute resources between the packs, and to look out for and educate Muggle wolves. The DMLE head usually knows about it because we liaise with them, under the table, when a wolf’s arrested for one reason or another. As I understand it—correct me if I’m wrong, Remus—the packs each elect a representative to monthly meetings, just to make sure they all more or less work together?”

“It’s more complicated, but that’s the gist of it.” Remus truly looked exhausted. Albus hoped this would clear up soon, so Remus could go spend a few weeks recuperating at Potter Manor. “There’s a few packs that embrace their—other side—instead of just trying to manage it. The council is… aware of them but they don’t recognize its authority. Of those, Greyback’s is the one that matters—there’s three others, but all they do is live in the woods and hunt their prey as they need it.”

“And their sentiment regarding our war?” Kingsley said.

Remus hesitated. “I… there’s some, I think, who would sympathize with us… but the general mood is pro-Voldemort. He’s promised them legal representation, access to Wolfsbane, a path to actually rejoining our society. It’s a tantalizing vision. If we could offer the same…”

“We can promise to try and change things,” Albus said. “But, of course, you can’t let them know your Order ties.”

“It’s absolutely twisted,” Hestia said, hair crackling. “It’s precisely the people promising them representation who hold the anti-werewolf prejudices, and keep them from representation!”

“We just can’t convince them,” Dedalus agreed. “The Death Eater propaganda—”

“You-Know-Who’s lies, you mean,” spat Alastor.

Albus leaned back and watched them all discuss the issue. James, Elphias, even Bill all joined in, and they bounced their shared opinions back and forth until the warded basement became an echo chamber. Only Andromeda, Ethan, and Remus stayed out of it, Remus mainly because he looked too tired to care. Albus let them go for some time as the conversation ranged through various topics beyond the werewolf issue. They would enjoy how much they all agreed with one another and leave this meeting high on passion, their bonds to one another and to the Order reaffirmed.

“One last thing,” Kingsley said when the conversation wound down. “Guarding the Department of Mysteries. We need to increase our rotation—with Sturgis arrested, we’re short a man. I know we were short-staffed on that to begin with because we’re all busy, but if anyone could possibly carve out a few hours here and there…”

“I…”

“Arthur!” Molly cut her husband off. “You’re barely sleeping as it is!”

Arthur shifted his feet. “I can let Linda do some more work in the office,” he said. “To free up some time.”

“And I can handle more of your paperwork at home,” Bill offered.

Molly’s face twisted unhappily.

“It’ll be all right,” Arthur said softly, taking her hand. A few people averted their eyes to let the couple have this moment; Albus did too because he preferred people to think him decent, courteous. “This matters, Molly.”
“Oh, very well,” Molly said. Her irritation was covering worry and they all knew it.

“Thank you, Arthur,” Kingsley said with feeling. “Mind if I drop by tomorrow to work out where you fit in the rotation?”

“Not at all. I get off work around six,” Arthur said.

“Come for dinner,” Molly said, then looked around the room. “Actually, anyone who wants, Floo to the Burrow, tomorrow at seven.”

“Thanks, Molly,” Hestia said with a grin. “You’re the best.”

Molly beamed. “It’s a joy to cook for all of you.”

“Let’s get going, then,” Bill said with a grin. Albus invited him to these things mainly because his easy, confident presence, like Kingsley’s but younger, helped smooth this group’s many interpersonal jagged edges. “Since Mum’s probably going to start cooking as soon as we get home.”

Molly swatted him on the shoulder and set half the group laughing; they jostled each other on the way out, while Alastor semi-successfully attempted to marshal them into some kind of staggered exit.

Andromeda caught Albus’ eye, tilted her head towards James and Ethan. He nodded briefly and eased through the group on its way out, exchanging a quick word with Dedalus, smiling at Hestia and clasping her hand, until he got to James and Ethan and could ask under his breath if they’d mind staying behind.

When it was just the four of them left in the room, Andromeda cut straight to the chase. “Harry Black.”

“This again?” James complained. “I’ve told you, I washed my hands of him when we had him disinherited—”

“James, please,” Ethan said. “We’re here because Hadrian and Jules are still friendly.”

James made a face. “Wish they weren’t.”

“You know why I’ve asked Jules to reach out to him,” Albus said.

“I’m concerned,” Andromeda said. “I don’t think it’s working. I think keeping Black abreast of any of our plans is too big a risk.”

Albus sighed internally. “Andromeda—”

“Don’t Andromeda me,” she said, with what he found to be rather too much petulance for a grown woman. “I know how Slytherins operate. That boy is as cold as they come and even Severus admits he’s clever if you press hard enough. He could’ve found out more than he’s given us, if he was really motivated.”

“The risk is not nearly so significant as that. We’ve given him very little that the Death Eaters could use. And the boy has delivered us useful information,” Albus said neutrally. “We know of several students whose families’ Death Eater ties were unconfirmed before; we’ve leads on the hidden storage place under the Malfoys’ drawing room—”

“Which just contained a dueling hall and family heirlooms,” Ethan pointed out.

Albus looked at him.
Ethan raised his hands. “I’m not arguing, Albus, just stating facts.”

“There were traces of Dark magic,” Albus reminded them. “I suspect Draco got careless with his words and another Slytherin sent word back to their families, giving Lucius and Narcissa time to hide their misdeeds. It will take time.”

“Albus, you’re not seeing this clearly,” Andromeda said. “Listen to me. That boy might or might not be beyond saving but you’re trying too hard and it’s putting everything at risk.”

Albus felt his lips thin for a moment before he caught and controlled himself. “I will not accept collateral damage so easily, Andromeda. He is a bright boy from a good family—even Sirius, yes, I know you and he have your differences but he is a Gryffindor and hates the Dark. He is a path to saving other Slytherins, and perhaps salvaging the future of that House, of our young people.” And if Albus could help him in this way, perhaps it could make up for some of the wrong he’d done, that he could not regret but for which he could try to atone.

Andromeda stared at him for a few seconds, then made a disgusted noise and broke eye contact. “Your savior complex will be the death of us all, Albus. I want no part in it.”

“James, Ethan,” Albus said, “would you be so kind as to step out for a moment? There’s something I’d like to ask Andromeda and I don’t believe there’s anything more we need to discuss.”

“Nope,” James said, “see you tomorrow?”

“I’m busy,” Andromeda said acidly.

Albus smiled warmly. “I shall endeavor to put in an appearance.”

Andromeda wouldn’t look at him even when they left.

“I’ve let it be this long, but, Andromeda.” Albus tilted his head, trying to restore eye contact. “What happened between you and Sirius?”

For a long moment she was perfectly still. “You can’t understand my family,” she said at last in a perfectly expressionless voice. “What it was like to grow up one of them.”

Albus thought of his own family. Impulsive father, manipulative mother, Ariana’s condition, Aberforth’s wildness, his own arrogance and foolishness. “I am not unfamiliar with a less than ideal family dynamic.”

Andromeda snorted. “My parents weren’t too bad. Stay away from Aunt Walburga and Uncle Orion, they said, and we did—Bellatrix and Narcissa and I. Of course, we had to mingle at family functions, and we knew Sirius and Regulus well. They were the Black cousins of our generation and one of us would be expected to marry one of them. To keep the blood pure.” She laughed jaggedly. “It was supposed to be Sirius and Bellatrix.”

“Ah,” Albus said delicately.

“Yeah. They’d have teamed up to murder Sirius’ parents in their first and last moment of shared objective if either of them ever found out. Anyway, Sirius was—my favorite but we…” She took a steadying breath. “He had James and Remus and Peter; he got into Gryffindor. I had no one and I was stuck with the snakes. And I didn’t hate it—I had friends, I had… people who weren’t like Bellatrix, it’s true that not all Slytherins are bad. I’m not ashamed of my House. But I was so jealous that he could just… walk away from it all so easily, and seem to not care. And sometimes he’d seem like he was judging me for not breaking with them all so cleanly—even when I confessed that I’d
been seeing Ted in secret, he couldn’t get over the Slytherin thing.”

“He seems to have now,” Albus said. “Taking young Harry in so wholeheartedly.”

Andromeda ran a hand through her hair. “Only to replace it with judging me for this. Albus, you have to know he hates you for a reason.”

Albus nodded, reluctantly. He knew he deserved Sirius’ hatred. It was another burden he would bear, willingly, remorselessly, because the boy had been an uncontrollable wild card too dangerous to leave at large. Already he was providing Harry Black with a safe haven of which Albus disapproved. But he could and did acknowledge that Sirius’ hatred was justified.

If only Sirius could see past the personal wrong to the greater good—but that was unlikely. The Blacks’ hatreds and loves were all personal, and all fiercely undying.

“Well. He hates me for standing with you.”

“Andromeda,” Albus said carefully, “if there’s anything I can do—”

“There’s not, so spare us both the bullshit. I knew what choice I was making for my family when I signed back up. I know what you are, Albus, and I know it’s not what most of those people think you are.” Andromeda’s narrowed eyes were sharper than ice picks or Severus’ verbal jabs; Albus knew she didn’t see the truth of him, not entirely, but she came quite a lot closer than most. It was almost refreshing, dealing with someone on mostly-honest terms. “I know you’d kill any of them if you thought it’d get you closer to your goal, and feel guilt, but no regret. It’s one thing Gryffindors and Slytherins share—we will tolerate almost any collateral damage in pursuit of our goals. I just happen to be less self-serving than most of my House. So I don’t regret that I’m not on speaking terms with the last tolerable member of my family, because I would lose a lot more than that to see Voldemort and the Death Eaters destroyed for good. What worries me? Is that you don’t seem to see Sirius clearly, or Hadrian. They’re both in some kind of cognitive blind spot for you. Sirius is not a good little Gryffindor—we both know what kind of magic he got up to last time. Why you thought it was necessary to damn him. He operates in extremes. You think because you’ve saved people before you can save Hadrian, you can at least contain the fallout from Sirius, but I think you’re wrong.” She stopped, breathing heavily.

Albus weighed her words. From most, he’d have ignored them, but Andromeda—she was clever and she knew Sirius and she knew Slytherins and she knew him. Even with all that...

“Sirius will not go over to the other side,” Albus said firmly. He believed that. “He may be misled, he may even petulantly side against us in the Wizengamot because he doesn’t understand all of the forces at work and thinks voting against me will hurt me—but he will not knowingly support them or allow Harry to do so. And Harry... I’ve seen his type before.” Twice, actually, and in neither case had he been able to save the child in question, not before it was most probably too late. “There is goodness in him, Andromeda. The risk is small, and worth potentially gaining his knowledge and his connections. You know Slytherin politics better than I ever could.” Flattery, always useful. Especially when it would seem sincere and was rooted in truth. “He can bring the others with him. Some of them. You said you’re not ashamed of your House.” Albus carefully took Andromeda’s hands. “Harry Black could be the way to making Slytherin something of which you can be proud.”

Andromeda stared back at him for a few seconds. “Fine,” she whispered finally. “Fine. We’ll do things your way.”

“Thank you,” Albus said, sincerely. “There is much at stake. Sometimes risks must be taken. And I appreciate your honest counsel.”
“Yeah.” Andromeda let out a jagged little laugh and took her hands out of his. “Yeah. Honesty. So Slytherin of me. Narcissa would be appalled by that little display, Merlin…” She paused by the door and looked back over her shoulder. “I still think you’re playing with fire, Albus, but you want what I want and you’ve been right before when I disagreed. So I’ll just keep praying you’re right about this, too.”

Chapter End Notes

i forgot how long this chapter is, yikes. enjoy
okay note from last chapter, re jules in the Hog's Head meeting: lots of you have gotten pissed about Jules not giving Harry more credit, or not defending Harry more. yes, true, it looks like he's leaving harry to the wolves, but notice that the Vipers in the room get mostly pissed when other people are shit talking harry, not at what Jules says or does. Jules has actually learned his lesson and he knows Harry has to keep his cover. he also knows that means that if he defends harry too much, it looks suspicious, and also that he can't really explain what's going on. like he's wrong about Harry spying for the Order but he's trying to do right by his brother and also create a space for students to learn Defense since the school won't give them one. and yes, he's opening it to bullies and jackasses. he's not perfect. he's also trying. please rip on other people than jules for the last chapter's harry-dragging, thanks for coming to my TED talk

a/n 2: several people have suggested a Harry/Barty pairing, enough that i'm going to address it here en masse: i *definitely* see the potential but because of the age difference in this fic i'm going to say no, not happening, just to take it off the table. If Harry were older, the age difference wouldn't be nearly so big a sticking point for me, especially given how long wizards tend to live and given that Barty has not mentally developed enough to match his literal age (given Azkaban and years of Imperius containment), but in this fic, Harry is a teenager and Barty old enough that I'll just say it's not happening. I'm sorry to disappoint but just wanted to answer any speculation :) THAT SAID, you are all free to speculate about what if that happened, & like... i do see it

a/n 3: i made a comment a bit ago about how you can probably guess the BWL at this point. i think i spoke too soon. also i realized given a plot difference from canon it will be less obvious from here on out, sooo... yeah, scratch that, i love hearing your guesses but it's more ambiguous than i realized and i've decided to be happy about that

a/n 4: umbridge was about to use Ango, the choking curse, on Veronica last chapter

Harry

—— — — BY ORDER OF — — —

THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

All Student Organizations, Societies, Teams, Groups, and Clubs are henceforth disbanded.

An Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge).

No Student Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.
Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with Educational Degree Number Twenty-Four.

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

High Inquisitor

Harry eyed the notice board. How irritating.

“How much do you want to bet someone overheard Potter in that pub?” Theo said.

“Don’t look so amused,” Blaise said. “This includes our dueling club, you know.”

Theo stared at him. “So?”

“Elaborate,” Pansy ordered.

“Make me,” Theo said.

Pansy snapped her fingers. Astrych moved in an orange-and-black blur.

“OW!” Theo yelled, dancing back. “That thing bit me!”

“Good boy,” Pansy crooned, scooping her familiar into her arms. Astrych bared bloody teeth at Theo.

“Foxes shouldn’t be able to look that smug,” Theo grumbled, glaring at him.

Blaise’s lips twitched. “Oh, do you need the hospital wing?” he said with perfect sincerity.

“What did you mean it doesn’t matter?” Harry asked.

Theo shrugged, still glaring at Astrych. “It’s been secret for years. We’ll just have to stop bringing new people in. The younger set aren’t going to tell; they hate Umbridge enough already. And the older set won’t turn you in because we’d take them down with us for illegal magic.”

Daphne swept an icy, assessing look around the Slytherin common room, which was presently a minefield of students avoiding talking about the decree. Several were aggressively ignoring Harry’s group, all of them students in dueling club.

“The Carrows, Noah, Everett, Celesta, and Adrian all come pretty often,” Pansy said quietly. “Anita Strickland and Jordan Harper are… somewhat regular. Viridian and Goshawk from Ravenclaw… I’m not sure about them.”

“We can trust Iris,” Blaise said.

Pansy shrugged. He knew her better than the rest of them, having been dating off and on since the Yule Ball. “Goshawk, then?”
Blaise frowned. “I think he’ll be fine… he doesn’t really express opinions one way or the other. It’s difficult to tell.”

“Hold out for a few weeks, then, and talk to Iris,” Pansy said.

Harry nodded and moved off from the message board. Some of the younger Slytherins were avoiding going to look at it while they were standing there. No need to block up the spread of gossip.

“We’ll have to—”

“Harry!”

He turned. “Adrian—what is it?”

“This includes Quidditch,” Adrian said.

“…ah.” Harry made a face. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“I’m heading up to petition to have the team reinstated,” Adrian said. “Draco’s coming, and Celesta, and Everett.”

“And you don’t want me there.”

“There’s convicted Death Eaters with less extremist views than hers on blood supremacy,” Adrian said flatly. “I have no clue how she’d react to you. Weasley’s Sacred Twenty-eight, at least.”

He didn’t like it, but the decision was logical. “Feel free to claim you haven’t kicked me off just for the sake of appearances.”

“I was planning on it,” Adrian said with a humorless grin.

Jules’ little vigilante resistance was in a tizzy over breakfast. Harry had to work to keep from rolling his eyes at the way seemingly half the Gryffindor table tried to converge on Jules as soon as he sat down. Hermione frowned at them all and leaned over to say something fierce to Jules, who started waving people off.

“Thank Merlin for Hermione’s good sense,” Theo said, watching the pageant with the same mix of amusement and disgust.

“Seems her sense doesn’t apply to dating,” Daphne said nastily.

She jolted as Theo kicked her under the table.

Harry considered his bowl of oatmeal and decided to add a bit more cinnamon.

Draco leaned around Theo. “Adrian talked to you about the team?”

“Yes,” Blaise answered, since Harry’s mouth was full. “Best of luck.”

“She’s in awe of my family name,” Draco said with a derisive sneer. “I’ll make some comment about my father being grateful for her consideration and have her eating out of Adrian’s hand.”

Pansy grinned at him. “Finally finding some cunning, I see.”

“Oh, shut it, Parkinson,” he said irritably.
Adrian stood up. Everett and Celesta followed suit.

“You’d best get moving,” Daphne said, nodding at the upper years.

“Oh, shit, right. See you in class,” Draco said, hurrying after them. Umbridge waddled out of the Great Hall not a minute later, to Harry’s relief. Her squat pink figure in his peripheral vision put him off his food.

Draco hurried up to him less than two minutes before Potions started. “Success,” he announced more loudly than was absolutely necessary. “Slytherin Quidditch team’s got permission to continue playing… I mean, it was pretty automatic, she knows my father really well, he’s always popping in and out of the Ministry… It’ll be interesting to see whether Gryffindor are allowed to keep playing, won’t it?”

“I reckon we’ll get permission,” Neville said with a good-natured poke to Draco’s shoulder. “Even if she lets us stew a few days…”

Hermione just watched Jules and Ronald, both almost literally steaming across the hallway.

“Who bets Weasley actually gets better for not practicing?” Pansy said snidely. “I mean, at that practice, he just got worse the longer they flew…”

“That’s what having famous friends gets you,” Blaise concluded in his elegant sneer. “Positions you didn’t earn.”

“Oh, like you’ve earned anything in your life, Zabini!” Ronald shouted, just as Snape opened the door.

“Shouting in the hall, Weasley?” he said, eyes glittering. “Ten points from Gryffindor.”

Ronald subsided, fuming.

Blaise smiled with false kindness as he elbowed past the line of Gryffindors. “I earned a higher spot than you in last year’s academic rankings.”

The class fell dead silent as Snape shut the door. “You will notice that we have a guest today,” he sneered.

Harry didn’t turn to look. He’d registered Umbridge as soon as they walked in, and resolved to ignore her.

“Let’s see that bitch get it,” Theo whispered gleefully. He put his cauldron down next to Harry’s. Neville sat across from him and Draco across from Harry. Neville and Draco side-eyed each other and seemed to decide in the same moment that a mutual truce would work.

“We are continuing with our Strengthening Solutions. You will find your mixtures as you left them, if correctly made they will have matured well since we last worked on them—you will find instructions on the board.” Wand wave. “Carry on.”

Umbridge roamed the class for the first half hour, peering into various cauldrons and generally putting everyone on edge. She stared into Harry’s for a very long minute during which he resolutely kept stirring at a fixed rate.

“Salamander blood, Nev,” he murmured not thirty seconds after she waddled over toward Thomas, Finnegan, Hermione, and Blaise’s station. “Not pomegranate juice.”
“Right,” Neville muttered, swapping out the vials. “Sorry.”

“No shame being put off by her,” Theo assured him.

“I hope not,” Harry said drily, “because you just put in double the salamander blood you need.”

Theo swore fluently. Harry was focused on listening to Umbridge go up against Snape and left him to handle his own error.

“Well, the class seems fairly advanced for their level,” she said brightly to Snape’s back. “Though I would question whether it is advisable to teach them a potion like the Strengthening Solution. I think the Ministry would prefer it if that was removed from the syllabus.”

Snape straightened up very slowly and turned to look down his hooked nose at her. “As long as the Strengthening Solution is on the Potions OWL, I shall continue to teach it,” he said, barely moving his lips.

Jules, at the front of the class, was clearly paying almost no attention to his potion. Harry watched him pour walnut oil into the potion instead of crushed apple seeds. It turned from turquoise to a menacing orange.

“Well, be that as it may…” Umbridge said sweetly.

Snape just stared at her, expression unfathomable.

She coughed a little and moved on. Point Snape. “Now… how long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” she said, quill poised.

“Fourteen years.”

“You applied first for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post, I believe?” Umbridge said.

“Yes.”

“But you were unsuccessful?”

Draco scoffed quietly.

Snape’s lip curled. “Obviously.”

“And you have applied regularly for the Defense post since you first joined the school, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Snape quietly. He looked angry now.

“Do you have any idea why Dumbledore has consistently refused to appoint you?” Umbridge asked.

“I suggest you ask him,” Snape said jerkily.

“Not a no,” Neville murmured. Theo nodded absently, still distracted by trying to fix his potion.

“Oh I shall,” said Umbridge with a sickly smile.

“I suppose this is relevant?” Snape asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Oh yes,” said Umbridge. “Yes, the Ministry wants a thorough understanding of teachers’—er—backgrounds…”
She wandered over to Pansy, Daphne, and Bulstrode’s table.

Jules ended up with a potion smelling of burned rubber, no marks, and an extra essay on top of the regular homework. Harry’s Strengthening Solution was perfect, as usual. He smirked at his brother and left the classroom with the rest of the Slytherins plus Hermione and Neville.

If ever there was a time to use Occlumency, it was now.

Harry knocked.

“Come in,” said a sickly sweet voice.

He stepped into a nightmare.

The Defense professor’s office could not have been more different than its practical Spartan air from Crouch’s tenure or the comfortable one from Lupin’s. He didn’t let his shock show but—the walls were covered in pink wallpaper, every surface was draped in lacy covers and cloths, vases of dried flowers resting on doilies perfumed the air with a horrible sickly sweet smell, and on the wall behind her desk hung a collection of Technicolored moving kittens painted on ornamental plates. Harry would never have believed that kittens with bows around their necks could look so fucking sinister.

“Good evening, Mr. Black.”

“Good evening, Professor Umbridge,” he said with a polite smile. “I received your invitation for tea?”

“Yes,” she said with that horrible stretched smile, gesturing to a straight-backed wooden chair across from her desk. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, Professor.” He sat down neatly and did his best to look perfectly at ease despite the fact that the chair seemed designed to allow for no comfortable position.

She eyed him for a second and then her displeasure vanished behind a toadlike smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you in person, Mr. Black. The other professors have had some… glowing things to say about you.”

He brought a light flush to his cheeks and glanced away. “Thank you, Professor.”

“No need to be bashful,” Umbridge said, leaning forward like a spider having spotted a nice, juicy fly. “Tell me, how do you take your tea?”

“One sugar, please,” he said politely.

She got up and made quite a performance of preparing the tea with her back to him. Harry concealed his sigh. There weren’t many potions or poisons whose taste could be covered by tea alone.

“There,” she said, handing him a china teacup embossed with another of the horrid kittens. “Drink it before it gets cold, won’t you? Well, now, Mr. Black, I thought we ought to have a little chat, after your—ex-brother’s little displays in my classroom.”

Harry lifted the cup to his lips and pretended to blow lightly on it while pulsing magic into the tea. Detecting other potions was hard, especially when they were other people’s and not freshly brewed, but Crouch had been drilling him on this lately and he was pretty sure…
He took a very small sip. No taste.

A loose, floating feeling overtook his mind. Veritaserum, then.

Harry drew on his magic and strengthened the barriers around his mind. Only dementors had been more powerful than this urge to tell the truth, be honest, be trusting. Veritaserum was truly powerful stuff, and if he hadn’t been a very untrusting person, he might’ve fallen prey to it even with his Occlumency. As it was, he couldn’t quite dodge its influence, and prepared himself for some creative wordplay.

“How are you enjoying the school year thus far?” Umbridge said pleasantly.

“Quite well, thank you,” he said, and took another sip.

Her smile widened. “Excellent, excellent…and your classes?”

“As interesting as ever, Professor,” Harry said. Not technically a lie—they were the same level of interesting as usual: not. “I do enjoy doing well in school.” Also true.

“Very good, very good,” Umbridge said. “Including my own?”

“Just as intriguing as I expected upon learning of your appointment,” Harry said. “The Slinkhard method is certainly a departure from our previous Defense courses.” Indeed, he had expected boring lessons as soon as he learned one of Fudge’s people was to be Defense teacher, and the Slinkhard was unlike even Quirrell’s rather lackluster teaching style.

Umbridge beamed. “I thought as much… Such a pity that your brother does not seem to agree.”

This might not be as hard as he’d thought. Honestly, this woman had made it through seven years in Slytherin? “All due respect, he’s no longer my brother, ma’am,” Harry said. “Neither in the eyes of the law nor the family magics.”

“Very true.” She had a sort of predatory satisfaction on her face. “I noticed that you do not seem to agree with his statements?”

Harry did some rapid mental math as to whether it would be better to imply allegiance with the Light or Dark here.

Light won. “You-Know-Who was a powerful wizard but coming back from the dead seems quite impossible.” Technically, he hadn’t been dead. “That whole night was a chaotic mess and Julian has always been prone to telling stories for attention.” Technically true, on both counts. The Veritaserum’s influence crept through his mind but he’d said enough to satisfy it and he could resist the urge to keep babbling.

“Mmm.” Umbridge sipped her own tea. If only she’d spiked her own drink. “Thank you ever so much for coming to speak with me, Mr. Black. It is my dearest hope that I shall be the best of friends with you all.”

“I’m sure we’ll have an excellent relationship,” Harry said respectfully. The Veritaserum screamed in his head at that but he fought it as hard as he’d ever fought any mental influence and bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood. The pain distracted him enough to keep his mouth shut.

“It’s always a pleasure to see such promising young students in my House,” Umbridge simpered. “The Black family is a noble bloodline… Such a pity, your mother being what she was…” She watched him closely, as if for a reaction, but Harry had long ago excised any sort of residual
defensiveness over his mother as a person. All he knew about her was that she’d been brilliant and she’d married James Potter. The insinuation about Mudbloods pissed him off, sure, but he could resist the anger over that. There were more effective ways to deal with her.

He sipped his tea. “I’m very grateful to have been legally adopted by Lord Black,” he said. One hundred percent true.

“Of course you are.” Umbridge settled back, satisfied. “I will let you return to your classwork, dear. If you would be so kind as to inform the younger Miss Greengrass that I should like to have tea with her next Monday at two o’clock?”

“I will, Professor,” Harry said, placing his mostly empty teacup on the desk. “Thank you ever so much for the tea.”

Her nasty pouchy eyes bored holes in his back as he left.

Harry made it three corridors over, ducked into a secret passageway only he knew about, and sat down, falling headlong into active Occlumency to burn the Veritaserum out of his system. Magic wrapped layer by layer around his mind. He meditated, plucked the revolting urge to be honest and trusting off his thought processes like mold off a wall, until he thought he could carry on a normal conversation.

Next stop, the library. He had to warn his friends—and get help brewing antidote to Veritaserum. The vendetta against Muggle-borns was bad enough, cursing students worse, and illegally drugging them the final straw.

Not to mention, he had secrets to protect that Astoria Greengrass might spill.

**Justin**

Justin tried to keep it a secret.

Long sleeves. Eating with his left hand so his right could stay in his lap. Sitting on the right side of every class so people wouldn’t notice the eight letters that carved themselves into the back of his right hand over the next week.

In hindsight, he shouldn’t have expected it to work. The Slytherins were just too damn observant.

“Justin, what happened to your hand?” Pansy said.

He tried to stuff it under the library table. “Nothing.”


“Just a cut from Herbology,” he lied. He’d just finished his last detention with Umbridge. He didn’t need to bother his friends with this—

“Glacius,” Theo said.

Justin lost conscious control of his muscles.

Hermione grabbed his right hand and pulled it up on the table and gasped.

“Merlin and Morrigan,” Daphne breathed.
Draco and Blaise and Theo just stared.

“That—Umbridge did this?” Neville demanded, uncharacteristically murderous.

Luna just blinked at his hand. “You ought to try essence of murtlap. Blood quills are nasty things,” she said.

“Thanks,” he said, the temporary paralysis charm wearing off. Justin didn’t even bother glaring at Theo; he just slumped a little bit and glared at the word on his hand.

*Mudblood.*

“What happened?” Blaise said quietly.

Justin closed his eyes. “She… made me write lines. In my own blood. Said it needed to sink in.” He spat the words out.

“What the hell, Justin,” Theo said. “You could’ve come to one of us!”

“I didn’t want to bother you.” I wasn’t sure you would or could do anything.

“And you didn’t protest?” Hermione said, hair crackling with indignation.

“I tried,” he said miserably. He didn’t like being reminded of that failure, dammit. “She said—my parents are Muggles. They wouldn’t even know what a—what a blood quill is, much less that it’s illegal, or who to go to in protest. And then she hinted Fudge would just sent Obliviators after them—I couldn’t…”

“That utter bitch,” Pansy said, incensed. In her lap, Astrych’s tail was puffed up nearly the size of the half-grown fox’s body with shared anger.

And just like that, Justin’s anger burst the control he’d been struggling to keep on it. “Is that the Ministry line?” he demanded.

“Shh!” Pansy, Neville, and Theo hissed.

Harry turned the nearest corner of the stacks. His relaxed demeanor vanished as soon as he saw them. “What’s going on?” he said.

Daphne whipped around. “That hag made Justin do lines with a blood quill in detention,” she snarled.

Harry’s poison green eyes got cold, and colder still as they fell on the back of Justin’s hand.

“She told him Muggle-borns don’t matter just because our parents have no power in the Ministry,” Hermione spat.

“Is that actually what they think?” Justin said, clenching his fist. A few more drops of blood oozed out of the M. “That they can just—haul out archaic torture instruments to use on teenagers just because we’ve got dirty blood?”

“They think you don’t matter.”

Everyone turned on Draco. Justin knew he was glaring and wanted to stop but couldn’t help it. He didn’t get angry, usually, but when he did—
Control your temper, he told himself furiously.

Draco lifted his chin and sneered at them. “Most Muggle-borns don’t have the money to count in the Ministry’s eyes and even those that do have no influence. They don’t have to consider you because you have no voice.”

“Muggle-borns are only a fraction of the population,” Neville said. “Not enough to matter in elections.”

“Eight percent, to be precise.” Hermione’s voice was clipped.

Draco nodded. “I’m not saying I agree—but to a sadist like Umbridge it’s a gift-wrapped opportunity.”

“Bugger that,” Justin said fiercely. Everyone stared at him in surprise but he didn’t give a shit. This was—“We need to take that toad out of play.”

“That’s an insult to toads,” Neville said.

Harry frowned at Justin’s hand. “She called me in for tea,” he said softly. “Just now. She dosed it with Veritaserum. Took all my Occlumency to keep from spilling—a lot, and even then, I had to get creative.

“I’ll set up a brewing station in the Chamber. We churn out massive quantities of dittany and antidote to Veritaserum. Set up a shift of who’s down there monitoring them. Next Hogsmeade weekend, I’ll buy a bunch more cauldrons and smuggle them back in in my trunk so she doesn’t catch on. We can distribute the Veritaserum antidote to any of our people she tries to have tea with. If she finds out about dueling club—or the sorts of spells we practice—"

“We need more information,” Pansy said. “We can’t just—drive her out.”

Justin wanted to insist that yes they fucking could, but he knew why it was unreasonable. He didn’t like Umbridge much but he didn’t like Dumbledore either, and strategically, distracting the latter with the former was a good play. He didn’t like the Death Eaters either, but so far the people who’d hurt him the most and wouldn’t let him forget his blood status were the Ministry and the whole Dumbledore-worshipping crowd, while his best friends included Death Eaters’ children.

If his parents had raised him with any values in mind, those values were fairness, hard work, and open-mindedness.

Sometimes he worried he was being too open-minded, and then he saw Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy and Theo Nott plotting how to protect Muggle-borns from Umbridge and kicked those worries in the teeth.

“Some of us will have to get in her good books,” Blaise concluded.

“Draco already is,” Justin said.

Draco nodded, making a face. “Unfortunately. Theo, Pans, she’d eat out of your hands, too.”

“Hestia will get involved,” Daphne said. “Umbridge was a Slytherin—she really should know better than to break rule one like this.”

“Yes, well, she’s more loyal to Fudge than anything else,” Hermione growled.
Justin clenched his fist again and happily joined in the planning. Relishing the pain.

**Harry**

“Who tested curses on you?” Crouch said, raising an eyebrow.

“More like who tested a blood quill on my friend,” Harry said evenly.

Crouch’s expression darkened a fraction. “Umbridge.”

Harry nodded once, sitting down across from Crouch like usual.

“Would you believe me if I said we didn’t expect her to do that?” Crouch said.

“That depends.”

“On?”

Harry cocked his head. “Whether you teach me how to brew a blood-based potion that can heal the scars from repeated use of a blood quill.”

Crouch laughed lightly. “I can in fact teach you that. Who are you intending to use it on?”

“Justin Finch-Fletchley.”


“Remember Veronica Butler?” Harry said. “She was a first-year Slytherin last year.”

Crouch nodded.

“She’s Muggle-born,” Harry said, watching Crouch’s reaction carefully. “Umbridge didn’t take it well. Tried to curse Butler. Justin intervened.”

“That,” Crouch began, and stopped, tapping his fingers on the tabletop. “I would prefer that you not run her out of the school.”

“If I wanted her gone, she would be,” Harry said. “If not now, then by Ch—Yule.”

Crouch smirked at the correction. “I thought as much. Your restraint is appreciated.”

Harry grinned back at him. “I’m about as fond of Dumbledore as you were of your late father, if that clears anything up.”

“Funnily enough, it does.” Crouch pinned Harry under that cold owl’s gaze again. Harry resisted the urge to squirm in his seat; he was fifteen, for Merlin’s sake.

“I’ll teach you,” Crouch said. “Starting tomorrow, since I’ll need to bring some extra materials.”

Harry wrestled with the words for a few seconds. “Thank you.”

Crouch adopted an irritatingly knowing expression but didn’t call him on it. “I did promise you’d have a say in what I teach. Although—if tomorrow is potions and healing…” He grinned wickedly. “Today’s dueling practice.”
Harry barely had time to draw his wand and lunge sideways before curses started flying. “Fucker,” he gasped, retorting with silent hexes of his own as Crouch’s laughter rang through the stone room.

Justin soaked his hand in essence of murtlap to reduce the swelling. Harry looked up potions, stole a cauldron from the student stores, and sent out owl orders for ingredients. Veritaserum took a month to brew. Its antidote took longer. He and Daphne pored over an owl order form and sent it to the Hogsmeade apothecary Thursday morning.

On Friday, Harry went down to the Chamber of Secrets to figure out a way to set up a makeshift laboratory. He nearly fell over in surprise when a fourth door appeared on the inner balcony while he stood there wondering whether to use the study or the incubator or just the floor where the basilisk used to live. When he opened the new door, it led to a large, well-lit laboratory to rival the one at Grimmauld Place save for there being no windows.

“Thank you, Salazar,” he hissed gratefully, and set to work setting it up.

Their purchases were delivered Saturday morning. Daphne popped a shrunken trunk in her pocket and sneaked out using the Honeydukes passage. She came back two hours later with Harry’s purchases and her own. He dragged Theo and Hermione down to the Chamber to set up his four new cauldrons and help him put away the bulk-purchased ingredients in the shelves the new laboratory conveniently provided. Daphne dragged her sister aside, gave her a tiny vial of the antidote, and told her to put three drops under her tongue before she went to Umbridge’s for tea.

They were all waiting in the common room when Astoria came back from tea with the bitch.

“How was it?” Daphne said. She looked icy and uncaring but Harry saw the tightness at the corners of her mouth and the way her foot tapped restlessly under her perfect silk robes.

“Fine,” Astoria said, flopping down next to her sister. Vane sat next to her and leaned her head on Astoria’s shoulder. “She was just asking me about the school, and the teachers, and do I like the Gryffindors, and have I heard any ‘seditious’ rumors, and blah blah blah. I just smiled and did the vapid sweetheart routine.” She tossed her hair over one shoulder. “She ate it up.”

Harry had a sudden and terrifying image of Astoria as a Ministry bureaucrat running half the government without people even realizing how much power she held.

“She told me to send Ginny up tomorrow,” Astoria added.

“Shit,” Theo muttered. Ginny’s temper was well-known.

“We’ll give her antidote,” Harry sighed. “And a lecture on self-control.”

“At this rate we’ll need to order more antidote before your first batch finishes,” Daphne said gloomily.

Astoria looked around the group of fifth years. “I—may have heard some rumors last week from Gryffindor about a defense club run by Potter.”

“You may have heard correctly,” Pansy said.

Vane leaned forward, elbows propped on her knees. “They’re not letting Slytherins in, are they?”
Harry smirked. “You should’ve seen their faces when I walked into their little meeting.”

“So let’s start one of our own,” Astoria said.

Theo and Blaise turned and glared at Harry. They’d suggested the exact same thing the previous night. Harry honestly thought the dueling club was enough, but if other people were asking for it, too…

“Why d’you think we need something other than the dueling club?” he said carefully.

“Well—their group’s more than a dueling club, isn’t it?” Vane tapped her fingers. “It’s a… resistance group. Against Umbridge.”

“And you want to resist Umbridge?” Harry said.

They both looked at him like he was mad. “She’s wrecking our education and attacking our friends in the corridors,” Astoria said.

Fuck. They were looking at him. The fifth years, both of the younger girls, Everett and Peregrine at the next table over pretending not to eavesdrop—

Harry abruptly felt like setting the couch on fire. He was still trying to figure out his own bloody opinions here, not lead some kind of underground resistance group.

Still. Umbridge needed to go. She was threatening Slytherin House, and she’d gone after his friends; those two strikes were enough that he’d have done something drastic by now if not for the Death Eater agenda—and he realized with an uncomfortable jolt that if he was choosing them over Dumbledore now then he was already tilted more towards one side than he’d like.

“We start a group,” he said quietly. “Adapt dueling club into something with a greater purpose.”

“Only people we trust,” Pansy said. She whipped out a parchment and started writing. “I’ll draft a list.”

“Justin, Hermione, Neville, Luna, the twins,” Harry said. “Anyone else not from Slytherin?”

Astoria grinned. “I’ll get you a list from my year and below of students she’ll target.”

Daphne disappeared into the dorms without an explanation. Blaise pulled out quill and ink and started writing a note to his mother. Harry leaned over with Pansy and Theo and helped with the list-making. They went with Noah Bole and Jordan Harper, all the fifth years, and Vasily Sitch from Astoria’s year. “Pritchard, Butler, Baddock, and Eirian,” Harry added. “From the second years. They’re useful.”

“And already inclined to be loyal to you,” Pansy agreed, adding their names.

Harry frowned slightly.

Theo saw it, and kicked him. “Don’t even make that face,” he said. “Who else would lead this thing?”

No one. Harry knew that perfectly well. It would be immeasurably useful to have a network of loyal people in a more codified form than just his dueling club associates and various degrees of trust. He wanted that. To be on top, be in command—not the beaten or broken or bullied, but the best—

But on the other hand—
“Yeh remind me o’ someone I knew in school, tha’s all. Someone I didn’ like much.”

“You remind me…” Dumbledore trailed off, looking troubled.

It was a very Tom Riddle thing to do.

Harry rubbed his temples and came to a decision: fuck that.

“Yes,” he said. “I agree.”

Daphne returned with Ginny, Evalyn, and Alex in tow. “Let’s sort out anyone outside Gryffindor,” she said grimly. “I’m not doing this with anyone we don’t trust.”

“We’ll need to work out where to meet,” Ginny said.

The fifth years passed knowing glances around their circle. “That may be the only problem we don’t have to work out,” Harry said.

They settled on Demelza Robins and Jordan Hughes, Gryffindor, from Ginny’s year as the only other non-Slytherins. Pansy, Harry, Ginny, and Natalie spread the word, getting cautious agreement from Robins and Hughes.

The non-Slytherins from Harry’s immediate circle accepted the plan immediately.

“I’m glad we don’t have to do something like my precaution,” Hermione said. “That you trust people enough.”

Harry snorted. “I don’t trust people, I trust their self-interest and hatred of Umbridge to keep their interests aligned with mine.”

“You are so bloody cynical,” she huffed.

“Yes, but I’m alive.”

“What was your solution?” Neville said.

“I knew there was something fishy about that parchment you had us all sign,” Fred said indignantly.

Harry looked around at them. “What’s this?”

“Hermione passed ‘round a parchment at Jules’ club’s stupid meeting in the Hog’s Head,” George explained. “We all signed it.”

Hermione looked a bit guilty. “It won’t stop anyone telling, exactly, but it’ll jinx them if they do. Badly. Don’t panic, I have a counterjinx,” she added hastily when Neville looked a bit pissed. “All of us are exempt.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m not planning to not talk about it with this lot, at least,” Neville said, gesturing vaguely around at the usual Knights Room crew.

“When are you going to show everyone the Chamber and start this anti-Umbridge group?” Fred asked.

Harry barely glanced up from his star chart. “Give it until November, so there’s time for people to really come to hate her. Cautiously feel out people who are more on our periphery, like Robins and Goshawk. Using the Chamber lends me significant authority but we still have to be careful about
“Justin,” he said quietly.

Justin looked up from his book. “Yeah? Is this about…”

“Kind of.” Harry flicked out his wand and muttered two quick incantations for layered sound wards. He reached out and grabbed Justin’s hand.

“Merlin, Black, I didn’t know you felt that way,” Justin said with a fake gasp.

“Oh, marry me, won’t you?” Harry said with a smirk.

“If you insist…”

Harry dropped the light tone and turned Justin’s hand so the red half-healed letters faced up. “I can heal this,” he said very quietly.

“Wh-really?” Justin stared at him. “I looked it up—Hermione said it’ll scar…”

“I’ll need your blood.”

Justin stared back at him for a very long moment. They’d look really weird if anyone showed up at this particular moment, Harry mused—two boys practically vibrating with tension, one holding the other’s wrist, neither of them looking happy.

“Blood-based healing potions are illegal,” Justin said.

“We’ve been doing illegal magic for years.”

Justin nodded very slowly. “Okay. Now?”

“Chamber,” Harry said. “Tonight.”

He let go. Justin examined the back of his own hand for a few seconds, let it fall to his side, and nodded resolutely.

NL

It’s tonight.

HB

What’s tonight?

NL

Jules’ Defense group

Hermione and I are still in it. Only because we promised Jules we wouldn’t tell you where or when

HB
You just told me when.

NL

Hermione pointed out that technically I didn’t give you an exact time. You lot have been a terrible influence. And I don’t have to tell you where because you can figure that out for yourself.

HB

I see. Thanks, Nev

NL

Hopefully it’s not useless.

HB

Careful what spells you use. Kick Pritchard’s ass for us if you get a chance.

NL

Gladly.

Neville

“Seventh floor corridor,” he muttered. “Why the seventh floor?”

Hermione looked pensive. “Winky mentioned something about the seventh floor once. It’s some kind of Hogwarts house-elf secret… She was, you know, pretty out of it, so she didn’t seem to remember details and I didn’t press… but now I wish…”

“How’s she doing?” he asked when Hermione trailed off completely.

She beamed. “Wonderfully! The ritual went perfectly. She says her magic feels completely back to full strength.”

“This is your house-elf?”

Neville jerked a little. He hadn’t realized Dean was right there.

Dean stuffed his hands in his pockets with a sheepish grin. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s fine,” Neville said. “I know you didn’t.”

“Yes, my house-elf,” Hermione said.

“How does that work?” Dean said, joining them. “Does it like… drain your magic? If her magic only works right when she’s bound?”

Neville was glad for all the practice dodging Blaise and Daphne’s curses. He was in way better shape than he used to be, and it came in handy with all these bloody stairs.

“No,” Hermione said passionately.

“Now you’ve done it,” Neville said with a grin.
Dean looked alarmed. “Done what?”

“Confessed ignorance,” Neville said.

Hermione elbowed him in the ribs. “You be quiet. No, Dean—it’s a common misconception among Muggle-borns, I’m afraid, and one I shared when Daphne first told me how house-elf magic really works—but it’s a fascinating subject if you really study it! Elf magic derives from latent magic in the world, just like a witch or wizard’s, although their biology changes how they use it on a fundamental level. The bond allows them full access to their magical cores. Magical creatures like elves actually need magic to survive, whereas witches and wizards are less dependent on magic—elves become mentally unstable when unbound, or forget how to access their magic, or in some cases even get violent.”

“How d’you explain Dobby, then?” Dean said. Huh. Neville hadn’t thought he’d be interested, but the question seemed genuine.

Then again, even if he’d just been saying it to be polite, it wasn’t like Hermione would notice. She plowed on regardless. “Dobby’s an unusual case. My hypothesis is that his obsession with clothes is a symptom of being a “free elf.” It may also be that, physiologically, he’s more able to withstand being unbound than other elves. Every population has its outliers.”

“Huh.” Dean frowned. “Why don’t they teach us this? Even Ron and Jules don’t know it and they’re pureblood. Well, or Jules was raised as one, anyway.”

“They don’t bother to learn,” Hermione said, voice laced with irritation. “And no one bothers to teach Muggle-borns. Most of us never even realize how much there is we don’t know. Instead they offer that ridiculous class—as if any magical is going to run off and disappear into Muggle London anytime soon.”

“What d’you think of a mandatory or optional wizarding culture class for Muggle-borns?” Neville said, cautiously floating an idea he’d heard Gran mention over tea with her friends from moderate noble Houses.

He’d always thought she was being intransigent. Expressing opinions from a dead era. You-Know-Who was dead and with him should be blood supremacy. Neville hated lying to himself so he couldn’t deny that his Slytherin friends had at least made him think about things. And he was usually a little scared to bring up stuff like this around Hermione—but if Dean was already going there, kind of—

“I think it would certainly be a better use of school funds than Muggle Studies,” Hermione said with a huff. “I would’ve benefited enormously from a culture class first year. Instead, I had to have Harry tell me off in first year, and then the Greengrasses gave me a terrifying crash course the summer after second.”

“Yeah, I’d have liked one, too,” Dean said with a grin. “All the bloody—house-elves and goblins and I got yelled at one time in Herbology because I made a joke about going to prison, didn’t realize about Azkaban being such a shithole…”

“That’s exactly the kind of thing I’m talking about!” Hermione excitedly. “And… where did that door come from?”

This was because they’d turned a corner and discovered, across from the ballet trolls tapestry, a door that Neville was quite sure had never existed before.
“Magic,” Dean deadpanned.

“Well obviously but—”

“Joke, Hermione,” Neville reminded her.

She blushed. “Right.”

“No harm,” Dean assured her easily.

Neville grabbed the door and hauled it open for them.

Dean stopped dead on the threshold. “Whoa.”

“Keep it moving,” Hermione said, prodding his spine. He jumped forward.

“Wow,” Neville said, following them in. “This is…”

“Hey, guys!” Jules called, waving.

Neville looked around and barely remembered to not let his jaw drop. The room was spacious, well-lit with flickering torches instead of witchlight, furnished with bookshelves around the walls and large silk cushions on the floor. He recognized a bunch of instruments like Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a large, cracked Foe-Glass that he’d seen in the fake Moody’s classroom the previous year. (Neville smothered the surge of emotion caused by the thought of Barty fucking Crouch teaching him for a year.)

“What is this place?” he breathed.

“The Room of Requirement,” Jules said. “Dobby told me about it!”

Hermione made an indecipherable noise.

“You just walk back and forth three times in front of the wall, thinking about what you want the room to make,” Ronald said, loping over after Jules with his hands in his pockets. His freckled face was lit up with a sort of feverish excitement that made Neville edge away from him.

“These are really cool,” Hermione muttered, tracing fingers over the books. “I wonder…”

Neville followed her along the shelf, glancing back once as the noise suddenly increased: Seamus, Lavender, Angelina, Alicia, Katie, Parvati, Fred, and George had just come in as one big group.

Hermione snagged *A Compendium of Rare Curses, Evolution of the Dark Arts, and Weirdly Specific Countercurses*. “These are good,” she said absently. “I don’t think even Theo’s seen this one on countercurses… I wonder if we can take them out of the room?”

Half a second later, she choked and stopped moving.

“You good?” Neville said worriedly.

“It just… I—got—an affirmative,” Hermione said, eyes wide. “That shouldn’t be possible.”

Neville looked around, and then stopped when he realized that was silly. “Is the room… sentient?”

“Are you sentient?” Hermione said.
They looked at each other, his eyes wide and hers pinched with the frown she got whenever something challenged her worldview.

Nothing.

“Can we take books out?” he said.

A second later, he felt—something. Else. Something else. Neville had been studying Occlumency a little in the last two years, and he wasn’t near as good as Harry but he knew what was him and what wasn’t, and that was not him. But it was also definitely a yes.

“Are you a person?” Hermione said uncertainly.

He raised his eyebrows. She paused and then shook her head.

“So… it can tell us about the rules?” Neville said, frowning. This wasn’t his best area but—it made sense.

The yes feeling brushed over his mind for a second and then faded. Hermione gasped—she’d felt it too.

“Was that Foe-Glass in the fake Moody’s office?” he said.

A yes.

“Huh,” he said. “That’s cool.”

Hermione looked at him like he was insane. “How—you just—accept this?!”

“Well, yeah,” he said, confused. “Magic can do weird things.”

“But—but—it’s a room! That can apparently answer questions into our heads!” She threw her free hand in the air, almost dropped her three books, and scrambled to catch them. “And you—it—you just huh, that’s cool?”

“Um,” he said. “Hermione—d’you think you have a skewed sense of what’s possible?”

She blinked at him. “…what?”

“You think Divination’s—that Divination is bullshit,” Neville said. How to put this…

“Well it is,” she said huffily. “The future is not set in stone! And magic doesn’t—”

“How do you know?” he insisted. “That it doesn’t? I mean, yeah, Trelawney’s a… a crack or a fraud or whatever but—that doesn’t mean the whole discipline’s tripe. Would it have survived this long unless there was something there?”

Hermione opened her mouth—and then stopped.

Neville waited. He knew what he was trying to say but not how to say it so he’d just wait until she answered and see if she got it.

“Muggle Divination is bullshit,” she said firmly.

“Muggle superstitions are largely bullshit,” he said. “From—what I can tell, anyway… with what you and Dean and—and Seamus and Harry have said. But—there’s usually a basis for them. In
magic. Muggle Divination’s bullshit because they haven’t got magic. And—yeah, the future’s always changing, but…” He trailed off, frustrated.

Hermione’s eyes unfocused, oblivious to the growing noise as people arrived in small groups. Neville heard Ronald’s laugh and Jules talking loudly but he ignored them. “Well—hypothetically—I suppose it would create a fundamentally different mental framework to grow up aware of magic’s existence,” she said. “Merlin—I need to research this—talk to people—”

“How about not right now?” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “I think Jules wants us to start.”

“Right.” Hermione shook her head, as if knocking thoughts out of the way, and stuffed her three books into her bag. Neville lurked up to the back of the group with Hermione at his shoulder as Jules waved for quiet.

“Well,” he said. “Thanks to all of you for showing up again… This is the place we’ve found for practices. It seems like everyone thinks it works well—”

“It’s fantastic!” Chang said loudly.

“And you’re biased,” Hermione mumbled, but there was a general rumble of agreement and Neville thought they were right. The room was pretty damn amazing.

“Harry’s going to love it,” he said instead.

“It’s bizarre,” Fred said, looking around with a frown. “We once hid from Filch in here, remember, George? But it was just a broom cupboard then…”

“Hey, Jules, what’s this stuff?” Dean asked, pointing at the Foe-Glass and its companions.

“Dark Detectors,” said Jules. Theo’s sneering, irritated debate voice echoed in Neville’s head: *They don’t detect darkness, they detect deceit, or people out to harm you. A Foe-Glass owned by the Dark Lord would show Dumbledore in it even though he’s Light. A Sneakoscope would light up for a smuggler talking to an undercover Auror as soon as another one to an Auror being lied to.*

“Basically they all show when Dark wizards or enemies are around, but you don’t want to rely on them too much, they can be fooled…”

Jules looked into the mirror for a second, but then turned away resolutely. “Okay, I’ve been thinking about the sort of spells we should focus on first—” he started.

“Hold on, Jules?”

Everyone looked at Parvati.

She batted her eyelashes and smiled at the attention, standing up. “Shouldn’t we choose a leader?” she said brightly. “It’s important for a sense of group unity, isn’t it?”

“Jules is leader,” Chang said, glaring.

“Put your claws away,” Parvati said. “Shouldn’t we vote on it properly?”

Neville heard a huff. He looked at Hermione. Her eyebrows had almost disappeared into her hairline.

“Anyone want to challenge Jules for leader?” Ronald said, stepping up to Jules’ shoulder.
No one said anything, although Neville saw Ernie Macmillan twitch a little.

“Okay, hands up for Jules?” Parvati said.

Everyone raised their hands. Neville sighed and stuck his up in the air.

“All right, now we need a name,” Parvati went on. “Ideas?”

“Why d’we need a name?” someone said.

Hermione got to her feet. Eyes turned her way. “Like Parvati said. Group unity. It makes it official.”

For a minute, she and Parvati, historically at loggerheads, met eyes. Neville had the sense of an unholy alliance forming.

“Can we be the Anti-Umbridge League?” said Angelina hopefully.

Yeah, and who’s the one looking out for the bullied kids? Neville knew full well it was networking that drove Harry to collect the outcast, bullied students, but it didn’t matter because it also helped them. Gave them friends. The spine to protect themselves. Somewhere safe.

He knew that feeling. Harry’d done it for him, too.

And Jules was standing up here posturing but he’d ignored Neville for years. Stood there while his friends were assholes or joined in. The hypocrisy made something clench in his gut.

“The Ministry of Magic are Morons Group?” suggested Fred.

“I was thinking something we can use as a sort of code,” Parvati said with an amused smile.

“Defense Association?” said Chang. “DA for short, so no one knows what we’re talking about?”

“Yeah, that’s good,” said Susan Bones. “But maybe Dumbledore’s Army instead? Since that’s Umbridge’s greatest fear?”

Jules grinned at her. “I like how you think. All in favor of Dumbledore’s Army? The DA for short?”

People set up a loud rumble of agreement.

“Oh no,” George whispered so only Fred, Hermione, and Neville could hear. “I dunno if I can still be a part of this.”

“Think of it as an exercise in self-control,” Neville said gloomily. Bloody hell. Dumbledore’s Army. He might be in an army if it was standing for something good, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to be in one that had Dumbledore’s name on it. Good thing Hermione left him out of the snitch jinx on that paper of hers.


“Thanks, Parvati,” he said, as the girls sat back down. Chang was still glaring at Parvati, but the beautiful Gryffindor ignored her.

Neville wished Luna hadn’t been busy.

“Okay, the first thing I was thinking is the Disarming Charm,” Jules said. “You know, Expelliarmus. It’s pretty basic but a basic thing done well can be really effective—”
“Oh please,” Smith said, rolling his eyes. “I doubt that’s exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?”

Nope, Neville thought.

“I’ve used it against him,” said Jules quietly. “It saved my life last June.”

“Technically…” Hermione whispered.

That at least shut Smith up.

“But if you think it’s beneath you, door’s right there,” Jules said.

No one moved.

“Great.” Jules looked around. “Let’s all divide into pairs and start practicing.”

People started shuffling around.

“Hermione, work with me?”

Hermione turned to Anthony. “Oh—er—right, sure,” she said with a guilty look at Neville. He grinned and waved her on; those two had always bonded over knowledge and books and he knew she’d have fun with Anthony.

On the other hand, that left him partnerless.

“Hey, Nev,” Jules said, “you can work with me.”

“Thanks.” Neville drew his cherry wand. His wand.

He and Jules faced off. It was weird. Like dueling Harry except for some reason Jules wasn’t nearly as intimidating. Harry did this thing where he just stood there and watched you and his green eyes were bloody creepy and when he moved it was like a snake and—

Yeah, Jules wasn’t intimidating in comparison.

“On three!” Jules said loudly. “One—two—three!”

An “Expelliarmus!” was already forming on Neville’s lips on three. He and Jules snapped their wands out.

Jules’ wand went flying out of his hand.

Neville’s eyes widened. He’d done it. He hadn’t thought—

“Wow,” Jules said, blinking several times. “I—er—good one, Neville.”

“Thanks,” Neville said, grinning. Jules’ shock was annoying, but his smile and the way he clapped Neville on the shoulder seemed genuine, and they went a few more times. Jules was a little more on his game after the first try and they were about equal as to who could snatch the other’s wand first. He didn’t seem at all bitter about Neville’s improvement.

After they’d each won three rounds, he and Jules looked around in wordless agreement to take a break. Neville actually stepped back in shock. The amount of shoddy spellwork going on was frightening. Umbridge was really afraid of this lot? There were fifth years in here whose Disarming
Charms only made their opponent step back, or made someone’s wand wiggle in their hand.

“Hey—Neville.”

He looked round. Jules looked somewhat pained as he watched Ernie Macmillan wiggle his wand and spray what looked like lemonade out of the end of it, all over Padma Patil. “Yeah?”

“Would you mind taking it in turns to practice with another pair?” Jules said. “I, uh, think I need to go help… some groups.”

“Yeah,” Neville said, looking around too, for once in complete agreement with Jules Potter.

“We’ll work with him.”

Oh, hell. Ben Creed and Toby Pritchard. Judging by Creed’s expression, he remembered that Neville had been there when Harry cut his optic nerves with a curse. Neville tightened his grip on his wand.

“Thanks, guys,” Jules said, too distracted by the others to notice anything. “Keep it up, Nev, that was great.”

*You don’t get to call me Nev.* “Thanks, Jules.”

“All right, who’s first, traitor?” Pritchard jeered as soon as Jules moved on. “Me or Ben?”

“I dunno,” Neville said, reckless fire making words fall out of his mouth before he knew what they were. “Who wants to lose their wand first?”

“Expelliarmus!” Creed snarled.

Neville dodged instinctively. “Expelliarmus!”

Creed lost his wand.

“Oi!” Pritchard jumped into dueling position. “Ango!”

The Choking Curse caught Neville off guard. His throat constricted. He staggered backward.

Somewhere a whistle blew.

“*Libaire,*” he wheezed, pointing his wand at his throat, dodging another curse he didn’t hear—

The pressure eased. Air whooshed into his throat.

People were shouting.

Angry rushing filled Neville’s ears. He dodged again. “*Caesum lumiere! Protego! Fumigus!*”

His Shield Charm deflected something that felt distinctly nasty and then, with a bang, thick gray smoke billowed out from him. Neville hit the floor and rolled as more spells flared wildly through the space where he’d just been standing. He couldn’t see anything but—

“*Amplius auri,*” he whispered, pointing his wand at his own skull.

The headache flared almost immediately but he’d been careful not to put too much power in it and he could tune out the incredulous and worried shouts like he’d ignored taunts of *Squib* and *coward* and *useless*—
He could hear Pritchard’s heavy, unsteady breathing. His feet shuffling on the stone.

Neville crept low in a crouch. It felt awkward as hell but he’d seen Daphne and Hermione do it when they were ducking and it worked for them. There.

He opened his mouth, *glacipulmo* taking shape on his lips and tongue—

Slammed his teeth together with a *click*, shaken. That was—the Lung-Freezing Curse. Not necessarily lethal, not if you were quick with the counter.

“*Glacius,*” he said instead.

There was a choke and then the sound of a body hitting the floor.

“*Ventus!*” a bunch of voices shouted.

Powerful wind ripped through the dueling space. Neville’s smoke blew away. He muttered “*finite*” and the pounding in his head eased as his hearing went back to normal. The rest of the fledgling DA stood around in a ragged circle, eyes wide and faces worried, and there was Toby Pritchard paralyzed on his back in the middle of the room.

“What did you do to him!” Libby Borage shrieked.

“Freezing charm,” Neville said, staring at her. Had she really not recognized the spell? Or just not heard it, he’d said it pretty quietly, but *still*—

He summoned Pritchard’s wand. “It’ll wear off in a sec, he’s just paralyzed,” he assured her.

“You—” Borage jumped to her feet.

“Libby, hold up,” Jules said, scrambling forward. “It’s fine, I know that spell. Neville, nice job, but what did they do?”

“Thanks.” Honestly, why were the so confused? “They both kind of jumped me. Started with the Choking Curse.”

“They wouldn’t!” Borage said shrilly.

Jules glared at her. “Why would Neville lie?”

“He’s not,” someone said. “I heard Toby cast *ango.*”

Borage shrank back a bit as Jules turned his glare on Pritchard, who chose that moment to unfreeze and sit up. His eyes landed on Neville. “You little bastard!”

“Hey!” Sue Li said loudly.

“Out of line,” Angelina agreed, glowering.

“Give me my wand back,” Pritchard said.

Neville didn’t move. “Then d-don’t hit me with a Choking Curse—when—we’re supposed to be drilling *expelliarmus,*” he said.

Pritchard scowled.
“Toby, that was not acceptable. We’re here to learn how to defend ourselves, not to pick fights with each other.” Jules swept his disappointed frown over the group at large and raised his voice. “I don’t give half a shit about your differences. Not everyone here has to like each other. That doesn’t matter. What matters is that we can set that aside and work together. We all hate Umbridge, and we all want to get better at Defense. The next time anyone takes advantage of this club to take out a grudge on another one of the DA, I will throw you out.”

“And if you get tossed out and go tattling to Umbitch, good luck, because the rest of your school year will be hell,” Parvati added. Hermione made a noise of agreement and both girls leveled scathing looks over the assembled group.

Silence rung through the room.

“Er. Here,” Neville said, handing Pritchard his wand back.

Almost every pureblood or halfblood in the group let out a choking noise or a gasp. Neville eyed Pritchard, still holding the boy’s wand out, point first. It was a major breach of etiquette and a snub the likes of which rarely went forgiven. If someone had done this in a professional dueling competition, they’d be booed off the stage unless they had serious provocation.

Neville considered himself adequately provoked.

Slowly, Pritchard took his wand back, scowling so hard his face was twisted into something inhuman.

“Right,” Jules said, clearing his throat. “Let’s get back to work.”

“Neville, work with me?” Katie Bell said loudly.

“Yeah, sure, thanks,” he said, immensely relieved.

She strode over to him. Gradually, the group dissolved back into pairs, and shouts of “Expelliarmus!” started up again.

“That was out of line, what he did,” Katie said quietly. “But you were really great, Neville.”

“…thanks,” he said. “Want to go first?”

Hermione at least waited until she and Neville and Fred and George were out of sight of anyone else before she burst. “That—was—appalling!”

“Yep,” Fred said.

She whirled. “Yep? Neville gets attacked, they can’t cast a basic jinx, and all you have to say is yep?”

“See, you covered it pretty thoroughly,” George said.

“Didn’t feel a need to say much else, really,” Fred finished.

Neville sighed. “This is going to be a long year.”

“On the bright side, Pritchard will think twice before he duels you again,” Fred said.
“So will everyone else,” George added.

Harry

By watching on the Marauders’ Map, it was not difficult to figure out when Dumbledore’s Army met. It was harder to figure out where exactly everyone disappeared to on the seventh floor, but after a quick conversation with Fred and George, he had all the information he needed for some brief experimentation. Harry, Blaise, Pansy, and Daphne went to investigate. The room created an exact replica of the Knights Room.

“We could almost use this instead of the Chamber,” he mused, thinking of five cauldrons deep beneath the school and Theo working on a Potions essay while he monitored them.

“Too easy for one of Jules’ crew to find us,” Daphne said dismissively, poking at a replica of her favorite chair.

“Note that I said almost,” Harry said.

Daphne threw a pillow at him.

As the first Quidditch match of the term approached, Jules stopped his DA practices and Harry had to lean a bit more heavily on his friends to complete his classwork. Crouch frequently assigned him readings, practice work, or spells to master in between their sessions. Balancing his work, Quidditch practices, brewing in the Chamber, and the boring but time-consuming regular homework, Harry was starting to wonder when he should schedule sleep. He and Draco staggered back up to the castle in the dark almost every night, exhausted, sore, and barely able to see straight.

“Where’s Flint working now?” Draco said the night before the match, as the two of them dragged themselves into the common room.

“Boxwood Protective Services, why?”

“We should owl them, see if Flint’s been showing up for work,” Draco complained. “I’m starting to think he’s Polyjuiced into Adrian and come back to kick our asses.”

“Not that you’d notice if he had,” Blaise said.

Draco tried to hex him. Blaise retaliated. Harry leaned back and ignored the sparks flying. “Pansy, what’re you working on?”

Pansy blinked at him. “Hm?”

Harry sat down across from her and pointed at the parchment in front of her, which was covered in much-edited writing that looked like a poem. Everett, Celesta, Noah, and Daphne pasted fake innocent expressions on their faces.

“Ohhh,” Pansy said, a mean smile creeping over her face. “This… well, this is a little project of mine. I was going to ask Draco for help, d’you think he’s awake enough?”

They looked over just in time to see Draco hit Blaise with a Body-Bind.

“I think so,” Harry said, lazily casting the counter before Blaise hit the floor. He staggered, recovered
his balance, and bowed.

“Impressive,” Everett said with a grin. “You managed to make a bow look sarcastic.”

“It’s a gift,” Blaise drawled, sprawling into a seat between Everett and the edge of the sofa.

Draco sat next to him. “Pansy, is this the…”

“Yep.”

Harry tapped his fingers lightly on his leg.

“Plausible deniability,” Celesta said, crossing one leg over the other. Harry had never liked her much—too vain—but she was Sacred Twenty-Eight and that made her a valuable connection.

“You need to be able to convince Potter you didn’t know about this,” Everett said.

Harry raised his eyebrows and stood. “Know about what? I’ve been busy doing homework all week when not in practice,” he said.

A ripple of laughter went around the circle. “We won’t let you down,” Daphne said with a smirk.

“I know,” Harry agreed, heading for his dorm.

He needed to sleep anyway.

_Ethan_

By this point, he knew the layout of the Anne Williker Ward by heart. It was a square with the nurses’ station in the center, the storage rooms and bathrooms and staffroom to the right, the lift and awkward waiting rooms in the front, and then on the left and rear walls of the square, patients’ rooms. Room 204 was on the back. Fourth door on the left.

He knew exactly how much pressure the sticky knob needed, and how long it would take his eyes to adjust to the dim light in the room, and how many times he’d sneeze (four) from the weird musty smell. It was the smell of a late-stage thrugdal infestation and he was intimately familiar with it.

“Hi, mum,” Ethan said softly, easing the door shut.

His mum’s eyes fixed on a point a few feet to his left, milky white and sightless. They’d been one of the first organs targeted by the thrugdals. Ethan swallowed, sneezed, and stepped carefully over next to her bed.

“A… Aaron?” she whispered.

Ethan had to swallow again. “No, Mum. It’s me. Ethan.”

“Ethan.” Her fingers were so frail in his that Ethan almost couldn’t stand holding her hand; what if he broke them? “My good boy.”

“How are you feeling?”

Mum rubbed one foot convulsively against the other. “Like… I… tired.”
She was always tired. “Any pain?” Ethan said. He sneezed again.

“No… where’s Aaron?” Mum’s fingers tightened on his for a moment. “Baby, where’s your father?”

“He… Dad’s gone, Mum,” Ethan said, fighting to keep his voice steady. “Remember?”

“Gone?” Mum closed her eyes for a long moment, and when she opened them, her expression was a little sharper, a little sadder. “Gone. Cancer. You were… you brought your friend to the funeral. Jack?”


“Yes. James.” She let out a shuddering breath. “I’m sorry, baby. It’s all… in pieces.”

Ethan held her hand in both of his. “No, Mum. Don’t—never be sorry. It’s okay.”

“Tell me… something happy.”

He cast about for a story to tell. “Yesterday week, James’ son, Jules, my godson, he sent us a letter with a story from Charms class at Hogwarts? The professor, Flitwick—he was hired after you graduated—is part goblin, so he’s really short and has to stand on a stack of books to see over his desk.”


Ethan laughed a little. “Yeah, Albus doesn’t care, as long as you can teach.” With the exception of Severus Snape, who was the most godawful teacher Ethan had ever heard of, but he supposed Albus had his reasons. Keeping a former Death Eater under close watch and control was worth letting him teach the kids—they could buy their potions from an apothecary when they were older anyway. “So Flitwick was a dueling champion, he’s great with charms from what Jules says, and a good teacher. But someone’s charm went astray and bounced, and hit his stack of books—they all started trying to tap-dance and dumped him right on the floor.”

Mum’s smile grew. “Charms… always so many accidents,” she said. “Someone… set a feather on fire… my first year.”

“Happens a lot,” Ethan agreed, sneezing into his elbow. “In my class, too.”

“Wasn’t you,” she said. “Was it?”

She knew this story; he’d written her that very evening, they used to laugh about it all the time—“It was,” he said with a grin.

“My boy,” Mum said, patting his hand. “Everyone has to start somewhere, hm?”

“Yes.” Ethan closed his eyes because she couldn’t see his expression but if he let the tears fall she might feel them. “Charms wasn’t my best subject, anyway.”

“That’s… okay. Plenty of others,” she whispered, already fading. “I wish… wish I could… help. With your war. You are fighting a war… right?”

“Yes, Mum,” he said, switching to the new subject easily. Her mind wandered. “Don’t worry, okay? I’m not—a soldier.” Yet. There’d been no actual fighting, so he couldn’t say he was a soldier. “But I’m helping. The people that did this to you…”

“They’re gone, baby,” she said. “I… Leah says… they left?”
Well, technically. He was glad her nurse was offering her comfort, hated that her condition meant she couldn’t be sure and had to keep asking. “They had to leave Britain,” he said. “But it’s all the people like that, the Muggle-baiting and everything. I’ll make it right, Mum.”

“I know you will,” she said. “You’re my good boy.”

“Love you,” Ethan said.

“Love you, baby.” Mum slumped back on the pillows, eyelashes fluttering and the lucidity fading from her expression already. This had been a good day. He’d known it wouldn’t last. It still left a lump in his throat to see her fade so quickly. The degeneration just in the last year had been—difficult.

He sneezed again. That made four.

“Aaron… Aaron, did you see Ethan’s letter?” Mum opened her eyes again and smiled in his direction. “Es and Os on his OWLs—the wizarding exams… he’s doing so well… our boy.”

“Yeah, dearest,” Ethan said, using what used to be Dad’s pet name. He’d been too sick to get both syllables out at the end but even when it was just dear they all knew what he meant. “He’s doing real well. I couldn’t be prouder.”

“Love you,” Mum said. “Tell Ethan…”

The words trailed off, and she slipped off into a doze again.

Ethan leaned forward, rested his head on her hand, buried his face in the edge of her hospital bed and tried not to cry. It just never got any easier.

Pulling himself together took a few minutes, and then he gently rested her hand by her side, pulled up the blankets, checked the vital readouts projected in the air over her bed, and slipped out.

Leah, her main caretaker, was waiting in the hall. “How was she today?”

“All right,” Ethan said. “Remembered me, after I prompted her.”

“Wonderful.” Leah hugged him. After the thrudgadal-scented hospital room her perfume was almost too full of life; his mum just smelled like dying. “I know this is hard on you, Ethan, but it means so much to her that you come every week, she always feels so much better for a few days afterwards. And… we have some patients with her condition who never get any visitors… it makes everything so much worse.”

Ethan nodded jerkily. “I—am happy to come. It’s… she’s…”

He couldn’t find the words, but Leah got it. She hugged him again and scraped her gray hair back into a no-nonsense bun as she slipped into Mum’s room. Probably to clean it or check her vitals or something. Ethan shoved his hands in his pockets and walked the familiar route back to the front hall. Thirty-three steps, left turn, forty-seven, another left turn, and there was James sitting in the waiting room like always, reading a Quidditch magazine. Ethan hesitated when he saw Remus with him.

“Hey,” James said, standing up and pulling Ethan into a rough hug as soon as he saw him. “How’d it go?”

“Today was a good one,” Ethan said. Remus had stood up and now hovered off to one side,
obviously unsure where he fit in James and Ethan’s weekly ritual. Not to mention uncomfortable with the whole hospital thing. Ethan supposed he would be, being a werewolf.

“That’s good,” James said.

Remus nodded, and there was such blank understanding in his expression that Ethan found himself relaxing a little. “I’m sure it means a lot to her,” he said, “you’re doing a good thing.”

Ethan smiled and knew it looked strained. “She’s a fighter.”

“C’mon.” James grabbed both of their shoulders and steered them towards the lift. “I have a bottle of Scotch with our names on it waiting at home.”

“It’s noon,” Remus said.

“On a Sunday, we’ve got nothing to do,” James said.

“Well, all right, then.” Remus laughed humorlessly as the lift closed behind them. “I suppose I could use it.”

“Just tell the wolves you stole it if they smell it on you,” Ethan asked.

Remus shrugged. “Works well enough.”

The St. Mungo’s lobby allowed people to Apparate in but not out, as a security measure in case one of the mental patients got hold of a wand. James handed over a few sickles in exchange for Floo powder and the three of them stepped into the green flames, and out one by one into James’ study in Potter Manor.

Remus visibly relaxed. “Not a fan of hospitals?” Ethan said.

“Not as much,” Remus said tightly. “Spent too much time in them as a kid. Bad memories.”

Ethan nodded. Understandable.

James flicked his wand and a few of the armchairs in the room zoomed together by the fireplace. Ethan sank into the one he preferred and accepted a tumbler of Scotch on the rocks without paying too much attention to it. Normally he liked good liquor as much as the next man but today he just couldn’t get his mind to focus.

Remus sipped his and stared moodily at the fireplace. James knocked back a shot and poured himself another that he swirled around but didn’t drink yet.

“I know you want to ask,” Ethan said abruptly. It was easier to get this out of the way.

“I wasn’t going to,” Remus said.

“Nah, because you have some tact.” Ethan took a drink and let it burn its way down into his stomach. Not the same as firewhiskey, but if there was one thing Muggles did at least as well as wizards, it was alcohol. “She’s got a thrudgal infestation.”

“Merlin’s balls,” Remus swore. “How?”

It was a fair question. Thrudgal infestations were rare now that Healers had finally worked out a potions regimen that could cure them if they were caught early enough. “She used to be a Healer,” Ethan said. “One of the Ministry Healers who go around secretly curing Muggles of magical-origin
diseases and injuries. There was a kid in a Muggle hospital, they didn’t know what it was so she started casting some diagnostic spells. Turned out that the kid was a Muggle-born whose parents opted to not send him to Hogwarts. His magic was bound but the thrudals could still feed off of it.”

“So they got to your mum when she cast diagnostics,” Remus finished, looking grim. Ethan remembered Jules raving about how much Remus knew about magical creatures. He’d have at least heard of thrudals, no matter how rare they were.

“Yep. Magical parasites. So charming.” Ethan’s hand tightened on his tumbler and he forced himself to relax and take another sip. “This was before they knew any spell allowed the little fuckers to infest another witch or wizard—thought it was just healing spells, that diagnostics didn’t count. She got the kid on the potions regime but not herself. Fast forward a few months, and they found out the kid was jinxed by a couple of purebloods out for some Muggle-baiting fun, and one of them was getting over a thrudal infestation. He gave it to the kid. Kid gave it to Mum.”

“What happened to them?” Remus said.

Ethan waved his hand. “Fined.”

“Fined?” Remus fumbled his tumbler and had to set it down before it spilled. “They did that and they got fined?”

“And exiled from Britain, to be fair,” James said. “But yeah. Bloody disgrace.”

“Merlin’s balls, Ethan.” Remus ran a hand over his face. “That’s…”

“Fucked up, yeah.” Ethan poured himself more Scotch and did the whole shot at once. “You too, right? Greyback running free?”

Remus lifted his glass in a bitter toast. “To justice.”

“Someday,” James said savagely, draining his tumbler again. Ethan followed suit and James passed the bottle around. “This war. We’ll fix this. When we’ve won.”

“Defeating the Death Eaters and killing Voldemort won’t fix it all,” Remus said tiredly. “Not the prejudice, not all at once. If anything it’ll make the survivors more fervent. We can’t catch them all. They’re not all stupid enough to tattoo themselves and parade around in masks and give us things to charge them with.”

Which was exactly why Ethan intended to see the bigots all die, but he wasn’t about to say that in front of Remus. James he could discuss those things with. James knew him; James was willing to entertain the possibility that the only way to eradicate the prejudice for good was to kill off all the assholes who perpetrated it and raise the next generation free of all that baggage. Ethan just didn’t know Remus well enough yet.

“We can win, though,” he said instead. “We can make sure these bastards are buried so deep in disgrace they’ll never claw their way back out again. We can kill Voldemort and pass laws cracking down on prejudice and Dark magic until they’re forced to change. It’ll take time, but we can do it.”

Remus looked at him, a little startled. “You’re—more passionate than I realized.”

“Most people don’t realize,” Ethan said.

James laughed. “He keeps it under wraps.”
“You couldn’t,” Remus told his old friend, grinning.

“And I don’t even try,” James agreed. “Ethan likes being quiet about it.”

Ethan shrugged. “There’s enough hotheads already.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Remus said drily, kicking James in the shin. “This hothead is enough to deal with already. Two would be too much.”

“Hey!” James looked pleased.

A shadow crossed Remus’ face, and Ethan hurried the conversation along before James also remembered there had once been two hotheads in that group. “And I don’t need everyone’s pity if I spread it around about Mum. You shouldn’t have to have had a family member hurt by the Dark to care about fighting it.”

“Fair point,” Remus said. “Plenty of us have.”

“But plenty of us fight because it’s right,” Ethan said. “I’m not special. Just more vehement, maybe, but if I’m committed on behalf of everyone else, it’ll be more of an inspiration.”

Remus laughed. “Are you sure you’re a Gryffindor?”

“Could’ve gone to Slytherin,” Ethan admitted with a grin. James clutched a hand to his chest and gasped even though he’d already known that. “But the Hat decided I cared too much about principles.”

It had said he was just like his mum that way.

“Cheers to that,” Remus said, and they all drained their glasses, passed the bottle around.

“How’s Jules’ defense club going?” Ethan asked.

James’ face lit up. “Really well, from what Albus can pick up. They’re doing stunners, Impedimenta, Reducto, stuff like that. Some of them have even said they want to try learning the Patronus.”

“Impressive,” Ethan said, eyebrows raised. He hadn’t learned any of that until sixth year at the earliest. It was a good thing Jules was doing.

“Yeah.” James was practically bouncing. “I knew he’d be a good leader—and he’ll make sure those kids can defend themselves, help us find a new generation of Order members and Aurors.”

“We need all the wands we can get,” Ethan agreed fiercely. “They’re too easily indoctrinated by the Ministry at home. Even with Umbridge in the school we can make sure they see the right side of things from there.”

Remus’ eyes flicked between them. Ethan was increasingly glad he hadn’t said anything about his more radical plans. “Do you disagree?”

“Not at all,” Remus said. “Just… child soldiers.”

“Whoa,” James said. “No one said anything about child soldiers, Remus, just—they’re the kids of soldiers and the Death Eaters aren’t going to hesitate to go after someone’s son or daughter or niece or grandson if it’ll get them what they want, will they?”

“No,” Remus admitted. “That’s true. And you know I’m all for them knowing how to look after
themselves. Merlin knows they need it.”

“No one’s going to force them to fight,” Ethan said. That would be pretty fucking messed up, and unwilling conscripts were never as useful. “But we have to counter the Ministry propaganda, Remus, and the best way to do that is through the school.”

“Yeah, okay. Agreed,” Remus said. “Good on Jules—I wasn’t sure, when I was teaching, how he’d be as a leader among his peers, but it seems he’s really growing up.”

James radiated pride. “He really is.”

“I wish Albus wasn’t pushing so hard to reach out to Harry,” Ethan grumbled, and did another shot to erase the bad taste in his mouth that came from remembering multiple arguments.

“You too?” Remus said.

Ethan stopped halfway through reaching for the now-two-thirds-empty bottle. “You agree?”


Oh, Ethan was well aware of that. “It’s not the risk,” Ethan said. “Andromeda’s worried about the exposure but we haven’t given him anything dangerous. It’s—the precedent.”

“He’s… I disinherited him for a reason, Remus. I had to take the opportunity, while the murder was fresh on everyone’s minds.”

“You know he didn’t really do it,” Remus said. “Right?”

“Yeah… but I needed to detach him from the Potter name. It’s not so much that he’s a Slytherin, not anymore, Andromeda’s a Slytherin and she’s all right, but he won’t walk away from them.”

“He’s friends with blood supremacists,” Ethan spat, even as he relished the sound of his words in James’ mouth. “Spends time at their houses in the summers, lives with them. We can use him as a spy but even that I don’t trust—the only reason he can spy on them is because they trust him, and if they trust him, that means they think he’s one of them. He’s convinced them that he’s just like them over the last four, five years. There’s no way he hasn’t—no way some of it hasn’t rubbed off.”

“We can’t have any prejudice survive, Remus,” James said darkly. “No inclination toward Dark magic. I couldn’t—Harry had both.”

Harry’s childhood was a tragedy and a mistake on James’ and Albus’ parts but even back in the boy’s first year Ethan had seen how it drove Harry into the waiting arms of the Dark. A Slytherin sorting on its own wasn’t that big a red flag. A child abused by Muggles who’d just found out his birth father accidentally left him there to rot and then befriending Theodore Nott being sorted to Slytherin, however—that was cause for alarm. That was a target ripe to be inculcated with prejudice. Ethan had seen it happen before, with Severus Snape and others. Now too many years had gone by of James not knowing how to deal with it and Harry Black was a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“He’s your son,” Remus said. “He’s… was my godson.”

“I’ll celebrate if Jules can reach him,” James said. “But the Dark isn’t a tool that you can use for good. Not for long. Not without consequence. He’ll have to cast it off completely, and convince us that he’s done so, before I’ll ever trust him.”

Ethan nodded along, but he knew it wouldn’t happen. Albus’ ideals were nice but Ethan preferred
realism. No taint of the Dark could get into the Order if they were to succeed in wiping it out and Harry was already tainted. He’d convinced James to cut Harry off so there was no chance of the Potter name and vaults being lost to the other side—so there was no chance of Harry rejoining them and preserving the very things Ethan was trying to drive out.

Remus’ eyes were heavy on Ethan, not suspicious but sharp and alert in a way the rest of him wasn’t. He was too clever by half but Ethan didn’t think it would matter if Remus found out exactly how much of James and Harry’s estrangement he’d engineered. Remus was softhearted but only up to a point, and at the end of the day, he’d follow James’ lead like he used to when Ethan watched them in school. Like he had ever since.

“James, tell me you’ve another bottle,” Remus said after a moment, with the precision of someone tipsy and trying not to slur.

“Oh, do I ever,” James said, standing. He had to grab the back of his chair to steady himself before he made his way over to the hidden liquor cabinet and extracted another bottle, potent barrel-aged firewhiskey this time. Ethan grinned. At least James hadn’t tried to summon the next bottle this time; he’d done that a few weeks ago and set his curtains on fire.

Remus did two shots in quick succession. “Whoa,” Ethan said. “This isn’t a competition to see who can pass out fastest.”

“Won’t be me,” Remus said darkly. “Fucking wolf metabolism.”

“This guy,” James said, clapping Remus on the shoulder, “could drink anyone under the table in school. Drove the others nuts trying to figure out how he did it. Especially ’cause he was always so skinny.”

Remus grinned. It was the first true smile Ethan had ever seen on his face and it transformed him completely. Suddenly Ethan understood why this man had been James’ friend for so long. “I raked in a lot of money sixth year taking bets on if anyone could out-drink me before they all decided to quit trying. Well, except Sirius, he never knew when to quit.”

James’ face darkened.

“Oh, come on, James, it was funny,” Remus said.

“It was,” James admitted, and then smiled reluctantly. “Remember the time he tried to go shot for shot with you after we beat Slytherin?”

“And he tried to snog Frank?” Remus laughed.

“I thought Alice was going to kill him,” James said. “Ethan, you weren’t there, were you?”

“Nope,” Ethan said, grinning. “Still a third year, the prefects kicked us all out when you started busting out the real alcohol.”

“Oh, well. I’ll show you in a Pensieve sometime,” Remus said, waving the bottle. He didn’t show any sign of sharing and James snorted and got up to get another. “Was hilarious. Frank dumped him in a potted plant and broke it.”

“Didn’t remember any of it the next morning, of course,” James said, sitting back down and refilling his and Ethan’s glasses. “But he wanted to know if the kiss looked any good and if he should try again.”
“Shocking,” Ethan said, taking his tumbler up again. The firewhiskey burned going down and his mother was dying and he was a year away at best from fighting in a war and he wasn’t as confident as he liked people to think that he could accomplish his goals in it. But for tonight none of that mattered because he had James and possibly Remus to help him. “What about you, James? Do anything stupid drunk?”

“Oh did he ever,” Remus said, leaning forward and eyes alight.

James convinced Remus to spend the night, that he could sleep outside for a few nights and change his clothes and keep the other wolves from smelling. “You need a night’s good sleep,” James insisted, leaning on the bannister and slurring his words, and Remus caved with a rueful smile.

“Yessss,” Ethan said, too drunk to worry about spying on wolves. “Sleep. We all need so much sleep.”

“Master and Master’s friends is going to be needing Hangover Cure,” one of the Potter elves said. “Master Remus and Master Ethan, the guest rooms is this way.”

Staggering and leaning on each other, Ethan and Remus followed the little creature through silent, familiar halls. Remus told stories about paintings and tapestries as they went—“see how that one of Alaric Firestaff’s washed out at the bottom? Sirius dared James to drink a potion they found in the attic one time and he puked on it and it leached all the color out”—and Ethan tried not to wish he’d been friends with them then, too. They were older and the darlings of Gryffindor and every kid from Ethan’s year’s hero, the Marauders. Clever, friendly Peter Pettigrew; witty, subtle Remus Lupin, arrogant, fearless Sirius Black; charming, relentless James Potter.

Everything would’ve been better if James had chosen Ethan then instead of Peter, instead of Sirius. But it was useless wishing for what could’ve been so Ethan only let himself be glad that he was friends with James now, could maybe be as close with Remus as he was to James in time.

“This’s usually my room,” Remus said, switching his weight from Ethan’s shoulder to a doorframe. Ethan staggered and caught himself, leaning up against the opposite wall, and then they were both laughing, laughing and drunk, and Ethan impulsively hugged the werewolf before he shoved himself down the hallway into the room the house-elf showed him, and as he collapsed on the bed he found wishing with a helpless sort of longing that life could be nothing but this. No war and no Dark and no families in hospitals, just good friends and nights spent on stories.

Ethan would do whatever it took to make that happen.
Harry

“Samhain is this Tuesday.”

Harry paused halfway through the spellcrafting exercise Crouch set him. “What?”

“I just realized,” Crouch said, shoving aside a heavily annotated potions formula, “what do you know about Samhain?”

“It’s one of the old rites,” Harry said slowly. “I know Sirius practices them.”

“Thought so,” Crouch muttered. “And you?”

“Theo says there’s a group for fifth years and up that practice it on Samhain night in secret,” Harry said. “I was going to ask him this weekend if that’s—still going, and if I’m—welcome.”

“You would be,” Crouch said. “I can go over it with you, if you like?”

Harry hesitated. “That… I’d like that.”

“Did you do the midsummer ritual?” Crouch asked, spinning his fountain pen around his fingers.

“Yeah.”

Crouch nodded. “Good, you have some experience with the rites, then. What do you know about Samhain already?”

“Not much,” Harry admitted. “The books I’ve been able to find just describe it as a… day of honoring the dead, and the past. Ancestors. Family. No specific rituals like the base Latin chant for midsummer.”

“Because of the family bit,” Crouch said. He leaned forward in his seat, becoming more animated and more inwards-looking at the same time, delighting in knowledge and in sharing it. He’d done the same as Fake Moody except toned down because Moody wasn’t a Ravenclaw; in their tutoring sessions, it was even more pronounced. His love of learning was contagious.

“Each family is different,” he went on. “Each family has its own history, its own subtle or not-so-subtle magical affinities. And within each family, its members have their own practices, to account for their individual parents and perspectives on their history. Midsummer’s simple in comparison.

“The Samhain rite can be done at any point on October thirty-first, using the Gregorian calendar, but it’s best done at night, as you might imagine. You won’t channel raw magic from the world; you’ll channel family magic with the incantation.” He fixed Harry with a serious look. “If you want to participate, you’ll need to contact Sirius and talk to him about it, and you do not share the incantation with anyone. I can help you understand small pieces of it if you really need help but Samhain rites are some of the most private of all family secrets. In the old days, children weren’t even allowed to learn them until they were solid intermediate-level Occlumens.”

“Am I a capable enough Occlumens for that?” Harry said.
Crouch grinned. “My lord attempted passive Legilimency on you in the graveyard and got very little.”

“I didn’t feel Legilimency,” Harry said, frowning.

“Because he’s perhaps the foremost living expert on the mind arts,” Crouch said drily. “If you had, I would be very worried about his sanity. Using enough force to bypass your Occlumency shields would have gotten him noticed; that fact alone suggests you’re good enough to learn the Black rites. On top of that, you survived the blood adoption with your magic intact. Doing that ritual past the age of six or seven is dangerous without good mental discipline. Speak to Sirius but my assessment is that you’re a solid intermediate-level Occlumens, easily in the range to learn the rites.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Would I have to modify them, then?”

Crouch shook his head. “Probably not this year. Each family has a standard incantation to channel the magic that their children use. As you get older, and understand what it is you’re doing, and translate the Latin, you may or may not modify the incantation. It’s highly personal.”

“And it wouldn’t be different for me, being blood adopted?” Harry checked.

“Shouldn’t. The family magics and the Head of House both accepted you,” Crouch said. “This first year, you’ll do the standard incantation, and having done it once, you’ll understand in practice as well as in theory what you’re doing. After that you can modify the incantation or not, as you wish.

“That being said, there are precautions everyone takes on Samhain. You’ve heard the Muggle superstition that the veil is thinnest on Hallowe’en?”

Harry nodded. “I take it that’s not unfounded?”

“No,” Crouch said. He traced one finger in the air; runes appeared, written in faintly glowing light. Wandless magic. Interesting. Harry had kept his wandless abilities a secret so far but it seemed he wasn’t the only one capable of it. “Ghosts appear in areas of high magical concentration, like Hogwarts, which is built on an intersection of ley lines. They tend to get more active on Samhain. Some have been known to affect the physical world to some extent, which is impossible on any other day of the year. Poltergeists and other such spirits get a surge of energy. It’s the most powerful day of the year for necromancers, optimal for creating and binding inferi, and lends the most power to rituals involving a death sacrifice. Some such rituals can in fact only be performed on Samhain. And, occasionally, in channeling the family magics, some witches and wizards—usually Lords or Ladies but occasionally an Heir—have been known to receive messages from their ancestors on the other side. Sometimes words. Others just a feeling—foreboding, affection, anger, et cetera. And sometimes—other things beyond the veil have an effect.” He gestured at the runes he’d written in the air, and they flipped around so they were facing Harry, not him. “That’s what these are for. Protection.”

“Like… demons?” Harry said hesitantly, eyeing the runes. He didn’t recognize the language, which was in itself strange.

Crouch snorted. “Hardly. The Muggles have cooked up some ridiculous notions of good and evil over the last three thousand years of trying to understand things that don’t concern them. There’s no good and evil. The things the runes protect from—they’re not demons, or the Devil, or angels, or vengeful spirits. They—may attempt to take possession of the living, or influence us, because it’s their only way to affect the material world. Some have intentions you’d find benign or understandable, others you would call malicious and inhuman. And different people and different cultures would define different actions as benign or malevolent. It’s a matter of perspective.
“A few very ambitious and very foolish wizards have tried to contract with the entities from beyond the veil. It never ends well. My lord has never even tried, which should tell you something about the risks involved.”

Interesting, but if it wouldn’t help him, Harry wasn’t going to spend time looking it up. “How likely is it that doing the rites would catch one of those—things’ attention?” he said.

“Not.” Crouch waved a hand, dispelling the runes. “I never have. None of my school friends ever did. My lord said it happened once in his memory, after which he strengthened the protection runes to prevent a second occurrence. You’re young, untested, with an unformed magical core far from its full potential. Write the runes with a blood-bound ritual potion and you’ll be fine.”

“That’s why you focused on blood-bound potions last week,” Harry realized.

Crouch smirked. “That, and your friend Justin. How is the healing going, by the way?”

“I brewed a salve,” Harry said. “The marks are fading already.”

“Excellent.”

“What language were the protection runes in?” Harry said. “I’ve never seen it.”

Crouch considered him for a few seconds. “No.”

“What?”

“You’re not ready,” Crouch said. “Have Sirius send you the runes that he uses for protection, but—no. It’s a runic language that no one fully understands and whose origins have been lost to time. Studying it or attempting to change it has led many people to death or insanity. I’ll teach you someday but not now.”

Harry frowned, but he had to admit it made sense. He probably wouldn’t trust a teenager with what Crouch was describing either. And that was the whole point of having a tutor, as Snape had pointed out—someone to guide him away from things too dangerous or advanced for him to study now.

“Back to work, Black,” Crouch said, pointing at Harry’s half-finished spell design problem. He was attempting to reverse engineer the runic and arithmetic bases used to create the Disillusionment Charm, and it was complicated enough to make Harry’s brain hurt. “I’m not letting you cast that spell again until you properly understand it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said with a grin, pulling the parchment back in front of him and picking up his abandoned gel pen.

“Sirius Black.”

Harry and Sirius usually spoke on Friday nights, which meant Sirius was expecting the mirror to light up and it only took him thirty seconds to respond. Harry grinned when he saw his godfather. “How was the demonstration?”

“Incredible.” Sirius’ eyes got dreamy as he thought back on the Muggle car show he’d gone to the previous week. “I bought two cars.”

“Of course you did,” Harry said, snickering. “What modifications are you going to add this time?”
“Flight, obviously,” Sirius said. “And invisibility. Muggle-dodging. I think I can charm them to have some degree of sentience if I pump enough magic in.” His eyes shuttered a little. “This would be easier with Remus, but…”

“Have you talked to him lately?” Harry said carefully. Lupin was a subject he never dared broach unless Sirius brought it up first. Some things were better left unsaid and some differences of opinion couldn’t be bridged. He and Sirius hated James Potter with equal and unfltering passion but they were a bit more divided on the subject of Remus Lupin.

Sirius made a face. “Lunch two weeks ago in the Leaky,” he said. “It was weird. He’s got more conviction lately. Kept telling me that the war’s not just against the Death Eaters but against the Dark in general and I should be able to get behind that because of my family. For the greater good.” The last two words came out in a mocking snarl.

“Charming,” Harry said.

“I told him I will under no circumstances shack up with the Order again,” Sirius said. “James isn’t my problem anymore. So then Remus accused me of being a fake Gryffindor.”

“He’s the fake, if anyone,” Harry said.

“He caves to James at the slightest pressure.” Sirius sounded miserable. Harry controlled his expression so Sirius wouldn’t notice any hatred. “But…”

“You’re not a fake,” Harry said firmly. “Gryffindor’s about principles, Sirius. You stand on yours. It’s not your fault you just have different principles than he does. Just look at Neville versus Jules.”

Neville, who dislikes Dumbledore. Neville, who I—need to talk to.

Sirius tried to smile. It was a little strained but Harry recognized the effort. “I… true. Thanks—for that.”

“Yeah. Oh,” Harry said, as if just remembering something, “I was thinking… Samhain.”

“…what about it?” Sirius said.

“Well… you still do the old rites, don’t you?” Harry said. “And… Theo and Neville and most of my friends—they do too. I was wondering…”

“You’re not allowed to leave school to do them with the family,” Sirius said. “I thanked Merlin for that rule, Mother couldn’t drag me home…”

“There’s, um, a group of students that do them here,” Harry said. “I haven’t spoken to Theo yet but—he brought it up last year. He’d take me if I asked.”

“You’re sure?” Sirius said, eyeing him carefully. “I don’t want you—pressed into this because your friends do the rites, or because I do. If you’re uncomfortable—”

“No, I’m sure,” Harry said instantly. “I’ve always—hated the trite Halloween with pumpkins and bats and a feast and—it felt like celebrating the day my life started to suck, honestly.” Sirius snorted. “The rites… honoring the dead, one’s family, all that—seems fitting.”

“I’ll send you the book,” Sirius said quietly. “Blacks over the years have spelled the dickens out of it. If anyone else even tries to open the thing their eyes will be scorched out of their skull so be careful with it. Read all the warnings at the beginning. I don’t know exactly what will happen if you forget the protective runes, but it’s not pretty, so draw them in your best runic potion, and be careful,
“okay?”
“I will,” Harry said with a grin. “Thank you. Actually—could you put the package in the Shrieking Shack? Neville said he overheard Jules speculating that Umbridge is searching our mail.”

“Hag,” Sirius growled. “Yeah, I’ll put it in there—wards keyed to your magical signature.”

“Thanks.”

He couldn’t find time until the thirtieth. Between Eriss and three other snakes bribed with Cockroach Cluster to scout for him, and the Marauders’ Map, it was laughably easy to slip away during dinner and out to the grounds. Eriss prodded the knot at the base of the Whomping Willow and Harry followed her into the tunnel.

“Anything unusual?” he asked.

She cast about for a few minutes, tongue flickering in the light of the dim witchlight conjured over his head. “Jules used the tunnel recently.”

“That’s weird.” Harry frowned at the earth under his feet and set off at a brisk walk. This got more awkward every year. Couldn’t they have made the bloody thing tall enough to stand up in? “I wonder why.”

“It’s faded.” Eriss ranged ahead. “Probably a… week old? Maybe a bit less. On the way back he was carrying something that smelled of magic.”

Harry snapped his fingers. “Bet it was the handheld communication mirrors he gave to the DA.” Hermione, Neville, and the twins had shown him the mirrors. They looked like normal compacts but if Jules breathed on his and then wrote in the steam, the same message would appear on everyone else’s compacts next time they opened them. He’d been inspired by Harry’s fib about the journals’ origin to go find someone who could make the mirrors for him.

“You aren’t the only one who knows about the passage, then.”

“No,” Harry said. “They used it for Lupin’s transformations, remember? Of course James knows—and of course he told Jules. James probably even helped him think of the mirrors, since he and Sirius did something similar.”

“He’s not here now,” Eriss said. “I would scent him.”

She slipped up into the Shrieking Shack ahead of him, protected under her invisibility runespell. Feelings of approval and security filtered back to him through the familiar bond a few minutes later. Harry climbed up without hesitation and found himself once again in the werewolf-scarred house.

“He left it in here,” Eriss called from what probably used to be a living room. “I can scent him. His magic.”

Harry could feel the ward, too, once he got close enough. Not the most intricate one in existence but strong as hell. He flicked his wand out into his hand. “Finite.”

The ward recognized his magical signature and folded in on itself.

All that was left behind was a single package wrapped in brown paper and radiating old, old magic.
Eriss shuddered. “It’s... strong.”

“Yes, it is,” Harry said reverently, picking up the book. It was easily a foot tall and almost as wide; he could feel hard accents, like jewels or metal inlays, through the paper. It seemed to almost purr in his hands in recognition of a Black. Even weirder, he could feel his own magic reacting, running beneath his skin.

“That is old,” Eriss said. “Older than the wards.”

“What wards?”

“Around Grimmauld.” He picked her up with one hand and she carefully explored the package. Harry felt its magic recognize her as a Black’s familiar and welcome her, too. “This is older than they are.”

“How can you tell?”

“I just can.”

He shrugged. “I’m not surprised. Ready to go back?”

She slid back down to the floor and into the tunnel, scouting ahead. Harry shoved the book into an expanded pocket of his robes.

Samhain dawned with howling winds and driving rain. Harry rolled out of bed at his usual hour and headed straight down to the Chamber. He had potions to check.

He was halfway through a complex and precise stirring pattern for a cauldron of dittany when the door opened again. “Hang on,” Harry said before Theo could get a word out.

Theo nodded and leaned on the counter, watching with unreadable eyes as Harry kept stirring. He held the pattern in his mind and felt a steady stream of magic flow down his hand and into the potion. The stirring pattern shaped it, set it into the potion. Slow. Careful. Precise.

He felt the moment it caught and sighed, pulling the glass stirring rod out of the dittany. He tossed it in the sink to be cleaned and turned down the heat of the fire under the cauldron.

“So,” Theo said, guarded. “Samhain.”

Harry grinned. “I was going to ask you about that today, anyway.”

“You want to join the rites?”

Harry pulled the Black family book out of his pocket and set it on the counter. The thing was ancient, bound in dark brown leather. Gold accents strengthened the spine and corners; the Black crest was embossed on the front and back covers, set with emeralds.

Theo’s eyes got wide. “Merlin,” he breathed. “Father won’t even let me touch ours...”

“Responsibility is—not Sirius’ strong suit,” Harry admitted. “I mean, I’ve no intention of losing it, but still.”

“There’s a curse on it, I presume?” Theo said.
“Burns out your eyeballs if you open it and you’re not a Black.”

“Yikes,” Theo said with a smirk. “Ours will essentially pulverize the brain.”

“I want to learn that curse,” Harry said.

“I don’t think it exists anymore.”
He made a note to ask Crouch. “I memorized the incantation and the protective runes.”

“And you know the dangers?” Theo said.

“I asked my tutor.”

“Ah,” Theo raised a knowing eyebrow. Harry smiled but said nothing else. He was pretty sure someone had told Theo who was tutoring Harry. Neither of them ever brought it up. “They explained it to you?”

“At length.” Harry tapped the book. “And this provides a fairly comprehensive explanation.”

“Great.” Theo grinned. “Be ready to leave the dorms at ten. It’ll go past curfew. Snape looks the other way.”

“Anyone from other Houses?”

“Viridian, Goshawk, Johnson, Graves, Jigger.”

“No Puffs?” Harry asked.

Theo snorted. “Hardly.”

“And… Neville?”

“I haven’t asked,” Theo admitted.

“Might as well.”

Theo nodded slowly. “Everyone’s coming down here after breakfast, I’ll ask him then.”

Harry changed into dyed black linen robes that evening. Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, Blaise, and Theo all did the same and sat on their beds, talking idly or reading or working on homework, while minutes ticked by.

At nine forty-five, Blaise was the first to stand. No words were exchanged. The rest of them followed suit and filed out the door in silence, carrying bottles of rune potion. Harry and Theo had brewed their own with their blood in the Chamber while the other boys brought theirs from home in stasis vials. The flagon of potion felt heavier than it should have in Harry’s pocket.

A quiet group waited in the common room. Most of the seventh years, half of the sixth years, and everyone from Harry’s year. The dueling club circle stood a bit apart; Celesta, Noah, Flora, Hestia, Adrian, Peregrine, and Everett stood with Harry’s year-mates. Pansy looked half-asleep still and admitted through a yawn that she’d taken a nap beforehand. Harry let her lean her head on his shoulder while they waited.
Anita Strickland and Brendan Owens were the last to join them, looking harried.

“That’s everyone,” Hestia said quietly. “Let’s go.”

They moved out of the common room in one group. Hestia and Adrian set off hand in hand, aiming for a section of the dungeons Harry almost never visited. It was dusty and abandoned and held nothing but abandoned rooms with strange holes in the ceiling and stranger stains on the floors.

It looked different tonight. Less dusty, more alive.

The Slytherins stopped outside an ancient oak door set into the stone. Harry was sure it hadn’t been there before.

“Hogwarts’ ritual room,” Flora explained in her quiet razorblade voice. “It only opens on Samhain.”

Hestia checked a plain silver watch. “We’ll wait for the others.”

It wasn’t long before Eriss lifted her head, scenting the approach of more feet. Harry looked over with the rest of the Slytherins. Mason Goshawk, Sam Graves, Iris Viridian, and Aaron Jigger from Ravenclaw, Angelina Johnson from Gryffindor, and Neville, looking hesitant. Harry caught his eye and Neville hurried over to stand with them.

“Anyone else?” Hestia called softly.

Johnson and Jigger shook their heads.

Hestia nodded and pushed the oak door open.

At first the room was unimpressive, nothing but a plain open square, flat stone under their feet and an irregular chiseled roof above their heads, lit by torches. Then Harry concentrated.

Magic crackled over his skin, the echo of a thousand years of rituals. He forgot his composure completely, eyes closed, drawing in a deep breath and savoring the power in the air.

A snicker snapped him out of it. Looking around, most of the other fifth years were in similar conditions, while the older set watched with knowing grins. “Intoxicating, isn’t it?” Goshawk said. “Happens to all of us, no worries.”

“Do we just…” Bulstrode gestured around. “Pick somewhere?”

“Everyone have rune potion?” Jigger said.

Heads nodded and hands pulled flagons out of pockets.

“Then yeah, just pick a spot and start on your runes,” Jigger said. “Hestia and I will come ‘round and make sure you’ve all done them right.”

Harry ended up near the wall, with Theo and Everett nearest him. He knelt on the cold, unforgiving stone and started tracing runes on the floor in his potion.

Feet paused near him. Harry finished the rune he was on and looked up with a raised eyebrow.

Hestia scanned his work and nodded curtly. “Wasn’t sure I’d be seeing you here.”

“Sirius does the rites,” Harry said.
“Family is important,” she said approvingly. “Those look good.”

She moved on to Theo.

Harry finished the runes and sat back. There was a weird power coming off them. It felt a little bit like a ward and a little bit like a Notice-Me-Not and also nothing like anything he’d ever worked before.

“Weird, aren’t they?” Theo said.

“Very.” Harry couldn’t wait until he was old enough and knowledgeable enough to study these. He’d have to ask Crouch how long that would take. Trusting his safety to magic he didn’t fully understand sat ill with him.

Hestia and Jigger finished going around and checking everyone’s work, then settled back in their own rune circles. “Start whenever,” Hestia called. “Just remember it cuts out at midnight.”

For a few seconds, no one spoke. Then Hestia and Flora started chanting in perfect, soft unison, sitting cross-legged in circles that almost touched, facing each other like mirrors.

Jigger was the next to start up. Then Goshawk and Johnson started their own soft incantations at almost the same time.

Harry took a deep breath and began.

He knew Latin pretty well. The chant hadn’t been hard to translate. Understanding it was a different matter, given the archaic language, but he had a pretty good sense of its overall meaning. It told a long history of a family who bickered and fought and maneuvered and occasionally stabbed each other in the back and stood together when it mattered. It spoke of trickery, deceit, and power held behind the scenes, of rising and falling fortunes, of passions that burned cities.

The Blacks did neither love nor hate by halves.

At first it was just words. Harry got through the incantation once and started on the second iteration, feeling a bit silly.

Eriss started hissing wordlessly in his lap.

He felt it a second later. Power flooded straight into his core and out his hands. His runes lit up brightly enough to turn the backs of his eyelids red.

It was nothing like the midsummer rite. That energy was clean, impersonal, pure—latent magic from the world. This was family magic pouring into him, flavored by hundreds of years and dozens of generations of history. He choked and almost stopped chanting.

Overwhelming. Intoxicating. Magic pounded in his blood out of his fingers and dissolved out of his pores and left his veins scraped clean.

A presence bore down on his mental shields. Multiple presences. Not like Legilimency. They were formed of pure magic. Too many to count. Not attacking but exploring, searching, testing. Some were suspicious. All were curious—about the new member of their family. The one they’d never felt before. Harry understood, suddenly, why you had to be an Occlumens to do this. Even after all his practice it was a struggle to hold onto his sense of self under the weight of so many generations.

We felt the addition of a new Heir, they said in a perfect chorus.
Harry would’ve been more cautious but—he could feel their magic. Black magic. Like his own.

They didn’t mean him harm.

He dropped his mental shields.

The presences whirled through his mind. Harry couldn’t even be afraid—he wasn’t in pain, he was in control of himself, he was also *known* in a way he’d never recognized before.

Approval radiated from the magic surrounding him. Streaming through him.

*Welcome, Hadrian Sirius Black* echoed in his head. *A worthy addition to our family.*

Harry was vaguely aware of an exhilarated smile on his face and tears streaming down his cheeks.

Time passed. He resonated with—belonging, welcoming, heritage.

Like flipping a switch, it suddenly began to fade. He clutched instinctively at the connection but it poured out of his mental grip and disappeared. *Goodbye* whispered through his head and then the Black magic was gone, leaving only his own, roaring in a turbulent storm.

He became aware of Eriss turning restless circles around Harry’s shoulders. Sensory information trickled in again. First soreness from sitting on the cold floor. Aching muscles. The familiar heavy silence of the dungeons broken only by shifting of other bodies nearby.

Harry blinked hard and settled fully back into his body, breathing deeply. Midnight. Right. Samhain was technically over.

Slowly, he uncurled from his cross-legged seat. The runes were burnt out, as tended to happen after rituals. Harry flicked his wand and evaporated what was left of the rune potion.

“I’d forgotten that,” Theo sighed, climbing to his feet as well. “Been too long.”

“No kidding,” Everett said. “I was so relieved when I hit fifth year and Miles brought me in. Mum taught me the rites even though Grandfather cut us off. Sometimes her sister and brother-in-law would come do the rites with us. I missed it when I started here.”

“Fucking Dumbledore,” Blaise said, joining them.

“Hear, hear,” Everett said.

Johnson frowned at them. “Dumbledore—”

“Forbids the practice of all the old rites on school grounds,” Theo said before she could join in.

“Which is why you’re down here with the rest of us on our holy day.”

“He’s trying to create a more culturally welcoming environment,” Johnson said stiffly.

“Instead he created a school where Muggle-borns never even notice how different their old world was because we have to keep some of the most significant aspects of our culture secret,” Theo said.

“One of you lot called Creevey a Mudblood two weeks ago!” Johnson folded her arms.

“He was chasing Veronica Butler around trying to take her picture, and wouldn’t back off when she repeatedly turned him down,” Celesta said. “That’s considered very poor manners in our world and I’d guess even in the Muggle one, Black?”
“Rude, yes, although that doesn't excuse the use of that slur.” Harry wasn’t going to jump in on their side in front of a Gryffindor he didn’t know but neither would he condone what had happened. He'd have Pansy or Blaise ferret out whoever had called Creevey that later, and have a word with them. Neville was listening with his mouth set in a grim line.

“You might have noticed Granger and Finch-Fletchley haven’t heard the word Mudblood in years,” Hestia said on her way by. “Not from us, at any rate. That hag pretending to be a Defense teacher is another story entirely.”

Johnson scowled. “I looked it up. She was a Slytherin.”

“And she’s a heavy-handed short-sighted idiot actively disliked by the majority of our House,” Harry said, voice hard.

Johnson frowned. On the other hand, at least that ended the argument.

Harry fell into his bed in the dorm and passed out almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. It was the first time in years that he slept without Occlumency exercises and still had no nightmares.

“Hestia,” he said the next morning. “What happens if a Muggle-born does the Samhain rites?”

Hestia eyed him for a few seconds. Flora kept looking at the book in her lap but here eyes had stopped tracking over the words. “Why?”

“I’m curious.”

“If a Muggle-born’s ever done them, or because you want to bring a friend in next year?”

He smiled blandly and didn’t respond.

Hestia rolled her eyes. “There’s a connection with one’s Muggle ancestors, or so I’ve heard. It’s different. Less communication. Just the sense of belonging. They still feel something. And if a Muggle-born marries into a magical family or gets blood adopted, they’ll connect with that family in the rites… as I’m sure you know.”

“I’m so glad of the connection through Alvadora Black,” Harry said, letting an edge creep into his smile.

“I’m sure,” Hestia said, with a matching smile. “I hope I’ve satisfied your purely academic interest.”

“Completely.” Harry sauntered away to his Transfiguration class, pretending to be unaware of the way Hestia’s and Flora’s attention followed him.

The storm blew itself out by November second, leaving clear, cold skies for the rest of that week. Adrien kept everyone at practice so late that half the time Harry had to go straight from the pitch to the warded, forgotten room where he worked with Crouch.

Curses flew in the hallways all week. Draco, Pansy, and Everett imitated Ronald dropping the Quaffle whenever they were in his line of sight. Seventh years hissed threats at Harry in the halls. Celesta ended up in the hospital wing with blood seeping out of the pores on her face. Poetic justice demanded Peregrine turn up some archaic curse that left Ronald crying tears of blood for a day. Even
Pomfrey couldn’t fix the spell until it wore off. Jules refused to so much as look at Harry after that episode, which was fair because Harry had gone straight to Peregrine and learned the curse.

Petty jinxes were the name of the game between the less hateful team members. Spinnet went to Pomfrey with her eyebrows growing several inches per hour; Johnson hit Noah from behind with a hex that left him speaking in Gobbledygook for a day. Fred and George avoided Harry and he them, but other than that, all three of them considered the other’s whole team fair game for minor, relatively harmless spells.

The best part of all of it was Ronald turning green and red in turns at the insults and threats. Jules brushed it off with the ease of someone who’d been in the public eye his whole life. Ronald was far more sensitive. Harry took to smirking at him, very slightly, like he had a secret planned and couldn’t quite hide his delight, whenever they made eye contact. Ronald turned white as a sheet every time.

On Saturday morning, the skies and the ceiling of the Great Hall were a pale, pearly grey. Snow capped the mountains surrounding the school. Harry dressed in his Quidditch boots, trousers, and jumper, and went up to breakfast with the team. Match days meant the usual year-group seating arrangement went forgotten and the team sat together.

Pansy was grinning like a demon when she sauntered into the Hall halfway through breakfast. Harry paused with a spoonful of oatmeal hanging between his bowl and his mouth. That expression boded ill for someone.

She sat down between Draco and Theo, looking very pleased with herself, and whipped out a beaded purse. “Who wants to piss off some lions?”

“That would be everyone,” Natalie said brightly.

“Excellent.” Pansy grinned wider and reached into her purse up to the elbow.

She came out with fistfuls of crown-shaped silver badges printed with black letters:

WEASLEY IS OUR KING

“This is your project?” Harry said.

“Part of it,” Pansy said airily, passing them along.

Adrian, Peregrine, Noah, and Everett pinned theirs on immediately. Ginny looked at hers for a few seconds, glanced over at the raucous Gryffindor table, and attached it to her jumper with slightly jerky movements.

“You don’t have to,” Adrian said. “Family’s family.”

“Ron’s no family of mine,” Ginny said in a low, angry voice. “Not after—everything he’s been saying this year.”

Noah clapped her on the back. They’d gone out for a month or two last year but it hadn’t seemed to cause any awkwardness. “We’re your family now,” he said with a grin.

“Rule one,” someone said. A murmur of assent ran around the table.

Harry flicked the badge on his chest. “These are good work, Pans.”

“Can’t wait to see the bastard’s face,” Daphne said fiercely.
Adrian made sure everyone had a decent breakfast before he ordered them to their feet. The team troupèd out in a group to applause from their table. Harry caught a glimpse of Luna waving wildly at him from the Ravenclaw table, wearing a hat shaped like the head of a snake with a body as big around as she was. It bared its fangs at him and hissed loudly enough to be heard across the Hall, making a lot of students jump. Harry grinned and waved back.

“Who the hell is that?” Everett said.

“Luna Lovegood,” Draco said.

“Loony?”

Harry turned a cold, unimpressed look on Everett. The older boy had the sense to flush and shut up.

They got down to the locker rooms, changed, and huddled on the benches while Adrian went over their plays.

“This is the strongest team we’ll face this year,” Adrian said in conclusion. “Potter’s put on more experience, their Chasers have been working together for years, and the Weasley Terrors are well-named. Their weak spot’s the Keeper. Draco, keep Potter off the Snitch as long as possible. We just keep pounding their Seeker. Everett, do your thing, watch out for Bell, she’s good at trick shots, and Johnson has a wicked arm. We’ve got this.”

“Slytherin!” they yelled in unison, shouldering brooms.

The team formed up in the hall and marched up to the pitch.

Harry never got sick of this feeling. A grin came unbidden to his face as cheers pounded down from above and adrenaline started trickling into his system. Ginny, next to him, looked around with wide, exhilarated eyes.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” Everett said from her other side, pumping a fist in the air to chants of “Sly-ther-in! Sly-ther-in!” from the green-and-silver section of the stands.


They came to a halt in the center of the field.

“Aaaand the Gryffindors—Johnson, Spinnet, Bell, Weasley, Weasley, Potter, and Weasley!”

More cheers, as the Gryffindors marched out of their hallway. They formed up opposite the Slytherins. In the corner of his eye, Harry saw Draco catch Ronald and Jules’ attention and tap his badge with a smirk. Ronald turned green.

Well. Greener.

“Captains shake hands,” Hooch ordered. Johnson and Adrian stepped forward and did the usual thing where they tried to crush each other’s fingers. “Mount your brooms.”

Harry swung his Firebolt down into position, tossed a leg over it, and—

The whistle blew.
Fourteen players shot into the sky. Wind tore through Harry’s hair and Quidditch robes. Everett and Ronald streaked off towards their goal hoops. The Seekers took off to hunt the Snitch. Harry put them all out of his mind.

“And it’s Johnson, Johnson with the Quaffle, what a player that girl is, I’ve been saying it for years but she still won’t go out with me—”

“JORDAN!” McGonagall yelled.

“Just a fun fact, Professor, adds a bit of interest—”

Bole slammed a Bludger. It hit Johnson in the back and she dropped the Quaffle straight into Ginny’s hands. The youngest Weasley took off in a blur of red hair and green robes, dodging expertly around a Bludger sent her way by George. Harry left Bell in the dust, took a pass from Ginny and reverse passed it back to Pucey right before Spinnet shoulder-checked him—

“—that’s a Bludger to the head for Pucey, he drops the Quaffle, caught by Katie Bell of Gryffindor, Bell freight passes to Alicia Spinnet and Spinnet’s away—”

Harry whipped around and leaned forward, his broom shooting across the pitch just like they’d planned. With his superior speed he could make it down the pitch for defense and back up for offense faster than his teammates. Ginny stayed in the middle; Pucey got in position to receive a pass —

“—dodges Derrick, avoids a Bludger—close call, Alicia—the crowds are loving this, what’s that they’re singing?”

Harry turned a fragment of attention to the crowd even as he barrel rolled around Fred and bore down on Spinnet’s tail.

“Weasley cannot save a thing,
He cannot block a single ring,
That’s why Slytherins all sing:
Weasley is our King.

Weasley was born in a bin,
He always lets the Quaffle in,
Weasley will make sure we win,
Weasley is our King.

Harry laughed wildly.

“—and Alicia passes back to Angelina Johnson!” Jordan was definitely trying to drown out the singing. “Johnson dodges Black—SHE SHOOTS—SHE—aahh…”
Everett slung the Quaffle Harry’s way. The pass was a little wobbly. Harry had to flip almost upside down to get it, took a Bludger to the shoulder with a wince, and sped off up the pitch.

Fred and George converged on him with bats at the ready. Harry fired off a pretty desperate pass to Adrian and pulled up short. Adrian caught it but Spinnen checked him a second later. He dropped the Quaffle.

Johnson shot under him and almost caught it, but Noah sent her a Bludger and she missed—and there was Ginny, streaking along close to the ground, scooping the Quaffle into one hand, aiming up the pitch for the Gryffindor hoops—

Harry and Adrian shook off their tails and scrambled for position. Adrian hand signaled for a Pepperjack Attack (named over firewhiskey, cheese, and crackers one night in mid-September). Harry peeled off instantly, curving up the edge of the pitch away from the main action.

Ginny misread the play and almost passed to no one; she checked herself at the last second and managed to get the Quaffle off to Adrian. He barely caught it and bore down on the goal—

The singing got louder.

Weasley is our King,
Weasley is our King,
He always lets the Quaffle in,
Weasley is our King.

—and it’s Pucey, Pucey with the Quaffle, out of Bludger range, looks like he’s just got the Keeper ahead—

Weasley cannot save a thing,
He cannot block a single ring…

—so it’s the first test for new Gryffindor Keeper, Weasley, brother of the Beaters Fred and George and the Slytherin Chaser Ginny, a promising new talent—come on, Ron!

Next second, a scream of delight from the Slytherins temporarily broke up the song. Ronald had taken a wild dive while the Quaffle soared straight through his arms and then the center hoop.


WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN,
WEASLEY IS OUR KING…
Harry was in perfect position. He swept the Quaffle into his arm as it fell and pointed his broom straight at Ronald.

“—it’s Slytherin Chaser Black, bearing straight down on the Gryffindor Keeper, using his Firebolt’s speed to stay ahead of the Gryffindor Chasers—”

It was almost impossible to hear Jordan’s commentary over the singing thundering through the stadium. Harry dodged a Bludger by an inch and fired: the Quaffle slammed through Gryffindor’s right goal hoop.

“Black scores! Twenty-nil Slytherin—”

Adrian caught the Quaffle, but lost it to Bell within seconds; she took off for the Slytherin end with furious speed. Noah and Peregrine both pounded Bludgers her way but she passed the Quaffle off to Johnson and dodged—

“—Ginny Weasley going after the Quaffle, you can take her, Angelina—turns out you can’t—nice Bludger from Fred Weasley, I mean George Weasley, oh who cares, one of them anyway, and Ginny drops the Quaffle and Katie Bell—er—drops it too—so that’s Pucey with the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Pucey takes the Quaffle, and he’s off up the pitch, come on now Gryffindor, block him!”

Spinnet tried to do exactly that but Harry blocked her. Ginny whipped around a Bludger and then George—took a pass from Adrian—

_WEASLEY CANNOT SAVE A THING…_

“—and Ginny Weasley’s dodged Bell, she’s heading straight for the goal, stop it, Ron!”

Ronald didn’t stop it. Ginny pumped one triumphant fist in the air at her first goal and peeled off. Spinnet caught the Quaffle and launched into a complicated pass pattern with the other Gryffindors, moving relentlessly back up the pitch.

Harry swept by the Slytherin stands with a flourishing barrel roll, to their delighted screams. Pansy was standing at the front conducting the song: she broke off long enough to turn around and wave back at him. Harry caught a fragment of her delighted smile before he was gone, rejoining his teammates by their own goalposts—

_THAT’S WHY SLYTHERINS ALL SING:_

_WEASLEY IS OUR KING._

Forty-ten.

Fifty-ten.
Sixty-twenty.

Seventy-thirty.

There was no sign of the Snitch. Draco was marking Jules so closely their knees kept bumping. Luna’s ridiculous snake hat hissed creepily whenever there was a Slytherin goal. Harry relished the adrenaline pounding in his veins and the song pounding around the stadium with no sign of stopping anytime soon. Pansy was really doing an impressive job keeping everyone in unison.

Eighty-thirty.

The song dissolved into an incoherent roar. Harry spared a glance for the Seekers. Draco had spotted the Snitch and torn off after it, Jules on his tail—

They were neck and neck, Jules on his Nimbus 2000 and Draco on his 2001, the Potter Quidditch genes rendering the broom advantage fairly useless—

“The Seekers are off, Jules Potter and Draco Malfoy neck and neck, I can’t see that either of them has an advantage, they’re totally even, come on, Jules—!”

Draco shot up into the air, one fist pointed at the sky, screaming.

The Slytherin section exploded.

Six green blurs converged on Draco. Adrian was the first to get there, slamming into him with a yell—then Ginny and Peregrine piled into them, and Harry managed to kick his personal space issues to the curb long enough to join in, and then Everett and Noah hit the group last, all of them screaming and laughing with joy as they descended to the pitch in a tangle of limbs and brooms—

“You did it!” Peregrine shrieked. “You beat Potter, you beat Potter—”

“Brilliant!” Adrian bellowed.

Their feet hit the ground. The group staggered and fell over. Harry’s stomach got sick with panic at having several bodies piled on top of his—Merlin dammit, too many people touching him—but he was fine, he could handle this—

He hung onto his composure. Ginny and Everett rolled off of him and got to their feet, grinning like crazy people.

Thank fuck. Harry scrambled upright and smiled at Ginny.

“How’d you like your first match, Weasley?” Everett laughed.

“ Fucking incredible!” she whooped.

“You bet your ass!” Peregrine yelled. “Draco, that was epic—”

The Gryffindors started hitting the ground not far away. Students were beginning to stream onto the pitch. “Filthy snakes had to resort to cheating to win!” Jules yelled loudly, red-faced with fury.

A snatch of Weasley is our King drifted past them. Fred and George frowned and looked at Harry, who shrugged. He hadn’t written the thing, or even known about it.

Plausible deniability indeed.
“Did you like the song, Weasley?” Draco taunted. “We wanted to write another couple of verses, but we couldn’t find rhymes for bully and prat—”

Fred and George exchanged a loaded glance. Harry saw family loyalty warring with their long-held dislike of Ronald.

“Yes, yeah, hilarious, Malfoy,” George said good-naturedly. “Whole school enjoyed that rousing little performance.”

“Pansy going to start up a choir?” Fred said with a smirk.

Harry grinned back, grateful that they’d headed off the brewing argument. “I don’t know, she might—she had a lot of fun plotting this out, wouldn’t tell me what was going on…”

“Like HELL she didn’t!” Ron shouted.

“No, actually, no one said anything to him,” Adrian said with a nasty smirk. “We knew he might have a conflict of interests, see…”

“Unlike some people, at least I didn’t need to buy my way onto the team,” Ronald snarled.

“No, that’d be Jules getting rules broken for the Boy Who Lived,” Harry said agreeably.

Jules was practically shaking with anger. “You—I earned my spot!”

“You tried out?” Ginny said with fake surprise. “I don’t remember hearing that.”

“Ginny!” Ronald glared at her. “What’re you playing at, eh?”

She grinned at him. “Quidditch.”

“Damn well, too,” George said proudly.

“Our ickle baby sister, all grown up,” Fred said with a melodramatic sniff. Johnson was hissing in Ron’s ear, hopefully trying to get him to back down.

“Well played, Ginny dear.” George bowed.

“Weasley talent’s undeniable,” Noah agreed, grinning at them.

Everett snorted. “Although sometimes it skips a kid…”

“Death Eater bastard!” Ronald shouted.

“Control him,” Harry said flatly to the twins. He wanted to go celebrate with his team, not stand here exchanging barbs with the Gryffindors.

Fred grabbed Ronald’s arm. “Ron, c’mon, mate, I know you’re disappointed but—”

“What, are you his fucking lapdogs now?” Jules demanded, shaking Johnson off and facing off with the twins.

“No,” George said angrily, “we’re his friends, and our brother’s being an idiot.”

“I don’t need babysitters!” Ronald shouted.

“Sure seems like you do,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. “Can we go?”
“Please,” Adrian said. “This is boring.”

Noah slung an arm around Ginny’s shoulders as they all turned away. She laughed, bright and bell-like, at something he said—

“Ron—Jules—NO—”

Someone crashed into him from behind.

They flew forwards. Harry landed facedown with a body on top of him. Pinned by a bulkier, heavier person. Unable to reach his wand—trapped—

He flailed. One elbow hit something hard.

A fist slammed into his spine. Laid him flat on the ground.

Just like that—

*Useless freak!* thundered in his ears. He saw double. The linoleum floor of the Dursleys’ kitchen and the neatly trimmed grass of the pitch. Another blow hit his kidneys. Agony lanced up and down his back.

*Never. Again.*


He was fine. He was fine. A *wizard*. Capable of protecting himself.

Harry took a couple of deep breaths.

Then he passed out.

“...don’t know what they were thinking.” Fred.

“Mum’s going to have kittens.” George.

“Yes, and half her anger’s gonna be because of Ginny playing on a team of guys.” Fred again. Why did his head hurt so badly?

“We’re not going to—*hurt* her or—” Noah?

“What the *fuck*, we’d never—” Everett.

Oh. Magical exhaustion. Oops.

“We know that.” Fred.

“Mum’s overprotective.” George.

Shuffling feet. “How long do we wait?”

“Pomfrey said we have to go at thirty to curfew.”
Harry blinked and opened his eyes.

“I should be worried that I don’t even freak out waking up here anymore,” he croaked.

Pansy, Theo, and Neville’s faces appeared over him. “Good to see you up, mate,” Neville said.

“Thanks, Nev.” Harry struggled to sit up and found his entire Quidditch team, minus Ginny and plus Fred and George, had joined his usual circle. Hermione, Daphne, Blaise, and Luna were sitting on the bed next to his. Hermione’s lip was ragged from being nervously bitten.

“What happened?”

Theo snorted. “Straight to business, I see.”

“Is there anything else I ought to waste attention on?” Harry said. He felt for his magic, found it pretty normal—he’d burnt himself out by losing control, not by releasing too much magic. Next the familiar bond. Eriss, calm now that he was awake, somewhere below him.

“Your health, maybe?” Hermione seethed, elbowing Theo aside so she could get a better angle from which to glare. Several of the Slytherin upper years who didn’t know her well looked uncertainly between her and Harry. Surprised at her audacity, or her tone, or something Harry didn’t care to parse. He settled on giving her a lopsided smirk.

“I’m perfectly all right.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, Mr. Potter—I mean, Mr. Black!” Madam Pomfrey barked.

Bloody tyrannical nurse.

Harry sat in strained calm as she cast one diagnostic spell after another. He was a little sore, but he usually was after a match. A night’s rest and he’d be back to normal and in the meantime he was not going to miss either dinner or the victory celebrations.

“Well, it seems that you’re mostly recovered,” Pomfrey said as if she very much doubted her own charms. “But you are to come right back here if you experience any light-headedness or fatigue whatsoever, Mr. Black, understand?”

“Of course, Madam Pomfrey,” he said, eyes wide with sincerity. “If you think it best.”

She huffed. “I must say, it’s nice to see a student with sense. So many of you boys run off and seem to actively seek out danger…”

Pomfrey subsided into irritated mutterings. “I assure you I don’t seek it out,” Harry said with a rueful smile. “It just seems to find me…”

“Yes, well, that it does.” Pomfrey waved him off. “Don’t celebrate too hard, Mr. Black.”

“Certainly not.”

As soon as the door closed behind them, Blaise’s studied indifference melted away into a smirk. “Nicely played.”

Harry smiled, thin and a bit cold, the Slytherin smile only his House mates and close friends saw.

“That I will not,” Harry said.

“Drunk wizards tend to cause explosions.” Everett grinned. “Remember that one time with Miles and the firewhiskey and cauldron cakes?”

Adrian groaned. “Don’t fucking remind me, I couldn’t look at a cauldron cake for weeks.”

“What happened?” Hermione asked hesitantly, like she wasn’t sure if she’d get an answer, or maybe just whether or not she wanted to know.”

Adrian, Everett, Peregrine, and Noah launched into a complicated story that overlapped itself, involving food stolen from the kitchens and stupid drunken errors. Harry walked quietly in the middle of the group.

Whispers from behind reached his ears. Harry flicked his wand, concealed in the folds of his robes, and cast a silent amplius auri on himself.

“—skey is a bad idea.” Theo.

Fred, snorting. “Especially when it’s Harry.”

“Why, ‘cause his mean streak is wider than the Channel?” Neville muttered.

“Well, yeah,” said George.

“But also, he’s scary powerful,” Fred finished.

Silent agreement.

Harry ended the spell, amused. They’d hit on the exact reason he disliked alcohol.

_Hermione_

“Banned?”

“A lifetime ban,” said Ronald miserably. He was halfway through a weird concoction of Stratusten vodka, eggnog, and orange juice. No one had called him on how disgusting it looked. Or how pathetic it was that he was getting drunk over Jules getting banned when he himself was fine.

Hermione’s working theory was that Percy was still kissing Fudge’s ass, and Umbridge had orders to avoid antagonizing Weasleys.

“She can’t do that,” Hermione said.

Ronald looked at her like she was mad. Nothing new there. “She’s just done it!”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, do you _have_ a functioning brain?” she snarled. “The Defense post is in all likelihood cursed, and even if not, when was the last time we had a Defense teacher for more than a year? She’s making everyone hate her. The hag will be gone inside a year and if you think McGonagall won’t flip that ban the second she leaves, you’re even stupider than I thought.”

She was being unreasonable and she knew it, he was tipsy and upset and not thinking clearly, but also, she was furious. They’d _attacked Harry_. Put him in the hospital wing. Indirectly, fine, but that didn’t excuse it. Hermione knew enough about Muggle psychology to have a good guess about
Harry’s assorted issues. Ronald and Jules needed to pay attention and learn not to cross certain lines. Not that it was acceptable to cross those lines regardless of a person’s former traumas, but the fact that Harry reacted so badly just made her angrier.

“And Malfoy got off scot free,” Jules snarled into his own drink. “At least Harry got a year ban for blasting us like that.”

And just like that, Hermione was done. “They didn’t even do anything. And Harry was defending himself!” Remembering his face at dinner when the news reached him—for one second, before he got his expression under control, she’d actually thought he might murder Umbridge in the middle of the Great Hall.

“They—you heard what they were saying!” Ronald bellowed. Hermione flicked her wand and set up a silencing charm with a muttered incantation.

Fred and George plopped down on either side of Ronald. “Yeah, and we heard what you were saying about our sister,” Fred said.

Ronald looked from one to the other and had the sense to falter. The twins always had something mischievous in their expressions, but when they got pissed, lighthearted teasing turned to malicious mockery. The sort of gleam that would laugh while someone danced through some sick, twisted jungle gym in a futile attempt at survival, as in a horror film Hermione stupidly watched when she was seven. That gleam was in their eyes now. It definitely wasn’t an accident that they were flanking Ronald.

“Well, you know what Mum’s like,” Ronald blustered. “She’ll lose it when she finds out Ginny’s playing—”

“And Ginny’s a brilliant player, and she’s got hundreds of people watching if she falls,” Neville said.

“You’re saying you don’t care about her?” Jules demanded.


Neville met Hermione’s eyes; the two of them often ran interference to keep the twins’ nasty sides in check, but she was pissed enough to not care. He was, too.

“Course we care,” George said. “And if anyone hurt her, we’d hold them down for her.”

“But we know them, they’re all decent blokes, and it’s a bloody sports team, not some dungeon orgy,” Fred finished.

Ronald shook his head. “That Pucey’s a nasty piece of work—Kinney’s family, we all know what they’re like—not to mention Bole—”

“Ginny would hex their balls off if they touched her,” George said. “And they know it.”

Fred looked fake thoughtful. “Wonder what she’d do to a girl. Curse your bits shut?”

“Some kind of rotting curse,” George mused.

Ronald flailed a hand. “How does she even know spells like that! It’s what being in Slytherin teaches—”

“Actually, we taught her the ball-withering one,” Fred said. His evil smile widened. “Look,
Ronniekins, normally we like the element of surprise—”

“—but as you’re our brother, here’s a warning,” George said.

“Enough with the ripping on Ginny.” Fred tapped his wand threateningly in his left palm.

“Or we’ll demonstrate that curse on you,” George finished.

They stood up in unison. “Sleep well, Ronniekins, Julie Toons,” Fred said.

Jules and Ronald stared after them.

“Ron, that was out of line,” Jules said, once the twins were gone. “The… c’mon, would you like being accused of doing something to Katie or Angelina?”

“I wouldn’t!” Ronald protested, flushing again.

Jules shifted in his seat. “And neither would those guys. They’re Slytherins, and—Hermione, don’t kill me, but Slytherins I don’t know are hard to trust, okay? But that doesn’t mean they’re going to be—to do something like that.”

Ronald scowled.

“One more thing.” Hermione crossed her arms and stared Jules down. Ronald she had no hope of reaching, but Jules… “You know what Harry’s childhood was like,” she said flatly. “You saw how he reacted today. Put two and two together for once in your life, Jules Potter, and have a guess about why he reacted so badly.”

Jules’ eyes blew wide. “But…”

“But nothing.”

“Like he’s got—that kind of issues,” Ronald scoffed, but he sounded defensive. “We all see him all the time, he duels just fine!”

“You jumped him from behind,” Hermione said, “pinned him, and trapped him. Next time he might do something worse than just blast you off.”

“Fuck,” Jules muttered.

Ronald slumped a little lower in his seat, scowling. “I didn’t think he’d… react like that.”

“Exactly,” Hermione said acidly. It was a tone she’d learned from Daphne and they both flinched back. “You didn’t think. Try doing that next time, before being around you kills any more of my brain cells. I’m going to bed.”

“Tell him I’m sorry?” Jules said.

Hermione didn’t even look over her shoulder. “Tell him yourself.”

_Harry_

“Harry.”
He looked up at Blaise, trying not to be annoyed at the interruption. He was so close to a breakthrough on the Disillusionment Charm thing. “Yes?”

Blaise sneered at him and dragged a chair up at the side of the desk in the Chamber study. “Theo’s pissed you’re not answering the journal.”

“I’m busy.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “Or I was.”

“Checked the time recently?”

Harry looked at his watch and swore.

“Thought so.”

“Don’t be so smug,” Harry said, stacking his papers aside and standing up. “You’ve still got to make it to the top of the entrance hall passage and let them in, haven’t you? Unless I’m forgetting the plan?”

“Shite,” Blaise said, dashing out of the study.

Harry smirked and followed him out, closing the door firmly behind himself.

Blaise was already halfway across the exterior of the Chamber when Harry stepped out of the statue’s mouth, moving at a quick jog. Harry tugged on the familiar bond, made sure Eriss was on her way, and went back in to track down everyone else who was already in the Chamber.

He’d mentally asked the room to provide a space for Fred and George, and it had obliged, creating a combination potions laboratory, kitchen, and alchemy workshop where they spent a lot of their time. Four boxes were stacked in the corner. Harry asked once what was in them. Fred replied “contingency plans” with a shifty expression and Harry quit pushing.

“Oi! Terrors!” he shouted over the weird whining noise coming from behind the door. It didn’t stop so he banged on the door and shouted again. The one time he walked in unannounced he’d walked back out covered in purple paint that didn’t wash off four hours, for which Theo and Pansy and Daphne still teased him mercilessly.

Even the pounding didn’t work. Harry pressed his lips together and cast a mild _reducto_. The door shook on its hinges. The whining cut out.

Three seconds later, George cracked the door open. He was wearing goggles with perfectly reflective white lenses and his red hair stood straight up on end. Harry laughed out loud at his perfectly he fit the image of a Muggle mad scientist.

“Merlin bless me,” George said with fake shock. “The stoic Harry Black, laughing?”

“Your ridiculousness has reached previously unsurpassed levels,” Harry said, controlling himself. Fucking—he hated laughing… but then again this was George. And behind him somewhere, Fred. Harry could trust them. Probably.

He drop-kicked that last thought out of his head. Occlumency was so useful sometimes. “The first meeting of… the upgraded dueling club is starting soon,” he said, getting down to business.

“Oh _shit_,” George said. “Right, sorry, we’ll be down in a sec, lost track of time. Fred, shut off the—”
The door slammed shut again.

Snickering, Harry went a little further around the balcony. Library next. Hermione and Theo were predictable.

Their heated voices spilled over into the hallway as soon as he opened the door to the library.

“—can’t use a Ryagkov array in that manner,” Hermione snapped. Harry caught a glimpse of two heads, one bushy and one neatly groomed, leaning over a book with their backs to him.

“Fucking hell, Hermione—”

“Language, Theo!”

“Fucking heck, then!”

What sounded like someone hitting someone else with a book. “Not what I meant!”

“Stop clinging to the bloody rules and look—if you just forget the fundamental laws for a second—”

“That’s the point of them being fundamental, Theo, you can’t just forget about them—”

“They were codified almost five hundred years ago and no one questions it! What if there’s a workaround or—or a loophole—or the conference was wrong?”

“It wasn’t wrong—those were some of the greatest magicals ever to exist—”

“How much has Muggle theory changed in five hundred years, Hermione? What if we could get around the fundamentals—”

Harry cleared his throat. “Not to break up this fascinating argument, but it’s almost time.”

Both of them jerked and turned to look at him, Hermione’s eyes panicked, Theo’s annoyed. “Merlin!” Hermione said. “We’re supposed to be down there waiting—if we miss—”

“You’re fine,” Harry said, smirking. “But really, we should get going.”

“Right—sorry,” she said with a guilty grin.

Harry stepped back and held the door for them with a mocking bow. Hermione swatted him on the shoulder, as she’d recently begun doing. He tolerated the casual contact because it helped his self-control and because she was the sort of person to show affection of any kind with touch. For his friend’s sake Harry could tolerate some limited physical contact.

Theo followed Hermione out. Harry caught Theo’s eye and tilted his head at Hermione’s retreating back with a questioning eyebrow raise.

“Fuck off,” Theo said with a smirk.

“Ouch,” Harry deadpanned. “And here I thought we were friends, Theodore.”

“I’ve got you fooled,” Theo said with a smirk.

For the second time, Harry fought off a stab of uncertainty. What if he couldn’t trust his friends? Here he was preparing to bring more people into his secrets—essentially handing his closest friends more power. More opportunity to hurt him.
“Harry.” Theo stopped and examined Harry intently. “You good?”

Harry glanced aside; Hermione was in such a hurry that she hadn’t even noticed the delay. “I…”

If he could trust anyone on the planet—it was Sirius. And after him, Theo.

“We have no guarantees,” he said softly. “This is a—a huge risk. If someone bails—”

“Adrian would pound them into a pulp,” Theo said bluntly. “Or Everett or Flora would smack them with an Obliviate so strong they’ll think they passed out studying in the library. And it won’t come to that. We picked people carefully.”

Harry rubbed his temples. “So did my parents, and look at Pettigrew.”

Theo shrugged. “Well, the Light would say it’s all about the power of love that binds people together.”

“None of us is that fucking naïve.”

“Fear, then,” Theo said.

Harry considered his words for a long moment. Something Crouch said in one of their politics lessons came back to him—*Fear, respect, loyalty, those things will bind as truly as a magical contract, and all the stronger for being voluntary—so long as you never push fear over into hatred, or beyond respect.*

“You know,” he said finally, “I’m not sure which of us is the bad influence anymore.”

Theo laughed, a quiet, cutting thing. “Does it matter?”

“Guess not.” Harry lifted his chin and schooled his expression.

Five minutes later, he waited with Theo, Hermione, Fred, George, and Daphne, who had (terrifyingly) been in helping the twins with something. They’d created a surprisingly comfortable sitting area in the back corner of the chamber, to the left of the statue’s feet.

If Harry’s chair was just a little bigger and a little more visible than the others, well, only a particularly observant person would consciously register the difference. Even then, it would probably be dismissed as coincidence.

When the familiar bond told him Eriss was right outside the Chamber doors, which were keyed to all his closest friends now, Harry sat up just a little straighter. “Showtime.”


“Hey, everyone,” Harry said with a wide, genuine grin. He’d been waiting for this moment for a while. “How’s it going?”

“Black,” Flora spat. “Explain this.”
The time when she’d scared the shit out of him was gone; Crouch was a lot more terrifying and a lot more deadly. Harry just smirked at her and secretly enjoyed the surprise that crossed her face. No one in Slytherin wasn’t intimidated by the Carrows.

“I should think that’d be obvious,” Pansy crooned, enjoying the whole pageant.

“How?” Everett said, staring around with eyes wide, Slytherin composure completely forgotten. He and Adrian were the only ones other than the first years to lose it entirely. “You’re a Potter and a halfblood—even the Blacks aren’t descended from Slytherin—”

“No,” Harry said, twirling his ashen wand absently around his fingers, “but the Potters are, albeit very distantly.”

Dead silence.

“The Gaunts,” he said. “Know them?”

Sacred Twenty-eight,” Celesta said. “How could we not?”

He leveled an unimpressed look in her direction.


Hestia’s eyes widened. “And the children would take the Potter name,” she breathed.

Harry nodded. “Working theory is that Vincent’s abdication weakened the magical inheritance enough that it was passed down, dormant, until my—erm—ex-brother temporarily vanquished a Dark Lord and set off Slytherin family magics as well as Dark magics in our nursery.”

Everyone looked uncomfortable.

“Oh get over yourselves,” Hermione snapped impatiently. “He’s back. We all know it.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Hestia said acidly. “Hm? Being what you are.”

Hermione’s smile was sharp. “A witch?”

Several appraising looks went her way. Hermione had never interacted much with the Slytherin upper years. Even in dueling club she tended to stick to the fifth years or teach the younger students. Nevertheless, she was brilliant and a powerful witch.

There was consternation lurking in her expression, though, and in Justin’s. Neville, surprisingly, had a clear face, standing with one hand in Luna’s.

“So you are the Heir of Slytherin.” Adrian’s expression was calculating.

“One of two,” Harry said, “technically. I just have precedence because I’m actually a student at the moment and he’s not. And no, before you ask, I didn’t let the basilisk loose three years ago. I did lie to Dumbledore. His theory is that I’m a Parselmouth because of wild Dark magic that Samhain, and that I can’t get down here because technically I’m not Slytherin’s blood relative.”

“So…” Robins hesitated. “You’re not…”

“What?” Harry said with an eyebrow raise. “A Mudblood-hater?”
She winced.

“I’m not overly fond of Muggles,” Harry said with a shrug. “But live and let live as far as I’m concerned. We have the Statute of Secrecy for a reason. Any other issues?”

None.

“To business, then,” he said, deliberately shifting his posture to defuse tension. Wands waved and chairs were conjured and everyone sat down in a ragged group. “I’m sure one of you can guess why we’re here.”

“The toad,” Adrian said instantly.

“Hey,” Neville said. “You’re insulting toads.”

Pritchard eyed Trevor, sitting in Neville’s lap.

“The hag, then,” Everett said.

Justin clenched his fist. “She’s using blood quills on students.”

“She’s what?” Jordan Hughes gasped.

Everyone looked at him.

Hughes flushed. “My dad’s a wizard, I know about blood quills…”

“Yeah.” Justin flipped his hand around. The word was almost faded but it was still readable.

“And she’s hauled three people in for tea laced with Veritaserum so far,” Astoria said, twirling blond hair around her finger. “I’ve got her wrapped around my wand, but you know… Still bloody annoying.”

“Language,” Daphne said halfheartedly.

Astoria grinned at her. “You’re the Heir, I can do as I like.”

Daphne stiffened very slightly.

“Okay,” Hermione said loudly. “So we’re here because Umbridge is a nasty piece of shit who’s so far crossed both Slytherins and people who didn’t deserve it and she’s compromising our educations.”

“Bloody fucking Ministry,” Celesta snarled with such vitriol that Harry was mildly surprised nothing caught on fire.

Hermione visibly held back a smile. “Yes, that too.”

“And we’re going to need to know how to defend ourselves,” Everett said, with a little bit of hesitation in his voice. His eyes were on Harry.

Everett had never been a leader. Adrian was, but only in Quidditch. Flora was terrifying but she followed Hestia’s lead. Hestia—she could possibly challenge him but this was his terrain and that was an unconquerable advantage.

“We are,” Harry said. “Think of it as dueling club… with a bit of an upgrade.”
“A bit,” Noah scoffed, looking around. “This is epic, mate, Alton’s going to be pissed he missed it.”

“No, he won’t, because you’re not going to tell him.”

Dahpne didn’t falter as everyone’s attention landed on her all at once. She leaned forward in her seat. Hard as glacial ice that hadn’t so much as thought about melting in a few hundred years. A pureblood Heir to the bone. “This place belongs to the Heir of Slytherin,” she said. It was not an order, merely a statement, ringing with truth. “And no one speaks of it to an outsider without his permission.”

One by one, Harry met everyone’s eyes, until he got a nod from each of them.

He saved Hestia for last.

Green eyes met dark brown.

She was the first to look away. Smiling slightly. “Let’s give that Ministry hack hell, then, shall we?”

“We need a name,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Draco said derisively. “We’ve just been the dueling club for this long.”

“Jules’ crew has a name,” Neville said. “A stupid one, but still.”

“We’ve a purpose now,” Hermione said. “Beyond just—just studying. We can’t chase her out but we can protect the students from her while she’s here.”

_or get payback for hurting my friends, Harry thought, but sure, whatever motivation helps you sleep at night._

“What d’you care?” Peregrine said. Genuinely curious, by the sound of it.

Hermione huffed. “Because I’m not particularly fond of a system that throws innocents in jail with show trials or sham trials, stifles intellectual progress, perpetuates bigotry, runs on rampant corruption and nepotism, and controls freedom of speech and the press.”

The following silence was broken only by Theo’s sudden laughter.

“Now, if you’ll stop vetting my friends,” Harry said with just a touch of ice in his voice, “we can get back to the issue of a name?”

He’d needed to let them push Hermione a little. Justin kept a low profile but she was the Gryffindor Muggle-born, brilliant, principled, one of her year’s top two or three students without fail, and the absolute last person you’d expect to hold Albus Dumbledore in low esteem. People who didn’t know her well might assume Harry and Theo and their friends were only using her. They tended to avoid real informality in front of outsiders during dueling club practice. The Slytherin upper years wouldn’t respect Hermione without getting to push her a little, but Harry still had to cut them off and make it clear that she was ranked above them.

“Ideas?” Pansy said, rolling a quill thoughtfully between her fingers.


“ADL for short…” Harry shrugged. “Bit limited in scope.”

“So is something like the Anti-Umbridge League,” Hestia said.
Blaise snorted. “Except those options have no style.”

“Who needs style in a name?” Adrian complained.

“Heathen,” Celesta sniffed. Several of the younger set snickered and only shut up when Adrian glowered at them.

“How about the Vipers?” Justin suggested. “For Eriss. And being secretive.”

His eyes were on Harry as he said it. Harry grinned.

“Does it have to be Slytherin’s animal?” Demelza Robins complained, but she did it with a grin, so Harry wasn’t too worried.

Ginny laughed at her friend. “Well, the rest of you lot are so horribly outnumbered…”

“’S not our fault if people get stuck on how awesome Jules Potter is,” Jordan Hughes muttered. He blushed hotly when people looked at him and he realized he’d spoken loudly enough to be overheard.

“Not interested in teaming up with his lot, then?” Everett said leadingly.

Hughes snorted. “After he and Weasley spent my first year throwing their weight ’round the common room? Not likely.”

“I like the Vipers,” Flora said plainly.

Hestia glanced at her sister and seemed to come to some kind of decision. “As do I.”

“Any objections?” Hermione said.

Harry smiled internally when none were raised. He quite liked Justin’s suggestion. But he didn’t want to make unilateral decisions here. A name should be chosen by them all.

“Good idea, Finch-Fletchley,” Noah said with a good-natured grin.

“Justin, please, and thanks, I thought you’d appreciate that,” Justin said with a return smile. “Fits our meeting place, after all.”

Everyone looked around at the distinctly serpentine interior of the Chamber. “It does, at that,” Harper agreed.

“To business, then,” Harry said, shifting forward just a bit, just enough to get their attention. “This should be obvious but just in case it’s not, we don’t speak of this to anyone. Dueling club was one thing. This is another entirely. I suggest you come up with a lie before you need to use it in case anyone asks where you’ve been spending your time. Everyone here has someone else from their House; maybe say that you’ve a study group together or something.

“I’m not opposed to bringing new people in, but we can’t just invite them along. If you know someone who might be interested, speak to me, Blaise, Pansy, or Justin.” The best with people among his closest friends. “Aaron and Iris—we were thinking of Sam Graves and Mason Goshawk?”

Aaron Jigger and Iris Viridian shared a look. “Mason, yes,” Iris said. “He loathes Umbridge and he’s never thought highly of Dumbledore, or of the Ministry.”
“Our House doesn’t take well to rampant censorship of magical theory,” Aaron said with distaste.

“Yes, you’ve got sense,” Hermione said.

Iris and Aaron nodded. “I could make some hints to Mason?” Iris said.

Harry nodded. “Please. Graves?”

“Give it a few weeks,” Aaron said. “He and I have a study group for our Runes NEWT.”

“Was that everyone?” Harry asked Pansy.

She consulted some mental checklist. “Think so.”

“Dueling now?” Theo said. “I have some frustration to burn.”

Harry shrugged. “Might as well.”

Jules

It wasn’t planned. Hermione’s words had just been bouncing around inside his head ever since the night after the match. Jules couldn’t ignore what she’d pointed out—the thing he’d been too stupid to realize when it all happened. At first he’d been shocked by the force of Harry’s reaction, then he’d been distracted by the Quidditch ban, and furious as hell. Once she yelled it in his face, though, it couldn’t be ignored.

So when he took too long practicing jinxes in an abandoned classroom and had to take a shortcut down to dinner, and ran into Harry in some random corridor under the main staircase, Jules didn’t even stop to think before he blurted “I’m sorry.”

For a few seconds they just stared at each other. Harry’s expression and entire body were so still that Jules half-thought he’d been petrified. The silence lasted long enough that Jules started to wish he’d gone the long way.

“For what?” Harry said.

Jules flushed. Just like Harry, to make him spell it out. But that was fair, he guessed. “For—Ron and me jumping you after the match. Ron’s sorry too. He won’t say it, but he is. I just—that song, I still think it was way out of line. But. You… from behind, and getting pinned… I didn’t realize how strongly that would… I forgot. And I’m sorry.”

Harry’s eyes widened, a fraction, and Jules realized it was the first sign of true emotion he’d been able to pick up on from Harry in years. “You realized why someone who grew up in a physically abusive household reacted so strongly to unexpected physical assault?”

“I know,” Jules snapped. Harry didn’t have to make this so difficult. “I was an idiot. You—seem so functional, and I forgot. It won’t happen again. I mean—it wouldn’t have been okay even if you weren’t… but yeah.”

“…thank you,” Harry said, and with even more surprise Jules watched him slowly lower his guard. Somewhat. “You still should’ve worked that one out ages ago—but I appreciate you did now.”

“Yeah…” Jules rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He didn’t know how to explain how hard it had been to admit Dad was wrong about Harry. A little. A lot. Something. That Dad was wrong
about a lot of things, and Harry was—a snake, someone to be wary of, someone to watch, someone Jules had shared a womb and a bedroom and a family with once. Someone Jules wanted to still call family no matter what Dad said. “I—want to—wish it hadn’t taken me… so long.”

In hindsight, this apology was for more than just jumping Harry after the match.

“Me too,” Harry said, actually smiling. It was small and tight but it was there. “But—we’re still brothers.”

“Yeah,” Jules said, and decided that was enough heavy exchanges for one conversation. “It’d be hard to forget, what with you looking like a Slytherin funhouse mirror of me.”

Harry’s smile grew. “Or you looking like a Gryffindor funhouse mirror of me.”

“At least you got the green eyes,” Jules said. “They’d clash with my tie. Green and red, Christmas colors, can you imagine?”

“I’m sure the Sorting Hat took one look at my eyes and decided oh I know just where to put you,” Harry said. “Eye color. The Sorting theorists have gotten it wrong for centuries.”

Jules laughed. “I’m sure you’ll show them all up one day.”

It was even true. Harry had risen steadily in the class rankings over the years and topped their class now overall. Jules got good marks, but Harry’s were near-perfect.

“Nah, Sorting theory’s too boring for me,” Harry said with a very Slytherin grin. “I’ll go into potions or something lucrative.”

“If you beat Snape’s patent record I’ll love you forever,” Jules said fervently.

Harry laughed.

Jules felt something warm spark, somewhere around his heart. It was the first time he could ever remember making Harry laugh.

“I think Snape would hate me,” Harry said, “but I’ll take that trade. Come on or we’ll miss dinner.”

Harry

“What was that about?” Theo asked as Harry sat down, tilting his head in the direction of the Gryffindor table.

Harry started serving himself dinner. “Jules apologized for the mess after the match,” he said.

“Damn.” Pansy raised her eyebrows. “I might have to scale back the insults, if he’s finally growing an independent brain.”

“Doubtful,” Daphne sniffed.

Draco sighed through his nose. “I hope you all realize that it’s physically painful for me to defend Julian Potter of all people,” he said with a haughty sneer, “but I imagine he’s been indoctrinated in his father’s regrettable worldview all his life. That can’t be easy to unravel. Although he certainly ought to have started trying sooner.”
This little speech resulted in almost a solid minute of dead silence as their group tried to process *Draco Malfoy* standing up for a bigot on the other side of the spectrum.

“*Two* people finally growing up,” Blaise said at last. The tension dissipated almost instantly and they all laughed.

Jules caught Harry’s eye across the Hall and grinned. Harry nodded back—he couldn’t be seen *smiling* at his brother, not after the display at the match, and not so publicly—and kept watching as Jules went back to a conversation with Thomas and Patil. His brother was grinning and joking as always but he’d begun to sit a little straighter, scan his surroundings with attention for sharp movements and loud noises. Duelling practice paying off.

Dumbledore and the rest—they wanted to use him as a figurehead. To stick him in battles and *use* him. Years of nightmares and flinching away from friendly pats on the shoulder had taught Harry all he needed to know about dealing with bad memories. He didn’t want Jules to have to learn that.

Even though, by the look of it, he’d already started.

Chapter End Notes

A/N for the outcome of the match: in canon, this match is only *barely* won by Harry. “Malfoy’s fingernails scrabbled the back of Harry’s hand hopelessly”—they were really, really close. In canon, Harry was on a faster broom than Malfoy. Here, Jules is actually on an older one, albeit a broom that is still really, really near the top of the line. I’m thinking that if canon Harry had been on his Nimbus 2000 against Malfoy on a 2001, it might’ve been Harry’s hand scrabbling at the back of Malfoy’s.

A/N 2: some of you may argue that Harry could not beat Hermione in their year if he tried. I would point out that time spent reading has a very strong correlation on intelligence in general and on performance in school, particularly among people who spent lots of time reading as kids. My Harry took refuge in the library, loves books, and has been studying his whole life. Even then, his first few years in Hogwarts, he didn’t have the same overall skill as Hermione. He could outscore her on year-end exams if he really tried, and then not consistently. His real advantage over her is in areas of magic outside the Hogwarts curriculum, save Potions, that he’s gone for independent study and Hermione hasn’t really because of her tendency to color inside the metaphorical lines. Harry is a lot more poised to think for himself and he’s been working his ass off for years. He’s not a natural genius. Neither is Hermione. They both just read a lot and study magic outside their curriculum—in her case for the knowledge’s sake, in his because of what it can get him.

A/N 3: life’s been a bit of a mess for the last two months. Thankfully my academics are fine but otherwise i’ve been juggling a lot of different commitments. I’m not sure about the pacing or consistency of updates going forward, although be assured all of this book is finished and will be posted within a few months. I’ll get around to answering comments in a bit but it’ll likely be a while. Thank you for your patience!

A/N 4: edit 2/21/19 thanks to a comment from guest user minty; changes have been made to the conversation between Angelina and the Slytherins after the Samhain ritual regarding the use of the Mudblood slur. Harry was initially too accepting of its use, and I should’ve thought that through better, so it’s been changed.
okay i've been meaning to address this for a while and completely forgot to do so in the notes on the last chapter, oops, so here goes: i said a while back that you guys could probably guess who's the real BWL at this point. based on comments that was bias of the author, since i know where it's going, and your speculations in the comments are telling me it's not actually obvious yet. which is better, actually, so scratch what i said before, and keep guessing, it'll be revealed eventually!

as far as the WBWL tag, i included that because this story in many/most ways fits the WBWL tropes: twin or sibling Potters, ambiguity about the BWL and the horcrux, slytherin/non-Gryffindor Harry, one or both Potter parents is/are alive. It's not a guarantee that Harry is the BWL, nor is this comment a guarantee that Jules isn't; i'm simply tagging it thus because i believe people searching the WBWL tag would enjoy this fic and that it fits the genre.

oh and someone asked a while back why some chapters have titles and some don't. the answer is that i suck at titling and am lazy.
Chapter 14

notes section is going to be a bit long so buckle up.

I have been reading all of your comments in my email notifications for the last few months, and I would like to say thank you to everyone who's complimented S&S or expressed concern about my random disappearance. I'm fine; I've just had very low mental energy for a few months and it's difficult to proof and post chapters. So I'm going to try to get chapters up about once every two weeks until it's done, minimum once a month. I can't say when or how much I'll interact with the comments but I'll do my best to read and respond to them.

I know I've said before that I intend to stick S&S out to the very end. I never wanted to be another fic author who took on a monstrous project like this and then abandoned it, leaving readers hanging. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that I have a full course load, familial obligations, several extracurriculars, and my own mental health to manage. It's a delicate balance that got thrown extremely off for a few months and right now I simply don't have the time or energy to write.

that said, I have a very complicated plot outline of book 6 on my laptop, and a solid idea of how book 7 will (?) go. I'm not certain if this is the route I'm going to take, but if anyone is interested in potentially taking over the project while I step back to a beta reader/critique partner role, drop a line in the comments? I'll gauge interest levels and then see where that idea goes.

oh one other thing, Notifications was deleted, because of a rule I didn't know about wherein non-fanworks aren't allowed. Ao3 contacted me but i wasn't paying close enough attention to my email to notice before it got taken down. So if anyone went looking for it, yeah. that's what happened.

all right, that said, here is chapter 14!!

Hermione

“Guess what!” Jules sat down at the breakfast table excitedly.

Fred, George, Neville, Hermione, Katie Bell, and Lee Jordan all glared at him for interrupting three separate conversations. Down the table, Hermione distinctly caught an eyeroll from Demelza. Jules either didn’t notice or didn’t care, grinning blithely around for a response. Ronald and Seamus elbowed their way into seats on either side of him.

“What?” Hermione said, deciding that he wasn’t going to move on until he got a response.

“Hagrid’s back!”

Neville groaned.

Ronald glared at him. “Aren’t you excited?”
“No,” Neville said bluntly. Hermione beamed; watching him learn to speak up was brilliant. “He’s nice, Hagrid, but he’s not done a great job preparing us for our Care OWLs, has he?”

Hermione looked critically at her plate. Perhaps a bit more cantaloupe would balance out her eggs. “He does seem better suited to be gamekeeper than teacher.”

“Hagrid’s great,” Jules said fiercely. Hermione looked up; he was glaring. She looked back down dismissively. Other people had leveled far more frightening looks at her. Among them Jules’ brother.

“Whatever,” Fred said. “What was he doing?”

“Off with Maxime, eh?” George said with a wink.

“Er,” Jules said, “yeah… kind of.”

“Huh.” Lee Jordan raised his eyebrows. “Good for Hagrid, I guess. The one woman his size in Europe, prob’ly.”

Hermione watched not Jules but Ronald. Jules had spent a lifetime in front of cameras and he was actually decent at hiding his thoughts, if not lying. Ronald, on the other hand—he was an open book. Especially after four years of trying to figure out Slytherins. And he was looking distinctly shifty.

Neville clearly hadn’t noticed. The twins had. Hermione watched as Jules shifted off down the table and put his head together to confer with Seamus and Ronald. Dean was nowhere in sight.

“Neville?” she said quietly.

He looked where she was looking and sighed heavily. “Cast it?”

Under the table, Hermione pointed her wand at him. She whispered the incantation into her mug of tea. “Amplius auri.”

His face screwed up a bit in concentration. “Hate this spell…”

It had to be awful, using amplius auri in the Great Hall. Hermione had yet to manage having it cast on herself, to Daphne’s amusement and her chagrin. Neville shut his eyes and leaned his forehead in his hands, clearly struggling to cope with the overload of information, but the time Evalyn went into sensory overload from the charm she’d started trembling, and that was Hermione’s usual reaction too, and Neville wasn’t there yet, so until he was Hermione wouldn’t cancel the charm.

If only I was better at Occlumency… Hermione checked that thought. She’d tried to learn Occlumency. Was still learning, in fact. None of them was quite sure why she struggled with it. Least of all her. It was infuriating to struggle this much with something but she would keep practicing and in the meantime Neville could eavesdrop with the spell in situations Hermione couldn’t manage.

She kept eating like nothing was wrong.

Neville lifted his head after about two minutes, tapping his fingers stiffly. Hermione flicked her wand and thought finite and he relaxed.

“Really hate that spell,” he sighed. “I mean, I love it, it’s dead useful, but…”

“I know,” Hermione said. She did. Her headaches after an amplius auri practice session were brutal. “Anything useful?”
Neville rubbed his hands over his face, clearly exasperated. “Useful, I’m not sure, but interesting yes. Apparently Hagrid was off trying to recruit giants for Dumbledore. Death Eaters beat Hagrid and Maxime to the jinx.”

“Whatever else you might say, You-Know-Who seems to be out-planning Dumbledore,” Hermione said grimly.

George leaned over. “Did I hear giants?”

“You did,” Neville said, and filled the twins in quietly.

The Weasley Terrors shared a look that would make any sane person go running for the hills. “We’ll get to work on that,” Fred said.

“Magic-resistant skin… quite a challenge,” George said.

Hermione frowned. “Planning to take up arms with the Order?”

“Hardly,” Fred said, stealing a bit of her cantaloupe. Hermione frowned a bit harder but he just smirked at her. “But if there’s giants running around England again, I’d like to know how to deal with them. Wouldn’t you?”

“It’s logical,” she agreed.

“How’re the Snackboxes coming?” Neville asked.

Fred grinned widely. “Available for mail order. Fainting Fancies, Puking Pastilles, Nosebleed Nougat, and Fever Fudge.”

“Impressive spellwork,” Hermione said grudgingly.

George threw an arm around her shoulders. “Why thank you, ‘Mione.”

“Not that I approve of the use they’re supposed to go to,” she added snippily. The twins laughed uproariously and went back to whatever conversation they’d been having with Lee about how else they could provide opportunities for idiots to cut class.

Harry

“Third years and below, over here, please,” Justin called, summoning the younger Vipers to a carefully warded set of dueling boxes near the Slytherin statue’s feet.

Harry stood next to him. They kept the usual Friday dueling club time slot for Vipers meetings, which meant that he was exhausted from Thursday night dueling (more accurately described as dodging practice) with Crouch. This week’s had been particularly brutal. Harry was still nursing bruises up and down his left side and the lingering effects of a bone-weakening curse. He’d chosen to work with the younger set today and take it easy.

In the middle of the Chamber’s main hall, the upper years had a warded circle and wore robes changed into different colors, purple or orange. They’d split into two teams and prepared for a free-for-all duel, clustered in groups at opposite ends of the large chalk-outlined circle, strategizing.

“We started work on chapter one of Defensive Use of the Dark Arts last week,” Harry started, referencing the book he was using for the younger set. “That includes the Choking Curse, a few introductory cutting hexes, and os abdo, the Bone-removing Curse. For obvious reasons we won’t
be practicing that last one on each other—I can brew SkeleGro but I’d rather not have to keep any of you down here overnight to regrow your arm bones. Hermione and Daphne have thoughtfully created dummies with fake skeletons for you to use.”

“So we can practice the cutting curses on each other?” Vasily said.

Justin shrugged. “The upper years will use them in duels. It’s good to practice healing spells on real wounds instead of torn dolls.”

“But we’ll save that for later,” Harry said. “Today, dummies only.” He grinned. “And only after we’ve gotten to watch the big duel.”

The younger Vipers looked back at him. Liam, Veronica, Malcolm, Graham, Romilda, Astoria, and Vasily. All Slytherins—although Justin thought a dueling club kid from Astoria’s year named Dylan Worple was a possible recruit. Faces too fierce for their youth. They were acutely aware of the war coming and the fact that there’d be a lot fewer fence-sitters this time around.

Harry gestured towards the middle of the Chamber.

Justin took over as all of them turned to watch. “Team dueling is a training exercise used by the Aurors,” he explained in his easy way. “It’s supposed to simulate real-life large-scale dueling, where you might have yourself and your spouse and maybe a friend or two against a couple of robbers who’ve broken into your flat, or maybe tried to rob Diagon while you were there, or maybe they’re attacking your family on the street. Doesn’t matter. It’s not near as coordinated as the simple one-on-one duels you’ve been doing up ‘til now.”

“Give it another year or two, and you can move on to things like this,” Harry said. “For now, one-on-one duels to improve your casting speed and stamina. To make the spells feel like second nature. Though given the Slytherin common room, I’m sure you’ve all been fought some chaotic impromptu duels already.”

Grins rippled around the group, because all of them had fought little common room squabbles, and all of them had learned how to come out on top most of the time. Partly it was dueling club but partly it was that live practice that made them advanced duelists for their age.

“Team dueling usually has pairs,” Justin explained as the orange and purple groups started shifting into position. “Like how Aurors work in pairs. They watch each other’s backs. A good pair—watch Theo and Daphne if you get a chance, or the Carrow twins—can look like they’re mentally connected.”

In the dueling circle, people spread out. Daphne and Theo were on opposite teams but the Carrows were both orange. They’d paired together. So had Fred and George on the purple side. Both sets of twins were watching each other with evil little smiles. Blaise and Neville had paired off in the oranges, Iris and Daphne in the purples—that would be a team to watch—Theo and Hermione, hardly surprising… Ginny and Natalie, Evalyn and Alex, Finn and Luna, Aria Cross and Pansy, Draco and Adrian…

Hermione lifted her wand. “Ready,” she called.

“No wands drawn until the pebble hits the floor,” Justin said quietly, nodding at the small stone in Hermione’s left hand. “Even for the thrower. She’s got to toss it high… and there it goes.”

The rock hit the floor.

The echo was drowned out almost instantly. Hands whipped wands out of pockets, sleeves, and
holsters, voices shouted spells, feet scuffles, magic banged or whooshed or crackled in the air. Things devolved into controlled chaos almost instantly.

“Watch how the orange team’s using battle transfiguration,” Harry said. “Stone to air and back again—that’s a difficult spell but incredibly useful if you have enough control, you can form solid walls out of thin air—”

“Quicksand?” Vasily said, looking closely at the ground as Finn stumbled into a soft patch.

A stunner took him out. “Yep,” Justin said.

Luna revived her partner but a half-second later, more spells shot through their spot. Both went down and the wards popped them out of the circle onto their backs. Luna sat up first, then Finn. “Rules here are that if both partners are out, the wards suck them out and end all the spells on them,” Harry explained. “Look how they’ve left a hole in the orange lineup…”

“Damn,” Justin muttered. “Twins are scary.”

Impressed mutters ran through the young Vipers. Harry grinned, watching Fred and George go toe to toe with Hestia and Flora. The Carrows had a terrifying arsenal of curses, even limited to things they could heal promptly. They seemed to go beyond mind reading, like they were connected, two halves of one mind. Flora had a sixth sense for miniscule weaknesses that she exploited with ruthless efficiency. Hestia had a sixth sense for when her sister was going on the offense and she’d switch seamless to defense as Flora slipped forward. Fred and George, however, didn’t make it easy—their chaotic patternless dueling style made them almost impossible to predict. And they were just as in tune as the Carrows.

Demelza and Jordan Harper were the next to go down. Neville and Blaise got into it with Ginny and Natalie, came out victorious, fell to Draco and Adrian as Peregrine and Everett took down Pansy and Aria.

“Fire’s a good blanket defense,” Harry said, pointing to Everett easily incinerating a handful of gravel transfigured into bees, “but it can backfire—just like that, actually…”

Daphne had flicked her wand and turned the fire back on its caster. Everett struggled for a few seconds inside a cocoon of it before he cast Dueler’s Defeat and got sucked out of the circle to join five others who’d done so to avoid nasty curses. “Duelling wards include a Dueler’s Defeat clause,” Harry explained. “If someone casts it in the wards, the wards will suck them out, end all spells cast on that person while inside the wards, and heal any physical damage. Don’t know if you noticed, but Everett was a nice lobster red there from the fire before he yielded.” At the edge of the circle, Everett turned around to glare, obviously having overheard. Harry just smirked.

“Ready for this, pureblood princess?”

The insult tore his attention away from a clever spell combination fired off by Adrian. He was alarmed at the content, even more alarmed when he saw it was Daphne facing off with a new opponent, and then calmed when he realized said opponent was Aaron Jigger. There was a grudge match there for something Daphne’s grandmother said to Aaron’s great-grandfather decades back about academics not being a respectable career for the oldest son of a pureblood family. Then the scandal when Aaron’s mother married a Muggle-born, which made Aaron, like Harry, technically a halfblood. He and Daphne had sniped at each other from afar and never gone head-to-head but Aaron had sense. This shouldn’t devolve too dramatically.

“If I’m a princess, I could technically have you beheaded,” Daphne said sweetly, slashing her wand.
Harry snapped his fingers at the younger set. Their attention switched to him instantly. “Daphne and Jigger,” he said quietly. “One to watch.”

Aaron batted her sickly blue curse away without breaking a sweat and switched to silent casting. He’d lost his partner Mason to Dueler’s Defeat but Iris was distracted by Celesta Fawley so he had Daphne to himself.

“Silent casting’s a sixth-year skill,” Adrian said, sauntering up to their smaller group with Ginny, Noah, and Evalyn on his heels. “Aaron’s been kicking our asses since we started on it last year. Some kind of family talent.” Harry made a note to look into that. “It’s ridiculously difficult. Those curses he’s throwing at her? Most of us struggle with silent fifth-year charms and we’re NEWTs.”

Blaise and Neville carefully did not look Harry’s way.

“So… is that a disadvantage?” Liam said uncertainly. “Daphne doesn’t seem at a disadvantage.”

“My sister’s brilliant,” Astoria said proudly, watching Daphne spin and duck stray curses, never putting a foot out of place on the now-pitted ground. Her face was set and icy, movements precise, spells sure.

Harry quirked a brow at Evalyn, well aware that her family had been collecting Pensieve memories of various duels for centuries. Some were at tournaments. Others were unsanctioned. Some were actual battles. That bit of gossip had been the price of a fairly minor favor done for Strickland two weeks ago, who was still pissed she’d got the short end of the stick.

“It should be,” Evalyn said, recognizing the cue to offer opinion. “If you look—there, that yellow one, I didn’t recognize it, oh and that was the Bryaxis Curse, are we allowed to use that?”

Harry nodded. “Dueler’s wards would handle it.”

“Okay, so that’s allowed—there again, with the disarmer—if you look, Daphne’s relying on dodging. She can’t tell his spells from incantation so she can’t trust that a protego will hold. Physical fitness matters ‘cause in a duel like this, you have to be able to outlast.”

“Until?” Harry said.

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“You get an opening. Like that one.” Evalyn nodded as Daphne nailed a Blood-Boiling Curse on Aaron’s calf. He cast Dueler’s Defeat instantly and fell to one knee outside the wards. Mason offered him a hand up, which Aaron took with a grimace.

“But you already knew that bit of dueling tactics, didn’t you?”

They all looked at Draco, who alone was watching Harry instead of the duel. Huh. He was actually learning some Slytherin shrewdness. Harry offered approval in the form of a slight nod and an actual answer. “Just curious how extensive Miss Travers’ studies have been.”

“My family has enemies,” Evalyn said precisely. “A thorough understanding of dueling was only good planning.”

Draco had not missed Harry’s approval, and smirked back very faintly. The older Slytherins knew the game and watched this interchange with narrowed eyes, registering that Draco seemed to be a bit higher in Harry’s estimation than might be expected for a longtime rival. Only Veronica, Astoria, and Graham from the younger set caught on and watched as well.

Harry reconsidered a few things as he turned his attention back to the duel. He fully intended to
codify the hierarchy of this little club. Once things solidified a bit, and tighter bonds were formed than the wary camaraderie of dueling club, _then_ he could move. The upper years also had to have time to push Harry’s close friends and get knocked back or they wouldn’t respect them when Harry made it clear who was in his real confidence and who wasn’t.

If he was going to be the leader of this little group, he was going to do it _right_. And he was going to use hatred of Umbridge to build a power base. He’d have done this anyway over the next few years. The hag just gave him an opportunity on a silver platter. Harry snorted and ignored the strange looks it earned him. He’d have to send her a thank-you note if she survived the year.

Actually, if she survived the year, he could just send her the thank-you note with a time-delay runic curse and make her resignation much more permanent.

Eventually, only four pairs were left. The twins’ battle continued without pause. Daphne and Iris still stood for purple, and Theo and Hermione still stood for orange. Both pairs paused, assessing.

Vanquished members of their teams watched intently from outside the wards. The Weasleys and the Carrows ignored their younger teammates. It said a lot that the Carrows were kept so thoroughly occupied that they couldn’t even get off a spell at Daphne and Iris as a distraction.

“This should be good,” Evalyn said with a critical eye. “Iris spends less time with us, so she and Daphne are at a disadvantage in that they don’t know each other as well.”

“Granger’s not a great duelist, though,” Adrian pointed out. “She knows her theory and she can cast the spells but…”

“High-level dueling requires a certain flexibility of mind that Hermione somewhat lacks,” Harry agreed absently. Theo was muttering quietly without taking his eyes off Daphne. Hermione’s hair was crackling so badly with magic that he expected it to snap its own elastic tie any second and expand to its full, impressive diameter. She and Iris watched each other with steely determination.

Justin frowned. “She’s really good in practice.”

“Yeah, but frankly, the lot of you are inexperienced,” Everett said bluntly. “Spend some time in less, er, structured environments, and you can’t just know the spells. Creativity. Foresight.”

“Spontaneity,” said Ginny.

Veronica shot the redhead a dubious look. “Aren’t we supposed to plan ahead?”

Ginny grinned. “Guess it’s the Gryffindor in me talking.”

“Our dear Weasley’s always had a bit of the lions in her,” Noah said with a theatrical sigh, dropping an arm around her shoulders.

“Doing something unpredictable in a duel can be very useful,” Harry said. The pairs were shooting some potshots at each other, testing, probing. “Slytherins plan ahead, but plans go awry. Improvisation is as much a House value as ambition.”

“Water people?” Justin said wryly.

Ginny laughed. “Still think I’m more fire, myself…”

“Eh, you can be both,” Harry said with a shrug.
Theo shot off a Bryaxis Curse in imitation of Aaron, from earlier. “Escalating,” Evalyn said quickly, “he’s upping the ante…”

Daphne shielded. Iris worked over her shoulder at Hermione, who barely dodged.

_It’ll devolve_, Harry predicted, putting some of Crouch’s training to work. _Theo and Daphne distracting each other—Theo because Hermione loses to Daphne every time, Daphne because a true pairs duel is tricky with an unfamiliar partner._

He half-listened to the Vipers debating in low voices how this duel was going to go. The twins had been at an impasse for almost ten minutes now and were clearly growing exhausted; they could return to that when the recent drama finished. Evalyn, Draco, Celesta, and Adrian took Harry’s side about how it would play out, though there was much argument about who would win. He noted those four names.

Less than thirty seconds in, Daphne managed to get off a fast hex at Hermione, a _tarantallegra_ that took barely any of Daphne’s power or concentration but left Hermione with a gaping defensive hole. Iris missed Daphne’s cue and the opportunity slipped by; Hermione had always been good at _finite_. Daphne smiled evilly at Theo.

Theo snarled back at her and sent a furious volley of spells into the gap between her and Iris. The purple pair was forced apart.

“There,” Harry said to the firsties. “Hermione’s weakness—less dueling skill. The purple team’s—unfamiliarity. Theo’s splitting them up.”

“He loses an advantage, too,” Everett argued, more for the sake of being Devil’s Advocate than anything else, Harry thought.

He glanced at Veronica. She already had most of the boys in her year following her around. Only Lilian Pym and Malcolm Baddock could challenge her in a year or two when the political game really heated up, and if Malcolm came out ahead Veronica would be his right hand, and Romilda could always topple Pym if it came to that. Harry was happy to give Veronica a boost if it helped him prove a point. “Ideas, Veronica?”

The older set noted his use of first name with calculation, even amidst a furious duel.

“Daphne took advantage of Hermione before her and Iris’ weakness came up,” Veronica said promptly. “Nott’s worried next time it won’t be _tarantallegra._”

“You dueled before?” Draco said with interest.

That was new. He’d so far taken the tack of pretending the Slytherin Muggle-born didn’t exist. How interesting.

“Not outside dueling club,” Veronica said, and nothing else. Good girl.

“We get lots of challenges,” Liam said, grinning. His mask wasn’t perfect yet. Harry could easily see his nervousness and calculation in the way his eyes flicked between the upper years, measuring.

“More than the usual, I’ll bet,” Adrian said with a nasty grin.

Harry pointedly looked back at the duel. Veronica could fight this one on her own. He was just in time to see Daphne’s hair start growing at a fantastic rate while stubbornly trying to entangle her legs. It slowed her down a lot. Clever tactic on Theo’s part.
“And I’m better for it,” Veronica said with just the right degree of deference. There was a spine in that one, though whether it was ice like Daphne or fire like Hermione or steel like Theo he wasn’t sure yet.

Celesta nodded approvingly. “Challenge trains the quickest wands.”

Harry kept his surprise off his face. Neville didn’t quite manage. Blaise shot Harry a grudgingly impressed look that probably had something to do with their unofficial dueling club growing into something where a girl from a Sacred Twenty-Eight family commended a Muggle-born. Granted, it was a Slytherin Muggle-born, and Veronica had taken Harry’s advice and thrown herself into wizard culture with a vengeance, but still.

“Oof,” Everett said with a laugh as a Bludgeoning Curse took Hermione right in the stomach. Demelza Robins shot him a look that said he might not still be able to make noise come morning. Harry would have to ask the Weasley twins to look into her as a potential future prankster… Or maybe not. They were bad enough without a protégé. Maybe second term so they wouldn’t have time to do too much damage before they graduated.

Daphne had managed to sever her hair. It was now hanging glumly around her ears, and she looked absolutely irate about having her perfect shoulder-blade-length cut ruined. Hermione was still trying to remember how to breathe and barely dodging Iris’ renewed onslaught.

Then something exploded.

Harry shielded instinctively. Adrian and Draco layered shields on top of his, which was curious because he’d adapted a reflex born of having things thrown at him a lot, generally either fists or plates or frying pans before it turned into hexes and curses, and the other boys were almost as quick as he was. Even though it ultimately didn’t matter because the dueling wards kept the debris in.

Smoke swirled on the inside of the wards for a few seconds before Harry got sick of it and flicked his wand, casting a nonverbal *ventus*. The younger Vipers’ awed gazes bore into his side but he ignored them. Or, at least, pretended to. Showing off a bit would only help cement his position.

The smoke billowed and dissolved, at first slowly, then all at once.

“Fascinating,” Blaise said in a lazy drawl.

Flora, Fred, George, Iris, and Hermione were splayed around the edges of the circle, coughing and slowly sitting up. They were all pale and shaky in the manner of people who had very recently been experiencing immense pain that cut off abruptly. Harry knew what that felt like: a week ago, Crouch had decided, without warning, to hit him with a *crucio*. Briefly, so he’d see what it felt like, and even while pissed Harry understood the point of the exercise, but he’d still used one of the extremely rare times he landed something on his mentor to return the favor. It was weak and only lasted a few seconds because Harry had never practiced the Cruciatu on a person. Crouch had laughed and congratulated him when he stood up.

Inside the circle, it seemed that Hestia, Daphne, and Theo had managed to shield instead of casting Dueller’s Defeat. Judging by the newly formed crater in the Chamber floor, Hestia had been on almost ground zero of the explosion.

“The hell did the Weasleys do,” Jordan Hughes breathed.

Daphne recovered first. She hit Hestia in the chest with a weak Stunner that still left the disoriented older girl unconscious. The wards sucked Hestia out a few seconds later, where she let Flora help her
to her feet with an irritated expression.

Leaving only Daphne and Theo.

Harry grinned.

“Show’s about to start, kids,” Ginny said delightedly.

For a count of seven, they both stayed frozen.

Theo moved first. *Kid gloves coming off then,* Harry thought, eyebrows actually rising at how perfectly nasty that curse was. The sort where a shield spell wouldn’t hold unless it was rune-based; you needed a specific counter.

Daphne knew it, luckily, and batted the spell away before returning her own.

Magical fire splattered on the insides of the wards. Theo and Daphne dodged back and forth furiously for several minutes.

“They’re good,” Aaron said, reluctantly impressed.

Adrian snorted. “Daphne kicked your ass, Jigger.”

Aaron simply looked at Adrian for a few seconds and turned his attention back to the duel. Harry smirked at Blaise. Ravenclaws. Never interested in “wasting time” on verbal sparring.

“*Incremo.*”

Harry barely heard the incantation but it snatched his attention away from the Vipers’ little power plays. Theo staggered back, though not without a last spell, and cast Dueler’s Defeat with obvious panic on his face.

He slumped outside the wards.

Harry resisted the urge to run to his best friend and sauntered over instead. Daphne lifted her wand and concentrated very fiercely for a few seconds, not speaking, before she, too cast the Defeat and appeared next to Theo. With her exit, the wards folded in on themselves and went dormant.

“Congratulations,” Natalie said brightly, beaming. Technically, Daphne had won, since she was the last to concede.

Mason eyed her but the wards had stripped any side effects. “What was the last spell?”

“Choking Curse,” Theo said, looking up at Daphne with irritation. “One of a few I can do silently, since *someone* left me in too much pain to speak.”

“Burning him up from inside,” Harry said with an amused eyebrow. “Bit vicious.”

“That was for my hair, Nott,” Daphne snarled.

Theo winced.

“Not surprised you recognized that one, Black,” Flora said very softly.

The group shifted almost instantly into those who knew and those who didn’t.
Flora met his eyes. Harry loathed Dumbledore but the old man was right about killing changing you, and he let the part of him that had been satisfied by look back. Figured his biggest issues would come from the Carrows. He was mostly surprised Flora’s was this overt.

“Well, it’s worked quite well for me in the past,” he said, smiling just a little. Liam actually choked and Theo edged away from him. Theo. Possibly Harry should tone it down. Flora very grudgingly backed off, in body language and attention, and the tension eased. He considered that it would be rather like Flora to make an overt jab and then sneak in another blow when he was patting his back for parrying the first and resolved to be on the lookout for a few days.

“Was that entertaining enough for today?” Justin asked the younger set, grinning. They all nodded, wide-eyed.

People began to disperse, discussing spells, sharing pointers or observations, and swapping friendly or slightly-less-than-friendly challenges. Harry was pleased to note the easy way Aaron, Mason, Iris, Fred, and George slid in with the older Slytherins to teach each other new magic. House was important, but other things came first.

Even Voldie had Ravenclaws and Gryffindors in his ranks. Harry grinned a little at the thought that, technically, he’d one-upped the Dark Lord by making friends in all four Houses. Or just by making friends at all, given that Riddle seemed to have thought of his people more like minions.

“Okay.” Justin pointed the younger group back over at the more standard dueling lanes, which were shaped like thin rectangles and designed for two people at a time. “Choking Curses. If we’re good at it, maybe we’ll set you two-on-one with an upper year and you can use them for target practice.”

“He’s not the best at teaching,” Blaise murmured. Only he and Theo had remained behind.

“But he’s pretty good,” Harry said. “And he likes it. And he doesn’t scare them shitless.”

“Thought we talked about fear,” Theo said.

Harry smirked. “Of me.”

Theo laughed and Blaise raised an eyebrow, smart enough to catch the gist, politically clever enough not to admit he didn’t know what was going on.

A particularly loud snatch of laughter drew Harry’s attention. He turned around and found a group of people working on repairing the trashed floor while rehashing the duel. The laughter was Aaron’s and aimed at something George apparently just said to Peregrine. Harry took in the dynamics of their little circle as he and Blaise and Theo joined the repair efforts. Another challenge had been issued to the Gryffindors, then, and George had held his own.

So far, so good.

Though he needed to be thinking about making some things slightly less informal. There wasn’t realistically anyone else who could lead the Vipers. Not that Harry would have accepted bowing to anyone except possibly one of the Carrow twins, and that only for this year. He’d spent enough of his life on the bottom of the totem pole, thank you very much, and he fully intended to spend the rest of it firmly at the top. Starting now.
And that meant binding people a little more firmly than secret smiles shared in the hallways. Secrets shared were powerful, but not as much as symbols.

Tattoos were right out. A permanent mark, so easily adapted or used as an enchantment—he could definitely see why the teenaged Riddle had found that option so appealing. If it didn’t smack of the Death Eaters Harry might’ve gone for something small and inconspicuous and decidedly nonmagical. But his… predecessor had already gone that route and there was no style in being a copycat.

Something else, then. It could always be some kind of pin or badge… But again, those had been used before, and anyway, that was boring.

Celesta demonstrated a spell for her year mates Noah, Jordan, Iris, and Mason. Yellow light glanced off the Black Heir ring on Harry’s left hand and into his eyes.

He wanted to laugh. Perfect.

Now what to put on them.

Harry managed to strike a balance in the weeks leading up to Yule. Two nights a week, practice with Crouch that exhausted either his mind, his body, or both. Dashing off the main points of essays for Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology, Runes, and Arithmancy on subjects he’d covered months or years before, then checking over full-length versions one of his friends wrote up for him in payment for the summary. Transfiguring book covers so he could read in class, relentlessly drilling himself on magic in abandoned corridors or the Chamber study, finding Dark magic people didn’t want him to know. Theo caught him at it, once. His expression was unreadable and Harry’s was too. Then Theo grinned and flourished his own wand and started showing off some spells he’d learned over the summer. And, of course, the Vipers, who had weekly meetings now, and got good at overseeing Harry’s brewing projects, and kept a close eye on who Umbridge was calling in for tea this week, and made sure to levitate antidote to Veritaserum into that person’s pumpkin juice in the mornings if they knew a secret the Vipers wanted kept. Most people didn’t know what was going on. The few outside the Vipers who could be trusted without the antidote included Hannah Abbott and Angelina Johnson, both of whom had the sense to take it and not ask too many questions when a younger House mate pressed a vial into their hands. And four days a week, there was Quidditch practice, because while he was technically banned from playing, no one said anything about practicing, and he had to drill Everett as his replacement. They’d switched him from Keeping to Chasing and moved Graham from reserve Keeper to the game lineup. He looked tiny in front of the posts.

It came as a surprise, then, when Crouch commented one Thursday that he wouldn’t be seeing Harry until after the holidays.

“I didn’t realize how close it was,” Harry admitted. Not in more than an abstract fashion, anyway.

Crouch snorted. “Situational awareness much?”

“I have a lot on my plate.”

“With what?” Crouch said skeptically. “If I’m taking up that much of your time with the work I’m assigning, then I’ve underestimated you.”

“Extracurricular activities,” Harry said.

“Ah. I see.” Crouch watched him for a moment. “It’s… traditional for a master to get his or her
apprentice a Yule gift.” He flicked his wand and a package wrapped in plain dark green paper appeared on the table. Harry struggled to conceal his surprise. “Presumably you wouldn’t want this showing up by owl over the holidays.”

Harry remained perfectly still. He watched Crouch, not the package. It was innocuous and looked to be a book, but that could be a book-shaped box with expansion charms holding anything from a lethifold to a pile of unicorn horns. Crouch promised not to harm Harry or try to remove him from Hogwarts grounds. It was entirely possible that the brilliant man had found some loophole. Or it might have been tampered with by some other Death Eater in whatever hideout they were using and Crouch just didn’t know.

“You are the most paranoid child I have ever met,” Crouch complained.

“You spent a year screaming constant vigilance at me,” Harry pointed out. “And I think I’ve a right to paranoia. All things considered.”

“I know Slytherin teaches everyone detection spells. Have at it,” Crouch said.

If nothing else Harry could determine that the paper was safe. He could test out a handy little spell, a variation on protego, that could be used to transport volatile things. He hadn’t been stupid enough to put something explosive in the spell and test it but it held when he cast it around a harmless potions reaction involving high-pressured gas. And… He met his tutor’s light blue eyes and found himself wanting to trust Crouch at least this much.

Harry started muttering detection spells. One after another after another turned up nothing. Crouch had taken out a book and started reading, as he tended to do during any moment of spare time. This time it looked like one on a history of wards and their impacts on wizarding conflicts. Ravenclaw.

Inside was a book, bound in plain purplish-black leather with charred edges. Harry squinted at it for a few seconds.

Then his eyes about bugged out of his head.

Crouch cackled, sounding, for a second, like the Azkaban-mad fugitive people thought he was. “Recognize that, do you?”

“I can’t accept this,” Harry said flatly, recovering his composure. “This is—”

“One of two remaining copies of Parselscript Rituals, yes,” Crouch said. “Resistant to copybooks, only readable by your, er, bloodline.”

Harry’s eyes snapped up to him. This was a test. Of fucking course. “Riddle wanted to make absolutely sure, huh?” he said. “If I hadn’t been able to read this…”

“Seems you really are the Gaunt heir,” Crouch said cheerfully. “Assuming my lord doesn’t have children. Which, frankly, is unlikely.”

“No blood adoptions for you, then?” Harry said with raised eyebrows.

Crouch’s expression darkened. “He offered. I declined.”

No more explanation was offered and Harry didn’t ask for one.
Well, if Voldemort was going to test Harry’s Parseltongue, then Harry was going to keep the book he used for it. This was a book on Parselmagic as rare and valuable as anything he’d found in the Chamber library, as it seemed even Salazar Slytherin had a limit on what kinds of things he was willing to leave in a school for his heirs. Harry sent another volley of detection spells on the book but he wasn’t expecting them to turn anything up. The motivation for the gift was obvious enough and he’d spent enough time in the Black library to be fairly confident he could handle a nasty book. Confident enough to lightly brush his fingers over the cover.

Startled, he jerked his hand back.

Magic. The book’s magic had reacted to him. Like the Black family grimoire that had been carefully stowed in his trunk in a warded box in his secret, Parseltongue-password-protected compartment. Only less personal. It recognized his Gaunt heritage, that he was a Parselmouth, and practically purred with satisfaction, but it wasn’t as sentient. Harry hypothesized that the Gaunts had been magically deficient and criminally insane for generations due to inbreeding and stupidity and hadn’t done as well by their ancestral possessions as the Blacks.

He snorted internally. Teenage Tom Riddle in the Chamber had ranted about his Muggle father but honestly he should be glad to be a halfblood. The Gaunt family tree had resembled that of the Hapsbergs when Harry was doing his research. They were even worse than the Blacks.

“So you’re keeping it,” Crouch said.

“Obviously,” Harry retorted, letting an incredulous expression onto his face.

Crouch grinned. “Just checking.”

“I may not be a Ravenclaw but I’m not stupid enough to pass this up,” Harry said, running reverent fingers over the book’s spine. Even Slytherin’s library didn’t have much on Parselmagic in it and what little existed was almost impossible to understand. There was nothing in the way of an introductory text. Harry valued his magic, life, and sanity (in that order) too much to risk mucking around with thousand-year-old Parselmagic that he didn’t understand.

“Good. If you did, I’d really question your sanity, and that’s coming from someone who spent a year in Azkaban.”

“And signed himself over to a Dark Lord, and volunteered to pose as a paranoid Auror to teach schoolchildren, and then volunteered to teach me…”

Crouch sighed. “Hadrian, do you even understand what it is to be an apprentice?”

Harry frowned. He’d done a bit of research, obviously; the apprentice oaths were a time-honored tradition between a teacher and a student. “It used to be how witches and wizards got educations, before Hogwarts and other schools. After a baseline education standard, it evolved into the commonly accepted route for Masteries and focused post-school studies, although the practice has declined as the Ministry has grown and spread its regulatory tentacles.”

“Look it up over the holidays,” Crouch said. “There’s—a bit more to it than that.”

Great. Another research project. Harry added it to the pile that included his grimoire project of potions experiments and runespells, independent studies in Dark Arts and dueling magic, the conversation he still needed to have with Hermione, his struggle to build and maintain active Occlumency barriers, and translating and studying the Chamber library. Oh, and the whole political mess he knew full well he wouldn’t be able to avoid much longer.
“Harry.”

Crouch blinked. “What?”

“Stuffy bureaucrats and annoying professors call me Hadrian,” Harry said. “You are neither.”

“I should hope not.”

“If you’d like to call me Harry, go ahead.”

Crouch looked at him a bit oddly. Harry looked back, blank-faced and unapologetic. Crouch was well within his social rights to refuse the offer and maintain their current arms’-length formality but damn it if Harry didn’t like the man. The list of people he genuinely enjoyed spending time with was short. Even if Crouch occasionally made him feel stupid and had a sadistic streak a mile wide.

Very suddenly, the Death Eater’s face split into a wide smile. “Barty, then. If we’re being informal.”

“Not Bartemius?” Harry said skeptically.

“That’s my dad,” Crouch—Barty—said.

Harry nodded. He didn’t need more explanations. People putting hands on his shoulder in the Great Hall or clapping him on the back after a Quidditch game or brushing against him in the corridors no longer made him flinch, but unexpected physical contact would more often than not get a reaction. And words like “freak” or “boy” sent his direction still caused a knee-jerk hateful sort of nausea.

Some connotations just didn’t fade.

“Thank you,” he said, tapping his fingers on the book. Honestly, he was expressing far too much gratitude to this man. Fake gratitude was fine, like fake apologies; it wasn’t giving up a weakness since he didn’t mean it. Sincerity, on the other hand—that was handing someone a knife and pointing to a joint in his armor.

“Unfortunately, Parselmagic is one thing I cannot teach you,” Crouch—no, shit, Barty, this was going to take getting used to—said. “Seeing as I don’t have the ability myself. My lord says that book includes an introductory chapter designed for Gaunt heirs whose parents cannot or will not spend enough time to teach their children the basics.”

“Excellent,” Harry said. Maybe now he’d be able to make more progress with the Chamber books. One more project for the list. Everett said last week that Harry was as busy as if it were already his NEWT year. And he didn’t even know the half of it. Harry had yet to reveal to anyone outside his closest friends exactly how far ahead of the curriculum his survival-oriented studying had put him.

At least he’d have access to the Grimmauld Place potions laboratory again over break. The one in the Chamber was great, but the Grimmauld Place laboratory was the first that had really been Harry’s. The first true laboratory he’d ever had. Built to his specifications and more or less given over as his private space since Sirius had neither the patience nor the inclination for brewing more than basic household potions.

Also, it had windows.

“Will you be celebrating Yule this year?” C—Barty said.

“I think so.” Harry shrugged. “Sirius and I did Christmas last year. I didn’t want to ask.”
“Do.” Barty watched him, considering. “He stayed here during most holidays, if I remember right, but he did the rites in secret.”

“Did you stay here over the holidays too?” Harry said.

Barty paused. “…for the first five years,” he said quietly. “Father wasn’t a fan of the rites.”

And after that, Harry surmised, something happened that led to Barty considering Tom fucking Riddle a surrogate father, at which point he had somewhere to go over the holidays. That, or Crouch Senior forced his son to come home.

“Happy Yule, then,” Harry said. “I’ll see you second term.”

“Happy Yule, Harry,” Barty said with a smile that, for once, had no sharp edge. Neither was it particularly kind, but Harry personally thought kindness was an overrated virtue.

He grinned back, a similar expression, and left their secret training room. The now-familiar wards brushed over his skin. No one but the two of them and Snape could even try to open the door without suddenly discovering a pressing need to go do something else. Barty would slip out later when Snape came down to facilitate the exit. Harry had taken to watching their progress on the Marauders’ Map; twice he’d waylaid another Slytherin doing who-knew-what in the corridors to prevent any issues for the two men. No similar problems cropped up tonight, however, and Harry put the map away before joining his friends in the common room.

They’d left a seat open for him, as usual, the green armchair embroidered with snakes that sat closest to the big hearth. Harry had yet to tell anyone but Theo that the snakes spoke to him in Parseltongue. They reported conversations that went on in the area in his absence. It was an advantage he wasn’t quite ready to give up.

Conversation didn’t cut off or change as he took his spot, although there was a subtle current of eyes flicking his way and body language shifting to accommodate him. Theo offered a faint grin that Harry returned. He paid no particular attention to it and let his mind relax for once, the flow of words washing over him.

“…Manor after Yule.”

Something changed in the air of the group. Harry blinked and paid more attention.

“All of us?” Daphne asked with a deliberately casual voice. Pansy looked around, saying nothing, stroking the mostly-grown Astrych in her lap.

“All of us.” Theo gestured vaguely around the group, which included Harry, Pansy, Daphne, Blaise, and Draco. The upper years were clustered a little off to one side, studying for NEWTs or sixth-year exams. “Plus Hermione, Luna, Neville, and Justin if they want to come.”

“Hold on.” Draco stared at Theo. “Did you just say you want to invite the Longbottom Heir, two Mud-gle-borns—” This was followed by an anxious eye flick towards Harry, who decided to forgive the slip since Draco caught himself— “and Xenophilius Lovegood’s daughter to Nott Manor?”

“For a Yule gathering, yes.” Theo was not looking at Harry in a way that told Harry his friend was paying very close attention to his reaction.

“It took me a month to get Father to let me have Justin over last summer. I had to swear up and down he knew the customs and the risks that come with having Muggle family and wasn’t your typical Muggle-born tourist,” Draco said flatly. “And Lord Nott’s just… going to have them over?”
“Awww, Draco,” Pansy cooed, “is that concern I hear?”

“Shut it, Parkinson,” Draco said in a bored voice. “I’d rather not have my Yule holiday ruined by seeing people cursed.”

But that was real concern Harry thought he heard lurking under all the defensiveness. Draco had gotten quite good at lying, deflecting, and hiding his emotions; it probably wouldn’t have been visible to anyone outside Slytherin. He and Justin paired off more often than not for one-on-one dueling practice and signed up for a lot of the same potions monitoring shifts in the Chamber. And there was definitely something between him and Hermione even though she was unofficially dating Theo at the moment. His concern wasn’t precisely surprising.

“Father will be fine.” Theo’s entire bearing was rigidly controlled. He slid a parchment over to Harry.

Harry unrolled it slowly. A binding magical contract on Gringotts paper, signed by Lord Calvis Nott. “No one on the property aside from himself, his son and Heir, and his son’s guests, and no harm to come to any of said guests,” he summarized. “Quite a contract, Theo.”

“He didn’t want an oath,” Theo said.

Understandable, given how swearing too many magical oaths strained one’s core. The language of the contract was simple and to the point. Part of Barty’s politics training involved looking for any possible loopholes in hypothetical magical oaths and contracts; Harry couldn’t see any here. “Journals?” he said. “Might as well let them know now, so they can write home and plan it.”

“Neville’s gran is going to do the official passing of her son to the Notts’ care,” Pansy predicted. “Probably Lovegood too, if he remembers.”

Theo already had his journal out, writing.

“Harry,” Draco said, trying to hide his hesitation, “ah—you could place Hermione and Justin under the Black family protection.”

Harry cocked an eyebrow.

“Interesting thought.” Blaise looked at Draco in the manner of a predator recognizing a possible fellow predator where before it had seen prey not worth consideration. “I’d forgotten that custom… Fallen out of favor.”

“It would work like Sirius formally handing me off to Lord Nott’s supervision?” Harry said.

“Smacks of pureblood elitism in certain circles,” Daphne said disdainfully. “I’m sure my parents would claim Hermione, actually. She and Father have been writing back and forth a bit since she stayed with us last summer; I’ll ask him tomorrow.”

“Is she going to your manor over the holidays?” Theo asked, still scribbling in the journal.

“For the first week. Her parents,” Daphne put the slightest sneering emphasis on the word, “don’t understand the concept of celebrating Yule instead of that trite Muggle version, so she’ll stay with us through Yule and return home on the twenty-second.”

“Good, I can Floo over and see her,” Theo said absentely, snatching the contract back, probably to copy its exact language down. Sounded like something Hermione would ask for.
“When’s the big day, Theodore?” Pansy said with a smirk.

Theo smirked right back. “Certainly after you and dear Draco here make the oaths.”

Pansy hit him in the leg with a Stinging Hex.

The last night before the holidays, Harry woke up in the middle of the night to a barrage of painful magic hitting his hand.

He shot upright, magic surging under his skin, one hand scrambling for the wand under his pillow and the other ready to cast wandless magic if he had to, light flaring over his head—

Harsh white witchlight lit up the inside of his bed and showed him no one there.

Harry blinked and woke up all the way and realized that the pain had been Stinging Hexes sent by his journal. A quick tempus told him it was just past one in the morning, and he frowned. No one generally wrote in them in the middle of the night.

If it wasn’t something important, he was going to be deactivating the Stinging Hex alert system while he slept in the future.

Harry hissed a Parseltongue password to take down the wards around his bed, opened the curtains with a thought, and summoned the journal and his glasses to his hand.

Ginny had sent him a message directly, as had Fred and George, who’d modified the runes so any single-person silver page message went to both of them. Harry flipped to Ginny’s first, yawning.

The yawn turned into a choking noise of shock that his silencing wards fortunately kept for his ears only.

GW

_Dad’s been attacked in the Ministry. No one will tell us what the hell he was doing. All of us are being pulled out tonight._

The ink was smudged and splotched, as if tears had fallen on it as she wrote.

Harry’s fists clenched. Ginny was a Slytherin and one of his Vipers.

He knew what the twins’ messages were going to say before he turned the page.

FW

_McGonagall just pulled us and Ron and Ginny. Dad’s been hurt in the Ministry, I think on Order business._

GW

_Just Flooed to St. Mungo’s. They won’t let us in to see him, the Healers are too busy._

Harry sent the same message to each of their individual pages:

HP
Grimmauld Place Floo is always open to you. I’ll have Pansy get her uncle to bring you news if no one will say anything.

He was out of bed in seconds, since Pansy never used the Stinging Hex alert system of the journals and would probably sleep right through the messages. Harry didn’t bother to sneak. All the prefects were Vipers and anyone else he could intimidate.

The wards on the girls’ dormitory could be dodged with some NEWT-level runes that the fifth years and up shared as a House secret, but Harry didn’t bother with those either. As Slytherin’s heir, a few quick Parseltongue words were enough for the castle to ignore his presence.

He knocked on the fifth year girls’ door, not wanting to piss any of them off by walking inside. Daphne especially would wake up and throw curses before asking questions if she found a random person in her dorm in the middle of the night.

Luckily, it was Bulstrode who sleepily opened the door. She blinked sleepily at him for a second before her brain caught up and her eyes blew wide. “Black?”

“The one and only,” Harry said with a teasing smirk. She blushed bright red. Interesting. Possibly he’d been wrong to assume girls outside his circle wouldn’t be interested in him.

“What do you want?” Bulstrode snapped.

“I need to speak with Pansy.”

She started to glower.

Harry let his smirk harden into a cold smile.

Bulstrode’s glower melted like wax. “Er, right, hang on.”

She shut the door. Harry leaned on the wall opposite.

Pansy slipped out a minute later, wrapped in a silver dressing gown, hair askew. Her fox followed at her heels. “Harry, what is going on?”

Wordlessly, he handed over the journal, still open to the twins’ messages.

Pansy read them and turned pale. “Circe…”

“I know,” Harry said grimly. “Any chance you can shoot off an owl to your uncle? I know he’s a mind healer but if he could get them any news…”

“I will. Come with?”

Harry nodded. He cast Notice-Me-Nots and silencing charms on both of them and didn’t bother to go back for the Map. The snakes would be enough. Eriss slipped off his shoulders and rejoined him not a hundred meters down the corridor with four other castle snakes in tow. Astrych yapped and the snakes hissed back, but Pansy settled her pet and Eriss’ quick hiss got the other snakes in line.

“Scout for me,” Harry said briskly. “Cockroach Cluster in the morning. We’re headed to the Owlery.”

“As you will, Speaker-Heir,” they chorused, vanishing again with Eriss in the lead.

“Useful, that,” Pansy whispered.
Harry grinned. It felt forced. “No kidding.”

They made it to the Owlery with no trouble. Astrych made no sound, sticking closely to Pansy’s heels. Her barn owl Fey was gone, so Harry whistled Alekta down from the rafters. The Taiga falcon’s savage talons dug into his arm as she landed. He stroked her beak and head while Pansy scribbled out a letter and tied to th Alekta’s leg.

“Healer Parkinson,” Harry said. “If anyone tries to take the letter, feel free to have a go at them.”

Alekta shrieked happily and vanished out the window.

“Hopefully none of the Healer interns tries to take that,” Pansy said.

Harry shrugged. “She’ll know if they mean harm or not, and go easy.”

“Clever bird.”

“Of course,” he said, refreshing the charms on both of them for the return trip. “She’s mine, isn’t she?”

“I hate you sometimes.”

The banter was familiar but there was a forced undertone. Harry ignored it resolutely.

It took him twenty minutes of Occlumency exercises to calm his mind enough for sleep.
The train the next day was a quiet affair. Everyone knew what had happened, and hushed speculations passed around the compartment at the back of the train that Harry, Neville, Luna, Hermione, and the Slytherin fifth years had claimed as soon as they got on. The Weasleys hadn’t sent any more information. Even Astrych picked up on the bad mood and paced in circles when Pansy let him out of his cage, ears laid flat back against his head.

“We should assume the worst,” Blaise said evenly after thirty minutes of empty conversation.

Silence followed.

“Don’t say that,” Hermione scolded.

“It’s logical.” Theo’s voice was flat and cold. “If there was good news, we’d undoubtedly have heard by now.”

Hermione opened her mouth again, clearly furious.

“Drop it,” Harry said.

Surprisingly, she did, though not without another glare for Theo.

Silence reigned again until Neville, bless him, whipped out a pack of cards and his toad and determinedly started a game of Exploding Snap with Draco and Justin. The sight of the Malfoy heir yelling along with the other two, pale eyebrows singed and fingers red from mild burns, distracted everyone from the tension. Though it didn’t go away entirely.

Harry was immensely relieved when the train pulled into King’s Cross.

Leaving the station meant maneuvering around the chaos that sprang up whenever the Boy Who Lived appeared in public. Harry couldn’t keep a sneer off his face as he looked over the crowd surrounding Jules and James and Ethan. They were pathetic.

“You’d think people would be used to seeing him by now,” Sirius complained, taking Alekta’s empty cage from Harry.

“Why, Sirius,” he said with fake shock, “are you really suggesting we expect people to be logical?”

Sirius’ barking laugh drew more than a few stares.

They stepped into the Floo and popped out seconds later in the Grimmauld Place kitchen.

Harry almost stumbled when he saw Fred, George, and Ginny at his kitchen table. “Ah,” he said. “Hello?”

The three of them looked up, devastated.

Sirius hopped out of the Floo. “So I need to introduce you to… oh.”

“He’s dead,” Ginny said hollowly. Dried tear tracks ran down her face; she didn’t seem to notice or
care that her makeup was smudged and smeared. It gave her a raccoon-eye effect that was vaguely terrifying. Fred and George both looked brittle and drained, eyes hollow.

“Oh,” Harry said softly.

“Molly?” Sirius asked.

George sneered. The expression was very like Fred in one of his nastier moments. Fred, on the other hand, looked positively murderous. “She’s an overcontrolling bint and won’t quit bloody smothering us,” George snarled.

“You said the Floo was open,” Ginny said.

Harry had a strong sense that if he tried to send her home, she would either break down in hysterics or attempt to curse him within an inch of his life. Not that he had any intention of doing so. “And I meant it, or the wards would’ve shut you out.”

“Stay as long as you need,” Sirius said. “You’re sure you wouldn’t rather just be with family?”

“You of all people should understand that family’s not always all it’s cracked up to be,” Fred spat.

Sirius winced. “Fair enough. Kreacher!”

The elf appeared in the kitchen with a crack. “Yes, Master Sirius?”

“Guest rooms for Fred, George, and Ginny,” Sirius said. “D’you want to share a room?”

“Yes, please,” George said. Fred nodded.

“Two rooms, then.”

Kreacher nodded. “Right away.”

He cracked out again.

“Thank you,” Ginny said. She was curled in on herself. Fred and George’s spines were so stiff they looked like they’d snap if Harry poked their shoulders.

He sat down at the table, not sure what to say or how to say it. A glance at Sirius conveyed Harry’s helplessness. Emotions were so not his thing.

“Firewhiskey,” Sirius said firmly, moving for the cupboard. He flicked his wand and small glasses flew over to each of the kids. Sirius sat down by Fred with a bottle in one hand and a fifth glass in the other.

“We’re underage,” Ginny said uncertainly.

Sirius snorted, pouring himself a glass. “Most wizarding families ignore that tripe. I was drinking wine at parties by the time I was your age. Mostly parents do it to make sure their children drink responsibly and know how to manage it. Magic and alcohol don’t mix all that well.”

“We know,” George said. “You should see some of our relatives at family reunions…”

“Remember Uncle Bilius?” Fred said.

George snorted. “Vividly.”
Sirius poured each of them a glass.

“What the hell,” Ginny said, knocking it back and promptly subsiding to a coughing fit.

“That’s the spirit,” Sirius said encouragingly.

Harry sipped cautiously. He’d had firewhiskey before, after Quidditch celebrations mostly, but he’d always been careful about the quantity. The (literal) burning didn’t shock him too badly and neither did the taste.

It helped warm him up.

The twins’ brittle edge dulled a bit. Ginny had another small glass and soon didn’t look quite so close to collapse. Sirius cut them all off after a small amount and insisted on everyone playing cards. He made jokes and told stories and resolutely soldiered on until late into the night, when all the teenagers’ eyes were drooping with exhaustion.

“Sleep potion?” Harry said, seeing Ginny staring blankly into the middle distance.

“Please,” Fred said.

George looked worriedly at their sister.

“Kreacher,” Harry said.

When the elf appeared, he continued, “Please grab three doses of Dreamless Sleep from my potions cabinet and put them by our guests’ bedsides. Enough for… ten hours?”

The Weasley kids all nodded, so Harry confirmed the order. Kreacher bowed and disappeared again.

“Thanks, Harry,” Ginny said hollowly.

“Of course,” Harry said. He forced himself to wrap an arm around her shoulders as he led her out of the kitchen and up the stairs, Fred and George on their heels.

Ginny collapsed into the guest room she usually used. Harry watched her take the potion and collapse into bed, pulled the blankets over her with an eyeroll, and gently closed the door behind her.

Fred and George lurked in the shadows of the hallway like malevolent redheaded gargoyles.

“Dumbledore did this,” Fred said with no preamble.

Harry frowned slightly. “Your father volunteered,” he said quietly.

“We know,” George said impatiently. “But it was still Dumbledore’s idiotic plan.”

“The cause of death was a snake bite,” Fred said. “Mum started crying when Shacklebolt came ‘round and told her. They think it’s You-Know-Who’s familiar.”

“I’ll look into it,” Harry said shortly. “Is there anything else?”

“Alex Rowle,” George said.

Harry rubbed his forehead. “Wouldn’t hurt a fly if it didn’t hurt him first, wants to be a Healer, is probably the least likely person to break Ginny’s heart out of the four boyfriends she’s had this year.”
“Not what I meant,” George said.

“Mum doesn’t approve,” Fred said. “So don’t mention it to anyone who might talk to her.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Since when am I in the habit of talking to people who might spill things to your mother?”

“Point,” Fred said. “Back to our original issue.”

“We’re never joining the Order now,” George said. “Not after Dumbledore waltzed Dad into the line of fire without telling him what exactly they’re protecting. He died for the old man’s secrets and he still won’t do us the fucking courtesy of telling us why.”

Harry looked between them. Something about their expressions put him in mind of the capricious fey out of old Irish tales, the sort who played jokes that ruined lives and laughed while they watched the dust settle. He wasn’t stupid. He knew what they were saying.

“How about we talk about this more later,” he said at last. “When it’s not fresh on your minds. Take the potion, get some sleep. Your mum will probably come around tomorrow, frantic.”

They nodded and retreated to their room. Harry had Kreacher spy on them to make sure they actually took the potion before he went downstairs, where he found Sirius halfway through the bottle of firewhiskey.

“Fucking Dumbledore,” Sirius snarled as Harry joined him.

Harry just nodded and poured himself a shot.

As it turned out, Molly Weasley didn’t show up at Grimmauld Place the next day. She did send three Howlers, one for each of her wayward children, shrieking about them abandoning family and not caring about their father and how they needed to be together, et cetera. Fred and George both adopted positively ugly expressions and Ginny incendio’d the last Howler before it could finish, but they reluctantly disappeared into the Floo.

Barty—

He didn’t have to die.

JP

Heard anything?

HB

My close Slytherin friends are just trying to keep themselves and their families alive. Means they can’t share much—it’s risky. They’ve got the message across that it was unplanned. Wrong place, wrong time sort of thing. No one I know has been told why V’s familiar was in the Ministry at all.

JP
Thanks for the update. They’re not targeting you too badly?

HB

No, I’ve managed to just act the same. Helps that I don’t have any public ties to you.

JP

Or private ties. Harry Black.

HB

Get over it, Jules, your father was a right prat to me and I’m one hundred percent justified in being relieved to see the back of him.

JP

Doesn’t mean I have to like Black.

HB

Wouldn’t expect you to.

Do you know what Mr. Weasley was doing in the Ministry in the first place?

JP

Guarding something. Dumbledore’s not telling us what, for security purposes. Something important to the war, something You-Know-Who didn’t have last time. I think some of the adults know. Andromeda, Kingsley, maybe Molly. Definitely Dad and Ethan. We’re more public and more vulnerable so they’re keeping some things compartmentalized from the kids.

HB

Fair enough. Where in the Ministry was he found?

JP

In the lower levels of the Department for the Licensing and Control of Experimental Magic, near the connection to the Department of Mysteries. Makes sense. A lot of the Ministry’s weirdest and most dangerous magic and research is in the DoM. If Voldemort wants anything powerful, it’d be there. Ron’s and my guess is some kind of weapon. Do you have any idea?

HB

None. DoM is secretive as all hell. I’ve looked into them in the past—Unspeakable might be a viable career option for me. There’s almost nothing known about what goes on down there. I’d agree it’s a likely candidate to house whatever Voldemort’s target is.

I don’t think it’s a weapon, at least not in the conventional sense. Knowledge, something to weaken his enemies or strengthen his people, but not precisely an offensive weapon like a magic bomb.

Is there a meeting over the holidays?

JP
Nothing official. Dumbledore says to keep doing what you’re doing; it’s good to have someone else kind of on the inside.

What’s a bomb?

HB

Someone else? And never mind about bombs, Muggle reference

JP

I shouldn’t have said that.

HB

You sound like Hagrid.

JP

Shut up!

I can’t tell you, okay? Trust me on this one, and please let it be.

HB

I will. Happy Christmas.

JP

Are you doing the old holidays now?

HB

Don’t you?

JP

Nah, Dad and Ethan don’t really bother. Some of the Order do but not many. Aren’t they… you know, Rituals? Dark?

HB

If they were Dark they’d be illegal, Jules. Sirius does them. It’s just celebrating Yule on the twenty-first instead of Christmas on the twenty-fifth. Not that different.

JP

Huh. Okay. Happy Yule, then.

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Harry—

We didn’t kill him. Look at the real autopsy.

-Barty
Healer Parkinson,

I write to you on behalf of several people with whom Pansy and I are friends—Fred, George, and Ginevra Weasley. Their father recently died in an unfortunate mishap outside the Department of Mysteries. The tragedy has understandably overshadowed their holiday season. In an effort to help put their minds at rest, I’ve been investigating certain inconsistencies in the official story of Arthur Weasley’s untimely death. I know you are a Mind Healer and likely had no involvement with the investigation, but in your capacity as a Healer, could you possibly look into the autopsy report? A credible source has led me to believe that there may be something less than honest about the whole affair.

May the new year bring you blessings and good fortune,

Heir Hadrian Black of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

Heir Black,

The news of Mr. Weasley’s unfortunate end saddened me. He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, as far as I’ve heard, and I know of Pansy’s friendship with some of his children. I admit I did not have cordial relations with the man but I regret the emotional stress her friends must be enduring. Helping them understand what precisely happened is the least I can do.

It took a bit of digging, but your suspicions were entirely correct. The official cause of death is a lie. I examined the cadaver myself, merely a day before his ceremonial cremation. No snake bite was found anywhere on Mr. Weasley’s person. Most intriguingly, his skin was marred with runes burned into it of a kind I’ve never encountered. I’ve included several photographs, but given his proximity to the Department of Mysteries, the Unspeakables will likely be the only people who can help you decipher this mystery.

Unfortunately, this was all done in secret, and I would risk my job and my husband’s if I were to reveal what I’ve found. There’s immense pressure on the hospital to keep it secret. I only found out because my husband works in the Ministry Liaison Office at St. Mungo’s. I would, of course, appreciate your discretion on the matter.

May the new year bring you blessings and good fortune,

Melvis Parkinson of the Noble and Ancient House of Parkinson, Healer

HB

Luna, your mum was an Unspeakable, wasn’t she?

LL

Yes, for some years. She became frustrated with the nargles in the department and resigned when I was young. Why?

HB
I know the Unspeakable oaths would have prevented her from telling you much, but I’ve come across some highly unusual runes tied to the Department of Mysteries. Would either you or your father be willing to take a look and tell me if you know anything about them?

LL

Ooooh, yes! Daddy loves runes. So do I. He and Mummy found ways around some of the oaths, you know. I shan’t reveal anything to you but we would love to take a look!

And of course no one will hear a word from us.

HB

Excellent, I’ll copy them into the journal, give me a few minutes.

Healer Parkinson,

Naturally, I will refrain from doing anything that might bring harm to a member of my good friend’s family. I am not so foolish as to challenge the Ministry outright—that would be my estranged twin. Your efforts are greatly appreciated; the House of Black will remember the debt we owe.

Happy Yuletide,

Heir Hadrian Black of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

Barty—

Thank you for pointing me in the right direction on the autopsy. A contact is looking into his real cause of death.

Harry,

How are the Weasleys holding up? I know a few of them are friends of yours.

Barty,

Not well. I won’t go into too much detail about their private family business but it’s been hard on all of them. My friends among the Weasleys have been spending much of their time at Grimmauld Place; they’re coming over for Yule tomorrow for a bit since their family officially practices Christmas.

Happy Yule.

Harry lowered his arms with a sigh.

The Yule rite was closer to the midsummer one than to Samhain. Midsummer magic and Yule magic...
came from latent magic in the world; midsummer felt like life and cleansing, while Yule felt like
rebirth and opportunity.

Around him, others stepped out of the posture almost everyone adopted by instinct, arms raised to the
sky and spines arched. Luna and her insane-but-brilliant father Xenophilius had come along to the
clifftop where the Blacks did the Yule rites. Fred and George and Ginny had come too, obviously,
but also Veronica, Romilda, and Graham. None of them was allowed to do the rites at home and all
of them had expressed an interest in learning. Judging by the awed looks on their faces, they were
hooked.

“That was incredible,” Ginny breathed, looking halfway between tears and ecstasy.

Luna wrapped an arm around her friend. “The rites are beautiful.”

“Magic is,” Veronica said fervently.

Xenophilius smiled like a crazy person and turned a cartwheel.

Sirius eyed the older man, clearly decided that he didn’t want to know, and looked everyone over.
“You’re all right?”

“Amazing,” Graham said with a huge smile. “My family are idiots to skip out on this.”

Harry caught Sirius’ eye, got a nod of approval, and said, “Graham, Romilda—I’ve offered Veronica
this before but if you need to get away from your families… there are rooms enough at Grimmauld
Place.”

Graham’s eyes got wide and Romilda’s narrowed. “Really?” Graham said.

“Why?” Romilda said suspiciously.

“I ran away from home at sixteen,” Sirius said. “No one should have to deal with the kind of shit
from their family that makes them want to leave.”

And loyalty begets loyalty, Harry thought but did not say. Romilda at least was clever enough to see
that part of his motivation. She smirked and thanked him for the offer. Graham hesitated and then
asked if he could come over after Christmas. “My parents want me to celebrate it with everyone
but…”

“Of course.” Sirius threw an arm around the boy. “The wards’ll be open for you.”

Ginny

They walked back down to the Apparition point, a grove of ancient cedar trees. Sirius said the
Blacks always Apparated and Disapparated from there so the magical reside didn’t interfere with the
ritual. Luna’s presence was a comfort, as always; Ginny wrapped an arm around her friend’s waist in
return and leaned into her. The wind blew from their backs and blew their long hair out in front of
them in a tangle of white and red.

“I am glad you liked it,” Luna said happily. “The nargles won’t affect you as much now.”

Nargles meant bullies and stupid narrow-minded people in Luna-speak. Ginny smiled; she knew
they wouldn’t, not now that she had people like this.
“It’s the first thing that made me feel like I can keep going,” she said quietly. “Since… Dad. The magic… it showed me there’s always a chance to move forward, isn’t there?”

“It does that.” Luna hummed a bit of eerie music. The wind snatched it away from Ginny’s ears before she heard more than the melody’s general shape. Ahead of them, Fred and George and Harry put their heads together, no doubt plotting something nefarious, and Romilda held Veronica and Graham’s attention. She was probably teaching them her canny ways.

Ginny held Xeno’s hand as he Apparated her and Luna back to Grimmauld Place. Sirius brought Harry and Romilda, and the twins respectively brought Veronica and Graham. Ginny staggered a bit on the landing—she hated Side-Along-Apparition—and was relieved to see that no one had gotten Splinched.

Harry

Other than the rites, and opening presents in the evening, Yule was much the same as Christmas.

Harry got a wide assortment of styled robe pins, enchanted rings, cloakpins, robes, books, sweets, and Quidditch-related gifts for Yule, much as past years. He still got a strange squeeze in his chest when he saw the pile of gifts meant for him in the living room. It wasn’t the contents of the boxes so much as the fact of the gifts’ existence that mattered. People cared enough to buy him things and wrap them and send them along.

Hestia had noticed Harry’s fingerless leather Quidditch gloves getting worn out, and replaced them in a joint gift from her and Flora. Harry made a note to thank her. And also to pay more attention, if she was watching him closely enough to notice his gloves getting worn out.

Sirius kept everyone up until long into the night. Ginny was withdrawn and the malicious gleam in Fred and George’s eyes hadn’t diminished in the slightest but firewhiskey and presents and the Lovegoods’ oddities managed to give everyone a good time.

Harry walked in on Luna holding a crying Ginny late in the evening. Kreacher woke him up at two in the morning after everyone had gone and led him down to the dueling room, where Harry found Fred and George hurling curses with single-minded intensity at the target dummies. Dark curses of the kind they’d turned a blind eye to when the Slytherins studied them but refused to practice themselves.

They both glared at him as if daring him to try and stop them.

“I can show you better ones,” Harry offered, flicking the ash wand into his hand.

Neither twin smiled but they accepted the offer without hesitating.

They had to go home the next day—apparently it took a four-hour row to get Molly to let them go to Grimmauld Place even for the one night after they disappeared from St. Mungo’s.

A day after Christmas, Graham came back without warning, stony-faced and quieter than Harry had ever seen him. Harry used a vial of Graham’s blood, had the kid sit on a counter, and explained what he was doing as he brewed a complicated blood-based healing potion for the wand-tip burns marching up and down Graham’s arms. There was no way his young Viper understood everything Harry said but it seemed to comfort the kid nonetheless.

Graham drank the potion and watched the burns fade.
“I can heal most of the physical scarring,” Harry said quietly. “The mental is more difficult.”

“That’s okay,” Graham said, running a finger down his forearm. Small, pale circles were the only remnants of the burns. “I don’t want to forget. If I did, there’d be no one to make them pay.”

“They?”

“Grandmother. And Father. They don’t like Slytherins.”

Harry studied Graham for a moment and decided he could stand to reach out with the Vipers’ special holiday gift a little early. He reached into the bottomless bag that hung at his waist, inside his robes, and wandlessly summoned one of the rings. It was silver and wrought in the pattern of scales. “I’ve got one of these for all the Vipers,” he said quietly. “Only someone with a ring can see them on another’s hand.”

Graham took it, and slid it onto his right index finger without hesitation. His eyes widened when Harry flashed his own ring—also silver, but inlaid with a green basilisk scale among the carved scales. Theo, Blaise, Neville, Justin, Daphne, Pansy, Hermione, Fred, and George would be getting similar rings; the rest would be like Graham’s, only done in the metal of the wearer’s House. He’d selected carved black diamond for the Hufflepuff rings.

“Thanks,” Graham said.

“You can come back here this summer.” Harry went to work cleaning up his potions station. He needed to do something with his hands so he didn’t lose control and shatter the granite countertop, or possibly Floo to the Pritchard home and eviscerate Graham’s father. Sirius had taken one look at Graham and disappeared into the basement with a bottle of vodka from a Siberian magical settlement. Harry planned to go drag him out if he didn’t emerge by dinner. “The photographs I took and your testimony would be enough to get you removed from their custody if they kick up a fuss. Threaten their reputations and they’ll back down. After the hit James Potter took for child abuse, they won’t dare try to weather the storm.”

Graham nodded. “If not even the Boy Who Lived’s father can dodge the charges…”

“Exactly.” Harry finished his cleaning process and decided he had himself well enough in control to stop moving. His lips twisted bitterly. “It’s odd. Magicals consider children almost sacred and as far as I can tell there’s far fewer instances of child abuse but those isolated cases are always extreme.”

“It’s not…” Graham swallowed, tried again. “I can’t tell if—I always think I’m overreacting.”

Harry faced the kid. Sitting on the counter, Graham was a little taller, but he’d slumped so much they were the same height. “Graham, look at me,” Harry said.

Once Graham reluctantly made eye contact, Harry said, “You are not overreacting. This is not normal, or even a little bit worse than normal. If you want to lose your connection to your family Sirius and I will take your father to court for this. They might disinherit you, but if you want, that’s entirely your choice. But you won’t be sent back there no matter what you choose. Tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” Graham said. He’d finally straightened his spine a little but there was a faint leftover tremble to his hands. “I don’t want… to have them arrested.”

“Done. You’ll stay here and we’ll blackmail them into staying quiet about it,” Harry said. “Did you leave anything behind you want to go back for?”
Graham opened his mouth, closed it.

“Tell me. I’m going to go have… words with your father anyway, and I can get whatever it is then. It’s not a burden and I don’t mind,” Harry said firmly. He still remembered all the things the Dursleys tried to convince him were true—that he was a waste of space, especially. If Graham’s family just saw him as the useless Slytherin youngest child, as the punching bag, he might have the same insecurities.

“My things in general,” Graham mumbled.

“Okay. I’ll get them.” Harry considered a few things and decided he might as well Floo straight to the Pritchard home; it wasn’t like he had anything else to do today and the earlier they moved Graham’s things to Grimmauld Place the faster the kid would settle in. Harry didn’t particularly feel like offering a hug or a shoulder to cry on but he could at least make sure Graham was comfortable. “Do you want to come with me? If you’d like to make sure I get everything, you can come. If you think it’d be too hard to see them, I’ll bring Kreacher along and have him pack up the entire room.”

Graham thought about it for a few seconds. The tremble in his hands was easing. “Come.”

Harry kept a razor smile off his face. The kid was a Slytherin—figured he’d want to see them get taken down a peg. “All right. Will their Floo let me through?”

“…probably not.”


“What are you going to do?”

Harry nudged him off the counter. “Write a letter.”

Post owls managed to cover vast distances in improbably short time periods, so Alekta brought Lord Pritchard’s response back inside an hour. Harry scanned the curt letter accepting his request to visit the Pritchard home via Floo that evening.

“You just asked?” Graham said, with justifiable skepticism, when he met Harry in the kitchen.

“You just asked?” Graham said, with justifiable skepticism, when he met Harry in the kitchen.

“Of course not,” Harry said. He’d selected black-trimmed green robes out of sheer spite, and even though they were spelled to shed wrinkles and dirt, he checked them over one last time in the mirror Sirius had hung by the hearth. High-collared, tailored, every inch indicating money and taste. “I asked, and then I very politely told him that if he said no, or if any harm came to me, reports would go to the Wizengamot and DMLE detailing the state in which you arrived at my home. Enough to open an investigation.”

Graham nervously stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Oh.”

“You up for this?”

“Yes.” Graham squared his shoulders in a transparent overcompensation for his nervousness but Harry didn’t call him on it. Bravado was better than shrinking in on himself. “Let’s go.”

Harry grabbed a pinch of Floo powder and stepped into the hearth. At some point he really had to get a Floo connection installed in the entrance hall if he meant to ever have more formal guests than
his friends come over; inviting someone into your home via the basement kitchen wasn’t the classiest thing ever. “Pritchard Manor!”

As soon as he stepped out on the far side of the connection, Harry thanked Merlin and Morgana that he’d finally figured out how to exit the Floo without looking like an idiot. There were three people lined up in the front hallway and all of them looked pissed. Pritchard loomed like a scarecrow in between two women Harry supposed were his daughters, Lucille and Marcine. Lucille was built like Toby, short and compact, while Marcine had gotten her father’s lanky height. They both might have been pretty but the pinched, unhappy expressions on their faces sort of ruined it.

“Lord Pritchard,” he said, not bothering to bow.

Graham’s father narrowed his eyes at the multiple snubs Harry had just given him and his children. “Black.”

Harry smiled. A snub in return. Nice to know they weren’t pretending.

The Floo rushed again and Graham stepped out, chin high and Slytherin mask firmly in place. Probably only Harry could detect the cracks in it. “Father,” he said.

“Graham,” Lucille snapped. “What were you thinking?”

“Play nice, Heir Pritchard,” Harry said, because Graham’s shoulders had just hitched a fraction of an inch. “He was probably thinking he didn’t want to get any more wand burns this holiday, and frankly I can’t blame him.”

“Little shit,” Lucille said.

Marcine’s fingers were twitching towards her wand. She’d been a Ravenclaw, Harry remembered, and clever; her quiet watching eyes made him more wary than Lucille’s brash Gryffindor anger. But Nedwin Pritchard was still the one to watch. He was the family Head, and this was almost a conflict of noble Houses.

“Lucille,” Pritchard said evenly.

She crossed her arms and said nothing.

“You wanted to speak with me, Heir Black,” Pritchard said, turning Harry’s title and name into an insult. “Speak.”

Harry shoved his hands into his pockets and looked around their entrance hall, as relaxed as he could possibly be. “Such a nice home,” he commented. “I’d imagine, oh, five house-elves to keep this place running?” And to act as status symbols. “Plus gardeners, artisans… and of course, those all cost money.”

“Your grasp of finances is truly astounding,” Marcine said.

“So I’ve been told.” Harry wandered over to an end table by the hearth and tapped one finger on what seemed to be an heirloom decorative cauldron judging by the way all three older Pritchards tensed. “And you’ve got the family relics out in the open, how… brave.”

“Giving up family secrets now?” Lucille hissed at Graham.

“Your crest is engraved on the cauldron,” Harry said derisively. “It wasn’t hard to figure out.”
“Make your point,” Pritchard said.

“Oh, I’m getting there.” Harry picked up the cauldron and turned it over in his hands. “How much d’you think this would go for, Graham?”

“It’s a family thing,” Graham said, uncertain but playing along. “So… few hundred galleons?”

“More than that,” Harry said, enjoying the nervous cling of the Pritchards’ eyes on the heirloom in his grasp. “I know several wealthy families who’d dearly love to own a Pritchard family heirloom… to laugh at. Perhaps for target practice. Rather like they would a Potter one, come to think of it.”

Graham shrugged and grinned a little. “It’s solid gold.”

“A few thousand galleons then,” Harry said appreciatively. He tossed the cauldron in the air and grinned maliciously when Lucille jerked and stopped herself. The cauldron landed back in his left hand. “No worries, Lucille, I wouldn’t dream of dropping this on the floor. Not when you’ve so kindly invited me into your home.”

“Have you only come here to try and guess the value of our possessions?” Marcine said icily. “It’s getting old fast.”

“No,” Harry said, dropping the relaxed act and setting the cauldron down with a thunk. “I’m just a bit curious, see, because maintaining this lifestyle requires some serious gold.” He waved a hand around at the glittering well-lit three-story entrance hall, the marble floors, the antique tapestries and hand-carved accent tables by the Floo and sweeping double staircase at the end. “Gold you might find yourself short of should you lose your jobs over a child abuse scandal.”

“There is no child abuse in this home,” Pritchard said.

For just a moment, Harry allowed himself to picture stuffing his wand in Pritchard’s mouth and whispering one of the curses he’d only practiced with Theo and Blaise in the safety of the Chamber, dredged up from books dripping rancid magic on the floor. Then he cut that thought off before he was too tempted.

“Are you sure?” he said instead, producing a packet of photographs from one pocket.

None of the Pritchards made a move to take them, so Harry sighed and tossed them on the floor. A few mental nudges had them landing face-up and angled so the Pritchards could see detailed photographs of Graham’s arms and the burns covering them, the small silvery scars sprinkled over his back and chest that spoke of years of casual, minor injuries.

Lucille looked and made a face. Pritchard and Marcine didn’t even bother. Their eyes were trained on Harry, and tinged with caution now. They’d finally caught on that he meant business.

“That is a Lord’s prerogative,” Pritchard said icily. “What happens in a noble family seat is outside the jurisdiction of the Wizengamot. Graham.” His eyes slid to his youngest child. “It’s time to stop this nonsense. Go to your room.”

One of Graham’s feet twitched. Harry recognized the way Graham was folding up before his eyes, closing doors in his mind one by one until he could obey without thinking and get through whatever happened. “No,” Harry said. “Graham will be staying with me. If you try to force him to stay here, well, it’d be ever such a shame if certain evidence made its way to Amelia Bones, wouldn’t it? She’s rather opposed to parents doing deliberate harm to their children and I have some Pensieve memories and photographs at home that might draw suspicion on you.” He raised an eyebrow at Lucille. “I hear you’re quite the rising star in the DMLE. I doubt Madam Bones would look kindly on you.
standing by while such egregious law-breaking went on in your own home. And Marcine, well, a Wizengamot internship is a nice starting place in the Ministry but they can always find replacement interns.” Harry looked at Lord Pritchard, thought about his blood streaking the spotless marble floors. Smiled. Pritchard paled a faint shade. “As for you… I’m sure you recall James Potter’s trial, the memory evidence I provided… His crime was negligence, his Heir is the Boy Who Lived, and he’s hanging on to his job by a thread thanks to what he did to me.”

“James Potter is a good man, and his reputation will weather this storm,” Pritchard said.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. Are you willing to bet yours would?”

Pritchard was silent.

“How long d’you think your vaults will last if all three of you lose your jobs?” Harry said. “Before you have to start selling things like that cauldron… and that tapestry… before you can’t get tailored robes, eat out at fancy restaurants in Paris where the desserts are charmed to tap-dance before you eat them?”

“Father is a Lord and a member of the Wizengamot,” Lucille spat. “You’re a jumped-up arrogant little snot from a Dark family with no influence to your name.”

Harry laughed at her. “No influence? Are you so stupid you don’t realize who would step up against you on this?”

“Lucille,” Pritchard said.

She ignored him. “Sirius Black is a traitor and a scumbag isolated from Dark and Light. You’re fifteen. Neither of you scares me.”

“Maybe not Sirius,” Graham said, “but Harry should.”

Lucille stared at him. “Worthless bit of gutter trash.”


Fucking Merlin. Graham had definitely gotten all the brains out of his parents’ gene pool. Harry stared between them for a second trying to figure out if they were being honest. The kids at least looked convinced that they were right, but Pritchard’s gaze was measuring. He was a Gryffindor too but clearly tempered by experience, unlike Lucille.

“Under oath,” Harry said. “It doesn’t matter what House the witnesses hail from if they’re telling the truth. How stupid are you?”

“I’ll have you know I obtained five NEWTs—” Marcine started.

Harry flicked a hand and shut her up. Then, for good measure, he silenced Lucille.

Pritchard swelled like a bullfrog. “You will not spell my children and Heir in my own home,” he snarled, stepping forward and drawing his wand. Both girls appeared to have left theirs elsewhere. Morons. “Stop now or this becomes a House feud.”
Harry left his wand in its holster, kept his hands open and relaxed by his sides. Graham was practically vibrating with tension but Harry had never been this calm or still. His whole body was ice and he spoke slow and sure so Lord Pritchard would know he meant it. “If you so much as cast *lumos* I will leave all three of you unconscious on the floor, and then I will go home and rip your *world* to shreds. I am offering you a chance to save your skin.”

“Take it,” Graham said. Not like he was begging—like he was giving a *warning*. Seemed he’d found his spine again in the shelter of Harry’s confidence.

For a long moment everyone stood very still.

Harry leaned forward and delicately plucked Lord Pritchard’s wand out of his hand. It was a gross breach of etiquette and one for which he could justifiably challenge Harry to a formal duel. The rage that flared in Pritchard’s face for a second was hot as hell. But not enough to be frightening.

“Cherry,” Harry said absently, turning the wand over in his hand. “A better wand than you deserve, but I suppose everyone has the potential to turn out decent at eleven.”

“Black,” Pritchard said through stiff lips. “Return my wand.”

Quick as lightning, Harry tossed it at him. Pritchard fumbled the catch and the wand clattered to the floor. Harry swept his eyes over Lucille’s furious gestures, Marcine’s even more furious stillness, and Lord Pritchard’s undignified scramble to obtain his wand. “Pathetic,” he sneered. “Graham, let’s go get your things.”

Prickles went up and down his spine as they walked away. Harry knew exactly when Pritchard unsilenced his daughters because Lucille’s sudden shouting echoed loud enough to drown out Harry’s boots on the sweeping staircase but he refused to look back. He was ready to shield, grab Graham, and Portkey home in a hot second if he had to but no spells came at them from behind.

Graham led him silently up to the third floor and a suite of rooms littered with the detritus of a whole life lived in one place. Harry turned and tossed the strongest locking spell he knew at the door. “Kreacher,” he said.

The elf appeared with a *crack*. “Yes, Master Harry?”

“How fast can you pack up all of Graham’s belongings?” Harry said.

Kreacher looked around the rooms. Bedroom, sitting room, bathroom, and what looked to be a once-nursery-now-rec-room. “Ten minutes.”

“Take it all to Grimmauld Place, the room next to mine,” Harry said.

“Right away, Master Harry.” Kreacher didn’t bother to walk into the bedroom, vanishing and reappearing in front of Graham’s wardrobe with another *crack*. He snapped his fingers and clothes started leaping into Graham’s trunk.

Graham swallowed hard. Now that they were away from his family, his whole body looked on the verge of collapsed. “Harry—”

“Wait until we’re home,” Harry said firmly. He deliberated, then laid a hand on Graham’s shoulder. A hug might have been more helpful but he only had so much self-control and he’d already spent a lot of it on not cursing Graham’s worthless father. “Why don’t you go make sure Kreacher doesn’t forget anything.”
“Okay,” Graham said. He jerked his shoulders back up into a semblance of a normal posture and disappeared into his rec room.

Harry leaned up against the door and opened his journal. Neville, Theo, Pansy, Daphne, and Blaise would be ready to bring their parents in on this if necessary. Theo, Pansy, and Daphne’s parents he knew well enough to know they’d help, for various reasons, and Blaise’s mother was so uninterested in British politics she’d let Blaise direct their family policy on this one. Lady Longbottom and Lady Greengrass could be trusted to lean on Pritchard without going public with it. On the other hand, Harry didn’t trust that Lady Parkinson, Lord Nott, and Lord Malfoy would respect Graham’s wishes to keep the whole thing secret; it was too good an opportunity to take a Light family down a peg. Draco would be kept out of the loop entirely and Pansy and Theo would only tell their parents if Pritchard stepped out of line. He caught Hermione and Justin up on the whole situation just so they’d know what was going on. Hermione didn’t answer right away, probably busy, but Justin immediately offered to host Graham at his place if they needed somewhere safe to hide him. Harry thanked him for the offer and said (honestly) that he’d keep it in mind. The Muggle world was the last place Pritchard would look for his son, but it shouldn’t come to that.

“We’re done,” Graham said.

Harry snapped the journal shut and tucked it away in one of his many magically expanded pockets. “Excellent.” The rooms were now stripped bare of all but the furniture. Kreacher had even taken the bedcovers and throw pillows, leaving bare mattresses and upholstery in his wake.

“Leaving the curtains?” Harry said drily.

Kreacher snapped his fingers and the curtains disappeared. “They is being hung in Grimmauld Place at once,” he croaked.

It had been a joke, but okay. “Thanks, Kreacher,” Harry said. “Graham? You’re good?”

“Yeah,” Graham said.

“Right. Kreacher, thanks, you can go home,” Harry said. “If we’re not back in ten minutes let Sirius know where we are and what’s happening.”

“Yes, Master Harry.” Kreacher bowed and vanished.

“Ready to face them?” Harry said. “Last time.”

“Ready.” Graham looked determined.

“Let’s go.” Harry took down his spell on the door.

He half-expected jinxes to shoot at him when he opened it but the hallway was empty. They made it all the way back to the main staircase without encountering any Pritchards.

“Where’s Tobias?” Harry asked Graham as they started down.

“Creeds’ house.” Graham was staring fixedly down the stairs.

“Fortunate,” Harry muttered.

Pritchard and his daughters were waiting between the stairs and the Floo. All three of them looked furious and said not a word, practically daring Harry to pick a fight and try to make them move. Harry led the way around them with an amused smile that said he was humoring their sad little
power play. Pritchard and Lucille turned ugly, identical shades of red with anger and Marcine threateningly tapped her wand on her leg.

Harry plucked it out of her fingers and thanked Merlin yet again that he’d learned to wandlessly move things as a kid. “Clumsy,” he said innocently, as it clattered to the floor.

Marcine twitched towards him.

“Go on, Graham,” Harry said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Graham looked from Harry to his family, evidently decided that he didn’t want to know, and grabbed Floo powder. “Grimmauld Place!” he said, and vanished in a whoosh of fire.

Harry took a pinch of powder but didn’t use it. “One last thing,” he said, facing the three Pritchards.

“What more could you possibly want, demon,” Marcine snarled.

“Oh, demon, that’s a new one,” Harry said appreciatively. “Nothing from you, though, so just sit there and look pissy, you’re quite good at it. You, on the other hand.” He focused on Pritchard one last time. “Let’s make sure you won’t go fuck a prostitute and make yourself another little punching bag, why don’t we?”

The second it took Pritchard to catch on was all Harry needed to pull his wand and cast a spell he’d learned in a medical textbook of all things. Pritchard’s mouth gaped in a soundless scream as he crumpled with his hands around his crotch.

Lucille whipped her wand out and Marcine snatched hers off the floor. “What did you do!” Lucille bellowed.

Harry flicked his wand again and both of theirs went flying as their feet stuck to the floor. Marcine hissed a spell and almost came unstuck. Someone was clever enough to learn wandless casting, at least, but Harry was armed and he nailed her with a *glacius* before she got free. He wanted her to hear this. “Nothing Dark, just a little medical spell,” he said pleasantly. “Of course I made some… modifications… and it’s usually paired with anesthetic, which is why he’s currently, ah, lost some dignity.” Pritchard was curled in the fetal position on the floor and didn’t seem to be listening. At least he wasn’t making noise. “Let’s just say all the Viagra in the world can’t help him now.”

“How dare you!” Lucille screeched. “Explain yourself, you fucking halfblood,” Lucille spat. “Your Muggle references have no place here.”

The sheer *irony* made him want to laugh. “You can ask him later,” Harry said. “It probably won’t take him long to find out, based on how often he visits that high-end brothel in Amsterdam.”

He stepped backwards into the Floo and called out “Grimmauld Place”. Lucille’s screeching “*How dare you!*” was so loud Harry couldn’t even hear the flames roar to life.

Graham was hunched over at the kitchen table when Harry hopped out again, brushing ash off his robes. He straightened up. “What did you do?”

“He’s sterile now,” Harry said, deciding not to explain what *else* he’d done to Nedwin Pritchard. “How are you?”

“…okay,” Graham said. “I’m okay.”

“You’re safe,” Harry said, “and it’s okay to not be okay yet.”
Graham swallowed. “Is it… can I have Malcolm and Liam over?”

“Of course,” Harry said. “You can use Alekta, write Malcolm and see. I’ll let Sirius know.”

“Thank you,” Graham said fervently. They both knew he meant more than letting the other young Vipers come over. Harry just nodded and took the stairs down to the actual basement.

Sirius was slumped on a chair. “Already took a Sober-Up,” he said when Harry came in. “How’d it go?”

Harry threw himself over another armchair. “Threatened them with a trashed reputation and lost jobs, got Graham’s stuff, cursed Nedwin Pritchard so he’s sterile and won’t be enjoying any more Dutch prostitutes.” He’d have to thank Pansy for that little bit of scandal.

“Nice,” Sirius said with a quick, mean grin.

“Glad you approve.” Harry rubbed his forehead. “He tried to start a House feud but I don’t think he will. Graham’s staying here from now on—I’ve got to go owl Pritchard with the exact terms, I didn’t hammer it all down while I was there."

“We’ll handle it if he tries to make a fuss,” Sirius said indifferently.

Harry nodded. “Longbottoms and Greengrasses will back us under the table to keep him shut about it. If he ignores that and tries to use the Wizengamot to get Graham back, or tries to disinherit him, we go public. Pansy, Theo, Draco, and Blaise can get their families involved if it gets to that point and there’s others who would be happy to crucify the Pritchards.”

“I see you’ve got it handled already,” Sirius said drily. Then he grinned. “Don’t look so wary, I’m not mad. Less for me to do. You know I don’t love the politicking.”

“You’re not bad at it,” Harry said.

Sirius shrugged. “Couldn’t grow up a Black without picking up on some things. Where’s Graham now?”

“Owling his friends, he wants two of them to come over,” Harry said. “I told him it was fine.”

“Yes, of course. I’m going to go talk to him really quick, want to come?”

“Sure.”

Harry followed Sirius up out of the basement. They found Graham in the drawing room, opening a window for Alekta.

Sirius sat down on a couch across from Graham, who shifted, eyes cutting to Harry. Harry nodded encouragingly.

“Look,” Sirius said, “my parents were absolute shitbags too, and I can’t promise to be a great role model because responsibility’s not really my forte, but you’ll always be safe and welcome here. The rules are don’t be an ass to the house-elf, talk to Harry or me about any magic you practice and any books you pull out of the library, don’t get into the alcohol without supervision, and clear it with one of us if you invite people over.”

Graham looked suspicious. “That’s it?”

“Like I said,” Sirius said, standing. “I’m not great at responsibility.”
“You’re sure?” Graham said, eyes sliding to Harry again.

“Of course,” Sirius said.

Harry nodded.

The next second, a ball of hyperactive twelve-year-old slammed into him. Harry let out a surprised *ooof* sound and barely stopped himself blasting the kid away from him. Graham’s arms latched around his ribcage.

Harry stared at Sirius, aghast. His godfather was clearly trying to stifle a laugh.

Very awkwardly, Harry put his arms around Graham’s skinny shoulders in return, trying to position them like he’d seen other people do.

Thank Merlin the kid pulled back pretty quickly. He flushed bright red and looked down. “Um. Sorry.”

“No, it’s—fine,” Harry said, still trying to wrap his head around this. Why the hell did people like hugs so much? Who decided to make humans creatures that got so comforted by confining physical contact? “Er. Shall we go figure out what room is yours? You can decorate it however you want, Kreacher’ll help…”

“Oh, right,” Sirius said. “Kreacher!”

“Graham will be staying with us from now on when not in school. Follow his orders unless they contradict one of mine or Harry’s, okay?”

“Yes, Master Sirius,” Kreacher said, turning shrewd tennis ball eyes on Graham. “Master Graham’s things is waiting. Kreacher will see that they is exactly how he wants them.”

Graham shifted awkwardly. “Er, thanks.”

“If Master Graham could follow me,” Kreacher said.

Graham looked at Harry.

“It’s fine, I’ll be up in a minute,” Harry assured him.

The elf led Graham out of the drawing room.

“Er,” Harry said. “Did I just see Kreacher *bouncing*?”

“I think so,” Sirius said gloomily. “Merlin, why are so many people so awful?”

“Too many reasons,” Harry said.

Sirius ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. I’m going to go for a flight.”

Harry impulsively and awkwardly hugged Sirius before he followed Graham up the stairs. It was no more comfortable for him than any of the other hugs he’d ever given or received but it helped Sirius. So he made himself deal.

The look on Sirius’ face afterwards was worth it.
The day after Yule, and the day before Hermione went home to her parents, they all took the Floo to Nott Manor.

Harry had only been there once before, the summer after his third year. The foyer looked much the same as it had then—grand, with blue-gray marble floors, arched windows, and a staircase of the same blueish marble lined with dark varnished wood bannisters twisting up to the first floor.

He was the third out of the Floo, after Blaise and Neville. Hermione was coming from Daphne’s and Justin popped out a second later, having come over to Grimmauld Place for a bit first.

“Not worried about leaving Graham with Sirius?” Neville asked.

“Slightly,” Harry said with a grin. “I think Sirius is planning to tell him all the prank stories from his Hogwarts days, and possibly teach him some of the Marauders’ spells.”

“Merlin,” Theo said with horror. “We’re going to have a teenaged Slytherin Sirius on our hands.”

Blaise made a face.

The Floo whooshed, spitting Justin out. He flicked his wand to spell ash off his robes. “Graham tried to change my hair purple before I left,” he said indignantly.

Blaise, Neville, and Theo burst out laughing.

“The Floo whooshed, spitting Justin out. He flicked his wand to spell ash off his robes. “Graham tried to change my hair purple before I left,” he said indignantly.

“Sirius is maybe not the best role model,” Harry admitted.

“I will most definitely be warding my trunk tighter when we go back to school,” Blaise sniffed.

The Floo whooshed again and spat out Hermione, Daphne, and Pansy in quick succession. Hermione appeared to have been in the middle of a sentence when she stepped into the Floo and hadn’t let the fire-travel stop her. “—cannot let that foul woman keep pressuring us!”

“We’re resisting,” Pansy pointed out, glowering. “Subtly. If you keep antagonizing her in class, you’ll lose points and look like a fool; it’s not like her mind is going to change!”

“I can’t just—listen as she spouts all that drivel!” Hermione threw up her hands. “And she’s altogether too smug in her opinions. And it will galvanize people if someone stands up to her!”

“Just… leave it,” Harry said. “Pansy, if she wants to cost Gryffindor points, not our problem.”

“It’s my problem,” Neville protested.

Theo made an urgent noise. Everyone glanced at him. He nodded at the staircase.

A second later, Harry registered what had caught his attention: a door closing somewhere on the first floor.

Lord Nott appeared at the top of the stairs a second later. He looked much the same as always. Theo’s father was neither particularly tall, nor large, nor handsome, but he had a sort of quiet power in his build and bearing that drew attention. Harry was reminded of a mountain.

“Welcome to Nott Manor,” Lord Nott said with an easy smile. “Daphne, Pansy, Blaise, good to see you. It is a delight to meet Theo’s friends in person, all at once. Though I understood Heir Lovegood is coming? And two of the Weasleys?”

“Luna’s late,” Theo said. “Probably lost track of time. She does that. And Fred and George… after
their father…”


“Well met, Lord Nott,” Harry and Neville said almost in unison, each of them half-bowing.

“Calvis, this is Hermione Granger,” Daphne said politely, hauling Hermione forward. The Muggle-born girl met Lord Nott’s eyes stubbornly before dipping into a standard gesture of respect. “My family’s ward.”

“Well met, Lord Nott,” Hermione said.

“Well met indeed, Miss Granger.” Lord Nott smiled. “I have heard only the best about you from the Greengrasses and my son.” He put a bit of emphasis on ‘my son’ that left Hermione and Theo both blushing; clearly Nott wasn’t oblivious to their relationship.

“May I present Justin Finch-Fletchley, temporary ward of House Black,” Harry said, gesturing towards Justin, who executed a perfect bow and greeting. He pulled off ‘pureblood scion’ like he’d been doing it his whole life. It couldn’t be that different from his childhood, given that the Finch-Fletchleys were the Muggle equivalent of the Malfoys in many ways.

“A pleasure, Mr. Finch-Fletchley.” Nott looked Justin over, unreadable. “And… ah, that must our last guest.”

Luna popped out of the fireplace, somehow staying completely free of ashes, and immediately fixed her huge blue eyes on Nott. “He doesn’t like knitting,” she said to no one in particular.

Nott blinked, which was the most reaction Harry had seen from the man yet.

“No, he doesn’t seem the type,” Harry agreed after a few seconds, deciding Luna had most likely been talking to him.

“Do you like knitting?” Luna said.

Nott blinked again. “I can’t say that I do. I prefer geology.”

“Have you visited the floating azure caves in Pakistan?”

“I was under the impression that those were a myth,” Lord Nott said.

Luna smiled. “Oh, they are, but that does not mean you can’t visit. Mummy and I went when I was five.”

“I see the latest Lovegood heir is as insane and brilliant as her predecessors.”

“I like being insane,” Luna agreed. “Do you have pudding?”

Neville had to turn aside at this point, coughing. Hermione looked somewhere between horrified and amused. The rest were good enough at controlling themselves to only show laughter in their eyes.

“I do have pudding,” Nott said. “Our house-elves make an excellent chocolate one, with pecans. Shall we adjourn to the dining room for lunch?”

“Yes, Father,” Theo said promptly, offering Hermione his arm.

Harry smirked a bit at the way Lord Nott eyed first the contact and then Hermione. Thank Merlin
one of the other girls had prevailed upon Hermione to put some extra effort into her hair. Harry
didn’t blame her in the slightest for not wanting to spend time taming the mess, but it was worth the
effort to look sleek and polished for things like this.

Justin and Neville flanked him as they followed Nott into his dining room. “You’re not worried?”
Justin murmured.

“I don’t worry,” Harry said flatly. “If he breaks the contract, or there’s a loophole I missed, I’m
confident the lot of us could handle up to three Death Eaters. Four with some luck.”

Neville and Justin both nodded and went with it. They’d already had this conversation in Grimmauld
Place with Hermione, Vanessa, and Sirius a few days back. Harry was confident everyone was loyal
enough to the Vipers to keep the extent of their training a secret. On the other hand, the Death Eaters
had seen Harry duel in the graveyard last year, and Riddle wouldn’t have gotten this far without
being a cautious bastard. In the end, the unforgiving language of the contract convinced all of them,
even Vanessa, who was sworn to confidentiality in the standard barrister’s contract.

The Notts’ dining room was every bit as grand and impressive as the one in Potter Manor. A long
varnished table ran its length, with a narrow blue cloth draped down the middle. Twelve places were
set already. Paintings and portraits lined the walls, enough to be interesting but not so many that they
became gauche or distracting. The room was lined with windows on the eastern wall looking out
over the unadorned fields surrounding Nott Manor.

“Fantastic view, isn’t it?” Nott said, taking a seat at the head of the table.

Theo tilted his head very slightly, indicating that Harry was to sit at his father’s left. Harry held in a
smile. Theo, as his Heir, got the seat at his father’s right hand, and putting Harry at his left was an
honor. “It is indeed, sir.”

“I was under the impression that, traditionally, magical families kept extensive gardens,” Hermione
said, sitting at Theo’s right.

“Very true,” Nott said. He hadn’t stopped appraising her but he was also being perfectly civil. A
good sign. “We have never been a family of such excesses. There are some lovely gardens on the
south side of the manor, but not nearly so extensive as most. You should see those at Malfoy
Manor.”

“Are they as ostentatious as Draco’s wardrobe?” Justin said. He grinned and managed to make the
whole thing into a good-natured joke. Hufflepuffs.

Nott rolled his eyes very slightly. “You’ve no idea. Lucius has always been fond of his, ah, displays
of wealth. They have trained white peacocks living there year-round. I remember one time…”

He reminisced about the Malfoy gardens while the rest of them sat down. Harry’s placement was
partially a nod to his semi-official authority over this group as well as him being Heir to one of the
oldest families in Britain. Only the Smiths, Ollivanders, Selwyns, and Abbotts could trace their
lineages back farther. Technically Hermione should’ve been farther down the table but Theo had put
her at his right in an unsubtle message to his father. Daphne flanked Hermione, since she was the
Greengrass ward and they were friends. The Longbottoms, Parkinsons, Lovegoods, and Zabinis
were all about the same in terms of status, so Neville, Pansy, Luna, and Blaise sat at Harry’s left.
Justin took the spot to Daphne’s right. Fred and George would be next to him.

Nott finished his story. Hermione and Daphne laughed with more than polite interest, as far as Harry
could tell.
“Harry, do the Blacks have a manor?” Neville asked.

Harry barely contained an indecorous snort.

“A manor, Mr. Longbottom?” Nott said, smirking. “The Blacks have several, as well as a castle.”

Hermione’s eyes bugged out for half a second before she controlled herself.

“Sirius isn’t overly fond of his extended family,” Harry said, grinning. “Grimmauld Place is plenty for him to deal with.”

Nott raised an eyebrow at him, then looked around the table. “You’ve all heard of Riasmoore?”

“The town in the southeast?” Hermione said. “It’s one of the largest magical settlements in England, isn’t it?”


“And very few wrackspurts,” Luna said.

Hermione smiled at them both. “I’ll have to visit sometime, then.”

“Next summer, we’ll take you,” Daphne said. “Astoria loves it there.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up.

“What about it, sir?” Justin asked.

Nott winked. “The Blacks own it.”

Pansy, Daphne, and Neville understood the ramifications; they all stared at Harry.

He shrugged. “The family holdings include Black Castle, a manor outside Riasmoore, the town, the surrounding farmland, and two other smaller properties. All of the houses are locked down and warded until someone goes and opens them.” And I have plans for those properties.

“Circe,” Pansy said. “No wonder the Black vaults are so deep.”

Harry just smiled. He’d gone over the family income with Sirius after his adoption, albeit briefly. The farmland and the town in the southeast were making money hand over fist, and they had partial shares in both Diagon and Knockturn. All the time Sirius was in Azkaban, the Black vaults had been making interest and raking in rent and taxes from Riasmoore, as well as a cut of the sales from their farmland. Nigel Blacke, in the thirteen hundreds, had created a shockingly lenient contract between the family and the tenants. It operated like a fiefdom with very uninterested nobles and pretty much ran itself. Thanks to reasonable rent and the family putting a significant amount of tax and rent income back into public services, Riasmoore had thrived, and the Blacks’ prodigal skill with magic kept the whole area warded to high hell against Muggles and invaders.

It helped that the town and the house, the official Black Manor, sat squarely on a ley line.

“We should all take a trip,” Neville said. “Gran took me once when I was little but she’s got some issue with the Gamps—they still live in Riasmoore, right?”

“They do,” Nott said. “She ever tell you what that issue was?”

Neville grinned, a little hesitantly. “No.”
“Of course not.” Nott smirked. “Augusta Selwyn never would admit her failings. Old Herbert Gamp brought up her Transfiguration OWL result. It didn’t go over well, as you might imagine.”

“Oh, excellent,” Justin said. “Nev, what are the odds she decapitates me if I mention that next time I come over?”

“Um,” Neville said. “Pretty good.”

Justin sighed. “Drat.”

“Are you sure you’re a Hufflepuff, Mr. Finch-Fletchley?” Nott said.

“Everyone always asks that!” Justin said. “Yes, I’m quite sure, thank you. The Sorting Hat didn’t even hesitate.”

“I thought it was off its rocker when it sorted Harry,” Theo said, smirking across the table at his best friend. “We all did, actually. A Potter in Slytherin?”

“I was quite surprised as well,” Nott admitted.

Harry shrugged. “It didn’t seem to have a hard time choosing.”

“Did you know my Gran?” Neville asked Nott.

Theo’s father laughed. “Did I know her! I shouldn’t be surprised she hasn’t mentioned it, but at one time Augusta and I were engaged.”

Neville choked on his drink.

“Really,” Pansy said, delighted. Daphne sipped her wine, probably to hide a smirk. “Whatever broke it off?”

Lord Nott kept them entertained for all three courses with stories about his school days. He was old enough to be Theo’s grandfather, having gone to school in the late forties, but unlike many others in his generation, Calvis Nott didn’t let the brewing war rush him into marriage. He hadn’t ascended to the lordship until his mother, the Lady Nott, died sometime in the sixties, and even then he didn’t marry until the eighties, because, as he put it, it took him quite a long time to find a woman who would put up with him. Theo’s mother Lady Moira Nott had been thirty years her husband’s junior. None of the magic-raised teens seemed to find that odd. Harry supposed that when people regularly lived to be two hundred or more years old, age differences in marriage stretched a bit beyond what Muggles would consider appropriate.

“I thought it was hilarious,” Nott said, grinning. “So did Abraxas and Xander—but it took a decade before she forgave me for that incident.”

“I had no idea Grandmother held grudges that long.” Pansy said, still laughing. “Merlin…”

“Is she still the Head of House?” Justin asked.

“No.” Pansy shrugged. “She abdicated to my father a few years before I was born. Told him it was time he stopped gallivanting around the world with Mum and took on the responsibility so she could have fun for once.”

Harry tried, and failed, to picture the stern-faced Neil Parkinson doing anything that could be described as gallivanting.
“This is most excellent pudding, Lord Nott,” Luna said, scraping the bottom of her bowl with delight.

“I’m glad you like it, my dear,” he said, clearly amused. “The Lovegood sweet tooth strikes again, I suppose.”

Luna hummed.

“Have you met your Heads of House for career discussions yet?” Nott said. Harry narrowed his eyes very slightly. It was subtle, immensely so, but the man’s demeanor had changed. Serious talk time. Despite his casual tone and steady body language.

And judging by the shift in Nott’s attention, he knew Harry had noticed.

“Harry here’s already got a career lined up for him,” Theo said with a smirk.

“Oh?” Nott said. “Do tell.”

Harry swirled his half-empty wineglass. He preferred firewhiskey to wine, and was only drinking it to be polite. “I hope to pursue a Mastery in Potions after school,” he said. “Sirius is young yet; it should be some time before I need to take up the mantle of Lord Black. Theo’s referring to a few potions of my own discovery that I’m hoping to sell.”

Nott raised an eyebrow. “You’ve already been discovering potions? At your age?”

Harry smiled and didn’t respond.

“Mmm.” Nott nodded slowly. “A perfectly respectable career. And your family’s Wizengamot seat?”

“We’ll see,” Harry said evasively.

Nott studied him for a moment. Harry held his gaze and didn’t back down. The man was old, and powerful, and while Harry wasn’t going to outright challenge him, neither would he submit.

“We will indeed,” Nott said. Harry felt like he was talking about a lot more than whether or not Harry joined the Wizengamot. “And you, Heir Longbottom?”

“Neville, please,” Neville said.

“Neville, then. I know Augusta hoped you’d follow in your parents’ footsteps.”

“I think she’s realized I’m not quite suited for the Aurors,” Neville said with a faint grimace.

Pansy shrugged. “I think you’d be a fine Auror, Neville.”

“…thanks,” he said. “But I mean—I’m not sure I want to. And Gran’s realizing that. I’d like to study magical plants, I think.”

“Nev’s a prodigy at Herbology,” Daphne said, managing, as only she could, to make it sound like truth rather than a compliment. “He tops our form in Sprout’s every year.”

“Impressive,” Nott said. “An oft overlooked field of study. I’m sure you’ll be a credit to your House.”

Neville blushed faintly. “Thank you, sir.”
“Pansy? Daphne? I’ve heard you speculate before, but fifth year is usually when Heirs start planning for real…” Nott trailed off, looking at the girls with genuine affection. Harry forgot, sometimes, that they’d grown up with Theo.

*Will I always be an outsider?*

“I will *not* be taking over Mother’s business,” Daphne said with a very slight grimace. “It is most definitely not my avenue. Nor Father’s firm; I believe he means to leave it to Miss Tate.”


“I’ll be joining the Wizengamot once Mother steps down,” Pansy said, eyes gleaming. *That will be terrifying*, Harry thought, grinning on the inside.

“I can’t wait to see *that*,” Justin said. “You’ll have them all dancing to your tune inside a year.”

“You flatter me,” Pansy said, theatrically batting her eyelashes. “It might take me two.”

Laughter rippled around the table. Harry decided he was getting entirely too relaxed and ran over his Occlumency shields. It was getting easier, and more of a habit, to keep active barriers in place without consciously thinking about it, although they weren’t very strong yet.

“Blaise?”

Blaise sipped his wine and took a few seconds to answer. “I’ve yet to decide for sure. Although…”

His smile was fleeting and sharp as a razor. “There’s always the family business.”

Lord Nott narrowed his eyes. “There is indeed.”

Theo and Harry shared a glance, each of them confirming that the other had no idea what that meant. No one else seemed to, except Daphne, who’d gone uncommonly still.

Hermione blinked twice. Harry recognized the tell and glared at her, and she glared back but stayed quiet, thankfully. They could sort that out later.

“And you, Mr. Finch-Fletchley? Do you mean to work in the Muggle world or the magical one?”

If that wasn’t a loaded question, Harry didn’t know what was.

Justin shrugged off the tension with an easy smile. “My family are all businesspeople, Lord Nott. A skill that translates to the magical world quite well, if Draco is to be believed. I plan to let my brother and sister inherit our parents’ nonmagical assets and make a name for myself in this world.” He examined the remains of his chocolate pudding like it was far more important than their conversation.

“Business, hm?” Nott flicked his wand, setting the wine bottle to pour him another glass. “Yes, I imagine you’d get on well with Heir Malfoy in that regard, then. Miss Granger? Any particular career plans?”

“Magical law,” Hermione said without hesitation. “The wizarding world has some absolutely idiotic laws, particularly those that restrict the rights of sentient nonhumans.”

Nott pinned her with his gaze like collectors did insects behind glass. “You are aware, I’m sure, that those laws come from the Ministry’s attempts to control the use of magic?”

“Which is a patently ridiculous objective in the first place,” Hermione returned. “*We* can’t even control magic on an individual level in stressful circumstances, and they seek to do so with laws?”
“What do you think of the blood magic ban of eighteen oh three?”

Just when Harry had thought they wouldn’t have any heavier questions than Justin’s…

Hermione didn’t miss a beat. “It ought to be repealed in full and cases of blood magic abuse tried on the basis of harm done to other magicals rather than what magic was actually used. But I’m not naïve enough to believe that will happen, so perhaps periodic amendments until it’s essentially nullified. The sweeping ban eliminated entire fields of healing, tracking, and warding magic.”

“Not to mention crippling the study of potions,” Harry said mildly.

“That too.” Hermione visibly stopped herself from continuing.

“I imagine you’ll do well in court,” Nott said noncommittally. “Miss Lovegood, if I remember correctly, your father said you had quite an interest in experimental charms.”

“That was Mummy’s field,” Luna said. “It interests me, but most things do. I imagine I’ll be a traveling scholar.”

“Merlin help any magical stupid enough to set upon you in your travels,” Nott said drily.

“They might find themselves set upon by a lisp in return,” Luna agreed.

Blaise coughed on his wine.

Harry didn’t fully understand the joke but there was suddenly a live wire of tension between the two that he’d never noticed before. Theo, likewise, watched the two with interest; what was going on there?

Nott didn’t seem to understand any better, but he took it in stride. “Always a risk.”

“Excuse me, Calvis, but Mother said she wants Hermione and me home by nine,” Daphne said. “It’s quarter till. Hermione needs to pack for her return home.”

“Of course, forgive me. Randolf.”

An elf popped into the dining room at Nott’s elbow. “Yes, Master?”

“Clear the table, we’ve finished.” Nott laid his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back. “I’ve some papers to deal with tonight as well, so now’s as good a time as any to wrap this up. Thank you all for coming. I’ve looked forward to meeting Theo’s friends for quite some time.”

“Of course, Lord Nott,” Neville said, as they all got to their feet and headed back towards the entrance hall. “It was an honor.”

“I’m glad it worked out,” Pansy said with the faintest trace of a smirk. “Times being what they are.”

“Yes, well, that’s precisely why I took precautions,” Nott agreed. “One can never be too careful.”

“I was a bit surprised you invited two Mudbloods to your home.”

Hermione’s tone was perfectly bland but it nonetheless drew everyone’s attention.

She smiled at them, an expression she seemed to have copied from Roxanne Greengrass.

“Blood matters,” Lord Nott said slowly, as if measuring every word before laying them heavily on
the ground. “Ability matters more. I am perfectly willing to accept Muggle-borns who make an effort to truly join our world and appreciate the privilege they have been given.” He smiled at her, letting his mask slip for the first time all evening, and Harry decided he might actually rather have Riddle as his enemy than Lord Nott. “I admit I was surprised to hear my son had befriended a Muggle-born witch. Continue to prove him as good a judge of character as I raised him to be, Miss Granger, and you shall hear not a word from me on the subject of your blood.” He transferred his attention to the group as a whole. “Happy Yule.”

Everyone was silent as Lord Nott climbed the stairs and disappeared into the first floor.

“You,” Theo said to Hermione, “are either very brave or very stupid.”

The tension broke like a sheet of ice. Neville, Justin, and Pansy let out relieved and slightly shaky laughs.

“Not much difference between the two, is there?” Daphne said snidely.

“Hey,” Neville said. “I object.”

“Of course you do,” Daphne said. “Gryffindor.”

“I would like to be getting home,” Pansy said. “And Harry, I think you’d like to make sure Sirius hasn’t entirely corrupted that poor child you left to him all evening.”

“I really would,” Justin said, “seeing as I’m staying over tonight.” He hopped into the Floo, shouted “Twelve Grimmauld Place,” and disappeared.

Harry followed Pansy’s meaningful gaze, saw the way Theo and Hermione were looking at each other, and hid a smirk. “I quite agree.”

Daphne caught on. She winked at Theo and Flooed out, leaving a lingering echo of laughter.

One by one, everyone left, until Harry was the last in the Notts’ entrance hall save Hermione and Theo. “Don’t snog for more than five minutes,” he advised, and quickly tossed down Floo powder before either of them could get off a hex.

He stepped out of the hearth at Grimmauld Place.

A spell hit him squarely in the stomach.

Harry staggered backwards. “What—fuck!”

“Language!” Sirius chided, looking like Yule had just come back for seconds.

“Why is my voice two octaves higher than usual,” Harry squeaked.

Graham laughed. “That’d be me. Sirius has been teaching me!”

“I’m going to kill you both,” Harry threatened, with a grin so they’d know he didn’t mean it.

“Check this out,” Justin said.

Harry looked at him and choked. In place of hair, Justin now had what appeared to be grass growing out of his scalp. He weighed the opportunity to make a joke about mowing the lawn against the ridicule that would come with his irritatingly high-pitched voice and decided it wasn’t worth it.
“I wouldn’t try to take the jinx off,” Sirius advised, seeing Harry go for his wand. “The more you try, the longer it lasts, unless you know the counter. I invented that little beauty.”

With a flick of his wand, Harry spelled out a few words for Justin in the air, reading *let’s go, we can enact vengeance later.*

“Great plan,” Justin agreed, waving cheekily at Graham as he led the way out of the kitchen.

Harry turned his best vindictive grin back on Graham and Sirius over his shoulder as he followed. Gratifyingly, they both paled a bit.

The next morning, the squeaky voice jinx hadn’t worn off. Sirius and Graham laughed right up until they started eating breakfast, at which point they found themselves unable to speak in anything but rhyming couplets.

“Is there something in the scrambled eggs, Harry?” Justin said conversationally, eating his yogurt.

“Possibly.” Harry raised his eyebrows at Graham and Sirius, who didn’t even laugh at his voice. “After all, you and I didn’t have any, and we can speak in normal English…”

“Merlin’s balls, you’re going to fall,” Sirius sang, and looked horrified.

Harry put on a fake quizzical expression. “I’m sorry, Sirius, I couldn’t quite understand that?”

“Maybe he meant ‘you’re going down,’” Justin suggested.

“Ah, of course.” Harry turned a sinister smile on his godfather and the young Viper. “Oh, and I wouldn’t recommend trying to undo it… any attempt to do so will force you into a different language. After all, I did invent that lovely little potion.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: for luna's comment, google "name meaning blaise"

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