Eyes of Avada Green

by Tranquil_Tevine

Summary

There is only so much one person can take. For Harry, he's reached his breaking point. Who will survive the fallout?

Notes

Hope you enjoy! If the chapter index is checked, I went through a chapter merging stage
since they were really short at the beginning. I have been updating weekly since 2016, promise xD
His Way

Chapter Summary

It was one thing after another and eventually, it all came to a head. Harry's broken free and now, he's doing things his way.

Harry Potter stood outside of Number 4, Privet Drive, with a sadistic gleam in his eyes. If someone were to pass by and gaze at him, they would surely back away from the malice in his expression. Gazing dispassionately at the bloodied remains of the Dursleys beneath his feet a kitchen knife lay beside them, crimson staining the steel.

Never again would he have to listen to Vernon constantly berate him for something he couldn't help. After all, magic was a part of him. It flowed freely through his veins. Vernon’s hurtful words and punches that cut through him like a knife to butter, Petunia shrieking to cook the bacon and pull the weeds in the already immaculate garden, Dudley and his gang chasing him for another round of ‘Harry Hunting’, was no more. Finally, his cupboard. Throughout the years he had lived with the Dursleys, it was his only respite from the outside world, teaching him that no one would be there if he called, that darkness would be his only friend.

Harry reflected upon what had led him up to now. In his first year of Hogwarts, there was the Philosopher’s stone. At the end of it all, it was left to three Gryffindor first years to go on a merry chase after the DADA teacher, Professor Quirrell, who was going to steal the stone. Who, as Harry found out later, had Voldemort hidden away under his turban. Dumbledore could have put a stop to it, being the Headmaster but no, wasn't it convenient that he was out attending to an emergency at the Ministry when Quirrell decided to make his move?

Second year. The Chamber Of Secrets, all starting off from when Harry heard a hissing sound coming from the wall, during his detention with the arrogant and egotistical bastard that was Lockhart, the new DADA teacher. Following that were several petrifications, Harry speaking Parseltongue, causing the students to believe that he was the heir of Slytherin who opened the Chamber. Then there was the Diary of Tom Riddle, which was the instigator of it all. From the Diary, which Harry found on the water soaked floor of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, he discovered Hagrid’s Acromantula, Aragog, in the forbidden forest with Ron. The legend says that a monster resides within the chamber itself. Aragog was not the monster.

The attacks became more frequent. After Hermione was petrified, Harry and Ron discovered what the monster in the Chamber was, thanks to Hermione and one single word on the ripped library book page. 'Pipes'. A Basilisk. From there, all that had happened started to make sense. After finding the Chamber and surprisingly Ginny Weasley, The memory of Tom Riddle set the Basilisk on Harry and by luck, using the sorting hat, Fawkes and Godric Gryffindor’s sword, Harry fought the Basilisk and triumphed. Using the fang that impaled him in the arm after he was healed by Fawkes, he stabbed the Diary. How did a trio of 2nd years discover all this and yet the Headmaster hadn’t? He must have known! He could have helped Harry. Surely, as Headmaster he could have found a way, but no. It was left to a solitary 12-year-old to unravel another 'mystery'.

"3rd 4th and 5th year. What is there to say? It's more of the same." Harry sneered to himself. "It all comes back to Dumbledore and what he didn't do to help me." Harry began to work himself up into
such a fury that Mrs Figg's cats who were wandering around the premises fled. The light surrounding him by now was blinding, and his eyes were swirling pools of trapped emotion. Thinking about all the years of needless suffering he’d gone through, eventually became too much. Screaming out his anguish and sorrow, he fell to his knees desperately. For all those years that he refused to grieve over the deaths of his parents, Cedric and Sirius, he let it all out. The light, an eerie green, became solid. It exploded, causing the ground to shudder violently.

“I've had enough, fuck him!” Harry whispered bitterly. With a simple wave of his hand, Harry summoned his personal belongings. He’d been able to do wandless magic from a young age, due to the necessity of protecting himself. Naturally, no one knew. He had been suspicious of Dumbledore for a long time now, as his manipulations became less subtle as the years went on. He often felt Dumbledore scan his mind, so he had learned to keep his innermost guarded secrets locked away in his subconscious. If it wasn't for that unfortunate meeting with Malfoy on the train, he may well have agreed with the hat to put him in Slytherin. Was Dumbledore behind him choosing to go to Gryffindor too? Harry didn't know what to think anymore. As he was about to leave, who apparated in front of him? The old goat himself, along with The Order.

Harry prepared himself. No doubt Dumbledore would be 'disappointed' in him. He had to stifle laughter at that thought. It was clear to Harry that Dumbledore believed that he was still under his thumb, but no more. No more hiding who he was, he would tell all of them.

Detachedly, Harry observed the reactions of Dumbledore and The Order to what could only be described as chaos. Due to Harry's emotive magic, the ground that trembled also held traces of cracks surfacing if any more trauma were to happen. Some cars had been caught in the middle of Harry's magic and as a result, left them mangled beyond repair. Along with the silent, dark street and what remained of the Dursleys with Harry standing over them, he was certain it made quite a picture.

“Harry my boy, what have you done?” Harry glanced at Dumbledore with disgust. The annoying grandfatherly twinkle normally present was gone, scanning the surroundings in horror.

“What does it look like I've done, Dumbledore? I've gotten rid of my so-called relatives.” It seemed that comment brought Remus out of his shock-induced stupor.

“Harry, why did you do this?” Harry could see how broken and worn his surrogate godfather was. He felt sorry for Remus. He was one of the few people in Harry's life who didn't show open hostility to him, manipulate him or treat him as a child.

“Remus, I have nothing against you. You're one of the few people in my life that I respect and am fond of. I killed my relatives out of revenge, anger, whatever you want to call it. They abused me. They starved me, kept me in a cupboard and made sure I was as unhappy as humanly possible. I couldn't live my life. I want to live. I don't want to be the pawn used to end Voldemort. I'm going away from here, and I'm not coming back.”

Remus smiled kindly, hiding away the mixture of discomfort and rage he felt. “Alright, I'll help as much as I can. Wherever you decide to go, will you keep in touch?”

Harry smiled. A genuine smile this time. He wasn't as alone as he'd thought. “Of course I will.”

“I'm afraid I can't allow you to leave.” Dumbledore attempted to look stern. ”You have a duty to the wizarding world. You have to defeat Voldemort, according to the prophecy. Due to the Dursley's unfortunate demise,” Harry snorted loudly. Unfortunate? "I will be your magical guardian and see to your needs. You will receive training from Professor Snape and me in order to defeat Voldemort. No exceptions. You will come with us to headquarters.”
Dumbledore had made his point clear. He came out in the open before Harry could tell him straight. He was inwardly seething. “Not a chance! I'm through with you and your little Order, dictating my life.”

“Harry, what would your parents say?” Dumbledore never got to finish his sentence as by now, Harry had snapped. He'd tried with all his might to reign in his temper, but to no avail. He'd gone too far this time.

For the first time, Dumbledore was nervous. Perhaps he had gone too far with that last remark. No sooner had he thought that when Harry unleashed fury in the form of his magic.

“DON'T YOU DARE BRING MY PARENTS INTO THIS!” he roared, the magic becoming more solid than the first time. It took no form as such, simply a mass of swirling power.

“HAVEN'T YOU RUINED MY LIFE ALREADY WITHOUT MENTIONING MY PARENTS?! I SHOULD HOPE THEY APPROVE OF MY DECISION TO ESCAPE, YOU SET ME UP TO DIE!”

Eyes narrowing to slits, he had to leave here. With an almighty CRACK, Harry apparated. The backlash of magic was near staggering, many Order members losing their balance from his actions. The area taught with tension Remus left himself, to mull over all he'd heard today.

Harry fell into an ungraceful heap on the ground, belongings scattered around him. He could never get the hang of a graceful landing and he'd been practising that particular trick since his bout of accidental magic when he'd Apparated onto the school roof. He'd waited until Hogwarts though. Polite inquiries to the house elves as to where Harry could possibly practice magic lead him to discover the Room of Requirement. The elves were more than happy to help since he treated them well.

He never learned to Apparate the traditional way or indeed a lot of his magic. That way he wasn't tracked, not even with the wand he used, as both had to be tracked by ministry records for the spell to register, though Prior Incantato would still tell of what spells he'd performed.

Righting himself, he shrank his belongings to fit in a pocket. He could sense the hum of magic in the air, he was sure the place he was looking for was nearby. Reaching out his senses, Harry let them guide him onward. He came to a stop when he could see a visible dome of magic. Hesitating, he stuck an index finger through. Nothing happened, so he stepped through entirely. The view was absolutely stunning.

The sun was setting. It cast a beautiful glow upon the little river which trickled gently. There was an arched bridge allowing crossing. As far as he could see, there were plants, flowers and wildlife of all varieties. In the middle of it all stood a large manor. It was almost Victorian in appearance, the walls painted an off-white, roof tiles black. Harry instantly relaxed gazing upon the sight. Wasting no time he reached the entrance, taking note of the sign which read Evergreen Manor.

Harry had been planning this for a while now. Entering the Wizarding world, he was blind to all around him. He'd made use of Gringotts and Griphook had been kind enough to teach him of his family's heritage. While he hadn't looked upon what he'd inherited from Sirius and his parents much, what he did set eyes on was a new place to escape the clutches of Dumbledore and his relatives, though the latter no longer mattered.
There had been several properties, though this caught his eye the most. It was located in Ireland, right on the outskirts of a forest. There was no one to bother him and that suited him just fine.

"Alohomora." he murmured, the door creaking open. He'd have to change it so a simple lower year spell wouldn't allow anyone to gain entry if the wards didn't keep them out.

He'd spent the past half an hour touring the place. The design scheme was much the same as the outside, he would consider some redecoration later. There were several rooms, though he was sure there were a couple of hidden rooms, much like what Hogwarts had. He was slightly surprised to note that there was no dust, though that could be due to a house elf. As if it was summoned by his thoughts, a house elf appeared before him, oddly enough wearing a dress.

“Greetings Lord Potter, my name is Misty. How can I assist you today?”

Harry's eyebrows were above his hairline. He'd never heard of a house elf so well spoken. Still, no matter. It made a refreshing change from the overwhelming presence of Dobby, as much as he was endearing.

Harry knelt down to shake her hand. "Hello Misty, call me Harry. Could you tell me about yourself and this property?"

Once he was more informed, Harry filled the hungry hole in his stomach caused by the unexpectedness of his magical outburst. Opening a window, he relished the breeze caressing his face and eyes sparkling a little when Hedwig flew through the open window. “Hello girl, I knew you'd find me. Could you take a letter to Remus?"

He conjured a bowl of water and some owl treats for her, while he penned his letter.


Remus,

Are you well? Wish I could've stayed to see the fallout, but I was too consumed by my own rage to appreciate the destruction caused. Maybe you can show me the rest that happened sometime? I still can't believe the nerve of Dumbledore. I'd grown used to his manipulative ways, but he must've felt I was slipping from beneath his thumb with the death of the Dursleys. I've never truly been under his thumb, though he doesn't need to know that.

Anyway, to the point. I've relocated to a place called Evergreen Manor. I've hooked up the Floo Network to yours, so if you want to visit, the password's 'The Lion's Den'. To anyone else reading, this entire letter will be something to insult them or just nonsense. I thought up some amusing insults for Dumbledore and Snape if they do read it. Look forward to hearing from you!

Harry

P.S: I charmed the envelope with a unique hex. Let me know if any suffer the consequences.
Placing the letter in an envelope and sealing it with a wax stamp, Hedwig took off into the rapidly darkening sky.

It was a days later, where an emergency Order meeting had been called.

“Good evening everyone. Welcome to The Order of The Phoenix. I have called this meeting in session due to what happened last night. Harry Potter,” here Dumbledore waited a few seconds to build suspense, at this Remus casually rolled his eyes, “Has become a dark wizard.” He stopped speaking so the gasps of outrage were allowed to ring throughout the otherwise silent room. ”He killed his own relatives in cold blood, using powerful magic to destroy his surroundings. We need to capture and subdue him.”

Idly stirring his lukewarm tea, Remus wondered, not for the first time, what the hell he was still doing here. He wasn't sure if he was feeling some sense of responsibility to keep his cub safe in case of what Dumbledore was planning, or to be part of the resistance who opposed Voldemort.

Well, they said resistance. He thought it was just a bunch of people wasting time discussing things, some not even relating to Voldemort when they could be out there crippling Death Eaters and planning courses of action so that they were always at least one step ahead.

His attuned senses, unfortunately, couldn't block Albus' waffling out, but he did smell something familiar. A little like Harry, but mostly the outdoors. His suspicions confirmed Hedwig gave a little hoot, gliding in through the narrow window to land in front of him, leg outstretched. He wasn't sure at first how she could find Grimmauld Place since it was protected by Fidelus, but then Harry must have told her. Dumbledore couldn't remove Harry since Sirius was still legally listed as the owner, deceased or not. If Sirius had left this house to him, he could kick everyone out if he chose to.

He'd barely touched the envelope before it was snatched from his grasp. He didn't know the old man was anywhere near him. He barely restrained baring his teeth in a growl and his eyes flashed amber for a second. No one stopped him from seeing how his cub was doing!

He was about to take the letter back and leave, but he was more than glad he decided to wait, going with his gut feeling that Harry had jinxed the letter.

He wasn't wrong. As Albus read the letter he began breaking into painful, pus-filled boils. Dropping the letter as if he'd been burned he quickly fled the room, to cancel the hex with Madam Pomfrey’s expertise.

Observing with satisfaction, Remus would have had to question Severus' place in Slytherin house if he did decide to pick the letter up after seeing those results. Reading through the letter's contents, he didn't stick around. The Order Meeting was unofficially over anyway. Heading straight to where Harry was, they had a lot to discuss.
Chapter Summary

Harry changes up his appearance, Remus pays a visit and after, something happens which neither could have ever predicted.

Slowly opening his eyes, Harry found himself lying upon one of the softest pillows he'd had the pleasure of feeling. The sheets were cool and refreshing to the touch. After a few moments thought, the events of yesterday replayed through his mind. So much had happened within that time period.

He removed himself from the bed, stretching. He had a few items of muggle clothing, but he'd thankfully had a growth spurt recently, so he'd have to purchase some more.

Selecting a long-sleeved dark shirt and black jeans, he checked his wand was still in the holster on his left arm. Confirming that his wand was indeed there, he navigated the manor until he arrived at the kitchen. He was just about to make himself an Omelette when Misty popped in.

“Lord Potter! Let Misty take care of this.”

Smiling, he turned to address her. “Thanks for the offer, but I don't mind cooking. Also, it's Harry. The title of Lord makes me sound more adult and responsible than I am.”

Misty let out a shaky laugh, nodding in acceptance of his requests and popping away again.

“Handy that the fridge is filled with exactly what I need, wonder if Misty does the shopping?” he spoke aloud. He threw some ham, eggs, cheese and a little salt and pepper into the mix before happily tucking into a light breakfast.

He decided to go into Diagon Alley, as there were some things he needed to do, now that he'd started the journey of carving his own path. He only needed to make a quick trip into Gringotts to ask about something, as the past few years what vaults owned by his parents and more recently Sirius, he'd claimed any and all items of sentimental value. He had yet to unpack his belongings but would do eventually.

He was wondering how to remove The Order of The Phoenix from Number 12 Grimmauld Place. He was unsure of the process and wanted to know. Once he had the knowledge, he'd wait. He wanted to give it some time, for the right moment they were all inevitably booted out on their arses, except Remus. Though Harry had a feeling that he wouldn't voluntarily choose to be there, if not for The Order.

Everything else was just a case of buying his school supplies. He hadn't had his Hogwarts letter yet, but he had an idea of what to buy. In truth, he was after buying a lot of things and chances are he'd cover the required textbooks during his purchases, but would ask just to be sure.

As he'd done so when heading into Diagon Alley for the past five or so years, he placed a strong glamour charm over his body. Conjuring a pin, he pricked a finger, placing it against his forehead. The blood dissolved into the disguise. This way, he was keyed into his own magic so while others could sense the glamour, they wouldn't be able to remove it as they needed his blood to do so.
He had his pouch of Galleons secured to his waist, in a little drawstring bag. He'd placed anti-
summoning, theft and a myriad of other charms on the pouch to prevent people from getting their 
hands on it. The pouch was linked to the Evans vault. He had Sirius', The Potters, The Evans' and 
his Trust Vault.

Once he had everything sorted, Harry opened and locked the door of the manor, apparating with a 
faint crack.

He reappeared in one of the darkened side alleys. Eyes shining in determination, he went about 
Diagon Alley doing his business.

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He'd gotten everything needed for the new school year, plus some extras. He'd found out how to 
remove everyone from Grimmauld as well. All he had to do was edit the name log. For every house 
under the fidelus, there was a log tracking who was allowed on the property. Harry now owned this 
log and he could add and remove whoever he wished. He was glad the process was simple.

He'd snuck into Knockturn Alley as well. Ever since his 2nd year when he'd accidentally Floo'd into 
the place, he'd been intrigued at what it could offer. The answer was another wand which wasn't 
traced by the ministry. He'd had to pay 35 Galleons, but it was worth it. Surprisingly, he had a 
stronger connection to this than he did to his old wand, so he'd decided to buy two new wand 
holsters. These had spring actions and with just a thought, the wands would eject to slide smoothly 
into the owner's hands, though it took practice. He shifted his Holly wand onto his left arm, while his 
new wand was near his stronger arm. The core was that of a Hargraven feather and the Heartstring 
of a Dragon, once known as the time eater. The wood was dark ash ten inches, inflexible. Needless 
to say, the wand was incredibly rare, not to mention illegal. Harry had broken more rules than not so, 
at this point, he didn't care.

Now came to the thing which he really wanted to do, alter his appearance. There was an obscure 
shop he knew of right at the very end of Diagon Alley. It offered haircuts, tattoos and piercings. He 
was planning on all three. He really wanted to express himself and this was one way of doing it. As 
he opened the door, a little bell rang and a petite witch greeted him.

“Hello sir, how can I help you?” she smiled, the dimples in her cheeks showing.

“I'm looking to get a haircut, possibly dyed. Also, I was thinking of getting a few tattoos and 
piercings?”

“Certainly!” she clapped her hands excitedly, dragging him a little by the wrist. “Now do you have 
any ideas about what you'd like?”

Harry did, in fact.

After much discussion, his hair was done first. It was shorter, not as messy. Artfully spiky would be 
a better term. His fringe was chopped so it sloped more towards his scar, the other side shorter. At 
the back of his head, he had layers of his hair dyed green and decided to get a little green tint, only 
oticeable if stood in the light, but more so at the back. The colour accentuated his eyes nicely.

He had both ears pierced and after some extra thought, his nose. The best thing about piercings in the 
wizarding world while more uncommon, the area could be magically healed. After what he'd been 
through, he was sure his tolerance for pain was abnormally high. He had simple titanium studs, but
actually had plans for jewellery once he headed back home.

Finally, what Harry loved the most, the tattoo. On his arm, was the Basilisk which he had to kill in his second year, coiled and ready to strike, eyes that if real, would definitely kill. He never actually wanted to kill her, he had no choice. He loved reptiles of all kinds and had developed a tentative bond with a lot of the common snakes around Privet Drive. He'd come to understand a lot of their thought processes and ways. Through this, he knew the Basilisk wasn't of her own free will and sound of mind. She was utterly under the control of Riddle and still was, after all these years. The longer Imperio was put upon her, the more it became her natural state of mind. He felt true sorrow that day. He had to slaughter such a magnificent serpent thanks to the Dick Lord. While it was true he nearly died due to her venom, it was partially his fault, to begin with, though he was thankful for Fawkes saving his life. So this tattoo was to honour her. The man paled a little, but thankfully his nervousness didn't pass over to the artwork on his skin.

Leaving the shop, he made one more stop to purchase clear contact lenses with a few charms placed upon them so he could throw away the pieces of shit that were his glasses before he was finally done for the day, disappearing where he stood. Removing the glamour, he unlocked the door and headed back inside.

Pleased to see Remus, he clapped him on the shoulder. "I take it Dumbledore or Snape tried to look at the letter I sent you?"

"Albus did and suffered the consequences. Unfortunately, Severus chose not to." chuckling, Remus ruffled his hair affectionately. "You've been busy! So other than your appearance, anything else new?"

Harry rolled his sleeve up, Remus' eyes twinkling in amusement. Only Harry would want a reminder of his own near death. "It's a wonderful piece of art, though I imagine many will run screaming when they see a Basilisk on your arm."

He snorted. "True, can't deny that. So, care to tell me what happened?"

The Marauder rubbed his hands in barely restrained glee. "Oh, with pleasure. Is there a Pensieve here?"

Harry thought for a moment. "I'm not sure if I do or don't, to be honest." He called out tentatively. "Misty?"

The little elf was before him. "Yes, Harry?"

"Do we have a Pensieve at all?"

She nodded, large ears flapping from the force. "Yes, shall I fetch it for you?"

"Please."

In a few moments, a pensieve was before them.

"Thanks!" Harry called out.

Remus pulled out two strands of memories. The one where Harry lost control of his magic, the other The Order Meeting.

"Let's get started then!" Remus clapped Harry on the shoulder, before they leaned over the Pensieve, pulled within Remus' thoughts.
Harry was stunned. His eyes really glowed like that? He was too angry to pay attention to anything other than the people who raised his ire so to see the destruction caused by Remus’ point of view was staggering.

Said man who provided this memory turned to him, eyes calculating. “You know, you were quite intimidating that night. I’m not sure half the order recovered from your outburst, though it was long overdue.” He gave Harry a side hug. “I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you more.”

Harry shook his head. “You're here now, that's all that matters.” Harry whistled low, watching the memory finish before it was black for a moment. "If I was them, I think I'd be intimidated as well."

Once the two landed back in the living room, they spent a few hours chatting away and as a whole, growing closer together and cementing their friendship with stronger bonds. Remus was reluctant to keep going to the order, but would for Harry's sake. Firstly because he can pass any information onto him and secondly if there was ever a repeat of earlier that day, it would be more than worth it to sit through another Order Meeting.

With an offer of staying whenever he liked, Remus waved goodbye, flooing home.

Harry, was now going to attempt some permanent transfiguration. He went upstairs into his bedroom, looking at the full-length dress mirror. He pointed his wand at his left ear, focusing on what he wanted it to be.

With delight, he noticed that it worked, his right ear changing to match the left. He now had studs in his ears which were of a golden lion's head, the eyes were glittering, similar to rubies.

He next pointed his wand at his nose stud. This time it took a few more tries, but he was eventually successful. It was now a ring, a delicate silver snake and where the hole of piercing was, a tiny snakehead was near, little titanium tongue sticking out. Its eyes were Emerald Green. After further thought, he charmed them with the intent of what he wanted. In this case, his studs would detect nearby threats, such as enemies and potions slipped into food and drink. His nose ring would allow him to see through disguise magic and items, much like Dumbledore.

He lay back on his bed for a little, just thinking. He wasn't sure what to do with his life. He would continue attending Hogwarts and kill Voldemort, but he was woefully unprepared. He would take a leaf from Hermione's book and read texts until the knowledge left an imprint on his brain.

Sharp, burning pain brought him from his thoughts. His eyes widened slightly. The scar left there by the Basilisk was slowly but surely fading. The pain was still there, but it encompassed his whole body. It was similar to that of the Cruciatus, but the liquid fire in his veins felt like ice. Perspiration rolled down his brow and he bit his lip to keep from crying out. As suddenly as it started, it stopped. His left arm with the Basilisk tattoo was almost feverishly warm. Harry was stunned when the tattoo actually moved. He could feel and see the mini Basilisk uncoil. She crawled up his shoulder and came to a rest on his back. She'd expanded to cover the wider space. He'd never heard of an animated tattoo before. How? Why?

His blood ran cold when he heard a sibilant whisper in the corner of his mind.

“Harry Potter, we meet again...”

Harry stayed very still, trying not to give in to the sudden fear which had gripped his embarrassingly small frame.

A tingle ran up his left arm, where his tattoo resided. He was hit with only mild surprise when the realistic looking Basilisk was moving. It uncurled from its position, staring into his emerald gaze with
a piercing glint.

"Was that you, who spoke within my mind?" He was startled when he'd spoke Parseltongue instead of English.

"It wass, sspeaker. My name is Aela." Harry raised an eyebrow, inclining his head politely. "Pleasure to meet you, Aela. What brought this about?"

He didn't know how or why his tattoo suddenly became sentient or indeed why he no longer had a scar, but he had a feeling his questions may have answers.

"Let me explain." Once he nodded his assent, the animated Basilisk moved to Harry's shoulder, nearer his ear.

"For four years, you have had my venom flowing freely through your veins. It isss only thanks to your Parseltongue ability which offers you some degree of immunity to all snake venom and the tears of a Phoenix which saved your life. Once you decided to ink me onto your skin, the exact likeness of the inked Basilisk called to the venom and magic in your blood. The ink absorbed the venom, healing the point of impact. Once you go back to Hogwarts, go to the chamber. Repeat the very wordss which Tom Riddle uttered. I will leave your body as will the venom. I will no longer be ssentient and the mark marring your skin will remain unmoving. For now, until my moment of releasse, I am with you."

He groaned, rubbing his face wearily. "For what it's worth," Harry eyed the Basilisk with something akin to amusement. "Welcome to Hotel wonder boy. Please enjoy your stay and ignore frequent visions of maniacal Dark Lords and dreams of strangling lemon drop loving old coots."

The Basilisk merely blinked, choosing to curl in its coil again.

Remus reclined slightly in the worn threadbare armchair which he favoured, letting the soothing herbal taste of lemon and barley tea warm his insides. It was the little things like this which he lived for.

Day by day, the order meetings were starting to wear on him and it was only when visiting Harry that his life didn't seem as chaotic, as ironic as that sounded.

With him, though, the pain of losing Sirius wasn't quite as pronounced. It still hurt him deeply, more so as he was a werewolf because Sirius was a part of his pack and his mate. The bond was only ever broken by death and when one died, a piece of them physically died with him or her.

But yes, the order meetings. His respect for Albus since the day Harry lost control of his magic a few days ago had plummeted. He was starting to regard him as nothing more than a bumbling old fool. Of course, Albus was powerful, but his self-assurance would be his downfall, as would him trusting in Severus Snape.

The meetings were daily now instead of weekly and often went on for several hours. These days it wasn't even discussing Voldemort, but Harry! The man who was firmly on their side and would sooner join Voldemort's cause than Lucius Malfoy declaring his undying love for him.
Finishing the tea he fully relaxed into his chair, more than happy to slip into a light sleep right there. He hadn't bothered to change out of his clothes as he'd left Grimmauld Place about an hour ago. Dozing beneath the warm fire, he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

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Remus jerked awake with a start. He was sure he heard something. Thanking his attuned sense of hearing for probably not the last time, he slowly slipped his wand from the holster attached to his arm. It was worn, much like a lot of his possessions, but serviced well.

The wards placed around his home didn't indicate an intruder but he was still wary. He had a right to be.

His eyes widened in growing alarm as the windows of his cottage smashed, shards would have pierced his skin if not for the hasty Protego.

“What the hell?” he shouted, placing a disillusionment charm on himself. The Wards should have alerted him to anything wrong but to his confusion, they hadn't, until they dropped all of a sudden. If it was Death Eaters, he was hoping none of the elite was here, such as Bellatrix Lestrange.

He dove out of the way, as a loudly uttered Confringo headed for the closed door, blasting a huge hole into the wall, debris and bits of wood flying everywhere. When the haze of dust cleared, Remus couldn't believe what, or who, he saw.

It was Dumbledore, with several others. Snape, Kingsley, Mad-eye, and Bill Weasley. Mad-eye immediately spotted him crouching in the corner.

“Don't bother hiding Lupin,” he growled, wooden leg grating harshly with the floor. “You're not leaving here tonight.”

Before Remus could even respond, Dumbledore took over the explanation, his and five other wands pointed directly at him.

“I cannot allow you to leave alive, Remus.” Dumbledore's eyes took on a hard glint. “You have been working with the enemy, Harry Potter. He is a dark wizard and because you're choosing to associate with him, you will pay the consequences.”

“You can't be serious!” Remus gave him an incredulous look. “We can't afford to turn on our own people when Voldemort is out there, what are you thinking?”

Dumbledore shook his head before false regret entered his eyes. “I'm sorry Remus, it's for The Greater Good.”

Abandoning all shocking thoughts, Remus immediately entered into a battle stance, wand outstretched. It was with a growing sense of horror when spells were not aimed at him, but the surrounding room. Fiendfyre erupted from wands, immediately setting the place ablaze. The five wizards apparated, but not before firing debilitating spells at Remus. One which he failed to dodge, the smoke from the fire clouding his vision. The bone shattering curse immediately hit his right leg and it was all he could do to keep from screaming as he landed on his knee, jarring his lower leg. He had to get out of here. Thanking whatever deity was up there that he hadn't lost his wand in the confusion, the crawl to the blast in the wall was a slow one. He could feel his skin melting and bubbling. He wanted so dearly to pass out but couldn't. He had to warn Harry!

At last, he crawled a fair distance away from his home. He had doubts anything could be recovered.
“Aguamenti,” he croaked, attempting to put out the fire on him. He succeeded, thankfully. He couldn't Floo, but he could apparate. He was well aware of trying to apparate in his current state, but he would die trying. Putting the excruciating pain he was in to the back of his mind, he focused with all his might, on Evergreen Manor.

It was with some shock and no less alarm that the wards he'd set up flared. Checking his wands, he looked out of the window.

"REMUS!"

Harry didn't care for stairs right now. He jumped from the window, using arresto momentum to slow his descent. He could tell it was his friend before checking. One of the charms he had installed into his lenses was to identify people and as soon as he cast eyes on the charred body, he knew.

Harry ran to him, desperately checking for a pulse. It was faint, but there. Harry nearly wept with relief. A hand touched his own and he gazed into the pained eyes of the only family he had left.

“Harry.” he coughed violently. Speaking looked painful for the man.

“Shh,” Harry quietened him. “I'm going to get you help and I'll murder the fucking bastards who did this to you.” Eyes hardening, he called for Misty.

“Yes, Harry?” She asked, eyes wide upon seeing Remus.

“Could you take Remus to St Mungo's emergency ward? I would, but I'm in no fit state to apparate someone else right now.”

“Of course.” With a snap of her fingers, a stretcher was placed under Remus. As the two disappeared, Harry shortly followed them.

He explained what had happened at the front desk and Remus was rushed straight into a room. It was all Harry could do to not completely break down. He paced outside the door, seating himself when the pacing only made him feel more agitated.

“Mr Potter.” Harry looked up from his brooding, noting that the healer's name was McCarthy.

Seeing his silent question as an affirmation to continue speaking, the man took the chair opposite him.

“He is in critical condition. The bones in his right leg are shattered knee down and his vocal cords and lungs are damaged from the intake of smoke. Burns cover 50% of his body but his lycanthropy works somewhat to his advantage. He was attacked with Fiendfyre. He will not scar from this. Mr Lupin has a higher resistance to dark or darker magic due to his condition and in this case, it will be more of a help than a hindrance. As for his other injuries, as with a lot of things, it will take time.”

Harry nodded, relief taking some weight off his shoulders. “Can I see him?”

“Yes, he's awake. He'll have to stay with us for at least a few weeks before you can take him home.”

Harry nodded, opening the double doors.

A tousled head looked in his direction. Harry winced at the burns which started from his left cheek and trailed to his chest, the rest covered by sheets. He took the chair by Remus, taking his hand in his.
“Hey, Cub.” Remus rasped out, smiling.

Harry fixed his green gaze on Remus' amber ones, that watered as he began to cough.

“Here.” Harry gently lifted his head so he could take a few sips of the water he held.

“Thanks.” he sighed in relief, looking at Harry seriously.

“You need to be careful. The people who attacked me were part of the order. Dumbledore, Snape, Kingsley, Mad-eye, and Bill.”

“I'll kill them.” Harry sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do you want me to see if there's anything left at your home?”

He gazed at Harry sadly, nodding. “I don't think there will be, but thank you anyway.”

Harry smiled, a glossy sheen to his eyes. ”It's the least I can do.” With a pat on Remus' shoulder, Harry left to salvage whatever might remain.

Dropping to the charred ground on his knees, Harry promptly choked on the air which was thick with the acrid smell of ozone and burnt flesh.

Death, for the Fiendfyre surely destroyed most if not all of Remus' quaint little cottage. Looking at what was left or what wasn't left, Harry cautiously approached the ruins, sending out a scan with his magic which would detect any non-threatening items within the area.

He feared that everything was destroyed until a faint silvery glow indicated that something had survived the attack. A few minutes of levitating rubble and debris later, Harry hastily rubbed at the grime and sweat which had gathered on his person, to gingerly reach into the pile and pull out a slightly burned book.

To Harry's amazement, it was a photo album. Of all the things which could survive Fiendfyre...

Deciding not to question his luck, he hastily pocketed the book in favour of returning home to peruse it further. Visiting hours were now over, so he would return the album to Remus the next afternoon.

Several minutes later, found Harry with the album rested on his lap, chamomile tea warming his chilled hands. Flicking through the pages, he found several photos. Some of Remus and his family, Hogwarts, his parents, a few with the marauders.

But one single photo right at the very end caught his eye. His breath hitched, heart skipping a beat. It was of Remus and Sirius and in that one animated moment, all the trials and hardships of war seemed to have melted from their faces. In their place were left middle-aged men who looked so indescribably happy. It looked recent, not long before Sirius met his demise. It pictured Remus, idly flicking through some book or other before Sirius suddenly shot into the photo, arms locking around the werewolf so he dropped his book, arms drawing his Godfather closer. He spun Sirius about on the spot, kissing him, smiles on their lips. They both turned to wave and smile at the camera before the photo infinitely looped once again.

Harry bit his lip, though his heart and eyes were smiling, he couldn't prevent the tears even if he wanted to. For the loss of life and how unfair it was. He'd known for some time that the pair had
shared more than a friendship. He had vague suspicions when he'd first met them and the secret glances and smiles only confirmed his suspicions. The most saddening thing was, a lot of the members of the Order of the Phoenix were aged and therefore had old-fashioned ideals. Even the younger generation raised by their judgmental parents showed clear disgust for same-sex relationships.

So Sirius and Remus had to keep their relationship private. Harry dearly wanted to tell the pair that they had his full support among the masses of hate but there was neither the time nor the opportunity that he could bring it up. Personally, he was of the mind that it didn't matter. There were idiots among humanity, there was no doubt about that. It wasn't restricted to a certain race, religion or sexuality. It was something which humanity of all kinds suffered. It didn't matter to Harry what or who people were. As long as they were nice to him, he was nice to them. He was not under any illusion that it was as simple as that, but Wizards had the habit of making life overly complicated. So what if a man is attracted to another man? As long as they're happy and not harming anyone else, what was the problem? Love is love, no matter what, something even the muggle world didn't grasp. He was bisexual, personally. Though he hadn't had a steady relationship or even one to speak of, he found himself attracted to both sexes. Harry would never personally understand the issues but perhaps with time, would come more acceptance.

Feeling like he had brooded enough, Harry spent the rest of his time exploring the limitations of his magic. He had become confused as to why all of a sudden, his magical core had spiked with power. Inquiries here and there indicated that someone had placed a magical block on him and was failed to be informed of this. He had the suspicious feeling that it was the old coot who had done so.

Harry made the promise to himself. For Remus, for him, he would have his revenge.

It was the next afternoon and as Harry promised himself, he went to visit Remus, album in hand.

Luck had it that the man was awake, his gaze immediately landing on the photo album. He paled slightly and the only reason Harry could think of why was the photo at the very back which Harry and he suspected the tawny-haired man loved the most.

He sat down in the chair beside Remus, placing the album in his lap.

"I know about the picture." Harry decided that blunt was best before he shot him an apologetic look. "I know I could've snuck in to give it back to you yesterday but I like not having St Mungo's healers on my arse." he gazed at the man, raising a single finger before he could say anything.

"Give me a minute, I need to tell you this, I've wanted to for years." Harry crossed one leg over the other, hands clasped on top.

"I don't care about Sirius being your mate, lover, whatever you want to call it. Personally, I'm happy you found someone you deeply care about in these dark shitty times. Life's too short for others to worry about who someone else chooses to be with. Who cares if someone likes the best of both genders, the opposite gender or the same gender? At the end of the day love is love no matter what and if the narrow-minded members of the order or indeed anyone can't see that, it's their loss. They should mind their own bloody business anyway." Smirking a little, he continued. "I've suspected since I saw you both interact 3rd year. It was like pieces of you were being restored before my very eyes. I saw the way you looked at each other, your eyes speaking more than words ever did. It was one of the bright spots in my life that despite everything, something as normal as love could blossom. I support you Remus and I always will, no matter what. Hey, I bat for both teams myself! So I'd be a hypocrite to judge."
Remus was shocked and definitely emotional. He loved Harry very much like a son and though his
disgust in him, if it would ever happen, would upset him, he would love him no less. In fact, he
expected as much once Harry found the picture but to not only hear that he supported the relationship
he had with Sirius but had known for a while now was a huge revelation. He almost felt ashamed
he’d thought the worst of Harry but years of being shunned for his homosexuality instilled a deep-
seated fear of anyone finding out. It was nice to confide in someone about the simple things.

The amber-eyed man choked on his words a little. "Thank you, Harry, your support means the world
to me."

Opening his arms a little, Harry reached over to embrace the bedridden man.

"In other news," Remus sounded rather cheerful. "Healer McCarthy spoke with me just before you
came. He said that though I'd only arrived the other day, that the burns were healing at an incredible
rate. He estimates that I can go home with you in a few days instead of weeks!"

Harry couldn't help but be drawn in by Remus' enthusiasm.

"Awesome!" And indeed, Harry could see that some of the burns had already cleared up, leaving
behind pink tinged skin which had grown back and would fade to normal over time.

He took note of Remus' yawn, deciding to bid him farewell. But not before some parting words.

"Now that you have those photos, be sure to spell the sheets clean."

Laughing at Remus' sputter of indignation and rising blush, Harry went home.

It was a few hours later, whereby Harry was firmly rooted to the spot. He reread the letter over again,
to be sure that he was not mistaken.

Lord Potter,

It is with some regret that I was unable to contact you earlier than this. Due to you being placed with
The Dursleys, certain letters of importance over the years were unable to find their way to you. One
Albus Dumbledore placed your place of residence under the fidelus, with him as secret keeper. It
was only your location to another place and presumably away from him that allowed me to send this
letter.

You have visited the bank recently, but documents confirming your change of housing were only just
updated now.

This is to inform you of several powerful and illegal blocks placed upon your magic. A high level of
magical disturbance resulting in minor to moderate damage to the area around Privet Drive forcibly
broke one of the minor blocks. Emotions, particularly high levels of anger, can contribute to this.

This is why your power levels may have spiked or become irregular. It will remain this way until
your magical core adapts to the use of magic.
There is a Portkey enclosed to the lower levels of Gringotts, where an associate of mine specialising in specific forms of magic will assist you in removing these blocks. However, this has to be done over time. Details of how many, when and why these blocks were placed on you will be discussed upon your arrival.

The choice of when to remove each block is entirely up to you. This Portkey is keyed to you and you only. No one will be able to take that. It is recommended that any blocks removed should be given a fortnight for your magical core to adjust.

May the blood of your enemies flow freely,

Griphook

Harry took deep breaths, but he couldn't prevent the slight green glow and the brightening of his emerald eyes in his anger. "The old fucker does it again!"

"I presume you mean Longbeard?" Aela hissed from his arm.

Harry smiled a little, despite his mood. "The very same."

He sighed. Better late than never. He touched the golden ring which came with the letter, heading to Gringotts.

It was with some luck that for once, Harry didn't lose his footing. Judging from the rather long and menacing stalactites which hung from the ceiling and the damp smell which permeated the air, he guessed they were deeper down than he'd ever been.

An old withered goblin looked up sharply at his arrival, placing the Quill down that he'd been writing with and approaching him.

"Mr Potter, I have heard much about you. I am Dragonclaw."

Harry bowed lightly. "Greetings Dragonclaw. Shall we get down to business?"

The goblin nodded, wisps of hair fluttering in the breeze. "Indeed."

It was all Harry could do to not approach Dumbledore and kill him.

"I see." Harry gritted his teeth, unable to form more of a response for the moment until he got his temper under control.

Dumbledore, in his infinite so-called wisdom, had placed seven blocks on Harry's magic. Down to six from his Privet Drive outburst. The one which Harry had removed was placed upon him at the end of 5th year after Harry had destroyed the old man's office in a fit of rage.

The other six, were at various memorable stages of Harry's life. The first was placed on him when he was just a baby. Apparently, he'd convinced his parents because he was showing high and unusual levels and control of his accidental magic. The second was placed on him before he got his Hogwarts letter. The third was after his rescue of the philosopher's stone, the fourth was after the chamber of secrets, the fifth was during his rage and the last one was during his confrontation with Dumbledore at Privet drive. So he'd removed a block only to gain one back, which was immensely annoying. The man could have killed him! No one was meant to put more than one block on an adult, let alone a
child! It was a miracle Harry survived with what little amount of magic he had.

Taking note of a door blended into the rocky and damp wall that opened, Dragonclaw beckoned with one finger for Harry to follow. Soon, they were in a small and tidy chamber. The walls were like that of the upper level of Gringotts, with no indication of how far down they both were. It was with some amount of alarm and apprehension that he was laid upon a flat surface, magical binds restricting his movements.

"People tend to thrash around, disrupting the flow of magic and damaging themselves." the goblin offered by way of explanation. "Just a precautionary measure, nothing to worry about."

"There's always something going on in my life." the teen moaned. He gestured as much as he could for the goblin to proceed.

A harsh, guttural sound erupted from him. Harry didn't know what language that was. It certainly sounded nothing like Gobbledegook. Speculations on what language Dragonclaw spoke was lost in that moment because the pain he was in was unbelievable.

It was an ache, a bone-deep one and he couldn't help the slight hiss. Soon, there was a slight tug and with it, all his nerve endings were on fire. He could feel something within his chest pulling, forcing its way out by invisible hands with no incision for it to leave. It was as though dentists were operating on his teeth and removing them without the use of anaesthetic, only with his magical core.

He screamed, throat almost tearing. The tugging was vicious, but he could feel something give way. With one more tug, it was free and within only a few seconds the pain dulled to a slight tenderness. He could already feel his magic replenishing and it was as though he'd took a sip of Felix Felicis. His power level increased and it felt like he could do anything.

The bindings were released but Harry sat on the stone slab to regain his bearings.

"Bloody hell." he breathed. A funny noise made him look up and Dragonclaw's version of a laugh escaped him.

"Yes, it will do that. The tenderness will go away shortly and I recommend you burn off any excess energy you have." He advised.

Harry nodded, standing up and shaking the goblin's hand. "Thank you for the help, I appreciate it. I'm not looking forward to getting the rest removed in the same way but by the end of it all, I reckon it's worth it. See you in two weeks!"

The goblin inclined his head slightly, watching the human go before a predatory grin lit up his face.

"Dumbledore won't know what hit him. This wizard shall shake up the Wizarding world and we will profit." Rubbing his hands, he left to go and annoy Griphook, his favourite pastime.

Harry took the goblin's advice. Once at home, he entered the basement, where a small training room was located. It had several training dummies and a closet which was much like the Room of Requirement.

He spent the next few weeks in this manner. Summer was nearly at an end. To Harry's delight, once he'd brought Remus home, he was up and walking within the week with the burns slowly fading. The exercise he'd partaken in not just to burn up energy was benefitting Harry's body greatly. It made sense that with a powerful magical core, a body to match that would be advisable, for maximum efficiency. For all he'd toned up and had a lot more energy, not counting the fact that most of his blocks were now removed save for the largest one, he was still the runt of his year. Hopefully,
he'd grow a bit.

"There's hope for you yet." Remus grinned slightly, flicking through a textbook in the library. "Your father was short as well, though he shot up several feet in his 6th year of Hogwarts."

Harry offered a mild glare in his direction. "Easy for you to say, you tower over me! I only come to your bloody chest."

"Not much different from when you were a baby then." he joked.

"Piss off!" Harry would later deny that he stuck his tongue out in a fit of childishness.

The man laughed. Harry was far too easy to tease sometimes.
Harry learns more about himself than he could ever expect, along with the reassurance that not only Remus was on his side.

The more time he spent conversing with Aela, the more he realised that he could speak from within his mind to her. It saved Remus from hearing a series of hisses when he was about the house and it was more convenient for Harry.

A lot of his spare time, he used reading various tomes found in the manor's library. One of which mentioned that to find out his animagus form, he could either take a potion or meditate to find it himself. The stronger his magical core, the quicker success he'd have in the latter. Harry decided to meditate as it had advantages over the potion. So it was one day that after having breakfast with Remus, Harry made use of the Requirement Closet. He thought deeply of what he required, stepping out.

Harry let his guard down, eyes holding an almost childish expression. He was free of the Dursleys, they who moulded him into who he was. It wasn't just the physical and mental abuse heaped upon him, it was also the fact that not once in his life was he ever exposed to the pleasures in life which a child was allowed to have, such as visiting the beach. Harry never visited the seaside or a beach of any sort. His life had been so busy recently that he'd never took the time to do the simple things.

The sand felt so soft and warm on his now bare feet, yet when he scrunched his toes together, rough with grit. It was a curious sensation and not one he was used to. At first, the strong smell of the sea made his eyes water a little but after a few seconds, he was ok with it. He took his time, appreciating the view.

The sun was setting and it cast an orange glow upon the water in the distance, sparkling and untouched. The sands were golden and soft shadows danced upon the ground, which seemed to emphasise the natural beauty of the beach. Harry had always liked the sun setting, it promised the future and it made the past.

The rippling of the water and the gentle waves lapping at the shore as he grew closer soothed Harry more than he thought possible. He decided then and there that even if he didn't have an animal form, he would come here, just to sit and think, escape for a little while.

He approached a large fluffy towel laid upon the sand. Getting himself into a comfortable position, Harry closed his eyes.
and only a spotlight was cast upon his feet, ensuring he wouldn't trip over them.

It could have been seconds, hours or minutes for all Harry knew but the darkness sure as hell wasn't getting any brighter. He wasn't aware of the passage of time and nothing indicated how long he'd been here.

There was a change in his surroundings. As though a blindfold had been removed from his eyes, he found himself high up in the mountains, a narrow path sloping upwards, ending near a crumbling hole in the mountainside. Harry would've been convinced he was actually there, if not for the lack of breeze blowing or any signs of wildlife. The path wasn't steep, thankfully and within a few minutes, he was facing the hole, with something definitely unexpected inside.

At first glance, it looked to be a dragon, but there were no legs to indicate this, just one huge tail to make up for the lack of limbs. Its tail was curled around the rest of its body like a serpent and much of its mannerisms were snakelike. It picked up its head slowly, slithering forward to come face to face with the stunned teen.

On closer inspection, the scales that Harry thought were black were actually blood red. They were shiny and glistened even with him blocking a lot of the artificial sunlight. While the upper half of its body was red, the length of the body soon turned into a deep orange and ended with a golden colour. In stark contrast, the eyes had not much white and were a swirl of mercury. It was an unusual colour combination but seemed to fit the creature. Spikes and horns adorned the body, more so along the top of the head and decorating the tail. They were of varying sizes and shone dark grey. There were some upon the end of its wings, like little claws probably used to grasp surfaces. The wings themselves were huge, almost the size of its body. The leather of its wings was a crimson colour, fading to different hues much like the scales.

There was a little nudge. Whether it was in his mind's mind or his magic, he didn't know. It was telling him to touch the creature on the forehead. Giving into the instinct and hoping he wouldn't lose a hand, he lightly touched the scales.

It was overwhelming at first, but soon his mind catalogued the information. It explained everything about this animal form, even down to dietary requirements though that wouldn't matter since he wasn't planning on spending all his time in that form.

The creature was called an Amphithere. It was part dragon, part snake. They had no magical powers to speak of, with the exception of this one. It was a fire Amphithere and with it, brought some control over the element of fire, which could carry on back into human form. It spat fireballs very much like a full dragon, but it was more concentrated and less widespread flames than its relation.

“Greetings, human,” the Amphithere nuzzled Harry's hand. “My name is Lume. I am one of your inner animagi. I am here for you to learn more about me, as your form and to guide you through the steps of transformation.”

“Wait.” Harry blinked. “One of my inner animagi, you mean there's another?”

“Yes.” Lume nodded, resting his head on his curled tail. “He is your soul animagi, the one you are connected with the most. Other animals can form due to circumstances. I am here as a representation of your sorting into Gryffindor and the fires of trial you have overcome.”

“I suppose that explains all the Gryffindor colours.” Harry mused. “How often should I return and speak with you?”

“Whenever you wish. I sense your magic and it's strong. Not anywhere near its capability but it will
not take long for you to transform. There are not many people who communicate with their inner animal verbally, they merely observe what they are and what they do without the inner knowledge to help. You are different, more connected with your magic than most so that allows for you to reach out more.”

Harry sat down, still marveling at Lume. “Is there anything else I should know about you?”

“One thing.” here he stood up, springing on his tail and suddenly, limbs sprouted into existence and his tail shrank. He huffed a little, flames spouting from his nose. “You can change your form at will, whether for land or sky though we are suited to the air more. Don’t try and outrun anything in this form, you won’t get far.”

“If all else fails, I’ll just roast them.” Harry declared. Lume gave his version of an eye roll before closing said eyes, laying down upon the rocky surface again. “As I say, feel free to return when you wish. Your soul animagi, Thanatos, wants to meet you. He and I speak but really we’re rather incompatible. He’s your Slytherin side you see.”

Harry shrugged. “Some things never change.”

“Indeed.” Lume still had his eyes closed. If he was able to, he would’ve made a shooing motion. “Off with you now, the bloody idiot is impatient enough as it is. Do stop by for a chat soon. Farewell!”

As the world around him faded to be replaced with another, Harry had barely recovered from his first animagi form, let alone knowing he had more than one. With his new fascinating surroundings, however, that thought promptly left his mind.

While the mountain scenery was very nice, the place he was currently in was otherworldly, quite literally. What looked to be souls and wisps fluttered in the non-existent breeze. Faint outlines of humanoid spirits could be seen in the distance. Some were conversing and others were simply sat, not doing much of anything. The ground was hard and lined with cracks of immense strain, the earth blackened from thunderstorms. Turrets and towers with a strange purple fire hovered above them. Some of the turrets had broken away and remained suspended in the air with nothing to ground them, like little individual islands. Not a sign of life as he knew it was present. Any trees were withered and rotting. A dark fog hung in the air, which would be chilling if he were there in person. It was beautiful, in a morbid way.

Clip-clopping sounds from behind made him turn around, Harry’s eyes lighting with interest.

Thanatos, even without Harry touching him, was a skeletal horse. His bones were a polished black and a fine smoky mist-shrouded them. Where there would be hair on a horse which was alive, there was not. In place of the mane and tail, a green fire crackled and hissed threateningly, swaying much like what hair would do. Harry realised with some shock that while it looked like fire, it very much represented Avada Kedavra curses if they were fired in rapid succession, clustering together to create one hypnotising sight. His eyes matched his own, flames within eyeless sockets. He should be scared, but Thanatos was a fine creature.

Tentatively, he held out a hand and the horse obliged, nose touching it.

“Who was he calling a bloody idiot?” Thanatos snorted indignantly. “Stupid overgrown scaly twit.” he bent his front legs in a bow, inclining his head slightly. “Lume is annoying at the best of times, but that you have already discovered. You know who I am and how I came to be, so there isn’t really much more I can tell you other than to communicate with me as you would Lume. There is only one thing I need to mention. I was created the moment the killing curse marked you with that scar. Death
has tainted you, in more ways than one. The man who marked you left a part of him behind. That part was his soul. I am your soul animagi, as you know. I have a connection and the piece of his soul is battling for dominance with my rightful place. If not removed, it will overpower me. The killing curse never dissipated. It was absorbed into your very being, hence my existence.”

Harry was horrified. “You mean to tell me I have a bit of Voldemort inside? That's disgusting. Don't worry I'm going to get rid of him.”

“Good.” he nodded approvingly. “It is nice to finally converse with you and I know Lume agrees. Though I have been around for approximately a decade more than he, he made for some interesting company while we waited for you to connect with us. Now that you're here, we can finally connect with you fully. Upon transformation, our instincts and abilities will be absorbed into your form. We will be a part of you and you will be a part of us. There is a chance what you have in your forms may carry over to when you are human, it depends on the creature. I am unsure what you will gain from me, Lume is much more obvious.”

“I understand. If I'd known you guys were here I would've connected a lot sooner.”

“You would not have been able to connect before your magical blocks were removed. Though it is only meditation, your reserves at that point were low. Between us, we channel a high amount of magical energy and if you had found us before this point, it's likely magical exhaustion would have woken you up from meditation, sending you into unconsciousness.”

Harry hesitated before asking the question that had just popped into his mind. “If I'm able to complete the transformation soon enough, will the soul piece battling for dominance become dormant?”

He tilted his head. “I believe so. I don't think it will take you long before you are able to learn. For now, though I am more than a match for it.”

Harry didn't answer, deep in thought. For him, it was a lot to process and he was sure he'd have to think about it before it all sunk in. Not only did he have one incredible animagi form, but two and both were magical creatures! It was certainly an interesting development, to say the least. More time passed by as he talked away the seemingly endless time with Thanatos. He learned a lot about his personality and with time he was sure he'd learn more about both of them. He bid him goodbye, willing himself to wake up.

Harry woke with a sudden start, confirming to himself that yes what happened was indeed real and no it wasn't a dream. He sat up, popping joints as he did so.

“Aela hissed from his back. She preferred it there. “Your magic was sporadic and shifted slightly. The taste was rather strange.”

“I think that was meeting two of my animagi, they're literally polar opposites,” Harry told her. “I still can't believe it.”

Harry sprang to his feet, sprinting back to the closet door and shutting it behind him.

It was with no amount of shock that while he'd left 8 am this morning, it was now 10 pm at night. 14 hours it had taken! It certainly didn't feel like it.

Harry grinned, excitement bubbling up before he could try and stop it. Leaving his shoes, for now, he went in search of Remus, the man would faint.
“REMUS! YOU’LL NEVER GUESS WHAT!” he shouted, cupping hands around his mouth the moment he left the closet. Finding him in the kitchen, Harry quickly relayed what happened.

“You've got to be joking. You mean to tell me that not only do you have one form, but two and they're both magical? Your life is never normal on any level is it?” Remus shook his head, amusement soon giving way to shock.

Harry couldn't help but agree, silently glad that Remus did actually believe him.

“Whichever form I learn first, I could accompany you when you go to transform?” Harry offered. "I don't think you would hurt me and it's not as if either of those forms are defenceless. It can't be easy on you, I've seen the deep scratches and if I can help with the pain I'd be more than happy to. Instead of you going out into the woods we can use my closet in the training room, find a nice place for you to run and eventually me when I learn.”

He smiled warmly, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you, I think I'd like that.”

Grinning, Harry stood up. “Brilliant! Oh yeah, I have two Marauder names now.” seeing the curiosity in the other man's gaze, he elaborated. “Both animagi have names. The Amphithere is named Lume, the skeletal horse Thanatos.”

“Ahh.” Remus nodded, barely restraining a yawn.

“Right I'll bugger off now. Night.” Harry chuckled, retiring to his own room with Remus following shortly after.

Harry couldn't help but feel a little worried that in time, he'd be off to Hogwarts again. Dumbledore was bound to have someone follow him there, so he'd have to see about casting one or two more charms to protect himself. He had every intention of going down to the chamber once at Hogwarts and hopefully, Aela would be brought back through what she'd told him to do.

His second worry was he wouldn't have much time to converse with Lume and Thanatos. He knew to speak with them was the easiest step, the hardest would be to actually complete the transformations. Could he make time flow differently?

To Harry's delight when returning there, it had worked. He focused on the beach he was at yesterday, but also that the time flow was removed from the current one. It was a bit difficult at first but once there, he experimentally made a sandcastle, which he estimated must have taken around half an hour. Stepping from the closet, he cast a quick tempus. It was the same time as when he'd disappeared. This opened a huge door of opportunity for him and when he went to Hogwarts, he could use the Room of Requirement for the same purposes.

He spent almost all of his time at Paradise, as he'd affectionately named the beach. For many hours he conversed with the pair until he was brimming with confidence from the inside out.

By Harry's estimation, it had been about two months. So his body didn't deteriorate, he often exercised or went for jogs on the beach, sometimes going for a swim. Though most of his time was spent with his inner animagi, he couldn't deny he felt differently even before transforming. The meditation had increased his natural mind shielding. The mountains and underworld became such a familiar refuge, that often they would appear as his mind's defences. It was unintentional but by no means a bad thing. He became slow to anger and when he was angry, it was a lot more silent. He could control his outbursts of anger more and choose when to 'blow up.' as he called it. It was a more deadly, slithering kind of calm. All in all, it was a good change for him.
After a most amusing conversation between Lume and Thanatos of who Harry liked more, he awakened, with a bout of determination. Further reading on the subject along with the animagi's explanations gave Harry clear instructions. He decided the hardest of the two, Lume, would be his first try. He'd brought a change of clothes in case he failed to imagine those blending in with his form, though a simple reparo should do the trick.

Harry kneeled upon the sand, wearing a loose pair of black slacks and a green tank top. Focusing fully, he let his mind do what was natural.

He was huffing a laugh, batting his wing playfully. He took off into the sky with a screech, flying and twirling for Harry's benefit. His long tail slashed through the air like a quill on parchment. His silver eyes sparkled with life and his scales were vibrant beneath the sun. The horns shined almost to a polish beneath the glaze, shifting colours as the shade covered him. He opened his mouth, long teeth revealed as a deep red fireball was spat, crumbling and burning the rock.

All this and more, Harry let himself be filled with his emotions until it was not just Lume, Lume was him. He was the one flying through the air, spitting fire, swishing his tail. He envisioned himself shifting. Body increasing in size, tail sprouting, wings appearing, bone structure and species itself changing. Letting what he wanted to happen to fill his mind, encouraging it with his knowledge and how right it would feel.

Suddenly, it was happening. The feeling was very disorienting and with no small amount of pain. He gritted his teeth, letting the transformation happen. Within his mind, he heard voices.

“Hah! Thanatos, you owe me a few spirits in return for this, I won the bet!”

“Humph. Fine.”

“Oh don't be like that old chap, you'll be joining me soon. Farewell, for now, I'm off to bond with Harry.”

They were betting on him. Really? He expected no less from the pair. The snort wasn't without its consequences, however, as flames spouted from his nose.

A brief flash of magic accompanied the final transformation. Instincts became natural to him now, not needing to be learned.

“Fantastic!” Harry shouted in excitement or tried to. A series of hisses and growls accompanied his attempt. After a roar of triumph, he spent his remaining time getting to know how his body worked, practising flight and attacks with his tail. He wondered if he could harvest ingredients from either of his forms? It would be excellent for potions and he actually wasn't bad at the subject.

He transformed back, happy that his clothes were intact.

It was sometime later before he transformed into Thanatos, which he found easier after bringing forth similar experiences and memories. Like with Lume, Thanatos melded with his animagi mind and galloping across the golden sands was perhaps just as fun as flight.

He loved Lume and Thanatos equally and they would both be invaluable. While he could use Lume to go with Remus, Thanatos could run alongside the wolf and would be much better companionship.

The next full moon was on August 18th. It was with no small amount of surprise that he'd been at Evergreen Manor since the 5th of August. Shaking his head from those thoughts, he trudged back over to the door, cracking it open and stepping back inside the manor.
He found Remus reading the newspaper, who looked up at Harry's approach.

“That was fast, I thought you said you were going into the training room?”

“I have.”

He narrowed his eyes a little. “You look different, somehow. You smell different too. Strange.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow, taking the seat across from him. “Strange how?”

He sniffed a little. “There's the distinct smell of you, with undertones of cinnamon and...liquorice? What on earth have you been doing?”

“Actually Remus, I've been gone for two months. I created an alternate timeline within the Requirement Closet and made some interesting discoveries.”

“What's that?” the man tilted his head curiously.

Harry grinned, tilting on his chair. “Think old wolfy old pal. Why would I suddenly have two distinct smells and what did I just discover the other day?”

“You mean?” he trailed off.

Harry's expression must have given something away because, with a burst of energy, he sprang up from the kitchen chair, taking Harry's wrist in his hand. “What are you waiting for? Don't keep said old wolf waiting, I want to see!”

Laughing heartily at his excitement, Harry followed. They came to a large clearing, away from the manor.

He turned to Remus expectantly, an anticipatory gleam in his eye. “So, who first?”

“Lume.”

Harry nodded and instantly, was much, much bigger.

“Bloody hell.” he breathed, coming closer to the Amphithere. “I know you've told me in great detail but it's even better seeing it in person.” he brought a hand up to the metallic scales and patted his snout. Harry butted his snout against his hand and Remus chuckled, laughing harder when he batted his eyes and tried to blow kisses.

Harry bent his body slightly, a wing tilted towards him and shot Remus a pleading look.

He looked from Harry to his wing and understood. “You want me to ride you.” he queried, unsure.

Harry nodded vigorously, the jerky movement producing smoke from his nostrils.

“I don't know.” Remus was torn. On one hand, he'd love to be able to see the view from up here without the initial discomfort of a broom. On the other hand, what if he fell off?

His internal debate ended when the reptilian face before him pouted. Actually pouted. Remus couldn't say no.

“If I fall off I'm blaming you.” smirking a little at Harry's bounce of excitement, he clambered upon the scales, getting comfortable and holding onto one of the larger horns on his neck. He nearly let ago in his fear when Harry swooped into the sky.
It took him several moments to get used to the sensation but once he was, he couldn't help the whoop of joy. It was the most exhilarating feeling, he hadn't been on a broom in years to fly and didn't have the desire to. Riding on an Amphithere was a chance he couldn't pass up and he was having the time of his life. A few times he dared to remove his hands and stretch them either side. The adrenalin rush was incredible and not even half of what Harry felt.

Harry was also having the time of his life, more so than usual because he just knew Remus would have fun up here. He didn't do his usual swoops and aerial tricks he'd learned from watching Lume and some of his own, wary of the passenger on his back. He felt so free, much like when he galloped across the sands as Thanatos. It was several minutes before Harry gently lowered to the ground, careful not to overbalance Remus. The man got off and Harry quickly transformed back.

He looked years younger, the worry lines seemed to have melted off his face and his grin matched Harry's. “That was bloody fantastic!”

“See? I knew you'd enjoy it! Want to ride Thanatos too?” he asked.

Remus shrugged. “Why not? Isn't every day you get to ride a horse of death.”

Harry felt the familiar sensation of shifting bones, muscles and thought processes.

A mischievous look entered Remus' eyes. “If only you were here during the Marauder days. Sirius and James would have never passed up the chance to make the firsties wet themselves.”

Harry snorted. The two spent several hours outside, Harry not only giving Remus a few rides but demonstrating some abilities he had.

While Remus retired to the library after, Harry couldn't pass up the chance to have a shower. It was with no small amount of relief that the warm water hit his aching muscles, easing the pain. He was content and very relaxed when he opened the bedroom door. Spotting the owl heading for his window, it looked as though it would have to wait. Opening the window so it wouldn't do a Pigwidgeon, he didn't recognise the owl.

Hedwig was off hunting, so the owl gratefully made use of the water and food set out in the corner, taking flight once more.

He was surprised by the envelope. It wasn't written on parchment, the envelope was definitely muggle, as was the letter itself. He had an idea who it was from and scanning the contents, his suspicions were proven correct. He returned his eyes to the top of the page, reading properly.

Harry,

How are you? I'm so sorry I haven't written to you sooner! I had to send this secretly. I found out about you and your relatives and I want you to know it doesn't change my opinion, you're still my best friend. I know how badly they treated you. After the events of the ministry and what had happened recently, I have found myself placing less and less trust in the people who are supposed to protect us.

We've made use of Fred and George's extendable ears. The whole time Dumbledore was claiming that you had gone dark and joined Voldemort, which is obviously complete nonsense.

You may notice that I didn't mention Ron. The idiot believed what Dumbledore was saying! We tried
to tell him otherwise but he blew up and stormed off. Dumbledore forbade us to contact you but while we were out purchasing our school things, I snuck into the wizarding post office and sent this letter here.

I don't know how postal services work but your address didn't show up at all. My only explanation is that postal owl gets an imprint of your location in mind by the name and somehow manages to locate you. I would have written to you the normal way but I don't know your address.

If you get this letter, please send one back if only to let me know how you're doing.

Hermione

Harry was shocked but definitely pleased. A bit angry too. He was wondering why his friends hadn't contacted him. The wards enabled anything which wasn't harmful access. He wasn't sure how secure that system was but it had worked so far. Hermione was his closest friend and while he cared for her, her unwavering faith in authority often blinded her to the bigger picture. Since they'd last spoken though it seemed that part of her and withered and died and she had a healthy amount of suspicion. He wasn't sure who he could trust after his blow up at the Dursleys and he was glad one member of the golden trio was on his side.

He would look into Ron. Out of everyone, he was saddened to release that he wasn't surprised by him. Over the years his loyalty only extended to the point where it was just below his jealousy. He had a lot to think on and he was appreciative of Hermione still willing to remain in his life.

Penning a quick response, the usual hexes were in place so that anyone else intending to read it before Hermione would get a nasty shock.

It was at that moment Hedwig returned from her hunting. she gave a little hoot and Harry tied the letter to her leg, stroking her feathers with the back of his hand. Not taking a moment to rest and sensing her master's urgency Hedwig took flight, delivering what needed to be.
It's a full moon and Harry is there, to support Remus in his time of need. Then before his inevitable return to Hogwarts, Harry decides to visit a place which he has been interested in for a while. But once there, he find something or someone, more than what he bargained for.

“"You didn't have to do this you know."" Remus looked at Harry, sipping his Butterbeer. They were in the Requirement Closet at his suggestion, with refreshments before the full moon's arrival.

“I wanted to. Not just to support you but what's the fun in having animagus forms if I don't use them?”

“Good point,” he admitted, jerking lightly as a spasm of pain swept across his body.

Harry's brow furrowed. “You ok?” he asked, placing his bottle on the ground to shift Remus' back to him. He placed his hands on his shoulder blades, rubbing away the tension.

“This usually happens, I'll be fine.” he groaned in pleasure. “You're a wizard, Harry.”

Harry laughed, unable to help it.

Remus looked back in confusion. “What did I say?”

“It's just that those were the same words Hagrid spoke to me when I first found out I was a wizard. Did I ever tell you that story?”

Seeing a shake of his head, Harry quickly explained.

“Wow.” Remus shook his head, rolling his shoulders to crack them. “Do I want to know what happened in your first and second year?”

"Probably not."

The moon rose above the clouds and Harry quickly packed away the basket with a wave of his wand, moving a few feet away. Now he was Thanatos, he watched Remus transform just before his clothing was shed. The burning, stretching pain began. Muscles and flesh tearing open only to reform upon a skeletal structure, which snapped, cracked and welded back together.

Remus' scream soon turned to a low, keening howl. Fur sprouted from his lanky, shaggy body and he wagged his tail eagerly. Where was Padfoot? He whined confusedly, howling to the sky and growling at the intruder, teeth bared.

Thanatos stood as still as he could, letting the wolf approach and sniff him out of his own accord. Best not to startle him until he was familiar with the reassuring sense of Harry underneath this form.
It took a few seconds of dedicated sniffing before a light bulb went off in Moony's head. It was Harry, their cub!

His attitude changed immediately and he resembled more of an overgrown puppy than a fierce stalker in the full moonlight. His tail wagged furiously, eyes screaming a challenge as he took off running, weaving between the dense trees.

Thanatos decided to play things smart, settling for a light run until the trees cleared out a little. Leaves danced upon the midnight breeze and the wind ruffled his mane. The only sounds piercing the quiet of the night were the two animal and animagi friends racing each other to a destination unknown, paws thumping the ground with an intense speed and hooves clopping to match.

They came across a fairly wide stretch of river, not too deep. Thanatos gained the slight lead as Moony stumbled upon the slippery rocks beneath the water while he simply jumped over them. Moony looked to be having the time of his life, tongue lolling and matching his speed very well.

It was then the path cleared up and trees were on either side of them instead of in their way. Sensing an end, Thanatos increased his speed, the fire in his eyes glowing brighter and his mane and tail illuminating the darkness. Then Thanatos skidded to a halt, triumphant as the wolf lagged behind in speed since he'd been running full pelt all the way.

After another hour or so of running about, Harry dared to transform back, ready to bolt in an instant if things went wrong. To his credit, Moony merely blinked, trotting to Harry so he could put his big furry face in his and try to lick it to death.

"The Wolfsbane really does tame you doesn't it?" he chuckled, scratching the wolf softly behind his ears until both settled down for the night.

Movement beside Harry woke him up and he turned to see what the disturbance was, realising too late.

"Remus!" He squeaked, summoning his clothes, trying desperately to hide his embarrassment. He practically threw them at the man. "I forgot about that."

"Nothing I have that you don't Harry." amusement coloured his tone, turning serious shortly after being clothed. "Thanks for being here, it means a lot."

"No problem." Reaching up to pat him on the shoulder they left the Requirement Closet behind, content.

It was two days after the full moon, and Harry fancied touring a very specific place. As far as the non-magic users knew, Dracula's castle had been burned to the ground centuries ago by a Vampire-hating mob.

Since entering the Wizarding world, Harry had done his best to learn about different magical creatures and other magic users, such as Vampires. They had their own magic of course and were much different from their muggle Vampire counterparts. They were stronger, magically resistant and superior. Muggles often didn't survive the turning, same with Werewolves. Harry was very interested in the history and culture of them and exploring a castle, not even many wizards bothered to tour held a certain appeal for him.

It was one day after locating the International Portkey Service in Diagon Alley that Harry decided to go take a look for himself. He decided to bring a light cloak with him, considering Transylvania was known for its hot summers and cold winters. The cloak itself had the Potter and Black crests
Emblazoned across the fabric and the clasp was an elegant Celtic looking knot with a red stone in the middle. He picked out a dark red T-Shirt, fitted jeans and comfortable dragon hide boots to wear. He placed essentials in his backpack and wore his cloak, for now, double checking his blood glamour and waving goodbye to Remus. Harry stepped outside, apparating on the spot.

It was a simple sign really. Harry looked above and saw it attached to the side of the building, swinging in the breeze on its rusty hinges. It read 'International Portkey Service.' Stepping in, a tall and casually dressed man greeted him at the desk he walked to.

“Good evening sir, what can I do for you?”

Harry studied him for a short moment. “Would I be able to purchase a two-way Portkey which drops me off at the Portkey service branch in Transylvania, Romania? I'm hoping to tour Dracula's castle.”

The man paled visibly. “O-of course, I will get you one immediately.” The man practically ran to the door behind him, before Harry could pick up on frantic whispering and wild arm gestures through the doors darkened window. What was that all about? He shrugged, waiting a few minutes.

The man returned with a Tennis ball. “Tap this once with your wand to leave here and when you want to come back, do the same thing. The Portkey will disappear once used and return to our possession ready to be reused.”

“How much do I owe you?” Harry pulled out his wallet.

“Six Galleons.”

Harry handed the money over, picking up the tennis ball. One of the most unpleasant sensations he had to date, took him to an entirely different country.

Needless to say, Harry didn't land on his feet.

“Bloody hell.” he moaned, rubbing his aching head.

“Rough landing?” An outstretched hand lead to a man who didn't look that much older than him.

Accepting it, Harry stood up. “Yeah, I've never been good with Portkeys. Thanks!”

“No problem.” He gestured Harry to some plush armchairs, where they both sat down.

“What brings you here my friend?”

Harry smiled. “I'm here to tour Dracula's castle.”

The man checked to see who was surrounding him, then quickly pulling out his wand to cast some privacy charms.

“My name is Alin. I live in the small wizarding village just shy of the castle. I have grown up hearing the stories of how the castle is haunted and has been for quite some time. All who have entered have returned but have spoken of things they've seen, ghostly apparitions and the like. So I thought I'd just warn you.”

Harry shrugged. “I'll have to see for myself. I'm used to the paranormal activity. I go to a school called Hogwarts and the place is filled with ghosts and a poltergeist.”

The man blinked. “Oh, I have heard of Hogwarts. What is your name if I might ask?”
Harry didn't see the harm in it, it's not as if the man knew who Harry knew. If it came to the worst case scenario, he would later blame himself for his 'Gryffindor' stupidity. “Harry Potter.”

To his relief, the man merely had a faint recognition in his eyes. "I see. Tread with caution."

“Nice meeting you Alin and thanks for the warning, I'll be careful.” Nodding to the man, he decided to take a slow walk to the castle, which was about a mile up the road.

Harry had to admit to himself, it was a lovely looking place. The vibrant colours of the sky were eye-catching, though by far the most impressive sight was the castle itself, surrounded by greenery with a somewhat treacherous patch leading up to it. How much of this was through magic Harry didn't know, able to faintly detect something which might indicate some form of illusion. The building rivalled Hogwarts in its size and Harry was excited to explore but kept the warning fresh in the back of his mind. Once level, he was amazed at the sight that greeted him.

Smooth grey cobbledstones formed a wide path. To the end of this path, stood a large, imposing door. It looked to be at least 40ft high and either side of this door, smaller stairs to the left and right of the main stairs joined on, leading down to other areas.

Perched on the outer bannisters of the left and right stairs, two stone gargoyles in the shape of wyverns faced each other. Their stone tails hung off the edge and glowing orange eyes gave the appearance of sentience.

Harry noticed that the sky seemed to darken ominously upon his arrival and he could feel slight apprehension build until he focused inwards and locked that debilitating feeling away. The only light shone from various torches dotted about the place, small sparks of colour brightening his surroundings among the dimness. A large round window was above the door, intricate designs etched into the glass work.

His footsteps echoed as Harry sprang his best wand from its holster. There was no trouble, not even when he got to the door, as it opened with ease.

“This is far too easy,” Harry muttered, slipping inside and scanning the area.

He was in a throne room. Beneath his feet a carpet of the deepest red with swirling golden threads made a long line across the expanse of the room, ending at the throne itself. On either side of him were strange looking statues which seemed to be made from metals, dangerously sharp spikes covered their armoured bodies and they were crouched, ready to attack.

Eight pillars from ceiling to the floor were on either side of the carpets, each having a semi-naked golden angel with arms stretched above. A huge chandelier hung in the centre of the room, the candles on it and spread throughout the room at the base of some of these pillars shedding the only light, as the silken crimson curtains remained shut.

The most impressive sight for Harry was the throne. A crucifix hung above the seat with a Wyvern design at the very heart of it, wings spread in flight. The throne itself was regal yet imposing, a velvet cushion to match the red and gold themes in the room. Though they were the dominant colours, there were black-grey stones which built the foundations and smooth surfaces were jade green marble.

There were no other doors Harry could see until he turned around. Stairs on either side lead to another much smaller door, but he decided to go and inspect the throne. The first of Harry's problems was when he ran a hand lightly upon the throne's armrest.

It was a split second later that his senses were screaming for him to move and did, just in time as a
long metal javelin narrowly missed his skull. Going into battle mode, he swung around.

The strange guardians on either side of the entryway were alive and currently trying to kill him, one tucked its legs into its body, creating a ball. It spun until it gathered up tremendous speed, charging into Harry. He jumped, rolling to take most of the impact and using his forward momentum to duck behind a pillar, as the second guardian tried to take his head off with a sword.

“Why is it always me?!” he shouted, running through a mental list of spells he could use. He noticed with no small amount of amusement that the one charging him had done so to the extent where his metal spikes had gotten him lodged into the wall, stuck temporarily.

Harry pointed dead centre as his target. “Expelliarmus!” he cried, the sword flying and sticking to the opposite wall. To his dismay, another sword appeared out of thin air and he charged at Harry. Thinking quickly, he ran halfway up the stairs, aiming at the ground and waited.

“Reducto!”

The spell did its job, the Guardian was sent flying through the air from the force of the shock waves, slamming to the ground. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Harry cast aguamenti, the joints rusting up and slowing the movements. Then, lightning crackled upon his outstretched palm. Though a wand was good as a focus, the raw power came from the skin and a direct conductor. He put considerable power into the spell, aiming for the water and watched as the guardian was fried to a point where he exploded, bits of metal flying everywhere.

But, the other had gotten free without Harry realising and cut into Harry's arm with the sword from the wall, grazing the cloak. Thankfully the cut was a shallow one and he made quick work of healing the skin.

A light bulb went off in Harry's head. He noticed that far off to the side, there was a large part of the ceiling which looked to be corroding naturally, ready to give way. He would need both wands for this. He encouraged the second guardian to stand directly beneath the loose stone, using his new wand on the guardian while his old one was for the stone.

“Levicorpus.”

The Guardian was suspended by the ankles, staying there. Aiming with his other arm, he charged the spell. “Confringo.”

The effect was instant. Harry let go of the spell the same time as he cast the other. The stone fell upon it, mangling the Guardian.

'Note to self, don't touch anything.'

Then, a sudden wind kicked up, putting Harry on alert.

The ghosts he had been told about appeared, but none seemed to take notice. They looked nothing like Hogwarts ghosts, though, they were somewhat flat and not realistic. He simply watched them and after a few minutes vanished. The wind didn't die down and if anything, grew cooler. Unnaturally so.

“Oh, God.” His eyes widened. Through the large door, he'd entered in, six Dementors floated through. It was all he could do to not collapse to the ground and succumb to his worst memories. Instead, he brought forth the one of where he and Remus ran through the forests and Remus' ride on his animagi forms and let the emotions swell within him. A scabby hand touched his cheek gently. He had to act quickly.
“Expecto Patronum.” He did a double take when instead of a stag, a corporeal version of Thanatos appeared. He wasn't the usual silver, but instead a chillingly bright green. He charged through them with ferocity, but they tripped and fell over. It clicked.

“Boggarts?” he sighed. “Riddikulus.”

He had to chuckle when their robes turned the different colours of the rainbow and they joined a line to form the conga before they too vanished.

“I see what Alin means,” he mused. “I've come too far to go back, though, let's see what else this place has to offer.”

He was just about to head up the stairs when a voice called out from behind him.

“Impressive, everyone else ran at this point.” Harry spun around, fireball tingling upon his palm and a wand pointed at the nose of a very amused man.

“Do you make a habit of giving people heart attacks?” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Only the interesting ones.” he flashed a charming smile, the white fangs gleaming. A vampire then. “They all say it is haunted when really that is my pranking side. Life can be incredibly dull, otherwise.” his voice had a musical lilt to it and was calming to listen to. Despite this, Harry didn't let down his guard.

“You mean to tell me,” he gestured to the large rock buried in the ground and the puddle surrounded by blown up bits of metal, “That they were a prank? You have a morbid sense of humour since I nearly died.” he commented casually. “As for the others, I'm used to ghosts. Boggarts I tend to avoid and now you understand why.”

He tilted his head, curious. “They were not my doing. It was because you touched the throne and magic detected that you are not a part of that bloodline. The ghosts frighten people usually but you were not phased. As for Boggarts people have common fears, but yours was fear itself. Dementors.”

“Had a run in with them on several occasions, definitely not the best moments of my life.”

The Vampire let out a tinkling laugh. “I can imagine!” he held out an elegant hand, larger than Harry's own. His skin wasn't pale like most vampires, it just had a healthy, normal glow and was just a shade lighter than Harry's slightly tanned colour.

“My name is Alistair Avis Lothaire. I am the last of my line save for my brother, who is not here. When my parents passed on, Dracul's castle was inherited by me. I am currently 1,500 years old,” he smiled slightly at Harry's shock. “I've lived here for most of my existence, the only entertainment being those who enter this castle and run screaming in fright once my little pranks get to them.”

Harry took the larger hand in his but to his surprise and slight embarrassment, Alistair brushed lips over the top of his own.

“It is only polite.” his eyes twinkled as Harry's entire body seemed to flush.

“You know,” Harry managed to speak after a few seconds. “If you fancied company you could have always invited people round for a drink instead of scaring them.”

Alistair made a tut-tutting noise at the back of his throat, shaking his head. “Now where would the fun be in that?”
Harry grinned. “I can't fault you there.”

He gave a grin of his own. “I knew you would see it my way. In that case, do you care for a drink? You are the first to have not run after meeting me, most people hate us.” he gazed at Harry curiously. “Why is it that you have not run? You know that I could easily kill you where you stand?”

Harry gazed at him unblinkingly, thinking of his answer. “I've never met a Vampire, up until now. Though the Wizarding World have their biased opinions upon Vampires and Werewolves, I promised myself that I wouldn't pass judgment unless I actually met one. Werewolves are seen as mindless beasts but my friend is one and he's the kindest man you could ever have the pleasure to meet. As for you, I understand all too well how you could kill me but you seem a nice enough bloke. If you'd intended to kill me I'm pretty sure you would've drunk me dry rather than introduce yourself. In answer to your other question yes, I'd love a drink.” his green eyes glittered as he followed the taller Vampire, as they walked from room to room.

Alistair smiled widely, meeting his eyes. “For one so young you have a mature view. It is a refreshing thing to see. If only the rest had your mindset.”

Harry snorted, shaking his head. “Tell that to everyone else and they'll have your head on a pike, or try to. I'm either the scapegoat or boy wonder back at home.”

He blinked. “I apologise, how rude of me, I did not think to ask. What is your name?”

Harry didn't want to be so arrogant and think that everyone had heard of him, but he braced himself for whatever his reaction would be anyway. “Harry Potter.”

Alistair's eyes gleamed interestedly. “You are? Out here, there is not much talk of you but I have travelled to England before and the stories that I have heard sound very far-fetched. You will have to clear up some things for me.”

Harry looked at him gratefully. “I'd be more than happy to help you, in that case.”

Alistair pushed open a door, leading to an office. The room was much the same style but looked far more lived in. Comfortable sofas and chairs were in the room, two of the chairs near a large wooden desk, with a quill, ink and parchment. A cabinet was off to the side, filled with bottles of alcohol, another larger cabinet filled with several different bottles, but those were a similar colour of red. If Harry had to guess, it was probably blood.

Unlocking the cabinet with a wave of his hand, the glasses for what Harry realised was firewhisky appearing on the table. The pair sat on one of the sofas, Harry having to battle the urge to sleep as the seat was so comfortable. He raised an eyebrow when Alistair poured a generous amount into a glass. Sipping his own, he responded after. “It is not as if there is anyone here to reprimand you.”

Harry really couldn't argue with that. He hadn't actually tried the drink before, so was careful to take a small amount.

“First time?” Alistair commented, smiling at the look on his face.

“Yeah.” at that moment, Harry took a proper look at Alistair.

Hair a medium brown and tied into a high ponytail, a braid framed his face. His facial features were soft, well defined with not a wrinkle in sight. When his lips quirked into a smile, Harry's attention was drawn to their soft pinkness and the visible dimple. He wore a long flowing cape, embroidered on the inside. The cape itself was black on the outside, with a waistcoat, long sleeve buttoned shirt,
trousers and dark leather shoes.

His eyes captivated Harry the most. Looking into them, he was reminded by the sunsets he would love to watch in the evenings. They were a blended mix of orange, red and yellow. It should look odd on him, but he suited it. Overall though he was over a thousand years old, he looked in his late 20's. The teenage side of Harry's brain remarked on how drop dead gorgeous he was. The rational side of Harry told the teen Harry to shut up because he'd never pay him the time of day.

Harry blinked once, finding the man staring at him. "Like what you see?" he teased.

"Anyone remotely attracted to men would be insane to say otherwise." he realised what he came out with, Alistair's musical laughter made him want to melt into the couch. He took a deeper drink of his whisky.

While Harry was studying Alistair, He was doing the same to Harry. He felt the very familiar feelings of attraction stir within him at his beauty. While he was born a vampire and by no means a virgin, no one had ever quite captured his attention like Harry, as he was the first to not run either from the pranks or from him. His hair was tinged with a dark green and arranged messily. He seemed very expressive and in Alistair's opinion rather adorable, with eyes the most enchanting shade of bright green he had seen.

While Harry himself in youth declared innocence, his eyes told a different story and Alistair's compassion reared its head once more, wanting to aid him. He was not like the other Vampires. Most of them cared little for other humans and were only there to serve their own selfish needs.

It was after a moment of observation that he felt magic upon the young man and came to the conclusion that it was a glamour charm, but he could see through it. Though it was stronger, truly it was a simple matter of will, which not many people knew. If your will was stronger than the magic, then it would override any means of magical disguise. Vampires had the ability to see through these anyway and Alistair had spent a lot of time refining his techniques and sharpening his skills.

"Come now, it is not that bad. I thank you for the compliment."

Harry couldn't help but smile in return, his emerald eyes softening. "You're welcome." He marvelled how at ease he was despite being in an unknown environment. He looked back at Alistair, so many questions he wanted to ask but his brain couldn't produce a single one, so he went for something in general.

"I've searched through Wizarding and Muggle texts and while they do list the history of Vampires, there's not much info. Could you tell me about your history?"

"I would be delighted to." he set his drink back on the table and Harry gave him his undivided attention.

Harry learned a lot from Alistair and he found to his delight that his internal questions were covered in some form. They talked for hours, Harry feeling as though he was talking to a friend rather than an acquaintance.

"Thank you, I appreciate it. That actually did answer all the questions I had." He chuckled, holding out his glass when Alistair went to pour more into both.

"Rumours of you are far spread, even out here. Is it true that when you were eleven years of age, went through a series of defences designed by adults, to stop someone from using the Philosopher's Stone?"
Harry rubbed his head. “Much as I wish it wasn't, yes that's true.” seeing the silent question in his eyes, he continued. “Ron, Hermione and I uncovered the plot of a then bodiless Voldemort to use the stone for his own gains, so he could be immortal. He possessed the DADA teacher of that year, who wore a turban because Voldemort was sticking out of the back of his head as another face.”

Alistair shook his head in disappointment. “A bad possession. Once you possess someone, you are meant to be that person while still retaining mental faculties. It should not damage the person being possessed or the possessor if they are careful. How did you not die? Your magical training must have been limited.”

He bit his lip. “It was limited, but right from the start, I was manipulated by Albus Dumbledore. He dragged me along like a dog on a leash, moulding me to be the perfect weapon so I can defeat Voldemort and sacrifice myself for the greater good. There's a prophecy out there with my name on it. I don't believe in prophecies but someone has to stop him, he's caused so much damage as it is.”

Harry watched as Alistair's eyes became a shade darker. “I dislike Albus Dumbledore. He is a supporter of eradicating Vampires altogether. It was him who persuaded the British ministry to force further restrictions upon us all. I take it you are here because you have broken free?”

Harry nodded in confirmation. “I have. Oh and just to confirm if the rumours are anything like the one you've just told me.” he held up his fingers scrunched and raised them one by one, counting off what he'd done over the years. “I killed a basilisk and saved the school, helped an escaped innocent convict to evade being captured and fought off over 100 Dementors, I won the Triwizard tournament and unwittingly helped with Voldemort's rebirth and I survived and successfully pushed out possession by Voldemort in the Ministry.”

Alistair's eyes were wide. “Well, that clears that up I suppose. There is one thing I want to ask.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know you have a magical block on your core?” he broached hesitantly.

“I'm supposed to get the last one removed in a few days time.”

“The last one?”

Harry grimaced. “I was lucky to not die. Dumbledore placed a total of seven magical blocks on me. I was practically a squib in comparison to now though, after this one, my magical levels will have doubled.”

Alistair nearly choked. “Seven? The man is senile! Does he truly wish to have so much power that he would kill you?” he gave Harry a searching look. “I presume you'll return for your 6th year?”

“Yeah.” Harry closed his eyes tiredly. “I know this year will be more challenging than the last, but I'll do my best.”

Alistair furrowed his brow in concern. “It doesn't sound like you are very safe there, be careful. As for your magical block, I can remove it if you wish? It will not be as painful as others removing it, but it will still hurt a little.”

Harry shrugged. “May as well since I'm here. Thank you.” he gave the man a smile, standing up.

“You are quite welcome. Lie down for me,” he instructed, kneeling at the side of his head.

He placed a cool palm on his forehead. Out of instinct, Harry closed his eyes.
“Relax.” he heard his voice saying. It was quite easy to, much more so that he was on a comfortable sofa and not shackled deep underground. It helped that Alistair's voice was naturally soothing. Perhaps that was the reason it hurt as well, that Harry wasn't comfortable or relaxed in his surroundings, like now.

Unlike the goblin, Alistair used no words. It was either a show of will for the magic to release Harry or a silent chant. Perhaps a combination of the two. Harry sunk deeper and would have fallen asleep if not for the pain. He was right, though, it didn't hurt as much but it could still easily rival the Cruciatus. He bit his lip to keep from crying out, only to feel a gentle tug as a thumb stroked over his bottom lip once.

“It is fine to cry out, you will feel better,” he whispered softly.

Harry was bullheaded at the best of times though and didn't cry out until the pain reached its peak. He was used to keeping in his cries of pain, no thanks to his dear old Uncle Vernon. Before that, he settled for gritting his teeth.

“AHH!” he shouted, a spasm jerking his body before the hand not touching his forehead rested a hand on his stomach. The waves of magic made his body relax, the spasms dying down.

“You are doing well. It is nearly over.”

He tried to sit up when done, only to slump bonelessly back down.

“God that's draining.” Harry managed to open his eyes and squint, surprised at Alistair's close proximity.

“Would you like to rest here for a while?” he asked. “Removing larger blocks are exhausting.”

Nodding weakly, he could say no more as he allowed himself to be carried off in sleep.

Regarding the young man with a fond smile, Alistair took a seat at his desk. He had a letter to write.

It took Harry a few seconds to realise that his mind was conscious, grimacing slightly. He'd never been a heavy sleeper, all those years underneath the Dursleys ensured this though today was different. He was almost regretful of waking up and tempted to fall back asleep but suddenly reminded of where he was and what had happened. He stood up slowly, taking the time to stretch.

A sudden movement caught Harry's attention. Alistair was seated at his desk, faintly concerned.

“How did you sleep? Twelve hours have passed.”

“Really?” Harry exclaimed. “I slept well, actually.”

“You seem surprised about that,” Alistair observed.

“I am. With all that's happened so far, not to mention a Dark Lord after my arse, it doesn't really leave much room for a restful sleep.” he smiled a little. “It makes a nice change.”

“Do you not have Dreamless Sleep?” he questioned.

Harry frowned. “No, I've had that stuff before. At one point I got addicted to it. The worst thing was that when I stopped, nightmares that I had returned but they were more frequent each night until it had balanced itself back out. So I tend to avoid taking it.”

The man's eyes lit up in understanding. “We do not dream, as such, so have no need of it.”
“Lucky. I’m half tempted to become a Vampire just for that.”

Alistair’s eyes glimmered with some emotion Harry couldn’t place. “You are welcome to stay here for a few days if you wish. The company around here is rather boring.”

Harry was amused, filing away the information that there was at least one Vampire who broke the stereotype. “I can stay for a bit, yeah.”

"Excellent!” Enthusiastic, Alistair happily showed him around most rooms, leaving many untouched but with the possibility of exploration.

In the end, Harry stayed for three days before deciding to head back. On the first day, he sent a brief letter to Remus.

Remus,

How are things? Not too lonely without my top-notch company are you? To get to the point, I’m having a brilliant time. Something distinctly me has happened, though.

I’ll tell you more when I get back,

Harry

It was a few hours later when Harry and Alistair were in the main sitting room. Lavishly decorated with a smaller version of the large chandelier he’d seen, a shimmering pattern coated the walls and ceiling.

Harry was surprised to learn that Alistair didn't burn in the sun like what a lot of books described or at least, not as severely. With age guaranteed resistance though, for non-magic vampires, it varied.

“I want to ask you something.” Harry started as a plate of refreshments and a bottle of butterbeer for him and a glass of brandy for Alistair appeared on the table.

“Ask away.” he flicked his hand, taking a seat and giving Harry his attention.

“How have you ever actually possessed someone?”

Alistair's expression displayed slight discomfort. “I have. Not maliciously but in my younger years, I have slipped into several minds of persistent women, some who were not willing to understand that my preferences lie elsewhere.”

Harry eyed the Vampire. He'd remember that.

In that moment, Alistair decided to do something which hadn't been done in centuries. He would offer his alliance and any influence he had, towards his cause. There was something unknown to him which he couldn't shake free but had the feeling, that this decision would change the very course of
his life.

“The other reason why I possess people is that it is better than Obliviate if done correctly. The incantation depends on the skill of the caster and even if the caster is skilled, they have to be focused, or they will erase more than the desired memory. Possession is temporarily borrowing the mind, to implant subtle suggestions. The whisper of thoughts from me will allow them to forget that I drank from them that day. Though most Vampires drain their victims dry, I drink only enough to sustain, healing the bite wound after.”

It was a sobering thought for Harry, but he did find himself surprised that Alistair was so considering. Despite his intention of keeping an open mind, he’d always had the initial thought that Vampires were just blood drinkers and didn’t care much for humans or other races, but he was proved wrong.

“Thank you.” his eyes were sincere. “Whatever preconceived notions I might have had about your kind are gone. While I hadn’t met any up until now, it was hard not to go along with what I’d been told. You’re one of those diamond in the rough sorts aren’t you?”

Alistair smiled gently. “That is one way of putting it.”

It was time for Harry to head back, but Alistair told him to wait for a moment, as he had something to give him.

It was a few seconds later that Alistair found himself in the treasury room, located in one of the rooms far below the castle. The place was enormous and would take more than a few days for Harry to get to know all of them, that is if he wanted to come back here. He found what he was looking for in an intricately carved chest, bearing the Wyvern over the crucifix symbol. The throne wasn't there from Dracula's time. In fact, many updates and changes had been made to the castle since and the entryway was bare from most decoration until Alistair had gotten his neatly manicured fingernails into it. The chest with his family motto on it was very small, as it has only the need to store two matching items in it, which was what he sought.

Elongating his fangs to nick his index finger, he placed the bloody digit to the lock, watching with satisfaction as the little chest opened, protective magic still active after all these years.

The items he wanted were imbued with plenty of protection charms and other useful little things, but he spent time updating enchantments. Unfortunately, it couldn't stop Avada Kedavra.

They were two matching bracelets. Each was identical and the gems embedded into them would only change once worn. They reflected the wearer and the colours were in sync with their emotions, much like a mood ring, only more accurate. Instead of their emotions, they would show the one who wears the other bracelet instead.

The bracelet itself was a very simple yet elegant design, the metal extracted beneath moonlight. The moonlight has magical properties, as much as other wizards would scoff at this. At night, the bracelet shone with a light of its own, reflecting what the glowing orb in the sky imbued it with. On either side, clutching a stone between them, were two Wyverns. Their forked tails met at the end, joining to create a circle. They were magnetic and it was how the bracelet was pulled apart to place on a wrist, by pulling the tail ends apart and letting them reconnect.

The most special thing about them was the ability for telepathic communication, no matter the distance. They were originally used for one's intended, or anyone with a deep sense of trust and well-being for the other.
Placing one on his wrist and carrying the other, he felt hesitation for the first time in a long time. Would he accept it? The bracelets were intended for more than he was using them for, but situations did tend to develop over time. Shaking the stray thoughts from his head, he let the tendrils of darkness from the shadows of the room carry him to another shadowed corner, near where Harry was.

Harry had to admit, he had a great time. Alistair was certainly a character, that much he could admit. Deep down, he’d love to meet up with the Vampire again. He was one of the few people who saw him and not the cursed scar carved into his forehead. He’d realised that his glamours didn’t work with the man and he wasn’t surprised by that. Soft footsteps brought him back to the present and he stood upon Alistair’s arrival.

“Lord Potter,” Alistair started. Harry raised an eyebrow. “I wish to offer you an alliance, to aid you in the upcoming war which you will be in the centre of. I and my brethren are aware of the Prophecy and my connections and all I own which may help, I offer to you. Do you accept?”

Seeing the seriousness of the situation, Harry nodded. “I accept.”

The Vampire grinned, his mood returning to the usual. “Good! I have something for you if you will allow me to put it on?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Harry looked at the bracelet in the man’s hand and held out his right wrist. “Ok.”

He undid the bracelet, his fingers brushing the skin of Harry’s wrist, sending tingles up his spine.

“They will help with communication if you wish to get in touch. Simply think of my name and I will hear you. They are buffed with several protective charms, though I added a few extra before I brought them up. I say them, as I wear the matching one.”

“Thank you.” Harry nodded his head with a smile, genuine in his thanks. The gift was thoughtful and most definitely useful, what with how many people wanted to murder him on the spot.

“You are quite welcome.” he bowed slightly. “I shall see you to the door.”

He did just that and after waving goodbye to Alistair, Harry decided to peruse some of the shops he’d glanced at on his way up to the castle a few days ago. Near the Portkey service, he’d spotted a twisting path leading downwards, to the point where he couldn’t see what lay at the bottom. Deciding to browse the shops a little later, as it was only early and they shut late, he set off, a destination in mind.

Chapter End Notes

To anyone who may come from this country, I deeply apologise. Just think of it as magical based and what you know of it and how it truly is, the non-magical place.
Alliances and Truths

Chapter Summary

Harry discovers a new world, gets drunk with Remus which after, has consequences for others.

The land beneath his feet was dry, footfalls heard clearly as not many were wondering about the place at 8 am in the morning. To ward off the faint chill, was his cloak, the regulated body charms ensuring that he was neither too warm or too cold. The path he'd taken away from the small town twisted downwards into a slope but managed to keep his footing.

To his surprise, the close path lead into a cave. Time itself looked to have let the rocks crumble here and it was with some curiosity and excitement that Harry entered, the whisper of an adventure enticing him.

“Damn,” he murmured appreciatively, gladder than ever he took this little trip before his inevitable return back to Hogwarts.

The path before him was relatively thick but didn't cover the entirety of the cave. It was a bridge across to the other side. Multicoloured patches of moist grass glistening with dew shone with a light of their own as little glowing mushrooms dotted the bridge. He looked below, a steady stream of water and thick vines sprouting from the walls. The whole area exuded peace and tranquillity, as though humans had never stepped foot here.

“What's this?” he wondered as his attention was focused on a miniature tree sprouting from the ground. The branches were wrapped around a brightly glowing ball that seemed to reflect the entire galaxy within it, shining with a magic of its own. He cautiously reached out to touch it and was surprised when a small opening was revealed to him. Looking inside, he realised the contents were of several precious gems and wondered what on earth this thing was. Crossing his fingers that he wasn't being an idiot, he reached his hand in and placed the gems within his bag.

He truly took his time, marvelling at the sights and wonders of the likes which he had never seen. Then a plant similar to that of which he'd gotten the gems for stood before him, but it was smaller, taller and more like a flower than a tree. Behind it directly in the middle, was a large door made up of vines and swirling magic. To Harry, the plant looked almost like a lever or a pulley of some kind.

Crouching before it, he looked for any indication that the plant could be manoeuvred in some way and noticed a faint black line around the base of the ball. Perhaps if he turned the knob clockwise? Wondering if for once in his life things could actually be that easy, Harry did just that, delighted when with a rustle of leaves and vines scraping against rock revealed what lay within.

Harry had too may shocks within these last few days so it was by some miracle that he didn't pass out in a potentially hostile environment, but this was the one time he was glad to be Harry Potter and right here.

A huge, twisting tree stood in the centre of a circular room which looked to be bigger than The Great Hall at Hogwarts. The knots and wood spoke of age-old wisdom and the leaves it sprouted were deep crimson, lightening at the tips. Looking up he realized there wasn't actually a roof, but more of
these vines, much thicker which intertwined in the middle. Several leafed plants hung from the vines where the end of the vines themselves was wrapped securely around several towering grey pillars, looking like the room's foundation. The aforementioned tree was stood on a circular platform with several steps leading up and surrounding it, were several similar plants which he used to open the door. These didn't look like they had a mechanism of any kind, but more for decoration. The grass lush beneath his feet he glanced up, only to see someone approaching.

Harry scrutinised the female heading in his direction. At first glance, he would have pegged them for elves, but dismissed that thought immediately. They did have pointed ears, but they were larger and much more angular. This one's skin was completely blue, as a natural colour and immediately, could tell that she towered over him by a significant amount.

Upon closer inspection, spirals lined her cheekbones and went down beyond her neck, the skin a darker hue. She had no whites to her eyes, they were completely black as was the pupil. The only sign of recognition he could see in her looking at him was the very vivid shade of purple which shone like a neon light from her eyes, a faint white shine indicating where her pupils were. Her eyes were catlike, lips the same shade of blue as her markings. Her hair was tied into an elegant bun, another of those strange plants in her hair but they shone and accentuated her features. She wore what looked to be armor made entirely of vines and leaves, very much the same kinds of materials he had discovered in his short walk to the heart of this strange new world. Huge blades were upon her back, curved and looking like fanged boomerangs. She stopped before him, Harry craning his neck to look properly.

She cocked her head, gazing at him very much the same way as he was looking at her. Her widened eyes seemed to reflect surprise that he was even here. “Greetings, traveller. My name is Nihri. To what do we owe the pleasure?” she had an Irish lilt to her voice, Seamus’ own accent ringing in his ears.

“Hello, Nihri,” he bowed slightly. “My name is Harry. I didn't expect to come across this place, I was exploring and ended up here.”

He decided in this case honesty was definitely the best policy. She looked dangerous, as did some of the others who were eying him in suspicion.

She raised an eyebrow. “Mortal, no human has set foot in this place for thousands of years. We Fae who make this our home, but no human. You have found this place for a reason.”

Harry confirmed to himself that magic definitely guarded the entrance to the cave. He gazed at her curiously. “The entrance to your home was a cave at the end of a path which broke away from the town I was in. You have magic guarding it?”

She nodded. “Only those worthy may enter, the elder decides who but the fact that you have found us, is an indication. Come with me and you will learn about the Autumn Fae.”

Harry spent the day within the Autumn Fae's home. He found out that time passed differently. While here he was there for nearly an entire day, once he'd exited it would only be two hours later than when he'd entered, which was very convenient for him. A craft smith by the name of Gareon sensed that Harry had gems in his possession taken from the 'Elderlings'. In truth, no one knew their names and they each served a different purpose. They would only open when they sensed one who was worthy.

Gareon fashioned a ruby pendant for Hermione, a sapphire bracelet for Luna and rose quartz earrings for Ginny. He knew he could trust these girls, especially Hermione who was like a sister to him.
Harry found out that the elder was, in fact, the large tree and spoke. With all his years in the wizarding world finding out that half if not all the things he'd learned in the Muggle world was real, the idea of a talking tree was more than acceptable.

“Stay true to your path, beware a shadow that hides in the light.” The elder had a voice which reminded Harry of every Hogwarts door creaking in the castle. Like Dumbledore, they spoke in cryptic tones. He had enough intelligence to understand that it was a warning about Dumbledore, taking the advice to heart.

Eventually, most of the Fae warmed up to him, Nihri helping with this. She was among one of the most respected Fae within their clan. Soon he was answering questions about what it was like out there and he shared some of his 'destiny' with them. Later, Harry was surprised by her next words.

“I would like to offer you an alliance,” she stated formally. “Though we do not usually trouble ourselves in the affairs of mortals, we sense that you bring change and that it will affect more than just your world. If you have need of us, speak with Willow.”

He frowned. “Who's Willow?”

Nihri smiled softly. “You know her as the Whomping Willow. The only reason we know of the world outside is through her. She communicated with the elder who in turn communicates with us. She is one of our seedlings, lost to us in the travel between worlds. The tang of different magic in the air served as corruption when Albus Dumbledore planted her. The dark lycanthropic magic is toxic,” her brows creased into a worried frown. "And we have not heard from her in a long time."

Remembering his near-death experience, it was a struggle not to grimace. He would look into this when possible, however.

He bowed once more. “Thank you for your hospitality and gifts,” he gestured to the stowed away armor he'd been given that was adjustable and various weapons which they'd explained the use of.

Nodding her head with a slight smile she left, Harry leaving as well and once outside, intent on telling Remus of his latest adventure.

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Harry was certainly in a cheery mood after he'd returned to England. He'd had a fantastic time and while there, bought some finely tailored robes for Remus.

At first, he thought that Remus wouldn't believe that he'd gained an ally with the Fae and a Vampire, but then remembered with some disgust he was Harry Potter, the impossible was made possible where his life was concerned.

Exiting the Portkey Service, he looked upon his wrist with some fondness at the bracelet Alistair had given him. It was truly a beautiful design and the stone shone a golden colour. Harry knew how mood rings worked and he supposed that he was seeing a reflection of Alistair's emotions. He did wonder what his were like right now.

Through his glamour it was nice, to blend in the background. He wished he had some semblance of normalcy, that he could go down Diagon Alley and not be gawked at like the return of Merlin. One day after the defeat of Voldemort, it was his wish that he could walk about as he pleased with no one batting an eyelid.

Giving a wistful sigh, he chose the shadows of Knockturn Alley to apparate to home.

It was with a great sense of satisfaction that he stayed upright on his feet and didn't trip. They did say
practice made perfect and while he still found the sensation unpleasant, at least it was only
disorientating and not bruising when he fell flat on his face.

With a mischievous grin, Harry closed his eyes and let his magic search for Remus'. Since the
removal of his blocks, he'd noticed a lot of changes here and there, the most being his increase in
power but also, he was more sensitive to his own magic, others or in the air. In his mind, magic
looked similar to what objects do through a thermal camera, showing strengths and weaknesses. A
few seconds of searching indicated that his wolf friend was currently in the living room.

He disillusioned himself and his belongings, masking his scent and the sound of his footsteps. He
was the son of a Marauder and it was his duty in life to be the best son he could be, give his dad's
friend a few more grey hairs to join the numerous collection.

The door opened with a barely noticeable creak. Peeking in the thankfully open door, he was sitting
there, book in his open hand and tea on the side table. Barely restraining a snicker, he crept over to
the side of the armchair, leaning to whisper in Remus' ear.

“Your time is up, child. Let the ferryman take you across river Styx, where Death shall greet you as
he would an old friend.”

If Harry had never met him before, he would guess that the resulting wail was that of a banshee and
not a man. He narrowly missed the book hitting him, removing all spells and almost collapsing in
laughter. Dumping his things down, he offered a hand. “Sorry Remus, couldn't resist. I had a great
time and I'll tell you all about it. How are you?”

Remus sighed as though tired, but the amused twinkle in his eyes showed his true thoughts. He
grasped the outstretched hand and stood on his feet. Clapping him on the shoulder, he gave his best
stern look.

“I'm not getting any younger here, can you give this poor old defenceless wolf a break?”

Harry crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow. “Defenceless? You need a change of adjective. I'm.pretty sure that even with all my training you could still toss me on my arse.”

Remus gave him a considering look. “Why don't we find out?”

Harry's eyes visibly lit up. “Good idea, I have something to give you anyway.”

It was an hour and a half later that Harry and Remus collapsed on the duelling platform within the
Requirement Closet. They'd come to a draw and both were exhausted. It was then that Harry realised
that while he might have tremendous power, it meant nothing if he didn't know how to utilise it
properly. He was at a huge disadvantage with Voldemort having more experience than him. It was
his duty to see to it that he levelled the playing field.

They made use of their new armor, finding that it protected them better than even battle robes and it
was easier to move more fluidly. As of yet, they hadn't had the chance to take a proper look at the
weapons. While Harry was told how they worked, using them was a different matter entirely.

“Great work Harry,” Remus smiled slightly as they left, having an idea. "Care for a few drinks? I
know you take me as the responsible one of The Marauders but you're at home and I've been
meaning to show a way to thank you for saving me from certain death. What better way to express
my gratitude than to explain the joys of a hangover? Not me personally but James and Sirius had
terrible ones."

Harry smirked. “Let's see just how much alcohol shall we?”
It was 9 am. Harry had no clue how he’d managed to find his bed and the loud snores next door indicated that Remus had too. He was surprised to note that other than his itchy eyes and dry mouth, he didn't seem to be suffering from the effects of a hangover. He was for once in his life thankful that he was Harry Potter, the non-hangover guy. Now that was a title he'd rather have.

"Hello."

“Greetings!”

“Morning.”

To anyone else, if spoken aloud, it would just be various animal noises but to Harry, he knew it was Aela, Lume and Thanatos.

“Morning.” he responded, still groggy. He was in the process of getting up when somewhat familiar memories of the previous night struck him.

“Oh no, I didn't.” Harry groaned, torn between wanting to laugh or cry. Even when getting drunk at home he was a danger to himself and Remus was no help, responsible one of the Marauders or not. If he could recall correctly and at least for this part he could, he and Remus sent a joint howler addressed to Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape, to arrive upon the continuation of an Order meeting. How they managed to set that up in their state at the time Harry didn't know, but he was just thankful that the manor was so well protected. The only thing he wondered, was when the next meeting would be and what would happen at that point.

It was another meeting of the Order of the Phoenix and Arthur was, to put it politely, bored. He was sure he' d be bored for the past several years if not for Remus always speaking with him, as he wasn't blinded by the godly image Albus portrayed as were many of the other order members, including his wife. She trusted a little too much, while he preferred to err on the side of caution. Tonks, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie, Ginny and Minerva looked to be of the same opinion as him.

He was worried about his youngest son, however. It was subtle but over the years, he'd noticed how many trips Ron had spoken of to his office. What did he want with him? The sudden disappearance of Remus and the way that Harry was being treated didn't bode well either. These days they barely talked about Voldemort but Harry and how to bring him back over to their side.

The things which Albus has done has bordered on the side of grey, but no one questioned his motives aloud. He prayed that Remus was alright and hopefully with Harry. Running a hand through his thinning red hair, he drank some more tea, idly wishing it was something stronger.

Suddenly, a nearby window shattered into tiny pieces as what looked like a flaming comet the size of a Quaffle landed with a hard thump on the table. Strangely it didn't set the wood alight, but left a charred dent, ash and a crumpled ball.

Just as Albus was about to investigate this, the ball straightened itself out into a very recognisable howler, except this one was black. The only time a howler was black, was when more than one person was doing the shouting. It seemed to eye Albus and strangely enough Severus with its beady paper eyes, opening its mouth and uttering words which Arthur wasn't about to forget anytime soon.

“CUMBLEZORE!” Arthur presumed it was an attempt at Albus' surname but was either mispronounced on purpose or by accident. “D'you mind if I nick some of your beard hair? I need s'me knittin' practice an’.” There were several hiccups and coughs breaking the sentence up, where
Arthur came to understand two things. One, this was the first howler he'd heard where the one sending such a thing wasn't constantly shouting and two, that someone was Harry.

“Your beard would be ideal!”

From the mouth of the howler, two knitting needles and a pair of scissors emerged. Before anyone could so much as react, his beard was snipped clean off. The man had to settle for the loss of his beard by groaning into his hands as his beard usually soaked up his tears of misery, anguish and anger. They flew far out of everyone's reach, quickly vacating the smashed window and starting what was the beginning of an unusual jumper.

The howler then turned to face Snape, a second voice emerging simultaneously shocking some and pleasing others.

“Ah Severus and Albus too! how lovely it is to speak with you after your most recent murder attempt.”

Momentarily distracted, Dumbledore turned ashen white as a murmur of disbelief swept over the table. They were told Remus had defected and 'Gone dark' with Harry, but the great Albus Dumbledore, attempted murder? Most of the occupants didn't want to believe this, but some allegiances shifted, others were reinforced that they were on the right side.

Waiting a few seconds to see if the howler had anything else to say, Tonks drained her coffee. The black envelope imploded on itself, showering dust upon the occupants.

The rest of the dust sparked alight, floating in the air to form words. From the surrounding room, seemed to echo a whisper of a thousand voices. Those voices called to Snape who had not managed to Floo from the premises in time, the dust compelled him to retake his seat.

We are the essence of times gone by,
    A judge of morality, an all-seeing eye,
Any pure of heart who mean no harm,
You're faced with glitter, no need for alarm.

Those who wronged him with malicious intent,
    Shall be overcome with an obnoxious scent.
The tang of nightmares and paralysing fear,
    Is it a loved one, someone they hold dear?

Something humiliating, it really depends,
    Who among you, are truly good friends?
With that in mind, we bid you good night,
    We eagerly anticipate a fascinating sight.

Arthur did wonder who was the poet among the duo. On a hunch, he would have to guess Remus. He was always the most studious of his group of friends, though there certainly was a chance that Harry had let his creative juices flow.

Whenever there were no meetings, order members liked to drop by Grimmauld Place for a chat. He was sure Tonks noticed this also, what with her profession, but Albus, Severus, Mad-Eye,
Shacklebolt and his son Bill he'd often see chatting in a spare room, with every silencing charm known to mankind on the doors.

Like Arthur, Tonks had noticed the group, since the very beginning. However, it was only recently that she had become suspicious, what with recent events unfolding. It seemed like the most unlikely group of wizards coming together in a time of war, but tonight confirmed something was wrong.

She may be clumsy, but her mind was unaffected and her Auror training was kicking in. As soon as the first word was spoken by the howler of Remus, the same people who spoke with one another as a group unit created a shift in the air. Albus paled rapidly, noticeable even under the trail tracks of tears at the loss of his beard. She felt Snape shifting near her, his beady black eyes narrowing and a vein pulsing in his temple. Mad-Eye's eye was swivelling in his head more rapidly, Kingsley's eyes seemed to look everywhere but at the people surrounding him and Bill twiddled his thumbs, nervous.

As for her, she was more than relieved to hear that Remus was ok. Once, she did have a thing for him but that fizzled and died when she'd learned of his rekindled relationship with Sirius. She wasn't disappointed or saddened at all. In fact, she was happy for the pair as they looked good together. It was a true shame about Sirius, especially since she never got to know one of her few cool family members before his death.

She was brought from her puzzling thoughts as the judgement dust, the only name she could think of it, began to work upon three occupants in the room, leaving the others unharmed. She noted with some interest that the ones affected were of the five in the group she had been thinking about. Gears whirred in her mind and she was beginning to wonder just how Harry and Remus got tangled up with them.

Unknown to no one but themselves, Shacklebolt and Bill were affected by the dust turned glitter, just not in the same way as everyone else. While it was harmless, it acted as removal of all unwillingly placed spells. The voices whispered a warning, cautionary tales to be more careful while compulsion and loyalty spells drifted away.

Mad-Eye was in a nightmare. Right now, witnessing the release of all Death Eaters from Azkaban prison, ones which were confirmed dead, very much alive. The minister of magic was now Voldemort and all he could do was sit and watch in horror. Only he could see this, the other occupants of the room were either watching their colleagues in bemusement or had their own fears to deal with.

'What did I do to deserve this?' Snape wondered as he witnessed one of his worst memories to date, more potent once he realised that while the rest of the order couldn't see what he was seeing, they definitely saw the result of his trousers taken down, to be levitated from his seat and hung upside down.

Ron was starting to regret joining if this was what it entailed, invited by Dumbledore. He joined to enforce the good of the light and was glad Lupin was gone. He was nearly killed at thirteen by that creature! In his opinion, werewolves were disgusting, certainly not human, the fact that they were human every day with the exception of once or twice per month he failed to understand. Wherever he was, Ron was pleased it was away from here.

He had no regrets turning his back on Potter. Truly they were only friends before he met the greatest wizard there ever was, Albus Dumbledore. He was offered the world and he accepted. His ideal world was fame, power and girls. All evil was to be exterminated and people would look to him for guidance. He wanted to be the second Albus. If he had to steal Potter's belongings and spy on him, so be it. It was for the greater good. Deep down he knew the despite all the training he was receiving, he wasn't a strong fighter.
An involuntary shudder ran down his spine. His freckles were like flecks of lava on ice as the glitter didn't affect him, but the voices did.

Enemy once friend, there's a wind of change,
Avada Green eyes, a colour so strange.
They hold power, to shake Wizarding kind,
What side are you on, the perceiving or blind?

An Elder One, the shadow hiding in light,
Has caused greater damage, left him in a plight.
Ronald, while you haven't wronged him as great,
Careful of this path, lest share the same fate.

Ron was shaken up, but unfortunately convinced himself it was nothing more than a practical joke. He had every intention of continuing his destination, with no planned route changes.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore had arguably the worst nightmare. It was the case for all of these men, but while one was the worst fear, another was a past memory, his was a memory of cold, hard fact. The one fact which if it got out, not even his many titles could help him worm his way out of the consequences.
Act of Evil

Chapter Summary

A time of many years ago, which revealed what happened in more than just Albus' life.

WARNING: Dark themes in this chapter.

July 1922

“Creaking bones at my age is never a good sign.” Albus murmured to himself, resting his aching back in the threadbare armchair. He barely took a glance at the newspaper in front of him before tossing it aside, disgusted.

Yesterday evening, it was confirmed by several eyewitnesses that there has been an increase in the number of Vampire attacks. Victims are always found in the same position; Bodies drained dry of blood, discarded on streets in broad daylight.

“I was terrified,” says Amanda Burns of The Thistle Inn. “I was on my way home from work, about to buy some dinner when this man walks by me, moaning about the sun. I'm sure I saw a glint of white fang in his mouth.”

Are we prepared for the Vampires, or will they continue to slaughter us one by one? This reporter tried to get a statement from the Auror department, but no comments were made.

Will the attacks continue, or will our saviour step out from the shadows?

He poured a little scotch into his tankard, the news these days and the students he taught warranted something a bit stronger. “Filthy creatures. There's only room for the light in this world.”

He hated them. He hated them with such loathing, only Dark Lords could beat that hatred. Miranda's line about a saviour stuck out at him. There was only one man he knew who would help him in his quest to eradicate the Vampires. Jeremiah Buckle. Hurriedly sending a note he waited, to enact his plan.

“My dear brother, you do know that this will have serious consequences?” Alistair questioned, one eyebrow arched. The pair were seated at the dining table, a decanter of pixie blood between them. The Daily Prophet had branches globally, so the news spread fast.

“They are not noble. They have no honour and no understanding of how the world works.
“I understand and agree with you, but could you not have slaughtered them away from prying eyes? You know Non-Magic Vampires share no resemblance to the creatures they once were when dead.”

He took a sip of his drink, savouring the taste as if to wash away the foulness of their conversation topic.

“They had to be made an example of. Non-Magic and Magical Vampires alike roam out there. We only kill if necessary, if the body has recently died or we take our pick of the guilty. They do not. They prey on the innocents. Women, children, the elderly. We are looked down upon due to the actions of the non-magical kind and it is infuriating.”

Magical Vampires, unlike Non-Magic Vampires, could alter their appearance. Truly, it was only their fangs that gave them away. There were a few races out there including the Elves which shared their unusual eye colour, so any suspicion was averted if they simply mentioned their Elven lineage, which could perhaps in part be true.

Alistair was a dab hand with wandless magic and the elements. Anything magical was his strong point. Solomon was a master of the mind but many of the weapons in the armoury were enchanted by Solomon, a skill learned many years ago. He favoured a katana if they were in hand to hand combat. Alistair was proficient with weapons but preferred magic.

They were practically newborn vampires, Alistair at 20, when everything started to go wrong.

Their father was an ancient vampire at 3,000 years old. Other Vampires erred on the side of caution, with his great age. But inevitably, one day someone would strike. A large clan of Vampires cornered him after a session with the Vampire Council, most of greater age. While he had tremendous power, he didn't have the endurance to fight off all of them and was quickly overwhelmed. One drained him of every drop of magical blood he owned, increasing her strength. It was a fight to the death and hundreds of vampires lost their lives that day, unknown if she was among them.

Their mother loved their father very much and despite the years she had lived, she didn't cope with her husband's death. It happened gradually, bit by bit, creeping up on their once tight-knit family. It was still a blow to the two brothers that they never noticed a thing until it was too late.

She'd drink a little blood here and there but eventually stopped. Weeks turned into months without blood. Her magic and soon her life began to fade until one day, she collapsed, never to wake again.

Alistair shook himself from those saddening thoughts, or they were at the time. These days they were more a shadow of a memory which had once been, living as long as they had, that was bound to happen. He grasped Solomon's pale hands in his own slightly darker skinned ones.

“I know.”

A hand found its way to Solomon's inky black waves, settling at the back of his head. The short strands flowed through his hands easily and he felt his brother slowly relax into him.

“Are you thinking of Mother and Father again?”

At first, he was momentarily startled by Solomon's question but soon recovered. He could be very perceptive when he wasn't daydreaming or occupied with something else. It was that, among other things.

“Yes. They often pop into my head. Occasionally I wonder how much different our lives would
“Don’t focus on what could be. Focus on what can be.” Solomon advised, straightening in his seat.

“Wise words,” Alistair nodded approvingly, "If only more would heed them.”

Albus wisely chose the table furthest from his brother. Ever since Ariana’s death, they’ve never seen eye to eye and Aberforth barely tolerated him. The only reason he wasn’t barred was that it would be bad for business.

A subtle cough alerted Albus to Jeremiah’s presence.

Jeremiah Buckle was one of the most prejudiced people but to Albus, he was merely cautious. At Hogwarts, Jeremiah had caught his eye when he stood up for a fellow classmate bullied by some of the older students. He was a Ravenclaw, didn’t even draw his wand and instead used words to influence them in leaving the area. Using the Slytherin side of him which he denied, Albus sensed an opportunity.

At the age of 18, Vampires slaughtered his entire family, leaving only distant relations left. Albus never did ask for the details, only that there were no magic traces. It made no difference to him, magical or not magical, they were all cold-hearted blood-sucking creatures.

Jeremiah now worked in the ministry, for communications between magical creatures and wizards. It gave him the unique opportunity to learn valuable information about each race, to see if one or two more restrictive laws could be added to the long list.

Placing a few notice me not charms, files were dumped onto the table.

“Names and places of people who are suspected Vampires, or who are suspected of knowing Vampires. There are one or two members of the Auror Department who may be willing to help,” at Albus’ sharp look, he quickly carried on, “I casually dropped in conversation their opinion of Vampires. Some were indifferent but most wanted to take action against them.”

“Good. See if you can let them know that there are people who want to put a stop to the Vampires and their heinous crimes.” His eyes shifted from side to side in slight paranoia. Though he knew very few people had the magic level to break one of his spells, it never hurt to be cautious.

“We are ready to target the names on that list whenever you are.”

Deciding to put an end to the short meeting he stood up, leaving a few sickles on the table.

“Whoever wishes to help, report back asap.”

“Of course.”

With that, the two men departed, as though they hadn’t been discussing the desire to wipe out an entire species.

Albus cursed his rotten luck. Dippet really was an old fool, an old fool who apparently couldn’t be bothered to do his job, if the documents which needed a signature by the Headmaster was any indication. A half hour later he was done, he had just enough time to recline back in his seat, a cup of strong tea with scotch added in as a delivery owl flew through the open window.

As he went through the delivered files, it became clear to him that he’d listed the ones who really did
want to help, no matter the background and skill level and he'd left it up to him to weed out the desirable ones. It was fine by him. An hour later he had a team of seven in total, including him and Jeremiah. Confident in his choice, he perused them a final time.

Name: Ori Sanders
Age: 40
Occupation: Auror at the British Ministry of Magic

Reason for aid: I've been with the Aurors since the age of 21. I've seen a hell of a lot of innocents dead at the hands of those bloodsuckers and if the law isn't willing to eradicate them, I'm more than happy to join forces with someone who will help to get the job done. If I am accepted, I will kill them without remorse or mercy.

Name: Sara Wright
Age: 25
Occupation: Hitwizard (Secret Auror Service of America)

Reason for aid: They just creep me out. I have a good track record, I haven't failed a job yet. My parents are Hitwizards, they trained me since I was small. Plus the pay is more than I'd usually get for a job.

Name: Matthew Bell
Age: 43
Occupation: Potions Master

Reason for aid: I have some volatile potions I would like to test out. What better way to do so than by practising on Vampire scum? The Vampires die, I get to confirm if my concoctions will work. Everyone wins.

Name: Maya Sharp
Age: 21
Occupation: Apprentice Mediwitch

Reason for aid: I graduated from Beauxbatons with top grades. A vampire drained my brother and sister of their blood and I want revenge. If there's one extra person helping in this fight, then the odds are already better. I may be young, but I'm determined to bring the fight to them.

Name: Sullivan Rowe
Age: 32

Occupation: International Trader (By ship or broom flight)

Reason for aid: There are only so many times your cargo can be intercepted by thirsty Vampires looking for a drink. I tell you, transporting animals is a nightmare. Then I get the blame because I can't stop them! If anything, I want to rid the world of them so I can do my bloody job.

Confident with his choices, it was only a matter of time for Albus to contact these people and get to work.

With that, the Guild of Light was born.

It was several weeks later, about a month before Hogwarts began accepting old and new students alike. It was difficult to organise a time where they could all meet up weekly and eradicate the targets one by one, but they managed it.

“Welcome everyone, to the first meeting of the Guild of Light. We all know why we're here, to help rid the world of the abominations known as Vampires.”

There were murmurs of agreement, but the members stayed quiet, ready to hear what their leader had to say.

“I have decided that in order to prove your loyalty, you will all be marked by the symbol of the Guild of Light. You will feel mild pain in your forearm, whichever arm is up to you.”

Voices were less sure this time, but no one wanted to back out now. They wanted to help and if this was the only way, fine.

The design was very simple, a Phoenix in mid-flight. What better creature to represent their cause than one of the lightest there is? The sunset markings of the feathers and the piercing blue eyes shone on their skin.

They would be connected through magic. A member in danger would alert the others by a faint pulse which would radiate from the Phoenixes. The leader tapped a wand to his or her own forearm to send a warning pulse for emergency situations, that everyone was to leave for the calling area as quickly as possible. It still had a bit of tweaking and possibly extra additions, but Albus was happy with the result.

Maya buckled under the slight pain, but she was even more determined to see it through, as were the rest of the members. With them, would bring a change that the wizarding world would be thankful for.

Over a short period of time, other details about who would be working with who and what rank each member would be were sorted out. Jeremiah and Matthew their potions expert would partner with Albus. Ori would partner with Sara, which left Sullivan and Maya as the members who would offer a second line of defence.

The clothing was simple robes, embroidered with a second colour according to rank. The base colour was silver. Albus in gold, Jeremiah in Silver, Matthew in Bronze, Ori in Blue, Maya in green and Sullivan in red.
Their first target was a family of Vampires who lived in Brighton, England. They were well known and liked but to their eyes, The Vampires had obviously used magic to influence the minds of the folk around them.

“Everyone ready?” Albus asked. At their nods, they simultaneously apparated to just outside the magical community of that small town.

“I've never been to Brighton, it's very pretty.” Maya smiled slightly, enjoying the peacefulness of the place.

A sneering voice sidled alongside her. “It will be even prettier with Vampire blood spilt.”

Ignoring him, she focused on the task ahead. The Morganti family lived at the higher end of the magical community, the central mansion.

Enoc Morganti was 300 years of age and a well-respected businessman. He had a lot of connections with the Vampire community despite his young age because he had the drive to prove himself. He worked in spell creation where he met his wife of 195 years, Ava.

They had two foster children. A 6-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy, Jeremiah hadn't been able to get further details on that.

After a few point me spells, The group soon found their destination. They decided to take the non-violent approach at first, state that they were here to talk about religious beliefs. Albus was unsure on the plan, but Jeremiah assured him that they were open-minded.

The others waited a foot or so back while Albus rapped lightly on the door. A few seconds later, a petite and beautiful woman opened the door, red hair in a single plait.

“Hello, can I help you?” she smiled politely, not suspecting the malicious intent.

“Yes. We are conducting a study of the different faiths which people follow and how they differ from place to place,” he lied.

Her eyes widened slightly. “Oh, well we're not religious, but I would be happy to listen.”

It was easier than Albus had thought. He took a moment to observe his surroundings, as he felt his team come in behind him.

“Enoc!” Ava called. “Some nice ladies and gentlemen are conducting a study on differing faiths.”

“Oh, that's nice,” he called back, voice getting increasingly louder as he came in with a child on his hip.

“Emily, see if you can find your brother and stay with him while we talk, ok honey?” he placed her down on the ground, blue eyes piercing Albus' own.

“Yes, father.” She shot a wary glance at the strangers, having a foreboding feeling though didn't voice it.

The pair turned to them expectantly but before they could so much as react, they each removed a crucifix from underneath their robe, shining upon them.

Most people think that like Sunlight, the sight of the crucifix burns Vampires. In truth, it was more of a phobia, about half of Vampires got over their irrational fear and were unaffected. Ava and Enoc
were not among the few. He wrapped his arms around his wife, shielding himself as much as her.

“We are The Guild of Light, a force that eradicates all that which is not good or pure. It is our mission to exterminate any Vampires we can locate. Your deaths will be a blessing, you will no longer have to live with yourselves and your murdering ways and we can continue, a few more Vampires free.”

No emotion was projected into those words. They were as theoretically dead as The Vampires before them, as the group spoke in unison.

Albus had thought of how he was going to say it, deciding that words would be wasted on these creatures, he kept it relatively short.

“W-What have we done to you?” Enoc managed to gasp out.

“You live. That is enough.” Albus' eyes held no warmth, not like the gaze which was so desperately trying to meet his.

“Sullivan, Maya, find the children.”

“NO, DON'T HURT THEM!” Ava screamed out among her fear, trying to get her limbs to move of their own will.

“Crucio!”

Albus didn't order this but watched as Jeremiah held Ava under one of the three unforgivable curses. Ori shot a cutting curse at Enoc's arm which was trying to protect his wife.

Shortly afterwards, pitiless voices of Lumos Maxima rang throughout the room, a darkness charm hiding the worst of the light from their own eyes, but fatal to the couple.

The soundproof charms they'd cast upon entry of their home held, as the screams stayed within the walls of the mansion.

For the greater good, Albus reminded himself.

It was a few minutes later when Sullivan and Maya returned, with two extra additions. Both were resolute and silent, but something was reflected in Emily's eyes that Albus had yet to see on one so young; resignation.

“What do we do with them?” Ori spoke up for the first time, contemplating, unable to help herself from gazing at the lavish decoration of the room they currently occupied.

“Can't take the risk.” Jeremiah growled, studying the children as one would dirt, “We need to eliminate all threats. For all we know, they've been bitten.”

“But they're children!” Sullivan protested, only to be silenced by Jeremiah's and then Matthew's glare.

“Jeremiah's right,” he stated, matter of factly. “I haven't had a chance to test my potions yet. I request that one over there.” he pointed rudely at the boy.

“His name is Jacob,” Emily spoke firmly, staring at Matthew.

Matthew sneered in return.
“Very well. Just make sure he's not able to say what happened here.” Albus stroked his short beard, genuinely more concerned about the repercussions if the wrong people were to find out about this than the child's fate.

Sullivan and Maya sent a glance each other's way. Subtle enough that the other members didn't catch on. Yes, they weren't a fan of Vampires, but wiping out children just because they could possibly be Vampires? It was madness. Children weren't born evil, they were shaped that way. The Guild of Light lost two members that day.

Ori didn't like to see any children in pain or hurt, but she reasoned with herself that they were not human, they were less than human, despite having children of her own. Sara viewed this as merely another job, she never let her emotions get in the way.

Emily looked Jacob's way and held his hand for a moment. “Goodbye, Jacob. Don't let him get to you. Stay strong, for father and mother.”

He had a second to look into her eyes with his own distressed gaze before he was dragged away.

“I've always wanted to use this.” Jeremiah's gravelly voice broke the thick silence, as he transfigured a huge pointed stake.

“Is it really necessary?” Sara spoke up, bewildered. “Just AK her and be done with it.”

“They can trace spells, fool!” Jeremiah snarled, causing a hiss to emerge from the irritated Hitwizard. “Albus and I are willing to get the job done no matter what it takes, it's for the betterment of this world.” He turned to Emily, a faint smile on his face, the light in his eyes an indication that he enjoyed killing. None of them tried to stop what happened.

She met her killer's eyes, as the stake plunged into her small, regular beating heart.

Jeremiah twisted the stake with such force, they heard the audible crack of ribs, the point peeking from her other side. The already alarming amount of blood increased, staining the carpet below. Her body drained of all colour and as blood dribbled down her chin to drip onto the floor from where she knelt, Jeremiah finally released his grip on the wood. Her eyes landed upon the remaining occupants, focusing for a moment with final words ripping the blinds from another member's eyes.

“I forgive you.”

As her tiny body sank to the floor, Sullivan and Maya swallowed back bile, allowing themselves a little comfort in knowing that she was with her adoptive parents now.

While Ori looked away, she couldn't block out the final words of a child. What was she doing here, what was she thinking? The reason why she joined with the Aurors, to begin with, was to uphold justice and to protect the innocents. That child held no hint of malice, bloodlust or anything remotely associated with a Vampire and she was murdered in cold blood. She wanted no part of this. While Sullivan and Maya would leave together, Ori would return to her work and send a short note to Albus.

Later Matthew returned, stains littering his robes.

Albus shook his head, not really wanting to know the details. “Did you do what needed to be done?”

“Oh yes,” Matthew nodded, rubbing his hands together. “I know exactly what tweaking my creations need and which ones work to perfection. You don't need to worry about him.”
“We're done here.” Albus finally spoke. As the Guild of Light left, anything but goodness shrouded their auras. A subtle notice me not charm to cover the area around and to the side of them to reduce the risk of suspicion was performed, as their first task as a group was complete.

“I am looking forward to our visit, it has been a long time since we last saw them.” Solomon smiled slightly in fondness of Emily. A bright child, with spirit and a lot to offer. Jacob was very protective, but sometimes it was the other way around. They weren't raised in the orphanage together and were introduced to one another when Ava brought her home to meet her new brother.

A subtle shift beside him indicated that Alistair had stopped in his tracks and was tense. It only took a moment later for him to understand why.

“Dark magic seeps from the Morganti Manor.” Alistair murmured to himself, the powerful notice me not charm didn't stand a chance against his magical experience. Pain and, was that blood? Clouded his senses.

It seemed as if all external sound was blocked out, as the duo's boot clad feet clacked upon the path to the manor. The door was ever so slightly ajar and Alistair was acquainted with an emotion he'd nearly forgotten he possessed; nervousness. “The Cruciatius Curse.”

Hearing his words, Solomon's eyes were no more than chips of solidified ice, silent yet resolute. Alistair closed his eyes in preparation. Whoever was here had left, the peppery tang of apparition was still mildly faint in the air, suggesting it had only been a couple of days. Steeling his nerves he pushed the doors open.

The Living room was in the same room as the entryway, to the right of it in fact. One of Enoc's arms was around her protectively, the other limp from what looked like a cutting curse to the ligament. Alistair confirmed that it was Ava who had the Cruciatius curse cast upon her and the husks of what used to be their bodies were the result of fatal light exposure. It was the least humane way to cut short a Vampire's immortal state.

Emily's body was caked in her own blood, hair matted and a stake plunged through. It was rammed in with such force, a piece had broken through to the other side.

Alistair could feel the change overtaking him. The need for the blood of his enemy was strong and he knew his eyes reflected this. He was finding it difficult to stay calm.

Solomon's perfection on the mind art allowed him to keep his cool. He gently intruded upon his brother's mind, smoothing out the knots of emotion. “Be at ease.”

These words helped and bit by bit, Alistair's eyes returned from blood red to being their usual sunset colour. Regaining his composure, they needed information.

Between the pair, it didn't take long to decipher what happened, after a full search of the manor. They'd stayed in one room, with the exception of Jacob and another human. They couldn't find his body anywhere. Alistair held a faint hope that he'd managed to leave once they'd left and sought help, but Solomon was more of the mind that he was with his adoptive family.

They held onto each other for support, the contact providing no warmth to anyone but themselves.

They had known the couple well, Alistair becoming interested in Enoc, as he was one of the rare few Vampires who dared to stick out from the crowd. He caught Alistair's attention with spell creation, striking up an instant friendship with a mutual passion. It was actually thanks to Solomon that Enoc
met Ava, as the two were friends before and often had discussions of enchantments.

In a sense, they had adopted this family into their own. Having this ripped away when they were the only family left, hurt them deeply.

“They will pay,” Solomon promised, eyes resolute.

“We will make sure of it.” No humour or teasing was dancing in Alistair's tone of voice. He knew who they were. If he should ever come across those magical signatures on his travels again, those wizards and witches wouldn't live to see the light of another day.

They would have to add the Morganti family to the base stone. The base stone was one large stone with printed names of the families who had died out over thousands of years. There were others like it, for the Vampires who were not a part of the larger community, but the main one was beneath the foundations of Lothaire Castle. Despite Emily not being a Vampire, she was adopted by one of their kind and was, therefore, honorary. They wouldn't add Jacob's name, as there wasn't a body to confirm his death. One day, perhaps, they may find him, no matter what current state he may be in.

“We have made considerable progress for as little of us as there is. I would like to expand our Guild, however, there is a much more pressing issue. According to Jeremiah, the highest of the Vampire gatherings happen in London. There is a performance within Theatre Royal and we are going to be there to scope any Vampires out. I suspect there will be much older and more powerful ones there than before, but I have prepared for this eventuality.”

In just three months, The Guild of Light had wiped out some promising families. The ancient families were well hidden and Jeremiah wasn't good enough to glean the names of the higher ones. But it was a considerable dent, as they targeted the younger Vampires. Some, like Emily and Jacob, were not even Vampires. Men, Women and children associated with Vampires were also wiped out. However, people were that relieved that the attacks seemed to be stopping, so didn't investigate into the matter.

Over the years, Albus had come up with various devices which could help him in a future situation, only adapted as he became more knowledgeable.

He'd fashioned a tiny metal disc. The metal was attracted to those which have no body heat. It would seek out a Vampire, attaching to him or her and only his own blood would be able to remove it. It sunk into the pores, rather than the major organs being targeted, the skin would be. It would ooze into the body from there, remaining unseen to others. Jeremiah's information could only go so far but if they could find and break a Vampire, they could gain invaluable knowledge.

It was another night, about a week on from when Alistair and Solomon found what fate had in store for the Morganti family. Alistair was especially keeping a keen eye out on magic levels, though even for him it was difficult to distinguish between magical signatures in a room full of people of varying ages, races and genders. Solomon was scanning the minds of magic users in the audience of which he could access. None of them had any luck so far. Perhaps there would be more of a chance once the crowds dispersed and individuals could be singled out.

Sometimes, Alistair would sing while he played, but he had much more passion for the piano than he did for singing. He'd learned to play for as long as pianos were first introduced to the world and had been practising ever since, but still, it never hurt.

Though Alistair's memory was by no means poor, Solomon with the aid of his flawless mind arts had
perfect memory recall and was able to remember which particular pieces of music the audience responded most favourably to. Each time they would add something else to the mix and often, would use some of Alistair's own works. Each piece, whether by him or well-known composers, was placed together so they told a story. What story was up to the individuals listening.

Solomon's voice could be easily mistaken for the song of the Siren, despite his masculinity. With a varied vocal range is Alistair often listened, marvelling at the beauty.

The brothers, dressed in simple silk button-up shirts and trousers, bowed and took their leave once their hour and a half slot was over. Their audience tonight had been particularly receptive, both men on a high.

“A fine performance tonight, yes?” Alistair's eyes twinkled a little as he gazed upon his brother changing, quite literally lightning speed, while he took his time, admiring himself in the full-length dress mirror. He saw Solomon roll his eyes in the reflection, but decided to ignore him.

“Is it not a fine performance every time?”

“True.” Alistair mused. “But then again we are perfect. Well, at least I am.”

Solomon passed up to the urge to once more roll his eyes. “I will leave you to admire yourself in the mirror some more. I am in the mood for a walk, but I will be back soon.”

Once he left Alistair was alone, left to contemplate all that had happened so far. This was something he loved but now more than ever was a way to healthily cope with the pain of losing extended family. Getting dressed he decided he'd join Solomon, a little later.

There was a park that Solomon liked to frequent here, quiet and didn't see much activity. While they had performances in different countries, they enjoyed London particularly. He had the feeling that Alistair knew his love of the park, so specifically chose theatre royal for their performances.

The mind was a quick tool. A Vampire's mind even more so. Before Solomon could blink and think, his mind has already processed a Legilimency attack and dealt with the threat. So it was with a small amount of surprise that in the darkness, he saw a figure standing a few feet away. Or was standing, before Solomon's most certainly advanced Occlumency shield repelled the attack with such force, the person was smashed into a tree behind them.

Solomon's instincts told him to expect trouble. With the life that he had led so far, he knew he would be foolish to ignore them. Preparing himself, he watched their approach.

Albus had never attended the Muggle theatres before. For all his show of Muggleborn support, there were areas in which he assumed that Wizards were superior in, without actually checking. The seats were comfortable, if a little cramped, but otherwise it was a good opportunity to study the men they were watching perform tonight.

They looked too composed, unnatural in Albus' eyes, to not be Vampires. He did wish that the performances were less than an hour, but sacrifices had to be made. He could feel Jeremiah beside him practically itching to do something.

“If we're capturing a live specimen, do I have free reign to encourage them to talk?”

The elder man tilted his head in the direction of Matthew, his hearing not so good, especially with the noise of thousands of hands clapping. “As long as it doesn't affect their mind, yes.”
Albus pulled the metal disc from the pouch on his robe, once the performance was over. It wasn't very big, about the size of his smallest fingernail. He pressed his index finger to the underside, so it hovered in the air. Now all they had to do was wait for it to find one and take effect.

It was a few moments later that it latched to one of the two men leaving the stage. He was unsurprised to find that one of them was indeed a Vampire. The other was unknown. They waited until the seats had cleared out, following him. They had a few minutes before the device would activate, quickly locating it when the signal was sent.

It was then, Albus would later reflect, that he didn't make the wisest of choices. He had barely uttered the word Legilimens from his mouth as he was hurled several feet into the air and crashed into the nearest tree.

He was unsure of what these wizards wanted, but Solomon had a bad feeling. He tried to contact his brother but found something blocking his senses. He wasn't anywhere near as good as Alistair with practical magic since his expertise laid with weapons, the mind arts and potions, so he failed to notice that the metal disc of Albus' was the one to be slowly affecting him.

“Is there something you require, Gentlemen? And lady,” he added, seeing the slighter stature of one of the members.

“Your death would be a lovely start.” He heard an obnoxious man mutter. Choosing to ignore that comment, Solomon looked towards the ringleader of sorts.

“I just wanted to remark on how wonderful your concert was tonight.” Albus gushed, the false sweetness overpowering his lemon drops entirely.

A quick scan of his mind revealed less than honest intentions. Solomon narrowed his eyes. Something was off. The forefront of the man's mind was not solely focused on him, but Vampires as a whole and his desire to rid the world of them. It was disturbing, to say the least.

“Thank you.” He replied in very much the same tone. The man looked to be eyeing him expectantly as he frowned. What for?

It was then he began to feel strange. His senses were dulled and as he moved his hand, realised his reaction time was slower. Body sluggish, it was like he'd travelled through quicksand.

In unison, they all spoke as one the mantra of their group, before Albus poured a tablespoon of Phoenix blood into Solomon's mouth, easier as he offered little to no resistance.

“You will come with me. If you part with useful information about you and your kind, I may give you a merciful death.” He was lying, of course. He failed to realise that while Solomon's body was affected, his mind was very much intact and he could read the insincerity.

As young Vampires avoided the light, Older Vampires steered clear of tainted blood. The older the creature of light was it was unwillingly taken from, the more toxic it would be. Albus had removed the blood from Fawkes, who was rumoured to have existed since the founder's times. Solomon was aged 1,416 years old. As it was, the blood to Solomon would resemble a slow-acting poison, with no release in death.

Unwillingly touching the creature, he took him to the place not one single thing he knew of had ever escaped from. Azkaban.

It was a few minutes later when Alistair changed into one of his lovely swishy capes, a one which
improved his mood simply by wearing it.

He and Solomon had established a link, over 1,000 years ago now. While he couldn't hold a candle to his little brother's mind arts, he was still classed as formidable. They each felt their presence at the back of their minds and it was comforting to them.

It was when he packed away their things with a simple sweep of his hand that his brow furrowed a little. He couldn't sense Solomon and a number of times that had happened was rare. Growing increasingly concerned, he quickly arrived at the park a split second later. With a dawning sense of horror, he heard the crack of apparition, able to sense Solomon's earlier presence until it became completely cut off.

There was blood of a magical creature he could sense but the lingering remnants of the magic in the air was foul-tasting. As for the other magic, though, his complexion paled. He knew that scent well.

He and his brother were respected among the Vampire community as one of the elders, upheld for their knowledge of the ways and their friendly demeanour. There was only another of their kind of almost equal age and standing. He had to see Rupert, now.

“We are unable to locate him?!” Alistair tried not to let the panic edge into his voice, but this had never happened before.

“For the time that Phoenix blood is ingested, it alters the very chemistry of our body. Any connections or links we may have established with that Vampire is gone for the duration. Repeated dosage would mean we could never track him.”

Rupert Gray was one of the closest confidants that Alistair had. At 1,200 years old he was the third oldest Vampire of their recorded community. He came from one of the old families but was the last of his line, that he knew of. He was different from most of them, as he'd been bitten as a teenage wizard, not born naturally. This lead to most underestimating him. With his curly blonde hair and blue eyes, they tended to sneer at the Vampire who looked 16 and call him 'cute'. He worked as a Therapist but was also well versed in medical knowledge, relating to their kind. Often, he had solutions.

Not this time, apparently.

“So there is nothing we can do?”

“If no more Phoenix blood is ingested, we could track him. Keep your senses alert but for now, yes.”

“I am not giving up on him.” The power which many Vampires including Rupert were respectful of shone through his eyes, the man seated at his desk rubbed his forehead.

“I know.” he eventually said. “I wish you luck and I will help how I can.”

With that, Alistair left to begin the search for his brother.

1949

Alistair felt as though he'd been searching for eternity but to no avail. His brother wasn't dead, he knew it.

The Guild of Light had not stopped with their attacks. They covered their tracks well but Alistair sensed far more signatures now than in the past. He came to understand that a man by the name of
Albus Dumbledore led the group. While he was utterly furious and suspected that they may know something of Solomon, his hands were tied. Long ago, he'd signed a truce between the humans and the Vampires, many years after the death of Dracul. His father never did look over the very first contract but Alistair did and it was certainly archaic, in need of a change.

As long as they didn't openly attack humans, they wouldn't start their war with them. However, if they attacked a Vampire, they were not allowed to retaliate. It was incredibly one-sided but the best that could be done. There were Vampires that were outside of their largest community, living among humans, under protection, or within shelters. If he attacked Albus Dumbledore, known Vampire hater but also renowned as the Light Lord after his defeat of Grindelwald, he could condemn his brothers and sisters not of blood but kinship, to death. It was a huge responsibility and one he wouldn't take lightly.

Though he still had hope, it did dwindle. While he was certain his brother was not dead, it seemed as though he would be lost to him.

“Why?” he called out, sorrowfully as tears didn't stop their flow. Those who would say that a Vampire couldn't feel emotion, that they were a dark creature and incapable of feeling, would reconsider upon seeing him. He loved his brother so much and that he couldn't be by his side, or him by his side, was breaking his heart. Eventually, his sobs too died down, weary enough to shut his eyes for a moment.

It was then that the locals of Transylvania would start rumours of hauntings, as cries from the castle chilled them to the bone.

Solomon had lost count of the passage of time. Where he was now time did very much seem to drag by. Amusing really, considering normally to him a day was a minute, a year was a day and a few years seemed like months. But not now.

Unlike the residents of the prison he inhabited, he was not affected by the Dementor's presence. In fact, they seemed to like him. A fellow dark creature and who their presence didn't affect one bit. His mind shield was far too strong. He greeted them softly as they passed by and they did acknowledge and reply back, in their own way. Either that or the intense boredom and sickness was getting to him.

It was never the Dementors which caused him problems. The Phoenix blood did that on its own. Since he was classified as Dark and a Phoenix Light, it was very much like oil and water.

It didn't work with the blood, though. He'd tried. Instead, it was absorbed into his very being and he knew that couldn't be good for anyone. It was changing his appearance, too. Hair once black, he could see that the strands were turning pure white.

The man who he'd come to know as Albus Dumbledore would visit, sometimes bringing another man with him. They tried questions on various things, such as his family name, the names of other Vampires, but his will was strong. He would not give in.

He was not worried about himself, Alistair his greatest concern, extremely distressed that he could sense him and his anguish, but couldn't go there. He knew that the things in his system must have made the bond one way, for he was sure Azkaban would be a smoking crater in the ground otherwise.

He didn't blame his brother for his current situation and he never would. While they did usually stick together, it was very rare that either of the brothers was outright challenged or attacked and if so, always came out on top. This was simply a situation that he didn't see coming but he knew with no
small amount of sorrow that his brother would blame himself. Rarely did he ever feel helpless but this was one such time.

‘One day, I will see you again.’ Firm in this belief, all Solomon could do was wait.

Albus wasn't pleased. It had been years since the capture of that Vampire, learning nothing. But he was determined to get something. Once he'd realised he was actually friendly with the Dementors of all creatures, he moved Solomon to one of the dungeons, deep below the school. Not many knew of the area but once he'd took up the position of Headmaster, he became aware of the intricate details of Hogwarts.

The Guild of Light had made substantial progress in the years since their capture of the vampire. But to their minds, they were like parasites. The more which they removed, the more which would crawl from whatever dark hole they'd been hiding in.

Solomon came to realise that Albus must have moved him here due to the fact that he was friendly, for the lack of a better term, with the Dementors. It never failed to amuse him that despite he was obviously captured for interrogation, it had been years and in that time, he'd told him nothing. While he knew everything about the man, with some unwanted details.

It didn't matter what they did to him. It was painful, but he never once cried out. His mind arts were some of the strongest known to man and indeed creature kind. He was able to go through thoughts much faster than the average human Legilimens and chances are once a master of the art had detected his presence he'd retreated before the thought could even register.

He often did escape to his mind when they commenced the torture, determined to get something out of him. Focusing for a second, he idly realised that Albus was slashing into his chest with harsh wand movements, while Matthew, who he hadn't noticed arrive, was dripping something into the open wounds.

Solomon had to admit that he had changed, a least a little. He'd never normally entertain the thought of painful and humiliating deaths but this bastard had it coming, especially since he'd found out exactly what happened to the Morganti family.

He was glad it was him, not Alistair. He had somewhere to escape this, to retain his sanity. Alistair was not a master of the mind arts, not enough to endure what he was being put through. He thought of his brother every day, mindless of his own condition and worrying about his. But even if he should remain here until all those who knew about him died, his secrets would remain that way. This, he would swear upon his immortal soul.
There were many years of memories which current Albus watched. It was as though he were there for those years, but in fact, it was merely a few minutes. When people had gotten wind of The Guild of Light's actions and the bigger threat to the tentative truce between Vampires later established in the UK, he changed the name to The Order of The Phoenix. For the markings which the original members had, it continued to represent a group of people dedicated to fighting dark creatures. After Tom's creation of the Death Eaters and the twisted inspiration they'd taken from him, he no longer used tattoos, merely a contract. He didn't want to be associated with their kind, after all.

He looked across at his associates and realised that they were still in the throes of their memories. He'd noticed several order members had up and left, Shacklebolt and Bill among them. Blasted Potter and Lupin.

Tonks sniggered, hiding her obvious mirth by taking a sip of her now lukewarm tea. The Headmaster really did look different without his beard. In fact, his wrinkled bald face reminded her of the mandrakes she'd had to re-pot back at Hogwarts.

She didn't have much time to ponder on that thought before suddenly, what remained of the mysterious dust exploded into a shower of sparks. It showed a ghostly ledger, names of the members of the order written within. One by one members disappeared, until only herself, Arthur and Minerva remained.

Minerva never did frequent the meetings often. She had grown tired of Albus' words about her favourite lion and indeed the only reason why she'd shown up this time was to see if Potter had any more of that marvellous magic up his sleeve. Indeed, he had. Along with one of her other favourite former students. She had no idea how Potter had done such a feat, but she was mightily impressed.

Once Minerva left, Tonks glanced over at Arthur.

“I don't know about you, but that was weird.”

Chuckling bemusedly, Arthur nodded his agreement. “I think I owe Harry a letter.”

“I'll be seeing him at Hogwarts. Dumbledore has me on tracking duty. I don't trust him, not after all this. I'll morph into a student, let him know I have his back.”

“If he doesn't get my letter first, give him my support will you?” he took the initiative to clear the table with a wave of his wand, heading to the floo.

“Will do!” she shouted to his retreating back, deciding to stay a while.
For a reason unknown to him, Solomon had been more on Alistair's mind than usual. Recently, though, he wasn't the only one.

Harry popped into his head more often than not. Not just because he was the first human he'd had contact with for a long time, but their interactions were fascinating, particularly his open-mindedness and honesty. That, added to his impressive magical core and yet remaining humble despite who he was, left Alistair feeling strangely content.

He'd never received much positive touch, he'd noted. The way he stiffened and withdrew from any attempted touches indicated this. Frankly, he found him to be absolutely adorable. His heart had never beat, yet he almost believed it had at the darkened blush staining his cheeks or a tentative smile threw his way. Not to mention those beautiful green eyes.

It was the same thoughts, circulating his mind. He'd been unable to stop thinking about him since his departure and it was driving him mad. He wanted to see him again. But when did one overstep the line into pushy? He was happy to have whatever they had right now. An alliance, perhaps friendship? He had been alone for too long and that was something which affected his judgment greatly but here, Alistair didn't believe he was wrong.

Harry stared at Arthur's letter with some mixture of amusement and horror. Yes, he'd been correct when the meeting was scheduled that night, though what went down at said meeting was more than he ever could have anticipated. More than that, though, he was glad for Arthur's support. Other than Ron, he didn't know where he stood with the rest of the Weasleys, but he had every intention of finding out.

There was something he wanted to do today so as he headed to the Requirement Closet, he tried to puzzle out how he and Remus had created a substance which was multi-purpose, could erase magic, kick people out of houses and make them relive their memories. The more he thought about it, the more confused he became. Maybe further study would give an insight into what happened, or viewing their memories of the night was a valid option.

It wasn't far from his room to the requirement closet, but he stood there in thought for a moment, mind wandering more often than not. Sometimes it was to converse with Lume and Thanatos, or Aela. She'd probably be more talkative once reunited with the basilisk corpse and a living entity rather than an animated tattoo.

But no. Since leaving Dracula's, or now that he knew better Lothaire castle, Alistair had been on his mind. He wondered when or if he'd see the man again.

Within a few days, Alistair had broken whatever preconceived notions he may have had about Vampires. Despite classing himself as open-minded and willing to try new things, he couldn't help but take on board the general opinion of Vampires. His stay with him was pleasant, though the man must have thought he was shy since he averted his eyes a lot of the time. Harry was worried about what he'd do if he stared too long because the first look he'd had of his eyes, he was amazed by how colourful they were, how much they reminded him of the sunsets he used to sneak a peek of at the Dursleys.

In one way, it was foolish for him to have such thoughts about someone he'd only just met, but for once in his life, someone didn't fawn over his name like a lovesick fan. It was nice.

He shook his head of those thoughts, pacing in front of the closet.
'I need something to mask the power of my magical core.' He thought desperately. Instead of having to step inside, the closet opened of its own accord and provided him with a bound up scroll. He reached out and picked it up, hopeful that this would solve his problem.

**Larva et Virtutis**

Spells such as these are rare to come by in the modern world. In the old one, this spell was mainly used to hide magical objects in plain sight, where they would be safer. To this day, Muggle museums house magical artefacts, their power not sapped away, just hidden from sight, sound and smell. The spell acts as a net, made up of tiny threads designed to protect the magic within and prevent any excess from leaking out.

The spell also works for those who wish to hide their true power from all but themselves. If the wizard or witch has never had a magical block placed upon them, they simply have to imagine a state where their magic was not as strong while saying the words, Larva et Virtutis, a sharp upwards flick on the last syllable of the last word.

For those who have had their magic dampened but the blocks removed it is similar, except they imagine the time before their blocks were removed. Not even the most powerful of wizards can remove this spell without them knowing how it is applied. It will not work over clothing, the fine threads unable to settle over the rough material. It must be applied on bare skin, the full-body for the intended effect so that the netting can settle properly.

The spell is sustained by the magic in the air only, though it will mean a room devoid of magic, the spell will not work for that duration. There will be a mild tingling sensation upon the spell being cast successfully, but nothing more. The counterspell is Virtutem Revelare.

Looking at that, Harry could say that finally, he was ready for whatever his enemies chose to throw at him.

It was late evening. Harry noted with much glee and some sympathy that in fact, Remus did seem to get hangovers. Perhaps it had been such a long time since then that he'd forgotten since werewolves were notoriously hard to get drunk.

The wards stretched across much of the forest and he was about to set foot into them when he spotted something glowing and green on the floor. Before he could even think about if that was wise, he'd picked it up.

The green thing settled into his hand, evaporating into the palm and an indescribable pain swept over him. Screams ringing through the night, Harry dropped to his knees.

Why did he have to be such a Gryffindor?

Well to Harry at least, it felt like he was screaming. In fact, when the pain hit, it was very different from removing the blocks on his magical core kind of pain because he knew what to expect. It was
centred on his forehead and more painful than when Voldemort attempted to possess him back in the ministry of magic.

With the help of Lume and Thanatos, he retreated to the home of the souls where his undead Animagi friend resided. It wasn't intentional, but some hidden force seemed to be urging him to come here.

Harry took a seat on the floor, trying to think through it.

“What happened?” he spoke, through gritted teeth.

Thanatos nickered gently, butting his hard nose against Harry's forehead.

“The extra soul piece is being drained, but not removed entirely. You picked up one of my tail hairs, death lining its surface. The killing curse once touched you and with it, the extra soul piece was placed. One more killing curse has upset the balance. Right now everything draining is being pushed out, but the rest is here to stay.”

How Thanatos was so knowledgeable about these things he didn't know. Either way, it was definitely useful now.

He nearly bit through his tongue in an effort not to cry out. Apparently, his pain tolerance wasn't high enough for this to feel like a mere pinprick. His arms began to visibly tremble as though he'd lifted a great many weights and sweat clung to the back of his neck in droplets. Much as he was in a state, the world of souls wasn't in much better shape. The earth looked drier and more barren, souls crying out and wandering aimlessly.

The foundations of this world began to shake. The presence of something wrong wouldn't leave, but the sensation didn't retreat nor get any further. It seems as though Voldemort was attempting to fight back but found it impossible to breach his defences soul to soul. Pushing Voldemort out with the very curse that marked Harry seemed almost poetic. As soon as the shaking started, it came to a sudden halt.

A mass of thick, inky liquid trickled gently from his scar and with it, was a pressure behind his head relieved of which he didn't realise he had. It hissed but didn't burn, leaving a smoky trail carrying on the breeze. He'd lived so long with the physical and mental barriers that he'd only just come to understand how much he'd truly been missing out on.

He found himself on the ground, hands and knees shaking. Bile rose in his throat and he had to take a few deep breaths to prevent being sick.

’Harry?’

Ah.

He'd forgotten about the bracelet's capabilities. A slight flush rose to his cheeks as he listened to those wonderful melodic tones.

Shaking his head of stray thoughts in case the man picked them up, he righted himself and started to head back inside.

'I'm fine. To cut a long story short, when Voldemort hit me with AK, he left a piece of his soul with mine. One of my Animagi forms is a physical representation of death and one of the tail hairs is like the killing curse. I picked one up without glove protection, it sunk into my hand, pushing the extra soul piece out but draining it of any value or worth. I'm a bit shook up but no worse for wear.'
He could practically feel his alarm through the link they had.

'That is disturbing, to say the least. As long as you are alright I will leave you to your business. See you soon.'

See him soon?

"Harry! What's wrong?"

He was pulled abruptly from his thoughts by Remus, who wrapped an arm around him in concern. He probably did look like hell and there was no way he couldn't have heard him scream.

"Everything is fine now." Harry smiled slightly, though it came out as more of a grimace. There was a feeling of emptiness in his head but for all intents and purposes, there was a hole where a part of Voldemort's soul was. It was nothing which meditation couldn't right.

Remus gave him a questioning look and Harry patted the arm around his shoulder.

"It's a long story. There is something I need to do first but I will explain what I know." He gave Alistair the quickest version he could, but for Remus, he'd try to go in as much detail as possible, including all his encounters with Voldemort.

'It's never easy with Harry is it?' The older man thought to himself, preparing for shocking news as Harry didn't do things by half.

His travels into the forest were fruitful despite what happened, though he didn't go beyond the wards. He used a few stasis charms on a strange little plant he'd picked up, hoping Neville would find it useful. It made a tinkling noise, much like cat bells when he drew close. They seemed to shy away from his touch once they were picked, but soon settled back to normal when they were left to their own devices.

As sidetracked as he was by those discoveries, he returned to a previous thought. Although in one way he would like to do it, Harry didn't want to risk the legal repercussions of performing the killing curse on a bunch of death eaters. In his opinion despite the fate of his parents, it was a humane way to go, unlike the Cruciatius Curse. But what if, he could bottle Thanatos' tail hairs and throw them? He said as much that the hairs would only be harmful to his enemies so his friends would be in no danger. He saw no reason not to try.

He'd place them in one of the storage trunks he'd take to Hogwarts with him. There were several of varying sizes. One which looked to be made of snakeskin really caught his eye. At a guess, they'd belonged to one of the members of the Potter family, as did the others.

The rest of his day before heading back to Hogwarts tomorrow was sorted, as far as he was concerned. As promised, he did go into more detail and Remus knew more about Harry than even Hermione and Ron did. It was an indication of how close they had grown over the summer, that Harry was willing to share such things. Later he sat at his desk, conversing with Lume and Thanatos of how best to make use of scales, tail hairs and other Animagi body parts.

At an unmarked location, Tom Riddle, more commonly known as Lord Voldemort, gazed upon himself in shock. A hand moving at precisely the same time and the cool feel of glass under his fingers indeed confirmed that he was staring at his reflection.

He was still pale, but not the pale of a corpse recently cooled. His hands were long and thin, but not skeletal. The biggest change was his face.
While still retaining red eyes, his hair from youth was back, though peppered with grey. His nose was pointed and well formed and with a tint of colour returned to his cheeks.

Lord Voldemort had regained some of his humanity.

Severus Snape scowled, mercilessly slashing his way through student's essays. Really, they were dunderheads, the lot of them. He wondered why he continued to torture himself with teaching when he didn't even like the brats, but then remembered the now beardless old coot up in his office, and was suddenly and annoyingly reminded of exactly why he couldn't just up and leave.

While he enjoyed students and staff members alike flinching before his sharp tongue, it was always pleasing to run out of red ink, such were the length of his disparaging comments.

_Buttons, the day you lower yourself to plebeian standards and let your fingers touch a dictionary, surely hell would freeze over. The next time you hand in an essay which resembles that of a 5-year-old, you will not like the consequences._

That he enjoyed the suffering of others said a lot about him. That and his lack of social life, if being on his knees before the old coot and the snake faced bastard like some common Knockturn Alley whore could be counted as 'social.' he sneered at the thought.

If anyone who was not Severus looked at him, the twitch in his frame wouldn't be noticeable. As it was, his Dark Mark was not burning, but tingling rather curiously. He saw no reason to worry and after another comment which was sure to make Amanda Flairgold of Hufflepuff cry, he retired to his quarters to partake in a few glasses of sherry.

As he reclined into the soft leather armchair, he thought about all that had happened in his life up until now.

_Thought. Thinking. Without it, his life would have been cut short long ago. He played a dangerous game, walking on the razor between the Light Lord and the Dark Lord and he was one of the people who were key into how the war could end._

That, and Potter. He frowned. Potter had changed and if he were honest, he would say it was for the better. In fact, after the last disaster of the order meeting where some including him were affected with their worst nightmares, he decided that it wasn't worth it. Yes, he was angry and damning Potter, the pair of them in fact, to hell with the reliving of his most painful and humiliating memory, but wasn't how he treated the boy no better than how the marauders chose to treat him?

He had to admit himself, although grudgingly, that he'd hidden behind the excuse of treating Potter harshly due to Death Eater's children too well. The real reason was that every time he saw Potter, he was thrown into the past. So much like his father and yet his eyes...

He snorted bitterly. It did him no good to linger on the past, he realised this. He had a decision to make and the last one he made had huge repercussions, resulting in one boy being left as an orphan.

He could join Dumbledore, in the fight for the light, though was that was it was about anymore? Severus believed that Albus had lost focus. His focus was on Potter more than stopping the threat of the Dark Lord.

This was further confirmed when he was asked to accompany Albus to Lupin's home, to speak with him, or so he'd thought. Therefore, he'd been shocked when the man used Fiendfyre and he was sure he'd seen Moody cast a few spells. Talking and attempted murder were two entirely different things and the way that Shacklebolt and Weasley had been acting for the past several weeks made him eye
them in suspicion. Rightly so it seemed, for the strange...dust? That had affected the meeting so profoundly had removed traces of spells.

Albus was becoming too much like The Dark Lord for Severus' liking. While there was no love lost between him and Lupin, he had no desire to kill the man, especially on Dumbledore's insistence that he'd gone dark. While the incident in his 6th year still scarred him, it was through no fault of Lupin's what had happened that night. Partly his fault for going where he shouldn't but Black's fault for leading him there. Lupin was as much of a victim as he was in this. If Albus had chosen not to defend him and if Severus had been bitten, he knew without a doubt Lupin would have been put to death.

Lupin was a puppy compared to Greyback and anyone with their head not buried in the sand was aware of this. The revelation that Lupin was indeed alive brought a small measure of relief to him, though he was in no way absolved of all blame, since standing by and allowing something to happen was just as bad as the one who had committed the act.

He had a choice. Another difficult one to make, when one considered things from all angles, but he had to decide.

Side with Voldemort, who was a certified madman and intent on the destruction of those lesser?

Dumbledore, who had lost sight of the real issues and was instead chasing after a boy who had according to him, defected?

Or the boy himself, Harry Potter, who was very much an innocent caught in the battle of adults. Though with everything he'd been through, perhaps not so innocent. Spying took its toll. Hatred sapped energy, energy very much needed for his daily life. While he could never see himself going out for a friendly with Potter in many years time, the least he could do was offer a silent truce.

Six years of hatred and it was about time Severus moved on. They all had bigger things to worry about.
According to his mental clock, it was 9 am when Harry next opened his eyes. The surface thoughts were of very little use to those who were seeking information against him, so they were easily accessible in the thin mountain air of Lume's residence. The other thoughts, basic knowledge about him which people know or think they know, lay in the water and the rippling waves produced by the slight wind.

The real, dangerous thoughts, however, were Harry's second line of defence. Knowledge which if anyone knew, not only would he be in trouble, but certainly The Vampire community. He had to protect his mind for more than just him, though hoped Dumbledore would know to stay far away from his own.

If Alistair wanted to peek inside, he wasn't sure he could keep a Vampire out since he was at over a 1,000 years disadvantage but then again, from what little Harry knew of the charming man, he didn't seem the type to go rummaging through minds.

For a moment, he dulled his senses to everything other than the concentration of magic, sensing that Remus was downstairs, most likely having his usual brew and The Daily Prophet. He released the stasis charm he had in his hair. He'd decided to let it grow out a bit as he couldn't really choose a particular style. What he really liked, however, is that while he'd never be tall, he'd come a long way from the much shorter than average teen he used to be before the summer.

What muscles Quidditch had left him with had only developed and bulked more. He had the beginnings of a well-defined six-pack, sporting a healthy golden tan. Without his glasses and added piercings, he was almost unrecognisable.

"I wonder if after all this is over, skin graft surgery could fix this scar? Unless it dies with Riddle, of course." He waved his hand, the things he'd need for Hogwarts trailing after him.

This summer was the best he'd had and the addition of Remus only made it more so. With a happy smile he parked his trunk by the front door, going to join Remus in the kitchen.

All in all, Harry thought he was rather silent when he slipped into the chair near Remus' but was slightly surprised when he was greeted by a cheery morning.

"I didn't think you'd notice me, It looked like The Daily Prophet had your attention."

"I could smell you coming down the stairs," he replied offhandedly, eyes still fixed on the newspaper.

Yes, that was what was reinforced, his sense of smell. He often forgot that Remus was a werewolf. Truthfully, Harry didn't care enough for it to ever affect the relationship he had with him.

He loved Remus, all of Remus, including Moony. Years with The Dursleys not so silent judgement
of him and other people outside of their perfectly abnormal family instilled good character sense and open-mindedness. He strived to be the opposite of them and flourished into his own person.

Moony was Remus and Remus was Moony. They were one and the same but separate too. While he didn't care about his affliction, he knew Remus struggled more than Werewolves like Fenrir. When Harry went off to Hogwarts, he'd come back each month and help him as his shoulder massages eased the stiffening of the older man's muscles. He was happy to help.

Closing his eyes briefly in satisfaction, his head turned slightly in Remus' direction. “Anything fascinating and not lined with bullshit that Rita has to report?”

“Her articles are tamer than I've ever seen them. The only thing of note is a small column on the new DADA teacher this year. It looks like you'll get a decent education for once.” He silently handed over the newspaper, going cross-eyed as Harry's finger pointed between his.

“Don't disregard your teaching skills.” Harry admonished. “You did a great job. While some imbeciles would run a mile from you, I'll take my chances with a man who has excessive hair growth once a month compared to the other horrors I've had.”

Remus' chuckle was rather watery. He was touched. “Thank you, Harry.” He smiled affectionately, patting the outstretched hand.

Harry smiled in return, silently agreeing with Remus. There wasn't much of interest except for the column on the DADA teacher, which he quickly flicked through.

As our readers will know, Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore has hired some questionable members of staff over the years but none more so than DADA teachers, failing to exceed a year of employment. But this year, will we be proven wrong, that the Headmaster is not losing focus of what's important in his wise old age?

Not a lot of information could be gathered about this years' DADA teacher, but it looks as though Hogwarts students are in for an excellent education. This soon to be Professor is a Duelling Champion across multiple countries, not to mention qualifications and official documents signed by each Minister of Magic stating that this individual, for I do not know if it is a he or she, is legally able to instruct students.

I approached Headmaster Dumbledore with a request for a statement, and he had this to say. “I have always believed in the best quality of education for my students and their safety is my top priority. I have high hopes for this years' Professor and I welcome them to the staff with open arms.”

Now at this point, Harry took what he thought was a refreshing sip of orange juice while catching up on some mildly interesting news. However, the level of bullshit caught him by such surprise, that the mouthful he was about to swallow instead sprayed across the table.

“What is this?” he managed to wheeze out. “Dumbledore, putting students education and safety above all? Am I in an alternate dimension? See, this is how you know he's about to bullshit
everyone, it's his eye twinkle."

Remus sat back, simply gazing at Harry for a moment. He was correct, Dumbledore wasn't the symbol of light which he portrayed himself to be. It was obvious that he had his favourites and when in a position of authority, no student was above the other and during his time there, treated all students equally.

Albus didn't.

He considered both himself and Severus as the victims in the situation during their 6th year. He was unsure what was said between Severus and Albus all those years ago, but remembered smelling the bitter undercurrent of resentment and hatred emanating from Severus for several days afterwards.

Sirius wasn't punished. Not by Albus at any rate but Minerva had plenty to say on the subject if the two weeks detention he received wasn't any indication of her feelings.

The truth was, Sirius never really had the chance to grow, flourish. While he physically may have grown and changed, mentally and emotionally was a different story. He'd spent 12 years locked away in the worst Wizarding prison with good mind shields due to his Pureblood upbringing, but nothing which could withstand the force of Dementors.

While it was true that he had Padfoot to fall back on, there was still the issue of isolation and the knowledge that he was innocent, yet no one believed him, not even he, Sirius' partner.

He was stunted at the worst time. While James grew up after Severus nearly died, for Sirius it would take longer.

He wasn't as carefree and confident as he used to be. So many years of the Sirius he remembered, it was a shock to his system to see the shell of a man he cherished, who he still did. While Sirius had to learn to function again, the one thing which remained normal was their relationship. After leaving for James' house at 16, Sirius finally mustered up the courage to ask Remus out. It's not as if he was expecting it, on the contrary. He'd been harbouring a crush on his best friend for a while but he'd never expected it to be returned.

They'd left on a wonderful note. A promise that one day, they would marry, be it the Muggle or Wizarding way, if that's what Remus wanted, but he loved him even without official documents.

And then a short few years later, when he'd regained the man he loved, he was gone, just like that.

There wasn't even a grave he could go to. No body and he was still considered a criminal.

Sirius was in limbo and right now, Remus felt as if he was too.

Harry's words blurred in his mind, not even penetrating his sensitive ears as he was lost in memories of what could have been. Bowing his head, he was unaware he'd closed his eyes until silent tears escaped from beneath them.

Stopping mid-sentence and glancing over to Remus, Harry noticed with great concern that he was upset.

He shuffled his chair closer to the man's side. "Remus? What's wrong?"

"Sirius," he croaked, palming his face with both hands.

One word, but a word significant to both men and tied to so many memories.
It was a struggle not to break into tears himself but he was more often silently irritated or angry as a way of dealing with emotions than to cry it out. He'd never had as a child and as a young adult, it was much harder to do.

Despite being somewhat emotionally stunted, he'd developed an incredible sense of empathy and he truly hated to see someone he cared about being in pain.

He knew after this, that their relationship would once again turn on its head. He'd never initiated anything like this, not properly. He pushed aside, just for that moment, the fear that was making his hands tremble. The fear of rejection.

He didn't say anything, what could he say in response? He wasn't a Counsellor and he never would be. He'd have to at least have his own life sorted before he could help someone on the journey to fix theirs.

He hesitantly reached over to embrace Remus, both arms firmly, if a little awkwardly, wrapped around his middle. His heart was going a mile a minute. He shouldn't be so terrified as even lost in grief as Remus was, he could surely smell it. He didn't release his hold, however, just prayed for the best and was instantly rewarded with his courage when arms held him in turn.

Classing the waters as officially tested and with his heart threatening to land with a plop on the floor, he then spoke the words he'd dearly wanted to say to someone for the first time, but fear had held him back.

“I love you.” His voice trembled slightly as he came to the understanding that the comfort he was giving Remus was something which he needed too. He buried his face in the man's shoulder, feeling the heartbeat against his own chest which eventually calmed him down. He wasn't being rejected yet.

“I love you too.” His own voice was beyond trembling since he was only just starting to stop the flow of tears but through the haze of sorrow, he knew that this was a big step for Harry, to take the initiative in something like this.

And every word was true. He'd never cared for anyone as much as Harry since Sirius and even then it was in an entirely different way. He'd always wanted children but with his condition and sexuality, it wasn't possible. James and Sirius were a part of his small pack, his family. Peter never was and now the reason was made clear but back then, it was a mystery of why Moony would reject him.

When James died, it was as though a piece of him died alongside the body. Lily brought sorrow too as while they were never truly close, she made for a very pleasant study partner and her sweet smell was calming to him. That and James loved her. Then Harry.

Only the two kept him sane but then when Harry was taken away and Sirius imprisoned, he was back to being just as alone as he was locked in his parent's basement in a cage as a child during the full moon.

All this and more thoughts flickered past as he gently carded a hand through the younger man's hair, for a moment forgetting that he was in fact not a baby anymore and might not take kindly to such an act, before smiling gently as his tears finally came to a stop, when a head was tilted to lean into the touch.

Words couldn't describe Harry's relief at the reciprocation of his feelings. Before this, they'd established a good friendship but beyond that, he was unsure where they stood. Remus was one of the most important people in his life and to know that he wasn't rejected filled him with relief.
He settled into the embrace for a few moments, enjoying the normality of things for once in his life. He was very much independent but he'd be lying if he said he didn't need this kind of support at all. He pulled away, only to take one of Remus' hands in his own, pressing it to his heart.

“He's right here with us.” Green eyes locked with Amber as they shared a moment of understanding.

“You're right, Harry.” Remus kept his hand there for a moment, summoning a bottle of brandy to add to his tea.

Whatever train of thought either man was on stopped at a loud tapping coming from the kitchen window.

Harry was alert despite the assurance that no owl could find either of them if the contents were harmful. “Are you expecting any mail?”

Remus looked up from what he was drinking. “Not that I'm aware of. Harry, did you ever get your OWL results?”

Harry stopped midway through feeding the postal owl, who took the remaining treats from his hand and flew off while he was still in thought.

He was meant to have received them mid-August if he remembered correctly, but he didn't. Was this it? He didn't know why they hadn't come before now but that was the only thing he could think of.

He looked at the letter in silence. The Hogwarts seal was embossed on the front and he'd already received the letter listing the requirements for 6th year, though he'd taken care of that a while ago now.

Breaking the seal, he looked at the contents inside.

_Dear Mr Potter,

Please see below the results of your OWLS (Ordinary Wizarding Level) Examinations.

O- Outstanding

E- Exceeds Expectations

A- Acceptable

P- Poor

D- Dreadful

T- Troll_
Charms: E

Transfiguration: O

Herbology: A

Defence Against the Dark Arts: O

Potions: O

Care of Magical Creatures: E

Astronomy: A

Divination: P

History of Magic: D

Congratulations, you have scored the highest marks in Defence Against the Dark Arts seen since Tom Riddle. Find enclosed your certificate.

Below his exam results was a handwritten note.

Mr Potter,

My apologies for your late OWL Exam results. As your head of house, I see to every student under my care including exam results but the Headmaster was insistent. On multiple occasions, he tried to personally send you your results but they always returned unopened. I am unsure as to the reason why unless your location is under fidelus. I have sent this copy and if it is not returned, I shall know you have received it.

I hope that you have had a pleasant summer despite the hardships that you've endured and allow me to personally congratulate you, your parents would be proud. Pass on my regards to Mr Lupin, I will see you at Hogwarts.

Minerva McGonagall
At first, Harry assumed her congratulations were for his results when two shining items slid into his hand.

Quidditch Captain

Prefect

Harry was surprised at how well he did. At the time he was uncaring of his results and in truth, he still didn't care as much as he probably should. Too much had happened to him to regard his education as the most important factor in his life. History of Magic came as no surprise due to the vision he had but Potions was a definite shock. Snape would have to let him into his NEWT class.

DADA he knew he'd do well in but he didn't expect Voldemort to be mentioned. A brief flicker of amusement crossed his face as he imagined the man reading a letter from The Ministry about Harry beating his OWL score as if he wasn't plotting world domination a few seconds ago, old grades in school would hardly matter to him now.

The thought had never crossed his mind about having a position of authority at Hogwarts, but now he had two. Would he have time? Naturally, he was honoured and would accept, but any 'extracurricular' activities would have to be properly planned around his upcoming duties.

He personally thought McGonagall was losing her raving na-na. Quidditch Captain was fair enough in his opinion, it didn't tie up as much with behaviour in and around school since it was an optional activity, but a Prefect? He didn't have the best track record. Killing a teacher, even if it was in self-defence and by complete accident, should have been an indication of what she was getting into and the general theme of each school year.

However, he was not the head of Gryffindor and therefore wouldn't question anything which would move people's attention from his several monikers gained from when he was a baby and did nothing, to something which he'd somehow earned.

"Remus, catch!" Harry flung the small badges in his direction and pouted when he stopped their descent with magic. "That's cheating."

"Not cheating if you didn't set any rules," he ignored the stuck out tongue in favour of being more adult of the two and smiled softly at what he held in his hands. He looked over the letter Harry passed him as he retook his seat.

"I'm so proud of you, I know Lily and James would be too. I would suggest we frame your certificate but taking into consideration just who you beat, perhaps not."

Harry chuckled. "I'll keep it though. Maybe I'll take it with me on the battlefield. Show it to him and hope that he dies in a fit of apoplectic rage."

"I shall leave that up to you." Remus pushed the certificate in his direction. "It's about time for you to go I believe. Are you sure you don't want me to see you off at the station?"

"It's not that I don't want you to," he protested, standing up. "It's just-"

"I know."

Harry would like it, but considering who it was, he didn't want to take any risks. Dumbledore could
have planned something in the eventuality that Remus showed up and Harry couldn't bear if something happened, he was safer at Evergreen than at the station. He could say his goodbyes all the same.

“What will you ever do without my company? I don't think fleas are quite as good as I am.”

Harry dodged a slap upside the head, grinning slightly. “I know I know, you don't get fleas in your wolf form. I'll visit when I can and come back for your transformations, ok?”

Remus stood up as well, grasping his shoulder. “It goes without saying, but be careful. Albus is more cunning than people give him credit for.”

“I will.” As they waved their goodbyes to each other, Harry applied his blood glamour and quickly got changed into his uniform once in the hallway. Picking up his trunk, he exited the manor and apparated away, leaving his second home to attend the first.

Although everything looked as it should as he arrived on the platform, Harry still kept his senses alert. Not as busy as it was his first year, the definite return of Voldemort had struck fear into the hearts of the masses, so public places, even to drop off children to school, was something to be wary of.

Walking to platform 9¾, he could detect nothing out of the ordinary, visually or magically, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone watching him. Perhaps he was too paranoid? As Mad-Eye says, Constant Vigilance.

"Constant Vigilance indeed,” he sneered to himself. The old Auror had better have a good explanation on why he participated in the attempted murder of Remus, or he'd shove that magical eye so far up his arse, not even the best at St Mungo's could remove it.

As for Bill and Kingsley? He wasn't so sure. It seemed out of character but taking Ron into consideration, he would hold back his judgment and accusations until he knew for sure.

Dumbledore, however, he wouldn't offer the chance. It was likely he knew that Harry knew, but he'd keep an eye on him. As much as he'd love to file several complaints, it wouldn't wash over.

Everyone sees him as The Leader of The Light, with no perspectives but their own. It was either how he wanted the masses to see him, or the ones who could slip behind the carefully crafted mask of cheerfulness. His influence and reputation were practically un tarnished and he came across as a dotty and slightly eccentric yet powerful old wizard than the cunning, manipulative nasty piece of work that he was.

Not to mention that if Umbridge got wind of just who was attacked, she'd no doubt spout her filth and opinions about werewolves. But that wouldn't last for long. He was pretty certain that it was on no one's authority that she used a blood quill on several minors, not to mention an unforgivable.

Yes, if Harry had it his way, and he had every intention of making that possible, Umbridge would be reliving her worst memories for a very long time.

He strolled casually through the barrier, keeping a now sharp eye out for his friends.

Within a couple of seconds or so, he spotted his best friend's bushy brown hair. In fact, upon closer inspection, they were more tight curls than frizz, as he drew closer to her unsuspecting back.
She was talking with an older couple, her parents of who he hadn't properly met.

He waited for a small lull in the conversation, then letting his presence be known. "Hermione."

She turned around fast, hair almost whipping her in the face. He had the strong urge to laugh as he could read her so much better than he used to, now that he was able to pay more attention. Her eyes held a split second of confusion then lit with recognition, as she realised what she was seeing. Her eyes widened almost comically as they looked incredulously up and down his form.

"Harry! Is that really you? Oh, what a stupid question of course it is! How are you? You look so different, it's wonderful really-"

He placed his hands on her shoulders lightly, stopping her mid-sentence. "Breathe. I want to talk with you, not levitate your unconscious body onto the train."

She did breathe, a huff outwards, before the wheels turned in her mind and her usual sense caught up. Well, maybe not the rational and calm side.

"HARRY!" Her squeal was muffled as she nearly squeezed the life out of him, hair tickling his nose.

"It's good to see you too, but I also need to breathe." He joked.

He was released, so he could check that indeed all of his ribs were in the correct working order.

"Sorry." A closer look at her now that she wasn't frantic with excitement revealed that he wasn't the only one going through physical changes.

Her hair was tamer, it seemed with age it had grown more manageable. She was now the smallest of the trio, as Harry used to take that spot. It wasn't so much that her body had changed, but her eyes held some of the same light which he saw in himself.

The truth. Her unwavering and blind trust in authority figures was ripped away much like a plaster on a wound. She'd seen the world and its people for how they really could be. Hermione had gained a different sort of maturity, a more independent kind of thinking.

Her intelligence how held a sharper, keener edge to it and something told Harry that as proven by the previous five years, she would be of invaluable help again.

"Harry," his focus returned to his friend and the couple stood before them. She gestured with a wave of her hand in their direction. "These are my parents. Mum, Dad, this is Harry."

The elder man shook his head, turning to his wife. "It's Harry! Who'd have thought so? Not that she'd accidentally kill just anyone with one squeeze, mind you."

Emma rolled her eyes affectionately. "Now really, is that any way to speak about Hermione's boyfriend?"

Harry was ready to sink through the stone floor and Hermione's protests were cut off by laughter.

"I'm joking dear." she patted her daughter on the shoulder, looking at Harry.

"Hello." He nodded his head politely, shaking her hand.

"It's nice to meet you at last. If it's not her education Hermione talks about, it's you."

Dan clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Boyfriend or no boyfriend, take care of my daughter for me."
While we don't know much of what goes on in your world, I know enough to be worried."

"Hermione's looked after me from the start. The number of times her intelligence has gotten us out of trouble is unbelievable." Harry glanced at Hermione, smiling in gratitude.

He chuckled slightly. "That's my girl."

"We'd better let you go. You really must visit us sometime Harry, we want to hear your side of the adventures!" Emma winked, the pair saying their goodbyes as Hermione lead them both back through the barrier, then returned to his side.

"I didn't know you were my girlfriend. Did you?" he dodged a punch to the shoulder, running for the train.

"Harry!" She laughed slightly, running after him. "I think I see Ginny over there."

Harry looked on, a smile in his eyes as he watched Hermione approach Ginny. He'd missed his friends over the summer and they were key members of the DA.

Mrs Weasley was fretting, making sure everyone going to Hogwarts had what they needed, as it was every year. Ron was looking sullen as she seemed to be admonishing his ear off. He was surprised to see Arthur, as he thought he'd be at work. He looked rather weary, he noted with some concern.

He trailed behind Hermione, as she struck up a conversation with Ginny, gesturing to him. This time, he snickered as he approached the pair.

Ginny wolf whistled, catching his eye. "Wow Harry, you look fantastic! I'll have to owl Fred for his old beater's bat, you'll need someone to defend you from the droves of Hogwarts students who want to see what lies under those now form-fitting robes."

She looked up and down his body, grinning slightly. "I have a feeling that Hogwarts will become far more interesting. You'll be the talk for different reasons this time, looks like the summer has been good for you." The three turned their heads at the sudden shout of Mrs Weasley.

"Ronald, close your mouth! It's very unsightly." Meeting his ex-best friend's gaze, Harry smirked as Ron's jaw was practically dislocated from how wide it was.

"Keep an eye out for Neville and Luna. If I'm not back in a few minutes, save me a compartment, I'll just say hi to Mr and Mrs Weasley."

He ignored Ron, who seemed frozen to the spot until a not so light slap to the head righted him, though the mother nearly joined the son in shock as she got a good look at Harry.

"Harry, is that you dear? Oh, you look wonderful!" he was then greeted with the Molly Weasley hug that he'd come to grow fond of over the years.

"It is me. I've finally discovered who I am over the holidays and what I want. And I feel great." He was fine for being honest here, though the cautious side of him wanted to find out where she stood with Dumbledore. Mr Weasley's letter gave Harry an idea, but he hoped he could trust her.

"I'm so pleased for you." Her eyes looked genuine. "You'd better go see Arthur before you leave, I know he wants to speak with you in person."

It looked as though she wanted to say something more, but instead patted him on the shoulder and went over to greet Hermione.
Arthur was already on his way over, his weary look replaced by an honest smile, casting privacy charms. "I see getting away from Albus has done you the world of good. How are you both?"

Harry's eyes lit with happiness. "We're fine. Remus is healed from the attack and I think it's the one time he's thankful for his wolfish traits. Otherwise, he would've died in that fire. What does Mrs Weasely think, and the others?" Arthur laid a hand on his shoulder, squeezing slightly. "Molly loves you, Harry, as do I. We see you as one of our own but it will take her time to understand that Albus isn't all that he seems. She knows this, as she was there when your howler arrived at Headquarters. She's conflicted. Her love for you is warring against her loyalty to Albus so she's on the fence. I've spoken with her about this and she's not a supporter of killing in any form, sometimes to her detriment." he paused, for a breath.

"Kingsley and Bill were not willing participants when Albus tried to kill Remus. Whatever magic you two came up with dissolved the hold Albus had over them. I know that Bill wants to talk with you in person and so does Kingsley. As for Severus," he hesitated. "I'm not sure. He may approach you at Hogwarts so be on your guard, just in case. Minerva is on your side, she always has been. Tonks has been tasked by Dumbledore to follow you in school, but as a member of the family, even if she wanted to betray you would mean that the laws of magic would punish her, as you are one of the sole remaining heirs of Black. She'll morph into a student and keep an eye out, but only report back with meaningless facts."

Harry took his time to process all this. It was better than he'd hoped, to be honest, but he would still rather see for himself.

He shook Arthur's hand in gratitude. "Thank you, I appreciate your support and help. How have you been?"

"I have been better. Dolores Umbridge has recently returned from St Mungos after the incident with the Centaurs. It took a while before she could distinguish between the sound of footsteps and hooves and at first, they had to place a silencing charm around her bed so that she wouldn't panic. The sound of hooves still gives her panic attacks and everyone knows this, thanks to Skeeter. She's been poking her nose in different departments, sneering down her nose at me and I quote, 'Filthy muggle objects.'"

Harry could feel a headache coming on and this time, not from his scar. "A shame they didn't keep her, isn't it?"

Arthur tried to look stern, but his amusement won out. "Centaurs aren't known for their love of humans. They'd be doing us a favour if they did choose to keep her. Unfortunately for them, they landed with the worst of our species, save for You Know Who."

"I'm not entirely sure he's human anymore." And wasn't that the truth? The Horcruxes had removed whatever humanity he had left. "I'd better be off, take care of yourself." He waved goodbye, heading back towards Hermione and Ginny, joined now by Neville and Luna.

"Hello Harry, you don't have as much of a Nargle infestation this year." He was greeted with a usual Luna statement accompanied by a tilt of the head, her dangling radish earrings and no outward sign of shock or surprise. She was a particularly smart Ravenclaw. For all he knew, she was expecting this.

"Harry, nice to see you again, you're looking great." Neville shook his hand warmly, a genuinely bright smile on his face.

Harry was at peace. As much as he'd loved the summer and what it had brought, he'd missed his friends. Well, almost at peace.
"Alright mate, have a good summer?"

Ron stood behind Harry, oblivious to what he didn't know was his former best friend's testing of patience.

Harry took a deep breath, shutting his eyes for a moment. What did you usually do when you were angry, count back from ten? It had never worked for him. He'd fly around as Lume, but somehow Harry didn't think that would go over well in either the Wizarding or Muggle world.

Ron's actions had hit him hard, but in its place, he'd found another friend and father figure. While Ron wasn't the first friend he'd made, he was one of the longest and closest he had, or so he'd thought. He could do this. He'd have to employ his best acting skills around certain people anyway, he could fool Ron. He was part Slytherin, after all.

A casual shrug shook his shoulders and he gritted his teeth at the supposedly friendly slap on the back. Ron wasn't the brightest of sparks. All he saw was a friendly grin and couldn't read the Avada Kedavra in those green eyes.

"Yeah, it was pretty good. We're off to find a compartment. Coming?"

He didn't wait for an answer, leading them onto the train and finding a compartment.

It wasn't long before Harry located a compartment. With Ron there, he couldn't discuss what he really wanted to talk about and as they all sat down, Ron was oblivious as always.

"So, Ron," Neville began awkwardly. "How was your summer?"

Ginny felt a pang of sympathy for Neville, but none more than for herself. She had to live with her pea brain of a brother, who was under the firm belief that the sun shined out of Dumbledore's arse. She knew that wasn't the case. During her first year, she knew in her heart that Dumbledore didn't even bother to try and help. Since that moment, she had lost all faith in The Headmaster.

She'd spent the entire summer hearing Ron brag about going with Harry to the Department of Mysteries, as though she wasn't there at all. She'd given in to the temptation of a few Bat Bogey hexes aimed his way more than once.

As Ron prattled on about whatever it was he did, Harry couldn't care less, Hermione turned to him.

"Harry," Hermione started. He knew what she was going to say already, her body was thrumming with excitement but he didn't spoil it for her, as he had a surprise of his own.

"I'm a Prefect!" she smiled happily. "This is a chance to make a real change, to set an example for the younger students, that we're not all out for ourselves and truly care."

"Congratulations Hermione," Harry patted his friend on the shoulder. "I have something to tell you as well." Now here, he wanted a little bit of fun. He'd caught the attention of his other friends as Ron had stopped mid-conversation. Luna had a strange little smile on her face as she watched her friends, while Ginny looked on expectantly.

"Close your eyes." Harry reclined into the seat, studying Hermione. She was about to protest and ask why, but a raised eyebrow from him halted her words. "Oh, alright." She shut her eyes and Harry nearly chuckled at her obvious need to know. From the breast pocket of his robes, he pulled out his Prefect and Quidditch Captain badge. He opened the closed fist on her lap, placing them inside and closing it once more.
"Look in your hand."

Hermione did as asked and not for the first time that day, she was speechless. It took a few seconds but when she did, she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Harry! That's wonderful, we can go to the meetings together!"

He was startled when Hermione pulled him to his feet and began dancing a jig with him. Soon the compartment filled with the sounds of congratulations among laughter at Hermione's antics.

"Oh, my Harry is all grown up," she pinched his cheek lightly, pretending to wipe away a tear. "I'm so proud!"

He was about to respond to her, an affectionate smile on his face when he froze in his tracks.

"I'm a Prefect too."

All sound stopped. It was as if with those words, everything ceased to exist. Harry was sure his brain had flatulated.

"I'm sorry?" Harry turned towards the voice, to make sure his hearing wasn't faulty and his eyes weren't going to fail as well despite his contacts.

"I said," Ron puffed out his chest proudly. "I'm a Prefect too."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Harry shook his head in a daze. What was Dumbledore thinking? Because there was no way on earth McGonagall would have ever chosen Ron. He was still surprised she'd chosen him, truth be told.

"Headmaster Dumbledore personally recommended me."

Well, that answered his question. On second thoughts, he knew exactly what Dumbledore was thinking. It was another way of keeping tabs on him, should Tonks fail. Anything discussed whether it was a suggestion for change or reform, would be reported back to Dumbledore.

He was saddened it didn't go to Neville. While he sometimes lacked in confidence, responsibility like this would really help him come into himself. Not to mention the first years would love him. He couldn't see Ron coaching the younger ones on homework or offer advice when he barely did any work of his own. Granted Harry was like this in the past but he had a feeling that if he'd been sorted into Slytherin, Dumbledore wouldn't have had such a profound impact. He'd be more studious, he might even have removed the blocks earlier.

Hermione tried to say something positive. "That's great Ron, really. Well done." She offered awkwardly, cringing at how false it sounded.

Ron couldn't tell, grinning like he always did and slipping an arm around Hermione's waist. "Thanks, Herm. Should we get going to this Prefect thingy?"

She hated that nickname, fighting against the urge to punch him. It was second only to the worst name she'd ever been given, the first being Herm-own-ninny. Really, she didn't know why she was so infatuated with someone who pronounced her name as though she were a sea creature.

Snapping out of his thoughts and seeing Hermione's annoyance, he overcame his own problem with Ron and slung an arm around his shoulder. Releasing her, Hermione was able to distance herself slightly.
"Let's go. We'll see you three later." Harry waved, locking the door behind them.

*Why did the meeting have to be at the other end of the train?* Harry thought to himself, frowning. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have minded, but the sooner they arrived at the meeting to hear the head boy and girl's speech, the sooner Ron would stop talking.

He could see students from different houses entering one larger compartment, which looked to be magically expanded to fit everyone. He beckoned them to follow him, cutting off their bickering which was no doubt about to turn into a fight.

The first thing that entered Harry's mind as he looked about his surroundings was cosy. The colours were rich earthy tones and no indication of house favouritism could be seen. Instead, there was the feeling of community, they were all students with shared responsibility and Harry liked that.

There were a few rich leather armchairs around, but he spotted some seats for them all to sit nearby. He was about to catch up with Hermione, Ron at his side, when an obnoxious and all too familiar drawl sounded from behind.

"Weasley? They let anyone in these days. Potter I can understand, the boy who lived status can grant only the best. But you? Who did you bribe and what with, the dump you live in isn't fit for animals to stay." He shared an obnoxious guffaw with Crabbe and Goyle.

He turned around, meeting cold grey eyes which soon showed more expression that they would've liked. He gripped Ron's shoulder none too gently, as he could practically feel the red head's anger.

"Potter. It seems that at least, you're befitting of your house status and no longer look like a common street urchin." Malfoy looked at him appraisingly.

"Malfoy." There must have been something in Harry's tone, as the blonde boy gave him a sharp look.

It was then Harry made his decision.

Since the removal of Dumbledore's influence, he'd had the time to think through things, really think. The only reason he'd rejected Malfoy's hand in his first year, was the boy's superior attitude towards him and at the time, his insulting of Ron, the first friend he'd made.

If he hadn't met Ron and was sorted into Slytherin, would Draco have been part of the golden trio? Would he still have the same friends he did if he were in Slytherin? All those questions and more had run through his mind but in the end, he wanted a truce.

He had too much to do, too much to live for, to spend the remainder of his years continuing a petty rivalry. He didn't even bother to think of Ron's reaction, he could stuff it. If they had to be in the same room together out of duty, he wanted to at least have a civil conversion if the time arose.

"Potter?" Malfoy's keen eyes noted that they'd gathered a small crowd, no doubt waiting for what their next fight would be.

"I want a truce with you," Harry stated simply.

Draco prided himself on his calm, cool mask of indifference but Potter surprised him every time. "Sorry?"

"I want a truce," he repeated, slightly nervous as he too had noticed the crowd, not to mention that
Ron looked as though he were about to go into cardiac arrest.

"Why, what's in it for you?" There must be something Potter wanted from him.

"Nothing. As for why I have bigger problems and I suspect you do as well. I'm not asking we be friends, more like we can pass each other in the corridor without wanting to insult or toss spells around. What do you say?"

In a complete spin around to his first year, Harry was the one holding his hand out.

Grey eyes locked with green for a few seconds, trying to get a read on him. What did he have to lose? In truth, he had his own agenda and wasn't at all interested in continuing in his father's footsteps. Plus, he was no fun to antagonise last year. Oh well, there was still Weasley.

"Harry?" Ron squeaked, looking on in shock and abject horror.

"I accept." And with that, the two biggest, now former rivals of Hogwarts shook hands.

Harry nodded his head slightly towards Malfoy, who returned the gesture. He walked away to his side of the room with Crabbe and Goyle while Harry headed in the direction of Hermione, leaving Ron rooted to the spot.

Hermione greeted him with a smile of approval. "I'm glad you did that, maybe he'll leave us all alone now."

"Harry what did you do that for? You shook hands with a filthy slimy snake! He probably cursed you!"

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes, casually taking a seat beside Hermione as Ron stormed over.

"Look, Ron," Harry tried to calm him down. "You can defend my honour, you handle Malfoy so much better than me. Though I'm not fighting, it doesn't stop you from doing so. Go out there, show Hogwarts, be the proud Lion you know you can be." If Harry had to stroke Ron's ego for fewer complications, then he'd happily do so.

A few snickers sounded throughout the room, knowing full well that Ron couldn't handle Malfoy at all.

Ron puffed his chest out proudly, the redness in his face a dull pink now. "Well ok." Ron accepted, sitting on the other side of Hermione. "As long as you know what you're doing."

"I do." And with that, Ron's anger had abated. Maybe he did know what to do to calm him down.

Harry fully anticipated everything to kick off once he arrived at Hogwarts. Whether that would be gradually or all at once, he didn't know.

All in all, it wasn't a bad meeting. Peter Wickes of Hufflepuff and Charlotte Mayfair of Slytherin introduced themselves as the new Head Students. To his surprise, before they all got down to business, they had asked each Prefect to give an introduction and tell a little about themselves. He knew a lot of people were expecting him to blow his own trumpet and mentioned his boy who lived status, but all he'd said was his name and that DADA was his favourite subject in school.

Everything went fine, until Ron. It had only been about an hour since that moment but Harry was almost tempted to weep loudly. Either weep or accidentally tell Ron that the Chudley Canons were practising Quidditch around the Whomping Willow.
"I'm Ron, Ron Weasley. I'm THE Harry Potter's best mate!"

He wasn't doing himself any favours if glares shot the red-headed boy's way were any indication, but Charlotte saved the awkward silence by gesturing to the next person before it got ugly.

"Was he always like this?" Harry muttered to himself quietly, keeping pace with Hermione while Ron was out in front.

"Yes, though not as much as now. I think Dumbledore has said something to him." Hermione spoke softly.

He was thinking out loud, but he appreciated the response nonetheless.

"We'll speak more on this later." He gave her a significant look, jerking his head in the direction of Ron and she nodded silently.

"Excuse me, are you Harry Potter?"

He came to a stop, Hermione a few seconds after him, as he searched for the source of the noise.

A girl stood before him, a first-year since there was no house crest on her robes.

"I am." He spoke gently, different from how he'd have reacted before. Last year he would've lashed out, triggered by awestruck or even curious tones but this time, he could only smile sadly as she held the light of innocence in her eyes which he'd never seen reflected in his own.

She had long wavy light blonde hair, lighter than Luna to the point of it being white, and pale green eyes. She cocked her head, much like Fang did and Harry never failed to find it adorable.

"What's it like, being famous? It sounds scary." She nodded to herself as if in affirmation, but jumped when another voice called out.

"Oi, piss off kid, we're Prefects! We haven't got time for you little pipsqueaks, there's work to do!"

Ron shouldered his way through, towering over the girl who's eyes went wide.

"RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY, HOW DARE YOU SPEAK LIKE THAT!" For a moment Harry thought Mrs Weasley had hitched a ride on the train, until Hermione dragged Ron by the arm to their compartment, berating him all the way and ignoring his protests.

"But Hermione-"

"No buts, Ronald!"

Harry nearly chuckled at Ron's whimper, silently cheering on Hermione and watching as the pair faded in the distance.

The girl giggled a bit nervously, suddenly reminding him that he still had an audience. He crouched to her level so she felt more at ease.

"In answer to your question before I was so rudely interrupted," he rolled his eyes dramatically and got a genuine laugh out of her, "It's scary. There's a lot that people expect you to be, to live up to. But the truth is, you should only live for yourself. Don't live by people's expectations or you will lose sight of who you really are."

She looked at him with a new found respect. "I can understand that. You're a lot nicer than I thought you'd be!" She blurted out.
He chuckled slightly in response. "Well, I try. So, what's your name?"

"Lilah Caltir." Her relaxed shoulders tensed slightly. "I'm so nervous to start here, I can't find anywhere to sit, everywhere was either full or they kicked me out."

He stood back up, patting her on the shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll find you a compartment. Do you have your trunk with you?"

She gestured to her side, where she had a trunk and a shoulder bag. He cast a featherlight charm on both, tuning in slightly to the magic on the train. Eventually, he came to a compartment with one other person in, a boy who looked her age. He slid open the door.

"Excuse me," the boy looked up, eyes popping out of his head as he looked where Harry's scar was, peeking slightly through a gap in his fringe. "Can Miss Caltir share this compartment with you?"

The boy silently nodded his head, lost for words.

"Just Lilah is fine," she piped up, watching as Harry placed her bag on the seat and her trunk on the rack above.

"Lilah it is then."

"Thank you, Mr Potter." She hugged him around the waist as he patted her back a bit awkwardly.

"Harry is fine." He parroted her words back as they shared a small smile.

"Have a nice rest of the ride here, I wish you luck whatever house you're in." He said kindly to the pair, watching as Lilah settled herself onto the seat across from the boy.

He gave her a small wave, returning to his friends. Sliding the compartment door open with a flick of his wand, Harry had to use all his self-control to not burst out into laughter at a red-faced Ron sulking in the corner, trying and failing to make himself completely invisible. He retook his seat near Hermione.

"What happened?" he gestured to the redhead beside him, who seemed to be ignoring everyone.

"Well, You heard most of what I said. I also," she flushed. "May have sent a Patronus to Mrs Weasley?"

Harry's eyes went wide. Oh, she wouldn't let this slide. The Great Hall would have more in store than the sorting tonight, he was certain. He raised an eyebrow. "I see that not all of the Hermione I knew before this summer has gone."

She gave him a smirk in return. "Not when it comes to Ronald, anyway. He needs a kick up the arse," she muttered.

Neville heard and promptly snorted, turning it into a cough when Ron looked at him curiously. Ginny looked at Harry, mouthing the words, 'Bat-Bogey Hex.'

He nearly lost it just then but pressed his lips together so he wouldn't laugh. Thankfully, Luna provided him with a distraction.

"Harry," She cocked her head in that curious manner of hers. "Will Dumbledore's Archenemies start this year?"

He frowned, confused. "Dumbledore's Archenemies?"
She gave him a knowing look. "Will you be starting the DA?"

Then he suddenly understood. Luna, the intelligent free spirit that she was, knew he was on the outs with Dumbledore. He rather liked the sound of Dumbledore's Archenemies.

He smiled in return to her own, indicating that he understood, placing Muffliato on Ron so he couldn't hear as clearly. "I will. We won't have to hide what we're doing now. The Headmaster won't disband a group that's in his name."

There were murmurs of agreement across the compartment except for Ron, who was still sulking.

The rest of the train ride to Hogwarts was relatively uneventful and unfortunately, Ron got out of his funk and resumed talking about himself. He noted with some concern that Ginny's face was slowly turning red. He hoped they'd arrive soon if only to prevent a sibling fight of great proportion.

Just when he was about to consider putting up some magic absorption spells, the train came to a stop as he heard the gruff shouts of, "Firs' years, firs' years follow me!"

Relieved that it didn't escalate, he waved to the little first year Lilah as she gave one back, looking a little intimidated by Hagrid's size. He smiled a little as Hagrid must have lightened the mood, as all the first year's tension seemed to have lessened from a few seconds previously.

It was raining, so there were huddles of younger students without protection from the Scottish weather. He cast a couple of water-repelling charms here and there to help them out, receiving looks of gratitude in return.

The group of five plus one made idle conversation, as they chose a carriage to ride in. Harry was about to join his friends until something made him stop and stare.

A smaller presence appeared beside him until he looked down into the wide blue eyes of Luna.

"You can see them, how they truly are, can't you?" a smile danced about her lips, as she went to pet the nearest one.

At first glance, Harry thought the Thestrals looked like regular horses, but as he approached the second one pulling the carriage, he realised that this was furthest from the truth.

Their coats were black, blending into the darkening sky, but it was the kind of black where if looked at for too long, there was a subconscious fear of never escaping it. Their hooves produced gentle grey mist, settling around them in a thin sheen, almost like a blanket.

As a stark contrast, their eyes were pure white, with no iris. They looked sightless, but both turned their head towards Harry in curiosity.

An icy nose nudged him, a long pink tongue swiping a trail from his cheek to ear. Harry heard Luna giggle, as he raised a hand to pat the nose so near his own.

"Why are they different from how I saw them before?" He asked, never failing to be amazed by the magical world.

"Your views on death have changed, Harry. Before, death was horrible. A cruel, and unnecessary end, something which robbed you of any form of family and stability. But now, you see it differently. Something has happened to you, to change your mind. Like it did to me." She spoke airily, feeding the Thestral nearest her. "She likes you."
Looking into the Thestral’s eyes, he was overwhelmed with a sense of familiarity, of peace. Thoughts and images not of his own slipped by his shields, gently showering him with them. His first reaction was to defend himself but he stopped as his animagi instincts kicked in. The familiarity was from Thanatos. He stopped and let the images transfer, feeling dizzy for a short moment.

He’d have to properly process what he just saw later, as they would be late for the feast if they didn't hurry. He acknowledged the animal before him with a respectful bow, giving her an extra pat on the nose in farewell.

He linked arms with Luna, helping her onto the carriage as he sat between Ron and Hermione.

"What took you so long?" Ron asked, mouth half full with a pumpkin pasty.

"Someone put a curse on me. I couldn't climb into the carriage and I feared I'd have to walk to the castle of all things," he spoke in a serious tone, Ron becoming slack-jawed with half-chewed food in his mouth until a hand from Harry's other side reached over and closed it with an audible clack. "But Luna saved me."

"The curse has left you." She confirmed, looking at him in a way which suggested that there was more to her words than she was letting on.

While Hermione, Neville and Ginny could see through Harry's words, Ron apparently couldn't, as he just grunted in acceptance.

He relaxed, letting the conversation of his friends fill the air. He vowed to explore the castle more than he had, as he wasn't the son, godson and honorary son of Marauders for nothing.

It wasn't long before they arrived, Neville helping Luna down while Harry helped both Hermione and Ginny, frowning at Ron's lack of manners. He was still unsure whether the summer had changed Ron or he was always like this and blind to it.

At one point, the crowd of students parted like the sea for the group, as many were ogling Harry's new look. Walking through the open entrance to the castle, they were greeted by Professor McGonagall.

"Good evening Miss Granger, Lovegood, Weasley. Mr Longbottom, Weasley, Pott-"

She stopped for a moment and squinted at him, perching her glasses on the very tip of her nose. "Mr Potter. An interesting fashion choice." She looked closer at his piercings, nodding approvingly. "I see. A wise choice of spells and as the last of your line, very sensible to have."

She continued after a moment's pause. "After the sorting Miss Granger and Mr Weasley will assist you with the first years." She informed him, pursing her lips in disapproval at the freckled boy. "You are a student at Hogwarts Mr Weasley, not the leader of a rabble but a Prefect! Tuck your shirt in."

They were ushered into the hall, Ron hastily doing so.

He immediately felt many pairs of eyes on him, for an obvious reason. Both for last year and his current look, but there was one particular pair which caught his eye and he did a double-take.

There, sat in the Defence Against The Dark Arts Professor's seat, was Alistair Lothaire.
Guiding Hands

Chapter Summary

Speeches, Howlers, Responsibilities and a student disguised.

It seemed as if everything else faded around them, blurring. Alistair stared directly at him, winking. Averting his eyes, Harry blushed.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked, concerned and placing a hand against his forehead.

"I'm fine!" he squeaked, clearing his throat. "I'm fine, really."

She looked at him sceptically but must have been believable, returning to reading shortly after.

He watched the sorting, only half interested until Lilah was seated on the stool.

He couldn't help but smile when Gryffindor became her new home. Walking by Harry's side, she waved and hesitantly held her hand out. When her high five was accepted Lilah smiled happily.

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks! See you later!"

She took her seat, a short distance from him as Dumbledore called for attention.

All eyes turned towards him. Some with eagerness, others uncaring and a few filled with hatred.

The robed wizard rose to his feet. "Good evening everyone, I would like to welcome you all back to another year of Hogwarts." The twinkling eyes brightened and what seemed like a genuine smile bloomed on his aged face. "It is nice to see some new faces among those who have been with us for quite some time."

Harry could have blinked and missed his change in demeanour. Gone was the eccentric slightly dotty old man which he used for his own benefit and there appeared a powerful and serious Wizard.

"There is something which I want to share with you, that the Ministry is unwilling to. While they wish to protect, I believe it's best to be prepared."

He waited patiently for the murmuring and whispers to die down, failing to notice that while Harry was watching him intently, his new DADA teacher was similarly focused.

A troubled expression flickered across Alistair's face, too quick to be caught by anyone human. Confident that he was seeing all that he could see in Dumbledore's mind, nothing indicated anything out of the ordinary so unfortunately, there was nothing relating to the location of his brother. While he was here to find out more information about what Dumbledore knew of his kind and kin, he was also here to protect and support Harry.

They had one or two things in common, the main being their mutual dislike of Dumbledore. What else they may or may not have in common, he was looking forward to finding out throughout the year. While a part of him was taking in the speech, most were analysing what he'd do for the school
year, all the while occasionally glancing at Harry.

Harry meanwhile, was having similar thoughts of what he'd do this school year. He wasn't even pretending to listen, he knew instinctively what Dumbledore was going to say. Right now, he was more occupied with focusing on anything else in some attempt to not catch Alistair's eyes. It made his thoughts whirl chaotically.

It took several seconds, but Dumbledore was soon satisfied as the students settled down. "As some of you with family in the Ministry may know, there are rumours that Voldemort has returned. " He ignored the wave of flinches and a couple of screams, continuing. "This is true. He was brought to life by an ancient and dark ritual the night Cedric Diggory was murdered by the hand of Peter Pettigrew."

No amount of waiting patiently could get the students to quiet down now, many disbelieved.

"What's he playing at?" one student cried. "Does he expect us to believe him without solid proof?"

There were similar protests and it took a few flash bangs from McGonagall before the noise in the room quietened.

Harry personally agreed with the student. While he did understand that keeping people aware was important, he could have delivered it in a better way. He could see many confused faces among the younger ones, though there were a few which held the light of fear and recognition.

His eyes trailed further down the table to land on Lilah. Unlike the majority, there was a grave and understanding expression on hers, tinged with determination. It was something which no 11-year-old should have, something which he shouldn't have had. It seemed his earlier assumption of her complete innocence wasn't entirely accurate.

Harry watched on as Dumbledore let McGonagall keep crowd control after his speech, introducing Alistair who flashed a smile across the room, melting a few student's hearts. And at last for many students, food and drink appeared on the tables, filling the air with a delicious aroma.

He watched blankly as Ron practically swallowed an entire chicken leg, Neville watching him in morbid fascination. Then, a loud hoot and flapping of wings caught his eye.

He closed in eyes in preparation for what was about to happen and sure enough, Errol landed with a crash, knocking over a large bowl of peas and a gravy boat. Harry cast a quick scourgify, about to relieve the owl of its burden until the smoky, blood-red envelope caught his eye.

He backed off hastily as the howler ripped itself from the owl's claws, coming to float directly in front of Ron.

Ron was in the middle of devouring another chicken leg when he noticed it. His eyes opened wide in horror, mouth clamping around the chicken leg he was in the process of chewing fiercely. This caught most of the Gryffindor's attention and with time, the entire hall grew silent.

As the howler opened its mouth, Ron slipped beneath the table in some valiant attempt to hide. But as some students knew, there was no hiding from Mrs Weasley.

If it was by some strange twist of humour or the elves could read students minds Harry didn't know, but he found himself staring at a large bowl of popcorn, the tables suddenly dotted with the new snack. He pulled the bowl closer, taking a few pieces. A light crunch of popcorn echoed in the otherwise silent hall.
Alistair watched also, quietly curious. He knew of howlers, of course, but had never been in the company of someone who'd received one or sent one himself. He wasn't one for shouting in general but if he ever did need to express his ire, a normal letter or personal visits to demonstrate his displeasure always sufficed.

He didn't know this red-headed boy, but there was something about him which he instantly disliked. In all his years of living, he had an incredible amount of tolerance and patience and respected the diversity of the world he inhabited, but yet there was something about him. He closed his eyes, organising and sealing away outer thoughts so he could watch what was bound to be an interesting moment.

The howler was smoking to the point where Harry was concerned it would set alight rather than convey its message. He had both of his wands handy if that should be the case.

"RONALD WEASLEY!"

The school collectively jumped, as they weren't quite prepared for the volume. 5th, 6th and 7th year were feeling a sense of Deja Vu, as they remembered one such howler sent to Ron in his 2nd year.

"HOW DARE YOU TREAT A FIRST YEAR LIKE THAT, I AM SO DISAPPOINTED IN YOU! YOUR FATHER AND I WERE SO PROUD WHEN YOU SHOWED US YOUR PREFECT BADGE AND THIS IS THE RESULT? IF YOU DARE DISRESPECT A STUDENT LIKE THAT AGAIN, I WILL COME TO HOGWARTS AND DEAL WITH YOU MYSELF!"

"Oh and Hermione dear," her tone became different as night and day, "Keep Ronald in line for me while I can't. You too Ginny. If I can't rely on my own son to conduct himself in an appropriate manner, I can always count on you two." The howler exploded instead of ripping into shreds, bits of red paper showering the pale red-headed boy. Harry could only see the top of his head and eyes, but he looked ready to pass out. Harry was trying dearly not to laugh but lost the battle as a random student burst into giggles, it wasn't long before others joined in.

The only ones who had lost their composure among the staff were Filius, who had fallen off his seat, Hagrid with his deep belly laughs and the new Defence Against The Dark Arts teacher, Alistair. His tinkling laugh could be easily heard. If he looked closer at Minerva, he'd see that her lips were not pursed in disapproval, but so as not to laugh herself.

In the face of his humiliation, Ron once again acted before he thought. He slammed his fists down hard on the table.

"SHUT UP!" he finally yelled, face brighter than his hair at this point. It did nothing, however, but renew the laugh of the students. Staff had calmed down and were prepared for damage control. Harry wasn't even half tempted to warn Ron that Snape was rapidly approaching him.

"Mr Weasley, return to your seat at once. This is deplorable behaviour for a Prefect."

The brain to mouth connection for Ron didn't happen on time.

"Why don't you fuck off? And you can shove those words up your arse!" he snapped, spinning around. The change was instant. Ron was looking at the sight before him as though it were an Acromantula.

That stopped the student's laughter.
Professor Snape caressed the letters of each word with his tongue before he chose to let the less eloquent hear them, or at least that's what Harry thought. He watched on, the silence even more profound after much noise.

"Mr Weasley, how dare you speak to me this way!" he hissed, very much matching the house logo he belonged to. He drew closer to Ron who while tall, seemed to shrink in the face of such dark fury. "One would think you possess a modicum of sense in that head of yours but clearly, your siblings inherited intelligence while you were left with the dregs. 50 points from Gryffindor and Detention with me for the rest of the year, starting tonight!"

Harry was almost tempted to clap but stopped himself. He'd settle for cheering internally. For once, he was on Snape's side. He had to speak with the man, as much as he loathed the idea. A lot had changed, however, so perhaps like with Malfoy, they could come to some sort of arrangement.

Snape put a none too gentle hand on Ron's back, giving a little shove. He was confident that his Prefects could handle seeing to the new flood of first years, however as always, he would be present to speak with his house. He'd have a house-elf oversee the little idiot's slicing and dicing of various disgusting ingredients. Really, the feasts were the one guaranteed time he could relax. Sometimes, he loathed his job.

"Surely you're not thinking of keeping Mr Weasley in a position of authority? It's not even his first night and already he's set a disgusting example, the others won't stand for it!" Minerva protested, her sense of fair play stronger than ever.

"Now now Minerva, the boy is nervous, that's all. I'm sure that once he's settled back into Hogwarts he'll be a shining example among the students." He tried placating her.

"Dinnae now-now me Albus!" she pursed her lips, very much in disapproval this time. "That boy is insufferable 'n' gives mah hoose a ill reputation. A dinnae know what's happened fur him tae change this wey, but if he doesn't stairt acting lik' a students o' Hogwarts shuid, he'll be answering tae me!"

Albus knew when to retreat, so to speak. When her Scottish brogue became thicker and slightly difficult to understand, that was when she was truly furious.

He respected her, but she was beginning to obstruct his path. She couldn't see the greater good as he did.

The sound of Dumbledore clearing his throat along with food and cutlery going back to the kitchens caught Harry's attention, so along with the rest of the school, they looked to him.

"Since I started the evening on a sombre note, let us end on a high note. The School Song!"

A collective groan made its way across the hall. Harry saw no point in a song which had no set tune to sing to, but he couldn't help but smile as Alistair crept into the back of his thoughts.

As the words flew into the air Harry dutifully sung along, to an undoubtedly terrible and out of tune pace of his own creation.

All in all, it was an auditory nightmare and he was startled slightly, momentarily forgetting about his bracelet and what purpose it served.

'Good evening Harry, I hope you are well. I thought I would make a polite stop into your mind and inquire about something.'
His heart fluttered slightly, amazed he managed to still keep singing. 'Evening Alistair, or should I call you Professor? I'm fine. What do you want to know?'

'Ah, Professor everywhere but in private. I was never one for formalities. Have I been isolated in my home for so long that music is now a foreign concept to me, what is this? Music in my time was a beautiful melody, but this is positively ear bleeding.' A pained note entered his voice.

It was, rather. Most likely worse for Alistair, as Vampires had sensitive hearing. Not to mention he wasn't used to the Hogwarts way of life. He laughed out loud, but it went unnoticed among the noise everyone was making. 'I promise, not all music is like this. It's just that Dumbledore's trying to slowly kill us via song.'

Alistair laughed this time, a sound which soothed Harry's heart. 'Now that I can certainly agree with. You have my class tomorrow. May I request that you stay behind at the end? I wish to discuss something.'

'Of course,' Harry wondered what he wanted, though it could be the whole fact that he was here, to begin with. 'I'll talk with you later, welcome to Hogwarts.'

'Thank you.'

Finally, the song ended. After a scattered round of applause then came the few minutes where students were organised to be led to their new common rooms.

"After we've guided the first years to our common room, do you want to go to the Room of Requirement so we can all talk?" Harry muttered to Hermione, standing up.

"Well," she hesitated slightly. "As much as I'm dying to find out everything," Harry chuckled, he could well believe that. "We have to be up early tomorrow and we should get some sleep." She looked apologetic.

"No need to worry," he smiled reassuringly. "The room answers our demands, if we simply ask for a room with a different passage of time, we'll be able to discuss things freely, not to mention this is the perfect opportunity while Ron isn't here."

"I should start calling you Hermione," she joked. "Are you two available?"

Neville and Ginny both nodded.

"I want to find out when Harry became such a lady killer," Ginny spoke seriously. "Even McGonagall gave you the once over." She waggled her eyebrows, snickering as Harry blushed.

"She wouldn't be interested in me." His mind went blank as he realised how that sounded.

"Not that I want her to be!" he added hastily, wanting to do a Ron and practically hide under the table as Ginny descended into giggles. Neville patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

He regained composure. "What about Luna?"

"There's probably no need to ask. Luna has a tendency of guessing what's going on even before she's told. She either has brilliant intuition, or she's a seer." This came from Hermione, which Harry was slightly surprised about. Harry knew Hermione wasn't overly fond of Luna, but it seemed as though her attitude had taken a 180-degree turn.

As if she sensed what Harry was thinking, Hermione explained. "I had a lot of time to think over the
"I look forward to seeing what else Hermione +1 has in store this year." He told her mock seriously, waving farewell to Neville and Ginny.

"First-year Gryffindors to us!" Harry called out, watching as the students thinned out and the shortest of the lot were gathered in front of them both. He caught Lilah's eye and flashed a smile as she gave him a thumbs up.

He looked to Hermione, giving a hand gesture of 'Go ahead.'

"If you'll follow us, we will show you where you'll be staying." She explained, matching her pace with Harry as they both took their time, answering questions asked by the younger years.

After speaking the password, Harry turned to his temporary charges. "Make sure you remember this. You are allowed to write it down, however, be sure not to misplace it." He knew Neville would have appreciated that particular warning.

"Take a seat, make yourselves comfortable," Harry spoke cheerfully, Hermione and he choosing armchairs across from the students. Some chose to sit on the floor, others on furniture.

"Hello and welcome to Hogwarts!" Harry exclaimed, his dramatic arm movements accompanied by talking receiving a few nervous laughs. "I sincerely hope you all enjoy your time here. I'm Harry Potter," a few gasps here and there but he barely blinked. "And I'm Hermione Granger." Hermione took over. "We are one of the few Gryffindor Prefects this year. Any questions that you have now or later, don't hesitate to ask and we will help.

Harry nodded in agreement, continuing. "So, the basics. We or other Prefects will be available to take you to your lessons and the Great Hall until you're able to find it on your own. I know the castle is huge but don't worry, you'll find your way in no time." His easy-going smile relaxed some of the students. "Curfew is 10 pm for the younger years, midnight for the upper years. If you leave your common room after 7 pm and you don't have a valid reason why you will lose house points or receive detention for a repeat offence."

He stopped for a moment, letting the information shared sink in as Hermione picked up where he left off. "House points are awarded or taken away depending on your behaviour. The hourglasses in the hall are used to measure the number of points in total. At the end of the year, whoever receives the most points wins the house cup."

There were a few excited mutters among the students and here, Harry sensed the perfect opportunity to help shape the minds of new students.

"I'm going to tell you all something very important." He spoke slowly and seriously, making eye contact with each student as he did. "And I want you to remember this throughout your time here, long after I leave Hogwarts." He waited until eager and some wary eyes were upon him.

"If fellow students or even staff try to tell you that one house is inferior to another, don't listen. Not all Slytherins are evil, there's Gryffindors who think before rushing into a situation, Ravenclaws aren't just book smart and Hufflepuffs aren't the house of leftovers. Each house has its good and bad points, yet they don't define who you are. So, don't let narrow-minded views of others ruin what friendships you can make. Reach out to others, work together, start study groups and just help out. We're stronger united than alone." He finished.

"Brilliant Harry," Hermione beamed from beside him. "I couldn't have put it better myself."
Giving her a brief smile, Harry brought his words to a close. "That's all for tonight and remember, if you have any questions, you're more than welcome to approach us."

Lilah waved, following her roommates upstairs after they were free to leave.

"Shall we be going then?" Neville spoke up, Ginny standing beside him as she clapped them both on the shoulder. "Good work, if only all the Prefects were like you two."

Harry smiled, slightly bashful. "Just doing our job."

They were about to head out when a voice addressed Harry.

"Mr Potter, can I speak with you?"

He turned around, only to see Lilah's friend.

"You three go on ahead, I'll catch up with you later." He gestured towards the portrait and after they left, addressed him.

"Of course, what's the problem?" he asked, curious until the boy changed appearances faster than Harry could blink. When the transformation registered, he couldn't hide his shock.

"Tonks?"

"Wotcher Harry! Tonks grinned at him, reflexively patting her body. "I'm a natural Metamorphmagus, but I still check to see if I have all the correct parts." She cast a bubble around the two of them, ensuring privacy.

"When you do change to opposite genders, you change all the way?" Harry's train of thought went down a path he would've rather avoided.

"Of course," she nodded as if this was normal for everyone. "Have to keep things as genuine as I can. What do you expect me to say if the boys catch me changing and don't see anything hanging?"

He conceded that point, silently taking a seat. "I have to say, I didn't expect that. Your disguise is definitely the least suspicious thing. I can see why Dumbledore picked you for the job."

Perhaps more leaked into his tone of voice than what he would have liked. "I won't ask for details as I can guess the basics for myself. While Dumbledore did get me to watch you, he had in mind that I wouldn't reveal my identity." She laughed to herself a little. "I will tail you to an extent but we'll discuss what to share and what not to share."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." He frowned, thinking for a moment. "I take it Dumbledore asks for weekly reports?" at her nod, he continued. "How about as a cover, I'm working with you as a tutor of sorts at a scheduled day in the library? That way we can talk quietly and no one will be suspicious."

Tonks gave Harry an admiring look. "I was going to suggest that myself, you really have changed, in more ways than one."

"I feel a lot better and confident in myself," he confessed.

"I can tell, you've finally come into your own." A mischievous twinkle entered her eyes. "Anyone you have your eye on, a student perhaps?"

"Ah, no?" he was caught off guard, not really expecting a question of this kind from her.
"Ah, I see how it is. A Professor? Personally, I always did think, as soon as I saw you both together, that you and Snape would make a good match. I mean, all of that hatred is just unresolved sexual tension."

Harry's eyes bulged as he could barely squeeze out an answer. "Please, don't even joke about that." He had the urge to obliviate himself.

She laughed, patting him on the shoulder. "Sorry. How about that new Defense Professor? He's 50 shades of dreamy and every possible side dish you could order." She had a starry gaze in her eyes.

"Yeah..." Harry spoke absentmindedly, only realising with her expression what he'd just admitted.

"Ah so you do swing that way, always wondered." She nodded to herself as if confirming something.

"I swing both ways," he shrugged, unconcerned. "Sexuality was never a big thing with me. People are nice in their own way unless they've proved otherwise."

"Harry if you were a few years older, I'd take you for my own." She said jokingly. "There's been some terrible DADA Professors over the years except Remus but hopefully, he can do a good job. Speaking of Remus, how is he?"

"He's doing fine." A fond smile shaped his face. "There's something relating to that I need to talk to you about actually, but I don't have the time right now."

"That's fine, I'll let you go. Just wanted to officially check-in and establish our little secret." She winked, transforming back into her disguise. "Thank God for Madam Malkin's size adaptable charms," she muttered to herself, waving farewell at Harry and returning to her dorm room.

Hearing Tonks' comment and chuckling, he entered his dorm room for a few seconds, searching for his invisibility cloak. Pulling it out he was about to leave with it on, but there was something which didn't seem right. He focused closely on his cloak. In the centre was a bright spark of red and the bigger space, the cooler the colour.

That wasn't what bothered Harry, however. A shimmer of black coated the surface, not quite touching the cloak. He cast a simple detection spell, eyes practically narrowing into slits. Not only were there compulsion and loyalty spells but ones designed to weaken the mind's defences and raise the desire to be truthful.

While he truly appreciated Alistair's bracelet, clearly he couldn't let his guard down all the way. Sighing, he instead placed a disillusionment charm around himself. He hoped the spells didn't ruin his cloak, though found it very unlikely.

When he could, he'd take a proper look at his cloak and if need be, ask Alistair. After all, he had 1,484 more years of experience than he did.

But, he wasn't starting to like Alistair was he, as in past friendship sense? Surely not. However, all that he'd thought so far and certainly his reaction with Tonks was an indicator. The fact that Alistair was a Vampire was certainly no issue with him. He was open to anyone really, within reason of course.

'What am I thinking?' he shook his head incredulously, very near his destination now.

He looked at the entrance to the Room of Requirement, confused. Instead of the heavy, dark and very large door that he'd come to expect, in its place was a glass door. The glass itself was stained
various shades of blue, in such a way that Harry thought he was looking at the sea. Around the door attached to it, was a leafed arch with small orchids protruding from the gaps. Looking closer, there were tiny little creatures flying harmlessly about, giving off a gentle silver glow.

It was beautiful and he was almost sorry to disturb the tranquillity by pushing the door. Judging from its appearance, something told him that the Room of Requirement had answered one particularly eccentric girl's wishes.
A Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

Discussing everything that had happened so far, Harry's abruptly brought from his thoughts by an amused Ginny, as everyone is reminded of Hermione's capabilities.

As Harry stepped through the entrance, it seemed like an entirely different world. What caught his eye first was a smooth, clear glass bridge and when he cautiously stepped onto it, he feared it may break but held strong. Off to the side, was a waterfall, gently trickling. The water surrounded everywhere, only stopped by a long stretch of land much like the one he was standing on.

Dotted about the grass and near the waterfall itself were more orchids, each pure white and more of the same creatures fluttering about them. A sharp colour caught his eye and he watched in fascination as a rainbow Koi swam right under the bridge he was standing on.

Any adjectives which sprang to mind didn't express how tranquil and untainted everything was. Luna's mind remained as pure and unique as ever despite everything and it was something which he greatly admired her for. This fact was reinforced as with every step, the soft sound of wind chimes caressed his ears, though there were none to be seen.

In front of him was a cobblestone path, the stone marble-like in appearance as either side of him two young cherry blossoms in full bloom gently rained their petals down.

A soft breeze blew, nostrils filling pleasantly with the scent of blossoms. and skies endlessly blue. Lowering his gaze, there was a sitting area, with benches in much the same style as the bridge. The area was slightly shaded, covered by an elegant domed roof.

He almost lost himself within the sights, until a voice snapped him from them.

"It was like this when we got here." He looked over at Neville, seated next to Luna, who tilted her head slightly, blinking.

"The Nargles don't swarm you anymore." She stated, factually.

"They don't?" he questioned, thinking back on the time when Luna told him they did.

"Your eyes are clearer than they've ever been. What better room for you to share your adventure than a one which is nothing but?" she smiled, suddenly rising to her feet and skipping around the fountain there.

"Welcome to Lunaland," Ginny spoke, summing up everyone's thoughts.

"Tell us everything, Harry." Hermione gazed at him intently, with an expression he usually associated with her taking notes in lessons.

"I will," he promised, laughing slightly and altering his robes to access the pouch he always kept. "After I've given you all something."

Luna stopped her skipping around the fountain, clapping her hands together excitedly. "Presents?"
"Yes, presents." He smiled fondly, giving Luna the bracelet.

With a pulsating glow, the bracelet fit snugly to her wrist. Something appeared between two of the sapphires. A charm, in the shape of a crescent moon and smooth white.

"Thank you, Harry." She looked at her gift, something in her eyes saying she knew more than what she let on and throwing her arms around him. Returning the gesture awkwardly, Neville was next.

"I don't know what this plant is, I found it near where I live now," he spoke, watching as his eyes lit up. "I'm not sure what this is either, but I look forward to finding out! Thanks." He placed it next to him, giving Harry a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Ginny." From within his pouch a pair of studs, placing them into her hand.

Ginny looked at her earrings with no small amount of awe. "They're beautiful." They were studs, so wearing them as part of her uniform was not an issue. Before she could so much as slip them on, the rose quartz shifted so that it became a border and within them, two tiny suns. Silently, she slipped them into her ears, removing the plain studs she already had in.

"I'm sensing a theme here," Harry mused, looking between them in interest. He could practically feel Hermione's mind working on possible explanations for this development and right now, he would be happy to welcome them. He handed the final gift to Hermione, a modest ruby drop pendant.

She studied it intently, barely remembering to thank him as she watched the changes. A tiny tree was etched into the centre, the chain it was attached to had leaves sprouting from it. Still focused, her eyes widened when the pendant against her chest began to glow, simultaneously with Ginny's earrings and Luna's bracelet.

The scenery shifted slightly so that the structure was gone and in its place, was a large patch of grass. Ginny shrieked slightly as she and the other two girls suddenly floated into the air. While Hermione was startled, the calm and logical side of her brain was working into overdrive, still coming up with explanations while assessing what was happening. Luna showed no change, as though she'd expected for this to happen all along.

Harry sprang both of his wands to his hands so fast that Neville did a double-take, but he followed suit as the pair silently watched, in case something happened.

Ginny felt an insistent urge to link hands, as though something was trying to physically push her body into doing so. Not resisting, they all linked hands and as one, they formed a triangle, the glowing increasing in intensity.

They were several feet in the air by now and below them, something was beginning to grow. The ground shook harshly and Neville dropped to the ground but after assistance from Harry, both managed to keep their footing with difficulty. The wind which was once calming was anything but now.

"What's happening?!" Ginny shouted, trying to make her voice heard over the wind, but to no avail.

Hermione was one of the first to notice what was happening at their feet, aside from Harry and perhaps Luna, who had the same gentle and curious expression on her face as always.

Then, they were pulled apart, a tree which made the whomping willow look like a sapling growing rapidly. While the three were thrown back, they were lowered to their feet gently, Ginny staggering from the shock.
"Are you alright?" Harry went over to Ginny to support her and collect Hermione, while Neville went over to Luna.

"I'm fine," she shakily blew out a breath. "What the hell was that about?"

The five came to a standstill at the impressive sight, but before they had a chance to study the new addition, a large scroll landed at their feet. Silently looking to either side for permission, Harry picked up the scroll, opening it to read aloud the contents.

To whoev'r reads this missive:

Eith'r yourself 'r those who is't art in thy company has't been recognis'd by the pow'rs yond beest as not only representatives of forces united, but allies and square'rs fr all Fae kind. longeth has't been writ in l're yond this day wouldst cometh.

In the realm beyond our owneth, th're art troubles far most wondrous'r than yond of the Fae. This realm shall birth the human synchrony needed to link w'rlds.

Childe of Sun, the lady who is't burns bright, blazing with not only passion but f'rocity fr what is lief to h'r. The lady shall beest the yang to moon's yin, th're to square fi'rcely. The lady is strength, the Warri'r.

Childe of Moon, who is't is fair'r than the most delicate of beings and halcyon in the visage of most wondrous turmoil. The lady is silent, watchful, gentle. Yet, the lady can changeth the tides of fate. the lady is youth, the Healeth'r.

Childe of Bloom, struggling to groweth. Once the lady is grown and blooming, the lady shall adapteth und'r both the gentle Moon and the blazing Sun. H'r branches reacheth fr the sky, spreading in all directions. H'r roots art firmly embed'd in the soil yond the lady's madeth h'r home. The lady is wisdom, the Tactician.

In the corner of the scroll, a small triangle could be seen, with the base being the Moon and the Sun while the tip is a tree, each on the three points. From the points, they connected in the centre, a trio of swirling lines. Harry drew his attention back to the scroll, reading further.

As one, they shalt striveth to connecteth our w'rld as we knoweth to the w'rld yond those are b'rn to. They shall square and protecteth not only fr Fae kind but fr their owneth.

Alloweth t beest known yond the fair maidens three art a pivotal pointeth in bridging gaps once and fr all.

Sun, Shattered Blaze

Cé mo punt chroí, beidh mé ag troid

While my heart pounds, I'll fight

Moon, Gentle Whisper
He had to intentionally not focus his eyes upon the scroll to read the translation, which was strange. At a guess, he'd say one of the Fae had written this in their natural language, but the faint tingling in this thumbs suggested magic was at work which allowed him to see the translation.

Looking up, he finally took note of the tree.

"Picea Sitchensis." Neville piped up and when only receiving a blank look from Harry in return, he sighed. "It's a big tree."

"Sorry," he smiled in apology. "I don't speak Herbology lingo very well."

He waved away Harry's apology, silently admiring the sight.

Harry had seen trees in his lifetime but whatever this tree was classified as he was sure this particular one couldn't be found in the Muggle world.

Though trees were strong and could withstand many types of weather, there was a certain fragility around it that Harry was half afraid it would crumble before his eyes. Perhaps it was because rather than the bold colours and rough bark he associated with trees, the colours were soft and muted in comparison to the vibrant scenery around him. The leaves were practically translucent, almost like tissue paper.

"Should we do as it asks?" Ginny questioned, looking between Hermione and Luna. "I can see they're activation phrases, but for what?"

"We'll have to find out." Shockingly enough this came from Hermione and everyone except Luna, eyes still on the tree, looked at her.

"Well, aren't any of you a little excited about this? It's a real opportunity to learn more we know nothing about." She shrugged sheepishly as Harry laughed.

"I never thought I'd see the day where Hermione Granger abandons all sense of caution and plunges in headfirst like the Gryffindor she is. Neville, hold me!" he flapped his arms about dramatically, pretending to faint while Neville played along, catching him.

Hermione pursed her lips, the amused glint in her eye showing her true thoughts. "I have considered things, but I'm taking a leaf out of your book."

Before any more could be said, their attention was captured by a soft and inquisitive voice, not aimed at them.
"Good evening, pretty tree," Luna spoke as one would to a friend. "Will you show me how I shall protect with my soul?"

She skipped to the trunk, carefully placing her hand onto it and her ear pressed against the strangely smooth bark. She nodded her head seriously, as though listening to the response.

But, the rest could've sworn that the wind whistled differently from before.

Luna removed her bracelet, hanging it on a lower branch and to their surprise, it seemed to melt into it. As it did, part of the branch had broken off, dropping into Luna's palm and shifting before her eyes.

In size, it resembled a Stave, but not a single part of it was wood. The main body was twisted and see-through, ending with a point and resembling a unicorn horn, though the material looked like glass. Near the top, was a large sphere, made entirely of moonstone which seemed to shine with a light of its own. Where the horn shape ended, there was an indentation and as Luna pressed her thumb over it, the gift she was given at the start showed itself once more, the exception being an indentation there. Not looking in the least surprised, she slipped the bracelet back onto her wrist.

"Shutaro told me, this is Gentle Whisper." Luna smiled serenely, coming to join the group.

"Shutaro?" Hermione and Ginny spoke at the same time.

"That's his name," Luna said simply. From anyone else, this would sound insane, but Harry learned to always expect the unexpected with her.

As Hermione made a gesture for Ginny to go next, she also put her palm against the bark, along with her ear. She knew her friend long enough to know that her instincts were usually spot on.

"While my heart pounds, I'll fight." She spoke firmly, almost sure she could hear a voice instructing her.

Looking down, she noticed a large hollow in the middle of the trunk which wasn't there before. Following the voice, she removed her studs and placed them within the hollow, shielding her eyes from an incredibly bright light which nearly blinded her, but ended as soon as it had begun. Within that hollow, she could see the studs shifting, reshaping, until with some effort, she managed to pull out a huge Glaive.

The blade itself was golden in colour, eventually fading to orange and red, the metal not straight cut, but cut in a way which looked like flames. The handle was a solid grip with an indentation just above it. from the sides of the handle and connecting to the blade, sharp spikes jutted out and in the centre, was a revolving sun. The blade looked as though it could break any moment, as it gave the illusion of cracks forming across it, pulsing and silver in colour.

"It's going to take some serious practice before I can swing this about." She spoke, doing similar to Luna and pressed her index finger firmly into the indentation, whereby they turned back into studs. The indentation on her jewellery was for the left stud, as there was a slight difference in the sun motif than on the right. It was just the right size for the upper pad of her thumb, it seems it would have to be intentionally pressed for the change to happen, thankfully. Slipping them back into her ears she took a seat next to Luna, who decided to watch the proceedings while seated on the grass.

With curiosity burning fiercely in her eyes, Hermione was the last one. Harry, for his part, was quietly watching and wondering if the Fae knew something which he didn't at that time. Was it planned? To him, it seemed coincidental that he'd found the gemstones in that strange container on
the way to meeting them, but perhaps it was intentional. Playing with those thoughts in mind, he wondered what Hermione would receive.

"Mar shreabha mo eagna, beidh mé mar thoradh ar."

Somehow, Harry was not surprised that Hermione knew this language. Hand on the trunk like Luna and Ginny, she silently sprung her wand from its holster, pointing at the root. "Aguamenti."

Suddenly, one of the tree roots grew from the ground, twisting and turning until she flinched when the very tip pierced the ruby around her neck. Slowly and carefully she removed her pendant and watched in fascination as Willow's Strike was formed.

The root had twisted in such a way, that the shape of a longbow was visible. Once she picked it up, it changed instantly, a soft line connecting from one to the other, to complete it. The entire bow had the pattern of a tree, intricate branch and leaf designs curving around and up it, glowing a luminous green. The pattern left the very wood itself from top to bottom, curving in a way where one was symmetrical to the other. Like with Luna and Ginny's, there was also an indentation, but this time on both sides, in a way where she had to pinch with her thumb and index finger. While Luna's and Ginny's were easily explainable, where were the arrows? Leaving that for something she'd need to ponder later, she pinched the indentations, putting her pendant back on.

She was about to head back when something bright and swirling emitted from the trunk of the tree. It grew larger until, it stayed, forming the vague shape of a doorway.

Now, she was torn between investigating this new occurrence and asking Harry to share his summer. Deciding that the former could wait she joined the others on the floor, looking at Harry expectantly.

"All this fascinating stuff has happened and you still want to hear about my summer?" he asked incredulously, arm rested on a knee.

"Harry, your life puts the most thrilling of action films to shame, of course, I want to hear about it!"

He decided to oblige before his best friend spontaneously combusted. Looking around at the rest of his friends who were all listening attentively, he explained all that had happened so far.

As the sky remained cloudless and blue as ever, there was no way to tell the passage of time, though instinctively he knew that in 'Lunaland', it wouldn't be the same as at Hogwarts. Either way, once he'd finished, he knew that a considerable amount had gone by.

"So you've met the Defence Professor before. He's one of the oldest living Vampires in existence and you're allied with him. Then, you meet the Fae and they also offer you an alliance, not to mention Dumbledore, all that he's done including to Remus, the soul of the Basilisk you slew on your arm in your body and not one but two magical Animagi forms and that's glossing over other details." Hermione summed up, deeply interested. "I have a question."

"Just the one?" he smirked.

"Dracula's castle, or technically Lothaire Castle," she started, eyes already focused on something in her mind that only she could see. "Was there a library? If so, did you see it? What was it like? How-"

"-Hermione." He stopped her with a hand gesture. "That was more than one question." She stopped mid-speech, but that didn't prevent her earnest gaze.

"That's our Hermione." Neville quipped while Luna seemed as curious as she was. Ginny, however, was looking at Harry intently.
"There is, I'm not just saying this so I can see you fidget and squirm. Well, mostly not." He amended, seeing her narrow her eyes.

Describing the library to Hermione, he was reminded of his interaction with Alistair the first time he discovered it.

Taking his time to walk and appreciate the architecture, as he frequently found himself doing during his brief stay at the castle, a pair of ornate doors caught his eye. Much like the castle entrance, they were Gothic in appearance. However, they didn't give off the vibe of dread as those first double doors did upon his arrival. Approaching them, he gave an experimental push, finding himself once again surprised when they swung open with ease. He nearly received said doors back on his face once he'd pushed them open as the sight rendered him motionless.

The Hogwarts library was impressive but in comparison to this, it was closer to bookshelves in a nursery, though he wasn't suicidal enough to say as much to Madam Pince. That woman protected those books with the same relentless ferocity as Madam Pomfrey did her patients.

He walked in fully, almost wishing he was Hagrid's size so he didn't have to crane his neck. The room was circular, but by no means small. The ceiling was made of stone but looked to have the same enchantment as the Great Hall at Hogwarts did.

There were no walls to be seen because they were covered by shelves fitted with books. Or were the walls shelves themselves? Harry didn't know. There was a wonderful kind of lived-in vibe he received from this room and in a way, he could understand why libraries were like a second home for Hermione.

In the middle, various chairs and tables were set up, along with a few quills and ink and to his surprise, a couple of muggle pieces of stationery too.

But what caught his eye the most, was a large book on a stand, directly in the centre. It was glowing faintly with a self-inking quill attached to a chain at the side of it. Approaching curiously, he wondered what it was.

"Ah, I see you have found the library. A sight to behold, yes?" a familiar voice called from beside him. He jumped, nothing in his magic or senses gave Alistair's location away.

"Yeah," he managed, trying to calm his frantically beating heart. "I could use some of your stealth, looks like it could come in handy. But please don't do it too often to me, I'm too young to die!" he cried out dramatically, heart rate not slowing any at the sound of Alistair's warm chuckle.

"You are indeed." he met Harry's eyes, tilting his head. "Are you fond of reading? My brother and I were, though we often choose to see the sights for ourselves rather than to sit and read about them. When he was a child he would sometimes pass out over a book while our Mother and Father were off hunting somewhere." he sighed. "So long ago now."

Harry was curious as to just how his brother went missing, but he sensed it was a sore topic. "It depends on what you mean by fond." he hesitated, eyes clouding over with past memories. "My relatives never let me read any books or anything which would benefit as a whole. The only times I ever could read were in the school library. But even then, due to them saying I was a juvenile delinquent, I never felt comfortable reading there. If it wasn't the librarian it was my cousin. He never
voluntarily went into the library to read, only to find and torment me. But now that I'm free, I think I'm learning to appreciate books for what they are." He finished, lowering his gaze which had been fixed on the taller Vampire. Why was he comfortable enough to be so open with him? "Sorry about that, I said too much."

Harry had gone above and beyond his expectations. He couldn't lie to himself, he was fond of Harry in the sense that he was starved for company, but also appreciating him for who he was. To hear that he was hurt by his own family no less, filled him with heated rage.

Lost in his thoughts and slightly regretting bogging Alistair down with the details, he flinched ever so slightly when a cool hand touched his shoulder. "Please, do not apologise. I am glad that you shared this with me. It is never too late to begin reading." He spoke gently, such a kind smile on his lips that when Harry glanced at it, the tension in his face melted a little.

Alistair seemed to be lost in thought for a moment until he turned to face the book on the stand. "Tell me, have you ever heard of The Art of War by Sun Tsu?"

"I have, Hermione has told me about it. I've never had the chance to read it though."

"He was an interesting fellow, aware of Vampires yet not phased by us. Perhaps it was his role as a strategist which allowed for such calm. One of the more pleasant humans I have had the fortune to encounter." He spoke, writing quickly in the book and Harry watched as something brightly glowed in the distance.

"Ah, here we are." He didn't do anything, not even move a finger, yet the book he desired flew towards him. He caught it so fast, that the movement didn't register with Harry's eyes or brain.

Before he had time to marvel at just how fast Alistair was, he'd turned to Harry. "In truth, I have read this particular book so often, I could recite it word for word. But something is charming about turning the pages. Would you like me to read it to you?"

"Yes please." In a way, it felt childish. But since when had he ever been a child? He'd never had the simple times of being read a story. Perhaps when he lived with his parents, or even by Remus or Sirius he had, but it wasn't something he could remember now.

He gave a heartwarming smile, gesturing to follow him to the sofa.

As Alistair took a seat, Harry sat beside him, relaxing into the cushions and watching his hand movements as the well-worn book was cracked open. As he began to read aloud, he was enraptured not only by the words themselves but the way he spoke them with such passion. He ended up leaning to get a better look at words on the page, unaware that he was gently resting his head on the man's shoulder doing so.

Alistair, for his part, was enjoying himself greatly. Not only in whose company he was sharing, but at what they were doing together. He smiled internally seeing the completely attentive look on his face, one which he found rather adorable. He admitted to himself that all the expressions he'd seen so far were endearing.

He was surprised when feeling the weight of Harry's head on his shoulder. He knew, learning what he had about him that he wasn't one to trust so easily, but seeing Harry let his guard down in such trust almost fooled him into thinking his own heart began to beat. It was a comfortable, warm weight and carefully, trying not to startle him, he gently re-positioned his arm.

It was only as he was listening to Alistair read that he realised he wasn't in his usual robes. Instead,
he was in a long-sleeved peach coloured shirt, with a slight shine to it. His eyes widened slightly when an arm drew him closer. Normally, he’d tense, stiffen up or failing that, flip out when someone unexpectedly touched him though since Remus, those moments were few and far between.

But this was entirely different. He'd been resting his head on the man's shoulder unconsciously and he was disturbed to realise just how comfortable he was around someone he barely knew. He didn't ignore his instincts, however, and they told him that Alistair was someone he could trust.

As his body made more contact with the man beside him, even if just a little, he could feel how perfectly toned he was. He focused on the words spoken, feeling more relaxed than he ever had in a long while.

Beneath his arm, Alistair could feel Harry's muscles relax fully and the warmth by his side was pleasant. This was so reminiscent of the times he used to spend with Solomon as a child, that he stopped for a moment.

"You ok?" Harry asked, almost dozing off. From a side view, Alistair looked sorrowful. He didn't like to see such a look on anyone's face, save for his enemies, which Alistair was certainly not among.

Looking into the clear crystal gaze of Harry, he reassured him. "My apologies. I am fine. Are you enjoying this?"

"Very much so." Harry offered a lopsided smile, once more listening until he was relaxed so much, that his eyelids began to grow heavy.

Ears picking up on soft, even breathing and a decrease in heart rate, Alistair stopped reading, looking down into the sleeping face of Harry. It was looking at him now that he realised just how young he was and his instinct to protect reared its head. Not having the heart to awaken him, Alistair took note of the page number. Sighing to himself at how much of a sentimental fool he could be, he silently watched over Harry as he peacefully slept on.

'I can't believe I fell asleep on him! What an idiot.' Current Harry thought, mentally slapping himself. He was unaware that after he'd finished his explanation of the library, Ginny was trying to get his attention.

'I'd never felt so relaxed before, but still, it was embarrassing.' He flushed lightly but despite this, a smile tugged at his lips.

"Harry? Earth to Harry?"

Simply thinking about that moment filled his heart with warmth. That was until something cold covered him.

Spluttering, he blinked his eyes and was brought back to reality when he saw Ginny with her wand pointed at his nose.

"That's better." She smiled in satisfaction, turning into a smirk at Neville's laughter and Hermione trying to hide a smile. Luna merely tilted her head, eyes shining. "So, now that you're suitably drenched," she placed her wand back in its holster. "Do share with us who exactly has captured
Harry Potter's heart? If the masses were to know you could swim to Potions class via your fan's tears."

Harry rolled his eyes. "And what makes you say that?"

"I know that look anywhere." Ginny stared at him. "You can't fool me. It's like with Cho but you have it much worse."

Was he that obvious? In answer to his silent question, he could see the others agree with Ginny.

"I'll tell you, but only if it ever goes somewhere."

Satisfied, Ginny yawned, rubbing her eyes. "I bet it's late. As much as I'd like to see what's through Shutaro's portal, I think we've had enough excitement for tonight."

For a moment Hermione looked to protest but silently nodded.

"Will the DA be hosted here?" Luna asked. "Shutaro wouldn't mind the company, though he will hide his secret from others."

"Why not?" Neville shrugged. "It's a relaxing environment to be in and might help ease any younger students if they want to join."

After a few moments, everyone seemed to have come to an agreement.

"It's settled then. We need the DA now more than ever, but not due to an incompetent Defence teacher. The DA will help to unify the students and to work together as a team. How do you feel about inviting a few Slytherins? Providing you use the same contract as last time, Hermione, sharing the club without express permission shouldn't be a problem."

"Yes." Hermione agreed, standing up with the others. "I've made some alterations and sealed any potential loopholes. The penalty for attempting to share the DA's existence won't be as obvious. While we had to keep the existence of the DA quiet due to that woman," She practically spat, "Dumbledore knows of its existence and as long as he still thinks the club is in support of him, there shouldn't be a problem."

"That's great Hermione, thanks." He gave her a grateful smile, exhaustion catching up with him. "We'd better head back."

As they all agreed, Neville and Luna left as a pair, then Ginny and Hermione and finally Harry. If one of the two pairs or he were caught, it would allow for the others to get back safely, though he was confident they'd all get back fine.

His guess was proved correct. Neville had escorted Luna to the Ravenclaw entrance and had made it back unharmed. After saying a brief goodnight to the rest of his friends, Harry wasted no time, collapsing onto his bed. Relaxing his body and mind, he wondered what was in store tomorrow.
Lessons of Life

Chapter Summary

Harry visits the chamber of secrets once more and afterwards, experiences what it's like to be taught by Professor Lothaire. Afterwards comes a discussion, witnessing stupidity and then a surprising apology.

What was that horrible sound? Harry pricked his ears. Coming from the bed beside him, it took a split second to recall. Of course, Ron. He was half tempted to place a silencing charm over him and return to sleep but found himself unfortunately wide awake. He cast Tempus, grimacing as 6 am floated in mid-air. He wondered what he'd do for the remaining time but then had an idea. It was better sooner rather than later he should release Aela back into her body, so why not do it now?

He could hear her hiss of approval in the back of his mind. Checking to ensure that both of his wands were secure and dressing in his robes, he masked his footsteps, casting a Disillusionment charm. The halls were silent, echoing even the faintest of sounds.

Entering the girl's bathroom, he looked around cautiously, but couldn't see Myrtle which was relieving. "Open," he hissed, the chamber's entrance revealed to him once more.

The experience of sliding down the pipe was not as euphoric. That was either because the adrenaline he had running through his system heightened things, or flying as Lume rendered a slide ride unimpressive.

Everything was untouched and he retraced the steps he once took, clearing away the animal bones and grime. The door with serpents etched into it remained open, from the last time, so he carried on. He'd forgotten just how magnificent the chamber was. Then again he didn't have much time to appreciate it nor the desire to, busy fighting for his life.

Seeing the corpse of Aela still as it was, not to mention not rotting, he was momentarily surprised, until he thought. "Aela, does the chamber have preservation magic?"

"Yesss, it does. However I am with you in a sense, my body detectssss that and still clingsss to some form of life. I'm looking forward to being in my own body once more."

"Do I need to be doing anything else in the meantime?" he asked, still observing a soon to be ex-corpse.

"No. While the phrasssse is tied to my first masster since I no longer inhabit a body, the plan is I will return there. I hope."

"You hope?"

"I'm not ssure if it will work," she admitted. "Nothing like thisss has happened before."

There was only one way to find out. "Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four," Harry
spoke firmly, voice filling the chamber with certainty.

At first, he didn't think it had worked until a thin thread of magic coming from the corpses' throat connected, exactly where the Fang had penetrated him. It burned a spot through his robes, making contact with his skin. He thought he'd be in for a world of pain but instead, met with an insistent tugging.

Much like a bead on a chain, magic encouraged it, following the thread inside. It snapped all of a sudden and with it was a sharp pain, however, he didn't even have the chance to yelp before it was gone.

'Is everything alright?'

He blinked once, twice, his brain gaining some clarity. One day, he would remember that someone could mentally contact him and see the colour of his emotions. Once his life had settled down, that was.

'Fine right now, why?'

'Your emotions are a veritable rainbow, I do not quite know what to make of it. You are in good health and you still have all of your vital body parts?' Harry could sense the joking tone through their link, laced with some seriousness.

'Actually, I think I might have lost a toe in one of the corridors.'

'Aha, I see. No doubt Ser Sunshine has found it.'

'Ser Sunshine, dare I ask?'

'Why dear Professor Snape, of course. Who else among us members of staff has such a constantly cheery disposition, designed to set any mortal and immortal at ease?' an image flitted through his mind of Professor Snape, dancing in a sunny field.

Choking on a laugh his lips trembled. 'Not just me, but many other students would pay to see you call him that in public.'

'Perhaps that could be arranged. He has taken a liking to me I believe.' Harry didn't think Alistair was being entirely truthful.

'Well, he won't if you do that. But please, unless you value what friendship you've managed to scrape from him, make us all happy.'

After constant torment from the man, most which he'd say he didn't deserve, he'd like to at least see that much. A sight he could lock away in his memory for eternity, the one time where Snape had no idea how to handle something.

A tinkling laugh was his response. 'I shall let you continue what you were doing. I will see you in class later, you are with me for a double lesson first thing in the morning.' A brief flicker of a warm smile, tinged with something else. Excitement? Enthusiasm? It was a little hazy in his mind.

In response, he couldn't stop his stomach giving a lurch in excitement. He would be lying if he said it was purely because DADA was his favourite subject.

'Ok, I'll see you later.' All of this conversation had happened while most of his attention was on Aela. The wound she'd gained from him had started to close, little by little. Dried blood returned to the
body it once inhabited. She was still on her back but slowly, once, twice, her eyes blinked. The dull glassy colour was replaced by their usual vibrancy, a one out of instinct he looked away from.

"Do not fear Harry. My gaze will not harm you. We share a bond. Though created by accident it gives you some degree of immunity. While I am confident you won't be harmed by my gaze, I cannot say the same for another of my kind not related to me directly."

Slowly he met her gaze, as she righted herself, coiling comfortably until her head was rested on the highest one.

He had the bizarre thought that like this, she was rather cute. Unconsciously, his eyes started changing to the thick mercury colour of Lume until he managed to stop himself. Well then, that thought didn't come from him. 'Well, she is rather attractive,' Lume muttered, sounding apologetic.

He shook his head in exasperation, looking at the spot in his arm left by the thread of magic, his tattoo now non-animated.

"Thank you for releasing me," he looked up at her voice. "Follow me, there is something that I want to show you." Approaching the statue of Slytherin, Aela bumped it with her nose and at her touch, it opened. All that was left for him to do was follow inside.

As Aela came to a stop, he looked around the room interestedly. There were a few bookshelves that he could see, filled with tomes and while that was something he'd definitely look into, that wasn't what caught his interest. Aela was halfway into one of her shortcuts, large head peeking out.

"This is the entrance to lost soullss. I'm unsure if there are human soulss, but the soulss of animalss long gone and animalss themsselvess reside here. Perhapss with your creature connection you'll be able to ssstay there for a longer time, but it'ss probably besst to not sstay long. I called thisss to your attention asss there may be ssouls who can offer you assistance with the challengess ahead."

Looking down at the floor, Harry was faced with a large circular stone pad, triangles etched into the surface. In the middle was another circle, made from something which he couldn't identify, but it took his eyes a moment to get used to, as a radiant golden light coming from it brightened what would otherwise be a dark room.

'Ahh, time for us to depart. You're welcome to visit us at any time.' Lume sent a sharp-fanged smile.

'I bid you farewell. It is time for our souls to seek companionship in the world beyond this one, but we will always remain a part of you.' Thanatos informed him.

"Alright guys, do you need..help?" he wasn't sure how to phrase it, as the more he thought on two extra souls leaving his body, the more the concept of it became slightly disconcerting.

'Simply breathe in and out, calmly. We'll do the rest!' a spark of excitement entered Lume's eyes.

Harry did as asked, breathing in and out deeply. As he exhaled, two small balls of light floated on his warm breath, to softly land in the centre of the circle. It rippled until they disappeared beneath.

"Well, that's certainly something." He stated, slightly bemused. Going over to give Aela an affectionate pat, he smiled at her hisses of pleasure.

"Thanks, Aela, it's good to see you physically. Don't worry, the noseless one will pay for doing what he did."
She inclined her head, features not giving anything away but instinctually he knew she'd smile if she could. "I look forward to it." With that, she passed through the portal to the soul world, most likely off to seek some sort of companionship.

Now that she was gone, it was time for him to leave too. It was only when walking the halls of Hogwarts back to his common room, that he realised he was free. Not entirely as Dumbledore was still around, not to mention Voldemort, but everything else, including the Dursleys, was gone. Unchained, but restricted.

Sighing softly, he whispered the password to the portrait, entering the common room. If anyone was awake, they'd left already, as no one occupied the room. He returned to the dormitory, soft snores indicating that he was the only one awake. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he located a shower stall.

He let the hot water wash over his body, as always relishing in the fact that he could take as long as needed and as he did, couldn't help but feel prideful about his body. After so many years of malnourishment, it was nice to feel confident in himself for once.

As he rinsed the suds away, his thoughts strayed to Alistair. In the Library, he could tell Alistair was very well defined. How much?

'That would be my snitch caught for the day.'

The thrill of the chase and then the catch, the undeniable victory once it was in his grasp, the bubbling sense of happiness that he'd helped to lead his team to victory once more. Was he really comparing seeing Alistair in all his unclothed glory to his role in Quidditch? The answer was yes and Harry had no regrets, for once.

The soft pink colour of the gems on his bracelet caught his attention. It was pleasant to look at and he had an unexplainable attachment to this item of jewellery. While still unsure of colour representation, Harry could learn the meanings overtime.

Figuring he'd spent long enough in the shower, Harry dried himself off, semi-naked and redressing himself when he felt sets of eyes on his back. Turning around, he was met with the wide-eyed stares of Neville, Dean and Seamus.

"Where's our Harry and what have you done with him?" Seamus raised an eyebrow, whistling.

Casually rolling his eyes, he put on the clothing he'd discarded earlier, smoothing out the wrinkles. "He's dead. This is the new Harry." He fixed them with a serious gaze, clearer than ever without his glasses.

"Hello, new Harry." Neville jokingly stuck out his hand and obliging, Harry shook it.

"I'm going to the hall Nev, I'll save you a seat."

"Ok, thanks." Neville headed for the showers, sighing as he looked at Ron. At this rate, he would be late, but it wasn't his responsibility in life to be someone else's alarm clock, so he simply left him to it.

Harry took his time, appreciating that most of the student body didn't arrive until at least half an hour before lessons start, so he could sit where he liked.

"Morning Nick." He greeted him as the ghost floated by.

"Ah Harry, you're looking well I see." He bowed his head in acknowledgement. Entering through
the already opened doors, he selected a seat closer to the head table. Happily tucking into a breakfast which would have never seen the light of day with his previous malnourished self, he waited for the rest of his friends to arrive. As students came in he spotted Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna, waving them over.

"Morning, sleep well?" he asked, eyeing a sausage speared on his fork with great enthusiasm.

As he listened to variations of yes, he saw Luna about to head for her own table and gestured to wait. "Sit here with us, nothing in the rules says that we can't invite students from other houses to our table." He nearly smirked at Hermione's expression, no doubt going over the rules then nodding silently.

Eyes glittering, she practically bounced over to take a seat next to Neville and Ginny opposite Harry, Hermione on his right side. He was well aware of the stares but unmindful of them, more than used to it for various reasons.

"What's your next class Luna?" he smiled softly at how happy she looked, regretful that none of them had offered before now. But then again, this Hogwarts year was a year of changes. He noticed that she'd added a flower in her hair, which looked like one of the Orchids in 'Lunaland.'

"Potions," she commented lightly, an ever so slight furrow between her brows. "Professor Snape isn't happy. I've never seen so many Nargles attracted to one person."

Curious, Harry glanced over and immediately winced, glad that he didn't have Potions today and didn't envy Luna in the slightest. Snape had a scowl so deeply etched into his face, it reminded him of gnarled trees with rough bark. The source of his scowl looked to be Alistair, who had decided to take a seat next to him. As if Alistair knew Harry was looking at him, he made eye contact for a brief moment, only to mouth the words, 'Ser Sunshine.'

The piece of sausage which he was just about to chew suddenly flew out of his mouth with great force, snorting loudly. It narrowly missed Neville who ducked out of the way, but it vanished in mid-air before it could hit the floor.

"Sorry." he restrained another snort. "Something funny came to mind."

"No problem." Neville chuckled. "It's the first time I've seen a sausage become a possible weapon."

"Maybe I should bring one with me the next time I face Voldy," he mused, stroking his chin like a master villain. "He says I'm too predictable, I think chucking a sausage at his head is thinking outside of the box. Might give him a shock."

"Really Harry." Hermione rolled her eyes, one side of her mouth curled in a smile as Ginny and Neville laughed.

"Where's the party?" a familiar and unpleasant voice asked as he sat down on Harry's left side.

Turning his head, Harry blinked a few times. It was probably the late detention's fault, but Ron hadn't even bothered to straighten out his uniform, it just looked like he'd rolled straight out of bed.

Suddenly Ron's eyes found Luna's and he exclaimed loud enough for the whole of Scotland to hear, "What's loony sat at our table for?"

"Ronald!"

"Ow!"
A Stinging Hex was sent his way by Hermione.

"Herm, that hurt." He whined, rubbing the spot it hit.

"Don't even start Ron. You know I'd do worse." Ginny's eyes locked with his, narrowing as she twirled her wand menacingly.

What he didn't expect, when he turned to look at Harry, was to be met with eyes colder than Voldemort himself. Ron wanted to look away, but couldn't. Harry's eyes, a vibrant shade of green looked darker, flecks of acid throughout his irises which really did feel as though they were burning into him. In contrast, the magic around him and the air itself chilled. It was only thanks to Harry hiding his power that the entire hall wasn't affected by his icy rage. After a moment he spoke, the words shocking Ron as if he'd been drenched with a bucket of water.

"Never use that name for Luna. This is a warning. If you do it again, I won't be responsible for my actions. Understand?"

Ron nodded shakily in response, focusing his attention on the heap of food which looked ready to collapse, the air thick with tension.

"Morning Harry!" a cheerful voice piped up behind him and he was greeted with a perky Lilah, Dominic beside her. They exchanged brief eye contact in acknowledgement, then greeted her.

"Morning Lilah, all ready for your first day at Hogwarts?"

"Yes!" she piped up enthusiastically. "I'm looking forward to Defence Against The Dark Arts, It'll be so cool."

"My favourite subject," he grimaced slightly. "You're lucky you came this year, we've had mainly horrible Defence Professors, but I have high hopes for this one. Knock it out of the park yeah? If you need any help you can ask me."

"Thanks, Harry." a shy smile in response. "I'll do my best."

It was looking at her now that Harry realised something was wrong. She was very pale. He'd noted that she had fair skin, to begin with, but it was unnaturally so. "Are you feeling ok?" he asked, scrutinising her.

"I'm fine." She gave him a reassuring smile, giving a brief wave in farewell as she went to find a seat. Ah, how often had he said that and the opposite was the case?

"It's about time we headed off anyway," Ginny spoke, confident enough to break the silence.

"See you later Luna." The four minus Ron, who was still sulking, wished her luck on surviving with Snape. Harry hoped that one of those necklaces wasn't for him, he didn't want his friend returned to him in several jars.

The four of them left for Defence, Harry wondering what Alistair had in store.

Alistair had watched the proceedings from his seat, paying particular attention to Harry's confrontation with Ronald. While he understood that Harry had hidden his power, it didn't quite work for him. He was unsure if Dumbledore had taken notice, so checked. Apparently, he didn't suspect a thing and mentally, sighed in relief.
He also had his eye on the young girl speaking with Harry. He had suspicions of her true nature, vowing to watch over her closely.

"Ah my dear Severus, I'm afraid I shall have to take my leave." He finished, genuinely sounding sad.

"Oh, what a shame." Sneering, he stabbed his fork rather viciously into a poached egg.

Aware of the sarcasm but choosing to ignore it, Alistair smiled. "Have a lovely day, Ser Sunshine."

Severus ignored what suspiciously sounded like a hastily muffled laugh by Minerva, not even given the chance to snap at him for the ridiculous name before he left.

While Lilah was still at the back of Harry's mind, the rest of it was occupied with anticipation of what Professor Lothaire had in store for them all. Arriving outside of the door, they could all see that it was open and Harry poked his head through, looking around.

"No need to wait, come straight in." An enthusiastic voice called out.

One by one they entered, looking around curiously. Long blades of grass coated the floor and as Harry scuffed it with his feet, the soil moved. Any tension in his body drained, feeling comfortable in a setting which didn't remotely remind him of a classroom.

"Hello!" Harry looked towards the back of a room where a simple chair which looked to be made of intertwining branches rested on the grass. There the Professor sat, one leg crossed casually over the other, a friendly smile on his face. "May I ask your names?" he stood up, approaching the group.

"Hermione Granger, Sir." She inclined her head politely. He gave her a pleasant smile, holding his hand out for her to shake.

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Granger. Pick any spot you like and make yourself comfortable."

"Neville Longbottom." In contrast to the painfully shy boy Neville once was years ago, he stood before Alistair, confidently holding his hand out and as before, asked Neville to pick a spot he liked.

"Ron Weasley." He mumbled, awkwardly sticking his hand out and looking as though he wanted to be anywhere but in this room. It was only for a moment and Harry may have imagined it, but what looked like displeasure flashed across Alistair's expression. Then, it was Harry's turn. A mischievous voice entered his head.

'Ah, how I wish I could kiss your hand instead of shaking it, but whatever would your friends say? I shall save such actions when others are not here.'

Fighting against a rising blush, Harry picked a spot to sit down on. Watching, Professor Lothaire did the same for every student. It was a unique approach to a first lesson, one Harry felt that the students would be talking about throughout the day.

There was a visible divide in the room. Not one Gryffindor sat near a Slytherin, not one Slytherin sat near a Gryffindor. On the left a sea of red, on the right a shower of green. It summed up house relations perfectly, in his opinion. His eyes wandered to Malfoy who didn't look out of place at all on the grass.

"Good morning to you all." instantly, he had the attention of his class. "I am Alistair Lothaire and I will be your Defence Against The Dark Arts Professor this year." his impeccable hearing picked up on student's whispers of how long he would last. "I have heard about how unstable your Professors
have been in teaching you all thoroughly with the odd exception. I intend to correct the wrong done to you all."

"Wrong, sir?" a voice spoke up. He located the student and nodded firmly.

"Yes, Mr Zabini. A wrong not only to you who are in this room but all of the students who have passed through these halls. There is war. Not just here, but worldwide. Not providing the next generation of students with a way to defend themselves that would put most Aurors to shame is an injustice."

Doubt showed on more than one face. He nodded in understanding. "Words are all well and true, however, they can be broken and twisted in a myriad of ways. I give you a promise not through my words, but my actions." The belief and passion put into his words were backed up by the fierceness of his eyes. After Umbridge, many were happy to see someone who appeared to be genuine in wanting to teach them all they could. Only time would tell if he delivered upon his promise.

A warm feeling blossomed in Harry's heart. Every word he spoke resonated, having a profound impact on more than just him. Neville looked on in approval, Hermione was just as enraptured as he was. Malfoy looked to be in deep thought and even his lackeys were aware.

Alistair was wearing thick robes, not teaching ones by any means. However, he removed them until he was left standing in simple black trousers and a long-sleeved buttoned shirt, plum coloured. He heard feminine and a couple of masculine sighs of admiration at his obviously toned form and he had to stop himself from joining them.

Alistair placed his robes on the chair behind him. "Today will be something simple, but important. Not necessarily the tasks, but who you will be working with. How you interact with others could mean the difference between life and death." His tone conveyed all seriousness. "How all of you have chosen to sit with your house says more to me than words ever could. So today, each of you will be working with someone, not of your house."

Incredulous voices spread throughout the room, wondering if he was like Dumbledore and actually wanted them to kill each other off. While all that was happening, Harry managed to lock eyes with Malfoy, giving him a significant look. After a few moments of grey locking with green, he gave a short sharp nod.

"Decide pairs amongst yourselves. For those of you who are unable to decide, I will choose." He spoke calmly, his quieter yet self-assured voice slicing through protests. Except for Harry who now stood next to Malfoy and Hermione who had cautiously approached Millicent, everyone else seemed unsure of who to pair with. After a few minutes, Order had been restored to the room and most of the class were in a mixed pair. All except for a few.

There was an even number of students in the class. Ron, Neville, Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass were left. While Neville was happy with either, it was Ron who halted all progress. Complexion quickly matching the fieriness of his hair, Harry wondered what trouble he would land himself in this time.

"Mr Weasley, who do you wish to work with, Miss Greengrass or Mr Zabini?" Alistair asked, tilting his head questioningly.

"None of them. They're both slimy Slytherins!" sneering, his eyes expressed how much distaste he held for everything which wasn't Gryffindor.

"If you will not choose, I shall. Today's task requires that you work with a member of Slytherin
"But they're evil, the enemy! Death Eater scum who lick the shoes of You-Know-Who and you want me to work with one of them?" he raised his voice incredulously.

"My family have remained neutral for centuries," Daphne spoke, her chilling blue eyes shooting daggers at Ron.

"You're all at his beck and call." he eyed her with hatred. "I bet you're one of his whores, sleeping with him for favours. You make me sick."

It was as though the room had filled with a sudden heatwave. Even the breeze as a part of the room turned warm and humid. Alistair's changed expression caused Harry a degree of discomfort. He could never be afraid or uncomfortable around the man himself, however, he'd seen nothing but smiles, laughter and sometimes sadness. This anger was more dangerous than Snape's. His overall personality when he wasn't in a mood didn't change that drastically. But with Alistair who has such a charming and cheery disposition, it affected Harry far more than Snape ever could. He was sure that if his eyes were their usual beautiful sunset colour, they would bubble and boil like lava.

It was the amount of control Alistair had to make it look as though he was just irritated when instead he was most likely furious which impressed Harry. But if there was one thing he couldn't deny, it was Alistair looked undeniably attractive, even when not in his usual mood. He was heating up from more than the man's aura, that he was sure of.

"Mr Weasley." Alistair's tone of voice remained level, but the warmth wasn't present. A lot of the students had taken to casting cooling charms, some removing their robes altogether.

Ron narrowed his eyes, about to raise his voice at the Professor but the words caught in his throat. Something told him that further words wouldn't be wise and for once, common sense and a dash of self-preservation kicked in.

Not even 1,000 plus years of roaming the earth, could Alistair not react to such a disrespectful comment. He always treated men and women with respect, even if their profession did turn out to be a specialisation in pleasures of the flesh. Faced with prejudice for so long, he always ensured to listen to all that he could before decision making.

"Not only are you highly disrespectful to Miss Greengrass, but to the house, she belongs in. There is no evidence to back up what you claim and nothing gives you the right to treat a lady in such a way. This class is to help promote teamwork, as there will be situations where you will have to cooperate with others to succeed."

He didn't want to be this kind of Professor or even remotely strict, however, this child, for he surely wasn't a man was the first to test his patience in such a way. He hoped that he would prove a point, despite his reluctance to take such measures.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for verbally abusing Miss Greengrass and Five for refusal to follow instructions. You will have detention with me tonight and I shall inform Professor McGonagall of your behaviour."

"You can't do that!" at this point, Harry once would have swooped in and physically shut his mouth. But now, he was happily watching Ron digging his own grave.

"I can and I will, Mr Weasley." He replied firmly.

"I have detention with Snape tonight," Ron muttered sullenly.
"For how long?"

"Monday to Friday every week until he thinks I've learned my lesson." It wasn't fair in Ron's opinion. No one else was getting as many detentions as him.

"Then I will see you on Saturday at 7 pm." His tone of voice indicated this was his final word.

"It's a bloody weekend, THAT'S NOT FAIR!" the damn on his temper finally released as he screamed full force, Some members of the class wondering if his head would explode.

"Mr Weasley, report to Professor McGonagall immediately and tell her that I have sent you. If you do not, I will know." He withheld a sigh. He needed to continue with the lesson he'd planned.

Ron wasted no time. As the room finally cooled down, he picked up his bag and left the class, slamming the door behind him.

The class erupted into spontaneous applause, a few shouts here and there. Harry joined in with the whistling and even Hermione clapped. He dealt with Ron as though he'd put up with him for years and most importantly, he wasn't showing favouritism to any particular house.

Alistair couldn't prevent the surprised expression on his face even if he wanted to, addressing the students still without a pairing. "Mr Longbottom, will you work with Mr Zabini?"

"Yes Sir," Neville said simply, eager to find out what the Professor had in-store after that display.

"Miss Greengrass, since who should have been your partner seems to have abandoned all sense as well as the classroom, you can pair with me. Is that alright?"

"Of course." Her cool gaze assessed him. She could see he was a formidable fighter and would benefit learning from him.

He gave her a genuine smile, then speaking to the other students. "What I would like for you all to do is simple. I assume you are aware of the elements and spells associated with them?" he was rewarded with several nods. "One of you will use any spells associated with the elements. The other will defend or counterattack with an element in response. A shield of water will repel fire, for example. This task will require your full concentration and will improve reaction times. also, this will help you all take note of your partner's facial expressions and body language. Eventually, I will ask you to switch. Does everyone follow?" After a few sounds of agreement, the room soon filled with the sound of spellfire.

Harry let loose a breath he was unaware of holding. Things were tense for a moment there.

"Well, Potter, let's see if we can do a simple task without wanting to murder one another." His eyes captured grey ones, alight with slight amusement.

"Save some of that murderous intent for Ron, I know I will be."

"You? Wanting to kill Weasley? Has that scar of yours finally revealed signs of brain damage?"

"This year is a year of changes, Malfoy. So, what's happening? Will I be drenching you in water or will you be setting my robes on fire?"

"We're supposed to defend against the attack. Merlin forbid I leave you without clothing, you'd drown in your sea of admirers." Sneering, he gave a sweeping glance across one or two girls looking in their direction, who immediately flushed.
"Don't remind me. I'll defend, you attack. Sound good?" Already focused and adjusting his stance, he gave Harry a sharp nod.

No one else was in the room or occupying his thoughts. He watched every movement, every breath, a change in facial expression. He used all he'd learned so far. While a lot of the students were shouting what they were about to cast and what they were defending with, Malfoy, to Harry's realization, could non-verbally cast. Harry could both wandlessly and non-verbally, but that wasn't something he could let slip, at least not here.

Making use of his surroundings, a large clump of earth was levitated and just as quickly, thrown at him. Within an instant, a thin sheen of fire covering the entire front of his body appeared, the soil disintegrating before the shield. Taking into consideration how simple that was, he knew instinctively that Malfoy would get more creative.

Silently, Harry watched as Malfoy pointed his wand vertically rather than at him, at the very tip of his wand, hovering and gradually growing in size, was water, formed into a ball. He could see his lips move this time, in what looked to be a chant. The ball, now half the size of its caster, split into several smaller balls and surrounded Harry. Malfoy jabbed his wand forward, the water balls surrounding him gradually decreasing their distance.

'Ventus.' Wand in a wide swirling motion, wind much like the enclosing water balls surrounded Harry, gradually increasing in speed and intensity. Eventually, a long trail of water was left and once in front of him, created a whirlpool and sent it in his opponent's direction.

Caught off guard, Malfoy managed to mostly save himself. Narrowing his eyes, a large chunk of earth along with some grass was lifted from the ground. While that did absorb the water, it also created what was effectively sludge, hitting the ground with a wet thwack, flecks of mud spraying Malfoy's face. Harry didn't bother withholding his chuckle.

"New beauty regime, Malfoy? Really brings out your eyes." His tone mildly teasing.

Sensing no malice, he merely rolled his eyes. "What barbarian would spread mud across their skin?" Harry thought the conversation of mud packs could wait another day, as they mostly silently defended, attacked and occasionally rebounded spells.

While Hermione was just as focused, there wasn't much need to be in comparison to Harry and Malfoy. While Millicent was a decent fighter, it was more trading spells back and forth than an intense battle, so she was able to both keep an eye on Harry and attack Millicent. She had to give her credit though, while her spell control wasn't as tight-knit or powerful, she was very good with shielding herself.

Regardless of not seeing her as much of a challenge, Hermione took this on board as a learning experience, hoping that her partner for the lesson was gaining something too. She was already debating whether to offer her an invite to the DA. It was something to consider, but only more so if they worked together and she got to know her better.

Blaise tended not to associate with Gryffindors in general, let alone this particular one. The impression he got of him was a bumbling squib who didn't know which end of his wand was the correct one but actually, Longbottom was putting up quite the fight. A moment before, he controlled the earth to the point where a large flytrap looking plant sprouted from it, absorbing the large jet of water. Using the momentary surprise he felt, he was able to get a hit on Blaise in the form of his partially singed robes.
"A surprisingly Slytherin tactic, Longbottom." He bowed his head in acknowledgement and respect of his wand work.

"Thank you." Not offended in the slightest, Neville was enjoying the back and forth spells as well as the light conversation. "As a side note, the rest of the Gryffs probably have something planned for Ron as well. I doubt they'll let it slide."

"What about you?" Blaise asked, intrigued.

"Anything which our house might come up with, Slytherin will have a plan much better formed. I think it's easier to leave it to the professionals and the injured party in question."

"You know how we think rather well, for someone not of our house."

Neville smiled, slightly bashful. "The only Slytherin I've ever spoken with is Malfoy. I don't think Crabbe and Goyle's grunts count as an actual conversation. Despite what he's put me through, my family isn't a history of Gryffindors by any means. I see no reason to hate everyone for what one person has done."

He observed his partner for the day more closely than before. He had changed, just as much as Potter, if not more so. He had the air and confidence as heir of Longbottom. He most likely had Potter himself to thank for that. Secretly, he wouldn't be averse to working with him again in the future.

As one of the students who had also chosen to remove her robes, Daphne was thankful she did for more than one reason. She was quite literally being kept on her toes by the Professor, though she knew he was holding back. While a part of her would relish the opportunity to fight against the Professor at his full strength, she also knew instinctively that he was holding back for a good reason.

The sorting hat didn't put her into Slytherin purely because of her family lineage. For the past five minutes, she'd been plotting and in a couple of seconds, her plan would be put into action.

While it was true she barely had time to think, one thing she was skilled with was water. As most if not all of her housemates did, she carried a second wand. It was a simple incantation for a small rain cloud to appear above her opponent's head. However, the wand was hidden up her sleeve. With each spell, the leftover magical energy would feed it. Any second now and there would be a downpour.

Alistair was only using a small portion of his strength, but enough to give any Auror who had been in the field for a short while some competition. Miss Greengrass used any and all means available to her, very much like the house she belonged to. He was pleasantly surprised and impressed. Neither of them was voicing their spells and both found it difficult to read their opponent's expression.

Alistair was aware of the growing cloud, a part of him curious to see just how large it would grow before the rain started. His senses were highly tuned, so much so that he could pinpoint different kinds of magic. However, if he were the age that he appeared to be, there was a high chance that he wouldn't realize what Miss Greengrass had planned until it was too late.

It was an odd noise directly above that instinctively without looking, he aimed his free hand into the air, a fire-like object stayed suspended in the air, catching the downpour. The cloud had grown to a considerable size.

Daphne expected as much, as she could see just how experienced the man was. What she didn't expect, however, what was he said next.
"A clever approach Miss Greengrass, five points to Slytherin." He bowed his head in respect, all the
while still trading, defending and counter-attacking spells.

Her expression flickered in surprise for a brief second. "It would have been more clever if it had
succeeded." She pointed out, a small part of her determined to outsmart him.

"While that is true, it is thinking like yours which may help to save not only your life but someone else's as well."

"Thank you." The both of them knew she was referring to more than his complimenting her way of
thinking and instead of replying with words, Alistair turned up the notch of his strength a little more,
in answer to the fire in her eyes.

It was a double period, the majority of it spent with Alistair occasionally asking for them to switch
places, though it seemed as though half of the students were taking on both roles. The instructions he
gave were more guidelines than anything, as long as in theory each student had time to study their
partner and react accordingly to what spell may come next, everything was fine. Even the use of
elements was to keep things simple.

Though he didn't mention it to the class, it was also his way of seeing the variation of talent and
spell-power each student had and where they were up to in terms of magical prowess. What he found
slightly odd was that several students, mostly in Gryffindor, had exceptional talent. While there were
a few in Slytherin at the same level, there was some who were worryingly below average.

One thing he would have to address, however, was at least half of the students were voicing their
spells, be it for offence or defence. His mistake was assuming that everyone could cast non-verbally,
even if their lips still moved. However, according to the school's notes, 6th years should be learning
this. Not everyone had the aptitude, but even whispering spells would give someone an advantage
against their opponent.

He put an end to the session with his partner, formally bowing to her. "Thank you for your time,
Miss Greengrass."

She returned the gesture, giving him a sharp nod as her eyes were drawn to something.

After stopping, he was about to call for everyone to finish up until mostly everyone stopped on their
own, eyes drawn to one pair still fighting. The rest of the students stepped back, leaving them plenty
of space.

Alistair watched the two in interest, content to let them continue for a few more minutes. Though he
hadn't been at the school long, a few days before the students arrived, it was enough to learn of any
and all staff gossip, one among them being the notorious rivalry between Harry and the Malfoy
scion. However, watching as they moved from the elements to any and all spells in their repertoire, it
didn't seem to be that way.

There was a possibility that the pair of them managed to patch their differences, to the point where
their rivalry, was for show. Indeed at first glance and most likely to the students, it looked as though
they were firing spells with the intent to injure. However, he recognized the mirroring expressions on
their faces, one which he'd seen on his own.

Exhilaration, excitement, the adrenalin rush from a thrilling battle, the feeling of freedom. Watching
Harry was lately becoming his favourite thing to do. While he did hide his emotions well, each one
that he didn't hide was intriguing.
Harry wasn't sure when they'd stopped using elements and started using every spell they knew, but this was the most fun he'd had since flying around as Lume. While it probably appeared to everyone else that this was an opportunity for them to harm each other and get away with it, he sensed no such intent from his partner for the day.

Unknownly to Harry, Draco was having similar thoughts. He found himself surprised that he didn't want to kill Potter, a first for him. Just his sickening Gryffindor attitude was enough to seriously consider slipping poison into his pumpkin juice. But no, he'd returned to Hogwarts a changed person, for the better in his opinion. At least to the point where he might be able to tolerate his presence. It was as if everything he found unpleasant about Potter had transferred to Weasley, who was already insufferable. Harry watched as a strange glint entered the grey eyes, narrowed in concentration. From the end of his wand, a snake. Suspiciously similar to a one he remembered years ago.

"Scared, Potter?" he muttered, only loud enough for him to hear.

He couldn't hold back a snort. "You wish," he replied, just as quietly. He conjured a large flat rock, heated. "Ignore the rude boy who summoned you. Have a rest there." He gestured to the rock.

"Many thanksss." The snake immediately curled up on the rock. Shrugging, Harry returned his wand. "I guess we both win."

Watching the exchange, Alistair cocked his head in curiosity. Clearly, Harry's words were an inside joke of sorts. Seeing as they finished up, he called for the class' attention.

They were the last to finish, Harry noted, watching as the students redirected their attention towards the Professor or looked at him warily. Rolling his eyes, his attention was brought to Alistair.

"Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy, a fine display! Five points to Gryffindor and Slytherin."

A shocked murmur spread throughout the students. In part due to both houses gaining points, but also just who, as partners, had earned them for their house.

Then, the lesson was over before Harry knew it. The entire atmosphere had a different feel to it, one which he enjoyed immensely. It was a lesson, but it didn't come across the same as the others. It was how he preferred to work, nearly weeping in relief at his anti-Umbridge approach.

Remembering Alistair wanted to talk, Harry sat back down on the grass and chuckling, he followed suit until they were both on the floor, facing each other. Curiously he waited, wondering what he could want. Neither of them said anything for a moment, appreciating the comfortable silence and peace.

"You did a brilliant job." Harry eventually spoke, observing Alistair's lips turn upward ever so gently.

"I am pleased that you think so."

"I have so many questions, I don't know which to ask first." He admitted, bewildered.

"I apologize. It must have been quite the shock that someone you had a short encounter with becomes your Defense Professor." He did look a little remorseful and Harry's heart clenched.

"No need to apologize. Sure it was a surprise, but for once when it comes to me and Hogwarts, it was a nice one," he reached over, patting him on the shoulder. "Anyway, I'm sure you have reasons."
For a fleeting moment, it was as though Alistair's chest warmed at Harry's words. He was worried at how he would react, expecting something far worse than being referred to as a nice surprise.

Harry was right. He did have his reasons. One to keep an eye on the Headmaster and the other was for Harry himself. Lost in thought for a few moments, he was brought out of them by Harry's hesitant voice.

"When it's just the two of us, do you think you could remove your disguise?"

In truth, Harry was very comfortable. But, a tiny part of him experienced some discomfort not seeing the sunset coloured eyes which so often frequented his thoughts. There were other tiny changes here and there, however, his eye colour was the most noticeable.

"Of course." Outwardly Alistair did nothing, no hand gestures or words, just the evident change of disappearing brown and reappearing orange.

"I take it Dumbledore doesn't know you're a Vampire?"

At Harry's questioning tone, something passed through Alistair's expression which Harry couldn't identify. It was so many emotions simultaneously that it was hard to distinguish one from another.

He didn't want power. If he had all the power in the world, it still wouldn't bring him joy. What he truly wanted, was for humans and vampires to co-exist. Not necessarily be friendly, but at the very least civil. While he knew that was difficult, particularly with the non-magical vampires attacking innocents, it was something he desired, along with his brethren to be more tolerant of humans.

"The Headmaster loathes my kind," Alistair spoke honestly, voice hard as steel.

Harry shook his head, disgusted. "I loathe HIS kind. Honestly, it's his loss. It's everyone's loss."

"Thank you." Closing his eyes which glittered fondly for a moment, he relaxed, a tea set appearing between them. "Help yourself. Shall I tell you about my interview?"

Nursing some tea between his hands, Harry blew gently across, taking a sip. "Please do."

Observing the surroundings in curiosity, Alistair was half in disbelief that he was here. While he did submit more than satisfactory documents, he expected some sort of background check to be made before an interview. Apparently, he needn't have worried.

It was a decision on the spur of the moment, somewhat unlike him. It was after his interactions with Harry that he'd decided to contact Hogwarts, to see if he'd be able to apply for the position of Defense Professor. Today was the last step of his aim, but the first step of whatever may come.

With those thoughts running through his mind, Alistair ensured his fangs were retracted and eyes a normal looking brown. It was a simple task to mask the dark undercurrent which flowed through his magic. By nature, he was a dark creature. He was certain that Dumbledore would be able to sense what he truly was if not for that. As an afterthought, he placed a long-lasting warming charm on his hands. While Hogwarts was chilly and no doubt the humans inhabiting her had cold hands, he wasn't willing to take the chance.

"How curious," he muttered to himself, eyeing the portraits with interest. As intimately familiar with magic as he was, there were no moving portraits at his home.

He reached his destination, the gargoyle already moving. Most likely, the Headmaster had various
ways of knowing just who was outside his office, whether or not Hogwarts relayed to him the information.

He gave himself a few moments. This would be the first time he'd come into contact with the man and would confirm with certainty if Dumbledore was behind Solomon's disappearance. Ascending the steps, he rapped firmly on the office door, entering at the call to come in.

Albus Dumbledore was at his wit's end. In truth, he did care about the education of the students. However, it was only a few Professors over the years, other than when he'd covered Defence Against The Dark Arts himself, that provided them with the quality education they needed. As the years went by, he'd begun to put his own interests above the needs of students.

He'd hired Quirrell, in full knowledge that a shade of Tom Riddle was firmly ensconced within him. It was a chance to keep watch and test Harry. He would view from the sidelines and if needed, be the mentor to the lost young boy. It was his destiny to face the Wizard that had murdered countless and bring an end to years of national torment. The year produced the results he wanted, Harry was the perfect malleable piece.

Lockhart was a fool, plain and simple. The singular reason he was Professor for that year was the fact that he could be used. That he remained in the permanent ward of St Mungo's to this day was no concern of his.

Lupin was just as much a tool as Harry. He loathed Werewolves almost as much as Vampires, but he knew that if he wanted results, it was better to have allies across more than just humans. Such was the reason that he helped Lupin when he was a student. The fact that he had a connection to Harry as family and both were desperate for that was just the icing on the cake. That Lupin turned out to be a good Professor was a side bonus. Black was a spanner in the works, one he'd overlooked. Not that it mattered now, however. It was only a shame that he failed to reunite Lupin with him.

Barty Crouch Junior was another. However, his appearance couldn't have helped more. He knew that immediately upon his arrival, that he was not Alastor. He had known the Wizard for too many years to be fooled by something such as Polyjuice Potion. A quick glimpse into his mind was enough to confirm everything. Tom had grown careless. He was on par with Severus as a Legilimens, though the Prince line had an inherent talent for the mind arts.

Barty's plans played perfectly with his own. He was searching for a way to bring Tom back to a mortal body, as the state he was no doubt in wouldn't do. Everything went according to plan and as soon as he explained the situation to the real Alastor, he was accepting of it, though a little put out he'd waited so long to free him. He brushed that off, reaffirming it was for the good of the Wizarding World.

Dolores Umbridge, however, was a disaster. It seemed that Fudge had forgotten his place. One string was held by Albus, the other Lucius Malfoy. His string snapped and because of this, all of his plans for that year were ruined, except one.

He ordered Severus to work with Harry on protecting his mind. However, he knew that he would relish the opportunity to attack his mind and torment the boy more than actually teach him. Which left his mind wide open. Through this, he was hoping that Harry saw visions and reported to him so that the light would have an advantage. And it worked, to a certain extent.

But for once, in good judgment, he searched for someone with no ties to this country, no affiliations with Hogwarts and an impressive record. Mr Lothaire looked to fit the bill, though there was one thing which would guarantee the job and one thing only. With that in mind, he called for his visitor
Before Alistair had so much as stepped fully into the room, he was attacked with a wave of familiarity. The man's magical signature. It was very strong. Strong, deadly and not light as most would believe. More importantly, it confirmed what he'd only suspected up until now. But, ignoring his instincts to kill he instead stepped forward confidently, a natural smile gracing his lips.

"Good afternoon Headmaster, I am Alistair Lothaire." The man seated before him stood up, as they shook hands and for a brief second, approval passed through his blue eyes. for what reason, Alistair didn't know.

"Good afternoon Mr Lothaire." Dumbledore pushed his half-moon glasses further up his nose, eyes focused intently on him. Before either could speak any further, a joyful sounding trill filled the circular room.

Now, this was something Alistair couldn't prepare for. He knew the headmaster had a Phoenix familiar, one of the lightest Magical Creatures known. This Phoenix would know what he was. Chances were highly likely that it would reject him and securing a place at Hogwarts would be difficult.

But, to his immense surprise, the Phoenix flew from its perch to land on his shoulder. Not only that, but the feathered head rubbed against his cheek once, singing sweetly. He held a cautious hand out to the bird, in a slight daze as it allowed him to pet it. The beady black eyes caught his own, alight with intelligence and as it did, warmth spread through his body.

The older a Vampire, the darker their nature became, regardless of a Magical or Non-Magical state. Why was a Phoenix, of all things, friendly with him?

"Fawkes seems quite taken with you. He only approaches those who are light." He spoke calmly, observing the man before him. It seemed that he had no worries, then.

He watched in silence as Dumbledore fixed tea for them both, offering a bowl filled to the brim with yellow sweets. "Lemon Drop?"

"Thank you." He reached out to take one, but left it, still wrapped, on the armrest of the chair.

Newly grown beard twitching with slight mirth, Albus knew Severus did the same thing when offered one. He went through the motions though, in his mind, he was hired already. No one could argue against the judgment of a Phoenix, after all.

"What can you tell me about yourself?" despite his decision, he would listen to the man's answers well. He needed to know if he could prove to be a threat to his cause in the future.

Alistair went through every kind of possible interview questions beforehand, so that he would be able to amend the truth somewhat. He would be simply going by the age that he stopped ageing altogether if asked. He went over his words carefully.

"I spend most of my free time travelling, to both the Magical and Non-Magical areas. I want to appreciate every culture I possibly can, to broaden my mind and gain a deeper understanding. I am a qualified Dueling champion with several Masteries in Defence, as you know." he took a pretend sip of his tea. "I was homeschooled, relying on the knowledge of friends, family, and libraries."

There was nothing there he could disapprove of. He had been trying to encourage those who would listen to him to venture into the Muggle world more often, as some of their creations despite not
having magic at their disposal was quite ingenious, one such thing being Lemon Drops. Where this man gained his knowledge from, Albus didn't mind as regardless of if he'd attended a school or not, he was more than knowledgeable.

"I see, thank you." he stirred more sugar into his tea, Alistair's fangs aching at the sight. "Why should I consider hiring you?"

"While it is true that I am qualified to teach and I am confident that I will be able to meet Hogwarts' standards, that is not the sole reason I believe that I should be hired. The students will be my top priority. I will never knowingly put them in harm's way. I will protect them and if the unrest in this country spreads to the school, I will fight alongside them. Alongside all of you. I would like to take the opportunity to give back to the next generation so that they can help fight and secure their own futures."

The passion was clearly laced through his voice. As much as he omitted something vital with his first answer, this one he couldn't be more honest if he tried. Sensing a light probing of his mind, he allowed it to be filled with only his current thoughts relating to the answer he just gave.

Albus was toying with the idea of inviting him into the Order. He had impressive power, enough to rival his own and just a light scan of his mind removed most doubts that he had. Whatever way he looked at this, he would be an asset to the school.

"What are your three greatest strengths?" Albus watched out the corner of his eye as Fawkes took flight, landing back on his perch and seemingly watching the two intently.

"Despite my young age, I am experienced in many duelling techniques, each which vary from country to country. Through my travelling, I am fluent in over 50 languages. I work very well as part of a team unit, I would not have achieved all that I have without the support of others."

"What is a weakness of yours?" often, Albus had to sit and listen to those who thought they were clever, turning a strength into a weakness, He hoped dearly it wouldn't be the case this time.

"A certain area I am looking to improve is my ability as an authority figure. I am not a strict person. My usual approach is to mutually work out a solution than to immediately lay down the law. Through experience working in a classroom setting, I am confident I will learn more about balancing my approach."

It wasn't something which made him feel weak, it wasn't exactly that kind of weakness. But, he had to pick one which wouldn't affect his chances of being accepted as Hogwarts' staff.

Dumbledore couldn't say anything against this. He found himself relating to Mr Lothaire, as his teaching style in comparison to Severus was like night and day.

"Thank you for your time, Mr Lothaire. Before you take your leave, is there anything you wish to ask me?"

Draining the last of his tea, Alistair straightened himself slightly, thinking for a moment.

"Can you tell me more about the responsibilities of this position? What can I expect on a usual day?"

"If you were to be this year's Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, I would expect you to offer support to the students and your fellow co-workers, as well as to teach your students to the best of your ability. Once a week, meetings are held to check progress and to discuss any rising concerns and if you joined the staff, a senior member will be there to aid you and oversee any lesson plans, marking, detention assigning and removal of house points temporarily. You will be required to patrol
Hogwarts and the grounds along with the other staff, the head students, and prefects."

Despite the less than pleasant thoughts he had towards this man, he at least knew how to do his job. Or on the surface that was the case. But his decision-making was certainly flawed if what he'd heard from Harry was any indication. As much as he wasn't fond of prolonging his mental agony, they were questions he was genuinely interested to know.

"What are your aims for the next school year?"

How curious. It wasn't often he was asked a question relating to him. Usually, it was about what the interviewee could expect. Nevertheless, he answered.

"To continue to uphold the quality of education one can expect from Hogwarts School and prepare the elder students for whatever the future may hold." Albus didn't go into detail. It wasn't only graduation the students had in their future, after all.

Alistair had the vague feeling that there was more to his answer than he could pick up on. Ignoring the feeling and saving it for thought later, he thanked him and politely excused himself, to wait and see if he'd succeeded.

Bringing himself back to current topics, Alistair let a single sorrowful sigh escape. "I am here for more than one reason. To keep an eye on the Headmaster, yes, but I now know for certain that he was involved with my brother's disappearance."

A shard of pain pricked Harry's heart. He didn't ever want Alistair to sound like that. While he had no siblings of his own, he saw most of the Weasley family, Luna, and Hermione as his honourary siblings. The thought of not knowing whether they were dead or alive, he didn't even want to imagine.

"I'll help. I've been around Dumbledore more closely than you have over a longer period and I'd like to say that I know at least some of how he works. I can't even begin to think about how you feel, but it gives me one more reason to hate the old bastard. I've got your back-"

As he finished the last word, arms reached out, wrapping around his torso firmly. Alistair's braid tickled the side of his face, as Harry became overly aware of how close they suddenly were.

"Thank you." His voice filled with the warmth his body didn't have, a hand came to rest on the back of his head.

It took a few seconds for Harry's brain to catch up but once it did, his heart was beating enough for the both of them. As a blush coloured his cheeks, he swiftly hid it against Alistair's strong chest.

It was an unconscious gesture. Though Alistair was affectionate and Solomon rarely initiated physical contact, there wasn't ever a long time that went by where he didn't hug his brother. Although, he would be lying if he said he didn't want to hold Harry in his arms anyway. Something was comforting about feeling and hearing a heartbeat which wasn't his own. No one had sparked his interest quite as much as Harry, which was an achievement with how many generations he'd seen pass by.

As Harry felt himself being released, he was relieved that the blush had gone from his face and promptly ignored the tiny pang of disappointment at the loss of coolness. It was the polar opposite of Remus, in every way, but he found it just as comforting as his friend's incredible warmth.

"I shall let you take your leave. If you have time to spare, as I know this year is a particularly busy
one, you are welcome to stop by the classroom or my office. I will not be leaving the castle much, for now." He stood up, offering a hand. Taking it, Harry was pulled to his feet.

"I'll keep my eye out for any word of him. What's his name?" he asked, as an afterthought.

"Solomon Sakari."

Engraving the name into his heart, he made a silent promise. He would help Alistair as much as he could.

The rest of the day seemed to pass by in a blur. A part of his mind was still lingering on Alistair's embrace, but he firmly steered himself away from those thoughts with a bull-headed determination, as despite his distraction he felt the rest of his lessons went well.

Thankfully Ron was silent throughout the rest of the classes he shared with him. Harry wondered if Ron had actually gone to McGonagall. Not that he cared but if he didn't, he was more careless with his living state than even Harry had been. He'd rather face the Horntail any day than McGonagall. Hell, he'd rather face an angry Snape than an angry McGonagall.

Seeing a spot next to Neville was open, he slid into the seat, not wasting any time and piling his plate high. Looking at Luna, he was reminded of this morning during her butterbeer necklace creation.

"Has anyone got one of your necklaces yet?" she was seated by Hermione this time, reading what must be the latest issue of the Quibbler. She looked over the top, her wide blue eyes regarding him in curiosity.

"I gave Professor Snape one." She spoke in her usual light tone, as though what she'd just said wasn't a massive shock.

"And you're, alive?" Neville questioned, looking at Luna in slight awe.

A giggle escaped her. "Of course, silly. I left one on his desk." Ginny looked back and forth between Luna and the empty seat of Snape's, as Hermione was lost to the world, a well-worn book claiming her attention. It was then that he noticed.

"Ron's in detention, I take it? I never thought I'd say this but I feel sorrier for Snape than I do Ron." Running a hand through his hair, he wondered what to do about the former. He saw Dumbledore as the bigger threat, but it would be a problem if he continued to not know where he stood with the man where their hatred was mutual.

Hearing a hoot which was unusual since the post always came at morning, Harry looked up to see a Palawan Scops Owl, black in colour, land in front of him. Dark red eyes which unnerved him with a strange familiarity bored into his own. It seemed to radiate impatience as a letter attached to its leg was stuck out and he untied it, reading quickly.

Potter,

There is a matter of importance that I wish to discuss with you. At your earliest convenience, come to my office.
Now Harry understood where he felt the familiarity from. Really, couldn't he have said that less ominously? He eyed the owl in front of him dubiously, wondering if he'd be happy with bacon like Hedwig or if he'd prefer human flesh. He held out a strip of bacon experimentally, sighing in relief when Henrik took flight.

He was just about finished, there was no better time than the present. That and he couldn't pass up the opportunity to watch Ron suffering and for once, wasn't beside him doing so.

Sensing his friend's curiosity, he put the slip of parchment on the table for them to see. "I may as well go now. It's either going to go well, or we'll be on worse terms than we've ever been before."

"I'll start a group in support," Ginny spoke solemnly, plucking some grapes off a bunch and setting them down on a table. Transfiguring them into badges, she handed one to Hermione, Luna, and Neville, putting hers on her robe. 'PrayforPotter'. Seeing this, Harry shook his head in amusement.

"It's better than Potter Stinks anyway. I don't know what Malfoy was thinking with that one." He said more to himself than the group, leaving the table and heading for the dungeons. Since it was at his earliest convenience and he didn't know when Harry would come to his office, there was no real reason for him to rush.

During this time, the feeling he'd had since arriving at the castle returned with a vengeance. He put it down to fatigue or nerves and tried to dismiss it, but he wasn't nervous or tired. In fact, he'd never been more refreshed. This feeling in truth he couldn't chalk down to either. It was an insistent tug in his chest, saying to him without words that there was somewhere that he must be, it was strange.

Walking the familiar corridors and listening to the sound of his own footsteps, he was about to go in the direction of Snape's office, until he heard the sound of voices coming from their usual Potions classroom.

"Weasley! What part of harvesting Bubotuber pus did you not comprehend? The Potion vials are not there for pretty little desk adornments, they are there to be used."

"Once again, Weasley, you have proven me wrong. I did not think you could prove to be a bigger dunderhead than you already are. Squeeze. Them. Do not cut!"

Harry's tongue was practically bleeding from the acidic and barbed comments spewing out of the Professor's mouth. He was unintentionally eavesdropping but it was too amusing to walk away from.

"Greasy git."

Harry closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the rough stone in resignation. Whispering was never a word in Ron's vocabulary.

"I have already removed several points. If you would like your house to be in negative numbers for the rest of the school year, I would be happy to accommodate."

There was no response. Sensing a lull in the flow of conversation, Harry knocked hesitantly.
"What?" he winced at the snapping tone. He didn't exactly have a cheerful disposition at the best of times, but anyone would be pissed off if they had to spend their free time supervising Ron. Silently steeling himself and half expecting another jar of questionable potions ingredients to be thrown in his direction, he opened the door.

Harry was met with the sight of a looming Snape, much like the overgrown bat the students assumed him to be until he turned to face Harry, his expression immediately clearing of all emotion.

"Potter." He acknowledged him with a slight incline of his head. Before Snape could say anything, Harry caught sight of Ron and widened his eyes wordlessly.

In an act of sheer stupidity that even Harry didn't think him capable of, he held the Bubotuber in a tight grip, squeezing for all his worth. He wasn't gripping the Bubotuber correctly and was about to receive a faceful of pus.

Noticing the change in Harry's expression, Snape turned back to Ron and Harry watched in slight amazement at the various colour shades his skin went through, faster than what even Vernon did.

"Idiot boy!" snarling, he was about to unleash a tirade of more insults and summon the plant but was a fraction too late.

Snape's shout, tinged with a hint of panic, Caught Ron's short attention span. Brought out of his murderous thoughts, he realized too late just what a huge mistake he made.

Harry, still stood where he was, watched on with Snape, wand still half-drawn, as a considerable amount of pus hit Ron square in the face. He was only just quick enough to shield his eyes from the damage, but the majority of it still managed to coat his face, some being absorbed by the dragonhide gloves. The pus trickled, trailing a little down his neck and leaving behind little boils in its wake.

He sucked in a breath. The boils erupting on his skin looked more painful than the usual ones. He jumped at the sudden high pitched scream of pain, half expecting Fang to knock the classroom door down.

Quicker than either of the boys could register, Snape grabbed hold of Ron's collar, dragging him through a hidden doorway involving brick tapping much like Diagon alley and after a moment, Harry cautiously followed. He watched as Snape picked up some powder, enclosing it within his fist then throwing it into the Floo. He couldn't hear the destination as Ron was still screaming in pain, but at a guess, it was the Hospital Wing. He unsuccessfully tried to repress a snort as Snape unceremoniously shoved him into the fireplace, taking him to his destination before he could fall flat on his face.

"Seat yourself over there, I will be with you momentarily." Snape spoke to him, clipped and sounding more than irritated and for once, it didn't seem to be because of him.

Severus would truly prefer marking first-year Potions Assignments than this. Placing a cushioning charm on the floor and kneeling, he contacted Minerva. The last thing he needed was the blasted tabby sharpening her claws on him because he failed to inform her that one of her precious lions was injured during one of his detentions.

"Minerva McGonagall's Office." He was half hoping she was out so he didn't have to inform her. When he joined on as staff, dealing with irate yet fierce women wasn't in the contract that he signed or if it was, small print. Albus was that meddling for it to have been the case.

In the flickering flames was the familiar face of his colleague, a tin of Ginger Newt Biscuits and tea
on her desk in the back, the woman herself kneeling much like he was. Before she could even speak a word, the thin threads of patience he'd had throughout supervising Weasley snapped.

"I am beginning to think that your house is the house of idiots! Minerva, your lions share half a brain cell between them. When I am of firm belief that my hatred is at the maximum, another student proves me wrong!" While most would cringe, Minerva merely sighed.

"If I've told you once Severus I've told you many times, not all of my Gryffindors are what you claim them to be. Who was it this time?" she had a sinking suspicion.

"Ronald Weasley," he sneered, the remembered echo of his earlier screams battering at his mind. "He is currently in the Hospital wing, after having squeezed Bubotuber pus onto himself rather than the bottle he was meant to empty them in."

She closed her eyes in resignation. More than anyone, that was the name she was hearing and it was only the first day. "Very well, I shall speak with him." She was about to end the Floo call when there was a sudden knock on her door.

"Oh, who could that be?" Severus heard Minerva muttering to herself.

Minerva, for her part, was eyeing her scotch cabinet longingly. Somehow, she knew her mood wasn't going to improve any.

"Come in." She took a seat, sipping her tea and forgetting about Severus who ended the call himself.

The door opened to reveal their newest addition, as Minerva smiled fondly. She was the one overseeing his work, growing as fond of him as she was Harry.

"Ah Alistair, take a seat. Ginger Newt?" she pushed the tin over to the man invitingly.

The smile he gave her was slightly strained. "I am not here for a social call. Other than your class, has Ronald Weasley paid a visit to you?"

"No. Why?" she pursed her lips disapprovingly. If what she thought Alistair was going to say was correct, she'd reconsider the earlier thought on her bottle of Scotch.

Disappointed, he sighed. "I told him to report to you. I gave him a chance to be trusted after disrespecting me, ignoring instructions and verbally abusing a student. I did say that I would check to see if he had come to see you. Whether he thought I was bluffing, I am unsure."

"Who was the student?"

"Daphne Greengrass."

She prepared for the worst. "And what did he say to her?"

Alistair liked Minerva, she had a character that greatly intrigued him. But he'd never quite felt as much danger radiating from the woman as right now. After a moment of hesitation, he spoke up. "I bet you're one of his whores, sleeping with him for favours. You make me sick." He hated to repeat such vile words, the sound of them causing him discomfort.

She put the teacup she'd been drinking from down on the desk with a little more force than necessary, warm tea spilling onto the polished surface. Her lips were a thin line, eyes narrowed dangerously. The smell of her magic was apparent in the air.
"That laddie, how dare he treat someone this wey? A dinnae know what's gotten intae him bit rest assured ah will pat a stoap tae it!" She stood up suddenly, looking up at Alistair's tall frame. He was taller than Severus even but at that moment, it was like she towered over him instead. He was amazed a human could create such a setting.

"He will apologise tae Miss Greengrass 'n' ye even if ah hae tae drag him by th' lug. Do excuse me."

Her Scottish brogue was more apparent when angry. At least Alistair knew what signs to look for in the future. "Of course." He bowed his head in acknowledgement, leaving the classroom as Minerva flooed to the hospital wing.

Ending the Floo call, Severus mentally sighed at the wasted potions ingredients. Usually, even an inept student managed to harvest adequately, but Weasley had managed barely a drop of puss and there were still plenty more to go. In truth, he didn't have much time to prepare ingredients himself, which irritated him to no end.

"Do you want a hand with them?" Severus turned towards Potter who was seated but looking at the classroom beyond the door.

"With what, Potter?"

"With the Bubotubers. I'm here and two pairs of hands are better than one. Plus I might be a dunderhead, but I haven't reached Ron's level yet."

Severus was immediately suspicious. There was nothing for him to gain with this, so why the sudden offer? Keeping that thought in mind, his eyes penetrated Harry's own. "Very well, come."

Harry did as asked. He offered partly because he hated to see a job badly done, partly because he did find sorting ingredients soothing in its own way and partly because he really did want Snape to feel inclined to treat him with at least indifference.

Standing opposite one another, the pair set to work. Unknown to Severus, who was focused on the task at hand, Harry was watching him carefully. The man was a Potions Master and he was sure the way they were taught to harvest this was slightly different from the way he did it himself and after a few seconds, this proved to be true.

Even from the smaller plants, it seemed as though more puss than what was usual of a plant that size was squeezed out. Harry tried to alter his grip the same as his and he was relatively successful. Seeing this, he continued what he was doing and found that with each one, there was a slight improvement in just how much puss he collected.

Between them, they'd filled at least a dozen bottles. Severus raised one eyebrow, impressed despite himself.

"An adequate job, Potter." He didn't use magic to gather them all together, as often ingredients could alter depending on outside influences.

Harry returned to the desk chair he was sitting in, Professor Snape opposite him. He looked hesitant, but that didn't seem right at all.

"...I apologise." It seemed to take a lot of effort for him to say that. Harry guessed it was more who he was apologizing to than the apology itself. And then it hit him. What?

Harry said nothing, unable to hide his surprise and confusion. Why was he apologizing? Not that he didn't have anything to apologize for, the opposite was true. He was just wondering if it was
After a moment Snape continued, his words stiff. "Lupin. The Headmaster led me to believe that we were simply going to have a conversation. I was not aware that he planned to kill him. While I did not actively take part in his attempted murder, I did nothing to stop the damage inflicted upon his person either. If you wish for further proof," Here he stopped, looking as if he were fighting an internal struggle and Harry immediately understood why. "I shall make the memory of that night available to you."

He deeply regretted viewing Snape's memories, more so since breaking away from Dumbledore's influence. He knew just how painful it was for others to see unwanted memories and while Snape saw much more of his life than he ever did in the Pensieve, it didn't make him feel any better at all.

He thought over Snape's words and while he acknowledged them, his mind inadvertently flashed back to how he found Remus, almost unrecognizable in his burnt state. If it wasn't for his Lycanthropy, he would've died. The last of the family connected to his parents would be no more and he'd be left alone.

The air in the room seemed to plummet, a remarkable feat considering they were in the dungeons. A wave of quiet anger overtook him, so different from the heated rage he'd experienced when the incident happened. He flexed his hand into a fist, releasing after a few seconds and just as quickly as the anger came, it dissipated. Though imagining that he was wringing Dumbledore's neck as he clenched his fist had everything to do with it.

As chilled green eyes calmly met Severus' own, it reminded him of kneeling before the Dark Lord. It was as though he was staring death in the face once more. He was filled with a quiet determination to, over time, build at least some shaky trust with Potter.

"It's not me you should apologize to, it's Remus. He was the injured one in all of this mess. But I accept. I won't forget, though." a slight frown marred Harry's face. "I owe you an apology as well. My intention in your Pensieve that day was to see if you knew anything which Dumbledore neglected to tell me but not thinking of what memories you placed in there that you wanted no one to see, I went ahead and for that, I'm sorry."

Much like Harry was surprised by Severus' apology, Severus was surprised by Harry's but after a moment, he nodded in acceptance.

All of a sudden, Harry gave a tentative grin. "You have good aim, however, that jar nearly knocked my head off."

"Indeed." A mildly amused glint entered his eyes. After a moment's thought, a tea and coffee set appeared on the table and Harry couldn't help but give it a hesitant glance.

"Rest assured Potter, it is not poisoned. You would not have survived your first year at Hogwarts had I wished to kill you. You have done a remarkable job of nearly ending your life prematurely several times without my influence." Smirking, he set aside his black coffee to cool.

Harry was reminded of his first year. "I was convinced in my first year you were trying to kill me, up until Quirrell dropped several bombshells."

"He was a fool without The Dark Lord's possession. Which brings me to the main reason why I called you here. The Headmaster has lost sight of the Order's goal. I regret to say he is more fixated on you than he is anything else."
After a moment of thought, Harry spoke up. "With what I've heard from Remus, I gathered that much myself. But why are you telling me this? I thought you were on Professor Dumbledore's side."

"I am a spy, Potter. There is no side I am firmly on. I am bound to the Dark Lord through his mark and I am similarly bound to The Headmaster through blackmail."

Harry didn't expect that. "Blackmail?"

"Knowing that I was mistaken in joining the Dark Lord, I turned to him. For him to not turn me over to the Ministry, he demanded partial access to the Prince Vault and my skills as a Potions Master both academically and non-academically. Without taking the time to think, I agreed. Over a decade later, I am still bound by the decision I made."

Harry, for his part, was floored. He couldn't even form a coherent sentence in his mind to speak aloud. He was sure that Dumbledore valued Snape, at least in the sense of more than a pawn, just like him. It seemed like he was wrong.

Extortion was a new low for Dumbledore in his opinion. It certainly wasn't the action of any light leader. The potions, however, he found very interesting. What was he trying to do, exactly? With all these thoughts and more running through his mind, he eventually managed to formulate a response.

"For all that Dumbledore condemns--" here he was about to say Voldemort, but paused. Taking Snape into consideration, he changed what he was going to say. "-Voldemort's actions, he's just as if not more manipulative. Both of them saw the potential in you and both want to use your potential to further their own agendas. I honestly can't say I can side with either. I'm all for team Potter personally."

Severus barely withheld a snort. He was unable to refute Potter's claims, as he was correct. Albus had a large streak of Slytherin running through his very being and denying it was futile.

"Potter." At the slightly more severe tone, Harry cocked his head silently, gesturing with his eyes to continue. "You and I are trapped in the web of lies spun by both the Headmaster and the Dark Lord. I will inform him that Occlumency lessons will resume." at Harry’s incredulous look, Severus sent him a sharp glare. "I do not want to roam through your mind more than I already have. This is what he will believe. The Dark Lord does not have regular meetings, he summons us no matter the time of day. The Headmaster schedules weekly Order meetings. Potter, you are the most proactive. As a spy, my information is going to waste. As such, I wish to share it with you."

"You want to share it with me?" Harry repeated, slightly numb.

"As much as I loathe to mention it, your status carries influence. While you are underage some will listen to you. Use the information as you wish, it is in better hands with you than with a man who sits, lemon drops at hand and waits until the problem is beyond fixing. I am aware that my treatment of you since your arrival at this school has not helped, however for the sake of mutual benefits, I propose that we overlook this."

"I can see what I get out of this easily, but what do you get out of it?" he asked, mind still trying to wrap around all he'd been told.

"I have not seen the Headmaster lose as much control as in the way which your actions have caused him to. While I believe that the idea of The Dark Lord's downfall to be left solely to you is ludicrous, you are one of the keys to turning the tide in this upcoming war. The changes you've undergone recently will give you a significant advantage, as the image he has in mind of you is a malnourished waif who favours Expelliarmus and not the powerful person you have become."
After a brief pause, Severus held out his hand. "I will give you a choice, Potter. You are not obliged to accept this and if the answer is no, I will not ask further. I suggest that you think wisely, for it is something I wished a possed a modicum of at your age."

All of a sudden, it was as though a heavy blanket was draped around his shoulders, the weight of responsibility pressing down. He listened to Snape's words seriously. As much as he had no relationship to speak of with the man, other than one built upon past loathing of another, he wasn't Dumbledore and didn't sugarcoat. There were no benefits to walking away, Harry knew just how important Snape was. He would say far more than himself, as he didn't fully believe in the prophecy. Once more he met the man's eyes, calm as the waters of the black lake.

It was only 30 seconds at most but to both men, it was as though time seemed to stretch for hours. In response, Harry reached for Snape's hand, gripping it in his own and shaking once.

"I accept," Harry spoke solemnly, releasing his grip.

"You may leave, I have taken up enough of your time. I will owl you details later." Though outwardly Severus remained the same, an undercurrent of relief ran through his system. It was an indication that a civil relationship between them was not out of the question. As a spy, he liked to see information put to use. Albus only delivered on his wish half of the time. He knew that Potter would use whatever he had to his advantage.

Harry nodded once, heading for the door. Before he left, he turned just his head around. "Professor?"

Severus raised an eyebrow in response.

"Thank you."

Before he could so much as blink, Harry was gone.

A Potter, apologizing and thanking him in one sitting? He was almost convinced Lothaire's irritating cheerfulness had driven him mad.
**Protectors and Prophecies**

Chapter Summary

As Harry makes his escape from Ron to visit Hagrid, he helps someone in a situation close to his own in the past. Meanwhile the girls investigate Shutaro, one of them finding a new friend.

**WARNING: Suicidal thoughts/themes in this chapter.**

It was the next day, after classes. Ron had been particularly insistent on sticking close to his side but thankfully, saved from being tailed this morning by the intense game of chess Dean and Seamus were playing. Unable to pass up observing, it didn't take long before Harry could make a quick escape.

Neville was with Professor Sprout, helping her in the Greenhouses. As for Ginny, Luna, and Hermione, the five had a discussion earlier. He believed they were going to find out where the doorway in Shutaro leads to. They'd promised to meet up later in the day so they could fill Neville and Harry in on anything that may happen.

Occasionally greeting a student as he passed by, Harry walked the long-familiar path to Hagrid's hut. He hadn't visited him much last year but if he were honest, he didn't make for the most pleasant company then. It was coming to the stone circle that raised voices caught his attention, a group of three students with only one he recognized.

It was Lilah. Everyone was allowed to be out of uniform on the weekends so Harry couldn't tell what house the others belonged to, though they all looked to be of similar age. As he drew closer to the group, the voices became clearer. One of them reminded him of someone he'd rather forget.

"What do you think you're doing Caltir? You're a traitor. Why have you been sorted into Gryffindor anyway?"

"Yeah, go hang out in the Snake Pit where you belong!" another voice chimed in.

Though they looked to be her age, the boys were much taller than she was and immediately received the same vibes he had from his childhood and not so long ago. Dudley Dursley and Piers Polkiss.

Lilah spoke back, her gaze not wavering though Harry could tell she was nervous. "Don't you remember what Harry Potter said? Don't let narrow-minded views of others ruin what friendships you can make. Reach out, work together, start study groups and just help out. We're stronger united than alone." she recited, adding her own comment. "If you don't try to reach out to the other houses including Slytherin you're not getting the most out of Hogwarts."

Lilah had taken Harry's words to heart, determined to make the most of her experience here. She was lucky to even be accepted into Hogwarts at all and to hear her fellow housemates shun her for wanting to talk with Slytherin was frustrating.

It wasn't the first time these boys had done this, it seemed as if from the moment they met, they disliked her. The boy who had fallen silent was called Zain if she remembered correctly. She sensed
no real malice behind his words, unlike Keith. It was one of her gifts. Rather than read people's minds, she could feel people's emotions as though they were her own. She didn't have much control over it as of yet but was confident she'd learn over time.

Keith, on the other hand, flushed an ugly red. "You don't understand anything about how our world works, I don't know why they even accepted you here so shut up! You-You pale freak!" at once he drew his wand, pointing it at her and after a moment, Zain followed suit.

Lilah froze. An overwhelming wave of sadness washed over her and she couldn't even muster the energy to draw her wand in turn. It was always the same. She thought she was a nice approachable person and she loved to talk with anyone and everyone, fascinated by the stories they had to share. But, she still hadn't made any friends at home. At least here she had Dominic, but then who knew when he'd leave too? It was only a matter of time.

Harry was glad he was able to do Occlumency, as the number of memories the word freak triggered was almost staggering. He had to close his eyes for a brief second to regain control of his emotions and once he did, he made his way over to the three.

"Please tell me that you two don't have your wands pointed at an unarmed student because if you do, you're in trouble." He stated firmly, making eye contact with each of them and watched as they pocketed their wands, panicked.

"We were just talking, that's all!" the unofficial leader of the two looked to his friend for support, who hastily nodded.

"My definition of talking and your definition of talking must be two different things. What are your names?" Harry's tone of voice indicated it wasn't a request, but a demand.

"Keith Taylor." The more talkative of the boys muttered, defiance in his gaze.

"Zain Alford." The quieter of the pair offered, looking a little more contrite.

"If you were having a conversation with Miss Caltir you certainly wouldn't have your wands drawn or give her verbal abuse. You should treat your fellow housemates with respect, I won't stand for bullying. Five points from each of your houses. Think before you act."

"But we're in Gryffindor, you can't remove points from your own house!" Keith protested, wide-eyed.

Harry barely withheld his sigh, crossing his arms instead. "I can and I will, you're lucky it's not more. The fact that you're both in Gryffindor known for bravery is the worst and cornering someone is the height of cowardice. If I see or hear either of you bullying a student again, there will be more than house points removed. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Zain replied immediately, turning to Lilah. "Sorry, Caltir."

Harry could smell insincerity a mile off, but Zain sounded genuine with his apology. Keith however, offered no such thing, storming off.

"It's ok," Lilah said quietly to Zain, managing a small smile as he inclined his head, running off after Keith. Harry decided to ignore his disrespect as infuriating him further wouldn't help either of them.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, heart, thrumming in slight pain as her slightly watery gaze met his own.
"I will be. Thanks, Harry." Her smile crumbled, almost white hair shielding her face as she lowered her head.

 Barely giving a thought to his nervousness of being rejected he softly embraced her, resting a hand on the back of her head.

 Arms immediately wrapped around his own torso, as Lilah, just for a moment, let herself feel protected. Eventually, they pulled away, as Harry had an idea.

 "Unless you have somewhere to be, do you want to visit Hagrid?" It might help improve Lilah's mood, as nothing else could compare to barely being able to lift the bucket-sized mug of tea and inedible rock cakes. Hagrid was all heart despite his gruff appearance and during his younger years, it never failed to cheer him up.

 "Oh!" her eyes widened in recognition. "The man who guided us across the lake. A lot of us fell in. Don't they have spells to prevent drowning or something? Hagrid was able to get us across ok but it doesn't seem safe." She frowned, looking puzzled. After a moment she looked up again. "But yeah sure! I'd like that." She finally gave him a real smile.

 "You're right. You only travel that way to Hogwarts your first year, the rest of the time it's the carriages. Well for the most part," he amended, smiling wryly thinking of his second year. "Come on then."

 Harry matched his pace with Lilah's as she told him about how she found Hogwarts so far. He was usually the one being cheered up by others, so to do so for someone else made a nice change.

 'Are you alright Harry?' a brief flash of concern which he could see in his mind's eye more than actually feel it went through him. Alistair had spoken occasionally with him through the mental link they shared and Harry sometimes started the conversation first. Through this, he was no longer caught off guard as much. He was growing fonder of Alistair by the moment and often he had to remind himself to not laugh out loud when around the general student body.

 'It's all good. I just removed points from my own house because they were bullying a fellow housemate. Some of the things they said triggered my own memories, that's all. I'm with the student now. I'm taking her to Hagrid's to help her cheer up.'

 'Which student is it, if you don't mind my asking?'

 'Lilah Caltir.'

 'Ah yes, she was in my class yesterday afternoon. I had to reprimand one Mr Taylor and Alford as they were sending her rude messages written on parchment across the classroom. I take it they were the same students?'

 'Yeah. They had their wands pointed at her and she hadn't drawn her own.'

 Harry could sense the same kind of sigh which he'd withheld a short time ago. 'I will keep an eye on them. I abhor bullying of any kind.'

 'You and me both. Thanks. I'm worried about her. I helped her find a seat on the train and since then she's like a younger sibling.'

 'She is rather endearing, she was the most enthusiastic student, particularly with my start of class handshake. Now I shall let you take your leave, have a lovely weekend.' A warm smile.
Realizing they were now just outside of Hagrid's hut, he knocked on the door.

"Down Fang!" he heard the usual boisterous barking of Fang and Hagrid pulling him away from the door, which opened a second later.

"Arry! How are yeh?" Hagrid's face practically lit up as he crushed Harry, half lifting him off the ground in his excitement.

"Hagrid. Need. Air!" Harry managed to get out around gasps, hearing Lilah giggling below.

"Sorry about tha'." He placed Harry on the ground, patting his shoulder at which he couldn't help but wince.

"Who's yer friend?" Hagrid asked, finally noticing the giggling girl.

"This is Lilah, she's a first year. I thought if she wanted to experience Hogwarts in its entirety she couldn't pass up visiting you!" he offered a roguish grin.

Lilah stuck her hand out for him to shake and for once mindful of his strength, he took her hand in his own as carefully as he could.

"Th' more th' merrier!" He boomed, moving from the entrance and gesturing for them to come in.

As Harry followed Lilah indoors, he wondered how Ginny, Luna, and Hermione were doing.

"Where are we meeting Luna? We never did discuss that exactly." Hermione asked, barely able to restrain her excitement.

"Luna tends to come and go as she pleases. We'll probably come across her along the way or she's already there."

Before Hermione could respond, a voice which she was almost certain that she wouldn't have to hear until at least the evening rang out behind them.

"Hey, Herm, Gin, where are you off to?"

Almost in unison, two hands twitched, tempted to firmly grasp onto the wands in their possession. Hermione had told Ron she hated that name but in his usual state of blissful ignorance, he completely ignored her.

"And since when have you been our keeper?" Ginny raised her eyebrows in question, little sparks flying from her wand which the redhead eyed warily. "I thought you were watching Dean and Seamus."

"Their game finished. So, where are you going then?" the insistent tone, as though they had no choice but to tell him, irked Ginny. Sensing her friend's irritation, Hermione simply decided to watch from the sidelines.

"And that's your business, how?" her dangerous tone was a clear indication to Hermione, but not Ron.

"You're my little sister, of course, I've got to protect you. That and my girlfriend." He beamed, looking normal.

"What?!" Hermione cried out. "I don't remember our friendship changing in that manner." She
narrowed her eyes dangerously.

"No, but it will." Ron's expression was so stupidly confident that Hermione was half wondering if she wasn't hit with a Confundus charm.

Shaking her head once, she gave him a glare. "Not in my world Ronald. While you are my friend you have about as much charm as a nest of Doxies."

Before Ron could even so much as respond, Ginny approached him, one slow step at a time, until she invaded his personal space. He seemed to visibly shrink beneath her heated glare.

"Ron," growling, she furrowed her brows. "We're in Hogwarts. While it's not the safest as the past few years have shown us, there are people like Professor McGonagall who can help and even if there was any danger, I'm more than capable of handling it, or did you forget that I went to the Department of Mysteries as well?"

Ron shrugged, uncaring. "Yeah, I know. You shouldn't have gone though, a battlefield is no place for you, especially after what you know who did to you."

"I was eleven, I had no choice!" shouting, her voice eventually faded, to be replaced with a quiet calm. She took in a deep breath. "Fighting with you all, that was my choice. I won't stand by and watch everyone I care about risk their lives for me, I will help, no matter what."

"Even if you die?" he asked incredulously. "I won't let you." He looked at her for a minute. "You're not strong enough to fend for yourself." Scoffing, he made to walk over to Hermione. Or he would've if something very large and dangerous wasn't close to shaving the skin off his nose.

The thin tendril of patience she'd had with her brother, all throughout summer and up until now, snapped. She was close with Ron insulting Luna, but Harry's anger saved her from her own towards him, not to mention amusement at Harry's story of Ron's blunder in his detention, that gave her immense satisfaction.

But to be effectively told she was weak by Ron of all people? She knew if he actually applied himself in lessons he could be a formidable wizard but instead from what she knew growing up with him and hearing from Hermione, he close to slack off in lessons and up until recently, dragged Harry down with him.

It was a struggle to restrain herself, but she didn't even try to all the way. Instead, she casually pressed her thumb into the indent of her stud, quickly casting a featherlight charm. Within a few seconds, the Glaive was in her firm grasp and she didn't waste any time, pointing it at his face.

"Ron, this is Shattered Blaze. Shattered Blaze, meet Ron. Ron is looking to die a slow and painful death, do you think you can help?" While she was speaking to the weapon with a cheerful note, her eyes sparked with a burning fury which never left his own trembling ones.

"W-Where did you get that?" Stammering, he barely managed to get his words out, going cross-eyed as the sharp blade drew even closer. Not wanting to risk anything else he ran, narrowly avoiding Luna who watched him leave with mild curiosity.

Remaining silent but equally enthusiastic she matched their pace, heading for Shutaro.

While Ginny and Hermione may look out of place skipping instead of walking, the action seemed to be tailored to Luna as a person, as she wasted no time opening the door to the Room of Requirement.

It looked the same as it always did, nothing out of place from the last time they were there, aside
from the addition of Shutaro's doorway and with a mixture of excitement and nervousness, Hermione looked over at her companions.

"I have a feeling that we won't return to this room the same as when we left. As much as Harry has a part to play, it seems as if we do too."

"Yes." Ginny agreed, eyes glinting with determination.

"Shutaro said don't worry, The Elder is expecting our arrival, along with the Fae," Luna spoke softly, giving the tree one affectionate pat.

"It's hard not to worry when you're travelling to a world entirely different from your own," Hermione muttered, though in truth she was too curious for nerves to affect her much.

Luna stepped through first, and after a glance at one another, Ginny and Hermione followed suit.

Where they all arrived next was obviously of another world, but strangely had the same mystical atmosphere as Luna's mindscape brought to life.

As soon as Luna arrived, all she could feel was peace. It was soothing and somehow familiar to her, though she was quite certain she'd never travelled to anywhere like this. She caught the attention of the few Fae in the room, more coming over to see the three as they emerged from the elder tree, with a similar doorway to Shutaro.

A low murmur of hushed voices disturbed the calm and Ginny couldn't help but shuffle nervously, as Hermione looked around in curiosity and interestingly enough, a small smile appeared on Luna's face.

The attention they attracted was enough for one Fae to step forward, as they had to crane their necks slightly to meet her vibrant gaze.

"Childe of Sun, Childe of Moon, Childe of Bloom, we Fae welcome you to our home. My name is Nihri. This must be sudden for you all but with our help," she gestured to four other Fae behind her, "You will come to understand. Follow us, please." None of the trio spoke, but Hermione's and Ginny's nerves were settled with Nihri's calming tone.

A pair of sparkling blue eyes locked curiously onto Luna's own and in response, she gave a little wave. The owner of them seemed taken aback for a moment but eventually looked away, deep in thought.

Luna didn't mind at all. She was wondering if there were any hidden creatures she'd find on her travels here to tell her father about, as in her opinion, there was always something new to discover, no matter where.

While Hermione and Ginny stuck closer together due to the unfamiliar setting and its people, Luna was more than happy to skip along behind the Fae, wide blue eyes shining in delight as she drank in the tranquillity of their home.

They came to a small clearing slightly removed from the main area, a large door which looked to be a combination of vines and leaves in front of them. The three kept their attention focused on Nihri.

"This is my and Master Gareon's home." she gestured to a Fae who looked remarkably human-like. "We are Autumn Fae, however, the writings concerning you affect all of Fae kind and while some of us are not on good terms, you take precedence over this, which is why representatives of the Spring, Summer, and Winter courts are with us. They will work individually with you to best utilize your
gifts. Master Gareon will show you how to work effectively as a team unit in battle and I will be here to offer advice and guidance should any of you need it. Time passes by differently here to your world, so there is no worry. You will not be missed by those who seek you."

Hermione and Ginny collectively breathed a sigh of relief. While Luna had saved them all from the annoyance that was Ron, it would grow tiresome if he continued to decide to tail more than just Harry.

After a short while, they were paired with the Fae who would assist them, parting ways through the door which, once opened, split into three separate paths. Exchanging signs of good luck, they each went their separate ways.

Taibreah-Drenn, the fae that had introduced herself to Ginny, had encouraged her to walk side by side. Vivid orange hair shaved at one side, it glowed with an ethereal light. Her height was a little intimidating as Ginny only reached just below her chest, but she didn't feel threatened. Instead, she admired the confidence evident in her frame.

Skin the colour of peach and sharp red eyes caught Ginny's attention. But unlike Voldemort, these red eyes were filled with a burning passion, not all-consuming hatred. A broadsword much larger than Ginny's Glaive rested on her back, armour polished to the point where the reflections of their surroundings could be seen, if close enough.

"We shall both make the most of the opportunity that we have been blessed with. Let us work well together." A soft smile.

While Nihri's accent was Irish, as were her fellow Fae of the Autumn court, Drenn's was a variant of English, well-spoken. Ginny was unsure if this applied to every seasonal fae, but it seemed to be a running theme.

Eventually, the duo came to a halt, where Ginny could see nothing but open space and blue skies, almost unrealistically so.

"I will assume that you know how to summon your gift?" Ginny nodded once and looking satisfied, she continued. "While mortal magic will assist, it is best for you to build the physical strength to successfully wield him. While you have the innate talent for fire magic and you will be able to channel that, you will need to rely on your strength if there is ever a time where magic cannot be used."

Ginny understood that. She agreed, in fact. Imagining Death Eaters thinking they had the upper hand because she was disarmed of her wand, only to threaten them with a very pointy weapon, her lips twitched with mirth.

"Building physical strength is something which you can do in your own time here or if you have a spare moment, at your home. You can use your magic to help channel your strength though I would only recommend a little."

"How do I channel magic into it, exactly?"

"I will show you." Drenn held her own weapon, blade in both hands, point facing the ground.

"Like with any magical focus, picture the magic flowing freely through your body, to pool at the destination. It is the same feeling you have when using a wand. Though our focuses are a little different from yours, the result is the same. Would you be so kind as to conjure targets for me?" she asked, her blade glowing with a soft light.
Picturing the practice dummies in the DA, Ginny conjured a row of three for Drenn, watching intently.

The blade glowed brighter, to the point where it warmed the breeze in the air. Without moving from her position, She swung her greatsword in a wide arc and with the moving of air, the magic which coated it shot forward, to hit one of the targets. It was cut clean in half, with the faint scent of charred wood.

"Cool..." Ginny spoke aloud, causing Drenn to laugh. "What I did there is a little more difficult to pull off. While the idea behind it is similar to when you use your wand, the focus it takes is greater due to the amount sometimes needed and the physical strength to accomplish this. It is as much about endurance as it is being able to fight. If you plan to incorporate magic into your physical fighting I would recommend training to increase your magic reserves. For now, however, I will teach you how to coat him with magic."

"Why do you refer to it by him or gift?" Ginny asked, curious. "Why not Shattered Blaze?"

"We do not have the right to the given name, as we have not been chosen. Only you have the right to that. It is the way it has always been."

Nodding in acceptance, Ginny was pushed to her limits but in the process, gaining a sharper control of magic, how to hold herself in battle and an even distribution of her weight, not to mention effective ways to tackle an enemy. Though it was only the first hour, Ginny looked forward to what this training would do for her in the future.

Hermione had no idea how she could go from the surroundings she'd just been in, to a cavern filled with stalactites and stalagmites but as always, she'd write it off as a combination of nature and magic and leave it at that. Unlike the Fae Hermione had seen, Esha was only slightly taller than she was and while Fae had a long lifespan, she looked to be Hermione's age physically, perhaps a little younger.

She wore wind braids, a similar shade of green to Harry's eyes and dressed in traditional hunter's garb, with a cape resembling a giant leaf. With each step taken, it was as though she walked on air. Her feet barely touched the ground. She intrigued Hermione, particularly her flower-shaped markings and golden eyes like pinpricks of light in the dim setting. It was odd to think that pale green skin could suit someone since it was such an unusual colour but to Hermione, Esha couldn't be Esha without that particular feature.

"I'm so excited! I've never met a mortal before! You HAVE to tell me what it's like over there! I've never left my home you see up until now, it's my first time visiting the other Fae. This is going to be fun!"

She practically bounced all over the place with childish energy and Hermione smiled, identifying her Welsh accent. "I await your teaching."

"Honestly, it's pretty easy once you get the hang of it. I've got arrows with mine," she gestured to the quiver on her back. "But you won't need arrows though you can use them if you like. She uses your raw magical energy. For now, try with regular arrows. I brought some extra with me." She threw another quiver over to Hermione, which she caught. Outside of Archery in primary school, she wasn't well versed with how to knock back arrows so starting from the basics would benefit her.

The cavern was illuminated with the touch of a sconce until one after another, a row of them that Hermione hadn't noticed up until now helped to see their surroundings better. Esha fired arrows
herself, as Hermione took note of her posture doing so. Her target resembled a dummy, only made of stone.

A few arrows later, she turned to her. "Want to give it a shot?"

It was a lot harder than Hermione had anticipated and Esha didn't look like the kind of person to lie, so to hear that she was pretty good for her first proper attempt was reassuring.

"Here's something for you." Esha touched an arrow with her finger, the wood now ingrained with green runes. Aiming, she pulled back harder than the first few arrows and once it hit the target, Hermione's eyes widened.

From the point of impact was a series of mini-explosions, starting from the centre and once bits of debris hit the floor, it created a chain of them until a few seconds later, eventually died.

Esha gave her a Cheshire Cat grin. "Nice, huh? You can do the same but you don't need arrows. Like with your focus, just imagine the spell you need and shape it. It all depends on your accuracy but once you have that, there'll be no problem. The more practice you get, the better formed into arrows your spells will be." She stepped back, gesturing with her hand.

Hermione approached this as she would any problem, appreciating that knowledge over physical experience wouldn't save her every time. She picked Ginny's second speciality, Reducto. The power behind it and the damage it caused. She noted Esha repairing the rock her arrow previously obliterated.

Though there was no arrow, she imagined her magic in its purest form, that there really was an orange and very destructive arrow.

She was beginning to think nothing was happening until there was something faint. She could see it.

"That's it, Hermione, you almost got it!"

Spurred on by Esha's words of encouragement, Hermione applied the same focus to this as she did during her classes and slowly but surely, an orange arrow appeared. It was strange to touch a solid version of her own spell and while it wasn't perfect, it would do for the first one.

She was unsure how much time had passed but she could at least get the distance down. Her accuracy was something she needed to work on but at least, for this...

She had a moment of feeling like Robin Hood and entertained herself with the thought of robbing Malfoy Manor and donating what she found to orphanages.

Then, she allowed her mind to clear of everything but her target and let loose.

It was a faint blur of orange in the distance but that didn't matter. The spell crumbled everything in its path, including a chunk of the cavern wall.

"Oh yeah!" Esha jumped on the spot in glee. "I'm going to love working with you."

Hermione felt the same way and then, something indiscernible passed through the air. For a moment, she wondered how Luna was getting on.

For most of her life, more so since her mother passed away, Luna was left feeling discontent. Though looking at her, no one could ever tell. She experienced the feeling of loss and loneliness in
her younger years as often, her father would consume himself with their mutual love of strange magical creatures. Not that he ever shared those feelings with her but he never needed to. She was unusually sensitive to them.

During that time, she changed, never losing her unique way of thinking but all throughout it, left feeling as though something was missing. She did wonder if it was some yet undiscovered creature which caused this side effect but somehow, she knew that wasn't the case.

Arriving in the world of the fae, it was as though a puzzle piece previously beyond reach was now in her grasp and it fit perfectly. While she was positive that not even in her dreams had she visited this wonderfully unique world, it nevertheless resonated with startling clarity.

How she could miss somewhere when it was her first time Luna didn't know, but the feeling of loss wasn't as deep as it was before coming here.

Curiously, she looked at her companion. Granted she struggled with this task as he was taller than even some of the other male fae.

Whiter than the snow which often blanketed Hogwarts, his hair twisted into a french braid ponytail, swaying against his lower body, strides reduced in consideration for the sake of his smaller companion.

Sir Brio, as that was the name Luna was given, had an aura of cold. Not personality, but magic. Though certainly, the blue hue of his skin would suggest nothing but cold. However, she sensed none of that, enjoying the swirling patterns on his silver robes, as they were very pretty.

Luna knew instinctively that she would come to no harm with him. There was the type of kindness found in someone who often didn't know how to express it physically, but it was there. She was curious at the ocean coloured gaze of his earlier and if he found what he was looking for.

When he first set eyes on this mortal, there was a feeling of kinship, unlike anything he'd ever experienced, even with his fellow brothers and sisters. While it was true within their own courts they were close, Brio tended to keep to himself, though he had a civil relationship with those he lived with. The same couldn't be said for the others, the only exception being Nihri.

For most of his life, he had dedicated it to using his magic for the better, primarily to heal, much to the surprise and scepticism of those who didn't know him. Truly, his talents lay in the healing and shielding arts though if it came down to it, he could hold his own in battle. The honorific wasn't just for show.

In all his years of living, he had never encountered such an enigma. Why did he immediately feel as if he knew this mortal, a human at that, as though she were one of his kind?

He looked down at her, only to be met with pale blue eyes in return. The mortal smiled at him and he was taken aback, used to either grimaces or glares being thrown in his direction. He was more than aware his own people found him intimidating, let alone a human, but this one didn't seem to be phased at all. She didn't seem human, the way she held herself and even her physical appearance suggested something otherworldly. He couldn't help but think that, matching her pace as they walked side by side.

Semi aware of her surroundings so as not to trip, Luna's eyes visibly lit up, patting the bag she always carried with her, no matter the occasion. It was filled with cork necklaces, from more than just butterbeer. She'd left a Firewhisky cork necklace in the shape of a cauldron on Professor Snape's desk at the end of her lesson with him. While there was a chance he'd thrown it away, she dearly
hoped he'd keep it close. While everyone thought it was more than likely a placebo effect, Luna poured every emotion she could into making them, so that a part of her would be with the recipient, protected at least a little.

With this in mind, she picked one of her regular butterbeer cork necklaces not altered in any way, shape or form, as natural as the day she found it. This one would be perfect.

"Brio, I got a present for you!" she exclaimed, beaming. It didn't matter whether she was giving or receiving them, presents never failed to make her excited.

Brio had made such a reputation for himself that no one even assumed they were allowed to call him by first name only. The only ones with the right to do that were his family, who were long gone or grudgingly, Nihri. Normally he'd shoot a chilling glare at those who didn't know him with a reminder to not be so casual but looking into this human's innocent eyes with not a hint of deception, the thought of correcting her never crossed his mind.

A frown marred his fair features, slowing down as Luna came to a standstill. "Why?" In truth, the question was for more than right now, but he would be satisfied if at least one of them had an answer.

"Because you're my friend. Haven't you gotten a present before?" she was intending to be slightly teasing, but she didn't expect his reply.

"No." Brio couldn't understand this mortal and for the sake of politeness, he would call her by her given name. Once he'd reached that point, there was no turning back. Why would she gift him with something when they'd just met, and when had they become friends? The last time he was this discomposed was during his training as a child and that was a long time ago.

A wave of sorrow passed over Luna. He hadn't received a present before? She couldn't imagine it. "Well, today is a day of changes." She spoke firmly, happy to spread the joy of gift-giving as she held her hand out, necklace in her palm. He looked down, studying her intently.

A soft giggle escaped her lips, seeing his confusion. "It's a butterbeer cork necklace, they're for all of my friends and if you look after them, they'll look after you."

She looked from her palm to him. When stretching her highest, she still wouldn't come even close to Brio's neck. She was contemplating whether she should just levitate it when Brio's eyes met hers, this time from her own height.

Brio was unsure why he did it, as he could simply take this strange-looking necklace from her but he could see that for some reason, she wanted to put it on him. She was open with her expressions, but her actions, he couldn't even begin to predict. He crouched, far enough down so they averaged the same height.

"Thank you." He didn't know what to say other than that or how he should appropriately react. The closest to any form of gifts he'd received were weaponry all to do with part of his role, so that didn't count. This was something beyond his comprehension.

She said nothing, giving him her brightest smile. He was happy, he just didn't know that he was. She could sense his emotions better than anyone else's, but the reason why eluded her.

She slipped the necklace over his head gently, the string resting on top of his ponytail. She lifted his long hair from underneath and her eyes twinkled at how silky it was to the touch. She had the urge to run her fingers through it but refrained, letting go and taking a step back.
He stiffened at her touch but it was so brief, he needn't have worried. For that small period, it was as though she were handling something delicate and fragile, unaware that a touch could feel so curious yet gentle.

"I hope that we have fun together." She returned to her usual serene tone, but inside she was bursting with joy and unable to help herself, she reached out and took his hand in her own. Hers almost swallowed by the size of his she skipped cheerfully, sensing their destination wasn't far off.

Brio couldn't prevent the widening of his eyes even if he wanted to. No one was comfortable around him. There were times where he was uncomfortable with himself, even, and one of the smallest mortals he'd ever laid eyes on willingly touched him, even though if he desired, he could crush every bone in her hand. As much as some of the select members of the Summer court believed he'd take delight in such things, that was not the case. He'd sooner heal than hurt and though bewildered, he accepted her kind touch, his curious and slightly thawed gaze compared to previously at least, watching and wondering if she would differ from the fae students he'd taught.

The answer to Brio's question of if she would differ from the other students he'd taught was a resounding yes, even though he hadn't started yet. The students under his care were always well aware of him and his reputation and usually arrived at their lessons with equal parts respect and trepidation but leaving stronger than when they came. He had no experience teaching females and the majority of male students were focused on purely offensive moves. While he was certain he taught to the best of his abilities, he failed to understand why one of the many others in the winter court didn't undertake offensive teachings if they enjoyed it so much. His passion lay in healing and the only enjoyment he received from teaching was the end result and not the process.

Luna, as he sternly told himself to call her instead of mortal, was not only a different gender to what he was used to but a human too. When Nihri had contacted him for aid with the three mortals, it didn't take him too long to make his decision. Not one of their kind was ignorant about the children of Sun, Moon, and Bloom as it was vital for them to offer aid if they were to show themselves and they did, indirectly through the gemstones.

He would have to take a different approach as he knew even without speaking directly that her preference lay in healing and defence. It was easy to sense those of similar dispositions and as he found out, this didn't differ across species.

Still holding Brio's hand, Luna altered her skipping pace back to walking, surroundings changing almost instantly. She could have blinked and missed the transformation.

Even if she stretched to look at the sky as far as she could, the tops of the trees so similar looking to Shutaro wouldn't fill her vision. What did instead, was the gentle pale glow of moonlight, helping to light the way. She had never seen the moon as close as it was, almost as though it could be touched.

Off to the side was a small pond. To others, it would look out of place but to Luna, it was just right. A single flower floated on the water, looking to embody purity itself as it drank in the moonlight, tiny ripples disturbing the otherwise smooth surface.

"So lovely," Luna spoke quieter than she usually did, reluctant to disturb their tranquil surroundings.

"The Eireachdail Woods, named for the Moon which eternally shines," Brio spoke, tone equally soft. He watched Luna in puzzlement, as she removed her socks and shoes, banishing them with a wave of her wand.

"Nargles steal my shoes, but sometimes I like to feel the nature for myself." A peaceful smile, more natural than her usual expression seemed to add a further air of tranquillity, burying her toes in the
soft grass.

Brio had always kept the soles of his feet bare, not believing in walking on blessed soil with something manually crafted by his kind. All courts were close to nature, some more than others but all respected it in its purest form, but to see a human do so was unexpected.

The slight tension in his muscles relaxed, seeing that with every minute that passed by, the chances of Luna causing him trouble were unlikely. Added to the fact that she'd released his hand. He wasn't averse to her touch strangely, simply unused to physical contact from another.

As Luna took a seat on the grass, toes still buried and watching the pond with childlike wonder, she turned her focus from it to Brio, now seated beside her.

"This flower surfaces and blooms once per decade, we are fortunate to see it." He had only once in his lifetime before, as when per decade was never specified. It was purely down to chance whether it would show itself.

"Does it have a name?" Luna asked, wanting to engrave it in her heart as it was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen.

He looked over at her, the stirrings of what could be a smile quirking his lips. "There is no name. It simply is."

Luna required no explanation, as not everything needed to have a name. It was just a label to define one thing from another. This flower didn't need anything to define it, it was unique in its own right.

"Let us continue." Brio stood up and after a moment's thought offered the hand which not so long ago was held, helping Luna to her feet. Matching her pace once more, they walked a little further, coming to a small clearing, trees still surrounding them both.

"There are many places to learn, but these woods are untainted. They have never seen bloodshed or battle which was not part of nature and are best suited for healing."

"Does that mean, everywhere else is tainted?" Luna asked hesitantly, worrying her bottom lip.

Though his expression remained the same, Brio's eyes couldn't hide the flicker of sorrow which Luna caught. After a moment of silent debate, he gave a soft sigh.

"You are right. While we seek to protect, the impurity of fighting comes at the cost of purity from our world."

Pressing her thumb against the indentation, Luna held Gentle Whisper, her heart strongly beating with the desire to help however she could.

"Will you show me?" her earnestness reached Brio and he nodded once.

"I sense that you have used healing magic before, but your gift requires you to use it differently. It is reliant on intent as with all magic, but to protect and heal requires emotion. You must place the desire you feel not into words, but into your magic. The best way for me to demonstrate is to allow you to experience this yourself."

Brio rarely had lesson plans, having a firm idea of what he wanted to accomplish in the short space of time waiting for his students. Absurdly enough he was slightly nervous initiating contact with Luna. With his strength, there was never a reason to hold back as none of his students was children. While Luna was young she held a strange maturity, but she was far more delicate than what he was
used to dealing with, slightly concerned he'd end up unintentionally harming her.

Standing behind her, he placed his hands hesitantly on her shoulders, careful not to press down. While he realized she was likely not as fragile as she appeared to be, telling himself this seemed to not help at all.

He kept a level, calm tone. "Focus on the emotion, my intent is not important for the moment. While my emotions may differ from yours, the desire to heal remains the same."

Still careful with his hands, Brio welcomed the free feeling. Unlike attack magic which was called upon forcefully to serve a purpose, healing and protection magic worked with the caster, leaving the fingertips or focus more naturally. Slowly he closed his eyes, at peace for the first time in a while.

Even now with his hands on her shoulders, there was no pressure at all, as if he was afraid she'd shatter beneath his touch.

'His consideration is endearing.' Luna couldn't help but think that eyes sparkling when the refreshing touch of magic was made known to her.

Although she was very good with emotions, the feeling of another's magic was something entirely new and exciting. It was a breath of fresh air, so clean and light. She was almost disappointed that the air itself was nothing like Brio's magic but the more it surrounded her, the more revitalized she felt in heart, body, and soul. She couldn't help but think if the air were like this, everyone would be happier.

Brio's magic helped to focus herself, as she held Gentle Whisper with both hands, closing her eyes and letting herself relax.

'Hello pretty world, my name is Luna. Will you let me help?'

She took Brio's instruction to heart, knowing by instinctively that the time was right. She truly wished for everywhere to be at peace, not just these woods. Letting this desire fill her, her magic joined with Brio's, distorting the breeze with a faint whisper of colour.

He was going to stop the flow of his magic and let Luna try on her own, but there was no need. She was a natural. Her magic touched him. It was warm. Not the heat of the summer court, but a warmth he'd associate with comfort, a blanket on a colder night.

As their magic was released, it carried upon the winds, their mutual desire to heal heard. Slowly but surely, their wish spread across the land, damage to it undone. It was not perfect by any means, but only time would heal further. With this, the magic dissipated, as the pair opened their eyes.

"Oh, that was wonderful!" Luna cried out, happily spinning around on the spot, arms stretched to either side. "Does it always feel like this?"

Brio wasn't as guarded as before, his eyes a little softer. "Usually, but not as strong, our joined magic producing a slightly different effect." He eyed her with respect. "You did very well for the first time, it will not take long to teach all that you need to know."

Without warning, she took hold of his hand again. This time he only tensed a little, following her to the ground as she sat and losing count of the number of things he'd done today which he wouldn't normally, sat beside her again.

Luna lay down face up, hair splayed around her as she looked at Brio, a soft smile on her face. "I look forward to it." gently exhaling, she watched almost trance-like, the stars glittering. "The stars are
Glancing over at his companion for a moment, Brio also lay down. Though he had stargazed many times in this manner, it was always alone. It was the first time he'd shared a moment like this with another.

"I'm home." Whispering this to herself, they enjoyed the comfortable silence.

The Eireachdail Woods watched over them. They had waited centuries for this moment and at last, it had arrived. Their thanks for the aid to the land was conveyed as the flower, unnoticed to them, glowed brighter than before. It would stay, content to watch the ones that had piqued its interest enough to surface.

The urge for Harry to relieve himself for an hour was strong, as he left Hagrid's hut with Lilah. Even if the rock cakes weren't fit for consumption, the tea was good. He managed to drink the entire cup without realizing, more focused on conversing with Hagrid.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" he asked Lilah, turning to her as they walked back the way they came.

"Yeah! I'll definitely go again." She relished the time spent with him. Although she treasured Dominic as a friend, there was something off that she couldn't place. It was nothing to do with friendship, she trusted his feelings were genuine. It was more the emotions didn't fit with his body, but that made no sense at all, did it?

One minute she was thinking of Dominic, the next she was trying not to throw up, as a wave of nausea washed over her. It vanished after a few seconds but robbed her body of all strength, to the point that she stumbled, nearly tripping over. For some reason, she couldn't seem to focus.

"Lilah, what's wrong?!"

Hearing the alarm in his voice, she tried to reassure that she was fine, there was nothing to worry about but for some reason, was unable to form the words. Sleep sounded good...

Harry's mind came to a stop as Lilah became limp in his arms. While he thought she did look a little ill, he didn't expect this.

"Shit!" he lifted her into his arms with ease. The only reason he hadn't descended into panic was his singular focus on taking her to the Hospital Wing, running as fast as he could.

"Mmm..." He heard her weak voice, dazed pale green eyes unfocused.

"Everything's fine, I'm getting you help." He reassured her, almost missing an added voice.

'HARRY?'

The voice most soothing to him filled his senses. It was right now, in particular, he was thankful to be mentally connected with Alistair. Not waiting for him to continue, he explained before he could.

'Lilah just collapsed suddenly, I'm taking her to the Hospital Wing.' He couldn't prevent the worry from his voice even if he tried.

There was a long period of silence, broken by Alistair's resigned sounding voice.

'I know what is wrong, bring her to my office.'
Harry was about to protest but then thought for a moment. While he knew Madam Pomfrey would know what was wrong with her, there must be a reason why Alistair seemed to.

"Ok."

It didn't take long until he arrived outside Alistair's office, the door already open. Walking in as the door automatically shut behind them, he found Alistair at his desk. standing up immediately upon seeing Lilah, he had an intense expression on his face which Harry hadn't seen before.

"Could you place her over there?" Alistair gestured to a sofa not far from his desk.

Harry did as asked, taking a seat beside her.

"She will be fine, I promise you." Harry nodded, glancing at him for a moment.

It did disturb him when Alistair conjured a dagger, but he found out why.

Taking the dagger, Alistair put light pressure on his neck, dragging the blade enough for blood to slowly trickle. He was about to ask what he was doing until Lilah shifted, her usual innocent gaze from where he was sat shifted, from green to a vivid gold.

Everything to her was a blur of noise and movement, stuck somewhere between being conscious and falling unconscious. That is until something painfully familiar filled her senses. It was as if the scent awakened her, like a cold spray of water on a sleeping person. Everything which she tried so hard to hide was coming to light. She didn't want this!

"No, please, don't," she raised one arm, weakly pushing against the person leaning over her, the tang of blood that she hated reminding her of the hunger pangs.

However, that hand wrapped firmly around her own, the coolness grounding her as, with eyes open, understood who it was.

"Professor?" she managed to speak, upset evident in her voice and posture as she tried to turn away, closing her eyes and trying with all her might to go back to normal.

But he didn't let her, hand still holding hers.

"Yes Miss Caltir, it is me. I understand that you are scared, but you must drink. Will you do that for me?" he kept his tone kind, not letting the familiarity of the situation affect him.

"But why do I have to?" she was terrified, searching her mind for everything she could do to get out of this.

"You are ill, Lilah." He switched to her first name, catching her attention as her golden irises met his disguised brown ones. "It will kill you if you do not."

She looked away, her desolation and sorrow leaving Harry shaken. "I know. won't you let me? I don't wanna live like this." She wavered between keeping herself alive or letting what she was die with her.

Born to a Human and Vampire, she belonged to neither. Shunned by the humans for being different despite her mostly human appearance and by the Vampires for not being pure, the only ally at her side was father, despite the disgust shown to him by others.

Although he'd tried to hide it, several times when younger her father had come home worse for wear
and on one occasion, she'd witnessed the violence for herself, the other Vampires not holding back with their cutting words to her either.

She knew if not for her, father could live a better, more peaceful life. They would accept him if she was gone. Voldemort would not approach him either, as he did a while ago, attempting to convince her to join his cause and enact vengeance on all those who had done her wrong. She didn't want that. She just wanted to live her life. But truly, she could never remember a time when she was happy, mother dying just after childbirth.

And one day, she just, stopped. Stopped drinking any kind of blood, be it animal or human. She couldn't bring herself to, her very existence causing pain. Though half Vampire which didn't guarantee her immortality, she knew all Vampires would die without some form of blood. Maybe if she was gone, father would be free.

Her acceptance to Hogwarts seemed like a fresh start, a new beginning to finally make some friends. She knew immediately what Professor Lothaire was as soon as she saw him and knew it would be the same in his case. Though she hadn't met, she'd heard of him. He was one of the if not the most influential Vampires of their kind and she was nervous to be around him, but slowly put herself at ease, as he was very kind to her.

Any hope of making friends, she thought, was shattered. Harry was the first friend, or she'd like to think he was. Then there was Dominic. But on the first morning, it was her, Zain and Keith in one room, the latter had cut his finger. She'd changed to something abnormal, scaring them. That moment was what sparked Keith's name of 'freak' which served as a reminder.

To be faced with another such reminder in the form of Professor Lothaire's neck, a pure Vampire of all things shedding blood for someone unworthy, was an insult to him.

Everything she'd concealed was no longer, a wound she'd thought had faded returned with a burning vengeance, as bitter tears stung beneath her lashes.

"Please don't make me, I beg you! Y-you're pure, you shouldn't shed blood for someone like me."

As Alistair released his grip on her hand to support her into a sitting position, another smaller hand took its place, the warmth causing her to look over at the source, her trembling increasing anew.

Listening to Lilah, Harry shocked himself with how deeply he was affected. She'd given up on life completely and as someone who'd walked the line between life and death since the moment he was born, whether it was the desire to rob himself of his own or someone trying to kill him, he knew the feeling all too well. The urge to just stop fighting and actually let Voldemort kill him became very overwhelming. Hearing another going through what he had and sometimes still did, had shaken him.

He reached out, gripping the frail hand tightly in his own as if to keep her from tipping over the edge. As her sorrowful gaze turned in his direction, he swallowed past his emotion, desperate to help.

"Lilah, I've wanted to leave this world more times than I can count. People have placed so many expectations on my shoulders for something which I had no control over, or used and discarded me when I'd served my purpose. I was close to ending it all but do you know what stopped me?" at her silent shake of the head, he continued. "My friends and the family I have left. I told myself if I couldn't live for me, I would live for them, as I don't want them to suffer while my own suffering ends. You're not alone in this." He squeezed her hand, his eyes holding nothing but sincerity.

She hadn't thought of it like that. Head-turning from Harry holding her hand to Professor Lothaire, she considered things from another angle.
She still felt the same, despite Harry's words, but her desire to live was a little stronger as, despite everything, her father had taken care of her and did care for her. She didn't ever want him to be sad because of something she'd done.

It was the hardest decision she remembered ever having to make and after a short while she closed her eyes, nodding once.

"I'll try."

"That's all I can ask for," Harry replied, relieved, but knew her heart was undecided.

"While our kind has told you that you do not belong, that is the furthest from the truth. You are just as precious as the rest of us. Because I am borne of two Vampires does not diminish your value." Alistair spoke firmly, a seed of regret in his heart that he had not encountered his brethren in action as if so, he could have put a stop to it immediately.

At that Lilah's gaze snapped to Alistair's, disbelief and doubt etched into her expression and in response, he gave her a sad smile.

"While you may not believe me now, I give you my word that I will watch over you as long as you remain in these walls and do everything within my power to ensure that you or any others do not receive such treatment again."

He opened his wound once more, which had automatically healed after a few seconds. It was a safety net in a way, no Vampire could commit suicide by a blade unless it was a special exception. The only way a self-inflicted wound remained open for more than a few seconds, is if another drank from it.

This time Lilah didn't turn away but stared in silence, fear still evident.

"Everything will be fine, you will feel better." He soothed, giving better access to his neck and kneeling by her side. Having a sudden idea, he dipped his finger into some of the blood, holding it out for her to see.

Hesitantly, she removed her hand from Harry's, touching Alistair's hand close to her face. Looking at him then his hand, her tongue darted out, tasting a little of the blood on his finger and suddenly, it was all she could see. She didn't want to hold back now.

Her eyes focused on his wound, still bleeding a little and for support, she held onto a shoulder with one of her hands, the other tightly clenched at her side. Though inexperienced, she instinctively knew what to do and with a deep breath, fangs pierced his skin, the blood coating her tongue and it almost seemed to not be enough.

Alistair silently watched over her, relieved that between them, they had encouraged Lilah to drink. As she latched on tightly leaning more into him, he supported her back, the other gently pressed against her head.

"Good girl." He encouraged softly, sorrow clouding his gaze for a moment as while she drank and was sating her hunger, the unmistakable feeling of tears dripped onto his skin. Once the wound closed on its own, she had enough energy to clean the dried blood from the first wound, until she went slack in his arms.

He placed her on the sofa once more, gently wiping the blood from her mouth with a handkerchief. "She is fine. She will sleep for a while as her body needs the time to repair itself." He looked at Harry directly for the first time, wondering at the prickling sensation in his heart. He could see how
upsetting this was for him.

Harry scrubbed at his eyes fiercely, uncomfortable with showing tears, thanks to the Dursley's insistence that real men didn't cry but despite his vicious rubbing, they continued to fall. His cries were silent, still unused to making a sound and more than mortified that he was crying in front of Alistair. He didn't want to disturb Lilah's rest so he stood up, walking around the room with one hand running through his hair.

Alistair stood up as well, watching his feverish pacing and quick breaths until he couldn't any longer, going to him in the blink of an eye and grasping his shoulders with both hands. Unfocused and teary green eyes looked in his direction. Removing one hand, his fingers brushed away stray tears.

"Harry, We have not known one another for very long, but I want you to know that you do not have to hide how you feel with me." he gestured to the bracelet on both of their wrists. "You have been given so little reason to trust and while I trust you with everything I am, I know it is unreasonable to request the same but if you should feel that you can place it in me, I will remain at your side."

Silently he waited for a response, resisting the overwhelming urge to hold him, despite how strongly he wanted to.

Harry swallowed once. This was the big question. He really did trust only a handful of people, some taking years before gaining it. Yet Alistair, who he'd only known for a few weeks, he would trust with his life.

"I trust you," Harry spoke as firmly as he could, eyes a little more focused than before. Even with Remus, he was reluctant to let his guard down when emotional precisely of how close the connection they shared was. With Alistair, it was different. Tense muscles relaxed some, as he rested his forehead on Alistair's shoulder.

"Thanks." Was all Harry managed until sadness over his own and Lilah's trauma bubbled to the surface. For a moment he wanted to suppress it with some force but in the end, he sobbed softly.

Casting some privacy charms just to be sure, He let Harry cry, finally giving in to the urge and carding a hand through his hair, the other rubbing his back.

Harry, in turn, wrapped his own arms around Alistair tightly, completely forgetting his constant state of embarrassment usually associated with being close to the man, appreciating that there was someone in his life where he didn't have to hide a thing with.

While most would think it foolish after all the times he'd been hurt, this was the one thing Harry was willing to risk it for as slowly but surely, Alistair was becoming an irreplaceable part of his life.

His thoughts echoed by Alistair, the two shared a moment, hearts trembling from the similarity of one young girl's situation.
Chapter Summary

Development of days, discussions, meetings and then a shocking discovery made by Harry, later on.

After a while, still encircled within Alistair's arms, Harry pulled away though mourned the loss of contact.

"If there are times where you are in need, I will always be available."

With red-rimmed eyes, he managed a small smile. "Thank you."

The breath caught in Harry's throat at Alistair's tender smile, the softest one he'd seen from him yet. "You are welcome."

The taller man drew close, planting a soft kiss on his forehead.

Thoughts which had been running a million miles a minute suddenly seized to a halt, his entire body flushing with heat as Alistair finally released him, heart attempting to beat through his ribcage. To refocus, he asked a question. "Would you be able to take a look at my invisibility cloak? I don't know when, but Dumbledore placed a lot of spells on it."

"You have my class on Monday and a free period immediately after. During then I will remove every trace of him."

After giving his thanks Harry watched over Lilah, deeply asleep.

"I will watch over her here and inform her father. You are welcome to visit whenever you wish, though she will not wake up for a short while."

Harry guessed as much. Though, it gave him an extra excuse to visit more than just her. "I know she's safe here. I'd better go now."

Smiling kindly, Alistair returned to his desk, pleased that he had faith in him. "Take care, Harry."

After returning the sentiment Harry left and alone in the corridor, was faced with an unwelcome addition.

"Harry my boy, I would like to see you in my office, at your earliest convenience."

As Dumbledore's Patronus left the area, it had brought along a bitter taste in his mouth. However, he did say at his earliest convenience. Giving a low chuckle he didn't hesitate on taking a detour, lightly tickling the pear as he stepped into the Hogwarts kitchens.

He hadn't the time for his eyes to adjust to the surroundings, before something small and slightly hard collided with his legs. As some of the elves looked over at the slight disturbance, they quickly returned to their tasks, as diligent and hardworking as ever. He met the rounded and slightly teary eyes of Dobby, his own softening at the impressive feat of several woolly hats balanced between his
ears and feet padded by several socks.

Early in third year, he'd discovered the kitchens through his exploration and found Dobby. Though he'd nearly died through his actions, the thought behind them was just to keep him safe, if misguided. So every time he came to visit, he brought one of his socks, as if to commemorate the day Dobby became free. This time was no exception, the only difference being that these were genuinely his socks and not Dudley's with more holes than fabric.

"It's good to see you Dobby. Sorry I didn't visit much last year." Giving a self-mocking smile, he gently pried the small arms from around his legs, so Harry could crouch to his level.

"Dobby is understanding." His ears flapped while nodding, hats still balancing. He said nothing more, solemn eyes returning to their usual brightened eagerness as he held another sock in his grasp.

"You should start a new collection," Harry gestured to Dobby's feet, each sock belonging to Dudley and not offering much in the way of comfort. "That sock does belong to me and it wasn't owned by anyone else."

"Harry Potter sir is so kind!" It was easier than Harry thought for Dobby to discard his current collection and wear his new sock. This one was patterned with animated brooms, unable to resist purchasing several pairs along with other designs from Madam Malkin's.

"Is there anything Mr Harry Potter be wanting?" Dobby asked, undecided on whether to stare at his new sock or look at Harry.

He hesitated, but only for a moment. Of age be damned, if there was ever a time he'd need liquid courage to lie to the master of lies, now would be the perfect opportunity.

"If there's any Firewhisky knocking about, I wouldn't mind some of that."

And Dobby, eager to please as he was, brought more than one bottle over. Ah, if only Remus was here, then they could have some fun. He didn't say anything about how much, simply patting Dobby on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Dobby, just stopped by to say hello, I'll be on my way now." Gratitude laced through his tone, as he never wanted Dobby to feel unappreciated by him.

He uncorked one bottle, taking a small measure. He didn't want to overdo it after all. Amusing as it would be to turn up to the Headmaster's office completely inebriated, it wouldn't exactly help him.

'Well, here goes.'

He found, as usual, he didn't need a password, able to pass by and follow the staircase up to his office.

Before he could enter, a familiar face walked past. Dominic and Harry greeted one another with nods and he barely reacted as something was pushed into the palm of his hand. He quickly glanced at it, nodding to himself.

Meet me in the ROR.

He let the parchment burn to a crisp through wandless magic, preparing himself to give the best performance of a lifetime.

"Come in, my boy." Of course, it could be Harry's imagination, but he'd like to think he did hear just
a touch of impatience.

The office looked as it always did, no signs of his previous fit of destroying everything. The one thing about last year he didn't regret. He was saddened he hadn't managed to leave behind permanent damage.

"Good evening Sir," he bowed his head, remaining as polite and neutral as possible. A genuine smile curved his lips when Fawkes landed on his knee once seated. He indulged the Phoenix and ran his fingers through the feathers, a few losing their place as he looked close to burning day.

The piercings he now owned came in handy, immediately seeing that the lemon drops held a mild calming draught and the tea was laced with Veritiserum. The calming draught could work in his favour, but Fawkes was a better solution than any calming draught.

As for the Veritiserum, it would work better in his favour if he did take a lemon drop, it would convince Dumbledore that Harry trusted him still.

Not wanting a repeat of fifth year and Umbridge, Harry and Remus had spent some time giving each other Veritiserum and asking one another for the truth, to the point that much like with Professor Snape, both grew immune to the effects.

Before Dumbledore could say anything along the lines of gently encouraging him to drink tea or have a lemon drop, Harry spoke up, all that could be read from his expression was one of great shame and remorse.

"Headmaster, I owe you an apology and I believe not any amount of atonement can make up for what I've done."

Both bushy eyebrows raised in response, a faint flicker of surprise until his usual benevolent aura returned.

"Would you care to explain what you mean, Harry?" he asked, busying himself with tea preparation.

Harry allowed himself to take a shaky breath in, averting his eyes for a few seconds to make it seem as if he were emotional. Looking up, he took a small sip of tea and tried not to grimace at how much sugar there was.

"The incident at Privet Drive. I-" his eyes wavered with emotion. "-I was too weak. I couldn't stop him, Sir!" he beseeched as if to seek Dumbledore's guidance and wisdom.

Suddenly, Dumbledore stopped all action and pinned him with the most intense gaze. "Stop who, Harry?" his tone of voice was urgent, expectant, even.

"Voldemort. Like at the ministry, I couldn't stop it. He came back. He possessed me, twisted my thoughts and all the hatred I harbour for him, he used to fuel the murder of my relatives. I wasn't in control. Because I was too weak I couldn't stop what he did. I mean yeah, I was never close to my relatives exactly but they were my only living family, how could I not care for them?"

Dumbledore remained silent, almost lost in thought. But not quite enough for him to fail to notice Harry draining the last of his tea. Sensing this, Harry adjusted his expression, allowing his features to slacken and eyes to unfocus, willing his heartbeat to slow down.

Dumbledore leaned forward, nodding to himself in satisfaction, half-moon glasses perched upon his nose.
"Are you telling the truth, Harry?" a significant weight seemed to hang from these words.

"Yes." Nothing coloured his tone, remaining flat and void of all feeling.

Remaining as though he was affected by Veritiserum proved more challenging, as he sensed movement internally. He remained calm, letting the appropriate thoughts just float there.

And then, it was over. All he wanted to talk to Harry about after that was irrelevant topics, small talk here and there.

Of course Voldemort hadn't possessed him and of course, he didn't care for his relatives. He hated them and Umbridge more than he did Voldemort. It was a closer threat to home. While he left him an Orphan, it was the Dursleys who turned him into a broken but slowly recovering mess. Vernon took particular pleasure in it, his son quickly following the same path while Petunia, face twisted in constant disgust, watched on.

At last, Harry was free to go and he couldn't hold back the small sigh of relief as he did so, heading for the Room of Requirement. Overall he'd had little contact with Tonks but whatever tense situation Sirius failed to break, it was often by her tripping over the Troll Leg umbrella stand.

"Wotcher Harry!" he came back into focus as a hand clapped his shoulder.

She wore no disguise today, her normal self in Auror robes. Casually slinging an arm over his shoulder, she pushed him lightly into an armchair and gave an exaggerated huff of relief.

"Boys are filthy pigs, the lot of them. You don't know how happy I am to have a break from it. I'd rather face Death Eaters than have to witness some of the things I've seen in the dorms." She shuddered.

Harry couldn't argue with that. "Is Dumbledore even paying you for this?" he queried, curious more than anything.

"Not a Sickle." her eyes flickered uneasily. "I'm not sure he even has the money. When I asked about payment he simply said-" her facial features slowly morphed into Dumbledore, "You are helping future generations of witches and wizards with your actions, my dear, that is a reward itself."

It was a pretty good impression of Dumbledore, Harry had to admit as he snorted. "Is he serious? I'd like to see his reaction if his pay for running Hogwarts was cut short."

A serious look in his eyes mingled with some disgust, he reached a hand into the pouch by his side. At Harry's thought, a table appeared. The room rang with the sound of a generous amount of galleons hitting wood. "This is your payment from me. You have two options. Yes or yes."

Grinning, he watched as Tonks rolled her eyes. Feeling silly he slicked back his hair with overly exaggerated charm, narrowly missing a well-aimed rubber duck. Catching it, he looked at Tonks quizzically.

"My answer to Arthur's question." she gave a casual shrug, Butterbeer appearing on the table as she popped the cork. "I remember him asking me, what's the function of a rubber duck? So whenever I get the chance to chuck something out of frustration, It's one of these."

His eyes widened in recognition. Arthur asked him the same thing before the start of his second year, he never had the chance to answer but if so, it would be a lot simpler than what Tonks had come up with.
"We're getting off track." Tonks clapped her hands as if to refocus her attention. "You said before there's something about Remus?"

"Not just Remus, me as well. I would ask if you remember what happened earlier on in the year, but it would be hard to forget."

Tonks grimaced. "Yeah. I'm taking a more active role, Kingsley is a great help. Not crazed like Mad-Eye but not lax like Dumbledore. He's found a happy middle ground I think I can run with."

"Glad to hear it." Harry's smile turned strained. "During that time, I'd broken a magical block placed on me without my consent. When I went to the Goblins, I'd found out altogether, I had seven of them."

"WHAT?!" she closed her eyes for a moment. Once open again, there were no traces of panic or surprise and Harry admired her control.

"One magical block is risky and only recommended as a last resort if a child's magic is too wild to control and even then there is a small risk of death. May I see your memories?" her shift from carefree friend to Auror was almost instantaneous. He trusted Tonks but couldn't help feeling hesitant from the last time someone rummaged through his mind.

"We can use a Pensieve if you prefer, I know I'm not too fond of someone in my head."

"Neither am I. But go ahead, I trust you."

It was harder than Harry thought to lower his guard, so tightly kept up and not loosening much even when he was alone.

"Legilimens."

He was unsure how much time had passed but once she'd left his mind, her skin tone was a little pallid.

"Thanks, Harry. I can't believe Dumbledore would do this. I never thought..." she shook her head softly. "I'll see Amelia about this, I know she'll be interested though I'm not sure how much we can do at this point."

He'd already thought as much. "That's ok, as long as someone knows I'm happy. Dumbledore will get what's coming to him. As for Remus, it's better if you ask him yourself. If you want to use the floo to where he is Grimmauld Place is best."

Nodding in acceptance of his words she stood up. "I'll be on my way then."

"The password is The Lion's Den. Once you're done speaking with Remus, get him to obliviate you. It's not that I don't trust you, just to be safe."

Tonks nodded, the light of approval in her eyes. "I understand. Take care, Harry."

"You too." After watching her leave, he couldn't help but think if Evergreen Manor needed more security. He was always looking for different options to consider. There was never such a thing as too much protection in his opinion.

Deciding that while he was in the room he would make the most of it, Harry's thoughts shifted to Lunaland and finding a large patch of grass he worked off his pent-up ball of energy, every spell aimed towards a figurative Dumbledore.
Letting the rhythmic feeling of tending to plants overtake him, Neville's mind wandered. Usually, the enjoyment of helping Professor Sprout was so great, that he had to be reminded of the time, too absorbed in his task to notice.

Right now, it was different. So much had happened he'd had trouble taking it all in. He saw this as a chance to process everything, including the plant he was given.

To his surprise, Professor Sprout hadn't seen anything of its kind before. He had yet to approach Professor Snape and ask and while he was much more confident and self-assured now, the wariness he had in the past remained somewhat.

Since the start, he had the feeling of being an outsider looking in. While Harry and Hermione treated him well, Ron, overcome by jealousy, often forcefully changed the topic of conversation. It was a lot better during his fourth and fifth year as he'd always wanted to get to know Harry, as a true friend.

And now, this year, everything had changed. Worry clouded his mind during the summer as he thought of what state Harry must be in after all he'd gone through. It made him glad that he wasn't the chosen one, however that didn't stop strange things from happening.

Harry had returned to Hogwarts, quite literally a new man. He'd even gained a few inches and while Neville remained taller, he could see the confidence this and his sharpened physical appearance had given him. Not to mention his magical power. Neville was unsure what had happened but the air around him seemed more charged.

"Good evening, Mr Longbottom."

While his mind completely focused on something else, movements remained ingrained into his being. So used to tending to plants, his body knew what to do, even if mentally preoccupied. He finished tending to the current plant, with a nickname of ‘Wizard Trap.' Much like the Venus flytrap, however, they seemed to enjoy men. Curiously enough, women didn't interest it.

Looking up and wiping his hands on the towel he always left nearby, Professor Lothaire stood across from him, smiling pleasantly.

"Good evening, Mr Longbottom."

Hang on, evening?

Sure enough, the Greenhouse was significantly dimmer than when he arrived this morning. He'd done it again.

"Evening Professor, what brings you here?" he asked, all the while replacing everything he'd used for the day. He observed the Professor looking around, head tilted curiously. He appreciated curiosity of any kind relating to this.

"I find Hogwarts to be fascinating. Whenever I am not drowning in the paperwork I find myself with, I have decided to discover more about other subjects. Professor Sprout asked me to retrieve you, as without a reminder, her words and not mine, you would remain here throughout the day and into the next morning." His eyes twinkled with amusement.

"She's not wrong," Neville gave an embarrassed smile. No one could understand him except the Professor he worked alongside sometimes. His Gran didn't even try, simply left him to it.

The brown eyes before him turned serious. "I admire your dedication to a subject that you are passionate about, what some of my students are severely lacking."
Ron's face flashed across Neville's mind for a second. He could understand that. "If you've got any questions fire away, I'd be happy to answer them." Neville slid a stool in the other man's direction, sitting down on his own until they faced each other.

After a short pause he spoke, the same curiosity in his eyes from before, prevalent now. "Have you always had a love for Herbology?"

Oh. What Neville meant was questions about the subject itself, not him. He didn't mind, however, just found it unexpected. Within the first few minutes, his answers were a little guarded but over time, the more questions Professor Lothaire asked and the genuine expressions crossing his face during them, the more relaxed and as a result passionate, Neville got.

"There was one time, working in the Greenhouse at home, where my Gran forced me to entertain this snotty kid of a family we were acquainted with. Real pushy, attempting to boss me about. It was genuinely an accident, but I was so busy working in the Greenhouse that I didn't hear him come in. If I had I would have shouted some kind of warning."

Neville paused for a breath and to try and compose himself. The event in question happened nine years ago, but he never failed to find it amusing.

"Basium-Amare, or Kiss-Love in English, the name is stupid really, is harmless but one of the more difficult plants to take care of. It requires a lot of attention, including talking with it. They're naturally affectionate and the more care you give them, the bigger they grow. So when I look over at him, I see nothing but smooth green vines and small pink flowers. It wrapped him in their version of an embrace, rubbing against his cheek. As soon as I coaxed it away I'd never seen him run so fast, screaming his head off."

He laughed to himself, then remembered who he was talking to. "Sorry sir, I got carried away there."

"There is no need to apologise." He reassured Neville who looked flustered, "I am glad that I know more about you, I wish to understand my students as I believe that it may help with my approach to the role I have."

Neville thought that the new DADA Professor was a pretty decent bloke, especially in his fair treatment, but his respect raised a few notches. He was half expecting to be brushed off or tuned out when he was speaking but the opposite was true, no one had ever wanted to know so much about him and for the first time, Herbology was not the direct cause for his happiness.

"I apologise, I did not mean to keep you." The Professor spoke after a while, noticing the rapidly darkening sky. Seeing this, he quickly but elegantly, for that's the only word Neville could think of, wrote something down on a spare bit of parchment, both self-inking quill and parchment pulled from what seemed to be the inner depths of his robes.

Looking at it, it was a note excusing him for being out so late. Though curfew was less strict over the weekend, there was still a requirement to be within the dorm rooms by late evening.

"Thanks." Neville nodded his head in gratitude, standing up and matching the steps of the Professor as both left the Greenhouse behind.

"Before you take your leave, I have one more question if I may."

He signalled to go ahead, hearing attuned.

"Has Mr Weasley always acted in the manner that he currently conducts himself?"
In the dim lighting, Neville could make out the Professor's features. At a guess, he was asking in an attempt to understand Ron more but even after knowing him for years, he couldn't even begin to understand what ran through his mind. But from all that he'd seen, he'd try to answer as honestly as possible.

"He's always liked Gryffindor since the majority of the Weasley line were Gryffindors, so he sees it as the superior house compared to others. He won't even consider our house has bad points and the others good, especially Slytherin." Neville shrugged. "Sorry I can't give you a better answer than that."

Professor Lothaire looked at him, smiling gently. "Thank you, Mr Longbottom, you have been more than helpful. I shall take my leave now, enjoy the rest of your day."

Bowing his head in farewell, Neville could have sworn he melted into the night. In his opinion, Ron may be beyond help but if that was the Professor's intention, he admired him for trying.

Though they hadn't discussed an official meet up time, Neville decided to head to the Room of Requirement regardless, wondering how everyone else's day had been.

Releasing a single, long sigh of satisfaction, Harry finally lowered the wand he'd raised. He relaxed some, the pent-up stress of Lilah's collapse and Dumbledore's summon draining slowly, along with a portion of his magical reserves. Taking a seat in the same place as the last time he was here, he waited for his friends to arrive, drying his sweat-soaked body.

It wasn't long until Neville joined him. "Alright, Harry? How was your day?" he sat across from him, gratefully reaching out for a bottle of butterbeer.

"Normal, at least compared to usual standards." A faint grimace crossed his face. "Bumblebore wanted to see me."

Neville choked on a sip of his drink, looking at Harry incredulously.

"It's an interesting pass time of mine, the game is simple. All you have to do is call Zumblegore by anything other than his actual name. Between us, or the girls if they want to join. Want to give it a shot?"

Harry hoped Neville would be on board. Any way to have fun at his expense was worth it in his opinion, smile widening at Neville's hesitant nod.

"Gumbleshore."

Harry nodded in approval. "Exactly, you've got it. Humbleyore."

"Trumblecore."

"Yumblejore."

"Jumblelore."

Back and forth the two went, their amusement rising with every name until Neville spoke, unexpectedly for Harry and Neville himself if his widened eyes indicated anything.

"Wanker."

That was it for Harry. He laughed himself hoarse. It was the last thing he expected his friend to come
out with and after Neville got over his shock, soon joined him.

"Making jokes without me? Harry, I'm hurt." A mock sorrowful voiced called out, as Ginny, Luna and Hermione joined the duo.

"We were having a game of name that Headmaster." At Ginny's confused look he explained, eyes glittering in response.

"You can count me in. Sounds fun!"

Luna watched the proceedings curiously, only saying two words in response. "Tempered Wrinkler."

Harry listed that as yet another nickname route.

Harry's attention then focused on Hermione, who opened her mouth.

"Although I won't deny he's an utter bastard," she promptly ignored Harry's exaggerated gasp of shock at her language, "I don't think I'm inventive enough for that. So I'll just listen and laugh."

"Works for me!" Harry clapped his hands, almost for emphasis, until he noticed Luna looked a little different than usual. Though her natural state was usually overwhelming calm or serenity, happiness practically radiated from her small frame, blue eyes clearer and sparkling more than he'd ever seen. Come to think of it, Ginny and Hermione had returned to Hogwarts with a similar kind of energy.

"How did your training go?" Harry asked.

Ginny relaxed fully into her seat, looking a little drained, but perfectly content. "Tiring but rewarding. It's going to take me ages to swing that thing around, but I want to through my own strength. Mostly because I want to see Ron's jaw drop and never close in his shock."

As if in contrast, Hermione leaned forward in her enthusiasm, body animated. "I concur with Ginny, I did have a little experience with archery, but this is far more skill-based and intense that simply shooting targets. Harry, I didn't have arrows to start with because they're fashioned from spells! Willow works similarly to a wand, but I've been itching to go to the library to see if I can find out more."

He gave a low whistle. "Arrow spells? Death eaters won't know what hit them."

"I can coat Blaze with magic as well." Ginny's expression glazed over, probably imagining the sheer possibilities.

"Luna?"

"It was very relaxing. I feel at home there, though I can't explain why." Luna spoke, tilting her head in thought.

"It's like when I came to Hogwarts the first time, I thought the same thing. I still do." Harry smiled fondly. "How about you Nev?"

"Nothing much happened until Professor Lothaire came in, told to get me by Professor Sprout as I lose track of time."

"So, what did he want?" Harry couldn't prevent the slight quickening of his heartbeat at the mention of his name.

"He came to find out about the subjects he didn't teach, he wants to know more about them and the
students too. He even asked me about Ron, if he'd always been such a-" here Neville broke off, struggling to find the words.

"Bellend?" Harry supplied, helpfully in his opinion as Ginny snorted.

With a small smile, Neville nodded. "That'll do. I think he wants to help Ron somehow, that's the impression I got anyway."

"In all fairness to the bloke, he's lived for far longer than we have and might stand a better chance." Harry pointed out as murmurs of agreement passed through the room. "He's welcome to try though."

"Ronald can't hear us, the Wrackspurts follow him." Luna's eyes turned uncharacteristically serious and if there was anything Harry had learned about his eccentric friend, it was there was a shade of truth behind everything spoken.

"About the DA, does next weekend work for everyone? We can go about recruiting tomorrow and over the next week. Though I think we should do so on Hogwarts grounds, after last year I'm not sure I want to risk Hogsmeade. If Death Eaters can so easily enter the ministry, Hogsmeade would hardly be a challenge."

No objections were raised and Harry was satisfied with the results. He had already spotted some promising students. Reminded of earlier, displeasure crossed his face. "The old man wanted to see me today, I had to tap into my Slytherin side, I've never lied so much in my life."

He shared the details of his meeting with the group, Neville's colour a little pallid, almost in sympathy. Ginny was impressed he could keep up his act.

Hermione's eyes narrowed, studying him as if under a microscope. "How did you manage to become so good at Occlumency in such a short amount of time? I know Professor Snape was harming more than helping last year."

"I promise I'll tell you, just later." He hadn't discussed his new animagus forms. It was something he wanted to teach members of the DA, even the younger years.

"We'd better be off Harry, we have a meeting soon," Hermione spoke up, checking the time.

"See you later." Neville departed first, while Ginny offered to walk with Luna back to her common room.

Harry and Hermione remained and as he turned to his best friend, he placed a hand on her shoulder. "You ready for this?"

She patted his hand with her own. "As ready as I'll ever be. As soon as I think Ronald can no longer surprise me, he manages to find another way."

Mentally preparing themselves, Harry and Hermione wondered just what Ron would do this time.

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The question of what Ron would or wouldn't do didn't have an answer as right now, he was late to the meeting, even with the head students extending the time by an extra five minutes to allow stragglers to arrive. Barely withholding a sigh, Harry could almost feel singular strands of hair turning grey, one by one.

"Headmaster appointing him or not if Ron doesn't pull himself together he'll be forcefully kicked out by us, never mind the bloody Professors," Harry muttered into Hermione's ear in exasperation but
acceptance of the situation.

Malfoy's face remained expressionless but to Harry, his eyes were alight with anticipation. He just knew the Slytherin would find a way to antagonize him.

"I know." Hermione sighed, soft enough so only Harry could hear. "I had a faint hope that he'd take this seriously, but apparently not."

Before Harry had the chance to respond, the hum of conversation stopped.

"Alright, let's get started. We can't wait much longer for anyone late." Wickes spoke, as he and Mayfair seated themselves side by side.

The first couple of minutes, The Head Boy and Girl asked each student how they were getting on with their new roles and if there were any issues. He had to hold back a chuckle at Hermione, limiting her words when he could see she wanted to go into written exam details.

The consensus seemed to be everyone enjoyed what they were doing at the moment, even if some students did feel they lacked the wisdom to be able to guide the younger ones. As for Harry, that was the one area he was confident in, purely because of his experiences in Hogwarts and the way his life had been up until now.

He would be straight with the students as it was something that he wished for when he was younger, instead of finding himself surrounded by adults which he had varying amounts of suspicion of. The Dursleys had lied and omitted the truth for years previously, after all.

"Potter, what about you?"

Harry opened his mouth to respond to Wickes with most of the thoughts that had crossed his mind but was interrupted by an abrupt opening of the door with such force it slammed against the wall.

He looked in that direction, closing his eyes for a few seconds and truly hoped this wasn't real. But from the sighs of disgust and intakes of breath, he came to realize that this was happening.

Harry could feel his face flaming with embarrassment and as he took a side glance at Hermione, he found her face buried in her hands. He had to squash down the overwhelming urge to apologise to everyone on his behalf.

He'd not only entered the room in the most impolite way possible on top of being late, but he looked as though bombs had gone off in all directions surrounding him. Gracelessly plonking into the empty seat on Harry's left side, he didn't bother to apologise.

He was only in half uniform, no robes, no tie, shirt completely untucked with more wrinkles than there were smooth parts. Harry had looked dishevelled in his uniform before in his younger years, but even then that was only because he had never been given a uniform to wear at his old primary school so didn't know how to use ties or smarten himself up.

Ron hadn't even tried, right now he was either completely oblivious to all the eyes on him or aware, but choosing to ignore it. Right now, his hair was messy enough to rival how Harry's used to be. While most of the students seemed to be speechless, all the words unspoken by them, left through Malfoy's lips.

"Weasley, have you no pride?" the usual haughty sneer graced his face, with an added tinge of disgust. "That half-giant oaf has better dress sense than you."
Harry was equal parts irritated at Malfoy for insulting Hagrid, but also in agreement. It was like he didn't care at all.

Ron clenched his fists, offering the fiercest glare he could manage. Malfoy simply smirked.

"Fuck off, Ferret." Sneering, Ron crossed his arms but to both their surprise, Malfoy showed no reaction. It seems that Harry wasn't the only one who'd matured over the summer.

"Quiet!" Mayfair snapped, her harsh look saved for Ron. Expression turning neutral, she directed her gaze towards Harry. "Apologies Potter, continue."

The mood in the room afterwards was subdued, Ron sulking impressively and Malfoy looking quietly triumphant. Harry was unaware that Greengrass was made Prefect as well, as he didn't see her during the meeting on the train, but she was not the only one. Susan Bones was there as well.

He couldn't look at Greengrass for long, wincing at the sheer amount of loathing which radiated from her. He didn't envy Ron in the slightest.

After so long, every member had shared their opinions, all except for Ron. Wickes and Mayfair looked at each other and Harry could see their reluctance.

Seeming to resign himself, Wickes addressed Ron, asking the same of him as he had for everyone else.

Harry held his breath, Hermione hadn't moved from her earlier position much, only enough to peek through the gaps of her fingers.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered, so softly he almost missed it.

"Yeah?"

"As members of Gryffindor, will we manage to survive this year?"

He looked over at Hermione, patting her lightly on the back. "Don't worry, we will." All too soon, their short conversation was over and even if they wanted to, neither of them was sure if they could block Ron's words out.

"Well, I like being able to remove points, the number of snots getting away with things these days are ridiculous." The room went dead silent at his words.

"Well, I like being able to remove points, the number of snots getting away with things these days are ridiculous." The room went dead silent at his words.

Harry didn't have the willpower to listen to anything more. They were all saved from their thoughts by an abrupt knock on the door, opening to reveal Professor Snape.

"Oh shit."

As those words passed through Harry's mind, they seemed to reflect on Ron's face as well. They faced the door and Mayfair, unaware of Ron's skin colour turning to curdled milk, faced her Head of House.

"Good evening Professor."

"Evening, Mayfair." Professor Snape was as curt as always, silently handing her parchment with his spidery scrawl. "The deadline is next week."

That was all he needed. But before he left the room, naturally Ron caught his eyes.

"Weasley!" Though addressing Ron only more than one student jumped to attention, his classroom voice making their reactions instinctual. "If you do not appropriately present yourself within the next
five seconds, I will remove house points."

Ron sputtered, not even having the chance to protest before Gryffindor lost ten points. Harry considered that generous. With a look of disdain, wandless magic corrected Ron's attire, his tie replaced, but perhaps a little tighter than was necessary.

"If I ever see you looking as disgraceful as you were again, I will not hesitate to give you more detentions."

Snape appeared as quickly as he had swooped in, several breaths releasing as some students held them. Ron didn't seem to know what to do with himself and sensing that none of the students could focus after that display, The Head Boy and Girl called it a day. They called over to Ron and presumably giving him a warning if the scowl was anything to go by.

As one by one the students left, Harry signalled with his eyes to Malfoy and after a moment did the same with Greengrass. Hermione stayed by his side, knowing instinctively what it was he wanted to say.

"Potter?" a fine eyebrow arched, both Slytherins maintaining a neutral expression.

"You remember the secret club meeting you tried to crash in on as part of Umbridge's' Inquisitorial Squad?"

A faint grimace crossed the boy's face. "I saw an opportunity, nothing more. But yes. Your point?"

Harry was as serious as he could be. "Do you both want to join? I leave it up to you but there's no need for it to be secret anymore and I'm welcoming anyone who wants to be a part of it. You'll have to sign a contract though."

"That is to be expected. What about you, Granger? No protests to Slytherins joining?" Greengrass asked a silent Hermione.

"Of course not. No protests to joining a club filled with Muggleborns?" Hermione returned, as Greengrass shook her head once.

"The only objection I have is Weasley, assuming he will be there."

"He most likely will be, but I'll have words with him," Harry promised. "It's important now more than ever that we work together and I'll make him understand, even if I have to duel the point into his skull."

Matching smirks crossed their faces and after a moment of silent debate. They told Harry and Hermione to meet them tomorrow at 3 pm, the third-floor corridor. The very room fluffy used to be in, but now nothing remained, not even the trap door that was once there. Not knowing or caring where Ron went off to, Harry returned to the dorms, ending one very long day.

While yesterday was eventful, today was the most normal he could ever wish for. Though adding Slytherins to the ranks when compared to his past could class as abnormal. After many questions on their part, they were one small step forward to being united.

However, as Harry had come to understand from a young age, nothing in his life ever remained normal. The feeling that he had somewhere to be over the past week remained, more insistent now in this room.

Setting wards so he would know if someone tried to open the closed door, he looked around,
scrutinising every detail. The first time he hadn't the chance, as Fluffy wanted to play tug of war with their first year ragdoll-like bodies, at least if he'd had it his way. The second time was curiosity.

Nothing had changed at all. The only explanation that Harry could think of was that he'd changed, drastically. And in doing so, he was able to detect what he wasn't able to before. What that was, however, remained to be seen.

He toyed with the idea of contacting Alistair but didn't find it necessary just yet.

From what Harry could detect, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Lack of magic would strike him as strange considering their surroundings, but it ticked the box for that. No stone was out of place either, though he was unsure if the trap door was removed entirely or simply covered over.

However, he never ignored his instincts, they had either saved or helped on more than one occasion. He tried the one sure thing he could think of, the Marauder's Map.

Over the time he had spent with Remus, aside from Harry keeping him company during the full moon along with drinking and duelling sessions, a lot of the time was spent discussing Remus' time at Hogwarts and Harry's current experiences. None of them could deny that the map had been invaluable, but was a little outdated, considering it was made when Remus was a student. So between them, they had managed to refine the map into something concrete. It now differentiated between those who have similar names and Hogwarts itself became far more detailed.

Though progress was slow, the pair had pooled their knowledge of the Ministry. It would show what little they had if the person in question with the map was on Ministry grounds. The Forbidden Forest was something they considered, but neither of them knew the forest well enough to be able to pinpoint anything of note.

Needless to say, it was the new and improved version but right now, even though it was an apparent error, it provided further evidence that all was not what it seemed.

'Third-Floor Corridor: Entrance to Underground Chambers' flickered beneath his gaze, The name itself was not solid, appearing and disappearing for brief intervals. With a new sense of purpose, he allowed himself to focus, this time, looking for abnormalities in heat. The castle itself was never warm so too much heat would be an indicator.

Thankful that he'd had his eyes corrected at the least, he crouched to the floor, moved to the corners, looked above him to the ceiling, even ran his fingers over the roughness of the stonework. Nothing was left untouched.

He had no idea how much time had passed, but one of the stones in the upper far corner caught his eye. Out of reach, it held a faint pinprick of warm colour. He thought it was his eyes playing tricks but similarly to the room name appearing and disappearing on the map, so did this heat signature.

While he could try to summon that specific stone, he had no idea just what it was exactly. The possibility that it could trigger something which he would prefer to leave alone was high. Not that touching the stone without the use of magic would guarantee it to be any safer, but Harry had seen what happened with a summoning charm carelessly used. It involved a toxic potions classroom, an evacuation, a sneering, hissing and sharp-tongued professor and one oblivious looking Crabbe.

Briefly entertaining the thought of transfiguring a trampoline and bouncing up to the stone, he shook his head once. Instead, he transfigured a stepladder from a pencil in his pocket. His footing was sure and in no time, within arms reach of it.
Outwardly, the stone didn't differ from the others and he couldn't detect anything remotely harmful. If not for the combination of the feeling he had walking in, the map and his magic, he would assume this was just an ordinary room.

Adding this to another of the questionably risky things he'd done, he reached out and touched the stone which to his surprise, came loose and dropped into his palm.

'Why this stone?' he wondered, looking around to see if anything had changed and to his confusion, everything remained the same. The map was still fluctuating, unable to keep the name of the room listed.

His brain was going around in circles, as he placed his feet back on solid ground.

It was then, that it hit him. The unnatural silence. Even in quieter areas of Hogwarts, there was always the sound of faint breeze or the crackling of the sconces outside if no students were there to muffle the noise. There was nothing of the sort, even though there were two sconces directly outside of the door. To check he put his ear to it. Nothing. After a moment he opened the door and heard what he should have been able to, even with the door closed. That meant only one thing.

He closed the door, looking at the room with new eyes. "This room is an illusion." Muttering, he scrutinised the stone as if he could solve its secrets. "And this is the anchor."

As those words were spoken aloud, the room suddenly shifted, revealing one very different. Keeping the stone with him, he slipped it into his pocket, once more checking the map. This time, there was a solid name, simply saying, 'Underground chambers'.

At first, he thought the room was devoid of everything, however upon closer inspection, a section of the wall close to the door where they found the unconscious troll differed from the rest. Small, metal hooks protruded from the stone, several rows, in fact, with keys. above each hook, something carved into the stone. V1 for the first key, all the way down to V30. Harry couldn't even begin to understand what it meant. V1, however, was missing.

"Why are there so many keys? There's nothing here to open." His voice was barely at a whisper, caution laced through it. He didn't like this at all.

Someone could be here. Casting a variety of concealment spells he proceeded through the next door, already open and thankfully lacking a Mountain Troll.

Harry expected something far more heavily protected, though he supposed Dumbledore was under the mindset of why bother when no one knew its existence anyway?

As he drew closer to the room which used to hold the mirror of Erised, tense and a touch irritated voices caught his attention, one he recognised immediately. The other, he had never heard. Sticking close to the wall, he only moved his head slightly, enough to see the entire room.

'What is this?'

What was once an oval-shaped room with pillars about half a foot distance between each, the spaces in between were not just walls. They were individual cells, with bars that had little to no gaps. In each, were frail-looking prisoners. The one closest to him rocked back and forth, deathly pale but with a hint of fang peeking through. His eyes glowed red, mouthing words silently. The others looked to be a similar state from what he could see, most seemingly unaware of their surroundings.

Unlike the tiny cells fitted between pillars, the middle one was larger, rectangular and more structurally sound. A man was on his knees before Dumbledore and another man, silent and still as a
Whoever had caused the gashes, it had happened recently, as blood still trickled from the wounds but even as Harry watched, they healed over slowly.

"Give it up Albus, 74 bloody years. Do you think this thing will spill anything? Just kill it. Or better yet, let me test some of my more deadlier creations."

"No. This creature knows something vital to the war effort. He is one of the oldest living Vampires that we know of and there may be more. He will tell me."

At last, here was the real Dumbledore that only a select few knew existed. There was nothing jolly or light-hearted about his words or tone, no false pleasantries. It was the voice of a cold and calculating man who was firmly ensconced in darkness.

He was keeping Vampires prisoners, underneath the school? One slip of the doddering old fool's mind, a cage left unlocked could spell disaster. There were thirty vampires, all starved of blood. With a school full of students, he didn't even want to think about the consequences. Everyone in this room was starved against their will. He couldn't blame their lack of control and he didn't fear them at all, simply wanting to help.

The other man snorted in frustration, informing Dumbledore that he knew where he would be should he need him again. Harry caught his breath, the brush of sleeve as the man passed by revealing what at first he thought was the mark of a Death Eater, but it was coloured yet faded, in the shape of a Phoenix.

Gradually exhaling, he watched as Dumbledore muttered something, forcefully pouring the liquid into his mouth and afterwards, pushed back into his cell.

Harry had a close shave when Dumbledore stopped his movements, close by. But he detected nothing, continuing on his way out after replacing the key.

He made sure that no other sounds could be heard, going back to the wall to retrieve 'V1'. He was in complete disbelief. While the chances of someone finding this place was low, why didn't he have the keys assigned to his magical signature? It seemed very careless but he wasn't about to waste the opportunity.

He cautiously walked back into the room and one by one removed his concealment charms. Sitting in front of him, he knew the man realised his presence. He cocked his head, saying nothing.

"I don't know who you are or who any of you are, but I want to help." He kept his voice firm, eyes not wavering even as the man before him slowly looked up.

He was overcome with a wave of familiarity, though he couldn't be sure why. A strand of hair by his fringe remained black, while the rest of the waves were snow white. A pair of silver eyes, slightly sunken in pallid skin but holding a startling amount of sharpness and clarity, when looking at Harry.

Did he know him? He looked closer. Hang on a minute...

"Harry Potter."

Pulled abruptly from his thoughts, his eyes widened slightly. "You know who I am?"

"The bearded fool, a mind so open, that I have learned all sordid secrets, many of which need to be forgotten." Harry grimaced in sympathy.
"Yes, I know who you are." He answered finally if a bit sluggishly. Whatever had been done to him and for how long left lasting damage.

There was something, niggling at the back of his head. He knew who this was! Not to mention that the feeling he’d had around Hogwarts and first entering the illusion room paled in comparison to now, much stronger.

He looked once again. True, the man was worse for wear, but his facial features, they were so similar. Then, it hit him.

Harry remembered the sad look in Alistair’s eyes and recently, sharing the fact that his brother was missing and he was a Professor at the castle precisely because he was sure Dumbledore was involved with his disappearance.

Heart pounding loudly in his chest, he knew whatever answer he received, it would change everything.

"Are you... Solomon Sakari Lothaire?"

Harry was pinned by a gaze so intense, breathing became complicated after asking. Though he hadn't given a verbal answer, there was no doubt in Harry's mind of his identity. They both commanded the same respect, with equally intense auras.

After an indeterminable amount of time, he nodded once.

Harry closed his eyes, honestly wishing that Voldemort would show up and randomly try to kill Dumbledore. As much as he would relish the privilege, he also didn’t fancy Azkaban.

So, he needed to contact Alistair after all. Though, it didn't feel right doing so without informing Solomon of the situation first. While clearly, he'd used his imprisonment time to scan the mind of his captor Harry didn't know how often he came here. There was a chance that this was the first time since Alistair joined the staff and after 74 years of imprisonment with an open mind to read, Harry doubted Solomon bothered to check as frequently.

After a moment's thought, he pulled back the sleeve of his shirt, showing the bracelet which Alistair gave him. Solomon looked at it for a few seconds, then back at Harry.

"Though you are proficient with magic enough for the fool to not detect you, our family's heirlooms always shine with the unique magic of their own, one which I am very familiar with."

For the first time since entering the room, there was a brief flicker of emotion.

Though Solomon didn't ask for an explanation, Harry had to say something, mainly to distract from his anger. That was the last thing he needed right now.

"I met Alistair by accident, wanting to visit Transylvania and by extension Lothaire Castle. People said it was haunted, but turned out to be harmless pranking. I didn't run. We talked, I stayed for a few days and left with an alliance and this." he moved his wrist for emphasis. "He's the new Defence Professor this year, he joined because he was looking for you."

Harry looked slightly apologetic. "I have a mental link with him, however, I didn't want to go ahead without informing you first."

"Thank you." Harry began to realise he wasn't one for wasting words, simply using them when necessary.
Palms sweating with nerves, he reached over, unlocking the door to let Solomon out, who looked at him seriously.

"I do not have the strength nor desire to attack you." Indeed, all Solomon did was sit across from Harry.

Now Harry was nervous for an entirely different reason. He had seen Alistair angry, the class had to take off their robes due to the blistering heat when he experienced that particular emotion. Absolutely nothing would compare to his fury once he sees this.

Telling himself to get a grip, he tentatively opened the connection they shared.

'Alistair?'

'Ah, my endearing little Gryffindor, good afternoon!' Harry flushed, deepening as Solomon watched him intently.

'Are you busy? Even if you are you need to drop everything and come here, I'm serious.'

'I am simply watching over Miss Caltir while dealing with the wonders of school-related paperwork rather than my usual paperwork. I am sure a House Elf can watch over her for a little while.'

"Dobby." At Harry's call, said House Elf appeared. "Will you watch over Lilah Caltir in Professor Lothaire's office while he's away? I'd appreciate it." As an offering, he removed one of his socks, this time decorated with snitches. "This will go well with your Broomstick sock."

Dobby accepted it, looking as though he'd discovered the lost treasure of a watery kingdom.

"Harry Potter is being so very kind! Dobby will help." Then he disappeared, the sock enough of a distraction that he hadn't paid any attention to his surroundings.

'Ah, that is one problem solved. Harry, are those your socks on his feet?'

'Yes.'

'I will not inquire further, despite my curiosity. Where are you at the moment?'

'I found this place partly by instinct and accidentally, the entrance was an illusion. It's an underground chamber.'

'I can detect your location as a natural ability. What is it that you need me for?'

Harry couldn't speak momentarily, within his mind or out loud. '...This isn't something I can explain, it's better if you see for yourself.'

He could feel the concern and his heart twinged with sadness, even if a large part of him was happy at finding Solomon, the state he was in along with the other Vampires held captive he felt nothing but regret.

Suddenly, Solomon's head snapped to attention, seeming to ignore all fatigue as his body matched the alertness of his eyes for the moment, focusing on a spot behind him.

Harry followed his gaze, watching as instead of apparition, Alistair seemed to emerge from the shadows, of which there were a few, sconces dimly lit.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry's mind couldn't help but wander into forbidden
territory when faced with a casual him, wearing a white shirt with a few buttons undone, enough that he could see a glimpse of collarbone peeking through.

But, he needn't have worried about his straying thoughts for much longer, as they soon came to a crashing halt.

Shock radiated from Alistair. Then, came the white-hot anger.

He knew that Harry wouldn't have wanted to call him if it wasn't something important. Then, once seeing what was before him, nothing else encompassed his thoughts. Nothing but the overwhelming urge to drain Dumbledore dry, or turn him. The irony of Dumbledore existing as something he despised had Alistair chuckling with dark amusement.

His eyes were no longer brown or orange. He was just on the brink, holding himself back by a thread. Seeing so many of his kind, in physical and emotional pain, left his heart on the verge of breaking. He couldn't detect the reassuring presence of his brother, though they were just feet apart. It was a source of anxiety for him as though cut off for years, he'd never known anything like it.

He was unaware of his slight trembles and the blistering heat of the room until a familiar warmth lightly touched his hand. With it, the bloodlust slowly dissipated, though the agitation remained in his frame.

Harry coughed, mouth dry from the heated air.

Alistair gave him an apologetic glance waved it away, green eyes blinking rapidly.

"Aguamenti." He let the water spray his face, drinking some simultaneously.

Harry removed his hand from Alistair's own, who looked a lot calmer now. From all the experiences he'd had, he could now say he knew the feeling of being inside a volcano.

He resumed his earlier position on the floor, watching as Alistair crouched before Solomon. He had the most heartbreaking and open expression Harry had seen, as though the image before him would shatter, revealing lies. He remained quiet, not wanting to interrupt.

Though of course, it was physically impossible, it was as if his heart had cracked down the middle. His brother, so dear to him, was right in front of his eyes.

"Solomon..." Alistair has done his best to keep his innocence there, protective. But he saw no traces of that left now, harshly pushed away and leaving behind sharp edges. He suspected Phoenix Blood had everything to do with his current condition, including physical changes and certainly their lack of mental connection.

Reaching out a hand, he clasped his brothers own, the coldness familiar yet distant to him. But undeniably, undoubtedly and uniquely Solomon.

"Solomon," Alistair repeated, as if in prayer. Squeezing the hand interlocked with his own as if it were a lifeline.

While occasionally he had come close to losing control, not having a handle on his emotions at all was a rarity. But then, something happened which he didn't expect.

Solomon's eyes widened slightly. Reaching out with a shaky hand he brushed away wetness from beneath Alistair's eyes.
"You are crying?"

Alistair blinked as if to confirm it and as a show of support, Solomon squeezed the hand still held tightly.

Closing his eyes for a moment, tears slowly trickled down beneath his lashes. But a section of his heart warmed, as he could feel Harry's compassion shine through like a little ray of sunshine.

Unable to hold back any longer, he pulled Solomon into a gentle embrace, aware of the trauma his body had suffered. Sorrow not diminishing at Solomon stiffening, something which he'd never done but, eventually, the embrace was returned. It gradually increased in strength to the point where they were unable to tell where one ended and the other began.

Alistair's practised hand ran through Solomon's hair, the same feeling remained even if white rather than black filled his vision.

"I missed you," Solomon whispered into his ear, the first traces of emotion he'd heard.

"I missed you too, very much." Alistair strengthened his embrace.

Though neither wanted to let the other go, for fear that either would suddenly disappear, they eventually pulled away. Harry caught Alistair's eyes as he let out a watery laugh, Solomon looking at them in interest.

Harry was unable to adapt to the heat, casting repeatedly to the point where he was drenched, still releasing jets into his face to cool off.

He gave an embarrassed smile in response. "It's boiling in here. If you went to The North Pole and released your heated rage you'd single-handedly be the cause of global warming."

He dried himself off, thankful that the room was gradually cooling down. He watched with concern as Solomon furrowed his brow.

"The Phoenix Blood?" Alistair asked, gripping his shoulder.

"Ah. Would I be correct in the guess that Rupert informed you?"

"Yes, though he was unable to do more than tell me how you were affected and what it would do. Are you in pain?" worry swam within the depths of his eyes.

Solomon thought for a moment, unable to come to a decision but voiced his honest opinion. "I was at the start, but as this condition is constant, I am no longer able to distinguish between types of pain."

At Solomon's words, he jumped a little. Phoenix Blood? So that was what Dumbledore had given him. According to records, Phoenix Blood willingly given was rarer than tears or a tail feather, as both could be lost painlessly. Phoenixes were proud creatures and while born of elements, their sole purpose was to help, to heal, including themselves. Shedding blood went against their nature and only if their master was in great need would they part with even a drop.

There was certainly more than a drop there and although his stomach churned at the thought, Dumbledore was probably using Fawkes. To not only treat Fawkes so horribly but using his blood to hurt Solomon, Harry thought this a special kind of cruel.

However, what if he could help? Of course, he had no idea if it would work, but it was better than sitting by and doing nothing. Fawkes' tears were able to cancel out any negative effects of Basilisk
poison and just like with his Tattoo of Aela when animated with a part of her, the tears had remained in his bloodstream. He'd had a checkup with St Mungos before, finding this surprising discovery.

Though the blood and tears both came from Fawkes, they were used in the complete opposite way, one to heal, one to hurt. Harry didn't know if the effects would change since he planned to have Solomon drink from him rather than Fawkes crying on wounds but the more he thought over it, the more stubbornly determined he was to try.

Harry waited for a lull in the conversation. "I've got an idea."

"Of course Harry." Alistair smiled in encouragement, gesturing for him to speak.

"Blood of Fawkes, unwillingly given." he pointed at Solomon. "Tears of Fawkes, willingly given." he pointed to himself. "I still have traces of the tears in me, as they were used to cleanse Basilisk poison. If Solomon has my blood, the tears in it might help to remove the damage caused by Fawkes'."

He couldn't be more serious about this despite his nerves and to show it, he didn't look away from either of them.

"Ah, with such a passionate look in your eyes, how could your aid be refused?" Alistair smiled at Harry's resulting sputter. "Solomon?"

Solomon stared at Harry for a short while. "Are you sure? It will be difficult to stop until I have had enough."

"I've got blood replenishing potions with me."

Solomon inclined his head in acceptance. "Very well."

'I can see that you are nervous. It is alright, I will be here.'

At the mental voice of reassurance, Harry's tense muscles relaxed a little. He was caught off guard when Alistair sat behind him, a hand lightly resting on his side.

As Solomon's eyes shifted from silver to violet and his fangs elongated, Harry couldn't help but watch in fascination. He'd faced far more terrifying and dangerous things in this life and besides, this was for a good cause.

Waiting for the fangs to pierce his skin, Harry had to wonder at some of the situations he found himself in.
Chapter Summary

It was so much worse than anticipated. But with a little help from inside and outside sources the situation is resolved, along with unexpected twists and turns.

**WARNING: Dark themes Physical/Sexual abuse) in this chapter.**

Once the fangs touched Harry's skin, he couldn't help but flinch slightly, more in surprise than anything. Alistair's hand still rested nearby, other reaching around to cover his own.

Harry sucked in a short breath, as a sharp pain ran through him.

*'There are many places for a Vampire to bite. While Solomon had the choice of the carotid arteries where the richer blood flows, you would lose it quicker, which is why he is drinking from your external jugular vein.*'

'Good to know.‘

And he wasn't being sarcastic either, morbidly curious and although the situation itself was one of the strangest he'd found himself in there was hardly any pain after, just a mild throbbing sensation.

While his heart should be pounding with a steady rhythm, he instead began to calm down and wished for his blood to do some good for once.

Solomon started to suck on the puncture wounds harder than before, almost desperately. However, it was becoming harder to keep a clear focus, eyes blinking blearily. He'd gone from feeling like a kid on a sugar rush to sleeping for a week. Just when he thought he was about to nod off, Solomon released him, fangs retracting as he steadied himself.

'*If not for his weakened state, he would have healed the points of entry. Allow me.*'

In a flash, Alistair was now seated in front of him, similar to Solomon. As his tongue swiped over the puncture spot methodically, he had to clench his teeth against the moan that would slip out otherwise. The spot that Alistair had licked clean and now fully healed, remained feverish as the rest of his body throbbed sweetly.
Watching Alistair run the tongue used to heal him over his lips to remove excess blood really didn't help either. Thanking him, he peered over at Solomon.

"You ok?" After asking this, he uncorked a bottle of blood replenishing potion and drained the contents. He was already beginning to feel better and silently, thanked Snape for his potent brews.

Solomon nodded once. "There are changes occurring."

No sooner had he said this, that all emotion in his eyes was wiped clean.

Whatever his blood was doing, he had no idea if it was a good or bad thing. While the room's temperature had returned to normal, something else arrived in its place. Harry couldn't see it with his own eyes, but it was bubbling, trapped beneath the surface.

Breathing a sigh of relief at the fact that Alistair had placed magical precautions in case of their own spells or magical backlash, he waited, filled with nerves and although it was inevitable, guilt for causing Solomon more pain.

'I know what you are thinking Harry. While it is true that he is in pain, the corruption inside is leaving.'

Alistair's tone was unusually firm and Harry couldn't help but silently nod in response, shaking his head free from that mentality.

While Solomon remained simply still when Harry first saw him, he was now rigid and stiff, every part of him tense. Holding his breath, he waited for something, anything really, to happen.

"Shit!"

The energy he could 'see' earlier, at least with his magical sense, released itself. Causing a shockwave to pass over the area, the force threw Harry off his feet entirely. The Vampires still in cells were unaffected while Alistair and Solomon remained unmoving.

To stop himself from cracking his skull painfully on the wall, he furiously thought, 'Arresto Momentum!' It caught him off guard to the point where there was to time to say the incantation aloud or use his wand. While there was a chance a cushioning charm was included among Alistair's spells, if there's one thing he'd learned at a young age, it was never to rely solely on others.

The shockwave remained physical and magical, as he came to realize once safely slowing his impact, to the point where his back thumped lightly against the wall. As the wave washed over him, so did raw feelings, mad whispers seeming to come from every direction at once.
PAIN. pearls, catching on cracks, tearing at tortured souls. FEAR, festering in the depths of despair. SORROW, shining falsely among the jagged hooks of HATRED.

Help. Help me...

Though the physical force passed quickly, the remnants of corruption in Solomon's body lingered for longer than Harry was comfortable with, finding himself shaken at the familiarity. Those thoughts, he had shared once, all too relieved when they faded away.

"Are you alright?" Alarm tinged Alistair's voice, asking him this aloud while still observing Solomon. Watching Solomon intently he couldn't detect anything else, moving closer.

"I'm fine, but you didn't move at all. Perk of being a Vampire?"

"Simply knowing magic and Solomon as well as I do. Though I will admit, it would take considerable force to upset my balance." He threw Harry a teasing smile. "Though you are more than welcome to try."

Declining as he knew a lost cause when he saw one, enough blood to make the wounds Dumbledore inflicted look like a paper cut left Solomon's body, but there were no marks, it simply leaked from the pores, pooling at his kneeled form.

The blood sizzled upon contact with the stone, strangely not burning Solomon, but happy enough to lick away at the stone beneath it.

"Phoenix Blood." Harry murmured, almost to himself as he watched in a trance. That something from Fawkes when used with ill intent could cause this much damage and the quantity of it filled him with nausea.

While the blood did singe the stones some, the pair came to the realization that it had gathered at a specific point on the floor. Away from Solomon, it shrunk and shifted in shape until a tiny metal disc, remained on the floor.

As Alistair transfigured what remained of Solomon's clothing into something similar to his, he lowered him to the floor, out for the count but looking a little better.

After a moment, Alistair turned to face Harry, a hard expression on his face. "Now the Phoenix Blood is out of his system, I have regained my connection with Solomon. He was able to show Dumbledore's memory, through his own mind search. That thing," Alistair's expression faintly twisted into disgust for a moment, "Also contains Phoenix Blood. On the night that Solomon was taken, Dumbledore was at Theatre Royal in the audience. His aim was to capture a Vampire for questioning and the device of his creation would seek Vampires out, absorb into their very being and induce a torpor effect. The plan being that only his own blood could remove it, but he did not take
you into account, Harry.

Flashing him a grateful if a slightly pained smile, Alistair wordlessly pulled him into a fierce embrace.

"From the bottom of my heart, still as it may be, I thank you. I will live eternally but during this time, I shall find a way to repay you."

The voice in his ear was filled with so much emotion that Harry swallowed some, returning the embrace and seriously worried he would pass out, his heart didn't look to be slowing down any.

He couldn't help but laugh at himself, seeing the humour in his situation. "You'd better hurry then. I've had more near-death experiences that I can count and from birth, according to the prophecy, I'm going to die or Mr Tall, Pale and Noseless will. Not that I put much stock in the prophecy mind you."

He gave Alistair a soft smile, looking up at him. "My life has never gone to plan, I don't know how long I'll live or when I'll die. But that's just like everyone else. The only difference with me is my amazing ability to attract trouble."

"I have heard all about your escapades. From you, of course, but Minerva was very forthcoming about her favourite lion. She has competition, however, as naturally, you are also my favourite lion."

And there it was, that charming smile with the ability to knock Harry dead and have male and female students alike scourgifying their underwear.

Realising him Alistair got down to business, Harry regaining composure.

"We will need the aid of a friend of mine to relocate the others and Solomon to Lothaire Castle. Though now, I have a reason to take defences seriously. No one will harm them again." The conviction shined through in his voice.

And Harry didn't doubt him for a second. As much as he could come across as charming yet carefree at first, he was as passionate as the next man, perhaps more, especially when it came to friends and family and this was something he could relate to.

Just when he thought he couldn't be surprised by Alistair anymore, he was proven wrong.

He didn't use a wand to cast. Actually, he didn't know if Alistair had need of or owned any kind of focus but shockingly enough, he could conjure a Patronus.
Not that Harry had ever seen Alistair as a Dark creature. He was more of the opinion of both Vampires and Werewolves before he had the opportunity to meet them, to save his judgments until initial contact.

But just about every book he could think of or any person he'd asked, born dark creatures and wizards who used too much dark magic couldn't cast this spell. He knew not to believe everything he'd read though, that and he was feeling immensely satisfied that Dumbledore couldn't be more wrong.

Alistair's Patronus, if not for the colour, could be mistaken for a real animal. Golden, it illuminated the entire room, enough for the vampires in their cells to regain some semblance of awareness.

"Rupert, I need your assistance, immediately. There are thirty of our kin in the lower grounds of Hogwarts, Solomon among them." He conveyed his message, the Patronus seeming to have more sentience than any Harry had seen.

"Go." He gave his Patronus a gentle nudge, realistic enough that the feathers on its glowing form swayed with his hand movements.

In all his life, Harry didn't think he'd ever see a Flamingo Patronus. Marvelling at the fact that his life remained exciting for better or worse, he couldn't help but think that healing Solomon was only a small bump in the road, compared to what else lay before them.

They waited a few seconds at most until a response came, in the form of a Tiger, silver in colour.

"Understood. Show me."

At Harry's questioning look, Alistair elaborated, while his eyes briefly glanced around the room, focusing on the spot he had appeared from.

"Temporary possession. While it is treated as dark magic within most human cultures, for us it is merely a mode of transport."

"How does that work though? Most people leave their bodies behind for a short amount of time while they're sharing another body with that mind still present aren't they?"

"It's a little different for us. Rather than our bodies remaining whole, we are able to deconstruct our forms into fine molecules, with the same faintness as mist. We travel to the host, in this case, Rupert will travel to me. I will feel his presence within my mind and slowly, he will reconstruct himself, gradually fading from my physical body while doing so."

Harry blinked once, furrowing his brow in thought. "Sounds complicated as well as unpleasant, but
nothing like when Voldemort possessed me, I thought he was going to rip my head in half."

Alistair shook his head, sighing softly. "The humans should leave this technique to us. It is Dracul who was first born with this ability, after all."

Harry barely had time to think about that as one minute it was just them in the room and next, the man who must be Rupert materialised. They were on a different level to all of them, clearly.

Rupert quickly assessed the situation. "Ah. Now, where is he? I have a sudden craving for old man steak, extra bloody."

His grin was akin to that of a shark, expression looking completely out of place on his otherwise angelic face. He looked his age, soft blond curls and bright blue eyes, not even that much taller than him, his appearance screaming innocence.

'Do not let his appearance trick you. The number of challengers which have provoked him, the halls of Hogwarts would run red with the blood of his victories.'

'I'll keep that in mind.'

Rupert then turned to Harry, approaching him. "Mr Potter." as he held his hand out Harry shook it briefly, the grin widening on his face.

"Alistair has told me much about you." He nodded to himself. "And meeting you in person for the first time, I now have a keen understanding of why he finds you more desirable than the blood of the first."

"Now really, Rupert-"

"Flustered, are we? Now there is a rare sight."

And true to his word, Alistair did look a little discomposed but quickly recovered.

As quickly as the grin appeared it faded, once Rupert saw Solomon.

"Give me an overview." Harry found himself impressed how quickly he could switch from teasing and almost childish to professional.

Instead of a verbal report, he could only assume it was an exchange of imagery, as Rupert muttered to himself here and there and after a few minutes, spoke aloud, directing his words toward Alistair.
"I doubt that we will be able to move everyone without going completely undetected. By all rights, I should not have been able to enter this castle and neither should you, the 'Dark Creatures', that we are. Aside from searching the fool's mind or Solomon's, which is inadvisable in his current state, there is no certain way of knowing just what protections are in place."

The three were at a loss. While Harry knew that there were people aside from Dumbledore, right now they were all inaccessible. And even if they searched his mind, there was a chance Dumbledore had thought ahead and placed his memories elsewhere.

Out of nowhere, Harry experienced a surge of exhilaration. Happiness, even. Hang on a minute...

With a bright flash, Fawkes appeared before them. Looking closer, he had seen better days. At first, Harry thought that was due to his burning day being close by, but none of his feathers had fallen out or dulled in colour.

He couldn't pinpoint what was wrong at first until he looked again. It wasn't so much Fawkes' physical body, but his spirit, intelligent black eyes so often filled with enthusiasm and life turned sorrowful, something which shouldn't belong to a Phoenix. He lacked the usual proud mannerism, even in flight he looked a shade of his former self.

On his breast, there was a mark, faint enough that it could easily be passed over if not looking closely. At a guess, that was where Dumbledore was getting his blood.

After a moment Fawkes landed on his shoulder, almost nestling into him. Harry didn't hesitate to bring a hand up to scratch beneath his chin and for a moment, basked in the affection received.

Until, Harry sensed a presence in his mind, other than his own or occasionally Alistair's.

: I can help :

Harry stiffened, eyes widening in surprise.

'Fawkes?'

: Yes. Connection is weak but there. You have my tears. Cannot speak for long. Painful if communicating with others :

Pushing aside his surprise, Harry nodded. 'Understood, don't strain yourself.'

: Thank you. Hogwarts bans all threats. Albus assumes all Vampires are such. Sun Vampire and friend are not. I can help move prisoners. Touch will not harm :
Fawkes spoke no more but sent Harry a series of images, ones which related to the nature of his bond with Dumbledore. That was something he would happily look into once the current issue was solved, as there may be something there which would allow for Fawkes' release.

Then, in complete contrast to the burst of happiness experienced earlier, a wave of sorrow hit him. Not his own, it was a reminder of when Dementors were nearby, only without the chill and the rush of his worst memories.

Fawkes hovered in midair, only to land by the unconscious form of Solomon, Harry's heart gripped in a vice. He'd never seen Fawkes look this way.

His very form trembled as he hung his head low, drops of water splashing to the stone beneath them.

Fawkes was crying. But these were not tears to help heal another.

Just like Harry had shed tears over Sirius or over his miserable lot in life, so was Fawkes. These were tears of sorrow.

Then he looked straight at Alistair.

Truth be told, Alistair had grown rather fond of Fawkes, for the short time he had been here. He had never met a Phoenix, in truth wary of them since their nature remained opposite to his. Up until Fawkes, that is. His natural if feathery charm almost comparing to his, which was impressive in itself. He still found it surprising that Fawkes had seemed to take a liking to him, always perching on his shoulder and wanting a scratch here and there. Unfortunately for him, it was a requirement that he see The Headmaster every day for a few weeks, to inform him of his progress and life settling in though truly, it was just an excuse.

Seeing Fawkes in that present moment, direct a gaze filled with such sorrow to him, it was an impossibility that he could remain unaffected.

: I am sorry :

Fawkes hung his head lower, looking almost ashamed and Alistair couldn't bear such a normally proud creature reduced to this, through absolutely no fault of his own.

He didn't hesitate to approach Fawkes, crouching by his side and tentatively, wiping away a tear with a finger.

'It is not your fault. The blame lies with that of your master. Thanks to the actions performed four years ago, you aided Harry, who has in turn aided Solomon. So please, there is no need to shed tears.'
Fawkes didn't respond. However slowly but surely, he managed to regain control of himself, returning back to normal. Or at least as close to it as possible. Harry wasn't sure that had ever been the case, at least while Dumbledore was his master.

Crouching by Solomon's side, Rupert removed a lock of his hair. "It shall take a short while, however between us, we will create a wide scale deception, enough for the fool to not suspect a thing until we are long gone."

Alistair seemed to know Rupert's plan and though Harry hadn't verbalised his confusion, Alistair picked up on it.

'Golems, Harry. Specifically of a magical and somewhat organic construct. Animated Golems are created from inanimate matter, such as clay. However, these Golems require a different substance, hair or fingernail clippings, for realistic purposes. Once created, they will assume the form of the object for a limited period of time. The stronger the will during creation, the longer that these Golems will last.'

Harry understood. At least this way, none of them would be anywhere near the area when the prisoners 'disappear.'

'Can I help at all?'

Alistair smiled softly. 'I thank you for your offer, however, it is simpler if Rupert and I do this. While no incantation is required a considerable amount of willpower depending on the object is and a slip of your focus may mean draining your magical core to near depletion. If you wish, outside of this room I would be more than happy to show you how.'

Harry swallowed nervously, his sense of self-preservation kicking in. As much as he did want to help and the size of his magical core now, there were some things he was better off leaving alone. With that thought, he returned to the first room, removing each of the keys and organising them.

Returning to the room and after nods of assent from both Alistair and Rupert as the three began to unlock the cell doors, Harry went to open V15, hand stopping mid-motion.

He froze mind blank of anything and body stiffening. He knew to expect the worse when faced with something like this but he'd honestly hoped Solomon would be the last.

Harry swallowed several times, incapable of encouraging his voicebox to work. Forcing his hand to cease its trembles, he unlocked the gate, the rusted squeak of hinges ringing throughout the room as his numb fingers dropped the key.
The first thing which became apparent was that each cell did have a variation of spells. This one, in particular, masked at least scent as with the unlocked cell door, an overpowering metallic smell of blood filled his nostrils.

There wasn't an inch of the cell not coated in it, or at least in the dim lighting, it seemed to be that way. The image burned itself into his retinas, in a sense more striking and painful than Aela's venom could ever have been.

A woman, certainly Vampire from her appearance, lay on the floor, in a way which suggested used and discarded. Nothing covered her frail, still, form.

Most of the blood had dried beneath and between her legs, arm bent at an unnatural angle. She looked no older than her early twenties, even with eyes shut her expression conveyed nothing but the forced pain in her final hours, matted and bloodstained hair missing a chunk.

Most of the pale skin couldn't be seen, a mass of bruises masking skin tone, the largest gathering centred around the stomach. On top of everything, she was heavily pregnant. Why? Why would they do this? It was all he could think, but not verbalise.

"Alistair." Harry finally managed to speak, even just the one word sounding weak to his own ears, trembling easing some with the familiar weight of a hand on his shoulder.

Oddly enough, the feeling of Harry's anger helped Alistair to maintain his own control, though admittedly it couldn't be helped once he'd seen Solomon, however, this was a very near thing. He placed respect above most things and among that included the treatment of women, whether that went for their own kind or not.

Knowing Rupert would be able to tell all they needed to know he kept a hand on Harry's shoulder, knowing that while despite his young age he had seen many things he shouldn't have been exposed to, this time he would have someone to stand alongside him.

Grim-faced, Rupert needed no more than a few seconds for the results to be known to them.

"Three bodies. Two deceased, one near deceased. Her family name is Setsuna, age 25 in years and appearance. The child within died a few minutes after, though both were already weak from lack of blood consumption, her death and ultimately the end of her magical core left nothing for the child. Violated repeatedly, sexually and physically. Time of death, a fortnight ago."

Everything about the way he spoke to Harry suggested clinical, factual and every bit dispassionate, though he realised this was simply Rupert's way of maintaining control, as someone had to despite the situation they found themselves in.

Rupert stopped for a moment, to inspect something closely.
"Traces of seed remaining, belonging to a wizard named Jeremiah Buckle. Magical signature faint, but there."

Alistair's hand squeezed Harry's shoulder harder for a moment, eyes turning sharp as he confirmed it for himself.

"Rupert. He is one of those who assisted in the murder of the Morganti family, as part of The Guild of Light."

"Ah. And I thought we'd heard the last of that old name."

Though Harry had more than one question about that, he saved it for the more pressing concern. "You said three bodies? I could only see two."

Rupert gestured to the very back of the cell, of which there wasn't much room for one body, let alone more. In the very corner of the cell, there was indeed another body, blending into the darkness and unmovning to the point where Harry had missed it.

As Rupert lifted them into his arms, Harry could see it was a young boy, who looked no older than five but thankfully, despite the bruises on his form, his clothing remained intact if threadbare. As if Rupert read his thoughts he turned to Harry.

"Violated physically, but not sexually." He kept his voice hushed, the boy too weak to so much as protest, lying limp against his shoulder.

Elongating fangs and cutting his index finger, Rupert coaxed the boy to drink, a tiny amount only needed due to the potency of it. The older a Vampire, the more effective the blood would be in every aspect, including healing for their own kind.

It didn't take long for him to latch on, glazed and pain filled eyes taking in his surroundings, as he looked at Rupert, eyes reflecting relief until anxiety became prevalent as he looked around more frantically.

"Mummy?"

Rupert didn't answer his question, touching fingertips to his temple. It would be difficult enough to explain to an adult, let alone a small child.

"Sleep."
There was a chance that other family were alive, simply in another cell. They wouldn't know until everyone was released. Either way, a lot of families outside of here would have to be informed, as well as additions to the base stone.

As with Solomon, though his Golem would be the last creation, Rupert removed a lock of hair from the boy. Harry watched silently as Rupert returned to where he'd found him, hand outstretched. It wasn't a case of the Golem emerging out of nothing like Rupert's arrival here, on the contrary.

To Harry, it was a slow distortion of air at first but then, an exact replica of the child lay there, no detail left out.

"We will avenge you." Harry could hear Rupert whisper to the woman he carried in his arms, gently placing her on the floor and removing a fingernail clipping. A simple blanket was conjured next, to cover her body as Rupert repeated the process, ensuring the fake Setsuna remained in the same position.

Shaking his head slightly, Harry patted Alistair's hand once in reassurance.

'I'm ok. I didn't expect something like that, though I should have really. We've got a lot to do.'

Harry's voice shook a little, even internally but he knew how important this was and as he'd done so many times before, he locked away his worries, sealed until he could meditate later.

With that he helped to unlock each door, Alistair and Rupert sharing the responsibility of Golem creation and one by one, the physical bodies in the cell were replaced by convincing copies.

None of them attacked, not even before Alistair and Rupert used a small sample of their blood to help sustain each of them. Dumbledore wasn't picky about his prisoners, men women and children alike. Though the keys ranged from V1 to 30, some cases more than one body was in there and to their sorrow, ten of them, not including Setsuna and her unborn child, were dead. That required the Golems be tweaked a little, as they couldn't be sure if Dumbledore cared to check whether they were dead or alive.

Harry then asked the other thing on his mind. 'Alistair, what's The Guild of Light?'

A sad sounding laugh in response.

'The original Order of The Phoenix, created by Dumbledore during his youth. The small group made it their mission to eradicate any and all Vampires, even those merely associated with them.'

Harry thought back. The man who had walked by him had the mark of a Phoenix, scarily similar to Voldemort's. If Harry was correct, then it was Dumbledore who created the original, Voldemort found this out and fashioned one of his own choosing.
At this point, Harry couldn’t decide who was the bigger threat. Voldemort actively trying to kill him or Dumbledore, trying to kill him through his own need to be in control.

Leaving out his thoughts on Dumbledore's manipulations, he told Alistair of the rest, wondering if he had any input. Finishing with one of the last Golems, save for one more prisoner and Solomon, Alistair nodded once, tone thoughtful.

'I believe you are correct, however, the thought that at least two murderers are freely entering and leaving Hogwarts, not including the murderer who runs this school is not a comforting one.'

From the little that Alistair had seen into Dumbledore's mind, any longer may actually cause him to develop gag reflexes, he relied solely on his magic, with no training in physical defence, self-defence, martial arts or weapons training. All Vampires, at least in their circle, were required to undertake at least self-defence and one other means of fighting back, if ever they were in a situation where the use of magic was inadvisable.

Though very rarely caught off guard and even rarer without magic, Alistair still remained sharper than any needle. At first, he had need of an Anti-Magic chamber, an isolated room where magic would be unavailable but as the years went by, he had less of a need for it and varied his approach.

While he couldn't deny that Dumbledore was powerful, knowing nothing but and relying solely on magic, was an undeniable weak point.

With that thought in mind, Alistair watched as Harry released the last prisoner, in better shape than the rest and able to walk unassisted.

Then their eyes found him, surprise reflected in them.

"Alistair?"

Being caught off guard was becoming a regular thing, as Alistair was faced with someone he knew, and who should certainly be dead.

Jacob Morganti. Alistair could barely recognize him, not the ten-year-old boy he knew. Not even the human, for that matter.

While there wasn’t a body, deep down both Alistair and Solomon assumed that he was dead. But despite all that he stood before him, a man only slightly younger than how Alistair looked, with features more closely resembling Enoc and Ava than his own.

"It's been a long time. I didn't think I'd see you again." Jacob's voice wavered with restrained
emotion, though his eyes didn't linger for long, looking around the room.

"Where are my son and wife? We were brought here several months ago, just after we found out she was pregnant."

A pain went through Alistair's heart. Jacob had lost family as a mortal child and now, though he didn't know the full story, he had lost family as a Vampire.

Though he wasn't silent for long, Jacob seemed to understand. "How?" his voice devoid of emotion as he walked over to one body, a noticeable bulge among the dead.

"We are unsure of the direct cause, whether it was her injuries or from lack of blood consumption," Rupert added gently and as Jacob noticed what they were doing, allowed him to remove a lock of hair, to replace where he'd once occupied.

"Akari..." He whispered, placing her lifeless hand on his cheek, eyes closing wearily.

"Your son is alive, however." Rupert gestured to the sleeping body next to Solomon, as Jacob sighed in relief.

"I didn't think I'd be so lucky. I've had everything taken from me once, I refuse to do so again. Are you returning everyone to their families?"

"Lothaire Castle. From there we will make contact. You are more than welcome to stay for as long as you wish."

Jacob gave a tired smile, moving over to his son.

"Thank you. I shall take you up on that. I've told Eduard and Akari of you, Solomon and Lothaire Castle. I told the little one too."

He was barely keeping it together, Alistair could tell. The least he could do was offer his assistance.

"One more thing," Jacob said, softly stroking his son's head as he seated himself on the ground. "Awfully convenient that I can just show you memories rather than explain, as I'm sure you'll want to know what happened."

Though to Harry the exchange seemed to be over in a few seconds, Alistair saw years fly by, as Jacob relived the past he wished to forget.
October 1922, Morganti Manor

Though life in the Orphanage wasn't bad by any means, Jacob had always wanted something better for himself and eventually, that chance came along, even if he didn't picture himself living with Magic born Vampires. The idea took some getting used to, but they treated him well.

Over time he adapted, to the point where he couldn't see his family in any other way. This only increased with the introduction of Emily.

The siblings always enjoyed when The Lothaire Brothers came to visit, coming to see them as doting uncles. Often the four of them would leave to travel for the day, seeing sights which no one would ever tire of, while Ava and Enoc had some well deserved alone time.

Sometimes the brothers would split up, Jacob going with Solomon and Emily going with Alistair, or vice versa. Jacob hadn't once felt left out though he knew the pair had a soft spot for Emily. He had the very same one. He had only known her a few months but it was as if he had his whole life. He loved her with all his heart.

Today started out ordinary, at least by his standards. That is, until two strangers neither of the siblings had seen before entered the room, asking for them to follow. Not letting his worry show he walked close to Emily, in the case of something happening.

"Who do you think they are?" He asked Emily, whispering so they wouldn't be overheard.

"Bad people." She replied, eyes staring resolutely forward until they locked with his, the serious expression almost out of place for a child.

"Jacob. Whatever happens, don't let them win. I love you."

"I love you too. But what do you mean?"

But she didn't reply, reaching out to squeeze his hand once.

As he followed the strangers he came face to face with more of them, body tensing as the sight before him, he would never forget. He had the urge to scream and crumple into a ball but through sheer will he didn't, in the presence of strangers who'd done this.

He knew instinctively the bodies were mother and father, they could be no one else. Dried and burnt husks of their former selves, barely recognizable but their torturous and twisted expressions were as plain as day.
He glanced over at Emily, startled to see a resigned expression on her face. Everything was a blur, words being spoken but none were penetrating the light buzz in his brain. The only thing which did register were her words to him.

“Goodbye, Jacob. Don't let him get to you. Stay strong, for father and mother.” she squeezed his hand harder this time and unaware of what was happening, he found himself being dragged away by one of them, trying to resist but to no avail.

He drew a sharp intake of breath at the vicious twist of his arm, as the man opened the door to his parents’ Potions Lab, throwing him inside and locking the door.

A vicious sneer twisted his face. "You can't escape now."

The pain in his head as it cracked against the wall and his knees as they scraped along the stone floor soon overpowered the pain in his arm, what was happening bringing him into the present.

From his pocket, the stranger brought out a small bag, placing it on the table as he cracked his knuckles in glee.

"I've always wanted to test these on a live specimen, the brat of Vampires only sweetens the deal. Smile, boy."

The words of his sister repeating like a mantra in his head, Jacob only hoped he could survive this.

Jacob wasn't sure he could speak, let alone move. Throat raw from screaming, no sound would escape his lips from fear.

Cut, burned, prodded, poked, stabbed, branded and in tiny spouts here and there so he didn't die instantly, healing spells. He wasn't even allowed to lose consciousness, at one point a bone breaking curse shattering the arm he was grabbed by. He believed his legs remained functional if burned from the acidic substances applied in small doses to his skin. Floor slick with blood and in some places dry and stuck to him, his face was stiff from crying, unable to stop from doing so but not once did he beg for mercy, shout for him to stop. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

He was nothing but pain itself, to the point where he couldn't distinguish between different kinds, only knowing he wanted this to end.

It could have been minutes or hours, Jacob didn't know but at last, the man left him, a small smirk on his face.

"I would kill you now, but mercy is too good for the likes of you. Have fun."
He shut the door behind him but didn't lock it, so sure in the fact that he would die there.

Relieved at last to be left alone, Jacob succumbed to the unconsciousness that he'd wished to at the start.

Whether it was the cold or the pain that woke him up he was unsure, but what he knew was that despite it all, he lived. But that wouldn't be for long unless he could get himself out of there.

The uncomfortable sensation aside from the cold and his injuries alerted him to the fact he needed to pee, and now.

He tried struggling to his feet, legs trembling beyond his control. The thought of having to relieve his bladder right there on the floor filled him with disgust but he had no choice. He couldn't move fast enough. It soaked through his trousers, the smell of his own blood and urine mixed with the chemicals tested on him almost overpowering.

"Be strong, be strong..." He whispered to himself, even that caused him to wince, throat still raw. His sister was right. He lived. He'd find her, they'd get out of there and together they would survive and once they were strong enough, find and punish the people who did this.

With that plan in mind, Jacob once more struggled to his feet, thankful he was able to walk, though his legs remained weak and shaky.

There was a chance that those people still remained in the house, but how was he to know otherwise if he didn't leave? He knew if he didn't and find help soon, his injuries would kill him.

Taking a deep breath, Jacob carefully opened the door and listened for any sounds. The walk there seemed to take longer than it had any right to, as he returned to the living room, squinting slightly at the dim lighting.

He almost wished the man had affected his eyesight if only to spare him from having to see.

"No..." he shook his head repeatedly, refusing to believe it. He could only stare.

His little sister, ghostly pale which even he could see from a distance, lay crumpled on the floor, a wooden stake piercing her frail form. Eyes usually so full of intelligence and life were replaced by something dull, unseeing.

The light carpet was stained with her blood, but what affected Jacob the most was the lack of fear in her final moments. She resembled a porcelain doll more than a human child.
In his head, Jacob knew he would never see his sister again but his heart refused to accept this, even as he felt it shatter beneath his ribs as if the man had cast a curse to break that too.

"EMILY!"

Dismissive of his vocal cords screaming in protest, uncaring that his legs were weak and choosing to ignore the pain which shot through his body as he ran and dropped to his knees, he used the one good arm he had to hold her close. He wished he could remove that thing from her, but lacked the strength to do so.

"Please...Please don't leave me, I love you..." Rubbing his cheek against hers, he wished that the man had killed him, but that would have been kind.

He didn't want to leave her. He didn't want to leave his family, even if they would never respond to his words. But he had to. His plan wouldn't change. The only difference would be, he'd have to do it alone.

"I'll come back for you." He promised, looking at the corpse of his sister and the husks of his parents. He had to go. He suspected the ones who did this were long gone now. He dropped a kiss to his sister's temple, heart aching at the lack of warmth but confirming his goodbye.

Gritting his teeth through the pain, the will to see himself to safety and the drive to live if only to make sure they would pay kept him going.

Heart beating a steady rhythm, the chill of the evening hit him. He couldn't see anyone around, that is until someone across the street spotted him and came running.

"Hey, kid! Are you ok?"

Jacob shook his head multiple times, about to collapse again if not for the arms that held him up.

"Who did this to you? No, never mind. Let's get you patched up first."

Thankful he was able to find help so soon Jacob closed his eyes, unconscious once more.

All this Alistair saw. The man who'd helped him was Vilka Greyback, born with Lycanthropy and part of the Greyback pack. He learned to heal from him, someone used to living in society and his status as a werewolf was never known.

Later, Jacob returned for the bodies, only to find that they were gone. He could only hope fellow
Vampires came to investigate and gave them the proper burial they deserved.

He spent his childhood and teenage years assisting Vilka and through him, grew friendly with pack Greyback, up until his dying days. He mourned the loss of the man who had looked after him for nearly half his life but never forgot the family that became his first home.

As an adult, he became the first human accepted among not just pack Greyback, but other packs as he proved his trustworthiness, offering his help with all the healing that Vilka taught him and knowledge in exchange for their assistance should he ever ask for it.

When he first ventured into the magical world and spoke with the Goblins, he was left with another surprise. Enoc and Ava had originally intended to blood adopt both Emily and him, though they ultimately would have the choice for immortality or not, their blood would not pass it on if he didn't wish for it to be so.

But in the end, he did. It wasn't the end for him, he had confidence that there was a way to see his family again, even if not in death. Gradually, over time, he began to see he could make a difference. He was the first he knew of as both human and now Vampire to make such progress with packs and hopefully, Jacob could improve overall relations between Vampires and Werewolves.

As with first learning about Enoc and Ava, he adapted to his changed body and while his contacts were wary, they came to realize he was the same person so treated him as they always had.

He gained the ability to use magic too, but in an unusual way. Born without a magical core he couldn't use it from within. But, he could draw it from sources, such as magical stones or if energy was present, the air from his surroundings.

With his newfound status of immortality, Akari popped into his life, a woman so selfless and beautiful he couldn't help his fondness for her the moment his eyes met hers. From there, the rest was history.

Their firstborn came along. At six years of age, he'd inherited Akari's deep red curls and his dark blue eyes, lightening a shade when in need of blood. Though his magic was wild, he had a magical core, from his mother's side no doubt.

It was February 1996. 74 years since the day his family was attacked. Jacob could barely believe it had been so long but now, with his wife, six-year-old son and another child on the way, he couldn't be happier.

Then, why couldn't it stay that way?
"Dumbledore caught a lot of us off guard," Jacob spoke, once Alistair had seen all he had to. "I had no reason to suspect that he was involved in the murder of my family, I didn't see his face at the time. None of realized until it was too late."

It was supposed to be a gathering, a celebration of achievement where all kinds of people could meet up and make connections, compare their experiences. Dumbledore had tainted this, for all involved.

"I apologize that you were unable to find me, I would have offered my assistance immediately." At least they were able to give his family that much, sending his memory to him.

Jacob gave a small smile in response, tinged with relief at the images. "No need to apologize. What matters is that you're here now. I believe I have you to thank for our rescue?" He asked Harry from his seated position on the floor.

Harry had been watching the proceedings intently. Though he didn't know the details, it was one more thing to condemn Dumbledore for. "Yeah. Something drew me here. I'm starting to think it's because Solomon had Fawkes' blood and I have Fawkes' tears."

"No matter the reason, you found us. I will not forget your act." Jacob's face remained expressionless, but his eyes shone with gratitude.

A sudden sound of disgust caused the three to look over to Rupert, who levitated the coin-like thing of Dumbledore's creation into a box similar to the curse breaking ones Harry had seen.

Rupert shrank the box, placing it within the inner lining of his cloak. He would thoroughly analyze it later, once he saw his kin to safety.

At last, the final Golem of Solomon was created. The three once more locked the cells, Harry replacing the keys.

With the help of Fawkes, Alistair, Rupert and once they checked him over Jacob, relocated everyone to Lothaire Castle. Harry ensured everything was in place, removing traces that they'd ever been there. Once Alistair returned, he removed Solomon's blood from both their shirts.

As he nodded farewell to Rupert who disappeared with Jacob for the last time, Alistair approached Harry. "Thank you. None of us will forget your actions today, down to good fortune or not. It means the world to us, to me."

He placed an arm around Harry's shoulder. "Rest, if possible, you have earned it. I shall walk with you back to your common room and if Dumbledore should happen to find us and ask, we were discussing the Defense Association."
"How-" Harry started to ask until he stopped. "Hermione."

"Yes. She has asked several students and some staff, including myself. I do wonder how she effectively manages her time."

"That's Hermione alright. In my third year, her time was managed questionably. You'll have to ask her for the details and entertain yourself as she tries to explain."

"I shall do that." Alistair chuckled softly, removing his hand as they ascended the staircase where some students remained.

Though his conversation with Alistair was helping to distract from his thoughts, he needed to sort them and fast. If his friends were there he'd check in and after, it was time for another visit to the chamber.
His Memories

Chapter Summary

Harry needed to meditate, after what he'd seen. That was his intention, but it didn't quite go to plan. Afterwards, he learns something shocking about one of his animagi.

WARNING: Child abuse in this chapter.

Before long, they arrived outside of the Gryffindor common room.

"Ah, this is where I shall have to leave you." Alistair didn't try to mask his disappointment, though he wasn't alone with his feelings.

Giving a fond smile he waved farewell, as Harry approached the Fat Lady.

"Viribus."

At his voice she swung open, giving him a cheerful greeting as he passed through.

"Harry, over here."

He turned his head at the sound of Ginny's voice, playing a game of Exploding Snap with Neville. Hermione sat a short distance away reading, aware of his presence.

His feelings over the previous few hours must have shown on his face, as concerned frowns crossed theirs.

"I just came to check in. I need to go and clear my head, I'll tell you what happened later. It's another, 'Thing that can only happen around Harry Fucking Potter' moment."

"I thought your middle name was James?" Ginny teased.

"You were gravely misinformed." Harry's tone turned low and serious. "The Marauder that he is, my dad decided to forge a fake birth certificate, with my middle name listed as James. But the day I got access to my vaults properly, the real birth certificate was there for me to see, in all its glory. Harry. Fucking. Potter."
He placed his hands on the table, leaning in close to the three.

"My life was a lie."

Harry's face split into a grin as Ginny and Neville descended into laughter. Hermione gave him an affectionate eye roll, addressing him.

"Go on then. When you do tell us what happened, you'd better not spare any details."

"By details, do you mean like that essay in first-year Potions on the effectiveness of ingredients where Snape asked for a few inches and got several feet?"

Snickering, he left the room, hearing Hermione's flustered shout of "Harry!" at his back. It was something which caused her endless amounts of embarrassment as not only did Snape make her rewrite it, but labelled it as 'pointless fluff, lacking anything of real substance' or something along those lines, as the tearful girl shared with them at the time.

What kind of friend would he be if he didn't remind her of the one and only time she'd had to redo an essay?

Still chuckling he walked at a decent pace, laugh dying in his throat as the one person he could do without seeing ever, but right now especially, appeared before him.

"Ah Harry my boy, how are you?"

His guard went back up faster than he'd let it go with friends, almost instinctual at this point. He allowed his mind to fill with nothing but respect and adoration for the man in front of him.

"Very well Sir. How are you?" He returned politely, smile just as fake as the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes.

"Enjoying the little free time I have as Headmaster. Alas, Harry, this is the price to pay when one decides to run a school." He kept his tone carefree and Harry had to bite his tongue, in case something snarky and Snape-like slipped out.

Grumblelore, another alternate name of The Headmaster Harry mentally added to his list, reached into his robes.

"Lemon Drop?" He offered, holding out the sweet to Harry who politely declined.

Dumbledore instead popped it into his own mouth, mumbling some nonsensical words around it.
Harry continued to his destination and once his back was turned, Dumbledore attempted to place a tracking charm. It didn't fail but instead rebounded back to the caster.

Harry could sense the magic just before it hit him, the subtle shifting of the air an indication. The bracelet was a remarkable thing.

He was eager to see Aela again and while there, would visit Lume and Thanatos as well. He was curious to hear thoughts on their new home.

Sliding down, he heard the happy hissing voice of Aela.

"**Harry!**"

Entering the spacious chamber he was nearly knocked over by the speed which Aela moved towards him, the air from her movements ruffling his hair.

"**I missed you.**"

Aela was oddly adorable, despite her size.

"I'd visit more often if I could. It hasn't been that long since I started this year, but it's already the busiest of my life."

Aela brought her head closer to his, nudging him to climb on. He did so and found himself being placed on her coiled body. Why not meditate here? He was at his calmest right now. Altering his position, Aela settled down to watch over him.

He had every intention of meditating but instead, fell into a light sleep.

"No, no..." Harry whispered to himself, fearful of shouting in case Aunt Petunia heard.

He kneeled in the bathroom, a bottle of bleach beside him. Some had spilt on the mat, leaving a white stain. He was told to bleach the toilet, but as the bottle was heavy, he only managed a tiny bit before he dropped it. Some coated Harry's hands, leaving his skin burning and itching.

Aunt Petunia was going to kill him.

Eyes filling with unshed tears, he tried in vain to fix the stained mat, body still aching from Vernon
teaching Dudley how to deal with freaks earlier.

He didn't know what had changed but his dreams had taken a different depth entirely, able to see his past self rather than be him. He gritted his teeth, knowing what would happen.

"Harry?"

Present Harry jumped, absorbed in watching the five-year-old and knowing what pain he was about to endure.

He looked to his side, eyes widening when seeing Alistair.

"How did you get here?"

"I believe that this has something to do with it." Alistair looked down at his adorned wrist, coming closer to Harry.

His own desire for someone to be here must have drawn Alistair in. "Sorry. If you can, you'd better leave. I'm not sure I want to see this again, let alone someone else."

Alistair turned his attention from present Harry to past Harry, eyes narrowing slightly. "Was this brought on by the abuse you have seen today?"

Harry nodded once. "I think so. It's why I meant to meditate, as I knew a nightmare would be a possibility, but I fell asleep instead."

An intense look in his eyes, Alistair turned back to present Harry.

"If you will allow me to, I should like to stay. Even the strongest of us need a sturdy shoulder. My shoulder has been found, thanks to you," A soft smile lit his face. "I wish to offer the same in return."

He certainly trusted Alistair but this was a window into his fucked up past. He appreciated his words though, finding himself unwilling to refuse. "It's not pretty, but you can stay."

Alistair said nothing, watching just as intently as Harry himself.

"Potter!"

Present Harry flinched, in a similar manner to past Harry as the sounds of Aunt Petunia drew nearer.
All young Harry could do was shake in response to his surname and the disdainful tone it was spoken with, bathroom door opening rapidly.

"You'd better have finished, or else-"

No further words left her lips, eyes glinting and lips pursing in anger at the state of her bathroom mat.

"You little freak. What have you done?!" She screeched.

"I'm sorry Aunt Petunia, it was an accident." Harry's voice was frail, as though he would fade away at any moment.

"Don't lie to me! You did this out of spite, the ungrateful little freak who can't appreciate all that we've given him!"

Every movement animated with anger, Petunia opened the cabinet, removing a washcloth from the packet and using the still opened bleach bottle, poured some onto it.

"Open your mouth."

He widened his eyes, looking from Aunt Petunia to the washcloth, mouth shut.

"You'd better do as you're told, or I will tell Vernon."

Alistair's eyes narrowed, stiffening ever so slightly. It was a struggle to remain calm, though knew attacking a memory would be a waste of time.

Scared into submission Harry opened his mouth, present Harry swallowing reflexively, throat almost closing as he remembered the sensation vividly.

Petunia stuffed the washcloth in his mouth, uncaring of his reaction.

"Don't you dare spit it out."

Shaking his head from side to side repeatedly, his screams were muffled.

He sat on the ground, rocking back and forth, his cries not ceasing as she pinched his nose hard.

"Keep quiet!"
So that Harry could breathe through his nose he did, though each breath hurt him more, he had to.

He couldn't bring himself to look away, but his own heart trembled when a hand took his own, interlocking their fingers with it firmly.

"It is just as well you have disposed of your relatives as rest assured I have inventive means at my disposal."

Harry almost wished he had. Focusing on the sensation of his hand he squeezed it softly, an anchor between past and present.

Before long he was allowed to remove the washcloth, insides burning and itching as much as his hands. He was allowed a minute of using clear water to wash the bleach from his mouth and hands, but no more.

If not for Harry's magic, he would have had permanent tissue damage from that day. As it ended, they sat side by side.

"I haven't been dealing with my memories, just keeping them locked away so they didn't bleed into my sleep. I'll have to eventually."

Alistair removed his hand, and with slow and careful actions, used it to softly stroke his head. "If you have need of me, I will always be available to assist."

"Thanks," Harry spoke, his voice quiet and contemplative. Though he found asking for help difficult, in these moments he would try.

Eventually, Harry awoke. Lowering himself from Aela he returned to the room of souls. Standing in the middle and gradually disappearing.

"Good Evening!" Were the first words Harry was greeted with as he arrived by Lume, Thanatos following behind. Their colours were not as vibrant, muted the most appropriate description.

Thanatos snorted lightly, saying nothing.

"Don't mind him. He's been in a fouler mood than usual. He's missed you more than I have."

"...Don't put words in my mouth." In place of eyes narrowing, the flame in his eyes sparked.
"Even if they're true?"

"Shut up."

Thanatos moved closer to Harry, ignoring Lume entirely. "Has the old man tried anything?"

"Ignoring the fact I found out he's far worse than I thought, yeah. He tried something on my way down to the chamber, a tracking charm. Bastard can't track me, though he can try." Smirking at the thought of his recent failed attempt, Harry looked at his surroundings with interest. There were many other animal souls and among them possibly animagi souls.

At the moment it was nothing but empty space but as he grew closer to other animals, he began to see faint outlines of the place of their origins, including a Fennec Fox, bringing with it the faint sight of the Arabian desert, sand particles scattered at its feet for the brief moment it entered his vicinity.

He experienced similar things with the other animals, the ones he drew close enough to. Though there were thousands of souls, with the same structure type as his Patronus, unlike Lume and Thanatos who remained lifelike. It wasn't crowded or clustered in any sense, seeming to stretch for eternity.

"This world is solely dependent on the minds of those who have a deep connection with their animagus forms," Lume explained.

"Do you mean because there's no limit to our minds, there's no limit to how big this place is?" He asked, watching the two out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes," Thanatos answered his question and Harry could feel Lume glare at him.

"He was talking to me, not you!"

"The question was answered anyway, you hot-headed Turkey."

"I'll have you know that I'm NOT a Turkey. I am, in fact, an Amphithere."

"You're definitely something."

Harry left them to it, trading insults back and forth until something caught his eye.

While it was possible that it was just a simple lost animal soul and not an animagus soul, Harry could see this animal clearer than the rest. Even if two people had the same animal, something would make
it distinguishable from the other, be it body or eye colour.

The thought that his dad could have established the same kind of animagus connection that Harry had never crossed his mind, but it made sense. The close bond they had with Remus, Sirius and his dad at least, and the amount of dedication it had taken to achieve their forms in secret just to help a friend in need, it was almost impossible for them not to connect on a deeper level.

The stag raised its head, as if it sensed his presence, drawing closer.

Unsure what to say Harry simply stared. It could be his imagination that he was seeing this form clearer than the rest but he hoped that wasn't the case.

"Are you...Prongs?" He asked, hesitant enough that his voice remained quiet, losing itself in the surrounding silence.

"Yes," The stag raised its head high, pride etched into every simple movement. "And you are Harry Potter."

"How do you know my name?"

"Through my connection with James, until it snapped. Unless taken here physically the only other way is if the one with the connection is dead or trapped beyond normal means of reach. The latter, I'd still feel a faint connection but as I feel nothing, I assume that he's dead. Before I left, he spent several months around you and through this, I became aware of your existence. You share similar features with his life mate."

"My mum?"

Prongs inclined his head in acknowledgement, watching Harry intently. He spent a short amount of time speaking with Prongs and decided to return here later, with the information that Padfoot would be interested in speaking with him when next around.

Over the past week, between how incredibly busy he'd found himself, he tried to sort through the images he received from the Thestral on the nights but in truth, he couldn't make much sense of them. The only thing he understood from the images and his own and Luna's understanding was they appeared different depending on how someone saw or didn't see, death.

The only problem was, Harry had no idea how much time had actually passed. Though the time before all students had to be in their common rooms was extended to midnight, it was better for him to actually be there, his role as a Prefect and all. He enjoyed being able to use his role to help the students, that made it all worthwhile.
Nothing distinguished one area from another and if he didn't have connections with Lume and Thanatos guiding him, he could easily see himself becoming lost. He had to shake his head in some amusement and disbelief when Harry found the pair exactly where he left them, bickering and all.

"I hate to tell you, my doom bringing friend, but Harry likes me more."

Lume rested on the ground, coiling similarly to Aela.

Oh, that again. Harry had heard it on more than one occasion and while at one point he'd said he liked them both equally he usually chose to let them argue it out. There was only so many times he could say it.

"How did you come to that conclusion? You're a flame ball with eyes and stubby little legs, absolutely nothing likeable about a creature which totters about shakily like a newborn foal."

Lume's mercury eyes swam with sadness, even managing to make them look wet, though he didn't really have tear ducts. It was undoubtedly the saddest look Harry had ever seen.

"Surely you don't mean that, my deathly compatriot?" Lume's head drew closer, until his nose touched with Thanatos, looking at him with pleading eyes.

He snorted in response. "Remain distant, or I will knock you unconscious." He drew in a breath.

"Not until you say you love me." His eyes filled with stubbornness, something more than familiar to Harry at this point.

"No."

"Then I'm not moving."

Just as Thanatos was about to neigh for all his worth, Lume licked a wide stripe across his face, as he reared in irritation.

"Lume!"

Chuckling Lume flew circles around his head, both shouting distracted farewells as Harry called out to them. Moving back to the platform he appeared on he soon arrived back in the chamber, Aela close by with her eyes shut.

"I'm going, for now, I'll visit you later. I'll bring one or two of my friends if they want to come." He patted her on the head, heart twanging at her sad look. If she could shrink to hide beneath his robes to
the size of the tattoo on his arm he'd bring her everywhere but to his knowledge, there wasn't a way to do this.

Salazar may have an idea though as in one of the rooms were books, the chest they were stored in see-through, almost like glass. Certainly unbreakable but he wasn't about to try to brute force his way in, referring to Alistair for the delicately woven bits of magic.

It was a shame he couldn't slide his way back up to the entrance but as he arrived back at the pipe, he placed sticking charms on his feet, using his strength to climb back up. Thankfully, it wasn't too steep and he couldn't sense anyone nearby. He scourged his clothing, just in case, checking the time with a quick tempus afterwards.

8 pm, there was enough time to visit the Thestrals, not to mention he was curious to communicate with them further.

Not many students or staff were in the corridors at this time, most indoors which made it easier for him to navigate without having to be stopped. As he crossed the wooden bridge, he spotted Luna just ahead, who skipped over to him.

"Hello, Harry." She tilted her head and he was more than sure she seemed happier than usual, blue eyes sparkling. "Have you come to see the Thestrals?"

"Yeah." He gave her a small smile as she walked alongside him, at this point not questioning how she seemed to know these things.

He was reminded of the butterbeer cork necklace given to him by her, in the shape of a key. He did ask why that shape in particular, however, she only smiled mysteriously and refocused her attention on smearing toast with a generous layer of strawberry jam. Unconsciously he traced the outline of the key with his finger.

"I'm happy that you like it, Harry."

As his eyes looked into hers, filled with gentleness rather than the stress and grief of before, Luna knew that her necklace would offer him good protection. More, if he found the lock which it fits into.

At the end of her first DADA lesson, Luna skipped over to Professor Lothaire's desk, unable to help herself. He greeted her with a soft smile.

"Miss Lovegood, how can I help?"

Picking the specially made necklace from her bag, she held it out to him. Giving or receiving presents always filled her with joy. This cork was the only one she didn't know the origin of, as old
"A present for you!"

Though she knew he was unsure of what it was, the way his eyes twinkled with gratitude as he carefully took it from her was unmistakable.

"It's a cork necklace, it will keep you safe."

"Thank you, I shall treasure it." Saying this he placed it around his neck. He was not one for necklaces but with the knowledge that she had most likely made this herself, there was a charm about it he couldn't ignore.

"What is the occasion, if you don't mind my asking?" He kept his gaze on hers, fingers running curiously over the heart-shaped padlock design.

"We're friends, and friends do nice things for each other!" She gave him an honest smile, filled with genuine warmth and Alistair appreciated that for every Albus Dumbledore, there were those like Harry and Luna.

He hadn't encountered someone who established bonds of friendship quite so quickly, however, he couldn't deny having Miss Lovegood for a friend would make for an interesting experience.

"I'm glad you like it, Professor." She gave a small wave of farewell, turning her back and skipping to the exit.

"Have a lovely day, Miss Lovegood," he called after her as she returned the sentiment. He had a feeling his smile would remain for the rest of the day, in a more cheerful mood.

With those thoughts in mind, Alistair resumed the routine of marking, becoming more familiar with each day. The necklace almost seemed to have a calming effect on him, though that could easily be his imagination.

As Harry was about to pass by Hagrid's Hut, he stopped for a moment. Luna knew where the Thestrals were and he had a feeling as Thanatos, he could sense where they were too. He kept his distance. While Hagrid would find the idea of his animagus forms fascinating, he was far too honest and would blurt it out within a heartbeat. He moved to a more shaded area, checking to make sure it was just the two of them.

"Luna. I'm about to turn into Thanatos now, one of my Animagus forms I told you about. Aside from Remus, you'll be one of the first to see him."
"Ooh!" She clapped her hands in delight, looking up at him with anticipation in her eyes. "Show me, please?"

Harry chuckled, distancing himself a little to do just that. "Of course."

Unlike at the start, the change from human to horse became as natural to Harry as anything else, noticing with interest that the bracelet he wore resembled a silver tattoo painted just above his hoof, something he'd never noticed until now.

A soft gasp caught his attention, the novelty of how different everything seemed in this form not having worn off just yet.

"You're wonderful." She didn't hesitate, running a hand through his mane which unlike its threatening and crackling appearance, didn't harm Luna, just cast a green glow upon her skin. At her words he'd blush if he could, none of the pride bordering on arrogance of Thanatos when his appearance was complimented, it was all Harry.

He lowered himself in her direction, as an invitation for her to climb on. He tried to as much as possible, as he stood just taller than the Thestrals at 22 hands high.

He needn't have worried as with a little help from magic Luna seated herself on his back. In this form, he was confident he could locate them, though he had Luna to rely on as well.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, softly calling out in delight as he reared on his hind legs and sprinted, joyful and feeling so free.

The memories from the Thestral which eluded him made far more sense as Thanatos, fitting together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and the finished result left him breathless.

There was more to Thanatos than Harry knew. If what he thought was correct, the problem of Avada Kedavra may finally have a solution.

This changed everything. Only a fraction of his mind was devoted to avoiding the dense trees, the sound of his gallops shattering the otherwise silent night, most of his mind on this new revelation.

The day that he picked up Thanatos' tail hair, it altered his body chemistry gradually. Not enough to notice, but enough for change to occur. Finding Thanatos was simply the beginning. He's death itself and along with Harry's own brushes with death, he'd begun to build a resistance to the killing curse and touching the hair granted immunity.

According to the Thestral, he gained the memories from, Thanatos was the first of their kind and rivalled Fawkes in age. He shared similar height and structure with the current Thestrals but other
than that, time and breeding had altered them.

Thanatos' Memory

Born to a Unicorn who'd lost her horn when young and a Friesian horse marred by trauma, he discovered his connection with death from a young age. While he had magic capabilities thanks to his mother, his father's influence wasn't to be forgotten, even if he held no magic of his own.

His mother died shortly after giving birth, his father trying the best he could to raise him, even if the idea of affection and love was beyond someone who had received none.

He had no name at that point, only just able to gallop about without falling over his own hooves when wolves attacked as the father stepped in to protect his son, though suffered a bite to the neck as a result.

The young horse, filled with fear, saw the wolves collapse to the ground, dead. One of them tried to attack, only for their fur to brush his mane, alight with a mysterious green glow.

His magic had manifested, in a more destructive way than the healing properties of a unicorn. The very hairs from his mane and tail became composed of death itself, instant upon when someone or something touched them.

Realising what had happened, he looked at himself. There was no reason he couldn't use this for good, however. He slowly moved to his collapsed father, blood staining the grass below him. Looking into his eyes for the final time, he let his mane brush across and with it, made it so his father would feel pain no longer.

Neighing in sorrow he stayed with him for a while, reluctant to move until he came to understand that he needed this, to survive.

And so he did, tail and mane hairs alike dropping out from natural causes, coming to mingle and create magically charged air, after the surface which it landed upon was robbed of any organic life.

He continued to grow both in magical power and strength, most fearful of the strange creature with control over death, some seeking aid when a life needed to end.

That is until he came to understand he couldn't truly die himself. An attack which should have killed him didn't, instead causing eyes to glow with the same fire which sparked through his hairs, the glossy black sheen of his coat ruined by chunks of flesh torn away which revealed bones the colour of ash peeking through.
Those close named him Thanatos, while outsiders spat a curse, Avada Kedavra and unforgivable, as they shared the legend of the creature to those back home. Though he didn't have a name before, he wouldn't shun this, for that was what he was, death. He wouldn't even shun their curse, becoming a part of him.

For all that most were afraid, one unicorn remained fascinated and her fascination helped with the creation of their species, Thestrals.

Their connection with death allowed for travel to the world of souls, discovered when the first of their kind passed on, a portal appearing upon their death.

Thanatos felt as if it was his duty to better things for his kind, confident in leaving them to travel the world of souls. While he couldn't die himself, he could remain as a soul and travel that way.

The world of souls was filled with other creatures, those of regular animals or animagi souls. Those not animagi souls could be picked to establish a connection with humanoid magic users, as he came to understand.

Over time, it seemed as if every soul travelled elsewhere, except for him. None of the magic users was closely connected with death and he couldn't help but feel that he needed to form a connection with another.

He had no way of knowing about Harry, or that the outsiders' view of death became so negative that while his kind hadn't changed, to most eyes they were twisted, ugly creatures or not visible at all.

Every time someone uttered the unforgivable Avada Kedavra, a tiny portion of the magically charged air was used, a part of Thanatos twisted to a particular purpose. Be it to painlessly end someone's life who wished for it or cut another life short which didn't deserve such a fate.

The day Voldemort spoke those words and tried to kill a small child, Thanatos had found his purpose. His soul was drawn to this place as the other part of himself in the form of the killing curse absorbed into the tiny body.

Now, all he needed to do was wait until Harry found him.

As Harry's mind processed the memories, more of it returned to his current surroundings. He was relieved that in this form it seemed as if he could close his eyes and still find the destination, the forest not as intimidating or confusing to him as it would be if he were in his human form.

"Thanatos, can you go faster?" Though her voice was always quiet and she never raised it, Luna's
words remained easily heard.

Challenge accepted. In truth he was only going half the speed he was capable of, mindful of just who was on his back. Remus couldn't handle him going too fast, but somehow he knew that Luna would be able to.

It could have been seconds or minutes that passed by as Thanatos increased his speed, the trees looking as though they physically moved away, rather than skilfully manoeuvring around them. He gave a cheerful neigh in response to Luna's cry of delight, not scared in the slightest though she did continue to keep her gentle hold around his neck.

The further they travelled, the harder it was to keep his current speed due to the density of the trees but before long, he sensed that they were close by and gradually stopped. He once more lowered himself to the ground, Luna lightly landing on her feet and skipping ahead.

As he entered a small clearing, small enough to the point where it could be easily missed, he watched as Luna happily made her way over to the foals.

While the younger of the Thestrals paid no attention to him, the elder did. Specifically, the one which gave him the memories. There was something about her which was different from the rest. More alive and aware.

'Do you understand the nature of your form better?'

He was becoming used to having animals and Vampires alike able to communicate with him mentally. He had a good ability to adapt, given all the situations he'd found himself in over the years.

'Yes, on the ride over here. I tried to as a human but I'm guessing I had trouble with that because the memories aren't from a human's point of view.'

'You are correct. Come.' She walked a distance away from the others and Harry followed her to a slightly more secluded area.

Though she had no pupils, simply the whites which stared into his own, he didn't feel disturbed or fearful, simply at peace. She came closer, nuzzling her nose against his as he watched her in curiosity.

She distanced herself a little, bowing her head slightly. 'I am Nāve and Thanatos is my ancestor. I know his soul currently resides where it used to be, though he has no memory of this.'

'He has no memory of what I've just seen, you mean?' Thanatos was in for a shock, there was no way to break it to him gently either.
'Yes. Before he left, he shared his memories with his mate and so that he wouldn't be forgotten. A select few were trusted with the information, the same way it has been for centuries and what I am entrusted with until the day he returned and to keep the history of how we came to be alive.'

Suddenly, Harry felt as though he needed to sit down but in this form, that wouldn't be the most comfortable thing to do. Out of everyone in the world it could have been, Thanatos was drawn to him of all people. Not that he hated the idea, he was fond of Thanatos even before finding this out and whatever purpose he felt needed to be fulfilled, Harry would do his best to help.

Though he had an understanding of what he'd seen, talking it through with Nāve helped as well. To a certain extent, he had control over death, at least if it was Avada Kedavra. While Thanatos couldn't heal as healing wasn't part of his nature, there were other ways he could help. Since the hairs belonged to him and magic was about intent, that was why they didn't hurt Luna or Harry himself when picking one up. In the case of self-defence or to attack if that was his will, they would affect whatever they touched.

The biggest thing for Harry was if someone was hit with Avada Kedavra. According to Nāve, though her knowledge of the subject was limited, a brief period of time would be available for the effects of the spell to be reversed, as long as traces of the raw spell remained which after a few seconds, wouldn't remain in solid form and disappear.

Meaning that in theory, if an ally was hit nearby with the spell, as Thanatos, he could reverse the effects by calling that part of him back. Though he wasn't willing to try that out on a live subject, the irony that the one spell which tore his family apart could be used for good wasn't lost on him.

'Thank you for telling me this, I'll help Thanatos to find his purpose.' Though a human would find it hard to search for sincerity, Nāve had no problems reading him and nodded her assent.

'Though I am glad Thanatos is back, I am also glad to have met the one that finally allowed for his return.' Saying this she returned to the others, Harry following behind and had to smile at the endearing sight of Luna surrounded by Thestral foals.

As he approached, one of the smaller foals turned their head, cocking it in curiosity. On wobbly legs they circled him and he stood still to let them get a feel for him. It wasn't long before they butted their head against his side.

'Friend.' The foal seemed content, adamant about sticking close to him.

The elders who didn't know of Thanatos were suspicious at first but soon warmed up and even if he tried, he couldn't lie his way into their hearts.

And stay he did, he got to see a side of Luna she didn't show others, more open and carefree than
she'd ever been before. He was glad to know of the Thestrals who if given the chance, would show the outside world that they're not the cursed creatures that their ancestor was first named.

Before long they had to leave, the further darkening of the sky evident even through the pinpricks available to their gaze. Harry would certainly return and if Luna was amenable, he would join her for her visits and she seemed to do so fairly frequently.

He turned back, met with her smile. "I'm glad I got to spend time with you Harry," Luna spoke, eyes lit with joy as she walked with him back into Hogwarts.

"Me too. Let me know when you're seeing the Thestrals again, I'll tag along. I had a good time tonight."

Luna happily agreed and despite his tiredness walked her back to her common room. He knew what her fellow Ravenclaws and some other members of the house treated her like and the idea that she could be targeted while in the corridors late at night didn't sit well with him.

After saying his goodbyes he returned to Gryffindor tower, the last thought on his mind wondering what tomorrow's defence lesson would have in store and if Ron would act his age for once.
There's an eventful start to some people's mornings, an exciting DADA lesson and a reminder that Harry isn't alone.

At least if today's DADA lesson continued with the same drama as the last, Harry could take solace in the fact that each house and year now had three Prefects rather than two according to the bulletin board.

While Harry would have preferred that Ron was stripped of Prefect status, it at least gave more students an opportunity. He was sure that McGonagall pushed for this change with fierce determination, to the point where Dumbledore's beard detached from his face in an effort for it to escape her fearsome wrath.

"I'm glad it's fairer now," Hermione spoke up from his side. "I believe more Prefects, providing that they can do their job, can be nothing but a good thing."

"What's a good thing, Herm?" Ron asked, approaching the pair.

"As I was saying.." Hermione muttered, skilfully dodging Ron's arm which tried to wrap around her waist. By this point, she'd given up on telling Ron how much she loathed that nickname as nothing short of a bludger would get through. She was almost tempted to ask Fred and George to return, if only to disillusion themselves, their bats and their brooms and whack actual bludgers at him.

"Cauldron bottoms," Harry replied to Ron's question smoothly, not missing a beat as Hermione's lips upturned into a slight smile. "It's a good thing they're so thick to support any combination of ingredients imaginable, wouldn't want to lose any precious potions now would we?"

As he suspected Ron's eyes glazed over barely three words into the sentence, giving noises of affirmation to show he was listening, even if he wasn't.

Ron's attention successfully diverted, Harry and Hermione waited for Neville and Ginny, plenty of time for them to have a conversation and eat something before leaving for their first classes.

Despite everything that happened the previous day, Harry felt surprisingly refreshed and afterwards he'd be glad to finally have the spells removed from his cloak.

Students were happier to greet him on his way to The Great Hall this year, his attitude had changed a
lot. He still had issues, a change in physical appearance and the blocks removed from his core wouldn't negate the damage done to him but right now, he was the happiest he could possibly be.

Ron showed more enthusiasm when faced with a table of food than he did with anything else, as evidenced by him practically barging through students who had yet to take their seat, shooting glares as he passed by. Swallowing a sigh Harry gave a smile of apology, weaving more carefully through students on his way to the Ravenclaw table.

"Morning Luna." He gave a smile in response to her own, wishing that she was in their house, though he knew Ravenclaw was made for her. He couldn't help but think she looked unhappy where she was right now. If only he could swap Luna for Ron. Though if that came with a change of house Ron wouldn't last a week. He'd drown in the sheer amount of fully functioning brain cells in comparison to the severe lack of his own.

Though hesitant at the start, Luna was becoming used to sitting at the Gryffindor table with her friends and while at first people looked at them strangely, they'd begun to see it as more normal now.

"Ron, are you hibernating for Winter?" Harry heard Ginny ask incredulously, as Luna took a seat between him and Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Ron sitting across from them.

He couldn't help but agree, looking at the Hagrid-sized portion of food on Ron's plate being consumed at an alarming rate.

"Mum says I'm a growing boy who needs his food," Ron answered, a half-chewed sausage hanging out of his mouth.

"Emphasis on boy," Ginny muttered, Harry snorting into his goblet. he'd grown used to Ron's eating habits, though sometimes the temptation to stick him in a zoo and have small children throw food at him was strong.

He let his friends' conversation wash over, the topic being DADA and what their next lesson involved. Harry wondered the same, though the optimistic part of him hoped that Ron would control himself.

Alistair was more punctual than Severus, at least in some regard. He liked to be there early and listen to the atmosphere slowly fill with sound, staff and students alike filling the hall. It made a nice change to the years of quiet solitude he had before Harry's arrival.

Punctual with classes, Severus was usually one of the last to arrive in the hall, a permanent sneer on his face to greet everyone with. Alistair preferred to think of it as a smile in progress.
Pumpkin juice wasn't something he'd had the pleasure of trying before arriving here but much like with Ginger Newts, he'd acquired a taste for it. He didn't need the sustenance which came from them, but blending in was his goal, not eating or drinking anything would work against him in the long run.

Most of his colleagues seemed to find the interactions with Severus amusing as recently Filius had changed seats, the only available one for Severus being next to Alistair, Minerva on his other side.

Though he had found Solomon, along the way he'd grown passionate about his job here and had adapted to teaching the students quickly. He wanted to share his experience and knowledge with them, as well as to teach Ser Sunshine how to smile from the heart. In truth, he wanted to be friends with him too.

However, he had to sigh on the inside at the familiar situation he found himself in, some of the student body showing open admiration in a way which went far beyond his teaching, though they would remain disappointed as he only had eyes for a certain dazzling green-eyed young man.

The arrival of Severus became apparent when his very distinct aura entered the room, tinged with a darkness not of his own creation and curiously despite his role, which The Headmaster had filled him in on after he'd recently asked him to join the order, his magic remained light grey while The Headmaster himself was treading dangerous murky waters.

"Good morning Severus!" Alistair flashed a bright smile, which Severus ignored in favour of sitting down with his usual black coffee. Alistair waited patiently, knowing by now that it was better not to initiate a conversation until he was sufficiently filled with caffeine.

After a moment Severus glared at him, though Alistair was certain that he simply needed to learn how to smile and this was the closest he could manage for now. "Your incessant cheerful attitude irritates me, Lothaire. I do not recall ever giving you permission to use my name."

"We're friends, are we not? I've told you many a time to call me Alistair."

While most kept a safe distance from Severus, Alistair didn't classify as part of the general population.

Severus had only just arrived, however the urge to leave immediately was tempting. "No."

Not discouraged in the least Alistair reclined in his seat, nodding his head. "I understand. You wish to keep your cheerfulness and friendships locked away behind closed doors, so the students see you as Professor Snape. But, I know your true form."

With a simple wave of his hand, a tiny ball of energy resembling the sun shined above Severus, casting a bright glow.
"A wonderful morning, isn't it Ser Sunshine?" The students were too busy in their own conversations to take note of their interaction, Alistair's voice only loud enough for Minerva and Filius, sat next to him, to hear.

Severus' fingers twitched, itching to hex the man. He'd worked alongside far more unpleasant people, but his morning cheerfulness was unnatural. Not to mention one of the most ridiculous nicknames he'd ever had.

His mood didn't improve any when Minerva conjured tiny little birds, flying close to it.

"They're lovely." Alistair complimented, watching them with a smile on his face.

"Thank you. Your sun is impressive as well." Minerva replied back, voice filled with amusement, equally immune to Severus' glare as Alistair was.

"The both of you, cease this foolishness." He scowled and in response, Alistair's sun grew larger.

"It will brighten his heart." He told Minerva, completely confident in himself as her lips pursed tightly in an effort not to smile.

Severus looked him, not bothering to hide his irritation, and cancelling out their efforts immediately. If he didn't consume his daily dose of caffeine, he might do something later that he probably wouldn't regret.

Sipping some more from his goblet, Alistair looked in Harry's direction, something he found himself doing more often than not. Though for once he wished he hadn't.

'Do Mr Weasley's aspirations in life follow along the lines of wanting to be a waste disposal unit?'

Harry wasn't as caught off guard as he used to be whenever Alistair spoke within his mind but sometimes, the words got to him. In this case, he had a mouthful of tea ready to swallow but instead, it sprayed from both his nose and mouth, lightly showering the table as he started to laugh between coughs.

Hermione slapped him on the back, some students glancing at him for a second then resuming their conversation.

"You alright?" Neville asked in concern and slight confusion, even as Ginny said, "Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Choked-To-Death-On-Herbal-Tea."
"Bit of a mouthful isn't it?" Harry asked once his coughing fit had stopped.

"It is, but you spat yours out."

He couldn't argue with that. Harry had mentioned the bracelet and what it was, but he hadn't gone into details with his friends about what it could do, such as providing the mental link with Alistair. He knew they were waiting for him to tell them in his own time but for now, at least a short while, he liked having this little secret with Alistair.

'I'm not sure about now, but he used to say he wanted to play for The Chudley Cannons Quidditch team."

'I apologise, my timing was poor and I am pleased to see that you are still among the living. As for Quidditch, I have yet to watch the sport."

'It will take more than that to kill me. And seriously?' Harry practically threw mental question marks. He didn't know many who hadn't seen a game. Even Hermione who wasn't overly keen on the sport had seen a few matches.

'Though I have lived for longer than most, there are still many possibilities. Most of us are able to fly without the need for brooms. Any sport is in the form of martial arts or weapons training."

Alistair was open to all cultural experiences and if there was ever a place for Quidditch, this was it. He found the sporty rivalry between Minerva and Severus to be amusing and not originally from Hogwarts as a student or used to the idea around it, he found everything to be new and no less interesting.

'Tryouts along with training and practice matches start in late September, if not that then you have to come to one of the matches. It's not for everyone but it's certainly an experience you should try.' He put every ounce of earnestness into his voice as he could.

A teasing smile and wink. 'If it allows me to have a valid excuse to watch you for a long period of time then it would be absurd for me to refuse such a delightful opportunity."

Before Harry could so much as respond, it was if Alistair just knew.

'Ah Harry, your blush is adorable.'

He ignored the round of questions when, moving aside his empty cereal bowl, he folded his arms, resting his head on them to hide his face. Because of course, with at least half of the words directed at him from Alistair, they had the ability to change his skin colour.
And there it was, the laugh no matter in his mind or in person, never failed to influence the increase of his heartbeat.

The thought of Alistair watching him fly filled him with a different kind of excitement to the kind he usually had before, during and after a match. He hoped that even if he didn't find the sport as thrilling as most did, there was something he'd gain from the experience.

After impatiently waiting for Ron to finish his umpteenth serving they parted ways, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville returning to the DADA classroom.

Whenever Harry had classes, the rooms were to learn in and nothing beyond that. In fact, he associated them with unpleasant memories, mostly the same if not for items of personal decoration here and there, though thankfully nothing to the extremity of Lockhart or Umbridge, with her office splashed in enough pink to make even the most hardened Death Eater vomit from utter disgust.

He didn't know whether the room was assigned to the Professor or they got to pick, but entering the DADA classroom again this year reaffirmed it. He received none of those negative vibes because the room itself looked nothing like a classroom, simply a place where he would voluntarily choose to go. Though DADA was his strongest subject he wished some of the other Professors would take a leaf out of Alistair's book and create a more relaxed environment. He could forgive Professor Snape for not doing so, it would put Harry on edge seeing his irritated expression if the classroom against his will transformed into a field of golden flowers.

He managed to keep a straight face despite that sudden thought, greeting Alistair along with Hermione and Neville, though Ron's was barely decipherable.

Within a few minutes, handfuls of students arrived, Gryffindor on one side and Slytherin on the other, exactly the same as last week.

Harry considered himself great at picking up information, but even those who weren't couldn't possibly miss students from every year talking about Alistair. Whether with friends or not, their excited voices told of his lessons and how enjoyable they were.

He'd built up a reputation in the short time he'd started teaching, in a different way to Professor Snape but through it, the voices around Harry quietened quicker than before. Many looked at Alistair with expectant, interested or calculating gazes.

To their surprise, he seated himself on the floor this time and seeing his relaxed and carefree expression, some students did in turn.

"In future lessons, I would like you to sit with your assigned partners, meaning that you will mix among your houses."
He met everyone's eyes in the room, lingering for a split second on Ron who Harry knew was about to explode, if the sudden paling then rapid reddening of his skin was any indication.

Except Ron, there were only a few grumbles, some students coming to realise that working with the Snakes or Lions wasn't so bad after all.

Ron was holding himself back by doing this too. His attitude would back him into a corner and isolate him from everyone at this rate and despite how much of a bastard he was being, particularly this year, Harry didn't want to see someone he once called his best friend die prematurely because he was too stubborn to see past his own set ways.

Then and there, he made a decision. This would be the last time he'd try to help Ron change his mind and after that, there wasn't much more that could be done.

'I'm going to try and talk to Ron. I'll place a silencing charm around us because at this rate he'll kick off like last week.' He told Alistair, truly sorry he had to do this instead of listening alongside the other students.

'Alright. Though during his Detention with me I made an attempt of my own to help, it will be more effective coming from someone he has known for longer.'

Harry could see Alistair's point, though he wasn't sure it would help much.

In one way he'd rather be in Dumbledore's office again rather than having to do this, though he was certain that Ron's more extreme attitude was thanks to the influence of said bearded bastard.

Silencing charm in place, Harry nudged Ron who'd taken a seat by his side.

"Hey, mate?"

"Yeah?" Ron asked, turning to him, face and tone stiff with irritation.

"I get why you don't like Slytherin. It's true that a lot is on Voldemort's side," He ignored Ron's flinch, "But they're not all bad, give them a chance."

"Are you serious Harry? A Slytherin killed your parents and you're saying they're not all bad?!" Ron shouted, almost deafening and Harry thanked the existence of silencing charms.

"None of the Slytherins in this school are responsible for the actions of one years ago. If Pettigrew, a Gryffindor, hadn't betrayed my parents, Voldemort wouldn't have found and killed them in the first place." Harry pointed out, watching Ron deflate.
"Well yeah, I suppose." He muttered, backing down slightly. "But I still hate them."

"I'm not stopping you, just don't try and piss them off. If any of the students aligned with Voldemort have the opportunity to hand someone over, who do you think they'll pick first?" He looked pointedly at Ron, who paled rapidly.

"The people who went out of their way to be arseholes to them. You don't have to like them, just tolerate them at the very least. I haven't fought with Malfoy once since I made my peace with him and with everything going on right now, the last thing either of us needs are Slytherins on our back because we're antagonistic pricks. Don't give them a reason to."

Ron didn't say anything in response, though Harry could see the cogs in his mind working for once. Hopefully, that had done some good. If not, then he'd tried.

Removing the silencing charm, he left Ron to stew in his own thoughts, managing to catch the last of Alistair's words.

"Today is about control. While a large spell repertoire and magical core are undoubtedly useful, this will mean nothing if you are unable to utilise those effectively. Control is important, no matter how proficient you are. Magic itself is about the mind as much as it is the body and that is something which I would like all of you to discover for yourselves." He had no need to raise his voice and be heard, the room was silent enough for a pin to drop.

Harry nodded in approval and as if to back up his thoughts, he heard some murmurs of agreement. Even Ron looked a little interested.

Harry hadn't paid attention before, but Alistair did have a wand. It differed from both of his own wands but he looked forward to the day that he could use his other wand without restrictions. Both wands served a part of him however and his original wand was no less powerful but naturally, he'd be faced with the same disadvantage he had with Voldemort two years ago, so it was nice to have more than one option.

He'd be interested to see Alistair's wand up close, the wood not straight but with a slight wave, the only straight part being the notched grip, in more than one different shade.

Alistair didn't halt his words, the students watching a scarlet swirl of light forming at the very tip of his wand, seeming to have no end as it gently weaved through the air.

Though it could be something different entirely, the colour Harry was all too familiar with.

"You all have more control over than you may realise. No matter the incantation, it can be shaped
into what you wish until the moment the spell leaves your focus. Visualisation is key."

The swirl split into different parts, homing in on the few students who had taken out their own wands, making an attempt to copy Alistair. In a flash they were disarmed, murmurs of disbelief among the students even as their wands were returned a moment later.

"Expelliarmus?" Harry asked, incredulously. No spell colour was exactly the same and as a spell which he'd used more often than anything else, Harry would know it anywhere. However, he'd never used it in that way before.

"Yes, Mr Potter." Alistair smiled at him. "Providing that you have control, any spell will work. Trying one in this manner that is above your level could result in serious injury so please, do not attempt any outside of your range. Today, I want you all to pick a harmless spell and keep it under control for as long as possible. It can be in any form, however too large will drain your magical core so keep it to a size that is personally manageable. I will be available to assist should you have need of me."

This week was an individual task then. Harry thought it was a nice way to shake things up from last week, Alistair's approach to teaching nothing like he'd seen before. Out of all the training Harry had done, which included with his animagi forms, learning new spells, spell chains, altering the intensity of spells and other things, this form of control wasn't something he'd considered, even before when his magical core was much smaller than it is now.

If he found it to be effective, whenever he had time to he would do this. He suspected like with most things, the more he practised this form of control, the better he would be. Both in visualisation and the best way to work with his magic, rather than call upon it without much thought at all.

"This is fascinating!" Hermione told him, eyes alight with excitement as Neville rolled his eyes affectionately behind her back. No one could quite outshine Hermione in her quest for knowledge.

In the end, he chose to sit by the tree, close to the Professor's chair. Everyone spread out evenly, enough space and less distraction, some choosing to use silencing charms so outside noise wouldn't disrupt their concentration, along with either standing or sitting.

The silence unnerved him. Locked in his cupboard in the past, the darkness was a comfort. He couldn't see his tormentors and for the duration of the time locked in here, he couldn't see himself or the damage done. It was the silence and lack of any noise in that space which scared him, not the dark.

With that in mind, he used the few students and Alistair himself as background noise to allow him to maintain his own control. He hadn't tried anything like this before, so it was a challenge he looked forward to attempting.

"Lumos."
The tiny ball of light grew to the size of an orange, as Harry let it spin at the very tip of his wand, a gentle and almost hypnotic speed and he fell into a similar state as when he meditated, the glowing ball of light sometimes changing shape if he happened to picture it, but not once breaking away from his wand or altering in a size beyond what he could handle.

Glancing around the room nervously, Millicent tried to keep her chosen spell under control. But knowing that the task was for as long as possible and no one else seemed to be struggling to maintain a shape as much as she was, she sighed to herself.

She thought using Protego would help since defensive magic was her forte, but she couldn't keep her concentration for long at all.

Not an outspoken member of Slytherin, throughout her years at Hogwarts she tended to fade in the background, almost painfully shy despite getting Granger in a headlock in the Second year duelling club, for as little as that lasted.

She regretted her actions back then, even now, most of them to fit in as Draco used to go out of his way to irritate every Gryffindor he possibly could. Already picked on for her physical appearance by other houses and a select few in her own, she figured it was better to follow the crowd. She didn't want any unnecessary attention, even if Professor Snape's intervention once he saw what was going on stopped the names to her face, it didn't prevent the odd whispers at her back or the sly comments whenever he wasn't around.

She was grateful for Daphne, the only one she could call a friend and Pansy was a bitch, even more now that Draco had backed off Gryffindor.

When Granger had chosen to be her partner Millicent was shocked, concerned that she'd take the opportunity to enact revenge, as Gryffindors were noted for holding spectacular grudges. But that didn't happen. She was patient, encouraged her and even gave her spell tips, more than what her own house had done in some ways.

Despite her gratefulness to Granger, that didn't solve her current problem. Even Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be faring better and considering their work in the past, how they'd made it into as many classes as they had was a mystery.

She had poor confidence, to begin with, but the pressure was getting to her. She wasn't a quitter, the fact that she hadn't left Hogwarts despite her less than pleasant time was proof of this but the despair which filled her was like none other.

"Is everything alright, Miss Bulstrode?"
Millicent jumped out of her skin, eyes wide when Professor Lothaire appeared before her, silent enough to rival Professor Snape with his movements.

"Apologies if I startled you." Noticing her anxiety as she glanced around the room, he placed a Notice-Me-Not charm around them, the incantation aloud for her benefit, as her shoulders slumped in relief.

"I'm having problems controlling my magic. I can't for more than a few seconds and after that, I panic and it fizzles out."

"Is it the thought of others watching you?" He enquired, keeping his tone gentle as she nodded hesitantly.

"I'm not very good with magic at all and it looks like everyone else is doing better than me."

Against her will, frustrated tears escaped from her eyes and seeing this, Alistair silently offered her a conjured handkerchief.

"Thanks." She whispered, ashamed to be caught in such a state and glad no one else was seeing her like this.

"Please do not think that this is a competition, Miss Bulstrode. It is to explore your own potential and so that I have an indication of individual control levels. Every single student has the ability to be a wonderful Witch or Wizard. Your shield charms against Miss Granger last week were excellent."

"Thank you, sir," She replied, eyes widening in surprise even as her tears dried. Purpose fulfilled, the handkerchief banished itself.

"You're very welcome. As for the eyes of the other students, have you heard of Obscurum? It will hide your view of the other students, though you will still be able to hear."

Shaking her head once, she watched as Professor Lothaire showed her how to do it, thankfully easier than most of the other spells she'd tried.

"Until you are confident enough, use those spells for as long as you wish to. You are not the only one who has chosen to do so."

Honestly, that did make her feel better and thanks to the combination of the spells and the Professor's faith in her, she was ready to try again.

Alistair nodded in approval, heart lightening as her expression filled with confidence, hesitant as it
was. Even without reading her mind he'd encountered many like her, others with comments designed to belittle and shatter the spirit of the person intended. Hopefully aside from Ser Sunshine, who he knew was a positive influence and a marvellous head of house despite his surly exterior, he could provide some semblance of support.

Then, he had an idea. "Miss Bulstrode. What is your favourite thing?"

"Sir?" She asked, confusion clouding her expression.

"If you are able to visualise something that you're fond of along with your chosen spell, it may help your control," He explained, wondering if this method would work for her.

"Cats." Just the thought of her own brought a smile to her face.

"Imagine the scenery for your cats. It can be anything you like, with your chosen spell as the focus."

Millicent nodded silently to indicate she understood, an image of her cat playing with a tiny Protego ball of wool on their living room carpet, holding it between her paws and when it sprang from her grasp, running to catch it once more.

As Alistair watched, a small but very strong ball formed, rolling away mid-air from her wand but a tiny trail still connecting it to the tip.

"Ten points to Slytherin, Miss Bulstrode." he murmured, unwilling to disrupt her concentration now that she had found it.

However, it wasn't long before something else needed his attention and sensing trouble, he cast a widespread silencing charm over the room so that the students wouldn't be disrupted.

Ron jumped Crabbe, knocking them both to the floor after Crabbe had thrown what was presumably a piece of parchment, judging by the scrunched up ball. Alistair didn't expect such an extreme reaction, the red-headed boy quicker to anger than he'd ever seen before.

He soon got over his surprise, casting a barrier between them and in those few seconds, They had managed to cause damage to the other. Despite the barrier, that didn't stop their verbal fight.

"What did you do that for you fucking bastard? I was concentrating!" Ron renewed his efforts to get past the barrier to Crabbe who after standing up, remained where he was, smirking.

"Just wanted to see your reaction."
Alistair had come to realise just why Severus' frown lines were so deep if this was what he and some of the other staff had to put up with on a regular basis. He kept a close eye on them, removing the barrier and not even trying to mask the displeasure in his tone.

"Five points for Language, Mr Weasley. and detention for both of you. You can explain in detail what happened then. I am not concerned with who instigated this, blindly throwing punches is not the answer. Anything further and I will remove house points. Do I make myself clear?"

As both muttered a yes, Alistair told them to return to their task, but not before speaking to Ron first.

"I hope that your detentions with me will not become a regular occurrence."

"No, sir." Sullen, Ron continued what he was doing before he decided to punch Crabbe.

Alistair did consider healing their injuries, however, it would serve as a reminder for now, unless they chose to heal it themselves or visit Madam Pomfrey later.

He'd have to inform Minerva and Severus of this and as with the last few times he'd had to report a student to their head of house, he took no joy from it. At least any other student except Ronald Weasley. Though that was something he wouldn't admit aloud.

A couple of students had stopped and started a few times but Miss Granger followed by Mr Malfoy and Miss Greengrass had managed to keep a consistent level of concentration since the task started almost an hour ago, only losing focus once or twice. Mr Longbottom was doing admirably as well.

Many were doing better than he expected and with practice outside of class, they would easily have a greater grasp of control.

Despite helping Millicent and dealing with Ron and Crabbe, Alistair had frequently turned to Harry, If it wasn't for the fact that his wand remained lit with lumos and each time he looked it shaped into a different form, he'd think that Harry had fallen asleep.

They were a little larger and more varied, not breaking a sweat in the slightest as he watched it form into what looked like a little snake, curling up and around his shoulders but still maintaining its connection, form not wavering for a second.

Though he'd encountered many kinds of magic and the different feelings surrounding them, such as the cool touch of Severus' and the gentle feel of Luna's, Harry's magic was not something he could set in concrete, as it seemed to evolve every time he came face to face with him, whether it was by a little or a lot. What always remained despite this, was the sheer strength and passion emanating from it, his magical core a kaleidoscope of bold colours, with a swirl of grey through the centre.
It was a fascinating sight to behold, and one that he could find himself looking at for hours.

All in all, this was the most relaxing DADA lesson he'd had the pleasure of having. He realised at some point he'd gone into a similar state of meditation but didn't lose his concentration as in his mind's eye, he could still see his wand and the Lumos at the end, sometimes changing shape if he wanted it to.

'Harry?'

'Yes, this is Harry Potter. How may I assist you today?' He asked, sending an impression of a teasing grin towards Alistair, who chuckled in response.

'You have excellent control, to the point where none of the students could break you out of it.'

'Really, how long? It feels like no time passed at all.'

'An hour and fifteen minutes, to be precise.'

'Oh, sorry. One second.'

Blinking his eyes, Harry managed to open them, squinting some against the sudden light, smiling sheepishly as every student's eye was on him.

"Sweet dreams, Potter?" Malfoy asked, an amused smirk crossing his lips as Harry answered with one of his own.

"If you can count me being chased by a rampaging horde of slick-haired Draco Malfoys through the halls of Hogwarts sweet dreams, then sure."

Malfoy rolled his eyes, Harry barely restraining a snort when he patted the top of his head to check and see if his hair was still in place.

Standing up Harry joined the rest of the class, the remaining 45 minutes spent in a similar manner, only this time, as part of large group. The class including Alistair stood in a circle and what essentially became a combination of catch, quick thinking and control.

As Alistair formed a ball at the tip of his wand, no one would know who it would be aimed at and during that time, the student had to know what spell it was and respond accordingly. As the spell ball travelled through the air, it remained temporarily out of control until someone took charge, maintaining the spell, the shape and the size. At some point, almost everyone hadn't managed to
think on time, showered with water or on the receiving end of a cheering charm but fresh off of practising individual control, Harry found it to be enjoyable and so did many of the other students, judging by the expressions on their faces.

Before long the lesson was over, Harry waiting until the class left including Hermione and Neville, saying he'd catch up later.

Patting the pouch with his cloak in, he hoped that Dumbledore hadn't done too much damage. But if anyone could fix it, then Alistair would be the man to do so.

Though Harry mainly used the pouch to withdraw money, it was Goblin made and therefore served for multi-purpose uses and at any time, he could switch what he wanted to retrieve with a tap of his wand. As always with Goblins it came at a price but in exchange, enough protection to rival a mini version of Gringotts' bank. At least, according to them.

He followed Alistair through to his office until he was reminded of something.

"Where's Lilah?"

Alistair smiled in reassurance, taking a seat behind his desk.

"She is in another bedroom. Though my private quarters only housed one, I curiously found myself with another."

"Yeah, Hogwarts does that." Harry patted one of the stone walls in fondness, taking a seat opposite the desk and removing the pouch attached to his side.

Opening it he summoned the cloak, using his wand and though he'd touched it before when he didn't know better, he didn't want to take the risk now and carefully lowered it onto the desk.

Harry didn't say anything, happy to watch Alistair work in any situation. The way he used magic fascinated him, not to mention the magic itself. So unbelievably strong but not a hint of danger or threat to him, unlike Dumbledore.

Alistair didn't use his wand, hand hovering a little above the material, slowly moving across and as Harry tuned in with his own magic, the sight was different to what he'd seen when he looked at first.

Once Alistair's hand ran over a certain area, the layers stood out in stark definition and Harry could see the spells were more interwoven into the fabric than he'd thought.

"The spells that you identified earlier are correct. However, there are more. For a human, loathe as I
am to call Dumbledore that, his spellwork is nearly flawless."

"Nearly?" Harry asked, not looking away from the thorough analysis his cloak was undergoing.

"Everything has a weakness. I have not yet encountered anything where that isn't the case or spells of any kind which I am unable to undo."

There was nothing arrogant about Alistair's words, just simple confidence and fact.

The further Alistair's hand travelled across the fabric, the more his brow furrowed. That is until his expression froze completely, his tone devoid of its usual lightheartedness.

"In the many varieties of ways one can succumb to death, none would even come close to what this mockery of a human deserves."

Alistair's eyes flashed, practically narrowed into slits.

Harry looked up, wary. He knew what Dumbledore was capable of. Well, he thought he did, that is until the fact that Dumbledore had kept Vampire prisoners under the school was made known to him.

"There is another spell, the most deeply embedded within the fabric but maintaining a black sheen on the surface, which you have no doubt seen. That is an altered form of Obliviate. Dependent upon how long and how frequently the item is used, the wearer will lose memories. It acts over time, however, used in this manner there is a high chance it will not stop until there are no more to take."

"I'd be a shell of my former self. " He murmured, a wave of fear washing over him, of what could have been. In that state, if done correctly, he'd be a literal puppet for Dumbledore to use, able to implant whatever commands he wished and all the while not knowing how he used to live, or knowing any better.

While Alistair had near flawless control over his emotions where it counted, he only chose to hide them where in that case, it would be better. Even before the Glamour charm over his eyes he still managed to convey the same emotions, even if Harry was glad he was now one of the few allowed to see through the brown eyes for the remarkably beautiful colour they were, his gaze seeming to warm Harry from inside out.

"He will not harm you through this again. Though this cloak is a marvellous construct of magic, it is impossible that it would stay in the same condition across such a long period of time. Where the material is frayed, that is where the enchantments have faded and as a result, those are places that Dumbledore has targeted."

It made perfect sense to Harry, thinking along the same lines.
Beneath his amazed eyes, the cloak began to change. Not only were the spells carefully removed with surgical precision, but the gaps once filled with ill intent were stitched back together, not a word spoken or mouthed, not a movement out of place.

Alistair worked with the same finesse and delicacy that Professor Snape had with the art of Potions. Alistair was in every sense, a master of magic. He worked with it, rather than calling it to his command without care.

The harsh contrast of colours vanished, as did the sheen of black. With each movement, they shifted to a softer gradient.

The cloak underwent physical changes too. In its normal state, not exactly light and when it wasn't being used, black with a faint copper tint.

Slowly but surely, it transformed into something which looked a lot lighter, a shimmering silver to rival Unicorn Hair.

All in all, it must have only taken Alistair a minute, if that. Sometimes Harry forgot just how old he was since his physical appearance resembled someone in their mid 20's.

"Absolutely nothing will break this cloak's defences now. It will adjust to the wearer or wearers, it is lighter and the faint traces of enchantments that were once there I have renewed, along with extra of my own. Anyone who wishes to curse this particular item will be greeted with a special surprise." His smile at that moment wasn't a friendly one.

Harry ran a hand over the fabric, marvelling that it even felt different to the touch.

"Thank you, much appreciated." Harry gave him a relieved smile, placing the cloak back into his pouch.

"You are always welcome." His sunset eyes sparkled, Harry's heartbeat raising in response. Distracted as he was, he didn't think about his wording.

"Can I see your wand?"

Sparkle in his eyes not dimming any, Alistair's voice turned teasing, smile not leaving his face.

"Why Harry, how surprisingly bold of you!"

'Shit, think before you speak!' He admonished himself, knowing instinctively his blush had returned.
"I-I meant a wand you cast spells with! Not-" He stumbled over his words, Alistair's warm laughter not helping any.

"The other kind of wand." He finished, not knowing what else to say.

Alistair's hand brushed his flushed cheek. "I apologise, I knew the meaning of your words. However your reactions are so endearing, I find myself wanting to tease you."

'If he teases me anymore, I'll die at the hands of a charming Vampire, not Voldemort.' He thought.

Though in his opinion, there were worse ways to go.

Alistair's wand sprang forth from its wrist holster, similar but different in design.

"Is it ok to touch it? The wand that you have in your hand," He added hastily, saving himself further embarrassment and now that Alistair had mentioned it, unable to keep his mind out of the gutter.

"Only those with ill intentions will suffer the consequences, more so if they should attempt to cast using it. Though I would not recommend using my wand under any circumstances."

"I understand." And he did. He was lucky that his Holly and Phoenix feather wand didn't harshly react to others who'd touched it, it simply refused to work for them. His illegal wand, however, he was unsure of.

He listened to Alistair, even as he turned over the wand in his hand, studying it with interest.

"Pear wood, rigid, fifteen and a half inches with a quarter of a Chimaera scale fragment. I have used the very same wand since I acquired it at a century of age."

"Why so late?" Harry queried, the craftsmanship different but no less impressive than his own wands, tiny runes engraved into the wood and while at a distance he thought Alistair's wand was brown, the wood was actually golden in colour.

"Though there is always new magic, by that time I had the utmost confidence in my skills, enough to be able to wield a wand with that particular core though, at the time, I had no idea it would be as potent. If I were any younger, I would not have been able to use it effectively."

Alistair continued to speak for Harry's benefit, even as his mind relived the memory.
"Chimaera scales are incredibly powerful and I have only ever encountered a small handful of non-vampires who have the same core. I have the advantage of immortality while many others do not. It has taken me many years before I could say that I truly know my wand inside and out. It is like an old friend, particularly since it was gifted to me by Solomon who crafted it himself." He smiled in fondness.

"Solomon's a wandmaker then?" True Harry was curious, but to know anything more about Alistair and by extension, Solomon was a blessing in itself. He carefully ran his finger over the runes, treating the wand delicately though having no doubt when wielded, it would completely and utterly kick his arse.

"Ah, not exactly. That is the only wand Solomon has crafted, though he has not shared how long for, he learned every single aspect of wand making he could and applied it in practice. He prefers enchantment, such as the creation of martial arts blades and imbuing them with special properties. Nevertheless, I still appreciate it, more so since it is an art which he has the least interest in."

In one way, Harry was jealous of the sibling bond they shared. Growing up with The Dursleys he'd always wanted siblings and when the Weasleys, Hermione and Luna came along, it was all he could ask for. To keep the same wand for 1,400 years and still looking in excellent condition, was a testament to the great care Alistair treated his wand with and the craftsmanship of Solomon.

Though his mind was always filled with what he needed to do in the present and what had to be done for the future, there were moments when his parents and Sirius flitted through his mind. He was so thankful for Remus but the thought that he'd been robbed of his parents, leaving only their death as a vivid memory and Sirius who he'd barely known sometimes made him regret that he was Harry Potter, the savour or scapegoat.

"Harry?" Alistair's soft voice called him from his thoughts and silently, he handed Alistair's wand back, still taking care.

"Sorry." Harry smiled, though it was tinged with sadness. "I was sparing a thought for what could have been."

"There is no need to apologise. It is something I often found myself doing, particularly the first few years after Solomon's disappearance."

Alistair's wand now back in its holster, a set of refreshments appeared before them and Harry couldn't help but laugh as a plate of Ginger Newts appeared alongside tea and Pumpkin Juice.

"McGonagall's converted a boy blessed with strange luck and a Vampire to her Ginger Newt loving cause. And Pumpkin Juice?"

"There is something strangely pleasant about it."
That was pretty much Harry's reaction the first time he'd tried it too. Overall he preferred tea, not the overly sweetened crap that Dumbledore and Umbridge favoured, along with Butterbeer whenever he had the chance to have some.

"I am glad that you are smiling Harry. I find that is my favourite expression of yours." Alistair's eyes met Harry's over his goblet.

The fact that Alistair was always so upfront and honest never failed to embarrass him, but it made a nice change from most of the people in his life hiding their true feelings, as well as himself, out of necessity.

"I like your smile too," Harry replied, not as embarrassed about saying it aloud as he thought it would be, perhaps because of the sheer truth of it, though his own smile grew at seeing Alistair look so happy.

They enjoyed a pleasant silence, along with their mutual love for Ginger Newts.

After some time had passed, Alistair broke the silence with a question that he least expected.

"Why is it that you wear a Glamour Charm?"

Alistair had been curious about this ever since he'd first met Harry. Though he could easily break through and see, he didn't want to do that. The only reason he'd broken through Harry's disguise Glamour was to see who he truly was. He could tell the distinction between Glamours and the second one was there for a reason. He sensed no malice or hidden intentions from Harry that day so didn't see or ask about it, wanting him to feel comfortable enough to release it.

"I'd forgotten I'd even applied it." Harry set his cup down, blinking.

It was true. He really had. Come to think of it he did wonder why none of the boys had commented on his tattoos. Harry could safely say he was confident in his own body, even the scars he had. Well, most of them.

Usually, he knew when to cancel his Glamour, magic giving an indication, tiredness pulling until he released it, ready to replenish overnight. But now that he had access to his full magic, the only time he'd felt drained was the days when he practised in the Room of Requirement.

Not only that but he could see himself for how he truly was, tattoos and scars, but no one else could unless they chose to break through and he knew full well Alistair could, but the fact that he hadn't and chose to ask about it instead touched him beyond words.

Harry cancelled his Glamour, not even feeling less strain on his magic like he would have in the past.
"It was to hide my scars, I was terrified of anyone finding out what The Dursleys did to me at that time. After this Summer I didn't have to worry about it anymore, but coupled with habit and my increase in magic so I didn't notice the strain, it never occurred to me that I don't need it anymore. There are only a few scars which I'm uncomfortable with."

Harry couldn't bring himself to look, the thought of Umbridge causing them to tingle and even after months, they'd not faded as much as he'd have liked them to, probably due to how many hours he was forced to sit there and write. If it was his current self in his past body, he wouldn't willingly put himself through the same torture but at the time he saw no way out, viewing her in much the same light as The Dursleys and any more defiance at that moment would have only made it worse for him.

Essence of Dittany thanks to Hermione helped but much like the scar on his forehead they were cursed and would remain there forever, according to Dumbledore at least. But these days, anything of what Dumbledore claimed only had a small kernel of truth.

Harry placed both hands on the desk, palms face down. He didn't have to look to know that his left hand read, 'I must not tell lies.' while his right read, 'I will not break rules.' Try as he might he couldn't stop from feeling vulnerable and unable to help it, he looked away, eyes on the ground.

Harry didn't say a word, though he didn't need the sudden heating up of the room to know that Alistair was furious. As rare as the moments were they were memorable enough for Harry not to forget the signs anytime soon.

Though Alistair knew that Harry had been through more in his young life than he could imagine, from what he'd heard as a Professor and from Harry himself, but a Blood Quill? Absolutely no other dark object could do this, having one of his own. Though the only times he used them were for the very official and therefore either important or dull, contracts.

For such severe scarring to occur, it would have to be repeatedly and for hours, the scarring even for humans fading as one signature and a Wizard's healing capability ensured fast healing time.

"Who did this to you?" Alistair asked, voice calm as the waters of the lake, yet he longed to drink whoever did this dry.

"Dolores Umbridge," Harry spoke quietly, though his tone didn't stop the tingling any, flexing his fists unconsciously. "A goon from The Ministry placed there by the Minister of Magic to keep an eye on Dumbledore, suspicious that he was raising an army to overthrow him. She was last years' DADA teacher and despite her appearance, everyone was terrified. There were no practicals, all textbook work. She said that Voldemort wasn't back. I argued so I got this."

He flexed his left hand, breathing in and out. He hadn't really talked about this, not even to Remus. Sirius hadn't known at all, the most they'd known was that he'd had a lot of Detentions, but not what he was doing.
"And that one was after she found out about, at the time, Dumbledore's Army." He flexed his right hand, gladder than ever it was now called Defense Association or as Luna put it, Dumbledore's Archenemies.

"She had me in Detention every night she could get away with, I usually didn't finish until after midnight either. I've experienced a lot of pain but that-" Harry's voice cracked. Squeezing his eyes shut he continued. "-That was some of the worst."

Harry put his head in his hands, struggling to stay seated and having the urge to pace, uncomfortable with laying everything out in the open although as before, strangely relieving to get it off his chest.

"The number of times I had to sit there and write I almost started to believe it. Hermione was a great help but that only lessened some of the pain, amplified a bit more with each night I carved the same words into my hands, over and over again. It killed me, physically and mentally and that's partly why my mind was weak enough for Voldemort to slip in and possess me without a second thought. Every single year at Hogwarts has been some kind of chaos, but last year was a special kind."

Harry's chest felt as though a weight was pressing down on it, he had to swallow several times in case he started crying again. Once was more than enough when Lilah's situation hit too close to home, he didn't exactly want a repeat performance.

He hadn't heard Alistair move, but a larger hand grasped one of his own. Though it was naturally his imagination, Harry could almost swear they contained a little physical warmth.

A thumb ran soothingly over the back of his left hand, calming him even as they passed over the roughness of his scar.

A gentle hand touched beneath his chin, encouraging him to lift his head and he did so, cursing internally as his eyes watered.

Alistair's serious gaze never left his own, so much warmth and compassion, more than he'd seen many humans hold that Harry thought the general population should reconsider Dumbledore's status of wisdom, if he painted all Vampires with the same brush, including Alistair, who didn't fit any of the stereotypes.

"Every single person who has willingly harmed you will know what it is to experience fear. I am at your side Harry, no matter what scars you bear."

Voice more gentle than Harry had ever heard before, Alistair picked up Harry's other hand and in an action which soon stopped any and all thought processes, kissed the back of it, soon followed by the other, as if to seal promises.
Still crouched where he was, Alistair drew Harry into a gentle embrace, Harry surprising himself by barely stiffening up, the most relaxed in response to affection he'd been for a long time.

Harry couldn't help but think Alistair's affection was something he'd never grow tired of. Returning the embrace Harry allowed himself to relax into it, heart and mind even lighter now he'd shared yet another of his limitless burdens. They remained that way for a long while until he reluctantly released him.

"Ah, as much as I adore your company, Harry, I am afraid the joys of marking are calling to me."

"Of course." Harry was back to normal now, it was as if the combination of Alistair, Tea and Ginger Newts had fully recharged him.

"Thanks for your time Professor, see you later," Harry called out, knowing that once all their classes were over, a certain group of friends would be awaiting his arrival, particularly Hermione, with what had happened yesterday.

Watching him go, Alistair's heart seemed to physically ache. Then, he reflected upon the strange happening since rescuing Solomon.

From the moment he'd tasted Harry's blood to heal him from Solomon's mark, there had been subtle changes, changes so slight most wouldn't notice but for someone like him, he could sense if so much as a particle became irregular.

At the moment, he didn't have an answer for why these changes were occurring, only time would tell. But time, was something Alistair had plenty of.
Deeper connections are formed, between friends, forming friendships and on the verge of something more.

Harry was enjoying classes more than he ever had, due to the Dursleys no longer being a threat, or injuries which prevented him from giving his full attention and concentration. Having the capability for Occlumency to help keep track of some of the more stressful and darker thoughts which tended to fill his mind helped as well.

However, the rest of the day, at least to him, was passing by slower than it took to digest one of Hagrid's rock cakes. He was sure time had slowed down purely because he wanted the day to be over and while his earlier words with Ron hadn't stopped the fighting with Crabbe, as Alistair had informed him, he at least hadn't said a word to Daphne. Though that could have easily been because today's task was mainly individual. The Slytherins were undoubtedly still plotting their revenge.

Speaking of Ron, Harry was trying and failing to ditch him, unable to head straight to his destination.

"So, what you up now mate?" Ron asked, through a mouthful of Pumpkin Pasty. Instead of school supplies, Ron must have a supply of food because roughly half of the time Harry spoke with him his mouth was full, the only exception being when showering, sleeping or in lessons.

It was easier than he thought to adopt his past attitude, though he had kept it up for so long. Partly to fit in and partly because back then his mind was limited as much as his magic, following a set path with disallowance for personal growth.

"No idea, I was just going to wander for a bit." Harry shrugged, giving off a carefree vibe.

"Ooh look, if it isn't Potty and Weasel!"

Perfect. Though Peeves wasn't always the most cooperative of Poltergeists, when it came to pranks, his temporary loyalty was guaranteed. Full loyalty when it came to Fred and George.

"Peeves, can I have a word?" Harry enquired, keeping his tone level as any sign of desperation or annoyance, at least from past experience, would only encourage him to do the opposite of what he wanted.

"Give me a minute." He told Ron, halting him with an outstretched hand as he placed Silencing and
Notice-Me-Not charms around himself and Peeves.

"Got a deal for you." Harry started, stopped by Peeves' cackling.

"Naughty Potty the Prefect making deals with Peeves! Whatever shall I do?" Grin widening, his gaze seemed to challenge Harry.

"Distract Ron and I'll get you more Stink and Water bombs than you can hold."

He was serious as well. If Peeves agreed to do this much the very least he could do in return was purchase a good amount, maybe even some other harmless pranks. Fred and George had managed to bring their dream into reality thanks to Harry's Triwizard Tournament winnings and according to Ginny, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes was one of the busiest stores in Diagon Alley right now.

"Weasel is fun to prank..." Peeves thought for a moment and Harry added something extra.

"Here's a tip. If you want some new prank ideas, ask Professor Lothaire. He might know more than you think."

Peeves stared at Harry for a long moment, swooping in close to look right into his eyes. He didn't break eye contact.

After a moment Peeves seemed to nod to himself. "Deal. If you break your promise Potty..." He rubbed his hands, eyes twinkling with glee.

He barely withheld a shudder. Not that he couldn't avoid Peeves but wherever he was, Filch or another Professor was sure to follow as he wasn't exactly quiet.

"I won't." Harry held out his hand and after a moment Peeves shook it, but not before blowing a raspberry, cackling as Harry cancelled both charms. He only watched Peeves torment Ron for a few seconds, chuckling in amusement as he escaped from the chaos no doubt about to be created.

It hadn't been long since they were last in the Room of Requirement, however so much had happened since then that it felt as if it was an eternity.

He checked his surroundings and after making sure that no one was around, opened the door which vanished behind him once closed.

"You can stop fidgeting now, he's here," He heard Ginny, smirking as he knew Hermione's patience could be selective at times.
"Sorry for the delay, I enlisted Peeves to help me ditch Ron." Harry took a seat next to Neville, smiling apologetically at Hermione who waved his comment away with a gesture of her hand.

"Seriously Harry tell us now, I don't think Hermione can take the suspense much longer," Ginny smirked with amusement but Hermione didn't even protest.

"I'm curious as well," Neville confessed even as a series of snacks and drinks appeared on the table, courtesy of Harry.

"We're going to need them. This is big."

Despite Hermione's lack of patience, she could tell that Harry wouldn't say those words lightly. As Neville, Ginny and Hermione unconsciously held their breath Luna remained her usual self, except for the brief flicker of sadness in her eyes.

"Alistair has a brother called Solomon. He was missing for 74 years." Harry started, everyone's eyes on him. Speaking about it again was putting the memories of the event at the forefront of his mind and he employed all his Occlumency skills to stay calm.

"I'd felt a tug since returning to Hogwarts, some kind of urge that I really needed to go wherever the feeling was. And it took me to a room with an illusion and once that was gone, back to where we found the Philosophers' Stone." He looked at Hermione, as her eyes widened.

"Once I got to that room, I found Solomon and others as well. Dumbledore has been keeping Vampire prisoners in the school, starved and mistreated, some of them dead. One of them was pregnant."

Harry's voice slowed down a little, in an effort to not sound too shaky, even as Ginny paled rapidly. Luna's expression didn't change, though Hermione's hardened. Neville didn't try to hide his shock.

"I contacted Alistair and in turn, he contacted one of his friends and between the three of us, we were able to move the prisoners to safety, with the help of Fawkes who showed up. But Dumbledore's forced him into a bond. I haven't looked at them yet but he sent me images of the type of bond and hopefully, I can help him out."

He stopped for a moment, to catch his breath and to attempt to let the information sink in for everyone else, though it hadn't for him yet. Speaking of it only reminded him of how very real it was.

"Dumbledore used Fawkes' blood unwillingly given to keep Solomon weak and through Solomon drinking my own blood which still has traces of Fawkes' tears, it was able to undo a lot of damage caused. He's in a sleep state at Lothaire Castle recovering along with the others we freed."
The room was silent for a moment, the mood sombre, until Hermione spoke up, determined.

"Will you show us the memory? From the moment you encountered the illusion to the moment you left."

Harry was hesitant. He had a feeling Hermione would ask and while he knew she was strong, he didn't want her or the others if they chose to view it to be affected in the same way he was.

"Are you sure?" He asked and when she nodded resolutely, he looked at the others. "Do you want to see as well?"

Ginny nodded, complexion still paler than usual. "There's a chance we might spot something you missed. We've got the opportunity to watch but look at the surroundings as well."

Neville nodded in agreement. "Though I haven't been a friend for as long as Hermione I want to offer my support and for that, I need to know and understand what you saw."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Harry clapped him on the shoulder, turning to Luna, who gave a gentle nod in response.

Stomach churning with nerves for what they were about to see, a Pensieve appeared in the centre. Harry didn't want to watch again so waited for them to finish, consuming his nerves with Butterbeer and Neopolitan ice cream. He couldn't get enough of the stuff and with each spoonful, it seemed to calm him.

Once they returned from viewing his memory, he expected extreme reactions. He had one of his own, in the form of what he'd seen triggering a past nightmare and once they returned their reactions were almost what he was expecting.

What he wasn't expecting, was the look of unadulterated anger on Neville's face. In all the years he'd known him Harry had never seen Neville angry. Irritated sometimes, always shy in the past and confident in the present, but never angry.

His anger was unmistakable, however, eyes narrowed and clenched fists even as Hermione sat down, visibly shaken but mind working overtime. It wasn't long before she was temporarily in her own world, Harry assuming that she was writing down everything she saw.

"I can't even imagine losing any of my brothers for so long, I'd lose my mind. And Poor Fawkes..." Ginny whispered, taking a deep drink of Butterbeer and watching Neville.

"That son of a bitch..." Neville growled loudly, even making Hermione jump out of her usual writing stupor, the group transfixed with watching Neville pace on the spot, practically spitting out his next
"You know what? Deep down despite all he's done, I thought that there was an ounce of truth, just a little bit of the good man that everyone has been made to believe he is. But there's nothing there? That's proof!"

Neville pointed to the Pensieve. "Not to mention that while in there, Ginny, Luna and I agree with Hermione and I'm sure you came to the same conclusion, that Voldemort got his inspiration for the Dark Mark through Dumbledore. So much suffering and why? Because they're different. That's it. I mean yeah some Vampires are dangerous but I've been attacked by regular witches and wizards more than Vampires, Bellatrix the Bitch Lestrange personally."

Harry couldn't prevent his shock even if he wanted to when a bottle of Firewhisky appeared, Neville pouring a small measure into a glass and knocking it back.

"Sorry, I needed that." Neville took a deep breath in, then exhaled. "If I never see that bearded tosser again, it'll be too soon."

A murmur of agreement across the room, as Neville had spoken for all of them.

Then, Harry's eyes caught Luna's.

"Luna?" He asked softly, approaching her.

He hadn't once seen her cry, even when she had reason to and much like himself her cries were silent, enough that he didn't pick them up.

Tears slowly trickled down her face and before Harry could do anything Luna went swiftly for the exit.

"Luna, where are you going?" He shouted at her and though she replied in a softer voice than usual, somehow her words managed to carry over.

"To see Professor Lothaire, I'll be back soon."

He blinked rapidly as he watched her leave, even as his heart warmed. Alistair would be in for a pleasant surprise.

"I may as well tell you now, though you probably already knew. The bracelet Alistair gave me allows me to communicate with him mentally." Harry said, still watching Luna's retreating back as he retook his seat.
Both of Ginny's eyebrows raised as Hermione finished writing, looking at him with interest.

"I had my suspicions and you've just confirmed it. What does it feel like?" Hermione asked, even as Ginny sniggered to herself.

"Weird at first because sometimes it's images and I struggled to talk normally when having a conversation, but I'm used to it now."

Then, he cocked his head questioningly at Ginny. "What's so funny?"

"Well," She started, leaning forward and Harry regretted ever asking, after hearing her next words. "How many racy images have you sent each other of yourselves? It's a conversation in the mind, no one needs to know..." She wiggled her eyebrows for emphasis, laughing as Harry sputtered.

"None, I swear!" Harry protested.

"...The way you said that, I don't believe you one bit."

"I'm staying out of this," Neville smartly removed himself from the situation, approaching Hermione. "So, what is it you've written down there?"

As Neville and Hermione got into a discussion and Harry tried to convince Ginny that they hadn't been sexually explicit once, he wondered how Alistair would react to Luna's surprise visit.

As Luna made her way towards Professor Lothaire's office, she found herself surprised at her own actions. She hadn't cried, not really. The last time she could remember properly crying was when her mother died. Usually, she'd keep any sadness locked away to deal with in private, or filter a little of her feelings into her butterbeer cork necklace.

Though none of them knew, Luna was an Empath, the same as Harry's new friend, Lilah. She hadn't had the opportunity to approach her and offer help. Luna had to manage on her own and over time she was able to block out others' emotions and stop them from bleeding into her own. As soon as Lilah woke up, she'd offer assistance.

She couldn't sense Professor Lothaire's, most likely because of his great age and experience. No one would see his inner turmoil unless he trusted them enough to allow that much.

Over the summer, Luna had developed Seer abilities, which ran in her mother's bloodline. Though it was nothing impressive, at the moment she could only see a few days into the future and even then it
wasn't much.

She knew that something would cause great turmoil, but not to who or when. At most, it provided a forewarning for herself and with very little information to go on, there wasn't much point in sharing what she knew, until her abilities developed in such a way that they could help.

But she didn't expect this. Even if only in memory form she experienced the emotions as if they were personally her own. The look of relief and love on the Professor's face as he was reunited with his brother and not knowing if he was dead or alive for all those years before, keeping himself in near isolation filled her with sorrow.

Though he would heal, a little better now that Solomon was found, it wouldn't erase the past decades of pain that Professor Dumbledore had caused the brothers.

Though Luna didn't have the capacity to hate, Professor Dumbledore came the closest to achieving that.

Luna wanted to help Professor Lothaire in her own way and as his friend, it was her pleasure to do so. Everyone deserves the comfort of another, no matter who they are.

Placing his quill on the desk, Alistair barely withheld a sigh. As many ways as Wizarding culture had advanced, the simplest of things remained trapped in the past, such as the insistence of Quill, Ink and Parchment.

While he did appreciate the Biro's quickness, he'd always loved calligraphy and his penmanship was beautiful. He had an eternity to perfect it, after all.

He was more than happy to give the resident Poltergeist some tips as Peeves had approached him earlier, though Minerva would not be pleased should she ever find out he did so. He had the suspicion that this was Harry's doing, as he was the only one who knew of his love for mischief with the exception of Solomon and Rupert.

He was brought from his thoughts by a knock on the door and once it opened, he was greeted with Miss Lovegood.

He stood up and before he had the chance to so much as say hello, small arms gently wrapped around his middle, bringing with them the soothing vibe of her magic. It seemed to shroud him, as though a heated blanket was placed across his shoulders, the gentleness seeping into his skin. Though he'd never once in his life needed to inhale for any reason he had the urge to do so and with it, the stresses of his eternal life didn't appear quite as strong.

"Is everything all right, Miss Lovegood?” He asked, concerned even as he returned her hug.
"Everything will be alright. You're my friend. Even if it's just a little, I want to help. Everyone deserves a happy hug." Her voice trembled with earnestness.

A smile instantly bloomed on his face. In all his years, that was the sweetest thing he'd heard anyone say. He could understand why she was one of Harry's friends and in his opinion, she was too pure for this world, the way it was. He accepted her hug wholeheartedly, feeling energised.

"Thank you, Miss Lovegood, you're very kind." And in truth, once she pulled away, he did feel better.

Giving him an open and honest smile Luna skipped to the exit, wishing him a nice day.

Though he had only taken this job as a way to be close to Dumbledore and to watch over Harry, Alistair was glad that the job was turning out to be far more rewarding than he'd realised. A soft smile on his face Alistair resumed marking, the secret of how he could accomplish so much in such a short time remaining with him still, much to Minerva's frustration.

Trying to convince Ginny that he was innocent of sending Alistair anything mentally explicit was like trying to convince Ron that food wasn't a necessary thing every hour of every day; impossible.

Feeling that Ginny had teased Harry enough she joined Neville and Hermione, as they waited for Luna's return.

Thankfully Alistair didn't catch him off guard when he next spoke, able to eat the last of his ice cream in peace without swallowing it incorrectly.

'Harry, do you know why Miss Lovegood was in distress? I just received a visit from her where she proceeded to hug me. While I do feel better, I'm curious as to why.'

Harry smiled to himself, though it was tinged with some sadness. 'I showed everyone what happened below the school and told them about Dumbledore keeping prisoners. I'm not sure whether it was a specific thing Luna saw in my memory, but that was what probably brought it on.'

'Ah, I see. Though if given the option, I would much rather have you in my arms.'

'How can you say something so embarrassing and not bat an eyelid?'

'That would be many, many years of experience, coupled with my enjoyment of teasing you.' A casual wink.
Of course. Not that Harry minded, but he was thankful for small blessings, such as Ginny not looking in his direction right now, the chance of him being able to keep a straight face in response low.

There was silence between them for the moment, each enjoying the other's company, even if it wasn't physically. Harry never found silences to be awkward with Alistair, even from the start.

'Are Miss Weasley, Mr Longbottom and Miss Granger alright?'

'Hermione's been scribbling away for a while now, I'm assuming it's notes of the things she saw in my memory. Ginny felt for you though, having brothers of her own she couldn't imagine losing one of them.'

'I would never wish a missing sibling upon anyone.' Harry could hear the seriousness in his voice. 'Though it fills my heart with happiness that Solomon is no longer lost.'

That was something Harry could agree with. Those fleeting moments of sadness that crossed Alistair's expression clenched his heart. Though from personal experience he knew this to be unrealistic, the wish for Alistair to always smile remained.

Thinking back on a few minutes ago, Harry couldn't help but smirk.

'It's Neville that surprised me, he was so angry. Taking a shot of whisky kind of angry. Dumbledore needs to watch out or I think he'll find himself strangled by some nefarious exotic plant.'

A warm chuckle. 'Now that, I would like to see. Mr Longbottom strikes me as quiet yet confident. They do say it is the quiet ones that are often the most deadly.'

He couldn't argue with that. At the sound of the door opening, he stopped talking, Luna retaking her seat.

She sent a soft smile his way, looking better than when she'd left.

"He feels better now."

"Glad to hear it." He sent her a smile back. Glancing over at Hermione questioningly, he looked at the papers in her hands.

"Notes about what I saw in your memory." Well, that confirmed his guess.

"I also have an idea." Steely determination in her eyes, Harry silently gestured to continue.
"While I appreciate all that you've told me, Harry, and that my Occlumency skills are good, they're not good enough to withstand an attack from Professor Dumbledore and if he wants something enough, meaningless memories as a distraction or decoy won't work. I believe if Professor Dumbledore attacks your mind and you're unable to stop it, Professor Lothaire will be able to assist you. But for us," She gestured to herself, Ginny, Neville and Luna, "We don't have that option. Though I'll still include you, as I realise Alistair may not always be there to help protect your mind if needed. But what if we partially remove our memories?"

"What do you mean partially?" Harry asked, not quite following Hermione's train of thought.

"When using a Pensieve as storage the memories are removed from our minds entirely, fragments of reminders that remain when we want to view them but unless you choose to absorb your memory again, there's a blank spot. Occlumency seals them away behind defences of our choosing but otherwise are still there for anyone to see. If they're placed somewhere only we know and the only way to recall them is through trigger words or phrases, it will be impossible for Dumbledore to locate them."

She handed her other notes to Harry, filled with ideas to protect their minds.

"Nothing is set in concrete, but the idea that Dumbledore could find out about what you've told us and all the changes that have happened to you over the summer doesn't sit well with me."

He looked over her notes, clear and precise to read as always. She never failed to impress him.

"Why don't you go and see Professor Lothaire? He could help."

Harry was going to share the knowledge of Voldemort's Horcruxes but thought better of it, at least for now. Hermione was right, he was guaranteed some form of protection but without the back up of Alistair, Dumbledore could easily ransack his mind for necessary information if he chose to. The less attention Dumbledore paid his friends the better though if Dumbledore had found out information in the first place, there was no way he wouldn't act upon it.

Seeing that Hermione was probably torn between going to someone more experienced for help and coming to a solution on her own purely for the challenge involving hours upon hours in the Library, Harry told her something she couldn't possibly pass up.

"You've got a 1,500-year-old Vampire in this school as your Professor. Just think of all the knowledge he has. He can tell you more about the Lothaire castle Library too..."

"Harry, that's not fair." The closest to a whine that Harry had heard she shot him a glare, relenting. "Though I enjoy challenges, time is of the essence with this. And it would be nice to hear more about the library."
Even with just the first few words, Harry knew that he'd convinced her.

'Sorry to contact you so soon again, are you busy at the moment?'

A soft shake of the head. 'Ah Harry, no matter the time of the day it is always my pleasure and privilege to speak with you. There are quite a few hours of my time left to spare, as sleeping is not a necessity.'

'Good, because you're about to meet Hermione in an inquisitive mode. She wants to protect everyone's minds from Dumbledore as I've told them information relating to me and you. She enjoys tackling a challenge by herself but I managed to win her over by mentioning your castle's Library and wealth of knowledge.'

'Though she has not spoken to me at length, the desire to seek knowledge no matter the form burns strongly in her eyes. She is more than welcome to ask me questions. That and I'm rather curious to ask of the Time Turner.'

He almost wished he could see her reaction to that. 'She'll get flustered, I guarantee it.'

Hearing the remnants of Alistair's laugh in his mind Harry quickly turned back to Hermione, who looked impatient to leave already.

"He said he's free, ask all the questions you want." He nodded his head at the door. "Don't worry, the rest of what I have to say can wait."

After giving them a brief farewell Hermione left, Harry half surprised she didn't start sprinting.

Neville and Luna in the midst of conversation, Ginny turned to Harry, with an uncharacteristically hesitant expression on her face. It wasn't one Harry had seen before, so sure and confident in her actions once she'd grown out of her adoration for him.

Though it was unusual, Ginny found herself battling with her own mind and what she should do. Once the Basilisk was dead she thought that was the end of it. But coming to Lunaland for the first time and Harry telling them everything including Aela, she was filled with indescribable nerves. Though she hadn't told Harry the thought that the Basilisk was beneath the school again terrified her. It was about time to receive some closure, as thanks to Harry she came to understand that Aela was controlled by Tom much like she was controlled by the Diary.

To this day she still had nightmares, not offered any form of professional help and assured by Dumbledore that 'Time would heal all.' The only thing time had provided was the improvement of her Occlumency skills and gaining the ability to lock certain memories away to keep them from
Though she trusted Harry with her life, going down there to see for herself that Aela was ok would provide reassurance and she could put her past to rest.

Harry said nothing, remaining silently encouraging as he waited for Ginny to speak.

"Harry, can I go with you to see Aela?"

Out of all the thing she could have said, he didn't expect this. He had no reason to refuse though, guessing that she wanted some form of closure. At that thought, he felt a little guilty. Of course, she would still have issues, he had nightmares of the chamber and Aela for weeks alongside the recurring ones of The Dursleys and even one or two of Quirrell over the first two years of Hogwarts.

Though he had his own issues to deal with, he'd never tried to be a proper friend to her until last year. She was like him in the sense that she preferred to deal with things on her own rather than ask for help.

"Of course. There's nothing more I need to share at the moment, so do you want to come with me now?"

Though she'd asked, she didn't expect to be able to go immediately. Despite that, she nodded assent, eyes filled with determination. "Yes."

"Luna, Nev, we're off to the chamber. Do you want to come?" He asked, once there was a lull in their conversation.

"No thank you, Harry, I'd like to see Brio."

At that thought he couldn't help but smile, suspecting that Luna saw Brio as more than just a friend or mentor, though he was unaware if she realised this or not. In any case, he'd never seen her look so happy and he was glad she'd found someone to do that for her.

"Potions Homework." Neville gave a strained smile, surprised he was accepted into Potions with Exceeds Expectations. Because the exam was run by a ministry official and Professor Snape was nowhere to be seen, he was able to complete his Potions with only minor mistakes. He knew what a lot of the ingredients did, often helping Professor Sprout harvest them so that Professor Snape could add them to storage.

If he was faced with a Boggart, he wondered if it had changed over the years. The fear was not as strong, though he still tensed up whenever he happened to pass by his station, the same went for a lot of the Gryffindors. He'd barely said a snide word though, not even trying to antagonise Harry thanks
to his truce. Or at least, what he suspected to be the cause.

Nodding his assent and bidding farewell much like Hermione, Harry left with Ginny for the chamber, willing to support her in any way he could.

Slightly regretful he hadn't brought his homework with him to work with the soft sounds of wind chimes and trickling water, Neville figured it was best to get it done as soon as possible.

Even when separate, Luna could tell if her magic or something which she'd filled with her magic was nearby, such as her butterbeer cork necklaces. They didn't have to be worn to work properly, her heart filled with happiness when she came to realise Professor Snape had kept her gift, though she wasn't sure if he wore it beneath his robes or not.

Whenever they had a spare moment and taking note of the time once entering, Hermione, Ginny and Luna spent as much time training as they could, though nothing too strenuous as working with two different time zones along with regular school hours would wear anyone out. She wasn't sure what Hermione's or Ginny's training sessions were like but due to the nature of what Brio was teaching, nothing was rushed or stressful. Challenging sometimes, but never impossible.

In all her life, Luna had never been more excited than the couple of times she'd visited Brio. If he wasn't there within a few minutes he would be, staying with the Autumn Fae for the duration of mentoring her.

Eyes sparkling with joy Luna left her land, to visit another.

Though Hermione was aware Harry half expected her to, she didn't sprint to Professor Lothaire's office. Instead, she took the time to go at her own pace, thinking through every word spoken carefully.

Over the summer, she'd gone through changes of her own. Some which Harry had picked up on, others recognisable to no one but herself. Throughout childhood she was friendless, her peers either not interested in playing with someone who'd rather read books or intimidated by her intelligence. That in itself wasn't the issue, it was her attitude at the time and starting Hogwarts.

Her bossy nature turned people away and she didn't understand why they couldn't grasp the concept of something which seemed so simple. Instructions on how to do things correctly often sounded as though she thought herself superior, even if the opposite was true.

It was a character flaw, a large one. But over the years her bossiness had faded, to be replaced by understanding. Though that didn't stop her from watching over Harry and checking to see how he was doing. Starting last year and the beginning of this year, Hermione had taken a step back to let Harry do his own thing, especially since he no longer needed her help. Perhaps he never did, her
overbearing personality clashing with his past shyness, in a way where she couldn't hear his voice even if he did know what to do.

Now that Harry was allowed to come out of his shell and be himself, They'd didn't clash as much. She was more thankful to him than she could ever express, remaining her friend despite everything. Though contributing towards saving his life once or twice certainly helped.

Something else that she came to understand was there were different types of intelligence. Reciting pages word for word given the context and answering questions flawlessly came naturally with the aid of her memory. But, Harry was intelligent too. Innovative and quick on this feet.

She'd never had the (dis)pleasure of meeting Harry's relatives before, only from a distance. And from a distance was how she wanted it to remain. So many times she'd invited Harry to stay and was always confused and hurt at first for why he couldn't. It wasn't until later on she began to understand Dumbledore was blocking most attempts at contact and Harry's uncle didn't want to risk him letting slip that he was being abused. Just the thought of it caused magic to crackle through her frame, tight curls standing on end.

The curiosity and determination for knowledge she'd held in the past often overwritten how the person in question felt about the matter and unknowingly, she'd hurt that person as a result.

Her determination was refocused now. She wouldn't make the same mistakes. This change was not only necessary for her own personal growth but so she wouldn't drive away the small group of friends she had.

She wasn't a fan of hiding her true self, though knew why Harry had to, for years in various situations. Though she had many questions for the Professor, there was a time and place for everything. She didn't want to give him a bad impression, as she had with so many others in her childhood. Though she was unsure of his opinion on humans as a whole, for every human such as Harry, there were several of Dumbledore out there.

Humans as a whole she didn't know, but Harry himself? Vampire or not the Professor seemed to keep his expressions open, at least around him. Harry was in no question whatsoever, she'd seen enough last year with Cho to know it was similar to one of those situations.

However, she believed it went beyond a crush or simple attraction, at least from an outsider looking in. Whatever happened, she wished him the best and while her blind trust in authority figures had wavered greatly, she was willing to trust Professor Lothaire. Not only because of Harry but for the good he was doing the school, Umbridge having brought with her a year of constriction and ignorance, something which had sucked the life out of the subject she took great interest in, a feat in and of itself.

With a last reminder to not be too overwhelming, Hermione knocked on the door.
To Alistair, all of Harry's friends had proven to be interesting. Though he had only spoken with Miss Lovegood and Mr Longbottom, Miss Weasley had also caught his attention. Though the sibling relationship between her and Mr Weasley was unmistakable, he couldn't help but wonder how personalities could be so different.

She channelled similar energy, though it was directed in a more sensible way unlike her brother, who chose to let it loose on the next most available target. Miss Weasley was a fighting spirit if ever he saw one.

As much as Miss Granger was no doubt curious about him, he found himself curious about her in turn. He wondered if she was allowed the chance to, that Emily would have grown into a similar young woman? Miss Granger held the spark of intelligence that she had at six years old, even if her curiosity and drive was a little more intense.

He wanted to be better acquainted with one of the few people who had contributed toward saving Harry's life, according to Harry himself without her there would have been a much higher chance that both himself and Mr Weasley would have died.

Though Alistair was rarely caught off guard, the cup to his lips halted mid-motion, blinking as within his mind's eye, an incredibly realistic image of himself surfaced.

Without a stitch of clothing, he stood proudly. Proud all over, for there was no other word Alistair could use, bath warmed skin glistening.

Despite his surprise at the unexpectedness of it all, he was rather pleased Harry saw him in such a way, overactive teenage mind in regards to Alistair's physique only a little off the mark.

Though he had teased him more than usual, Alistair could hardly pass up such a wonderful opportunity.

'With such intricate detailing of my naked body, I believe you have put renowned artist Michelangelo to shame.' A teasing wink.

'Y-you saw that?!”

Chuckling as Harry was naturally more flustered than he'd ever been, Alistair watched as the image faded quickly, replaced with little noises of embarrassment.

'Not that it was my intention to see your deepest desires and wishes, however the imagery you presented was so strong, you inadvertently projected it into my mind.'

'I don't think I'll ever recover from this.'
It was stated with such seriousness, Alistair couldn't help but laugh.

'There is no need to worry Harry, it is perfectly natural. May I say that you have captured me rather well? I would be delighted to set aside time for a real life portrait.'

'...I didn't know Vampires could tease until I met you. I'm not creatively inclined at all unless it's just imagination. I can't get it from my head into poetry, song or on canvas.'

'Ah, well they do say that you learn something new every day!'

Unable to argue he heard Harry give a resigned sigh. Any apologies would be insincere, as Alistair enjoyed listening to and watching his reactions. Hearing a knock on the door he gave Harry some reprieve, knowing enough to realize it would take him a short while to dispell the endearing blush from his face.

At the cheerful call to come in Hermione did so, closing the door behind her.

"Good evening Professor," She greeted him, tone polite and level, though the sparkle of excitement in her eyes to those that knew her was unmistakable.

"Good evening Miss Granger." He returned, giving her a welcoming smile and gesturing to take a seat. Doing so, her eyes wandered around the room in interest. His decoration of choice wasn't to the extremes like Umbridge with many cats and too much pink, but a tasteful balance and more than a few books. Seeing this she immediately directed her gaze forward, away from the biggest distraction that she would happily occupy herself with.

She studied him in interest, keeping her gaze casual in case it came across as rude. She already knew his true eye colour through Harry and found it shame that he had to hide a part of who he was because of close-minded people such as Dumbledore. She'd thought with age wisdom became a part of the package but not for the first time, she was proven wrong.

"Do you have a preferred refreshment?" He asked, even as a jug of Pumpkin juice alongside a goblet appeared, to her surprise. She kept those thoughts to herself, with visual proof that most if not all of her knowledge surrounding Vampires rang untrue. She used to believe that books always held the truth but after second year, she usually absorbed information alongside a hefty pinch of salt. The thought that she'd read many fabrications aside from this saddened her.

"Lemon water, please." As she spoke this aloud it appeared, with ice cubes and lemon to garnish.

It was one of her favourite drinks. Despite not being overly health conscious like her parents, she'd picked up a few healthy habits. She did drink regular water but usually preferred to add a little lemon
juice or some form of citrus juice to it. She didn't mind tea or coffee and with the exception of the
glass of alcohol she was allowed to try when her parents were there, her experience with it was
limited.

Sometimes when in deep thought she did like to suck on the end of a sugar quill instead of worrying
her lip to death, but the number of students including Ron who consumed sugar startled her. She
wanted to have as clear a mind as possible, coffee and sugar good for energy but once that was gone,
it was the crash and burn period, as she'd witnessed with Ron.

Apple slices accompanied her glass and she smiled softly, appreciating the elves' efforts now that her
eyes had opened and she'd truly listened to how things were. While it was true that some were
mistreated, most truly enjoyed their jobs as she'd seen from Dobby, as manic as that particular elf
could be.

"What is it that I can help you with, Miss Granger?" Alistair enquired, cocking his head in curiosity.

Though it was likely Harry had already mentioned something, Hermione explained her idea but
briefly.

"I want a way to protect our minds, leaving the memories somewhere other than behind Occlumency
shields or within Pensieves to avoid detection but if needed, a phrase or keyword to trigger their
temporary return."

"I see." Alistair sipped from his glass, spending a few short seconds in thought.

Though Hermione had come partly because of her own curiosity and partly because Harry knew
what she liked, she didn't expect to engage in conversation with the Professor as equals. Having
someone else there she was able to bounce ideas off of more than helped, glad that she'd brought her
notebook and pen with her. She carried the conversation fluidly even as her hand struggled to match
the pace her thoughts were running at.

He didn't tell her what it is that she needed to do either, his words giving her enough ideas that it had
shortened the time she'd need to make this work exponentially. She appreciated it since as Harry
said, she liked a challenge. Though admittedly on her own the amount of time it would take to reach
a solution would hit dangerous waters.

"Thank you! I have so many ideas I don't know what to do," She eagerly looked over her notes for a
moment, then placed them back in her bag.

Alistair gave her a soft smile in response as she enjoyed the sweetness of the apple slices.

"It's a pleasure to speak with another individual who is passionate about learning. Though I have a
question of my own, if I may."
"Of course." She nodded in assent, formulating answers to possible questions.

"What do you know of Time-Turners?"

Not expecting that of all questions to be asked her eyes widened comically, any words about to be spoken dying in her throat and resembling a fish out of water.

There was only one person who would know and tell the Professor of this.

"Harry?" She asks in return, wearily.

At his nod, she tried desperately to string at least a sentence together.

"Ah, you see-"

Starting again, she barely managed to withhold a wince at her past overeagerness.

"Professor McGonagall gave me permission to use a Time-Turner so that I could attend every class available, I didn't want to miss out because I was only allowed to choose so many subjects along with the mandatory ones. Outside of using it for classes Harry and I ended up using it to save the lives of an innocent man and Hippogryph."

Of course, she was barely skimming the surface of the year at all but unless she showed memories of the events in question, it would take her a while to explain. It wasn't one of the smartest moments she'd had but she took comfort in the fact that with it they did manage to rescue Buckbeak and Sirius.

Though he held respect for and was rather fond of Minerva, he had to wonder what her reasoning was for allowing a teenager to alter the very fabric of time. Time-Turners were incredibly delicate and though he knew Miss Granger was very capable, many older than her had made one simple mistake, but a mistake enough to change everything they once knew.

"At ease Miss Granger, I am not going to chastise you for an event that happened long before we met."

He chuckled at her sigh of relief, agreeing with Harry. It was amusing to see her so discomposed.

Hermione regained her composure, with the help of Lemon water. Though she couldn't make a silent promise to herself that she would keep it, considering her next question.

"What's your library like? Harry's told me a little about it."
"Ah, it is a wonderful place, though my travels over centuries have ensured that it still holds a wealth of knowledge. It would be simpler for you to see the beauty yourself."

Instinctively knowing what he meant Hermione looked directly into Alistair's eyes and within a moment, an image so vivid it was as though she was there. Those few seconds imprinted themselves onto her brain.

She couldn't hold back her gasp of delight even if she tried. "It's amazing!"

Louder than she'd intended to be she closed her mouth, smiling apologetically but practically buzzing with excitement. After a moment, she continued.

"I've never seen anything like that before. Truly."

"I can see that you are fond of Libraries and the knowledge found within them," He observed, pleased to know that there were others like him who appreciated what books could offer.

"Libraries are like my home away from home. My first in primary school was a small but comfortable place. I didn't have any friends growing up so I usually spent my free time there, helping the Librarian and taking care of the books the others would carelessly throw, not put away properly or bending the pages."

Her heart sank at the thought, as she finished the rest of her water. Alistair watched, listening to her words intently, as they were an insight into the person that she is.

"By the time I'd arrived at Hogwarts, I'd read most if not all of those books from school. Then the Hogwarts Library renewed my passion for them. As much as I love books, I love my friends more. Without them, I'd never want to leave the Library as, without anything as a distraction, the isolation and loneliness would be overwhelming."

She didn't think on her childhood much. Though it was nothing compared to what Harry went through, she had loving parents who cared for her wellbeing, even if they didn't understand her sometimes. Though she'd taken the time to explain to them over the summer and they were concerned but appreciated not being kept in the dark any longer.

"Though I know there are impressive Libraries across the world where thousands of people use them every day, there's something special about yours. I can't quite put my finger on what it is but though I've only seen an image, it..resonates with me. It's so spacious yet welcoming."

She sighed in bliss. Even just seeing it filled her with contentment.
Though Alistair was proud of their library, he had never seen another person so joyful over something which many people take for granted. With every word he could hear the care she had for books. If the opportunity should arise, he would ask if she would like to see the library in person, as he knew Miss Granger would treat the books there with the same respect she had for others.

They spent a little while on the discussion of books, Hermione finding out the Professor's preferences but much like herself, he appreciated every single book for what they could offer, even the ones such as Lockhart's. Not for the information they contained but what could be taken away from it. A cautionary tale to those after nothing but the truth.

Then came the next most important question Hermione wanted to know. Normally her own desire would override the words that she'd speak but she took the time to consider her wording, more so since she'd seen what had happened through Harry's eyes.

"Whatever it is that you wish to ask, I will provide the answer if there is one."

His smile filled her with encouragement, her initial hesitation pushed aside. "How are your brother and the others doing?"

"They are fine for now, thank you for your concern." His smile turned sad for a moment. "Though I'm afraid only time will tell, particularly for Solomon. The rate of healing corresponds to age but I've known none of my kind to have been force-fed Phoenix Blood over a long period of time."

She could understand that. She knew that a day would make hardly any difference, but she just wanted to hear from the Professor's own lips.

The time passed, Hermione pacing her questions and truly thinking about them instead of firing off one after another. She didn't take notes, wanting to be there in the moment but as soon as she left, her notebook would be filled with information.

The more that she came to learn, the more she realized how wrong she'd been. How wrong everyone was. It was painfully obvious that any information about Vampires was offered by someone with a bias opinion. She had yet to come across information at least neutral toward Vampires and even if it's in a small way, she wanted to help.

If people like Lockhart could publish a book, then why couldn't she? It would have to be under a pen name due to her blood status but if she was able to accurately portray the truth of Vampires and they were not all that people assumed them to be, then perhaps it could help people keep an open mind.

Though it would take time, Hermione was determined to do this. Lessons and training kept her busy for now, but she had time to collect all the information she'd need.
There were no set sessions of when Luna would receive training from Brio, simply when she had the time to visit. While she'd kept note of the time when entering and leaving the realm of the fae, while she was with Brio many hours could have passed and she wouldn't know.

Though usually, thoughts didn't linger within her mind, today she was unable to help it. While seeing the Professor and offering her own way of help offered some reassurance, the amount of pain and suffering just within that one memory made her worry for the state of the world, if there were more like Professor Dumbledore.

The desire to heal filled her heart and yet she couldn't, though she could take solace in the fact that all of them were safe now.

'Everything will be okay.' She told herself, usual bright smile wavering a little.

Stepping into the world which was becoming more familiar each time, even a few seconds was enough for the little amount of stress to blow away, as if carried on a breeze.

Though the worlds were the same when it came to having wildlife, the atmosphere couldn't be more different. Many had forgotten just what nature provided them with, receiving little to no respect and though there was magic in the air, especially around Hogwarts, it was the disturbed and tainted sort. Many a dark wizard had passed through the halls, leaving their mark physically, emotionally and magically. Not even their deaths could erase that.

Luna sensed it all, at times leaving her skin prickling uncomfortably. She was unsure if anyone else noticed, though her own alignment with magic was at the opposite end of the scale, so it would make sense if she was unusually receptive to it.

But here, there was none of that. While she realised for every Dark wizard in her world there will have been or is a fae equivalent, that hadn't affected the surroundings at all. They hadn't forgotten nature, that each of them walked barefoot was a testament to this. Because the land was treated kindly, it treated them well in turn.

"Hello, Nihri," Luna greeted her softly, usually the first to spot and direct her to Brio, if he wasn't there himself.

"Greetings, Childe of Moon. Sir Brio is within Eireachdail Woods."

Though Luna had assured they were more than welcome to use her name, it seemed to be something which they would have to do gradually.

Luna's eyes sparkled, smiling softly as when she arrived she immediately noticed Brio, hair in his usual French braid ponytail, lying face up and by the looks of things, stargazing.
She didn't want to interrupt him but though she was virtually silent upon entry he noticed her anyway, ocean gaze meeting her own.

He furrowed his brows and a moment later stood up, approaching.

Brio had taken to stargazing more often as without the distraction of nature, he found himself thinking about Luna frequently. Though in his mind he was able to call her by name, aloud was another thing entirely, so used to addressing others by honorifics or the rare few humans he encountered, mortals.

But, he found himself wanting to and with each meeting, he became less and less suspicious, more convinced that her intentions were innocent. To have an affinity for healing magic required a certain nature alongside. Anyone filled with malice wouldn't be able to use it properly.

With the tip of his finger, he stroked the necklace gifted to him curiously, the magic within like a gentle heartbeat accompanying his own.

It was no use. Even stargazing, Luna always seemed to be on his mind, an endless source of curiosity.

He had spent enough time in the woods that he could sense even the slightest disturbance, eyes one of the sharpest of his kind. It didn't take long until eventually, he could sense the arrival of the very person in his thoughts, magically before physically.

And because of this, he noticed immediately that something wasn't right.

While the biggest factor to the changing nature of magic lay with natural ability or the certain types of spells used to determine how magic feels to another, emotion also played a part, whether that was to hurt or heal.

The magic he'd quickly come to recognise as Luna's still had a warm, comforting touch, but it was also tinged with sadness.

As he raised himself into a seated position and looked into Luna's eyes, the fact that she'd cried not so long ago was unmistakable.

Brio's heart clenched. It wasn't something that he was familiar with at all and just to make sure nothing was physically wrong, he did a quick check of himself.

He'd never had anyone or anything to be concerned over, all those he'd taught adults and if they ever
were emotional, it was dealt with in private. Though some of the fae were more open, others weren't.

Though his job was to heal, he never crossed the boundaries between healer and patient. He didn't remember receiving anything close to affection throughout his childhood. It wasn't that he hated it, but how to appropriately give or receive it, he still hadn't managed to find an answer to.

Despite this, he didn't want to see Luna in distress, but to always have her usual smile, such an expression rarely shown to him. With that in mind before he could think about it further, he came face to face with her, still unused to their height difference.

Normally the way forward was always clear and without too much thought, he knew what he needed to do. But in this situation, he found himself having an internal debate. He knew the process of comforting someone and he had the desire to, but what if putting it into practice, it went wrong?

For the first time in his life, Brio couldn't see what potential outcomes were a possibility.

Tilting his head, he cautiously reached out a hand, traces of tears clinging to his fingertips when they brushed across her cheek.

"You are in pain." He spoke softly, brows furrowing a little.

His concern for her grew beyond his own worries, enough for him to reach out once more, fingertips sweeping the rest of the tears away. The touch was so gentle most wouldn't have believed it came from him.

"I'm in pain for someone else," She explained, tone as soft as his but giving him a genuine smile, perhaps to alleviate some of his worries.

However, when the smile didn't quite reach the eyes that were always so openly expressive and instead misty with sorrow, Brio closed his own for a moment.

By nature he wasn't a risk taker, not taking a step forward unless he had a clear goal in mind. But when she looked up at him without her usual bright smile, it threw him off guard. He was her mentor and it was his duty to see that she remained happy and relaxed while under his care, though he was relieved to hear that it was for another that sadness shrouded her, and not because she'd been harmed.

Then and there he made a decision, to cross those boundaries for the first time. He remained professional as a mentor and a healer in the past but with Luna, she had changed everything he thought he knew.

Heartbeat increasing a little with nervousness, Brio reached out, not instinctively knowing where his arms should go. After puzzling it out he placed one on her lower back and with a single movement,
drew her close to his chest. Remembering the soft touch of her fingers through his hair he tried to replicate that, hesitantly running his fingers through and unable to help but think that this didn't come naturally to him at all.

But the sensation itself wasn't unpleasant. Having a smaller and warm body near his own and able to feel her heartbeat seemed to calm him down too.

"I understand." This was all he said, still keeping his voice soft and awkwardly running a hand through her hair.

When Brio brought her into an embrace, Luna couldn't hide her surprise. She knew that he wasn't a naturally affectionate person and even in his arms, she could tell how odd he found this.

Although this was something he wasn't used to, his intention and emotion were made clear, his own magic embracing her much like he was.

Without a doubt, this was the best one she'd ever received and in response, she wrapped her own arms around him, unable to help but snuggle in a little. Though in truth she would be alright, she really appreciated his kindness.

As she felt him stiffen her hand moved lightly across his own back, not tall enough to reach his head properly.

Though she was unsure of the other's attitude towards Brio, she could see that affection was something foreign to him.

She pulled back some, enough to look into his eyes, which wavered with discomfort.

"I am unused to this." He confessed and despite his awkward expression, didn't stop the gentle fingers through her hair.

"Well, you're very good at it!" She encouraged, enthusiasm leaking into her voice as her previous mood seemed to melt away, giving him an honest smile.

And in response, he showed her a small smile of his own. Even if only small it changed his expression entirely and as a result, she could feel her own heartbeat quickening.

Because he was unsure of how to express himself, others misunderstood. Though Luna only knew a little, that much she could tell. She hoped that with time the others would warm up to him and try to understand, as being somewhat isolated from his own kind must be very lonely.
"You have a pretty smile, Brio." She told him honestly, not used to hiding her true thoughts.

He cocked his head at her, not comprehending what she said for a moment but once he had he averted his eyes, a blush so faint most wouldn't notice.

"Thank you." He wasn't sure how else to respond, finding Luna puzzling.

Once he noticed that her magic had settled and her usual serene expression had returned, he slowly released her, gesturing to follow him.

They came to the same clearing as before, with the moon that looked touchable and the trees far out of reach.

For the past few weeks, Luna had worked with Gentle Whisper and though healing magic came naturally on her part, now in comparison to when she'd first started, it was as if she could live and breathe the magic itself. Her new focus was more compatible than her wand, as the only magic used was of a kind not called upon forcefully, more of a quiet encouragement to go free and work with her, while her wand was the complete opposite of that.

Again they came to stand beside the pond, the curious flower with no name floating there.

"Though most believe that healing has no divergence, this area of magic is, in some ways, more varied than spells solely for attacking. A strong healing spell may be used for allies but in reverse, damage those constructed of darkness, such as animated corpses or severely corrupted mortals."

Luna cocked her head, listening intently and for a brief moment, an image of Tom Riddle flickered across her mind. In his state, once mortal again, would he count? Was there some human left? Though for the latter question, the same could be said for Dumbledore.

"Healing branches into defence. There are charms used to protect against offensive magic but there are healing shields used to restore energy to one ally or a group. The energy used is directly proportional to how many allies are included."

With that explanation, Brio cast a healing shield around Luna, not using or having a focus but his own hand, finding that he had better control this way.

Softly closing her eyes, Luna allowed the magic to wash over, taking it to heart. If she could help others in this way, nothing would make her happier.

"Most healing spells don't require an incantation, simply a clear focus and strong will. Knowing why you want to use a spell rather than casting because you have the knowledge affects the outcome."
As if to make a point, Brio reached into his robes, retrieving a knife and making a shallow cut on the back of his hand, enough so it bled a little.

Though the cut was minor, Luna didn't like the thought of Brio being hurt in any sense, though she knew it was a guide to her progress. The familiar feeling of magic filled her with a gentle light, no thoughts occupying her mind other than her purpose and what she wished to do.

'Please, will you heal my friend?' She asked politely.

Magic had a voice, at least in some sense. When a witch or wizard didn't speak, spells often spoke for them, their intentions laced among the variety of colours and it was no different for Luna, her desire to help gently mingling with pale gold, as the small ball of light encased Brio's hand, gradually healing it.

Luna's abilities never failed to surprise Brio, as he fully expected her to cast a similar shield to him and not just focus on the cut directly. The plan in his mind was to slowly work their way up to more specifically focused shields, but it seems there was no need.

"You've exceeded my expectations, Luna." He tried out her name for the first time and realised it didn't sound as awkward to say as he thought it would.

Suddenly her eyes lit up as she jumped on the spot with visible delight. "Ah, you called me by name!"

At last! She'd wanted someone to other than in her own world and the fact that Brio was the first to do so made her happy beyond words.

If Luna received such joy from him calling her by name, Brio would ensure to do so more often.

For a while, Brio watched over Luna as she practised her shielding though for all the times afterwards, a magical construct filled with a replicant of blood and able to bruise. Since the only purpose was for it to be able to bruise, break and bleed, it didn't take Brio more than a minute to make. Slowly but surely, Luna was able to request the required magic at a faster rate than when they'd started, though only practice outside of these sessions would let her keep the current speed.

Eventually, he gestured her to stop, not wanting her to tire out too much though looking at her, he could see a little exhaustion.

Feeling drained but content, Luna immediately linked hands with Brio, lying down in the same spot she'd had her first time with him. So much at ease, in fact, that her eyes naturally closed.

As Brio looked at their linked hands and the face of Luna, asleep, he found himself not wanting to
wake her up or let go. He was somewhat fascinated at the exchange of heat between them with their linked hands, looking down in interest.

No one would disturb them here. Most wouldn't risk his wrath, or at least their interpretation of his reaction, certainly blown out of proportion.

Though Luna remained unaware and so did Brio himself, the forest watched as his expression shifted into something soft, cool eyes shimmering with a little warmth.

As he closed his eyes, Brio already looked forward to future sessions they would spend together.
Overcoming Obstacles

Chapter Summary

DA lessons, facing fears, alliances and an unprovoked attack.

Just after Harry had tried to convince Ginny that he wasn't, in fact, sharing explicit images along the mental link he had with Alistair, what just had to happen?

It took all he had to maintain his composure, on the way to the girls' bathroom, but the blush surfaced despite his inner protests.

He enjoyed being able to speak with Alistair whenever he had the desire to but the amount of teasing that he liked to regularly engage in, Harry was half worried his heart would give out.

Suddenly Ginny turned to face him, opening her mouth to say something, but stopped, staring.

Eyes narrowing, a mischievous smirk crossed her face. "So, about our earlier conversation."

"What conversation? I don't remember." Harry feigned ignorance, hastily quickening his steps as he heard Ginny's knowing chuckle at his back. He was both cursed and blessed with an active imagination, but it wasn't a cause for concern up until now.

Thankful for the distraction of arriving at their destination, Harry spoke the familiar words of entry, watching as the chamber revealed itself to him once more.

He turned to Ginny who stood a little distance away, unable to hide her nervousness.

"It will be fine, promise," He gave her a reassuring smile and she returned a weak one.

Closing her eyes for a moment, they opened again, with burning determination. At the resolve in them, Harry nodded in silent approval, sliding down first and waiting for Ginny at the bottom, hoping that today's visit would help.

Though Ginny was very confident, the polar opposite to her first year of Hogwarts with the crippling crush on Harry and all that had happened, it had taken an immense amount of courage, more than ever in her life, to ask Harry if she could go with him to the chamber.

She was sick of having to deal with Ron's attitude problem and Mum's reminders to keep an eye on
him. He was 16, even if he didn't act like it Ginny wasn't his keeper. Having this on her mind on top of schoolwork and battling with recurring nightmares didn't do her any favours either.

She didn't want to fear the same thing happening again this year, despite the Diary not being a problem any longer. Because she'd spent most of the year unaware of her own actions through it, the nightmares lacked vividness. The only memory of Aela she had was a flash of scales and yellow eyes. Not even when she was in the chamber did she see her properly, unconscious throughout and even when conscious, she didn't look, leaving with Harry, Ron, Lockhart and Fawkes as fast as possible, not wanting to stay a second longer.

But sliding down the pipe after Harry only made it more real, though she was thankful for the lack of slime and animal bones, once she'd reached the bottom.

Harry unconsciously slowed his pace to match hers, which she was thankful for. She wanted to reach the chamber quickly yet at the same time, never wanted to arrive. Despite her internal troubles, the chamber which she'd only spent a few hours in had etched into her memory. At the flashes of familiarity forming a whole picture, Ginny stopped, tension running through her entire frame.

'Come on, you've faced Death Eaters, what's an oversized friendly snake?'

Her inner voice remained joking, in an effort to dispel any other thoughts.

She could see that Harry was keeping an eye on her even as he walked forward, the sounds of Parseltongue sending shivers along her spine. She steeled herself, employing all the Occlumency training she had, more so since recently, in an effort to prepare.

However, despite her best efforts, nothing could prepare her. As the mouth of Slytherin's statue opened and the pair of yellow eyes she remembered so well appeared along with a body which never seemed to end, she paled rapidly. Of course, she'd heard from Harry the size but to see it for herself...

It took all the will she had to remain on her feet, heart drumming a furious beat and blood pounding.

She breathed out, deeply. Unknowingly she had held her breath and right at this moment, in particular, breathing was a necessity.

Absentmindedly she took note of Harry speaking to Aela, who seemed to slow her approach in response to his rushed hissing words. Though Harry had already told them that now she was in control her stare would only affect those who meant to do nothing but harm, she still found herself unable to look directly at her.

Unlike the hissing of a normal snake, Aela's seem to reverberate throughout Ginny's body. She looked at Harry, filled with anxiety and unable to prevent her shaking, though she tried to keep her tone of voice level.
"What did she say?"

Harry shot a sad look towards Aela, looking into Ginny's eyes.

"She said hello and that she's sorry you're a victim too."

At those words, Ginny felt a pang of sympathy and bringing forth the rest of her courage, looked at Aela directly and was shocked by what she saw.

Harry patted the side of her head, in apparent comfort. Now that she was looking, she found herself unable to turn away and instead of the yellow eyes filled to the brim with malice and ill intent she saw nothing but remorse and sorrow, so raw and human-like that she physically took a step back.

Despite her fear and adrenaline ready to kick in at any moment, Ginny didn't like seeing that expression on her face and returned to her previous spot, trembling.

"You can touch her, you know," Harry tells her, a reassuring smile on his face. "Just think of her as a scaly dog, she likes being petted."

At that Ginny gave a small chuckle, looking from her hand to Aela and back again. She could do this. She repeated those words, minutes passing.

Then tentatively she stretched out an arm, slowly, firmly clamping down on her stretched arm with the other for a moment, to try and control the trembling. Swallowing several times her fingers made contact with scales, surprised to find that despite their rough appearance, they were actually very smooth.

Everything inside was screaming to either defend herself or run, fight or flight was a certainty despite the fact there was no danger.

As her fingers brushed more firmly across the scales she drew her hand back in alarm when a strange rumbling noise erupted from Aela.

"She likes that. Everything will be fine, just take your time." Harry softly encouraged.

"Thanks." Giving him a more confident smile she continued to pet Aela, little by little growing used to the sensation, though still on edge.

All throughout, Harry kept an eye on Ginny. He couldn't begin to imagine what was going through her mind but he would do his best to be of support and mindful of Aela's excitable character, Harry
asked her to approach them more slowly. He was pleased she was taking this step forward and knew that it would help put her demons to rest, especially if the pair could communicate with him as a translator. Communication was key here and with it, he was sure it would help.

Eventually Harry and Ginny sat down, with the help of conjured cushions and slowly but surely she began to relax. The tension left her shoulders as she spoke with Aela more, breaking into a smile when she nuzzled her head gently against her body.

"How can a Basilisk be cute?" She asked Harry, perplexed yet happy that her nightmares would hopefully no longer be a problem in the future if pleasant memories started to outweigh the unpleasant ones.

"That's what I want to know, but she somehow manages it." Aela looked happy for the company. Then, he had a sudden thought.

"Ginny, will you be fine on your own for a few minutes?" He asked, just in case.

"Go ahead, I'm feeling better now." And it was true. She was much better than when she first arrived and now that they'd spoken with one another, albeit not in the usual way, Ginny didn't fear the unknown anymore.

Reassured by her words Harry returned to the room and after a moment assured that it was safe to shrink and store the chest which he couldn't open just yet.

It didn't take him long to get what he needed and as he returned to the chamber, he couldn't help but smile, seeing Aela in her usual coil and Ginny tentatively leaning against her.

"She's taken a liking to you." He commented, retaking his seat beside her as Ginny gave him a smile, her usual composure and colour returned.

"I've taken a liking to her as well. I'm glad I came here. Did you get whatever it was you needed?" She asked, cocking her head quizzically.

"Yeah, it's a chest with enough protections to rival Gringotts, but I'm hoping there's something that can shrink Aela down so she can leave with me." He looked at her fondly.

"That would be great! I hope there is something. Can you imagine Ron if he found out that the Basilisk resurrected from the dead was shrunken and hidden within your robes? He'd shit himself."

"I'm half tempted to let Aela hiss at him so he'll fuck off and leave me alone," Harry muttered, rolling his eyes slightly at all the times Ron had tried to follow them.
Softly chuckling Ginny relaxed, closing her eyes. "I haven't felt this calm in years."

This was a step forward for her and he was glad to be there and see it. As the two of them sat side by side in the company of Aela, Ginny truly meant what she said. While she didn't think the nightmares would leave straight away, today would contribute towards them no longer being a problem for her.

It was Saturday, the days beforehand mostly normal and like any other student in that role, was able to focus his effort towards helping other students with his Prefect status.

Though today he would drop the role of normalcy, as the first DA lesson within 'Lunaland' would commence in just under an hour. He was looking forward to it and though between him, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna they had invited students who each of them believed would be an asset, the number who would show up, remained unknown.

Though in polar opposite to last year they had the most capable defence teacher last seen since Remus. Because of this, anything extra outside of class might be seen as unnecessary, especially since Professor Lothaire approached his lessons in an innovative way.

Even if only a handful of students arrived, Harry would ensure they would benefit from voluntarily choosing to spend an hour of their weekend with him.

He was seated in the common room, idly listening to his friends' conversation for a moment, until something made him sit straight up in his seat.

'Harry, Miss Caltir is awake.'

At Alistair's words, he shot to his feet, ignoring the strange looks and telling Hermione, Ginny and Neville that he'd explain later, sprinting from the room.

As Harry arrived outside Alistair's quarters, he could hear voices.

"He's going to hate me so much!"

"Harry is very fond of you, I am confident that he will not."

Knocking on the door, he interrupted the voices and let himself in after Alistair's faint call.

As Harry's eyes immediately looked to Lilah, he couldn't help but sigh in relief. Though he'd visited most days to see her condition for himself, now that she was awake, her colour looked much better,
not sickly pale, just naturally so.

She looked ready to fly into a panic and seeing this Harry approached, taking a seat on the sofa next to her.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, knowing that physically she might feel better, but emotionally was an entirely different story.

"I'm ok. But aren't you mad?" Lilah questioned, worry filling her eyes.

Harry shook his head silently, looking at her directly to convey his sincerity. "Of course not. I'm just happy you're awake."

"I'm sorry." She managed to whisper. Before Harry could respond his heart clenched as she looked directly at him, tears overflowing from her eyes.

"I'm sorry!" She yelled as if pleading, reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck, crying into his shoulder.

"Please don't hate me, not you too..."

His past could stay in the past for the most part, with each day he was growing more comfortable around the idea of giving and receiving affection, thanks to Alistair who was naturally affectionate and Remus, who he already had a close bond with.

Though it hadn't been long he already saw Lilah as his little sister, just like Ginny and Luna. To him, family was about more than blood. While there wasn't a day that went by where he didn't miss his parents, he was now surrounded by people who cared and he'd found people to care for in turn.

So he didn't hesitate to hug her close, trying to place all the affection he had for her in his actions.

She raised her head, tearstained face looking into his own.

"I'm just a burden. I collapsed, then both of you had to see me be pathetic and weak, the Professor had to shed his blood and forced himself to take care of someone like me."

Her words were halted by a finger on her lips, Alistair sitting down.

"Now, what was it that I said?" He gently admonished, voice firm but kind as her gaze switched from Harry to him. "You are just as precious, Dhampir or otherwise. Within the last week, I have spoken with my brethren regarding this, however, I'm afraid we have similar issues as the humans
Despite his age, Alistair found himself to be naïve when it came to his own kind. It was only through deeper investigation on Rupert's and his part that lead them to realise the tension between Dhampir and Vampires ran far deeper than they thought.

In that sense they were not so different from humans, the emphasis placed on blood status practically emblazoned everywhere he went. Now that his eyes were open, Alistair vowed to change opinions with everything he had. Other races were suspicious enough without infighting.

"I believe you can do something Professor. You're really nice to me and I bet nothing gets to you."

A mischievous twinkle entered his eyes, one that Harry had seen before. "Ah, that is not quite true."

"No way!"

Widening her eyes, Alistair found her outright disbelief adorable.

He sighed dramatically, sending Harry a mental wink as his lips twitched in response. "Men with very long beards are unnerving."

Lilah cocked her head curiously. "Like Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Headmaster Dumbledore especially." Alistair leaned in close to speak quietly.

"Miss Caltir, can you keep a secret?"

Lilah nodded seriously, pear green eyes focused on him until he held a finger out.

Removing an arm from around Harry's neck for a moment and smiling softly, Lilah locked pinky fingers with him, awaiting his next words.

"Professor McGonagall once told me that Headmaster Dumbledore had a bout of forgetfulness and without magic dried his hair, using his beard as a towel wrap."

Harry didn't bother to hold back his snort, knowing it was completely false but he could see Lilah's mood improving, no doubt that was Alistair's intention.

"He did? But that's so silly!" She started giggling, imagining his beard used for that purpose. And at her laughter, Alistair chuckled himself.
After a few minutes, Lilah calmed down, relaxing her grip on Harry, who released her when she'd let go of him.

Much like when he found Solomon, he didn't detect the arrival of another presence in the room, until they appeared fully.

"Dad!"

Springing up from her seat faster than Harry could register, she was a blur in the air until the man caught her in his arms, holding her tightly.

"Sweetheart, you're awake. I'm so glad."

"Thank you for taking care of her." His eyes conveyed sincerity, even through the mixture of worry and relief.

"Not at all, I am glad that she's alright, though Harry was the one who brought her to me." Alistair watched, relieved for him as during the week once he was made aware, he came to visit every day to see his daughter's condition.

"Everything alright?" Alistair asked, retaking his seat beside Harry and placing a subtle charm so that they wouldn't disrupt the other pair in the room.

"It is, now that she's awake. But seeing this, I've decided something, if Mr Caltir will accept."

At Alistair's gesture to continue he did, eyes locked on Lilah's small back.

"I want to ally with them. A slight against them is a slight against house Potter. If Dumbledore finds out about her or her family he'll do the worst thing imaginable. They're under threat both from Vampires and non-vampires and if people are made aware we have an alliance, it might encourage them to back off."

Though it involved a lot of back and forth procedures, security questions, extra enchantments and visits to Gringotts whenever he had a spare moment, Harry had managed to establish a link with his Gringotts account and as long as he had a clear image of what he needed, the pouch he always kept would provide him with what he had in mind. Through this, he had access to the ring with his house crest and unlike the fancy words he expected, all he needed to say was something simple. And then depending on the answer, a brief flash of magic and wherever the item representative of their family was, the Potter family crest would be added.

"I fully support your decision Harry and I'm positive that Jedrek will accept your offer. Thank you."
At his words, Harry looked up, to be met with calm sunset eyes that caused his heart to skip several beats altogether.

Harry shook his head. "No need for thanks. If it's within my ability, I want to help how I can."

As soon as he spoke those words, the sun seemed to pale in comparison to Alistair's bright smile.

"That is what I adore about you. Despite your past filled with nothing but those who would take and not give, you still seek to help."

Adore? As Harry's brain stuck on that one word his entire being seemed to warm and without looking, he knew at once a blush had resurfaced.

As Alistair cancelled the charms he'd placed, seeing that Lilah and Jedrek were finished, she turned to Harry in concern, running up to him.

"Your face is all red, are you ok?"

Harry brushed away her comment with as natural a smile as he could. "I'm fine, it's just the lighting."

A soft chuckle in his mind.

"Mr Potter, thank you for helping my daughter."

At his words Harry stood up, facing the man and while not quite as tall as Alistair, still managed to gain the upper hand on height. He was still holding out on the hope of a late growth spurt, though.

Jedrek shared Lilah's eye colour, though his hair was a messy, chestnut brown. Just one glance and Harry could already tell he'd gone through hardship. He could smell insincerity a mile off and knew his love for Lilah was true.

"I'm just glad I was there to help. I've taken a liking to her, like a kid sibling."

Harry sent him a small smile, which he returned.

Jedrek seemed to think to himself, directing his gaze towards Alistair.

"Might I use your office for a moment? I wish to discuss something with Mr Potter."

After Alistair gave him the go-ahead Harry followed behind, taking a seat as Jedrek did so. Harry had wanted to speak with him as well, but what Jedrek needed from him, he wasn't sure of.
Pinned by his serious gaze as they took a seat facing each other, Harry awaited his next words.

"What is your view on Vampires?"

Harry blinked, thinking for a moment. The atmosphere didn't suggest that he should rush into his answer, but think about it. He'd had enough time to form an opinion about them, though.

"Thanks to most published books showing Vampires in a negative light, most people don't think too highly of them. I tried not to have an opinion one way or the other, as I've been judged for who I am despite the person in question not having met me but over the summer, I've come to learn the truth."

Seeing that he was listening silently, Harry took the time to properly formulate his words, as the answer could affect the outcome of whether he would walk away allied with the Caltir family or not.

"I've seen first hand what Vampires can be like, they've laughed, cried and felt just as much if not more than any human. They're different, but they're also the same in some ways and definitely not blood-sucking creatures incapable of emotion."

His expression darkened, thinking of Dumbledore.

"While I don't know everything, what I do know is that I want to help everyone see Vampires in a positive way."

Harry waited with slightly bated breath, as Jedrek's expressionless face for that time transformed into an easy smile.

"Understood, my apologies. The number of people that have approached my family under the pretence of helping when really there was something they wanted from us, I've lost count. Alistair has a lot of influence and is trusted by our kind, so I will extend the same trust to you."

"Thanks for placing your trust in me, but I understand your caution."

And he did, almost painfully so. While not in the same way exactly he knew the feeling of those lying about their true intentions right until the very end.

A comfortable silence fell between them for a few moments, until Harry spoke up once more.

"I have something to ask if you don't mind."
At Jedrek's gesture to continue Harry did, not seeing the harm in trying.

"Would you be willing to ally with my house?"

His expression turned thoughtful for a moment. "I'm not opposed to the idea at all, but why so suddenly?"

"For Lilah. Hogwarts isn't as safe as some people claim it is and there are several people here who would condemn her for her true nature. A slight against her would be a slight against me and that way, I could offer her some form of protection."

At his words, Jedrek sighed. "I didn't want to let her go, I'd heard rumours of Hogwarts and even more of the Headmaster but despite her collapsing, I'd heard no end of her love here, and for you, her first friend." His smile turned sad. "But as I asked for Alistair specifically to act in Loco Parentis while she's here in addition to your offer, the worry will be less now."

Harry could see guilt in his eyes, most likely over Lilah's condition. He could say that it wasn't the man's fault, however, it had never worked for him, so the next best thing would be to ensure she didn't collapse again.

With that in mind, Harry followed the instructions for alliances to the letter, the telltale flash of magic indicating that it had worked. Knowing that Lilah and her family had protection from both Vampires and non-vampires filled Harry with great relief, as they sealed the magic with a brief handshake.

All in all, it only took a few minutes and checking the time, there was still enough for him to leave for the Room of Requirement. As they returned to the other room Lilah bounced over to Harry, unable to remember if he was as energetic at her age.

"It's the DA meeting today right?"

"You remembered?" He asked incredulously as she nodded excitedly.

"Yes! I've been excited about it all week! I want to see your magic!" At the enthusiastic response with stars in her eyes, he gave a light chuckle, throwing a questioning glance towards Jedrek.

"Is she ok to go?"

"Yes, she's in good hands with you."

At his assent, Lilah cheered, stopped in the midst of doing so by Alistair.
"Miss Caltir?"

"Yes Professor?"

His tone turned firm. "Please see me twice a week to feed. You still have not regained your full strength."

"But.." She was about to protest, shuddering at having to lose control again, until a voice halted her words.

"Please Lilah. If not for yourself, will you do it for me?"

As she met the eyes of her dad who she loved more than words could describe, she couldn't find it in her heart to refuse, despite hating the idea of feeding again altogether.

"Okay." She nodded reluctantly.

"Good girl. Have fun today, Alright?" As Jedrik closed the distance between them he bent down to her level, kissing her forehead.

"I will!" Smiling happily and regaining her excitement, she didn't hesitate to grasp Harry's hand in her own, ready to march off.

"Bye Dad! Bye Professor!"

Holding back their laughter at her excitement Harry said his own farewells, allowing himself to be caught up in Lilah's pace.

As they made their way to the room of requirement, Lilah slowed her pace a little, looking at him apologetically.

"Sorry, I'm just so excited! I get to learn cool magic from you!" She gave him a bright grin and with his spare hand, Harry ruffled her hair fondly.

"I'm glad you hold me in high regard, but I hope I don't disappoint!" He was only half joking, as the look in Lilah's eyes indicated that if he told her he could part the sea with a single gesture, she'd believe it.

"You won't. We've all got a lot to learn! Maybe I can make some new friends too."
He squeezed her small hand in his for a moment, at the hopeful yet doubtful look held in her eyes.

He knew the feeling all too well, not having made any friends of his own up until before Hogwarts, starting with Hagrid and Hedwig. The first years of his life were some of the loneliest and most isolated he could recall, with barely any memories of when his parents were alive. He was sure they were buried deep down somewhere in his mind, only the Dementors bringing forth his worst memory and as a result, pushing any of the good ones he may have to the very back.

Harry was glad that Lilah had awakened before the first DA lesson of the year. He didn't exclude any years or any house because danger applied to everyone. If he had the opportunity to when younger, he wouldn't have hesitated to spend a part of his weekend with someone who could teach him all he needed to know.

As they arrived, Harry watched Lilah gasp in delight at the usual door to Lunaland, with a leafed arch and small orchids among the greenery.

There was still some time left before everyone arrived and to his disappointment, Ron was intending on coming too. He couldn't even fool himself into thinking that he still saw Ron as a friend, not with the way he'd been acting.

Deciding he'd worry about that particular problem later he released Lilah's hand and with it, she opened the door, widening her eyes at what she saw.

"It's so beautiful."

"It is. This comes straight from Luna's mind, so we've nicknamed it Lunaland, for anyone who asks."

"Oh!" She exclaimed in understanding, eyes still taken in with the impressive sight.

As he looked towards his friends he could see that he didn't have to explain his sudden hasty actions, Hermione nodding her head in understanding and after checking that Lilah was alright, approached Hermione.

"So, how many people do you think will turn up? One? Two?" He said, jokingly.

"Providing that every student shows up and if they don't I'll find out why, 140."

Harry's mind stopped for a moment.
"...Say that again?"

Raising an eyebrow at him, Hermione picked up the contract which every student was required to sign. "Didn't you check this?"

He hadn't checked the contract, getting those to sign where he could but not actually counting just how many. He'd assumed that most of those from last year would return minus the students who'd left and didn't expect too many more but looking closer, everyone from last year had signed, including Marietta Edgecombe but with some luck, last year had taught her Hermione's wrath though this year, it was far more formidable.

He took a deep breath, thinking for a moment. "Depending on the turn out would you be ok if the five of us took a group each? Alistair is doing a great job of teaching everyone what's required as part of the syllabus along with his own ideas, but I want everyone to find their animagus forms and for the younger students if it's not possible yet, to learn meditation and Occlumency if they don't know it."

"We're finally going to see your Animagus forms?" Hermione asked, a gleam of interest in her eyes.

Harry nodded his assent, smiling as he could already see the wheels in her head turning. She knew what forms he had but hadn't seen them for herself just yet, the same as Ginny and Neville. Luna had already seen one of them but that was something he hadn't told the others, enjoying that they'd visited the Thestrals together was something just between them.

He watched curiously as Luna approached Lilah. Now there was another friend she would make as Luna was liked by nearly everyone. Perhaps that's all she wanted, to make friends with her. Luna did strike him as that sort of person and wasn't worried at all.

Gesturing Ginny and Neville over the four of them discussed their plans for the session, filling Luna in when she'd finished though, in one way, he expected her to know before they needed to explain.

As Harry opened the door with Lilah at his side, Luna breathed an internal sigh of relief. She already knew that Lilah was a Dhampir and she appreciated Harry's consideration of not telling anyone else, even them but as an Empath, Luna inadvertently came to know.

As Lilah hadn't managed to block the emotions of others out just yet, similarly, she was unable to control her own emotion and any empaths which were able to pick it up, could. Her true nature was revealed the first time she'd met her, but not spoken with.

Who people were didn't matter to Luna, it was their heart which did the most and within Lilah, she could see a little of herself at that age. One day, she hoped the idea of others different to themselves could be more universally accepted, Professor Lothaire, being the sweetest Vampire she'd encountered, even if the first. She couldn't be happier for Harry and Alistair too. They were not quite where they needed to be, she could sense this from Harry at least, but they would be. This she was
"Hello! I hope you're feeling better. May I speak with you for a second?"

Giving her a warm smile as Lilah approached she asked this, the girl in question cocking her head in curiosity, but nodding her assent.

As they sat side by side on the benches, Luna decided she wouldn't mention she knew of Lilah's status, not wanting to cause her distress as she'd just woken up, already having to gently push away the onslaught of emotion radiating from the girl beside her.

"You are an Empath, I am too. I'd like to help if you'd let me."

At Luna's words, Lilah widened her eyes. "You are? And you want to help? I was worried I'd be the only one here. It gets too much and I get sick if I'm in the hall for too long."

She softly placed a hand on Lilah's shoulder. "I was ill often until I gained control, but don't worry! We can work together!"

Giving her a beaming smile Luna held her hand out, which Lilah shook.

"I hope we'll be good friends from now on," Luna says, eyes sparkling.

"You want to be my friend, really? Yay!" Lilah reached out, hugging Luna happily.

Luna didn't hesitate to return it, glad that she could offer Lilah some help and together, they would help overcome her control issues.

Once they'd finished speaking, Harry filled in Luna. It was close to the time when everyone would arrive and in accordance with their wishes, the room changed but only slightly, with enough grassy area to comfortably fit everyone into, at least for when the DA sessions ran.

It was one thing to be made aware of just how many may attend but as the door slowly opened, it was another thing to see it in person. According to Professor McGonagall, he'd be informed beforehand if a member of staff wished to sit in and watch the proceedings which was a good thing. Dumbledore wouldn't be able to make any surprise visits as once everyone arrived, the door would disappear for the duration that they remained there.

As the students filed in, he could see Lilah visibly stiffening, understanding why when Zain Alford and Keith Taylor appeared and after some words to Keith which Harry couldn't pick up among the noise of over a hundred students, he drew closer to Lilah. Harry didn't say anything, watching silently and ready to step in if need be.
As Zain saw Harry he averted his eyes for a moment, remembering his earlier encounter with him but resolute, he met the wary eyes of Lilah.

"Sorry, I've been a jerk. I'm trying to convince Keith to leave you alone but it's not working right now. Sure your eye colour changing is weird, but I've seen weirder since coming to Hogwarts and I just kind of jumped on Keith's bandwagon. Can we start over?"

He timidly held out his hand to shake, knowing that he'd deserve every bit if she chose not to accept his apology. While Keith was more of the instigator he still went along with it even though he had a mind of his own.

Lilah looked at him for a short moment, cocking her head and it didn't take long until she enthusiastically responded to his handshake. "I forgive you."

She gave him a happy smile as he averted his eyes, muttering a 'See you around', hastily retreating.

Thankful that his apology was sincere, Harry spotted someone in the distance. "Lilah, I see Dominik over there."

"Oh right! I have to apologise for leaving him alone a week!"

Her tone was frantic and before Harry could utter one syllable, Lilah was off. Tonks could be here under Dumbledore's orders, but surely he'd know like last year, they'd take measures to prevent information from being shared? Not to mention he hadn't stopped Dumbledore from coming to see any of the sessions for himself. If he could, he'd find out at the end.

As the students gathered in front of them, Harry couldn't hear himself think over all the noise. Somehow, it sounded much louder in here with roughly half of the student population rather than the hall with everyone there.

"Sonorous." Harry murmured, wand at his throat.

"QUIET!"

His amplified shout carried across, reaching every single student and with it, all noise ceased.

"Thank you."

Harry spoke once more, cancelling the charm and taking a seat on the grassy ledge behind him, so he could see the students at the back too.
"All of you, welcome to the first DA session. I appreciate you taking the time out of your weekend for this and it's going to be worth every second of it. This year, we have an excellent Defence Against The Dark Arts Professor -"

"Yeah, he's hot!"

Someone shouted, causing murmurs of agreement and chuckles to spread across the crowd.

"-Yes, and eye candy for the eager ones in this room." The students laughed as his eyes swept across the girls' starry-eyed expressions at the mere mention of him, steadfastly ignoring Ginny's smirk. He continued, once the voices had died down again.

"-We have an excellent Professor who teaches us everything we need to know and more. Last year this group was a necessity. This year, it's a bonus and because of this, I want to show you all how to become Animagi. Who knows how already? If you do, raise your hand."

A small handful of students did and only mild surprise registered when Draco Malfoy was one of the hands raised.

"And how many of you found your form or forms if that's the case, through meditation?"

Only one kept his hand raised. Draco Malfoy, coldly arching an eyebrow.

"Meditation is the best way. It's how I found my own, over time. Some of the students in this room may be too young to find their form and won't be able to as quickly as the older students, however, meditation will still help to clear thoughts and make school life easier."

He smiled at the murmurs of agreement, glad that he had their attention as this was something he felt passionate about.

"The Ministry encourages Animagi to sign the registry, but anyone can access that information if they wanted to. The enemy won't give away their secrets, so why should we? Unfortunately, right now, we don't live in a world where we can freely share this information without repercussions and in battle having an unregistered Animagi form will give you an edge. Yes, it's breaking the rules but for those who know me whether that's inside or outside Hogwarts, that's nothing new."

Seeing a few knowing looks in the eyes of his housemates, he shrugged his shoulders sheepishly, not regretting all those late night explorations, but that he wasn't a little more cautious.

"I want all of us to be prepared. While some of the Professors wish to shield us from what it's really like, that's not going to help if the school is ever under attack or when trips to Hogsmeade and
Diagon Alley are interrupted by Death Eater raids. We have to learn how to fight, to protect ourselves and each other."

He noticed Katie Bell raising her hand and with a slight nod, gestured for her to speak.

"Will you show us your form, Harry?"

He shook his head silently, smiling apologetically at the few disappointed sighs.

"I don't want to reveal all my cards at once. Though Hermione's told you what will happen if you share anything outside of this room with anyone else other than a fellow member, that won't stop the information being plucked from your minds. You'll see them, one day."

"Them?" She asked, incredulously.

But Harry only smiled mysteriously in response. As soon as he'd finished here, he'd gather his friends and show them his forms. He wasn't sure Hermione would last until the end of the session if not.

Looking at the mass of students, he wondered how the hell he was supposed to take roll call.

Hermione seemed to know what he was thinking, speaking to him quietly from below the ledge he sat on.

"The contract will do it for you, it doubles as a register. With each student's signature, there are traces of their magic and through this, it will detect who is or isn't in the room. Any students not here, their names will glow. Just tap the contract when you're ready."

"You think of everything, don't you? Thanks." Giving Hermione a grateful smile and taking a hold of the contract he tapped the parchment, watching it work.

After a few moments, his eyes ran down the names that glowed, none of them which he knew. That left 101 students in total. The five of them would work with a group of 20 each, except for one with 21. For now, though, he'd talk them through the process of meditation and thanks to his wishes, exactly an hour and a half would pass by outside of this room but within it, time was limitless. This way, each student would get the most out of every weekend and that was something which Hermione had informed them of, in case they wondered why their fatigue was higher than normal.

As soon as he finished he asked for them to talk among themselves for a few minutes, gesturing for his friends to follow, with enough spells surrounding them that those in the room would have a hard time trying to break through.
"As much as I don’t mind showing my forms to the others, I’ve got no way of knowing if their minds are protected and with the exception of Occlumency, which all of us know, Hermione has an idea to further protect our thoughts."

The group nodded in understanding, eyes alight with eager anticipation, especially on Hermione's part. So much had happened within the space of a short time that he'd simply forgot to show them, just a mention when he'd informed them all about his Summer.

Harry double checked to make sure he had enough space, shifting into Lume with a smooth transformation, flowing like water.

Hermione's eyes widened comically and Harry couldn't help but shift beneath her intense gaze, even as Luna didn't hesitate to softly stroke his snout. A growl left his throat, finding it pleasurable as he pushed his snout into Luna's hand.

"You'd better show us what Lume can do another time, I don't fancy seeing anything burn to ash, or die in the case of Thanatos, even if the room can correct itself," Neville spoke, slightly wary.

Harry nodded his scaly head in acknowledgement of Neville's words, shifting to Thanatos.

"Of course I believed you when you told us your animagi forms, but to see it is a completely bloody different thing!" Ginny exclaimed, hesitantly patting the ash bones on his side.

"Do you have any idea what this means? There hasn't been a recorded witch or wizard with more than one form in over a century! and for them both to be rare? That hasn't happened since the times of Merlin. Harry, you may very well be one of the most powerful wizards of this century."

Hermione's eyes held more fire than Harry had ever seen and not for the first time, he was thankful that she was on his side.

Then Harry shifted back, grimacing.

"Well, that gives me another reason to be noticed, then. Damn it."

"Noticed? Harry, you have a Vampire who fancies the absolute snitch out of you, you're being more than noticed."

Glaring at Ginny he didn't respond but she wasn't affected, snickering.

Having done it so many times himself, including before he slept, he found it easier than first thought
to talk the students through the process of meditation after everyone spread out. Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna went around to see if their assistance was needed, before joining everyone else. He'd already told them to inform him if they'd managed to catch sight of any forms and he'd instruct them on the best course of action afterwards.

"Come on Herm, sit with me!"

Harry closed his eyes briefly in resignation, head turning towards the unmistakable voice of Ron, seated close to the front.

"No Ron! And keep your voice down, you're disrupting the others."

"But Heeerrm-" He whined, drawing out Hermione's most hated nickname even longer than it needed to be.

"No! And don't ask me again!"

He didn't say anything but grumbled incoherently under his breath.

Mind relatively at peace Harry chose to watch over everyone else, making sure that there were no issues and smiling to himself as Dominik seemed to be giving Lilah pointers.

All in all, he wasn't sure how long they spent in the Room of Requirement but thanks to the difference in time, they could get the most out of each session and by the end, a small handful of students had approached him, saying that they'd seen something.

He had it easy for now as meditation involved far less chaos than over a hundred students learning various types of spellfire. That would be when he'd need to break everyone down into smaller groups and depending on if any of them could track down and ask the missing students why they didn't attend, they could be even or uneven groups.

Suddenly, the flying parchment he'd seen glimpses of in the Ministry hovered before him, as he took it curiously.

\textit{Wotcher Harry, just stopped by to see how everything was going, I'm not here under The Headmaster's Orders. Keep up the good work!}

\textit{Tonks}
Sending a smile of thanks at Dominik's retreating back among the mass of students, he noticed Lilah was waiting near the bridge, no doubt for the majority of the student body to clear up.

Ron hadn't left however and by the sound of things, it was a continuation of the previous argument. Harry noticed the warning signs of an angry Ron, as his facial colour began to slowly match the hair.

"Fine!" Blind in his anger Ron snarled at Lilah, "Move it, Pipsqueak!"

As his hand shoved her aside she fell backwards, falling into the water with a splash and not even given the chance to cry out. Ron didn't turn back even though he clearly heard the commotion, continuing on his way.

Harry quickly rushed to the water and thankfully it wasn't too deep. But to drown, it didn't need to be.

"Succendam Sicco."

As he helped Lilah out of the water he cast this, drying her instantly and helping her to cough up the water she'd swallowed the wrong way.

"RONALD WEASLEY YOU GET BACK HERE AND APOLOGISE RIGHT NOW!"

For a moment Harry thought Mrs Weasley had somehow found her way into this room but it was just Ginny, eyes ablaze with anger, clenching her wand tightly and Hermione wasn't in a much better state either.

He steadfastly ignored her, leaving the room.

"We'll take care of him." Nodding in agreement with Ginny's words Hermione left with her.

"Harry?"

As Harry looked into Lilah's sad expression, he gestured for her to continue.

"What did I do wrong?"

She lowered her eyes, staying quiet after that.

"You didn't do anything wrong, this is all on Ron," He reassured, a hand on her shoulder.
"I don't want to go back to the common room, Ron scares me.." She whispered, leaning against him tiredly.

As Harry's eyes chilled with anger of his own, a familiar and welcoming voice resonated through his mind.

'Everything alright Harry?'

'No. Ron Fucking Weasley strikes again!' He shouted mentally, a lot louder and snappier than he'd intended and after a moment he breathed deeply, reigning it back in.

'Sorry.'

A soft smile and with it, that seemed to gently blow aside some of his anger.

'There is no need to apologise. What has he done this time?'

'He got pissed off because Hermione wouldn't sit with him and then deliberately pushed Lilah out of the way. There's water in this room and she fell into it. I just helped her cough up the last of it now.'

He continued after a moment, sadly. 'She doesn't want to stay in the common room anymore because Ron's there. Is she allowed to stay with you?'

'I have asked Minerva and because Jedrek has appointed me as acting parent, there are no problems if she wishes to stay with me. I have words for Mr Weasley and not a single one of them are pleasant. Why on earth would he let his anger blind him to the point of nearly injuring a child?'

'I know McGonagall is doing everything she can to get him removed as Prefect, he's only one because Dumbledore wants him to keep an eye on me.'

'I am doing the best I can as well. He is a visual representation of everything that is wrong.'

'I agree there. Are you ok to take Lilah now?'

'Of course.'

Harry turned back to the girl in question, still silent.

"Do you want to stay with Professor Lothaire?"
Softly nodding her head she stood up, reaching her hand out and Harry grasped it in his, softly squeezing in comfort.

He kept Lilah's pace, a complete contrast to her earlier excitement and energy and before long, they arrived back outside where they'd left previously.

No doubt sensing their arrival with similar charms Dumbledore had in place, Alistair opened the door, furrowing his brow in concern.

Looking at Lilah she seemed ready to collapse. Meditation was great for clearing the mind, though at first the concentration itself required to clear the mind until it could be done effortlessly did become draining.

As Harry released her hand Alistair knelt before her and with a swift movement, lifted her into his arms with ease.

"Rest, Lilah. Everything will be alright." He soothed, running a hand over her back.

"I'll close the door behind you, thanks. I'm going to have words with Ron, I'll see if he's in the common room."

Watching them, he knew Lilah would be in good hands with Alistair and remained thankful there was someone there for her who knew what it was like to have vampiric traits. He made his way for the common room, ready to give Ron a piece of his mind.

Though the common room was bound to be empty on a weekend, there was something which didn't sit right with him and if there was one thing he knew, it was to never ignore gut feelings. Ascending the stairs to the boys dorm he opened the door, in case Ron was sulking in there.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. He didn't see Ron. But, what he saw instead caused all the blood to drain from his face.

With a length of rope attached to the ceiling and tied around her feet, Hedwig dangled upside down, directly in front of Harry's terrified gaze. A message with one word only was pinned to and through her breast with a small needle.

**Revenge.**

With the thin threads of calm remaining, Harry immediately freed her from the rope, removing the message along with the needle and placing them into his pocket, securing it.
"Hedwig?" His voice cracked as he pressed an ear against her, not able to hear a heartbeat.

"HEDWIG!"

His strangled cry was loud enough to rouse the whole of Hogwarts, cradling her in one arm as he sprinted from the common room.

Absolutely nothing else was on his mind, other than the urgent and desperate need to get to Hagrid. He could heal himself just fine but animals? He wasn't a healer by any means but Hagrid knew what he was doing, he could help, right?

"Hogwarts, don't fuck with me now..." He whispered, almost praying as he thought of the moving staircase. What if he was too late? No, he couldn't think like that. He'd lost his parents and Sirius, he couldn't lose Hedwig as well.

He'd never been more thankful for his increased endurance and abandoned corridors, flying through the halls at record speed.

'Please, I have to get there...'

He wasn't given the time to blink before his surroundings faded for a split second, only to be replaced by Hogwarts' grounds and more specifically, Hagrid's hut.

He barely spared a thought for the fact that he'd accidentally managed to apparate within Hogwarts, scanning the area and when Harry didn't see anyone, pounded on the door in desperation.

"Hagrid!"

He called out, unable to mask his fear, Hedwig shaking in his arms.

At the sound of his knocking the door swung open, Hagrid's bushy eyebrows raised to his hairline.

"Arry! What can I do fer-"

His speech trailed off, eyes widening when he saw who was in Harry's arms and stepped out of the way. He gestured for him to come in and with one broad sweep of his arm, everything originally on the table crashed onto the floor in a heap.

Appreciating Hagrid's swiftness Harry gently placed her down, taking a seat out of the way as his urge to pace the room when anxious if firing spells till exhaustion wasn't an option wouldn't help either of them.
Sitting there and waiting to find out whether Hedwig would be ok was one of the longest experiences of Harry's life and to his own frustration, he couldn't control his trembling limbs, rocking back and forth where he sat. The more his mind became consumed by what-ifs, the more he began to lose sense of his surroundings.

The loss of his parents was great, but he didn't have enough good memories to feel it so keenly, even if the end result was a life of abuse. Sirius was the promise of what could have been, too short a time but enough fleeting moments here and there to create something tangible within his heart.

But Hedwig, through Hagrid, even if she couldn't verbally communicate was more than just a means of delivering letters. To him, she was an irreplaceable part of his life, the first friend he ever had and the first time he was able to show his affection. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd made his way to the Owlery, Hedwig landing by his side as he spoke about his problems, running a hand through her soft feathers all the while. She listened, even if she couldn't speak, with eyes so calm and intelligent that once he'd left, his heart felt lighter, somehow. The possibility that he may never be able to do this again made him feel as though the ground shook beneath his feet, cracking and opening to the point where he wouldn't find his footing.

"Arry, we're goin' ta need Professor Snape."

At Hagrid's words, Harry's heart beating rapidly threatened to stop altogether.

"Ok." Taking a deep breath Harry closed his eyes for a moment, using everything he had to regain concentration. This was important. While messages via his Patronus was something considered higher level, Harry knew he'd need the ability sooner rather than later.

"Expecto Patronum." At his words, Thanatos sprang forth, green light casting the room in an eerie glow.

"Professor I need your help, I found Hedwig and she's been afflicted by something. I'm at Hagrid's."

Thankfully he'd be able to understand Harry's words but was unable to keep the tremor from them. He knew that most would shake their heads, saying that to ask for his time when he was always so busy over a possibly poisoned animal was ludicrous, but Hedwig meant more to him than he could possibly express.

As he watched the Thanatos Patronus gallop through the wooden walls Harry fistred his hair, tugging on strands in his anxiety and frustration, unable to do anything but wait.

Harry lost the passage of time entirely, not even hearing the knocks as Hagrid opened the door nor their discussion over Hedwig, as the Professor ran a diagnostic test.
Thoughts on an endless cycle, Harry jumped when a hand touched his shoulder, wide and slightly unseeing eyes staring into those of Professor Snape's.

"Professor, I didn't hear you arrive! Is she ok?!"

Unable to keep the panic from his tone he tried to stand, but a hand stopped him from doing so.

"Sit, Potter."

He removed a bottle from his robes, thrusting it beneath Harry's nose and at just one glance, knew it was a calming draught.

"Thanks."

He didn't take them often, having an addiction to that and Dreamless Sleep in the past but occasionally, they came in handy. Downing it in one whirl of thoughts cleared instantly and from this, he knew it was of the Professor's own batch and not the Hospital Wing's. Once refocused, Severus repeated his earlier words.

"It is Draught of Living Death and those which have consumed it fall into sleep, all vitals slowed. I am able to produce the antidote however, I have never known of an Owl to consume it. If the antidote fails, she will never awaken."

That explained the stiffness of her body, then. Harry knew it was thanks to the calming draught that he hadn't collapsed right then and there. He appreciated him not sugarcoating words or giving false hope, knowing he'd be all the more devastated if the opposite turned out to be true. But that didn't make him feel any better.

"There is nothing more that can be done, for the moment. Hagrid will ensure she is kept stable." His tone was devoid of emotion, clinical.

Harry nodded silently, knowing that what he said was true. Shakily he stood up, drawing close to the table. At her lifeless form, Harry could feel his heart shatter, swallowing several times.

"She'll be alright, ye'll see." Hagrid tried to reassure him in that clumsy way of his and in response, Harry managed a weak smile.

As he left, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease. Irrational as it was, Harry couldn't help but wonder if Remus was ok. Evergreen was protected to the best of his abilities and it would be difficult for anything to happen he knew this, but still. He nearly lost Remus and he'd be damned if it happened again.
He had to check, his mind and heart wouldn't settle until he did. While Snape's calming draught was the best, of that he had no doubt, Harry's panic overpowered this as a few minutes later, the effects slowly began to subside.

Hoping that Professor McGonagall was in and she'd allow him to use the Floo, his pace didn't slow at all from earlier.

With worry gnawing at his stomach, Harry knocked on the office door, a little more composure now than he had outside of Hagrid's.

At the call to come in he did so, Professor McGonagall in the midst of marking, spectacles at the far end of her nose. He must look terrible as she stopped all action, eyes narrowing with concern.

"Are you alright Potter? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?"

At her words he shook his head silently, managing to formulate a sentence though, in his current state, he found even that difficult.

"Can I use your Floo to see Remus, please?" He asked, unable to prevent the desperation in his tone.

He was thankful she didn't ask why. "Of course. I'll know when you leave and once you wish to return, send a Patronus to inform me ahead of time."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. My Patronus isn't a stag anymore though it's an undead horse, just so you know."

At those words, she raised both eyebrows but sensed it was better if she didn't know too many details. Out of consideration that his home was password protected he detected muffling and silencing charms placed around him so that she wouldn't hear.

Taking a pinch of Floo Powder Harry stepped into the fireplace, scattering the powder at his feet.

"The Lion's Den."

He called out clearly, not wanting a repeat of his earlier years and with a flash of green flames, he disappeared.

To his surprise he didn't fall flat on his face like a newborn foal, managing to step from the fireplace rather than stumble. As his eyes scanned the room he couldn't see Remus but if the man was indoors, he'd be alerted if anyone tried to use the floo.
"Remus?" Harry called out tentatively, negative thoughts consuming him until a short moment later he entered the room, a soft smile on his face. He could have wept with relief.

"Harry! Great to see you!"

Remus stopped whatever else he was going to say, alarm in his amber coloured gaze as he'd never seen him look so young and lost, rather than the too soon adult he'd been shaped into.

"Remus.."

Harry approached the man in a half-aware state, reaching out for his wrist and locating the pulse point. Thoughts in a whirl the only thing on his might right now was to check.

'Remus is alive. He's here, breathing.'

He told himself this but all the while, body still trembling. In a repeat occurrence of his earlier actions with Hedwig, he listened for the sound of a heartbeat.

**Thump. Thump. Thump.**

Regular and steady, completely normal and nothing out of the ordinary. He closed his eyes, listening quietly.

"Harry?" Remus asked softly, confusion and worry in his tone at the unusual actions.

"I'm listening for your heartbeat, because-"

His voice cracked, fingers clenching the fabric of Remus' shirt for a moment.

"-I couldn't hear Hedwig's."

Briefly, he explained what happened, struggling to speak the words he needed but once Remus understood, he manoeuvred them both to sit, Harry's head resting against his chest.

"Take as long as you need cub, I'm not going anywhere." Remus rested a hand lightly on his back.

Hearing Remus' heartbeat and his elevated body temperature seeping into his own skin was far more reassuring than it should be, as he closed his eyes once more.
'Harry?'

Alistair's voice peeped into Harry's mind, filled with concern.

'Sorry, if you've been trying to talk to me for the past several minutes I won't have heard anything, I was in too much of a state. Professor McGonagall has probably told my friends where I am but not why. Someone's hurt Hedwig, I found her in the boy's dorm and right now I'm with Remus.'

Even his internal voice didn't sound composed.

'Do you know who would do this?'

'No. I'll find out, though.'

'Alright. Take care, I will always be here should you ever have need of me.'

'Thanks.' A soft, if trembling smile on Harry's part.

Then, a sudden wave of affection, enough to almost feel as if he were cocooned within. Slowly but surely he began to calm a little, the care from some of the most important people in his life helping in that endeavour.
Within Their Power

Chapter Summary

Unable to sit idly Alistair takes an active role to help Harry, in more than one way. Once Harry returns to Hogwarts it's straight to the Ministry, one step closer to resolving the Hedwig issue.

As the door softly shut behind Alistair, his attention turned fully to the child within his arms.

When Jedrek had asked if he would act in Loco Parentis during the school year, Alistair found himself surprised. Not only because it was rare to ask any member of staff, new or old to be responsible for one specific child, but in all his years of living he could never recall being responsible for something, other than himself or Solomon. At least until he chose to teach here.

He didn't find it unpleasant in the least, Lilah was a sweet child who encouraged his protective instincts to rise, particularly if others chose to target her.

Rupert had been gathering intel in relation to Dhampir/Vampire interactions while Alistair contacted the main parties concerned for a meeting of importance, and the results were not what either had hoped for.

The majority had never met another Dhampir in person and because of this, formed preconceived notions through the words of their elders rather than actively conversing. That children and adults were shunned through no fault of their own or simply because love crossed the boundaries of their own kind saddened him beyond words. He truly thought they were better than that or at least, from watching the humans, they would learn something valuable.

Even with his influence, he knew that changing opinions would take time but in regards to this, he couldn't allow that mindset to cause more damage than it already had.

As the door to the new spare bedroom opened he drew back the covers, a temporary transfiguration on Lilah's clothing to sleepwear. As of yet, she hadn't officially moved into his quarters, belongings still remaining in Gryffindor.

At least this way, he could keep an eye on her. He had the feeling that she would try to avoid any more blood consumption. Not out of deliberate disobedience but through her own fear. He hoped that with time, she would grow used to the sensation of feeding and through his own and Harry's encouragement, no longer feel ashamed of her nature.

Gently removing her arms from around his neck, he placed Lilah beneath the covers and with sleep-
addled eyes, she looked at him.

"P'fessor?"

At the sound of her tired voice, he seated himself at the edge of the bed, eyes kind and encouraging her to continue.

"Why does Ron hate me so much? Whatever it is maybe I can fix it so he'll like me?"

Though she asked the question, it was with a lost and despondent tone and reaching out, he softly took her hand in his own. Lilah put it down to feeling exhausted, but she could almost swear that the hand covering hers generated a little warmth.

"Mr Weasley's attitude is in need of fixing. You have done nothing wrong, nor do you deserve to be treated in such a manner. I will ensure that he does not repeat his earlier actions."

As she nodded in acceptance, Alistair asked her a final question.

"Despite that, did you enjoy Harry's teachings?"

"Yes! He's teaching us about Animagi! It's just meditation right now and that's why I'm so tired but he says it helps, so I'm going to do it every night."

As she tried to stifle a yawn, he softly smiled. She seemed hesitant, wanting to say something.

"You may tell me anything, I will assist how I can." He encouraged, watching as she struggled with her words.

"When we're alone, will you call me Lilah? And-" She stopped, averting her eyes out of embarrassment. "Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?" In truth, she didn't want to be alone right now.

As an answer, Alistair linked his fingers with hers, providing as much comfort as he could.

"I will stay with you for however long you need, Lilah. You may call me Alistair in private if you would like."

At the sound of her name, she smiled, closing her eyes.

"Thanks. Maybe one day but I don't wanna slip up in class.."
It didn't take long until the grip on his hand loosened and as it did, he rearranged her back under the covers.

"Sleep well."

He murmured this softly, standing up and closing the door behind him. Not an inch of his quarters or office were spell free, prepared for any and all possibilities. If Lilah should need him he would know, even if he left the castle.

He found himself checking the bracelet occasionally. As he'd come to realise, even if others saw Harry as closed off, that didn't stop the emotional turmoil within.

As far as Alistair could understand, warmer colours were positive, cooler colours negative. Those not classified as colours such as black and white were extreme opposites. Up until Harry, he had never used them, only remembering the days of his Mother and Father. So long ago and yet sometimes, as if it were only yesterday.

While the colour had wavered between shades of pink, Alistair was startled when before his eyes, it slowly changed to black. He didn't outright communicate with Harry, just gently checked and was greeted with a solid wall, of a material he couldn't quite put his finger on.

In this instance, it would only appear during times of panic and distress, unable to focus on anything but the problem at hand. This was something he came to learn through Solomon, who had found a similar wall the day they discovered Emily's body.

Though he couldn't help but be concerned he waited for a while, continuing to mark assignments and chuckling softly to himself, as Minerva's annoyed expression flashed across his mind in response to his ease with marking. Sleep was optional for him and usually, he chose not to unless he was sharing a bed with his partner for the night.

Eventually, he tried again, worry not lessening any at the sound of Harry's voice. Though not physically there, the pain and helplessness were nevertheless conveyed to him strongly. He knew of Hedwig, through Harry himself, Hagrid and a select few others. He had come to visit The Owlery before, endlessly curious about the school and wishing to see as much of it as possible.

A Snowy White Owl had landed nearby, regarding him with curiosity and though there were other owls, this one seemed different, somehow. In truth, Alistair still found himself surprised that light creatures or those considered light didn't shy away from him.

He didn't see himself as a dark creature at all like so many others did. Simply a man with an endless curiosity of the world and in turn, an endless lifespan to accompany it.
He wished to spend his endless lifespan experiencing many things. However, a broken-hearted Harry telling him of a possibility that Hedwig will not awaken due to the action of another, the desire to seek out the culprit in question rose within him, as his eyes flickered with anger.

But even then, through their link and knowing that he would be fine with Remus, Alistair projected all the warmth and affection he had for Harry, sending it along in support.

Though Alistair was unsure of the details, at a guess, Harry had left Hedwig in the capable hands of Hagrid. Even if he did know the details, the care of animals was not his expertise nor Solomon's, unless it involved Potions.

However, while there wasn't much he could do for Hedwig or Harry at the moment, that wouldn't stop him from doing a little investigating of his own.

"Dobby."

At his soft call, the overly energetic house elf appeared, bouncing up and down in an odd pair of Harry's socks.

"Will you watch over Lilah again? You did a splendid job last time."

At his honest smile, Dobby bounced higher if that were possible.

"Professor Lothaire Sir is so kind! Like master Harry Potter-"

He stopped, looking sheepish. "-Harry. Dobby is not to be calling him anything else but that. I'll be watching over Miss Lilah."

Chuckling at his words after giving thanks Alistair left his quarters, to head for the Gryffindor Common Room.

Though he was a flight of stairs below the Fat Lady's portrait, Alistair could already detect that something was amiss, only growing stronger as he came to stand outside.

It only took a moment for him to realise that a strong misdirection ward targeted the frame of the portrait, the image itself spell resistant but not what held it. Most likely to drive everyone away, except for Harry and to those it was not directed against, virtually undetectable.

Though he could easily take care of this himself, Minerva would want to know of any issues surrounding her house.
As his flamingo Patronus stood before him Alistair directed it to go, with a brief message.

"Minerva, I am outside of Gryffindor Common Room. There is something you must be informed of."

And with that, he waited, unsure if Harry had informed Minerva of Hedwig or not.

He nodded at Minerva in greeting once she arrived and could see that for now, he needed no words, detecting the very same spell he had.

"Inform me of what you know, Alistair." She turned to him, lips thinned into a line.

"Upon returning to Gryffindor Common Room Harry found Hedwig injured within the Boy's Dormitory. I assume that this ward is here to drive others away, all but Harry himself."

Minerva shook her head slightly, even as her eyes flashed with anger similar to his own. "He used my Floo to visit Remus, I wondered what was wrong but didn't press for details. The poor boy can't catch a break since his arrival at this school. I have never seen a stronger bond between human and animal than Potter and Hedwig."

Alistair nodded in agreement. Even he could see that, despite the short amount of time he'd spent here.

As Minerva systematically dispelled the ward around the portrait, she rapped sharply on the frame, awakening the Fat Lady from her sleep.

"Minerva, what is it?" She questioned, annoyance laced through her tone at having been awoken, rubbing her eyes.

"Do you recall seeing anything suspicious today?"

At Minerva's serious tone she straightened to attention, alert as she remembered the times she wasn't sleeping.

"You know, I did notice something. The password was spoken so I let them in, but I couldn't see anyone."

"Thank you for your time."

Bowing her head in response to Minerva's words she opened for the pair, who ascended the stairs to
As Alistair scanned the room he could sense faint traces of magical signatures. When not using magic they could still be detected, albeit faint. When using magic the signature remained for far longer. Harry had used Diffindo to cut something recently but before that, Wingardium Leviosa coupled with a sticking charm, by a signature unfamiliar to him.

"I assume Potter took the evidence. Without it, there isn't much more that can be done. I will see to it that every Common Room is better protected. But if it's another student of this house.." She trailed off, frowning.

"Minerva, I may have a solution. There is a spell by the name of Înțoarce-te. Once it is known well it doesn't require a verbal incantation. It reverses time, but only within a certain area and unlike Time Turners, will not alter the course of reality as we know it."

It was a spell of Alistair's own creation, disliking the dangers presented with using Time-Turners as they could alter the very state of the world, with one wrong spin.

It only took a moment for Minerva to answer.

"I have never heard of it. But if it allows us to know for certain just who was here, I have no complaints."

Nodding in assent to her words released his wand from the holster on his arm, sliding into his hand with ease. The spell required upkeeping and once all was seen, releasing it from the tip of his finger or focus would 'snap' time in that area back to the present.

As time began to rewind, Minerva watched in fascination. They hoped that once inside the dorms, whoever had been there felt it safe enough to dispell the magic, for that moment.

Alistair stopped, following Minerva as they watched silently from the corner of the room, seeing someone enter after having removed their disguise magic, a limp Hedwig held by one stiff wing.

"Lorelei Voska," Minerva muttered to herself, explaining quietly for Alistair's benefit.

"She is a transfer student from Durmstrang. I have never known one student to attend so many schools. As her transfer was accepted and it's incredibly late, Miss Voska stays in a room separate from the school dormitories, unsorted at the moment. I don't know what Albus was thinking, accepting a student close to graduation age."

Alistair nodded in understanding. It explained why he didn't recognise her signature, she wasn't among any of the students he'd taught. Perhaps she saw class as optional. It was just as well, while
Miss Voska wasn't there physically, seeing her treat an animal so cruelly had him itching to do something.

Nevertheless, they both watched as Hedwig was hung upside down by her feet, dangling on the end of a rope attached to the ceiling. But when she pinned a note to Hedwig with a needle ensuring it went all the way into her chest, Minerva gasped.

As time passed by she left, and Alistair released the magic, snapping back to the present, as planned.

Glancing over at his colleague, Minerva's lips were pursed to the point of non-existence, magic crackling ferociously.

"Abusing an Owl in such a wey! she's auld enough tae know how tae treat a living bein' wi' respect. A dinnae know her but she has some explaining tae dae 'n' by that time, she'll know ME!"

For the most part, Alistair had managed to avoid Minerva when truly angry, knowing The Headmaster and Severus had experienced this many a time, but it was quite a thing to fully witness it for himself.

After a moment Minerva composed herself, no less furious but nodded her head curtly.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll inform Potter when he returns that we know who did this."

"Of course." As they left, descending the staircase Minerva parted from him with a brief farewell. Knowing that the student would be dealt with and glad that the situation of who was resolved so quickly, he set out in search of Harry's friends, in the next endeavour to do all that he could for him.

Hermione was at her wit's end. That was saying something, taking into consideration the amount of patience and general alertness she'd needed over the years with Harry and Ron as her friends. Well, just Harry now and after the Summer, he could confidently stand on his own two feet.

She didn't know what had happened to Ron, though. She suspected Dumbledore's influence but in what way, she didn't know. But what she did know, is that such a rapid transformation shouldn't have happened in such a short time.

Ron was often jealous but the Ron she knew cared for his friends and took pride in his family, no matter the reputation as blood traitors. While the year of Voldemort's return wasn't good for any of them that was when Hermione noticed changes the most. Last year she was keeping an eye on Harry more than anything so within that frame of time, anything could have happened.
Having a younger sister that Ron doted on to a fault, Hermione couldn't understand where all the underlying anger came from, to the point where it could have harmed a first-year student.

She, along with Ginny, had followed straight after Ron but to their confusion, he turned back the way he came before coming within five feet of The Fat Lady's portrait so they followed him once again, coming to stand outside near the stone circle.

"FUCK OFF AND LEAVE ME ALONE!" Apoplectic with rage Ron spun on his heel, glaring fiercely at the pair.

Despite the explosiveness of Ron's anger, Ginny's put most to shame. While Hermione's friendship with Ron had practically fizzled and died she'd grown closer to Ginny. The siblings and Mr Weasley, more than once, had commented on just how much she channelled Mrs Weasley when angry but since her training, Hermione firmly believed Ginny's anger now had a much more dangerous edge.

"No! What crawled up your arse and died? Since this year has started you've done nothing but abuse and bully others and rebelled every step of the way. You could have injured an eleven-year-old today because you don't even bother to think how your actions affect others!" She snapped.

Ginny's hand was hovering over her wand, reminding Hermione of an old western gunslinger.

Ron gritted his teeth. "Who's side are you on anyway? I'm your brother! Come on Herm we're going, I know you agree with me."

Still seething he grasped Hermione's hand, intending to walk away. What he didn't expect was to be at wand point.

Feeling a sense of deja vu Hermione narrowed eyes, the tip of her wand sparking dangerously as she held it to Ron's throat, his back gradually up against one of the stones.

Ginny watched from a slight distance, a smirk on her face and as an afterthought, placed a mild notice me not charm around them. The last thing they needed was for a Professor to intervene. All this time Hermione had held her patience, longer than both Harry and Ginny.

The very air charged with magic to the point where her hair almost resembled childhood frizz, her gaze pinned Ron, straighter than the spell arrows that she'd learned to fire with Esha.

"Don't put words into my mouth! I disagree with your actions this year. You're a Prefect and yet you insist on acting like an immature child rather than be there for the younger students to look up to as a role model. This is your chance to help change things for the better, even if only a little and you're
wasting the opportunity given!"

She knew for a fact Ron would never be suited for a role of authority, not unless he changed his
attitude and behaviour and she was proven to be right. But in this case, she wished she wasn't.

She took a deep breath, wand not moving an inch as he visibly swallowed.

"Apologise to Lilah when you next see her. Angry or not you have no excuse. And call me Herm
one more time and I swear, I will hex you. Go."

When Ron didn't move an inch, she shouted.

"GO!"

He fled the scene.

"That utter arse!" She spoke aloud, frustrated and closing her eyes for a moment to compose herself.
No sooner had she done so, that someone else called her name.

Though Alistair was unsure of Hermione's location, it didn't take him long to find her, in the middle
of a heated confrontation with Ron, Ginny standing aside. Catching the last of their argument he
nodded to himself in understanding. The both of them were there to try and get to the bottom of
Ron's attitude but as he'd once heard Harry say, nothing short of a bludger could get through to him.

He brushed aside Ginny's charm effortlessly, coming to stand behind Hermione.

"Miss Granger?"

Ginny jumped, caught off guard. Alistair put Professor Snape to shame because one moment no one
else was there but them and the next, he appeared. She found it impressive and knew there wasn't a
reason for him to conceal himself via magic, so it was through his own natural abilities.

As Hermione turned around, brow furrowed in irritation she opened her mouth but mid-speech
stopped, seeing just who it was and paled slightly.

"Professor?"

Chuckling slightly at her panic, he reassured her. "You are not in trouble, I wish to borrow you for a
moment if that is alright?"
Giving a sigh of relief she nodded her head, waving farewell to Ginny who twirled her wand menacingly. Hermione had no doubt the Bat-Bogey hex would be in Ron's near future.

Since the air was refreshing, Alistair saw no need to take this conversation to his office and instead, picked a particularly grassy spot, not hesitating to sit down and shrugging, Hermione followed suit. After a moment refreshments appeared, lemon water for Hermione which she smiled in appreciation for.

"There is no rush. Take a moment. Though I have not known Mr Weasley for as long as you or Harry, I know enough to realize that he tests the patience of every mortal or immortal that he encounters."

"He never used to be like this. At least not as bad, anyway." Sighing softly the tension left her shoulders, magic dissipating as her usual calm returns.

"What can I do for you?"

She asks this a moment later, eyes alight with curiosity.

"As Harry's closest friend, might you recommend something that he likes?"

Though Alistair had conversed with Harry through their link and in person, they hadn't really had a conversation which touched upon the simplest things and he didn't wish to breach Harry's privacy by slipping into his mind and finding out.

"Is there anything you have in mind?"

There were a lot of things Harry liked, however, Hermione didn't know if there was anything specific Alistair wanted.

He thought for a moment, tilting his head.

"Confectionary, perhaps?"

Hermione straightened to attention, placing her cup aside as her eyes lit up.

"Yes! He loves Mint Chocolate Truffles."

She explained, her mind remembering the past with each word spoken.
"One summer my parents and I visited Glarus in Switzerland. There's a company named Läderach with a chocolate boutique in the city itself, though they've started to branch out abroad as well. I'm not a chocolate person but I was curious to see if there was anything for Harry. I picked an assorted box and at his Godfather's home, once everyone was asleep, I gave them to him. He tried every single one, a little too quickly as if he was scared I'd take them from him but at the same time, appreciated them."

She stopped for a moment, frowning to herself. "I'm glad that his relatives are a thing of the past but before Hogwarts, he'd never tasted chocolate in his life. He'd never tasted or tried many things before then, The Dursleys stunting both his mind and growth. But...

Her eyes turned earnest. "The last chocolate was a mint truffle and the moment he tasted it, I'd never seen such an honest and happy smile before then, it made all his genuine smiles before this pale in comparison. I hope that he can smile like that again one day, through more than just chocolate. I know he's tried other truffles, but none of them had quite the same impact as that one."

She shook her head, smiling apologetically and finishing her water.

"I didn't mean for the story attached to it Professor, but I hope that helps."

"Not at all, thank you for the information, Miss Granger." He gave her a genuine smile of gratitude, a firm plan in mind.

"Professor, do you know where Harry is? I know we left him with Lilah but I thought he'd be back by now." She asked hesitantly, eyes clouded with worry.

Alistair glanced at his wrist and within his mind, checking both. Harry had fallen asleep and though they had found out just who had harmed Hedwig, Miss Voska was in the more than capable hands of Minerva for now and he didn't wish to wake him for this, sensing that sleep would not come easy for Harry until he knew of Hedwig's status.

"He is alright and with Mr Lupin, for the moment."

He gave her a smile of reassurance, feeling it was not his place to inform Harry's friends of what happened, sensing that he'd want to be there to explain for himself.

Hermione didn't question any further, knowing that Harry would fill them in if anything had happened.

"Thanks for the drink, Professor."

Inclining her head to him she stands, giving a brief wave in farewell and returning to Ginny.
He trusted Dobby to watch over Lilah, at least for a few more moments, the second part of his plan in action.

The desire to help Harry in whatever form available filled him, leading to Miss Voska and the search for something to bring a smile to Harry's face despite everything, even if only a little.

Changing his clothing to something suitable for a non-magic and cooler location, Alistair was thankful for Hermione's input. He travelled to the gates of Hogwarts, leaving them behind to shift to his destination.

Though he hadn't seen everything, Alistair was the closest to doing so, in his opinion. However, since Solomon's disappearance, he had lost the desire and drive for exploration but now, it was returned to him.

He hadn't visited Switzerland since the 19th Century, so Läderach may or may not be a recent development.

His method of travel didn't require having seen the area once before to picture it clearly within his mind, only ability alone. When younger, Alistair relied on the faint traces of magic left behind, a little of each person lingering there no matter how many passed through.

Within a moment Alistair disappeared and unlike the telltale quiet pop of apparition, not a single sound was heard, as though he'd never been there at all.

During his visit to Switzerland, Alistair made a point of visiting everywhere within the country that he could but at the time, the valley itself had only just begun to be industrialized. One thing which hadn't changed were the mountains which rose above everything, a light dusting of snow upon them. He disliked the cold, but not for the temperature itself.

Alistair was proud of who he had become and not ashamed in the least but unlike humans and creatures with body heat, Alistair couldn't stay outside in the cold, then come indoors to warm up by a fire, like he had seen so many do before. The weather didn't affect his lack of body heat at all, remaining as he always had. He expressed this on more than one occasion, so Solomon and Rupert knew, but the one thing he wished he could have, was a little body heat. It was why his past lovers were rarely Vampires because he enjoyed the warmth next to him and a heartbeat by his ear, the rhythmic thump somehow soothing.

It was a foolish wish for one such as him to have, this he knew, but it was a wish that remained anyway.

As instantly as the melancholy thoughts appeared they quickly left, as Alistair focused his search. While magic had a solution for different languages, he found that certain things, he liked to do himself. One of those things was the knowledge of other languages, both human and non-human.
After quietly asking for directions Alistair acknowledged the stares, knowing that even in normal attire, he'd stand out.

Before he'd even entered, he couldn't help but give a soft sigh in admiration. Not a thing was out of place, many shelves behind the counter and along the sides, organized according to name, type or colour. A relatively new experience to him he opened the door, looking around curiously.

Men and women, old and young alike filled the store, a variety of people as there was chocolate. The staff looked to be busy so Alistair occupied himself, marvelling that there were more chocolate combinations than first thought.

Reminding himself not to get too distracted he finally found what he was looking for, several in a bag and secured with a large, green ribbon.

Finding even the packaging itself endearing Alistair's eyes sparkled, waiting patiently in the line to be served, even if he could easily use magic to manipulate those around him.

"Hello Sir, just the one?" Filip, according to his nameplate asked with a genuinely bright smile in place, once it was Alistair's turn.

"Yes, thank you," Alistair responded with a smile of his own, wondering why all humans couldn't be as cheerful as him.

"We have an option for a personalized card attached to any purchase made, would you like one?"

It only took a moment for him to answer in the affirmative.

Pulling out a drawer behind the counter Filip removed a small card accompanied by a pen, handing them to Alistair.

Barely any time had passed before Alistair had written a short message, writing flawless whether it was Biro pen to card or Quill to parchment.

Filip blew out a breath in appreciation. "Your penmanship is beautiful, I haven't seen such a style in years."

Finishing up Alistair smiled softly. "Thank you. I believe writing is an art in itself."

Nodding in agreement, Filip tied a string to the package, card hanging alongside the bow.
"I'm sure your intended will be pleased to receive such a gift."

Ah. Alistair didn't correct him, understanding why he'd jumped to such a conclusion. But one day he wished to be closer and with each day that seemed more likely. Alistair knew how to read the signs and Harry was interested in him, much like he was in Harry. Staff was privy to information long before the students and this year, a certain event may provide the perfect opportunity for them both.

"He is very special to me."

This was all Alistair said, giving a cheerful wave of farewell and leaving the shop, along with Switzerland, behind. Now all he could do was wait. Though he was worried for his state of mind, Alistair hoped that this would help to ease it some.

Minerva's teaching career was expansive, including the variety of students she'd dealt with, but Lorelei Voska was by far one of the most infuriating she had encountered in years. Usually, the student in question was intimidated enough to begin speaking and much like Severus, she could easily spot signs of lying. Her dark brown eyes gave away nothing, simply the faintest hint of a sneer.

To Minerva's frustration, there wasn't much she could do if she was classed as a student, despite her late joining. Albus had access to the book of rules, the very same which the founders themselves collaborated to create, preservation charms lasting even after all these years.

If she had any chance of confirming for herself, at least how she managed to bypass the wards surrounding the Boy's Dormitory, then she needed the rule book. With some hope, he wouldn't dither about and simply hand over what she would ask him for.

Pinning Lorelei with a sharp glare, she spoke curtly. "Don't move."

In response, she merely raised one eyebrow, a smug smirk firmly in place. Pursing her lips Minerva turned away. She would know, even with her head in the Floo, if Miss Voska chose to move. She wasn't taking any chances, having dealt with students who had tried to leave the room before. Her wards would indicate any attempted tampering with them or if any possible exits opened.

Wishing that Floo communication was more reliable, Minerva kneeled before the flames after throwing a pinch of Floo powder into them.

"Albus' Office."
At her words after a few moments, the familiar sight of his office but at ground level filled her vision and along with it Albus, coming to kneel much like her.

"What can I do for you, Minerva?" Albus asked, both of them sharing a slight grimace as even with a cushioning charm at their age, it remained uncomfortable.

"The school rules. Do you have them?"

She didn't mean to sound quite as clipped as she did, however, she had no time for Albus' twinkling and games today and sensing this he hurried away, wanting to keep her placated. He'd known her for long enough to realise when questions would or wouldn't be appropriate. He wasn't too concerned as she had every right to see it and probably just wanted to confirm something.

As the book was passed through the flames Minerva took it.

"Thank you. I will return it when I'm finished."

Though she had this book in her possession many a time during her early teaching years, she was unsure whether the book itself mentioned anything about the students as while it did list school rules mutually decided upon, there was other information pertaining to the school and students as well, not accessible in Hogwarts: A History.

It only took her a moment to find what she needed, nodding to herself in satisfaction. With a tap of a wand to the spine, the writing would translate into many known languages, accessible to most. She didn't know whether it was an update or if it had always been there.

All candidates must be sorted into a house, or they will not classify as a student. The only exception being signed on as an apprentice by a Professor, by which no house would be acceptable.

What this meant for Minerva, was that she could treat Miss Voska like any other person. The protection of a student no longer applied to her and though legally an adult by their laws, being a student would have still caused some problems.

Minerva retook her seat across from the girl who hadn't moved, nor had the smirk left.

"You are not a student here, but a stranger to this school and unless you wish for The Ministry to be involved, you will cooperate."

"And why do you think I'll cooperate with the likes of you, Miststück?"

Lorelei broke the silence, the lack of respect for Minerva evident in her tone and body language.
"You are an adult. It is your choice. Harm to a familiar is a serious offence and if you are found to be lying or refusing to give information, a low-security cell in Azkaban is a certainty."

Minerva wasn't bluffing either, though most if not all of the Ministry's laws were in need of changing or tweaking. The direct cause of death to a familiar would result in a fine of 2500 galleons to be paid to the wounded party with no exceptions, a lifetime ban from animals and a year in a low-security cell of Azkaban.

If the familiar was injured but lived, a fine of 1500 galleons was to be paid and if not, community service until the work amount reached the total. A five-year ban would be issued and the offender would spend six months in a low-security cell of Azkaban.

There was once a repeat offender, killing familiars and even animagi forced into their forms solely for the purpose of potions and ritual experimentation and because of this, he was placed in a high-security cell. Minerva was unsure what had happened to the man but regardless, she hoped he was suffering.

And still, Lorelei didn't react to Minerva's words. Whatever way she looked at it, The Ministry would have to be involved. She hoped that Harry would return soon because as he was the person directly affected by her actions and held onto the evidence it was up to him what would happen.

Withholding the sigh that threatened to release Minerva sent her Patronus, with a message for Amelia.

She was unsure how much time has passed but as she saw Kingsley in the flames of her floo, she let him through.

"Amelia is in a meeting, she sent me in her stead."

His deep voice reverberated around the room, surveying the situation. He was a bit more subdued due to the spells the Headmaster had him under but as a result, more dedicated to his job and now with his mind clear, suspicions and distrust for the man had returned.

Minerva waved her hand silently, muting their conversation to Lorelei as she explained the situation. Once she was finished he nodded in understanding, frowning.

"We need Mr Potter, he should be here for questioning and the evidence, as well as you and Mr Lothaire. The most I can do is take Miss Voska with me until all parties are present. Then we can begin with questioning."

"I will let you know when he returns."
At her words, Kingsley nodded in assent and stepping outside the boundaries of Minerva’s spell, approached Lorelei and after nothing more than a casual shrug, she followed him into the flames, with not a hint of resistance.

Minerva longed for something stronger than tea but if Harry returned today, intoxication wouldn't be in her best interest. What was a peaceful Saturday turned out to be anything but, once more sending her Patronus but this time to Alistair. It had only been a few hours and yet to Minerva, it seemed more like weeks. She didn't envy the trouble that surrounded the boy at all and hoped for both his and Hedwig's sake, that she would recover.

As Harry opened his eyes, it took him a moment to realise where he was. Once he did, he wasn't sure he could ever keep a straight face around Remus, embarrassed about his earlier actions. Now that he was awake he wasn't sure whether to move or stay but surprisingly enough he felt well rested, despite the events of today.

He stiffened at the touch of a hand on the back of his head but after a moment, relaxed. A short while later, Remus broke the silence.

"Will you raise your head? I've forgotten what your face looks like."

At his teasing tone and the sensation of his chest rumbling against Harry's cheek, he smiled through his embarrassment.

"I can't right now."

"An old battered werewolf like me can't be too comfortable, surely."

At his words Harry finally did raise his head, lightly glaring at him as he took a seat properly.

"Don't give me that bollocks Remus. You're what, 36? Not old at all."

With warmth in his eyes, he chuckled. "Thanks, Harry. Being told that by a 16-year-old does make me feel better."

Then, his expression turned serious.

"Do you have any idea who'd harm Hedwig?"
Harry shook his head. "No. I don't recognise the handwriting either, it was probably a Quick Quotes Quill."

He removed the paper and pin with traces of blood from his pocket, showing them to Remus.

"Will you go to The Ministry?" Remus grimaced at the very thought, not trusting them in the slightest, after what happened with Sirius.

"Will The Ministry even care? I don't know what to do, honestly. Professor Snape's working on an antidote for Hedwig, so that's something at least. When I go back, I'll have to talk to Professor McGonagall since there's a chance it's not a male student in our house who did it."

Harry ran a hand through his hair but before he could think further, he heard a sharp intake of breath, a hand grasping his own.

He closed his eyes, once he realised. He didn't have to look either. He'd removed his glamour charm, so Remus could see everything. That included the scars on his hands.

Resigned he opened them, only to be met with Remus' angry gaze. despite his wolfish nature, he'd never seen him like this.

"Harry, who did this?" His words were calm, unaffected. However, he knew better, that the calm was just a facade.

In one way, there was some guilt at not having told Remus who he considered family before Alistair. But it was because of how close Remus was to him, that he'd hesitated to say anything.

"Do you remember last year when I told you and Sirius about all the detentions I received from Umbridge?"

Remus looked like he wanted to say something but he didn't, gesturing for Harry to continue, but not releasing his hand.

"They were detentions, but I had to write with a Blood Quill, usually for hours up until midnight three to four times a week."

Harry showed Remus his other hand, smiling sadly. But then, he sensed something different about the man across from him.

"Remus?" Harry blinked, startled.
Though he didn't physically change form, Remus' entire aura lost its usual gentleness, to be replaced by something wild, dangerous. His warm amber eyes became flecks of lukewarm steel, growling deep in his throat as a snarl curled his lip.

"I'll kill the bitch!"

This was Remus but at the same time, it wasn't, a distinct threat in the tone of his voice. Much deeper and filled with promise.

"Moony?" He asked this, slightly hesitant. He'd heard from Sirius that unlike Fenrir Greyback, Remus had never fully accepted his monthly transformations and hated who he was. Because of this at times of extreme emotion or if his pack was threatened, Moony's personality temporarily came out. Remus couldn't control when it happened, the same as he couldn't control when he turned. But this was the first time Harry had met Moony, properly.

"Yeah." His voice was gruff, but the same feelings were there. Harry was caught off guard when roughly pulled into a hug, squeezing with enough strength to rival Hagrid.

"I'll tear her limb from limb. She'd better not run into me any time soon or I can't guarantee she'll walk away intact." He gave a dark chuckle, releasing Harry as abruptly as he'd reached out.

"She'll get what's coming to her, I'm not the only one who has been affected, but she's a problem for a different day." He promised this, marvelling at the difference in personalities.

Perhaps at the time where he had compassion for everyone in his life, he might have felt sorry for Umbridge. But not today. The Centaurs already hated her, not including Alistair and now Moony/Remus, he was sure plenty of others were out for her blood too.

Perhaps reassured and turning back to normal, it wasn't long before the atmosphere Harry was used to returned.

"Sorry about that."

Harry dismissed the apology with a wave of his hand. "No need to apologise, it's fine."

For a moment, Remus became lost in his thoughts, until he suggested something that Harry didn't expect.

"If there isn't a way to remove curse scars with magic, then why not skin grafting? The magic contained within the curse would remain, but if successful, it wouldn't show a physical sign any
more."

"...Remus old wolly old pal, you're a genius!" Harry clapped him on the shoulder, almost slapping himself for not having thought of that before. Chuckling at Remus' bashful smile, he understood why Sirius often said Remus was the brains of The Marauders.

He'd try to find a way with magic, first. Alistair might have an idea as well. It was something to think on, at least. He refused to believe there was no solution when ways to communicate with the dead and all manner of things existed.

As much as he wouldn't mind staying here some more, he had to get back. He owed McGonagall an explanation at least.

"Thanks for earlier. You could've just woke me up though, watching me sleep must be boring." Harry told Remus, standing up.

With a fond smile, Remus' eyes reflected the past.

"Not at all. I used to do this much when you were a baby. You'd fall asleep, curled against my chest. I think you enjoyed the warmth."

Harry was torn between embarrassment and happiness at knowing a little more of what he couldn't remember.

"But if you ever need help, I'm always here. I don't need thanks for this Harry, I care for you, very much."

Giving his softest smile, Harry once more basked in the feeling of being loved. It was something he'd never grow tired of and after saying his goodbyes to Remus he sent a Patronus to Professor McGonagall ahead of time, using the floo to return to her office.

Out of all the changes Harry had gone under, gracefully stepping from the floo rather than tumbling out into a soot-covered ball was a small, yet pleasing one. He further reaffirmed this when once he'd returned to Professor McGonagall's office he was not only met with her but Alistair too, serious expressions on their faces.

He looked from one to the other questioningly.

"What's going on?" He asked, unable to keep the wariness from his tone.

"Potter, we've been waiting for you. Thanks to the efforts of Professor Lothaire we know who it is
that harmed Hedwig."

"You found out already? How?"

With those words he was reminded of the note and pin in his pocket, reflexively patting it to ensure it remained there, turning his gaze towards Alistair.

Between them, they informed him of what happened and he found himself stunned that so much had happened in such a short space of time.

Glancing at Professor McGonagall apologetically, he barely withheld a sigh.

"Sorry I didn't tell you, Professor. After the scare with Hedwig, I wanted to check on Remus."

He trailed off, mind flashing back to the day he found him burned by Fiendfyre and with it, though no one else noticed, Alistair's eyes flickered.

"There's no need to apologise."

Shaking her head softly and once more sending a Patronus, she gave him an amused smile. "You attract more trouble than your father did."

Harry gave a wry smile. "Don't I know it? I'm a human magnet."

Regardless of his thoughts, he had to go to The Ministry anyway but from what he'd heard, there wasn't any other way to resolve it. But being back at the place where he stood trial and where Voldemort possessed him wasn't something to look forward to, by any means.

That and he'd never heard of Lorelei, or the family she came from. Usually, he knew who hated him and why but for the first time, he had no idea.

A moment later a Lynx appeared, the unmistakable voice of Kingsley emerging from it and with that, the three would go to London.

Silently, at least to one of the three anyway, they travelled to just outside Hogwarts' gates, Alistair not for the first time today.

'Are you alright?'

Harry welcomed the voice within his mind, a small smile touching the corner of his lips.
'I'm better than I was, anyway. Once I'm at The Ministry though, it's hard to say. I just want to know why she'd target Hedwig like that, she didn't do anything wrong.'

Though Alistair considered himself a master of words, there wasn't much he could say here. He had done all he can to help and a little extra and the best thing to be done now was to be by Harry's side while all this is happening.

'I am not sure what goes through another's mind that they believe harming an innocent creature is acceptable. However, what I know for certain is that after today, she will be punished for her actions.'

A sad smile. 'I don't have much faith in that, not after my past experience with them and just how many corrupt members of the ministry there are, far more than the honest ones. But whatever happens, thanks for going out of your way to find out who it was, I appreciate it.'

'My only wish is to see you smile from the heart and if I am able to aid in removing something or someone in the way of you doing so, it is my pleasure.'

His voice was unusually serious, lacking the teasing tone but with the hint of warmth that Harry had grown used to.

Once Minerva had apparated Alistair turned to Harry.

At the undeniably mischievous twinkle in his eyes, he prepared both himself and his heart or at least tried to. Alistair could be unpredictable at the best of times and once more this rang true.

"Ah Harry, now that we are alone, I shall sweep you into my arms and we will vanish together."

He made the motion as if to pick him up and flustered beyond words Harry stood, mouth slightly open and blush resurfacing once more.

Seeing his state Alistair laughed joyfully. Drawing closer to Harry he stood behind, finely muscled arms wrapping securely around him. Though his method of transport only required a hand touching Harry's shoulder at the most, he found himself unable to pass up the opportunity.

Harry's heart drummed a rhythm enough for the both of them, musculature more prominent at his back, as both wore casual clothing rather than robes. Harry wasn't one for the latest fashion trends but the peach colour of Alistair's long sleeved button up shirt, he distinctly recalled the same or a similar one the day The Art of War was read to him.
He refused to acknowledge the fact that he practically squeaked in response to Alistair's actions, but the thought of pulling away never crossed his mind either.

"Hold on tight."

A pleasant tingle travelling along his spine at the soft whisper Harry placed his hands on Alistair's arms, bracing himself as though he could apparate, he usually avoided doing so, uncomfortable with the sensation. While he knew this wasn't apparition he couldn't help but brace himself, stiffening reflexively.

His worry was for nothing, as he could have blinked and missed his arrival to London, it happened too fast to register in his brain, however, as he stood, dumbfounded and forgetting the situation he was in.

"Holy shit, that's incredible.."

He voiced his appreciation, eyes sparkling with interest.

"One minute we're not here and the next we are, nothing changed at all! I didn't feel like I was being squeezed through a tube or anything."

In his enthusiasm, he forgot that Alistair still had his arms around him, so jumped at the bewildered voice by his ear.

"That is what apparition feels like? Why do humans put themselves through something so unpleasant?"

At the genuine confusion in his voice, Harry reluctantly removed himself from the embrace, turning around to face him.

"Yeah, it's awful, but it gets you where you need to go. Portkeys aren't much better. If given the choice I'd rather fly my broom."

After Umbridge confiscated it, Harry was unsure if he'd see it again but once order was restored, McGonagall returned it to him before he went home for the summer.

Alistair tilted his head, brow slightly furrowed. "Surely there are other methods of transport which are not uncomfortable for you?"

At Harry's casual shrug Alistair's expression changed to the teasing one Harry knew well enough by now.
"You are more than welcome to travel with me in the future, Harry."

At his wink, Harry quickly turned his face away, noticing that they were in a side alley a little way in. The bustling streets of London ahead were more sparse now, considering it was evening.

As it turned out, Alistair had only appeared a little way from the Professor as Harry saw her, though she'd chosen to keep her usual robes on and opted for a notice me not charm instead. As she spotted the pair her eyes instantly landed on Harry, looking at him over her glasses.

"Are you alright Potter? You look flushed."

At Alistair's chuckle, she glanced at him curiously, even as Harry glared. At this point, he'd run out of excuses, but he couldn't exactly tell her that the reason he was in this state was solely through his Professor, who he was undeniably attracted to. Somehow he didn't think this was the right thing to say, even if true.

"I'm fine." He smiled to reassure her and briskly walked forward as if to leave his embarrassment behind.

Minerva's eyes flickered between the two of them, having suspected something for a while, but that something, she wasn't sure of yet. She knew what it was like to be attracted to someone and Potter displayed the signs. Alistair, despite his apparent openness, she couldn't get a read on, strangely enough. But instinct told her the feeling was mutual. While many would disapprove Potter was an adult, considered as such the day he wore his family ring, even if he hadn't reached his magical maturity yet.

She wondered what else he had in store as, besides his physical changes, his attitude to work and even his spellwork had improved drastically, breaking away from Mr Weasley's habits and following more in Miss Granger's footsteps, of which she was glad to see. Her Gryffindor determination shone through, she would see the day that Harry could finally live happily, at peace, without others trying to harm or kill him.

Though he knew today was serious and he would do his best to see to it that Miss Voska received exactly what she deserved, Alistair couldn't help but look at his surroundings curiously. He hadn't been to London in many years and within that time, a lot had changed, even if he was in a different area. He hadn't returned to London since the night of Solomon's capture but to see it now, he admired the growth it had undergone. As he had never seen the British ministry before nor had the desire to, from all he heard, he simply walked alongside the pair, intrigued despite this.

Before long they arrived at the entrance, the three of them barely fitting into the Telephone Booth.

"A subtle expansion charm wouldn't go amiss," Minerva grumbled to herself, frowning with
displeasure even as she dialled the required entry number. As she did Alistair tilted his head, watching her.

"Why is the entrance to your Ministry accessible by a telephone booth? Does that not present a risk of security?"

Harry couldn't help but find Alistair's curiosity endearing, but it was a valid question and one he hadn't put much thought into. Or even wanted to, considering the topic at hand.

"In what way?"

A brief flash of puzzlement. 'Unless each individual's mind is sufficiently protected, anyone with the ability could obtain the dialling code. I assume that this functions as a regular Telephone Booth, meaning that unless there are misdirection wards for those without magic, by random chance they could happen upon the entrance.'

That much was true. Harry wasn't the right person to ask about this but the last time he went to the Ministry with Mr Weasley, as visitors, it required the code and nothing more, with badges identifying them as visitors. As he didn't work there he wasn't sure what form of mind protection people had or didn't have.

'I'm probably not the right person to ask but you're right if so. Not everyone at the Ministry is friendly but if you come across Arthur Weasley, at the very least I know he'd be happy to answer questions.'

Somehow, Harry could sense a little eagerness and despite his tension returning to a place that he'd rather not, he couldn't help but smile in response, as he pinned the visitor's badge to his shirt.

As the three descended to the atrium, Harry watched Alistair from the corner of his eye as it seemed to calm his own nerves. Mentally telling himself to get a grip he didn't let his unease show once they stopped.

As Harry exited nothing much had changed, gathering the attention of some people due to Harry's and Alistair's state of dress and to Harry's own disgust, people blatantly staring at his scar.

And then, the one person that he had no wish to see who even from a distance and gradually drawing nearer, he couldn't mistake for anyone else.

Dolores Umbridge looked no different outwardly, the same horrible shade of pink, curly hair and toad-like features. The very same overly fake and sugary sweet smile, with not a hint of honesty behind it.

Beside Harry, he noted the stiffening of Professor McGonagall's expression, lips thinned into a
dangerous line. Of course, they were taken note of and after a brief flicker of surprise in her eyes, no doubt to Harry's changed appearance her eyes wandered to his hands, scars visible to her gaze and with that, a sense of smug satisfaction filled them.

'Is this Madam Umbridge?'

Alistair questioned within Harry's mind, lightly curious but voice devoid of his usual cheer.

'Yeah.'

'Oh dear.'

The way those two words were delivered, it was only through sheer will that he didn't break into laughter, partly from amusement and partly from nerves. Though he hadn't had to often, Harry picked one of his many masks, firmly slipping it into place. The overly confident expression surfaced as she very obviously approached them, snubbing both people by his side.

"Good evening Mr Potter. I see that your lessons have sunken in."

This was accompanied by a titter so sickeningly sweet, Harry had the urge to vomit.

Unknown to him, Minerva had followed the earlier gaze and saw the scars. She regarded herself as perceptive and yet, she'd missed the signs. It didn't take her long to connect the dots either and knew that her students during that time were fearful to tell anyone, in the case of consequences. She firmly believed that Madam Umbridge would receive everything she deserved and more, knowing that Potter wouldn't sit idly by now that he was in a position to do something. Minerva was unsure when but believed that he would strike back.

Due to necessity, Alistair didn't let his magic bleed out, maintaining a neutral expression. He knew exactly what this unpleasant woman was referring to and aside from the fact that she needed a serious fashion intervention, he wasn't sure draining her dry would be healthy for him. Confident that Harry could handle himself he watched silently.

With a smile similarly artificial to hers, Harry gave his greeting, polite and professional on the surface.

"Good evening Senior Undersecretary, you're right. I've learned my lesson."

Moving close enough to her so that no one but his companions could hear his clear emerald gaze pierced her own, the smug satisfaction leaving her eyes, as they narrow.
"I must not break rules and therefore, I must not tell lies. Voldemort IS back."

And then a smirk, so reminiscent of James Potter that those who knew him would perhaps do a double take, eyes flashing with confidence.

She believed she had the upper hand but as the reality of the situation hit her, Dolores Umbridge bristled with anger. Unable to say anything in response she stalked off, stubby legs only carrying her so far.

As she walked away the tension left Harry's shoulders, sighing softly in relief. He gave a weak smile, returning to them.

Expression still stern Minerva looked at her retreating figure.

"That creature somehow becomes more unpleasant with every meeting. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can leave. I dislike ministry affairs."

As Harry nodded in agreement Minerva walked ahead and for just a moment, Alistair's hand brushed Harry's, to hold and squeeze it softly.

Though no words were shared between them, aloud or within their minds, that simple touch was enough to restore some of his calm.

But, the day was far from over and with this in mind, he hoped for the best outcome possible.
Though everything seemed to go about as smoothly as Harry could expect, that changed, naturally.

LAST CHAPTER: Harry, Alistair and Minerva arrive at The Ministry, only to be met with a particularly unpleasant toad.

Warning: Mentions of suicide and abuse.

As they arrived at the holding cells, Harry could see Kingsley outside, even from a distance. He wasn't sure what was going to happen or even if they followed along the lines of regular police investigations. He had taken a leaf out of Alistair's book, knowing from him that he didn't like the use of the word Muggle. It did sound derogatory and non-magic fit better, at least in his opinion.

It didn't take long before Kingsley spotted them, immediately approaching Harry.

"Evening Mr Potter. Professor McGonagall told me you have evidence?"

"I do." Carefully reaching into his pocket he handed the pin and note written on parchment to him, as he levitated it into a box.

Knowing that the only experience Harry had with the Ministry through checking the records himself, was the use of a Patronus charm in front of a muggle he filled him in on what to expect for today, including Alistair.

"Miss Voska is the one under suspicion, however, all three of you will be taken to a separate room for questioning to ensure that the answers given align and that there are no abnormalities. Before
questioning you will be tested for any recreational potions or alcohol. If there are either we cannot question you until the substance leaves your system."

Harry listened seriously. It sounded similar to regular police investigations and while he knew there were professional Aurors and surely they could handle a 17-year-old and obtain needed information, they hadn't exactly given him much faith.

It filled Harry with relief to know that he wouldn't have to spend time with Moody in an isolated room. That honour went to Voska as the other Aurors arrived, Moody being the only one he knew but another, he had vague memories of accompanying Minister Fudge, particularly during fourth year. The pin and note within the box were handed to Moody, as the one Auror Harry vaguely knew caught his eye, gesturing for him to follow. Harry hoped that for once, things would go smoothly.

Though seeing Umbridge had shaken him, Harry gradually returned to his usual calm, determination to see this day through overriding everything else. As the door closed behind them, the man introduced himself.

"Good evening Mr Potter. I am Auror John Dawlish. Shacklebolt has informed you of today's procedures?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stand still please."

Doing as told Dawlish, wand in hand, moved it over Harry's form from head to toe, chanting under his breath all the while. If there was one thing to be said, this way looked to be much simpler and more efficient. After finishing and nodding to himself Dawlish took a seat, Harry sitting opposite. He was half worried he'd be treated differently because of his idiotic boy who lived title but appreciated that wasn't the case as he answered the questions asked, as best as possible. Thankfully it was kept strictly to that day and nothing else, maintaining professionalism to his relief. Then it came to the hard questions, beyond a confirmation of name, age and his day leading up until the moment.

"What happened as you returned to Gryffindor Tower?"
Though he didn't have the desire to relive the moment, he told himself repeatedly that this would help in the long run and to bear with it, for now. Out of consideration, unless it was a part of his orders, Dawlish summoned a glass of water and giving him a brief nod in gratitude Harry took a sip, trusting that there was no Veritiserum in there either.

"It wasn't until I went inside my common room that I thought it's weird no one else is around. It's a weekend but usually, at least one or two others are in the common room or if not there, the dorm rooms. I had this gut feeling something was wrong but I couldn't explain why and once I checked the boys' dorm, I was right."

Harry gave a brief rundown, Dawlish nodding in understanding.

"Where is the familiar now?"

Mind flashing back to Professor Snape's words within Hagrid's cabin, he grimaced.

"She's with Hagrid. He's looking after her while Professor Snape brews an antidote to help her."

"If necessary, would you be willing to extract a memory of this event?"

Harry didn't hesitate. "Yeah, if that's what it takes. I just want her to pay."

Dawlish didn't speak for a while, simply staring. Harry met his gaze, letting him search for whatever he hoped he might find until he stood, opening the door and letting him exit. It must have taken about half an hour at most, faster than what he'd expected anyway. Exiting he took a seat outside, waiting for the others to finish.

"Mr Robards. Do you really expect to find these substances in me?" Minerva pursed her lips, making the displeasure known. Though she'd considered her prized bottle of scotch rather than tea on more than one occasion, especially this year with Mr Weasley, she hadn't touched a drop.
"It's protocol."

Even after so many years of leaving Hogwarts, her glare hadn't changed in severity any. His years of Auror training allowed him to remain unaffected.

Minerva understood, even if she couldn't help but feel a little righteous indignation. It only took a moment before she got the all clear, invited to sit down and answer the simple questions first.

"How did you come to hear of the incident in question?"

"I received a Patronus from Professor Lothaire, informing me that something was amiss at Gryffindor Tower and of what Mr Potter had found. A misdirection ward was placed around The Fat Lady's portrait, to ensure that he was the only student who entered during this time. Entering the boy's dormitory Mr Potter had already removed the evidence but through a spell of my colleague's creation, we were able to see what happened at that moment."

"What spell was this?"

Minerva thought back, taking a moment to remember as any spells she was used were usually in Latin or her home tongue.

"Întoarce-te."

Robards shook his head, muttering to himself for a moment. He hadn't heard of this spell and though Kingsley had briefed them all on what he'd been told, the purpose of questioning was to get each of their perspectives. If this spell did what it claimed, it could change how situations would be dealt with permanently. Saving that thought for later he finished up, informing Minerva that she could leave.

Lost in his own thoughts, Harry was abruptly brought out of them by one of the doors opening. The
cells and rooms with doors were nearby, making use of expansion charms. As Professor McGonagall and the other Auror emerge, he gave her a tired smile, as she sat down next to him.

Idly watching as the two Aurors conversed he reclined back, closing his eyes.

"Just for once, can I have a normal week?"

"It will be over soon."

Though Harry didn't believe that, he smiled to himself as the professor didn't even bother to hide her own displeasure. After a moment, she spoke up one more.

"Did Remus ever tell you about when The Marauders turned The Great Hall into an ice skating rink?"

He could picture it now. Giving a snort of amusement he softly shook his head. They waited for Alistair to finish, along with Moody's own questioning.

As Alistair followed Kingsley to a separate room from the others, there was nothing that he found dull about this, unlike pretty much everyone who had to go through the same thing. He was open to every kind of experience, even if simply answering questions. Though in this case, the questions weren't simple. Whatever he answered would contribute in the end result of today. Curiously, he watched as the outstretched wand did its work, ensuring that no substances would interfere with questioning. Looking satisfied, Kingsley took a seat.

He didn't know what to expect exactly, but it was proceeding smoother than what Alistair had envisioned, keeping questions strictly to the incident, with him sharing all that he knew. It was as he mentioned his own spell that Kingsley frowned to himself.

"Professor McGonagall told me as much, but I've never heard of it."

He didn't see the harm in explaining once again. It wasn't as if he was trying to remain the mysterious unknown either, more a case of if anyone asked, he'd tell.
"It is a spell of my creation, able to see events of the past within a specific area and return easily."

Alert and mind already several steps ahead for what this could mean, Kingsley leaned forward slightly.

"Would you provide a demonstration?"

Alistair hesitated for a moment, thinking. "Within the last few hours, have there been activities within this room that an outsider should not be privy to? If you'd like, I could show you the incantation to try for yourself, once I have left this room."

Though he was taught to always think ahead, in this case, his interest for something new and almost revolutionary had overridden anything else. But he appreciated the man's consideration.

"Thank you, that would help." His deep voice echoed around the otherwise silent room.

Alistair kept his tone neutral, not injecting anything but sincerity into it.

"Auror Shacklebolt you are well within your rights to refuse, but would you open your mind so that I am able to share my knowledge of Întoarce-te?"

After the mind-altering spells of Dumbledore's making, Kingsley found himself much more cautious than he ever was previously. But one thing he always did was follow his gut instinct, which told him that Mr Lothaire could be trusted. It was harder to willingly allow him access than first thought but managed to do so. As the knowledge flowed into his mind, it almost seemed as if his whole perspective had changed or would, once he saw this spell in action.

Though he was free to go, Alistair mentioned one last thing.

"I am not shy about spell creation, but none of them are published. All I ask is that you are careful with this knowledge."
Alistair and Kingsley shared a moment of understanding. He left the room and Kingsley, deep in thought.

Harry appreciated the distraction Professor McGonagall provided, eagerly lapping up any stories of his Dad's and their friends' Hogwarts days. Though Pettigrew was involved, she never mentioned him thankfully, the thought leaving a bad taste in their mouths.

Harry gave a small smile to Alistair in greeting, who joined them in sitting down. He didn't say anything, listening to tales of The Marauders with rapt interest. Though he'd heard a little from Harry himself, it was always nice to know more.

Unable to help himself, Harry cast tempus at least every five to ten minutes, unable to settle down completely. Though the Professor had helped some, he really did just want the day over with.

"I hope he's not pissing in the wind." Harry muttered to himself, in a somewhat irritable mood because of just who they were waiting on.

He then remembered the company he was in, giving a sidelong apologetic glance towards Professor McGonagall, doing his best to keep a straight face despite Alistair's laughter.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that Potter." Despite her words, she held back some amusement.

"We're not in school, so it doesn't count." He dared to give her a cheeky grin, quickly sobering up when he was told to 'Not push that sheer dumb luck of his too much'.

"You have an interesting way with words, I don't believe that I've ever heard of this before. May I assume that it means to waste time?" Alistair asked, expression almost joyful.

"Yeah, that's the one. Seriously though what's he doing in there? He'd better not come out after all that and say he couldn't get any information from her."

Before either of them could respond to that, the door opened and Moody emerged, shortly after Kingsley himself. The two discussed things for a few seconds, the elder Auror making his way over
to them, wooden leg ringing loudly through the room. After fourth year the man rubbed him up the wrong way, just looking at him was enough for irritableness to set in. Even if Barty Crouch Jr was a Death Eater, by the end Harry had a preference for him. Not that it mattered now, Fudge displaying his incompetence and allowing for his soul to be claimed by a Dementor.

"Voska’s mind defences are strong, can't breach them. Immune to Veritiserum. Only information provided is pertaining to how she gained access to a gender-restricted room. According to Voska the wards around the rooms are targeted towards the average hormone balance for men and women, not gender itself. Apparently, hers are off the damn charts so much the wards accepted her as male."

Minerva closed her eyes in frustration. Though she wasn't the one who'd placed these wards, how many students had done this? Hormones changed all the time, whether it was through puberty, pregnancy, menstruation or stress. A loophole like that if known by other students could be easily exploited. There wasn't a penalty for trying to enter the wrong dormitory, simply an invisible wall which pushed them back. Pre-teens and teenagers were naturally curious by nature and she had no doubt every single one of them had tried at some point. Even without natural circumstances, there were ways to change hormones, outside of Polyjuice and Metamorphmagi, having placed those wards down herself but granting Tonks the exception, Albus having informed her that she was among the student body to report to him about the students' overall wellbeing as he couldn't be everywhere at once. Minerva realised that the nature of Tonks' job wasn't exactly true, but didn't pry for details.

Harry decided it wasn't wise to call out Moody on his incompetence. While he had personally ensured many people deserving of it remained behind bars and was invaluable for his skills, he couldn't handle a 17-year-old? He didn’t know anything about interrogation techniques but Moody had been an Auror since the first war. Surely in that time, there was something else to spill information? Of course, it could just be him but precisely because of who Voska had harmed, Moody may not be doing his job as well as he could. Harry's gut feeling was rarely wrong and the one which indicated Moody didn't like him remained strong. It didn't matter now. He would find out himself even if it took the rest of the day.

Standing up Harry faced Moody, determined. "I'll try."

His electric blue eye-rolling in its socket, the dubious expression was plain to see, as Harry fought against gritting his teeth.

"What can a boy do compared to a senior Auror?"

The lack of respect Moody had made obvious, he had to bite down on his tongue to stop himself from ruining any chance he had.
"Can't hurt, can it?" Giving a casual shrug Moody grunted with displeasure, but gruffly gave his assent.

Inclining his head Harry remained polite on the outside, at least.

'Fuck off and get yourself a full-time job as a museum exhibit you Cubism faced bastard, you're practically a fossil as it is.'

Harry wasn't an arsehole normally, but some people really brought it out of him. He realised that the bits Moody had lost were a mark of his contribution to war efforts, but he was of the firm belief that respect was earned, no matter for past actions. Harry lost all respect for Moody years ago and until he proved himself otherwise and actually began to treat Harry as an adult, he'd insult him every chance he got.

Of course, through their mental connection, Alistair heard every word and caught off guard he laughed aloud, earning strange looks. To clear suspicion he began to tell one of many jokes that he'd memorised, claiming that this was the source of laughter.

'Ahh Harry, I see that now we are even. You with Alastor 'Picasso' Moody and me with Ronald 'Waste Disposal Unit' Weasley. I hope that you are able to discover what Auror Moody could not.'

'Thanks.'

Leaving Alistair to crack jokes, Harry opened the door and closed it behind him once Kingsley had followed through, there to guide him where he needed to be. Rows of cells stretched down a long, narrow corridor, any voices speaking aloud only quiet until they reached the end.

Peeking through the bars Harry spotted a tanned girl, wearing a cool expression. Noticing the commotion outside she shot him an infuriating smirk but as soon as her eyes saw the scar, the smirk froze in place.

"You..."

Kingsley drew his wand in warning, Lorelei springing to her feet and latching onto the bar, a growl
escaping her.

"She's remained silent most of this time, this is the first reaction anyone's got from her." Kingsley muttered by Harry's side, who remained calm even if his first instinct was to curse her to oblivion.

Seeing his lack of reaction only seemed to fuel her own. She had spent so long with a fixation on Harry that seeing him caused her own restrained emotions to spill over.

"Why are you so calm?!" She practically screeched, dark eyes narrowing into a glare, emotion overriding anything else.

"Because I want to understand. Why do this? I don't even know you. Clearly, you have a problem with me but why target an innocent animal?" It took all he had to keep his cool and remain politely curious. He didn't think reacting in a similar manner to her would help him any in the long run. But it seemed to make her own emotions boil over.

"YOUR FAMILY AND THEIR FRIENDS RUINED MY LIFE, FUCK YOU!"

With that scream, Harry was unable to prevent the onslaught of memories into his mind. Not only of the incident with Hedwig, but everything else as well. It was enough to nearly knock him over, but Kingsley held out a steady hand.

"Alright?" He questioned, peering at Harry in concern who nodded shakily.

"Your father isn't alive but you are. I wanted you to suffer, feel as much pain as I do, every day. The best way to do that is hurting the one closest to you."

It took a moment for him to process everything but once he did, Harry's face paled rapidly.

Lorelei Voska was of mixed heritage. Her father, Alesandro, and his parents originally lived in Greece but moved to Britain, in an effort to build a new life. With that her father transferred to Hogwarts, sorted into Slytherin at 11 years old. He became a target of The Marauders, James Potter, in particular, seemed to have an interest in him. Raised in another country and of a different
background to most of the other students, his views were unique including a natural talent for spellwork, knowing more than what was on the curriculum.

Because of this, most likely through jealousy, he became the target of pranks. At first, they were innocent and harmless but over time and the older they grew, the pranks began to have a harmful and vicious edge to them. Once so bright and curious he began to change, withdrawing into himself. The only thing which lightened his life was another transfer student from Germany, Marie, sorted into Hufflepuff. But even once they'd established a relationship, the abuse from The Marauders didn't stop. Sirius Black only made things worse, though the others and their reluctance to intervene once things went too far didn't help either.

Alesandro and Marie left Hogwarts, managing to graduate despite her falling pregnant during school term. She was never targeted by The Marauders despite her relationship with him, but Alesandro was left a broken teenager, not changing once reaching adulthood. He rarely shared anything with his partner of the time at Hogwarts, battling demons alone, even after they married.

With the arrival of his daughter Lorelei, for a while, everything was alright. But he often left her alone to raise their child, only returning when it suited him and more than once, he'd been physically violent with his wife and every time, it killed him a little more inside. But despite this she stayed, knowing how hard it was for him and loving him despite it all. He had nothing but kind touches and sweet words for his daughter. But one day, it all proved too much.

At five years old, Lorelei watched through a crack in the door at her parents arguing, more vicious than usual until enraged, Alesandro stormed off. A few minutes later he returned, shotgun in hand. His parents were farmers, knowing how to handle one through their control of shooting pests trying to steal the crops and on his 16th birthday, he'd received a gun of his own. Maddened glint in his eye he aimed at Marie's head, pulling the trigger, gunshot ringing throughout the room and blood coating the wall behind, her body clattering to the wooden floor below. Arms trembling he fell to his knees, cradling her close. Nothing remained of what he once knew, blown away by one bullet and leaving behind a shattered, empty shell. Unable to believe that he'd killed the one thing he'd loved with all of his heart, except his daughter, he whispered a tearful apology to them both, not knowing that Lorelei was watching through a crack in the door, terrified. He turned the gun on himself. Closing his eyes the shotgun fired once more, a fervent wish that he could find happiness in the afterlife. But, he left his flesh and blood very much warm and alive, yet cold and dead inside.

Rushing into the room Lorelei was confused at first. She knew guns hurt people but they were just playing dead, right? The truth only registered within her mind when a neighbour, having heard the gunshots called the police, taking her away even as the others investigated the cause of death.

Though Lorelei had family on both sides, none of them wanted her. Having seen her parents and on top of that already having issues from hearing them argue, be physically and verbally abusive along with her father's mutterings of The Marauders when he was unaware she'd overheard, they didn't
want to deal with a problem child. For years she was moved from foster home to foster home, tossed away unwanted and in some cases, physically and verbally abused by those who had sworn to protect her. To escape, she filed for emancipation at a young age and after a long battle, managed to win her right to freedom.

In an effort to be stronger she attended many schools, picking up things along the way and it didn't take much digging before she found out just who The Marauders were. Among her parent's belongings that was returned to her by the goblins when she was emancipated was her father's diary and in it, a written record of everything, the endless pages detailing his hatred of the Marauders and how much they had ruined his life, in particular, James Potter.

She knew that James Potter was dead, but his son still lived. After all these years she had a purpose. Revenge. She would grow stronger and one day attend Hogwarts and once close enough, she'd destroy Harry Potter.

Coming back to the present, Harry was unsurprised to find out that he was crying, silent tears spilling from his eyes. Her hatred for him was unlike anything he'd ever felt and because The Marauders were unavailable to her and Harry himself was, everything had centred around him. She'd become so fixated on revenge that nothing else mattered. He understood now. He didn't agree, but he understood. She had taken a similar path to Voldemort, finding out a little of his past through the knowledge he had absorbed with the horcrux already in him. Paths diverged and Lorelei had gone one way, while Harry went the other.

Seeing her memories of abuse brought his own to the forefront and unable to help himself he desperately reached a hand through the bar, grabbing hers firmly.

She cried out, furious. She was about to pull away until she looked at his face for the first time and something rendered her immobile.

"Please, listen to me-" His voice cracked, whispering weakly. "I know what it's like. I was abused too. I don't like what my dad did at all. Pranks are all well and good but if they hurt someone, it's not funny. But I wasn't born, I couldn't control my dad's actions or his friend's actions. When Voldemort killed my family I had to live with my relatives for years."

He pushed his own memories of abuse into her mind. He didn't want her to suffer any more than she already had but wished for them to be on the same wavelength at least.
"Revenge doesn't help. Once you have your revenge what then? There's nothing left!"

"I have nothing left!" Her eyes wavered with emotion and for the first time, Harry saw something human in her. Human and absolutely terrified.

"There's always something to live for! If you carry on like this you'll regret your actions always. You're going the same way that every Dark Lord started off as. Don't do this to yourself."

Harry broke off, holding back a sob and not releasing his grip on her. The hostility faded, to be replaced by a multitude of expressions that he'd seen on his own face.

Before this, he had a clear plan of action in mind. Now his mind was so jumbled he had no idea what to do. But as they locked eyes with one another Lorelei turned her face away, removing her hand and retreating to the corner of her cell. Curling into a tiny ball her anguished cries were clearly audible.

Harry hoped he'd got through to her. He turned to Kingsley, who politely didn't react to his current state.

"Can I decide what to do with her?"

He gave a nod. "You have the information needed. Once Miss Voska is calm I'll question her again. I have a feeling she will willingly confess everything now. As her actions directly affected you, her punishment lies within your hands."

Harry wasn't sure he could give a verbal response, so simply nodded tiredly. Right now, he didn't know what to do. He just wanted to leave. Giving one last glance to Lorelei, his heart twinged with empathy. Feeling an impending headache coming on, he prayed he could leave The Ministry soon.
Sharing Gaiety

Chapter Summary

Left shaken by Lorelei's revelations, Harry was unsure of what to do. Sensing this Alistair offers his assistance of sorts and with it, their day turns around.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Questioning at the Ministry and with it, Harry found out more than he bargained for.

At the familiar sensation of a glamour charm, Harry's tense muscles relaxed slightly. Though it was nice not having to use them on a regular basis, he wasn't about to let Moody see that he'd cried, under no circumstances. He'd taken his eye into consideration and the day Harry received his contacts, that was one of the things he'd asked about. It could see through disguise magic to a certain extent, depending on the strength. Blood magic was one of the strongest and though it was generally frowned upon, not illegal by any means.

It didn't take long for Harry to read the situation, once they returned. Moody remained stern, glaring at his colleagues from the corner of his eye as they looked amused enough to break professionalism and start laughing any minute. Alistair had finished recalling his repertoire of jokes a minute or two before Harry came back.

"I've got what I need." He informed his companions, holding back a smirk at Moody's disgruntled expression and by the looks of things, he hadn't noticed the glamour. He doubted that he'd refrain from commenting if the opposite was true.

"Is there anything else?" He addressed Kingsley, heart sinking when he answered in the affirmative. Watching as he waved his wand for privacy charms, it changed to relief when he realised it wasn't anything to do with today's visit.

"Where did the scars on your hands come from?" He had a suspicion what caused them, but couldn't be sure without confirmation.

He gave a smile of discomfort. "If I can that's something I'd like to talk to Madam Bones about."
Kingsley frowned, thinking for a moment. "You'll get the opportunity to talk with her soon, I cannot divulge more information than this."

Harry sensed there was more behind the man's words than he let on, but didn't follow up on it. He just really wanted to leave now and sensing this Kingsley cancelled his charm, with a promise to contact him once further progress with Lorelei was made.

Alistair sighed to himself internally, even if his words were cheerful. If not for Auror Moody, he was absolutely positive that Auror Dawlish and Robards would at least crack a smile. As it was they barely reacted on the outside, though further encouragement was given by Minerva, who would occasionally chuckle here and there. Though in one way it was to cover up his sudden bout of unexpected laughter, a small part of it was a welcome distraction, unwilling to mentally communicate with Harry during this time, despite his concern.

Once Harry returned the concern didn't lessen any, spotting the glamour instantly and suspecting the reason why. However, like the previous times with the exception of when they first met, Alistair didn't break through it and was relieved for Harry that they could leave, as he'd gone through enough for one day.

He owed his friends an explanation of today's events, but he wasn't sure he could handle that at the moment. Not even knowledge of Occlumency was helping much, his mind so full with memories not his own that he was almost unable to distinguish between them, particularly the ones involving abuse and in some cases, overlapping. He wanted to sleep for a week but at the same time, didn't want to close his eyes in case he had a repeat of what had happened before.

Once back at Hogwarts, Harry was unsure of what to do. At that moment in time, he didn't want to return to the boy's dormitory, the vision of Hedwig strung from her feet there hadn't faded any. Usually, he had something planned but for once he was at a loss.

Though his mind was full, strangely, the voice that suddenly joined it seemed to soothe away some of the rougher edges.

'You are more than welcome to spend some time with me. I imagine that Gryffindor Tower is not a place that you wish to return to at the moment.'

Other than when his thoughts became too strong and Alistair couldn't help but see them, Harry had been told that he didn't scan his mind at all, even if he could slip in and out without him being any
the wiser. He trusted Alistair on this and because of that, it just went to show how well the man had come to know him. Though lifespan could contribute to his way with people it seemed as if he knew Harry better than others who had known him for years. Not that he could blame anyone, only having broken free and embraced his true self over the summer.

That and whenever Harry had found himself not in the best of moods, Alistair always somehow managed to cheer him up.

A barely there smile. ‘Thanks, I’ll take you up on that.’

"I need a large scotch," Minerva muttered to herself, her mood not any better than Harry's.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that Professor." At her mild glare he couldn't help but chuckle, his own spirits picked up slightly, but he genuinely couldn't blame her if she did decide to.

Though he wanted to lose himself in his own thoughts, he remained aware enough to leave The Ministry, Alistair touching his shoulder to disappear and reappear at the gates to Hogwarts. Once they did Minerva turned to them both.

"Look after yourself Potter, I have confidence that Severus will find the correct dosage."

Harry had filled them in on his side beforehand, so they knew that Severus and Hagrid were collaborating to help Hedwig.

She looked at Alistair, giving him an amused smile. "You remind me of a student I had once. He was fond of all jokes, not restricting them to practical ones."

Her eyes flickered with nostalgia briefly and after bidding farewell she returned to her office, seriously contemplating at least a little scotch.

Once they were alone Harry glanced up, giving Alistair a smile tinged with sadness.
"Thanks. But I probably won't make for the best company today."

With a wave of his hand, the glamour vanished and beneath it, as Alistair had guessed correctly, were faint traces of red beneath his eyes. Though he did want to ask what happened, he had no wish for Harry to feel as if he had no choice in the matter. It would be up to him what he chose to share or not share. No matter the outcome, he would be there to listen.

Alistair's tone was soothing, even as he reached out to softly brush away traces of wetness beneath Harry's eyes.

"I will never tire of your company, no matter how it is you feel. In fact, I would particularly like it on occasions such as this, so that I may aid in returning a smile to you."

He couldn't think of a response to that, touched beyond words. Alistair seemed to instinctively know, however, matching his own pace with Harry's as they returned to his quarters. Dobby had done a splendid job of watching over Lilah the times that she was asleep and he couldn't be there. He would have to follow in Harry's footsteps and present the eccentric elf with another item of clothing. Though at his rate, any more and he would be buried beneath the various fabrics.

Alistair had brought a taste of home with him, items of decoration and furniture reminiscent of Castle Lothaire, which Harry noted had become more and more like that, as they entered.

Sinking into the plush couch Harry's thoughts ceased their constant whirling, but that only meant the vivid ones coming to the forefront. He resisted the urge to curl into a ball, somewhat reassured when Alistair sat directly next to him and a moment later, presenting him with a warm mug of tea. Not the usual kind, but herbal.

"The Elves assure me that this is a relaxing blend. Teas are not exactly my expertise, so for this, I refer to those who know better. It contains Chamomile, Fennel and Marshmallow Root."

His explanation was so animated, Harry couldn't help but glance up at him.
"You're interested in tea blends?" He didn't bother to hold back a smile when he saw Alistair favouring a glass of Pumpkin juice. He really had taken a liking to it.

"Not so much the tea, more the acquisition of knowledge that I was unaware of previously. There is always something new to learn, even with eternal life."

Alistair cared deeply, that much Harry could see. While some would be content to live in ignorance and refuse to educate themselves further, he was open to everything, unless they proved to not be worth his time, such as Dumbledore. While he couldn't deny that there would be a lot to learn from someone with his experience, it was tinged with manipulation and danger which couldn't be ignored.

"I don't think there's anything I could tell you that you don't already know." He mulled the thought over, drinking his tea and hoping that it would help a little.

"On the contrary, there is something."

Harry regretted meeting Alistair's eyes at that moment, a mischievous sparkle within them.

"Why is it, that you are so enchanting?"

Harry nearly choked on his tea but managed to save himself. He stumbled over his words a little, the telltale blush returning.

"I-I didn't mean that!"

And then, that laughter once more. The one which never failed to lift his spirits, even if it usually went hand in hand with his own embarrassment.

Finishing his tea, Harry could say he was more relaxed than before, though his eyes remained troubled. He wanted to talk about what he saw, but found it difficult to start.

Alistair relaxed into his own seat, abandoning his usual elegant posture in an effort to help Harry feel further at ease. He didn't break the silence, allowing time for him to think.
It took a few minutes for Harry to gather his thoughts, but he was unable to prevent the slight waver in his voice.

"Before the Ministry, I thought my mind was made up, whatever I found out. I just wanted her to pay for hurting Hedwig. But absolutely nothing prepared me for the rage and hatred. According to Kingsley they couldn't get anything out of her but as soon as she saw me, it was like a damn had burst on her emotion and I saw everything. Not just Hedwig, but every aspect of her life."

He tried his best to summarise the finer points, as he hadn't processed all the information himself yet.

"Her dad came from Greece and started Hogwarts here but The Marauders pranked him. They weren't fun pranks either, some were horrible. My dad was the instigator and he went through hell. He graduated Hogwarts with Lorelei's mum who was pregnant but the years of trauma he'd suffered thanks to them changed him. He married her but never came come and started abusing her. He left Lorelei alone."

Just like the image of her parent's death burned within her mind, Harry found himself in a similar state, the memory almost stronger than his own of the night Voldemort came. Though the cup remained empty, having drank it while trying to organise thoughts, he gripped it with enough force to nearly crack.

"Her dad shot her mum and then himself. The pain in his eyes, it was like someone else had pulled the trigger and not him, he couldn't live with it. Lorelei saw everything and developed issues. No one wanted her because of that and every family she went to hurt her until she broke free, and found out the truth. She focused her sights on me because none of The Marauders was there. So now, I don't know what to do. There's only one thing I've decided on for certain and that's for her to see a mind healer, they could help. As for the other, I don't know any more. It's just like with my relatives, I was never wanted and they made that clear for years, betraying my trust multiple times. Some of her memories are bleeding into my own, everything's a mess."

Somehow he managed to finish, stopping and starting throughout until he'd said everything. He'd gripped the cup so hard his knuckles began to turn white, until hands firmly pried the cup away, to take them and slowly rub the feeling back.

"There is no rush to decide what must be done with Miss Voska, as her fate lies within your hands but I believe that a healer for her is an excellent starting point."
With his words, came a comforting blanket of reassurance. He didn't want to take something like this so lightly but listened intently, as Alistair continued.

"Harry, there are those in this world who do not deserve the gift of life. By extension, they certainly do not deserve to cherish another. I know of many people who want you in their own. You are not a child anymore but a young man, with a heart of gold and whom I am very fond of."

Once satisfied, Alistair released Harry's hands and frustrated with himself, he had to hold back more tears. He'd cried more today than he had in his whole life, not even able to shed anything for Sirius, heart and mind too numb to fully comprehend the situation.

Alistair remained steadfast that the only tears he wished Harry to shed if there had to be any, were joyful ones. It was time to put the last part of his plan into action.

"Harry, there is something that I wish to give you." He conveyed his sincerity as much as possible, lips upturning into a smile at the curious little head tilt he received in response.

Capturing his attention, Harry's eyes followed the track of a small bag, summoned to Alistair's palm and decorated with a green bow. Held out to him he took it, unsure of what it was. The black bag crinkled, balanced on his palm as he inspected it. Looking closely he could see a little note attached.

Harry,

You have faced arduous trials and yet, remain true to yourself. I fervently hope that this will help provide all the happiness that you deserve.

Your charming companion,

Alistair.

Harry couldn't help but admire the penmanship once more, having seen some of it with his recently marked essay. Brushing over the note with his thumb fondly, he untied the ribbon, peering in to see
the contents. At their appearance, he couldn't help but feel as if they were familiar, somehow.

Reaching in for one, each individually wrapped, he knew why. Eyes widening in surprise, he looked at his palm in wonder.

Mint Chocolate Truffles. Only one person knew his favourite chocolate and that was Hermione. There were other, more common flavours to pick so a coincidence wasn't possible. Alistair must have talked to her at some point, but the fact that he'd even thought to ask filled Harry's heart with a happiness like no other.

Most people would give him an incredulous look and say that it's just chocolate, nothing to get excited over. But for him, it meant much more. The first time he'd truly tasted it and even then, there was a lingering fear that it would be taken away. He had vague memories of trying it in the past while in The Great Hall, but his stomach usually couldn't handle anything rich or too sweet after the long breaks from school he had. Not to mention that the taste didn't register within his mind, too worried that The Dursleys would show up and Vernon would once more inform him that 'Freaks don't deserve nice things.'

That changed during the summer of third year going into fourth and to this day, he couldn't thank Hermione enough. It was like seeing the world from an entirely different perspective, The Dursleys couldn't do a thing about it either. Despite his limitations, he came to realise that he could change and be who he wanted to be, no matter what anyone said. Though Harry had broken free recently, the chains had begun to loosen on that day.

Placing the bag beside him and unwrapping the truffle he placed it into his mouth, savouring the favour. Closing his eyes in bliss he didn't chew, simply let it roll over his tongue and with it, came an influx of memories. Though Grimmauld Place was dreary and Harry hated it as much as the others did, he'd had some good times there with Hermione, Sirius, Remus and some of The Weasleys too.

Within those few minutes, he was in his own world, aware that Alistair remained by his side and once he'd finished the most genuine, warm and brightest smile lit up his face, enough to make all others pale in comparison. Eyes sparkling with joy they caught Alistair's own, gratitude shining within them. He knew already but had to confirm.

"You talked to Hermione about this?"

Alistair had watched him intently all the while. So entranced by his smile it took a moment more to respond than usual, nodding with a gentle one of his own.
"Though there is nothing that I can do to alleviate your pain of a familiar coming to harm, I would not allow myself to idly sit by. That is why alongside accompanying you to The Ministry, today involved a trip to Switzerland and a thorough investigation of Gryffindor."

He went out of his way to do all this for him. No one had gone to such an effort before in his life and if his parents had, the memories were buried deep away.

Suddenly overcome with emotion Harry reached out, drawing Alistair into a firm hug, arms wrapped around him and catching them both by surprise. He was so happy he didn't know what to do with himself, the usual fear of rejection far from his mind.

"You have no idea what this means to me, thank you so much."

He managed to speak again, voice trembling and heartbeat drumming a steady rhythm as Alistair immediately reciprocated, pulling Harry closer. His head rested against his chest, a gentle hand on his back. Though Harry couldn't see his expression, the warmth in his tone was a clear indicator.

"Your smile is all the thank you that I need."

Harry moved away a little, enough to look up and stare directly at him. He conveyed his earnestness, almost desperately.

"How can anyone say that all Vampires are cold, unfeeling creatures? You have one of the kindest hearts and I'm sorry that everyone insists on painting you with the same brush as some others. I wish they'd understand. I don't care if your heart doesn't beat like other people, or if your skin doesn't have warmth. It doesn't reflect on who you are as a person. It's there and it's real."

As if to make a point Harry placed the flat of his palm on Alistair's chest, directly above where his heart lay still.

Alistair didn't know he needed to hear something along those lines until now. He wasn't ashamed of who he was in the slightest, he just simply wished for what some others took for granted.

"Harry. I-"
Before Alistair could continue, something made him stop. For the past couple of days, he could sense changes in his body but would know if they affected him negatively. Since he couldn't detect any signs of this he didn't go to see Rupert at all or inform anyone about it. But the moment that Harry touched his chest, a strange tingling sensation began to run along his frame, lasting for only a second. But with it, everything that he had known, changed.

"What?!"

At Harry's startled exclamation Alistair paid attention, Harry's hand feeling colder than before. But how could his temperature change so quickly? It was impossible for Alistair's to. But then, he realised part of the reason for Harry's reaction and for the first time in over a millennium, he was shaken to the core.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

A heartbeat. Not Harry's as his was much faster, but another one. He sensed it with his own magic first and though he knew it was honed to perfection, there was still some disbelief there.

It was his. His heart had started to beat for the first time. Slower than a human's but unmistakeably alive.

"How? It's not just your heart either! There's some warmth here too." Harry took a hold of Alistair's hand.

Even with his years of practice, Alistair struggled to keep his calm. Mind running a mile a minute, he came to a conclusion.

"On the day that Solomon drank from you, what is it that you were thinking?" Not understanding what that had to do with the current situation but sensing that his answer would be important, he thought. "It was nothing specific. I just really wanted to help and hoped that my blood would. Why?"

Saying it aloud confirmed his suspicions. He was rarely wrong and instinctively, knew this to be
"I have experienced changes within me over several days, ever since I healed the wound of Solomon's creation. I believe that the combination of your wish to help and heal, along with the tears of a phoenix willingly given running through your veins, granted my own. I have always seen my lack of heartbeat and warmth as a flaw of mine. Though that is something that can't be helped, the thought has always remained. Completely by accident, you have granted my one wish."

His voice changed from analytical to pure excitement, sharing in the joy that Harry experienced earlier. He hoped that this would last, that after so long, his body could show signs of how he truly felt, alive and not simply living through a vessel of sorts. The more he mulled over that fact, the less he could contain himself, even if usually he didn't actively try to.

Alistair stood up, taking Harry by the hand and pulling him close once more. Laughter of pure elation escaping his lips he spun them both around, magic acting as levitation as his feet even left the ground for a short while.

Much like Harry's smile had captured Alistair, Harry found himself in very much the same situation and while none of his smiles held a dimness, this particular one seemed to outshine the sun.

Heart lighter than ever before, he had another reason to hold on.

"Woah!"

His feet left the ground along with Alistair's, unable to help but think of Peter Pan, in this instance. Thinking Happy thoughts certainly did make Alistair fly and Harry was pleased to see it for himself. Eventually, their feet once more touched the ground, as he was released.

There was no need for masks with him. He could be his true self without fear of consequence, and there were only a small handful of people he could do the same with.

Harry spoke up, happiness for both himself and Alistair throughout his tone. "Though I had no idea I'd witness a literal miracle, I'm glad this happened."

Drinking in every bit of his expression, Harry couldn't help himself. "In thanks, your smile is all I need."
Parroting some of Alistair's earlier words back to him, the man in question shook his head in defeat. He couldn't win against him, in this case. As his hand carded through Harry's hair, a glimpse of his face revealed the endearing blush.

Though Alistair had planned a gift for Harry, Harry had returned the favour. Their hearts drummed a rhythm and though they would never be quite in sync, the men who owned them always were. Moods drastically improved from before the passing of time didn't register to either, as none could say how long they remained this way. But as Harry finally left for the common room, chocolates in hand, he couldn't help but feel that every cloud had a silver lining.

Chapter End Notes

I've had this idea for Alistair for a while, even before the idea of Dumbledore capturing Vampires. I don't think I've ever seen a Vampire have an issue with the way his body is naturally but I thought it would be something different and to match him in the end.
Chapter Summary

There's a lot that Harry needs to explain, though he encountered a few unexpected moments along the way. After this is a shared moment of appreciation that only a certain two can understand.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: It was one surprise after another, in the form of gifted chocolates for Harry and the gift of a heartbeat accompanied by warmth for Alistair.

Yesterday, Harry was worried at the idea of not being able to sleep well after everything he'd discovered. But after spending time with Alistair, He slept more peacefully than he could ever remember. He'd taken the time to sort out the memories not his own, filing them away in a separate area and like the memories of his childhood, would properly process them eventually.

The events of the other day seemed almost surreal. It started off well, everyone's response to the DA, for the most part, resulted in success. Until Ron came along and let his anger get the better of him. That put a dampener on it but he knew Alistair could look after Lilah. Then Hedwig and even after, he still wasn't sure if she was going to be ok.

But then, the day turned around on its head completely. Alistair's invite to stay and speak with him and catching Harry completely by surprise, gifted with chocolates he hadn't seen or tasted in years. He wouldn't rush them, even if he did have the means to go there himself and buy more. These were extra special because Alistair went there himself to buy them. Embarrassingly enough even once he'd finished, he was planning to keep the bag and note attached and wouldn't tell a soul.

This was followed by a second surprise. He was once more reminded of just how amazing the Wizarding world could be though like with the non-magic world, it had its flaws. But the things that could be done with blood and what Harry's blood had accomplished was unbelievable. Literally by all standards, it should have been impossible and yet, that happened. He had no idea Alistair felt this way as he'd never met a more confident and self-assured person, but he was once more reminded of just how human that made him, Vampire or not. Though a Vampire by nature, his warm personality now matched skin temperature and beating heart.
Out of everything that happened, what remained firmly planted in his mind was the blinding, brilliant smile. Without exaggeration, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen and he'd come across unicorns before. It played on repeat in his mind and Harry remembered that he did have something to do but along with the stupid grin he no doubt had, this occupied his mind.

Well, it did, until a sense of deja vu attacked him, in the form of a water spray.

"The next time this happens I'll levitate and drop you into the lake."

Sputtering and brought from his thoughts forcefully, Harry wiped his eyes and sent a mild glare in Ginny's direction.

Not affected in the least she twirled her wand expertly. "It's Professor Lothaire isn't it?"

"Partly," Harry admitted, seeing no use in denying it.

He'd already filled in Remus on the rest of the day earlier that morning through a Floo conversation, with permission from Professor McGonagall. But he'd called his friends to the Room of Requirement to discuss the same and also, the Horcruxes. He'd fully absorbed the information given to him and unfortunately, it was mainly Voldemort's childhood and knowing that there was more than one, but not what they were or where. What he had found out though, was something interesting. If needed, Voldemort could drain his follower's magical cores if his own reserves were low, through the Death Eater mark. It wasn't his idea originally, but Dumbledore's.

Harry had only seen the memories relating to the Death Eaters recently and the man who passed him by and the man he saw kneeling before Voldemort were one and the same. His name was Matthew Bell and Harry had no idea if he was a relation to Katie, or if the surname happened to be coincidental. He was a double spy and had been since the moment Voldemort rose to power and apparently, Dumbledore had no idea. Harry had to wonder how the man was still living if both of them could drain his magical reserves.

During that time, he'd also seen Fawkes' memories of the bond with Dumbledore, from his side. It acted in a similar way to how the mark for both the previous Guild of Light and current Death Eaters did, only the connection ran far deeper with the years that went by, so would be harder to break. In his heart, Fawkes knew that the path Dumbledore had taken left the side of which he approved long ago, but he'd bonded with the man because, in the way only a magical creature could, he loved him. And because of this, he didn't want to leave but the moment he'd brought himself to do so, it was too late.
Harry would have to find out how exactly this connection of Dumbledore's creation worked and instinctively, he knew that the answer wouldn't be in the man's mind, but possibly the Pensieve within his office. Fawkes deserved to be free and to find someone who would treat him well.

Putting some of those thoughts firmly away, he steadfastly ignored Ginny's knowing smirk. Instead of the usual seats they sat in a circle upon the grass in Lunaland, the girl in question crafting a flower crown. Usually, Hermione had a book until Harry was ready to speak but today, she had a small smile on her face, hands unoccupied. Whether that smile was aimed towards anyone, in particular, he didn't know, but it would soon be gone with some of the information he had to share, sadly. Seeing Neville among them Harry was reminded that once Ron was taken off as Prefect because it would happen, Harry would recommend Neville to Professor McGonagall, if he wanted to. He'd really come out of his shell over the years and he knew something like that would only benefit him further.

They'd had a picnic of sorts, some light sandwiches and desserts alongside drinks. Harry had the feeling that they would be sorely needed, so wanted everyone to be relaxed first before he shared information. Apparently, he was too relaxed, with Ginny having to get his attention again.

Harry blew a soft breath out. "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Bad, then the good can soften it out after," Ginny responded instantly, met with nods of agreement from the others. Luna, sat on his left turned to him, finished crown in hand. With a gentle wave of her wand it changed, the flowers remaining in their natural form but more ethereal, somehow.

"For you!" Smiling happily, she held out the flower crown to him and it never crossed his mind to refuse. Lowering his head far down enough it was placed on his head, a perfect fit.

He didn't think that flowers were something that particularly suited him, but he didn't have the typical thoughts most males would have. No matter what it was, it was a gift, something he very much appreciated and what he'd never had for the majority of his childhood, as well as friends to give him them.

"You look pretty." Luna tilted her head, stating this as if it were fact.

Harry didn't know what to say in response, somewhat lost for words.

"Thanks." He finally managed, not letting the silence settle because if he did, he'd be more aware of
the slight blush on his cheeks. Pretty wasn't an adjective that came to mind if someone were to describe him, but Luna had never followed set rules. Though that was something he liked about her and wouldn't change. She simply beamed in response, giving him her undivided attention, like the others.

"Ok, bad news it is." There was that much bad news in question, it was difficult to know where to start.

"Did any of you notice something weird where our common room is?" He asked, looking at Hermione, Ginny and Neville.

"I didn't go back until later on in the evening and by that time, everyone was in the common room." Neville shook his head in response.

Hermione and Ginny turned to one another, discussing something among themselves. Hermione started to speak slowly, seeming to organise her thoughts as she did.

"We went after Ron but he turned around outside the portrait and changed his mind, going in a different direction. That was unusual on his part but none of us tried to enter the common room."

Though he'd come to understand why the common room was strangely empty, it further confirmed it within his mind. "There was a Misdirection ward placed on The Fat Lady's Portrait, it made sure no one could enter but me. I left Lilah with Alistair and returned to the boy's dorm and when I did.."

He knew he wasn't helping himself by talking about it once more but they were his friends and deserved to know.

"..I found Hedwig. She was strung upside down from the ceiling and a note pinned to her chest saying revenge. I left with her for Hagrid's and while there, I had to call Professor Snape because she'd been fed Draught of Living Death. He's working on an antidote for her but I don't know if she'll be ok as of yet."

He went on to explain about the trip to The Ministry, mentioning Alistair's help in the investigation of who did it. Interested he'd asked for details about Alistair's spell and knowing that Hermione's interest would far outstrip his own, had written down the details for her to look over later.
He'd decided not to share the details of Lorelei's memories with them, thinking the fewer people that knew, the better. The only reason he had with Alistair was out of need and after offloading his feelings on the topic, was able to file it away. She didn't even want him to see the memories, completely by accident on her part. He knew what it was like to be scared of telling someone what it is he went through and had no wish to cause damage, even if he did trust his friends not to tell anyone else outside of this room.

Finishing he left them in stunned silence, none of them knowing what to say. Holding out the spare bit of parchment with Alistair's spell out Hermione took it, almost in a daze. She was the first to break the silence.

"I'm surprised that The Ministry is willing for you to decide what to do with her. Often they charge on ahead without a thought for anyone else."

Grimacing in distaste, she was reminded of Harry put on trial for defending his now deceased cousin.

On the same wavelength as Hermione and remembering his own past experience, he'd found himself surprised as well.

"That's true. They said they'll get in touch when they know everything. I still don't know what I'm going to do with her yet."

Ginny narrowed her eyes, a fierce expression on her face. "She's still a bitch. Even if she wanted revenge there are other ways to do that."

Harry agreed there. He would have rather had her enact revenge on him in person, someone who could fight back, instead of a defenceless owl.

Neville had a solemn expression, contemplating everything Harry had said.

"I agree with Ginny, though wouldn't have worded it that way." He sent her an amused smile as she responded with one of her own, shrugging carelessly. "But people who have nothing left to fight for and spend nearly their entire life focused on one thing, can't see past that. Look at V-Voldemort. His goal was power and now he's been left a shell of his former self."

Though Neville still stuttered over the name, it was something he was gradually growing used to
saying. If there was one thing Dumbledore got right it was encouraging Harry to call him by name. Once it was taboo but not any longer. He refused to call him anything but this in person. Addressing him as you know who would give the impression that Harry was scared, but on the contrary. When younger he was scared but now, for once, he felt at least a little prepared.

Harry could see both Ginny's and Neville's sides, seeing it from both points of view the other day.

"Where I stand right now I don't know who's the bigger threat. Dumbledore or Voldemort."

Harry voiced the concerning thoughts he had, words settling into the silence between them. The Leader of the Light was just as bad if not worse, than Voldemort himself.

"Neither of them are good. There's no right side to pick. One I would have sided with Dumbledore without question, but not any longer."

Hermione paused for a moment, looking hesitant.

"I can't help but think that there's more to Voldemort that we don't know. All we have is Dumbledore's words and I doubt that Voldemort would answer anything himself."

Though she didn't know it, her comment followed onto the next bit of news he had to share, this one significantly worse, but he had to start somewhere.

"One day, we might find that out. But that's related to the next bits of news I have and I'm sorry it's taken me so long to say anything. Any of you know what Horcruxes are?"

He didn't expect any of them to, only knowing himself through Thanatos. But the last person he expected, did.

"Soul Fragments."

At the unusually solemn voice beside him, Harry turned to Luna, shocked. "You know what they are?"
Luna nodded. It was a part of Brio’s teachings and how to spot someone with a broken soul. If the person was remorseful enough and wanted to be well again, it was possible to heal them. Though there were only physical demonstrations of healing and defensive magic on both of their parts, Brio shared other knowledge outside of that and through this, she had come to learn more of herself and other people. Which lead her to a suspicion. She wasn't confident enough to be able to share her thoughts just yet, relying on the little experience she had and her ability to see flashes of what could be in the future.

"Brio told me. If you hurt someone badly enough with the intent to murder and succeed, their soul is broken away and it takes humanity too."

Saved from having to explain any further Hermione connected the dots, a dawning realisation on her face.

"Voldemort has done this."

It wasn't a question but stated as fact, knowing instinctively that she was right and as Harry nodded, Ginny sucked in a breath, paling rapidly.

"Ginny?" He questioned, looking concerned even as Luna frowned, ever so slightly to the point that it went undetected.

"The Diary. That must have been one. There's no way that was a normal one, not with it possessing me like that. We knew it was dark magic but not what kind."

Harry's mind raced with the possibilities. "I think you're right, but it's gone now."

At Luna softly shaking her head, Harry had a bad feeling. Sensing his gaze her eyes locked with Ginny's.

"Only a little of it is gone." Her voice was soft, sorrowful.

Luna had known for years now that there wasn't something right. Ginny didn't practice dark magic and during the year that she was possessed, Luna had her own guesses of what happened with the
year of the chamber. Though everyone had said Ginny would be alright, Luna could still see and feel some kind of corruption but not knowing what to do or practicing healing of any kind she didn't know how to help and even if she'd spoken up, no one would have believed her except for perhaps the girl herself. But she couldn't go on feelings alone and scare her friend.

But with time she'd become surer of herself, confirmed completely within her mind on Brio's lesson of Soul Fragments along with Ginny's mention of the diary.

As she explained her thoughts Harry glanced over at Ginny, who looked as though she was going to be sick any minute.

"A part of Voldemort was left inside me on the night of my parent's death when he attacked. Over the summer I managed to get rid of it, completely by accident and Thanatos told me about Horcruxes. Everything negative about it went and some black inky stuff left my scar. I still have Parseltongue and some of Voldemort's memories, which I've only sorted through recently."

Harry stopped, switching his gaze to Luna. "Do you think you can help her?"

Eyes filled with a quiet, calm determination, Luna nodded softly in response to Harry's question. Running her thumb over the bracelet she wore, Gentle Whisper appeared. Standing up she moved from Harry's side, to sit directly in front of Ginny.

"May I help?" Her tone was soothing as she asked this and after swallowing a few times, Ginny nodded once.

"If you can, please. I want it out."

Colour not improving, she clenched her fists in the grass and as a show of support, Hermione placed her hand over one.

"Luna can help. I know it. And when have I ever been wrong?" She teased, Ginny smiling weakly in response.

Reaching out for Ginny's other hand Luna took it, to grip around Gentle Whisper and place her own hand over the top. Though she hadn't tried before she thought back to the time with Brio when together, through their mutual desire, The Woods was stripped of the corruption which war had
brought.

She didn't speak aloud, closing her eyes and working together with magic. The only sounds that could be heard were the trickling of water, tinkling of wind chimes and grass, as a soft breeze blew through it.

'Please, help my friend.'

Though her wish went unheard by the others, magic could sense it well. As Harry watched with interest, a silvery glow left her hands, to connect with Ginny. Once the connection was made it absorbed into her skin, only for a strange, black mist to leave the pores in exchange. It looked similar to what had left Harry, but he just assumed that it was the residue of the Horcrux and nothing more than that.

She was surprised that there was no pain but with it, could tell something had changed. A drain on her reserves and mind that she didn't know she had left and with it, was almost the feeling of being reborn anew again.

"I'm sorry, I can't take his memories if there are any there." Luna's voice held a hint of remorse, blue eyes glimmering with concern at Ginny opened her own, having unconsciously closed them.

"If I can access them, it's something we can use, right?" Ginny tried to stay optimistic and even if she'd rather not have memories of the shade of someone who made her life hell, she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Thanks, Luna." Ginny conveyed her gratitude, feeling more alert than ever at that moment.

After looking over himself and seeing that Ginny was ok, he sent a smile of thanks of his own at Luna. "I remember what the magic was like so it already gives us an advantage. Luna, you can sense it too?"

"I can feel all of the magic. The halls and grounds are coated with ill intent. I'm not sure how to remove it but I want to. I don't want Hogwarts to hurt any more."

As Gentle Whisper once more returned to its usual state, Luna vowed to herself that she would find a way to return the school to how it once used to be.
Harry winced, sympathetic. "It means that we have an advantage and though this year was a huge indicator, Rumblechore isn't as light as he claims himself to be."

Neville choked on his drink, bursting into laughter then giving a pained grunt when Ginny slapped him none too gently on the back.

Thankful that this was the last of the bad news he had to share, at least for now, he took his time explaining the memories that had some with the Horcrux previously embedded within his scar.

Hermione had taken notes, listing information into fine bullet points to go over later, alongside the others she was given by Harry. Though her memory was excellent it would make it easier to recall if there was a summary of everything so far.

"I didn't think I could hate someone as much as Bellatrix, but I've been proven wrong," Neville spoke, his voice low and vaguely threatening. "This is at least half of The Headmaster's fault. If he hadn't done as much The Death Eaters might have never been a thing or if they were, not as organised as they are now. He had a hand in creating this mess. I mean hell, at least Voldemort doesn't try to hide his intentions but the supposed leader of the light does, to the point where I'm not sure what's true anymore."

Not for the first time, Neville had summarised an issue. Harry didn't either as the old bastard was a ridiculously good liar. By nature Harry was suspicious but even he had believed that Dumbledore's word was law at one point. He had no one to look up to and unfortunately for Harry, he was an easy picking those years ago and he took advantage of that and his vulnerable state.

They spent a few more moments of discussion, before Ginny glanced at Harry wearily. "Good news now?"

"Good news. Well," Harry changed his words slightly. "It's something interesting and amazing all rolled into one but I swear, I'm not bullshitting."

"I'll hold you to that." Ginny muttered, her colour better than before and giving a small smile.

"Right. When Solomon drank from me, Alistair healed the wound. I was talking with him yesterday and all of a sudden out of nowhere, he gained a heartbeat and warmth to his skin. He thinks that because my wish to help wasn't specific on who and with the phoenix tears, it granted his own wish,
which was to have those."

Harry just came right out with it. There wasn't a way he could tell something of this magnitude and not sound like he needed a VIP room in St Mungos.

"..You're bullshitting us."

That was Ginny's immediate response as Harry shook his head rapidly. "I'm not I promise, you can see for yourselves the next time."

"Really?" Hermione straightened to attention, gaze intense. Seeing the truth in his eyes Hermione's own widened. "Amazing..

"That's wonderful! I'm so happy for him! How did he react and how is he doing?"

Hermione was usually the one with questions but this time, they came from Luna. Not that he thought Hermione had no questions though. On the contrary he could see the cogs turning within her mind, shock soon giving way to excitement.

"He's got a kind of alibi now. If anyone makes an accusation of not being human they'll have nothing to back it up."

While Neville made a valid point, there was still one issue with that. On the surface no one would suspect but if Madam Pomfrey took a look at him, things could be different.

"He's got a heartbeat but it's slower than a human's. His temperature is a little lower as well."

Coming from her thoughts, Hermione provided a solution. "Not every human is the standard body temperature and if it's a little lower, that's not an issue. Even in Summer Hogwarts is a bit chilly so I don't think he will be suspect."

Harry conceded that point. "What about his heart rate though?"
"If need be, he could always claim to have a heart condition. A family member of mine has Bradycardia, so her heart rate is slower. But she used to be an athlete and even now still trains when she finds the time so for her, that's normal."

Harry blew out a breath, impressed. That was something he'd definitely tell Alistair about, it could be useful to know if he didn't already.

"That's brilliant, thanks!" He gave her a grin, suddenly realising that he hadn't actually answered Luna's question and gave her an apologetic smile.

"I'd never seen him so happy, genuinely. He smiles a lot but right then it was like having all birthdays at one time."

He was nearly drawn into his own thoughts again, but saved by Ginny's outburst.

"That's it!"

"What's it?" He looked at her, warily once he realised that her expression was reminiscent of Fred and George when they were about to pull a prank of epic proportions.

"That's why you had the expression of a complete idiot earlier, it was definitely over Professor Lothaire and it was totally because of his dashing smile."

She batted her eyes dramatically, making kissing sounds as Harry protested, but it sounded weak to his own ears.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Usually Harry could lie fluently but with this he just couldn't. Ginny having hit the nail on the head, he blushed in response.

"Of course you don't."
Her sarcasm was obvious and once more, Harry shot her a glare, to which she simply stuck her
tongue out at.

Neville shook his head, suddenly flopping back onto the grass. "Is every week going to end with you
dropping several bombshells?"

"Stuff happens to me, I don't want it to but I attract trouble. I've given enough for everyone to think
on though, you guys can go off and process it all now."

Ginny was the first to stand up, mentioning something to him before she left.

"Official Quidditch practice won't start until late September, yeah?" At Harry's questioning look she
continued. "Some of the Gryffs are having match for fun later. Stop by and have a game later?"

It's not like he had any plans for today, so he didn't see why not. He hadn't tried out his broom since
his physical improvements and was eager to see if it affected his performance at all. "Sure, I'll be
there."

"Great! See you then." Giving him a brief wave she left, hoping that the memories she might have of
Voldemort's weren't too bad.

After Neville said his farewells he left also, walking alongside Luna and engaging in a conversation
about one of the many creatures she believed to exist. Hermione was in the proces of gathering her
notes up when Harry approached.

"Got a minute?"

She nodded, regarding him seriously. "Of course."

Giving her the biggest grin he reached into his pocket, with temporary cooling charms until he could
safely store them away. Taking her hand in his he held it out palm up, placing one of the wrapped
chocolates he'd recieved from Alistair onto it.

Looking down at her palm and then back up, her breath caught. There was the smile of her best
friend that she hadn't seen in years, not since he'd tasted the very chocolate that was in the palm of her hand. It was enough to nearly move her to tears, to witness that rare moment for herself once more.

"Did Professor Lothaire?" She trailed off, knowing that she was asking a question to the obvious, but couldn't help herself. She should have known he would act upon her answer but she didn't quite expect something so soon.

As an answer he took the bag from his pocket, showing Hermione the small note attached. As she read the contents of the message a warm, genuine smile curled the corners of her lips.

"That was nice of him. I did wonder if there was a particular reason he asked, but it was to cheer you up, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It did as well, big time. It's been a while since something so simple could make me as happy as I feel right now."

As she tried to hand the single chocolate back to him, he silently shook his head. "That one's for you, keep it."

Placing the chocolate aside for later and resting it on top of the parchment she'd yet to pick up from the ground, she gave a silent thanks to the Professor for his support.

And then, Harry looked at her with so much gratitude, though that word barely scratched the surface. Between Hermione and Alistair he was half worried his cheeks would hurt from smiling so much. At last, he began to not fear rejection and for the first time with her, initiated a hug. Resting his chin on her shoulder his arms wrapped around her, squeezing firmly.

"Thanks 'Mione, you're the best friend I could ever ask for."

She really did get emotional at that, sniffing slightly.

"Me too. I would have never made it this far without you."
Though they had deepened the bonds of friendship since the trio became a duo, the shared secret between them which none of their other friends knew of, strengthened further, within that moment. No person or situation would ever come between them, after the events of today.

Chapter End Notes

I'm amazed I actually remembered to ask this after a suggestion last week, but what's everyone here for? The story, pairings or a bit of both? Curiosity on my part :)

~If I have a better chapter title I'll change it, but that's all I've got xD
Tides of Change

Chapter Summary

Mindsets are changing and during this, Harry and Luna set out to change something too.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: A long-awaited discussion with friends, flower crowns and further cementing of friendships.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

No matter the angle at which Lord Voldemort stared at his reflection, it remained unchanged from the sudden transformation. The first of its kind happened a few weeks ago now and since then he had remained shut away, perusing through the impressive book collection that he owned. Unlike what Dumbledore believed, Riddle Manor wasn't his main base of operation, merely a means to an end. Where he was now, no one knew. Not even those he rarely placed his trust in. He had a suspicion what had happened to cause this, but again, there was no sense to be made of it.

His Horcruxes were intact. Even separated from the main piece of his soul, there was a thin thread connecting from it to each one, enough to know if one of them should be found and destroyed. The rituals he'd performed ensured that his appearance would never return. The only way to reunite them was to feel remorse for those that he'd murdered and for the sake of power, not an ounce of it was present.

But if they hadn't been destroyed, then what had caused this? That was the mystery Voldemort had been trying to solve, with no results.

And then, it happened once more. About half an hour ago, in fact. His skin was pale but no longer held the unhealthy tinge to it, hair entirely black rather than showing signs of age. For all intents and purposes rather than the 69-year-old man he was, the reflection of a man in his mid 30's stared back. The only thing remaining the same being the dangerous red sheen of his eyes.

Other than his appearance, that wasn't the only thing altered. His way of thinking had too. Rather than the relentless pursuit of information through torturing and killing others until he had what he needed and letting his followers run free in that area, he had returned to his subtle Slytherin ways. None of the others had seen his new appearance yet and he had no wish to show himself until he'd discovered the cause. But at this rate, he might not be left with a choice.
Isolated away from everyone, he'd had the time to truly think. Power was and always had been his goal, ever since his days at the Orphanage. The day that Dumbledore visited was the day he saw a way to escape the hell and become strong enough to make the others pay.

After all those years, the memory of Slughorn sharing the knowledge of Horcruxes didn't seem to slide into place correctly, as if something was off, of which he couldn't quite put his finger on. Too young at the time to notice and too far gone with the splitting of his soul to sit and contemplate this, with his transformation had come many different paths he could take, rather than the one, incredibly long route he'd chosen.

Though his goal was The Ministry, what then? Before now he was all too happy to seek world domination and while more power was always appealing, there was only one thing he wanted, even more than that.

To kill Albus Dumbledore.

Why was it, that he'd invested so much of his time in a Prophecy not heard with his own ears? While he didn't doubt the truth of Severus' words he had also come to realise that he didn't know the full picture. What he did know was that Dumbledore wasn't the twinkling harmless fool that others believed him to be. Loathe as he was to admit it they shared similarities, the willingness to manipulate others was apparent to see, at least for him. The general masses would only believe what Dumbledore expertly showed them. He didn't try to hide his intentions, he made them plain for everyone. Dumbledore did, choosing to use puppets and work from the shadows. Once, Voldemort was a Puppet and the night of his rebirth, he saw the very same in Potter. But he chose to ignore the moment of similarity, focusing on the fact that this scrawny child would be the cause of his downfall, everything that he'd built up until this moment.

For the first time in his life, Voldemort believed that he was wrong. Potter was not the threat here, caught up in Dumbledore's games just as much as he was. He had seen things in the boy's mind while possessing him, things which ran true for his own dark past.

There was only one thing which must be done now. The others would not know of this, only one would. Somehow, Voldemort had the feeling that Potter had some idea as to how his transformation came about. He no longer had the desire to kill him. No. That honour went to Dumbledore, the one who denied his freedom from the Orphanage he longed to escape from every year, but sent back each time.

Eyes flashing coolly, the mark stood out starkly against pale skin. Wand in hand the tip pressed upon it. He refused to fight against someone that he had no desire to crush.
Keeping a watchful eye over the Wiggenweld Potion, Severus didn't see his lack of results as a failure, merely a challenge to overcome. Though he had checked with others he was acquainted with through the optional monthly gathering of Potions Masters and Mistresses such as himself, none of them had heard of an instance where an owl was fed Draught of Living Death. While this did make the task at hand more difficult, he would succeed. There wasn't any doubt or hesitation there. It involved knowledge beyond his expertise and while Hagrid was hardly the subtlest of men, his knowledge of animals couldn't be put to question and through it, Severus had a better idea of what results he needed to see. While the dosage for a human would be stronger and therefore a bright magenta in colour, the dosage and colour for an owl would be different. While too much for a human would have side effects, too much for an owl could kill it, even if it was a healing potion. It needed to be just right.

He had to wonder why on earth Potter's blasted owl became a target anyway. From his perspective the act itself was cowardly. If the culprit had an issue with it was better to act from the shadows with the intent of harming the boy in question or confront him directly. Involving a simple messenger and familiar into a mess, not of her own creation didn't serve a purpose.

After their truce, Severus felt as if something was to put to rest. What exactly he didn't know but with it, he saw Potter for how he truly was. He'd watched the changes in him over the past few weeks and whatever had happened, it had done him good and noticed an improvement within his Potion making. Or perhaps Severus was too lost in the blind hatred of James Potter to see his son's acceptable skills. It was the intelligent and lively eyes of Lily which shone through and now that the glasses were gone, it was more of Lily than ever.

He had more questions than answers relating to him now as the moment when a strange undead horse in the form of a Patronus and Potter's voice along with it, there was a split second of confusion, as he knew that his Patronus was a Stag. But then he didn't ponder long on that thought and before he knew it, found himself coming to his aid, actively and with him knowing, rather than the other way round. This year was destined to be one of firsts, in many ways.

And then, for the first time in a while, the searing, burning pain throughout his arm. It ignited his nerves and wasn't the kind of sensation that could be grown used to. Knowing better than to keep him waiting Severus banished the cauldron's contents, knowing that batch was unacceptable and left the school behind to apparate wherever he may be.
As he parted with Hermione outside of the Room of Requirement, there was a sense of contentment. Though over the years he had grown closer to her, this year, in particular, was what divided them and Harry had gone the opposite way, with habits more along Hermione's side than Ron's. But right now, he felt closer to her than ever and not for the first time, counted himself lucky to have such a friend.

Not far along the corridor, Harry spotted Luna, humming a cheerful tune to herself and in the process of creating another flower crown. He knew that his own was white Jasmine, but the sunset coloured flowers she held were unfamiliar. He hadn't noticed her with them either and as she added the finishing touches, posed a question to her.

"What's the name of those?"

Even with her attention solely focused on the crown, Luna didn't flinch or react to his voice in any way, detecting his presence.

She gave him a cheerful, bright smile and held it out to see better. "They're African Daisies, Neville told me about them."

Harry was about to satisfy his own curiosity and ask just who they were for when a voice very familiar to him called out cheerfully.

Glancing away from Luna Harry met the eyes of Alistair, hair loose for once. Viciously banishing the thought of wanting to run a hand through the silky smoothness, he inclined his head.

"Good afternoon Professor."

Harry couldn't help but notice that Alistair's aura could outshine the Sun significantly. Though he'd always thought of him as a warm person, it seemed as if the new changes brought with it a sense of freedom.

After returning greetings to the pair of them, Alistair's eyes twinkled with pure affection. It wasn't in his nature to hold back true thoughts when they were able to be released so with a gentle touch, his thumb brushed across the nearest Jasmine petal around Harry's crown.

"Oh Harry, you are adorable."
Giving a pleased laugh at Harry's loss for words and endearing blush, his warm gaze flicked to Luna.

"That crown is your work, Miss Lovegood?" He tilted his head, genuinely admiring the craftsmanship. It was simple but woven with affection, each flower carefully placed.

Nodding happily and without Harry noticing, she'd hid the other crown behind her then brought it back out, barely able to contain her excitement. Usually calm and serene, it was rare that he ever saw Luna so animated. Though she was never given much of a reason to be this way before, the bullying from her housemates ensuring her insolation, until Harry changed that outside of the dorms, at least.

"This is for you!" Though instead of giving it to Alistair it was presented to Harry instead. Looking at the crown in his hands he glanced over at Luna, confused.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

Eyes sparkling, she couldn't help but giggle to herself. "It's for you to put on him, silly!"

"For me to put on him?" Harry repeated, somewhat dumbfounded and eyes widening. He didn't see a problem with it of course but for some reason, a strange kind of nervousness filled him.

Of course, Alistair had no such problem, crouching to just below Harry's level, for his eyes to shine joyfully. Even if the thought had occurred, how could he possibly refuse? Harry wasn't willing to admit how much influence a simple look from Alistair had over him.

With the crown in hand, Harry placed it on his head securely and in the process, fingers brushing against hair just as silky as he'd imagined. Heart skipping several beats he took a small step back, Alistair elegantly rising to his feet again.

"You both look wonderful!" Luna was overly enthusiastic in her response, looking happier than he'd ever seen her, truth be told.

"How do I look, Harry?"
At Alistair's question, Harry stared blankly for a moment, taking note of the teasing smile. Of all the words that Harry knew, at that moment he couldn't think of a single one, let alone several to string a sentence together.

"You look-" He stopped for a second. Adjective, he needed an adjective!

"Nice." He finished, on a lame note and barely held back a wince. What kind of a compliment was that? It was moments like this he was painfully reminded of being a teen.

Though he couldn't verbally say anything, his thoughts ran a mile a minute.

'Merlin's wrinkly sack, he looks gorgeous!'

Though the laughter remained between the link they shared, it reminded Harry that yes, Alistair could hear his thoughts if they were prominent enough.

'I am glad to know your true thoughts. You have made me a happy man.'

'Shit! When am I going to remember you can hear me if you want to?'

A blown kiss. 'I fervently wish that the answer is never, as I find your surprised expression delightful.'

Harry had nothing to say in response, even as Luna cocked her head curiously.

Happier than before, if that was possible, Alistair directed a cheerful smile in her direction.

"Ten points to Ravenclaw for a beautiful flower crown."

Luna's eyes lit up. "Thank you, Professor!"
It wasn't the points themselves she cared about, but the act behind them. She loved making gifts and while she didn't ask for praise and thanks, to know that the recipient was grateful and expressed as much, never failed to cheer her up even if she was feeling sad.

"You are more than welcome, enjoy the rest of your weekends."

Sincerity shining through within his bright smile Alistair carried on his way, but not without some parting words.

'Oh, Harry? 10 points to Gryffindor.'

'What for?'

'For being lovely.'

'...I really hope they don't keep a written record of why points were awarded. Are you serious?'

He attempted to convey his scepticism, even as a part of him became bashfully happy.

There was no answer, save for a warm chuckle.

Giving his heart time to recover he eventually glanced over at Luna. "Were you waiting for me before?"

With a glimmer of excitement still in her eyes, Luna nodded seriously. "Will you come with me to see Willow?"

Confusion clouded Harry's mind for a moment, but he quickly caught on. "Yeah, I can do that, why?"

With his words, Luna went back to her usual airy self, but with a quiet determination shining within her gaze.
"With Brio, I helped Eireachdail Woods not hurt any more. There was so much war and now it's at peace again. Maybe I could help her too."

It was worth a shot definitely and thanks to the Fae, he knew that when she attacked, it was beyond her control. If Luna could help, then she would be less of a danger to both the students and herself.

Once Harry nodded in acceptance Luna didn't waste any time, taking his hand and beginning to run. He was surprised by her actions, opposite to the usual carefree pace but since it was something she felt strongly about, he could hardly blame her. He didn't tell her to stop, instead easily matching her pace and luckily, not coming across anyone who would rebuke them for running in the corridors.

Once outside Luna began to slow her pace and as the weather brought a chilling breeze, out of consideration he cast a mild warming charm, greeted with a small smile in response. The closer they came to the willow, the more that Harry could see something wrong with his own eyes. He hadn't seen the tree in months and yet, it looked considerably darker and gnarled. It was as if the air itself was stifling and taking note of Luna's fair skin going a touch paler, he stayed close to her side.

"You ok?"

She shook her head softly, unable to hide the distress. "She's in pain. I haven't visited her in years, as too long and I feel sick. But that will change."

Anticipating an attack Harry was well and truly ready, not wanting to use defensive spells and while his Magical core had grown in size considerably and all the excess energy from it had left, he'd never tried a shield charm against something which physically, packed a huge punch.

"Protego Maxima!"

Though they were a short distance away and seemed to have not spotted them yet Harry kept the shield in place, a dome-like protection rising over. Though he'd practised this on his own after class he'd gone to see Professor Flitwick who within a few minutes gave him some pointers and afterwards, was able to cast it more efficiently. The stubborn streak of wanting to learn everything had died down a little and now, he wasn't afraid to ask for guidance if needed, so he was able to better himself in the process.

In case the shield failed, possible plans of action ran through his mind, particularly if Luna was
unsuccessful. Though he did consider that outcome he never ignored his gut feeling and for once, it remained positive.

Keeping Luna's pace all the while they gradually approached and despite her size, the swaying branches held lightning speed as with a deafening swoosh of wind and creaking wood, several headed in their direction.

Harry focused on keeping one foot in front of the other, heart stopping for a moment in case the shield wouldn't hold but thankfully it did so, at the cost of Harry skidding back on his feet with the sheer force of impact.

Though he wasn't sure if a tree held any form of emotion, every swing seemed to be animated with anger and desperation and at that moment, McGonagall's sheer dumb luck comment ran through his head, as he'd relied on nothing but when faced with the Willow during his second and third year. At least this time he knew what he was getting into and came as prepared as he could.

Continuing to move forward his shield held. If it was any weaker he was sure he'd be sent flying through the air with a branch straight to his gut but despite her efforts, Harry could match them tenfold.

The closer they came to the trunk, the more difficult she found it to attack. Her branches held a long reach, with very few able to hit close range but despite this, she tried, one or two still managing to even as the body of her trunk seemed to shake.

Arm trembling faintly with the effort of keeping his shield up and withstanding the force, a grunt left him as one particularly vicious swing connected, back thumping painfully against the trunk. However, the shield still held over both of them. He didn't speak to Luna, not wanting to disrupt either of their concentration, dedicating himself to the task of protection.

Seeing that Harry and Hermione were sharing a best friend moment, Luna had decided to wait outside and hope that he would have time to help. Sometimes she received flashes of the future, but they could either be of something very important, or something mundane. One of those flashes included Professor Lothaire and Harry, both wearing crowns. So, she'd decided to craft the one she'd seen within her mind, so used to the process that by now, she had cut down her creation time to a few minutes. She wasn't sure when Professor Lothaire would arrive, but knew it would be within the time frame of today. While she could have given the flower crown as it was her gift, it would mean more if Harry himself did it.
Anything which brought them closer caused no end of joy to her as while Ginny was vocal about how obvious Harry was, Luna remained a silent and happy supporter. Much like Harry himself, she believed love in its purest and simple form. Finely attuned to her own emotions, it didn't take long before she became aware that her friendship with Brio was beginning to blossom feelings which went beyond that. She knew how to help others, but helping herself needed a little work.

Once Harry agreed to come, a mixture of passion and desperation filled her and on reflex, took his hand to hurry them both but once outside slowed down, as they'd need to reserve their energy for the task at hand. If it wasn't a dangerous moment, Luna would have taken the time to admire Harry's magic, as it had grown into something otherworldly. Strong, bold feelings and just being around him gave her courage, to the point where it seemed as though she could try and succeed in everything. But right now she appreciated his protection as on her own, she wouldn't have been able to both protect herself and try to heal Willow.

Aware that Harry would feel strain the more minutes which passed by, Luna placed a warm, gentle palm on the roughness of the bark, pouring all her care into that single touch and once more, asking if magic would work together with her.

'Will you help, to end her pain?'

Gentle whisper held in one hand, she didn't force magic to leave quickly, simply letting it flow at its own pace. It became a problem when the trunk itself tried to avoid her touch, moving back and forth and allowing the deformed branches to strike the ground surrounding them repeatedly, in an effort to upset their balance.

One such strike succeeded, Harry's feet slipping on the earth as his back scratched against the tree. He was sitting rather than standing now but didn't dare change his position. But gradually, the Whomping Willow began to not lash out, coming to a rest.

From the very roots themselves, darkness itself sprouted, smelling intoxicatingly sweet as it carried away upon the breeze and along with it, an ear-splitting shriek reminiscent of a banshee. Harry winced, not trusting to lower his shield until the danger had passed.

"She's not hurting any more."

With awe in her voice Luna once more put her palm against the trunk and beneath her touch, it began to smoothen.
As Harry rose to his feet, he cautiously lowered the shield charm and came to stand by Luna, in time to catch the transformation.

Rather than the darkness leaking from its roots, a faint silver outline was noticeable which by the second grew brighter, to the point where he couldn't stare directly but once it had left, the willow had sprouted into her true form.

Keeping height, grace replaced bulk, branches no longer deformed, but slender. With it, were leaves with speckles of orange and gold, that gently swayed in the breeze. The visibly noticeable change was the lack of entry to the shrieking shack and similarly, nothing to press for entry. He wondered if the shack had disappeared along with the corruption itself.

He remembered some of Nihri's words which in reality hadn't happened too long ago but with the amount of time he'd spent in rooms where time passed within and yet outside barely moved, it had been months. The willow was another gateway into the world of the Fae, as she belonged to them. Even with this knowledge, he wasn't sure how to go there.

"Thank you, Harry." Her sincerity shone through, eyes slightly misty and giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze, he returned a smile of his own.

"Glad I could help. Everyone's going to be surprised, but I'm happy to leave this as a mystery that only we know the answer to. Sound good?"

Giggling at Harry's conspiratorial grin, she nodded her own head softly. Before another word could be said they saw something in the distance, rapidly coming closer. He was about to raise his wand in defence until he realised it was simply a Patronus.

"Potter. My office." It was strange to see a Doe have the sharp and to the point voice of Professor Snape, but he ignored that fact in favour of wondering what he'd done this time to earn his ire. Unless it was related to Voldemort? They did have that agreement between them earlier, after all.

"I'd better go. I'll see you later Luna!" Though he regretted leaving so abruptly, he knew better than to keep the man waiting. His patience only extended so far.

Turning her head to watch Harry leave for a moment, joy bubbled within her. After so many years, she really could help! Without Brio she would have never been able to do this and for some reason
unknown to her, she believed she knew how to see him from here. Having the overwhelming urge to
do just that she wished Harry good luck within her mind, doing her best to communicate with
Willow.

Chapter End Notes

The Harry's internal thoughts and what leaves his mouth during the flower crown part
was a last minute idea, but I have no regrets xD I love it
A conversation of the ages takes place and with it, the balance has shifted once more.

LAST CHAPTER: The beginning of change and the healing of one which should have never been corrupted.

Usually so focused, Severus Snape found himself apparating on autopilot and even once returning to his office, was unable to process what he'd just seen or heard. Severus knew of the rebirth ritual. It was some of the darkest magic known to wizarding kind, twisting the mortal body beyond recognition and to the extent of his knowledge, there was no way to reverse the after effects. Though his new appearance had come as a slight surprise, that wasn't what threw him off completely. Only his years as a spy allowed him to keep composure.

He wanted to talk to Potter, not kill him. Unlike Dumbledore, The Dark Lord's intentions were made clear. He wanted absolute rule over the masses and would cut down those in his way. However, the glint of madness had vanished and with it, was a cool, calm and collected strategist. Severus had the feeling that this was Tom Riddle, the man before the birth of Voldemort and with his appearance change, the mindset seemed to have accompanied it.

While Potter was his student, Severus now saw him as an equal and like the Dark Lord, he had undergone changes of his own as well. So it was with this that if he wished to be alone with him, Severus would leave. Though refusal to if asked wasn't an option, he could at least do so and not be as concerned for lack of preparation if things did take a turn for the worst. Knowing that it was best not to keep him waiting Severus sent his Patronus. There was no hoping about it, Potter had to be ready for this.

Prefect or not Harry jogged back, keeping a steady pace in the corridors. His gut feeling reared its head again, telling him that whatever Professor Snape had to say, it was of vital importance. That and he didn't want to keep the man waiting. While they'd reached a truce he didn't want to push his luck.
by taking time to get there.

Once outside of the door Harry knocked. At the call to come in, he did so, closing the door behind him. Once he turned around Professor Snape looked the same as always, however, there was an undercurrent of seriousness present. More so than usual when it came to him.

Unlike Dumbledore, Professor Snape always cut to the chase, which was something he liked, rather than a seat and lemon drops.

But then, he gave him a strange look.

"Sir?"

And then, he realised. Frozen in his tracks, he closed his eyes.

He was still wearing the flower crown.

He had gone to Professor Snape's office, wearing a flower crown.

He wasn't sure how the crown had managed to stay on his head after all that. Reaching up he took it off, giving him an apologetic look and knowing his embarrassment was plain to see.

"Sorry Sir, I came here in a rush and forgot I had it on."

He looked at Harry for a long moment, but then swiftly proceeded, lightly narrowing his eyes. "The Dark Lord wishes to speak with you."


Biting back the sarcastic response on the tip of his tongue, Severus confirmed as much. "Yes. I will take you to the unmarked location. It is not his usual place of residence."
He sneered to himself. "Dumbledore is a fool if he thinks Riddle Manor is the only location."

But, to talk? Harry still couldn't process it and while he knew Professor Snape's words were no lie, he'd never wanted to talk. It was always trying to kill him and never asking questions.

Harry agreed. If Dumbledore seriously thought that Voldemort wouldn't have anywhere else but the manor, he was being dangerously optimistic. But then the thought occurred that if Professor Snape hadn't reminded Harry in his own way of the flower crown, he would have gone to see Voldemort wearing it.

At that thought he blanched and seeming to know what direction his thoughts had headed, the man gave a barely noticeable smirk. Realising he hadn't responded yet, Harry hastily did so and even if to talk, he checked and double checked that his wands were easily accessible.

"I'm ready."

Levelling a serious gaze the Professor's way he gave a sharp nod, exiting his office swiftly and with some effort, Harry managed to match his strides. He'd return for the flower crown later as appearing before Voldemort wearing that, really would sign his death warrant this time.

Every time before this, when faced with Voldemort, there was an undercurrent of fear. Not of Voldemort, but failure. He ran on instincts and adrenaline alone, with selective talent for a few areas. His attacks were predictable, Expelliarmus a signature spell but now, he'd changed his methods. If it wasn't for the fact that his original wand was the brother to Voldemort's and served as a distraction, in the end, he would have died that night.

But now things were different. While he couldn't say he'd match Voldemort with experience, he could say that at least this time, Harry could give him a run for his money.

Thankfully, on the way out, they didn't run into anyone and made it to the gates of Hogwarts with little issue. So faint that Harry could easily mistake it for the breeze, Professor Snape whispered to him.

"Alastor Moody is here." The clear note of displeasure could be heard throughout his tone, coming to a stop. Turning around, his gaze focused on a particular area and after a moment, Harry saw a slight abnormality to the left and after a moment, he revealed himself. With the disguise magic gone,
his face twisted grotesquely, even as his wooden leg rapidly thumped towards them. Electric blue eye swivelling in its socket, it immediately focused on Professor Snape.

"Going to see your master I bet, pathetic Death Eater scum." Not giving him a chance to answer he glanced at Harry, voice gruff with hostility. "And you're the latest recruit? I should kill you both now."

Seriously? Harry knew Moody was paranoid but this was too much. As his gaze remained locked on Harry his mind formulated a plan, though it might not be easy considering just who he was trying to fool, as he hoped Professor Snape would play along.

"Of course not. I have remedial potions. We're travelling outside of the school grounds to locate and harvest ingredients for a Pepperup Potion. Professor Snape is showing me the correct way to do so because the effectiveness of Potions is directly proportional to ingredient quality."

Still suspicious, Moody glanced from one to the other. "On a Sunday?"

Professor Snape smoothly took over. "Loathe as I am to waste valuable hours teaching this particular dunderhead, neither Potter's schedule or my own will allow for a weekday."

Hopefully, Moody didn't know that Harry received an Outstanding in Potions. It was the first thing he came up with and true in the sense that it was another cover for what they were really doing. Though at the Professor's words, the glare was partially truthful.

At the subtle probing of his mind, Harry's first instinct was to shut it out but as he was meant to be a clueless teenager, allowed him entry. Instead, he brought forward memories based on truth. While most would be satisfied he stayed for longer than necessary, inspecting each memory thoroughly. Just when Harry thought his true thoughts might spill he left.

True to his name he always looked to be in a bad mood, but at the displeasure at being unable to do anything to stop them with no real proof, a sense of satisfaction filled Harry. Moody was the third on his list he hated, Umbridge second and Dumbledore first. While Umbridge had put him through hell and was equally as twisted, Dumbledore was the bigger threat. His mask was better crafted, able to tell with a single glance that Dolores Umbridge had more to her than met the eye. For Dumbledore, it had taken years.

Grumbling to himself he walked away, and Harry couldn't help but wonder if he was bored and just
decided to follow them. The Ministry couldn't be giving him much work if he'd found the time to do something like this.

Unable to help himself, Harry threw a casual two-fingered gesture at Moody's retreating back. He knew he hadn't been caught, as the Auror wouldn't have let it slide.

Severus arched an eyebrow. Though at first, he was sceptical when he was informed that the sorting hat's first choice was Slytherin, he could see why now. Mad-Eye hadn't scanned his own mind, most likely knowing that he would be able to successfully divert his attention or simply give enough for it to be believable. He'd tried Potter but as there was no outcry, Severus assumed that he was successful in defending the attack off.

He knew that his method of teaching Occlumency and about Legilimency wouldn't help anyone, let alone Potter. Dumbledore had asked him to be harsh, as 'The boy needs to face the hardships of this world.' And while a part of Severus had questioned the pointlessness, the largest part relished in the opportunity to get back at James Potter through his son. Using Dumbledore's words as justification he'd done more damage, in truth. But now that a truce was formed, Severus could see things for how they really were.

With that disruption out of the way, they could finally continue. Outside of the gates to Hogwarts, the Professor swivelled to face him.

"Though I am aware that you can apparate, the mark is the only indication of where the Dark Lord is."

"Hang on, how did you know I could apparate? Sir." He added on the end, just to make sure. Only a select few people knew that he could.

Smirking, he arched a single eyebrow. "Though I had my suspicions, you merely confirmed them."

'Stupid bloody Slytherins.' Grumbling to himself, he nodded once.

"Rest assured Potter, there will be no detention or loss of points. Any advantage is preferable to none."

And at that moment he didn't speak as a Professor, but a man who knew the importance of
advantages all too well. Deciding that he didn't want to test Voldemort's patience any further Harry placed a hand on his arm, the pair disappearing with the faintest of pops.

After Riddle Manor, Harry expected something similar but to his surprise, it was about as ordinary a house as you could get. Not a manor by any means, but a sizeable, detached house isolated far away from others. with the exception of natural wildlife, there were no garden decorations or anything fancy, simply a building to suit needs and certainly nothing suspicious about it.

From a planning perspective, it was perfect. Dumbledore would never expect to find him here. Either somewhere ridiculously lavished to demonstrate his power, or somewhere heavily protected. Not that Harry didn't doubt there were no protections, however, they weren't made obvious.

As they approached much like Dumbledore's office the door opened. In one way, the interior reminded him of the mockery of a bedroom he had with the Dursleys. The barest of furnishings with enough to make it just livable. The only difference that despite this it wasn't dark and dreary, only dimly lit as the day grew later. One thing there was plenty of here and there, were bookshelves. Filled with books they lined the inside of various rooms, almost certain that expansion charms were involved to successfully be able to fit everything.

He didn't know what to expect at all and while he appreciated the heads up from Professor Snape, he didn't lower his guard for a second. Coming to a room right at the very end, this door was open as well. Peering in, this room was a little more decorated than the last, looking like a cross between an office and living room, perhaps the two combined. Papers stacked neatly to the side of a darkened oak desk, a man who looked nothing like the Voldemort Harry knew sat, head bent over paperwork as his quill smoothly flowed across the parchment. Without looking up from his work, he spoke.

"Severus, leave us."

Even with those few words alone, Harry could already detect some difference, the hint of madness throughout his tone gone and with it, a sense of calm and control.

Inclining his head in the other man's direction Severus swiftly left, knowing that Potter could apparate back unless the Dark Lord called for his return.

Standing in the doorway Harry was unsure what to do. He wouldn't assume he could sit down
without being invited to but simply staying there gave him the feeling of being a complete idiot.

Finishing, Voldemort replaced his quill back in the inkwell, finally raising his head. As soon as he looked at Harry, his eyes registered a brief flicker of surprise. This wasn't the skinny waif under Dumbledore's thumb but a healthy, strong wizard, eyes shining with confidence rather than reckless foolishness, instilled by an old fool. Voldemort could tell that Potter had tried to hide his power through another charm or spell of some sort because he had done the same once. Even now, he doubted that Dumbledore knew the extent of it. A Slytherin never gave up his secrets and even before this, he tactically conserved his energy. What stood before him was not a clueless boy with more luck than sense, but someone with a goal in mind. Someone that Voldemort could see a little of in himself, even if Potter's ambition wasn't destructive. Both puppets of Dumbledore with dark pasts and yet, the forks in the path were starkly contrasted.

Voldemort wasn't the only one surprised. Harry, in turn, was as well. It looked like he wasn't the only one to undergo changes this year. While he'd seen that he once more had hair and not showing signs of age, Harry wondered if he'd performed some kind of ritual to restore his looks and once he raised his head, he saw a small part of who he was before all this, Tom Riddle. The looks which many a student had fallen for in school had returned, with the exception of eyes that still shone a blood red. He didn't know what had caused this change, both in looks and actions, but nevertheless, he kept his guard up.

"Sit."

With an elegant gesture of his hand, he indicated toward the chair opposite the desk and after a moment, Harry did so. He kept his expression neutral, not looking away for a moment.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "You know of my Horcruxes."

Harry didn't know what he'd been called here for but even so, he didn't expect him to cut straight to the chase. He didn't see the point in lying either, he would find out one way or the other. The fact that he apparently just wanted to talk, Harry counted that as lucky. He didn't want to do anything to jeopardise this surreal situation, even if he couldn't help but be suspicious of ulterior motives. That, and he knew that Harry knew about them, otherwise he would have phrased it as a question rather than fact.

"Yeah, I do."

"What of them?"
Though Voldemort's tone was almost casual, it presented a threat of consequences if his question remained unanswered. He wondered how much he should or shouldn't share, but decided on the basics. They would be true, but not every detail included.

"I know that I was one, and your Diary was another."

Ever so slightly, Voldemort stiffened. His magic stirred as if calm waters had begun to bubble.

"Potter. Explain."

His tone brooked for no argument and he obliged.

"Lucius Malfoy slipped your Diary into Ginny's cauldron-"

He was cut off, Voldemort's tone impatient.

"No. A part of my soul resided in you?"

Oh. Harry stopped and abandoning his mask completely, gave him a confused look. "Wait, you didn't know?"

"Of course I didn't know, Potter! Why would I make you into one of my Horcruxes intentionally?" He snapped, slightly irritable.

Harry saw his point there, there were other things he could use beside another human. "When you tried to kill me and the curse backfired, that's when it happened. It's why I saw visions as well, but I don't get those any more. Something happened and the Horcrux didn't completely leave, but some weird black mist left my scar. I've still got some of your memories but that's it. I can still speak Parseltongue so someone in my family must have been able to."

He didn't mention anything about Thanatos. Even if it hadn't descended into spellfire and the conversation was decent so far, Harry wasn't prepared to tell the one man he'd been fighting on the
opposite side and against technically his entire existence. Except the Horcruxes, Harry didn't know if he'd been called here for another reason.

Voldemort didn't ask about the Diary, knowing most of what had happened and even without questions, he assumed that the Horcrux within it had done something similar. Not even magic could explain a sudden appearance change of that nature. The mist which Potter spoke of, was surely the cause of his own changes. His irritation left, seeing no reason to release his ire on Potter when in truth, it wasn't his fault. That and his Horcruxes were still intact. changed, but intact.

He had the answers he required for this, his suspicions being correct that Potter knew of them. The thought didn't alarm him as much as he'd thought, unsure of the reason why. He could easily refuse his next demand and unlike in the past, he wouldn't resort to Crucio for compliance.

"Remove whatever it is that hides your power."

Harry stiffened, startled but trying not to show it. While he could see slight similarities in Dumbledore and Voldemort at least in their manipulative ways, Voldemort was like Professor Snape, both refusing to sugar coat words and seek precisely what it is that they wanted. If Dumbledore knew that Harry was hiding his power, he doubted he would have sat idly by so assumed he didn't know. How was it that Voldemort knew? He thought about refusing, though that would get him nothing but the man's ire. He wasn't ashamed of his power, on the contrary. He was proud of how strong he'd become, but hiding it was a necessity, as he didn't put it past Dumbledore to try and block his magic again.

In a sense, it seemed as if he was testing him. In what way he didn't know, but Voldemort knowing his true power would be less dangerous than Dumbledore who had already known and took measures against it. While Voldemort killed his parents and started the mess, Dumbledore had only worsened and prolonged it.

Withholding his sigh he did as asked, removing his Holly and Phoenix feather wand.

"Virtutem Revelare."

Since arriving at Hogwarts, he hadn't removed this spell and as it used the magic in the air and didn't touch his core, it worked out fine to keep it on. Though the spell was supposed to hide it to all but himself, he had no doubt that Alistair could sense his true power despite this. He already had with some at least, helping to remove one of his many magical blocks.
With it, he didn't feel any different, but Voldemort gave him a calculating look.

"What is this? Your magical core was abysmal when you last faced me."

A sarcastic response on the tip of his tongue, Harry held back. He liked his body intact and not under threat of harm.

"I had blocks placed on me by Dumbledore."

At the mention of Dumbledore, Voldemort's expression burned with a fierce hatred, one that mirrored Harry's own on the inside. And then he paused to speak once more, voice dangerously low.

".Blocks?" He had taken note of Harry's word usage.

"Seven. I managed to remove them over the Summer."

Though Harry was calm speaking about this, he wasn't prepared for Voldemort's reaction.

A deadly kind of magic spread throughout the room, in the form of Voldemort's rage. Much like his own, it was quiet and calm, however, it held a certain kind of toxicity that made his throat want to close up. As though if he inhaled, it would affect him in the worst way.

"Seven?!" He hissed, hands slamming palm down onto the table with an audible thump as he pinned Harry with a ferocious glare, the one it was meant for currently at Hogwarts.

"That fool! He tampers with magic as if it's nothing!"

Was Voldemort angry for him? Surely not. That didn't make any sense and hesitantly, he replied back.

"I thought you'd see that as a good thing."
Reclining back in his chair, the magic permeating the air slowly left, Harry no longer feeling as though he was choking.

Before now, Voldemort would have agreed, at least to a certain extent. However, for all that he was a Dark Lord, he had never touched a Wizard or Witches' magical core. Magic was a gift and he'd spent many years researching any and all of it, even those that he couldn't use. Without magic, he would be dead or in a far worse place that he was now. No. Torturing and killing he wouldn't hesitate to get what he wanted, but he left the magical core alone. However over the past few weeks, torturing and killing didn't seem quite as appealing, except for Dumbledore, that is.

He knew the damage blocks could do. He'd seen it himself and if he'd cared to look, Potter's condition would have been made obvious. Even one was a threat to life, but seven? For all that Dumbledore claimed Potter was the golden boy destined to defeat him, he had an idiotic way of showing it. If there was one thing he liked, it was a challenge. An underfed and underprepared Potter wasn't a challenge. If he thought the power of love was the key because he was incapable of feeling such an emotion, he vowed to break into the school and Crucio him to a gibbering mess.

Waiting for an answer, Harry found himself feeling a little relaxed. He never thought he'd see the day where he thought that in the presence of Voldemort, particularly after all that had happened but the fact that they'd known of each other for years and had only talked now for the first time outside of open hostility, he found to be strange.

And then, Voldemort shook his head with a sharp movement. "Before now, yes. But you are no good magically crippled."

He spoke seriously, as Harry listened in silence. In truth, he didn't think the shock had set in yet, but it no doubt would after they'd finished.

"Dumbledore has made puppets of us both, but you have broken the strings. He is my focus, so I will leave you alone."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Do you mean a truce, of sorts? You don't want me to join you?"

Voldemort couldn't deny that having Potter as an ally would cause him no end of amusement with envisioning Dumbledore's face, however he could see that he was on his own side. He refused to drag a teenager into something not of his own making and he believed that now, he had the right focus.
"No, I don't want you to join me. I require absolute loyalty to my cause, of which you don't have.
And yes."

Every single handshake had been significant in some way, this one not an exception. As Harry held his hand out to shake, Voldemort stared at it, for a long moment. Just when Harry thought he’d refuse he instead reached out, chilled hand touching Harry's own briefly.

This man killed his parents. Harry would never forget that and the life of misery it set him up for, but one less person not after his blood was an opportunity he'd embrace. While he doubted he'd ever see eye to eye with him, this hopefully meant that his only worry was Dumbledore now. And with this truce, the Horcruxes were no longer a concern. Of all the outcomes he expected, this wasn't one.

The moment Voldemort dismissed him Harry left. Thankfully, it wasn't large enough to become lost in and soon enough he found the front door, opening and closing it behind him. By now the sky was bathed in an orange glow, fields all around. Once he'd got a fairly far distance away he sat right on the grass, dazed.

He'd just shaken hands with Voldemort. The most feared Dark Lord since the time of Grindelwald. Even by his standards that was beyond shocking. What? He came to lie down, simply resting.

Harry didn't know how long he stayed there, deep in thought, until he was brought from them by a familiar voice. The skies had dimmed further, shadows creeping across.

'Harry?'

He jumped a little.

'Yeah?'

'Are you alright?'

Tilting his head, he glanced at the bracelet and understood why Alistair had checked in on him. Right now it couldn't settle on one solid colour, fluctuating between many. He would class that as accurate, certainly. He still couldn't believe any of that happened and the bracelet reflected this.

He tried to get his jumbled thoughts into some semblance of order, met with a brief pause by Alistair.

A hint of disbelief. 'May I ask you to repeat that?'

If he wasn't in shock himself he might have gave a small victory pump at managing to catch Alistair off guard but as it was he explained the situation as best he could.

'One moment Harry, I will be with you soon.'

Before he could so much as think on the meaning of those words, Alistair appeared before him. Of course, an unknown location wouldn't apply to a Vampire, not to mention the link they shared via the bracelet itself. Rather than Harry having to sit up Alistair joined, lying in the grass beside him as they both watched over the sunset.

Alistair broke the comfortable silence, softly voicing his thoughts.

"It is beautiful. I find that sometimes, we are so caught within our own lives, that we fail to appreciate what has always been there."

Harry couldn't agree more. Still staring at the sky, he didn't quite think over his words until they were spoken. "The sunset reminds me of your eyes."

"Are my eyes beautiful to you, Harry?" His tone was lightly teasing and even so, Harry's true thoughts spilled out.

"Yeah."

Realising what he'd admitted to, his face flushed lightly and Alistair's gentle laughter didn't help either.
At the soft touch of a hand on his own, only to interlink with it, Harry looked over at him. He was met with a smile of tranquility and even with simple contact such as this, his heart fluttered.

Lips curving into a smile, Alistair's hand continued to hold his own. "Your eyes are beautiful to me, also. Emeralds that twinkle with a special, unique light of their own."

Managing a genuine smile at Alistair's compliment, Harry bashfully averted his gaze, as silence returned to them once more. He spared a single thought for Ginny, a little guilty that by now the day was over, along with Quidditch. He'd play a practice game soon, before he was due to start tryouts.

Heart thoroughly warmed through with Alistair's compliment, they stayed that way for a while, until the inevitable return to Hogwarts.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 100 is insane :O It feels fitting that the 100th is the first meeting of Harry and Voldemort after both have undergone changes. I didn't think I'd get this far and continue to go this far when I continued this in 2016. Thank you so much, to everyone whether you're silent readers or leave comments, I appreciate you more than I can possibly convey <3
Friendship Severed

Chapter Summary

Would Ron ever learn his lesson? Harry didn't know but this time, he'd had enough.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Severus and Harry fool Moody together, a truce with Voldemort and spending time with Alistair.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Harry's weekend was a mixed bag, to the point where he didn't quite know what to make of it. Like most of the days that started off with something bad, the rest of it seemed to drag, to the point where the urge to sleep became strong. Sunday was better than Saturday at least, having helped Luna heal the Whomping Willow and creating a truce with Voldemort. As soon as he got back he collected his flower crown from the Professor's office, filling him in on what happened and though met with apparent indifference, Harry guessed that he'd kept the surprise on the inside, to deal with in private later. He also gathered his friends, telling them about the events of the day. By this point they thought Harry couldn't shock them any further and yet, he'd managed. All except for Luna, with her usual serene smile that seemed to suggest she knew more than she let on. Afterwards, he apologised that he couldn't make the game to Ginny. She brushed off his comment, saying that it was the ultimate excuse for missing it but he still owed her one.

Later that night just after reapplying the power masking spell, Kingsley got in touch with him. Lorelei had willingly confessed her actions and it was left up to him how to deal with her. Professor Snape was still working on the antidote for Hedwig but the one thing he knew he'd made a decision on, whether Hedwig awakened or not, was that she needed to see a Mind Healer. He didn't want her to suffer from memories of her own abuse at the hands of Dementors or her parent's death, knowing all too well what that felt like. He could sense she was strong but like him and like Voldemort, they had each chosen a different path. The path of Power, the path of Revenge and for Harry, he hadn't yet discovered his own.

But, the thing that was making him stir his porridge idly rather than eating it, was what happened immediately after Voldemort. Alistair had appeared right where he was and though the scene on his back with the cool breeze blowing across his skin brought with it a sense of calm, having Alistair join him caused happiness to bloom within his heart. They talked about anything and everything, all the while linked both in mind and through interlocked hands. It was simple and yet, in Harry's world, one of the best things he could ask for. He wouldn't mind making a move but his own doubts, worries and lack of experience held him back. Alistair was a natural flirt and though he knew he wasn't lying about the compliments paid to him and that he liked him, but did he really like Harry in
the way Harry liked him? He was a mentally and physically scarred teenager with more baggage than many adults. Alistair was beautiful both inside and out, confident and experienced. Out of all the people he had his pick of, he doubted that he'd be the first choice.

His thoughts took a depressing turn, as he sighed deeply. That is until he was brought out of them with a sharp rap on the head.

Jumping in surprise and then shielding his head from further pain, Harry glared at the offender.

"Hey! What was that for?" He accused, rubbing his head. That had actually hurt.

Ginny stared back at him, not recoiling in the slightest. "If you sigh or space out one more time, I'm going to hit you with mum's wooden spoon. What's wrong with you? And Luna, for that matter."

Luna?

Glancing over at her he realised that she was spacing out too. It was common for Harry in truth, even before Alistair, but Luna was a rarity. He was beginning to wonder if she was in a similar boat as him, with Brio. She talked about him a lot, with a higher level of excitement than usual. When it came to him, it seemed as if she couldn't keep her usual calm yet cheerful composure. Though saying this she was making better progress than him, actually eating properly, though her eyes indicated thoughts furthest away from now.

Ron had joined them, though he didn't make much conversation, choosing to inhale his food with barely a chew as usual and once again, Neville found himself watching in morbid fascination. Hermione had given up on lecturing him about manners, knowing that Ginny was better for keeping him in line as in truth, she was more irritated with him than she'd ever been in her life. He couldn't seem to understand the concept of the word no and having to reject his intention of them being more than friends on more than one occasion, was really beginning to take its toll.

Hiding a smile with her goblet as she drank, Luna was vaguely aware of her surroundings enough to notice Harry. She knew why he had been this way often and they were so close, she could sense it. It wouldn't be long before the nature of their relationship changed, she was sure of it and when it happened, she would be their biggest supporter.

Though she spared some thoughts for Harry, most were on the events of yesterday.
Pressing the flat of her palm against Willow, Luna could tell that she was precisely how she was meant to be, rather than darkness permeating the very bark of the wood. With the touch of her hand, a section wavered, disappearing and revealing something similar to Shutaro in the Room of Requirement. Passing through she was greeted with the familiar sights only this time, Brio was in the midst of a conversation with Gareon and just finishing up. Excitement animated her every action and barely noticing the stares she ran over to him, unable to contain herself. Noticing her he gave a small, but genuine smile in greeting. Mutters spread among the fae as they'd never seen him like this but with one frosty glare directed at them, soon quietened.

Sensing that she wanted to speak with him he lead the way to Eireachdail Woods. He knew his reputation would hardly be tarnished because he was friendly with a mortal but even if it did, he didn't care. He was beginning to find a reason to smile more these days, Luna a constant source. Though no longer uncomfortable by her touch, the feeling of awkwardness lingered whenever he tried to reciprocate. She only held his hand once they were away from the others, perhaps out of consideration for his own discomfort with other seeing the sign of affection.

But the moment they arrived she turned around, only to grip both of his hands in her own, jumping up and down on the spot. A curious frown on his face he watched, waiting for her to speak.

"Thank you so much! I could always sense that something was wrong, but I didn't know how to help. Today I helped heal my friend and Willow!"

"How did that come to happen?" He questioned her softly, understanding what she meant, at least for Willow. One of their own seeds that had been twisted and corrupted by dark magic.

As Brio listened to her intently, he began to be swept up in her enthusiasm and for him, the smile on his face was a large one. He was proud of her progress and that she was able to act on all that she'd learned so quickly. Wary incase his touch was rough and feeling more than out of place, he reached out to softly stroke her head.

"You've done well."

So overcome with joy, Luna didn't hesitate to jump into his arms instead, wrapping her own around his neck as her legs gripped his sides. Her slight weight didn't stagger him at all though he did stiffen briefly, before returning her affection the best he could, supporting with an arm underneath and a hand resting firmly on her back.
"I'm so happy. I've wanted their pain to go away for so long, and now it has."

Her voice returned to normal, though quieter even as after a while, her arms loosened a bit. As Brio expected, the use of her magic to aid both left her feeling drowsy. Glancing at the inner pocket of his robes, he'd give the gift he had for her once she awakened. Not hesitating for a moment he carefully lowered himself to the ground, sitting down with Luna in his lap.

Simply looking at her asleep, wholly trusting and fond of him caused the unfamiliar stirring feeling in his chest once more, one that he was slowly growing accustomed to. Luna was unlike anyone he'd ever met before and, a little selfishly, he didn't want her to return to the other world. What was this feeling of possessiveness? That he wanted to protect her always? He had never felt this way for any of his own kind.

Before he could think over his actions, Brio kissed the top of Luna's head. He didn't think at all, why did he do that? Embarrassed at his actions, Brio's cheeks tinged pink. But he didn't let go, simply tightening his arms around her.

Unknown to him Luna was still awake, though barely. At the soft kiss, it seemed as if she could soar into the heavens and take flight for eternity. This world was so much purer than her own and if given the choice in the future, she would rather stay here and occasionally visit the world she was born in rather than how things were now. But for the moment, she allowed herself to settle, content in the arms of the one she was fond of.

Unconsciously, Luna's hand found its way back to her ear, to gently touch the earrings Brio had gifted her with. She was so happy and didn't know what to do with herself, thanking him so profusely that he grew quietly flustered. Giggling to herself, she couldn't help but think how adorable he was. She loved them, even more than her radish ones. Silver half moons which dangled a little they were dotted with tiny amethysts, her birthstone. They were so beautiful.

"Loony's being loony again.." Ron muttered to himself and before anyone could react Hermione, without looking up from her book once, removed her wand and pointed it in Ron's direction.

"Ternum."
Having taken a sip of his drink, Ron promptly spat it out, showering the table with a light spray of juice.

"Oi Herm, what was that for?"

Rubbing his arm, he shot a frown her way. It felt as though he'd been pinched repeatedly.

Calmly Hermione closed her book, pinning him with a murderous glare so intense, it caused him to pause, a sausage midway to his mouth.

"Ronald Weasley, you had better call Luna by her name, or I'll use a spell that does more than that. And for the last time-"

She pointed her wand threateningly in his direction. Not having speared the sausage enough, it promptly dropped onto the table with a small thump.


Nodding hastily, Ron picked up the sausage and shoved it into his mouth, still talking after. Out of habit, he'd said the nickname once more, albeit muffled but she heard. Swallowing quickly he finished the rest of her name, in case she did decide to deliver on her threat.

"Mione."

Satisfied, she resumed reading.

Harry watched the proceedings with great amusement. If Hermione hadn't got there first, he was sure either himself, Ginny or Neville would have. Luna wasn't affected in the slightest, still smiling and giggling to herself. Curiously, he couldn't help but ask.

"Did something good happen?"

Brought from her thoughts she nodded happily, an ever so faint blush painting her cheeks. She didn't
elaborate at all, but Harry could at least make a guess.

Alistair was missing this morning, however, he'd already been informed that Solomon had woken up and on top of occasionally checking in to make sure Jacob and the rest were settling in ok, would be out of Hogwarts for a few hours. But that wasn't what worried him. What worried him was the empty chair of Dumbledore as well. Despite Harry's opinions of him he rarely if ever missed a meal in The Great Hall except for occasions where it couldn't be helped. But these days, he was beginning to think that whenever he was missing, it was a sure indication of trouble heading Harry's way. By the general population's standards, Monday was the worst day of the week. For Harry, any day of the week had the potential to be because he was nearly turned to paste by a mountain troll on a Thursday, for example. He just hoped the bad feeling swirling in his gut was wrong because, after everything else, this was the last thing he needed.

On top of that, the first class of the day was double potions with the Slytherins. Ron hadn't been too out of line, like in DADA, but Harry was just waiting for the moment he inevitably slipped up once more. Why did he have the sneaking suspicion that today would be it?

Before long it was time to go and after parting ways with Ginny and Luna, the four made their way to the dungeons. Oblivious and lost in his own world, Ron remained unaware of their conversation, the general chat of the other students further ensuring they wouldn't be overheard.

Letting Ron go ahead Harry slowed his pace, walking in line with Hermione and Neville. Staring at his back for a long while, the sign he released was as if the weight of the world accompanied it.

"Is it just me who thinks Ron is going to do something stupid?"

Hermione answered before Harry, irritation laced throughout her tone. "It wouldn't be the first time. Idiocy is part of his nature, it's impossible for him to think intelligently."

As soon as she said it Hermione promptly closed her mouth, a guilty look flashing across her face. Before she could amend her words slightly, Harry burst into laughter. He knew she didn't mean that, at least some of it. They were aware that Ron had brains, but this year he'd chosen not to use them as much.

Harry's laughter had caused a few strange looks, but still not enough to get Ron's attention. Arriving just outside of class, Harry could see Professor Snape at the door, waiting for them to go in. His expression remained neutral but by now, they all understood that in this case, it meant, 'Hurry up'.
On the way by Harry inclined his head to Snape in greeting, receiving a short one back. Their relationship had come on leaps and bounds. Though it may not seem that way to most, since, for the most part, it remained hidden, there was a lot less of a burden on Harry's shoulders without having to worry about Snape and what snide or snarky comment he'd have for his Potions. In fact, he'd remained indifferent and in some cases, fairly awarding points where in the past even for a job well done, he would have simply ignored this in favour of Slytherin.

From their first lesson, Professor Snape had picked Gryffindor/Slytherin pairings and perhaps sensing that the animosity between them was nowhere near as great from previous years, had paired Harry with Draco. To both of their surprise they worked well together, Harry usually in charge of cutting and measuring the ingredients while he meticulously stirred and measured. They'd only had a few lessons and within that time, both had swapped places and yet remained consistent. Draco had always been good at potions, Harry suspected he'd had a tutor, perhaps Professor Snape himself before arriving at Hogwarts but regardless, his talent couldn't be denied. Now that Harry was left alone, he could show his true talent. He wasn't fantastic but he wasn't too bad either. He'd never had the chance to prove himself before now, Potions being sabotaged or his own fear of success holding him back, with how it had been handled the brief time he attended Primary School.

Taking his usual seat, Harry's heart sank when in Professor Snape's spidery scrawl, Polyjuice Potion and the steps for it were written on the blackboard. It wasn't so much the potion itself, he'd sort of helped Hermione during the process, it was more the fact that he doubted Ron would take it seriously. His partner was Pansy Parkinson and the first lesson, both had been vocal about their displeasure with that fact. Admittedly no matter who Ron's partner was, he would have no doubt complained. There wasn't a nice way to put it really, but Parkinson was a bitch. All the Slytherins had accepted his offer of at the very least civility but she'd simply told him that on no terms would she ever associate herself with a Gryffindor and a Potter at that, turning her nose up and walking away. Despite her unpleasant nature, she was good enough with Potions to carry them as a 'team' at least. Harry used that word loosely.

Still waiting for everyone to arrive, Harry caught Hermione's eye, flashing a knowing grin. Casually rolling her eyes she gave him an amused smile and with that, he knew they were on the same wavelength.

And then he remembered that his partner was Draco Malfoy. Harry gave him a casual sidelong glance, memories of second year flashing through his mind. As though he could sense Harry's gaze Draco's silver eyes narrowed, arching a single brow.

"Potter?"

He debated whether telling him about then was a good idea, but he doubted Malfoy would grass him up over something that happened four years ago. Plus that and Harry found himself curious about his reaction. He thought for a moment, wondering how best to word things. The longer he remained
silent, the more suspicious his gaze turned. He decided tapping into his Gryffindor blunt side might be best for this situation.

"Do you remember the whole heir of Slytherin thing second year?"

"...Nothing short of a bludger to the head would make me forget. Is there a point to this?"

Deciding he'd better hurry up, he stealthily checked to see if Professor Snape was out of earshot.

"I suspected you were the heir, along with Hermione and Ron. We brewed Polyjuice in Myrtle's bathroom and used it to sneak into the Slytherin common room and question you."

It didn't take long for him to connect the dots, a moment of silence between them. Pinning him with an incredulous glare he whispered, practically hissing.

"You and Weasley?"

"Yeah."

At Harry's confirmation, Draco shook his head in disbelief. "I thought they were acting more intelligent than usual."

Harry promptly snorted, not noticing an odd look in Draco's eyes. Turning his head, he spoke.

"Oh, Professor Snape-"

Harry paled, shooting around so fast on his stool he nearly pulled several muscles, on the verge of panic as he checked behind him. Thankfully he was still at the door and hadn't heard a thing. Then, he realised that Malfoy of all people had played a trick of sorts on him. Shooting a vicious glare his way, Harry muttered under his breath.

"Harry Potter, The Boy Who Died."
Then it was Draco's turn to be amused, though Harry could only tell through the faint glimmer of his eyes. Abruptly all conversation stopped, as Professor Snape made his way to the front of the class. Pinning everyone with an icy glare, his very demeanour radiated seriousness, more than usual.

"May I remind you all that you are here because, by some miracle, you are skilled enough for advanced classes." Here he glared at Ron, who was mumbling nonsense to himself.

"I will not tolerate any foolish behaviour."

Professor Snape's instructions were short and to the point, the blackboard conveying everything needed. It was Harry's turn to prepare and measure the right amount of ingredients this time, as he waited for the majority of students to clear out before going for ingredients himself. On the way, he stopped Ron from messing up before the lesson had even started, seeing him try to summon them.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you mate, the ingredients react badly to magic."

Freezing in place, Ron nodded and put away his wand, shooting Harry a grateful look which he promptly ignored. Maybe a part of him did want to see Ron succeed for himself, rather than go down a path of no return.

Despite the complexity of the Potion, they worked together swiftly and silently. With all those years of rivalry, Harry didn't think this day would be possible. In truth, he was glad to see it. They were one of the first to come to the resting period, only having to wait an hour as Draco's cauldron was of the best quality, both having agreed on using it together. He took a moment to look around, watching Professor Snape swoop over to a pair the other side of the classroom, presumably about to make a mistake. However, while his back was turned, Harry spotted something else.

"Fuck..."

Ron, with little to no subtlety, had thrown something into the cauldron in front, seemingly without the two students noticing as both for that moment had left it unattended. Even with the correct ingredients, it could go wrong but something that doesn't belong at all?
Harry was off, nimbly darting between the tables and ensuring not to knock any student, though his sudden movement had attracted the attention of most of the class. Wand outstretched he pointed it at the cauldron, beginning to bubble over to the duo's confusion.

"Protego Maxima!"

A strong, silver-domed shield covered the cauldron just in time. Even with it muffling some sound, the students nearby had to cover their ears from the force of the explosion, though contained. Cauldrons were designed to withstand many a thing going wrong but with this, the copper itself burst into metal shards. Harry ensured the shield didn't waver as, without it, it could have easily covered a widespread area. Once he deemed it safe he slowly released the shield, swallowing audibly as the liquid began to eat away at the table beneath it, faint steam coming off as it sizzled.

The two students slowly backed away, a Slytherin girl he didn't know suddenly bursting into tears.

Harry could feel the eyes of everyone on him, others not far behind in finishing part of the first stage to brew Polyjuice. A wave of a wand not his own cleared the desk, restoring it to pristine condition.

He swore he blinked and missed Snape's approach, making a beeline for Ron who turned the colour of curdled milk when faced with the Professor's rage.

"Mr Weasley. If there are any functioning brain cells within your head, care to enlighten me on just what I explicitly told the class?"

Though it was conveyed as a calm, casual question, the underlining threat of answer immediately was understood by all present, hand clenching around his wand a little more tightly than usual.

Gaping like a fish out of water, Professor Snape's patience wore thin. Ron didn't exactly help himself either, as Harry casually inched away from an explosion of a different kind.

Giving a shrug, Ron muttered, looking at his feet. "No idea."

"No idea, what?" Harry could practically see the vein in his temple throbbing.
"No idea, Sir."

Attitude dripped from his tone of voice. Harry was half tempted to ask for Popcorn. Watching Ron bury himself in the shit always guaranteed to be entertaining.

"Not to be foolish, Weasley! 30 points from Gryffindor. Are simple instructions beyond your understanding? If not for Potter, your moment of idiocy would have severely injured both a member of mine and your own house!"

Snapping, Professor Snape let his caustic tongue loose, each word as sharp as the crack of a whip, Ron shrinking visibly. Returning to his deadly calm, his glare pinned him in place.

"Every night, from Monday until Friday, the detentions that you already attend with me, will be extended by an hour."

The class held their breath collectively. By now the rumor of Ron's detentions had spread like wildfire, what with his previous outburst to earn all those in the first place. By now, they knew not to worsen the situation and to accept the punishment silently.

Well, all except for Ron.

"Piss off, I'm not doing that!"

More than one student gasped, however, most were like Harry and eagerly waiting for the end result.

"Get. Out. I refuse to have you in this class any longer. Do not return." When Ron didn't move, the class collectively jumped as he slammed his hands down on the table. Thankfully the cauldron in question was so heavy, that the slight ripple across the surface of the Polyjuice didn't affect anything.

"NOW!" Shout starling Ron into action, Professor Snape moved away.

"Report to your Head of House. Potter, ensure that he doesn't stray." Here he sneered, turning away
and not sparing Ron another glance.

The class breathing out as one Harry glanced over at Draco, giving him a small nod. He should be back before the hour was up, to continue.

As Harry left with Ron, his irritations levels were high. He hadn't really exploded as such, the angriest he'd been was in defence of Luna. But he'd crossed a line, more than once.

"The greasy git reacted over nothing there! Don't think it was fair I got more added onto my detentions and points taken away for that. Do you?"

The fact that Ron was made a Prefect to keep tabs on him on top of the fact that he didn't give a shit about anyone but himself, caused something in him to calmly crumble. Not even snap, as that what had happened with the Dursleys.

"Yeah, I do."

Fully expecting Harry to agree with him Ron stopped walking, turning to him in shock. "Seriously?"

"Did you not listen to him? Someone from our own house could have been injured!" Harry didn't know how to put across his point either, as Ron could be ridiculously stubborn. The telltale red tinge to his face had surfaced with Professor Snape's words but only deepened with Harry's own.

"So what? He was paired with a Slytherin and looked like he enjoyed it as well. It's not like we haven't chucked something into cauldrons before!"

"That was first year! And even when our cauldron was affected the results were never enough to injure us, just mess up the process of the brew. No one had done that for years or even dared to. You want to be an auror right?"

At Ron's annoyed nod, he continued.
"You need Potions for that and you've just been kicked out. You think Snape's going to let you back after that? You need to grow up, fast."

Harry had told him straight but by now, Ron was furious. Harry equally so though his own anger he could usually reign in. It was just as well the corridor was deserted. He didn't want any witnesses to two Prefects arguing.

"Fuck off! Who are you, my mum?"

That was it. He'd had enough. With lightning quick reflexes Harry grabbed the front of Ron's robes and with his other arm, he drew it back, only to punch hard. Feeling bone crack beneath the force of his fist, a strange kind of satisfaction filled him.

"No, I'm not. But for some strange reason, I'm your friend. You've only got one life and you're determined to waste it all!"

Blood flowing freely Ron cried out, hastily dabbing it with his sleeve and apparently, forgetting he was a wizard and could magically heal a nosebleed. He tried to talk, but it didn't come out very clear. He simply settled for glaring instead, which Harry promptly ignored.

It was true too. Somewhere deep down he did consider Ron a friend still, even if it was built on lies. But after today, he decided he would sever it for good. He didn't let his mind linger on that too much, as they continued to Professor McGonagall's office.

But, despite this, Harry couldn't help but echo the words once spoken by Hermione.

That felt good.'

Chapter End Notes

...felt good to write too xD
Blurred Lines

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore crossed a line. But this was one line Harry thought wouldn’t be touched at all.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Draco can joke, Harry prevented a disaster and then after, punched Ron in the face.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Harry's amusement, after he’d explained why they were here Professor McGonagall didn't make him leave. After fixing Ron's nose and giving Harry a stern but knowing glance, she released the full force of her ire. They had to strain their ears a small bit, her accent hard to pick up on as they'd rarely witnessed her truly angry.

"A've had enough o' you, Mr Weasley. Ah dinnae care if your role of Prefect was th' headmaster's choice. Ah refuse tae have such an immature, irresponsible wee laddie representing this school and setting a bad example fur th' other students!"

And with that, she'd taken away Ron's Prefect badge, stating that she wouldn't allow Gryffindor house to be disgraced by such behaviour and on top of the detentions he already had with Professor Snape, she'd scheduled one with her for every Saturday which would only end when she said so. He didn't envy Ron at that moment, but there was one thing he was pleased about.

After having asked Harry for his opinion, Neville was now the new Gryffindor Prefect. Glares from both sides quelled Ron's protests and as Harry left Ron in her office, he'd returned and handed Neville Ron's badge. There wasn't a single snide comment from Professor Snape as everyone overheard Harry. Coming from him that was the closest to approval anyone could get.

The rest of the lesson passed by uneventfully, aside from the two students thanking Harry for his quick thinking and unknown to all in the class, the Professor had decided to award five points to Gryffindor. He had taken more than he'd given and it would be a special moment indeed if he was able to go a day without removing points from that particular house.
Even with everything that had happened this morning, the bad feeling hasn't dissipated any. In fact, as they arrived at the Great Hall for Supper in the evening after classes had finished, it had only grown stronger. He was almost tempted to ask his friends to skip eating there and go to the Room of Requirement a bit earlier, as Hermione had something to tell them. Though he had learned not to ignore his instincts, he doubted he could avoid whatever it was and even if he did, he wanted the feeling gone.

Hiding his nervousness skilfully he entered with the rest of his friends, taking their usual seat. As soon as he walked in, he could tell something was wrong. He knew, even without looking at the head table, that Dumbledore was back, though Alistair wasn't yet. The air seemed almost stifling and yet, everyone was laughing and joking as usual. It was enough to put him on edge and quietly, he spoke to Hermione who sat opposite the other side of the table.

"Hey, is Dumbledore looking at me?"

Apparently, he was unable to fully hide his nervousness. For once Hermione wasn't reading but removing one of her books she pretended to, surreptitiously glancing over the top of it for a few brief seconds and giving him a small nod.

He thought so. The feeling of holes being glared into the back of his head was strong. He tried to push the feeling away, to at least drink something. All he had to do was not look him in the eye, like always. But then, he had a thought. What was to stop Dumbledore from entering his mind now? Even if he wasn't looking at him and a fair distance away, a master probably could, if they wanted the information badly enough.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind, he stiffened. At first, he thought it was simple paranoia that within his mind there was a small disturbance. But when it wasn't deterred by the idle and non-threatening memories he used in defence, it wasn't paranoia at all.

Dumbledore was in his head.

He placed notice me not and silencing charms around himself, allowing his friends to converse and forget he was there for the moment. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention. Trying not to panic or let his heartbeat distract him Harry employed all that he knew to protect whatever memories he was after. The sensation grew uncomfortable and he wanted him out. But he didn't know how to. It was a fluke with Snape and Dumbledore knew far more.

Then, he noticed his memory of finding Solomon and the prisoners seemed more prominent than before. He remembered that the golems would fade with time and then, it all made sense.
Dumbledore must have gone to where the prisoners are and found them missing. Then for some reason, he suspected Harry knew. Of course, he did, but he wasn't about to let him find out.

He tried to casually push this memory away, much like a boat on the sea. His plan didn't work and the pressure only increased. It must have continued for at least another minute and Harry wondered when it would stop.

Then, a searing pain assaulted him. He was glad for the charms now as the sheer brute force showed made Snape's own pale in comparison. Gritting his teeth and holding his head in both hands Harry desperately tried to keep Dumbledore at bay. The more he fought, the worse the pain became. He considered himself to have a high pain tolerance but this was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Whimpers threatened to leave his lips as with it, the threads of his defences began to crumble and alongside this, blood flowed freely from his nose. He had to get out, now.

He'd closed his eyes so tightly that upon opening them, his vision was blurry for a second. Or was that because his eyesight was being affected too? He didn't know but staggering to his feet, it also wasn't his imagination that hearing had become more difficult. Shakily raising a hand to his ear, he came away with blood.

Harry thought he was going to pass out but before the pressure built, even more, a solid, sturdy wall encased his mind, not of his own creation. Though the threat had left the pain remained and with it, his defences had been completely destroyed, memories swirling within his head of which he had no control over. Alistair could be speaking to him for all that Harry knew and yet, he couldn't think to communicate at all. More than once he nearly tripped, praying to whatever deity there may or may not be that after all this, Dumbledore hadn't managed to find anything.

Every step was agonising as if it shook the contents of his head, a snowglobe in the child's grasp. The mountain holding Lume's home crumbled to nothingness, even as the realm of Thanatos burned with the raging fires of a storm, lightning crackling over the bruised sky even as souls quickly vacated the area. The lines were blurred, no clear distinction between his memories or his Animagi's meditation spots. It was all a broken mess.

Harry made it to just outside of the doors before he could go no further. Falling to his knees he barely registered the discomfort of that over everything else. He hadn't managed to eat anything so only bile left his lips and spattered the floor beneath. He didn't know what hurt more. There was no water and yet, the feeling of drowning was unmistakable. Lying on his side he curled into a ball, retreating into old habits ingrained into him from a young age, whenever something hurt too much. And when it hurt, no one came to help.

However, this was in the past and vaguely, Harry could hear someone approaching, but nothing beyond muffled sounds. Though his eyes were shut, the overpowering scent of bile disappeared even
as he was gently coaxed out of the tight ball. He couldn't understand a thing and only had guesses as to who was there. Relieved he tried to formulate words, hoping that they would make sense.

"D-Dumbledore, my head."

And before he could say another word, unconsciousness claimed him.

Since taking the job as Professor, Alistair had rarely left Hogwarts. In fact, Harry's chocolates were the first time he'd done so and it was more than worth it to see the wonderful smile in response to this. A lot had happened since then, namely, the discovery of his brother and their brethren, locked away. Today's visit was to check up on everyone and have some much-needed catch-up time with Solomon.

Many felt confident enough to return to some semblance of normalcy, Alistair making the arrangements so they had somewhere safe to live, with enough protections to make those of Gringotts pale in comparison. He was responsible for everyone's wellbeing and he refused to idly sit by when men like Dumbledore were at large. He didn't charge for the protections as each barely made a dent in his magical core. The only thing that he required of them was to spread the word to friends and family of their own, so that he may offer their homes the same.

He had checked in with everyone, all except for Jacob. Unlike most, he had been here before, though that was many years ago now. He could detect every presence in the castle though Jacob was a little harder, with no magical core.

Eventually, Alistair arrived outside. This particular area was barren of anything, all except markings in the ground which suggested that something was once there, but no longer. When younger, he had the vague memory of an archway standing here. The base stone was beneath the foundations of the castle and held all the names of the dead. It was lightly enchanted so as not to disrupt nature, but enough so that it was sufficiently protected from those who would wish to do harm and the ability to infinitely add names. At least, after all this, there was no need to add Jacob's name.

The archway that was once here, held the souls of Vampires. Alistair didn't know if souls naturally gravitated to where it was now, however he'd like to return it to its proper place if he should find out what happened to it.
Jacob didn't speak, simply sitting on the grass below and drinking in the colour of the sky. Everything in his senses screamed freedom and yet, he still felt bound in some way. His family meant everything to him but Akari and their child were no more. It only made him more determined to protect Eduard from now on.

Akari’s ashes had scattered upon the breeze and he hoped that at least, she could meet his sister, mother and father. Taking a shaky breath in, he unconsciously pulled his son closer, blue eyes a mirror of his own regarding him in curiosity.

"Dad?"

"It's alright." Shaking his head softly, a hand brushed over Eduard's curls. What he regretted the most, was his son suffering in a similar manner to how he had. He was mature for his age, inquisitiveness and creativity only matched by his quiet yet friendly personality. He had yet to see Alistair but through no suggestion of his own, Eduard had fashioned a thank you card for both Alistair and Harry, Jacob helping with spelling where needed. Eduard was insistent on giving it to the young man himself and even now, he wished adults could be as selfless as children. He knew Alistair was here today so both of them would have the chance to give thanks.

Alistair was reluctant to disturb the calm quiet between them, knowing that those moments during their imprisonment hadn’t existed. However, the choice was taken from him as Eduard curiously turned his head around. Seeing who it was he rose to his feet, Jacob doing the same shortly after as Eduard ran over to him. Taking something from his pocket he fidgeted with it for a few seconds, offering it over.

"Hi Mr L-Lothaire, this is for you." He stumbled over the name, giving a nervous laugh.

Sending a gentle smile his way to put him at ease Alistair accepted the envelope, seeing his name written in Eduard's best handwriting. Carefully opening it he held an A5 sized card in his hand. Most of it was taken up by bold, colourful letters forming the words thank you, with spaces in between occupied by shakily drawn stars. He could tell he’d tried his best with this and only wished a select few of his students could take a leaf out of his book. His heart lightened further upon reading the words inside.
Mr Lothaire,

Thanks for helping me and dad, you've got a big house! Dad said it's a castle but you still live in it like a house, so it's a big stone house. I still hurt from the bad men but you helped stop it. You're the bestest person ever and I wanna be like you when I'm older.

Ed

Alistair became lost in thought for a moment, touched by the sweet gesture. He hadn't expected this at all but glanced up, seeing Eduard staring at him.

"Do you like it?" He asked, worried in case the answer would be no.

Crouching to his level Alistair reached out, to softly pat his head.

"It is a wonderful card, Mr Morganti. Your penmanship puts some of my students to shame. Thank you very much, I will treasure it."

He let all the warmth that he could leak into his voice, on top of carefully sliding the card back into its envelope, rather than throwing it away. Seeing this his eyes lit up, appreciative of the care shown.

"I'm happy you like it. And you can call me Ed! I mean, if you want.." He averted his eyes, a little bashful.

Giving a small chuckle at how adorable he was, Alistair nodded.

"I will call you Ed. In exchange, you may call me Al, if you wish."
He'd never been addressed by a shortened version of his name before and he was always open to new experiences. He certainly appreciated politeness and respect, but only where needed. He wanted Eduard or Ed, as Alistair would now call him, to feel comfortable for however long they chose to stay here.

Giving a happy smile he turned to Jacob, raising his hand and obliging, he gave his son a high five. Turning back to Alistair, he asked one other question.

"Will Harry Potter come here? I've gotta thank him too."

It didn't take much thought on Alistair's part.

"Yes. I am not sure when, but he will return."

Seeming satisfied with that answer he turned to Jacob, who softly muttered something. Once he'd finished Eduard gave a brief wave, running off after a quick, "Bye Al!"

Melodic laughter left Alistair's lips, as both watched him leave. Now that he was alone with Jacob, he could begin a discussion not meant for a child's ears. He was well versed with conversation and yet, he found this one to be particularly difficult.

"How are you feeling?" He broached the topic carefully, realising that at the core it was an idiotic question.

Jacob didn't react as if it was, giving him a strained smile with an expression more open than when his son was present. He managed to speak, though each word caused him difficulty.

"Like the world has ended yet somehow, I still live." Though he hadn't properly spoken to Alistair since he was a child, he trusted him and saw no reason to hide his true thoughts.

At those words, Alistair furrowed his brows sadly. He could relate, having felt this way first when his parents died and then after, with Solomon missing. Silently he conjured a bench, inviting Jacob to take a seat and once he did so, sat beside him.
"Though it will not bring those you lost to The Guild of Light back, the time will come where each will pay for their actions. This to you, I swear."

As if to seal his promise Alistair reached out, firmly shaking Jacob's hand.

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

There was silence between them for a short while until Jacob spoke once more, tone clouded. Alistair listened seriously all the while, even if this was one of the only forms of support he could give.

"I'd told Akari of you, Solomon and the adventures we once had. She hoped she'd meet you one day, my daughter, too."

Jacob sighed, shaky breath clouding in the slightly chilled air. "I'm waiting for the day where I can live my life in peace, but I don't think that will happen for me. Those happy years building a family of my own, I couldn't have asked for anything better. And then-"

He broke off, trembles wracking his frame.

"Her name was Mila, my miracle. They killed my wife and never gave my child a chance to live and why? Because we're FUCKING DIFFERENT!"

He cried out, anguish ringing through the sky as Alistair's now beating heart clenched.

"Something we can't help and yet, this..." Trembles only increasing, Alistair could tell he was trying to hold back. He didn't want him to carry this alone, however. Placing a careful hand on his shoulder, he kept his voice soft.

"Please, don't hold back. I have known you since you were a child and though you are older and wiser, you are still the Jacob I know."

He had precious few people to rely on as the ones he had, they'd been taken away from him. He was terrified the same would happen to his son and even Alistair and Solomon who he also saw as
family. He had to be strong all this time, for many reasons. His family, himself and so others wouldn't exploit potential weaknesses. But he'd taken on so much alone and everyone had their limit. With all that had happened, he'd reached it.

"Mila, Akari.."

Those names leaving broken lips, his tears were silent and yet with each drop, years of torment and torture left. Every breath taken was enough to nearly hurt.

Hand still on his shoulder Alistair moved it, only to gently pull Jacob against him. Listening to him brought forth memories of his own and though he was an adult, Alistair still saw a fraction of the child that he used to be. Those who he knew had been directly or indirectly impacted by Dumbledore and his guild, the damage was widespread. He didn't say a word, allowing him to air his sorrows and knowing words at this point wouldn't be heard.

"Thanks." Dark hair hiding his features Jacob moved away after a short while had passed. Not wanting to further embarrass him Alistair simply acknowledged the thanks with an incline of his head.

Changing the subject, they hit upon various different topics and with it, Jacob's unique connection to werewolves. If the time should come when all sides clash, the chances of their assistance would be greater. The time flowed as water did in cupped hands, to the point where he realised the day was getting later.

"I shall have to take my leave I'm afraid." Glancing at the sky and giving an apologetic smile, Alistair rose to his feet. Remaining seated, Jacob offered a genuine smile, though sadness tinged it some.

"Of course. Thanks for everything."

With a promise to speak further at a later date, Alistair headed for where he knew his brother would be, even without a detection aid.

With a gentle push, the large ornate doors leading to the library opened. The memory of reading to
Harry surfaced in his mind, a smile naturally upturning his lips. They'd read in precisely the same spot he used to with Solomon all those years ago.

Though his brother was returned to him, he would never be quite the same. This was something he'd come to understand even when seeing him again for the first time in 74 years. He would love and support him no matter what, he was the most important person in his life though steadily, Harry was becoming just as important.

Even now, seeing Solomon, as he suspected, reading in the usual spot he wasn't completely unaware of the world around him, unlike before. Every so often, he'd glance up and around the room. During one such glance, he spotted Alistair, marking his place and resting the book aside. Standing up he came over, with a glimmer of warmth in his silver gaze. His hair remained white with only a single part of his fringe black, signs of the Phoenix Blood that was in his system before.

"Welcome home."

Home. To Alistair, it really did feel like it once again and even now, he could hardly believe Solomon was in front of him again and as he'd always done, reached out and pulled him close to his chest. His heart squeezed near painfully as Solomon stiffened, so reminiscent of how Harry used to be but then, returned it. Alistair couldn't see his expression, however, as a flicker of surprise crossed it. After a short while, he pulled away, giving a mischievous grin as the very tip of his fangs showed.

"I realize that our stock of Decanted Dragon's Blood is for a special occasion but I believe it is an appropriate time, yes?"

Swirling the glass in a firm grip, Alistair sat across from Solomon in his office, enjoying the familiarity of the situation and the comfortable silence. Taking a careful sip he watched Solomon, who was unable to hide the bewilderment and curiosity in his expression.

"I noticed as soon as you came to the Library, but how is it that your heart came to beat? That should be impossible. And you are warm..."

Strangely enough, Alistair hadn't forgotten about the addition to his body, but he'd forgotten about Solomon finding out. They shared nearly everything, though both kept one or two things from the other. One of those things was Alistair's discomfort that he had lacked warmth and a heartbeat.
It took a moment for Alistair to explain but once he did, Solomon's eyes widened briefly.

"With the damage caused by Dumbledore's Phoenix, I did find it intriguing that his blood could heal me so quickly, even with the addition of Phoenix Tears. But to create something that you were born without is a miracle. But, why did it happen to begin with?"

In truth, he genuinely couldn't predict Solomon's reaction as unfamiliar feelings of nervousness began to rise.

"I believe that it responded to my wish. I have always experienced a certain.. discomfort when faced with the knowledge that I am unable to change what I was born without."

It didn't take long for Solomon to catch on. "Your still heart and lack of warmth were mismatched with how you are as a person, you mean?"

Solomon looked confused saying this but even so, Alistair agreed.

"Yes. I will always be proud of who I am, who we are. But there was always the feeling of missing out on something truly remarkable."

Alistair waited, mind unable to help but conjure the worst possible scenario. Before it could, Solomon blew his expectations out of the water.

"It is strange, but if this is something that brings you happiness, I am happy for you too." He was serious and calm with his response, the opposite to Alistair for that moment.

He couldn't speak at first, choosing to drink more from his glass and within that time, formulate a response.

"You are not repulsed at all?" As confident as he was, that part of him was an insecurity.

"No. You are my brother and I love you, no matter the different body chemistry we now have."
Solomon rarely, if ever openly expressed his feelings, usually keeping to himself and being the silent supporter. The fact that he had chosen to now, meant more than he could adequately express. They shared a moment of understanding, Alistair’s mind at ease.

Solomon expressed curiosity over Alistair being a Professor at Hogwarts and how that came to be. He had only seen Dumbledore's side of things but he found himself unsurprised that Harry was tied right into the thick of it.

"How do you find teaching to be?" Without realising they had drained their glass dry and wordlessly, Alistair poured a refill. His blood collection was extensive and he never took without consent. Somehow the blood was far more satisfying when both were happy. One of the differences between his father and both of them, in that sense. He was careful and didn't kill unless necessary, but he showed no concern for consent or not. Some were willing to part with a little and others hostile and some of the time, from a particular species that had died recently, where the blood was still fresh. Neither of them needed much to survive. In fact, Alistair treated his blood collection much like his collection of alcohol.

Alistair thought for a moment, a spark of passion in his gaze as the enthusiasm shone across.

"It is rewarding. I have underestimated the younger generation and many hold wonderful potential. Though there are some, where this is not the case. One particular student has a terrible temper and has caused trouble on numerous occasions. I usually prefer not to think ill of another but it is a blessing that they are not the majority of the human race as a whole, or they would surely become extinct."

He didn't mention names, though Ronald Weasley's face flashed vividly across his mind.

"It seems that you have found your calling," Solomon replied, a glint of amusement in his gaze at the description of whoever this student was.

"My calling?"

"I have never seen you this passionate about any of the professions you have tried before now."

That may be true. Solomon had a different perspective and would see whatever Alistair couldn't. He continued to ask questions and was all too happy to answer, more content and absorbed in
conversation than he'd been in years. It was as he happened to glance down at his wrist, that problems occurred. The colour of the bracelet he wore, the gems were a solid black, with flecks of blue. Over the times he had noted the colour and conversed with Harry, he had a mental chart of the colours according to emotions and he knew this was serious. Trying to talk to Harry he was alarmed when not only was he blocked off, but another presence seemed to be there.

The barrier was strong, but Alistair was far stronger. Breaking through it it was greeted with a raging storm, flashed of areas familiar to him through Harry's description, torn to shreds. This was Harry's mindscape and he realised that someone was attacking it. He had a suspicion of just who that was and without hesitation, he erected a barrier, sensing the intruder had been reflected successfully.

'Harry?'

When he received no response, that was when he took action. Within that moment Solomon had noticed that something was wrong and giving him an apologetic glance, Alistair came to stand.

"I will explain later. Something of utmost urgency has arisen."

Giving a brief nod Solomon's eyes followed Alistair, even as he silently faded away, to return to Hogwarts. Seeing their family bracelet, he came to his own conclusions about just what this problem was.

Alistair was thankful that his method of transportation couldn't be tracked, as not many vampires knew of or could use this ability, never mind humans. Knowing the castle well enough he closed his eyes, tracking the familiar feeling of Harry's magic. Every student left a trace wherever they went within the school and yet, Harry's remained for far longer. Taking a quick note of the time Alistair's best bet was the Great Hall. Appearing just outside of it, the heart which had only just begun beating for the first time, nearly stopped again as he looked on the floor a short distance away.

Curled into a ball on his side lay Harry, blood trickling from his nose and ears, a small puddle of bile coating the floor beneath. With a wave of his hand, the bile and blood vanished, however, he continued to bleed. Seeing this he ran up to him, crouching down and gently coaxing him out of the tight ball he'd created.

"Harry, what happened?" He tried to communicate, panic colouring the tone of his voice and when
he heard Harry's answer before falling unconscious, he had the urge to tear Dumbledore limb from
limb. Despite his anger, he was far more worried for Harry.

Battling with the strange feeling of a rapidly increasing heartbeat Alistair easily lifted Harry into his
arms, cradling him close. Though he knew Madam Pomfrey was a skilled Mediwitch, there was
nothing blood of his own couldn't do for the time being. He trusted no one else around Harry for
now and once again disappeared, to reappear outside the Room of Requirement. Being careful to not
jostle him soothing noises left his lips, in an attempt to calm Harry who even in unconsciousness,
made sounds of distress.

After pacing the door was revealed and on the inside, was a replica of his bedroom. Carefully laying
him down Alistair nicked a finger, letting the blood well to a single drop on the tip. Sitting on the
side of the bed he leaned over, sliding his finger between Harry's lips and ensuring his tongue
touched it. Instantly the bleeding stopped and once more, he cleared away the traces of blood.

Lying on his side, Alistair intertwined his hand with Harry's, in an effort to ease whatever troubles he
faced now, expression scrunched with pain. How long had he been like this? He was a skilled
wizard for his age but not even an adult man could protect their mind against someone with
Dumbledore's experience. He hadn't noticed until it was nearly too late. Guilt welling up inside
Alistair released a shaky breath, larger body protectively surrounding Harry's own. Though he
probably couldn't hear him he spoke quietly, brokenly.

"I am here now. He will not hurt you anymore."

That was all he managed and for the second time in many years, Alistair cried. No doubt the pain he
was feeling right now wasn't even a fraction of Harry's and yet, he would rather face the sun when
he was a child than the helplessness of now. So many times Harry had been hurt and while he was
away, it happened again. He wanted Harry to be happy and be the one to put a smile on his face and
most of all, he didn't want to lose him to the actions of a madman. Tears escaping from beneath his
lashes, he let the warmth of his magic touch Harry's own, doing his best to be of support and not
leaving his side for a moment. Then, a voice rang throughout his mind.

'What is it?'

No doubt Solomon could detect his distress.

'Dumbledore attacked his mind, Harry is unconscious. He was bleeding from the nose and ears, but
I have taken care of that.'
'.That obnoxious, twisted goat. Wait here, I will come.'

Alistair couldn't help but be wary of this and sensing as much, Solomon continued.

'If the mind is damaged, I will be able to assist. Consider this a favour returned, for finding and healing me.'

Agreeing Alistair waited and a few moments later, Solomon appeared. He looked around curiously.

"This is home. It serves no reminder to below the castle so I will be fine."

And then, he looked at Alistair for the first time. "I have rarely seen you shed a tear. You must care for him, deeply."

Alistair could only nod in response. "If I had arrived sooner, then perhaps he would not be in such pain."

He held Harry's hand a little tighter and taking note of this, Solomon frowned. "Harry would not want you to blame yourself. I am sure he didn't expect Dumbledore to go this far, either. This was not a predictable situation."

Solomon's straight logic helped to right Alistair a little, who composed himself but didn't move an inch away. But as soon as Solomon drew close to the bed, he stopped.

"Calm yourself, I am not a threat."

Unconsciously Alistair's eyes had flashed red in warning and remembering just who it was, quickly controlled himself.

"I apologise. I am feeling out of my element at the moment."
Solomon waved away his apology, placing a cool hand on Harry's forehead. "No need for apologies. He must be a special human, for a reaction such as that."

Not able to deny his words Alistair watched intently from Harry's side and knowing for certain that between them, he would receive the help needed.

The room grew a margin more threatening, Solomon's magic quietly crackling with anger.

"His mindscape is severely damaged and all memories locked away or organised are now on the loose. He is trapped within them and will need assistance to leave. I will keep his mind stable and repair the damage accessible. Will you bring him back?"

There was only one answer and without a drop of hesitation.

"Yes."

Determination and the desire to help shining within his sunset eyes, Solomon began to repair what he could, while Alistair ventured into Harry's mind.

Watching Harry leave, Dumbledore narrowed his eyes. Caught in the merriment of food, drink and conversation, no one noticed that his usual grandfatherly twinkle was gone and in its place was the cold, hard truth. Blue eyes glinting without a shred of remorse, he wondered when the boy had gotten so good at Occlumency. That wasn't part of his plan. He knew that Severus would enact revenge on the son of James Potter by attacking his mind and as expected, left Harry open and vulnerable. He wanted Harry to see these visions because then and only then, he would be close to his destiny.

Harry was nothing more than a useful tool, a convenience. He suspected that he wasn't what he seemed and remained unconcerned that his schoolwork had taken a turn for the better, suspecting Hermione Granger's involvement. There was something else but he had no proof. He had checked and his power levels remained the same. The Vampires had gone and he suspected Harry and yet, found nothing within his mind relating to this and before he could dig deeper, something pushed him out. He would keep a close eye on him as, despite his little outburst, he doubted a boy surrounded by the light side and with him as a guide, could go dark.
With the faint hope that Harry would see another vision through the damage done to his mind, Dumbledore slipped a lemon drop between his lips, even as the cheerful mask crafted for manipulation, returned once more.

Chapter End Notes

I noticed I have a habit of dumping a chapter of feels out of nowhere. It keeps things interesting? *Sweat drop*
Chapter Summary

Harry is trapped within his own mind, in a sea of memories where the majority of them, he'd simply locked away. The brothers unite to help free him.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: 99 problems and Dumbledore is all of them.

There is child abuse and suicidal themes in this chapter.

The brief chaos that Alistair had experienced previously, when in Harry's mind before was still present but even now, little by little, he could feel some of the harshness fade. The worlds were still not clearly defined and rather than separate areas for Harry's animagi, everything had blended into one. A part of the mountain had broken, firmly lodging itself within the cracked ground of the soul realm. A storm brewed and wind battered vigorously against him. Anyone else wouldn't be able to navigate in such conditions but different from the rest, he was able to.

Within Harry's mind, it had become real. When viewing memories or mindscapes, the ability to interact was non-existent. The only thing possible was to watch how everything unfolded. But instead, it was as though he'd travelled to this world himself. He was able to place a hand on the ground and feel the parched, dry earth for himself, catch the scent and taste of decay and barely heard his own thoughts over the world crumbling to ruin.

Rather than souls, memories had taken their place. They had nowhere to go, simply whizzing around frantically. Everything seemed to be here, the good and the bad. But there had to be a starting point. It could have been seconds, minutes or hours, there was no way to tell the passing of time.

All of a sudden the wind changed direction, forcefully blowing memories away all except for one, trapped beneath debris. Crouching down and brushing it away Alistair saw flashes of the contents and wondered if this one memory remained by chance, or if it was somehow intentional on Harry's part. He wasn't an expert on the mind by any means, that area was Solomon's, but he knew enough. With all of them freed, the most prominent ones would be changes in his life, that shaped him into
who he was. Aware of Harry's past, he had the feeling that each memory would signify nothing but suffering. Though he had no wish to see him in pain, he would rather be aware of it that remain ignorant. That way, he would know how to help best. With that firmly in mind, Alistair touched the memory and instantly, his surroundings changed.

The first thought that popped into his mind from just once glance was the fact that this was a house, not a home. It didn't look lived in but unnaturally clean and from Harry's description, this was The Dursley residence.

The last time he'd only seen the bathroom but this time, was the cupboard under the stairs and again, the memory presented itself to be real. Just in case, Alistair used magic to ensure he remained hidden. Not a moment too soon as with a bang, the door at the end of the hall opened and storming through, was Vernon Dursley, a complete opposite to his wife. Facial colour a dangerous shade of purple his beady eyes narrowed, and lifted by his arm and into the air, was Harry. He looked no more than five years old, with clothes not fit to clean the floors and taped glasses perched askew on his nose, dirt covering a fair amount of skin available. Vernon physically shook him and though it must have pulled at his arm socket, he didn't say a word. Spittle flecked across the small boy's face accompanied by the man's rage.

"BOY! WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU? NO FREAKISHNESS IN THE HOUSE!"

Harry's voice was meek and quiet, so opposite to what Alistair was used to hearing.

"I-I didn't mean to Uncle, it just happened-"

SLAP!

With his free hand, Vernon swung, striking Harry hard across the face, knocking his glasses off completely. With a sneer, Vernon crushed them beneath his feet and openly laughed at Harry's cry of pain.

"You should have died with your no good parents, in hell where they belong."
Opening the cupboard door he threw Harry inside, closing and locking the door.

"Don't even think about leaving that cupboard for one minute with your freaky powers. Or you'll regret the day you were born."

With that warning, Vernon left the house and after a few moments, Petunia and Dudley followed behind.

It took everything within him to not intervene at that moment, not knowing the nature of this or if somehow, it had developed into more than just a memory. Even now he didn't quite understand but though he wouldn't be able to leave the boundaries of the area, the fact that more than one of his senses was available here suggested to him that something could be altered. Not changed completely as only Time Turners would accomplish such a thing, but something a little different. He had seen the many ways time travel had gone wrong and he wasn't foolish enough to follow those footsteps.

Approaching the cupboard door he touched it, feeling solid wood beneath his palm. Though Vernon had the key Alistair had magic and after a moment, it opened once again. With Harry's back faced to him, he became visible again, newly beating heart stopping for a moment at his soft sniffles. Upon closer inspection and to his own alarm, it wasn't dirt but bruises. the bedding couldn't be classed as such, a threadbare, stained mattress, a flat pillow and ratty covering. How could they do this to a child? He couldn't even begin to fathom their cruelty but kept his anger in check, firmly locking and burying it away. His wrath would solely go to Dumbledore. Even from here Alistair could tell he was sick. What with he didn't know but his core fluctuated wildly, in an effort to heal the damage done. Alistair knew that in part, this was the reason why Harry's was so large for his age.

Kneeling on the floor, Alistair kept his voice soothing and gentle. Interacting with objects successfully was one thing, but he was unsure if it would apply to people as well.

"Harry?"

Though it was dim inside the cupboard he could make out the slight form flinching badly. However, once he managed to turn on his side and look over, several emotions almost too quick to catch flickered in his eyes. However, what left his lips wasn't what Alistair expected.

"Are you an Angel?" He didn't ask how Alistair knew his name, no doubt seeing the childish scrawl of it, paper taped to the inside of his room.
The tone of his voice was tinged with a mixture of curiosity and hope. For a moment, Alistair found himself at a loss for how best to respond. In the end, he settled for a question of his own.

"What is it that makes you think so?"

Whimpering from the struggle he attempted to sit up but in the end, remained slumped on the floor. Eyes that had seen too much caught his own, a flicker of innocence within them remaining even still.

"Angels come when it's time to leave," He tilted his head up to the ceiling for emphasis.

Harry thought he was going to die? The number of times he could curse those who had wronged would total to an infinite amount, as he shook his head.

"I am not an Angel."

"Oh."

Harry looked crestfallen for a moment, but then his eyes lit up as he made a suggestion.

"Will you kill me?"

Alistair froze, eyes widening. Seeing his expression Harry elaborated.

"I can see my family again. Uncle Vernon, Aunt 'Tunia and Duddy don't want me but maybe Mummy and Daddy do."

It didn't take long for Alistair to answer, though he was unable to prevent his shock.

"I will not do that."

Lowering his head in defeat, Harry was on the verge of tears. "Why? No one will miss me if I go."
He kept his composure even if within, the urge to enact vengeance was near overwhelming. Still keeping his voice calm, he tried to aid him, if only a little.

"You are only a child and have not yet experienced what else there is in life. It will get better, this I promise you."

Then, Alistair held out a pinky finger. Seeing this Harry tilted his head and hesitantly, wrapped his own around it. Promise sealed Harry glanced up at him. Seeing the warmth in his eyes that he was so unused to from his own family, unshed tears swam in his eyes which he blinked away, furiously. Slowly and carefully, so as not to startle him, Alistair's hand touched the top of his head, fingertips lightly running through the matted strands.

"If you wish to cry, please don't hold back."

Harry shook his head furiously, about to pinch his own arm harshly for something to focus on other than his emotion, until Alistair's other hand blocked him.

"Freaks can't cry. Uncle said so."

"I am not your Uncle, so you may with me."

Harry looked up again and seeing that Alistair's expression hadn't changed, all he whispered was a weak ok, dry sobs escaping his throat as he tried to curl into a ball. He didn't rush his next actions and Harry was able to see him during the process. He stiffened, squeezing his eyes shut but the pain didn't come. Just an all-encompassing warmth, as he was lifted into the circle of Alistair's arms and rocked gently.

Alistair didn't care about the grime on his clothing or the smell which permeated the cupboard and Harry himself, all he cared about was to ease his pain, even if a little. He didn't apply pressure, not wanting to unintentionally hurt him through the bruises on his body. He hadn't experienced such emotions for a long time but between Harry himself and finding Solomon, he found his usual perfect composure had cracked a little down the middle. He cared, deeply, about both of them. Any pain to them was painful to him, even if this version of Harry didn't know who he was. If he had the opportunity to be slightly influential, he would take it.

It took a while before Harry even thought about relaxing a little. Hesitantly, his own arms wrapped
around Alistair's neck, cries now muffled. It was never good to hold in emotion, this he had come to understand through years of experience. He'd always had an ally in his brother and yet, Harry had no one. Over time he had relaxed completely, though he didn't let go, craving the love and warmth he'd been denied for most of his life. When he next spoke his tone of voice was quietly adamant.

"You're real nice to me, so I guess you're an Angel and don't know it yet."

The absurdity of being called an Angel when he was inherently dark by nature didn't simply pass him by but if this was how Harry saw him, he wouldn't do anything to quell that thought. He didn't respond, sensing that he was close to slumber as the panicked heartbeat from before had slowed to a normal rate, gradually drawing closer to a relaxed state. Of his own volition and not planned, Alistair began to sing softly. It was one of his own compositions, the basic melody and at that moment, he came to realise he hadn't sung for a long time now. The piano was his forte while Solomon's vocals were his and yet, he enjoyed it.

"Pretty voice.."

Alistair heard Harry mumble this and a short while later, fell asleep. Chuckling to himself and appreciative of the compliment, he gently lay Harry down. Magic was a part of him and had remained so for longer than most, so he knew how to successfully fool a non-magic family. He was unsure if it would apply once he left this memory but even still, he wanted to do this much. While Harry himself and the interior of the cupboard kept their surface appearance, the mattress became a bed which cocooned him in comfort, alongside his healed injuries. As a final touch he left a slight whisper in Harry's mind that he would keep knowledge of this event, but what Alistair looked like, he couldn't quite remember. He didn't know if it would have negative consequences later on and it was better to be safe than sorry. If he had healed Harry's injuries and his so-called family saw as much, they would assume magic was to blame and he feared they would only make things worse. He finished up and rather than returned to the mindscape, he was instead pulled to another memory.

He found himself outside this time, with the boundaries of the memory itself larger as an older Harry sped past him. A slightly taller and ratty looking boy was hot on his heels, the others lagging behind as Alistair spotted Dudley Dursley. He recalled conversations with Harry over the 'game' his cousin and friends used to play, he suspected this was it. Following behind he couldn't help but think that much like the interior of the house, the streets themselves lacked individuality of any sort, cookie-cutter in appearance right down to the neatly trimmed gardens. The appearance of everything alone would drive him to the brink of insanity.

They arrived at a park and quickly Piers, Alistair believed the name was, bent down to pick up a
stone and with pinpoint precision, aimed it at the back of Harry's head. It hit and it was enough to make him stumble and trip, disorientated. That was all they needed and before long Dudley ran over, hands braced on his knees, bent over double and wheezing. From the ground and barely showing any reaction, Harry let an amused smirk slide onto his face. Those green eyes had grown colder and more jaded over the few short years. His tone was equally cold, mocking.

"Careful there Duddykins, you wouldn't want to give yourself a heart attack. Maybe I could give you one."

He wiggled his fingers, as though he was about to cast a spell and while the others looked at him weirdly, Dudley paled, stammering.

"F-Freak! I'm telling dad!"

"Run fat boy run!" Harry called out, grinning. At his core, he wasn't a bully, but he knew how to get beneath others' skin. He would only be cruel to those who were cruel in turn and deserved it. If people gave him a chance he could be nice and even as he received a hard kick to the stomach from the insulted boy in person, he thought it was worth it.

While Alistair didn't intervene before with not knowing how the memory would be, he would now. A stranger helping a child on the street wouldn't be as out of place as a stranger suddenly appearing inside another's house. Footsteps silent enough to put Severus Snape to shame, Alistair cheerfully spoke to them from behind.

"Is there a problem?" Despite his tone, he let a small fraction of a threatening aura into the air and immediately, they backed away.

Dudley looked at him for a moment and when slightly chilled sunset eyes met his own, he backed away.

"You're one of those freaks!" Ignoring his previous winded state Dudley ran, not even waiting for his friends to catch up.

Annoyances as Alistair considered them out of the way he reached out a hand to Harry, offering to help him up. Narrowing his eyes suspiciously he looked at the outstretched hand and back to his face searchingly. He kept his expression open, not a hint of falsehood and after a moment, Harry took it. Pulling him up Alistair let him go and wordlessly, offered a handkerchief from his shirt pocket.
Feeling the throbbing sensation, Harry touched the back of his head, grimacing at the traces of blood. Taking it he held it to the wound.

"Thanks." Muttering this he awkwardly averted his eyes, looking anywhere but at him, clearly uncomfortable. Dead silence filled the air for a few minutes until Harry looked at him warily. "What is it? You wouldn't help me if you didn't want something."

Though he'd seen a brief glimpse into Harry's life before, seeing it for himself and being told of it was something different entirely. He appreciated the insight as he learned more of Harry every day, but he wished he hadn't through such a painful manner, for both. This was a cynical Harry, a one where his mask rarely came off.

"There is nothing that I require from you."

At Alistair's words, he snorted in disbelief. "So, what, you expect me to believe you did it out of the goodness of your heart?" His tone turned mocking but once he truly looked at Alistair's expression, he stopped. Though he remained dubious, the attitude swiftly left.

"..Sorry. Not used to being helped, that's all." In a complete opposite to previously he tensed up and Alistair knew he was expecting to be hit.

"There is no need to apologise. Is your head alright?"

There was quite a bit of blood on his palm before but seeing only a little on the handkerchief, Alistair gave an internal sigh of relief. As Harry nodded his head once he handed it back, a fist lightly closing around the fabric. Alistair cleaned it wandlessly without him being any the wiser, placing it back in his shirt pocket. Though Harry was still on edge, some of the hostility had left, to be replaced by hesitant curiosity.

"You're not from around here, are you? Cool contacts by the way." He rubbed the bridge of his nose in discomfort, the red mark visible from where the not properly prescribed and broken glasses dug into his skin.

Bringing The Dursleys back from the dead just to torment them was looking more and more appealing, as the list of reasons why they were some of the most disgusting humans reared its ugly head once more.
"No, I am simply passing through." He gave a soft smile at Harry's compliment, even if they were in fact, his real eye colour. "Thank you."

Harry blew out a breath, a small sigh leaving his lips. "Weird. I don't know who you are and yet you're more real than people who've lived here all their lives."

"There is no price to pay for the cost of being kind. There are those who simply choose the harder way."

Though Harry didn't respond, Alistair could see him silently mull over those words.

Glancing up at the sky, Harry's mood darkened. "I'd better go home. Thanks for the help anyway, maybe I'll see you around sometime." He didn't ask for Alistair's name, sensing he might not get an answer and he understood people had their reasons. His name didn't matter, but the actions behind them counted for something.

Before Alistair had a chance to respond Harry gave a brief wave, sprinting away. Like before, this version would also not quite recall what he looked like. His only regret was not being able to prevent what would no doubt happen upon his return to the household. However, he didn't have long to think about this, returned to the mindscape once more.

He was unsure how much time had passed however, it was in a better condition than when he left, memories still where they're not supposed to be but the weather had calmed some. And then, he heard Solomon's voice.

'Whatever it is that you have done seems to be working, he is a little more stable. I assume that you know he is no doubt trapped within the pivotal memories?'

'Yes. I have seen two, where he was approximately five and ten years of age.'

'There will be a final memory, somewhere. One that is recent.'
If they followed the same pattern, the next memory would only be a few months ago.

Then, Alistair began to search for any indication of the final memory. He assumed the task at hand would be easier, with Solomon’s reparations organising the area to some semblance of normalcy, but that wasn’t the case.

In the distance, the faintest ripple of water caught his eyes. It was only approaching that he realised it was another memory, the unnatural crater in the cracked earth resembling a nature made pensieve, in a way. No other memory had particularly stood out to him, the first and the second connected and within Alistair’s sights in a way that made them more noticeable. Making a decision his fingertips touched the memory’s surface and with it, he was transported once more.

The first thing he noticed, was that he was in a bathroom at Hogwarts. Myrtle’s bathroom he believed, from the descriptions he’d been provided with by Harry himself. The room was near quiet or would be, if not for breathing that suggested nothing but torment. Though the two memories together painted a gruesome picture of Harry's past, Alistair found himself unprepared for the sight in front of him.

Broken, shattered, like the cracked and dirty mirror that showed Harry’s reflection. Skin waxen pale, he looked more like a doll with invisible strings rather than a human, underweight for his age. The sparkling green eyes Alistair always found himself enchanted by resembled dull, glassy orbs. Lacking determination and passion they remained unseeing. The only thing present there was pure hatred for the one reflected. Dark circles underneath, slight trembles wracked his weak frame. Hands clenching the sink in a grip so tight that his knuckles paled further, a voice wrought with grief left dry, chapped lips.

“Sirius..”

And then, Alistair understood. Harry had only recently told him about his Godfather, though didn’t go into details about the cause of death. He had done his own research and was saddened to see that he’d never had the chance to truly experience life. At further words from Harry, he halted that train of thought in its tracks, hidden and watching in silence.

"Why is it that every time I even dare to be happy, it's taken away? You did nothing wrong, just
wanted to be free and fight alongside us, and yet-"

He broke off, one hand leaving the sink to take out his wand. Detachedly he gazed at it, once more glancing up to stare at the cracked reflection before him.

"There's nothing left. I get knocked down and struggle to my feet, only to be pushed over again. Fucking prophecy. I'll do Voldemort's job for him."

He raised the wand to his temple, letting out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob.

"You really are a freak, Potter. Just do it. You hate yourself enough that the spell won't fail. Avada Kedavra, two words."

The struggle was evident and though Alistair's heart was on the verge of breaking he remained calm, moving just enough within his line of sight so that he could be seen within the mirror's reflection.

Harry spotted him instantly and panicking he spun around, pointing his wand at him and taking a few steps back.

"Who the fuck are you and where did you come from?!"

Of course, this version of Harry didn't know him, but to see the look of fear in his eyes was more painful than he could have ever anticipated. He first met Harry in August and Sirius Black had passed away in June, the changes within that time were shocking, though he knew spaces, where time passed more slowly, were mostly responsible. He knew this would be the most difficult as in nearly every sense, Harry had lost his innocence.

He carefully raised his hands, showing to him that he wasn't a threat.

"My name is Al. I have permission from The Headmaster of your school to tour the facilities, as I am conducting research into how the education of countries differ and if the building itself is a factor. I simply passed by and heard your voice."

It didn't seem like he was lying. Harry hadn't thought it through, the bathroom door able to be
opened and no silencing charms in place so that was understandable. No one ever came here though so he thought he'd be safe.

The travelling part was true, anyway. Though he felt remorse at not being entirely honest, the focus was to distract Harry from the darker thoughts. He didn't lower his wand, still suspicious.

"Yeah well, you can leave now."

When Alistair softly shook his head in the negative, Harry's eyes darkened. "Why? So you can kick me down and then go running to the Prophet that their saviour is actually a spineless coward? You want to see just how pathetic I really am?"

He was lashing out at the nearest available target, but Alistair let him. His lack of composure only angered Harry more, however.

"ANSWER ME!"

Mirrors didn't just shatter but explode, fine crystal shards going in every direction and silently, Alistair raised a shield to protect them. Even with magical blocks on at this time, Alistair could tell just how powerful Harry was. His magic was wild because it was never given a chance to flow free, trapped. As Alistair repaired the damage, he did so.

"Who you are to me is of no concern. All I see is another human in need of help, that I'd like to provide you with."

Harry retorted immediately, dismissing his words. "Bullshit."

He ignored how genuine he seemed to be too. Vernon was very good at pretending to be sincere and like an idiot, he'd fallen for it every time until it got to the point where he realised his Uncle would never change and neither would Petunia or Dudley.

Alistair knew that this could backfire but he raised his hand, a soft golden glow leaving it and surrounding Harry. Surprised he fired off a spell, Alistair easily sidestepping it. Wavering between anger and confusion, he pinned him with a cold glare.
"What did you do?" His body felt much better. Better than it had in a long time, in fact.

Rarely did Alistair let his guard completely down. Most of the time he was open and free with his expressions, the personality he showed his students and Harry was the truth. But even then was the reminder of what he was and much like Remus Lupin, who Minerva had told him about, there would be a chance he’d be shunned for his nature, by more than Dumbledore himself. But at that moment, as someone who didn’t know who he was, Alistair dropped everything. He usually went with the flow, carefree laughter and spreading cheer where he could, but he wanted Harry to listen seriously.

"You are healed. Not everyone within this world is here to inflict pain. I swear upon my life and magic that my intentions are true. So mote it be."

Before Harry could so much as react, Alistair had sworn an oath with a blinding flash of light and when nothing happened, Harry’s beliefs shifted. The main thought he’d had before this was to treat him nicely so that he would be in his debt at a later date. But no one could lie with magic as the judge and come out on the other side unharmed. When Harry said nothing in response, lowering his head and wand, Alistair continued.

"There are many things which the world has to offer. It will not always be like this."

He spoke from experience, going through similar turmoil with the death of his parents. Vampire deaths were rare, at least in comparison to those who were mortal, but the fact that it had happened to both of them, one after the other, was a blow.

"How the fuck do you know that? You have no idea what my life has been like. From the moment I was born, I became either a stain on society or their hope. I CAN’T DO THIS!"

His last words screamed, they tore at his dry throat and raising his wand once more he spoke, shakily but with conviction.

"Av-"

He didn't get any further than that. Alistair with his lightning quick reflexes moved to Harry, taking the hand with the wand in his own and in shock his grip slackened, wand clattering to the floor. Wrapping his arms around him from behind, both arms became pinned to his side. Nothing short of apparition would free Harry from his hold.
"What are you doing? Let me go!" He struggled furiously and at one point tried to headbutt Alistair and slacken his grip, but he held on tighter, unable to hide the pain from his voice.

"You are precious. Not because of your title but for you, as yourself. I am sure that there are friends and family who care, deeply. I was not much older than you when my parents passed away and the pain seemed to be near insurmountable. But with the aid of my brother, I am in a better place now. There is not a day that goes by where they are not on my mind completely, but it is easier to live life to the full, how they would want me to."

Harry listened, his struggling weaker now as despite not wanting to listen and just break free to end it all, his words made sense. He had precious few people in the world but he treasured Ron, Hermione and Remus. Sirius until his death but he was right. Sirius wouldn't want him to cut his life so short and neither would any of the few that actually saw a little of who he really was. But that didn't erase the internal struggle.

He didn't fight against Alistair anymore, defeated.

"Everyone I care about always leaves me, then I'm alone again."

And then, his cries were silent, the slight trembles in his form the only indication. He didn't loosen his hold or say a word in response, but he allowed his magic to blanket Harry in the warmth and affection he held for him, even he was unaware. To some extent, he held back but the fact that a stranger had seen most if not all of what happened and not only didn't mock him but was trying to actually help, he was filled with a quiet disbelief that had shattered much like the mirrors of before. It was with that realisation, that the dam had burst.

Earlier Alistair had cast a silencing charm, just in case by chance, someone else did happen to pass by the area at whatever time of day it was. It was just as well he had, as the heart-rending sobs forced from Harry's lips echoed harshly around the room, even as both dropped to sitting positions. He could see this was something he'd needed to release for a long time, as everyone had their limit.

Now more than ever, he wanted to be one of Harry's supporters, side by side. He wouldn't protect him, as Harry had relied on himself for far too long to accept being sheltered. But on the opposite side of the scale, he wouldn't leave him in the dust either. Only Harry could restore his mindscape close to how it was before. Even with Solomon's experience each one was unique and couldn't possibly be recreated by another perfectly.

Though his cries had quietened, they sounded uncomfortable and with one arm still wrapped around him, the other conjured a glass, filling it with water.
Harry's voice was quiet but sincere. "I won't try anything."

After his arms were released he accepted the glass, draining it within a few seconds. With it the fog of unease seemed to clear, some clarity returning to him even as he realised the absurd situation he'd gotten himself into.

"..Thanks, Al. You're a good bloke."

That was the last thing spoken, the turmoil of magic calm waters with a few ripples now, rather than a tsunami of a large scale. Sensing the calm he repeated his earlier actions, who he was a blur to him. A moment later the surroundings disappeared, replaced by the mindscape.

'Everything is in order. He is better than the condition he arrived in, however, we will only know for certainty once he awakens.'

Nodding his head in acceptance of that, Alistair finally left Harry's mind and with it, a deeper understanding of how Harry Potter came to be.
Harry awakens, shaken but intact. And then, two that should be on opposite sides defy general expectations.

LAST CHAPTER: Alistair and Solomon work in unity, to help free Harry from the horrors of his mind.

The sensation of having his head unravelling like parchment was beyond unpleasant but as Harry fell into unconsciousness, the hell essentially of his own making caused just as much pain. At first, he vaguely sensed voices here and there but shortly afterwards, a sea of memories violently swept him away. They pulled in every direction at once and if not that, dragged to the drowning depths. Through a haze of memories, he could see the shredded state of his mindscapes.

It was so much worse than the last time he'd had to confront one of his own memories. He wasn't seeing them as if watching a film but right there reliving the moments. He was the seven-year-old cradling a burnt hand to his chest, the twelve-year-old left outside in the snow overnight. Every detail he could remember, right down to his senses and desperately clinging to a thread of himself. If he didn't keep up constant reassurance that he was no longer there, The screams waiting to tear their way through his throat would happen not of his own volition.

He wanted, needed this to end. In truth, he hadn't even tried to deal with a lot of his memories, some subconsciously repressed. He had good ones but the worst of them lingered, in particular, the memories which indicated a personal change within him and the ones he couldn't forget unless Obliviation was involved.

As trapped and bound by his own mind as he became, Harry could still sense the presence of others, one very familiar and another faintly so. Unlike Dumbledore, he knew they would cause no harm. A moment later the raging waters seemed to ever so slightly calm and Harry regained a little more awareness.

'This is Solomon. We are here to aid in repairing the damage done. I am restructuring your mind and Alistair is locating memories which are of the greatest concern.'
He tried to indicate he understood, but couldn’t manage to get the words out. He sent a strong nod of affirmation instead, hoping that it reached one of them and wondered if there was anything that he could do from here. The only possible answer that came to mind as he quickly recognised the memory he was in, was to try and project it outwards. Perhaps it would be made more noticeable among the many others there.

The memory must have reached Alistair but unlike what he knew happened, events unfolded differently. Though the outcome didn’t change, it instilled a tiny pinprick of belief, that not everyone was out to hurt him. Whoever this person was, he couldn’t put a name or face to it despite remembering the rest clearly. He did consider the possibility that it was Alistair himself doing this, but his memories weren’t interactive, surely? He considered that a stretch even with his track record of making the impossible become possible. He wouldn’t ask though as whatever was happening, worked.

However, he had limited control even within his own mind. It was bizarre and distressing beyond all comprehension and the ray of light in the darkness was just who was helping him. One of the eldest Vampires in recorded history, but it wouldn’t surprise him if there were more somewhere, older than they were, as unbelievable as it sounded.

Sucked into yet another memory he tried to communicate but found himself unable to, raw grief and anger stabbing at his vitals over and over. It wasn’t long ago that he was feeling this way but to experience this so soon again, he couldn’t provide any guidance on his end but at least with his mindscapes being meticulously rebuilt, it made the journey of navigation easier.

He let himself go, as resisting only made it worse. He didn’t even know where it began and where it ended, emotions blurred into one tangled mess of choking knots that slowly began to loosen, one by one until he was released. Still sluggish he could move but was no longer influenced directly, even as the waters had calmed to a near standstill. He wanted to get out, away from his mind and simply... breathe.

Harry didn't jerk awake with a start or noise. In contrast to the chaos of his mind, eyes simply opened to stare at an intricately patterned ceiling. He didn't recognise it as such, but the overall theme looked familiar, somehow. He didn't spare much thought for that, as something else became known to him.

Head propped on pillows he glanced to the side, seeing and feeling his hand interlocked with another. It explained the warmth and as his eyes travelled further up they were met with Alistair,
asleep.

Throat dry Harry swallowed several times and though he made a conscious decision to try and not stare in general with how uncomfortable he found it to be, he couldn't look away, as if some unseen force was keeping his head there. The unseen force being Alistair's attractiveness. The fairytale sleeping beauty absurdly came to mind and of course, his beauty was a different kind and at that moment, he found himself drinking in his facial features.

He'd never had the opportunity to study up close, his charming yet teasing words always catching him off guard. Though he knew Alistair's age totalled at least half of the population of Hogwarts, looking at him no one would ever guess, a man in his mid-twenties rather than one which had seen many ages pass by. Having no need to breathe there wasn't a rise or fall to his chest that could be detected and yet, Harry knew that his heart still drummed a gentle rhythm. Long eyelashes cast ever so soft shadows, with not a wrinkle in sight.

Though, there was one thing. Narrowing his eyes in concern, he noticed that Alistair's own were a little red-rimmed, faint but enough to be noticeable. Unconsciously he gave a small squeeze to the hand in his, not liking the thought of him upset but unwilling to awaken him, as an air of peacefulness shrouded them.

Noticing a slight disturbance to the side Harry glanced up almost casually, eyes finding Solomon's who sat fairly close to the bed in a chair, observing keenly.

For some reason, just what position he'd found himself in hadn't registered until now. Though it was delayed, his blush resurfaced once more. He kept his voice low, resisting the urge to try and melt into a puddle of nothingness and escape the embarrassment.

"Sorry, I kind of forgot everything for a bit there."

Waving away his apology with a slight movement of his hand Solomon stood up, arriving at Harry’s other side.

“IT is understandable. With exception of the obvious, are there any issues?”

Though they shared very similar facial features, that was where the similarities ended. Being Dumbledore’s prisoner will have no doubt changed him, though Harry couldn’t make a comparison. Solomon looked to be serious and direct by nature. It didn’t help that he couldn’t exactly remove his
hand from Alistair’s either, though a part of him was reluctant to let go in the first place.

Just the reminder of his previous pain through the hands of Dumbledore was enough to make his head flare up, with a tender and bruised touch to it. He’d pretty much been kicked from the inside as he couldn’t help but wince.

“My head’s still a mess and hurts a bit, but it’s not as bad now.”

“Good.”

Even as he spoke that single word Solomon carefully reached a hand out, ensuring that Harry could see his every movement. He was aware of the abuse he’d gone through thanks to scanning Dumbledore’s mind and didn’t wish to cause him further distress, especially with his brother taking up the post of a guard dog earlier. A cool hand touching his forehead Solomon allowed magic to flow freely, soothing the ache.

Feeling some of the pressure release, he blew a small breath out.

“Thanks.”

As Solomon acknowledged this with a polite nod of his head, Harry glanced down at Alistair once more.

“I thought Vampires didn't need to sleep.” He was intrigued at the idea of being able to function without sleep.

“While it is true there is no need for it, there are small benefits doing so. However, those hours are important to let the days or months of memories settle naturally, without the use of organised meditation. It simply makes the process easier. He is stubborn and I have never known him to willingly sleep, not even as a child.”

Alistair did strike him as the stubborn sort when it came to particular things but at confirmation of this, a small smile tugged at his lips. Despite this, his eyes remained haunted. Today had set him back several steps but it could have been far worse if not for both of the men by his side. Just when he was about to ask roughly when Alistair would awaken, the man in question stirred.
Orange eyes locked with green and somehow, it was that much more embarrassing. Carefully releasing Harry's hand Alistair quickly changed to a sitting position, softly cupping his cheek as his worry was made clear.

"Are you in pain?" He asked, a little frantically as though he could seek out the source and obliterate it.

Hand now released he placed his over the top, doing his best to be of reassurance.

"I'm not in physical pain anymore, Solomon helped with that. My head's still full though."

The emotional pain was left unsaid, but both Vampires caught onto his meaning immediately. Solomon sensed the rising temperature of Alistair's magic before Harry did and as though he'd never been missing at all, slipped into his brother's mind to share with him a sense of calm. The exchange between them was a split second if that, but it was enough to make a difference.

Seeing that Harry was doing as well as he could possibly be given the circumstances Alistair removed his hand, though remained seated where he was as Harry slowly came to sit up himself. He looked around the room curiously as he did so.

"I get this is the Room of Requirement but who's requirement was it?"

Really, he should have known better than to ask.

"It is my bedroom," Alistair responded immediately, not a hint of hesitation in his tone as Harry opened and closed his mouth silently, mouthing the word, bedroom?

Of course, it was a bedroom, that much was obvious but hearing as much aloud seemed to drill it into his foggy mind. of course it was just an exact copy of his bedroom, the real one being back at the castle, but still.

"Why do I always get myself into embarrassing situations?" Groaning into the palm of his hands, he flopped back onto the bed. Hearing a mischevious chuckle, hands gently pried his own away. Met with the teasing twinkle in his eyes, Harry tried to prepare himself but as usual, couldn't even begin
to build a defence.

"It is almost as though you would like to be ravished."

Harry choked on air. "No! Yes! Ahh-"

His brain hadn't caught up fully, resembling a fish out of water and well beyond embarrassment at Alistair's laughter. He was saved from further mortification by a throat clearing.

Still amused, Alistair turned his attention to Solomon. "I see that is another habit of humans you have graciously picked up."

"I find it useful to silence troublemakers." Giving Alistair a pointed glance, he refrained from rolling his eyes at the grin in response, directing his question toward Harry.

"What memory was the bearded excrement after?"

It took everything within him not to burst out laughing with that particular name and at the reminder, panic threatened to assault him. What if he'd failed and Dumbledore saw everything, not just the memory he'd targeted? He kept the panic at bay, enough to answer the question.

"Dumbledore wasn't here this morning but returned later on, the Golems must have disappeared because he was searching for memories of the prisoners. I hope he didn't find anything, fuck.." Harry massaged his temples, chewing his lower lip.

"If he had found all that he needed, you would not have sustained the damage that you did. He would have simply left, undetected. I suspect that desperation had a part in the actions taken."

At Solomon's calm and logical words, Harry saw his point but still worry gnawed at him. He didn't stand a chance against Dumbledore, what if he attacked his mind again? He wouldn't make it through the other side if there was a next time and he had so many memories to protect.

Solomon had come to a decision. Though he tried to be, he wasn't as open minded as Alistair with humans, treating their kind with scorn and knowing that on more than one occasion, Alistair's heart
had been broken and scarred when shunned for his nature with those who he pursued a romantic relationship with. He didn't trust as easily but if Harry had ill intent, he wouldn't have gone to such lengths.

At the first mention of Vampires the majority had run screaming and yet, he'd willingly offered his blood alongside finding him and through it, Solomon was better. Like Alistair, to those who were willing, he had a lot to teach. As the younger brother his confidence was quieter and yet, knew that it would be rare to find one as skilled in the mind arts as him.

"I will instruct you so that you are better defended."

Harry wasn't the only one surprised by his words, Alistair quickly conversing with him.

A questioning look. 'You are willing to help him? I know that you have a certain distaste for humans.'

'Distaste would be an understatement. However, this one is different from the others. I will give him a chance.'

Sending a wave of gratitude through their link, Alistair was relieved. He could teach Harry himself as he was no amateur, but Solomon had taken the time to study the mind arts inside and out. He was as proficient with this as Alistair was with his own magic and how to utilise it best. No doubt Solomon knew of a better and more efficient method of learning.

"Really?" At Solomon's short nod of confirmation, excitement replaced the worry. "Thank you."

That was a huge weight off his shoulders. Any help was appreciated and though he'd managed on his own, it wasn't good enough to stand against a man with that sort of experience. Before any further words were spoken, a blinding flash of light filled the room and once it left, Harry was stunned.

Fawkes appeared, looking worse for wear as he didn't have the energy to stay in flight. Flapping weakly to the ground, faint tremors shook his almost frail form. The eyes that always held a spark of intelligence reflected nothing but pain, making soft sounds of distress. Taking immediate action Harry sprang from the bed, kneeling by his side.
"Fawkes! What happened?" Harry was unsure if he was in any fit state to communicate but not wanting to leave him there and mindful of any possible injuries, he carefully lifted him, only to place him down on a softer, conjured surface. The air was stifling, Fawkes' emotion affecting the very room.

: Albus took too much power. I am weak. He is not the same man. If I stay, I will die :

'You'll die? But you're immortal!'

: I am not invincible. Sun is harmful to Vampires. Darkness is harmful to me :

"Shit Shit Shit! Fucking Dumbledore you arsehole!" Growling under his breath, he asked another question.

'Is there a way we can help?'

: I am unable to communicate with the one I want to bond with. His mind is closed :

Harry had an idea of who, as Alistair would have no reason to block Fawkes. 'You want to bond with Solomon?'

: Yes :

Turning to them Harry was about to relay the information, but promptly stopped. Though Solomon was better at all of them with hiding his true emotion, Harry could see that his already pale skin had gone a tinge whiter and understood what might be the problem. All he could do for now was wait, knowing Alistair had likely already caught on and in the meantime Harry ran his fingertips through Fawkes' feathers, trying to be of some comfort and not watching their interaction, reluctant to intrude.

The moment Fawkes appeared, Alistair noticed Solomon stiffen, face tense and hands trembling ever so slightly. To anyone else, unless incredibly observant, they wouldn't notice the changes in him but
to Alistair, it was near instantaneous. He didn't speak, simply waited for him to.

"I know that he is just as much a victim as me, if not more so. But, his blood caused the greatest pain that I have experienced to date. We are opposite and I feel that I should not be near him."

His voice was flat and devoid of emotion. He had never heard his brother sound like this before, so was momentarily startled.

“He does not wish you harm. I know that just words are inadequate, so there is something that I would like you to see.”

Though the conversation was between Harry and Fawkes, Alistair had a suspicion of what it was that Fawkes wanted, as the timing couldn’t be a coincidence. He wanted to help however he could as in the end, he believed it would be beneficial for both.

A flicker of curiosity arose within his silver eyes and sensing the opportunity, Alistair let the memories of Fawkes’ tears over Solomon and his apology to Alistair be projected into his mind. He thawed instantly, surprised but still wary.

“I thought that he would hate me. I am dark by nature.”

Alistair understood that all too well. “I believed the same until he informed me otherwise.”

Looking away from Alistair, Solomon glanced over at Fawkes. Though he had hardened over the years of imprisonment, his heart still remained and looking at the pitiful state he was in, felt a twinge of hatred for Dumbledore on this Phoenix’s behalf. It wasn’t his fault he ended up this way, he had faith that some good remained in the man he’d bonded with, even if the bond itself was forceful. If not for Fawkes, Harry wouldn’t be alive and the chances of him being found would have lowered to non-existence. He owed his thanks to more than one and Alistair’s memories had helped to smooth things over.

“Thank you.”

“Of course! I am not just a pretty face.”
Solomon really did roll his eyes this time, a faint smile tugging the corner of his lips and satisfied, Alistair was confident that it would make things a little easier.

As silence filled the room, Harry saw the window of opportunity. His hand not stopping its gentle ministrations for a moment, he turned to explain.

"Dumbledore's gone Dark, Phoenixes can die from too much corruption the same as Vampires can from the sun."

Both Alistair and Solomon seemed to not have any idea this was the case either, as a flicker of surprise passed between them. It probably wasn't common knowledge but the more Harry thought over this, the more it began to make sense. Phoenixes only allied themselves with those of good morals and once, Dumbledore was on the right path. But something had to have changed over the years and any bond with him will have caused Fawkes to suffer as well. Evidence of this was right in front of them. Harry continued after a moment, his eyes finding Solomon's.

"He wants to talk to you."

Solomon knew what that meant. However, lowering his defences to allow anyone but Alistair in his mind was proving to be a difficult task. Lifting Fawkes into his arms Harry returned to the bed, sitting down again and not speaking further.

Though it took a moment of resolve, Solomon allowed his mind's defences to drop, though his jaw clenched tightly at the foreign voice.

: I am using the last of my strength to communicate. My rebirth is close. Albus has changed since the last time. I need to leave before I am reborn. I fear what will happen if not:

Fawkes didn't say as much, but Solomon finally came to the same conclusion as Alistair and Harry. He wished to bond with him and he was surprisingly calm despite the unbelievable situation. Solomon had one final question, not wanting Fawkes to suffer further for the sake of his curiosity.

'Why me?'

: There is a connection there, that I have not felt in years, stronger than it was with Albus.
You have suffered at the hands of a human but hold no universal hatred. Albus has suffered at the hands of Vampires but the desire to rid the world of every single one has bled into every aspect of his life, clouding judgement in more than one way. To bond with you is my atonement as I can be of help. Though you are dark by nature, that does not reflect the choices you have made. You and your brother are light and have not succumbed to your natures. There is a thread connecting me to Albus. I am only able to be bonded to one at a time and once the thread of your magic overpowers Albus, it will break. Do you accept? :

Fawkes put everything he could into explaining, the exhaustion plain to see and hear. There was no reason for him to refuse and although it would take time, perhaps they could overcome their suffering at the hands of one man, together. Solomon couldn't deny that he was still a little on edge not because of Fawkes himself, but how at odds something could be when it was willingly and unwillingly given. However, he wanted to try, not just for Fawkes' sake but for his own, to move on. That and he received just a small amount of satisfaction that the very Vampire Dumbledore was trying to take information from had not only escaped with help but was about to take his Phoenix too. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him.

'There is nothing to atone for. I accept.' He was abrupt and to the point.

And then, he had a thought. If his burning day was close, chances are it would move forward faster after the new bond was established. He conveyed this much to Alistair and no sooner had he finished, a very familiar perch appeared one that Harry recognised.

"Did you seriously just summon Fawkes' perch from Dumbledore's Office?"

Not looking guilty in the least, Alistair gave an elegant shrug. "It belongs to Fawkes. It is not as if Dumbledore will need it, unless there is something he is neglecting to tell us."

Hearing confirmation for himself he burst into laughter, half sobbing as he tried to speak.

"W-What if he's in his office and poof! The perch is gone? He'll be so confused."

With the word poof, Harry clenched his fists, releasing them quickly for emphasis. Giving a warm chuckle at Harry's amusement and finding the thought equally so himself he picked Fawkes up, placing him on his perch. If he should be reborn, the ashes would drop straight into the holder just below. Alistair returned to his seat near Harry, waiting and watching while Harry forcefully stifled his laughter, not wanting to disrupt them.
With everything in order, Solomon did just as asked, seeing the thread for himself. It was a loose, wispy connection at best, barely hanging on. Solomon was confident that it was Dumbledore's will alone keeping them connected and none on Fawkes' part anymore. Letting his magic flow freely another bond was formed, a blinding white with silver that resembled more of magically constructed rope than simple thread. With it, Dumbledore's feeble hold faded into obscurity.

: Thank you :

With those final words and a flash of fire brighter than Harry ever remembered it being, ashes settled into the holder below and with a tiny cheep, Fawkes' head peeked out from the small pile, black eyes blinking.

"I feel.. energised, somehow." Solomon murmured to himself, intrigued. Hesitantly he moved his hand, a finger running over the top of Fawkes' head and he didn't realise it himself, but a small smile curled the corner of his lips.

"Fawkes will be happier now he's away from Dumbledore."

Harry murmured this to Alistair, who nodded in agreement. "I believe it is a fresh start for both. Solomon will take good care of him."

Returning to himself, Solomon addressed his next words to Harry.

"If you encounter any further issues inform Alistair and he will inform me. I will contact you at a later date so that we may discuss the best time."

Giving the perch a glance, he spared an amused look of his own, directed towards Alistair. "Between us, the fool is losing everything."

"It is the least he deserves. Thank you for the help."

Rising to his feet, Solomon carefully placed his hand on the perch. Though most methods of transport didn't flow smoothly, Alistair and Solomon were able to take others and objects with them and not be jostled at all. To Fawkes, it would be as though he never moved and Solomon wanted
him away from the castle and to their home, safe. The protections had been renewed and revamped since Harry's visit and the guardians activated when he touched a bloodline only object, fixed and replaced along with other little surprises here and there. But unlike practical jokes, they were deadly. Silently he disappeared, Fawkes along with him.

Alone with Alistair, he gave him a grin.

"So, you fell asleep?"

"Yes." He frowned to himself, in thought. "The last time I remember sleeping was as a child. There is so much of the world to be seen in place of wasteful rest. I have never had a particular fondness for it."

Harry could understand that, certainly. He wished he didn't have to sleep either but unfortunately, it was a requirement for him.

The mood shifted between them all of a sudden, Harry finding him looking into serious yet sorrowful eyes. So confident and self-assured with rarely a word out of place, it threw Harry for a loop to see him struggling internally with something, for even a moment.

"Harry, I must apologise to you."

"What for?" Confusion bled into his voice, genuinely not following the reason why.

"You were in pain. You still are and yet, I was nearly too late. Dumbledore is not a force to be taken lightly and if I had noticed sooner, this situation may have been avoided. The moment I found you on the floor, my heart."

He broke off, head turned down and palm flat across his chest. "-It hurt. I have never experienced such a thing in my lifetime. If I had not known better, I would have suspected that you were dead."

To his alarm, Alistair sounded on the verge of tears and hastily he reassured him, giving himself a mental slap as he stumbled over words in his haste.
"What? No! You don't need to apologise. I didn't think Dumbledore could sink so low so it's not something any of us expected. The fact this happened when you were out was just bad luck. You were checking in on everyone and catching up with your brother who you hadn't talked to in years, I get it completely. You've helped me out more times than I can count and today is no exception. If you hadn't found me when you did and together with Solomon help me escape my own mental prison, I'd be much worse off. I was bleeding as well, did you help with that?"

At Harry's words, Alistair nodded silently.

"See? Don't feel bad. I'm fine, really!"

To emphasise this Harry gave the goofiest grin, in an attempt to coax a smile from him. However, it backfired as a few seconds later, he realised how he must look and instead, ended up making himself laugh.

Though that wasn't his intention that did get Alistair smiling, the usual cheerful spark beginning to return.

"Silly Harry."

With all the fondness and affection laced through his tone, he pulled Harry close, arms firmly wrapping around him. Harry sensed it was just as much for him and reaching up, he stroked Alistair's hair. He did his best, though lacked the elegant gestures and knew he was a bit clumsy. Rather than feel awkward or out of place with affection, Harry had come to love Alistair's hugs and he swore he could stay there and never grow tired of them. He'd come a long way from avoiding affection for fear of being hit. After a moment, the comfortable silence was disrupted a little.

"You are providing reassurance to me, yet you are the one hurt the most."

"I don't think any of us came out of this intact. You've supported me when I needed someone to talk to, I'm just returning the favour. We'll support each other, yeah?"

As Harry pulled away with earnest green eyes shining, Alistair could agree to such terms. He found it unusual as most of his interactions were rather one-sided, but not unwelcome in the least. Giving a small chuckle, Harry didn't realise just how many openings he provided him with and drawing close, he pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, the opposite one to last time.
Harry remembered vividly the previous kisses he'd received before and from most others, he'd suspect they were making fun or ready to use it against him somehow. However, Alistair was naturally affectionate and had been nothing but openly honest with him, even from the moment they'd met. Though it wasn't the first time it may as well have been, tingling pleasantly and heart rate at a pace he was almost unable to keep up with.

He kept his head down, blushing more today than he had for a while in truth until Alistair gently tipped his chin up.

"Ah, your reactions never cease to be adorable. Thank you for your words."

"Y-You're welcome."

He gave himself a mental kick. 'Speak properly damn you!'

Alistair's smile remained, though his eyes held seriousness. "I have healed the damage I could, but may I suggest that you pay a visit to Madam Pomfrey? The opinion of a Mediwitch is just as vital."

"Yeah, I'll do that, I was going to check in anyway."

Having his fill of teasing for now Alistair gently pulled away and together, they left the Room of Requirement.

As Harry made his way to The Hospital Wing, he couldn't deny he still felt a little skittish and slightly paranoid that Dumbledore was nearby. Trying to shake away that feeling he raised his guard, determined to come out stronger because of this.

Watching Harry leave, Alistair had a job of his own to do. It had been years since he'd engaged in
true pranks and this was an occasion that called for it. Though he could say with confidence Dumbledore would snap like a dry twig beneath just a fraction of his power, he didn't deserve the quick death that would grant. There were so many ideas and with every step he took, he considered each one. It was time to unleash his creativity and though Dumbledore would never find out just who, it was one of the many reasons why getting on Alistair Avis Lothaire's bad side, was inadvisable.

Chapter End Notes

I know one or two of you mentioned Alistair when it came to Fawkes, but I honestly had Solomon in mind all along. I just like the idea of two victims of the same man working together to overcome all that they've suffered.
Chapter Summary

Alistair is plotting, letting his creativity flow as magic does from his wand. All the while Harry explains what happened to his friends, plus one.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry is guaranteed support for the future and Fawkes is no longer bound to one that harms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Outside of duels both magical and weaponry related, it had been a while since Alistair was allowed to let his creative spirit flow free. The simple amateur little prank he'd set up in his home before Harry was simply a way to pass the time and to see just who would show themselves. Of course, after that, he'd heard it had a reputation for being haunted and to those who hadn't seen an actual ghost, that would be the case. But then Harry came along and with him, just about everything had changed. For the first time in years, he could say that he was truly happy and he had Harry himself to thank for this.

He had first met Harry mid-August and now, it was September 16th. Barely any time had passed and yet, the amount they had spoken through the bracelet created link and in person, he was left feeling as though he had known him for several hundred years. It was strange yet not unwelcome in the least. So today, he'd had enough. He knew that Dumbledore would be dealt with legally and that time wouldn't be too far off. But in the meantime, it wouldn't hurt for him to be a Guinea Pig.

Which was why Alistair made his way to The Headmaster's office, having come back from a brief outside trip to procure some Lemon Drops. However, these sweets were special, as not all of them were yellow. For colours seen by a human eye, there were seven in all, reminiscent of a sugar rainbow. Alistair had altered them himself and they still tasted of lemon, only with some added features. Including the brief trip out, it had taken him half an hour at the most.

There were seven main pranks in all, one for each colour. The extra additions for every colour held the same theme, only the outcome was a little different. Within one red sweet and upon consumption over time, Dumbledore would lose all hair. Another would encourage it to grow until he resembled an ancient version of Cousin Itt and the final would cause his hair to itch, along with a life of its own.
Of course, he was confident they would work how they were supposed to but if anything went wrong, he didn't see this as a bad thing. If there wasn't at least a six-hour waiting period after eating the first, then the effect would be lengthened. Unfortunately for Dumbledore, the urge would be difficult to ignore with the compulsion charm added. Only some could be hidden through non-magic means if he chose that option but otherwise, he'd ensured that none of them could be removed and would have to fade on their own. Of course, there would be consequences if he tried.

If there was something he'd forgotten to include, Alistair would take note and next time would be that much closer to pranking perfection.

As a chuckle filled with promise left his lips, he spotted a familiar cloaked man practically gliding across the floor.

"Good evening Severus!" Alistair called out, eyes sparkling with mischief.

He received a slight incline of the head as a response. He wasn't deterred by this, encouraged in fact. Before now he was ignored and he chose the appropriate moments for nicknames. Out of respect for Severus, Harry had only told him the bare minimum, but Severus had been on the receiving end of nicknames and pranks both mean-spirited and he never wanted to come across that way. In fact, he couldn't think of anything worse as he genuinely liked him. It was only fun and games when the other person wasn't hurt by his actions and even with his age, he always reminded himself not to get too carried away.

It was a work in progress, however, Alistair was determined to befriend Severus and the Slytherin that he was, convince him that his intentions were honest and not because he wanted something or to use him.

With all that he'd seen from Harry and the state he'd found him in, Alistair needed something to lift his spirits and this was one way to do so. It was the first time he had voluntarily gone to the Headmaster's office and to his distaste even if it worked in his favour, he'd apparently taken a liking to him and on the whole, he found himself surprised at how well he seemed to mingle with his colleagues.

As always upon arrival, the password was required and changed weekly.

"Liquorice Straws."
The theme remained consistent however and a moment later stood outside of the door which opened before he could so much as knock. Alistair could tell he liked to give the impression that he was all seeing and knowing, but it was most likely due to his connection with Hogwarts as Headmaster, or spells of his own doing.

Even with his most of the time flawless control, Alistair found a tiny crack in the foundation of his being when faced with Dumbledore who looked as he always did. It was as though nothing was wrong and he hadn't nearly destroyed a 16-year-old's mind. Gently brushing aside his own personal feelings, he allowed the lies to come forth and match the man before him.

With a heartbeat and warmth of his own any lingering suspicion should dissipate and thanks to Miss Granger’s suggestions, if asked, Alistair had convincing answers. He hadn't the need for manufactured smiles before now much but in this office, it was a necessity.

Upon closer inspection, Dumbledore did look different. He lacked the presence he usually had, alongside the glow of his aura. Though the majority wouldn't notice, Alistair couldn't help but think he looked every single one of those human years, suspecting the broken bond with Fawkes was the cause.

Eyes twinkling behalf half-moon spectacles Dumbledore finished the line he was writing with a practised hand, placing the quill back in its holder and giving him his full attention.

"Ah, Alistair my boy! What can I do for you?"

Sparing some amusement for the fact that in this case, Alistair was his elder by over a millennium, he placed the bag of Lemon Drops on his desk.

"For you, Albus. I often venture into the non-magic parts of society and I came across these. They are all Lemon Drops, regardless of the colour change. I thought you may like them."

Suspicious by nature, Dumbledore subtly checked for spells and charms. Satisfied with not finding any, he accepted them gratefully. He could see the potential in this man, to use him for his cause of eradicating evil and while he didn't look easily manipulated, Albus had encountered many different types. He was confident that with time, he would be just like the others. Fawkes leaving him threw a spanner in the works and though it had only happened just over an hour ago, he still couldn't understand how he'd done it. To break the bond between them would require immeasurable power. The only ones who came even close that he'd encountered was Gellert, Tom and Harry. He was confident however that none came close, so who did it? He didn't let those thoughts show, however.
Giving Alistair a smile accompanied by a grandfatherly twinkle, he opened the packet, emptying it onto the dish of Lemon Drops that he already had.

"Thank you."

Not wasting any time he picked up a red sweet, placing it between his lips and sucking happily. His expression turned to one of delight and it mirrored Alistair's, although he kept his hidden. His lack of self-control would remain to be seen as for now, it was the curiosity of trying something new. He knew what spells he'd used but hadn't taken note of the specifics. If he wanted to he could locate the remaining red sweets and determine which one Dumbledore had eaten, but where was the fun in that? Bidding him farewell Alistair left, looking forward to what the future had in store.

Harry couldn't deny that compared to before, he was feeling much better. The pain had nearly gone along with some of the tenderness, but he was still feeling a little off, particularly with his ears. He had no doubt if not for Alistair and Solomon's combined efforts, he'd be in a much more critical condition. That and he was due to visit Madam Pomfrey anyway. It wouldn't be right to not have to go within the first month as by now, it was almost a habit of his.

Hearing a slight sound behind him he continued to walk, though internally froze. His senses were screaming a warning at him. Far too jumpy for the moment to ignore and quick as a flash he spun around, drawing his wand and pointing it.

'Oh, fuck.,'

He couldn't help but think this, replacing his wand as quickly as he'd drawn it. Getting past the nervous lump in his throat, he bowed his head slightly.

"Sorry sir, I didn't know it was you."

He wondered what the minus numbers of Gryffindor's house points would look like, preparing himself for the worst. However, his expectations were blown out of the water.
"Raise your head Potter. It is disconcerting."

Once Harry did so he continued, expression still stern. "You are fortunate that no spells were fired, or you would be in detention with me until the moment you graduate. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Softly breathing out, Harry couldn't help but feel as if he'd dodged a bullet with that one and seeming to read his mind, he smirked.

"Hone those reflexes, they will come in useful."

Taking the advice for what it was he inclined his head to indicate he understood. As they moved in the same direction, Severus narrowed his eyes faintly.

"Am I to assume that The Hospital Wing is your destination?"

"Yeah."

Though no one else was in the corridor except for them, Harry placed privacy charms around them for the moment, eyes serious. Seeing this Severus stopped in his tracks.

He decided not to mention Solomon, as that would open a whole new topic, one of which he didn't want to delve into. He told mostly the truth and having secrets of his own, Severus understood the need to leave out some details.

"Dumbledore ransacked my mind. I don't know what he was looking for or if he found it but it was much worse than what I experienced before. Professor Lothaire found me outside the hall, I'd nearly passed out from the nose and ear bleeding. He patched up the worst of it but told me to go see her, just in case."

While it was true Severus had taken the opportunity to blaze through Potter's mind in revenge for his father's actions, he knew the limits. He held many regrets over the course of his life and one of them was allowing past resentment to take over. It didn't make him any better than Albus himself, but damaging the boy's mind beyond repair wasn't his intention. To cause such serious injuries would require tremendous force and even with help, he was shocked Potter remained standing and so soon, as everyone had left the hall not too long ago. Puzzling that out for another time he returned to the matter at hand, a deep frown creasing his brows.
"Albus is losing sight of the goal he once had. You are discussed more than the Dark Lord. However, he is no longer a threat. Even before the restoration of his sanity, his word was absolute, unchanging. He will not break it."

"He's still insisting I've gone dark, then?" Harry asked, exasperated.

Able to reflect on his past actions he didn't regret them, only that it had built up to the point where that was the only option he could see. Years of pent-up emotion had come to a boiling point and it had to be released somehow. His only regret was that perhaps, with time and if away from his parent's influence, Dudley could have bettered himself. But he didn't linger on any of his regrets long as in the end, they didn't help him now or for the future.

A sneer curled his lips. "You may as well be the next Dark Lord. Though it is recent, his attentions have turned toward bringing Professor Lothaire into The Order."

Harry had to stifle a laugh, which he waved away at the Professor's suspicious look. If Alistair was accepted into The Order, it would be too perfect. He was a Vampire, the very thing that Dumbledore wanted to eradicate and he'd be privy to all information shared. He dearly hoped that would happen, so he could laugh long and hard about it later.

Harry gave a casual shrug. "Let him think what he wants. I'm on my own side and I'm not getting stuck between old men and their games."

Severus couldn't argue with that, stuck in the middle himself and continuing on their way, Harry cancelled the charms just outside of the doors. For once it wasn't busy, no one but Madam Pomfrey in the room. Approaching her, Severus silently handed over a slip of paper. Eyes flicking across she nodded to herself.

"This will do nicely. Thank you."

Inclining his head briefly he didn't leave, but went to a door already ajar, entering and closing it behind him. Once turning to Harry, she noticed his curious look.

"Severus supplies me with Potions, as his are of better quality than those on sale at the Apothecaries in Diagon Alley. He will occasionally refine and improve them, to show me the results after."
It was a reminder that he did more than just teach and spy. It didn't occur to Harry that he'd do this as well though it should have, really. That meant over the years every single potion he'd consumed was brewed at the hands of Professor Snape. Dreamless Sleep he'd become addicted to and over time, became immune to it. At the time it had helped but he'd used it as a crutch and suffered the consequences after. He'd had to see Madam Pomfrey and be forcefully weaned from it.

Seeing his curiosity had been sated, Harry noticed the switch to Mediwitch instantly. In this mode, she had an aura to rival Dumbledore himself and to his amusement, gestured for him to sit on the bed he'd engraved his name beneath.

"Mr Potter. Just once I would like to not see you in the first month of every year."

She sounded almost at her wit's end and in response, he gave her a charming grin. "But I make for great company!"

An amused smile cracked her professional appearance slightly as she removed her wand.

"What seems to be the problem this time?"

Though she was under a Hippocratic oath and wouldn't break patient confidentiality, Harry didn't know what her opinion was of Dumbledore. If asked, he'd stick to basics until he knew for certain.

"My ears feel a bit sensitive like everything's too loud."

Of course, he knew what was wrong with him, but she might be able to pick up on what he couldn't. Nodding to his words her wand ran over him and a moment later, letters and numbers indecipherable to him hovered in the air for a few seconds, then faded. An expression of relief crossed her face for a moment, addressing him.

"You have perforated eardrums. There's a strain on your mind and signs of fatigue. Are you resting well?"

"Better than I have been before. I haven't needed Dreamless Sleep for a while now."
"Good."

Going over to potions storage she returned, a calming draught in hand and handing it over to Harry.

"Your heart rate is a little high. Take deep breaths."

Usually, he knew if he was panicking but this time, he was only made aware of it by her. Knowing that he was anxious only made him feel more so and regulating his breathing, he downed it in one. He knew why he was feeling this way and hoped it wouldn't be a regular occurrence.

The effect was instantaneous and with it, his mind and body calmed some. Satisfied and telling him to keep still, her magic washed over, centralised on his ears.

"Stay in a relatively quiet environment for a few hours and they'll heal. Other than this you're in good health. I'm glad you're taking care of yourself."

He truly felt better than he'd ever been too, confidence at rock bottom and while he lacked it at times, it was much better than what it used to be. The reason why he'd been sleeping so well was Alistair's voice soothing his mind. More than once he'd fallen asleep having a conversation with him, waking up more refreshed than ever. He was surprised by how simply and easily Alistair fit into his life and now, he couldn't see it without him.

"Thanks, I'll see you later."

"I hope not."

Turning away so as to hide his grin, Harry decided to try the Room of Requirement as that was where they'd planned to go today. Within the time he'd left to go to the hospital wing, they might already be there as it wasn't long before everyone had to leave that he had himself. It was only on his way there that he'd realised something. He'd told Remus of what had happened with Voldemort and though in disbelief at first, eventually came to understand Harry was serious and took it well, though he did need to take a seat and be reassured that yes, Harry was still alive after having been alone with the current Dark Lord.
But, he also needed to tell him what happened today and preferably, he didn't want to have to go over it a second time. Though he was still wary of Dumbledore, he wondered if Remus couldn't be temporarily brought to Lunaland and returned later. He didn't see why not as technically, it still classed as part of the room if added and Headmaster or not, Dumbledore wouldn't be able to access it unless he knew the room's appearance down to every last detail.

That and Harry was worried that Remus might be feeling a bit isolated since for the moment, he was laying low. Dumbledore might want to finish the job and even now he was still affected by it. Harry wasn't the only one assaulted by night terrors and over the summer, they'd supported each other.

Even with the calming draught, Harry couldn't help but glance around and as a result, was relieved when he arrived at the Room of Requirement sooner than expected, thankful that he no longer grew winded easily. Pacing with Lunaland firmly in mind the door appeared and after double checking that no one was around, opened and closed it behind him.

As he suspected he found his friends, in the midst of conversation but at the sound of the door, voices stopped. As he made his way over and took a seat next to Ginny, Hermione gave him a questioning look.

"Did you cast a notice me not charm earlier?"

Harry nodded. "I did and there's a reason for that. Before I say anything though Remus needs to be here."

They all shared a look, hearing his serious tone.

"Can the room even do that?" Harry could see her scepticism.

Neville shrugged, giving Lunaland a once over. "I don't see why not. If it can take anything from our minds and make it a temporary reality, I don't think someone being able to come here without entering Hogwarts first is too much of a stretch."

Ginny conceded his point. "Can't hurt to try."

Seeing that everyone was in agreement Harry focused intently. Standing up and crossing the bridge, a fireplace jutted out of the rough stone wall, as if it had always been there. Taking a pinch of floo
powder he threw it into the flames, kneeling on the grass below him.

"The Lion's Den."

No matter where Remus was, he'd hear the floo. It took longer than what Harry expected and a moment later, he found out why.

Reading glasses askew on his nose and hair slightly messy, Remus blinked the sleep from his eyes, becoming immediately alert when he saw who called.

"Harry! How are you?" Warmth filled his eyes, accompanied by a soft smile.

Seeing Remus like this he couldn't resist, amusement obvious. "Never mind me, what about you? Having dirty dreams, sly old wolf."

Able to catch Remus off guard for once, Harry happily sniggered to himself when his comment brought forth a flustered glare.

"Aside from teasing a knackered wolf, is there something you want?"

He couldn't help but snort at that. "Yeah, there's something I need to tell you. Hopefully, if you just call out the name of the room I'm in, you should be able to come here."

Wasn't Harry at Hogwarts? However Remus decided to trust his words and hearing the name of the room he was in caused a raised eyebrow but providing this went how Harry wanted it to, he'd save his questions for after. Taking a pinch of floo powder on his end, he threw it into the fire.

"Lunaland."

There was a small part of Harry that doubted it would be so easy, with how life events had gone so far but to his relief it did, Remus stepping through shortly after.

It would save a trip out as too often, he wouldn't be surprised if Dumbledore tried to track him. He
already had before, his results letter not accepted due to said tracking charms. At this point, Dumbledore was more of a threat to his life than Voldemort and anything which made things easier was good in his books.

The moment Remus stepped from the floo he quickly righted himself and with a wave of his wand, fixed his crumpled clothes and hair. Putting away his reading glasses he took his time to drink in the sights, in near awe.

"This is the Room of Requirement?"

Harry gave a proud grin, directed towards Luna. "Yeah. We walked in one day to this world Luna created and since then, we come here to relax."

Remus could see how it would be relaxing, watching a rainbow koi swim through the water with ease, as he walked with Harry over to where he noticed, his friends.

"I was only made aware of the room last year, with your running of the DA. It would have helped my monthly transformation as a student if I knew of its existence."

His look was almost wistful and in response, Harry reached over to lightly squeeze his shoulder, giving an encouraging smile.

"You've got the Requirement Closet now though, I'll be with you this month like the last, I'll make sure of it."

Remus pulled him in for a one-armed embrace, ruffling his hair affectionately. Harry had improved leaps and bounds from how he used to be and with the death of Sirius, he appreciated someone there by his side.

Shuffling over Ginny made some room for Remus who took a seat, Harry on his other side.

Everyone was happy to see him and in good spirits, especially after knowing what happened before. Hermione was the first one to speak,
"It's good to see you! How have you been?"

From there sparked some small conversation and with a small smile on his face, Neville spoke up.

"Hello, Professor."

Remus shook his head, laughing softly. "I haven't been your Professor for years, Neville. Call me Remus."

It was more habit on Neville's part as even now, he had the aura of an educator. His smile turning sheepish, he gave a nod.

Remus' eyes flickered with curiosity. "How are you all finding the new Defence Professor?"

He knew from Harry, that it was the same Vampire that he'd met on his trip to Transylvania and while Harry didn't tell him everything, he couldn't help but feel wary at first. Moony's natural dislike towards them didn't help with his own opinions though, often bleeding through. Seeing how happy Harry was, however, especially when he'd occasionally come up in conversation, Remus held back any judgement he may have, knowing what it was like to be treated with hatred and was more than reluctant to treat someone else in the same manner.

Ginny was the first one to respond.

"He doesn't do lessons like the other Professors, there's no textbooks or desks and it's all practical. He's the opposite of Umbitch."

She broke off, a smirk on her face when Harry nearly choked on his laughter. No one disagreed with her, similar chuckles following.

"In every way. Everyone is benefitting from him."

She gave a guilty look towards Remus. "Sorry, not to disparage you in any way."
He waved away her apology, giving her a reassuring smile. "No need to apologise, I'm pleased that you have someone reliable and I enjoyed the time I was here."

However, Ginny didn't finish there.

"He's a great Professor. To some, a little too great." Giving a significant look towards Harry he shot her a glare in response.

"Ginny, don't you dare-"

"Harry fancies him."

Naturally Ginny ignored him and while his friends knew as much, he hadn't said a word to Remus and was beyond embarrassed. He wasn't worried that he would disapprove at all, he was close enough with the man to know that wouldn't be the case but at that moment he hated Ginny. She knew it too, an amused twinkle in her eyes.

Mouthing the words 'You'll pay for that.' in her direction he warily glanced at Remus, not liking the look in his eyes. He liked his words even less.

"Don't be embarrassed, it's a perfectly natural thing to happen to a growing young man."

Neville and Hermione wisely kept out of it, though their amusement was obvious. Luna watched, head ever so slightly tilted to the side and giggling at Harry's reaction.

Harry's moans were muffled, hands pressed palm down against his face, taking a moment for sense to reassert itself. Ginny's laughter wasn't helping the situation or his facial colour and a part of him hated to break the mood but in a way, brought with it a sense of relief so they could swiftly move on.

Raising his head, the sudden seriousness must have shown, as the room quickly quietened. It was only then that he realised he'd neglected to tell Remus about the Vampire prisoners, sighing to himself.

Having everyone's attention, he decided to deal with that first. "All of you already know about this,
but it has to do with what happened today." He gestured to his friends, turning to Remus.

"You might need a strong drink after all this."

Steeling himself, he prepared for Harry's words, though his amber eyes were wary.

"I'll give you the short version, but you can watch my memory of the event later if you want to. I found Vampire prisoners Dumbledore kept under the school for torture and interrogation not long ago, men, women and children."

Remus thought he'd prepared himself, but evidently, that wasn't the case. He knew this was no joking matter and yet he looked for signs of this. Finding none he slumped back into the bench slightly, rubbing his temples. He knew Dumbledore wasn't as light as he claimed to be, but this? He was no better than the Death Eaters at this point and he doubted all of them had committed whatever crime he seemed to think they had unless they were innocent? The more he tried to logic it out, the more he couldn't fathom just what he was thinking.

"Not that it makes it any better, but did he have a reason?"

Harry had discussed it a little with Alistair after and had some idea of what it was.

"Before the Order, Dumbledore ran The Guild of Light. They dedicated themselves to eradicating Vampires and Dumbledore used the mark of the Phoenix. Voldemort took that as inspiration for the Dark Mark and while the Order is still running, members from the old group have come into the school to help with his interrogation. He's after the elite Vampire families. Alistair and his brother are one of them. Dumbledore kept Solomon locked away for 74 years and in that time, got nothing from him. Only the families in that position know of others. There isn't much more than this I know."

He didn't mention Solomon's state at the time or that he'd let a Vampire feed from him, as he liked Remus alive and well better than expired from shock.

Harry's earlier advice for a strong drink was almost tempting at that point since it was apparently the proclaimed light leader's fault that Voldemort was so organised through the mark of his own. It was a confusing mix and he didn't even think sleeping on it would help much. He gestured for Harry to continue, as there was more to this.
There wasn't really any way for him to prepare them for his next words, deciding to dive right in and deal with the aftermath later.

"I put up silencing and notice me not charms because Dumbledore attacked my mind."

He continued, over the sound of gasping and in Remus' case, growling. Slightly nervous about that, he tried to finish as soon as possible.

"When he looked at me I felt something in my head. I thought it was paranoia but it kept prodding, insistent. I tried to hide what he was after but out of nowhere, he pushed in, full force. When the prisoners were rescued lifelike golems were placed there by Alistair and a friend of his. By now they've gone and Dumbledore suspected I might know something and wanted to check. I don't think he found anything though but when I left, I was a broken bleeding mess on the floor."

He shuddered in memory of that, not happening long ago. "Alistair found me and along with Solomon helped to patch up my mind with the worst of the damage, in the Room of Requirement. We left and you guys must have arrived when I went to the Hospital Wing."

Only the sounds of wind chimes rang through the air, otherwise deadly silent. No one knew what to say, too stunned to speak. Then, Harry saw Hermione pale rapidly. Noticing his gaze on her she shook her head back and forth, on the verge of tears.

"I'm so sorry! That's what I wanted to talk to everyone about. I have something to help protect our minds. I finished it a few days ago and I was waiting for the right time. I should have mentioned it then."

"It's fine. It's not like you knew this would happen. Better late than never right? And I'm ok now."

That wasn't completely true but at least compared to before, he was. Wand in hand, Ginny handled it in a dangerously threatening way. Usually one for words she seemed to be trying to gather her thoughts, but Neville needed no time.

"That fucking son of a bitch!"

Like before the outburst came from nowhere. Usually mild-mannered and fairly quiet, he once again proved that out of all of them, he wasn't one to be underestimated.
"How is he any better than Voldemort? In fact, right now, Voldemort is looking better by the day and I never thought I'd say that. He could have destroyed your mind! Left you like my parents-
"

His voice cracked at the end, magic swirling around him and with it, nigh taking their breath.

"A man like that shouldn't be in charge of Hogwarts. The sooner he leaves, the better. But for him to stoop this low? I didn't think he would but I've been proved wrong."

Defeated he slumped back into his seat. With his outburst, Harry hadn't noticed the growls becoming louder and more threatening. They had no time to let Neville's outburst sink in, as Remus joined in soon after.

"I'll snap the bastard's neck and use him as a toothpick!"

'Not Remus, Moony.' Harry corrected himself.

Not having seen Remus like this before they widened their eyes, even pulling Neville out of the mood he'd created. The only one who didn't look shocked was Harry himself and Luna, sadness flickering within her eyes. She'd stayed quiet for the most part but as amber eyes reflected inner turmoil, she reached into the bag she always carried with her. She'd only started to craft cork necklaces after Remus left as Defence Professor, deciding to build this hobby and bless others with happiness wherever she could.

The cork necklace she had was special. Smaller than the others, it had been bathed under the light of the full moon, blanketed with her own magic as a finishing touch. She liked to experiment and this one, was for if she ever saw him again. His fear of the moon and himself was what caused his transformation to be so painful. She knew he'd find it painful as signs of stress and premature ageing ran throughout his form. The moon never wanted to hurt him. She watched over everyone at night, not only guiding the tides at sea. Luna wanted to express as much to him.

Harry was about to protest, not sure Luna approaching Moony would be a good idea. He was instantly on guard as a threatening snarl left his lips.

Of the two of them, he was the alpha. Knowing this she didn't place her gift around his neck, instead putting it onto his left palm. His body language conveyed hostility and a hint of suspicion. But as he brought the necklace to his nose and sniffed, some of that faded, a little calm returning.
"What's this?" His tone was gruff, still battling with the urge to find this Headmaster and ensure that only 'master' remained.

"It's a present!" Luna let the enthusiasm bleed into her voice, even as he looked at her strangely. Despite this, he seemed willing to talk some.

"Moonlight calms me. Remus fears it."

She cocked her head curiously. Seeing this, he continued. "I'm Moony, the monster side."

He sneered to himself, making it clear that wasn't his own opinion.

Harry had told her a little of the Marauders, though she didn't know until today that Moony showed himself in this way. Stretching her hand out, her enthusiasm was still plain to see, genuinely happy.

"It's nice to meet you Mr Moony!"

If Remus himself was the dominant personality, he wouldn't have spared her a strange look either. He'd never met anyone like her, not a hint of fear to be seen. Caught off guard he responded and firmly shook her hand, swept along with her pace.

There was every chance he'd say no, but she hoped he wouldn't, believing that it would help both of them in the future.

"Will you accept it?"

There was simple curiosity, no pushiness or forcefulness. Instead of a verbal answer, Moony cautiously placed it around his neck. As he did so the atmosphere changed.

Sensing Remus was back and as always, she wasn't one to hesitate. Approaching him once more, she carefully wrapped her arms around him and in a low voice only audible to him, tried her best to be of reassurance.
"Don't be scared anymore. You're not a monster."

She accepted him, both the human and wolf side, as did everyone else in the room. Remus had precious few friends and fewer still that didn't view him in any sort of negative light, but he treasured the ones he had and any new ones he'd forge. Luna was only 15 and yet, Remus somehow felt his scarred heart soothe, reassured by her words and curiously enough, the necklace. He should be on edge, wearing something near moonlight as that was a natural reaction for him and yet, he wasn't.

He returned her affection, the moment brief and while his anger for what Dumbledore had done wouldn't fade any time soon, at least he wouldn't be rampaging through Hogwarts out for old man blood.

Pulling away Luna returned to her seat, sighing sadly.

"I don't think I can save the Headmaster."

"Some people are beyond saving. The only thing I'll be saving him is a bludger in the face during Quidditch Practice, since he sometimes comes to watch. Accidental, of course."

Ginny's sinister smile suggested anything but, as Harry snorted. Accidental his arse. Maybe he should ask Dobby to charm the bludgers so they chased Dumbledore instead? The thought was an amusing one.

"What have you got for us?" He finally asked Hermione, curious as to what she had.

As always, she never disappointed, explaining in thorough detail in a way that everyone was able to understand, rather than in the past, using terminology that would be unfamiliar to everyone but herself.

Jewellery was the focus, though each ring differed from the other only slightly. There was nothing remarkable about them, simple silver and gold bands with a gem holder that could be altered appearance-wise in any way if desired, as no one else would be able to see them, not even with Moody's eye as the rune combination itself would need to be known. It was the engravings on the inside and the protections surrounding them that counted. The moment a mind was attacked, the targeted memory or memories in question would leave and where there should be a gem, the memory would fill that void. It acted as a pensieve, using similar methods for extracting a memory with a
wand. The five rings had a link between them so not only would the memory leave, in theory, it should allow the capability to defend whoever was targeted. If Harry was targeted again Neville, Hermione, Ginny and Luna should be able to go there and provide back up.

"A lot of this I won't know unless tested, but I'm confident it will work." She finished, giving each of them a ring and slipping one on herself.

"Brilliant, thanks 'Mione."

"You're welcome."

Harry was feeling much better than before. The promise of future Occlumency lessons with a guaranteed master of the mind arts went a long way towards helping too.

"Would you like one Remus?" Hermione asked as an afterthought, knowing some of the adults needed protection too.

"If it's not too much trouble. Wonderful work on your part Hermione."

It was no trouble for her at all, enjoying the challenge of creating them. "Not at all, when I've finished I'll give it to Harry for you."

The mood was still a little tense, but it had dissipated a bit from earlier. Harry's words weighed heavily on their minds, none one of them believing that he would go so far for the sake of information. And then, he was reminded of something.

"I've got some good news though, among the sea of crap."

When he had their attention, a smile naturally came. "Fawkes has bonded with Solomon, he's away from Dumbledore."

At Remus' confused look, he explained. "Dumbledore was mistreating him, taking his blood and giving it to Vampires which harms them."
Remus closed his eyes briefly. Opening them, a bottle of firewhisky and a glass appeared on the table. With a tug, the cork popped out. Pouring himself a generous measure he knocked it back straight, enjoying the burn. When a hand holding another glass appeared in his vision he looked up, meeting the eyes of Neville.

At Remus' surprise, Neville gave a casual shrug. "I'll join you, I need one myself to be honest."

"I'm corrupting you. Don't tell Molly."

Giving an ever so slight shudder at her wrath, he poured until Neville gestured to stop.

"Anyone else?"

What the hell? Harry didn't see why not and held out a glass of his own, Luna and Hermione declining. At the same time, all three downed their own measures. Harry still wasn't used to it, so ended up coughing. It was Ginny that surprised him though, barely reacting.

Sensing his suspicious gaze, she only spoke three words.

"Fred and George."

Ah, that made sense. He doubted Mrs Weasley knew and the day she did, he didn't want to be there for the fallout. While the three didn't go past their first shot Remus did, finishing the entire bottle. Having drank with him before Harry knew it took more than a bottle to have an effect.

"I owe those Vampire brothers several handshakes and drinks. I won't forget what they've done, no one hurts my cub."

The embrace Harry was pulled into rivalled Hagrid in strength, gasping slightly in response and having to tap on his shoulder repeatedly, to loosen his hold some.

"We all owe our thanks. Dumbledore knows nothing about Vampires, won't even try."
Ginny summed up the other's thoughts, murmurs of agreement throughout. Remus spent a small while among the company of others, enjoying it. Perhaps he'd be able to return sometime and then he left, returning to the manor.

"I'm glad that Fawkes is alright, he deserves better. But Harry, are you sure you are?"

Hermione was one of those people that could read him well, even if he sometimes didn't understand himself. He decided to give his friends some more of the truth and though it was too late now, he hoped calming draughts and alcohol didn't react negatively.

"I will be, with time. I was trapped in a load of my own memories, most of them I'd locked away, out of sight and they're fresh again."

Sensing a nosedive in the mood, Harry swiftly changed that with the appearance of a lined notebook and pen. Flipping to the first page he scribbled words, in what Professor Snape scathingly called 'chicken scratch.'

**NAME THAT HEADMASTER**

Along with the title, was a crudely yet accurately drawn representation of Dumbledore. He took the time to explain the little rules he had, showing them the notebook.

"Originality is key. Anything not outside of the box is forbidden. More than just names are allowed, burning insults are welcome, even. Bonus points if outside of this room, you insult him while he's within earshot. You up for it?"

Ginny replied instantly. "I'll dance on his desk, screaming insults into his ears."

Harry couldn't help but picture that, amused. "Insult him, but don't get expelled from Hogwarts."

"Fine, but I can imagine it can't I? Don't take that from me."

After reassuring Ginny that he wouldn't rob her imagination, the game was underway, each marked by different coloured ink, to keep track.
Throughout it, Harry had made some observations. Luna's were creative if odd, but he'd have it no other way. For all that Neville wasn't the most vocal of their group, Harry believed that only made his written words more potent. Some of them would have Dumbledore crying into his beard, he had no doubt of this. Ginny's were foul, both in content and language use. Mrs Weasley didn't know her daughter as well as she'd like to think and even Hermione joined in. While she was reluctant to disrespect someone of authority no matter how corrupt, that faded. Her best friend could have been permanently damaged through his actions and while she had to explain some of her words, Harry guessed she'd be the most likely one to score bonus points of insulting Dumbledore without him realising. Harry didn't hold back either, insults designed to dig deep as while Dumbledore hid a lot of himself, Harry liked to think he knew enough to pack a sizeable punch. It went on for much longer than Harry expected, deciding to keep this notepad and if others were up for it, assign a colour and invite them to join in.

Before long they left the Room of Requirement and headed back to their respective dorms, Harry escorting Luna this time. Dumbledore might try to break him but as always he'd stagger back to his feet, facing the storm. He wasn't a Slytherin in Gryffindor's clothing for nothing and with several options available, he planned to make full use of them.

Chapter End Notes

My chapters are long recently and the only problem with that is if it feels as though it's dragging out. If they ever feel like that let me know, but apparently I've had a lot to say these past few weeks xD

~Also chapter title! Nothing particularly inspirational sprang to mind but if it does, I'll change it.
Chapter Summary

Everyone has personal demons, Harry more than most. In the middle of battling with them, Alistair's pranking spirit helps to lighten the load.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Alistair puts his pranking plans into action, while Harry updates his friends and Remus with all he'd found out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was four days later and Harry would be lying if he told himself anything but, he wasn’t doing well. Hermione’s birthday provided a great distraction and with the help of Alistair, he was able to unlock the glass chest he’d found in the chamber. While he was there he'd checked for signs of Padfoot but according to Prongs, he'd yet to return. From the chest, he gifted her books from there and his own vaults, alongside several other things, herbal teas and assorted snacks which admittedly, he’d had to do some research for. But seeing her happy made it all worth it and when Alistair received permission from Professor McGonagall after school hours to take Hermione out and show her the Lothaire Castle library, he was sure it was one of the best days of her life as she came back positively glowing. He’d like to return there with all of his friends at some point if possible.

While that day did help, it didn’t stop the nights. He’d enjoyed the fleeting moments of restful sleep but even with Alistair’s voice recently, he was unable to stay asleep and if he did drift off, always became caught within his own memories to wake up, trembling.

Even when he was able to sleep well he didn’t risk not using silencing charms as the last thing he wanted to do was wake others up. He hadn’t told anyone of this recurring problem, not even Alistair. He trusted him, but Harry was so used to dealing with things on his own, that he’d fallen into familiar habits.

As he suspected, he didn’t find the Great Hall any easier and to his friend’s worry, he was unable to eat and barely drink anything while there. He’d changed his seat so that he faced Dumbledore, paranoid about having his back to him and yet, averted his eyes all throughout. He was the first to leave where he could, unable to help but escape the tense situation each time, on the verge of panicking.
He hated feeling like this. Alistair was there and he now had the ring of Hermione’s own creation. Everything was fine now, but why did he feel so uneasy? In an effort to keep it out of sight and out of mind he went to the Room of Requirement, finally trying out the blades he’d received from the Fae. The armor he’d already equipped, light and airy enough that he sometimes forgot it was beneath his robes. The moment he’d touched them with the intent to use, knowledge not his own flowed within his mind.

With handles to hold them by they curved, taking up most of his back, with the blades themselves having jagged teeth. He could channel his magic through them if need be and allowed for a short ranged attack as when thrown they’d return a short while later. He’d gained the knowledge of how to use them, but putting it into practice would be an entirely different thing.

Pushing the exhaustion to the back of his mind he consumed a pepper up potion, ensuring that he was careful with dosage this time. He needed something, anything to focus on. He’d completed his assignments for Potions, Transfiguration, DADA and Charms before Hermione at a near feverish pace, concentration levels at an all-time high due to the need for distraction. He’d checked and double checked over them to the point of growing sick and satisfied, he’d handed them in. He would receive his marks alongside everyone else’s at the same time and with not much in the way to do of work, he’d refocused his attention elsewhere.

Gripping the handles firmly, several sack dummies rose before him. Placing one foot forward and crouching a little, he crossed both arms either side, blades facing outward. For the moment, these dummies wouldn’t strike back, until he was completely sure he’d nailed the basics. Every action played within his mind as if on a reel, green eyes narrowing with concentration. Ensuring his balance was just so he sprang forth, arms crossing opposites sides in a wide arc and slicing clean through the material. It wasn't perfect by any means as he'd missed cutting through a small part completely, but it was a start.

Retreating he tried again, repeatedly and almost lost within the repetitive rhythm, though ensured he didn't fall too deeply into it. While he could heal himself if injured, he'd rather not have to.

Taking a few steps back and breathing fairly heavy after putting everything he had into each swing, Harry turned to the side, getting into a similar stance and crossing his arms. He had to channel His energy into it for impact, but it was just as much about how he released as anything else. Not letting go of the handles he cast a nonverbal drying and cooling charm, centred around his hands as the thin sheen of sweat was affecting the grip he had. Ideally, when thrown they should curve much
like the blades themselves, cross over the top and upon returning, he’d have the other one in each hand instead.

That was the plan anyway but as he threw, they fell short of the target.

“..shit.”

He had a feeling it wouldn’t be quite as easy as physically attacking. While he considered Lunaland to practice in, he didn’t want to spoil the tranquillity. That and there were several distractions so a plain, dull room eerily similar to the one he stayed in with the Dursleys suited him, only bigger. Back then, there was nothing to be distracted by, bored to tears on more than one occasion. But for once, a room like that would serve a purpose.

He didn't use his magic, as it was the last day of classes. While he doubted he'd make a dent in his core enough for him to be affected, it was better to save it where possible.

There were several approaches to take, however, he stuck to the same two for now. He contemplated learning how to use the sceptre properly as well, remembering the last time he'd tried it and leaving a large crater in the earth. He would have to be careful with that one, as he suspected it held more power than both of his wands put together. He didn't want to be like Voldemort or Dumbledore in that sense and lose himself.

Harry stopped before he pushed himself past the limit, limbs aching as he threw the blades for the last time. the rushing sound as they cut through the air rang in his ears, glinting in the light. While they still didn't hit their target, they’d grown closer all the while. He still classed that as progress. More physical than magical based, he wouldn't pick it up as easily but as all things, with time, it would happen.

An addition was made available to his trunk, able to shrink and carry it with him if need be. In this case, it became useful, storing away the weapons as his trunk returned to its original size. Shrinking it once more and ensuring its safety Harry left the Room of Requirement. There was no time delay, not needing it. Waking up at 5 am wasn't exactly his choice, but he was better off spending it doing something productive rather than trying and failing to fall back asleep. He'd never take Dreamless sleep again, concerned he'd fall into the same substance abuse as before and with it, he didn't trust
himself. That and he didn't think it would work anyway unless the Professor had strengthened the
dose or changed it.

At this time of the morning, Harry couldn't deny there was a certain eerie chill present in the air.
Hogwarts would always be one of his homes, but it always seemed strange when no one else was
around, too silent.

He enjoyed the feeling of a warm shower early on a morning to soothe his muscles and today would
be no different. Returning to the dormitory he placed his trunk at the foot of the bed again, opening
and closing the door behind him. He didn't mind if the others saw his armor or not, it wasn't exactly a
secret but usually, he was the first to be ready for the morning as the others woke up.

Stripping off he made circular motions with his shoulders, loosening the muscles some and stepping
beneath the hot water. A sigh of pleasure swallowed by the steam left his lips, as he closed his eyes.
He wasn't sure how long he remained this way before a shocked voice called him out of the blissful
daze.

"Harry?"

Opening his eyes he made out the form of Seamus and even through the steam, he could see how
pale he'd gone. Following his eyes, he looked down to his own torso and realised what was wrong.

For years, including the time before when he'd seen his tattoos, Harry had worn a glamour charm, to
hide all the scars. Having more confidence in himself he'd removed it and to others, they no doubt
looked bad. But he tried not to think about it or look at them too much. Out of all the changes he
wished he could remove these but before he could, a change within himself needed to happen as the
scars would only disappear through his own will. He didn't like them and yet, a small part of him
believed that they were wholly deserved. It was the first time since removing it that anyone had seen
them.

Thin scars crisscrossed over his skin here and there, while a larger one started from the hip, trailing
down his leg. If asked, he could probably recall which scar came from who and what did it. Despite
the problems he had none of them was willingly self-inflicted, as he didn't count the ones he gained
during detention. A ring-shaped burn scar on his inner arm came from the gas cooker, a punishment
from Uncle Vernon because the bacon wasn't cooked just right. A lot of them came from being pushed and pulled into various objects, a little of smaller scars coming from the bits of a broken plate he'd fallen into, thanks to Dudley. The one which covered his hip and leg were thanks to being pushed into a metal railing, old and worn away enough that a large splinter stuck out from it and as a result, cutting into him.

His skin was littered with various types and sizes. Some were more memorable than most, but the other he couldn't see unless he used a mirror and he'd rather keep it that way.

In large, uneven and jagged lettering just above his shoulder blades, the word 'FREAK' was carved. Though he was underage that didn't stop Dudley from drinking and after having too much as both parents were out he'd pinned Harry to the floor on his front, grabbing a knife. As he was just about to start Vernon had come home from work and instead of telling him to stop, had given Dudley the sharper kitchen knife, watching and encouraging all the while. His pain tolerance was high but the knife cut deep and agonisingly slow, Dudley's hand slipping more than once. Clearly, Vernon didn't care about his own son's safety either as it was a wonder he didn't cut himself in the process. Once finished they laughed, Dudley, staggering upstairs to his room and Vernon no doubt to the living room for some scotch. That scar was the last one he was given and in fact, was part of what triggered his outburst at Privet Drive.

"Hi, Seamus." He couldn't think of what else to say in truth, watching as the other boy was rooted to the spot. It seemed neither of them knew what to say so for the sake of moving past the awkwardness, Harry helped him out.

"I had a glamour charm up nearly all the time, I've removed it now."

"..Have you always had them?" He asked, finally looking away and realising how his stare must appear.

"New ones added over the years but yeah, I've had a few of these for a while."

Finally moving, Seamus made conversation beneath the shower head. "The Dursleys?"
It wasn't a secret what his relatives were like. On more than one occasion at the train station, most of Gryffindor and some of the other houses had seen exactly what they were like, most jumping rightly to the conclusion that they were abusive, though they didn't say as much to Harry.

"Yeah."

Seamus' face darkened, his anger plain to see.

"Fucking bastards."

"Who are fucking bastards?"

In a repeat occurrence, Dean stood in the doorway, stunned. With soap in his hair, Seamus explained and in a similar occurrence to McGonagall, his accent thickened though not to the point of being barely understandable.

"The Dursleys, they did that to him. 'tis a good 'tin they're not near me or we'd 'av problems."

Nodding in agreement, Dean came to join them. "Well, you're looking great Harry. We've all noticed the change in you and I think it's for the better. What's said in this room stays here, right?"

"Definitely."

"Thanks, guys." Harry was touched. He couldn't help but think the worst even if he knew Dean and Seamus were good people. There was the niggling worry at the back of his mind that he'd be taunted and before long, rumours of him being abused by his muggle relatives would spread throughout the school like wildfire. Even if it did come down to that he wasn't afraid of retribution on the Dursley's
part, but it was nice to have the reassurance.

Letting Seamus and Dean leave before him Harry finished last, changing back into his armor after a quick scourgify, his school robes over the top. Inevitably Ron was still sleeping but on the way out, he saw Neville.

"Morning Nev, I'll wait for you downstairs."

Returning his greeting Neville nodded in the affirmative, heading for the showers. Giving a final despairing look towards Ron, Harry descended the stairs and firmly ignored his exhaustion. He’d been eating and drinking fine, just unable to do so in the Hall. Nerves churned his stomach to knots and he couldn’t seem to manage it.

Taking a seat, he realised Dominik, or Tonks was sat nearby. There were enough people for others to not take notice but just in case, he took necessary precautions. Shuffling closer, he muttered in a low voice.

“Have you managed to talk to Amelia Bones?”

“Yeah. She knows you want to speak with her but The Ministry’s been swamped recently. Strangely enough not with Death Eater attacks or activities from Voldemort, all’s quiet on that front which can’t be a good sign.”

At the concerned tone of voice, he wisely chose not to comment. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Tonks, but the fewer people knew about the understanding he’d come to with the man in question, the better.

Then, all of a sudden, a mysterious smile.
“You’ll definitely have an opportunity to speak with her though.”

Harry narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Kingsley said something similar. What’s going on?”

“You’ll find out.”

Frowning irritably he wasn’t given the chance to respond as with a wink, she left the common room.

What was that about? Clearly, it was something only the adults knew. Whatever it turned out to be, he hoped it didn’t spell trouble for him.

Deep in thought, he jumped out of it with a poke to his cheek. Turning sideways he met Ginny’s amused expression.

“Frown any more like that and I half expect you to grow your hair out and clothe yourself in black. Harry Snape does have an interesting ring to it.”

Harry shuddered at the thought. “We only need one Snape. Any more than that and Gryffindor would never get out of minus points.”

"True. Shall we go?"

She gestured over to the side and seeing Hermione, Neville and Ron, agreed.

He hoped that today would be different even if the past few days hadn't been but as he got to the
double doors of the hall, his eyes once again found the spot he'd collapsed at. Ron went on ahead, not waiting for them and letting his stomach guide him. His friends waited patiently until suddenly, a warm touched his hand and with it, a sense of calmness representative of a fresh breeze.

Luna's voice held the usual serene quality to it and looking down to meet her eyes, he was reassured by her calm yet demeanour. She didn't speak to him, but no words were needed.

"Thanks, Luna."

Sparkling blue eyes held his for a moment as if to make sure all was well. Releasing his hand she joined the rest of them and thanks to her, Harry felt better than he had before.

Entering, he noticed straight away that Dumbledore was missing and he prayed it had nothing to do with him. But, as always, not many could tell if there was something wrong with him and only the ones he allowed to be close.

"Morning Harry!"

There wasn't a chance he could remain in a solemn mood when the happy smiling face of Lilah stared up at him and in a natural movement, responded with a smile of his own. She looked better than when he'd last saw her.

"Morning, how are you?"

"I'm fine!"

She seemed to want to say something else but stopped, looking down and scuffing her shoe on the floor shyly.
“What is it?” He kept his tone of voice friendly, in the hope that she was comfortable enough to share the rest of her thoughts.

“Can I sit with you?”

Harry was going to ask about Dominik but realised he wasn’t there. Either Tonks needed to go to The Ministry or she was reporting to Dumbledore since it was Friday.

Ron was sitting near Seamus and Dean for once. He saw his attempt to eat and make conversation simultaneously and as usual, earning various sounds of disgust.

That was good. He wanted Ron nowhere near Lilah as thanks to him, she didn’t feel safe enough in the common room.

"Of course you can."

"Yay!" How someone could look so happy from a simple thing he didn't know, but it was refreshing, to say the least.

Though he knew they wouldn't mind he checked with the others to make sure. Seeing their agreement, Harry sat Lilah by him, Luna on the other side. Hermione, Ginny and Neville sat opposite. Voices in the hall were raised more than usual, perhaps because it was unusual for Dumbledore to be missing on these occasions, particularly more than once in the same week.

There was a morning announcement before breakfast started, that Professor McGonagall would begin in the Headmaster's stead, if not there. Watching the head table the staff were also muttering among themselves. She was probably briefed beforehand if he was unable to make it but judging by the frown on her face, this wasn't expected.
The minutes ticked by and the students were growing restless. The day hadn't even started and select members of houses were already in trouble. Harry heard one shout of, "Hurry up, I'm fucking starving!" earn said, student, a loss of points and a detention. Just as the Deputy Headmistress rose to her feet, the door behind opened.

In contrast to earlier, a pin could drop and be heard clearly, voices gradually dying down. Even the staff were silent, similarly shocked to the students.

Well, all except for one staff member. However, they went unnoticed, as everyone was too enraptured by the sight before them.

Harry was glad he was about to take a drink and didn't actually drink, or it would spray over his friends immediately.

Through wandless magic, Albus Dumbledore was keeping his hair out of the way, the breeze needed as even before their eyes, that and his beard had grown to impossible lengths. A male Rapunzel came to Harry's mind, so long it trailed across the floor and without magic, he'd definitely trip. Though the sight of that was unusual, that wasn't what had everyone struck dumb for words.

A rosy blush on his cheeks accompanied by ruby red lipstick and dazzling eyes to match, the makeup stood out strongly. On anyone else it would probably look good, however, a drag queen was the prominent thought in most student's minds, of the ones that were aware of them.

To accompany the makeup, was a rather risque dress. Thankfully it didn't show areas that would scar them all for life but the slit up the side left nothing to the imagination and for those close enough to see it, his leg hair had grown too.

It was horrifyingly hilarious, in Harry's opinion. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or splash his eyes with holy water.
The silence continued as students and staff alike watched as he came to stand in front of them all. His annoyance was obvious to Harry, even as his makeup laden eyes twinkled falsely. He opened his mouth, only able to speak two words.

“Good morning-“

He would have been able to finish his sentence, if not for Harry’s uproarious and loud laughter. He’d barely kept it together from the moment Dumbledore walked in, but his voice resembled that of someone who’d inhaled helium. The squeaky, high pitched voice was unexpected, but the dam holding back his amusement had burst.

It seemed to be the case for other students as much like a domino effect, one by one they joined him in laughter. Only a select few Professors didn’t show their amusement outwardly while others delighted in expressing it.

Harry couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard, to the point of tears streaming down his face. Through his blurred vision he could see his friends in a similar state, but no doubt his exhaustion raised the intensity of emotions. For a moment, he wondered who could successfully prank the Headmaster as not even the Weasley twins had been able to.

"They all say it is haunted when really that is my pranking side. Life can be incredibly dull, otherwise."

The words Alistair had spoken to him upon their first meeting came to mind and as they did, his eyes naturally gravitated towards him. Sensing his gaze their eyes locked, a mischievous twinkle present in his, accompanied by the most satisfied grin Harry had seen. Giving him a sly wink he returned to watching the chaos unfold.

Laughing so much, innocently and carefree was a new experience for him but with it, the tension and stress seemed to leave by the second and he realised, it was something he’d sorely needed. Struggling with his own mind was no laughing matter but this?
He’d have a difficult time being able to adequately thank him. How did he thank someone who had experienced much more of the world? Even if the reason was solely for Alistair’s own amusement, he’d indirectly helped him in the process.

Though Dumbledore tried to restore order with the aid of a Sonorous charm, it worsened the result. Only a small handful of those watching noticed his expression darken imperceptibly. Though the general population thought his opinion on pranks were positive, that only applied when not directed towards him. Anything which tarnished his authority and reputation he was firmly against. This made a mockery of the man that he had become and this was beyond a simple prank. Short of mass obliviation not a soul in this room would forget today. He demanded respect and seriousness and yet he was made a laughing stock. No student had successfully managed to prank him until now and with the Weasley twins gone, he had no idea who had stepped up to the task. The thought that one of his colleagues did this never crossed his mind, believing that childish pranks were beyond all of them. He considered Harry but for everything else that the boy was, a practical joker wasn’t one of them. The question remained, who? He didn’t know, but he’d find out and how they did it as well. He already knew it wasn’t the Lemon Drops as multiple times he’d checked for traces of spells and found none. No matter what he tried he was unable to remove them either. He couldn’t go to the Ministry like this and had every intention of waiting it out. At least he had those strangely more tempting than usual sweets to sample. He chalked it down to a simple sugar craving and not much thought beyond that.

Before the situation flew completely out of control Harry watched, breathless with laughter still as McGonagall swiftly restored order and with it, breakfast began.

“I haven’t laughed like that in ages!” Harry exclaimed, face nearly splitting with his grin.

All of them were relieved to see Harry happy. Even Lilah had noticed something was off with him and while she didn’t know who had done the prank, she enjoyed it anyway.

Hermione had quickly caught on to who the culprit was, catching their brief exchange earlier. She mouthed one word.

‘Alistair?’
At his nod of confirmation, she hid a smile by swiftly looking down, to focus on her plate. Neville, Ginny and Luna had come to the same conclusion and though they didn’t speak further of it, the mood between them was much lighter.

Maybe after this, he would feel more at ease in the Hall. He could only hope but in the case of it ever being too much for him, he believed it was time to ask.

‘After classes have ended, do you have time to spare?’

‘I always have time for you.’

Warmth encased his heart with those words. ‘Will you teach me about Golem creation? I’ve.. been having problems with this room recently because Dumbledore is here. If it gets too much I thought I could have one in my place.’

‘Of course, I will. If this will aid in helping you feel better then I am happy to be of assistance.’

He breathed a sigh of relief. The more options available to him in this situation, the better.

‘Thanks.’

Though the laughter had died down some, it didn't stop the occasional chuckle here and there. Dumbledore continued on as normal, or about as normal as he could considering the situation with a five-minute extension to the morning, due to the delay.

"Shimmering Whistler."
Harry blinked rapidly, mind trying to comprehend the two words of Luna's. He was about to question them but guessed what they were in relation to. He'd taken to carrying the notebook around with him and if anyone else should happen to look, it would show a various list of book titles, rather than what it actually was. Silently he handed it over to Luna along with a pen. Adding it she handed it back over to him, adding another three points to her total. Two for originality and one for the name itself. He had no idea where it would go from here, it was simply another way for him to take the piss, truth be told.

Curiosity got the better of him, finishing the last of his orange juice. "What does that mean?"

It didn't take long for her to respond, staring almost vacantly into space. "Whatever you wish it to."

Well, it was open to interpretation, then. For Harry it would mean only dogs could hear his voice, imitating a whistle. As for the shimmering, probably the way his eyeshadow looked beneath the light. Daring to glance over he thankfully wasn't looking in Harry's direction and once more he burst into laughter. Quieter this time, lest his risk the wrath of McGonagall. He knew she was just as amused though, even if she didn't admit it. Heart lighter than ever before once it was time for morning classes Harry left, ready to give his all in each lesson.

A sense of contentment and sheer satisfaction filled Alistair. It had worked of course, but better than he'd expected. In truth, the compulsion charm was weak, which only meant Dumbledore consumed sugar at an alarming rate. Not every spell could be detected if the one in question knew how to hide them. Alistair knew of many ways to do this and the results today indicated that he'd consumed three of the seven sweet colours available, one of each. Not all of them were fast acting, some were slow such as the Lemon Drop with hair growth. Cutting it would only ensure it grew back quicker than previously.

The Blue Lemon Drop targeted clothing while the green altered voices. All three combined produced the species of Headmaster all had seen today. The makeup wasn't a prank but the penalty for trying to remove said pranks.

He had met many men and women like Albus Dumbledore. They were the kind to gain a
nourishment of sorts from attention and recognition. If they were well known and able to be influential, all the better. He had seen cases where this had been used with both good and bad intentions. What better way but to prank him in a manner that took away from his reputation? While they wouldn't forget his past actions, students and staff alike who were there to witness it would never quite look at him in the same light again.

Unless he became suspicious enough to halt all Lemon Drop consumption, the fun was guaranteed to continue for the next few days. If a Lemon Drop of the same colour was consumed, it would cancel out the first. Though Alistair had planned this for revenge, half of it was for Harry.

Though he hadn't spoken to him, Alistair had noticed that something wasn't right. It would be naive to think that once Harry wasn't trapped within his own mind, that the problems would end there. He suspected that wouldn't be the case, however, he had no wish for him to suffer any longer. He wasn't the kind of person to press for answers, happy to wait until Harry was ready to share, whether it was with him or another person he trusted. Forcefulness wasn't a part of his nature and never would be, much preferring the use of persuasion and calm rationality where possible.

Harry's pure, unfiltered laughter was like a soothing balm to the soul and with each day, Alistair found a new facet of his personality. He had never met anyone who, if given the opportunity, could flourish and grow into someone so wonderful. Though Alistair already thought the world of him now he knew like with everyone, the potential for growth would only help him shine brighter. He didn't make a habit of setting life goals, but for now, he did have one. for Harry's mint chocolate truffle smile and today's laughter, to be a common occurrence rather than a rarity.

"Dare I know what it is you're thinking?"

Turning to Minerva, he didn't miss a beat. "Why, how charming you are, of course."

Accompanying this was a cheerful grin, not being sarcastic in the slightest, though Alistair had no idea he could feel a sneer being aimed in his direction, up until Severus, that is.

Sending him a shrewd glare without heat, she was once more reminded of Sirius Black in a way, only without the arrogance. Those men were the only ones who were able to get away with acting in such a manner and not suffer her ire in response. Perhaps it was a particular skill trait only available
to certain individuals. However, for how similar they were, the differences were larger than life. While Sirius was unable to mature past his teenage years, there were times where Alistair seemed far older.

With every candidate for Professor, it listed their name, age, qualifications and experience. As Deputy Headmistress she looked over each one alongside Albus. Alistair had twice the experience at half of the age, at 26. There weren't many people that she admired, but he was among one of the few.

There were a rare few Professors she respected or even liked that decided to take up the position of teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, Remus one of the few in years and like with him, she would be said to see Alistair go as no doubt the curse placed by Tom Riddle on the position would ensure he didn't stay for longer than a year. A rumour it might be, but she wholly believed in it. She would make the most of the time she had to chat with her colleague.

Though Alistair only occasionally engaged with Dumbledore enough to dissuade any suspicion of him not being fond of the man, he couldn't help himself. If he had the opportunity, it was rare that he didn't take it. Seated between Minerva and Severus, Alistair caught the man’s eye.

“Ah Albus, May I just say that you look rather striking? The hues of red do wonders for your skin tone. It accentuates the twinkle in your eyes beautifully and the glossy sheen of your hair is to die for.”

Some within earshot didn’t know if he was serious or joking, but the sincerity nonetheless shone through. Minerva and Severus placed their bets on the latter, though Dumbledore himself didn’t know how to react. Speaking probably wasn’t the best choice he could have made.

“Thank you, my boy.”

The squeaky voice hadn’t worn off any and while Alistair’s comment had ignited the flames of mirth, Dumbledore added coals to it.
In the middle of sipping her tea, it had taken every ounce of professionalism before now to not crack a smile at Albus’ appearance. As strict and somewhat mirthless as she appeared to be, her well of humor, in fact, ran deep. Though she disapproved with some of the Marauder’s pranks, there were others genuinely harmless that had her chuckling in the privacy of her office. Today was one such occasion, in the form of her tea lightly spraying across the table.

Feeling the eyes of her colleagues she waved her wand over the slight mess.

“One moment.”

With every privacy spell known to wizardkind, she disappeared for that moment going unheard, out of sight and mind. Alistair’s own amusement flared. He wouldn’t speak any more of this, however, he could guess what she was doing, as chuckles resurfaced here and there.

The darkened mood around him was more noticeable, as students left for their morning classes and a moment later, Minerva reappeared. She looked the same as always, save for a telltale glint in her eyes.

The staff soon joined the students, a few somewhat concerned on just how they’d get their classes to focus on the task at hand and not the events over breakfast.

Though he expected as much, Harry’s classes were certainly eventful. Though he didn’t have Potions he doubted Professor Snape or McGonagall would stand for any nonsense. With Charms Professor Flitwick indulged them for a few minutes, taking the opportunity to turn it into a learning session with a possible combination of charms used to achieve such a prank.

The prank was all anyone had talked about, alongside possible culprits. Not one of them suspected a staff member and most thought the Weasley Twins has somehow snuck back into the school and were masquerading as 1st years. Honestly, Harry wouldn’t put it past them and what he’d heard from Ginny, business was booming.
With lessons over, Alistair had agreed on a time of 6 pm at the DADA classroom. Dressed in casual clothing since outside of school hours was his own time, Harry arrived outside of the door five minutes early and hopefully by the end of this session, he would come away with the knowledge to further protect himself, if the need arose.

Chapter End Notes

Definitely more pranks where that came from xD
Shoulder to Lean On

Chapter Summary

Harry makes progress in what he set out to do, Alistair shares a memory and Lilah wants everyone to be happy.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: An unforgettable morning, as Albus Dumbledore shows off his womanly charm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knocking softly on the door, Harry called out.

"Professor?"

“Come in.”

Doing so he opened it, comforted by the familiar sight of woodland scenery, grass beneath his feet. Wanting to feel it more naturally he removed his footwear, placing it aside and wiggling his toes in the earth.

Raising his head he was surprised that Alistair had joined him, also barefoot. At his questioning look, a gentle smile was shown.

“We are in the classroom, but on our own time. Whatever will allow you to feel at ease, I will join in.”

He continued, mischievous twinkle present within his eyes.

“Therefore you are free to use my name. Unless you receive a certain enjoyment by addressing me as Professor?”
He really didn’t want Alistair to see what thoughts flickered briefly across his mind, so did his best to not dwell on them.

“I’m alright, I’ll use your name. Alistair.”

He said as much to make a point. His shirt today was a deep, almost blood red colour, he couldn’t help but wonder if there was a colour that didn’t suit him.

He soon forgot all about that though, with Alistair’s next comment.

“What are your thoughts on the Headmaster’s new look?”

His mischievousness hadn’t abated any, the chuckle following that filled with delight. Still enthusiastic and somewhat giddy from earlier today, his excitement came through.

“Brilliant!” Fist pumping the air, he laughed happily. Green eyes brightening, they flickered as though they really were emeralds. “How did you do it?”

Alistair bathed in the glow of Harry’s joy, more than happy to explain.

“Lemon Drops of various colours, three of each. The spells are contained within and upon consumption, they activate.”

As he went into detail Harry listened with rapt attention. The fact that he had a lot of knowledge at his disposal and put it to use through pranking made it so much better. One thing was for sure, he’d be showing Remus his memory of Dumbledore.

He still didn’t know how to thank him, for everything really. His smile was near blinding and he’d never forget this day any time soon.

“I haven’t laughed like that in ages, you’re the best. Thank you.”
There was so much warmth in his tone, that he’d caught himself off guard. It seemed as if with him he could let everything go. His friends he was comfortable around certainly, but Alistair had seen him more than once at his lowest moments and yet, was still here. It provided a degree of closeness different from that of his friends or Remus. The fact that Alistair wasn’t there and hadn’t witnessed all that they had of him personally made it easier. Before now he didn’t know much of Harry and hearing about him from the source and for himself provided a different perspective.

While he’d made the observation of Harry gaining a new dimension to his personality, Alistair was experiencing something similar, but with his heart. It curiously fluttered within his chest at those words. It was a pleasant if new feeling.

“You are always welcome. Shall we begin?”

Refocusing his attention, Harry nodded sharply. Like always, he appreciated any knowledge shared by the one who had gathered much of it. Watching, he prepared himself for the task ahead.

Alistair possessed the sort of voice which could captivate a class without the use of shouting, much like Professor Snape. The only difference was the overall mood.

“There is no incantation required. How much magic you have and a combination of willpower is key to successful deception. The first known records of golem usage date back to one of my ancestors. She was due to attend a formal meeting, and her reluctance to was strong enough that magic manifested in a lifelike form of herself. Confused but delighted she managed to send it in her stead. Unfortunately, since it was not intentional, it faded part way through the meeting. She was unable to explain the incident but recorded it and over centuries, we have been able to perfect this.”

It was strange how magic came to be and not all of it was created purposefully. He could picture Fred and George doing something similar. Then, he remembered the process of creation with the prisoner’s golems.

“Why do you use hair or nail clippings then?”

Alistair inclined his head. “A good question. They are a part of us and if used it not only allows the process to be simpler but provides a stronger connection between the golem and creator.”

That made sense. He found it fascinating how a replica of himself could be made from it. He wasn’t sure if the Wizarding world had Primary Schools but he remembered learning of DNA and cloning.
Usually, in class, he preferred to watch from the sidelines but recently he'd began to take more part in discussions alongside the practical aspect of lessons. He believed it was partly due to his increased confidence but also the diversity of Alistair's lessons that allowed him to feel as though he could ask questions without fear of ridicule. Though Professor Snape didn't help with that side in his earlier years, he knew the majority of his Professors would do no such thing. But the combination of his relatives and Primary School teacher ensured he kept quiet. He was coming out of his shell more and seeing sides of himself that he didn't know existed. Questions came to mind and as they did he voiced them, with little to no hesitation.

"You said before that a slip of focus could drain my magical core. When in the middle of creating one, is magic output out of my hands for that time?"

Alistair’s eyes lit up. He truly enjoyed being able to teach someone and when the other person was willing and interested to learn more, all the better.

“It is dependent upon how much magic resides within the Witch or Wizard. Too little and attempting this would be a threat to their core. For you, it is more than possible. However, I would not create more than one at a time for the moment. Concern over core drainage would only put it at risk of depletion if you attempt to regulate control.”

More questions might arise later, but Harry was eager to get started. Indicating he understood Alistair’s explanations, his curiosity was plain to see. He decided to give a demonstration first so that he could get a feel for how it should be done.

Watching every movement closely, Alistair plucked a strand of hair, letting it rest in the centre of his palm.

“No one knows you better than yourself. That is always the optimal starting point.”

Those were the last words he spoke before his attention focused on the task at hand. Wand drawn and pointed at his palm all was silent. Though Harry couldn’t see a physical change, the sudden shift in the air was unmistakably charged with raw power. As the hair began to float Alistair carefully lowered his arm, not breaking concentration for a moment. Slowly but surely the hair was absorbed into a soft ball of light, growing larger and taking shape by the second. Then, stood directly opposite him, was a perfect replica of Alistair. It must have only taken 30 seconds at the most. It was amazing, to say the least.
Curiosity getting the better of him Harry approached the golem, stretching out a hand to touch the side of its face. As he did he was surprised that even then, it was lifelike and held warmth of the real one.

Before he could react, golem-Alistair took his hand, pressing a kiss to the back of it. The real Alistair was by his side still and though it was supposed to be internal dialogue, the words accidentally left him.

“This is great, but my heart can’t cope with two of you.”

It was true as well, with it practically going ten to the dozen due to actions very much like his creator. With a delighted chuckle, the golem vanished, Alistair’s eyes searching his.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I'll give it a shot.”

Harry was determined but nervous in case he completely fucked up. Sensing this Alistair tried to reassure him.

“You will be alright. I am here if things go awry.”

His words did help, as Harry listened to instructions given. The more detail that could be added, the more effective it would be. Visualisation was a large part of this, such as power flowing into the single strand of hair and shaping it into something solid.

More than once his concentration was broken, trying to rush instead of allowing it to happen in its own time. Firmly reminding himself that Alistair was 1,484 years his senior and therefore Harry would take much longer, he went at his own pace.

Encouraged by the gradual progress, he included all the details he could, right down to the finer points. Before long, another Harry appeared.

He was relieved he’d managed to do something at least. But then, he noticed Alistair’s expression
became troubled. Worried at this turn of events, he couldn’t keep the disappointment from his tone.

“Did I do something wrong?”

At his despondence, Alistair returned to himself.

“Not at all, there is nothing here that I can fault. Only..”

He trailed off, unsure what to say. It was true, there was nothing wrong with his golem. However, the real Harry and golem Harry were not perfect replicas. Alistair had spent enough time in front of the mirror to be classed as vain but really, he held an accurate representation. He didn’t see himself as more attractive than he really was or less attractive, he simply was. But with Harry, the difference was noticeable.

While golem Harry shared the same height, physique and eye colour, it lacked everything else that made him the person stood before Alistair now. The shine of intelligence was missing, eyes dim and unaware. His posture lacked any form of confidence and though no words were spoken, it was as though it wanted to sink beneath the floor and never return. It was Harry but at the same time, not. Self-perception would change the outcome, but Alistair never expected this.

And then, he had an idea. Approaching golem Harry he moved it to the side. With a small wave of his hand, a full-length dress mirror faced him. Standing just to the side, he softly gave his next instructions.

“Can you describe your reflection to me? What is it that you see?”

Harry had an idea of what the problem was now. His self-image was warped and he knew as much but didn’t think it would be particularly noticeable. He’d been told so many things over the years that it had practically bled into him and with it, transformed into that golem. He couldn’t speak for a moment, voices of more than one in his mind with words etched into memory.

‘Stupid whelp, you’re better off dead.’

‘You’d be lucky to get a prostitute, Potter. No one would ever want someone who looks like you.’
‘Ugly little freak. Get out!’

His relatives were a charming bunch, really. So quick to 'compliment' him. At the rising heat in the room, Harry realised that Alistair had heard those. Giving him a glance from the corner of his eye he lowered his head, ashamed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for them to affect what it looked like.”

Alistair was quick to respond. “That is through no fault of your own. Please, raise your head.”

As he did so, Harry was reassured by the warmth in his eyes. Looking at his reflection, Harry tried not to let the comments of others cloud what he saw but in the end, it was similar.

“There’s nothing about me that stands out. If it wasn’t for the scar on my forehead I’d fade into the background. I don’t see myself as appealing in any way, I just exist, for lack of a better word. I look healthier definitely, but to say I resemble either of my parents is an insult to them. Both are wonderful people, inside and out. I share my mother’s eye colour but beyond that, nothing else.”

Harry found himself uncomfortable staring at his own reflection, promptly turning away.

What broke Alistair’s heart was not just the words themselves, but that they were delivered as though it was a fact. He truly saw himself in this way and looking at how confident Harry had become, Alistair wouldn't have thought as much. Just when he believed those thrice damned relatives of his couldn't get any worse, they managed to lower the bar significantly.

Feeling a presence behind him Harry glanced up, meeting the eyes of Alistair in the mirror’s reflection. Somehow, like this, their height difference was even more apparent. He either couldn’t or didn’t want to look away, but the air had cooled in comparison to before. Resting hands on his shoulders, Alistair murmured into his ear.

“Would you like me to say exactly what I see?”

Oh, god. This never went well for him. Scared, he could only nod. The urge to turn away once more was overwhelming, but Alistair’s words rooted him to the spot, stunned.
“I see a confident young man with much to offer the world if it would let him. He has an aura that is simply wonderful to be around and he inspires others with every word and action. He is a selfless, kind individual who is happy to give those a chance that many wouldn’t. He is a light among darkness of the human race, with a lovely smile to match.”

Being complimented so much and directly to his face was almost overwhelming, unable to help but blush. Alistair spotted the opportunity for further teasing, embracing it fully.

“Did I happen to mention that he has the most endearing blush when complimented and that his eyes are the most captivating shade of green?”

“Hey, that’s too much..”

Harry muttered, but there was no annoyance present at all, only a small smile. For now, the memories of past comments were a blur, nothing but Alistair’s words filling his mind and heart. The mirror vanishing, he removed his hands from Harry’s shoulders. Aiming his wand at the golem, it disappeared.

“Would you like to try again?”

Nodding Harry took deep breaths, focusing himself. He found it easier than before, falling into the same pattern he’d adopted previously. Only this time, his mindset was different. He produced the results he wanted a little faster this time and as his second golem materialised, he could hardly believe the difference.

This one was full of life, with strength to match its physique. While there was a hint of pain within the eyes, it was balanced with confidence and an appreciation for life. It held itself in a way which suggested it wouldn’t be beaten down by anyone and honestly, real Harry loved the change.

“This is how I look to you?”

He asked, eyes finding Alistair’s own and filled with wonder.

“It is. But this is also exactly how you appear to be. Not exaggerated in any manner, but the truth.”
The truth. He wanted to believe it but found it difficult doing so. He didn’t doubt that was how Alistair saw him but to see it for himself and believe the same? That would take time.

Alistair also knew that for Harry, self-belief would happen gradually. However, he was more than willing to tell him exactly what he thought daily if it would allow him to believe for himself. If faced with the same trials, he couldn’t say with confidence that he’d turn out even half the man that Harry had become.

“Can I keep trying?”

The determination to succeed burned within him, similarly to learning the Patronus charm when Remus was a Professor. He didn’t want to stop now while he had a good grasp of things and felt as though he could continue for a while longer.

He knew his own limits and Alistair wasn’t about to stop him. Giving the go-ahead he watched over silently, the room empowered with the flow of Harry’s magic. Aware that the more detail equalled higher magic use Harry was careful to not overdo it and after a while, stopped. Exhaustion crept at the edge of his vision and the last thing he wanted to do was black out from pushing himself too much. Wand springing back into its holster he flexed the hand that was holding it, stiff from gripping so firmly. As he did this, Alistair voiced his thoughts.

“You never cease to impress me.” His gaze became passionate. “You are sixteen and yet, have a remarkable grasp of magic itself. Though this form of magic is not known of outside our own kind, it would be classified at senior Auror level due to the danger it poses. Though there is more to learn, this is an excellent start.”

Alistair’s praise and compliments were on par with the feeling of catching the snitch, it was that euphoric for him. Especially because he meant every word. He would never grow tired of it as he was starved of more than just affection throughout his childhood.

Though Alistair came to rely on the bracelet to gauge Harry’s mood, he found himself needing it less and less with exception of extreme circumstances. He could see for himself that Harry was tired, even if he had grown adept at hiding it from most people.

Alistair cupped a hand to his ear jokingly.

“I believe that I hear refreshments calling our name.”
Following behind him, Harry didn’t protest. In fact, he could almost swear he heard the very same voice. Spending time with Alistair, he found to be relaxing but in a different way to his friends and Remus. Perhaps not relaxing for his heart as that engaged in a vigorous workout but for the rest of him, certainly.

How sofas seemed to be softer after a day of moving vigorously was magic in itself, as sinking into it was the first thing Harry did upon entry to Alistair’s quarters. It was so comfortable in fact, that he could sleep right then and there. Struggling to fight off the urge of doing so, he appreciated the cool drink carefully placed into his hands.

Making even the simplest of movements elegant, Alistair seated himself next to him. Peering into the man’s cup curiously, Harry’s lips upturned into an amused smile.

“Pumpkin juice again? I swear they should use you as an advertisement.”

Harry’s overactive imagination struck again, in the form of him not just drinking it.

“Ah, it is a delight to see the marvel that is an active teenage mind.”

Instead of answering as he knew he’d only embarrass himself further, even if the blush gave it away he drank from his cup, eyes immediately lighting up.

“Cranberry juice! You remembered?”

He’d only mentioned it in passing, one of those drinks he chose not to have often precisely because it was his favourite. Somehow, it became more special if he just had it occasionally.

“It is a detail about you. No matter how important or unimportant you consider it to be, I will remember it.”

Harry could tell he was serious. Just when he thought he couldn’t possibly be any more content, he
was proven wrong. No one had ever gone to such lengths as remembering even the little things. He appreciated it more than words could convey.

Comfortable silence passed between them, as Harry debated whether he should ask what was on his mind. Cranberry juice finished he placed the cup aside and with nothing to occupy him, fingertips drummed against his lap, a little restlessly.

Keeping an eye on his companion, Alistair smiled to himself. While Harry hid a lot of his true self, with him, he was very expressive and much like an open book, even if at times the words which left his mouth weren’t quite what he expected.

“Can you tell me a story?”

Harry finally asked what he’d wanted to but aloud, he realised just how childish that sounded, hastily continuing. “You must have more experiences than the population of Hogwarts put together. You don’t need to though if you don’t want to.”

If he wished it, Alistair could share hours of stories. They became more treasured when another was by his side to hear them. He didn’t hesitate to answer.

“I am pleased that you asked, of course, I will.”

Excited, Harry wondered what it was he’d hear about. Though history through the eyes of someone who had seen it personally, anything about his own personal experiences would be appreciated as well. Much like the time Alistair read to him in the Lothaire library, his voice gently spread across all corners of the room, captivating him.

“For the first years of our life, we are to avoid all forms of light until we have the means to resist it. Protection through magic will only provide so much and it wasn’t until I reached the age of 100 that I could comfortably function during the daytime. Travelling to different parts of the world is a passion of mine, however, my very nature restricted me.”

Feeling a weight on his arm, he looked down into the eyes of Harry and unlike before, his actions were intentional rather than unconscious. He had never been shown so much trust by anyone other than his own kind, others sadly more close-minded than he thought they’d be.
“What’s the first thing you did, the moment you became free?”

Hazy green eyes watched him intently.

Alistair sensed the weight of Harry’s words, who had freed himself over the Summer. Eyes flickering with nostalgia, he let himself to be immersed with memories of the past.

“While during the day offered an entirely new dynamic, I revisited the places I loved, to watch the sun rise and set. It is a common occurrence and yet, I was unable to watch from anywhere but indoors, operating under the cover of night if I wanted to leave. Dependant upon the location, it is different each time. But, the most beautiful I have encountered to date..”

He thought for a moment, head tilting to the side in consideration. There were many which resonated within him and even after all these years, he never took for granted what he could do now in comparison to the first decades of his life. He could be there in the moment at any time of day, to do what he wished.

There was a few moments of silence between them, Harry looking up at him in anticipation.

“..Butterfly Beach, California. Its beauty is simply breathtaking. It was the last time I travelled as soon after, was Solomon’s disappearance. I shut myself away but even so, the memory was enough to be a reminder of the wonderful times.”

Blissful yet melancholic. That was Harry’s first impressions and without consciously deciding to do so, lightly rested his hand on top of Alistair’s own, keeping his tone optimistic.

“It sounds amazing. Everything’s good now though, you can return there one day.”

At Harry’s show of support, Alistair returned to himself. It wouldn’t do for him to be swept away by past isolation, as he was right. At the moment, everything was as good as it could be. Though he could project precisely what he saw that evening to Harry, he didn’t want to spoil it, as a part of him hoped that upon his return, he would not be alone. Instead, he settled for as detailed a description as possible, voice satin-soft.

“The moment my bared feet met golden sun warmed sands, it was as if I gained a deeper connection. No destruction but peace, the only sign that I was there being faint footprints not yet touched by sea.
Palm trees softly swayed in the breeze, darkly defined shapes that supported the sky and within their shadows, sand spared from the sun’s rays. Nothing disturbed this tranquillity, save for gentle waves teasingly lapping at the shore. The sea became a mirror to reflect all above and as I raised my head to look, an artist’s canvas. They had taken the brush of life and painted sure strokes with not a single lonely colour. A kaleidoscope of them, blending ever so slightly. Each time this brush was rinsed with seawater, it slowly came to resemble its reflection. Sitting beneath the palm tree I closed my eyes, relaxing among naturalness barely touched.”

Feeling the grip on his hand slacken, Alistair looked down into the sleeping face of Harry, leaning against his shoulder and with it, experienced a sense of déjà vu. Though lulling him to sleep wasn’t Alistair’s intention, he found himself relieved of the outcome as, without his usual glamours, the exhaustion was noticeable through the circles beneath his eyes. He was confident that he was safe and relaxed enough to fall asleep and that it wasn’t because of boredom. The day that Alistair was boring, would be the day that Severus declared his undying love for all things Gryffindor.

Amused for a second if that actually happened, Alistair had no intention of waking him. Carefully manoeuvring him to lie on his back stretched out, he temporarily transfigured his clothing into something suitable for sleeping. Then, leaving the room he came back a moment later, pillows and duvet from his bed at wand point, hovering in mid-air. Placing the duvet over him Alistair gently lifted his head up, pillows slipping beneath it.

Watching him he realised that even in sleep, a furrow of distress formed between his brows. Crouching beside him Alistair softly stroked his head, magic flowing through the fingertips in an effort to further soothe.

“Rest well, Harry.”

Coming to stand again, Alistair’s chest tightened with the overwhelming affection he held for him. It had been a long time since he’d felt this way, even past partners. Aware that Lilah would return soon he put privacy charms in place, to ensure that Harry wouldn’t be disturbed by noise.

It wasn’t a moment too soon on Alistair’s part, hearing the door to his quarters open with such force, it slammed into the wall opposite. Meeting the eyes of Lilah he gave her a faintly admonishing look.

“Sorry, I got excited..”

Cheeks slightly flushed she made a point of softly closing the door. Alistair couldn’t be in the least bit irritated with her. She had the most infectious energy and there was nothing more he needed to say. It didn’t put a dampener on her mood however as she returned to her bouncing self.
“Today was so good! I got to learn loads of stuff and won points for Gryffindor too! But guess what?”

“I am not sure, you will have to tell me.”

Alistair’s eyes twinkled with delight, enjoying the moment. He didn’t want to linger in his response, half worried she’d burst with the need to tell him.

“I got five points from Professor Snape for my Potion! I heard people say mean things about him, but he’s only strict because Potions are dangerous right? Harry said he had trouble with him in the past but to give him a chance. I trust Harry so I’m gonna give everyone a chance.”

Seriousness punctuated the excitement within her eyes and Alistair was pleased. He wanted everyone to give Severus a chance. He was by no means innocent but wanting a truce with Harry showed that he was ready to move past the animosity once held for him and at least in one sense, he was changed.

“You have done a marvellous job, I am proud of you. I am sure your father will be when I inform him of your progress as well.”

The mention of him only heightened her happiness. He noticed that the moment she came in and even while opening and shutting the door, she held something carefully in her hand. Noticing his gaze she placed it on her head, beaming.

“Luna made it! She’s an empath too and helping me out. They’re my favourite flower. But how did she know? I didn’t tell her.”

Her ability to jump from one topic to another so quickly was astounding, something he found common among the first years. Luna struck Alistair as the type to instinctively know things without an explanation of why. A shroud of mystery always seemed to accompany her and he was content that Lilah had support from a fellow empath, as both unconsciously projected themselves to sense emotion and with that, he was made aware of their ability.

“I am afraid I don’t have an answer to that question. However, what I will say is that the carnations are lovely. They suit you very much.”
He softly patted her head, his own flower crown by the bedside table. Luna truly had a gift and was one of the kindest yet eccentric people he’d had the pleasure of meeting.

At that moment Lilah couldn’t be happier. It was when she was about to take a seat, that the sleeping Harry came into view. Worry and slight fear threatened to swarm the cheerful mood completely as while she aspired to be even half the person Luna was, she’d adopted Harry as an older brother, at least within her mind. If anything happened to him she wasn’t sure what she’d do. Her voice left, weak and trembling.

“Is he ok?”

She wanted to run and be by his side, but a gentle hand stopped her as he spoke soothingly.

“He is fine, simply exhausted.”

Harry’s discomfort even in sleep was apparent to her. Deciding something she went into her room, putting her flower crown away and coming back with a medium sized plush rabbit. Alistair could tell it was well loved, the black fur and cottontail a little discoloured in places. With a small nose that he could picture twitching, soft floppy ears and glass eyes a warm chocolate brown, it was rather sweet looking.

She held it up, for Alistair to see. “This is Ray. He protects me from bad dreams, but he can protect Harry too.”

She silently looked at him for permission and after a small nod, carefully pulled the corner of the duvet towards her, placing Ray at Harry’s side. Satisfied she let it fall back into place, watching him all the while.

“Ray’s special. Can you see his fangs?”

Upon closer inspection, Alistair realised that there were tiny fangs just beneath the stitching creating his mouth. Taking a seat on the armchair opposite Harry Lilah curled up, Alistair joining her in the other as her voice became fraught with emotion.

“I got really lonely on my own and the kids who knew what I am didn’t want to play with me. I just
stayed inside a lot ‘cause I burn in the sun easily. Dad made Ray and I take him everywhere. Before Hogwarts, he was my first kind of friend. He doesn’t talk but he’s been there for me.”

She averted her eyes, sighing.

“Stupid, I know..”

Sometimes, children didn’t know any better and that was when the adults needed to step in and act as guides. Lilah like Harry was deprived of friendship, something which many others took for granted. She had done nothing to anyone, her very nature was something she couldn’t help.

Recently, Alistair had found it more difficult to organise a meeting where everyone would be available, including non-magic Vampires as the majority had gone rogue, for lack of a better term. They had been on the rise recently and he didn’t know who was responsible for the increase, but they caused more harm than good. Those born as Vampires learned to control their instincts overtime while others turned later on in life either couldn’t or chose not to. Rupert was the exception and an example for others to follow. But once a date was settled, he found himself not eagerly anticipating the outcome.

“Not at all. I have every confidence that Ray is a loyal friend to you and that he will protect Harry to the best of his abilities.”

Warily her eyes met his. Seeing nothing but support there she stared at him, in disbelief.

“You’re so good to me. Why aren’t you saying I’m too old for make-believe?”

“Because you are not. There are times that I allow my own imagination to run free. It is by no means a bad thing. What is magic, without imagination?”

That way of thinking seemed to broaden Lilah’s own mind. “I’ve never thought of it like that, maybe I could make a spell too!”

Alistair didn’t discourage her line of thinking, firmly believing that if he could do it, every magic user could. Giving a soft smile of encouragement, he let the pleasant mood settle between them for the moment. He was reluctant to spoil it, however, he would do so without a valid reason.
“Lilah.”

At Alistair’s serious tone, she knew what he was going to say and in response, curled herself into a tight ball.

“I don’t want to.”

Her voice was muffled, but not inaudible. He expected to be met with resistance, experiencing much of the same last week and while she was healthier already, nowhere near where she needed to be. Standing up, he crouched by her side and from up close, could see her pale green eyes peeking out. A teasing smile on his lips, he drew in close.

“Now this will not do. You are too adorable to hide like that.”

Despite the mood change she giggled slightly, raising her head some. In truth, he wasn’t experienced in this, not once even disliking the sensation of feeding, let alone a fear of it. But by no means would it stop him from doing the best he could to help.

Alistair’s patience alongside no anger or irritation to be seen allowed Lilah to uncurl from her self-made ball. He could see that she was resigned yet reluctant, so her next words surprised him.

“Can I do it myself? I’ve got to again sometime.”

Knowing that she was referring to making the marks herself rather than Alistair, he didn’t see why not. Her worry was made clear but even if she didn’t manage today, there was always another occasion as these things took time.

Knowing that she would feel drained afterwards, Alistair suggested that she get ready for bed, with little to no protests on her part, remembering what it was like the first and second time. Closing the bedroom door behind her Lilah changed into pyjamas, poking her head around the door afterwards.

“I’m ready.”
He could sense her nervousness even at a slight distance, attempting to put her at ease with a reassuring smile. This was a big step, not having fed from anyone but her father and even then, this was years ago.

Taking a seat on the edge of her bed Alistair loosened some buttons on his shirt, to give easier access. Biting her lip hard enough to be on the verge of bleeding, she tried her best to not resist the natural urge.

“Take your time.”

Nodding to indicate she understood his words, it was an internal struggle for a long moment. The words of Harry, Alistair and her dad filled her mind. She did want to get better and this was the best way to do it, the only way. Not every Dhampir could say they had the privilege of tasting blood willingly given by someone of pure lineage, after all.

Trying to think along those lines to help calm down, Lilah placed her hands carefully on Alistair’s shoulders. As she did, her eyes widened in surprise. It wasn’t her imagination, she was sure of it. His skin now radiated faint heat and forgetting herself for a moment, her hand moved to his chest. Struck speechless, she couldn’t believe it. She held a little warmth and a heartbeat of her own as she wasn’t a pure Vampire, however, she knew that pure Vampires had no heartbeat or warmth.

“How?” She cocked her head, looking at him questioningly.

Alistair had forgotten about that, adapting to it surprisingly well and was only just reminded that Lilah wasn’t aware of this. He only told her the basics, not wishing for her to know just what the Headmaster was like and his opinions on their kind. She accepted his explanation surprisingly well.

“Are you happier, like that?”

It took only a moment for him to answer.

“It is like I have recovered a part of myself, that I was unaware of missing.”

The brief divergence was enough to settle Lilah’s nerves, mind full of new revelations to the point where what she had to do didn’t seem quite as daunting.
Taking advantage of this she once more placed her hands on his shoulders, eyes shimmering golden. Fangs elongating, her movements were a little awkward but a moment later, they carefully sunk into his neck. Blood flowed freely, more than if he’d created the wound himself. The moment it touched her tongue, she was made aware of a hunger unable to be sated by food and no longer holding back, sucked fervently.

Though she was still somewhat fearful, he saw the lack of tears as a step in the right direction, as he didn’t like to see her upset. She didn’t need as much encouragement, a hand cupping the back of her head in support. Before long her grip on him loosened and with it, a swipe of her tongue to heal the puncture marks.

On the verge of dropping off, she managed to mumble some last words.

“Sorry, no good at healing. And I’m glad you found a part of you though..”

Before Alistair could respond, sleep claimed her. His own healing ability didn’t make it an issue, however, he appreciated her consideration. Rising to his feet, he adjusted her beneath the covers and with his handkerchief, gently wiped away all traces of blood. Cleaning it shortly after he switched off the lights, closing the bedroom door behind him.

Though he didn’t drink too often, he found it nice, on occasion. He had only touched the bottle of port he had dating back to 1868 once but tonight, it would be the second time. He’d brought a small collection of alcohol with him and much like his quarters, protected against intruders enough to put the goblins to shame. He’d had over a millennium to know his limits and certainly wouldn’t surpass them while he was responsible for teaching students. Though in truth, he couldn’t remember the last time he had.

Pouring a small measure into a wine glass and sitting down he sipped at it, savouring the rich and bountiful flavour. Caught up with marking, he instead chose to read Hogwarts: A History. It wouldn’t hurt to know more of the school he was teaching in so setting the port aside, for now, he crossed one leg over the other, book in hand. With Harry’s soft breathing in the background, Alistair allowed himself to be lost within the pages of history, if only for a short while.

Chapter End Notes

I can't trust any browser, they either run slow or delete my work. Microsoft Edge, the only thing its done is put me on edge when editing in case it freezes xD
Harry's morning is livelier than expected, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. Hermione reflects on a few days earlier, with her first meeting of someone who she found to be fascinating.

LAST CHAPTER: Alistair teaches Harry the art of Golem creation, both learning more along the way.

Peaceful. That was the first word which popped into Harry’s mind, caught between sleep and awareness. He always remembered if he'd had a nightmare because that would signal the end of his resting period. Nothing like that happened this time, but worryingly enough he couldn't remember returning to his dorm either. So where was he, exactly?

It took a moment to open his eyes, not entirely aware of the surroundings yet. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d fallen into such a deep sleep but as he did, memories trickled back, in dribs and drabs.

The accomplishment of making a start with Golem creation filled him with a sense of satisfaction, even if along the way he learned that how he saw himself wasn’t exactly accurate. Then afterwards, he talked with Alistair. The last thing he remembered was listening to his story of the Californian sunset.

Blinking, the ceiling came into view and as he suspected, it wasn’t the boy’s dormitory or even a bed. Not that he could tell, it was soft and comfortable enough with the only difference being its narrowness. He even had covers and pillows, the scent of them strangely familiar. A faint hint of honeysuckle?

And near his shoulder, a toy rabbit. Thoughts still sluggish, he failed to notice Lilah until it was too
“Morning Harry!”

Either she was louder than usual or his own hearing was sensitive for the time of day, but it startled him badly enough that he jumped and in a tangle of covers, fell to the carpeted floor. Sprawled face up he lay in a daze, managing to greet her in turn. Still somewhat stunned he tried to untangle himself from the covers and while doing so, picked up the rabbit as she stared down at him in puzzlement.

“Is this yours?” He asked Lilah, throat somewhat parched.

“Yeah! That’s Ray, he protected you from the bad dreams.”

She gave him a beaming smile, at least from his position. Sitting up, he patted Ray on the head, directing his words to the rabbit.

“Thank you.”

That made Lilah happier if possible, but as he handed Ray back she covered her mouth. A giggle escaped from behind it.

“What’s so funny?”

Before he could get an answer to that the door opened, Alistair emerging from his office. Seeing Harry on the floor his eyebrows arched faintly, amusement plain to see.
In an unconscious gesture, Harry scratched the back of his head. “I fell off.”

Crouching down, Alistair disentangled Harry’s legs. Banishing the cover and pillows back to his own room, he laughed softly all the while.

“I did happen to wonder at this morning’s commotion, but the mystery is solved.”

Alistair offered Harry a hand up. Taking it, he righted himself. Noticing Lilah’s gaze, he understood her earlier laughter. Conjuring a makeshift mirror he checked his appearance and sure enough, he had a duck’s arse going on. His hair stuck up in every direction imaginable, once again as Harry had let his hair go back to its natural state for now.

“Hehe, you got bedhead.”

Sending a mild glare in the giggling Lilah’s direction, he tried and failed to get his hair under some semblance of control, until Alistair stepped in with a helping hand. Quite literally as with the help of magic, Harry’s hair lay flatter than it ever had before.

“I’ve got to learn how to do that one.” He blinked at his reflection, surprised at how different he looked with hair that to others, seemed tameable.

Having her fill of fun Lilah didn’t stick around for much longer and with quick goodbyes to both, wanted to make the most of her weekend. Wishing he’d had that energy at her age running to the freedom of Hogwarts’ grounds, Harry should have known that Alistair wouldn’t let him escape without one comment.

“With such a hairstyle, what daring activities were you partaking in?”
Innocent in one sense he may be, but it didn’t take Harry long to follow his train of thought. At the start, he would have been lost for words but over time, he’d grown used to Alistair’s ways and while he couldn’t predict his words, Harry could predict the impact they would have on him.

"I'd say sleeping on my Defence Professor's furniture counts as daring."

Seeing his point, the corner of his lips upturned into a gentle smile. It was at that moment Harry noticed what he was wearing. Or rather, what he wasn't wearing. Caught between embarrassment and panic, he voiced his worries.

"Did you change my clothing?"

Alistair shook his head in the negative. "A simple transfiguration." To demonstrate, Harry's clothes returned to normal. He couldn't help but feel relief at that fact, not quite ready for the other man to find out he had more scars than most thought.

Then, a hopeful shimmer to his sunset eyes, one that Harry picked up on immediately even as elegant hands smoothly flowed through loose silken hair, to create his usual style. Half expecting more teasing, Harry was surprised by the words which left his lips instead.

"Would you like to join me for breakfast?"

Did Harry like Quidditch? The answer would always be a resounding yes, as more time with him was never a bad thing. Both subconsciously and consciously, he’d begun to believe that there weren’t enough hours in the day to know more about him.

Though Alistair didn't say as much, the way Harry eagerly nodded his head reminded him of an excitable puppy. Utterly adorable and though he gave no verbal response, this was all he needed to know as confirmation that Harry enjoyed spending time with him, as much as he enjoyed spending time with Harry.
Relocating to the kitchen attached after he freshened up in the bathroom, he took note of the familiarity it shared with Lothaire castle, even if on a smaller and simpler scale but like this, it gave off a certain charm. It was enough for him to forget that they were in fact inside a huge and drafty castle and not a cosy space almost reminiscent of Mrs Weasley's home, even if a lot less crowded.

Politely placing their orders with a House Elf, it didn't take long to arrive. Sitting opposite one another, the small plate of light and fluffy pancakes topped with blueberries was enough to rouse his appetite. Dietary requirements could be met as even now, Harry still didn't eat enough for someone of his age unlike Ron, with servings enough to feed an entire continent. Since he'd started actively changing his lifestyle, the amount he could eat had slowly but steadily increased, even if he had to watch himself around overly rich foods.

A voice of sorts broke the comfortable silence, in the form of Harry's stomach. Of course, it had to happen right there and then. It wasn't a quiet one either, the growl belonging to more of a voracious beast than anything else.

"Did you hear anything? I definitely didn't."

Harry attempted to pass off the noise, though was unsuccessful in the face of Alistair's knowing smile. Cream cheese bagel in hand, he watched as his breakfast companions' cheeks tinged with a familiar red.

"I believe that there is a kitten in need of feeding."

Pride rearing its head, Harry couldn't help but protest. "Why not a Lion?"

Then, he realised just what he was protesting, shutting himself up via a mouthful of pancake, to prevent himself from digging a hole he couldn't climb out of.
Silence once again fell between them, but it remained comfortable. The atmosphere as a whole was different and each time, it varied. With Remus, it was often back and forth banter over meals or discussion of the news. The Weasleys, it was what conversation he could hold or hear, over the top of many others happening simultaneously. Though it was crowded and somewhat hectic, family was the foundation of The Burrow. His late relatives were none of that and on the rare occasions he was allowed to sit at the dining table, he left the same time as everyone else, whether he'd finished eating or not and usually, he didn't. He'd given in to the instinct to wolf down food before and suffered for it, whether that was through feeling sick or Vernon's fists in response to him being like a wild animal.

Then, with his friends, he enjoyed the conversations and Alistair's prank had helped to break the tension somewhat. However his enjoyment was marred by the actions of Dumbledore and once he returned to normal, Harry was sure his anxiety would resurface. But right now, he'd class this moment as flawless. With the window slightly ajar, cool September breeze flowed through the air, sun shining softly through bruised clouds.

He wasn't sure if Alistair normally ate faster, but Harry noticed their pace was in sync. Here he was, an awkward teenage lump faced with a man who even when eating, every moment seemed to be well thought of with not a crumb out of place. Each bite wasn't too much or little but just right, enjoyment apparent as he casually polished off his first bagel.

Harry had stopped mid-bite to stare, only made aware of it when Alistair's eyes met his own.

"Like what you see?" The teasing had returned, but Harry was so content that his true thoughts slipped out.

"I always do." Harry's honesty was accompanied by a slightly bashful smile. This opened the way for further conversation, Harry able to provide a positive answer in response.

"Did you sleep well?" Alistair's eyes flickered with concern.

"I did, better than ever." He wished it would remain that way, but he was more open to conversations he'd normally keep tight-lipped about, realising that at this point, there wasn't much more to him than what Alistair already knew, having seen more than one of his past memories.
Thinking about what he wanted to say, he paused for a second to gather his thoughts, starting hesitantly. "I haven't been sleeping well over these past few days, it's like his attack on my mind shook loose memories I'd rather forget, they're more vivid than ever. So, it's a relief to feel refreshed."

Alistair's concern didn't lessen, expression more open than he'd ever seen it. "I am always available for a conversation if you are unable to sleep."

Harry finally lowered his gaze. He knew that he would be as well, but how much talking was too much?

"I didn't want to come across as annoying. I'm sort of used to dealing with it on my own and it's hard to break that habit. Sorry."

He genuinely meant it too, worrying at his lower lip. Alone with him, it was as if everything became stripped bare, emotion in particular. The touch of a hand on his was startling, though he couldn't bring himself to look up again just yet. He listened to Alistair's words intently and not for the first time, wondered if there was a limitation to his kindness.

"It is alright, there is no need to apologise. I simply wanted you to know that I am here should you have need of me and that conversations are a delight, rather than an annoyance."

Glancing up to see a smile as gentle as the sun's glow, Harry vowed that he'd try to rely on Alistair more, at least in this sense.

Finishing his breakfast shortly after Alistair, he gave a soft sigh of contentment. "They never disappoint."
Closing his eyes in bliss, they shot open immediately when Alistair ever so softly brushed the corner of his mouth and with a mischievous expression, licked the pad of his thumb.

"The blueberry sauce is particularly divine."

Oh, god. Did that just happen? There was no end to the whirling of his thoughts, replaying the moment over and over to try and make sense of it. He wasn't a flawless eater by any means, Alistair's actions proving this.

“Y-Yeah, definitely.”

He stumbled spectacularly over his words, wishing that the breeze was just a little cooler. Perhaps then, it could blow away the heat suffusing his cheeks. Thankfully Alistair didn’t leave a period of silence, his fanged grin telling all and swiftly moved on, saving him further embarrassment.

The morning passed by pleasantly, to the point where he nearly forgot one important thing.

“Does Professor McGonagall know where I am?”

He knew at this point it was probably a bit too late at 10:30 in the morning, but Alistair answered positively.

“I informed her last night.”

Harry could rest easy knowing this, but the longer he remained here, the more at risk of ribbing he suffered from his friends. They’d no doubt noticed he’d failed to return to the dorm and he didn’t think explaining it away would work either. He had to make a move. They’d returned to the living room earlier and rising from the sofa, Harry told him as much. Before he left, couldn’t help but ask
one thing.

“Maybe we could do this again?”

Alistair’s smile in response was breathtaking. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure.”

Reassured by his answer and giving a brief wave in farewell Harry left, closing the door behind him.

For Alistair, it was no lie on his part. While food and drink weren’t a necessity, he always enjoyed the company along with it, whether that was his colleagues or brother. The passage of time had lost meaning somewhat, having lived for so long but he’d found that with Harry, it had gained a new meaning previously unseen. He’d enjoyed sharing his knowledge and conversation and looked forward to future interactions.

As Harry expected, there was a barrage of questions from his friends and also, as expected, much wiggling of eyebrows from Ginny despite his protests of anything happening. After checking with his head of house and judging the weather as just right, Harry decided to follow up on the promise of a Quidditch match with Ginny, informing Alistair that they’d be having a friendly match for most of the day, as that was how it usually went.

There were various styles of Quidditch gear, some fully equipped for games and others that were lighter and easier to move in. Since it was a casual game Harry opted for the lighter protection, eager to see how his changes over the summer would benefit him. That and he was curious to see if Lume had any influence. There were so many things he didn't know but looked forward to finding out.

A surprising number of students had turned up, some to join in the game but most to watch and among them, several of the first years. Standing in the middle of the pitch with Ginny, Ron and several others from his house, he spotted Lilah and Dominik in the distance, giving a wave. Hermione, Luna and Neville sat at the very front, watching the proceedings even if for Hermione, it was over the top of a book.
Though Dumbledore occasionally decided to watch any Quidditch games or practice when the time was available, Harry expected his absence to be directly related to his little lemon drop problem. It was just as well really as he couldn't say with confidence that he'd be able to fully concentrate on the game.

Since it was a friendly game and not tryouts until a few day's time, Dean and Seamus had joined them. There was a small handful from the other houses, except Slytherin. He hoped that over time and much like the DA lesson he was running later on in the evening, he could encourage more inter-house cooperation and his truce with both Professor Snape and Malfoy, helped with this. It would be a work in progress, especially with others like Ron but over time, he believed it was entirely possible. Firebolt in hand, he waited to take to the air via broom once more, for the first time in months.

Hermione’s 17th birthday had flown by in the blink of an eye, but it was one to remember and perhaps the best she’d had so far. It was a modest celebration every year, but the small gathering in the Room of Requirement and the birthday cake made by Harry that was sugar-free and delicious took her completely by surprise. She even received a gift from Luna, something she didn’t expect but was thankful for as with her own changes, her mind was more open than before and to Luna’s different way of thinking. Just because there was no factual proof didn’t mean to say she was wrong. If there was one thing that Hermione had learned, not all books contained truth.

Though the end of the evening marked down a wonderful day, what happened before that remained prominent within her mind.

September 19th

“Well...” Hermione shouted, placing a hasty hand over her mouth when realising how loud she was. When called to Professor Lothaire’s office she’d expected many things, even to be in trouble, but not this.

He’d asked Professor McGonagall and with her permission, Hermione was allowed to leave the school grounds with him to see the library at Lothaire castle. To say all her birthdays and Christmas’ were wrapped into one would be an understatement. There was no word in the dictionary to properly describe her level of excitement and this was a gift in and of itself.
Caught up in Hermione’s own excitement, Alistair’s eyes twinkled happily. Her love of new things was refreshing and relieving to see that despite some of the young generation, there still remained the few with an appreciation for knowledge.

“Happy birthday, Hermione.”

His use of her first name only brought forth the current moment more, smile glowing in response.

“Thank you.”

They were to leave immediately and once outside of Hogwarts’ gates, she lightly touched Alistair’s arm. Though she knew how to apparate she hadn’t seen the non-magic or magic areas of Transylvania, having no idea what to expect and for this, needing guidance.

Though she wasn’t one to swear, something she’d heard frequently from another over the years automatically slipped out as for this moment, it seemed overly appropriate.

“Bloody hell.”

Shooting a sidelong apologetic glance at the man beside her but not trying to take back the words, Lothaire Castle easily rivalled Hogwarts in size. They were outside of the entrance and looking back, the risk to simply be here was much higher, being at the very top with a sloped rocky path leading to it.

It was the very epitome of Gothic architecture and though she’d seen the pictures Harry had taken when there, it truly didn’t do it justice. There was a certain intimidating air, wards stronger than any she’d come across before only contributing. Her eyes never stayed in one place, etching this into memory. The history of the structure must be fascinating as well and though most would be fearful at
practically walking into Vampire territory, Hermione only saw this as an opportunity to expand her field of knowledge and wholly treasured the opportunity and trust shown by the Professor.

The interior was no less amazing and despite having been introduced to the Wizarding world and their differences six years ago now, the novelty of it all hadn’t worn off. So many books classed as fairytales or fictional contained truth, without her knowing any better. By her side was a someone who hadn’t just seen a century go by, but several. While Hogwarts was an aged castle this had remained standing for twice as long, perhaps even more. The only thing that halted the barrage of questions so desperate to leave her was the probability of them being answered in the library.

Her voice was softer than usual, as though any loud noise would be an offence. “You have a wonderful home.”

Her genuineness shone through, enraptured by everything down to the finest detail.

Though Alistair believed as much, to hear it from another was appreciated. Though Hermione would certainly be intrigued if given a full tour, Alistair decided to take her straight to the library because if she was anything like his brother, the world outside of pages blurred to non-existence along with the passage of time.

Arriving outside of the library doors, this was where Alistair would leave her. She didn’t need to be supervised and while he was here, he could check in on those who remained still, like Jacob and Eduard. Their own home held too many memories, so they wanted to search for another. Alistair had many properties globally and it wasn’t only the humans who managed their finances with goblins. He had a good relationship with them and the effort to learn their language and communicate through it had thawed their icy gazes considerably. While the Goblins’ wards were impressive, his own was absolutely impenetrable. The only ones who would stand a chance were fellow Vampires his age or older. While the majority were under his jurisdiction of sorts, there were more who operated alone or outside of his influential circle. He hadn’t seen hide nor hair of them in centuries, though he had his suspicions of why. Those among his own kind who would be a threat hadn’t shown themselves however, he wasn’t naive enough to think the relative peace would remain.

So today, he would discuss a list of properties with father and son, to see if there was anything to interest them.
Giving her a warm smile, Alistair made his words brief as he could sense her eagerness.

“I shall take my leave here. I will return for you later. Enjoy!”

With a casual wink, he left Hermione alone and faced with the double doors. Heart pounding with anticipation her hands carefully pressed against the wood and with a light push opened them.

Motionless within the doorway it nearly closed again, until she remembered to step through. Her excitement was plain to see, eyes watering slightly. Though most would roll their eyes at her becoming emotional over something so simple, books were her first friends and she treated them well. Though Alistair had projected an image of the library within her mind to see, like Lothaire Castle, nothing could compare to seeing it in person. She wouldn’t betray the trust placed in her, overwhelmed at the sheer size of it. Noticing a particularly large book in the centre of the room, it was supported by a stand. Resting by its side was a self-inking quill and though Hermione had never seen one before, she could take a guess as to what it was for.

She hadn’t come with a particular topic in mind and falling into familiar childhood habits, let her hands gently run along the shelves to pick anything which sparked her interest.

Though she had magic at her fingertips to help, for years she’d carried a stack of books to the reading table. Her parents often commented that she should pursue a career in waitressing, as carrying so many and not dropping one was an impressive feat.

As the pile of books in her arms grew, so did the weight as they faintly trembled. It was getting to the point where she was unable to see clearly over the top of them, so stopped.

Making sure her footing was even, she was about to take a step forward, when half of the books stacked was promptly lifted off. Her load was lightened and as it did, a face came to view and she nearly dropped the remaining books stacked in her arms.
Making the connection immediately with familiar facial features, Solomon Lothaire supported the larger stack of books. Their sibling relationship was undeniable and yet, they couldn’t be more different.

With Alistair, Hermione had noticed that it was rare not to see a smile on his lips or for laughter to leave them and rarer still, to see him angry or even frowning. While most would let their anger be visibly shown when faced with Ron’s past attitude in class, Alistair tackled it in a different way, not letting the mood remain subdued and his charming and cheerful attitude had made him well loved fast across the student body. She didn’t know opinions along the staff but suspected more of the same. While she doubted he was a completely open book, he made others feel at ease and often, they lowered their own guards a little, with Harry being a prime example.

With Solomon, Hermione couldn’t read his expression at all. Though there was nothing there, it almost seemed as if there was an invisible wall between them and with the trauma at the hand of Dumbledore she knew he faced, that was to be expected. A shock of short, white wavy hair with only a strand of black paired with shimmering silver eyes, they seemed to compliment his clear alabaster skin. He was closed off to her and yet, she had the urge to learn as much as she could about him.

Normally so well spoken and the first to make conversation she found herself lost for words, something which rarely happened. Apart from similar features, another thing that the brothers shared were smooth actions. Every gesture pre-planned beforehand, it suggested a level of maturity and refinement which most sorely lacked. Expression giving nothing away, Solomon’s eyes narrowed imperceptibly.

“You are a magic user, yet struggle beneath a weight nearly beyond your capacity. Why?”

Though it was a question, barely any curiosity was detected, as though he was asking merely for the sake of it. Of course, she could be wrong, but unable to predict his words or actions left her feeling a little on edge, but fascinated all the same.

She was a stranger to him, so a certain level of distrust wouldn’t surprise her and with certain Human/Vampire relations, the majority of them probably weren’t like Alistair. She’d never really needed to hide her true self, beyond her use of magic in certain settings and saw no reason to now, opting for honesty.
“I’ve lived most of my life knowing I was different, but not that magic was the cause. I’m used to doing things for myself without it.”

Inclining his head in acknowledgement of her answer, Solomon placed the stack of books he had on the table, at her brief direction. Though he wasn’t overly interested in such things, he knew how to be polite if need be so once their hands were free, Solomon held his own out to shake.

“Solomon Lothaire.”

Hermione didn’t hesitate and looking him directly in the eyes, gripped his hand firmly. What she didn’t expect, however, was a strange tingle beginning at the fingertips, to travel the entire length of her right arm. In those few seconds, she tried to analyse this strange sensation but saved it for later as she introduced herself in turn.

“Hermione Granger.”

Though most would say nice to meet you or something similar Solomon didn’t do this, returning to his own seat a short distance away and adjacent to her own.

Hermione didn’t mind and rather than seeing it as standoffish and rude, it seemed to her that he was the kind of person to say only what was necessary and nothing beyond that. She’d keep such thoughts to herself, however, only having heard of Solomon through Harry and the Professor. She’d chosen a variety of topics but what intrigued her the most was the history of Vampires. The library was extensive and she had the feeling that these books would hold a more accurate representation. Though she could ask, research could possibly help to narrow down the number of answers to many questions she had. Not everyone was willing to put up with her constant barrage of them.

Embracing the quiet without hushed whispers of researching students Hermione reclined into the seat and before long, taken to a world far from her own.
As Lothaire Castle was their joint home, Alistair had checked with Solomon to ensure he was agreeable with another visiting the library. He could invite who he wished to and while he trusted his brother, he wasn’t always the best judge of character and despite all that he may see if he chose to scan minds of the unsuspecting, he liked to believe the best in others and was often on the receiving end of physical and emotional pain because of this. With a simple glance into the mind, Solomon could judge a person’s worth in that moment. Though they may change to become better people, it was more common in his experience that they remained the same.

As this was Harry Potter’s friend and Alistair had told him a little of Hermione, he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. His trust in humans was shaky before his encounter with Dumbledore but after it, he couldn’t help but default to the worst. He didn’t want to at all, as there were many of his own kind which are as bad if not worse in some cases, but the amount of pain he’d undergone beneath a man not even a quarter of his age had imprinted a lasting memory upon him, despite his frequent escapes to the mind. He sensed her arrival before she’d even reached the doors and while her core wasn’t the largest, it was one of the most concentrated and sharpened with sheer pinpoint precision cores he’d seen. Alistair could see in more detail than him, as he chose to pursue talents in other areas, but he knew more than enough to be acceptable, much like Alistair with the mind arts.

She wouldn’t notice him, choosing to remain undetected and watching her carefully. Though he knew of her bookish nature, that remained to be seen. Any sign of disrespect and he would make his displeasure known. Rather than what he expected to happen, instead he was faced with a rapidly increasing stack of books which would no doubt topple over at any second. Excitement and passion emanated from her and while he was positive humans were predictable, this one didn’t follow a familiar structure at all.

Giving his assistance by carrying the majority of her stack, Solomon found himself mildly intrigued, though pushed that emotion back almost viciously. There was no reason to involve himself more than necessary but at seventeen, she held very little of the naïveté often demonstrated by teenagers, the majority of females that he’d encountered self-absorbed and not remotely interested in expanding the mind. He didn’t travel as much as his brother, his experience with the opposite sex limited at best so there was a chance he could be wrong.

There was a strong confidence within her gaze, sharp brown eyes shining with intelligence and once hearing the answer to his question, it made sense. Despite his internal protests, his view was already shifting as the moment his hand touched hers, the urge to let go immediately became overwhelming as he’d forgotten just how warm humans were. It had been a long time since he’d made physical contact with one, Harry being the first in centuries. The rare few lovers he’d had, the majority were Vampires and only one human. One of which he’d rather not think about.
Though Alistair always held some degree of guilt scanning unsuspecting minds, even the times it was for their benefit, Solomon held no such regrets. But even scanning Dumbledore’s mind on that fateful evening didn’t prevent what happened after. He would find out her intentions, nothing more. He had no wish to invade privacy beyond what was essential to know and knew more of Dumbledore and by extension Harry than he’d like to.

The moment his eyes locked with hers during their handshake, he took the opportunity to spend a split second within her mind. He created no more of a disturbance than a drop of water in the vast seas or the sound of a pin dropping among a cloud of feathers, but it was enough.

Her love of books rivalled his own but without trying to, he found out more than he’d planned. Libraries were the very foundation of her memories, roots burying deep into her psyche containing both pleasant and unpleasant memories.

Unexpectedly, he felt a twinge of sympathy for her as while he liked to keep to himself, he had a friend and confidante in Alistair but for most of her childhood, Hermione had none of that. Often, people shunned what they were unable to understand and he knew this all too well. Her mind was so full of memories, some had been unconsciously projected outwards.

Solomon decided that along with Harry, Hermione wasn’t a threat to him or his brother. The only thing in relation to him was a healthy amount of curiosity and faced with a stranger, it was nothing he didn’t expect. Beyond today, he doubted they’d meet very often but for now, his suspicions were lower than before. He couldn’t promise anything, to himself or to anyone else, but he’d try to be more open with humans.

His eyes followed the movements of her hand as it rhythmically flipped pages but over time, found himself relaxing a little and oddly enough, found it similarly soothing to when Alistair read him stories all those years ago. Satisfied he picked his own book up. If someone were to try and grab their attention, nothing short of a bomb explosion would raise them from their trance of sorts. With a mutual love of books hanging between them, each absorbed the words in front of them.

For a short while, Hermione had the feeling that she was being watched but it soon faded. That or she’d failed to notice as the words in front of her were more interesting. A fast reader, the stack of books in the unfinished pile began to slowly lessen. A stranger to her or not she dearly wanted to have a debate with him over something, but she was unsure if he would be willing or even if he was
the type to. If given the chance she liked to make friends with everyone and if she could get into long, deep discussions with them? All the better. But he didn’t invite conversation or at least, she didn’t know him well enough to be able to. She struggled internally, but just as she was about to dismiss her thoughts and return to reading, a calm, well-spoken voice quietly called out.

“..You were not raised knowing of magic?”

His tone held no judgement and as he was the one to start a conversation, perhaps he was more approachable than Hermione first thought. Though distance remained between them, it was a start.

She’d been asked this question more than once, but not phrased politely in the slightest. She knew that the Wizarding world’s view of Muggleborns was poor at best, but what about Vampires? Concerned what she may or may not see, her eyes remained firmly on the pages.

“My parents are Muggles. I’m a Muggleborn and I didn’t know anyone else with magic.”

Though she didn’t wish for it to be, her blood status was a sensitive topic as before Hogwarts, she wasn’t aware of it. She faced similar discrimination in the Wizarding world as people of different ethnicities or sexual preferences faced in the muggle world and in some cases, the Wizarding world too. Though she realised that each was very different things, all were down to something that couldn’t be helped. Though she excelled in her studies at school, there were some at Hogwarts who treated her with disdain because of it. She wasn’t pure and therefore, inferior.

“I see.”

There was a momentary pause. Solomon was the inquisitive kind, but he usually found the answers to the questions he sought beforehand. There were other things that only a human would know. He’d never had the opportunity to ask but also, not many were willing to be near a Vampire, let alone converse with them. The very fact that Hermione was here suggested that the idea of Vampires weren’t frightening enough to keep her away. Books didn’t always hold the answers and sometimes, only personal experience would help. Reminding himself that he’d try to give humans a chance, Solomon continued with his questioning.
“Why is the term ‘muggle’ used? I have heard it on a few occasions, however, it seems derogatory.”

Hermione had her own thoughts on that and while she agreed with him, inevitably she’d grown used to the word and as a result, it became part of her own vocabulary.

Displeasure clouded her tone, each word dripping with disapproval. “It is, to differentiate between people with and without magic or for me, my place. I would rather be referred to as Muggleborn than the other.”

Muggle was a vaguely familiar term to him, having heard it on the odd occasion he travelled, but he wasn’t aware of other names.

“..The other?”

“Mudblood. Dirty blood.”

Hermione was loathed to say it, making her skin crawl and want to curl into a ball whenever she heard it. The whole time her eyes didn’t leave the page, staring at the same word rather than turning them. Every possible scenario flashed through her mind, none of them good. However, what Hermione heard wasn’t what she expected at all.

“What they do not understand, they instead label. You hold magic just the same as every other witch. Humans are humans, magic is irrelevant. Non-Magic and Magic are better to use as it targets the facts only.”

In the five years of her time in the Wizarding World, Hermione had never known anyone with that viewpoint. There were plenty accepting of blood status as there were not accepting but even their judgement was unconsciously clouded because ‘that’s the way its always been’.
The strangest thing, she was hearing this from a Vampire who in some ways, had a worse reputation than werewolves and yet, they’d shown her more kindness than some humans had. It was an eye-opening experience. Raising her head from the page, she finally glanced up at Solomon. A small, genuine smile lit up her face as while he lacked the warmth of his brother, she doubted he’d waste his time with such words if they weren’t genuine and for that, she was more grateful than he could ever know.

“Thank you.”

He was right. For all these years she had fallen into a hole with no visible way of escaping. She was so used to hearing Mudblood, Muggle and Muggleborn that she’d simply let it be. But no longer. Absolutely nothing made her different from the so-called Purebloods or even her parents. They had thoughts, feelings and actions just the same, only they were able to do things for themselves and didn’t have to rely on magic to get the job done. Right there and then, she made a promise to herself. She would carve her way in this world and show blood status didn’t matter and she could do what she set her mind and heart to. For herself and for all of her own magic status.

Aware that her personality could be overwhelming, she toned it down over the years but sometimes, she did get carried away. Hesitantly, she decided to try her luck and making a mental notation of the page number, closed the book and carefully placed it back on the table.

“Have others that aren’t Vampires always treated you badly?”

From her point of view, Vampires weren’t seen in a positive light, but she wondered from his perspective. She was careful not to say humans, with Dumbledore’s despicable actions.

Solomon stared at her for a long moment. Why did she want to know? Alistair often told him he read too much into situations, but doing so had kept them both alive to reach over a millennia. A human couldn’t deceive him, not in the mind arts so there were no harmful intentions behind the question, despite his initial discomfort with it. In fairness, his questions had targeted something which she herself found uncomfortable, so let it slide without an issue.

“Not always. I have come to expect negativity by default, as Vampire/Human relations are poor.
Other races are more civil. However, Harry Potter has defied all expectations.”

At the mention of Harry, Hermione’s lips curved into a fond smile. “He wouldn’t be Harry without that ability. Thank you for helping him, by the way. If not for yours and Professor Lothaire’s combined efforts he could have been severely brain damaged.”

At the reminder of Dumbledore, the very ends of Hermione’s hair crackled dangerously, magic almost returning it to her former frizz.

He was thanked by a human twice in these many minutes. What was the world coming to? If other humans followed Harry and Hermione’s lead, perhaps they weren’t as doomed as he first thought. Unused to being thanked, however, he felt a degree of discomfort.

“..You are welcome.”

Gradually, this opened the floodgates for further conversation. Solomon was reserved and didn’t converse with many people beyond his brother, so he was out of his comfort zone. Hermione wasn’t what he’d call a chatterbox, simply someone who had a lot of wisdom to share, with a brain which operated at a higher rate than she was able to speak. He did enjoy debates truth be told, but he’d found none could keep his interest save for Alistair, dismissing anyone else who didn’t put in the time and effort to contribute. He never thought he’d feel positive about anything related to humans but for someone so young, her level of observation admittedly impressed him.

All the while their voices were quietly passionate, neither wishing to disturb the tranquillity but each becoming interested in the other, at varying levels. While Solomon still kept his distance both physically and emotionally, he offered his own views here and there which only fuelled Hermione’s passion further. He found overly talkative people irritating but when they had something valuable to share, it held meaning.

Back and forth they conversed, touching upon one or two topics and though surrounded by hundreds of books, today their information came from elsewhere.
As Solomon didn’t discourage her, Hermione’s excitement levels rose further and in her enthusiasm, she stood up, with animated hand gestures all the while. They’d been discussing the subject of history itself, Hermione’s mind bursting with new information and her own thoughts to share.

Solomon’s eyes tracked her movements. She was odd certainly. Such a wide range of emotions all within the space of a few seconds and yet, somehow, not unpleasant. Her passion was clear to see and he held respect for those who cared to make a difference, big or small.

“There’s so much we can learn from the past! Take the information available, study it and learn not to make the same mistakes. But we do, repeatedly. History is the story of truth, facts in the rawest form and we haven’t found everything there is to see. Each day is the opportunity to discover something new and to change it for the better! I-“

She cut herself off, stopping in the middle of her impassioned rant. Composing herself, she returned to her seat. “Sorry.”

In the past, she was either told to shut up because no one cared, or she stopped herself because of this. Even Ron had told her to before but recently, Harry was able to talk with her much better than before, as he’d taken to loosely following her footsteps rather than Ron’s. Though she’d seen no physical indication that he was uninterested, she’d stopped herself before she became too carried away.

There was a flicker of something indiscernible in his gaze, more than Hermione had seen from him so far. He didn’t respond to her apology, continuing the same line of conversation instead, agreeing.

“Our kind is ever evolving, though a select few do believe that nothing is in need of change. They are the ones who hold us back.”

Alistair did the talking for both of them sometimes and often, Solomon wondered how he did it. Perhaps he just hadn’t found the right individuals as he was not only participating in this discussion but actively contributing. The thought was alarming, but talking with someone other than his own brother who had lived a completely different life to his own he found to be interesting.
More open now at least in comparison to before, the conversation between them continued to flow smoothly. There were disagreements here and there but at the end, both came to understand each other’s perspective. Hermione showed no reservations and didn’t mind that he wasn’t quite as talkative, but ensured she paused to let him speak too, as she’d had issues with this previously. Rather than lost in the stack of books each had, instead time itself seemed irrelevant while they talked with one another.

Returning to the Library and the door slightly ajar, Alistair couldn’t believe his eyes. On some conscious level, Solomon knew he was there but for the rare sight this was, he wanted to watch it unfold. The last time he’d talked to anyone but him and so passionately, was a long time ago. Perhaps when he was still a child, even. Solomon was his opposite in a lot of ways and to those who didn’t know him as well, he remained closed off. Even in the short time he’d been found, Alistair had noticed changes. He stiffened at touches and remained more closed off than ever. He hadn’t discussed the details of what happened over the years he was missing and Alistair didn’t want to press for answers either.

But to see Solomon like this was a start, one that he was overjoyed about. He’d often told him to give humans a chance though there were times Alistair wondered why he did. But then if not, he wouldn’t know Harry. Hermione was a lovely young woman and he hoped that she would contribute towards Solomon changing his views on humans as a whole.

With a small period of silence, Alistair took the opportunity to speak. “It is wonderful to see you both getting along well. But, reality calls out in a sweet voice.”

There was no heat to his words but all amusement and while Hermione turned to flash an almost guilty look, Solomon subtly rolled his eyes in response, to which Alistair answered with a shameless grin.

“Sorry, have you been here long?” Hermione's eyebrows creased into a frown.

“Not at all, a few minutes at the most.”
Knowing that she would have to leave now, she couldn’t keep the crestfallen look from her expression. Not only had she learned more through books not available to her elsewhere, but through Solomon himself. The time had never gone by so fast and seeing this, Alistair was a little sad too. It only took a moment of thinking for him to continue, though.

“You are welcome here whenever you wish. Isn’t that right?”

He directed this question towards Solomon and while his expression didn’t change, communication not for human ears occurred.

‘Why are you asking me?’

‘You were enjoying Hermione’s company. Am I wrong?’

‘No. She is not obnoxious, like some others.’

He gave an inward chuckle, sensing a mild glare especially for him.

‘Wonderful! Then there is no issue.’

‘The only issue is your meddling.’

‘But, you adore me anyway.’
Solomon wasn’t overly annoyed, a barely noticeable smile in response to their back and forth banter. He answered aloud, for Hermione to hear.

“Yes.”

Having approval from both, Hermione cheered up instantly, addressing Alistair. “I’ll just return these books.”

Informing her he’d wait just outside the door Alistair left once more, Solomon deciding to help her. Then, he made an offer that surprised them both, for Solomon because he treasured every book here.

“If there are any of interest, you may borrow them.”

She could see how much he loved the books here and taking any with her simply didn’t feel right, though the temptation was there. “It’s alright. They belong here, but I appreciate the offer.”

Coming here today had made her happy beyond belief. Their home and the library was a beautiful place and though he might not think the same, it was nice to meet Solomon as well.

Books put away in their places, it was time for Hermione to take her to leave. She wasn’t sure what to say to him, however, giving him a small wave and a slight smile, she turned around to leave.

“She.”

At the sound of her name, she looked back, cocking her head quizzically.

“Happy Birthday.”
Throughout the few hours they’d talked he hadn’t once lost his seriousness and though it could be her imagination, she could almost swear his eyes were just a touch warmer.

He likely knew through Alistair. She’d enjoyed her time here and to replace the earlier smile, was one filled with her true thoughts and feelings, with a radiance only matched by the library itself.

As she left, Solomon watched the empty doorway for a time after. Though he still believed Alistair was more meddling that he had any right to be, his protests were weak at the thought of Hermione returning here. Somewhat distracted Solomon seated himself again, meditating and returning to his usual calm.

“Miss Granger, Are you alright?”

Hermione jumped, her loose grip on the opened book she held gone as it dropped to the floor. Picking it back up, she looked into the mildly concerned gaze of Alistair, who had taken a seat next to her. Shaking the haze from her mind she nodded reassuringly and waited for sense to reassert itself. Her eyes returned to the pitch, watching Harry give a brief talk to all gathered there.

“Have you come to watch Harry play?”

She asked, Alistair’s eyes similarly following him.

“I have, upon his recommendation. Quidditch is unfamiliar to me.”

Hermione felt sorry for him. Not because of her own general disinterest of the sport, but because she doubted Harry had gone into details of his own daredevil stunts on the pitch. The year he fell from
his broom when Dementors swarmed the air, she thought her heart would stop. She decided to give
him a warning.

“Prepare yourself, Professor. Harry’s fantastic. Insane, but fantastic.”

Prepare for what? And why insane? Though he had questions they would perhaps be answered with
time as with a blow of the whistle, the match began.

Chapter End Notes

And we have the introduction of a future third pairing :) I've had this planned since
about chapter 70 something? So months xD
Driving Force

Chapter Summary

Harry goes into Quidditch, all guns blazing. With little to no knowledge of the sport, Alistair found himself wholly unprepared for what he was about to see.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: A shared moment between Harry and Alistair, along with Hermione and Solomon. Then, the beginning of what's going to be a very bumpy Quidditch ride.

Scanning the pitch to ensure all was clear, Harry looked between each of their teams. He wondered, friendly game or not, how this would turn out. They’d planned more than one today with hopefully enough time so while Dean and Seamus wouldn’t be participating in this, Seamus had offered to commentate and keep score while Dean would referee.

Each team was a mixture of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw so thinking ahead, Harry had asked everyone to come up with a name for each team to differentiate. In his own were Himself as Seeker, Ron as Keeper, Zacharias Smith, Roger Davies and Eric Cadwallader as Chasers, along with Ritchie Coote and Jimmy Peakes as Beaters.

“Are we decided on the name then?” Harry asked, looking at his team as several snickered among themselves. Hearing no protests Harry turned expectantly to the opposing team. Ginny had decided to join, wanting to challenge herself against Harry for once since she’d been given the opportunity. Cho Chang had joined as Seeker and the unofficial leader for the team, much like Harry was for theirs. In a slightly proud manner, Cho gave her team name.

“Hogwarts Heroes.”

From the corner of his eye, Harry watched as Seamus sat in the commentator’s booth and below the points counter, ‘Hogwarts Heroes’ etched itself below.

Harry tried his best to keep a neutral expression, but the stifled laughter of his team didn’t help. With
an almost mischievous grin, Harry shouted his team name aloud, for all to hear.

“Arse Kickers!”

Amused chuckles spread across the small audience and with a significant absence of Professors Snape and McGonagall, Harry wasn’t reprimanded for language use. Adding the other team name, Seamus was eager to watch the sparks fly, as were the others.

“Confident, Potter? Careful what you wish for.” Ginny’s eyes gleamed with a competitive glow, one of which Harry was all too eager to reciprocate.

Adopting the cockiest smirk, he lit the flames further. “Of course. You’re Gryffindor’s reserve Seeker for a reason. I’m unbeatable.”

Of course, Harry didn’t think that way, though he was confident in himself. The majority there would see it as banter and they’d be correct. It did the trick, as Ginny gripped the handle of her broom surely.

“Bring it on.”

Cheers from both teams rose, filling the pitch with raucous noise as Dean blew his transfigured whistle sharply. Cutting through their voices, both teams turned to look at him.

Clearing his throat and to the amusement of those gathered, he did a passable imitation of Madam Hooch. “I want a nice, clean game.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed, staring at every face available to him at that moment and once receiving several physical and verbal affirmations. As one, each team mounted their brooms, ready to kick off at a moment’s notice.

“On the count of three!”

Harry was ready for this. Eager, excited, everything rolled into one. Simply the thought of flying soon had him trembling with anticipation.

“Three.”

Heart pounding fiercely, the blood seemed to circulate throughout his body at an increased rate.

“Two.”
Leaning his body forward to a degree, he knew how to coax the best speed from any broom. Mostly down to instinct, partly down to experimentation.

“One.”

Could time pass any slower? ‘Come on Dean!’ Harry shouted in his mind, impatient.

“Go!”

The breeze sweeping his hair back and having no need of glasses without a proper prescription, Harry was more on top of his game than he’d ever been. From the moment that one word left Dean’s lips, he was the first to be airborne.

Opening the trunk Dean undid the straps, Snitch nimbly taking flight as the Bludgers soon joined it, albeit much more manically charged. Quaffle in hand he threw it skywards and with that, the game began.

Harry couldn’t explain it. Flying to him was an escape from stresses which he shouldn’t have to deal with at his age. It was liberating, freeing. Because of how long he’d spent not flying and his changes over the summer, it somehow felt even better when he was in good health to appreciate it more. The answer to his question was yes, Lume did have an effect on broomstick flight. As much as he enjoyed flying in his animagus form, it was the fact that by nature humans weren’t meant to fly, that made it so much more thrilling. He was filled with more daring than usual and on impulse, did a tight loop de loop. The wind rushed past him, the biggest grin on his face as several gasps and some shouts of “Show off!” Reached his ears.

Glancing below, Ginny was in possession of the Quaffle and though they’d never worked as a unit before, Chambers and Bradley of Ravenclaw worked surprisingly well with her. It was only for a second he checked the action below, eyes returning to the Snitch. While he could catch it and end the game quickly, everyone was here to watch a good game play out. A little tension and suspense building never hurt anyone and in his opinion, if he’d paid to watch a professional game which ended in minutes with the snitch being found, it would be anticlimactic, to say the least. On the opposite end of the scale, three months was a little too overboard as well. A happy medium of a few hours was perfect but in a wide open space, catching the elusive glint of gold wasn’t always straightforward. He'd wait for the perfect opportunity and strike.

Though he was far elevated above the crowd, Harry could see Alistair seated next to Hermione. He came to watch! Heart doing a little dance it only added to the adrenaline coursing throughout. Giving them both a brief salute and sly wink, fellow seeker Cho Chang joined him. He hadn't spoken to her since they shared that awkwardly wet kiss and while the thought of that itself was uncomfortable, being in her proximity wasn't anymore. He had a sneaking suspicion of just why that was. Though they weren't the closest, Cho was a nice girl and he knew that kiss was an impulse on her part, as a way to erase the heartache of Cedric. Though they were in the middle of a game, the conversation
would only be brief.

"How have you been with, you know.."

Yeah Harry, real smooth. Turning to him Cho understood his meaning and while she smiled, it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Better than I was, at least. It's hard." She averted her gaze for a moment but upon raising her head, Harry could see a kind of strength not present before. "Thanks for asking anyway. Are we okay after what happened before?"

Startled at her forwardness, Harry nodded reassuringly. "Yeah. It hurts losing people close, but it's the good memories created with them that count the most. I hope in the future you'll find someone who makes you happy."

Lost for words, she seemed to struggle. "I appreciate it. You've changed Harry, for the better. I hope you find that special someone too."

Alistair flashed through his mind, only for a second but enough for it to register. Keeping his head in the game, the thought settled firmly behind that. "Right. Back to being Quidditch rivals?" Making a fist, he extended it towards Cho who in response, bumped her own against it. Sharing a friendly smile they parted ways and before long they'd come into contact again, over a mutual chase of the snitch.

Leisurely circling the pitch, Harry had to admit that as a first-time commentator, Seamus was doing a pretty good job. So far Dean got the nice clean game he asked for, not having to reprimand anyone for rule breaking or award penalties. So far Hogwarts Heroes was in the lead by twenty points. While their chasers were a coordinated unit, Ginny was in a league of her own and while a decent seeker, chaser as a position practically called to her. She'd flown on a broom from a young age, Charlie teaching her the basics and much like him had picked it up naturally. Often channelling her mother's temper through a competitive spirit, nothing diverted her attention during that time, something which Harry could admire.

Harry turned into Seamus, letting his voice be the backing track which he created veritable music in the air.

"-And the Quaffle is once again stolen by Weasley! She knows how to handle balls." He continued to speak, over some lewd whistles of the crowd. "Smith and Davies attempt to box in Weasley, nicely dodged by the girl in question."

Ducking under, Ginny barrel rolled to the right, beneath Davies and bringing her just beneath the hoops. She was faced with Ron, a concentration on his face rarely seen by him otherwise. Though a
part of her was almost tempted to scream that there was a spider on his shoulder to watch the panic, she was a good sport. Not that she'd give him the chance to though. He was a decent Keeper or would be, if not faced with her. The disadvantage of being siblings at least on Ron's part, was Ginny being more observant than she let on. She didn't know if he cared to do the same but with their matches at home, she was always on the lookout for how Ron played. She had a few seconds to do this if that but was confident she'd pull it off.

Standing up Seamus was leaning so far forward a few were afraid he'd plummet into the earth below. But due to students falling off in the past, an invisible barrier was erected to ensure no further accidents or non-accidents, would happen. It wasn't generally known but it was a safety measure needed.

Seamus certainly had the passion, that couldn't be denied. The whole of Scotland could probably hear his voice and for good reason. Ginny feinted, aiming to the left and at the last possible second once Ron headed in that direction, threw the Quaffle dead centre. As one the crowd held their breath and though Ron was close, it slipped through his fingers and the hoop.

Though Harry shouldn't support the opposing team really, he couldn't help but clap. With the score at 90-60, it was time for him to make a move. All the while he kept the Snitch in sight and much like him, was fluttering lazily around the pitch. Cho was at the opposite end and flying with purpose, drew near her. As she took notice of him he pretended not to see, eyes scanning the pitch and settling on one spot. The Snitch was elsewhere but from here, he could turn and begin the chase.

Barely giving a moment for anyone to react Harry began a steep dive from fifty feet in the air, the sudden shouts of the crowd drowning out all else. To him, voices became a blur, filled to the brim with absolute confidence and more agile on a broom than he'd ever felt before. Sensing Cho on his heels, Harry allowed a victorious smirk to slide on his face, the ground beneath rapidly approaching. Nothing else mattered in the air, problems blowing away on the breeze rushing past. Pressing his body even closer one arm stretched out, He couldn't help but hear raised voices, unable to deny Seamus' words.

"Potter's mad! Less than a metre above the ground but has he spotted his prize and will he pull out of that dive on time?"

As one, the stadium held their breath and at the last possible second, Harry corrected his position. He was so close, the grass skimmed the tips of his shoes as he leaned ever so slightly back. The different weight distribution allowed him to smoothly level, hoping he threw Cho off who, glancing back, barely managed to pull out of her own dive in time.

"A fantastic Wronski feint performed by Potter! I nearly shat myself."

The last part of Seamus' sentence wasn't meant for audience ears but with a sonorous charm, his faint mutters could still be heard, some nodding or laughing in agreement. Chuckling to himself he had to wonder. Would Cho believe him next time, or think it was another trick?
There was no denying it, Harry was in top form. Too much, in Hermione's opinion. After rolling her eyes at their choice of team name, He delved right into the reckless stunts and overly confident attitude. At least with Harry, he had the skills to back it up and it wasn't meant in a bad way. His elation was clear to see, tracking him with the binocular's she'd purchased when attending the Quidditch world cup. While she'd never be the fanatic that Ron, Harry and Ginny were, Hermione could appreciate why it was popular and she'd learned to be in the moment. While books were great Harry deserved her full attention and she was slightly regretful that sometimes, she'd buried her nose in a book with an occasional eye on the game rather than watch him. But the moment Quirrell jinxed his broom, Hermione paid attention. Not only so she didn't miss some of happiest moments of her best friend's life, but to also watch out for anything amiss. Any self-control went out of the window, eyes widening as she tracked Harry's rapid descent to the ground and like the rest of them, was unsure if he'd actually seen the Snitch.

"HARRY!" Hermione shouted, unable to help it and worried in case he'd left it too late. He nearly had in truth, a hair's breadth away from plummeting into the ground and breaking more than one bone. Suddenly lightheaded and heart beating a mile a minute, Hermione felt relieved she wasn't standing or she'd collapse on the spot. Right now, she didn't know whether to hug or kill him, toying with the idea of both. Taking her eyes away from Harry she turned to the side, Looking at Alistair for the first time since the game started.

"Professor, are you alright?"

She had good reason to ask, a single fist clenched in his lap tightly to the point of cutting off whatever circulation he may or may not have, expression focused intently. Eyebrows drawn into a frown Hermione would be fooled into thinking he was simply immersed in the action, if not for his paler than normal complexion. He didn't seem to know what to do with his other hand, alternating between running through his hair or gripping the barrier in front of him. Hearing her words he managed to speak, unable to keep his concern and worry hidden.

"It is always so dangerous?"

She hated to make him feel any worse, but lying wouldn't serve any purpose. Tone apologetic she returned to watching Harry.

"Yes. Right now it's not too bad, compared to previous games."

"I commend you, Miss Granger. You are alive and well after watching Harry participate in several of them. I fear I may not see the end of this one."

Though joking was his intention, being immortal, it came across more serious than planned. Worrying at her lower lip nervously, Hermione hoped that this stunt would be the last of Harry's but knowing him, it was far from over.

Though broomstick riding by the general non-magic population was seen as a regular mode of travel
by pointy nosed and green-skinned witches, the truth was they were all just as human, with the most common mode of travel being via Floo or apparition. For Vampires, Alistair in particular, his own mode of travel was closely linked with apparition, though it called upon ambient magic and twisted it into something entirely different and more reliable.

It was only coming to England and accepting a job here that he came to understand just how broom and Quidditch obsessed the student and some staff members were and the moment he mentioned to Minerva he had never once seen Quidditch in action, he received such a look of disbelief he wondered if he hadn't grown an extra head. Largely on Minerva's insistence, she suggested that he came to watch the friendly game in her stead as to her own disappointment, she was unable to attend.

Even without her insistence, Harry had suggested he came along to experience it for himself, albeit in a less intense way. While he knew all sports held a level of competitiveness, fencing and weaponry fighting, in general, was a more quiet, focalised kind of competitiveness. There was nothing quiet about Quidditch. Vehemently heated would be the aptest description he could think of and yet, that didn't sum it up adequately.

Seated in the stadium, he had no need of binoculars like the others. His vision was enough to be able to focus on far away objects in great detail, able to track moving objects much faster than the average human but right now, he found it to be both a curse and blessing. A blessing to be able to watch Harry in his element but a curse, as some of the risky movements admittedly set him a little on edge. The moment Harry took to the air, Alistair found himself enraptured by his clear enjoyment as if all burdens had been left on the solid ground. From Harry himself, Alistair had learned he first took to a broom in his first year and yet, he would believe that he'd had much more experience. As he flipped through the air, Alistair's newly beating heart jumped uncomfortably. He saw himself as a driven and focused man, able to make decisions instantly and yet, he found himself conflicted. He would never want to stop Harry from doing something he loved so dearly, but why did it have to be at the risk of his own wellbeing? He could hardly watch but if he didn't, what if something happened? He knew Harry could take care of himself and was the most independent 16-year-old he'd met, but some situations could easily become out of control. Though, couldn't help but smile in response to Harry's little salute and wink. His confidence shone through and Alistair wouldn't deny that he found it to be attractive.

As if his earlier thought had set an example for future actions, Alistair was made aware of a 'Wronski Feint'. It was something he'd rather learn through reading, than a visual experience and unknown to him, his thought matched that of Hermione's. If he wasn't seated, the unlikely risk of him fainting would have risen to likely. It was a conundrum of emotions for him and despite his inner turbulence, he found the whole idea of Quidditch strangely thrilling, the adrenaline of a tense situation running throughout his body.

Much like Alistair considered himself talented at magic and how best to use it, he came to consider Harry much in the same way. He was truly a natural and it was a joy to watch, even if his heart was undertaking vigorous and worrying activities of its own. He would be both relieved and disappointed when this was over. Hermione's honest words didn't help, though he wouldn't have appreciated her lying either. He never outwardly showed his worry but found himself unable to hide it, due to in part
the combination of where he was and who was with him.

But what concerned him, were the Bludgers. They drew dangerously close to the students and the beaters actively hit them away or towards the opposing team. He was able to understand anything he put his mind to, experiences helping build his own character but right now, why they did this was beyond him. If they made an impact they would cause serious damage. In response to this when asking one student they simply told him there was no reward without risks. He didn't think a risk to overall health was the intention.

Perhaps the subject of Bludgers shouldn't have crossed his mind, as he had the overwhelming urge to locate every single one on earth and transfigure them into bouncing sponges, seeing what was happening. He didn't fidget but right now, his hands had a mind of their own and aware of how he must look, forcefully kept them still. However, his fingertips couldn't help but twitch in response. A touch of nerves within his intent gaze, Alistair fervently hoped for the best outcome.

At the start, Harry believed the snitch to be somewhat docile and almost casual. How wrong he was. For what must have been the past twenty minutes he'd tracked it, flitting about here and there while at the same time, trying to remain casual. He wanted to have a head start before Cho caught on. With the scores not far apart, it was time. However the moment he increased his speed and let it be known he was after the Snitch, it presented a problem. That problem not just one, but both Bludgers. He'd learned to sense the displacement of air whenever they were around, senses more attuned than ever but also, with how high up he was, the noise of the crowd faded into the background somewhat. He almost had a sense of deja vu, the time when Dobby sent a Bludger after him his second year. Apparently, not only did the snitch skilfully evade trying to be caught, the Bludgers were strangely fixated on him too. He doubted they were sabotaged, having the feeling it was simply Harry's bad luck showing.

Narrowing his eyes in concentration he tried throwing them off, weaving and dodging between and behind the higher stands but like glue, they stuck to him insistently. Heart hammering away, he managed to catch a glimpse of his target, heading straight beneath the supporting beams. His actions caught the attention of Seamus, narrating as best he could while scoring had come to a temporary standstill.

"Potter's chasing the Snitch and both Bludgers are chasing Potter! Chang is on their tail."

No sooner had Seamus said this, that Harry sensed more than the Bludgers behind. Concentrating on not crashing became his main focus, as high speed with not enough room wasn't ideal. Only the rush of air was present and with the help of his Firebolt, reached speeds to the point of every distinctive colour becoming a blur. To his surprise Cho managed to reach neck and neck with him, his Firebolt outclassing the Nimbus by a significant amount. It was a testament of her skill.

Cho shouted something, Harry having to attune his ears to hear properly.

"THE BLUDGERS LOVE YOU!"
Too much, in his opinion. He shouted back similarly, still focused as a moment of distraction could mean his end. "YOU'RE NOT KIDDING! I COULD DO WITHOUT THAT!"

The only words shared between them they fell silent, barely noticeable among the buzz of the crowd above them. When he least expected it the snitch rose above ground and not slowing his speed for a second, swiftly flew between the beams. Ascending upwards in a nearly straight line, he unknowingly flew right in front of where his friends and Alistair were seated and in a mess of broken splinters, the bludgers soon followed behind. Not as willing to risk it like Harry Cho had lost her speed, safely navigating out. Catching up to him at this point would be unlikely. Watching him leave the boundaries of the pitch, Cho waited until she had another opportunity upon his return.

To Harry's frustration, nothing he tried seemed to work. Outside of the pitch, there was countryside in its purest form. Not even trees or passing beneath a bridge diverted their attention and taking a second to glance behind, both matched each other for speed. This was a game of following the leader he'd rather have not played if given the choice.

Having strayed further away than he intended Harry directed his broom to the left, creating a semi-circle in the hope that the Snitch would go closer to where they'd left. Away from the noise, the fluttering of its tiny wings beating as it flitted about punctuated the otherwise silence, but destroying it completely as the bludgers drew close once more. Making a split second decision Harry stayed slightly lower, the flickering gold still in sight but a slightly higher chance his pursuers would be slowed down than higher up, where there was less.

Apparently, optimism did him no good as to his own frustration, they remained stubbornly close.

"Bugger off will you?!" Harry couldn't help but voice his annoyance, even if a verbal response wasn't on the cards. He'd tried everything he could think of, pushing his Firebolt to the max but they were still there. Never mind wood they should make a broom entirely out of bludgers, maybe then they'd leave him alone and on top of that, he could use their speed to his advantage.

His mind couldn't afford to wander. He had to end this. Though this was a friendly game there was nothing casual about his attitude to Quidditch. He went in with a winning mentality and gave it his all while enjoying the journey. Though he'd been keeping an approximation of how much time had passed he'd lost it, but knew he needed to return.

Determination fuelling him he put everything he had into catching up, equally as stubborn as the bludgers behind and coaxing all the speed he could from it. With a steep incline he rose the highest above the pitch that he'd gone yet and in the distance, he could see the faint form of Cho rapidly approaching. He didn't blame her for not following him earlier, his insanity knew no bounds apparently, in particular, today. While it was mostly down to Harry himself, the extra dashing of daring was all Lume, of that he was sure. While he was away team Arse Kickers had managed to turn it around, 120-90 in their favour. Either he'd been gone much longer than first thought, or Cadwallader, Smith and Davies had proved to be a solid unit. Either way, that snitch would be his. Eyes gleaming with challenge he resolutely followed behind, less than a foot between them.
Though Cho tried to catch up with him once more she swiftly darted out of the way, Bludgers still on Harry's tail. She wasn't placed in Ravenclaw for no reason and while she enjoyed Quidditch, it wasn't worth risking life and limb over. Her team didn't protest one bit, all other actions coming to a standstill as both teams and the crowd watched on, Seamus making himself heard over the raised voices of both.

"Chang's called it a day, that girl has sense. Potter's cutting it close, to his own life or the ground below, we've yet to see. WHAT?!"

Shouting while already using a sonorous charm wasn't Seamus' best idea, many ears ringing after that and forgetting he was supposed to keep track of events despite everyone being able to see for themselves, he provided a different kind of running commentary.

"Harry, you feckin' mad bastard! If you die, I'll kill you!"

No one bothered to question Seamus on the impossibility of his commentary, that one sentence summing up the majority of their thoughts perfectly.

Harry had been in some tight spots before, but this quite literally took the piss. Once more the ground rapidly decreased in distance, pulling out of the sharp dive sooner than the first time. The Snitch was directly below him but even when stretching, he'd just miss it. Right on his tail were once again the Bludgers and now, he was faced with the Hufflepuff section that he'd tear through if not careful. Bludgers targeted the body and though he could grab the Snitch, chances were that either him or his broom would be targeted by both with any sudden movements. So, in his mind, there was only one logical conclusion.

Gripping the broom firmly between his legs, Harry swung upside down, reminiscent of a sloth hugging a branch, This way his balance was questionable but if he should fall, the damage would be minimal. Disoriented for a moment the golden sheen was unmistakable, even from his awkward position. Apparently, he couldn't have timed it any better as directly above, the Bludgers sailed harmlessly over him, as if in slow motion. Yeah, a hit from them would have really packed a punch. Stretching his arm out in front the Snitch tried to dart away, but to no avail, as his fist triumphantly clenched around it, the weight small yet significant. He couldn't celebrate right away though as with one swift movement, he righted himself and the course his broom was taking. He didn't have to worry about the Bludgers because naturally, they'd gravitated elsewhere once the match was over. Unable to help himself he aimed a two-fingered gesture in their general direction with his free hand, light headed and panting heavily. Tiredly he raised his arm for all to see, cheers erupting from the stadium and his team.

"Potter's caught the Snitch! Arse Kickers win!"

With the final score at 270-90, Harry's heart was beating fast enough to rival that of whenever he was around Alistair and that was significant. As soon as he released the Snitch and was able to think clearly, a grin split his face. He couldn't deny it. He loved Quidditch and the healthy dose of danger
it brought. Dismounting, Harry was met with both his teammates and the opposing team. The first to approach him was Cho, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I can only echo what everyone else had already said, but you're mad."

"Can't argue with that."

Ginny was the next to approach, her excitement obvious. "Brilliant Harry!"

Raising her hand for a high five, he didn't hesitate to return it, together sharing in their enthusiasm. "You were great yourself, threw Ron for a loop back there."

The relationship between Harry and Ron was chilly at best, but once he came over to join in the conversation, for the moment Harry could almost forget that their friendship wasn't fragmented. One game was enough for him, eager to see for himself without having to focus on the snitch which of the other Gryffindors could be potential team members.

Hermione hadn't bitten her nails in years, but this situation called for it. The ends of her hair were practically frizzing with the shared tension between them. Glancing to the side poor Neville had gone drip white while Luna, in a typical Luna style, wore a fashioned headdress with a representation of each house mascot which occasionally made noise. She didn't look fearful in the slightest, a small smile on her face and an eye twinkle to accompany them.

Sometimes, she envied Luna's ability to remain calm in situations where panic or worry was normal. Before she could think better of it she voiced what was on her mind, having to speak louder as while not every student or staff member had shown up, there was enough for it to be loud.

"How can you remain so calm?"

She asked Luna, even as Neville shakily nodded his head in agreement. "You must have nerves of steel, I can hardly watch."

Her reply was instantaneous, usual serenity present. "Because he's Harry. He'll be alright."

Neither Hermione nor Neville had a counter-response, her words settling between the friends. She was right, but Hermione could only wish she had the same confidence.

Alistair's worse fears were realised. Up until today, he wasn't aware that this could be a worst fear but at the moment, he was the tensest he'd been in several centuries and he'd seen many wars pass by, globally. It was absurd really.
The only one who wasn't startled by Harry's shock appearance in a burst of broken wood was Alistair, able to clearly define his magical signature. Even when out of sight, his hearing remained flawless, able to hear his brief conversation with Miss Chang and though it was faint, a shout of 'Bugger off will you' outside of the pitch. Chuckling to himself, albeit nervously, it went unnoticed by the others.

He loved new experiences of all kinds, though he couldn't possibly imagine just how many there'd be within the space of a few months. Harry certainly didn't do anything by half measures, though he couldn't help but grow concerned when half an hour passed by. His only reassurance was being able to ever so slightly hear his movements.

But, it was naive of him to hope that would be the last of the excitement as when Harry did return, it immediately resulted in another one of his dives and to Alistair's disbelief, hanging upside down on his broom with veritable danger from both sides. He would swear with every year of the life lived so far, that his heart stopped again. He was known for his composure and remaining charming throughout, even with the most unpleasant people but Alistair had to fight against covering his eyes. Metaphorically he was on the edge of his seat, a surge of adrenaline he'd usually only receive when weapons training with Solomon.

And then, the snitch was captured.

Seeing Harry's happiness for himself, caused a naturally warm smile to tilt his lips. He really was at home in the air, even if he abandoned and any all safety procedures there may or may not be. Though his newly beating heart suffered for it, Alistair didn't regret a single moment and could say with honesty, that he enjoyed himself and future games, whether official or friendly, he would attend. Not only to watch Harry in his element but also, he could understand the appeal and admired the bonds created through a single sporting event. It was a double edged sword as that also sparked rivalries, but it was the same for many others as well.

To his relief, this was the only game that Harry played, the ones afterwards, at a guess, to scout potential talent. For his own peace of mind, at the risk of becoming a mother hen, he wanted to see if Harry was alright for himself. There was a fine line between protective and overbearing, one of which Alistair didn't want to cross.

Scratching the back of his head nervously, Harry watched Hermione rapidly approach him, expression displeased. The day's games had ended with some of it to spare still, enough time to prepare for the DA lesson later on in the evening.

He had a right to be concerned, Hermione launching into a tirade that had him wincing.

"Harry, you idiot! What were you thinking? You could have been seriously hurt!" With every few words accompanied a light punch to his chest.
"Hermione I'm fine! I've still got all of my limbs, look."

He wiggled his fingers jokingly, even as she tilted her head up to him, narrowing her eyes sternly.

"I swear if one of your stunts ends up with you in The Hospital Wing, I'll inflict worse pain."

And then, in a complete 180° turn to her earlier mood, a smile lit up her face as she hugged him happily. Mind reeling with confusion Harry returned it.

"You did well though, your dad would be proud."

Girls. For as long as he lived, he'd never understand how Hermione's mood could shift so dramatically, but the mention of his dad filled him with pride. Though he couldn't agree with many of his past actions, one thing he admired was his dad's flying ability and being compared to him in that way, he didn't mind at all.

Making brief conversation with Neville, Luna, Lilah and Dominik, a welcome voice gently encroached on his mind.

'Harry, may I have a word with you?'

Checking the stadium Alistair remained in the same spot, seated. Wrapping up the conversation with his friends and that he'd see them later he jogged up to him, energetically vaulting over the railing.

"You called?" Laughing to himself and in high spirits, he immediately sat down beside him. Alistair didn't want to ruin his mood, Hermione accurately conveying her thoughts enough for the both of them. Up close, he couldn't help but check for injuries, even though he knew he was unharmed. Admonishing himself to not be a fool, he carefully thought about what he wanted to say, still a little conflicted.

"You are a natural and it is truly a pleasure to see you involved with something you are so passionate about. I am privileged to have seen this for myself."

Every word was true and as his sincerity shone through, Harry glowed from the compliment. He remained silent however, sensing there was more.

Usually so fluent with words Alistair found some difficulty with how to voice his concerns. He didn't wish to be intrusive and sincerely hoped he didn't come across as unpleasant. Sensing some internal conflict, Harry waited expectantly.

"Does Quidditch always pose such a risk?"
Though Hermione had confirmed as much, Alistair would rather hear it from Harry himself. He had attended this friendly match with little to no knowledge of the subject. Today had confirmed that he needed to be educated on the subject, preferably from the source of his slight worries.

A part of Harry did feel guilty that he was on purposely elusive about the details of Quidditch, but he wanted Alistair to experience it for himself, form his own opinions. Now that he had an idea of what a match could be like, he was more than happy if a little apologetic, to explain. Leaning back into his seat and giving his aching muscles a rest, he gave an honest answer.

"It's pretty rough, no one's died in years though." Seeing Alistair's alarm he hastily continued, wondering if he was being too honest. "But it's not too bad now, even if I've had my fair share of, ah, mishaps."

Alistair was almost afraid to ask. "Mishaps?"

"My first year I caught the Snitch in my mouth, Second year a Bludger broke my arm. The DADA Professor at that time vanished all the bones when he tried to fix it and I had to spend a night in the Hospital Wing regrowing them. Third year it was bad weather, then Dementors swarmed the pitch. I fell off my broom but didn't get injured."

Alistair didn't know what to say, more than one thought running through his mind but unsure which one to voice first. However, the Professor in question who displayed such incompetence, it would be detrimental to their health if he should ever meet them.

Harry continued, having one final thing to mention. "I haven't played Quidditch these past two years though since the Triwizard Tournament replaced Quidditch and last year, Umbridge confiscated my broom. Today was the first time in months I got to properly play, that and one of my animagus forms are extremely confident in the air. The combination of both influenced my actions, I don't usually take as many risks."

After being deprived of something he loved for a long period of time, Alistair could understand his point of view perfectly. Discussing it helped to ease his own mind and away from the earlier tension and adrenaline, he was able to organise his thoughts.

"There are other sporting events at the same or a higher risk level though admittedly on more than one occasion, I am sure my heart ceased to beat again."

The usual melodic laughter spilt from his lips, to show he wasn’t upset in the slightest. "Though, I must apologise if my concern caused any discomfort."

Though Harry responded, he was still in the midst of his own adrenaline rush. But at Alistair’s words, he sharply refocused, protesting immediately.
“No way! Anyone in your position who didn’t know the details of Quidditch would feel the same.”

Pausing he averted his eyes, somewhat bashful. “I don’t mind, thanks for caring.”

Before he met Harry, Alistair didn’t believe that humans could be adorable but more than once, he’d been proven wrong. Then, noticing something, his brows creased ever so slightly.

“Are you in pain?”

Without realising, Harry had been flexing both of his hands at the fingers. “It’s fine, they’re just a bit stiff from gripping the broom handle.”

Expression not altering in the slightest, Harry found his hand in both of Alistair’s own. Right then the differences became even clearer to him. His were smaller, rough and scarred while Alistair’s were larger, well kept and with not a mark to be seen. Before he could think any better of it, more of his honest thoughts were voiced.

“My hands aren’t too great, but they get the snitch catching job done.”

Alistair’s reply was instantaneous. “Your hands are lovely, they tell a story that is unique.”

He gently traced Harry’s palm and with one hand supporting beneath it, the other soothingly stroked from the tips of his fingers down to the wrist for a short while. Flipping his hand over, the back of it along with his fingers underwent the same treatment.

Palm down, Harry watched Alistair’s fingers carefully work on his own and with each one, he could feel himself relax further. Though he hadn’t received one before, he was confident that this was a hand massage. Instinctively he seemed to know how much pressure was acceptable to apply, not painful in the slightest and already, he could feel the ache leaving little by little. He found himself touched that he was being treated with such care, every movement fascinating.

“Who taught you that? It feels so good.”

As if to reaffirm his words, a soft moan accompanied them. Apparently, his wrist was the sweet spot, small circular motions with Alistair’s thumbs being applied to it.

“My mother. I inherited many of her characteristics and we share a resemblance. She firmly believed that self-care contributed to overall happiness, so made it her duty to supply me with masseeuse knowledge.” As he said this, Alistair carefully switched to Harry’s other hand.
That she was spoken of in past tense didn’t go unnoticed by him. One topic of conversation they hadn’t covered was Alistair’s parents and what held Harry back was the sense of it being a sensitive subject. He didn’t like it when others probed into his life and didn’t want to do the same. The least he could expect was refusal to talk about it however so steeling himself, he asked the one question that had been on his mind for a while.

“Where are your parents now?”

Not stopping his ministrations, Alistair was unable to prevent the sadness clouding his tone. Or perhaps because of the company he shared, he didn’t feel the need to mask raw emotion.

“They are dead. My father was outnumbered, drained of all blood. Even as an ancient and with no others nearby, his healing abilities were not enough to save him. My mother loved him with all her heart and without our notice, she starved herself of all blood, remaining withdrawn until her body could no longer handle the strain.”

Silence passed between them, Harry swallowing thickly even as his hands were free and much less stiff. He’d asked now, there was no going back, but he couldn’t help feeling regretful. Though Harry was overly emotional on that day and couldn’t remember much, it also explained why Alistair seemed to be a little more emotionally driven than usual when dealing with Lilah, because her situation ran close to home for him.

A few short months ago he would never be able to do it, but Harry followed his instincts, leaning into Alistair’s side as a way of comfort.

“I’m sorry, that’s awful.”

Raising his arm, Alistair slipped it around Harry’s shoulder, drawing him to his side. “Don’t be sorry, it was over a millennia ago now.”

“Doesn’t mean to say you can’t still miss them. I could live for another year or another hundred and I’ll still miss mine.”

He always would. For all the missed opportunities and that he couldn’t remember a single happy time. His mum’s screams on that night overpowered everything else.

Alistair had never spoken about it to another outside of his own community, not even previous partners. The topic had never arisen, or he didn’t feel comfortable enough to share. But this time, it was different.

“You are right, thank you.” Tone returning to his usual warmth, Harry grinned to himself.
“I’m usually wrong, it’s nice to be right about something for a change. But honestly, your parents would be proud. You’re a fighter through and through and look where you are now! Teaching pre-teen and teen snots the wonders of magic. I respect the hell out of you.”

To hear that was a great comfort to Alistair, wondering if they would approve or disapprove of the life he was leading and while he’d never know for certain, he couldn’t deny the feeling of reassurance.

“Though our souls travel elsewhere to humans, I would like to think that in another life, our parents would create bonds of friendship.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.” Laughing to himself Harry looked up at him, a cheeky glint in his eye. “There’s no chance mum wouldn’t like you. You could charm your way out of a room of Ser Sunshine’s.”

Alistair laughed, louder than intended. The thought itself was amusing if challenging. Beneath the slowly darkening sky, they enjoyed each other’s company, the only ones remaining outside.

“Alistair?”

Glancing down at Harry, the man tilted his head questioningly.

“What are your parent’s names?”

“Maven Monique Lothaire and Callan Cynhard Lothaire.”

Harry etched the names into memory, puzzling something else in his mind. “Do Vampires really like alliteration?”

Alistair hadn’t thought to ask himself that question, but there was a certain odd satisfaction he received from it and he knew Solomon was of the same opinion. Conveying as much to Harry, he understood. It was pretty satisfying to see or hear.

“I feel like a new bloke.”

He wiggled his fingertips happily. Glancing at the sky, it wouldn’t be long before the next DA session and reluctantly, after saying he needed to leave, Harry removed Alistair’s arm from around him. Standing up and giving a brief farewell with his Firebolt in hand, Harry headed indoors again.

Watching him leave, Alistair didn’t regret this day for one moment. Not only was he able to spend a little more time with Harry than usual, but he’d also gained knowledge previously outside of his
expertise. It truly was a joy to see Harry partake in something he loved but even if his calm had returned, the urge to make sponges of Bludgers, hadn’t. Alone, he let the pent-up sigh escape him.

'Solomon. At this moment in time, are you available?'

There was a brief pause, Alistair sensing his slight suspicion. 'I am. Why?'

'I wish to drink only the finest alcohol we own, as I am in dire need of it and your company.'

'Alright.' Solomon didn't protest, suspecting there was a story behind this that would soon be shared. Disappearing on the spot Alistair decided to indulge himself. While the humans may think youth was on his side, today he felt every one of his years.

Chapter End Notes

This is my way of testing out Quidditch xD I've never written one out before and any student names now and in the future are either taken from canon or made up, if there's some positions not mentioned that year.
Chapter Summary

A friend is returned to Harry who afterwards, gains knowledge which will benefit him for the future.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: It’s Harry's first Quidditch game in months, leaving Alistair nail bitingly anxious as a result.

Even if just a friendly Quidditch match, that and the success of the DA lesson had helped Harry to be ready over the next week, even if a restful sleep eluded him, He slowly but surely began to rely on Alistair more, trying his best to ignore the natural instinct to suck it up and deal with it, needing to do so before now.

With the full moon having passed by on the 27th, Harry had received permission from Professor McGonagall to be with Remus once the school day was over and a short while before the transformation, had shown him just how Dumbledore was pranked. Needless to say, Remus was in tears with the result, only the time of his transformation drawing near enough to quell his laughter.

One of the things Harry was most happy about, was being able to have the connection that he’d developed with Remus. Starting a little in his third year but now, it had blossomed into something where the man was irreplaceable to him. He wanted to introduce Alistair to Remus but at the same time he didn’t, more than worried over Moony’s possible reaction, as Werewolves were known to have a particular hatred of Vampires, instinctually. He’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

Having returned to the chamber, he had informed Thanatos of his true nature and with the reminder, memories returned. Though he remained unsurprised, having admitted he suspected not everything was what it seemed. He would stay with Harry, feeling that he would have a better chance of fulfilment with him than he ever would alone, even if with his control over death he could leave the soul realm and inhabit a body at any time.

But for right now and with everything he’d needed to do finished, Harry had learned something interesting. The chest in the chamber couldn’t be seen by just anyone. According to Salazar Slytherin only those worthy of it would be able to and even then, they had to have the knowledge of wards to break them and access the contents. In that very same book, was the mentioning of Aela. Written in Parseltongue the words came naturally, though his eyes had to adjust some.
There are those who would wish to use Aela for their own nefarious purposes and if it is known
that she is able to alter size on command, Basilisks as a species will be under threat of extinction.
It is simpler to capture something smaller, with little chance of fighting back, after all. For their
safety and upon her agreement I, Salazar Slytherin, have locked away this information here until
such a day where it is safer.

Below this was a sentence, which Harry assumed would be spoken aloud to her.

*The locks are broken. Protector against those who would tear the world asunder, remember all
that was once lost, to regain your true power.*

A thrill of excitement ran through Harry's frame. If she was able to shrink at will, he'd be able to take
her with him, to see things not only from a different perspective but areas where size restricted her.
Reading the same sentence to memorise it he closed the book, placing it back into the chest. It listed
only the finer details, including some of the school's wards. He wouldn't leave the room with it or
some of the others, as he probably wouldn't feel safe reading something so valuable out in public.

Returning to the main body of the chamber he found Aela, curled into a large coil. Running his hand
across her scales, he'd told her what he'd found and jumped backwards quickly, with her own
excitement nearly flattening him.

"Pleassse Harry, tell me now!"

Curiously, it was possible for snakes to have puppy eyes, though he wasn't sure how. In truth he
didn't think he'd be able to wait anyway, granting her request.

Once the last syllable left his lips, white light shimmered around Aela's head, dissipating a moment
later. Not hesitating she closed her eyes, tapping into the knowledge once known. Before Harry's
eyes, the intimidation factor of 60 feet long began to decrease. In comparison to before, Aela not
being much larger than a Ball Python was what he considered to be a dramatic change.

Though he shouldn't be, Harry was surprised that it had worked. The books were no forgeries after
all but to think, that a living thing could change size at will! Drastically and not suffering health
consequences either, it was something the Muggle side of the world would think to be impossible.

Crouching he looked her in the eye, finding it strange that firstly he could easily look her in both eyes
and secondly, he was the one looking down.

Harry watched carefully, as Aela stretched to her full height of three feet, trying to take in her
familiar yet unfamiliar surroundings. "How do you feel?"

"Like a mousse. I had forgotten what it was like to be the tiny one."
"I can imagine, it's a big change for you. Want to go on an adventure?" Eyes sparkling mischievously he stretched out his hand and the moment it takes for the human eye to blink, Aela had already coiled around his arm, to leave and settle around his shoulders.

"Yesss! Onward, my trusssty human sssteed!"
Hissing with contentment Aela settled against his neck. "Ssso warm."

Chuckling and reaching up with a hand to smoothly stroke her head, he was interrupted by a familiar Patronus heading towards him.

"Potter. My office now."

The sharp and to the point tone of Professor Snape cut cleanly through the air, echoing in the vast open space. Once it vanished, Harry shrugged.

"Not the adventure I had in mind, but ready to go?"
He asked his travelling companion and once he got the go-ahead, promptly left the chamber.

Suspecting that the new sights would be overly exciting Harry placed a centralised silencing charm so that he would be able to hear her, but no one else would. He would still have to watch when he spoke, however. Keeping an eye out for others nearby and seeing the coast was clear Harry knew Professor Snape may want to speak with him for a number of reasons.

The first vestiges of nervousness assaulted him, the moment he knocked on the door. Not for who he was going to speak with, but what he may or may not find out.

"Enter."

Trying not to let it show he opened the door, closing it firmly behind. Upon his entry Professor Snape rose to his feet, expression unreadable. Steeling himself Harry waited patiently until the man picked up something off his desk. Upon closer inspection, it was a phial, filled with a Potion vaguely familiar to him.

The gears turned within his mind, realising just why it was familiar. Sixth year covered Potions such as Draught of Living Death and the antidote, Wiggenweld. As much as the topic of that was particularly painful to him at the time, he enjoyed the complexity these Potions provided, but not so much having to test the finished result and the antidote upon themselves. Thankfully, over the few weeks, Malfoy had proved to be a good Potions partner and therefore, the results produced were as
close to flawless as could be. Much to their surprise, the Potion combination earned five points apiece. Not a surprise for Slytherin at least but certainly Gryffindor.

Though the colour was a little different, Harry recognised it to be Wiggenweld Potion.

"Sir?" He voiced this questioningly, not even daring to hope until receiving a verbal confirmation.

Professor Snape's tone didn't lose its severity, conveying his seriousness. "For your Owl. Potter, I will say this here and now. There is no guarantee that it will work. The Draught of Living Death was not intended for anything outside of humans and as such, this is an adaptation."

As always, Harry appreciated that he didn't sugar coat things. Too much had happened for him to ever remain optimistic. Usually, pessimism worked better. Failure was nothing he didn't expect. Success would be a welcome surprise. However, if he expected to succeed and failed instead, he knew he would feel so much worse. It could be somewhat applicable to the current situation. Seeing that he expected an answer, Harry nodded quickly.

As the Professor sent his Patronus out, this time to Hagrid so he knew of their arrival, Harry tried to squash down the hope bubbling inside. If anyone could help Hedwig, it was him. What if it worked? What if it didn't work?

The soft hissing by his ear strangely helped to calm him down. On the way, he'd explained the situation to Aela and if she received no response, it wasn't safe to talk just yet. He could always mask his own voice to block the hissing out but that was more of a hassle than anything.

Once the Patronus was sent he opened the door, gesturing for Harry to leave first. He did his best to match those long strides after, swearing the Professor glided along the floor rather than walked. Thankfully no further conversation was shared, unsure if he could carry one any further right now. He'd only visited Hagrid once or twice for an update, not wanting to burden him with excessive visits but also the more he did visit, the harder it would be to function normally without his calm and confident facade crumbling.

Once outside Harry immediately sighed, lost to the raging winds and downpour. The ground sodden beneath his feet he carefully followed behind and of course, the man didn't stumble or falter once. God, he hated the rain. Sometimes it was refreshing but mostly, it reminded him of his relatives. On reflex, he went to wipe his glasses but stopped a moment later. He'd yet to get out of the habit, having needed to do it for so long and usually forgetting the charm Hermione had taught him so he didn't need to manually clean them. Having no need of glasses made navigating in this weather much easier, not to mention better eyesight overall.

Though Harry was in better health and didn't consider himself to be overly clumsy, the ground was soaked enough for him to slip. While he managed to keep his balance he skidded down the slight incline to the side of the path, mud gathering at and around his feet. Unintentionally he drew level with the Professor and even through the rain, could see his raised eyebrow.
"Sorry, I slipped." Smiling sheepishly and with some force, he managed to lift his feet out and once on Hagrid's doorstep, quickly scourged and dried himself. Not a moment too soon as after the knock, Hagrid's large silhouette stood in the doorway. Warm black eyes landed on Harry, only to pull him into a bone-crushing hug.

"Arry! How are yeh?"

"F-Fine.. need to breathe.." Harry managed to gasp out, sure he'd felt more than one vertebrae click in the midst of Hagrid's abundant enthusiasm. Looking mildly apologetic he was placed back on his feet, Hagrid moving aside for them both to come in. But the moment he released him, Fang wanted in on the action and with a great leap, placed both large paws on Harry and tried his best to lick him to death.

"Down Fang! Great bleedin' lump." Despite Hagrid's words, the tone was nothing short of affectionate.

Once Fang had settled Hagrid shuffled to the side, coming back with Hedwig in one hand. True to his word she was well cared for, not looking malnourished even though it had been days since the incident. Making room on the table he carefully placed her down.

"She's all yers."

Hedwig's beak was gently pried open, Harry observing from a slight distance as the Professor poured a small measure of it into her open mouth. Ensuring it was swallowed he recorked the phial, waiting. It was probably the longest wait of Harry's life so far, or it seemed to be. Aela broke the silence for Harry.

"Thisss is your bird friend?"

knowing that Professor Snape would be able to detect his magic in such close proximity, he nodded silently.

"I can ssmell the dark one. He is confident. It will work."

Harry could only wish he had the same level of optimism, trembling faintly.

A few minutes later, Hedwig stirred ever so slightly. Harry didn't move or say anything, remaining quiet as the Professor checked her vitals. There was a moment's discussion between the two of them before he spoke once more.

"She is weak but otherwise unharmed."
Taking a step back, that was Harry's cue to move forward. As if she could sense his presence, her eyes slowly opened. as they did a feeble hoot broke the silence, on her feet again. It was just as he said. Not as full of energy as usual, but her vivid yellow eyes held the same level of awareness that he'd always known.

Precisely because all thoughts of her were firmly kept at the back, they rushed forward beyond control. The relief was so strong that he was unable to restrain his emotion.

"Hedwig."

Hand shaking, his fingers brushed across the feathers of her breast, as she nipped at them affectionately. A large lump in his throat he tried to swallow past it. To his frustration and slight embarrassment because of the company he shared, he was unable to stop himself from crying. His only saving grace being that by nature, he wasn't loud. Swiping his eyes roughly and breath hitching he tried to get himself under control, until a clean handkerchief the size of a small towel was placed onto his open palm.

"Yer alrigh'." Words rough but no less warm Harry made use of it, carefully drying his eyes.

'Harry?'

At the voice he was overly fond of filled with concern, Harry quickly relayed the good news.

'I'm fine, Hedwig is awake. Professor Snape managed to brew the correct dosage for her.'

A joy to rival Harry's own was shared through their link. That is wonderful to hear! I shall have to thank him. Subtly and anonymously, of course.'

The thought of that made Harry smile slightly, unsure if he wanted to know details. After a short pause, Alistair continued.

'Solomon wishes to know if you are available today, for Occlumency lessons. If your answer is in the affirmative, he will collect you outside of the gates.'

Worry clouded his mind. 'If I were him I'm not sure I'd want to be within ten feet of Hogwarts.'

'Yes. We are stubborn by nature and nothing will dissuade him. I did ask if he was sure. He wishes to overcome any lingering doubts and fears, to be stronger for it in the end.'

Harry could respect that. 'I'm at Hagrid's but when I'm finished I'll let you know.'
Sending through all the warmth he held, Harry sensed the barest flicker of a smile in response.

Eyes dried and breathing under control he cleaned the handkerchief, handing it back to Hagrid.

"Sssee? I told you." At Aela's smugness, Harry refrained from rolling his eyes and mindful of where she was, perched Hedwig on his right shoulder.

Eyes still red-rimmed but composure having returned, he bowed his head slightly. "Thanks for the help, both of you." Looking at each of them in turn and conveying his sincerity, Harry still couldn't get a read on the Professor while Hagrid responded happily.

"Yer welcome."

Harry nodded his head in direction of the door. "I'm going to the Owlery with her."

Hagrid waved cheerfully. "Alrigh'. Look after yerself."

Silently they watched as Harry left, closing the door behind him.

As a Professor and Potions Master, Severus never found himself with much free time and never did he think he'd spend it creating an antidote specifically for Potter's Owl. But with its completion, brought a sense of quiet accomplishment only fellow masters and mistresses would understand. His words to Potter were true, there was no guarantee it would work. While he was positive it had turned out correctly, there were many unknown factors coming into play.

Since their truce, Severus had been witness to sides of Potter that he never thought he'd see. Some he was uncomfortable with, even if he refused to let it outwardly show. Arrogance to be taken down a peg or two he could handle, but an emotional and teary-eyed Potter, thankful no less? He'd found himself in many situations which weren't ideal and he listed that as one of them. He wasn't the comforting type and if alone with Potter, he would have left the room and returned in a few minutes and hopefully by that time, return to familiar territory.

His colleagues as a whole were overly affectionate but most knew better to even think of placing a hand on his shoulder or Merlin forbid, hug him. He shuddered at the very thought. However, Lothaire took the concept of affection to another level entirely, charming men and women alike wherever he went. In a way, he reminded Severus of the late Potter, only without the arrogance and only a hint of obnoxiousness. His company wasn't entirely unpleasant and while he loathed nicknames no matter who or what they were, the one given to him wasn't done so out of malice or ill
will. In fact, if he didn't know better, he'd think the man was trying to befriend him. He didn't trust
him entirely just yet, able to count on just one hand how many true friends he had and possibly even
less if the truth of his spying nature came to light.

But one thing Severus was sure of, was if Lothaire tried to hug him, he would spend countless nights
perfecting a suitable poison in retaliation, to be slipped into Pumpkin juice. With Lothaire, he would
observe silently. But with Potter, he found himself satisfied, both at his own success and Potter's
wellbeing.

It was that thought, that had him wondering if he hadn't gone senile, as he'd so often told
Dumbledore. Saying his own curt farewell to Hagrid he left, returning to his office.

Stepping into the Owlery, he watched as Hedwig carefully took flight, perching not far above his
head. Harry could tell she wasn't at her physical peak just from that, usually going higher. Informing
Alistair that he was finished Harry quickly made his way to the gates, keeping his senses attuned and
slightly paranoid that Moody was lurking about. If Harry happened to come across him again, it
would be confirmation that the DMLE didn't keep him busy enough.

Knowing that Hedwig would be alright, Harry still classed this as one of his better years, even if in
some ways he'd traded one for another. While Voldemort seemed to no longer be a threat,
Dumbledore had become one in place of him. Once clear of the building and any disapproving eyes
he ran, not wanting to keep Solomon waiting for much longer.

Despite their imposing size, the gates made barely a sound once Harry opened them. Stood off to the
side was Solomon, leaning slightly against it. Though Harry could see him, he had the feeling that
anyone else wouldn't be able to. Wearing a similar shirt to Alistair's, he had to wonder if they did
casual at all.

Saving the possible question for another time, Harry had no doubt Solomon detected his presence
long before he even reached the gates. Walking over to him, he was met with a silent stare, eyes
narrowing faintly. He probably noticed Harry’s current state but didn’t mention it, righting his
posture with one fluid movement.

“I am unsure how long the session will last but once finished, I will return you here.”

“That’s fine, thanks.” He gave Solomon a smile, looking forward to what he’d learn.

Their mode of travel required no physical contact but even without his brother mentioning as such,
he didn’t doubt for a second that he hadn’t taken advantage of being able to initiate contact with
Harry. Solomon was reminded of a few days ago, still half in disbelief that one human, a teenager at
that, could render someone such as Alistair more discomposed than he’d ever seen him. It was one to remember, that was for certain.

Lothaire Castle, Quidditch Aftermath

"It was positively outrageous! From fifty feet in the air, if not more Harry swooped down much like a bird of prey in pursuit of the Snitch. But it was a ruse! A plot cleverly hatched to deceive his opponent. A dive of which I was almost certain would leave him with several broken bones."

Alistair's hand gestures were more animated than usual, having forgone glasses in favour of bottles a while ago. One such bottle of Glenavon Whisky was gripped with near bruising force, already half empty despite being opened a few minutes ago. He continued as if narrating a particularly thrilling theatre performance.

"Old is simply a label to differentiate individuals from each other and not one that I would apply to myself, but the moment those thrice damned Bludgers began to pursue him, I began to feel every single one of my accumulated years. I have witnessed many shocking things and yet, never batted an eyelid. But Quidditch? It is utter, thrilling madness. I tell you, I am a teenager struggling with a myriad of emotions and what direction their life should go in once again."

Leaning back with a glass in hand, Solomon decided that the best approach would be to let him talk it out. Vampires had a very high alcohol tolerance or at least, they do. He was unsure for others but on a normal night, between them, they'd managed to drink the equivalent of a decent sized pond. But today, more on Alistair's part, the amount of alcohol consumed was more closely compared to Olt River. It was a slight exaggeration, but it wouldn't be to say that if any human tried to match them, they would succumb to severe liver poisoning.

Alistair wasn't the typical drunk. not only did he need a lot to become even close but when intoxicated, no one could tell except for Solomon. He liked to talk but with alcohol, he became overly chatty and somewhat dramatic and/or flirty. Solomon usually stopped before reaching that point but Alistair wasn't afraid to test his limits. His pronunciation of words remained flawless, unlike most. He hadn't talked himself the whole time, the only noise from him being small affirmations that he was still listening. It was a rare occasion indeed if Alistair resorted to profanity for expression.

Just before Alistair arrived, Solomon wisely decided to hide the very best of their alcohol, choosing the ones they could afford to lose on impulse. They had some that should only be saved for rare occasions, one or two even dated older than them.

Looking at the steadily growing pile of empty bottles, Solomon had made the right call. Tilting his head to the side, he filled the silence during Alistair's brief pause for breath. "I can see why you have
drunk so much. Your throat needs lubrication from all that talking."

A flicker of puzzlement crossed Alistair's face. "Whatever do you mean? I have barely drunk-"

He stopped, eyes drawn to the table with bottles of various shapes and sizes, all empty. The table wasn't enough to hold them all, so some remained on the floor."-Oh, I see. Perhaps I have, just a little."

"A little? There is enough here to get an entire city drunk."

Somehow, without Solomon noticing, the bottle in Alistair's hand became empty. It was as if he entered another dimension altogether and returned once each held no more.

Hands empty Alistair stood up, running a hand through his hair and caught midway between excitement and agitation. "It is no less than what I need. I have never suffered from this particular kind of stress before. It was captivating yet terrifying! But Harry, he loves Quidditch. And if he is happy, then I am too."

Since Alistair was in a more talkative mood than usual, Solomon decided to take advantage of that. "You are overly fond of this particular human."

With his words and quick as a flash Alistair seated himself next to Solomon, taking him by the shoulders. At the sudden seriousness, he snapped to attention, faintly concerned.

"Of course. He is the most adorable young man to ever walk this world and the next."

He should have known better than to ask. He could tell Alistair was serious but, really? He softly sighed to himself.

"My little brother is adorable too."

Caught off guard, Solomon flushed.

Alistair's tone became teasing. "Oh, is that a blush that I see?"

"I would like you to keep quiet now." Averting his eyes Solomon tried to subtly leave, prevented from doing so when he was abruptly pulled into a hug.

"That is not true. If it is, I shall be heartbroken, never to recover!"
And there was the dramatic side. Desperate to escape the embarrassing situation he awkwardly patted Alistair's head, doing his best to think of a distraction. "I challenge you to a race, equines only."

Knowing that he was referring to their shapeshifting ability, Alistair immediately pulled away, eyes sparkling like a child's. "Wonderful! Where?"

"The Sahara Desert. I will place a marker. The first one to reach it wins."

Solomon wasn't overly fond of shapeshifting. If he was going to explore, he would much rather do it as himself and not be left vulnerable in an unfamiliar body. He relished time with his brother after being separated however and knew that this was something Alistair wanted to do more often. Once in a while, it wasn't a bad idea. And this way it would cancel out any effects of the alcohol ready for when he had to return.

"Then, what are we waiting for?" Standing up once more Alistair exuberantly pulled Solomon to his feet, the pair disappearing.

As Solomon's magic wrapped around Harry's own ready for transportation, he reflected on the race itself. Alistair won but for the first several miles, it was near neck and neck. While Solomon had opted for a black Mustang, Alistair had chosen the form of a chestnut brown Arabian. Both horses were suited to the climate, Solomon putting it down to his own lack of experience. But it worked how he wanted it to as by the end it was time for Alistair to return to Hogwarts, back to his usual self and with an apology that Solomon waved away. At this point, he was used to it, though not quite as extreme.

With Harry, had brought about changes in Alistair and to a certain extent him as well, not including his rescue. He hoped that today would bring about the start of him being able to adequately protect himself from the bearded excrement. He'd never taught anyone outside of Emily and Jacob Morganti, both children so in truth, he had no idea what to expect.

Though brothers, they couldn't be more different, in Harry's opinion. Both were very likeable and according to Alistair, Solomon had taken an interest in Hermione and the feeling was mutual. He was curious to see where that would go but also, curious as to how different Solomon's teaching style would be. Better than Professor Snape was a certainty but if asked again, he was sure the outcome would be different. Those lessons were fuelled with mutual hatred, the other man using it as an opportunity to get back at his deceased father through the son or at least that's what it seemed like to him. But either way despite their truce, Harry couldn't say he'd be comfortable learning that particular topic from him again.

Seeing the castle in its splendour once more, it hadn't lost the ability to be impressive in the slightest.
Returning brought a sense of comfort and familiarity, though only there for a few days previously. Though mostly the same, there was a stark difference. Wards so strong that the magnitude stole Harry's breath away, the air containing nothing but magic filled with purpose. Inhaling as much as he could, Harry followed alongside him. He assumed they were there as extra protection for those free from Hogwarts.

Once inside and turning a corner, Harry felt something crash into his legs. Looking down he was met with the eyes of a young boy, who looked no more than five or six years old. Before Harry could ask after his wellbeing, he bounced back on his feet happily.

"Who's this Sol?" He questioned, curious. Solomon didn't mind the name shortening, knowing his entire name as a whole would be difficult for a child to pronounce and knew Alistair had offered the same solution. "Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter?" mouthing the name silently, his eyes widened. Quickly, he pulled an envelope from his pocket, trying to straighten out the slight creases. Eduard had kept it with him, in the hope he'd meet the one it was intended for in person. Somewhat tongue-tied he couldn't speak, wordlessly holding it out to Harry and shuffling his feet in the process.

As Harry took the envelope, he had no idea what it could be though a moment later, he had the answer. To his surprise, it was a thank you card. Alistair must have informed him of his fondness for flying, as an androgynous character sat on a broom mid-flight, with a field as the background. The words thank you were written above their head, resting on some fluffy clouds. He could tell a lot of time and effort went into this and regardless of reasoning, he appreciated it.

Not entirely sure what he was being thanked for, he checked the contents.

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To Harry Potter,

Al said you found us first, so I guess not all humans are bad even if they did hurt me. He also said I could trust you and since he's the bestest ever, I will. Thanks for the help!

Ed

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And then, it made sense. Harry thought he looked familiar but unconscious, covered in dirt and bruises would alter anyone's perception. That and subconsciously, Harry had blocked out the more
graphic details so, in truth, faces with the exception of Rupert, Solomon, Alistair's or Jacob's were a blur. Finally realising who he was and just what the card was for, Harry showed him a smile. Unknowingly he reacted similarly to Alistair and rather than throwing away the envelope, carefully placed the card back inside, keeping it close.

“Thanks, this is great! You’ve got good attention to detail.” Usually not the best with compliments, this one seemed to come naturally.

Taking note of his reaction, Eduard beamed. “Glad you like it! Do you want to play with me?”

Play with him? Harry didn’t consider himself able to keep a child entertained but even if he wanted to, he couldn’t.

Sensing his reluctance to turn Eduard down, Solomon spoke for him. “On another occasion. He has a lesson with me today.”

Harry hid a smile as Eduard grimaced, looking at him sympathetically. Though he tried to whisper, the chances of Solomon being unable to hear him remained at zero. “If it’s boring, run away! Then you can play with me.”

Before either of them could say anything Eduard ran past them, with energy Harry only wished he had at that age.

“I think it’s going to be far from boring, this is my fucked up mind we’re talking about. I don’t envy anyone trying to teach me something.” He gave Solomon a sidelong glance, smiling bitterly.

Solomon didn’t reply until they arrived at his office. Opening the door with a light push he chose the armchairs, wanting a more relaxed setting. Seated in front of Harry, he chose his words carefully. “Give yourself a little credit. Alistair has informed me a number of times you are a dedicated student, that puts 100% effort into tasks set, practical or written.”

Harry wasn’t used to being told something of this nature so directly, not sure what to say. So instead, opted for humour. “You might want to kill me by the end of today. I’m either loved or hated, there’s no in between.”

Though Solomon was aware of his joke, he couldn't help but respond seriously. "I would not kill the one who found me, no matter how unpleasant. As for your mind, we each have our own disturbing content."

According to some people, Harry was the reincarnation of Voldemort, or at least Voldemort before the current one that only a select few knew about. He couldn’t argue with that either, knowing at the hands of Dumbledore Solomon will have suffered more than what any of them could imagine.
As Solomon focused his gaze exactly where Aela's head was, Harry shifted uncomfortably. He'd forgotten about that. While it would work with humans, Vampires could probably sense a lot more than he gave them credit for.

"..Why do you have a shrunken Basilisk?"

The fact that he knew what it was even without seeing it, Harry found to be impressive. Cancelling the charms he'd placed and briefly hissing to Aela she could come out, Harry watched as she left the warmth of his clothing, to rest on top. "It's sort of a long story so I'll condense it. This is the one that I was poisoned by. She died in the Chamber of Secrets but the venom and part of her essence manifested in me through a Basilisk tattoo I got. When I went back to school I brought her to life and today, I found out how to make her smaller so she's with me, on an adventure."

He finished, trailing off and realising how absurd the entire story sounded when explaining it to someone else.

"I see. Interesting." Solomon's voice lacked the sarcasm Harry expected, looking genuinely intrigued as a soft voice hissed by his ear.

"He smells like that bird."

"What bird?"

That question was answered as in a more blinding flash than ever before, Fawkes appeared. Harry found himself shocked by just how radiant he looked and compared to before, it made it all the more clear just how much he was suffering through Dumbledore. Though not fully grown all his feathers were present, each an embodiment of fire itself and tilting his head, they shimmered in many shades of warm sunset.

"Ahh!"

Panicking Harry hastily repaired his clothing, Aela's venom burning small holes into them as she bared her fangs in warning.

"Sssorry." She did sound apologetic but her agitation could be felt by all in the room. Perched on Solomon's shoulder, Fawkes' eyes tracked her every movement.

: I sensed your presence here, so came to see for myself:

Aela recoiled, glaring daggers even as she slithered to the ground. Though she rose up to appear
intimidating, she couldn't quite do that at her reduced size. "Get out of my head and out of my sight!"

Fawkes briefly glanced at Harry. : I heard your explanation :

: I apologise for damaging your eyesight previously. However, if I had not intervened in such a manner, your current owner would be dead :

Aela's rage dissipated some, lowering her head sorrowfully.

Fawkes continued, a note of almost gentleness present. : I realise it wasn't your fault and I hope that we can start anew :

"Fine, I won't eat you."

Harry laughed aloud and after a moment's thought, conjured a heated rock for Aela. "A relaxation rock."

Unable to pass that up Aela immediately came to rest on it, in a much smaller coil than she was used to, but warmer than she'd been in a while.

Harry assumed Fawkes was briefly relaying their conversation as while he could understand both, Solomon was unaware of Parseltongue. It was one of the languages which couldn't be learned but inherited through family lines only. Or in Harry's case, through Voldemort. But then again, was it really through the Horcrux or did his family actually have a history of Parselmouths? It was something to ask the Goblins, at least.

A flicker of amusement crossed Solomon's face, eyes on Aela. Though Harry could see it for himself, he genuinely cared about Fawkes' wellbeing.

"How are you feeling?"

At Harry's words, Fawkes trilled happily. : A weight has been lifted and the bond is stronger than ever. He is a better master than I could have ever hoped for :

His song filled the room, spreading joy to all with the exception of Aela, immune to the effects. Still perched on Solomon's shoulder, Fawkes rubbed his head against him and perhaps not aware of it himself, a barely noticeable smile touched the corner of his lips. Though Solomon thought it would take far longer to adapt, it was almost as if this bond was meant to be and his fear quickly dissipated as it wasn't towards Fawkes, but the blood. He wouldn't be imprisoned anymore and Fawkes was safe from harmful clutches.
Harry never thought he'd see the day where he saw a Phoenix cuddle into a Vampire but there was no other way to describe it, as Solomon ran a tentative hand along his feathers. Once a short while had passed, Fawkes addressed him again.

: Farewell, Harry :

He disappeared in a flash, with the same abruptness as his arrival.

Thanks to Fawkes, The majority of Harry's nerves had left. Solomon didn't waste any time, getting right into a question that had Harry wincing. "What is your experience with the mind arts?"

Even thinking of it was headache inducing for him. "I first learned of it last year, I was pretty much forced to do it so I'd be protected from Voldemort. I could see how helpful it would be but the person teaching me, I had a bad history with. He shouted to clear my mind without actually telling me how to and attacked it a few seconds after. In the end, it left my mind more open than before."

Solomon knew of these lessons through all the information about Dumbledore he held over the years, at least what was in his mind and not the Pensieve in his office. However, he didn't know the details, only that the man had ordered Severus Snape to teach Harry, knowing full well that he wouldn't do a proper job and his intention all along was for Harry to receive a vision and tell him of it. Once everyone's schedules allowed for it, Solomon wanted to discuss all that he'd learned as some pertained to Harry himself while most were in direct relation to The Guild of Light turned Order of The Phoenix. He was well and recovered enough to be able to discuss these matters.

Solomon loathed Dumbledore more than any being with a modicum of intelligence he'd encountered, however allowing a man who had personal history with Harry's father to not even teach but abuse him, was a new low entirely. He shook his head in disbelief. "That is not an effective teaching method. However, it seems to teach was never his intention. Rest assured, if the wizened fool attacks you again, he will be in for a very unpleasant surprise."

No vindication bled into Solomon's voice, just simple, unfiltered fact. Harry hoped so. If Dumbledore even felt a fraction of the pain that he'd gone through, maybe he wouldn't be so quick to bulldoze through people's minds.

"May I see your mindscape?"

Harry didn't think too much about it, nodding immediately.

There were no problems, or so Harry thought. Solomon was a master and didn't need to say a word and while Harry couldn't tell he was there at all, knowing he was caused panic to set in. It was beyond irrational but the memory of Dumbledore was fairly fresh still and though the situations were incomparable, his mind's defences reacted harshly. Breathing heavily he tried to regain control of himself, heartbeat increasing to alarming levels. Gripping the armchair with bruising force, faint
sounds of distress left him. He knew how pathetic he must look and tried to apologise.

"S-Sorry." His vision blurred some but even still, he could see Solomon carefully approach him. Ensuring he wasn't out of sight for a moment, he placed the palm of his hand directly over Harry's heart, allowing the fresh touch of his magic to offer a sense of calm.

With Solomon's palm pressed against him, it only made Harry more aware of the terror which wracked his frame. He didn't initiate more contact than what was needed, keeping a somewhat professional but peaceful barrier between them. Gradually, his heartbeat began to slow.

"We will take it one step at a time. Such a reaction is normal, with all that you have experienced. I was given enough time for analysis and all that I was able to see, retained no lasting damage." Solomon expected something like this. In truth, he was prepared for it.

The use of 'we' instead of 'you' wasn't particularly significant but unlike with Professor Snape, he had the sense of being supported rather than it being all on his shoulders. It wasn't something he could explain exactly, but it was much appreciated.

"Thanks." Harry's smile was slightly shaky but calmer than just a moment ago. Seeing this Solomon retook his seat. Much like Alistair, he had the ability to draw everyone's attention through voice alone. Though his aura was nearly the opposite, their purely practical approach shared similarities.

"Occlumency is not solely about protection, as there are some able to easily overcome them. The mind is expansive and no creature alive holds all knowledge to just how it works. But, it is limitless. When an attacker is stronger, what do you think the advantage would be with a layered mind, rather than one with a single solid defence?"

Thankfully, Harry didn't feel pressured to answer quickly, sensing no impatience at all. With a strong mind, it would depend on who it was. Even someone with the strongest mind for their age would struggle against someone older and with more experience. It was a case of what you see is what you get. The moment the mind is breached, getting past those defences are top priority.

Layers didn't have to all be the same. In fact, many were different and distinguishable. As Solomon said the mind was limitless, so what was to stop someone from using it to their advantage? He had his answer, though lacked confidence in it.

"Deception. With layers that person can pick and choose what to put there. The first one could be something fairly strong but easy to slip by. The attacker could get cocky and think it's easy but before they know it, they're trapped."

Solomon showed no outward reaction, asking him another question. "Can you provide an example?"

He hadn't thought that far, though voicing his answer helped to solidify it. Thinking quickly, he took
inspiration from his Fourth year. "A maze. But not an obvious one, maybe let them think they're getting somewhere with memories that have a little meaning but really they're going in circles. Once they get frustrated and without focus then launch a counterattack."

To Harry's surprise, Solomon smiled. A noticeable one, filled with a little warmth reminiscent of his brother. "A very good suggestion. How else might you defend against a stronger opponent?"

One difference Harry noticed, was that Solomon asked more questions while Alistair's words gave Harry questions of his own. As an approach, they were two sides of the same coin, both leading to him knowing much more than before. It didn't feel like a lesson at all but more of a relaxed discussion and though the idea of entering someone else's mind caused him discomfort, it was far less than anyone looking into his own. Harry appreciated his patience, taking a few tries before he could peer inside and there, received a visual demonstration of his earlier example.

Beyond that, Solomon's words gave birth to questions on Harry's part as well. From all that he'd heard from others, he'd more or less followed along the same path. Create a place that's comfortable to both meditate and organise memories and when under threat, defend appropriately. Details were covered that he would have never thought of himself, such as involving music to provide a distraction. Harry doubted Dumbledore would appreciate deafening Techno blasting away when he was busy searching for information. Harry found himself with so many ideas that he came to understand why Hermione always carried a notebook with her but just as he'd hoped, today had opened many doors of possibility. Seeing the sky dusted with shades of pink, Harry had one final question.

"When someone tries to scan your mind, what's your method of defence?"

Solomon's eyes flickered briefly, to just before he was captured. "No one has for many years and those who do, quickly realise their mistake. I have reached the point where no diversion or defence tactics are needed, as they are instantaneously rejected. The last one to try and keep trying was Albus Dumbledore."

Gently, Solomon pushed the memory of his first encounter with Dumbledore towards him, a few seconds conveying more than words ever could.

Watching a much younger version of The Headmaster hit a tree, the crack of his skull brought with it a sense of sheer satisfaction, laughing with delight. "Brilliant! I want to send him flying into trees with my mind as well."

Though after that brought nothing but years of suffering, Solomon looked on those few seconds with the same amount of satisfaction as Harry. He didn't mind sharing it with someone who would appreciate the sheer beauty, having been wronged by Dumbledore all his short life. It was one of the first things that Solomon showed Alistair the moment they began to reconnect after so many years apart. There was nothing quite like bonding over a mutual hatred of someone, after all.

Having noticed the time himself, Solomon finished up. "I concur with Alistair. You are a good
student and we will organise another lesson in the future. Also, I can confirm I have no wish to kill you."

Grinning in response, Harry rose to his feet. "Great! One less person out to kill me is progress."

Not usually concerned with anyone's well-being outside of his own or Alistair's, Solomon, to his own surprise, had extended this to Harry. Humor was a defence mechanism for many to deflect honest feelings and while it was delivered jokingly, it wasn't without a good measure of truth. At Harry's age, that wasn't something he should worry about and yet, had from the moment magic was introduced to him and before that, even if unknowingly.

Harry continued, his gratitude clear as he picked Aela up to place her around his shoulders again. "Thanks for today."

Solomon was a little distracted by his own thoughts, though didn't let it show. "You are welcome."

Leaving his office, Solomon escorted Harry back to the gates. Watching him leave reaffirmed in Solomon's mind that perhaps, getting to know humans wouldn't be as unpleasant as he anticipated it to be.
Chapter Summary

Another prank is enacted while Harry is lost in October mood, Ron once more manages to mess everything up and Hermione recaptures her childhood.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry finds a way for Aela to travel around with him and after, learns more of Occlumency.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Tuesday morning, October 1st and a month which left Harry feeling either pensive or poignant. For most, it was a time of celebration and in both Muggle and Wizarding worlds, plenty of sweets. He'd never put a dampener on everyone else's' fun but the days leading up to October 31st and the day itself, he struggled more than usual not to sink into a low mood. The life he could have had was always on his mind, simply brought to the forefront around this time, yearly. Though he realised dwelling on what could have been wouldn't help him now, he found himself unable to help it.

"Harry?"

A voice roused him from these thoughts, looking into the concerned eyes of Hermione. For a moment he'd forgotten he was in the hall. Giving her a weak smile, he finished up the little that was on his plate. His appetite had returned pretty much to normal, the extra reassurance of Hermione's way to protect their minds and Solomon's eye-opening lesson combining to give him more confidence. Also, he realised he didn't want to give Dumbledore the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten to Harry. But then, ever since Alistair's prank, no one had seen him. As the Headmaster it wasn't mandatory for him to be present for all meals but Professor McGonagall had been the one to give daily announcements for a while now, which was unusual. He was reasonably sure that during his absence, Dumbledore was researching a way to become un-pranked. If he'd eaten any more of the coloured Lemon Drops, that wouldn't be for a while.

"Just thinking."

Hermione scrutinised him closely, speaking softly. "Your parents?"
She was more perceptive than Harry gave her credit for. "Yeah."

The mood turned a little sombre, his other friends overhearing. But before it could linger much longer, a burp loud enough to startle birds on trees from miles away echoed around the table.

Of course, it was Ron, earning several disgusted looks.

"You pig!" Ginny elbowed him none too gently in the side.

"Oi! What was that for? It's a sign I've enjoyed my meal!" He protested, shooting her a glare and rubbing where her elbow had hit.

"Well say excuse me or pardon!"

"Fine! Excuse me."

"I don't like your tone." Her hand hovered over her wand menacingly. Though Ron often had a case of foot in mouth syndrome, for once his past experiences with Ginny kicked in. Keeping silent, he resumed eating.

Their sibling bickering strangely helped Harry, watching their exchange in amusement. The morning had only just started, some students here and there still filtering in. Though Lilah usually sat with Dominik, he noticed her come closer to him, looking as though she were about to cry.

"Can I sit with you?" She asked him, voice meek and in response, Harry patted the seat available to him after Luna shuffled along to make space.

Silently, she leaned into his side and wordlessly, Harry drew her closer. "What's wrong?"

Biting her lip, she glanced downward. "Dominik left Hogwarts. He said it wasn't for him and that where he's going I wouldn't be able to keep in touch. He was my first friend, but now I'm alone."

That explained it. Harry was aware that Tonks was going to leave soon, just not exactly when. She did feel guilty for leaving her as while older, the friendship between them wasn't one-sided even if she wasn't really an 11-year-old boy. For now, she believed it was better not to say that Dominik technically wasn't real but one day if the opportunity arose, she would tell Lilah the truth.

Dumbledore had changed his tactics and while she was undercover in Hogwarts, Amelia Bones remained unaware that she did anything else other than attending Order of The Phoenix meetings. If she found out it could put her job in jeopardy along with landing others in trouble who knew of it as
well, her actions against the law unless approved by Amelia herself.

Harry had also learned that Amelia had placed Alastor Moody on temporary leave, his sudden appearance the time Harry left with Professor Snape to meet Voldemort making more sense now. While his skill couldn't be denied and without Tonks going into too much detail, his paranoia and suspicion had caused him to turn on some of his colleagues, insisting they were aligned with or were Death Eaters. While Harry knew Moody was right and there were ministry officials with the mark, he'd even pointed the finger at Arthur Weasley, of all people.

So apparently, for lack of anything else to do, Dumbledore had recently given Moody the task of tailing Harry rather than Tonks. This placed Harry at a disadvantage as while aware of his surroundings, this was a senior Auror. He'd have to somewhat filter his words, knowing that the man would tell Dumbledore everything rather than unimportant words.

A few seconds after, Lilah continued. "I know you're my friend but Dominik was my age, you know? We hung out after class and worked together, but now he's gone." A fist gripping his robes she fell silent.

Harry was unsure what to say at first, knowing all too well how she was feeling but throughout his time here he'd grown with friends by his side, even if some differed this time. It wasn't long into the school year but rather than fall into familiar patterns, Lilah went out of her way to talk to non-Gryffindors, Keith targeting her for that. In general, Harry liked to think he was a good reader of people and sensed no maliciousness behind his actions, other than lashing out at what he didn't understand. Though a dhampir, very few knew this so Lilah stood out as herself. Giving her shoulder a squeeze, he tried to be encouraging.

"The year's only just started out, you'll make friends soon, I promise. How can you not? You're so likeable!"

Accompanying his words Harry tickled her side, earning a giggle in response.

"Thanks, Harry, I hope so."

Feeling better she gave him a genuine smile, turning her attention to the other side. "Luna! Show me how to do my hair like that, please?"

Today, she wore a flower motif, created out of her own hair as part of a pattern, matching the half moon earrings. Hearing Lilah's words she was more than happy to do so, turning her to sit sideways on the bench. Giving soft instructions she styled her hair in a similar way. Between Harry and Luna Lilah forgot her earlier mood and while still sad that Dominik wouldn't be around, maybe she could make some new friends. She'd never forget one of her first, though.

‘Is Lilah alright?’
At the faint note of concern in Alistair’s voice, Harry was quick to reassure him. ‘Yeah, Dominick left Hogwarts and she was upset about that.’

A momentary pause. ‘Am I to assume that she left in relation to her Metamorphmagus ability?’

Harry shouldn’t be surprised really considering Alistair’s nature but despite that, he was. ‘How long have you known?’

‘From the moment she first stepped into this hall. I am not sure of her name, only that she is in her early twenties. While her physical appearance is flawless, her core remains that of a grown woman. I have encountered them before though admittedly, not many.’

Before Harry could think any better of it his true thoughts slipped out, unfiltered.

‘..Fuck, you’re impressive.’

Warm, melodic laughter. ‘I aim to please. But only for you.’ A wink, both in silent conversation and at the head table, aimed his way.

Alistair’s charming nature would be the end of him, of that he was certain. By some miracle he managed to not blush in response, focusing on information exchange.

‘She’s called Nymphadora Tonks, an Auror with the Ministry. Dumbledore set her to watch me but she just fed him unimportant information. He’s sent Moody after me instead.’

A faint note of distaste entered Alistair’s voice. ‘I dislike him. His magic is strong but sour. My fangs ache in his proximity.’

Harry couldn’t argue with that. He remembered Alistair explaining the extent of his magic sensing ability, right down to the finest detail and he never failed to find it fascinating. Scanning the room nervously, he had one question.

‘Is Moody here?’

‘No. He is only here when the Headmaster himself is. No one has noticed his presence, save for perhaps Professor Snape.’

Before Harry could reply, Alistair continued.

‘Ah, it appears the mere mention of them acts as a summon.’
Timed perfectly, the door behind the head table opened and having not been seen in days, Dumbledore appeared again.

Though Harry expected more pranks were in store, he never thought anything could top the hilarity of the first. While in one sense that was true as the first time was sheer surprise factor coupled with Dumbledore's appearance. This time it was both the polar opposite of the first prank and to how he would ever dress. Along with his three other middle names, eccentric could be added there. Neon robes, robes patterned with moons and stars, nothing was beyond him.

What he didn't do, however, were muggle suits. If he did they would be patterned and coloured eye-catching. This one, however, manure was the first word that sprang to mind, colour wise. Everything was brown including shoes, the exception being a crisp white shirt. It would look marginally better on anyone else, except Dumbledore. But, that wasn't what had everyone once more staring at him incredulously.

While before he could barely keep control of hair growing by the minute, there was none to be seen. Harry didn't want to know if that extended to other parts of his body but his beard, eyebrow hair, the hair on his head, everything was gone. He was left resembling a newborn playing dress up, the sight bizarre. Harry was too busy staring to laugh, however, it was Seamus that set their table off, to those in earshot.

"The fuck's he wearing? Looks like a right cockwomble."

Harry snorted, bursting into a fit of laughter while trying to voice his question. "What's a cockwomble?"

Seamus shrugged, eyes not leaving Dumbledore for a second. "No idea. But whatever it is, he's one of them."

Through blurred vision, Harry removed the notepad he'd took to carrying around and on a new page, listed Seamus' name and the insult beneath, in a different colour. He'd introduce him to name that headmaster one day, though he'd unknowingly taken part already.

One by one, the student's laughter filled the hall and again, the same members of staff showed restraint. Though internally, some were equally amused. The laughter died down a little if only to hear his daily announcement.

Of all the voices Harry expected to hear, this wasn’t the one. Despite everything, professional yet absurd looking could sum Dumbledore at that moment. It was contradictory yet added to the hilarity.

“Ey up lads an’ lasses, ‘ope ya ‘avin an orite mornin’. Only got one thing t’ say, we’re ‘aving an ‘alloween party an’ fancy dress is optional, but don’t be borin’ bastards. Bring a partner wi’ ye, birds or otherwise.”
He gave a casual shrug, slumping into his seat and crossing one leg over the other on top of the table, despite being food and drink there. He finished off with one final thing.

“If ya ‘avent already get some scran down ya, that's all.”

By his no less than horrified expression, Harry had no doubt it wasn’t of Dumbledore’s own free will that he was acting and talking this way, all part of the prank. Some of the students couldn’t understand a word, some could and others picked bits up here and there. But what Harry took away from it, was bringing someone to the party with him. From the moment he heard that he already had someone in mind, instantaneously. He mentioned nothing about formal dancing so Harry assumed it was a casual affair. Maybe this was what Tonks and Kingsley were referring to? He couldn’t think of anything else, the Yule Ball having ministry officials there though that was a bigger deal.

Much discussion that morning lead to who would be taking who to the party and the subject of fancy dress. He’d never had the opportunity to go all out on creativity and have some fun so he figured, why not? Between Harry, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna, all had decided to come in fancy dress though they wouldn’t reveal what their chosen costumes would be until the night. Lilah had shown particular enthusiasm for the party, energetically bouncing in her seat until it was time for classes. This was pre-planned and organised long before, unlike Harry’s last-minute attitude of two years ago. Though he had classes to attend, he had every intention of speaking with the person that he wanted to escort to the party afterwards.

While Alistair pictured what Dumbledore would look like with the loss of his hair, it couldn't visually or mentally prepare him for reality. He was of the firm belief that any supposed authority and wisdom he held lay solely in his dearly departed beard as, without it, he resembled a particularly wrinkled prune.

Alistair was an advocate of fashion as a whole, enjoying the different cuts and styles of clothing available. However, unlike some, he knew it was hardly an important thing in life or summed up who each individual was as a person. Harry had told him of the Weasleys, not financially well off and with second-hand clothing but with the children that he'd met so far, he could tell they had a certain strength of character. Particularly in Ginny, very opinionated and with a fiery temper but could direct it in a more appropriate manner, which Ron hadn't learned how to as of yet. He knew Harry was close with the family, treating him as one of their own and if he should be accepted into the Order, he would very much like to meet Mr and Mrs Weasley for himself.

So, with him knowing the ins and outs of fashion, he knew precisely what cut, colour or style would suit those he'd come to know and on the opposite scale, what wouldn't compliment them at all.

Which was why that among the coloured Lemon Drops, the dullest, most unoriginal suit he could possibly come up with was an option. There were more than one voice changers in there, which would control his actions to a degree too. Dumbledore was fairly well spoken and not known to use slang or profanity, even mild. Which made the situation better, in his opinion.
In an effort to not look on her opposite side, Minerva turned to Alistair. "I'm sure the Weasley Twins have returned somehow to prank the one member of staff they were unable to before leaving."

Though he'd had his fill of laughter and remained composed, internally, there was a small child rubbing his hands with glee. Absolutely no one, other than who he'd told, suspected him. He hadn't had this much fun in many years. Tilting his head curiously, he decided to ask a little more about them. "Do you mean to say that they managed to prank Severus?"

Seated on Alistair's other side, the glare Severus sent towards Minerva would freeze the blood of anyone, other than the two next to him.

She didn't react at all, eyes glimmering with amusement. "Severus, you should know by now that I'm immune to your medusa stare. What's the harm in telling him? It's a memory that I'm particularly fond of."

Severus sneered, in an irritable mood. "It gives me great pleasure to know that one of us delights in another's suffering."

Both of them knew, at that moment, how hypocritical that particular sentence was coming from him. He backed off, albeit unhappily.

Minerva ignored the urge to roll her eyes, if barely. "Severus was due to teach a class and the moment he entered, his physical appearance began to change. His hair and robes took on a bright, rainbow shimmer and with every movement a tiny ball of light grew above his head, resembling a miniature sun. For the rest of the day, he remained like this until the charms applied faded. It was impressive spellwork for their age, but not only that."

Minerva's eyes met Severus'. "Ser Sunshine is a fitting nickname, Severus. I believe you should embrace it."

"I would much rather embrace your silence on the matter." He turned to Alistair, a deep crease between his brows. "Not a word to anyone else, Lothaire."

Alistair simply gave him a grin, accompanied by a warm chuckle. "Of course not. I shall keep the delight of your former colourful appearance to myself."

Not giving him a verbal answer Severus rose to his feet and with a swish of robes, swiftly left.

Watching his retreating back for a short while Minerva refocused her attention on Alistair, leaning in ever so slightly and keeping her voice low. "I visited Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes over the weekend. What they've done is remarkable and I've seen many of our current students. While it does create more work for us and Argus adding to his extensive banning list, they are what we need in
times such as these.

Alistair had heard much of the Marauders and today he learned more of the Weasley twins, deciding that their way of pranking was much preferable. Rather than the majority of them targeting Slytherins and some borderline malicious, the Twins were harmless and everyone was fair game and at the end, they and the ones who were pranked could laugh at the end of it. Though Severus wasn't amused by Minerva retelling the story of his rainbow day, Alistair could tell there was no bitterness or resentment present. Though both Harry and Minerva hadn't gone into details out of respect for Severus, he was sharp enough to put the pieces together and realise that much of his disposition and personality came from those 'pranks'.

Like the students, Alistair looked forward to the party. Not only out of curiosity for what Harry would be wearing, but he was going to use all the persuasion skills at his disposal, to convince Severus to appear in something other than just plain black robes. It would be a challenge, but one he looked forward to.

Harry didn't waste any time. Upon returning to the common room after classes it was full, but he spotted who he wanted to speak with straight away. Parvati Patil sat by the fire, Lavender Brown by her side and engaging in an apparent deep discussion about makeup. While before he would ask to speak to her alone without anyone else around, he didn't care. She had every right to reject him and in truth, he almost expected her to. But he'd like the chance to right a wrong.

Though he had a lot on his mind the year of the Yule Ball including the stress of the Dursleys, being a champion of Hogwarts against his will and a whole other host of issues, he couldn't make any excuse for how he treated Parvati that year. He wasn't enthusiastic at all and stepped on her feet the night of the formal dance more than once, happy with it being passable. Then after that, he was more content to hang out with Ron and sit on the side lines so in the end, she went with someone from Beauxbatons for the rest of the night. Looking back on that now, he was honestly ashamed of himself and while this was an informal affair without any formal dancing, he saw it as an opportunity to make up for what happened.

Making a beeline for her he felt the eyes of more than one of his peers on him but brushed them away. Though, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't in the least bit nervous. Drawing close to them and waiting for a lull in the conversation, he kept his voice level.

"Parvati, can I talk with you for a minute?"

Her gaze was cool at best, her eyes seeming to look and judge his very soul. Lavender's gaze didn't help matters either as many of the students had turned to watch their interaction. He'd told his friends who he had in mind and it was met with approval, especially from Hermione who for a short while after, didn't speak to either of them. Harry because of how he treated his own date for the evening and Ron, for his attitude and jealousy towards her.
"Yes?" She replied, her voice carefully neutral. Gryffindors were known to hold grudges but considering he'd never even apologised to her after, it was understandable. She made it clear she wasn't about to place silencing charms or up and leave the room for the sake of privacy so taking a breath, Harry prepared himself to either be torn to shreds or come away successful.

Not averting his eyes for a moment his gaze locked with her own and though he was unaware of it, there was a certain charm that drew many of the students in. Parvati found herself having to fight off a slight blush, even if their relationship was tepid. She, like the others, had noticed Harry's makeover in every sense and had watched him curiously from afar. She'd started to attend the DA classes as well, having respect for his abilities if nothing else.

Harry had never been more serious in his life. "I'm sorry for how I treated you at the Yule Ball, I was a complete and total arse and there's no excuse for my actions. Would you allow me to make up for that and take you to the Halloween Party?"

He bowed his head, allowing some nerves to show now that his expression was hidden. It was probably only a few seconds but to Harry, it resembled more of a lifetime.

And then, her voice broke the silence. "Alright. But I swear if what happened that year happens again, I won't talk to you until we graduate."

Raising his head, he was met with a warning glare and in response, nodded. A hesitant smile curving his lips he reached for her hand, squeezing it softly. "I won't do it again, I promise you'll have a good time."

Releasing it he stepped back, Parvati looking somewhat flustered. "We'll see."

Despite those words, her gaze compared to earlier had thawed out a little. The moment Harry turned his back to return to his friends he was met with some rounds of applause and Parvati's giggling along with, to his own embarrassment, a new discussion of his attractiveness.

Slapping him on the back, Neville gestured for him to take a seat. He'd worked faster than Harry, asking Luna over breakfast that morning to which she happily agreed. Shortly after that Dean had asked Ginny so already, most of them were sorted for Halloween evening.

Seeing Harry's success, Ron was filled with a confidence of his own. The difference being that while Harry's was just confidence, Ron's held cockiness and a touch of arrogance. Turning to Hermione, her gaze became wary.

"Herm, go to the party with me."

Hermione didn't like the way Ron said it, as if she had no choice but to say yes. The use of a nickname he knew for a fact she hated didn't help matters either. She couldn't help but question him.
"You want me to go with you and not as a last resort?" Her mind flashed back to fourth year, unpleasant memories assaulting her.

Ron shrugged, unconcerned. "Well, who else is going to go with you?"

Apparently, she was right to feel wary. Ron remained oblivious to both Harry and Ginny's glares, along with Neville's own disbelief. Voice shaking faintly and knowing she'd regret it, she continued. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you should be happy someone's asking. There's loads of fit girls in our year I could have chosen but I went for you instead. So, is that a yes?" He smirked, waiting expectantly.

Hermione's heart sank. He'd hit right on her insecurities, knowingly or unknowingly at this point, she didn't know. Before now they'd argued frequently but always made up afterwards. She didn't know why he'd changed so much but rather than cut him down to size with sharp words, she did the opposite. Standing up, she said one thing before leaving.

"..No."

Taking her bag, she left the common room and once the portrait closed, her eyes filled with tears. Usually, she could brush Ron off, his attitude was questionable at times and though he'd hurt her before, they moved on as all friends did. But his behaviour not only to her but others has caused the rift between them to widen and on Harry's part, their friendship was weak at best. But this, she couldn't.

Spending her years in a room of girls makeup and boys obsessed, she stuck out like a sore thumb and more than once, found herself looking into the mirror when the other girls weren't around. She wasn't out of shape and ever since training with Esha, she liked the changes she'd undergone. While her confidence in that area was shaky at best, it had slowly improved. But right now, Ron's words had undone the work to think better of herself.

One thing which she'd told no one was the deep curse scar which ran along her side, edging towards her stomach. Dolohov had given her it and though everyone knew she was critically injured by him, she hadn't made a complete recovery. Only Madam Pomfrey knew of her scar, finding herself thankful that healer/patient confidentiality was a thing.

She'd seen the other girl's bodies and they were to die for, truly. She could detect any glamour charms with certainty and none of them had physical scars that were noticeable, unlike her. She couldn't bear to look at it most days.

Her thoughts turned darker with each step taken, chest tight. Her destination was the Library and like many times before, she planned to bury herself in a book far away from reality. Madam Pince wouldn't ask questions or treat her horribly and neither would the books.
"Ron, you idiot."

Tears previously unshed began to fall, loud sobs leaving her lips. No one else was in the corridor but honestly, she didn't care if there were. It hurt, more than it had any right to. Usually so aware of her surroundings, she failed to notice that there was someone else until she inevitably bumped into them.

"Sorry." Her voice was tearful but apologetic, as she moved to go past them.

"Miss Granger?"

Startled she raised her head, looking into the concerned expression of Alistair. It didn't lessen any, seeing her so distraught. "Is everything alright?"

It was obvious nothing was, so she didn't even bother trying to lie. "No. But I'll be fine Professor, sorry to concern you."

His words held consideration for her, unlike Ron. "Would you like to discuss what is on your mind?"

Hermione appreciated his kindness but doubted he'd want to know anything about women and their insecurities. "It's nothing, really. You won't find it interesting in the least."

His reply was simple. "If it is something that has affected you in such a manner, then it is important to me. Perhaps I may be able to help."

There was nothing forceful there, leaving the decision up to her. While she still believed the matter was trivial at best, she caved in and accepted his kind offer.

Rather than his office, Alistair took her to his quarters and invited her to take a seat. He didn't want her to feel as if was a formal setting and relaxed enough to speak if she chose to.

Despite her low mood, Hermione took in the surroundings with interest. The decor matched that of Lothaire castle, feeling homely somehow. At the appearance of her favourite refreshments, it encouraged a small smile even as she took a seat. Getting her breathing under control, a drink of lemon water helped to soothe a little. In an armchair in front of her, she focused on the cup in her hand rather than him.

"Ron asked me to the Halloween party but he did it in a way as if yes was the only option I had. When I questioned him he replied back, who else would go with me? And that I should feel privileged because out of all the attractive girls in our year, he picked me. Though he didn't say those words, it feels as though he implied that I was..ugly."
She hated to say this about herself but for years, her teeth were something she was overly self-conscious about up until the moment she stopped the shrinking charm on them to just a little smaller than they were previously and while that helped, her self-esteem wasn't the best.

Sometimes, Alistair wondered what went through the youngest Weasley's head, to make someone feel this way. Did he have no remorse? Heated anger simmered within him, even as he did the utmost to help Hermione feel better. "Mr Weasley is a child, who has not yet matured into the man he has potential to be. In all my years upon this earth, I have yet to see anyone else so young with as much intelligence and thirst for knowledge. There is nothing ugly about you, Hermione. Please, don't allow Mr Weasley's foolish and untrue words to affect you. If he is unable to see what I am able to or, as I suspect, your other friends, it is his loss."

While Hermione wasn't completely convinced, his sincerity came across. "Thanks, Professor, I'll try."

Relaxing, she allowed his words to sink in and during this time, a familiar voice.

'Your ire is heated enough to thaw the coldest of locations. Is something the matter?'

Once Alistair gave a brief rundown, Solomon soon joined him. Though he didn't know her as well, he knew enough from those few hours to see none of that was true. He rarely censored thoughts around his brother and though it was accidental, it wasn't something that could be taken back.

'I am fond of both her appearance and personality, as absurd as it is to say about a human I have only met the one time.'

Alistair remained silent though internally, he let the mischievous grin be known. 'Ah, so you want to see her? I understand. I'll be a few minutes at most.'

Alistair could sense his near flustered reaction, chuckling inwardly. 'I am not sure where in my words you came to that assumption.'

'Admit it, dear brother of mine. You enjoyed her company and would like to see her again.'

'I am admitting nothing. Why do you sound so happy about this?'

A gentle smile. 'Because, you are beginning to open your heart to someone, other than me.'

Though Alistair received no response, that was only because he knew Solomon was mulling those words over. Putting his plan into action, his eyes sparkled eagerly. "Miss Granger, would you like to see Solomon? I believe that he would help in returning your usual cheer."
Lost in thought, she was pulled from them quickly and unable to hide her excitement. "Are you sure? Don't I need permission from Professor McGonagall first?"

"I am positive. What your head of house is unaware of, will not hurt her." Sending a conspiratorial wink, his heart soared as already, her mood was improved and Solomon wouldn't be isolated. In his opinion, it was a win-win situation and he would wholeheartedly encourage them.

Answering Alistair in the affirmative she finished up her lemon water and alongside him, navigating the school to outside and the gates. Not disturbing a thing around them, the pair vanished.

As Hermione left, Harry's expression was positively thunderous.

"What the fuck Ron?"

At the same time and with the same question, Ginny spoke along with him, equally furious. Neville watched on in concern for Hermione, but more than happy to sit and watch the fireworks explode.

Harry and Ginny shared a chuckle for their moment of apparent mind reading and with a wave of his hand, gestured for Ginny to go first. Realising the predicament he was in Ron finally had the sense to keep quiet and with each word, shrunk further into his seat.

"You complete and utter arse! What's wrong with you? I swear on Merlin's left testicle if you don't apologise to her when she comes back, I'm asking Fred and George to use you as their guinea pig and I'm not responsible for any damage!"

Seething, some of the other students close by recoiled, not having seen Ginny in this state before. Along with Luna, Hermione was the first friend she'd made and someone who she looked up to and aspired to be like. Seeing how hurt she was by her idiot of a brother caused her already hot temper to spark dangerously. Saying nothing else to him she left the common room as well, to find Professor McGonagall. She needed a verbal conversation with mum, and fast. He wouldn't escape her, however. Though the bat bogey hex was her signature, there were plenty of others available to use. Wondering which combination would be most effective, Ginny hoped that Hermione would be ok.

Ginny had said it for Harry and he couldn't have put it better himself. He was angry and sad in equal measures but with a sister of his own, Harry would have thought Ron would be better than this but unfortunately, he was proven wrong.

"You do know that without Hermione, both of us would be dead twice over?" His voice was factual and calm, even if he was feeling anything but.
"Yeah. So?" Ron questioned, sounding shaken from Ginny's verbal tirade.

"You insensitive prick! Is that all you've got to say? So? You treat her like shit and imply she's not attractive and then expect her to say yes? She's done a lot for us and you need to realise that. If I were you I'd apologise as soon as possible."

“It’s not like I was lying! She doesn’t compare to some of the other girls here. What do you want me to do, say oh Hermione, you're the most gorgeous girl in our year so please go to the party with me?”

Ron completely and utterly missed the point. One thing Harry wouldn’t miss, however, was Ron’s face once his fist flew into it. Strongly holding back the urge to, he had his final say.

Though Ginny’s temper was explosive, Harry’s was a force to be reckoned with as he managed not to shout. “She’s supposed to be your best friend! You’re meant to be supportive, not knock her down! You know what? I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve ruined your friendship with her completely. I’m going to go before I do something I regret.”

A bone-deep sigh escaping his lips, he went to search for Hermione and with him went the almost stifling magic. Several of the students took a deep breath, the majority sending hateful glances towards Ron who still looked confused. Neville had nowhere to be so instead, went upstairs to the dormitories. The plant Harry had given him was a puzzle he’d yet to solve, not growing or changing in any way despite his research. It did make a strange noise, like the sound of little bells whenever he talked to it. Anything, but be in the same room as Ron. He just couldn't right now.

Though Gryffindor’s opinion of Ron wasn’t the best with how many points he’d managed to lose them and his general attitude, any respect a lot of his peers held was lost witnessing that moment while at the same time, opinions of both Ginny and Harry were raised. There was a lot of discussion among them and left alone, Ron sulked. Maybe he’d try and ask her again later, once she’d calmed down.

Though she'd asked Alistair, Hermione still couldn't help but wonder if Solomon found her visiting again just a few days later tiresome. It wasn't an opportunity she wanted to pass up, though. While the Library was undoubtedly magnificent, for the first time in her life there was something within one that had captured her attention and wasn't a book.

Though technically speaking, she suspected that between the Lothaire brothers, they held more knowledge than perhaps several libraries combined, accurate as well since they had lived through certain times.
It was only the once, but Hermione had etched directions to the library in her memory. The second time would be a confirmation that her memory served right and navigating the hallways, there was nothing that needed to change. Arriving outside of the doors, Alistair didn't linger.

"I shall return for you in a few hours. Enjoy!"

Perhaps he was a little too happy about this, but he wouldn't try to mask or hide away his true thoughts. Deciding to check in on Jacob and Eduard, he was thankful that the majority of humanity wasn't like Ronald Weasley.

While Solomon never allowed his anger to assume control, he found himself startled by just how irate he was. Irrational really considering he barely knew Hermione at all but the degree of quickness he found himself warming up to her was alarming. Alistair was the kind to dive in head first and think of consequences later when it came to social interactions and relationships but for him, it was a case of looking before leaping. He could count the number of relationships he'd had over the years on both hands once, but that was it. Often he'd simply retreat to the library and while his brother had fallen in love many times, Solomon had yet to. He was unsure if he was the one holding himself back or if how many times Alistair had his heart broken was a deterrent. But he couldn't deny, now more than ever, that there was a certain kind of fear present within him and while he had the better control of his emotions, he found them slipping out of his grasp. Often pushing others away save for family, he found himself not wanting to this time. Aware of her presence outside Solomon waited, a mixture of slight eagerness for their interaction and worry for her emotional state swirling within him.

Hermione couldn't be classed as dense, in any sense. She didn't want to change the way she interacted with him upon the second time of meeting, but it was difficult to keep composure when she recognised initial feelings of attraction. Only, it was different to Krum. Looking back now, she realised that much like her crush on Lockhart, it was a passing fancy and appreciation of someone the opposite gender who paid attention to her in a more romantic sense. Though that wasn't the case in her second year, it was how her 12-year-old mind interpreted it.

But this was a connection, with someone who has a love of books to rival her own. Krum couldn't be counted as an intellectual and while Lockhart was intelligent, he'd wasted it completely. Shaking past crushes from her mind, she gently opened the doors.

Hermione assumed that this particular sofa was a favourite, seated in the same spot as before. The moment Solomon's head raised from the pages of his book to look at her, she experienced a wave of bashfulness.

"Hello."
"Good Evening, Hermione."

Giving him a hesitant smile she turned away, to try and recompose herself but also, to find whatever it was that took her fancy. So focused on that, she missed his expression of faint surprise. It was such an innocent smile yet filled with undeniable warmth. Catching him off guard completely, his concentration was broken and instead, found his eyes following her movements around the room. Ronald Weasley must be in need of eye corrective surgery to imply something so ridiculous. Of course, that was simply his opinion, but he genuinely couldn't believe anyone thought of her in a negative light. He tried to pick up where he left off, but it was no use. Seeing it as a lost cause he placed his book back down, committing the page number to memory.

There were no books Hermione didn't like to read, except for Lockhart's, now. If they were accurate accounts from those who had done the feats he'd claimed to have then maybe, but it was a career built upon lies and fraudulence. It was one which she couldn't support at all, knowing the reality. Going to the book on the stand, she decided to try and search for something. Though it may be a library, the odds of finding what it was she wanted would be low, considering where they were. Dipping the quill in ink, she tried anyway.

Roald Dahl:

To her shock and excitement, her words highlighted upon the page and with it so did the book she was after. Going over to the appropriate shelf and taking it out, she could hardly believe it. The sole purpose of Libraries was to store books of all kinds but a children's book by a British writer, in Transylvania and a Library owned by Vampires?

It was one of her favourite books when younger and rather than years of educational texts, Hermione was in the mood to recapture her childhood. Hesitating for a moment, she decided to sit nearby Solomon but ensured to keep some distance between them. She didn't want to assume familiarity, that and she wasn't sure if he'd be comfortable with her being any closer. With all that Solomon had gone through, she was lucky he allowed her this close.

"That is a good choice."

As Hermione had taken a seat, she didn't think she could be any more shocked, glancing at him. "You've read this?"

Solomon could hardly blame her disbelief. Who would think it, of someone like him after all? "I have read all that he has to offer. I believe that there is something for everyone to learn, not just children. That and I find his storytelling to be enjoyable."

In a complete turnaround to earlier, joy like no other replaced her earlier mood. "Do you have a favourite?"

Solomon almost expected Hermione to think it was juvenile of him to like children's books but rather
than say anything along those lines, asked about his favourite. It needed no thought on his part at all. "The BFG."

She had the insane urge to fangirl. He not only liked Roald Dahl but genuinely had a favourite book by him too! She found it to be an interesting story but was curious. "Is there a particular reason why?"

There was, but Solomon hadn't really shared it with anyone before. It wasn't exactly a conversation that had arisen with his brother either, but he didn't mind sharing. Hermione noticed that his expression was a little more open compared to before, his own passion showing albeit reservedly.

"It shows a friendship between a giant and a human. That despite their differences, it is possible. The BFG is not like the others. He is friendly and has no wish to harm or eat children. He instead blesses them with dreams he believes would make them happy. It is a representation of how it could be with Vampires and Humans though with the way that things are currently, the idea of peaceful relations between us as a whole seems nothing more than a fairytale."

She'd never thought of it that way. Like Matilda was a story which she could directly relate to, Solomon had one of his own as well. However, she had to disagree with him, partly.

"While I do think things need to change and not everyone will accept Vampires, some are perfectly fine with it. Harry and Professor Lothaire, for example. You'd have to see it for yourself to understand but he's never had such a connection with anyone right from the start, not even with me and I'm one of his friends. Harry doesn't care that he's a Vampire at all and I'd like to count myself as well. Since meeting both of you, I've come to realise that not all Vampires are the same and just use humans as a form of sustenance like they're so often depicted. They're all different and inherently flawed, but the same can be applied to humans as well. Perfection is in the eye of the beholder. What might be perfect to them, won't be to another."

Solomon couldn't help his pessimistic outlook, but Hermione's words were strangely reassuring. For every human like Dumbledore, there were humans like her and Harry. He could only hope that with time, there would be more. Studying her intently, the guards raised so high began to fall, gradually. "Thank you. Is this your favourite?" He changed the subject, gesturing to the book in her hand. He was curious to see that if yes, that she had reasons of her own or not.

Nodding eagerly, she explained. "I didn't know it was magic, but strange things happened throughout my childhood. Reading Matilda, I could relate. She was the brightest in her class and had powers she couldn't explain. One of my happiest memories is the first time I did intentional magic. Like in the story, I tried to use my own powers to summon my copy of Matilda, and it worked."

A fond smile on her lips, she thought she would ask anyway, even if he turned out to be uninterested. "Do you want to see?"

Despite himself, Solomon was curious enough to answer in the affirmative and rather than going into her mind to see, she projected the memory towards him as best she could and that way, he could
With frizzy hair that no amount of products could permanently tame, a five-year-old Hermione sat on her bed, with an expression of deep concentration.

"If she can do it, I can too!"

Giving herself this pep talk, a small fist scrunched the bedding beneath her. It had to work, there was no way it wouldn't! She was just like Matilda, funny things happened all the time. So she tried, the hardest she ever had in her life.

"Book, come here.."

Whispering this over and over under her breath, she swore there was a slight movement and encouraged by this, renewed her efforts.

Minutes passed by, but she was stubborn. She did see the book move and it would come.

To her delight, it did, slowly and steadily. She nearly lost her concentration out of excitement but frantically continued, seeing the book waver in mid-air. It was slow and shaky, but she wasn't seeing things. It definitely moved and the moment that it was in her grasp without having to get it manually, she squealed with delight.

"I DID IT I DID IT! YAAAY!"

Hugging the book to her chest and innocent eyes sparkling with accomplishment, her bare feet hit the carpet repeatedly as she jumped up and down to express her jubilance. She wore the biggest smile on her face and hearing the commotion, her dad opened the bedroom door.

"Is everything alright sweetie?" He asked this, concerned but seeing that she was simply excited, relaxed. They had the day off from work, his wife out shopping so it left him and his daughter alone in the house. She was very independent for her age and felt comfortable enough leaving her unsupervised, though still checked in.

She had someone to share her achievement with! Without hesitation she leapt into his arms.

"Daddy I did it! I got a book from the shelf without going to get it! I summoned it just like Matilda!"
Not having the heart to tell her that was impossible and instead happy that she was, he picked her up into his arms and gave her an affectionate smile. "That's wonderful! Well done."

Giving her a light kiss on the forehead, Hermione giggled to herself happily. Maybe she could do it again sometime so her daddy could see! Saving that thought for another time, she mused on what else she could do with her powers.

"Little did dad know I was telling the truth. I was too happy to realise he was just humoring me."

Eyes filled with nostalgia, they raised to Solomon's where her heart nearly stopped.

He was smiling, unreservedly and with eyes so warm despite their cool colour. Hermione's heart began to beat, a little faster this time. It really did change his expression entirely and she found herself wanting to see it more. And when he spoke, it lacked any sort of neutral tone and instead, held the same sort of warmth.

"That is a lovely memory and I can see why you treasure it."

How could he not smile at that? Though his mind often wandered to darker places when not occupied of his imprisonment time, this indicated that innocence and goodness did still exist. Though something very basic to grown magic users, it was often taken for granted. Young Hermione's enthusiasm was a reminder of just why Solomon loved magic so much.

Touching the front cover fondly, Hermione realised that Solomon didn't have a book of his own. Usually able to formulate thoughts before speaking them aloud, she was unable to do so this time and mentally, cursed her idiocy.

"Shall I read it to you?"

Why would he want her to do that? He wasn't a child! She only hoped the response to her question wouldn't be too harsh. Vowing to curb her tongue in the future and wholly expecting the worst.

"..I would like that."

Hermione took a breath. Believing she had a suitable apology in mind she opened her mouth, only to close it again. Her few seconds of preparation promptly flew out of the window, unsure if she heard him right at first. Glancing over and seeing he was serious, she widened her eyes a little. Gaze
turning almost expectant she obliged, opening the book and turning to page one.

"It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful."

Though Hermione was the one who offered, she hardly expected him to say yes and for the first page, fought back feelings of slight nervousness. She could feel his eyes on her, listening to every word and aware of them. But, as the minutes passed, her awareness faded as she lost herself in a world filled with nostalgia.

"Matilda's brother Michael was a perfectly normal boy, but the sister, as I said, was something to make your eyes pop. By the age of one and a half, her speech was perfect and she knew as many words as most grown-ups. The parents, instead of applauding her, called her a noisy chatterbox and told her sharply that small girls should be seen and not heard."

Her voice filled the room, quietly confident yet passionate. She was lucky enough to have supportive parents and in relation to her neglect, she was reminded of Harry's childhood. If he was instead adopted by someone like Miss Honey, he would have turned out far differently but then, would she have ever met him? Trying not to let her thoughts wander down the route of what could have been she continued, somehow managing not to stumble even when an arm brushed her own.

So lost in listening to her words, Solomon had unconsciously drawn closer to her side until eventually, his eyes followed the very same words as she read them aloud. Thankful that she didn't have to look at him and simply the page, she was unable to prevent a faint blush suffusing her cheeks. Hair touching the side of her face, each breath she took to help further her reading was not only the distinctive smell of parchment and books far older than her but something fresh, with a hint of mint. It was almost revitalising and in truth, she was impressed she hadn't stopped reading for a single second. But one thing was for sure if how she was feeling now was even a fraction of Harry's around Alistair, it was a miracle he still lived. She didn't find it uncomfortable in the least, simply unused to this situation.

Returning to the Library, this was how Alistair found them and he knew from a single glance, that both were unaware of his arrival and lost within the pages of the same book. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do first, scream like an excitable teenage girl or dance around the room. Not that he would do any, but the urge was strong for a moment.

He had never seen Solomon so unguarded before, at least not with anyone else but him. There were sides that he never showed to Jacob and Rupert, along with the late Morganti family but with a human? Alistair had told him on several occasions to give them a chance, that they were worth it despite his own heartache of the past but even without telling him, Alistair could sense his reluctance. But this right here was a breakthrough and if Solomon believed he could escape any teasing words, how wrong he’d be. It was moments like this that he wished their library was in a room where time became irrelevant but at least, they were content.

Feeling mischievous he slipped into the room and faster than any human could register, silently
appeared behind them. His words were aimed towards Solomon, jokingly yet casual.

“All making the most of your alone time, I see?”

Delighted, he watched as the pair of them jumped. Hermione’s heart rate skyrocketed, for a different reason this time. Meanwhile, Solomon couldn’t hide his surprise. When did he get so close to them? While he didn’t distance himself, he turned his head away to hide an ever so faint blush which of course, Alistair caught.

Once Hermione recovered from her near heart attack, she was aware of her own embarrassment. It’s not like they’d done anything wrong and yet, it was as though she were a child with her hand in the cookie jar. Smiling somewhat sheepishly, she managed a small question. “It’s time already?”

At his regretful nod, she sighed. She’d managed to finish the page she was on at least and not really having the opportunity to read to someone with the exception of aloud in class when younger, Hermione had enjoyed herself. Closing the book gently, she looked up at Solomon with a peaceful expression.

“I’ll continue this at a later date?”

At Solomon’s gentle nod in response, he returned to his usual calm self, if more relaxed than previously. Disappointed that it had to end so soon but pleased that there would be another time Hermione left with Alistair, after having returned the book to its place.

Solomon had seen that expression Alistair wore many a time and knew before the day was out, he’d be left feeling more discomposed than ever. But in truth, he didn’t mind. The fact that he was unaware of his own movements and actively went closer to her worried him. Not because he believed she was a threat, but because he’d never quite zoned out that much. It was a natural movement, to see for himself what she read and as a result of feeling relaxed. Curling up on the sofa, the memory he’d seen of the little girl so entranced with magic, was something which would help keep his own toxic ones at bay.

Hermione was positively starry-eyed. “Thank you, I feel so much better. I never thought you’d own books by Roald Dahl! Amazing.”

They had more in common than Alistair had initially thought, which pleased him to no end. “It is rare that we would reject books for our own personal collection. There have been a few exceptions but I believe that every book has something to offer, whether it is a cautionary tale or an expansion of knowledge.”

Hermione agreed but still, it was a revelation she’d struggle to get over, in truth. With the way she was feeling now, she was glad she ran into the Professor as alone in the school Library, she would’ve buried her emotions rather than talk them through or share company. As they returned to Hogwarts she wasn’t eager to face Ron again, but could at least do so with a lighter heart and mind.
I'm from North Yorkshire in the UK, I gave Dumbledore my accent, because why not?
xD
All That's Forbidden

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione find themselves connecting with a shared interest, Mrs Weasley takes matters into her own hands, Ron is suffering silently and three first years begin to rival the golden trio for danger levels in their younger days.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Dumbledore's under the effects of a different prank, Ron was a dick and through this, brought two lovers of books closer than ever before.

Out of the common room and away from Ron, allowed Harry to regain a sense of calm. His anger hadn't been a problem recently, manifesting itself in different ways rather than explosively. He had no outlet for it previously but now it was more of a calmer anger and though he wouldn't dream of making the same comparison a year or more ago, similar to Professor Snape. Though in Harry's opinion, there was no question just which of their anger was the deadliest.

Hermione might want to be alone and if that was the case he'd speak with her later. The number of times he'd voluntarily isolated himself or went off for some alone time to brood should be classified as a world record, particularly last year. It was a destructive continuous cycle, one of which he was glad to have broken. While calmer now, the slight twitching in his fingers remained. He wasn't sure if he'd reach for his wand or think 'fuck it' and hit Ron first because at this stage he didn't mind. The only thing that stopped him was the presence of younger students and the last thing he wanted to do was set a bad example.

Harry was more observant than Hermione gave him credit for but in relation to this, most who were even vaguely familiar with Hermione would come to the obvious conclusion that she spent a good amount of time in the Library. What they didn't know was that where she was in the library was dependant on her mood. Cheerful or there to study she could be found sitting at one of the more available and noticeable tables but if she was there to escape her own thoughts, then it was usually a more secluded section of the Library and where other students usually didn't go as for some reason, it was colder.

Reasonably confident that Hermione would be there Harry entered the Library, checking the spots he was aware of. Unexpectedly she wasn't anywhere to be seen and truthfully, he didn't know where else she could be. Maybe she was here just before him and left with a book? There was a possibility she was reading outdoors as while she enjoyed reading, she used it as a form of escapism sometimes, much like Harry used to when younger. It was better to ask Madam Pince anyway as dependent
upon her answer, he'd know where to look next. He waited at her desk and the moment she came back, her gaze was shrewd. Understandable really since the times he came here to stay, he wasn't exactly the quietest. She wasn't favoured among the student body really but if there was one thing Harry could respect, it was the ferocity with which she guarded the books under her care.

"Excuse me, do you know if Hermione Granger's been here?"

Her surname probably wasn't needed, but just in case there was another Hermione equally studious. Severe expression lessening slightly, she shook her head in the negative. "Not today."

"Ok, thanks." That changed his plans. She must have gone elsewhere then. Not worried in the slightest, Harry searched his memories for any indication of where else she might go. McGonagall? But then, he had the sneaking suspicion that's where Ginny was at the moment. The Room of Requirement was a possibility, but outside of DA sessions, their own meetings as a group of friends and training with her weapon, Harry hadn't known her to go there though he could be wrong. When in use, the room wouldn't appear for anyone else and the only ones who could still enter and exit at will, were House Elves. With that in mind, he checked.

"Dobby?"

At Harry's call, the elf in question appeared and somehow, with even more items of clothing than previously. Woolly hats balanced precariously on his head, in danger of falling off or weighing down his ears, as all were slightly too big. His socks were mismatched and worn, Harry recognising that they were the very same ones he'd given to him. Already large and rounded eyes growing rounder, Dobby bounced on his feet eagerly.

"Harry Potter! What can Dobby be doing for him?"

His name alone without the Master and Sir added on was definitely progress. Now all he needed was to drop the surname and Harry would call it a success. Crouching to his level, Harry wandlessly shrank the hats so that they fit better and afterwards, informed Dobby of what he wanted.

"Can you check and see if Hermione's in the Room of Requirement for me?"

Nodding eagerly, he'd barely disappeared before reappearing again, looking despondent. "Miss Hermione Granger isn't being there." As his ears drooped sadly, a tendril of worry began to curl inside him, though he was quick to reassure Dobby with an easy-going smile.

"It's ok, thanks for checking anyway. I'll stop by sometime, I might have more clothes for you."

That cheered him up immensely. "Dobby thanks you for your kindness! Anything else Harry Potter be needing?"
As Harry shook his head Dobby vanished, one of the hats in his enthusiasm falling from its place at the very top. Before it could hit the ground a small slightly blurred arm snatched it from mid-air, disappearing for good this time.

Her parents crossed Harry's mind for a minute but he found that to be unlikely, as she hadn't during school time before and at this moment, they'd probably still be working. It was irrational for him to be this worried but Ron had upset her many a time and she wasn't one to break a routine of sorts. It was unusual and just in case, he decided to check with the Professors.

Sometime later, Harry was definitely worried. None of them had seen Hermione and as a last resort, cast a 'point me' spell. When the results only had his wand spinning around without a direct destination, he automatically began to think the worst. Death Eaters? Hogwarts had proven to not exactly be the safest school. But then Voldemort had called a truce of sorts with Harry or at least a case of leaving each other alone, so that wouldn't make sense. But then, what if the Death Eaters had split? Giving it some thought he doubted Bellatrix would be appreciative of her master's regained sanity, having none of it herself. Somehow, they could have located Hermione and took her, to get to him.

"Fuck off," Harry told himself, rubbing his forehead in irritation. She was fine! Worry still clouded his mind, though he had one person left to ask. Holding out hope and trying to keep his panic under wraps, he leaned against the stone wall to breathe, for just a minute.

'Have you seen Hermione?! Ron was a dick to her and she went off somewhere.'

Well, his plan to ask calmly flew out of the window. Fidgeting restlessly he desperately waited for a response.

'Easy, Harry. She is with me. I apologise for causing you concern. We are at the gates now, having returned from paying Solomon a visit.'

All the tension deflated from him. 'It's fine, don't worry about it. I just panicked because she usually goes to the Library when upset.'

The knots of stress eased within him, Alistair's voice helping to soothe. 'That was most likely her destination and I am aware of Mr Weasley's actions. She unexpectedly bumped into me, but I had no wish for her to walk away upset.'

Harry finished, understanding. 'So you talked to her and suggested to see Solomon?'

At his nod, he breathed a sigh of relief. Thanks. She's probably much better now. For that reason, I'm glad.'
'She is lucky to have a friend such as you.'

'I'd like to think so but really, it's the other way round. She's saved my life several times.'

He wasn't worthy of Hermione and before now, closer to Ron to the point where he neglected the one friend which had always stood beside him. Essence of Dittany to help his hand heal with Umbridge's detentions, even when he was being a broody and angsty bastard. The year he was made to compete in the Triwizard tournament, only Hermione and a select few believed that he hadn't done it intentionally. Time and time again Hermione had pulled through for him and it was only this year, truly, that he wanted to show how much he appreciated her. He'd changed. Over months when taking the Room of Requirement and Requirement Closet into mind but over a month and a half, in real time. But one thing he was certain of now, was his growing comfortableness with affection, mainly thanks to Alistair. The fact that Dumbledore claimed all Vampires were blood-sucking monsters without a shred of compassion was utter shite. There was no other way to describe him. Alistair was, without a doubt, a giant teddy bear.

Yes, that childish thought did cross Harry's mind, thankful that he was alone in the corridor even as he navigated them to outside. But, it was true, even so. A monster, honestly. The monster was Dumbledore and that was a fact.

A gentle, teasing voice. 'I am a giant teddy bear, hmm? Shall I expect to be squeezed lovingly on a night?'

Harry's eyes widened. Their mental connection was both a blessing and a curse. The thought was simply a passing one but apparently strong enough for him to pick up. Though neither could see the other, both were overly aware of his current state.

'I didn't say anything, it was your imagination.' Harry knew he was unconvincing, furtherly confirmed by Alistair's next words.

'Ah, but the teddy bear is your imagination. In my own it is you, blushing redder than a fully bloomed rose.'

Going from worried to embarrassed so quickly was enough to make his head spin, but relief overpowered them all once outside and faintly in the distance, seeing Hermione.

'I'm not blushing.' Amused and in a certain childish action, Harry gave a mental imitation of a tongue sticking out and was rewarded with a fond chuckle. No more words were exchanged between them for now, mildly surprised that it had grown dark so quickly. Apparently, he'd spent longer fretting than first thought. But even so, his earlier one of Bellatrix might prove to be true. He was half tempted to write Voldemort a letter and ask, absurd as that was. He could only imagine the fallout and a part of him would be amused to see Dumbledore panic. It was a thought he'd seriously consider as well.
Close enough to see her distinctly, Harry shouted. "HERMIONE!"

Ever since he left the common room, he'd thought over and over again of what he'd say to help her feel better. He wasn't the best at expressing himself. He was terrible in his opinion but he wanted to try at least. But seeing her now and that in contrast to before happier than he could ever remember her being, he saw that it wasn't necessary. But even so, he wanted her to know he was on her side.

Sprinting the rest of the way he didn't hesitate, nearly knocking the both of them over with the strength of his embrace and since his growth spurt, no longer shorter than she was.

Unseen by Harry, Hermione mouthed the words 'thank you' to Alistair. Sparing them a fond glance he left, Hermione listening to Harry's impassioned words. "Don't listen to Ron, he's talking shit and if he doesn't genuinely apologise he'll have me and Ginny on his arse. Don't change for anyone, ok?"

His last few words were muffled into her shoulder, relieved and feeling more than stupid for thinking that Death Eaters of all things, had gotten to her. Releasing her before he felt anymore awkward about his feelings, he slowly began to relax.

"Thanks, Harry, I don't plan to change anytime soon. What you see is what you get and if people don't like that, sod them."

She wasn't one for profanity but seeing the amused sparkle in her eye and that her visit to Lothaire Castle had revitalised her, he slung an arm around her shoulder. "Good to hear. So, did you enjoy talking about things with Solomon which would probably fly way over my head?"

Excited to discuss it with someone else Hermione shared all that she had learned, Harry only just managing to keep up as in her enthusiasm, spoke quickly. He could hardly believe his ears. "They've got Roald Dahl books?" At her nod, he gave a grin. "Brilliant."

Harry was taken back to his own childhood, tone wistful. "I always liked James and the Giant Peach. Reminded me of my dad but his home life was like mine. He escaped from his aunts and flew away on the giant peach with his new friends, but I don't know how the story ended. Dudley took the Library book and ripped it to shreds. I got the blame and then I was banned from there completely."

Removing his arm from her shoulder they walked back together, side by side. "I'll finish it one day. Until then, maybe I can get my own happy ending."

Day by day, Harry was beginning to believe that was possible. They didn't rush back, enjoying the breeze and one on one discussion time they could have. Harry was glad that Hermione had found someone who could keep up with her intellectually as though he tried, he couldn't really do it most of the time. If Ron had even a shred of decency left, he'd regret his words. Hoping an apology for Hermione was somewhere in the future, both returned to the common room.
Having just left Professor McGonagall’s office, a gleam of satisfaction entered Ginny’s eyes. There was only so much they could all take, especially her. While mum believed she could help keep Ron in line he wasn’t a child and she couldn’t watch his every action. Though with his behaviour recently she began to wonder if she really was the youngest in the family. She’d told her mum about Ron, but in what way she’d respond or when she didn’t know. Either way, something needed to change and whenever it did happen, she could only hope it would stop him from alienating himself completely.

Ginny didn’t have long to wait for her answer. Calmer than before Neville had returned to the common room and though no closer to figuring out just what the plant was Harry had given him, he felt as if he could look at Ron without having the urge to lock him in one of the more dangerous greenhouses. Harry and Hermione had returned shortly after, though the tension between her and Ron was significant. Though she wasn’t upset anymore, content even between the Lothaire brothers and Harry, Ron’s words weren’t something that she’d forget any time soon. The tension thick enough that even Ron could notice he was given a wide berth, choosing to sit a slight distance away from everyone and continue to sulk.

Though not everyone was present witnessing the situation between Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny, other students intrigued by the gossip were soon filled in. It turned out they would have more, in the form of the portrait door opening.

Looking over Harry expected the last few students but instead, got the shock of his life.

Framed in the doorway and looking as though she meant business, was Mrs Weasley. Wide-eyed he glanced back over to Ron, who had gone the colour of curdled milk. Though she hadn’t said anything he seemed to instinctively know he was the one in trouble.

While parents were allowed onto Hogwarts grounds any time within reason, it was rare enough that students spent it not seeing them within Hogwarts grounds until graduation, with the exception of the Triwizard tournament for some two years ago. There were no official parent/professor consultations unless one or the other organised a meeting but in the common room itself? It was unheard of.

It was almost eerie, how silent the room became. As if she was unaware of the effect her presence had she bustled into the room, smiling.

“Harry dear, I’m glad to see you’re looking well. Hermione too! Oh, Neville how you’ve grown—“

She fussed over them for a few seconds, but much less than usual. She had come here for a reason, after all. Though her smile remained, the majority of students could see it was a little forced. As her eyes met Ron’s, he seemed to shrink in his seat.
“Ronald, might I have a word with you?”

Though the question was posed politely, it left no room for protest and the two siblings were aware that their full name could only mean trouble. Added to their middle and surname? They may as well sign their death warrant. Swallowing reflexively he rose from his seat, following her outside.

Speechless, Harry looked over at Ginny who seemed just as surprised. "I told mum, but I didn't think she'd come here herself! I thought she'd send a howler or something."

She wasn't in the least bit concerned, however. As the conversation all around them swiftly turned to just how much trouble Ron was in.

"I almost wish she'd told him off in front of everyone," Neville admitted, feeling as though he was missing out on a fireworks show. "I enjoyed the howler."

Laughing Harry agreed though he didn't expect those words from Neville, of all people. "I did as well. But hopefully afterwards, he'll keep a low profile. He's pretty much digging his grave with all the houses and Professors at the moment."

As it was growing late, with the help of Hermione and Neville Harry checked to ensure that every student was accounted for. The enchanted parchment they were given was a new feature, previously having to rely on checking themselves. With this, a list of names present in the common room would appear. It was loosely linked to each student’s magical signature and through this, was their identity. Over the past few weeks, Harry had come to learn each student’s name with the help of that and Hermione, who was better at memorising than him. There were still a few where it took a few seconds to recall, but he knew enough of them to notice. Seventh years weren’t included on the list, self-governing to a point and those with apprenticeships had no curfew. Immediately, he noticed that names he knew very well weren’t on the list.

“Lilah Caltir, Zain Alford and Keith Taylor are missing. Is there anyone else?” He asked Hermione, who scanned the list quickly.

“No. They’re the only ones.”

Harry’s brow furrowed, concerned. “I think I should go look for them, it’s ten minutes to their curfew.”

After receiving nods from both Harry once more headed out, praying to whatever deity there may or may not be that none of them was like the Golden Trio in their younger years because if so, that would mean imminent danger.
Though Molly received Floo calls from Order members and occasionally Minerva for a social visit, the last person she expected to be called by was her daughter. The moment the call ended, she was unable to hide her shock or disbelief though quickly, anger became prevalent. Various trinkets around the room began to shake threateningly, on the verge of upsetting shelves dotted about the room.

Sensing the commotion Arthur hurried to her side, resting a calming hand on her shoulder. He’d overheard bits of the conversation, enough to piece together the reason for it. Molly didn’t speak straight away but the moment she did, Arthur’s alarm grew.

“I can’t believe he’s acting this way! Ginny wouldn’t lie to me, she knows better. I’m talking to him, face to face.”

Her stubbornness shone through, practically daring her husband to try and stop her.

“I agree, his behaviour needs to change. But don’t let anger cloud your actions, love.”

Planting a gentle kiss on her cheek, the majority of her anger seemed to dissipate but in its place, were doubts and worries. “Disruptive in class, sabotaging potions where the result could have seriously injured other students, pushing a first year, hurting his friends emotionally and that’s just some of it. Arthur, what’s going on with him? Fred and George often got into trouble but never for these reasons.”

Arthur sighed, almost able to feel another grey hair joining the collection. “I don’t know. I wish I did.”

Though she was undeniably angry still, everything remained stationary. She wanted her unexpected visit to mean something, have a lasting impact. She’d only had to come into the school once, having to strongly reprimand the twins as their pranks with exploding toilet seats included the staff room and unfortunately, Severus was the first one to experience it. But that was their first year at Hogwarts and since then, there had been no problems. Or, perhaps more accurately, there was no sufficient evidence to connect them to many of the pranks years afterwards.

Her mind made up she contacted Minerva for permission. Surprised but having no reason to refuse she agreed, Molly shortly stepping into the flames.

“Minerva’s Office, Hogwarts.”

Watching her disappear, Arthur ran a hand tiredly through his hair. It was times like this that he would appreciate Remus’ company but also, times like this where he damned Albus. It was
something he rarely did and yet, Molly still wanted to believe the best of him. But eventually, evidence would come to light which would prove the contrary. Kingsley had informed him of Harry’s desire to speak with Amelia and once that happened, it would change all they knew.

Molly was no stranger to discussions over her children, whether it was positive or negative feedback. But this was the first time she’d decided to pay a visit herself, rather than having been contacted for a discussion. She’d always wanted a large family and was aware that their behaviour in a way, reflected on her and Arthur as parents. While she disapproved and was saddened that she wouldn’t get to see Fred and George graduate she had to admit, even if only to herself, that they were doing well. Percy had cut himself off from the family almost completely, with blind faith in the minister and his relationship with Arthur was strained in particular. But she believed, like with all her children, that Ron had potential. Ginny’s words were concerning and before anything else happened, she felt it was her job to step in.

Ron was struggling. He had been for most of his life if he were asked. But mostly over this summer and the school year, in particular. His actions at odds with his mind and it were as though his mild annoyance suddenly amplified tenfold, for no reason. Or was it how he truly thought? He’d always had a problem with his temper, but not to the point where it had gotten the better of him outside of his friendships. But this year, it had him sent out of class, buried deep beneath a pile of detentions and a strained relationship with Harry and Hermione. He didn’t understand why they were so serious all the time. He was just trying to lighten the mood and if that ingredient he’d thrown into the cauldron damaged a Slytherin, so what? He couldn’t believe Harry was willing to disregard all the shit that Malfoy had done as well. Overall he did think that some of his actions were extreme but justified. At least, that’s what he told himself.

But, nothing he told himself would ever wash over with his mum. Dread sinking like lead into the pit of his stomach, Ron found himself following her outside and to the nearest available empty room, descending flights of stairs that thankfully, didn’t move. The moment the door shut behind them, Ron winced once again beneath another verbal tirade. He guessed that his sister or one of the Professors had told her. Either way, it was a situation he desperately wanted an escape from.

“Ronald! I am absolutely disgusted. You’re lucky the Headmaster hasn’t expelled you for the behaviour I’ve been informed about! I don’t know where this sudden decline in attitude has come from but it will stop, now. Have I made myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

Ron was horrified. That wasn’t what he wanted to say! In his head, it was ‘Yes, mum.’ But out loud it was this. What was going on? He had no time to be confused, however, receiving an entirely expected backlash.

“RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY, DON’T YOU DARE TAKE THAT TONE WITH ME!”
He wanted to explain, desperately, that wasn’t what he wanted to say, but those words didn’t physically leave his lips.

“WHAT FUCKING TONE?!?”

Unexpectedly he shouted, taking both of them by surprise. He wasn’t angry, so why the raised voice? The feeling within him was undeniably anger, but it was fear prevalent the most in his mind. For good reason with his mum there, but also the recurring feeling that he wasn’t in complete control of his actions. He dismissed the thought, beginning to believe that it was down to his body changing as a teenager like he’d overheard his parents talk about once.

Molly couldn’t believe her ears. Not once in all these years had any of her children dared to show such disrespect, but she would put a stop to it, immediately. No silencing charms were placed and the students in Gryffindor tower could almost swear they still heard the pair, even from several flights down.

Leaving the room and his mum behind, Ron released his tongue, spitting out blood. It took all the willpower he had to not dig himself into a deeper grave but even then, he had to take such measures because he knew instinctively what he’d respond with verbally, wouldn’t be his thought mentally. Fighting off a wave of nausea and dizziness which had become commonplace, He wondered, not for the first time if he should go to the Hospital Wing.

‘You’ll be fine, you’re just hungry and tired. You’re a grown man, after all, nothing to worry about.’

Agreeing with his mental voice and nodding, he was done with the day. He didn’t want to talk to anyone but rather than the tears he wanted to shed at the frustration of everything, his facial colour only reddened further. Hoping that sleep would solve at least some of the problems plaguing his life, Ron retired for the night.

“Point me, Lilah Caltir.”

Finding himself in the corridors once more, Harry hazarded a guess that where one was, the others may be. If not, he’d find them as well. He wasn’t annoyed in the slightest, having slipped out on a night himself or pushed the boundaries of curfew so really, he’d be a hypocrite. But each time he was caught he paid the consequences for his actions and depending on the situation, the three of them would also.

However, the sky was now pitch black and when he was taken outside, past Hagrid’s Hut and to the entrance of the forbidden forest, he really did panic this time. Checking twice for Zain and Keith
with other point me spells, his wand didn’t change position and was confirmation that all three were there. He was about to head in and search for them himself, but stopped to think.

‘Don’t be an idiot Harry, remember what happened your first and second year?’

He needed help. But regardless of who he wouldn’t be stopped from going in, he was too worried about them to stand idly by twiddling his thumbs, not when he could be of some help.

‘Alistair? Are you available right now?’

He tried his best to remain calm, he really did, but his response didn’t help.

‘I am in a staff meeting at the moment. Is everything alright?’

‘No it fucking well isn’t!’

Harry took a deep breath, feeling remorseful instantly. ‘Sorry. You’ll find out in a minute.’

Sending a Patronus to the staff room it wasn’t addressed to anyone in particular, but the message would be clear. Whether it was Alistair or another Professor who responded, he hoped it would be soon.

Alistair would rush to be at Harry’s side within an instant, knowing that he wouldn’t need his help if the reasoning wasn’t serious. Truly the meeting went on longer than it had any right to and while most staff members had crafted the perfect poker faces, even Severus looked to be bored. They’d covered all that was needed in the last half hour and the next half hour, was in a word, waffle.

Chuckling to himself he realised that beneath the brim of her hat, Pomona had dozed off though, from the Headmaster’s angle, he was unable to see this.

Interrupted mid-speech, was Harry’s Patronus which had most of the room’s occupants confused when they heard his voice leave it. Wasn’t it a Stag? However, the message was concerning enough that this fact was firmly placed on the back burner.

“All first years are in the forbidden forest, I need assistance ASAP.”

All could hear the fear in his voice, occupants of the room now alert. Seeing this opportunity for what it was, Alistair was the first to speak up. “I will go.”

“Are you sure? You’ve never entered the Forest before.” Minerva was concerned. She knew he could handle himself but even Hagrid where the forest was almost a second home to him, couldn’t
predict all outcomes.

At his nod and mutters among the staff, there were no protests. Rising to his feet he bowed his head. “I shall take my leave.”

The moment he closed the door behind him, he vanished on the spot and reappeared instantly by Harry’s side.

Harry could have wept with relief, but there was no time to waste. He was about to go charging in when a hand grasped his own for a moment to hold him back. Impatient, he sent a mild glare Alistair’s way.

“I’m not waiting here, no way.”

It never once crossed Alistair’s mind to make Harry do this. He was incredibly stubborn and even if he told him to leave and he’d go on his own, Harry would no doubt still follow anyway.

He gave Harry a reassuring smile. “That was not my intention. I am able to go straight to their location from here, so there is no need for us to walk there.”

His irritation left instantly. “Oh.”

While there was an opportunity for further physical contact, the seriousness of the situation only had him resting a single hand on his shoulder and as before, the process so smooth that it was as though they hadn’t moved at all.

Due to the density of all the trees, not even the moonlight could shine it’s way through and create a path for them to see by. Reacting instantly, Harry saw this as a good opportunity to try out a needed spell that he’d been experimenting with slightly.

“Lumos Maxima.”

The familiar, bright ball of light formed at the very tip of his wand but rather than stay there, floated into the air and alongside them.

“Yes, it worked!” Giving a little fist pump in victory, it illuminated their path perfectly. While he doubted Alistair needed it, he definitely did.

Being around Harry was a joy, smiling in the face of Harry’s little accomplishment. It was sweet really, how the simplest things left him feeling content. It was a shame they weren’t in better circumstances.
“I hate this forest. I was nearly eaten by Acromantula once.”

It was delivered so calmly, that it took a moment for Alistair to even react. “What?”

He lacked his usual elegance, too caught off guard to react in any other way.

“I’ve been here a few times, but Hagrid told us to follow the Spiders.”

He did remember Harry telling him about that, come to think of it. Truly it was a miracle he’d survived up until this point. Before he could respond further, raised voices captured their attention.

“WHY DID YOU LEAVE HER THERE? WHY DID YOU MAKE ME COME WITH YOU?!”

Zain held Keith by the collar of his robe, on the verge of tears. He was terrified, more terrified than he’d ever been in his life but this was too much.

“Stop shouting! You’ll attract their attention! Do you want to die?” Keith responded, trying to frantically quieten him.

“YOU LEFT HER! SHE COULD BE DEAD!”

Pushing him away, Zain trembled from head to toe, looking resolved.

“I’m going to get her, it might not be too late.”

“No, don’t!” Keith grabbed his arm, but it was shaken off roughly.

“Get off me!”

It was this scene they arrived to, Harry noticing straight away Lilah wasn’t there but before he could ask, Zain’s frantic voice cut through the air.

“Lilah’s in danger! She’s with the Acromantulas!”

That one sentence, repeated itself in Harry’s mind, almost to the rhythm of a constant drumbeat. Not waiting for Alistair he sprinted away, the large light ball taking off after him and allowing Harry to cast a point me spell. Again, he realised that Alistair could just probably take them straight there but instinct had completely taken over. He lost nearly all reason when it came to family and Lilah, in a short amount of time, he’d come to see as his little sister. She could be dead or worse and he never
wanted to see someone he cared about die, ever again. The swiftness of Thanatos guided him all the way but also, he vaguely recognised the route he’d taken as well. It was the very same one which had lead him to Aragog. Nothing entered his mind, other than the urgent need to be there.

Arriving at a clearing and skidding to a halt, Harry’s heart stopped.

There were far more of Aragog’s children than he’d ever seen, the spider in question aged to the point where moonlight only made the appearance of grey hairs stand out more starkly. Large, beady eyes peered out, unable to see the parched ground beneath with the amount of Acromantula packed into one place, seeming to scurry over each other.

Dangling from a thick, sticky web with an end attached to a thick tree branch, something moved violently within the sac, attempting to escape.

Lilah was in there, he knew without a doubt. But, he’d drive them all away, far deeper into the forest so students couldn’t accidentally stumble on their nest and if some were killed in the process? So be it. Hagrid and possibly magical menageries would hate him for this, but it wasn’t something he was about to share over butterbeer any time soon.

Holding back the urge to give into the therapeutic nature of profanity, Alistair cast a barrier around the boys that nothing short of an army of giants could break through. As there wasn’t an army of giants present, he was confident in saying they would be safe on their own.

“Do not try to move from here.”

After nodding in assent at his calm instructions, he once more appeared by Harry’s side and could hardly blame him for leaving in a hurry, faced with the sight before him. While he appreciated that all creatures were here for a reason and that many of his clothing items were lined with Acromantula silk, his own dealings with them had been far from pleasant. There was no sense of negotiation, each thing with a life force of its own considered to be food, even their own kind. While he’d heard from Hagrid himself about Aragog, Alistair didn’t doubt for a moment that the thought of Hagrid as a tasty morsel had crossed the acromantula’s mind.

The one question emblazoned in flashing neon lights, to Alistair, was why on Earth were there no protections put in place to ensure students were unable to enter the forest without adult supervision? Globally, these creatures were classified as highly dangerous, unable to be domesticated or trained and right at this moment, an 11-year-old girl was wrapped within the web of one.

Much like Harry had decided on driving the colony away, Alistair similarly would place a barrier around the forest, only letting a select few have entry but, perhaps more importantly, no one would be able to enter the grounds from them.

Many of the Acromantula had begun to climb the tree from which Lilah dangled, impatient and unable to wait for their prey to die. With a leap, one tried to latch onto the sac and bring it down with
them. Before it ever managed to leave the tree trunk, the sac was snatched from thin air, whisked far away. Before Harry could so much as blink Alistair became a blur, vacuous mist unable to be harmed and yet, solid enough to carry a child. The moment Alistair touched solid ground with her, hundreds of glittering, ravenous eyes fixated on them.

“Stand back.”

Alistair distanced himself and with swift movements, an invisible force sliced clean through the thick webbing encasing Lilah. Burns covered her body, visible through the singed material of her school clothes. She was awake, but barely aware as she desperately tried to bring air into her lungs after being denied it, coughing harshly. Uncaring of his clothing Alistair seated himself on the ground, propping her against him and with a hand rubbing her back, kept his voice calm.

“You are safe now, breathe.”

Though there was no need for him to take breaths Alistair did so, establishing a rhythm which she was able to follow.

As Lilah regained awareness, trembles shook her frame but she seemed too surprised for a proper reaction, spellbound with everything she was seeing. In a near catatonic state, she blindly reached for Alistair’s hand, needing something to ground her for the time being. Heart twisting with pain the thought of refusing her never crossed his mind, providing her with all the comfort that he possibly could in this situation. Soon, he expected the events of the day to catch up with her but for now, Harry had captured both of their attention.

Though he was told by Harry himself of his animagus forms, he had yet to see them for himself, up until now. An Amphithere was an impressive form to have, especially to have found it so young. Only the most clueless of individuals would fail to notice a serpentine creature taking to the air and flaming all in its path, not to mention the noise. To ensure that no more attention was drawn than needed, Alistair interlinked runes in the air, drawing with his index finger and leaving behind noticeable marks. Once done they disappeared in a flash, a shimmering barrier large enough to cover a good chunk of the forest put into place.

While there were certainly cleaner and less destructive ways to clear out a colony, Alistair appreciated, at least in some part, the opportunity to see him in action. Mainly he was worried for Lilah as the boys looked to be unharmed, at least physically. In part, he could hardly believe this was a school, situated so close to a forest which held all manner of creatures certainly not children friendly.

Alistair didn’t need to look, senses attuned to the point where it would put the sharpest animals to shame. However, it was of no concern. All that tried bounced harmlessly off of the barrier he’d erected. Most were targeting the new threat in their midst and before long, the rest soon joined in. It was a veritable fireworks show, one of which admittedly had him fascinated.

At this point, Lume and Thanatos were second nature to Harry. Whenever he had a spare moment,
which admittedly wasn’t often with how busy he kept himself, he liked to explore their range of abilities and stored away, were various tail hairs, scales and a myriad of other potential potions ingredients that had dropped off them over time.

As Harry shifted form, a terrifying roar permeated every inch of the clearing. Filled with his own anger and Lume’s instincts, the reds, oranges and yellows of his scales gleamed beneath the moonlight. His mercury gaze promised nothing but death to those who dare challenge him. With a grace almost at odds with something his size, he became airborne. Hovering a good twenty feet in the air he swooped down, planting his body firmly into the ground with a resounding crash. Shaking every inch of the forest, this action alone crushed several of them beneath his body. While still aware, in this form all he could think of was to get rid of the ones who wouldn’t hesitate and nearly did, to kill someone he considered close. Enraged more went to attack him, unable to inject venom into his scale protected body and for their efforts, were rewarded with a large tail sweep. Caught off guard their bodies were effortlessly swept into the air, crashing into trees around them. Those who managed to avoid his tail were treated to the acid-secreting from his glands, stronger than the digestive juices in the human stomach as it ate away at flesh and the ground beneath alike. With pained shrieks, those kept their distance but didn’t stop the constant 8 legged barrage.

The more Harry wiped out, the more which seemed to appear in response. Many had clambered onto his back, none staying on long with the acid secretion. Inhaling deeply, White hot flames left his nostrils which carried several feet forward.

"Who wants some?!"

He thought, even if what left his mouth were distinct and threatening growling sounds. The flames spread all around, catching alight all that stood in its way as piercings shrieks mingled with the acrid smell of burning creature flesh.

Finally, they began to retreat, seeing the corpses of their brothers and sisters littering the floor beneath them. Thinking that the threat was over, he was almost unprepared as with a movement that belied his age, Aragog struck. Unlike his children, their sizes were equally matched and the force sent the pair skidding across the ground. Like the others he tried to puncture Harry’s hide but was unsuccessful and though blind, it only meant he was overly aware of everything else going on.

“You will pay, friend of Hagrid. My children did not feed upon you the first time. This time is your last.”

Aragog remembered him? He barely had time for that thought to pass before the wiry hairs of his gigantic legs hooked onto him, scratching his underbelly, a sensitive spot. With a pained roar, he took to the air again, shaking him off as Aragog plunged to the ground. He didn’t want to kill him unless he had no choice but here, he did. Back and forth for a while, they went, Harry, trying not to damage him too much while Aragog tried his best to kill him.

Before he could think any better of it he landed over him and picking Aragog up by the abdomen, but into it with his sharp teeth, hard. He avoided his skull, knowing his jaws had the power to kill
instantly but with this, his wounds would eventually heal as his saliva held nothing dangerous. With the bite wound, blood pooled into his mouth and immediately, he released Aragog as the cry in response was enough to shatter glass.

He had no wish for his children to die so not sparing a glance he left, taking the rest of his family with them. If he could in this form, all the blood would drain from his face. He’d forgotten about Mosag, the wife of Aragog which Hagrid had told him about. He could only be thankful that her priority was protecting the rest of her children and not him because comparing her size to Aragog was like the difference between Hagrid and Grawp, she was considerably larger and in his opinion, more menacing. Hopefully, wherever they went, it was far away from the school. He was sure that Hagrid would find them again but if he did, he hoped there wouldn’t be conversations of a student turned Ampithere being the one responsible for attacking them in an act of vengeance. He understood completely that pretty much everything was a potential food source, but that didn’t mean to say he’d accept it without retaliation, he just couldn’t. In disgust he spat the blood and hairs out, shaking off the rest of various spider parts he’d found himself with.

All this time Lilah had remained silent but the moment things turned gory, for lack of a better word, Alistair gently covered her eyes with his free hand. He didn’t want her to be subjected to anything more than what she already had and the moment that Harry sank his teeth into one of the largest Acromantula, it was a nauseating sight and if human, he most likely would have expelled the contents of his stomach onto the already messy ground. She could still hear all that went on, but not having a picture to the sounds would ease the burden she already held.

The moment the coast was clear Harry transformed back, bracing himself on his hands and knees.

“I can’t believe I did that.”

Though he spoke to Alistair he breathed quickly, his gag reflex kicking in.

“Never again. Aragog tastes disgusting.”

Aguamenti left his wand and not bothering with a cup of any kind, directed the stream into his mouth and a few seconds later, spat the contents back out. Once doing that he immediately returned to Alistair’s side, terrified. “Is she ok?”

“She is in shock,” Alistair informed him, having uncovered her eyes now that they were gone. All was quiet and seems to realise that she was out of danger, the reaction Alistair expected finally happened.

Sensing that she was out of danger Lilah promptly burst into tears, heart-wrenching cries filled with all the hurt and terror she hadn’t been able to express up until now. Right after Harry pulled her into a hug, mindful of her injuries.

Finding her voice she was barely able to speak, hysterical. “I-I thought I was going to die!”
She clung onto Harry for dear life, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face into his shoulder. He could only just manage to understand her words, interlaced with sounds of her sobbing.

“I-I know I’m not supposed to be in the forest but Keith and Zain were going to go in and I couldn’t leave them on their own! I-If I went to get a Professor they could’ve run out of time and I didn’t want them to get hurt, I’m so sorry!”

Harry rose to his feet, with her in his arms. “Shh, calm down Lilah, it’s ok. We’ll get the full story soon. They can’t hurt you now, I promise.”

Resting a hand at the back of her head, he softly stroked her hair as both headed back to where Keith and Zain were.

Alistair restrained himself from bringing them both into an embrace of his own, Harry’s expression equally terrified. He was only young himself and yet, didn’t hesitate to fight against what was a threat. He understood perfectly just why Harry was placed into Gryffindor but on occasion, had certainly seen the Slytherin sides. Today he was nothing short of risky with his approach but he couldn’t deny the feeling of pride swelling within him. Out of consideration for Hagrid, he didn’t take those actions, instead being the driving force for them to rebuild their home elsewhere in the forest. One thing Alistair wasn’t looking forward to, was informing Jedrek of tonight’s events. He was unsure whether to wait until morning or tonight, it all depended on Lilah. She would need someone as support now more than ever.

The moment they returned and Zain saw that Lilah was relatively unharmed, his tears began anew, this time of relief. Alistair didn’t waste time, acting as Professor for only the necessities as he wanted all of them to go to the hospital wing as soon as possible.

“Mr Taylor, can you please explain how you all came to be here?”

Looking shaken, he nodded obediently. “They’re from Gryffindor but I don’t know their names. I overheard them talking about going into the forest and how it’s not that scary. Anyone who didn’t go in was fucking pussies.”

At Alistair’s stern look, he paled. “Sorry professor, but that’s what they said! So I thought I should go in because I don’t want to be seen as a coward. Zain tried to convince me not to do it but I did and he followed me. Lilah found us and found out what we were doing so she followed too. We got lost, found those weird spider things. Me and Zain got out but Lilah fell behind.”

Keeping his calm and resisting the urge to lecture on why pride was not more important than a life, he turned to Zain. “Is this an accurate account, Mr Alford?”

“Yeah. But sir, when she fell behind we could have helped her!” He pointed at Keith accusingly, glaring. “He said we’d die if we went back for her but there would have been time!”
Harry kept quiet, simply watching and trying his best to soothe Lilah who was still crying, tears soaking into his shirt, though quieter. While he could understand Zain’s point of view he could Keith’s as well. Though the three of them together weren’t friends he could never knowingly leave someone behind but looking into Keith’s eyes and despite his feelings towards Lilah, Harry could tell it wasn’t a decision he was proud of, but one he found necessary. It was a difficult situation but not one he would offer his voice to, knowing it would only complicate things. What mattered right now was that they were all alive and safe.

“It’s not like I wanted to do it, ok? I felt bad about it but if we’d all died, it would have been so much worse!”

“Better than knowingly leaving someone behind!”

“Enough.” Alistair’s firm voice cut through them both, as they fell silent immediately. Like Harry, he could understand both sides, but the situation could have been prevented in the first place if all had simply stopped, to think.

“Mr Taylor. In future, please refrain from allowing your sense of pride to override judgment. At the very start of this year, the Headmaster warned all students of the dangers. Perhaps you should not believe everything that you overhear, as it is more than likely they were bluffing.”

“Yes, Sir.” Keith couldn’t argue with that and considering what happened, it was a pretty stupid idea of his.

“Mr Alford, if a friend is insistent on putting themselves in danger, do not under any circumstances, follow them. Inform a Professor or if at any time they are unavailable, a Prefect. They are better equipped to deal with situations such as this, rather than someone with very little experience.”

Sniffing softly, Zain nodded mutely.

Approaching Lilah she raised her head from Harry’s shoulder, fearful of what she’d see there as the last thing she wanted to do was disappoint anyone and yet, she knew that her actions had done as much. Giving her a comforting smile to show that he wasn’t angry, he addressed Lilah last.

“And Miss Caltir, if you ever find yourself in this situation again, talk to someone that you trust and do not follow someone into certain danger.”

Her voice was weak and choked up, but audible. “Ok.”

Truly he didn’t want to punish them as he believed that tonight was a punishment in itself, but he wanted to dissuade them from ever doing it again.
"Miss Caltir and Mr Alford, fifteen points from Gryffindor. Mr Taylor, as it was your idea, twenty points from Gryffindor. All three of you will have detention with me."

While they were no doubt envisioning the worst possible punishments, Alistair had every intention of teaching them all a simple and quick spell to contact someone if they ever needed to. He believed in embracing the opportunity for students to look at a situation differently and if there was knowledge readily available for him to share, he’d be more than happy to. If Lilah had known how to contact a Professor instantaneously, perhaps there was a higher chance that this situation could have been avoided.

At the points loss, the boys groaned, though didn’t voice their protests. Harry knew it could have been far worse, McGonagall had taken fifty off him alone before.

Lilah flinched ever so slightly, though went almost unnoticeable among the shivers she already had.

“Cold?” Harry murmured softly to her, feeling a nod in response. Overhearing Alistair cast a mild warming charm over her, receiving a smile in thanks. With what he considered his ‘Professor’ duties out of the way Alistair turned back to Harry, for his next mild concern. “Are you in pain?”

“What?”

Following Alistair’s gaze, Harry realised that the scratches Lume’s underbelly had taken transferred to his abdomen in human form. It was only when he was made aware of them that the sting began to register.

“I didn’t notice, to be honest,” Harry admitted, shrugging. “I’ve had far worse. Madam Pomfrey will patch it up, don’t want to disappoint her when she realises I’ve come to visit without an injury.”

Alistair just wanted to make sure, giving an amused smile despite the seriousness of the situation. Admittedly for his own peace of mind but also, Lilah had provided enough distraction ensuring that she was breathing properly, that he had to time to be worried over if Acromantula Venom had somehow managed to affect him in his Animagus form.

Alistair didn’t need to mention their destination, the three first years able to accurately guess. Noticing that Lilah had grown quiet Harry looked down, to be met with her peaceful sleeping face. How long she would remain peaceful, he couldn’t say. Poor kid, she had enough on her plate between Ron and her own issues with her Dhampir status and now this. If he could, he’d take it all away from her. It was difficult growing up and having them as well but as someone who had personally been there, he’d offer as much support as possible. Arriving outside of the Hospital Wing, Harry cracked a cheeky grin when he met the gaze of Madam Pomfrey, who looked exasperated.

“Mr Potter, what is it this time?”
Then, she noticed who else was with him, quickly taking charge. After placing Lilah down he quickly stood by, watching as the immediate problems were taken care of. As Lilah was asleep she was able to heal visible burns and by some miracle, Keith and Zain were unharmed but shaken. Keeping the three in beds side by side she gave the pair a calming draught, which had them feeling drowsy almost immediately. As they would be fine unsupervised, she returned to Harry’s side.

“I got into a fight with an Acromantula.”

Seeing that he was serious, she pinned him with a fierce glare. “Of all the foolish things! Between you and your late father, I’ve been kept busy. Avoid Acromantulas, rogue bludgers, Dementors and Basilisks Mr Potter, if you want to make it to Graduation.”

“I can’t promise anything.” He thought of Aela, returned to the Chamber for now as the new sights in a form she hadn’t been in for so long were enough to make her head nearly spin.

Apparently, near death and dangerous situations ran in the Potter family line. Deeming him fit to leave after healing the scratches and under her own insistence checking Alistair for injuries, they left together.

Back in the somewhat safety of Hogwarts, Harry had time to reflect on his actions and decided that perhaps, it wasn’t the wisest thing to do. Shooting Alistair a guilty look, he threw Harry an amused smile.

“You are not very subtle.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry about earlier, it’s sort of instinct at this point for me to rush in and think later. But when Zain mentioned about Lilah I had to go.”

Seeing her in that sac surrounded by Acromantula would add to the list of his ever-growing nightmares.

“There is no need to explain yourself, Harry. I understand. While it was undeniably reckless and dangerous, it was not a situation that you rushed into knowing full well there was no chance. You prepared yourself accordingly.”

Harry gave a relieved smile. “Good. Admit it though, I was impressive as hell.”

Though he was only joking and didn’t really want an ego boost, he received an honest response.

“You were. Lume is magnificent. However, the one stood before me now is significantly more so.”
With a teasing smile, Alistair leaned forward, to whisper in Harry’s ear. Tingles running along his spine, they seemed to fill every inch of his mind.

“Ten points to Gryffindor.”

He never mentioned what they were for and with a cheerful wink, left Harry rooted to the spot for a long while afterwards. While one returned to the common room for the last time in that day, the other made sure once and for all, that no student would ever step foot in the forest unsupervised again.

Though Lilah had fallen asleep before, she found herself very much awake now. It was dark, with a little light showing from beneath a crack in the door which she guessed was from Madam Pomfrey. She was embarrassed she’d cried all over Harry like that but she had to admit, it was needed. She was too shocked and scared to think straight, to the point where she’d forgot to even thank him and Alistair for rescuing her. She’d think of something to thank them, it was only right.

“Lilah? Are you awake?”

She jumped, hearing her name whispered softly from the bed beside her.

“Yes. What is it?”

It was Zain. She wondered what he wanted, knowing it was probably late.

“I’m sorry we didn’t go back to get you. I tried to convince Keith, I swear!”

She didn’t want him to sound so sad. If she looked at it from their point of view they were equally as scared and Keith wanted to do what was right for both of them. She didn’t hate Keith for it and knew Zain tried to convince him otherwise.

“Don’t be, it’s ok, really.” She tried to convince him, though talking about earlier caused her fear to rise again. She kept her voice low, aware of Madam Pomfrey close by.

She could see a little better in the dark than humans, able to faintly make out Zain’s form, expression anguished. “It’s not though, I want to make it up to you.” Lilah sensed his hesitation, preparing herself for whatever words would come next.

“Will you be friends with me? After everything I’ve done, I’d understand if you wouldn’t want to
Her fear, for that moment, was swarmed by joy. “Really? You want to be my friend?”

“I do.” His sincerity shone through and happily, she agreed.

“Ok!”

While glad to have made a new friend, she bit her lip. She wanted to see her dad, badly. Though the big spider things couldn’t get her here her senses were on high alert, paranoid enough that from her position she scanned everywhere she could possibly see. Even the silence to her was loud and she didn’t like it.

Zain noticed her distress. “Are you ok?”

“No, I’m scared.” She admitted.

Then, Zain did something she didn’t expect. Throwing the covers carefully off him, he slipped beneath Lilah’s own and awkwardly wrapped an arm around her.

“What are you doing?” She asked him, confused but appreciating the contact right now.

“When I get scared, my mum does this. I’m not very good though. Does it feel bad?” He sounded worried but understanding the reasoning behind it, Lilah was quick to reassure him.

“I feel better now. Thanks.”

Snuggling up to his warmth, Zain was startled. How could she trust him so easily, after what he did? But still he wanted to make amends and if he was honest with himself, he found her interesting from the moment he met her. Keith’s reaction had created a rift, feeling as if he was forced to choose between a friend he’d had since practically birth and someone that he would like to know. While he was glad that they were friends now, he only wished it had happened under better circumstances. As Lilah dropped off to sleep he soon followed her and for that night at least, no bad dreams plagued them.
Demon-Potter & Friends

Chapter Summary

It's October 31st, the night of Hogwarts' Halloween party and dressed to (Somewhat) impress, Harry hopes to enjoy himself. Even on the date that changed everything.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: A new friendship are made, bound by unfortunate circumstances.

Harry barely had the time to think of how significant this month was for him, kept busy enough that his thoughts usually didn’t tend to wander. With the help of Alistair, a regular sleeping pattern was becoming the norm, though there were some troublesome nights here and there.

He wished he could say the same for Lilah, who looked exhausted but she at least had the support of Alistair, Jedrek and more recently, Zain. It wasn’t a surprising friendship, sharing faint similarities to his own with Hermione. Unfortunately, she was immune to the effects of Dreamless Sleep, wondering if that was a result of her half Vampire status or just down to the body’s natural chemistry.

He’d adapted to a routine of sorts, settling into Hogwarts again quicker than he could ever remember. As the days passed by he juggled extracurricular activities, his social life and what he’d be wearing for Halloween. Out of school hours this involved trips to the Room of Requirement and more illusion spells than he could reasonably keep track of. Like his friends, he’d remained tight-lipped about his own costume, wanting to surprise everyone, literally.

It was October 31st, the long-dreaded date for him yearly, but Harry would try to set aside his melancholy mood for the sake of enjoying himself. He doubted that his parents would want him to be in a low mood because of today’s significance, so he promised this to himself but also, that he’d do much better today with Pavarti than the Yule Ball.

Much like that year, the boys found themselves waiting for their partners and upon arrival, would proceed into the Hall. No one had any idea of just what the decoration would be like, but Harry knew that Alistair had offered a helping hand. Classes had ended early for that day, to allow the students time to prepare and Staff to help get everything in order. Instead of the usual evening feast, food and drink would be supplied during the party.
While with the Yule Ball everyone was aware that Harry waited for his partner for the evening along with the others, this time no one was. Using every kind of disguise magic at his disposal he allowed the other boys to leave before him and once they did, hid himself and his movements in every way he possibly could, except for the sounds of his breathing. Now he waited for Parvati at the bottom of the stairs, feeling a little mischevious and hoping to catch one or two people off guard. Perhaps that was in part, to his chosen costume.

He didn't consider himself overly creative, though any hope of him being able to develop that side was thoroughly squashed by the Dursleys, going out of their way to find and destroy anything produced by him. Dudley's own on were practically placed on a pedestal though, which killed him a little inside.

But for this, he was proud. It involved slight transformations into his animagi forms and truthfully, it was one of the most difficult things he'd done to date. But he believed he'd managed to pull it off successfully.

His was a Demon or at least, his version of one. Hair usually a little more tamed, for this he'd on purposely styled it to be messier, banishing the undertones of green and letting the natural black shine through. Dark, curved horns protruded from either side of his head, sharpened to a point. The process was made easier by picturing Lume's own, tweaking them to suit. Beneath lights, they were smooth, polished to a shine and unconsciously, Harry's hand ran over the protrusions. There were no nerves connected, only having a sensation at the base, where his skin met the near bone-like shapes.

He'd done a similar thing with the wings and tail, finding the wings to be the most difficult as he had to find the right balance between them and his own body, not wanting to put pressure on wings that would be too heavy for him. The skeletal structure was a little different, sturdier and lighter than when fully transformed, not to mention smaller. They were large enough to be noticeable but small enough to not be in the way. To his surprise, they actually functioned well, though he preferred flying by broom or as Lume. The scales were black, gradually lightening to a deeper red as they reached his wing tips. The black itself was the sort whereby if stared at too long, the feeling of being sucked into the absence of light became overwhelmingly strong. The webbing itself was lighter, see-through and upon close inspection, blood vessels supplying what was needed.

His tail was of a similar style, black also fading to red with a sharpened point, spikes adorning it. There was no question, having horns, wings and a tail which were no illusion was one of the strangest sensations in his short life.

While he didn't change his eye colour, he added the illusion that toxic green flames sparked within them, ready to strike and the moment he smiled, sharpened incisors would be noticeable. He didn't alter them too much, worried that he'd accidentally puncture the inside of his mouth if not careful. His nose and ear piercings remained, changed to simple silver rings.

He didn't have much of a fashion sense either so with permission from McGonagall, went to Diagon Alley to have a discussion with Madam Malkin. The Wizarding World was somewhat behind with the times as many of the formal robes were Victorian inspired but for this, it was what he'd been
looking for. There were not just robes, but waistcoats and shirts. Robes wouldn't go with his chosen theme and the more he explained what it was he was after and receiving insight from someone passionate about fashion, the more it painted a picture in his mind of what would look best. If he wanted the best fashion advice no doubt Alistair would be able to help but he was remaining quiet, even with him and trying not to project his thoughts. Hopefully, he'd been somewhat successful. It was a far cry from his usual attire and actually, closer to what Alistair wore on a regular basis.

Investments in businesses placed long before he was born ensured he received a steady income, the numbers according to the Goblins were enough to make his head spin. He wasn't careless with money in the least and apart from Hermione's birthday and his school supplies, he'd barely touched it except for donations to causes he believed were important, at least to him, one of which was orphanages. While the rate of children being put up for adoption was significantly lower as magical children were usually cherished, it was still an issue and the few they did have across the United Kingdom were struggling. As someone who did grow up with 'family' yet wished to be taken in by someone who would care, Harry at least wanted the facilities to be of the best quality possible.

But for this night, he'd decided to go all out and wearing second-hand clothes for most of his life, tried his best to not pass out at the cost. The Malfoy family probably wouldn't bat an eyelid, used to decadence unlike him but at least, it was certainly worth the price.

The waistcoat was primarily velvet, intricately patterned and a softer black in comparison to everything else. Paired with this was a silky, long-sleeved buttoned shirt, a similar shade of red to some scales and daringly, leaving two of the buttons undone. Daring for him, as some of the scars became visible. Little by little, he was trying to change his mindset, unable to be rid of most due to his own beliefs but this was a start and one day, he hoped to be rid of them completely.

Black trousers, a belt with a skull buckle and shoes polished to a shine were the last thing to complete his look, the trousers more form fitting than he was used to but had no reason to mask his physique. He'd shown the final result to Remus, met with approval and impressed at the work he'd done to achieve the balance between horns, wings and tail.

Harry hid away, allowing enough space for his wings to stretch out a little and skilfully manoeuvring to the front, by Neville's side. In truth, if Neville hadn't spoken Harry wouldn't have known it was him. He was a Spriggan, faintly familiar to Harry as he remembered a topic on folklore in Primary School. It was impressive, everything except for his eyes wooden in appearance and for any intricate detailing, the bark was smoothened and almost resembled the musculature of the human body. Leaves sprouted from his form and while not traditionally scary, Harry couldn't deny that there was something a little disturbing about it, especially when his hands were almost claw-like. Harry wondered what spell work was involved as despite the material used, Neville looked to be able to move comfortably.

In stark contrast to Neville was Ron, looking as though he’d placed minimal effort into his outfit with simple robes but at least they were nothing like those of two years ago. To all their surprise Ron had managed to find someone, almost certain he wouldn’t once word spread of his treatment towards Hermione. In the end and apparently with Parvati’s disapproval, Lavender accepted Ron’s invitation when asked, seeing Hermione as a lost cause. She’d informed them she wasn’t coming alone but remained strangely secretive as to just who it was.
His attention was aroused by Neville’s concerned voice. “Have any of you seen Harry? I thought he’d be here by now.”

Dean, Seamus and Ron shook their heads, the former two dressed as a Mummy and Zombie respectively. Harry was mildly surprised that Dean hadn’t used toilet roll in place of bandages for a laugh and that Seamus hadn’t come as some form of fire creature, or at least a Pyromaniac.

“Pretty sure he’s fucking with us. Might be here somewhere.” Seamus scanned his surroundings suspiciously and for a moment, Harry held his breath.

“Harry if you’re here, make some noise.” Seamus joked, returning to waiting with the rest.

A faint noise against his will escaped Harry’s lips when faced with an unbelievable mental image, thankfully covered by the arrival of more people.

Much like the time, Harry’s imagination got the better of him in relation to Alistair and lack of clothing, Harry found himself faced with a similar image that was scarily accurate. The only addition needed were more scars, knowing the man hadn’t seen just how many of them there were. But overall Harry was flattered that he was seen in such a positive light. Beyond embarrassed definitely, but it was nothing he hadn’t done. He addressed Alistair, positive that his embarrassment could be heard, if not seen.

‘You’ve got spectacular timing. I’m outside of the Hall waiting for Parvati, but I’m disillusioned. I nearly gave myself away.’

‘I apologise.’

Somehow, Harry didn’t think that he was entirely sincere. ‘I mean despite that, thanks for seeing me in such a, well..’

He trailed off, unsure how to finish the sentence. However, his conversation partner more than happy to provide adjectives.

‘A spectacularly attractive light?’

‘Yes, I mean no! I don’t know.’

In typical Harry fashion, he tripped over his words much like a new born foal finding its feet for the first time.
Alistair didn’t comment further, chuckling warmly. ‘I shall see you later.’

With that mini heart attack out of the way, Harry ensured he remained unseen and unheard. He suspected that his friends would wait for him, but he wanted to keep the mystery for as long as possible.

Lavender arrived first, not in costume but a pale blue dress which complimented her features. Ron didn’t say a word as she descended the stairs or offer a hand, the most he did was give an awkward grunt in response. Not waiting around he immediately headed for the hall and shockingly enough, Lavender didn’t seem to mind. Giggling to herself she followed alongside him, the other boys looking on in disbelief.

"Jesus Christ, I think she should've gone with Professor Snape, at least she'd get more of a reaction," Seamus complained, shaking his head.

Dean snorted. "Can you imagine?" He straightened to attention, doing his best stern impression. "Miss Brown. You look... adequate, tonight. However, if you do not conduct yourself in an appropriate manner, Gryffindor will be in negative house points. Do I make myself clear?"

Turning to Seamus Dean attempted to arch his brow, but ended up raising both instead. Harry had to bite the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. The only thing that would have made it better was the sudden appearance of Professor Snape himself, though Harry knew he was in the Hall.

Neville shuddered. "Change of topic please, I'm sure every time someone talks about him he miraculously hears even when not in the room."

Their change of topic came, in the form of Ginny and Luna who arrived together, as complete opposites. Ginny took her time on the stairs, wearing a pair of high heels. Harry would never understand girls or why they chose to wear the most uncomfortable looking shoes. Well most anyway, as Luna had chosen to wear no shoes at all.

Ginny had embraced the Halloween theme thoroughly, wearing a red velvet dress that hugged her form in all the right places, without being too revealing. Hair in a braided bun she wore earrings, resembling droplets of blood but the most unnerving thing to Harry, was her eye colour. Pure black including the whites and seeing an illusion of tarantulas crawling over her body, Spider Queen was Harry's first thought. It was creepy and definitely suitable.

Ruby red lips turning into a smile, Ginny watched Ron's retreating back. "I can dispel the spider illusion whenever."

Dean swallowed reflexively, finding Ginny's eyes disturbing. "You look terrifyingly beautiful."

"Then I achieved what I set out to do. Where's Harry anyway? I thought he'd be here waiting for
"We don't know, he's not here yet." Neville frowned, scanning the slightly thinned out crowd as more couples began to join the party.

Luna didn't say anything and going unnoticed by the others, her eyes found Harry's exact spot, for just a moment. He should've known. Luna had a sixth sense for this sort of thing.

"Neville, we match! I'm a woodland Nymph!" Luna was positively delighted, deciding not to spoil Harry's surprise.

"That's nice, but you're not exactly scary. You're pretty." Neville told her, not in the least embarrassed about saying as much.

Harry had to agree. Her dress was pure white, light and flowing freely. She wore a similar flower motif in her hair to the other day, a large daisy crown for decoration. Her fingernails and toenails were the lightest shade of pink, with minimal makeup. It was simple, but uniquely Luna.

Losing her carefree and cheerful attitude for a few seconds, Luna's blue eyes shone with seriousness. "Nature can be scary."

Immediately, the forbidden forest rose to Harry's mind. He could see her point. While most of nature was there to provide a home for creatures, there were natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis to contend with, that could easily rip all of it away. Looking at her now, Harry couldn't picture Luna as anything else. Something along the lines of his own or Ginny's costume wasn't exactly her style.

Seamus' own partner for the evening was Susan Bones, or at least Harry had overheard a conversation between Seamus and Dean discussing whether he should ask.

Harry's question was answered, Susan appearing at the top of the stairs, Parvati and Hermione just behind. It would be time to put his plan into action shortly.

Judging by the spotted ears sprouting from Parvati's head and the furry tail accompanying her similarly spotted dress, she'd chosen a cheetah theme and her makeup was suitably cat-like. A strangely realistic looking twitchy nose and whiskers to accompany it, she wore her hair loose.

On this day, Hermione would be his sworn enemy. With large white wings adorned with gold sprouting from her back and the biggest bow along with quivers that he'd ever seen attached securely, she seemed to be charged with a threatening yet divine energy. Rather than tame her hair, it was wilder, appropriate for her outfit of choice. It wasn't a dress she wore but armor, made of light material with the same intricate detailing on her wings. Like Luna, her makeup wasn't overly heavy, just enough to accentuate her features. As the Archangel seemed to glide down the stairs, to
everyone's shock, Theodore Nott stepped forward, bowing his head ever so slightly.

"Hermione, impressive spell work."

Though most would probably take offence to not mentioning their appearance, Hermione did no such thing, beaming. "Thank you, Theo."

Theo?! Since when was this a thing? Everyone, invisible or otherwise looked on in shock except for, unsurprisingly, Luna.

Before they could ask, Hermione supplied them with an answer but didn't go into details. "He's my study partner."

There was no doubt about it, Harry would have questions when the opportunity arose but for now, he had no problems. He'd only interacted with Nott briefly but it was enough to wonder why he wasn't in Ravenclaw. Unlike Malfoy, though he'd piped down since, he wasn't vocal about blood supremacy and usually kept to himself. Like the Greengrasses and Harry himself, they seemed to be more on their own side.

"Where's Harry? I swear if he's ditched me.." Parvati trailed off, face drawn into a slight scowl. Time for him to make his appearance, then.

He'd had enough practice to be confident enough in knowing he wouldn't plummet to the ground and with that, silently hovered in the air. They'd formed a rough circle, no doubt waiting for him and just large enough to drop into. The moment he took flight, a gust of air blew across. While Hogwarts was chilly, there was nothing nearby to even remotely cause a breeze. Cancelling all the charms hiding him from sight Harry suddenly dropped to the ground, landing on both feet and wings spread. Parvati shrieked, Seamus went through every non-child friendly word in his vocabulary, Luna's eyes twinkled, Ginny drew her wand as the majority reacted with varying levels of surprise.

"Boo." Harry grinned, sharpened incisors prominent.

"I knew you were fucking with us! You nearly killed me!" Seamus glared.

"Thought I'd start this party off with a bang." Harry shrugged, not apologetic in the slightest.

Ginny gave a whistle, eyes roaming over his form. "Sexy. Anyone, in particular, you're trying to impress?"

She knew full well what his answer was. It’s not like he was trying to impress him, it was something he’d wanted to do for himself. But he’d be lying if he said the thought of his reaction hadn’t crossed Harry’s mind.
“No. Why do you think that?” Harry acted innocent, hating Ginny’s knowing smirk. His attention was caught by Hermione, eyes glimmering in interest with his own wings.

“I know I’m your enemy but I swear, I’m innocent! Don’t shoot me!” Harry cried out dramatically, wings curving around to shield his body.

Jokingly Hermione held her bow in hand, pulling back the string and arrow she held. Closing one eye, she focused on him.

“You’re a tempting target, Demon-Potter.”

It’s not like her weapon was simply for show either, she’d been keeping him informed of her progress. Helped by her childhood archery lessons he had no doubt she could hit moving targets and then some.

Harry was in a playful mood. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this way but for once, he was acting his age.

“Parvati, you look great. We’ve got to run from Hermione though! She has it out for me.”

Giggling to herself and grateful for the compliment especially compared to two years before, Parvati decided to play along and accepted his arm to link in with, face flushed. Silently she agreed with Ginny and that she’d certainly ended up with one of the best looking boys. What he’d be like for the rest of the night was another story entirely.

“Your costumes look brilliant. Nev, I like the wooden style you’ve got going on and Ginny, you’ll scare the shit out of Ron. Luna, I wouldn’t have you any other way. Got to go!”

Before anyone could respond he quickly walked through the double doors with Pavarti at his side, dramatically checking behind him every few seconds to ensure he wouldn’t find an arrow up his arse.

"It's good to see him like this." A fond smile on Hermione's lips, this was the first time in a long while that he'd let the 'teenager' side of him come out.

"Trying to impress someone eh? Detective Finnegan is on the case." Seamus stroked his chin, earning an eye roll from Dean.

"You can play Detective when we're inside. Come on, we'll be late."

As the rest of the students filed inside, it left Hermione with Theodore and Neville with Luna.
Neville watched him leave. “I haven’t been close to Harry for as long but yeah, it makes a change to see him acting his age for once. We’d better go inside. Who knows what Demon-Potter is up to?”

It was surprising that they’d had a similar idea and later, Hermione planned to pester Harry in the friendliest way possible about every inch of his outfit choice. She knew how Ron would react to her bringing a Slytherin but hoped, probably in vain, that he wouldn’t cause a scene. Accepting the arm that Theodore offered, Hermione followed Neville and Luna inside.

Luna began humming to herself, smiling secretly. While those nearby put it down to one of her quirks, there was a reason. Tonight was the night, that it would change for Harry. She could feel it, with every fibre of her being. The thought floated there within her mind that much like every student upon entering the Hall, became entranced by their surroundings.

The moment Harry stepped through the doors, he skidded to a halt, amazed. Though Parvati wasn’t easily impressed, she found herself in a similar state. "It’s so beautiful.."

Harry couldn't agree more, knowing that the majority of this was Alistair’s influence, as it somewhat reflected the decor of Lothaire castle. It was rich and decadent, yet lacked the pomposity associated with some rooms and the people within.

It didn’t look like the Hall he was used to and it was a far cry from the yearly decorations infused with childish spirit. A plush, dark carpet cushioned his feet and with the soft lighting, could see faint undertones of red. The room itself was larger than the Yule Ball, the dance floor alone enough to comfortably fit students and extra guests. And because all students were allowed to attend and not just fourth year and upwards, it was a significant amount. The floor itself was polished to such a shine, that the reflection of the equally large chandelier and its surroundings could be seen clearly.

Tilting his head upwards to get a better view, Harry noticed that the chandelier almost seemed to be suspended in mid-air, hundreds of candles being the sole things to provide the light needed, the jewels beneath almost resembling droplets of blood. The colour scheme itself matched Harry’s primarily and yet somehow, didn't all blend into one. Every shade was counted and rather than just a simple ceiling, it gave the impression that many eyes in the darkness were blinking, watching over them all. But then he realised that only the darkness itself was an illusion, a stream of bats leaving what looked like the near-empty void, to flap around the ceiling.

The walls were a red and black damask style, complimenting the six evenly spaced arched windows that reflected the night sky outside. Harry wouldn't be surprised if Grawp could pay a visit by entering through one of them, they were that large. Perhaps it was the style of the room, but Harry could almost swear the shadows in each corner shifted, hiding something within.

On the left and right side of the walls, between the windows sat gargoyles, each identical to the last and wings tucked away. Though made of stone, they looked eerily lifelike, as if they’d spring to
just in front of each of the arched windows were two tables, rivalling the size of the hall's though these were decorated differently. Rather than wood, the surfaces were glass, as the main body looked to be made out of metal. Each chair was cushioned and much like the room itself could comfortably seat every guest invited. Even the cutlery reflected a spooky theme, spider webs etched into titanium plates as the handles of each knife, spoon and fork were carved into skeletons of various positions. One crouching, another hiding its expression entirely while the last's entire form seemed to writhe in silent agony. It was chillingly detailed and Harry hadn't quite seen eating utensils like it. To finish were goblets, as though a clawed hand gripped each of them for the stem and embedded into each ring finger, gems which reflected all colours visible to the human eye.

Harry could barely hear himself over the noise of all gathered there, finding to his amusement that Vampires of stereotypical appearances were a common theme, along with a few werewolves. Most had decided on a costume of sorts while some had come in semi-formal robes or clothing. Making sure to walk at Parvati's speed, they moved to a section of the floor not quite as crowded.

"Harry!"

Managing to hear his name even above the noise Lilah waved happily, running over to him and looking mildly exasperated, Zain jogged after her. He was one of the many Vampires there though unlike some, he hadn't used fake blood sparingly.

"Wow, so cool! Are they real?" She bounced on her feet, reaching out to touch one of his wings and surprised by their scaly smoothness.

"Yes and no." It was a mixture of both, really. She didn't question further though, spinning around on the spot. "What do you think? I'm an Elemental Elf! Dad told me about them."

As an unseen gentle wind swirled around her small frame, her chosen element being air. With prominently pointed ears and twin plaits just to the front of each, a dress similar to Luna's in the light, floaty material accompanied them, coloured a faint lilac. Much like Luna, Harry couldn't see Lilah picking anything particularly scary for Halloween, simply something she was comfortable with and after the difficulty she'd had since starting Hogwarts, it was nice to see her having a good time.

"It suits you. Enjoy yourselves and if there are any problems you can come find me, ok?" Harry made the offer, knowing that parties rarely ever passed by without some form of issue. "We will," Zain responded seriously, though Harry could see he was swept up in tonight's excitement as well.

Lilah was so excited, she couldn't decide where to focus her attention first. Grabbing her friend's hand, she thought nothing of it and pointed excitedly to one of the Gargoyles. "It's so cool! I want a closer look. Come on!" And just like that, they were gone, a faintly blushing Zain in tow.

"Ooh," Parvati shivered, eyeing the Gargoyles warily. "I don't know why she wants to get closer,
they're horrifying."

"It's a new experience, she might not have seen them before. Admit it though, they're pretty awesome." Harry wouldn't mind a closer look himself, later.

"If you like things that look capable of murder."

Well, he couldn't deny that. Their expressions were rather fierce and he could almost swear, the one that Lilah approached had flashing eyes for a moment.

As a stage shimmered into appearance, the room gradually fell into silence. Students and adults had mingled, all eyes watching as Dumbledore cast sonorous. Closer to the front Harry could see that the robes were his usual style, bright purple and covered in orange pumpkins. While clothing hadn't been affected Harry doubted that even for Halloween, he would have dramatic dark eye makeup or that his freshly grown hair and facial hair would take on a life of its own, twisted into individual strands and writhing in a similar manner to Snakes. His voice was normal, leading Harry to believe that he'd gone a little easier on the coloured Lemon Drops. Either way it earned him some incredulous stares, particularly among the Ministry members present.

The Ministry and Hogwarts were linked with one another, as the majority of graduate students ended up working there. They were invited tonight to see the current state of Hogwarts but mainly, converse with students and get an idea of the up and coming generations for themselves.

Though the last thing he wanted to do was listen to one of the men that had tried his hardest to ruin Harry's life, there might be information that he'd miss, if not.

Raising his arms in greeting, Dumbledore's voice carried throughout the room. "Welcome, to Halloween at Hogwarts. This is a gathering to mingle but also, acknowledge those that are lost. Entertainment will be available shortly and refreshments until midnight. Be cautious, as they may contain a trick or treat and you will not be informed of which. Tonight there will be no curfew, all students are welcome to stay until the end. That is all."

This announcement was met with scattered cheers, particularly from third year and under who were a little more restricted with what they could and couldn't do. As Dumbledore finished and stepped down from the stage, refreshments appeared. Unsurprisingly the Weird Sisters were tonight's entertainment, more fitting for this particular month than during Christmas. While waiting for them to set up, guests gravitated towards the tables. Keeping Parvati by his side Harry navigated them through the crowd, managing not to bump into anyone.

Seeing the various bowls of punch and a ladle, Harry eyed them suspiciously. Was that one bubbling?

"Has Professor Snape been here?" Parvati questioned, glancing around nervously. "It looks like poison."
One of them was a toxic green, seeming too viscous to consume and Harry didn't disagree with her but decided to take the plunge. "Dumbledore said trick or treat applied."

Perhaps expecting the worst she released his arm, taking a small step backwards. Giving an experimental sniff, the fact that he couldn't detect an odour was almost worrying. Dipping the ladle in he poured a small measure into his goblet. Raising it to his lips he took a sip, ready to unintentionally spray the contents everywhere if foul tasting.

To his surprise it wasn't thick like its appearance suggested, sliding down his throat with ease and having the strong taste of sour apple. The tang lingered on his tongue for a short while but after, it wasn't too bad.

"It's sour apple." He informed Pavarti, who decided to follow his lead after shuddering at the goblet's design. Taking a sip herself she shook her head. "Not for me, I prefer sweet things."

There were a lot of punch bowls and one filled with rose pink caught her eye. Harry admitted that it did look nice, but he had a sneaking suspicion. Deciding not to voice it he watched, quickly having a napkin at hand when she started to cough. Accepting it gratefully, she grimaced. "Alright, that was disgusting."

"We may as well suffer together." Giving himself the same amount he swallowed, trying his best to not spit it out. He wasn't even sure of the flavour either, positive that it was a blend of everything that shouldn't exist and there it sat, innocent and pretty in the punch bowl.

"Yeah, you're right. We'll find you a sweet one though or my name isn't Demon-Potter!" Striking a heroic pose Pavarti laughed at his antics, already finding herself swayed by his changed attitude and the evening had barely started.

During their quest to find the sweet tasting punch, Harry spotted Hagrid a short distance away. Once empty the bowls refilled and rather than the goblets provided, Hagrid had one of his own mugs at hand, resembling the size of a small bucket. When full, that was half of the entire bowl gone and with one huge gulp, Hagrid drank the contents.

Or so Harry thought, the majority spraying from Hagrid's mouth and due to his dramatic height difference, those on the other side of the table were treated to punch rain.

Pulling a worn handkerchief from his pocket, Hagrid looked sheepish. "Sorry about tha'."

Harry chuckled to himself. Looks like they weren't the only ones brave enough to try the punch, though Hagrid tackled them in the same way most did a pub crawl. They'd had a variety of flavours, a lot recognisable and he was positive that they were actually every flavour beans but drinkable. Maybe they were blended but between them, the closest to sweet they’d found was honey, a bit too sickly for his liking.
“How about this one? It’s Strawberry.” Harry pointed to one of the bowls, filled to the brim with a black liquid that stained the very edges.

“How about this one? It’s Strawberry.” Harry pointed to one of the bowls, filled to the brim with a black liquid that stained the very edges.

“Really?” Giving it a dubious look she decided to trust Harry’s words, eyes lighting up when he was proven to be truthful. “Perfect! Thanks, Harry!”

Knowing that it was one of the safe bowls, she filled her goblet to the brim, this time. He wondered, at the rate Hagrid was going, whether punch would be worn or consumed more. There was no Madam Maxime but regardless, he looked to be enjoying himself.

Immersing himself in the atmosphere and to his own satisfaction, he’d found a bowl with a flavour combination that roughly matched cranberry, happily sipping away at that and like most, waiting for the music to start. So preoccupied with his quest to find Parvati’s punch flavour of choice, that he’d actually forgot the main thing on his mind.

What Alistair would be wearing.

It’s not like Harry could miss him, he was noticeable without even trying to be. Still remaining somewhat close to the stage, Harry searched there first but from his position, several people blocked his view. Knowing that he’d see him at least once before the night ended Harry was about to give up his search, until something or rather someone, caught his eye.

As more people chose one table or the other for various refreshments, it left the dance floor in the middle emptier and therefore, easier to see across the room. Before his contacts, Harry would have stood no chance on seeing at even medium distances clearly but in the midst of a conversation with Professor McGonagall and at a reasonable distance to be seen clearly, was the very man who these days, filled his every thought whether awake or asleep.

All thoughts stopped. Time itself seemed to stop and Harry himself stopped mid-action, cheeks faintly bulging with a mouthful of punch.

From the moment he had first met Alistair, Harry was undeniably attracted to him and with each day that passed by, the attraction had only grown as alongside it, had revealed to Harry that he was in fact, the sweetest, kindest and most thoughtful man that he’d had the absolute privilege of discovering. His sunset eyes, the smile that coaxed Harry’s poor heart to run a marathon each time and his smiles along with that wonderful laugh! No words could possibly describe how much he loved them both. Hell, he loved everything about him and the fact that he was a Vampire? Not one negative thought regarding that crossed his mind and all of this, these conflicting feelings swirling within him, put his crush on Cho to shame with the enormity of it all.

Harry had seen some beautiful things in his time, among them unicorns but in his opinion, they couldn’t hold a candle to him. Heart pounding furiously within his chest, he’d somehow managed to become even more handsome. Dearly hoping he wouldn’t pass out, Harry’s eyes drank in his elegant form faster than Hagrid with the punch.
Though Harry considered even his casual wear to be somewhat formal, it was as though they were transported back to the Victorian era for fashion inspiration but there was nothing dated about it. He owned the look and Harry was beginning to find it unfair by just how much.

While the main body of his long-sleeved cuffed coat was navy in colour, the lapels and cuffs themselves were a rich bronze. The outlines of the lapels, cuffs and coat were golden and lining them, were patterns of the same shade in an almost heart motif. Beneath this coat was a horseshoe collar waistcoat, outlined in gold as well. On either side of the buttons was a stripe, paler gold in colour and to either side of the stripe, more of the rich bronze.

The sides of his trousers matched the waistcoat perfectly, the rest navy with thin strips of gold on either side that line up with the waistcoat points. His shirt was a crisp, clean white, with silken gloves to match. A cream coloured lace jabot comfortably rested against his chest and in the very centre, an oval amethyst for decoration. To the right side of his lapel and attached to the coat was a red rose, in full bloom. A cape of matching design lay snug around his shoulders, flowing with every subtle movement.

A mauve ribbon wrapped around the base of the tricorn hat adorning Alistair’s head and to the right, a golden star with one more smaller amethyst sitting directly in the centre. Just behind this was a trio of cream feathers, each one precisely eight centimetres in length. The tricorn was worn so that each point could be seen, the curved v shape in line with the collar. Navy to match the cuffed coat, it also sported the same pattern as the cuffs themselves.

No doubt there were even finer details that he’d missed, but he was in another league entirely. Simply stunning and more than just his eyes were on him.

Even so, there was only one pair of eyes Alistair was remotely interested in and as though he knew just who had finally spotted him, those sunset eyes that he was the only one able to see, met his burning emerald gaze.

Help! What should he do?!

He was rooted to the spot still. Eyes sparkling brightly enough to put those amethysts to shame, a graceful smile accompanied with a slight head tilt which held overwhelming fondness, aimed Harry’s way.

That was it. Forgetting himself entirely it wasn’t just his cheeks that were set ablaze, but his entire facial colour and body beneath his own clothing too. He was entranced beyond all reason but for this, he needed none. Of course, he was only there for a few seconds at most but just then, everything seemed to have gone in slow motion. So the moment he naturally smiled in response he was made aware of the fact he hadn’t actually swallowed the mouthful of punch he’d taken and inevitably, it left his mouth to dampen the shirt beneath. Cursing under his breath and feeling almost lightheaded he quickly waved away the mess, mouth incredibly dry despite all the punch tasting from that simple look alone.
Harry sighed to himself, blissfully yet concerned. How was he supposed to concentrate now? It was a struggle to tear his eyes away from Alistair but forcefully he did so, as the music was about to start.

To most, magic itself blended in and the signatures of Witches and Wizards were indistinguishable, unless close. For Alistair, this wasn’t the case. He could pinpoint every signature within the room easily and individually, some more recognisable than others.

The moment that Harry arrived he could tell immediately and knowing that he wanted to keep his outfit choice a secret, ensured to gently push away any unintended projected thoughts. In truth he wanted it to be a surprise as well, but Harry had surpassed his expectations.

Devilishly handsome was a particularly fitting adjective and no matter his clothing choice whether it was T-Shirts or school robes, Alistair always found himself spellbound.

But, he had yet to see Harry in formal attire such as waistcoats and truthfully, hadn’t expected it either. But now that he’d seen it, it was though he’d been treated to something special. It suited him very much and the simple fact that Harry remained unaware of his own charm had only increased his attractiveness. He could tell that his Animagus forms played a part in his costume of choice and he found himself both impressed and distracted. Though it was common for women to say that most men couldn’t multitask Alistair could do it rather well, at least before now. However, he found keeping a conversation with Minerva and trying to watch Harry simultaneously to be particularly challenging.

Turning away to try and direct his full attention to her, inevitably thoughts of Harry still lingered within his mind. But later on, another opportunity presented itself, feeling the eyes of the one that mattered the most on him. Turning his head briefly he gave a smile tinged with all the affection he held, pent-up or otherwise. To his delight, Alistair was rewarded with a familiar blush, more all-encompassing than ever along with his little punch mishap. It was enough for his heart to leap, such an awkward teen-like thing to do and yet, still adorable.

“He is the very epitome of perfection..”

Unaware that he’d spoken those words aloud and usually more careful, Alistair embraced the idea that each individual had their own idea of perfection and to him, Harry was this and so much more.

“And who might that be?”

Hearing the amused question by his side Alistair jumped ever so slightly, discomposed. Apparently, not all of his thoughts were internal and once more, though reluctantly, he looked away from Harry.
“Forgive me, Minerva. I admit I am rather distracted.” He gave her an apologetic glance, unable to help but feel a little guilty that he was neglecting their conversation, even if the object of his affections was currently in the same room.

Waving away his apology dismissively Minerva didn’t question him further, already having her suspicions. Careful her colleague may be, but she had taught for many years and with each year, her level of observation only grew. She was aware that Harry had bumped into Alistair on his summer travels, but not so much the details. In many ways Alistair was more guarded than Severus, knowing that not all was what it seemed but despite this, relied on her own feelings which told her he could be trusted. She’d silently watched their budding relationship and from the start, it was clear to her that their relationship went beyond the boundaries of Professor/Student. While some frowned upon this Minerva was a firm advocate that love or budding love could be found in almost any situation and this particular one, she didn’t see an issue. While her role as Professor, Head of Gryffindor house and Deputy Headmistress meant that she couldn’t really publicly support this if it were to happen, she wouldn’t discourage it either. Perfectly content to watch from the side lines, she wished nothing but the best, for both.

Not for the first time, Alistair counted his blessings of the link that she shared with Solomon, even if no doubt hearing of Harry was beginning to grow tiresome. But, to convey his own ever blooming affection for the young man wasn’t the only reason he had. As Solomon couldn’t be there tonight for various reasons, it was, of course, his duty as big brother, to help deepen the budding relationship between him and Hermione.

With all the details that he could possibly include, Alistair projected an image of her costume for Solomon to see. Several lengthy seconds of no response passed by, until a voice which held more wonderment than ever before, echoed in his mind.

‘She is radiant. I am sure that no other woman among all present could ever possibly compare.’ Alistair heard a faint sigh. ‘I am a little jealous.’

In response, his tone held a regretful note. ‘I apologise. That was not my intention.’

‘I am appreciative to see her, even if not through my own eyes. And Harry?’ Solomon swiftly moved the conversation on, knowing that showing him Hermione’s costume of choice was secondary.

‘Oh, I am a love-stricken teenager once more. He is a handsome, delightful demon. So much so, that from the moment he entered this room I have found myself unable to concentrate on anything but.’

For the entirety of this month and a little of the last, Alistair had mulled over one important decision. However, it was only tonight that his confirmation of it being the right course of action became stronger.

‘..Solomon. I believe that it is time.’
Without further details, he knew. 'You mean..' He trailed off, letting Alistair finish though the answer couldn't be clearer.

'Yes, tonight.'

He would never consider himself to be anything less than completely confident, however, an unfamiliar feeling of nervousness began to make itself known. Only time would tell and for better or worse, Alistair would receive his answer. As Solomon passed on his good wishes, one of the few actual Vampires at Hogwarts' Halloween party, vowed to enjoy himself until then.

Embarrassed didn't even scratch the surface of Harry's current feelings, genuinely concerned that death by attractiveness could actually be a thing. Thankfully, except for Alistair, he didn't think that anyone had noticed. Maybe. If they had he just hoped it wasn't mentioned while he was within earshot. Once the music started and in complete contrast to before, he offered an outstretched hand to Parvati. "Want to look like idiots on the dance floor?"

In response she sniffed, tossing her hair mock haughtily. "You may look like an idiot, but I can dance."

Accepting his outstretched hand they arrived in the middle of the dance floor, along with most of the students and even some adults. Before he didn't care, for various reasons. Self-conscious because he couldn't dance, in case anyone saw his scars and just unwilling to be out of his comfort zone. He wasn't at his healthiest in the least either and even after the opening dance, found himself slightly breathless. It was a wonder he'd survived up until now with his lack of nutrition.

But in the middle of it all right now, he realised something. Not everyone was a professional dancer, but everyone was here with the aim to enjoy themselves. The Weird Sisters weren't exactly the genre of music where a great knowledge of dancing was required, most of it pretty much jumping repeatedly to the beat and in the case of Professor Flitwick, surfing the crowd. There were no rules involved and no one would be looking at his footwork. He could just simply be.

The thought was almost liberating for him. More confident, happier and healthier than he could ever remember being, he didn't mind looking like an idiot.

While he still didn't think dancing was his forte he gave it his best shot. With Parvati’s hand in his he tried to match her step for step, no matter what they turned out to be and at one point, easily lifted her in mid-air while he spun on the spot and by some miracle, managed not to drop her. In truth, he had no idea what he was doing most of the time and if not that, raved with the rest.

“YOU’RE DOING GREAT HARRY!” Parvati shouted, making herself heard above the noise and enjoyment clearly seen.
“THANKS!” He replied back and somewhere along the line, had begun to really get into the swing of things. Harry recognised a few of the songs from before and though not all in the room would perhaps realise, covers from some well-known singers in the Muggle world.

By the end he’d lost count with how many songs passed by, laughing and smiling more now than he’d done for the entirety of his 5th year. During a pause, while another song started, Parvati took the opportunity to speak.

“I forgive you. I don’t know what happened for you to change but it seems like for the better.”

Through the crowd, Parvati noticed something. “My sister wants to dance with you and she’s not the only one. If I hog you all night, the others will hate me forever and the resulting stress won’t be good for my complexion.”

Harry thought she was exaggerating, but he couldn’t be more wrong. Surprised he found himself dancing with more girls across the span of minutes than he could accurately keep count of, some names and faces only vaguely familiar but in a sense, it was a new way to socialise. By chance, he happened to pass Neville and as one, gave a mutual thumbs up. He’d stayed vigilantly by Luna’s side and those who usually had a snide comment or two for her remained tight-lipped, unnerved by the stoic wooden guardian. Seeing Harry Luna’s eyes sparkled brilliantly and faster than he could register, swapped partners. But rather than dancing in the centre and Harry somewhat taking the lead Luna was more than happy to, pulling him by the hand and skipping along the outskirts of the dance floor in little circles, all the while spinning them both around with crossed arms. It took all of Harry’s concentration to ensure he wouldn’t fall flat on his face.

“Luna! Aren’t you dizzy?!”

Reading his lips she shook her head, only spinning faster. He was at risk of being permanently dizzy for life until they were unexpectedly stopped by Ginny. Having double vision it took longer than he’d like to admit for everything to cease moving when he wasn’t. Luna didn’t look affected in the slightest, swept up in the atmosphere much like him. He was thankful he’d only been sampling punch and hadn’t eaten, as of yet.

“If you spin much faster Harry’s going to collapse! Then how will he get a dance with his future boyfriend?” Ginny’s tone took on a teasing note and to Harry’s surprise, Luna agreed. Nodding silently she released him and once sure for herself that he wouldn’t collapse, practically floated away.

It wasn’t until in the middle of finding himself dancing with Ginny, that her earlier words registered.

“B-Boyfriend?!” Sputtering he couldn’t finish the sentence he had planned, growing breathless as he hadn’t once taken a break since starting.

Lifting Harry’s arm to spin beneath it, he could almost swear he saw a glimmer of the twins in
Ginny’s smirk. “You know who I mean, it’s so obvious. You fancy each other so it’s going to happen.”

“Yeah, I fancy him,” Harry admitted, seeing no point in trying to dodge the topic. “But I’m not sure he fancies me.”

Glaring fiercely, Ginny reached up with her spare hand, to flick him on the forehead, hard.

“Ow! Why’d you do that?” He complained, eyes watering slightly. Rubbing his forehead, learning later on that she might have dented his skull wouldn’t come as a huge shock.

“Because right now you’re denser than Ron and I didn’t think that was possible! From what I’ve heard with you he’s flirtier than all of the female students put together! Do you really think he’d act like that with a friend only?”

Ginny made a valid point. But still, he found it hard to believe that someone like his idea of perfection would be so interested. He’d thought about having a conversation along those lines with him but the more he replayed every possible scenario, the worse his mental outcome became. He wasn’t sure what to do, stuck in a limbo essentially of his own creation. It was almost agonising and knew at some point, there had to be a change.

Ginny didn’t press the matter further, hoping she’d given Harry something to think about but thankfully, nowhere near enough to dampen his mood. Honestly in her opinion the sooner the inevitable happened, the happier they’d both be.

As the only other one with wings in the room, Hermione stood out, not dancing wildly but just at her own pace. Theodore has for a short while, admitting that dancing wasn’t much for him and offered to look after her bow and arrow for a few minutes. She wasn’t one for dancing either really, but the current mood was infectious and moving along to the rhythm, she found to be enjoyable.

Shaking his head softly, Harry wondered why he didn’t walk over to Hermione rather than do a cross combination of sidestepping and sliding his way over like some sort of undiscovered species. But it was enough for her to notice him and arch one brow in amusement, so he achieved something at least. With a few more students taking a break the noise has dimmed somewhat, enough so Harry could give his voice box a rest from shouting conversations rather than talking.

“Enjoying yourself?”

Hermione nodded happily. “Even if this was organised by Dumbledore, nothing’s gone pear-shaped yet. But then I haven’t exactly run into Ron either. I’ve been unintentionally avoiding him.”

With all the tension between the three of them he caused, it was no surprise. “So, you’re not going to shoot me? We might be best friends but we’re also enemies!”
Hermione shrugged, pretending to look disappointed. “Theodore is looking after it for a few minutes, I’ll be leaving for a drink soon. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself with you.” At that, she gave him a warm smile of approval.

“Yeah, she forgave me thankfully. Not sure I could survive the rest of Hogwarts otherwise. Hermione.”

At his serious voice, she snapped to attention, frowning at him with concern.

“We’re having a dance, just a small one. Are your wings for decoration only?”

The sudden topic change had Hermione reeling, but then she had a sneaking suspicion. “In theory, they should function like wings, but I haven’t tested them.”

“Well, only one way to find out!”

“Harry, don’t you dare-“

“Here we go!” Giving a cheer and gripping her hands in his, he hovered several feet above the air.

“Ahhh! Harry?! I said in THEORY!” Frantically Hermione set her panic aside, gaining shaky control of her wings and at least, was somewhat confident that she wouldn’t fall if released.

He’d no doubt be in for the lecture of a lifetime later on but if Hermione said, in theory, it should work, chances are it did. He wanted to use this time to have fun, with his friends especially. Both of them would never be professional dancers but as promised, for a short while, they swayed in mid-air to their own music. Bit by bit, he could see Hermione enjoy herself just as much, albeit with a little trepidation.

As he carefully lowered them to the ground on the carpet, Hermione inhaled deeply. “That was fun.” She reluctantly admitted. “But that’s enough excitement for now.”

He could understand. However watching her leave, he wasn’t quite ready to stop just yet. Casting a cooling charm he continued and in a way, had the feeling of reclaiming some of his childhood that he’d sadly missed out on.

The students once knew him as a typical Gryffindor, usually seen as part of the golden trio and if not that, explosive arguments with Professor Snape and a general ball of angst and broodiness. But now it couldn’t be more different and by the time Harry was truly out of breath, the Weird Sisters had called for a break. Not only for them to partake in refreshments as well, but some of the students had questions for them. He must have danced with nearly every female student in the school and at
several points, alongside Neville who moved surprisingly smoothly for a Spriggan.

Taking a seat he allowed himself to rest a bit, drinking in the cheerful atmosphere that was a far cry from the impending clash of Dark vs Light. He wished that these moments could happen more frequently but given time and with fewer issues plaguing both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds, perhaps his wish would become reality.
Together at Last

Chapter Summary

Nothing had gone wrong so far, which Harry classed as a good thing. He was able to speak with some people and overall, was content with how everything went. But then, something happened which he didn't expect in the least.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry lets himself go, dancing without a care in the world for that time and during it, Alistair once again captures his attention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was only when the music started, that Alistair came to realise that he wasn’t as well informed with the modern world as first thought. Things could change within a matter of weeks, let alone the many years he had isolated himself from the outside world.

He hadn’t really taken notice of tonight’s entertainment, hearing the group’s name and as anyone surely would, assume that the Weird Sisters were a group of female musicians. It was when the lead singer opened their mouth, that he was faced with a conundrum.

The lead vocalist’s voice sounded male and upon closer inspection by Alistair, their physical appearance and chemistry matched this. But then, why?

Brow furrowing, his puzzlement showed clearly. Inspecting them in a way which suggested they held the answer to all of life’s mysteries, he wondered if his colleague would know.

“Minerva. If they are men, then why does their group name indicate otherwise? Sisters are female family relations.” He didn’t even try to mask his bewilderment.

In truth, she was probably the worst person to ask, any student would be able to provide better information.
“I don’t know.” She admitted, a frown similar to his own. “They’re a rock band, I believe. At least, I remember Albus telling me so at the Yule Ball when first booking them.”

Alistair was far out of his element here. “Which kind? Sedimentary, Metamorphic or Igneous?”

It was Minerva’s turn to be confused. “I don’t quite follow.”

Alistair promised himself that once he had the chance, he would acquire knowledge on all that he’d missed through books, or asking students himself. It was on very rare occasions that feelings of stupidity arose, but this moment was one of them. Giving a brief overview of rock formations, her confusion cleared.

“Oh, not that kind of rock. This is referring to the music style.” Minerva didn’t voice her surprise, expecting a young man such as Alistair to be more aware of such music. But then it was just a reminder to not judge a book by its cover or in this case, by age.

Though she didn’t say as much, Alistair could easily read what went through Minerva’s mind but with music, he hadn’t actually ventured much outside of classical though had heard other styles here and there in his past travels. Rock wasn’t one of them so no doubt it had developed during the time that he wasn’t travelling. He still didn’t quite understand, but perhaps they had based the musical genre on rock formation? The music itself was incredibly loud and quite harsh on the ears, much like some rocks were to touch. He didn’t dislike it, simply found himself unused to such sounds.

The dancing accompanied with it as well. There seemed to be no structure or certain rules to remember, each individual moving how they wished to and receiving enjoyment from that. He found the majority of students and even some younger Ministry members had taken to throwing their arms skyward and jumping on the spot repeatedly. As someone so used to formal dancing that it was second nature, this informal setting was an entirely new experience.

Harry was someone who reminded him of an adult long before his time, skipping out on the joys of childhood and arriving straight to responsibilities. If he hadn’t already known, he would have never guessed that he was sixteen, having the aura of someone far older. But to see him among others and truly acting his age brought the greatest joy to his heart.

Distanced enough from the noise to be just about audible, Minerva voiced his thoughts.

“It is rare to see Potter like this. The poor boy has had nothing but hardship the moment Albus left him on their doorstep.” Her disapproval could be heard clearly and for the first time that night, Alistair’s attention remained solely on Minerva.

“He was left on a doorstep?” He asked incredulously, unsure if he heard right. The finer details of just how Harry came to be with his late relatives wasn’t a topic discussed.
She looked ashamed. “It was not my finest moment. I assured myself that if he awakened they would hear his cries and come to investigate but for all any of us knew that night, he may not have been found until morning.”

Alistair was aware that feeling even a little panicked over something that happened a long time ago was irrational, but he couldn’t help it. Harry was safe now, watching him among his peers and dancing was visual proof. But then, the heated, silent anger. Anger was a particular emotion that he disliked, but then he doubted that anyone enjoyed feeling this way. However, this was certainly a situation to be angry over. Leaving a child unable to defend themselves on a doorstep, where the night was most likely cold and anything could have happened within those hours? He simply couldn’t understand it. He refrained from asking if they’d considered a warming charm to somewhat negate this foolish action. But then again if the answer wasn’t what he wanted to hear, he didn’t wish for this room to suffer noticeable heat damage, repairable or not. Most of his anger was directed towards Dumbledore, seeing just how persuasive he could be. Influence via magical means couldn’t be discounted either but either way, Harry’s life could have been lost long before he had the chance to live.

“Thankfully, those days are long gone by.”

“Indeed they are.”

Just after Minerva’s verbal agreement, Alistair’s hearing attuned into a sound that wasn’t human. Tilting his head up and standing out starkly against the darkness was a familiar owl, able to see her just as clearly even at a distance. For a moment her gaze flickered below, no doubt seeing Harry but straight after, made a beeline for Alistair.

This was something else that he couldn’t quite understand, finding that most animals seemed to like him, in particular, Hedwig. Harry informed him she had a particular fondness for bacon rind so ever since then and if he had a spare moment, he’d pay her a visit. Once Harry was made aware of this he’d jokingly said that she’d like him more now, both knew where her loyalty lay.

Raising his arm, he offered Hedwig a perch while she was there. Taking the offer and with a contented hoot, she settled there. Out of consideration, he muffled the sound around her.

“Ah, hello! May I say that you are looking lovely this evening?”

In response, her hoot seemed to say, ‘I always am.’ Accepting the gentle touch of his fingers stroking her breast, her wide yellow eyes regarded him expectantly.

A delighted chuckle escaping him, Alistair knew what she wanted. "Of course. Perhaps keep it a secret between you and I from Harry, with just how much that I am feeding you?"

While he was aware that Hedwig could hardly converse back, Alistair saw her as a great listener.
Since the Draught of Living Death incident she had made a steady recovery, appetite unchanged. As anything could be requested with a thought if not there, he took Hedwig to the table nearest where some bacon rind appeared. Removing one silken glove to pick it up, he'd barely had it near her for a moment before it was gone.

Alistair was sure if possible, she'd convey her enjoyment with small sounds of pleasure but once finished and in thanks, she did so in the form of giving his fingers an affectionate nip. She didn't stay any longer, once more taking flight and returning to the Owlery.

Glove back in place, Alistair watched her leave with faint amusement. It seemed she wanted to see the festivities for herself, perhaps check on Harry simultaneously, all while going to the one available person who would feed her without hesitation.

Though he was ever observant, it would take the most clueless of individuals to not notice Hagrid and his sudden decision to join the general masses on the dance floor. While his bushy beard hid most facial features, his warm dark eyes held great enjoyment. Some students gave him a wide berth, others deciding to join in and one, who he came to realise was Lilah, coming to sit on top of his shoulder. He was glad to see her in good spirits, the past few weeks difficult.

“Professor Lothaire, dance with us!”

Distracted from the sight of Hagrid dancing, he was met with a group of girls he knew well. While some were in different houses, the one thing they all had in common was giggling, particularly if he was nearby with a gentle reminder to stay focused on their work rather than communicating among themselves and usually, the chosen topic about him.

After Harry’s visit, Alistair began to want to experience things once again and if he let this unique opportunity slip by, he might not get another chance. Accepting their invitation and politely taking his leave of Minerva, Alistair joined students and Ministry workers alike, moving to their own personal rhythm and though initially out of his comfort zone, he adapted to things far easier. It was only in the centre of this crowd, that he had an idea. Once tonight’s planned entertainment was over, he would enact it.

Sitting down, Harry thought that would allow his heartbeat to settle but instead, it kept up a steady rhythm. Wiping the sweat from his face and outside of the crowd, he watched the rest, eating something before he lost the chance to.

Harry’s whirling thoughts were only proven right because Alistair’s smile should be illegal with the way that it affected him and to his surprise, he joined the dancing crowd.

Harry wouldn’t be surprised if he could dance as he seemed the type, but this kind wasn’t what he had in mind. While a small part of him would love to join in again, most of him was screaming to rest his knackered body because he’d never been on the move so much in his life without a break.
Quidditch he trained for, dancing not so much. But then again, dancing with Alistair? He wasn’t sure his heart could take it. He’d trip over his own feet or a number of various other embarrassing things. Heart still racing he watched him sway his body just so, cape swishing with him.

He couldn’t look away but then, he had no reason to. More than once his eyes naturally strayed downwards and ensuring he didn’t project this particular thought, admired his arse.

If it wasn’t for the fact that Harry then saw something unbelievable, he probably would have continued to stare shamelessly.

He hadn’t seen Professor Snape so far until now, eyes widening in disbelief.

“You’re not wearing black!”

Closing his mouth immediately after, Harry realised that probably came across a bit more impolite than intended. Already looking to be in a foul mood his change of robes didn’t affect how effortlessly he swooped across the floor, pinning Harry with a glare.

“Sorry.” Harry offered, sincerely but still unable to hide his surprise.

Severus let it slide. Albus thought, in his infinite wisdom, that the ability to take points or give detention on Halloween wasn’t ‘in line with celebratory spirit.’ So had taken it upon himself to ban all Professors from doing either. Of course, he voiced his protests, but was answered with the usual, "It will be fine, my boy."

On no less than three occasions, Severus had spotted Seamus Finnegan trying to spike the punch bowls and every time Severus confiscated them, miraculously another bottle appeared. How on Earth was he doing it? The Elves answered to no one in relation to this but their master and he doubted Albus had sanctioned alcohol. He was itching to put him in detention and that was just some of it. Dark corners they may be, but students engaging in inappropriate acts would not escape him, no matter how many privacy charms were in place.

Relieved that his words hadn’t earned detention, Severus arched a single eyebrow.

“A Demon, Potter? How fitting.”

Ordinarily, Harry might have taken offence, but thinking of the countless times he’d gotten himself into trouble with the man across from him, he didn’t protest. “May as well show my true colours on Halloween.”

The barest hints of a smirk graced Severus’ face at that. He’d never admit as much, but he found Potter’s spell work to be mildly impressive. As for him, Potter wasn’t the only one to take notice of
his changed wardrobe and while his glares worked on most, Minerva had expressed her delight in various ways to the point where he was seriously considering hiding catnip in her office. He blamed a long moment of foolishness when deciding to attend in these robes, given to him by Lothaire, of all people.

15th October

“Severus, I must speak to you about a matter of utmost urgency.”

Those were the exact words spoken by his colleague, the moment he received a polite yet precise knock on his office door. While he wasn’t in the mood for Lothaire’s irritatingly cheerful presence, he didn’t think any variation of go away would deter him so reluctantly, allowed him entry.

“Well? What is it?” He asked, impatient.

“Do you plan to wear your regular teaching robes for All Hallows’ Eve?”

“I fail to see how that is any of your concern, or how this classifies as urgent!” He snapped, mood turning sour.

Not faltering for a moment, Alistair took that answer to mean no, as he suspected. Returning a shrunken wrapped package back to its original size, Severus narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

Placing it on his office desk, Alistair provided a brief explanation. “They are robes, you may wear them if you wish.”

“I am not a charity case, Lothaire. No doubt you believe a change of clothing is imperative for me due to their quality.” Sneering, his gaze became icy cold.

Clothing itself was a particularly unpleasant topic for Severus, whether he vocally admitted as much or not. He didn’t come from a wealthy family, their clothing quality poor and on several occasions, the late Potter and Black frequently targeted him for this. When older he rectified this, purchasing clothing which was practical and of acceptable quality but still, the damage was done. Indirectly, pathetic as it may be, this was a reminder of those days.

“Forgive me, that was not my intention. See it as a token of friendship.”

Severus could detect false sincerity from a great distance and yet, there was none to be seen from his younger colleague. Why on earth would he want to be friends?
Sensing his confusion even if not shown, Alistair didn’t hide his true thoughts, allowing every emotion to appear.

“Unlike most, I had not heard of you before taking on the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor here, so this has allowed me to build my own opinion. Severus, I hold nothing but the greatest respect for you. As a Potions Master, there are many who are not as pained thanks to your work. I would not allow the negative views of others to cloud my judgement and therefore I would like to build a friendship if you would permit it. I enjoy the brief discussions that we have had thus far and I would be interested to hear your opinions on other future topics.”

Pausing for a moment, his tone was a little softer. “I shall take my leave.” He wouldn’t pressure Severus or stay any longer, not wanting the mood to turn awkward. One way or another, he would receive his answer. Saying this he left, closing the door behind him.

For a while, Severus remained motionless, as silence settled once more. The choices that he’d made throughout life ensured that he’d seen the very worst of what humanity had to offer and therefore, firmly believed there wasn't much out there that could shock him.

However, at this moment, the feeling within him was undoubtedly shock or at least surprise. No one, not even the small few that he considered friends, had an overly positive opinion of him. Though, those that he considered friends no doubt saw him as a useful connection for his abilities. The one exception to this being Minerva, who had expressed her remorse for the dismissive way she'd treated him in relation to The Marauders' bullying. She was too much of a Gryffindor to ever see him in a light which would help to further her own position. But even then, her negative views on Slytherin house were plain to see.

While Severus didn't take part in mindless chatting, he listened silently and mostly everyone forgot he was there. Lothaire's home country was Romania, explaining his exotic features and on top of this home schooled, so completely away from the idea of schools and houses as a whole.

He knew he came across as unpleasant but the more his caustic personality showed, the more it seemed to practically bounce off the younger man and encourage a brighter smile. He couldn't understand him or his irritating constant cheer. Without shame, he could say he was downright rude and yet, he wanted to be friends?

Running every single test he could to check for unwanted spells or even potions, he came up with nothing. Expecting it to be nothing less than a joke and the robes themselves to be utterly ridiculous, he debated with the idea of simply throwing them away but then, he always could afterwards once he realised they were nothing more than a prank.

Prepared for any possible resulting situation, Severus carefully opened the package and immediately after, distanced himself. His suspicion didn't lessen at all, even when seeing that the robes were far from garishly coloured. In fact, they were the deepest green, almost black unless someone happened to look a little closer. There had to be some subtle trick that he was missing, as much as this thought frustrated him. Perhaps if he saw the entire thing, what he was missing would be more obvious.
Adjusting the robe so it filled the entirety of his office desk, Severus inspected it closely. It seemed harmless and once again there was nothing there that shouldn't be.

Smooth and silky to the touch, it suggested that this was a robe he certainly couldn't afford on his less than average wage per annum, even if its appearance wasn't ostentatious in the slightest. Lucius’ robes were designed purely to display his wealth, a lot of unnecessary decoration for this purpose no matter whether it was a social visit or a formal occasion and it was enough for Severus to be permanently sneering on the inside. He loathed clothing and to a certain extent people, who used such fashion for the unspoken fact of 'I'm richer than you, so, therefore, I am better.' He would rather sell his soul to the Potter family than ever wear such a thing.

But this robe was different. He preferred more plain robes, under no circumstances any bright colours or extra decoration. Practical, moderately comfortable and most importantly, easy to move in. If forced to, Severus would purchase a more formal robe but if he was able to get away with his regular teaching robes, he would. The material itself was inexpensive, some of the more experimental potions meaning that an unexpected explosion here or there wasn't uncommon and his younger years, sometimes stained the robes he wore. Since then the material was made damage proof by him, but sticking to the same robes for convenience and cost.

While Severus would never choose such robes for himself, to his utter annoyance, he liked them. He never liked any gifts that were clothing. It was almost an unwritten rule by this point. There was nothing overly fancy about them and in fact, loosely resembled the robes he normally wore with exception of the different material and colour.

He liked something that the most irritatingly sincere and cheerful man he'd ever encountered had given him, without asking for anything in return. While he now believed that the robes themselves were harmless, the likelihood of him not asking for something if, hypothetically, he decided to attend in them was low. But that was something he was prepared for. Severus was convinced that too many years around Albus had loosened screws and he'd officially lost his mind because a part of him wanted to accept the robes and therefore, the offer of supposed friendship.

For a long time, longer than he perhaps realised, Severus thought deeply and eventually, had an answer. He'd taken big risks before, the majority of them life-threatening and with far more consequences than he could see with this.

Wondering if this would be another regret for his extensive list, Severus didn't dispose of the robe. Picking it up he carefully stored it away. Whether he would wear it on the day, however, was another question entirely.

In the end, Severus decided to, thankful that Lothaire didn't comment on it like some students and most of his colleagues. However, his blinding smile in response was nauseating enough that he had to look away, sticking to the darkest areas of the room and while he couldn't give detentions or take points, he would be on the lookout the following day for even the slightest infractions, to make up for it.
At risk of more detentions than he could reasonably handle, Harry didn’t comment on the robes but had a sneaking suspicion that his sudden adventures in the fashion department weren't Professor Snape's idea. It was interesting to see him in something different than all black. Unexpected, but different. However a change of clothing didn't mean a change in personality, the new cape still billowing as his strides were filled with purpose. It was as if he had an invisible force field around him, adults and students alike quickly moving out of his way and though Harry couldn't hear the words to whatever unfortunate student had earned his wrath, no doubt they'd stop.

Before he could react, something materialised before him. A body with great bulging eyes with teeth so large and sharp, their lips couldn't close properly.

"Fuck!" Harry jumped out of his skin, wand in hand and only halted mid-motion when a familiar voice emerged from the creature.

"Wotcher Harry! Did I scare you?"

Exhaling loudly he closed his eyes, securing his wand once more and allowing his frantically beating heart to slow. Upon reopening them he was met with Tonks, back to normal and with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Raising an eyebrow as if to say, what do you think? Tonks took the seat across from him. "Just arrived a few minutes ago. Kingsley's here and Arthur's somewhere. Amelia is as well but she's not staying for long. I think she came to see her niece and appease Dumbledore but now's a good time to set something up while she's still here. Thought I'd let you know."

That was an opportunity Harry would definitely take, distracted by Tonks' next words. "Where's that hot Professor? Ooh, there he is. I see why you sat there Harry, nice view."

"He started dancing when I'd already sat down but yeah, the view's great."

It then occurred to him that he'd probably been a bit too honest, flushing promptly. Slinging a casual arm around his shoulder, she didn't mind in the least. "That's it, be honest with yourself. Is he single? You should ask him out."

Actually, that was a point. He didn't know if Alistair was single, it wasn't exactly a topic of conversation that had arisen but then surely he must be because their interactions had been flirtatious more than once. Deciding that yes he was, that didn't change anything because Harry would almost rather go back in time and repeat his first five years than ask and have the possibility of being rejected.

Harry shook his head sadly. "I can't. Basically, I don't have the balls to. I know someone else could
in the meantime but..

He couldn't explain himself further, but she understood. "You're not hung up over the fact he's a Professor surely? It's frowned upon but not illegal. You're at the age of consent in the muggle world and only a year away here. He's what, in his mid-twenties? Take it from me Harry older men are better. I'm sure he could show you a thing or two."

Waggling her eyebrows, she gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. "Kingsley's waving me over. Just think about it, you might be surprised and from what I've seen, I think he likes you. Epic costume by the way."

Thoughts whirling, Harry managed a smile in response. "Cheers Tonks, see you later."

Once she left, Harry didn't waste time. Having caught his breath and rested enough he headed in the direction Tonks had gestured to. On the way he checked for Dumbledore, not wanting him to see or suspect a thing. With how many people there were he couldn't see exactly, which caused a tendril of unease to unfurl inside him.

Removed slightly from everyone else Harry spotted Madam Bones and to his great displeasure, Mad-Eye. That was someone he could definitely do without but for today, he only wanted to mention he needed to discuss something at her earliest convenience.

The displeasure was mutual apparently, Moody not doing anything to hide his disdain. Remaining neutral and not returning eye contact, he approached her. "Madam Bones, may I have a word?"

Eyeing Harry appraisingly, her eyes imperceptibly narrowed and in his opinion, the monocle only added to her overall sharpness.

"Very well." She addressed Mad-Eye. "I will be gone momentarily." Giving her a nod and Harry a suspicious glance, they moved to an emptier part of the room and without Harry having to do so, a number of Privacy charms were put in place. Unconsciously, he breathed a sigh of relief. Surely even Dumbledore wouldn't be stupid enough to try and break through privacy measures Amelia Bones herself had put in place.

With no one else to see, she showed Harry a small smile. "Mr Potter, Susan has told me of this 'Defence Association.' and how useful it is. With how lacklustre some of your previous Defence Professors have been, I am pleased to know that this year she has good support from both this year's Professor and yourself. Thank you."

Not expecting that, Harry floundered for a moment, until he could formulate an acceptable sentence. "We need it, ma'am. Otherwise, we won't be prepared for any possible threats."

While the optimist in her wanted to disagree, her realistic side was stronger. "Indeed you will."
Instantaneously, her expression shifted. "I have already been informed by Auror Tonks that you wish to speak with me."

That she already knew made it easier for him. "I want to press charges against several people."

Amelia suspected as much, seeing no other reason for why he'd contact her.

"Who?" She asked, planning to make a note of them once back at her office. It gave her a reason to leave despite arriving not long ago, the music giving her a headache.

"Dolores Umbridge, Alastor Moody and Albus Dumbledore."

To her credit, she showed no outward surprise whatsoever. "Very well, I will contact you at a later date for an appointment, so that we may discuss this. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Cancelling all privacy charms she returned to Moody and after a brief discussion, swiftly left. Hopefully, whenever he had the chance to talk this through, it would mean that those who had done him and others wrong, would pay for it.

Near one of the arched windows, was a familiar figure who he hadn't seen since leaving the train station.

"Mr Weasley!" Giving him a wave, Harry jogged over. Bathed in moonlight, he looked more tired than usual and he couldn't help but feel concerned. Apparently, he was unable to hide this, the man giving him a strained smile in response. "The Ministry is busier than ever, not just my department. But I've done enough overtime to give myself a little break."

God, Harry wished he could help. He had the feeling without seeing for himself, that Mr Weasley wasn't treated very well, no doubt because of his obsession with all things muggle. While he couldn't do anything about his work situation, there were other ways in which he could. Saving that thought for later, Harry leaned against the wall. "At least you can get away for a bit. Have you seen Ginny's costume?"

All traces of tiredness gone for the moment, a proud smile showed. "I have, she looks all grown up. You too Harry, you're looking better than ever."

"I feel it as well." He replied honestly, eyes once again drawn to Alistair. Following his gaze, Mr Weasley's tone turned thoughtful.

"Your new Professor's a charismatic fellow, I had a brief conversation earlier. What do you think of him, Harry?"
Somehow, he didn't think a gorgeous hunk of deliciousness was quite the answer he was looking for. Harry spoke honestly, at least from a Student/Professor perspective. "He's great, takes a unique approach to learning and believes more in practising for ourselves than books and the theory behind it all."

Mr Weasley nodded approvingly. "That's a good attitude to take. While theory is useful to know the inner workings of a spell, it won't protect you in a tight spot."

Harry couldn't agree more, particularly with personal experience. Glad that he'd stopped by to talk for a bit, Harry took the opportunity to mingle some more. Since the overall vibe in the room was positive, most otherwise unapproachable might listen to him. He didn't count Pansy Parkinson among them, having tried to settle a truce with her earlier in the year which was promptly rejected.

The mere thought summoned her existence apparently, Draco alongside her in robes of ice blue. Ordinarily, he might have struck up a conversation, on far better terms with him than Ron at this point but not wanting to deal with her unpleasantness, settled for a subtle nod aimed his way.

There were fewer people on the dance floor now, most at the tables for refreshments and at one of them with chairs facing the wall, he could see his friends and their partners. Spotting him before the others, Neville gave a wave. "Harry! Saved you a seat."

"Thanks. Enjoying yourselves?" Receiving various nods, he allowed himself to bask in this moment and over all too soon, as The Weird Sisters left precisely half an hour before today was due to end.

While the band was preparing to leave, Hermione spoke up, amused yet exasperated. “Ron earned Professor Snape’s ire earlier. Predictably, he confronted us over my choice of partner and Professor Snape basically told him to mind his own business, or detention.”

“Maybe that’s who he went after, I had a brief conversation with him or more like, dodged a detention myself for blurting out that he wasn’t wearing black.”

Lucky that, maybe he was in a good mood. Not that Harry would ever be able to tell though.

The others echoed his thoughts, expecting that with tonight’s entertainment now gone, nothing particularly eventful would happen.

With the general chatter and winding down mood, Harry believed the same. While he’d enjoyed himself tonight, a part of him was disappointed that it was over too soon but mainly, unable to spend time with Alistair. Before he had any longer to reflect on that thought, music of a very different kind elegantly washed over all voices. Caught off guard Harry and many others in the room searched for the source, looking towards the recently vacated stage.
In place of humans, were what looked like spirits. Harry would say ghosts but in truth, he wasn’t sure, each one see through but having a faint tinge of colour to them. They were vaguely humanoid in shape, with features so faint, they may as well be a blur.

It was a spiritual orchestra, for lack of better wording. To his untrained ears, the start of this music seemed to be played flawlessly and though he’d never heard this particular piece before, the rhythm was unmistakably a waltz. If it wasn’t for the Yule Ball and having to open it with a formal dance, he wouldn’t have known otherwise.

Feeling a nudge in his side, he looked at Ginny. Seeing her excitement, he frowned in confusion. "What?"

With an overly exaggerated gesture, she turned her head to face the other side of the room, following suit, he couldn’t believe his eyes.

With perfectly even strides and his cape flowing gently behind, the sound of his footsteps could be faintly heard. Coming to a stop in front of him, Alistair's body bent ever so slightly, arm extended and palm facing upwards. His shimmering sunset eyes glistened with a light of their own, Harry the only one able to see their true colour.

"May I have this dance?"

All eyes were on them and Harry tried desperately not to panic. This was a formal dance, he thought formal dances wouldn’t be a thing today? But judging by the reactions he could see, they all found this just as unexpected. It certainly put him on the spot a bit, but hadn't he thought more than once before that he'd have liked the opportunity to? But shit, he couldn't do formal dancing! But refusing would be even worse. His gut instinct kicked in, usually only showing itself in fight or flight situations but if there was one thing he'd learned, it was to trust it. Right now, it gave him the feeling that if he refused, he would regret it, deeply.

God, he couldn't refuse that face either. It would be like kicking a puppy.

'You've got this Harry. You've faced Voldemort and his Death Eaters more than once, dangerous tasks in the Triwizard Tournament and a bloody Basilisk of all things. What's a dance after all that?'

Hoping that he wouldn't mess up too badly, he touched the palm of Alistair's hand with his own, giving a smile tinged with nerves. He wasn't sure he could give a verbal answer, but this action spoke louder than words. With enough confidence for the both of them, little to no strength was put into the arm which swiftly pulled Harry to his feet. For the past half an hour at the very least, his heart had kept up a fairly steady rhythm whether it was fright at the hands of Tonks or a dazzling smile by an equally dazzling Vampire.

Harry could feel himself beginning to sweat, begging with his sweat glands to at least hold off until after this moment. He'd been in some tricky situations but never in his life had he felt so nervous.
Arriving at the centre of the dance floor, he forcefully kicked his brain into gear. It was two years ago now, McGonagall's instructions a hazy memory and in this case, Alistair would be the lead.

**Chin parallel to the floor, a straight back and raised head. Bend the upper body, relax the knees. Extend right arm, bend elbow slightly.**

Whether he recalled the correct words remained to be seen but this time, he would try. Before he didn't care enough because he hated dancing, being constantly exhausted and stressed enough that this was simply added stress. But still, he'd learned with the rest and a passable attempt was good enough for him.

But this was so much different. He wanted to do well and above all, wanted to enjoy himself doing so. Apparently, he recalled her instructions correctly, though from a different point of view. This also meant different movements, but he tried not to think about that too much.

"You are in good hands," Alistair soothed, speaking low enough for only them to hear. "Do not concern yourself with the details, simply enjoy the moment."

Easier said than done, coming from someone who clearly had years of experience, but he trusted him. Inhaling to exhale gently, he simply let himself go, at the hands of the one who would support him.

And then, they began to move.

He tried to at least not look down and definitely didn't look at the sizeable crowd either, or any shred of confidence would evaporate quickly. He did remember the leading steps and with it, required him to watch his partner's steps at the time. Still, he stood on Parvati's foot more than once during the opening dance despite that, but he allowed his earlier memories of this to guide him. He had the advantage of being happier and much healthier this time, reassured by the subtle squeeze of Alistair's hand interlocked with his own alongside the arm just beneath his.

Listening intently to the music, there was something inherently haunting about it. Chilling, yet beautiful enough to tug at the heartstrings of most there. Harry enjoyed music, the rare times he got to listen to any from the darkness of his cupboard and while not a connoisseur, could appreciate all different kinds. The melody itself seemed to surround them and with it, helped Harry to follow Alistair's lead.

Not an inch of the dance floor wasted, Harry matched him step for step and while he didn't find it easy in the least, it was the most fun he'd had in a long while so naturally, a smile rose to his lips. Part way through the music, he had the confidence to glance up and caught Alistair watching him. The moonlight guided their path, far away from the others for the hint of pink on his cheeks to remain unnoticeable, with his next words.

"That is the smile that I have been waiting to see. It is my pleasure and privilege to dance with the
most handsome man present tonight."

Harry disagreed strongly but accepted the compliment for what it was. "T-Thanks."

Of course in this situation, his voice had to crack, throat dry but no longer as nervous. He didn't dwell on this, however, allowing both the company he shared and the music to carry him away and soon, forgot that they weren't the only ones there.

As the music reached a crescendo, so did the pace of their dance, speeding up just a fraction and in Harry's excitement, forgot about the wings at his back which almost seemed to spread joyfully and in that sense, dancing their own tune alongside the graceful flutter of his dancing partner's cape.

It really was unfair that Alistair seemed to be good at everything, Dancing more natural to him than walking, at least from Harry's perspective. He'd never seen anyone move so gracefully yet effortlessly before and if he wasn't a part of this dance, he would be alongside the others to study him in awe. Whenever he was at the risk of stumbling, Alistair was there to support him.

While the sight in itself was unusual, to most watching it was more the fact that the pair of them looked visually perfect together. Students had asked Professors to dance with them throughout the evening and into the night, but this was the first time a Professor had asked a student. While one or two of the more conservative members in the room held faint disapproval considering the relationship, most saw no problem as there was no inappropriate conduct or more physical contact than needed, simply what was required as part of a Waltz.

"Oh, it's so beautiful!" Luna gushed, starry-eyed and not taking her eyes off them for a moment. The romantic side of Hermione, agreed, admittedly in a similar state as she sighed blissfully. Ginny, however, had thoughts beyond the dance.

"I bet you five galleons they'll be a couple before October 31st ends." She muttered to Neville, confident.

Shaken from the semi-trance he was in, Neville frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"You've seen everyone's reactions here. It's obvious this was planned by Alistair alone and no one else knew. Harry's not confident enough to admit out loud he likes him so he's taken the initiative. Once this dance ends, at some point tonight they're going to go off somewhere and he'll confess. The opportunity's too good to pass up."

Neville made a compromise. "Tell you what. If you're right, I'll buy us all a round of Butterbeer the next time we're at Hogsmeade. Sound good?"
"You're on!" Ginny raised her hand, giving him a high five. She could almost taste that Butterbeer now, only two days to the weekend.

Gradually, the music began to slow again, growing quieter. Lifting his arm Alistair brought Harry underneath for a spin and to finish, extended their free arms either side, accompanied with a small bow.

Holy shit, he did it. He did it and didn't once step on Alistair's feet, trip over or generally make an idiot of himself. He probably looked as though he were fumbling along but still, leaps and bounds better than the Yule Ball.

Among the uproarious cheers and applause, a familiar voice spoke within his mind.

"Harry, there is something that I wish to discuss with you. In five minutes, open this door to the outside."

With a subtle gesture of his head, Harry followed his line of sight to a door near one of the dark corners, one of which he swore wasn't there before.

"Ok."

Alistair released his hand and with one last smile, left the dance floor.

Half dazed Harry returned to his seat, receiving a clap on the back from Neville and overly aware of Ginny's knowing smirk.

"Harry, I had no idea you could dance like that." Sniffling slightly, Hermione found herself holding back tears. It was moving, physically and spiritually. She'd never seen anything quite like it.

"I did ok then?" He asked, curious how everyone else found it.

Ginny threw her arms in the air enthusiastically, nearly knocking Neville out in the process. "Ok? Bloody Brilliant! You do know most if not everyone is this room is incredibly jealous of you right now?"

"I'm trying not to look at anyone else." Harry swallowed, knowing all too well that Alistair has his own little fan club, both male and female students.

Luna remained starry-eyed, in her own world and softly humming. They gave off such a happy, positive energy that she was almost drunk off it. She was so happy, she believed that if needed, she could use that memory for her Patronus.
Low enough that only his friends could hear, Harry continued. "He asked me to meet him outside in five minutes."

He missed Ginny's knowing smirk, as Neville did the mental calculation of how much money he'd need on Saturday.

While he wondered what Alistair wanted to speak with him about, all of his friends at that moment, knew exactly what. Sensing that by now five minutes had passed Harry rose to his feet, heading for the door.

Standing beside his colleagues, Severus barely held back the urge to roll his eyes. A Mandrake would be quieter than Hagrid, blowing his nose noisily into the hand towel sized handkerchief. Any words were lost within the loud sobs that almost caused the ground to shake in their intensity.

With a smaller handkerchief, Minerva dabbed at her eyes.

"Pull yourself together woman!" He spoke harsher than usual, scowling as a room full of overly emotional fools put him on edge.

"In all my years I have yet to see a more wonderful sight. Oh, If I were any younger.."

No. He was NOT having this conversation with Minerva. He refused. Severus had limits and this was one of them. He didn't want to know where this conversation would lead and if continued, he would have to put Mr Finnegan's confiscated alcohol to good use. Seeing no reason to stay any longer he left his colleagues behind, seeking the escape of his office which provided sanity. Something of which everyone else seemed to lack, in his opinion.

Composing herself, Minerva stretched her arm, unable to pat Hagrid's shoulder so settled for his upper arm. "We were all similarly moved by this unexpected performance. Even Severus, but under threat of death, he would not admit to such a thing."

"Beautiful. Jus' beautiful."

And then, renewed sobbing. He'd cry himself out eventually. Until then, there were twenty minutes left before tonight would be over. With a drink in hand, Minerva grimaced. It appeared she'd made the wrong choice, with what punch to drink. Setting her goblet aside, she noticed that Arthur was present and decided now was as good a time as any to give him a brief student progress check, to pass some of the time away.
Though his nervousness during their dance had abated, it returned anew, unexplainably, as he managed to slip away unnoticed to what he was sure, was a recent addition to the room. The door was single, simple in design but the moment he opened it, belied just what was behind.

He stood on a balcony, large enough for two people with white marble polished to a shine. He'd never seen the moon so close, almost as if he could reach up to touch. It bathed everything in soft light, a blanket of purple just behind and spreading outwards, colours turning darker. It was a fairly clear night, the faintest wisp of clouds passing along the sky with not an inch exposed free from stars.

Used to hours where there wasn't silence, the lack of noise now became even more obvious. While he couldn't deny the beauty of his surroundings, it was the figure leaning against the balcony itself, that captured all attention. Footsteps echoing, Harry drew closer until he came by Alistair's side.

Now alone and away from the others, a wave of shyness hit Harry as he resolutely focused on what was ahead, rather than to the side.

"Won't you look at me?"

Hearing the note of sadness in his voice, Harry didn't believe Alistair really felt that way but nonetheless, succeeded in tugging his heart. Fighting against the shyness, Harry turned to face him. "Hi." He mumbled, positive that his entire face was aflame.

Eyes twinkling brighter than the stars above, he chuckled warmly. "That is better, Hello."

He couldn't hold it in any longer, voicing the one question on his mind. "So, what is it you want to talk about?"

The mood shifted. Subtly, but enough for Harry to notice. Gazing into Alistair's eyes, Harry came to realise that any previous passion or emotion was but a fraction of what he saw now. It was enough to steal his breath away entirely. In his attire, he looked more of an ethereal prince than ever. Right then, no force on that world or the next could ever shift their gazes away from one another. Much like on the dance floor, Harry was swept away, this time with words.

"Harry. Before we met, I firmly believed that there was not much left to experience and yet, I have found this to be untrue. An alliance between us was solely my intention, but it has grown far beyond what I could have ever anticipated."

He paused, just for a moment and while the air was chilly, it didn't stand a chance against the warmth of Alistair. Not once in Harry's life, could he ever remember being looked at in such a loving way.

"My heart sings when I am with you. It is a newly liberating experience, one of which will never grow tiresome."
Taking Harry's hand, Alistair pressed it against his chest, his own on top. Sure enough, his heart beat strongly, a faster rhythm than usual to its normally slow pace. That made the two of them then. Harry's heart felt like it would bash through his ribcage any second now.

Pain entered Alistair's voice, breath hitching just a little. "The day I found you hurt at the hands of Dumbledore, I realised that I never want to see such a sight again. I wish to be by your side, as strength and support. I treasure our friendship, however all the feelings that I possess go beyond this."

Releasing Harry's hand, Alistair cupped his face with such tenderness, it was enough to leave him almost teary-eyed, from both his words and the affection shown. He remained silent, a tiny part of him daring to hope. A gloved thumb softly stroking his cheek, Alistair continued, eyes regarding him expectantly.

"I adore everything about you. Your kindness, bravery, the capacity to care despite everything experienced and many, many more things which I have yet to discover. Harry, will you allow me to find them and in doing so, deepen our bond?"

Harry realised that he was dense. Standing there right now simply reaffirmed it and thinking back, he had the suspicion that his friends knew long before he did. While it was an unconventional way of asking in this day and age, at least Harry hadn't heard it before, the meaning was clear. But just to be sure, he reworded it in a way that he was used to hearing.

"..You want to go out with me?" Even then, he still feared rejection, that it was simply a joke and it would just end right there. However, his worries were unfounded, receiving confirmation straight after.

"I do, very much so."

He couldn't believe it. He detected no lies and his hearing was completely fine. It was no dream, the touch of Alistair's hand very real. Chest tightening and still in partial disbelief, a shaky hand touched Alistair's. Green eyes wavering with a sparkle of hope held within their depths, Harry's next words changed the course that his life would take.

"Y-Yeah, ok." Spectacularly stumbling over his words, Harry lacked any refinement whatsoever, but that didn't matter. With a smile almost blinding he was easily picked up, strong arms wrapping around him as he was spun in a circle, mid-air.

Caught by surprise he squeaked a little, holding onto Alistair for support as the older man's delighted laugh rang through the air. Before long he was put back down, sitting on the balcony support. Even then, he remained slightly taller as he closed the distance between them. With Harry's legs at either side Alistair removed his gloves for the final time. Storing them away, finely shaped lips drew close to Harry's ear, to whisper three words that shook him to his very core.
"Close your eyes."

Nervously Harry did so and through a natural desire, all illusion spells and parts of his Animagi forms disappeared, leaving with it his natural self. He knew instinctively what was about to happen, but not what to expect from it.

A hand gently cupping the back of his head to tilt it upwards, Alistair's lips softly brushed against his for a fleeting moment. That alone caused his body to tingle ever so slightly. But the moment that his lips returned to deepen the kiss, he became lost in a haze of sweet pleasure.

There was no force behind his actions, supportive and guiding much like with their dance earlier. Any description that Harry could try and come up with would fail to do it any justice. The tingles transformed into electricity, spreading throughout his body.

It seemed as if within that moment not only did their lips meet for the first time but so did their magic, blanketing both as naturally, Harry's arms came to wrap loosely around Alistair's neck. His lips were filled with so much consideration for him and a quiet yet bold passion. He felt so cared for but most importantly, complete, as though Alistair was the final piece of a jigsaw that had been missing his whole life.

A sound that he'd never heard before escaped his lips, holding all the pent-up emotion that he hadn't released until now. Before long, Alistair pulled away and then, Harry opened his eyes.

Stunned, he barely registered what happened, but then wondered why everything was blurry.

"Harry?"

At the concerned note in Alistair's voice as his hand carefully swiped across his cheeks, he realised he was crying. He did the best he could to express himself, struggling slightly as with his kiss, it had brought everything to the forefront.

"I didn't think this would ever happen. I feel the same way about you, more than I can say but I was too scared to say anything because I thought I'm not good enough for you. And-"

He was interrupted, by a finger on his lips. "Breathe."

Harry did so, trying to compose himself and once ready, continued. "And I'd be better off just giving up."

Alistair shook his head softly and without any warning, mercilessly peppered soft kisses across his nose, cheeks and eyelids and with it, removing all traces of tears. A ticklish sensation rising on his
skin, Harry laughed a little until comforting arms pulled him close. Resting his chin on Harry's head, Alistair spoke with a mixture of fondness and exasperation.

"My silly little Demon, nothing could be further from the truth. You are wonderful and at every available opportunity, I will remind you."

The nickname of sorts caused a warm feeling to blossom inside. He liked the sound of it.

"You were not the only one fearful."

At his words Harry pulled back, looking up with a hint of disbelief. "Really? I couldn't tell at all."

"I have been refused before, more times than I can count. It is a feeling of unease that lingers."

Right there, was another point which proved Dumbledore wrong. Fear was prevalent among humans and that a Vampire of Alistair's age could feel it as well? That was another thing that Harry was all too happy to learn, though sorry that it was something that he'd experienced before.

And then, a niggling worry. Thinking back, was he actually any good? Though the very little ego he had would inevitably dent, he needed to know. "I'm not experienced with kissing. I guess that was obvious."

Harry got the last answer he expected, Alistair's tone more teasing than he'd ever heard before. "Ah, but therein lies the fun of teaching you."

A moment of silence, broken by Harry's hesitant voice. "So..can we do it again then? I mean, only if you want to-"

Eyes widening, Harry was cut off by the touch of Alistair's impossibly soft lips once again. His mind was far slower, only clicking firmly into place now.

Knowing he looked like an idiot, a grin nearly split his face when Alistair moved back. "Does that mean you're my boyfriend?"

"If that is something that pleases you. However, I much prefer 'lovers'. Let me assure you, Harry, that my thoughts go far beyond the boundaries of a male friendship."

Somehow, Harry had the feeling that all of his previous teasing and flirting would pale in comparison to future interactions. He didn't think it was possible to be this happy, especially today.

"Alistair?"
As Harry looked up again, he practically purred at the gentle fingers running through his hair and tried to stay on track. Alistair's eyes were questioning, a soft and serene smile for him as an indication to continue. "I didn't find out when my parents died until I came to Hogwarts and since then, it was difficult to ever remain happy during the month I lost everything."

But then, Harry smiled. It was so beautifully innocent, that Alistair found himself the stunned one. "I know mum and dad would want what's best for me and to be happy. You've helped with that. I'm happier than I can ever remember being, so thanks."

Not having enough Gryffindor courage needed for the bold action he wanted to take, Harry settled for giving his hand a gentle squeeze in thanks.

Alistair would be difficult to put up with after this. Right now he was floating among the clouds, more thrilled from a simple kiss than he had been with anything in years. Sensing that their time was drawing to a close, he picked Harry up to set him on his feet again.

Without words, Harry knew that the Halloween Party had ended, students going to their respective common rooms. The thought of returning with them right now caused a bout of loneliness so strong, that it rendered him motionless and before he could think better of it, voiced his reluctance. "I don't want to go back yet. Not after we just.." He trailed off sadly.

Alistair was reluctant to part ways himself, finishing the sentence within his mind that Harry couldn't. He understood, more than the younger man could ever know, but the thought of insisting he returned to Gryffindor Tower never occurred. Seeing that Harry felt a little awkward to ask, Alistair did it for him.

"Harry, will you stay with me tonight?"

He didn't hesitate to respond, nodding somewhat bashfully. Wrapping an arm around to pull him closer, they disappeared from the balcony and directly to Alistair's quarters. It was then that his wording registered in Harry mind and unconsciously, he stiffened. Rubbing his arm soothingly, he was quick to reassure him.

"Nothing untoward will happen, I promise. My only wish is to hold you, there is no rush and we will go forward at a pace that you are comfortable with."

As if to make a point, a pair of familiar pyjamas appeared, perfectly folded and handed to him. Harry was about to ask how he knew where they were exactly but realised that the House Elves would and heard all requests, voiced or not.

Harry was thankful he didn't have to explain, not ready for him to see the extent of his scars just yet. How could he, when he wasn't entirely comfortable with them himself? Following Alistair into his bedroom, Harry noticed a bathroom attached. Indicating that he was going to get changed in there he
opened the door, letting it close behind him.

Never in his wildest dreams, could he have ever imagined that today would have been possible. The most beautiful person that he'd ever met, in mind, spirit, heart and just everything, returned his affections. Alistair was his boyfriend. His boyfriend!

Though no one was there, Harry buried his face into the folded pile of clothing, to hide his giddy grin. Right now, he felt as though he'd caught a very special, unique Snitch. But this one, he wouldn't have to give back. He would keep it close for as long as it, he, would have him. Not wasting any more time he changed quickly and out of habit borne of the Dursleys, folded every item of clothing into a neat pile. Pushing the door open with one hand, he nearly dropped his clothes.

Alistair’s own clothing wasn’t exactly revealing, but slightly form fitting, the material a silken pale gold. Sitting on the bed to wait for him his hair was loose, cascading freely. Placing his clothing on top of the dresser, Harry didn’t know what to do. Well, he did in relation to the obvious, but then what? He hadn’t slept in the same bed with anyone before.

Knowing that remaining stood up wouldn’t do either of them any good, Harry approached Alistair who with a gentle movement, took his hand to press a small kiss to the back of it.

And just like that, any lingering tension dissipated. He wouldn’t do anything that Harry didn’t want him to. Reassured by his warm smile, Harry followed his lead once more.

Drawing the covers back he seated himself in the middle, patting his side invitingly. Joining him there Alistair lay down, extending his arm outwards with a teasing smile on his lips.

"You have the rare honour of using me as a pillow! Do not take this offer lightly Harry, for my body is a precious thing indeed."

Appreciating his attempt at humour, Harry gratefully accepted the offer. The moment he joined him in laying down, the covers were drawn over them both. Snuggling closer, an arm wrapped around him as Harry found himself resting on his chest. Almost naturally, his arm draped across Alistair's torso, bent slightly. It was an unfamiliar sleeping position, but he couldn't remember ever feeling so safe and secure before. At first, he was worried about being unable to fall asleep, but the arm at his back began to rub it in repetitive, soothing motions. Growing drowsy, fingers smoothed his hair back, to place a kiss directly over the lightning bolt scar.

"Sweet dreams," Alistair whispered, able to sense the moment that sleep claimed him. Dimming the room's lights, he could hardly believe his fortune. He simply couldn't wait a moment longer.

'Solomon, Harry is now my lover. We shared a dance together and now he is here, asleep in my arms. This heart of mine may just wave a little white flag in surrender to his endearing charm.'
No word in any dictionary available could possibly sum up how happy he was. Right now he could take on worlds, both known and unknown and successfully claim them for his own.

But then, there was only one thing that he'd wanted and that was here, with him.

‘Congratulations. There was no doubt that he would accept. His affection for you is glaringly obvious, though I am unable to see whatever charm he appears to.’

‘Oh, you wound me. I shall never recover!’

A familiar warmth travelled through their link, along with a smile that he hadn't seen for many years. ‘I wish you both the best.’

Support from the only family he had meant the world to Alistair, who still found himself amazed that Harry was right there, his chest rising and falling softly with every breath taken. Not fond of sleeping or even resting at all, now he had a reason to. He would watch over and protect Harry in his sleep and perhaps, join him sometime. He loved to share warmth with another and simply hold them close, but many of his previous partners had been reluctant to do so, mainly because of what he was. That was the source of many past love life issues and if sharing a bed it was usually the opposite sides, no closeness involved. But despite his nervousness, Harry hadn't hesitated and even moved closer of his own accord.

Though perfect had no solid definition, Alistair could say with confidence, that October 31st and November 1st, came the closest that it possibly could. Optimistic for the future he closed his eyes, resting beside the one that had changed the world as he knew it.

Optional, but The Vampire Masquerade by Peter Gundry gave me the idea for everything, both this chapter and the previous one. It's what I pictured them dancing together to months ago now and I still love it. You'll find it on YouTube and I'd highly recommend checking it out, if you've got the time :)

Chapter End Notes

Well, it finally happened! Hope it was worth the wait! Some of you have been around since the beginning so that means roughly two years. Thank you for your patience xD I got emotional writing this, in the best way.

On another topic, last week I was surprised by another AO3 user who made a cover for this story and it's now in my gifts section. If you like check that out and show them
some support because I can't thank them enough for their consideration <3
Trouble Ahead

Chapter Summary

Harry's Friday morning went remarkably well. He only wished he could say the same for Saturday afternoon.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: VAMP CINNAMON ROLL KISSES YAY!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As Harry's eyesight refocused on his surroundings, it took a moment to acclimatise. Not once during the night could he remember waking up or even moving position. But more importantly, no events of October 31st were fabricated. Warmth filled him, but not only through the covers and Alistair's slight body heat, but at the pleasant, almost too good to be true memories that he now possessed.

He remembered the faint smell of honeysuckle the last time he was here, only stronger now. Usually, anything overly sweet he found to be unpleasant, but this scent he found to be relaxing, perhaps because of just who it belonged to. With his head still resting in the same position and the arm around him that hadn't loosened in the slightest, his desire to actually get up and complete the last of his schoolday before the weekend arrived diminished with every waking second that passed by.

Carefully, Harry adjusted his position, to get a better look at the man lying beside him.

How was it, that even in apparent sleep, he managed to remain flawless? He didn't know if he was asleep but he looked to be, at least.

Hair splayed across the pillow, Alistair wore a peaceful expression with the faintest hints of a smile about his lips. Able to study him up close in a different light to the Room of Requirement, eyelashes cast soft shadows beneath and even now, the rate of Harry's heartbeat rose ever so slightly. This devastatingly attractive man shared his feelings and he knew, it would take him a short while for that fact to sink in. He didn't want to disturb his rest but then, the urge to touch him became almost overwhelming.

So far from how many people expect Vampires to be, Harry sometimes forgot that's just what he was and so far, hadn't seen everything he was capable of. A part of him really wanted to, knowing that at his full strength it would no doubt make the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort in the Ministry drastically pale in comparison.
In the end, he couldn’t help himself and with a careful hand, stroked Alistair’s cheek. His skin was silky smooth and checking for any reactions only to find none, he grew a little more daring. Shifting a little closer and leaning over, Harry’s eyes naturally trailed down to his lips. They spoke words of flirtation, kindness and a simple upturn of them was enough for his heart to flutter. And more recently, their ability to rob him of all coherent thought with a single kiss. He was placed into Gryffindor for a reason. Surely he was brave enough to take the plunge? The temptation was genuinely too much to resist and though it was only brief, their lips brushed together.

About to move back, Alistair's eyes opened and locking with Harry's, held great amusement. Caught like a deer in the headlights, he wasn't sure how to react.

"Were you awake this whole time?" He wondered, fighting desperately against the embarrassment and at his delighted chuckle, that was all the answer he needed.

Alistair's expression turned serious. "Alas Harry, I am afraid your stealth tactic has failed and therefore, you must suffer the consequences."

"What consequences?" He failed to notice the expression shift to mischievousness. He was only made aware of said consequences when quick as a flash Alistair sat up, only to attack his sides which were incredibly ticklish for him.

"Ahh, hey!" He protested between a burst of laughter, attempting to escape Alistair's fingers which had found their target the first try, but to no avail. His laughter only provided further encouragement, dancing along his clothed skin and leaving him breathless. Alistair's laughter soon followed after, enjoying being able to tease Harry in such a manner as he firmly believed Harry's laughter could banish all dark clouds, whether metaphorically or in relation to the weather.

With tears of laughter in his eyes, he'd barely caught his breath when it was stolen from him by the caressing touch of Alistair's lips. It was sweet and while he was clumsy at best with responding, he tried to let his positive feelings flow into it. Then, their lips parted. On instinct, Harry's eyes had closed and upon reopening them, was met with a happy smile.

"Good morning, Harry."

Good morning indeed. The best morning he'd had, with absolutely no competition.

"Morning." He responded, more at peace than he could ever remember being, the feeling only growing when Alistair's arms encircled him from behind, chin resting lightly on his shoulder.

"Did you sleep well?" He murmured into his ear, detecting no distress from Harry throughout the night, but would only know for sure with a verbal confirmation.

"Better than ever." It was without a hint of hesitation and while usually, he was quick to start each
day, a part of him wouldn't mind being held like this for longer. He hadn't experienced much in the way of affection and faced with so much of it from a literal affection powerhouse, it was a situation he was unused to but one where adaptation was wholly possible.

Unknown to him Alistair shared similar thoughts, having taken an alternate approach to Harry than he had with anyone else. Though right from the start it was different, Harry had found him rather than Alistair actively searching for someone and in that sense, perhaps this difference was what mattered. It was early days. In fact, not even an entire day had passed with Harry and their newfound relationship but already, he had high hopes. He tried to not let them be too overpowering, having experienced this before only to be let down but still, it rivalled a joy only matched by the day that his brother was found.

Right now, Dementors could swarm the Quidditch Pitch and Harry was sure they wouldn't even make a dent in his happiness. But that bubble quickly burst, in face of a panicked thought.

"Oh god, I'm going to be questioned relentlessly today since I didn't return to Gryffindor Tower." Groaning, he could easily picture it now. Though they might not look it, Ginny and Hermione could be intimidating. Luna no doubt would be just as curious though maybe not persistent. Neville, it remained to be seen.

"Not to worry, there is a Golem in your place at the moment. Just before we arrived here, he left through the door behind. The door itself and the balcony were temporary constructs so once nothing remained on its surface, they disappeared as well."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, I didn't even notice you do that."

While that helped, Hermione had known him long enough that she would probably be suspicious. He had no idea what the construct had said in his place or even if it had spoken to his friends, but he'd find out.

Shortly after, Harry was offered the first use of his shower which he accepted, albeit hesitantly. Since there was only one rather than a stall each in the boy's dormitory, he ended up reverting to older habits unconsciously. Counting out the in his head, that was enough for him to do the essentials and with a silent request from the Elves, have his school supplies ready along with returning the clothing from yesterday to his trunk. Ensuring that he'd left everything spotless, he returned to the bedroom.

As the door opened, he was met with a look of faint surprise. "You have finished already?"

Not even ten minutes had passed by, so Harry could understand his reaction. "It's your bathroom, didn't want to keep you waiting."

Sighing, Alistair's eyes flickered with sadness. "Were you perhaps rushed to shower quickly in the past?" Though it was a guess, he would have assumed that Harry simply wasn't one to linger for long, if not for the faint traces of guilt in his expression.
Every day for most of his life, in fact. At that thought, he grimaced. "Yeah. I couldn't take more than five minutes and if I did, my Aunt would usually make the water freezing or scalding hot and force me to stay there for an extra minute."

Each time he learned of something else that Harry's relatives had done, his loathing for them increased. He was very family orientated, with the little that he had and he would never mistreat Solomon in such a way. Rising to his feet Alistair arrived by Harry's side, to card a hand through his messy hair.

"They are deplorable. You will suffer no mistreatment here, I will swear upon my eternal life and magic if need be."

He knew that even without such drastic measures, Alistair told the truth. But to hear a verbal confirmation was nonetheless a reassurance. Once Alistair entered the bathroom Harry left, to wait in the living room. Upon arriving there he saw Lilah, who tilted her head in confusion.

“Hi Harry, how come you were in Al’s room?”

Though it had taken some time, Lilah could comfortably switch between how she addressed him in private versus in class and hadn’t slipped up yet. In truth, she was still in awe she could be so informal with him and how nice he was, unlike some of the others who were older than her dad.

He’d forgotten about Lilah. Unprepared to be asked such a question his mind raced with believable excuses, not ready to get into a discussion about the changing nature of his relationship with Alistair to someone who might not understand yet. Apparently, he didn’t need an answer as before he could, she came up with one of her own.

“Oh wait, I get it! You were having a sleepover! That’s what friends do right?”

She wasn’t exactly wrong, but then she wasn’t right either. Harry didn’t know of a sleepover between friends where they held each other intimately but didn’t refute her words. It was better than any explanation he could’ve come up with on the spot.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Nodding to confirm her words, he took a seat opposite. “Did you enjoy the party?”

“It was so cool! Everyone’s costumes were great and Hagrid let me ride on his shoulders. I could see everything! I ate and drank so much I thought I was going to explode.”

Her expression was so serious at that, he couldn’t help but laugh a little. He’d tried out the punch with Parvati more than he’d ate anything, but he didn’t mind. Well, there was Alistair, but kisses probably didn’t count in that regard.
Of course, his mind went there. He was pulled from his thoughts a few minutes later by the concerned voice of Lilah.

“You’re really red. Are you sick?”

“I’m fine,” Harry reassured her, though she didn’t look convinced. Deciding not to question him further he listened to her talk, using that as a way to forcefully pull his mind from the gutter and after a while, they were joined by Alistair.

As they relocated to the kitchen and sat down, a goblet of Pumpkin juice which Alistair didn’t ask for appeared in his hand. Glancing over at Harry, his cheeky grin gave it away.

“Ah Harry, you know me well.” With a fond smile, Alistair returned the gesture, in the form of cranberry juice. Lilah remained somewhat oblivious, more focused on the food that had appeared and opted for the lighter choices. The atmosphere was peaceful, three voices filling the room enough for it to be homely and pleasant as some days, he found himself irritated with mornings in the Great Hall.

“What is it?” Alistair asked Lilah gently, seeing her sudden internal struggle. Deciding that right now provided the best window of opportunity, she voiced the thoughts on her mind for the past week.

“I think I’m ready to go back. Ron still scares me a little, but I can handle it. Thank you for taking care of me though.”

Reaching over, he patted her head. “Of course, you are welcome to return whenever you like.”

He left her weekly visits to him unsaid, knowing that she would return to feed and by the week, was making remarkable improvements for someone who hadn’t tasted blood in years.

Happier now she returned to her usual chatty self, her two eating companions listening intently. One thing was for sure, the events of yesterday and this morning were more than enough to help him produce a Patronus.

To make up for classes ending early, Harry’s Friday was much more busy than usual, to the point where he didn’t really have the chance to talk in depth with his friends and once the day had ended, didn’t hesitate to collapse on his bed after. He’d been on the receiving end of gazes and whispers the entire day, most believing they were being subtle but Harry picked up bits here and there. Unsurprisingly it was about his dance with Alistair and no doubt in a few days time, any rumours would escalate beyond his control.
It was Saturday and to Harry’s mild surprise, Neville suggested a trip to Hogsmeade. Usually, they spent their weekend on the grounds or in the Room of Requirement, but he couldn’t argue it would make a nice change of pace. Having only gone with Ron and Hermione before, it would be a different experience with Luna, Ginny and Neville coming along. With a muttered discussion between the latter two that he couldn’t quite understand, they’d all wrapped up warm against the chilling November wind. Sidling up to Hermione, Harry couldn’t keep the curiosity from his voice.

“Any idea what they’re talking about?”

Hermione tried and failed to look innocent, not the best at maintaining a poker face. “I have no idea.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

She couldn’t argue with that. She could keep secrets but if they were found out, keeping a straight face was a struggle for her. “Oh, fine. You’ll find out soon.”

Sensing that he wouldn’t get any more information and upon Neville’s quiet insistence, the five-headed straight for the Three Broomsticks. But peering inside, it was no good.

The inn was more full than he’d ever seen it, with barely enough room to comfortably move and judging by how many there were, it would be a while before they would be served.

“Want to try the Hog’s Head?” Harry asked, glancing back at his friends. He’d never been before but he’d heard of the questionable reputation it had. Despite that, he didn’t think it would be anywhere near as busy and either way, they’d get a drink.

Neville shuddered. “That place is dodgy. But I don’t think we could even get a seat in there, it already looks like there’s an added expansion charm inside.”

With that decided they left, the other inn a street or two away from everything else. Harry only knew the basics, except for who actually owned it. Its dilapidated appearance alongside an actual Hog’s Head dripping with blood didn’t exactly give the best impression.

“Halloween was two days ago.” Ginny joked, attempting to diffuse the mild tension around them.

What’s the worst that could happen? Those words had damned him more than once but all they wanted was a drink. Ignoring the outward appearance, he winced at the overly loud creaking of the door.

It was a struggle not to cough, the inside reflecting the outside perfectly. Unlike the Three Broomsticks it distinctly lacked cheer or even cleanliness, dimly lit despite the clear sky outside and for some reason, the bartender was cleaning the same glass with an already filthy rag.
The inn was sparse, no one else there from what Harry could see and moving closer got a closer look at the bartender.

The moment Harry saw his face, he was struck with a sense of strong familiarity both with Dumbledore and the vague memory of being shown the original Order of the Phoenix members.

Putting a name to the face, he realised this was Aberforth Dumbledore, the Headmaster’s younger brother and their similarity were so striking, it was enough to put him on edge. He wasn’t aware that the man owned this inn but then again, it could have been one of the many occasions in the past where he was told and simply hadn’t listened. He didn’t do anything, however, keeping a firm resolve to not instantly judge just because his brother didn’t deserve to breathe the same air as everyone else.

But then, while Dumbledore favoured garish robes of bright colours and patterns alongside a falsified eye twinkle, Aberforth’s only similarity was the beard and piercing blue eyes, which lacked half-moon spectacles. However, those eyes weren’t overly exaggerated in wanting to portray a grandfatherly aura, they seemed to say ‘what you see is what you get.’ His robes matched that of the interior, the colours plain and dull but at the very least functional.

Noticing his gaze and as with most people, Aberforth’s eyes briefly flickered up to Harry’s scar.

“So you’re the Potter kid that old goat’s been harping on about.”

Harry choked on air, at least part of that sentence being something he hadn’t expected. The way he spoke was different, sharing the gruffness and informality of Hagrid slightly but still, he was wary.

“Yeah.” He didn’t say much more than that, remaining cautious. However, not all of his friends took the same approach.

“Hello, Mr Dumbledore!” Luna chirped happily, looking completely at odds with the inn’s interior and cheeks mildly flushed from the outside cold. Turning to Harry, she gave him a bright smile directly from the heart. “Don’t be afraid, he’s a good person.”

Harry wondered if she’d been here before but judging by the sudden puzzled frown, he had his answer. “Have we met?”

Luna nodded enthusiastically expression returning to its usual serenity. “Yes, just now. I’m Luna.”

As the others shared a fondly exasperated look, Aberforth decided not to question her eccentricity too much. At least, it was in a more pleasant way, unlike Albus. Scourgifying the rag in his hand, he made a renewed effort to wipe down the counter which had several stools behind it.
“Sit down. What’ll it be?”

Seeing that as an invitation they did so, Harry more at ease with Luna’s words but still not completely relaxed.

“Five Butterbeers please.” Before he could say anything Neville ordered for them.

“What’s the occasion?” He wondered, mildly curious which quickly changed to suspicion at Ginny’s knowing smile. Raising her eyebrows almost comically, she gave him a look which suggested that all secrets wouldn’t remain that way.

“So, Professor Lothaire and Harry Potter are boyfriend and boyfriend now?”

“How the hell did you know that?!” Caught off guard, he was thankful that the dim lighting hid the lack of composure, even if his voice was unintentionally loud enough to shake dust from the inn’s foundations.

“I had my suspicions, but you confirmed them.”

At Harry’s glare, Ginny remained unapologetic, her smile only growing wider. “You seriously thought I wouldn’t notice? We all did, including the fake you that left with us.”

He had the grace to look sheepish. “Alistair made it, more as a placeholder. I guessed you might suspect it wasn’t me.”

Neville casually interjected, placing what he’d roughly need on the wooden surface. “During your fancy dance, Ginny made a bet with me that you’d get together by the end of the night. Instead of a bet, I said I’d buy everyone a round of Butterbeer if it turned out to be true. Harry mate, it’s obvious something happened so I thought I may as well order.”

At Neville’s shrug, Harry was left lost for words. Glancing at Hermione and Luna questioningly, both nodded. He’d had the brief thought that they’d known this would happen before he did but to have confirmation really did leave him feeling like an idiot.

After their congratulations, Ginny asked the one question he should have expected to hear from her but still found himself unprepared.

“Is he a good kisser then?”

While Neville looked mildly uncomfortable at the turn their conversation had taken, Luna and even
Hermione looked curious. At his incredulous stare, she flushed slightly and tried to justify her feelings. “Well, it’s an unusual situation so I was just wondering if there were any noticeable differences.”

Folding his arms to rest on the table, Harry placed his head on them, groaning. “You’re asking someone who’s only kissed one person before now and even then, we weren’t dating. I can’t make comparisons.” His voice was muffled but hoped that the answer he gave would satisfy their curiosity because any longer on this topic and he’d never regain his normal facial colour again. Lifting his head after a brief pause, he continued. “Yeah, it was really nice.”

While he doubted the questioning would end there, at least she seemed satisfied for now. Or, it was because Aberforth returned with the five glasses asked for. Sliding them along the counter for them to catch he left Neville with approximately a galleon in change.

“A Galleon, 16 Sickles and 25 Knuts in total, this ain’t Rosmerta’s place.”

He didn’t ask why they were here, knowing that usually if there were students, the Three Broomsticks were full up. Usually, he only served clientele fit for Knockturn Alley and no doubt supporters of Voldemort as well, who appreciated his discretion. What they did was none of his business but neither would he be a part of it either. He’d had enough of that as part of the Order and now, he just wanted to be left in peace.

“Alright, thanks.” Taking his change back, the atmosphere was awkward at first with only six of them in the room. Grabbing a stool himself, Aberforth seated himself down and rather than the ways of his brother which involved dancing around the subject, he tackled it head-on.

“Albus has done something to you. Has to have, or you wouldn’t be looking at me as though I’d committed every offence under the sun.”

Harry hadn’t realised, feeling slightly ashamed. “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

Aberforth waved away his apology. “Doesn’t matter. Haven’t seen him in months. If I had it my way, I wouldn’t, ever. He plays too many games, sees everyone as Pawns on a Chessboard and buggery to their feelings. I’m not here to pry or report back to that meddler. You’re a customer, nothing more.”

Aberforth’s feelings for his brother were no lie. Much like Professor Snape but with less sarcasm, he didn’t sugarcoat his words or feelings. While Harry couldn’t exactly trust him yet having only met for the first time, he was comfortable enough to relax his expression.

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Without going into details he’s fucked me over multiple times.”

Aberforth didn’t look surprised in the least, giving him a simple nod. After that, the awkwardness
dissipated as steady conversation flowed between them. The Butterbeer tasted just fine and without the extra sweetness, actually found it preferable. Harry found himself surprisingly comfortable enough to carry a conversation even if Dumbledore’s brother of all people was there. He had to admit it was slightly unnerving to see someone so alike yet unlike him at the same time.

Harry found himself curious about Aberforth and in his experience, curiosity was either a good or bad thing. He was a part of the original order after all. What did he know? But then it wasn’t exactly his business either. He debated on whether to ask or not, becoming lost in thought as the chatter going on around him.

“Harry?”

Returning to himself, he was met with questioning looks. Glancing over to see where Aberforth was, Harry voiced his thoughts. “I’m wondering what he knows, about the original order.”

“Me too,” Hermione admitted, looking mildly frustrated. “They insist on keeping us out of the loop for our own safety but at this point, we’ve seen more than what some adults have.”

“Then again I’m not sure it’s even worth being there since the last time Remus was, Dumbledore insisted I’d gone dark and was a threat to the Wizarding World.”

Ginny placed her half-empty mug back onto the counter, with a little more force than necessary. “It’s him who’s the dark one. Who does he think he is anyway? Trying to turn people against a sixteen-year-old?” She was practically seething, just the thought getting her worked up.

Faint amusement entered Aberforth’s eyes though with his back turned to them, that couldn’t be seen. “You all need to learn the meaning of discretion.”

Turning around, he caught several guilty looks. It hadn’t occurred to keep this bit of conversation private and under ordinary circumstances he was careful. But his instincts had resurfaced and he experienced no unease around him, unlike with Dumbledore.

Returning to his stool, he looked at them expectantly. “Not times I want to remember, but what do you want to know?”

If he could help these kids in some way, Aberforth would bring up old memories better forgotten. But then while they were only young, he could tell from a single glance that they’d experienced more than others their age should be allowed to and without asking, he suspected that was partly Albus’ fault. It was no good keeping them in the dark and from the brief conversation he couldn’t help but overhear from their lack of subtlety, that’s exactly what was happening. Recognising the red-headed girl as a member of the Weasley brood, Molly came to mind with her idea of protection. While he could understand that, her desire to wrap them in cotton wool would benefit no one as he’d seen it with younger members of the Order.
Discussing among themselves, Harry and Neville both asked for personal reasons first and foremost, which the elder man understood and anticipated.

“They knew each another, but only became close friends when bonding over starting a family. Frank and Alice would provide support if needed and without Lily to keep him in line, James would’ve rushed headfirst into danger without a second thought. We lost a lot of good people and it’s a damn shame. They were the best of us and all that’s left are dregs.” Aberforth shook his head, a deep frown creasing his brows. While it wasn’t in his nature to gossip, he was provided with an opportunity and a listening audience. To not trust Albus went unsaid as judging from their reactions, none of them favourable towards him anyway. But there was one other person they needed to be made aware of.

“Keep your wits about you, particularly with Alastor Moody. The man’s paranoia has condemned innocent people to death and I doubt that’s changed. As a veteran of the war and a Senior Auror people have turned a blind eye to it. He’s unstable.”

Harry knew as much from his own experience but the fact that someone else didn’t trust him either was a reassurance. Depending on his eventual meeting with Amelia, Moody might no longer be an issue. They nodded seriously to his words and with that encouragement, began to learn more about what it was like to live in those times. Though he’d heard a little from Sirius and Remus before, they were reluctant to speak in great detail. To find someone patient enough to answer their questions and shed light on things they were previously unsure of helped greatly.

In the end, they’d stayed longer than planned but at that point, Harry might be able to class Aberforth as an ally of sorts, though only time would tell. One thing was for sure, he was nothing like his brother.

Once leaving the inn their discussion revolved around Aberforth for a short while, browsing various shops until they inevitably came to Honeydukes. As always it was busy and as he hadn’t been here in a while, glancing around curiously to see if anything new would capture his interest.

It did in fact, able to find a little something for Remus and seeing an opening, he asked one of the workers there.

“Do you have anything with Pumpkin?”

It was a long shot, but he wondered if there was anything Alistair might like here since he’d grown fond of pumpkin juice.

To his surprise, there was a fairly wide variation, to the point he wasn’t sure what to choose. Knowing he was being a bit excessive but unable to help it, he ended up purchasing one of everything. Partly as thanks for all Alistair had done as his own chocolate gift to him, but also because he wanted to. He loved being able to give something to people he considered close, now that he had those people in his life and that he was able to purchase things for them.
Though Alistair was a little different to the others now. He could pick and choose from the little collection of pumpkin-themed sweets and if in the process he found something else he liked, all the better.

It was a weekend and things were going smoothly. It should have been an indication that it could go all wrong as they had before, but Harry was only made aware that the day wouldn’t exactly go as planned when upon exiting Honeydukes, he noticed someone in the street, hunched over as if in pain. Leaving his friends to catch up, Harry didn’t hesitate to rush over and crouch to their level.

It was a child, who looked no more than eight years old as he shivered, head bowed.

“Are you ok?” He couldn’t keep the concern from his voice, though maintained a little distance so as not to startle him.

As the child raised his head pure, unadulterated fear shone within his eyes, features sharing the exoticness of his classmate, Blaise Zabini. Faster than any of them could react he stood up, only to sprint away.

Before he could think any better of it Harry gave chase, hearing his friends not far behind. Doing his best to navigate the fairly busy streets, Ginny was the first to catch up.

“Are you sure about this?!” Ginny questioned, a worried frown creasing her brow.

“No. I can’t just leave him though. Be prepared for anything, the situation’s too weird for something not to happen.”

A short distance behind Neville, Hermione and Luna heard his words, nodding resolutely. This was a familiar situation, running into possible or imminent danger without a second thought. But at least this year, he was better prepared.

A combination of concerned and suspicious along with several twists and turns later, they came to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and with it, a fairly large clearing. Slumped against a tree in front of them was the child, but what caught Harry’s attention was a distinct chill, one of which didn’t belong to the slightly bitter winds of an early afternoon.

“Someone else is here..” Harry whispered, though under no illusion that they hadn’t noticed for themselves.

He was right, but also completely wrong. What shimmered into view was not a person but persons, Vampires at that. He hadn’t gotten a good look at the child but he realised that he was a Vampire too.
They looked far different from the ones he encountered and in fact, closer to the stereotypical and somewhat exaggerated kinds described in spooky stories. Like those kept beneath Hogwarts, they seemed to be starved of blood, but each one shared a similar vacancy and blankness of the eyes which suggested the imperius curse or something similar, all except for the child. It explained why he seemed to be inhumanly fast, at least.

They were outnumbered, ten including the child to their five. They were left with no option to communicate verbally as far faster than their eyes could keep up with, the nine adult vampires struck.

Immediately, Harry noticed that none of them went for his friends and only him, which lead to the thought that this was certainly planned and possibly ordered by someone else. Voldemort came to mind but one this wasn’t quite his style and two, they’d come to an agreement and while it was true he could have broken it, he trusted Professor Snape’s words. If available, he would have used Vampires before now to capture him, so this was another unknown that he had to deal with. Sensing that they weren’t completely in control of themselves, he tried to incapacitate.

“Incarcerous!”

Jumping back over to distance himself slightly, he only just missed the swipe of particularly sharp nails across his cheek, as thick and sturdy ropes left his wand.

But like a knife to butter, the vampire cut through his attempt and the five found themselves on the defensive. In an effort to distract Harry sent a particularly powerful reducto to the ground beneath, which caused a noticeable crack as chunks of parched earth and dust obscured his own view of them for a moment.

It was another moment when the most obvious course of action eluded him, only finally kicking his brain into gear when three of them tried to stun him physically. They either didn’t or couldn’t use magic and none of their actions suggested they wanted to do lasting damage.

As one gripped his arm to twist it, he instantly retaliated. Used to this from Dudley he twisted his body in a way which wouldn’t damage the arm held tight Harry’s leg swept beneath the Vampire’s own and not expecting him to know this way of fighting back, loosened the hold. With his arm throbbing, that in itself heightened the usual adrenaline rush he received from dangerous situations. With barely a spare moment to think as nine blurs without a doubt wanted to capture him, his frantic internal voice contacted Alistair.

‘I’ve got a problem.’ He sounded a bit too factual and calm, taking into consideration just what was happening currently but surprisingly enough, didn’t feel panicked. Probably because he was aware of possibly walking into a trap.

‘Is everything alright?’

Harry was slightly worried about what his reaction might be. ‘We may or may not be fighting against
Vampires.’

‘We?’ Alistair’s voice held all the alarm that Harry’s should have.

‘Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna are with me.’

Rather than receiving a worded response, Alistair appeared in the midst of it all happening and with a split second to analyse everything, took immediate action.

With a sweep of his hand which controlled with pinpoint precision and a highly concentrated expression, sparks of light almost electrically charged targeted all nine of them and with a blinding flash, left unbreakable bonds that lightly shimmered.

As quickly as it had all started, it stopped. But it didn’t end there.

“PAPA, DON’T DO IT!”

Previously leaning against a tree trunk the child ran over to one of the restrained Vampires. Scraping his knees against the ground as he stumbled, dark eyes pleaded without words to a man who shared his appearance.

The real emotion he showed was fleeting, enough to convey all that he could before the blankness swept him away once more.

“I have failed, I’m sorry. Ti amo, Ciro.”

Ciro, as those gathered there, came to understand was the child’s name, tried to stop what only he and the other incapacitated Vampires knew would happen, but was too late.

Though they were bound their mouths remained free and with a subtle movement of their jaws, made motions as if to bite something. Only Alistair heard the faint crunching sounds and with something that he couldn’t have possibly predicted, bright, burning light encased all those there which was so intense, none were given the chance to scream before their bodies disintegrated into nothing more but heaps of white ash on the ground.

A scream which wrenched the hearts of all there tore through the silence and completely shaken, Harry stared unseeing at what was previously a living being. A father.

‘Harry, I will deal with this and speak later. Wait for me if you wish to.’

Nodding at Alistair even though his back was turned, Harry relayed the information to his friends.
who were more than happy to leave. No one spoke on the way back, unsure what could be possibly said in such an unbelievable yet tragic situation. As they arrived back at Hogwarts, Harry was the one to break the silence.

“T’m waiting for Alistair. If I find anything out I’ll let you all know.”

Hermione reached out, to squeeze his shoulder briefly. All of them were shaken up by what just happened and while Luna was the one who usually kept everyone’s spirits light, she sought comfort in Neville’s arm around her shoulder as unshed tears shone in her eyes. She loved and appreciated her friends but right now, more than ever, she needed him. She didn’t rely on anyone, used to getting by on her own but the more times that she visited, the more she began to see him as a pillar of support and strength. As Harry left for Alistair’s quarters, Luna spoke up, voice subdued.

“I’m going to see Brio.”

Ginny nodded, the most composed out of all of them. “Catch you later.”

With a sad but thankful smile for them, Luna left as well.

A frown creased Hermione’s brows. “They weren’t interested in us, only Harry.”

Neville and Ginny nodded, noticing that as well. It had put a dampener on the day, but there was still a lot of it left. Knowing that Harry would fill them in if he found anything out, there was a quiet discussion between the three at just who was responsible for this.

Once Alistair and Ciro were the only ones remaining, he ensured that no one else would hear or stumble upon them. If anyone were to find out that rogue Vampires were near Hogsmeade, their already shaky relations with humans would plummet.

He knew immediately that Ciro and the nine deceased Vampires were non-magic and recently turned. They hadn’t yet adapted and most likely were forced against their will, as were the majority, sadly.

Able to see that they weren’t of sound mind, he’d restrained them in the hope of questioning their intent. What he hadn’t expected, however, was the unspeakable act of cruelty. In all his life he’d never seen light concentrated into a pill for consumption much like poison for spies if captured and interrogated. It was clear they were untrained, mindless slaves to do the bidding of who he suspected, turned them in the first place.

Perhaps Ciro was left with free thought precisely because he was a child but to his alarm, he had been supplied with the very same pill and quickly, summoned it to him for safekeeping.
Rupert had broken down the components of Dumbledore’s device that was used against Solomon, which contained the man’s own blood. He was currently in the process of creating a form of protection against this, should he try to take one of them again in the same manner. This pill would be another thing for him to study, as he stored it safely away.

Though it was in his grasp Ciro didn’t notice it missing, curling into a ball as cries tore their way through his throat.

“P-Papa, non lasciarmi..” Rocking back and forth, he didn’t notice Alistair until a hand rested on his shoulder. Flinching as though he was burnt and knowing in his heart he could do nothing, escape was the only thing on his mind. However, he’d barely taken a step before Alistair stopped him with a gentle arm around his middle.

Though a Vampire he was born human, so found himself unable to cope and began to panic. “Let me go, please! They’ll know I failed and kill me too!”

Ciro was used to panic, but the fact that his heart beat no longer in response to this only made it much worse. He didn’t know what to do. He was so confused and scared. He tried his best to wriggle free but was no match against the older man’s strength.

“No one will kill you, I promise.” Alistair didn’t make them lightly but knew if Ciro was willing, Lothaire Castle would provide ample protection. Once comfortable enough, he may be able to help piece together what happened and their purpose for coming here. That would depend on his answer but either way, he would not leave him to fend for himself alone.

Resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn’t be able to run away Ciro stopped trying to struggle free, leaning back tiredly against Alistair’s chest. He was numb, in shock as his eyes couldn’t stray from the piles of ash.

“You’re a Vampire too?” He asked, meekly.

“I am. If you would allow me, I can help.” He wanted to, dearly. What happened today only made the upcoming meeting more important, one of which he’d finally managed to schedule for next week.

There was a long pause, Alistair didn’t rush him, simply kneeling and waiting for a decision to be made.

“Ok.”

Relieved Alistair stood up, carefully placing Ciro back on his feet. A closer analysis would reveal the other Vampires’ identities and until he knew more, would keep the individual ashes until it could be
decided what to do with them. With the help of Solomon, Alistair was confident they would be able to contact any remaining family members and if possible, explain the situation. From there, the ashes of each may be released or kept. A troubled sigh escaping his lips as he disappeared with Ciro, Alistair couldn’t help but think this was an indication that more trouble headed their way.

Knowing that Alistair had keyed Harry into the wards that allowed him to come and go whenever he wanted please him to no end but right now, he wouldn’t feel comfortable letting himself in when Alistair wasn’t there, if not told. While he associated pretty much every room there with the words warm and welcoming, they did nothing to penetrate the shield of ice around him now. Trembling faintly, he found more than familiar dark thoughts encroaching on his mind.

He didn’t know who they were, but clearly, they were after him or his friends would have been targeted as well. Vampires had a lot of means at their disposal but if they’d wanted to kill him, surely they’d try to bite? But none of them had, instead choosing to target him in a non-lethal way.

Though it was absurd, Harry began to feel guilty. If he’d just let them take him to whoever it was that ordered for it, would that child still have a father after?

He took on unnecessary burdens too much, this he knew. But the thought that a different choice to what he made could have saved all of those from committing suicide felt like one more thing added to the stack in his mind which would inevitably fall. Seated on the sofa, a deep crease formed between his brows. He couldn’t say how long he remained there lost in thought, but he was brought from them by a teasing voice.

“Ah Harry, a frown spoils your handsome features so I would advise against it.”

As a thumb smoothed over the creases he relaxed, though was unable to muster a smile in response to Alistair’s own. Seeing this, he took a seat beside him. Harry relished the warmth and presence by his side, who helped to keep his more unpleasant thoughts at bay.

“Whatever it is troubling you, I am here to listen.”

That’s what he appreciated the most. To his amazement and no matter what, Alistair had listened to everything and given helpful advice. Sometimes he worried about being too reliant and through that becoming a burden, but little by little he was coming to understand that would never be the case.

“Before I start anything, how did it go?”

Alistair briefly filled him in on the next course of action they’d taken, leaving his stomach twisting further with guilt. Hesitantly, he opened his mouth. “I feel like it’s my fault they’re dead. If I’d just fine with them instead of fighting back they wouldn’t have had to do that.”
Wanting to lower his head, he was prevented from doing so when a hand tipped his chin up. He looked into Alistair’s eyes, which were faintly admonishing.

“If you had chosen to do this, I would have been furious. There is no way to predict every outcome and whoever they associated themselves with are no friend of ours. But Harry.”

Alistair cupped his face with both hands, caressing the warm skin beneath his palms.

“It is not your fault. We cannot rule out the possibility that upon their return, they would have died at the hands of whoever sent them, to begin with.”

Harry saw his point but still wondered if there wasn’t a better choice he could’ve made. Biting his lip he considered different options, but not for long.

Drawing closer, Alistair tugged at Harry’s lower lip skilfully, softly nibbling it in his place. Cupping his head he slowly deepened the kiss, leaving Harry flushed and breathless after.

“I shall be the one to bite your lip from now on.”

His whisper was sweetly seductive, washing over Harry and leaving him to positively melt inside. With it, the dark cloud over his thoughts at least for now was no longer present. Aware that he still had his little gifts for Alistair, he didn’t think that it was the right time just yet, deciding to save them for a later date.

Feeling confident enough to know that he wouldn’t be pushed away, Harry snuggled into Alistair’s side. With an arm wrapped around him, his meeting with Aberforth was discussed, alongside the Headmaster’s own rising interest for Alistair to join the Order.

As always, Harry felt much better after talking to him and though there wasn’t much he could fill his friends in on, all agreed that they were after him for some reason. Vowing to keep a close eye out for anything particularly amiss from now on, Harry couldn’t help but think that Dumbledore and any rogue Death Eaters weren’t the only threat he had to deal with.

Chapter End Notes

It genuinely was going to be a normal Saturday as well, but then I end up getting a literal last minute idea on Monday xD
Back in Black

Chapter Summary

In the soul room, Harry didn't expect much to happen from what he'd confirmed. However, more did than he could have ever possibly imagined.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: They'd only planned a day in Hogsmeade but in the end, were faced with a new and unknown enemy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Not even a week had passed where Harry's relationship with Alistair had grown more intimate and yet, it seemed as if in a sense, he was seeing this world for the first time. The first few weeks of Hogwarts and leaving the Dursleys to spend time at a boarding school, awe and a little fear guided his small footsteps through the castle. Over the years, he gained an increasingly pessimistic outlook on his time there and while he'd never regret attending Hogwarts or the friends that he'd made, he could have certainly done without the unnecessary drama or fame of which he didn't feel was deserved.

Fifth year, by far, was the worst. The rebirth of Voldemort certainly not ideal but last year hit far closer to home, with another abuser added to the fairly extensive list. That and the loss of someone who really, he never had the chance to deepen his connection with. He was thankful every day that he didn't miss this opportunity with Remus but the moment Padfoot returned to the room of souls, he may be able to shed light on Prongs' words that day.

But right now, despite all that Dumbledore had done to him, Harry was happy. Scarily so. Scary, because at the drop of a pin it could easily change like so many times before. He was positively glowing and while he had a stressful moment here and there, the initial feeling seemed to just wash over him and while before now he often found himself lost in thought, usually about Alistair, recently he'd been far more driven and focused than ever.

But with all his imagination, he could have never anticipated just how sweet Alistair would be as a boyfriend, even in early days. He'd held back somewhat before, with flirty comments happening more frequently.

In the Chamber of Secrets and on his way to the room of souls just after classes had finished, a soft smile touched Harry's lips at what he'd received this morning and like the gifted bag of chocolates, he'd stored it safely away. He wasn't a hoarder by any means, living with The Dursleys ensured he
didn't grow attached to anyone or anything but these, he had every intention of keeping now that he
could.

Feeling gradually less on edge with Dumbledore in the Great Hall, it was a normal morning for
Harry interspersed with some light conversation. This changed when Hedwig arrived, with an
unexpected letter for him. Feeding her some bacon rind for the trouble, he could tell with a single
glance that it wasn't the usual kind of letter. A blood red wax seal with a familiar crest was on the
envelope's front, the borders with a faint gold line. Breaking the seal, the parchment within held a
faint fragrance to it and was of a significantly better quality than his own. Reading curiously and not
knowing what to expect, the end left him having to hastily hide a silly grin. As always, his
penmanship was flawless, though slightly different here.

Harry,

At every waking moment, I find myself captivated and enamoured. If there are times where doubt
and negative thoughts cloud your mind, know this. I adore you, with all my heart, when it began to
beat with a life of its own and previously, where it held none.

May the rest of your day be filled with nothing but the highest of blessings.

A.A.L

Alistair Avis Lothaire. Out of the students, only Harry knew those initials and his middle name had
never actually come into conversation with his friends. But as the only other students who knew of
his changed relationship status, he doubted it would take them long to piece together the puzzle.

A girlish squeal brought him from his reverie. Unable to contain her curiosity, Luna had read Harry's
letter sitting next to him. Bouncing while seated, she was unable to contain her excitement and it
made a change from her usual airy and serene appearance.

Though Hermione loathed Rita Skeeter, The Daily Prophet was a good source of news but the way
it was reported, she'd learned to take with a generous pinch of salt. Luna's little outburst was enough
for her to pay attention, equally curious. "What is it?"

"Hey! What is this, pass the parcel?" Harry complained as with nimble fingers, Ginny took the letter
from Harry's loose grasp, scanning the contents. "It's a letter from his lover boy."

"L-lover boy?" Stuttering slightly, he wavered between slight embarrassment at his predicament and
extreme happiness with the letter's contents, as Ginny passed the letter over for Hermione and
Neville to read.
"Oh, that's so sweet!" Hermione gushed, as Neville blew out a breath. Handing the letter back to him, he spared a subtle glance for Alistair. "That puts modern dating to shame, no one does this anymore. The most romantic these days is violently snogging in the Astronomy Tower."

Sadly, that was true. Harry couldn't remember seeing anything beyond that though what happened behind closed doors with the relationships between students he couldn't say.

"What's going on? Don't want to miss the action here." Seamus asked, just a bit further down from where they were, getting to his feet and peering at the contents of Harry's letter. With each word, his eyebrows climbed impossibly high until a low whistle left his lips. "Bloody hell that's fancy. Harry, the sooner you say you're taken, the sooner your fan club can begin the grieving process."

Carefully placing the letter back into its envelope, Harry gave him a disbelieving look. "So, what? You want me to shout out sorry guys, I have a boyfriend so keep your distance?"

Seamus looked mildly surprised. "You bat for both teams?" At Harry's cautious nod, Seamus understood. "Aye, fair enough. I won't judge you, just surprised that's all. Everyone knows about that crush you had on Chang and no one's seen you take an interest in anyone else."

With a determined look, Seamus scanned the student body. "Harry as your friend, it's my duty to keep students from throwing themselves at you."

Before Harry could ask what he meant, Seamus' voice drowned out all others.

"LISTEN UP! POTTER'S NOT SINGLE ANY MORE SO YOU CAN LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR TONSIL TENNIS!"

There was dead silence in the hall, all except for the loud thud of Harry's forehead hitting the table. Straight afterwards, the wash of voices mainly with Harry as their topic of conversation filled the room.

"Seems like you bagged yourself a fine bastard there Harry. I won't ask who but Detective Finnegan will continue the case." With a friendly shoulder slap, Seamus seated himself again.

'Mr Finnegan is correct. However, I would have perhaps phrased it a little differently. Passionate kissing goes far beyond a mere sport.' Through the inflexion in his tone, he could tell Alistair was serious about this.

'I'd rather he didn't let the whole school know so dramatically, but it serves a purpose I guess. Probably won't stop some students trying. They're wasting their time though, I've only got eyes for you.'
He didn't mean to be quite as honest, but it simply slipped out. In his mind, at least. He didn't regret it though, especially when it was met with a burst of warmth through their link.

'Ah Harry, sometimes you say the most endearing things. The feeling is wholeheartedly mutual.'

Though he didn't mention the short letter, he was certain Alistair had watched to see his reaction anyway. It was enough to brighten his entire morning and with that, give a positive vibe for the rest of that day.

Standing on the raised platform in the room of souls, he returned to the room slowly becoming familiar to him and hoping Padfoot would be here this time, so he could get some answers.

The habitats and environment associated with souls always became clearer once Harry drew close to them, a brief whisper of rocky mountainous regions for someone's Snow Leopard Animagus. He'd seen several dogs, but none of them quite like Padfoot. He wasn't the sort to blend in, liking to stand out. But despite how many there were each time, he'd managed to find Prongs before which lead him to believe that perhaps he could detect his moment of arrival.

"Harry, hello! The soul you're looking for is over there."

In front of him were Lume and Thanatos, the former of which had taken to the skies cheerfully, while the latter would have rolled his eyes, if possible. Hearing Lume's words Harry looked towards the direction he'd indicated, seeing a group of souls who looked to be playing together. Drawing closer he realised they were all dogs, and one with his rear end in the air and tail wagging furiously looking very familiar.

"Padfoot?" He asked, just to make sure and at the sound of his name and brief barks, the other souls left. With an abundance of energy, he bounded over to Harry, running in circles around him.

"Slow down just a bit, I can't keep up." Since trying to follow his movements was making him dizzy, Harry stopped trying to do that and waited for him to settle.

As he finally sat, Harry could see all the vivacity he possessed, even as an animagi soul. Before he could say any more, Padfoot voiced what was on his mind.

"I don't know how much time has passed out there, but I've been travelling. Making new spirit friends. I can't just stay in one place all the time and here, there isn't much to do. I want to be back in the world I know."

On all fours again, he began to pace, huffing with agitation. "Prongs can't feel his connection to James. I can. Sirius is there, but I can't get to him. Something's blocking me. We're cut off from each
Harry couldn't hope. He wouldn't let himself. He'd already grieved and the fact that Padfoot was insinuating that Sirius might not actually be dead, was too much for him. But then, what did they know really? True Bellatrix had hit him with Avada Kedavra, but no one he knew at least had fallen through the veil straight after.

Mind fit to burst with one thought after another, this was a discussion he needed to have with both Alistair and Remus. Alistair, because he might be able to help and Remus, for obvious reasons. It wasn't exactly how he envisioned their first meeting to go but as Harry had learned, things often didn't go how he planned them to.

"I'll see what I can do." Saying this to Padfoot he left and pushing away all worries of him coming across as tiresome from his fairly frequent communication with Alistair, hopefully, he would be available.

Even having the advantage of not needing to sleep which could, therefore, be put to use with catching up on marking, Alistair still found himself busy as a Professor. His sole purpose of taking the job was in part to keep an eye on Harry as even then he was inexplicably drawn to him, and also closer to the man who had caused significant harm to his kind. But along the way, he'd never expected to enjoy this job as much as he was.

He'd taught before, just not in a professional setting. On many occasions, he'd educated Emily, Jacob and Solomon on topics of which they weren't intimately familiar with. But schools were an entirely new concept. He knew of them and had seen them on his travels, but never the inner workings of one. It provided a learning opportunity not only for the students of which he could share his wisdom with but for himself as well.

The students were far more knowledgeable than he gave them credit for. With immortality came time, and plenty of it to do all that he wanted. It was clear that many had done their own research outside of the classroom, coupled with Harry's Defence Association this year and the last, due to previous incompetent Professors, all except for Mr Lupin.

Alistair certainly wouldn't count himself as incompetent and truly, he'd heard only positive things from his students in the form of feedback. But it would be naive to believe that everyone would like him or his teaching methods. Indeed he didn't believe that Mr Weasley was overly fond of him, however, the fault was none but his own. Recently, he began to wonder if there wasn't more to his behaviour than what could be seen and had taken to observing him whenever possible. Nothing was amiss at the moment and over the last month, he had been relatively quiet. No doubt, it wouldn't stay that way.

Before now, he believed that Professors were there to instruct students in class, keep track of their progress and monitor behaviour. Sometimes, this would apply outside of the classroom and long with assigning homework, some staff meetings and marking. Beyond that, there wasn't much more to it.
However, it was this and much more. Homesick students, a few of which had come to him rather than their head of house and while he helped, always steered them in the right direction after as he knew that Minerva, Severus, Pomona and Filius wouldn't dismiss their feelings on the matter.

It was staff meetings, marking, lesson plans, scheduling times for students who needed extra help after class, covering for other classes, keeping an eye on each individual students' progress among other things which he never expected.

But, he loved it. He really did. While it was a job which paid, money had never been a concern for him. As a direct descendant of Dracul, what came with it was inheritance and over thousands of years, any and all investments his predecessors had decided was worth their time. Along with his own and many other jobs which he'd tried out of curiosity, money certainly wasn't the reason why he wished to remain here. Knowing that he'd helped to broaden so many young minds with the knowledge he had to impart brought him a certain kind of joy which he was unable to find anywhere else. That and regularly interacting with others as opposed to his years of voluntary isolation beforehand gave his immortal life some purpose.

So it was for that reason, Alistair had decided now was the time to remove Tom Riddles' curse. It had taken more time than expected to pinpoint just where it originated from and he had to admit, it was rather clever.

The classroom in its natural form looked just like every other with its basic structure, the ceiling made from the same roughened stone as the walls and floor. Hogwarts held an incredible amount of magic, more in the air than he had ever seen in many years. It was because of this, the difficulty of locating magic with a cursed intent through magic of any and all intent, made things a little more complex.

Eyes focusing on a particular section of the ceiling, Alistair pointed his wand skyward. He had narrowed down the object, a shard of stone made from the same material as Hogwarts, which blended in and was roughly the same size and appearance as a needle. Truly, it was no wonder it had been written off as a series of misfortunate events. He did wonder if Dumbledore had known where it was all along and has chosen to leave it but in the long run, this only added to his workload of finding a staff member every year, so surely not? But then, he didn't want to know the inner workings of a man who gave the impression that he could be trusted.

Able to see magic by its individual layers, Alistair noticed that it weaved throughout the object, rather than a thin coating on top. It was intricately done, but in a way which meant caution was key. One wrong move and effectively, the needle would detonate. It was much like disarming a bomb but as magic itself was his strong point, he only saw this as a thrilling challenge rather than everything at stake, for someone much younger than him.

Cockiness was an unappealing trait and one which he'd held before until he came to realise that somewhere out there, as someone who wielded a greater skill than him. He was shown this one day and since then, he hadn't let himself be too carried away. Despite all that Tom Riddle had done, at this point, he was no worse than Dumbledore. Both had tried to kill Harry numerous times, but only one didn't make his intentions clear. But now that one was no longer trying to, a part of Alistair
would like to meet the man behind this admittedly impressive spellwork.

While he wouldn't forget his actions had cost Harry family which in his eyes was nigh unforgivable, he saw this as an opportunity to broaden his mind further on just how some humans work. But then, he wasn't entirely sure he could be classed as human. The quest for immortality was something which Alistair had seen rampant in humans and this current time period was no exception.

Unravelling the threads of magic bit by bit, Alistair studied each component with interest during the process, until all traces of his spellwork had left. Sensing that there was nothing else, he banished the stone which didn't belong, cutting through all manner of sticking and anti-removal charms effortlessly. Satisfied, he thought of dropping into Severus' office unannounced to delight him with a surprise visit, but then his plan changed quickly.

'Hi, have you got some time?'

Ah, if only Harry didn't sound so hesitant every time he asked, as if Alistair would say no. That was a mindset which he hoped to change over time, along with Harry's opinion of himself.

'Harry, even when bathing, I would say yes. In fact, an invitation for you to join me would be likely.'

Leaving the chamber, Harry's mental imagery certainly worked. As he hadn't technically bathed with anyone else, he wondered what it would be like. Thankfully before his mind could delve into possible specifics, Alistair continued.

'But in answer to your question, of course. I am in the classroom.'

Good. He could get things started straight away then. At least, if all went according to plan.

Harry didn't need to knock, the door already open and Alistair leaning against his desk. The room was how it normally appeared for once and while he came here with a specific purpose in mind outside of just seeing him, he shook his head faintly.

How was he so effortlessly sexy? It was only a single shirt button undone and of the same style as usual, only coloured lilac. There was absolutely nothing revealing there at all and it left him feeling confused why he was reacting so strongly. Regardless of this, he'd come here with a specific purpose in mind.

"Bit sudden I know, but do you fancy meeting Remus?"

Even if it was sudden, he had no reason to refuse. He'd looked forward to meeting the man for quite some time and though Harry had expressed his worries about the known hatred between Vampires and Werewolves, he had reassured him that this wasn't universal. How could he hate someone who
had provided support for Harry and who had nearly been murdered by Dumbledore, no less? Werewolves were held in far less regard than Vampires, due to the lack of a written agreement between the two races. Of course, a piece of parchment didn't change all opinions but at least, it was something.

Knowing that Harry had a reason beyond introducing him to his family, Alistair quickly agreed.

Harry was relieved he'd accepted as in truth, he wasn't sure how long he could keep this to himself. Relocating to Alistair's quarters, Harry made use of the Floo network, to contact Remus. He tried to communicate with him as much as possible, feeling guilty that he was left alone there most of the time with little to no contact outside of letters and people who knew the password. The sooner Dumbledore was dealt with, the sooner he could go beyond Evergreen. Kneeling before the flames, he waited.

Seeing a flicker Harry was shown Remus, reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, wearing a worn cream cardigan.

"Harry! How are you?" A smile lighting up his face, Harry couldn't help but feel a little nervous. Not so much about Remus meeting Alistair, but Moony. It's not like he could predict what would happen, after all. He pushed those worries aside, for now, to answer his question.

"I'm fine. Mind if I come through? There's someone I want you to meet."

"Of course, the more the merrier." He looked excited by the idea, and Harry couldn't blame him. As Alistair arrived by his side, there was little to no hesitation on Harry's part who immediately, reached over to hold his hand. It was such a simple thing and yet, the feeling of his fingers intertwined with a man that he deeply cared for brought with it a sense of contentment.

Overjoyed that Harry had initiated contact this time, Alistair pressed a kiss to their linked hands. Really, it was as if he'd been taken back to his very early years, so hopelessly giddy.

In truth, he'd rarely travelled by floo powder before, having no need to. Today wasn't an exception either as while the fidelus charm was supposed to guarantee that a property was made unplottable, he could still find the location without, given time and the size of said property. Though he could do this, that wasn't something he'd tell Harry. Not only because he respected his privacy but also, didn't want to sow seeds of doubt in his mind of whether his family would be safe there.

As the fireplace was big enough for the two of them Harry took a larger pinch of floo powder.

"The Lion's Den."

Releasing it, they were taken to Evergreen Manor.
The moment they stepped through, Remus was there to greet them. Releasing Alistair's hand, Harry took on the role of introduction.

"Alistair, this is Remus. Remus, this is Alistair. He's my-"

"Mate." Before Harry could continue, Remus finished for him. It was a statement and not a question.

Harry faltered, eyes widening, "Hang on, how'd you know?"

Remus tapped the side of his nose, chuckling to himself at Harry's dawning realisation. Much like he forgot Alistair was a Vampire, sometimes he forgot about Remus' furry little problem, as he'd heard Sirius so often call it. Really it should be obvious and it was, but Harry didn't see them any differently to how he did the others he cared for in his life.

Any traces of his usual fatigue fading away, Remus' amber eyes flickered warmly as he shook Alistair's hand. "It's good to meet you."

They studied each other for a moment, Remus finding it surreal that he wasn't on edge at all when faced with someone who likely held more power than an army of Dumbledores. In fact, he felt almost at ease.

It was the same for Alistair, who had never hated Werewolves despite the majority of his kind who had a deep-seated hatred of them. He knew Harry wouldn't exaggerate and say things precisely how they were so Remus was everything he appeared to be, kind and warm. Much like himself, or at least that's how he hoped to come across.

'Stay calm, everything's fine.' Harry reassured himself, but the fact that everything was going smoothly only guaranteed that the bump in the road hadn't surfaced yet.

He was proven right when instantaneously, a familiar shift in the air occurred. He had no time to voice a warning as once the handshake was done, that very same hand grabbed Alistair by the throat, only to slam him against the wall with enough force to shake the small ornaments sitting on top of the fireplace.

As his head hit the wall with an audible crack, Harry panicked. His panic didn't decrease any when a trickle of blood could be seen.

In an extreme opposite to Harry's panic and Moony's obvious anger, Alistair remained calm. His facial expression didn't shift an inch, despite the pain centred around the back of his head. He'd expected something like this to happen, just not when or in what form. Having no need to breathe, the hand at his throat would cause nothing more than bruises. He'd heard about Moony from Harry, knowing that the extreme shifts in highly emotional situations were solely down to the fact that
Remus hadn't yet accepted himself. The loathing kept them separate and unable to settle, wolfish traits were more likely to appear even far away from the next full moon. He'd seen this before, but never a werewolf with quite so much self-loathing.

Both of them knew who was the most powerful. But by nature, Alistair wasn't strictly Dominant and had never seen himself as such, whether this applied to relationships or outside of them. He didn't limit or restrict himself, happy to do whatever he liked in that regard. Moony, however, was. He wished to be accepted, by both man and wolf. So this was the reason why didn't fight back but simply submitted. Fighting for dominance would serve no purpose and would only guarantee that with each meeting, they would never come to an agreement.

Though Alistair was the tallest of the two, it didn't stop Moony from raising him until his feet didn't touch the ground. A threatening growl leaving his lips, amber eyes filled with warmth cooled quickly.

"Watch yourself, Vampire. If I find out you've hurt my cub at any point, I'll ram a stake straight through that fucking heart."

He knew Alistair had it under control but still, the tension was nearly too much. This was between them, something which Harry didn't want to interfere with.

Remus might like him, but he was a fool who liked everyone until they stabbed him, both of them, in the back. By that time it was too late. No. He wouldn't easily accept him into his pack. He'd have to earn his trust first. The only things which stopped him from getting violent were the scent of his power enough to overwhelm his sensitive sense of smell and Harry's obvious liking of him.

Reminded of Emily, a flash of pain flickered across Alistair's eyes though, in the setting, it went unnoticed. Unless imbued with incredibly strong light, a stake wouldn't harm him in the slightest, beyond the obvious pain and blood loss, both of which could be easily healed. But still, he took the warning seriously. He would sooner extract his magical core and live without than ever think of hurting Harry but of course, Moony wouldn't know this. Alistair did the best he could to convey his sincerity, not moving in the slightest.

"I understand. I will make no verbal promise, as words are meaningless unless proven by actions taken. So, I will show you, over time, that I will not hurt him and that my intentions are serious."

Good. He hated words. Loathed them, in fact. They damaged Remus, almost beyond repair more than once. Actions, he could watch. Words, he couldn't predict.

"We'll see."

Satisfied, at least for now, Moony released his throat. His head injury healed almost immediately after impact and the moment he was released, the markings on Alistair faded. Dropping harmlessly to his feet, he watched with mild concern as Remus appeared again, distressed.
He hated harming anyone, even if it was a Vampire who had probably faced much worse. Having no control over himself was enough for him to want to curl into a ball and never leave it.

"I'm so sorry, are you alright?" His eyes held nothing but guilt and remorse, physically checking for injuries.

Slowly, Alistair placed a light hand on Remus' shoulder. "I am fine, there is no need for concern. That reaction is expected when faced with an unknown."

Remus still didn't look convinced. Seeing his internal struggle, Harry stepped in to embrace him. At first, he stiffened, faintly detecting Alistair's scent but then, relaxed and returned it.

"He's one of the best things that's happened to me. You'll be able to trust him."

Coming from someone they trusted deeply, Harry's words proved to be more convincing and as a result, helped to calm Remus down.

"Beyond meeting each other, there's a reason why you're both here. Remus, you might want to sit down for this."

As it would take a short while to explain, Remus took the armchair while Harry and Alistair seated themselves on the sofa. He didn't want to create false hope, but it couldn't go unmentioned either.

"There's a slim chance that Sirius might still be alive." Voicing this only raised his own hopes further and he really didn't want to disappoint himself or Remus especially, with this news.

Hearing his words, Remus blinked with disbelief. "What? How?"

As Harry told them about the room of souls and Padfoot's thin connection that could still be felt, Remus' confusion showed. As silence fell between them, Alistair was the first to speak up. "There is no need to explain if doing so is too painful, but how did he die?"

Sirius fading away and through a structure which no one but the Unspeakables themselves new about, was a memory he'd much rather forget. But someone had to explain and out of them both, Harry would rather be the one to do so as someone who had known Sirius for less time, not wishing for Remus to go through a memory equally as if not more painful.

"He was hit with the killing curse, then fell through the veil."

Alistair understood, all except one thing. "What is the veil?"
Harry shrugged. "No idea. It's this weird archway. It looks so old I'm shocked it hasn't just collapsed. It's got some tattered black curtains in front of it that flutter, but there's no breeze."

Alistair froze. That description was very familiar. The courtyard at Lothaire Castle, where he'd had his first proper conversation with Jacob since their reunion, flashed through his mind. Could it be the very same one that he remembered being there when just a child? But, surely not.

"Harry, may I see this archway?" He kept his voice gentle, though there was a sense of urgency that couldn't be ignored. Opting to choose the moment he first laid eyes on it, Harry projected the image to Alistair's mind.

His suspicions were confirmed. This archway, or the veil, as the humans called it, belonged to the Vampires or more specifically, him. His memories of so long ago were sketchy at best and while there was a chance that it had been sold or traded, those chances were very slim due to what exactly it was.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, confused by Alistair's sudden shift in mood.

This was serious. More serious than most realized. Having no name previously and only a name for what lay within, perhaps the veil was an apt description. As firstborn of the most elite family, only Alistair was privy to the details of this, at first. Shortly after he'd informed Solomon, as someone who he deeply trusted. Similarly, he trusted the men in this room with him, particularly because it directly concerned someone they both cared about, deeply.

"This veil that you speak of, belongs to the Vampires. I am unsure of how it ended up in Britain, but it was never meant for the souls of humans. I am reluctant to share intimate details, as we hold it in the higher regard than anything in this world or the next."

Harry was stunned. Sharing a look with Remus he didn't pry but had to know one thing. "What does this mean, then?"

"I am unsure. I have never known a human soul to enter before now." Alistair admitted, troubled. "But, I know, in theory, of how to interact with it."

He'd never had the chance to himself, vanishing long before he held the rights to know of just what it was. In fact, it was only after his father's death that he learned the full details.

Meant for the souls of Vampires who could no longer keep their immortal bodies for whatever reason, it leads to Valea neMuritoare. Humans believed in reincarnation and rightly so as in a sense, that's precisely what this object of unknown creation, even to him, had the capability of doing. At any point, whether a second or thousands of years into 'death', Vampires had the chance of being reborn in a sense, but could only use the body of an immortal to match their soul.
One thing was for certain, Alistair intended to take it back. It didn't belong to them. Who knows if the many souls over thousands of years had been able to find their way there, when not in its rightful place? He was polite and diplomatic most of the time but in relation to this, he wouldn't hesitate.

Alistair had said in theory, as he'd read clear instructions over what sort of control he had. He couldn't control the reincarnation progress but he could effectively communicate with any and all souls beyond the mortal realm. Whether it would work in practice, however, was another question entirely. Then, there was the matter of what happened to human souls who had found their way through but also, one who had been struck with the killing curse beforehand. In this instance, he wouldn't know until he found out for himself.

Harry remained silent, not daring to voice his hopes that were now sky high. He just couldn't. Swallowing several times, he shared a moment of understanding with Remus, in a similar state.

"May I see the room that it is held in?"

Harry nodded. Once Alistair had a clear image, he was ready.

"Alright. I will take us directly there."

Staring at him, Harry was partially disbelieved. "You mean, straight from here to the room itself?"

"Yes." It was said as if he were discussing the weather, extremely confident in his abilities.

"...Through the Ministry's Wards, without alerting them?" Remus asked slowly, barely comprehending the level of power he no doubt possessed and most of all, forgetting that his age probably totalled more than the entire population of Hogwarts itself.

"Of course. They will remain unaware."

"It's worth a try." though he said this, Remus couldn't hide his slight trepidation.

No better time than the present then. Even if nothing came of it, Harry could at least say to Padfoot that they'd tried. As he didn't need to make physical contact to transport them all, Alistair's magic wrapped firmly around the two mortals and swiftly, they disappeared.

So quickly thrust into the heart of duelling with Death Eaters, Harry hadn’t the chance to study his surroundings much. The large, mostly rocky room was blanketed in darkness, the only light source available being the ever so faint shimmering of the veil’s archway, when the tattered curtains moved just so.
While Alistair headed straight for it, Remus’ eyes locked on the very same spot he’d seen his lover die. Knowing that he was struggling, Harry offered him support with a brief hand squeeze. “Whatever happens, I’m not going anywhere.”

Giving Harry a shaky smile, Remus appreciated it. To this day he was still grieving but now, he pathetically clung onto this tiny possibility. Side by side they followed, footsteps echoing and stopping at a short distance away, to give Alistair some space.

This was it. So vaguely familiar and yet unfamiliar, seeing it differently now to how he did as a child. It was a thing of wonderment, of mystery. But now, it was so much more. It was a great responsibility placed on his shoulders and yet, he didn’t feel the slightest bit of pressure. While it was true he didn’t know what happened to human souls, he didn’t think they would be destroyed. Simply held in suspended animation, for lack of a better term.

It was easy to see that it was out of place, at least to him. At the stonework’s base were very faint lines, an indication that it didn’t belong with the stone that served as the support below. The stone was sentient, in a sense. It would recognise the touch of his bloodline alone and no other. For anyone else, nothing would happen.

A hand running over the roughness, his touch seemed to reawaken that which had not been seen in several millennia. Before their eyes markings ingrained into the stonework flared to life, each one a bright, vibrant blue. Covering the entirety of the arch, each provided a restoration effect, resetting the stone back to its former glory.

The markings were actually symbols, each with a different meaning. To communicate, it required all twenty to be touched in the correct order. Knowing that they would understand why this was necessary, Alistair erected a barrier, to prevent them from seeing the combination.

"This must be important to them, more than we realise," Remus muttered, slightly unnerved by how eerily silent everything was.

"We probably know more than most with just the basics, better to keep it that way."

Harry could only imagine just who would be interested in this kind of information. The little they knew, the safer it would be overall. Stomach churning with nerves he waited, ears attuned to every little noise.

Airborne, it took little to no thought on Alistair's part, instinctively knowing the correct order and in preparation for the day that he should find it again, would know what to do. The incorrect combination would ensure in an imminent lockdown and while it would appear no different, further interactions wouldn't be available for quite some time to come. With each direct touch, the engraved markings shifted to pure white and the tattered curtains began to whip wildly, in response to a breeze not belong to the room itself.
The winds grew strong enough to the point where Alistair lost the ribbon used to tie his hair with, fluttering harmlessly to the ground a short distance away. The moment he touched the final marking, he dispelled the barrier preventing them from seeing. While whispers could be heard by anyone, only Alistair could make out distinct voices within.

In place of the mist, was Valea neMuritoare. Rather beautiful, really. It only showed a glimpse but there was lush and verdant greenery as far as the eye could see.

There was a noticeable difference between Human and Vampire souls. Because life was so short for them, their souls shone bright, with the essence of life. Though often, it was tinged with the choices they had made as well. Those, like Dumbledore or Voldemort who had chosen a darker path, would equally have a soul to match. Moral alignment was everything while with Vampires, not so much.

Inherently dark by nature, by default their souls were both the same size and colour unless altered by drastic measures. to anyone else they would appear identical and in essence they were. Only those who were finely attuned to magic itself would notice where the differences were. A weaker Vampire's soul was fainter and the stronger they became, so, in turn, was their soul.

As he was searching for a human who still had a body rather than a Vampire without, it didn't take long for Alistair to sense just where Sirius was. While he could enter himself, there was no guarantee of what could happen once he did. Placing a hand flat on the stone's surface, he tried to communicate.

'Sirius Black?'

The thought was a strong one, causing a ripple to pass beneath the stone he stood upon. Though it wasn't a verbal answer, it remained an indication to continue. With the exception of Sirius, he couldn't discount the idea that other races had somehow passed through and once in his possession again, he would investigate this. For now, there was only one he looked for.

And there, a ghostly reflection. A faint one, but enough for Alistair to recognise the features he'd seen glimpses of on the occasions where Harry's thoughts were strong enough to project. He seemed to be vaguely aware, on the fine edge between life and death. He didn't think Sirius would be able to leave without assistance.

Sensing that he wouldn't be harmed, Alistair reached a hand through and for a moment, felt the temperature plummet. Connected with the veil, Alistair's intent was clear.

About a minute had passed and just after, there was a weak tug on his hand, the grip loose. Within he could see the faint shimmer of his body, barely solid. Tightening his own grip, Alistair pulled, met with no resistance.

Barely conscious, Sirius was a dead weight in Alistair's arms, skin ashen pale and freezing to the touch. He could detect a magic there not his own, but couldn't see it, which was unusual.
Before Harry could so much as blink Remus dashed off, to Sirius' side. Kneeling on the opposite side and looking close to passing out, he was almost too scared to voice the question on his mind. "Is he dead?"

Alistair shook his head, finding a pulse point on his wrist. "He is trapped between the two states of being."

Alistair could make an accurate guess as to what was keeping him there, however so little was known about the killing curse, even to Vampires, that he wouldn't know the first thing to combat it. The best he could do for now was keep him stabilised until a viable solution presented itself. This was another reminder that age didn't guarantee an answer to everything.

Harry was the last to join them, skidding to a halt. "Can't you see it?"

"See what?" Remus asked, confused.

"He's got a green glow around him." The moment Harry said this, he understood perfectly and quickly, Alistair caught on.

"Avada Kedavra. Harry, perhaps it is your connection with Thanatos?"

"I think so. He told me the killing curse originated from him and in my Animagus form." He trailed off, eyes widening.

Náve had told him that as long as some traces of the raw spell remained, there was a brief window of time where the effects could be reversed. As death itself and the creator, Thanatos had some degree of control. Death was fleeting, so it didn't provide much time.

Instead of explaining, Harry did what came naturally to him at this point, transforming into Thanatos. In this form, he could see and sense so much more. Every intricate detail as the spell seemed to call out in an intoxicating voice, one of which only he could understand.

Letting out a neigh it seemed to shake the very foundations, raising the hairs on Remus and Alistair. Bending his head down, Thanatos' nose brushed against Sirius' chest and with it, Avada Kedavra shook loose. Sensing that where it belonged wasn't on this body it returned to the original creator, fine, hair-like wisps which attached itself to his mane, as if it never left at all.

"Fascinating." Alistair marvelled, having watched what happened with great interest. Only taking his eyes off Sirius for a moment, he sensed the changes in him immediately. He was still in need of medical attention, but safely out of the danger zone.
"He will be alright."

The moment Alistair confirmed this, Sirius' eyes opened blearily.

Transforming back and distancing himself, Harry shuddered lightly. That was beyond weird. Adrenaline had guided his actions but right now, none of this was sinking in. As something was placed around his neck, he looked up and into the eyes of Alistair, curious. "What's this?"

"It is a one-way Portkey. Simply touch it and it will take you outside and to the same alley in London that we used to visit the Ministry, officially."

He was about to ask why he'd given him this when his attention was captured by Remus. The past several minutes, Remus had been in a daze and only half believing that this wasn't all a dream. He was only made aware that it wasn't when the moment his eyes opened and then, everything else ceased to exist, all except for them. It was him. It was really Sirius. He had kept his childish immaturity and yet, lost all the innocence. The gaunt man before him was but a shadow of his former self but to Remus, it didn't matter a bit.

"Remus?" A parched voice left dry, raspy lips.

Known for his calm and patience, Remus couldn't hold either back any more, nor the tears which fell from his eyes. A hand cupping the back of Sirius' head to support it, a pair of lips tinged with desperation met his own, almost to check for themselves to see if he was still alive.

A muffled squeak left Harry's mouth, a mixture of embarrassed and overjoyed for them. He turned away to give them some semblance of privacy and in doing so, noticed Alistair had disappeared.

Still somewhat dazed, Remus' kiss helped to restore some of Sirius' sense of reality, enough to wrap arms around his neck for extra support. It wasn't long at all, a few short seconds at most. It was enough to rekindle a connection which for one had been months and another, mere minutes ago with losing all sense of time.

"That's one hell of a wake-up call." Giving him a lopsided grin, Sirius realised what position they were in and slowly, his memories began to trickle back. With help from Remus, he carefully propped himself into a sitting position, eyes on the veil and then, looking down at his own body with confusion.

"The last thing I remember is my dear cousin's insane mug, then falling through there. How did I get back out?"

Just the thought of explaining gave Remus a headache. There wasn't even a short story. It was either
the long version or the very long version. "I'll save that for when we get out of here." He regained a little composure, though still a little shell shocked. His joy intermingled with Moony's, elated to be reunited with his mate again.

He couldn't argue with this. The room gave him the creeps anyway. "How long has it been?"

"About four and a half months." Harry saw his opportunity. Taking it, he seated himself by Sirius' other side.

Not having noticed him before, he could blame Sirius for looking so shocked. He'd come a long way from the pale, malnourished person that he'd been before his death of sorts.

"Harry?" Sirius squinted a little, the Death Chamber holding little to no light by which to see him. Noticing this he cast Lumos, leaving his wand to hover by their side.

"Yeah, it's me. We've both got stories for you."

Glancing at Remus, Sirius panicked slightly. Before he could say anything, the other man guessed where his train of thought had gone. "He knows about us."

Sirius swallowed, looking nervous until Harry's hand touched his.

"I'm happy for you both. If I had issues I'd be the biggest hypocrite, because you're looking at Mr Bisexual extraordinaire."

To lighten the mood he attempted a joke, chuckling to himself. Sirius was there. Really there. Harry had helped but without Alistair, he would have never been able to leave.

He couldn’t help himself. Fear of rejection these days was the furthest from his mind, thanks to both Remus and Alistair. Whenever he thought of Sirius it was regret. Regret that he didn’t know him sooner and regret that their moments together were so few and fleeting. Mainly depressing, as Grimmauld Place had the ability to sap the light and joy out of most people who stayed there. Already having his own personal demons, staying in a place that he’d told Harry more than once he hated didn’t help matters.

He wanted to help Sirius heal. He wanted him to live the life he never had the chance to, one of which was robbed away in more than one sense. So it was with this, that Harry hugged him. He tried to place as much love and affection that he held for someone that really he’d barely had the chance to know but wanted to, in his actions. Face buried in Sirius’ shoulder, Harry sniffled slightly. He could feel him stiffen, knowing that he hadn’t expected such actions from but immediately, returned the gesture.
“Moony, get over here. This is a Marauder group hug!”

Sirius sounded delighted with the idea and Harry laughed, voice choked with tears. Equally enthusiastic he made room for Remus and the moment he joined, I felt as if everything was right, for the first time. It would never be perfect, the night that his parents died ensured this, but it became close.

He wasn’t sure how long they were there for but surrounded by the closest people he considered to parents, he could almost forget everything else.

“We’ve probably broken several laws being here so the sooner we leave, the better.”

Reluctantly, Harry was the one to break the moment up, though only out of necessity. With assistance from Harry and Remus Sirius rose to his feet shakily.

“So, how exactly are we leaving without the DMLE up our arses? Actually, how did you even get here?” Sirius had so many questions he wasn’t even sure what he wanted the answer to first. Glancing at their expressions, he sighed. “A long story?”

He was met with two identical nods.

“I’ve got a one-way Portkey, it will get us out.” Gesturing to his neck, Harry spotted something a short distance away.

“One minute.”

Moving closer, he realised it was Alistair’s hair ribbon. He’d noticed before he’d left that he wasn’t wearing it any more and wondered where it had gone. This answered his question. Lilac in colour as well he picked it up, to put in his pocket.

Returning to them Harry picked up the Portkey by its long chain and once ready, held it in the palm of his hand. He doubted any other could pass through the wards but one made by Alistair, he wasn’t surprised. Still supporting Sirius Remus touched his shoulder, leaving the Chamber.

Just like Alistair said, they arrived at the very same alleyway and to their surprise, didn’t so much as stumble or fall over.

“We’re not going to Grimmauld Place, don’t worry,” Harry reassured Sirius, who grimaced faintly. Hearing Harry’s words, he breathed a faint sigh of relief.

Remus was the one to transport them all back and once outside of the door, gestured for Sirius to
press his palm against the door to be recognised. Noticing a light sheen of sweat on his brow, Remus lead him to the sofa to lie down.

“How are you feeling?” He furrowed his brow, concerned.

“Like shit.”

Harry wasn’t surprised. Thinking quickly he threw some floo powder into the flames.

“How are you feeling?” He furrowed his brow, concerned.

“Like shit.”

Anxiously, he waited for a response and hoped that she wasn’t too busy. Seeing her face reflected in the flames, both eyebrows rose in surprise. “Mr Potter? Why are you not in School?” Her voice took on a disapproving note.

“Sorry,” Harry tried to sound as sincere as possible. “But it’s important. Can I possibly borrow your expertise?”

Knowing him well enough that he wouldn’t ask if it was something trivial, she nodded briskly. If anyone should enter or if a patient needed assistance, she’d be alerted. "Very well."

After ensuring no one else was in the room with her, Harry spoke the password and a moment later, she arrived in the living room.

“Now Mr Potter, what’s wrong with you this time?”

“Not me, it’s him.” Harry pointed to the sofa, bracing himself for any and all possible reactions.

Following his line of sight, Madam Pomfrey shrieked. All thoughts of professionalism promptly flew away in the face of such a shocking sight.

“What’s wrong Poppy? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Sirius gave her a cocky confident grin, tinged with some tiredness.

Even if she wasn’t under an oath, she wouldn’t say a word. Who would believe her? While there were questions in need of answers, she had a job to do. Running a quick diagnostic, a series of letters and numbers nothing more than jargon to Remus and Harry flashed in mid-air. Muttering to herself, various potions familiar to Harry emerged from the linings of her robes. Not losing focus for a second, she kept them informed.
“His core is drained to dangerous levels and he is fatigued. For now, what he needs is rest but other than this, he will be fine.” Madam Pomfrey turned to face them.

“Remus, I’ll give you a health regime for him to follow as I fully expect my orders to be ignored otherwise.” Giving him a glare as she said this, Sirius’ expression turned sheepish.

After Remus’ assurance that he would help to keep Sirius in line, Harry was last. “Mr Potter, thank you for placing your trust in me. However, it is best you return to school now.”

He understood that. It’s not like anyone else knew where he went either, except for Alistair. Sirius was safe here. He had time to catch up with him. Plus, he had a special someone to thank.

Feeling mischievous he approached Sirius, whispering into his ear so that only he could hear.

“Catch you two lovebirds later!”

Grinning to himself, he deftly dodged what would have been an enthusiastic head ruffle. Saying his goodbyes to them, Harry returned to Hogwarts.

A few minutes later and leaving instructions in Remus’ capable hands, Madam Pomfrey did the same. Sitting on the edge where Sirius’ head was propped on a cushion, Remus watched with faint amusement as he eyed the dreamless sleep in his hand with mild distaste.

“You owe me an explanation for all this. Prongslet too.” Deciding it was better to do as she said, Sirius downed the potion.

“Of course we will, I promise.”

While waiting for it to take effect, Sirius voiced what had been on his mind, other than the unbelievable situation he found himself in.

“So, Harry’s bi? I had no idea. Wasn’t he crushing on that Chang girl?”

Remus nodded. “He was, but not now. He’s just started dating someone.”

Sirius’ eyes gleamed with interest. “Really, who?”

Before Remus could answer Sirius paled, gripping his arm tightly. “Moony I swear if you tell me
he’s dating Snape..”

Remus choked on air. “Merlin, no!”

Slumping back into the sofa, his grip on Remus slackened. “Thank fuck for that.”

“He’s dating a 1,500-year-old Vampire.”

“Oh, fair enough.”

Remus said it so casually, that the words didn’t register within his tired brain until a few seconds later.

“WHAT?!”

That shout had drained the last of his energy to stay awake and before he could ask further questions, fell asleep.

Chuckling to himself, Remus didn’t plan to move from this position and with a wandless thought, altered the sofa enough to comfortably fit both of them. For a long time, he simply watched, in disbelief still that his lover was here and sleeping peacefully. It would take a while to sink in. Lacing his fingers with Sirius, he looked at their intertwined hands with contentment. Both Remus and Moony would find some way to thank them, their honour demanded it, for the restoration of a pack member they considered to be irreplaceable.

Thankfully no one else was in the halls, as Harry didn’t exactly fancy running into a Professor in his hurried state. God, he didn’t think it was possible to be this happy, ever. He couldn’t stop himself from hoping despite everything and against all the odds, it wasn’t in vain. Harry’s luck was a strange kind but in this case, it was the luckiest he’d ever been. How could he even begin to thank Alistair? Just when he thought he couldn’t be anymore fonder of him, that had increased tenfold.

Footsteps filled with purpose, around this time he should be in his private quarters. Drawing closer to them he gave no warning, pushing the door open with a light shove and walking towards him.

Having sensed his arrival before the door opened, Alistair gave him a happy smile. “Harry! How-“

Throwing all caution to the wind and wanting to sincerely convey his thanks in one way, Alistair never had the chance to finish his question as he was silenced by lips passionately locking with his.

Caught off guard, he let out a faint gasp. As Harry’s fingers threaded through his silky hair, he didn’t
hesitate. With just enough room between the chair and desk, Harry slipped right in, to confidently
straddle Alistair’s lap.

Beyond this, he had no clue what he was doing but the faint sound he’d managed to coax out that
was similar to his own provided enough encouragement. The moment Alistair opened his mouth a
little, Harry’s tongue experimentally stroked his.

He needn’t have worried though as the split second Alistair was taken by surprise, he soon matched
Harry’s pace and much like before, slowly guided him even as strong arms pulled him closer.

It was as if Harry burned from the inside out but in the most pleasant way possible. It was difficult
for him to describe but this intimacy gave him an adrenaline rush, in a different way to flying. He
didn’t want it to end but eventually, he had to pull away for air.

Eyes fluttering open, he realised just what he’d done and what position he found himself in. Flushing
deaPLY, he was met with a warm chuckle.

“It is too late to be embarrassed now.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s like a kissing demon possessed me there.”

Harry didn’t regret his actions for a moment though, still a little dazed. He shuddered lightly, as
Alistair whispered into his ear.

“I find your boldness delightful.”

He’d try to be more proactive. Really, there wasn’t any need to remain shy around him at all. Alistair
had seen Harry at his best and worst, so something like this wouldn’t be out of place.

“Without you, Sirius wouldn’t have been able to leave. I’ll find a way to repay you, promise.”

Harry’s eyes shone with sincerity, as Alistair’s hands cupped his face.

“There is no need. You unintentionally located something very important to me so technically, we
aided one another.”

That much was true. But even still, he wanted to do this much though right now, he felt that anything
he could come up with in response wouldn’t be enough. Remembering the ribbon in his pocket,
Harry took it out, to show him. “Missing something?”

“In my desire to give you privacy, I forgot to retrieve it.” He admitted, carefully taking it from Harry
to place on the desk. “Now, before I was so enthusiastically interrupted, did everything go smoothly?”

As Harry gave him a brief rundown of what happened, he looked content. Aware of the position Harry was in he attempted to stand up but rather than let him go, Alistair adjusted him so that he sat sideways, instead. Arms still wrapped around him, he dropped a small kiss to the top of his head. “Ah Harry, you cannot escape me so easily.”

Not that he was thinking clearly enough to consider this but judging by the pile of paperwork, Alistair was in the middle of something. “Shouldn’t I go so you can finish working?”

He gave Harry a meaningful look. “I have been given a new assignment. Quite recently, in fact. There are enough hours to finish my work, but there is not enough in the world that satiates my desire to spend it with you.”

Harry was touched. He felt cared for and treasured, in a way that he never had before. If Alistair didn’t want him to leave, Harry wouldn’t protest. The more time he could spend with him, the better.

In the warmth of Alistair’s arms, they continued to discover more about the other, until long after the rest of Hogwarts slept.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully everything with the veil makes sense, thought I'd take some creative freedom with it xD
Not Alone

Chapter Summary

While Harry is catching up with Remus and Sirius, Alistair comes to the realization that he isn't as well informed as first thought. As the realization brings him down, Harry then helps him to learn a valuable lesson.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: SIRIUS IS BACK!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While Sirius was brought back from the veil on Tuesday, he was unable to visit him again until the weekend. But over the last few days, Harry had done the best he could to fill his friends in on all that happened, though there were questions about the veil that remained unanswered. But in this instance what mattered were the results. If he was comfortable sharing details about it, then Harry was all too happy to listen. But until then, he would focus on the huge positive that came from it.

Hearing a familiar barking when leaving the floo, Harry followed it to outside. Mid last month, He'd placed some benches just in front of the Manor as by far, this was where it offered the most impressive view. Due to the colder weather, some plants had left to make way for new, while trees clung to the last of their vibrant colours before winter temporarily swept all of it away. Among this was Remus, a leg crossed over the other with an open newspaper. Occasionally he would glance up, an amused smile about his lips as he watched Padfoot chase a particularly deft Rabbit.

Coming behind the bench, Harry glanced over his shoulder. "Anything good?"

Remus shook his head, making a faint sound of disgust. "The usual shite, a kernel of truth among a sea of exaggeration. There was only one thing of interest."

Pointing to a particular short article, Harry skimmed the contents.

Muggle Deaths: Are Vampires to Blame?

Brought to the head of DMLE’s attention by the current Prime Minister, muggle forensics have been unable to identify the cause of several deaths widespread across the United Kingdom. There were no
As the general public is forbidden to know of the Wizarding world, Amelia Bones is to take up the case. It is rumoured that we are not the only country to be affected. When asked if she believed Vampires to be the cause, Madam Bones had this to say:

"There is a possibility. However, other causes cannot be discounted."

Once this reporter knows more, you, the dear readers, will be informed.

Eddie Walker

Harry sighed. He appreciated Amelia's words and there was nothing there to ignite the flames of those who already vehemently hated Vampires, but this wasn't helping overall relations at all.

Because he wanted to understand from the source, many of Harry’s questions to Alistair were about Vampires and the differences between magic and non-magical. He'd come to realise that there were quite a few and regular humans without magic who had been turned usually didn't survive, But if they did, then the urge to feed would be near impossible to control unless they held remarkable willpower and often, they would succumb to their desires and drain another dry during daylight. Some had been caught, others had gotten away with it.

Wizard born was the same, with one difference being the possession of their magical core and the rate of those who survived the turning were increased. Hundreds of years ago, a Vampire without magic would never be able to see their reflection while those with magic could detect faint hints of what they should look like, born Vampires included. But now that mirrors were made of different components, some were able to accurately show their reflection.

Born Vampires like Alistair, adapted to their powers over time. With parents usually there to guide them self-control was taught and having known no other life before until those who were turned, had no internal or emotional struggles.

Dhampirs were not immortal but would live far longer lives than Witches and Wizards, whether they possessed magic or not. They don't need to feed as frequently, regular food and drink satiating the part that was human but too long without blood and their bodies would shut down all the same.

They were differences Harry hadn't thought of and the images in his mind before now were a far cry from what he was told. He'd appreciated the chance to know more of Alistair but also, the truth behind what many didn't see. He'd admitted himself that they couldn't be absolved of all blame as some born Vampires still chose to drain their victims dry, but the majority he knew primarily drank creature and animal blood and only occasionally human, but never to kill.
The article was sobering, in a sense. Not everyone felt the same way Harry did after all and many would sooner watch a Vampire burn than ever listen to them.

"I hope they find out who did it." That was all Harry said, choosing to sit on the grass and watch a certain mischievous Animagus for a while. The moment he did so Padfoot abandoned his chase, making a beeline for him instead.

"Oof!"

With an excited twinkle in his dark eyes, Padfoot knocked Harry flat, paws pinning him there as his tongue tried to lick the life out of him. With several swipes his face was covered and blindly, he reached up to pat his head. Turning his face to the side he spoke, but not without difficulty as his ear was then targeted.

"It's good to see you as well. Mind getting off me? Furry lump."

His voice held an affectionate note, a hand finding its way to Padfoot's shaggy fur and scratching just behind his neck. Apparently, it was a sweet spot as immediately he shifted positions, beginning to scratch with his hind leg.

Chuckling at how close man and dog were in resemblance looks and personality wise, Padfoot transformed back into Sirius. Though it had only been four days, he already looked a lot better. It would take a while for him to get where he needed to be, but it was good progress. As he offered a hand up Harry accepted and unconsciously, found himself staring.

Sirius made a show of sniffing his armpit. "Do I smell that bad?"

Harry snorted. "No worse than usual." Laughing at Sirius' indignant look, his green eyes flickered with seriousness. "Still half in disbelief that you're back."

"How do you think I feel? One moment I'm supposedly dead the next I'm not." Sirius shook his head, bemused and eventually, Harry seated himself between Sirius and Remus, the former with an air of expectation.

"I haven't told Sirius anything yet, as most of it revolves around you," Remus explained, giving a mildly apologetic glance towards his partner.

Harry could understand that, but god he was nervous. Scared, even. Sirius was the stereotypical Gryffindor. All heart and definitely brains, but used in situations he rushed into rather than sitting back and thinking before all the action occurred.
It was only as Harry glanced down, that he'd realised that the scars on his hands were hidden. He'd promised himself he wouldn't hide them and while he didn't with Alistair who had seen some and around school, somehow it was different this time.

He didn't know he'd hid them. There was no physical indication, glamour charms at this point akin to breathing with how natural they came. While Remus had already seen them, Sirius had yet to. Catching his line of sight, Remus gave him an encouraging smile.

There was nothing to be ashamed of. They were inflicted by himself, but through the hands of yet another abuser in his life. One who in the future, would see the inside of a cell at Azkaban if all went well.

Sensing the change in mood Sirius eyed them both, confused. "What's wrong?"

"There's a lot of things we've got to tell you, but this is one of them." Heart pounding with nerves, Harry dispelled everything hiding the scars on his hands and silently, showed them to him.

Fearful for what he might see, he kept his gaze averted. Each time he felt horribly exposed, as though stripping away all the layers and leaving the original product.

Truthfully Harry expected an explosion of sorts but instead, got the opposite. Flinching ever so slightly at the touch of Sirius' fingers as they took his hands, he swallowed at the deadly, poisonous calm.

"Who did this?"

"Umbridge. I had to write lines with a blood quill."

Silence. It was unnerving to the point where he forcefully ignored his urge of running.

"Harry, why didn't you tell me? Or Dumbledore? Anyone?"

Harry flinched noticeably this time, Dumbledore the trigger. He had so much to explain, but one step at a time. At the hurt in his voice, Harry's heart clenched painfully. With Sirius holding both of his hands, he couldn't fidget. So, all that remained was for Harry to meet his gaze head-on.

Seeing the overwhelming sadness in his eyes didn't help Harry to feel less guilty, either. What he was about to say had a high chance of leading into another topic of conversation, one that needed to be discussed, but one he couldn't guarantee his readiness for. As Remus' hand soothingly rubbed his shoulder, his warmth helped to thaw some of the coldness, enough to at least respond.
"I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she got to me. But mainly, I'm used to keeping quiet about stuff like that."

Sirius knew he'd regret asking. "What do you mean, used to it?"

Could he go the next step? His friends were the first to see the scars on his torso as he trusted them, followed by Dean and Seamus. It wasn't so bad with them, close in a different way to how he was with Alistair or Remus and Sirius. That was why he'd hesitated.

A part of him was still ashamed and the rest saw them as a large, glaring flaw and his own mind was the obstacle to getting them removed. While he was far better with affection than he'd ever been, the fear of rejection was never too far off.

He began to shake, lost in thoughts of what ifs and struggling with whether he should show them or not. He was genuinely terrified.

'Get a grip! You've been entered into a tournament which a lot of adults died in and lived to tell the tale yet you're wimping out at this?'

Giving himself a mental kick, it took all the willpower he had to not break down there and then. "The Dursleys. Ever since I was dropped on their doorstep they've treated me like shit. They made sure I felt that way as well."

Harry blew a long breath out, thankful for the fresh air which allowed him to think a bit clearer. Standing up to turn around, fingers brushed the hem of his shirt, gripping it. Remus knew about the abuse but hadn't seen the scars and Sirius knew nothing.

Lifting his shirt and hearing the intakes of breath coming from them, Harry immediately dropped his gaze. He remained motionless, neither moving or speaking.

"I'LL KILL THEM!" Harry jumped, the outburst he was waiting for arriving while Remus held back tears. He almost expected Moony to make an appearance but now that his mate was here, perhaps he had a little more control. Releasing his shirt, it fell back into place while Harry delivered more shocking news, not the last of today.

"I already have."

That stopped Sirius in his tracks, who had gotten up and had his arm held tightly by Remus, jaw dropping.

"..You killed them?"
Harry wasn't ashamed in the least. At first, he held some remorse in the form of old nightmares but then, that stopped. If it wasn't for the fact that they portrayed themselves to be law-abiding citizens, Harry had no doubt Vernon would have killed him. Petunia and Dudley wouldn't have cared either. Hell, several times over the years between the three of them, they nearly had. If it wasn't for his magic, he would have died long before he got the chance to live.

"Yeah."

"Saved me the job." Though Sirius said this, Harry could see he was shaken. "I never wanted you to know what it was like to kill someone. Stupid really, considering the times we live in."

Harry's memory flickered back to his first year. Technically he already had killed someone, though it was in self-defence. That was a particularly rough time, just more fuel to add to the fire of his nightmares.

Remus had remained quiet but kindly interjected. "Sirius and I have our fair share of scars as well. Thank you for showing us yours. We don't think any less of you because of this."

As Harry sat between them again, Sirius enthusiastically ruffled his hair, swiftly changing the mood.

"So," Running a hand through his shaggy hair, Sirius gave a cocky grin. "Who's that handsome devil on your stomach?"

Sirius knew that Harry knew it was Padfoot but still, nothing short of a sledgehammer could dent his huge ego. Harry didn't feed into it, though. "You know who it is."

"He's got good taste, agreed?" Sirius directed his question to the man on Harry's other side, who remained casual.

"Sure, if you want a flea-bitten mutt inked into your skin for life. You have my sincere condolences."

"Remus, you wound me!" He exclaimed, aghast.

Harry smiled, watching their little exchange. But the sooner they explained between them what had happened during the months Sirius was gone, the better. He opened his mouth, filled with resolve.

"I'll start at the beginning and work from there."

Turning to Sirius, he explained everything and during the process, watched every kind of emotion surface and various changing expressions. But through it all he remained tight-lipped, just listening.
Already pale his skin took on a deathly tone when revealed that Dumbledore wasn't everything he appeared to be and all that he'd done to Harry and others. Unlike most Sirius reserved his judgement on Vampires, as he'd find it hypocritical to blindly hate them when he was in love with a man who had faced hate and ridicule on a daily basis for something he couldn't help.

By the time Harry finished his voice was hoarse, and he fell silent.

It was too much for him to process. Sirius was torn between wanting to strangle Dumbledore with his beard, faint at the thought of a truce with Voldemort and scream proudly from the rooftops at how much Harry had changed for the better and clearly, a lot of this had to do with his new Vampire lover.

Harry didn't mention his truce with Professor Snape, not wanting the mood to turn sour. They'd yet to sort out their differences and while according to Remus he'd managed to do that to the point that they could speak civilly without a harsh glare aimed in his direction, Harry hoped that the same could happen for them as well. He didn't like what the Marauders had collectively done to him throughout their school years but also, he didn't want to argue over it. Just let him find out whenever. The thought was headache inducing, so he pushed it firmly to the back.

"Accio Firewhisky."

A bottle whizzed into Sirius' hand a moment later, with nothing locked thankfully.

"Sorry but if you're telling me all this, I need a drink." With a twist, the cap came off and rather than pour a glass, he swigged it straight from the bottle.

Sirius exhaled in pleasure, feeling the burn in this throat. "Much better. Right, so Dumbledore is an arse, Snake face is still an arse but an arse that's going to leave you alone. You're ridiculously powerful and have two Animagus forms, one of which helped to save my life. The Basilisk you killed is back from the dead and in the Chamber of Secrets again."

Sirius tried to sum it up, moaning to himself. "God Harry, overload my brains cells with information why don't you?"

He probably hadn't even mentioned half of what he'd been told and in truth, it would take a while to process. There was that much he couldn't decide what the most appropriate action should be. But there was one thing.

"So, you've got a Vampire lover and he's your Professor? Kinky." He raised his eyebrows meaningfully, causing Harry to blush.

Sirius barked a laugh, giving him a friendly shoulder slap. "I mean there's older men and then there's OLD. Takes the piss slightly but without him, I wouldn't be here now. So I've got no complaints."
Remus, what did you make of him?"

Actually, that was something Harry wanted to know as well, waiting for his response anxiously.

Remus gave Harry a reassuring smile. "He's nothing like what I expected, charming but without the arrogance." He gave Sirius a glance, who feigned ignorance.

"Don't know why you're looking at me, I'm not arrogant, just honest. I'm a charmingly handsome bastard and you know it."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Way to toot your own horn there. Ever heard of a thing called humility?"

"Can't say I have. Sounds tasty though."

Honestly. Harry had nothing to say to that, Grinning to himself. But, there was one thing he didn't yet know and he'd left that for Remus to explain. Sensing Harry's gaze, he steeled himself for another explosive reaction. If told over time he had no doubt a lot of Harry's words would have him practically foaming at the mouth but all at once affected things slightly.

"There's one thing I haven't told you."

Sirius didn't like the way Remus said this, gaze turning wary. "What?"

Harry certainly didn't envy their situation and for a small excuse to leave the situation, went to fetch three shot glasses. He wasn't about to let Sirius slowly damage his liver alone and really, it was a drink worthy time.

Remus understood why Harry had left for a short while, not blaming him. Being able to look at Sirius directly made things a little easier. "Albus tried to kill me, alongside some other members of the Order."

"He what?" Sirius' voice was a low growl, threatening and his already wild magic from the shocking information delivered by Harry began to manifest in the form of wind not part of the November breeze. "Why? And who else?"

"Mad-Eye and Severus. Kingsley and Bill were under compulsion spells."

"Mad-Eye?" Sirius was shocked. "He didn't strike me as a bad bloke, knows his stuff when I went through Auror training with him. But Snivellus the greasy haired bastard! I should give him a piece of my mind, maybe the shock of me being alive will kill him, with some hope. Waste of space he is.."
He knew nothing good could come from Snape, he'd known it for years. It wasn't a petty rivalry dragged out from school days either, men like him would throw anyone under the bus just to elevate their own position and when he voiced his complaints, he was always brushed off. But now this. He was seething.

"Severus apologised for his actions, Harry told me as much." Unlike Sirius, Remus was calm. He still had the odd recurring nightmare of that day but thankfully, had made a complete recovery.

"What, so that makes things all better? He couldn't come and apologise to your face? I won't ask what they did because you'll have to physically and magically restrain me from cursing the lot of them."

"It doesn't, but then holding onto grudges won't do me any favours either."

Sirius' anger faded somewhat, replaced with concern. "Are you ok now?"

Carding a hand through his shaggy hair, Remus leaned over to kiss him. "I'm still the same battered old wolf and an alive one, thanks to Harry."

Sirius blew out a breath. "Good."

He was still stewing in his own anger when Harry came back, glasses in hand and glancing at Sirius worriedly. Noticing his gaze Sirius gave him a smile, though it was darker than he intended. Harry had heard the back end of their conversation and the truce that he hoped for between Sirius and Snape wouldn't happen anytime soon. Stupidly enough, he'd forgotten the fact that he was there on the night Remus was attacked and of course that wouldn't improve relations any.

To Harry's relief, Sirius didn't ask him about Snape and he was more than happy to leave the conversation for another day. He didn't protest against the glasses either, seeing nothing wrong with letting him drink as long as he was in the company of adults.

Sirius' gaze became starry-eyed, having just pictured something. "This Alistair bloke. Imagine how many pranks he's seen!"

So much had happened which couldn't be considered positive that Harry had forgotten to tell him about Alistair's latest pranks towards Dumbledore, which were still in effect. Sipping at his own glass, he filled Sirius in on the action who by the end, was left in stitches. Wiping tears from his eyes, his earlier mood was practically forgotten.

"He'll have to give me some tips, that's priceless!"
It really was. Harry spared a thought for Alistair, wondering how everything was going. If he recalled correctly, today was the first meeting of sorts, a little like with Voldemort and his Death Eaters or Dumbledore with the Order, in many years. When Harry next saw him, he'd ask how it went. But for now, he basked in the company of the two men who he'd loved to have met when growing up beneath the Dursley's roof.

Lothaire Castle held many rooms, one of which was used to hold assemblies by his father before him and ever since the tender age of 21, Alistair himself. It rivalled the Great Hall of Hogwarts in size and situated in the centre, was a large circular table. The sconces were lit, windows showing but darkness outside as pillars similar to the entryway held up the ceiling, with beginnings of arches between the spaces. It was overly decadent but saw as necessary by some.

It had been far too long since the last meeting, well before Solomon's disappearance which was kept quiet from others except for Rupert. With every year that passed by, their numbers dwindled. In Romania alone, their number used to totalled thousands but now, he had only managed to make contact with just over a hundred. A small handful was kept as Prisoners by Dumbledore while the others had returned to their respective countries.

They were self-governing and had no justice system, as such. Rarely, the most influential Vampires from each country and continent would hold a social gathering of sorts but often, kept to themselves.

To show power and influence, there was a particularly audacious looking chair that resembled more of a throne which Alistair had quickly traded for a normal chair like everyone else. He was simply born into a privileged family, it made him no better than the rest. The one thing he could do and always tried to was used what influence he had to better the lives for everyone. It was becoming more difficult, humans having a less than favourable opinion of them and with most in this room, the feeling was mutual.

The closest to Alistair and seated at his left and right sides were Solomon and Rupert. Next to Solomon were Lilah and Jedrek and Rupert, Jacob and Eduard. Now that he'd met some and been reunited with others, he hadn't hesitated to invite them along. They were a part of their community, though smaller than it used to be.

Before he'd begun, Alistair could already tell he'd been incredibly naive in relation to how Dhampirs were viewed. Most of the stares directed towards Lilah were borderline toxic and rather than be intimidated, she simply looked resigned and that broke his heart.

Though Lilah was used to it, it didn't make the many sets of eyes on her any less nerve-wracking. From beneath the table, Lilah reached over to grab her dad's hand and hoped once Al started talking, the attention would be taken away from her.

"Their stares are meaningless. You have as much a right to be here as everyone else. Do not let it be of concern."
At the quiet voice by her side, Lilah looked up into the gaze of Solomon, giving a weak smile. "Thanks, Mr Lothaire."

He offered a small smile in response, hearing much of her from Alistair. This would be difficult for an adult, let alone an eleven-year-old and yet, she was handling this remarkably well.

As everyone was here, Alistair called for attention. His voice, without shouting, carried across and those in the midst of conversation stopped. As Lilah had hoped all eyes turned to him, relieving her of some pressure. She couldn't lie, she was experiencing hero worship of him. Here he was, in her eyes, the most powerful of all of them and yet he was so nice. His brother too! She was so lucky to have met them. She listened seriously, thankful that he considered her to be one of them.

"Good afternoon. There are many faces here that I know and some, I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting. It has been far too long since our last meeting and for this, I apologise." He bowed his head slightly, from where he sat.

"For the last three months, I have stayed in the United Kingdom and have found opinions of us to be worrying. Recently, there have been unexplained murders of which the non-magic could not explain and I have every reason to believe that one or more of us have taken to turning humans, uncaring if they survived or not. Can any of you confirm if the same is happening elsewhere?"

There was a murmur among those gathered, until one man a few seats away from him, spoke up. Darius Alistair believed he was called, remembering a past conversation to places they had each visited. Stocky with a gravelly voice, his travels were for research purposes so if someone were to have information, it would be him.

"I've been hearin' some things here and there. Seen 'em too. There's more of us turned than born and then they prey on the first ones they find. Smarter ones drag 'em down alleyways at night, then leave when done. The UK's not the only one with problems."

"I see. Is this widespread?" Alistair asked, not looking forward to the answer. He received it from someone else he was unfamiliar with at the far end and having to speak loudly. Fairly young, she didn't possess magic. "I moved here from Spain five years ago. I don't know about anywhere else but the town where I lived, there were more Vampires than humans. It was more common than not to see piles of bodies burned because proper burial rights were too expensive and all that I'd seen, were those who'd failed to transform fully."

Alistair gave her an appreciative smile. "May I ask your name?"

"Isabella."

"Thank you for your input. It is most appreciated."
Alistair wasn’t reassured as one by one, others offered their own input which overall, painted a concerning picture. He was unsure whether this individual acted alone or had accomplices. However, he had a suspicion that the Vampires which targeted Harry were turned by the very same one responsible for the rising number of human deaths and the increase in those who had survived, uncontrollable urges and all. He could detect no hints of guilt in the room and knew that none of them was responsible for this. One or two had probably targeted a human and perhaps unintentionally killed them if they received no guidance on how much was acceptable to take, but no one was innocent in this.

In his early years, he’d nearly drained a human dry, foolishly neglecting his body’s needs and more interested in other things until the urge nearly consumed him. Since then he’d been careful to monitor when the next feeding should be. Creature blood was effective depending on what they were, but human blood remained the best form of sustenance. But still, a reminder would do no harm.

“Despite our written agreement, humans already see us in a less than favourable light. Actions such as this will only serve to fuel the flames of their hatred. While I will not dissuade you all from their blood, please take care. Under no circumstances must you kill, be seen or leave any physical damage behind. To those who are unable to use magic, there are masking orbs available which will aid you in the feeding process. This is all that I ask and if I find out that my words have not been heeded, there will be severe consequences. Are we clear?”

His tone of voice brooked for no argument and to punctuate his point, allowed much of the power that he usually kept under wraps, to be released. It served as a subtle warning and with it, were various voices of assent.

“In relation to the growing number of turned Vampires. If any of you happen to discover more, no matter how trivial, I am always available to contact. I will not sit idly by while our wellbeing is very much under threat.”

There was no falsehood and the ones closest to him could see the strength of his conviction.

Raising his glass, Alistair took a small sip of what was within and during that moment, planned out what he would next discuss. He had an agenda of sorts or at least, points that he would cover if they didn't happen to be mentioned in discussion.

For today's assembly, Alistair had handwritten each individual a letter of invitation and with it, enquiring about their preference of refreshment. While for some it was alcohol, others insisted upon the blood of a human and as with creature blood, he did keep it in stock. A lot of it actually, to the point where he'd amassed a small collection but rather than drink it himself, kept it for occasions such as these. None of them had requested food though it was certainly an option.

The moment Alistair placed his glass down to speak again, a voice which he'd hoped to not hear, made its obnoxious presence known.
"I must question why they are here. That, in particular."

His voice carried clearly across the room, dripping with disdain.

Despite his general dislike of the man, Alistair didn't show it and simply questioned him. "Why who are here?"

He gave Alistair a look as if to say, 'Isn't it obvious?' While glaring harshly at Jedrek. "The man who would dare sully the noble race of Vampire by fornicating with a human and having a hybrid child, of all the disgusting and nauseating things."

Alistair reminded himself that overall, it wouldn't lead to the best outcome if he hexed him into oblivion, despite the tantalising temptation.

Serghei Negrescu was the most stubborn and infuriating man he'd ever had the displeasure of meeting. The textbook definition of traditional, he didn't hesitate to make his opinion known and was unwilling to see that times had changed. His rudeness knew no bounds, whether to man, woman or child. While Alistair believed that all voices should be heard, he never offered solid reasonings for his way of thinking, only 'That is the way that it has always been.' Before now, a Dhampir hadn't attended an assembly so of course, he should have expected some opposition.

Solomon and Rupert could sense his anger but to the others, there was no physical or magical change. The eyes which often held much warmth cooled significantly.

"Sergei, they have as much a right to be here as we do. Might I remind you that they have names? I would advise you to use them."

Alistair always tried to be pleasant, liking others to feel relaxed around him. However, he sensed trouble brewing and as a result, his seemingly limitless patience. It was a subtle reminder to show respect but unfortunately, it was ignored.

He sneered. "Why, of course. How could I possibly forget their names? Dhampir and the father to said Dhampir who should have been killed at birth."

Gasps followed his words. A select few felt the same way but lacked the courage to voice it, unlike Sergei. Others disagreed but again, courage was lacking.

Lilah wanted to run away and cry somewhere where she wouldn't be found. She wanted to scream and do a lot of things and while she'd been subjected to much hate before, it was never this vehement. The touch of her dad's hand was comforting, his thumb stroking the back of it soothingly and for all the courage everyone else didn't have, she gained it. So ignoring previous urges she defended herself.
"I'm here because my dad loved my mum, it didn't matter that she was human. Things are different now and if you don't accept that, you're gonna be sad and lonely."

Jedrek would rightfully accept all the hatred and scorn if he could spare his daughter the pain of it. The only thing that stopped him from challenging Sergei a duel to the death was the chance that he could lose and with it, leave her alone. He loved her too much to ever do this but perhaps, with this invitation, it signified change and over time, they might see Lilah in a positive light. He couldn't be more proud of her and when this assembly ends, he would make it known.

Alistair tried not to smile, though it was difficult. Sergei came off as unapproachable and intimidating to most but Lilah had challenged his words, head on.

"How dare you speak to me like that, girl!" He snapped, magic lashing out like the crack of a whip. "Hold your filthy tongue or I will cut it off."

He'd had enough. Sergei had overstepped the boundaries, greatly. So quick that to look away for a split second it would be missed, Alistair rose to his feet and flashed to his side immediately. Even the most dimwitted could feel his anger radiating, the room that was cooled quickly reaching sauna-like temperatures.

As there were children present, Alistair restrained himself to a certain extent, but not enough that it didn't strike fear into the hearts of those who knew what power such as this could be used for.

Solomon smirked, having no such restraint. It was very rare for his brother to be angered so and to see it unleashed on someone very deserving, he couldn't be more satisfied. While Lilah was awestruck, Rupert was slightly disappointed that it wouldn't end in blood. Long ago he'd established his reputation and those who knew of him would discard the cute body of a 16-year-old he held and see him for the delightfully bloodthirsty Vampire that he was. But only those who foolishly challenged him, or Sergei. Oh, he'd longed to drain him dry for many years and even now, he searched for a plausible excuse to do so, that he wouldn't be held too much in contempt.

Alistair's eyes no longer held the sun's warmth. Instead, they held the blistering and deathly heat of bubbling lava. He wasn't the kind to shout but then, he had no need to, able to make a point without raising his voice. It was only as Sergei met his gaze, that he realised for himself that he'd gone too far.

"I have lived many years upon this earth and in all this time, I have never been so disgusted. How dare you disrespect not only a man where the only crime is his love of a non-vampire but threaten a child as well! We are not the same as a millennium ago or even a century. It is this close-mindedness which will hold us all back. To survive, we must move forward, both in belief and physically. Tradition is not a bad thing by any means but clinging to what is no longer there will hinder progress."

Alistair didn't like to make such comparisons as of course, not all humans were like this. Harry, for
example, was his precious diamond in the rough and yet, he couldn't help but see similarities.

"Your views make us no better than humans. Witches and Wizards who are born to parents without magic or even one parent, are classed as inferior and looked down upon for something that they cannot help, by pure magic families. You loathe humans and yet in the end, perhaps you are not so different from them."

The retort on Sergei's lips died, falling silent. Alistair wouldn't ask him to make an apology to them. Though they deserved one, he would never be sincere in his delivery. For now, at least, he hoped it had given him something to think on but more importantly, to only contribute if he had something helpful to say.

Retaking his seat, order had been restored and Solomon wasn't disappointed. To be compared to a human, at least for Sergei, would be the biggest insult and while Alistair continued as if nothing happened, the lingering remnants of his anger took a long while to cool down.

It was just over halfway through the assembly when Alistair was interrupted by a child's cry. It was neither Eduard or Lilah and before long, his gaze fixated on a young woman who looked no older than eighteen. She was just a few seats away from him and noticing his gaze, became fearful.

"Shut that brat up will you?" Sergei shouted, which only renewed the child's cries.

Alistair was almost tempted to let Rupert deal with him. "Sergei, you are treading a very thin line, One more word and I will not be held responsible for my actions."

Unhappily he quietened, still shooting irritated glances in their direction.

Rising to his feet, Alistair approached them, smiling gently to set her at ease.

"I'm sorry, no one would look after her but I couldn't miss this. I'll leave now." She gave him an apologetic look, still on edge. With a small motion of his hand, he halted her actions, speaking a little louder to be heard over the crying.

"There is no need to leave, it is quite alright. May I ask your name?"

"Sera, sir. Sergei is my father."

Alistair's eyebrows raised in shock. Upon closer inspection, he did see some similarities but had failed to make the connection, their last names different. He was unaware Sergei was even a father and furtherly astounded that he would treat his own family in such a way,
"It is a pleasure to meet you, Sera. And who is this?" He glanced at the child cradled in her arms.

To replace the fear, her eyes filled with love. "Karliah. She's eight months old."

Hearing her name she seemed to perk up, still crying but looking up at Alistair with innocent wonder. Hiccuping a little her chubby hand reached up, trying to touch his face.

He chuckled, watching her with fondness. "A fine name. She is a curious one."

"I think she wants you to hold her." Sera smiled somewhat anxiously, having raised her with little to no support and in those months, barely anyone else had held her.

When she'd asked she'd been told the Lothaire's were good men but couldn't be sure, until now. She sensed no bad intentions and believed Karliah to be a good judge of character. Rather than cling to her like with the relative that she was unfortunately related to, her tiny arms stretched upward.

"Who am I to deny such a charming little one?" He cooed, directed towards Karliah who'd stopped crying, but sniffled softly still.

Sera's smile became more natural, but still nervous and all the while checked to see if Karliah was ok while she was transferred to Alistair's arms. With one arm supporting beneath, his heart may as well have melted, seeping into the stones.

"Oh, she is adorable." He nearly forgot he was in the middle of something as admittedly, children were a weak spot. He loved them. They were the light and promise of positive change and he would never understand why someone would neglect or abuse them.

With cherubic features, her soft blue eyes regarded him curiously, cheek resting against his chest. He was running a bit later than planned but the moment he attempted to hand her back, she began to fuss.

"Would you mind if I continued? Rather unorthodox holding a child I will admit, however it seems her curiosity holds no bounds."

Sera shook her head, finding it strange to be without her even for a moment but could see she was in good hands. "Go ahead, sorry for the holdup."

It was one of the best hold ups he'd had, in Alistair's opinion. Not embarrassed in the least he sat down, placing Karliah in his lap with an arm to support her back.

Several gazes turned incredulous, unable to believe that their unofficial leader was like this. Those
who hadn't met him pictured someone strict, no-nonsense and stern and while he was clearly no pushover loving was the first adjective that came to mind. It had earned him the respect and admiration of quite a few, though Sergei remained sour faced.

He didn't halt his words for a moment, not even when Karlia decided that his finger made for a good teething object, with just a tiny bit of her fangs poking through. As the assembly came to an end he glanced down, another finger kept captive with her gentle grip.

"Is my finger that interesting?" He watched in amusement as she gave a toothless smile, laughing. She didn't understand his words so much as the warm tone they were delivered in.

If he should die, he would ask Solomon to deliver an official apology to Harry. While most may think the key to killing him lay in light or fire of the most potent, he believed that Karlia would ensure his demise.

As he'd greeted all that had arrived he did the same once they left, stood with Karlia in his grip. As Sera came towards them she giggled, in a cheerful mood compared to earlier.

This time there was no resistance, reunited with her mother once more. Sera gave him an apologetic look.

"On behalf of my father, I apologise for his behaviour."

Alistair was sorry that she had a father like him, to begin with, never mind his behaviour. "There is no need. You are not at fault for his actions and I thank you for coming today. It was a pleasure to meet you and Karlia, of course."

As Sera left, Karlia peeked a little from behind her mother. "Bye-Bye." She held a soft, almost sure voice and continued to hold his gaze until they turned the corner.

"Shall I expect to return home one day and find a small army of children?"

"Perhaps." Solomon had only meant it as a joke, but the response had him worried.

Alistair patted him on the shoulder. "I promise I will not surprise you with an army of children. But wasn't she lovely?"

"Sergei's death would be lovelier," Rupert interjected, grinning. "Nicely handled by the way. About that pill you gave me. It's concentrated light, with a protective casing so no damage will occur until it dissolves or breaks. I've never seen anything like it."
"Though I dislike Sergei, that does not mean I have given you sanction to harm him." He continued, not trying to mask his troubled look. "Admittedly, neither have I. Solomon?"

"No. I have worked with things enchanted by Sun and Moonlight before, however, I was unaware that it could be captured and consumed."

Alistair would have to ask around. It was concerning, to say the least, perhaps someone else would know. Before returning to Hogwarts, one thing was left to do. The Caltir and Morganti families were still there and to his delight, they seemed to have formed a friendship of sorts.

"That man was scary and you stood up to him. That's pretty cool. I've never met a Dhampir before. What's it like?" Eduard was quietly curious, happy to know someone close to his age range than anyone else he'd come across.

"You don't mind what I am?" She bit her lip, anxious.

"Dad told me I shouldn't judge before I know someone and you seem nice, so.." He gave a shrug, not understanding what the big deal was who her parents were and to Lilah, it meant everything.

"Thank you! I was so scared, but I didn't want to let him bully me."

Noticing Alistair's approach, Jedrek smiled, though it was strained. "Sergei's a pleasant fellow."

Alistair sighed regretfully. "I must apologise, to you and Lilah."

Hearing her name, Lilah looked at him questioningly. "What for, Al?"

"I have shown a remarkable lack of knowledge in just how dire things are. I was unaware that Dhampirs were seen in such a hateful light. The fault is mine alone and I will do all I can to rectify this."

He bowed to them, feeling guilty though he didn't let it show.

"It's not your fault!" Lilah shook her head forcefully. "You didn't tell him to believe that stuff and you're here to watch over us all, right? It means a lot that there's some who care about me no matter what I am."

He appreciated her words but still, how many more out there thought the same way as Sergei and he hadn't realised? Brother missing or not he'd neglected his duties during this time and there was a lot that he'd missed.
He wasn't physically exhausted, but mentally he came close. After seeing everyone out with the exception of Solomon, he returned to his quarters in Hogwarts. He was feeling down, in a different way to the raw grief on the days where he wondered if Solomon was dead and not alive out there, somewhere. It was the kind of mood where each limb felt strangely heavy, as he fell deep into thought. This was an issue he would have to tackle mostly alone, but the changes he wanted to see wouldn't happen overnight. It was where to begin, that he struggled. Sighing, his eyes focused on nothing in particular and dearly hoped that no one would pay him a visit. He wouldn't want their mood to be spoiled by his own, after all.

While Harry was pleasantly tipsy alongside Remus, Sirius was well and truly shitfaced and wand in hand, rather than the modest decoration, every inch of the walls, ceiling and floor were now garish neon colours and before now, a demonstration of both Animagus forms. The earlier mood was forgotten, though Harry wondered if Sirius would experience a crash and burn period. He had vague memories of laughing until his sides hurt and then later, crying when he'd had too much to drink. All of that was forgotten when he happened to glance down at his wrist.

Rather than the bright colours Harry usually saw, it was a deep blue. He asked for a little more information at one point and knew that the cooler colours represented negative emotions. Was he ok? Worry gnawed at him inside and in what was probably not the smartest decision, Sirius transformed into Padfoot and promptly tripped over his own feet.

“I think you’ve had enough.” Remus sighed, hoping that he didn’t try to transform back. He didn’t fancy contacting Poppy to tell her the details of today.

“Oi!”

More than tall enough for the coffee table Padfoot took an unopened bottle of whisky between his teeth, running away.

Remus gave chase, forgetting that he had magic as a series of crashes resounded throughout the Manor. Eyes twinkling with amusement, Harry made contact with Alistair.

‘Are you ok?’

‘I have been better. Is your day going well?’

Harry’s worry didn’t lessen any, the subdued tone one that he hadn’t heard before. Most of the time he was used to hearing and seeing his happiness, so this threw him for a loop.

‘Mmm, yeah. Sirius ran away with some alcohol and Remus is giving chase.’
Harry snorted and unexpectedly, burst into laughter. Just thinking about it or at least the mental conversation had caused the dam on his humour to burst.

“This isn’t funny!” Remus shouted from another room, a muffled bark sounding almost mischievous which drew closer as Padfoot zoomed by his feet, followed by Remus. This only caused him to laugh harder, losing his train of thought completely.

‘I am glad to hear it.’

There was definitely something wrong. While Harry could tell he meant his words, there was none of his usual teasing which he’d come to expect.

That settled it, then.

‘Are you up for a visit?’

‘I have no wish for my own mood to ruin yours, but I will not stop you.’

Harry appreciated his consideration, but it worked both ways. Any time his mood hasn’t been the best Alistair was always there. For once, he wanted to return the favour.

‘I’ll see you soon.’

Ending their conversation, Harry shouted to Remus. “I’m going back to Hogwarts! Good luck catching Padfoot!”

At Remus’ less than polite words in response, Harry grinned to himself. Summoning all the concentration he had he returned to Hogwarts, via Lunaland. As he’d given it a name it technically existed within that space and from there, he could use it. As long as the Room of Requirement wasn’t in use, of course. Thankfully it wasn’t and before he saw Alistair, he had something to fetch first.

Glad that he’d waited before giving it to him as now seemed a perfect time, Harry opened the door. Away from the Marauder’s brand of fun, he realised he was a bit tipsier than first thought and stumbled over his own feet a little.

“Careful.” He told himself aloud, looking for Alistair and finding him seated in the living room, looking thoughtful. At his appearance, Alistair smiled, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Harry’s heart squeezed painfully. In this state, he’d never even heard of the word shy so with no
hesitation and once seated, placed his head in Alistair’s lap, gazing up.

“What’s wrong? If someone’s upset you, I’ll go and curse them.”

He gestured with his empty hand, invisible wand swishing more like a sword than to cast magic.

Alistair’s fingers carded through his hair, feeling so nice that a faint moan escaped him. Laughing a little, his eyes regained a little spark. “I see that you are drunk.”

“I’m not drunk, just a tiny bit tipsy.” He gestured with his thumb and index finger, only a small space between them. His green eyes darkened a little, serious. “You’ve helped me out so many times when I’ve felt like shit. I want to return the favour.”

Alistair didn’t see the harm in talking about it and truthfully, stroking Harry’s hair in the meantime was therapeutic. Judging by his contented expression, he seemed to be enjoying it as well.

Alistair’s gaze was nothing short of pained, making eye contact with him but not stopping the motions of his hand. “There is a Vampire among us who is extremely traditional and unwilling to embrace change. He is rather vocal, but today particularly so.”

Harry listened to Alistair silently, not interrupting once and to him, he sounded like Malfoy senior and in no at could that be considered a compliment. Though, one thing was apparent. Alistair blamed himself, most of it unnecessarily so. That was something he often did so could relate, in that sense.

Taking Alistair’s hand in his own, Harry linked their fingers together. No one could flip a switch and instantly be happy, it didn’t work like that. But he hoped his words could ease some of the troubles felt by him. The haze of alcohol left him, focusing all his attention on speaking.

“The way I see it, we’ve all got problems, humans, vampires, werewolves, every race. We’re not perfect and you’ll get the ones who desperately grasp at tradition because it’s all they know. But for every one like that, there’s others that care, deeply. You feel this way because you want what’s best for everyone and you’re not alone in thinking that. Change can happen, it just takes time. I believe in you!”

Harry gave a cheer, grinning up at him.

How could Alistair not smile at that? It was impossible and rather than be dragged down by his mood, Harry had improved it instead. Not a day went by that he didn’t thank the sudden bout of luck that lead him into his life. Or fate, maybe? Either way, blessed was the only adjective close to describing his feelings right then.

While reluctant to move away from Alistair and his frankly magical hand, Harry seated himself
upright, to pick up the bag beside him.

“This is for you. I got it in Hogsmeade but with what happened after that, I didn’t think it was a present appropriate time.”

Alistair accepted it curiously, peering inside at the contents. The bag was large, tied with a red ribbon and note attached.

Alistair,

I can count the number of good things that’s happened to me with both hands. Great things are rare but the best things? They’re legendary.

You’re one of those legendary things and I wouldn’t change what happened for the world. So, I figured you’d be interested in this, as a man exploring the wonder of Pumpkin Juice. Enjoy!

Harry

With a smooth motion, Alistair untied the ribbon and peering inside, couldn’t hold back his delight. Eyes lighting up like a child’s he found a variety of different sweets, all of them that he could see relating to pumpkin. Both sweet and spicy, there were several different varieties to choose from.

“I’m not that good with words and my handwriting’s pretty bad, but I mean it.”

It was unexpected but greatly appreciated. While having his eyes opened to the truth earlier today wasn’t pleasant in the least, his earlier mood was practically forgotten. Carefully placing the bag beside him, he swept Harry into a near crushing embrace.

“You are the sweetest.” He murmured into Harry's ear.

“Are you feeling better?” Harry asked, a little anxiously even as he relaxed into the comforting warmth.

“Much.”

He was glad to hear it and also, glad to know that his visit had worked. Feeling confident, Harry pressed his lips against Alistair’s for a fleeting moment. How something so simple at the core could bring such joy he didn’t know, but he’d never grow tired of it.

“I think I’m improving! Practice does make perfect.” Harry looked very pleased with himself and feeling mischievous, Alistair joined in, eyes shining happily.
“Indeed you have, I am impressed. Ten points to Gryffindor.”

“Seriously?” At Alistair’s nod, Harry burst into laughter. “I’m not telling Professor Snape that one, he’d spontaneously combust.”

Curiously, Harry looked into the bag. “Anything in there catching your interest?”

With an arm still around Harry, he picked something from the bag at random, giving it to him. It was chocolate, small and spherical in shape.

He was confused for a minute but when he saw Alistair’s expectant look, it clicked.

“You want me to feed it to you?”

At his delighted nod, Harry blushed. He didn’t have a problem with it though, they were alone after all. As Harry brought the chocolate to his lips Alistair opened them, taking it.

For a second, his tongue brushed against Harry’s fingers, sending a pleasant tingle through him.

It really wasn’t fair. Why was literally everything he did so sexy? It was only chocolate. But then, it could easily be his mind.

The flavour was exquisite. He didn’t really eat sweet things but this was certainly special. It melted in the mouth fairly quickly, but not too much.

“I adore your passionate gaze.”

At Alistair’s words, he realised he’d been staring and before he could react, the fingers which held the chocolate were licked clean by his tongue.

There wasn’t a spell physically keeping them there but there may as well be, watching as his fingertips were kissed. Before long Alistair’s lips trailed upwards, planting more kisses onto the back of his hand and with each touch, left it feverish.

“I didn’t think it could feel so intense there.” He admitted, knowing it was a clear window in to see just how inexperienced he was. “I don’t really know that much beyond finding people snogging in the Astronomy Tower. Ahh-“

He broke off, a kiss to the palm of his hand borderline ticklish, as Alistair answered him.
“Ah Harry, there are many things which the youth of today have sadly neglected. It would be my pleasure and ultimately yours, to demonstrate this.”

He looked forward to finding out, still surprised that hand kisses had robbed him of breath. He didn’t think he’d ever grow used to the idea that someone way out of his league liked him in this way and yet, he was coming to accept it. More than happy to stay here and thoroughly relaxed, there was one more thing he had to say.

“If you ever need help, you can talk to me. I might be able to offer a different perspective and even if I can’t, I’ll be here. Honestly, I’d rather know if you’re not feeling the best than just carry on and not know so I can bring your smile back.”

Then again, the cause of his death could easily be Harry as well. Just holding him alone was enough to banish many of his concerns and worries. He had a point, too. How could he expect Harry to come to him if he had a problem if he didn’t do the same? The dynamics of an intimate relationship were far from unfamiliar but many a time, it had been one-sided for him. After conveying his thanks once more, he was reminded of Harry’s words earlier.

“Now, what is it that you were telling me about Sirius and running with alcohol?” Alistair’s eyes twinkled amusedly, as Harry was all too happy to explain properly. A sense of contentment filled him, knowing that he was able to cheer someone up that was a great source of happiness. Sparing a thought for Sirius and Remus, he only hoped Evergreen Manor wasn’t pranked beyond repair whenever he returned. That and Remus’ quest to retrieve Whisky from that mischievous mutt was fulfilled without a hitch.

Chapter End Notes

I had no inspiration for the chapter title. Maybe if I stopped posting these past 1am my brain would function better xD
Vampire Among Humans

Chapter Summary

Don't judge a book by its cover. Something commonly known and yet, a select few still choose to ignore it.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: An assembly organised by Alistair, to discuss current issues and problems. During this his heart is stolen equally by a vampire child and Harry, but his mind tested against one of the traditionalists.

It was the day after his assembly at Lothaire Castle and to Alistair's amusement, he received a summons from Dumbledore. Upon arrival, he was informed that he'd been accepted into the order. While this was his goal from the start and for that he was pleased, there was a certain sense of irony in the fact that a Vampire, the very thing he hated, was about to officially be a part of his organisation. The pranks had finally worn off, running out of coloured lemon drops but that didn't mean Dumbledore would be going prank free for too long.

Wearing the very same peach long sleeved shirt that Harry confessed is what drew his attention to Alistair further, he smiled fondly in remembrance of that conversation. He had a wide variety of clothing but for both appearance and comfort, this particular line from Madame Bellerose happened to be his favourite.

That sparked an idea. While today was serious in the sense of learning what Dumbledore was feeding to the gullible and not so gullible members, he'd longed to spend an entire day with Harry to deepen their newfound relationship and he'd deliberated for the last few days on where would be the perfect spot. Why not Paris? Often referred to as the city of love, both the magical and non-magical districts held wonderful sights. While Diagon Alley in London defined itself as strictly magical and only the non-magic with assistance could access it, attitudes in Paris were much more relaxed or as they could be, around the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy.

Though most hated the idea of Vampires, Alistair had found the relation between the magic and non-magic to be just as poor. Though in France, both were viewed in a slightly more positive light. Madame Bellerose was a unique exception, having quarter Vampire blood and like those before her, the owner of a family run Men and Women's fashion boutique. He knew that Harry didn't know much of clothing but there were many things there that Alistair believed would be to his liking. Of course, that was but a small part of what Paris held.
That settled it. At the next available weekend, he would invite Harry out with him. He could hardly wait, truth be told.

"We're going to the Weasley's humble abode. I don't think you've met Molly?"

And then, as if Cupid himself had shot the arrow to burst that particular pleasant bubble, he was brought crashing down to reality.

"I have not had the pleasure." Sweeping earlier thoughts to the back of his mind, the floo in this office would be used to travel directly there. Out of all modes of travel, this was the one he found to be particularly unpleasant. Portkeys, if designed correctly, could provide a fairly smooth landing but with having his own method of travel, he hadn't needed to use any other way, up until now. Travelling via fireplace provided no such control, with an addition of soot.

He didn't voice his complaints however and once Dumbledore disappeared amidst the green flames, he followed shortly after.

Alistair knew of the Burrow, but nothing of what it looked like and as with Hagrid's hut, it held the feeling of not just a building where people lived, but a genuine home. There was nothing that suggested decadence or elegance, but everything which indicated the very walls themselves contained warmth of family.

While he took pride in Lothaire Castle, he couldn't say that it was thoroughly lived in. There were a lot of rooms, many of which hadn't been used up until those freed from Hogwarts were invited to stay there for as long as they wished.

He could tell immediately the room had undergone an expansion charm and he had to wonder if Molly was the only one willing. From his brief conversation with Arthur at Hogwarts, he gave the impression of indifference leaning towards dislike for the Headmaster.

Even with the expansion charm, it was a little crowded, most not having taken a seat yet. While everyone was in the midst of conversation, the flow halted once Dumbledore spoke.

"Good evening everyone. You may have noticed a new face among us. This is Alistair Lothaire, our current Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor. After weeks of observation and some questions, I believe that he'll be an asset to us."

Once finished Dumbledore turned to him, false grandfatherly twinkle present. "We have a few minutes before starting. Why not take the opportunity to mingle? You'll feel at ease here."

For a human, Albus Dumbledore was extraordinarily good portraying himself as everything he
wasn't. The only truth in his words was in relation to the Burrow itself as in fact, if not for Dumbledore and to a certain extent Alastor Moody, he would certainly feel at ease.

Once Dumbledore left to engage in conversation of his own, a woman bustled over to him. Standing at 5'3 she was far shorter, a little plump yet kind in appearance. To his surprise, she hugged him, a rare form of first greeting these days but one he didn't hesitate to return.

Stepping back, she gave a welcoming smile. "Hello dear, I'm Molly. If you're feeling nervous not to worry, you'll feel right at home here. Refreshments are on the table and if there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to ask. Alright?"

"Of course, thank you very much."

He could feel himself relaxing and before long, settled into a light conversation with her. All throughout it, longing tugged at his heart. Confused, he had to wonder why. Emotions were more complex than most would believe and even now, he didn't always understand himself. Longing for what, exactly?

“How are Ron, Ginny and Harry doing in your class?”

She seemed anxious to know, suspecting that most of it lay with Ron. He could see that she truly considered Harry to be one of her own and not for the first time, Alistair was pleased he was surrounded by people who cared for his wellbeing.

Taking a seat directly next to her, he smoothly crossed one leg over the other. Wanting to give an honest answer he tilted his head, thinking for a moment. “Though there have been a number of issues before, recently Ron’s behaviour and attitude have improved and he is making steady progress.”

She looked relieved and Alistair was glad he’d managed to set her mind at ease over this. “Ginny takes to practical tasks with ease and confidently offers her own opinion. If I am occupied with another student, there is no hesitation on her part to help.”

He hadn’t seen signs of the infamous temper that Arthur had mentioned yet but thankfully, her class was a little tame compared to others. Perhaps it was the calm before the storm, though.

Remembering that he was informing Molly of Harry’s progress in class, Alistair tried not to let his personal feelings get in the way. “Harry has a remarkable grasp of magic for his age and the knowledge he possesses is impressive, he is well behaved and truly, a joy to teach.”

Possibly, Alistair sounded a little biased, but he couldn’t help it. Even before their current relationship and discounting the friendship they had, he thought the same thing before now.
Appreciative of his words, Molly smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. Have you had previous experience of teaching before?”

From there, it sparked a conversation that soon allowed him to forget that he shared a room with someone who was responsible for the pain and suffering of many near and dear to him. It was only once they finished their conversation, that Alistair realised what this sense of longing was directed towards.

His mother. She didn’t resemble her appearance wise at all but as someone who clearly cherished her children, the kindness and warmth, everything else was present. He was close to both his parents, but practically inseparable from his mother, who’d taught him so much. When his father died he was distraught but then he’d had the thought, ‘at least mother is still here.’

And then the day she succumbed to her lack of blood consumption, was when the rug was firmly pulled from beneath his feet and reality was laid bare.

He could see that the Weasley family were very much blessed to have her and if nothing else, Molly herself could almost feel as if she were a home away from home.

Most of the Order members were older, some choosing to watch him at a distance suspiciously rather than verbally greet him and that was something he could understand. Many of them were survivors of the time where Voldemort was at the very height of his power and any newcomers were no doubt untrustworthy unless proven to be the opposite.

Kingsley held no such reservations, however, bending by his ear to murmur something into it.

“That spell you showed me is ingenious. I haven’t told anyone else of it but without going into details, let’s just say not as many people are getting away with past activities as previously.”

“I am glad it has been of use.”

Their exchange was brief but meaningful.

His attention was roused by a crashing noise and looking over, saw someone fall out of the floo rather than step through it.

They’d knocked several ornaments to the ground, shattering it and once on their feet, repaired it hastily.

“Sorry, Molly.” Giving a sheepish smile, Tonks placed what was previously broken back on the shelf after a hasty reparo. Dusting the soot away, her eyes landed on Alistair and practically lit up. She’d had the chance to talk with him briefly on October 31st and respected how he presented
himself.

“Wotcher Professor Lothaire, how’s the job teaching toerags?” Snagging the newly empty seat nearby, she looked at him expectantly.

Chuckling at those choices of words, he could see that her appearance remained unaltered as, during their conversation, she had assumed the guise of a nameless monster with sharpened teeth large enough that it was a struggle to close her mouth. Naturally, that made it difficult to talk as well but effective in appearance. So, it was nice to have a conversation where both could understand each other clearly.

“Alistair is just fine. Rewarding, for the most part.”

She blew out a breath. “Alistair it is then. But rather you than me.” Surreptitiously checking her surroundings, she leaned in closer.

“I’m not usually the nosy or interfering type, that’s more up my mum’s alley. But, Harry’s got the hots for you pretty bad.”

Her straightforwardness was unexpectedly refreshing. It wasn’t new information, however, and he found Harry’s reactions to be ceaselessly adorable.

After assuring for himself that there were no signs of others listening in, he decided that no harm would be done if he informed her of recent developments.

He couldn't hold back his smile. "I am aware. The feeling is mutual, which is why Harry is now my lover."

It went without saying that at the moment, The nature of their relationship must be kept a secret. Professor/Student relationships were considered to be taboo, even if both were of age. As much as he’d like to declare it from the rooftops, it was in their best interests to keep this information to family and friends.

“YES!”

She gave a cheer, earning several stares. Unmindful of them, Alistair could see her delight as she tried to compose herself. “Brilliant, bet he’s over the moon. I can return to work with my heart full of joy.”

She sighed, almost blissfully.
“Good afternoon, you two.”

Joining them was Arthur, immediately holding his hand out for him to shake. “It’s good to see you again.”

Returning it, Alistair could say that he was completely at ease, for now. “Thank you for the warm welcome. Molly is equally accommodating.”

Arthur sighed, running a hand through his thinning hair. Pulling up a seat beside them, his eyes regarded her with deeply seated fondness. “She is. I would say too much so. Unless evidence to the contrary is in front of her, she wants to believe the best in people. Even the Malfoys, before they made their displeasure known.”

Once Arthur’s attention switched to Dumbledore, Alistair noticed the faint grimace. “She’s blinded by Albus. She believes he can do no wrong and jumped at the chance for Order Meetings to be held here. Recently they’ve been held during weekdays alongside weekends and most of us haven’t got the extra time.”

“I haven’t got the attention span or time, it’s so boring. I’d rather be doing paperwork and I hate that.” Tonks grumbled, shooting a mild glare in Dumbledore’s direction. “Seriously, nothing useful is discussed. At one point it was about how Harry’s gone dark and that’s the one time Molly’s sceptical. Some others were starting to believe him but that howler from Remus and Harry shook things up.”

That was one thing that hadn’t popped up in conversation. “A howler?” He asked, curious.

She snickered to herself and even Arthur had a smile. “They’d been drinking. It was a black howler with both of their voices, but it was rambling and nothing like one of Molly’s. It wasn’t even delivered by owl either, but this weird flaming ball. I almost wish they’d send another one, to keep things entertaining.”

It was good to hear from their perspectives and of course, Harry going dark was utter nonsense. If Dumbledore was considered everything light and good in this world, they would be better off seeking another.

Catching Tonks’ eye, Kingsley gestured her over with a subtle jerk of his head.

“Catch you two later.”

Weaving her way through the small handful of people, she left Arthur and Alistair in thought.

“If the purpose is to oppose Voldemort, then why on Earth is Harry being discussed?”
Arthur frowned. “I don’t know. Albus has changed recently. Or he was this way all along and I didn’t notice until now.”

Alistair could almost certainly guarantee that it was the latter.

Close to the meeting’s starting time, Minerva and Severus were the last to arrive. While Alistair couldn’t say that he was friends with Severus just yet, the fact that he hadn’t rejected his gift to him and as expected, that the robes he wore on Halloween suited perfectly, there was hope. The first name basis was one-sided but as of late, the glares, scowls and all other suitably intimidating expressions to the student body had lessened in severity ever so slightly.

Severus looked about as pleased to be here as Tonks had just expressed. Most gave him a wide berth, able to practically feel his foul mood radiating across the otherwise cheery room. That didn’t affect Tonks, however, trying to engage him in conversation while he remained stony-faced.

It was Minerva that had him concerned, however, who looked nothing short of frazzled. Expression strained, she appeared to be every one of her years in age.

Choosing a space beside Alistair, she temporarily transfigured one of them into a comfortable armchair. Sinking into it, she closed her eyes for a moment.

“Is everything alright?”

Hearing the concern in his voice, Minerva opened her eyes again.

“It would be better, if Albus didn’t insist on neglecting his work as Headmaster and leaving it to me, alongside my own duties as Gryffindor’s head of house and a Transfiguration Professor.”

Her tone was flat, devoid of the usual enthusiasm that Alistair often heard. Minerva grimaced, realising how she sounded.

“Forgive me. It wasn’t my intention to offload burdens as if you were a mind healer.”

He’d noticed her exhaustion before now, but hadn’t mentioned it. She was a proud woman but he could see that this was too much work for her. From his point of view, Alistair saw it as Dumbledore taking advantage of someone who was truly passionate about their job.

He placed a hand lightly over her own, resting on the chair’s arm.

“No matter who it is, we all are in need of someone to converse with. Otherwise, it will be simply
hidden away until it is released, beyond our control.”

He paused, thinking of the best way to articulate his next words.

“I realise that you are a proud woman, of which many, including myself, look up to. However, there is only so much work a single person can do. I would be more than happy to assist with marking.”

Minerva was touched by his words. She couldn’t deny them either, often preferring to work through things on her own and was the usually the one to offer help. It was nice to receive it in return. Here and there in the past, her colleagues had helped before but often found themselves just as busy. Severus with his brewing for poppy, personal brewing and acting as a double agent, Pomona with the greenhouses and Filius with the after-school activities he often ran.

For Minerva, it was an endless stream of work and often, the only time she was able to rest was in bed, for a couple of cherished hours. Over the years, Albus was leaving more and more work for her of which she found hard to keep on top of.

Despite the kindness and good spirit that it was intended in, she was often reluctant to accept help as she knew how busy her fellow colleagues were. However, she found herself surprisingly agreeable this time, which just went to show how worn down she’d become.

“Your help would be most appreciated. But are you sure?”

He nodded, posture filled with confidence. “Very. I know enough of Transfiguration that I believe I will be of use.”

She didn’t doubt his words either. For such a young man, he was very well versed on a wide range of topics and with him, conversations had never run dry.

She managed a brighter smile this time, with some of her Gryffindor fire returning. “Thank you.”

Alistair was glad to help, patting the hand beneath his for a moment before cheerfully diving into conversation. Not for long, however, as Dumbledore called for the attention of all those who were now seated around the table. Severus found himself on Alistair’s other side, similar to their seating arrangement in the hall and steadfastly ignored the cheerful smile thrown his way.

If there was one thing Alistair could say, Tonks wasn’t exaggerating in the slightest. In fact, he believed one or two of them had fallen asleep. It was the same as staff meetings, not engaging or informative in the slightest. Thankfully there was no mention of Harry this time, or Alistair would have to bite his tongue in response to the obvious hypocrisy.

Another thing which threw him for a loop was the lack of any contract or written agreement. Was he
so confident in his influence and leadership abilities, that he didn’t believe anyone would betray him? It was a serious lapse of judgement and one that he couldn’t understand.

Eventually, the conversation took a turn that he wasn’t quite expecting.

“What are your thoughts on this?”

It was a good thing Alistair was paying attention, or he would have missed Dumbledore’s gaze land on him in response to the very thing he’d discussed only yesterday.

Well, a discussion of Vampires on a whole he’d expected, but not to be asked directly for his opinion. A part of him wondered if Dumbledore suspected him, but a brief glimpse into his mind out those sudden worries to rest. It was a way of testing his character.

He couldn’t bring himself to lie. He refused to paint himself as a hater of Vampires as the very thought was physically nauseating. His true feelings wouldn’t hurt here.

“I believe that they are misunderstood and often, media portray them in a negative light. While they are a problem, perhaps it is just a select few, like us. We are not perfect by any means. Vampires are almost certainly responsible for this, but I am sceptical that they all think alike.”

Alistair’s words caused a murmur among those gathered there, some voicing their agreement but most on the fence about it all. His answer earned him a calculating stare from Dumbledore, one of which he met with an unwavering intensity.

“Rubbish. The ones I’ve met are worthless creatures, nothing but trouble.”

Mad-Eye completely disregarded his words, electric blue eye swivelling in its socket violently.

The ones that he’d met were no doubt the ones turned against their will. But the fact that he was a Vampire alone in a room full of humans, most of which either disliked or outright hated Vampires, was enough for Alistair to feel somewhat isolated. He responded instantly.

“You have not met them all and therefore, hold no accurate representation. They would be valuable allies in times such as these.”

Moody snorted. “They’d sooner drink our blood than ally with us. Until you gain some real-world experience, shut it.”

Alistair stiffened, ever so faintly. He was purposely disrespectful and he found himself battling against the urge to show just how much experience he’d had. More than anyone in the room
combined but of course, here he was a 26-year-old human and not a millennium and a half millennium-year-old Vampire.

“Alastor. We have already lost Order members. Need I remind you that we don’t need to lose more? I would advise you to show some respect. A young man he may be but his credentials are extensive.” Minerva snapped, slightly irritated and channelling Severus for a second there.

Severus smirked, noticeably and not trying to hide his pleasure. He hated the man with a flaming passion and anyone who dared to take him down a peg or two were welcome in his books.

“I’ve had my problems with them, but as he said, I’m pretty sure they’re not all like that.”

Three of the Weasley children were present and to Alistair’s knowledge, Bill was the one who’d spoken. The twins he was very familiar with, at least through what he’d been told or what he’d heard from other students.

Though they whispered to one another, Alistair could pick up their words easily.

“Hey, Fred.”

“Yeah?”

“Think we can lure Vampires with Blood Pops?”

Fred tapped his chin, pretending to think. “Nah. I reckon they’d want actual blood. You think Umbridge is still around?”

George nodded. “Yeah. From what I hear she’s still Fudge’s lackey. Her blood wouldn’t do though. It would probably give them cavities from all that sugary shite she drank.”

“Good point.” Trying to show his canines, Fred mimicked going for his brother’s neck. “I vant to suck your blood.”

Snickering among themselves, they quietened when spotting Molly’s shrewd glare.

“Still, would be pretty cool to meet an actual Vampire. I reckon Bill and that new bloke’s right, they’re not all bad.”

Those words came from Fred and at George’s agreement, Alistair was reassured by their strength of character and amused by their choice of conversation.
“That’s enough.” Dumbledore’s voice was firm. “Thank you for your input.” Those last words were directed towards Alistair, who nodded briefly in acknowledgement.

“Severus. Anything to report?”

Through those around him, Alistair was already aware of Severus’ role as a double spy, but not so much the details. Just the mention of Severus was enough for Moody to grit his teeth, the hatred plain to see. He could tell that the feeling was mutual.

Though Severus hadn’t said as much, the last time he was summoned was to bring Potter along to establish their truce and since then, nothing. Each time he’d stated there was nothing to report. Silence like this didn’t bode well but since he’d undergone changes, Severus couldn’t be sure.

“The Dark Lord has not summoned me, as of late.”

Dumbledore frowned, subconsciously stroking his beard. “This is troubling. Could he be planning something?”

Severus inclined his head. “Perhaps. If I should happen to find out more, you will be the first to know.”

“I doubt that, Snape. We all know what side you’re on.”

Severus’ fingers twitched. For all that Black was no longer here, Moody had taken up the reigns of torment, so to speak. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered at all but then, remembered that throughout his life, he’d had little to no choice in anything.

“I hardly think the words of a cripplingly paranoid Auror long past his glory days hold any worth.” Sneering, it was enough for some to push their chairs back in a small attempt to escape the intensity.

“The truth will come out. One of these days you’ll be thrown in Azkaban with the rest of the scum.”

Alistair kept a tight lid on the anger, but let his words flow freely.

“Severus has a responsibility of which many would buckle under the pressure of and I suspect that without his information, a significant number of people would not have lived to see today. The risk he takes is beyond all our comprehension and quite frankly, Auror Moody, I am doubtful that you could do the same.”

Many in the room were shocked, but none more than Severus. With past verbal spats Albus was
usually the mediator and if Minerva was present, she was of two minds if it was between her precious Azkaban worn lion or a student she’d disliked and only formed a friendship with once joining the staff. He didn’t need anyone to rise up in defence of him, knowing how he must look and had come to understand early on that he wouldn’t be accepted by everyone. So why try?

Severus knew he’d been harsh towards Lothaire. And yet there he was, defending him.

His heart thawed slightly. He rarely let his guard down, forcefully shoving aside any emotion in fear of turning into a sentimental Gryffindor and to hide the fact that Lothaire’s actions were surprisingly appreciated, he only scowled deeper. Merlin forbid he show any positive emotion, however, a mass passing out across the adults gathered would be fairly amusing. Of course, there was the chance he was doing this to gain favour but in this context, it wouldn’t make sense. Despite his inner, wise voice informing him that everything about Lothaire and how he appeared to be was a lie, in this, he was beginning to think that his sincerity was genuine.

Moody’s eye narrowed, the other in its socket remaining stationary for once. “I challenge you to a duel. Right now. Someone needs putting in his place.”

“Now Alastor, I don’t think-“ Dumbledore tried to interfere, but was quickly shut down.

“No. This whelp needs to learn. Outside.”

Moody’s wooden leg against the floor sounded much louder, in the sudden silence. No one dared to speak up, all eyes watching them both.

Of course, he would accept. It provided a perfect opportunity, though he imagined none would expect that the rude and disrespectful man currently making his way outside, would be the one to be put in his place.

He always tried to treat others with respect, even those he didn’t like and for no valid reason, he was given a remarkable lack of respect. Respect was earned no matter the age and while he will have contributed greatly to the war effort in this country, that didn’t give him free rein to treat others in such an abhorrent manner.

“You’re not going to accept, surely? He’ll destroy you!” Tonks protested, hair flashing various different colours in her distress.

“I will be fine.” He smiled reassuringly.

Fred’s voice broke through the silence.” Place your bets! Who’s going to win? Grizzled Auror-“

“-Or Defence Professor Newcomer?” George finished, holding out a box with separate
compartments.

“Really you two. Now isn't the time!” Molly screeched, strands of her hair practically frizzing with agitation.

“Mum, betting’s a serious business,” They glanced at one another, speaking in unison, “When there’s cash to be made.”

Amusingly enough a handful of members participated and unsurprisingly, the majority of bets were in Moody’s favour.

Checking the total, Fred and George discussed it among themselves, before glancing over at Alistair. His gaze didn’t waver, offering them a smile.

Fred shrugged, tossing a handful of galleons into the box he held. “You know what? I think he’s got something up his sleeve. When faced with Moody most would be shaking in their boots or at least nervous.”

“I’ll bet my right nut that Mr Defence Professor wins.” George joked, causing Fred to raise both eyebrows.

“How will you carry on the Weasley name? And why the right nut?”

Grinning, George slung an arm around his brother’s shoulder. “I’ve still got one nut. That and my left side’s the best.”

Following Fred’s lead, George added Galleons of his own.

Alistair decided to make things interesting and in his eyes, it was for a good cause. Approaching them, he made an offer.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence. In return, once I am victorious, I will purchase one of each item you have for sale at Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.”

It didn’t go unnoticed by the twins that Alistair said once he was victorious and not if.

George was speechless. Knowing one of them had to respond, Fred did for both of them. “Seriously? We’ve got a lot of products, you know.”

Alistair nodded, enthusiastically. “Yes, you have my word. Think of it as a token of appreciation for the joy you provide through pranks in times such as these.”
“…Ok, it’s a deal.” Still stunned, George was the first to seal the deal by shaking his hand, Fred straight after.

Giving them a wink, Alistair quickly made his way outside and seeing that others were following them to watch, Albus decided his time was better put to use ensuring that a new recruit wasn’t left worse for wear.

The garden was spacious enough and once the rules were established, Dumbledore acted as referee. To ensure that no property would be damaged, a barrier was erected around them. Alistair smiled, though this one couldn’t be considered nice.

It was to be magic only, nothing else. It would only end when one was physically unable to stand due to injuries and the one left on their feet, would win.

Right from the start, Moody was at a severe disadvantage and while Alistair could easily end the duel within seconds, he wanted to prove a point. By the time Dumbledore had declared the rules for all watching, he already had a plan in mind.

A small crowd consisting of the Order members had gathered, many of them looking worried he assumed, on his behalf. The skies were clear, nothing to obstruct their view though for him, it could rain heavily and his sight wouldn’t be affected.

“You may begin.”

No sooner had Dumbledore spoken those words, that Moody unleashed a relentless torrent of expertly chained spells. In the past, he had often taken advantage of his opponent by reading their minds, lips or studying their body language. But now, he had no need to rely on such tactics as mind reading. Within the first minute, he could predict possible outcomes and any frequently occurring pattern.

Effortlessly, he sidestepped the chain heading in his direction, sending a singular and simple spell back in retaliation. Batting it away, Moody scoffed.

“Is that all you’ve got? It’s a disgrace that you’re teaching students how to fight!”

Just as Alistair had hoped, Moody was not only underestimating him, but his confidence crossed the line into arrogance and slowly began to increase the intensity of his spells.

Alistair rarely fired back and if so, kept things simple. One thing that remained constant, was the fact that no matter the rapid spellfire he was faced with, he ducked, dodged and at one point even flipped, over various types of spells.
A few minutes in, Alistair had an adequate read on his opponent. It was clear that he hadn’t practised recently and could see the beginnings of exhaustion in his posture, coupled with irritation. Only colours to those watching would indicate which spells as both men used non-verbal incantations.

Tonks rarely had a filter and liked to say what was on her mind at the moment. She could take a guess at what Alistair was doing and found herself surprised that Mad-Eye was unable to. Unless he truly believed his abilities were that subpar.

“I never thought someone could be so sexy when duelling.” She muttered, Fred overhearing and chuckling to himself.

“I had no idea Mad-Eye was your type.”

Tonks elbowed him, none too gently.

“Ow!”

“You know who I mean!”

Fred rubbed his side vigorously. “I’ll have to contact the DMLE to report an unarmed assault, get some Aurors on the case. Oh, wait..”

Tonks rolled her eyes, the only moment when she wasn’t looking at the entertainment combined with eye candy and soon, refocused her attention.

Alistair was aware that he didn’t exactly operate like most. Anyone else would probably see this as a challenge and respond accordingly but in a way, he found this to be therapeutic. Relaxing, even. The vast array of colours flew at blinding speeds towards him but it may as well be a casual stroll on the beach.

Rather than a chain of spells, a widespread consecutive stream left Moody’s wand. Alistair would be lying if he said he didn’t like to show off, at least a little bit. It had taken countless hours of practice and dedication, so he couldn’t be prouder. Smoothly sliding beneath them, a heavy spray of ice coated the grassy earth beneath Moody, freezing it completely solid.

For all that his eye could catch many things, the high speed at which Alistair moved, it could barely track. Expecting more of the same spells, he found himself caught off guard that while one foot was able to establish a firm grip on the slippery surface, his wooden leg was unable to do the same, stumbling.

That was the opening Alistair had been waiting for.
While Moody was undoubtedly an expert, today he faced a master. A trio of spells forcefully summoned not just one spare wand but two. The last banished his current wand, temporarily tearing a hole through the erected barrier and effectively, making it impossible to summon his wand back unless it was strong enough to tear its way back through.

Perhaps it was a little overdone on Alistair’s part, but the look of pure shock certainly provided him with a sense of satisfaction. And then, for the finishing touch.

The closest thing that could be described to the rate of Alistair’s spellfire would be an assault rifle. Not that anyone but Alistair and quite possibly Arthur would know what exactly one of those was.

Incantations were a way to help verbalise the spell, but many shortcuts could be taken. Magic allowed anyone to use their imagination and the only limitations, were when someone was unable to think outside of the box. He visualised what he wanted to happen and it simply did. It wasn’t always this way of course but now, magic was perfectly natural. Much like it was for a human to breathe.

None of the spells was to physically injure but combined, they would undoubtedly incapacitate. Due to the incredibly strong wand core he held coupled with his own core, Alistair only needed a minuscule amount of power to achieve what he wanted. The spell chains were so close together that they blurred, colours becoming nearly indistinguishable.

The time taken to melt the ice beneath his feet with one wand he’d managed to summon, four spells had already found their target. Quickly Moody erected a shield while trying to erase effects of the other spells. But he was faced with such a rapid onslaught, that it quickly crumbled beneath the overwhelming intensity. It was akin to one man facing an entire army, limbs feeling as though they were glued together and finding that any counterspells he knew remained useless against the majority of them. Before long he crumpled to the ground, unable to free himself while Alistair remained standing, unaltered save for his slightly windswept hair from the speed of his evasion tactics.

While it was clear who the victor was, everyone remained motionless, as if frozen in time with nearly identical expressions of shock. Revaluations of both men were circulating in each mind, the first pair to break the silence being Fred and George, cheering and clapping loudly enough to shake the very rooftops.

“BLOODY BRILLIANT!”

Their voices seemed to rouse others, Dumbledore realising that he actually had to do something. Dispelling the barrier around them, his eye didn’t leave the prone form of his friend on the floor who looked equally flabbergasted.

“Alistair wins.”

Immediately, Alistair cancelled every spell which had hit his opponent and closing the distance
between them, offered a hand up.

“You are an excellent duellist, Auror Moody. It was a pleasure to see this for myself.”

While his words were genuine, a small part of him was also pleased with thoroughly proving him wrong.

He’d gone a long time without anyone being able to best him but today was a firm reminder that there was always something to learn. They were both adults and he could accept losing graciously. Especially to someone with such remarkable skills. He accepted the hand up, firmly gripping it in his to shake.

Electric blue eye locking onto him, Moody’s voice was gruff. “You’ve got skills, lad. I apologise.”

Most gathered there thought that didn’t even begin to describe what they’d just witnessed but remained silent.

He wasn't sure what part he was apologising for, but didn't ask for him to clarify. “Apology accepted.” Giving a warm smile, he returned the handshake wholeheartedly.

Knowing that continuing today’s meetings after that would be a lost cause, Dumbledore dismissed them. While Moody returned to the Ministry, Alistair found himself surrounded by a small group of people.

“Impressive,” Severus admitted, keeping his distance from the others slightly and sneering at his cheerful grin.

“Oh, Severus! At last, you are sparing a smile for me!”

Scowling Severus retreated, but not without some parting words. “You are in need of an eye assessment. Don’t push your luck, Lothaire.”

Opinions would change of him from here on out but ensured that he didn’t appear to be too fast when duelling, or he would face suspicion. He wasn’t used to hiding what he was and in a sense, it pained him, particularly as he had come to see quite a few people as friends or close friends.

While he appreciated the words of those gathered, there was a certain pair of twins he needed to delightfully uphold his promise with. When faced with just them, they glanced at one another, dropping to their knees, arms outstretched and bowing repeatedly. Much like a tennis match with a back and forth serve Fred and George spoke, one after another.
“We’re not worthy!”

“Teach us your ways, oh master of magic—“

“Wizard of wonders—“

“Demon of duelling!”

Alistair halted them, musical laughter ringing through the air. “Why, thank you. If it is convenient, I am available to purchase your products.”

In disbelief that he was actually serious, they decided now would be better anyway. They had Lee Jordan covering for them, and it was about time they returned.

Alistair hadn’t had the chance to stop by and see their combined efforts, so today’s visit to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes would be a first. He’d heard much about it from Harry, who had stopped by in early October to see it for himself, as an investor.

Even from the outside, it was eye-catching, drawing attention where everyone went and the only thing which could outstrip it in that sense was the imposing building of Gringotts. However, the outside barely reflected the majesty of inside.

Vibrant and colourful, Alistair was unsure of where to turn his head first, as so much was happening. The sight was nothing short of wonderful and even now they had many customers. Quickly, they resumed work. While George went to assist Lee, Fred was occupied with gathering one of every product as the majority of them couldn’t be summoned by magical means. All the while he looked around with deep interest, everything about it a far cry from what he was used to.

"Simply marvellous.." Hearing his words, George sent an appreciative smile his way.

Fifteen minutes later Fred returned, slightly out of breath and returning with three bags filled full to the brim.

“Sorry for the delay. These bags are shrinkable if you tap your wand against the sides so you don’t have to lug them around.”

Muttering a spell under his breath, a series of numbers and letters formed in the air and once they disappeared, he looked nervous.

“35 Galleons, 5 Sickles and 23 Knuts.”
Alistair had various ways to access his account, both in physical currency and using cards. Thankfully the one card he held was international, Gringotts branching out into many different areas. A solid black shine with a gold motif, the card was hugely recognised of those who held the most wealth.

He didn’t like to flaunt it and in truth before now, the last personal recent purchase he’d made was for Harry’s chocolates, the rest in sizeable donations to various charities. He hadn’t visited Madame Bellerose for a long time and looked forward to it, but with welcome company if accepted.

When younger he hadn’t hesitated to spend and while his brother wisely warned him to go steady, it had taken years of needlessly gaudy objects to realise what he would become if not careful. So since then he’d slowed his pace down significantly and found that while purchases for himself were nice, for others it brought him joy like no other.

Seeing that he was able to swipe his card he did so, Fred saying nothing though his skin did take on a paler pallor. Once the transaction was processed, he bowed his head.

“Thanks, that’s kind of you. Can I ask something?”

Securing his purchases, Alistair indicated for him to continue. “Of course.”

“Would you be willing to give feedback on any products used?”

Alistair’s response was instant. “It would be my pleasure.”

Still, somewhat in shock over the events of today but thoroughly pleased, the twins bade him farewell as Alistair looked forward to perusing what he’d bought in close detail, at a later date. He was simply glad to have helped a booming business flourish further.

Returning to his private quarters, Alistair was happy to see Harry. More than once he’d told him he was welcome to come even when not there but he rarely did, perhaps because he saw it as impolite. In the middle of fidgeting, Harry stopped, anxiousness clear to see.

“How did it go?”

Sitting down in the armchair opposite his, a faint sigh escaped Alistair’s lips. “As expected, in one way. However, no amount of staff meetings could quite prepare me for the dryness of Albus Dumbledore as the Order’s leader. I rarely find myself uninterested or bored and yet, I would have preferred to be anywhere else but there.”

Harry smiled sympathetically. “At one point I really wanted to be in the Order, before I found out
what he was really like. Now I don’t think I’m missing out on much. What sort of contract or agreement did he get you to sign?”

That was the unbelievable part. “Nothing. It was a simple introduction then an invitation to converse with other Order members.”

Out of everything, that wasn’t what he was expecting to hear. “Seriously? You mean to tell me that this underground organisation formed to oppose Voldemort and barely legal has no contracts, unbreakable oaths or anything?”

Covering his face, Harry’s moans were muffled. “And he’s running a school? Hell, even Hermione has taken every precaution with the DA.”

Alistair thought the same thing, frowning faintly. “It is deeply concerning. While I am unable to say that the meeting was informative, I found it to be entertaining nonetheless.”

At Harry’s questioning look, he elaborated. “I had the pleasure of meeting Molly, firstly.”

Grin nearly splitting his face he relaxed, curling into the chair properly. “She’s great, right? Feels like my mum even though she isn’t biologically.”

Bizarrely, that was similar to how Alistair had felt and to date, he’d never had such an experience before. At his age it was undoubtedly absurd and yet, it had happened.

“She is a wonderful woman.” Reflecting on the new emotions and experiences that had come his way over the last couple of months, his eyes flickered with amusement in remembrance of Tonks’ enthusiasm. “Tonks is a rather interesting character. After her words to me, I informed her of our current relationship.”

Harry had a bad feeling about this. “Hang on, what did she say?”

“Harry’s got the hots for you pretty bad.” Eyes twinkling, he watched with visible delight as his mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Before long he managed to find the words, meeting his eyes.

“She’s not wrong, but has a way of dropping me right into the thick of things.” Laughing to himself, he gave Alistair a shy smile. “Thanks for giving me a chance. Ahh!”

The distance between them closed, as Harry’s armchair moved across the floor of its own accord. Right next to Alistair, he took note of the mischievous twinkle.

Fingers brushing the side of his face, Alistair’s thumb smoothed over his bottom lip. Head tilting, he
smiled alluringly.

“Ah Harry, it is impossible for you to say something so endearing and escape unscathed.”

Taking his hand, Alistair pressed a kiss to each finger and after, held onto it. To Harry, his touch was both calming and yet, never failed to test his heart rate. It was a curious case of opposites, but one that he enjoyed.

Still holding his hand, that brought Alistair onto the more unpleasant followed by interesting part of the day. “Alastor Moody voiced his disapproval of Vampires and afterwards, mentioned my lack of real-world experience alongside referring to me as a ‘whelp.’

“He what?” Harry’s voice was a low growl, eyes flashing to chips of darkened Jade for a second and through their contact, Alistair could feel him flinch slightly. “Vernon used to call me that a lot, I hate it. Did you kick his arse?”

Seeing how hopeful he looked, Alistair was glad to not let him down in that sense.

“He challenged me to a duel.”

Literally, on the edge of his seat, Harry squeezed Alistair’s hand between both of his own, eager. “What happened?! Is he still intact?”

Instead of a verbal answer, Alistair projected earlier events into his mind, that was still fresh.

It was one thing to be told Alistair was a Vampire with an insane grasp of magic itself, but it was another to see it. He could barely keep track of what was going on, moving with an ease that many would envy. Fluidly from one motion to the other, it was like a form of dancing rather than duelling. He’d never seen him duel before, until now.

Even when he’d seen it all he replayed it on repeat in his own mind, in awe of what could be achieved given time and dedication. Then again Harry could have all the time and practice in the world, but he’d never look as attractive while duelling. His respect, admiration and adoration for Alistair only deepened, the shiny cherry on top being Moody completely and utterly trounced by the end.

“Percentage-wise, how much power did you use against him?” Harry wanted to get an estimation of Alistair’s potential, in a way that he could try to understand.

“Five percent would be the closest.”
“Five?!” Harry was sure he’d lost his mind, unbelievably sharing company with a man who had enough power to blow up planet earth. “That means with me, you’d be using about one if that.”

It was mind-blowing but amazing. Showing him a brilliant smile, his mind was still caught up with the facts that he’d been presented with, both in numbers and visually. It was ridiculous, but despite knowing for months Alistair’s nature, it had only really occurred to him now that he was truly a Vampire with centuries of experience.

A touch of hesitation entered Alistair’s voice. “Does it concern you?”

Harry shook his head straight after. “No, it’s just surprising.”

More than one had expressed their concerns and fears around someone with the power that he held but found himself relieved that he could see no signs of this with Harry.

Harry didn’t think he could be any more thrilled, especially after hearing about Fred and George. But shortly after, he was proven wrong.

“Harry. Sunday the 17th, are you free?”

Saturday was the DA, same as every week. Sunday? He couldn’t think of anything.

“Yeah, I’m not doing anything. Why?” Asking this, he was genuinely unsure where the conversation was going.

Heart fluttering, Alistair wished for only one answer. “Would you like to accompany me on an outing?”

“..Like a date?” He asked, slowly.

“Yes,” Alistair confirmed, waiting for his answer.

“Really?!” At the delighted nod in response, Harry couldn’t contain himself. He was more excited than he’d ever been in his life, for anything. Even the time he saw the Quidditch World Cup and that was truly an achievement.

One moment Harry was sitting down and the next, in Alistair’s arms. Returning the embrace and squeezing softly, his all-encompassing warmth spread throughout him.

He’d never had a partner quite so affectionate or expressive though, to begin with, Harry wasn’t like that. But now, he appeared to be completely at ease. He had a number of favourite things but holding
Harry was very high on the list.

Kissing his cheek, Alistair teased him.

“Am I to assume that this is a yes?”

He nodded eagerly. “Definitely. Where are we going?”

Giving a wink, Alistair partially lost himself in the here and now, with Harry and his scent that he found to be incredibly comforting. “I shall leave that as a surprise.”

Harry didn’t protest though honestly, wasn’t sure how he’d survive the week to come. He could hardly wait, endlessly curious to know what it was that he had in store. Regardless of where they went, to spend the entire day with him uninterrupted sounded like the best thing in the world to him. Though thinking back on Moody’s grave mistake in challenging a duelling master, he had to admit that came pretty close. Blessing the recent luck that he’d ended up with, he hoped it would last throughout the rest of this day.
Harry's excited about the information he's just been told, but the reappearance of someone who he hasn't seen in years brought with it a tempting request/offer that he couldn't possibly refuse.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry's told some exciting news and Moody is given a physical demonstration of why every individual has more to learn each day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Long after Harry left Alistair's quarters, those earlier words were on his mind. A date! Of course, it was to be expected that at some point they would go out together, but the thought of that was so far from his mind due to other things that when asked, it took him completely by surprise.

With a spring in his step, The weird looks received in response to his earsplitting grin was plain to see. He didn't care though. But how was he expected to concentrate in class for the next week? Potions were the one subject in particular where absolute focus remained a requirement and he didn't think an excuse of 'I'm excited about my weekend date.' would be acceptable in Professor Snape's eyes. Though, it would be interesting to see his reaction.

As it was getting later in the day, he had every intention of returning to his common room when alone in the corridor, an unknown Patronus in the form of a crow flew around the corner, to hover in front of him.

It delivered a message and unlike the Patronus, its sender's voice was strangely familiar.

"Harry Potter. Return to the place that's no longer cursed. I'm waiting for you."

Where had he heard that voice from? It rang a bell, but one from years ago. The Shrieking Shack was no doubt where this man meant if he was even waiting for him. He didn't discount the probability of it being a trick or trap of some sort, but he was prepared should that be the case. He hadn't used several spare moments to train both physically and magically for nothing.

That was a topic of conversation still circulating around among staff and students alike. How did the
whomping willow change to a normal tree? It was no longer dangerous to be there, a small number of students sitting beneath when the weather wasn't too harsh.

Facing bitter winds outside, He should have brought a coat, but warming charms served just as well. Blowing into his hands to ward off the cold, it certainly served as a suitable distraction for the excitement ahead. In the meantime, he ransacked his mind for where he could have possibly heard that voice before, coming up with nothing. He'd decided the sooner he got there the better, so kept up a steady walking pace. Close to the willow, he could already sense wards there which allowed him to bypass them and lacking her violent nature from before, was able to enter with ease. Hoping that his luck would continue to hold out, he double checked that his wands were at the ready and available to use if need be.

Inevitably, it brought back memories of his third year and truly, he was overjoyed to be where he was now both in his own life and that Sirius and Remus could comfortably build upon what they already had before.

Layers of dust remained, somehow thicker than before and it was a fight to not cough or sneeze in response. Ears attuned to any sounds out of place he could hear nothing, not even behind the door he'd arrived outside of. Prepared for anything, the oil-starved door creaked for all it was worth upon opening.

Though Harry had just thought he was prepared for anything, he quickly came to realise that wasn't the case. Windows similarly caked with dust, there was no light to see by other than Harry's own Lumos which illuminated both the room and man inside.

There had to be a mistake. He was dreaming, seeing things or his contact lenses had encountered a malfunction. That could be the only explanation for who he was faced with.

"Lockhart?" His voice cracked at the end, so stunned that a feather could knock him over.

His eyes regarded him coolly. "My name is none of your concern. Though, Lockhart is not it."

Harry realised why he couldn't recognise the voice straight away. It was brisk, businesslike and lacked any sort of pomposity or self-importance.

It was definitely him, of that Harry had no doubt. The same blond hair and blue eyes though styled differently. Rugged was the first word that came to his mind, a dark coat slung over one shoulder as he leaned against the wall. Shirt sleeves rolled to just above his forearms, the dark mark inked into his skin stood out starkly.

Harry's words died in his throat. What the hell? It was definitely Lockhart, but none of the man Harry knew remained.
Seeing that he wasn't going to speak anytime soon, the unknown man continued. "My lord demands a moment of your time. I'm here to bring you before him."

He had so many questions trying to barge their way into his thoughts, that he actually couldn't think of a single one to ask first.

"Now?" He asked, still suspicious of who he was but claimed not to be.

"Yes. We will side along apparate to the destination."

Hoping that Voldemort would be in a generous mood to answer some of them but more importantly wondering what he wanted, Harry cautiously touched his arm. More used to Alistair's smoother method of travelling, his stomach lurched once they left the shack, for wherever in the world Voldemort was.

Straight away, Harry could tell that they weren't in the same place as before. The restoration of some sanity had brought with it deeper thought, as his base of operations remained Riddle Manor for years, even when aware that Dumbledore knew of it.

If Harry decided to tell someone, it was effective in the sense that any previous descriptions before couldn't apply now and moving from time to time made someone harder to track than if in the same spot constantly. Not that anyone but his friends, Remus, Sirius, Professor Snape and Alistair would learn of this, however, as that would be asking for him to paint a target on his head.

He tried to keep his gaze forward, silently following just behind the man but couldn't help glancing over. It was such a bizarre sight that his eyes naturally wanted to go in that direction. Despite Harry's slight rudeness he didn't say a thing, silently navigating his way through the halls upon entry to the unnamed ranch-style house and with a gestured of his hand, indicated for Harry to go through the opened office door. Knowing instinctively he wasn't needed, he shut the door behind Him.

The interior and exterior were completely different from the last place, but no less refined despite different styles. However, there was one obvious difference. That difference stood stiffly by the desk, while Voldemort himself perused a bookshelf behind it.

"Wormtail..." Harry's voice was a low growl, eyes flashing threateningly as the man paled in response to his obvious anger.

Snivelling, his watery eyes held a healthy dose of fear, though looked at him almost beseechingly.

"H-Harry, how good t-to see y-you-"

"Don't call me by name. You lost all rights to that years ago you cowardly bastard!" Snapping,
Voldemort was the only thing holding Harry back from drawing his wand but as it was, his hand twitched.

Maintaining a remarkable level of calm, Voldemort wasn't affected in the least. In fact, he expected a much more explosive reaction. Fingertips gliding along his book's spines, the heightened tension circulating around simply bypassed him. Finding what he needed, Voldemort turned around to place the book on his desk. Eyes flickering to Wormtail for a brief moment, they held a mixture of disdain and amusement.

Since settling matters with Potter, he experienced a sense of strange, uplifting calm. Liberating would be the closest word, however, he hadn't felt trapped since his orphanage days.

The time spent in voluntary isolation had helped to solidify things within his mind. For years, he had followers who were simply that. They followed him and his every word to the letter or risked the wrath of punishment. Loyalty was important and yet, how many of them were, truly? Loyalty out of fear rather than free will wasn't the same and only Lucius and Severus even dared to voice their opinions. Even then, they'd tasted the agony of his cruciatus curse many times.

He'd done his research, into every spell used. Knowledge is power and the more awareness he held, the better the results would be. Overtime prolonged exposure could damage the body irreparably and to a man such as Severus where finesse and a steady hand were vital, it only worked against him in the long run.

He wanted people who believed in his cause, not bound to servitude and therefore forced but along the way, he'd lost sight of his original goal and focused it entirely around Potter and a prophecy. While he was against the idea of any mudbloods in the noble house of Slytherin, he'd come to understand that times had changed but more importantly, there were those that treated others like scum of the earth no matter their background.

There was no black and white with magic, it simply was. While the Ministry placed restrictions on certain kinds for many reasons, incendio, taught in schools, could be used to set someone alight and inflict damage the same as Crucio. It was the intent behind it that mattered. Not all but a lot of magic considered 'light' or 'good' could be twisted into a completely different purpose.

While a changed mindset over magic as a whole would be ideal, what Voldemort wanted to change the most were those in a similar situation to him, throughout his childhood. Every child deserved to have a good life and Mudbloods or not, it wasn't their fault they were born into a world like this one. It was the fault of abusers and perhaps just as much, those who knew but chose not to act. It was the main reason why he loathed Dumbledore, however, his tall tales interspersed with grains of truth he found to be laughable.

And then, his eyes landed on Potter. He looked no different from before and yet, he detected a change that he couldn't quite put his finger on. A Lion in Snakeskin or not, it was clear that he had a question to ask. Taking a seat and inviting him to do the same, he used the modicum of patience he held, to wait.
Sitting down, Voldemort's crimson gaze pinned him in place. He seemed to be waiting for something and hoping he wouldn't have to nimbly dodge a well-aimed crucio for talking out of turn, Harry decided to try asking.

"That man who brought me here. Was he Gilderoy Lockhart?"

He had the feeling that would be the question asked. In fact, he'd sent him specifically knowing that Potter, in particular, would recognise him. Though he was brought here for an entirely different purpose, Voldemort was in a charitable mood and provided an explanation.

"At one point. He now goes by the name Glenn Leydon, with a convincing copy in his place. A nearly blank slate, ready for false memories to be implanted."

While little to no details were provided, Harry believed he understood. "So you saw this as an opportunity to craft the perfect follower?"

A short, sharp nod accompanied by a slight sneer. "Five points to Gryffindor."

The man wasn't placed into Ravenclaw for no reason. A career built upon lies and deceit without a shred of honesty or decency and for years until it all caught up with him, showcased his intelligence even if the execution was all wrong. As security was lax, Wormtail managed to slip in and learn the details. His condition was down to a broken wand and while his mastery of the obliviation charm was apparent, using a faulty wand ensured that the results were far from perfect. Meaning, that there were still memories to work with and he wasn't left a gibbering vegetable.

The creation of Glenn was a fairly recent thing, after one of his Horcruxes, Potter himself, instead joined the little piece of soul inside him that was left. It was something to develop and refine over those few months, while he took the time to adapt with his own changes.

Barely managing to not wince at the sarcastic and biting edge to his tone, Harry reminded himself to tread carefully, tone polite. "What do you want with me?"

Voldemort studied him, in a way which suggested that he knew Harry’s innermost secrets. Though, he had the feeling that their first meeting and this one, his mind hadn’t been peered into. He had no proof, simply gut instinct which had rarely lead him astray.

Reclining in his seat, the words that left Voldemort’s lips were not ones that Harry expected.

“Wormtail is no longer of use to me. Do with him as you wish.”

“M-Master?” Wormtail squeaked, the strange silvery hand in place of the one that he’d cut off
shimmering in the dim lighting, as he nibbled at the hard fingertips in anxiousness.

Instantly on guard, Harry’s mind raced. If this was a serious offer, he doubted that he’d be able to just up and leave with someone that without, Voldemort’s rebirth would have happened either much later or never beyond simple possession. But suppose he could take Wormtail, that meant he could bring him along to his meeting with Madam Bones when she had the available time. The fact that he was alive alone proved Sirius’ innocence, though most believed he was dead by having his soul sucked out and not through previously falling victim to the veil, thanks to Dumbledore.

“What do you want in return?”

Voldemort had little to no patience for fools and wasn’t the type to engage in step by step handholding. Potter was no fool. Inexperienced, but not a fool. Glad that he didn’t have to point out the obvious, this would test him, in a sense.

“One of my Horcruxes lies within Hogwarts, the Room of Requirement. I assume you know of it?” At Harry’s nod, he continued. “It’s in a room filled with various discarded items. Bring it to me.”

It was a simple fetching request. Only what didn’t make it so simple was the fact that it was a part of Voldemort’s soul. In the end, there was only one question he had.

“What does it look like?”

His next words were delivered so casually, that Harry nearly missed the gravity of them.

“Ravenclaw’s Diadem. Distinctive enough that it’s impossible to miss.”

Holding his tongue forcefully, he nearly asked if Voldemort was serious and tried the best he could to keep his personal thoughts out of it. Though he couldn’t help but be slightly disgusted that he used a founder’s relic for something of this nature. If these were his feelings when not a member of Ravenclaw house, he definitely didn’t want to tell Luna.

If he did decide to return one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes, there was always the chance that he wouldn’t follow through on his end. But considering what was at stake if he refused, the inclination to agree remained stronger.

Weighing his options, Wormtail’s fear-stricken, whining voice grated on Harry’s nerves.

“M-Master, you can’t be serious, S-surely? I-“

Cut off, the balding man squeaked, finding himself at wand point and cowering beneath Voldemort’s
chilling glare. “If you so much as try to flee or even speak another word, I will cut out your tongue.”

Harry knew it wasn’t an empty threat but more importantly, so did Wormtail. Faced with disdain from Harry and Voldemort, he elected to remain quiet yet uncomfortable, still standing.

Satisfied, Voldemort retook his seat, arching a single brow. “Well?”

The fact that he had a truce with Voldemort still hadn’t sunk in. But actually returning a soul piece? That was insanity. Of course, his motivation had partially selfish routes as the potential ‘reward’ benefitted his family as a whole. Before all this, he would have taken the opportunity to destroy it, but he had no desire to this time, mainly because of what it was.

“I’ll do it.” Nodding to confirm his words, Harry most likely imagined the pleased expression that flickered across his face.

“Glenn will return with you, to wait. He’s already aware of what it is that I require.”

As if he knew when the right time would be to return, Glenn opened the door.

“My lord.”

He barely spared a single glance for Wormtail and with a gesture of Voldemort’s hand, that was Harry’s indication to leave. All in all, he couldn’t have taken more than ten minutes and with a vague memory of what the diadem looked like through an extract of Hogwarts: A History, at least he wasn’t going in blind. But actually thinking along the lines of Voldemort to access the room and then finding what he needed would prove to be no easy feat, as he highly doubted that the diadem could be summoned.

Thankfully he wasn’t apparating himself as with his sudden mental distraction, he’d end up in St Mungos suffering from a splinching accident. Glenn said no more than was needed, returning to where Harry first found him and in this case, he decided the sooner the better. While he could inform his friends, it would be faster to just do it and tell them afterwards. Under normal circumstances he wouldn’t have hesitated to, however, he didn’t think just a small part of Voldemort’s soul reunited with the rest would mean a sudden addition of limitless patience.

Though it hadn’t been long since he was last outside, the sky always darkened quicker around the later months so as it was, the only lights that could be seen were from Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. Leaving the willow he was faced with even colder winds, leaving him shivering slightly. Applying a warming charm, he jumped when a familiar soft voice called out to him.

“Hello, Harry.”
Looking all around him, he couldn’t locate the owner of that voice.

“Up here.”

Glancing upward he saw Luna, giving a wave as if she climbed trees on a daily basis. Sitting sideways she only wore a light coat but didn’t look to be affected at all by the weather.

“Luna? What are you doing here?” He asked, puzzled.

Hair waving wildly in the breeze, her presence there was almost ethereal. “I sensed you might need help, so I came.”

Oh, that explained it. “You saw a vision of me here?”

Nodding gently, she floated to the ground, with aid of magic. Once on her feet, she tilted her head to the side questioningly. Reaching up, her fingertips smoothed over his brow.

Harry relaxed his face, realising how tense he’d been for the past few minutes. Having one of his friends here was better than none, he could do with the extra help. Though he’d agreed to retrieve the diadem, he was still conflicted. Slowing his pace to match Luna’s, he explained on the way back to Hogwarts and decided to leave Lockhart or Glenn, as he was now known, out of it until a later date. “Voldemort wanted to speak with me. He offered Wormtail in exchange for bringing him one of his Horcruxes from Hogwarts.”

“And you feel conflicted because of your past history with him?” She guessed, Harry, finding himself surprised by how perceptive she was but also, how any previous stress or worry seemed to float away just being around her.

“Yeah. The whole situation’s just weird. I’ve spent years listening to Dumbledore say that Voldemort is the ultimate evil and that it’s my job to kill him, but now everything’s different. There’s every chance this could go wrong but then if I do get Wormtail, it could change everything for the better, eventually.”

Voicing the thoughts he had did help, Luna nodding understandingly. “It’s up to you, Harry. I don’t think there’s a right or wrong choice but whatever you decide to do, I’m sure everything will be fine.”

From most others, it would sound insincere but with Luna, Harry found himself believing her. “Thanks. I haven’t got time to tell the others but I’m glad you’re here.”

She’d never get tired of hearing that, treasuring every single friend as she did her corks and the Quibbler which to her, were very high on the list.
Though she was with him and would see anyway, Harry hesitated to go into further detail of the Horcrux itself, remaining silent. Her lighthearted account of the day she’d had is what he needed to settle his nerves some, providing enough of a distraction that they arrived outside of the seventh floor with no trouble at all.

The next issue was what exactly Voldemort thought when requesting a room like that. If it was filled with a lot of things, it would be hard to find a certain object in amongst it all.

’I need a place to hide something.’ Pacing up and down Harry tried this, the door shifting into a one he’d find around the school rather than the usual double. Placing his palm flat against it, he applied a little pressure as the door swung open.

With little to no lighting, almost every spare inch housed some sort of object or another, with some walking space obstructed by the sheer amount.

"Lumos." The light ball hovering alongside him he tried summoning the diadem. He knew it wouldn’t be easy, but it was worth a try anyway.

"How the hell are we supposed to find anything here?" Sneezing, a cloud of dust circulated in the air. There was everything he could think of here, including what looked like abandoned homework drafts with various stains from at least a century ago. Aside from the diadem, there were probably some things of worth and at a later date, they could always return and find out.

Realising Luna had remained quiet, he turned to her and immediately became concerned at the paler tinge to her skin. "What's wrong?"

Before her lessons with Brio, Luna had always been sensitive to magic with dark intentions but spending time in an entirely different world which was so much purer and cleaner, her sensitivity had reached new heights, to the point where some parts of Hogwarts had become unpleasant to spend time in and the forbidden forest, almost made her feel ill. It was a reminder of how much their world had suffered under the hands of neglect and abuse and in a way, it was as though she’d emerged from water, short of breath when travelling to the Fae's realm. Hopefully, around this magic, it would be worse before it got better.

Noticing her silence had worried Harry, she explained as best she could past the sudden tightening in her chest. "There's a lot of bad magic here."

Of course. Harry remembered being told about how certain types of magic affected her. He was going to say she didn't need to go through with this but stopped himself. She wanted to help him and came in here, despite knowing that Horcruxes were one of the darkest forms of magic out there. In a calm, serene way, she could be equally as stubborn.

"Can you tell one from the other, or is it all sort of jumbled together?"
Taking a few seconds to try and acclimatise, Luna had her answer. "There's one that's stronger than
the rest."

Feeling slightly lightheaded she continued onwards, in the direction of where she sensed it and
appreciative of Harry by her side. Occasionally he would flick his wand, removing any of the larger
obstructions so that they were able to continue further.

At a distance it was overwhelming for Luna but drawing closer, it was on the verge of being
unbearable. Where the most clutter lay was heaps of clothing and in among it, a large oval sapphire
caught the light, peeking out from beneath the mound.

Deciding it wasn't the best idea to touch it with his bare hands Harry searched nearby, finding a cloth
sack which had seen better days. Now that he was close he could feel the power radiating from it,
but not only that. It whispered to him as if sharing great secrets. Of how he could bring his parents
back, the diadem would help with that and grant knowledge beyond his wildest dreams to achieve
this.

"It's horrible.." Luna murmured, shaking her head from side to side and firmly keeping away the
encroaching voices speaking of her mother.

Harry wasn't sure whether she referred to what the Horcrux was or the magic itself, though it could
easily be both. "Yeah. I haven't picked the Horcrux up yet and I already can't wait to be rid of it."

Thankfully the levitation charm worked, dropping it quickly into the sack and with some relief, able
to drop it into the pouch he always carried around, filled with essentials.

Sealed away, it was as though an unseen pressure lifted and he could finally breathe.

"Thanks for the help. Without you, it would have taken twice as long." Giving her a pat on the
shoulder they quickly left, worried about Luna's overall wellbeing if they stayed for much longer.

Outside, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Though Voldemort's smart, I have to question why he'd
voluntarily make something like that." Shuddering, his brow furrowed slightly at Luna's pale
complexion. Before he could say a word, his facial expression quickly turned neutral though
internally, his heart stopped.

Dumbledore, finally back to normal and in his robes patterned with silver stars paired with a pointed
hat, made his way up the corridor and towards them. Thankfully the door had disappeared, so there
wasn't a way for him to check what room they'd been in.

But of all the shit timing. It had to be now when he had one of Voldemort's Horcruxes. Eyes
twinkling brightly, he adjusted his half-moon spectacles until they perched on the very tip of his
crooked nose.

"Ah, Harry my boy! And Miss Lovegood too. What brings you to the Seventh Floor?"

Think Harry! A plausible excuse! Mind racing and trying not to panic he came up with something on the spot, hoping it sounded believable. "I was training with Luna, Sir. There was something we learned with the DA that she needed help with. She overexerted herself a bit so I'm taking her to the Hospital Wing."

The tension between them was so thick, it could be sliced clean with a knife. Glancing over at the Lovegood girl, he could see that she did appear to be fatigued and her colour was off. He'd keep his eye on them both, but wasn't suspicious, for now.

Shaking his head slightly, Dumbledore chided them. "You must be more careful to not overdo it. Magic is precious and must not be used lightly."

Oh, how Harry wanted to snap right then and there, maybe pull his newly grown beard clean off and shove it where the sun will never shine. He'd nearly robbed Harry of his magic completely! Not to mention the number of times he'd been harmed through Dumbledore's own magic. Biting his tongue, he managed a level response. "Yes, sir."

Inclining his head in their direction, he turned a corner and left. While his back was turned Harry gave him the finger, earning a small giggle from Luna. Continuing, he couldn't help but glance behind just to make sure. Seeing no one else was there, he gave her an apologetic look. "Had to come up with something on the spot. I'll take you to the Hospital Wing before I go back if you want?"

Despite the slight urgency of needing to return, he couldn't help but feel concerned. Smiling cheerfully if a bit weakly, Luna reached up to pat him once on the head. "I'll be fine. On the way here, I think I saw a Blibbering Humdinger. I want to check."

Harry had no idea what that was but trusted that she would indeed be fine. "Ok. I'll see you later then."

Giving her a brief smile and wave they parted ways, Harry heading back outside.

Though she didn't say as much to him, she did feel a bit weak and a Pepperup potion would be beneficial to her at this stage. She'd never once had to take one but there was a first time for everything. Afterwards, she thought it might benefit explaining what she knew from Harry to the others, so he wouldn't have to.
Truthfully, she would rather be faced with the Horcrux than the Headmaster again. She didn't like being near him. The magic was strong enough, that it overrode her shock at realising that it was her founder's diadem that had been corrupted. The thought saddened her deeply that something so precious had been used as a vessel to achieve immortality.

Not for the first time, Luna wished Harry could live his life without feeling trapped in the middle of two factions, equally flawed. Earth could be a wonderful place, if not for those so intent on destroying it. There were so many sights that she wanted to see. Brio had never ventured beyond his realm before and with him, they could discover them together. Those thoughts had been prominent within her mind recently, more than anything else within her little bubble and it was a revelation. Something which she'd never experienced before but observing some of Harry's past behaviour, she came to understand what it was.

When the opportunity arose, she would tell Brio. She wasn't scared, simply excited at where the answer to that one question would take her, good or bad.

Those thoughts she carried with her, up to the Hospital Wing. Peering in, she was surprised to see Professor Snape there, rather than Madam Pomfrey. There were no patients there and by the look of things, he was restocking supplies.

Hearing the sound of footsteps and rising to his feet, the dark expression on his face didn't affect Luna in the slightest. Craning her neck, his dark eyes regarded her and skilfully hid his slight wariness. She was unpredictable and didn't quite know what to make of her.

"What is it, Miss Lovegood?" Looking mildly impatient he waited, folding his arms.

"May I have a Pepperup Potion?" Not wanting to waste his time she got straight to the point, hoping that he knew she wouldn't ask if it wasn't needed.

The last time he'd seen her in the Hospital Wing was after the Ministry's events and before this, he couldn't recall another time as his spare moments were often spent here. It was an usual sight but analysing her critically, he could see that her complexion was paler than normal. He loathed those that either time wasted or exaggerated, but he could see that she was doing neither. Rather than a verbal answer he quickly located what was needed, handing the vial to her.

Uncorking it, she carefully drank the contents and returned the empty bottle to him. Already, she could feel herself perking up and gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you, Sir, have a nice day."

Skipping away, any thoughts of reminding her to walk normally left his mind. Have a nice day? Wished well by a student, no less? He couldn't remember ever being told such a thing. Even among his colleagues, it was rare. Shaking unnecessary thoughts away, Severus continued what he was doing previously while filling in for Madam Pomfrey.
Reclining in his desk chair, Voldemort flipped through the pages of his book, finding a particular extract which was of interest to him. Though to the side of him, Wormtail's hovering presence was irritating. Without looking up, his voice was sharper than a razor's edge. "Get out of my sight, until I summon you again."

It was the fastest he'd ever seen Wormtail move. Smirking lightly, he found himself mildly curious what Potter would do. It was a considerable risk and if it happened to be destroyed, he would know immediately. However, he saw mutual benefit in this movement. Glenn had proven himself to be invaluable, with the tasks he'd used as a way to test his strength of character. Through this, he no longer needed Wormtail. But, sending a non-student or staff member into Hogwarts where Dumbledore was very much on the prowl wasn't a risk he was willing to take. Severus was in an advantageous position but again, he preferred him away from the line of fire and acting solely as Potions Master and Spy.

For Potter, it was different. Establishing a truce after years of at one point a one-sided rivalry, it changed the dynamics of their relationship. Not only this, but he was aware of Horcruxes and at one point, a vessel for his soul. In a bizarre way, one of which he wouldn't put too much thought in, there was a certain sense of gratefulness that it was kept safe for those years, unintentional or not.

During their first meeting, he'd taken the time to study Potter closely. Less Gryffindor and more Slytherin had emerged, which gave him the confidence in making this request. He doubted he would accept without some sort of incentive. If returned to him Voldemort would not only have one of his Horcruxes nearby but be rid of someone who had become more of a hindrance than a help. Then, Potter would be able to do what he wished with the one who had condemned his 'friend' to years in arguably one of the worst places, alongside two murdered by his own hand. That idea brought a small measure of amusement, admittedly.

The moment anyone arrived, the wards would indicate so. The only ones who knew of this place were himself, Wormtail, Glenn and Potter. So when he was alerted, it could only be the latter two returning. Mildly surprised yet pleased at how quick he'd been, Voldemort ensured that nothing showed on his face. Though it had only been fifteen minutes at most since Wormtail had been dismissed, he pressed the tip of his wand against the mark, to summon him again. It wasn't long after he returned, stumbling through the door and bowing repeatedly that Potter made a reappearance.

Removing the cloth sack from his pouch, Harry levitated the Horcrux out, keeping his shudders to the minimum. In the brighter lighting, he could see the masterful craftsmanship, all centred around a large sapphire sitting directly in the middle.

Narrowing his eyes, Voldemort was satisfied. “Good. Any problems?"

Not that he cared. Results were all that mattered, in the end, and Potter had delivered satisfactorily.

“Ran into Dumbledore on the way out.” Harry sneered, distaste evident with every syllable. “He asked what I was doing there. Gave him an excuse and I don’t think he suspected anything.”
Oh, yes. He received a certain amount of satisfaction that Dumbledore’s golden boy could no longer be defined as such.

Using a spare bit of parchment, Voldemort wordlessly transfigured it into a cage which held surprising elegance in its design. Cold crimson eyes switching to Wormtail, he turned pleading eyes upon the one he’d served for years.

“M-Master, please..”

Not swayed by his pleas in the least and forced into his animagus form, the cage became Wormtail’s new home, for now. Hardly able to believe his luck and waiting for a few seconds to check, Harry picked it up. This changed so much and there wasn’t a chance in hell that he was going to escape, either. He’d make sure of that.

He was gleeful enough to do a little jig around the office but refrained from taking such actions, considering the company. Bowing his head, Harry gripped the cage for dear life. “Thanks.”

He hardly needed thanking, merely giving away unwanted rubbish though the thought of being thanked genuinely for anything was rather odd. Giving a sharp nod, he dismissed him with a brief gesture of his hand. The door closing firmly behind he looked at Rowena’s Diadem, plunging into the depths of deep thought.

Though the soul pieces returned to him were mostly by accident, he wondered if there was a way to restore them without actually harming the object. His desire for immortality was still strong but along the way, he’d lost sight of himself and though he loathed the very idea of sharing similarities, he’d gone down a similar road to Dumbledore. Was immortality worth the price of intelligence? More monster than human, he’d let a prophecy by a half-baked deer dictate what could and couldn’t be done and while he believed some truth remained, it wasn’t set in stone. Bellatrix had fed into his own madness, followers kissing his bare feet in a manner which was insulting to them and himself. He was a straightforward thinker, with a mind clearer than the most tropical of oceans and yet, the Horcruxes had done nothing but fuel his desire for revenge and power. Mortality was not an option. But having just one rather than several? That was something he could work with, providing that his only one remained untouchable to those who would destroy it. Wormtail free, it was a pleasant breath of fresh air for him, one of which he would revel in.

Today, he’d ferried back and forth between Hogwarts and various places more than ever, but with good reason. On the way out he'd made small additions to the cage, ensuring that he wouldn't be making a quick escape any time soon.

"I've got you, bastard," Harry muttered, smirking to himself when from the corner of his eye, he could see a silver pawed rat trying its best to squeeze in one corner of its temporary home. Where Wormtail was going, he doubted that would last for long.

He could hardly believe that Voldemort had actually given him Wormtail. Granted he had to get something first but from his point of view, he had the better trade-off and Voldemort had the greater
risk, depending on what Wormtail knew of his former master's plans. Compared to before with his overconfidence in the graveyard, Voldemort struck him as someone a lot more careful with plans so maybe, he knew nothing. Either way, getting his hands on this particularly slippery rat was certainly a highlight of this year.

One more time, he'd leave Hogwarts and then return again. This time, to deliver a rat to one very special reunion.

"Fuck."

"I believe the correct answer is Checkmate, Sirius."

"Shit."

Greeted with this straight through the floo, Harry caught the back end of what looked to have been a heated chess match between Remus and Sirius. Remus looked perfectly composed, while his opponent for the night ran a hand through already shaggy hair in agitation. "Have you been practising?"

Stretching his arms, Remus chuckled lightly. "No. You're just terrible."

"Oi!"

Then, at almost the same time, a very familiar scent filled their nostrils. They'd heard the floo and assumed correctly that it was Harry but would know the added company anywhere.

Sirius stood up with such force, that the table with chess pieces overbalanced, crashing to the floor. Turning to Harry he raised the cage up, grinning. "Surprise!"

"My birthday's passed by and it's too early for Christmas. What's the occasion?" Sirius practically jumped for joy, in contrast to Remus' calm appearance. Though the feral gleam in his eyes couldn't be ignored.

Placing the cage down, they were in line to hear another unbelievable story. "Voldemort gave him to me in exchange for fetching one of his Horcruxes from Hogwarts."

Amusing himself, Sirius picked up the cage, tilting it and watching Wormtail cling on for dear life with dark amusement. At Harry's words, he glanced up, eyeing him incredulously. "That's insane."

Sighing, Harry plopped himself down on the sofa. "I know, but if there was a slight chance I could
get to him, even meaning that Voldemort is more guaranteed to stay immortal." He trails off, caught up in memories of a few short years ago. "I had to take that chance. For me but more importantly, both of you."

Glancing at Sirius with no small amount of amusement, Remus clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's a difficult choice to have made."

"I would've done the same thing. Don't get me wrong, I hate Volde and what he's done to all of us. But right now, he's almost looking like the lesser of two evils."

Sirius grimaced. "Can't believe I just said that. They're both as bad as each other but while one started something that ruined your life, the other continued it, for years."

That was true. Harry didn't dwell on his choice much longer, watching Wormtail still cling to the bars. "How long are you going to do that for?"

In mid cage tilt, Sirius cocked his head in consideration of the question. "Think I'm done now."

Opening it he reached in, pinching the tail between his thumb and forefinger and before Wormtail could scrabble at him, was flung none too gently in the air.

Airborne Remus flicked his wand, rat transforming back into man as he collapsed into a heap on the floor. More than happy to watch any potential fireworks Harry kicked back, relaxing and enjoying the moment.

Remus had the foresight to summon anything which could be used to make his escape, including several Portkeys.

There was the issue of his Animagi ability, but a spare room could be used which prevented this ability providing the correct charms were applied. Deciding that it was better to be safe than sorry they did just that, picking one of the more lightly furnished and unused rooms. Dragging him in, they closed the door behind them. Leaning against the wall and out of the way, Harry observed silently.

"Y-You’re supposed to be dead!" Eyes bulging out of their sockets, Peter couldn’t believe it, looking at Sirius in shock.

“Well, I’m not. You’ll wish you were though. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.” Cracking his knuckles almost menacingly, the expression of a natural prankster emerged.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Within a few seconds, it seemed as if years were taken off Remus as he was transported back to his youth, though circumstances were different.
“A guinea pig or in this case, rat for pranking experiments?”

“Exactly.”

Oh, this should be good. By the end, Wormtail would probably prefer Azkaban.

“Misty.”

At her name being called, she appeared.

“Hello Harry, how can I assist you today?”

Unlike Dobby, Misty was quick in adapting to using his first name only though with his previous master, it would take time for the other elf. “Can you prepare a few refreshments for me please?”

“At once.”

Disappearing she reappeared not long after, placing them on the side table.

“Thanks, that’s it for now.”

Showing her a grateful smile she bowed her head, leaving again.

Using a chair nearby he sat down, amused as he observed Wormtail trying to either plead or bargain with them. Able to see them in action Harry observed eagerly, taking the opportunity to use this in learning more not just about pranking but themselves, and the dynamics of their relationship. Interested for what the future would have in store for them all, there was a certain sense of satisfaction that long ago, a spell told by the twins to Ron for a Rat to turn yellow finally began to happen, as two of the Marauders unleashed their creativity on a third.

Chapter End Notes

Paris date next week <3
A Parfait Day in Paris

Chapter Summary

It's Harry's first date and for the shopping district, there was plenty to see and do. Everything was going how Alistair had hoped, until he encountered someone unexpected.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: In exchange for Wormtail, Harry retrieved one of Voldemort's Horcruxes from right under Dumbledore's nose. So, two Marauders were rewarded with a third.

Finally, the day of his date with Alistair had come. The week was near agonising, trying his best to concentrate fully on classes and assignments but this was difficult, particularly on the days with Professor Lothaire.

Thankful that he had female friends he'd gone to each of them for advice on what to wear though predictably, all answered differently. Hermione had suggested something casual yet smart, Ginny something which left nothing to the imagination while Luna suggested lots of bright colours.

He'd tried to incorporate several ideas, settling for a red pullover shirt with 3/4 sleeves, skinny black jeans and a lightweight jacket. He'd checked it over with them and while he'd been given the ok, Alistair's opinion was the one which mattered the most to him. He knew nothing of fashion and to someone who clearly knew a lot, he felt a slight pressure to look at least halfway presentable.

He was told to meet Alistair by the lake and though it was November, the skies were clear. Slightly different to how he usually dressed in his spare time he garnered a few head turns and wolf whistles, alongside some raised brows from the smattering of students as he passed by in the common room. It was 9:45 am so 15 minutes left plenty of time, providing the staircases behaved themselves.

Thankfully they did though on the way down, his stomach churned with nerves. He'd never been on a date before. What were the dos and don'ts? Was there a certain way he needed to act? A small part of him was concerned that he wouldn't measure up to any of Alistair's past partners and while the past usually stayed there, he still wondered.

In his worry, those unnecessary thoughts swirled within his mind and forcefully, he pushed them aside. What mattered was right now and inexperienced or not, he'd make the most of it and learn as
Since October he'd changed his hairstyle again as for the first time, it was in a way which hid his scar from view but since then, he'd come to realise something. Even without the scar, most knew who he was any way through media coverage. What use was it to hide something which may always remain? Instead, he'd let his hair go back to its natural colour and style, only a little tamer. Alistair had mentioned that he liked his messy hair and that gave him a reason to embrace and appreciate it more.

Once outside, no one was in immediate sight but near the lake, he could only see only one person. It was someone that he'd recognise even at a great distance.

Leaning back against the tree slightly, Harry could see that Alistair had dressed down a little bit, but not to the point where he could ever picture him wearing a hoodie. The collar of his own white shirt unbuttoned a little, Harry could see that like himself, he wore Luna's butterbeer cork necklace. Noticing him immediately he gave Harry a light wave, who increased his walking pace in response.

Once close he could see that Alistair's ribbon matched the shirt colour and for once, his hair didn't have a small braid. Fighting past his sudden tongue-tied state Harry's eyes drank in his form.

"Sorry, have you been waiting long?"

"Not at all, a few minutes at most." Fingers tracing beneath Harry's eyes, Alistair's own held faint concern. "Were you unable to sleep?"

Not used to being asked such a thing, Harry was thrown for a moment. He could usually hide any and all signs but then, he hadn't used glamour charms for a while now.

"I got too excited thinking about today, so I couldn't fall asleep." Admitting this he gave a slightly sheepish smile, rewarded with Alistair's fingers running affectionately through his hair.

"If I had the need for sleep, I confess I would be in a similar state. But, I am glad that it was not the fault of nightmares." For a few seconds, he stared at Harry, having the sudden urge to fidget.

If the sky was cloudy, they'd be banished instantly when faced with Alistair's brilliant smile. "You are exceedingly handsome Harry, I am very fortunate."

A genuine compliment, straightforward and delivered smoothly without a hint of embarrassment. He almost envied that particular ability. "Thanks."

He struggled for a response, though did the best he could. "I can say the same for you, but I feel like that every day."
One arm pulling him closer, Harry's eyes naturally closed in response. Head tilted back ever so slightly, the slight chill in the air couldn't cut through warmth which spread throughout him in response to the gentle kiss pressed against his lips. He'd grown used to how they worked in a sense, gaining more confidence when his surprising and passionate one on the day of rescuing Sirius was met with a positive reaction. Though his first kiss with Alistair he'd consider special, it didn't take away from the times after that either as none of them failed to get his heart racing furiously.

With a soft sound, he pulled away, gratitude shining within his gaze. "Shall we go?"

"Yes!"

Chuckling warmly at Harry's enthusiastic response, they met no one else along the way and possibly, it was due to students wanting to lie in over the weekend while they had a chance to.

Once outside of the gates to Hogwarts, Alistair wrapped his arms around Harry's middle. "Close your eyes."

Confused Harry did so, wondering why even as they left the school grounds. Without being able to see he relied on other senses, noticing the atmosphere change instantly as animated voices and sounds of people bustling about filled his ears. A faint smell of cinnamon reached his nose, combined with others that almost had his mouth watering. The majority of voices that he could distinguish from the general noise were French, a language which he knew the very basics of from a few lessons in Primary school alongside when Beauxbatons visited Hogwarts.

"Open them."

Harry did so and now that he could see, a gasp left his lips.

Diagon was rustic in a sense, but not in a bad way. Some shops were shut down and buildings a little dilapidated here and there, but it still held the wonder of many things on offer and Harry would never forget his first time there. But this was equally wonderful.

He could tell immediately that the buildings were in excellent condition, the architecture holding a certain class which others seemed to lack. There was something refined and almost elegant about each one, the paths nowhere near as narrow and much cleaner. Harry could tell that they'd remained standing for a long time, perhaps longer than Diagon Alley. The energy was no less vibrant, unsure of where to turn his head first as there was a lot to see or do. Many of the signs were outlined in either gold, silver or bronze accompanied with flawless script, which served to catch Harry's eyes.

"It's beautiful." Starstruck he tried to take in as much of the surroundings as possible, feeling fingers interlink with his own. He could hardly wait to look around, having enough time to do so as France was only an hour ahead of Scotland. Practically bouncing on his feet, it would be nice to not rush around for once.
Since he hadn't been here before, Harry would rely on Alistair for where the best places were, though some had captured his interest already. They accepted galleons and euros, which saved having to convert any and as they walked, Alistair provided brief history of Ensoleillé Allée. Though, it was delivered in a way which intrigued him, unlike Binns. He could hardly be called a Professor as out of everyone, History of Magic most likely had the worse grade rates.

Hand in hand Harry listened, Alistair's words helping to paint a greater picture.

"Unlike most areas, this particular alley has remained untouched by war or any forms of attack and outside of regular maintenance, is the main reason why everything looks pristine. It is one of the most well-known shopping districts throughout Paris which displays its fine architecture and is a go-to place for tourists, wealthy or otherwise."

Looking around, Harry could see that it did welcome people of different backgrounds, though he wondered if their attitudes towards blood status were any different.

"Do you come here often?" He was curious though judging by how at ease he seemed, the answer would probably be yes.

"Not in years, though I used to visit fortnightly. Little has changed, thankfully."

A translation spell was available and according to Alistair, used by all vendors so that communication barriers aren't a problem. With a simple tap of Alistair's wand by his ear, Harry was able to understand the conversations going on around him which would come in handy, particularly since he'd take the opportunity to do some Christmas shopping here alongside enjoying the day out.

Though Diagon Alley would always be one of his favourite places, there was one thing this place had which the other lacked and that was anonymity. In the UK, partly thanks to Rita, Harry was famous or infamous, depending on how someone looked at it. Because of this, it made having a peaceful day out without stares or whispers harder than usual.

But here, he hadn't encountered this problem so far and if they knew who he was, they were at least subtler about it. He wasn't so arrogant to think that everyone in the world knew him, but he'd rather no one did other than those who mattered. But then, life didn't work out that way.

They received stares, but he believed that was due to the company that he shared more than anything else. Alistair was certainly a head turner.

Matching his pace with Harry's, the younger man was able to observe everything to his heart's content. Then, a particular shop caught his eye.

"Cotes et Extrémités," Wincing at his butchering of the elegant language, he could see it didn't have
"It translates to odds and ends, so a little of everything." Alistair could see his interest, finding himself mildly surprised that this was the first thing which had captured his lover's interest. Aside from Madame Bellerose's, this was a favourite for him to frequent as often, there were some things here that even he hadn't seen.

Harry's eyes sparkled with intrigue. "Can we have a look?"

"Of course, there is no need to ask permission. Wherever you wish to go, a simple tug will inform me." Indicating their joined hands with a small swing of his arm, Alistair gave him a teasing smile.

Glancing down at their hands for a moment, it was as if Fawkes sang a beautiful song for him to feel so warm and happy inside. Before Hogwarts he was unused to being able to go where he pleased, the rare outings with the Dursleys he had either locked in the car for hours or dragged around wherever Dudley wanted to go. Over time he'd learned to find a comfortable balance with his friends so, with Alistair, he'd need to adapt in some small ways as well.

"Ok! If there's somewhere you're interested in as well let me know. I want to see as much of everything as possible."

If he wasn't holding Harry's hand, Alistair was almost afraid he'd rush everywhere in his quest to see all, much like the firebolt he treasured. He appreciated Harry's consideration as for date destinations, Alistair was happy to go wherever his significant other did as seeing them happy was a personal goal. Some had gone wherever he'd expressed an interest in as well, but most had simply gone wherever they wanted to and for him, that was fine.

"I will, perhaps a little later."

Satisfied with Alistair's answer, Harry eagerly opened the door and as he did, a small bell rang above him.

"I will be just over there." Gesturing to something which had already captured Alistair's attention Harry nodded, unsure of where to go first. The way everything was set up reminded him of a charity shop, which also had a mixture of everything but looking at the quality of items on sale and price tags attached, the layout remained a singular similarity.

On a shelf was a crystal ball, looking eerily similar to the Prophecies and when he gazed into it, the previously clear interior turned an impenetrable, inky black. He wasn't sure if it was an omen or not, but he wanted to stay far away from any sort of Divination. He'd picked up a few things of interest, some of which he believed that his friends would like. One of them was a quirky and eccentric bag with various odd charms attached, something which screamed Luna the moment his eyes laid on it. He hadn't seen anything which interested him personally yet, but there was plenty more to see.
Placing what he planned to purchase in Luna's bag so he wouldn't have to carry them separately, there was a tome just above his head that looked to be caked in dust. Cursing his less than average height Harry stretched, able to only just reach it but once he did, quickly pulling it down.

Gently blowing dust away from its surface, script previously indecipherable suddenly became legible, letters aligning on the book's surface. Parseltongue, then. It could be no other as Harry only knew that and English.

The pages were intact, looking almost brand new so he doubted it had been read often. From what he could see it was the origins of Parseltongue and many things which had been forgotten about the language and arts associated with it. So absorbed in what he was reading, he failed to realise someone stood nearby until their voice cut through his concentration.

"Hello, I haven't seen you around before."

With an accent that was unfamiliar Harry glanced up at who was talking to him, trying not to stare.

A woman in her early 30's, she wore a skintight velvet dress, with a pair of overly large assets that he tried to avoid looking at. Long, wavy blonde hair thrown over her shoulder and rich blue eyes, he wouldn't be surprised to find out if she was a model.

"It's my first time here." He wondered if there was a point to this conversation, slightly irritated to be interrupted by a stranger.

He thought that with having mainly female friends, he'd come to understand women a bit more but when she tilted her head and ran a hand slowly along her side, he realised that wasn't the case. Why in the middle of a conversation?

A seductive smile upturned her lips. "I see. I'm more than happy to be your tour guide, for the day."

With perfectly measured steps and one foot in front of the other, her high heels clicked against the wooden floor as she leaned over, to see what he was reading. Harry was more than uncomfortable, tall enough that her breasts were directly against the side of his face.

"No thanks, I'm with someone." Keeping his head down so as not to look at her, his eyes stared blankly at the page as he wondered how to politely dismiss himself. He appreciated her offer and if alone he might have accepted some tips or pointers of where to go, but he already had the best tour guide.

"I'm sure they won't mind if I show you around a little." Her voice was alluring, persuasive and the very epitome of seductiveness which had worked on many men and women alike, but not Harry. He remained entirely clueless and confused about her insistence.
"I do mind, in fact. I would advise you to keep your distance."

When Alistair pulled Harry into his side, he glanced up and was startled by the coldness in his expression. Retreating, she winked at him.

"We'll meet again." Swaying her hips she sauntered away, Harry watching her leave and still confused with their exchange.

"Harry, please be more careful." At Alistair's admonishing tone, it only increased his confusion. "Of what?"

"Of temptresses. She was seducing you."

"Seriously?" At Alistair's nod, Harry was floored. "I had no idea."

While Alistair was happy that her actions didn't affect Harry, his cluelessness was both endearing and concerning. With time, he would hopefully learn to spot the signs himself. Otherwise, he could be in for a slightly difficult time. But, it wouldn't be his Harry without some element of teen awkwardness and he wouldn't change that for the world. Having already purchased what had caught his eye he waited for Harry to do the same, keeping his eye on anyone else who may try.

Once they left the shop, Harry thought and realised that she probably had been hitting on him. But he had no reason to take notice as she wasn't Alistair, after all. Without much conscious thought, Harry reached out for his hand to hold again. It was something so simple but the feeling of his engulfing Harry's own brought indescribable joy.

Seeing a Magical Menagerie of sorts, Harry couldn't help but take a look inside there as well. Hedwig and Aela were more than enough for him animal and reptile companion wise, but different species were fascinating.

Much like Diagon Alley, there were various different kinds of animals, enough noise being made that a discussion between the vendor and customer could barely be heard over it. Through all this, a tank with golden script embossed onto a wooden surface caught his eye. 'Solis'

Presumably, that was their name, the Snake inside so beautiful that Harry's breath caught. the scales were iridescent, shining many different colours depending on where the light hit. He could hear their hisses of discontentment.

"Ssstupid human!"

Assuming that they were referring to the vendor and without thinking, Harry spoke to it.
"Are you ok?"

Alistair watched with rapt fascination. He hadn't met Aela as of yet so for him, it was the first time hearing the language of Snakes from Harry. Despite knowing Dragonspeak, it was different enough from Parseltongue that he was unable to understand their conversation.

"You are a ssspeaker?" Previously coiled in one corner, they slithered over eagerly. "Fantassstic. Inform that human that I want to be placed in the sshade, at once!"

Raising both eyebrows at the demanding nature, he could see the Snake's distress being exposed to direct sunlight, obliging them.

Alistair sighed in admiration. "What a beautiful creature. He belongs to the xenopeltis genus. They are nocturnal, so may I assume that he wishes to be out of direct sunlight?"

Harry wasn't sure if it was he or she, that cleared things up. "Yeah. He was pretty insistent about it as well."

"Enough dissscussing about me, human, I'm waiting!"

Chuckling to himself, Harry approached the vendor. "One of your Snakes, Solis, wants to be placed in the shade."

Looking frazzled and slightly guilty, he did just that. "Thank you. Its been a busy day and I knew there was something I'd forgotten."

As a peace offering, a lizard was thrown into the tank with him and he began to hiss with contentment. "Thankss, Ssspeaker."

Other than that nothing overly eventful happened and after looking around, left with a large bag of owl treats for Hedwig and something for Aela, for when in her shrunken form.

The hours trickled by much like water from a tap and before Harry knew it, they were about halfway through their day. Thankful for his pouch, he'd bought many things, the majority of them which he would wrap ready for December. Even though he'd looked inside many of the shops, there were some which he hadn't yet.

Even without being able to fully understand this shop’s sign, the window displays were unmistakable.
“I did wonder how long it would take before the lure of Quidditch called you.”

Brought from his slight trance Harry glanced up and unknowingly, had a pleading look in his eyes. It hadn’t crossed Alistair’s mind for a moment to refuse but how could he? Those eyes could melt a heart of stone, at least from his point of view.

Even without Harry asking, it was obvious where he wanted to go so Alistair lead the way.

Once indoors excitement practically radiated off Harry, spouting Quidditch and knowledge in relation to equipment, brooms and general trivia on par with Hermione for her chosen topics.

“France’s national team is mainly women. I haven’t watched any records of them playing except for a snippet as a demonstration of their team in the Quidditch through the ages series, but I could see they’ve got a strong formation.”

There was a lot centred around France’s team, one of which was a large holographic and animated image of their team move, on their national stadium.

“Have you seen their pitch? That’s amazing! Puts Hogwarts’ to shame.”

Holding it up for Alistair to see, elegant gardens covered the field below, the architecture resembling the palace of Versailles. It was impressive, alongside the dizzying levels of spinning performed by some members of their team.

“I hope that they are not giving you too much inspiration to perform yet more daredevil stunts in the air.” Unable to keep the slight dread from his voice, Harry patted him on the arm reassuringly.

“I can’t promise anything, but I’ll try not to go overboard.”

Alistair would have to settle with that. Despite his slight worries, seeing Harry in his element was nothing short of wonderful.

“Arry?”

Harry looked up, shocked to see someone very familiar. “Fleur?”

She looked no different to how he remembered her, though knew the same couldn’t be said for him. Their eyes met across one of the displays,

“Eet eez so good to see you!”
Giving him the standard greeting she noticed Alistair by his side, able to sense their connection instantly. “Oh, you ‘ave a lover? C'est magnifique!”

He hadn’t said a word! How did she know? During his fourth year, he assumed that Fleur was snobbish but quickly understood that wasn’t the case. After rescuing Gabrielle, her attitude to him became a lot warmer and whenever an opportunity presented itself, he found starting a conversation with her wasn’t too difficult as unlike the majority of the male population, Harry wasn’t affected by her Veela charms. He suspected that was due to Cho, his crush at the time.

He talked so often with Alistair, that he wasn't sure what he had and hadn't told him. He remembered going into details of each year here, but not so much about his fellow champions representing their school.

"This is Fleur Delacour, she was the champion of Beuxbatons during the Triwizard Cup. Should've been called Quadwizard really." Muttering that last bit to himself, he shook his head softly. "And Fleur this is Alistair, my.. well, you said it."

Flushing slightly, he wasn't sure when the novelty of that would wear off.

Sensing that unlike the woman before her intentions were harmless, he inclined his head politely. "Enchanté, Mademoiselle."

Delighted to be spoken to in her mother tongue, Fleur grew more impassioned, leaving Harry to pick out the words he could probably understand.

"Votre prononciation est impeccable, je suis impressionné!"

"Merci. C'est une belle langue, donc je tiens à rendre hommage."

For the most part, Harry had no clue what they were talking about, but it somehow increased Alistair's attractiveness further, which he didn't believe possible. Whatever he'd said pleased Fleur greatly, judging by the wide smile on her face.

"I never saw you as the Quidditch type, to be honest." Harry politely interjected, not wanting to feel too much out of the loop with his subpar language abilities.

"It's for my sister. Shé'll be 'appy to see you again."

Still holding the holographic image Harry followed her, Alistair leaving them to their reunion of sorts, as something which he believed Harry may like had captured his interest.
Nearby the latest broom models were Gabrielle, a miniature version of her sister whose eyes widened comically when seeing him.

"Arry Potter!" Darting over she shook his hand enthusiastically between her own, reminding him of Ginny in Second year with her case of hero worship. "I 'ave told my friends all about you!"

Used to Lilah's chatter, Harry was able to keep up with Gabrielle's and though there were jokes here and there about him giving out Autographs, he hadn't until now. It was a bizarre moment, but seeing how happy she was with his chicken scratch on a spare bit of parchment, he couldn't complain.

Talking briefly with the sisters Harry left with Fleur's contact details, something which he should have done before they returned to Beuxbatons but with what happened in the Graveyard, things like that were far from his mind.

Returning to Alistair, he felt slightly guilty. "Sorry, I'm supposed to be having a date with you and I go off and have a conversation elsewhere."

"You have not seen Miss Delacour for a long time. I will not demand that you are by my side throughout and I have no wish for you to feel as though that is mandatory."

While Harry was reconnecting with a friend, Alistair was able to purchase the thing he believed that Harry would like, alongside some others. On countless occasions, Solomon had warned him of spoiling his partners too much and while he'd heeded him, sometimes he still got a little carried away.

Relieved that he didn't mind, Harry picked up some more memorabilia of the French Quidditch Team, waiting in line until his turn came.

With a backwards cap and laid back attitude, the vendor reminded Harry of the Skater kids in his school, who Vernon told Dudley to stay away from because they were 'A bad influence.'

Flicking her hair back she saw Harry's scar, demeanour changing immediately. "No way. Harry Potter? The youngest seeker? Dude!"

Harry's eyebrows raised, surprised. "It's an international thing? I thought only my school knew about that."

"Are you serious? Of course, I know! Every aspiring Seeker does." Muttering to herself she crouched behind the counter, a heavy looking book in hand. Licking her fingers she flipped through the pages, coming to a stop so far through. Spinning it around she pointed to a section, the translation spell working for writing as well.
From Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Harry Potter, age 11, was accepted onto the
Quidditch Team, making him the youngest seeker in a century.

It was a short passage. He had no idea how people here had found out, but it was something he’d
much rather be known for than surviving a spell that should have killed him. She wanted to give him
a discount based on that but he refused, insisting on paying full price and even adding something
extra, for her. If he could use the money he had to make someone’s day, he considered it to be a job
well done.

Once outside, Harry blew out a breath. "Well, that was unexpected."

Alistair's eyes flickered with unease. "Minerva was more than happy to inform me of the details.
However, hearing it from your point of view is rather anxiety-inducing."

Giving a lopsided grin, Harry patted his back. "That was years ago. I don't have any plans of
crashing nearby or through windows where Professor McGonagall is again."

While Alistair was relieved to hear this, that didn't discount future daring stunts whether during
practice sessions or actual Quidditch matches.

As Madam Bellerose was nearby, he made the suggestion. "There is somewhere that I would like to
take you."

"Sure, let's go!" If nothing else, Harry was more than confident to take Alistair's hand, showing no
hesitation. Wherever he took him, Harry had no doubt it would be a place of interest.

He was proven to be right. Reading the sign, he guessed correctly that it would be like Madam
Malkin's for selling clothing, but that was where the similarities ended.

Inside it was far bigger than it appeared to be, the marbled floor polished to such a shine that looking
down, he was able to see his reflection. Out of every place he'd stepped into this by far was the
busiest, staff rushing about here and there. There were custom fittings, manikins displaying what was
on offer, racks of clothing with hundreds and several changing rooms.

"Is it always like this?" Harry made himself be heard over the noise, head practically spinning with
the levels of activity.

"It is usually busy, but more so closer to the holiday season."

That made sense. Among it all was a particularly striking woman, reminding Harry of Marilyn
Monroe who gave precise instructions to available staff. With Alistair, they were able to navigate the
fairly thick crowd and through it all, she managed to spot them. Ruby red lips upturned into a
delighted smile, short and curly auburn hair complimented her clothing and petite frame.

"Alistair! C'est merveilleux de vous voir!" Kissing each cheek she turned to Harry and noting his confusion, switched to English. "And who is this?"

Alistair chuckled delightedly. "This is Harry, he is my lover."

'I shall warn you. Madame Bellerose is particularly passionate about new customers.'

No sooner had Alistair told him through their link, that a pair of delicate hands turned his face this way and that. Her sudden close scrutiny had him mildly on edge. "Oh, his eyes shine like emeralds! You have impeccable taste."

Then, followed an in-depth discussion of fashion which flew completely over his head. She was an interesting character and while he knew nothing of the subject, certain cuts and styles did draw his attention towards them. That and he wanted Alistair to enjoy himself as well, so it was only fair to visit where they both wanted to. While he was in his element with Quidditch, Alistair clearly found a second home in fashion.

Before he could so much as open his mouth he found himself lead over to stand on a small stool, which took his measurements in very much the same way as Madam Malkin. Staying perfectly still, she was finished with him sooner than expected.

"Do you have a favourite style?"

She may as well have asked him how to predict the future because either way, he didn't know the answer. "I'm not that good with fashion, sorry."

His answer only seemed to encourage her. "Not to worry! We'll soon find out."

Between Madame Bellerose and Alistair Harry was presented with an overwhelming amount of clothing, asked to choose one from each to make an entire set. In the end, he went for a white scarf, hooded long-sleeved charcoal jacket, a T-Shirt only slightly loose and fitted trousers which paired with lace-up boots. Even underwear and to his embarrassment, recommended by her.

Going to try them on he entered the changing room, paling drastically at some of the ones with price tags still attached.

"How much?!" He whispered to himself, panicked. With how perfectly everything fitted and the softness of both the scarf and shirt against his skin, he could see why. But having spent pretty much all his life in clothing that cost nothing and he had no choice but to wear, it shocked him. His Halloween outfit was shocking enough but he considered that to be a one-off. Alistair used to come
here fortnightly, which meant he probably spent what Harry did on that day, regularly. It was something normal to Alistair but unlike some families which sprang to mind, he didn't lord his wealth over others. In fact, Harry only assumed that he was wealthy, it wasn't confirmed by the man himself. But judging by this clothing, he had to at least be on par with the Malfoys.

Realising he'd spent long enough staring at something which probably cost more than the Dursley's entire wardrobe put together, Harry quickly got changed. Poking his head out from behind the curtain he found them waiting expectantly. Once fully in view, he waited for their appraisal nervously.

Clapping her hands excitedly Madame Bellerose gestured for him to spin around. Awkwardly he did so, wondering if she'd explode with exuberance. "Simply wonderful! The outfit doesn't wear you, you wear it! That's a rare quality."

He didn't understand the difference but decided to go along with it. Catching Alistair's eye he winked, smiling in a way which made his heart throb.

"How much is it altogether?" Asking this Harry was about to open the pouch for his wallet, but was stopped abruptly.

"There is no need Harry, I will pay. Consider it to be a gift."

A gift?! It was an entire outfit! His first instinct was to protest, feeling guilty that so much money would be spent on him, but stopped. It was a kind gesture and he could always return the favour later, since having so much money spent on him caused tendrils of guilt to swirl within him. The same for his Firebolt, once he realised that Sirius in fact, wasn't a murderer after Harry to finish the job he started.

Choosing to change back into his regular clothing, he vowed to only wear this on particular occasions as for the moment, he couldn't picture something so expensive as casual wear and the last thing he wanted to do was damage them.

Unknown to Harry, alongside his own personal purchases, Alistair had taken note of the other clothing he'd expressed an interest in and had every intention of adding that to the list of December gifts for him. Once Solomon found out about Harry's gifts on the increase, he was no doubt in for a lecture. He meant well, but nothing could dissuade Alistair, especially since Harry was deprived of so much in his life. Compared to a few centuries ago, he considered himself to have a greater degree of restraint.

"You didn't have to do that, thanks, though." Harry still hadn't paid him back for all the time's he'd been helped by the man and now this? It was worrying, to say the least.

Raising Harry's hand, Alistair kissed his fingers. "You are welcome. It is more than deserved."
Their final destination for the day was a cafe, finely furnished with a warm atmosphere that instantly had Harry at ease, but when Alistair mentioned that he'd pay for both of them again, that's where Harry drew the line, shaking his head firmly. "Can we at least split it? Please?" He didn't mean to sound so desperate but the fact that there were no prices of things mentioned was enough for his anxiety levels to rise.

Alistair didn't have a problem with that, though found himself confused at Harry's reaction. For him, it was natural to pay for everything when it came to eating out, whether fine dining or otherwise. Not once had anyone wanted to share the cost. It was unusual for him.

"Of course, that is no problem. But why?" He was genuinely curious about Harry's reasoning. Sitting side by side and waiting for their orders to come, Alistair wrapped an arm around Harry to pull him closer. It was a particularly expressive cafe, with more loveseats than regular chairs and couples engaging in similar or more extreme activities, so they blended right in.

In normal circumstances, Harry would have felt embarrassed but considering their circumstances, that quickly faded. "Dates are about mutual enjoyment, right? It takes two people for that so it wouldn't be fair if one person paid for everything and just went wherever the other wanted to go. That's why I'm happy you brought me to Madam Bellerose. I'd feel bad if it was just things I wanted to do. I want you to enjoy yourself as well."

He hoped that made sense. Alistair seemed more than experienced with this sort of thing, unlike Harry. That and he seemed like the kind of person who was used to buying things for other people, though he could be wrong.

Alistair was so used to it, that he never considered things from his point of view or even thought of it that way. Though he believed it to be impossible, his heart became fit to burst with affection for him. His consideration and kindness were greatly appreciated.

"Ah, it seems that it is possible for an old Vampire to learn new tricks." Saying this jokingly, he expressed his gratitude by pressing a kiss to the top of Harry's head. "I understand now, thank you."

Glad that they were on the same wavelength, Harry couldn't remember ever talking so much while eating, the combination of food and company enough that he was surprisingly chatty.

Alistair had been on many dates before, some of which had ended in nothing short of a disaster, whether it was because no connection was made or awkward silences. Before now, he believed that seeing his partner happy was enough for him but in comparison to now and being able to go where he'd expressed a desire to alongside Harry's offer to split costs, it was a different level of enjoyment entirely. It wasn't a case of taking his partner out and ensuring that they enjoyed themselves and he'd be fine with that, Harry checked to make sure that Alistair was, as well. Rarely, if ever, had that happened.

Compared to when they first met, there was no sign of Harry's masks or guarded expressions and at
one point, he'd been admiring him too much to realise that he'd asked Alistair a question. In all his
years, he had never quite enjoyed himself this much and considering the hundreds of dates he'd
planned out or been on, that in itself was an achievement.

Though the food was divine, dessert was what had Harry excited. "We can make one? Yes!"

Cheering he stood up, grabbing Alistair's hand and almost dragging him. They each had their input
in crafting the perfect Parfait and with Alistair's suggestion picked the larger glass for it, to share.
Happy to see him acting his age for once they sat side by side again, two spoons firmly planted into a
mountain of ice cream and whipped cream. Staring at the huge amount, Harry glanced up at him.
"We might have gone overboard."

Noticing his mischievous expression, Harry prepared himself. Leaning over, Alistair whispered in his
ear. "That means there is more I can enjoy feeding you with."

A tingle of pleasure ran along his spine. Together, they could hopefully tackle this creation. Alistair
was the first to move, ensuring a generous amount of dessert balanced on the spoon, he aimed it
towards Harry.

He didn't care what anyone said, this was embarrassing. He didn't hate it though, opening his mouth
in response. Once his tongue met with the amalgamation of sweetness, he closed his eyes in bliss. It
tasted fantastic. It didn't beat the chocolate Alistair had bought for him, but came close.

"Enjoying the taste?" Opening one eye he was met with Alistair's amused smile, which widened as
he nodded enthusiastically. "It's brilliant."

Since he'd already fed Alistair once, He didn't think a parfait would be that much of a challenge. But
for some reason, once the spoon was in his hand, he felt strangely nervous. A seeker had to have a
steady grip of the broom and great control, however, this spoon seemed to elude him.

Hand shaking slightly, he made a beeline for Alistair's mouth, spectacularly missing. Rather than
tasting what Harry had, the tip of his nose was instead painted with a mixture of ice cream and
whipped cream. Partly mortified that he couldn't even do something this simple right, amusement
won him over as he burst into laughter, considering a large amount of it had managed to stay on
there.

Holding back his amusement, for now, Alistair accepted the mouthful of dessert, this time not aimed
towards his nose. Harry was right, its deliciousness couldn't be denied. Though this was the first time
that his nose had been treated to the same thing.

Wiping the end of Alistair's nose, Harry attempted to curb his laughter. "Sorry, got a bit jittery there."

How much more adorable could he be? Alistair didn't mind at all. Today was filled with new and
welcome experiences for him and in Harry’s case, broke his shroud of nervousness over an activity that was intimate, in one way.

Mostly Harry kept to his own spoon, sometimes feeding Alistair and had more success with fewer blunders. Though he wasn’t keeping track, Alistair was more content to feed Harry than himself, entertained by his reactions.

Harry tried not to look at the bill for too long, calculating how much he’d need for his half but relieved that he was able to contribute to their date in this way.

If every day could be like this, at least in the sense of no trouble, Harry would be more than happy. But of course, it rarely stayed that way.

Once on the main path again, the first indication that something was wrong came in the form of Alistair's hand gripping his just that little bit tighter. Looking up, Harry couldn't get a read of him. Always expressive, the sudden lack of anything unnerved him. "What's wrong?"

Following Alistair's line of sight, a man far taller than those who passed him by caught Harry's attention. Heading for their direction he came to a stop in front, a look in his eyes which reminded him of Vernon in one of the more violent moods. Having spent the majority of his life around abusers, he could sense another one easily.

"..Bren." Alistair’s voice was tightly restrained, holding back something unknown to Harry. Bren, which Harry presumed was the man’s name, smirked.

“Alistair, long time no see. Your latest fuck buddy, I take it?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, watching the stranger suspiciously as he sniffed the air.

“A virgin? Hmm, maybe not. A runt at that.” Tutting in disapproval, the gravelly voice had Harry gritting his teeth.

“A whore will spread his legs for anyone, I see.”

“Say that again, bastard! I dare you!” Harry had been called far worse than runt, it didn’t affect him in the slightest. But the insults towards Alistair he wouldn’t accept, at all. Eyes flashing angrily he didn’t hesitate to approach him, not intimidated by their height difference in the least, glaring fiercely.

Harsh, mocking laughter that set him on edge. He could see there was something between them, though couldn’t pinpoint what.
“The runt has a bite to him! How precious. You’ll grow tired of that and come running back to me before long. I’m the best fuck that you’ve ever had and we both know it.”

Remaining silent up until now, Alistair seemed to struggle with his words. Harry had never seen him in this state before. “You are deluded. No matter how much time passes, I will not return.”

He said nothing in response, bumping Harry’s shoulder harshly and giving a casual wave as he left them. Their exchange was brief but served to build the tension.

“Who does he think he is? What a prick! God, I want to hex him.” Harry’s fingers flexed against his wands and if he should ever run into him again, the urge to do so would be strong.

It was glancing down and seeing the blackness of his bracelet that he realised just how distressed Alistair was. This Bren has shaken him badly. It was getting late and they should probably call it a day anyway.

“I think we’re done here, right?” He asked, returning to Alistair’s side and squeezing his hand soothingly.

Lost in memories long since buried, he managed to sound normal in his response. “Yes, I believe so.”

Taking charge of the situation Alistair lead them both to an area filled with fewer people, disappearing on the spot and directly to his quarters. No sooner had he done this, that warm arms firmly wrapped around him.

“Don’t listen to him, he’s not worth your time, especially someone who just throws out insults and shows a lack of brain cells during them.”

It was only through Harry Alistair realised just how affected he was. He never thought he’d see Bren again, especially not in Paris. It was an unwelcome reunion, one of which left him feeling more vulnerable than ever. He appreciated Harry’s warmth more than ever after that, melting into his touch.

"Why do you have to be so tall? I'm like an ant with a lightning bolt scar."

As he hoped, that received an amused chuckle from him. Then, Harry had an idea. "One minute."

After gesturing for Alistair to sit down, he headed straight for the kitchen. He didn't want to take long, concerned about him. From what had happened, he could piece together their past relationship and the nature of it, but he wouldn't ask unless he was comfortable enough to talk about it. The least
he could do was offer the same courtesy, as Harry wasn't ever pressured to talk.

He was gone for about a minute at most, returning with a steaming cup. He’d debated on hot chocolate but after their parfait, realised that might not be the best idea. Handing him the cup Harry sat by his side, remaining relaxed and silent. His anger had quickly dissipated in favour of seeing if Alistair was alright. He could unleash his rage on target dummies at a later date.

"Pumpkin Spice?" Alistair questioned, taking a sip and delighted at the taste which hit his tongue.

"Yeah. It's tea, that relaxing stuff but the house elves said adding something extra wouldn't hurt, so they helped me out."

It certainly helped to relax him. Between that and Harry, Alistair already began to feel better. The past usually stayed there but sometimes, it did come back to haunt him. Harry deserved an explanation, particularly since he was insulted by a complete stranger. Taking his time to thought collect, he explained to the best of his ability.

"There are certain kinds of bars that I frequented, as they host all manner of interesting characters. It was here that I met Bren. A werewolf who embraced their affliction was something of great intrigue to me as the majority I had met, shunned that side. I found his confidence to be attractive so sitting beside him, we struck up a conversation over drinks."

Harry listened intently, remaining quiet and watching various emotions flicker across his partner's face.

"He had a rather sarcastic and biting edge to his personality and a unique perspective on the life that he had lead I found to be intriguing. A few weeks later, we began dating. While not overly affectionate there was a soft side he showed. But over time, he began to change."

Harry already knew in what way he changed, without being told. He really didn't want that to be the case, but all signs were there.

"The dynamics of our relationship altered. I became his toy, pet, possession, whore. All of those things I was referred to and for the slightest infraction, such as a friendly smile towards another man, he would give out punishments. Affection became something that was earned but foolishly, in his own way, I believe that he loved me. It was only after a while of being together that I came to realise that I was in an abusive relationship. After that, I left him."

Harry regretted not cursing him before they left, deeply. That settled it. If he should happen to run into him again, he wouldn't hold back. "I had no idea you'd been through anything remotely similar to me so I'm sorry for that. But in a way, I can help you out. It's not your fault, ok? While I don't doubt you've got the power to crush him, it's the fact that you've never wanted to that sets you apart from that arsehole. I'm not sure I could ever give someone else a chance after that, but I'm happy you did."
Though he'd spoken of Bren with Solomon, who he'd met during his disappearance, being able to talk about it with Harry helped lighten a load he hadn't realised was there. Admittedly, he hadn't wanted Harry to see this side of him, but perhaps his desire to always remain the strength was where he was going wrong.

"For all that there are abhorrent people in this world and others, I firmly believe that there is an equal amount of good. I simply made the wrong choices. Over centuries I have tried many different approaches, scanning my partner's mind for their likes and dislikes in an effort to make them happy, but that only caused suspicion so since then, I have rarely ever used legilimency. I have told partners of my true nature and they have left, in fear of what I would do to them. I have tried everything, all except how we met."

"Well, I don't think someone stumbling into your home, nearly dying at the hands of guardians and tackling a Boggart is the usual way to say hello."

Heart much lighter than before their unfortunate encounter, the usual sparkle returned to Alistair’s eyes. “That is true.”

Harry stared at him, seriousness in his gaze. “I don’t get why though. It sounds like the majority of people are put off because you’re a Vampire. Sometimes I forget you are, you blend in really well.”

Suddenly, Alistair’s eyes flashed crimson, fangs elongating. It changed his expression slightly, some hunger hidden within the blood-red depths. “That is why.”

Harry hadn’t had the opportunity to study him up close, seeing a glimpse of Solomon when feeding from him. But rather than feel threatened or afraid, a thrill of excitement ran through his frame.

Fascinated, Harry brushed his fingers by Alistair’s mouth. He didn’t picture his fangs to be quite that sharp and for a moment, imagined them piercing his skin. How different would they be from Solomon? He couldn’t help but wonder.

“..Is it weird that I think you look hot like that?”

Judging by the shock in Alistair’s expression, it probably was, just a little bit.

“I admit, that is the first time I have heard someone say as much. But to know that you are not afraid is reassuring.”

Returning to normal and showing Harry a warm smile, he was relieved to see that the bracelet’s colouring was a pale gold now. “Far from it. You’re a Vampire. So what? You wouldn’t be you without it.”
If only Harry’s way of thinking was universal. He believed that way, there would be far fewer problems with Human/Vampire relations as a whole. Harry was a wonderful enigma, of that there was no doubt.

“I apologise that our date had to end on a sour note.”

“I think it’s my luck, to be honest. I can either have a lot of good luck or a string of bad luck that comes in threes. Pretty sure it’s a Potter curse. Either way, it couldn’t be helped.”

Shrugging lightly. Harry leaned into his side. “Despite that, did you enjoy yourself? I did, by about this much.” Stretching his arms up as far as they’d go, he tried to demonstrate. When a pair of longer arms surpassed his own, he protested. “Hey, don’t use your height advantage against me!”

“But because of that, you fit into my arms perfectly.” As if to demonstrate, they wrapped firmly around Harry. “In answer to your question I did, very much so.”

Well, when he put it that way, Harry couldn’t complain. About one or twice out of each week so far, he’d chosen to sleep with Alistair and the other times, in his dorm. Today was one of those days and before long, they’d retired to his bedroom again.

Changing once again in the bathroom, he struggled internally. Should he take the next step? Granted the step was simply sleeping topless but for him, that was huge. It was one thing briefly showing Sirius and Remus but in close proximity with someone, he shared a bed with? That was a different thing entirely.

Despite everything that had happened, Alistair hadn’t judged him, not once. He was simply there to cheer him up when needed and as an immovable pillar of support. Finding out more about him was always a good thing, even if Harry wished he hadn’t gone through something like that. He trusted him completely and a while one part was worried, the other wanted to let him, just that bit more.

Clothes folded into a neat pile Harry placed them on top of the dresser again, looking down at his clothed torso and still debating on whether he should or shouldn’t. He wasn’t sure if Alistair knew what he was thinking but didn’t disturb him during it. After a short while of deliberation, he decided that he would. Hands fumbling with each button until the pyjama top joined the folded clothing pile. Throat dry he approached the bed, unable to look Alistair in the eye as he sat beside him.

He knew they were horrible looking and he could only imagine what he must be thinking. When a warm hand touched his back, directly beneath one of the more serious scars, he flinched. He hadn’t been touched there in a long time, muscled taut with nerves. But when his hand began to move in small, soothing circles, Harry relaxed beneath the soothing ministrations.

“Harry, this must have taken an incredible amount of self-resolve and I thank you for that.”
He’d never felt more exposed and vulnerable in his life, so there was no lie in Alistair’s words. Gently, he was pushed onto the soft pillows behind and finally looking upwards, he was met with such a tender expression. “If given the opportunity, I would not hesitate to express my displeasure towards those who would hurt you in such a way. But even so, you are stunning.”

Harry’s voice came out more lost and smaller than he’d intended. “Really?” He found that hard to believe, though knew his self-image was incredibly warped.

“Yes. May I?” Alistair gestured to his own pyjama top and after getting the go-ahead, that was a further indication that he was willing to match Harry’s pace. He hadn’t removed it before now, so this was the first time that outside of his own fantasies, he was going to see more of Alistair.

Not that he wanted to look away but even if he did, an unseen force kept his eyes locked into place as inch by inch, more of his skin was revealed. Harry had the feeling that his slightly slower pace was a way of teasing him but still, he found himself enjoying the show of sorts. Torso bare like Harry’s, he dropped the shirt to one side and though he considered his imagination to be vivid, nothing he conjured could compare with reality.

His skin was smooth and flawless, much like the rest of him and so perfectly defined. For a moment there was a feeling of inadequacy when faced with this Adonis of sorts but he wasn’t left for long to linger on that thought, as Alistair straddled him. Careful not to press any weight down, a soft kiss was planted just below Harry’s ear as a passionate voice accompanied it.

“I will demonstrate just how much.”

Wondering what that would entail, Harry’s heart began to pound furiously. Though out of everything, the touch of Alistair’s lips against one of his scars wasn’t expected. It caused a far different and more intense reaction from him, a combination of surprise and pleasure. Though he couldn’t see Alistair, the feeling of love placed into each one was unmistakable. Meticulously he kissed them all, working his way across and down.

“Ahh..” Every so often embarrassing sounds would escape him, calling out in a voice that he didn’t recognise as himself. Directly over places which were nothing but pain, it was as if Alistair was trying to erase all that, along with the mental scarring that had occurred from it.

When their bodies brushed together, sparks danced between them and hesitantly, Harry’s arms wrapped around him. But even through the haze of pleasure, he could clearly hear Alistair’s words.

“You are strong. Stronger than you realise. While many have caused harm each time, you have come out victorious. The student body sees you as a leader, of which you meet all requirements. Harry, you are no longer the sacrifice. You are far too important to me and many others, for that to be your fate. I believe in you, with all of my heart.”
Words were just words. But when delivered in this way, the truth of them was so powerful that the beginning of tears stung Harry’s eyes. He couldn’t help it. Free from Dumbledore or not in some ways, he was unused to thinking for himself. Heat rising to the surface of his skin he embraced both the words and touch, believing them.

Alistair didn’t try to remove his lower half, something which Harry appreciated. There were more scars but he didn’t feel ready to go that far yet.

Still not finished with him Alistair readjusted them so that Harry sat directly in front. His torso and arms tingled, almost hypersensitive from the dedication shown to them. He relaxed, eyes falling closed and treated to a different, unrushed kind of care.

It took a few seconds before he realised that Alistair had stopped, practically boneless. “Wow.”

Chuckling, Alistair pulled him close. “So you see, Harry, I find you very attractive indeed.”

Glancing up at him, Harry wet Alistair’s lips with his tongue, grinning cheekily. “I thought your mouth would probably be dry after all that kissing.”

If alone, Alistair wouldn’t have been able to improve his mood after running into Bren. But Harry had proven once again that despite his age and lack of experience, he was a formidable opponent. Alistair meant every word. He loathed all those who had laid a hand on him in harm but even with what he was left with, his attraction to Harry had only increased.

Harry thought with skin to skin contact he wouldn’t be able to calm down, but it served as a soothing balm. Long into the night they talked, Harry’s memories of the day trip to Paris duelling his own thoughts of where they’d next go together.
Revelation and Rejuvenation

Chapter Summary

Solomon has something to discuss with Harry and Alistair, while Luna and Brio cement not only a forest’s future, but their own.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry and Alistair’s date in Paris, along with an unfortunate encounter and a reminder that his Vampire lover adores him, scars or not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One evening, Solomon made contact with him in the form of a Racoon Patronus. While at first, he thought it was for their continued Occlumency lessons he learned that wasn't the case when it informed him that he wished to see Alistair as well. Slightly concerned for what the reason could be and once his last classes for the day were finished, Harry went to Alistair's quarters which by now, were becoming the boy's dormitory kind of familiar.

"Had a good day?" That was the first thing Harry asked once entering and in response, an air of exasperation not aimed towards him, as Alistair finished the last sentence in his structural comment on a student's essay.

"It is greatly improved now that you are here. but yes, overall. Though there is one student that is insistent upon doing absolutely everything other than what he is supposed to and no amount of points taken or detentions seem to deter him." Shaking his head from side to side, he was impressed with Minerva's teaching record and while certainly older and more experienced, that didn't apply to every area so happily, he referred to his 'younger' colleague if in need of assistance.

There were plenty of students, but one who had recently started to attend the DA stuck in his mind. "Is it Jonah Clemence?"

Rising to his feet, Alistair's face registered mild surprise as he gestured for them to leave the room. "It is. How did you know?"

"He's in the DA. It takes ages for him to settle down but whenever I checked his progress personally, he seemed to appreciate it. Maybe one on one?" Harry made the suggestion, wanting to help how he could.

This was one avenue Alistair hadn't considered, at least for that particular student as the times he did
do as asked, there were no signs of struggling with any tasks.

"I thank you greatly for the advice, junior Defence Professor."

Ruffling his hair affectionately, that left Harry with a happy smile as they once more made their way to Lothaire Castle.

While he hadn’t been here too often, to Harry Lothaire Castle had lost some intimidation factor, to be replaced by wholehearted appreciativeness of the architecture and while he found Hogwarts to be impressive, this could easily rival it in the depth of detail. Their destination was Solomon’s office, a room which Harry frequented with their lessons.

Arriving there, Harry noticed two crystal decanters, alongside three matching goblets. One of which held a liquid of the deepest red, while the other seemed to contain a blue which could only be found in the ocean. He suspected one of them was blood, but which? He knew there were certain animals and probably mythical creatures with different coloured blood, so he couldn’t write off blue entirely.

The mystery was quickly solved when without even removing the stopper, Alistair glanced over at his brother curiously. “Cecaelia blood? Whatever it is that you have to share must be serious indeed.” Uncorking it he poured a small measure of the blue into each glass and with the second decanter, almost full to the brim with goblet number three.

Sensing where Harry’s train of thought had suddenly gone, Alistair chuckled in amusement. “It is not blood.”

“Well I guessed that, but you know.” Shrugging, he was unable to articulate himself so decided that the best course of action would be to keep quiet about it. Though, he did have some questions.

“Do you drink blood like this more than from the source? And what’s a Cecaelia?”

“We have a preference to collect and stock various types of blood as with age, it becomes more of a treat than a daily necessity though human blood is still mandatory to our continued survival.”

While Alistair answered one part, the other came from Solomon.

“They are known as Sea Witches, who possess the forms of fully matured women from the waist above, while below are the tentacles of an Octopus.”

Who needs libraries when Alistair and Solomon? What’s the meaning of life and other ambiguous questions could probably be definitively answered between them. It was nice to know more though, both about creatures that he was unaware of and elder Vampires as a whole.
Settling into separate armchairs, Harry steeled himself for whatever he should hear.

Taking a small sip, there was a sense of quiet urgency around the white-haired man that couldn’t be ignored. “As I have briefly highlighted upon, during my years of imprisonment, there have been many attempts to learn secrets whether through questioning or trying and failing to successfully perform legilimens. In doing so, Dumbledore left his mind like an open book, one of which I have read thoroughly, though there are pages missing. I suspect that the bulk of it is hidden away, in his Pensieve.”

Harry almost didn’t want to know what Solomon had found out, as there was a high chance that it could be about him. But then, he’d spent years in ignorance and that ignorance could have cost him his life. He spoke up, slightly hesitant.

“I’m waiting for The head of the DMLE so I can bring charges against Dumbledore and some others. Once that happens and when he’s found guilty, Professor McGonagall will probably be Headmistress. If we let her know of what’s going on, his Pensieve is in the office.”

Pleased to hear that plan of action, Solomon inclined his head approvingly. Silver eyes darkening imperceptibly, that was at least Alistair’s indication that his next words would be a combination of interesting and disturbing.

“I am fully aware of the former Guild of Light’s activities from the moment of its creation up to now, but not where the recently active members are. There is a large sum of information missing.”

“Even so, it is more than we had previously.”

In response, Solomon placed a hefty pile of parchment on the table which again, had flawless calligraphy. Harry was beginning to wonder if it just ran in the family.

At Alistair’s questioning look, Solomon elaborated. “An in-depth, written record of their activities, I have spared no details though again there are some missing, as it is only one from one perspective. I will make my copy of the memories available for your perusal also.”

Harry could almost swear he channelled Hermione for a moment. Or had he always been like this? If so, it was fortunate that she’d found such a kindred spirit.

It was above and beyond what Alistair expected of him, this was invaluable. “Thank you. With this, we are one step closer to seeing that they pay for such heinous actions. But, I sense that is not all.”

For a second, Solomon’s eyes flickered to Harry and it was then he could see his involvement in some way. His own goblet was surprisingly enough Cranberry juice, suspecting that Alistair will have informed him of his favourite at one point. Not minding he relished the taste, green eyes wavering with wariness all the while.
“Dumbledore is and was aware of every child in an abusive or neglectful home, purposefully choosing not to intervene as he believed it would build strength of character. This includes Severus Snape and Tom Riddle.”

Harry knew of Tom Riddle’s past through the Horcrux previously within him, but not Professor Snape. He found himself unsurprised but saddened. And then, the rest of Solomon’s words hit him.

“STRENGTH OF CHARACTER? WE DIDN’T HAVE A CHOICE! WHAT THE FUCK IS HE THINKING?!”

He didn’t mean to explode like that, but anger prevailed over sadness. He couldn’t believe it. How could Dumbledore not care what he was condemning not just him at one point, but many other students which had passed through Hogwarts? That was unforgivable. If he had the power to stop that from happening he’d use it, with no hesitation.

Harry’s magic served as enough force to shatter the crystal, shards embedding themselves into his hand as Cranberry juice and the broken remains of a drinking vessel stained and littered the carpet below. Almost mechanically, his eyes watched droplets of blood trail down his palm, the pain barely registering.

“Sorry, didn’t mean for that to happen.” Glancing at Solomon apologetically who he’d unintentionally interrupted, his hand was gently grabbed by Alistair who had crouched in front of him, while Solomon repaired the goblet. In doing so the shards left his hand, though not the damage caused by them.

“It is understandable.”

Glad that Solomon didn’t mind Harry’s eyes tracked Alistair’s movements until it seemed as if they were the only ones there. Rather than a healing spell, he opted to lick the droplets of blood, cleaning and healing his palm during the process, much like he’d done so with Solomon’s puncture wounds to his neck. Rather than feel awkward or disgusted, it served to instead fuel the flickering flames of desire.

Looking at Alistair’s perfectly sculpted features and warm eyes swimming with nothing but concern and fondness for him, it was the fastest that his anger had ever cooled and where his tongue had swiped, tingled pleasantly.

“I would appreciate that any and all flirting is done out of my immediate vicinity, though I understand the call of new love is strong.” Aimed at Alistair more than Harry, his tone held a note of fond exasperation.

Not looking apologetic in the least Alistair returned to his seat, throwing Harry a conspiratorial wink beforehand. Grinning to himself Harry resumed listening, feeling better now.
“Tom Riddle knew of Horcruxes, but only the name. Dumbledore used his friend Horace Slughorn so that the blame of an eventual immortal wizard could not be traced back to him. Slughorn’s knowledge of Horcruxes is Dumbledore’s own, planted firmly into his memories so if it should be investigated, fingers would point elsewhere.”

“Anyone else would deter him away from magic like that. It sounds like Dumbledore wanted to create the next Dark Lord, which would go completely against what he’s been saying about straying from the wrong path. But I don’t think he was ever on the right one.”

Solomon’s eyes flickered, a certain degree of coldness present that wasn’t many years before. “That is likely. Every one of your school years was tests, of which he had planned to a degree and if not, was aware of the outcome.”

It didn’t take for him to catch on. “So he knew about the stone, the chamber, Sirius, who put my name in the goblet and Umbridge?”

Solomon nodded something that Harry wished he was unable to confirm. He felt sick to his stomach. Dumbledore was too good of an actor, more of a pawn on the chessboard than he first thought. Though without a doubt, Wizard’s chess. Nothing more than a sacrifice and on several occasions could have met his end.

Harry had the urge to curl into a ball and never leave it, palming his face. “He could guess how I’d react but predict it move for move? I doubt that. It could have gone wrong so many times and if I’d died, he wouldn’t have cared. That bastard has a lot to answer for.”

“He does. Though, I am unsure of why he has chosen for the information we now know to remain within his head. Perhaps he has the utmost confidence in his abilities that no one could possibly find out?” This question came from Alistair, Harry inclined to agree.

“I believe that is the case. There is one more noteworthy piece of information that I have.”

When they gestured for him to continue, Alistair could see the mild disbelief in his own words, when spoken. “The hatred of our kind stems from what happened to his sister.”

Harry didn’t follow, frowning. “What about it? Her death’s almost public knowledge by this point, or at least anyone relating to the Dumbledores. Didn’t she die during a three-way duel between Grindelwald and the brothers?”

“No. A lot of what is known is true, however, the duel was irrelative to Ariana. As the eldest Dumbledore became her guardian, to the point where she began to feel imprisoned within her own home, running away. With destructive magic, it had control over her more than she did it. Once finding her it was too late. She had fled to what she believed was the safest place to hide from her brother when in fact, it was the home to a Vampire coven which she had unwittingly stumbled upon.
She is not dead but one of us, imprisoned again. Aberforth believes that she is dead, having his memory tampered with. But her location is unknown to me and I suspect that lies within the Pensieve as well.

For a moment, Harry couldn't find his voice. "..He's kept her trapped for over a century?"

Sadness flickered within Solomon's eyes. "Yes. He hates what she became and before now, loved her. He no longer sees them as siblings, but cannot bring himself to end her immortal life. His hatred of Vampires is all-consuming."

"It is still inexcusable," Alistair stated firmly. "While I will not deny that what happened is truly awful, she is the innocent here. My only question would be, why turn her? Many Vampires not under my or other's jurisdiction feel no remorse in draining humans and animals alike dry."

"Maybe they saw potential in her?" Harry suggested, deep in thought. "I doubt Dumbledore didn't use spells to keep her locked away. Anyone who can break through those is someone to be watched, even at his age."

"Possibly. I-" Alistair stopped a faint furrow in his brow. "Forgive me, I shall have to take my leave. Someone is attempting to enter the Forbidden Forest."

"I will return Harry to school later. There is a matter that I wish to discuss with him, while he is here."

Finishing the last of his drink he didn't wait, disappearing on the spot.

While Harry was confident he could apparate without splinching himself, he hadn't tried across such a long distance before. It was better to be safe than sorry, an approach he was trying to adopt more of for this and every other year.

"I meant to ask, how's Fawkes doing?"

No sooner had Harry asked this, that there was a flash of fire and somehow, his feathers seemed to shimmer ever brighter. Landing on Harry's lap he gave a joyful trill, more so when he lightly scratched Fawkes' breast.

Harry glanced down at him incredulously. "Can you hear everything we say?"

With an almost mischievous look, Fawkes nodded once. Then, he was at least part of the reason for Dumbledore's apparent omniscience, though not any longer. Satisfied that Harry could see that he was doing just fine, Fawkes' next destination was his master and though Harry couldn't see the bird's hopeful look, Solomon's soft smile was plain as day. It changed his expression entirely.
"You are fortunate I keep a regular supply now." Saying this, he retrieved a small handful of what looked similar to Owl Treats. Whatever they were Fawkes enjoyed both the attention and eating from the man's hand.

Once Fawkes left, Harry found himself shuffling mildly uncomfortably beneath Solomon's piercing gaze. "It has been many years since I have seen Alistair quite this happy so I am pleased. However, should you at any point intentionally hurt him, no force upon this world or the next will stop me from enacting vengeance."

Shivering slightly, the temperature seemed to drop by several degrees, though it could be his imagination. He wouldn't do anything of the sort, but only his actions would prove as much. "I understand."

For a long time, Solomon held his gaze and Harry didn't dare breathe in response. "Good."

Finally able to exhale he did so, the atmosphere returning to normal. Then, the conversation took a turn that he wasn't quite expecting.

"How is it that you and Hermione came to meet?"

Harry doubted that it was himself he was overly interested in, Hiding a smile, he tried to focus his description around Hermione as much as possible. Unknown to Solomon, his facial expression had softened considerably in comparison to before.

"I first met her on the train to school in our first year, but we didn't become friends until along with Ron, I rescued her from a Mountain Troll that had been let in."

Solomon nodded, following his words. "I was able to see Quirinus Quirrel through Dumbledore's eyes, shouting about this troll."

Though he'd seen much from Dumbledore's perspective, Harry's provided a greater insight to him, but mostly Hermione. Sensing that this was intentional, Solomon wondered when exactly he'd become so transparent. Dismissing that thought a moment later he listened intently, furtherly painting a picture in his mind of the first human to completely capture his interest.

Rather than their lessons, Luna's visit to Brio was for two other reasons, with neither one having a predictable answer. She could feel a change. Not just in her magical ability, but spiritually and emotionally as well.

Barefoot once more, the soft grass cushioned her soles as she searched for Brio. Not finding him on the ground she tried looking up, surprised when seeing him sitting up in a tree. That was unexpected.
Waving up at him he noticed her and after returning the greeting, gently lowered himself to the ground with help of magic.

"The skies are crystal clear, more so when closer to nature itself." It was a simple explanation, but one which didn't need to be elaborated further.

Bathed in moonlight, it wasn't often Luna classed herself as fortunate but having the pleasure and privilege of a friend caring of nature and the rare few that he allowed to grow closer, she could at that moment.

One of the reasons she'd come here was to ask for Brio's help, as what she wanted to do she couldn't possibly achieve on her own. The remnants of the Horcrux from Ginny and Willow's purification was enough to drain her, but the Forbidden Forest? He'd never left the realm of the Fae before and though she'd told him how unclean her world was in comparison, her hope was that he would be in an adventurous mood.

Hair cascading down his back in a snow white waterfall, it made a change to see it loose for once. Almost glowing with a light of its own, it nearly distracted Luna enough to forget what she'd come for. That is until those bright eyes turned in her direction with quiet curiosity.

Now was the time to ask, fingers playing with her butterbeer necklace unconsciously. "There's a forest near my school that's filled with corruption, more than Willow. But it's so strong that I can't do it on my own. So, I was wondering.."

Biting her lip she stopped, Brio's expression unreadable. "Is this forest important to you?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation. Expecting him to refuse, her heart sank. It was well within his right to of course and her opinion of him wouldn't alter. It just meant finding another way.

Brio's first instinct was to say no. Not because he didn't want to help, but what her world would do to him if he accepted. She had lived there for her entire lifespan, but still faced problems. As someone who was surrounded by nature and those who cared for it constantly, it was a worry.

But, his desire to not disappoint or upset her won out. Before now he had no issues saying no to someone, but Luna had never asked him for anything before. The least he could do was grant her request. In a way, it would be his thanks to her. What for specifically he didn't know, but her arrival into his life would suffice for now.

"Alright."

Her blinding smile in response reassured him that his decision was the correct one. Even so, nerves of venturing into the unknown began to build.
"Thank you!" Beaming, she took hold of his hand but even without their sudden contact, she could
sense his concern. "Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

The thought that someone more than half of his height could do such a thing would be laughable in
ordinary circumstances, but from Luna, it was strangely believable. Though he hadn't used offensive
magic for a long time, he was well versed enough in it to protect her, if need be.

With the restoration of Willow, it provided more than one way to visit Brio and while Shutaro leads
to the main body of the Fae, Luna had discovered Willow took her straight to the forest.

Hand in hand, Brio had grown used to this form of contact, though it had taken some time. Even
now, he was mildly disbelieved that anyone would want to touch him in such a gentle manner. The
few Fae who wanted to speak with him found Brio to be more approachable than before, though
most still kept their distance. He didn't mind. He would rather have a small few who truly cared than
many who didn't. Not knowing what to expect, he let Luna take the lead.

Used to silence with only a gentle breeze disturbing the general tranquillity, the biting cold and harsh
winds reminded him of home. As winter Fae, he adapted to it easily. Thankfully, Luna had come
with a coat which wrapped snugly around her small frame.

The cold was one thing. This air was another. It left him short of breath, but not because of wind.
The air was unclean, more than he could have ever anticipated. Every hair capable of rising did and
he found it to be a shame. While it couldn't compare to his own world, its uncleanliness was at odds
with the otherwise pleasant scenery.

When Brio faded into thin air then reappeared with a faint shimmer, he answered her unasked
question, hand still in his. "I suspect that the other mortals will have questions if they see me. You
will be able to, but they won't."

Luna didn't think of that, excited enough about the entire situation that something obvious had passed
her by. Thankful he had, she gave his hand a squeeze.

She'd never held the hand of someone invisible before. Softly talking to him about different things
they spotted, her notoriety for being 'a loon' for talking to herself allowed her to remain undetected,
in a sense.

Reaching Hogwarts, she giggled in response to his look of shock.

"Not even the grandest of ruins compares to the magnitude of this." He admitted pride for his own
world not overruling everything else that he couldn't see the beauty in another. It was then he realised
that he'd never considered Luna in the same way. She blended in with them so effortlessly, as was as
if she'd always lived there.
Pleased to hear something positive from him, her eyes sparkled. The closer she came to the Forbidden Forest, the more it began to affect her negatively. Glancing up, she could see that Brio fared no better, arguably worse.

"Hey, Loony!"

Recognising the voice as one of the Seventh Year Ravenclaws which had taken to targeting her, a group of the same four approached. When telling Harry that Nargles had taken her shoes, the true meaning was other students. Perhaps because she chose not to fight and wanted to resolve every situation peacefully, it painted a larger target on her back.

Hiding her anxiety, she greeted them with a smile. "Hello."

Dismissing her politeness, they kept their distance, the ringleader of sorts sneering. "Talking to yourself again? I had no idea Hogwarts accepted nutters."

"Ow!"

Spinning around to see who had attacked him and finding no one, his eyes narrowed. "Whoever you are, show yourself!" Rubbing the sharp sting in his arm, another of the students was targeted next.

"I think it came from over there!"

Distracted from her they left, in pursuit of their unknown assailant.

"Does this happen often?"

Guessing that Brio was responsible for that, Luna was thankful to him. The situation was diffused before it could develop any further.

"More often than not." It was sad to admit this much. Not even her friends knew this. She didn’t want to concern them but then Brio found out, on his first trip here.

"Mortals are beyond my understanding. They ridicule those that are even slightly different. I pity them, though they are undeserving of that much."

Brio fought against the anger, able to calm himself quickly. Negative or destructive emotions were counterproductive to healing magic, rendering any cast ineffective or weak. Though, he found it more difficult to than usual.
With no one else to distract them, they arrived at the Forest's entrance. Stunned, all Brio could do was stare. While Luna always felt ill around the forest, the darkness seemed to give him a wide berth. Even so, he found himself affected negatively. The sooner this was over with, the better.

"The malevolence levels are overwhelming."

Luna glanced up, allowing some of her anxiousness to show. "Can we still help?"

Brio had confidence in his abilities. No, their abilities. With Luna he was stronger, that much evident when cleansing Eireachdail. Though there was much more here than anything he'd ever seen.

"Yes. The source must be found, before the healing process can begin, however."

Narrowing his eyes, there was something else there that didn't belong to the forest. Raising his arm he outstretched it, Palm touching an invisible barrier.

"That's Professor Lothaire's. He erected it to stop students from wandering in."

Whoever this man was, the magic matched his own in power, perhaps even surpassed it in some ways. He rarely, if ever, received a challenge but he was guaranteed to know something which would allow them to pass by, but also leave the barrier intact.

"A wise choice. This is no place for a child." His voice grew fainter, the majority of his attention aimed towards a plan of action. Absolutely every base was covered, all except one. No doubt it was here to prevent aspiring adventurers from entering and so was equipped to deal with any and all offensive spells, with the power output irrelevant. The opposite of that was never taken into consideration.

Before he could put his thoughts into action, a figure materialised out of thin air and immediately, could sense that this was no mortal.

Wondering just who it was that wished to try his great amount of patience, Alistair disappeared on the spot, reappearing close to the parts where he sensed a disturbance. Any and all admonishments if it was a student and warnings if it was another died in his throat when faced with Luna's serene expression.

She was the last person Alistair expected to see. Alone for the most part, he was comfortable enough to use her first name. "Luna?"

"Hello, Professor." A dreamy smile on her face and cheeks slightly flushed, it seemed out of place for her to be here. But, he could sense that she wasn't alone.
"Show yourself." Tone neutral, he wouldn't go on the offensive unless it proved to be necessary. Whoever this was held immense power, but seemed to be non-threatening.

As they shimmered into view, he skilfully hid his shock. While some believed that Dragons, Unicorns, Vampires or even magic users were myths, Alistair could never be sure about one race in particular. That was the Fae. Harry had mentioned them of course and to know that there were other immortals out there which had existed for longer than the Elves, was a fascinating revelation. But to see one for himself? His interest was piqued. He had nothing to worry about with him, this much he could tell.

"Why are you here?" His name could wait. The purpose of his visit was the more pressing question.

Brio studied him silently. What kind of immortal was he? He'd never seen anyone like him before. Able to vaguely see through the magic centred around his eyes, the orange reminded him of the Autumn Fae, but he wasn't one of their kind. If not for the unusual colouring and his immortal status, human would be the closest description. He saw no harm in answering the question, detecting that this was the Professor Lothaire Luna was referring to.

"Luna has asked me for assistance in cleansing this forest of corruption."

To Alistair, there was light, dark and everything in between. but he had assumed like most, that some things couldn't be changed. The thought that there was an underlying reason for why this forest attracted dark creatures had never occurred to him.

“I see. And this is something you believe is accomplishable?”

It was Luna who answered his question. “We do. But thank you for the concern, Sir!”

He’d seen what was in there or at least, a little of it. The Acromantula was fierce and while Harry drove them away, he doubted they’d left the forest entirely. This Fae’s power was noticeable and certainly not someone to be underestimated. However, he didn’t strike Alistair as the offensive type. Taller than him and in robes of white and silver, he had an aura of tranquillity matched by Luna herself. He wondered if this was the very same Fae that Harry had mentioned when highlighting the girl’s training in this other world.

Making a split second decision Alistair picked up a pebble from the ground, enchanting it.

“Should you need assistance, a single tap with your index finger will suffice.” Offering this to the Fae, he accepted it. “You will let us continue?”

Alistair nodded. “I will. I trust that my student is safe in your hands.”
If it was anyone else, Alistair would have said no without a doubt. But, he was confident that this wouldn’t prove to be against his better judgment.

Rather than give a verbal response the Fae conveyed his intent to the barrier, allowing him and Luna to pass by. Rather than be annoyed that the barrier wasn’t as secure as first thought, it excited him. Who else would have the intent to help the forest, rather than to simply enter and explore? It was a purpose he couldn’t possibly defend against. Wishing them luck and that the pebble would remain just that, Alistair returned to his quarters. Solomon’s papers in hand, he had a lengthy amount of gruesome details to cover.

Luna shivered. The Thestrals were her friends, but it still didn’t make the forbidden forest any more of a pleasant place to be in. Though around them, the corruption didn’t affect her quite as strongly. Appreciative to have Brio at her side, she glanced up at him. Faced with a complicated expression, she tilted her head.

“Brio?”

Brought from the thoughts which he’d descended into, he voiced the first thought that had come to mind. “What is your relationship with this Professor Lothaire?”

There was curiousness, but an underlying hint of something else which she couldn’t quite pick up on. Unsure why he asked this, she answered honestly. “He’s my Professor and friend.”

Brio’s expression didn’t change. It was only through this that another thought occurred. Perhaps he was jealous? If so, that was incredibly endearing to her. To test this, she lengthened the explanation.

“Professor Lothaire is Harry’s lover.”

“Ah, I see.”

Luna was right. Through the forest’s nigh impenetrable darkness, a pink tinge suddenly coloured the blue hue of Brio’s skin, eyes flickering with relief. How could she be anxious here when he was by her side? Still keeping a hold of his hand, Luna allowed him to guide them both as out of the two, he had the better sense of this corruption’s origins.

Why did he ask that? It was none of his business. But then the relief at her answer flooded his system. He’d never once struggled to maintain his composure and yet with Luna, every shield or guard he erected was effortlessly blown away. He had great pride in himself and ridiculously, couldn’t help but think during their brief interaction, that Professor Lothaire would be horribly suited to Luna when compared with him.

He’d never felt this way before, alongside such fierce protectiveness. Not even his students or patients, though he treated each one with his own brand of care.
It had been a long time since he was this adversely affected by anything. The disadvantage of living in a ‘pure’ world devoid of most corruption was a negative reaction in response. It was an equally balanced scale. If one side weighed more, so did the other. The price for mastery of healing magic was an intolerance of the dark arts, unless able to be banished. But for a school to be this close to it? He was concerned for the other students but more importantly, Luna. He couldn’t ask her to leave this world behind, but who knew what prolonged exposure would do? Unconsciously, his hand tightened around her own.

Forests were usually distinctive, but this one resembled more of a maze than anything. If not for his ability to detect corruption sources, they would no doubt find themselves lost by the dense woodland surroundings. While Brio was able to cope, he could see that Luna struggled to and silently, cast a protective barrier around her to keep most of the corruption at bay.

Noticing this change she thanked him, finally feeling as though she were able to breathe better. The forest was far larger than expected and while they never went in circles at any point, moving straight forward looked no different. Passing by one area, she saw signs of a previous scuffle and husks of Acromantula corpses, charred by flame.

“I think this is where Harry and Professor Lothaire rescued students from. It’s why the barrier was placed there, so no one would be in danger again.”

Her soft voice filled the silence, Brio’s tone just as quiet. “While they may have left this area, the same cannot be guaranteed elsewhere.”

Taking Brio’s warning to heart Luna nodded. Though they were dangerous, she loved all creatures and was glad that Harry had chosen not to wipe them all out, they had to survive, just like every other creature and though they looked scary, she could never bring herself to intentionally harm one.

An unknown amount of time later, Luna had the feeling that something, or several somethings, were watching her. Unable to detect anything but the ghost-like wisps of their breath and their footsteps against the winter-hardened ground, Brio was able to pick up something more.

As though someone had left Halloween decorations up weeks after the holiday, thick sticky webs connected between each tree, some of which had tightly wrapped cocoons hanging from branches. It was an eerie and strangely beautiful sight, at least to Luna.

“I believe that we’ve found their new home,” Brio muttered, eyes locking on some of the smaller Acromantula, Black beady eyes tracking their movements hungrily from the tops of trees.

Rather than fear, Luna watched them in fascination. Outside appearances weren’t everything and as much as they were widely loathed, Acromantula silk was considered to be of the utmost finery in higher society, for looks and feeling.
One movement out of line, and they would attack. They weren’t the kind of creatures to be negotiated with but coming to a large clearing and seeing the main body of Acromantula, Luna could tell something was wrong. All of them sensed their presence and worriedly, she voiced her concerns to Brio.

“Aragog’s hurt.”

“Aragog?”

Forgetting that he wouldn’t know the Acromantula by name, Luna briefly explained. “Hagrid named him. He’s the second largest and Morag is his mate.”

He remembered Luna mentioning him. A friendly half-giant with a love of creatures that matched her own. Though, he had to question if this man knew the meaning of danger.

However, he could see that Luna was right. Aragog had a large bite wound in his abdomen, one of which hadn’t healed correctly and with the puffiness surrounding it, looked to be infected. Slumped on the floor he seemed robbed of all strength and disturbingly enough, the smaller ones looked ready to consume him.

There were times where his heart acted before rational thought. While most would run away or even kill him, Brio wanted to heal him. He’d rarely done so with creatures before, but this was an area in which he had unshakable confidence. He took pity on him, knowing that he must feel a great deal of pain, the milky whiteness of his eyes suggesting blindness, too. Blindness was something among the Fae which never occurred as with age, senses and powers only improved. If sight was taken during a fight, healing the damage done and restoring sight was a simple matter to all healers. While Brio couldn’t reverse the ageing process of something with a mortal lifespan, everything else could be easily taken care of.

The only issue he would face is how to convince them that they meant no harm. Already they were on edge, more so when neither made a movement. That is, until Morag, by Aragog’s side, spoke.

“Leave this place. I won’t tell you again.”

Looking ready to strike, Brio remained calm and not intimidated, despite the fact that they may as well be ants in comparison to her.

“We mean you no harm. I only wish to help heal your mate.”

While her facial expressions lacked the animation of most mortals and immortals, the eyes were windows of insight into her complete disbelief. “Help? You dare to infiltrate our home and pretend to offer help? Humans and non-humans are all the same. You’re nothing more than sustenance.”
Distrust etched into every fibre of her being, she struck. Faster than her mate, but not fast enough for Brio.

Arm outstretched and palm facing towards her, a brilliant white light without heat illuminated the darkness, there to deter.

Luna watched, wide-eyed but trusting that no one would come to harm during this altercation, as Morag stopped mid-attack. Momentarily blinded, she found herself unable to break through the shimmering shield. Brio tried again.

“Without medical aid, your mate will die. The wound is already infected and if left untreated, it will be too late.”

In her own way, Morag cared for Aragog. Without him, she would not be able to bear children and keep their kind from eradication. For the hundreds of babies born, many more were slaughtered in retaliation to those who entered their homes and were used as food. She was indebted to Hagrid who, like Aragog, had saved her and paired them together. But anyone else, she considered to be the enemy. Only Hagrid was allowed near them, but no one else had ever offered help. She had no way to contact him because as of yet, Hagrid hadn’t found their new location and unless the human who injured her mate had informed him, he wouldn’t know that Aragog was dying. With a fever of sorts ravaging his weakened body, she hadn’t been able to talk with him for a while now. She had a decision to make. Accept the help and risk her family, or refuse and attack? To her frustration, she found herself unable to do the latter, but the former was incredibly risky.

Nothing but silence. Fae and Acromantula locked eyes, as Brio attempted to reach the same wavelength. Sensing that neither would move on until a decision was made, Morag hoped that she wouldn’t regret this. Remaining silent her pincers clicked and as she moved aside, so did her children in a thousand plus legged scurry.

The way clear Brio moved forward, Luna following as he crouched by Aragog’s side. The wound was worse than first thought. Jagged and raw, it oozed a foul liquid, the scent eye-watering. Used to such a thing he wasn’t phased. Once Brio’s hand touched just below the wound, Aragog did nothing more than shift his body slightly, weakness gripping his form. Now closer, he could make out faint mutterings relating to Hagrid.

Sitting down, Luna did the best she could to be soothing, whether her good intentions went to waste or not. “Everything will be fine. You’ll feel better soon.”

Sparing a small smile for her thoughtfulness, Brio effortlessly slipped into healer mode. Dangerous or not, for the moment this was a patient. Seeing traces of acid in the bite wound, that was what prevented it from healing properly and though he hadn’t noticed before, Aragog’s legs showed signs of damage, the acid ate away at some of the flesh. Rather than a focused heal, he would need to apply both this and rejuvenation to his entire body.
As Brio closed his eyes, the magic naturally came forth, in no way forced to leave him. As it did a gentle golden light illuminated the forest, growing in size and strangely, none of the Acromantula was threatened by this. In fact, it seemed to calm them, particularly the younger ones. In awe, Luna watched her friend and mentor at work, the damage caused to Aragog recently and over the years repairing and renewing itself.

This was what she wanted to do. The ability to help others like this, be it a creature or non-creature, would be bliss. She already received a great sense of satisfaction from healing Ginny and Willow but for a job? Now more than ever, Luna was sure this could be the path for her and she had Brio to thank. Just seeing him in his element inspired her to do the best she could as well.

Working at a comfortable pace, Brio let the magic guide him rather than him guiding it. Infection fading, flesh mending, hair regrowing and blindness cured, it was a gradual process which all in all, took no longer than a minute. Finishing the job he immediately stepped back, leaving Aragog to regain his bearings and be of sound thought again.

Not long after he was able to rise, balancing agilely on eight legs. While nearly incapable of any emotion other than anger, Aragog looked about as close to wonderment as could be. So much so, that he didn’t adversely react to realising that strangers were once more in their territory, though wariness was evident in his stance. His scuffle with the human turned creature had left him wary.

“**What did you do? I feel young again.**” Fear mixed with disbelief, more through body language than the eerie voice delivered in.

“I healed you.” A simple answer, one of which needed no detail and while Aragog was surprised with his transformation, Morag was due to the fact that Brio was truthful.

Not usually one to take interest in anyone’s affairs but family’s, Aragog found himself asking one question. “**Why?**”

Narrowing his eyes faintly, Brio looked at him in consideration. “You were in need of medical assistance. I acted on that.”

Though none of them capable of speech said so, Brio liked to think that they were thankful and seeing something in good health once more, always heightened his spirits. Where they needed to go was directly through their territory but not wanting to disturb them more than necessary, he took Luna’s hand again to move around and past them.

Once out of the way, Brio stiffened when suddenly, small arms wrapped around him. Face pressed against his middle, he could faintly make out Luna’s joyful if muffled voice.

“You healed him! So many would have chosen to run away but he doesn’t hurt any more. You’re wonderful.”
While he’d adapted to hand-holding, hugging was an enigma. Still, despite the chill in their air and encroaching darkness, Brio felt nothing but warmth emanating from the smaller body. A hesitant smile on his lips he returned her affection, mimicking what he did the last time as he wasn’t met with an adverse reaction before. Then, her last words hit him. Glad that she was unable to see he had to fight away a much more noticeable blush, compliments still somewhat alien to him.

Knowing they still had a task to do Luna kept her expression of gratitude brief, mood greatly heightened from before. She knew Harry would be pleased as well, remembering that he’d expressed some guilt towards injuring who Hagrid considered to be one of his friends.

It had been a while since they’d first set foot into the forest and while Harry had increased endurance from his Animagus abilities and Ginny from Glaive training, hers lay solely in the healing arts. Used to flittering from place to place, it didn’t guarantee a lack of tiredness when venturing on a more serious journey. It was rare she found herself not fond of anything, however running was one of them. Even so, joining her friends on the early morning jogs they’d taken to doing might prove to be of some good for her in the end. It had only been a few weeks and already she’d seen some changes in them.

Following Brio’s lead up until now, She no longer needed to when corruption far more distinctive and rivalling that of Voldemort's Horcruxes made itself known. Appreciative of Brio's earlier actions so that the full brunt wasn't as impactful, she was able to study the source closer than what she would have been able to otherwise.

It was another tree. Or at least, a twisted mockery of one. While Willow's true nature became warped, this tree seemed to thrive on corruption or at least, its origins were borne from darkness. Outstripping the others in size by a significant amount, roots weaving themselves through the water-parched earth resembling barbed wire, rose-like thorns protruded from bark which seemed more likely to scrape skin with a single touch than anything else. The bark itself gashed, blood red sap stained both wood and ground.

Like Willow, this tree was very much animated. Branches resembled roots that if whipped with enough force, could slice clean through the skin. It seemed to pulsate, as though it were a living, warm-blooded thing.

It occurred to Brio that this wasn’t a tree where its true nature had been warped, but how it had always been. He was unsure if it came from this world or in fact another, but something which is corruption itself couldn’t possibly survive an onslaught from two individuals with light natures. They would be cleansing the forest in its entirety, with nothing salvageable from the source.

Swaying in the breeze it seemed to stop, sensing their presence and remaining eerily still.

“Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do to spare this tree.”

Luna suspected as much, though a tendril of sadness unfurled within her to know it. The moment
they drew closer one of the smaller and flexible branches struck, thorn-like protrusions and rough park striking her across the cheek and with it, leaving a steady trickle of blood. Effortlessly she healed it, removing all traces of there being an injury and sticking close to Brio.

Pleased with her calm and composed attitude, not even the strongest of branches could get within reach of him and if one grew close it recoiled, as though burned. Slowly but surely they pushed forward, coming to a stop close by. Though it swayed violently, almost frantically from side to side, it was unable to prevent the next actions from being taken.

Once Brio’s palm was flat against the trunk, Luna’s one came to rest on top of his. With the magic of those fully in sync and understanding of cleansing and healing combining as one, two different power sources with the same intent worked in harmony.

White light against absorbent black and after a moment, the victor became clear. As Luna and Brio’s efforts gently cocooned it the light grew brighter, almost blinding until fading, taking all traces of corruption as well.

It was as if they’d been attempting to escape the clutches of quicksand all this time, affecting them strongly enough that optimum efficiency wasn’t achievable for that time. But more than feeling better was the Forbidden Forest itself.

While nothing much had outwardly changed, it would attract far less dark creatures than before, allowing regular animals to roam in peace. Luna wondered if the forest’s dark lure was a partial reason to why Voldemort drank the blood of Unicorns that night. Thankful she hadn’t seen it, her sorrow went solely to Harry for the fact that he had and many other things.

Having spent most of the time a mixture of anxious and excited, joy was what overwhelmed her the most.

“Brio, we did it!”

Unable to help herself she took both his hands in hers, bouncing on the spot. She could have never imagined such a thing would be possible, even if hoping for it. Without Brio, she would have never been able to do this.

And then, came her second reason for visiting him, to begin with. She wasn’t fearful of the answer, more curious and excited than anything but she’d been unable to pick a suitable moment, until now.

“Brio..”

Stretching to her full height, she was barely able to graze his cheeks with her fingertips but still, it left him spellbound in a sense.
“Luna?” Head tilting, his windswept hair came to slide over one shoulder.

Seriousness shining within her eyes in contrast to the usual disposition, the rate of her heartbeat began to increase.

“I like you.”

“.I like you too.” Though he responded in kind, it was clear to see that they weren’t quite on the same wavelength. Deciding to take action Luna jumped, hooking her arms around his neck and by reflex, he supported her. Expecting this, she placed a soft kiss on his lips. Fleeting and barely there, but a new way to initiate contact with him and a one which made her feel all warm and bubbly inside.

Luna wasn’t dim-witted or too naive, Ravenclaw wouldn’t be the house for her otherwise. Quickly, she’d identified just why her feelings differed with him compared to everyone else and shortly after, had realised Brio’s were the same.

It was only with her sudden and shocking actions, that he came to understand what Luna meant by the term ‘like’. Though his peers were very experienced in this area, Brio had little to none. It wasn’t something that he’d ever mentioned, considering that no one else’s business but his own. He’d settled for a life of solitude, not particularly close to anyone but still doing his part until Luna came along.

He’d encountered mortals before, but only on the battlefield and never one to work with closely. But, he wouldn’t change his situation for the world. His earlier question, reactions and unable to think about anything but Luna? This explained it and there was only one suitable response he could give.

“I like you.”

Sitting down exactly where he stood, a long-fingered, blue-tinged hand reached for hers. Joining him, Brio’s smile illuminated their setting and drawing closer, gently brushed noses with her. As if she were a delicate flower Brio carefully cupped the back of her head and matching movements, brushed his lips against hers hesitatingly.

“While my role as your mentor I’m suited to, beyond that is outside of my expertise.”

“Then we can explore together!” Knowing that she wouldn’t be inexperienced alone, came as a great relief. Truly, even if in a different world, she had found someone she could relate to on many levels and that in itself was a miracle. Basking in the glow of their new relationship and a forest restored, it was a short while before Brio returned to his own world.

Having kept watch from his office window, Alistair smiled in satisfaction. They had succeeded
spectacularly, able to sense the shift himself even if no one outside of the three of them could. Harry made remarkable friends and in turn, their friends shifted very definitions of light and dark, to a whole new level.

Chapter End Notes

I know some of you are fast readers so this will look weird xD a lot of things are against me this week. I’m in a different part of the country that’s new so running on lack of sleep and a bad internet connection which is why the sooner I post it the better 😊 I’m sharing a room with some people who complain that I even write to begin with and THEN they decide to sleep and it’s not even 10pm. So I can’t use my laptop and have to post the main body with that and use a quieter device for editing. Sorry about this guys! I’m cry levels of frustrated right now and if the chapter quality is a bit off, this is why 😔
The Truth

Chapter Summary

Alistair offers a helping hand to one of his favourite people and later on, provides help to Harry in a different way. Harry himself is again lost in memories, but is brought crashing back to reality when dropped into the midst of a deadly serious situation.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Luna and Brio cement their relationship, as Solomon reveals some interesting information.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a Thursday, just after classes had finished and close to November’s end. During his time at Hogwarts, Alistair had taken to observing his colleagues’ work pattern closely, particularly Minerva’s. By nature, he had far more time to spare so he believed that should be used to either his own or someone else’s advantage, like recently. There was a very convincing replica of the Veil in the Ministry when in reality, it had returned to its true place. Seeing something which belonged to his family returned brought him a different kind of joy to what he’d experienced so far.

Pulling himself from those thoughts, Alistair believed around this time Minerva should be in her office, no doubt tackling paperwork with at least half of it belonging to Dumbledore. She was an asset to the school and the last thing he wanted to happen was her collapsing due to overworking. Not only because he cared about her as a friend, but the school simply wouldn’t run as effectively. Wearing tailored teaching robes, he enjoyed the materials’ swishing with every movement and Alistair suspected Severus received some enjoyment from the way his own robes billowed. Grinning at the thought, he knocked softly on Minerva’s office door.

“Come in.”

From those two words alone, the exhaustion was clear to hear. Brows drew in a concerned frown he opened the door, only for them to raise in shock at the sheer amount of parchment looking ready to topple at any moment.

And surrounded by seemingly endless amounts of it was Minerva, quill poised to use further and her usual tight and neat bun with wisps of hair escaping. Seeing who it was she managed a strained smile.

“Good evening Alistair. To what do I owe the pleasure?”
Serious with his intentions he didn’t tease, getting straight to the point. “I am here to assist you with marking.”

Though he offered, Minerva didn’t actually expect him to follow through. She didn’t doubt his sincerity, however, her colleagues had offered the same and usually, their own workload often prevented them from assistance. Perhaps she was more fed up than first thought, as her stubbornness didn’t rear its head. Putting up little to no protest she temporarily extended her desk, adding a plush chair directly to the side of her own along with a quill and ink set. “Thank you.”

With purpose Alistair went to Minerva’s side, scanning the parchment closely. “Which of these are Transfiguration Assignments?”

Without looking up she didn’t miss a beat, carefully perusing through yet another document which Albus had neglected. “All of the ones to my left side.”

The majority of them were for Transfiguration, then. Good. That means he had more to assist with, as she was focused on the ones which needed to be overseen the most.

Taking the first one, a split second was all he needed to focus on a different subject of which he had more than acceptable knowledge of. Recognising some of the students during marking, it was interesting to see how their abilities remained consistent or fluctuated across different subjects and used to absorbing information quickly, was able to flawlessly and effortlessly work through the piles at a rate which had captured his colleague's attention. So much so that all traces of fatigue for that moment had left her, as she watched him with mounting interest. Inspecting one marked piece of work, Minerva’s eyes regained some of their spark.

‘You show an excellent understanding of the material source, but would benefit from a little more detail in paragraph three. How do any materials used impact upon final results? This is a tremendous effort, however. Keep it up.’

“Your perspective on this student’s assignment is refreshingly encouraging.”

Able to split his efforts between conversation and the smooth flowing actions of quill and ink against parchment, his slowly beating heart began to warm beneath her words.

“I am glad to hear this. Before now, I have never tried to teach as a serious profession, however, I find myself greatly enjoying the experience despite some of the more trying students that I have encountered.”

Minerva could relate, having seen her fair share of those over the years. But if she didn’t receive enjoyment from her job, she’d have left it to pursue something else years ago. “I’m glad to hear that you find it rewarding. The students and I are very fond of you.”
Alistair felt almost giddy. But then, they didn’t know his true nature and with Harry’s recollection of how some students had discussed Remus after his werewolf status had been announced, there was a small measure of worry that the friends who were unaware of his nature would look at him in a more negative light. He knew the time would come when all would be revealed but for now, he’d keep it under wraps.

Ending on that positive note a comfortable silence passed between them, each absorbed in their own marking and strangely enough for Minerva, finding herself working through the piles slightly faster than what she normally would. Perhaps having company made all the difference or at least extra reassurance that there was support if needed.

By the time Minerva had tackled half of hers, Alistair was almost done with his despite having more of the workload. It seemed the advantage of youth had presented itself before her, almost envious that he handled his own remarkably well, but appreciative as he used that spare time to generously assist her.

"I may just have to clone you as my helper." Though it was said in jest, Alistair responded seriously.

"There is no need. Should you require assistance I would be glad to offer it."

Before Albus had neglected his own work, she was able to keep an acceptable schedule for marking times but with the addition of that, it made time management for someone who didn't have enough hours in the day more difficult.

Minerva patted him on the shoulder. "Your kindness is appreciated."

Between them, the unfinished piles transformed into finished much faster than Minerva could have anticipated. Everything that needed to be done for this week and some weeks after were taken care of and in less than half the time.

"I have several moments to spare." As if that short sentence were a foreign concept, she remained motionless for a few seconds, as if to bask in that fact. But not long after, Her usual tea and Ginger Newts took pride and place in the desk's centre, while a simple flick of her wand organised the parchment into their correct bundles, stored away for a later date.

Taking a sip of tea, she closed her eyes in apparent bliss. Content Alistair observed, believing that his free time was well spent. Their conversation took a mildly unexpected turn.

"Potter is happier and more confident than I've ever seen him recently. I assume that you're to thank for this."

Tilting his head questioningly, Minerva's eyes twinkled. "Many students have passed through this
school, most at some point having experienced intimate relationships and I'm no stranger to it either."

Alistair saw no point in denying it. "Yes. Perhaps I am a contributor to his continued wellbeing, or at least I hope so."

Seeming content with this she didn't pry further, allowing herself to truly relax without the worry of work for the first time in years. Perhaps she could even get a few hours of extra sleep, something more unbelievable than being able to comfortably sit and chat for hours with an esteemed colleague and friend.

Recently, Ron had begun to calm down some and while Harry was relieved, he almost waited for the next explosion to occur. Thinking back on his behaviour since September, he began to wonder if there wasn't something more going on that they couldn't see. He could be jealous and a bit of an arse, but not to the point of scaring first years with a horrible attitude. Though their friendship was now fragmented, he still cared, How could he not? Ron was his first friend, even if at this point it might only be one-sided.

He'd seen Ron at his best and while feeling overshadowed by his talented siblings, had displayed a knack for Wizard's Chess and strategy in general. It was a game he loved but more and more, Harry had seen him go off on his own. Due to Dumbledore's insistence, according to Professor Snape, Ron was allowed to attend Potions classes again and Harry could see he wasn't pleased about that. But he'd remained silent during most classes, so there was less of a protest than usual.

It was after class and Harry was alone with Ron, walking back to the common room. Hermione had left to return a library book and Neville had left just before them, quietly determined to discover what the plant Harry gave him was and if it had a purpose.

The silence between them wasn't as awkward as Harry thought it would be, but it didn't last for long. Two students who were trying their best to squeeze into one shadowy part of the corridor were doing a bad job of it, clear to see that their lips firmly locked together. Harry was sure one attempted to eat the other's face and couldn't help but flash back to one of many Alistair kisses and compare.

Realising how ridiculous that was he quickly stopped, approaching them and feeling awkward for other reasons. "Sorry guys, could you move that somewhere else? Or at least learn privacy charms."

Smiling to show that he wasn't annoyed or offended, he was surprised and partly pleased to see that it was a male couple but more specifically, a Gryffindor and Slytherin who looked to be in their 4th year.

While the Slytherin looked unaffected, the Gryffindor boy blushed to the very tips of his ears. "Sorry. I don't know those sorts of spells though."

Harry wouldn't tell them outright as technically, he was supposed to prevent this from happening and not encourage it. But knowing how fantastic it was from his own limited experience, he couldn't
bring himself to be a killjoy. But he could always point them in the right direction. "The Library will have what you need. They could come in handy for loads of different situations and if you find revision boring, just think of how many different ways spells can be applicable."

The Slytherin looked at him in consideration. "Thanks."

Harry nodded his head. "I won't take points this time but don't let me catch you two again."

Knowing that they wouldn't have got off as lightly if a Professor had found them, they went in search of a new place that would hide them more successfully.

"They're fine to do that stuff as long as it's out of my sight, especially with a Slytherin." Ron watched them leave, grimacing slightly.

"What's the difference between them and any other students doing it?" Harry asked, dreading the answer.

Shrugging Ron turned the corner, glancing over at him for a second. "Well it's a bit weird for blokes to do it, it's normal seeing girls with a bloke though."

Unaware of how his words had impacted Harry Ron said this casually, hands in his pockets.

Harry kept his voice level. "Shit, I forgot something in the classroom. You go on without me."

"Ok." Giving him a brief wave Ron left.

Of course, it was just an excuse, a flimsy one at that, but it was the best he could come up with on the spur of the moment. Rather than head back to class, he made his way for the Astronomy Tower and hoped no one else would be there at this time. The Room of Requirement would guarantee privacy, but sometimes he did enjoy looking out over the scenery from a castle which had a lot to offer.

Footsteps echoing as each hit the stairs, Harry listened out for any sign of other students, spreading out his magic to detect any charms which hid them from plain sight. Finding none once arriving at the top, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Bruised clouds floating across the darkened sky, Harry seated himself on the railing and idly, glanced up to see how his eyes would interpret each cloud's shape.

He had to leave and think. His initial reaction would be to set Ron right but then, he wasn't the only one of the same opinion. The Dursleys had made it known what they considered normal and
abnormal. Among the abnormal things were homosexuality and magic. Magic because of Harry and his deceased family and the other as a general opinion. Though Dudley often called him a 'faggot', he didn't actually know Harry liked men. Though if they knew he was bisexual, it wouldn't soften the blow at all since there was still a part of him that liked the same gender.

It made growing up with them that much more difficult and while he was treated horribly, all of that would pale in comparison to if they found out that little detail about him. He would go to his grave before he ever admitted it aloud, but the first time he realised he was bisexual was because of Remus. Before he knew who he was, Harry did show initial interest, both for his intelligence and slightly rough around the edges yet kind appearance. Once he found out the truth that quickly stopped, so he turned his attention elsewhere.

Which lead him to now. Harry knew he was biased, but he couldn't help it. To him, Alistair was the most attractive individual in the world and if faced with billions of people and appearances, he knew that he'd always try to find him among the crowd. He was so unbelievably happy and while that fact hadn't changed, Ron's comments had doused some of that happiness with the cold reminder that not everyone was open-minded and accepting.

Becoming lost in thought, Harry was unaware of the time which passed him by, or the increasing cold of a chilly November evening.

When seeing that Ron had come alone to the evening feast, Hermione frowned.

“Where’s Harry?”

Shrugging Ron glanced over to Dumbledore, looking impatient for his short speech to be done with. “No idea. He said he’d forgot something in class but that was about half an hour ago.”

Hermione was only slightly worried. Harry had gone off on his own occasionally but these days, he usually informed them of where he'd be. She wasn't his keeper by any means but alone with Ron, she became suspicious. Harry had a good memory, on par with hers after the Horcrux removal and him forgetting something was rare. Wondering if it was just an excuse he provided, her mind began to race.

Listening to the conversation was Ginny, equally suspicious and while Neville and Luna engaged in conversation, she decided to join the interrogation of sorts. "What were you doing before that?"

Confused about their line of questioning, he spoke around a mouthful of chicken. "Some blokes were snogging as we walked by, Harry moved them along.”

Noticing the change in his expression, Hermione had a bad feeling. "Do you have a problem with
"Well if I don't see it there's no problem. Bit weird you know?"

Hermione and Ginny looked at one another. He hadn't had to say he was Bisexual to them, it became apparent when they realised he was head over heels for their Defence Professor before Harry knew. But they doubted Ron was aware. Not that it gave him an excuse, but neither could exactly rant as it was up to Harry if he chose to tell Ron. Considering the fact that it was likely he'd said the same to Harry as what they'd heard, that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

Seeing that they'd finished talking to him Ron became oblivious to the world, lost in piles of food created for consumption.

"He'll be ok, probably just wants some time on his own." Overhearing their conversation Neville muttered to Ginny, Luna nodding her head in agreement though her eyes swirled with melancholy.

"I hope so." The mood subdued, it completely bypassed Ron who continued to shovel food into his face, despite Ginny's none too gentle elbow digging into his side.

Though the feast had only just started, Alistair attempted to come up with a plausible excuse to leave early. He'd tried to communicate with Harry and while there was nothing blocking him, he suspected that he was too deep in thought for any other to register. The bracelet's colour a deep blue, it was a fair cause for concern and the only consolation he could receive from this, was knowing that at least it wasn't black. Glancing over at his friend's usual spot, he could see that Harry wasn't there and as he rarely missed meals in the Hall, Alistair began to think the worst. Usually, he was an optimist but with Harry, he'd learned he couldn't be too careful.

Able to hide his thoughts he attempted to participate in the conversation around him as usual but found that to be no easy task. Instead, he remained silent, simply listening.

Though listening he still found himself distracted, running an elegant hand through his hair in mild agitation and in doing so, loosened the meticulously tied ribbon. He'd let it grow longer recently, enjoying the care of it and also, buying certain kinds of ribbons. While some women were known for their collection of bags or shoes, Alistair would say the number of ribbons he owned rivalled this.

Unable to concentrate, he couldn’t sit here and not act any further as technically, he’d eaten and drank enough to leave without any concerns or questions.

“I apologise, but there is a matter of urgency that I must take care of.”

Directing his words towards Minerva who looked better than before, her eyes showed concern. “Do you need assistance?”
Alistair smiled, not letting his worries show. “Thank you for the offer, but I will be fine.”

Inclining his head in her direction and giving a casual wave to Severus who chose to ignore him, Alistair was relieved he could leave about ten minutes into the feast. A moment's time of attuning his hearing revealed that Harry’s friends were also unsure of his location.

Thankful that he would be able to locate him anywhere save for the Room of Requirement, Alistair went in search of him.

Lost in memories of the Dursleys, Harry was unsure how much time had actually passed. He was there physically but also not. It didn’t make sense to him, but it was the closest description to his current feelings. He was also aware the sky was practically pitch black and the feast had no doubt started, but the panicked thought that he should move before getting into trouble didn’t register either.

As though lead weights had sunken to the pits of his stomach Harry remained there, seated on the bitingly cold railing’s edge while his hands gripped it tight enough for the combination of white and slight redness to his skin colour to show.

Feet clanging against the metal repeatedly as he swung his legs, Harry was nearly consumed by the all-encompassing blackened sky above. That is until the touch of something on his hand vaguely registered.

“Harry, you are freezing!”

That and the panicked tone it was delivered in brought back his awareness, along with everything else. Turning around to face Alistair, it seemed he’d had a delayed reaction to the temperature drop. He’d only meant to be outside for a few minutes at most.

Slowly easing himself off the railing, he winced at the stiffness of his limbs. This wasn’t the smartest decision of his by any means.

Saving the well-meaning lecture for later, Alistair had to warm him up first. Wrapping his arms around Harry firmly they quickly disappeared, relocating to his quarters.

With nimble fingers, Harry cloak was removed and after gently easing him into the sofa, Alistair's duvet covered him from the neck below. After a moment's consideration he joined Harry beneath, taking one of the shaking hands into his own and trying to rub back some warmth into them though admittedly, because of his own lower body temperature, he was at a slight disadvantage. Due to the sudden change of temperature, the last thing he wanted to do was warm him up too quickly. A gradual increase in warmth would be better for him.

Harry's hands still trembling faintly Alistair held tea, requested by him to the House Elves and
holding the cup to his lips, encouraged him to drink.

The combination of warmth and the hot drink brought back further awareness. Ready to hold the cup on his own he let it warm his hands further, shifting it every few seconds as his hands were still chilled enough for the porcelain to feel hotter than actuality.

Watching over him and satisfied that he was fine, Alistair allowed his heartbeat to settle at a normal rate. When getting to know Harry, he didn't expect to not only gain a heartbeat but be at risk of losing it again with some occurring events. He couldn't imagine a scenario where he'd ever be angry with him but concerned and worried were becoming commonplace by this point.

A short while had passed and once the body beside his own had ceased to tremble, Alistair finally spoke for the first time since entering this room.

"Harry."

At Alistair's serious tone Harry placed the empty cup down, giving him his full attention.

 Somehow, it was much more difficult for him to reprimand Harry. He'd adapted to doing so with his students when needed, not having or wanting to shout at any point. His flushed cheeks from the cold and wide green eyes were so captivating that he'd rather kiss him. It was only the reminder that if no one had looked for him he would almost certainly have fallen ill that kept Alistair on track. Sunset eyes softly glowing, Harry could tell he meant business.

"The weather conditions outside are dangerous, if out for too long. If I had not searched for you, how long would have been spent outside?"

It wasn't the first time he'd done this. Before now, it had been when he was close to falling unconscious though admittedly, it had been a while. Those times he was suicidal and just thought, who cared if he got sick and died? Everyone would mourn the fact that their saviour couldn't rescue them from Voldemort but that was it. This time, it was genuinely an accident. It didn't change the outcome any, though.

"Probably until I fell unconscious." He didn't try to sugar-coat his words, though a small lump formed in his throat at the sorrow in Alistair's expression.

"I am relieved that it did not go to such extremes. Self-care is incredibly important and I hate to see you neglect yourself in such a way."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to stay out for so long. I got caught up in memories again." Feeling heavy hearted Harry glanced downward, Alistair stroking his hair shortly afterwards.
"You are forgiven. Will you promise to try and care for yourself better?"

Harry tried to give a verbal answer, but the touch of his fingers was so soothing, that the only thing which left his lips was a contented sigh. Taking that as a yes Alistair chuckled to himself softly, only stopping to tilt his head up just enough to press a warming kiss against one cold cheek.

Glad that the situation was resolved and feeling pretty much back to normal, Harry sighed. "I was walking with Ron back to the common room and some boys were kissing each other pretty much in plain sight. I sent them on their way and then Ron starts saying stuff like it's weird and he doesn't mind if they do that as long as it's out of his sight. I made some excuse about forgetting something in the classroom and pretty much ran away. It brought memories of the Dursleys to surface though they were worse about it."

Everything seemed to circle back to those abhorrent relatives. Happy that Harry was comfortable enough to share what happened, it was something he could wholeheartedly relate to.

While now he could look back upon his memories as unavoidable experiences, at the time it had hurt and confused him deeply. Pulling Harry close to his side, he basked in the warmth which had returned to him. "Countless times I have been insulted, along with attempted assaults and murders for my sexuality."

Harry straightened, eyes widening in shock. "Seriously? People went that far?"

Nodding, an amused smile tugged at his lips when recalling one of the few incidents which Solomon was there to witness. "There was a particularly vocal group of people who had seen me flirt with another man and voiced their disapproval. Solomon was with me on an outing at that time and I could see his displeasure. Transfiguring a large handful of pebbles into sheep they did his bidding, relentlessly chasing after the group until they returned to their original form."

Just picturing it was enough for Harry to go into hysterics. "Why sheep? That's brilliant though, I think he's got a bit of pranking spirit in him as well."

"I am not sure, I never asked. Perhaps I will one day. Though he would vehemently deny such a thing, I believe so too." The mood far lighter than previously Harry ordered food from the kitchen, not wanting to miss a meal as he was very close to being the right weight for his height though according to Madam Pomfrey, he wouldn't grow much taller beyond 5'6. Yet another thing he had to thank his crappy childhood for, though the way Alistair tried to make him feel better about that fact was sweet.

Knowing that it was growing late Harry left, no longer cold from the extreme weather but warm, for more than one reason. Opening the door he was met with Hermione, fist raised in mid-knock.

"Harry! I was looking for you!" Relieved she lowered her fist and closing the door behind him, they made their way back to the common room.
"You nearly knocked on my face instead of the door."

Seeing the truth of that, she looked sheepish. "Sorry. I got the gist of what happened from Ron. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, much better now."

Relieved to hear that Hermione opened her mouth to speak again, quickly closing it as her eyes focused on something in the distance. Turning to him she mouthed the words, 'Is that Ron?'

Glancing in that direction, an unmistakable head of red hair turned the corner. Nodding once he motioned for her to remain quiet, disillusioning them both. Careful to keep his voice low while they walked, he studied his back.

"Is it just me who thinks that his personality change has been a bit too extreme?"

"No. I'm wondering if it has something to do with Dumbledore. Ron had a private conversation with him in Grimmauld Place like I told you in my letter, so maybe that's got something to do with it."

"I hope you're wrong but if not, it adds more to the reasons of why I hate him."

Hermione hoped she was wrong too, but those times were rare. It was night time now and close to their curfew. Where could Ron need to go at this time?

That question was answered later, as he made a beeline for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Hardly anyone went in there, not even Harry now as he could visit Aela via the Room of Requirement. So under normal circumstances, it would guarantee some level of privacy. Feeling slightly guilty for watching him but having the feeling that it would shed some light on what they were missing, Harry and Hermione watched closely.

That was it. He couldn't take it anymore. Ron was known for being impatient but truthfully, every ounce of it was being drained in relation to the battle going on inside of his mind. He wasn't going mad, that he was sure of. Someone had done something to him, had continued to for a long time now and it was messing everything up. His earlier words to Harry wasn't true at all but the more he fought against them leaving his lips, the worse the answer ended up being. No matter if he gave in or fought back, most of what left his mouth these days were lies with a tiny shred of truth.

He didn't know how to stop it or what to do. He wasn't in anyone's favourite books and for good reason. He'd been keeping to himself more often, but the time alone to think had only reinforced that truthfully, nobody liked him. Not even his family. Why should they? He was a disgrace to the Weasley name. He was even remorseful over the way he'd treated Snape and he hated the man. But he knew, the moment he tried to say sorry, something else would happen that would land him in
deeper trouble. He'd already paid the price for his words to Daphne, forced to walk on his hands for exactly an hour with no way to undo the spellwork alongside some other little pranks here and there. They were deserved so his desire to retaliate was small.

Staring at his reflection within the grubby and cracked mirror, Ron was met with a person who he felt he'd never seen before. Or more accurately, hadn't been able to see his true self for some time. Then, a voice which resembled his own and yet didn't.

'Everything is normal. This is who you are. The sidekick and friend to Harry Potter who only wants what's best for him. Slytherins are evil and you're simply doing your duty as a proud Gryffindor to guide and sway him from the dark path.'

Those weren't his thoughts, not completely. His hatred of Slytherins stemmed from the Malfoys and their treatment of his family, but he'd be an idiot to ignore the fact that Wormtail, a Gryffindor who betrayed Harry's parents, was his hand me down pet rat and close by for years. But it was as if someone had taken the very roots of his hatred so that they now spread and became firmly implanted beyond his control.

'You're wrong.'

'I'm right and you know it.'

"GET OUT OF MY FUCKING HEAD!"

So frustrated, upset and angry wrapped into one tangled ball Ron screamed at the top of his lungs, punching the mirror repeatedly which eventually shattered beneath the force, leaving his hand bruised and bloodied. Still, he continued, venting his rage and once spent, could feel there was something wrong.

Eyelids flickering he collapsed to the floor, senses overloading and his mind awash with too much information as spasms wracked his limbs.

Harry and Hermione jumped, not expecting his outburst or what followed, frozen with horror. The moment Ron collapsed was when Harry sprang into action. Cancelling the charms he sprinted over, falling to his knees.

"Ron!"

Studying him closely Harry received no reaction or awareness that his name had been called and though equally panicked, Hermione was quick to act and sent her Patronus to Madam Pomfrey. Joining him on the floor unshed tears shone in Hermione's eyes, gripping Ron's hand tightly as her own arm was jerked with the force of his movements.
"I think he's having a seizure. I've read about medical conditions in my parents' books when I was a child but I don't know how to treat them!" Frantic, the ends of her hair began to frizz as her magic levels rose to the surface.

As healing spells weren't his expertise, Harry didn't dare to touch Ron's hand though couldn't help but think he wouldn't vanish bones like the former Lockhart had managed to do. Waiting anxiously for a response, neither of the friends had ever felt more fearful, only increasing when he began to froth at the mouth.

At last, they heard footsteps heading towards them, the intensity of Ron's seizure not lessening any as pained moans burst from his chest.

A little breathless Madam Pomfrey appeared, clear to see that she'd run all the way there. Not questioning why they were in a, for the most part, unused girl's bathroom, she ran a diagnostic, instantly paling.

"Mr Weasley will need transferring to St Mungo's, this is beyond my expertise."

Harry had seen her treat a wide variety of things, but he'd never heard of anyone needing to be taken there from school. Whatever it was, it had become far more serious than both could have anticipated. Looking as though she were about to cry, Hermione voiced a weak question.

"Can we come too?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded, looking mildly exasperated with her next words. "If I said no, you two would still find a way there."

Glancing at one another, they flushed slightly. That was precisely what they'd considered if it came to the worst-case scenario. Stabilising him Madam Pomfrey levitated Ron into the air securely, returning to the Hospital Wing. As someone in the medical profession, she was able to use the floo service straight there for emergencies rather than the inconspicuous front entrance. Hers was much bigger than usual, presumably to transfer patients. After a few seconds of conversation, she gestured for them to go first, giving the destination's name as she followed shortly after.

Finding themselves in the A&E department of sorts, a healer on standby directed them to seats while Madam Pomfrey spoke in hurried tones to two available healers. After their exchange of words, Professionalism took over, an aged healer joining the team of three in transferring Ron to one of the wards.

This ward was a busy one, healers rushed off their feet and amongst it all Harry sat, dazed. Until Hermione finally burst into tears by his side. Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, his own face was pale and drawn. "He'll be fine, you'll see."
The words were as much for him as her, but she appreciated them nonetheless.

Once unoccupied again Madam Pomfrey headed for the floo again, this time to make another call. A few seconds later, Mr and Mrs Weasley joined them in the ward, looking equally distressed. Harry couldn't make out their conversation but guessed that they were trying to ask for details. She probably brought Ron here so that specialists could look at him, so they'd be sure of whatever was wrong. That was the only reason he could think of, anyway.

With a few seats unoccupied, Mr and Mrs Weasley seated themselves next to Harry.

"Do you know what happened?!" Frantic, only Arthur's hand holding her own stopped Molly from storming the wards in search of her son.

Harry nodded, explaining for them both as Hermione hadn't yet found her voice. "It was close to curfew and Ron headed off somewhere. We didn't know where so followed him to Myrtle's bathroom. He just stared at himself for a few minutes, then screamed for something to get out of his head. He punched the mirror he was stood in front of until it broke, then he had a seizure."

Seeing that they were confused by what a seizure was, Harry tried to explain though his knowledge was limited to what he'd seen minutes beforehand. "He was unresponsive and his limbs jerked a lot."

Knowing what had happened didn't ease their anxieties any, but it was better than only knowing that Ron was at St Mungo's and nothing else beyond that.

Eventually, Hermione calmed down, wiping her eyes and remaining silent, but anxious. Since September, Harry scanned his mind for anything out of the ordinary other than his mood swings. Apart from that, he couldn't think of anything else out of the ordinary, but the waiting was setting him on edge.

'Harry?'

At Alistair's voice, some of the anxiety eased. 'It's not me this time you'll be glad to know. You already had enough of that earlier.'

'That does fill me with relief. But if not you, then who?'

He couldn't think of a conversation topic with any of the three sat there and to start one would feel inappropriate somewhere, considering the tense and serious situation. They didn't know how long they'd be there for but this connection more than once had provided him with reassurance in times like this. Explaining what he just had to Mr and Mrs Weasley, concern flowed through their link.
'I shall hope for the best outcome in this situation, whatever that may be.'

'I'll keep you informed.'

Closing their link, for now, it allowed Harry to feel at ease, at least a little bit. There was still the worry of what the healers would say, though.

Casting a quick tempus, Harry read the time as 10:30 pm. Past curfew now and they’d been waiting for what felt like hours, but in reality, about half an hour at the most. The ward became so quiet that all four jumped when the older looking healer that Harry had spotted earlier emerged from behind the door which Ron had been taken to. Slightly shaggy hair that was greying at the roots, he gave an authoritative impression. Spotting them sitting there, he made his way over and skipped the pleasantries for the sake of urgency. He spoke with a Scottish accent, thick but not to the point of there being a communication barrier.

"I'm Head Healer Bliant. You're Mr Weasley's friends and family?" Making that assumption, he continued when answered with identical nods.

"Mr Weasley has a Grade One Pituitary Tumour. I'm Muggleborn and Brain Tumours are practically unheard of with magic users, so my experience in the Muggle world was needed. Grade one is benign and easily treatable, they often go away on their own, but are very difficult to detect even with magic and often take years to grow in size, as with this one."

While Harry and Hermione could follow his conversation, Mr and Mrs Weasley still looked confused. "What does that mean?" Arthur asked, scratching his head and feeling like an idiot.

"A tumour is a growth on the brain and we often don't know what causes them. The pituitary gland is the main part of the brain which is solely in charge of hormonal balances and a change in this affects mood, among other symptoms. However, I suspect the catalyst is down to magic. I will need to contact the Ministry to identify the spell used,"

"But, will he be alright?" Anxious to know Molly squeezed Arthur's hand, hard enough to cut off blood circulation. Knowing that she was under stress right now he let her, bearing with the pain.

Harry couldn't get a read of his expression. "If the tumour was naturally formed I would say yes. But since magic is at work here, I can only say once I consult with the Ministry."

Not exactly satisfied with the answer but knowing that he was doing his best they settled down to wait, again.

"The Office for the Removal of Curses, Jinxes, and Hexes," Hermione whispered to herself, mind running a mile a minute to think what kind of spell could do such a thing and in the process, a successful distraction from some of the more pessimistic, darker thoughts.
Like most regular Hospitals, there was a drinks dispenser as Harry softly broke the silence. "Does anyone want some water?"

A verbal response came from Hermione. "Yes Please." Showing Harry a thankful smile he fetched four plastic cups, filled with water and while he held his own, the other three were effortlessly levitated. Each taking their cup he returned to his seat, wetting his parched throat while waiting anxiously.

The other two healers hadn't left the room, but Healer Bliant presumably headed towards the entrance, to meet whoever he required assistance of and a few minutes returned, with her in tow and back to the room Ron was in.

He hated this feeling, just waiting. But most of all, Ron's change in attitude was down to something more serious. He knew nothing of brain tumours before today but previously, he'd just written Ron off as being an arse and while that was partly true, it seemed like most was down to a combination of this tumour and whatever spell triggered it.

He was about to go down the route of self-blame but quickly stopped. That wouldn't help him or anyone else. Since Alistair's words with every kiss on his scarred torso, it had imprinted both a pleasant memory and impacting words. He wasn't the same person from years ago or even before this summer. There was no need to feel tied down by the past and he should just embrace who he was now. He understood this and gradually, could feel yet more changes within him. It was the fault of whoever cast this spell and no one else's.

11:15. Harry didn't expect to be here for this long, exhausted. He was used to a regular and fairly early schedule, but too anxious to even think about sleeping. Hermione fidgeted restlessly and even if she had a book, was unsure she could dedicate enough concentration towards reading it. It had been silent for a while now, though Harry suspected a myriad of privacy charms were the main reason for this.

A quiet door squeak alerted him, seeing Healer Bliant and immediately straightening to attention. Approaching them once more, his level of calm served to restore some of Harry's own. When he applied more than a few privacy charms, he knew the information about to be shared was serious.

"I apologise for the delay. I was required to fill out documents supplied by the Ministry worker while there. Mrs Drew has identified it as a variation of the Imperius Curse, purpose unknown. Caster, Albus Dumbledore, September 1991 and strengthened August of this year."

Molly was the only one shocked. "S-Surely there must be some sort of mistake!"

Healer Bliant shook his head softly. "I'm afraid not. He's to be taken in for questioning immediately."

Drip white Molly fell silent, thoughts whirling which left Arthur to ask the more important question.
"Will Ron be alright?"

The subtle change in his expression in response to that question wasn't one which set Harry at ease. "Only Dumbledore himself may remove the curse, as it has been synced to his magical signature. If he agrees to remove it, the tumour will shrink. In doing so, normal bodily functions and personality traits will be restored. But as it's in part due to the Imperius curse, it will take a long time before Mr Weasley will return to how he should have been, long before this curse was applied."

"..And if he doesn't agree to remove it?" Harry voiced the one question Arthur couldn't.

"Then the tumour will continue to grow, with a possibility of it becoming untreatable and in several years time, fatal. In any instance, I would recommend a Personal Therapist for Mr Weasley. Unfortunately, they are private and not part of the national health service. If you should agree, it will require a fixed charge per session for however long needed."

He certainly had a blunt way of delivering information. It was a part of his job though, particularly not getting attached to patients or whoever else might seek his aid. Dumbledore had done some despicable things in his time, but surely he wouldn't refuse a 16-year-old who would die sooner than intended, if not?

It was the uncertainty that scared him. But more than that, he was angry. Angrier than he'd ever been and there was no chance of even attempting to get a restful sleep when feeling the way he was. He had to leave soon, but not without making an offer that he really wanted Mr and Mrs Weasley to accept. Once the healer left after supplying them with a card and contact details, Harry turned to them.

"I'll pay for the sessions."

Arthur and Molly looked at one another, guilt-stricken. It was true that they couldn't possibly afford what would no doubt be expensive, but they couldn't possibly ask that of him.

Seeing their conflict, he placed his hand over Molly's free one, letting his sincerity show. "I haven't been on best terms with Ron recently since he's changed a lot. But this explains a lot of what I'd been wondering about. You can take this as a thank you for seeing me as a member of your family for all these years, but it's something I want to do, that I can do. So please.."

Trailing off, he tried not to let his emotions bubble too much to the surface, though found it difficult. At this point, he didn't care. He couldn't write off Ron's actions completely as he wasn't sure which part was down to the tumour or curse, but it shed light on an otherwise confusing situation.

Eyes wet, she could see the truth of Harry's words and after glancing over at Arthur who gave a subtle head nod, she caved in. "Alright dear, thank you."
Giving Molly a strained smile, they were interrupted by one of the two healers from Ron's room, looking fatigued. "Visiting hours are over, but you may see him for a few minutes tonight."

Harry stood up with Hermione. "We'll see him soon, we need to get back." He wanted to give them some alone time, without the added pressure of knowing that they wanted to look in on him as well. But glancing over at Hermione beforehand, he could see she was equally as exhausted and as they were the ones who found him to begin with, that was more than enough action. It was close to midnight, long after even the sixth and seventh years' curfew. Allowed to use their floo just for the night, Harry and Hermione returned to the Hospital Wing.

"That was a nice thing you did," Hermione whispered, managing a smile, though it trembled faintly as they gave a faint wave to Madam Pomfrey in greeting. Once leaving there, Harry began to feel the rage consuming him.

"I've got more money than I know what to do with. If I can help in that way at least I'm doing something good with it."

"I'd better tell Ginny. Even if she's asleep I'm sure she'll want to know." Reluctant to wake her, Hermione knew it would be worse if she chose not to and was one of the last people to find out about her brother's current condition.

"Good idea. I'll probably come back to the dorm later, but I can't right now."

Not asking but understanding, Hermione squeezed his shoulder. "Take care, Harry."

Now left alone, Harry headed straight for the Room of Requirement, with purpose. Still, he kept his magic reigned in, even if the rest of him itched to kill the old bastard right where he stood. The real Dumbledore was in for questioning, but that didn't mean to say he couldn't replicate him at the same time and hopefully, tackle his rage in a colourful yet explosive way.

Then, he remembered he needed to tell Alistair what happened.

'I've just got back from St Mungo's now. Ron's got a brain tumour, caused by a variation of the imperius curse cast by Dumbledore. It's why his moods have been so extreme, so it sounds like a combination of both.'

He delivered those words calmly, even if he felt anything but.

'I am sorry that it is not better news. Is it treatable?'

'Depends on if Dumbledore removes the curse or not.'
He could go into detail, but Harry was far too tired and angry to elaborate. But since he was talking with him, Harry decided to mention something else.

'I'm going to the Room of Requirement and having it filled with Dumbledores for me to shoot spells at. Want to join in?'

'I shall watch you deliver destruction upon replicas deserving of it with delight.'

He certainly had a way with words. And as for the rest, it meant more for him to enact vengeance upon.

Once arriving Alistair was already there, Harry giving him a weak smile as he paced in front of the door. He wanted a room filled with Dumbledores and what he'd been mostly taking advantage of, one where the passage of time was different.

Opening the double doors once ready and Alistair following behind, he shuddered. "I was not aware that I had a worst nightmare. However, I believe this is it."

Every inch was packed with Dumbledores. Identical to the last with their damned twinkle and garish robes. The only available space was a large strip upon entry and out of consideration of Alistair if he was just watching, a comfortable plush sofa which looked oddly out of place in what would be a sparse room if not for the several replicas.

"Don't worry, they'll be gone soon." Eyes sparkling with intent Harry wasted no time in getting to work, Alistair taking a seat to watch. He had to admit it did look fun and Solomon would agree, but it was clear Harry needed this. He'd done his best to hide it but even without the bracelet, Alistair had learned to read him very well and his anger was clear to see. Rather than one wand, he opted for both, wielding them almost as if they were pistols and firing continuous, powerful spells of a medium speed. They weren't so realistic as to burst into a shower of blood and body parts, but rather what would happen if a sack dummy was hit with enough force to burn, shred, tear, explode or sever.

He held remarkable power for his age and though it was a thought he hadn't shared, he believed that the magical blocks were part of the reason why Harry held so much power. Inevitably with age a Wizard or Witches core matured along with the body and usage, no matter how little there was. Over the years Harry had used it to heal himself and once starting Hogwarts, during lessons. The removal of each block after that released all of the magic he should have had, on top of what he'd developed during his life. So by placing blocks on Harry to weaken him, Dumbledore had actually done the opposite. He had to chuckle at such a spectacularly backfired plan.

With the size of Harry's core and his added endurance, it could ensure at least a few hours before truly growing tired. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't use fully powered spells. However, in this instance, each spell was at the highest capability of power, with many requiring a lot to cast. Alistair guessed this was for maximum satisfaction but the more this continued, the more he worried that it would until Harry inevitably dropped from exhaustion. He still had a final day of school before...
the weekend and if his core became fully depleted, it would require a longer amount of hours to regenerate than the average student. Though he could tell even without Harry saying so that time flowed differently here, Alistair still didn't want him to grow too worn out.

Harry had adapted to a rhythm of sorts, each replica putting up a fight of which he imagined the real Dumbledore to do. It might be too much, too little or not enough, but it provided an adequate challenge. Even when he could feel signs of exhaustion he continued, not even beginning to dig into the depths of his rage as some magic physically chilled the ones closest to him, slowing their movements.

Breathing deeply he targeted one with a particularly vicious Reducto, smirking with satisfaction as the force of which it flew backwards knocked several others askew. It was clear his new wand emitted more power but still he used the Holly and Phoenix feather one, feeling a sense of accomplishment in a strange way that he used one more extra than the many he faced.

"Harry."

He thought his voice had been called but so absorbed in what he was doing, he dismissed it until suddenly they disappeared, a pair of large, fairly warm hands cupping his cheeks and stopping him mid-motion.

Breathing heavily as a thin sheen of sweat coated him, it was just as well Alistair stopped him. Absorbing the warmth he closed his eyes, head slightly turned down as tears escaped from beneath his lashes.

As they touched Alistair's fingers, the older man felt his heart clench. He wasn't sure he'd ever get used to the sensation, much more potent now that it had a slow beat.

"Oh, my love..

With a gentle motion and not for the first time today Alistair pulled him close and with a single thought, the sofa a short distance away was moved to directly behind them. Sitting down Harry naturally curled in his lap and though it wasn't often, Alistair began to experience a feeling of powerlessness. Magic wasn't a cure-all and even those who dedicated their lives toward research of the brain couldn't possibly uncover all secrets of it.

"T-The Healer s-said if he refuses, then the t-tumour will grow and in a few years time Ron's going to d-die."

It was a slight struggle to make out Harry's words, breath hitching and muffled against his shoulder. He hadn't seen Harry this angry or upset since Lilah was brought to him and he had no wish to relive it. But no matter what, he wanted to be there, especially if he was feeling this way. He couldn't offer words of comfort either as truly, he didn't know whether Dumbledore would agree to or not. All that they could do was wait.
Slowly rubbing his back, he could feel the soft fabric of his teaching robes begin to soak. "I was not due to wash my clothing in at least a few days, but you have provided the service free of charge."

His attempt to cheer Harry up worked, a watery and slightly choked up chuckle in response. The arms around Alistair's neck were tight, but even so, he would never tell him to loosen them. He simply wrapped his free arm even more firmly around.

Before long Harry pulled away, sniffling slightly and looking up. "Thanks, bet I look horrible."

Noting his red-rimmed eyes, Alistair dropped a soft kiss beneath them, a bewitching smile on his lips. "You are incredibly handsome to me. A few tears will not change my opinion." He continued to speak a moment later. "I realise that it is not the scheduled sleeping times organised, but today is different. Would you like to?"

Harry nodded, without hesitation. For the sake of not arousing suspicion, at least outside of his friends, he'd taken to sleeping in the dormitory during the week but across weekends, with Alistair. His sleep was much better these days but weekends, even more uninterrupted, warm and peaceful than usual.

Taking his hand Alistair stood up, leaving the room behind and once outside, checking to ensure they were alone. Disappearing on the spot they reappeared straight in his bedroom. Though they'd only done this a few times, Harry had outgrown his initial shyness though had yet to remove anything below the waist. He had several sets of pyjamas, taking advantage of being able to. He kept some in the boy's dorm and some here, quickly changing. Glad he didn't feel rushed in that manner he slipped into bed, concerned he wouldn't be able to fall asleep straight away, anxious about Ron.

Though it did take a while, Alistair softly conversed with Harry until the unmistakable slow breathing pattern of sleep made itself known to him. With some hope, Amelia Bones would take advantage of this opportunity shortly and call Harry in so that he'd be able to press charges not only against Dumbledore but all others he wished to as well. Alistair felt with every fibre of his being, that the time for Dumbledore to pay was very close.

Looking forward to that day, he spared a thought for Ron Weasley. A tumour was not something he expected to hear, nor the seriousness of the situation. Like most, he'd assumed that the hormones of a teenage boy were to blame for his actions, not knowing him enough to possibly suspect anything like Harry. But if both the tumour and spell were no longer a part of him, it would remain to see just how much of his personality and behavioural traits were not controlled or changed. Either way, he wished for the best outcome, not only because he didn't want for a young life to be possibly cut short, but for Harry and The Weasley family, who he'd grown fond of over the tedious and recently increased, Order of The Phoenix meetings. Relaxing into the pillows behind Alistair closed his eyes, listening to the sound of his lover's soft breathing and fervently hoping that Friday would bring better news.
I'm so glad to be home and back to normal! Enjoy <3
Crimes and Kisses

Chapter Summary

Neville makes a surprising discovery while Harry and Hermione visit Ron. Afterwards he has other places to stop off at. One with a certain pair of Marauders and the other, which would change all their futures for the better. And the cherry on top for Harry? Alistair, of course.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: One of Dumbledore's more long term schemes is brought to light, Ron having suffered for this to the dismay of his family and friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By Friday morning and due to the fact that some students couldn't keep quiet, the knowledge that Ron was in St Mungos became widespread and a pointed topic of conversation, though not what for. Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Neville had been subjected to endless rounds of questioning, particularly Harry and if it happened again, he was very close to hexing them.

Gripping his fork almost painfully, Harry's poached egg became the victim of a vicious stabbing.

"Just ignore them. They're nosy bastards. Easy for me to say I know but like every other time, they'll find something else to talk about eventually." Ginny tried her best to help, holding her hands up when a mild glare was thrown her way.

Softening his gaze he lowered his eyes, sighing. "True. But every time they ask, I see it."

They knew what he meant without having to explain. Hermione wanted to spare Ginny the details but largely at her insistence, she knew of Ron's seizure.

Harry tried his best to eat but could only manage a little, stomach churning with nerves. Tomorrow would be another practice session with the Gryffindor Quidditch team that he handpicked with the help of Ginny's expertise and he looked forward to it, hoping that would be an adequate way to take his mind off the worrying situation.

Even if their friendship had pretty much fizzled and died, he wouldn't wish anything bad on him. In fact, he felt remorse and guilt that he hadn't noticed the signs of something more serious. But the only comfort he could take from last night was that Ron wasn't alone when he'd had that seizure. But then, how many times over the years had he suffered from those without their knowledge?
He was distracted, but not to the point of Neville's missing presence passing him by. "He said he'd be delayed this morning since he's figured out something about the plant I gave him, but there's not long left until breakfast is over."

"If he's not here by the time classes start, just save something for him to eat if you see him on the way."

At Hermione's suggestion, Harry nodded, wondering just what it was that Neville had found.

Neville was aware that he'd miss breakfast if he didn't hurry, but to him, this was much more important than a missed meal. He'd been approaching this all wrong. He'd checked with Professor Sprout and even Professor Snape and neither had ever seen a plant which looked like this before.

It had grown in size, large enough that small, copper coloured flowers had sprouted among vines which had entwined themselves around his bedframe. He'd woken up one morning to Seamus' less than polite exclamation and after explaining, became a normal fixture of the room. It still made the curious noise of tinkling bells but beyond watering it daily and the speed of growing, nothing had changed.

He'd researched using any and all non-fictional books available, even checking the restricted section with written permission from Professor Sprout. He'd found nothing.

It was a long shot but eventually, he'd turned to fictional books and among them, was a particular tome which listed any and all plants suspected of being mythical or part of mythology itself. And right there, towards the very end underneath the 'Z' category, was the very plant he'd been looking for, unbelievably.

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**Zeme's Vessel**

*Zemes māte, the Latvian Mother of Earth, is part of their religious beliefs. Not much is known, save for a single plant capable of fertility in the presence of those deemed worthy.*

*It is said that only those chosen will see Zeme's Vessel in its true, beautiful form, while others, nothing more than a tangled mess of ancient thorny vines. Though in its early stages, will present itself to those in contact with the one that would keep her power alive.*

*Zeme's Vessel is named as such, for holding the Goddess' power over earth and all affiliated with it. Met with her demise at the hands of Velns, she knew that one day, another deity borne mortal...*
would resurface, no matter where or when to continue in her name. In doing so, the Vessel would bloom where needed.

It is nothing more than a fairytale with speculation at most, but the image shown is a recreation of a carving found in the mid 13th Century.

To the right of it, though not as accurate compared to some drawings and real-life images, it was unmistakably what Neville had been looking for. The only difference being the flowers themselves were gold. Suspecting that it wasn't quite in full bloom, it was a least a step further than where he had been.

"Zeme's Vessel." He murmured, staring at the plant almost critically. At the sound of his voice, it almost seemed to perk up, the very tip of it hanging off the edge and in front of his face, resembling snake-like movements. It was only up close, that he realised just beneath one of the flowers, was a tiny, glowing mark. He'd never seen that before.

Frowning he went to inspect it and the moment a fingertip grazed across, it became stuck. As if that had been what was needed all along, a near-blinding flash of light caused him to look away. The moment his eyes returned, the copper petals had made way for shining gold. As his finger was released, the razor sharpness of Zeme's Vessel struck Neville in the fingertip.

"Ow!" Yelping, Neville's eyes widened when before his eyes it seemed to shrink and shrivel. The more it did so, the more he felt an unimaginable power flowing within him. As if he'd been struck with a great fever, the heat rose and cooled against his skin. It lasted no more than a few seconds and by the end, Zeme's Vessel had crumbled into nothing but dust.

Unwilling to throw it away, Neville wondered if it could be replanted or used somehow, Deciding to store and save it for later, it was only after doing this that he looked at his hands for the first time.

"What?!" In the corner was a full-length dress mirror. Rushing to it, he gasped.

Glowing softly were thin, golden markings with an almost swirl like motif. They seemed to pulsate, skin still slightly flushed from the power surge he received. He felt no different other than that, those sensations calming down. but as he inspected his eyes, the limbal ring had turned the same shade of gold, rather than remaining black.

How the hell was he going to explain this? He could always use a glamour charm but it wasn't something he was afraid of people finding out. Strangely enough, it was almost as if he'd been blessed. If he showed any side effects from this, he could always go to the Hospital Wing but for now, he'd remain quiet unless asked. The truth wouldn't hurt, as he doubted anyone except his friends would believe what had happened. But then, he could barely believe it himself. Shaking his head from side to side Neville rushed out, ensuring he didn't forget his school bag or the tome in
question. Hermione and the others would no doubt want to look.

With fifteen minutes left to go Harry waved Neville over, who rushed to take the seat beside him. Turning to him Harry opened his mouth, promptly closing it again as he inspected him closely. Trying not to draw attention to himself though certainly surprised, Harry cast a mild privacy charm around them, looking at him expectantly.

"If you guys don't believe me, I wouldn't blame you. I can hardly believe it myself." Taking the tome out of his bag and clearing a space on the table Neville flicked through, coming to a stop with his index finger by Zeme's Vessel. "This is the plant you gave me Harry."

Harry nearly spat his drink out, incredulous. "I gave you a suspected mythical plant?"

Neville nodded. "Yeah. It was no accident either."

Reading the information closely, Harry understood, while Neville was undergoing a thorough examination by an extremely interested Hermione.

"So how did you get those changes, then?" Continuing the conversation Ginny's eyes focused on Neville's newfound markings.

"It all happened so fast. I saw something beneath one of the flower petals and when I went to touch it, my finger got stuck. The next minute it was released, then stabbed. It's like it was pushing whatever power it had into me because, after that, it turned to dust."

"Met with her demise at the hands of Velns, she knew that one day, another deity borne mortal would resurface, no matter where or when to continue in her name." Muttering this, her eyes widened. "Neville. If this is true, then you are or have the potential to be a god."

Laughing to himself, Neville glanced over towards the Slytherin table. "Imagine if the Malfoys learned that. Or even better, Bellatrix. Pretty sure the shock would kill them. I don't feel that much different, but I suppose only time would tell."

Contrary to everyone's shock, Luna was delighted. "That's wonderful! Maybe you can communicate with nature."

At that thought, Neville couldn't hold back his excitement. "Unless I'm dreaming all of this, then no. But if not, just imagine.."

"I think we've lost him." Chuckling, Harry watched as Neville became lost in thought of endless possibilities, all the while taking in at least a little nourishment while still having time.
Neville's revelation was a blessing for Harry then, serving to distract him enough that his mind left
the current topic of conversation for students. Dumbledore wasn't present this morning, unsure if he
was in his office, at the Ministry or elsewhere. It was just as well really, one of the many reasons
why Dumbledore was on his shit list. He'd do his best to concentrate, particularly needed since it was
Potions today.

Without Ron's presence, the atmosphere wasn't as charged with tension. But those who noticed
Neville's strange appearance instead chose to question him rather than Harry throughout the day,
which did him a favour. To the staff's credit, none of them batted an eyelid at Neville, while students
had taken to gawping at him idiotically. Either way, it provided at least a temporary relief, knowing
that conversations would no doubt turn back to the subject of Ron.

With Potions being the last class Harry took his usual spot beside Malfoy and with Professor Snape
no longer targeting him or other Slytherins, found himself strangely enjoying it. That was a thought
he would never share with Sirius, though. The motions were vaguely similar to cooking and forced
to do it growing up, he'd still ended up enjoying both that and baking in his own time. It was
something he'd created and had control over, those moments precious and few several years ago.

Though each potion was complex in its own right, they spent enough time on it that Harry had a
good grasp of each before moving onto the next one. Felix Felicis was the next one to do,
notoriously difficult. He had a strange kind of luck and would definitely benefit from a little, but that
was the sort of route he didn't want to go down. Disastrous if brewed wrong or consumed a lot, it
was a wonder Professor Snape trusted them with this at all.

Like a few times before now, Harry and Malfoy worked well together, rarely butting heads to both
their surprise. It was during a resting period, that he broke the silence.

"So, Potter, what really happened to Weasley?"

Expecting that question Harry squashed down the urge to hex him, settling for a chilling glare. In
response, Malfoy arched a single eyebrow. "You've been asked this a lot, then."

"You don't say." Voice bordering on sarcasm, Harry tried to think of a way to dodge the question,
promptly stopped by his next words.

"There are several popular rumours. One that Professor Snape tried to turn him into potions
ingredients, and the other Professor Lothaire finally lost his temper and as a result, Weasley's
shrivelled into a husk."

Harry snorted. "I can confirm neither of those is true. But I'm not saying what actually happened
either."

Not pushing the matter he backed off, to Harry's relief. Hopefully, he'd be able to get permission
from Professor McGonagall along with Hermione, to visit Ron after class. Ginny had missed part of her morning to do the same.

Unable to see who it was, Harry glanced over at Professor Snape who swooped rather than stalked over to a table on the opposite side of them, able to feel the intensity of his glare though not aimed in their direction.

"Your idiocy knows no bounds! Start again." Vanishing the poor duo's contents who withered beneath the sharp tone he stalked away, making a beeline for their table. Malfoy looked as confident and composed as ever, Harry trying to remain neutral but even with their truce, his presence in this situation was enough for anyone to have a nervous breakdown.

Briefly glancing into the contents of their cauldron he stalked away, Harry still feeling nervous.

"We're on track." Saying this Malfoy's eyes flickered to the blackboard, continuing where they left off while Harry prepared more ingredients.

"I couldn't tell, so I'll take your word for it." Shrugging they worked in relative harmony, or as much as a Gryffindor and Slytherin could, anyway. Honestly, it was a relief not to be shouted at for once. Before now, Professor Snape was a large part of the reason why he struggled with dark thoughts on a daily basis, right from the first lesson with him. All he'd wanted to do was take notes, fascinated by what he was hearing and then, wrongly targeted by the man. It had shaken him badly but at least, things were different now.

Once the end of class was signified, Hermione came over to him. "I was thinking we should ask Professor McGonagall for permission to see Ron."

"I was thinking the same thing. I meant to check earlier but did you sleep well?"

"A few hours at least, not uninterrupted. I took the opportunity to Owl my parents for any books on medical conditions they owned as I tried the Library earlier on today, but there's nothing relating to that. How about you?"

A smile curved Harry's lips. "I think so yeah. I might have stirred once or twice but I've got no memory of it."

Glancing around to ensure that they weren't overheard, Hermione moved closer to be heard better. "Did you sleep with you know who?"

Hermione had intended it so that any possibly eavesdropping students wouldn't hear Professor Lothaire mentioned but at what else was implied, she looked horrified. "I didn't mean that you know who!"
Harry was a mixture of disgusted and amused. "Really Hermione? We're not at each other's throats anymore true but our relationship doesn't extend to that. In answer to your question yeah, I slept with Avis."

Deciding that Alistair's middle name was safe territory, Hermione mentally slapped her forehead at not thinking of this. Swiftly changing topic to the surprise of that morning, they made their way to McGonagall's office. As Harry knocked on the door it swung open of its own accord, surprised to see Alistair there as well.

"Sorry Professor, should we come back later?" Harry asked, not wanting to interrupt their conversation.

"No need. You wish to see Mr Weasley, I presume?"

At their nods, she gestured to her floo over on the desk's right side. Only a select few staff knew what was wrong with him and who was the cause, successfully keeping the information quiet even though incorrect rumours were rampant. If Albus was put on trial, however, most details would be made public knowledge. "Whenever you wish to visit him, my floo will be made available."

Relieved that the process was simple they gave thanks, Hermione going first. Catching Alistair's eyes he was rewarded with a smile that had the blood pounding in his ears. He quickly followed behind, hoping he'd successfully managed to hide his discomposed state.

Once Alistair turned back, Minerva glanced at him in mild amusement as he cocked his head questioningly. Stirring her tea, she regarded him closely. “Potter seems flustered.”

Feigning innocence he remained composed, even if internally he was experiencing a sense of childish glee. “I wonder why that might be?”

Sensing that she would get no more from him on that subject, she switched to one which had become increasingly interesting. “Severus’ usual dour disposition with you has lessened. Did something happen?”

Surprised she hadn’t asked any sooner, Alistair was all too happy to answer. “I wanted to prove my sincerity in forming a friendship, via a gift. If Severus should accept, he would also acknowledge this. If he refused, I would leave the matter alone.”

Thinking back to that night, understanding dawned on her. “I see. So Severus’ robes were your idea?”

“Yes.”
“That explains it, I doubted he would dress up for such an occasion. If he should grow comfortable enough to converse with you, I believe it would be good to have someone closer to his own age as a friend.”

Alistair wondered how Minerva would react, the day that she discovered there was 1,464 years instead of ten, between Severus and him. He intended on telling those he trusted, with certainty. Undoubtedly Sirius knew though he hadn’t met the man yet, but that was inevitable. Ever so slightly nervous about when that day came he set those thoughts aside, for now, sparing them for Harry and Hermione at this difficult time.

The floo network was extensive, with connections worldwide. As their first visit was an exception they couldn’t use the floo straight into A & E again, but were able to exit close by. The moment they emerged each temporarily transfigured their clothing into something normal, not wanting to attract too much unnecessary attention once they emerged from the building.

To fill the silence between them, Harry remained honest with his feelings which for him, was a rarity. “I’m nervous to see him again.”

“Me too.” Hermione’s eyes wavered, sadness flickering within their depths. “It was bad enough seeing him hurt in our first year after the stone and this year when we went to The Ministry. Though we haven’t been close recently and his condition might mean a lot of our friendship was a lie, I still consider him my friend.”

Harry agreed. He saw things in the same way and for all that Dumbledore had done, he hoped there was a shred of decency within him to see that using Ron for his own plans at this point wouldn’t work anymore. But he had the feeling he’d cling on to whatever shred of control he could.

Arriving at St Mungo’s and entering, they approached the receptionist.

“Who is it you’re visiting today?”

Harry wondered if she was a relative of Rita, having a similar hairstyle and obnoxious glasses, though kept those thoughts to himself. “Ron Weasley.”

“Sign yourselves in then head on through.”

After doing so they scanned the area, looking for where they needed to be from there and after a few directions, managed to find their way.

As soon as they walked into the A&E department, Healer Bliant was in the midst of conversation
with someone just outside of The room Ron was in. Towering over him, it was easy to see that Kingsley Shackleton was the other. Catching Harry’s eye, he wondered if the man had something to say afterwards.

Harry gestured with his arm. “You go first.”

“Are you sure?” Looking anxious, her gaze flickered between him and the closed door.

He smiled to reassure her. “Yeah, go ahead.”

After ensuring he was ok with his Hermione carefully pushed the door open, closing it behind her.

Taking a seat in the waiting room, he almost regretted not having music to take the edge off some. He didn’t really have a favourite genre, appreciating anything and everything he heard from his cupboard at the time. He usually didn’t mind silence, but this kind was getting to him.

Noticing that they’d finished their conversation, Kingsley made his way over to him and sat down in another seat.

“I was just on the way to fetch you, after speaking to the Healer in charge of Mr Weasley. Madame Bones wants to find out details from you about Mr Weasley. While there, she would be willing to hear further details of what you wanted to speak to her about.”

That would kill two birds with one stone. If the Ministry hadn’t got involved then he would have taken matters into his own hands. Finally, he could bring an end to all of this.

“That’s great. Before we go though, can I stop off somewhere first? It’s related to what I need to discuss with her.”

Kingsley nodded. “Of course.”

There was a certain cool suaveness to Kingsley which set him apart from the other Aurors. It was refreshing to see and broke the stereotype of how some who hadn’t seen Aurors, pictured them.

Five minutes later the door opened, Hermione emerging and more composed than he’d expected her to be.

“I won’t be long.”

Saying this to Kingsley he rose to his feet, talking quietly with Hermione as they passed by one another.
“Kingsley was going straight to Hogwarts looking for me after finishing up here. He said Madam Bones wanted to talk to me about Ron and she will with you later. But I might be able to bring charges against the ones I want to.”

Face slightly drawn before, she aimed a beaming smile in his direction. “One step closer!”

“Exactly. See you later.”

Making her way back out, Harry pushed the door open.

It was a shared ward, about six other people in the room with only one curtain not drawn around the bed. The shock of red hair was unmistakable, sounds of his footsteps loud in the otherwise silence.

Unsure if he was asleep naturally or through medication, the crisp white sheets almost seemed to swallow Ron in their vast amounts. Taller than both of them he looked smaller and so much younger than Harry could ever remember. Sitting down in the chair beside him, he didn’t know what to say, simply staring.

Freckles standing out starkly against his skin, it was a far paler, more unhealthy shade than it should be. When not faced with his usual attitude, Harry realised that his perception of Ron was different.

How much about Ron himself did he really know? It was as if everything he’d learned had been turned upside down within the space of 24 hours. It wasn’t the first time this bad happened but with someone, he once considered himself close with? It left him at a loss of what to do. Casting a mild privacy charm around them Harry spoke, airing his thoughts more than anything else.

“No idea if you can hear me or even if you’d want to, but I’m sorry. If I’d known, I would have tried to help much sooner. It doesn’t change what happened and while in my opinion this was found out much later than it should’ve been, there’s still something I can do to help. Dumbledore has messed the lives of many others up including yours now and the time’s coming closer for him to pay, I can feel it.”

Stopping to gather some of his thoughts he sighed, regarding Ron seriously.

“When all this is over, I want to start again. Get to know the real you, underneath everything that’s happened. It’s unfair on all of us but you the most and a fresh start won’t hurt.”

Unable to think of anything else Harry stood up again, giving Ron one last look.

On the way out, It occurred to Harry that Remus and Sirius knew nothing about what had happened the previous night. Checking the time and seeing it was 5:45 pm, he wondered if Kingsley would
agree to his on the spur suggestion.

Closing the door behind him, Harry voiced the idea he’d had to Kingsley. “There’s something I need to do before I go to the Ministry. If I make my own way there, would 6:30 pm be fine?”

Not in a position to question him, Kingsley didn’t see why not. He wasn’t under arrest after all. “I’ll wait for you inside, near the visitor’s entrance.”

Glad that it went smoothly, it gave him enough time to keep them updated and collect Wormtail. Going their separate ways Harry headed back outside, using the floo to travel home.

Once stepping through, the silence was eerie and on instinct, went to check the room which they’d unofficially dedicated as Wormtail’s. Seeing the door was shut tight he cautiously tried the keyhole, kneeling down and peering through the narrow gap.

All three were inside, mouths moving but no sounds escaping their lips. It was private property and isolated from others so there was no need for any form of soundproofing. But then it could be a force of habit from their pranking days. The pair looked positively gleeful and seeing that Wormtail randomly flashed neon colours, he only hoped they were reversible so he could be taken to the head of the DMLE.

Neither had given any indication he was here and with some luck, it was because Wormtail’s scent overpowered his own. One lesson, Alistair had taught them what at face value seemed like a pointless and silly spell only fit for pranking but proved to them through a physical demonstration that it was another effective way to catch an opponent off guard. It ended with nothing short of a paint firing session and though many tried, none could hit the Professor.

Deciding that it would be fun to use for this purpose and suspecting that it probably was its original use, Harry poked his wand a little way into the keyhole. He’d yet to master this one non verbally, though he was well on his way to doing so like with many spells he knew. This one required the incantation Aliquam, along with a colour in the same language.

“Aliquam Rubrum.”

Whispering this, a thin jet stream of red paint travelling at a speed which would make it difficult to dodge or even shield against unless the other person had quick reflexes, hit Sirius point blank in the face when he turned around.

Face dripping with paint he squawked, a strange sound which had Remus bent over double and having been forewarned was able to shield against the second lot of paint.

“Harry?”
The door swung open of its own accord, able to hear everything now and standing there, he tried to look innocent. “Sirius, why do you have red paint on your face? I get house pride and all that but you’re taking it a bit far.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes, the action causing drops of paint to hit the floor. “Hmm, I don’t know. Do you?”

“Nope. But don’t worry, I’ll get it off.” Grinning cheekily, a well-aimed Aguamenti sprayed him, washing away the paint but soaking him in the process. “There you go.”

Rather than be annoyed, Sirius looked at him with nothing short of pride. Drying himself off magically, he wiped a mock tear from his eye. “Remus, we’ve finally seen Prongslet emerge.”

“Harry, I think you should paint him again. He’s so much better looking when you can’t distinguish his features.”

“Hey!”

Harry smiled, following their banter. “Maybe another time. I’m off to the Ministry a bit later, I think I can finally bring charges against those I want to and I’m taking Wormtail with me. Unfortunately that means you won’t have your guinea pig or in this case, rat, to experiment on.”

“Small price to pay when considering what this means!” Rubbing his hands gleefully, Sirius glanced at Wormtail who seemed to cower in the corner. “I think these spells can be cancelled out. Maybe some need to wear off on their own…”

“Preferably I want him free of all pranks. I won’t have to explain myself to Madam Bones then.”

At Harry’s words Remus nodded, returning him to normal and summoning the cage. Back in his Animagus form and not given the chance to escape, the cage was reinforced to ensure there was no chance of that.

“Before I go, I’ve got something to discuss with you both.” Giving a strained smile Harry sat crossed legged on the bed, cage nearby as Sirius and Remus joined him, looking expectant.

“You know the times I mentioned Ron and how he’s changed?” The question was directed towards Remus, though Sirius had heard a little as well. After receiving nods he continued, taking a deep breath.

“Along with Hermione, I saw him go off in a direction he didn’t need to at that time of night and when he went into Myrtle’s bathroom, he started punching the mirror. He had a seizure and Madam
Pomfrey took him to St Mungo’s. The Healer told us that he’d been put under a kind of Imperius curse by Dumbledore since his first year and through that, he’d developed a brain tumour. It can only be removed by the caster of that spell and if he doesn’t, Ron’s going to die prematurely.”

It was a blow to them, especially Remus. Sirius didn’t know Ron very well but Remus had taught him, at least a few years ago.

“I can’t imagine what the Weasley family is going through, especially Molly and Arthur.” Clapping a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder, the mood turned sombre. Usually the childish and joking one, even Sirius was subject to it. Facial expression dark, his fingertips twitched as if they wanted to grab someone or something.

“It always comes back to Dumbledore. Molly thinks the sun shines out of his arse so this should be a wake-up call for her. I wish it didn’t have to be in such a drastic way, though.”

Harry had thought the same, agreeing. The only thing beneficial which came out of this situation was the possibility that she would now be on the same side as the majority of them. Their own or at least firmly out of Dumbledore’s camp.

"When do you need to be at the Ministry by?" At Sirius' question, Harry glanced over at him.

"I told Kingsley 6:30, he was the one who said Amelia would be able to see me relating to Ron and some other things, so I'm taking the opportunity to explain everything that's happened so far."

With the return of Sirius, Remus looked better than Harry had seen him before. That they didn't need to hide their relationship from Harry seemed to significantly lighten the load as well. Those they cared about would see no issue but at the time, they needed all the Order members they could get. Some were traditional enough that the thought of being around someone who preferred the same sex would be cause enough to leave permanently.

"At Harry's words, Remus checked his watch. "There's still enough time, but it can't hurt to go a little earlier. Unless there's something else?"

Wracking his mind for any information, Harry came up with nothing. "No, just another reason why Dumbledore doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as us."

At the roguish gleam in Sirius’ eyes, Harry prepared himself. He was used to Alistair's mischievous moments, but not so much what they would result in.

"So," Sirius began, leaning in close to him. "How's it going with that Vampire lover boy of yours? Still haven't got over the shock. Over 1,000 years age difference is taking the piss a bit."
When he put it like that, Harry couldn't argue. Unable to meet Sirius' gaze he averted his eyes, feeling put on the spot slightly. "We're fine. Great, actually."

Oh. In that sense, there was one thing he did forget to mention. "We had our first date in Paris." At the thought of this day, an almost shy smile curved his lips.

"When was this?!" At Sirius' almost excited exclamation Harry raised his eyes, looking mildly sheepish. "The 17th. Sorry, it sort of slipped my mind to tell you everything else going on."

Remus took over, clamping a hand over Sirius' mouth. "Paris? That sounds lovely. Did you enjoy yourself?"

Enthusiastically he recounted the day, then remembered the two little blips, only mentioning one. "We went into this shop filled with different things, I don't think it stuck with anything specific. I found a book I was interested in and this woman approached offering to show me around. It was only afterwards Alistair told me she'd been flirting. Thinking back I suppose it was obvious. She had huge, you know.."

Trailing off he resorted to using his hands, emphasising their large shape with them. "And she was leaning in close."

Sirius and Remus looked at one another. It seemed Alistair had his work cut out for him if that thought occurred after the event in question had happened. They wished him luck in that area.

On the verge of sighing, Remus tried not to look at Harry as if he were a lost cause. "You have a lot to learn."

"Yeah, I know. I'll get there, though."

Sirius groaned. "Good thing you're optimistic Harry because I'm not. Merlin's Beard you need to be more careful!"

"Yes, Mother."

Glaring mildly, Harry should have known he wouldn't leave it there. Returning to his usual joking attitude, he straightened his posture, throat clearing. "Harry. When a man and a man are in love--"

Oh, no.

"-They engage in certain activities, which is sometimes referred to as the birds and the bees."
They hadn't got that far yet. He thought it would be too quick, at least for him. He hadn't even gone beyond semi-naked and while Alistair was patient, Harry worried that it might begin to run out after so long. Face flushing bright red, Harry stopped him in his tracks.

"Sirius, I'm not listening to anything about this topic from you. Remus is the serious one."

Grinning, Harry knew he should have chosen his words more carefully. "I'm always Sirius."

"How many times has he told that joke?" Harry referred to Remus, a mixture of amused and exasperated.

"Too many times." Running a hand through his hair Remus took up the same line of conversation to Harry's embarrassment but coming from him, at least he could take those words in a non-joking way.

"When you do decide to go a step further, take every available precaution. Also, never feel as though you have to rush. If he cares for you, he'll wait until you're ready."

Sirius nodded his agreement. It was as if Remus read Harry's mind and it put that matter to rest a bit. It would only be settled completely if he had that conversation, though couldn't picture how to start such an embarrassing conversation.

Sirius wagged his eyebrows comically. "But most importantly, have fun. I bet he's got a thing or thousand to show you. Ow!"

Remus elbowed Sirius in the side, none too gently. "Will you take something seriously for once in your life?"

As he opened his mouth, Remus added more. "If you say that again, I'll hex you."

Sirius closed his mouth, not remorseful in the slightest for adding his piece.

Cursing Sirius for setting his thoughts off in that direction, it was about time for Harry to go. Picking up Wormtail's cage he left, giving each a brief wave and hoping that the few minutes journey there would be enough to cool his heated cheeks.

Reaching over with his hand Remus closed the distance, placing it on top of Sirius'. "It won't be long now. While I don't have much faith in the Ministry as a whole, I doubt they'll refute the hard evidence Harry has, in his mind and the cage."

Sirius' gaze turned nostalgic. "It's been so long since I could just roam freely. You're trapped here in a sense as well, what with Dumbledore lurking about. You think the time will come where we'll be
able to go where the wind takes us, like old times?"

"Old being the operative word, along with grey. I haven't lost hope, despite everything, so yes."

Finding comfort in Remus' words, Sirius could hardly wait for the day he could see the sights for real, rather than relying on the requirement closet to fulfil his needs.

Returning to his office, it had been a while since Dumbledore felt this frustrated. Ever since Harry's little rebellion stunt, it seemed as if all of his plans were doomed to fail or be found out. He liked to plan months, even years in advance and over the course of his lifetime, could usually predict every possible outcome. That hadn't been the case recently but even so, he wasn't a one trick pony, as he'd heard one muggle say before. There were always back up plans he could implement.

Stirring his overly sweetened tea he took a tip, the sugar serving to give him a temporary revitalization. The possibility of someone discovering Ronald's current state had occurred to him, but he'd labelled that as unlikely. Before the spell, he was known as hot-tempered and impatient. With teenage hormones, who would suspect a thing? They'd pin it down as rebellious behaviour and nothing else. True he didn't keep track on possible side effects but after three years of no suspicion, he'd grown confident.

It was a way to keep Harry in line, but increasing the strength of his Imperio coupled with making Ronald a prefect had backfired spectacularly and as a result, was unable to gain any more information than what he already knew. How Ronald's condition had been discovered he didn't know, suspecting Harry to be the source.

A brain tumour was not something he'd considered, not knowing the definition until it was explained to him in crisp detail. When questioned thoroughly and irritatingly by Amelia alongside a request that he remove the spell, he'd asked for a time frame of 24 hours to prepare and focus his power, as it would require a lot to remove something that had been there for years. While that was true, it also provided an excuse for him to retreat and think.

He wasn't making further progress on any areas, including finding out more about the newest addition to his staff. He fully believed he was everything he appeared to be but had the nagging doubt there was something important missing. Bringing him into the fold was a way to find this out but also, gain the expertise of someone who clearly knew much despite their young age.

There were many issues which needed tackling, Harry being the main one. He didn't like the influence that his status and he as a character had over the general population. In his opinion, he was the true and rightful leader. Harry was simply a means to an end. Even if it should cost him deeply, there were truths of which he couldn't allow anyone else to know. Discovery of them would surely lead to his ruin. Without him, the Wizarding World as they knew it would collapse.
Thankfully, the trip to The Ministry did allow Harry to go back to normal. On the way to the telephone box, he muttered to Wormtail, going unheard among the general bustle of London.

"The time's come for you to pay."

Chuckling darkly at the almost frantic squeaking noises Harry entered, pinning a visitor's badge to his clothing and trying to keep all signs of nervousness hidden.

Stepping outside he spotted Kingsley straight away, who gestured for him to follow with a movement of his head. Increasing his strides to keep up with the tall man, he observed that the energy seemed to be more charged than normal. Noticing his wandering gaze, Kingsley provided an explanation.

"You've seen the Daily Prophet's report on rumoured Vampire attacks?"

"Is that why everyone seems so rushed?"

"Yes. It's also why Madam Bones hasn't been able to spare time sooner."

That made sense. He suspected she was able to now because of just who is involved. Dumbledore was fairly influential globally, but more so in the UK. If the public should find out that the unofficial leader of the light intentionally harmed a 16-year-old, there would be an outcry very hard to prevent. When added to Harry's information and any other actions performed, it would be a devastating blow to faith.

Remaining silent for the rest of the way, Kingsley didn't ask why a rat was in the cage, knowing that he wouldn't have brought it without a reason.

Outside of Amelia Bones' office, Kingsley knocked twice. "Mr Potter is here to see you."

"Enter."

Opening the door for Harry he allowed him to enter first, Kingsley about to leave them alone until a hand motion from the woman seated behind her desk stopped him.

"One moment, stay. I have a feeling you'll be needed."

Impressed with her intuition, her eyes sharpened, seeming to hone in on the cage which he placed down. Glancing up at him he was reminded of Professor McGonagall, the same focus and intelligence there. "Mr Potter, explain."
Opening it, Harry took great delight in pinching the rat's tail harshly, ignoring its attempts to flee. "The one who betrayed my parents wasn't Sirius Black. It was his friend, Peter Pettigrew."

Even Madam Bones couldn't completely hide her shock. "Records show that Mr Black murdered him. Are you saying that this information is false?"

Harry nodded. "It is. Sirius was framed. Pettigrew faked his own death, letting him take the blame for this, the betrayal of my parents and the twelve muggles."

She wanted to know just how Harry knew this but refrained from questioning. That would come later as she had the feeling that more than one trial to be overseen by the court would occur. Her eyes locked onto the silver paw. She'd never seen a rat with such a feature before and knowing that there was only one reason why a rat would be brought to her, did the necessary work. Standing up, she aimed her wand towards the rat which refused to accept its fate.

A soft blue light leaving her wand it encased the rat. Releasing its tail and taking a step back, Amelia and Kingsley watched in shocked fascination as a man who was supposed to be dead revealed himself to be very much alive.

Horrified he didn't say a word, very obviously looking this way and that to make a quick escape. With actions far faster than his own Amelia sent a Patronus for instant backup and a minute later, Tonks stumbled into the scene. Seeing Wormtail first, her eyes practically popped. "Blimey!"

After that exclamation she instantly sprung into action, ensuring he wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Question him. Report to me later and I will discuss this with Minister Scrimgeour."

Nodding sharply they both left, tugging a reluctant Peter between them.

Apparently, Harry hadn't been keeping up to date with news. Fudge wasn't the Minister of Magic anymore? Not that it mattered. Maybe a new Minister would at least guarantee more success when trying to get each case across. Plus Voldemort and the Death Eaters' infiltration couldn't have helped matters either.

Returning to her seat, Harry had the feeling that she withheld a sigh. "Mr Potter, if you are correct then there has been a serious miscarriage of justice."

Inviting him to take a seat she straightened, pinning him with a gaze that had him slightly nervous. "Now then, to business. Describe the events of last night to me. How did you come to find Mr Weasley?"

As Harry explained, a flash of Ron on the floor flew through his mind's eye and it took everything in
him to not send an anonymous hex via post addressed to Dumbledore.

She used a quick quotes quill or at least a variation of it, accurately recording his and her words for the session so that she was able to give him her full attention.

“Would you be willing to provide your memory of the event in question?”

Expecting as much, Harry saw no problem. It would only strengthen the case against Dumbledore, after all. “Of course.”

Dipping a separate quill into ink Harry watched as a short note was written and like many of the ones he’d seen flying around, was crafted into a parchment aeroplane. Flying with swift speed out of the room when she briefly opened the door, a few minutes were spent in silence until there was a brief knock on the door.

Once open it revealed an older woman, greying hair tied into a tight ponytail. Wearing a formal suit she looked strictly business and was introduced to Harry as a memory specialist. A certified master of Occlumency and Legilimency, she was able to identify whether memories were fabricated or truthful. She was also able to take a direct copy of memories in question, without needing to remove them.

Placing the tip of her wand to his temple, her tone was clipped and straight to the point. “Think solely of the memory you want to be seen.”

Doing as asked he cleared all other thoughts from his mind, other than the moment he spotted Ron along with Hermione up until arriving at St Mungo’s that night.

As his memory in the form of a wispy substance gathered on the end of her wand, it was placed into a bottle, clearly labelled.

“Thank you. I believe there are other matters that you wish to discuss with me?”

There were many, something which he couldn’t forget as every detail, in this case, would be important. He noticed that the memory specialist remained, but suspecting he’d be providing many more copies, there was no need for her to leave.

Harry took a deep breath, knowing he’d need to rehydrate by the time he was finished with this. “As you know, I want to press charges against three people.”

Figuring that he’d better start off with the ones he had the least to report about, Alastor Moody was the first. “I want to report Auror Moody for Aggravated Assault with the intent to murder.”
It was only during his explanation of what happened to Remus, that Harry realised he would figuratively drop Professor Snape into the middle of things. It was proven Kingsley and Bill didn’t voluntarily participate, but the same couldn’t be said of him despite the apology. Though that was a slight niggling worry he continued and when asked, provided the memory. Thinking it was best to speak up about that he did so, hoping that nothing bad would result from it.

“Professor Snape has expressed his regrets to me over what happened.”

Nodding to indicate she understood Amelia got straight to the point, though reluctantly considering the sensitive nature with part of it. “I understand Mr Potter. However, it is primarily Mr Lupin’s choice in that matter if this is taken to court.”

Harry’s blood ran cold. “If?” To him, there was no question about it. It was a second-hand memory true but Remus could always provide his own directly.

Able to remain stony-faced, Harry appreciated her brief show of regret regarding this, as it let him know more of her personal feelings on the matter. “Unfortunately, our laws are archaic and Werewolves are seen as sub-human, despite transformations only occurring once a month. With the way things are currently, I doubt that this will be taken seriously.”

He should have known. Bitterness clouding his heart, Harry tried not to direct his ire towards her. It wasn’t her fault, after all, she was one of the few who wanted change to happen. All he could do was accept it.

“Thanks for hearing me out anyway.”

Nodding once, she indicated for him to continue, quill hovering in the air and catching every word.

“Dolores Umbridge. When she was employed as a member of staff she attempted to use the cruciatus curse on me and owned a blood quill, for detentions.”

Her eyes seemed to flash, sparking with anger as her monocle gleamed with an inner light. “How many students were subjected to this?”

“I’m not sure,” Harry admitted. “I was, several times.”

Though he’d provide memories, the scars on his hands he saw as sufficient proof. Placing them face down on the desk, they stood out starkly against his tanned skin.

Memories associated with each crime were a requirement, though Amelia knew those scars would be satisfactory evidence alone. She’d had words with Dumbledore but the feeling that she wouldn’t be
done with him yet rang strong.

Harry had to give them credit, their expressions hadn’t shifted much but as for him, he was barely keeping it together. Talking about every detail again was like pouring salt into barely healed wounds. It was much more difficult than he could have imagined, feeling vulnerable.

It was only at that moment he realised a select few people would wonder where he was.

‘Just to let you know I’m at the Ministry.’

‘Alright. Thank you for informing me, however, Miss Granger alerted myself and your head of house as to your whereabouts.’

Ah, good. He could always count on Hermione.

‘How are you?’

At Alistair’s question, Harry barely withheld a sigh. ‘Not good. I haven’t even got to Dumbledore and I already feel a headache coming on. Amelia told me there’s a chance they’ll dismiss the attempted murder on Remus because he’s a werewolf.’

A thrum of anger not his own travelled through their link. ‘It is something that I suspected. However to have confirmation of this is deplorable.’

‘Not half. Apparently, we’ve got a new Minister. Hopefully, he’s more of a decent sort. While on the topic, there was something else I wanted to ask. Should I mention Dumbledore keeping prisoners? He’s endangering students again and it would be more to use against him, but Vampire relations aren’t exactly the best right now.’

It took only a heartbeat for Alistair’s response. ‘While I see your point, our relations are marginally better and even if the very fact that my kind was kept prisoner is of no concern to them, the welfare of children in a school with a threat of many blood starved Vampires will be. It is worth mentioning and though not renewed in many years, there are still written contracts of our agreement available, owned by me and accessible to any Ministry.’

Having a plan of action for that, Harry was once again thankful for their method of communication. ‘Thanks.’

‘It is my pleasure. Inform me when you are done, so that I may come for you.’

Harry was pleased by the offer, slightly hesitant. ‘Are you sure? I might not be done for a while yet.’
'You are my lover. It is a pleasure and privilege to spend time with you. Not as much as I would like, as your schooling and my teaching have a way of stealing many precious hours.'

Considering the serious situation Harry was in the middle of, he had to forcibly squash against the ear-splitting grin which wanted to desperately spread across his face. It was nice to know he viewed time in pretty much the same way.

‘Ok then, I will do.’

Awareness returning Harry quickly got back on track, the pause in conversation not long enough to be suspicious as of yet.

Then, he came to his last report. Steeling himself for what would be an emotional ride, Harry took the time to gather his thoughts.

“With Albus Dumbledore, something became apparent to me over this summer and afterwards, previous and future actions of his which gradually came to light..”

Sparing no details Harry included it all, the magical blocks, the breaching of his mind, knowingly leaving him in an abusive home and the last several years where an indication that the students’ safety wasn’t top priority became apparent. What he didn’t mention was his murder of the Dursleys. He wasn’t trying to get himself in trouble exactly, it would possibly count as self-defence or an eye for an eye since, at the time, Vernon was in one of his drunken rages. It would possibly come to light at a later date but if so, he’d cross that bridge if he came to it.

Amelia listened closely, hardly believing the words leaving Harry but knew their validity was unquestionable. Like several times before, copies of his memories were required until a small collection of labelled bottles stood on her desk. There was no doubt of at least two trials, though Auror Moody was pending. The list of crimes on Dumbledore’s part was extensive and if proven to be guilty on just a quarter of them, would ensure an incredibly lengthy sentence in a high-security cell of Azkaban. This was only what Amelia was aware of through the young man before her and Mr Weasley’s current condition. Who knew what else Dumbledore had done? The last 24 hours had been enough to sway her opinion entirely. While she didn’t believe he was all he claimed to be, this wasn’t what she had in mind either. Thoroughly shaken she was almost tempted to have a drink, despite taking her job seriously.

Taking a moment to stare at the concrete evidence she was almost dazed, knowing that once much of it came to light, it would change their portion of the Wizarding World as they knew it. Storing them away she turned to Harry, noting his exhausted appearance and suddenly, a glass of water appeared before him.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Gratefully he gulped some down, throat parched and head pounding slightly. It was over for now thankfully, a thought which almost made him weep with relief.
She showed Harry a rare smile. “Thank you, Mr Potter. The nature of many topics was taxing. It takes courage to stand against those who have done wrong and it is my hope that justice is met to each individual, no matter their status.”

It was a shame not all thought like Madam Bones, but even one was of great comfort. After being informed that trial dates would be delivered to him Harry left, exhausted physically and mentally but satisfied.

‘I’m done.’

It was 8:30 pm, he’d been there for a total of two hours and it felt like a lifetime.

‘I shall be there upon your arrival outside.’

Harry thought that after a while the novelty of a new experience would wear off, but it had been a few short weeks. Still, he reacted and felt exactly the same way. Seeing him standing just outside of the telephone box, it was as if all traces of tiredness were erased instantaneously. One thing was for sure, he’d never see Alistair as anything other than amazing.

Opening the door and smiling brightly, it only widened when Alistair offered his hand to hold. Taking it their fingers intertwined, in the same sort of intimate way as their date in Paris. No longer as hesitant to say what was on his mind, Harry made a simple request. “Can we just walk around for a bit? I love spending time with you.”

Gaze earnest Harry glanced upward, unaware that Alistair’s heart swelled in more affection for him that he thought possible. Curiously he had the feeling of having a shortage of breath, despite not needing to breathe in the first place.

Even without glancing around, Alistair could sense that they were alone. Taking advantage of the opportunity he pulled Harry close, softly yet swiftly stealing his lips for a few moments.

At his sudden actions and in public, Harry was too startled to even blush. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, questioning.

Sighing to himself, he showed Harry an affectionate smile while squeezing his hand. “If you insist on saying such adorable things, I am not able to hold myself back.”

While Harry thought he threw around that word a bit too loosely, it still served to melt him a little inside. “Is that a yes, then?” Sounding hopeful, he was rewarded when Alistair’s footsteps echoed against the ground. The moon’s silhouette illuminating them, Harry swung their connected arms lightly, feeling giddy inside. Indulging him in the slightly childish action Alistair joined in, laughing to himself. If Sergei could see him now, he’d no doubt faint from the shock. Receiving satisfaction
from that, he took the time to admire London’s sights at night and Harry too.

The skies were certainly clear a minute ago but once the heavens opened up and began to pour down upon them mercilessly, anyone else would think it was a lie.

It was the sort of rain which obscured all vision, the sounds of it hitting every available surface almost deafening as in a matter of seconds, they became drenched. Seeing a bus stop in the distance Harry didn’t hesitate, tugging Alistair by the hand.

“Quick, run!”

Rather than be bothered about getting soaked Harry laughed, finding the situation both amusing and entertaining as he sprinted for the shelter.

Able to keep up easily despite his initial shock of the UK’s unpredictable weather, Alistair did find this situation to be strangely fun as well.

It only occurred to Harry after they’d reached the shelter that their short running session wasn’t exactly necessary. Feeling slightly embarrassed that he’d indulged in his childish side he looked up, discovering he couldn’t see a thing. Water dripping from his frame and soaked through, his usual messy hair was plastered to his head, unable to see a thing. Before he could do anything a gentle hand swept his hair back, regarding him in amusement.

“I guess we could have just disappeared on the spot. It was kind of fun though, right?” Grinning he shivered slightly, the roughly a minute pour down stopped to make way for more chilling winds.

“It was, admittedly. I have never found myself running through such extraordinary weather conditions and yet, here I am.”

It was interesting just how many new things he was experiencing with Harry, many that he’d never have thought of otherwise.

Harry couldn’t stop staring. Skin glistening, water droplets trailed down the side of his face, dripping slowly. But, more noticeably, the usual light coloured shirt clung to his muscled form, leaving nothing to Harry’s imagination. He’d worn something more casual, black not as see through but with Alistair’s, every muscle was defined. Swallowing, he realised two things. One, a Vampire’s nipples could become erect from the cold and two, a soaked Alistair was a turn on for him.

Coming to that realisation was as though he’d been hit on the head and suddenly, he didn’t feel so cold. The opposite, in fact. Averting his gaze he tried to think of anything but what was in front of him but found it to be impossible.
“Harry, what is it? Are you cold?”

Having no concept of feeling overly cold or warm still despite his slightly increased body temperature, Alistair found himself mildly perplexed by Harry’s actions.

Harry had promised himself to be honest but god, it was embarrassing. Steeling himself he raised his eyes once more, meeting Alistair’s concerned ones.

While he had good articulation with Madam Bones, he’d forgotten all of it around the one who mattered most.

“I find you really attractive right now. I do anyway but I mean more so now because you’re wet, from the rain…”

He trailed off, knowing how absurd that sounded. It was a revelation for him anyway.

Understanding much better now Alistair glanced down at himself, seeing his state of dress yet undress and also, suspecting just where his young lover’s eyes had wandered to. In the mood to tease him, Alistair tilted his chin up, smiling widely. “Why Harry, how positively shameful of you!”

“H-Hey!” He protested, relieved to see his joking demeanour but embarrassed all the same. “It’s not like I knew until now..”

Happy to know a little more about what made Harry tick and filing that information away for further use, Alistair expressed his own desires again. As drops of water trailed down the side of Harry’s face he kissed them away, pressing their bodies together and once done, his tongue began to trace Harry’s bottom lip, nibbling lightly. Accepting it fully he moaned ever so slightly, arms wrapping around his broad back.

Everything outside of their interaction faded, completely forgetting that they were doing this in public and while Alistair was aware, he found Harry incredibly hard to resist. It was as if someone’s favourite thing in the world was just in reach. They could take it if so desired but in certain circumstances, was considered forbidden. He hadn’t had intimate relations since his last partner which was a fair number of years ago, so he’d missed the closeness. He’d never had such an inexperienced lover, a virgin at that and knowing Harry’s memories for his first time of most things would be based on him, Alistair wanted to treat him how he deserved to be, like the most precious thing on this earth. He would go at Harry’s pace, for everything. Time was irrelevant to him at this point, having lived for so long. But there were certainly many moments where he had to restrain the urge to embark on a quest of kissing him everywhere and leaving nothing untouched. This was another one of those moments.

Reluctantly Alistair pulled away and finally, dried them both off. It was just as well he stopped, as Harry found himself slightly overwhelmed and on the colder side, as well as where they were.
“We’ll have to do that again sometime.”

That wasn’t something he meant to verbalise, clapping a hand hastily over his mouth and flushing at Alistair’s laughter.

“I am not an expert with the weather. However the next time it rains I shall find you and together, we will stand beneath it and engage in intimate activities.”

Though it was probably meant to be a joke, Harry couldn’t help but think that wasn’t a bad idea. Though the Ministry was stressful, absolutely nothing could penetrate the fact that he was on cloud nine right now. As they returned to Hogwarts Harry found it difficult to sleep that night. Not because of past memories, but recent ones, involving England’s weather and a thoroughly drenched Alistair.

Chapter End Notes

To those who celebrate, Merry Christmas! If there's anyone who doesn't, I hope that you still have a good day :)

~I have nothing inspiring for the chapter title again xD apologies if there's any mistakes, I've had a few drinks!
Chapter Summary

It's December 1st and already, Alistair is in the festive spirit. Harry and his friends have a much needed catch up session where Hermione runs into trouble, Luna is her usual self and Neville stumbles upon something surprising, relating to his new power. Later on Harry and Alistair spend some time together, discussing and going through memories whether they're captured in picture form or simply by the mind.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry visits Ron, reports several people deserving it along with handing someone in who has evaded justice for years. Afterwards Alistair furtherly demonstrates the depths of his desire, uncaring about the weather.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mr Potter,

Regarding Albus Dumbledore, Dolores Umbridge and Peter Pettigrew, a court date has been set for January 5th, 2:30 pm.

In the case of Alastor Moody, the Wizengamot have yet to decide whether this is a serious matter for court, for the reasoning that I discussed.

If you are unable to attend on this date, the Ministry is to be informed with haste.

A. Bones, Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Enclosed were details of legal defences, though Harry wondered if the Goblins would be able to tell him if his parents had used the services of a particular lawyer.

Either way, he had over a month to think about this. It was the 1st of December today and already, he could see a select few students and even members of staff in the Christmas spirit. He thought it might be just a bit too early for that yet, but it served to brighten the overall mood.
To Harry's relief, Dumbledore had agreed to remove the spell of his own design and for now, Ron would be kept under observation and eventually, could return to normal school days. As the tumour itself wasn't serious enough to require an operation, it would shrink on its own. Harry, Hermione and those involved had been informed that they would witness extreme behavioural changes, be it anger or something else.

Prepared for that, Harry just looked forward to the day when Ron could return to normal. He'd already proceeded with payment for his therapy, feeling good that he could do something positive with money he had no awareness of existing before Hogwarts.

While a lot had happened since September, Harry could say that today wasn't so bad. The students had been informed that Professor McGonagall was Headmistress on a temporary basis, but not why. Harry suspected it was because of the charges brought against him or Ron's situation. Either way, he could relax now more than he ever had. If things went according to plan, Harry doubted that Dumbledore would return.

But, things had a way of not going to plan. Harry had the feeling that when in court, Dumbledore wouldn't go down without a fight, even if it meant publicly defying the law. It could simply be his pessimistic outlook, but he was rarely wrong with these things. After Madam Bones' feedback, Moody's results came as no surprise to him.

One thing that he couldn't seem to keep stored away to the back of his mind was the few minutes after leaving the Ministry, spent with Alistair. He was far more refined and well-spoken than anyone he'd ever met, even the Malfoys. He lacked the I'm better than you because I'm upper-class mentality that Harry disliked as well, which was a bonus.

At first, he worried about their obvious differences, excluding the fact that Harry was mortal and Alistair immortal. He'd never once heard him swear, always carried himself properly and overall, didn't seem to have any flaws.

For him it was a lot different, sometimes having an air of awkwardness that he couldn't seem to get rid of and swore, on a fairly frequent basis. When having nothing else and out of his supposed family's earshot, it had been his way of expressing frustrations, with everything. Alistair had told him that he didn't mind at all, finding some of his verbal rants to be amusing while others, there to support him when Harry took more of an upset turn.

With the exception of their first kiss, there was something about that rain-soaked kiss particularly striking. Other than Harry finding out something new about himself. Maybe it was the way they seemed closer than ever right then? Or Alistair's look at the moment which seemed to express his unspoken desire for Harry.

Unable to believe the path his thoughts had taken, Harry refocused his energies on what today had in store for him. Not much with hope, outside of catching up with friends, relaxing and seeing Alistair later. He'd adapted to dropping by whenever even when he wasn't in just yet and the bright smile he was met with every time that happened reassured Harry that he wasn't making the wrong decision.
Outside of the DA, Quidditch and his Prefect duties, it hadn't left much in the way of talking with his friends and with nothing else planned, he looked forward to it.

"Thinking happy, Vampiric thoughts?"

At Ginny's question, he jumped, having stopped his spoonful of cereal midway when suddenly lost in thoughts of his own making. Having been caught in the act, he didn't see a reason to deny it. "Yeah."

"Your honesty is refreshing. So-" Leaning in close, Ginny whispered something into his ear which rendered Harry flabbergasted. Thankful it was after his last spoonful, as he became too stunned to even blush. Turning to her, he didn't even try to mask his glare. "Don't you think that's a little too personal?"

Not phased in the slightest, she simply smirked. "I'll take that as a yes."

Harry shook his head, looking frantic. "I haven't seen it yet!"

Sensing the truth of his words, Ginny looked mildly disappointed. Intrusive she may be, but the enjoyment of getting Harry flustered over something considered natural would never fail to entertain her. "Let me know if you do."

Even if he didn't, Ginny had an uncanny way of detecting changes in him. She'd find out, either way.

The topic of conversation enough to arouse her curiosity, Hermione joined in. "What are you talking about?"

"An..appendage." After giving a subtle sidelong glance towards Alistair, Hermione understood and rather than feel embarrassed, it got her own thoughts whirring. "What about Solomon? Hmm.."

"Hermione!" Louder than he'd intended it drew the attention of students close to them, as Harry quickly dropped his voice. He didn't expect her to carry on the conversation.

"What? I'm curious. Genetics is a fascinating thing and while as brothers they share physical similarities, it's only natural to wonder if it applies in all areas."

How could she be so calm about this? Her approach to topics was usually logical but before now, she would have shut down this line of conversation quickly. Either she'd changed more over the summer than he'd thought, or it was because of her own situation that she was more willing to participate.
Annoyingly enough that also had Harry's mind wandering. The last thing he wanted to do was see his Occlumency instructor in that light. There was one man and one man only that Harry would reserve his thoughts for. Damn Hermione and her seemingly unending curiosity.

Seeing Minerva in Dumbledore's place was a new but welcome sight for Alistair. Upon their meeting, he believed her rightful place was as Headmistress and not Deputy, particularly when discovering further evidence that the man was neglectful of his role and the student body as a whole. Providing that the Ministry wasn't as incompetent as he feared, he would serve justice on that day and should Minerva wish it, take up the role of guiding Hogwarts to a better future on a permanent basis.

A seat had been removed, for now, leaving Minerva on Alistair's right while Severus was seated on his left. Even without glancing over, he could tell he'd been subject to a particularly chilling glare from the moment he'd arrived. Thinking back over their previous interactions, he couldn't think why that would be the case. He understood that Severus found his cheerful attitude irritating and on one memorable occasion, nauseating but outside of that, he was unsure.

Head turning, the tiny silver bells attached to just beneath the ears of his Reindeer headband made a faint tinkling noise. It was close to authentic, down to the look and the feeling of both ears and antlers. With an added fun touch, of course. He knew of no Reindeers with tiny bells by their ears, after all. For an added effect he could always have a red nose to resemble Rudolph but then, it would be inaccurate. One because Rudolph was a female and two, reindeers are able to see fine at night so would not need a red nose to guide the way. That interesting tidbit of information was provided by Solomon, the moment they'd learned of this fabled Reindeer. Still, it made for an intriguing song.

"Is something the matter, Severus?" His cheerful smile and early festive mood didn't waver, even when faced with his colleagues' dark one.

Severus' glare aimed towards his head. Noticing this, Alistair's smile widened. "Ah, I see! Would you like a pair?" His eyes sparkled at the thought. This was the wrong thing to say. Either that or winter had suddenly descended upon their table.

Severus was tempted to edge his chair away but refrained from doing so. "No, I do not. If I am given a pair of those abominations, you will regret it."

Alistair knew he wouldn't accept, but didn't let that dishearten him. After all, for everyone not as willing as him to embrace the festive spirit, there were many who would. He had no doubt Harry would join in and frankly, the thought of him with a pair of antlers and ears was nothing short of adorable.

He knew the origins of Christmas thoroughly, with information best kept under lock and key as it would be enough to start yet another war. Many had been for reasons less than this or precisely
because of religion. He owned the blood of Christ and in fact, considered it to be one of his most prized possessions, originally owned by his father. Though most would like to believe an ordinary human could perform such feats, Alistair had evidence through memories passed down that this wasn't the case.

Christ was a wizard. A proficient one at that and for so many believers of him who condemned witchcraft as the sign of evil, Alistair found that to be poetically amusing, especially considering the fact Lucifer possessed no magic of his own at all.

While having this knowledge, he didn't consider himself to be religious because, for him, it was fact. But there were some things better off unknown to the public and this information was certainly the 'lock and key' type. While he didn't celebrate the origins, he did appreciate how this particular holiday had a way of bringing most families and friends together that other occasions simply couldn't. It wasn't the case for his relationship with Solomon as they'd always been close, closer now they'd been reunited but any excuse to spoil the little brother that he loved so much was a welcome one, even despite the protests of his birthday being in January, so there was no need.

Giving Severus a once over, Alistair fell into light thought. "Would a headband cauldron wrapped with tinsel be more to your liking?"

It was a genuine suggestion and not a joking one this time and overhearing it, Minerva chuckled to herself. "A fine idea."

Severus would almost rather be with the Dark Lord before his regained sanity right now and that was saying something. When Albus was otherwise indisposed, he believed that granted him a small reprieve from irritating festivities and garish robes to match said festivities. But no, Lothaire filled that slot nicely, with Minerva only adding fuel to the fire.

When Alistair received an intensified glare by way of response, he knew a lost cause when he saw one. But still, perhaps one day. He believed anything was possible.

Once everyone had finished, Harry and his friends left the hall. They'd yet to check outside temperatures for themselves and while from the boy's dormitory it had looked clear, appearances could be deceiving.

To their relief, the weather reflected how it looked and for Scotland, temperatures were fairly warm. Most students were still in the middle of breakfast, so it gave them enough time to pick their usual spot, which was beneath the tree overlooking the black lake. While the Room of Requirement had everything they needed, sometimes exact details couldn't be captured by imagination.

Harry leaned his back against the rough bark, Hermione at his left side with Ginny, Luna and Neville facing them. Taking in the scenery's tranquillity, a soft smile quirked his lips. "This is nice. It's how
school should be. I've got no idea if Beuxbatons, Durmstrang or any kind of school have experienced half of what we have but if not, they're lucky."

"I doubt it. I also doubt they have a revived Basilisk which can shrink at will. Though saying that, If it was a normal year every year, there's a chance you'd have never met Sirius."

With Ginny's words, Harry fell into thought. He'd received both good and bad, in equal measures. If outside of school was normal he certainly wouldn't have met Alistair and that thought was unbearable. It was probably too early to think it and definitely too early to verbally announce it, but he couldn't picture his life without the slightly enigmatic, charming and undeniably handsome Vampire by his side.

In case his thoughts turned completely mushy, he continued the conversation. "That's true. Neville wouldn't have got any mystery godlike powers either. Speaking of that, have you discovered anything new?"

Glancing towards Neville curiously, three other sets of eyes did the same. He had in fact but wondered how best to bring that up. Pleased Harry gave him an opportunity, Neville thought back to just a few days ago, when helping out in the Greenhouse after school hours again.

Though some if not everyone would consider it weird, Neville had taken to carrying the vessel's ashes with him. It wasn't as if he saw it as a good luck charm or anything, but couldn't shake the feeling that they could be used for something. It was an unexpected situation but also an opportunity. Harry had his animagus forms alongside his ridiculously large core while Hermione, Ginny and Luna were part of a separate prophecy entirely, receiving training from beings not even a part of their world. He felt normal in comparison and while he didn't consider that to be a bad thing, bringing something new to the table which could help in future was something that he'd embrace.

Though, he didn't account for physical changes in him either. Not including the markings across his skin or slightly altered eye colour, he'd hardened up and sharpened in some places subtly. He'd lost much of his baby fat over the summer, gaining confidence which only increased as he often joined Harry for runs most mornings. But the Vessel had unlocked some sort of hidden potential within him, alongside granting powers of unknown description.

He had yet to see his Gran, unable to picture what response would be most accurate, a thought which filled him with nervousness. Stepping into one of the greenhouses, he'd recently been trusted with some of the more dangerous plants. They were ones grown by Professor Sprout for Professor Snape's use, so not the kind students worked with and of a highly advanced level. But, he'd been told more than once that in all her time teaching, she'd yet to meet a more promising student in the field of Herbology than him. While his grades for other subjects were good, this one he received consistently high marks for both practical and written assignments.

He found it much easier to complete homework for Herbology, usually saving it until last as a sort of morale booster when the other subjects and his lack of inspiration for them brought him down.
It was warmer in this Greenhouse compared to others, particularly when outside. Taking a moment to adapt, Neville made his way towards the back of the room, to plants which needed more immediate attention.

The difference between Greenhouses used by people possessing no magic and those with magic were vast. Not only because more reliable conditions can be created, but access to things which ensure the plant's longevity and improved growth. Dragon dung was often used as fertiliser, something which couldn't be found among muggles and the benefits from using this were vast. Not only this but plants ordinarily unable to grow in Scotland's weather conditions or even in a normal greenhouse could, thanks to some areas able to replicate more tropical areas, such as those which grow across Malaysia, China or Madagascar.

While Muggles believed man-eating plants were a myth, the carnivorous plants here were more than capable of digesting humans due to improved growth.

Nepenthes were an example of this, a few of which Neville was currently checking on. Most would say they were a visual representation of their worst nightmare, but Neville found them fascinating. Even so, he didn't let his lack of fear blind him to their real danger. This wasn't the first time he'd visited this Greenhouse or them and yet, he could detect a change. They were already twice as large as those grown without the use of specialised dung or fertiliser at a staggering height of 30m, but his approach almost seemed to draw them towards him.

Hidden in a cage and protected with masking charms were several large rats, of which they could drown and digest with fluids produced from inside. There were three in all, each seeming to track his movements. Naturally, without eyes, Neville was unsure what it is they wanted or even if they were sentient, in that sense.

By accident, his hand brushed against one of their leaves and in response, he was given a brief flash of a poor, pixelated image which held none of the right colours but vaguely resembled a view of him. Strangely enough, there was a particular fixation on the pouch around his neck.

Glancing down towards it for a moment, Neville glanced back and forth between his hand and the plants, as if he'd never seen them before. "..The fuck?"

He wasn't much for swearing, but he believed this situation certainly called for it. This was a bizarre situation and he didn't know what to do. But considering what the pouch contained, it must hold some sort of significance.

Experimentally he removed it and as he did, their focus shifted. He realised they weren't 'looking' at him, but what he now held in his hand.

"Do you want some of this?" Unsure why he asked a question that wouldn't be answered Neville took a pinch, glad no one else was around to observe and not knowing what else to do, sprinkled a minuscule amount at one of the Nepenthes' base.
"Ahh!" Shocked Neville stumbled backwards, grabbing the table behind him for support and thankfully remaining upright, though barely. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The results were instantaneous. Before his eyes, it grew larger that should be possible. It seemed to sing power and strength, almost monstrous and making the others dwarf-like in comparison.

What the hell was this? Quickly Neville secured the pouch again and while part of him wanted to give the same treatment to the others, another part thought that if asked, it would be difficult enough to explain away as it was. The Vessel was fairly large and as a result, gave him a hefty amount of ash. If used liberally by someone with ill intentions, this could be dangerous. Vowing to only use it if for some reason it became sorely needed Neville secured it away again, after seeing to the Greenhouses' continued upkeep.

Finishing his recounting of what happened he left his small audience stunned, with the exception of Luna. He wondered if anything actually phased her.

Harry had a sudden thought, shuddering and glancing over at Hermione. "Imagine if the Devil's Snare we faced was given a dose of that. I have a feeling it would have taken a lot more to shift it."

Oddly enough, Hermione's thoughts had gone in a similar direction. "Let's be thankful that part of the past will stay there."

"Neville, you're like every Herbologist's wet dream-" At Ginny's words Neville sputtered, eyes widening. "What?"

"-Let me finish! Seriously. This is the start of something revolutionary. You'll be like the plant whisperer! I don't know about everyone else but I've never heard of anyone being able to detect what a plant wants through imagery, bad quality or otherwise. And stuff that can make them grow even more? Damn."

"You've got an interesting way with words." Laughing to himself Harry agreed, seeing Neville in a new light after this revelation.

Unnoticed by them, Luna's eyes turned glassy for a split second. Returning to herself, her blue eyes glittered. "Why don't you touch the tree that Harry is leaning against? Something fun might happen."

Hair tied back today Luna hugged her knees, resting her chin atop them after having delivered that information with a casual touch no one else could quite pull off.

Deciding it was best to not question Luna's words Neville simply followed them through, not expecting much when his hand brushed against the tree's rough bark.
He should have known better, really. This came from Luna after all who had a knack for attracting the extraordinary, much like Harry. At first, he didn't notice anything but then, there were subtle changes. The tree had many names carved into it and as though it were shedding skin bark fell from the trunk in all manner of places and underneath it was fresh, rich and untouched. Even the last few dead leaves clinging to branches gained a little vibrancy.

Luna clapped her hands excitedly, those motions stirring Harry from his surprise. Clearing the shedded bark away from the ground and himself, he ran a hand over it. "Nev, I think you just rejuvenated this tree."

Looking in his direction, Harry blinked. The rings of Neville's eyes shone golden, his new markings pulsating. "You're glowing."

"I am?" Clumsily conjuring something to see his reflection in, he studied himself closely. "Weird."

Suddenly he felt sluggish as if he'd ran a long distance in a very short amount of time. Studying his expression, Hermione's mind worked quickly. "It must have drawn from you to do this. We're all conduits of magic, but you're more a conduit of nature."

Breathing deeply Neville acknowledged her words, taking a second to compose himself. "I think you're right. It's not like I had that in mind when touching the tree, I just did it which means it might have just taken whatever it wanted to achieve that result."

"Maybe.." Before Hermione went beyond the point of no return, Harry turned the topic of conversation towards something else. "So, how's everyone's training going?" He hadn't had much time to ask, knowing they'd visited a lot and was curious about how much progress they made. He knew the gist of Luna's, results evident when faced with Willow and now, the Forbidden Forest. with exception of them, Alistair and Brio, those were some of the biggest mysteries this year and with absurd theories to accompany them.

Harry's words reminded Luna of something she'd neglected to tell him. That day was significant for her. Not only because the forest was how it should be, but the confirmation that Brio felt the same way she did. The dynamics of their relationship hadn't changed much, only a certain degree of intimacy added. She'd discovered an endearingly shy side to Brio, one of which surfaced whenever he surprised her with gentle kisses, soft enough to indicate that he still thought she might break beneath their obvious height and strength difference. She was unsure how to go about reassuring him that she would be fine, but there was always a way. "Brio helped Aragog. He was suffering from the wound Lume gave him."

At the touch of sadness in her voice, remorse filled him. "I'm glad he's ok. There wasn't much else I could do in the situation, though my anger didn't help. I know they need to survive like the rest of us but Lilah's a first year. Hell, there's plenty of people deserving of being Acromantula food but she wasn't one of them."
Seeing him try to justify his actions, Luna patted his hand. "I'm not blaming you, Harry. I just thought you'd be happy to know Hagrid's friend is ok."

Showing him a heart warming smile he followed suit, admittedly relieved. For some reason, the changes in Luna had only occurred to him right then and while she hadn't said anything, the radiance around her aura was unmistakable. Now that he knew what it was like, he found it easier to spot it in others.

Before Harry could ask, Hermione was more than happy to provide them with details. "At first I wasn't sure if I could live up to Esha's expectations, but I'd say I'm coming along well."

With her mysterious smile, Harry decided to challenge her. "Ok then. If there's a small, moving object in the air, do you think you could hit it?"

"Yes." Confident in saying this since that was something they'd practised recently Harry requested an apple from the kitchen, something which would fall fairly fast. To make sure it was fair Harry climbed the tree behind him with ease, sitting on a sturdy branch midway up. Glancing down, he raised his voice to be heard clearly. "Let me know when you're ready."

Running her thumb over the jewellery indentation, Willow's Strike was now an irreplaceable part of her, adapting to just as if not quicker, than her wand. Slowing her breathing down she assumed a stance now intimately familiar, blocking everything out other than the desired target. She was able to use spells but also regular arrows, whether handcrafted by Esha or transfigured.

Arrow and string firmly gripped she drew back, not applying too much force but enough for it to launch. Once whatever was thrown became airborne, she could adjust her grip where needed. "Ready."

While for everyone else the apple was thrown and rapidly falling at a normal speed, for Hermione, everything seemed to slow down, matching her breathing. With only the sounds of her heartbeat and blood pounding, she quickly located her target and to make up for the speed of its descent and the distance, compensated by firing just below. She'd never worked with an apple before, but what she'd learned still applied. Her confidence didn't waver for a moment, putting enough hours in with archery practice there to show progress made.

Having drawn her bow close to full strength she released it, watching as her arrow cut through the air cleanly. Tip sharpened to a point, the fruit was not only pierced but skewered, dead in the centre. Stopped mid-descent it plummeted, hitting the ground several feet away.

"Accio Apple." From his position in the tree, Harry summoned it, inspecting the results closely. He was impressed but expected nothing less from her. When she set her sights on something, she would put in no less than her best effort and this was clear to see.

"Brilliant! if anyone calls you anything other than Hermione Hood from now on, I won't answer."
Rolling her eyes Hermione explained Harry's reference, bypassing Ginny and Neville. Luna gave no indication whether she understood or not, simply watching everything play out with great enthusiasm.

Eyes narrowing, Harry could see someone rapidly approaching them. For once it wasn't Malfoy Crabbe or Goyle which had him worried, but Pansy. It seemed as though the moment he'd made a truce with both Malfoy and Professor Snape, she'd filled their boots of being the school antagonist. She reminded him of a mini Aunt Petunia, with her I'm better than you attitude and believing everyone else was nothing but mud beneath her shoe. It was no exaggeration to say Harry hated her. While it would never be Dumbledore or Umbridge levels, she certainly gave it her best shot.

While Neville and Harry watched warily, Ginny looked about ready to start a fight. Glaring, without words she seemed to say, insult one of us and pay the consequences. Apparently, they'd seen what she'd done if Crabbe and Goyle's dumbfounded expression was anything to go by.

Looking down her nose at them she sniffed, honing in on Hermione who remained calm. "So, the Mudblood plays filthy muggle sports? Why am I not surprised?"

Those names couldn't phase her any longer, Solomon's words providing an infinite source of strength. She'd learned to embrace her origins, no longer feeling ashamed. It wasn't something she could help and it was Pansy's problem, not hers. Unlike Harry and Luna, she was unable to see Solomon as often as she'd like to, taking the maximum amount of classes allowed into her sixth and seventh year, alongside training and her Prefect duties. She knew Harry was equally busy, but having Alistair close by was a benefit for him. She tried to manage at least once or twice a week, though was hesitant about continuously asking the Professor if she could visit him.

It was then they'd come to an arrangement. Wednesdays and Fridays were when she didn't have as many classes or responsibilities and while the thought of Solomon appearing close to the school and person which had imprisoned him for many years was an anxiety-inducing one, the reassurance that he'd done the same for Harry with their Occlumency lessons had eased her worries some. Through this, she no longer needed to ask and could leave on those set dates. She'd yet to miss one, enjoying not only reading through Roald Dahl's works with him but able to bounce ideas off someone so incredibly like-minded, despite their differences.

She felt so much stronger and for that, she had her friends and Solomon to thank. Academically competitive, especially with the Ravenclaws, Hermione sometimes liked to challenge some of the more like-minded students to quizzes and through this, she could pinpoint some of the brightest to dimmest. Pansy was average across the board but could be better, with a dash of humility and less arrogance.

About to give Pansy a piece of her mind, Ginny was interrupted by Hermione walking over to her with purpose. Pansy had yet to master her poker face, expressions and emotions clearly readable as they flickered across.
Detecting unease in her Harry watched, with nothing short of glee. He was having flashbacks to when she punched Malfoy in the face and despite their truce, he considered that to be one of his best memories so far.

Usually the one to taunt her Malfoy remained surprisingly silent, a further indication that he took Harry's truce seriously. He hadn't targeted a single one of them except Ron but before they knew better, he'd deserved it.

Hair bouncing around her shoulders wildly, Hermione returned Willow's Strike to its proper place. It wasn't as if she was trying to keep it a secret and nowhere in the rules did it mention anything about weapons which honestly surprised her. She wouldn't use it to attack the students though admittedly, it was a temptation to fire a particularly vicious hex towards the pug-nosed bitch.

When they were an arm's width apart she stopped, calmer than ever. "Yes, I am a Mudblood. Muggleborn, however, you want to address me. I have parents who possess no magic of their own and I'm proud of it. I've come this far with my parents support, my friends and as a result of my own efforts. There's no difference between any of us. Everyone here has magic and the potential to be great. Blood status doesn't matter. Information is readily available about prominent figures who teach here and their blood status, so I invite you to research and see for yourself."

Good old Hermione. It wouldn't be her without offering some knowledge related advice set in factual stone. At a guess, Harry believed she referred to Professor Snape, knowing his half-blood status through Remus' limited knowledge. She was closer to him than Sirius, often going to him for advice whether about James or Severus, to his mild displeasure for the latter.

Not expecting such a response it stopped Pansy in her tracks, looking as though she'd swallowed something sour. Swiftly retreating, Hermione had the sinking feeling that wouldn't be the last she heard from her.

As Malfoy gave a subtle head nod in their direction, he glanced up towards the branch Harry still sat on, expression not changing as he gave the same. Though he hid it well, Harry wouldn't be surprised if he was sick of Pansy's company. He wasn't sure how he lasted five minutes with her, let alone hours on end and sharing a common room.

Climbing down from his spot, Harry met her with an enthusiastic show of applause. "Brilliant! That shut her up."

Hermione gave a slightly embarrassed smile. "I hope so. But I have a bad feeling."

Spending the last few seconds glaring at Pansy's retreating back, she looked over questioningly. "What kind of bad feeling?"

Retaking her seat by Harry, she sighed lightly. "That Pansy is going to spin some story to Professor Snape that I attacked her."
Harry wouldn't put it past her, truth be told. "Maybe. But even so, Snape's got a bullshit detector. Has to with the life he's lead so far. It's much better this year than any other so I think he'll play things fair this time."

In an effort to lighten the sombre mood Harry glanced over at Ginny, mock scared. "Can I expect a Glaive in the back from you if I step a toe out of line?"

Pretending to think seriously, Ginny's lips upturned into a half smile. "Not right now. Anything to confess? Chasing after you with a weapon might be therapeutic. At least for me anyway."

Harry took Madam Bones' letter out of his pocket. "Not so much a confession more than I sort of forgot to show you this."

Unfolding it the letter was passed around, for everyone to see.

"The laws need to change. It's not right to disregard attempted murder just because he's a werewolf," Neville spoke up, impassioned and mildly annoyed. His Gran held the Longbottom seat and Harry would for Potter, once he became of age. But considering his current status, there was a chance he could hold it earlier. But for every member who wanted to see positive change, there were twice more who would see it remain.

Neville was reasonably confident that there were many Death Eaters able to slip under the radar and feed whatever information they wanted and while Voldemort himself posed no problem, the same couldn't be said for those who might want to break away. Bellatrix and some others were still incarcerated and he doubted she would take kindly to her master's apparent change for the better.

"I know. I should have expected something like this but before I was told that could be a possibility, I never considered it. He's human 99% of the time and the other percent is only one day per month. It's ridiculous."

Frustrated that there wasn't much to be done, his thoughts went along the lines of Neville's. How much change could he bring? Politics had never overly interested him but when they took a personal turn, he had all the more reason. Not only that but what about an inheritance test? He hadn't taken one before but might find something interesting.

Those thoughts were interrupted by a familiar Patronus, in the shape of a Doe which moved quickly towards them, with purpose. "Miss Granger, come to my office at once."

His tone was devoid of any emotion, a state which gave Harry anxiety more than any other because he never knew what the man was thinking. Giving them a look as if to say, 'I told you so', Hermione quickly headed for his office. "I'll be back as soon as I can."
"Good luck!" Harry shouted to her retreating back, met with a wave of acknowledgement.

"Harry. Didn't you say Alistair bought one of every product from Fred and George?"

At Ginny's question, he nodded, not understanding where she was going with this. "You think he could use one on Pansy? Even better, come up with one of his own? I want to see what else he's got up his sleeve after Dumbledore."

It had taken a while before Dumbledore remained un-pranked, eventually running out of the drops and since then, had taken on Severus Snape levels of caution. Not that it mattered of course as if or when Alistair chose to again, there were many other ways to remain undetected.

"I could always ask, I'm seeing him later on today." Harry did enjoy the time spent with his friends certainly, but there was something special about Alistair that often left him giddy inside, among other things.

"Yeah yeah you're in love, we get it." Ginny teased, taking note of Harry's expression as he was abruptly pulled from them, embarrassed.

She was probably right. His time with Alistair was nothing short of a wonderful dream except, it was actually reality. But these were thoughts he couldn't voice as of yet, feeling as though it would be too soon to admit anything aloud. Though, to himself, he could at least say with a fair amount of confidence that he was beginning to fall for Alistair. Perhaps he was already there? He didn't know. He'd never experienced such a thing before, so it would take time to work out his own feelings on the matter.

Swiftly moving on, a thought occurred to him. "Luna, I forgot to ask. What does Brio think of our world?"

At the mentioning of his name, a mild blush coloured her cheeks. Ordinarily, she'd be able to respond as usual but unknowingly, Harry had caught her in the midst of thinking about him. "He thinks it's unclean, but has potential."

"I did notice the air seemed fresher when I was there but is it really so different?" Harry took an experimental sniff, puzzled.

Luna giggled softly at his antics. "Not in that way, but magic."

Glancing towards the forest which was at least a little bit more normal, it dawned on Neville. "You mean there are fewer traces of magic with bad intentions?"

Luna's eyes flickered with sadness. "There's little to none. But the more I'm with Brio, the harder it is
for me to return here. I can sense the same."

Harry had come to realise that Luna was different in many ways, but the possibility of her finding this world difficult for her to live in at the cost of visiting Brio had never occurred. "Isn't there anything you can do to help with that?"

She nodded. "He said it will be worse before it's better and I'll adapt. But in the meantime, he's taught me ways to ease the difficulty."

Relieved to hear it, Harry wondered what angle Pansy would try to take in her mission to get Hermione in trouble. He wouldn't want her for any other reason, the timing was too convenient. More than anything, this was a test to see how much Snape had changed or was willing to with his teaching practices and favouritism. It was clear to anyone who should be the one reprimanded, after all.

Though she hadn't been actively targeted in Potions like Neville and Harry, Hermione still experienced some wariness around the man. It was years after the incident but the moment he'd told her he saw no difference when she was unintentionally hit with Densaugeo by Malfoy had hurt her deeply. In the process, it had shaken loose some of her faith in authority.

While she was glad Harry had sorted out his differences with him, Hermione was unsure where she stood. More than once he'd failed her assignments in the past for too much unnecessary detail and while some were understandable, others she couldn't see why he'd reached that decision. Alongside the jibes of her being a know it all, it was difficult to bounce back at first. But over the years she'd calmed down considerably, taking a different approach and through it, found that students deemed her more approachable.

She hoped he would do the right thing, trying to have at least a little faith in Authority. It had even wavered with Professor McGonagall, quick to dismiss their insistence that someone was after the Philosopher's Stone. In fact, the only one she had unshakable faith in was Alistair as time and time again, he'd shown he wouldn't be bound by house rivalries and would treat everyone how they deserved to be. Not only that, but he'd made Harry happier than she'd ever seen him and introduced her to Solomon. How could she not be thankful?

Such thoughts were enough to distract her from reality, at least until she reached his office door. Taking a leaf out of Harry's book she attempted to keep her expression neutral though knew this would undoubtedly waver before Professor Snape's intimidating presence.

At the call to enter after knocking she did so, faced with two seats on the opposite side of his desk. Taking the vacant one, she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Both at Pansy's smug expression and the way she moved the furthest possible distance from her as possible.
She'd done nothing wrong. She could admit this both aloud and to herself with confidence. Letting this knowledge shine through the slight stubbornness in her expression, she met Professor Snape's gaze head-on.

"Miss Parkinson has informed me that you attacked her, unprovoked, with a weapon."

It didn't even contain a shred of truth. Did Pansy expect to not be questioned over it? The answer was probably yes and in the past, that no doubt happened. Slytherins could get away with murder and have nothing more than a slap on the wrist, if that, as punishment. Realising he wasn't being accusatory but open to hearing her side of the story, this was a promising start. As it happened mere minutes ago, she could recall everything with clarity.

"No, sir. I've taken up Archery as a hobby and Harry asked me to show him what I learned. After I did this Pansy came over and called me a Mudblood."

Unsurprisingly, Severus was hearing two different stories but with her words, he let out a low hiss, glaring darkly at Pansy. "Is this true? I have made it known on more than one occasion that I abhor such language!"

Surprised, Hermione watched their exchange. Why did he care that much? Through Harry, she was made aware of his past closeness with Lily but hadn't gone into details. Did that have anything to do with it? Either way, this was unexpected.

Unprepared for that line of questioning, Pansy struggled for words, paling "N-No sir."

Even the most dim-witted person could see she was lying, displaying all the typical characteristics. Showing no outward reaction, he continued his line of questioning. "If Miss Granger deliberately harmed you, where is the wound?"

It didn't take him long to find the holes in her plot. Trying not to smile, Hermione observed a tale being unravelled quickly.

There was a long pause before an answer was given. "It was on my leg, but I healed it."

A single arched brow. "Where is this arrow? Surely you have it, to present as evidence."

Leaning forward ever so slightly he remained calm, unlike Pansy's increasing sense of dread. It was too late of course but quickly came to the understanding that she was in over her head. "No Sir. I threw it away."

He didn't bother to hide his disbelief. "Being struck by an arrow with force is a serious injury and without medical training, difficult to treat. You have displayed no remarkable aptitude for the Protego
charm or any healing spells, as Professors Flitwick and Lothaire have informed me. I find it difficult to believe that anyone would discard important evidence. Miss Parkinson. If I find out that you are lying, you will be in detention for as long as I see fit. Am I clear?"

Ending on a harsh note Hermione winced, glad she wasn't on the receiving end of this. Anyone else would have confessed by now but to her disbelief, that didn't happen.

Tone resolute, Pansy trembled faintly. "I'm telling the truth."

When Professor Snape's eyes moved to her again, Hermione wasn't going to sit there and listen to her pointless drivel any further. "I'm willing to show my memory of the event, as proof."

There was no reason he should refuse. He'd done this much to Harry, illegally. But now that she was 17 she classified as an adult in the Wizarding World and was allowed to take such measures.

From the corner of her eye, Hermione could see what shred of Pansy's composure remained, crumbled into nothingness. She remained silent, spared only a glance by the man as he agreed to her offer.

Clearing her mind of all but the one memory she waited, indicating her readiness as he swiftly entered and exited. He'd viewed the memory skilfully enough that Hermione was unable to detect him at all for the brief time period.

His expression swiftly changed, to nothing short of thunderous as his eyes darkened noticeably. Sensing the change Hermione resisted the urge to retreat, feeling nervous even when it was clear she wasn't in trouble. "Miss Parkinson. There was ample opportunity for you to change your story. How dare you lie to me!"

Slamming both hands down on his desk as he stood up both girls jumped, Pansy's eyes faintly watering.

"If the matter was not investigated thoroughly, Miss Granger would face expulsion and Azkaban imprisonment, for an attack on one of the Sacred Twenty Eight."

While Hermione had come here knowing she was innocent, the possible consequences if her side of the story refused to be heard left her paling rapidly. She knew what the Ministry was like and when faced with Pansy, a Pureblood and her, a Muggleborn, it was obvious who would be believed. At this stage, the Ministry was corrupt enough to simply go ahead with matters and not dig deeper, as they'd proven with Sirius. Added to the fact that Pansy's family were considered to be true Purebloods? It didn't bear thinking about. Gripping the seat beneath her tightly, she felt short of breath.

Severus continued, not finished yet. "Miss Granger received an unprovoked attack upon her person.
The reasons why you did this are irrelevant. What matters is that you chose to go through with it. For threatening a student's wellbeing, verbal abuse, foul language, lying and wasting my time, five points will be taken for each infraction. I will leave you to work out the total lost, Miss Parkinson."
Sneering lightly he waited.

"Twenty-five points?! Sir that's too much! It's only Granger." Pansy protested, Severus, realising more and more that for all the times he'd protected his house when no one else stood up for them, he'd allowed similar things to happen. In fact, the very things he wanted to prevent but this time, aimed towards non-Slytherins. It made him just like Minerva in that regard. Shamefully before now, he most likely would have not questioned her story and allowed an innocent student's future to be destroyed, irreparably.

Strangely enough, it was thanks to Potter's truce that had opened his eyes to past actions. While there were many things too late to change, his attitude while teaching wasn't one of them. If asked whether he enjoyed his job, it would be a resounding no. He was a Potions Master, not a Professor, but with so little time for actual potion making, he instead had to watch and ensure classes of students each day didn't explode Cauldrons which would pull on the school's budget even further. It was a means to an end, a dismal paycheck with no option to resign as Dumbledore held the key to his potential ruin. Not for the first time, he cursed his miserable life.

"Detention, Miss Parkinson! Effective immediately. I am disappointed. Prefect status is not given lightly and for this stunt of yours, that will be held in question. Go to the classroom at once and wait for me. If I do not find you there, the consequences will be severe."

"Yes, Sir."

None of the fight present before Pansy rose to her feet, scurrying out. Not having been dismissed yet Hermione waited, trying to fight her rising panic of what could have been. It was stupid to get so worked up over something which didn't happen, but it was the sheer possibility had had her clinging onto the last vestiges of control.

As a familiar draught was placed on the table in front of her she looked up, into Professor Snape's expressionless face. Accepting it silently she drained the contents, rarely needing one that the effects of it were instantaneous.

Breathing deeply, clarity returned to her mind again. "Thank you."

"You may leave."

While he didn't respond to her thanks, Hermione had the feeling it was accepted. It was surprisingly considerate of him, something she hadn't expected to happen and whether intended that way or not, she accepted this as an apology of sorts. While it wouldn't erase actions before this, it promised the start of something better. That was something she'd happily accept. Not taking as long as feared she quickly made her way back outside.
Enjoying the clear weather, a familiar figure with her usual endless bounds of energy sprinted towards Harry.

"Hi!" Jumping up and down on the spot she dove into his arms, with enough force to nearly send him sprawling. Giving her a fond pat on the head, he noticed a pair of antlers and ears similar to the ones Alistair wore.

Noticing where his gaze trailed to, she smiled happily. "Professor Lothaire made them for me! Cute right? Zain has some too."

It was only now Harry noticed him, sprinting after Lilah and slightly breathless. "Hey don't run off like that! Who knows what could happen?" At his briefly admonishing tone and Lilah's repentant look, Harry hid a smile. Just like a Mountain Troll had helped him gain a friend in Hermione, certain death by an Acromantula colony had similarly brought Lilah and Zain closer. He'd taken to observing them, ensuring that everything was ok and while Keith kept his distance slightly, he found Zain's developing protectiveness of his new friend to be charming.

At the mention of his headband, Zain flushed. "She asked me to, so I accepted."

Harry would find it hard to say no as well. Faster than she'd sprinted over she stood up again, eyes twinkling. "I just came over to say hi! We're going on an adventure."

By the looks of Zain, this was news to him. "We are?"

"Yeah! I wanna see Hagrid, come on!"

Before Harry could so much as open his mouth she sprinted away again, Zain chasing after her.

"Looking at them makes me feel like I'm about my Gran's age," Neville admitted, unable to remember a time when he'd ever been that energetic.

"Same here. I'm glad she's happy though. She's had a rough time of it." Watching them leave again he saw Hermione return, far sooner than anticipated.

"Everything is fine," Luna confirmed, long before Hermione came back to their side and as always, Harry could believe those words when coming from her. There was no question about it, but if the results were anything other than Pansy was punished and Hermione wasn't, Harry would give him a piece of his mind.
Seeing their expectant gazes Hermione quickly relayed what happened, Harry having the urge to facepalm. "How the hell is she in Slytherin? One of the sacred bloody twenty-eight or not, I didn't think anyone could be that stupid. She makes Crabbe and Goyle look like geniuses."

Hermione wondered the same thing. "The Sorting Hat must have found something, or she wouldn't be there. Unless it considered another option for her and she begged Slytherin?"

"It's possible. Happened to me after all. If I actually did end up in Slytherin, I reckon Snape would have died from the shock." Snickering at the thought Harry could have been placed there, if not for bad first impressions.

Spending most of the day outside, it was a catch-up session he thoroughly enjoyed. They only returned for the evening meal, having requested something light from the kitchens a few hours earlier. While Alistair was far better at it for obvious reasons, Harry's golem was coming along nicely and now, it was closer to his actual appearance rather than the warped one he had through years of abuse. Technically he was supposed to be in the common room at all times and if not, inform Professor McGonagall. But in no circumstance could he ever picture asking her if he could be away from the common room through evenings and nights because he was sleeping with his partner who also just happened to be their defence professor. She was perceptive enough to probably already know there was something more between them, though nothing had been mentioned.

For many things that Harry had come to learn about Alistair, there was much more he didn't. Sirius and Remus had added to Harry's photo album gifted by Hagrid, amassing a collection which he now considered to be one of his most prized possessions.

Tucking the book under his arm Harry skilfully navigated the corridors, knowing by now his golem would be in place. If he was unable to be there he simply informed Alistair via their link but if nothing was mentioned, then a golem would swiftly take his place. No one else except his friends knew and to his knowledge, no one else was suspicious either.

Familiar enough that he didn't need to knock and hearing no conversation inside he simply opened the door, Alistair seated on the sofa with a book. Reading quietly he flipped the pages, Harry finding himself reluctant to disturb him but smiling to himself when seeing that he still wore the Reindeer headband.

Hugging the album close to his chest he needn't have worried as one he finished the page, Alistair shut the book to place it aside. Seeing his eyes visibly light up, it served to soften Harry's heart even further. Patting the seat beside him Harry didn't hesitate, leaning into his side and in response, was rewarded when an arm firmly wrapped around him. As Harry looked up Alistair removed his headband, placing it on Harry instead.

"How do I look?" Harry asked, knowing the truth would be ridiculous even as the tiny bells tinkled with his subtle movement.

"Delicious."
Yep, as he suspected. Then, the word registered. "D-Delectable?" He stumbled slightly, bewildered even as he was met with soft laughter. Taking Harry's hand, he gently traced the lines of his palm with a finger. "Of course. Of food or drink, delicious. But attractive, when applied to you. However, I believe both definitions are perfectly suitable."

As if to prove his point, everywhere the tip of his finger touched was punctuated with soft kisses.

Harry didn't think anything like this would set his heart aflutter. But in reality, Alistair could simply stand there, sending a wink or smile and it would drive him to the brink of madness. Was it like this for everyone? Either way, it served to nearly distract him from the fact he held an album under one arm.

Granting Harry a reprieve Alistair released his hand, allowing him to regain his bearings. Placing the album on his lap, Harry stroked the cover reverently. "This is the photo album Hagrid gave me. I can't really introduce you physically to a lot of my family but I can in a sense through this. Want to see?"

Though Harry asked this casually, Alistair could see and hear that this was something meaningful to him and the gesture behind his actions was very sweet. It was an entirely new experience, one of which no force on earth could ever dissuade him to refuse.

"I would love to."

Overjoyed with his response tinged with warmth Harry settled further into his side, resting the album between them. Opening the first page it was his parents, on a snowy winter's day and though a snippet of their life, it was clear to see how much they adored one another and by the end, both waved happily out at them.

"Their spirits live on. It is clear to see that they were warm, loving people and you are following in their footsteps."

Watching their every movement closely, his expression softened further and though just beginning, Alistair was looking forward to hearing more about his young lover's family.

Harry had looked through it so many times that he could describe which photo would be next without seeing it. But there was something infinitely more special about this moment as if he was seeing them for the first time again and to share that with Alistair? He couldn't be happier.

He took his time, not very many photos as the majority were lost on that fateful night. But there were enough to paint a picture of what his life could have been like but also, what life was like for his parents, Sirius and Remus in their Hogwarts days.
Everything was going smoothly, enjoying explaining the story behind each image to Alistair who listened intently. While it wasn’t a lie that he could accurately recall every photo and where in the album they were, the embarrassing nature of one, in particular, didn’t register until now. Eyes widening he attempted to casually skip by this but was stopped by Alistair’s hand.

Swallowing, Harry was sure everywhere from his ears to the tips of his toes were crimson. "This photo’s self-explanatory."

Pictured clearly was a baby Harry, wearing nothing but a nappy and happily zooming around on his new toy broom. While Lily attempted to bring him down James enthusiastically cheered in the background, knowing he would be safe with child restrictions placed on there.

Tracing the edges of this photo fondly, Alistair’s eyes twinkled. "You are adorable. The loving relationship with Quidditch started early on, I see."

It was embarrassing more than adorable, but trying to argue that point would only see him lose to Alistair’s greater vocabulary. "I’d forgot about anything good from my childhood. All I could hear was my mum screaming and a flash of green light, those were my nightmares for ages. It was only when Hagrid gave me that album that I remembered I did have a happy life."

Harry’s heart squeezing painfully when reminded of those times, it eased some when he felt and heard the sound of a kiss being pressed to the top of his head.

"It is not easy. My youth was over a millennia ago and yet, it had taken many years for Solomon and me to accept that we were the only family left. We do not suffer from nightmares, but every waking thought was dedicated to what could have been. I believe it was more difficult for Solomon to accept as he was only a child at the time."

"So there’s no one left in your family but Solomon?" That was a saddening thought but to Harry’s knowledge, only Sirius and Remus were but even then, weren’t classed as blood-related.

Alistair’s eyes flickered, melancholic. "No. I have checked. There are resources available to ensure any living relations can be found, but the majority succumbed to the hands of Vampire hating humans."

Harry was the one to take his hand this time. "You're welcome to join my dysfunctional family. Sirius is the misbehaving kid, Remus is the responsible parent and I'm stuck somewhere in the middle."

Grinning at some of Sirius’ antics it served to lighten the mood, appreciating Harry’s words. While he’d made many foolish decisions in the name of love, he believed that this time, this truly was the right choice. "I would be honoured to join the pack of unruly Marauders and their aspiring protege."
Thinking back to the paint covered Sirius, Harry laughed. "I try. We'll have to team up and prank them together."

Then, that reminded Harry of Ginny's earlier words. "Speaking of pranking, I've got a request from Ginny."

Glancing up, Alistair gestured for him to continue, listening curiously. "Can you prank Pansy Parkinson with your own idea or some of Fred and George's products? She tried to get Hermione in trouble with Professor Snape today and called her, you know.."

He couldn't say it, the name being enough to leave a sour taste in his mouth.

"You may tell Miss Weasley that I accept and perhaps, it will be a combination of both."

Looking forward to what the future results would be, Harry continued until they came to the very same picture of Sirius and Remus that he held in his wallet. This too brought back memories, along with the reminder that Remus may never see justice. At least, not for everyone involved who had a lack of remorse.

"I wish it wasn't so hard for them. They couldn't come out to the order at all and only those close knew. They didn't say much about it but back then, I'm guessing it's because they needed all the members they could get. But now, they've got a second chance. A larger one, once Dumbledore is out of the picture and Wormtail pays for what he did."

"Are they well?"

Harry nodded, happily. "They're doing great. Sirius has been pestering me because he wants to meet you. I think we'd better do that before he busts a nut."

Chuckling at Harry's unique way with words, it wasn't long before they came to the photo album's end. Once closed Harry placed it aside, filled with contentment.

"Thank you for sharing this with me. I can see how meaningful it is."

As Alistair's hand ran through his hair, Harry had to wonder if he'd learned this was one of his few weaknesses. So many times he'd had his hair pulled, sometimes clean out with Vernon's brutish force. to have another loving touch centred there, it was as if it smoothed over all the hurt.

"Don't you have any photos?" It was when asking this question that Harry mentally slapped himself, not needing Alistair's answer to know what it would be.
"Such technology was not invented then. Even if so, it would not accurately capture us. Outside of my own efforts, I was unable to see myself clearly in a mirror's reflection or a camera flash until a century ago."

Harry had the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry about that, I forgot your age again."

Not minding in the slightest, it mattered that he thought to ask. He showed an interest in Alistair's family which was wholeheartedly appreciated. "I may not have a photo album, but there are many memories which I cherish. Would you like to see?"

"Yeah!"

At Harry's excited response Alistair's heart warmed, gently projecting an image which he held dear.

Harry drank in the sight, seeing who were without a doubt Alistair's parents and energetically running behind them in the background, a much younger Solomon with a head of black curls. It was the living room, remaining mostly unchanged despite how many years had passed by since then.

Immediately Harry could see where the brothers shared their resemblances, the shapes of their faces, Solomon's original hair colour and Alistair's eye colour all down to Maven. For Callan, it was Solomon's eyes and Alistair's hair.

Callan reminded him of Professor Snape in a way, having that same strict and stern appearance but when looking at her, that all changed as hard edges softened noticeably. With long, wavy black hair, she held the same warmth, charm and kindness he associated with Alistair and suddenly, a small blur dove between them. Revealed to be Solomon he gave a cheesy grin, aimed towards Alistair as his father gave him a rough but affectionate head rub, while his mother proceeded to tickle him mercilessly. With tears of laughter in his eyes, Solomon sprang to his feet, drawing closer to Alistair and taking him by the hand, to join in.

It was a few seconds if that, but all Harry needed. Drawn from the wonderful memory, he was in awe. "She's beautiful. You look just like her, but with your dad's hair."

"Like a certain someone I know," Alistair teased, similarly tickling his sides to the memory shown and was rewarded with light laughter. "I aspired to be like her, from a very young age. She was everything I believed others should be and perhaps because of this, my standards were set high. Not until later did I realise that this was unfair of me, as I have yet to meet anyone like my mother. But, individuality is a wonderful thing."

Harry couldn't agree more. With 24 days left until Christmas, he'd struggled for something special to get him. But after that, he had an idea. He wasn't sure if it would work, but there was somewhere he'd seen in Diagon Alley that could possibly help. Saving that thought for later he enjoyed the rest of his day with him, up until the moment it was time to sleep again.
Only when getting to his recent half dressed pyjama state, was he reminded of his brief conversation with Sirius and Remus. If he didn't ask now, he'd probably be unable to sleep until he knew the answer.

Once released from its ponytail and accompanying braid Alistair brushed his hair, always enjoying the silky smooth results afterwards. Once joining Harry in bed, he noticed he began to fidget slightly.

"Is everything alright?"

Jumping slightly, Harry tried to clear his thoughts, deciding to come straight out with it. "Are you ok with this?"

Usually, quick on the uptake, Alistair needed a little more information. Seeing his puzzled expression, Harry elaborated. "With how slow I am to do stuff." Gesturing to his half-undressed state, he bit his lip. "Won't you get sick of waiting? Its been just over a month and I haven't got past this stage yet."

Understanding fully now, Alistair was quick to speak soothingly. "Oh Harry, how long has this concerned you for?"

"Since the start pretty much. Sorry, I didn't say anything, I was worried."

Turning to face him, Alistair gently cupped his cheeks, smoothing over them. "There is no rush. It is a new experience for you and while I am no stranger to it, I never want you to feel pressured. I will go at whatever pace desired as it is a journey for both of us. So, there is no need to worry further."

Glad that he asked, Harry was relieved. How he got so lucky was beyond him, but he appreciated it more than words could convey. Sending a silent thanks to Sirius and Remus for their words he'd pay a visit to Diagon Alley at his earliest convenience. Though right now, Harry happily lost himself in the pleasured haze of Alistair's considerate kisses, saving other thoughts for a later date.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! The fact that I've been continuing what was only meant to be a one shot in late 2016 and it's still going three years later is unbelievable. Thank you all so
much for the support <3 I hope you all had a nice Christmas. I now have a new laptop and writing is much easier now with something that isn't being slowly destroyed with every touch!

~This would have been posted earlier, however I'm still burning through some alcohol in my system so if there's any mistakes, I apologise and let me know xD
Generational Gaps

Chapter Summary

Harry's morning is briefly interrupted by Pansy, who isn't her usual self. With Dumbledore out of the picture for now, he takes this opportunity to reveal something to those that deserved to know. While some of what he expected to happen did, there was much that he couldn't have possibly predicted.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry and friends spend some much needed time catching up, Pansy tries to get Hermione in trouble and memories of times gone by are shared.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Since Alistair had access to Staff information, Harry came to learn that Dumbledore wasn't in the School at all. Rather, at an unnamed location until his trial date arrived. Sensing this as the perfect opportunity while he was out of the picture, Harry intended to contact all those he trusted and inform them of Sirius' very alive state.

Publicly, his 'death' was recorded years ago when Dumbledore himself told Harry that though he managed to save Sirius from the Dementor's kiss, those outside of their large circle would be none the wiser. True to his word, at least for once, the matter wasn't investigated any further. Whether the Unspeakables had noticed Sirius had fallen through the veil, was another question entirely.

As Christmas came ever closer, so did festive spirits of even the most reserved students. While Professor Flitwick was largely responsible for decoration, Harry could see Alistair's influence here and there as well. Admittedly, he did worry that Professor Snape would try to poison him as with each day, his head attire changed. This time it was a Santa hat, made of the exact same material and pattern as his teaching robes which today, were a soft shade of pink. He doubted that there wasn't a colour he couldn't pull off as Harry had seen him in various different shades, having yet to think the words, 'that doesn't really suit him.'
Though Harry suspected there was more up his sleeve, today it snowed. Not the regular kind as while the snow disappeared before touching hard surfaces, caught in the palm of a hand would reveal that this snow tasted sweet.

Harry could never remember the energy being this charged, December more than a little subdued last year because of one particularly unpleasant toad. To his amusement even Hagrid had joined in, cheeks rosy with joy as his own headband sported two baby dragons with twinkling Christmas lights. It was inventive but then, Harry would expect no less from Alistair.

While he'd asked for details of what he'd planned for Pansy he avoided doing so, only saying that it would result in a temporary attitude adjustment. He didn't know where or when it would happen either, exactly a week after inquiring.

Harry's question was answered with an unexpected arrival at Gryffindor's table. Pansy Parkinson in all her sour glory. But then, taking a closer look, he wasn't sure whether to laugh or flee.

Rather than her usual expression was a bright, cheery smile. Or at least, that's what he believed it to be as for her, it looked scarily out of place. His eyes locking incredulously onto her, others followed his gaze and to their shock, a compliment from the last person expected.

"Morning Harry, I like your headband, it suits you."

Harry had taken to wearing the headband Alistair had given him, at least outside of class time. He liked the little bells and sensing that it also pleased Alistair, he saw no harm in joining the select few students who had requested festive-like attire from him. Then, Harry's eyes nearly popped out at her words. Was he dreaming? he had to be. But when there was a moment of internal conflict showing externally, one of Pansy's thinly shaped eyebrows were treated to a dose of rainbow colours. Then, Alistair's words made sense. For some others, this sort of thing would be more weird than amusing but as someone who went actively out of her way to insult many students and sometimes staff behind their backs, it was out of place enough for Harry to burst out laughing.

She wasn't finished there, however, paying compliment after compliment and while Neville, Luna and Ginny didn't result in any changes, the one to Hermione transformed Pansy's eyebrow into similar bright colours. Harry believed if she actually did smile more it might help her overall mood.

Then, to his mounting horror, she paid a visit to the staff table but only some were complimented. Harry had no idea what was said but Alistair didn't even try to hold back his laughter, Professor Snape only scowling more deeply in response. Cheeks flushed, Pansy's no doubt inner rage didn't show at all as she returned to her table.

"That must have hurt the bitchy reputation she's built for herself." Smirking faintly, Ginny watched her swift return to Slytherin. "Hey lover boy, can you check in what she said to Professor Snape?"
Glaring at her for the nickname Harry did as asked, curious himself and in case of the answer, made sure to not be eating or drinking anything.

'Ginny wants to know what she said to Professor Snape. A unique but fitting prank, by the way.'

'Why, thank you. I excluded myself so as not to draw unnecessary attention. Miss Parkinson's words were nothing short of passionate. She informed dear Ser Sunshine that his eyes were beautiful, of the richest, darkest chocolate brown and most enviable.'

Oh, god. Harry wasn't the one pranked, to begin with, but just the thought of saying those words had him wincing. If taking an outsider's point of view, Harry could definitely see why some would find him appealing. Many found intelligence attractive after all though for him, with no offence intended towards the Professor, he'd rather sprint naked through a Dragon's Lair than ever consider him in that way.

Forcefully pushing those thoughts aside he muttered Pansy's compliment to Ginny, who promptly snorted. "I shouldn't laugh too much though. My infatuation with you was nothing short of terrifying."

"That terrifying, I remember your poem word for word." Shuddering, Harry reflected on the times where thoughts of romance were far from his mind. In a mischievous mood, he decided it was time for Ginny to feel flustered. Clearing his throat dramatically, he put on a falsetto voice, trying not to cough during his recitation.

"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad, 
His hair is as dark as a blackboard."

"Harry, we don't need a reminder!" Hissing Ginny attempted to stop him, a hand hovering over his mouth but Harry skilfully dodged it, to the amusement of his friends and those closely gathered who'd overheard.

"I wish he was mine, he's really divine, 
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."

Cheeks flaming Ginny swatted him with a rolled-up copy of the Daily Prophet, brought recently by morning post. Ducking for cover, a random thought occurred to Harry.

'You don't need Pansy for compliments anyway, I can give you plenty. Well, once I think of something good, I haven't really gone beyond adjectives like sexy and gorgeous yet.'

Alistair's obvious delight travelled through their link, Harry tingling from head to toe with the pleasant sensation. 'If a man should have limitless vocabulary, it is irrelevant if he does not know how best to use the words at his disposal. With what it is that you do know, it is conveyed to me in a
He always had a way of making Harry feel better, no matter the issue. One of Harry's worries was being unable to deliver words at the same intensity, as Alistair had achieved the perfect balance between over complimenting and a lack of it while sometimes, he struggled to string a sentence together.

Happy to know his thoughts on the matter, Harry vowed that one day, he'd come out with something that would blow Alistair's mind.

Though usually in a good mood, Alistair was overly cheerful today which he knew irritated Severus to no end. Unknown to Harry, he'd initiated this prank on the day it was requested and in a sense, was a joint effort. The colour changing was down to one of the Weasley Twins' products and to help them, Alistair had written an in-depth report about it.

The other side was much more subtle, a gradual process which had come to a head today. Some of them were genuine thoughts of hers, only brought to light in a comedic manner. While he didn't paint all teenage girls with the same brush, he had yet to encounter anyone more unpleasant. Before now it would have been Ron Weasley but with what had come to light, this had changed his opinion slightly. Only slightly, because how much of it was due to circumstances beyond the young man's control he'd yet to know.

"Lothaire. Cease your actions at once, or I will burn that abomination to ash."

At his colleagues' snappish tone, Alistair's fingers stopped playing with his hat's pom-pom and with part jest and part seriousness, gave Severus a sad look.

Unsure whether he was actually at the staff table and not sat among the students for a second, Severus had to wonder whether Albus hired him because he was similarly irritating rather than his teaching capability. Though he wouldn't admit it aloud, the obviously pranked Miss Parkinson had thrown him entirely off guard and though of little interest, Severus had to wonder if Albus, in his apparent infinite wisdom, was wrong about a student being the culprit of these pranks. While Potter considering his background influence was likely, Severus had the feeling that it wasn't him. He suspected Lothaire but irritatingly enough, had found absolutely no evidence which would suffice as proof for suspicions.

While he had a less than favourable opinion of pranks, the red-headed horrors that he no longer had to put up with and this mystery person had a better grasp of humour than the Marauders ever did. Though, he distinctly remembered a student of exotic origins around his age receiving similar if not worse, treatment than him.

As his younger colleague stopped the motions of his fingers, the only thing which prevented him
launching into a verbal tirade about his immaturity, was the evidence that his presence here was doing good for the students as for the first time since admittedly Lupin, they were receiving an education in one of the most important subjects that were up to standard. Everyone had a breaking point. Potter had hit his, explosively at that and with Lothaire's demonstration of his power towards Moody, Severus wanted to avoid that possibility.

Not only that, but Lothaire was far more observant than Severus gave him credit for. On more than one occasion he'd directed either a member of his house with personal problems which he may have overlooked due to his own overworked status or students from another house with issues much deeper revolving around potions, towards him. While Severus believed in his own capability, seeing that Lothaire did also was highly unexpected, but not entirely unwelcome.

It wasn't just him, either. Severus was unsure how recent this development was, but he'd seen the younger man assist Minerva with her own paperwork. At one point, he'd even offered to help Severus, claiming that his knowledge was at least acceptable for the younger years but his pride wouldn't allow it. Minerva's was far stronger than his own admittedly so for her to accept his help, the situation was dire indeed.

So, despite everything, Severus didn't dislike him. He was very much neutral, though less of the overly happy smiles and perhaps, it would develop into something more lukewarm.

Promptly ignoring Lothaire's pathetic look, Severus was mildly interested in Filius being knocked from his seat as a result of Hagrid's usual clumsiness, but contentedly sunk into silence afterwards.

On his other side, Minerva admitted something that had Alistair's eyes sparkling with unrestrained amusement.

"I was watching your movements from the corner of my eye. The feline side of me wished to join in with what looked like great fun."

Referring to his hat's pom-pom, Alistair quickly fashioned a similar hat for his colleague, only this one had a tartan theme. Delighted with his attention to detail, perhaps she would wear this closer to the time in place of the usually pointed hat. It was a very nice design, after all, particularly the pom-pom.

Finding her hands involuntarily wandering to the little soft ball attached she stopped herself, having it taken to her office instead. Alistair's was enough of a temptation, never mind her very own.

Harry had left the school grounds more now than he'd ever done in previous years, though each time was for an important reason. He'd informed Professors Snape and McGonagall he needed to see them and some others about a matter of importance, but not the details. Trusting his words they agreed and before now Minerva would have refused, the only reason being she needed to dedicate
every available moment to the completion of Paperwork. But with Alistair's help, she was able to manage her time more effectively and gradually, was able to balance her work out. As Filius was Deputy Headmaster for the moment, those duties belonged solely to him while the responsibilities of Headmistress and Transfiguration Professor were left to her. With one less job to do, she had breathing space again. This much Harry could see and even without Alistair's explanation, it was enough for him to have taken notice.

While Bill was unable to make it, Kingsley and Tonks' hours were more flexible, able to book in a few days or hours off saved up if they chose to, unless called in for an emergency. Mr and Mrs Weasley had agreed to let everyone meet at their home, still wracked with worry for Ron but that had eased some, with the knowledge that an illegal curse was no longer influencing him. While he'd asked his friends if they wanted to come along, they'd said no. The main reason being for Hermione, Ginny and Neville is their reluctance to witness the fireworks between Professor Snape and Sirius. He'd forgotten about that and couldn't blame them, though an update would follow after. For Luna, she'd already agreed to help Professor Flitwick with some charmed baubles for the tree.

Sirius, as Harry expected, pestered him non stop about meeting Alistair and at one point, had even sent a letter whenever he hadn't visited. So, this killed two birds with one stone as while the appropriate people would learn of Sirius and for many see Remus again for the first time in months, Alistair meeting him beforehand would also ensure his continued survival, before Harry put an end to him through sheer annoyance.

"Ah, my little Adonis has arrived."

Those were the words which Alistair greeted Harry with, once reunited for the first time today and for the moment, his classroom. While his cheeks suffused with heat at those words, Harry did his best to return them. "If I'm Adonis, wouldn't that make you a God? You've got the immortality bit nailed."

Stating that as though it were a fact he paused, again wondering how he managed to land with someone who seemed to have everything and lacked nothing. "You've got everything else nailed too, damn..

The last part was quieter, voicing his admiration more to himself than anything but Alistair easily heard it. He'd removed his robes, leaving the usual choice of buttoned-up silk shirt in place which was a similar shade of pink to his hat.

Closing the distance between them, Alistair's fingertips trailed across his cheek, leaving heat in their wake. Sunset eyes clear enough that Harry could catch his own reflection, he forgot to breathe for a moment. "Your words are most appreciated."

Rather than what Harry expected to happen, he was treated with the sensation of soft lips pressed against his neck, once Alistair leaned over. With somewhere rarely touched, Harry bit his lip, to stifle all noises. For a moment he thought Alistair would indulge by sinking his fangs in, but that didn't happen. At some point, once he was confident enough to voice it, Harry would ask about that.
Since they'd organised a time to meet rather than checking to see if he could come through in case they were in the middle of something, Harry and Alistair, hand in hand, went through the floo again to Evergreen Manor.

In hindsight, maybe he should have checked in with Sirius and Remus anyway before deciding to go through.

Upon arrival, they were met with silence or at least, for a few seconds everything did seem to be silent. But once Harry had cleaned the excess soot from himself and things had settled down, he heard a noise from upstairs. Mixed with thumping and creaking, he furrowed his brow in puzzlement.

"What's that noise?"

Without missing a beat or losing his composure, Alistair answered. "At what I believe to be a highly accurate guess, those are the sounds of two men reaffirming their desires for one another."

Though his words were flowery, Harry caught on to the meaning immediately. Unsure if his awkwardness or embarrassment was more prevalent, he cursed his horrible timing. "Fuck."

Amused, Alistair couldn't help but reaffirm the point. He decided to spare Harry from details which only he could pick up. "I believe that is the idea, yes."

Releasing Alistair's hand so that Harry could bury his face in both of them, the sounds of his voice became muffled. "You're not helping!"

Still amused but feeling for Harry's current predicament, Alistair offered him a way out. "I have yet to see what lies beyond the confines of these walls."

Taking the hint and grateful that it had cleared away some unwanted thoughts of Sirius and Remus, Harry made his way outside. While he preferred Summer out of all seasons, he could still see Winter's appeal with the light, freshly fallen snow. clearing and drying the bench Harry sat down, with a particularly strong warming charm applied.

Once over his initial shyness and disbelief of their relationship which had taken a step up, conversation returned to flowing smoothly and though he knew far more than when they first met, there was much more he'd yet to learn. His Animagus forms had come up on more than one occasion and Alistair had now seen them both, but he'd yet to see his. It was only when thinking about this, that Harry was surprised he didn't bring this up sooner.

"What's the difference between Shapeshifting and Animagus forms? Does it work differently for you?"
"Shapeshifting belongs to us. The Lothaire family line and a rare few others possess this ability but it is inherited, not learned. There is a small chance that someone bitten who possesses the ability will similarly, but I have yet to hear of such a thing. But, the biggest difference lies in numbers. While you are limited to two forms, the forms I am able to assume are limitless."

Most people Harry knew would boast about being able to do such a thing, but Alistair was simply informative with nothing beyond that. He appreciated it but rather than be envious, he was excited. "Seriously? Anything?"

Seeing him practically bounce in his sitting position, Alistair regarded him with fondness. "Providing that it is organic, yes."

Harry's eyes widened. "So you could turn into a Dragon but on the opposite end of the scale, turn into Professor Snape?" At Alistair's nod of confirmation, his lips twitched. "Now I'm picturing him in anything but black or those robes he wore. It changes your voice as well?"

Again receiving confirmation, Harry's gaze turned slightly hazy. "That sounds like so much fun. There's no way you haven't used that to mess with people, right?"

At Harry's question, Alistair was thrown back to a long time ago. "There was a time where Solomon and I switched places. It was rather disorientating for both of us, but it happened so frequently that I believed my father was close to pulling his hair out. Of course, there have been many other incidents, but there are too many to recount in one conversation."

Harry intended to ask for these incidents across many conversations, in that case. He wanted to hear every single one he could remember because he had the feeling it would be entertaining. He had just one more question. "Have you got a favourite animal form?"

Seeing the sparkle in Alistair's eyes, Harry non verbally received his answer. "I do. Would you like to see?"

"Definitely!"

Pleased to have such an enthusiastic audience, Alistair effortlessly shifted. While Harry expected something almost flamboyant and large, the opposite happened. Rather than looking up he looked down, into the eyes of what must be the cutest animal he'd ever seen.

He had no idea what Alistair had shifted into but could see why he liked it. Smaller than a cat it tilted its head, looking almost out of place against the much larger ears which twitched occasionally. With a soft, sandy coloured coat mixed with white and a bushy tail, Harry would never have guessed it
was Alistair if he hadn't witnessed his transformation.

And, there went Harry's heart. It had officially melted into a puddle of goo, even more so when he proceeded to sit on Harry's lap with his tail curled around.

Using the back of his hand Harry stroked him gently and in response, emitted a quiet, slightly high pitched purring sound.

"I swear you could demand anything from me and I wouldn't be able to refuse." Sighing to himself, Alistair probably knew just how cute he looked as well and rather than be awkward, seemed right at home there.

Hearing sounds gradually growing louder, Harry realised that Sirius and Remus had probably finished what they were doing but rather than change back he instead climbed up, settling himself around Harry's shoulders.

Glancing sideways into his dark eyes, he could almost swear he saw a mischievous look in them. The door opening Sirius was the first one out, not bothered in the least in contrast to Remus' almost apologetic look. That reminded Harry just what they'd been doing, flushing deeply again.

Not one to pass up such an opportunity, Sirius pretended to be hot under the collar. "Remus was all over me, He's a randy old wolf."

Amusement replaced his embarrassment, particularly when Remus smacked him upside the head. "Shut it."

Not affected in the least, Sirius gave him a sidelong glance. "Where's the denial?"

Rather than answer, Remus' attention was captured by the unusual addition to Harry's shoulders. "Is this another familiar?"

"Not exactly." Rather than explain Harry decided to watch, Remus studying it with interest. "That's a Fennec Fox. Where did you find one?"

At Harry's lack of answer Remus grew suspicious. Alistair was supposed to be here but instead of him, was a small and admittedly adorable fox. But Remus remembered Alistair's sweet scent and couldn't detect it anywhere, just a rich earthiness. For all intents and purposes, this appeared to just be an animal. While Remus had his doubts, Sirius appeared to have none and when he approached, the fox closed his eyes for a second, to stick its tongue out.

Harry snorted as Sirius drew back, looking mock offended. "That's a cheeky fox you've got there. Doesn't he know who I am? If it's a he?"
Harry nodded, trying not to laugh. "Yeah, it's a he. I didn't exactly sit him down and have a conversation about my flea-bitten mutt of a Godfather."

As strange sounds came from his shoulder, Harry realised Alistair must be laughing.

Pouting, Sirius decided to investigate further, as Padfoot. During his transformation, he missed a wink from the Fennec Fox, aimed towards Remus.

That definitely wasn't normal animal behaviour, the wink no accident. Though he didn't say anything, Remus was positive of this being Alistair.

As Padfoot, otherwise known as the great shaggy beast by Harry he jumped up, placing his front paws either side of the bench. He was tall enough to easily be able to look the fox in the eye. For a few long seconds, a staring match occurred between them, unblinking. Then, catching them all off guard the fox leapt as if to go for Padfoot. Its expression was harmless and almost casual but so focused on out-staring the small creature, he reacted on instinct. Letting out a bark of surprise he jumped backwards, crashing into Remus in a tangle of gangly paws and scruffy fur.

Giving Fennec Alistair a pat on the head, Harry laughed loudly. "Good job."

Looking almost proud the fox nimbly landed on the floor, instantly transforming into who Remus suspected it to be. Amber eyes warm with amusement, he reached out to shake his hand. "It's good to see you again."

Returning it, Alistair was happy to receive just a positive welcome. He could tell, even in animal form, that the man was doing much better with the return of his mate and that Moony was far less volatile. He 'd had every intention of changing back before their arrival, but the opportunity for a small prank was too much to pass up. It had worked spectacularly towards the one intended, on purposely letting Remus know that not all was what it seemed.

Still, as Padfoot, he looked about as flabbergasted as a dog could remaining that way still slumped on the floor when transforming back. "Bloody hell! I had no idea. I couldn't smell the difference at all."

While Remus helped Sirius up, Alistair provided them with further information. "It is a little different for me. When assuming a form, absolutely everything is included while everything except the ability to retain my own thoughts and actions is excluded. I believe that you recognise my scent after our first meeting?"

With the question directed towards Remus, he nodded, curious. Standing up he continued to explain, while the four returned to indoors. "During transformation it erases itself, replaced by the natural scent of whatever form I am in."
Another way Shapeshifting was different, then. Harry remembered Remus telling him about his different scent, all combined into one through Animagus forms and interactions with Alistair. But for Alistair, they were separate things.

Sitting opposite one another, discussions turned for the plan of action. Since Harry and Alistair could communicate over distance, it was decided that Harry and Remus would be the first ones to go through. He wanted everyone to be present before they started explaining and having Sirius there when people were still arriving would create a bit more fuss than needed. It was better to have them both settled, then Alistair and Sirius arriving last.

Checking to see if they could come through and getting a positive response, Harry made a gesture towards Remus. "Ancient werewolves first, it's only polite."

Grinning, that widened with Sirius' snicker. Used to both of their antics Remus simply rolled his eyes, heading through first. Giving them a little salute Harry followed suit, mentally crossing his fingers that everything would go smoothly.

Once alone with him, Sirius felt more than awkward. In his youth, he loved to socialise, at least with non-Slytherins anyway. He was outgoing, loud and proud. But years of wrongful imprisonment had changed him, for the worst. Remus was more than he could ever ask for, reconnecting after the misunderstanding was solved.

The change of scenery helped greatly, his family home more depressing and dreary than any amount of funerals, but the personal demons and nightmares remained. With people, he knew and liked he could almost return to his normal self but with strangers, any silence put him on edge. He wanted to break it himself but didn't know how or even where to start.

Taking note of the sudden changes in him, Alistair was the first to speak. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

Surprisingly enough, his warm and easy-going demeanour served to relax Sirius, unclenching his fists but still observing him carefully. "Same to you."

Fearing any further silence, he quickly continued. "Harry said you helped to get me out of there, so thanks for that."

Alistair accepted his thanks, very much at peace, especially with the reminder that what was once lost to him was now returned during their rescue mission of sorts. "You are welcome. I wish for Harry's happiness deeply but also, the restoration of a life unfairly taken pleases me."

That lead onto what Sirius wanted to know the most. While he'd flirted and had many casual
relationships before Remus, this was one area where it wasn’t a joking matter. "How serious are you about him?"

Careful not to make any assumptions he waited for a response, unable to help but think that Harry had the amazing ability to get himself into unbelievable situations or in this case, meeting unbelievable individuals.

Alistair expected this question, thinking of how best to answer. He realised that in this day and age, entering one relationship or many in his case with the intention of marriage were odd but despite how he appeared, that was all he’d wanted. Not once, with any relationship, had he ever been unfaithful. Unfortunately the same couldn’t be said for those he became involved with. He appreciated honesty though, a small handful choosing to tell him that they were no longer interested and though rare, the feeling was sometimes mutual. Though he liked to think himself optimistic, his seemingly endless poor choice of partners had haunted him and dimmed his overflowing spirit, little by little. With Harry, it had been restored greatly. Alistair decided that despite what Sirius may think of him, honesty would be better and in some aspects, he was no stranger to opening up.

"While I am usually the one to find a partner, from the start it was different with Harry. I was attracted to him, however, at first, I only sought an alliance. Securing a teaching position was to not only watch over Harry but be closer to Dumbledore and perhaps, find my brother's whereabouts. But with each day, my attraction grew. I have yet to meet anyone quite like him or to be involved with someone so inexperienced. Many trials and incidences have closed the gap between us until our friendship developed into something more. Though it is early days, I can say with utmost confidence that I adore your Godson, with every fibre of my being. Though I am unsure what the future holds, I hope with every heartbeat that it is hand in hand with him."

Sirius didn't expect such a lengthy or passionate answer, maybe something along the lines of 'I fancy him and it's not a fling.' this was far more than he expected, but eased the slight anxieties he had. That and honestly, he was touched. It was rare to find anyone who thought like that now and maybe the fact that he was born and raised in a different time period altogether was the key. He couldn't detect any traces of lying and though he suspected that he'd be able to hide dishonesty well, Sirius decided to trust his gut with this.

He smiled, warm and from the heart. Just hearing that was enough to banish some of the dark clouds which constantly filled his mind. "Thanks, that's all I needed to hear."

Glad that his response was received well, it seemed as if this was the icebreaker as after, Sirius found himself talking more. "I have to admit, you don't look like a Vampire, just an ordinary bloke."

A soft sigh left Alistair. "May I assume that before now, you viewed us in much the same way as media portrays them to be?"

Thinking about what he'd read in The Daily Prophet, Sirius nodded, scratching his head awkwardly. "Yeah, sorry about that. So you can hide your fangs then? I thought they just stayed there."
It was a common misconception. He was able to retract them at will but those who were turned couldn't unless they survived long enough to learn. It enabled him to blend in more. "While feeding they are prominent but in a normal state, no different from normal teeth."

Sirius surprised himself with how interesting he found that to be. "Can you shift into that state any time, or just when you're starving?"

Rather than verbally explaining Alistair decided to show him, with the slight risk of setting Sirius against him. He'd learned to be open with his true nature, as hiding it only hurt more. Slipping into a familiar state his canines elongated, thinning out and sharpening to a point, while the usual shimmering orange of his irises turned crimson.

A shudder ran along Sirius' spine. It was both disturbing when thinking too much about it but intriguing at the same time. He wasn't bothered though, it would be strange if so since he was in an intimate relationship with a werewolf, who was arguably just as dangerous during full moon time. Shifting back to the usual state he awaited a response, slightly anxious considering the variety of reactions he'd had before.

Sirius shrugged. "I've got no problem with it." Suddenly, a spark of childish glee entered his eyes. "What a party trick that would be! Someone you don't like? Flash them the sinister fang and watch them run screaming."

Seeing that he didn't mind and was comfortable enough to even joke about such a matter, Alistair relaxed once more. "It is not something that I have done, as my relations with other races, in general, are poor. I admit, it has been a temptation."

In Sirius' opinion, Alistair made Malfoy look like a peasant in comparison with how well spoken and proper he appeared. He lacked the arrogance though, which was always a good thing. He wanted to do right by Harry, having failed to be there for him when he should have. Though he wasn't the best with decision making, as his time in Azkaban showed, he believed that Alistair would be good for him.

Glad they were able to have this conversation, Alistair was informed that it was time to make their entry. "I believe it is time for your dramatic reveal." Sending a wink in Sirius' direction, he was on the same wavelength. A simple 'hello, I'm not actually dead' wouldn't be enough for him. Eager to see some reactions, Alistair and Sirius went through the floo one by one, to join the Weasley's.

As Professors McGonagall and Snape hadn't arrived yet, it seemed their chosen plan of action was the best approach. The moment Harry stepped through the floo he was greeted with one of Molly's hugs, something which he could finally return without feeling stiff or awkward. Scanning her features in mild concern, he could see traces of tiredness there. Considering everything, Harry was grateful she and Mr Weasley had agreed to this at all.
"Hello Harry dear, you're looking well!"

Glad to hear she was bubbly as ever, he returned her greeting with enthusiasm. "I feel it as well. I've brought a visitor with me."

Right on time Remus stepped through, experiencing a sense of nostalgia as the last time he came here was during the days Lily was pregnant with Harry. She'd spent many hours sharing Molly's company, bonding over motherhood while he usually listened to Arthur's enthusiastic talks about various muggle items.

While those there expected Harry, he hadn't informed anyone that Remus would be making an appearance. Before he could do anything, he found himself being squeezed rather than hugged by Molly. Considering their height difference, the strength in her arms caught him off guard. Happily returning it, able to see those he'd truly missed the company of over the months returned a spark of life to his eyes.

"Remus! It's lovely to see you." As if he was one of her brood she studied him with motherly concern.

"You as well Molly. Its been a while." Released from her almost crushing grip Arthur immediately came over to shake his hand. While Remus was reuniting with order members, Harry spotted a vaguely familiar face which surprised him. The red hair was naturally a giveaway. Slightly stockier than his brothers, he gave off a friendly and casual demeanour. Though, he'd changed in the years since Harry had seen him in person.

Not expecting to see Charlie there, he was in the midst of a conversation with Fred and George. Going over to join them, identical expressions of slack-jawed awe appeared in the twin's expressions and even Charlie looked surprised. Without asking, Harry suspected it either Ron or a time he was able to visit is the reason why Charlie was here.

"Blimey Harry you've changed!"

"A lady killer-"

"-Or gentleman killer,"

"If ever we saw one."

Finishing each other's sentences and ending them together was something singularly unique and what Harry had sorely missed. Sitting next to Charlie, gave them a lopsided grin. "Yeah, life's pretty great right now."
As Charlie held out his hand, he shook it firmly. "Not the scrawny kid I remember! You've been taking care of yourself."

Remembering their brief first meeting, there was a question that had to be asked. "How's Norbert?"

Charlie's eyes flickered with mild amusement. "While I like Hagrid's enthusiasm, he didn't get her gender right. Noberta is fine."

Harry blinked. "How can you tell the difference? From what I've seen of Dragons they're all run or I'll burn you kind of creatures."

Remembering the Triwizard tournament the twins nodded, similarly curious.

Pleased to talk about one of his passions, Charlie leant forward in his seat slightly. "The females are much more violent. Take your Hungarian Horntail, for example."

Remembering one of the many times he nearly got himself killed, Harry grimaced. "Point taken. Hagrid will be happy to know she's ok."

Used to Fred and George in a constant joking mood, it changed when they eyed him with a mixture of seriousness and gratitude. Fred was the first to speak. "Mum told us about Ron, thanks. If you and Hermione weren't there, Ron might not have been."

It was a sobering but true thought. Harry was glad to be there as well, he didn't want to consider what could have been. "She told you everything?" When the three nodded, Harry sighed. "I don't mind telling you that Dumbledore's on trial in January. I pressed charges against him for stuff he's done to me, along with Umbridge. I handed in Peter as well."

Charlie knew enough from his siblings to follow their line of conversation "Brilliant, they'll get what's coming to them."

"Maybe Sirius' name will be cleared posthumously. Sorry to bring that up, mate."

Shaking his head softly at George's words, Harry only smiled mysteriously. Seeing a window of opportunity the twins went to greet Remus themselves, wondering at Harry's slightly unusual reaction.

At the green flickering of flames, the last two people Harry was expecting arrived. Glancing around the room and seeing everyone was present, satisfaction filled him. Now, all that needed to happen was getting successfully through this meeting without caustic tempers and attitudes clashing.
As Minerva and Severus arrived, Remus tensed slightly. While it was true he had forgiven the man, it still brought back unwanted memories of that night. After Minerva had greeted and welcomed him back, it left them alone.

Dark eyes emotionless, he inclined his head. "Lupin."

Sensing that Severus wanted to say more Remus remained silent, calm but slightly wary. To ensure no one else would hear, privacy charms were temporarily put in place. "I apologise."

Not expecting a passionate or lengthy in-depth discussion of why he was sorry or for him to elaborate, Remus recognised how difficult it was for him. Though to verbally hear this apology and one that was sincere, it helped. "Apology accepted."

Not expecting much Remus held his hand out as a peace offering, fully expecting him to ignore it. But to his shock, the handshake was returned, albeit very briefly. Saying nothing more he cancelled all charms in place, scowling just enough so that most wouldn't consider greeting him, then taking a seat.

Chuckling to himself Remus followed, nearby one of the two empty chairs at the table.

With another empty chair at one side and Tonks on his other, Harry glanced around at all those gathered there. Mr and Mrs Weasley, Fred, George, Charlie, Tonks, Kingsley, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and Remus. Soon to join them, Alistair and Sirius. Along with him, that made thirteen people. While Harry felt guilty for not including Hagrid as he would be similarly delighted, he was more or less a security risk. Not only because he doubted he had any mind protection, but easily let information slip. People would eventually find out the truth anyway, but those gathered here he could trust to not say anything.

As all expectant eyes turned to him, Harry started. "Thanks for coming everyone. You're all here through a matter of importance and I can trust that the information shared won't leave this room."

Having everyone's attention, it was time. 'Lights, camera, action!'

'That is precisely what Sirius is thinking. Not even an hour has passed by, yet the spirits of pranksters unite no matter the passage of time."

Not doubting that for a second Alistair was the penultimate one to arrive, bowing his head. "I apologise for my tardiness."

Trying not to give anything away with his expression, Harry smiled slightly. "No problem Professor, we've just started."
Harry thought he was good at hiding his true self and intentions, but there was a slight chance that those who hadn't seen Harry and Alistair together and didn't know would begin to have suspicions. Not that he minded too much but with Dumbledore out there still, he didn't feel overly comfortable revealing all yet in case the Ministry caught wind of it. Select members would take delight in jumping down his throat over the matter and with the certainty of involving Alistair, it was best saved for a later date.

Not a moment later the final person arrived, looking happier, healthier and slightly more insane than ever. A cocky grin in place, he opened his arms wide. "Black is back!"

As expected, reactions were nothing short of a small explosion, beginning with Molly's shriek as if she'd seen a ghost. In contrast, Fred and George burst into laughter, Harry catching fragments of their words. They believed it to be the ultimate prank and considering Sirius' choice of entry, he could see why. While Arthur was similarly shocked he attempted to calm Molly down, Minerva at this point paler than her younger colleague. It was Professor Snape's reaction that had Harry nervous, however. A tinge of colour on his cheeks no doubt down to anger, his temple throbbed noticeably. Charlie was closer to those who knew, simply observing the chaos with raised eyebrows while Kingsley remained unflappable as ever.

Once Sirius took his place next to Remus, Harry spoke up over the noise. "Sirius isn't dead."

Hair rapidly flashing different colours, Tonks looked delighted but responded with mild sarcasm. "You don't say?"

Shrugging sheepishly, the noise eventually died down as Harry explained the details of what lead up to this moment. There were some parts he left out, mainly the veil belonging to Alistair's family but instead, everyone was informed of his knowledge on the runes etched into it. He respected Alistair's reluctance to share such details, appreciative that he was willing to with him and Remus in the first place.

He'd never seen the Professor so angry, not even during Harry's accidental pensieve trip. Sirius was a particularly sore topic for him and he'd heard of their spats during order meetings but had yet to see for himself.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if he would witness this first hand.

Though Harry could see Remus talking to him, Sirius didn't listen, a challenging gleam in his eye. "Happy to see me, Snivellus?"

Harry could feel Alistair subtly tense beside him. While Harry had heard it before, it didn't lessen his dislike of the name at all. For Alistair, it would be an entirely new experience. It was a side of Sirius Harry didn't like, unable to let go of the past and make amends.
Glare more vicious than Harry had ever seen it, he was reminded that Professor Snape seemed to own the art of sarcasm. "I am thrilled, Black. It seems your little trip to oblivion was unable to curb the brainless side."

Harry couldn't help but think he really didn't help himself. It only gave Sirius more fuel for the fire but considering his own bullies from childhood, it was hard not to be strongly affected.

No one else spoke, the majority simply accepting it while those who hadn't seen were filled with tension.

"Why don't you take a shower for once? Greasy haired git."

Severus refrained from rolling his eyes. Not that Black needed to know, but hygiene was important in his line of work. The grease was down to potion fumes and while he loathed spending time on such things, he'd created a product especially for his hair so that it wouldn't be damaged. "How mature."

The almost bored expression indicated to Harry that he believed the opposite. Instead of shutting up, Sirius immediately fired back. "At least I'm not a murderer! You tried to kill Remus!"

"Sirius, he's apologised! To Harry and me, just before you came." Attempting to calm him down Remus interrupted, to no avail.

Shaking his head rapidly and resembling Padfoot, Sirius clenched both fists, gritting his teeth. "No amount of apologising can make up for what he did to you."

Severus arched one eyebrow and while angry at first, seeing Sirius so affected restored his composure, sneering. "Pot calling the kettle, Black. I will give you one guess as to the incident in question."

Knowing what he was referring to, Sirius immediately dismissed it. "That was different, we were kids then. You shouldn't have stuck your ugly nose in where it doesn't belong."

While most sat there in confusion, including Alistair, Harry filled him in on what happened, having heard it from Remus' point of view. *When they were students, Sirius told Professor Snape about the Whomping Willow passageway and it was a full moon night. If my dad hadn't stepped in and stopped him he might have been bitten or killed. Sirius still sees it as a prank.*

Sorrow mixed with anger travelled through their link. *That is not a prank, but a malicious act. Regardless of age, he should have known better. Pranks are harmless fun intended to amuse and not injure. I must admit now that I know this, it is difficult to not intervene.*
'I know what you mean.'

While they weren't exactly friends, even before their truce Harry felt empathy towards the Professor. But since Alistair truly considered him a friend, Harry knew just how hard he must find it. With their chairs pulled to the table and others too distracted by what was going on, Harry was confident enough to silently place his own hand on Alistair's leg. Hoping the warmth was reassuring, Alistair responded to this by intertwining his fingers with Harry's own, lowering one arm beneath the table.

Severus' expression tightened. Feeling vindictive, Sirius didn't stop there. So caught up in his words and hatred of the man opposite him, he failed to realise that they would hurt another as well. "A shame nothing happened, really. No one would miss a waste of space like you."

Seeing Remus stiffen, Harry's heart clenched even as he watched the Professor rise to his feet, wand drawn and a snarl on his lips. "You dare speak to me like that? I would be thrilled to demonstrate just how much of a murderer I can be."

"Bring it on!" Sirius roared, similarly drawing his wand and across the table, they aimed for one another. Seeing Sirius about to mutter some sort of spell, Harry hoped that Professor Snape wouldn't kill him for this later.

The two spells which Harry had fully mastered, wandlessly and non verbally, were Expelliarmus, once considered his signature and Accio. Today they proved invaluable and while it wouldn't stop wandless magic, it might shock them enough to halt further action. Without a doubt the Professor had a second wand and if in its holster, probably had an anti-summoning charm. But wands themselves couldn't be charmed, at least to Harry's knowledge. Releasing Alistair's hand he successfully caught the summoned wands, wincing beneath one particular glare but remaining firm.

"That's enough, particularly you Sirius."

Being called out by Harry, he reacted predictably. "What did I do? More importantly, why did you stop me? I was about to teach this bastard a lesson!"

"I am sure you were." A dry drawl which clearly irritated Sirius to no end.

Harry was tempted by the nearest wall, to bash his head against. "Because you started it! Give it a rest! The better question would be what didn't you do? For Merlin's sake you're an adult, act like one! Both of you are here for a reason and no one's value is less than the other." Giving a pointed glare towards Sirius, Harry continued. "Don't forget that without Professor Snape's information over the years we'd be in much deeper trouble."

Still, angry Sirius remained silent. Pushing himself back from the table and not trying to reclaim his wand he stormed away, returning to Evergreen Manor.
Serving to kill the mood Remus quickly returned home, wanting to calm Sirius down despite his own hurt. When only a few remained, Harry approached the Professor to give his wand back. "I didn't want either of you to fight."

Reigning in his anger, Severus saved it for the one idiot deserving of it and silently took his wand. "I would have appreciated more positive news, Potter."

Harry glanced away, looking guilty. "I thought the sooner you knew the better since everyone's going to find out eventually."

Severus understood his reasoning, though still wasn't appreciative with the return of someone he'd much rather have stayed beyond the veil. For some reason, Potter liked the mutt, however, so couldn't say anything further on the matter. "I do not require justifications for actions taken. It is done."

Giving him a sharp nod Severus swiftly left, believing that a shot of whisky from the bottle given to him by Minerva wouldn't go amiss.

Saying his goodbyes to Mr and Mrs Weasley, Harry felt sick to his stomach. He hated any arguments or confrontations and when shouted at, it always reminded him of Vernon. He didn't think Sirius would hurt him physically at all, but old anxieties rose to the surface. Whispering to Alistair, he eyes the floo as if it were his biggest fear. "I know we're done for the day, but will you go back with me?"

While Harry didn't explain why Alistair could guess. He was going to return anyway but knowing he needed support, it gave him more of a reason to. "Of course I will."

He didn't want to admit it, but he was scared. He'd never spoken that way to Sirius before but more specifically, defended someone he hated deeply. He didn't know what to expect at all.

Taking a deep breath he was the first one to step through, returning and as he honestly expected, greeted with a shouting Sirius. Red-faced he turned to Harry, stalking up to him in a rage. It took everything he had to stand his ground and not react on instincts ingrained into him. Snatching his wand back, Sirius pocketed it again. "What the hell was that about?! Why did you defend Snape of all people?"

"Because you were targeting him! Yeah, he's not perfect but who is? At the start of the school year, I made a truce and he accepted, we're fine now!"

Harry tried to remain calm but rather than raise his voice in anger, it was out of panic.

Arriving on the scene Alistair kept his distance, knowing that this confrontation was inevitable. Standing beside Remus, Alistair sighed. "Has it always been like this?"
Tempted to join him, Remus looked wearier than ever. "I've tried to make him see reason. But it's difficult when he hasn't had the chance to grow up fully."

As Alistair hadn't gone through the same hardships, he found himself unable to relate but tried to see it from a different perspective. Seeing Harry so distressed as a result of this, however, he found that to be difficult.

It had all come to a head now. Harry saw no point in trying to hide it, the situation being far worse than what he could have predicted. Looking betrayed, Sirius shook his head repeatedly.

"You must be joking! How can you say that after everything he's done? Not just to you but everyone else as well?!" Throwing his arms in the air, Sirius gave Harry a look as if to say he was a lost cause.

"I've got enough shit to deal with, the last thing I need is him breathing down my neck and now it's sorted, I don't have that problem! Why can't you be happy for me?" Not meaning to, Harry ended on a slightly begging note.

"Yeah ok, good for you," Not sounding sincere, Harry frowned. "But he's a Slytherin! You're friends with Slytherins now?"

So sick of the same argument with Ron, Harry let something slip which he never meant to, at least with Sirius. "If it wasn't for Malfoy being a prick that was the sorting hat's first option for me!"

Harry fell silent afterwards, regretting saying anything, especially when Sirius paled, tight-lipped. Swallowing thickly, Harry's anxiety only grew when the silence between them similarly did. Looking almost disgusted, Sirius left words hanging in the air, which shattered Harry's heart to pieces.

"I can't believe it. A Potter in Slytherin? James would be so disappointed in you. I bet you're friends with Malfoy's kid as well so go, join him and the rest of the Snakes."

After saying his piece Sirius walked away, leaving Remus growling. At that point, Harry was unsure if it was actually Moony growling but numbly watched as he went after his mate.

"Sirius, apologise right now! How dare you speak to your Godson that way!"

Receiving no response, Harry was glad Remus was in his corner, so to speak. He didn't expect such a negative reaction. No, scratch that. He did, which was why he'd never mentioned it to Sirius. More accurately, he didn't expect Sirius to bring his dad into this. Though he didn't mention himself, it was clear to Harry Sirius' feelings on the matter.
If asked by someone how well he knew Sirius, the answer would be not at all. His time with Remus had allowed him to say with confidence that they’d grown closer and truthfully, Harry saw him as a Godfather too. But hours of conversation couldn't make up for years missed out on. They’d had their disagreements before now, but nothing like this.

He'd forgotten that Alistair was there at all until strong arms wrapped around him from behind. Usually enough to at least make him smile, Harry found himself barely responding. Even so, Alistair was the one thing keeping him from returning to old habits. If alone, he wouldn't have hesitated to once more sit outside in freezing temperatures, hoping to fall unconscious and stay that way.

Gripping onto his arms like the lifelines they were, Harry watched the scenery around him change instantaneously. It was enough for him to speak, strained at his voice was. "Where are we?"

Resting his chin lightly on Harry's shoulder, Alistair gave him the only information needed. "It is Lake Louise, in Canada. One of the various places of which I find to be therapeutic and relaxing."

He could see why. The temperature was close to freezing, not feeling it for long before a warming charm encased him. Not having this to worry about, he was able to study his surroundings in greater detail.

Mountains as far as the eye could see, a dense forest lined the other side of the expansive lake. Unlike the black lake, the waters were a sharp, clear blue. So clear that he was able to see the pebbles beneath. Not a sound could be heard, tranquil waters helping to soothe over his distress.

"It's beautiful."

Sitting down on the grass beneath them, Alistair sat Harry between his legs, encouraging him to lean back. He did so, allowing Alistair's own slightly slower heartbeat to settle his similarly. "I am pleased you think so."

Wrapping his arms around him once more, the silence between them was a comfortable one. Having spent the last few minutes genuinely terrified, it helped to calm him down. Though, the pain still remained. Voice small, he spoke up quietly. "All I ever wanted was to make him proud. Is Sirius right? I think he hates me now, I never should have said anything."

Regret filling him, he didn't think he could go back to normal with him. Chest tight and throat burning, he couldn't speak any more. Hating to see Harry in such a state, it was physically impossible for Alistair to hold him much closer, but it didn't stop him from trying.

"While I do not condone his actions, particularly out of anger, that is all they were. They do not reflect his true thoughts and while I believe that his issues with Slytherin house are deep-rooted, the love for you remains. When alone, he questioned my intentions towards you and if they were serious."
"Really?" Glancing up and into his eyes Alistair nodded, whispering into his ear with a soft smile. "I told him that I adore you, very much."

Though weak, Harry's smile was still visible to him. It was a start, but Alistair's mission for Harry's smile to return was still active. "As for your father, I believe that you have done much for him to be proud of. I doubt that the possibility of another house would change his opinion."

The reassurance was everything for Harry and while doubts and concerns still remained, he no longer felt the need to go off somewhere and never return. "You're like a Guardian Angel or something. For a minute there I just wanted to crawl into a hole and never leave but now, I'm not so bad."

Relieved to hear it, Alistair thought for a moment. "Forgive me, Harry, I seem to have forgotten my wings."

A moment later a large pair sprouted from his back, with glossy white feathers that were nothing short of magnificent. Straightening in surprise, Alistair curved one wing for Harry to see better. Reaching out, he stroked one of the feathers. "You can sprout wings just like that? Brilliant!"

A sudden idea striking him, he put it into action immediately. "I believe that it is time for a closer view." With the familiar twinkle in his eyes, Harry didn't quite catch on. That is until he was effortlessly lifted into Alistair's arms.

Caught off guard by the speed in which he took flight Harry's arms clung on by instinct, securing themselves around his neck. Laughing joyfully Alistair climbed impossibly high, only to dive back down and skim the water's edge.

Quickly getting over his surprise and trusting that Alistair had a firm hold, Harry wanted to join the fun. "I want you to throw me in the air, high as you can. I'll sprout my own wings mid-fall."

Excited, it was enough for him to temporarily forget Sirius' words. Alistair responded to his request, able to throw him several feet into the air with ease, believing his words.

As Harry was released, he allowed the partial transformation into Lume to take over. Falling into a familiar state spent from times practising for Halloween, the black Devil wings in contrast to Alistair's angelic ones sprouted from Harry's back. Given more than enough time he swooped down, hair blowing every which way as his competitive side arose. "I've spent a lot of time in the air. Even with wings and not a broom, I reckon I'm pretty fast. I'll race you across the lake!"

Though this wasn't planned, Alistair was glad he had the forethought to ensure that they would definitely be alone here. No doubt a human and apparent human with wings would be a cause for concern if those without magic happened to spot them. Admiring Harry's spirit, he agreed immediately. He loved to experience things in different ways but with Harry? All the better.
There was no countdown. At the Lake's edge, all it took was a look between them, before they were off.

The breeze blowing his hair every which way, Harry quickly adapted in the air, getting the most out of his position to coax some extra speed. Naturally, he underestimated his opponent and by the end was left breathless, a few seconds behind Alistair. Panting slightly, Harry was impressed. "Bloody hell you're fast."

Chuckling, the ribbon which held his hair back fluttered below, floating in the water. He'd gone to such great speeds that it loosened, leaving his hair equally windswept. The twinkle in his eyes not dimming even slightly, Alistair proceeded to capture Harry's hands with his own. "I believe that a reward for winning is in order."

"What do you want?" Tilting his head, a myriad of things ran through Harry's mind.

Still, in mid-air, Alistair closed the distance between them. "I already have what I want."

Catching onto his meaning Harry flushed, with joy rather than embarrassment. This time he initiated things, adrenaline from his flight rush fuelling the passion which he placed into Alistair's reward kiss. It was then, he came to realise that this was only the tip of the iceberg. When ready, Harry would be awash with more sensations that he could possibly picture. Once again thankful that he'd quite literally found him they remained that way, for a while.

In the distance and growing closer, Harry recognised Remus' Patronus.

"Harry, please come back. Sirius has something to say."

Pulling away reluctantly, he couldn't ignore the quiet urgency in Remus' voice. The situation had to be resolved, as the last thing he wanted to do was walk around Sirius on eggshells.

“He’s got the worst timing.” Complaining slightly, he was able to give Alistair a full smile. “Thanks for helping me out, I can take it from here. Bit off topic but since you can leave my place, I guess you can find it again even though it’s protected?”

Though it was something Alistair wanted to avoid answering, lying would serve no purpose. “Yes. Though it is only down to my greater experience that I am able to do so. I would be happy to update your wards with a little something of my own at a later date?”

There was no way he’d pass up on such an offer. “That would be great, thanks. I sort of guessed you could do that but I don’t mind if you zap in and out without the password, I trust you.”
Returning them both to the ground and now wingless, Alistair carded his hand through Harry’s hair for a moment. Trust was an important thing and to be given it by someone who had been hurt so many times, he considered this an honour.

Feeling somewhat back to normal, Harry couldn’t say he was ready to face Sirius so soon but putting it off wouldn’t help him either. As they both disappeared, Harry wondered what exactly it was Sirius had to say.

Remus was at his wit's end. It was like talking to a particularly thick brick wall. Wondering if he’d find a clump of hair falling out from stress on the pillow tomorrow, he had the urge to scream despite his reputation for being calm and kind. “Will you listen to yourself? All Harry was trying to do is help and you directed your anger for Severus towards him! Thank Merlin Alistair is with him right now because I don’t want to imagine what he might be thinking alone.”

Often, Sirius acted before he thought. It got him into trouble many times, in school and as an adult. This time was no exception and because of that, the last person on Earth he would ever consider hurting was, deeply.

He didn’t mean to get so worked up, but Snape brought out a side of him he hated and when Harry intervened on top of the whole thing about Slytherin, he’d lost it. As the minutes passed by, he sank deeper and deeper into regret, until Remus’ words brought back some clarity.

Hanging his head low, Sirius groaned. “Moony, I’ve fucked everything up. I bet Harry hates me after I said that. I hate myself for saying it, never mind him!”

Sitting down beside him, Remus was relieved that they’d got to this point so quickly, as Sirius’ moods usually lasted a while. “He doesn’t hate you and I don’t think this changes his feelings. You might have to earn his trust again though.”

Damn Remus and his calm logic. He was far too good for him, this was made clear. “What do I say to him after that? I’m the biggest idiot going.”

Remus didn’t bother to correct him, agreeing straight away with a mildly amused smile. “That you are. And be honest with him, it’s the least he deserves after all he’s been through. But above all that, apologise.”

Yeah, he could do that. He wasn’t angry any more, far from it. Though Harry was good at hiding things, Sirius could see that right then, he’d feared him. The thought made him even more miserable.

“Shall I send a Patronus?” At his mate’s gentle question Sirius nodded, silently planning out what he could say to try and make things at least a little better.
As Harry appeared back home Alistair left, after giving his hand one last squeeze. In the kitchen, Harry remained motionless, until Remus came in. Studying his features closely, he rested a hand on his shoulder. “Everything will be alright.”

Trying his best to believe him, Harry headed for the living room and found Sirius, hunched over on the sofa.

Fighting against his rising nervousness Harry sat next to him, unconsciously keeping some space between them. The move didn’t go unnoticed by Sirius, feeling even worse if possible. It was easy enough for Remus to say but actually doing it? He didn’t know where to start.

Hugging himself, Harry watched warily. “Are you still mad at me?” Voice smaller than he’d intended, he flinched slightly when Sirius jerked his head up fast. Able to see his face, remorse was etched into every line of it. “No. I was never angry at you, just Snape. I’m sorry for what I said. I know that apologies mean sod all but it’s true.”

Feeling himself getting worked up Sirius reeled it in slightly, addressing what he’d said. “I don’t like Slytherin. There’s too many bad wizards from there and thinking for just a moment Snape could have been your head of house, I hated it. But hell, you’ve saved my life multiple times, more than my ungrateful arse deserves.”

That drew a smile from Harry. Feeling a bit more encouraged, Sirius continued. “I was shocked when you told me about that, but it doesn’t change who you are in here.”

Reaching his hand out carefully, Sirius placed the palm of it against his anxiously beating heart. “I’m proud of you, pup. I couldn’t ask for a better Godson and James couldn’t have asked for a better son. You’ve got every right to hex or hit me, I won’t stop you.”

Hesitantly, Harry placed his own hand over Sirius’. “You’re the biggest arse ever but I can’t hate you. I love you and I accept your apology. I thought you hated me though, it hurt so much..”

Feeling vulnerable Harry was about to lower his gaze until, looking a little awkward, Sirius held his arms open. Knowing how difficult it was for him to be this open at this stage of their relationship, Harry immediately reciprocated. It was strange for him to be the one comfortable with giving and receiving affection but for that, he had Alistair to thank.

"I could never hate you.”

Encircled in Sirius’ arms, he was relieved.
“I’m glad we’re ok.”

With his words, Sirius silently agreed. Damn it Remus was much better with this sort of thing! He was supposed to be carefree and joking, not a father figure type. But then, this was a glaring reminder that he really did need to change his ways. Feeling uncomfortable at first he quickly relaxed, content being able to hold Harry for the first time since he was a baby.

While Harry did forgive him, forgetting he wouldn’t be able to do so easily. From here it would take time to build what trust they had between them again and in a dark corner of his mind, the barest hint of doubt remained.

Eventually, they pulled away and at risk of being on the receiving end of Sirius’ mood swing again, Harry had to try and request one thing. “I know you don’t get on with him but can you at least try to be civil? For me?”

Faced with Harry’s piercing and pleading green eyes, he couldn’t say no. He couldn’t say yes either as around Snape, Sirius lost all sense. “I’ll try.”

That was the best he could hope for, considering their past history. Satisfied, Remus chose that moment to come in, with various sorted refreshments carried on a tray.

Harry blurted the first thing which came to mind. “That’s the biggest House Elf I’ve ever seen.”

Not expecting such a comment Sirius burst into laughter, narrowly avoiding a mild stinging hex by Remus as he placed the tray down. “Don’t encourage him! As for you..”

Turning to Harry with a mischievous look, he didn’t stick around to find out what that look meant. Through years borne of ducking, dodging and running during Harry hunting sessions, he put those skills to good use in an effort to avoid being targeted by one of the Wittiest Marauder members.

Spirits lifted Sirius happily joined in, Harry having more work on his hands. Once again, Alistair had saved him. At the threat of crumbling to pieces, the combination of his words and actions had helped immensely and if not for him, the conversation with Sirius might not have gone as smoothly.

Sending a silent thanks, the burst of affection along their link ensured Harry that he was there, to support him every step of the way.
The thought of him as a Fennec Fox refused to leave my brain because I could picture it perfectly, they're so cute I almost can't handle it xD
I'll Be There

Chapter Summary

Two intellectual hearts are brought much closer, Gryffindor students have a lapse of judgement and in the middle Harry, struggling with his own mind. But, as always, Alistair is there to help.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Alistair is in a pranking mood, showing Harry his favourite animal form in the process. As more people are made aware of Sirius' alive state, it isn't all plain sailing when several heads clash, Harry caught in the crossfire. There for him Alistair ensures he's ok and with it, helped to restore some of Harry's calm to make amends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 14th. It was six days after his argument with Sirius but to Harry, it seemed like a lifetime. He'd apologised for saying what he did, sincerely and the day after that went smoothly.

So then, why did he feel like this?

Largely thanks to Alistair, his nightmares were almost a distant memory and if he happened to have one during the weekday, he was simply a mental conversation away. Soon after was able to drift off to sleep again, something he'd never been able to do.

But each night over the past week, they'd returned with a vengeance. Harry was proud. He realised how absurd it was to be proud over something like a lack of nightmares but for him, this was a step forward towards feeling a little more normal. But with this, that had shredded his good mood entirely.

It wasn't as if what Sirius said was that bad, compared to what he'd heard from the Dursleys. They'd never had a disappointment stage, skipping that entirely in favour of telling him with great delight, how much they hated him, wished he'd never been born and the most frequent thing, how he 'Should have died with his freaky parents.'

Expressing disappointment, in comparison, was nothing. But then, it came from someone he cared about and trusted. Well, had trusted.

He hated to even think it, but how could he trust Sirius not to say something like that again? He'd wanted to make amends but time away from that and more to think, his thoughts had spiralled into
dark corners he'd hoped to see the last of. He even began to suspect Remus who in all the months he'd reconnected and got to know better, hadn't said one bad word about him.

But still, there was doubt. It wasn't so long ago he'd expressed to Alistair how pleased he was to be nightmare free most times when sleeping and now this? It had got to the point where during the night, he'd removed their bracelet. While it left him with a strange, deep sort of emptiness without the slight weight on his wrist, he didn't want him to know it had been every night.

He trusted him and overall, he was getting better at being able to rely on someone else when having problems. But he was so ashamed of his own mind creating problems that weren't even there that in some aspect, he'd returned to his old ways.

The one thing he hadn't used was glamour charms. His secretive ways wouldn't have gone unnoticed and undoubtedly, Alistair knew something was wrong or that he'd removed the bracelet if he wanted to talk.

He hadn't explained his problem to anyone, deciding to think alone and more than often distracted. He was running on very little sleep, forgoing it completely through fear of being trapped in yet more nightmares.

He was exhausted and even the most dim-witted person could tell, but no one had asked about it. Alistair probably would though, the next time they met outside of class and if so, he wouldn't lie. He couldn't bring himself to, especially since he'd feel even worse than what he already did and that he'd know straight away.

It was a Saturday, late evening and just before curfew. Disillusioned so that no one would see him, Harry headed for Alistair's quarters. With exception to the normal times he saw him during the day, he hadn't had the chance to physically speak with him over that week so since last weekend, it would be the first time.

He hated to sound sappy or even pathetic, but he missed every moment they were apart. It made hours of lessons a waking, different kind of nightmare.

Though physically and mentally exhausted, it was impossible to not smile in response to Alistair's own once arriving. As the older man opened his arms Harry walked into them, the familiar scent of honeysuckle enveloping his senses.

Alistair's arms were so relaxing, that Harry began to feel sleep encroaching on the edges of his consciousness. Shaking his head slightly in an attempt to ward that urge off, things were made marginally difficult when his hand found a particular spot in Harry's hair that he liked.

"Hello Harry, I hope that your day was a pleasant one."
Running on lack of sleep guaranteed more honesty from him. "It's brilliant now that you're here."

Muffled against his chest, Alistair still heard clearly. A warm feeling spreading throughout him, he tilted Harry's head up. He'd noticed over the week and during his approach but up close, it was worse than he'd thought. Gently tracing beneath his eyes, a keen sadness filled him. "Are you alright?"

About to answer with the usual 'I'm fine.' out of habit, he stopped himself. He'd promised himself to be honest and while he wasn't sure if it would do much good, he could at least be it with one person. "No."

Pleased that he was comfortable enough, to be honest when faced with such a question, Alistair took him by the hand, to sit down. Patting his lap invitingly, Harry lay down and was rewarded with his magical, hair stroking fingers. It probably wasn't magic at all and just a combination of learning what he liked and the masseuse skills learned from his mother, but the results were anyway.

Content to sit there with him, Harry always felt comfortable to open up on his own after a while, without prompting. He would have done like several times before, if not for exhaustion getting the better of him.

Looking down into his lover's sleeping face, the peacefulness he'd seen each weekend when with him was nowhere to be seen. Like the time before their relationship had developed, Harry's brows were drawn into a distressed frown. One hand by his side the other moved, as if in search for something. Whatever it was his actions were subconscious, still in the throes of light but troubled sleep. As his fingers touched the searching hand it softly latched on, clumsily threading fingers.

At the further contact, his expression lacked as much tension. Finding those actions almost unbearably adorable Alistair continued to watch, reluctant to move. Regardless of this, Harry startled himself awake a moment later. Blinking blearily, it took a moment to remember where he was. Rubbing his eyes, he looked up at him apologetically. "Sorry, didn't mean to fall asleep."

Seeing just a glimpse of Harry's restless sleep, Alistair's worry didn't ease any. "It is understandable, you are tired. Would you like to sleep?"

It was a yes and no answer for him. Yes because he could barely think straight, fogged up as his brain was but no, because he had the feeling another nightmare was around the corner. Finding even that much too complicated for explaining at the moment, he simply nodded.

He was too sluggish to even think about going to the bathroom, where he'd usually change. Rather than change into pyjamas he left his boxers on, another step towards feeling comfortable in his own skin but more importantly, with Alistair seeing it. There were more scars revealed, yet some still hidden away. Pulling back the covers for him Harry climbed in, feeling content for the first time that week when Alistair whispered into his ear.
"My opinion has not changed. You are still incredibly handsome."

He'd never get tired of hearing that as before Alistair, it wasn't something he'd ever heard. But these days, he was beginning to believe it.

About to join Harry in bed, Alistair was prevented by a Patronus. Though he hadn't seen it before, the distinct feline shape alerted him to who it was, before any message had been conveyed. "Come to my office. There's a matter of utmost urgency I must discuss with you."

Always happy to assist Minerva, Alistair was tempted to verbally curse the timing. He didn't want to leave Harry, not today. The thought of him having a nightmare alone if it should happen, caused a shard of something painful to prick his heart. He was tempted to decline, however, would be unable to assuage his guilt if it turned out to be serious.

Sending a reply that he would be there momentarily, Alistair squeezed Harry's hand. Grasping onto the edges of his consciousness, he sent him a small grin. "Go. if you don't, the Professor might have kittens."

Alistair shook his head softly. "You are silly." Smiling fondly he swept the hair from Harry's forehead, pressing a kiss there. "I will be back as soon as I can."

After hearing a slightly slurred ok in response he swiftly left, hoping the matter would be dealt with soon.

In a better mood than before, that still didn't prevent Harry's worry. He could hardly tell Alistair he wanted him to stay. Not only would that sound childish, needy and beyond pathetic, but he was also a Professor and a good one at that. The last thing he wanted to do was hold him back and whatever she needed help with, he'd be able to, in spades.

But damn it, he hated this, knowing for a fact that once asleep, it wouldn't be peaceful. He trusted his instincts and around his sleeping patterns, they were very precise. However, he was unable to stop himself from falling asleep again. But this time, he found himself slowly falling into a trap of his own memories.

Hermione was excited. Rather than spending an evening with Solomon, she was going to spend the entire day instead! So that she wouldn't have to be taken there anymore, Alistair had fashioned a two-way Portkey. It would bring her straight to Lothaire Castle and back. She'd yet to try it out but according to Harry who had once before, it was nothing like the Portkeys they were used to.

Travelling close to 2,000 miles from one place to another required a lot of magical power and even reaching her magical maturation, she'd be hard pressed to do this without draining her core
considerably. Not wanting to take the risk this was an acceptable alternative, already informing Professor McGonagall that she would be out for the day.

She couldn't wait. Each week her excitement levels were monumental and once, Professor Snape had snapped in Potions to keep focus. After that, she'd done so, careful to reign it in.

But nothing could dampen her enthusiasm now. With understanding and much teasing from her friends, particularly Harry, she'd explained that this Saturday, she'd organised to spend time with Solomon.

Wearing snug dark jeans and a thick lilac jumper, it protected Hermione from December's bite but quite possibly, it would be even colder there. Thankful she wouldn't be outside for long Hermione reached Hogwarts' gates, shutting them behind her and with one touch of the small coin fashioned into a pendant of sorts, disappeared on the spot.

It would be so good to see him again. This was her thought every week but at this point, it had blossomed into something far more and while he enjoyed her company too, evidenced by him being the one to invite her today, Hermione couldn't tell if his feelings were the same. It would be the first time she'd come on her own and right around the time they'd agreed to meet, she navigated the corridors with ease once inside, directly outside of the library doors.

Before opening them, she couldn't help but feel there wasn't something right. An extreme wave of cold leaked from beneath the slight crack between them, causing Hermione to shiver. Inching the door open to peek in, her eyes widened at what she saw.

Sitting in his usual spot was Solomon but rather than reading, he clutched his head in both hands, hunched over as if in pain. One glimpse of his expression was sheer torment and just looking at it was enough for her heart to be figuratively torn out. Rocking back and forth, faint mutters carried across the room to her.

"I am not a prisoner any longer, you cannot bind me.." Voice breaking, Solomon tugged at his hair, as if to pull it clean out.

While his expression was guarded at first the magic wasn't, remaining dormant during their first meeting. But as opposites his expression was plain to see, magic acting as his defence. While she could guess what was happening, only Solomon truly knew.

Careful to keep her steps small, slow and measured, Hermione closed the distance between them. "Solomon."

Her voice was quiet, but loud enough for him to usually hear. Rather than respond he continued his rocking motions, muttering all the while. So lost in whatever he was experiencing he didn't seem to sense her at all and wanting to do something, anything to help bring him back, Hermione placed her hand over the one curled in his lap.
Quick as a flash, it grabbed hers with bruising force. Eyes locking with Hermione's he seemed to look through rather than at her, Silver eyes deadened and haunted. The muttering had stopped, but she watched, in part fear and part fascination, as his eyes shifted to violet and fangs elongated.

"Dumbledore."

That confirmed Hermione's suspicions. While fear had overtaken her for a moment out of his unexpected reaction, it dissipated. All that remained was the desperate desire to reassure him that he was no longer imprisoned.

Brown eyes watering with emotion, she tried to reach him. "I'm not Dumbledore. It's me, Hermione!"

When he twisted the wrist in his grip sharply, she cried out with the pain. Any more force and he probably would break it.

As her pained voice reached him, Solomon returned to his normal state. Seeing some of the man she was used to, he finally looked at her. Widening his eyes he loosened his grip, ashamed.

"Forgive me, I.."

Trailing off he took her hand again, immediately healing the damage done. Afterwards, he dropped it as if burned. Lowering his gaze he stood up, about to leave the library. Having the feeling that if he left they may never see each other again Hermione called out, panicked.

"Please, don't go!" Now that he was a part of her life, she couldn't imagine it without him. There would be nothing left, except an empty void. If he left now that might become reality and the thought of that made her feel more alone than ever. At her voice, he did stop but remained there. Going over to him she glanced up, but Solomon refused to meet her eyes.

Taking the hand which had gripped hers he stiffened, but allowed the contact. Sadness overwhelming, she did her best to convey the feelings welling inside. "I think of you as a friend, someone who I can rely on. I don't know exactly what's going on but you don't need to tell me, we can talk about something else. Just, don't leave.."

As she sounded close to tears, guilt gripped him. What had he done? He'd never wanted to make anyone feel this way, let alone her. Of course, they were friends, but he couldn't bear to be in the same room with someone he cared for, that he'd harmed. "I hurt you."

At his vulnerable expression, Hermione smiled. "I'm ok, really. You didn't mean to and my hand is fine, look!"
Removing her hand from his she wiggled her fingers and seeing that, brought some mild relief but didn't lessen the guilt. Returning to his seat he waited for Hermione who, after some hesitation, seated herself near him. Outside of reading this was a more recent development, Solomon comfortable enough to allow her close by.

As the one who'd found him during one of these moments, it was only fair to provide an explanation. He couldn't simply ignore the fact it happened, after all. "Since the moment of my release, I have been experiencing episodes. I am unsure of how else to label them, except perhaps waking nightmares. They somehow slip through all defences, into the consciousness and I am rendered paralysed until their completion. They are primarily of Dumbledore and his various torture methods."

He delivered the information emotionlessly, though Hermione knew his true thoughts on it, having seen evidence for herself just now. There were many who'd seek revenge on him and without a doubt, she was one of them.

"Does Alistair know?" That was the primary question in her mind, and though she asked, didn't expect a shake of his head in response. "No. There is a part which still clings onto the hope that I have not changed much from how I used to be. Truthfully, there is a part within me as well."

"I won't tell Alistair, promise."

Reaching out as if to touch her, Solomon stopped himself. "I know."

Then, he made a decision. Before telling Alistair anything, he had to accept it for himself. The small amount of black hair that remained was a physical reminder of who he used to be. The Phoenix blood had changed his body chemistry and with it, had aged him. Not so much in physical appearance but much like the elder magic and non-magic with greying or white hair, the trauma he'd suffered altered it. Short of dying his hair, which was something he'd never do, it would never be black or quite as curly again.

Fashioning a pair of scissors, he snipped the last of his black hair away, banishing both afterwards. Running a hand through his white waves, it was if that small part of him released one of the many burdens he bore.

Realising the significance of this moment, Hermione was almost honoured to witness it but happy that he'd taken this step. Knowing all that she needed to, a pleased twinkle entered her eye. "There's more time today, so I think we can finish the BFG."

They'd read Matilda, Hermione getting a different experience from it each time, though it had been a while since she'd last read it. Though, a part of her couldn't help but think how surreal it was that a Vampire far older than her was content to sit and listen.

With a touch of slight impatience, Solomon summoned the book, catching it expertly. Neither had
need of a bookmark, able to remember the page number without. Handing it to Hermione she found the correct section, settling down to read.

As her voice once more filled the library Solomon listened intently, unable to help but think that her reading capabilities were on par with Alistair. He used to love listening to his stories or those read from this very library, but that stopped during his childhood. It was a return to those times, yet different. It seemed as if no time passed at all but before he knew it, Hermione had read the last sentence.

"But where you might ask, is this book that the BFG wrote? It's right here. You've just finished reading it."

Closing the book gently she beamed, glancing over at Solomon only to realise once again, just how close they were.

Gaze diamond clear, Hermione could almost swear she saw her own mildly flustered reflection within the eyes which fascinated her, deeply. As though frozen in time, the only thing which roused her was the cool touch of Solomon's hand.

Barely breathing she didn't move, reluctant to disrupt this moment while partly curious and hopeful as to what he'd do next.

Cupping her cheek as though it was something fragile, they were almost nose to nose. Gazing at Hermione for a long moment, the distance decreased into nothingness as the surprising warmth of his lips touched hers.

Eyes widening for a moment they fell closed, doing her best to return his tentative, almost inquisitive kiss with the book knowledge she held. Applying knowledge into real life experiences she could usually do, but this was much different. She liked to plan her day out, tackling unpredictability's if they arose but usually, could predict outcomes.

This was never planned. How could it be? It was a fleeting hope that she'd one day find someone to truly connect with, in every way. Putting romance firmly on the back burner she'd placed it right at the bottom, focusing on what she needed to do at Hogwarts to ensure a steady future. She'd read everything about it, knowing she should remain informed so when the time came, she had an outline of what to expect.

But, no amount of written words could sum this moment up. It was blissful, a different kind of joy from discovering new reading places completely. Shifting slightly she faintly registered the book falling from her lap and onto the floor but was soon swept away.

Unsure of where to put her hands she tried his shoulders, muscles firm beneath the touch. Leaning closer her arms naturally came to rest around him until eventually, he pulled away only slightly.
Looking as surprised as she felt, only the quickest of disguise charms could hide his faint blush. As no charms were in place Hermione saw clearly, in a similar state herself. It was too late to feel embarrassed about such a thing, meeting in the middle over this as she'd helped to close the distance a little as well. Usually, someone of many words, they failed her this time, as if that one kiss had stolen them.

Unable to believe he'd done such a thing Solomon was worried at first, but seeing nothing negative in her expression returned some confidence. Knowing that one of them had to break the silence, he spoke quietly. "In all my years, I have yet to meet a human like you. It restores my faith. A friend is not an adequate enough description. You are intelligent, beautiful and for the first time, I have enjoyed someone else's company outside of family."

Sometimes, he envied Alistair's ability to confess, compliment or express his adoration without feeling an ounce of embarrassment as though he kept it hidden, there was a certain feeling of awkwardness.

Listening to Solomon, brought some awareness back. She didn't think it was possible to feel this happy and telling her she was beautiful? It was something rarely heard, except from her parents. Coming from someone else, she could almost swear it was perfect for Patronus material. Gathering what remained of coherent thought, she kept her eyes locked with his. "I feel the same way. I've never had many friends and while at first, that's what you were to me, it's not like that now. I'm drawn to your mind, spirit and everything which is a part of you."

Confessing this, she then asked something of Solomon which past Hermione would have blushed for several hours at after. "Will you kiss me again?"

While it wasn't a full-blooded confession with the words, 'will you go out with me?' or something similar, it was enough for Hermione and Solomon to be firmly on the same wavelength. Neither had needed many words to get their point across and this case, actions spoke far louder. Her question to him was a clear indication that she accepted his feelings and from there, the dynamics of their relationship had changed.

Knowing that officially Hermione was now his lover and her words to him, the beginnings of a smile curved Solomon's lips as he granted the request. Cupping the back of her head this time he reminded himself to not overdo it, realising that he'd need more than a few tips from Alistair, with this being his first, fully fledged relationship where his intentions were serious and not for pleasure and experiences' sake.

When Ginny had asked Harry for details about his intimacy with Alistair she'd listened, applying what he'd told to memory but right now, she'd thrown all that away. She thought it could be of some help but they were different people, the same went for Alistair and Solomon, so it couldn't possibly help her now. It was better to live in the moment, at least for this. Completely content, she did what she'd wanted to since entering the library. Softly wrapping her arms around him, she conveyed through her body warmth this new start and that everything would be fine.
She was so incredibly warm. Were humans always so warm? He'd only had experience with one, a mutual agreement to keep any deeper, more intimate emotions locked away and simply enjoy physical pleasures. It was an arrangement which worked well for him but during that time, not even intercourse brought a great amount of joy compared to being held in such an affectionate way. It was confusing, but still wrapped his own arms around her in turn.

"Thank you, for giving humans a chance. You have every right not to but I'm so incredibly happy that you did."

A hint of warmth returning to his expression through her own body heat and his thawed personality, he'd have to thank Harry sometime for stumbling upon their family home. If not for that, none of this would have happened.

"I am pleased that I did as well. You are welcome."

Though time passed by quickly, it seemed to slip through their fingers after mutual confirmation of blossoming feelings. Discussions turned to more about them as individuals and close to Hermione's curfew time, her head was filled with a different kind of knowledge which she treasured above all else, information about Solomon.

Reluctant to part so soon, she could only hope next week would arrive quickly. At least Harry and Luna could visit their significant others when they desired but for her, it was different. While she could ask Harry if they'd be able to make use of the Requirement closet she'd heard so much about, she tried to limit her time in spaces where it flowed differently. Unless requested otherwise, her body would still age in there. She'd reached her magical maturity a little before her birthday and while she hadn't said anything to Harry, she suspected he would as well. Magic itself knew when the time was right and the moment he unofficially turned 17, would be it.

As Solomon dropped a farewell kiss to the back of her hand, it brought her from wandering thoughts. "I will see you soon."

The back of her hand now tingling pleasantly, Hermione was sure if anyone spoke to her tonight they'd class it as a failed endeavour. She was about to join Harry and Luna in their moments of staring into space with Alistair and Brio on their minds, of this she was sure. Positive that she'd remember this day for eternity Hermione left, looking forward to sharing the happy news with her friends when the opportunity presented itself.

The moment the library doors closed Solomon practically sank into his seat, partially disbelieved that this had happened. The moment she'd saw him like that he was positive she'd run away from him and so she didn't need to, he'd taken steps towards that. But rather than what he'd expected, the opposite happened. He'd have to tell Alistair about his memory issues sometime but for now, he didn't want to burst the bubble of happiness he had with Harry. Wondering if he was available, the desire to share this news welled within him.
'Alistair?'

'Ah, if it isn't my dear brother! How is Hermione?'

Smiling a little at his eccentricities, he was positive his heart would pound if it had the ability. *I enjoyed my time with her. She has returned to Hogwarts. We are. closer now.*'

Dancing around the topic slightly, not even the vaguest response would prevent Alistair from catching onto his meaning. *Oh, that is wonderful! I insist upon a celebration soon.*'

Solomon was bewildered, to say the least. *What on earth.. why? Your verbal congratulations are more than enough.*'

*Because my relations with humans are common. For you, this is monumental. You have opened your heart to one, something which has never happened. I am overjoyed.*'

Feeling his brother's familiar warmth, a small smile touched his lips. *I see. If this should happen, would it be too much to hope that you will not consume enough alcohol to make an entire country inebriated?*

*Yes, I believe that you place entirely too much faith in me, though we will see what happens.*'

He thought so. After giving a mental farewell, Solomon wondered if he'd ever have the ability to lose himself within a book again, now that Hermione fully occupied his thoughts.

Solomon’s timing was impeccable, really. Their conversation was brief, over by the time he arrived at Minerva’s office but helped to soothe over a great deal of worry he felt about Harry. If he should have a nightmare he’d know immediately, the same wards in place as when Lilah stayed with him. But even if he should be alerted, dismissing himself wouldn’t be so easy.

Knocking on the door it opened, admitting him immediately. Seeing Minerva with a pinched and disapproving expression on her face, he waited for the silence to be broken.

‘Bun tighter and neater than usual as if to reflect her mood, she refrained from glancing over at the alcohol cabinet. *The Prefects of each house count the student total. I have recently been informed that twenty-five from my house is missing.*’

Such a large number? Alistair was surprised. Shown the parchment with a list of names outlined in red, he scanned over them. He was familiar with each one, the majority in their final year here. As though he didn't already have enough to worry about, Lilah was one of the students unaccounted for.
Romilda Vane, Cormac McLaggen and Mallory Norden didn’t fill him with a great deal of confidence either. Romilda, to his displeasure, was more fixated on discussing Harry than what she was supposed to be doing. Cormac was content with a minimal amount of effort to pass by and he’d had to warn Mallory both inside and out of class on his attitude and bullying other students.

"And you would like me to assist in finding them?"

"Yes. This is unusual and in the case, they're not all together, it may involve a degree of detective work."

Minerva’s displeased expression indicated to him her thoughts on that. It did seem to be serious but at least the forest wasn’t an option. Though Luna and Brio's combined efforts banished the darkness, the barrier remained so that what happened to Lilah wouldn't again.

After confirming that he would indeed provide his assistance, they selected a name and to match with his colleague, used a point me spell. If alone he could easily go to their location as once aware of this information, Alistair focused. He could detect magical signatures and their cores with great accuracy and after a few seconds at most, was made aware that every missing student was by the Black Lake. Hoping that the first thing which sprung to mind wasn't true considering the cold weather and the already freezing lake temperatures, he easily kept his pace alongside Minerva's hurried strides.

No words were shared between them, Alistair dreading what it is he'd find but also wondering why this couldn't have happened yesterday. Any other day this month, in fact, all except now.

Once outside, Minerva didn't like the direction her wand was pointing. "Surely not."

Though he already knew, Alistair's abilities were far beyond a 26-year-old human. But until Dumbledore was no longer a worry, this secret would be kept for a while longer. "Is something wrong?"

"There are only a number of places once outside. One of them is the Black Lake. I'm proud of my Lions but more than once, they've proven to have brawn over brains."

Alistair could concur with that, though there were prominent exceptions, such as Harry and his group of friends. It was one step at a time, but Alistair wanted to bring his self-worth up to where it should be. He was more intelligent than he gave himself credit for, shining through with their conversations and his participation in class.

Though he'd had his suspicions, it was precisely what he'd feared. Having better eyesight than most he could make out many distinct figures which to his alarm, weren't wearing a stitch of clothing. Discarded on the grass many students were already in the water, the rest about to join them.

Hearing a splash his eyes flickered further across, seeing that a student had been thrown into the
water. Now closer and able to see and hear what was going on better, Minerva's expression was thunderous. Reminding himself to once again not be on the receiving end of her ire, one or two students saw her approach.

"Shit, it's Professor McGonagall!"

If the situation wasn't so serious, Amusement would have won out over how some of the students chose to express their thoughts. As it was she had her way towards the older students, voice ringing out loud and clear.

"What is the meaning of this? Remove yourselves from this water and get dressed, immediately!"

There were students from every year, Minerva pointedly averting her eyes as Alistair went over to the one student he'd seen thrown in. Rushing over to the water's edge he saw them struggling to swim, dressed in night clothes. Once close enough he lifted her out of the water, using a drying charm. Seeing who it was, sadness welled within him. Why did it seem as if Lilah was targeted? He could tell by her distressed and terrified expression that skinny dipping in the lake wasn't something she'd willingly gone along with. Thankfully she was dressed, but seeing that the other students were experiencing his colleagues' righteous anger, Alistair busied himself with seeing if she was alright.

"What happened?" As the smaller hand reached for him he took it, squeezing softly. Glancing behind as if to check they were the only ones there, it took longer than usual for Lilah to say anything, stammering.

"I-I was asleep but a girl I didn't know came in the dorms to wake us up. She looked over and t-told me to come down to the common room but no one else. I did and there was a b-bunch of others too. The older kids dared us all to follow them out and I didn't want to, but one of them s-said if I didn't they'd hex me."

"Do you know their name?" If he could receive confirmation, he'd ensure they wouldn't get away with it. Nodding but looking scared, she glanced over at one of the stragglers, pointing. "Him."

Of course, it was Mr Norden. It made a change from Keith who had remained quiet, however, a 17-year-old threatening to hex a child was unacceptable.

"I came outside and wanted to go back in when they t-talked about skinny dipping in the lake. I wouldn't take my clothes off and join them so he t-throwed me in."

Helping Lilah up Alistair returned to Minerva, keeping his distance slightly and glancing over all those gathered there. Wondering who else was forced into doing this, if any, he scanned their expressions. He could see a handful of the younger years had separated themselves from the older, glaring fiercely in their direction. As his colleague paused to take a breath, he interjected.
"Is there anyone here who was unwilling to do this, but forced? The truth, please, I shall know otherwise."

All the students except Lilah jumped. They hadn't noticed his presence, many believing that he'd been taking lessons from Professor Snape in that regard. As a handful of the younger students and a smaller amount of the older raised their hands, Alistair wondered how long the situation would take to resolve.

Between them, the truth emerged. A house wide dare was established to skinny dip in the black lake, fronted by Cormac and Mallory. Random students were selected to participate whether they liked it or not and while some were happy to join in, others weren't. Those that raised their hands were telling the truth, the Professor's ability to see through lies between teaching experience and life experience just enough pressure to differentiate between them. Eleven of the twenty-five students were randomly chosen and six were unwilling to go along with it, while the remaining five joined in, helping to apply pressure for everyone's participation. The other fourteen were already aware of this idea, discussing among themselves to involve more students.

While Gryffindor was in the lead with house points, they'd dropped straight to the bottom after this. While the six pressurised were let off with a warning to inform her of this next time, a total of nineteen detentions and a points loss of 10 per student willingly involved, with the exception of Cormac and Mallory who lost 20 and 15 points respectively. It was a dizzying amount and definitely a record set for points lost and detentions issued all at once. Not that this was something Minerva was pleased about. It would be triple detention with a class full of students. The other staff members would gloat, particularly Severus, as it placed Slytherin in the lead.

Knowing Alistair would have to tell Harry, he was almost tempted to wince at the figures. He understood why the punishment was severe, however. Drying and warming charms were an extra and helpful precaution, but wouldn't prevent illness if the students had chosen to stay in for more than a few minutes. It was a health and safety concern above all but should dissuade them from trying anything like this again.

With a strict warning from Minerva to take no detours the students left, Lilah waving towards her. "Hello, Professor."

Returning her greeting, Minerva was reminded of Harry where trouble seemed to find him. Though often, he actively sought it out too. After assuring them she was fine Lilah also left, vowing to stay far away from some of those students.

Watching her leave, Minerva sighed. "I believe Mr Potter, Miss Granger and Mr Longbottom's unofficial points loss record has been broken."

Alistair had heard much of Harry's escapades, but this one didn't ring a bell. "What happened, exactly?"

Though later she'd discovered everything mentioned was true, it still sounded too absurd. "I caught
Mr Malfoy and Mr Longbottom out after hours, the former ranting about how Hagrid was in possession of a Dragon. Naturally, I believed he was lying. Argus brought Mr Potter and Miss Granger to me shortly afterwards and each student lost a total of 50 points, serving their detention with Hagrid.

Alistair was mildly surprised. "Hagrid? I was unaware he supervised detentions."

"I'm not sure why, but it was largely at Albus' insistence that Argus would decide their punishment and Hagrid would provide supervision. He mentioned my overworked state and that they would save me a few extra hours, so I accepted. It wasn't until afterwards, I learned the nature of their detention."

He didn't like where this was going. "What is it that they had to do?"

With the fairly recent incident of Lilah and the Acromantulas, Minerva loathed to say it aloud. "Their detention was in the forbidden forest, helping Hagrid search for leads to Unicorn killings."

Rarely lost for words, Alistair found himself in that state. Perhaps there was more to each year than what Harry had informed him of. "Why on earth were students with little to no magical training allowed to accompany Hagrid? While he is a fine man, I am sceptical he would be able to adequately protect them should anything posing a threat emerge."

Minerva agreed, sorrow clouding her gaze. "Those students, Potter, in particular, have seen far too much."

As he was about to answer, the wards placed around his quarters let him know there was a disturbance. With complete confidence, he could say no one had broken in as that would trigger something entirely different, but it also meant precisely what he'd feared.

While any other day he would have been delighted with Minerva's company, participating in conversation all the way to her office made him overly conscious of the minutes slipping by. Once outside, she invited him in but he declined as politely as possible. Nothing short of an all-out war would deter him from where he needed to be and as this was highly unlikely, Alistair reappeared in his quarters once the coast was clear. With him, Harry had never suffered from nightmares. The most he'd heard was the aftermath and talking so that he was able to calm down again.

He was experienced with many things, but nightmares were not one of them. Not through personal experience and thinking back over past encounters, not many of his lovers had suffered trauma or at least, what he knew of. Harry was the kindest, yet most damaged individual he had ever met. But that encouraged the protective instincts within to rise more, despite his independence.

Before opening the door, he realised silencing charms were in place. Whether he'd knowingly or unknowingly did this Alistair was unsure, but dispelled them immediately. Harry's mouth was opened silently, but no longer. His quarters were a large distance away from other students and staff, so it ensured privacy. But even so, the screams which seemed to rip through Harry's voice box
caught him off guard. Constricted by the duvet he'd rolled himself into a tight ball, tangled within them as his face contorted with pain far from Alistair's understanding.

With a wave of his hand, the fabric trapping Harry in place was cast aside, Alistair reaching over to touch him. The moment he did, a fist was aimed in his direction. Catching it easily he reached out, pulling him closer and supporting from behind. Still asleep it ignited his fighting spirit, trying his best to pull free from the unknown assailant. Body coated in sweat he moved his head back as if to head butt however beneath Alistair's superior strength, was unable to. Screams dying in his throat they were soon replaced with sobs, breaking Alistair's heart.

"Uncle, don't hurt me, please!"

Trying to reach him, Alistair murmured soothingly. "Harry, I am not your Uncle."

Remaining calm despite feeling anything but, he did his best to reassure Harry and in the process, wake him up from whatever horrors he was reliving.

It was Christmas Eve. A time of celebration for many, including the Dursleys, but not Harry. The kitchen was wet from his cleaning, beginning to dry it and while telling Dudley not to run, he'd ignored him and fallen over, cracking his head on the tiles.

Harry could only watch in horror as a small amount of blood pooled beneath his head. With cries loud enough to shake the roof down Uncle Vernon came blundering in, Aunt Petunia following shortly after. A piercing shriek punctuating the already sound filled air, she kneeled before Dudley. "Diddydums, what happened?! You can tell Mummy."

At this point nothing more than crocodile tears, Dudley saw this as an opportunity. "The freak pushed me!"

Knowing better than to speak up for himself Harry remained silent, avoiding Uncle Vernon's glare. That is until a meaty hand reached out, yanking him by a fistful of his hair and pulling upward.

Unshed tears in his eyes Harry didn't cry out, or the punishment would be worse. Red-faced, spittle flecked across his face as Vernon yelled.

"HOW DARE YOU, BOY! YOU'VE DONE IT THIS TIME! OUT! GET OUT!"

Eyes blurry by this point he was carried by the same fistful of hair, unable to take the force as it was ripped out. Before he dropped to the floor Vernon instead dragged him by the arm, door swinging open. In contrast to his previous yelling, Vernon's voice dropped to a menacing mutter.
"This will teach you, freak."

Snowing heavily, Harry was unable to see clearly across the street as biting winds nipped at his exposed skin. Wearing nothing but Dudley's clothing and no shoes he was thrown out, landing awkwardly as the door was slammed shut again.

Surely he wouldn't leave him out here all night? It was only a few seconds but in his malnourished and undressed state, Harry began to feel his body temperature dropping. Bare feet freezing against the snow he stumbled across, seeking the bushes he usually hid in from Dudley, as shelter. With no leaves, it was a poor shelter at best but protected him from the worst. Able to see his breath clearly with every inhale and exhale, he wondered and hoped, if this would be his last night alive. If he died, he wouldn't have to feel this pain anymore. Living each day trapped with people who didn't love or even like him, tore at his strong spirit.

"Mum, Dad, why did you leave me?"

His question lost to the raging winds Harry curled into a tight ball, trying to protect his hands and feet. Before long, he didn't feel cold anymore. Almost warm, in fact. Or was it numbness? He vaguely registered falling unconscious at that point but unknowingly, his magic was hard at work, doing its best to see him through the night.

In place of snow, it began to rain, washing everything away as thunder and lightning crackled. Unable to think straight and senses assaulted from all angles with extreme weather, Harry wondered how he hadn't died yet. Maybe that was fate's cruel way of saying he wouldn't be reunited with his parents for a long time.

Vaguely aware that morning had arrived, he'd lost sense of all time until he was pulled from the bushes, by the very same arm. Wincing and voice hoarse, Harry realised he'd fallen ill but knew what was expected. Glancing up and expecting to hear something along the lines of 'make Christmas dinner' he was instead confused with both the tone and words Uncle Vernon used.

"Harry, I am not your Uncle."

What? Of course, he was! Unless that was a lie too. But then, it wasn't his voice. It was another, much warmer and kinder and for some reason, very familiar. Where had he heard it before?

"You are having a nightmare, please, wake up!"

Why did whoever this was sound so sad? This wasn't a nightmare. Many times he'd wished he could wake up and be relieved that his life was all a bad dream and really he was living happily elsewhere, but it never worked like that. Did it?
Opening his eyes, it took a moment for Harry to pinpoint where he was at first. Trembling, he shivered as cooled sweat against his skin mockingly imitated the nightmare's sheer cold. But through all that and his tears, a familiar, comforting scent.

"A-Alistair?"

Voice cracked, dry and hoarse he coughed. Eyes still closed, a cool glass pressed against his lips. Parting them water soothed his throat, gratefully drinking what was offered. Heart pounding and mind still partly fogged, Harry let another voice override that of Vernon's.

"Yes. You are safe, here with me. There is nothing that will hurt you."

From anyone else, Harry wouldn't believe it. But from Alistair, it was different. He'd proven to be one of the strongest individuals out there and he'd never met anyone who would be a match.

Rocked slowly in Alistair's arms, Harry became conscious of his current state, worried. "What about your robes? I'll ruin them."

Rather than be released he was pulled closer, gentle kisses pressed to his sore eyes. "Though I am fond of clothing, there is no comparison here. You could be covered in many questionable substances and it would not deter me. You are in need, so the state of my clothes is irrelevant."

Harry was beyond relieved. Alistair was right, he did need someone. That was a memory he'd forgotten, no doubt one of the many he'd repressed but so kindly, his mind had decided to make him aware that it did actually happen. Turning around, Harry squeezed him tightly. "I'm glad you're here."

Content to hold him for as long as needed, Alistair was concerned when his trembles didn't lessen. "Are you cold?"

Feeling Harry nod, he had an idea. "I will be back in just a moment."

Releasing him Harry's anxiety levels rose, until he realised he'd only gone to the bathroom. Hearing the sounds of running water strangely helped to relax him a little and as promised, Alistair returned not long after. Opening the door he came over, offering a hand up. Taking it Harry was pulled to his feet, seeing that the bath was filled to the brim with hot water, steaming. Glancing up questioningly, Alistair's eyes glittered with fondness. "I thought perhaps a bath would both freshen and return
warmth to you. I will not interfere too much, however, I am able to confirm that having your hair washed by another is incredibly relaxing."

Afterwards, Alistair added something extra. "And, there is a large part of me that wishes for the indulgence to take care of you." Not worried or embarrassed about admitting this, he wanted to do all he could to help. Actions often spoke louder than words and he had no ulterior motive here, other than helping him to feel better.

He'd never had his hair washed before, at least from what he could remember. His parents would have, but memories before that night were mostly swamped down from the horrors of years after. Touched that Alistair wanted to do this for him, it didn't cross his mind to refuse. "I'd love that."

Knowing that Harry hadn't reached a complete state of comfortableness, Alistair turned away until the rest of his clothing was removed and he'd eased himself into the water. The bath was oval shaped, a sparkling white which could comfortably fit two people. Keeping his mind away from those thoughts, for now, he indicated to Alistair he was in.

Sitting behind him he indicated for Harry to lean back slightly, the water at just right temperatures as he wet his hair. Hands lathered with a fair amount of shampoo Alistair gently rubbed it into his scalp, ensuring to target all areas and smiling at Harry's pleased sighs.

"That feels amazing."

It was as all his aches and pains were washed away and with it, so was the nightmare. He forgot everything else, solely focused on the caring touch of Alistair's hands as he worked the fragranced shampoo into his hair. Leaving that to settle for a minute he did the same, this time with Harry's exposed shoulders, arms and back. Though he hadn't mentioned it Alistair was carefully reading the signs. Seeing that he would be open to this he'd take the next step, gliding over Harry's aching muscles and massaging them with a cleansing body wash.

Harry was so relaxed he wasn't keeping track of anything said, on cloud nine as for the first time in years, he was taken care of in this way. Before now he would have thought this was childish, able to bathe himself just fine and ordinarily would have taken offence, but there was something almost intimate and adult like about this.

He loved the sound of Harry's voice. If he could always remain this happy, Alistair would truly be content. But in the moments where this wasn't the case, he wanted to be there for him. Very rarely had he ever been allowed to do this with past lovers so he relished this chance and enjoyed it very much. "I am pleased to hear it." His tone of voice served to steam the room further, Harry thoroughly warmed through from more than the freshly drawn bath.

If not for this, he would have stayed quiet about the contents of his nightmare but through Alistair's care, he found himself able to open up much easier. "I'd forgot this one even happened. It was Christmas Eve and I was cleaning the floor. I told Dudley not to come in because he'd slip, but he did anyway. He fell back and cracked his head, telling Vernon I'd pushed him. He grabbed me by
my hair, pulling a chunk out before he got to outside so changed it to my arm instead. I was left outside all night, snowing and then raining. I got sick but I woke up before anything else happened afterwards.

Once again, if only Harry's 'family' were alive. He reserved pranking for those he liked or disliked, but the Dursleys were a special exception. Only the worst of fates would be in store for them, though hoped wherever it was that death took mortals, it was somewhere filled with nothing but suffering for those deserving.

Washing away the shampoo and what he'd lathered into Harry's skin, Alistair had only one question. "Which parts of your arm and hair did Vernon touch?"

Trying his best to recall, Harry pointed to the upper arm on Alistair's left and a spot at the top of his head. Leaning over, Alistair kissed the spots that Harry mentioned.

"I hereby claim that you are protected and if anyone should touch you with the intent to harm, they will be met with a punishment of the highest severity."

Laughing at his words, Harry tilted his head back enough, to meet his eyes. "That was official sounding."

Reaching beneath the water to lightly tickle Harry's sides, Alistair watched with amusement as he tried to squirm away. "I am serious." While he tried to show this through his facial expression, he was unable to remain that way for long when faced with Harry's grin. Conditioning his hair next, he enjoyed the smooth silkiness of it, even when still wet and that had been washed out as well. Rising to his feet Alistair crouched by his side, eyes swimming with a little lingering concern. "Are you feeling better? If there is anything else I can do to assist, you need only ask."

Appreciative of his offer, Harry couldn't possibly ask for more. Not only that but he honestly couldn't think of anything else. "Much. Thanks for doing that, I've never felt so... loved."

He couldn't think of a better word, truth be told, an undeniably strong feeling welling within him though it was meant in a slightly different context. Pleased to see Harry's contentment, Alistair expertly dodged a small amount of water mischievously aimed his way. Seeing the playful twinkle in his eyes, Alistair ruffled his wet hair with a great deal of fondness. "I shall wait for you outside."

Closing the door behind him, Harry revelled in how short of a time his mood had been turned upside down.

His words were no lie. He'd never expected or thought this could ever be a possibility, the only time he'd had a bath was in the Prefect's bathroom, as part of the puzzle requirement in relation to the second trial. He'd realised what he'd been missing out on, so used to showers that he'd never bothered with the other. Self-care had come late to him and he never lingered in showers for long, used to doing the bare minimum. Alistair had spent more time on his hair than he did showering in total but running a hand through it, he couldn't believe how much nicer it was.
Climbing from the water he dried his body and hair, cleaning everything up and pulling the plug. Ensuring everything was spotless, he blushed faintly when seeing a clean pair of boxers laid out for him. He hadn't noticed Alistair place them there, so thought this must be the Elves' doing. Grateful nonetheless he was still tired, but better than he had been in days.

Opening the door he saw Alistair, sitting in bed and waiting. Seeing him emerge, he sent a smile which had Harry's heart practically leaping to the back of his throat. The covers slightly dishevelled he could see Alistair was dressed similarly, muscled and shapely legs on show. At first glance, Harry hadn't taken him for an overly hairy person and this was proven, skin as smooth as it came. Realising he was staring a bit too intensely Harry quickly joined him, handed a cup of something hot and nothing short of mouth watering. Detecting something he knew all too well he experimentally took a sip, eyes widening.

"It's hot chocolate, but made with mint chocolate truffles right?"

Harry didn't think they could possibly become any more delicious but he was proven wrong, thoroughly warming him from the inside out.

"They are. I am not well versed with such things but a short while ago, I contacted the chocolatiers that produced the truffles you liked and enquired whether it would be possible to make them drinkable. Kindly they sent a recipe, which resulted in this. Is it to your liking?"

"It's brilliant!" Harry exclaimed, enthusiastically and touched beyond words. "Want to try some?"

While he held the cup up for Alistair to take, he instead kissed Harry directly and with that, was able to taste it for himself. Caught off guard, he glanced between the cup and Alistair. "I meant the cup, but I guess that works as well."

As Alistair's arms wrapped around him, Harry heard him sniff a little. "I must admit, your scent is unexpectedly intoxicating. It is what I use regularly but somehow, very different from you."

His actions tickling Harry a little, he found himself distracted and kept hold of the cup firmly, not wanting to drop it. What he'd wanted to tell Harry next slowly leaving his mind, the softness of Harry's hair brushed against his face as Alistair inhaled gently. It was incredibly pleasing but reminded himself to not get too carried away.

Curious, Harry asked him a question. "What did the Professor want with you?"

Knowing that he would ask eventually, it didn't make telling him what had happened any easier. Softly conveying everything, Harry groaned. "Seriously? In this weather? What a bunch of nutters. I can't believe they roped Lilah into this, but I'm glad you were there to help her. Pretty sure they beat my record points loss."
Since Minerva didn't know the full story, Alistair wondered if Harry would be willing to fill him in. "I was informed of this not long ago. You served detention in the forest?"

Remembering his nightmares for weeks after, he grimaced. "Yeah. Hagrid got us to split up and search for evidence. I was with Malfoy and Fang and eventually, we came across a hooded figure drinking the blood of a dead Unicorn. Malfoy and Fang bolted, leaving me there. I got cornered by it but before it did anything, a Centaur came to my rescue."

Drinking a little more, a sigh escaped him. "It's too ridiculous to make up. I didn't know at the time but it was our Defence Professor with Voldemort attached to the back of his head."

Ah, the possession which went terribly wrong. Alistair remembered hearing about that, but facing such a thing at eleven years old must have been terrifying, especially with no means to defend himself. "Before this school, I have never been to another, so I must question if this is typical."

At that thought, Harry smirked slightly. "It's not for the primary school I was in anyway. I can't really say about the other Wizarding schools, though."

Seeing his wrist, Harry was reminded of something else. With everything Alistair had done for him, he deserved complete honesty. "I've been having nightmares all week. I didn't want you to know so I took the bracelet off."

He'd figured as much. Careful to keep his tone curious and nothing more, he wanted to understand the reasoning behind it. "Why?"

Glad he was given the chance to explain Harry did so, feeling worse with every word spoken. "It's not that I don't trust you, but it wasn't that long ago I said how good it was to not have as many nightmares, so it seemed stupid to admit that I'd pretty much gone back to square one. I'm sorry."

Hearing his regret, Alistair was swift to soothe it away. "I understand your reasoning but no matter the lack of troubles or a great amount, I am here to support you. Did something trigger this?"

Reluctant to voice it aloud Harry did so anyway, knowing he'd have to come to terms with it. "Sirius. A part of me thinks he's going to say it again. I know he apologised but if it happens another time, I'm scared it will break me."

While Harry had told him they'd resolved their issues, Alistair didn't think it would end there so easily. He was a forgiving person but truthfully, he wasn't satisfied. While he didn't doubt Sirius' apology for hurting him was sincere, the rest was questionable. He hadn't mentioned as much to Harry, but a slow acting prank was in the process of developing into something truly cruel. Or at least, from a die-hard Gryffindor's point of view. From Alistair's, it was simply a fitting punishment and something satisfying for him. If Harry discovered this and asked, he would be honest. But for now, he delighted in keeping this his little secret.
As Harry’s worried words reached him, there was little in the way of reassurance he could provide, since Sirius’ future actions weren’t guaranteed but the explosiveness of his temper certainly was. Taking Harry’s free hand in his own, he intertwined their fingers. "If Sirius does repeat those words or something similar, he will quickly discover the wrath of someone who has seen many eras pass by."

Harry had seen just a little of that, the rare times he expressed his anger. Yet to see him fully angry, he could only imagine just how many inventive ways he could come up with to enact retribution. Hoping Sirius would at least avoid that for his own sanity and safety, the heavy burden upon his shoulders added with each day had lightened to nothingness.

As Harry finished the cup, it disappeared and with it, his tiredness returned. Lying on his side Alistair joined him, loose hair splayed about his pillow. Feeling the beginnings of sleep returning, Harry had one final thing to say. "I didn't think you could be any more amazing, but I'm wrong. There's an infinite number of things in this world and other ones, but I'm sure you're definitely the best of them all. Thanks for taking care of me."

Sinking into the familiar softness, it was only with some awareness that Harry reached over to smooth down some wayward hair of Alistair's he’d spotted. Hand falling to his side after, he fell asleep almost instantly.

Gazing at his sleeping profile, Alistair had the absurd urge to shed tears. Not of sadness, but joy. Harry’s words had touched him and he couldn't remember ever being held in such high regard by another before, except family. Happily holding him closer, there wasn't a single chance that harm would come to Harry, wrapped within his lover's warm embrace. Alistair looked forward to Christmas coming soon as with some hope, Harry would have time to spare for several pleasant surprises.

Chapter End Notes

That's all three pairings together! To any of you following this, I have a question. Is there anyone you can see Ginny or Neville with? For those two I genuinely have no idea at the moment. They don’t have to be of course but the more the merrier xD Any characters are welcome! Depending on answers I can try writing them with some mentioned and that could give a visualisation of what works. I'll see what happens :)
For You, with Love

Chapter Summary

It's Christmas. There's an unexpected exchange between once enemies, Harry, Sirius and Remus create something extraordinary and Alistair has a surprise for his lover. Unknown to him, Harry has one in return.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry's nightmares took a turn for the worst, Hermione and Solomon are closer now than ever and Gryffindor show a lack of judgement. But Alistair is there and after overseeing Lilah's welfare, aids Harry in having the first restful sleep in days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last thing Harry wanted was for Alistair to witness just how bad his nightmares could be but through what had happened, he sensed they'd grown even closer.

Thinking back on what Alistair did for him that night, a surge of affection welled with him, to the point where it was nearly breathtaking. He'd gone above and beyond what Harry could have ever expected and after that, his nightmares seemed to calm down considerably.

Harry hadn't planned to meet Alistair today as he knew how busy he'd been recently. Though he didn't need the sleep, there was still a chance of being overworked and he hoped he wasn't taking too much on. He seemed fine whenever they met but vowed to keep an eye on him anyway.

But by chance, Harry happened to come across him in the same corridor. Giving him a cheery grin and wave he was about to pass by until a hand on his shoulder stopped him. Glancing up, he was startled by the soft touch of Alistair's lips on his. Caught off guard he blushed, checking his surroundings to ensure they were alone. Seeing that they were, his silent question was answered.

Leaning against the rough stone wall ever so slightly, Alistair regarded him with deep fondness and a hint of mischievousness. "There was such a pleading look in your eye. It would not be very gentlemanly of me to ignore it. So, I fulfilled your deepest wish to be kissed."

Touching his face as if it would reveal what expression he had, Harry was flummoxed. Seeing no point in denying it he shrugged, looking sheepish. "Yeah, you got me."

It was a struggle to not pin him against the wall and show Harry the true meaning of passion. Alistair
found him irresistible, in every way. "Your honesty is utterly charming. But, do you have a moment to spare? There is something that I wish to ask."

Nodding and indicating with a gesture of his hand to continue, Alistair hoped that his answer would be a positive one. "On the afternoon of December 25th, are you available?"

Thinking to that day, Harry nodded. "Yeah I should be, Sirius is like a big kid and last year, ended up waking us all at the crack of dawn to open presents, so we'll be finished by then. Do you want to take me somewhere?" At that thought, a thrill of excitement and some anticipation ran throughout him.

Glad to see his excitement, Alistair happily confirmed it. "I do. Or, more appropriately, there is something I would like to show you."

Eager to learn more, Harry continued his line of questioning. "What is it?"

"I shall keep that a secret."

He did that when mentioning their date and for the next few days, Harry had agonised over what he could possibly have planned and naturally, came nowhere close to the actual answer. But the surprise was more than worth his lack of sleep resulting from it.

It was exactly a week away until Christmas and already, he began formulating possibilities to what he might have planned, excitement building behind a dam ready to burst. Realising Alistair was awaiting an answer, Harry quickly spoke. "Definitely, can't wait!"

Stroking his head briefly Alistair bid him farewell, already knowing precisely what he wanted to do and with the promise to pick him up at Evergreen Manor for 12.

It was December 23rd, far closer to Christmas now more than ever. Neville, Ginny, Hermione and Luna had returned home for the holidays and he'd join them in that, for Christmas Eve onwards until the new year when they returned. He'd already exchanged presents with most people and through Dobby and Misty's help, ensured they would be there and ready to open on the day. A sparse few in the Great Hall he was alone for now, left to admire the decorations which seemed much more elaborate this year.

Thanks to Alistair he wore a Santa's hat, this one decorated with Snitches and glancing around, could see many of the other students had personalised hats as well. Professor McGonagall looked pleased with her own and the only member of staff who didn't have one was Professor Snape, unsurprisingly.
With the sugar snowfall again, Hagrid had outdone himself this year with finding the most impressive tree Harry had seen, elaborately decorated. With a wrapped present set on the table, Harry kept an eye out for a familiar head of platinum blond hair. Most students returned home for the holidays by now and since he hadn't, Harry assumed Malfoy was remaining here this year. They were on a strange middle ground where he was unsure if it could be counted as friendship but to him, he realised that now, this was how he saw him, as a friend.

It was a truce at first but through defence and potions classes, Harry had discovered they worked surprisingly well together, something he would have never considered even a year ago. Not that he expected anything back, but just being able to give presents to people made him incredibly happy. He didn't have anyone to give them to throughout his childhood but even if he did, Vernon wouldn't have let him anyway. He wasn't sure the novelty of people liking him enough to give presents would wear off either.

Spotting who he was looking for he managed to catch Malfoy's eye, waving him over. Looking mildly curious he approached, poker face set. "Yes?"

Sliding the present wrapped in silver and green paper over to him, Harry gave him a half smile. "Merry Christmas."

Unable to maintain his composure, Harry could easily catch the shock. "Potter, you're insane. But, that makes the both of us." In disbelief, he held something in his hand that Harry hadn't noticed before. Placing it on the table, it was his turn to be shocked. "You too? I didn't expect one back."

A moment of silence passed between them, staring at one another as they came to acknowledge the dynamics of their relationship had changed. "So, does this make us friends, then?"

At Harry's question, it didn't take long for a response. "I suppose it does."

Grinning, Harry took the next step forward. "Have a seat, Draco."

Inviting him to sit down, Draco saw no reason to refuse. The ones who would be a problem and report activities to his parents, namely Pansy, were at home for Christmas. Sitting beside him, he regarded his surroundings with mild interest, seeing the difference more towards the front than his usual seat at the far end Slytherin table.

Hearing his first name from his former enemy's lips was nothing short of disturbing. But there weren't many friends, newly established or not, who went by surnames. Deciding to try it out for himself, Draco gestured to the surprisingly neatly wrapped present. "Thanks, Harry."

As he grimaced slightly at the strangeness, Harry laughed. "Weird isn't it? That will take some getting used to."
Draco couldn't agree more. Feeling eyes on him he looked up to the staff table, meeting Professor Snape's cool gaze. Sending a subtle nod, he just managed to catch Harry's cheesy grin and wave in the Professor's direction.

As a fierce glare was aimed his way, Harry was amused more than intimidated. Turning to him, Draco arched a single eyebrow. "Do you have a death wish?"

"Maybe. I got him something for Christmas as well."

About to eat, Draco was glad he wasn't in the process of chewing when hearing this shocking bit of information. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm deadly serious."

Shaking his head, Draco wondered how long this newfound friendship would last. "I hope it's not a prank because he'll probably try to poison you and make it look like an accident."

Harry could see why he thought that way, but it definitely wasn't a prank. At his polite request, Aela had given him some venom and recently, she'd grown larger. That left several feet of something valuable, particularly to a potions master. The venom was wrapped but for the other, Harry had come to an arrangement with the goblins to keep in storage for the Professor to collect.

"It's not a prank, he'll definitely like it. Tell you what, it's so much easier without having you two jumping down my throat."

"I'll bet."

Having a proper conversation for the first time outside of class, they each learned more about the other, now having the interest to.

With more to do this year than last, Minerva would be slightly delayed in going home. Alistair's assistance had been invaluable however and without that, it would be much longer before she'd go without meeting her new great-grandchild for the first time. She could hardly wait. But in the meantime, Hogwarts certainly kept her busy. Regarding the two students, she'd never once thought would be civil let alone friendly, she was curious to know what Severus thought of this. "You have a new honourary Slytherin."

Knowing that in another reality that could have been possible, Severus' scowl deepened. "If Potter had graced Slytherin house with his presence, I would have resigned."
Used to his dramatics by now, she doubted he would have done that, hatred for James or not. "Perhaps he would have flourished in Slytherin."

Mildly surprised to hear something like that from her, it did kickstart the what-ifs within Severus' mind. Usually not one to linger on it he did today, wondering if one student's house change would have signified changes elsewhere.

On the subject of houses, it made Minerva consider the one member of staff who didn't attend Hogwarts. "Alistair, what house are you suited for?"

Surprised at the line of questioning, he genuinely didn't know. Tilting his head in consideration, the pom pom followed his actions. "I have seen amongst the students that some share several house traits. Miss Granger would have done well in Ravenclaw similarly to Mr Longbottom in Hufflepuff."

Seeing his point, Minerva remained silent for a moment, thinking. Before she could respond, Severus cut in snidely. "Slytherin is not an option."

Comfortable to discuss him not only because Dumbledore was away but the renewed protections on their family home would ensure no access to those who would do him harm, Solomon rose to mind. "Perhaps it would be, for my brother. If not, then certainly Ravenclaw."

"There are more of you?" Severus looked faintly disgusted but rather than be offended, Alistair was amused. Though Severus was unaware, the potions that Dumbledore had once requested of him were used as part of his torture regime for Solomon. Not a single part of him blamed the man though, knowing that he was simply doing what was required.

Contrary to Severus' displeasure, Minerva was pleasantly surprised. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He gave an apologetic smile. "It was a topic of conversation that never arose." Turning to Severus, Alistair gave him a little information. "If you meet Solomon, your opinion may change. The art of Potions is one of his many passions."

Seeing that he'd intrigued Severus if only a little bit, Alistair smiled. "He is 24, slightly younger than I am."

While in fact there were ten years separating them, that was roughly the age Solomon stopped at. For anyone else that would be bizarre to think about but for them, it was normal.

Now that she knew a little more about him, Minerva's questioning didn't stop there. "Is there more family that I'm unaware of?"
Guessing that would be her next question, Alistair wished the answer was yes. "Unfortunately not. Most of my relatives passed away long before I was born, some too young to remember. My mother and father joined them six years ago."

Patting him on the shoulder, her eyes held sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that. But you must introduce us to Solomon one day, I insist."

If Solomon would be willing, Alistair would be more than happy to. However, that couldn't be even considered until Dumbledore was firmly out of the picture. At Solomon's request, Alistair had been helping him brush up on areas of magic, particularly the ability to sense even the tiniest details. While it came with age, the majority went hand in hand with magical training. He didn't want to be captured by someone or something with ill intentions again.

After giving a promise that he would introduce what remained of his family to Minerva, Alistair observed Harry with deep-seated fondness. Though he had a great deal of patience, the slight temptation to manipulate with time so that their own together would be a few minutes rather than two days was mildly strong.

Before now, he'd easily been able to wait for planned dates or outings but now, time had gained more meaning, especially knowing that Harry was just as if not more excited than he was.

Sensing Severus' gaze Alistair paid no mind, knowing how sharp he was. No doubt before they informed others of their close relationship, he would connect two and two together and realise for himself. Thoroughly in the festive spirit, that would only deepen when their time together drew even closer.

On Christmas Eve day Harry packed his things, including Hedwig's cage. Knowing where he lived she'd take the journey home by flight. Thanks to Hagrid, after Professor Snape had helped to awaken her, she was stronger and healthier than ever.

Arriving through the floo to home again, he had to check the time and make sure he hadn't got anything wrong.

10 am. Exactly as he'd thought and a bottle of Whisky on the table, it was already a quarter empty. About to raise the glass to his lips Harry quickly switched it out, something very different in there.

As Sirius was about to drink the entire thing neat he quickly coughed, spitting it back out. "Prune Juice?! Come on Harry, don't spoil the fun."

On the verge of whining, Harry rolled his eyes. "It's not even the afternoon yet! Wait until 7 pm at least."
Grumbling to himself Remus regarded Harry over his reading glasses, leg folded and newspaper in hand. "You look like you want to tell us something."

Did he? He couldn't see his own expression but then was reminded that he hadn't told them about Christmas day yet. "Not sure what's going to happen exactly but Alistair wants to take me somewhere Christmas day. I said we'd be done by the afternoon?"

Expecting Sirius to be at least a little put out, he reacted oppositely to what Harry expected. Raising and lowering his eyebrows repeatedly, he nudged Harry in the shoulder lightly. "I think he wants to get in the festive mood with you."

Wanting the floor to swallow him whole, it was a struggle to keep his thoughts from going in that direction. "I thought Remus was the randy one? It's all you ever seem to assume these days."

Not repentant in the slightest, time trickled between their fingers as eagerly, Sirius resumed his mission to be completely and utterly wasted. Having a much higher alcohol tolerance than the pair of them put together, it would take a lot more for Remus to follow.

Remembering the little bits of what happened the last time he got completely drunk, Harry was slightly nervous about what might or might not happen. But wrapped up in Sirius' raucous laughter for something or other he quickly joined them, knowing instinctively he'd still be fine for tomorrow.

Harry had far more to drink than planned. Barely able to focus on his surroundings the table was littered with empty bottles. It was advised not to transform when inebriated as alcohol affected thought processes but naturally, Sirius ignored this. Blearily, he watched a large, shaggy black grim bump into every available surface and stagger on four legs rather than just two.

Nearly every room looked as if a bomb had hit it, with Padfoot energetically running around in both forms, causing destruction wherever he went. Lying face up on the sofa, Remus came into view. With some effort he managed to shift himself, making enough room for both of them. Leaning into Remus' side he mumbled, hoping he wasn't past the point of all understanding. "Merry Christmas, I'm glad I've got you and S-Serious."

He messed up somewhere, he just couldn't think in what way. Tipsy but not drunk Remus still had his senses, pulling Harry closer with one arm. He was glad to have him too. The night was still young though, so plenty of opportunities for Remus to join them in a similar state.

As Padfoot came rushing through he stumbled, skidding on all fours and crashing into the sofa. Flat out he transformed back, remaining there on the floor. "...Feeling that in the morning. Until I find the hangover potions anyway."

Harry didn't doubt that, watching with nothing short of amazement as Remus downed a half-empty bottle in one gulp. Proceeding to sing the first Christmas song he knew off by heart and completely
out of tune, Harry and Sirius were no better. A small corner of Harry's mind was dedicated to being thankful that there were no next door neighbours. Truly enjoying himself, he had the feeling this would be a Christmas break to outdo all others.

Harry had no idea how he'd ended up in bed, not remembering going there, to begin with, but for a moment he lay there, regaining his bearings. He could barely remember a thing of what happened last night, throat parched from dehydration and slightly sore from a combination of singing and some straight drinking. Thankful that a pounding headache wasn't a thing for him, he tried to recall what happened, with not much success.

Finding a tall glass of water by his bedside, he thanked whoever had the foresight to leave one there. Gulping it down whole he stretched, feeling impossibly stiff.

'Good morning.'

Turning over to bury his face in the pillow, it hid an almost giddy smile. 'Morning, I've just woken up now. I have a feeling I did something similar to what I told you about with that flaming comet and the order members.'

'Your feeling would be correct.'

That triggered something in him. Harry did remember having an idea at one point but not what it was, or even if he'd acted on it. Then, Harry was briefly sent a memory, one of which he could hardly believe.

Alistair reflected on that, but also what had happened before another of Harry's drunken achievements.

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On Christmas Eve, for the first time in over seven decades, Alistair and Solomon sat with one another. Drinks in hand, they were a combination of alcohol and blood, usually alternating. This one was special. Not only because the brothers were reunited but both were in newly fledged relationships, spending some much needed time furtherly reconnecting but also discussing their love interests.

It was just as well no promises were made, their combined indulgence unknowing putting Harry's, Remus' and Sirius' to shame. Tilting his glass to drain the contents, a happy sigh escaped Alistair's lips. "I had forgotten what it was like to feel this content. I experienced unrest unlike anything else when unable to find you."

Knowing just how much Alistair had agonised over not knowing his location, he decided now was the time to tell him that though he was freed, he didn't come away completely unscathed. "There is
something I neglected to mention."

At Solomon's serious tone, Alistair placed his glass down. "What is it?"

If it wasn't for Hermione, Solomon might have never told him about this, as shameful as this was to admit internally. "I experience moments, where I am trapped within my own mind. I have yet to discover the reasons why, but thoughts of my imprisonment swarm and warp my surroundings. Hermione discovered me in the midst of one and thinking she was Dumbledore, I grabbed her hand hard enough to break. I wanted to leave, ensure I was not in the same room as someone I'd hurt, even unintentionally. But, she pleaded with me not to go, so I remained. I believe she is more than I deserve."

Stopping there, he lowered his gaze when the orange irises opposite him swam with mild confusion and hurt. "Why did you not tell me about this?"

Alistair recognised his hypocrisy here since there was a single element about a past relationship of his that he hadn't told Solomon about, but to tell him the complete truth might have shattered his trust in humans forever.

Raising his eyes again, they wavered with more emotion that Alistair had seen since their reunion. "I am not the same as I once was. I only wanted you to hold onto that idea, for a while."

Realising that it was in consideration of him, Alistair's hurt melted away. "Oh, Solomon, there was no need. I could sense as much and to expect anyone to remain the same after that, would be foolish. But I will always be there. If there is a moment you are able to communicate and you feel as though you are about to experience another 'memory trap' inform me, alright?"

Transported back to his childhood during the days of Alistair gently lecturing him, Solomon nodded. It didn't happen all of a sudden, more gradually. So, he'd be able to do that.

Feeling overly emotional partly through alcohol and what he'd been told Alistair reached out, pulling Solomon into his arms. "I love you, very much."

Solomon could sense that it had shaken him up, just a little. He'd never been as straightforward with his emotions but admitted, it was nice to hear things like this from time to time. "I love you too."

Returning his affection, they were interrupted with something trying to break through their wards. On high alert, for that moment it quickly faded, when realising it wasn't something harmful. Curiously Alistair opened one of the large windows, eyebrows rising with shock at what he could see in the distance. As it drew closer there was no way for it to land smoothly. Seeing this he cushioned its landing, coming to softly rest on the carpet.

Sharing a look between them, Solomon broke the silence. "A Rocket?"
Several feet in length it was surprisingly accurate, right down to the finest details and apparently sturdy enough to make its trip from wherever it came from. As what would be where the Astronaut entered and exited opened, a black howler to indicate multiple persons burst from the opening.

While Solomon had no idea, Alistair had his suspicions. Taking it from mid-air he broke the seal, waiting for its contents to be revealed.

"Allstar, M-Merry Kissmas."

With kissing sounds in the background, Harry spoke up. "Oi, it was an accident! Bugger off Sirius, I meant Christmas."

Punctuated with a hiccup, Alistair could hear that Harry was adorably drunk. Laughing happily he continued to listen, Solomon partially so and looking at what the howler had arrived in with interest.

"If y're there, same t' you er.." Trailing off it was a couple of seconds before Harry offered up a name. "Sullymen."

Hearing sounds gradually drawing closer, Alistair recognised Remus' voice. "Harry, you're fussed as a part."

"Y' mean pissed as a fart right? Y've got that thing. Wha's it called? Spannerism, no... Spoonerism. Th' thing where you mix up the firs' letters of each word."

Before there was an answer to that, a familiar yelp of pain rang out, along with the sound of wood.

As Harry burst into a full-on belly laugh, Alistair pieced together from his hysterical gibberish that Sirius had pretty much tripped over thin air. Ending with their laughter, he had to wonder how on earth it managed to arrive here, without being intercepted and successfully sent off.

Bursting into laughter of his own, Alistair was pleased to hear that Harry was enjoying himself. "I must admit, I have never been addressed as Allstar. How about you, Sullymen?"

Solomon was curious how much Harry had drunk to reach that state. "No. I would like to think that between us, there are few things unknown. But how did this reach us, unharmed?"

Shaking his head from side to side, he simply stared at the rocket. "I believe that is a question which will remain unanswered."

Lapsing into silence, discussions afterwards turned to the drunken humans' combined creation.
Stunned, Harry stared at the ceiling for a long moment. *Thanks for showing me, that solved some of the mystery anyway.*

Alistair ended their mental conversation, with something that narrowed down their destination for today. *Dress warmly.* There were plenty of cold places though, so chances were he really would just have to wait and see.

Seeing Christmas as an opportunity to properly thank Alistair for all he’d done, Harry had never spent so much on one person before, ever. While he’d made sure his friends and family received several as well, he couldn’t seem to help himself. All but one gift, wanting to give this in person instead. It was one that he hoped would be appreciated and the times he’d visited, hadn’t seen anything like it.

Jumping out of his skin, he was abruptly pulled from his thoughts by the door flying open, a black mess of fur crash landing on the bed and licking him for all he was worth. Pinning him to the bed Harry could barely breathe, face liberally coated in dog saliva.

"Sirius, let him go for Merlin's sake." Sounding exasperated Remus dragged him off, Harry wiping his face. Transforming back Sirius tugged him by the hand, not giving him the chance to change. "Come on pup! Presents!"

Apparently, they’d woken up before him. The miracle of hangover potions was definitely not something to be ignored, judging by Sirius’ chipper attitude and Remus’ tired but certainly not hungover appearance.

Since yesterday was a whirlwind of ensuring Sirius didn’t drink until it grew dark outside, he hadn’t taken much time to appreciate the decoration while he’d been at Hogwarts. Every inch was covered in something festive and with some light snow outside, it did much to reinforce Christmas.

With Sirius practically diving into the presents, Harry and Remus gave each other a look but soon joined him. As always, Harry read the labels attached, unwrapping carefully.

From Ginny, he received various Quidditch memorabilia and a broom cleaning kit, Luna an oddly shaped dreamcatcher and a book detailing them. Hermione, to his delight, had picked up some tomes on Parseltongue he’d yet to find for himself and amusingly enough a dark red T-Shirt with the words ‘Quidditch Fanatic.’ in fancy script and below that, two brooms crossed beneath one another. Following on from that he received two hoodies from Neville, one of them animated with snitches and the other, snakes.

Then he came to Seamus. With a short note attached, it was very like him.
Harry, thought these might give you a laugh. It's all bollocks clearly, but it's entertaining bollocks.

Seamus

His actual present was an assortment of sweets, while the other was various merchandise of his that he definitely didn't authorise. Horrified, he picked up a figurine which had a faint resemblance to him.

Catching their attention, Remus picked up one of the books, flipping through the pages. "Utter nonsense. There's plenty who'll believe this, though."

With a shirt in his hand, Sirius wiped tears from his eyes. "Oh Harry, it looks so much like you!"

Seeing what Sirius was pointing at, a pair of overly cutesy, round green eyes from a cartoonish face stared back at him. Throwing the 'Harry Potter' clothing at him and buried beneath the vast amounts, he'd have to check and see what nonsense the author had come up with at a later date.

Next was Lilah, who had hand-drawn him a greeting card, with a message inside.

Merry Christmas Harry! I know boys don't usually like cute things but you seemed to like Ray, so I asked dad to help me make one for you. I hope you like it!

Lilah

Unwrapping the paper Harry stared into the eyes of a small plush teddy, jet black in colour all except for the red stitched scar and bright green glass eyes.

He did like it. Stroking the soft fur he sat it in his lap, a warm feeling filling him up. He'd never had toys before, always taken away by Dudley. Well, he did once, a threadbare stuffed dog that his cousin didn't want any longer, destined for the bin. Slinging it Harry's way Vernon reminded him this was out of the goodness of his heart.

He loved that dog. He used to talk to it since he had no one else but seeing how Harry was so attached to it Dudley became angry, ripping the head from its body one day.

Though he knew it wasn't alive really, Harry had considered 'patches' to be a friend and seeing that was too much for his mind to process. Bursting into tears Dudley laughed, shortly by Vernon who'd
witnessed the entire thing.

After that, he never got attached to anyone or anything again, until Hogwarts and all that came with it.

He'd thank Lilah when next seeing her and hopefully, she liked what he'd gotten her as well.

From Sirius was leather gear of his own, with the promise that one day when he was truly freed, he'd teach him how to ride his bike. Looking forward to when that opportunity arose, he realised his wardrobe selection was much more vast now. He didn't even know what he liked truth be told, so having someone buy clothes for him helped to decide if there was a certain style he preferred.

Curious about this one, he opened the appropriately Gryffindor themed wrapping paper from Malfoy, now Draco, no doubt sarcastically paying homage to his house. Contrary to that was a jet black cloak, with a silver serpent clasp. He could tell it was of high quality but to someone like the Malfoy's, the cost was probably pocket change. It was surprising how much to his taste it was.

What he didn't expect was Solomon's. His gift was memories, each one about some part of history they'd briefly discussed if the topic had arisen during his Occlumency lessons. Stored in bottles with stoppers they were neatly labelled, detailing their length and period of history. With it, was a short note.

To Harry,

I believe that you will find these informative. I was at a loss of what to give as an appropriate gift, so chose knowledge itself.

Enjoy your Christmas,

Solomon

Informative was definitely the word, looking forward to viewing those at a later date and ensuring they were out of harm's way.

Picking up the next present, who it was from caught Harry by surprise. Reading the label closely, he wondered if this would be a new beginning.
Harry,

I guess you probably don't want anything to do with me now. If I was you, I wouldn't either.

Mum and Dad told me you're the one paying for my mind healing sessions? Thanks. I know I don't deserve it but I already feel better. It's nice to have my own thoughts and just that.

There's still this brain tumour thing though. It's weird to know that's affecting me so much but explains a lot. The drastic mood swings will be there until the tumour stops growing so if I'm an arse, sorry in advance.

I'll be back at school in January, so see you then.

Ron

Harry never expected this but even so, he'd still sent Ron something. Maybe they'd all get the chance to know the real him as truly, they never had before now.

Putting the jumbo box of chocolate frogs from Ron aside, he was disrupted by Remus' voice.

"Oh, very funny." Harry glanced over, looking at the bottle of flea shampoo in his hand.

As Sirius burst into laughter, he failed to notice Remus flip the lid open, squeezing the bottle hard as a thick stream of it aimed towards the unsuspecting man.

"Not the hair!" Forgetting that magic was actually a thing Sirius used his arms to shield himself, all the while scrambling away.

Not relenting Remus drove his point home, the entire bottle nearly used up. "Werewolves don't have fleas. Animagi dogs, on the other hand."

Sirius looked like some sort of partially melted abominable snowman. Moving everything yet to be
unwrapped away he slowly edged back, glancing up occasionally even as he picked up a very familiar package from Mrs Weasley.

Unwrapping it, he was presented with her usual homemade fudge and knitted sweater. A dark green colour, a lighter green H sat in the centre, golden snitch in mid-flight just below it.

He'd kept every one of them, even though they no longer fit. It was the kindest and most thoughtful thing anyone had done for him and to throw it away would mean throwing away hours of work put in for him, at least that's how he looked at it. Unfortunately, that choice had been taken away once, the sweaters he'd received from second-year upwards burned by Vernon. He'd managed to protect the very first one though, which was something.

Planning on wearing that later, Harry placed Mrs Weasley's sweater to one side. Still dripping in shampoo, Sirius gestured to the largest pile. "They're all yours, you know."

Harry had assumed they were something Sirius and Remus hadn't sorted out yet. Eyes widening, he stared at them incredulously. "From who?"

"Who do you think?" As Sirius made kissing motions Harry took the nearly empty bottle from Remus, splattering his cheek with it.

"What is this, gang up on Sirius day?" Sending a mild glare at both of them he cleaned himself up with a wave of his wand, but the strong scent of shampoo intended for dogs still remained.

All of those were from Alistair? There had to be at least 30, if not more.

Suddenly, that reminded him of Dudley's birthday one year. He'd received 36 presents in total, throwing a tantrum because last year it was 37. With a promise from Petunia to buy two extra presents when they went out, it was a stark reminder that though Dudley was his cousin, they couldn't be more different.

Pulled from his memory, it was enough to overwhelm him. This year, he'd received more presents than he'd ever had in his entire life. That was something monumental and though he appreciated every single one of them, it would be nothing next to all the people he'd met.

But really, it was too much. Each present was a different colour, wrapped to perfection and so picture perfect it was a shame to ruin the work put in. On each one was a small note, none of them failing to encourage a smile once rarely seen on Harry's face.

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Harry,
When I first discovered this, it was you that came to mind. It is my fervent hope that it will be useful and one day, I may have the pleasure and privilege of receiving something created by your hand.

Love, Alistair.

If there wasn't a compliment sneaked in somewhere it was a hint as to what was inside, this one being a calligraphy set. His writing was terrible and always had been, with no one properly instructing him. But with this were various kinds of writing implements, from Quills to Fountain Pens. High-quality parchment, wax, seals for them and envelopes, self-refilling and self-inking.

Knowing that it would definitely be useful, Harry wondered if Alistair would be able to show him how to write better. With a quill, his writing was poor, even when taking his time and more often than not, had to make use of the Room of Requirement so he wouldn't spend the entire night trying to meet required inches.

He couldn't expect a miracle, but managing to go a paragraph without smudges would be a start.

That was only one thing, however. To his shock, he found wrapped up every single item of clothing he'd liked but decided against in Madame Bellerose. Some of them he'd never even picked up, simply looked at and thought it was nice. Swallowing once, the total price would probably be enough to cover the mortgage of the house he'd heard Vernon complain about more than once.

Trying not to think about that too much, he worried about what he'd got him instead. He hoped it would be enough, some things he was sure Alistair might not have seen since he'd spent the past several decades in his own country, stopping all travelling.

But still, he hoped he'd like them. He treasured every one, the amount of new clothing growing and, perhaps not so coincidentally, clothing perfect for the colder climate. There were even some things he didn't know he liked, a testament to just how well Alistair knew him. There were things for practical or personal use, decoration, education and overall, a nice balance of different things. He could see each one was well thought out and now more than ever, he was impatient for the mere hours to pass by.

"Have I mentioned that you spoil others, including myself, too much? Thank you, though."
On the verge of sighing, Solomon stared at the sizeable pile of presents and along with it, far too much festive decoration than what was necessary. Largely due to Alistair's 'puppy eyes' which really shouldn't work at this point but did, he wore a blue and white Santa hat but firmly refused the suit. Finding the pom-pom slightly irritating he'd spelled it to stay in place, keeping it firmly away from his field of vision.

Not worried in the slightest, Alistair picked up on a point that Solomon had vaguely hoped would go unnoticed, eyes twinkling.

"Perhaps I can say the same for you? Hermione in particular."

Solomon was usually more sensible with money, only getting the necessities but this year, he'd taken a leaf out of his brother's book and may have indulged a bit too much. Even before his established relationship, he'd listened closely to what Hermione liked, picking up things for her here and there but afterwards, he'd gone on something of a frenzy. He'd spared no expense with Alistair either, receiving more enjoyment from shopping than he usually would, since he had the freedom and appreciation to once again.

Alistair loved this time of year. It was his favourite, with the exception of Solomon's birthday. It gave him an excuse to plan big surprises every year and with it being in January, he already had plans in mind.

But now, there would be Harry's birthday too. While that was months away from now, he still happily planned away. He enjoyed spending a lot on partners, friends and family. While it was more about family for him than anything else, he liked to show his appreciation in various ways. However, he was unable to predict just how many presents Harry had bestowed upon him.

Alistair could tell if they were wrapped by hand or magic, with faint traces of it still remaining so all those there were done by hand. He wasn't one to tear wrapping paper open, taking his time to appreciate everything there. However, he was certainly one to verbally exclaim his delight. Feeling Solomon's amused gaze on him, his voice followed shortly after.

"Am I mistaken in thinking that you are a fully grown man?"

There was no heat or irritation behind the words, only mild teasing. But if there was one thing no one could outdo Alistair in, it was the art of teasing. Giving him a mock admonishing look, he folded his arms. "I am old enough to place you in time out, Solomon Sakari. Will a reminder of those times be needed?"

Not expecting that comeback, Solomon quickly closed his mouth, cheeks flushing faintly. When their parents had died, he was only ten at the time and as a legal adult, Alistair was given the responsibility of him and ended up filling all the family roles. Both were torn apart with their loss, but seeing his father killed before him and his mother's dead body not long after that, had taken away his childhood innocence.
As most children did he tested boundaries and Alistair's patience, finding himself in trouble more often than not and usually, said things out of anger he later regretted. But with age he mellowed out, calming down considerably to the point where he could look back at his childhood and feel thankful that his brother was always there for him.

"I see your point." Saying only this he swiftly moved on, Alistair silently counting this as a victory and for one second, was reminded of those trying times.

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To Solomon,

My Mum and Dad weren't much for reading, but they always enjoyed reading Roald Dahl to me and one day, surprised me with something. They said it would be better in the hands of someone who had an appreciation for books. While I do, I've found someone who will appreciate this even more than me.

Merry Christmas! (Open it!)

Hermione x

---

Solomon unwrapped the present, seeing Roald Dahl's the BFG. Kept in excellent condition it was hardback, opposed to the paperback edition which was often less durable.

Realising what the brackets referred to he opened to the inside, finding a signature very familiar to him. Unable to hide his surprise, he could tell with a single glance that this was authentic.

Unfortunately, he'd discovered Roald Dahl too late, who'd passed away and with that, the slight possibility of having anything signed was gone. Precious beyond any explanation and she'd chosen to give it to him? This was one of the most generous presents Solomon had ever been gifted with. For a long moment, he simply stared but then, could feel a genuine smile spreading across his face.

"Solomon?"

Alistair was surprised but pleased to see him looking so happy. Curiously he listened, able to see his
passion for this particular story. He was unaware of the details but was filled in, sending a silent thank you to Hermione for encouraging such a peaceful, untroubled smile.

There was one present among them which he didn't expect, from Molly. Curious as to what it could be he carefully unwrapped it, presented with what looked like homemade fudge in a packet and neatly folded, a sweater. It wasn't something he'd worn before and curiously, unfolded it.

Lilac in colour a capital A with silver outlining sat in the middle and twisted around it, a soft golden ribbon. Tied into a bow, it was almost as if the letter itself was gift wrapped.

She'd knitted this for him. Harry had mentioned her knitting before but had never expected to be given one of his own. He was touched. So touched, that the urge to thank her right then and there was overwhelming.

Putting it on it fit perfectly, Solomon tilting his head. "Different, but it suits you."

"I shall be back in a moment." Before Solomon could respond Alistair disappeared, to the Weasley's home.

Once arriving he could hear the sounds of several voices. Hoping that he wasn't disturbing anything important he quickly knocked on the door, a tired looking Arthur answering. Seeing him he was greeted with a warm smile.

"Alistair! Can I help you?"

Before either could respond, a high pitched shriek punctuated the air.

"Ginny? What's wrong?" Arthur shouted back, both of them doing their best to make out Ginny's words.

"HARRYGOTMEAFIREBOLT!"

Paling, Arthur blew out a breath. "She'll practice all day now, even Molly will be hard pressed to stop her." Once the shock wore off he shook his head, smiling softly. Noticing that Alistair wore one of Molly's sweaters, he guessed what it was he wanted, before saying. "Molly! Alistair's here."

"Coming!"

Leaving the doorway open he returned to his family, Molly soon taking his place and her whole face lighting up. "You look lovely dear!"
Never one to hold back with affection, Alistair swept her into an embrace. "You are very talented. I am touched beyond words that time was spent knitting this for me. I will treasure it."

It was almost as if he'd been given a present by his mother again. Molly wasn't related to him at all of course, but the feeling remained.

Surprised but touched by his own gratitude she returned his affection, silently adopting him as an extended family member. Hearing several crashes from inside Molly gently pulled away.

"I'm pleased that you like it. Merry Christmas to you. I have to go, can't leave those two alone for one moment.."

Assuming she was referring to the Weasley twins he laughed, understanding completely. Wishing her the same as the door closed, a warm feeling encased him, from more than the sweater.

No more than a few minutes he returned, having saved Harry's until last. There wasn't a single one he disliked, simply knowing who it came from made Alistair want to go there and steal him away from Sirius and Remus earlier.

There was a various assortment of hair ribbons, to his delight, each one different than the last. Clothing out of the ordinary from what he usually wore, seeing Harry usually in 'hoodies'. It would be a new but exciting experience for him, outside of his comfort zone in one sense but an area he was more than willing to broaden his horizons in. There was one T-Shirt among them he had a particular fondness for.

Blood red for the main colour a pumpkin situated itself in the middle, a floral design in lighter and darker oranges surrounding it. Above that, in interesting font were the words, 'Pumpkin Spice.'

Though he already had what he'd wear in mind for today, that quickly changed to something else. He had the feeling that seeing him in something different from normal would make Harry happy. Since that was what he strived for he set that shirt aside, for later. Trying not to check the time too often, he made sure the present he wanted to give Harry in person was safely nearby, looking forward to giving him it.

It had to be time now, surely? agonisingly ticking away, it left Harry practically bouncing on the edge of his seat. Several times he'd checked to make sure he wouldn't be forgetting anything, especially the present he wanted to give in person. Wearing everything needed for the colder weather he stood outside, serving just as well for here as he'd already said his goodbyes to Sirius and Remus beforehand.

Wearing his new quidditch shirt and sweater, he wondered what Alistair would be wearing. A part
of him hoped for some of the more casual wear like his, but most likely it would be his usual attire. Not that he minded, liking that just as much, but it would be nice to see him in a different light from usual.

He was startled from his thoughts by a sudden and silent arrival. Dressed similarly in winter outerwear, it was already a slightly different sight for Harry, only ever seeing him outdoors and dressed like that around school a small handful of times.

As Alistair's gloved hand touched Harry's own, he intertwined their fingers and instantly, disappeared.

Reappearing in completely different surroundings, every inch was covered in a thick layer of snow. Rather than the light to medium dusting of snow on trees, he was used to, clumps of it stuck to branches as if replacing the leaves there once upon a time. Not a cloud in sight the skies were clear blue and without a doubt, couldn't be called anything but a wonderland.

Seeing why he'd been asked to dress warmly, it made Ireland's weather seem like a tropical paradise in comparison. While the air was still with no breeze, Harry could tell that taking his gloves off here without a strong warming charm would ensure his fingers froze within seconds.

But still, it was beautiful. He'd had the worst experience with snow but here, with Alistair, there was a side of it he'd never seen before.

The tip of his nose and cheeks colder now, Harry drank in the sights around. "Where are we?"

"This is Luosto, Finland. I have booked us for an overnight stay at Hotel Aurora and later, will be another surprise. Merry Christmas, my love."

Grinning like an idiot with the term of endearment, a kiss was pressed to the tip of his nose. Catching his attention he glanced up, lost within the eyes which Harry believed could melt even the most stubborn of snow. As he did so his lips were gently captured, one way to negate the sudden drop in temperature.

Distracted by the sights, it was enough to nearly forget what he wanted to say. Gratitude shining within his eyes, Harry squeezed his hand. "You know you didn't need to get me so many things, right? I've never had so much in my life, but everything was great, truly."

Other than because Alistair adored him, that was why he'd wanted to do this. Knowing that he'd spent most of his life without anything, saddened him beyond words. The very least that could be done was this and seeing him happy made it all the more worthwhile.

"Let them be for all the years that I have not known you. For if I had, I would have taken you away from them within a heartbeat. Everyone deserves to be loved."
Knowing that Alistair referred to his relatives, the reminder that he would never have to live with them again layered his fluttering heart with a sense of peace. Making their way through the snow, Alistair spoke once more.

"I must thank you for my own as well. The hair ribbons, in particular, pleased me."

Indicating to his hair Harry recognised one of the ribbons as part of the selection gifted to him. "I knew you'd like those, the ribbons are really nice. Not that I want to grow my hair for them or anything, but it's like a guessing game for what colour you'll choose the next day."

Pleased at his thoughtfulness and amused by his comment, Alistair tightened the grip on Harry's hand a little, as it became less walking and more wading through the snow. No less excited he continued talking, far from winded though a little slower than normal. "I'm glad you came when you did, I think I was driving Sirius insane because I couldn't sit still."

"Admittedly, I was in a similar state. Perhaps Solomon and Sirius will unite in their mutual irritation."

If that did happen, he'd have to make a hasty retreat.

Before long they came to a path, far smoother than the new footprints they'd created as many others had marked the way. Able to walk easier now Harry could see a building in the distance. The only hotels he'd seen were in London, so already had a pre-built image of what it might be like.

However, it was nothing of what he expected.

It looked warm and inviting but simultaneously, an impressive building. What Santa's Grotto must be like came to mind, a large entryway with smaller roofes on either side and towards the back, the main body of the building. There was something charming about the design and away from all other things such as the number of vehicles, people and lack of nature, it only increased the appeal.

Fairly close by and dotted in the distance were many trees. It was only breathing the air in here that he could detect a distinct type of freshness not present during his time in Surrey.

Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Alistair with a lack of confidence or self-assurance. Simply glancing at him always provided strength that he couldn't get elsewhere and knowing instinctively he was familiar with this place, let himself be lead inside.

The interior reflected the exterior, in the naturistic sense but still maintained a level of professionalism. Unsurprisingly Alistair communicated in their native tongue, a brief exchange before they were handed a key and something else attached to it.
Noticing his gaze directed towards it, Alistair explained. "That is an alarm."

An alarm? Slightly nervous, Harry voiced his thoughts. "Is it common to be attacked in this sort of place?"

Alistair’s first instinct was to laugh, refraining when he saw Harry’s genuine concern. "It is perfectly safe. This is something to notify us of a certain event when it is about to begin."

Wondering what he was referring to but doubting he’d get a direct answer, Harry decided the best thing to do was just wait and see. But rather than their rooms being indoors, they were somewhere different and completely unexpected. Stopping in his tracks, Harry couldn't help but stare in slight amazement. Glass igloos?

Without going through the entrance he could already see inside each one within his view, rooms immaculate and beds of various sizes. Arriving outside of an igloo with one of the bigger beds they went inside, Harry placing Alistair's present away for safekeeping. Whatever happened later on in the day, he'd give him it then. It was only when sitting on the bed and able to look out, that he realised something.

“If people look in, they can see us, right?”

Thoughts rushing in a completely different direction, his chin was tilted up as Alistair’s mesmerising gaze captured him. “And what exactly are you imagining, hmm?”

“Nothing, really-“

Before he could continue Alistair pounced, covering Harry’s body with his own. Pressing soft kisses against his jawline, to gravitate upwards and take an earlobe between his teeth. Nibbling it gently, Harry’s defences quickly crumbled in the face of such a passionate yet steady attack.

“Are you sure? I will give you the chance to change your answer. If not, there may be consequences.”

Nearly nose to nose he hovered over him, voice lowly seductive. Swallowing once, he wondered what would happen if he continued to deny his true thoughts. As though reading his mind Alistair loosened the scarf around Harry’s neck, kissing the way down his now bare throat.

Finding just this alone thrilling, it was a struggle to say anything in response to his question but somehow, managed. “Maybe this sort of stuff crossed my mind for a split second...”

Seeing that this was about as honest Harry would be, Alistair quickly righted him. Inwardly and outwardly pleased with his slightly dishevelled appearance and expression, the younger man blew
out a breath. “You’re too good at that.”

Taking this for the compliment it was, Alistair didn’t let the conversation end there. “I would be delighted to teach you. I am a Professor so certainly qualified.”

Though it was partly in jest, Harry seriously thought about asking for that at some point. He wouldn’t want to do it with anyone else but him, but tips from a guaranteed expert might let him catch Alistair off guard more often.

Leaving the things they’d brought behind inside, Harry wanted to explore outside a little more. Leaving the hotel, for now, there wasn’t an inch of ground untouched by snow. In a playful mood, he let Alistair get further ahead, crouching down to form a snowball between his hands. Packing snow together until he had a decent sized ball, he aimed for his back.

Without any indication that he'd detected the snowball at all, it missed him as he sidestepped to the right. Expecting as much Harry tried again but each time, missing the mark.

"Curse you and your dodging skills!" Harry shouted, impressed but still trying to think of ways he could get a hit in. The next time he blinked, Alistair was no longer in front.

"I shall have to break this curse you have cast upon me."

Detecting his voice directly behind, Harry hadn't the time to open his mouth for a response, before he was lifted into Alistair's arms.

Caught off guard he yelped but didn't struggle, quickly settling. Playing along, a slight smirk graced his lips. "How are you going to do that? This curse is pretty strong."

Alistair stopped before a particularly large pile of snow, murmuring into his ear. "I believe that this is the solution."

And then he was dropped, having a soft yet cold landing in the pile of snow which his body sank into.

Sucking in a breath at the sudden cold he sent a mild glare, which soon dissolved into a small smile as the sounds of his joyful laughter rang throughout the air.

"Yeah, I think that did it." Admitting this, the hand which Alistair offered to help him up sparked a sudden idea. Grabbing onto it he pulled and going with the motions, Alistair's body hovered over his. Closing the distance instantly Harry captured his lips.
As one arm rested on his back, Harry used his other hand to collect snow, feeling that he had just enough there, his hand cupped the back of Alistair's head and with it, the snow.

As he gasped, Harry gave a mental cheer of victory. Locking eyes with him he shrugged or at least, the best he could. "I have to get advantages where possible. You've got years of experience on me."

Rubbing noses with him Alistair rose to his feet, pulling Harry up shortly after and brushing the snow from him. Doing the same Harry reached up, carefully smoothing his hair down.

"That was a cunning plan. Severus may not resign if you decided to transfer houses."

"Is that what he said?" At Alistair's nod, Harry snorted. "I wouldn't blame him, especially if I ended up in Slytherin, to begin with. How did that conversation come up anyway?"

Taking his hand again, they continued walking. "Some of the staff including myself were watching you conversate with your former rival."

Understanding now, his mind flicked back to that day. "We're friends now. I got him a present but I didn't expect one back. It was the same for him, but I really feel like this year's turned around for the better."

Curious to know his thoughts on the matter, Alistair continued. "Minerva was wondering what house I would be best suited to."

Now that he'd mentioned it, Harry wondered the same. It didn't take long to come up with an answer. "I don't think anyone's fully Gryffindor, Slytherin or any other house, it's just where the Sorting Hat thinks you'll do best. I don't know what you were like as a kid but right now..."

Thinking over everything he'd discovered about him or been told, Harry provided an honest answer. "You're really brave. To go through what you have because of the gender you're attracted to for so long on top of losing your parents at a young age, I don't think many people would have the strength to carry on after that. You're loyal, I can see the strength of your bond with Solomon and you've stuck by my side as well. But then you're intelligent as well, I've learned a lot of things. So I'd say any house, except Slytherin."

Alistair agreed but was intrigued at his reasoning. "Why not Slytherin?"

Harry thought of how best to word it. "You're... sweet. You've got no ulterior motive than to bring smiles to people's faces and you're not the type to use others if need be to further your own goals in life. You're ambitious, but it's not just for your own personal gain, it helps others as well."

Alistair was surprised by the depth of Harry's observations but more than that, one word stood out
among the rest. "You think that I am sweet?"

While some would take offence to a slightly more feminine compliment, Alistair's heart basked in the warmth of Harry's words.

Feeling slightly awkward now, Harry scratched the back of his head unconsciously. "Well, yeah. You are. It was the only adjective I could think of on sort of short notice."

Every time, Alistair thought that the possibility of his affection for Harry growing much more would be slim but then, he was consistently wrong. He was so innocent to certain ways of the world, despite being stripped of much long before he should have. Holding him close for a moment, his attention was caught by the sudden sparkle in Harry's eyes."Let's roll down that hill!"

Of all the things Alistair expected him to say, this wasn't one of them. Bewildered, he watched as Harry sprinted through the snow to the best of his abilities. Lying on his back, he let himself tip over the edge, the momentum carrying him downward.

"Come on!"

With Harry's shout in the distance as he began gathering speed, Alistair had never been more confused in his life. What on earth possessed him to do this? He wasn't a killjoy by any means, though couldn't help but feel somewhat odd doing this. Following suit he copied Harry, trying his best to come up with possible reasonings though found that difficult, as his face occasionally brushed against the snow. Landing face upward he lay there for a moment, wondering what other spontaneity Harry had up his sleeves.

Springing to his feet, Harry cheered. "Brilliant! I've always wanted to do that. Fun right?"

Alistair couldn't disagree. Unexpectedly it was but had no bad words to say, especially when Harry was enjoying himself so much. Before he could stand up their roles reversed, with Harry on top this time."Got you."

"And what will you do now, Harry? I await your decision." Through his actions Alistair's ribbon had loosened, leaving his hair splayed in the pure whiteness beneath.

With a dusting of snow across his cheeks, Harry simply admired the view at first. It didn't seem to matter if he was sleeping, half-naked or teaching classes, there was always a new side of Alistair for him to drink in. After a moment he picked up a large amount of snow, looking at him meaningfully.

"Prepare to be atta- ahh!"

Before he could finish Alistair quickly switched their positions, Harry dropping the snow he'd
collected. While obvious Alistair was stronger he didn't resist whenever he fought back and for a while, played in the snow together. Both enjoying themselves they laughed and anyone who might chance upon them would see nothing but a close-knit couple appreciating every second together.

As both were soaked through, Alistair quickly dried them off and applied a mild warming charm. Sending him a thankful smile Harry crouched down, making something else from the snow. After a few minutes, he spread his arms wide. "And here we have Dumbledore!"

Amused, Alistair could see no resemblance other than the generally long and thin shape of its torso. Similarly to his concentration when creating a golem the snow around them swirled, slowly but surely forming into a lifesize replica of the aforementioned Headmaster.

Staring at it, Harry poked the tip of his crooked nose. "That's scarily accurate." Afterwards, he targeted the beard, cutting through it with his fingers and watching as it fell, to blend back in with its surroundings.

"It is almost finished. I believe there is one final touch needed." Tilting his head as if to regard it Alistair took one small step back, angling his body and catching Harry by surprise he delivered a swift kick, foot connecting with snow-dumbledore's head to knock it clean off.

Harry had no idea he could do that. How many things had he trained in, exactly? He knew about the weapons, particularly sword training but this? At his full strength, he could easily kill someone with such a blow. Clapping enthusiastically he watched as the head landed somewhere distant. "You've got more pent up aggro than I thought for him. Nice kick!"

Harry definitely couldn't get his leg that high. Though he supposed it was easier for Alistair, taller than both Dumbledore and Professor Snape. In fact, by the sounds of it, the only one taller than Alistair was Brio who, according to Luna, was incredibly so.

As his height put him at a disadvantage, Harry aimed for somewhere even more satisfactory or at least, where he imagined Dumbledore's vitals were beneath the snow robes. Kicking through to the other side, it crumbled beneath their combined onslaught. Dusting his hands off, Harry felt strangely at peace. "That was honestly therapeutic."

Alistair couldn't agree more. Seeing that they'd spent more time outside than he'd thought by the slowly darkening sky, he took his hand again. "Shall we head back? I imagine that your antics in the snow have worked up an appetite."

Now that he mentioned it, Harry was hungry. "Good idea. Thanks for messing around with me, it feels good to act like a kid again."

Pulling him in to ruffle his hair fondly, Alistair was more than happy to accommodate. "You are welcome. Reconnecting with childhood roots is surprisingly pleasant."
Once again, Dumbledore could kiss his arse with the all Vampires are evil and need to be eradicated mentality. The fewer people like Dumbledore in the world, Harry believed, the better.

Sometime later, there was one minor disturbance when sitting nearby a man on his own, as they waited for their orders to arrive. Every now and then he would shoot glares in their direction, facial colour rapidly turning red. Reminding him of Vernon, Harry grew uncomfortable and couldn't settle. Bitting his lip worriedly he shuffled closer to Alistair, whispering quietly. "I think he's angry at us."

Knowing who he was referring to and suspecting what the issue may be Alistair paid him no mind, wrapping an arm around Harry. "I believe you are right. But there is no need to worry. He is not important to me."

As he planted a brief kiss on Harry's forehead, that seemed to be the last straw. Chair scraping against the polished wooden floor he stormed over, shouting in a language that Harry couldn't understand a word of. "Du är äcklig, gå göra det någon annanstans!"

Slamming his hands down on the table Harry flinched, relaxing only slightly when Alistair pulled him even closer. Not phased in the slightest, he responded calmly. "Om det finns ett problem, föreslår jag att du lämnar. Vi har inte gjort något fel."

Remembering the spell in Paris Harry quickly cast it, as lack of understanding only increased his anxiety. Catching the gist of what was happening now he stiffened, a threatening finger pointed their way. "Don't you tell me to leave! I have a right to my opinion and my opinion is that what you're doing is unnatural."

Alistair longed for the day when he didn't have to interact with these kinds of people. They had an attitude which ate away at his patience much like acid spilt upon a carpet. "And I have a right to mine, as well. I say, that we have not caused a disturbance and rather, it is you creating something astronomical from nothing."

"Is there a problem?" Coming over to them was a petite brunette waitress, directing her question towards the angry man.

"Yes, there is a problem! Why are you letting people like them in here?"

"People like them?"

Lowering his voice he sneered, speaking the word as if it was a curse. "Gays."
Understanding what the problem was, her expression went cold. "Sir, we welcome any and all guests regardless of their sexual preferences. Harassment goes against this hotel's policy."

Flabbergasted he opened and closed his mouth repeatedly. Glancing between the three of them he stormed off, taking his coat with him.

Once he left, she bowed to them apologetically. "I'm sorry, I hope this hasn't ruined your experience."

Though Harry was shaken up, it hadn't ruined it for a moment. "No, it's great here."

Nodding in agreement, Alistair smiled to soothe her. "Not at all, it is a lovely establishment and I thank you for the assistance. May I ask your name?"

Reassured by their reaction, she was more than happy to. "Anja."

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Alistair and this is Harry."

Able to tell with a glance she was the good-natured sort they shook her hand, one after another. Hearing someone call her name she dismissed herself shortly after, saying she'd come back with the bill once they'd finished.

As it was warmer inside than out they took their coats off, Harry staring at Alistair in surprise. "Mrs Weasley made you one too? We match!" Giddy with excitement he studied him in a new light, interested to see the change of clothing.

Seeing that Harry also wore his Alistair lifted his sweater up, to show the pumpkin T-Shirt. "I have a particular fondness for this as well."

Seeing that he was wearing what Harry had bought him, his happiness soared to new heights. "You look great! I didn't think you'd wear it to be honest since it's so far from your usual style, but I'm glad you like it."

Showing what lay beneath his own sweater, Alistair correctly guessed that it was Ginny who'd purchased the quidditch themed shirt for him. Reminding him of earlier on in the day, he decided he should relay the good news. "Ginny was overjoyed with your gift for her. I heard her shouting while talking with Arthur. I'd come for Molly, to thank her for my sweater. No one has ever made such a thing for me before, so the act was deeply touching."

Harry knew what he meant. "I hadn't either. When I got that my first Christmas at Hogwarts, I was so happy. That's the indication that you're an extended member of her family, by the way. I'm pretty sure she sees you as another son now."
Laughing softly at the thought with their age difference, it served to turn his mood around completely and could relax more, now that the man had gone. Glancing up at Alistair, he voiced what was on his mind. "Is it always like that?"

Knowing what he was referring to, his eyes flickered with brief sadness. "I am afraid so though often, it is usually worse than this. Are you alright?"

Appreciative of his concern, Harry nodded. "Yeah, just caught me by surprise that's all."

As their orders arrived, Harry wondered when he'd ever get used to being able to eat at his own pace and have someone that enjoyed his company. Though it had been a long while since he'd spent his company with the Dursleys, the novelty of some things hadn't worn off yet.

As they finished up, Anja came back for the bill. Paying it, he placed something extra onto the tabletop. Giving her a warm smile, he pushed it forward slightly. "This is for you. You are doing a wonderful job."

Shocked, she remained motionless for a moment. She'd been tipped before but never this much. Her own family had never shown such kindness, never mind a stranger. Misty-eyed, she bowed her head slightly to try and regain some composure. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

Doing her best to remain Professional at least in front of the guests Anja swiftly left, Harry looking at Alistair with warmth. "If you're trying to get me to jump you or something, you're going the right way about it. You've made probably her entire week, never mind her day."

Shaking his head softly, he wondered if there was a limit to his kindness because right now, he couldn't see one.

Under any other circumstances Harry's words could be seen as sinister, however, Alistair would more than welcome such an attack. filling the silence between them were the alarms Alistair had told him about before, each of the guests who had one going off simultaneously.

Knowing what was about to happen Alistair's excitement levels rose, mainly for Harry who had yet to see them. Leading him outside and away from everyone else they disappeared, reappearing where he believed they'd see them best and undisturbed.

Already it was beginning to happen, a clear, cloudless night with many twinkling stars. Placing a hand over Harry's eyes for a minute, he lowered it shortly after.
Able to see again, Harry was stunned. Rather than the usual night sky, he expected to see it was instead filled with bright colours. Spreading across in shimmering waves, the sight took his breath away. "What is this?"

"It is an Aurora. The hotel we are staying at offers one of the best views of them, with alarms to indicate when they will appear."

Harry finally understood now. Unable to draw his gaze away, it was as if his mind had expanded further with this new knowledge. "I'd never heard of them, let alone seen them. Thanks for bringing me, this is amazing..."

The only thing which drew Harry's attention was Alistair's creation of a bench for them to sit on, out of thin air and no longer feeling the wind's bitter chill. As Harry sat beside him Alistair shook his head. "That is the wrong seat."

Finding himself with a warmer seat Harry didn't blush for once, coming to expect it. Instead, he leaned back, hair tickling his cheek as Alistair lightly rested his chin on his shoulder.

For a while, they remained there, content with each other and their surroundings until Alistair softly broke the silence. "There is something that I wanted to give in person."

Turning his head to gaze at him questioningly, Alistair held a small and neatly wrapped present in the palm of his hand. Another one? Surprised that they had the same idea, Harry was curious as to what it could be. Taking it from him this wasn't labelled, though had no need to be. Unwrapping it there was a black box, with elegant golden borders. Once he opened it, Harry's eyes widened in astonishment.

They were earrings and immediately, recognised the design to be that of the Lothaire family's crest. They were studs, medium in size and intricately detailed. Looking closer he could see gemstones embedded within them, specifically the ruby red of the Wyvern's eyes. They were stunning and Harry didn't even want to think of their cost.

While Harry looked at them with awe, Alistair provided an explanation. "The base metal is platinum, reinforced with ruthenium for greater durability. The eyes are pigeon blood rubies and the crucifix detailing are Colombian emeralds. They come with magical protection that only the extremely talented could even begin to scratch the surface of."

"Where did you get them from?" Harry asked, studying them closely.

"They were specially made for you. Though, I added the protections myself. Allow me."

Removing the stud from Harry's ear he gently put the Wyvern one in its place, repeating that for his other ear. Once finished he showed a reflective surface, so that Harry was able to see his ears clearly.
Harry believed they really did suit him, giving a boost of confidence. Closing the box with his old studs he placed it to the side, turning around and showing his appreciation by wrapping his arms firmly around. "I love them."

Happy to know that his last gift was well received Alistair returned it, surprised by Harry's next words. "I've got something for you as well."

Even more nervous than before he took it from the inside of his coat, smoothing out the wrapping a little before handing it over. "It's not really that extravagant or anything but I thought you might appreciate it."

Stomach churning he faced forward, letting the aurora calm his heart, along with the comforting weight of his new earrings.

Curious as to what it could be Alistair unwrapped the present. With its back facing towards him he could see it was a photo frame, with something attached to the back so that it would stand on a sturdy surface or could be hung up on a wall.

But once he turned it around, the last thing he expected to see, stared at him back in the photo.

His mother and father, safely within the frame's confines, sat together in a snapshot of a memory which he knew all too well. It was a shared moment between them, glancing away as their hearts connected through loving gazes. With the same smile as Alistair had his mother laughed, giving a little wave and though more reserved, his father was no less content. It was ten seconds at the most before repeating again and each time, Alistair's own heart swelled further.

He was a man of many words, one of the reasons why he found it interesting to converse with Severus, who held an impressive vocabulary of his own. But this time, he couldn't think of anything to say.

Long ago, he'd accepted the fact that the majority of his family was gone and wouldn't be back and as with their possessions, let them fade into a pleasant memory. When sharing this memory with Harry, it was because he wanted to open his heart further, allow him in to meet them, in one sense.

Since he'd come to accept it, the thought of doing something like this hadn't crossed his mind, despite having the awareness that such an advancement in technology might allow this possibility. Hand trembling faintly, his fingertips brushed across the glass. Apparently, he'd stayed silent for too long, as Harry spoke again.

"While having a memory is good, sometimes it's nice to have something to look at, as a reminder of how you came to be here. I thought it was sad that you don't have anything like that, so I went to Diagon Alley and checked to see if I could for you. Sorry if the frame's a bit weird, I made it and I'm not that creative."
Not only had Harry taken something which Alistair held dear and breathed new life into it, but added a personal touch which no one in the world could truly recreate. It was made of cherry oak, polished to a smooth shine with something incredibly homely about it.

Sensing his nervousness, Alistair found the words that he'd been looking for. "No one has ever put so much thought and consideration into a gift for me. This is something that no amount of money or valuables could ever buy. It is precious beyond words. I-

Stopping for a moment, pure emotion and gratitude threatened to overwhelm anything else. Carefully placing the photo frame down, he continued.

"I am unsure if anything will adequately express my deepest gratitude, but you have earned it and so much more. My heart is yours. Harry, thank you."

He knew just where he'd put it as well, knowing Solomon would appreciate this just as much. Though he couldn't hold Harry any closer physically, that didn't stop him from trying. Smoothing back his hair he placed a kiss directly against the lightning bolt scar, content for him to be in his arms.

Relieved with Alistair's reaction, Harry couldn't deny the beauty of their surroundings. But even so, they couldn't compare with the man that had stolen his own heart long before now. He'd never felt so loved, appreciated, everything. While his friends, Remus and Sirius had shown him what it could feel like, Alistair had, time and time again, with every action, thought and words spoken.

As December 25th began drawing to a close, it would be no exaggeration to say that this was the best Christmas of Harry's life.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly one of my favourite chapters to write, I've had the northern lights idea and Harry's present to him for ages and it feels good to include it now xD
With Open Arms

Chapter Summary

Sirius is suspicious, Severus receives a delayed gift and Alistair has found a friendly rival in Harry's improved teasing methods. Later on, the five friends are treated to shocking information, but none so more than Luna. While she discovers the deeper meaning their days end elsewhere, with Harry seeking professional help.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Presents are exchanged, along with what Harry would consider the best Christmas to date.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was something strange going on. Sirius had no proof or any glaring signs, but he couldn't shake the feeling loose.

No stranger to pranks, he'd like to think he could detect any and all but this one confused him, deeply. There were no painted bright colours, ice beneath his feet or even anything to change his clothing to something really unpleasant but over the last few days, there were changes in him.

Not keen on returning to Grimmauld Place for clothing he still had there, an elf assigned to the property had fetched them for him. He had a variety but rather than slightly warmer colours, he'd chosen to wear one of the very few green outfits he owned.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he was a far cry from how he used to be, but even so many years of being stuck in hell on earth hadn't ridden him of his good looks. This, he could say with confidence. However, rather than feeling satisfied with his appearance, there was something missing. He enjoyed accessories and couldn't help but feel his lapel needed a little sprucing up. Picking up transfiguration tips from James, Sirius fashioned a small brooch. When seeing what it was, he stiffened.

Two silver snakes intertwined, each had deep green eyes and rather than feel disturbed by this, contentment filled him.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" Muttering to himself in the mirror he went to change it, but his wand hovered over, motionless. He didn't want to. Why? If anything it should be a proud lion, to represent seven years of Gryffindor house, not Slytherin.

At first, he suspected Remus to have done something but out of everyone, Sirius liked to think he
knew him best. This sort of pranking wasn't his style. Sirius knew he wasn't acting or thinking this willingly, suspecting some sort of potion or spell making him feel this way.

His next suspect was Harry, who he knew had a motive. If Sirius was him he wouldn't hesitate to get his revenge, especially after what he said. While Alistair entered his mind, he quickly dismissed that. The situation was more between him and Harry than anyone else and though he knew of his pranking nature, couldn't visualise it.

As Remus emerged from the bathroom he opened his mouth as if to say something, but snapped it closed straight after. As his eyes glanced down to Sirius' lapel, he knew he wouldn't get away without being subjected to a round of questioning. "Snakes?"

Not sure how to answer, Sirius, shrugged. "You tell me. Something weird's going on. I think Harry's pranked me."

Amused, a twinkle entered his amber eyes. "Or, you're embracing the inner Slytherin."

He didn't want to think about that. Shuddering, Sirius threw him a mild glare. "Yeah, funny joke."

Remus dismissed Harry as being the possible culprit, suspecting Alistair. He could see how displeased Sirius' actions had made him the day of his argument with Harry and on his behalf, it was possible he'd done something. If so, then neither of them would be able to remove it. Not that Remus wanted to if true, believing that Sirius was more than deserving.

Still amused, Remus left him to it. "I'd finish preening if I were you, Harry's returning from wherever Alistair took him."

"Preening? He wasn't a Peacock!" Glancing in the mirror once more Sirius hurried after, hoping Harry would be in a nice enough mood to change him back to normal.

Upon arrival, Harry didn't think anything would be able to break him from his semi-glazed stupour, memories of yesterday with Alistair all-encompassing but then, he was proven wrong. At first, he didn't see anything wrong but the moment his eyes landed on Sirius, he couldn't help but stare.

In complete disbelief Harry approached, touching Sirius' forehead with the back of his hand. "Are you ill or something? I thought the day you familiarised yourself with anything remotely relating to Slytherin was the day Voldemort would enter an ice skating competition."

Eyes rolling, Sirius batted his hand away. "You're not convincing. Come on, spill. What's the prank?"

Frowning with confusion, he took a seat beside Remus, glancing over at him. "Seriously, is
something wrong?"

Shaking his head lightly, Remus' lips twitched. "Sirius is convinced that you pranked him somehow."

Looking back at Sirius and seeing mild suspicion, Harry was genuinely confused. "I swear, I didn't do anything. So what's the prank? That you like Snakes now?"

"I don't know! This morning I thought oh yeah, green would look nice and then after that I transfigured a bloody Snake brooch!" Throwing his arms into the air Sirius flopped down beside them. "Then I've been having thoughts that Slytherin's not so bad, they're just like any of the other houses. Are you sure you didn't do anything?"

Harry nodded, confident. "Yeah. It's not like your thoughts are wrong though. I admit there have been more dark wizards in Slytherin than any other but look at Dumbledore! Pretty sure I read somewhere he was in the same house as us. Need I say more?"

Grimacing, Sirius conceded his point. "I get you, but there's no chance I'm thinking and doing this stuff on my own. I wanted to put up Slytherin banners in our bedroom!" Shuddering at the thought Sirius glanced at himself, almost distrustingly. Then, Harry had a sudden thought.

'Did you by any chance prank Sirius? He thought I did it until I convinced him otherwise.'

'Perhaps I did. The question is, what do you believe?'

When a question filled with the enthusiasm of a seasoned prankster was returned to him rather than an answer, it was a struggle not to smile. 'I think you did. But why? What did Sirius do to you? Not that I'm complaining though, it might help him to think a bit more positively.'

'Not to me, but you. While I am aware that he did apologise for the words spoken that day, I was not satisfied. We have grown closer with every moment and I have no wish to see such hurt in your expression again, particularly since it directly influenced your sleep.'

Oh, so it was Alistair's way of revenge on his behalf. Grinning to himself, he had to wonder. 'When does it wear off?'

The soft laughter he obtained in response was no less warm but carried a sense of satisfaction. 'When he is remorseful of the words spoken to Severus, he will return to normal.'

'Brilliant.' Sighing to himself happily after their brief exchange, he was met with matching stares from Sirius and Remus. Looking innocent, Harry reclined into his seat. "What?"
Resigned, Sirius sighed. "Was it him?"

"Who?" Harry knew full well who he referred to, but wasn't about to make it easy for him.

Crossing his arms, he gave Harry the side eye. "Your Vampire boyfriend."

Trying not to laugh, Harry purposely lengthened it out. "What about him?"

Knowing what he was doing Remus simply watched things unfold, amused, while Sirius looked as though he wanted to strangle him. "Was he the one who pranked me?"

"No idea might have been but then again, he might not have." Swiftly dodging Sirius' arms, he pretended to think. "Who fancies going to the beach for a bit? Might be December but the closet meets our needs! Remus?"

Leaving Sirius slightly open mouthed he was quick to agree. Seeing that he wouldn't get a straight answer from Harry Sirius followed, vowing to get the truth from him somehow.

Severus hated Christmas, of this there was no doubt. Everyone's nauseating cheerfulness irritated him more than usual and each year he'd shut himself away.

While that prevented some of the more persistent members of staff, House Elves were allowed access to every part of the castle. So on Christmas morning, a small handful of pity presents had awaited him and shockingly enough, one from Potter.

To his complete shock, it contained Basilisk venom, one of the most expensive ingredients available. The average price for a single drop was three galleons but the small phial he was given contained at least twenty.

Of course, he didn't get anything in return, not expecting as much from him. But faced with that, grew even more irritated at the tiny slither insistent he should return the favour with something or other.

Sneering to himself, the one thing he could appreciate was by this time, there were little to no dunderheaded students he had to oversee and nothing to mark. Having received another variety of alcohol from Minerva which was surprisingly to his taste, he was disrupted by a soft knock on his door.

Irritated he checked his wards, no change in his expression when detecting Lothaire outside. What in
the seventh circle of hell did he want? Silently reminding himself to be civil as by his own choice he'd accepted the man's token of friendship, he admitted entry.

As he'd ran out of time yesterday, Alistair was unable to give Severus his present in person like he wanted but today, he had more than enough time. Happily levitating the large present behind him he set it on the ground, having kept the wrapping simplistic. "Apologies for the delay Severus, Merry Christmas."

Doubting the man would leave otherwise, Severus sliced through the paper, not expecting what was inside.

Three cauldrons of brand new quality, Brass, Copper and Pewter. Within all of them were matching utensils and one or two useful items which would aid in potion creation.

He hadn't the time or funds to purchase new ones of his own, relying on cauldron repairs which were cheaper, but couldn't return their quality completely.

Never one to be lost for words he was this time, even more so with the next words spoken.

"I was informed that you have requested equipment for the students to Albus on more than one occasion, but he has declined. It was Minerva's intention to fulfil what he should have, however, I intervened."

Before Severus could express his ire, it quickly left when given a full explanation. "I informed her that I would offer my assistance instead, to save more for what is sorely needed."

As he was handed a receipt, Severus could hardly believe his eyes. Every single student had been accounted for. The school's supplies were there for the families who were unable to afford brand new equipment every year and with each year he'd taught, that seemed to be on the increase. Families such as the Malfoys or Parkinson's never had an issue but others did and often, affected their quality of work.

There was no funding in place for students, something which Severus would have benefitted from greatly if such a thing existed when he attended. It was something that needed to change, now more than ever.

Holding the slip of paper as if it were an enigma, he could only think of one word. "Why?" Dark eyes piercing the man across from him, he remained expressionless, waiting.

As honesty was always preferable, Alistair stuck to that. "Because I care, deeply. It is the least that can be done for the students and as for yours because I see you as a friend."
Friendship. What was the meaning of it, really? To Severus, it was conversations and maybe a small gift exchange, not something costing roughly 300 pounds.

That wasn't including the fact that this receipt stated that three cauldrons and matching utensils were purchased per student, for how many currently attended. Seeing the price total, he could feel himself paling by the second and forced back the urge to sit down.

He knew with one glance the first time he'd met him, that the man was more than financially stable, but now he began to suspect that his wealth greatly surpassed even the noblest families. The only difference being, that this act was entirely selfless.

That would be two people now that Severus needed to return the favour. How he could possibly do that when both were greatly expensive he didn't know, but his damned conscience demanded it.

Though he didn't use first names lightly, Severus admitted that this was wholly deserving of it. Inclining his head in respect, the words which left his lips were alien and wholly unfamiliar. "Thank you... Alistair."

Alistair couldn't even describe how happy he was, taking everything he had to remain calm. For months he'd wanted Severus to use his first name and even if it was only a one-time thing, it had still happened. "You are welcome. I shall leave now." Giving a faint wave he left, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

For a long while, Severus didn't move from his spot, unable to believe that anyone's kindness could be so vast. But if he wanted proof, that lay within Diagon Alley as it requested Severus himself to confirm and collect the order. Deciding now was as good a time as any he also left, ensuring it was a few minutes after his younger colleague. While there, perhaps he'd find something for him and Potter.

Once a good distance away Alistair spun about on the spot, laughing in joy. Though it was of little to no importance, this was something he really wanted to share with him.

'Oh Harry, I am positively giddy. I was unable to deliver my present to him on the day, but I have now. Upon receiving it he thanked me, by my first name!'

'Seriously? You must have got him something brilliant for a response like that. I'm happy for you.'

Sending a bright smile through their link, Alistair knew Harry would understand more than most what this moment meant. 'An assortment of cauldrons and matching utensils, alongside various other items at Solomon's recommendation. I also purchased every cauldron and utensil set equivalent to the number of students that attend Hogwarts.'

'No wonder he was pleased. I would be too if I was passionate about po-'}
As Harry stopped mid-sentence, Alistair awaited a response. 'Hang on. Did you just say for every student as well?'

'Yes.'

Within his mind's eye, Alistair could visualise him doing the calculations. 'Holy shit! That's thousands of galleons! Though the students probably won't see it that way it's a gift for them too. That's insane, he must think he's dreaming because I gave him some of Aela's venom and when he next checks in at Gringotts, there's Aela's recently shed skin. When you can will you come and meet her with me by the way? The times I've brought her out of the chamber I haven't gone to see you.'

He would be delighted to. 'Of course, I will. I am simply content that he has accepted it with surprisingly enough, no sarcasm.'

'Probably because he was too surprised. I didn't think my opinion of you could get any better, but then you go and do something like this. Heartless creature my arse, Dumbledore can kiss it.'

It would be uncharacteristic of Alistair to let Harry's words slip by, so he responded immediately. 'I am unconcerned with what he believes, as my own opinion of him is lower than anything on this earth. But, I must protest. If anyone is kissing that part of your anatomy, it will be me.'

While not physically there to see it, Alistair knew instinctively that he'd managed to coax an embarrassed reaction from him. These days it was a little rarer, as he'd begun adapting to their changed relationship and by now, was used to his mannerisms. But the times that Alistair was still able to he treasured, as that or one of his bright smiles only increased his appeal.

'I-I didn't mean in that way! Though that doesn't sound bad. Wait, what am I saying? Ahh-'

There was no doubt about it, teasing Harry had to be his favourite pastime. His reactions were always entertaining and never disappointed. 'I shall file away that information for future use.'

Sending a warm chuckle filled with a touch of desire he ended the conversation there, in a very good mood.

"Good afternoon Mr Malfoy." His cheerfulness still there he was treated to a strange look by him, returning his greeting politely as he passed by.

"Afternoon, Sir." Wearing the Dragon clasp cape from Harry Draco continued to his common room, marvelling at the variety of insane or eccentric defence professors they'd had over the years.

Once alone Alistair disappeared from the corridor, returning home. With time to spare, he found
himself curious about Roald Dahl and once asking Harry about the author, discovered his favourite of the children's books. Through Solomon, he knew both his and Hermione's favourites.

He appreciated any and all literature. Not only did he want to because he might be able to read Harry's favourite to him sometime, but a part of Alistair wondered if he would have a favourite as well.

Arriving at the library he immediately sought out Solomon, nose firmly buried into a book. Sensing his presence immediately Solomon glanced up. "How did it go?"

Suddenly reminded of Severus again, Alistair's eyes lit up and once conveying it went well, he nodded with satisfaction. "Good. What are you reading this time?"

While he planned on selecting whatever caught his fancy from that particular author, Alistair decided to rely on his brother's expertise. "Roald Dahl. Taking into consideration that you, Hermione and Harry are fond of him, I am curious. Do you have a recommendation?"

"Really?" At Alistair nod, Solomon's smile couldn't grow any brighter. "I do, one moment."

Knowing off by heart where they were, Solomon looked for the perfect one which would ensnare Alistair's interest. Finding the one he returned, handing it over to him.

'Charlie and The Chocolate Factory.' Reading the title silently, his interest was piqued. Solomon knew him better than anyone else, though Harry was well on the way to learning more too. Trusting Solomon's judgment he sat a short distance away, one leg neatly crossed over the other as he began to read.

Watching over him for a moment Solomon returned to his own reading, quietly confident that this would be something he'd enjoy.

Used to reading things 600 pages or over, something just shy of 200 pages was a short but sweet trip into a world away from this one. It must have taken an hour if that to read it but he wasn't aware of time passing by at all. Unable to lose himself in books like he used to, it had been a while since that happened.

Gently closing the book he remained there for a minute, letting new information settle into his mind. There was no doubt that he'd thoroughly enjoyed this, with each character having their own appeal. He was a fan of happy endings and to know that Charlie and his family had received theirs, filled him with contentment.

While only seeing and listening from Harry's perspective, Dudley was much like the children spoiled by their parents. He couldn't help but think that he would have benefitted from the Oompa Loompa's strange but amusing way of teaching them a lesson.
While he found Charlie and his family to be endearing, it was Willy Wonka which Alistair liked the most. A man of many talents, eccentric and with a limitless imagination, there was someone who believed anything was possible and had dedicated his life to it. By the end, he'd achieved something wonderful. While a work of fiction, there was a surprising amount he'd taken away from this.

"Did you enjoy it?" At Solomon's question, there was no hesitation.

"It was truly remarkable!" Eyes sparkling like a child's, he was happy to be introduced into the worlds of this author but also, the opening of new conversation topics with both his lover and Solomon.

Before long Alistair settled himself down again, eager to read everything available and sometime later, would spark what he believed was an excellent idea.

Checking that he looked presentable, Harry waved his goodbyes to Sirius and Remus, heading for Diagon Alley. It was a Saturday and he'd agreed to meet with his friends not only for an outing but to sate their curiosity and for Harry, one extra thing.

He wanted to know if his parents had at any point needed a lawyer and if they were still available. If so, he trusted their judgement and would like the assistance ready for January. No doubt Dumbledore would try to spin his most elaborate tale and if anyone would accept him as a client, back him up on this. In Harry's mind, there was no question of right or wrong, but any additional support couldn't go amiss.

Agreeing to meet in The Leaky Cauldron Harry apparated to London, picturing one of the shaded, secluded parts that he'd seen once when on his way there.

Appearing with a faint pop, he'd yet to master complete silence but was edging much closer to it. Though he'd lived right by the road with neighbours for much of his life, he definitely preferred where he was living now. Much quieter, with more nature and less pollution.

His preferences were interrupted at his destination when the select few inside and even Tom, were subdued. Spotting his friends in the room's far corner, he made a beeline for them.

"What's wrong with everyone?" Harry asked, puzzled. Noticing that they looked the same, he glanced at Hermione questioningly.

"Have you read this morning's Daily Prophet?"
Shaking his head no the newspaper was pushed towards him, the article and accompanying pictures glaring out him in black and white.

Seeing very familiar Azkaban mugshots, Harry's expression turned grim. "They've escaped again?"

When the Dementors switched sides to follow Voldemort's cause, it allowed ten of his Death Eaters to escape. About two months after the Department of Mysteries and largely led by Alastor Moody, the majority of Death Eaters were captured and imprisoned, including Lucius Malfoy. With Scrimgeour as the new minister and unable to be bribed, evidence of his Death Eater status and past dealings with the former Minister of Magic came to light.

It was something which ensured the Malfoy family's influence didn't carry as much weight. The public's faith was already shaken through Sirius' escape and then the mass breakout of that time, but this? Harry doubted anyone would have faith now.

Leaning in close, he was pleased to see privacy charms were already in place. "I think Voldemort got them out this time. I can't explain why, just a gut feeling."

Neville's expression was steely. "Even if he's not as insane and up to now has left you alone, I don't like that he let that bitch back out."

Harry agreed. "Yeah. There's something else I'm worried about though. I don't think anything can restore Bellatrix's sanity and from all the times I was involuntarily dragged into Death Eater meetings through visions, she liked it best when they were allowed to torture innocent people. From what I can see, Voldemort's not interested in that anymore. If that's the case, what's to stop her from switching loyalty?"

Harry was met with dead silence, broken by a worried Ginny. "There are others who think the same way and if they don't like the changes in Voldemort, they could join Bellatrix."

Surprisingly enough, it was Luna of all people to provide a brand of reassurance Harry would have expected more from Ginny. Bright blue eyes filled with seriousness, her fingertips ran lightly over the bracelet. "If they should find us, we'll be ready."

As the five nodded in agreement, Neville's eyes gleamed. "We held our own pretty well against them in the Ministry until help arrived. With all the training and changes in us, we'll be a match. But if I see Lestrange again, I can't promise I'll let her live."

Harry nodded understandingly. "She doesn't deserve redemption."

The mood sombre, Hermione briskly changed it. "We came here for a reason right? There's nothing that can be done other than listening out for more information. Shall we go?"
Appreciating the topic change the five left, heading for Diagon Alley. Hanging back, Ginny treated Harry to a rib-crushing hug.

"Thanks for the Firebolt Harry, you're brilliant!"

Patting her back, Harry managed to squeeze a few words out. "You'll be a force to reckon with on the pitch now, but a bit looser, please?"

Looking mildly apologetic Ginny released him, Harry rubbing his sore ribs.

Much like inside, the streets of Diagon Alley were busy, but the buzz of chatter held a tinge of fear. Trying not to let the general mood be a dampener, they enjoyed being able to look around together and thankfully, didn't experience anything like the Vampires after him in Hogsmeade. He still didn't know who sent them, either.

Their last destination of the day or in Harry's case penultimate was Gringotts. While he got on well with the Goblins or at least believed he did, he couldn't deny that several suspicious beady black eyes observing them critically put him a little on edge. Joining a queue not as long he waited until it was eventually their turn.

"Yes?" This goblin looked older than the rest, a few wisps of white hair and small, round spectacles perched on the end of his nose. Getting straight to business, he didn't want to waste time. "I was wondering if we could take an inheritance test?"

Gesturing to his friends as well, the goblin narrowed his eyes. "One moment." Scanning his surroundings, they stopped on another goblin. "Ragnok!"

Hearing his name Ragnok approached, conversing in their native tongue until they were told to follow him.

Pushing the door open and told to take a seat, Harry shifted beneath his gaze. Jagged teeth clearly visible with his smile, Ragnok placed several pieces of parchment on the table, a faint tag of magic surrounding them. "Your blood is required, one drop only."

Feeling strangely apprehensive, he glanced around. "Want me to go first?"

When receiving nods to go ahead he pricked his finger with a pin provided, squeezing it onto the parchment below. The moment he did it dissolved, creating an elaborate family tree in flowing script.

Perusing the contents, Ragnok's expressions didn't change as his finger traced back to the very roots. "Heir to Ignotus Peverell."
Eager to know all that he'd missed out on, that included children's fairytales and like Luna, suspected each held some truth. Aware of which brother that was, it only confirmed his thoughts that the cloak he owned was one and the same. The only thing which he wasn't aware of was the family relation.

Looking for himself, he could see that Ignotus' Granddaughter had inherited the cloak with a lack of male heirs, later marrying a Potter and across generations, had been handed down. But rather than deteriorating further the cloak was improved, thanks to Alistair and his assurance that any and all spells would fail to take.

"If I've got one, the others have to be out there."

All those familiar with the tale they caught onto his meaning, silently nodding in agreement. After that, they wondered if there would be any more surprises in store.

As it turned out, the answer was yes.

As the closest living relations had died out the next were the Longbottoms and though distantly, there was enough of a familial tie to claim the vault contents of Pliny the Elder.

With no one other than Neville vaguely familiar with the name information was quickly located, thanks to Ragnok's expertise. A Pureblood and author of Naturalis Historia, it listed hundreds of different drugs and plants, helping to pave the way for future encyclopaedias but more importantly, the study of Herbology and all fields relating to it. Pleased to know that Herbology, in some sense was a part of him, Neville had to wonder if his gran knew or had tried an inheritance test.

Hermione's came as a shock. Isolt Sayre, the founder of Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, had twin daughters. Martha, the eldest and a squib, married a non-magic native American. Clear to see was the family branching out, having roots in more than one civilisation. According to her family tree, she was from a line of squibs, with the occasional magic user emerging.

The most recent was William Granger, recognising that as her Grandfather from Dad's side. As he'd died before she was born she'd never met him. But, rather than someone with no magic in their family, her Dad was a squib. Her mum held no magic roots but still, it was far more than what she expected.

Then, she saw a name crossed out. 'Gormlaith Gaunt.' Branching from Isolt, she could see that was her aunt.

Noticing where she was looking, Ragnok provided information. "The Gaunt family would be next in line, however, their names have been stricken from this tree. Blood-related they may be but through Sayre's request, they are unable to claim anything."
Hermione was glad to be sitting down, thoroughly shaken. Family trees were of great interest to her and while not as well versed, Harry would recognise Gaunt anywhere.

Since growing closer to Ginny, Luna and Neville, it involved a lot more in-depth detail of his adventures over the years, Gaunt coming up in conversation with his trip to the Graveyard. Afterwards, he'd checked the family, partly to sate his curiosity but mostly so as not to remain ignorant. Voldemort or Tom Riddle was the Grandson of Marvolo Gaunt. To see that on Hermione's tree was nothing short of shocking.

"Fancy a tea party to share that news with him?"

At Hermione's glare, Harry held his hands up. "Only kidding! But seriously that's great, there could be some interesting things."

Not disagreeing with him there, Ginny was the next. While none of them thought it could get any more shocking, it was proven wrong when revealed that the Weasley family had ties to Godric Gryffindor, who, along with the Peverells, had a seat in the Ministry of Magic. Ginny was unable to claim, but her dad would be able to. Once she went home, there were answers to questions sorely needed.

Last but not least, was Luna. While Ragnok had remained unphased by information revealed to him so far, a change in his expression indicated that the information was unexpected.

"You share Fae blood. A race not seen in this world for over a thousand years."

Even Luna wasn't expecting that, eyes widening and while her friends were as well, Harry found himself only mildly so. He'd always thought there was something different about her and this only confirmed it.

It was her mother. She was the one who shared Fae blood. Brought from her awe and wonder, a brief flash came from Ragnok's desk drawer. Opening it there was a sealed envelope, handed over to Luna.

Recognising the writing she'd seen from so long ago, Luna gently broke the seal.

My Darling,

If you are reading this, then I am no longer here. Your father does not know of my origins, of which I had only learned myself shortly after marriage. For years I had searched for a way to the world of which my ancestors belonged, but to no avail and I suspect this to be the cause of my demise.

For the entirety of my life, I suspected there to be something missing, even with a family of my own.
While I have not found a way to reconnect with what once was, it is my fervent hope that one day, you will be able to. I have all, but the one missing puzzle piece.

If you have found the land long lost, then speak with Gareon. He is the one whom we share our blood with. He will know what to do.

Words will not be enough to express my sorrow for not being here to see you grow. But, know that I am proud and I always will be.

With all my love,

Mother

Cradling the letter close, Luna's breath hitched, eyes watering. While Harry didn't know who it was from he could guess, reaching out to softly squeeze her shoulder. "It's ok."

Trying to be of reassurance she gave him a soft smile in response. A few minutes later, each of them reeled from the new information, as Harry spoke for them all. "Thanks for helping us."

Nodding once, Harry was given a list of contents and the key. Only he was able to see his vault's contents, with the Weasley family returning at a later date and Hermione's and Neville's own belonging to Gringotts branches located in America and Italy.

Shortly after Sirius' alive state, Harry had given him his ring back, though would be unable to go there until his name was cleared. As such he only had the ring made by Hermione and the Potter family ring. Curious to see if there would be a ring for the Peverell family line, Harry wanted to explore the opportunity straight away.

Once outside, Ginny and Luna left. Luna to confirm her mothers' letter and Ginny, to contact her dad who for once, had a day off. As there was time left before it grew too late Hermione and Neville went their separate ways, provided with two way portkeys to take them directly to another branch and back to this one.

Left alone Harry was guided to the cart, driven by a goblin very familiar to him.

"Griphook." Nodding his head and offering a faint smile he looked mildly surprised that his name was remembered, returning the same though without a smile. "Mr Potter."

As always he enjoyed the ride down, still believing that customer safety wasn't exactly their top priority, though security definitely was. Gripping onto the sides, they went deeper than he could ever
remember before.

Waiting outside of the vault Harry inserted his key, retrieving it once the various locks and bolts had loosened. The heavy door opening slowly he lit lumos on the end of his wand, to see better.

There was a decent amount of Galleons, Sickles and Knuts, unconcerned with this as he'd barely made a dent in his family one. What he was more interested in was a ring on a raised pedestal, along with several, scrolls, tomes, paintings and even some clothes.

It looked like nothing more than various odds and ends at first but upon closer inspection, was a small, fabric covered book which had seen better days. At its threadbare state, Harry was surprised it hadn't dropped to pieces, mildly concerned that it would crumble to dust if he touched it.

Carefully opening it he could see it was a diary of sorts but was unable to read it. Deciding to take it with him, it was always worth checking if Alistair knew the language. The chances were much higher than anyone else he knew, surpassing Dumbledore greatly with various bits of knowledge.

Deciding he'd have a more thorough look at everything in future, Harry slipped the ring onto his finger, with the Peverell family crest. Taking the book and various other bits with him, he'd sort them into his trunk once back at home but for now, would make do with the pouch he often carried.

As the vault door closed behind him, Harry returned to above ground and there, saw Ginny and Arthur just leaving one of the offices behind, both looking shaken. Approaching them, he gave Arthur a brief wave. "Hi, Mr Weasley."

Up close, Ginny's freckles stood out starkly against her skin, looking thunderous. Quickly reading the situation, his face remained serious. "What's happened?"

As Arthur practically collapsed into a vacant chair Ginny explained, hand twitching for her wand all the while. "Dumbledore obliviated him. He wanted to take an inheritance test after finding out from Sirius he was related to the Black family, to see if there was anything else he didn't know. He'd confided in Dumbledore who tried to persuade him otherwise but didn't listen. When I showed him our family tree it brought something back. Dumbledore must have done a botched job of it."

At this point, Harry doubted if there were any families out there not directly or indirectly affected by Dumbledore's actions. "Why would he try and persuade him not to? Unless he knew all along that the Weasleys were related to Gryffindor.." Trailing off, Harry's mood darkened. "Maybe it was because he knew Gryffindor had a seat in the Wizengamot and didn't want any possible opposition?"

"I want to strangle that bastard with his own beard!" Hissing she sat down, stewing in endless possibilities of ways to murder Dumbledore.

"You and me both." The sooner his trial came, the better. Sitting on the other side, he was pinned
with a serious gaze from Arthur. "Harry. Will you act as a proxy for me?"

Not expecting to be asked such a thing, Harry simply stared for a moment. "Why me?"

He'd never seen Mr Weasley like this, used to his quietly bubbly personality and love of all things muggle. "Gryffindor's vault and title will help us, more than my job at the Ministry has done so far. With that title comes influence, but opinions of me are poor."

Pausing for breath, Harry almost forgot where they were as belief shone within his eyes. "They'll listen to you. I know you've had problems with the Ministry before," He grimaced faintly at the Dementor incident, "But I know you have what it takes."

With no one else in his family, Harry was allowed to represent the Potter name. While not at the age of magical maturity, he was officially recognised as an adult once cutting ties with the Dursleys and emancipating himself. In court, if he accepted, he would have the right to four votes. Potter, Peverell, Gryffindor and Black. Sirius has asked him to do the same, at least until his name was cleared. Mr Weasley wouldn't have asked if he didn't trust him, so it was the least that could be done.

"I accept." Clapping Harry on the shoulder, he returned to normal. "Isn't it about time you start calling me, Arthur? We've known each other for a few years now."

Harry was so used to calling him Mr Weasley, it never occurred to him. "Ok, Arthur."

Like with calling Malfoy Draco, that held a strangeness to it as well.

"Thank you for your present to us. We haven't told anyone yet." Eyes twinkling conspiratorily, Ginny cut in. "Haven't told us what, Dad?"

"You'll find out soon." Reluctantly conceding, for now, she pinned Harry with a considering look. She could guess, but he was confident that any suggestion would miss the mark.

He had many properties and one of them, strangely enough, was in Romania. He wasn't sure which of his parents were the ones to branch out and purchase properties in a wide variety of areas, but he'd gone there to see it himself. It was far larger than Evergreen Manor, with enough bedrooms for the entire Weasley family and some spare for any guests.

He had no need of it, knowing that it would be better in the hands of someone who would benefit from it more than him. It would save them from having to stay within hotels. He could tell Arthur hadn't seen the property for himself yet, or his reaction would be much more extreme.

Looking forward to when they all did, documents via the goblins were submitted to the Ministry. He'd looked over them briefly, wondering which member of the Ministry would receive a great
shock.

Giving Harry a wave Ginny and Arthur left, returning home to share the news with those there.

As it turned out, there was someone that his parents had used the services of, though was unsure exactly when. It was a law firm right there in Diagon Alley, which he'd never noticed before. Either that or because he hadn't needed to use that particular service, it went overlooked.

After asking for a few directions, he arrived outside of an official-looking building. Between places which saw much more customers, it was no wonder Harry overlooked it. As he opened the door, he could see the inside was much more spacious. Seeing a bored looking Receptionist, she barely glanced at him though had her Quill at the ready.

"Name, please."

"Harry Potter."

That snapped her from boredom fast. Eyes widening she scribbled a quick note, taking flight and aiming for an office with the door slightly ajar.

"One moment, Sir."

Invited to take a seat he did so, easily ignoring the stares and whispers. Used to as much from school he waited, strangely nervous.

'Hello, Harry.'

Either the bracelet indicated his anxiousness, or Alistair knew instinctively when he needed him. 'Hi, you've got great timing. I'm nervous as hell.'

'What is it? Perhaps I may be of assistance.'

He already was, voice calm and reassuring. 'I'm at a law firm in Diagon Alley. I was told to wait and I'm hoping to hire the same person my parents used. I don't know what they needed one for, but the notes by his name were positive.'

'Ah, I see. Nervousness in this situation is perfectly natural. But, I am sure you will come away successful. Just be the confident and self-assured young man that I know and adore.'

Ducking his head to hide the silly smile that wanted to show, Harry expressed his gratitude through their link. 'Weirdly enough, I completely believe it when you say that.'
'I am pleased to have settled your nerves a little. There is an idea that I would like to implement in future if you and Hermione are agreeable.'

Curious now more than ever with the mentioning of Hermione, Harry could tell it would be a few minutes before he'd be seen by anyone. 'Go ahead.'

'Very recently, I have been introduced to the wonders of Roald Dahl. I found myself curious, knowing that you, Hermione and Solomon each have a favourite. Through a recommendation of Solomon's, I now have my own.'

Having no idea where this was going Harry continued to listen, curiosity piqued.

'A little research, I noticed that there are visual adaptations of each book, with two of them released earlier this year. I thought that it would be a splendid idea to set a few hours aside and watch each of our favourites, all together.'

'So, like a movie night?'

'Yes, exactly that. This is an area that I am behind in, as, at the time, colour motion pictures were not an invention.'

Behind was an understatement. 'If ever there was a reminder of how old you are, that's it.'

'Why Harry! You wound me.'

Harry sent a roguish grin. 'I think it's a brilliant idea. I've never had the chance to watch any of them and you can get with the times.'

A soft sigh. 'Ah, perhaps your teasing is only fair. Though, you have quite a journey to go before I will admit that you are a worthy opponent.'

Mentally sticking his tongue out in a burst of childishness, he was rewarded with warm laughter. 'I shall discuss this idea with Solomon.'

'I'll do the same with Hermione, I reckon she'd be more than happy to.'

As Harry was about to tell him of their inheritance tests, he saw the receptionist wave him over. He'd have to tell him later. 'I've got to go now.'

'Of course, I will see you later.'
Approaching the receptionist she pointed to the still ajar office door. On the front of it was metal plating, the name 'Mr J Coote' engraved into it.

That name ringing a bell he knocked on the door. When hearing a voice to come in, he realised why that surname was so familiar.

Dressed smartly in a business suit, Ritchie was the spitting image of his dad, right down to the slim build. Shaking hands, he offered Harry a brief smile. "Mr Potter."

He had no idea how these meetings were supposed to go, but his past experience would be a start. Taking a seat, he thought of how best to word it. "Were you the one that handled a case for my parents?"

Confirming what Harry had read, he received a brisk nod. "It was at my request that I would handle this consultation."

Now that he knew, Harry had to ask. "What was the case and results?"

Though it wasn't supposed to be, the Potter's case was made a public record, but only after their death did it come to light. He suspected the person at the receiving end was the one to mask and quiet any further discussion of it so these days, a rare few knew the details.

Tapping his wand against the filing cabinet behind he went through the list of names sorted alphabetically, coming to Potter. It was the first and last case by the family he was given, but a serious one. Handing over the file, he watched various emotions flicker across the young man's face.

Embezzlement and Fraud? Reading the details, Harry couldn't believe it.

After leaving Hogwarts, his dad had volunteered to be representatives on the school board, giving advice to where funding would be best used. During that, he noticed anomalies. While Dumbledore was responsible for running Hogwarts, all funding had to be approved by the board.

Instead of making improvements to areas they were notified about, a surprise inspection weeks later only confirmed that something was amiss, with no visible changes and with legal help, it was confirmed that a total of 2008 Galleons and 15 Knuts across a period of six years were used for personal purchases.

While that was shocking, it wasn't that crime which had Harry bristling with righteous anger.

From the moment his dad became head of house Potter, small sums which increased in size were taken from his vault. More than once he'd been obliviated, personal details stolen.
Disguised through blood magic which most considered a grey to borderline dark area, the Goblins at that time only had security measures against the use of Polyjuice potion.

Everything was listed there, including bribing select members of the board to overlook his actions. When taken to court they won the case, but it was a shallow victory.

"There was no proof, but I suspect that bribery was involved to lighten his punishment. Fraud against a minor family is a month in Azkaban, low security. But your family? At the very least six."

"I'm not surprised," Harry muttered bitterly. "I came here for that, actually." Rather than explain he showed the letter received from Madam Bones he'd brought along.

"The only one who I think will be a problem is Dumbledore. There's a lot of evidence stacked against the others as well, but they can't talk themselves out of situations like him. So just in case, things go south, I'll need some legal help."

It was a struggle not to react, unsurprised to see Dumbledore and having a keen dislike for Umbridge, but was thrown for a loop when seeing a person who was thought to be dead long ago. Though paid, it was a bitter time for him to know that while the Potters had won the legal battle, they'd lost the war.

He'd already decided the moment he'd received a missive from reception about Harry Potter, that he'd accept whatever case was brought to him. Outside of his job and responsibilities he did want justice, not only for the Potters but others Dumbledore had undoubtedly affected.

To Harry's relief Mr Coote accepted, the rest of the time spent discussing possible plans of action and through his own desires, became more informed of how matters in court worked. Feeling readier than ever before, Harry left the law firm with one less worry weighing him down. He had the feeling he was trustworthy and if needed, would be a great asset to building his defence towards whatever was thrown at him. Returning home, he had much to discuss with Sirius and Remus.

Managing to keep her balance, Hermione landed in the middle of America's Gringotts branch. Seeing subtle differences here and there, she barely had time to glance around before a Goblin approached her. "Ragnok informed us of your arrival. Your document."

One clawed hand outstretched Hermione gave them her family tree, mildly uncomfortable for the few quiet moments it took for him to analyse it. "Very well. Follow me."

Once given a key to the vault, Hermione had to wonder if the carts were a universal thing, whizzing about many twists and turns that even her sharp mind couldn't memorise. Unlike Harry, she wasn't much for enjoying the ride, more for silent prayers that it would end soon before an accident befell
Nearly stumbling from the cart, she could tell by cobwebs connecting from wall to sconce and a faint hint of dust that no one had come to these row of vaults in some time. The harsh, grating sound against her ears when it opened was only further confirmation.

Spotting a sizeable amount of currency, she knew with this that her parents would no longer need to pay tuition fees as compared to regular boarding schools, the price per annum was a considerable amount. With families like Harry's, many parents set things into motion years in advance so by the time Harry started his first year, every year including that one was already pre-paid.

For Hermione, she didn't have that choice, with all of her family remaining uninformed as well. It was something she'd have to discuss with them, once returning home.

After searching around for a while she came across a pensieve, smaller than the ones she'd seen and filled to the brim with memories. Excited at such a discovery, she had to wonder why they were just left in there. But still, there could be valuable knowledge contained within.

As Hermione left the vault, she had a request to make. "Will I be able to transfer some of this to my vault in the UK?"

She was treated to the sharp tooth smile which never failed to put her on edge. "You can.. for a fee."

Expecting as much she gave an internal wince at the price but accepted for convenience's sake. While she'd protested it was too much as one of her birthday presents, Harry had given her a total of 100 Galleons, 6 Sickles and 23 Knuts, which she'd put to good use but saved the majority of it. Apparently, it came in handy then.

Leaving the vault behind she'd transferred things of greatest interest, wearing the ring that she'd found in there. While it wouldn't carry much weight in the UK, it would here if there was ever a time she needed to return for some reason or other. Happy at the day's findings, a small part of her did wonder what Voldemort's reaction would be, but most of her wanted to stay far away from those possibilities.

Like Harry, Neville had his moments of bad luck. For the first five minutes, he tried communicating with one of the younger Goblins who, unfortunately, couldn't speak English. It wasn't long before that issue was resolved, but he didn't fancy having to mime again. He wanted to work in the field of Herbology and not as an actor.

Once in the vault though, he soon forgot about all that and remained in awe. There were many different seeds, carefully preserved along with information dating all the way back to the Roman Empire.
If that wasn't enough, then what looked like an original copy of Naturalis Historia had caught his attention, looking as though it had been repaired several times but in relatively good condition. While he couldn't read what was written, there were methods available so that he'd be able to.

Carefully placing the seeds into a bag he carried the encyclopaedia under his arm, knowing that nothing would shock his gran now after the physical changes he'd undergone.

While she wasn't supposed to be on school grounds after signing to go home, Luna saw this as necessary. The Ravenclaw within her wanted to know everything but also, it explained much of what she was unable to understand.

This letter was beyond precious, an insight into her mother which she'd never known before. While sad that she was unable to gain the sense of completion that she had upon first arriving, Luna was quietly determined to fit the missing piece of that puzzle.

Her relationship with Brio was going well, admitting to her friends alongside Hermione's own confession of their deeper connection. While neither had any experience, she was happy to go at a pace comfortable for the both of them. He still needed convincing that she wasn't so fragile as to break beneath his touch, but it was something that could be worked on overtime.

Excited yet nervous as to what this information would entail Luna arrived, softly questioning Nihri as to Gareon's whereabouts. Directing her towards a small alcove, she began to feel the unfamiliar feelings of nervousness.

Looking up from his work, he gave Luna a questioning look. He was one of the more pleasant mortals he'd encountered, sharing brief conversation here and there. When he was handed a letter and another document, Gareon could scarcely believe the details.

"I have always known my family's roots spread to beyond our own world, but I never expected this..." Trailing off, he knew precisely what to do, taught by those before him if it should ever happen. "Come with me."

Going through an area which Luna hadn't yet seen for herself, he led her deep into the heart of a chamber. With vines twisting around every available surface, it was a struggle to pass by them and reach the heart of it. Once there was a small circle, glowing a faint, pale blue. As Gareon’s fingertips brushed across one they untangled, coming to rest around Luna and leaving just enough room to move. Listening to his explanation, she remained calm.

“The Blood within has yet to be awakened but upon activation, you will no longer be mortal. Those in the family line have always been able to invoke immortality, but only once all requirements are met. You are the first in five centuries.”
Immortality? She would be immortal, like the Fae? Rather than feel scared or anxious, she welcomed the last thing she’d instinctively been missing for all her life.

As Gareon chanted in a quiet, monotonous voice, she began to undergo changes. Ears once round they tapered to a point, but still remained small. Eyes blue they brightened further, gaining an ethereal glow. As Luna’s blood was still human the changes were small, not growing taller but feeling stronger, somehow.

There was no pain with these changes, only a strange tingling and as the last echoes of Gareon’s chant filled the chamber, Luna was released. Looking over her critically, the warmest smile she’d ever seen from the usually businesslike man broke across his face.

“Many of us already consider you kin. To know that it was always meant to be will please them.”

A warm feeling encasing her heart, the burdens she bore of knowing that they all faced the calm before a storm seemed to fade away for now. Handed back what she’d given him Luna held onto them, excited to tell her father but while here, Brio.

There was no need for her to as once they emerged, Gareon called for attention. As the voices of those gathered died down, some eyed Luna with visible shock.

“The Moon Childe is Kin!”

With Gareon’s words, all eyes were on Luna and one by one, all came forward to welcome her.

She belonged somewhere. Unable to dismiss that compared to everyone else she really did feel odd, she thought that finding this world would be the last of it. But to know that like those before her mother it was always destined to be, joy, unlike anything she’d ever known blossomed within her heart.

“Thank you.” It was a whisper lost among welcoming voices, but only one Fae among a sea of many was able to gently capture her full attention.

As soon as it was polite to do so she excused herself, heading straight for the place that Luna had come to see as theirs. Noticing his absence she decided to wait, sitting on the lowest branch of the most accessible tree.

She could barely believe it wasn’t a dream, but the pointedness of her ears confirmed it was reality. Not only that but her hearing seemed to be more acute, the tips of them more sensitive than what she expected.
Sometime later she could sense Brio nearby, confirming this when she saw a familiar head of flowing white hair. As he glanced upward, a quiet voice drifted on the soft breeze.

“I will catch you.”

Trusting his words Luna slipped off the branch, coming to rest in his arms as she landed within them. Nose to nose, he studied her intently. “So, what Gareon told me is true. You are one of us.”

Looking at the documents in her hand, a peaceful smile tinged with relief transformed his, to others, cold expression entirely. “I was fearful, for what the future may hold. The thought that one day you would no longer be by my side, was unbearable to me.”

Sitting down, Brio carefully held her within the circle of his arms. Cheek resting against hers he breathed deeply, her fresh, calming scent settling his anxieties.

“I’m so happy.” Relaxing into his tentative affection, she jumped slightly when a curious finger ran along the tip of her ear.

“Did I hurt you?” Sounding slightly panicked, she was quick to reassure him. “No, just a little sensitive, that’s all. See?”

Returning the gesture, Luna’s fingers touched the point of his much larger ear as a soft sigh escaped him. Tilting his head for better access, Brio’s chest rumbled with faint sounds as she giggled. “You’re like a puppy.”

With a mixture of confusion and pleasure in his gaze, he questioned her. “A puppy?”

She nodded enthusiastically, not giving an explanation as to why but as long as she was happy, he didn’t mind. He also wouldn’t complain if she continued to stroke his ear either, finding the action incredibly soothing. No one had touched his ears before other than him but somehow, it was much different when Luna did it.

She looked different to normal and somehow, more beautiful than he already found her to be. A soft blush colouring her cheeks Brio impulsively kissed one of them and in doing so, soon followed her as the blue hue of his skin darkened for a moment.

He was happier than he could ever remember being, to the point that he wasn’t sure how to express it. She was his moonbeam, a nickname he’d yet to voice but the truth of it settled in his rapidly beating heart. She was the moon childe, with a gentle glow of her own and overtime, had melted the ice which encased his heart. He remembered what it was like to feel again, to have a friend. He didn’t think the novelty would ever wear off.
Content to hold her close, Brio wondered if overtime, other changes within Luna would make themselves known.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone's worried over the mystery of the disappearing chapters, I'm combining/editing my earlier ones and correcting/deleting things which don't make sense. I have no intention of abandoning this story and I will continue every week until it's completed :)

Harry and Alistair are surprised that their gifts to Severus were returned and later, Jacob contacts Harry for an unexpected reason. If there was one thing Harry had learned this month, it was to never trust Sirius with an already opened bottle of Butterbeer again, even if it did lead to something good.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Sirius is pranked, Severus is surprised by certain gestures, Harry seeks legal aid and along with his friends, discovers something surprising about each of their family lines.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Oral sex between men in this chapter. If it's something you're not interested in, just skip over that bit)

Sirius, Remus and even Alistair were surprised when revealing each of their lineages, but no one more than Harry when finding out Luna's newfound immortality.

Even now there was a light discussion of Neville's physical changes and with Luna's now pointy ears, he was certain more gossip would follow. But once processing the information it seemed strangely fitting.

Though Luna hadn't mentioned as much, Harry could tell that she was happier with Brio in his world than this one. Before long, he wouldn't be surprised to know if she began to visit their world rather than the other way around, as a new home to her.

In his room and reading the tome he'd purchased in Paris, Harry was startled by the faint popping sound of a House Elf very well known to him. Surprised he stared at Dobby, who'd thankfully toned down the amount of clothing he wore but more importantly, had discarded the threadbare ones which once belonged to Dudley. He marked his page, smiling. "Dobby! It's good to see you."

His large eyes watered, about to overflow with tears. "Harry Potter is being so kind! Professor
Snapey is giving this to Dobby for you."

Realising what he'd just said he shook his head, large ears flapping back and forth. "Dobby wasn't supposed to tell!"

Before he could do anything rash, Harry quickly interrupted. "I won't tell him, promise."

Looking relieved he snapped his fingers, a long thin package hovering in front of Harry. Holding his hands out it dropped into them, Dobby disappearing.

Harry didn't expect anything from the man, even more so than Malfoy. As Christmas was under a week ago he guessed it was a returning of favours. There was no label or note attached, just simple wrapping paper without additions.

Unwrapping it carefully, there was a bound, leather book. It wasn't very thick, with nothing to indicate what it was. As he opened it, Harry gasped softly.

It was a photo album, with four per page. Flicking through he could see there wasn't many but in each, was his mum. Of varying ages, starting from childhood and happily taking herself higher with a set of swings ranging to Hogwarts, stopping at an age of what he guessed was 14 or 15.

Harry noticed that no one else was there but her, one or two students in the background for some, unfocused.

There were no notes beneath to summarise each picture like with the album Hagrid gave him, but there didn't need to be. He had so many of his dad, finding some in the Potter vault and many more supplied by Sirius and Remus. But his mum, they were far and few.

Harry may have provided the Professor with something worth a fortune and useful, but he'd provided Harry with something far more precious.

Hugging the album close to his chest, yearning and longing shrouded his senses. He'd barely known her or at least, unable to have such a good memory for the times as a baby.

They'd never met really, but Harry missed her more than words could express. The first thing he wanted to do was thank the Professor but one he'd promised Dobby and two, he didn't think it would be appreciated if too much of a fuss was made.

Heart tightening with both love and pain, it mixed into something which had him on the verge of tears. Usually, he kept himself so busy thoughts such as this never had time to emerge but now, they did. Truce or no truce, he didn't think he'd ever be able to forgive Voldemort for robbing him of the life he could have led.
Wanting to talk, he opened his connection with Alistair. 'Professor Snape gave me an album with pictures of my mum.'

Sensing his heightened emotions, a flicker of concern registered. That is very kind of him. But, are you alright?'

'I will be. I just really miss her. I miss my dad too, but this reminded me just how little I know about both of them.'

'Just say the word and I will be at your side.'

He did want to see him but hesitated. 'Aren't you busy?'

'Even if I were the busiest man in the world, I would always have time for you.'

Earlier on this year, he wouldn't have admitted he needed anyone, more content to push people away for his own protection but now, he was becoming less afraid of voicing his true thoughts.

'If you've got time, then yeah.'

No sooner had he thought those words, that Alistair appeared. With a soft smile, he sat behind him, long legs either side of his own. Soothed by his presence Harry leaned back, arms encircling him.

"Thanks." Harry murmured, feeling Alistair nuzzle him softly. It wasn't long before the tightness in his chest left, replaced by a warm, all-encompassing feeling. For all the times Alistair had called him adorable, he couldn't help but think such an adjective was more suited to Alistair himself.

Rather than give a verbal answer, soft lips playfully kissed his neck. He was usually affectionate but today, seemed even more so.

"Did something good happen?" Harry asked, slightly breathless.

"Of course, you are here. It is always guaranteed to be a wonderful day, then."

While Harry could see that was a part of it, there was something more. "Did Professor Snape send you something as well?"

"He did, I received it this morning. Various bottles of alcohol, all Pumpkin themed. Admittedly that is also a source of my joy."
He thought as much. "Probably noticed you don't drink tea or coffee and instead need your daily pumpkin juice fix."

Alistair's tone was nothing short of mischievous. "While my fondness for it is true, I must disagree. You are my 'fix'."

Harry's face flamed. While it couldn't be seen from his position Alistair chuckled quietly, knowing instinctively.

As he opened the album to show Alistair, her on the set of swings looking carefree and joyful had to be one of his favourites. Stopping for a moment on each page, Alistair's voice was filled with conviction. "It is clear that you resemble your mother greatly. I have seen past Daily Prophet articles with you and even then, I still believe that it is her, in spirit and appearance, that you share similarities with. Though there is no denying where your hair came from."

Ruffling it affectionately, they shared the singular thought of Severus Snape and his surprising actions.

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It had been longer than ever before since Severus' last visit to Diagon Alley, relying on Owl deliveries if things were dire enough. But he had to visit Gringotts sometime, if only to alert the goblins that he wasn't in fact, dead.

Sneering to himself passers-by gave him a wide berth, secretly pleased as it meant not having to deal with overcrowded places. He hated those enough to rival Black.

Entering Gringotts he waited in line, on the thinnest thread of impatience as some imbecile tried to argue with one of the goblins. It was pointless, as rarely could anyone win against them.

Whoever this man was, he had the most irritating nasally voice. The kind which encouraged Severus' more violent urges. Drawing close to the man he hissed, the thin threads of impatience snapping.

"Silence, you irritating cretin. I have listened to this drivel for the past five minutes and you are wasting my time. Finish your business, immediately!"

With his tone of voice whipcrack sharp, the man turned, paling drastically. Come to think of it, he did resemble a student in his class he could vaguely recall, from his earlier years of teaching. His request was granted and no more than a minute later left, Severus next in line.

He answered the Goblin's grin with a smirk of his own. While he planned to visit his vault and withdraw a small amount of Galleons, that wasn't what happened, at first. "A package has been left
for you, in one of our storage rooms."

He narrowed his eyes. "By who?"

"Mr Potter."

After confirming he'd like to see it Severus followed behind, woefully unprepared for what met him when the large iron door with several bolts was unlocked.

He didn't need to be told what this was, knowing by sight immediately. This was a Basilisk skin and judging by its condition, recently shed. Used to measuring potential ingredients with his eyes he estimated it to be 70 feet in length and from a female, with the slightly varied scale pattern.

As there were no seats in the room, he had to settle for leaning most of his weight against the wall. He believed not much could shock him with all that he'd seen over the years. But with what he came to realise was a second gift of sorts from Potter in the form of something worth more than his yearly pay per year he'd taught at Hogwarts, the revelation was enough to visibly shake him.

"What do you wish to do with this?"

At the goblin's question, he shook himself from his reverie, mind working a mile a minute. There were several options and something like this didn't happen to everyone. While he would use some for himself, the rest could be sold off for a profit.

Keeping a quarter for personal use he trusted the goblin's business sense, for good reason. Their connections were vast and with some discussion in their native tongue between a group he couldn't understand, there were already interested buyers. He would be contacted with details at a later date, as the skin would be automatically sold to the highest bidder.

He had little clothing, the majority of it the usual starched and flame resistant teaching robes. But if he should ever find himself in a more dangerous situation than usual, Severus couldn't deny that having robes of Basilisk skin would provide a degree of resistance other clothing couldn't achieve.

There was no doubt about it, Severus had to return the favour. For both of them. Potter's wasn't something that could be bought however while here, Severus had a thing in mind for his irritating yet well-meaning colleague. Both he and Minerva were frequent visitors to a certain part of Diagon Alley, specialising in various brews, some of them exotic. It was their Christmas and Birthday presents yearly, with a long shelf life.

As he usually ordered it had been a long time since a physical visit there. When making his orders a few months prior he'd seen that they were offering a variety of pumpkin-based beverages. Whether spiced or sweet and he'd thought, what kind of idiot would that cater to?
And now, he had the answer. Only, this person was no idiot. Loathe as he was to pay compliments in general, even within his own thoughts, Lothaire was an intelligent man. A foolishly generous one too, judging by his recent actions. The same could be said for Potter, as ridiculous at that sounded.

Apparently, Pumpkin was popular with the younger generation and though Severus was by no means old, there were days where he wondered if he wasn't Albus' age, with the aches and pains he had.

Barely managing to hold back a curled lip of disgust he made several purchases, six bottles of alcohol and all with an underlying pumpkin theme. Once home, he would arrange for those to be delivered. As Severus didn't know his address, he would make do with asking one of the elves to leave it in his office.

With that out of the way, Severus returned home, to Spinner's End.

Well, he said home. Really it was a house, there was nothing homely about it. With the barest minimum of furnishings, it stored some of the more important possessions, nothing else.

If not for the elf he'd assigned to a weekly upkeep, every available surface would be caked with dust. He didn't have time to return here, living out most of his days within Hogwarts' walls.

ascending the stairs they creaked beneath a weight they'd not seen for a long time, similarly so when the door to his old bedroom opened.

There was no nostalgia here, no fond memories of childhood. It filled him with more bitterness and resentment than was healthy and thanks to his bastard of a father, any positive memories were an impossibility.

That is until he met Lily. His first friend and one that he was pleased to have, once realising that it was no trick and she required nothing from him. They were simpler, happier times. Or at least during those moments, he could temporarily forget reality.

That changed when attending Hogwarts, both through the crowd he fell into and the Marauders. He still deeply regretted those words spoken to her, years ago.

But during those times, whenever he could, he documented their friendship. Or at least her, as a memory of the time they'd spent together. At one point he'd never put it down, a rare smile on his face when recalling some of the deeper discussions they'd had.

But after their friendship had ended he'd locked the album away, out of sight and mind. No one knew of it except him and if the late Potter had, Severus had no doubt it would have been taken from him.
Locked physically and magically Severus easily undid the protections, locating the key and turning it within the lock.

As the drawer opened there it was, beneath a preservation charm. While he never intended to look at it again, he also didn't want it to deteriorate.

Unlike those times, when Severus looked at each picture, there were no smiles or warm feelings. There was nothing but a different kind of bitterness and what could have been if a different choice was made.

While he didn’t regret capturing these moments, it went to waste now. Though darkly tainted he had memories of these moments and more than a few second snapshots. It would do it no justice to remain locked away for eternity and if he trusted anyone with this, it would be Potter.

He’d never had the chance to know her, not as he did. It was the least that could be done and for the years that he’d observed him, it had occurred that he wasn’t one to base something on the values of expensive and inexpensive. He was very much family orientated and Severus had the feeling that this would be appreciated more than anything else.

Transfiguring some plain dark paper Severus wrapped it, leaving it label and note free. It needed nothing more than the contents and he wasn’t one for lavish decoration.

Recalling Lucius’ angry recounting of a house elf freed from his service Severus summoned it, raising both eyebrows as for some reason, he wore clothing and seemed content with that. After a stern warning to not under any circumstances tell Potter who it came from and to deliver it at a time when he wasn’t busy, ‘Dobby’ vanished into thin air once more.

While it was likely Potter would guess, he’d rather it remain that way than fact. Having him apologise and thank him once was enough, never mind a second time. He needed no thanks. If there was one thing he could do right in his pathetic life, it would be this. While he played a part in ensuring Potter was orphaned, there was nothing preventing Severus from helping him piece together the past of someone important.

Today called for one of the more stronger drinks, especially when he could retire from teaching altogether. The profits from the sold basilisk skin would ensure he’d never have to rely on a sub-par teaching wage again.

Looking forward to that distant future he left, returning to the comfort of his private quarters.

Harry wasn’t sure how long they remained that way, sitting on his bed and chatting together but more than once Sirius and Remus had come in to check on him. To Harry’s amusement each time
Alistair hid himself, still in the same position but able to prevent either of them from seeing, hearing or even smelling him. Each time it was a struggle to keep a straight face and while Sirius seemed convinced, Remus remained mildly suspicious. After the third time of leaving, Harry laughed softly.

“I feel like a kid who’s snuck his boyfriend in without permission.”

Alistair was similarly amused. “I believe that you are correct. But it adds an element of excitement, yes?”

He couldn’t argue with that. Unable to see Alistair’s expression, his next words were unexpected. “A teddy bear?”

Sitting on his desk was the stuffed bear given to him for Christmas. Embarrassed, he could only nod. “Yeah. It was Lilah’s present to me, she got her dad to help make it. She thought since I had Ray that time I should have one of my own.”

Feeling awkward, Harry was unsure what to say exactly. “I know it’s a bit ridiculous at my age, but I like him.” Unintentionally, his tone turned defensive. But as he should have known, the last person to have a negative reaction would be Alistair.

Leaning forward to kiss Harry’s cheek, his tone was soothing. “Not at all. From the childhood that you have had, I am doubtful that your relatives allowed you to have stuffed toys.”

Thoughts along the same line as to when he’d seen the bear, Harry nodded once. “I had a stuffed dog that Dudley didn’t want anymore. It became my friend until Dudley ripped its head off. Vernon just laughed.”

“You have missed out on vital parts of childhood. But truly, there is no age limit to this. There are adults who collect them, after all. May I see him?”

Harry was reassured by his words. Seeing no reason to refuse he summoned the bear, which came to sit in Alistair’s cupped hand. Fingertips lightly stroking the top of its head, Harry altered positions slightly so as to see his expression, curious.

He looked content sitting there with him and once more, it struck Harry that intent was everything. Alistair held a lot of power at his fingertips and if he wanted, could easily dominate this country and possibly every other too. But rather than that he was here and much like him, happy over the simplest things.

"He is very sweet."

Levitating the bear to rest in its original spot, Alistair turned Harry to face him. "There is no need to
feel ashamed. They are harmless and have a certain innocent charm. You, more than most, deserve to have the chance of experiencing such basic comforts. I am not a believer of restrictions and if you should decide that you would like one of every stuffed creature, I would aid you in finding them."

While he'd never go to such extremes, his understanding and open-mindedness were more than welcoming. Though only loosely related, their conversation reminded him of something.

"I forgot to ask back then, but why are Fennec Foxes your favourite animal form?"

Reminded of that time, Alistair's smile became tinged with a touch of melancholy. "It was during my travels to see every part of the world I had yet to discover, the dry and barren deserts being one. I find animals to be particularly fascinating and it was my hope that I would encounter a Fennec Fox. As the sun began to set I did, a kit and his mother. But, she was dead. I suspect to those who prey upon them. Kits do not leave until they are a few months old and he was too young to be alone. I was highly reluctant to leave him but the poor thing was terrified of me. So, until the time he could fend for himself, I became his substitute parent. It was unusual adapting to such a small form and difficult to build trust with him but I managed, until the day he left. Since then I have a fondness for them, particularly the one I raised for a brief period of time."

Out of all the answers Harry expected, that wasn't one of them. Blowing out a breath, his words had painted an image of that time perfectly. "That's amazing. I bet you made the best fox dad."

"I was a proud, but temporary father." Smiling at the thought, Harry's previous mood was now firmly entrenched in the past. A short while later Alistair left, leaving behind remnants of his warmth. Hiding the album away for safe keeping, he continued to read.

Harry,

There's something I want to discuss. Tap this parchment with your index finger three times and it will bring you to my location.

No one knows about this and for now, I would prefer it remains that way. It concerns something vital to possible future events.

Jacob

Not expecting a letter from him, Harry stared at the brief words for a moment. Though they were acquaintances, it was impossible for Harry not to trust someone who'd suffered beneath the hands of
Dumbledore more than most. While he had to wonder at the secrecy, he'd be a hypocrite to judge with all that he'd hid over the course of his life.

Harry allowed the information to settle within his mind, trying not to think too much of it. He didn't want Alistair to pick up on them, not yet anyway. He'd find out eventually but decided to follow Jacob's instructions.

Tapping the parchment three times he was taken away, brought to a dimly lit, sparsely furnished room. With an ominous air, Harry's fingers twitched for his wand as the flickering thought of this being a trap occurred.

"Sorry, I didn't mean for the setting to be so gloomy. This is just the most secure location I know."

At his voice, Harry breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing when the room became brighter. Invited to take a seat across from him he did so, giving a small smile. "It's ok, don't worry about it. How are you and Eduard?"

Appreciative of this thoughtfulness, the stormy clouds usually present within his eyes receded somewhat. "We're slowly trying to rebuild our lives, like everyone trapped beneath the school. It's going to take time, but I've got plenty of that."

Smile turning a little self-deprecating, Jacob got straight to business. "It's nothing shady, but it's better if kept between us for the moment. Alistair is protective, particularly of you I've noticed. Though he's better than most at hiding his true thoughts if choosing to, the moments where you've come up in conversation are telling."

As Jacob gave him a significant look, Harry began to wonder just how obvious they were to others they hadn't outright told. "I take it this is something he'd want to be here for?"

Jacob nodded. "Definitely. But the fewer people, the better. It's a difficult situation. For the majority of my mortal and immortal life, I've kept in contact with Werewolf packs across this country and others. While isolated from societies they remain connected with those in similar situations and know of me. I update them weekly, visit and see if there's anything I can do. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to do this and today will be the first time in months I've visited. I've been wanting to introduce them to others and from me, the process of trusting them would run much smoother. I want to do this with you."

Harry was surprised. "Why me?"

Gaze serious, he leaned forward in his seat slightly. "Whether you realise it or not, you're important. Others have taken notice of you and the more allies readily available, the better. I've got nothing but a gut feeling, however, I don't think Dumbledore and The Guild of Light, once put to an end, will be the last we see of trouble. All I ask is to stay alert."
It wasn't a pleasant thought, but one Harry agreed with. The question of who sent those Vampires after him was still unsolved and the more he had time to think, the more he became convinced this wasn't Dumbledore's doing. There was something he'd yet to piece together and hopefully, once one threat was gone, the other would make itself known.

"I understand. So who you want me to meet then?"

Jacob's response came without hesitation. "Fenrir Greyback."

Harry stiffened. "You can't be serious."

When seeing that he was, Harry maintained his calm, though difficult. "Does he even want to?"

"No," Jacob admitted, straight-faced. "He knows of you though and his opinion is less than favourable. But if he realises you played a part in my rescue, his attitude will change. I see him as a friend so I won't break his trust, but not all you've heard of him is true."

Reminding himself to be open-minded despite knowing he was directly responsible for Remus' suffering, he nodded reluctantly. He could see the advantage of having someone like Fenrir on his side but unlike Jacob, wasn't optimistic. "Ok then. Where is he?"

As Jacob looked reluctant to answer, Harry quickly realised. "You don't want other people to discover the location from my head."

Glad of his understanding, Jacob rose to his feet. "I can see you have impressive defences, however, I don't want to take the chance."

That was fine by him and in the end, only meant that he had less valuable information that others might want to gain. While Alistair's reaction was of mild concern, it was Remus which worried him the most. More than once he'd told him that if they should cross paths, stay away. He wasn't even meeting him for a fight either, but to talk. Or at least, that was Jacob's idea.

Hoping that Remus wouldn't be too angry when he found out this particular piece of information late, he touched Jacob's arm and they both disappeared.

Reappearing in the middle of a forest it looked just like any other to Harry, nothing at all which would indicate that the Greyback pack lived here. Nervous didn't even begin to sum up his feelings, remaining quiet and following Jacob's lead, who looked used to this.

"They move to a different part of the forest every month and each year, a new one entirely. They never settle in one place for longer than that."
Harry could see how difficult it would be for any of them to grow attached when they had no permanent home to speak of. If it wasn't for people like Umbridge, then maybe more werewolves could live like Remus.

He wasn't given long to mull on those thoughts before raised voices caught his attention. Turning his head he could see a short distance away a boy, around Harry's age, standing over a huddled form and delivering a swift kick. Before he could think about whether that was a good idea, he ran.

Ignoring Jacob's concerned voice he came to a stop in front of them, seeing that the huddled form was a little girl, obviously injured.

"Get out of here!" At Harry's angry voice the boy looked up paling and running in the opposite direction from them.

Face pale the girl remained silent, looking at him with fear. Crouching down he held out his hands, to show there was nothing threatening in them. "It's ok, you're safe now. I can help."

Lowering one hand, Harry focused magic into one palm and was about to heal her, when an incredible force picked him up by the neck. Squeezing harshly he was slammed into the nearest tree, head cracking painfully.

Seeing stars, it took a few seconds for his eyes to focus. He hadn't noticed anyone else approach, surprisingly silent.

"Who the fuck are you?" The man growled, sour breath hitting his face from an appearance caught somewhere between wolf and human. With a broad, muscular physique, the hand around his throat tightened to the point where it was difficult to speak.

"H-Harry Potter. I was going to help, I saw this kid kicking her."

Beginning to panic his heartbeat rose, hoping that Alistair wasn't paying attention to the bracelet at this point in time. Then, his saviour came in the form of Jacob.

"Fenrir, release him, he's with me. What he says is true."

At the familiar voice, he stiffened, dropping Harry immediately who was given the chance to breathe. Looking furious, he stormed over to Jacob. "Where the fuck have you been? I hear nothing for months and then you just show up?"

While most would be intimidated, including Harry, Jacob remained unaffected. "I was imprisoned beneath Hogwarts. Dumbledore had captured several of us, including my family. Akari and my
unborn child are dead."

That stopped him in his tracks. Seeing his expression even from the side, Harry could see the effects it had on him. So this was Fenrir. Remaining quiet and wincing as his fingers brushed against what would no doubt be a bruised throat, he observed them.

"That bastard has a lot to answer for." Growling, he spared a glance for Harry. "So why is Potter here?"

"I wanted you to meet him. If it wasn't for him I might not have left Dumbledore's clutches."

Fenrir turned to look at him properly. "You want to help her?" At Harry's nod, his suspicion and distrust remained, but the hostility was tightly reigned in. "Do it then." Turning to Jacob, his expression was steely. "I don't give a shit whether you brought him or not but if he hurts her, I'll kill him."

Harry didn't doubt that. Nervously Harry continued what he was going to do, finding it marginally more difficult to concentrate when the one man largely responsible for the werewolf population increase bore holes into his back with a burning glare.

He was no healer but knew enough from his own injuries over the years to get the job done. Satisfied with his work he stood up and with surprising gentleness, Fenrir lifted the girl into his arms. Making slightly harsh growling noises they seemed to calm her down, frail arms loosely wrapped around him.

Walking away with quick strides Jacob gestured to follow and now that he had the chance to, Harry healed his throat. The last thing he wanted to do was add more fuel to the fire with Remus' understandable hatred of Fenrir.

As they drew closer Harry could see that they had the bare minimum of furnishings, some necessities here and there for the children which outdoors couldn't completely provide. There were more adult males than children or females, about 20 werewolves including Fenrir and he assumed the girl, in total. After a low hum of conversation between a stocky but no less well-built man, Fenrir handed her over to him and headed a small distance away.

"Sit." It was a demand, not a request and Harry did so, on the grass in front of him. Jacob sat to Harry's right, off to the side slightly but there to intervene if need be.

With unusually sharp teeth, his dark eyes regarded Harry with mild disgust. "So, not Dumbledore's little lap dog any longer?"

Rather than take offence, Harry answered normally. "No, far from it. That bastard's done too much for me to ever feel the same way again."
He grunted. Whether in approval or acknowledgement of his words, remained unknown. Piercing eyes turning to Jacob, they silently demanded more information.

As he explained Harry remained quiet, growls rumbling within Fenrir's chest as his earth-stained hands flexed, most likely imagining Dumbledore's scrawny neck in front of him. His nails were sharp and again, Harry got the impression he was more wolf than man. Rather than Remus' rejection he'd clearly embraced his nature, to the point of it partially consuming the human side remaining.

Once finished, Fenrir spared Harry a glance, voice, gruff. "Thanks."

Harry gave him a nod. Knowing what he referred to, he must hold Jacob in high regard for such a reaction. With no idea of any possible outcome, he allowed himself a mental sigh of relief that things seemed to be going smoothly. He was brought from his thoughts by Fenrir's question.

"Why did you bring him? Don't give me that bullshit of wanting us to 'open up to humans' more."

While that was true, Jacob had known him for too long. He wouldn't accept such an answer so used the other, instead. "Harry's important. I don't mean the boy who lived nonsense either but to all of us. His actions could influence how we all live and when the time comes, your help would be appreciated."

Fenrir's expression remained unchanged, straightening to attention when his piercing eyes seemed to slice through all of Harry's defences. "Potter. What say you?"

Realising that this was a test of sorts, he remained honest. He never expected this to be a possibility, but allowed his true thoughts to surface. "There might come a time where I need all the help I can get or there might not. Either way, it's up to you but I really do want to see changes for Werewolves. Dumbledore is preventing that from happening but once he and others like him are gone, I think it will be a better future for all of us. Not only for you but my family as well."

Fenrir's expression shifted, but not to the point where he could get a read on him. "...Fine."

Muttering something to Jacob, all Harry could hear was his surprised voice of, are you sure? Before he swiftly left the area.

Fenrir was a hard man to read but not the cold-blooded, heartless bastard that the media and order members had portrayed him to be. Of course, he could be wrong but with Jacob there, Harry had the feeling he wasn't far off the mark.

Remaining there, Jacob watched him go for a short moment. Breaking the silence, Harry's voice was hesitant. "Did that go well, or?"
Jacob nodded confidently. "Better than I expected. He's not a man of many words. He told me just now that I could tell you a bit of his past. He left due to his own discomfort."

Smiling sadly, what Harry learned next was shocking.

Fenrir had a son called Brynn, who was murdered by Dumbledore. He'd wandered too far from their home and a member of the order had found him. Seeing the resemblance he was called, a Patronus sent to Fenrir. Once there he watched as Brynn was killed before his eyes.

Enraged he broke free from his bindings and while Dumbledore left the scene, those with him either did but with serious injuries or didn't, as he tore them to shreds. Vowing to have his revenge he made it his mission to infect as many children as possible, raise them to hate wizards but among them, Dumbledore especially.

"He regrets his actions, though will never say it, because he was unwillingly infected as a child too but learned to embrace his changes. He remembers every child he turned."

While Harry was glad to understand better, he couldn't completely agree. "I get why he was angry but so many kids never got to have a normal life growing up. I'm sorry that happened to his son, but..."

Trailing off, he glanced at Jacob apologetically. Remus still suffered to this day because of Fenrir's actions and this wouldn't wipe the slate clean by any means.

"I understand. All you need to know is if the time comes, you can count on his aid."

Harry didn't exactly hate Fenrir anymore, very much on neutral territory. That he expressed regret was a start. If he didn't he wouldn't want anything more to do with him.

Knowing that he'd be in for a round of questioning once returning home, Harry figured it was best to get it over with sooner rather than later.

He was correct on that count. Remus wasn’t the one to emerge but Moony and after quickly explaining, calmed down but only by a small amount. Harry didn’t regret going with Jacob to do this but didn’t mention anything about Fenrir’s past. At this point, he wasn’t sure it would change Remus’ or Sirius’ opinion for that matter and felt as if some things were better left to settle.

Alistair was surprisingly calm and understanding, mostly in part due to Jacob’s trust and agreed with both to remain alert but of course, he left out the fact he was grabbed by the throat. Harry hoped there wouldn’t be a time where he needed the help of many but if he should, he was much better prepared now than the day he broke free from Dumbledore, this, he was certain of.
It was New Year’s Eve. While Sirius was testing the limits of his liver, Harry wanted to remain sober as he planned on seeing Alistair later. Remus was having a drink too but decided to take it steady.

When he was handed a bottle Harry was about to refuse, until Sirius patted him on the shoulder. “It’s Butterbeer.”

Taking a cautious sniff Harry realised he was right. It had a low alcohol content so he’d be fine with that. It was only after taking a sip that he was reminded to never lower his guard around Sirius.

He felt different, somehow. Not in a bad way but something pleasant. Still, it was too much of a quick change to not be suspicious. Pinning Sirius with an accusatory glare he placed the bottle back down. “What did you spike my drink with?”

“I have no idea what you mean.” Looking innocent he swiftly dodged Harry’s arm, who tried to focus on what he was going to say, but found he couldn’t.

Even with Occlumency, his mind was full of thoughts, to the point where they sometimes drowned everything else out. Among them mainly was Alistair but right now, as if it was one of their kissing sessions, nothing else but him filled Harry’s mind.

It wasn’t the time he was supposed to meet him yet, in his quarters at Hogwarts, but was unable to brush away the strong urge to go now. Vowing to kill Sirius later Harry flooed away, intending on surprising Alistair with an early visit.

Once alone, Remus turned to him. “Spill. What did you do?”

“Nothing much! Just added a little something to spice the lovebird’s evening.” Grinning to himself, he was met with a slap upside the head.

“Ow, Remus! It’s not Amortentia or anything like that, it just makes the biggest thought in Harry’s mind more important. Even a complete idiot can see most of his mind is focused on Alistair. The feelings are already there and he’s not being controlled in any way, just a little nudge of liquid courage. The kid’s got so much going on he could do with a stress reliever.”

Seeing that it was a prank but not one intended to harm, Remus, relaxed. “Even so, you do know he’ll probably kill you?”

Sirius shrugged. “I’ll come back, I already did once.”

Rolling his eyes, Remus decided to take a step back and simply observe, once Harry came back to
enact revenge in a possible pranking form.

In Lunaland through the floo’s connection, it was difficult for Harry to concentrate on anything other than Alistair. This always happened when in close proximity but alone, his body flushed with desire. Anything else which worried or concerned him such as the trial in January and the weight resting on his shoulders from those who chose to watch him closely didn’t seem as bad. He still had his own thoughts and control over what to think, but it was different in the sense of his thoughts not straying to darker areas.

The urge to see him was tugging away at Harry and rather than feel concerned, he’d question Sirius about what it was later. He had no doubt he’d put something in the Butterbeer but right now, decided to go with the flow.

Impatient he connected with Alistair’s floo, throwing in a pinch of powder and stumbling through the other side. Righting himself he removed his shoes, placing them down. Afterwards, he located Alistair, seated on the sofa with a book in hand. Glancing at him with faint surprise, he checked the time.

“Hello Harry, you are early.”

With each word, Harry focused on Alistair’s lips. How the hell did he get this lucky? Across the last few weeks he’d learned a lot and while he still couldn’t claim to be very experienced, he’d observed him closely.

With no ounce of hesitation and only a small amount of embarrassment, Harry embraced his inner Gryffindor. Carefully taking the book from Alistair’s hand and placing it aside he sat down, straddling him.

Surprised but pleased by his boldness he studied Harry intently, who shared the brief memory of a few minutes ago. “I think he just wanted to give me a nudge in the right direction. I was thinking about it as well before that, so don’t worry.”

He reassured Alistair with his clear, uninfluenced green eyes that this was something he wanted.

One thing which Alistair would never do was take advantage of someone under the influence. Without consent, it would make him nothing more than the monster what others claimed him to be. He detected a hint of Butterbeer from Harry, but nothing more.

“Only what you are comfortable with.” Stroking his head Harry purred beneath the touch, all fears and doubts no longer seeming as vast.

“You’re ridiculously handsome.” A soft smile on his lips Harry initiated their kiss, a gentle brush at first as his hand came to cup the back of Alistair’s head.
Content to let him take the lead and build confidence, he was unable to remember a time before Harry where he was rendered so discomposed by a lover’s touch.

As Harry pulled away to inhale, Alistair’s heart warmed. “You are too. Very much so.”

He allowed liquid heat to pool in his shimmering eyes, releasing a little more of all the desire that he held back.

Breath catching at what he’d managed to bring forth, it was an unfamiliar but welcome change for Alistair to be the one to let him make decisions.

Seeing that his shirt was fully buttoned, dissatisfaction filled him. He wanted to see more. Hands reaching out he fumbled with them, frowning.

“Your shirt’s conspiring against me.”

Amused and finding his grumbling nothing short of adorable, Harry managed to undo all of the buttons, baring Alistair’s torso.

“That’s better.” Looking pleased with himself Harry took off his own shirt, a simple one with no buttons in sight. With Alistair’s many reassurances that his scars weren’t something which lessened his attraction, Harry didn’t look away or hide himself.

Arms wrapping around him, he experimentally kissed Alistair’s neck. Rewarded with a soft gasp it boosted his confidence, infinitely curious as his teeth came to lightly nibble an earlobe.

“Do you like that?” His tone of voice was teasing, squeaking when Alistair’s hand slid down, lightly squeezing his rear.

Leaning back slightly to look at him, it was as if a new side of himself began to surface. A playfully naughty one that he had no idea existed.

This expression of Harry’s was new, one that awakened Alistair’s desires southward. “I believe that you already know the answer.”

He knew without a doubt whatever Sirius had given him hadn’t affected his own actions, but he could hardly recognise the words leaving his mouth. “Then, I’ve got a new question. What are you going to do next, Professor?”

Putting extra emphasis on the last word, a challenging gleam entered his eyes.
Rather than tell him verbally, Alistair decided to demonstrate. His self-control wasn’t limitless after all and with Harry’s efforts, he’d stripped the majority of it away with ease.

As Harry was comfortable taking things further, the past, most passionate kisses paled in comparison to this one. There was no need for Alistair to breathe, dedicated to tasting his lips. As Harry gasped for air, a sweep of his tongue answered that and began to stroke his own.

Oh god, this was much more than he was expecting. His first kiss would always be special because it was a confirmation of feelings returned but this was an indication that he’d come a long way in terms of self-confidence. He could say, for the first time in his life, he felt good about himself.

Holding onto him Alistair’s hands glided over his skin, feeling the heat radiating from it. He was a male siren. So tempting and hard to resist his allure, only made more so when completely unaware of his own charm. He’d come such a long way, right now was proof and pride in his progress was strong, but none more so than the strength of his want.

And then, Alistair heard the sound of footsteps, drawing closer quickly. Knowing exactly who it was he was tempted to curse her timing and himself, for insisting that she didn’t need to knock.

“Harry, we must stop for the moment. Someone is coming.”

Not liking the sound of that at all, Harry refused. “Tell them to bugger off.”

Sighing softly, he was almost tempted to do just that. “I cannot.”

Under normal circumstances, Harry would have panicked and climbed off his lap immediately, but those thoughts remained unimportant. What was important sat right here and no force on this earth would stop him. “Please?”

His inability to remain firm with Harry would no doubt be Alistair’s undoing. So, rather than the normal response between a couple about to be caught in the act, something else happened instead.

Disguising Harry and his discarded shirt, Alistair was able to give the illusion that he sat there alone, fully dressed and a book by his side. Or at least, he hoped he’d managed to achieve that. Having a semi-naked young man sitting on his lap didn’t help concentration much, after all.

No sooner had he done this, that Minerva opened the door. Trying his best to act as normal he gave her a warm smile. “Minerva! What brings you here?”

Not suspecting anything wrong in the least, she looked more energised than he’d ever seen her as of late. “I came to wish you an early happy new year. On behalf of myself and the students, thank you
for all of your hard work.”

While touched at her comment, Harry’s own that only he could hear didn’t help matters, chuckling mischievously. “Not the only thing that’s hard.”

Discomposed, it took him a second longer than usual to formulate a response. “I must thank you too. Without your support, friendship and expertise, I would not have settled into teaching life quite as smoothly.”

No longer kissing Harry, Alistair could feel the touch of lips on his chest until the warm, wet sensation of a tongue targeted his nipple.

A strange sound leaving him, Alistair blushed, deeply. He knew without looking to see that his cheeks were coloured red.

Seeing his expression, Minerva frowned. “Are you alright? You look flushed.”

“I have been feeling a little under the weather recently, but it is nothing to worry about.” Reassuring her, Alistair would have welcomed her company earlier on today but right now, it remained nothing but extraordinarily bad timing.

Giving him a concerned once over, she made a decision. “I’m glad that you’ve settled in among the staff and that I’ve helped in that regard. I’ll leave you for tonight, get plenty of rest.”

Once Minerva closed the door and her footsteps faded into the distance, Alistair cancelled his spellwork and gave Harry an admonishing look. Catching it, he didn’t feel guilty in the slightest. Grinning triumphantly, Harry’s fingertips brushed across his chest. “I found a sensitive spot.”

One of his most sensitive spots, in fact. Even after so many years, they remained this way, even more, when Harry’s attention was directed towards them. Though breathing wasn’t necessary, Alistair truly found himself breathless.

“What on earth possessed you to do that with your head of house a few feet away?”

He wasn’t angry or even irritated, simply a combination of stunned and embarrassed. Looking sheepish, he hugged him by way of apology. “I’m impatient. Since we got caught out in the rain that time I haven’t been able to get them or you out my head.”

At Harry’s admission, he was defeated. “Ah, whatever shall I do with you?”

Returning his arms to their original place to indicate he wasn’t irritated, Harry locked eyes with him
and on purposely shifted. He could feel him stir in response.

It seemed as if for all the times Alistair teased him, this was the night Harry had enacted vengeance. His little devil wouldn’t get away with such actions completely unscathed.

Wondering if he’d pushed a little too far, Harry was startled when Alistair stood up, supporting him from beneath as he held on firmly. The door pushed open he was carefully laid on the bed, roles reversed.

While Harry had no experience before this, he was a healthy teenager in every other aspect. He hadn’t touched himself at all, but the fabric of his trousers and boxers strained beneath the pressure.

Heart hammering within his chest, other thoughts once more filled his mind. Having the feeling that what he’d taken had worn off, it didn’t matter now. He could take things from here and wanted it to go further.

With his head propped up, Harry was able to see all of him. Hands going straight to his belt buckle he welcomed the action. Loosening it he lifted his hips, allowing Alistair to remove them and shortly after, his socks.

As Harry lay there in nothing but boxers, could he go a little further? In his mind, the answer was yes.

A combination of nervous and excited, his voice trembled slightly. "Y-You can take those off too." Blushing fiercely he kept his gaze steady.

Not wanting his confidence to waver any Alistair didn't ask if he was sure, able to see for himself. Gripping the waistband of his boxers he pulled them down, and off.

He was naked, for the first time in front of him. While he wanted this to happen, he didn't anticipate how vulnerable and exposed it would leave him feeling. Turning his head to one side, the nervousness of if Alistair's opinion had changed any barely had time to surface within his mind, before the distance was closed between them.

Stroking his cheek soothingly, Harry's nerves began to melt away. Looking at Alistair, he was reassured by a warm gaze, tinged with a hint of awe. "You are more wonderful than I could have ever anticipated. I will say once more, that it is your pace and yours alone that we will go. But, let it be known that I am enamoured."

He wasn't the only one. Moving back over, Harry's legs were gently parted. Feeling kisses pressed to his inner thighs and slowly moving upward, he gripped onto the sheets beneath him tightly. Much like his earlier words he called out in a voice alien to him, attempting to stifle his loudness.
"Do not hold back, I want to hear you."

There was no I would like or please there, he wanted him to. It was a different choice of words and one that Harry couldn't possibly refuse. Exposed to the cool air he had something now in need of attention. While he appreciated Alistair practically worshipping his body, he wasn't sure if he could hold back much longer.

That thought had barely crossed his mind, as a kiss was pressed to the tip of his length.

"Ahh!"

Harry's reaction was instant. As if he'd suffered from an electric shock his back arched, as though all the pleasure he'd felt today became concentrated in that one area.

Laughing a little, it was Alistair's eyes which held the glint of naughtiness. "Now there is the voice that I was searching for."

Before he could so much as respond, similar kisses were planted there, from where he'd started to the base and each time, a jolt of pleasure set his nerve endings alight.

But when his tongue began to expertly lick the same path, Harry lost track of his thoughts entirely, completely centred on where Alistair had his attention focused the most.

He wasn't completely oblivious. Seamus was particularly vocal about his experience with girls, one of them being blowjobs. Harry knew this was it, but the name didn't fit what he was feeling at all. It didn't do it justice, the word too crude for what Alistair was doing to him right now.

One thing was for certain, nothing that he'd ever done to himself could ever hope to match his current level of pleasure, particularly when he was taken into Alistair's mouth. His experience shone through, no action going to waste as he leisurely bobbed up and down.

At this point, he doubted he was coherent at all. His fists were bloodless, gripping the sheets tighter than ever as pleased cries left his thoroughly kissed lips. Building to a crescendo he gave Alistair a warning, hoping it was understandable.

"I'm going to.."

Expecting him to move away at the last second, he didn't. With a final shout, he climaxed, Alistair taking in all of him.
Harry's mind was blown. Breathing deeply he couldn't think clearly at all, thoughts scattered to the far winds along with his heart.

As Alistair came into view again, Harry could hardly believe what he'd just done. Not embarrassed in the least his smile turned seductive, murmuring softly.

"So, Harry, what would be the aptest description for your first experience in this area?"

He was asking him what he thought of that? He could barely string a sentence together. Hurriedly collecting some of his scattered thoughts, he channelled Ron for a moment. "Bloody brilliant."

Delighted, he pulled him into an embrace. "I am pleased to hear that."

As he did so, Harry was reminded of something. Renewed with a burst of energy, he propped himself up. "It's my turn now, right? You're in this state, to begin with, because of me."

Grinning, he switched their positions. "Not that I'm sorry for it."

Looking up and into his eyes, Alistair's held a sparkle of enjoyment as he watched him. He loved giving and receiving pleasure, but there was something particularly special about being the one solely responsible for Harry's state.

As he expected, Harry was nowhere near as graceful, removing the pesky clothing in his way with the same fumbling motions from before. Eventually, he managed until with a final tug, the last of Alistair's clothing joined the small heap.

As he sprang forth, Harry's eyes widened slightly. Biting his lower lip in slight nervousness, he spent a minute simply taking it all in. Even he wasn't completely composed, his usual words not as smooth flowing as a light dusting of pink flushed his cheeks.

He wanted to hear more of Alistair too. He didn't know what he was doing at all but decided to wing it alongside his limited knowledge. By hand, he knew what pleased him, but the rest was uncertain. He'd never be able to pull off the same flair as Alistair, but he'd put his all into trying.

To him, it was perfect, not too much there to be overwhelming and rather than dive into unknown waters, did what he knew how to best. Rather than lay back as he did Alistair propped himself upright, observing him through slightly misty eyes.

Gripping him, Harry's thumb brushed across the tip, rewarded with a gasp. The skin was velvety smooth, pulsating with heat familiar yet unfamiliar. Growing used to the feeling Harry went further, leaning down and licking tentatively. A mild salty taste registered and along with it, a pleased, quiet moan.
That was all the encouragement he needed. 1,500 years old with a great deal of composure or not, he wanted to hear much more. A hand stroking his hair, Alistair's voice was softer than ever. "Do not attempt to rush, or you will choke."

Knowing what he was referring to he listened seriously to the advice, going at a steady pace and much like a lot of things in his life, winging it and hoping for the best outcome.

"Oh Harry, that is.. you are.."

Unable to complete a sentence was definitely a start. Both entertained and aroused from seeing Alistair's lack of composure he upped the pace, tongue making up for where it couldn't fit just yet. Thoroughly enjoying himself the room swelled with Alistair's sweet sighs, shifting to a slightly sharp cry when his tongue swirled around the tip.

Even without words, Harry could tell he was close. Much like the majority of what had happened so far, he'd never done this before, but again, wanted to try. As Alistair climaxed he swallowed, a small amount leaking from his lips. Licking what he was unable to catch, that unconscious yet natural gesture was enough to unravel yet more of Alistair's self-control.

Sitting properly, Harry looked at him teasingly, with a small amount of expectation. "So, how did I do?"

As he'd asked him for his opinion, it was only fair Alistair responded in kind. Throwing a wink his way, he pulled him close. "I believe that outstanding would be an acceptable description."

In his arms, Harry's eyes once more found his lips. But rather than wanting to kiss them, he asked a question which Alistair wasn't expecting. "I know you get urges to kiss me, but do you get the same for my blood?"

Genuinely curious, he waited for a response.

As the majority of his lovers stayed clear from that side of him, he didn't expect such a question to come from Harry. But still, he placed honesty above everything. "I do. More so, since the day that I healed Solomon's mark."

With seriousness in his gaze, Harry tilted his neck to the side. "Bite me, if you want to."

At the hesitation in Alistair's eyes, Harry gave him a bright smile. "Really! I mean it. I'm curious what it's like. I have been since Solomon bit me."

Though it was vital to his recovery, a surge of irrational jealousy welled within him that Solomon
was the first to taste him, in that aspect. Pushing aside those absurd thoughts, he knew Harry wouldn't have mentioned this if it wasn't something he wanted to experience for himself.

Allowing the natural change to take over, his lust for blood became far stronger. He could hear it, rushing through Harry's body at a higher rate, as his heart had yet to stop beating quickly. Opening his mouth Alistair drew closer, sinking his fangs into precisely the same spot as Solomon had. Wrapping his arms around him the blood coated his tongue, awakening his urge to have more than just a small amount.

He tasted divine. It had been a long time since he'd fed from a human but a human and his lover? Even longer still. But, this was the one area where he could absolutely not lose control. He'd done that once centuries ago, nearly killing the human. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Harry remembered what it was like last time, the sensation too bizarre yet intriguing for it to ever slip his mind. But this was so much different. The sharp pain registered but shortly after, a sense of euphoria. It was as if he'd had several shots but rather than alcohol flowing through his system, blood was leaving it at a steady pace. Lightheaded he couldn't deny it was still bizarre, but began to enjoy the sensation.

"Feels good.." He whispered close by Alistair's ear, tugging his hair ribbon free to run a hand through the silky smoothness.

Alistair was experiencing a similar sensation, only it did produce a feeling of intoxication. It had been so long since the last time and coupled with Harry's blood being some of the most potent he'd ever tasted, that was his indication to stop. Healing the wound with a final swipe of his tongue his eyes were a little out of focus. In an attempt to regain it and lacking his usual grace, he flopped back onto the bed.

Hovering over him, Harry was mildly concerned. "Are, you ok? You look a bit out of it."

Smiling to reassure him, he explained. "It has been a long time since I last drank from a human. Coupled with the potency of your blood, it is very much like alcohol."

Harry glanced down at himself, amazed. "So, I got you tipsy?"

"A little, yes." He admitted, most of his usual clarity returning to him little by little.

Strangely, he felt a sense of pride that his blood could do what most couldn't.

"What did it taste like to you? For me whenever I cut my finger, it was sort of coppery."

Alistair did his best to explain with something Harry might have tried before. "It resembled mulled
wine."

Mulled Wine? He’d tried that before, fairly recently as well. Putting it down to the fact that he wasn’t a Vampire and therefore didn’t have blood tastebuds, Harry was glad that he enjoyed it nevertheless. Joining him in lying down, he laced his fingers between Alistair’s. “I liked that. It was weird but in a good way. If you fancy some more just say and I’ll down a blood replenishing potion.”

He couldn’t detect a hint of fear or disgust at that side of him at all. Truly more than ever before, Alistair had never felt so healthy. Human blood always would be so effective, but it was only not that he realised perhaps he’d neglected that side of him more than he’d thought. Appreciative of his thoughtfulness, his arm came to rest around him. “I will.”

Pleased to hear it and unconcerned that he’d recently drank some of his blood, Harry kissed him once more. It was only a few seconds but confirmed the intensity of his affection.

“Harry?”

At Alistair’s voice, he glanced back up, eyes twinkling. “Happy New Year.”

Blinking rapidly he checked the time. 0:01, January 1st, 1997.

It was a new year. With new people and more importantly, with Alistair.

"Best new year ever." Nodding his head as if to put that point across he settled down, feeling optimistic. Right then he decided he wouldn’t kill Sirius, but what son of a Marauder would he be without a retaliation prank?

While the two hearts side by side would never beat as one, their feelings nonetheless remained the same. Feeling as if he’d taken one more step forward towards being comfortable with himself, Harry truly looked forward to what the future would hold for them.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve written smut a few times before, but this was challenging considering the gradual build up before that and the fact that it’s not solely that but a bit of everything xD so the language use is a bit muted. For those who read that bit though I hope you enjoyed :P
Pursuing Destinies

Chapter Summary

Sirius is pranked again, Solomon is introduced to two of the most important people in Hermione's life and a few days later, Sun, Moon and Bloom are pitted against something which has plagued the Fae realm for longer than they've been alive.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Severus returns unexpected gifts and with a little nudge from Sirius in the form of a prank, Harry deepens his relationship with Alistair.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WARNING: Some fairly gruesome battle moments.

Upon Harry's arrival back to Evergreen Manor, Sirius had another prank to live life day by day with. Not only was the 'Slytherin' prank from Alistair still active but now with his in the mix, he'd break into a pantomime-like song and dance session every time he walked through a doorway. Even when avoiding doing so inevitably he'd have to, as apparating within the building would drain his reserves over time.

Leaping into the room as if he were a ballerina and spinning on the spot, Sirius slapped a hand to his chest, taking a deep breath.

"Gazeth upon mine own visage and beest in awe, as mine own wild and untam'd locks art the key to w'rd rapture. Mine own lips blesseth those yond t touches 'r whatev'r w'rcds leaveth those folk. I shalt demonstrateth, with song!"

Glancing at one another, Remus and Harry snorted, with the latter taking particular pleasure since Sirius was infuriatingly smug about knowing something more happened with Alistair yesterday.

Being treated to the worst version of Greensleeves he'd ever heard, it was both amusing and slightly painful. A part of him wondered if a temporary clothing transfiguration for those few minutes would be possible.

Looking disgruntled, Sirius flopped into an armchair. "I like making an entrance, but that takes the..."
piss."

Not apologetic in the slightest, Harry maintained a straight face, though found it difficult. "What are you doing here? There are things to bless with your lips and the world to rapture waiting outside, it's your destiny!"

Ruffling Harry's hair until it was a suitable mess, Sirius fought against the urge to roll his eyes. "Destiny my arse. That's one hell of a prank though because I don't know a word of Anglo Saxon. Until now, that is."

Without missing a beat, Remus smoothly cut into the conversation. "Sirius, thou art a blinking idiot of most wondrous proportions."

Lips twitching, Harry nodded. "I second him."

"Oi!"

As some input was provided by Alistair, Harry wondered what other combination of words Sirius would come out with, as he planned for this to last a long while yet.

While Hermione usually spent her Christmas period reading or studying, this year was different. She could only put it down to parent intuition but somehow, through the letters she'd sent, they'd detected a change in her and once home, received a confession. She'd planned on telling them about Solomon a bit later but now, they both knew of him.

Wanting to communicate even when physically apart, Solomon, with Hermione's approval, had established a mind link between them. It only required absolute mastery from one person and it was how he communicated with Alistair as well.

Between them they'd organised a day to meet, that day being January 1st at 6 pm. It was when both her parents were home from work and would be able to then. Her mum would be welcoming, the same as with her friends, but there was a certain protective streak in her dad which had surfaced more than once when complaining to her old primary school and the parents of children who bullied her.

That was just bringing a boyfriend home for the first time. The fact that he was a Vampire touched a different topic completely. Usually so confident and self-assured, Hermione was nervous. Like many, her parents feared the unknown and she'd glossed over some of the more finer details.

They knew that many things considered fairytales or myths were actually true, such as the existence of Vampires and Werewolves. They'd met Remus once, who she'd told in confidence about his
condition and were reassured that he was nothing like what he appeared to be or at least, the human side of him.

There was no such separation for Solomon, able to shift appearances at will rather than against it. So for this, she couldn't possibly predict their reactions. As he was able to detect her location through their link, there was no need to inform him of her address.

As they'd finished work a 5:30 pm, her parents wanted to be ready and waiting for him but also, take the extra time to question Hermione.

"What does he do for a living?" Perhaps he didn't mean to sound so intense, but on the end of inquisitiveness on par with her own left Hermione mildly discomfited. They'd discussed previously what to say, expecting some questions and decided there was no harm in the truth. Both of them would know of his true nature soon enough and to make up a normal job would be senseless.

"He's self-employed and enchants objects for others."

Looking satisfied with his prior knowledge to meeting him, at least for now, Hermione had the feeling that later, Solomon would be taken aside for questioning of his own.

At 6 pm sharp, there was a knock on the door. Hermione was sure her heart had left its confines, beating out of excitement and nervousness. Springing to her feet she left the room, approaching the front door to open it.

With a soft lilac button up shirt tucked into trousers, he was smart enough for a first meeting but not overly so. Even by his appearance, the majority could consider him odd, as white hair with his apparent age was unheard of unless suffering from trauma. If a human, then his hair colour change would be down to that rather than Phoenix Blood, she suspected.

But even if he looked odd to others, he was right for her. Showing a small smile which was becoming more common these days, he tucked a lock of loose hair behind her ear. "Hello, Hermione."

Momentarily discomposed by his demonstration of brief affection, she welcomed him in. "Hi, you look great!"

Seeing shoes stacked neatly by the door, Solomon slipped his own off to match Hermione's sock cladded feet. With a calming hand on the small of her back, it was as if he knew instinctively she was nervous. She suspected he was too but unlike her, didn't show it.

"I can easily say the same of you. But then, I am doubtful there would be a time where you are not radiant to me."
He had a similar kind of charm to Alistair, only without the flamboyance and playful dramatics. From the little, she'd overheard with his conversations to staff members and some students, anyway. Harry had confirmed he was no different in private and more outgoing if that was even possible.

Though he might not realise, Solomon had a lot of the same characteristics. It was only his overall approach that differed, far mellower.

Appreciative of his compliment, it helped to ease some of her nerves. Opening the door she entered the living room again, Solomon following shortly after.

While her mum was curious about what he looked like she'd remained tight-lipped, not wanting them to make any prejudgments before meeting him. So their surprise was understandable, especially since she realised that Solomon didn't appear to be her type at all, at least appearance wise.

Breaking the silence, Hermione made the introductions. "Mum, Dad, this is Solomon Lothaire."

While her dad was tall, even standing up he was unable to match his height and fell just short. Taking over from there, he inclined his head slightly. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

With an effortless gesture and one born from a family which instilled manners rarely seen in such modern times, Solomon picked up her mum's hand, brushing his lips across it.

Not expecting it Hermione blinked, amused at her mum's flustered expression. He didn't linger for long, giving her dad a firm handshake. Returning it he remained stony-faced, something which she hoped would fade at whatever suspicions he had were put to rest.

After introducing themselves by name, her parents returned to their seat. Unlike her husband, Emma had already warmed to him and now, wanted to know all she could. Leaning forward in mild anticipation, she gazed at Hermione with expectancy in her familiar brown eyes. "How did you two meet?"

She smiled, for the fact that it was in a kind of environment very important to her childhood and throughout it. "A library, one belonging to his family."

Sparing a brief glance for Dan, Emma could see that he was unable to remain unaffected by that, a brief yet fond smile on his lips.

"I should have known." She teased, immediately assuming that Solomon was the studious type.

Rising to his feet, Dan headed for the kitchen. "I'll make some tea and coffee. Solomon, will you give me a hand?"
Knowing that this was his way of saying he wanted to have a conversation alone, he followed behind and closed the kitchen door after him. Left with her mum, she gave her a questioning look. "What do you think?"

Glancing towards her hand, she giggled in a way Hermione had never heard before. "Well, he's certainly a gentleman. Though, I didn't think men with an alternative style were your type. Are those coloured contacts and dye?"

Hermione shook her head in the negative. "That's his eye colour. And his hair was black, but something happened to change it."

Understanding without an in-depth explanation, her gaze turned curious. "I've never seen a silver eye colour. Is it like that for some Wizards?"

"...Sort of."

Suspicious at her evasiveness, her intuition indicated that there was something missing she'd yet to find out though, with some hope, that would be answered today.

Once the door closed behind them, Solomon watched as Dan took four cups from the cabinet. It was different in style to what he was used to and for lack of a better word so modern, that it was a struggle not to inspect everything in great detail.

"Are you a tea or coffee man?" Busying himself with preparations, Solomon assisted him when asked to. Given something vaguely resembling a kettle and recognising that he had the tea bags, came to understand that this was for brewing coffee. He hadn't drunk coffee in well over a century but remembered having a fondness for it. Though, far different now to the first time he'd tried it in Southern Arabia.

Not looking at him, it gave Solomon the chance to figure out how this worked. While before now he'd have no hesitation searching minds for information, he was reluctant to do so with Dan. Not only because there was no way to defend himself but it would break whatever trust he wanted to establish between them, even if the information he wanted to know was harmless.

It was something simple, an everyday occurrence for modern families but at the moment, it was beyond him. Locking away the mildly displeased side not knowing this, he decided to ask. "I have a preference for coffee. How does this work, exactly? I have never used one."

At his words, he realised. Strangely despite his appearance, he'd forgotten he was magic too. Though he hadn't asked, he'd just assumed they used magic of some kind to do things instead of the few minutes waiting.
Taking the time to explain how it worked, Solomon absorbed the information. Now he knew what to do, he dedicated the majority of his attention on that, while answering another question.

"What's your intention with Hermione?"

Feeling his gaze, Solomon shifted to meet it, the answer instinctive. "Our relationship is new, but I would like to nurture it. She was there for me in my weakest moment and we share a passion for books, which has lead to many hours of discussion. I enjoy her company and I am fortunate, in turn, that she enjoys mine."

Unknown to him Solomon's expression changed, to one Dan had seen in himself during college days when meeting Emma for the first time. Relaxing somewhat, he nodded. "Thanks for answering. I trust you'll do the right thing by her."

If he didn't, magic user or not, he would give the young man a piece of his mind. He seemed like the decent sort, even if their obvious age gap was a slight cause of concern. But Hermione had always been mature for her age and in their eyes and the Wizarding Worlds, she was an adult and capable of making her own choices.

For his first time, Solomon believed he'd done well. Making his preference he'd asked for Dan's, adding a measured spoonful of sugar and some milk. Taking two cups each they returned to the living room.

Retaking his seat by Hermione, the cup warmed his hands. Though it would be a temporary thing, reverting back to their coldness. He'd wondered if Hermione minded his lack of warmth and has asked before, reassured by the answer.

Unlike Alistair, he had no desire to produce warmth of his own or have a heartbeat but was happy for him nonetheless. Taking a sip from the steaming cup it tasted far different to how he remembered but given time many things did.

As Dan drank some of his coffee, his face registered surprise. "This is good, better than I can do. Are you sure you've never used a Coffee Maker?"

Slightly confused, Solomon shook his head. "No. But I am pleased that you like it."

Putting it down to a magic thing Dan gave a mental shrug and if there was a next time, he'd watch him and see if there was anything different to what he did.

The mood more relaxed than before light conversation between them took place, serving to break the ice completely and soon, Hermione's nerves melted away. Things were going well, though they'd yet to mention Solomon's true nature.
Though I dislike admitting as much, I am slightly fearful of their reaction. The majority of humans I have met have reacted negatively when faced with my Vampirism.'

Still unused to their new connection Hermione nearly jumped, doing her best to answer him mentally while joining in the physical conversation. 'I understand, but they're open-minded people. After finding out that I'm a witch and there's a magical world, I doubt anything can shock them too much.'

Seeing her point, it didn't lessen his worry any. With other humans, he didn't care, but these were her parents. Alistair's long list of decisions resulting in terrible partners of various kinds had put him off the idea of relationships completely, believing it wasn't for him. But Hermione had begun to broaden his view of possibilities and above all, at least with them and who he considered friends and family, acceptance was something he'd like.

Waiting for a lull in the conversation, Hermione spoke up. "There's something you need to know."

Faced with identical inquisitive looks, Hermione glanced up at Solomon briefly. In a way, so her parents couldn't see, she squeezed his hand gently.

Reassured by her touch, Solomon's eyes didn't waver. "I am a Vampire."

While Dan paled, Emma was surprisingly calm. "That's where your eye colour comes from?"

He nodded. "My father's side."

"Wait, that's their natural colour? I thought they were contact lenses?" Flummoxed, he struggled to understand what he was hearing. In his head, he'd pictured someone normal with a normal job like a lawyer, not a Vampire Enchanter. It explained the different vibe he got from him.

Taking a moment to collect his thoughts, another question popped into Dan's mind, almost afraid to ask. "...How old are you?"

Solomon wasn't the type to cut corners in any situation, this one, despite the unusualness, being no exception. "1,490 years."

Though over the years Hermione had provided them with enough information to induce heart attacks in the average person, this was shocking enough that the number didn't register.

Nearly dropping her tea a little spilt over the rim. Placing it on the table in front of her, Emma's lips upturned into a smile. "And you don't look a day over mid-twenties! Tell me, what's your secret?"
Caught off guard by her reaction, he replied instantly. "Immortality."

All he'd read of Vampires flashed through Dan's mind, uneasy. But then, he looked nothing like what he'd expect. He definitely had pale skin, but what about the red eyes and fangs?

While his wife and daughter were naturally inquisitive, he was too, from time to time. For now, the information settled on the surface of his mind, not quite ready to sink in yet. "How much of what we know is true?"

Out of curiosity, Solomon had read the fictitious books about his kind and if the ones he'd read were along similar lines, he doubted much of it was true at all. "What is it that you have read?"

Following that was a discussion, one of which Solomon never expected. With his time here, he could see that Hermione was a perfect blend of her parents and in the same way, tackled information that they didn't know differently. Rather than look at him with fear there was uncertainty but mainly, the desire to know more. Little by little, with those that he'd met, his opinion of humans was slowly on the rise.

Emma was fascinated. Though he wouldn't admit as much, she could see Dan was equally so. She didn't think they had control over changes and just assumed they always had fangs with no choice to retract them. Truly, how many people could say they'd met a real-life Vampire? Once alone the shock would no doubt sink in, but she was never one to pass up an opportunity.

"Have you had much contact with humans?"

With her question, Solomon's expression remained neutral despite his urge to grimace. "I have, each more unpleasant than the last. Until I met Harry and through him, Hermione and yourselves."

At the mention of Harry, her eyes gained a fond glint, looking at Hermione. "How is Harry?"

He was far happier than she'd ever seen him before and the thoughts that usually dragged him into a dark mood were safely tucked away. From her point of view, Alistair brought out the best in him. "He's doing fine. Do you remember the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher I told you both about?"

Wondering where this was going they nodded, Emma gesturing for her to continue. "He's Solomon's brother and Harry's dating him."

Emma's eyes positively twinkled. "A school romance!"

Having the urge to roll his eyes at her antics, Dan was mildly surprised. "Are they more open-minded on Teacher and Student relationships?"
"It's not illegal but some frown upon it. No one knows yet or at least, they haven't told anyone except friends and family. I suspect even if people did know they wouldn't go against Harry for that, but more attention would be on him which he already has enough of. I think he's waiting for things to settle down a little before making plans to tell everyone."

As her mum had expressed an interest in meeting them together as well, the discussion turned to that for a while, alongside filling them in on more of what was happening.

After telling them that she'd show Solomon around the neighbourhood they went outside where the weather was cool but not to the point of freezing. Properly alone, she wasn't shy or embarrassed to slip her hand into his, seeing it as something natural.

Mildly surprised by her actions he didn't reject them, finding the warmth of her hand strangely pleasant. As the properties owned between him and Alistair were all private and somewhat isolated, seeing houses side by side was a new experience entirely.

Before long they came to a large grassy field and in the middle of it, he could see a few children of varying ages playing on things he'd never seen before.

Seeing where his gaze was focused on, Hermione provided an explanation. "That's a park. I never had anyone to play with so I used to read there. It was one of my favourite spots. Do you want to see?"

At her question, he nodded, intrigued. There was nothing like this for him growing up, just outings when the sun no longer shone and often, playing with his brother who was more than happy to entertain him when their parents were out for a few hours.

Opening the gate with slightly rusted hinges, Hermione provided him with explanations, a demonstration given by the children there playing on them. "That's a roundabout. Someone usually pushes it around and climbs on, and the force moves it for a while. Then there's swings, monkey bars and a slide."

He could see there were two types of swings, with four in total. One set was smaller, with extra bars in place presumably to protect the younger children and the other was larger, with two chains attached to a seat either side.

Drawing closer he watched as one child progressively managed to climb higher using their feet and momentum alone, while the other struggled to do the same. Glancing at the child beside him he looked lost, not tall enough to place his feet on the ground and judging by the glances over towards one metal bench, his mother sat, talking on her phone.

Managing to meet Hermione's eyes, the boy called over. "Push me, please!"
Eyes imploring Hermione nodded, sending him a bright smile and walking straight over. Giving him a head start he was able to climb higher, matching the other boy next to him. "Thanks!"

"No problem." Telling him this Hermione returned, a slight smile on Solomon's lips. "After all these years, Alistair still has a childlike side to him. I have a feeling that he would enjoy himself here, whether playing alongside the children or helping them."

Shaking his head softly he went to sit on a nearby bench, Hermione following him shortly after. Unsurprised by his words, she could easily picture Alistair having the time of his life here.

As the sky darkened, eventually they were the only ones left. Seeing that the swings were available, her eyes sparkled with the shred of youth she still held. "Want to see who can go the highest?"

The swings were fairly large, enough to support an adult as over the years, she'd seen some people in their late teens swinging before.

While he thought the idea of doing this, to an outsider, would make him look like an idiot, the quietly competitive side reared its head. He wasn't one to shy away from new experiences, so why should this be any different?

"Alright." Accepting her challenge he went to one of the swings, sitting down carefully and testing their strength. The chains were old, but should easily hold him nonetheless. As Hermione was lighter she had an advantage but with his height, similarly, it would help. In this case, he believed they were evenly matched.

The last time Hermione had been on a swing or tried out any of the playground's equipment was definitely her early primary school years. But rather than feel childish or immature, a side of her emerged which she thought was long lost. Though unrelated, memories of the first time where she'd discovered magic resurfaced, filling her to the brim with contentment.

Familiar with the motions more from watching than participating Hermione slowly began to build up speed and with it, swung higher. Hair flying in every direction the breeze whipped it around.

Solomon matched her pace, a fast learner. It was unusual, like flying but not quite simultaneously. But to him, any time spent with Hermione was always good, no matter what they did and didn't do.

For a few short minutes they were neck and neck and when neither could climb higher than the other, gradually came to a stop.

Slightly breathless, the tip of Hermione's nose was red from the cold. Beaming she stood up, energised somehow. "I'd say that was a draw."
"I agree." Joining her and seeing signs of coldness Solomon reached out, readjusting her scarf to be a little more snug, alongside the woollen hat.

With his considerate actions, Hermione finally began to understand why Harry was so happy, as she was experiencing something similar. With his hand still nearby, it trailed down, brushing her cheek softly.

Heart racing Hermione gazed into his eyes, alluring beneath a sky on the verge of gaining twinkling stars. As his arm wrapped around her he closed the distance between them, softly taking her lips with his own.

Infinitely curious, Hermione had researched a wide variety of topics and on top of that, had listened to Lavender's seemingly endless tips with intimacy. While most she dismissed, some of them seemed legitimate and unless she applied a silencing charm around herself, she found it impossible to tune out her voice.

Reaching up her hand brushed through his soft hair, waves gliding through her fingers as he made a soft sound.

Unsure if magic or them moving was the cause Hermione found herself near one of the benches, Solomon sitting down. Following his movements and barely aware of her body's actions, she found herself sitting on his lap.

She loved books and always would. But for the first time, someone had captured her attention far more than even her favourite had. As far as she was concerned the world right then didn't exist, only the small bubble they'd created. Leaning into him she was supported from behind. Actions unhurried they took the time to know each other more and while the air was chilly, it couldn't hold a candle against Hermione's own body heat rising.

Before long she needed to breathe and when pulling away, realised her position. Even in the dim lighting, Solomon would most likely see her blush. The last time she had such a lack of self-control was during her time turner days but rather than feel ashamed, it was almost liberating.

As Solomon's hair was slightly messy Hermione smoothed it down, not moving from her current position. Wondering if she should, that thought left when his arms subtly tightened around her.

"Stay." It was a request, a quietly voiced one she couldn't possibly refuse. As the air around her began to warm up, she realised that magic for her benefit was at work.

Sitting sideways, she leaned into him. "I told you it wouldn't be so bad. Mum really likes you and I think you won Dad over with Coffee."
"You are right. I now understand a little more of you, as well. They are good people."

Happy to hear it, the day couldn't have possibly gone any better. They remained that way for a while, content to be with each other as one drank in unfamiliar surroundings, while another relived a nostalgic time with a new someone in her life.

As they heard the door close, the shock of what Dan heard fully hit him. "A Vampire? Over a millennium old? How on earth will we explain him to the family?" He was an endless fountain of questions, mind racing.

Except them, no one knew about Hermione's magical abilities. Emma's side was deeply religious and though completely absurd and untrue, would see her as the devil incarnate. And Solomon? His appearance alone would be enough to shun him. In his opinion, it was a miracle his wife turned out the way she did, with having a family like that.

"They'll just assume he's alternative in style like we did. I don't plan on telling them he's a Vampire but even if they did find out and believed those words, their reactions aren't important. Hermione's happiness is and I can see she is with him."

He agreed, but the information was no less shocking. "I might have a Vampire for a son in law."

While he understood he was jumping the gun, his mind headed in that direction. Watching his daughter grow up, all he wanted was the best for her and when ready, find someone nice and dependable to settle down with. He seemed like a nice man to him, though only time would tell.

"It's exciting! He's very well spoken. There could be worse potential son in laws out there."

Seeing her point, he practically shuddered at the thought of someone who heavily abused substances or was a violent person. He'd sooner kill them than let Hermione's heart be broken.

Eventually, Hermione returned home, after saying her goodbyes to Solomon. Talking with her parents for a while to get their opinion on him, she went upstairs to her room. Alone she flopped back onto the bed, a bright smile on her face. She had so many patronus worthy memories now, it was almost overwhelming.

Looking forward to the next time she'd see him, Hermione silently passed the hours away by reading one of the many books gifted to her by friends and family alike.

As Ginny, Luna and Hermione visited their world so often, they'd each been given something which would allow them to arrive just outside of Willow and when there, to transport back from wherever they left.
Hermione was mostly truthful, telling her parents that she was receiving extra training. Luna told her father the truth, who believed every word and each time wanted to hear more of her adventures there.

Ginny, on the other hand, hadn't. She had a little to Dad but knew Mum would never let her out if she knew about her weapons training. It made leaving more difficult as well since only her, Mum and Ron were home for the moment.

At her request, she'd asked Harry to teach her how to create a golem. For anyone else who didn't know her it would be easy, however, her mum was more observant than people gave her credit for and she doubted her magic would hold for an intense conversation. But still, Ginny had to take a risk.

The last time they arrived together, they were given a specific time to arrive which was today, January 4th. With countless hours of training, their mentors had come together and decided that for the first time, they should work as a unit against the part of their world which was filled with all manner of unsavoury things.

She wouldn't miss a chance to try her skills against living creatures for anything so even if in the end, her Mum discovered her missing, it would be worth it.

Fred and George had told her years ago that she could perform magic even when at home, as the Ministry had no way of telling who had performed what magic when in a house filled with of age wizards and witches. True to their word she didn't get a warning, so had taken the time to perfect her magic skills.

With today being no exception and ensuring she was alone, Ginny did her best to focus on the task at hand. While she was there time would pass much more slowly but just in case, wanted it to be believable.

Concentrating her magic with a strand of hair, a lifelike version of her began to slowly form. Not wanting to drain her core she kept things basic, forgoing the greater details. Usually, all her Mum did was either shout that tea was ready or help with any household chores. As she'd eaten earlier and done all that she was supposed to, the chances of being found out were slim.

Agreeing to meet with Hermione and Luna outside of Willow around this time she disappeared, eagerly anticipating on proving herself to Taibreah-Drenn.

Reappearing Hermione was the first to notice, waving her over and seeing a similar air of excitement around both girls.

"I can't wait to kick some arse!" Pumped up and ready to go Hermione agreed, as Luna remained her serene self.
"Ready to go?" Hermione asked and when given two nods in response, allowed Luna to go first. Following her, Ginny was the last, a combination of determination and excitement swirling within her.

As the three arrived they found each of their mentors, waiting for them. While Brio and Taibreah-Drenn remained composed, Esha could barely contain her excitement. “Can I tell them? Pretty please?”

Glancing between the two they shared a look, Brio the one to speak. “Very well.”

“Yay, thanks!”

With more energy to put a crowd of preteens to shame, she bounced on the spot, wind braids dishevelled with her movements. “It’s a pretty peaceful place here, but we’ve got our fair share of problems. Things that just don’t know when to quit. So what you guys have to do is make them quit. Work together! If anything goes wrong, we’re here to help. But most importantly, have fun!”

At the sound of a throat clearing, she glanced at Brio, met with a cold glare. Regaining a slight amount of seriousness, she straightened her posture. “This is a test, for us to see how well you work as a team but also on your own. Good luck!”

As Taibreah-Drenn lead the way Hermione and Ginny followed behind. Luna lingered, to give Brio a soft smile. Forgetting the company he was in he returned it, Esha’s eyes comically wide.

“You’re so totally in love with her.”

At her comment, his facial expression became stony, even as his cheeks tinted with a hint of colour. “Not another word.”

Giving him an exaggerated wink, she strolled ahead. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

As mentors, they’d had meetings to discuss the progress made between them and through that, Brio had gotten to know Taibreah-Drenn and Esha better. While the former he respected for her prowess in battle the latter he knew not to underestimate, even if he found her energetic personality exhausting yet mildly irritating. However, she wasn’t chosen to be a mentor for the sake of it.

None of them had ever gone this way before and when reaching a final doorway it opened, sunlight brightening all that was behind and in front of them. Lush, verdant greenery was there as far as the eye could see, coupled with a river, gently trickling. It would be peaceful, if not for the various creatures prowling the area.
They looked out of place in such a peaceful world, bone-like armor covering every inch of their scaly bodies. Some were no more than four feet tall, while others towered over Brio who stood the tallest of all gathered there. With bulging black eyes and jagged teeth so large that their lips were unable to close fully, it sent a shiver down the girl’s spines.

There were many there, some even fighting with one another and staining the grass below with inky blood.

Brio was the one to break the silence.

“They are from the underworld. We are unaware of how or why but beyond our control, portals appear in this realm and with it, they emerge. It seems as if the more that we defeat, the more that our land suffers. It has remained unchanging for thousands of years and if not for the elder, this would have fallen to ruin long ago.”

As Hermione, Ginny and Luna listened intently, even Esha was solemn when the harsh truth of Brio’s words further served to shatter the tranquillity. Taibreah-Drenn took over, finely shaped brows drawn down with hatred. “As we are unable to locate the source, this is an area where our best warriors train. Dummies and enemy replications are fine for practice, but do not hold against the real thing.”

They understood that all too well. The DA was great for practice but against Death Eaters, came to the realisation that they were woefully unprepared. But if this was something they could do well in, round two with the Death Eaters, if that should happen, would go far more smoothly.

Clapping Hermione on the shoulder, she gave her a salute. “Go forth, my talented minion! Do battle, make me proud and rub their ugly noses in the dirt.”

Returning the salute, Hermione was determined to do her best. She’d come a long way from their first session and was confident she’d be more than a match for them. Already she was considering possible approaches to take and which would be the most advantageous, considering they were vastly outnumbered.

“Remember all that I have taught you. Remain cool, calm, collected. If you are angry, channel it. Do not let it consume you. Show them that you will not back down.”

Ginny nodded, Shattered Blaze now a comfortable weight. With all of her training, she’d toned up further, arms gaining a muscle mass that she was pleased to no end about. She could channel magic through each swing if need be but preferred the satisfying swishing sound of her blade. In preparation for future events the dummies she practised against had become more lifelike and rather than stuffing, blood flowed freely from the wounds. At first, she was taken aback, as there was something more personal about swinging a blade to cause such damage rather than an incantation but eventually, she grew used to it. Today would be no exception.
“I would wish you luck, however, I know that you will do well. I am very proud of you.”

Brio took her hand in his, squeezing it gently as his sea blue eyes were clearer than ever.

While she did feel uneasy when faced with a sight so intimidating, there wasn’t a shred of doubt that she wasn’t up to the task. Brio was a good teacher, friend and all of that, combined to create something more which settled contentedly into Luna’s heart.

Returning to Ginny and Hermione’s side, the three were truly ready. So far into their training, they were given armor similar in style to Harry’s, allowing them to get a feel for how it would be to move in them over clothing and as they discovered, far more fluidly than robes.

Positioned where they were unable to be spotted the mentors kept their distance, hiding somewhere to see everything going on, but so the fight wouldn’t be brought to them.

Left alone, Hermione’s mind raced with possibilities. It was no more than a few seconds later, that she had a plan in mind. “There are a lot of the smaller ones running around. I think one at a time they’re not difficult to handle but altogether they could prove a challenge. You see that tree?”

Pointing to one which overlooked an area where the majority of them were, Ginny and Luna nodded. “What if we disillusion ourselves and launch a surprise attack? They’re fighting among themselves and might not realise until we have the advantage. I’ll pick off some of the smaller ones from up there. Ginny, you can take on the ones with tougher armor and Luna, do you know any spells that can distract?”

She knew plenty, in fact. "I do."

Hermione smiled, eager to get started. "Brilliant. So, does that sound good?"

When receiving verbal affirmation, each of them took their places, hidden with magic though their mentors could most likely see through such disguises.

Disillusioned and sitting on a lower branch, Hermione slowed her breathing down. She was one with the wind and today, it would guide her. Blowing forward, it guaranteed that arrows or spells wouldn’t be misdirected. As she didn’t want to be noticed, for now, Diffindo in a distinct arrow shape formed. Pulling the bowstring back she quickly located a target. A group of six were having a dispute, involving many swinging swords.

As one of them was about to swing its sword she fired and the moment that his sword connected with flesh, so did the cutting charm. With a strangled grunt that chilled her to the core, a large gash appears in its side. Blood seeping to the grass below it dropped to its knees, face planting the ground.
In this manner Hermione continued, picking and choosing her targets carefully. It was true, it seemed for every one she killed, another one appeared in its place. Though she didn't belong in this world as such, her research skills could be put to use in trying to discover what the connection was between the Fae and Underworld but more importantly, why this was happening.

Thanks to Professor Lothaire, a good majority of the students now knew how to cast a disillusionment charm, in a way that would allow them to be seen by allies, but not enemies. As Ginny and Luna were following Hermione's lead, it would make silent communication difficult when they were unable to see each other.

Spotting one nearby Ginny approached from behind, ready to strike. They were idle, not fighting but watching instead. While Hermione's targets were small, they were at the least double her size and wearing armor which looked almost impenetrable. The almost, being a loose chink directly over the lower back.

If there was no armor Ginny would have slashed instead but could see that stabbing would work better. Distancing herself she ran, knocking into the creature with enough force to topple it. Back fully exposed, Shattered Blaze easily pierced all in its way. Buried deep inside it was unable to make a sound, before succumbing to death itself.

Feeling a surge of adrenalin Ginny pulled her blade from where it had sunk deep inside the creature and with the help of magic, used bushes not far from the area to disguise the corpse. It helped her to get a feel for what it was like in reality and as soon as Hermione gave the signal, she'd charge straight in.

While Luna could use offensive magic, it wouldn't be very effective. But that didn't mean that there weren't other spells that could be used. She'd taken each into consideration and knew which would work with her and which would refuse to. The Confundus Charm was considered to be neutral and could be suited to Light or Dark aligned wizards alike. For this, it would provide a distraction.

A voice wasn't needed, able to silently cast with ease. She directed her spell towards the largest creature in the area, with one clawed foot easily bigger than any of them gathered there. With a crocodile-like face and a long, scaly tail, it seemed to prowl the area with purpose but suddenly, changed.

With a figurative question mark above its head, it scanned the area. What was it doing here? And who were they? Seeing little groups of them fighting, it snorted in apparent irritation. With each footstep shaking the earth beneath, the last crushed a few of the ones Hermione was targeting beneath a clawed foot.

Focusing her attention elsewhere so as not to see that, a gesture from Hermione drew both her and Ginny's attention. Holding up her hand with three fingers raised, they understood it to be a countdown. Each of them had levelled the playing field somewhat, and now it was time to get serious.
Hermione lowered another finger. Two. That left one finger and a second later, a raised fist.

Ginny had worked her way into the middle of one medium-sized group, Luna a short distance away to provide support. Canceling all charms she gained the element of surprise, her enemies rooted to the spot. Unlike them she took that opportunity to strike, felling one with a single slash and a wide arc, knocking others back and then closing the distance to finish the job.

Hearing the commotion it drew others to the area, rushing forward.

Her senses highly attuned, she'd never felt more ready to prove herself. Not only to those surrounding her, but as confirmation that she was no longer the girl manipulated by a diary, but someone who had a place. She wasn't a damsel in distress anymore. In fact, it was those up against Shattered Blaze that would be crying for help.

Slick, black blood coating her blade, it didn't lessen the fatality of its attacks at all. With a pile of smaller bodies surrounding her, she leapt backwards, avoiding what would have been a devastating blow by another of the creatures she'd hidden the body of earlier. Locking eyes with it she kept her senses attuned but now, this was her target.

Rather than pick separate targets Hermione and Luna worked together, to keep Ginny's path free of all obstructions. With a large jetstream of water on Luna's part, several were pushed back a great distance, Hermione finishing them off with a volley of arrows. They continued in that manner for the smaller enemies, though before long, only the larger ones remained. As they weren't toppled by water, Luna thought quickly.

Waving at one of them cheerfully it charged, Luna directing the water to hit directly in front of her. With the earth no longer dry but wet it slipped, mud gathering between its claws and toppling over.

"Luna, step back!" Hermione shouted, readying herself. She could see regular arrows wouldn't do the trick and using the first spell she ever tried, Reducto formed. Aiming for the head she fired, making a great impact as its head exploded beneath the force.

Doing as asked she did, missing the destruction Hermione caused as she fully trusted her to finish the job. She disliked the idea of killing things, even if she knew those deserving of it. However, she could always help her friends to achieve this end. Offensive attacks weren't always the answer.

As if to prove her thought she quickly erected a shield in front of Hermione, a large blue fireball heading in her direction. Locating the source she could see they had a magic user of their own but unlike the others, this one had a slim build. She had a feeling that it would be a problem, if not taken care of soon.

Hermione had located the source as well, thankful for Luna's quick intervention as she began to return fire. Caught in a deadlock, she needed Ginny's help. This one was nimble on its feet, easily
able to dodge her arrows despite the speed at which they whistled through the air.

Thankful for her friends clearing away the pests, she gave her enemy a challenging grin. "Go on then, I dare you." Her plan was to anger it if they were capable of feeling any emotion. If not, there were other options at her disposal. Quick to anger, quick to make mistakes. She'd learned to channel her own, thanks to the training she'd received and could pinpoint weaknesses.

Rather than attack she defended and dodged, unable to strike her and as the black eyes began to narrow with a cold, soulless glint, it was time. In contrast to earlier, she pushed back fiercely, her blade clashing with its own.

'Incendio.' With that incantation in mind, the blade in its grip began to blister and burn through the scales, into tender flesh. With a roar of pain, the weapon was released and using that window of time, rammed Shattered Blaze straight through its stomach.

It roared no more but gurgled, choking on blood as Ginny's stab had hit vital organs. Dying instantly she withdrew it, looking for her next target.

Seeing that Hermione and another were in a deadlock, she swiftly moved in front to distract. But rather than what she expected to happen four replicas of the same creature emerged and with it, a strengthened attack.

Moving around, Ginny lock track of the real one. Cursing, Luna's voice managed to be heard somehow, even among the noise.

"Ginny, the one on your far right!"

Not questioning how Luna knew or if she'd managed to keep track with her eyes she trusted her words, heading straight for that one and coating her blade with incendio. Water and ice related spells would be rendered ineffective though against enemies of that element, would do well. A water spell with her blade as the focus would be nothing more than steam or with ice, water unable to freeze the opponent. That was something that should solely be left to her wand. However, fire-related spells would work fine.

As it could dodge Hermione's attacks, Ginny created several. Concentrating on the spell she swung her blade repeatedly and each time, sending waves and lines of fire which scorched the grass. Overwhelmed beneath the sudden onslaught it forgot about Hermione, an arrow piercing its shoulder. Removing it, that was all it took before one of Ginny's attacks struck. Charred to a crisp it burned, nothing more than ash which harmlessly swept away on the breeze.

Sending a thumbs up to Hermione who returned it, Ginny couldn't deny how powerful she felt right now, though reminded herself to not get too carried away. Between them they managed to turn the tides, only a few smatterings of enemies left.
The only one which remained was now free from Luna's charm. Seeing the carnage it roared, a sound so loud that leaves trembled, beginning to fall as the girls on the ground struggled to keep their balance. With speed belying its size it charged, Ginny quickly moving out of the way as her heart began to pound fiercely.

But in doing so it crashed into the tree Hermione was sitting in, the thick trunk breaking beneath such incredible force. Before it could topple over Hermione apparated, reappearing close to Luna. "That was close."

No one had time to reply, as it held a club larger than its own body. Slamming it down with crushing force it left a several feet deep indentation, bits of earth and grass flying everywhere. There was a fair distance between them and it but was able to reach far.

"Got a plan, Hermione?" Ginny asked, readying herself.

Thinking quickly she analysed her options, studying the creature intently. "We're better off not sticking together. If we do then we're a larger target as a whole but splitting up, there's only one choice at a time. There are scales everywhere but his underbelly so Ginny, try to target that area if possible. Luna and I will try to knock him off balance."

Knowing what to do they readied themselves, those they'd defeated so far unable to compare with this creature's relentless pursuit. Sensing Ginny to be the greater threat its attentions were focused on her, spells bouncing harmlessly off the scales. Unlike those before, most spells it seemed immune to. In this situation, Luna thought it unwise to recast the same charm, as it could prove to be more dangerous for Ginny.

As it stayed in the spot Luna tried the same approach as before, soaking the ground beneath to provide a slippy kind of terrain. Adding to it Hermione cast Glacius, firing the icy arrow into the ground which froze that area entirely.

As they hoped it was unable to gain even footing but rather than fall back and expose the weak point it fell forwards, and Ginny realised that little to no damage would be caused trying to stab this one in the back. She couldn't rush in and attack this time, the giant club acting as a shield as when trying to move closer, it covered the parts she needed access to.

They tried everything or at least, mostly everything. Time passed them by with no injuries inflicted until an idea began to form in Hermione's mind. Sprinting to Luna's side, she spoke quickly. "How good are you with Protego Maxima?"

Cocking her head, she regarded Hermione closely. "Do you have an idea?"

Nodding, Hermione gave a brief explanation. "It's a shielding charm and can work against physical attacks as well as magical. The last time it charged, the tree I was sitting on broke beneath the force.
If it charged into Protego Maxima, in theory, it should lose balance and fall backwards."

Luna's eyes wavered. "But it would have to be strong enough to withstand the charge."

"Exactly. I think if we do this together, it will be enough and Ginny has the opening needed. I don't expect you to do this alone. We're a team."

Reassured by Hermione's words Luna smiled. "Alright."

While it struggled back to its feet, Hermione replayed what they'd discussed to Ginny, eyes sparkling with determination. "Cast Protego over me and I'll get it to charge. I trust you guys have got my back here and I'll keep enough distance that if the shield doesn't hold, I can get out of the way."

With their new plan of action Hermione and Luna stood together, Willow's Strike and Gentle Whisper ready to act. As Luna's shield protected Ginny Hermione's spell arrow struck it, absorbing into and strengthening the shield. While Luna continued to build the shield's strength arrow after arrow struck it until it was no longer a thin barrier but a luminous, solid structure of magic which matched the creature's size. Unused to using so much of their magical core at once it became draining, but they'd only need to hold it for a moment longer as true to her word, Ginny taunted it.

"Over here you great lump!" Waving her arms about Shattered Blaze caught the sun, glinting beneath it even under a thin sheen of dry and wet blood.

They were nothing more than pests, one of which should have been stamped out long ago and right now, that was the last straw. Club dropping to the ground with a thud, it shook the ground beneath with a second charge of that day.

Hermione and Luna held strong, unprepared for the force which would strike their shield and barely managed to keep it raised. But it held, despite the odds and as Hermione hoped, being forced to stop so suddenly sent the creature toppling backwards.

Wanting to end this quickly Ginny leapt, plunging the blade straight into its underbelly. Even unprotected it was tougher than she thought it would be and with a move that she didn't plan, the creature tried to right itself to pull the blade out.

In doing so it was no longer a stab wound but a gash, slicing its underbelly clean open. Paling Ginny moved backwards, away from its flailing, clawed arms. Bleeding profusely it took its last breath, among a sea of small and large corpses alike.

Luna didn't want to leave it like this. She had the ability to restore, heal. Despite her fatigue, this was something that had to be done. She couldn't walk away and leave such destruction as the ill intent from these creatures and actions of violence would shape this world forever, if left alone. Crouching to the ground she placed her palm flat to it, eyes falling closed. She needed no words for her intent,
already there with the strength of her desires.

A wave washed over them all, bathing the area in golden light. The tree which had fallen was renewed, the grass bloodstained, charred or damaged through any actions was no more. As if there were never any creatures roaming this land or a fight between them, the corpses disappeared. Everything looked how it should.

Catching her breath Luna remained there for a moment, outstretched hands for her to take. Accepting Ginny and Hermione pulled her up, supporting her from either side.

"I think we did good, but it's their opinion that counts." Ginny broke the silence, trembling from a mixture of adrenaline and fatigue.

Hermione glanced over, studying her. "You'd better clean up before you go back home, your mum will have a fit."

Much of her armor was stained with blood, flecks on her face smeared when she went to wipe away the sweat.

"Is it that bad?" She asked, knowing the answer was probably yes as she could no longer see her clothing's natural colours.

Stepping over to the river she was able to faintly see her reflection, grimacing. Her mum would have more than a fit if she saw her now. Thankful that it wouldn't come to that she quickly cleaned herself up, following the others to where their mentors were.

"That was so cool! Humans are the best!" Esha bounced on the spot, excited watching the entire thing and even more so now they returned. Brio and Taibreah-Drenn were more composed but inclined to agree. For humans and one of their bloodline newly introduced, their first efforts were solid. There were things here and there which needed tweaking, but all were confident that this was the start to something promising.

The three girls listened to feedback provided, taking all of it on board carefully. Together they'd discuss it further and in future, would plan to have more sessions with training together rather than alone.

With each of them given a bottle, they drank, finding out that it was a powerful restorative. According to Brio, it could only be used sparingly, as their digestive systems were more fragile than that of the Fae.

Before returning home, there was one more thing which the mentors decided upon. It was time for an introduction of what else their gifts provided when unlocking their full potential.
Taibreah-Drenn was the one to explain, looking over each of the girls intently. "Congratulations. You have greatly surpassed our expectations and as such, there is something more to each of your gifts. When approval and acknowledgement of your abilities are accepted by each of us, the uniform of Sun, Moon and Bloom is borne."

Rather than explain further she chose to demonstrate, gesturing Ginny to come forward. With Shattered Blaze in her grip Taibreah-Drenn's hands covered her own, chanting softly.

In place of what the Fae had given her, Ginny's armor began to change, resembling that of her weapon she wielded. The fabric a velvety colour which shimmered between deep orange and red, the metal shone a bright golden colour and embossed in the chest piece, was a Sun.

"Now, when you call upon your gift, it will grant you with this. A magical construction, sustained by using a small portion of the world's magic and if devoid of it, will call upon your own. It will provide greater protection than anything of yours or ours."

Stunned Ginny glanced down at herself. She'd thought there would be no more surprises in store, at least for this area, but found herself to be wrong. Similarly, Esha did the same with Hermione, her own outfit Robin Hood-inspired with soft leather boots made for easier movement. Stitched into the fabric of her cloak, was a tree which had reached the peak of its growth.

For Luna, they were robes of a gentle blue, the circlet on her head silver with a full moon directly in the middle. Now more than ever, they were ready for whatever came their way. The moment their weapons returned to jewellery their individual uniforms vanished and should they have need of their gifts again, would cover them fully and be renewed from any possible damage taken.

As Hermione and Ginny left with their mentors Luna stayed behind, joining Brio on a rock large enough for both to sit on. With sorrow in her gaze, she looked over the scenery, knowing it would return to its former state before long. "I had no idea it was like this. But now that we're here, we can help. Hermione is really good at research."

Finding her optimism encouraging, Brio's next action of playing with Luna's hair was an unconscious gesture, deep in thought. "We have lost many to them. By nature, I try not to hate, as negative emotion clouds intent. However, I have felt this emotion more than once. I must admit, I was uneasy that you would face them."

"Why?" Finding the tentative movement of his hand relaxing, her question held nothing but curiosity.

"Because I had no wish for you to feel such evil, or have exposure to the truth of battle. But I am aware that your world faces similar troubles, so such thoughts are foolish of me."

Luna shook her head softly, understanding his intentions. "None of your thoughts could ever be
foolish. You're sweet."

Unlike Luna, Brio didn't understand. Tilting his head in confusion, he tried to puzzle out her words. "Sweet?"

Nodding enthusiastically, she couldn't be happier. "You just want to protect me from how harsh things can be. But I'll be fine because there are family and friends by my side. Thank you for caring."

Luna stood up, leaning over to press a kiss against his lips.

Still finding the idea of such affection new his cheeks darkened noticeably, though his eyes were gentler than any had ever seen. Wanting Luna close by he lifted her into the circle of his arms, reciprocating and slowly coming to understand that despite her size and his own, she wouldn't break beneath him. He would rather end his immortal life than ever hurt the one which had brought more joy than he could ever remember before.

Feeling as if Ginny, Hermione and herself had turned the corner of progression with all that they'd learned put into practice, Luna truly believed that they were ready for what would eventually come all of their way.

Chapter End Notes

I seriously can't thank you all enough. 2000 Kudos yesterday! That's insane! For everything else that tends to go wrong in my own life, this is the one thing which hasn't and I'm blessed to share it with everyone. I love writing it, but having others along for the adventure to read has helped to shape this into far more than what it would have been <3
January 5th. A significant day for all, but those in particular affected by actions of the ones on trial. It was an hour before they were due to leave for the Ministry and any previous anxiety or nerves paled to now.

He didn't know much of law but considering it directly affected him, he thought it would be best to read up on all the knowledge he could beforehand. Surprisingly anyone could attend court, as long as basic rules were followed. Even without being there Harry imagined that there would be liberal usage of expansion charms or a fight to claim seats, though some would take priority over others if they had an active role.

Thanks to Shacklebolt, he now knew Moody wouldn't face trial for the murder of Remus and it wouldn't be brought up in Dumbledore's case either. While constant vigilance was something the man always said, he'd been caught red-handed with narcotics by Kingsley himself. He'd reported him to Amelia and afterwards, was dismissed immediately and all of those he'd sentenced to Azkaban himself, again without trials and his word, were in the process of being reevaluated. It was something at least and apparently, a decision wasn't made as to further punishment or not.

While Sirius couldn't be there, he had every intention of watching through a spell of the Marauder's own creation back in the day. Attached to a magic user and able to easily go unnoticed, it acted as a video of sorts and with the matching one, was able to see and hear everything happening.

Once the trial was over he'd slip in, head to Amelia's office and reveal that he wasn't actually dead. She didn't appreciate dramatics and Sirius knew when to curb that side of him. In this case, he didn't want to joke around. Freedom was so close that he could taste it and once that happened, he'd be out of there to recapture the youth he'd missed out on.
Harry and Remus had fully supported this idea, telling him to be careful. While that was something for the former to be happy about, it didn't cross his mind for more than a second before he resumed pacing.

He'd learned to never ignore his gut feelings, rarely leading him astray and in this case, it was more worrying than ever before. He just knew Dumbledore would try something, whether to get himself out of that situation or to try and focus the attention more on him he didn't know, but so many things hadn't gone the way he'd wanted to. Even if some had his track record overall was poor.

He was outside, with some vain hope that the fresh air would help to clear his head but if anything, more thoughts began to crowd it.

"Calm down," Harry spoke aloud, in an effort to settle down but the tension vibrated from his frame. Anxiousness and nervousness had been there for days now but more than anything, fear. He was terrified of what the outcome would be.

Feeling slightly nauseous he sat down, leaning forward and breathing deeply. He was also facing two of the three major figures who'd abused him and during that time, memories would definitely resurface. Closing his eyes Harry attempted Occlumency, envying Solomon's remarkable control as he gathered his scattered thoughts into a shoddy collection.

Watching him from the window, Sirius sighed. "Poor kid. He's got more pressure than most adults deal with. More than I dealt with at his age."

Remus felt the same, Moony howling within him in sorrow for all that his cub had to endure. "With some hope, after today, that chapter of his life will be over."

Between them, they'd tried to calm Harry down and while that had worked, it was a temporary thing. At this point, they realised there was only one person who could help more.

Right on time Alistair appeared, an addition alongside him. Fully recovered and stronger than ever, Solomon would be attending as well. With his brother nearby, not to mention a countless number of people, he felt it was safe to make an appearance. If Dumbledore should happen to notice them together and connect the dots while awaiting certain doom? All the better.

While they hadn't met, the family resemblance was strong, especially standing side by side. As Remus approached he firmly shook his hand. "You must be Solomon?"

Surprised by his easygoing nature, especially considering his previous entanglement with werewolves, Solomon returned it and shortly after, Sirius. Perhaps he was just unlucky and had found the dregs of society, rather than what they actually were. Either way, it made for a pleasant change.
After greeting the two men, Alistair looked out of the window. These days he rarely needed the bracelet to judge Harry's moods, it was something he instinctively knew after spending so much time with him. While it was there it remained more for decoration than function at this point. "I will return in a moment." Saying this Alistair headed outside, towards Harry.

Able to see a side view, his pale complexion stood out starkly. Heart swelling with a combination of affection and concern, Alistair occupied the available space beside him, carefully coaxing his hand palm down rather than the tight first he had it in, his fingers laced through Harry's in order to provide some comfort.

"The evidence against Dumbledore is too great for his usual evasive tactics. I am confident that a decision regarding his guilt and the resulting punishment will be made. You will not be alone. Family, friends and everyone that you care for will be there too."

"I just feel like he's going to try something. I don't know what, but he hasn't come this far in life without several tricks up his sleeve."

Alistair understood, having a similar feeling himself. "Even if that should be the case, any plans will not be carried to fruition."

Releasing his hand Alistair placed it on Harry's back alongside the other, already seeing his tenseness but feeling it for himself. Resting hands on his shoulders he rubbed the muscles beneath, carefully working his way down.

Harry didn't realise how physically tense he was until Alistair's hands began to work the same magic as they did on the day of his practice Quidditch Match. Only he detected no magic at work, except the fluidity of his own movements.

Unable to help it a soft noise escaped him. Capitalising on this moment, Alistair's whispered words soon brought him out of worries over Dumbledore.

"If we were alone, I would have to see just how many of those lovely sounds I could coax from you."

While a part of him just wanted to say fuck it and go somewhere a bit more isolated, Harry doubted they'd be finished in time for the trial. It was as if Sirius' 'liquid courage' that day had given Harry all the confidence he needed, no longer shy or hesitant about conveying what he wanted. While he wasn't ready for the last step just yet, his eagerness to prove that he was a dedicated student in more than Defence Against the Dark Arts had surfaced several times since.

Not to mention returning fire for all those days of Alistair's teasing which left him a flushed, no comeback mess.
"If we were alone, those sounds would be especially for you." Glancing back up at him with twinkling eyes, Alistair could see that Harry was well on his way to being the confident man he'd seen, deep down, even when first meeting.

In response to this, Alistair couldn't decide whether pride for him or the sudden surge of desire was stronger.

Straightening up, the tension had left Harry's body completely as if he'd just imagined his earlier state. While still worried about what could happen, it was nowhere near the level of intensity before his arrival here. Facing Alistair and about to thank him, he found a gentle kiss planted over his lightning bolt scar.

Before he could ask, an answer was given.

"It is a special kiss, to ward off undesirables. Though I will be there and help defend against those who would do harm, a little extra protection will not go amiss."

Scar tingling pleasantly, there was something symbolic of Alistair's which had remained unchanging, up until recently and bigger than anything else in the world. Turning slightly to unbutton he shirt a little he reciprocated, in the form of kissing directly over the slowly beating heart. "Now you've got one too. You're really strong but still, if someone's out to get you I won't be sitting back and letting them. We all need protecting at some point."

Realising the significance of his words, Alistair truly did think it was a shame they weren't alone but was more than content to hold him for as long as time would allow. His heart was something which had gained more meaning and over the years, had been shattered to the point of near permanence. He cared deeply about everything and sometimes, that had come at the cost of emotional pain. But with Harry, it functioned incredibly well.

As it was about time to go both returned inside, Harry feeling calmer. With a firm mental reminder to expect the unexpected, the five of them left.

Agreeing to meet with his friends in the Ministry, many people both staff, students and others would be there to see the verdict of each person on trial. While Alistair's eyes remained brown to all except those who knew, Solomon chose to remain how he was. By appearance alone it wouldn't be glaringly obvious he was a Vampire, with many holding the same views of their appearance as the non-magic.

Thanks to expansion charms they were all able to fit in the telephone box and while not saying as such aloud, Solomon couldn't help but think this was the strangest entrance he'd ever seen. Pinning visitor badges to themselves Sirius quickly left, suitably disguised.
In a large group were many people he recognised. Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Neville, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Fred, George, Professors Snape, McGonagall and Ron.

The last one caught his attention in particular. He looked better than before, the colour returned to his face though slightly subdued.

Seeing Harry his friends remained silent, watching as he approached Ron. Noticing he seemed to pale slightly, but didn't back down or look away. Before he could speak, Ron was the first. Looking truly apologetic, he stuck his hand out.

"I know Dumbledore's at fault for a lot of this, but I still ended up stressing you and a load of other people out. It's going to take time but I'm building my reputation back up, from scratch. I've still been getting moments where my moods took a turn but I can speak for myself now at least, which is a start."

Looking awkward, he continued. "I want you to know the real me. I'm still finding out who that is after so long but still, I think once all these pricks pay for what they did to all or some of us will help. So, what do you say?"

They were the most sincere and genuine words that Harry had ever heard from him. Shaking his hand firmly, he smiled. "Nice to meet you. I'm Harry Potter."

Relieved that he'd accepted Ron almost to respond, but tentatively smiled back. "Ron Weasley."

Some of what was wrong became right again. Now that was out of the way Hermione barely remembered to greet Harry before approaching Solomon, surprised. Seeing her chatting away happily he watched on with fondness, a familiar hand on his shoulder registering.

"Feeling ok?" With Neville's concerned words, Harry nodded. "I wasn't earlier but I am now. This is it yeah? After today, whatever happens, it's going to change a lot."

Rubbing her hands in glee, a wicked glint entered Ginny's eye. "I don't envy Dumbledore for a moment. He's got a list of crimes longer than his beard."

It wasn't an exaggeration either, to the point where there were one or two outside of what he'd done to him that he'd forgotten about. Though if Amelia was leading proceedings, he doubted anything would be left out there.

Then, out the corner of his eye, he saw someone completely unexpected. Or at least he thought so, a single blink enough to almost make him believe he was seeing things.
"I thought I saw Voldemort." Muttering this to Luna, Neville and Ginny Harry's eyes scanned that area, coming up with nothing.

"He is here," Luna confirmed, eyes glittering. "The darkness has receded. I think he's reunited with most of those that he once parted ways with."

Her words were on purposely vague, with many they didn't know to pass by who had the ability to eavesdrop. But even so, Harry believed he knew what she referred to. He'd mostly reclaimed his soul pieces.

Wondering how much that had affected him overall, Harry found himself unsurprised that he was here, a rival for decades longer. If an opportunity presented itself to see his biggest enemy put down, it would be difficult to pass up.

Returning to Harry's side Hermione was filled in, eyebrows raised in surprise. "He's taking a risk being here. Even though he's not a threat to us now or at least hasn't been so far, he's in a place filled with hundreds personally affected by actions taken in the past."

Harry agreed. If he was ever captured, the Dementor's kiss would be likely. But then, would it even work fully with someone immortal through dark magic? That was something to consider.

Delighted, Alistair was more than happy to make introductions and if Solomon hadn't followed willingly, would have no doubt been dragged behind. He'd talked of Minerva and Severus many times, strangely neutral despite potions and poisons of his creation going towards Dumbledore's limited but admittedly painful torture methods.

"Minerva, Severus, this is Solomon."

Happy to meet him at last Minerva shook his hand enthusiastically, Severus more reservedly. Lothai- or Alistair, he mentally corrected himself, wasn't lying. Their personalities despite similar appearances remained opposite, with a certain calm and level-headedness he could respect.

Travelling in a small group, they went to the very same courtroom where Harry had his hearing. Not filling him with the best of emotions, at least he wasn't sitting in the solitary chair far below where they currently were.

As the seats filled in he found himself between Alistair and Remus, waiting for things to proceed. As expected Amelia was there, along with the new Minister. The buzz of conversation swelled, many discussing basics made known to the public and while he suspected there was an attempt to keep the details quiet, inevitably every witch and wizard within the UK and not living under a rock knew that one of those to be judged was Albus Dumbledore. As such, the press swarmed about and he fully expected Rita to be here. At least for this, she wouldn't need to lie or exaggerate as the truth was shocking enough.
With the room fit to burst, a sharp, clear voice cut across the noise. "Silence."

The effect was instantaneous and seconds later, a pin dropping could be heard. Minister Scrimgeour, wearing formal robes, looked around all those gathered there. "Trial of the fifth of January, into suspected crimes and questioning of Peter Pettigrew, Dolores Umbridge and Albus Dumbledore. Interrogator: Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Court Scribe, Percy Weasley."

With spectacles perched on the end of his nose, Percy remained solemn, the same uptight and slightly obnoxious person that he remembered from years ago. It seemed time hadn't changed much and he wondered if, by the end of today, he'd still believe the sun shone out of Dumbledore's arse.

The Minister falling silent, it was left for Amelia to take the reigns. "Peter Pettigrew."

Those gathered there burst into shocked whispers and while made aware of who would be on trial, to see him in person when he should be dead was nothing short of unbelievable. The mere fact he was alive proved that nothing of what they knew was true. Shivering and snivelling pathetically the two Aurors either side of him none too gently pushed Wormtail into the chair.

There wasn't one ounce of sympathy there, Remus and Harry taking particular pleasure in seeing him there and Severus to a certain amount as well, one of the more annoying former bootlickers at the Dark Lord's side.

It was nothing more than a formality and before questioning began, the majority were already convinced of his guilt. With a dose of Veritiserum administered, the panic and fear faded from his eyes, replaced by an unfocused and calm appearance.

With Amelia interrogating, Harry assumed that her first two questions were to ensure he was under the potion's influence.

"What is your name?"

"Peter Pettigrew." Glassy-eyed, this was one person Harry knew couldn't fake the effects.

"When were you born?"

"1st of September, 1960."

Glancing at the documents for a moment, Amelia appeared satisfied. Sharp gaze honing in on him, the questions that many wanted to know were asked.
"Was Sirius Black responsible for the crimes accused of?"

"No." The response was instantaneous.

"Who did?"

"It was me."

The court was dead silent. After her last question, there would be no need for more. "Explain what happened on the night of November 1st, 1981."

Bits and pieces were known by those who cared to and the current DMLE Department, as once having the authority to do so, Amelia had read all that was available. To know that Sirius had no trial and was shipped off to Azkaban without another word was an injustice. If there was one thing they could do right, it would be to ensure that the right man served his sentence.

Unable to refuse the Veritiserum's effects, Harry observed with the burning light of satisfaction in his eyes. Everyone now knew the truth and without any details spared, painted a picture which alerted every single one in the room unaware, of his deception and betrayal of those supposedly close to him.

"At last." Remus murmured into Harry's ear, going undetected among all the noise of which Wormtail's answer had produced. Only just managing to hear him over it, Harry smirked. "Couldn't agree more."

Firing a spark from her wand it drew everyone's attention, eyes narrowed in fury towards the cowering Wormtail. With the effects wearing off, the knowledge of what he'd just told to a room of hundreds sunk in. Skin the colour of curdled milk, he began to sweat. "P-Please, have mercy."

Amelia doubted that any time would be needed to decide, swiftly carrying on. "All those in favour of guilty?"

Every single member of the wizengamot raised their hands. All could see this but for the sake of formality, she continued. "All those in favour of not guilty?"

When it was evident no one would support him, tears rolled down Wormtail's face. Harry couldn't feel a shred of sympathy, not for this. His actions had helped to make him an orphan, along with Sirius losing many years of his life, needlessly.

The Wizengamot took no longer than one minute to decide his punishment, a powerful Silencio in place for that duration. Once done, Amelia delivered the sentence with the smallest shred of
satisfaction leaking into her professional countenance.

"Peter Pettigrew, by this court's order you are sentenced to life in Azkaban Prison, maximum security. There will be no chance for parole."

Harry hoped they'd increased maximum security, with the number of times prisoners had managed to escape from there. But, it was still viewed as one of the worst punishments known.

"No! Anything b-but that!" Losing his composure completely he searched frantically for somewhere, anywhere which would provide an escape but found none, especially when finding his animagus abilities blocked. As two Dementors appeared to grab his arms either side and take him away, everyone in the courtroom shivered or at least became mildly uncomfortable.

All except for two people. Solomon, who was used to their company from his own time unwillingly spent there, was unaffected by their presence.

But Harry, more sensitive to them than most, found himself completely unaffected. Confused, he could only watch as they left.

'Something weird's going on. You haven't seen me around Dementors properly but I used to faint. I don't feel bad at all. If anything for a moment there I felt better.'

Confused, he tried to work out what had changed. Alistair's next words helped him to come to a realisation. 'Perhaps it is due to Thanatos? Dementors are associated with Death and he is the structure of Avada Kedavra itself.'

It was unexpected, but definitely a good thing. 'Yeah, that makes sense. I didn't fancy reliving my worst memories here but I haven't got that to worry about now.'

Alistair was glad of this too, concerned for him as he knew the chances of Dementors not making an appearance was unlikely.

Harry's attention was drawn by the next one who would face trial.

"Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to previous Minister of Magic."

Unlike Wormtail she was remarkably composed, lacking her usual sweet smile but still insisting on assaulting the eyes of those gathered there with her horrid shade of pink suit. Sitting down and clearing her throat with a high pitched 'hem-hem', she managed to locate Harry who sat in front of her, on one of the closer rows.
Eyes glinting menacingly, Harry reminded himself that after today, she would no longer be able to harm him or the others personally affected by her actions during her reign of Headmistress and Defence Professor. So rather than avert his eyes he faced one of his abusers head on, with a challenging smile.

Displeased to see that reaction, Amelia made all those unaware, aware of the crimes she was accused of.

"Do you plead guilty or not guilty to the following: Unauthorised possession of a Blood Quill, use of an unforgivable on a minor, use of a Blood Quill on minors, child endangerment, child abuse, abuse of authority and neglect of duty."

With apparent confidence, Harry couldn't believe his ears. "Not Guilty."

The evidence was stacked in his favour. Not just him but several other students were here, all who had suffered beneath her detentions.

After the jury was sworn in Mr Coote, who had been in contact with Amelia briefly and was given all evidence for Harry's trial, began to speak. "Mr Potter has not only provided memories which indicate that your claim of innocence is false, but he still has scars from the abuse he was forced to endure beneath your authority. Additionally, Blood Quills hold records of those who have used them and I have the offending item here."

Placing the Quill on a wooden surface beneath him, Harry could see that her composure began to unravel, ever so slightly. In her situation, it would be completely gone but clearly, she had yet to accept this. With a little help from Alistair, they'd managed to acquire it from her office in the Ministry, no less.

As an official took the Blood Quill it was handed to Amelia, tapping her wand on it twice. Airborne and floating in front of the entire wizengamot, were a list of names. Students and former students, some of whom were sons and daughters of the jury.

Cries of outrage rang throughout the air, as Umbridge began to show signs of nervousness. With a sharp cracking sound from her wand, silence reigned again. Locating Harry, her eyes narrowed faintly. "Mr Potter. Do you consent to your memories being shown to this court?"

"I do." Harry's voice rang out clearly. Though he didn't particularly want to see them again himself, he had no issues with everyone else seeing them. In the end, it would be worth it. Not only that, but it would dig a far deeper hole for the toad to be thrown into.

Seeing himself again and how he used to look and feel compared to now, it was then that it hit him. He'd changed for the better and right now, was happier than ever.
Everything was there. Several nights of detentions and snippets of hours, the cruciatus curse and times over those months and recently with lines carved into each hand, repeatedly.

With an official confirming for all gathered that Harry's memories weren't fabricated, the only line of defence in Umbridge's case began to leave the courtroom.

"Where are you going? Get back here immediately!" Her shriek pierced the ears of those there.

"Away from here. You've given me nothing. I can't defend this, I'm not a miracle worker."

A woman in her mid 40's with a low brown ponytail, she knew a lost cause when seeing one. Her job was to remain professional and unbiased but when faced with this, found it to be impossible. Though she would receive no payment for this, there were other cases where she would have a chance of winning rather than fighting a lost cause. The doors opening for her they closed once again, leaving Umbridge flabbergasted.

"Well, I didn't expect that," Harry muttered, amused but unsurprised. He would have done the same in this situation as well.

Normally it would be the turn of Umbridge herself or her lawyer to argue against the case they were presented with, but there was nothing.

Seeming to understand this anyone else would remain silent, but desperation clouded her judgement. "Yes, I did do that. But Potter deserved it! Spouting lies and filth about the Dark Lord's return."

Harry froze, wide-eyed. The general name for Voldemort was you know who, with his self chosen name made taboo. Tom was Dumbledore's choice, but Dark Lord? Surely not.

Apparently having the same thought, Amelia didn't let this opening pass by. "Madam Umbridge, it is well known that only followers of you know who use such a title. So I ask, are you a Death Eater?"

Harry recognised one or two, who shuffled uncomfortably.

Realising her mistake, she clamped her mouth shut. Seeing this, Amelia's eyes were practically slits. "If you do not answer, veritiserum will be used."

Not rising from her seat she remained there, able to pull the sleeve of her suit upward far enough to see the all too familiar skull and snake tattoo.

"Mudbloods and Half Breeds will pay for their filth staining our name!"
Glancing back at Professor Snape, who was directly behind Harry, he gave him a questioning look. Did he know about her? A single shake of his head was the answer and this time, it took more than a single spell to quieten everyone down again. Whether she trembled with anger or pride Harry didn't know, but apparently, Voldemort had welcomed anyone willing.

With her words, he patted Remus' hand. "She's just proven to be a bigger bitch than ever. She's dug herself into a far deeper hole than I ever could've. She should've just kept quiet."

As one of the more vocal ministry members about restricting his rights, Remus looked forward to the outcome. She had made his ability to live comfortably a difficult thing, not to mention was one of the ones responsible for hurting Harry and many other students he remembered from his time as a professor.

As Hermione flinched Solomon, seated to her left, covered her hand with his own. "Remember what I told you. Blood does not matter. You are a gifted and talented magic user."

"Thanks." Whispering to him a small smile emerged, paling slightly when faced with the venom hatred of Umbridge who she would have been glad to forget about entirely.

Looking at her with nothing short of disgust, the wizengamot once more were all in favour of guilty. It took a short while longer to decide but once they did, Harry was filled with grim satisfaction.

"Dolores Umbridge, by this court's order you are sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss."

At least of what Harry knew, that was considered to be the worst sentence. The body would be alive until vital necessities such as food and water went without, then it would die. Souls were the essence of who they were and without, were a shell of their former selves and unable to do anything. Aware of what was happening but not at the same time. The thought was a terrifying one.

As another Dementor came in and similarly to Wormtail, her situation began to sink in. "You can't do this! Release me immediately!"

She was having her soul sucked right there? He'd nearly watched Sirius lose his own and wasn't keen on a reminder. But he wanted to see this through until the end was in sight.

It was no less unpleasant than what he remembered, a black and tattered cloth-like figure floating towards her. With wrist and ankle restraints she was unable to escape her fate, though tried twisting and turning away. As a cold, scabbed hand grabbed her by the throat it slowly turned her back towards it, inhaling with a breathy, chilling sound that Harry remembered crystal clearly.

As a small ball of light emerged from her Umbridge began to lose colour, eyes rolling to the back of her head and slumping down, limp. Seeing that the soul colour was borderline black, the moment the Dementor consumed this the shroud of darkness surrounding it seemed to grow, along with its body.
It was only slightly, but Harry noticed.

Not wanting to witness such a thing Luna looked away, wishing that Brio could be with her, though was thankful to have her friends close by. Sitting between Ginny and Neville, she shivered slightly.

"That was pretty gruesome." Grimacing, Neville looked at her, concerned. "Are you doing ok?"

Patting his hand, she nodded reassuringly. "I'm fine. There was nothing good left inside her."

Hearing her words, they didn't doubt that. Having wanted to watch, Ginny was mildly disgusted but pleased to see one of the many corrupt ministry worms face a well deserved and severe punishment.

Only Dumbledore left now. One of which everyone was anticipating the most but nowhere near the intensity of Harry, Alistair, Solomon and if Luna was correct Voldemort. It was the one he was nervous about the most as despite having more evidence against him than what there would have been for Wormtail and Umbridge combined, he wasn't an idiot by any means. Waiting for his name to be called Harry remained alert, looking forward to when all of this would be over.

Sitting in the very same room where the others called to trial had waited, Dumbledore didn't let anything but the flawlessly crafted mask of a slightly eccentric yet kind and powerful man show. All his true thoughts were hidden deep within.

Skilled in the art of Occlumency and Legilimency he had memories ready to show as evidence, finely conjured lies and some true ones taken out of context. Immune to as many types of Veritiserum he could get his hands on, they wouldn't work at all. He'd studied those under the influence of this potion closely and felt that he should be able to convince the majority.

Nothing had gone to plan. Since Potter's rebellious stunt everything had spun far out of his control, something which he greatly disliked. But he was a man with a plan. Not just one but several. If things didn't go his way once more and everything else failed, he would enact the one which was a last resort only.

"Albus Dumbledore."

Heart beginning to beat irregularly, Harry watched as Dumbledore was escorted to the chair, sitting as if he owned it. All his anxiety revolved around this one man and knowing as much, he found his hand engulfed in the comforting faint warmth of Alistair's, thumb running over the back of it soothingly.

Unknown to him the actions had caught Severus' attention, who only found himself mildly surprised.
Saying nothing more he observed his former employer, wondering what web of lies he would spin to try in escaping the current situation.

Thankful that Amelia was the one leading this, the list of Dumbledore's crimes were extensive and at least double the amount of Umbridge.

"Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

Harry should have expected his answer but was half convinced he wouldn't try it in front of the Wizengamot. Eyes twinkling with false sorrow, a sigh left his lips. "I am guilty, only of the greater good."

A lawyer was optional and for a reason unknown to Harry, Dumbledore had chosen not to have one and represent his own case. Irritated with the thing that she'd heard from him so many times before, her patience began to thin. "That is not an answer."

Dumbledore was one of the few who had the ability to capture the attention of others, though it was usually the sugar-coated, meaningless drivel which triggered the wiser people's incredulity more than anything. As he looked around the room available to him from his seat, Dumbledore found Harry watching him coolly. But that wasn't what shocked him.

Right there, was the Vampire who had vanished from his sight and alongside him, Alistair. Side by side he could see a strange resemblance and when the brown eyes flashed orange for a moment, all the pieces of the puzzle began to form. On that day decades ago, he'd seen both of them. But it was only now that he realised for some reason, Alistair's image was hazy in his mind back then. It had never occurred when it should have and as a man who prided himself on having a good memory, Dumbledore was uneasy.

Both of them were Vampires. He, Albus Dumbledore, had employed a Vampire. Had let it into the order, no less! He felt sick to his stomach and angered. It was a struggle to remain calm once realising this and when next given the opportunity, he would wipe the pair of them out. Lothaire. That was the family name that he'd interrogated and tortured one of them for and now that he knew this, his focus turned to their extermination by his hands, once away from here.

'I must admit, there is a certain poetic justice about this. I am giddy with pleasure.' Harry hadn't missed the split-second flash of his eyes or Dumbledore's slight change in appearance, guessing where his thoughts had gone.

As the link was open, Solomon was able to hear his words as well. 'Even if he should somehow flee, no corner of this earth will protect him from our wrath.'

'Do you think he'll get the Dementor's kiss as well?'
The question was open for either of them to answer, Harry genuinely wondering. In his opinion, nothing would be enough.

'I am not sure. My only regret is that we are not the ones to decide his punishment. There are many of which I am sure that we could choose, which would be best suited to a man such as him.'

Harry wished for that as well, but only hoped by the end they could all move on.

"I am guilty of the crimes that I am accused of, but they were all for the greater good. On the night that Voldemort murdered Lily and James Potter, it was due to a Prophecy created by Sybill Trelawney. This prophecy detailed that Harry Potter would be the one to destroy Voldemort. Mr Potter, even as a child, was too powerful and for his own safety, I sectioned off some of his power with magical blocks."

Mr Coote interjected. "Mr Dumbledore, a total of seven magical blocks were used against my client. They are known to place a witch or wizard at risk if even one is used. If you claim this to be for his own safety, then why, with each one, did you put a then child and now young man at severe risk of death?"

The trial was off to an unorthodox start but would begin to poke holes in what he claimed.

He dismissed those words, eyes not losing their twinkle. "There is a risk if the child holds little to no magical power. Mr Potter, in his current state and without blocks, is more powerful than me. Seven blocks were not enough to pose a risk and he was still able to produce a Patronus at thirteen."

Harry didn't know how true it was in relation to magical blocks, but him being able to produce a Patronus despite all that, was.

"Do you have, in writing, permission from Mr Potter's parents and/or acting guardians stating that they hereby gave permission for such magic to be used?"

"No." Admitting this, it didn't stop Dumbledore's next words. "My point of for other's safety was proven as during August of 1996, Mr Potter murdered his own relatives."

Gasps rang throughout the room, attention now focused on him. He wasn't happy that the people he didn't want to know that particular detail now did, but wasn't about to lie either.

Harry had done his part, informing Mr Coote of any and all possibilities and he, along with his friends, Alistair, Solomon, Remus and Sirius were the only ones who knew. Until now, that is. Feeling the gazes of many burning into him, he wasn't ashamed or deterred in the slightest.

Mr Coote responded instantly. "Objection, Mr Potter is not the one on trial and it is irrelevant to the
While Harry appreciated his words, he met Amelia's stare head-on. "Mr Potter. Is this true?"

'You are well within your rights to not answer this. Dumbledore is the one facing questioning here.'

Glad of Alistair's support in his, he sent him a reassuring smile while one of the masks rarely seen these days emerged to hide his anxieties. 'I know. But if I don't, rumours will only spread. It's better to tell everything while I can rather than the media catching wind of this and printing more lies about me. I had a feeling he would bring this up somehow and I'm prepared.'

Taking a breath, confidence swam within his eyes. "Yes, this is true. However it wasn't murder, but an act of self-defence."

Those gathered there saw a side to the two influential figures they'd never seen before. One which stripped away Harry's golden boy reputation and the other, a cold, calculating side. Right there in the courtroom, Dumbledore's true self-emerged.

Eyes regarding him coolly, the twinkle held an entirely different, malevolent light. "What could a family of muggles do towards a wizard such as yourself? They have no means of magically protecting themselves."

How dare he. How fucking dare he! Harry was furious. It was only the fact that he was in a courtroom which demanded professionalism and surrounded by his friends that he didn't hex the man to oblivion. He wanted to scream, shout and simply vent all of his frustrations on the bearded bastard, to help him feel better. But rather than give in to this urge, he went down an entirely different path.

Squeezing Alistair's hand once he released it, rising to his feet. Moving past Solomon and Hermione he stepped down, to join his lawyer.

"I've got this." Muttering that to him Mr Coote took a small step to the side, leaving him to face Dumbledore and the Wizengamot. His actions raised many eyebrows, while several quills were at the ready to record proceedings.

Staring him down, a self-deprecating smile flickered across his face for a moment. "What can a family of muggles do, you ask? I answer, with this."

Lifting the front of his shirt, those behind and in front of him could see scars. Many of them, of varying severity, littering his torso and some trailing downwards.

God, he was terrified. It was one thing to show this with a select amount of people but so many? Mr and Mrs Weasley were there too. They didn't know the extent of it all. Professor Snape most likely
did from their sessions and Professor McGonagall, he didn't know truthfully. But either way
everyone did now, forcefully preventing his hands from trembling and keeping his shirt there long
enough for all to see. Releasing it he continued, confident and calm in contrast to his audience's
shock and the recognisable sound of Mrs Weasley's sobbing.

Smile turning sadder now he met Amelia's eyes for a moment until his gaze travelled across all those
in the courtroom. "They did this to me and much more. On the night of my parent's deaths, I was left
on the doorstep of a family who was supposed to look after and love me as if I was one of their own.
They didn't do that."

Pausing to take a breath, Harry was surprised at himself. He didn't think he'd be able to deliver such
information so smoothly, but it worked in his favour. "For years, hour after hour, day after day and
every year until 1996, I was abused. Physically, verbally and emotionally. I was a magical child
growing up with a family who had none but more importantly, loathed the idea of magic. I had no
idea it existed, I was never informed and for most of my life I just thought I was the freak and
abomination that the Dursleys had told me I was."

While his heart hurt, it was better that he was able, to tell the truth, while the opportunity was
available. "Dumbledore was the one who placed me on that doorstep. Anyone who bothered to
watch what was happening would know I wasn't being treated well there. He went against my
parent's wishes and it was stated, in writing, to not leave me there with them. I should have grown up
with a family such as the Weasleys, Remus Lupin or Professor McGonagall."

Not expecting events to go down this route, Amelia nonetheless did. She sensed it would be a nail in
Dumbledore's coffin and as the one who'd willingly gone off topic, they'd stay with this. "Do you
have evidence stating this?"

"I do." He'd found it in the Potter's vault, shortly after claiming Evergreen Manor as a place to live.
So much had gone on that he hadn't thought to mention anything about it, forgetting until it came to
the day where evidence gathering was vital. Handing it over to the official they gave it to Amelia.
Confirming that this was authentic she scanned the contents, temporary copies quickly created and
handed to each wizengamot member, fading upon their reading of it.

"I'm prepared to be questioned under veritiserum, swear an oath or give memories of this if need be. I
know what I did wasn't right, but in a situation where I feared my own death and as any further use
of underage magic would have me expelled and my wand snapped, I lashed out."

After this, even Amelia wasn't able to keep her composure completely. "That will not be necessary.
As Mr Coote says, you are not the one on trial, but this court thanks you for your time."

As Harry retook his seat, his hands began to tremble faintly. As Alistair retook it and resumed
stroking the back of it with his own hand, Remus whispered in his ear. "That's poked a few holes in
Dumbledore's story. You've just proven why you're a Gryffindor. With hints of Slytherin, of course.
Lily and James listed me as a Guardian? You kept that quiet."
"Sorry, so much has been going on lately that I forgot."

Not minding in the least as their wishes were carried out, albeit late, Remus wondered what other nonsense Dumbledore would spout.

'Harry, I believed that to feel any more pride for you would be impossible but yet, this is untrue. You are far more than what I deserve but nevertheless, I am incredibly fortunate that you feel otherwise.'

Mildly surprised by a hint of vulnerability in there, Harry responded immediately. 'I'd say the same. You're more than I deserve but we'll get nowhere thinking like that. So can we meet in the middle and say we're both fantastic and therefore together, we're doubly fantastic?'

Sending him a mental cheeky grin, the sounds of his warm laughter soothed Harry entirely. 'Yes, I believe that is an acceptable arrangement.'

In Amelia's opinion, if Dumbledore had nothing to hide he would answer her question clearly. The fact that he'd lead them all down this route filled her with suspicion. Though they'd sworn to see over this with a fair mind, she wanted the truth and knew instinctively that he wasn't telling it. From her own intuition and the day that Harry came to report his actions, with memories included.

"Will you submit to questioning under Veritiserum?" As she asked this, his agreement to do so was almost unnaturally quick. Before the trial, she was approached by someone who had presented her with evidence that he was a Potions Master and could see, that he sat beside who she recognised to be the current Defence Professor.

The man had given her Veritiserum, confirmed by the ministry's own experts with the information that Dumbledore was immune to most variations, all except this one. They'd run into that problem before and unfortunately, the ministry's current mind arts professional was exceptional, but not enough to see through someone who had decades of experience. Veritiserum, when there was no immunity built against it, was the best means of confirming truths from lies they had.

So it was with this, that rather than the usual Veritiserum, the one supplied unexpectedly came into use.

Such confidence. He wouldn't be so confident shortly, able to tell instantly at this distance, that they held the Veritiserum of his own variation. While immunity was a factor, the combination of ingredients along with one not readily available to humans was used, to create a new version entirely. A disadvantage to it was they would state what they believed to be true, rather than what happened. So insanity or delusion would render it useless. But for this, it would be entirely truthful. Some would say, too much so.

Solomon's soft chuckle was dark and menacing, one of which caught Alistair's attention. 'Might I inquire as to what is so amusing, other than the inevitable downfall of a bearded fool?'
'That and this particular variation of Veritiserum was created by me.'

Alistair believed he knew his brother inside and out. However, this was something that came as a shock. 'When? And can we expect this to have traces of slow-acting poison?'

At the faint hope in his tone, Solomon was amused. 'No, there is nothing poisonous but believe me, I was tempted. I delivered it to Madam Bones yesterday, suspecting that she would be the one to primarily preside over Dumbledore's trial. I have removed the weaknesses and added a strength.'

'A strength?'

'As in, details. The questioner has to be very specific but for this, not as much. At some point, he is guaranteed to mention his nefarious activities with the Guild of Light and this Veritiserum encourages not only truth but a baring of the soul's sins to a hungry audience.'

As the link was still open, Harry was able to hear everything. That was one thing he was concerned about. While he'd done much to hurt him, Vampires had suffered due to Dumbledore's actions for far longer. This was much more than what he expected. 'You're a bloody genius!'

'I second this. While I am not one to say that I revel in another's pain, in this instance, I shall greatly enjoy the fruits of your labour.'

Thoroughly pleased with himself, it only remained for a single drop to be applied. A human of his age had remarkable willpower. Coupled with his resistance, the standard issue brews would have never done it. But with potions, the strength relied on its user's magical power, alongside the brewer being skilled. A combination of the two would guarantee the end result incredibly effective. While Dumbledore was powerful, Solomon was much more so.

As a drop of Veritiserum was applied to his tongue, Dumbledore readied himself to act flawlessly. But, to his horror, he began to feel the effects of it against his will. No, this wasn't meant to happen! He had to leave, now...

Those thoughts quickly left his mind, nothing but a blissful blankness and the twinkle in his eyes gone, to be replaced by the potion-induced clouded gaze.

Looking forward to this though not letting her inner thoughts show, she began with the standard questions to check its effectiveness, after a confirmation that his state wasn't faked.

"What is your name?"

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."
"When were you born?"

"27th of August, 1881."

Checking the documents before her for a moment, Amelia touched upon the topic Dumbledore had mentioned. From there, she would get to the bottom of things. "When placing blocks on Mr Potter's magical core, was it with good intentions?"

She doubted so many would be used if there were good intentions behind it. Her internal thoughts were confirmed and then some, with his next words. Rather than the expected yes or no and having to ask another question for more information, Amelia was surprised that this wasn't what happened.

"No. Until such a time I felt it necessary, I would have removed them all so he could fulfil the prophecy, to kill Tom Riddle. In the process, he would die and as his mentor, I would mourn the loss of someone so young, but used this to further my own influence."

Amelia was disgusted and she knew, that many of those if not all gathered there, were as well. That one question had given much insight into how the man worked, but there were many more to ask yet. She was unsure what the man had done to make this particular batch of Veritiserum so effective, but now that he was here, she wouldn't stop there. Trying a different kind of question this time, she awaited his answer.

"Of the crimes that you are accused of, how many of them are false?"

Deep down, Dumbledore resisted with all his might, but couldn't stop the words which next left his lips. "None."

He was guilty of everything listed on there. Child Endangerment, abuse and more. It was enough to make her head spin. Knowing this alone was enough for a conviction, but the details of what was needed.

Working in an organised manner Amelia went down the list of crimes and with it, everything spilt forth. No details were left out and delivered in the dull, lifeless tone of someone under Veritiserum's influence, it made it that much harder for those gathered there to stomach. Over decades, his actions had either directly or indirectly influenced almost everyone in the courtroom, negatively, and their children.

Sickened they were all made aware of Dumbledore's plans for Harry, his near-death experiences being a part of his plan to build strength of character. Knowingly hiring inept Professors and having their children's education suffer, Harry's trip to the graveyard and a tournament which he could easily have gotten him out of, his plans for Ron and how he was a tool to use in keeping Harry from going astray, his knowledge of Sirius' innocence, nearly damaging Harry's mind with legilimency and not even scraping the bottom of the barrel, Umbridge's reign. He knew of the Blood Quill and her
actions against him but didn't lift a finger to prevent it from happening.

Even the embezzlement was mentioned, as one of the crimes listed was the abuse of authority and thinking about it, Harry could understand why that would be included. It was a past case brought forth again and he learned, that Mr Coote was right. Bribery for him to get a lighter punishment was the cause, his original sentence being a year in Azkaban, medium security.

Time passed by, though not fluidly. Not a single person in the room wasn't our for Dumbledore's blood, either enraged, saddened or betrayed the more that was learned. Most there thought the world of him, opinion shattering left, right and centre. But, it was towards the end where something that Dumbledore said caught her attention.

"As Headmaster, Hogwarts gave me the power to do what was right."

When Amelia asked him to elaborate, she wasn't expecting his answer. "The extermination of all Vampires."

At the mentioning of Vampires, Amelia was confused. Without a detail spared, Dumbledore had indicated just why he was one of the worst if not the worst Headmaster Hogwarts had seen, due to his actions over the years and constant endangerment to students. What did they have to do with it? Though she dreaded to ask in this case she did, even more, unprepared with his next response.

"They are evil creatures. I have dedicated my life toward ensuring that no more will roam this earth, using Hogwarts as a base of operation."

She had a foreboding feeling. Years of working in this field ensured her that her own gut feeling rarely leads her astray. "What do you mean by using Hogwarts as a base of operation?"

"I captured and tortured Vampires, intent on locating the families to eradicate them. They were kept beneath the school."

And then, the courtroom exploded. Metaphorically of course, but that was the closest to how Harry could describe it.

"Dumbledore you damned fool! You've gone too far!"

"How dare you!"

It took the Minister's input, for any noise to settle down after that revelation. It turned out they were learning far more than what was expected, following along the same line of questioning and as a result, learned of the Order of the Phoenix' origins. Nothing about actions taken then or now were legal, a shaky yet ancient contract in place which Amelia believed was in need of renewing. She had
nothing against Vampires and the worst of it was, that many were only suspected of being so.

Then, names from the guild emerged that were very familiar to her. Matthew Bell and Jeremiah Buckle. Both of them now retired, they'd spent many years within the ministry. The others she didn't know, but a thorough investigation would follow after this.

Taking action, she called Kingsley over, one of the few Aurors there to witness the proceedings. "I have a warrant for Jeremiah Buckle and Matthew Bell's arrest. Find them."

"At once, ma'am." Bowing his head Kingsley left the courtroom, knowing he'd need several drinks when off duty for a long period of time, after hearing this.

'While I am reluctant to allow Dumbledore to be punished by the Ministry and not us, Jeremiah and Matthew are the ones who hurt Jacob and murdered Emily. The moment they are arrested and brought in, I will inform the minister of my true status. This is something I will not negotiate. I want them to pay, by our own hands.'

Harry had never heard Alistair sound so determined. He sensed that the time to tell those who mattered about his Vampire status was close at hand, with Dumbledore's trial propelling things forward more than he expected them to.

'I will go with you. I am unsure of this Minister, but Madam Bones seems to be a fair and decent woman. Perhaps relations are a little better than expected. At least for the United Kingdom, this much can be done.'

With Alistair and Solomon in agreement over this, Harry didn't try to quell the sheer satisfaction he felt. Decades of lies and deceit, all brought out into a scandalous light which would ruin Dumbledore's reputation forever, until generations later when he became past history.

Eventually, the Veritiserum wore off. He was so confident in being able to fake results, that he hadn't thought to empty his mind into the pensieve. Everything which he didn't want those to know he'd told of, including events of earlier last summer. Having acquired the Gaunt family ring containing what he believed to be the resurrection stone, he was able to resist the lure in putting it on. Having every intention of Harry destroying the Horcrux within, it vanished, revealed to be a fake. Dumbledore didn't know where the ring was. All was told, with exception of memories not in his mind. Thankful that those were impossible to find, it still left him with a glaring problem. It was time to enact the last resort plan, it seemed. He was furious but didn't let it show, cursing Harry Potter and the Lothaire's to hell and back. He wasn't finished, not by a long way.

Before Amelia could speak another word and with incredible force, Dumbledore apparated from the courtroom.

It was an uproar. Ignoring the panic of those gathered there, Amelia issued orders. "Find him, now!"
He wasn't going to get away with this. She would use every means at her disposal to bring him back. Thinking of Susan, her only family left and how without her knowledge she could have been seriously injured or killed more than once, filled her with an icy cold rage.

"Albus Dumbledore's trial is on hold. You are free to leave or wait until its continuation."

With those last words, she left, Harry's mind racing frantically. "The Ministry's like Hogwarts, he's not supposed to be able to do that! How?"

Staring at the spot which he disappeared, Alistair's eyes flickered over to the man that he'd noticed the moment they'd arrived in the building. Tom Riddle, or Voldemort as he liked to be known, slipped out among the crowd, looking fatigued. There was no proof, but he had his suspicions. "He is powerful, but not enough to break through these wards alone. I suspect that he has used power from another source."

"I knew this would happen, fucking bastard..." Muttering to himself, the next thing came to his mind. "Do you think he's gone to Hogwarts?"

"No. I know his magical signature and I am able to detect his location. However, I believe that this is the perfect opportunity to access the memories of which he wants no one to see."

Thinking quickly, Alistair's serious gaze pierced Solomon's. "Find Amelia and inform her that Harry and I will find Dumbledore. If need be, explain my true nature then. It may help to move things onward."

Nodding once Solomon easily navigated through the crowd, intent on finding her.

"Oh, Albus. I never knew you at all, did I? His choices had left much to be desired, but I never thought he was that kind of man."

Looking as if there was no ground for her to stand upon any longer, Minerva's face was pale. Usually able to maintain her composure, it was the first time she'd found herself truly close to tears. It was a betrayal, one of which cut her deeply. Missing Alistair's exchange with Solomon, she was cut off from her thoughts with a tentative but awkward hand on her shoulder. Glancing to her side Severus removed it, scowling to hide any trace of former emotion.

Amused by that action so Severus-like and yet not at the same time, Minerva chose not to comment but appreciated her colleague's support, with a reminder that she wasn't the only one hurt by his actions. Rather than face it head on, he'd chosen to run away. Addressing Harry before he could leave, she managed to keep her voice steady. "I have borrowed his pensieve before. I know the location. I assume that is what you'll be after now?"
With Harry’s firm nod, she now had something else to focus on. Waiting for the crowd to disperse she followed Harry and Alistair out, thoroughly shaken.

"The shit's hit the fan now. Are you going to wait here?" Approaching his friends who'd gathered outside of the courtroom, he asked with a hint of urgency.

Discussing among themselves, Hermione was the one to speak. "Yes. I take it Alistair knows where he is?"

"Yeah. we're going to find his pensieve first."

Hermione's expression was firm, if wary. "Good idea. But with everything he'd told us in there, I'm not sure how much worse it could be."

"Don't jinx it, this is Dumbledore we're talking about." Shuddering, Ginny clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Go get that bastard, drag him by the beard if need be. If you can't do that, drag him by the b-"

"-Ok, I'll stop you there. we'll bring him back." A combination of amused and disgusted with what Ginny was about to say, Harry returned to Alistair's side. At this point, it didn't matter who knew and didn't know. So an announcement was made, in the form of Harry taking his hand.

Shrugging, he glanced up. "Sod it. Clearly, this is a day where nothing's hidden. That and honestly, I wasn't exactly keen on keeping this a secret, to begin with like it's something wrong and unnatural. It's far from it and hey, now everyone knows not to make moves on you."

Alistair was of the same opinion. And after this, a school romance compared to the sheer magnitude of Dumbledore's crimes would easily slip under the radar. He doubted anyone would mind and the one obstacle which could have possibly posed a problem, no longer would soon.

Delighted and entertained by Harry's show of claiming him, he kept his voice low. "Then, it is very much the same for me. Miss Vane's obvious infatuation with you is tiresome."

Harry grimaced. "Not half. She's still at it? I thought that had died down, to be honest."

It was a testament to their relationship that they were able to keep their usual banter flow when faced with such a serious situation. Once outside of the Ministry and with Professor McGonagall they apparated, to recover the last of truths.
Hey guys, hope you enjoyed! Last week was pretty tough as one family member of mine who I was aware of having cancer and would be here for a few months, which was shortened to next week instead. It's been shocking and distressing to say the least and harder to concentrate. I'll be sticking to the schedule if I can but in the next few weeks, if anything's off, you know why <3
The Dark Lord

Chapter Summary

After the escape of Dumbledore, Harry and Alistair were determined to find him. But first, his memories. Neither of them could have possibly prepared for what they’d discover.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Trials of the guilty and while two were sentenced, one got away.

In her own life and work, Amelia had encountered a number of shocking things before and as a result, found herself desensitised to subject matters where others would have a strong reaction.

There wasn’t much which should shake her firm footing upon the ground, but today was different.

Sitting behind her desk, it would take longer than usual for everything to truly sink in. Not only had a man she suspected of not being the saint he claimed to be proved far from that description, but a man she believed was dead in fact, was very much alive.

While the appearance of Sirius Black would be shocking enough, the man who’d supplied her with the Veritiserum had returned, explaining his nature and that this year’s Defence Professor was also a Vampire. He and Harry Potter would be searching for Dumbledore, to bring him back.

She had many questions, but not enough answers. While she hadn’t asked their age, there was something about his aura which indicated wisdom only present in those who had seen much of the world.

Unlike most, she felt no disgust or even uneasiness. The only discomfort would be her lack of knowledge of Vampires. How much of what she’d read was true? Susan has sung the man’s praises and if there was truly something wrong, their relationship was open enough that they would often discuss it.

When the opportunity arose, Amelia would take the time to question Professor Lothaire. Not only that but set things into motion which could hopefully help solve her current vampire related case and the issue of their poor relationship with them.
There was so much to do, but so little time. This department was her calling however and always received a sense of gratification for a job well done. She didn’t always enjoy it, but setting into motion the freedom of a man who should have never spent a minute in Azkaban let alone years, was something positive among the sea of negativity experienced by most on this day.

Even with his head of house present, Harry didn’t release Alistair’s hand. He’d been informed that she was aware of their relationship, so saw no reason to hide anything.

He didn’t want but needed the comfort it provided him. It was simple skin to skin contact, but one which helped to soothe his anxiousness considerably. Harry wished that his gut feeling would be inaccurate for once, at least with this.

Why couldn’t things be simpler? Not that he expected Dumbledore to just sit there and accept punishment like those before him, but this was ridiculous. Where did he get that power from? He had no doubt Alistair could travel through any wards, as he’d bypassed Hogwarts’ own defences before without harming them. But Dumbledore was mortal and Fawkes no longer belonged to him, as everyone else in the courtroom had found that out too.

Shaking his head forcefully, he was pulled from his thoughts by a concerned voice.

“You look pale.”

Glancing over towards Professor McGonagall, he tried his best to smile. “I’m fine, just shaken up with everything.”

On their way to the Headmistress’ office, there was a lapse of silence until her voice gently cut through it. In a tone which Harry hadn’t heard before, he looked on as the stern eyes with a hint of sharpness softened into something considerably warmer.

“If I had known that they requested for you not to be left on the Dursley’s doorstep, I would have taken you with me instead. Potter, know I am overjoyed that you have a home now and those despicable people unfortunately related to you met a fitting end.”

Touched and appreciative of her words, the smile came to him more naturally. “Thanks, Professor.”

Following this, came Alistair’s mental words on a blanket of tranquillity. ‘She is right, your colour is a little off. I am aware of Dumbledore’s current location and I will know if he moves. So if you require a moment, that is entirely possible.’

Ever thankful for the depths of his consideration, Harry stepped a fraction closer to him. ‘Thanks, but even if I did I don’t think I could relax until I know everything’s over. How do you know where he
is? He could have gone anywhere.’

‘When apparating, the faint tang of magic remains, long after that person has left. The stronger a magical core, the stronger their output. Unfortunately, Dumbledore’s magical signature and the unpleasant sour taste that coats my tongue with it is very distinctive. In that time I was able to connect with his magic in a manner of speaking, so there is a thread of magic detectable enough to follow.’

Harry was amazed. ‘That’s impressive. Either way without you, I don’t think the Aurors could ever find him. He’s an elusive bastard.’

That, Alistair, could agree with. ‘But, he will face the consequences of his actions soon.’

Upon their arrival to the Headmistress’ office, Harry observed Professor McGonagall as she muttered an incantation. Waving it towards the bookshelf there it seemed to split, still remaining solid as sections moved to the left and right. In it, Harry could clearly see the marks of where a Pensieve should have been, but no longer was.

Stunned, she could only glance at them apologetically. “Clearly, Albus anticipated this. I was unaware that he’d moved it.”

Frustrated, Harry sighed. “Well, that’s a dead end for one thing. Where could he have moved it to?”

With perfect timing, a voice interjected into Alistair’s consciousness. ‘How is everything?’

‘Not ideal. He has moved his Pensieve to an unknown location.’

Solomon sent a cool, calm wave of reassurance. ‘I suspected he would. Though there was much we discussed of what I have seen within his mind, there was something else that I recall.’

‘Yes?’ Alistair was intrigued but more importantly and hopefully, it would be an indication of where to search next.

‘There were flickering thoughts of hiding places. At the time I was unsure of what, as looking into his own mind required me to leave my own and experience the pain, but there was one. The Yucatan Cenotes in Southern Mexico the most frequently occurring.’

And that was why Alistair believed he wouldn’t have got this far without Solomon. What he lacked in, his brother made up for. While he would never wish for him to undergo such pain to learn this information, it may just be enough to aid in sealing Dumbledore’s fate. ‘Thank you, this is a start and an invaluable one. Rest assured, I will procure the finest bottle of Dragon’s Blood as a token of my gratitude.’
As a wave of pleasure passed through their link, Alistair had a faint yet fond smile. Dragon’s Blood was incredibly strong, equivalent to alcoholic drinks 100 percent proof. Alistair’s previous favourite belonged to Fairies, much sweeter but now without a doubt, Harry’s.

Knowing that they had something important to do, Alistair kept all thoughts of feeding from him at bay. The temptation was tantalising however, sprinkling a fine dusting of impatience to find these memories and Dumbledore. Then, perhaps they could lead their lives more peacefully.

Ending their brief conversation he relayed this information to Harry and Minerva, after explaining to the latter about the mental link between him and Solomon.

Harry was bewildered. "What's a Yucatan Cenote?"

Though it had been a long time since his last visit there, Alistair faintly recalled hearing of them at the time. "Cenotes are sinkholes, appearing when sections of land collapse. There was a flood, creating a network of them which divers have barely begun to scratch the surface of. Many have lost their lives during exploration."

"So they're basically underwater caves?" Clearly, if they were there, Dumbledore had no intention of returning for them and if he did, it wouldn't be for a long time. Why not somewhere closer? To him, it seemed inconvenient when it couldn't be easily accessed by the one who placed them there.

But that wasn't what he was most nervous about. If he had to pick a weakness, he would say swimming. The Gillyweed had helped immeasurably and without it, he'd say he was one of the worst. Not voicing those thoughts, Alistair's nod didn't help to settle his nerves any.

"It's the only lead we've got, but it's better than nothing." Resolute they shared a look, as Minerva seated herself behind her desk. "Good luck. Be careful and don't take unnecessary risks."

She had every faith in them. Both were remarkably talented for their age and in regards to Albus' memories, she'd learned more about him than she ever wished to. As they left, Minerva mourned the loss of a person she once considered a friend.

When leaving her office and alone together they disappeared, reappearing in an entirely different country. Under normal circumstances, Harry would have appreciated the view but today could only focus on the task at hand. Alistair had chosen a spot he remembered well, but as he'd never ventured or seen the caves in person, it was several people and incredulous looks later, that narrowed down their location.

When faced with a rough, rocky surface and beneath that, an area with murky depths, some of his nervousness began to show. "Are we really swimming in that? Divers are specially trained. I don't know about your swimming abilities but I'm not confident in mine."
Squeezing the hand in his own gently, Alistair next words were reassuring. "No. But I can confirm that Dumbledore was here. I detect his signature, though it is very faint. I doubt that he traversed these caves by swimming."

Glancing up at him, Harry didn't bother to hide his confusion. "Everywhere is filled with water. How can he not swim?"

Rather than explain, Alistair demonstrated. Without a word or hand movement, a large bubble surrounded them both. Surprised Harry poked it, springing beneath his touch but not breaking. "Is this like the bubblehead charm?"

"A little. Only this will ensure we do not need to swim. Not only that, but a creature of incredible force could throw its entire weight against this and it would bounce harmlessly off."

Harry didn't take that into consideration. He wasn't an expert of marine life in the least so anything could be down there. "Do you think we'll come across something like that?"

Rather than fear, there was simple curiosity and a little excitement. mildly surprised by his reaction, Alistair glanced down into sparkling green eyes. Seeing his questioning look, Harry was slightly abashed. "It's not every day you get to do something like this. I know it's for an important reason but how many people get this chance?"

"I am of the same mind. I enjoy the thrill of adventures, which is why I spent much of my time travelling. But for this, as we are not swimming and have magic at our disposal, the chances of death are zero."

"For you, not me." Harry pointed out. "You could swim through that blindfolded and still make it out alive."

"The chances of death for you, Harry, are impossible. Absolutely nothing will pose a threat, or I will be to it."

Delivered in such a serious tone, the lingering remnants of anxiety began to fade. With Alistair, he was safe. Even so, he wasn't the type to ever completely rely on someone so kept his wits sharp.

While bubbles floated to the surface, they began to float downward once entering the cave. as their feet met a slippery surface, the bubble adapted so that they were able to walk. With shining white and rough textured rock above and below them, the only way was forward.

The waters were eerily still, a lack of current or any sign of life. He was unable to see more than a few feet in front of him.
"This is weird, able to walk through water without it touching us." Wholly appreciative, it removed any need to swim. "Is there anything you can see that I can't?"

While Alistair was able to see clearly in the dark, there was nothing noteworthy for the moment. "I believe that in front of us, there is a sign. Other than that and Dumbledore's magical signature, no. It is fortunate that of those who have passed through here, he appears to be the only magic user as this area is devoid of it otherwise."

"I thought everywhere had at least some magic? Except for magic proof areas." Harry asked, trying and failing to penetrate the darkness around them in an effort to see more.

A faint furrow between his brows Alistair answered automatically, even as he honed in on the direction Dumbledore had gone. "They do, usually. The only instance of where there is none is if those who are able to call upon magic from their surroundings have dried up that particular source."

He couldn't begin to imagine how much magic it would take for that to happen. While they were able to walk, the sometimes jagged edges jabbed into the soles of his boots. Even walking was treacherous, requiring a good sense of balance as they still remained slippery from wetness in those parts.

True to Alistair's word, there was a sign. painted white and made from metal it remained firmly rooted into the ground, some chipped away as rust coated the nails that hammered it into place. The hooded Grim Reaper standing over corpses painted it in an ominous light. Reading closely, Harry could see why such a sign was put into place.

"Well, that's unsettling," Harry spoke aloud, shivering slightly. Over 300 people had died here? While the thrill of an adventure called to him, this was another situation where his Gryffindor side would have to be kept tightly under wraps. Charging in head first with something like this would only increase the risk of injury, or worse.

"We will take this one step at a time. While I am experienced, I have yet to apply this to such a situation." Keeping a level head, it was a sobering reminder for both not to get carried away. It still posed a danger, as a new and unknown area. Passing by the warning sign but taking it to heart, their surroundings became so monotonous that without the use of magic, they would be lost.

"It doesn't feel like we're in water at all. Even if we were swimming I don't think there would be either."

While Alistair had been in many kinds of water, the kind within a cave wasn't something he'd experienced. "Much of the world remains unknown. Here, of the estimated 6,000 cenotes, only a quarter have been discovered."

Harry's mind ceased to function for a moment. "Wait, 6,000? How far off are we?"
"I am unsure for the moment. But I will know if we grow closer to our destination. I am following the same path he has taken."

At least one of them knew where they were going. As Harry followed along, his thoughts turned to just what memories they'd find in there. Chances are there were some involving him, along with Dumbledore himself. Harry had the feeling there was something important about the man that he was missing.

His thoughts were abruptly directed towards something else, like the sight in front of them now was a far cry from the constant murky depths and treacherous rocky surfaces not meant for walking on. Stunned, he could only stare. "What the hell is that?"

Everything surrounding them was pitch black, all except for the centre with a tiny light source. Unlike the black surrounding it this was a toxic shade of green, giving the water a beautiful yet chilling feel.

"I am unsure, but Solomon may know." Sending an image of what they were seeing through their link, he received an instant response through the three-way link. 'That is the kukulcan cenote and the green that you see is a sulphur cloud. Divers have passed through this area and as I assume that you are not swimming, it is safe for you to do so as well. I would advise against going too deep, as there is vegetation which will slow your paths.'

Once given the opportunity, Solomon researched all areas which were grey to him. He disliked the times when he wasn't knowledgeable about a certain topic, as there was nothing he could provide with discussions. This place Dumbledore had considered to hide something was one of the first Solomon had researched. At least, all that the humans had discovered about it.

Thanking him they continued forward and if not for his grip on Alistair's hand, Harry would have lost his footing. Slipping on the rocks beneath him he barely had time to stumble, before he was pulled upright again. Heart beating quickly he checked behind him, a sheer drop into the unknown after a wide gap they'd crossed.

"Are you alright?" At Alistair's concerned voice he nodded. "Yeah. I'm usually pretty good with my balance but this definitely tests it."

Glancing at Harry's feet for a moment, a subtle movement of Alistair's hand was directed towards them. "Is that better?"

Testing his footing, the rocks no longer felt slippy beneath his feet, as if a thin barrier was placed between the soles of his boots and the rock below. "Much better, thanks."

Inspecting the cloud closely, Harry bit his lip, thoughtful. "Solomon said not to go below the cloud since there are things to slow us down. But going directly through it can't be a good idea either. I
doubt even you'd be able to see anything in that."

Alistair's sight was crystal clearer than many, but only the use of magic and attempting to push the cloud out of their sight would allow him to see better. When the sight in front of him was this thick, natural abilities only allowed him to go so far. "You are right, which is why we are going to float above and cross that way."

As they rose into the air Harry glanced below, able to see the faint outline of what looked like tree roots, but nothing more. The cloud was far larger than they could have anticipated but eventually, landed on solid ground again. As they did, Alistair's eyes honed in on something. A natural source of light and with it, Dumbledore's magical signature had become a little stronger.

"We are closer now." Informing Harry he headed for the surface, emerging and squinting as their eyes were assaulted by light for the first time in at least an hour. Once Harry was able to see again, he focused on something out of the ordinary. "Look at that."

Resting on a surface surrounded by stalactites was a statue of the Virgin Mary, alongside various items there to commemorate the dead.

"For those who lost their lives in the name of discovery." Finding the sight touching Alistair added a little something of his own, sparing a thought for those hundreds of people.

Harry looked at it for a moment more, finding it amazing that someone had gone to the effort of bringing a statue in honour of people no longer among the living. It was a reminder that for every Dumbledore, there were many a far cry from him.

While many caves were flooded, this one was above water level but no less dark. As Alistair headed for that direction Harry followed alongside, going deeper and deeper below the ground. As it became too dark for him to see, a light hovered above them which helped to permeate the darkness some. As it did, Harry almost wished for the constant darkness again, at least to remain ignorant.

"Of course, it would be this, of all the possible places Dumbledore could have hidden memories." Looking displeased, Alistair easily navigated the floor which was littered with various bones.

Harry had no idea what it was as to him, they looked like nothing more than crumbling ruins. But it was clear by Alistair's reaction, that he knew far more. Sensing Harry's questioning glance, he had no desire to think of that time again. "Are you sure you want to know? The details are highly unpleasant."

After some hesitation Harry nodded, wondering just how bad it would be. With a mixture of sadness and anger, his fingers ghosted across a small skull. "This is one of the many areas which Aztecs used for sacrifices, humans and animals. There were priests, one to cut out the heart of their sacrifice and four to hold them down during the process. The supreme sacrifice was a human life and as such, children were often used for their innocence. All of this, to appease their Gods."
Harry paled, feeling mildly nauseous. While it was more gruesome than he could have anticipated, he didn't regret asking. Trust Dumbledore to use such a place to hide things. "Were you alive then?"

Alistair smiled, though it was tinged with a hint of pain. "I was. And at the time, still young by Vampire standards. The first time that I visited Mexico, I accidentally stumbled upon one of their more elaborate sacrifices and with it, I disrupted things considerably."

Harry sensed a story behind that. "What happened?"

At the time, Alistair was still fairly innocent to the more macabre side of cultures, so accidentally stumbling upon one of these sacrifices served to shake him up considerably. It was his next actions which disrupted the natural flow of things. Approaching a statue he inspected it closely, all the while recounting details.

"I had come across one of their sacrifices well underway and at that point, it was too late to save the man when his still beating heart was placed in one of these bowls. But as they threw his body away as if it was nothing more than waste, a little girl no more than six years old took his place. At the time I had no knowledge of who they were or why on earth they would do this. So rather than watch I intervened, incapacitating the priests there and I left with her. Naturally, my actions were met with great anger and if not for my ability to travel instantly from one spot to another, they would have posed a problem."

Looking faintly troubled, Alistair's gaze flickered back to meet Harry's.

"I detect his magic, centred around this. The requirement is blood, enough to drain the body dry."

What Alistair referred to was a large, cauldron-like container. It stood out starkly against everything else, with an obvious indication that it was a recent addition. "Will one of your Golems work?"

While he'd never used any for this purpose, there was only one way to find out. "We will see."

Plucking a hair from his own head he poured enough magic in to create realism, down to the taste and texture of his own blood. There was only so much he could do, knowing the human anatomy and his body to a certain extent, but had never seen inside it.

As a replica of Alistair stood before the container with a sharp knife in hand, Harry looked away. This wasn't something he wanted to see as while knowing that the real one was very much alive and unharmed, it was realistic enough to be nightmare inducing.

"I apologise, it will be over soon. Unfortunately, I have nothing belonging to Dumbledore on my person, or I would have used a replica of him."
Pulling him closer to run a hand through his hair fondly, all sound other than that of Alistair's voice was blocked out. He was unable to hear the sound of metal meeting flesh or blood filling what it was intended to. Thankful that he'd been spared that much, his mind was prevented from conjuring darker scenarios with those actions taken.

Unlike Harry Alistair watched, fully aware that it was nothing more than a single strand of hair. Golems were highly advanced magic and kept tightly under wraps by their community, so he was unsure if Dumbledore had planned to do the same, use a real sacrifice or bypass his own requirements entirely. Either way, it had an anti-apparition ward around the area, erected by the man himself which would prevent him from entering again the easy way.

Once the last drop of blood had left the Golem's system Alistair banished it and the silencing charm around Harry. Flashing gold, the statue which held a large bowl, began to fill with a familiar swirling substance.

Alistair's expression darkened. "I am doubtful that he is ignorant to the Aztec’s history. He has placed his memories in the very same bowl which has seen countless hearts."

With bones littering the ground beneath their feet, Harry didn't think Dumbledore could sink any lower but with this, he was proven wrong. But then, there were the memories. Some would be an answer to unsolved questions, while others would reveal more than what was necessary. He could see various runes carved into the bowl, which he suspected were the same as what was on a pensieve. With the statue just low enough for them to be immersed in memories, they found themselves in a time far different to now.

Among these memories was the location of Ariana. While that information was valuable but would be difficult to tell Aberforth about, the majority of memories centred around either Harry himself or Voldemort. What they'd seen so far was serious, enough to add yet more crimes to the extensive list but as Harry was about to find out, that didn't even begin to scratch the surface.

In shock, Harry watched as The Dursleys at Number 4 Privet drive were cloned, in a different way to Alistair's Golem. During this, Dumbledore's thoughts were clear, concise.

He suspected that at some point, Harry would rebel or the blocks on his core would break beneath the sheer swell of magic and that his first target would be those who had treated him badly. He always had a plan and this would be no exception.

Before the day Harry believed he’d stab them and while they were alone in the house Dumbledore had explained, in a cryptic manner, that being around their nephew was unsafe and that they would be taken to a secure location. With replicas right down to their personalities over years of silent and, unknown to anyone but himself, frequent observations to see how his tool was shaping up to be, he had it all worked out. If such a display of magic was shown he'd act the part, suitably aghast with an offer of training. He would be taken along and during that time, oblivious of all but the essentials and once more would be shipped off to live with his relatives again, who he would also partially
obliviate.

Harry realised he'd planned for every eventuality. It was only now that he realised just how good Dumbledore was. On the day that he was called into his office and Harry provided a bullshit story, Dumbledore's actions were similarly fake and right now, he doubted the majority of it was believed.

But on the off chance that he did decide to go with Dumbledore the day he appeared outside of the Dursley's home, everything which made him who he was would be gone, with a simple obliviate. All the years of doubts and suspicions, his magic practice, everything. He would have been nothing more than a puppet and not only that, he would have never met Alistair.

But that wasn't the only thing.

Before he had time to process that information, more was revealed to him that he was wholly unprepared for. Voldemort hadn't sought out the information of Horcruxes on his own, it was prompted by Dumbledore but he used Slughorn, an apparent friend of his, to deliver the information. He knew that Tom's desire for immortality would guarantee that his interest in Horcruxes would be taken to unhealthy levels. With liberal use of obliviate that ensured Slughorn couldn't remember that Dumbledore was the one who had informed him of Horcruxes and Tom's after he'd spoken with Slughorn, he sat back and allowed events to continue.

Until later, when Harry was born.

Wormtail was a weak character and sooner or later, he would break and give up the Potter's location. Using the persuasion skills that he mastered over decades of practice, he convinced Sirius that it would be the best idea, able to predict what would no doubt happen. And when it did, he would be there.

Only able to remember screams and a flash of green light, Harry now saw what happened that night, through Dumbledore's eyes.

Sitting at his desk, the wards which alerted him that Godric's Hollow had an intruder, had him immediately apparating from Hogwarts, something which Headmasters and mistresses before him had taken advantage of. Outside of Godric's Hollow, he disillusioned himself, following the black cloaked, misshapen monster and not lifting a finger to help, when James Potter fell victim to Voldemort's wand. Following him, it would shortly be time to cement his place in this world.

Ah, Lily Potter. So brave and very much a Gryffindor. As Avada Kedavra was a signature spell of Tom's, Dumbledore put his next plan to action. Possessing him, the shared mindspace was a clean and quick action, with the host unaware of his presence.

As Lily refused to stand aside, Voldemort opened his mouth to utter those fatal words. Dumbledore
did the same, silently and with his will far stronger, it overwrote the caster's intent entirely.

As the killing curse struck her, Dumbledore returned to his body, satisfied. Possession was a useful tool. No one would suspect a thing. For all that anyone would know of this day, Voldemort had killed Lily and James Potter. But the truth? Using him, Dumbledore was able to indirectly kill Lily, remaining hidden but most importantly, fulfilling the requirements.

For all the magic that he knew, Horcrux creation was a new area of which he had yet to dabble in, until today. Uttering the spell which would split his soul, he was unprepared for when the killing curse failed on Harry, rebounding back to Voldemort.

Disrupted during a crucial moment he no longer had control over his soul piece. It detected that one of the three in the room already housed an extra soul piece, so instead went for the one lacking a great deal.

And so, Dumbledore's Horcrux, Lord Voldemort, was created. Cursing internally, pain coursed throughout his body before it just as suddenly disappeared, much like the shade without a body that quickly escaped. This wasn't part of the plan! How an infant had managed to survive this he didn't know, but the presence of a Horcrux Dumbledore was positive was accidental, he could easily detect.

This could work in his favour. What better Horcrux than someone who was immortal through the same means? While the idea of his soul being inside someone so grotesque was mildly unpleasant, he glossed over the finer details. The same as finer details of this night would be lost to all those but himself. Today, was the start of new world order, one of which he would take the reigns for.

Stepping over the dead bodies and tuning out the crying child he left, to answer the sweet call of Lemon Drops.

\[\text{The moment they emerged from Dumbledore’s memories, Harry was unaware that only the sound of silence remained and not the internal thoughts of the Darkest Lord that ever lived and the scream of his mum as she died by Voldemort’s hands, but through another’s magic.}\]

Anger, confusion, despair. Every emotion was warring against the other in a fierce, bloody battle. Replaying what he’d seen over and over, he didn’t know what to focus on or say, first.

While the Dursley’s alive state was shocking, relieving and slightly terrifying, the last memory resonated with him sharply. Then suddenly, a train running full speed with pure rage hit. Magic crackling at his fingertips, his green eyes took on an ethereal glow, reminiscent of that rebellious day and Thanatos shining through.

“I’LL KILL HIM!”
Harry’s shout echoed long after those words left his lips and ignoring the fact that anti-apparition wards were in place, his will battered relentlessly against them as the desire to appear right where he was and cut his life short, filled him to the brim.

When warm arms wrapped around from behind he struggled, not wanting anyone or anything to get in his way.

“LET ME GO!” While one part of him felt terrible for shouting at Alistair who had been nothing but kind, the other part just wished he’d relent and let Harry do what he wanted.

“You cannot confront him in your current state. He is the kind of man to take advantage of that.”

Harry knew this, but there was only so much he could take and right now, it was a sensory overload. Trying to pull away only ensured that the arms around him were a little firmer.

He didn’t need to say anything aloud. Both had seen the events which had unfolded but Harry’s desire to cut a life short which should have been long ago remained. He didn’t stop anything, using the situation to his own advantage and a death of someone he loved deeply despite not knowing her for long helped to fuel one of the darkest kinds of magic known to Wizardkind.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was smaller, weaker and more childlike than he’d ever heard it before. It was as if he’d been transported to those days back in his cupboard.

Unable to fight any longer the strength was robbed from his limbs, sitting down while Alistair continued to support him.

“You are not to blame for such a reaction as admittedly, I would like to do the same. But we must be ready for him. A man who is desperate is at his most dangerous.”

Alistair’s words barely registered, as his vision blurred. Heart physically hurting, the far reaches of Dumbledore’s manipulation began to sink in. Clutching his head with both hands with nails digging into his skin, cries unlike anything which he’d heard before, left him.

They came from the deepest parts, the ones which had yet to truly let go and unlike his usual near silence, they were loud and tugged at his insides viciously.

While Alistair expected as much, he was unprepared for how they would affect him. His heart experiencing pain more than it ever had before, his brows furrowed in sorrow for yet more trauma that Harry was experiencing. Sitting behind he pulled him close, doing all he could to provide comfort as he whispered words of reassurance into his ear.
“I am here, my love.” Pressing a kiss to his cheek, the salty taste of tears registered as they quickly cooled against Harry’s skin.

He couldn’t stop crying but knew if he was alone, the Gryffindor side of him to barge in without thinking would have reared its head.

Alistair was surprised to feel that his own emotions were heightened. While the majority was fuelled by Harry’s pain, some remained for the needless loss of life man’s desire to fight against their natures. While Tom Riddle was far from innocent, it helped him to realise that Harry was not the only one manipulated here. As he'd once promised before, he would personally see to it that all those who had intentionally hurt Harry, would suffer for such actions.

Once the cave filled with constant echoes began to die down, he fell silent. Altering his position so that Harry faced him, Alistair carefully traced the outline of his eyes. "We will take his memories and the Wizengamot will know the truth of what happened that night. Dumbledore will face the consequences of his actions. This, I promise you with every year that I have lived thus far."

Rather than it being a cleansing experience, Harry felt nothing but emptiness inside. "...What about his Horcrux? I don't know if Voldemort's reunited with all of his soul pieces but I doubt he knows about Dumbledore's."

Orange eyes flickering with an inner flame, Alistair responded a moment later. "I would have to see for myself. Though it is not something that I have done before, perhaps extraction is possible."

Calmer now, Harry rose to his feet. There would be time after this was over, to fully contemplate all that he'd seen within Dumbledore's memories. For now, they had an ex Headmaster to catch.

Squeezing his shoulder briefly Alistair stood up and with a motion of his hands, the liquid memories floated in mid-air. Remaining there he transfigured a small amount of debris into a stoppered vial. Uncorking it the memories flowed inside and once all there he replaced the cork, storing them away in his robes for safe keeping.

Dispelling his anti-apparition ward to erase at least some traces that he was ever here, Alistair reached over to take Harry's hand once more. "Are you ready?"

Determined, Harry nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be, let's go."

Leaving Mexico they reappeared, in a spot which may as well be called the middle of nowhere.

Lacking any sort of composure Dumbledore apparated, to one of the many locations he regarded as a safe spot. Falling onto the floor his bones creaked with age, groaning slightly at the jarring pain of his
shoulder hitting hard wood. Raising himself up and breathing heavier than he would have liked he reinforced the abandoned shack, a place to rest and recuperate his strength. Even stealing magic from Tom to fuel his own escape didn't leave him in a better condition. But no matter the distance, he could still do so.

He had copies of his memories, in more than one place. While some memories it was no concern of his whether he remembered or not, having no memory of his connection of sorts with Tom would be more troublesome than anything. Sitting in the courtroom that was one of the things he was unable to confess as at the time, he didn't fully remember. It was only during apparition and realising in that split second that he could access his rival's power, that it triggered a strong feeling of déjà vu. The ring on his finger was one such place, a portable pensieve for his most important memories and the ones that he couldn't simply leave there.

This was his last plan and for now, he had no more. He needed time to think about his next move but like sand between fingers, it simply slipped through the gaps, unrecovered. Hogwarts and access to the Room of Requirement would have been his first option but as that would be the first place people would look for him, this possibility was struck off the cards. But he hadn't lived this long through a lack of resourcefulness. No matter the amount of time, he would have something in mind.

Ever since Potter had brought him the Diadem, Voldemort had been rethinking his options. Ravenclaw wasn't a house he'd ever had an issue with, admiring them for their intelligence, as was evident with Glenn, formerly Gilderoy. It was reconsidering his options, which lead to him finding a way to be reunited with his soul pieces, without destroying the object. For some, he had no concern but with a founder's belonging and only one of its kind, that was different.

One way was to express remorse for the murders which lead to their creation but in truth, particularly for his first one, that was impossible. He didn't feel joy, love, sadness or anything which he considered to hinder or hold him back. Anger was what had driven him all these years. Anger and ruthless ambition but through it, he could see that his path hadn't strayed far from Dumbledores.

He had reunited with all of his soul pieces, except one. He'd yet to discover a way to not destroy the host, so that remained the only one. He still wished to be immortal, but extreme measures had lead to him losing the majority of himself along the way. But it was in doing so, that he began to feel something wrong, more so today.

The closest to joy he could feel was sitting in that courtroom and hearing his worst enemy's sins be aired to a shocked wizengamot. The urge to cackle was strong but he had gone incognito, remaining silent, nameless and faceless in the sea of audience members.

But the moment that he'd apparated, he was furious and suddenly, fatigued. Suspicion and doubts began to surface and the moment Dumbledore disappeared, he did also. He'd slit a thousand throats and desecrate their corpses before he'd ever let the old fool escape this.

Locating the source of his fatigue and focusing his magic, there was something there. He couldn't tell
what but sheer will alone and concentrating on the visage he would 'love' to Crucio he apparated, just outside of the Ministry's building.

Appearing in an isolated area, his thin lips curled with disgust as thick, sloppy mud coated his shoes. It didn't take long before he managed to locate Dumbledore. A dilapidated shack, of all things, with enough defences to rival Gringotts.

Remaining silent he swiftly worked, but the more he managed to cancel, the more replaced them.

"You can't hide away in your hovel forever, Dumbledore!" He shouted, a sneer upon his lips and red eyes flashing, knowing full well he could be heard. "Your time is at an end!"

They were at an impasse until two more arrivals made themselves known.

As they appeared Harry immediately spotted Voldemort, able to see the physical changes in him immediately. He looked different to when they'd last met, the only indication that at least one Horcrux remained, was the burning crimson of his irises.

Bowing mockingly, his eyes narrowed. "Ah, Potter. Welcome to the party."

"I take it Dumbledore's the party game?" Playing along, a corner of his mind was dedicated to disbelief, for joking around in such a situation.

Sneering Voldemort returned to work, never one for parties unless they were political gatherings. But if it was a party game where the objective was to torture Dumbledore? That was something he'd participate in.

As Dumbledore knew the truth and Harry had long before, Alistair saw no need to hide anything. Up until now, he had never allowed the true scope of his power to be felt by others, at least before meeting Harry. In Lothaire Castle he'd kept it under wraps and in Hogwarts, it remained at the level which would be believable of someone his apparent age.

His duel with Moody was only the tip of the iceberg. While targeting Dumbledore with the entirety of his power would give him the greatest pleasure, he was not the only one who had been wronged.

So for the first time in months, he allowed his power to flow forth.

Able to detect a change in him, Harry almost choked on the air, thick with highly charged magic. Glancing up at him in shock, he should have known. "I haven't seen even half of your potential, have I?"
"Up until now, you have seen the bare minimum. But the case is true for you as well, yes?"

Thinking back to the spell that he'd cast to mask his power from Dumbledore long ago, Harry saw his point. Shrugging, he murmured the spell to cancel it. There was no need to hide anymore.

"Virtutem Revelare."

Seeing the men for how they were supposed to be, Voldemort raised both eyebrows. Focusing his gaze on Alistair, his eyes glittered with interest. "A Vampire?"

Acknowledging his interest, Alistair inclined his head. "Yes. Stand aside."

At his firm order Voldemort would curse anyone daring to do so but in this case, did so. Unfortunately, he was unable to make any progress and while he didn't know the man's age, it was clear even a hundred of himself would be no match.

Eager to see what would happen Harry watched with part interest and part amusement when picturing Dumbledore's expression. Feeling slightly light-headed with how much magic filled the air around them, a strong wind began to whip up. Getting a firm footing on the rare spots of ground which weren't reduced to swamp-like textures, it seemed almost comical that a shack which had seen better days was Dumbledore's chosen hiding place.

While Alistair enjoyed the simple things in life, alongside Harry's company, shredding through Dumbledore's defences like a hot knife to butter, he would greatly enjoy. Focusing his magic he could see Dumbledore's location, which was the top right corner.

Directing it towards the shack's centre he pushed, a focused gust of blindingly strong wind tearing through magic and into wood. Blowing the structure and all that was inside it far away into the distance, all that remained was Dumbledore. Caught up in the wind's blast, he landed a few feet away and fell into the muddy, cold water with a great splash.

High pitched, cold laughter escaped Voldemort's lips. This was better than he could have ever hoped for and at a guess, this was a Vampire directly involved with Dumbledore's Guild of Light activities. When faced with such a display of power a part of him would step back with glee and watch the carnage unfold, but the rest wanted to enact vengeance as he'd desired for all these years.

When exposed and faced with those who he considered being threats, Dumbledore felt the slightest tendrils of nervousness but didn't let it show. Magic barely recovering from breaking through the Ministry's wards he rose to his feet, wandlessly cleaning his robes and readjusting the spectacles which had fallen off for a moment.

Now, there was something Alistair could investigate further. From the moment he first met him, he'd come to notice that there was a glamour charm built into his spectacles and for a split second, he
believed he could see why. All that remained, was physical proof.

Closing the distance between them his robes fluttered wildly in the breeze, hair ribbon swept away. with eyes the colour of bubbling, boiling lava, he allowed his fangs to elongate, showing a menacing smile. When faced with his true form Dumbledore's face hardened, wand at the ready. "Keep your distance, foul creature."

With Lumos Maxima at the tip of his wand, Alistair laughed. But not the joyful, musical laughter that Harry was used to. Filled with something far more threatening, it was yet another side of him unseen. Far from nervous or intimidated he simply watched, revelling in the fact that Dumbledore was uncomfortable, despite not showing as much.

Without so much as a whisper, a much brighter version of Lumos Maxima was balanced on his open palm. Causing him no pain, it illuminated the rapidly darkening area, casting objects in great shadows. But even so, he didn't miss the subtle change in Dumbledore's facial colour. With that balanced in the palm of his hand, he tilted his head. "As you can see, any form of light will do no harm. I am not a fledgeling."

Eyes glittering, he allowed the anger entirely directed towards the man in front of him, to be released in its entirety. The heat was so scorching, that the ground beneath their feet began to harden, drying out and in desperate need of moisture.

At such close proximity to it, Dumbledore began to sweat but found himself unable to move. Whether his shocking words were rooting him to the spot or it was a form of magic he didn't know, but his years of experience could never prepare him for this.

"My name is Alistair Avis Lothaire. I was born on April 2nd and I am 1500 years of age. For the last 74 years, your actions have destroyed the lives of my kind. Friends, those who I consider family and my own brother. Not only Vampires but that of your own kind! There is only one of us who is the foul creature here."

Despite the situation, Harry engraved Alistair's birthday within his mind. It wasn't a question he'd thought to ask or had even occurred, with everything going on but now he knew he would make plans, once large obstacles were out of his way.

He had no reason to lie about his age, Dumbledore could see this for himself. Suspecting that the Vampire he questioned was around a similar age, it occurred to him that out of the two, this one was more magically competent. The same trick wouldn't work twice and in fact, since he'd infiltrated Hogwarts and acted as Professor from right under his nose, he was unsure what would work.

Attempting to stall for time, he instead targeted the least experienced of them all. "Ah, Harry! Come to fulfil your destiny, I see?"

At his jovial and almost cheerful tone, the thin threads of his patience snapped. "Like Hell I have! I
came here to stop you. You escaped the ministry because there's no chance to bribe anyone for a lighter sentence. the past has caught up."

Seeing what he was trying to do, Alistair redirected the conversation, in the form of his next action. Horcrux creation always left a physical change in those who had performed the spell. With a subtle motion of his hand, Dumbledore's spectacles flew into his outstretched palm.

His vision was fine without them, thanks to modern technology, but Dumbledore was unable to wear contacts. The moment that he'd tried a severe allergic reaction occurred and since then, he stayed clear of them. He only ever removed them when sure he was alone, but they helped to build his grandfatherly persona. Stripped away from him now, they all saw what he truly was.

"...Well well. Leader of the light, Dumbledore? We're not so different after all."

Voldemort chuckled, devoid of mirth. But with Harry's next words, that soon changed.

"He was there that night. Dumbledore used you as a vessel to kill my mum. He made a Horcrux but it went wrong, and now a piece of him is in you."

"What?!" A mixture of shocked and disgusted, it all began to add up. "You leached magic off me to make your escape? How dare you!"

While Harry thought that was slightly hypocritical considering he did the same with his Death Eaters, he chose not to comment. Strangely, seeing their discomposure helped to regain his own. "The Prophecy no longer applies. Voldemort got his soul piece from me months ago and now, it leaves you both. But I know who is more of the Dark Lord here."

Green eyes piercing Dumbledore's revealed red ones, they were a shade darker than Voldemort's own. The scary part to Harry was the fact that the majority of his actions were done during the time when he had no Horcrux and with just one, this became the result.

Observing Alistair commented, returning to Harry's side as Voldemort held his wand in a death grip. "The reuniting with soul pieces has upset the balance and now that your soul is nearly whole once more it has shifted, to directly above your heart. I will be able to remove it and while you cannot die, you will feel a great deal of pain. Do you wish for me to do so?"

Unlike Harry with his magical block Alistair didn't offer this out of kindness, but to bring a deadlock to an end. Both of them had followed a path which tainted their souls beyond all redemption and between the two, thousands of innocents never had the chance to live.

His opinion of Dumbledore was much lower however, as a scan of Voldemort's mind revealed that his opinion of Vampires was positive. He held respect for their abilities and actions taken against them were only retaliation against an act committed by them first. But even so, their combined
actions had left Harry an orphan and that, in his eyes, was unforgivable.

As Voldemort gave his consent Alistair bound Dumbledore in place, with an invisible, unbreakable wall around him. Approaching Voldemort he stretched his arm out, palm facing directly forward.

Knowing that the barrier would hold, Harry cautiously approached Dumbledore. He'd caused so much pain to many and for what? "Why?" Unsure if he would bother to answer his question, Harry was unsure why he cared enough to ask anyway. Nothing would ever be an acceptable explanation.

Eyes devoid of anything which would note him as human, his face was set in stone. It was as if he'd come face to face with a demon instead. Eyes twinkling with a malicious light, a slight upturn of his lips followed mocking words "Harry my boy, the more appropriate question would be, why not? For the greater good, this world must see change. Vampires, Werewolves and any other non-human must be exterminated."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you insane? You could have doomed us all! Believe me, not even you and an army could stop Alistair and he's not the only one with greater age and experience. There are others out there and because of people like you, we'll never know the meaning of peace!"

Getting worked up wouldn't help at all, but to think that someone he once respected had actually fallen farther than all of them combined. Not expecting or receiving an answer to Harry's own response, he left Dumbledore to observe Alistair.

Feeling a sharp tug Voldemort barely reacted. His pain threshold was higher than most would believe, knowing first hand how painful the cruciatus curse was. In fairly frequent doses he cursed himself, possible if the desire was there, should the day come when someone managed to pull the wool over his eyes and capture him, for torture and interrogation. There were a number of things he'd done, some more daring with the lack of sanity along with a lack of soul pieces but now, they served him well. Focusing on the fact that he wanted such a thing away from his body he physically pushed, attempting to hurry it along with magic.

The soul piece was small and little by little, it began to emerge. Opening his mouth a tiny grey ball of light emerged and once there, crumbled to dust.

Not expecting such a thing to happen Alistair blinked, suspecting only one reason. In that time Dumbledore's actions had served to darken his soul, changing it to the point where it became unrecognisable. With nowhere to go that part of him simply ceased to exist.

Breathing deeply, Voldemort inclined his head by way of thanks. Able to watch but not intervene, signs of desperation began to show in Dumbledore's expression. Glaring at him with a look of utmost hatred, Voldemort had one request to make. "Lothaire. Before he is handed over to the Ministry, I demand satisfaction."
With a tone that brooked no room for argument, Alistair saw no reason to refuse. Everyone would want their chance at vengeance and according to Solomon, Voldemort's childhood was eerily similar to Harry's own, with a lack of input to change it on Dumbledore's part as well. He would settle for being one of the two to bring him back and face justice, alongside the two former Guild of Light members handed over into his custody.

"Very well." Taking a step back he released the barrier around Dumbledore and just in case, placed up an anti-apparition ward of his own. He doubted he'd try that again, detecting that his magical core was considerably depleted after apparating through supposedly impenetrable wards.

At Harry's side, he watched silently as a desperate man and one hell-bent for revenge, clashed heads. It was much more intense than the fight he witnessed in the ministry, with a combination of fuel from adrenaline and anger. Blowing out a soft breath, he could hardly blame Voldemort for his request. "While I do want this to be over quick, a part of me is also glad Voldemort gets to have his fun. I mean, if you can call this fun."

"I would certainly categorise beating Dumbledore into magically induced pulp entertainment."

Finding that image amusing, Harry would have a piece of him once Voldemort was done. He was tired of Dumbledore and all the manipulative games, but judging from the Wizengamot's decisions so far, what they would do to him would be far worse than what Harry ever could. He didn't deserve even a second of his time really, but that answer to his question had really riled him up.

"Voldemort has the upper hand. His movements are much more precise, while Dumbledore is a little non-erratic."

Studying their movements intently, Harry could see that he was right. They used every inch of space available and spells at their disposal, but it was clear who had the upper hand. Even so, Dumbledore fought back hard, Spells a blur of colour and chained with expert precision.

It had been a long day. Due to his nervousness, Harry was unable to sleep soundly and currently, it was only adrenaline alone that kept him going. As an arm wrapped around his waist, he looked up into concerned, loving eyes. Smiling slightly he welcomed the kind touch, responding to his silent question.

"I'm just tired that's all, I'll be glad when they're finished."

As Alistair felt the same, he decided to speed along the process. While he estimated in a few minutes time that more and more mistakes would be made that would inevitably lead to Voldemort's victory, he was more concerned with Harry's wellbeing.

With one subtle movement, the ground beneath dumbledore's feet was no longer solid but mud, much like the majority of marshland surrounding them. Unprepared for this he stumbled, which was all the opening Voldemort needed.
With a particularly vicious Reducto Dumbledore was blasted off his feet and for the second time, face up in the ground. Wand at his throat his own was dropped and with it, became Voldemort's. Crimson eyes gleaming in pure satisfaction, the wand that he'd wanted ever since his youth, now belonged to him.

Elder wand in hand he took the time to appreciate it, the surge of power giving him a thrill that none other could. He had won against his greatest enemy and now, to use the one spell he'd wanted to for so long.

"Crucio!"

Cackling aloud, a fraction of his sanity still lay within the diadem, but enough was there to know a stopping point. Before now he would have happily tortured him to insanity but seeing him receive the kiss or Azkaban would be far more satisfying. Nothing was worse than a man who had spent years building a reputation, to lose all of that and respect within the space of 24 hours.

Jerking beneath the spell he wheezed, not the nimble man he once was but unwilling to accept defeat here. With the last ounce of strength that remained, he summoned all his hatred, firing one of the three deadly curses at his intended target. Unable to say the incantation aloud he thought it instead, deep red eyes gleaming.

'Avada Kedavra.'

As the green spell aimed towards Harry, a deep-seated urge to transform rose within him. In the form of Thanatos, he faced it directly, coming to stop mid-motion and joining the mass of Avada green tail hairs as it made itself at home.

Free from Crucio, Dumbledore's eyes widened imperceptibly. "Impossible..."

Transforming back, Harry allowed a smirk to slip onto his face. "My soul animagus. Game over, Dumbledore."

Wrinkled hand trembling faintly from nerve endings set alight, it slumped bonelessly to the ground as he realised, it was no use. They were all one too many steps ahead of him and drained of both magic and ideas, he fell silent.

Hauling him up none too gently by the collar, the sheer pleasure in Voldemort's eyes sent a chill down Harry's spine. He had the feeling that Crucio was much more painful than anything directed towards Harry back then.

Shoving him towards Alistair, he twirled the elder wand about in his hand. "You can have the old coot."
Magically binding him Alistair decided to levitate his stiff body, knowing that it would be humiliating for anyone, but especially him. As Harry came to stand by his side he glanced over at Albus Dumbledore, reduced to such a state. Fingering his wand in silent contemplation, he decided on one of Ginny’s favourite spells. She was another one harmed by Dumbledore's actions or lack thereof, so thought it would be fitting.

As the bat-bogey hex struck him Harry had made it more powerful than intended, judging by traces of blood as the greenish yellow bats took flight. Uncaring and hoping it took away layers of skin inside down to the bone, he put his wand away.

‘While I am aware that Thanatos grants you immunity to curses such as this, I experienced a certain amount of discomfort watching you there.’

As Harry considered death to be a part of him or truthfully, Thanatos had influenced his way of thinking, he hadn't thought of anything else. ‘Sorry, I won't make a habit of it. But my animagus form feels stronger now.’

That sounded bizarre even to his own ears, but couldn't deny the truth of it.

‘That is intriguing, however, I would prefer that to not be a regular occurrence, or my heart may stop beating again.’ With a promise from Harry to act more carefully the pair disappeared with Dumbledore in tow. Voldemort followed, suitably disguised to watch an upcoming punishment.

Chapter End Notes

Research can be fun if done on my own terms 😊 this is the sign if anyone's curious http://i.imgur.com/7Vr7F1r.jpg I can't begin to describe how satisfying it was writing that last bit. Were the memories what any of you expected? It was one of the few ideas I've had since pretty much the early chapters. If there's any typos let me know, my brain is running on a considerable lack of sleep 😞
Heart pounding with nerves, Harry reappeared outside of the Ministry. It was different from the visitor's entrance and considering the situation's emergency, he doubted much of a fuss would be kicked up that they'd chosen the entrance reserved for employees only.

That point was only proven when mutters and shocked gaps stopped all bustling activity immediately, as those not present to witness Dumbledore's earlier trial could only stare, horrified, when the twinkling blue eyes of a man who many looked up to were no longer there. While Voldemort quickly departed back to the courtroom there was no need for a Patronus to be sent, as Amelia herself came a few minutes later. Thinking that she would want to be here for his Harry sent one of his own to Professor McGonagall, as many would want to see it through.

Drawn to the commotion Hermione, Luna, Ginny and Neville hadn't gone home but remained there, waiting as they knew before the day was out, Dumbledore would be back. Keeping their distance, a small smile curved Ginny's lips as she could see the last of a smaller bat bogey flying from his nose.

Even without asking, she could tell that particular hex was done on her behalf. She wished she'd been there to do it herself but knowing that he was thinking of her in what must have been the tensest moment of Harry's life, touched her beyond words.

Seeing the former Headmaster bound and looking nothing like how he portrayed himself to be, Amelia found herself shaken. Not only that but eyes scarily similar to he who must not be named, stared back up at her. "What on earth?" She asked, eyes almost beseeching as she looked at Alistair.

Letting the Aurors who had arrived on the scene take over, he responded immediately by handing
over the bottle with Dumbledore's memories contained within. "This is further evidence of his crimes. I must warn you that the contents are distressing."

Accepting the bottle, she would question the man later. For now, he and Harry had done them a great service. Bowing her head in respect, the bottle's lightness belied its contents. "Thank you, Mr Lothaire, Mr Potter. The court will reconvene soon. Until then, please be patient."

Nodding to indicate their understanding, Harry was tackled by a familiar head of shaggy black hair. He missed the warm twinkle in Amelia’s eye, catching sight of the man before she left.

"Harry, I'm free!" Laughing in delight his hair was ruffled until it resembled nothing more than a bird's nest. Trying and failing to smooth it down again, his happiness was contagious. With a gleam in his eye, Harry could envision him rubbing his hands in glee. "Once Dumbledore's taken care of, I'm leaving. I've discussed it with Remus, we're going to travel for a bit. He thinks the freedom will help me in here."

Tapping his head, he could hardly wait. "I'll bring back souvenirs. But for now, I'm looking forward to seeing that bastard pay."

He would even more, once realising that what Dumbledore had told the courtroom wasn't its entirety. As Remus came over, Harry could see just how happy the pair looked. It was what they needed since Remus had been limited on where he could go for the past few months too.

As Alistair was well travelled, he had a suggestion for somewhere that they could benefit from. "May I recommend the four seasons resort in Indonesia? It is excellently rated and provides many opportunities for rest and relaxation, along with stunning sights."

Sounding intrigued, Sirius shared a look with his partner. "I'll check that out, thanks." Offering a hesitant smile, he was relieved when it was returned. He'd been walking on eggshells around the man a little, knowing he was less than pleased with his outburst to Harry that day.

Spotting a head of blond hair in the distance Harry dismissed himself, going over to him. "Draco, I would say I'm surprised to see you here, but I'm not really."

Though he'd never met her before, Harry recognised her from the Black family tree.

"Harry." Acknowledging him with an incline of his head, Narcissa stepped forward. "Mr Potter."

Holding out a hand he accepted, with a brief yet firm handshake. "It's good to meet you."

Seeing his intentions were true, her eyes remained cold though could see a flicker of something within their depths. His encounter was short, as she left them alone.
"She's wanted to meet you for a while, but in public, she has to remain proper. My father had attempted to feed her all sorts of rubbish about you."

At the reminder of Lucius, newly escaped along with other Death Eaters, Harry grimaced faintly. Noticing this Draco lowered his voice to a whisper, ears and eyes attuned for anyone who might be listening. "I've seen him. He's changed and my crazy bitch of an aunt doesn't like that. She's trying to get the fanatics to join her instead."

Understanding who he meant with the word him, Harry suspected as much. "Before long she'll probably come after me then. Thanks, I'll watch out for that."

Saying nothing, Harry could almost swear he saw a flicker of relief before it went again. Following Narcissa, his friends shortly joined him. Seeing his face was still slightly pale, Hermione was the first to speak. "How bad was it?"

"Worse than I thought." Seeing that they would still have some time left before Dumbledore's trial continued Harry soundproofed the area around them, explaining to save them the shock once inside the courtroom. His reactions were as suspected, a shiver going down Ginny's spine. "So that's why his eyes were red. I caught a glimpse of them before he got carried off and they're creepy as hell."

"He's fallen further than any of us thought." Pale himself all Neville could do was shake his head softly, as Luna's eyes flickered with great sadness. Thoughtful, Hermione asked a question which he was unsure of the answer to. "What do you think will happen to him? It's clear what he's done is far worse than Wormtail and Umbridge combined and their sentences are severe. What's just as bad, if not worse, than that?"

While Harry had briefed himself with more knowledge of matters relating to law so he wouldn't be out of the loop as much, punishments weren't something he'd looked into. But either way, they'd find out.

"So, I take it everyone's going to know about your relationship with Alistair soon? Don't think I didn't catch you two holding hands." Eyes twinkling, Harry confirmed Ginny's words. "Yeah. I don't think anyone will care about that, to be honest. I haven't got official guardians and I'd sorted things out with the goblins. I'm emancipated even if I'm not of legal age by Wizarding standards."

Hermione spoke up, confident. "The media will be too busy with the scandal of Dumbledore. Rita's going to have a field day but for once, I'm looking forward to how much she'll slander his name."

He agreed with her there. He didn't like Rita, but she certainly knew how to draw readers in.

Making their way back over to the courtroom, he was joined by Alistair once more. Since he was there and knew far more than all of them combined, he decided it wouldn't hurt to ask. "Any idea what they might have in mind for Dumbledore?"
Alistair had wondered himself, truth be told. "I am unsure what the British Ministry of Magic allows and does not allow. With this, it remains to find out. Though if it is anything less severe than what those before him received, I will have more than a few strong words for those who came to such a decision."

Harry didn't doubt that in the slightest. When it was made clear they were allowed to return to the courtroom they managed to find their previous seats, sitting down to wait. The Wizengamot was there, not a single one of them looking unshaken. Even the Minister, a steely glare aimed towards Dumbledore as he sat in the seat he'd previously apparated from.

With Ginny sitting behind him this time, she leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I noticed the Bat-Bogey Hex on him earlier, brilliant job. Thanks, Harry, you're the best."

"I know."

Lightly slapping him on the shoulder he sent her a grin. "Glad you noticed."

Falling silent he turned back to the front, pleased with her response. Unlike the previous chatter, before the day had started, the mood was a subdued one, with odd whispers here and there. Many were anxiously awaiting the outcome, even as Amelia spoke once more.

"New evidence has been brought to light, of which Albus Dumbledore has not told this courtroom. Mr Potter, does this court have your permission for all others gathered here, to see them?"

As the majority of them concerned him, he understood the question and nodded without hesitation. "Yes."

Knowing what the rest was about to see Amelia steeled herself, doubting that a second time of seeing it would lessen the shock any. Dumbledore's lies had affected many of those here and not here, but none more so than Harry Potter and the Vampire community.

Placed into a pensieve they swirled within, runes glowing as a projection just clear enough to see, showed events spanning across the majority of Harry's life, down to his relatives but most importantly, that Voldemort wasn't the only one there that night.

He sensed many looks in his direction but steadfastly ignored them, finding it difficult to watch this for a second time. The only thing which kept him going was Alistair by his side and that it would all be over soon.

Then, the Minister spoke. "Mr Potter and Mr Lothaire, would you shed light on how you came to capture Dumbledore?"
Seeing no reason to refuse they shared a look and between them, gave details and filled everyone in on what happened. It was clear from his memory that Dumbledore and Voldemort had Horcruxes, but the chilling fact that his soul was unable to reunite with the rest once freed from the current Dark Lord robbed the room of all sound entirely. Once finished, Minister Scrimgeour gave a short, sharp nod. "I see, thank you."

Taking up the reigns, It was with no small amount of satisfaction that Amelia could deliver the final blow to a man who had evaded the rightful arms of justice for all these years.

"All those in favour of not guilty?"

No one raised their hand.

"All those in favour of guilty?"

Before she should finish her sentence, every single hand was raised. With a piercing gaze, she honed in on the newly revealed, red-eyed man.

"The severity of your crimes is something which this Ministry has not seen in an age. In light of this fact, it is the court's choice that the punishment to befall you is similarly so. Your actions have harmed generation upon generation, threatening our very livelihood, endangering our children and ensuring that more of them were left orphaned. Time and time again your own needs were placed above all others, resorting to sickening acts in an effort to ensure immortality. In the eyes of magic and the law, this is unforgivable. Albus Dumbledore, this court sentences you to undergo Expurgate Magia followed by Dolor Milia, effective immediately."

For the first time that he could remember, ever, Dumbledore truly looked scared. It was clear he knew what it meant but for Harry, he had no clue whatsoever. Turning to Alistair with a questioning look, he was provided with the chilling details.

'The first is, quite simply, the extraction of Dumbledore's magical core. Using a focusing crystal the spell is cast upon it and the once sentenced, removing it clean from the Wizard or Witch's body and absorbed into the crystal. Once done it shatters, taking magic with it. There is not a drop left after.'

Just the thought of such a thing had Harry paling. 'They can do that? I had no idea.'

'Yes. Not only that, but its removal is considered to be one of the most painful things which a human or non-human can undergo. The older they are, the more painful it is considered. For someone like Dumbledore, who is over a century in age, the pain will be very severe.'

As satisfaction leaked into Alistair's voice, Harry was still shocked that was a possibility. 'What's the second spell?'
'It translates to the pain of thousands. It cannot be stopped once put into motion and until it is done, he will experience pain that he has directly or indirectly inflicted upon all innocents. It draws upon the user's memories, acting as judgement in its own right and from there, will work through every individual that he has ever encountered.'

'Even if he did have the power to remove it before he couldn't because his core's been extracted.'

'Precisely. Our dear former Headmaster is about to experience a world of pain.'

It was well deserved, definitely. For the benefit of those gathered there who were unaware of what would happen Amelia explained, giving enough details of the spells to have each individual gathered there on edge.

Harry couldn't imagine life without magic. He loved it deeply and it had saved his life more than once. For him, it would be like having no oxygen. But for someone such as Dumbledore? It was a huge chunk of his influence, taken away in one fell swoop.

Knowing that by the end of today he would no longer be under Dumbledore’s thumb, Severus could barely hold back his glee. He would continue until the end of the school year however afterwards, he would hand in his resignation to Minerva. He disliked teaching overall and while he didn't regret watching over many students that had passed through the halls, it was never something he truly enjoyed. He'd rather focus his time on potion creation and supplying areas that needed it, not marking essays which were more smudged ink than actual sense.

But in the meantime, the least he could do was find a suitable replacement and from just today's brief meeting, he already had someone in mind. He would have to have a discussion with the man but meanwhile, that was one option. Feeling nothing but a sense of deep satisfaction, the sadistic side of him would revel in the man's screams.

Sharing a similar thought to the last one Severus had, this was better than Voldemort could have hoped for. If the Ministry should capture him he would face the same punishment undoubtedly, but he was no fool. While Lothaire could hand him in with ease, he would have done so before now. The reason why left him mildly curious but until then, he'd continue to lay low and reevaluate his options. After bathing in the sweet sound of his enemies' screams, that is.

While Arthur and Molly would receive no joy in watching something like this, neither could protest at the Wizengamot's decision. Their son and someone who they considered to be their son if not in blood, were harmed through his actions. For years, unknowingly, he'd betrayed their trust and thrown it in their face, repeatedly. They'd never known who he was and that fact hit them hard, particularly Molly. But she placed family above all else and when evidence was presented to her, the unpleasantness sunk in. Either way, they'd see an end to all this.

For Remus and Sirius, nothing could be sweeter. It was fitting end to a man which had personally seen to it that others met their own. The fact that he had a hand in Harry becoming an orphan and the
loss of friends who they considered dear was an extra twist of the knife already plunged firmly in. Once, they had loyalty to the man who they saw as someone influential for all the right reasons but now, that had changed. Understand that everything, not just some things were a lie, all that remained was to close the chapter of this particular story, so they could move on with their lives.

Opinions varied across the room but collectively, none could speak in his favour. Not even Aberforth but before now, at least in his mind, he'd disowned Albus. He was no brother to him, particularly when finding the truth out about Ariana. He'd thought she was dead for all these years but like so many other things, had hidden the facts from him. He had no idea how to deal with Vampires and was unsure how to approach her but judging by the Minister's question to Potter and Lothaire, he had the feeling they were involved with the recovery of Albus’ memories. Once today was over, he'd write them a letter. Disgusted that they were related by blood, magic or no magic, the least Aberforth could do was see this through.

To Solomon's surprise, with a softly coloured flash of fire, Fawkes appeared. Resting on his lap, he provided details.

:I am fully recovered. As someone who has spent the majority of Albus' life alongside him, I feel it is fitting I see this through:

Understanding now, Solomon's fingers tentatively ran through his brightly coloured shimmering feathers, rewarded with a delighted, quiet trill. It brightened the hearts of those nearest them, a reminder that something good came out of their bad situations.

Slowly yet stubbornly, the reality of Dumbledore's situation had sunk in. There were no more lies or secrets. Everything which he didn't want to be known was and before the day was out, everyone within and outside of these walls would learn of it. But still, he couldn't understand. While it was true his actions could be considered dark, it was for the greater good of all their kind.

It was a mantra, repeated often enough that it had become gospel, shrouded in a heavy cloud of denial. He couldn't escape again. His magic levels were depleted considerably and even if he was able to, the act would knock him unconscious and one of the two Vampires would simply retrieve him again.

Of course, he knew what would happen, he made it his business to know everything, one of the few aware of what those spells entailed. Yes, he feared this. The question was, who wouldn't? In his opinion, he wasn't deserving of such severity. Surely Azkaban would suffice? Either way, his protests would fall on deaf ears. Remaining silent, his only comfort lay in the fact that he wasn't alone with his thoughts and others would continue the work that he'd dearly wished to.

Minerva didn't expect Albus to be found so quickly and yet, was unsurprised by that and what else she'd learned. She couldn't bring herself to feel satisfaction in this, but could for all those who had been affected by his actions, in particular, Harry. While Voldemort was still at large, a part of the problem that they had with how thing operated in the UK, was about to be removed permanently. From there, she was determined to bring Hogwarts to its former glory and unlike him, would not
abuse the power which it provided her with.

Slightly nervous to watch something like this unfold, Harry didn't know how to feel overall. He was of two minds. He couldn't see himself enjoying the pain about to be inflicted on him like Voldemort probably would be but then, he had no sympathy either. He was firmly in the middle, though satisfied that this had been taken seriously and more so once the end result was achieved. A small part of him though was definitely intrigued. What did a magical core look like to the naked eye? Was it similar to a soul?

As a door opened a robed individual came in, a crystal larger than what Harry expected in hand. Guessing it was one of the unspeakables there was a brief exchange of words until their hands released the crystal. Rather than drop to the floor it remained there, jet black and sparkling slightly. Directly in front of Dumbledore, it hovered, as the unspeakable was just shy of being directly in the middle of them. Wand in hand, a genderless voice softly spoke.

"Expurgate Magia."

There was no build up, no increase in pain levels. It was instantaneous. A scream, as though it had come from a world far beyond, erupted from Dumbledore. Loud enough to shake the very foundations, many gathered there jumped, Harry among them. It was a sound, unlike anything he’d ever heard, appropriately inhuman much like the man’s red eyes through unnatural means.

While his wrists and hands were bound tightly fingernails scraped at the wood beneath, becoming broken and bloody. In an effort to escape the inevitable he rocked back and forth but with a sticking charm there, had no effect. Each one was the pure epitome of pain, barely able to gasp for breath and cry out more beneath the relentless assault.

Unprepared Harry’s eyes widened, deathly pale. But, it did the world a favour as magic in the hands of someone like him caused nothing but harm. Reminding himself that he’d lead the life he had mainly thanks to Dumbledore and all he’d done to hurt Alistair and his family along with friends, kept him from glancing away. He watched every movement, listened to every scream. He’d cried out for help so many times and the majority of them, no one had come to his rescue. It was time for him to experience the same now.

Even so, Harry’s band found Alistair’s resting on his lap, intertwining their fingers. Dumbledore or not, watching anyone go through this would still shake him up. He’d never heard such tortured, agonised sounds before in his life, mouth dry. Well, all except the sounds of his own during Vernon’s drunken rages and the Crucius Curse.

‘I didn’t expect that. I don’t feel sorry for him or anything, but..’ Mentally trailing off, his own emotions were confusing.

‘You are naturally a compassionate person. You have no wish to see others in pain but also, you have gone through a great deal of pain yourself.’
That could be it. He knew what it was like to go through a great deal of pain so on one level, could sympathise. But, he had no desire to prevent the inevitable. Even if it was horrible to see and hear, Harry’s curiosity began to rear its head. ‘How much pain do you think he’s going through?’

His response was swift and satisfied sounding. ‘Not enough in my opinion. But I would say a great deal, as magic is entwined within our systems. While our cores are centralised it spreads to every part of the body, particularly the hands where nerve endings are. It has completely adapted to his body and as such, will fight against leaving it.’

Leaning towards him, Alistair’s hair slightly obscured his actions from those behind as he pressed a gentle kiss against his cheek. ‘A thought spared for him is far more than he deserves. If it was another in his position, I am doubtful that he would be capable of compassion or any positive emotion.’

Alistair was right. He didn’t deserve Harry’s internal conflict or a second more of his time and strangely enough, knowing more of the details did help to calm his nerves a bit. Only Dumbledore himself would know how much pain he was in.

It was as if every nerve ending was scratched, blistered and frozen, sending waves of immeasurable pain only to repeat the never-ending cycle. It was severe from the start, the kind of pain he couldn’t grow used to and certainly not one like the cruciatus curse where, if talented enough, the victim could retreat to a safe space within their mind and escape some of the pain inflicted.

For this, he could do no such thing. Everything happened against his will, stripped of power directly until he was nothing more than a husk on the verge of shattering. But even so, magic fought against magic. He could feel it stay, remaining because of his deep desire to not be without but also the magic itself resisting all forces. But then that brought a bone-deep, highly uncomfortable ache, viciously tugging at the muscles, organs and bones beneath this nerve endings.

He couldn’t think, speak, all he could do was scream. There was no chance for communication, robbed of all words and voice box torn to shreds. It had enough, unable to produce sound clearly as it became harsh, guttural and hoarse.

Unable to bear screaming any longer he bit his tongue, bringing a fresh kind of pain. Blood coated chapped lips whenever he parted them, to try and intake just a little air for his lungs.

Eyes blurred Dumbledore was unable to see clearly, watering beneath the intensity as a light sheen of sweat covered his body. Heart beating erratically, an odd sense of bereavement washed over him as he could clearly see magic seeping from the pores of exposed skin. Reforming into a large ball of malevolent light, it was darker than his soul, all except for the single swirl of red within.

Looking at it, Harry shivered. That's menacing looking. Is it because of the magic he's used?’
'Yes. It has tainted his magic and soul beyond all redemption.' Confirming his question, Alistair found it amusing, in one sense, that someone who claimed to be light had the darkest magic and soul he’d yet to see, with Voldemort himself just a small fraction behind.

'Can you see everyone's cores?'

A soft smile, through their link and out of it. 'I can. Yours is the most beautiful, constantly changing and a veritable rainbow of colours.'

The crystal shattering violently pulled them from their mental conversation, shards littering the ground below as the faint shine in their broken bits became shattered beyond repair. The job done it had absorbed Dumbledore's magic, shards banished from the courtroom.

Harry noticed they didn't ask for his wand at all, likely because it was nothing more than a stick to him now. It was just as well, as the part they’d neglected to tell was Voldemort now in possession of it. The thought made Harry nervous, particularly when he made the connection that Dumbledore's wand was the Elder wand or otherwise, how would it work for him?

It was bizarre. Seeing Dumbledore slumped in the chair as much as his restraints would allow, those who didn't know him would easily mistake him for a harmless old man. But even without his magic, Harry couldn't say he was entirely so. It made up a huge part of him, but his mind and words were also a dangerous weapon. The only indication that not all was what it seemed, was the colour of his eyes. No magic could undo what was done here and the one thing which would have restored humanity, no longer existed.

The magic had stripped the last of everything away, including masks of which Dumbledore frequently used to fool all those around him. He didn't weep, not a tear was shed, but his eyes were devoid of any emotion as tremors faintly shook a frail frame.

Not even a minute after his magical core extraction, another incantation rang clearly throughout the air. "Dolor Milia."

Hermione was a combination of horrified and fascinated, in a deeply grim way. 'Does this play out in real time?'

Asking this to Solomon, she barely withheld a wince at his answer. 'Yes. For all the hours that he spent torturing me, the same will be reflected back. That goes for all those he has harmed.'

'I can't say it's not deserved, but for a while, I forgot how terrifying magic could be.' If anything, she would take this day as a learning experience.

'Yes, but in the hands of those with good intentions, it can have nothing but positive effects.'
Eyes narrowing, Hermione threw a mental insult his way. Though she tended to avoid such actions but was always amused by Harry's names for him, it was right then she allowed a second of indulgement. 'You reap what you sow, Dumbledore. I hope there's nothing but pain in life and death, you sack of Hyppogryff shite!' 

A faint chuckle of amusement across their link. For a moment, Hermione had forgotten she was connected with Solomon. 'I could not have said it better myself.'

Mildly embarrassed but not regretful, especially when thinking back over his actions Hermione continued to watch, all the while wondering just how long he would experience the pain of others for.

The loss of his magic was terrifying to him. In fact, he considered it to be one of his worst fears. His lies had extended to the fact that he saw nothing when faced with a Boggart but in fact, he saw himself, without magic at all. His worst fear had come true, but it was so much worse than he could have ever envisioned.

He felt so ordinary, powerless, useless. Everything mounted into one and above it all, he couldn't stop this from happening. Even now he believed he wasn't at fault, simply the others around him for failing to know what was best for everyone involved.

There were no more screams to be drawn from him, throat scratched beyond belief with all that had left his lips before. Was it minutes? Hours? He'd lost the concept of time and when his respite from pain was over for just short while it began anew. This was all in the mind. Physical pain had ended once the crystal shattered alongside his magic, but Dolor Milia would render him incapable of telling the difference.

As Amelia knew they would be waiting a while before the spell's effects ended, she indicated for Dumbledore to be taken away to one of the Ministry's holding cells.

Then, a voice addressed her.

"I believe that Mr Potter should be the one to decide what happens with Albus Dumbledore next."

Turning to the voice, she was mildly surprised that it was Augusta Longbottom who'd spoken. An influential member of their governing body, she was well known for being a voice of reason and many looked up to her. She was one of the few who actively fought against the majority of Dumbledore's decisions over the years, as chief mugwump.

Recognising Madam Longbottom from his brief encounters with her on the platform, Harry blinked rapidly. He didn't expect that. Looking over at Neville he met his gaze, similarly surprised.
Personally, Amelia had no issues with this. He was one of the few wronged by the man on multiple occasions.

"Is there anyone opposed to this?" When no one spoke out against it, Harry was addressed by her. "Mr Potter, what do you wish to do with Albus Dumbledore?"

He didn't need to think about it at all. The answer was already there. "I want the Vampires to have him. His actions ruined the course of my life and what it could have been but for much longer, before I or a lot of here were born, hundreds of vampire families have been killed by him with their only crimes being something that they can't help. They more than anyone deserve the right to decide how the rest of life plays out."

Solomon had asked if Jeremiah and Matthew could be released into their custody and with the Minister's approval, some Guild of Light members now belonged to them. The other former members were dead, but they'd left without harming a single Vampire back then so he was unconcerned with this. He was displeased to know that Dumbledore's punishment would solely be decided by the Ministry but with his current state, couldn't protest. Now was a different turn of events, one which he didn't expect but was thoroughly pleased about.

Amelia shuddered. She didn't envy Dumbledore at that moment, imagining just how ruthless they would be when faced with one of the few men which had dedicated his life to eradicating Vampires completely.

"Very well, he will be released into their custody. Today's trials are at an end, please make your way out in an orderly fashion."

Knowing her words would probably fall on deaf ears with media swarming the building she used the doors behind, her work far from done. She was expecting a visit from Professor Lothaire shortly, according to his brother earlier. It would help to shed further light on which she had little to no information on, alongside renewing the relations between Vampires and Humans through a freshly updated contract.

Before he left Harry approached Mr Coote, shaking his hand. "Thanks for your help earlier. You got to help hammer the nail into his coffin."

Breaking professionalism, he allowed a slightly sinister smile to show. "He didn't exactly help himself. His first words doomed him from the start but still, I'll consider this the highlight of my career."

If Harry was him, he definitely would as well. After this, the rise of potential clients for him could be on the increase.

Once leaving the courtroom, as expected, Harry was hounded by a sea of reporters and didn't know which way to turn his head first.
'Harry, I must see Madam Bones. Will you be alright for now?'

'I'll be fine, go ahead.'

Navigating through the crowd Harry was left, answering as many questions as possible. He'd expected as much and rather than shy away, embraced it. This was his chance for the truth to be heard, how he really was rather than the reporters receiving nothing and making up lies. While he'd rather go home and sleep for a week than still be here, it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up.

Just when he was at the end of his rope, fireworks lit up the corridors, taking animal shapes and chasing after some of the most persistent reporters. Quickly retreating familiar heads of red hair appeared either side of him, slinging arms around his shoulders.

"Harry, my good fellow! How wonderful to see you-"

"-Having witnessed the downfall-"

"-Of a bearded prick."

Fred, George, back to Fred. Always in that order and perfectly synchronised. As was Mrs Weasley's voice.

"Fred! Language!"

Winking at Harry, Fred called back. "I'm not Fred, he is!" Pointing to George Mrs Weasley simply glared, hands on her hips. "You've pulled that trick too many times, I know who is who!"

Shrugging as if to say oh well they tried, Harry found himself on the end of Mrs Weasley's bone-crushing hug. "Oh, Harry, I had no idea what you've been through!"

Sounding on the verge of tears, Harry hurriedly patted her back. "It's ok, everything's over now so don't worry. You knew only a bit of it but still cared more than some who knew it all and did nothing."

As Arthur patted her shoulder softly Molly released him, able to breathe properly again. Thankful for Fred and George's convenient timing, his mind couldn't relax just yet.

Shortly after Remus and Sirius approached, both looking slightly worse for wear. "That was some grim shite." As always, Sirius had a unique way of using words.
Barely able to refrain from rolling his eyes, Remus joined in. "It was deserved though. If there's one thing I'm glad of, it's that I'm not Dumbledore right now. Will you be alright?"

Harry couldn't agree more. But then, he'd brought this all on himself. Long ago he could have changed his ways, but the decision not to had led him to this day. Appreciating his concern, Harry nodded confidently. "Yeah, don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

Ruffling his hair with mild relief in his gaze, Sirius threw a grin his way. "Right, we're off then. Don't get up to too much, you know what while we're gone."

Wiggling his eyebrows, Remus shoved him in the direction of outside in response. "I'll see you later Harry." Giving him a brief hug they left and more than most, they definitely deserved a holiday.

Only a few of them remained in the corridor, Solomon approaching him shortly after.

"Alistair has informed me that he will see you after his business is finished here so for now, I will take you back to our home. Hermione, will you be coming along?"

Harry believed that was a question that didn't need to be said, saying her goodbyes as she came to join them. Making their way out Solomon's magic encompassed the area, taking them and himself away to Lothaire castle.

Appearing in the entryway, Harry was startled by a deep bow from Solomon. "Thank you for your earlier actions."

"You don't need to thank me for that. I'd hope anyone would do the same, especially after all you've gone through because of that bastard. Anyway, I'm sure you can think of better things to do with him than I could."

Solomon's eyes held a satisfied shine. "There is much that I have created over centuries, that I have not had the chance to test out. I believe that he will suffice as a guinea pig."

It was only fitting since he had done the same to Solomon and without a doubt, Solomon would return the favour of sorts there. Now that he was here, he wanted to continue his exploration. After getting permission he gave a wave to Hermione, who would most likely be heading for the library alongside Solomon himself.

He hadn't covered even half of the rooms or at least, that's how it appeared to be. He couldn't remember which areas he'd visited or not, so settled for peeking into each one until he found a certain area where things began to look unfamiliar.
Sometime later, he finally came to a set of double doors he didn't recognise. Made of slightly lighter wood than the library doors he pushed them open, greeted with a light and airy room, only lightly furnished compared to everywhere else he'd seen.

But considering what was in the room's centre, that was enough decoration alone.

It was a Grand Piano, but unlike any Harry had ever seen before. Made from a rich light brown wood it was furnished with golden laurel leaves along the sides and standing upon the wooden rests by either side of the lowest and highest notes, were Sphinxes. Strips of gold wound their way up the piano's legs, its feet a similar golden colour. The gold itself was brighter than any he'd seen, kept in pristine condition. With Greek, Egyptian and Roman themes present throughout the design, it was an impressive piece of art to look at, the stool similarly designed.

"I did wonder when you would find this room. That is one of my pride and joys, the C.Bechstein Sphinx."

Harry jumped slightly, not hearing his approach. With a fond smile about his lips, Alistair's fingertips ran along each individual key. "A very wealthy benefactor among our kind with a love for music held a competition and the winner would receive this. It is one of the rarest and most expensive pianos in this world. To this day I am unsure why he decided to give this away as a prize, but I am thankful that he did so."

Harry wasn't surprised to know that, he could tell just by looking at it. "When you say expensive, by how much exactly?"

"It is a replica, the first exhibition piece unfortunately destroyed. Old manufacturing techniques were used to create this and the sound is of highest quality. All that you see there is real gold. At the time it was given to me, around £900,000. I imagine that it is far more now."

Harry's head spun. "And he just gave it away?! That's madness."

Chuckling softly, Alistair couldn't disagree. "It is. But this madness meant that I came to own something I very much adore." Sitting on the stool, he softly patted the leather to his other side. "Come and sit here, I will play for you."

Of course, Harry had heard about his past theatre performances with Solomon, specifically the one which lead to his capture, but he'd never actually heard him play before. A mixture of excited and curious Harry joined him on the stool.

"Do you have a preference of music?"

Harry tried to think but came up with nothing. "Not really. I don't know enough of it to suggest anything." Looking mildly apologetic, those feelings were washed away by Alistair's wink.
"I shall surprise you."

He already had something in mind, seeing that the day had taken its toll on his lover. He was exhausted and as such, something relaxing would be perfectly suitable. It had been a long time since he'd last played, the very day Solomon was captured. Since then he'd had no desire to play any more but always returned to ensure that it was kept in good condition regardless.

Fingers aligning themselves over the keys, he was at home. In Lothaire Castle, with his favourite instrument and one of his favourite people there. At that moment, Alistair was happier than ever. Thousands of songs he knew off by heart, with so many more to learn. But of those thousand was one which had touched his heartstrings like no other.

Without an ounce of hesitation, he began to play, and it was as if he'd never stopped. Finger gliding effortlessly over the keys, melodic sounds filled the room. Slow and gentle it was a soothingly paced song, one of which reached out to all those listening, ever so slightly increasing its intensity part way through but shortly after, returned to an earlier pace.

Harry didn't know what it was but watching Alistair clearly in his element, he didn't think he'd heard anything so beautiful in all his life. It was no understatement, incredibly moved by everything he was seeing and hearing. Glancing from the fluid movement of his hand to his expression above, it was clear that he could feel every emotion, every note as they were played one by one or together.

He'd missed this, more than he'd thought. They were memories which he carefully kept hidden as before now, they became associated with happier times. But after today and that Solomon, though different, was no longer lost, Alistair believed he could begin to play regularly again. Much like Solomon when reading, nothing could pull him from the motions of music. They soothed him, heart, body and soul. If asked, he could play this with his eyes closed and not make a single mistake. It was instinctual, learning how to play himself from the moment pianos were made available for purchase.

It was no more than three minutes, over too soon in Harry's opinion as before long, the song ended. As the last note rang out he pulled himself from the trance he'd been put in, glancing up with nothing short of awe. "That was amazing, really."

For all compliments towards his piano playing made by those who had come to see performances, none could compare to Harry's words. Removing his fingers from the keys, one hand naturally went to fondly smooth down his messy hair. "I am overjoyed to know that. Would you like to try?"

Immediately, Harry shook his head. "No thanks, I'm terrible at it. I don't want to butcher the notes." Thinking back to his primary school days, his hands went far away from the piano keys.

That is until they were covered by larger ones. "Is there someone else in your past that I should consider having a discussion with?" The word discussion was used loosely in this case.
At Alistair's words, a smile tugged at his lips. "My primary school teacher. Each year you get a new teacher and they're responsible for educating kids on Maths, Science and other subjects instead of Hogwarts where it's one Professor per subject usually. Pretty much every teacher took the Dursleys words as gospel so they treated me like shit. I didn't get enough support but when it was time for something creative like music, she didn't stop watching me and was correcting everything I did. In the end, I got so frustrated the keyboard I was playing burst into flames. It set the fire alarms off and we had to go home early. Then Vernon found out and from there, you can guess what happened."

Sighing softly, he wasn't sure he had the confidence to try after that.

"I am saddened to know that your early experience with music was a negative one. But it will not burst into flame and I will never pressurise you."

Harry knew he wouldn't. He'd been nothing but supportive during his worst moments. Looking at the piano once more, he nodded hesitantly. "I'll try it out."

Unlike his memory of year 4, Alistair's instructions were helpful. He went at a careful pace and while it was nothing but the basics, Harry felt a mild sense of accomplishment.

Alistair had never taught another how to play, simply going along the lines of how he taught himself. But seeing Harry gain confidence in this area was satisfying. It was something else which should be considered an enjoyable time, tainted by yet another adult. There was one song that sprung to mind, of which Harry could play a part of.

"It is currently out of season, but Carol of the Bells is a song which we are able to play together." Playing a cluster of three notes for demonstration purposes, Alistair readjusted Harry's fingers to directly over them. "It is those notes in that order, for the entirety."

He could do that, surely. He knew how the song went so that was better than nothing. As Alistair began to play the melody he joined in, with those three notes and quickly finding the rhythm he needed. While the largest part of him concentrated on keeping in time, the other part marvelled at the fact that they were sitting there, making music together. The fact that it was January and no longer Christmas didn't bother him in the least, enjoying any amount of time they spent together and this, in particular, was special to him. He could feel the gentle shroud of today's memory covering over the past one, which had ensured he stayed clear of all musical instruments.

It was something so simple, but the sense of achievement he received from that was akin to whenever he managed to catch the snitch. Happy with himself once the song finished, his eyes twinkled. "I did it!"

Alistair could say with confidence, that Harry was unaware of his charms. Pleased for him as if he was the one to learn something for the first time, he wrapped both arms around him. "You did, very well too. No pianos bursting into flames and a further demonstration of how wrong your teacher's actions were."
Coming from him, Harry could believe that. Feeling Alistair's chin rest on his shoulder, his soft caring voice was music equally sweet to him as that of the piano.

"Harry, I must thank you. To us, Dumbledore has been nigh untouchable and while the Ministry's methods to punish him were very satisfying, Solomon and I had wanted to express our own displeasure. We had believed the opportunity would be lost to us. Unintentionally, I believe that you have gifted Solomon with the most ideal Birthday present. Naturally, I am very pleased as well."

At the thought of Dumbledore being a present for anyone, Harry was filled with mirth. But again with the thanks. It wasn't something he needed to be thanked for, able to see no matter what angle he looked at the situation, that his life and how much of it was left should belong to the Vampires.

"The choice was obvious. Solomon has been tortured by the man for a long time and you spent the same amount of time trying to find him. You were alone for most of that?"

At Harry's question, Alistair's eyes flickered briefly. "Yes. I voluntarily isolated myself, the days where I was not searching for him."

It was such a lonely existence. And for so long as well. Harry had felt alone for most of his life, so could relate in that sense. But not knowing if someone he loved was dead or alive? He couldn't bear to think about it. Swallowing past the mild lump in his throat, Harry continued. "He's done a lot to me, but he's done more to Vampires. Since I was given a choice of what to do with him, it was the least that could be done."

He made it sound so simple. But to Alistair, it meant the world and so much more. He didn't need to give him anything more, his presence alone set his newly beating heart aflutter and yet, he chose to. He was adorable, yet so strong. Much like his magical core, he was a mixture of many things, which combined into someone he was falling for.

Sighing happily he basked in his lover's warmth, easily able to catch him stifling a yawn. With a reminder that it had been a long day he rose to his feet, Harry's hand within his own.

"It would be best if you had plenty of sleep, as the students return tomorrow."

Harry had almost forgotten the holidays were over. It would be so much different with the confirmation that Dumbledore would no longer be there. He wouldn't be missed, that was for sure. Feeling mischievous and in the corridor, Harry cocked his head. "Easy for you to say that, but how am I supposed to sleep? You'll be right there next to me. Actually, the better question is, you sure you want me to sleep?"

Catching his naughty look, Alistair was proud that he'd come into his own with his newfound confidence here but had shortly discovered that his self-control was very limited when it came to this.
"Why Harry, are you trying to tempt me?"

Spinning around to look up at him, he grinned. "Whatever gave you that idea, Professor?"

Putting a particular emphasis on the last word, he let out a surprised squeak when he was promptly picked up. "Because, Mr Potter, the truth lies within your expression." He put the same emphasis in Harry's surname, sending pleasant tingle along his spine.

As his lips were kissed, his request to be put down afterwards was promptly ignored. They happened to pass by the library, of which Hermione and Solomon emerged from. A mixture of amused and incredulous she glanced at Harry, Solomon rolling his eyes casually.

"Hi, guys!"

As Alistair passed by he offered a greeting of his own, chuckling softly when a second later, came Harry's voice of "Bye guys!".

Smiling she watched as they turned a corner, amused with their antics. "Is Alistair always so energetic?"

Solomon's response came a moment later. "I am unsure what he was like during the time I was missing but after and before that? Yes. It is difficult to keep up with him sometimes. But this is the first time that I have seen a partner of his where I have thought that they are well matched."

Since Hermione was already here and the hour was growing late, Solomon thought it couldn't hurt to ask. "Would you like to stay the night?"

It was a new experience, a thought of which had her strangely nervous. "I would, but my... essentials are at home."

Unable to think of another way to phrase it, she blushed faintly.

Seeing her reaction rose within him a feeling of embarrassment too. He'd never had a woman stay the night with no ulterior motive. Intimacy was always involved and a considerable lack of clothing. What was it that Hermione needed? Other than night clothes, toothbrush, toothpaste, was there anything else? Either way, he could retrieve them from there, by simply envisioning the product.

Then, she confirmed that there was something else and explained the source of her embarrassment. During his brief encounters, Solomon had never interacted with women intimately during their time of the month. It was by chance more than anything, but this didn't affect his desire to sleep beside her at all. As what Hermione needed hovered before her she caught the pile, holding it in both arms.
"Are you in pain?" He knew enough about them to realise that it was a trying time for women.

She didn't expect him to ask about that but found his concern sweet. "I have mild cramps, but it's nothing I can't handle."

Whenever girls had their first period, they were encouraged to see Madam Pomfrey. Spells if used too often could cause hormonal imbalances, so potions or muggle methods were encouraged. She relied on a combination of both, though potions could only do so much as, like tablets, it required a certain amount of time to have passed before taking them and currently, she couldn't have another pain reliever.

Her answer didn't ease his worries any. Making their way to his room they separated, Hermione, taking the bathroom as Solomon changed into pyjamas. He rarely slept at all, once a month the most so the silken material he wore now wasn't used often. With the covers over his legs, Solomon sat, waiting for her to emerge.

Alone in the bathroom, even that was lavishly decorated. There was more than enough space for her things to be put down. Her parents were on holiday together, taking some alone time to themselves while Hermione returned to Hogwarts the next day. They both worked hard, so it was deserved.

Changing into her pyjamas she all that she needed to, opening the bathroom door and placing her clothes aside. Joining him in the bed, he regarded her with interest. "You are wearing books."

Looking at her book-themed pyjamas, she smiled fondly. "They were a present from Mum."

Forgetting himself for a moment, Solomon's fingertips brushed along Hermione's side, over one of the books. "I like this. It suits you."

At his actions, her heartbeat involuntarily quickened, as another ill-timed cramp made itself known. Though Hermione believed she hadn't made a face, Solomon had noticed. "Where does it hurt?"

quietly insistent, she saw no reason to refuse but at the moment, all she should do was ride it out until another pain relieving potion could be taken. For some reason paracetamol never worked with her, suspecting that magic might have some part in it.

Lying down on the pillow beneath, she gestured to her lower abdomen. "Here."

Content to just talk with him until she dropped off to sleep, Hermione didn't expect his hand to touch that same spot. It was only over her clothes but suddenly, all heat seemed to centralise there. About to ask what he was doing she stopped, realising a moment later.
With a look of mild concentration, Solomon leaned on one forearm, the other hand reaching over to carefully massage the area she'd indicated. He'd picked up bits of knowledge here and there from Alistair as while the art of massaging and details alongside it hadn't overly interested him, it was impossible not to retain some amount of information and in this case, knew it would help even if only slightly.

At his surprisingly firm but gentle touch, she practically melted. It helped to ease the tightening sensation and couldn't deny that it relaxed her. "That feels nice."

Encouraged by her soft words he continued for a while, stopping when she gave the indication. Touched by his consideration Hermione looped her arm around him, closing the distance to express her gratitude through a kiss. "Thank you."

Settling himself down beside her, his eyes held a serious look. "If it begins to hurt again, inform me and I will continue."

"Alright."

They chatted some more, revolving around the events of today and with Dumbledore out of the picture, both were optimistic for what else would happen.

As the door to Alistair's bedroom opened Harry found himself dropped onto it, straddled a moment later. Nose to nose their gazes locked, orange and green burning with the flames of passion. His exhaustion barely registered, replaced with a strong rush of adrenalin and fuelled with desire.

"Ah, whatever shall I do with you?" Sighing fondly, his fingertips brushed the back of Harry's cheek, lightly flushed.

Raising his hand slightly, Harry counted, lifting a finger for each item on his voiced checklist. "Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me and kiss me. Did I mention kiss me?"

With that indication plain as day, Harry found himself able to keep up with Alistair's pace. Both happy with the day's results and what had been accomplished their actions were slightly more hurried, lacking their usual care for tidy appearances and dishevelled clothes became quickly discarded, showering the floor beneath in a rain of material.

No matter what Harry would never have enough of Alistair's kisses, seeming to improve every time and by now, he could say he had a good idea of what he was doing. But even then, he had quite some time before ever meeting Alistair's level.

Skin to skin was something Harry liked very much, admiring Alistair's body and now, was much
more comfortable with his own. So much, that he was thinking about seeing Madam Pomfrey again. Maybe this time, his scars would go. But for now, he was content here, the adventurous side of him emerging when kissing various spots of Alistair's to produce a reaction.

Then, he remembered his slightly impulsive action of that time which lead to them gaining a deeper intimacy. No longer shy with this side of things he decided to investigate, fingers brushing across one of Alistair's nipples.

At a soft intake of breath, Harry was thoroughly satisfied. Beside Alistair, he sat up slightly, leaning over him. "You didn't answer my question earlier. You sure you want me to sleep?"

Once more, Harry was getting his way. But for this, he was happy to go along with it. He'd tried to tell himself more than once he needed to be firmer with him, but it was no use. If there was anything he wanted and it was within Alistair's ability to do so, he would have it within a heartbeat. As he placed honesty high on his list, he voiced his thoughts. "No, not just yet."

"Great! I'll give you a reward for being honest." Still, with the same look that Alistair had seen in his eyes earlier, his lips and tongue began to target the same nipple his fingers had brushed across before.

Every nerve ending tingled pleasurably, travelling directly to one prominent place. Harry used the sounds of his voice as a way forward, unused to doing something like this but going with what felt the most natural to him.

As Alistair often applied himself with a great amount of detail, whether it was within their relationship or out, Harry did the same here. He wanted him to feel good. No, better than good, but on cloud nine. That was his goal and with the ambition of Slytherin and determination of Gryffindor, he'd see this through, thoroughly enjoying it along the way.

Running a hand along Harry's upper back it slid into the softness of his hair which went every direction, encouraging him through actions. It had been a long time since anyone had paid that much attention there, the second most sensitive part of his body and he enjoyed the slightly rarer sensation of being pleasured rather than the other way round.

Some of his relationships had been one-sided, a reminder of the more saddening times but here, Harry was his equal. It didn't matter the astronomical age gap and a similar gap between experience levels, he truly saw him that way, as it should be. The fact they no longer would need to hide their relationship brought with it a sense of liberation and personally, Alistair couldn't wait to inform the Wizarding world that Harry was not available, romantically.

After lavishing attention upon them Harry pulled back, pleased with himself. He barely had time to think about his next actions, as he was swept away in yet another feverish kiss.

Tangled on top of the covers it was hard to keep track of any thoughts, losing himself with no resistance on either of their part. Needless to say, Alistair's plan of Harry getting enough sleep didn't
quite come to pass, reaffirming their desire for one another repeatedly and in celebration of a new beginning, all throughout the night.

Chapter End Notes

The family member I mentioned having cancer earlier passed away yesterday. Sooner rather than later was better so they were no longer in pain but still I'm devastated. Even so I won't miss my upload schedule, I love this more than anything and it's therapeutic at least <3

~I was listening to Elegy for the Arctic when writing Alistair's piano playing, it's so beautiful.
The Last Dumbledore

Chapter Summary

Harry and Alistair share a relaxing moment together, Hermione and Solomon become a little more intimate and Ron has a personality overhaul. Later on, the retrieval of someone who has suffered for far too long.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Dumbledore was unable to evade the law and by it, he has been severely sentenced. Afterwards, Harry and Hermione spend time with their significant others.

Warning: Suicidal/Dark themes in this chapter.

Warmth and comfort. Two words which at one point, Harry would have never associated with sleep or lying in bed as a whole. But ever since Evergreen Manor and later on, with Alistair, they were words which became more familiar. Right now was no exception, in the midpoint between sleep and wakefulness as a soft voice called out to him.

"Harry, it is time to wake up."

Recognising it straight away, the answer Harry supplied him with was barely coherent. Face half buried into the pillow beneath, his eyelids were faintly heavy with fatigue. Turning on the opposite side he intended to ignore Alistair's words until a kiss was pressed just behind his ear, a sensitive and strangely ticklish spot, as both of them had discovered.

Eyes open and fully awake now he jumped slightly, sitting up and met with the glittering, amused eyes of Alistair. While he managed to hold back a yawn, a sigh instead slipped out. "At least my lack of sleep was a choice this time."

Thinking of the adventurous side of him emerging more than once before eventually falling asleep, the only thing he experienced was regret that he had to go back to Hogwarts today. He always felt as if there weren't enough hours in the day, with how often he spent his time thinking about Alistair, whether in his presence or not.

Sitting up to join him, Alistair's amusement didn't fade, though a flicker of pleasure made itself known within his bright irises. "Tonight, ensure that you sleep well."
Harry knew he'd need it more than ever, as his final years of school would require him to be alert. Sensing a teasing opportunity, he was learning not to let them slip by. "Yes, mum. Will you be stopping by and checking I've brushed my teeth along with a bedtime story?"

Alistair appreciated his boldness and ability to tease back. While he still found the blushing Harry with a lack of words endlessly adorable, this side indicated that he was comfortable and had adapted to the new dynamics of their relationship. It was more fun for him and provided a challenge, to see if there was an action or certain words which would bring out his embarrassment.

Nibbling Harry's exposed ear he blew softly into it, voice sweet. "Perhaps not. But before we leave this room, there is something else which needs immediate attention."

 Conjuring a reflective surface it hovered in front of Harry, displaying his hair which had gone the opposite direction entirely. Sticking up every which way, it would be a clear indication as to his activities, as it was the kind of messy that couldn't be passed off as styled or natural.

Chuckling, he noted a dusting of pink that emerged across Harry's cheeks. "Yeah, I'd better take care of that."

His shyness had left, removing the covers and making his way to the bathroom. All of their clothes had been discarded one by one throughout the night, so no removal was needed. A sudden thought springing to mind, he wondered, with part hope and curiosity, if Alistair would accept his thinly veiled invitation. "Want to join me? It might save time."

His answer came a heartbeat later, coming to stand by his side. "How could I possibly refuse?"

It was a new experience for Harry, one that he was curious about. He'd been in one of the bathrooms before, but its splendour still caught him by surprise. With the choice of a bath or shower he immediately opted for a bath and in barely any time at all, it was filled to the brim with steaming water. It was large enough for four people, never mind the two of them, so there was no shortage of room when mostly submerged in the water together.

Unaware of how stiff he was before, the water soothed his muscles as he found himself leaning back against Alistair's chest. While he'd had his hair washed by the man before, it gained a deeper sense of intimacy when he was sitting directly behind him.

Relaxing Harry allowed the action, as cupped hands wet his hair, smoothing away the waywardness. With shampoo that held the faint smell of honey, it explained his natural scent and as it was thoroughly massaged into his scalp, it left him practically boneless. Reminding himself not to fall asleep despite his relaxed state Harry resolutely kept his eyes open, though was unable to prevent sounds of pleasure escaping him as with each touch, all pent up stresses were thoroughly washed away.
"It feels nice to be taken care of like this." Once over, he would have never admitted such a thing.

Pleased by his words Alistair washed away the suds, conditioner in his hands which he worked into Harry's scalp. "Everyone deserves kindness, no matter what form it chooses to take. You have been denied something which many have taken for granted and while it will not make up for the years lost, I enjoy demonstrating my affection in this manner."

Leaning over to kiss his cheek Alistair continued and despite his vulnerability through a lack of clothing, Harry had never felt safer. As he finished up with the water rinsing away all traces of conditioner, Harry wanted to return the favour. "Your turn."

Leaning back to catch a glimpse of his expression, he saw a faint amount of surprise there, but he didn't refuse. "Alright."

Due to their height difference, it required them to be in slightly different positions but in the end, was able to do what he wanted. Self-care was still a new thing to him, but doing this for someone else was rarer still. He was content with doing the required amount taken to be sufficiently clean and then go about his day, but Harry wanted to try this. He could tell, even without seeing his expression, that Alistair cared deeply. He did too and wanted to demonstrate as much.

Feeling slightly nervous, Harry made conversation in an effort to ease that but also for the question he had to be answered. "Hasn't anyone else wanted to do the same for you?"

Wetting Alistair's hair, Harry lathered his hands with a generous amount of shampoo and tried to replicate what he'd experienced. Finding this to be equally relaxing but in a slightly different way, he couldn't hold back a smile when hearing that he wasn't completely unaffected by his actions and as such, his answer wasn't delivered with his usual flawless tone.

"Ah, no. Well, I do recall a small number of times but often, I am the one to do this for another and I am unconcerned when it is not reciprocated. But mostly any activities in the bathroom involved a great deal of intimacy and nothing beyond that, even if the act of hair and body washing can be sensual, often they expressed no desire to try."

Rather than feel jealous over the fact that there had been several before him, all Harry could feel was pity. For those who weren't willing to try and saw no appeal in this but mostly, sadness. Harry hadn't outright asked about his past partners though he was curious. But from the little he knew, it sounded like quite a few were one-sided and in the case of an ex they'd run into on their first date, abusive.

While he realised feeling protective over someone who could clearly defend themselves from most if not all threats were absurd, the feeling arose within him still. Ensuring that he left no part of his hair untouched Harry did his best to provide him with a massage, speaking all the while.

"Their loss, my gain." It was said with such confidence, that a soft smile curved Alistair's lips upon hearing those words. While there was no shortage of affection from Solomon, albeit, in his own way,
the last time he remembered true care shining through in actions such as this was his mother. She had often complimented his hair, demonstrating the importance of looking after himself through actions, as she'd helped by washing and brushing his hair for him when a child.

Of course, he was aware of the difference when between lovers but even so, he had never recalled a moment of tender care such as then through his various lovers. He cared deeply, wanting them to know as much through his words and actions but often, if intimate times in the bathroom did involve hair or body washing, not nearly as much time or care was given to him in return. Perhaps he had expected too much? Either way, he hadn't let it concern him.

But with Harry offering to do this himself and doing the best he could while inexperienced, touched him beyond words. He was naturally an affectionate person and while he enjoyed intimacy, closeness with the one he cared for was equally pleasurable. That it came from someone so scarred, physically and mentally, from those who had hurt him, made his actions that much more special.

Harry was enjoying this much more than he'd expected, adapting to their role reversal with ease. There wasn't a single thing he disliked about Alistair, but his hair was always a point of admiration. Rarely dishevelled or out of place, there was always a beautiful glossy shine, particularly whenever the light hit it. That alone was an indication that he took care of himself but having a part in that today, was strangely pleasing.

Even leaning back, Harry still had to reach up slightly and couldn't help but grumble to himself. "I'm a pipsqueak. I don't suppose you know any magic to encourage growth spurts?"

He knew it would be down to his body alone for that and magic wasn't a cure-all but he asked anyway. It was an area he couldn't help but feel conscious about, the smallest male in his year group or at least, from what he'd seen.

Rinsing the suds from Alistair's hair his response came a short while later, ever so slightly breathy. "The magic available for something of that nature would pose a risk to your health. While I am aware that your height remains a sensitive subject, know that I very much enjoy having you within my arms. A drastic growth spurt would make things a little more difficult, particularly if the urge to straddle my lap overtakes you once more."

Harry could see his point there. Before he could respond, Alistair finished with something that threatened to undo him at the seams. "You are my pipsqueak, who I would not alter if I was offered the world in exchange." While the definition of pipsqueak wasn't exactly positive, Alistair said it in such a way which seemed like the highest of compliments and with enough affection to kick start his heart into a steady rhythm.

Finished with Alistair's hair which was similarly shampooed and conditioned, he would no doubt receive several eye rolls if anyone happened to see the silly grin which he now wore. Changing their positions he came face to face with him, the water swishing gently. Holding Alistair's hand and with a dramatic and exaggerated flair, he kissed the back of it. "Thank you, oh wondrous king."
More relaxed than he'd been in a while now, it was only during those few minutes Alistair realised how much he'd missed that kind of affection shown towards him, as contentment settled within his chest. At Harry's exaggerated yet flirty actions, he was suddenly thrown back to his younger days. Wilder, carefree and much more naive, he flirted endlessly with those he found attractive, to the point where it was off-putting for some. Age and the experience which it had provided tamed him but yet, Harry's actions threw him off guard slightly with how his heart rate increased in response. Once more, he was reminded that part of Harry's charm lay in the fact he was unaware of possessing any.

Sensing the hour was growing later Alistair was the first to get out and with a hand outstretched towards him, it was taken as Harry shortly followed. Once dried and dressed each went about their business and helpfully by Misty, everything he intended on taking back with him to Hogwarts was there.

Halfheartedly running a comb through his unruly mop, Harry spotted an ornately decorated brush on Alistair's dresser. Seeing as he'd yet to brush his hair and with the knowledge that his affection hadn't been returned before, Harry made another offer.

"I'll brush your hair."

Not expecting those words from him Alistair blinked. Seeing his seriousness he sat down and with Harry standing, they finally became somewhat eye level. Picking up the brush it was a light yet comfortable weight in his hands and with his back facing him, Harry was able to study it more intently. He rarely had the opportunity to do so, distracted by his facial features, words or actions.

A warm, rich brown, it really did shine beneath the light and as his fingers brushed it, they were met with a silky softness. It had grown since they first met, past shoulder length now. Supporting a section of it with his hand Harry ran the brush through them, straightening out each individual hairs until not a single one was out of place. He took his time, finding the motions soothing. Realising how strange his actions must be, a slight feeling of insecurity overtook him. "Is it weird I wanted to do this?"

So lost in his actions, Harry's question almost slipped him by. Perhaps it would have, if not for the faint note of worry in his voice. Smiling reassuringly, Alistair's eyes followed the unpracticed yet caring hands of his younger lover. "Not at all, it is simply unexpected. Apart from myself, my mother was the only other person to do this for me."

Harry was surprised. "Really?"

At the faint nod of his head, it was suddenly accompanied by a sound very similar to a purr, when the brush in Harry's hand ran through a certain section. Eyes twinkling, he definitely believed they'd all missed out. "I take it you're enjoying this?"
It was a sound foreign to Alistair, unable to recall a time when he'd made such a noise. Much like Harry's inquisitive tongue on the night Minerva believed him to be ill. "I am, very much so."

Pleased to hear it Harry continued and before long, finished. Looking mildly apologetic, he placed the brush back down. "I can't even tie my own shoelaces into bows. If I tried with your hair I'm bound to bugger up. And that other thing you do with it? I've got no idea."

Before Alistair, he'd associated anything hair related to girls. It was only through him he realised it applied to both, but there was nothing overly feminine about it either, just something uniquely him.

Perhaps it was simply down to imagination, but Alistair could almost swear Harry's tender actions had left his hair in a better condition than usual. Listening to his words with mild amusement, it wasn't long before his hair was tied with the usual ribbon and braid.

He couldn't have possibly predicted that Harry would want to do the same and more. It was something so simple, yet it left him indescribably happy. Standing up, he squeezed Harry within the circle of his arms. "You are very kind. Thank you." To know that if Harry had the experience he would make an attempt to do what Alistair did most mornings, left him wanting to dance from Romania to Scotland in sheer joy.

If Alistair was happy from something like this, he'd be happy to do it again. Releasing him, Harry was given a slightly despairing look.

Tilting his head questioningly, it was answered in the form of Alistair picking up the comb he'd discarded, brushing through it with precise strokes.

When feeling that particular parts of his hair stubbornly refused to stay flat, Harry smiled knowingly. "It's why I don't bother spending more than a minute on it. Unless I use gel my hair just does what it wants."

True to his word, Alistair found that the majority of hair simply refused to lie flat. Though he didn't mind this at all, liking its naturally wild style. Calling it his best effort they left hand in hand, Harry's trunk hovering behind him.

As she'd never shared a bed with someone else except her parents whenever nightmares were a part of her childhood, Hermione worried that she wouldn't get enough sleep. But slowly waking up, her worries were clearly unfounded. While her sleep was never severely disrupted like Harry's often were, she had her moments of late night studying or past incidents which occasionally returned in the form of nightmares.

Not today, though. Feeling well rested she rubbed away faint traces of sleep, catching the shimmer of Solomon's silver eyes in a room faintly lit. Content, she gave him a soft smile and unconsciously,
reached out to brush away the pure white waves obscuring his vision slightly. "Morning."

Solomon had tried his best to sleep but found himself slightly restless. The last time he'd shared a bed with anyone was easily over a millennium ago so unlike Alistair, this was unfamiliar. So for some of the night, he'd spent it simply watching her sleep.

He didn't utter this aloud, as it would only sound slightly sinister and disturbing if so. But he finally understood Alistair's giddiness on the night that his relationship with Harry became deeper. There was something infinitely special about having Hermione there with him and for the first time, not someone that he solely sought physical pleasures from.

So caught up with gazing, he nearly forgot to return her greeting. Feeling slightly self-conscious since only the girls she shared a dorm with had seen her in such a state she stood up, bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. "I'll just be a few minutes."

"Alright." As Hermione softly closed the bathroom door behind her, Solomon allowed his instincts to take over, for just a moment. The urge to feed was stronger than ever as while her natural scent was powerful to him, blood would always be the overriding factor. It had driven him slightly mad within the last few hours and it was only in close proximity to her that he realised this.

Blood was never involved in the casual relationships he'd had and it had never crossed his mind to ask them. Certainly not Hermione either. Alistair was lucky for Harry's open-mindedness and without going into great detail, had been informed of their mutual enjoyment when it came to that. While Hermione was certainly open-minded, everyone had their limits.

He was unsure of what to do. They had various kinds of blood in stock to quench his thirst but he knew, even without trying, that wouldn't satisfy him. Remaining motionless and lost in thought, it wasn't long before Hermione returned to the room, fully dressed.

Sensing her return he turned away slightly, trying to regain control. But now that he'd released it along with her intoxicating scent, he found it to be difficult.

"What's wrong?" Sitting on the bed she peeked around, trying to get a glimpse of his expression. For a second she did, the gears in her head turning quickly. It wasn't long before Hermione understood. "You're hungry."

There was no point trying to deny it. She knew exactly what the problem was and he'd always been open about his true nature. "Yes. Your... current state has awakened my urges."

She hadn't thought about that. A wave of guilt washed over her for that even as curiosity won over. "Do you want to feed from me?"

"Yes."
It was one word, of which Hermione could hear the restraint contained within. Shuffling over to his side of the bed she tilted her head, catching more of his expression. As her eyes met his violet ones, she was fascinated. Rather than fearful or wary, her attraction to him only increased as Hermione’s body began to flush with great heat. Before she could consider the ramifications of such actions, her lips met his.

Eyes widening briefly in surprise he stiffened but shortly after, returned her affection. Pulling back and in a very obvious manner, Hermione tilted her head hair swaying as it bared the skin of her neck.

Her actions were deliberate, the threads of his control were beginning to unravel. Staying still, warm brown eyes seemed to be an open invitation.

Searching her gaze, he saw nothing which indicated that this was something she was unwilling to do. Slightly hesitant he drew closer, senses attuned to any indication no matter how slight, that Hermione was unwilling.

With nothing of the sort occurring, he marked the point of entry with a kiss. Allowing the change to overtake him, he allowed her to prepare beforehand. "There will be a small amount of pain, but it will not last long."

Knowing as much from her own research and Harry's explanation she waited, heart, drumming a steady rhythm from part excitement and desire. As he’d said there was a little pain, but nothing unmanageable. Before long that faded, bringing with it a bizarre but pleasurable sensation. Eyes falling closed foreign sounds left her lips, a hand resting at the back of Solomon's head.

Hermione wasn't a big drinker of alcohol and had never gotten drunk before. But she imagined that this feeling came close, slightly lightheaded and a surge of adrenaline coursing throughout her system. Harry's description couldn't do it justice. It was such an intimate, trusting act, one of which Hermione allowed herself to be lost in, for that moment.

While Harry's blood had provided the strength he needed and had expelled the corruption within his system, nothing could compare to Hermione's. He loved Dragon's Blood, the potency appealing to him but her blood, was completely the opposite. He knew she rarely ate sugar, preferring things which were free from that and yet, it was like honey, so sweet.

He wasn't a fan of sweet things in general but this, he liked. Her blood supply wasn't unlimited however so before long, reluctantly, he had to pull away.

Cleaning the marks with his tongue they closed, leaving no indication that they were ever there. Pulling back he gazed into Hermione's eyes, ever so slightly dazed.

"What does it taste like to you?" It was what she wanted to know the most, finding it interesting that blood could share a resemblance to anything other than a metallic taste.
"It shares a resemblance to honey. While I am not a lover of desserts, I find your blood to be delicious." Licking faint traces of blood from his lips, she found his actions to be surprisingly erotic.

"I enjoyed it." Admitting this, she gave him a warm smile. "Do you feel better?"

He'd never expected her to be so willing but now that his thirst had been quenched, certainly. He was learning that not all humans were the same. "Much better. Thank you, Hermione."

Glad to hear it, she looked forward to the next time as in her mind, that would be a certainty. There was mutual enjoyment on both their parts and the opportunity to learn more first hand was something which she wouldn't pass up. Not for the first time, she was glad Harry decided to visit Romania those months ago.

Unsurprisingly Hermione and Solomon were the first to awaken and while at the time Harry believed taking a bath together would save time, it would have actually been quicker if they’d done so separately. Even knowing this he couldn't bring himself to feel regret for that and in fact, would do his best to convince the man that it was actually better to do this whenever they were together. He had the feeling that little to no convincing on his part would be needed, however.

The dining room was no less impressive, his stay there in August last year involving spending some amounts of time in this room. Out of curiosity, he'd asked and Lothaire Castle actually did have House Elves but was mainly in charge of keeping everything in good condition. Eating and drinking was never a requirement though sometimes, Alistair would indulge.

The table was long, similar to the four within Hogwarts, only more lavishly decorated. Undoubtedly it was for dinner parties but rather than sit at opposite sides, Hermione and Solomon sat together. Giving a brief wave Harry eagerly went to her side, immediately engaging in conversation.

Content with listening to their chatter, Alistair decided to confirm something he could immediately sense upon entering the room. Eyes holding a knowing twinkle, he communicated through their link. 'I see that you have partaken in Hermione's blood?'

'Yes, it was unintentional. However, my self-control was tested throughout the night, for obvious reasons.'

He had noticed that in fact. Before Harry, he would have found it difficult to resist the urge for blood. Not because he was attracted to women at all, but the need to satisfy a craving. However, he no longer had this problem, merely aware of Hermione's natural state and nothing more. Harry's scent easily overpowered everything else.

'Ah, say no more. I can tell by the dazed and mildly yet adorably dim-witted expression on your face
that her blood was greatly satisfying.'

Schooling his expression to some semblance of normalcy, he treated Alistair to a mild glare. 'How rude.'

Knowing that he wasn't actually offended, Alistair, winked. Refraining from rolling his eyes though dearly wanted to, the pair ordered refreshments for them all.

"Morning Mione." Folding his arms on the table beneath, he gave her a considering look. "Something happened this morning, didn't it?"

For everything that Hermione could do, masking her true feelings wasn't one of them. Still affected by Solomon's earlier actions, she explained. "He tried my blood."

Intrigued, he probed further. "What happened? Did he ask if he could?"

"He'd had the urge to for hours before, but couldn't hold back. I invited him to, mainly because I was curious."

Harry could understand the curiosity part, having endless amounts when it came to Vampires, Alistair in particular. "I get that."

Glancing over at Alistair, the thought of asking had slipped Harry's mind due to their previous hours of activities. "How did it go with Madam Bones?"

Truthfully, Alistair had forgotten about that as well despite its importance as once again, Harry had managed to steal away every prominent thought which didn't include himself. Thoughts flickering back to yesterday, contentment settled within his heart. "Better than I had hoped. Our relationship has been renewed, at least with the British Ministry and she is far more accepting than I first believed. Dumbledore will belong to us once the spell cast upon him is finished along with the two remaining Guild of Light members, and I have convinced her to let us handle the subject of Ariana."

Happy to hear some positive news, the last part was something which had slipped Harry's mind. Ariana had been kept in her childhood home for all this time, living off barely enough blood of Dumbledore's to keep her alive. He assumed no one had gone there to investigate and Aberforth himself hadn't returned, or something would have been leaked to the media.

With perfect timing, an owl which had clearly seen the various types of weather offered, dropped a sealed letter in front of Harry.

With the wax seal looking strangely familiar, he quickly learned the reason why once breaking it to read the letter's contents.
To Mr Potter,

Unexpectedly or expectedly, depending on how you want to view our relationship, I was present for Albus' trial. To learn all that he has done in our name to you and others fills me with a shame that I will carry on into the next life.

I believed that Ariana was dead but to know that she isn't and has been shut away from the world, I want to retrieve her. I ask for your and Mr Lothaire's help, as the ones who have gone to such efforts to see Albus face justice. My experience with Vampires are limited, so any input is appreciated.

Aberforth Dumbledore

Harry didn't know where else he frequented, so assumed that the best place would be the inn he operated. Showing his letter to the others, sooner rather than later for this would be best. As there were no further memories relating to Ariana other than her barely alive state and her location, Harry assumed that Dumbledore had obliviated himself of some memories. Only heads of houses could use those seals but as Dumbledore no longer held magic which was an unwritten requirement, it made sense that Aberforth had taken over in some areas.

Having a plan of actions for this, the state that Harry would find her in filled him with trepidation. But even so, he had a busy day ahead so couldn't let his mind wander along those lines just yet.

With an hour to spare before the train would arrive the couples took their time, spending the morning content with one another until the time came.

At King's Cross Station and after saying their goodbyes, one of which wouldn't be for long, Hermione and Harry managed to locate Ginny, Neville and Luna straight away. Locating a compartment, he bumped into Lilah along the way. Beaming, she threw her arms around him. "Harry! Thanks so much for your present! Did you like mine?"

Checking to see that they were somewhat alone Harry opened his trunk, just enough for her to see that the small bear was sitting comfortably in one compartment. "It's great, you and your dad are really talented."

"Yay!" Cheering, she was about to respond further when her eyes lit up. "Zain!" With an energetic
squeal, she nearly knocked over the boy with her enthusiasm, blushing and awkwardly patting her head. Giving Harry a half wave he picked the nearest empty compartment, Harry chuckling to himself. The train ride would be a while, so there was plenty of time to discuss the trial's outcome and Dumbledore further, something of which they didn't have much time to do of before.

They'd discussed everything which had happened that day and by the end, nothing but contentment that Dumbledore had nowhere to run and was effectively neutralised, settled within their compartment. There was one thing which Harry had forgotten to mention and for him, it was important but had gotten lost among the sea of other events. Reclining in his seat he popped an every flavour bean into his mouth, met with toothpaste flavour.

"The Dementors didn't affect me at all. Alistair thinks it's because of Thanatos."

"That would make sense," Neville mused, thoughtful. "I wish they didn't for me." Shuddering slightly, he didn't envy the fates of those who faced punishment within that courtroom.

Having listened silently up until now, Luna's head tilted as she gave them all something else to mull on. "They're dark by nature, but not evil. They feel nothing like fragmented soul pieces, closer to the Thestrals."

That piqued Hermione's attention. "The Thestrals? That would make sense. Souls are closely connected with the afterlife and we already know of Thanatos' true nature. Maybe there's a connection?"

There was so much of the world they'd yet to discover and in Harry's opinion, that could be a possibility. He wouldn't know where to begin in terms of finding out more, but it was certainly something to think on.

Ever since Ron had been freed from Dumbledore's spell, he'd done a lot of thinking. More than he had in his life, relishing the fact that for the first time in years, they were his own thoughts and nothing else. The outcome of Dumbledore's trial brought with it a great amount of satisfaction. The bastard deserved nothing less, after what he did to him, Harry and others.

Whenever the subject of Vampires and Werewolves had arisen, particularly in Defence Against the Dark Arts, it was difficult for him as he experienced blind hatred from a foreign source. It was only now that he realised a lot of his thoughts were Dumbledore's own. In truth, he had no opinion of Vampires as he'd never met one and Remus seemed a decent enough bloke, even if they were nearly killed by him a few years ago. It wasn't his fault though, so there was no hatred there either.

He'd kept himself isolated, needing space. The therapy was helping to sort his mind out but the rest would have to come from him. He wasn't an idiot though, he'd need help to do so in some areas. His grades were average at best and if he wanted any sort of chance at succeeding in life, he'd need to do his best in those areas.
Once on the train, he chose a compartment, securing it magically so he wouldn't be disturbed. Privacy was a rare thing in a house full of siblings, though emptier now. Fred and George had checked in on him several times out of concern which he appreciated, though didn't voice his thoughts.

He had a lot of apologies to make. Harry was a good start, but there were so many more. The majority of professors, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Neville, that Gryffindor first year, Greengrass, the list went on.

He'd offended just about everyone and the mountain before him seemed too steep for climbing but even so, he'd try. He still thought Snape was a prick but could admit, even if only to himself, that the majority of times last year he'd instigated things and made everything so much worse.

Professor Lothaire had done nothing wrong either. He was the best one they'd had for that subject and he'd just thrown it in his face, repeatedly. He could have used that time to make him do lines or any other kind of punishment but instead, he'd taken the time to ask if he needed help with anything discussed in class.

Shame welled up within him. At this point, he didn't know who deserved his apologies more but either way, he'd get round to it. Neville was a worthy Prefect, unlike him. But, Ron vowed to himself that he would change the course of his life. Maybe then he could be a kind of role model, rather than a student with an attitude to avoid at all costs.

Feeling positive for the first time in a while, Ron continued to plan what he would do. Strategy in chess was his strength, but thinking in similar patterns to that, he found helpful. He'd buckle down, get to work and maybe, just maybe, Mum and Dad could actually be proud of his achievements.

Time slipped through their fingers, as every student made the familiar trek back to Hogwarts. Without a doubt it had been the best Christmas Holidays of Harry's life, knowing it would be slightly difficult adapting to his hectic school life again. But for once in a good way, rather than a year filled with constant danger.

Sometime over that week, Harry and Alistair would inform those who they'd neglected to tell not only of their relationship but Alistair's Vampirism. With Dumbledore no longer a concern, very few remained which held enough influence to sway opinions. After that, the students would come to know as well. While he wasn't foolish enough to believe everyone would be on board, he hoped that the time spent here had proven his nature was of no concern.

The last thing he would ever do is attack a student. At least, maliciously. He had playfully pounced on Harry numerous times, each one more thrilling than the last. Though, that wasn't something anyone else needed to know.
Things were progressing, in the direction, they wanted it to.

It was the next day, as Ron had put his plan into action. One thing which remained the same was his bottomless stomach, consuming more food than most gathered there thought physically possible. In his opinion, he’d need the fuel it provided more than ever.

Throughout the day he was proven right and in lessons, tried to answer questions he knew. It was clear that he knew less than first thought, the combination of lessons and apologies exhausting him in every way. But even so, he was content. He shocked the majority of staff and students, particularly Hermione and Harry. She’d sooner hex than help him, but Ron would try asking for her help anyway.

At the end of Transfiguration class, Ron managed to catch her outside. "Hermione, do you have a minute?"

As she nodded hesitantly Harry gave them space, hoping that Ron was going to do what he did on Dumbledore's trial day.

He'd apologised to the majority of people, each one accepting it in their various ways though, for some, it remained to be seen if he was truly sorry.

Seeing that she was waiting for him to speak he quickly pushed past his tongue tied state. Any preparations for apologies promptly flew out of the window, when faced with her. Every day since he was capable of his own thoughts, he'd regretted all the times he'd made her cry.

It was true, he did like her, romantically. But his chances of that were messed up, due to a combination of the tumour, spell and his own awkward attitude around girls. However, it was too late for that, as he'd witnessed the kiss she exchanged with an older man who he remembered as the Professor's brother, from that day and introductions made to others.

One opportunity was lost, but another remained. He wouldn't be able to make it through sixth and seventh year without friends by his side. Hell, without Harry and Hermione he might have died that day so he owed the pair his life. A lot of hard work would be needed to even get a grain of trust from either of them again, but he was prepared.

Breathing deeply, he said what first came to mind. "I'm sorry, about everything. I've been the biggest arse in existence. I know it's easy for me to say this sort of stuff but I mean it."

Hermione could tell she did. Even after everything she still saw him as a friend. Sometimes she didn't understand her own mind as after all he'd said, their friendship should have been cut short. But then, it was easier now, knowing that the true Ron was never allowed to emerge when with them.

Giving him a small if awkward smile, all Hermione could do was take it day by day. It was better
than outright avoiding each other, after all. "I accept your apology."

Relieved, he decided to try his chances. "I wanted to ask you something as well."

Indicating for him to continue, Hermione couldn't prevent her jaw from hitting the floor. "I'm sorry?"

"Do you have any studying tips?" He could hardly believe he was asking her it either, so her shock was understandable.

She had plenty in fact. But his question had shocked her that much, that all of them had fled her mind instantly. Kickstarting her brain into gear again she removed a notebook and biro pen from her bag, finding them far more convenient than quills and parchment for note taking. Making a bullet point list she made things clear and concise, ripping the paper from its spiral and handing it to him. "Try those, they should help."

Hoping she wouldn't regret this at any point, Hermione added something else. "The Prefects run a study group every Wednesday evening. You're welcome to come."

Appreciative of this much, he sent a small smile her way. "Cheers, I'll see you around."

Keeping the lined paper close to him, Ron headed in the opposite direction. Classes were over, but his apologies weren't. He hadn't had Potions or DADA, but he'd rather get it out of the way while he could.

Still stunned she caught up to Harry, who had waited for her. "You ok?"

Hermione was inclined to think that she'd been hit over the head and in fact, none of that conversation had ever happened. But looking at the notepad and pen still in her hand, the truth was clear. "He apologised to me and asked for studying tips."

Harry blinked. "Say that again?"

As Hermione did, it still didn't register with him. "Holy shit."

"I know! I can't believe it." Still shocked, she glanced in the direction he'd gone. "He's really trying though. Did you notice he was paying more attention in class?"

"To be honest, I noticed the fact that it was quieter more than anything. He wasn't trying to start shit with any of the other students. I could get used to that definitely. Hopefully, he keeps that up, but we'll have to wait and see."
"He will."

At the third voice, Harry and Hermione jumped, Luna seemingly appearing out of thin air, with a knowing gaze. Exchanging looks, he encouraged his heartbeat to slow before it stopped altogether. "Where did you come from?"

Giggling to herself she still wore Brio's earrings, noticing that a radish had appeared in the form of a necklace instead. She'd changed physically, not by much but just noticeable to those who knew her well. "Around the corner, silly!"

Harry couldn't detect anyone there from either side, but there was an air of mystery around Luna which he'd yet to understand. "If you're right, that will make the rest of our time here much easier."

Later on, Harry was going with Alistair to see Aberforth. He had enough time afterwards, the Prefect meeting happening yesterday rather than the weekend, seen as the best time to discuss plans of action before January truly began.

Ron had two more apologies to make. One Professor who had every right to hex him but probably wouldn't and the other, expected nothing but hexes aimed his way. Indecisive, he wasn't sure who to see first, but the choice happened to be taken from him as Professor Snape was about to pass him by.

"Professor, can I have a word?"

When faced with a piercing glare, Ron gritted his teeth. He couldn't stand the man, but his attitude had practically painted a target on his forehead so far.

"What is it, Weasley?" Folding his arms impatiently, he didn't keep him for long.

"I'll be keeping out of trouble from now on, so I won't start anything. That's all I wanted to say."

He couldn't bring himself to apologise, but then he was the kind of man who preferred actions over words. Inclining his head Professor Snape continued on his way, not saying anything in response.

Hoping that meant they were on neutral ground, Ron headed for the DADA classroom first, to see if the Professor was there.

Sitting behind his desk and with the day's classes over, he had to wonder how a class of pre-teens could cause quite so much havoc. He'd underestimated just how much work would be required for this job but even so, he did enjoy it. Well, mostly. Marking essays of the slim few who were reluctant to put in even the required amount of effort was tiresome.
He'd set an assignment over the holidays, not out of choice but by requirement. Students in his class today, yesterday or throughout the day in between free moments had handed in their work. Harry already had over the holidays along with Hermione and as some of the students with consistently high marks, it was better to save those for last as a sort of mood improver.

His current marking task was that of a third year, on the subject of boggarts. He wasn't the type to sigh usually and yet, one escaped him. There was barely anything there, not even close to reaching the required length and with a significant lack of punctuation.

*Boggarts shape shift into stuff people are scared of and hide away in dark places and no one knows what they look like because they shape shift to peoples fears whenever people are near them*

There were no suggestions of how to conquer that fear, whether referring to the student's own or a general one. How can someone sense their presence? Where do they often frequent and what is the best way to deal with one?

He couldn't grade this, reluctant to leave behind a giant letter T. Her practical work was much better and she always paid attention in class, so he knew she was capable of far more.

*Miss Havers, this will not suffice. If you are struggling with the task set, see me. I require a resubmission.*

Disrupted by a knock on the door he placed the self-inking quill down, mildly surprised when met with Ron Weasley.

"Mr Weasley, how can I assist?" He asked, remaining polite and reminding himself that he was a victim of Dumbledore's manipulations too. With an expression Alistair had never seen Ron approached his desk, placing the parchment down. "My assignment."

He'd forgotten about that. His work was yet another example of minimal effort and he would take no pleasure in marking it. Saving that for later he still remained, hesitantly opening his mouth.

"Professor, I wanted to apologise. You've done nothing but try and help me out and I wouldn't listen. I'll have my mood swings still but it won't be as bad, and I'm not looking to get into trouble this time."

Seeing that he was serious, the thought never crossed Alistair's mind to reject his apology, finding himself pleasantly surprised. "I accept. Thank you for coming to see me. How are you feeling?"

Knowing that he was referring to the tumour Ron smiled, albeit in discomfort. "I could be worse. Better than usual though. I get headaches and nosebleeds but there's less of those now which is something." Shrugging casually, he was glad for small miracles such as that.
Finding him much easier to converse with, Alistair relaxed further. "I am glad to hear it."

"See you in a bit Professor." Feeling as if a great weight had been taken from his shoulders Ron left, looking forward to relaxing in the common room.

As his eyes happened to glance over at the assignment submitted, he could barely believe it. This was a far cry from his past efforts and upon closer inspection, he could see this was a solid Exceeds Expectations. Wondering when some aspects of the world had changed without his knowledge he left mainly positive comments, with some bits of constructive criticism here and there. Strangely enough, it had lifted his mood from Havers' shocking efforts. But, as always, he looked forward to seeing Harry again.

Overall it had been a busy day for Harry, but it was the kind of busy which he could easily adapt to and had, over the course of Sixth year. Side by side with Alistair they walked through the streets of Hogsmeade, arriving outside of the inn which had seen better days appearance wise.

"The building is... uniquely designed." Those words leaving his lips Alistair studied it intently, being the complete opposite of warm and inviting.

"That's one way to put it. But Aberforth's nothing like his brother, discreet as well. Anything discussed in the inn stays there."

Even with clear skies, the inn's interior remained dimly lit. With somewhat clean glasses stocked behind him, Aberforth was in the middle of light conversation with a hooded clientele until their appearance caught his attention. Nudging a middle-aged man in the shoulder he muttered some words to him, taking his place behind the bar.

"Hello Potter," With a gruff voice he greeted him, firmly shaking Alistair's hand. "Shit's hit the fan for the old goat. Good riddance to him, single-handedly dragging our family name through the mud."

Grumbling to himself, Alistair's eyebrows rose. He'd heard from Harry their differences but to see it was astounding. They were similar in appearance, right down to the long beards, but that was where it ended.

"I hope it hasn't ruined business for you," Harry spoke up, mildly concerned. Since the first time, he'd visited he made sure to come back, taking a liking to the man and being served almost immediately rather than waiting in large crowds to place an order.

"I haven't made my dislike of him secret and everyone here has no love for the man. It's changed nothing."
Relieved to hear it they made their way outside, noticing Aberforth pat the side of his practical and devoid of garish colour robes and as he did, Harry noticed a faint wand outline. "Thanks for coming. I want to get her out of there."

Turning to Alistair, his blue eyes were sharp. "Are you one of those Vampires?"

"I am." His answer was swift, instantaneous. Rather than rejection or disgust at this fact, Aberforth remained unconcerned. "Aye, thought so. He kept looking between you and the white-haired bloke that day. That and you're bloody powerful."

Since their confrontation with Dumbledore, neither of them had held back. Alistair suspected his colleagues had questions but soon, they would know. He could only hope for the best possible outcome, in that sense.

"I hope that this will not be an issue, Mr Dumbledore."

Grimacing noticeably, he waved his hand as if in dismissal. "I've got no problem with Vampires, helps me out for today's purpose anyway. Call me Aberforth."

The difference was truly night and day. Telling them his childhood home address he was the first to apparate, Alistair along with Harry next.

It was the wizarding village of mould-on-the-wold, a small area where Wizards lived among muggles, with the latter unaware. It was peaceful, nothing which suggested anything out of the ordinary.

Fairly secluded they'd appeared a short distance away, so as not to alarm the small number of people out and about at this time.

To those who were interested, the Dumbledore's family history was public knowledge, with many aware of what had happened. Even more now, alongside the truth about Ariana. It seemed to Harry as if she was the one trapped in the middle, caught between two sides she was unable to understand and even now, still paid the price.

Even after so many years, Aberforth knew the way. This particular village had been burned into his memory. How could it not, when the dynamics of their family had changed so drastically? He was only surprised that their old home remained standing.

As it turned out standing was one word for it, an eyesore among the buildings in relatively good condition. It appeared to be boarded up, not a scrap of wildlife anywhere to be seen and weeds in every place which they could grow.
But rather than pay any mind to it people simply walked by, as if it wasn’t there.

Before Harry or Aberforth could say a word Alistair ensured they wouldn't be disturbed, the attention took away from them and the building, even as he dispelled all protections put in place with a simple wave of his hand.

Able to see even without entering the building, Alistair's gaze honed in on a source of magic, raw and untamed.

"She is here," He confirmed, allowing Aberforth to go first as they brought up the rear.

With every inhale there was nothing but dust, thoroughly drying his throat as every inch was caked in thick layers of it. No sunlight could penetrate through, leaving them in darkness even as he easily located the cellar door.

"Can't believe the bastard kept her in here." Voice faintly trembling with anger, he heeded Alistair's warning to tread with caution.

On the way down, Harry nearly gagged. The smell of blood and filth was eye-watering, only able to see a short distance in front of him from Aberforth's dimly lit lumos.

But that was all he needed.

Curling on the floor below them on a mattress which was more broken springs than comfort and stained with various fluids, was a young girl. Hair matted, he could see that there were missing patches from her scalp. Remaining perfectly still, anyone would be convinced she was dead. But Harry had the feeling that their presence was detected.

His feeling was proven right. The moment Aberforth tried to take a step forward she lashed out, her magic acting as a harsh, jagged crack of the whip as he was forcefully knocked back. Righting himself, he was visibly shaken. "Ariana?"

Swallowing once, Harry contacted Alistair through their link. 'She's still the same age?'

Sadness welled within Alistair. 'Yes. Vampirism is natural to those who are born with it, so their body chemistry will similarly adapt and stop at the physical age of which each individual reaches their peak. But for those who are turned, all development processes are permanently frozen. Rupert is one such example, he will always physically be a sixteen year old.'

Without a shadow of a doubt, Harry would hate that. Ariana had 'died' aged fourteen and even now, she remained this way in appearance. Though to him, she looked much younger.
With her outburst of magic, she remained huddled in the corner, fear raw and uncontrolled like the magic which had risen up in defence.

Keeping his distance, Aberforth tried again. "Ariana, it's me."

Cocking her head, faint recognition registered as chapped, sore lips formed unfamiliar words. "A-Abforth?"

That word, mispronounced alone, seemed too much for her, clear that she hadn't spoken properly for a long time. Trying to stand she failed, slumping to the floor once more. Eyes finding his even in the darkness, Harry was taken aback by how much emotion was in them. "Kill me."

When there was no response from Aberforth, the words she'd intended them for, her voice held sheer desperation. "Please...tried but can't do it, heal fast."

That explained why there was so much blood. Dumbledore had kept her captive here, but she was the one who'd tried to end her own life, multiple times. But there were no scars on her skin, the healing rate of Vampires ensuring that bleeding out would be much more difficult.

Aberforth couldn't do it. He'd been called every name under the sun with many assuming things about him that were nothing more than lies, but this was too much. Clearly, she'd suffered more than any of them could ever truly understand. Vampire or not, this was his little sister. While he'd never liked Albus, Ariana he'd loved dearly. He still loved her, even now. He couldn't do it and even if he had the courage to, he didn't know how to end a Vampire's life. "I can't."

His words seemed to break the last threads of emotion she had held onto ever since their arrival here. With a wail more at home with a Banshee, Ariana began to repeatedly slam her head into the stone floor below, viciously. Fresh blood pooling from newly created wounds, the sound of her voice tore at Harry's heart. Before more damage could be done, Alistair put her to sleep with the calming warmth of his magic.

"I know of someone who will be able to help her. A friend of mine was turned against his will and he is what you would call a mind healer. Will you permit me to ask for his assistance?"

Barely able to collect his thoughts, Aberforth nodded. He was too stunned for words, not expecting this in the least. Albus was currently in the Ministry holding cells and as family, he had every right to pay a visit. Originally he wasn't going to, but plans change. He had more than a few words for his so-called brother.

After sending his Patronus, Harry found himself kneeling beside her. brushing aside some of her matted hair, she looked so young and innocent. He would believe her to be so, if not for the truth staring at him in every direction. The one area he was unable to relate with, was her being forcefully turned and denied the chance to be a fully fledged adult. But thoughts of suicide and attempting it?
He'd been there. He was much better now and those thoughts were the furthest from his mind now, but she was a reminder of the more painful times.

"Life gets better, I promise." Touching her hand for a moment which was stone cold he rose to his feet, Rupert appearing a moment later. It took only a moment to analyse the situation. "So, you are the fleshbag's brother?"

Directing his question towards Aberforth, he managed to find a small amount of amusement in the nickname given to Albus. "I am."

"I see." Studying Ariana intently, his eyes flickered with pity. "I am unsure as to the extent of damage this has done to her mind but rest assured, she is in good hands."

He had the utmost confidence in his abilities. He could see that of the three siblings, these were the two which had turned out just fine. Despite his hatred for the man which had tried to see the end of their kind, he would have his revenge soon. He'd asked and was already promised an hour or so with the man, once officially in Lothaire custody. He could hardly wait.

Harry still couldn't get a read of Rupert. He was slightly unhinged and enjoyed the prospect of violence a little too much, but his switch from vulgar language to professionalism within a few seconds was nothing short of mind-boggling.

Wary and mildly uncomfortable, Aberforth gave him a gruff thanks. Turning to Harry and Alistair, both could see that the rug had been pulled from beneath the man's feet. "Let me know how she's doing later. Need to clear my head."

Shaking it once he left the building, knowing that this day would haunt his dreams for a long time to come.

Lifting Ariana into his arms, his grin was positively shark-like. "I heard about what happened to him. Ahh, how wonderful."

Harry couldn't agree more, not envying Dumbledore in the slightest the day he was alone with this man. "Definitely, the prick got what he deserved."

Giggling to himself, his eyes sparkled with delight. "Naturally, I shall take my leave here. Good day to you both."

Leaving no trace that he was ever there, Harry stared at that spot for a few seconds. "Has he always been like that?"

"For the time that I have known him. The events which led to his turning were horrifying. I do not
wish to break what he has told me in confidence, however that contributed to his current state of mind."

Understanding, Harry didn't pry any further. "Let's get out of here."

Eager to leave the building and breathe fresh air again, his eyes began adjusting to outside once more. In a way, he'd become desensitised to such sights. Seeing the prisoner's state where the philosopher's stone once was had shaken him but now, with his improved Occlumency defences, he was already working to put today's memory aside ready to deal with at a more appropriate time.

As a caring hand brushed through his slightly windswept hair, he gazed up and into the glittering sunset eyes, filled with a combination of concern and affection. "Are you alright?"

To his surprise, yes. He wasn't completely composed, as seeing someone who had given up on living completely would always affect him. But he was finding himself able to cope with these things much better than before. "Yeah. Great, actually. That's the last thread tied to Dumbledore we needed to deal with. All that's left is Voldemort and the Death Eaters. I'm not as worried about him for the moment since he's left me alone, but Bellatrix and the people she's got on her side? Not so much. Draco told me on the day of Dumbledore's trial that she's not happy with Voldemort's change of heart."

He expected as much. While not having met them in person, he'd heard enough to be aware of their threatening nature. "She will not remain hidden for long. I suspect that at some point, she and those who have been convinced to her side will strike out in some form."

Determined, his green eyes glittered. "If she does, I'll be ready for her."

Alistair believed that he would be more than a match for her now. At his invitation, he'd seen Harry's practice sessions and the DA sessions he ran over the weekends and was suitably impressed. His confidence was undeniably attractive but then, he'd yet to discover a moment where he didn't find Harry appealing.

Neville would be as well. He had even more of a reason than him and if it came down to it, she would be all his. Considering that he now had the power of a deity linked with nature, Harry was confident he could handle himself.

And then, he was abruptly pulled from such thoughts by a kiss on the tip of his nose.

Blinking rapidly, a question fell from his lips. "What was that for?"

Mischievously Alistair leaned closer, whispering into his ear. "Because your expression indicated that you dearly wanted to be kissed."
Patting his face as if it held all the answers, Alistair laughed at Harry's resulting confusion. "Was I? I definitely do now though."

Realising it was another attempt to catch him off guard it had worked but quickly, regained his footing. Giving him a playfully pleading look, it wasn't long before Alistair happily responded to his silent request. Whether they were deep or featherlight, none failed to get either of their hearts fluttering. Rather than multiple times, each one was like the first shared between them, only much more intense as their bond slowly strengthened beneath every caressing touch. Voldemort, the Death Eaters and future issues were far from their minds, for now, allowing themselves brief moments of uninterrupted bliss, together.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, I love writing the pairings <3 Just to confirm this story isn't over yet, I've got the biggest trick up my sleeve which will eventually show itself xD
Jungle Adventures

Chapter Summary

Alistair's day begins with a smile, thanks to Harry. Then, the most interesting DADA lesson sixth year Gryffindor and Slytherin have had to date.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Some shared moments between two couples and the discovery of Ariana Dumbledore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alistair,

Perfection is supposed to be impossible, but you are to me, in every way. When we're together, I'm reminded of this fact and count my blessings that I decided to pay Romania a visit.

Have a great day,

Harry

Alistair was a lover of romance and the finer things in life. But, he'd learned how to balance both without coming across as ostentatious or downright unpleasant. Through centuries of experimentation and discovering what works for him and various others, he knew exactly what he'd like out of a relationship. He was never attracted to certain kinds of men in physical appearances, able to look at most and see a quality which made them shine brighter.

The written word was another thing, enjoying spending his time putting quill to parchment and writing something for his significant other. Sometimes it was reciprocated but mostly, not. It wasn't something that overly concerned him, as often affection was shown in different ways to this. But he truly did appreciate the gesture, if returned.

It had been a few weeks since his last short note to Harry, sometimes with words of wisdom, wishing him well or highlighting something about him which he liked. Simple, but such acts he'd always found to be a mood improver.
Harry had returned his letters, with feeling. This one was out of the blue, genuinely surprising him and using the stationary set given as a Christmas gift. When they had a spare moment Alistair was teaching him how to write better and he was slowly improving. The results were plain to see but also with assignments handed in. An overwhelming surge of pride and affection surged within him, to the point of hiding a wide smile behind his usual goblet of Pumpkin juice. But ever observant, his colleagues noticed.

"Did something happen?" Minerva questioned, curious as Severus sneered to himself. Even without knowing who it was from, he could accurately guess if the brief eye contact made with Potter was any indication. It was none of his business, finding himself unsurprised by the nature of their relationship but also slightly uncomfortable with the nauseating display of romance. The only thing of reassurance to him was not catching them in the Astronomy Tower like so many students, from every house over the years. If so, that would be a memory he'd obliterate himself of immediately afterwards.

As one of the few aware of their relationship minus those who had come to those conclusions on their own, Alistair slid Harry's short note across. Readjusting her spectacles she read closely, a rare smile emerging. "I thought such things were non-existent in this time and day. However, I've been proven wrong. How wonderful."

"Wonderfully sickening." As Severus promptly shot Minerva's comment to flames, she simply shook her head in response.

Expecting as much from the man, nothing at this moment could ever hope to dampen Alistair's mood. "I will write you a note, Severus, so that you can experience this delight yourself."

Directing a smile his way, it was met with a steely glare. "If I should find a letter from you with such... contents, I will burn the parchment into a pile of ashes and ensure that they are mixed with your morning pumpkin juice."

Alistair didn't doubt that though was mildly surprised that the threat didn't include some manner of poison. The simple fact that none was included indicated that Severus' opinion of him was rising.

Later on today, he would explain his true nature and relationship with Harry to those who were unaware. He'd contacted those he wished to know and immediately, Molly had extended an invitation to her home for that.

There would be plenty of time tonight, intent on returning Harry's note with a little something of his own again.

Harry had watched and waited for Alistair to open the letter from him, having given it to Hedwig in the Owlery before heading to the Great Hall. Countless scraps of parchment had sacrificed themselves in his efforts, not the best with words but wanting to sincerely return Alistair's efforts with his own, even if they did pale in comparison.
He hadn't told him, but a section of his trunk contained Alistair's written words alone. He couldn't bring himself to throw them away so had kept each one. Finding it mildly embarrassing to admit aloud he'd told no one else, though the man would inevitably find out one day.

He'd been doing some thinking and realised that like him, Alistair had missed out. In fact, even if their lives were entirely different, there were some similarities that remained. While Harry had grown up with a loveless family Alistair hadn't, but experienced it through some of the relationships that he'd had. Without knowing details, he could get the gist of what his past relationships had been like up until now and the one thing which summed it up was one-sided. It sounded as if there was no equality in terms of affection, whether it was simple gestures that meant a lot or partners who had physically or emotionally hurt him.

He couldn't understand why anyone would want to hurt him. When he had a moment to spare, Harry would locate Bren. While the man had set him on edge, he wanted to know why. But more importantly, put the wide variety of hexes he'd learned to good use.

'Harry, thank you very much for your note.'

Quietly breaking through and into his thoughts, it was just as well. Carefully placing those plans behind a mental lock and key, a warm feeling encompassed him through Alistair's gratitude and Harry's own response.

'No need to thank me, you're the one who introduced me to this sort of stuff. It's enjoyable.'

'I am glad to hear it. Your penmanship is coming along nicely, it was a topic of discussion in the staff room, at one point.'

Of all things Harry imagined was discussed, his handwriting wasn't one of them. They're probably shocked it's legible. I am as well, I didn't think my altered grip on a quill would have helped so much.'

He'd found it to be much easier after, though wished the Professors would accept something written on lined paper and with a biro.

Finishing his conversation with Alistair, discussions turned to the next point of interest. Leaning closer to Harry, Ginny's eyes were locked on Ron's profile. "I think someone's kidnapped my brother and replaced him with an impostor. Even before Dumbledore messed with his head, he was nothing like this."

As the one there who knew him better than they all did, Harry believed her words. Unlike his past slovenly appearance, he'd cleaned up nicely. He sat a short distance away, but the one thing which remained unchanging was the huge appetite.
Observing Ron for a moment, a small smile curved his lips. "He's really making an effort, I admire that. He's broken free from Dumbledore, as I did."

Only time would tell if he could remain consistent.

Today was another double DADA session and as always, Harry was looking forward to it. He never knew what to expect, as a different approach was taken with each lesson. Without a doubt, he knew it would be something fun.

Arriving outside of the Defence classroom they were one of the first, as Harry, Hermione, Neville and Ron made their way inside and instantly, they could see changes. The classroom was still naturistic in appearance only this time, it was as if they'd left Hogwarts altogether and were transported to another world.

If not for the door behind them, they'd be fooled into thinking they were actually in the middle of a jungle. Not a single detail spared, the sounds of wildlife there and even the smell of fresh rain were present. With long, thin trees that stretched skyward, it was day time, light penetrating wherever it could even as their feet met a slightly damp path.

Awed, Ron was the first to speak even as he experimentally poked one of the plants. "Bloody brilliant."

He'd summed up their thoughts perfectly, as a hawk flew overhead.

Leaning against one of the trees, Alistair heard his words, eyes sparkling. "Thank you, Mr Weasley. I will explain my reasoning for these changes once the rest of your class arrive."

That didn't stop Hermione from coming up with possible ideas beforehand and much like their own reaction followed various ones of their classmates. Even Draco looked impressed, visibly so.

Once every student had arrived the door closed behind them, disappearing as if it was never there. Towards the back, Harry touched where the door used to be, met with nothing but thin air. "Weird."

With more people there, voices were louder than sounds of any wildlife. Seeing that everyone was accounted for, Alistair's voice drowned out that of any whispered conversation as the students fell silent.

"Good morning, everyone. No doubt you have all noticed that there has been a drastic change in our environment. We are in a replica of the Nainital Jungle and today is a team-building exercise. As there are thirty of you, I require that you organise yourselves into mixed teams of six. Afterwards, I
will explain your task today."

A combination of excited and intrigued they did as asked, Ron showing no signs of protest. With Harry, he had Hermione, Draco, Millicent, Seamus and Goyle while Neville was with Daphne, Blaise, Ron, Dean and Crabbe. Once organised the groups of five gathered around, listening to Alistair's next words intently.

Enthusiasm showing in his actions and expression it became infectious, as some of the students' thrill for adventures began to emerge. "I have had the pleasure, over several hours, to see the magic produced by every single one of you, which is why I have decided that a little healthy competition is in order. In each of your teams, you must work together in order to find something which I have placed in the heart of this jungle. The first team that retrieves this item will be rewarded."

Harry wondered what the item was exactly. Only a second was spared for that, as Professor Lothaire set certain rules in place.

"The point me charm and those considered unforgivable curses, of course, are strictly forbidden. The former, I will issue a warning and if done again, will render your team immediately disqualified. I would like you all to rely on each other and natural instincts. And for the latter, I should hope that no explanation for severe consequences will be needed. I will be watching you all throughout this so any misconduct or lack of respect shown towards one another will not be missed. You have until the end of our lesson together to complete this and each of you will be placed in a different location, at the same distance away from your goal. Once a team has located what they need to, I will inform everyone. Before we begin, are there any questions?"

The first one came from Harry. "Yes, Mr Potter?"

Since their relationship, the use of his surname had invoked different feelings within him, so it was a struggle not to react. "What's the object we need to bring back?"

With a secretive smile, his answer remained similarly so. "Something very out of place for such an environment."

That didn’t exactly narrow down their options, but Harry was nothing if not observant, as were many of his classmates.

Eager to start that remained the only question, as Alistair swiftly moved on. "Alright, you may begin. One team will start from here, while the others will be moved to a different location."

Harry's team were the one to remain there. While the others went slightly ahead he lagged behind for a few seconds. Slowing his pace and walking by Alistair he reached out, giving his rear a generous squeeze. Unable to help it he'd indulged himself, having plenty of time to admire it whether in form-fitting trousers or with nothing at all. Spinning around he gave Alistair a brief wink and a wave, jogging the short distance to catch up with Hermione and the others.
Watching him go with a fond smile, Alistair tingled pleasantly in the area which was squeezed. Thankful that he remained alone, it would allow enough time for his rising emotions to settle. Performing one last feat of magic which would allow him to watch every student he took a seat, in the same chair which remained unchanging from the one he'd created for his first lesson.

As Harry caught up with Hermione, she gave him a questioning look. "What was it you spoke to the Professor about?"

Grinning shamelessly he leaned in closer, muttering to her. "Nothing. I slowed my pace down and gave him a little squeeze." Gesturing with a motion of his hand, Hermione was torn between good-naturedly lecturing him or simply letting it slide. But rather than that, something else happened.

"I don't blame you." With a slight smile on her face, she didn't wait for Harry's response, coughing sheepishly as she hurried on ahead. Chuckling she was replaced by Seamus. Slinging a friendly arm around his shoulder, there was a knowing look in his eye.

"So, Harry. I've been doing some thinking. Detective Finnegan put his nose to the grinder and he came to the conclusion that Professor Lothaire is that mystery boyfriend of yours."

Not agreeing or disagreeing, Harry went along with him. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, that Halloween dance for one. Didn't seem like that dance Ron did with McGonagall when she was showing us some moves. There was something classy and intimate about it. And afterwards, you've changed. Not in a bad way, you look happy. So, is it true?"

"Yeah, you can tell people or keep it quiet, I don't mind either way. People are bound to find out eventually." Shrugging lightly, Harry's eyes held a soft light. "I'm definitely happy."

Giving him a friendly clap on the back, Seamus nodded. "Good on you mate. You deserve happiness more than anyone."

Feeling slightly awkward saying something that like Seamus swiftly moved on. "We've got this in the bag. Hermione's a brainbox and you're brilliant with magic, so let's kick some bamboo arse!"

Pumping his fist in the air, he checked back with Harry. "Bamboo is in the jungle right?"

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I think so, not sure if it applies to all jungles. Come on then."

Heading to the front with him, he caught a look of frustration on Draco's face. "How are we supposed to know where we're going if we can't use navigation spells?"
At his words, a lightbulb seemed to switch on above Hermione's head. "That's it! You're a genius!"

Rummaging around in her bag Harry and Draco shared a confused look as she pulled out a spare bit of parchment, explaining all the while. "While no spells that will lead us directly there are allowed, he didn't say anything about making items which will help us navigate."

Touching the tip of her wand to the parchment, the Jungle's name appeared at the top and with it, small finer details of the location they were in.

Realising what she was doing, Harry's eyes widened. "A map?"

Concentrating, they observed as the distance they'd covered so far was placed on there.

"Yes. We don't know this area but if we can mark where we've been, the chances of us coming across the same place are unlikely. Usually, a map and compass are used together but since there's no magnetic deviation, that wouldn't do much good. But this is a start. I've set it to track my movements and the starting point is here."

Marking a black dot with her finger, she continued onward. "At least we have something. Though, I'm not entirely sure which way is north."

Then, an unexpected voice. "I know a way to tell."

When all eyes fell on Millicent she shrunk back slightly. But with Hermione's encouraging smile, she opened her mouth. "When I was younger I used to go camping. My parents thought it was stupid but I enjoyed doing things without relying on magic. There's something called the shadow tip method. It takes ten minutes but you can work out where North is from that."

Intrigued Hermione let her take the lead. It did ring a bell but as she'd never done it herself before, was more than happy to stand back and observe with the others.

Other than shielding charms, this was the first time Harry had seen her looking so confident and ten minutes later with the use of a stick, stone and the shadow from it, they had their North.

"That's brilliant! Thanks, Millicent!" Harry was suitably impressed and embarrassed she muttered a small welcome, falling silent once more. Now that they had a constantly updating map and a sense of direction, the six continued onward until they came to a sheer cliff face and stretching from one end to the other, a long bridge which had seen better days. Looking below they could see a drop of at least 100 feet, with water below. Harry was sure even without swimming in that, there were animals which they didn't want to cross there.
While the bridge was far from sturdy Harry remained unafraid, used to great heights through Quidditch matches. Various levels of nerves registered among his teammates, but none more so than Goyle. 'Gregory.' Harry reminded himself. Sometimes he forgot that wasn't his first name, as the only time he'd heard it was during their sorting. Drip white, it was the first of anything he'd seen from the boy other than a permanent look of confusion.

Sensing his gaze he glanced away, muttering quietly. "Don't like heights."

Draco looked surprised. "I had no idea. But we'll be fine, Goyle. The bridge won't break."

Remaining unconvinced, Seamus was confident and while he held no love for some of the people in his team, he was learning to set house rivalries aside and work together. "We're all in the same boat and from here, I can't see another way across. I know Gryffindors tackle their fears head on but Slytherin are ambitious, right? Just think about the end goal."

"I'll walk with you." Coming to his side, Harry almost swore Goyle smiled for a moment, though it could have been his imagination.

"...Ok."

It was filled with far less confidence than Harry would have liked, but he knew how difficult it was to face fears. Harry was the first to set foot on the bridge. "We're better off distributing the weight. So when I'm about a quarter across, someone follows me. When they're the same distance across the next person goes, etc. Does that work for everyone?"

With met with nods, Harry put his full weight onto the bridge. Though he had a good sense of balance now it was tested, finding the bridge wobblier now that he was on it than first thought. Evening out his stance he slowly progressed, slightly regretful that he couldn't admire the scenery.

Glancing between his footwork and the bridge's end he kept up a steady pace, constantly aware of the time ticking away but not allowing this knowledge to overwhelm him. Once reaching the end he gave a thumbs up, returned by those still waiting to cross and Hermione, a short distance behind him. Once her feet met solid ground she breathed a sigh of relief, accepting Harry's high five. "I'm not scared of heights, but that was intense. It felt like the bridge could give way at any moment."

"You're not kidding. But don't speak too soon. You more than anyone know all about my mixed bag of luck." Slightly nervous for a different reason Harry silently willed Millicent and Gregory to up their pace, just in case a dose of Potter bad luck affected them.
As Draco then Seamus had reached the end that left their last two teammates, walking at a slightly slower pace. No sooner had the pair touched solid ground again, before the rope on their side began to fray around the edges more.

Having caught this, Draco swallowed. "I'm not looking forward to walking back across that."

At the reminder they would need to head back over it Goyle looked displeased, but mostly relieved that he'd made it across and though not saying as much, thankful for the surprising amount of support shown by Gryffindors, of all houses.

Their first challenge came in the form of something highly unexpected. Where the wildlife was much denser and just outside of its cave, was a Chimaera. Glancing among everyone's faces, Harry could see that none of them was unaware of what faced them. Confused Harry broke the silence, quietly. "I didn't think they were in Jungles."

So as not to be overheard they disguised themselves, masking everything which would give them away to the creature and after doing so, began to discuss a plan of action.

"Through that cave behind it is north. While we could go around that seems to be the quickest way forward."

While Harry agreed with Hermione, he could see the Chimaera was on high alert. Even hidden away, it sensed that not all was what it seemed. On purposely blocking their way, passing by without some sort of confrontation was impossible.

Eyeing the creature with a great deal of wariness, Seamus' grip unconsciously tightened on his wand. "They're a bunch of different animals, so they probably piss each other off about where to stay."

He brought up a valid point. "While I'd say staying like this is a good idea, we can't see each other."

With everyone disillusioned, the only way he could tell they were nearby is if they happened to brush body parts or where their voice came from.

Eventually, they decided on a tactic. Spreading out their goal wasn't to kill, but distract and prevent it from going after them. Millicent, Seamus and Gregory would provide back up while Hermione and Draco along with him would face it directly. Once all spells were cancelled, the Chimaera rushed with an almighty roar. Heading for Harry's direction he nimbly dodged, sending a high powered lumos its way to blind it for a moment.

While one of them was stunned for a moment, the other wasn't. With a strike faster than lightning the snake struck, met with nothing but stone as Hermione had studied its actions intently. With a smile of thanks aimed her way, it didn't seem to know who to go for first, confused as they slowly began edging towards the cave.
"Bloody hell!" Narrowly avoiding being knocked over from its hulking mass, Seamus stumbled, quickly righting himself. It was only a moment later that Harry had an idea. With no time to explain, he simply acted. Looking directly at the snake, he tried to communicate. "Why are you attacking us?"

Stopping mid-motion, Harry had the feeling that if it could, surprise would register in its expression. "You can ssspeak with me?"

"Yeah, I've always been able to. So anyway, can you answer my question?"

Even while holding a conversation it didn't stop the Lion's movements, strangely fixated on Draco as he tried to keep it distracted. That didn't stop a sarcastic comment from cutting through the air. "I'm trying to prevent myself from being eaten and there you are, having a pleasant conversation. Help would be appreciated!"

He tried not to roll his eyes but considering the situation they found themselves in, his reaction was understandable. "I'm going to try and reason with it! Well, a part anyway."

"You're mad Potter!" Seamus shouted, incredulous as he aimed a stinging hex at its side.

He couldn't deny that. But he had an advantage here and felt it would be foolish to pass such an opportunity up. Over the sounds of spellfire, it made concentrating on the snake's words much more difficult. "We guard thisss entrance."

That confirmed it was their way forward. "I'll make it worth your while if you stop attacking us."

With his pouch handy, he never knew when he'd need something for Aela. It was unfortunate she wasn't with him today, as things would have progressed smoother. But even so, he had the perfect sustenance for a snake, pinched between his thumb and finger.

Tongue poking out to taste the air, it leaned forward as far as possible. Apparently, it didn't need much convincing. "If I do thisss, you'll give me the moussse?"

With a confident nod, it immediately sunk its fangs into the hide below it. With a roar of pain it lashed out, unable to reach but before long, grew drowsy and slumped to the floor.

Unsure what kind of snake it was, Harry assumed the body which it was attached to had some degree of poison or venom immunity, or the snake would be stuck to a dead body. Either way, it had done as Harry asked. Approaching the rear end he gingerly held the mouse out, snatched from his fingers instantly.
"Many thankss."

With a muffled hissing voice he promptly turned away, usually deciding not to watch whenever Aela was in the digesting process.

Turning back he was met with stares, even as Gregory crouched next to Millicent. Sitting on the floor, he was in the process of healing a spot on her arm which, by the look of things, had been swiped with the Lion's huge paws.

"Are you ok?" Coming over to her side she nodded. "I'm fine. I didn't think something that big could be so fast, but it proved me wrong."

A moment later there was no trace of her ever being hurt, other than the claw marks in her clothing which were quickly fixed afterwards.

A combination of surprised and impressed, he eyed Gregory with newfound respect. "Nice work."

Uncomfortable, he simply muttered thanks, offering a hand up to Millicent. Seeing that no one else was injured they headed onwards, Draco stopping by his side and giving him a look which Harry had never seen before.

"Do I want to know why you had a live mouse?"

Completely straight-faced and without a hint of joking, Harry lit lumos on his wand, the ball hovering just in front and lighting their way while he explained. "I feed the resurrected Basilisk beneath the school who's now my friend and can shrink at will. So sometimes, she goes on adventures around the school with me and needs frequent snacks."

"Pull the other one Potter, you can't fool me." Rolling his eyes Draco decided that something so ludicrous wasn't worth the time of day, concentrating on not making a wrong step with a rocky, slowly descending pathway.

Amused, Hermione drew closer to his side. "You told the truth and he didn't realise."

With a twinkle in his eye, Harry observed their new surroundings with interest, eyes adapting to the darkness. "If I was him, I wouldn't take me seriously either. Hopefully, Neville and the others are doing fine."

"I'm sure they are. Well, Ron remains to be seen. Reformed or not, I don't think he's ever seen eye to eye with Crabbe since their confrontation in Defence."

Wondering how long they would remain in this cave and keeping an eye out for some natural source of light, Harry believed that they made a good team.
Neville was at his wit's end. While Blaise, Daphe and Dean were cooperative, Ron and Crabbe weren't so much. They'd been bickering non-stop and overall, the mood was sour because of it. He had a great deal of patience but it was being put to the test right now.

They'd relied on heading straight forward, looking for any changes in the scenery and before long, came to a downhill and slightly muddy slope. By the end their school robes were caked in it, scourgifying them once reaching the bottom. Everything remained similar, blending into one thing which Neville couldn't tell from the rest.

Even walking at the front couldn't tune out their bickering and eventually, he had enough. Going to the back he stood between them, folding his arms.

"That's enough, you two! We're supposed to be a team! Have you forgotten that Professor Lothaire is watching all of us? It's supposed to be about teamwork and it's a bad job so far. Whatever your issue is with each other, save it for outside of class."

Having said his piece Neville returned, met with a smirk from Blaise. "Well said, Longbottom."

"I would have just hexed them to guarantee their silence." Sending an icy glare to the pair of them, Neville chuckled.

"I was tempted, believe me. But it's not very team spirit like. I just hope if we come across anything that poses a challenge they'll actually help and not hinder us."

"I wouldn't count on that." Dean piped up, adventurous spirit emerging as he'd fashioned himself a colourful bandana. "Those two combined would be like an ant wrestling with a mountain troll."

Picturing what that would be like for a moment, Neville shook his head. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Before long, the change which Neville had been looking for emerged, but not in a form which he was expecting. Below them was a river and while it wasn't a steep drop, it was clear what was required of them instead. With vines tangled into single knots, a sturdy looking rope hung just within their reach, with just enough length to swing from one side to the other.

"Sweet, like Tarzan!" Dean exclaimed, met with blank looks. Shaking his head, he muttered to himself. "Damn Purebloods." Eager, he was the first to step forward. "I'll go first."

Completely at ease with something like this Dean ensured he had a firm grip of the rope. Taking a few steps he ran forward, leaping off the edge and using that momentum to swing forward with
speed.

For some reason, lost to the other five, he did a strange shout while going across. Putting it down to possible Muggle culture Neville let it slide, putting this moment on the backburner to ask about later.

Once across he swung the rope back, along with advice. "Don't grip the rope too low. Give yourself a running start and you'll get across. If not you'll be stuck in the middle."

Even though Neville joined Harry on his morning runs sometimes, he was never the athletic type so this sort of thing filled him with nerves.

"Am I ok to go next?" When met with nods he followed Dean's advice, gripping the rope mid-level and taking a running leap. Swinging across he tightened his grip, heart beating uncomfortably aloud as adrenaline kick-started every sense. The only thrill seeking he actively sought out was in plants, preferring that his feet remained firmly on the ground.

Once they did, he was relieved. Swinging the rope back across, he could see Daphne was next.

He hadn't spoken with her much, but couldn't help his fascination. She made sure that everyone within and outside of Slytherin saw her as the Ice Queen. Cold, unfeeling and every other negative description, but Neville couldn't help but think there was more. Ever since Harry had begun to welcome Slytherin with open arms and his friendship with Draco, Neville wanted to do the same. He wouldn't mind befriending her, though had no idea how to go about such a thing.

Those thoughts were for only a second at most. As Daphne swung across she was a little slower and as such, only just made it to the edge. Once releasing the rope she lost her balance slightly, about to tip back until a hand gripped her own firmly, pulling. Once away from the edge it was released. Eyes flickering with surprise, it was easy to blink and miss the subtle change. "Thank you, Longbottom."

He'd have done it for everyone. Well, perhaps not Ron. A part of him would be amused to see him tumbling down and into the river below.

Trying to act casually even if being genuinely thanked by a Slytherin was anything but, his eyes went to Crabbe, Blaise and Ron. "No problem." He doubted she'd want a fuss to be made, so swiftly moved on.

Neville was only mildly disappointed when Ron made it across safely, Blaise swinging across with surprising grace. Crabbe did too but lacked any form of grace and face planted the ground once his grip loosened. As Ron snorted he was promptly given the finger by him, swiftly moving on before they had a chance to bicker again.
It was only once across, that Neville began to notice something odd. The sky seemed to darken, at an unnatural rate.

“Over there. What’s that?” Blaise pointed downwards, to a large clearing with its contents mostly submerged with the same darkness.

“We’ll find out soon.” Determined he stepped forward, teammates following behind and wands drawn.

What it turned out to be was a tree, but not just any kind. It was one none of those gathered had ever seen before.

“Are those tentacles?” Ron asked part fascinated but mostly disgusted.

Observing closely, Neville shook his head. “No. They’re branches, but look and move like tentacles.”

At this point, he’d rather be facing the former whomping willow. At least there weren’t various bones littering the ground below it.

“Didn’t think I’d be saying this about a tree, but it looks... hungry.” Shuddering Dean remained rooted to the spot, sure that if the tree had eyes it would stare.

Dean was right. There were plants that ate meat but of all the ones he knew, Neville had never heard of a man-eating tree. But, there was a first time for everything.

“There’s a trap door in front of it, so I assume we go that way.” Daphne’s voice punctuated the eerie silence, gesturing to the ground rich with rainwater and an aforementioned trap door.

Herbology was his best subject. Not only that but the power of Zeme now flowed within him. While he knew very little about his newfound abilities, there was enough to give them an advantage. Instinctively, he was certain this tree wouldn’t harm him.

“I’ll go first,” Neville spoke up, brimming with confidence as his nerves receded.

After saying this, he was met with incredulous looks. "Ok. If anything happens though, we've got your back." Caution laced throughout his tone, Dean made a point of remaining firmly rooted to the spot.

While Neville was doubtful of Crabbe having his back, he appreciated the sentiment. However,
believed that wouldn't be needed. Moving forward with purpose, a small hollowed out section of its trunk revealed several Bowtruckles, but not the kind he'd ever seen before. They resembled the tree in which they dwelled, wooden but with some movements and the look of smaller tentacles. He had no idea if this came from Professor Lothaire's imagination or from what he'd actually seen but either way, it was slightly disturbing to look at.

While they glanced at Neville none of them went for him, heading to the others.

"Stunning and distracting spells are fine. But whatever you do, don't kill them." He instructed, turning around to make eye contact with them for a moment.

Narrowly dodging one of the tree's roots not submerged beneath the ground, it was fully fixated on him. While the trunk itself remained motionless, the branches swayed from more than a passing breeze.

In a move far more silent than he could have anticipated, one of the longer branches managed to snag him from behind and as if he was within the grasp of an octopus, it began to wrap around him tightly.

Lifted in the air, he heard worried shouts and did his best to reassure.

"I'll be fine!"

They all hoped so. Or at least, most of them did. Crabbe would rather be anywhere else but with these people. Greengrass and Zabini were fine and overall, indifferent about Longbottom and Thomas. But Weasley, he could do without. Avada Kedavra was instinctive to him, father demonstrating his own unique version of hunting. Rather than guns, he cursed them, dead instantly and without needing to remove the bullet. It didn't affect the meat either, having seen and eaten the results first hand. So to him, it was a means to an end. But even so, he didn't fancy a trip to Azkaban for murdering his classmate.

He had a shorter, but less explosive fuse to his anger. If they just killed the Bowtruckles it would make everything go much more smoothly. One of them was so persistent swiping at him with its claws, that he'd had enough.

"Reducto," He grunted, blasting one of them back. As he did it gave out a high pitched cry, exploding into tiny shards of wood.

In a mixture of horror and anger, Daphne, Ron, Blaise and Dean watched as their attacks now paled in comparison to before. Suddenly there were swarms of them, latching themselves on to every inch of exposed and unexposed skin. Scratching, biting and swiping harshly, it was much more difficult to distract.
"Crabbe you tosser! What the hell did you do that for?" Ron shouted ears tinged red with anger. He'd be the first to say he wasn't all brains, but Neville was good with Herbology and in his eyes, that made him the expert here. If he said not to kill them he wouldn't, annoying buggers or otherwise.

"They're annoying." He replied back simply. Rather than stop the action which had worsened things he continued, remains of Bowtruckles scattering the earth.

With each one Crabbe destroyed, it only made things worse until Daphne snapped.

"Stupefy!" Aiming towards Crabbe he became stiff as a board, falling to the ground.

"I'm going to kill him." Muttering this under her breath it became lost within the sea of angered screeches, stunning or pushing back the others which went for her. One particularly long scratch stung her cheek, becoming soaked through when a downpour of jungle-like proportions occurred.

"Oh, bloody brilliant. Anything else that wants to happen while we're at it?" Ron exclaimed, frustrated.

Heart beating rapidly Neville was lifted high into the air, stiller than the night itself when motionless. Able to hear all that went on behind him, he knew what Crabbe had done. Once finished here, he had more than a few words to say. But for now, he was occupied with his own problem.

Beginning to tighten around him Neville could barely breathe but didn't cast any offensive spells. He meant to harm and this was only because of one action. But any more, and his ribs would be in danger of cracking beneath the strain.

Hands touching the branch, he tried to replicate what he accidentally did with that tree by the black lake, desperate for its grip to loosen so he could breathe again.

The rings of his irises glowing, markings which had faded to something only noticeable by someone who knew what to look for, flared gold. Pixellated images filled his mind, some of which he could barely make out but others, almost crystal clear. Beneath his touch the tree's bark began to shed, revealing a new, lighter colour.

To his relief, the grip around him did loosen. Unfortunately, he was released in mid-air. Before he could plummet several feet below and break more than a wrist, Neville slowed his descent. "Arresto Momentum!"

A few feet above the ground he hovered in mid-air, only to hit the ground shortly after. Laying there for a moment his vision refocused, seeing that the tree had returned to its usual position. Trap Door opening of its own accord, he promptly ignored everyone else in favour of the Stupified Crabbe. Cancelling all spells, he hauled him to his feet, truly angry. Of all the creatures, they were his favourite. anything closely linked to nature he found himself having a slight affinity for. They could
be vicious, but only when their tree or themselves were threatened. These were a little different in their approach but even so, didn't cause harm to any of them until Crabbe's actions.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" His closest friends were the only one who had ever seen him lose control, so this came as a great shock to those gathered there. Grabbing him by the scruff of his neck Neville's eyes and markings were still visible. "I said distract, not kill! They're peaceful creatures! What you did was cruel and unnecessary."

Unrepentant, he simply shrugged.

He couldn't hold back anymore. While he had no doubt points loss and detention from Professor Lothaire could be a possibility, all thoughts of that left his mind. Fist drawn back he slammed it into Crabbe's nose, feeling the bone crack beneath his fist. He'd never hit anyone physically before, given no reason to. He'd save the best spells and curses for Bellatrix Bitch Lestrange. But this, called for a more personal touch.

Grunting Crabbe held a hand over his nose, blood flowing freely as the others stared on, wide-eyed.

"You're sick. They're guardians of trees and without them, we might not have wands or any focuses made from wood at all. I don't know how many you killed and to be honest, I'd rather keep it that way. Being expelled isn't on my list of things to do. I don't expect you to apologise but I swear if you do one more thing like that again, I won't be responsible for my actions."

It wasn't Neville's business any longer. If he knew healing spells then he could sort himself out. If not, he wouldn't be doing anything to help. Why should he have any regrets when Crabbe didn't?

Ron and Dean showed no restraint, clapping and cheering for all they were worth. "Brilliant!"

Daphne and Blaise were far more so, though their eyes held the light of approval.

Returning to them, he smiled slightly awkwardly. "I would apologise, but it wouldn't be sincere."

Healing the last of her scratches, Daphne's words were laced with ice. "No need. If you hadn't have done that, I would have cursed him."

When met with nods of agreement, only a mild tension remained in the air. "Let's go."

Heading for the already opened trap door there was a ladder, leading down into unknown depths. Letting everyone else go before him it left Daphne last, who gave him a calculating stare.

Puzzled he returned it, with one word. "What?"
Eyes narrowing faintly, her expression became unreadable. "You're not the person I thought you were."

That wasn't the first time he'd heard such words. "True. I could say the same for you though."

He could see she wanted to say something more. But rather than doing that, she descended the ladder. Joining them after he shut the door behind them, a lumos already lit so he'd be able to see at least a little way down.

With a love of adventure himself, Alistair believed that this would be enjoyable for the students or at least, that was his hope. He'd spent weeks planning this, ensuring to capture every detail and with spellwork too complicated for an explanation to those not on the same level. The best way to progress would always be practical work and what better way to demonstrate their skills, magically and non-magically, by something like this?

It was more enjoyable to watch how the students handled different situations than anticipated, able to keep track of each team with ease. Though, the teams with Harry and Neville had captured his attention in particular. One for an impressive display of teamwork and support and the other, for strength of character.

Reluctantly, he would have to give Neville detention for that. But his actions were entirely understandable and while he wouldn't voice such thoughts aloud, believed it was wholly deserved. His abilities with nature itself were certainly impressive, finding himself honoured to see this in action. Alistair could tell that Ron was trying his best as well, glad that he was attempting to follow through with earlier words spoken.

He couldn't deny being slightly biased, especially when his lover and the lover of his brother were in the same team. But ignoring personal relationships, they did work well together and found Harry's handling of the Chimera to be amusing. He'd expected possible communication with the part he'd understand at some point, but not quite the end results.

With close to half of their time gone, Harry and Neville were roughly the same distance away from their goal. At this point, it could be any of them.

It seemed as if there would be no end to this cave. They'd encountered bats, beady eyes observing their movements closely even as a swarm had flown past them. On a constant downhill slope it made keeping balance slightly more difficult but with the use of a mild sticking charm, made things marginally easier.

"Why on earth do we have to go wandering through dark caves like idiots?" Complaining, Draco's features twisted with mild disgust as he avoided stepping in a pile of some questionable substance.
With the complete opposite attitude, Harry's tone was cheerful. "Come on, where's your sense of adventure? This is fun!"

"Your idea and my idea of fun are clearly very different."

Harry rolled his eyes. "What's your idea of fun then, collecting hundreds of Peacocks, giving them a home at your estate and having them compete?"

Draco looked over at Harry as if he'd never seen him before. "Of course not! They're kept at the estate, but House Elves look after them and guests usually visit to see."

Harry's mind crashed completely, ceasing to function. Blinking rapidly he fell silent, managing to find his voice a moment later. "Hang on, I was only joking. You actually have Peacocks?"

Amused, Harry burst into laughter.

Mildly offended, Draco was nearly lost for words. "What's wrong with Peacocks?"

He tried to explain himself. "Nothing just took me by surprise that's all."

Before there was a response, Hermione interjected. "We've arrived."

Sure enough, there was a natural light source and eagerly, they headed for it. Once outside they adjusted to the light again, Seamus inhaling deeply. "I thought we'd never leave."

"You might wish you were still in there." Muttering this, Harry could see they were now level with the water and in it, could make out faintly distinct shapes. As far as they could see from both directions was a murky river and various types of water life they wouldn't know were there unless they happened to cross through.

"I'm not swimming through that. Who knows what's in there?" Shuddering, Millicent almost swore she saw a pair of eyes blinking back at her.

"Piranhas and possibly Crocodiles." Hermione supplied them with information. Suddenly, the water became far more menacing. "We don't need to swim through this."

Gesturing to further down there were wooden boards and tied to either side, two boats with sails. They looked ordinary, only Harry couldn't see any oars. Releasing them they organised themselves into two smaller groups, taking a boat each. While a normal boat would move even slightly once released from its ropes, they did no such thing.
"How do we get them to move?" Harry wondered, about to put his hand in the water and see if that would move them ever so slightly, but thought better of it.

"...Magic." This came from Gregory, in the boat with Millicent and him. He hadn't thought of that.

"I'll give it a try." Shifting himself so he sat at the back, Harry directed his wand forward, casting silently.

'Ventus.'

Though slightly unstable it got the boat to move, not helping matters any when it suddenly began to rain. With Millicent and Gregory's help the wind became more stabilised, able to keep it in a straight direction and shortly after Hermione, Draco and Seamus followed suit.

It was halfway through, that that there was a bump in their road. With the stench of rotting decay, their boats began to slowly disintegrate.

Harry's brows furrowed. "We've got a problem, there's Bundimuns nearby. Can anyone see them from here?"

Hearing his words they scanned in front of them, near the edges where dirt was plentiful until something occurred to him. It was their secretions which did the damage, meaning that it was likely they were closer than first thought. He could see both boats faced this issue and directing his search elsewhere, caught something of a greenish colour stuck to the boat's side.

"Check your boat! I found one on ours." Leaning in close he placed the tip of his wand in the water, sending out a scouring charm which released its hold, floating by.

"We can't find the bloody thing!" Seamus shouted over, panic tinged his voice as the difference in their boat became noticeable. Seeing this, Harry thought fast.

"How good are you two with Wingardium Leviosa? I'm going to need some help. Their Bundimun might be at the bottom of their boat and I don't fancy diving in to check it out personally."

"I'm not the best with it, but I'll try." Determined Millicent held her wand. Harry wasn't reassured by the look on Gregory's face either, but would still need their help. With more magical power at his disposal compared to now it wouldn't be impossible to lift it, but he'd never tried before. However, this was an opportunity to work with the two members he knew least, so took it firmly with both hands.

"We're going to lift your boat. When we do one of you will have to climb out and get rid of it,
depending on its location."

Receiving nods tinged with slight anxiety, Harry gave them a countdown. "Three, two, one."

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

As one they cast, the boat slowly rising above water and as it did, Harry could see the Bundimun directly underneath. "It's right at the bottom!" He called out, Seamus hearing and taking action.

"Don't drop this bloody boat until I'm back inside." Hanging upside down out of it with his lower half supported by Hermione and Draco, a scouring charm hit its target, stopping decaying from occurring. Once Seamus had retaken his seat, they gently lowered the boat back down.

"Cheers Harry, Bulstrode, Goyle." Sending them a thumbs up Hermione gave them a smile, with a simple incline of his head from Draco.

Every Harry was beginning to feel fatigued at this point. Once reaching the other side they took a few minutes to rest, glad that it hadn't got to the point of their boats rendered unusable halfway across.

"I don't think we're far off where we need to be now. We'll just have to keep an eye out for anything that stands out." Standing beneath a shielding charm, it repelled the rain as good as an umbrella, in Hermione's opinion.

"I hope so. This is too much 'adventure' for my liking." Sneering slightly Draco walked in front, missing Harry's smirk in response.

"He loves it."

"Not too sure about that mate." Seamus eyed him, with a degree of dislike. He'd been fine with them all today, better than what he expected, but that didn't mean to say he could put everything of what he'd done to the side completely.

It was almost as if they were back at the start again. Everything looked exactly the same, though Hermione's map indicated that they were definitely moving forward and hadn't gone back at all.

A little to the right, Harry spotted something which he believed would count as odd. "A floating cube?"

There were a set of stairs, leading down to a platform covered in debris, vines entwined around the pillars which supported it. Directly in the middle was a cube, high above their heads and a solid grey
in colour. It rotated one direction and every few seconds went in a different one.

"This must be it," Draco affirmed. Descending the steps, more could be seen while there.

In a circle were a total of ten crystals, resembling levers as they were attached to metal poles within a system which allowed for them to be pushed forward, left where they were or backwards. Five of them were blue, while the other five were red. It looked to be completely randomised, no particular order of colouring except the even amount themselves.

"Puzzles." Groaning, Harry blew out a breath. "I'm bad at those. Or anything logical really. Any ideas?"

Hermione was the first to speak. "I think we need to lower the cube and get all the gems to be one colour."

Draco nodded, agreeing as his silver eyes narrowed in thought. "There's a pattern somewhere, I suspect it relies on memory."

Experimentally he pushed one. As he did, there was a strange beeping sound, before it returned to its original position.

On the circular platform where they stood, what looked like a clockwork arachnid appeared. The size of a small dog it went to attack until Harry blasted it away. As he did it exploded, scattering metal shards everywhere.

"Definitely an order to it then," Hermione confirmed, removing her biro pen and notebook. "Malfoy. If I make a note of these and mark which ones we've tried, will you pull another?"

Even though he was now friends with Harry, he still didn't see eye to eye with Granger. But, his issues with her had become minimal. "Fine."

Relieved with his cooperation they worked together, Harry, Seamus, Millicent and Gregory defending them for any wrong moves made. For every incorrect answer, another clockwork arachnid appeared. He could barely keep up with their discussion but maybe, given time, he could figure something like this out. Even so, they were on a time limit and with him, it would probably take several hours rather than under one.

Watching their progress, it looked as if all the gems had to be blue before progress could be made. With two left they were close but frustratingly enough, all levers reset if an incorrect answer was inputted. Even so between them, they remained calm, making fewer errors than he would have.

Blasting the last arachnid away, Harry observed the cube's descent as all gems turned blue. Once
doing so it spun faster, glowing red. The levers remained where they were, nothing else happening afterwards.

Scrunching up the paper and banishing it, Hermione drew another rough diagram. "I assume they need to be red now. Hopefully, this is the last time."

Harry hoped so too. At this point, over twice as many appeared and while easily destroyed, were surprisingly agile.

They had more difficulty with this one, unfortunately. He sensed there wasn't much time remaining but without Hermione and Draco, they wouldn't have got this far so Harry simply left them to it.

"Try the far right next. After that, there's only one more and I think we have it." Hermione instructed as Draco shook his head. "I think it's the other one."

Seeing that they were about to butt heads, Harry interjected. "Just try one. If it's wrong we'll deal with it. Either way, if you don't get it right this time, you will the next."

Grudgingly, Hermione let Draco follow through with his choice and kept her 'I told you so' to herself when faced with yet more clockwork arachnids.

"Pesky buggers aren't they?" Seamus chuckled, giving one of them a sharp kick and sending a spell their way straight after.

"Definitely. Rather them than Acromantula." Harry's mind flashed back to his encounter with Aragog for a moment.

"Agreed." Shuddering they finished the last of them off, for the final time as all gems glowed red.

"Yes!" Hermione cheered, sharing a look of mutual respect with her puzzle partner. She didn't expect him to be well versed with that kind of knowledge but knew little of him so it was to be expected.

Runes within the cube glowed, flashing between the colours they'd worked with. Exploding in a shower of sparks, something yellow dropped. Catching it, Harry couldn't help but look at it incredulously. "Well, he wasn't wrong. You don't find these in the jungle."

In Harry's palm, was a bright yellow duck. A squeaky one he discovered, gripping it firmly enough for that to register.

"He's barmy." Shaking his head once, Seamus caught his breath. "Does that mean we won then?"
Their answer came a few seconds later. "The item has been retrieved. Congratulations to Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy, Mr Goyle, Mr Finnegan, Miss Granger and Miss Bulstrode."

Shortly after, their surroundings changed and together, found themselves back as one large group again. Catching a singed Neville from the corner of his eye, Harry called over. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Blast-Ended Skrewts." It was what had slowed them all down, in the end. Neville had the feeling they weren't quite as vicious. But even with his detention, he didn't regret today or who he ended up with. He got to know Greengrass better, sharing bits of conversation here and there. They were both Prefects, so he'd make more of an effort. That and a part of him was curious about her.

Harry really hoped that some aspects were Alistair's imagination and not because some of Hagrid's creations now freely roamed different parts of the world. That was too terrifying for more than a second's contemplation.

Their surroundings shifted, to the classroom they'd all become familiar with. Feeling as if they were in open space for all that time, it was strange to be there again. With a bright twinkle in his eye Alistair seated himself on the grass, students following and finally able to rest for a moment.

"My expectations of you all have risen far beyond what I could have ever anticipated. What I have seen today, is teamwork better than most seasoned adults. I am impressed."

While Harry's team came out victorious, the other teams including their own received house points. The team in last received five each and for those closest to where they needed to be, an extra five were added. Twenty points were taken from Crabbe. Harry didn't know the details exactly but was surprised when Neville received a Detention.

"Mr Potter, if you would?" Brought from his thoughts Harry startled slightly, throwing the duck which he caught with ease. "Thank you, class is dismissed. Would those involved with returning this to me stay for a moment?"

Harry wondered what else was in store. The points for their houses were more than enough, at this point bringing Gryffindor and Slytherin close to equal.

They soon found out, when each of them was given something. From what Harry could see it was the Wizarding version of a coupon or voucher, in place of money which would allow them to make purchases for that value. It was for Honeydukes, with an amount that would give each of them a sugar rush for at least a week.

"Thanks, Professor, you're the man!" Grinning Seamus carefully pocketed his own. Chuckling at his terminology he received similar thanks. One by one each student left. Harry didn't try to, knowing without asking that he'd be required to stay.
Before they touched upon the topic that Harry expected, he asked a question he really wanted to know the answer to. "What did Neville and Crabbe get detention for?"

Sighing when thinking back to that moment, his eyes flickered with disapproval. "Neville specifically instructed the others not to harm Bowtruckles they encountered, but Vincent ignored his words, killing several and gaining a broken nose."

Harry's jaw dropped. "Neville punched him?" With Alistair's nod, he cheered "Yes! Did you have to give him detention though? He definitely deserved it."

"Unfortunately, for this, it is a requirement. However, what he does in detention is up to me."

That was something then. Harry doubted he'd have to do anything extreme.

"Harry." With his playfully serious tone of voice, Harry cocked his head. "Yes?"

He knew exactly what they were about to discuss. Sitting on the floor he reached out, pulling him close until they sat cross-legged in front of each other. "You are growing bolder by the day. I cannot recall the last time I have been surprised by squeezing that part of my anatomy."

Grinning, he was unrepentant. "There's a first time for everything right? I couldn't help myself. Rather than bold, I'd say my actions were cheeky. Really nice cheeks too."

A strange combination of amused and flattered, desire fluttered within Alistair's chest, as he murmured softly. "Why, thank you. Perhaps I shall return the gesture, with an element of surprise."

Adrenaline coursing throughout his system, Harry didn't hesitate to change his seat. "I'd welcome that. Today was fun. Did you see all of that personally?"

With the warm weight of Harry on his lap, Alistair ensured they wouldn't be disturbed until finished here, supporting him with his arms. "The jungle itself, I have been to. There were some elements included taken from different countries, however, the more dangerous creatures were a less severe version."

"It's really impressive stuff. Thanks for the points and everything else, but you're a better reward than any of it."

Tracing Alistair's bottom lip with his thumb, sincerity shone within Harry's eyes. "I'm looking forward to later. Everyone will finally know about us rather than just a few people. You're the best thing that's happened to me."
Alistair believed the same thing, with all his heart. There was so much different in this relationship that he couldn't even begin to put it into perspective. It was different, for all the right reasons. Never in all of his existence, had he been so happy sharing company with a significant other. Before Harry, he'd believed so but right now, all of those moments seemed to pale in comparison. Kissing him deeply, everything soothed his senses. His scent, the softness of his lips, the warmth of his body.

Sighing blissfully, Alistair's head became slightly fogged. It was as if he floated among the clouds in one of his flying forms, rather than within Hogwarts and sitting down. Eyes holding more warmth than Harry thought possible, his eyes fell closed for a moment when a caring hand brushed through his messy locks.

"I am of the same mind. My life has become much more thrilling, with you here."

With a break before his next lesson, Harry was more than content to spend it here. Once outside of the classroom, it remained to be seen if Seamus decided to share what Harry had told him. Either way, he didn't mind. Everyone would know eventually and they could hardly wait for that time to come.

Chapter End Notes

The funeral service for my family member was yesterday. There was a few poems and remembering the best of their life. The curtains closing around their coffin felt like the final goodbye so it really hit home for me. There was nothing over the top, something simple yet effective :) I'm sure they will rest in peace now <3
The reveal of their relationship and Alistair's Vampirism to those in need of knowing first, Alistair enacting vengeance on behalf of his lover and a snapshot in the life of friends.

While that day's DADA lesson had proved to be eventful, the reveal of Alistair's Vampirism and to some, the nature of their relationship, would prove to be equally so.

As Harry returned to Alistair's quarters, a tendril of nervousness swirled within him. He was excited definitely, but he couldn't exactly predict what everyone's reactions would be.

Seeing Alistair in casual clothing once more, caused his mouth to run dry. He wasn't sure there would ever be a time when he didn't have such a reaction. An hour before coming here his note was returned and after, had added it to the small collection he'd acquired.

"Are you ready to leave?" With a lovely smile Alistair held his hand out, Harry immediately holding onto it. The transference of mild warmth was a reassurance, though it was only then he came to realise that he was trembling slightly.

Smile comforting, Alistair squeezed the hand within his own. "You are not the only one nervous."

Surprised, he glanced upwards. "Really?"

Without an ounce of hesitation, he nodded. "I have faced many mixed reactions with my Vampirism. The majority, unfortunately, negative. I have found that rejection is a feeling I cannot grow entirely accustomed to."
Strangely, knowing that Alistar felt the same way helped to calm him down a little, more focused now on providing reassurance to the elder man. "You're friends with most of them right? It will be fine. They're not the kind of people to see you as a Vampire and nothing beyond that. You've broken the stereotype completely."

As pillars of support for one another, all they could do was take each moment as it came, dealing with it accordingly. Harry had known some of them for years and if any did happen to react negatively, then his judgement wasn't as sound as he first believed. But in his heart, he knew things would be fine.

Disappearing straight from Hogwarts they reappeared, outside of the burrow. Releasing one another's hands, for now, Harry mourned the loss of contact.

Without knocking the door opened, Mrs Weasley answering and greeting them with her usual bustling energy. Beaming, she pulled both of them into one of her smothering hugs.

"Alistair, Harry! It's so good to see you both."

She had such infectious energy, Harry couldn't help but smile back. Returning her embrace he patted her on the back and walking in, caught a glimpse of Hagrid attempting to sit on a dining room chair. Inevitably it broke beneath his weight, a hasty reparo and transfiguration by Professor McGonagall ensuring the new seat would be much better.

He could see that everyone was already there and that made things much easier. With two spare seats, they sat side by side, the room's energy serving to settle their nerves further. With Fred and George on Harry's side and Tonks on Alistair's, they found themselves in the midst of different conversations.

"Harry, my good man! How are you-"

"-on this fine day?"

With a stereotypical posh accent, Harry didn't think there were many twins quite as charismatic. Reclining into his heat, he was at peace. There was still the question of Death Eaters and Voldemort himself but otherwise, never better. "I'm doing great. What about you two?"

Harry could see their enthusiasm, Fred eagerly filling him in. "Since Alistair bought a sample of each product, he gave us feedback with everyone. We wouldn't have made anywhere near as much progress if not for him. I've got a feeling there's more to that bloke than what we know but either way, we're thankful."

George nodded, agreeing. "Definitely. Don't suppose this is part of the reason why you got everyone
here today? Minnie's looking good."

Harry nearly choked on the drink Mrs Weasley gave him, eyes watering. "Minnie?"

Gulping theatrically, the twins shared a look when on the opposite side of the table, she treated them to a stern glare.

"Surely she couldn't hear me from that distance?" Fred muttered, shuffling in his seat. Harry had the feeling that she could.

"Wotcher Alistair. How's it going?" Giving him a handshake, he could see her hair was bright red today. He found the concept of Metamorphmagi fascinating, as a human who could disguise herself through natural means she was born with, much like his shapeshifting abilities. He'd had the pleasure of speaking with her for a little during the Halloween party, more so with the Order meetings. The Order had officially been disbanded permanently, once light was shed on its dark origins. None of them missed the meetings, those hours filled with something useful rather than pointlessness.

"I am well, far more so now that Dumbledore is no longer a threat. What about you?"

At the mention of Dumbledore, Tonks' expression turned grim as her hair changed to a colour of less vibrancy. "I never expected any of that. I knew some of the stuff he did from what Harry had told me. But that much? I had no idea. Poor kid. And the Vampires as well, no one deserves that..."

Alistair patted her shoulder. "Only Dumbledore himself was aware of everything he has done. We had no way of knowing everything, until his trial."

Seeing the truth in his words, she returned to normal as a curious twinkle entered her eyes. "Can I get a sneak preview of what you've got to tell us all? I've been trying to guess for ages!"

Amused with her words, he politely declined. "I am afraid not. You will find out shortly."

Not discouraged in the least she accepted his words, hair flashing different colours at odd points, to indicate her mild impatience.

Seeing that everyone was gathered around the table, Harry called for attention. "Thanks for coming everyone. There are two things we need to tell you."

Sharing a look with Alistair, Harry didn't beat around the bush. "I'm in a relationship with Alistair. Back in August, we met in Romania, at his home."

Smiling fondly at the time which almost seemed so long ago, Alistair picked up where he left off.
"From there, we forged an alliance. I was unfamiliar with Harry and all that he had done, but I sensed potential in him. At the time, I was searching for my brother. It was from there that I decided to apply for a teaching position. Not only to watch over Harry but because I suspected that Dumbledore had a hand in Solomon's disappearance."

"And from there, we connected. I pretty much stumbled across Solomon and after that, things fell into place. We've been together since October 31st but didn't want to say anything while Dumbledore was still around. If he knew, he would have probably tried to use it for an advantage somehow." Harry shrugged. "Didn't want to take the risk."

There were mixed reactions. Some seemed unsurprised, while others did. Tonks was the first to break the silence, reaching around Alistair to give him a friendly slap on the back. "I knew it. See? Told you the feelings were mutual."

A combination of pleased with herself and for them, her colour shifts was brought on from excitement rather than impatience, this time.

Fred and George's eyebrows raised. "No idea you swung that way. I thought Cho was the apple of your eye?"

At Fred's question, Harry firmly shook his head. "No. She was just a crush but this is different."

With his hair ruffled to a further untameable state, George grinned. "I'm happy for you Harry."

After listening to countless amounts of congratulations and surrounded by happily tearful women, Severus brought everything to a shuddering halt. "Yes yes, congratulations Potter. You and the irritatingly cheerful man at your side have combined to create something nausea-inducing."

Rather than offended, they were amused, especially when Harry observed Mrs Weasley's and Professor McGonagall's matching glares. Unphased he remained irritated, a part of him wondering what in the blazes did they expect? He wasn't nice. He'd never claimed to be and wouldn't change a damned thing.

Keeping things on track, Mr Weasley was always the epitome of calm. "Congratulations to you both. What else did you want to share?"

Even though Harry had reassured him, he was nervous for the man. The nature of his relationship with him went down surprisingly well, though he expected future questions later. The staff who Alistair spoke with most would be the first to know of his nature but later on, each member of staff would be aware. After that came the students.

With their relationship out in the open, Harry didn't hesitate to hold his hand in silent support. While he wouldn't be the kind of person to become very intimate in public, he wasn't embarrassed in the
least with this much. He could sense Alistair needed it.

He never found it difficult to make friends. That is if they were unaware of his Vampirism. Once aware of this, it changed. Those of different races he considered to be friends had quickly shunned him, once finding out the truth. Each time, it chipped away a little inside. It was a wonder he had anything left after all the emotional turmoil he suffered but still, he had the capacity to love and care for others, deeply.

Which was why he hoped for the best outcome possible here. He was on the brink of friendship with Severus, the exchange of gifts helping to melt the ice more and despite his harsh words today, there was no ill intent or malice behind them. Minerva, he considered one of his best friends, developing a strong relationship with her. Molly had taken him in as if he was one of her own and Arthur, was a pleasant man to have conversations with. Hagrid, Tonks, the twins, he held a great fondness for. He didn't want to contemplate rejection in any instance but as he'd been faced with it so often, he prepared for any outcome.

Closing his eyes for one second he opened them, dispelling the glamour charm which hid his eyes from all but those who knew. Brown shifting to Orange, gasps met this silent revelation.

"I am a Vampire." Turning to Minerva and Severus, guilt rose within him. "I have lied and deceived you both. The experience I have gained has been over many years and not a human lifespan. I offer my sincere apologies and as Headmistress, if you should wish to permanently dismiss me and cut off all contact, I will understand."

The thought of that happening wounded him as if a shard of glass had pricked his heart.

She wouldn't do that, Harry knew for a fact. He'd been an invaluable help, to her personally and the students. The room was filled with dead silence until she spoke. While shocked, it held no trace of disgust whatsoever.

"With Albus' hatred of Vampires, it would be foolish to make that public knowledge. It answers the many questions I have asked myself." Pausing for a moment she took in his expression and somehow, felt as if everything was right now. This was bigger than she could have ever expected, but had never met a more genuine person. After years of reading many individuals, Minerva liked to think her ability in reading people was enough to see the truth. "I will not be dismissing you. Hogwarts has been in desperate need for a passionate staff member who is able to teach students how to defend themselves. I have not seen such dedication to the students in this subject until Remus' time teaching."

Then, she smiled. Many of those gathered there had yet to see her smile, used to her strict appearance. Fred and George pretended to faint. "While I'm surprised, this has no effect on how I feel personally. I consider you a valuable member of staff but also, a friend."

Alistair was touched, to the point where words failed him. She had every right to dismiss him for his actions but with her words, it was as if a great weight was lifted. It was Severus' response that came
as a greater surprise.

His eyes were filled with mirth, rather than anger, irritation or a neutral expression. Smirking, he thought back to all the students and their muttered comments. "Students believe that I am a Vampire Bat when, in fact, it is the last person anyone expects. Your Vampirism is of no concern to me Lothaire, though I ask that you not drain the blood of potential ingredients dry." Sneering slightly, that was his way, at least to Alistair, of saying that he accepted him.

Sharing a look between them, Fred and George were fascinated. "You don't look like any Vampire I've seen. Where're your fangs?"

At Fred's question, Alistair allowed his natural state to take over for a moment. Eyes widening, one word simultaneously left their lips. "Wicked."

Harry observed everyone closely, taking note of Mr and Mrs Weasley in particular. The former looked curious while the latter, hesitant. Wondering if it would help a bit, Harry smiled reassuringly. "There's a lot of things about Vampires taught that aren't true. Why don't you ask him a few questions? It might help if you know more."

Molly was raised to stay clear of Vampires and Werewolves, due to their dangerous nature. But with Remus she found this to be untrue, a lovely man with a nature he couldn't help. It was only during his transformation days he proved a threat but even then, that didn't take away from who he was.

She'd never met a Vampire, up until now. All that she'd learned fought against all that she knew of Alistair. Her heart knew that he would never willingly hurt anyone, but was anything she learned true? With Harry's words, that was the next step forward.

It started with questions from her but soon, the majority of those gathered there listened to Alistair's words when he answered every single question. From there the dynamics with everyone shifted, as Tonks finally asked the question she'd been dying to know ever since finding this out.

"How old are you then?"

With many curious eyes on his own, not a single person remained unaffected with the large number they were presented with. "1,500 years of age."

While Severus loathed using muggle idioms, he couldn't help but think he'd dodged several bullets. He detected no traces of lies and if he was a man with his disposition, no doubt he would have met his end within the first week of knowing one another. It was a glaring reminder to reign in the worst of his personality, especially when the man had gone to such lengths in befriending him.

Taken aback, all Tonks could do was stare. "And you haven't got one wrinkle! So, 26 is the number you stopped ageing physically?"
When Alistair nodded in the affirmative, they were all interrupted when Hagrid burst into tears.

Looking over at him, he was concerned. "Are you alright?"

"I though' Dumbledore was a good man. But 'e-" Stopping to blow his nose with what would be a hand towel for them all, he continued. "Wasn'. And 'e hurt you."

Standing up so suddenly that the table overbalanced, Harry could feel his own bones popping with the crushing force of Hagrid's enthusiastic hug.

"I'm proud of yeh. Not easy saying somethin like tha'."

Alistair had met many incredible forces of strength in his life. Hagrid was certainly up there with one of them, partly wondering if his internal organs would be permanently rearranged. But still, he found Hagrid's compassion very sweet.

Unable to place his arms around him in turn, Alistair settled for giving him a shoulder pat. "I am alright. We all will be now."

Wincing in sympathy for Alistair's predicament, Harry dove in for a rescue attempt. "Hey, Hagrid? I know he's immortal but I think you're testing the limits of that now."

Realising that if with anyone else he would have crushed their ribs, Hagrid hastily released him.

Before anyone else would make another comment, Fred and George glanced at one another.

"Fred, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I believe I am."

Muttering to one another, twin gazes lock onto Alistair's own. Standing up they gesture for him to follow.

"I will return momentarily." Following them, Alistair left the room and with it, the majority took their leave too. Without so much as a word to anyone, Harry watched as Professor Snape and McGonagall flooed back to Hogwarts.

Mr and Mrs Weasley approached him.
Harry was the first to speak. "How do you feel about everything?"

Taking a seat beside him, Harry could see she was still trying to process what had happened. "I had my suspicions that there was something between you two. Today only confirmed it for me."

She looked normal to him, unable to see traces of negativity there. But still, he couldn't help asking. "You don't mind then?"

She immediately shook her head. "Of course not! It's none of my business. From what I know of him he's a wonderful man. If he treats you well, then I have no complaints."

Harry couldn't hide his smile, eyes a tranquil shade of green. "He does. Even if he's a Vampire he'd never intentionally harm anyone. I'd bet my magic on it."

"I'm losing the last of my hair and I can feel more strands falling out," Arthur joked, still shocked and overwhelmed. "When you said there was something we needed to know, I didn't expect that. Fascinating, he must have seen many things over his lifetime."

"Hagrid, Harry, Tonks! Get over here!"

At Fred or George's voice, it could be any one of them, they shared a look and found themselves outside.

'What did they want with you?'

'I received very intense questioning about the art of pranks. I promised that at a later date I would discuss more with them, as to share everything I know would take more time than what is available.'

He should have known really. If he was them, he'd take the opportunity to ask as well, especially since he'd seen more than most.

"Good of you to join us all!" George enthusiastically greeted them, inviting for seats to be taken away from the table with two facing each other. As Harry sat down, he glanced over questioningly. "What's this about?"

"Hagrid and our newly revealed Vampire are going to have an arm wrestling match, of course!"

Looking excited at the prospect, both rubbed their hands in sync with one another. Harry remembered mentioning as much to Alistair and the twins would bet on something like that but didn't expect it to happen so suddenly. Even so, he was into it. "I definitely want to see this. Hagrid, Alistair, you up for it?"
Only mildly confused Hagrid agreed, thankful for their consideration as a larger than life chair was on one side.

"I am rather curious." He knew Giants were one of the strongest beings on this earth, but how would a half-giant measure up? His strength increased by the very slightest fraction each year. He'd never had to use his full strength before and more of a magic user than anything, found himself wondering about the possible outcome.

As each took their seats, Tonks clapped her hands excitedly. "Are you taking bets?"

The answer was yes, as the very same thing they used in Harry's 4th year popped into Fred's hands. "Roll up, place your bets now! Who will it be? Our friendly neighbourhood half-giant Hagrid or Alistair, a Vampire with some serious arse kicking skills?"

Harry couldn't imagine many people beating Hagrid in an arm wrestle. Even Alistair. It was hard to picture, with their obvious size difference. Harry had spent enough nights by his side to see that he had muscles, but not to extremes. Hagrid was bulky and Harry was sure of there being muscle as well. How else would he be able to drag an entire tree each Christmas by himself? It was like comparing a branch to the tree trunk.

But even so, he believed in Alistair. That and he could hardly bet against his own boyfriend.

Removing a large handful of galleons, he put them into one compartment. "My bet's on Alistair."

Tonks was Hagrid. Even the twins were divided in opinion, Fred joining Harry's bet while George joined with Tonks.

With equal support for both, the spectators took their seats, Harry watching intently.

The size difference was almost comical, barely able to grip each other's hands as Alistair's own became practically swallowed by the sheer size.

After a short countdown, they began. At first, there wasn't too much movement, taking a moment to test each other's strength. Hagrid had the advantage of a more secure grip, but Alistair's competitive spirit rose. Gradually they began to apply the pressure but even so, their arms remained locked in the middle. With looks of intense concentration, Harry was surprised by how evenly matched they were. It went to show just how strong Alistair was but also Hagrid, someone just a small fraction of his age.

At this point, Alistair had applied the majority of his strength and it was only slightly in favour of him. He had underestimated a giant's strength, knowing that if he were to face a full-blooded giant, he wouldn't win unless magic became involved. It was a reminder to never become lax with self-
improvement.

Arm muscle bulging, it began to strain slightly with the unique pressure. Arm wrestles were one of the things he'd never taken part in but he had to admit, there was a certain kind of thrill to it. His opponent wasn't completely unaffected, a light sheen of sweat coating his complexion.

"Blimey, yer strong."

He was surprised, even knowing his true age. He'd never met a Vampire but right there, was proof they weren't something to be underestimated.

With a twinkle in his eye, Alistair's strong grip belied appearances. "You are too, very much so."

Harry couldn't remember the last time he witnessed something so tense, for all the right reasons. Literally, on the edge of his seat, he couldn't and didn't want to look away, as the power balance constantly shifted. Just when he thought one might have the upper hand, the other would sweep that idea away.

It must have been at least five minutes and while Alistair showed no signs of being affected, Harry imagined he was, at least a little. Hagrid, on the other hand, began to sweat buckets, affecting his grip.

Now was the time to apply pressure. Using the majority of his strength, Alistair slowly began to push his arm down, meeting resistance every second. Centimetres from touching the table they remained locked, just hovering above it. Not having the capacity to be breathless, it didn't stop the faint sounds of exertion leaving his lips. So quiet, that Harry almost missed them.

And then, Hagrid's arm touched the table.

"Alistair wins!" Fred announced, to mild groans from George and Tonks as Harry was given half of the total winnings.

Seeing Hagrid's predicament Harry saw his handkerchief, temporarily transfiguring it into a towel.

Giving his thanks he scrubbed his face with it, catching his breath and giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder. One which threatened to partially bury him in the ground with much downward force.

Rubbing his shoulder and suspecting there would be bruising later, he couldn't help but voice his admiration. "Seriously, that was brilliant."

"Yer a worthy opponent." Hagrid complimented, dark eyes alight with enjoyment. "Yer welcome to a rematch later."
Truthfully, Alistair would accept that. He found it enjoyable, in a strange way. He never thought something like this would be entertaining to partake in, but surprised himself.

"So, Harry," Tonks came over, whispering into his ear. "A hot Vampire eh? You know what they say, with age comes experience. I don't mind admitting I'm a bit jealous of you there. Is he everything you expected?"

Thinking over their time together, he answered honestly. "I didn't know what to expect. Before all this, I just thought he was naturally flirty and he didn't feel the same way about me as I did him. But after that, it's been great. He's so supportive and I've never been happier."

Misty-eyed, Tonks' smile trembled slightly. She would have to be on her death bed before admitting it, but she liked the idea of romance too and even without asking, could tell Alistair was that type. "If anyone deserves to be happy, it's you. I'm pleased. It's going to take me ages to get over the fact that he's older than most of Hogwarts' students combined."

Blowing out a breath, the number didn't register in her mind at this point. Later on, though, it would no doubt sink in. She rarely took time off these days, now that there was no need for any more Order meetings so stepping out to take a short break from work had proven good for her.

Apparating back to the Ministry, Hagrid took his leave as well. Once saying goodbye to Mr and Mrs Weasley, they took a short walk, to discuss all that had happened.

"See? I told you it would be fine! Though honestly, everything went down better than I expected."

There were no traces of nerves from either, hearts light with the knowledge of acceptance.

Alistair could count the number of times this had happened on one hand. The majority of his relationships had broken down with those who weren't already aware of his nature and the ones that didn't mind inevitably ended up going down the same route.

"I am pleased that they are accepting of it. Though, it remains for the other students to find out."

Harry grimaced. That was one large hurdle. There were a thousand students who attended Hogwarts. It would be nice, but unrealistic, for everyone to be similarly welcoming.

"Everyone who knows has your back. You've helped so many. Not only that but you helped with Dumbledore's downfall. Times are changing. Not always for the better but I think with this, things are better than they used to be. So it's ok."

He wasn't usually the best with words but when someone was in need, his brain managed to conjure
up something that made at least a little sense.

At this point, Alistair was unsure what he'd ever do without him. "Thank you. Your words are reassuring."

Pleased to know that it helped a little, Harry touched upon the subject of his strength. "So you won an arm wrestle with Hagrid? Lifting me must be like holding a potato in comparison."

At the familiar twinkle in Alistair's eye, taking a step back barely crossed Harry's mind before he was promptly picked up. "In terms of lightness, perhaps. It is not a struggle for me to do so and I rather enjoy it."

Realising that his requests to be released would go ignored, Harry settled in for the short ride. Occupying himself he leaned in close, lightly nibbling on Alistair's earlobe. Kissing his neck, their close proximity in combination with his natural scent sent him faintly lightheaded.

Before long he was put down, to sit between Alistair's legs as he leaned back against the bark of a tree.

Nothing disturbed them, save for the sound of Harry's light breathing. Taking Alistair's hand he observed it, running his fingers over the back and spending some time simply admiring.

He loved these moments, more than words could express. The times when no words were needed and contentment was shared. He always felt so safe and secure, like those out there who had painted a price on his head never stood a chance targeting him.

"Harry. Might I ask you a question?"

At the hesitation in his voice, Harry's ears pricked as he prepared himself. "Sure."

"Have you decided on a course of action for the Dursleys?"

He had a feeling that would be it. Biting his lip Harry leaned back, supported by Alistair's arms. "I was trying not to think about it. I know I can't just leave things the way they are, but I'm not sure I can face them again."

Soothing him, Alistair kissed the top of his head. "I know. It is your decision and whatever answer, I will be here to support you. I only ask because I wish to pay them a visit."

Harry glanced up and into his eyes, morbidly curious. "You're not going to drain them are you?"
Laughing at the look of disgust, his answer was clear. "No. I fear what illness I would gain if I should indulge myself in that manner. And ever since I have tasted your blood, there is no craving for anything else other than that."

"I won't stop you from going to see them. As far as I'm concerned I washed my hands of that the night I broke free."

Oh, Alistair had every intention of expressing his displeasure. His hatred of the Dursleys was equally as strong with Dumbledore. The moment Harry turned around and tilted his head to the side, the action drew Alistair's eyes towards his exposed skin. Able to see the blood flowing through him, it awakened his natural instincts. Before anything should happen in public he transported them back, met with the familiar softness of his bed.

Brushing noses, Alistair almost sighed. "Ah, Harry. I am inclined to believe that you tempt me on purpose."

Harry's expression became innocent. "Would I ever do that?"

Even when saying those words, his hand began to run through Alistair's hair, loosening his ribbon in the process.

That was all the answer needed. looking for silent permission Harry nodded, exposing his neck invitingly. He never thought he'd use blood replenishing potions for such a reason, but he enjoyed when Alistair drank from him. Not only the euphoric feeling but seeing that it was pleasurable for him too.

Alistair had drunk his blood a few times since the first and seemed to show no signs of building any kind of resistance. He wanted him to indulge, liking the fact that he was needed and not only this, but he desired no one’s blood but Harry. It was a bizarre thing to be pleased over and yet, he was.

He could breathe and yet each time, it seemed as if air became a problem. It took his breath away, bringing with it a sense of euphoria like no other. Some were put off by the idea of Vampires but for Harry, he simply saw this as a bonus.

Each moment like this they shared, was a deeper bond of intimacy understood to no one but those who have partaken in the same thing. Before long he’d had his fill, thoroughly licking clean the puncture wounds so they healed.

As before his eyes became slightly unfocused, removing traces of blood from his lips.

“It’s sexy when you lose control like that.” Murmuring those words into Alistair’s ear during that temporary moment of vulnerability, it didn’t stop their sudden role reversal. Unable to speak further his lips were claimed, repeatedly. Breathless for an entirely different reason, it seemed impossible at
that moment to physically grow any closer.

Every time they touched, kissed, interacted, Harry’s feelings began to build into something nigh overwhelming. He’d mentioned he’d like to plan their next date and already, had something in mind. Like his first date with Alistair, Harry wanted to show him a different side of things that he might not have ever experienced. It would be on the opposite end of the scales in terms of the area, but hopefully would be enjoyable for both. He hadn’t set a date or time yet, but would soon.

He never wanted these moments to end. If he could capture a fragment of time and have it stop around them permanently, he’d be tempted to do so. He believed happiness was escaping the abusive clutch of his so-called family to spend time with someone he did consider family but after Alistair, that had reached a whole new level.

Idly, Harry wondered what Alistair would do to his relatives if draining them wasn’t an option.

It was a few days later, and time for Alistair to pay the Dursleys a visit. He had only ever seen the street which Harry grew up on through memories and not personally. They were moved to a safe location with their memories altered for a while and afterwards, returned to their home. Nothing to them was out of the ordinary, aware that Harry was at Hogwarts but nothing beyond this.

Arriving just around the corner from Privet Drive, he had never seen anything like it.

Strangely, it was enough to leave him unsettled. He could detect in a large radius if threats were nearby and while there weren’t, the cookie cutter houses all in a row with absolutely no individuality was almost stifling. He couldn't imagine spending hours here, let alone years.

Rather than verbally greet him, he could see that most chose to stare from within the confines of their homes. He'd made sure to blend in with some of the casual clothing Harry had purchased for him, along with brown eyes and loose hair. Though, it seemed anyone who didn't fit the usual mould would be given the same treatment.

Some conversed with their neighbours in hushed tones, of which Alistair could hear every word.

"Who is he? I've never seen him before."

"Probably visiting from elsewhere. He looks like a foreigner. Wonder where he's going?"

"May as well keep watch, to see."

There were no variations in opinions, the words foreigner spoken with more distaste than he'd ever heard. He'd always faced problems with his Vampirism and sometimes lineage for those with
unresolved issues with his families, but rarely was his nationality brought into things. Proud of his heritage and home country, it was saddening to see such close-mindedness.

In such a restrictive environment, it was truly a miracle that Harry had broken free from it at all.

Every single person appeared to be an interfering busybody, with the exception of Mrs Figg, who Harry had told him about. She'd moved to a different location than Privet Drive, an action which he honestly couldn't blame her for.

Running around the corner and in his direction, was a little girl. A large lollipop in her hand she licked it on the way, suddenly coming to a halt when seeing him. "Hello. What's your name?"

Curious she came right up to his side, gazing upward.

Children could grow to become terrible or great, depending on the environment. He hoped she retained her unique spark and this environment didn't remove it.

"I am Alistair." He introduced himself, relaxing enough to give her a genuine smile.

Nodding to indicate her understanding, she continued to look at him. "You've got pretty hair."

Before he could respond, a shriek which came from several houses down rang throughout the air. "AMY! GET HERE NOW!"

On the verge of pouting, she settled for a brief eye roll. "I gotta go, bye bye."

Giving him a small wave she went back in the opposite direction. That brief encounter with her had reaffirmed for him that Privet Drive wasn't completely filled with undesirables.

Arriving outside of Number Four this house was no exception. At least appearance wise. However, the significance of this building brought with it waves of unrestrained emotion. Even without entering, he found it challenging to remain calm.

He could detect that Vernon and Petunia were inside, but not Dudley. Assuming that he would return later and was busy roaming the streets in search of vulnerable individuals with his 'friends', Alistair knocked on the door.

Shortly after it was opened by Petunia. With an overly long neck and a permanent disgusted appearance, she made her displeasure of him known when giving him the once over. Facial expression pinched in disapproval, her impatience was made clear. "What do you want? If you're selling anything we're not buying."
Her rudeness to a complete stranger left him feeling taken aback while somewhere within his mind, mild irritation rose. Not enough for actions to be clouded, but present.

"I am not selling anything, Mrs Dursley. I am here to discuss your nephew."

The change in her expression was immediate. Face twisted with hatred, she hissed at him. "Whatever he did, we don't want him back. You can keep the little freak!"

About to slam the door in his face it remained open, easily overpowering her strength and with fast actions that were missed within the blink of an eye. Opening and closing her mouth she remained motionless until he invited himself inside.

He believed politeness was the very foundation of fostering good relationships. But for this, he desired nothing less. He could see that she would be uncooperative and returning home without having his say wasn't an option. Narrowing his eyes ever so slightly, he made his own displeasure known. "Do not use that word in my presence."

"Get out! I'll call the police!" Her shriek pierced his eardrums, more sensitive to sound than humans.

"You will do no such thing." Letting the glamour charm fade away from his facial features, she gasped. "Y-You're another one of those freaks! Go back to where you came from!"

Trying to back away from him, his expression rooted her to the spot. Not through magic, but his presence alone. He abhorred that word, more so than ever. He had been called many a name and didn't mind insults to him in the slightest but Harry? He would retaliate.

Hearing the commotion Vernon came blundering in, spittle flying from his lips as his skin tone took on a reddish purple hue. "HOW DARE YOU! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE THIS INSTANT!"

With a snap of his fingers Petunia began magically rooted to the spot while, with his other hand, the slightest motion of his fingers had Vernon lifted into the air by his throat. Little by little the pressure was increased, until his eyes bulged with fear and was now gasping for breath.

Magic holding both in place, Alistair came nose to nose with him. The Intimidator was now intimidated. Tilting his head to the side ever so slightly, a smile graced his lips. But rather than the usual warm expression, it was devoid of anything welcoming and reflected the darker side of his nature. Sunset eyes presenting a certain danger, he spoke.

"I will not leave. Neither of you has an option in this. You will follow my instructions to the letter. If I am met with any form of resistance, there will be severe consequences. Do I make myself clear?"
Unable to voice his assent, a nod was Alistair's answer. Satisfied he released them both, observing Vernon catching his breath while Petunia came to his side. Eyeing him with a mixture of wariness and hatred, he wasted no time.

"Sit down."

Gesturing towards the living room the pair reluctantly did as asked, taking the sofa while he seated himself in an armchair.

With almost perfect timing, the door slammed open. "Mum, Dad, I'm back!" Closing just as violently came the voice of Dudley. In the living room doorway, he stopped, noticing Alistair. Seeing the colour of his eyes, he paled. "Who are you?"

"My name is no business of yours. I am Harry's partner and I came to discuss your treatment of him. Take a seat."

Seeing that there was no option in the matter, Dudley squeezed onto the sofa end.

"What?!" Sputtering, Vernon was unable to keep quiet. "He's one of those nancy boys? Dudley, did he touch you?"

At that question, Dudley looked uncomfortable. "No."

Just when Alistair believed his hatred couldn't possibly reach new heights, the man had opened his mouth to prove otherwise. "Your ignorance disgusts me. His sexuality does not mean that he would commit such a vile act. In fact, it is all of you who are disgusting. What give you the right to treat a child, now a young man, in the manner which you have?"

Being confronted about this the first time, left them lost for words. While hesitation registered in Dudley's features, Vernon was the first to further test his patience. "We had no choice! That old fool Dumpling or whatever his name is left him on our doorstep! The boy is lucky we gave him what we did! Coming into our house with his freaky magic powers."

It was almost as if they truly did have a death wish, as Petunia was the next to speak. "Also ruining our reputation and having the neighbours gossip! I wanted nothing to do with my sister, Potter or his hellspawn. He's no nephew of mine."

Alistair's heart broke. It had been broken and fixed again under numerous circumstances, but this was a different kind of pain he had yet to feel until now. It was one thing seeing Harry memories and the talks he'd had with him about them, but another thing entirely to see just how deep their hatred ran. There was so much about Harry to love and he couldn't, for all the years that he'd lived, see anything about him that would be worthy of such hatred. While he understood that giving him up for adoption or to another guardian wouldn't have worked with Dumbledore there to oversee things,
basic needs such as a proper bedroom, food and clothing should have been met. They weren't, none of them constituting for something proper and even now, Harry was still recovering from the effects.

Dudley remained silent. A wise choice, as anything else might tip the scales a little too much.

Alistair was almost tempted to actually kill them. At least, Vernon and Petunia. While Dudley wouldn't be in any way excused, he believed that change was possible at that age. But death would be a blessing, something of which he felt they were wholly undeserving of.

He allowed his natural state to take over, mainly because, in place of blood, he would drink in Vernon and Petunia's fear as a substitute. For all the times Harry was afraid and no one came to his rescue.

Seeing his fangs and red eyes, Petunia screamed. It was fortunate that he'd soundproofed this building, or the authorities may very well have made an appearance. For the first time since asking who he was, Dudley spoke. "V-Vampire!"

Eyes glinting, he gave him a menacing grin. "Indeed I am. Well done."

Thoroughly cowed Dudley shrunk back in his seat, pupils trembling.

"You did not meet even the most basic needs with Harry. Where kindness and love are needed to raise a child you showed nothing but hatred and scorn, alongside neglecting and abusing someone who did not deserve such treatment. By nature, I may be a dark creature, but I would never raise a hand to someone in such a manner and to know that each of you has, repeatedly, sickens me to the core. In the eyes of magic and non-magic law, you deserve to be punished. I will not hand you over, however, I will enact my own punishment."

Whether verbally or internally, he had no doubt the Dursleys had ill thoughts of others. Until such a time came where their attitudes towards others changed, any negative thought of those undeserving would bring a great deal of pain. Depending on how one looked at it, this was worse than what Dumbledore was experiencing. The magic would stop once all the pain he'd inflicted on others was reflected back to him but then, that was it. He doubted that would change his opinions any. For the pain to stop for them, that would be a requirement.

With a slow wave of his hand, Vernon, Petunia and Dudley were under the effects of his curse. Dudley's was only a fraction less in severity, aware that part of the reason why he acted in this manner was through the direct influence of his parents and their direct spoiling of him.

He added a little something extra for Vernon and Petunia. A lover of food he would never be satisfied, every mouthful would be akin to sawdust. And someone obsessed with cleanliness and who would often work their nephew to the bone would experience something similar. Never satisfied with the house's state she would see imperfections everywhere, relentlessly cleaning indoors and gardening outdoors, even if there was nothing in need of tending to, there would always be a
This would remain with them forever. Or at least, until he chose to remove it. The moment those unpleasant thoughts returned, so would everything else.

"What did you do?!" Petunia cried, clutching her chest as she felt a stabbing sensation. Vernon was no better off, alternating between facial colours like a traffic light. So angry he couldn't form words, just simple grunting noises.

Alistair's expression was icy cold. "Something which someone should have done to you long before now." Satisfied with his work he stood up, with only a few parting words. "I believe no amount of redemption or apologies will ever be enough to erase all that you have done to him and I am thankful that he is the wonderful young man that I have the pleasure and privilege of knowing. While you may not love him I do and many others."

Ending with those words, he couldn't wait to leave. Exiting the room he was about to disappear on the spot but stopped by the surprising presence of Dudley. Sensing that he was about to say something he kept the conversation private, ensuring Vernon and Petunia wouldn't interfere.

With pain registering in his expression, Alistair could tell that it was already at work. It went along a line of conversation he wasn't expecting but even so, he listened silently.

"I still think magic is weird and whatever you hit us with, we deserve it."

He admitted that quickly, continuing. "We learned something at school recently, about abuse. Until then, I didn't know what we did to him was abusive. Whenever I asked mum and dad about why he was treated differently to me they just said it was normal to treat people with magic like that. I didn't question it and dad asked me to join in. He used to buy me things as a reward for it as well. I know it doesn't excuse anything, but I realise now."

Throughout that Dudley was unable to meet his eyes. In more courage than his parents had shown, he met Alistair's eyes that had returned to their usual colour. "I know you won't believe me and if you say anything to him he won't either but for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Normally Alistair preferred to stay away from people's minds unless necessary. But curiously, he scanned his surface thoughts and could see it was true. The language and actions he'd seen or been taught by his parents battled against the new information within his mind. Alistair could see that it would take time but at this point, perhaps there was hope.

Knowing by he Dudley referred to Harry, Alistair inclined his head. "Very well. Thank you for speaking with me. I have no intention nor desire of ever associating myself with your family again however, I will say this. There is a chance for you to grow and change for the better in this world, providing that you are open to it."
Before Dudley could respond, Alistair disappeared on the spot and with it, all the protective magic to prevent outside interference was cancelled. He was scared shitless and even now remained so, but had the feeling that taking those words to heart would be in his best interest. Returning to his room Dudley vowed to truly think about what he wanted out of his life and if being anything like his dad was a good thing at all.

Relaxing outside with his friends, Aela popped out of Harry's shirt sleeve. It was a day of adventuring, largely at her insistence because while she'd met Solomon, she'd yet to meet Alistair and her desire to investigate the scent which Harry smelled strongly off alongside his own was enough to be in a mildly pestering mood.

Hermione jumped, startled by Aela's appearance as her head poked out of Harry's sleeve close by. "How long has she been there? I had no idea!"

Glancing at his arm with the Basilisk tattoo along with the real one, his smile turned fond. "Since this morning. She wants to meet Alistair and I'm seeing him later on, so it's a good opportunity."

Apparently satisfied enough with sticking her head out, Aela returned to her original position. "Sssso warm."

Sometimes he forgot she was even there, knowing when it was fine to speak and when she should remain quiet. Even Professor Snape, arguably one of the most observant, hadn't detected her presence.

Harry decided to ask Neville something which had been on his mind over the past week. "I've seen you talking with Daphne Greengrass a lot recently. Anything worth sharing?"

Nudging him in the shoulder with a cheeky grin, Neville blushed faintly. "Not yet. I mean, well-" Cutting himself off he frowned, blushing even more with Harry's laughter. "I just thought she was interesting and I should get to know her better. I'm not even sure if we're friends but at least from my point of view, I get on with her well. Purebloods have these mandatory meet-ups with other Pureblood families and I vaguely remember meeting her a few years ago, before Hogwarts."

Still smiling, Harry accepted his answer. "Fair enough, I hope it works out for you."

Appreciating his words Neville's back rested against the very same tree he'd unintentionally renewed that day. Curiously, Harry turned to Ginny. "What about you? Anyone dashing that's caught your eye?"

Ginny shook her head, blowing out a breath. "Not really, they're all arses."
Amused with her comment, someone came to his mind. "What about Dean? I thought you got on ok with him?"

Seeing his point, Ginny amended her words. "Ok, not all of them. I don't see him in that way though. We tried for a bit but in the end, we're better off as friends. Why the sudden interest?"

"I feel a bit bad that I've talked about my relationship a lot. I talk about Alistair that much I'm shocked you haven't hexed me quiet." Joking, he shielded himself when Ginny playfully fingered her wand.

"Don't tempt me. Seriously, no worries. I'm happy for you. I don't think there's anyone at Hogwarts I can see myself with."

Within his mind's eye, a six-foot grave was being dug. "What about Professor Snape? He could cool your fiery temper with some of his comments."

"Ow!" A stinging hex with some extra bite hit his arm. Glaring, the tip of her wand glowed. "Harry! Don't even joke about that! I'm pretty sure he's someone's type, but definitely not mine."

Subtly, Harry tried to stand and edge himself away. "I don't believe you, classic denial right there."

When a stronger hex was aimed his way he nimbly dodged, taking cover behind the tree. Standing up she approached him, but not before he started to run.

"Harry get back here! I only want to talk!"

"Yeah, with your wand! I'm not stopping for anyone."

Watching as Ginny chased after Harry, Hermione's eyes glinted with fondness. "He's so much different to last year, it's amazing."

In the process of creating more butterbeer necklaces, Luna was humming under her breath, stopping to glance up for a moment. Eyes sparkling with joy, she decided to join in from her sitting position. Her wand directed towards them, she voiced her incantation. "Flores Imber!"

Seemingly from thin air, a shower of flowers fell around the pair, of all different kinds. Covering the ground in a myriad of colours, it brightened scenery which had yet to regain leaves lost.

Hermione blinked. "Luna, where did you learn that spell?"
"I created it. I can show you too." With her offer accompanied by the usual cheerfulness, she eagerly agreed. In truth, Hermione didn't know if it would ever come in handy but always liked to learn new things.

In the process of trying it out for herself, she succeeded, eyes glinting with triumph even as someone appeared beneath the shower. Brushing petals from his hair, Alistair glanced around in mild confusion. "Where did they come from?"

Sheepishly, Hermione waved her hand. "Luna was showing me a new spell, it creates a kind of flower shower." Then, she got a closer look at him. She'd never seen him look so casual before and idly, wondered what Solomon would look like if he did the same.

Seeing the colours was enough to raise his spirits. Sensing Harry was here he'd come to this spot. A moment later he noticed him, under spellfire and being chased by Ginny. Tilting his head, he questioned them. "Are they playing a game?"

Neville helpfully piped up. "Sort of. Ginny was saying there isn't anyone in school she's interested in. Harry made a joke and implied Professor Snape would make a good match."

It was rare to see Harry give into his more childish side so for a moment, simply observed. Sensing that it was coming to an end he appeared, right in Harry's path.

Skidding to a halt Harry stopped, ducking behind him. "Hah! You can't get me now! An unstoppable force has arrived."

Amused Alistair let it play out, addressing Ginny. "Might I borrow a moment of Harry's time? Afterwards, you may suitably retaliate."

"Hey!"

Chuckling at his mock indignation Ginny agreed, backing away and making a cutthroat gesture towards Harry.

Ensuring that they had privacy Alistair turned around, greeted with a question. "You visited the Dursleys today, right? How did it go?"

As slight wariness and curiosity wavered within his gaze, Alistair couldn't hold back. Pulling him into a strong embrace, he put all of his emotion and affection into it.

Surprised by his actions Harry returned it, slightly confused but not minding in the least. "What happened?"
Not releasing him, Alistair absorbed his warmth. "They are far worse in person. More than I could ever possibly imagined. Privet Drive in and of itself is unsettling. It discourages any form of individuality and most people there, rather than say hello, would rather settle for whispered discussions or peeking through their window. Throughout my visit, I was treated with disgust and hostility. Vernon and Petunia's words were the vilest that I have heard in quite some time."

Harry wasn't surprised, glad that he'd decided against ever seeing them again. "I'm not surprised. The neighbours are always like that. They usually spread rumours about me as well, making sure I remained friendless. As for Vernon and Petunia, I'm not surprised. What about Dudley?"

"He told me to tell you that he was sorry."

Pulling back enough to see his expression, there was shock written all over it, mixed with doubt. "Really?"

He expected as much. "Yes. He was telling the truth."

"..I know I should probably forgive and forget, but I can't. He was the one who carved that word into my back."

If he was in Harry's position, forgiveness wouldn't come easily to him either. "I understand. There is no need to concern yourself with them any longer."

At the sound of his satisfaction, his eyes lit with curiosity. "Are you sure you didn't kill them?"

"No. But Vernon and Petunia may wish they were."

Filling him in on the details, Harry could only imagine their current hell on earth but felt no sympathy. While Dudley had surprised him, to know there was some remorse there was better than he expected. Even so, he had no intention of ever seeing him again, family or not.

"Good." Equally satisfied now he knew the details, he could detect some traces of tension in Alistair's frame. "What's wrong?"

Even with Harry there, the language which they'd used and their blatant hatred filled him with so much sorrow and some anger, that he wanted to return and double their punishment. As such, it was a slight struggle to speak. "Though I am aware of their horrid nature, I found myself still caught off guard when faced with it. My name was not included but when mentioning that I was your partner, there was even more hatred directed towards you. And Vernon..." He trailed off, unsure if he should continue.
"Go on, it's fine. I've heard the worst from him." Harry encouraged, a smile tinged with sadness.

"..He asked Dudley if you had touched him inappropriately."

Harry shook his head, disgusted. "I swear, he's reached a new low. It's why I made sure never to mention it where they were or it would have made things worse. That spell will play havoc with their daily routines."

Almost tempted to rub his hands with glee, Harry stood on his tiptoes, reaching up with the best of his ability to kiss him. "Thanks for telling me. That's something else I can put on the backburner now. Far as I'm concerned that part of my life's in the past. I've heard pretty much everything possible from my relatives and I can brush away a lot of it now."

Seeing that Harry was encouraging him to relax, he allowed himself to do so, further with his next words. "Casual today? You look great." Using a hand to smooth some hair down Alistair captured it, pressing a kiss to the back.

"Harry, why did you run? I'm not used to being jostled sso much." With a hissing voice of complaint, she emerged from beneath his shirt. Looking upward, her tongue flicked out. "Thisss is your mate?"

"Yeah, that's Alistair."

Curiously she emerged, winding herself around and up his arm until she came to rest around his shoulders.

With fondness in his eyes, Harry made introductions. "This is Aela. She's been pestering me to meet you for ages."

Gently running a hand over her scales, he gave her a look of admiration. "You are beautiful."

If it was possible for snakes to feel smug, Harry was positive she would. "That goesss without saying. Keep him around, I insists that you do."

Harry relayed what she said. "She wants me to keep you."

Delighted he continued to brush his fingers over her scales, rewarded with hisses of pleasure. "It is my fervent hope that I will be kept by you, for as long as you will have me."

How could he listen to those words and not react? It was impossible. Squeezing the hand still within his own, his smile could outshine the sun. "You're not going anywhere. If you do I'm definitely
chasing you down."

Spending a few more moments together and Aela back beneath his clothing Alistair left, Harry returning to his friend's side. Edging warily around Ginny he observed her for a moment. Seeing that he wouldn't be under fire he returned to his position. At least, not under fire magically anyway.

"Have a nice snog?"

At her words he sputtered, her eyes glinting victoriously. He should have expected as much from her by now. "We didn't snog! Remember I told about him visiting the Dursleys? He did today."

Reminded of that, Hermione looked at him curiously. "How did it go?"

"He doesn't like Privet Drive either. Vernon and Petunia were their usual unpleasant selves but he set them straight. Right now they're all under a curse where if they think badly about someone who doesn't deserve it, they experience pain. Vernon's food now tastes like sawdust and Petunia's forever cleaning. Until they change their attitude."

Ginny gave a low whistle. "Inventive. I wouldn't have minded being a fly on the wall to witness that."

Harry wondered if his friends had any advice. "Alistair told me that Dudley was sorry for what he did. Should I forgive him? I'm not sure." Hesitation within his eyes, Luna was the first to respond.

"It takes time. It's good that he understands but you've been hurt through his actions for so long. There's no rush. One day, if you can forgive him, I'm sure you will feel better. But if not, that's ok too."

With murmurs of agreement, Harry was thankful. "I feel much better now."

"You sure you didn't snog him?"

Harry threw his arms up. "I'm sure. The question is, are you sure Professor Snape's not the love of your life?"

"Harry!"

And so, began round two of their chase and another part of Harry's life which would remain firmly buried in the past.
It was my birthday yesterday so I made sure to get things done Sunday xD I love writing the different facets of characters, everything plays out like a film in my mind whether I'm writing or reading. I thought everyone could do that but apparently, some people don't see anything. The more you know!
Broken and Fixed

Chapter Summary

It's another date, Harry's idea this time. Alistair is exposed to new sights and together, they conquer many machines designed to rob the average person of all they own. Throughout all that is plenty of teasing. Then later, after a confession, Harry finds out something about the man that he never would have guessed.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Those closest to Harry and Alistair are made aware of their relationship and Alistair's Vampirism. Afterwards, on behalf of Harry and for his own satisfaction, Alistair pays a visit to the Dursleys, enacting retribution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After some thought, Harry had finally decided where he'd like to take Alistair for their next date. It was a place he knew well, though never had the chance for any fun of his own.

Much like trips to the zoo he was always kept on a figurative leash with the Dursleys. The only reason he had ever been brought outside all those times remained solely down to the fact that they didn't trust him alone in the house and that even when locked inside the cupboard, would use magic to escape and create havoc.

He had no love for Surrey, but there were things there, such as the amusements, arcades, a couple of shops and some attractions. A lot of children and teenagers were there regularly including him. Even if he hadn't had the opportunity for some fun of his own, he remembered all those times well. After today, it was his hope that both of them would enjoy the day and for him, rewrite memories of the past which were far from pleasant.

It was Wednesday 5th of February, settling into school with far more ease than ever before. With Headmistress McGonagall, Hogwarts life for staff and students were steadily improving. Ideas and suggestions associated with education as a whole were actually implemented, unlike Dumbledore's attitude of taking them into consideration and yet never doing anything.

To Harry's surprise, he had yet to be released from the spell which caused him to relive all the pain he'd inflicted on others, reinforcing the fact that he truly was nothing more than a monster which had hidden behind the facade of a good man for all these years.

He hadn't seen Alistair at all that week, the number of assignments and out of school activities keeping him busy. He'd also kept mental conversations to a minimum, knowing that many hours could pass by and would remain unaware until there was no time left for work completion.
In the Library's corner where most silent, Harry dipped his quill into ink, writing the last line that he needed to fulfil his assignment requirements. Wandlessly drying the ink he reclined back into his seat, breathing out in relief. Satisfied with himself he carefully rolled the parchment up, intending on handing it in when due.

Even through his tiredness, the majority of that seemed to fade away when heading towards Alistair's quarters. He'd ask before returning to the common room, hoping that he would be available then.

Once arriving he opened the door, searching for him. When seeing no sign he cocked his head, until the sound of his voice came from the bathroom, slightly muffled. "Harry?"

"Yeah, it's me," He called back, about to sit and wait for him to finish, until the door opened.

As steam clouded around and began to escape from the opening, it was apparent that Alistair had taken a shower. Torso glistening, Harry's mouth ran dry. He didn't look away though, eyebrows raising faintly in admiration. With it, all thoughts of what he was going to ask swiftly left.

Observing him knowingly, Alistair wandlessly dried the rest of his body, forgoing a shirt completely. As he came closer, fingers traced beneath Harry's eyes. "Are you getting enough sleep?"

Thinking of the late nights he had recently, he winced. "Sort of? I'm not having nightmares or anything, just a lot of school work."

Accepting his answer but no less concerned, Alistair's arms wrapped around him. With the sweet smell of Honeysuckle and soft skin against his cheek, it was enough for a wave of drowsiness to hit him. Reminding himself that he came here for a reason, Harry's eyes remained open as a soft voice soothed him. "Please, do not push yourself. Sleep is vital so that you are able to function during the day. While I understand that a lot of time and dedication are needed, it is of lesser importance than your physical and mental wellbeing."

"I'll try." Appreciative of his concern, what Harry had wanted to ask in the first place rose to mind. "Are you free this Saturday?"

Releasing him enough to look into his eyes, Alistair tilted his head. "I am."

"Then, do you want to go on a date with me?"

Eyes sparkling with joy, his enthusiasm kickstarted Harry's own even more. "It would be my pleasure."

"Great! Is 10 am ok? Outside of Hogwarts' gates."
After he confirmed that it would be, Harry's excitement levels rose. At least it would be less time to wait rather than a week for their day in Paris though for this, he'd told him to dress casually.

The hour was growing late. Sensing that much even without checking the time, Harry was about to take his leave, until a hand stopped him. Turning back to glance up questioningly, his fringe was brushed aside, a kiss planted in the middle of his forehead.

Warmth generating from that area and spreading to all parts of his body, a smile naturally curled his lips.

"Goodnight Harry."

Forehead tingling from his caring touch, Harry had the feeling that tonight, he'd sleep deeply.

Over the next few days, he barely had time to think of their upcoming date with his hefty workload, which was probably why the time passed quickly. He was looking forward to spending the day outside, mentally keeping his fingers crossed for clear skies there.

Dressed in one of his favourite deep red T-Shirts, he could see that Alistair had followed the one requirement he gave him. Dressed similarly, Harry was unsure the novelty of seeing him in such unique clothing when compared to his usual style would ever wear off. Even his hair was different, loose around his shoulders with no accessories in sight.

Taking a moment to reflect on how fortunate he was, Harry reached out to hold his hand. "I'll apparate us there. I know your way is better but I want this to be a surprise until the last minute."

Easily accepting his words, Alistair was curious as to what place he'd see. Many years ago he would have said he was very informed about the world's constant evolution. But it was only among an environment with many young people and with Harry himself, that he realised there were many things he'd yet to experience. Sensing that he would be in for a cultural ride, he relied on his partner to fill him in on the areas where he lacked understanding.

Appearing in a secluded area he remembered, Harry quickly righted himself. He hadn't apparated anyone else alongside him before, so was thrown off balance a little. Checking himself over to make sure any essential parts weren't lost, he glanced up at Alistair, mildly apologetic. "Sorry, I haven't really apparated anyone else before. You've still got everything?"

"I do. May I know where we are now?" His curiosity piqued, Alistair allowed himself to be lead into the open, greeted with clear skies and a brightly shining sun. With cars on the road, several people on the paths both sides walked by, either with ice creams or various other food items. A short distance away was a beach and with his keen eyesight, was able to see dogs off their leashes, running about
on the warm sands happily as waves lapped at the shoreline.

"This is Surrey. Where all the amusements are, to be specific. I know it's probably weird to pick here out of everywhere, but I'm familiar with this area. That and even though I know my way around here, I never really got the chance to experience it for myself. Plus, you probably haven't been in the arcades before, right?"

Puzzled, a mild furrow appeared in his brow as he scanned the buildings closely. Seeing no signs of the arcades he knew, Alistair voiced his confusion. "None of this architecture has an arcade."

Now Harry was confused. Guessing that this was one of many words with multiple meanings, he pointed towards the sign of the building nearest to them, reading 'Surrey BC Arcades.' "I mean an amusement arcade. It's filled with stuff like bowling and different games."

The light of comprehension registered in his eyes. "It is not strange in the least, merely an opportunity that you have missed out on before now, so wish to make up for those times. Shall we begin? I will be relying on your expertise here, as I am out of my depth."

Admitting this with a hint of vulnerability, Harry's nerves settled. He was worried about what Alistair would think of such a place and if he'd be disappointed when comparing it to the lavishness of Paris, but was met with no such reaction. Relieved they headed straight for the arcades, experiencing a thrill like no other when realising he was free to do as he wanted, rather than waiting for Dudley to finish his fun.

With noises from people and various games including a bowling alley, Alistair's senses were assaulted with many new things. "It is very loud." Saying this above his regular speaking volume, he couldn't deny his fascination. There were coloured lights, some flashing or not flashing. Confectionery within some machines, toys within others and all behind glass. He could see there were slots, just the right size for coins, which he observed one child push them in.

"Honestly you get used to it after spending enough time here. I sat on that seat over there and waited until Dudley finished." Eyes flickering with brief sadness, he shook that away in favour of answering Alistair's questions. Coming to stand in front of one machine, Harry recalled Dudley's tantrums with vague amusement. After mainly failed attempts of retrieving one of the toys, it lead to a meltdown of titanic proportions. After more failed attempts, Vernon paid one of the staff members to open the machine so that he could have not one but several prizes.

"What is this?" Intrigued he touched the glass and inside, was filled to the brim with large plush toys.

"That's a claw machine. You put a certain amount of money in it and press that button to get started." Harry gestured to the large red one, pointing to the joystick nearby. "That moves the claw in any direction. You stop it over the one you want and press that button again. After that it's automatic, the claw will try to pick up whatever it is you want and drop it into that section. I'd say it's the most difficult one to get anything from."
There was a small queue for currency exchange. Standing in the line Alistair could see plastic containers. When placed underneath it caught many coins, these ones two pence pieces. Seeing what his gaze was focused on, Harry explained. "Some of them only accept certain coins. There's two pence or ten pence coin pushers, or other games which can be one or two pounds."

When it came to their turn, Harry handed over a few pound coins and two notes. "Give it a try. Just do the same as what everyone else before us did."

Alistair tried not to get distracted, however, there were so many things here which were of great interest to him, that it took a little longer than usual for him to mimic what the others did. As the container began to fill with coins from the machine he watched, enraptured.

Harry could clearly see his enthusiasm. It was something so simple and yet, his eyes sparkled like a child's. Rather than watch to see if the money exchange was complete Harry's eyes settled on Alistair's form, a wave of affection so strong, that his eyes blurred slightly. How could someone who had been through more than he would ever understand, retain such innocence?

Pulled from those thoughts with his happy smile, Alistair was unable to focus on just one thing. "What would you like to do first?"

That was a good question. While he'd been here many times, he'd never actually tried the games out before. Looking around, a slot machine caught his eye. 'Night of the living dead.' On it was various stereotypical spooky figures, such as Frankenstein's monster, mummies, zombies and to his amusement, Vampires.

It was clearly supposed to be Dracula, menacing expression and fangs dripping with blood. Following Harry's line of sight, he looked bewildered, speaking in a voice low enough so only he could hear.

"What on earth is that? Whoever designed this monstrosity I can assure them, that our fangs do not drip blood in such a manner or stain our mouths, without cleaning. Not a drop is wasted and to suggest otherwise is insulting."

With mild disapproval in his expression, Harry couldn't help himself. Snorting, he stretched up to pat Alistair's head affectionately. "It's ok. We know the truth of it at least."

Soothing his slightly ruffled feathers he was still curious, despite the woefully inaccurate design. "What is the objective of this?"

Still mildly amused, Harry half wondered if Alistair would find out who designed it and write in a formal complaint. "It's spin to win. You put in a certain amount of money and depending on what combination of symbols you get, there's a chance you'll end up with more than what you started with."
Pointing to a certain part of the machine, it listed symbol combinations and prize outcomes. "The jackpot is what everyone aims for. It's not like high-end casinos or anything but still, the thrill of a potential win is what draws everyone in."

Taking note of the sign nearby, Harry was reminded of something. "I can't actually play this one, you have to be 18 or over. I doubt anyone will ask for your ID though, so you can give it a try? I'll be nearby on the coin pusher machines."

Despite the inaccuracy of pretty much every symbol on there, Alistair did want to try this out for himself and also, looking at everyone else gathered around, understood why Harry wanted him to dress casually. Among everyone, he would have stood out.

Having exchanged money of his own prior to this day and guessing that it would be somewhere within the UK, Alistair had come prepared. Inserting the starting money he began to play, analysing what would be the best approach. Perhaps the minimum bet with a possibility of increase?

With three rows and three symbols in each there were nine in total and with his first spin, came three Vampires. Sitting close to the machine he could hear suitably spooky music, able to break the piece down into each of their notes and identify instrument usage. Overall, it was adequate, but suitable for such an environment. But a second later, the music was far from his mind.

"I vant to suck your blood."

And then, his winnings increased slightly. Oh, he dearly wanted to curse this machine, even if he was in a room filled with many non-magic people. Trying his best to tune out the obnoxiousness he continued, placing a fair amount of concentration into each action.

Putting the container of 2ps on top, Harry chose which coin pusher he would go for. The prizes were always practically worthless and if bought in a regular store, would amount to less money than what everyone spent on these machines. But even so, he'd always wanted to try. He knew from watching others, that it was all about the timing. Close to the edge was a spongy doughnut keyring and glancing upwards, could see it was the Simpsons.

He'd caught glimpses of episodes here and there over the years when doing chores for the Dursleys, finding them amusing. Overall he wasn't much for watching TV but if given the chance, he would embrace some aspects of life he missed out on.

And then, he heard the chilling, creepy voice of Dracula. Though Harry couldn't see Alistair's expression at that moment he could easily picture it, grinning to himself.

Pushing in one coin after another they dropped to the platform, settling behind the other coins and
pushing them onto the main platform below. Once they were also moved, Harry heard the clanging sound of coins hitting metal. Receiving the majority of what he put in, he decided to wait until he was empty, before crouching to put them back in again.

"..Fuck."

Glancing to his right side he saw a girl, slightly younger than him, sighing. Looking into the machine, he could see that the prize she was aiming for got stuck on the way down. Glancing to make sure she was taking no notice of him, he wondered if a little magic would help. Without a wand, the Ministry wouldn't be on his arse so if it worked, there'd be no penalty.

Concentrating on the doughnut, he willed it to move just a little and drop where she could get it.

And then, at least to her, it moved out of nowhere, dropping below.

Looking mildly taken aback she shook her head as if to confirm what she just saw. "Weird."

Shrugging but looking pleased she picked it up, wandering off to another game.

Satisfied with his sort of good deed for the day Harry resumed what he was doing, his own doughnut gradually getting closer to the edge.

As it dropped he gave a little cheer, marking that down as the first arcade prize he'd ever won. It was insignificant to many but for him, he'd always remember this moment. Putting the extra coins he won back into his container, he decided to save them for another machine.

Squeezing the spongy doughnut keyring and watching it spring back to its original position was strangely relaxing. While doing this he was just about to find another game, when the slots he'd left Alistair at made enough noise to drown out all others.

With a constant ringing sound and many flashing lights, the word Jackpot began to flash brilliantly. He had eight of the nine symbols, marked WILD and with cartoon-like werewolves on each of them.

"You got the Jackpot!" Harry exclaimed, wide-eyed as he watched Alistair's winnings leave the machine.

Alistair's actions had gathered an audience of sorts, a smattering of applause filling the arcade. Standing up and returning to Harry's side, he could see a slight twinkle in his eye.

"You're one lucky bastard. Seriously I've seen the same people try for ages to get it and they lose everything. This happened on your first try!"
Alistair absorbed his words. "I assume it is difficult to obtain?"

Difficult would be an understatement. Still, in partial disbelief, his mind spun with what he'd just witnessed. "Like trying to fight dragons with wooden swords."

When put that way, Alistair could understand his amazement. Able to see across the arcade, another game caught his eye. "What is this?"

Looking in the direction of his gaze, Harry could see that no one else was there for the moment. "Air hockey. You use those strikers and a puck. You have to get them into each other's goal, and the first to ten wins."

Hand hovering just above the table, he observed its coldness. He assumed that it followed along similar lines as ice hockey so, as such, the puck would move very fast. "Harry, I challenge you to a friendly competition."

He'd never played it before but then, Alistair hadn't either. Accepting, it was only when about to start, something occurred. Studying him closely, he once again forgot something important. "You're going to destroy me. You've got better reflexes than everyone else combined."

While that was true, there was a point that Alistair disagreed on. "Even so, I cannot make this puck go any faster than its capabilities. Here, it will rely on timing."

Harry knew even before starting, he'd lose. "Ok. I'm going to make a bet for myself, but I won't tell you what it is until we're finished here."

Wondering what that bet could be, the game began.

Part way through, Harry was doing better than expected. As in, he'd expected not to get a single one past Alistair but, in fact, two of them had. Even if Alistair had triple his score, he classed that as a victory. Winner or loser, he wouldn't just roll over and accept defeat so easily. For one of them, he'd pretended to miss hitting the puck but a split second after, slammed it home and just managed, by a hair's width, to get one over on the man. He suspected that if they were alone that wouldn't be the case as out in public, Alistair couldn't use the entirety of his capabilities.

Missing yet another one Harry sighed, resigned. "Bollocks."

Amused Alistair laughed, a light and carefree sound which never failed to set Harry's heart aflutter. "Your language is very colourful."

Giving a slight smile of apology, he couldn't help it. "You're that good I'm expressing my frustrations in a verbal way."
Orange eyes glittering with an inner flame, Harry's concentration levels plummeted with Alistair's next words. "There are many things of which I have a particular talent for. Perhaps later on today, I will give a practical demonstration."

Even Harry, who had his dense moments, understood what he was referring to. A mild blush painting his cheeks, he glared. "I know your game, trying to throw me off so you can even more of an upper hand."

With a mischievous chuckle, he spoke no further words though didn't need to, the images building within Harry's mind much more of a distraction and inevitably, Alistair won. But, in this case, he didn't mind losing.

Giving him a friendly handshake, Harry revealed his bet. "So, if I lost, I'd pay for everything outside of these arcade games. Since I lost, the bet's active."

Knowing that Alistair was so used to doing this himself, he would probably be reluctant in allowing Harry to do the same. But this way, it would be much easier.

He understood Harry's line of thought but even so, was slightly hesitant. "Are you sure?"

Nodding confidently, Harry tugged on his hand. "Positive, you deserve to be treated as well."

With those words warming his heart, they continued to try out different games together. Harry recognised most of them but others were clearly recent additions. Coming to stand in front of another he could see it was a music game. Observing the person currently using it there were four large keys and on the screen, were the ones which needed to be pressed. There was a certain amount of time and each correct note and the speed of which it was played, awarded tickets.

"What are the tickets for?" Alistair asked, Glancing down at him questioningly. They hadn't encountered the games with these, until now.

"When won you put them in a machine and it will give you a receipt with its total. You redeem those for bigger prizes."

Pointing to a large counter a short distance away Alistair could see many different kinds of prizes, a lot of the modern technology which he'd never seen before. But then, there were many things within this building which were new to him.

As the person using this game finished, Alistair decided to give it a try. Undoubtedly this would be child's play, the same for any pianist. But still he couldn't perform to the very best of his ability, merely one of a human with faster than usual brain functions.
Paying the £1 fee to play, Harry was content to watch Alistair blow whoever got the top score, firmly down into second place. He didn't recognise the song, a classical piece but with just the melody. Not missing a single note they were pressed in rapid succession, one after another. There were sixty seconds in total and within the first ten, Harry estimated roughly thirty notes were pressed. Even then, he could see Alistair was holding back somewhat. Not that anyone else knew, as the tickets for each correct note continuously began to pile on the dark carpeted floor.

"He's good." A bystander commented, about to pass by but observed Alistair's score increasing with slightly raised brows.

Harry agreed with him and by the end, Alistair's score was double of the original top one. And in a large pile, were a total of 500 tickets. The limit was only the individual's speed so, with someone who has plenty of it, this became no trouble.

Gathering the tickets up, Harry placed them into the backpack he'd brought along. "Is there anything you can't do? Serious question here, since there's a load of things for me."

Smiling, Alistair squeezed his shoulder. "There were many things. But, with practice, I improved. It is the same for you with writing, yes?"

Seeing his point, Harry felt a little better. "Yeah, that's true."

Away from the arcade machines, Harry's eyes lit up. "There are bowling alleys, do you want to try?"

Bowling was one of the oldest activities around and yet, Alistair had never played it. This was something which hadn't overly interested him, but he could never refuse Harry. That and with him, the most mundane of activities seemed entertaining.

After paying for both of them to play and entering in their names Harry picked the bowling ball best suited to him, medium in size. Waiting for the pins to fall he adjusted his stance, heading straight for the middle. To his mild surprise, it only veered off slightly, knocking over nearly all of the pins and awarding him a spare.

Stepping back, it was Alistair's turn. Playing without the barriers ensured that a gutter ball was possible. Studying him Harry could see nothing wrong with the chosen technique or even the way he released the ball. So why the ball veered so much and only managed to knock down three of the ten pins was beyond him.

Confused, Alistair cocked his head slightly. "Oh dear. Where did I go wrong?" Thinking back over the last few seconds, he had no answer. Neither did Harry, taking a sip of the drink he ordered as part of a packaged game deal.
"No idea. But it's probably just a one off, you'll do fine!" Encouraging him they each took their turn but halfway through, something occurred to them both.

"..Or maybe you won't." Harry later spoke up, watching as this ball missed the pins entirely.

A combination of confused and mildly embarrassed, Alistair had spent most of his time trying different approaches, but nothing seemed to work. He'd gotten a spare once but mostly, never made it over the five pin mark.

Harry, on the other hand, believed he'd found his calling. He hadn't dropped below five pins and in fact, had gotten mostly spares. For his first time, he was pleased with himself. Studying Alistair's slightly bewildered expression, he patted him on the back. "Think of it as a learning experience. I'm seeing a side of you I haven't before but I still like, and you're learning that you're perhaps one of the worst bowlers this world has ever seen."

Grinning, he meant no harm with those words and coming from Harry's perspective, Alistair could see the humour in his situation. "You fill me with such words of inspiration."

"I try!"

In truth, Alistair didn't mind at all that he was losing. He could be quite competitive but right now, he was simply content seeing Harry's enjoyment. He was too, this unfamiliar environment adding to everything.

Towards the end Harry rolled once more, not expecting too much but in the end, was stunned when he managed to knock all ten over.

"Yes!"

Cheering he turned to Alistair. "I got a strike!"

As if he had got the strike himself, Alistair's joy was equal to his. Trying some of the drink ordered he swallowed, finding the amount of fizz contained within that mouthful to be strange, but not completely unpleasant.

"I can see. Congratulations!" Pleased for him, Alistair consoled himself with the fact that at least he'd hadn't unintentionally missed all pins with each turn.

By the end and much like with Air Hockey but roles reversed, Harry won. With a score of 200, it was a genuine achievement he could add to his unofficial list.
Alistair had achieved half of that and, despite his earlier words, he wondered if this would be the one thing where improvement was an impossibility. "I believe that you have a natural talent for this."

Weighing his words, Harry spoke. "Maybe I'm just good with balls."

He was referring to Quidditch. While those balls were different, maybe some skills were transferable? It was only when taking note of Alistair's expression, that he realized how it must have sounded. "Quidditch, I mean."

Never one to pass up such an opportunity Alistair leaned in, to whisper. "I believe that you are good with many different kinds, not just bowling."

Blushing from the very roots Harry accepted his words, without resistance and some embarrassment. It was only fair since he'd had his teasing moments with Alistair's lack of bowling skills.

There were many things to choose from in the arcades, some with tickets as bonus prizes and some without. Between them, they managed to rack up a huge amount, thankfully not running out of space with a subtly added expansion charm for his backpack's interior.

There were several claw machines of which he'd explained to Alistair about earlier, but one, in particular, caught his eye. Filled with plush snakes, he smiled. "I wonder what Aela would think of these?"

As this was something they'd yet to try, Alistair didn't hesitate to put money in. "Her opinion of one will be known, shortly."

Sensing his quiet determination, Harry wondered if he was lucky enough to grab one of these as, in his opinion, they were one of the most money grabbing machines out there.

The answer to his question came almost immediately afterwards. "First try again?!" He exclaimed, speechless as a long, pale green snake dropped. Picking it up it was soft to the touch, carefully placing it in his backpack. "Amazing, how the hell do you do that?"

From Harry's reaction, he came to the conclusion this was another wooden sword versus dragon situation. "I am not sure."

Appreciating his honesty, Harry had learned that today, Alistair was the kind of customer which these kinds of places didn't want. Spend a little, win a lot. But then he hadn't done so bad either, a lot of the tickets coming from some games he'd chosen to play.

Between them, they'd done surprisingly well, various prizes such as sweets or little toys from each machine, along with tickets. Standing in a small queue to the ticket processor, Harry sighed. "This
may take a while."

It took longer than either of them expected, a queue forming behind them as every couple of hundred tickets, the line would break or twist, needing to be straightened out again. But by the end, on their receipt, was a number which made Harry blink rapidly.

"12,195? To be honest I don't even know how much we spent." He got caught up in the thrill of things. But even so, most of Harry's money had already been put to good use buying or donating to others, so moments like this were a rare exception.

Alistair knew exactly how much he'd spent, though couldn't say for Harry. "Perhaps more than we should have. But, are you enjoying yourself?"

He nodded firmly. "Definitely."

Delighted, Alistair's fingertips briefly ran through Harry's hair. "Good."

"What about you?"

Alistair's answer was instantaneous. "It has been a long while since I have felt such a thrill."

Harry could jump up and down on the spot, he was that happy. With the number of tickets they had, he could see that there was enough for one of the top prizes. Only a few other items interested him and since they had enough, gestured to a set of special edition board games, in one box. "What about that?"

Studying it closely, he didn't see any reason to oppose Harry's suggestion. The others, for all that they had done, seemed to be worthless for the ticket amount. "Alright. That is 10,000 tickets so we would be left with roughly 2,000. Is there anything else which interests you?"

Giving into the slightly sillier side of him he picked up two packets, while there. "These, they're 1,000 each."

"What are they?" Alistair had no idea.

"Rubber Mallets."

He decided not to think too deeply about why they were available for ticket purchase, simply going with the flow. Handing over the receipt Alistair placed the packages onto the counter, given the games set shortly after and once done, they left the arcade.
Once outside Harry's eyes adjusted to the light, breathing in fresh air once again. "I forgot how stuffy and loud those places could be. I had fun but I'm glad to be outside again."

With particularly sensitive hearing it took Alistair some getting used to, so being outside for him was also a relief.

They'd spent a fair amount of time indoors, but the day was still young. "Where would you like to go next?"

A plan in mind, he lightly poked Alistair's chest, eyes alight with enjoyment. "We're going to places where I can spoil you. If there's anything you're interested in, I'll buy it. The only answer I'll accept is yes Harry."

Gryffindor stubbornness rearing its head, Alistair could tell he wouldn't be persuaded otherwise. It did make for an interesting change and while the idea of him buying everything for the rest of that day made him feel slightly uneasy, he was touched nonetheless. "Yes, Harry."

Satisfied with his answer Harry began looking around, to see if there were any places of interest that might appeal to both of them.

As it turned out there was, one store selling tourist-like souvenirs and another, various kinds of clothing. While he found things that he liked Harry made sure to keep a close eye on Alistair, adding whatever he expressed an interest into his own pile. One of them was a dress shirt, pearl white in colour.

In the end, Harry had bought more for Alistair than himself. But he didn't mind at all, even when the man himself voiced his slight concerns.

"Harry, I am very thankful, but this is too much."

He disagreed firmly. "It's not. You bought me so many clothes and I want to return the favour."

So that they were on the same wavelength he tried a different approach, adding his purchases to the backpack and soaking up the sun outside, hand in hand. "Whenever you've bought something for your partners, how does it make you feel?"

It was one of the more common feelings he had, discovering it earlier on before romantic relationships were ever a part of his life. "Content. I am happy to know that my significant other is, with whatever I have bought them."

Expecting such an answer, Harry gently brought his point home. "It's how I feel too. When I buy something for friends, family and you. Everyone deserves to be treated at some point and the fact that
past partners haven't done the same is sad. Seeing your smile makes me smile too."

Perhaps for all these years, Alistair had approached relationships in the wrong way. After Bren, in truth he'd stopped searching, hurt by many men in his past and resolving himself to the fact that perhaps finding love, for him, was never meant to be. But Harry had found him. And in turn, he had discovered someone unique.

While he would always prefer giving gifts over receiving, this was a foreign but welcome emotion within the dynamics of this romantic relationship. And with Harry's reasons, there were no more protests.

"Thank you." Squeezing the hand within his own, Harry had another, important destination in mind.

The weather was perfect for it and as he'd made a point of not missing a meal alongside nutrition potions supplied by Madam Pomfrey, Harry believed that he would now be able to eat fish and chips, another thing he'd never had.

Seeing where they were going now, Alistair's eyes glimmered with interest, speaking slightly more quietly. "It has been a very long time since I have last eaten these. In fact, I believe it was when they were first introduced here."

Knowledge of how far they dated back was never something made aware to him. "When was that?"

"1862."

As Harry was about to open his mouth, Alistair gently placed a finger over his lips. "Shh. I sense that a comment about my age will leave your lips."

Once his finger was removed, Harry's eyes held an innocent spark. "I wasn't going to say anything."

And then, a minute later while in line, he proved otherwise. "You're really, really old."

"Shall I kiss you quiet?"

Partly teasing Harry and partly wanting to follow through, he spoke no further on the matter. But that didn't stop his rampant thoughts.

Not wanting to overdo it he ordered himself a small portion, knowing that would be enough for him to still enjoy the moment. Alistair ordered the same, more for experience's sake and as he had no need for food, his stomach was smaller than the average man of his size.
Sitting on a wall they faced the sea, a light breeze ruffling their hair as the smell of salt was carried upon it. Harry struggled to imagine anything which could be more perfect than this. He loved his time in Paris certainly, but being able to experience something he'd always wanted to with Alistair by his side, was nothing short of blissful.

As was the first bite of fish. Crispy batter, a light crunch and a little salt and vinegar, Harry savoured the taste. "This is amazing."

He began to eat, though didn't rush. The last thing he wanted was stomach problems, of which he'd had many of the moment in his life where he'd guarded food or eaten it fast so that it wouldn't be taken away.

But those times were long gone by. No one would take this away from him.

"This is much better than what I remember it to be. I enjoyed it then, but more so now." Alistair commented, smiling softly.

"Considering pretty much millions of years have gone by since you last had some, I'm not surprised."

He couldn't help himself. Polishing off the last of his chips he discarded the newspaper, Alistair following shortly after and with a few quick spells later, their hands were grease free.

Immediately afterwards Alistair pounced, this section of the wall free from any others passing by as he closed the distance between them.

"135 years, to be precise. You are surprisingly cheeky today."

As if to reinforce Alistair's words, Harry briefly stuck his tongue out. No sooner had he done this, that his lips were claimed for a second. Not sorry for his behaviour in the least, he still attempted to look somewhat apologetic. "Will you forgive me?"

Harry could burn all his hair ribbons to ash as Lume or commit any other number of deeds but by the end, he would always forgive him. He was never the kind to hold grudges but with such a playful atmosphere, there was no need. The fact that he frequently teased him about such a thing was only an indication that he was completely comfortable with their large age gap and that was a reassurance.

"I forgive you."

Eyes twinkling happily, Harry had room for one more thing which he had never tried, whenever coming here. Feet planted firmly on the ground he crossed the road once more, heading straight for where they sold ice cream.
"Seen anything you want yet?" Harry asked, already knowing what he’d pick the moment his eyes first landed on it.

Scanning the list of what was available, one, in particular, stood out to him. "The one that is Apple Cider flavoured."

As Harry paid for that and his Lemon Top they crossed the road again, stepping onto the soft, warm sand and finding a spot to sit down on. Once doing so he started on his ice cream, making sure to lick the areas which were beginning to melt. As the vanilla's sweetness combined with the tartness of lemon sorbet combined to create a pleasant explosion within his mouth, Harry thought, for a split second, he could dive into an entire bath full and consume the lot.

Noticing Alistair from the corner of his eye, he was unable to look away. In a strangely sensual manner, he began to methodically lick the same spot, tongue curling around and occasionally taking it between his lips.

As if he could sense precisely where Harry's thoughts were going Alistair stopped for a moment, lips glistening as he licked them. Eyes meeting his, he spoke five words. "Your ice cream is melting."

So caught up in watching him Harry forgot about his own, which began to run down the cone he held. Concentrating before it was nothing more than liquid, the weather, scenery and everything else today, combined to create one, big yes. Finishing his ice cream he relaxed, simply taking in the sights around him.

The sounds of seagulls flying overhead and not far from them, children part way through sandcastle creation. The sky and sea bluer than he could ever remember, Harry would be tempted to neglect Hogwarts in favour of staying here.

Then, out of nowhere, a dog came bounding up to them. Golden fur shining in the sunlight it panted, tail wagging happily. Drawing close to Harry it began sniffing him, tail whirling like a windmill by this point. When he tentatively held a hand out it was liberally coated in saliva, licking enthusiastically.

"You're friendly," Harry spoke to it, deep brown eyes filled with all the exuberance of life. Seeing a collar with a name tag attached, it read, 'Sadie'.

Assuming her owner must be further down the beach he pet her, lightly scratching behind the soft, floppy ears.

"I love dogs. Well, most of them. I hated Marge's. It bit me once and usually chased me up trees. She's the female version of Vernon pretty much."
A faint grimace crossed Alistair's face. "I have no desire to picture that man. A female version is nightmare material. Perhaps, I shall pay her a visit too, since I have neglected to do so."

If that's what he wanted to do, Harry wouldn't stop him. "That's fine by me. Marge was just as bad whenever she visited. If she lived there with us I'm sure she would have been much worse than all of them combined."

Turning her attention to Alistair she began to sniff him as well, cocking her head in different directions as if confused. Deciding in the end that he was also friendly, she began to lick his hand.

Stroking her head, her shiny fur brushed against his fingertips and once more, was amazed that no animal was repulsed by his dark nature. Even if unaware of what it was, he had no doubts they could still sense such a thing.

"Sadie!"

At the sound of her name being called the dog ran off, kicking up a little sand and leaving faint pawprints in her wake.

Removing the two plastic packages, Harry blew both of their prize rubber mallets up. Taking one, he lightly bonked Alistair on the head.

As though it had hurt he gave a mock wounded look, rubbing the top of his head. "Harry, how could you?"

"Return fire with your own!" Throwing it over to him it floated briefly, seeing that they were blue with various cartoon smiley faces covering them.

Studying it for a while he waited until Harry's guard had lowered slightly, the rubber mallet hitting the top of his head similarly.

What followed was a play fight of ridiculous proportions, mallets soon discarded as Harry found himself lying face up on the sand below. With Alistair hovering over him, another wave of affection for the man washed over. And suddenly, he couldn't hold it back anymore.

Perhaps those feelings had gradually begun to build ever since they met but the moment Harry realised that Alistair's feelings for him were mutual, they had grown tenfold. Before now he put that one word with multiple meanings to the back of his mind but right then, it refused to be shut away any longer. Everything about him. All that he'd done for Harry, the unwavering, endless support, picking him up in his lowest moments and being there, no matter what situation he faced.

Chest taught with emotion Harry's eyes blurred slightly, coming to that sudden realisation. Reaching
up to cup his cheek as if it were something fragile, he confessed, voice shaking with nerves.

"Alistair?"

Seeing the sudden change in Harry, a flicker of worry crossed his expression. "Yes?"

"I love you."

Saying it aloud was further confirmation. He loved him. Not in the way that he loved Hermione, Remus, Sirius or any of his family and friends. He'd never experienced such a feeling before but Harry knew, within his heart, he'd fallen in love with him.

Various emotions crossed Alistair's expression. Shock, joy, and sorrow? Unable to settle on one they wavered, seeming lost for words.

Discouraged Harry spoke up, voice small. "Was it too soon?"

Those three words had triggered something within Alistair he had locked securely behind Occlumency shields. It was rare his partners were the first to confess. The last that did, was someone who had hurt him, more so than Bren. He would take the abuse from him any day, over what had happened back then.

Thrown into a past which he'd kept buried, Harry's worried voice brought him swiftly from them. Seeing his anxiety, he was quick to reassure. "Not at all, I am simply surprised. I never thought that you would be the first. The feeling is very much mutual."

As those words washed over him Alistair smiled. Harry could tell it was from the heart, but something about those words had reopened a wound. One of which looked raw, painful.

Firmly pushing those memories away, Alistair focused on the here and now. Bathing himself in the glow of Harry's confession he embraced him strongly, showing his delight with many kisses pressed against his cheeks, forehead and finally, lips.

Pulling away, he was similarly misty-eyed. "Oh Harry, I love you too. More than I ever thought possible."

Both relieved and overjoyed that his feelings were once more returned, Harry cautiously decided to broach the topic. "..Are you ok?"

No doubt, Harry asked because those words had opened up a window of vulnerability within him. Even now he struggled to keep this memory at bay. Finding the right words he sat up, pulling Harry
to sit beside him again. Staring out into the ocean's calming waves, he saw a new side of Alistair. One of which he never wanted to see again.

Whatever this was it had clearly hurt, deeply. He presented himself as someone so cheerful, that Harry forgot he'd experienced the good and bad aspects that came along with life. Immortality only guaranteed an increase in both.

Still unable to find words, he received a little strength within the warmth of Harry's hand on his.

"..Forgive me. Those words have brought forth a memory I would have rather kept buried."

Heart clenching at the pain within his sunset eyes, he didn't release the hold on Alistair's hand. "No need to be sorry, I get it. There are things that trigger certain memories for me as well. If it's too painful you don't have to tell me but if you want, I'm here to listen."

Appreciative of his consideration and understanding, Alistair placed honestly above many things. But even so, he wasn't entirely. Not with himself or Solomon. "No one else knows of this, though perhaps it is time. But are you certain? This is not a pleasant memory."

Hesitation and concern swimming within his gaze, Harry couldn't be surer. "I want to help, however I can. I've told you some things I haven't to anyone else and I always felt better about it."

Encouraged by Harry's words and knowing that he was right, Alistair slowly began to talk about the one memory which pained him, even after so long.

On this very day, it had been a year since Alistair had known Alex and three months of them chatting back and forth, their relationship had blossomed.

Alistair found him endearing, everything from the deep red curls to a smattering of light freckles across his nose and cheeks. One of the few to not be repulsed by his Vampiric nature he seemed to embrace it and as the months had passed by, healed a heart which had been broken many times.

He had just purchased a ring, intricately crafted and for the first time in his long life, was going to propose. He loved him. At 22 years of age, this was the youngest human wizard he'd ever dated, but his maturity levels were higher than that of many older males he'd encountered, romantically.

To his surprise, Alex had been the one to say those three words first and even now, kept them close to a heart which had never beat. A combination of excited and nervous, he hoped with every one of his years that the answer would be yes.

He'd practised in his mind, repeatedly, what words he would say. He planned to surprise him, intent
on asking him out to dinner and during then, would ask for his hand in marriage.

Deciding to check Lothaire Castle first as he’d moved in during the later stages of their relationship, the weight of the ring box was a reminder of all to come.

Solomon was away on business, of a kind which required his weapon enchantment techniques. He’d chosen not to tell him, in case things didn’t go to plan.

Reappearing within the castle’s interior, he could detect the presence of his lover but also, a magical signature he didn’t recognise.

Thinking nothing of it and assuming that this was a new friend he had yet to meet, that thought was swept away with the realisation that the pair of them were in his bedroom.

Everything was silent, but that lay solely down to various privacy charms put in place.

Having been through this more times than most, his mind knew what to expect. Even so, his heart overrode any other reasoning.

‘Please, I beg you, not today.’

Alistair didn’t know exactly who he was pleading with but did so nonetheless. Closing his eyes for a moment he reopened them and with it, so did the door. All charms in place cancelled, he could see and hear everything happening.

How much more pain could be experienced? After everything it was with a fervent hope he would be desensitised to such a thing but this proved him wrong.

There, in the throes of passion was Alex, deeply intimate with another man he didn’t recognise.

In truth, his relationships had never lasted long enough for feelings to be firmly rooted. But even so, he experienced loss, sorrow and hurt for each one.

But nothing compared to this. He had never caught his lovers in the act, but the fact that it was someone he loved more than he had anyone else up to this point that he was going to propose, hit him hard.

Heart gripped within a vice the two men finished their business. Once they did Alex was the first to notice him, with a deer in the headlights look.

“Alistair, I didn’t expect to see you today.”
He was calm, unlike his bed partner's flustered expression.

He was unable to hide the hurt, despite trying his best. “Why?”

Not needing to elaborate, Alex’s answer was simple. “I don’t love you anymore. You couldn’t give me what I needed, I wanted someone wilder and rougher in bed.”

Unable to process what he’d just heard they remained there, swimming within the pool of his mind. “But why didn’t you tell me? How long has this been happening?”

They were questions which needed to be asked, but not ones he wanted to hear answers for.

“It was easier to keep it a secret. And six months.”

For half of that year he’d been seeing another man, or men, without Alistair being any the wiser.

Alex did look sorry, but whether that was because he’d been caught or for what he’d done, Alistair couldn’t say. It took everything within him to not break down right there.

“Please leave.”

He remained polite, faint tremors shaking his fingertips. Putting their clothes back on they did just that, apparating from the premises.

And then he collapsed, falling to his knees right there on the plush carpet. The smell of sex in the air coupled with soiled bedding filled every one of his senses. Head lowered to the ground, the box in his pocket seemed to be burning a hole straight through.

His heart had never beat. How on earth could it experience such pain? He was no medical expert by any means but knew enough of his body to realise that a heart couldn’t bleed from pure emotion. It was as if it were being squeezed within his chest, a large shard piercing an organ which, to a Vampire, was useless.

For a human, it was essential to survival but for him, it wasn’t. Why did he keep it? Perhaps if he ripped his heart out, he wouldn’t experience this feeling anymore.

It was a fleeting thought, but one which he realised wouldn’t change a thing.

There was something wrong with him, there had to be. Why else would he be cheated on so many times? He couldn’t do this anymore. He’d thought, for those blissful few hours, that he may have the
chance to settle down with someone he loved and share a lifetime with them. Their lifetime, if they chose to remain mortal.

But not long after, that hope had been torn away from him. Love was an impossibility. He wanted it dearly and had treasured every lover, but none more so than Alex. He was his everything, the bright light in his life which had never dimmed. How much of his feelings at the time were true? Did he ever love him or were they simply words of placation?

All those questions and more remained, but these would go unanswered.

A minute later, the enormity of what he’d just experienced washed over him. He was strong in every sense of the word and with each year of his immortal life, continued to be so.

But at that moment, he felt so alone, unloved. He wished more than ever for his mother’s advice or his father’s support. He knew Solomon would always be there for him, but this was the one thing which he couldn’t share. With a very low opinion of humans, he didn’t wish to tarnish their reputation in his eyes, further.

Even after this, he knew there were many good humans out there. The same could be applied to other races as well, but it was now Alistair’s belief that for him, it was never meant to be.

Realising this with a final twist of the shard in his battered heart, tears escaped from beneath his lashes. Trailing down his cheeks, each one held all the unrequited love for every partner he’d spend seconds, months and years of his life with. Without a need to breathe his sobs were endless, each one filled with several lifetimes of hurt.

Day turned to night and still, he remained there, curled into a ball.

Later on, he began to move, wondering if he would ever smile again. The ring had been in his pocket for all that time but now, would remain unused. Not having the heart to destroy something which he’d spent so much time picking out despite it going to waste he placed it into the bedside cabinet, leaving the room. This had always been his room but now, he couldn’t bear to be in it anymore. He would tell Solomon that he desired a room change, for the spontaneity’s sake.

Eyes red with all the tears that he had shed life would go on, as it always had in the name of heartbreak.

“I truly believed that he was the one. Looking back now, I can see why such a thought is nothing but foolish.”

Finishing his sentence, a heavy silence hung in the air.
Harry never expected this. How could he? It was delivered with so much raw emotion it was as if he’d experienced the same. Teary-eyed, he shook his head firmly. “It’s not foolish—“

Voice cracking he continued, holding back the tears he wanted to shed for all that Alistair had gone through.

“All everyone wants to be loved, share their life with someone by their side. None of it is your fault, he should have been honest with you.”

Harry couldn’t stand seeing that look in his eyes. Left in a room alone with every single one of Alistair’s past partners, he wouldn’t hesitate to hex every single one, none more so than Bren and Alex. How dare they! How dare those fucking bastards hurt him like this! His thoughts were a furious storm, whirling within him. Even so, they remained internal, his concern for the man he loved overriding everything else.

Positioning himself in front he stretched upwards, wrapping his arms around him tightly. Doing the best he could to transfer all the warmth and love he held, Harry began to stroke his hair, slightly clumsily. “You’ve got more strength than a lot of people have, to go through all this and still remain so gentle and kind. If I’d gone through even half of what you have, I don’t think I’d ever trust humans again. But I’m so glad that you do and you’re here, with me.”

Harry spoke a few more words, of which became Alistair’s undoing.

“Everything is going to be ok.”

This echoed the very day that he had discovered the truth about Alex. Ensuring that they had privacy Harry did a little wandless magic, the dam breaking on his own emotions as Alistair began to cry.

From his own personal experience, Harry knew how therapeutic this could be, not minding the timing in the least. While he wished Alistair had never gone through such a thing, it remained that he trusted Harry enough to share something so painful.

Nearly always the one relying on Alistair’s support in his lowest moment, it was time for him to return the favour. Thanks to his affection he was now completely comfortable initiating and receiving some of his own, putting it to good use here.

Arms wrapping tightly around him in turn, it seemed impossible for them to be any physically closer. Harry remained there, lending his shoulder even as he could detect traces of dampness upon it.

God, he wanted to hex him badly. Dumbledore and his relatives were cruel, but this was a different kind of cruel. They held no love for him, but a man who supposed to had proven otherwise.
“Don’t change for anyone, you’re perfect the way you are. Alex is the foolish one.”

It was a struggle to regulate his breathing, highly emotional when faced with Alistair’s own distressed state. But eventually, he pulled away.

And, like the man had done so many times for him he leaned in close, pressing a soothing kiss to each of his eyelids. “Do you feel a bit better now?”

Alistair had never been so vulnerable in front of anyone ever since he was a child. But he saw no traces of disgust or judgment within those bright green eyes, only the one feeling which he had longed to see reflected back.

He did. Much better, in fact. “Yes.” Wiping away Harry’s own tears with his fingertips, he dared to hope, even if just a little, that Harry would be his last and only love. “Thank you. You are.. remarkable.”

Puffing out his chest, he agreed. “I know! I’m Harry Potter, boy wonder extraordinaire.”

As he’d hoped that produced a laugh, still laced with heightened emotion. Heart lighter than ever before now that one of his worst memories was no longer a well-kept secret, the smile showed to Harry made the slowly setting sun pale in comparison, utterly breathtaking.

“Harry?”

He glanced up a question in his eyes. “Yeah?”

Meeting his eyes, they came nose to nose for a moment. “I love you. I have enjoyed our time together today, with all my heart. I look forward to what else we shall do.”

With an earsplitting grin, Harry was almost certain he could fly without the use of a broom, magic or his Animagus form. “I love you too. And I feel the same way. Hooray for adventures!”

Giving a small cheer he raised his fist in the air, settling into the warmth of his lover’s arms. To anyone else, this wouldn’t be a satisfying warmth but to Harry, there was no greater feeling in the world. They loved one another and today he had helped Alistair, in the same way, which he had him, many times.

As the sun slowly set only they remained, observing as their date came to a close. But even so, this was just the beginning of their journey.
Alistair's like my child, (Yes I'm 22 and he's 1500 but still xD) so writing that last bit really tugged at my heartstrings. But character development, yay! I could never leave him hurting <3
Scars and Secrets

Chapter Summary

Something is returned to Harry which he never expected, Hermione spends some alone time with Solomon and afterwards, it's time for Alistair to inform everyone else of his Vampirism. Afterwards Harry tries something again, a kind of magic which had never worked on him before but this time, hoped he would be met with different results.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Another date and this time, it was Harry turn. The day went very well, feelings returned though with an unexpected revelation from Alistair.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warning: Towards the end, there's smut between men.

It was the day after their date, and Harry was in the kind of blissful haze which, at this point, not even Fluffy could disrupt. At least classes didn't resume until tomorrow, which gave him today to sort himself out.

It had been a day of highs and lows. Nearly all of them highs, the only low being a heartbreaking revelation from Alistair. But even then, his willingness to trust him and talk about it, ensured that was one less burden upon his sturdy shoulders.

Harry had confessed his love, with less awkwardness or stumbling over words than what he would have predicted and then, it was returned.

Alistair loved him!

How the hell was he supposed to concentrate on anything ever again? Though, much like when their relationship first began, he would probably settle into the familiarity, though without any novelty wearing off.

Sitting with his friends in their usual spot by the lake, none of them could rouse Harry from his
thoughts.

Observing him closely and knowing where he'd gone yesterday, Ginny believed she could take an accurate guess as to what happened. And, as she'd done many times before, used her wand to ensure he was brought from his thoughts.

"Ginny!"

Sputtering as the water hit his face, her snicker gave it away. Drying himself off, he supposed this was a sure fire way for his attention to be directed elsewhere. "Sorry, sort of spaced out a bit."

"You don't say," Ginny commented, eyeing him with expectancy. "Are you going to tell us why, or is this something best saved for a Karma Sutra entry?"

He should have expected as much from her, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "No, nothing of that sort happened. During our date, towards the end, we were sitting on the beach. When I was there I realised my feelings and couldn't hold back any more, so I confessed."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You told him you loved him?"

As those words brought forth a memory which he believed would produce his strongest Patronus yet, none of them needed verbal confirmation. They could read it in his expression, the softest and serene yet. "Yeah. He loves me too."

The majority of Harry's friends were girls but even so, he didn't think he'd ever understand them. With a small squeal, Luna threw her arms around him, squeezing with some strength which belied her delicate appearance. "I'm so happy for you!"

Hermione and Ginny were no less composed and in the midst of it all, he sent Neville a confused look. Shrugging as if to say he had no idea, he settled for giving him a double thumbs up.

It was like they were the ones who had heard those words and not him but even so, he was grateful for their support. Whenever Sirius and Remus returned from their adventures, he'd let them know too. It was the sort of conversation which he felt would be better saved for in person.

Breaking the excited chatter was the arrival of a sinister looking Owl, almost as if its feathers were shrouded in black. Observing with a mixture of curiosity and wariness he could see that it had a package tied to its leg. Landing on the floor it raised its leg, giving him a sharp glare.

Sensing and seeing for himself that this wasn't an Owl with gentle temperament Harry loosened the package and straight away, it took flight without a response needed.
Attached to the package was a sealed envelope. Checking to see if it was cursed or charmed in any way and detecting nothing, he was ready to react if something should happen.

Breaking the wax seal he held the letter in his hands, eyebrows rising.

_Potter,_

_I have no need for this. Do with it what you will, as it no longer functions the same._

There was no signature to say who it was from. But he'd recognise that handwriting anywhere, even if slightly different from his days in school and the diary.

He could add a letter from Voldemort onto the list of things which only happen to him.

Ensuring that no students were nearby, Neville kept his voice hushed. "Is that from, well, you know who?"

At Harry's nod, it aroused the curiosity of everyone there, all except Luna. She knew what was in the package, even without Harry opening it. Over time her magic had changed, into something more beautiful that she could have ever anticipated. She'd undergone no more physical transformations, but her magic now allowed her to see things which only the Fae could, alongside being able to detect certain kinds of other magic.

And rather than her brief glimpses into the future, she was able to see more and more with each day. Not just one but several possibilities and even then, none of those may come to pass or would, but a different course of events could lead to those moments.

She could tell no one of the details, the responsibility lying solely with seers. Only they could know, as others having awareness of these possibilities would lead to nothing but disaster.

Not even Brio, as some of her visions had included him too. Even if no one else was allowed to know, she had the ability to guide them towards a future which would benefit everyone.

For now, all Luna could do was take each day as it came. But this decision of Voldemort's was promising.

As Harry opened the package, he was greeted by the very same Diadem which he'd gone to the Room of Requirement for. Unlike that time, not a trace of corruption remained. In fact, he couldn't detect anything.

"Why would he bother returning it?" Ginny questioned, knowing exactly what it was from the first
Taking the letter addressed to Harry Hermione scanned the contents, thinking. "He said it's of no use to him now. Knowledge is important and the diadem grants the wearer this. Did the Horcrux removal do something to it?"

Reaching into the box, it only confirmed what Luna had suspected when first laying eyes on it. She could feel nothing. For all intents and purposes, this was now an ordinary piece of jewellery. "The magic is gone."

Harry was stunned. "Gone, how? It belonged to one of the founders and they were some of the most powerful Witches and Wizards of their kind."

"Its been a Horcrux for a long time now and with something so dark attached to it, not many things could withstand that sort of magic at constant close proximity. I think it twisted the Diadem's power and when he reclaimed his soul piece, the Diadem's magic left as well."

With Hermione's words, Luna nodded. "I think so too."

He should have known really. But then he wasn't sure if Voldemort would actually find a way to remove his soul piece without destroying the Diadem, never mind giving away something that even without magic, would be of some considerable value. Naturally it was his fault this had happened to begin with but still, this was an act which had come as a surprise to him. Turning to Luna, he asked her a question. "What should we do with it? As the only one of us in Ravenclaw, I reckon you've got the biggest say."

Luna needed no time to think. "Professor Flitwick, he'd be so happy to see this returned."

As Harry handed it over Luna stood up, holding the Diadem carefully. “Come with me. We found it together so it’s only right to return it in the same way.”

Seeing no issue with this Harry followed her, giving a brief wave to the three. “Back in a few.”

Once they left together, a chill ran down Ginny’s spine. “Really dark magic or not, the fact that his was so strong in that way it stripped away the magic of a founder’s object completely is really disturbing."

Nodding in agreement, Neville’s expression remained troubled. “Even if he’s not actively targeting us or specifically Harry now, I still can’t see him as a good guy in any way. Just slightly less of a worry. Other than him having the elder wand, what scares me the most is how similar he and Dumbledore were. It took multiple splits of his soul to do all the things that he did but with Dumbledore, most of his crimes were committed before he made one, some of them just as bad if not worse than Voldemort. I’m glad he didn’t split his soul that many times or who knows what we
would have dealt with?”

They were valid points, ones of which even Hermione had failed to notice, amidst all the excitement. In truth, her thoughts were directed towards someone rather than something, which left only a little room for other things.

“Let’s be thankful that possibility hasn’t played out.” Shuddering, the mere thought made her hairs stand on end.

‘Hermione?’

Startling slightly, sometimes she forgot about her own connection with Solomon, even if it had been established for a short while now.

‘Yes?’

‘Is something wrong? I can detect uneasiness within you.’

Appreciative of his concern she explained, pushing that thought firmly to the back. ‘It’s fine. Neville was just talking about Voldemort and Dumbledore. How they’re so similar and yet, Dumbledore did everything mostly with his soul intact. It was a what-if scenario, this being what if Dumbledore had split his soul multiple times rather than just the once?’

Hermione could almost detect a faint hint of displeasure through their connection. ‘Ah, I understand. But he will no longer be a danger. The chance of him being able to split his soul again is also an impossibility, so there is no need for concern.’

Hearing those words from Solomon provided her with reassurance like no other. She missed him. She hadn’t seen him since last staying over at Lothaire Castle after Dumbledore’s trial. With all, she’d been through with the friends she’d made and her own personal trials, that required a great deal of patience. But for this, it almost seemed like entire lifetimes before they saw one another again. While she liked to think herself independent and mature, Hermione had her moments of vulnerability like any other person and for once, chose to voice them.

‘..Can I see you?’

Even so, they were hesitant, biting her lip slightly as she awaited a response.

‘Yes. Go somewhere that is a little more private and once you are ready, inform me.’

As Hermione began to formulate an excuse for why she suddenly had to leave, Ginny’s next words
dashed the need for her to do that.

“Conversation with your boyfriend?”

Looking mildly sheepish, Hermione nodded. Not long afterwards she'd told her friends of their connection, able to finally relate with Harry and understand the uniqueness of it all. “Was I that obvious?”

“A mountain troll disguised as a pixie would be subtler.” Ginny stated, bluntly. “Go ahead, leave us two alone and we can discuss what it’s like to be spare wheels in this friendship.”

Seeing and hearing for herself that she was joking Hermione left, giving them a brief wave and parting words. “If Harry and Luna come back let them know where I am.”

“Will do!” Ginny shouted to her retreating back, reclining against the tree’s rough bark with a sigh. “So, how’s it going with Greengrass?”

Partly for conversation purposes and partly to sate her curiosity, Ginny asked Neville, the last of her friends there for the moment. Out of everyone, she would say Neville was the one she was least close to. Even so, her group of friends wouldn’t be the same without him. She’d already gotten to know Hermione and Harry better than ever the start of her 5th year, and she'd like to do the same with him.

At the mention of Daphne, Neville perked up. “Ok, I think. I’m seeing her later on today. I offered to help with Herbology homework.”

Ginny raised her brows, smirking lightly. “Is that a euphemism?”

Realising what she was referring to Neville shook his head, blushing faintly. “No, definitely Herbology homework.” To shift the focus from him, Neville asked her a question in turn. “What about you? Anyone interesting popped up in your life?”

“Not yet anyway. For now, I get my kicks out of teasing Harry. His reactions are always fun.”

As someone who often observed the teasing rather than taking part in it, Neville could agree that it was entertaining to see Harry’s reactions.

A sudden thought occurred to her. “Actually, I never did ask. I remember you mentioning about getting detention from Professor Lothaire for punching Crabbe. What did he have you do?”

Since no one has asked at the time it slipped his mind shortly after, not feeling like detention at all.
“We just talked. It wasn’t a tea and biscuits kind of talk or anything, but just a discussion and covering some things in lessons more thoroughly that I had problems with.”

Ginny was amazed. “He didn’t even give you lines like I must not punch deserving bastards in the face?”

“No, he just told me there were better ways to handle things like that. He didn’t even want an apology to Crabbe either, because he understood where I was coming from.”

If it had been McGonagall, Ginny was positive it would be a lecture of great proportions. “What a legend.”

He couldn’t help but agree there. He wouldn’t make getting detentions with him a habit, even if they weren’t really punishments. But still, the fact that he took the time out of his day to help in such a way made Neville appreciate him all the more. Harry had told them that he planned to tell the whole school of his Vampirism tomorrow and if need be, would defend the man. Even without seeing school records, Neville knew instinctively that for DADA results across the board, they would be one of the highest in Hogwarts history.

Arriving outside of Professor Flitwick’s office Harry knocked, a high pitched voice calling to come in. As they did he looked unsurprised to see Luna, but his bushy eyebrows raised when seeing Harry. “Miss Lovegood and Mr Potter! What can I do for you?”

Beaming, she placed the Diadem onto his desk.

Looking at it, Harry was positive that if stood on a stack of books like in class, he’d no doubt topple off them. “Is this...?”

Trailing off he was silent, eyes wavering with a mixture of awe and disbelief.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. It’s a slightly long story of how we came to have it.”

“If you have the time we can explain.” Luna piped up, happy to see the Professor’s expression. Ginny was her first friend but arriving at Hogwarts, Professor Flitwick was the first person to instantly accept her quirkiness and even now she paid him a visit when possible. He was one of her favourite people, seeing him as a friend alongside her Professor when discussions had turned to life outside of lessons, particularly her newfound immortal status. Though, only he, her friends, her father and Professor Lothaire were aware of the full details.

He did have work to complete, but it wasn’t every day that a founder’s object thought to be lost was
suddenly placed on his desk.

As the pair of them explained he couldn’t hide his shock, facial colour alternating between normal and pale, fluctuating with the weight of such words.

Of course, Harry didn’t mention the fact that he had a truce with Voldemort and was sent the Diadem just now but instead told him mostly the truth. They’d found it in the Room of Requirement and while there, had asked it for something to remove a soul piece. But in the process, it had taken away all the magic while leaving the Diadem itself intact.

“Thank you both for bringing this to me, I am grateful. While it is a shame that the magic is lost to us, it would only provide too much temptation. Even so, a founder’s object without magic is better than none at all and finally, it can return to where it belonged all those years ago.”

Placing it away for safekeeping, the least he could do was return the Diadem to its original place, once he had a spare moment.

“You do the house of Ravenclaw proud. Gryffindor you may be Mr Potter, but I believe that you would have done very well here too.”

Caught off guard with the unexpected compliment he blinked several times, eventually managing to respond. “Thanks, Professor.”

Filius could be knocked over with a feather, he was that excited. “Twenty points to Gryffindor and Ravenclaw! This is a special and joyous moment!”

Harry could tell this was the right decision, pleased to see his enthusiasm. If roles were reversed he’d no doubt act the same as despite his sometimes Slytherin ways, he really did take pride in his own house.

Saying their goodbyes, Harry and Luna headed back outside.

“That was a good idea. The Diadem’s in safe hands with him.” Harry spoke, satisfied. Hopefully, no one else with ill intentions would try to get their hands on it in the future.

Once outside again and heading back towards Ginny, Hermione and Neville, Harry noticed they were short one. Glancing around, he was confused. "Where's Hermione?"

Eyes twinkling with a hint of mischievousness, a downpour of protests from Hermione's lips would rain over them all if she could have heard Ginny's words. "Gone to have a passionate snogging session with her Vampire boyfriend."
She probably missed him and just wanted to talk for a while. Though more probably would happen, he didn't think things would get too out of hand if she remained in school. But even so, the Hermione of 6th year was nothing like the Hermione of previous years so he could be proven wrong in this case.

"I'll take your word for it. Ravenclaw and Gryffindor are up 20 points by the way, Professor Flitwick was really pleased to see a founder's object returned."

Ginny snorted. "I'm just amazed we're not in last place, with that stunt Gryffindor pulled. Skinny dipping in winter, I swear. House of the brainless idiots, never mind house of the courageous."

Harry agreed. Even now this was something which resurfaced within their house occasionally and until their graduation days, he wouldn't be surprised if they never heard the last of it.

One member short for now they chatted the minutes away, Harry thinking to himself that these straightforward weekends with a date dotted in every now and then, he could happily get used to.

Hermione didn't like to think of herself as a really needy person, independent from a very young age. But this relationship was entirely new to her in every way and as such, wanted to spend a lot of time exploring it, while not sacrificing other things which were important too. She hadn't yet found a balance, busy day to day. But it was the kind of busy which she thrived upon.

Deciding to try the Astronomy Tower, it was known for being far away from where most staff and students were. As such, students thought it would be the perfect place to become intimate with their boyfriends or girlfriends but then, by the end, were usually caught.

However, Hermione liked to think she had a good grasp of magic. And with someone who had an even better grasp of magic, the chances of being caught by anyone were impossible.

Climbing the twisting steps upward, she could see that no one was here. Double checking and confirming this, she told Solomon.

'There's no one here now.'

No sooner had she spoken those words, that he appeared.

Drinking in the sight of him Hermione's heart fluttered, beating a consistent rhythm within her chest. It steady increased, as the small smile growing a fraction larger each time she saw him, lit his face with an entirely different light.
"Good afternoon, Hermione."

No one had ever spoken her name in such a way. To describe it would be difficult but somehow, it was so different when it came from him than with anyone else.

Within arms reach she closed the distance, wrapping her own around his strong frame. "Good afternoon, Solomon."

Returning his greeting in kind, Solomon hadn't get gotten used to a human's warmth. Alistair's own faint warmth had taken some getting used to but overall, he only held a fraction of his brother's affection. He'd been intimate with other Vampires and one human, but none of them was more than a mutual arrangement involving a night of pleasure. For him this was a new experience, one of which he would commit to memory and, if needed, ask for a little advice from someone who he knew had plenty of experience romantically.

Hermione was so warm and in contrast, icy coldness. He couldn't exchange body heat with her, for he had none. It had never been a point of concern to him but every now and then, that silent question arose within his mind.

Though that mild worry resurfaced, it wasn't enough to alter his actions any. Returning her affection, the reason why Alistair had a preference of partners who held body heat of their own, became clearer by the day.

Pulling back enough to smile up at him, her wild curls blew in the mild breeze. In an action which hadn't been previously thought out, he brushed some of her hair away, displeased that it obscured the intelligent, warm chocolate brown eyes that he liked.

As his fingertips brushed her cheek she placed her hand over his, their differences flashing before him with startling clarity. Rather than remain in his mind, another person became the first to hear it.

"I am always cold. I possess no body heat and that will not change. Does this bother you?"

Surprised by his question and the faintest sign of vulnerability held within it, she needed no time to think of her answer. "Of course not. It makes you different from me, just like the fact that I have a limited lifespan while yours is limitless. Because someone has body heat doesn't always mean to say they're a warm person. Dumbledore is a human with the same body temperature as other humans, but he's so cold."

Scarcely able to believe her boldness, Hermione drove the point home. "And if things happen to get a little heated between us, you can always cool me down."

Blushing mildly, she spared a thought to Harry who faced the same problem as her. There was only
a small difference in their height now, with Harry being slightly taller than she was. When sitting down there was no problem but standing up, it made things more difficult.

Tackling this situation as she would any puzzle, her need to was made null and void when she was suddenly picked up.

"Oh!" Surprised and with her legs either side of him, she found herself eye to eye with Solomon. Silver eyes alight with faint enjoyment, he regarded her with more fondness than he'd ever shown to most. "You were wondering how to kiss me."

It wasn't a question, stated factually.

Slightly embarrassed that her intentions were so obvious, Hermione didn't bother to deny it. "My height is a mild obstacle."

Brows drawn in a faint frown, he disagreed. "I like your height, it is... cute."

That was never a word which he spoke aloud and truthfully, couldn't remember the last time he'd ever used it. But even so, he found it fitting, her shy smile an indication that it wasn't a wrong choice.

She'd never thought of it as cute, more inconvenient than anything. But seeing that he was genuine, Hermione wholeheartedly accepted his compliment. "Thank you."

The reason why he'd picked her up, to begin with, was so that they were a similar height, for the moment. Never someone to let an opportunity slip by she wrapped her arms around him, conveying through the soft warmth of her lips that no, his lack of body heat wasn't something that concerned her at all.

Solomon was under no illusions of who, out of him or Alistair, was more experienced in the arts of seduction, intimacy and anything else which fell under those categories. But he'd kissed women before. Not many, especially when taking his age into account but still, enough that he knew how to pleasure a woman.

But why did this feel so different?

They hadn't done more than kiss yet, not wanting to push Hermione to a stage that she wasn't ready for. With just this, he was experiencing more pleasure than he could remember, even with a Vampire that one time who knew the ways of men more than he did women.

It was a slow, gentle caress of lips, matching one other in pace. Each time they reconnected, it almost seemed for those moments their magic twined together, mimicking the closeness of their bodies.
As she secured her grip around him a hand began to wander, sliding beneath the material of her shirt and met with warm, smooth skin. Going slowly and ensuring that he read her body language and emotions, he was rewarded with a soft, pleasured sound.

He wanted to explore all of her. He’d read many books in his lifetime and had ventured out to discover new things, but Hermione was the first person, romantically, he wanted to know everything about. But like with many things, remained unsure if his curiosity of her would ever be sated.

And then, a voice called out to them both. “Who is there?”

Hermione startled slightly, paling when realising who it was. While sharing Hermione’s company was pleasant and very enjoyable, Solomon’s senses were more alert than ever before. He couldn’t seem to ever switch off entirely, constantly on alert and aware of his surroundings. He would stand beneath the blistering sun until nothing more than ash before he ever allowed himself to be captured by someone again.

As such, he’d taken measures to hide them both and out of those he knew, only Alistair, if he should choose to, could break through the protections he’d put in place. Magic itself was his forte, after all.

“He has spectacularly terrible timing,” Hermione commented, calmly despite her heart hammering for an entirely different reason now. Still, in the same position with Solomon, she’d never been more relieved that he wasn’t the age he appeared to be, or circumstances might have been different.

Facing away from Professor Snape she didn’t need to see his expression, knowing instinctively what it would look like. She had to wonder how on Earth he knew and if he truly had nothing to do on Sundays, that berating students outside of lessons and school atmosphere became a pastime?

Seeing no one there he left, though didn’t doubt that suspicion remained.

At first, she thought that maybe this interruption had deadened the vibe between them but a second afterwards, realised this was far from the case.

But as Solomon’s hand brushed along her side and over the scar that she hated, Hermione flinched.

“Did I hurt you?” Puzzled and concerned he stopped his movements, gazing into her blurry eyes.

It had come as a shock, the only person who had touched it, out of necessity, was Madam Pomfrey. She only used a charm whenever showering or getting changed. Other than that she didn’t bother, not imagining a scenario where anyone else would see it.

But here, with Solomon, she’d completely forgotten until now. Brought rushing to the surface of her
mind once again, it became a struggle to keep her composure. “I’m fine. It’s just.. not many people have touched it.”

While he hadn’t seen it, Solomon could feel the difference in that area. The way it dipped slightly in over, indicated that this was a severe scar. But he didn’t know by how much.

“Eventually, you would have seen it. You can now, but it’s horrible looking.” She continued, nervous.

“Are you certain?” Solomon asked, detecting a high amount of distress levels coming from her.

She didn’t want to hide anything from him. Even if this was a part that she feared would cause him to turn his back on her. “Yes.”

As Hermione was placed down, she found herself unable to meet his eyes. Looking down to focus on the part of her body which at least, to her, stood out in the worst possible way, she slowly lifted her shirt to reveal the deep scar which ran along her side and stomach.

Whoever had done this to her, he desired nothing more than to enact the various types of punishments which he’d created or toyed with the idea of, during the year he was kept captive by Dumbledore. Soon he would be able to put those into practice, but using someone else wholly deserving of them would help him to iron out the finer details.

He could detect faint traces of dark magic within her, though was unsure of its origins. The only thing he did know was that it wasn’t her magical core, but an external source.

Unable to see her expression he reached out and with purpose this time, stroked over the curse scar. “Who did this to you?”

Voice laced with more cool anger than intended, the unwavering strength of his control began to, just a little. It was the same for Alistair. Whenever he was open enough to discuss past or current relationships, each time, he was prevented from personally confronting those who would dare to hurt him. Not wanting to go against his wishes he refrained from doing so, though that didn’t stop him from hoping that all the bad luck in this world would befall them.

“Dolohov, last year. He’s one of Voldemort’s Death Eaters.”

Hermione had faced different kinds of rejection, whether during her childhood or growing up, without a friend. Even with friends, she’d faced similar things, though on less of a severe scale. But this scar was a painful reminder, physically and emotionally. She knew that curse scars could be painful and that Harry’s scar was overwhelmingly so, though that hadn’t happened ever since the Horcrux removal.
For her there was no rhyme or reason to the pain, sometimes flaring up unexpectedly or tingling unpleasantly. She hoped that one day, for her, Harry and everyone else with curse scars, that there would be a way to remove them.

He’d commit that name to memory. If he happened to encounter him, there would be hell to pay.

That thought was for no more than a few seconds. The feeling of wanting to reassure another had never been so strong. Kneeling down he came face to face with her scar, purposefully kissing it.

Shocked by his actions she had many questions, but none fell from her lips. The words remained trapped inside, moving without a form of release.

“You’re not disgusted?”

It was a struggle to remain calm, a mixture of doubt and disbelief swirling inside her.

Solomon’s heart hurt. He’d never understood why. It always did when faced with extreme emotions but here, it was as if a needle had found its way inside, attempting to puncture the heart which had never beat.

In fact, to him, she had never looked so beautiful. The night of the Halloween ball she was certainly, with a regret he couldn’t physically be there at the time, but he’d come to learn there were many different types of beauty.

“I could never be disgusted with you.” Filled with quiet confidence he pressed another kiss to it, Hermione’s inner turmoil finally finding its release.

“I hate it. I thought you would too, so I was scared.”

Voice trembling she finally released her shirt, the scar beneath tingling for an entirely different reason now. Her heart was fit to burst. Self-confidence shattered from comments about her appearance over the years and then this scar, at least her academic achievements remained consistent. Putting negative thoughts aside she threw everything she had into her work, pleased with the end results even if it left her unable to stare in the mirror and say to herself, ‘I look good today.’

But he’d seen the worst part of her and yet, stayed right there. Whenever he complimented her she found herself truly believing it but his acceptance of this hit her like a ton of bricks.

“The only disgust I feel is towards the one who gave you this scar. My feelings have not changed at all. If anything, they have only grown.”
Coming to kneel in front of him she whispered, voice weak. “Thank you.”

Solomon was the first to act this time. Having no concept of comfort with a brother that embodied all the qualities of a teddy bear and more was an impossibility, after all. For the first time, he wanted to do this, with someone else other than Alistair.

Even so, this was far different, the strengths in his arms conveying what his words might not have. He hated the thought of Hermione hating herself, wishing with everything he had to over time, change her self image. There were so many things he liked about her he was unsure of where to start, but the road to her seeing those things for herself would be a challenging one.

Wrought with emotion and the unexpectedness of showing her scar, tears of joy, relief and other feelings which right now Hermione couldn’t comprehend, fell from her eyes.

It was cathartic, therapeutic and slightly embarrassing, considering what they were engaging in before. But even so, he’d turned an insecurity of hers into something far from this. While her negative opinion of it remained, already she was beginning to feel better about herself.

Within the comforting coolness of his arms, she remained there for a while, eventually pulling away. Smiling weakly, a handkerchief with fine embroidery appeared within Solomon's hand. Holding it out to her Hermione accepted, dabbing at her eyes for a moment. "Thanks."

Observing her for a moment and seeing that she was alright, Solomon didn't move from his position but stayed right there, talking to her.

"It has been many years since I last had the opportunity to enchant something but recently, I have begun anew. It is an art I am very fond of and one day, I would like to show you."

"I'd love to see!" Intrigued, there was only so much information that could be found about this.

He knew that would pique her interest. With a small, secretive smile he answered all of her questions and the time, as always, passing them by.

Tears long dried and spirits soaring, she’d spent more time with him than intended, but there were still enough hours in the day. Sensing they’d still be here she headed back out, knowing that their bond with that snippet of time, had deepened further.

Monday. In Harry’s experience, it was usually the most ordinary day of that week. It had proven to be as much, nothing overly eventful happening.
The last meal before everyone returned to their common room, he knew that Alistair planned to inform everyone of his Vampirism towards the meal's end, strangely nervous for him.

‘How are you feeling?’

Concerned he checked up on him, reassured by the answer.

‘I am optimistic, as the reactions of Minerva and the others were far from what I expected. So perhaps, today will follow in similar footsteps.’

‘It’s going to be fine. There might be one or two pricks who say something but they’ve all got to know you. A day doesn’t go by where I don’t hear one student or another talking about your lessons and how great they are.’

A mental, blown kiss. ‘Your support means the world to me.’

Ducking his head to hide the sudden smile, Harry’s slight giddiness had yet to wear off. ‘Glad I could help.’

More than anything though were the rumours going around and for once, the truth. Seamus had told Dean, who told another student and so on until the whole school were aware that he was in a relationship with Alistair.

More of said students than he could count had asked him to confirm this so now, only the students who lived under rocks remained unaware.

One more step and everything would be out in the open.

Close to the time when students would return to their dormitories, Harry observed Professor McGonagall as she tapped her goblet with a spoon. The ringing sound garnering their attention she spoke, glancing over at Alistair for a moment.

“If I could have your attention, please. Professor Lothaire wishes to make an announcement.”

It was rare that any other member of staff did so, other than the Deputy head or Headmistress. So this in itself was something new.

Rising to his feet without even a shred of nervousness showing, Alistair stood before the very same podium that Dumbledore had many times before.
Seeing that he had everyone’s attention, Alistair prepared himself for every eventuality. “Good
evening to you all. There is something about me which I have chosen to keep quiet, until now. I am
not a human but a Vampire, with far more experience than what my physical appearance would
suggest.”

The room was silent, almost eerily so, but Alistair wasn’t finished just yet. “As you may know, the
Daily Prophet released an article detailing the happenings of Albus Dumbledore’s trial. He was
directly responsible for my brother’s disappearance and I came here, hiding my true nature, to find
him. And I did, thanks to the actions of Harry Potter.”

At the mention of his name, some students turned to look at him, but most were listening intently.

“His hatred of Vampires is such, that he would not hesitate to destroy us if the means were at his
disposal. But as he now suffering the consequences of his actions, it is safe for me to tell you this. I
ask for your forgiveness in keeping something of this nature a secret for so long, but I will also
understand if having this knowledge of me, makes anyone feel uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable was an understatement really. Disgust would be more apt, something of which he’d
experienced many a time.

As he finished talking the room burst, filled to the brim with chatter. Fear, excitement, confusion,
until one student’s voice could be heard above everyone else.

“But you don’t look like a Vampire.”

Recognising this as Romilda Vane, Alistair answered her. “I have control over my transformations.”

“A Vampire? He’ll drain us of all the blood we have!” Mallory Norden exclaimed, faced with a
surprising amount of backlash.

Hearing him Seamus glared, pointing his fork with a half eaten sausage speared on the end, towards
him. “Give over Norden, you gobshite! How many of you here agree with him? If anyone, you’re all
gobshites as well!”

“Language Mr Finnegan!”

Hearing Professor McGonagall he acknowledged her words but didn’t apologise. “Sorry, this is
important. I’ll be FUCKED if I’m watching another Professor leave. So what if he’s a Vampire?
Remember Professor Lupin? He was the best we had and when he was forced to leave who did we
gen? A Death Eater disguised as a senior Auror and some bitch who tortured students. If it wasn’t for
Harry a lot of us wouldn’t have passed our Defence Owl last year. Thanks, Harry, you’re a good
lad.”
The partially eaten, speared sausage was pointed in his direction for a moment. Turning back to face Norden, he continued.

“I don’t know about you lot, but Professor Lothaire’s lessons are a right laugh and I’ve learned something along the way as well. Vampire or not, he’s a good bloke in my books.”

Harry had never heard him sound so passionate, the only exception being when he tried to perform miracles of turning water into rum. It was a surprising outburst but with that, it rendered any further protests silent.

Alistair was her hero. Lilah didn’t have the courage to tell Zain that she was a Dhampir, but maybe, judging by his reaction, she could think about telling him. Shuffling closer, she spoke.

“What do you think?”

Staring at the Professor, Zain took his time to think of a response. “I’m still getting used to the idea of Vampires and Werewolves. Before the letter from Hogwarts, I had no idea they existed, just the books with fictional tales of them. But he’s a nice person. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t have gone after us in the Forbidden Forest.”

Lilah agreed with him but decided to test the waters further. “That could have been him just doing his duty as a Professor.”

“Maybe. But he didn’t need to ask after our well-being. That and he let you stay with him when Weasley did all that. I think he goes above and beyond.”

She was so happy. Maybe, just maybe, he’d accept her too. His answers gave her hope, which had dwindled over the years. “Definitely, he’s so brave.”

With stars in her eyes, she listened to everyone else, ready to jump in and speak up if need be.

Reactions across houses varied, separate discussions occurring.

“That explains a lot.” Blaise was the first to speak, finally able to connect the dots. He’d known there was something different about the man but what that was exactly, had eluded them. A few of the Slytherins has suspected the same but for all intents and purposes, he just appeared to be a talented man.

“Loathe as I am to agree with a Gryffindor, Finnegan has a point,” Daphne added, glancing towards the Professor. “We have an expert. Not someone who claims to be either and if he was lying, there would be easier topics to pick.”
Even Pansy couldn’t say a word. She had no opinion of Vampires either way and while she disliked his overly cheerful attitude, he had proven to them he was a capable Professor.

“Vampire or not, Dumbledore is out of Hogwarts with his contribution. I couldn’t stand the old fool, pretending to be something he’s not.” Sneering, even the name left a bad taste in Draco’s mouth. “That alone, I have respect for.”

There were murmurs of agreement. While Millicent didn’t contribute verbally, she didn’t mind either. Shocking certainly, but he was kind to her. He didn’t treat Slytherin any different from the other houses. Even Professor Snape tended to favour them, in retaliation for most members of staff showing favouritism themselves. Thanks to him and surprisingly enough, Granger and Potter, she had more confidence in her spell work.

It was safe to say, after Seamus’ outburst, there were no more. Harry could see that some students looked uneasy or even fearful, but overall, there seemed to be no issue.

“Professor. Will you teach us about Vampires in class?”

That question came from Padma, Harry unsurprised that this came from a Ravenclaw.

This caused another burst of chatter, mainly across the other members of Ravenclaw house.

“Of course. If any of you have questions in or out of class, I will answer them.”

Looking satisfied they fell silent, some giving wary looks towards Seamus, still alert. Though, he’d finally started to eat the sausage which had become a part of his earlier impromptu speech.

Harry suspected that if there were going to be any problems with this, it would happen outside of the great hall, via rumours. It was how that sort of thing worked. He usually chose to ignore them but if he happened to catch wind of any that were false, he’d help to nip them in the bud.

Norden, for example. When Alistair told him he was the one responsible for throwing Lilah in the lake that night, he’d taken a particular dislike towards him. Cormac wasn’t much better but together, it spelt disaster.

After today, Harry expected he would be inundated with a variety of questions from the students.

Before long it was time for everyone to leave, topics of conversation turning to their newly revealed Vampire Professor. He wouldn’t be heading back to the common room just yet but the Hospital Wing. For the first time since 4th year, he would ask Madam Pomfrey to see if this time, his non-cursed scars would heal.
'That went good, I'm proud of you.'

Sending along his feelings through their link, a bright burst of happiness was returned.

'I am truly overjoyed. There are some students who are still uneasy, but I will keep an eye on them. It is not out of the question to assume that at some point, their lives have been affected by Vampires.'

Harry agreed. ‘Seamus was a shock, I didn’t expect that. How many detentions for bad language do you think Professor McGonagall will award him?’

A warm chuckle. ‘Perhaps she will be lenient, considering the words which followed after. I admit this is the first time that I have heard such a word. I assume it is of Irish origins?’

Harry smirked to himself. ‘Yeah. He’s not the best influence really. I’ve picked up some colourful language from him, but he’s a good laugh. I’ll probably drop by later?’

With a voice of warm honey, Alistair seemed to caress each word. ‘Ne vedem curând, dragostea mea.’

Assuming that this was in his native language, Harry vowed to learn more of it. Without him having to ask, it was translated.

‘I will see you soon, my love.’

Committing that sentence to memory he bid his friends farewell, heading straight for the Hospital Wing.

As Madam Pomfrey was expecting him she’d left a little earlier than everyone else, but was still present to hear Alistair’s revelation. While curious about the rumours she heard she didn’t ask, as he was there for a different reason. Inviting him to take a seat on the bed, she instructed him to remove his shirt.

As the magic spread outwards, she needed access to one of his bigger scars. Not embarrassed any more he did so, hoping that this time, it would work.

Though she had seen them before, it always took her by surprise just how severe they were. When he’d asked to come back here and try again she was surprised, but seeing how much self-confidence he had now, filled her with optimism that his willpower would flow in a beneficial direction.

“Relax.”
Doing as asked, he reminded himself of the months spent by Alistair’s side and the first time he saw his scars, the words spoken to him. He found him stunning. Attractive, even. And now, he believed it. His self-image wasn’t warped and with each day, he found it easier to look in the mirror and like what he saw.

Allowing all of that to fill him inside his eyes fell closed, as the wash of magic covered him from head to toe, slipping beneath the clothing which still remained. With a gentle, calming touch, it began to heal the skin.

Harry felt no more than a tickle, but this was different to the last time they tried. He felt nothing at all then.

Quicker than expected Madam Pomfrey finished and breaking her professionalism for just a moment, allowed a warm smile to appear. “Your scars are healed.”

He’d hoped it would work, but there was a niggling doubt in the back of his mind that it would be like all the other times. But with her confirmation, he looked down at his hands, arms and torso.

Every scar inflicted by the Dursley’s hands were gone. Harry couldn’t remember the last time he’d looked at himself and saw smooth, unblemished skin. Like the day he’d escaped from the Dursley’s, he’d escaped all that they’d inflicted on him too.

Leaving him alone for a moment Harry conjured reflective surfaces and with the curtains closed, inspected everything that he could see.

He almost didn’t recognise himself. In his eyes, this was such a drastic change. For so long now he’d wanted to erase the physical signs of abuse, the reminders of what he’d suffered, but never thought it was possible.

Not even his worst scar, the one Dudley carved into him, remained. All that there was were the blood quill scars and the one Voldemort gave him but in comparison to before, this change was huge.

And then, it hit him!

“YES!” Shouting a bit too loud for the time of day he leapt into the air, almost forgetting to put his shirt back on as he threw open the curtains. Filled with excitable energy he practically bounced on the spot, knowing exactly who he was going to see now.

“Thanks so much, you’re brilliant!” Harry grinned, an innocent one filled with a little of the inner child which remained and seeing such an expression on a young man that had suffered far more than what many could ever understand, Madam Pomfrey found herself holding back tears.
Eyes shining slightly, she patted him on the shoulder. “You’re welcome. You’d better go to your common room, the hour is growing later.”

Harry would, after paying a visit to the other person in need of his thanks.

He didn’t care if a Professor or the last few students happened to pass by and see him running, Prefect or not. This meant so much to him, that words could never describe it.

His footsteps echoed loudly in the deserted corridors, feeling as though he were a helium-filled balloon ready to pop. For all the time he’d hurt and the lingering effects remained, that had been swept away with magic. While the mental scars would always remain, he could feel much better in himself knowing one part of a whole had left, permanently.

Knowing by this time he would be in his quarters Harry burst through the door, catching the man’s attention. Sitting in an armchair with a book in hand, he was about to turn the page but stopped, with his sudden arrival.

Wondering what had happened Alistair opened his mouth to speak but paused, observing Harry jumping around the room with excitement.

“They’re gone! Every single one! It worked!” Barely pausing for breath his green eyes held a thousand twinkling stars, brightening by the second.

As Alistair stood up he barely had time to react, before Harry jumped, directly into his arms. Still not following his line of conversation but nonetheless pleased to see such happiness he held him close, jittering with positive nerves.

“May I ask what is gone?”

Realising he neglected to elaborate, Harry nearly tripped over his own tongue with enthusiasm. “My scars from the Dursleys, I went to see Madam Pomfrey just now to try again and I didn’t know if it would work or not but it did, they’re gone, they’re finally gone!”

He was able to follow Harry’s words, despite the great rush they were spoken in. Once they registered, Alistair finally understood and couldn’t be happier for him. “Oh Harry, That is wonderful!”

About to say something more he was prevented from doing so, met with a kiss so intense that if he were human, it would have taken his breath away. Harry was a fast learner, no longer shy over such things. Raw, hungry, a little rough but fit to burst with love, he wanted to share his joy and show appreciation.
With support for his lower half, Harry's hand found its way to the back of Alistair's head, cupping it and letting the soft, brown hair flow through his fingers. If asked what he preferred, it would always be his hair down. While he liked the ribbons and sometimes tried to guess what colour or pattern it would be next, the ribbon prevented him from doing things like this.

“Thank you, thank you..” Almost a mantra he repeated those words, soft whispers against Alistair’s parted lips as Harry breathed in, for air. Slowing his pace down, he pressed a kiss against Alistair's cheek, met with a similar softness.

“If it wasn’t for you, I don’t think they would have ever left.”

Sitting back down and still holding onto him, Alistair shook his head. “My words may have helped, but it is you that has made the changes.”

God, he was so happy. While their date was fantastic, this had only added to everything. Leaning into him, Harry’s excitement levels hadn’t altered any as he fidgeted some. “I’m not as flawed anymore.”

He gently disagreed. “Harry, we all have flaws. But that was never one of them. Even if we lived in a world where scar removal was impossible, I would never see you as anything other than handsome.”

Now that he was there, Harry decided he may as well go a step further. Alistair's words hadn't left him entirely unaffected. Pulling back enough to gaze up and into Alistair’s eyes, the excited twinkle began to shift into another kind. “You know, I could be lying when I said my scars are gone. Want to investigate for yourself?”

Both of them knew that wasn’t the case. But as always, Harry looked so tempting. Even more so when trying to do just that.

When Harry received no verbal response, he remained far from discouraged. Giving him a sad look, he tilted his head just so.

Those eyes would be his undoing. That, he could confirm with certainty. He was filled with so much energy and after that intense kiss, Alistair couldn’t deny that he would like more before parting ways for the night.

"Ah, my little Devil, this temptation tactic may very well be your undoing."

With an idea in mind, the only indication that Alistair was up to something, lay within a knowing chuckle. Turning him around so that his back faced him, Alistair began to whisper into his ear, seductively and in Romanian. Unless he’d studied the language a little more the words themselves
would be unfamiliar, but their meaning would still shine through. He wouldn’t be sitting idly by, after all.

“Esti divin. Vreau să te sărut, să aud vocea ta dulce.”

Another sentence, this one stealing his breath away entirely. It was one thing to hear it through their link, but another when feeling his mild warmth pressed against his back, soft voice tickling his ear.

Harry had no idea what they meant, but it was the sexiest thing he’d ever heard in his short life. The sexiest thing he’d seen, didn’t need to be said. In his opinion, the answer was obvious.

Moaning softly it seemed as if he didn’t need to know what they meant, almost a running narrative as Alistair’s hand began to slide beneath his shirt, gliding over newly smooth skin.

Everywhere his hand touched it heated up, sparking the inner flames of Harry’s desire as with a smooth motion, his school shirt was unbuttoned, placed carefully aside.

Torso bared, the areas where scars used to be and some nerves deadened with injuries, now repaired. Freshly sensitive skin exposed Alistair took advantage of his position, nuzzling his nose against Harry’s neck. Kissing it his lips moved downward, marking a path which only he alone had the pleasure of doing.

Heart rate quickening he gasped, not long before the threads of control quickly unravelled.

“It feels good. More, please..”

Shifting against Alistair he melted into his touch but longed for it to move southward.

Giving his earlobe a gentle bite, Alistair enjoyed this. Rarely he had the opportunity to speak his own language, often communicating in English. This was proving to be both arousing and entertaining. Tilting his head to the side Alistair’s lips brushed across Harry’s jawline, a hint of huskiness combining with the usual sweetness to create something otherworldly like the man which such words had come from.

“Dorința ta este comanda mea.”

Arms either side of him his hands slipped into the waistband of Harry’s trousers, slowly, almost teasingly lowering them. As he did, only one thing remained.

With a pleased sound, Alistair switched to English. “What is this I see? How naughty.”
Shuffling a little Harry blushed, sure that this one served to heat all of his skin.

With one arm holding him in place the other slowly moved southward, stroking a very obvious bulge through the meagre cloth in his way.

Fingertips of Alistair’s other hand dancing upon his stomach the other remained there, taking his time to caress and massage.

The pleasure began to build, a breathless voice still foreign to him, leaving his lips in a string of barely coherent words. Unable to take his eyes off the sight, it was so much more intense than whenever he did this. The difference was astounding, particularly when that hand slid beneath his boxers, to touch his fully hardened length directly.

“Ahh!” Harry cried out, that one touch travelling straight to his core.

Oh, his voice. It was the sweetest of nectars, an addictive substance. He couldn't get enough of it. “Let me hear you, Harry.”

Not even trying to resist he didn’t hold back, the firm and self-assured grip he had around the base of his shaft, that began to move with expert precision, encouraging him even more.

“That’s it, ahh~”

Barely able to inhale it was as if he’d drank an entire bottle of fire whisky, in a drunken haze of pleasure by Alistair’s actions alone. Moving up and down the entirety of him, a thumb brushed over his very tip, rosy red as if to mimic his blush.

Harry arched slightly, tilting his head back as his mouth opened. Taking advantage of that Alistair kissed him, tongue tangling with and passionately stroking his own.

He could barely keep up, waves lapping at the shore of his upcoming climax, torn between Alistair’s skilled hands but equally masterful lips.

How could he love someone this much? He never thought such a thing could be possible. Without a doubt enjoyed these moments but outside of this, with their sometimes silly conversations or more serious ones. Every facet of him was beautiful. To see one facet would mean not knowing that person. But Harry had seen so many that truly, in his mind, Alistair had become a jewel. So much colour and so many dimensions, that it took his breath away.

“A-Alistair, I~“
About to tell him that he was close the man knew this instinctively, effectively shushing him by claiming his lips once more when allowed to breathe in for a few short seconds.

And then, he climaxed, waves crashing against the shore within his mind. Going lightheaded for a moment his vision was temporarily stolen, returning when seeing that the majority of his release coated the man’s hand. But rather than what he expected, such as the use of magic to clean himself, the same tongue which had kissed him and left his skin thoroughly warmed, began to lick his hand clean.

At this point, Harry didn’t know whether his Romanian sentences or that action was sexier and at one point, could have sworn he whimpered when seeing this, just a little. He could barely concentrate, that delicious image pleasantly planted into his brain.

The other hand coming to stroke his hair, Alistair murmured into his ear. “Was that to your liking?”

It was as if someone had asked him the question, do you like Quidditch. “Yes!”

Full of enthusiasm Harry responded, earning warm laughter and the feeling of Alistair's chest softly rumbling. "I am glad to hear it."

Aware but uncaring of his unclothed state Harry turned around, to hug him. “Love you.”

He was nothing more than putty when faced with a playful, affectionate Harry. His heart had been out through a number of things but it was these moments, which often tested this the most. And, compared to the many times which he'd considered himself in love, he really did feel treasured.

"I love you too." Harry had no intention of returning to his common room, just yet. While Alistair had certainly demonstrated his affections, it would be only fair and his pleasure, to return the gesture.

An eventful Monday passed them by. One with freedom from more chains in his past and the other, with freedom of no more large secrets.

Chapter End Notes

The smut was unplanned, it just kind of happened xD The first sentence means 'You are divine. I want to kiss you, hear your sweet voice.' The second is, 'Your desire is my command.' :)


End to Madness

Chapter Summary

After laying a part of his past to rest, Alistair, Solomon and Rupert take steps towards investigating a person of suspicion. Afterwards, Hogsmeade is attacked.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: After an unexpected package, Harry and Luna ensure that it's returned to the right person. Later on, Hermione sees Solomon, revealing a side of her that she hates, but he embraces. With most of Harry's scars gone, he has to share this good news with the one who helped him take those steps.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had been a long time since he’d passed by this room, let alone entered it. With Harry’s confession, this was a step Alistair firmly believed needed to be taken.

It wasn’t because of the ring’s value that he’d kept it, barely scraping the surface when compared to the monetary value of his family. But, everything it represented.

A new start to life, sharing company with someone he loved. Of course, rings weren’t needed, but the symbolism behind them, he’d always liked. Alex had no idea of this ring but still, this tied to what he’d had with him. Or at least, his perception of it all.

He wouldn’t let this affect him anymore. Harry had heard the story, still remaining by his side.

His former bedroom, a place which used to be his haven of sorts, held nothing more than deep-rooted, unpleasant memories. This would be a step towards seeing it in a different light.

Hand hovering over the doorknob it remained there as if an unseen force prevented him from taking further action.

He’d faced a number of terrifying things and yet, the prospect of opening that door almost seemed like the worst thing. But if he didn’t do it now, he never would.

With firm determination he touched the doorknob, twisting and turning to open it.
A fresh, clean smell, nothing which suggested the activities of so long ago. Of course after all this time, it was impossible for such a scent to remain but even so, he’d almost expected it to.

Everything was as he left it, with the exception of bedding smooth as the clear, tranquil waters of somewhere far from here.

Sitting down Alistair disrupted the smoothness, almost as if to reflect his own, current troubles. Opening the drawer he’d placed it into, there was the ring box. It sat there, so innocently, even on his open palm now.

“How can something, at the core, simple bring with it so much pain?” He asked, knowing that there would be no answer. Orange eyes flickering in the room’s dimness he opened it, the ring shining within and just like the very same day he’d picked it out.

That shard of pain pricked his heart once more, remembering how much he’d enjoyed picking this out.

Banishment, for his own piece of mind, was what he’d decided to do with it. Banishment through magic sent objects to a place inaccessible to every creature, no matter their power levels. The act was irreversible though once, he’d heard rumours of living beings themselves being banished there.

It wouldn’t be fair to Harry if this remained here. For both of their sakes, he had to let go.

“Alistair?”

He was rarely if ever caught off guard, yet found himself in that position. “Yes?” Tilting his head questioningly Solomon came to sit beside him, bed dipping further with the added weight.

“What are you doing in here?”

Still staring at the ring within, his lips curved into a sorrowful smile. “Laying the past to rest.”

Solomon disliked the times where he had a lack of understanding, but this was one of them. “I am not sure what you mean.”

As the box snapped shut, Alistair held onto it, fist closing over the top. “Do you remember Alex? He was one of the more recent lovers of mine.”

He’d met him a few times, but couldn’t warm to the man. He had no idea how Alistair could remain so trusting after the number of times he’d been hurt.
He’d made less than flattering comments about past partners before and afterwards, was on the receiving end of a pranking war zone. He remained unrepentant but decided opinions of that nature were better kept to himself.

He’d never liked Alex. With more freckles than sense and a laugh which made Solomon want to knock himself unconscious, it made being around the man unbearable.

There was no proof that he couldn’t be trusted, other than Solomon’s instincts and he knew this wouldn’t have been enough. The moment he’d asked Alex to stay with him in Lothaire Castle was the time Solomon decided to do some travelling of his own.

Once he returned Alex was no longer there. While he did wonder why the sudden change of bedrooms he accepted Alistair’s words of things not working out, moving on from that.

“To my displeasure, I do remember him. Why?”

This was much harder to say than Alistair anticipated. “I apologise. I have told you many a time that honesty is what we must strive for and yet, I was far from this. Alex and I did not part on good terms. With this ring, I had intended to propose.”

Glancing down at the box sadly for a moment, he kept his gaze level once making eye contact again. “That did not happen. On the day which I purchased this, I found him here, with another man. He no longer loved me and four months into our relationship onward, he was unfaithful.”

“Why did you not tell me?” The only hurt in his voice, was for Alistair as he already suspected the reason why, even without an answer. He’d gone through something so painful and he had no idea.

“.I feared that the truth would shatter your trust in humans forever.”

It would have if he’d found out before meeting Harry and Hermione.

When first encountering Harry Solomon was unsure what to think exactly. He’d known of him, but only through Dumbledore’s memories at first. Learning more about him afterwards, proved to be educational.

Without voicing as much, he believed that Harry would be the one to bring Alistair happiness and he hoped, the same would continue to be for Hermione.

Seeing that Alistair was awaiting an answer, Solomon let his actions speak louder. Pulling him in close he squeezed, chest painfully tight with just a fraction of the hurt he must feel.
“I want only the best for you. To know that he did this fills me with rage. I understand your reasoning but there is no need now. I do believe that there are good humans.”

While Dumbledore had changed Solomon, so had Hermione. She’d helped to restore some of the man he once knew.

It didn’t matter that their age difference was slight and physical appearance even slighter, Solomon would always be his little brother. The desire to protect him would never leave, even if he was more than capable of protecting himself.

Returning his embrace he remained there for a short moment, pulling away. Heart truly at peace, he was ready. Without so much as a subtle movement, the box once more sat upon his palm disappeared permanently.

Knowing that he would never see it again, freed his heart from the chains which had weighed it down for some time.

“Why did you decide to come in here now?”

Alistair decided to indulge his curiosity, as he had the intention of discussing his date with Harry and all that had unfolded anyway. “It was Harry. In a move which shocked me, he confessed during our date. The last time those three words were spoken to me first, were by Alex. The memory resurfaced and eventually, I told him what had happened.”

Solomon suspected Harry was involved somehow. While only knowing him for a few months, he tended to have that effect. “And how do you feel about him?”

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation. “I love him. I have loved many and each time, I have insisted it is different. I truly want to believe this time. It is difficult for me, but I have hope because this relationship, from the start, has been different.”

Solomon did too. He couldn’t remember liking many of Alistair’s past partners at all, the last a few centuries ago. However, none of them had saved his life before. He owed Harry that and more.

Now that it had happened, Alistair appreciated Solomon finding him. As if a weight had been lifted from his chest he left the room, memories nowhere near as overpowering now.

Ever since the downfall of Dumbledore, Voldemort had been positively giddy. In such a good mood, in fact, he’d chosen to return the now useless Diadem to Potter.
But, that didn't mean everything was plain sailing.

Shortly into the restoration of his sanity, he could see more and more Death Eaters break away from him. Bellatrix was the unofficial ringleader. He'd brought this on himself, feeding her insanity with his own from soul splitting and as a result, the majority of his followers shared a single brain cell between them. That brain cell didn't stop to think, analyse a situation. The only thoughts which registered were raids, torture and murder.

Once over he approved of this but now, it reeked of pointlessness.

He'd heard, from Lucius himself, that Potter and he were now friends. And lacking the usual Malfoy grace had ranted about how he was disgracing the family name by associating himself with a Potter, of all people.

Half-Blood he may be, but Potter had influence. Within the wizengamot and as a person. He believed the youngest Malfoy had a long way to go but at the moment, showed more sense than what his father did.

The Vampires were involved. One of them taught at Hogwarts and if they should attack nearby, their chances of survival, if he chose to kill, would be impossible.

He’d chosen to keep a low profile. Whatever Bellatrix got herself into and if it did happen to involve that Vampire, was no longer his concern.

Her master's mind had been twisted. Bellatrix didn’t know who or what had done it, but he was no longer the same. She hated change.

Her loyalty to him had never wavered, until now. Out of everyone, she was the only one who knew what their purpose was.

To cleanse the world of half-bloods and mudbloods alike.

Potter and his little friends would come running if they targeted Hogsmeade, along with many, many others she longed to see writhing so deliciously beneath Crucio.

The most fun she’d had in years was the death of Black but before that, torturing the Longbottoms. She would gladly play with their son. Just imagining his screams of pain, Bellatrix tilted her head back, a wave of pleasure washing over her. Oh, she couldn’t wait.

Her current place was an abandoned building which didn’t attract too much attention. Used to the squalor of a high-security cell in Azkaban, this was luxury in comparison and as such, could sleep
anywhere.

She was mostly alone for the moment, but wouldn’t be soon. Usually able to occupy herself with torturing and killing a random filthy muggle family, that had lost some appeal. She wanted to target Hogsmeade, seeing this as second best to Hogwarts as, on a weekend, students would be there. Oh, if only Hogwarts didn’t have strong protection wards. Innocent blood would be spilt, with so many screams.

But, she’d have to settle for second best.

The abandoned building was magical in nature, with a floo network connection that hadn’t been used in years. With just enough powder to call one person, she settled for that, instructing them to inform everyone else.

Rabastan and Rodolphus were already here, sharing in her enthusiasm of reuniting Longbottom with his family.

Excited, she couldn’t wait to begin, as Rabastan gave her a sidelong glance.

Irritated with his look, she snapped. “What?”

Not reacting to her tone in the least, he remained calm. “Nothing.”

“Then, stop staring before I gouge your eyes out!”

Shaking his head he walked off, Rodolphus taking his place. “I’ll help.”

Bellatrix didn’t doubt that for a moment. It was why she married him, after all. They worked well together.

Tapping her foot against the floor she waited, impatient. To pass the time she went through all the list of names which would be punished for lateness, before getting down to business. At the moment this list was extensive.

Before long those she expected arrived, with the exception of one. Sitting around the table no one dared to banish the thick layer of dust settled on surfaces.

Shockingly Crabbe and Goyle were there, usually, one of the latest to arrive with the Dark Lord. It was Jugson, exactly a minute late, which became her target.

“You’re late!” She hissed, some of the newer recruits flinching.
Checking the time, Jugson opened his mouth. “By a bloody minute!”

Dark eyes glittering angrily she grabbed him by the throat, slamming him against the wall behind. Her appearance gave no indication to upper body strength, but he soon found out when sharp-nailed fingers dug into his windpipe.

“You dare speak to me in such a way? Crucio!”

It had been a while, at least for her, since she’d last tortured anyone with her faithful friend. Hearing Jugson’s screams were a reminder of how much she’d missed this feeling. Sheer, pure extasy, something of which only a select few understood.

Watching him writhe beneath her wand she cackled, madness swirling within the depths of her eyes. Regretfully she couldn’t do this for long, needing able-bodied followers. Killing him, at the moment, would work against her plans.

Releasing him she glared down dispassionately, sitting once more with an air of impatience.

Dragging himself up from the floor and throat burning from screams, Jugson sat down, mouth zipped shut.

“With Dumbledore out of our way, no one is there to protect Potter. He is our target and like the Gryffindor he is, will come running the moment he senses just a whiff of danger. One too many times he’s been in the way. Today, he DIES!”

Shouting the very last word she laughed, eyes alight with sadistic enjoyment. Oh, she couldn’t wait. They would all die, writhing beneath her wand. And once that was done, nothing would stand in their way.

They would leave, immediately. Donning their robes and masks they left as a group, poorly organised. But why should they be? The strongest ones hadn’t yet managed to kill them and mostly, it would be those not yet out of school. In Bellatrix’s eyes, nothing there would pose a challenge.

Ever since their run-in with Dumbledore, the days since then had been normal. In Harry's experience that never lasted for long so today, in Hogsmeade, he kept every one of his senses alert.

Alistair was at Lothaire Castle for another meeting, discussing recent events and Dumbledore's actions which had lead to many of his kind meeting their end. Knowing the importance of this, Harry vowed not to make any contact unless important.
Noticing how on edge he was, Hermione shuffled closer to him. "What's wrong?"

Checking the surroundings, Harry kept his voice low. "My gut feeling's kicking in again. I feel like something's going to happen."

"I take it this something is bad?" Ginny asked, warily.

"Yeah. I might be wrong, but this is one of the things, along with Hermione's brains, that have kept me alive."

Harry was right. Luna had seen it herself and yet, could say nothing. This was a heavy burden to bear but, as always, she would do her part. There weren't as many outcomes for this, but the best would depend on Harry's actions today.

"If you're right, I'm hoping it's Bellatrix and the rest of her family. She's not the only one I want to see pay." Voice steely with determination, Neville was more ready than he'd ever been.

Despite his own personal feelings, Harry had come to Hogsmeade with his friends to enjoy himself. Any days out he considered being a luxury, especially when the amount of work which had to be done sometimes became stifling. Placing his gut feeling aside he would keep it in mind, but spring to action if anything should go wrong.

For a while now, Alistair was beginning to suspect there was a large piece of the puzzle that they were all missing. It had been confirmed that Dumbledore wasn't the one to send those Vampires after Harry and also, was not responsible for the increasing number of deaths with suspected failed turnings.

Days beforehand he'd called for another meeting, to inform everyone of recent happenings but also, Sergei.

He liked to believe the best in people, but he was beginning to suspect that the man knew more than he let on. While not in the habit of asking such a thing from Solomon, a scan of his mind revealed nothing out of the ordinary. But still, he couldn't shake this feeling.

Though, for all the problems they had currently, Alistair was delighted to see Karliah again and once more, felt sorry for the fact that she had an unpleasant grandparent.

Everything had gone far smoother than last time, Sergei perhaps remembering last meeting's events and Karliah watching proceedings with apparent curiosity.

Heart soaring whenever her cherubic face caught his eye, Alistair finished up for the day. He could
see nothing else which would come from this, for now.

The moment Sergei began to leave Rupert approached them, blue eyes narrowed. "I want to follow him. There is something he is hiding."

Solomon agreed. "There was nothing in his mind to suggest anything suspicious, but the normalcy of those thoughts was suspicious in and of itself."

While Sergei wasn't the most powerful Vampire out there, wherever he may going could pose a threat. But, they did need information. "Go. But be careful."

"I will." Acknowledging Alistair's words Rupert tailed Sergei, no Vampires outside of the Lothaire family able to transport themselves to another area, unless away from the castle's wards.

Ensuring that Sergei had left Sera came over, nervous. "I'm sorry, I couldn't say anything sitting there, but my father has been acting odd recently."

"In what way?" Giving her his full attention, Alistair wondered if this would bring them any closer to a solution.

"This has been since the start of January. If I'm in the kitchen making tea and he's left alone he mutters to himself. I can't catch most of what he's saying but I've heard more than once, 'They'll be furious with me.' I don't know who."

That alone was enough to indicate all was not what it seemed. Appreciative, Alistair patted her on the shoulder. "Your help has been invaluable, thank you."

Smiling shakily, her nerves were frazzled. "You're welcome."

"And how are you today?" Turning his attention to Karliah, she appeared to be in a good mood if her giggling was any indication. Holding hands behind his back, it was a simple matter to create something which she would like, magic being the figurative needle and thread for this small feat of magic.

Once done he held a small teddy bear in his hands, with white fur, dark eyes and a light blue bow tied around its neck. Eyes lighting up her chubby hands reached out, taking the toy which Alistair held out. Noticing Solomon stood to the side, he waved him over. "Come and say hello."

If asked to adopt her, Solomon wouldn't be surprised if Alistair's answer was a yes. The only children he'd ever liked were Emily and Jacob, when he was a child and now his son, Eduard. But, even if only to himself, he could admit that Karliah did have charm.
With fondness in her eyes, Karliah watched over her daughter, very taken with her new and unexpected present. Looking up and into the eyes of a man which had done more for her than her own family ever had, her smile was much more surer. "I'd better go, thanks for listening."

With Alistair's wards protecting her home, she could rest easy whenever inside. She wanted the best for her child but in times such as these, found it difficult. His support in that manner meant more than she could say. Leaving and feeling as if she'd done her part, Sera hoped her father hadn't gotten himself into too much trouble.

Alistair and Solomon could do nothing but wait, knowing Rupert was very capable and once he returned, may provide them with answers.

Rupert had always hated Sergei, from the moment he met him. Born in Trier, Germany, he was a fan of travelling himself. But once meeting Alistair and Solomon, chose to settle down in Romania. While his home country was beautiful, he had no familial attachments there, simply memories which he would rather not recall. Having friends for the first time helped, though the bloodthirsty side of him remained.

One year Alistair had organised a ball, inviting every one of their kind whether influential or not, for a get together of sorts. And there was Sergei, high and mighty as could be as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

Hate was an understatement, so following the man right now with the chance of getting some cold, hard evidence of wrongdoing, would be his pleasure.

However, that hadn't gone to plan. Tracking his magical signature he arrived at the base of a high rocky cliff, overlooking the sea. On top of that was a small castle which, even from here, he could tell was protected with the strongest, most powerful wards he'd seen in several ages. Perhaps, as strong or even stronger than Alistair's.

Just outside of these wards, Rupert managed to catch a glimpse of Sergei before passing through them. He wasn't by any means not well travelled, but he'd never seen this area before. Maybe Alistair would know of it.

"Whatever it is you are doing, we will find out." Letting his voice be lost among the crashing waves, there was nothing more for him here, at the moment. Disappearing he returned to Lothaire Castle, intent on sharing all that he'd seen.

Something was wrong. The moment Rupert left and returned to Romania, knowledge of what he'd seen began to trickle from his mind. What magic was this? With no time to tell them or explain he settled for scribbling down what he knew, conjuring some paper and a writing implement.
One done, Rupert stared down at his words as if they were gibberish. He remembered that he had tailed Sergei, but what that area looked like now, he had no memory of. With only his rushed, written words to rely on, this worried him.

No longer than five minutes he found the pair exactly where he left them, though sitting down at the table. Putting the paper down he pulled up a chair, frowning.

"What happened?"

With Alistair's question, Rupert didn't know how to explain it. "I followed him. I know this but remember nothing about where. The information slowly left my mind the more time that passed. I had to write it down."

*Castle on top of cliff near sea. Powerful wards, cold climate, raining.*

"Curious," Alistair spoke, voice serious. "In all my years, I have never known such magic. Obliviate would be the closest but there is no time period. The effect is instantaneous and an incantation is required."

Solomon wasted no time. Committing the scant amount of information to his mind, he stood up. "I will research this."

Alistair could rely on him, his research abilities the best he'd ever known. He was well travelled but had seen quite a few places of that description over the years so, at the moment, it could be any one of them.

"What we have is better than nothing at all." Able to see Rupert's regret the man acknowledged his words. "True, though more would have been preferable."

Bitten before he could reach his magical maturity, Rupert didn't have quite as much magic as he could have nor had he reached his maximum physical growth. But Alistair had never known anyone more passionate or dedicated. While sometimes they didn't see eye to eye with methods, Rupert was the only one available for him to speak with, during his loneliest years.

Alistair was about to make a note of all the places he'd been to with this limited description until the bracelet caught his eye.

Wavering between black and deep blue it couldn't seem to settle on one colour, immediately concerned. Right on cue, came Harry's voice.

'I need your help, Death Eaters are attacking Hogsmeade. They-'
Cut off mid-conversation, any further attempts to contact him were blocked out by a similar wall that he'd seen the day of Dumbledore's legilimency attack.

Fearing the worst Alistair gave Rupert a brief explanation. "I apologise, a matter of urgency has come to my attention."

Leaving it at that Alistair disappeared, suspecting that the ones who had broken away from Voldemort would act, but silently cursed their timing.

Having noticed where Alistair's attention lay, Rupert had to wonder what on earth the human had gotten himself into this time. No doubt if he was under attack, those targeting him would face the wrath of a Vampire's love for their 'victim'. Oh, he knew, even without an explanation. He'd never fallen in love himself, but his expression was obvious.

In the meantime, Rupert would start some research of his own. Who knows what else it could do to him? Having open access to the Lothaire's library, Solomon would have a research partner for the foreseeable future.

The first indication that something was wrong, occurred when he heard several screams from outside.

In the Hog's Head with his friends Harry stiffened, leaving the mostly finished Butterbeer alone. "They're here."

No one needed an explanation. Putting down the glass he'd been cleaning Aberforth's wand sprung into his hand, customers quickly leaving the area or to join the ruckus.

"Just the last dregs to clean up now. I've been wanting to take out my frustrations on those Death Eater bastards for donkey's years." He'd seen and heard enough of Death Eater attacks to know when one was happening. Taking a second to lock up behind him Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville couldn't believe how quickly things had descended into chaos.

Harry recognised just about everyone there. Bellatrix, Rodolphus, Rabastan, Dolohov, Yaxley, Nott, Rowle, Jugson, Crabbe, Goyle and the Carrow twins. Surprisingly, he couldn't see Lucius.

Through his past visions and Professor Snape's information, he could recognise them even with their masks on. The different colours signified ranking and as a Spy, he was able to provide Harry with information of how they worked, during raids and duelling. While he rarely participated he was asked to attend most, as a show of trust from his lord.
Whenever an opportunity presented itself, he would thank the man for providing him with this information as right now, it would come in handy.

With the same message, Harry sent his Patronus to multiple people. Hopefully, the DMLE had already been contacted, but it couldn't hurt to reinforce the fact that this was definitely an emergency.

Spellfire thickening the air various colours flashed before Harry's eyes, mimicking all he'd seen in the aftermath of the world cup. In the chaos, he was separated from his friends and quickly, found himself in the heat of it all.

His frequent training sessions weren't for the sake of it. He knew, against Death Eaters with years more experience, he'd need it to even stand a chance against them. Some of them he'd never duelled against before while others, were painfully familiar. Not long after his Patronus professors arrived on the scene, some ushering the youngest students out of harm's way while others joined the fight.

With barely enough time to think he found himself on the end of lower level recruit's spellfire but shortly after, easily disarmed, summoned and snapped their wands.

"What the hell did you do that for?!" One of them shouted, Harry, picturing their shocked expressions behind the masks which hid them.

"I could ask the same. Why did you decide to follow Bellatrix Lestrange, of all people? Idiots." Disgusted he threw their wand remains back at them, dodging a sickly green, familiar spell.

Blasting another Death Eater off their feet, he could see they had a student at their wand's end. Not much older than Lilah he shivered on the floor, Harry crouching down before him.

"Madam Pomfrey will be in the Hospital Wing. I'll use disguise magic so you can head back safely. Can you walk?"

Nodding shakily he stood up, Harry quickly casting all the student would need to keep him safe for that duration. "As soon as you're within Hogwarts, the magic will cancel itself out."

"T-Thanks."

Harry only observed him for a second, turning to the Death Eater he knocked over. Removing their mask, he could see it was Goyle Senior. Shaking his head softly Harry moved him a little further away, securing him with magically and physically resistant chains along with an overpowered stupefy. He'd be damned if he'd let Death Eaters be revived by their allies with a simple counterspell.

He’d spared him, thinking of Gregory who he’d gotten to know some. But, he wouldn’t spare them all.
Expelliarmus was once his signature spell but since then, consciously made an effort to break that pattern. He'd gotten used to wearing his armor from the Fae beneath his school robes and even now, in casual wear, it was hidden beneath. It was only once in Hogsmeade that his gut feeling occurred, the blades still in his trunk.

He was better with magic anyway.

A short distance away he saw Professor Snape, crossing wands with the Carrow Twins. Said to be some of the more sadistic Death Eaters, their remaining sanity gave them a more dangerous edge. While a very capable fighter, Harry could see that he was being kept on his toes.

'Expulse.'

A bright purple bolt of lightning leaving his wand it hit his intended target. Nerve endings a hair’s width from frying completely, they spasmed upon the floor below. Closing the distance between them, he sent the Professor a grin. “Mind if I join in?”

Severus didn't mind in fact, seeing Alecto on the end of someone else's wand for a change was highly satisfying. With a holier than thou attitude, the twins were someone Severus would take great pleasure in killing.

"Be my guest." With those three words, he didn't let Amycus so much as breathe, keeping up a constant barrage of spellfire.

"Come on, I haven't got all day. Or do you like having your arse kicked by a 16-year-old?" Purposefully taunting her, a smirk naturally graced his lips in response to her threatening snarl. "You'll pay for that, brat!"

Immediately on the offensive, a bone breaking curse headed in his direction. Rather than dodge, he held debris just in front to absorb the spell.

"What am I paying with, Galleons, Sickles or Knuts?" He pretended to be curious, even as incendio left his wand. Dousing the fire with water steam rose up, obscuring their view for a second.

"Your life!" Harry once more blocked a spell, this time the cruciatus curse. Both of those spells so far required a high amount of magic. The darker it was considered to be, the more it cost. Incendio required a minimal amount of power but could burn someone to death. Yet, it was taught at Hogwarts. To him, it was purely about intent.

He had no time to contact Alistair right now. A few seconds spared to tell could mean being hit with a spell which would incapacitate him. At the moment this situation wasn't out of their control, glad to see the majority of students had left. But when he had the time, he would.
Not a lower level recruit by any means, her attacks were vicious, hitting him hard. A cutting curse caught his robes, slicing clean through some of the material but thankfully, avoiding flesh.

He had a plan. Sending a weak spell her way she sneered, observing him through narrowed eyes. "Is that it?"

Knowing this would only need a weak shield Alecto summoned one. However, what she couldn't see, was the significantly more powerful cutting curse directly behind Expelliarmus. Shredding the shield it sliced through her robes, cutting an arm which began to bleed profusely.

It was then, that Harry upped his pace. Similarly to the man across from him he didn't let her fire another spell, forced into a defensive position. His cut had hit deeper than first thought, soaking through the dark robes with blood. Trailing down her arm she had to switch hands, at an immediate disadvantage.

About to blast her back a stray reducto hit nearby, the force causing him to topple over. Scraping his hands against the floor they bled, stinging slightly. Barely registering as much he rose to his feet, Alecto healing her arm in that time.

In the midst of everything her mask lay on the floor, damaged. With no time to replace it, Harry could see her features, twisted into a cruel sneer.

Back and forth they continued to trade spells, though Harry could see that the blood loss of his opponent had begun to affect her reaction times.

Then, Harry had another idea. He'd undergone some physical training as well, many magic users neglecting that side of combat. This could either be the edge he needed, or a foolish move. Probably a bit of both, if he took the time to reflect upon it.

Charging headfirst towards her she froze, astonished even as a strong kick to the abdomen ensured she could no longer keep her footing. Immediately summoning her wand, this was one Death Eater Harry would never allow to continue living.

As always, his pouch was there. In it, was one of the bottled tail hairs he'd vowed to do something with all those months ago. What better time to test it than now? Death eater or not, Avada Kedavra carried with it a heavy sentence in Azkaban. Though his perception of this spell had changed drastically, the last thing he wanted was more trouble. And this way, it had never left his wand.

Holding the glass container filled with Avada Kedavra, his eyes, at that moment, were only a touch darker. "Have fun in hell."
Throwing it at her the glass smashed, its contents settling onto the warm body below. As it made contact it brightened for a moment, eventually fading. And with it, went the life of Alecto Carrow.

Noticing that one twin had been taken care of, Severus laughed. An unsettling one which roused Amycus' attention. "What's so funny?"

"The life of your sister has been cut short by Potter, who has yet to leave full-time education. Pathetic."

Paling, that was enough to distract him. Severus could have lied, but the truth, in this case, was so much sweeter. He'd have to question Potter later and ask just what the contents were. He had his suspicions but wondered how that would be possible.

While he could sit and revel in Amycus' misery cloud for hours, Severus believed he was doing him a favour. Death would ensure they were reunited, after all.

"Sectumsempra." He took pleasure in speaking this one aloud, the man too caught up in grieving his scum of the earth twin to avoid what was heading in his direction.

It made Harry's earlier attack look like a paper cut in comparison. Morbidly fascinated it was as though a sharp weapon had sliced into him multiple times, lacerations covering his body as holes in his robes revealed the severity of these wounds. Paling so much more he fell down, no longer having the strength to move as he was left, bleeding to death.

Blowing out a breath, Harry certainly had questions for him. But they would have to wait. Sending a nod in the man's direction he went in search for his friends, hoping they were faring well.

Lilah was scared. She'd attended every one of Harry's DA lessons and knew she'd barely scraped the surface of learning. She never thought it could be like this. She'd seen so many horrible things in her life, but there were screams everywhere.

Throughout the whole thing, she'd never let go of Zain's hand, making sure to keep away from the fighting and head to safety. They didn't stand a chance against Death Eaters and though she really wanted to help them fight, she'd be more of a hindrance than a help.

"What do we have here?"

Lilah was barely given time to grasp before she was snatched away by Zain. Ready to scream a hand clamped over her mouth, hot, sickly breath hitting her ear.
"Scream, and I'll kill you."

Terrified she nodded. But, rather than struggle, she bit down hard on the hand which began to move away from her mouth. Latching on she didn't let go, even when blood began to coat her tongue. It tasted foul, bile rising to the back of her throat.

"You little bitch!" He shouted, flinging her to the ground where she rolled, skidding painfully onto the floor below. Pleased with herself despite her fear she stood up, ready to run as Zain came over to her.

"Are you ok?!" Panicking he held her hand again, ready to shield her.

But, there was no need.

"Luna!"

Relieved that her friend was here Luna came to stand in front of the man, shielding them both. While now unable to cast strictly offensive magic, there were many other ways in which she could help. Light blonde hair fluttering behind her she drew her wand, expression lacking the usual serenity and all seriousness.

In Jugson's opinion, this was a piece of piss. What the hell could a little chit of a teenager like her do? She was certainly attractive though. Maybe, once he'd finished here he'd take her home. He liked the young ones best. Not too young though, there wasn't enough to grab then.

But she'd do very nicely indeed.

Resisting the urge to shiver, Luna remained calm. "Leave."

Looking down his nose at her, he could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Don't make me laugh. What could you possibly do to me? Give in sweetheart, I'll show you a good time if the answer's yes."

She didn't provide a verbal answer, a jetstream of water leaving her wand that was so powerful it knocked him off his feet, sending him flying several feet into the air. Skidding on the grass he came to a stop, stunned for the moment.

Lilah clapped her hands excitedly. "Amazing, thanks for helping us!"

Glad that she could get there on time Luna gently nudged them towards the direction of Hogwarts. "The way should be safe, but tread with caution."
Nodding to her words seriously Lilah gave her a small wave, staying alert. She didn't want to run into them again.

Why? Why did they love carnage, torturing innocents? It broke Luna’s heart and she wouldn't fall down the same path, even if they did deserve it. Offensive spells had never worked well for her. Not like the other students. She would nurture her strengths and use them to help others. It was all she could do and all that she had learned, with Brio. She would be putting his lessons to the test and already had, her healing magic helping many caught in the throes of duelling.

Ginny was on the warpath, towards a very specific Death Eater. Nearby she happened to overhear his words to Luna. Seething and with purpose, she made her way over to him. Struggling to his feet, a hard kick sent him sprawling once more, onto his back.

Grunting he looked up and into the eyes of his attacker, finding himself disarmed and wand snapped. Never very good without a focus, Jugson was now practically defenceless.

"You disgusting pig! I heard what you said to my friend!"

The stinging hex aimed towards him was the strongest she could manage, enough to produce a scream borderline breaking the sound barrier. Crucio wasn't the only spell which could cause pain, after all.

Not satisfied with just this, Ginny tried her best to lower his fertility rate.

“AHHHH!”

With a vicious kick towards his lower regions, Jugson curled up, whimpering.

"You're lucky I don't know a Castration spell. Though, I suppose a cutting curse could suffice.." Trailing off she pretended to think, a wicked gleam in her eye as his whimpers increased in volume.

Ensuring he wouldn't be going anywhere any time soon, Tonks came running over. She’d joined the fight as soon as possible, abandoning any and all paperwork. Observing the Death Eater and Ginny, she gave a low whistle. "Nice job."

Placing a small one-way portkey into the man's hand, he disappeared. An idea of Amelia's it would take them directly to the Ministry's holding cells, preventing any possibility of ally revival through cancelling stupefies. Without Dumbledore to muck things up, they were beginning to make slow progress.
Satisfied that even out of the fight that Death Eater would be in pain for a while to come, Ginny dusted off her hands. "Thanks, I'd better get back."

It never once occurred that Tonks should tell Ginny to leave here. She was a capable fighter and according to Harry, was training in an area which he'd yet to disclose. And at the moment they needed all the help they could get. It was a deadlock, though most of the students and bystanders were now out of harm's way.

Even so, that left the ones who had chosen to stay and fight. Returning to the fray, Tonks prayed that the portkeys didn't turn out to be faulty.

She'd killed him. Hermione had killed Dolohov, the one who had cursed her. Standing over his lifeless body, she gulped. It wasn't by her wand either but an arrow, recognising him as one of the few which had neglected to wear his mask.

He'd never seen her coming. Obscuring herself from view he'd dangled an elderly lady in the air via magic, a bone breaking curse shattering an arm.

He deserved no redemption. She wanted revenge, for what he'd done to her and so many others. Her bow in hand and quiver shimmering into existence she'd taken aim with a regular arrow, firing from the side and piercing his skull. There was no time to even scream.

Somehow, killing a human was much different from killing creatures in another world.

No regret but still shaken up, she had no time to reflect on the morality of her actions. Bow returned to the usual jewellery and wand in hand, the arrow fired remained embedded in his skull. Let them find him. Hermione doubted the Aurors would care he was dead, after all. Her friends were far more important and if not him, it could be one of them.

Leaving Dolohov there Hermione mixed herself back into the thick of things, intending on finding her friends again.

Just outside of the action, Harry paused to catch his breath. There were more Death Eaters than first thought though thanks to him and Professor Snape, two less. He didn't know how the others were faring but from his point of view, he could see they had the upper hand. Then, another, unpleasant person occupied his thoughts and vision.

"If it isn't ickle baby Potter! Did the poor baby lose his Godfather?" Her childish voice bringing bile to the back of his throat, he didn't react how she expected him to.
"I did, but he's back. Having the time of his life on holiday, in fact!"

He'd contacted Sirius and Remus too. While he didn't want to cut their trip short, he knew they would want to be here and see this through.

Face registering confusion at his response she didn't question him, licking her dry, cracked lips. "Die!"

A manic light in her eyes she laughed, Harry taking that time to contact Alistair. But, before he could finish his sentence, he came to realise that laugh meant something more.

Blasted off his feet again he managed to slow his momentum, but still landed awkwardly on his left arm. Gritting his teeth through the pain he rolled over, silently summoning the wand which had left his grip. Before he so much as utter one word, a spell which he'd hoped to never feel again, set his nerves alight.

"Crucio!"

It wasn't the sort of pain he could grow used to but even so, he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of screaming. Spasms wracking his frame Harry focused and through blurred eyes, tried to throw her off him. Shakily raising his hand it took all he could to concentrate, eventually managing to break her own spell with one of his own.

Limbs trembling beyond his control Harry raised himself to a sitting position, breathing heavily. Soon after, came a welcome arrival to this unfortunate battlefield.

Alistair had never been so angry in all of his life. He'd appeared, to see Harry under the throes of Crucio. Only catching the last few seconds and glad that Harry had managed to throw her off, he wasted no time in slamming her into the nearest building. Given no time to scream, he dearly wanted to kill her, but wouldn't deny Neville his vengeance. He'd heard about Frank and Alice from Harry but was also made known to him when the Order of the Phoenix wasn't disbanded.

Dark eyes showing fear for the first time, her nails dug into his hand. Not releasing the pressure and failing to make him bleed consistently, his orange eyes radiated blistering heat.

"You are everything which is wrong in this world. How dare you hurt Harry and every innocent not given a chance to fight back! On this day, you are fortunate that another wishes to see you die by his own hands. If left for me, you would beg for the release of death, but I would not grant it for a long time to come."

Letting her fall to the ground she clutched her throat, gasping for air. As if to take his place, Neville arrived. Giving him a grateful nod, his heartbeat quickened. Finally, he would have his revenge.
"Stand up."

It wasn't a request, but a demand. He could kill her right there, but he wanted the satisfaction of seeing defeat in her eyes, caught in a one on one duel.

She wouldn't leave Hogsmeade alive. He'd make sure of it.

As Harry managed to stand up Alistair rushed over to his side, acting quickly. Cutting his finger blood welled up, into a tiny droplet.

"It will heal you." Holding his finger out Harry obeyed, licking the droplet which immediately, began to take effect. Tremors ceasing almost instantly, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

They would talk later. For now, there was more to do. Never straying far from the other, it became clear to the Death Eaters just who the winning side would be, shortly after Alistair's arrival. Outmatched they were quickly pushed back, only key, still living members remaining.

Neville had changed. He was no longer the shy boy with low self-esteem, but someone who had come into his own. He would always be at home in a greenhouse, but thanks to Harry and DADA lessons, he could hold his own well.

Never staying in one spot he used all the space available to him, satisfied in the knowledge that this wouldn’t be a walk in the park like Bellatrix suspected it to be.

The ground beneath Neville’s feet was coated in debris. Whether ash from burned objects or something else, everything could be used. He’d learned this. With a strong gust of wind from his wand, it swirled in the air, heading straight for Bellatrix. Clouding her vision she gave a shout of frustration, quickly banishing the remainder away. She wouldn’t be bested by a teenager!

Even with that silent promise to herself, not one single Crucio had managed to hit him, with almost superhuman finesse as the power of Zeme shone through in golden markings and features. Neville was confident, that he’d win this.

It had taken longer than Sirius or Remus planned to return, having to take several portkeys. Thankfully they hadn't missed too much and upon arrival, Remus went to assist Tonks. Left alone for the moment, Sirius spotted two familiar figures. One of Bellatrix and the other, Neville.

Jogging over he joined the fight, raising his voice so Neville could hear. "I've got a few choice spells for my dear cousin. Can I join in the fun?"
"Sure, but she's mine. I'm the only one that's going to end her life, right here."

Sirius had no problems with that. Even though it was cut short, at least for the moment, their trip had done him the world of good. He'd had time to think, let past matters settle to rest. Even the thought of Snape no longer angered him as much and if alone in a room together there was a higher chance it wouldn't descend into spellfire. That, to him, was progress.

Really, Neville should thank the man. His arrival had caught her off guard so much, that a spell managed to slip by her admittedly impressive defences. Enraged her wild hair crackled, voice rougher than ever as Neville began to see the outlines of bruising around her throat.

"I'll kill you both!" Almost hysterical at this point she shrieked, spells so dark in nature that only Sirius could recognise the majority and expected nothing less from her.

Though better with magic than before, Neville had to admit he was in over his head a little, so appreciated the help. Between them they managed to keep her mostly on the defensive, her husband and brother in law unable to help, having issues of their own.

"Who the fuck is he?" Rabastan questioned Rodolphus, frantic as none of their spells had hit this unknown man, while they'd failed to dodge a single one. Robes singed, tattered, frayed and bleeding from more open wounds than they could count, he was practically a one-man army.

That question was never answered as with swift actions they were bound, immobile until an Auror transferred them to ministry holding cells.

Alistair tried not to kill if possible, though had in the past before. Once Dumbledore was within reach, however, he could make no promises. At least, until they tired of him.

From what he could see there were no deaths on their side, though the damage to Hogsmeade itself was significant. Parts of buildings had been set alight, while others were nothing more than rubble. It would take weeks of rebuilding before students could come here again.

Keeping an eye on everyone Alistair didn't toy with any Death Eaters faced, dealing with them swiftly. By his own hand two of the three Lestranges, Yaxley and Nott were incapacitated. Detecting the lingering presence of Harry around one body and Severus with the other, he could see the Carrow twins were permanently taken care of. Another Death Eater, surprisingly enough with an arrow. Believing that his guess of the culprit would be accurate, he felt no remorse for these loss of lives, when they'd put an end to so many undeserving of it.

Expertly blocking a spell which would have hit the back of a familiar blond head, Alistair was surprised to see Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy, of all people, fighting alongside one another. "Are either of you injured?"
“My leg,” Ron admitted, even as Alistair could see that he favoured one of them more than the other. Able to see a large gash he once more shed blood, a small amount placed near the open wound which began to heal at a Vampire’s rate.

Flabbergasted, Ron could hardly believe it. “Thanks.”

Inclining his head, Draco shook his own when faced with his orange gaze. “I’m fine.”

“Alright. Remain vigilant.”

Taking his words to heart, Draco never thought he'd be fighting against Death Eaters. Groomed by his father to follow the Dark Lord's every wish, times had changed drastically. He felt no loyalty towards them though, more than happy to see some meeting their ends, permanently.

Nott had cornered Weasley. He still didn't like him, but he'd never liked Nott senior either. So he'd intervened and from there, had found himself fighting alongside the other boy.

He'd come into his own. finally taking things more seriously and while not overly powerful, Draco could tell that he was changing.

Ron never thought he'd fight alongside Malfoy either, but weirdly, everything was going fine. He could see the fighting was drawing to a close, no doubt due to Professor Lothaire's arrival. What chance did Death Eaters have against a Vampire, after all?

And he was right. The Professors lessons had prepared them for such an eventuality, working with others they might not like. If he was still under Dumbledore’s influence, Ron could imagine today going very differently.

Thank Merlin for small miracles.

Harry still didn't know what had knocked him off his feet but if not for Alistair's blood, might well have suffered from the aftereffects until everything had come to a close. But right now he was doing fine and as quickly as the Death Eaters had arrived they left, whether to another plane or the Ministry's holding cells.

Then, a scream cut through all sounds of spellfire. As the scant remaining Death Eaters witnessed their unofficial leader disarmed by Sirius Black, Neville put an end to it. Knowing instinctively this would work he held Bellatrix at wand point. Eyed wild and sunken in her breathing was ragged, but didn't stop her words to him.
"What are you going to do, Longbottom, kill me? You don't have the stomach!"

Ignoring her words, Neville spoke aloud. "I am Neville Longbottom, pending head of house Longbottom. I call upon the powers that be, for vengeance Magic, hear my words and be the judge."

Thinking of his parents who were there in St Mungos lives stolen from them, he began to think nothing would happen. But then, the sky changed.

Once clear skies it darkened, bruised grey clouds swelling with the weathered rage of a storm. Bringing all fighting to an immediate standstill, the flash of lightning was closer than many had ever seen it before, a light purple in colour. Afterwards, came a rumble so deafening that many had to shield their ears. With normal storms, it took a few minutes between thunder and lightning.

But, this was magic itself, in the rawest form.

It struck again, a blinding flash of light and accompanying roar, right next to Neville and Sirius. Quickly stepping back Bellatrix’s body became engulfed in the enormous bolt of lightning.

With a pained cry only a fraction of the thunder’s loudness her body was thoroughly electrocuted, skin, muscle and bone charred to a pile of ashes with more volts than a Thunderbird itself could handle.

Not expecting something so dramatic Neville simply stared in astonishment, until satisfaction filled him. At last, she was dead.

Seeing what had happened the stragglers began to flee or at least made an attempt, prevented from doing so with Alistair's erected anti-apparition charm.

Gagging at the smell Sirius cast a freshening charm, helping everyone to round up and ship off the remaining Death Eaters. No longer needing to fight Luna was freely able to heal who she could, enough for Madam Pomfrey or other medical Professionals to do a more thorough job.

Jogging over to Sirius Harry clapped him on the back. "Sorry to cut your trip short, but I thought you'd want to be here for this."

"Oh, definitely." Grinning, he looked up at the sky. "Magic's always listening."

Having seen evidence with Bellatrix's demise, Harry blew out a breath. "Definitely."

Shortly after, Remus joined them, looking a little on the ragged side. "Not exactly how I envisioned my day."
"Not how I saw mine going either, but it was going to happen anyway. Not sure about Voldemort, but I don't think the Death Eaters will be an issue now."

Harry's words were food for thought. Whether they'd continue their trip later on or return asap he didn't know, but there was much to talk about after today, with everyone involved.

Eventually, he managed to meet up with Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville again. Separated from them throughout, he was relieved to see they were ok.

Seeing that the Aurors had taken control of the situation, Harry took that moment for a breather. "Well, that's been dealt with. That lightning bolt was handy Nev, she definitely went through more pain than what I did under her crucio."

Hermione frowned, concerned. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, right as rain! Alistair gave me some of his blood and it's done wonders. Any idea what happened to the other Death Eaters?"

"I killed Dolohov," Hermione admitted, still unable to believe it. Knowing how she felt, Harry squeezed her shoulder. "It's not a feeling you get used to. Though it was an accident, when I killed Quirrel, I had nightmares for weeks after. But I'm here for you."

Patting the hand on her shoulder briefly, Hermione couldn't bring herself to feel any regret. But knowing she had the support of friends, would help see her through.

Smirking as she recalled his whimper of pain, Ginny added in her two cents. "I hexed Jugson, then kicked him in the balls."

Simultaneously, Harry and Neville winced.

Smirking wider at their reactions, she gave a casual shrug. "He deserved it. I overheard what he said to you, Luna. Sick bastard."

While Luna wouldn't have done that herself, she was grateful for her friend's support. "Thank you."

She was so relieved, that the outcome she'd hoped for came to pass.

As the area cleared, Harry had every intention of discussing thing further with his friends at a later date. For now, they had to let everything settle in. With a goodbye to Sirius and Remus along with thanks for their help, he and Alistair were alone. Transported to the safety and comfort of his
quarters, he wrapped his arms around him.

"When I saw you there, in pain, I thought my heart would stop once more."

Sounding heartbroken he held onto him tightly, Harry’s agonised expression something which would never leave his mind. Relaxing into his touch, Harry was annoyed with himself. "I was careless. I don't know if it was a stray spell from elsewhere or someone aimed it at me but if not for that, I could have probably avoided her curse."

"It is not your fault. You are a remarkable fighter for your age. I am only sorry to see that you were hurt in such a manner."

Adrenaline levels on the decline, he was well enough to joke about it. "It's no big deal, Voldemort's was far more painful."

Cupping his cheeks in both hands, Alistair's eyes filled with sorrow. "Whether it is a little or a lot on the scale of pain, I do not want you to suffer. Please, do not make light of it."

Sobering up with Alistair's comment, a wave of guilt assaulted him. "Sorry, it's how I sometimes deal with things."

He knew as much, having met other people who used humour as a shield of sorts. But Harry’s words were one of the many reasons why he would dislike Voldemort, even with his apparent change of tune.

In an effort to turn their conversation elsewhere Harry pulled away, enough to hold his hand and sit beside him. "I've been meaning to ask, but did something happen? Before today, I mean. You seem more at peace."

Surprised but touched that Harry had noticed what he believed to be a very subtle change, it reminded him of the other day. "Yes. I returned to the room where I found Alex and left the ring. I banished it, to a place where it is impossible to retrieve."

Amazed, Harry glanced up at him. "You did? That's brilliant! Do you think you'll be able to go back to your original bedroom sometime?"

Alistair had given it some thought, brow furrowing slightly. "I am not sure."

Harry had an idea. "Why don't we redecorate it together? If the colours and furniture are different, you could make new memories there."
That was something he never thought of but found the thought to be very appealing. Eyes twinkling, he murmured into his lover's ear. "Would making new memories, happen to be a euphemism? I look forward to when we start."

Kissing his cheek, it took Harry a moment for him to reach the same wavelength. He supposed that was one way to erase bad memories but now the thought had entered his mind, it stubbornly refused to leave. "You can interpret it that way."

Giving a casual wink, Harry’s heart swelled. “I'm proud of you, by the way. It can't have been easy to go back in there."

Alistair had so much support, he almost didn't know what to do with it. Throughout Harry had been a firm pillar of it, able to lean on him if need be and in return, was given the same level of trust. He wondered if happiness had a limit because right now, he believed the answer was a resounding no. While there was still the matter of where Sergei was going and if somehow, it linked to the unanswered questions of which he'd discussed during the meeting, today's clash of sides and their resulting win ensured that the UK would be a little safer.

Chapter End Notes

Made a mistake last chapter, sorry! I said it was Bellatrix who gave Hermione her scar and I meant Dolohov.

Since it's gradually drawing closer, I'll say this is barely scratching the surface of what I have planned and it's not ending with the Death Eaters. It's going to be a boatload of emotions xD
Surety and Uncertainty

Chapter Summary

A plot unknown to others is developing and Remus is in with a pleasant surprise. Meanwhile with Luna and Brio, the latter comes to a realisation. Harry decided to spend the day out in Diagon Alley, unaware what was lying in wait for him.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Suspicions of Sergei arise, leading to a worrying discovery. Then, Hogsmeade is attacked.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His body was always cold. External temperatures didn't change anything and unlike humans, the weak creatures they were, didn't succumb to illness through extreme climates.

Sergei hated humans, deeply. If means were at his disposal, he wouldn't hesitate to rid the world of them forever. And over time he'd come to learn that not just one but both Lothaire brothers, were intimate with humans.

He'd heard them speak of their respective partners, though he'd learned of Alistair's at the start of this year, via another source.

At the start of January, a fellow Vampire approached him. He could tell they were turned recently, one of the many puppets belonging to the strongest which they could control at will.

He'd learned, that for longer than his own immortality, another Vampire was seeking like-minded of their kind, to form a resistance against this changing world. But unlike most resistances, this one had a considerable force, constantly pushing forwards.

Passing through wards and entering the heart of Swallow's Nest, Sergei was reminded of this fact.

He'd never met the owner of this small castle on the cliffs. Indeed, none of them had. Male, female, many of them or just one, no one knew. But even with that lack of knowledge, came with it information of everything else.

Their minds were protected, against those searching for specific information. Even the most skilled of Legilimens would be unable to penetrate the layer of invisibility, hiding important memories from plain sight. Also, those not within the ward's confines would find themselves forgetting Swallow's Nest ever existed, once leaving the area entirely.

It was a stroke of genius, whoever had thought of this. Sergei wasn’t a mind arts expert but with this, he didn't need to be.
With a mildly uncomfortable expression, he stood motionless, waiting for admittance. Whenever anyone passed through, a scan for outside abnormalities such as unauthorised spells was required. He saw the necessity, but it didn't mean to say he liked this any better.

However, it was important that he came today.

He'd found out not only had his presence been requested because of his opinion on humans, but his connection with the Lothaire's themselves. This Vampire, or Vampires, whoever they were, had expressed an interest in them personally.

For what reason specifically he didn't know, but the first thing which struck him was their power levels. They were one of the strongest, proving this together and apart.

His thoughts were interrupted when the temporary quarantine session ended. Admitted entry, Sergei approached one of the available desks. It worked somewhat like the global ministries, only they never saw their figurehead face to face. Signing himself in he waited, having alerted those who would want to know, that he had additional information.

Eyes and ears everywhere. It was how progress was made and yet, nothing. Sergei was a cog in a finely oiled machine or at least, the figure intentionally cloaked in mystery believed it to be so. They had bided their time, waited for the best moment. It had been many centuries since they'd last taken action, up until recently.

The Lothaire family, or what remained, were a thorn in need of removal. They and those similar held back their true potential. Contracts were meaningless, humans nothing more than a widespread stain in need of thorough cleaning.

Killing them would not suffice. Their increase in power had not gone unnoticed and must be put to better use. It would be absorbed, to join the father before them.

The eldest brother was gifted with magic, of the likes they had never seen for such an age. So he was left, to grow, mature. And now, ripe and perfect for picking.

All they needed, was a weakness.

And that had come, in the form of a filthy human. They'd noticed the eldest Lothaire frequently associating himself with humans, but none had ever affected him quite like this one. For a human, Harry Potter possessed impressive power. Something of which a human had no right to own.

At first the waters were tested, in the form of recently turned, expendable puppets. Another hid nearby, suitably disguised and observing should they fail in their task.

It was after this failure that they took a more personal approach, which also went poorly. The human unable to be swayed by charm they'd left empty-handed.

Subtlety was a preference, over brute force. But it seemed that would be the only option. Gifted that Alistair Lothaire was, he couldn't dash in to save him every time.

The moment he was away from Hogwarts school, they would know. Magical signature committed to
memory, the wards prevented their ability from locating a specific being with magic, no matter the distance. But without those, it would be simple.

Another test but also, many years of pent up frustrations with the human race. How soon would the boy break but, more importantly, how long would it take for Alistair Lothaire to rescue him?

It would be very interesting indeed. With infant's blood in their goblet, the first sip tasted so much sweeter than usual.

First, the Lothaire family. Then, this world. They had taken great care to ensure their work spread globally. While some reports of human deaths from failed turnings remained, it mattered not. Soon, they all would be. If not, then their blood would serve to fuel the best.

Cold laughter filling the dimly lit, stone room, only they were the one to hear it back.

Caught between a state of consciousness and unconsciousness, Albus Dumbledore wondered at what point, did his plans begin to fall apart?

Everything had progressed smoothly. But there, alone with his own thoughts and only just freed from the spell's punishing grasp, he was beginning to believe otherwise. The moment that Vampire had dared to set foot in his school, disguised, a ticking time bomb had begun.

Even when knowing the futility of such an action but mostly by instinct, he'd attempted to use magic. Of course, with the removal of his core, such action was now impossible.

He would rather die than be thrown to the Vampires. He'd tried to kill himself more than once, but the room itself was barren. It seemed every time he tried, an Auror intervened. No doubt his cell had all manner of protections, of which he couldn't remove himself.

The Mirror of Erised had shown him. Powerful, victorious and with thousands of Vampire corpses littering the ground. This desire had been snatched from him and instead, was experiencing exactly what he saw, whenever facing a Boggart.

Powerless, no magic and weak.

Not many things scared him, as he'd seen or performed acts himself which the majority would find horrifying. But knowing that the Vampires would no doubt have him shortly and there was no possible way of fighting back, truly scared him.

He would never admit as much to them either, especially not the one which he'd sought information from.

Numb from the fingertips upward, Albus truly didn't know if he was too hot, too cold, hungry, thirsty. Things which humans usually had no problems with. But curled up on his mockery of a mattress and far from the Headmaster's private quarter luxuries, nothing registered. In this dark cell, he'd stared at the same collection of stones for hours, perhaps even days.

As the door to his cell suddenly opened, he didn't know whether to thank whoever this was from
breaking the monotony or curse them, non-magically, for disrupting his thought process.

When seeing who it was, his deep red eyes flickered darkly. "Aberforth. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Tone devoid of its usual cheerful lies, nothing remained but the cold steel of words and for once, conveyed truthful displeasure.

It had taken Aberforth longer than planned in visiting him, usually putting it off for one reason or another. Given regular updates by Rupert about Ariana's condition, he thought he'd be content with this alone and while hearing of her very slow but steady recovery was encouraging, he wanted answers.

Even if like trying to get blood from a stone, he still wanted to try. Albus dying at this point was of no concern to him, but he didn't want to live the rest of his own life with regrets.

Which was why he'd come here.

He'd heard more than he would have liked to, that day in the courtroom. But the one thing which he hadn't heard, was about Ariana. Why keep her there, slowly withering away with multiple failed suicide attempts?

She was no longer the girl he knew, far older than her appearance would suggest. Damaged beyond belief, thanks once again, to Albus.

No matter his reasoning, it wouldn't change what he'd done. Not only to her but him and many others. They were family by blood only. He had no feelings towards him beyond this and if anything, this was simply so he could try and move on afterwards. Now seemed like the appropriate time, especially since the worst of Voldemort's forces had been curbed. Though, the man himself did still remain.

Entering Albus' cell, he was reminded of just why he hated him.

"I ain't thrilled being here either. You're nothing more than shit stuck to a shoe, but I want answers. Why did you keep Ariana a secret from me?"

Albus had nothing left to hide, brought out against his will. His fate was already sealed. "It was better you thought her dead. More than one of us knowing about the shame of having a turned Vampire in our family was enough. I loathe them, however, I never hated Ariana. Despite what she became I couldn't kill her, so chose imprisonment."

His answer brought Aberforth no peace, magic crackling enough to rival that of his brother's, the core far from his body. "Better I thought her bleedin' dead? She meant everything to me! If I'd known I would've got her some help, not keep her locked away like some criminal!"

As suspected, he didn't understand. Not having the strength to shake his head Albus simply remained there, voice dripping with disapproval. "I didn't expect you would understand that it's for the gre-

He was cut off, by Aberforth's wand an inch from his crooked nose. Voice gruffer than ever his hand twitched as if it wanted to be wrapped around a particularly thin, scrawny neck.

"If you finish that sentence so help me, Merlin, the Vampires will have to scrape you from this cell
because I won't be leaving them a scrap! Greater good my arse!"

Leaving, Aberforth resisted the urge to hex him. He'd just ask the Vampires to give Albus hell on his behalf instead. Even without asking, he knew they would have a myriad of punishments taxing to the body, mind and spirit.

Speaking to no one he left the Ministry, tempted to serve himself some alcohol behind the bar rather than his patrons, just for that day.

The aftermath of Hogsmeade's attack brought with it a great sense of relief. For those who learned of it afterwards via The Daily Prophet and everyone who had participated in the fight.

There were no deaths, thankfully, but casualties of younger students caught unawares with many of them injured or shaken up. Some had never witnessed such a thing so Harry, Hermione, Neville and the other Prefects found themselves busy providing reassurance for those who needed it and an influx of new students to Harry's DA lessons.

Hogsmeade was closed for now, needing time to rebuild. In the meantime, Prefects or students third year and upwards with parental permission were allowed to visit Diagon Alley so long as a Prefect was present.

As Minerva was now Headmistress on a permanent basis, she had placed all of her spare time into modifying or changing school rules entirely. With support from her colleagues, she believed Hogwarts could truly flourish. Her first point of correction would be for a subject taught here with consistently poor results for years. Sending out her Patronus she waited refreshments at hand.

Sirus and Remus had talked among themselves, back at Evergreen Manor once they'd finished 'Kicking some Death Eater arse.' As the former man so eloquently put it.

They had plenty of time to travel, so these few weeks, for now, were more than enough to suffice. They would stay here for the time being, in case anything happened. Plus, there were plenty of stories to share with Harry, along with expressing their thanks to Alistair for his suggestion on the day of their trip elsewhere. His recommendation was their first point of travel and afterwards, had left feeling like completely new men.

Remus was more relaxed than he could ever remember being. Like Sirius, for months he was housebound and in one sense, could understand. But at least he wasn't trapped in a house he loathed. It was the breath of fresh air needed, especially for Sirius.

No longer sun-deprived his skin glowed, light tan and a twinkle in his eyes Remus could only ever remember from his school years. The dark clouds had receded, leaving with it some of the man they all once knew.

But, judging by Harry's happy expression as he sat before them, they weren't the only ones with stories to tell. Throughout their conversation and through Sirius' dramatic recounting of holiday events, Remus could see that he had something to tell them.

He'd never had the chance to see Sirius like this before and for Harry, this was something special.
While he did want to hear about their trip, he spared no details or even breath, leaving him to nod or occasionally interject with a few words. It made a nice change of pace, particularly with last week's events.

The 15th of February today, Alistair's sweet actions the previous day in honour of Valentine's, remained with him. Nothing had changed exactly, as the man often showed how much he cared no matter what day or date of the week. But, to be surprised with another heartfelt letter and a box of his favourite chocolates, was an instant mood improver. He'd hated Valentines before, a reminder that he was alone in that regard but now, it wasn't as bad. He'd similarly returned the gesture and with a little help from Dobby, managed to surprise Alistair in turn with a shower of rose petals upon his bed.

Though they usually slept together over the weekend, that Friday was a special exception. One of which had furtherly encouraged Harry's adventurous side. While they hadn't gone all the way yet, he looked forward to the day where he was confident enough to voice that special request.

"Oi!"

Harry blinked, brought back to reality with Sirius' slightly put out expression. "Have you been hit over the head?"

Thoughts still partially elsewhere, he answered absentmindedly. "Probably, yeah. Is there such thing as a mallet of love?"

Raising both eyebrows, Sirius opened his mouth. "Well-

The rest of what he was going to say muffled by Remus' hand, he smiled gently. "Figuratively, I would say so. Did something happen?"

Batting Remus' hand away Sirius fell quiet, coming out of his own excited haze to see his Godson's expression. Dense he might be at times, but it was clear to him.

The kid had it bad. Or good, depending on perspective. He realised just why Harry was preoccupied as well.

Nodding eagerly, he filled them in on what happened during their date. "I confessed to Alistair. It hurt to keep it in so I just let it out, and he feels the same way."

It still didn't feel quite real, but saying it aloud again brought that fact home.

Sirius and Remus had never seen him look so happy, at peace. The burdens upon his shoulders with every day that went by lightened due to his discovery of love. They'd watched it develop in stages, from one moment before confirmation of their relationship and over time, during it. The changes were plain for anyone to see.

After expressing their congratulations, the arrival of a familiar Patronus disrupted them. "Remus, may I see you in my office?"

As the Patronus faded, Sirius looked at his partner suspiciously. "What did you do? Or, who did you prank?"

“No one at Hogwarts, anyway.” Shaking his head, Remus had no idea what she could want. Whatever it was, he hoped for good news. He'd had enough bad to last a lifetime. Deciding sooner
rather than later would be better he flooed to Hogwarts, curious.

"Any idea what that was about?" Harry asked, intrigued even as Sirius shrugged. "No clue."

A comfortable silence fell between them until a question Harry had wanted to know for a while left his lips. "How did you and Remus get together anyway?"

"You want to know?"

Curious he nodded, indicating for Sirius to continue.

At the reminder of a time when even then he was troubled, it brought about a nostalgic smile. That was his pinprick of light in complete darkness. "I asked him out, in front of everyone in the common room. He accepted but later on, I got an earful about appropriate times and places."

Why was he not surprised? Harry gave him an incredulous look. "Weren't you nervous? What if he'd said no?"

"That wouldn't have happened. We were edging around each other for a few weeks and afterwards, I found out that Lily had talked with Remus the same as James had talked to me. Both of them told us to stop being idiots and take the next step. So, it was your dad who gave me that nudge."

With the mention of his parents, Harry's eyes held a wistful flicker. Though he wasn't there to witness this moment, he could easily picture it, as if it were a film reel within his mind's eye. "Did anyone have a problem with it? Other than the Order back then? Remus told me about that."

At the reminder of those times, Sirius' smile turned bitter. "My mother, for one. I ignored her since before that point she'd already expressed her deep disappointment for being in Gryffindor. Any students who did rarely voiced as much, for obvious reasons."

With a mischievous sparkle in his eye, it needed no explanation. "What about you? I heard through the Grapevine that students know about you and Alistair now. Any problems there?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Not in school anyway. There was this one bloke over Christmas in the hotel we stayed at that had an issue with us, but quickly shut up over the combined forces of Alistair and a waitress there."

Now that Sirius and Remus knew of recent developments, Harry encouraged him to continue. "What were you saying before? I'll listen this time, promise."

He may as well while waiting for Remus. Taking a minute to recall where he was up to, any student who did have a problem with his godson's choice of partner would face his pranking retribution. He'd keep his eyes and ears out, just in case.

Outside of prior Order meetings, it had been a while since Remus last came to Hogwarts. He truly loved it here, the first place where he was accepted with warm, welcoming hands. While Dumbledore had proven to have no one's best interests at heart, he had James, Sirius and Lily to see him through those days.
Teaching here and seeing Harry for the first time, was wonderful. Though Severus revealing his true nature to everyone there and forcing him to leave broke his heart. He loved teaching the students, truly believing that this was his calling.

Trying to think over his interactions with Minerva, he couldn't think of a single incident which would result in her wanting to see him.

Strangely nervous he came to outside of Albus' office or hers now. That would take some getting used to. Not needing a password the spiral steps rose upward, allowing him to step on and climb up them, one by one.

Without needing to knock the door opened, admitting him entry. Unlike the various odds and ends Albus displayed for show, or what Remus suspected, this office held the same personal Scottish touch as her own.

Waiting for him, she showed a rare smile. "Good morning Remus, have a seat."

Rather than overly sweetened tea and Lemon Drops to accompany that, he could see her tin of Ginger Newts and tea, no sugar. Though the sugar bowl remained, a silent indication that she knew, like most, he loved sweet things. Whether adding some to sugar or endless amounts of chocolate, Remus' tooth was one of the sweetest out there.

Adding two spoonfuls of sugar he stirred it in, drinking some in a vague effort to ease his mild bout of anxiety. Wariness flickering within his amber eyes, Minerva could easily pick up on his mood. Rather than Albus' habit of creating suspense, she got right down to business. "Albus has done more damage to the school than I ever suspected, whether the student's education or the facilities themselves. I have been taking measures to correct this. As such, I have dismissed Professor Binns, effective immediately. Which means, there is a position available for History of Magic."

Remus never thought of himself as dense before, but genuinely had no idea what she was getting at. Silent, he waited for her to continue.

Either the possibility had never occurred to him, or Minerva no longer had the way with words she used to. The former she couldn't blame him for, a point down to Severus which she still hadn't quite forgiven him for. "Remus. You were awarded an Outstanding in History of Magic. Not only that, but your previous teaching experience here demonstrated your teaching capability. I offer this vacant position, to you."

He was stunned. So stunned, that a feather would knock him clean over. This is what she wanted? He never expected this. How could he? After what happened back then.

One of the few who remained awake during Professor Binns' dry lectures, he could always pick out the interesting bits of information, lost within monotonous tones. More than once, Remus had thought he'd be able to do a better job. Most students saw the subject as boring, but depending on how the information was delivered, it could be interesting. But, the chances of Albus ever dismissing him as a Professor, for whatever reason, were slim to none.

He hadn't considered Minerva's very different stance on things.

"I will give you time to think about it."
Realising he hadn't spoken a word Remus quickly snapped back to attention, excitement welling within him. "Are you sure? What about the Board of Governors?"

"I have already spoken with them, they give their consent. After Albus' actions and blind prejudice towards Vampires which in turn, endangered humans, opinions have changed."

It was almost too good to be true. He'd struggled to keep down a job, whether in the Wizarding world and a requirement for everyone to know he was a Werewolf, or the recovery time needed each month due to 'illness' in the muggle world.

In fact, his teaching position here was the longest he'd ever held down a job. Each time he had to wander from place to place and those months hiding from Albus and his attempted murder chipped away at him.

There was only one answer.

"I accept." though he replied normally, Remus couldn't disguise his excitement for one moment.

Internally, Minerva was relieved. She could think of no one better for this position, the first person who'd come to mind. She had others in mind too, but Remus deserved this. His loss was keenly felt by students at the time and while now Alistair was there and surpassing all expectations, it was time for the one subject which most students and ex-students treated as a joke, to be taken seriously.

With a few minutes of further discussion, it was decided that he'd start the following week. Some students tended to study the subject outside of class hours, but most didn't bother taking it to NEWT level.

While he'd loved teaching Defence, History of Magic was an area he knew he could make a real difference in. There was no competition there, a Vampire who had seen much more of life than many humans put together would always be able to impart far more knowledge and effectively. That subject was in capable hands.

Remus had a feeling that the rest of this weekend would be a long one. He couldn't wait to start and this time would be far more prepared. No one could know the trials and tribulations of marking unless they'd been in their office doing just that for several hours. But, he didn't mind. In fact, he welcomed it, making a change from being unable to do much.

Eager to get back and share the good news he left, but then thought for a moment. Why not leave it as a surprise? Harry, in particular, was perceptive, but he wasn't a Marauder for nothing. Let this count as a little prank, of sorts.

"So? What did Minnie want?" He was faced with a round of questions from Sirius once back, Harry promptly snorting at the name he'd heard the twins use as well.

"Oh, nothing much. Just a catch-up session."

While Sirius accepted it without question, knowing of his close friendship with her during the time he taught there, Harry narrowed his eyes, scrutinising him. It was clear something else had happened, but he couldn't pinpoint what. Either way, they'd probably find out eventually.

And Harry did, on Monday morning.
Having left Alistair's quarters fairly early, Neville and sometimes Hermione, Ginny or Luna, would often join him. It helped to perk him up, a shower afterwards leaving him with an appetite.

At first, he didn't notice, taking his usual seat as Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna seated themselves nearby. He was debating over what to choose for breakfast when Hermione shocked him.

"Remus is back!"

It was a wonder he didn't notice something was different even without glancing at the head table, as a wave of mutters crossed over the house tables.

Harry's head snapped up so quick, he nearly gave himself whiplash with the force. So that was what Professor McGonagall wanted!

Once all the students were there many stared up at the head table. With no need to call for much attention, Minerva made her announcement. "Most of you will remember Professor Lupin, our former Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor. It is with great pleasure that I welcome him back, to teach History of Magic."

A thunderous round of applause and several cheers, from most of the students gathered there. Some opinions had swayed when finding out about his, as Sirius called it, furry little problem, but many remembered his lessons and for the first time in a while, were given a decent education in that subject.

Gryffindor was one of the loudest there, Harry grinning when even from here, he could see Remus' embarrassment. He really didn't know just how much they'd missed him. It became more apparent, with fake Professor Moody and especially Umbridge.

"Maybe History of Magic won't be as shite now," Seamus commented, clapping his approval. Rather than sleep in those lessons, he usually tried to write down various ideas of how he could turn water into Rum. It had been a few years since his last attempt but hadn't given up yet.

Before long the noise died down, students talking amongst themselves.

"It's about time really. For all Dumbledore's done, I don't get why he still kept Professor Binns on."

With Ginny's words, Harry shrugged. "He's an arse hole. Arse holes don't need a reason."

None of them could argue with that. Then, Harry's attention focused elsewhere. With a glare in Remus' direction, he communicated with Alistair. 'Do me a favour, tell Remus he's a sneaky bastard of a wolf.'

As Alistair chuckled to himself, he leaned forward slightly to catch Remus' eye, on Minerva's left side. "I have been informed by a certain someone that you are, and I quote, a sneaky bastard of a wolf."

That word was one which rarely left Alistair's lips and for one so well spoken, Minerva couldn't help
but think it was a little odd, yet amusing.

Finding it amusing himself, Remus' eyes held a fond twinkle. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Today, Lilah sat next to Luna, with Zain on her other side. With the older girl's help, she was steadily gaining control over her empath abilities. Much better than at the start of the year, she still found it somewhat difficult to block others out. As such, she picked up on something odd.

"Luna, the new Professor's emotions feel like they're rebelling against each other. What does that mean?"

Lilah kept her voice at a whisper, so only she could hear.

A flicker of sadness shone within the older girl's eyes. He had yet to fully accept his wolf side and in most things he did, there would be resistance from a side rarely emerging.

"He is a Werewolf." Luna knew there would be no judgment from her, proven right when her eyes gained the dawning light of realisation.

"Oh, that makes sense."

Unaware of the events which had occurred before her time here yet, she would keep quiet about her newfound knowledge. He seemed like a nice person and really, anyone would be better than the Professor they had before. She usually worked on assignments from other classes and outside of that, went to the Library.

Surprised by how much of a warm welcome back he'd received, it was almost surreal that he sat here once more. In one way, it was as if he never left.

"Remus."

At the sound of his name, he glanced over at Alistair again, questioningly. "Yes?"

"When you need it, I would be more than happy to cover your classes."

He'd wondered about that. Severus had covered his classes before, later finding out that he'd disregarded the lesson plan entirely, in favour of heavily hinting about his condition to the students. But, thankfully, this would be different.

Truly, Remus didn't think he'd ever met anyone so kind and thoughtful. He'd heard all about him, along with Minerva mentioning his helpfulness whenever burdened with work Albus was meant to do. Coupled with Harry's happiness, it seemed his luck in that regard took a great turn.

"Thank you, I appreciate that."

As breakfast came to a close, the first day of Remus' teaching in four years, began.
Lilah had memorised her schedule, to save the need from ever having to frequently check and see where she needed to go next. Though a lot of bad things had happened while here, she'd also made friends. She never had friends before. Not only that but got to meet Alistair Lothaire! Who let her use his first name! For her, it was amazing, especially when knowing personally how nice he was.

Her first opinion of the new Professor proved to be a correct one and rather than one of the few still awake, he'd managed to capture every student's attention. Diving into the subject with great enthusiasm, it raised some student's tolerance of this subject to very bearable. But for Lilah, it was fascinating.

Hand unable to work faster than her brain could process information she scribbled down endless notes, legible enough for her to read at least. Usually, History of Magic was the one she struggled with the most, having to rely on her own studies or help from Harry and Hermione, whenever the Wednesday revision sessions were run. They were good, but she always seemed to learn better in a fun classroom environment best.

Once the lesson ended, disappointment welled within her. Unlike usual History of Magic lessons, time had flown by. Seeing as she had a break next and not another lesson, Lilah wanted to show her appreciation. As the room emptied itself, she approached his desk.

Remus had heard about Lilah from Harry, knowing she was a Dhampir. He could sense as much himself, standing out among her peers today with enthusiasm to match Hermione's levels. It was those kinds of students who reminded Remus of why he'd enjoyed teaching. That and to witness Harry produce a Patronus at thirteen, would forever go down as one of the most remarkable moments.

Remus gave her a warm smile. “What can I do for you, Miss Caltir?”

So filled with energy she practically vibrated, Lilah’s eyes lit up. “Your lesson was so cool! Everyone usually falls asleep during History of Magic.”

Remus knew that all too well. “He had the same effect on many students before you and would have continued to. And thank you.” Warm amber eyes glittering, he wondered what else she wanted.

Nodding in agreement with his words, Lilah carefully checked her surroundings. Ensuring they were alone, she kept her voice quiet. “Some of the older kids told me what happened when you were last here. I’m glad you came back. And..”

Trailing off, she tried to find the best words. Biting her lip in thought, her pear green eyes met his, resolute yet nervous. “I don’t care that you’re a Werewolf. I know what it’s like to get judged, ’cause I’m a Dhampir. I know that Vampires and Werewolves don’t usually get along, but I hope that we can.”

Lilah was placed in Gryffindor for a reason, that Remus could see. She’d opened up about her own nature, despite knowing there was a possibility of backlash. Grateful for her support, he was quick to reassure.

“T-I already know about Professor Lothaire. He and I have no problems.”

Relieved to hear it and also feeling a little better she’d told someone else about the part of her she was slowly growing less ashamed of, she headed outside to make the most of her free time.
The next day, Harry decided he would pay a visit to Diagon Alley. It had been a while since he last looked around here and while he loved spending time with his friends, he also enjoyed the odd moment of solitude.

As the bulk of Voldemort’s forces were gone and the man himself had left him alone, he felt it would be a good opportunity to have a look around and maybe, explore parts of the alley he’d get to see.

And, if there was anything that appealed, he could surprise Alistair with a gift or two. After all, he’d returned the gesture tenfold.

Luna was with Brio, Hermione visiting her parents for the first time in a short while. He didn’t know what Neville or Ginny was up to, but usually discussed the sort of day they’d had whenever free time next presented itself.

Actually, while here, he could always see the Twins. He hadn’t been able to visit their joke shop as often as he’d like, curious if anything new was added to their steadily increasing stock of products.

That was his intention until he happened to cross paths with the last person he expected to see.

Lucius Malfoy, in all his glory. No longer holding one of the highest ministry positions, a warrant for his arrest was issued by Amelia herself.

Harry wondered why he was showing his face out in the open. Arrogance, to the point of thinking no one would dare tackle him head on or alert the DMLE?

If not for Draco, Harry wouldn’t hesitate to kill him. Lucius had come up in conversation before with him and while he didn’t like to see his father suffer in Azkaban, he understood it was more than deserved for his actions in the past and present if still continuing his usual activities.

He had no intention of letting him walk free.

“Hello Malfoy, out for an afternoon stroll?” Harry enquired, wand in hand as his eyes sparked challengingly.

Sneering, the hand subtly tightened on the head of his cane. “I fail to see how this is any of your business, Potter.”

“Oh, but it is my business. I know plenty of people who would want to make it their business as well.”

Smirking, his Thanatos Patronus was stronger and sturdier than ever before. Directing it to the DMLE with a message, his face tightened with anger.

“You insolent whelp! Avada-“

Promptly cut off mid-spell was the arrival of Fred and George. Near Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes they’d caught sight of them both and with products in hand, saw an opportunity for some unorthodox
advertising and to help a friend out.

Quickly they acted, one of their infamous Portable Swamps pooling on top of and around the resident Death Eater. Covered head to toe in water and with plant life surrounding him, passers-by gave it a wide berth but stopped and stared, when realising who it was.

“Fred Weasley here! This is a Portable Swamp, there for your ultimate distraction needs. Or, as you can see here.”

“Works on Death Eater scum.”

“With the last part of Fred’s sentence echoed simultaneously by George, their words garnered much attention from others there. Remembering the swamp from last year Harry laughed, able to detect that he had an anti-summoning charm on his cane.

Trying to banish the swamp away, only made things worse. From nowhere frogs began to multiply, emerging from the water and in the case of one, making itself at home on top of his head.

Having learned this from Alistair, Harry used an anti-apparition charm. When he remembered the Aurors were on their way, that’s what he’d undoubtedly try next.

As he suspected the man did and in that time, Kingsley and Tonks arrived at the scene. To their credit neither reacted, Fred and George successfully disabling the swamp as Lucius was placed under arrest.

“Thanks, boys!” Tonks grinned, giving a double thumbs up and almost tempted to rub her hands in glee. She’d never liked the slimy bastard, so it was her pleasure to see him placed behind bars once more.

As they left, the Twins found themselves with an increase of customers.

“Thanks for your help! Lucius Malfoy, defeated by a swamp.” Snorting to himself, he would return to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes a bit later. It seemed like after their stunt, business was booming more than usual for a Sunday.

Harry failed to notice the pair of malice filled eyes, watching and following his every movement.

Recently, it was Luna’s birthday. She had a small celebration with friends, went to visit her father for a while and later on, Brio. It had never come up in conversation but somehow, he’d known and presented her with a gift. It was a dress, made of soft, silken material with a blue gradation. She’d never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

The time she was spending with him today wasn’t a lesson, but a date. Or at least, that’s how she saw it. Brio had told her that the word ‘date’ for an outing with their partner wasn’t something common among their kind.

Rather than the woods they often spent time in, Brio had taken her hand and together, slowly walked
through the many other areas of which the realm of Fae had to offer.

Pink sandy beaches, crystal clear waters and, Brio’s home. As a Fae of Winter, his homeland was always cold and plagued by creatures who, by the day, continued to ruin the once beautiful environment.

Time didn’t seem to pass at all and yet, in fact, many hours had. In the Summer realm with warm sun on their backs, Brio was the first to lie down. With trees nearby, it prevented the sun’s rays from obscuring his vision.

Their time together was better than Luna could put into words. While neither had any experience, she’d simply done what felt right at the time and tentatively, he’d begun to do the same. She always liked to go wherever the breeze took her, no set plan in mind. Today, this breeze directed her towards Brio.

Rather than lie down beside him, she decided to try and take the initiative. He’d been very sweet with her, chaste and gentle kisses when least expecting it. Luna loved surprises, which was why she wanted to give one of her own.

Carefully straddling Brio he raised his head, sea blue eyes widening in surprise. “Luna?”

Liking his expression she came closer to it, softly giggling and kissing his lips. “Hello.”

Harry had told her, with great affection, that she was more airheaded than usual and welcomed her to his world. She’d wondered what it was like to be in love with someone and now, knew.

With the advantage of time passing differently here, Luna had visited often. Months could pass by here and in Hogwarts, days. As a result, Luna had known Brio for just as long if not longer, than Harry had Alistair.

Never, in all her life, had she felt such a connection with someone. In every way, she believed he was her one and only. Life without him now would be devoid of life and colour. She couldn’t bear such a thought.

Hair splayed below him it was loose for once, white contrasting against vivid green. His markings, the hue of his skin, his eyes, personality and all that she’d discovered about herself and during lessons. All of that had contributed towards Luna feeling as if she’d finally found the part of her unknowingly lost and it was returned, stronger than ever before.

Eyes sparkling she kissed him again, lips brushing against the warmth of his own for a moment.

Brio had never found himself in this situation before and as such, had no idea how he should react. Once realising his current position, however, he couldn’t help but blush. Cheeks darkening, it took a second before he could think clearly again. Lifting his hand it came up, to tuck a lock of hair behind Luna’s ear. Lingering there for a bit, he eventually withdrew.

For a long time he’d closed himself off to everyone else, not believing that in his lifetime, he’d be close to anyone in such a way. What was this feeling? Like something wanting to burst out of him and take flight into the clear blue skies. He didn’t understand.

In all his years, fortune rarely favoured him. But ever since they first met, he believed that this was the greatest treasure he could ever discover.
Tentatively returning the affection, Brio’s arm wrapped around her. Bodies close together, her warmth he could keenly feel against his own body and within the heart that beat rapidly.

As his other hand cupped the back of her head, Brio’s lips connected. It was as though each time, a part of his soul was carefully captured, gaining a warm, comforting glow. The days of no smiles were long forgotten, two pairs of eyes falling closed as their immortal souls connected through a simple yet blissful exchange.

Pulling apart, Luna was never one to hide how she felt. Able to sense Brio’s emotions too, she could tell the feeling was mutual. Only, he hadn’t realised for himself yet. Drawing close to quietly speak in his ear, Luna’s brilliant smile was telling.

“I love you, Brio.”

Glancing at his expression, she could see her words had resonated with him. In awe, he pressed a hand against his chest. Deciding something, he looked at Luna seriously.

“Is this tight feeling within my chest, love?”

Happy to answer one of the most important questions she’d heard, Luna placed her own hand over his.

“If it’s a good feeling like you can fly, then yes.”

That matched exactly what he’d been thinking. He could feel his heartbeat and the warmth of Luna’s hand over his own.

He loved her. Those words had removed the clouds from his own emotions. He didn’t think he was capable of loving anyone, just tolerance at most. But she had changed the world he’d always known. Upside down and every which way far out of his control, but Brio liked this lack of it.

With the warmest, most gentle smile Luna had ever seen, her breath caught. They paled in comparison to his previous ones, a changed Fae through and through. Still, in disbelief, he cupped her cheeks as if she were the most precious thing. And to him, Luna was exactly that.

“Luna, my moonbeam..” Hands trembling faintly Brio didn’t know what to do with himself, emotions a jumbled mess.

Bringing himself nose to nose with her his eyes locked, reading nothing but the aforementioned love in there she’d so happily murmured into his ear.

She loved him. He loved her. Why couldn’t he see this before now?

“I love you too, so much.” As he sat up Luna readjusted herself, overjoyed that she’d helped Brio come to understand something more about himself and as a whole, them.

With a combination of joy and curiosity, Brio held her close. Nuzzling against her slightly, she laughed at the mild tickling sensation as her fingers ran through the beautiful hair she liked.

Over time, he was getting better with showing affection. She didn’t mind that he wasn’t overly so like her, it only made the times he did show it that much more special.
Content to spend just a little longer with him before heading back, Luna found her hand suddenly and viciously forced.

When seeing visions of the future, their effect upon her always varied. The brief flashes she’d received before her Fae lineage was revealed, were over before Luna could register they’d happened.

But after her transformation, they’d become longer, detailed. She had no control over them and sometimes, was on the verge of passing out.

At the most inopportune time, one struck.

**A flash of black hair, green eyes. Diagon Alley. Pure black eyes glinting, purposefully.**

**Kidnapped, captured, brought to a secluded place.**

**A different time. Blazing fire, screams, a sea of lifeless bodies. Flying creature, pure black eyes glinting, victorious.**

No, there had to be more! Luna always saw several possibilities. But the fact that she’d only seen one, didn’t bode well.

There were dire consequences for those to tried to change the future. Luna wouldn’t do this, but also couldn’t sit back and knowingly let the world she was born in be destined to an age of darkness. Hermione and Harry had gone back in time to save Sirius and Buckbeak. While reckless, it had worked.

Luna had these visions for a reason. If she chose not to act, she would regret it for the rest of her life.

Then, what she’d first seen struck her.

Harry!

Noticing the change in her instantly Brio locked away his internal panic, easily able to recognise the signs of a vision. His mother was a seer and she was what had driven him towards the path of healing. He hated that she had no control over when they’d happen and in the end, met her demise through this gift.

Knowing there was nothing he could do but wait it out with her, Brio knew why she hadn’t told him. He suspected she’d seen many visions, some perhaps involving him as well. It was a burden his understood, but only through watching someone else suffer.

Skin paler than normal Luna shivered, eventually coming to. Once she did, she tried to stand up, limbs shaking.

“You should rest for a moment,” Brio told her, healer instincts rising within him as she firmly shook her head.

“I can’t!” Panicked she pushed aside the physical toll from her recent vision, putting one foot in front of the other to run.
“Luna!” Brio called after her, worried. She shouldn’t be moving so soon. But whatever she’d seen, it was of utmost urgency. He’d only travelled to her world once, not really having the desire to again but this was important. Whatever this could be he wanted to assist but more than anything, he was worried about her.

She hated to leave Brio like this, but even the snapshots of this future possibility had given her enough to realise one thing.

Harry was in great danger. He’d gone to Diagon Alley today and chances are this was something Luna had seen, hours or even minutes before it was going to happen. The second she didn’t even want to contemplate. There was no time to, running short.

Thankful for her training Luna ran as fast as she could, heart pounding. She needed to contact Alistair. He was the only one who even stood a fraction of a chance to get Harry before he was taken by whoever the person she’d seen was.

Barefooted as always, her uncharacteristic hurried manner startled some of the other Fae which she’d made friends with. With no time for questions, she passed through, into her own world.

Stumbling through to the other side she focused on Brio, with his confession of love a few minutes ago. As the silver rabbit hopped before her, she was unable to keep the fear from her voice.

“Go to Diagon Alley! Harry is in danger!”

Willing for the message to be delivered with swift speed Luna trembled all over, knowing there was nothing else she could do. She didn’t want to alert everyone, only the one who had a chance of preventing this.

She needed to return to Hogwarts but stood, motionless. The seriousness of this hit her with full force and the more she thought on it, the more she believed the second flash of the vision Luna had seen would involve the Fae’s own prophecy. Many of those bodies were immortal. Vampires, Fae. Unlike dreams which sometimes fade into obscurity, this remained within her mind.

“Luna!”

Surprised she turned around, faced with a dishevelled Brio as his eyes swam with concern.

Luna didn’t know why he’d decided to follow her but now more than ever welcomed his presence.

“I’m sorry I left so quickly, but I had to. I saw something, someone. They’re after Harry.”

Calm, serene. Peaceful. Happy smiles, eccentricity. This was Luna, but also, the side that Brio saw now as Luna too.

Distressed, panicked, emotional. He didn’t doubt for a moment that she had the gift and wished, with all his heart, that he could share this burden with her.

He couldn’t promise a certain outcome for this, one way or another. But, he could still be there. Tipping her chin up and gazing into blurred eyes, Brio did his best to provide words of assurance.

“Whatever this unseen force is, your friend is strong. I have not met him personally, but that he has a friend like you and found our Realm, indicates a great strength of character. Whatever he faces,
whatever we all face, we will ride out the storm you have seen.”

Her choice to send that Patronus may very well have changed the course of destiny for them all. She only hoped that it was the right path.

At last. It had been a long time coming but there, transferred to Lothaire Castle’s seldom used dungeons, was Albus Dumbledore.

Standing over his, in Alistair’s opinion, pathetic form was himself, Solomon and Rupert.

There was no question in mind, of who would get to demonstrate their deepest displeasure first.

“After you.” Inclining his head with a hand gesture Alistair stepped back, all too eager in observing just what his brother had in mind for the man who had continually tortured and abused him for years.

Amelia had ‘gifted’ them with him today and now, all three plus those still having a bone to pick with the man, would all get their moment of revenge.

While nothing more than a non-magic man with signs of past corruption now, there was still a world of pain which he had yet to experience but would, through many hands.

Before Solomon could begin, an unfamiliar Patronus approached Alistair.

“Go to Diagon Alley! Harry is in Danger!”

Fear, the likes of which he’d never experienced, gripped Alistair’s heart in a vice. He didn’t need to breathe and yet, found himself breathless. No sooner had Luna’s words faded in the air that he disappeared, straight to Harry.

Sharing a look, Rupert and Solomon gazed coldly down at Dumbledore.

“We’ll deal with you later.” As Solomon followed Rupert lingered, long enough to satisfy himself with a good kick in the man’s ribs. Snickering to himself he too left, the way out of his new cell firmly locked, once the owners had left the castle.

Harry had enjoyed his day out, having just left Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. He’d found something for all his friends, Sirius, Remus, Alistair and even Solomon. In all the years he’d known Diagon Alley, he’d somehow managed to miss out on places which sold pretty remarkable things.

It reminded him that there was so much more of the Wizarding World he’d yet to see. Not just in this country, but everywhere else as well.

For all the stories that Alistair had shared, it wouldn’t compare to seeing such sights for himself.
When 6th year ended and the next break came around, he’d love to travel and see the sights with him.

His train of thought came to an abrupt end when those passing by him froze. Not of fear, but through magic.

It could be nothing else. In a snap of fingers, the usual business of Diagon Alley had come to an abrupt halt. Everything silent except for his own breathing, a bad feeling began to wash over him.

And then, magic darker and more twisted than he’d ever felt before, began to fill his senses. Gagging on the foul stench he turned around, to be greeted by a taller woman who looked vaguely familiar. Where had he seen her before?

Then, he realised.

“You were in Paris.”

The woman who’d tried to seduce him, with no concept of personal space. Confused and wary, he could see she was the source of this powerful magic.

“I am flattered you remember me.” Tilting her head just so, the distance between them closed faster than Harry could register. Too fast, for a human.

‘Alistair, the woman who offered to take me on a tour to Paris is here. I don’t know who she is or what she wants, but I think she’s a Vampire.’

Rather than the usual crystal clear connection, Alistair’s voice was fragmented.

‘Here.. where.. you?’

Barely able to make out his voice, Harry tried to communicate further but found his connection quickly cut off. Physically feeling the loss, chilled fingers with sharp nails dug into his chin. Lifting it up, what he saw in her eyes was devoid of any warmth.

It was pure evil, of the likes he’d never seen. Deep red lips curving into a smile, she spared a glance for the bracelet. “The Lothaire family heirloom is powerful indeed. But, that will not be enough.”

The streets were bare but still frozen in time. Every single person on an outing in Diagon Alley, suddenly found themselves transported back home.

He hadn’t seen her move. One minute his chin was in a vice-like grip and then, a slender arm wrapped around him, tightly.

“Get off!” Harry shouted, trying to use magic, apparate or physically struggle free, but nothing worked. Pulling with all his might, he shivered at the delight in her voice.

“Oh, I do like a fighter.”

As the world around Harry moved again, Alistair appeared. It was clear he’d been there for a few minutes but whatever magic this woman had cast, it prevented him from being able to see.

Locking eyes for a moment, Harry had never seen such fear and anger held within them. Rather than
to talk he struck, moving faster than any human eye could register.

But, he wasn’t fast enough.

A shield formed before them, pulsing as though it were a heartbeat. Immediately Alistair backed off, but that split second was enough for the skin of his hand to blister and burn with the light brush of contact.

“Oh, how sweet. The noble, gentlemanly Vampire attempting to rescue his love.”

Practically spitting the last word out, Harry could hear the disgust and sarcasm in her voice.

Irritated with her words, he was unable to keep his mouth shut. “Bitch.” Whatever she’d done, Harry couldn’t communicate with him as he reacted to none of his words.

Fingernails digging into his cheek they scratched, drawing blood.

Igniting his rage further, Alistair was ready to tear this woman limb from limb. "Release him! I will not warn you a second time.”

And there it was. That sweet, oh so familiar rush of power. Before long, it and his brother’s will be all hers. But first, she would have a little fun.

Amused, she observed him try to break her shield. “Find him, if you can. If not..”

She didn’t finish her sentence. As the shield around them faded, Harry felt drowsy. Fighting to stay awake he lost, the throes of magically induced sleep sweeping him into unconsciousness.

Then she disappeared, taking Harry with her. The bag he carried dropped to the floor, its contents spilling out.

Suddenly, memories of Solomon’s disappearance overlapped with his current situation. Right before his eyes, with no way to prevent it, he’d been taken and now, Harry too. Trying to speak through their link produced no results, the bracelet on his wrist colourless. Whatever magic was in place, rendered its natural power useless.

It would be so easy to just collapse right there, reliving the pain of which he had before. But he had a job to do.

The missing connection became apparent. There was no doubt in Alistair’s mind, that Harry had been taken to that castle upon the cliff. Any magic he’d used against the shield was useless, absorbing into it harmlessly. She was far faster than him.

Not far away, Solomon and Rupert had witnessed the entire exchange. There was no time to waste. Grabbing his brother by the shoulders, his eyes were filled with seriousness.

“Solomon, inform those close to Harry that he has been taken. I will find him, no matter how long it takes. I will not rest until I have done so. If I have a lead, I will need both of your assistance.”

Shocked all he could do was stare but quickly recovered. Understanding the gravity of the situation, he nodded. ”I will do this.”
Satisfied with his answer, Alistair sent a silent plea to whoever or whatever may be listening. ‘Please, for all that is still good in this world, let me find him, safe.’

He couldn’t bear to think otherwise. It would shatter his heart, irreparably.

“Rupert, come with me. Perhaps the correct place will restore your memory of where exactly you followed Sergei to.”

With a stony expression, Rupert nodded. After Alistair picked up the recently dropped bag to transport it somewhere safe they left, Alistair desperately searching his mind for other places he’d been that matched Rupert’s description.

Why had she appeared just now? And for what purpose had she taken Harry?

That second question, though Solomon silently asked it, already had an answer.

She’d been waiting for a moment to strike. In her eyes, Harry was Alistair’s ultimate weakness, a tool that could be used to bring him to his knees.

Solomon knew how reckless he could be, especially when it came to someone he loved. But he was here now and would make sure, that none of them would fall victim to her.

Thinking of Hermione, pain pierced his still heart. He didn’t want to be the bearer of such news, but this was important. It would be foolish to not say anything and then, the worst case scenario happened. No. Better those close to him were aware of what had happened.

The future had looked promising. But now, clouds of uncertainty descended upon them all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Levinson for their suggestion of Remus’ career choice! Much appreciated :)

Bit of a rollercoaster chapter to say the least! Definitely more to come for that. While I’ve written pretty much all of this with whatever idea comes to mind, from here on I’ve planned out pretty much what I want to happen.
One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Chapter Summary

Taken by a new, unknown enemy, Alistair wouldn't let anyone or anything get in his way in bringing Harry back. Harry himself isn't ready to just lie down and accept her words either. But in the aftermath, will everything work out?

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: New jobs, unravelling plots, deepening bonds. In Harry's case, a trip to Diagon Alley provided an unexpected and unwelcome turn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warning: Torture in this chapter.

"Headmistress, there is a matter of urgency that I must discuss with you."

Though she'd never seen this Racoon Patronus before, Minerva recalled Solomon's voice from their brief meeting before Albus' trial. After giving her consent, she was startled by the man's sudden appearance.

Solomon kept a neutral expression. "A few more will be arriving here soon. It concerns several of us."

Rather than ask questions, she simply waited. While unorthodox, Minerva doubted he would waste her time with trivial information.

Anxiously, Hermione headed straight for the Headmistress' Office. Solomon had requested her presence there and after she bade farewell to her parents, went straight back to Hogwarts. On the way, she ran into Luna and surprisingly enough, Brio. Keeping pace with them, Hermione could see that her friend's complexion was unnaturally pale. "Are you alright?"

'It's Harry who isn't, not me.' Luna wanted to say, but those words died in her throat.
Shaking her head from side to side, Brio's hand held onto her own. This air was foul beyond comprehension but he would endure a thousand times worse if it meant being able to support Luna.

Despite the situation's seriousness, Brio regarded these new surroundings with deep curiosity. He'd seen around the grounds, but never Hogwarts itself. It made for fascinating viewing. Though, in turn, he was treated to the same whenever they happened to pass by the odd student.

Arriving just outside of the Headmistress' Office, Ginny, Neville, Sirius and Remus shortly joined them.

It was one thing to hear about Brio. But to see him was something else. While Ginny gave him a friendly wave Neville took it in his stride.

"Bloody hell he's tall," Sirius muttered, staring at the newcomer. He'd heard all about the Fae's realm and girl's training from Harry but had no idea anyone could have such a presence.

"Ow!"

Jabbed in the ribs, Sirius rubbed them. "What was that for?"

"Stop staring."

He held back the urge to stick his tongue out at Remus. He was above that kind of immaturity. Well, mostly anyway.

Sirius had no idea why they'd all been called here but could take an accurate guess. Harry, the trouble magnet, had gotten himself into more of it. Most of Sirius was worried but partly, sorry that the kid couldn't seem to catch a break. And when he did, something else happened. Why else would they all be here?

One by one they entered Minerva's office. Everyone who Solomon expected came plus an unexpected addition, taking a seat upon one of the newly transfigured chairs. A Fae was highly unexpected. Able to read the connection between him and Harry's other friend instantly, he didn't mind. In fact, he would be of great assistance should it be needed.

Sitting himself down to face them all, he was unable to lock away his worries and concerns for both Alistair and Harry. For Harry himself but also, if something happened to him while with her, Solomon was unsure if Alistair would ever be able to recover. Closing his eyes for one second they reopened, silver irises the epitome of seriousness.

“Harry has been captured by a Vampire, one of considerable strength. We do not know her motivations, but Alistair and a friend are searching for him.”
Luna’s heart sank, clenched so tightly that she could barely breathe. It was too late.

The flash of that future she saw Harry was there. But that didn’t mean to say they would find him unscathed. While she didn’t believe he would die at the hands of this unknown enemy, anything else was within the realm of possibility.

“This is not your fault,” Brio told her, sterner than he’d intended but hoped it delivered his point across. Luna had done all she could.

“If I had sent my Patronus sooner…”

“No.”

When the next words came from Solomon, Luna raised her head to look at him. Questions swimming within her eyes, he elaborated. “You are a seer?”

At her nod, it was as he thought. Seers had an entirely different aura to regular magic users. “Any prior notice for such an event is welcome. We were able to see who exactly took him.”

“Vampire or not, I’ll tear her fucking throat out!”

“Moony,” Sirius spoke, a hand on his partner's shoulder as the wilder side of him emerged.

Most had never seen him like this or not. Minerva never had in all her years of knowing him, so it came as a shock to her.

“Though we have no proof as of yet, I suspect she is older than Alistair by a considerable degree. Such actions would result in your death.”

Remus agreed completely. Moony, on the other hand, wasn’t so convinced. “Oh yeah, I’d like to see the bitch try.”

There was a fine line between a healthy amount of confidence and overconfidence. Solomon believed such a trait was good but too much, hindered rather than helped.

“She’s got my cub.”

With those words, Solomon couldn’t help but feel sympathy for the man. He was no werewolf so didn’t know his internal struggles, but it was clear how often he battled against opposite urges to his own daily.
Squeezing Remus’ hand, Sirius couldn’t help but reflect that at the moment, they’d switched roles. “What happened exactly?”

That’s what Hermione wanted to know. While Ginny and Neville remained silent to listen, her mind was working in overdrive. There was a connection somewhere, there had to be. There always was, in some form. With Aela during her second year, the philosopher’s stone, the Goblet of Fire, one thing always leads to another. Whether it happened minutes, hours or more after the fact, varied.

Then, it clicked. Listening intently to Solomon’s recounting of events, Hermione was positive about one thing.

“She’s the one who sent those Vampire Assassins after Harry. She wanted to try something more indirect and when this failed, she decided to take a more personal approach.” Hermione spoke, sure she was correct.

Now that it was mentioned, it did indeed seem highly likely. He would inform Alistair of this, once current matters were settled.

“I believe you are correct. However, there is still the matter of where exactly Harry is.”

As Solomon explained Rupert’s findings and what Alistair was in the middle of, Hermione’s expression clouded with worry. The world was vast, more than many realised. The chances of there only being one castle upon cliffs was highly unlikely.

“Once he believes there is a lead, he will call for my assistance. Until then, there is not much we can do but wait.”

He spoke the truth. But for all gathered there, it hurt.

Hermione was more anxious than she let on. But puzzles, logic and research were what helped her cope at the most difficult times. Today would be no exception. “I’m going to do some research, see if I can find anything.”

Lothaire Castle’s library was ideal, but Solomon, like her, was an avid book lover. It was unlikely that he hadn’t searched for information himself. So that left her and the Hogwarts library. Perhaps there was a book here that they didn’t have. All she could do was try.

Ginny doubted she’d be able to concentrate on anything, never mind research. She hated to sit and wait. She wanted to do something, anything. The fact that there was nothing drove her to agitation.

Those regular Vampires she found strong. But one stronger than the Lothaire brothers? Shuddering,
she would have to up the number of times her and Shattered Blaze worked together. Her life could very well depend on it.

As one by one everyone left her office, Minerva could no longer concentrate on filing paperwork. She may run a school but unlike Albus had humanity, compassion. She’d watched that boy go through far too much in his young life. She was proud to have him in her house. While she didn’t hold faith in higher powers, she did in the capabilities of Alistair. Whatever the outcome, she would do her part to support.

Why did her magic feel strangely familiar? Alistair suspected that her current appearance was far from the real one. It was too normal. To have an aura so dark, it always showed. Just as with Dumbledore and his crimson eyes, she too would have physical signs.

But, this mattered not. What mattered, was locating and retrieving Harry. It was clear by her words to him, this was intended to provoke a response.

Oh, she would certainly have one from him. No one, no matter how powerful they may be, would ever take a loved one from him again.

He couldn’t find Solomon, the Phoenix Blood doing its part. But he had a lead, small as it might be. The wards overpowered any imbued magic within their matching bracelets but once nearby, there was one thing no amount of magic could ever mask, and that was his connection with Harry.

He had fed from him and in turn, Harry had consumed small drops of his own blood, for healing purposes. While he as a human would be unaware such a connection existed, Alistair could sense this the moment it began to form.

If Harry was where Rupert had seen Sergei go to, he would know.

For now, though, they had to locate exactly which castle upon the cliffs. In his lifetime, Alistair had seen many of them which would match Rupert’s limited description.

While they could transport themselves anywhere in the world without a magical cost, all of the castles he knew of or had found out about through Solomon’s recent research could very well be nothing more than crumbling ruins or the environment had drastically changed. Discounting all of the buildings along with mortal and immortal made technology, Alistair had seen continents themselves split, lands drifting elsewhere upon the sea.

What might, were the strength of these wards Rupert had included in the description. He wouldn’t have put powerful if they posed no threat to him. His talent with magic was widely and publicly recognised, spending many hours each day honing and refining techniques until it came naturally,
like not breathing.

Glancing down at his hand which had only just healed, the shield that she had used had a worrying effect. His healing rate was instantaneous, but the brief contact made with it directly combatted against his abilities.

Time passing by was meaningless, with someone who had an unlimited amount. However, he always became keenly aware of it while waiting to go on dates, see someone he liked, or right now.

While their method of travel cut down the amount of time by a significant amount, minutes seemed to tick away, tauntingly. They had visited six castles he knew of and each time, he could detect nothing.

Then, there was the weather. It had been cold and raining, but many of the places Alistair had visited rarely had cold weather. Occasionally rain but never anywhere that dropped below freezing.

And how big or small was this castle? Many varied in size.

There were so many things to consider, including the very real possibility that all the castles Alistair knew of, none of them were where Harry was. Or perhaps he wasn’t there at all, but another location far different from the one they’d researched.

He tried not to think about that, only focusing on now. Some areas they were unable to access immediately, misdirection wards placed around one or two so that they had to slip between the loose threads of magic, observing their true surroundings in this manner. That wasted several minutes, proven to be pointless in the end.

Saint Nicholas Castle, Tremiti islands in Italy. Alistair had visited all of the usually colder places and their castles, but nothing. He began to suspect either the weather had taken a naturally unusual turn wherever Rupert had been, or it was not by natural causes.

“No,” Alistair spoke aloud, frustration, impatience and fear twisting into a ball of knots with no end in sight.

Rupert nodded. “There are no wards in sight.”

They would find him.

He repeated that to himself. While Solomon had suffered greatly, an immortal had a far greater chance of survival than a mortal. The roles were reversed, Harry in the clutches of a Vampire. While he had survived and overcome many things in his short life, he wasn’t invincible.
“There is one more Castle by your description that I am aware of,” Alistair spoke, expression and body taut with tension. If not, there were no leads left. If Harry were a Vampire their blood connection would be strong enough that he could sense it from most anywhere but right now, it was only enough if in the same area.

“This will be it.” Rupert’s confidence helped to boost Alistair’s own. There was no time for doubts or worries to settle in. He was in a better position to find Harry than he ever was Solomon, something which he had yet to forgive himself for. That it had taken so long and with the help of another.

The Swallow’s Nest, Gaspra, in the Crimean Peninsula. He had seen it built himself, finding its design and small size compared to others very charming.

But if Harry was there, it would no longer hold those fond memories.

As they appeared and reappeared to yet another area, Rupert provided further confirmation of what he already immediately suspected.

“This is where I followed Sergei to.”

The weather was unnatural. Curious, he had spent several days nearby to observe the castle’s construction and not once, could he ever remember anything but warm weather. Perhaps during the night, it was a little less warm, but the temperature here was freezing.

Black, ink-like clouds loomed menacingly in the sky, met with a downpour of rain so great, that even with their superior eyesight being able to see clearly proved a task. Waves crashing violently against the cliff, they could barely hear themselves speak aloud.

It was only two in the afternoon here, but Alistair and Rupert could be fooled into thinking it was night.

Those clouds were the same magic Alistair had seen in Diagon Alley, from her. Her magic had manifested into a form of defence, coupled with the wards Rupert had spoken of.

Powerful was an understatement. Impenetrable seemed a more fitting description but even so, everything had a weakness. Harry was in there, he could sense it.

He wouldn’t become ill from wet clothing or this weather. Despite his warmth gain, he was still a Vampire and as such, would not suffer. Easily able to block out the weather, he contacted Solomon. ‘Harry is here, where Rupert followed Sergei.’

No sooner had those words been spoken, that Solomon joined them. Taken aback by the drastic
weather change, the sickening tang of her magic coated his every sense. “What about the wards?”

After a moment of studying, Alistair spoke loudly to be heard over the weather. “I see an opening. They surround the castle but are not tied to its foundations. They have been moved to something else, very recently.”

Falling silent his brother and friend watched. Ward creation and dispelling of them were one of Alistair’s specialities. They had yet to find anyone who could break his own but also, a ward he had yet to break himself.

Where on Earth were they tied to? He had never encountered wards like it. They were strong certainly, but they were there to protect the castle from intruders. So, why were they moved from its foundations, the most structurally sound part?

The answer came to him, in far more seconds than he would have liked. Mainly, because he didn’t wish to believe it.

They were tied to Harry.

These wards were dangerous, even to him. One wrong move and they would lash out, unforgivingly, whether their target was the mind or body. Interwoven with the finest threads of magic he had yet to see some would trigger individually while others, would all at once.

The magic itself was weaved in a dome, but the threat inwards, facing the structure. Which meant only one thing.

If he made a mistake, Harry would be the punished one. He could withstand the severity of these spells, though some would leave him incapacitated for minutes.

For a human, even with Harry’s will and inner strength, it would be enough to kill him.

Rushing the process would mean his death. To take his time, could also mean the same thing.

In all of his existence, Alistair had never been so terrified. Not only was there the pressure of needing to reach him, but also know that like every other ward before this, his technique had to be perfect.

Solomon noticed the change instantly. “What is it?”

Orange eyes wavering, Alistair was unable to take his eyes off the structure. “The wards are tied to Harry. If a single mistake is made, he will die.”
Solomon stiffened. He never expected this. It was like trying to disarm a bomb, only wards were much more complicated. He had seen the process of bomb disarming and there were far fewer components within those then the amount of spells which could be successfully weaved together.

Forcing himself to remain calm, Alistair had a plan. He would do most of the spellwork but still needed assistance. “My attention will be focused entirely on this. Once a spell has been unwoven, ensure it will not return.”

Rupert and Solomon were experienced enough to do this. Spells usually weren’t resistant to other spells, the exception being elements. Outside of those, they could gently guide those strands away from the others.

After they agreed to assist, Alistair began. He placed aside all his worries and fears. They wouldn’t help at all. Chances were, they would increase his risk of making a mistake.

Using his wand for precision he began to unravel each individual strand, painstakingly slowly. Once a hole was large enough to walk through without making physical contact, only then could he stop.

But, it wasn’t a case of starting whether he pleased and selecting certain spells. He had to follow her pattern, in reverse. He had no choice about what direction to take, only take advantage of an opening once it presented itself.

Solomon and Rupert did their part, some of the more stubborn spells attempting to drift back to their starting place, but were prevented from doing so.

Alistair would be further behind if not for their assistance. This ward was the most important one he would ever break through. A life depended on it.

And then, he came to a particularly stubborn one.

Winds raging and downpour only increasing, it put Alistair’s concentration to the maximum. Focusing on one, he almost failed to notice another colourless spell, begin to glow.

Pushing away the rush of panic and fear he quickly focused on that, dousing the colour before it could grow brighter.

It returned to normal, unlike Alistair’s heart.

Thoroughly soaked through, the grip on his wand was just short of it breaking entirely. To pause even for a moment could mean that all his work thus far could be quickly undone.
Water dripping from his hair Alistair blinked away the excess, only when he was able to and not a moment sooner.

As thunder and lightning ripped through the sky it illuminated the three men there. All of them worried and concerned for what lay inside, but none more so than the man tackling these wards head on.

A painful tug.

Given no time to wake up from the magically induced sleep, Harry winced when a large fistful of his hair was taken. Tugged back hard he could feel more than a few strands rip clean out, transported back to the days of Vernon. Only, he wasn’t at The Dursley’s anymore. In fact, he didn’t know where he was.

Pulled to his feet by the same fistful Harry’s eyes watered slightly, faced with his captor.

“Oh, so good to see that you are finally awake.”

No sooner had those cold words left her lips, that she transformed.

A waterfall of black hair cascading down her back, it shared the same, eerie non-colour as her eyes.

Rather than a Vampire, it was as though Harry was facing an Acromantula hybrid, the same menacing, fully black glint as he found in Aragog during their first encounter. Skin deathly pale her fangs were exposed for him to see.

She wore a choker and attached to it, a symbol. With an eye like her own, it sat on an infinity symbol. Harry filed away that information, in case it held significance.

She stood tall even now, appearance finally matching the toxicity of her magic. When speaking again, he could hear a noticeable difference.

“I am going to have fun with you.” Filled with hostility her accent had changed, to one Harry recognised as Russian. He recalled the same accent from his past, with a very brief encounter between a visitor to England and Vernon.

Harry didn’t like the way she spoke of this. “What do you want with me?”

Ruby red lips curved into a bewitching smile, she stroked his hair. It held none of the kindness and
warmth he was used to. In fact, it put him far more on edge than her earlier actions had. Disgust welling within him, he batted her hand away.

“Don’t touch me.” Glaring he tried to transform but of course, couldn’t. His Animagi capabilities were blocked.

She laughed, her resulting grin showing sharpened fangs. “You are not who I want. The Lothaire brothers, particularly the eldest, is who I seek. But, when I am finished with him, perhaps I will claim you. You and he possess power, of which you have no right to. I will take it for myself.”

It was always the same. Dumbledore wanted power, Voldemort wanted power. Why was it that every enemy kind he had encountered, power was the goal?

“So just like every other aspiring villain, you want power and to conquer the world? Do you have any idea how pathetic this sounds?”

It probably wasn’t in his best interests to antagonise her, but he’d never cower in fear.

“But, unlike the villains that you speak of, I have the means to succeed.”

Stroking his hair again, her smile became alluring. “Why not give in to more.. carnal urges? I loathe humans but some can be mildly entertaining.”

Knowing what she was referring to, his eyes flashed. Snarling, he slapped away her hand, hard. “I wouldn’t touch you if you were the last thing on Earth! You’re disgusting.”

He hated this. Trapped in a room with someone he didn’t know but not only that, suggested for him to sleep with her? He would never accept. He loved Alistair, no one else. He would only ever touch or look at him in that way and not her. She was scum.

He was struck, much harder than what he’d used to stop her hair stroking. Slapping his face the accompanying sting was great, putting some strain on his neck muscles with the force applied. Harry had the feeling that her full strength, would be enough to snap his neck.

He didn’t cry out, remaining silent. But, his eyes conveyed more than words ever would. Tasting blood by his lip, her sharp nails had caught him. Her sudden intense gaze had him uneasy.

‘Give in. Touch me.’

This wasn’t Alistair’s voice or his own internal thoughts, but the Imperius Curse’s call. He ignored the request and every time, he’d been able to resist it.
But the curse had never been cast by a Vampire.

The more he resisted, the more his arm moved. Feeling a great pressure within his mind he shook, hand outstretched towards her. As if he were suffering the aftershocks of crucio, visible strain showed within his expression as he tried desperately to fight her off.

'No! Stop!' He cried out in his mind. He'd prefer physical pain over this, thinking of Alistair who had been hurt so much. Harry didn’t want to do this but in a way, it still felt like cheating. Because he was too weak to break the strongest Imperius he’d ever been faced with.

Some of the pressure finally gave way, blood flowing freely from his nose. But Harry still didn’t stop.

However, his efforts proved futile, when warm fingers touched the curve of her exposed breast. Slowly stroking her icy cold skin, his heart tore in two. It was such a small action yet so intimate.

Gritting his teeth, he wondered if they would break beneath the pressure as well. While he had a sense of maturity many his age didn’t, he hadn’t lived enough to not be affected.

This pain was so much different from what Harry was used to. It felt like he'd hurt Alistair in the worst possible way.

He couldn’t stop her control over him and when finally released, bile rose to the back of his throat. What had he done? The room’s freezing temperatures, the pain in his cheek, nothing registered compared to this.

‘I’m sorry.’ He apologised within his mind, going unheard as their connection was blocked. He felt more isolated than ever. Not long into knowing one another, Harry had been able to communicate with him whether verbally or within his mind. In one sense, it was like he’d lost a piece of himself.

“Far better than associating yourself with Lothaire.” Speaking with the utmost confidence, Harry couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“You forced me! Why would I touch someone I don’t love?” God, he was furious. There were a few people he hated but quickly, this woman was making her way to the top of his list.

A sneer twisting her once pretty features, she easily picked him up by the throat. Slamming him against the wall he tried to struggle free, seeing stars for a moment as the back of his head cracked against rough stone. She didn’t squeeze but kept him in mid-air there. Leaning in close until they were nearly nose to nose, she spat her next words as if they were cursed.
“Love is a sickness. A delusion. An illness which has swept across this world and I will eradicate it. It does not exist. Only lust, anger and greed. You are a fool!”

Despite his situation, Harry could sense those words at least, were spoken from whatever blackened husk of a heart this woman had. Realising this, Harry had the smallest shred of sympathy. But as always, there were far better ways to go about this.

Love wasn’t a delusion. If anything, Harry relieves she was the deluded one. “If I’m sick with love then I’m glad! I’ve experienced the best of life and if you haven’t, then I feel sorry for you.”

Her magic was eye-watering. In close proximity to it, he could barely breathe, as though a thick smoke filled his lungs.

“I loathe your kind and this.. mentality. You know nothing.”

Tilting her head as if in consideration, the end void of darkness within her eyes gained a wicked glint. “Hmm. We shall see how long it takes before you are broken.”

He’d been through so much and come too far in his physical and emotional development across last summer up until now, for him to give up here. A cool wave of anger washed over him. Green eyes nothing more than cool chips of tinted ice, he made his view clear.

“I’ll never break.”

Gathering saliva in his mouth he spat, making his deep dislike of her clear as it splattered her cheek. With a subtle hand movement, her cheek was clean again.

Harry didn’t know what she had in mind but prepared himself. For most of his life, he’d been pretty much tortured by the Dursley’s, physically and emotionally. He escaped into his mind, pretending he was anywhere else but in that moment.

Then, a burning sensation. Biting down on his tongue so that he wouldn’t scream it only lasted for a moment, breathing deeply after.

Noticing his expression, she smirked. “Ah, how heroic. There are people here to save the day. Lothaire had better err on the side of caution, or he may very well kill the one he came to rescue.”

With deep enjoyment, her fingernail dug into his abdomen, where the burning originated. “A mistake was nearly made. Most, unfortunately, it was corrected.”

Taking the time to prepare himself, Harry hadn’t spoken until now. “What the hell are you talking
“My wards, of course. I transferred them to you shortly after your arrival here. If he should make a mistake and not correct it, you will die.”

Harry had no idea wards could be used for such a purpose. But, he had confidence in Alistair. He was one of the strongest people he’d ever met, magically, physically and emotionally. All the fear, anxiety and worry, he kept locked away. For now, all he could do was make sure under no circumstances, would he let his spirit be broken by someone who didn’t even know him.

He didn’t give her an answer. Noticing her brief flash of irritation, he smiled internally.

That is until the hand around his neck released him. So unexpected he dropped to the floor, banging his knees painfully against the hard stone. Before he could stand up metal cuffs attached to chains sprang from the ceiling, securing his wrists with enough force that his hands were unable to bend fully.

Dangling in mid-air he could feel the physical strain on his arms, legs left to dangle helplessly.

At eye level with her, she caressed his cheek. There was no love or like in those actions, only anger and hatred. Still sensitive from striking him earlier he remained resolute, determined not to show any reaction.

For a human so young, it was interesting to see his resistance. But for her, it only made the end result of crushing everything tangible that much more satisfying.

As she silently chanted, an object formed in her hand. Made entirely of magic it gave off a sickly, dark glow. Holding the handle of it a long line of the same magic dangled, starting thick but growing thinner towards its end. He then realised that this was a whip, one entirely constructed from magic.

He’d never been whipped before. Though if Vernon could have got his hands on one, Harry knew he would have been on the receiving end of it. He’d been belted, but that kind of pain was far different.

Dread curling in the bottom of his stomach, the only thing he could console himself with, was the fact that she didn’t want to use Imperius on him to touch her anymore.

“This is better than that was,” He told himself repeatedly, falling into the kind of trance with Vernon’s punishments that he’d had no need of for months now. Ingrained into him it was easy to fall back into those habits, despite how long it had been since the last time.

Already shivering from the freezing temperatures in this room, it was made worse for him when with
a tight grip on the front of his shirt, it was suddenly and violently torn from his body.

Face burning with the humiliation he had no way to hide. While he had more confidence in himself than ever before, only those in the Boy’s Dormitory, Quidditch Changing Rooms and Alistair had seen his body.

As soon as her hand touched the tattoo he had of Padfoot, it felt like an insult. Using his legs he tried to aim a vicious kick towards her, hitting thin air when she easily dodged.

Of course, that put even more strain on his arms than before, beginning to ache when kept in such an unfamiliar position.

Trailing the whip across his exposed and rapidly cooling torso, he shivered at how repulsive it felt simply touching his skin.

She remained like this for a moment, apparently wanting to build up anxiety in his anticipation of being struck for the first time with it.

Taking a measured step away her arm moved backwards, the whip’s tail just behind. Bringing it forward with lightning speed, Harry was unprepared for how painful it would be.

A shout left him, eyes sequencing closed as it tore a vicious line through his skin. Broken it began to bleed, slowly trickling.

Harry didn’t know if there was a difference between regular or magical whips, but this hurt like hell. His body was cold enough that when it struck, it was as if that single part of him had been coated in fire. It burned, setting his nerves alight.

No sooner had he processed this, when he was whipped again. Striking a different place to his abdomen, he could see actual enjoyment in her eyes.

He almost felt sick with that realisation.

“Let them hear your screams!” Tongue wetting her lips she leaned in, to run her tongue along the fresh blood from another whip mark. Trembling from both the cold and pain, he couldn’t hold his voice back. With her, whether he stayed quiet or otherwise, he could see she would only do more of the same.

However, when the whip bit into him again and crossed over a mark she’d already made, it increased the pain tenfold.
Expression taught with tension Harry’s head tilted upwards, as he screamed. “AHHH!”

It was the most pain he’d ever been in and he’d suffered beneath Voldemort’s cruciatus curse. Due to the temperature differences, he could physically feel if not see, where he’d been whipped and where he hadn’t been.

He didn’t know how long she would continue this for. He would allow himself to cry out as he could do nothing else but. However, he wouldn’t beg her to stop. He wouldn’t verbally admit to her, that she was affecting him.

Harry was determined to stick this out, prove her wrong. While she’d demonstrated physically and magically he wouldn’t leave here unassisted, there were other ways he could gain an advantage.

It wouldn’t be too much longer now. The downpour heavier than ever, wet clothes sticking to his skin when concentrating on something vitally important didn’t help in the long run. Unweaving another thread of magic, Alistair was able to hear something which was never a part of the weather.

A scream. So familiar and pain filled.

Harry!

Fighting back his instinct to stop and magically batter the ward to let them gain entry, he continued. He would have to. Anything else could mean Harry suffering far more.

Heart viciously squeezed, he almost had the urge to breathe in an attempt to relieve himself. But he wouldn’t.

He could hear nothing but screaming. It wasn’t a repeat of the first one he heard either. Every few seconds another one punctuated the air, sounding far louder than the weather’s forcefulness.

Towards the end was always difficult. There was the relief that he was close of course, but also posed a problem for concentration levels. He had to focus, block everything out.

And then, he saw an opening.

“Go!” He called out, making himself heard to Rupert and Solomon. As they carefully passed through the wards he followed them straight after, threads of magic re-weaving themselves back into a solid structure once more.
He didn’t waste time. As he expected, his usual method of travelling from one place to another was blocked. So, he would rely on physical speed.

Nothing more than three blurs in darkness they came to thick, heavy double doors, made of metal.

Once touched they opened, without a fight. Alistair was suspicious. But shortly after, realised why.

“Quarantine,” Rupert sneered, feeling the eerie wash of magic. “To ensure that nothing abnormal is here.”

Solomon was concerned. Alistair held warmth and certainly, humans wouldn’t be allowed. Harry was an exception, for the worst reasons. What if they detected Alistair’s own faint body heat?

As it turned out, he needn’t have worried.

With an explosive display of magic, Alistair targeted the identical double doors in front of them, bits of metal and stone shredded into nothing more than dust. Making his way straight through Rupert clapped, delighted, while Solomon vowed to keep a watch over his brother. He trusted his judgement, but what about when they found Harry? For all their sakes, he hoped that the younger man was alive.

He’d lost track of the lashes now, voice nothing more than a hoarse, cracked noise. Until suddenly, it stopped. Through hazy, pain filled eyes, he could make out her satisfied expression.

“Just give in, it will be so much easier for you in the end.”

His arms were aching, a different kind of pain to mingle with what he was already feeling. But he was resolved.

“..Fuck you.”

It was nothing more than a rasp at this point, unable to wet his mouth.

Grip tightening around the handle, her fangs were bared. Rage ignited he was turned around, back exposed. Able to hear the anger in her voice, he was unprepared for her next actions.

“YOU WILL SUBMIT TO ME!”
Shrieking, her magic targeted the lower half of his torso. With horror, he could feel every last bit of clothing stripped away.

He was given no time for that to sink in before the whip cut into him, repeatedly. No care was given for where the whip hit, nor a second’s pause. A split second after one lash the other followed, creating new, open wounds to the point where skin, not blood coated became a rarity.

He had no voice to scream, mouth open in silent agony as not for the last time, he tore into his tongue and lips with his teeth. By some miracle, he hadn’t cried. No doubt that Gryffindor stubbornness he’d heard mentioned so many times.

A brief smile touched his shredded lips, soon washed away as the whip struck new skin.

Stepping round to face him once more, Harry was only mildly surprised he hadn’t fallen unconscious. But then, he didn’t think she would allow him to. Heart pounding violently, every breath pained him but he needed it, to live.

And then, he stopped breathing. Only for a moment, as shock overtook him.

Changing her appearance once more, he was faced with someone he recognised more than anyone else.

It was Alistair. Not his Alistair but every feature was identical, wearing the same clothing he’d caught a glimpse of this afternoon.

Still holding the whip, it was as if he’d been doused in ice water. She wanted to emotionally hurt not only him but Alistair, who was still out there.

“I know what you’re trying to do, it won’t work.” He spoke, every word stinging his abused voice box.

Harry had never seen such an expression. It was nothing more than lies. The sunset eyes he lived were devoid of anything which he loved. They were filled with such loathing, it physically took him aback.

“What am I trying to do? It is simply some quality time I am spending with my lover.” A cold smirk gracing his lips he raised the whip, as Harry shut his eyes and turned away. No. He wouldn’t let her do this!

But then, her Imperius curse returned. Once again he tried to fight it, but his eyes were forced open. Paralysed, all he could do was watch as the whip struck once again.
At this point, he believed that his nerves had been ignited so often, they were now numbed to any more physical pain. But he was wrong.

She was trying to warp Harry’s perception of him, destroy the relationship they’d nurtured.

‘It’s not him!’ Harry told himself. He knew this in his heart, but his appearance and voice were so identical, that the lines blurred.

The only thing which kept him grasping onto reality was the knowledge that she couldn’t truly replicate him.

He was kind words, warmth, safety, security. He’d never looked at him with hatred or loathing and his voice was never cold.

He hung onto this, even as cold orange eyes remained fixed onto his own, whipping him.

Oh, Alistair. He couldn’t apologise enough to the man, feeling weaker than ever before.

His heart shattered. It was as if someone had torn it from his chest, crushed the organ into dust and left it to scatter in a wasteland.

Not only was she hurting him but Alistair, a man who had been hurt so often he would never do the same to another.

It was this, rather than the physical pain, which released the dam on his emotion.

Sobs escaping his lips he cried, no longer paralysed as his head hung low. Agonised tears dripping to the stone floor, he’d seen no more than a few minutes. But those few minutes would remain ingrained into his mind.

A full-length mirror in front of him, she forced his head up. Harry was relieved to see that she’d returned to normal.

“Ah, I almost wish that we could play for a little longer. But no matter. I will have the opportunity to again, once the Lothaire brothers are no more.”

Delighted with the idea, she sprayed him with cold water. Drenched from head to toe and already freezing, the trembles in his frame increased.

Blowing a mocking kiss she opened the room’s door, closing and locking it behind her.
He was alone, at last. Unable to look elsewhere, his own naked, battered form hung before him. Harry was horrified with what he saw.

Barely any part of him was left alone, dried blood sticking uncomfortably to his skin, some washed away with the recent water. The thin yet deep cuts crisscrossed in some sections, the only parts of him left unwhipped were the lowest part of his legs, the arms he hung by and his face. He couldn’t see the back of him but suspected more of the same.

Thinking over what just happened and seeing the mess she’s left his body in, he could no longer hold back his physical urges. Bile rising to the back of his throat he could keep it down, burning his throat more as it left his mouth, spattering the floor.

Trying to struggle free did him no good, suspecting anti-magic was placed on his restraints. But even so, he tried. Pulling at his wrists for minutes on end they hurt, irritating and opening the wounds in his body further. Without magic, he truly realised his helplessness. With no strength on his side, he hung limply, exhausted and panting.

More than physically sick he felt ill, no longer able to tell if his body was hot or cold. His surroundings blurred. Falling unconscious, only his laboured breathing was an indication that he remained alive.

Alistair could no longer hear screaming. To him, this was far worse as it could mean two things. One, he’d fallen into unconsciousness or two, he was dead.

No matter his current state, Alistair would still be able to detect him through blood. So at this point and with no contact, he wouldn’t know until they found him.

The castle itself was small, but it belied the current labyrinth they found themselves in. But, Alistair wasn’t lost. He followed his instincts, navigating the twists and turns of corridors with ease. He didn’t speak, as that would be a distraction. They needed to find Harry, now.

He was close, Alistair could feel it. Senses kicking into overdrive, the overpowering smell of blood was a clear giveaway. Behind a locked door which Alistair easily opened he rushed in, shortly followed by Rupert and Solomon.

Alistair had seen many horrible things in his lifetime. But none could compare to this. The rise and fall of Harry’s chest indicated he still lived, but his body was a mess of forceful cuts which he realised was the mark of a whip. The right side of his face darkened, he could see he’d been physically struck at one point too.
All this he processed while acting immediately.

Cancelling the magic cast upon his restraints they released Harry, Alistair easily catching him. Cradling him close, his eyes conveyed silent thanks to Solomon who had conjured a blanket to wrap him in.

They couldn’t leave just yet. Alistair could still sense the wards tied to him, even now.

At the heart of them, it was a much easier task to unweave the core of magic here than outside.

But, it proved harder than it was outside when faced with Harry’s condition.

None of them spoke, Alistair focused on the task at hand while Solomon’s heart darkened with deep hatred. He was learning, now more than ever, that their own kind was just as bad. He’d known this but found it difficult to accept when tortured at the hands of a human for so long.

But the evidence was here.

While not as gifted with magic, Solomon could see that whatever Harry had been hit with, would resist any form of their healing. Which meant, Alistair’s blood wouldn’t work.

Then, at last, the wards were dispelled. Among them were ones which prevented their regular mode of travelling so with that gone, they could leave immediately.

Picking up Harry’s things that were placed nearby, Alistair didn’t spare much of a thought for how suspicious this was.

Anger, sorrow, despair. Magic manifesting itself through sheer emotion Alistair cradled him close, forcing his way out of Swallow’s Nest.

As stone crumbled around them Solomon and Rupert quickly followed suit, the latter staying to observe the destruction with barely restrained glee, while the former returned with his brother.

Rupert laughed, eyes alight and a wide grin. Oh, she wouldn’t be using this place any more, that was for sure.

The force of Alistair’s magic was so strong it ripped apart not only the castle’s foundations but the cliff of which it stood upon. Crumbling into rubble it collapsed upon itself, a large chunk of cliff falling with it now lost to the sea’s unforgiving waves.

Of course, she wouldn’t be among that rubble. Rupert wasn’t a fool. She’d let them take Harry back
and doubted she’d been done here. Until then, they would have to remain vigilant.

Knowing he would no longer be needed Rupert returned home, ready to assist further if it should be needed.

As Alistair reappeared with Harry in his arms, Madam Pomfrey was glad that she’d been informed by Solomon beforehand. It was the first time she’d met the man with his brief explanation but she prepared herself when learning Harry could be gravely injured.

Keeping his distance, Solomon informed the first person he could.

‘We have found him. But, he is in a critical condition.’

‘I’ll let everyone know.’

Though it pained him to do so, Alistair let her take the reigns. His blood could no nothing for these injuries, magic interlaced with resistance to his form of healing. In truth, nothing had sunken in yet. Once he knew Harry was physically out of danger now, only then would it begin to.

As Madam Pomfrey unwrapped the blanket from around him, she gasped. In all her years, she’d never seen anything this serious.

Sirius and Remus had stayed at Hogwarts, wanting to be close by should they find Harry on that day. Thankfully he was found, as informed by Hermione, but none of those who had been present to hear Harry was taken, were prepared with the sight which faced them.

No one else was in The Hospital Wing but Alistair, Solomon, her and Harry, until the doors were thrown open with a rush of people.

Sparing a glance for them, her glare stopped them from getting too close. “He’s in a serious condition and crowding him won’t help.”

None of them needed to take a step closer, seeing for themselves what sort of condition he was in until the curtains were promptly drawn around them. While the hospital sheets covered his lower half, the many severe whip marks crossing over each other were clear to see.

“H-Harry..” Hermione stuttered, tears spilling from her eyes. She’d never seen anything like it and reactions varied across the room. Accepting Solomon’s comfort as he came to her side, Ginny, Neville, Remus and Sirius held no colour in their expressions, pale. Rooted to the spot they couldn’t move, Ginny’s eyes narrowing in rage.
“She won’t get away with this. Vampire or not, everything has an end.”

Those words were to reassure herself, torn between wanting to ignore Madam Pomfrey’s orders and stay by Harry’s side or rushing off to do something reckless yet cathartic.

Luna could feel the magic. She wouldn’t even know where to begin and despite Brio’s words, felt partly responsible for Harry’s condition. He was alive, but at what cost to his mental state?

“I will help her,” Brio spoke suddenly, startling her. Glancing up, she was filled with hope. “Can you?”

Nodding confidently, he gently parted the curtains. “Ma’am, I am also a healer. I have seen magic of this kind before.”

Looking up and into the eyes of Brio, Madam Pomfrey had never seen one of his kind before. His ears were pointed like an elf, but she could tell he wasn’t one. And it seemed no matter the differences, one thing remained constant.

His magic was the nurturing kind. Deciding to place trust in him, only time would tell if Harry needed St Mungo’s expertise.

Chanting softly, Brio’s hand brushed against Harry’s skin. As it did so the skin began to heal, reknitting itself and leaving no trace of a scar.

Relieved, she gave him a grateful look. “Thank you.”

While there were no longer physical wounds, Harry’s body temperature was abnormal.

Working tirelessly, there was only a smattering of conversation here and there by most, all except Alistair.

Once Madam Pomfrey confirmed it was alright for Harry to be seen now, he observed as one by one, his friends and family approached then eventually left. Until only he and Solomon remained. Visiting hours were over but understanding the situation while not able to be there herself for the moment, Minerva had allowed Sirius and Remus to stay until Harry was physically recovered and awake.

While Madam Pomfrey was strict about who she let remain, she couldn’t tell the man to leave.

For now, Harry was in a stable condition. Calming draught in hand, she handed one to Alistair. “If you have need of it.”
Giving him that option she retreated to her office, leaving the brothers alone. She would know if Harry awakened or another complication developed.

Placing a hand on Alistair’s shoulder, concern swam within his silver eyes. “Will you be alright here, alone?”

Appreciating his consideration, Alistair did his best to smile despite the circumstances. “Yes. Thank you for today, your assistance has been invaluable.”

Patting the hand on his shoulder briefly, Solomon gave him one last worried glance, before disappearing.

Alistair had remained rooted to the same spot for hours, wanting to be by Harry’s side instantly, but understanding that he couldn’t demand all the time.

So he’d waited. Alone in the same room with him, Alistair stepped behind the drawn curtains. Shutting them behind him he sat down in the recently vacated chair, picking up Harry’s smaller, limp hand in his own.

Placing it to his cheek he leaned in, finally processing the day’s events.

He’d failed him. Alistair had promised to himself that he would never allow another to hurt Harry but they had, equally as if not more severely.

Guilt shrouded his heart like the heaviest cover, unable to be shifted. Whoever she was, she’d done this to directly attack him. If he and Harry had never met, perhaps this day wouldn’t have happened.

Thoughts torn in two, Alistair allowed all the emotion he’d kept locked behind Occlumency shields, to flow free.

“Harry, my love, I am so sorry,” Alistair spoke aloud, eyes clouded in pain as the hand which held his lover’s trembled.

It was the connection, the one thing which ensured that Harry was alive. Every tear that Alistair shed held within it all that he couldn’t and failed to do.

He apologised, over and over, knowing the chances of Harry hearing him were slim to none. He remained by Harry’s side all night, not moving and still holding onto his hand.
His surroundings were blurry at first. Groggily, he tried to recall where he was. Nothing but white surrounded his vision. As the clean, sterilised smell filled his nostrils, Harry understood that he was in the hospital wing.

He felt no pain, miraculously, but the memories he held indicated that what he’d gone through was not a nightmare, but reality.

“Harry?”

As Alistair’s familiar warmth filled his vision, a part of Harry knew he was no longer at her mercy. But mostly, he reacted on instinct.

Jumping out of bed he stumbled, falling to the floor. Eyes swirling with panic and fear, he lashed out.

“Stay away from me!”

Every object in the room flew towards Alistair who, while shocked, made sure that none of them hit him or their surroundings. Doing as asked, it felt as if he were being punched repeatedly, with such a look of fear.

Confused and worried he could do nothing, wanting to physically approach and support him when seeing he was beginning to have a panic attack.

Hearing the commotion Madam Pomfrey rushed out, as Alistair left. He would be nearby but for now, knew his presence would only distress him. He didn’t understand why so suddenly, but it hurt far more than he could have expected.

Eventually, with Madam Pomfrey’s assistance, Harry was able to calm down. Once he did, he felt like the biggest arse. He didn’t mean to react like that, but instinct took over. He knew this was exactly what she wanted. For them to drift apart. He couldn’t allow it, wouldn’t, in fact.

Harry was scared at that moment. But he was back here, still alive. He’d suffered the Dursley’s abuse for years and thanks to the support of family, friends and Alistair, was on the road to recovery.

Damn it, he loved Alistair too much to let something like this affect them.

It was easier said than done, however. He needed to think, maybe do something to help clear his mind. It was a jumbled mess.

“Can I go for a walk? Don’t tell anyone else I’m awake yet. I know they’re worried but I just need
“Alright. But if anything ails you, I want you straight back here.”

After giving his verbal consent, Harry dressed, Dobby coming in handy and providing him with some clothes. Wand nearby he picked it up, leaving to go outside. Truthfully being on his own made him anxious, but the wards of Hogwarts were protection. Otherwise, she would have taken him from here instead.

Giving himself a once over and checking beneath his clothing, he could see there were no traces of scars. Relieved, he wouldn’t have been able to cope if he’d gotten rid scars he’d had for the majority of his life only to be replaced by more.

“She won’t tear us apart.” Harry promised himself this. There were no ifs or buts and with each step, it reinforced all that Alistair had done for him and if not for his contribution, he may very well be back beneath Dumbledore’s thumb and obliviated.

He had an apology to make. He’d hurt the man, who didn’t know why he’d reacted like this. An hour passed by, the fresh air helping to organise his thoughts some more.

The sooner the better. He wanted to explain, reassure Alistair. And when ready, show him what had happened. He deserved to know the entirety, no matter how painful it may be.

Right now, Harry wasn’t sure where he was. Chances were he could have returned home, but Harry’s instincts told him he’d still be here.

He didn’t want to ask through their link either. For now, he would leave that, as all of his words needed to be spoken in person.

Deciding to follow his gut feeling, it took him to the Astronomy Tower. It was a place he used to go all the time, another perfect place to clear his mind, at least before the Room of Requirement.

As he suspected Alistair was there, gripping the balcony before him. Harry had spent enough time by the man’s side, to read his body language. Around him, he’d shown many facets, though this one was new.

Heart sinking, Harry came to the conclusion that Alistair felt responsible.

“It’s not your fault.” He spoke clearly, voice no longer hurting.

As Alistair turned to face him, Harry couldn’t hold back his flinch. Cursing internally, he remained
rooted to the spot. “It’s not your fault,” he repeated, eyes serious. “I’d be so much worse off without you. And..”

He stopped, thinking of how best to word things. Heart clenching, he continued. “I’m sorry for earlier. She... hurt me, as you.”

That explained everything to him. While Alistair now understood, it didn’t ease the weight of responsibility he felt or the pain of knowing all that Harry had suffered and all that he’d yet to learn about what happened.

He loved him, more precious than life itself. Harry was irreplaceable, cementing himself firmly into his heart. Would he ever look at him in the same way? Pushing aside those worries, concern for him rose above it all. “Are you in any pain?”

His heart hurt. But he couldn’t really say that, so softly shook his head. Harry needed a stepping stone, something to ground himself and work from there.

“Your eyes.”

Confused, Alistair tilted his head.

“Your eyes, let me see them. Please.” Harry begged, desperately. He had to confirm for himself, truthfully.

Careful not to make sudden movements Alistair slowly walked over to him, crouching down so that they were eye level.

It was him. One thing in that constant pain-filled haze he’d latched onto was Alistair’s eyes. She looked and sounded like him, but her eyes were cold, voice equally so. If she had acted just like him, it would have made things much harder. In this sense, she’d made a mistake. One that he would take advantage of.

In contrast to her deep loathing, his Alistair’s eyes were fit to burst with love and concern.

A hand reaching out, Harry traced the side of his face. The faint yet comforting warmth emanated from him. Then, he traced his eyes. The way they sparkled like the highest quality jewels money could buy.

She was a terrible actress, really.

Smiling through his sudden tears, Harry wrapped his arms around him. “It’s you.”
Alistair was so relieved. Harry’s opinions hadn’t changed, able to read the same amount of love in there as he held for the young man before him.

Returning his embrace, the sudden stiffening was a sharp reminder that from here, they had a way to go before things could be anywhere near smooth. Able to feel his body tremble violently he slowly moved his hand in a rhythmic motion along Harry’s back, murmuring softly all the while.

As always, Alistair wouldn’t pressure Harry into sharing details he didn’t wish to. His reaction in the Hospital Wing, he believed, wouldn’t be an isolated event either. That could happen more than once and in this eventuality, he would have to be prepared.

It could be no one else but him. That smile, his soothing voice. Squeezing him for all he was worth, relief filled Harry completely. Pulling back enough to look up, his smile was shaky. “She wanted to turn me against you. I won’t let that happen. I’ll get through this.”

Shaking his head softly, Alistair corrected him. “We will. You are not alone. I promise, with all that I am, I will remain by your side.”

And then, he held out his little finger.

Unable to help it, Harry laughed. “A pinky promise?”

“Indeed. For if a pinky promise is broken, the most severe of punishments will befall me.”

Alistair was taking something that children usually did so seriously, that it helped to break up the tension inside his body completely. Locking fingers with Alistair, a promise was made.

The road would be a long and rocky one. But surrounded by the ones he loved, Harry would prove her wrong.

He wouldn’t break. If anything, he’d become stronger. And then, she would regret the day their paths ever crossed.

With that second personal promise in his heart, Harry believed he would get through this, as he had every time before.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, took longer than usual to upload because my concentration levels aren’t there.
A few hours ago I blacked out in the bathroom so my head's all over the place. If there are any mistakes let me know and I'll correct them <3
Amoral, Immortal

Chapter Summary

The way forward for Harry is unsteady footing but eventually, he manages it. Thanks to his memories, he along with Alistair and Solomon, manage to find out more about their new enemy.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry was taken, prompting a rescue mission and unsettling the hearts and minds of all those made aware.

As the hour grew later, it reminded Harry to see his friends, Sirius and Remus to reassure them he was fine. At least, physically. Alistair had told him what had happened from their point of view and Solomon informing everyone of his disappearance.

Leaning against the railing, Harry was much calmer once their conversations began to branch in a different direction. It helped as a distraction, during the process of placing his memories of that day behind mental lock and key.

Sensing what he was going to say and noticing the time himself, Alistair's hand covered his own, squeezing it softly. "I will see you later."

And, in a spontaneous move which surprised him, Harry reached up to press an affectionate kiss against his lips. Lingering for a moment his fingers brushed the man's cheek, a twinkle in his eye. Leaving Alistair there he grinned to himself. It wasn't too often he could surprise him but the days he managed to, were always worthwhile. Descending the winding steps, he went to find those concerned.

Lips tingling, Alistair's fingers touched them for a moment. They had kissed countless times and with every one, the feeling didn't lessen. If anything it grew, into something no longer within his control.

It was evident that they all had something to learn, especially him. That shield she had used was of unknown magic, one of which he would have to find out and combat against. If not, it could pose a large problem the day they came face to face again.

Alistair had the feeling that Harry's memories could be a significant clue as to who she was. Though the amount of time they had was unknown, as always, he would go at the younger man's pace. The
day he was ready to share, Alistair would be there to listen and support.

After seeing Sirius and Remus, who Harry rightly guessed would be in Remus' new quarters, he headed directly for the Room of Requirement. He hadn't discussed what happened with them, simply reassuring he was doing fine and knowing that Sirius had returned to Evergreen. While Remus hadn't looked entirely satisfied, a promise that he wouldn't remain silent if things were troubling him and he'd tell someone, came as a reassurance.

Opening the double doors he was greeted with the familiar sight of 'Lunaland' and his friends, along with an extra addition. If not for Alistair, he would have certainly been surprised.

Noticing his approach immediately, Harry could almost swear Hermione had Vampiristic traits, with the speed she approached him. "Harry!"

With untamable bushy hair flying behind her, Harry was taken back to the days where his friend hadn't yet learned of hair care spells. Able to feel her worry and concern in the strength of her arms around him, Harry did his best to reassure.

"Hey Mione, I'm ok. Mostly." He amended, seeing her look of slight disbelief. She pulled back, shortly joined by Ginny, Neville and Luna.

"You had me worried there mate." Giving him a friendly shoulder clap, Harry could see relief within his eyes.

"I woke up a few hours ago, but I was with Alistair."

Suspecting as much, Ginny nodded to herself. "I'd never seen him look so.. scared. He's always cheerful or at least from our point of view."

With a flash of his pained look earlier that day, Harry couldn't say he liked seeing every side but still, was glad to know more of him.

As Luna greeted him with a similar amount of relief, he could tell there was something she wanted to say but for whatever reason, held back. Knowing she would tell him in her own time, she told something Harry didn't expect, as his eyes landed on Brio.

With a happy smile directed his way, it was clear to see that her feelings for the Fae extended just as far as his own with Alistair. "Brio helped Madam Pomfrey heal you."

While Harry wasn't sure what part of him Brio used his healing magic on, any help was always appreciated. "Thanks, I owe you one."
As he stood up, Harry took note of how tall he was. After Hagrid, Grawp and various other large creatures, nothing could shock him in that sense any more. Though, he found it different with each person.

Professor Snape was a tall man but with his imposing presence, always seemed much taller to a younger Harry. Hagrid was simply Hagrid, gentle natured even if on occasion, he never realised his own strength.

And Alistair? Well, he wouldn't have him any other way.

Brio was a new one entirely, taller than both Alistair and Professor Snape, with an unmistakable calming yet cool aura. Like Harry, he didn't think the man allowed anyone to see what he didn't want them to. But Luna had cracked through his exterior.

Hiding a smile at that thought Harry held out a hand. Accepting Brio shook it, Glancing towards Luna after their brief exchange. "I must return. While this air is cleaner, it is not home."

Understanding in her gaze, she nodded. "I'll come and see you later."

As Brio went home, it left them all in the room together and, like with Alistair, engaged in conversation which helped to set his heart at ease. Though, a part of him dreaded tonight. Occlumency shields or not, nightmares always slipped past them, to linger in his mind when mostly at rest.

Before long they parted ways, about to head back with Hermione, Ginny and Neville when a soft hand on his shoulder halted him.

"I'll catch up."

Telling them this they nodded, suspecting what it was she wanted to talk with him about.

Seeming lost for words Harry watched her struggle internally, eyes swimming with sorrow.

"I saw what happened."

Remembering her telling them about her Seer abilities, Harry confirmed it for himself. "You saw a vision of me?"

"Yes. I tried to warn Alistair, but it was too late. I'm sorry."

Brio and Solomon had told her she wasn't at fault but as a Seer, Luna would always have some
degree of responsibility. Her emotions as a whole had changed too, through her transformation. While she still felt keen sadness and guilt, like now, she was calm as opposed to tearful.

"It's not your fault, I'm only sorry you had to see that." Smiling sympathetically, he squeezed her shoulder. "No point lingering on what-ifs, what's done is done."

Harry did believe the words he spoke, but his mind often chose to linger on what ifs or events in his past. But still, he could see his words came as reassurance.

"Thank you, Harry."

With a brief hug, she left for her common room, as Harry headed back to his own for a short while.

Opening the door to Alistair’s quarters, he could see him seated behind his desk, quill in hand and writing with a flawless touch Harry always admired yet envied. His writing had improved, but still had a way to go before it even scratched the surface of good penmanship.

With a faint furrow in his brow, his quill remained in mid-air, motionless for a moment as his eyes seemed to scan the same line, more than once.

“What on earth..”

Hearing that faint murmur, Harry’s curiosity got the better of him. Peering over his shoulder, that was one word for it.

Alistair was currently marking Crabbe’s Defence Against the Dark Arts essay.

“That’s the biggest load of shit I’ve ever read. It’s not like we haven’t covered this in class!”

Incredulous Harry’s eyes scanned the rest, shaking his head with every new and incorrect word. By the end, only one thing came to mind.

“I’m beginning to understand why Professor Snape is rarely happy. If half the things he has to mark is like this, I probably would’ve left to find another job long ago.”

Blowing out a breath, Harry certainly didn’t envy him.

“On occasion, it is tiring, particularly if they have potential but choose to squander it. But those who
make a real effort remind me why I enjoy it here.”

“Strange that it all started out with an alliance and you came here to observe Dumbledore. But you actually enjoy your job now. But still, there’s the issue of that curse on your position. I hope nothing bad happens.”

It was something Harry hadn’t actually given thought to until now. Concerned, that was promptly swept away by Alistair’s words.

“That will no longer be a problem. I removed his curse.”

Harry was stunned. “What? When?!”

Honestly, it had slipped Alistair’s mind. It was so insignificant compared to what else happened during then, that he hadn’t thought to mention it. “The day I met Remus. I had just finished when you contacted me.”

Harry remembered that. He’d come to the classroom and they’d travelled to his home, together.

Relieved, Harry’s chin rested on his shoulder. “That’s great, you can stay.”

“I would like to, for as long as our Headmistress will have me.” His free hand reaching up to stroke Harry’s hair, he spoke softly to him. “I will be finished soon.”

“No rush! Or maybe there is, to get Crabbe’s words of your head quicker.”

Harry wasn’t even the one marking but still wanted to cleanse his brain in something which would wash away either knowing or unknowing stupidity.

Heading to Alistair’s bedroom, a happy bubble formed within his chest when realising that one drawer was filled with his clothing. Pyjamas, school robes and various other bits, for when he left in the morning.

It had been like that for some time now but still, never failed to make him happy.

As he stripped off, he was about to sit in bed, when he froze.

A stranger had seen everything, something that only those for years or Alistair, who he was intimate with.
And when he was found by Alistair, Solomon and Rupert, they saw him in a similar state.

Swallowing thickly, Harry felt overly vulnerable in his current state but reminded himself, this was his Alistair, not the one pretending to be him.

Deciding to do the same as he had for a few night, he forewent pyjamas completely.

He hadn’t feared to go to sleep for many weeks now, almost believing it to be gone from his life completely. Returning with a burning vengeance now, Harry knew the moment he fell asleep today, would bring with it the reappearance of his more violent nightmares.

Throat dry he didn’t lie down, in case it encouraged him to close his eyes. Biting his lip, he barely noticed when the bed dipped down beside him.

Stiffening when a hand touched his back, he began to relax when it moved upwards and in tandem with Alistair’s other hand, began to carefully massage Harry’s shoulders.

While not expecting it, he realised his muscles were sorely in need of one. Just like the day his hands were massaged he could feel the tension loosen, bit by bit.

He didn’t speak, heart beating slightly faster than usual, though not solely through anxiety or fear. Relaxing into his caring touch, those few minutes were enough for some pent up anxiousness to be released.

Shuffling to look up at him, Harry could see he hadn’t gotten changed yet.

“Are you feeling a little better?”

Harry smiled, unable to hide his anxiousness. “Better than before.”

Relieved but not completely satisfied Alistair stood up, getting changed right then and there. Harry didn’t hesitate to watch. Fully used to the nature of their relationship, he’d discovered playful and bold sides of himself previously undiscovered.

Distracting him from his darker thoughts, he blessed the day he’d decided to get contacts in place of glasses. If not, he wouldn’t be able to see the embodiment of perfection before him.

Of course, that was the first thing which came to mind and not that he could see clearly in general.

Harry’s eyes lit up in admiration. “Now there’s a nice sight.”
Shirt unbuttoned Alistair removed it, to fold and place aside. As he did so it disappeared and as with all the used clothing, House Elves provided their services.

“Were you hoping for a striptease?” With a playful glance back he undid his hair ribbon and braid, letting it flow freely.

“It hadn’t crossed my mind. But if you did decide to have one I wouldn’t complain.” Harry admitted, feeling no shame whatsoever.

“I shall keep that in mind.” He’d experienced a lot of what life had to offer but some aspects remained new. It could be fun, in fact. Placing that idea aside Alistair joined him, lying down.

As he did so Harry was encouraged to, but still kept his eyes open. He couldn’t carry on like this, so let the man lying next to him know some of what he was experiencing.

“I’m scared.”

Shows of vulnerability always set him on edge. After spending so long with his guard raised, it was hard to not be affected when letting someone this close to him.

He found it much easier with Alistair though who, if Harry had the choice, wouldn’t have seen his more pathetic sides. But in that sense, he was glad he had no choice as their bond had strengthened through it.

“To fall asleep?” Alistair guessed, accuracy confirmed with his short nod.

Leaning over a little, he softly kissed Harry’s cheek. I am not going anywhere. If you sleep and awaken, I will be here.”

He’d never lied to him. The times he had woken up from a nightmare Alistair was always there. But the thought of falling asleep right now, caused tension to fill his frame.

He had to try. Attending classes with minimal sleep had never worked out for him. Thinking back to their past interactions, he recalled some of Alistair’s stories. They had never failed to relax or entertain him, depending on what he was sharing.

Rather than the pillow beneath, Harry instead lay on the man’s chest. Able to hear the slow heartbeat, he found the subtle sound to be comforting.

“Can you tell me about another place you’ve been, like Butterfly Beach?”
Alistair was more than happy to, enjoying sharing stories of his experiences with anyone interested to know. Many places flickered through his mind, but another one stood out to him. This more recent than some of the others.

“Ashikaga Flower Park in Japan. During Solomon’s disappearance, I rarely travelled but on this occasion, I did. The collection of flowers are truly breathtaking and in total, there are eight floral seasons. Each one displays their attractive hue best at these stages, so I was only able to see a few of all they had to show there.”

Listening attentively, Alistair’s eyes met his for a moment and with it, were memories of crystal clear definition.

A large, circular area. On the sides are chairs, providing a view of the bridge crossing over tranquil waters. Within those waters in available spaces are flower arrangements, soothing, pastel colours or others of a more vibrant nature.

Lush, verdant greenery on the far edges, the richest of green and hanging as far as the eye could see, soft pink flowers which obscured clear skies.

Another one of the same flower, lilac this time as Harry could see it was a tree.

Remaining in his mind for several seconds it moved from image to image, mind filled with a myriad of flowers.

“What are the hanging flowers called?”

“Wisteria. They are very beautiful.”

Just seeing them helped to calm him. “Definitely. We should go together sometime.”

“I would like that, very much.”

At peace with one of his more pleasant memories shared, Alistair’s observed Harry’s relaxed form. With a mixture of fondness and sadness in his eyes, he knew that wouldn’t last for long.

But still, he wanted to soothe him. Continuing to talk about all he’d seen there he kept his voice soft, the telltale signs of sleep descending upon his young lover with the steady sounds of breathing.

Adjusting him so he lay on the pillows once more, Alistair pulled the covers fully over them.
With one last kiss on his forehead, he settled in, silently watching over Harry for any signs of distress.

He was there, in the dungeon’s coldness and her blazing fire whip strikes. Constant, agonising, defenceless. He couldn’t fight back, every lash tearing into not only skin but emotional strength. Stripped away like the fabric of his clothing, she could do as pleased.

It hurt, so much.

“STOP! PLEASE!” He screamed, voice protesting to so much strenuous use.

Harry didn’t know if he was watching his past self or in the midst of it, confused. But reliving the details which stood out to him, was more painful than word could express.

Twisting this way and that he tried to escape, prevented from doing so with his restraints.

But if they were restraints, why didn’t they hurt his wrists or arms?

That was enough for him to pause and think and among the sounds of his own screams, another voice could be heard.

“Harry, wake up!”

Tinged with a sense of urgency and desperation he followed the sound of that voice, into wakefulness.

Throat hurting, he could tell that his screams weren’t limited to the confines of nightmares. As the first thing he saw was orange eyes, panic registered for a split second.

“Look into my eyes, you are safe here.”

That’s it. That’s what he’d told himself to focus on and what he did hours before, in the Astronomy Tower. Listening to his words he did so, able to tell it was the Alistair he loved not only through his eyes, but hair no longer in its usual ribbon.

Gently releasing Harry’s hands he sat up, uncomfortable. Pyjamas soaked in sweat, he waited for his heartbeat to slow down.
As a tall glass of water was held out to him Harry accepted, the coolness soothing his parched and sore throat.

Flashing Alistair a guilty look, his eyes flickered downward briefly. “Did I try to hit you again?”

Glancing back up, his eyes fell closed with the familiar hand carding through his hair. “Yes, but it is of no concern. Only you are.”

Frustration and loathing welled within him, directed to no one but himself. Why was he like this? Why did these things always happen? For Merlin’s sake, she wasn’t even interested in him, she’d said so herself! He was just a tool to be used like Dumbledore had used him for so many years.

“I was doing so well, but now I’m back to square one. I hate it, why can’t I be normal? What did I do to deserve this?”

In his head, he screamed. Aloud would do no good but right here, he was torn between crying and willing himself to go numb so he didn’t have to feel anymore.

Seeing that he was clinging to the last threads of emotion, Alistair carefully wrapped his arms around him. “Square one is the stage where you relied on yourself only, hiding true thoughts and feelings from those concerned. Today you opened up to me, admitting fears and insecurities. I would say that perhaps it is a single step back, but you will find your footing again.”

With Harry’s other words, Alistair disagreed. “There is no such thing as normal. As an example, I am a Vampire who, 1500 years into their existence, gained a heartbeat through very special blood. That is far from normal. Also, if your trip to Transylvania was normal, we may have never met.” He pointed out, hoping his words provided reassurance. “You deserve none of this. The only ones deserving of anything are those who hurt you.”

And with those words, Harry was brought back from the brink of giving up. It wasn’t the first time and doubted it would be his last either.

“Thanks.” Smiling weakly, it brighten alongside the shard of innocence contained in his eyes, when Alistair’s lips touched his. “Any time, Harry.”

Feeling better than before emotionally, he rose to his feet, heading for the bathroom. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

A bath helped him last time. Hopefully, it would be the same tonight. Checking the time, he realised it was 2 am. Groaning softly, he couldn’t wait to submerge himself in the water.

This was only the first night. He had many more to come yet and each one for a while would be
filled with the same.

‘Oh, joy.’ He thought, slightly bitter. As hot water filled the tub, steam began to rise from it. Once filled to his satisfaction Harry climbed in, sitting himself down.

Much better. If it was still the weekend he might think about taking some more time, but he'd need all the sleep possible. It was moments like this, that he envied sleep being a choice for Alistair and not mandatory.

As fresh clothing appeared on the side Harry finished up, ensuring the bathroom was left exactly how he'd first seen it.

Wandlessly drying himself off, a pair of his boxers and pyjamas were there. Dressing in one, he looked at the other in consideration.

Should he? It was more of a whim than anything, but the urge to do so was overwhelming. Deciding that it couldn't hurt, Harry’s curiosity piqued at what possible reaction Alistair could have.

Softly opening and closing the bathroom door behind him he headed for the set of drawers, with purpose. Trying one of them, he found a selection of pyjamas in there. Picking out a soft, cream coloured shirt he put it on, hanging loosely on him.

It was too big, sleeves longer than his arms, but Harry liked it. Deciding just to wear this he fingers brushed the material, feeling pleasant against his skin.

Shutting the drawer, he sat beside Alistair again. Giving him a look that was nothing short of adoration, Harry began to feel slightly self-conscious. "How do I look?"

If Alistair had a heart attack, it wouldn't kill him. Most likely, his heart would just stop again. But seeing Harry wearing one of his shirts, he was dangerously close to suffering from one.

None of his partners had ever done such a thing, so this was a new experience for him but silently, he tagged that particular item of clothing as belonging to Harry now.

"You are adorable." Playful side emerging Alistair planted kisses on his neck, tickling to the point where a small laugh escaped him.

In a far happier mood than before, Harry lay himself back down again. “True.”

Seeing the teasing look in his eye, it seemed as if he would have to be a little more inventive if he wanted to encourage Harry's blushing side. He welcomed the challenge.
As Harry shuffled closer, he found the spot he liked best, settling there. Head resting on the pillow below him, his eyes fluttered closed. "I think I can sleep again now."

Entwining his fingers with the hand between them, Alistair kissed the back of it. "You will have nothing but pleasant dreams for the rest of this night now."

Drifting off, Harry's response was absentminded. "Mm, magic kiss."

An amused twinkle entered his eye with those words. Of course, Alistair couldn't promise him this, something which pained him greatly. If he could take every nightmare so that Harry would no longer suffer, he would do this within a heartbeat. But, the most that could be done was ensure that he was there throughout the night.

He'd sworn to protect him. While he had protected himself for so long, there were many things in life where support was needed.

Whoever this Vampire was, she had chosen the wrong target. No one had threatened his family or those he considered close for nearly 500 years. It was time to hone his magic much further. He had the feeling it would be sorely needed.

Dumbledore was paying the price for his sins. She would too, that he was sure of. Curling his body around Harry's defensively, it would take an entire army and then some, to even scratch the surface of his capabilities.

He looked like death. That description wasn't an exaggeration by any means. Drawn, pale and with dark circles, his picture would be pasted into a dictionary alongside the word, 'Exhausted'.

Unlike Sunday, where he was able to sleep a little more after his nightmare, every night he'd been plagued with exactly the same. Again he'd placed privacy charms around his bed, not wanting anyone to hear his screams.

Giving up on sleeping for every night after that he'd taken himself outside, or in the Room of Requirement, to jog or try and train some more.

But, he'd hit a wall. Harry had thought he was doing more than enough, but that Vampire had turned everything upside down.

Part of the reason why he believed his mind was unable to settle, was the feeling of powerlessness. He couldn't stop her actions, any of them and like a damsel in distress, had to wait and be saved by
someone else.

He hated it.

He was independent, used to looking out for himself, but he couldn't. He only knew so much magic and while the Room of Requirement did meet his needs, Harry couldn't think of what else he could use to help with having an advantage over whenever he next met her.

He was both exhausted and desperate. Never a good combination, from past personal experience. His talks with Alistair through their link had helped to ease his mind a little but wasn't enough.

Not only that, but it was Transfiguration this morning. Professor McGonagall had told them what to expect Friday morning. It was human transfiguration, a topic which Harry could easily and smoothly do, as he'd done partial transformations with his animagus form and for the Halloween Party, but had never attempted to do it sleep deprived for obvious reasons.

He slapped his cheeks lightly. "Get a grip," Harry told himself, focusing on the fact that it would be one more school day before the weekend again.

Emerging from the bathroom, he could hear nothing but soft snores. Once again, he was the first one up.

"5 am, fuck." He whispered to himself, every sense on edge. He hoped something or someone wouldn't irritate him today, or he might just snap. He was slower to anger than last year, but a lack of sleep always brought out his worst side.

There was no point trying to sleep again, there were plenty of things to do. It was never an excuse to not submit assignments on time, after all. He could busy himself with this until it was time to go.

The only problem with that was his concentration levels. They were so low that every few minutes, Harry's mind wandered far away from the task at hand. Before submitting anything, he'd show it to Hermione. His work quality had improved, but in his current state, he'd benefit from someone who could think much more clearly.

Forcing himself to concentrate, he did actually manage to scrape a potions assignment together. Whether it was pure drivel or markworthy, remained to be seen. It was too late now, but Harry thought perhaps doing school work when he had an entire day of that ahead probably wasn't his best idea.

He tended to stay away from coffee, becoming dependent on it to see him through the day along with dreamless sleep once, but he'd taken to drinking it over the past week. It did help for a short while, providing he was already hydrated. He'd learned the hard way that without having drunk some water beforehand, it only made him more tired.
Not only that, but he'd lost a lot of his appetite, reverting to portions he was used to when younger and far too little for someone of his age.

All in all, he was a walking disaster.

Ink dried, Harry rolled the parchment and placed it into his bag. Over breakfast, Hermione might be willing to give it a once over. Remaining in his seat, he waited for his friends so they could go down together. Closing his eyes for a moment, they reopened at the sound of a concerned voice.

"You look sick."

Opening them, he was met with the pear green eyes of Lilah and by her side, Zain. These days, he'd never seen one without the other.

"I feel it." He easily admitted, moving over so they could take a seat beside him. "How are classes going for you?"

Giving him a worried glance, she was soon distracted by his question. Bouncing in her seat eagerly, Harry wouldn't say no to sharing some of that energy. "They're great, kind of hard though. But I like Potions! Isn't it cool how you can mix stuff together and there are different results?"

"Yeah, definitely." Harry agreed there though one over, wouldn't have understood her fascination. Turning his attention towards Zain, he smiled inwardly at his mildly incredulous look. "Potions isn't your thing?"

He shook his head, firmly. "No. Professor Snape creeps me out. One minute he's in another part of the classroom and the next he's behind me. It's like something out of a horror film."

Harry's lips twitched, eyes watering he blinked them back, having the urge to laugh.

Glaring at him, Lilah made her disapproval known. "He's not creepy! Just sneaky. I think that's a good thing. He can move silently, like ninjas."

Lilah's eyes lit up. "Maybe he is a Ninja! How else could he move that quietly?"

Harry didn't want to curb her enthusiasm, suspecting it was a part of his spying nature and spellwork. But the thought of him in Ninja attire was interesting, to say the least.

Thankful that he didn't have Potions today, he asked Zain another question. "Is there a subject you like?"
He thought for a moment. "Not really a subject, but I like flying. I feel free when I'm on a broom."

Forgetting his tiredness for that moment, he'd captured Harry's attention. "I felt exactly the same. Do you like Quidditch?"

Eagerly, he nodded. "Yeah! I watched you during practice and matches, it's awesome."

"Why not try out next year? We're always looking for new members." Harry suggested, feeling slightly awkward that Professor McGonagall had specially bent the rules for him to play earlier.

Enthusiasm similar to Lilah's own, he eagerly agreed. "I'll do that."

Talking with them, Harry felt much better. In a lot of ways, he felt old though still young himself.

Eventually, he was joined by Neville, Hermione and Ginny. Waving them over and with Lilah and Zain, they headed down to the Great Hall.

Concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other while talking, Harry found to be more difficult than usual. Slowing her pace to match his, Ginny muttered into his ear. "Nightmares?"

"Yeah, since last weekend."

She frowned sympathetically. "I guessed so. I could never get back to sleep after mine. Have you tried a warm drink?"

He had, in fact. "Doesn't do anything. It's relaxing, but not enough to sleep again. To be honest, the only thing that works is sleeping near Alistair."

Ginny nodded her head understandingly. "Maybe you could ask Professor McGonagall if you can stay with him permanently?"

Harry snorted. "I can just picture how that conversation will go. Excuse me, Professor, I just wanted to ask if I can sleep with my boyfriend every night? Because my nightmares aren't as bad then."

"Well, when you put it like that.." Amusement in her gaze, she gave him a concerned glance. "Still, I hope you'll be ok."

Appreciating her thoughtfulness, he did his best to smile. "I always am, aren't I? In the end."
Honestly, the thought of asking her had crossed his mind. But he was far too embarrassed to discuss that sort of thing, even if he believed it would help.

Taking his usual seat in the hall, Harry groaned. "I'm not ready for today."

Closing his eyes briefly he reopened them, taking the parchment out of his bag. "Hermione, could you do me a huge favour and look this over?"

Accepting the roll of parchment she gave him no verbal answer, opening and reading silently. If she’d said no, Harry would guess he was on another planet entirely.

"I'm never ready for any day," Neville added, looking nervous. "It's transfiguration. I know I'll mess something up."

At least he wasn't alone then. Forcing himself to eat something he happened to glance up at the head table, seeing Professor Snape first.

Ridiculously, within his disorganised mind, the man appeared, dropping upside down from the Great Hall's ceiling in a crouch. With a mask and ninja attire, only his dark eyes could be seen as they narrowed imperceptibly.

He'd officially lost the plot. Hiding his face with both hands, Harry couldn't decide if he was laughing, crying or both. Merlin, he needed sleep.

Confused his friends looked at him, Harry needing a few minutes to pull himself together.

'Harry? What is it?'

A wave of worry and concern travelled through their link and in response, he tried to explain.

'Lilah called Professor Snape a Ninja. Dropped from the ceiling, really stealthy, wearing all the gear.'

An amused chuckle. 'Ah, I see.'

He doubted it made much sense, using his folded arms as a pillow to muffle his laughter.

Breathing deeply he managed to recover, wiping tears from his eyes. Ginny looked at him expectantly. "Did someone hit you with a cheering charm?"
Shaking his head Harry gave them an explanation, reassured by Luna's giggle. He wasn't off the rails completely then, it was amusing in some way.

Finished with reading, Hermione joined the conversation. "If Professor Snape did want to train in those arts, I think he'd do well. It needs a certain amount of self-discipline and dedication."

"Don't give him ideas, the last thing we need is an even more stealthy Professor. How'd I do?"

Handing his assignment back over, he could see a hint of surprise in her eyes. "It's good. I would probably rewrite it though."

Glancing back down at his work, he grimaced. There were more smudge marks than words, just barely able to make out what it read. He had until next week though, so would work on it at some point before then.

And then came Transfiguration, a subject he was dreading more than anything. He'd managed to scrape by this week, Potions a near miss, but this was a topic with many risks and dangers. He had to focus.

As today was an individual task they all had separate spaces, listening closely to the Professor. Harry did his best to, coffee only doing so much for him.

"I do not expect immediate progress. Many who have graduated to this day still struggle with human to animal transformations. But Progress, no matter how little, will contribute to succeeding in a high mark for your NEWTs. My advice is to start simple. Only use an animal which you are very familiar with and a structure similar to your own. And if you wish to practice outside of this room, ensure that another is present to change you back should things go awry."

Hermione, as per usual, was taking notes. It was Ron following in her footsteps which surprised Harry. Sitting behind them both, Ron really was coming into his own.

He considered writing notes himself, but he knew this already. His abilities as an Animagi would be a considerable advantage.

And then, they were instructed to begin.

The wings Harry based off of Lume's were far from simple. But for the sake of his mental and physical wellbeing, he followed her advice. Monkeys had a similar structure to them, particularly the arm. He could give that a try.

Wand in hand and a mirror to see himself with, he focused on what the monkey's arm would look like. Hairy, with leathery skin and thick fingernails, dark in colour.
Focusing in a similar manner to his transformations, Harry pictured what he wanted or at least, tried to. The end result was far from what he planned.

Arm bulking and growing it ripped through his robes, blacker than ash as long, sharp nails grew from the three digits he had.

Staggering beneath the sudden weight he held himself up with his wand arm, looking at his partial transformation with horrified fascination.

"What on earth is that?" Turning to address who'd spoken he saw Draco, eyeing his arm with disgust.

Experimentally, Harry flexed his hand. Never mind losing all the bones in his arm, this topped the number of weird things happening to him. "It was supposed to be a monkey's arm. It didn't go as planned."

"You don't say," Draco commented, eyeing it for a moment before returning to his own work.

As the Professor approached him Harry waved with his newfound monstrosity, wincing. It was like trying to lift Hagrid.

Staring at his arm for a moment, her piercing gaze cut right through him. "I assume this is not the result you wanted?"

Harry nodded. "Definitely. I'll give it another go."

Once seeing he could change back on his own she left him. A lack of sleep was affecting more than he'd planned.

Time to try again. He was determined to get it right before the lesson ended.

His second attempt went much better, as in he could tell exactly what it was this time, repairing his robes afterward. By the end of the lesson, he was satisfied, able to use it as he would a normal arm. When fully immersed in something that needed concentration, Harry found he was able to push it aside, at least for a short while.

Leaving the class, he was reminded there were still more to come yet. Keeping his complaints internal, he'd do his best to see the day through.

Harry could drop dead on the spot. Muscles and bones he forgot were a thing ached, tired physically
and magically. He could be face up, floating on the freezing Black Lake and still probably doze off.

Leaving his last lesson, he ran into two unwelcome students.

It wasn't the Slytherins these days, but members of his own house. Namely, Norden and McLaggen. Once or twice he'd seen them give him disdainful looks, but hadn't come to a verbal confrontation. Apparently, today was a day of change.

Running into them in the corridor, Norden nudged his friend, acquaintance? Harry didn't know or cared, going to walk straight past them.

"Oi, Potter, we know your secret."

He wasn't in the mood for more rumours. Giving them a deadened look, he commented dryly. "Do you? Brilliant."

Stepping closer, Norden smirked. "So, do you suck him off for Outstanding marks in defence?"

Harry immediately understood what he was referring to. "I'm capable of getting good marks without cheating, thanks."

Now more than ever, goon one and two came to mind, replacing Crabbe and Goyle entirely.

McLaggen snorted, looking down his nose at Harry in an eerily similar way to Petunia. "Yeah right, like we believe that for a second. Just admit it."

Patience running dry, Harry's wand hand twitched. "There's nothing to admit. What's your problem?"

"You. Saint Potter, hero of the people, who gets all he wants at the drop of a hat just because he says so."

Trying to look suitably intimidating, Harry wasn't scared. Just irritated more than anything. Where the hell did they come up with this? "I don't know what reality you're both in but it's not this one. Open your eyes."

Trying to walk by them he was pushed back by his shoulder. "We're not done with you."

"There are several flaws in your logic, Norden. Everyone knows that before Professor Lothaire, Potter's marks in Defence were impressive. Typical idiot Gryffindor." Sneering, Draco stood alongside him.
Harry didn't hear his approach, appreciating the defence.

"Shut up Malfoy!" Drawing his wand it was pointed straight at him.

"How original. I bow before your superiority." Doing so in a mocking fashion, Harry could feel the last threads of his control unravel, particularly with the next words directed at him.

"So because you can't get a girlfriend you'll pick a bloke for some sort of pity fuck? Pathetic."

Harry didn't know what he'd done to them personally, but he wasn't about to stand there and take it. The tone, their attitude, everything combined into what he hated the most and had heard before.

Drawing his own wand, he pointed it directly at Norden. Chilled green eyes flickering with something dark and dangerous, it was enough to root him on the spot. "I swear, if the pair of you don't shut it, I will shove your wands so far up your arses, St Mungos will have to surgically extract them. Get. Out. Of. My. Fucking. Way."

He punctuated each word at the end, truly angry this time. Surprised by his outburst they finally backed off, Harry's fist trembling with a mixture of anger and fatigue.

"Thanks," Harry spoke, not having the energy to say much more.

Inclining his head, Draco observed him. "You look terrible."

"Oh really? I had no idea."

Shaking his head, a glimmer of amusement lay within his silver gaze. "I'll leave you to foam at the mouth in peace."

Giving a brief wave he left, heading for what Harry assumed would be the common room.

He prayed there wouldn't be any more confrontations. There was only so much he could handle in one day. Dropping his things off in the Boy's Dormitory, he headed straight for Alistair's quarters. Whether he was there yet or not, just being in the room calmed him down.

Opening the door and seeing a familiar, welcome sight really did wonders. Removing his shoes he flopped onto the sofa, face down. Why today? Not that he would have reacted much differently if he'd had enough sleep, but still, it didn't help at all.

Either he'd dozed off or fell into a swirl of thoughts, but a hand on his back startled him.
Changing positions so he lay face up, he gave a weak smile towards Alistair. "Hi." His irritation from earlier still hadn't left.

"What happened?"

Seeing Alistair's question as an invitation to vent, Harry happily did so. "Norden and McLaggen happened. I ran into them and they wouldn't let me pass. Accused me of using my boy who lived status to get what I want, that I pleasure you in exchange for high marks in defence and that I'm with you because I can't get a girlfriend. Then, I threatened them at wand point." Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair.

While Alistair tried to be fair with everyone, he may take a leaf out of Severus' book and find a plausible excuse to give them detention. They were the last thing Harry needed.

Feeling mischevious, Alistair leaned down to whisper in his ear. "They are very much mistaken. Most likely, I would be the one to reward you for a well deserved outstanding. But, that is not their business. Only yours and my own."

Giving him a wink, Harry's mind stopped on that possibility for a second, blushing slightly. But other than to see him, he had come for a reason. "I've got a favour to ask."

Once Harry had his attention, he voiced what had been on his mind for a while now. "When you've got time, will you practice magic with me? I need to learn some new things, stuff that will give me an edge. I couldn't do anything against her and that was terrifying."

Alistair knew that feeling all too well, easily agreeing. "Of course I will. Though, it is best to start when you are able to sleep more soundly."

He saw his point but didn't know when that would be. "I don't think that will be anytime soon." His eyes flickered sadly.

"Perhaps it may be. Today. I asked your head of house if you would be able to stay with me each night, at least until your sleeping pattern returned to normal. She agreed."

"Seriously?" At Alistair's nod, relief and happiness welled within him. "I didn't think she would, but I'm glad."

Whenever he wasn't teaching and they were apart, Alistair always found himself worrying. Was Harry sleeping or eating enough? The former was obvious. Though it was still early, he would benefit from a few extra hours.
"I will be a few minutes." Heading to the kitchen Harry waited, more relaxed than before. Coming back with a steaming mug, he inhaled the pleasurable scent once handed to him. It was the same chocolate he loved, as a warm drink. While he'd had it a few times since then, it always tasted like the first one.

"There is a mild sleeping draught in this. I asked Solomon to create one, so the ingredients are different."

It was just as well really. Hopefully, that meant he'd have no immunity. He appreciated Alistair informing him beforehand though. With some miracle, he would actually sleep soundly.

Drinking the contents fully, it wasn't long before the draught began to affect him.

For it to act so quickly, it showed just how little sleep Harry had managed to get. It should see him through several hours of uninterrupted sleep. Taking the empty mug from his hands he placed it aside, picking him up with ease. While he would never refuse his shoulder or lap to lay upon, his sleep would be far more restful in bed.

Settling him down beneath the covers, he transfigured Harry's clothing into something comfortable. Hair smoothed back, Alistair kissed his forehead. Watching over him briefly he returned to the other room, with some more marking to do before he'd be finished completely.

'Thank you. Your draught has worked perfectly.' Sending along his gratitude to Solomon, it was returned a short while later.

'You are welcome. It should keep his nightmares at bay but without the unfortunate side effects of Dreamless Sleep.'

Not for the first time, Alistair blessed the fact that he had such a talented brother. For now, it would help Harry on the road to recovery.

It took until mid-March before Harry returned to normal again. Or at least, close to it. He'd come to terms with what had happened, nightmares only occurring once or twice a week now. A significant improvement to every night. During that time he'd trained with Alistair, slowly and steadily gaining confidence as more and more spells were introduced, to be a part of his magic vocabulary. But, he hadn't spoken or shown anyone his memories when with her, until now.

He was ready to share what happened and with the help of Misty and Dobby, his pensieve from home rested upon the carpet. In Alistair's quarters again, the man gave him a serious look. "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded, confident. "I am. You deserve to know what happened. I won't spare any details."
Though he longed to. Not for his own peace of mind, but Alistair’s. It was one thing to describe, but another entirely to see it.

Closing his eyes, a swirl of white mist became attached to his wand, slowly growing in size. It was only a copy, so he still remembered events. Placing it into the pensieve before them the runes lit up briefly, before dulling again.

Dipping his head into the contents, it was an agonising wait for Harry. Swallowing briefly, his nerves rose when he realised just how long this memory was. But right then, he had no concept of time.

An unknown amount of minutes later Alistair emerged, visibly shaken. Many things had done this, on varying levels. Seeing someone who looked exactly like him hurt the last person he ever would, the physical and emotional abuse, but also her.

Seeing the look on his face, Harry had to ask. “Do you know who she is?”

"I do, but I cannot recall where from." Descending into deep thought, it took longer than he would have thought to arrive at the answer.

Hundreds of Vampires. A sweeping crowd. Mother, Solomon, Father, where were they? Fighting through them and at the heart, he found his father, at the mercy of far more aggressive attackers that even the most powerful could hope to defend against.

The leader of them, a Vampire with long, dark hair, pale skin. Draining him dry blood stained her chin, licking it greedily.

Her eyes were dark, but not completely.

But since then, she'd changed. It was no wonder it took a moment for him to search his memories. It had happened a long time ago, her eyes now fully black and the dark magic which shrouded her like a disease.

She had murdered father. This much Alistair knew, but the draining of power too? He'd never considered the possibility that anyone could succeed in doing so with a 3,000 year old Vampire. He'd searched for her along with Solomon, finding no trace so he'd assumed she was no more.

So, the magic was familiar because it was his fathers. He felt physically sick with that realisation.

As Harry placed a hand on his shoulder, it helped to bring him back around. "What's wrong?"
Harry knew about his father's death already but explaining he found to be difficult as if a crushing force weighed down his tongue. "I... do not know her name. All I know is that she is the one who murdered my father. Not only this, but she successfully absorbed his power to join her own magical core."

Harry paled, coming to understand what it was she wanted. "That's why she wants you, for your power."

His eyes flickered, showing an alarming lack of emotion. "Though he is not mentioned, I suspect Solomon also." Now that he knew, there was no time to waste. "Do you recall the symbol that she wore?"

Harry nodded. "Have you seen it before?"

"I have. That is what I am going to confirm. There is a tome not in the castle's library, but mine and Solomon's shared vault. Will you come with me?"

Standing up, Harry took hold of his hand. "If I'd asked and you'd said no, I would've still found a way to tag along."

Grinning, it encouraged a small laugh to escape the other man. "It is telling Solomon that will be the most difficult part."

Leaving Hogwarts Alistair communicated with him, knowing he would have more than a few words to say if they went information searching without him.

Other than Gringotts in England, it was the first time he'd visited one in another country and outside of the bank, was Solomon. Dark fury burning in his eyes, he inclined his head briefly towards Harry. "Once we find her, I will see to it that she dies."

"I agree, but we must be cautious. I believe she is older than us but by how much, I am unsure."

Grudgingly accepting his words, it didn't prevent Solomon from giving into his more internally violent urges.

As they all stepped into Gringotts, Harry observed that there wasn't much difference between branch appearances, minus the layout. As Alistair approached one of the available Goblins, he communicated in their tongue.

Looking unsurprised he waved another goblin over, lead to a cart which didn't look any safer than the one back in England.
Harry knew the Lothaire family was wealthy, but he stepped off the cart and was faced with an open vault door, he didn't realise by how much.

While there were many items such as tomes, scrolls and various magic objects, in the middle of all this was currency the size of a large mountain. He'd thought his own vault was overwhelming but this rooted him to the spot.

But they'd come here for an important reason. While he was curious about how much was there, he wouldn't ask. He couldn't think of a way to word it that wouldn't sound rude or prying. That and he was afraid Alistair would suspect he had ulterior motives.

"What's the name of the tome?" Harry asked, wondering how many hours it would take to search through all of this.

"I am not sure. There is no title, only a dark, hardback cover so as to appear nondescript. It contains information of all major Vampire families and their crests."

He'd recalled his father telling him about it. The memory itself was buried deep within his mind, resurfacing just now. This book could be the key and back then, he and Solomon were far too lost in their grief of losing both parents so young. Or at all, considering it was extremely rare older Vampires ever passed on into the afterlife.

"Let's get searching." Cracking his knuckles, Harry kept his eye out for tomes with no titles, sparing a thought for the fact that he was trusted enough to be here and trying not to be distracted by his surroundings. Summoning wouldn't work, just about every protective spell imaginable in place. Harry doubted this vault had ever been broken into.

Just when he thought they were never going to get anywhere, a tome caught his eye. Somewhat isolated but stood up, it was directly above his head resting on a shelf. Standing on tiptoe, he couldn't see a title anywhere.

"Is this it?" Harry called back, not trying to touch it himself. He didn't want a repeat of what happened at Lothaire Castle.

Hearing him Alistair came over, reaching up to take the book. Bringing it down, he scanned the contents. "It is."
As Solomon joined them, Alistair quickly flicked through the pages, checking each of the symbols within family crests.

Their own was there as well. Listed in alphabetical order, there were many major families, whether the family line had died out or otherwise.

Mahler, Maiorana, Moavero...

Morozov.

"There it is." Alistair murmured, fingers brushing over the eye and infinity symbol.

Written in Romanian, Alistair read it aloud for Harry's benefit. A part of Harry almost wished he hadn't.

There were once seven members of the Morozov family. Six male, one female. Their hatred of humans was widely known, often spreading into acts of brutal violence and knowingly violating the contract. She, the sole female was their eye. The one who saw the way forward and would lead while they, were the symbol of everlasting purity.

Together, they would eradicate humankind.

While hatred grew in their hearts, greed blossomed in another. In exchange for her father and brother's immortal souls, Volos, god of the Underworld, would grant power beyond her wildest dreams. Accepting, she now wielded disease itself.

From there, came her biggest attempt to exterminate humanity. The darkest of magic in hand, a disease which all came to know as the Black Plague, began to spread. Starting from Central Asia it slowly but surely made progress, infecting the smallest organic hosts. From there, human methods of transportation would ensure it reached every corner of the earth. It would not affect the undead, even when feeding on a human suffering. She had made sure.

Unfortunately, it didn't do as she'd desired. Killing at least a hundred million, some remained alive despite future outbreaks.

Enraged she settled, in wait of another opportunity to try again.

At the bottom in smaller writing, the tome mentions a possibility that the Morozov family being the starter of the Black Plague could be false, but Harry had the feeling it was all true.

It listed all of their names and as the only female, it made identifying her easy.
"Seraphina," Alistair muttered, gripping the tome with bruising force. "I have no doubts that this is true. During our travels, I recall seeing many suffering humans. At the time I had suspected magic, but not who or how. She is... evil. There is no redemption for one such as her. It took many years before humanity could recover and even now, small pockets of the world are affected."

Sickened, Alistair closed the tome, Solomon's lips drawn into a thin line.

How could anyone do this? But then, Dumbledore and Seraphina were two sides of the same coin. One had an extreme hatred of humans, the other Vampires. If Dumbledore shared a similar age, Harry believed he would have tried something similar.

"At least we know now," Harry spoke. They'd confirmed she was older than them, birthday listed there in black and white.

Born 110 B.C, She was currently 2100 years old. All three realised they were dealing with a very real, dangerous threat.

Deciding to take the tome with him, Alistair gave it to Solomon. Now that they had this information, hopefully, more would become readily available.

The trip back to Hogwarts was silent, Harry trying to think of something to say.

He had only a small idea of how he could possibly be feeling, at one point. Avenging his parent's murder was high on his list but now, Harry didn't know what to do. Voldemort had changed, but not enough for him to be forgiven. He had the feeling that at some point, for whatever reason, their wands would cross.

But this was far different and on a much larger scale. She'd killed not only Alistair's parents, one directly and one indirectly, but was responsible for millions of human deaths worldwide. That wasn't including any she'd personally killed herself.

Before they reached the gate to Hogwarts, Harry stopped them with a tug of his hand. Looking upward, he could see the usual sparkle in Alistair's eyes had dulled. Heart hurting for him, he simply went with the first, honest thing that came to mind.

"We'll get revenge. For your mum and dad and all those people that died for her sick goals. She might be older and powerful, but that doesn't mean she's going to get what she wants. The world might not be in the best state but I've got hope for it. For the first time I'm happy with someone I love and I want to actually start living my life. Am I going to sit and wait for her to ruin it all? Like hell!"

Harry had never been so fired up or determined in all his life. He'd had so many near-death experiences, that it had got to the point where he was beginning to think, bring it on. He was angry at
her, with such a selfish desire for power she sacrificed her own family in the process. He'd sacrifice all he had to bring his family back. Loathing burning within him, flames were struck within his Avada green eyes.

He'd come so far from the person he'd met last year. So confident, strong, brave, attractive. Alistair knew he possessed those qualities but over the months, they had grown, shining with the brilliant light of stars.

"Thank you, Harry. Those are words that I needed to hear." Alistair confessed, returning life to his own eyes as he swept him into a crushing embrace. "You are right. I will not stand aside as she seeks to take away all that is good in this world."

Pulling back enough to gaze into his eyes, they shone with the light of awe. "You are.. remarkable. I believed it was not possible to love someone this deeply and yet, I do."

Harry could say the same. In a move, so beautifully natural, their lips met. Not for the first time and certainly not the last either. But, that touch was filled with so much loving determination.

Seraphina Morozov. A name neither would forget, but one they sought in putting an end to, permanently.

Chapter End Notes

For some of you way back before I started editing past chapters, you might remember that she was called Leia. That was more of a filler name than anything and originally, I never planned to include her in this. But halfway through I was like yeah let's do this! More drama and turmoil! So Seraphina, a new individual to be placed on the shitlist, was born xD
Surprises and Confessions

Chapter Summary

While recent events are still on Harry's mind, spending the last few weeks focusing on something very special was a suitable, welcome and enjoyable distraction. Also, Hermione shares some details of her first date with Solomon.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Harry's recovery from his ordeal in the Swallow's Nest. With the reveal of his memories, it triggers a painful memory of Alistair's. With it, they discover just who their new enemy is and what she has done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Some smut in this chapter.

In contrast to what had happened February, the rest of March and just touching April was normal in every aspect. As Harry learned from Alistair he applied his newfound knowledge to DA lessons, as sharing knowledge would only benefit them in the long run.

It was a busy time for them all, but he was now preoccupied with planning something exciting.

Alistair’s birthday was today. Ever since Harry had learned of it he'd been thinking of what to do. With access to the Room of Requirement and Dobby, he'd put together a rough idea of what he wanted to happen. The hard part was keeping it a secret.

As a gentle hand touched his shoulder, Harry jumped, surprised. Locking eyes with the one that never left his mind, he pushed away his thoughts, keeping them locked away for now.

The words Happy Birthday wanted to leave his tongue immediately but stopped himself. Curled in an armchair, Harry’s grip on the warm cup of tea he held wasn't secure, nearly falling from his fingers.
"Are you alright?"

Harry's heart thumped painfully, seeing his forlorn expression. He wanted more than anything to confess but reminded himself, it wouldn't be long.

"I'm fine," Harry spoke, truthfulness within his gaze. While they'd dressed properly, Alistair's hair was still loose about his shoulders. In fact, he hadn't seen a ponytail or braid in at least a month. He'd meant to ask about that.

Standing up and moving to the sofa, they sat side by side as Harry looked up at him questioningly. "Don't you like putting your hair up any more?"

Harry observed his eyes flicker. "I thought that perhaps, staying away from the version of me Seraphina transformed into, would help your healing process."

Harry didn't consider that. While he understood his reasoning, a part of him missed the hairstyle. He liked it both up and down but found some degree of enjoyment watching him tie it on a morning. So, if he missed it, then he doubted it would trigger any memories. If by some chance it did, all he'd have to do would be to look in Alistair's eyes and remind himself of reality.

Then, an idea struck him. As his answer he grabbed Alistair's hand, tugging it until he stood as well. Taken by surprise with the suddenness, he had no time to respond to Harry's earlier words, before he opened the door to what Alistair now considered their bedroom.

Directed to sit in front of the bedroom mirror Harry crouched down beside him, opening the drawer where he'd last seen his hair ribbons. Glancing to the side he could see the shirt beneath his teaching robes were a shiny, pearl white, accompanied by silver trimmings. He always seemed to colour coordinate in some sense so Harry would do the same.

This would be his birthday ribbon and hopefully until later, would reassure Alistair that nothing was wrong. While he'd found the conversation awkward and mildly embarrassing, he'd asked Luna, who Harry had seen wearing her hair in various styles from ponytails to flower motifs, to teach him how to do what Alistair usually did with his own hair.

Just knowing that a partner had never done something simple like brushing his hair, fuelled Harry to go the extra mile. He wanted to show he cared, in more than just being physically affectionate. He didn't think it looked simple but found it harder than expected.

He'd managed though, not stopping until Luna gave her solid approval. Practising on a wig which was a similar length to Alistair's hair, it provided some hours of frustration when unable to meet the high standard he'd set himself, at first.

But now, he'd put it into practice.
There were so many ribbons to choose from, that Harry wondered how he wasn't late to teaching classes from indecision. He was faced with that now, but able to see individual styles, colours and materials as each was meticulously kept. Some for braids and others, ponytails.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, taking two from the drawer. Silver with golden borders, this would do nicely.

Standing behind him, Harry gathered his hair into a ponytail, trying not to miss out any strands. Ribbon in his other hand he slipped it around, to take both ends of the ribbon and loop it into a knot. Right, that was one step. Was it centred? Yes.

The last time he'd concentrated this hard, was keeping an eye on the snitch during Quidditch matches. Only rather than that being his goal, Harry wanted to win a special smile.

Just a bigger and slightly fancier shoelace. That was how Harry had approached it, creating two loops to form a bow. Satisfied, it left what he believed was the trickiest bit. Coming to stand in front of him this time, Harry found it harder to concentrate with Alistair's surprised yet warm expression observing his actions.

It was only a small braid at the front, slightly doubtful Harry could manage anything bigger or more elaborate than this. Separating the remaining hair into three sections. Left over middle, right over middle, with both directions having a middle at some point. It was one of those things Harry tried not to think too deeply about, slowly and steadily following the pattern.

It took longer than he would have liked, but the results weren't bad at all. Finishing up with a smaller bow like he'd seen sometimes in place of a regular hair tie, he stepped to the side, strangely nervous.

"How did I do?"

Of all the things Alistair might have expected, Harry doing what he'd usually do with his own hair wasn't one of them. He'd settled for brushing and letting it hang loosely for a while now. But seeing his own reflection, was a reminder that he really did love those few minutes on a morning dedicated to hair care.

When Harry had brushed his hair, he'd mentioned this in passing. And as results went, he couldn't have done it better himself. Yet somehow, he looked different.

"You did a wonderful job. But why, all of a sudden?" That was the prominent question on his mind.

"I had Luna show me how. I'd been wanting to try it for myself, but with everything that happened.." shrugging slightly, Harry's gaze turned earnest. "I didn't want you to stop doing something you liked, even if it's for my sake."
It took a few moments for Harry's words to settle in. He'd learned how to tie and braid hairstyles, for him?

Alistair's heart swelled, fit to burst as if a balloon had swiftly replaced his tentative yet steadily beating organ.

Harry's heart drummed furiously, blood pounding in his hears when faced with the smile he'd hoped to see. "Ah!"

And then, he was grabbed. Arms wrapped firmly around him from behind, Harry found himself sitting on a much warmer seat.

"Thank you. This means more than words can say. But now, I am reluctant to let you leave. The temptation to steal you away so that others cannot share your time just for today is very strong." a note of dissatisfaction filled his voice at the end.

Somehow, seeing his and Alistair's reflection in this position turned up the intensity for him.

"Alas, your education is very important." a soft sigh escaping him, Alistair settled for having his fill of kisses, before they had to leave.

As the time drew near, a twinkle entered Harry's eyes. "There's always after school, Professor." raising his brows meaningfully, his heart skipped a beat as a finger brushed his bottom lip.

"Why Harry, is that a proposition?"

Throwing a cheeky wink his way, Harry went to pick up his school bag. "Maybe."

Bag picked up Harry felt a hand touch his rear and then, gave a gentle squeeze.

A strange noise left his lips, a cross between a squeak and something unidentifiable. Bag in hand he spun around, eyes wide. "Did you just?"

Unable to finish the question he stopped, slowly growing redder by the second. Biting his lip to prevent any other sounds, some of his own words on that day were parroted back to him.

"I could not help it." looking innocent, Harry barely had time to think on what just happened, before his lips were claimed for a brief kiss. "Have a wonderful day."

Giving him a fond wave Alistair left, the door ajar for Harry to leave as well. Once he did, it would
Harry blinked. That was one way to kickstart his morning. Probably one of the best, in fact.

And if all went to plan later, Harry was determined Alistair's birthday went in a similar manner.

Determination and the stirrings of arousal now, with his actions.

'Calm down.' Harry told himself, willing the blush to fade before he met with his friends. Once satisfied he looked somewhat close to normal, he made his way to the Great Hall.

Piling a small amount of food on his plate, he tried and failed to start a conversation with Hermione. Stopping mid-bite he placed his fork down, experimentally waving a hand in front of her. When met with no response, he touched her shoulder.

Glancing in his direction, she made a questioning noise. "Hmm?"

"What's up?"

With Harry and then Luna's recounting of confessions, sharing her own experience seemed only appropriate. Also, her absentmindedness may start affecting other things.

"I had a date with Solomon over the weekend."

Mind flooded with the weekend's memory, she believed it was Patronus perfect.

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Even when sitting her OWLS and confidently knowing all the information she’d need, Hermione had never felt the same level of nerves as she was experiencing currently.

With more classes than most in her year, she’d been busier than ever. As the only one out of her group of friends in relationships whose partner wasn’t in Hogwarts or reachable from there, she hadn’t been able to see Solomon very often. But, it only made their time together more precious.

Outside of her love of books and the friends to this day, she believed she was lucky to have, Solomon was in a category of his own. In a way, he was a book, a wealth of knowledge beyond her wildest dreams. She found his life experience to be fascinating.

But more than that, she’d found a kindred spirit. His love of books was equally strong and she felt understood, in a way she never had before. Without her friends, she wouldn’t have got this far, but Solomon had cemented himself firmly within her mind and heart. Academically driven, she had
found another reason to strive for betterment.

The last time they'd spoken, it was to set a date. While at first she'd worried about going about normal activities outside of protected buildings like Hogwarts and Lothaire Castle with Seraphina out there, Hermione understood that she couldn't limit herself based on recent events. She'd struck at Harry when alone for a reason. With Solomon, as he'd reassured, she wouldn't try anything again so soon even if he was a secondary target. As they were aware of her motivations, she had no advantage.

So, their date went ahead. Dressed casually, she’d gone with a lightweight cardigan, jeans and a tunic top.

Wearing only a little makeup she used the usual hair care spells, allowing it to be tamed to something more manageable.

Checking her appearance again, it was time to go. Ensuring she had everything Hermione left the Girl's Dormitory, to Hogwarts’ gates.

Able to see him even from a distance, she broke into a run. The last time she’d seen him was a few days after her brief encounter with him in the Hospital Wing when Harry had been brought back. March, there wasn’t time to meet at all.

“Solomon!” she called out, overjoyed to see him. While they’d communicated through the mental link established, it wasn’t the same being unable to see each other in person.

Practically flying into his body she wrapped her arms around him.

Hand cupping the back of her head he returned the affection with equal strength, able to understand exactly why Alistair loved humans so much. They were warm and comforting. Or at least, some. He’d missed her.

“Hello, Hermione.” tilting her head up, he regarded her with eyes softer than they’d been in decades. “You look beautiful.”

Unused to being complimented in that way still, she gave a bashful smile. “Thanks, so do you. I-I mean handsome, not beautiful.”

Stumbling over her words was rarely a thing which happened but this time she did, more nervous than first realising.

His lips curved, amused. “I appreciate the compliment.”
Eyes brimming with excitement, she hoped he would satiate her curiosity. “So, where are we going?”

Alistair had told him an element of surprise, providing he knew she would like it, would be far better than just telling her outright. “You will find out soon.” Holding her hand they disappeared, reappearing somewhere she knew well.

London, bustling and busier than ever before. Outside of Diagon Alley, it had been a while since she’d last visited this part. Happy to be spending time with him, she knew instinctively there had to be a particular reason why this was Solomon’s choice.

Noticing others give him strange looks, a burst of protectiveness rose within her. White hair and silver eyes were not standard colours in the Wizarding community and unless altered through dyes and contacts, neither was it in the Muggle world. But Hermione loved them.

With that in mind, she met the eyes of those who did stare, glaring in response.

Solomon had noticed the stares himself but paid them no mind. They were nothing more than the quiet buzz of a fly, easily batted away. Though, he did find Hermione’s actions endearing.

Endearing? Clearly, he’d spent too long listening to Alistair’s enthusiastic tales about Harry.

As her hand was gently squeezed, Hermione gazed up into calm eyes. Giving him a smile, she kept her voice quiet. "Honestly, you’d think they’d have something better to do. Their lives must be dull."

"Where we are going, those inside will be preoccupied with staring at other things."

He was teasing her. Solomon knew she wanted to know where they were going, but had given nothing away. "Can’t you tell me, please?"

Solomon shook his head, silently enjoying her reaction. "$\text{We will be there shortly.}\$"

There were many people surrounding them but to Hermione, it seemed as if it were only them, within their own space. As they eventually came to a stop, Hermione found herself facing something unbelievable. Eyes widening, she looked inside.

Books lining the shelves, comfortable armchairs and sofas with polished wooden tables in front lay on a plush carpet. While there was a counter for book purchasing, another one was a short distance away, selling tea, coffee and various light snacks.
"This is a Bookshop Café, it opened very recently. I am not well travelled like Alistair, so it has taken a while to find something which would be to your tastes and my own."

Slightly dazed, she snapped from it with his words. Eyes lighting up brilliantly, Hermione nearly bounced on the spot. "Wow! I've never been to one of these before!"

Observing her expression, he sent silent thanks to Alistair. Surprises did seem to be the best option. He hadn't been inside either, so found himself looking forward to it too.

Books, warm drinks, a homely atmosphere. It was perfect in her opinion. While a lot of their time was spent in the library reading together, that was how they'd got to know one another. Books had helped Hermione cope but also, were how she'd met Solomon.

Stepping inside, a wave of contentment washed over her. Releasing her hand, Solomon glanced towards the café section. "Would you like a drink?"

Nodding, she silently browsed the options. "Herbal tea, please."

As Solomon went to the counter, Hermione browsed the books on offer. Feeling adventurous, she settled for something in the fantasy section. Or for her, she suspected a lot of it classed as fiction would be non-fiction.

And now that she'd known this for years, was intrigued by how someone, if they hadn't seen the Wizarding World, portrayed magical creatures.

Mind whirling with possibilities she seated herself on one of the sofas. She'd picked a collection of short fantasy stories, something to finish within an hour or so.

Immediately, she was absorbed within the pages. Barely noticing a cup clinking on the table before her, she did vaguely register the sofa dipping down further.

At the end of one story, she sighed. "That's so sad." It was nothing more than a murmur but easily heard by the man sitting beside her.

"What is?"

With Solomon's question, she sipped at her tea before it grew too cold. "It's a collection of fantasy stories, but the one I just read was very dark. Humans were murdered. Men, women, children. It was made to look as if Vampires and Werewolves were the cause, through fang puncture marks, slashed claws, torn out throats. But it was another human, recreating those wounds. Not only did he murder himself but indirectly, Vampires and Werewolves were killed for crimes they didn't commit."
Her eyes lingered on the pages. "And I can't help but think this story has an air of truth."

It did, in fact. Solomon had known of many Vampires framed for acts they didn't commit if caught near the dead body. He suspected the same could be said of Werewolves too. But often there was no physical evidence a Vampire had committed such an act, only blind prejudice.

"It does. But, there is hope for a better future. Even with recent events."

Hermione agreed, remaining optimistic even when faced with such overwhelming odds. Curious, she spared a moment to look at his book. "What are you reading?"

Showing the cover, she could see it was a detailed recounting of the Sengoku Era.

"It is surprisingly accurate. I was not there myself, but Alistair has seen and told me much of that time."

"Is there anywhere he hasn't been?" to Hermione, it sounded like he'd seen just about everything.

Solomon thought for a moment. "He has visited every country in the world, at least to my knowledge. But all the places within those and more recent development there, he will not have."

Between them, there was so much history and knowledge. A part of her envied being able to live that long and see things with their own eyes rather than relying on books which might not be entirely truthful. But mostly, felt sorrowful. To see so many wars, deaths and if they'd made mortal friends, seeing them grow old and pass away.

This was supposed to be a date! Reminding herself of this fact she shook away those depressing yet very real thoughts, moving onto the next story.

Every now and then they stopped, discussing certain parts of their books until both had reached the end of them. Closing the book, Hermione decided to buy it.

They had the rest of the day yet, with other places to see. He hadn't planned everything out, only knowing they would start here. It had calmed Hermione down considerably and if he were honest, himself.

"Do you want to stay a little longer?" He asked Hermione, as she returned.

She softly shook her head. "Let's go. We can always return again another time." Marking this in her memory as another favourite place, they gravitated towards whatever interested them. It worked out fine, temporarily splitting up if one saw something for the other and on a few occasions, Hermione
explaining something to Solomon of which he hadn't seen before.

The one thing which London had were many parks, natural or theme. When younger she'd enjoyed them but now, preferred somewhere quieter and less extortionate. That and experiencing Gringotts' carts had put her off Rollercoasters for life.

They'd spent much of that day browsing various shops, bags fit to burst with various purchases. She'd even found something for Alistair here, remembering Harry mentioning his birthday was soon.

Hermione had completed all due essays, to make sure her mind never wandered towards doing them instead of being here. It was a relief, to feel unhurried.

Walking side by side, The streets of London eventually left them behind, coming to somewhere far more tranquil. With a gravel path that split into two directions, trees filled every line of sight. The vast amount of water was so still, that their mirror image was seen in water which appeared to be equally green. With benches dotted about here and there, it was a reminder for them both that places like these remained, among some areas starved of nature.

"It's beautiful," Hermione spoke, almost afraid to disturb the quietness. Ever since her training with Esha, her childish nature had rubbed off slightly. Sometimes when outside at Hogwarts, she liked to climb the tree and see things from that perspective. It was ingrained into her from training to have a bird's eye view of the action but also, never something she did as a child.

The urge to climb a tree, even now, was strong. She didn't think there were rules against that, only littering or anything else which would damage the environment.

There was one particularly tall tree which overlooked the water. Able to see from here there were enough grooves and low branches for her to climb upward, she decided to indulge in her whim.

Grinning to herself a little she tugged Solomon over to the tree. Eyes twinkling, she spied a branch which should easily support both of them. "Let's climb this tree."

Surprised by what he was hearing, Solomon simply looked at her. Seeing her pleading look, he decided to go along with it. Saving his questions for afterwards, he watched her climb up with surprising ease.

Sitting on the branch, she waved down at him. "Come on!"

He had climbed trees as a child, but never since then. Relying on his strength he managed to climb up and join her.

Hair ruffled from brushing against twigs he passed by, Hermione stretched her arm up to smooth it
out. "Sorry, I know that was sudden. More often than not I've been wanting to climb trees rather than sit under them."

Surreptitiously checking her surroundings, Hermione's fingers touched the necklace she wore. "Want to see Willow?"

Noticing her glance around them, Solomon ensured no one would see with a brief wave of his hand. "I do. I am intrigued." She'd told him of her training, but had yet to go into details.

Seeing his eyes glimmer with curiosity, she pressed her thumb into the indentation. Willow's Strike in hand, her clothing temporarily transformed into the outfit she'd adapted to.

Robin Hood immediately came to Solomon's mind. Though he had no doubts her skills were superior. The second thought which came to mind was that she looked very attractive in this.

Right there on the tree, he kissed her, deeply. Surprised Hermione nearly dropped Willow but held on, melting into his touch.

Pulling back enough to gaze at her, he enjoyed her blush. "I like it." Fingers brushing against her clothing, her response was slightly delayed.

"Good." Smiling through her embarrassment, she looked out over the water. "Can you see where those ducks are? Place a target there. I bet I can get a bullseye."

He wanted to observe her movements, so agreed. A target floating on the water a fair distance away, he was intrigued by her sudden transformation. He could hear her heartbeat and breath slow, a look of intense concentration. Bow and arrow in hand she drew back the string, firing with what he discovered to be pinpoint precision. Hitting the target dead centre with a faint thump, he gave her an admiring glance.

"Impressive. Archery is a good talent to have. As with any weapons, it requires a great deal of dedication."

He spoke as if he had experience. As Willow's Strike returned to being a necklace, Hermione's usual clothing returned. "Have you practised with them?"

"I have. Alistair and I were trained with weaponry from a young age. Less dangerous and increasing in danger the older we grew. He prefers magic, while I prefer swords. I have spent many hours enchanting them for clients. I have come to appreciate both their craftsmanship and what they are able to do in the hands of those skilled."

The idea of weapons no longer frightened Hermione as much. Surrounded with magic which could
be even more dangerous in the wrong hands and was a weapon in and of itself, she was interested. "Do you have a favourite sword?"

Sorting through his mental catalogue of swords, there was one that he had a particular fondness for. "The Wakizashi. During his travels, Alistair brought one home as a gift for me."

Hermione blinked. "He gave you a sword as a gift?" Somehow, the idea of swords and Alistair's cheerful, charming nature didn't align.

Sensing the direction of her thoughts, he nodded with surety. "We have rarely had a reason to use our weapons training. However, there are times we have come across full-scale wars and were required to pick sides. Either because the lives of friends we had made were at stake, or being unable to leave the area knowing an environment and many generations of individuals would suffer more without our input."

Hermione couldn't even begin to imagine how difficult that must have been. Resting her hand on top of this, it echoed her earlier thoughts. "I'm sorry."

It had been harder for Alistair than him. He'd rarely grown close to anyone, but his brother was a friend of the world. He could make friends with surprising and swift ease. If they passed on, his usual outgoing nature was dulled for some time afterwards.

To move on from the sobering conversation, Solomon took a leaf from his brother's book, acting spontaneously. Wrapping his arms around Hermione he picked her up, sliding off the branch and effortlessly landing on his feet.

She had no time to exclaim, placed back down before she knew it. Heart fluttering, it was a definite distraction.

With not as many people here, it was the perfect spot for both to recharge. Dogs chasing after balls, children playing frisbee beneath the sun's gentle glow, a part of Hermione wanted to remain here, permanently.

"Could you take our photo? Haven't got a stand or timer." A man came up to them who, to his credit, barely reacted at Solomon's appearance. Though he favoured an alternative style, which Hermione suspected was the reason why.

As the camera was held out to Solomon, he cautiously agreed. "I will return in a few minutes."

With a group of people not far off, Hermione seated herself on one of the benches nearby.

Soaking in the sunlight, she didn't react when someone else sat next to her until an alcoholic stench
filled the clean air.

"What’s your name, sweetheart?"

Turning her gaze towards the man in question he wore a business suit, with more creases than smooth lines. Rough stubble and a leering expression, Hermione didn't answer, standing up to move away.

"Awww don't go, we were just getting to know each other."

When her wrist was grabbed tightly she spun around, glaring fiercely. "Let me go."

His eyes widened, a mocking smile on his lips. "Ooh, I'm so scared. What are you going to do, eh?"

She loathed men like this, who thought just because she was a woman, couldn't do anything. Letting magic coat her fingertips she wrenched her wrist free, changing their positions as Hermione viciously twisted an arm behind his back.

"Ow, hey!" He protested, trying to break free and wincing when more pressure was applied.

Not caring about their height difference in the slightest, she could see Solomon approaching from the corner of her eye. Smiling to herself, she kept her voice low. "This is what I can do. If you don't leave, what I'm doing now will be just a fraction of what my boyfriend will."

As Hermione released him he rubbed his sore arm, flinching beneath Solomon's cold glare. Wrapping an arm around her waist, his words were near damning. "She is correct. Leave, before my hand is forced."

He didn't stick around. Quickly retreating, Solomon gently took a hold of the wrist recently grabbed. Kissing it, Hermione's heart warmed. "Are you alright?"

Seeing his worry, she was quick to reassure him. "I'm fine, I sorted him out." Pretending to dust off her hands, his eyes glinted with pride. "You did indeed."

Taking her hand in his again, Hermione could tell it was a slightly more protective hold than usual, tracking the man until he could no longer be seen. Once satisfied, he loosened his grip a fraction. "Boyfriend?"

He'd heard it before from Alistair, what Harry often called him.

It was a natural instinct on her part. "Would you prefer something else?"
"No, that is fine. But why is it, boyfriend and girlfriend? That implies you either have male or female friends. We are friends, but also more than that."

She'd never thought about it in that way, brow furrowed thoughtfully. "I don't know. It's what everyone else calls their significant other. I've never heard lover or partner, even if those words are more appropriate."

Perhaps research would tell Solomon more. Not that he minded, finding the fact that Hermione saw him as hers pleasing.

It had been a relaxed day, interspersed with some adventure and a little unpleasantness. But neither one could deny that they'd enjoyed it immensely.

As the sun began to set, Hermione's pace unconsciously slowed. "I don't want to go back yet." Freely admitting this, she wanted time to stop right there.

He didn't want her to go back either. He knew her curfew was later on a weekend, so an extra hour or two could easily be spared. "Return home with me for a while."

Eagerly agreeing they found a secluded spot, instantly reappearing in Lothaire Castle.

As the day's events sunk in, It was as if Hermione was on cloud nine. So happy, that in comparison to her other happy moods, it paled drastically. So thankful for the wonderful day, she wanted to demonstrate it.

Barely able to believe her own boldness, Hermione knew the way from where they were now, to Solomon's bedroom as she headed there now.

Allowing himself to be lead, Solomon was surprised when they came to his bedroom. But nothing could compare to his surprise when once inside, Hermione pushed him onto the bed.

He could have easily withstood such a push but allowed himself to fall back. As she hovered above him, he could feel his cheeks darken ever so slightly. Of all those he'd been physically intimate with, none of them had ever wanted to take charge. He hadn't thought about role reversal, the possibility only registering when he found himself in the middle of it.

Hermione was enjoying herself. She'd never imagined herself in such a position and yet here she was, straddling Solomon.

Hiding her amusement at the fact past Hermione would have been a sputtering wordless mess if she could see her future self, she cupped Solomon's cheeks. "Thank you for today, I've had a wonderful
Placing his hands over the top of hers for a moment, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been this caught off guard. "It is a privilege to spend time with you."

He didn't remove her from him, remaining still and quietly curious. What would she do now? Finding it thrilling, it was like a puzzle he'd yet to solve.

Undoing the buttons of his shirt she opened it, smooth pale skin meeting her eyes. Like the day he'd drank from her she kissed his neck, in exactly the same spot he'd marked.

the palm of her hand flat against his torso she stroked the skin beneath, rewarded with a soft groan. Kissing her way downwards, Hermione had read and heard enough that she had some idea of what to do. The idea of putting her knowledge to practice in this way was incredibly exciting.

Why did her touch feel so different from the others? So much more powerful, intense, pleasurable. Even as he asked himself this question, he knew the answer. More than once he'd questioned Alistair about relationships, love, what did it feel like?

The feelings within his chest now mimicked the descriptions he'd heard. He'd never let anyone else do this to him. She'd even seen a side Alistair had yet to, the pained one that sometimes became trapped within his own memories. He never thought he'd feel so close to a human. Another Vampire possibly but a human? He would have bet his immortality that the idea of closeness with one in every sense was impossible.

If the bet had been real, he would no longer be in this world.

With strong realisation of his feelings, he wanted to show it in kind. Finally deciding to switch positions and body tingling with every caressing touch of her lips, he drank in the sudden intake of breath. Releasing all that he'd held back for fear of driving Hermione off, his passion swept her away.

Repeatedly their lips met, each longer and deeper than ever before, lightly biting her bottom lip.

It was as if desire demons possessed them both, with full control of their bodies but only vague awareness whenever exposed skin met cool air.

Hermione had never felt such intense pleasure. Even in the girl's dorm, she'd made sure no one else saw the body beneath school robes or casual clothing, lacking confidence compared to those she shared the room with.

Expression more raw and open than she'd ever seen, Solomon gazed down, as if in awe. "You are
A cool hand slid beneath the fabric of Hermione’s bra. Easily pushing it upwards he gently massaged, thumb purposefully brushing over her nipple.

"Ahh!" Barely able to breathe soft noises escaped her, heart threatening to beat from its confines as his lips and tongue joined the mix.

Targeted with so many foreign sensations Hermione could barely think straight, no other thoughts entering her mind other than one.

"Don't stop," she ordered, voice breathy and feeling herself begin to unravel beneath his intense ministrations.

He had no intention of doing so. He wanted to explore all of her, though remained alert should she wish to halt their actions at any time.

As his hands came to the waistband of her underwear, he met her eyes, asking for silent permission.

Breathing heavily by this point, Hermione managed a teasing smile. "What are you waiting for?"

That was all the encouragement he needed. Lowering her underwear and placing it aside, Solomon found himself hungering for something far different. It wasn't blood and yet, he could feel natural changes occurring in him. Fighting against his eye colour shifting, it required willpower to resist the delicious, glistening sight before him.

He didn't have enough of it. Giving in with a great deal of contentment, nothing could prepare Hermione.

As if she'd been zapped with a bolt of pleasure lightning, every nerve ending seemed to be in tandem with Solomon's tongue, knowing about but never considering that she would experience oral sex herself.

No verbal or written descriptions could do it justice, tongue dipping into her entrance and devouring every drop of arousal which had gathered, since the moment she'd decided to be more forward. Burying her hand in his hair, she arched into his touch, shouting loud enough that she feared the roof would come down.

But the moment he focused his attention slightly upward and repeatedly flicked over that same spot, Hermione wondered if she was on planet earth anymore.
Body temperature rising, it submitted beneath the intensity of Solomon, as he succeeded in making her lose every ounce of control.

She was more delicious than he'd ever thought. He'd held himself back, scent intoxicating and after feeding on her, found it even harder to remain restrained. But her actions today had snapped some of the threads which held him back. Her cries were like nectar. Solomon wasn't a lover of sweet things as a whole but Hermione quenched a thirst he never realised he had.

No woman had ever threatened for him to come undone at the seams quite like her. In Solomon's eyes, none could compare. She was intelligent, exquisite. She was the one.

He'd confirmed this already, before now, but this only cemented his thoughts in stone.

Keenly listening to her cries and noticing the pitch shift he remained in that one spot which had never failed, tasting everything which was already there and more.

He sensed when her moment was near, legs coming to wrap around him and squeezing. As if rewarded by his accurate guess, Solomon was able to taste more of his newfound craving.

It was as if she'd trained for hours on end, body robbed of all strength. She didn't have many words to spare. Mind-blowing, bloody brilliant?

As Solomon came into view she wrapped her arms tightly around him, a fierce kiss of gratitude fuelling her lips. Hermione intertwined their hands, a breathless promise voiced in the darkened room. "It's your turn next time."

Her words were almost enough for him to lose it again. The act of pleasuring her alone was enough for his own release, partly embarrassed that it had taken so little, but partly in awe that Hermione affected him so strongly. With a wave of his hand, Solomon cleaned them both.

Gazing at her intently, he made a decision. "Hermione. Over our month apart and today, I have been thinking."

Heart rate yet to normalise, she willed herself to focus. "What about?"

"About us, what we share and my own feelings. I have come to a realisation. One of which I never thought I would see in my lifetime."

While similarly discomposed, Hermione heard the seriousness of his words. Turning to face him properly, her brown eyes sharpened. She didn't want to jump to conclusions, but the way he said those words. Could it be?
Seeing that he had her full attention, Solomon struggled with his words for a moment. "Hermione, I love you."

Those three words were so rare, that he could hardly believe he'd spoken them. Never in a romantic sense and only family. After Dumbledore, he'd kept his emotions tightly guarded. But somehow, Hermione had managed to navigate through the thorns protecting his heart, burying herself there. It was startling, yet liberating.

At his confession, Hermione's breath caught. She'd thought the same for a while now, but had hesitated to say anything in case feelings weren't mutual.

A burst of strength returning to her limbs, she hugged him tightly. "I love you too."

If only they were in the Room of Requirement or a similar time altering space. The hour was growing late. Solomon felt some regret at this fact, but not enough to douse the joy of feelings returned.

She didn't need to hear a heartbeat to know the strength of his love. It lay there, in his arms, soft smile and the warm light in a normally cool expression.

They remained that way for a while, Hermione barely making it back to Hogwarts before curfew ended. But detention for a missed curfew was insignificant, compared to what they'd shared on this day.

Hermione had given her friends a rundown of what happened alongside Solomon's confession but naturally didn't include what happened after that.

Her blushing face gave it all away. Happy for her Harry gave a good-natured grin. "Congratulations Hermione, together we've ensnared the Lothaire brother's hearts."

Folding his arms in a proud manner, Hermione shoved his shoulder playfully, but couldn't hide her smile.

"Hey, starting to feel left out here," Ginny commented jokingly. She'd definitely find someone but doubted it would be during her time here.

"Have you forgot about Professor Snape? He's there, waiting for you to run into his webbed wings."

Rather than a verbal answer, Harry found a small amount of porridge stuck to his cheek. Flicked
from her spoon, she glared menacingly. "Harry.."

"Only joking!" Wiping the porridge from his cheek he licked his finger, grimacing. "Needs sugar."

Rolling her eyes, Ginny vowed she'd come up with something more inventive.

Neville remained quiet, enjoying the friendly atmosphere. He was getting along well with Daphne and wondered if there was something between them. He’d spent some time with her here and there when their schedules allowed for it, growing closer on the days he offered to help her with Herbology. He didn't want to say anything for now, but the possibility was there.

Observing Harry and his friends with a small amount of amusement, Minerva asked the question which had been on her mind. "How is Potter?"

Entertained with Ginny and Harry's banter and able to hear from where he was, Alistair's smile was telling. "He is doing much better. Where is Severus?"

He noticed his colleague's absence, especially since their conversation wasn't interrupted with a breakfast serving of sarcasm.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps he's running late or decided to skip eating entirely."

Alistair could see why the students thought Severus was a Vampire, particularly on these days. He didn't need to eat and yet chose to, because he enjoyed all the flavours and textures. Food and drink itself were experiences. Just because it was optional, didn't mean to say he couldn't pick yes every now and then.

As a wrapped gift was placed in front of him, Alistair blinked, surprised. Seeing his expression, Minerva smiled. "A very happy birthday to you."

On his way to the Great Hall Solomon had also sent along his best wishes and when they next saw each other, would give him his gift. Truthfully, he'd forgotten. He made sure to remember Solomon's, Rupert's and some other birthdays, but rarely remembered his own. It had lost meaning for him, ever since his mother died and that there would be infinite birthdays anyway, providing he didn't run into fatal trouble.

As always he appreciated well wishes, but never saw this day as one which stood out among the rest. It was why he'd told Solomon not to make too much of a fuss, even if he did sound like a hypocrite. The same went for his past partners if they happened to find out.
Accepting her gift, he looked over questioningly. "Your application form. I assumed the month and day would be correct, even if the date wasn't."

He did recall putting his birth date down, come to think of it. Opening the gift, he was greeted with a curious bottle. Able to see it was alcohol, all that was on the table were the company and a giant question mark.

"What is this?"

"A bottle of mystery alcohol. There isn't a name, as with every glass full, the flavour and type changes. I thought that perhaps it would help towards discovering more of your likes and dislikes."

The moment she'd seen it, Alistair came to mind. The price for such an amount was absurd but for a friend and someone who had done all he had for this school and outside, it was the least that could be done.

Appealing to his adventurous side, he sent it back to his quarters, eyes twinkling excitedly. "Thank you."

Pleased to see his gift was well received, Minerva sent a silent prayer to whoever or whatever was listening, for a smooth, uncomplicated day.

It was time. Stomach churning with nerves, Harry went straight to the Room of Requirement. He'd spent a good deal of time in the kitchen and with the House Elves' permission and help from Dobby, had hopefully created a number of things which would be to Alistair's liking.

Now came the next part. He wore a tuxedo, bottle green in colour and a black bowtie. Remembering that Alistair had liked his hair on the night of Halloween, Harry had only tamed a little of his messy hairstyle. For an hour each day he'd visualised what kind of dining setting he wanted, drawing inspiration from things he'd seen. Opening the door, he believed he'd got it right.

On the grass, were elegant chairs facing one another and a dining table, topped with a vase and rose inside it. Looking to the right were endless clear waters, tropical fish swimming beneath them as Lily pads floated on the surface. Water rippling gently, it needed only one thing.

Taking the sealed letter he'd written earlier, Harry closed his eyes for a moment, imagining a portal. Through it came Hedwig, hooting happily. Owl treats in hand he held some out, snatched up instantly as he tied the letter to her leg. "Hey girl, can you send this to Alistair?"

Stroking her breast she lightly nipped his finger, taking flight back through the portal as it closed.
Checking his appearance nervously, all he had to do now was wait. Everything was freshly made and beneath a preservation charm, Dobby there to silently observe and help things run smoothly. Reminding himself to keep calm and remain confident, all he could do now was wait.

Settling down to read a book, Alistair was interrupted by a tap on the window. Seeing familiar snowy white feathers, he opened it. Stroking Hedwig he thanked her, untying the letter from her leg as she flew back to the Owlery.

Able to recognise the handwriting instantly, Alistair smiled. Harry had chosen to surprise him with another letter. It was only opening it, that he could see the contents were very different from normal.

_Alistair Avis Lothaire,

_I cordially invite you to dine with me in a room which fulfils many needs. The dress code is formal but optional. It is my fervent hope that I will see you there._

_Yours Sincerely,

_Harry James Potter_

And beneath his name, was a clumsy yet heartfelt signature. It was an attempt at a formal letter, his own personality still shining through.

What had sparked this so suddenly? While he'd mentioned formal was optional, Alistair loved occasions where he could dress up. He had many formal outfits to choose from, taking no longer than ten minutes to get ready.

Checking his reflection he'd decided on a light shirt with ruffled sleeves and a waistcoat, rich copper with a brocade pattern. Black shoes and trousers to complete his outfit, Alistair was excited. So used to surprising others, he couldn't remember the last time he truly had been himself.

Though Harry's words were a little vague, it left no room for error where he was currently. Of course, Alistair's only answer to his letter would be yes.

Reappearing on the required floor, he could see that there were double doors, made of glass yet curiously not see through. Placing his hand against them he pushed, easily opening.
Harry didn't think he'd refuse to come but as the door opened, he breathed a sigh of relief. It could be no one else, making sure it wouldn't open otherwise. Rising to his feet, he committed Alistair's genuine surprise to memory. It was nice to be the one with plans for a change.

Now that he was here, Harry found it easy to remain calm and confident. Closing the distance between them he picked up Alistair's hand, brushing a kiss against it. "You look amazing."

He really needed to absorb a dictionary. That way, he could find some different compliments as anything he came out with seemed inadequate.

Feeling as if he were a lovestruck teenager once more, Alistair was the one lost for words this time. Harry's clothing complimented him beautifully, making his eyes shine brighter if possible. "I can assuredly say the same for you, my love. You are equally amazing."

Somehow, the same adjective sounded far more intense and impactful, when coming from him. Taking the hand he'd kissed into his, Harry lead them over to the table and chairs. Pulling it out some way, he gave what he hoped was a charming grin. In his current giddy mood, idiotic was probably the closest to it. "Have a seat."

How many sides of Harry were there? His little Demon, a young man of many temptations and now, the perfect gentleman. It was the kind of chivalry Alistair often showed to another, but having it in return was different yet no less pleasing.

Not to mention where they were. He'd never seen it before. "Where is this?"

As Harry took his own seat, he shrugged. "Somewhere in my mind, that isn't disturbing."

Ah, there was the other side of Harry he loved. So casual, yet no less handsome.

"It is beautiful." Fascinated he looked all around him until his attention was drawn by the appearance of a familiar house elf. Wearing a bowtie slightly askew two dishes were in mid-air, held up with the same magic Harry had seen him use at the Dursleys.

"Mr Potter and Lothaire be having Pumpkin Soup for starters."

Hiding a smile at Dobby's serious expression, Harry would buy him a million socks after this, if he wanted them.

Looking into the bowl, Alistair was curious. He hadn't had pumpkin soup before, but it looked delicious. Smooth orange in colour with a swirl of what he suspected to be cream, he couldn't wait to taste it for himself.
"Dig in," Harry invited him to with a wave of his hand, not eating his own just yet.

Dipping his spoon into the soup, Alistair's eyes fell closed, blissful. "It is delicious."

"I'm glad." Hiding his relief Harry began to eat, admitting to himself and trying not to sound arrogant, that he'd done a pretty good job.

Eyes alight with enjoyment, Alistair had a question. "What is the occasion?"

It wasn't time just yet, so the answer Harry gave him was indirect. "I'll tell you later, but it's something special."

Seeing Alistair try to work out what it was, Harry found to be entertaining. Their conversation flowed smoothly, drinks shortly following after. As he had school tomorrow he refrained from too much alcohol, only having a little. He wanted to remember this day clearly, not have alcohol mar it.

As their soup was finished, the bowls disappeared. As Harry had told Dobby to wait a few minutes in between for their stomachs to settle, he took the time to reflect on his actions over the past few weeks. In his opinion, this was all worth it.

"Did you have a good day?" Harry asked, curious.

"Your thoughtful actions this morning certainly contributed towards it. I am afraid that now, my ribbon does not match. I was reluctant to remove them."

Harry did notice that. The ribbons were the ones he put in this morning. "If you want me to do that again sometime, just ask. I enjoyed it."

Remembering what had happened after that, he sent Alistair a playful glare. "Speaking of this morning, that was sneaky of you. Having a squeeze then leaving the room. Took me ages to calm down."

"Now you know my feelings. It is fortunate that the class were separated into groups and away from me so that I was able to compose myself upon your return."

"I affected you that much?" Harry was unable to keep the hint of pride from his voice.

One hand resting on the table, Alistair's came to cover it. "Of course. Touched so suggestively by the one I love, it is impossible for me to remain unaffected."

"If you want more suggestive touches, I've got plenty."
Not thinking before he spoke Harry quickly shut his mouth, smiling sheepishly while drinking in the sounds of Alistair's musical laughter.

"I very much look forward to that."

During a lull in their conversation, Dobby returned. "The main course is being Pumpkin Gnocchi."

As Dobby disappeared, Alistair had thought that perhaps pumpkin was a coincidence. Sure that it wasn't, he gazed at Harry. "Did you ask the Elves for specific recipes?"

Trying to look innocent, Harry faintly shook his head. "Nope. They serve all the meals anyway and probably noticed you liked Pumpkin."

There was something Harry was hiding. But he would never look inside his mind without permission.

Looking down at the dish, he could see it was Italian, with a pumpkin twist. Far from bored with the same theme, Alistair was fascinated with the many uses of pumpkin and how each time, it tasted different.

Once again, his expectations were blown out of the water. Each bite better than the last, it managed to surpass the starter, somehow. The potato's softness with a hint of parmesan, salt, pepper and the dumplings made of pumpkin, made his mouth water similarly to the times Harry had bared his neck.

Sensing his lover's gaze and in a teasing mood, he slowly licked his lips. "Divine."

Again, Harry watched him, receiving his answer plain as day. Blushing slightly, he was nonetheless pleased. Everything was actually going to plan. That never happened when he made one usually.

Cleaning their plates, there was another resting period.

"I was watching you earlier today. I take it that Ginny having romantic interest in Severus is a joke which will never fade?"

Harry grinned. "Nope. I love winding her up. She does it all the time with me. Remember when you were sent an image of yourself in the buff by me? She was the one who put that in my head. Soon as she found out we had a mental link, that was the first thing she suspected me of doing. And well, that happened."

"Shy is certainly not a word to describe her." Chuckling to himself he turned Harry's palm over,
drawing little circles onto it. "I would not say no if you desire to do that again."

"You never know, I might one day. When you least expect it too."

Their teasing, flirtatious and enjoyable banter did far more for Alistair than alcohol ever would. As something else appeared on the table however, his eyes widened in shock. A medium sized, single tiered cake. With a ribbon at the base, it fashioned a small bow, similar to a one he owned. the cake itself white it had golden piping, detailed in a way which reminded him of some outfits he owned.

And on top, a little fennec fox made of edible modelling clay. It was easy to identify it, even if the modelling and some piping were a little clumsy. But to Alistair, that didn't matter. Whoever had done this, it was clear a great deal of passion had been put into it.

It was the other things on top, which caught his eye. Four candles, thin yet elegant in appearance and forming numbers. 1,5,0 and 1.

1501.

Then, it clicked. Before Alistair could respond Harry stood up, coming to his side and hugging him. "Happy Birthday."

This was the most surprised he'd been in many years. Speechless, he returned the strength of Harry's embrace. "Is this what you have been keeping a secret?"

Pulling away, Harry's eyes were apologetic. "Yeah, I wanted it to be a surprise. Sorry if I worried you."

He had been, for a short while, fearing the worst. But realising he'd never needed to worry about such a thing, Harry actions began to sink in.

Finally able to explain, Harry pulled his chair around, to sit beside him. "When handing Dumbledore's arse to him, you mentioned your birthday. I remembered and since then, I've been trying to scrape something together. It was only over the last few weeks I had an idea though. I knew we couldn't really leave the school, so settled for here. I'm glad you liked the food because I ah.. made it."

Admitting this with some embarrassment, Harry's eyes landed on the cake. "That as well. Couldn't have done it without Dobby though. He's got a good eye for recipes and details I can't pick up. I know the Dursleys forced me to cook but like with Hermione's cake and today, I wanted to learn more and turn it into a good thing."

Alistair listened in silence, hardly able to believe his ears. Seeing those green eyes filled with so
much love, earnestness and knowing how much time and effort had been placed into something which he'd no longer seen as meaningful, his eyes began to water.

"Harry, thank you. There are no words to convey my gratitude."

Voice choked with emotion he leaned over to kiss him, pouring every ounce of love and affection into his lips.

Giving himself a mental cheer, Harry was beyond happy at this point. Once able to speak again, he couldn't hide his eagerness. "If there are no words, how about actions? Come on, blow out the candles! I did think about putting in 1,501 regular candles as a joke, but then there'd be more wax than cake."

Laugh caught between genuine amusement and a joyful sob, he was taken back to the days of his mother. She always saw life as precious, celebrating all of their birthdays with various gifts and plenty of affection. Solomon had tried to recreate her enthusiasm and he appreciated it but in the end, had told him that he would be happy with whatever he wanted to do for him on that day.

So came the good wishes and simple gifts, nothing more than that. But this...

As the candles were lit by an unseen match, Harry watched. "Remember to make a wish! And don't tell me, or it might not come true."

Alistair already knew the wish he would make. Committing it to heart and memory, he gently blew out the candles. Once extinguished a knife appeared, Harry removing the candles then cutting a small piece of cake. Holding the slice up to Alistair's lips, his enjoyment was clear to see. "There's no way I can pass up feeding the birthday Vampire."

Rather than leading Harry along adventures, he'd been lead this time. Opening his mouth, he was delighted when tasting mild pumpkin spice and fresh cream.

Contentedly Alistair finished the slice, Harry having fed him the entirety of it. Stomach fluttering, each of his fingertips was kissed.

And, in return, Alistair fed him a slice too. It was official. Harry had jumped in the deep end with this relationship. But by no means would he be returning to shallow waters.

Saving the rest of the cake for later, Harry picked up the bag he'd come in with, just beside his chair. "Your present."

As he opened it, Harry provided an explanation. "You're the creative type, with composing and making music right? This sort of brings art and music together. I don't really know the details exactly
but it's like a snow globe. Or, whatever globe you want it to be. It takes directly from your imagination and creates something new. So, if you wanted to have a mini Hogwarts with snow to shake around and some quiet music, it can do that."

Alistair loved ornaments and decorations. He believed they were the heart and soul of a building or room, Minerva's tartan inspired décor coming to mind. Intrigued, he used the surroundings Harry created, as an example.

And, exactly how he pictured it, was the water with miniature fish contained in the globe. A second later it began to rain, the gentle pitter-patter creating ripples.

Now Alistair wondered if it had limits, or if the limits were his imagination? If the latter, then there would be no problem.

Placing the globe down, he regarded it with a deep fondness for one moment. He had a feeling that in spare moments, this would capture his attention.

But for now, he had to try and express his appreciation further.

“Thank you.” Eyes swimming with affection, it was adorable at how easily and willing Harry was to settle in his lap. Facing him, Harry had a last, spur of the moment idea. "Hey, I'm like a present too. See?"

Gesturing to his bowtie, he smiled. "Want to unwrap me?"

"You are the best present that I have been given."

Spoken with surprising seriousness to combat his joking nature, Harry was touched. As Alistair's fingers grazed the bowtie it easily came undone, feeling strangely exposed. Reaching for Alistair's hand he took it, held between both his hands. "You deserve the world. I'm not that powerful, but cake's good, right?" Impulsively, he leaned in to plant a kiss on his cheek.

Blinking back tears of elation, it was physically impossible for Harry to be held any closer. "Cake is certainly good. But you are perfect."

Sitting in the chair he enjoyed the rest of his birthday, showering Harry with enough kisses that they easily surpassed his current age. With all that he was, Alistair hoped that the wish he'd made, would come true. This birthday would be a one he remembered for eternity.
Just an update, roughly around seven chapters this story will be finished. Might be a bit more or less but either way, I can confirm it definitely won't be long.
Chapter Summary

Another truce is made, alongside a new relationship formed. Meanwhile, Harry helps to ease some of Alistair's past, sharing their most intimate moment yet in a place far from their homes.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Planned birthday surprises, the restoration of a much-loved hairstyle and a confession of love from Solomon.

Warning: Intercourse between men in this chapter.

Ever since the reveal of Seraphina, Ginny had increased the number of hours she spent training with Taibreah-Drenn. Whether together as a team with Hermione and Luna or alone, she wanted to be absolutely sure she was prepared for what would come.

It wasn't a question of if anymore, but when. Everyone aware of what happened to Harry and Harry himself knew this. She'd pushed herself to the absolute limits, rewarded with a confidence booster when her mentor had told her she put many of their current warrior trainees to shame.

Ginny felt much better for it too. Active and fitter than ever before, she found it benefitted towards other areas of her life too. She was never one to sit back and let everyone else do all the work. She wanted to be a part of things, truly make a difference.

Seeing the clear skies outside, Ginny decided to take a break. It had been a while since she last went flying, missing the freeing feeling of being airborne and temporarily leaving her worries on the ground.

With the Firebolt Harry had bought her, Ginny headed outside to the quidditch pitch. She wouldn't mind having a practice match with Harry, but he'd mentioned something about redecorating.

Inhaling the fresh, clean air, she already felt much better. While she did enjoy her training sessions, nothing could beat flying.

Once on the pitch, Ginny realised she wasn't the only one who had decided to take advantage of the
nice weather. Seeing a very familiar head of blond hair, she reminded herself to be civil.

"Malfoy," Ginny inclined her head, expression neutral. Mirroring her look, he returned the greeting. "Weasley."

Feeling uncomfortable, she wondered if the Room of Requirement would be a better idea until his next words stopped her. "Wait."

Halting mid-motion she turned to face him, raising an eyebrow. Expression unreadable, the only thing which made her listen was the reminder of his surprising friendship with Harry.

"As you know, I have become friends with P-Harry." correcting himself, Ginny was mildly surprised he'd started along the same lines she'd been thinking of. Falling silent, he seemed to be thinking of how best to word things. "I once thought my father was always right. But since his imprisonment in Azkaban and resulting tarnish of our reputation, I've come to think differently. As such:-"

Ginny could see his struggle, even if well hidden. Stiffening at the mention of Lucius, she still stayed put. "-I owe you an apology. Weasley, I'm... Sorry."

A feather could have knocked her over, so stunned was she. It was one thing to make amends with Harry, of whom he'd had an on and off rivalry with for years, but her? That was something different completely. The rivalry between her family and his had been there long before she was born and naturally, Lucius passed it onto his son.

While she couldn't sweep everything under the rug, she reminded herself that it was Lucius who slipped the diary into her cauldron, not him. While it didn’t excuse all the younger Malfoy’s actions, a part of her pitied the role model he had. If Harry could be civil with him, she could too. But, it left her with one question. "Why now?"

His answer was immediate. "I don't want to follow in my father's footsteps. Not only that, but I can't always count on friends when it comes to things such as the attack on Hogsmeade."

She'd seen a glimpse of him working together with Ron that day, a sight firmly imprinted onto her memories. Understanding what he was implying, Ginny made a decision.

"I accept your apology."

Silver eyes showing a flicker of relief, Ginny narrowed her own in consideration. Why not? They were on neutral terms, which was more than she could say for select members of different houses she'd butted heads with.

"Since we're both out here, we may as well make the most of it. I'll race you." a competitive gleam in her eyes, Ginny was satisfied in seeing that she'd managed to catch him off guard. A wicked idea in mind, she wondered if he would accept her offer. "If you win, then I'll show you something only a few people know about. But if you lose, you have to prank Professor Snape."

Draco tried not to show his interest. Information was what had elevated their family to the highest of ranks, though their influence wasn't what it used to be, through his father's actions. Even so, her offer intrigued him. "How do I know this information is worth the risk?"

"Oh, it definitely is. I would bet my life on it." confident, a part of her did want to see his shock when realising that magic wasn't the only area she was growing strong in. But they'd all know
eventually and she had no intentions of losing. "The same for me. If I win, you have to tell me something interesting. If I lose, I'm the one pranking Professor Snape."

He was far too interested to pass this opportunity up. With a handshake to seal the deal, Ginny decided on their style of race. Five laps around the pitch, including passing through each of the Quidditch Hoops along the way. No knocking into each other and magic would keep track of their progress.

Ginny was confident. Having flown on a broom since she was a child, she'd often taken one of her brother's, to practice in secret. As Malfoy came from a wealthy family, she had no doubt that he'd also flown from a young age. As both owned a Firebolt, it would solely rely on their skill as to who would win.

Hopping onto her broom she flew in the air, hovering as Malfoy lined up alongside. Leaning forward on her broom slightly, she focused her sights ahead. "Ready?"

"Yes."

She counted them down. "Three, two, one, go!"

As the last word left her lips, they were off. Leaning forward a little more to coax some extra speed from her Firebolt, they were neck and neck for now. As Malfoy was a seeker and she was a chaser, different flying patterns had been ingrained into them. Seekers could fly just about anywhere including outside of the pitch, while chasers focused on flying formations and teamwork. She was a far better Chaser than Seeker, but Ginny had to wonder just how precise he was. He'd need it, for weaving through Quidditch hoops. Liking a challenge she'd thrown that in, only having done it a few times herself.

Curving around the pitch, Ginny was only slightly ahead. With the left, middle and right ring, they were to weave through in that order, continuing around. Flying through the first she immediately turned around, finding the quick turns slowed her down a bit. Noticing Malfoy had more precision he managed to just get ahead of her, now a second behind.

Vowing that she would do better next time, there were still the other set of hoops to go. It had been a while since she last raced anyone, finding herself strangely enjoying the moment.

"Ready to lose, Malfoy?" Ginny called out, met with a confident response.

"Are you ready to lose, Weasley? I'm the one in front."

Apparently, that confidence cost him as when weaving through the hoops, he bumped into the last one. Roles reversed now, Ginny was only putting half her effort into this. Once on her final lap, then she'd go all out.

From the second lap onwards Ginny remained in front, though could sense her opponent wasn't far behind. Going into the fifth and final lap she remained steady, weaving through the hoops. Only needing to go straight now for the finish line, she pushed her Firebolt to the absolute limits.

Just like at the beginning, they were neck and neck once more. Able to see the golden finish line she'd set up glimmering in the distance, the adrenaline rush usually received through flying, spiked violently.
She wanted to win. Burning with fierce determination, she liked to imagine Malfoy eating broom fumes. With an eye-watering speed which Harry would be proud of, she crossed the finish line first. Coming to a stop, it was clear Malfoy was only a hair's width behind her. Looking a mixture of dissatisfied and impressed, he reluctantly accepted the inevitable. "Not bad Weasley."

"You flew pretty well yourself. Don't forget to prank Professor Snape," as she smirked, Draco hoped that he'd get away with it. If not, nothing would protect him from his wrath. Grimacing at the images which flew through his mind, he now had to share information which Weasley would find interesting.

Trying to puzzle it out, they remained airborne as he thought. "I have no idea what sort of things you'd be interested in hearing," Draco admitted.

Definitely nothing too personal. Ginny highly doubted he'd share that with someone he'd only recently made a truce with anyway. She hadn't thought about it. "Whatever you're willing to share."

There wasn't much which fit that description and none of them he thought would be interesting for her to hear. It was his own fault he'd gotten himself into this predicament. Underestimating her ability, he was confident he'd win. As such, he had to pay the price of betting with a Gryffindor, of all the houses.

They weren't friends but also, not exactly enemies either. He wouldn't have flown with his enemy if he saw her in that light. Draco decided to settle for something only select people knew, if they cared looking into it. "Our family owns a wide variety of Peafowl, in various colours through selective breeding. Our rarest is an all white Peacock, named Albion."

She didn't expect that. Brown eyes flickering with surprise, she looked at him. "Seriously?"

At his nod, she let that information digest. "Well, that's definitely interesting. Didn’t expect you to have an interest in birds."

"Why not?" he replied, a little defensively.

Ginny held her hands up. "No judgement here! I think it’s a good thing."

Eyeing her suspiciously, he eventually nodded in acceptance of her words.

"Don’t forget about the prank."

How could he? Draco wondered if he should start planning out a will.

The hours passed by, both enjoying their broom flight. The race and sharing of information breaking the underlying tension, Ginny thought that this side of Malfoy was tolerable. It was a start anyway.

Trying to hide his nervousness, Neville could almost swear the dark dungeon corners had beady black eyes, observing his every movement. Even now, he couldn't banish the image away. He was quite literally, walking into the viper's pit.

"Honestly Longbottom, you'd think you were facing execution."
For the first time, Daphne had invited him to the Slytherin Common Room. It was permitted, so long as their Head of House knew beforehand. Which was why they were on their way to Professor Snape's office.

Even if civil with the man now, there was something about him which still chilled Neville to the bone.

"I am, aren't I?" Neville asked, only half joking. Swallowing, he fought against the urge to flee when stood outside of his office. He was placed in Gryffindor for a reason. If he could kill Bellatrix, facing Professor Snape was nothing.

Lip curling in faint amusement, Daphne carefully schooled her expression to normal. She had a soft spot for Longbottom. Something which shocked her as she had soft spots for no one, except Astoria. She had more of a reputation to keep than Malfoy did, Almost envying him since no one bothered reporting back to his father any more.

She had lied, telling her father this was an alliance solely out of convenience. But truthfully, she liked having a friend, not in Slytherin. He thought far differently from her and they were opposite in almost every way imaginable but strangely, they didn't clash. She found most boys insufferable but without him, Daphne had to admit her quality of Herbology work would be much lower. She wasn't a natural at the subject, unlike him.

Not only that but there was a stirring of something else within her. Ever since they were placed in a team together for that time in DADA, he had aroused her curiosity. She'd only heard of Longbottom through Malfoy's jaded eyes, finding the majority of what he'd said rubbish.

But he'd changed and evidently compared to the shy, trembling boy of years past, so had Longbottom. Daphne had never invited anyone outside of her own house to their common room before. It was a year of firsts.

Knocking on the door she opened it, after the sharp call to enter. Stepping in alongside her, Neville held back a faint flinch when Professor Snape's eyes lingered on him for a moment. Landing on Daphne, he arched a brow. "Miss Greengrass and Mr Longbottom. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Placing the quill back in its holder, Daphne sensed he was in a good mood. Or at least, his version of one. She'd learned to read some of his more subtle moods over the years. "Permission for Longbottom to enter the Slytherin Common Room."

Regarding them for a long moment, he agreed. "Very well." He had no reason to distrust Greengrass, showing that she had a level head even from a young age.

As Professor Snape pinned him with a glare, Neville stopped breathing entirely. "Longbottom, do not abuse the trust placed in you. If I find out that your fellow Gryffindors are made aware of our password, the consequences will be severe. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir." Neville was proud his voice didn't shake one iota.

Satisfied, he dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

Once outside of the door, he blew out a breath in relief. "Am I dead? I feel it."
Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Daphne pinched his arm. "I don't think dead people can feel that."

Point made when he rubbed his arm, Neville agreed. "It's a miracle I'm alive. Or he let me in the common room."

"I don't think so. He wouldn't let just anyone enter. Weasley wouldn't stand a chance. Not that I can imagine him ever wanting to come in."

Neville decided not to mention their Second Year. Harry and Ron had already seen it.

Unlike the Fat Lady's Portrait, there was no visible entrance to the Slytherin Common Room. Standing in front of a wall, Daphne spoke the password.

"Serpens Oculum."

Admitted entry, Neville had no idea what the common room looked like. It wasn't something he'd ever asked Harry either, only hearing of their adventure there.

In his mind, unable to help it, he'd pictured nothing but dark furnishings and an air of gloom.

While the furniture was dark with hints of silver and green, it was far from gloomy. Tasteful was what came to mind. Not only that but as they were below the school, Neville could see that the windows reflected underwater life.

Neville thought he'd feel uncomfortable but actually, he was far from it. Sometimes the garish red and gold of his own common room could be a bit much but here, it wasn't bad at all.

Daphne observed his reaction in cool amusement. "Surprised?"

"I am yeah. I expected something more sinister." freely admitting this, he could see they were the only ones in the common room, for now.

As Daphne took a seat, Neville sat beside her. "Everyone does. But it's home away from home for a lot of us."

Seeing a flicker of something cross her expression, Neville changed the subject. "Fancy a game of Exploding Snap or Chess? Not that I'm any good with either of them."

"I prefer chess. It's good for building the mind." as Daphne stood up she went upstairs, returning with a chess set. Placing it on a round table with two chairs opposite one another, they moved to those seats. "Since you're my guest, I'll let you choose black or white."

Picking the white side Neville sat down, trying to remember some of the moves he'd seen Ron pull. If he was ever given the option he usually left for the Greenhouses rather than play chess, but he could do with the practice.

At first, they were silent, concentrating on making their moves. As Neville instructed his pawn, it was Daphne's turn.

"Longbottom. There's something I've been wanting to know."

With a gesture to continue Neville listened, unsurprised by her question.
"How did you get those markings and your eye colour change?"

They hadn't talked much about themselves whenever meeting up, usually about Herbology, School Life or due essays. He welcomed the change. "You really want to know? Every time I remind myself how it happened, it sounds unbelievable."

"I've heard some shocking things before. Try me." eyes glinting with some challenge, he didn't see why not. It wasn't really a secret anyway.

"Harry gave me a plant and for ages, I couldn't work out what it was. Then I read up on some information and found out more. The plant was a vessel for a goddess of nature. I touched it and gained powers, it turned to ashes which have similar powers and now, I'm no longer plain Neville Longbottom."

Locking eyes with her seriously, Daphne could detect no traces of lies. But still, she looked at him with incredulity. "You're right, that is unbelievable. But then, Potter has gotten himself into unbelievable scrapes before as well."

Agreeing with her, a part of Neville was glad they were talking like this. More than this was that Daphne showed enough interest in him as a person.

Without a doubt, Neville was losing to her spectacularly. Focused on the conversation more than their game of Chess, it wasn't long before Checkmate was upon him. Looking at his decimated pieces and Daphne's near untouched side, it reminded him that anything involving logic for him was bound to end in disaster.

"Bugger," Neville exclaimed, leaning back in his seat and casually observing the results of his defeat.

At the sound of soft laughter, he glanced up, met with a sight he hadn't seen before. Daphne's eyes for that moment were unguarded. Brightening in amusement, a smile tugged at her lips. It gave Neville a different impression of her entirely, one that he liked. The closest he'd ever seen her to a positive mood was either a neutral expression or some form of cold amusement.

Acutely aware of his heartbeat now, he found himself unconsciously staring at Daphne. Noticing his look her own turned wary. "What?"

His outbursts often caught others off guard, particularly when angry. Harry had mentioned the many times he'd blurted things out, either getting himself in trouble or providing entertainment for Alistair. It was only after he'd said it, Neville discovered he had a similar issue.

"You've got a nice smile."

Neville shut his mouth, waiting for a cool, Slytherin-like brush off or some form of inventive curses. He hadn't complimented her personally, even if his thoughts had strayed in that direction. Their friendship wasn't the kind he had with Harry, slinging his arm around the other boy's shoulder with no shortage of banter. It was more tentative, testing the waters and slowly getting to know one other. But with this, he'd figuratively dropped himself in the deep end.

Caught off guard, mild self-consciousness began to rise within her. Only her closest friend, Blaise, had seen anything like the expression which Longbottom had. Her first instinct was to snap defensively, but she could see he was genuine. Reigning back her natural instincts, Daphne let
herself relax. No one else was in the room. "Thank you."

Internally relieved by her response, Neville gave her a smile in return. His heart was doing somersaults. Merlin, what had he landed himself in?

"I'll practice myself later on. Next time, I'll be the one victorious." clenching his fist determinedly, Daphne shook her head. "Foolish Gryffindor."

"Foolish, likeable Gryffindor," Neville added, quietly amused at her faint look of exasperation.

"Yes, alright. Likeable Gryffindor. Don't let Parkinson overhear, I'm sure she'll have a fit."

"I won't," Neville promised, happy by her words. He didn't think she was the kind of person to hang around with him for the sake of it or even for Pure-Blood house alliances and advantages like a lot of Slytherins did. Somehow, he could sense she liked him for him. Hopefully, he wasn't wrong and it would come back to bite him on the arse, but he had a good feeling about this.

About to sit down on the sofa with him again, Daphne knew she shouldn't have mentioned anything. Of all the students to return, she was the last one on her mental list.

Just the same as first year and throughout, Pansy's pug-like nose remained consistently turned up, seeing every other house as personally offensive, but none more so than Gryffindors. The moment she entered the common room and saw them, her shriek pierced Neville's eardrums. "Greengrass, why is there a Gryffindor here?!"

"I invited him," Daphne stated, observing her coolly. She saw no reason to elaborate.

"Traitor!" she hissed, glaring fiercely. "You of all people should know better!" Drawing her wand, she pointed it at Neville. "Leave, you're not welcome here."

Folding his arms, he remained where he was. "I don't think so. Firstly Daphne invited me and secondly, Professor Snape gave permission."

Faltering, she lowered her wand slightly. "T-That can't be true! He wouldn't!"

"Miss Parkinson. Care to tell me why your wand is pointed at an unarmed student?"

How the hell he did do that? Neville swore every time his name was mentioned, he appeared from thin air.

Face paling, Pansy opened her mouth, snapping it shut with his added words.

"If you so much as think of lying, you will serve detention, effective immediately. Come with me."

As Neville turned to face the man fully his robes billowed behind, Professor and student leaving. Alone once again, he grimaced sympathetically. "And you share a room with her?"

Distractedly, Daphne confirmed his words. Mulling over her thoughts internally, she stared at him in a way Neville hadn't seen before. "Just then, you said my name."

Until she'd pointed it out, he hadn't realised. In his head, he'd often called her Daphne, but hadn't out loud until now.
"Sorry, it just slipped out." feeling slightly awkward, his feeling was only temporary with her next words, spoke hesitantly. "You can use my first name, I don't mind."

"In that case, call me Neville. If you want to."

To most, it would be strange that friends addressed each other by surnames mostly, but Neville had adapted to it. It was only when speaking her first name, he came to understand how much of a barrier that placed between them.

"Alright... Neville," Daphne tested his name experimentally, a strange expression crossing her face.

Laughing, he seated himself down on the sofa. "Bit weird sounding isn't it?"

"Very." Joining him, a comfortable silence fell between them. Now that this had happened, what next? Now more than ever, he became aware of their close proximity. He hadn't minded before now, mind focused on whatever it was they were working on together. But away from the Chess set, Greenhouses or anything else but them, his mind began to wander.

And then, his hand brushed Daphne's. Resting on the soft surface it began to tingle, Neville reflexively glancing over at her. Eyes meeting another pair, they remained locked for a long moment.

Neville had no idea what happened. One minute they were staring and the next, her own softened features drew close to him. A hair's width away from one another, they were interrupted with another student entering.

"I've been looking for you. What-" trailing off, Blaise blinked in surprise. "Longbottom? Didn’t expect to see you here."

"I invited him. Whatever you want, can it wait for later?" tone clipped, Daphne didn't bother to hide her irritation.

And then, it clicked for Blaise. "Oh. I'll ah, talk to you later."

Shaking his head in disbelief he left, half wondering if he'd imagined things.

Daphne was aware of what would have happened if not interrupted. Never one to pass up an opportunity, whether to further her ambitions or otherwise, she didn't give any time for potential awkwardness to settle in. "Now. Where were we?" Smirking, a similar amount of distance remained between them. All that was left to do was close it.

Neville hadn't moved, rooted to the spot and focusing on what had nearly happened. No sooner had that thought crossed his mind when a pair of lips touched his own.

What was currently happening, he silently corrected himself. Eyes wide he scraped together whatever brain cells remained functioning, to hesitantly respond. This was his first kiss. Pushing aside awareness of his own inexperience his eyes naturally fell closed, focusing on the soft, shapely feeling of hers.

It was so at odds with what he knew of her or how she appeared to others. The Ice Queen of Slytherin, known as much by her peers across all houses. But there was nothing cold about her. This moment, this kiss, was incredibly warm. Heart rate steadily increasing they pulled away from one
another, Neville robbed of all speech.

She'd kissed Neville Longbottom. That thought barely registered, before brushing it away. It didn't matter. Gryffindor or otherwise, she liked him. He was a source of curiosity, someone Daphne couldn't help but want to know more about. Seeing his dazed expression, she casually waved a hand in front of his face.

Blinking rapidly, his lips tingled pleasantly. "That was, wow. I-" stopping and starting, he could barely form a sentence. Aware of her amused gaze, he blushed.

Obvious to her that it was his first kiss, Daphne didn't mind. In a strange way, she was honoured.

Realising that he should say something, Neville quickly pulled himself together. "Want to go for a walk?"

Damn it, that wasn't what he wanted to say.

With an affirmative to his question, Daphne stood up. As he joined her, Neville gave himself a mental kick.

'Come on, are you a Lion or a Mouse?'

Hoping that it wouldn't result in being hexed, he reached over to take her hand. Met with no resistance, he intertwined their fingers.

Glancing down to gauge her reaction, he was rewarded with a small smile. "How bold of you."

"I try," he joked, butterflies in his stomach. Giving a mental shrug, he decided forwardness was his best option here.

"I think we've sort of done this in the wrong order, but Daphne, will you go out with me?"

Reminding himself that she wouldn't have initiated the kiss or let him do this, he awaited her response.

"Yes."

And just like that, they'd gone from friends to more in a matter of hours. Head spinning, only one thought came to mind. "Parkinson's going to have a heart attack when she finds out."

Smirking, a glint entered her eye. "Her reaction will be entertaining."

That was one way to put it. Passing by Professor Snape's office, they were unaware that the man had spotted them.

Greengrass and Longbottom. Now there was a pair he would have never predicted. Unconcerned in the least, he would leave them to it. Both could easily withstand the backlash of the more traditional, house proud students. Having already dealt with one of them, Severus could hardly wait for retirement.
Harry Potter, bedroom redecorator extraordinaire. That's what they should call him. Or at least, from his point of view, it was a job well done.

He hadn't mentioned redecorating Alistair's old bedroom as a joke. He had every intention of at some point, completely changing how it looked. He'd decided to do it alone, jokingly shooing him out of the room and wanting it to be a surprise. And now, it would be a pleasant or unpleasant kind.

He hoped for the former.

There were bad memories associated with this room, but Harry believed this would strip those memories away. It was the final piece of a past lover to let go.

A part of Harry imagined himself as jealous when picturing himself in a relationship, as he'd seen much within those around Hogwarts. But he'd never experienced that. He'd come to learn there was nothing to be jealous about as with more of his past relationships Harry heard, the more he thought, why would he ever be? It sounded like most if not all of his past lovers had treated Alistair like shit, in various ways.

He could be wrong and if so, would send a silent thanks to those who did treat him well for that period of time. But right now and he hoped for the future, Harry was with him. And he had every intention of showing his love, rather than just saying the words. In his experience, actions often spoke much louder.

'I'm done,' suspecting he'd gone somewhere else during Harry's redecorating, he opened and closed the bedroom door behind him. Materialising into view, he gave Alistair instructions. "Eyes closed, no peeking."

Dutifully closing them, Alistair let himself be lead by the hand. Opening the door and closing it behind them Harry stood to the side, slightly anxious.

"You can look now."

A combination of curious and excited, he did so.

It looked like an entirely different room. With a deep red, crushed velvet bedding, the bed itself was even a different style from before, with plump inviting pillows.

A bedside table stood there and on it, the gift Harry had given him for his birthday. The wallpaper was vintage, also dark red but a slightly different shade. Standing upon a black carpet, Alistair could see a faint silver sparkle among the similarly vintage pattern. Previously this room was various shades of blue, so it had gone in a much opposite direction.

It was a classic, timeless combination of colours, unexpectedly elegant in appearance. His own quarters at Hogwarts were cream and white with a touch of gold. He loved it.

"Harry, this is wonderful." stunned, he took in every detail of the room.

"I'm glad you like it. Reckon I should go down the interior decorating route?"

"If that is your desire, then I am certain you will brighten many a home." softly wrapping his arms around him, Alistair made a decision. Usually, he was fond of plans, but taking Harry to another
country for relaxation purposes after Sirius' outburst, was certainly spur of the moment. Sometimes, it added an extra element of fun.

Recently, Minerva had permitted older students to spend their weekends anywhere they wished, providing heads of houses were informed of their location beforehand. The prefects had mentioned to her general thoughts and feelings, some of which included the feeling of restriction on weekends when they could only go a very limited number of places.

Alistair had the perfect location in mind. "Harry. Would you like to visit a little of Japan?"

Surprised that the conversation went in such a direction, he needed no time to think. "Yes!"

Pleased by his enthusiastic response, Alistair took his hand. "At this time, it will be late. I am afraid it will only be an overnight stay, but I would like you to experience a little of the culture."

Ever since his mention of the flower garden and seeing some of them, Harry had been curious about what else it had to offer. Disappearing, they reappeared somewhere isolated from other people spotting them.

To Harry, it was a small culture shock. Everything looked as if it contained a great deal of history, the air so clean he hadn't realised it was a far cry from Hogwarts.

Though he was unable to read Japanese, Harry could still see the building itself was a hotel. Several stories high, it made for an imposing yet inviting sight.

As they entered Alistair communicated with the staff and unsurprisingly, in their native tongue. Was there a language he didn't know?

At least to Harry, it didn't seem like the kind of place which could be booked on a whim. "You had no problems?" he asked, following Alistair who seemed to know exactly where he was going.

"Normally, I would reserve in advance. But fortunately, the room I desired is still available. I believe that this is partly because I am the owner so exceptions can be made."

A flash of guilt entered his eyes. "I try to not make a habit of it, as it can be troublesome for the staff. So, occasions such as this are very rare."

Harry's mind shuddered to a halt. "Wait, you own it?"

"I do. Solomon and I have many shared properties across the world. Whether it is hotels, homes or otherwise. Most, I purchased to protect them from constantly developing technology. Many monuments and wildlife have been sacrificed in the name of change."

That was true. Privet Drive was one such example, only a small park and more cars than there were trees. "It's really good you do that. I'm sure a load of people are thankful for it."

"While I am an advocate of change, particularly with the mindset of some individuals, change is not always positive. I try to do my part." eyes flickering sadly in remembrance for those he couldn't save, Alistair explained where they were going, for Harry's benefit. "We have one hour of onsen privacy."

"What's an Onsen?" the word unfamiliar, Harry tilted his head and tried to associate it with something he'd heard before.
"It is a shared bath. Usually publicly available, but time slots can be made for couples and families."

As in, they could be shared with other guests at the hotel? Harry was glad they didn't have to do that. It was one thing becoming completely comfortable in his own skin and with Alistair seeing it, but another entirely when thinking of sharing such intimate space with strangers.

Guessing where Harry's thoughts had gone, the man chuckled. "It is strange at first, but I found it surprisingly easy to adapt. However, I have no wish for anyone else to see you in an undressed state, other than myself."

At his show of possessiveness, Harry's heart fluttered. Hiding a grin, he gave Alistair's hand a squeeze. "They don't have the privilege of seeing me in all my impressive glory, unlike you."

"Ah, so confident," he teased, eyes twinkling with amusement. "Indeed, I do see it as a privilege."

Traversing the halls, Harry could see traditional decorations and materials within which differed greatly from what he was used to. On the way, Alistair informed him of what would happen. Remove their shoes in the entryway. The only thing they could take with them was a small washcloth. Once in the changing rooms, all clothes placed in the baskets provided. Afterwards, shower completely. Then, enter the onsen and balance the washcloth on their heads.

Committing those words to memory, Harry had one question. "Why balance it on our heads?"

"The area around an Onsen is usually very wet. It is for patting off excess water before using the larger towels to dry ourselves. While we have magic at our disposal, I believe some of the experience would be lost otherwise."

Understanding, Harry was looking forward to trying it out.

Nothing went wrong, to his surprise and relief. He expected to either miss the stool for showering and crash on his arse or somehow accidentally offend. Fortunately, that didn't happen.

Arriving outside, the view was stunning. At least from what he could see, clouds of steam obscuring his vision slightly. The water looked so blue and welcoming. Slipping into it, he sighed blissfully. Somehow, though it was just hot water in a different setting, Harry relaxed much quicker than usual. With the washcloth balanced on his head, it was only now that he realised something, anxious.

"Will we be ok here? What about Seraphina?" eyes flashing with worry, Alistair wrapped an arm around him.

"You will be safe here, with me. Not only that but it is impossible for her to be anywhere near this island."

"How come?"

"Can you see a structure, over there in the sea?"

Pointing it out, Harry could see. "Yeah. What is it?"

Glancing up questioningly, he made sure not to move his head too fast.
Reassured by his peaceful expression, Harry similarly began to relax. He hadn't tried being anywhere alone, outside of his home, Hogwarts or Lothaire Castle. He doubted he'd be able to at all, knowing Seraphina was out there.

"That is Itsukushima Shrine, one of Japan's most sacred sites. Ever since the 6th Century, it has stood here. While Seraphina is very powerful, the magic at her command is much too dark to ever be allowed entry. The shrine has protective magic, driving away all those that would do harm. Close your eyes and focus on that fact. Your power has been steadily increasing since our first encounter so perhaps, you may be able to sense it."

Curiously, Harry did so. No more than a minute later, he could sense something. "It's so... peaceful. Like a blanket warding off the cold."

Trying to explain in words did no justice, but provided Harry with all the reassurance needed. Leaning into the body warming up beside him he enjoyed his first onsen experience, determined more than ever it wouldn't be his last.

Feeling playful, Harry lightly splashed him. Actions drawing Alistair’s attention, he feigned innocence.

“Did you splash me?” knowing full well he had, Alistair pretended otherwise.

Shaking his head firmly, Harry turned his gaze forward. “It was the wind.”

Hand cupping the side of his face, Alistair gazed into bright green eyes. “It is a still night, there is no wind.”

Harry puckered his lips, blowing through them. As he did, strands of Alistair’s hair were caught in the created breeze. “See? I told you it was the wind.”

With such an adorable expression, Alistair couldn’t help but kiss him in that moment. As Harry tilted his head back he felt the washcloth fall from his head. Before falling into the water, he snatched it mid air. “My Seeker reflexes come in handy.”

Triumphantly, he repositioned it.

Keeping a careful eye on Harry, Alistair didn't want him to overheat. Such a thing for him was impossible, external body temperature rising but internally, only by a small margin.

Noting the rising flush on his cheeks some time later, Alistair sensed the time to leave was near. "Shall we go?"
As Harry nodded, Alistair helped him out of the onsen. Remembering what he’d told him he patted his body down, then used the larger towel before returning to the changing room. Rather than their clothes, they were provided with a robe made from cotton.

According to Alistair, this was a Yukata. Looking at the design, he grinned. "Hey look, Dragons!"

Chuckling at his enthusiasm, Alistair’s was patterned with Koi. Easily slipping into his own and tying the obi, he showed Harry how to put his on.

Feeling comfortable against his slowly cooling skin, Harry was learning more new words than he ever had in his life. They wore Geta, or sandals in his mind, on their feet. Those surprisingly comfortable as well, Harry was lead to an open, airy room. With a sliding door to open, tatami mats were in place of stone, wood or carpet, of which Harry was used to. With a clear view of outside ahead, a bed without a mattress was placed on the mat itself.

Seeing where Harry's eyes had gone to first, he explained. "That is a futon. They are far more comfortable than you would think."

Harry had no problems. Once, he’d fallen asleep on a windowsill of Hogwarts castle when younger. If he could get an hour or so somewhere uncomfortable, there would be no issues with this. He did think it looked comfortable.

Attracted to the view outside, the sky held just enough light for Harry to see out of it. unable to look away, he smiled. "The view is amazing."

Looking across the waters, Alistair’s eyes held a hint of nostalgia. “What you see is Mount Misen. I have seen each of these rooms and I believe this one offers the best view. Which is why I am pleased it was available for an overnight stay."

Eyes still looking out over the sea and beyond, Harry voiced his opinion. "It’s nice, but none of that compares to you."

He often came out with such words, that rendered Alistair nothing more than mouldable putty. He loved to travel but more than anything now, he wanted to with Harry. Everywhere possible, whether visiting new sites or ones he knew intimately. Everything with him was an adventure, as though the next page of a long book had yet to be written.

"Oh, Harry. Sometimes, you say the sweetest things without realising as such. I am flattered."

Sunset eyes glittering, nothing seemed more natural than to share a kiss at that moment.

There was something about this place, that freed Harry of all burdens. For now, nothing else mattered. His schoolwork, threats, personal demons, everything temporarily ceased to exist.

With Alistair's kiss, it ignited the inner flames of his passion, one of which he had yet to fully discover. Following his heart rather than his mind, Harry poured as much of his affection into it as possible. Stretching upward to wrap his arms around him, he was saved from having to do so, when easily picked up.

Voicing his surprise that too was claimed by Alistair's lips, transformed into soft moans of desire. Back resting against the wall his weight was supported between that and Alistair, dizzy from his
intoxicating kiss with a hint of something more.

They changed angles and with each return, sparks of electricity danced upon Harry's skin. Never, in all his existence, did he believe it was possible to feel like this. It was almost as if he'd discovered the existence of the Wizarding World again and that magic was real, it wasn't a figment of his imagination. But this was a different kind of magic completely.

Sensing that they'd moved he found himself lowered down, on top of the futon. Slipping the Geta off his feet a larger pair joined them, Harry observing as elegant fingers began to skilfully untie his recently tied obi.

"May as well not have bothered dressing." Harry laughed, breathlessly as his bath warmed skin was treated to a number of loving kisses.

"Perhaps, but undressing you is part of the thrill." eyes twinkling mischievously, Harry's face flushed as with every inch of skin revealed, kisses were planted against it. Both disrobed now and his own body nothing more than a quickly heating inferno, he realised that time and their future, had become uncertain.

They'd been together for nearly six months. In one sense, to Harry, it had felt much longer than this. He had seen sides of Harry he'd shown to no one else. Through thick and thin he'd been at his side, of constant support, reassurance, companionship and teaching.

He loved him so much it was hard to breathe. He'd thought that with Dumbledore and the Death Eaters no longer a threat, they could live out the rest of their lives happily. But now, with Seraphina, he didn't know anymore.

Harry wanted to take that step forward. Not only because he could think of no one else he'd rather share it with and right here and now, it was the perfect setting, but he wanted to take this chance. If not, it might be taken from him forever.

Nerves rising within him, Harry still managed to speak. "Alistair?"

At his hesitant questioning the man stopped what he was doing. Eyes locking with Harry's, he listened.

Wondering how to voice what he wanted, Harry put faith in the fact he was experienced and as such, would catch onto his meaning. "I'm ready."

Understanding immediately, Alistair's eyes gained a note of seriousness. Searching his expression, they flickered. "Are you sure?"

Nodding confidently Harry reached up, a hand brushing the side of his face. "More than anything. Not just with all, that's happened and what will, but this is a really special moment. I want you to be my first."

The weight of Harry's words was significant. Alistair had tried not to think of possible unpleasant outcomes, but the gravity of the situation was brought to the forefront by Harry. He was right. After today, there might not be another moment like this again.

Keeping his sorrow tightly locked away, the rest of Harry's words sunk in. Heart beating a steady rhythm, a strange kind of nervousness of the likes he hadn't felt since his own inexperienced times,
washed over him. More than anyone else he'd shared these moments with, Alistair wanted him to enjoy it.

"Alright." smiling down at him, Alistair dropped a kiss onto his nose. Tickling the tip of it, this eased some of Harry's nerves. "If you wish to stop at any moment, tell me."

Harry nodded, appreciative of his consideration.

Kneeling beside him, Harry could see his fingertips glow with faint magic. "This will feel a little odd. But preparations beforehand are necessary."

Fingertips directed towards his skin, Harry began to feel a tingling, emptying sensation inside. Realising what the spell had done, he blushed. That wasn't something he'd thought of, despite its obviousness. "Oh."

Chuckling to himself, Alistair shared a little of his own experience. "It is perfectly natural and yet, I was much like you are."

"You were like me? I seriously can't picture you anything but confident," Harry confessed, seeing him in a new light.

"We all have to start at the beginning. It has taken many years for me to be absolutely sure in my actions."

That made sense. Body relaxed, Harry could feel Alistair's hands on his legs. Able to feel but not see what he was doing, he naturally kept the position they were put into.

Knees up and feet flat on the futon for a moment, it wasn't long before Alistair coaxed them up, gently spreading his legs apart.

Realising that this left him more exposed than ever, Harry couldn't decide whether his embarrassment or arousal was stronger.

"Y-You can see-" Harry stumbled over his words, voice a higher pitch than normal when hearing Alistair's amused words back.

"-Everything?"

"Yeah."

Hearing a knowing laugh, Harry jumped when feeling soft kisses pressed against his inner thighs. Slowly moving inward, he was unprepared for Alistair's tongue to suddenly target an area he never considered.

Going through every swear word in his mind, Harry's surprised shout sounded somewhat strangled. Arms coming to wrap around his thighs he was gently held in place, a tongue all the while almost leisurely licking his entrance.

Why did it feel so good? He was confused and pleased beyond belief, mind suddenly and unexpectedly opened to a whole other realm of possibilities.

"Ahh..." Harry inhaled, gasping for air as all he could focus on was the sensation of Alistair's tongue.
Hands balling into fists beside him his eyes fell closed. Breathing heavily, he could feel his legs shake slightly.

For minutes he remained there, holding Harry in the same position, slowly unravelling beneath his masterful ministrations.

When Alistair eventually stopped, it took a moment for Harry's mind to catch up. With a slightly dazed expression, he voiced the first thing on his mind. "I didn't expect that."

"Always expect the unexpected, Harry. An act such as this can be very pleasurable, as you have learned."

Rising up to wink at him, Harry was almost painfully erect at this point. Sometimes, simply being close and not engaging in anything was enough for his mind to be the only fuel needed. But in this situation, he was slowly but surely going insane.

Heart rate not slowing any, Harry felt something different brush against him. Stiffening, he listened to Alistair's soft, melodic tone.

"I do not want to hurt you. Focus on steadying your breathing, it will help in relaxation. I am going to use my fingers."

Doing as instructed Harry's eyes fell closed. In, out. In, out. Regulating his breathing, he began to relax. He would rather be told what was going to happen, than feel anxious about the unknown.

He'd never done this himself, finding the sensation of a finger inside strange, at first. Slowly adapting to the feeling Harry began to enjoy it, moving in a way which almost matched his breathing.

"It feels nice," Harry spoke, voice very soft but still heard.

"I am glad to hear it."

As a second finger began to join the first, Harry was stretched further. Stiffening he focused on Alistair's previous words, taking a little longer to adapt this time, but enjoyed this new kind of intimacy.

"You are doing wonderfully, my love. Whenever you feel comfortable, we will continue."

Smiling at his nickname, Harry needed the encouragement. Relaxing further, he eventually began to focus on the fingers moving back and forth inside, gently scissoring.

As always he went at Harry's pace, growing used to this new feeling. Moans leaving his lips, he wanted to take the final step.

"I want to feel you."

Confidence and desire in his voice, Alistair withdrew his fingers. More magic at his fingertips, he kept Harry informed. "I am going to cast a protective spell."

A barrier would be placed inside. Upon the point of climax, all released inside would hit this barrier, disappearing with it upon contact. Magically and structurally sound, it ensured nothing would happen.
Nodding to indicate his understanding, Harry felt another, milder tingle inside him for no more than a second. Resting on his forearms slightly to see, a small jar appeared in Alistair's hands. Unscrewing the lid he scooped out a fair amount, the clear, slightly thick substance coating his fingers.

As Harry watched Alistair lubricate himself, he found the act to be incredibly erotic. Ensuring he was liberally coated, the hand slick with lubrication became clean once more.

The tip of him pressed against Harry, his eyes swam with nervousness. Fingers were one thing, but would he fit? He'd always seemed a perfect size, but feeling him inside was a different story.

"Do not fear, I will be gentle." Alistair soothed, reaching for Harry's clenched hand to hold it comfortably.

Being able to see him properly now along with hearing him and the touch of his hand, was all the reassurance Harry needed.

Slowly and carefully, Alistair began to ease his way inside. Fighting against the instinct to clench, Harry focused on the soft, sudden sensation of Alistair's lips. He relaxed into it, tongue stroking his own.

Able to feel him sliding inside he didn’t tense, distracted by Alistair’s kiss until, they became one.

He felt whole, complete. As though something had been missing in his life, up until now. The feeling was so breathtaking, so wonderful, that Harry's eyes watered slightly.

Expression more raw and open than he'd ever seen, Alistair's free hand came to cup his cheek. Thumb stroking the skin, he could see a similar expression reflected back at him. "Harry..."

The biggest smile he'd worn in a while, it was only natural for Harry's legs to wrap around him, secure. Placing his own hand on top, he squeezed softly.

"Go on."

With that voiced encouragement, Alistair began to move.

There was nothing rushed about his actions. Hips moving in a slow, steady rhythm, pleasure unlike anything Harry had experienced began to build within him.

Hands coming to rest on Alistair's shoulders, his length hit something which made Harry see stars. "Ahh!" He called out, throwing his head back, surprised and pleasured beyond all comprehension. "What was that?"

Kissing him, Alistair whispered into his ear. "That is your prostate. Just as a woman has a pleasure point, so do we."

"It feels amazing."

"It will feel much more so, very soon."

With that promise hanging in the air, Alistair redirected his focus, to hitting the very same sweet spot.
Every few seconds, a jolt of pleasure intertwined with the carefully building flames of his desire, caused him to cry out. Not holding back Harry's arms wrapped around him, their eyes locking together and entirely on the same wavelength. One hand sliding upward, his fingers ran through silky hair.

Harry could feel him moving, far deeper and more intense than he could have ever pictured.

The sounds of their ecstasy in unison, no composer could ever hope to recreate music such as this. They were one single entity, wholly connected in minds and bodies.

It was more than Harry had ever imagined. A steady stream of moans leaving him at this point, they began to find a rhythm, together. Meeting every gentle thrust, their universe became the only one to exist.

More intimate that they'd ever been at this point, no guards, no worries, nothing else in the room, other than their unwavering, intense outpouring of love.

Alistair's eyes seemed so clear. Crystal, even though night had descended upon them. If he looked closely, Harry could see a reflection of himself. With a mirror image of emotions, it was almost hard to believe his happiness now, with a lack of it so many years before.

He could feel every inch. They needed no words, voices conveying all it needed to. Taken over by instinct, they naturally began to move a little faster.

The waves of pleasure occurring more frequently, Alistair's name fell from his lips more than once, as if in prayer.

"A-Alistair, I-" breaking off he threw his head back, crying out loudly. Meeting his lips afterwards for a passionate, intense kiss, Harry was truly, madly, deeply.

"I love you!" his outburst was desperate, achingly genuine as he pulled the man much closer. Feeling him deeper than ever before Harry readjusted his legs slightly, embracing the further skin on skin contact and Alistair himself.

"I love you too." Alistair had no need of breathing and yet, his reply was breathless. The threads of his control thoroughly unravelled, no one had ever managed to affect him like this. Right now was special. Not only for Harry's first time but Alistair's too.

It was the first time he'd ever felt so confident, assured in another person's love.

Chest tight with this knowledge, Alistair knew that whatever happened, Harry would be his last. He loved him, to the point where it physically hurt. There could be no other. All of his heart which began beating through Harry alone, belonged to him, completely.

So close were they, that it became impossible to figure out where one ended and the other began. He was moved, open to a world of such beauty, it began to overwhelm him. Tears of joy leaking from the corner of Harry's eyes, his voice hitched. "I'm so close."

Not stopping for a moment, Alistair kissed his tears away. “I am too.”

With his soft admittance, a final jolt of pleasure was enough to push him over the edge.
With one last shout, Harry climaxed. Clenching around him tightly Alistair matched him even now, finding his own release shortly after.

Filled up with his warmth, it disappeared seconds later. But still, he didn't mourn the loss, Alistair himself right there with him and still inside.

Trying to catch his breath, Harry's vision swam for a moment. Holding onto Alistair his heart rate had yet to slow down, able to feel the other's man's beating rapidly too.

They lay there for a long moment, basking in the knowledge of what they'd just done. Never in his life, did he think anything could feel like this. In his heart, he knew it wouldn't have, if not for Alistair.

Ensuring that only a little of his weight rested on Harry, Alistair eased his way out. He'd done this many times but it was so much more intense and pleasurable, both for his own and Harry’s, that it almost seemed like his first time as well.

Gathering him close, Harry's arms wrapped tightly around him. Whispering a spell to clean them, Alistair listened to his next words.

"Meeting you was the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Voice muffled against his chest, Alistair's arms were equally strong, with a hint of desperation.

“I am overjoyed that you found me.” Eyes closing, love, awe and a myriad of emotions welled within him. This was it. If anything happened to Harry, his heart would shatter. It had been broken many a time, but he wouldn't recover from this.

Stroking his hair Harry relaxed, his body temperature cooling down as he snuggled closer.

"Are you in pain?"

At his concerned voice, Harry looked up into worried eyes. Smiling reassuringly, he did what Alistair had done for him many a time. Pressing a smattering of kisses across his cheeks, Harry smiled with a faint hint of fatigue. "No. If there was pain at any point I don't remember. You made me feel better than I ever have before.”

Relieved to hear it, Alistair had the curious sensation he believed was known as butterflies in his stomach. "Good. But if you do feel any pain later, inform me.”

Promising that he would, a thought came to mind. "Hey! After this, I can now call myself Harry Potter, the man who lived.”

Alistair burst into laughter. "Silly Harry," he teased, manoeuvring them both so they lay between the futon cover. Seeing how drained he looked, he encouraged Harry to lay on his chest. "Rest, I will be here.”

Harry didn't doubt that for a second. Every moment had to end but in his mind, he clung onto right now, stubbornly. Fighting against his natural urge to rest would do no good, even though he knew once he awakened, they would have to go back. He couldn't run away. He never had, always tacking issues head-on. Seraphina would be no exception.
Settling down Alistair's hand began to stroke his hair again, a quiet, almost familiarly soothing humming filling the now silent air.

Able to detect Harry's slower breathing and heart rate a few minutes later Alistair lay there, absorbing what had just happened. He had taken his time, for Harry's sake and his own desire to enjoy the moment, but passed by all too soon. He had never slept with a virgin, worried for what possible negative outcomes there would be or accidentally hurting potential partners. To his relief that hadn't happened with Harry. The fact that he trusted Alistair so much that he was willing to share his first time, was something he'd treasure always.

He was precious, irreplaceable. Because of that, he feared the future’s possible outcomes.

Everything happened for a reason. If not when she had, Seraphina would have revealed herself at another point. She intended to defeat them, take their power. He wouldn't make it easy for her. He had his family to protect. Solomon and without a doubt, Harry was family too.

Watching over him Alistair held onto every second of time he could. He had a feeling that something would happen soon, an opinion of which Harry and the others shared. But for now, they could take this moment alone together until they had no choice but to return.

Alone with his thoughts, as was usual these days, Voldemort reflected on his lack of concern, for all his Death Eaters who were once more imprisoned or dead.

Regrets did nothing. He never lingered on what he should have done, but what he would do in the future.

But right now, he found himself with regrets. He'd ended up almost exactly like Dumbledore, a man who he'd sworn to never be like. The only thing he could gain satisfaction from was still having his own mind and magical power. Disguising himself and assuming a new identity would be simple. He'd done it many times before now.

Deciding on the way forward, he was interrupted when a figure materialised in the room. Wand drawn, he pointed it directly at the intruder. "Who are you?"

"Who I am is none of your concern. What I want, is. Join me, or face the consequences."

He joined no one. "You dare try to force my hand? I refuse. Leave at once!" he hissed, wand still drawn.

"Oh, such a pity. Your cooperation would have made things much easier. No matter. At least this way, it will be interesting and ensure you obey no one but me."

Before he could so much as utter another word, an intense pain targeted his neck. Body trembling violently, he crumpled to the floor.

Leaving him there, Seraphina sat down, to wait. This method of transformation was much more intense and if successful, Tom Riddle would be no more than a mindless puppet with one task only. Kill.
Inky black eyes glinting amusedly, she had no doubts he would survive the transformation. He was magically powerful and his will, for a human, was impressive. While she could drain his power, why not put it to intriguing use? The many transformed Vampires under her command lacked magical strength in comparison to physical; he would have both.

Once awakened, it would be time to strike. No one had ever accused her of being unfair so she would give them time to prepare.

Crossing one leg over another she settled down to wait. All the while, imagining the sweet taste of blood coating her tongue and his power, uniting with her own.

Cold laughter filled the room. Soon, the Lothaire brothers and Harry Potter would be hers, then, this world.

Chapter End Notes

Things are getting intense now! Well, I suppose they were before, but in a different way :P I've written smut quite a few times before, but these two mean so much to me. I wanted to show that for them, it was much more than just sex. There was a physical and emotional connection, of two characters who have been through a lot, with unwavering feelings. I hope I was able to get that meaning across 💖
Three, Two, One...

Chapter Summary

All good things must come to an end, as Harry finds out upon returning to Hogwarts. A declaration brings days filled with bustling activity and surprises, one which is of vital importance. Even with such darkness on the horizon, there are those willing to fight.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: New relationships and blossoming ones, a step further than ever before.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warning: Violence and mentions of rape in this chapter.

Warmth, comfort. The moment that Harry awakened, those were the first words which sprang to his slightly hazy mind. Opening his eyes he was met with a naked form and just over the top, only vaguely familiar surroundings.

Lower on the ground than he expected to be, last night's activities came to Harry’s mind. He'd had some vivid dreams, but the aching of his body indicated that this was no dream.

Coming to this realisation he stayed still, a part of him hoping that Alistair wouldn't notice he'd woken up. Mostly, because he also knew it would be time to go back soon. His gut instincts had rarely led him astray and today, he had the insistent niggling sensation that once they did, something would happen.

Attempting to subtly burrow himself beneath the covers and closest to the most reassuring thing in his life, Harry felt a hand tinged with faint heat, touch his back and stroke along it.

"Morning, Harry."

Thoughts of simply going back to sleep dashed he shuffled back, enough to glance up at him.

Hair lacking the usual neatness, Harry could see traces of the minutes he'd spent carding his hand through those silky strands, thoroughly in the heat of passion. From there, lead onto a chain reaction of memories. As they rose to the surface, he blushed reflexively. "Morning."

A soft, serene smile illuminating his face, Alistair's fingers brushed his cheek. "How are you feeling?"

Guessing what he referred to, Harry had never felt more relaxed, disregarding the anxiety of heading
I feel... good. Better than good, brilliant. We really did, didn't we?"

Harry wasn't eloquent at the best of times, but proper words failed him here.

"Yes. I confess, that I have never shared a partner's first time, until you. I am honoured that you have placed such trust in me."

He envied Alistair's ability to sound composed, no matter the situation. "Don't forget love! That's a key point in all of this," Harry pointed out, closing the distance between them to stealthily steal a kiss.

"Indeed it is." sighing happily, he could see various emotions flickering across Harry's face until his smile faded. "Any idea what time it is? I know we'll have to go back soon."

Raising his hand from beneath the covers Alistair held it up, fingertips spread out slightly. Seeing the time, his eyebrows raised in faint surprise. "12:30pm."

Sitting up, Harry's eyes widened. "I slept for that long?! I'm adding this to the list of things which are a first for me."

Raising himself up to join him, Alistair's arms wrapped around his middle. Whispering into his ear, he delighted in seeing Harry's flush travel further down. "It is only natural, after how voraciously passionate you were a mere few hours ago."

After years of being Hermione's friend, Harry had picked up a few of the more complicated words she'd used, committing their definition to memory. Recalling what that one meant, words failed him again. "...You're exaggerating."

Chuckling to himself, he disagreed. "Not at all, I am simply being truthful."

If only he could freeze this moment for eternity. Sighing softly, a thought occurred to him. "It's only early in Scotland, right? Can we have a look around here, for a few hours until it's morning over there?"

That was what Alistair had planned to do, even without him suggesting it. "Of course. There are other things I wish for you to see before we return."

Happy with his reply, Harry would treasure their time together here, more than countless hours they'd shared before now. Able to hear the reluctance in Alistair's tone, he knew they were on the same wavelength for this.

Dressing in fresh clothes summoned by Alistair's magic, they enjoyed the few hours left to spare in Japan, Harry's mind broadened further to a culture different from the one he was used to.

To both of their sorrow, time swiftly slipped through their fingers and before long, it was time to go back. Waving a silent farewell to Japan and with Alistair's hand in his own firm grip, they disappeared, reappearing within Hogwarts' grounds.

As if to signify Harry's earlier thoughts of something happening, the clouds above their heads were a bruised, battered grey. With the threat of a downpour, they headed inside.

"Usually I don't think bad weather is a sign of anything more. But I've got a feeling that this is
different."

With those words, it echoed Alistair's thoughts. A hint of unease swimming within his eyes, his grip on Harry's hand tightened reflexively. "I share your opinion. But all we can do is prepare, to the best of our abilities."

Compared to before, Harry was confident. While he didn't think he would last long against someone like Seraphina, he had a few tricks up his sleeve which would throw her off, if her attention strayed from Alistair. "True. I think everyone else should know of the danger if she's the type to always strike without warning."

So far, only those close to them both were aware of Seraphina. But undoubtedly, more would have to be involved in this. As it was around the time of breakfast being served they split up, to arrive through different entrances. Harry's hand mourning the loss of contact he instead balled it into a determined fist at his side. Squeezing briefly, he released it. Senses alerted, he would be ready to tackle whatever came their way head-on.

As Harry and Alistair joined those gathered in the Great Hall, they were spared only a few curious glances. To begin with they'd been the talk of Hogwarts but now, used to their habits, most students settled for other gossip.

Taking his usual seat, he was treated to Ginny's gaze of extreme intensity. "Something happened between you and Alistair, didn't it?"

"What makes you say that?" asking nonchalantly, Harry silently wondered how she always seemed to notice changes in him.

"No idea, you just seem different." shrugging, she resumed eating her breakfast.

He'd been fairly open about his relationship with Alistair, but not treading into the too much information category. Even without going into great detail, they'd catch onto his meaning.

"Yeah. We went to Japan for a few hours and things happened. I told him I was ready and we..." stopping there he needn't have continued, Ginny's eyes sparkling.

With a squeal from Hermione, Harry ducked his head a little. "Hey, don't draw attention to me."

"Sorry." looking mildly apologetic, a smile lit up her face. "I'm happy for you Harry."

With the presence of his friends reassuring, he noticed that Neville's gaze strayed elsewhere. Following his line of sight, Harry saw Daphne, features somehow slightly softer than usual.

Guessing what might have happened, Neville's sheepish expression at being caught out was telling. Without having to ask, he explained. "While things progressed for you, they did for me as well. Daphne invited me back to the Slytherin Common Room, we k-kissed," stumbling over that word, he gave himself a mental kick. "And now she's my girlfriend."

"That's brilliant Nev!" clapping him on the shoulder enthusiastically, he would have never pictured them together at first. But he'd seen them together sometimes before now, deciding that they were a good match.

Before any more words could be spoken, their attention was captured by a late arrival. Only, there
was a difference.

Caught in the middle of drinking, Harry choked on the mouthful of Orange Juice he'd taken. Unable to believe his eyes, he blinked. When everything remained the same, one culprit came to mind.

'...Did you prank Professor Snape?'

A faint sound of disappointment. 'Alas, I cannot take credit for this.'

Harry wondered who it was. Robes rainbow in colour his hair was a vivid green. With a full face of clown makeup, his scowl around a comically painted red mouth was clear to see. A shiny red nose accompanying it, no one dared to laugh. Instead, the hall fell silent.

Knowing exactly who did it Ginny turned to the Slytherin table. Managing to catch Draco's eye, she gave a subtle thumbs up. Laughing softly to herself, Ginny kept her voice at a whisper. "I know who did it."

With questioning glances in her direction, she explained. "Malfoy. Yesterday I went to fly on the Quidditch pitch and he was there. I was going to head back inside but she stopped me, to apologise. We made a truce and from there, a raced him a couple of laps around the pitch. Whoever won would hear interesting information shared from the loser, while the loser had to prank Professor Snape. I won, found out something interesting and now this."

Apparently, Harry had missed out on some pretty significant developments while away. "Well, that explains it. Judging from his glare, I'd say he blames Professor Lothaire for it. Let's hope he doesn't find out the truth."

"He looks so pretty in those colourful robes!" delighted, Luna admired how they shimmered slightly different with subtle movement.

"Don't let him overhear you say that," Harry spoke, slightly breathless from trying to hold back laughter. But at their eyes happened to meet, he couldn't hold back any longer. Ducking his head down to hide it, his shoulders shook with laughter.

Harry should have known that's when trouble would strike.

Everything returning to normal, or close to it, he could almost fool himself into relaxing completely. But Harry couldn't. Not just yet.

His internal thoughts were proven correct when, alongside the postal Owls, came a strange, black silhouette. Vaguely resembling a flying creature, it held a dark envelope in its wispy claws.

Unsure if it was a magical construction or an actual animal, it nonetheless drew the attention of all students keeping an eye out for any mail. When it landed in front of Alistair, Harry's heart sank with dread.

Even without opening it, Alistair knew exactly who this would be from. An unseen weight pressing down on his shoulders, the construct of magic dissipated into the air. Checking for any signs of hexes or curses, he found none.

Meeting Minerva's concerned gaze, he thought it would be best to explain, before opening it. "I believe that this is from Seraphina."
With only her and Severus able to pick up on his words, her lips drew into a thin line. Catching the man's serious expression, Alistair was in no mood for joking now.

Taking no more than a few seconds, he easily dispelled the prank. Returned to normal, Severus inclined his head in thanks. Eyes narrowing at the letter, he was the next to speak. "What should be expected?"

Alistair's response was instantaneous. "The worst. I am under no illusions, that she seeks to destroy this world as we know it. But, she will begin with me."

Knowing at this point he was prolonging the inevitable, the wax seal of her family crest was further proof of who had sent this. Breaking it he expected to be greeted with parchment and handwriting but instead, received something else entirely.

The moment the seal was broken, inky black magic rose from the contents. Spreading into the air it formed, creating a solid mass. Or more correctly, a projection of Seraphina herself. While most looked on in confusion, some swallowed nervously.

Able to tell straight away that this was a pre-recorded projection rather than live, her eyes still somehow managed to meet Alistair's, throughout the entirety of her words.

"Lothaire. For over a thousand years I have waited, biding my time until you were strong enough for me to claim. Now, the time has come. I give you three days to prepare. On the fourth day at 3 pm, I will come to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You will remain on the grounds for this day, or I will kill every single student that resides within, no matter if they are in the building or elsewhere. You may surrender or resist, but no matter what, all of your fates are sealed. Until next we meet."

The words spoken sent chills along everyone's spines. Filled with such loathing, malice and a hint of glee, many students who had seen him were reminded somewhat of Voldemort, with her sinister air. Panicked and fearful shouts rang across the hall, fit to burst.

With an ashen pallor, Minerva rose to her feet, acting before things spiralled into chaos. "Attention all students! Arrangements will be made for those who wish to return home."

None of them was blind to the clear hatred she directed towards them all, not just who it was intended for. While students began to make their way out along with the staff's guidance, Harry found his section of the table crowded with familiar faces.

They were all from the DA. Half expecting as much, he called for attention of his own. "Can any members of the DA not going home follow me, please?"

Able to make his voice heard amongst the general muttering students were split, many following Harry and his friends while others left.

Heart beating a steady rhythm, Harry kept his trembles under control. Seeing her again, even if only a projection, had affected him more strongly than he let on. It would be up to them if they decided to
help. But for the younger students, he wouldn't give them an option.

Spotting Lilah and Zain among those who followed him, he wouldn't allow them to remain. They were too young. Really, they all were, but he'd never had a choice of when to grow up. That had been taken from him long ago.

Going straight to the Room of Requirement he pushed open the door, standing in front of the hundred or so students gathered there. He owed them all an explanation. Expecting them to act without knowing full details themselves was not only irresponsible but unfair.

Meeting the eyes of all those gathered there, Harry organised his thoughts. There was no time to worry.

"Thanks to everyone who came here. We've spent a lot of time together, perfecting spells, Animagus forms and training as a large group. But this, more than anything, will determine life or death."

Able to feel the seriousness of Harry's words, no one spoke. "The projection you all saw in the hall, belonged to a woman called Seraphina Morozov. She's a Vampire, older than Alistair. Don't take her words lightly. She's a threat, much more than Voldemort. If she's given us three days to prepare, she's not going to come alone. There's a chance she'll have backup, with Vampires and possibly other things which pose a greater danger."

"How do you know her?" identifying the voice as Blaise, that was something he expected to be asked.

"She used me to get to Alistair. As you all know I'm close with him and for a few hours, I was imprisoned. I'll spare you the details, but it was... horrible. I couldn't fight back and I'd never seen such power. So take this as a warning. Anyone in 5th year and upwards, I won't try and influence your decision. But anyone 4th year and below I ask that you go home."

"That's not fair! You mean to say after the months you've taught us you won't let us fight?"

Recognising the voice as Romilda's, Harry answered her. "I'm not your parent so I can't stop you. But knowledge of advanced spells and everything learned in class pales in comparison to experience. How many of you have fought against threats, like magical creatures or Death Eaters?"

When only half raised their hand, Harry nailed his point home. "Seraphina is more dangerous than all the Death Eaters and Voldemort himself combined. While I appreciate all of you, I don't want to see anyone die before their time comes. I can't guarantee the lives of those who choose to stay though so if everyone goes home, I wouldn't blame you."

Finishing there, the last of the younger students' protests died down. As a few of them left the majority stayed, Harry surprised by just how many.

With tearful eyes, Lilah came up to him. "I understand. But please, be careful." giving him a brief hug she sniffed, wishing she knew more magic and was old enough, to help.

"I'll do my best," Harry spoke, not promising anything but patting her head soothingly. Watching her leave, he was internally relieved that his words had got through to them all.

"Blimey Harry, you get yourself into some troublesome shite," Seamus spoke, slightly disbelieving. "But still, I'm with you. Some friendless bitch with trust issues isn't going to stop us that easily."
As always, Seamus had a way with words that helped to ease the tension in his heart. "Thanks."

"What's the next plan of action?" Ginny asked, forwarding things on.

For a while, the group of students remained there, in an area where time passed differently to outside. The question of Voldemort himself being there was frequently asked by the students but for that, Harry didn't know. They weren't exactly friends but not enemies either. The man had ways of learning information so before the days were out, he suspected that Voldemort would be aware of something happening.

Feeling secure in the knowledge that they knew a little more at least, the only ones who remained were Harry, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna. As the girls shared a look, Hermione was the first to speak. "We're going to need all the help we can get. I think we should ask the Fae."

Nodding in agreement, Ginny's memory flickered back to the first time they'd heard of Sun, Moon and Bloom. "I think their prophecy ties in with this, somehow. If we explain, that's one step towards success."

Trying to remain positive, Luna silently concurred with her words. She'd seen lifeless bodies of Vampires and Fae. While unable to tell which sides they were on, a part of her suspected that Seraphina had more than just Vampires within her ranks. Keeping her fear for the real possibilities locked away, it left Harry and Neville alone.

"I'm going to visit Aela. She's someone we'll need the help of."

Nodding to indicate he understood, Neville had his own place to be. He'd yet to use all of Zeme's ashes, or his own powers fully. He wondered, just how much could he influence the trees? If each of them had a little something extra, it could be beneficial. While there was a chance Seraphina and whoever she brought along wouldn't come from the Forbidden Forest's direction, he saw that as the most likely course of action. They'd need every advantage possible.

Ron had remained silent throughout Harry's speech, amazed at how much he'd changed. But then, so had he. Along with his change of attitude and therapy sessions, the thought never crossed his mind to go home. No. He'd stay and help. Not for the reasons he'd done so in the past, but because he wanted to stand alongside his peers and the other adults.

With permission from Professor McGonagall, he flooed home, only so he could tell his family what had happened. They needed to know not only the situation but that he would be taking part in it. Feeling better that he was doing something to help, even if only a little, Ron couldn't deny his nervousness for what would happen.

Assisting other members of staff in seeing students home, Seraphina's words were alarming. But more than that, determination filled his heart. They would prevail. To fail, would mean many innocents died at her hand alone. She had already murdered millions, Alistair wouldn't let history repeat itself.

"I must find and inform Solomon of what has happened. Forgive me if I am absent over these coming days, as there are those that I must finally ask favours from."

"With the bare minimum of students remaining in school, lessons will have to be halted until we know the outcome. The Minister and Amelia must be made aware of this, so your absence is..."
understandable and noted."

With Minerva's words, Alistair approved. He didn't expect her to react any other way but was still relieved. “Thank you. I must go.”

Disappearing right on the spot, Severus had work of his own to do. His field of expertise was Potions for a reason. In his quarters, were a number of ingredients and potions or poisons crafted from them, which would see him serve a hefty sentence in Azkaban. But with times such as these, even areas of the Ministry still incompetent will recognise a threat around the corner. Anyone who believed what they'd heard today was a joke, were fools in his eyes. It was obvious Lothaire and she had history. What that was he didn't know or care. All that mattered, was the Dark Lord had suddenly become very insignificant when faced with this. He'd survived so far, despite playing both sides of a dangerous game. Severus would be damned if he died now. Without Albus there and the Dark Lord's lack of interest in him, the right side became plainly obvious. It was a side he'd remain with, having a choice in the matter for the first time. He wouldn't waste such an opportunity.

Present throughout the entire thing, Remus couldn't help but think Hogwarts drama never changed, no matter how many years passed by. Intending on sharing this information with Sirius, many possibilities ran through his mind, none of them good. Life had taught him pessimism but for this, he remained stubbornly optimistic. Knowing that he'd be home by now Remus returned to Evergreen Manor, needing a confidence boost from someone who had plenty to spare.

As Alistair reappeared in Lothaire Castle, he was immediately able to tell where Solomon was. Not only that, but Rupert and Jacob were present also. Taking advantage of this, he found himself in the dungeons where Dumbledore and the two remaining members of his former resistance group were.

He never found torture satisfying, even with those who had personally harmed his friends or family. A firm believer in an eye for an eye, Alistair still couldn't wash away the unpleasant sensation of spending hours torturing another. For him, a spell and staying briefly to watch the effects were more than enough.

Solomon however, was different in that respect. Or at least, his experience had changed him. He'd suffered enough, that he would do nothing else but ensure those who had contributed did in turn. And then, on a higher scale, Rupert greatly enjoyed it. A discussion they'd once shared, it didn't affect the bond between them as family and friends, despite the heavy topic.

The last time Alistair had seen them, they were on their last legs, particularly Dumbledore. Humans without magic very rarely lived to see his great age so inevitably, without magic to sustain him, he was dying.

He felt no pity, nor compassion. Why should he, when the man had shown none for others? All he could feel was disgust.

But then, there was Seraphina. His feelings for her went far beyond the hatred he felt for Dumbledore, into dangerous territory. He had researched the magic she'd used against him on the day Harry was taken and in response, believed he had a suitable counter defence if she should use it again. Outside of teaching Harry, he'd taught himself many new things as well.
Able to detect his seriousness and uneasiness from here, Solomon placed aside the recently emptied vial. Handed to him by Jacob, he'd come to have his revenge on Matthew Bell, the man responsible for all the potions tested on him when he was a child. At Jacob's request for a potion, Solomon had done all he could to recreate the desired effects he wanted. Now, all they had to was wait for it to begin.

"What is it?" Solomon questioned, concerned as Alistair’s skin seemed a touch paler.

"Seraphina has made her move. Today in the Great Hall, I received what I believed to be a letter from her, but was a physical projection. We have three days to prepare and on the fourth, she will come."

Sharing the memory to them, Rupert sneered. "She is foul. While the thought of tearing her throat out is highly satisfying, I will be leaving the honour to you."

"She deserves no less," Alistair responded, solemnly. "There is much to be done. I can think of several who I have yet to call upon their favour, after giving many of my own. I will be seeking them out."

Glancing towards Matthew who began to show the first signs of pain, Solomon's eyes flickered. "I will dispose of them, today."

Knowing who he was referring to, Alistair nodded. "That would be best, as we do not know our own fates, as of yet."

The time had come. Jacob had known for a while there would be something, just not what. Sparing a glance for the man suffering, satisfaction filled him. "I will inform Fenrir. He promised his aid when the time came. Others may join as well."

"Thank you." giving him a grateful look, Rupert had already left. Suspecting that he had his own favours to call upon, Alistair's head would be spinning with confusion by the time this day was out. The ones he had in mind were spread out, across various countries. Which meant even more time zones.

Knowing their assistance would be invaluable, Alistair would beware the fact that some may be in league with Seraphina herself. Hoping that wasn't the case, he worked swiftly.

Left alone in the dungeon, Solomon looked over the no longer recent additions to them. For a while now Dumbledore, Matthew and Jeremiah had been here. He'd taken great pleasure in expressing his displeasure towards them, especially the one who had started all this.

If not for today and Seraphina making her move, he would have gladly left them to die of natural, human causes. But leaving them in here alive while they all went to confront someone who may have their lives precariously balancing on the edge, didn't sit well with him.

Matthew needed no further intervention. Due to the strain his body had already undergone, physical wounds healed or not, this potion would ensure within the next few hours, death. Eyes like chips of ice, Solomon hoped with every one of his years, that he suffered until the last breath.

Which brought him to Jeremiah. Not only was he the one to murder Emily, but Jacob's wife suffered beneath his foul acts. The mind was vital in making decisions and he'd chosen to commit one of the worst acts Solomon could think of.
As such, there could be only one punishment.

Every inch of the castle was kept in good condition, so the metal of a heavily reinforced door didn't creak, upon opening it.

Sitting on the floor almost casually was Jeremiah, face twisted into a sneer when seeing Solomon. "Do your worst, vermin."

Only one of the two in this cell were vermin. And Solomon knew exactly which one.

"Oh, I intend to." tone almost casual at this point, a human eye would have blinked and missed the speed of his next actions. His foot connecting with the man's chest he was forcefully kicked to the floor, wand pointing directly at him. Starting from his chest it moved downward, stopping at a very specific place.

Pinned to the ground, not by magic but the force of Solomon's will, Jeremiah felt the first stirrings of nervousness. While his voice still remained hoarse from screaming, each time, like the one before, he stubbornly vowed to keep quiet.

Able to easily sense his thoughts, no trace of a smile was on Solomon's face, even if the pinprick of light within his eyes, held a satisfied one. Vital to any man, it would ensure that he too, suffered until the very end.

While Alistair was the most proficient with magic, Solomon had learned a curse or two as well. With human justice systems, they were a far cry from delivering just punishments to rapists. That was precisely what Jeremiah was and, as Solomon had learned, Akari was not the first victim. For every innocent that had died because of Dumbledore, similarly, Jeremiah had stolen the innocence of men, women and children.

It was so sickening, that a wave of nausea had passed over him at the time. This curse was not just perfect but made for people like him.

Chanting softly, Solomon had studied precisely what this curse did. As if there were an invisible hand, the testicles would be squeezed so viciously, that they popped as if nothing more than grapes. The rest would follow suit, but much more explosively. With a lack of treatment, dying of blood loss was a matter of minutes.

But this curse slowed the blood flow considerably, to tie in with its effects. Meaning, it could be hours before death arrived.

He took no pleasure in the act itself, more the end result and knowing that their crimes hadn't gone unpunished.

Finishing, it was a matter of seconds before the curse did its work.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHH!" a bloodcurdling scream left Jeremiah's lips, a noticeable red stain gradually spreading across the threadbare trousers he wore. In shock, Solomon could see he had no idea what happened at first until he shakily sat back up. Paler than a freshly dead corpse, bloodless lips formed fearful words. "Y-You-"

Heart thundering away in his chest, Jeremiah was sure he'd faint. But it seemed as if something held
him back, prevented from being allowed the welcoming release of unconsciousness.

"You deserve nothing but the greatest of pain in your final hours. For all the lives that you have ruined with this, it is both fitting and deserving."

Words colder than the touch of frostbite, Solomon closed the door behind him. Able to hear his whimpers and the pained moans of Matthew, that left the final door.

Solomon knew exactly how he'd end Dumbledore. In the same way, he'd murdered his friends. Only, it would mean him surviving the transformation. With his magical power, perhaps. But without, he didn't know.

At this point, he'd done everything imaginable to the man and much like he was a guinea pig used for potions and experiments, Solomon similarly used him. So if he should die during the transformation, it would be a delicious twist of satisfaction. But more so, if he lived.

Either way, his life would come to an end. As the door opened, Solomon spared no words. Grabbing the man and easily pushing him back against the wall, he let the transformation overtake him.

Eyes shifting to violet, he punctured Dumbledore's neck. Injecting a small amount of blood from his own system, it was how the transformation worked. The blood of an immortal would always override an immortal, allowing the change to take over. This process could either mean life or death.

As the man fell into unconsciousness, it would be a matter of minutes before Solomon knew the results.

Until then, he had the urge to gag. During the transference, his tongue had come into contact with Dumbledore's own blood and without a doubt, was the worst he'd ever tasted. So thick and bitter, as if there were nothing more than clots in his system rather than liquid. Imagining his brother's horrified reaction when he shared details of this, dark amusement lit Solomon's eyes.

Leaning against the stone wall opposite, he waited.

As scars and gradually closing wounds began to heal completely, his skin paled to a shade which indicated that the transformation was successful. Silently pleased, he was more so when hearing Dumbledore's weak voice.

Unable to control his state at will the canine teeth had changed, lengthening and sharpening.

"What have you done to me?" he croaked, terrified. He should be dead. He had no heartbeat. Was this the afterlife? But then remembering who he shared this cell with currently, horror assaulted his system. "No..."

"Yes. You are a Vampire. Congratulations, you are now one of us, whom you hate deeply."

Taking great satisfaction in these words, Solomon allowed that information to sink in. He wanted the man to understand what had happened, rather than being unaware of the fact that in his final moments, he'd become the very thing he'd spent so many years trying to eradicate.

Though, it wouldn't be for long.

Lumos Maxima was incredibly painful when casting at Vampires who had little age and therefore,
little resistance. But for new Vampires, it would reduce them to ashes in a matter of seconds. Solomon didn't want it to be over in seconds.

So Lumos, the weakest version, would be suitable and have a slightly different effect. Whether sunlight or light produced by magic, any kind was deadly to a Vampire, for a long time.

Satisfied that Dumbledore was now fully aware of his fate, Solomon put an end to things. Magic freezing him in place, silver eyes met crimson.

"Dumbledore. For years you have harmed Vampires and humans alike, placing your own selfish desires and needs in front of others. For the greater good is what you have told others and yourself as if a mantra. No matter if those murdered were human rather than the Vampires suspected of being, still, you acted."

Pointing his wand at him, Solomon believed his heartbeat would quicken if it had that capability. "As Lumos ended the lives of friends I still hold dear, so will it end yours."

He would know first hand, just how painful it was to be on the receiving end.

"Lumos."

As a bright light lit up the cell, Dumbledore tried to shield himself with his arms. Hands exposed the flesh peeled, burning faster than his new healing rate would allow. As it peeled it burned further, skin turning black. No sooner had blood welled and began to flow, that it too dried.

The clothing wouldn't protect him, lumos burning every inch of exposed skin and spreading across, as if a disease. The smell of charred flesh filled the room, without a single scream leaving him. Instead, it became nothing more than a gurgle, choking on his own blood as it left blackened lips.

As the light left his eyes, Dumbledore's final, resounding thought, was when had it all began to go wrong?

And then, nothing.

Looking at the husk which barely resembled him, Solomon banished his body to a place where it would further decompose and never be found. He would do the same to the others, once they succumbed to their wounds.

He shared many things with Hermione, but this was one which could wait for safer, peaceful times, should they all live to see it. They would be made aware of Dumbledore's death, but would only share details with Alistair. Despite all she'd seen, a shred of innocence somehow remained and if only a little, he wanted to protect that.

After he'd finished here, there were other places to go. Even without communicating as such, Solomon knew that Alistair would be taking advantage of the fact that they had not just the day but nights, to act. Time for rest and any planning could come, once secure in the knowledge that they would be ready.
Everything was beginning to fall in place, smoother than Harry thought it would. Lume and Thanatos were with him, able to enter and exit his body at will once done for the first time. Aela would assist and having another thought, was able to contact the Delacours. Conversing with them he learned Bill was there.

As Charlie was later contacted, communications were underway for dragons to support them if needed. Dragonriders were rarer than tamers, as it required a high level of understanding between the Dragon and rider. But by the sounds of it, securing their assistance sounded very possible.

Knowing that Headmistress McGonagall was still at the ministry, he hadn't seen his friends for a while now. Arriving outside, he saw someone familiar in the distance. Jogging over he could see it was Neville, faced with a surprising sight.

"That's it, brilliant." facing him were plants, larger than Harry had ever seen before. Vaguely resembling large venus flytraps, there were enough to constitute a small army. Coming to stand beside the front row of trees their roots dug firmly into the soil, wrapping themselves around the trunks and blending in seamlessly.

Unable to tell where they were now the colour had changed, Harry was impressed. "How the hell did you do that? I didn't know plants could walk."

Neville jumped. He hadn't noticed Harry's approach. Turning to face him, he offered an explanation. "Most can't normally. But Zeme's ashes are something else. It's like they give plants sentience or autonomy. I don't really know the right word but either way, these can move about. I'm hoping the rest of these ashes if spread through the forest, will bolster wildlife in there."

He was an expert. Clear that Neville had things well in hand, Harry filled him in.

Relieved, Neville dared to hope, if only a little. "We're far from surrendering. We've still got some time as well and if the Fae join us, that's a bonus."

Nodding in agreement, Harry's mind raced. Unable to settle, he still had the feeling he could be elsewhere, informing others and securing aid. But the hour was growing late and unlike the Vampires, he did need sleep.

"Want to call it a day for now? I'm starved."

Neville nodded. "Let's go."

Returning to the castle, he tried not to dwell on darker thoughts.

In the realm of the Fae, Hermione, Ginny and Luna had the attention of not just their mentors, but other Fae gathered there. As they revealed the events of moments ago, many there came to understand that the prophecy would be fulfilled.

"Yeah, let's kick some butt!" Esha cheered, pouting when on the end of Brio's glare. "Aw, you're no
Relieved and secure in the knowledge of their support, Ginny and Hermione began to discuss possible plans of action, once the fateful fourth day arrived.

Listening and absorbing the information, a warm hand took her own, gently guiding them away from the thick of things. Recognising the hand as belonging to Brio, she found herself within the Eireachdail Woods. Gazing up at him questioningly, the blue hue of his skin darkened a little. "I wanted a moment with you, alone."

Understanding she smiled, bare feet touching the cool grass beneath. Though, her smile was tinged with sorrow. "I wish I knew what is going to happen, but I don't. Not for certain."

"None of us do. But, it only highlights the importance of spending whatever moments we have wisely. Luna, know that I love you more than there are stars above."

There was something about the kiss they shared, that seemed more special than the others. Then, a gentle breeze picked up. But, rather than flow in one direction, it seemed to surround them, almost comforting.

Looking around, Luna noticed something in the distance. Carried on this breeze and heading towards them, were flower petals. The moon shining down upon them they glowed, a beautiful, almost ethereal blue.

And then, Brio noticed the flower upon the pond which rarely emerged. The same colour as these petals, one by one they floated, to join the moonlit petals.

With nothing but a newly growing bud, it sank beneath still waters. As it left, soft, twinkling music began to fill the air.

Perhaps it was their imagination or the forest could sense their sadness. For so long war had ravaged every corner, until both had helped to restore what once was. It was time to help, in the only way it knew how.

Lives thrown into a tumultuous whirlwind, it almost seemed strange that the couple in a circle of moonlit petals, began to dance. Bodies gently swaying to a music only they could hear they slowly spun around, an arm wrapped around her waist.

Holding his hand, something about this moment seemed so natural, so beautiful, that Luna was reluctant to let it go. Laughing softly she rested her cheek against him, able to hear the steady thump of his heartbeat. So sure, unlike their future.

Brio's heart hurt. It was painful, confusing even. But he knew, it was the thought of never seeing Luna again if she should come to fatal harm. If death took her, Brio would follow. She had given his life meaning, opened his heart and mind to a new side of the world. To live without her, would be impossible.

For a while Luna and Brio remained there, swaying among moonlit petals which imparted their nurturing, protective magic. They'd done all that was possible and while not having a voice, the forest still hoped it would not be the last it saw of them.
As Luna returned with Brio, she waved over at Ginny and Hermione. Rejoining the conversation, all gathered there believed their training had lead to this very moment. They would all do their part, work together, to ensure that whatever future Luna saw wouldn't come to pass.

Thankful that it was still the weekend, Harry headed for Alistair's quarters. It had become another kind of home to him, the sight so familiar that every time he entered the room, tension began to unravel from his tense frame. He hadn't seen the man since this morning. Even if he didn't return tonight, Harry would still sleep here. He associated this room with security, safety.

Exhausted from the day's events he carefully placed his shoes aside, resting face up on top of the bed. Alone with his thoughts, he began to meditate there, locking away anxiety and fear behind ever improving Occlumency shields.

Hermione, Ginny and Luna had returned earlier, bringing with them good news. The Fae would help. Those able to fight would do so, though some needed to remain and keep watch over their own realms.

And then, Harry was able to detect someone. Their presence was nothing more than a feather-light touch upon his consciousness, but instinctively knew who it was. Cracking an eye open, he gave a tired smile. "Hi."

Alistair had ensured he wouldn't be heard and disturb Harry. So the fact that he'd managed to detect him, came as a surprise. Sitting down beside him, he smoothed down unruly hair.

Leaning into the touch, Harry filed away that information for a later date. He hadn't been able to detect Alistair at his quietest, so what had changed?

At first, he thought it was still in the throes of a meditative state, but realised that wasn't the case.

Right there, within Alistair's chest, was a ball of golden light. Shining as if it were the sun itself strands burst, spreading to every part of his body.

It was beautiful. Tilting his head to the side, Harry tried to puzzle it out. Why hadn't he seen this before? What was it?

"Harry?"

Pulled from his thoughts he explained, confused all the while. "I can see something in you. It's like a really bright ball, here."

Placing a hand directly over his heart, Alistair couldn't hide his surprise. "That... is my magical core."

Sharing in Harry's confusion, a part of Alistair had wondered what his own looked like. He could only see others, not his own. But more importantly, how could Harry? It was very rare that a non-vampire could see magical cores, never mind a wizard so young. How was this possible?

Thoroughly distracted from what had happened earlier, he looked at Harry with nothing short of awe. "You never cease to amaze me. I was unable to see the cores of others, until 500 years into my magical training. Some are born with this ability while others, it develops with experience."
"What does this mean, then?" Harry asked, still confused but entranced with the beautiful sight of his magic.

"I am unsure," he admitted, thoughts whirling. "But if time should allow us, I will research this."

Nodding to indicate his understanding, discussions turned to all they'd done that day. While they had secured the help of a few, there were more still to come.

Distracted by the surprising revelation of Harry's new ability, it had slipped Alistair's mind to tell him, until now. "Dumbledore is dead, along with the remaining Guild of Light members."

With everything that had happened, Harry had forgotten about him. Rather than joy, there was simple acceptance. A part of Harry believed he should be cheering, but remained calm instead. "Honestly, he died the day he lost his magic. That's all he ever used to harm others so without it, he became insignificant. That and Seraphina."

Maybe without her, Harry would feel some amount of joy. "Still, I hope he suffered."

"He did. Solomon turned him, but only for a few minutes, so he could experience pain at the hands of the same spell which put an end to Enoch and Ava's lives. He described his blood as sludge. The thought is rather nauseating."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, that's pretty disgusting. But he met a fitting end. The Wizarding World won't remember him as anything more than a monster."

The thought of such a thing filled both with satisfaction. As Harry fell asleep, Alistair lay beside him. Thoughts split between Seraphina and Harry able to see his core, he allowed himself a few hours of rest, beside the one he loved.

Throughout the second day, further developments took place. Severus had a number of deadly potions and poisons along with some of the more nasty curses under his belt, Minerva had successfully convinced the Minister and Amelia to take Seraphina's threat seriously and as a result, was promised Auror support. Alongside this Charlie had gotten in touch with them and, in a strange twist, one of the dragons which would be assisting them, was the very Hungarian Horntail which Harry had faced during the first task. They would be stationed at the same clearing used to keep them, waiting until assistance was needed.

Similarly, Hagrid had gone into the forest. Able to locate Morag, he'd learned that old age had finally claimed Aragog. Thankful that his assistance had secured her a family, she and her eldest children would keep watch for intruders. Asking the same of centaurs they agreed, if only to protect the place they called home.

Negotiations with Fenrir were successful and thanks to Jacob, packs spread throughout the UK would unite, recognising the threat. That and the promise of tearing into Vampires was too good to pass up.

On the third day, Harry's nerves were shot. Between them all they'd done everything possible, those who would be able to assist contacted, agreeing to help. He couldn't think of anything or anyone else
to ask, until a ridiculous thought born of a desire to have all the advantages possible, rose to mind.

Realising that he'd probably lost the plot, it couldn't hurt to try. Solomon had spent years alongside them, surely he'd know if it was possible? That sudden idea spurring him on, he jogged to Hogwarts' gates, sending his Patronus.

"I need to speak with you. Meet me outside of Hogwarts."

A moment later, the man appeared. Giving Harry a questioning look, he stepped outside of the gates to join him. "This is going to sound insane. But what if we can get the Dementors to help? I know you spent some time in Azkaban. Did you ever manage to communicate with them somehow?"

Filled with questions Harry stopped himself, body tense with the need to do something.

Truthfully, the thought had crossed his mind. Harry's idea did have some merit. "Not with words exactly, but I believe it may be possible to come to some sort of understanding. It is worth a try."

That's exactly what Harry thought. "Then, we should go now."

Normally, it required travelling by sea to reach Azkaban. But Solomon remembered where it was. Standing side by side they disappeared, reappearing in the midst of stormy weather.

"Shit," Harry cursed, almost blinded by the thick sheet of rain pelting down upon them. In the distance, he could see Dementors, alongside the telltale glow of Patronuses.

Carefully disguising them both, Solomon made his way around the slippery, rocky terrain and away from the Azkaban guards. Following just behind Harry made sure to watch his footing, wanting to slap himself at thinking that communicating with a Dementor might be possible.

It wasn't until he nearly bumped into Solomon's back, that Harry realised something. At first, he thought this all-consuming blackness was the weather. But he realised, they were all Dementors.

Ragged black cloaks. Such a high number of them that if still in his third year, would have had a violent reaction by now.

As they circled them both, none went to attack. They moved forward, Harry and Solomon also forced to move forward.

Nervously, Harry glanced at the man beside him. "I've never seen Dementors do this."

"Neither have I, but I believe that they want us to follow them. Their direction seems specific."

Keeping calm, they would be fine. Within his heart, he knew this. If they wanted their souls, an attempt to suck them out would have been made long before now.

As Harry found out, Solomon's words were correct. Hollowed out within the rocks slippery from rain, was a path which lead downwards into darkness.

Unable to see, he only created a little light nearby. Not wanting to somehow anger the Dementors in any way, he was relieved when they showed no physical reaction.

"Where are they taking us?" Harry whispered, the fluttering of many cloaks and their echoing
footsteps, the only noise to be heard.

"I am not sure. But if things take a sour turn, I will get us both out of here. I want to avoid a lecture from Alistair at all costs."

Smiling at the thought of that, they came to a sudden halt when the ground beneath their feet levelled out. Wondering if they were under sea level, the sight he saw was enough for him to take a step back. Prevented from doing more than this when the brush of a chilled cloak hit it, Harry was stunned. "...Is that a Dementor?"

Dementors stood at nearly 10ft tall, a considerable height and slightly more, as they hovered above the ground, but this one, if a Dementor, stood at twice this height.

But rather than a black, tattered cloak, it was a pure white. Illuminating the darkness its skin was similarly wrinkled but lighter. Even so, the hood completely obscured its face.

They moved forward still, only stopping when the Dementors surrounding them stood before the one cloaked in white.

Shocked, Harry watched as they lined up, bowing. Was this their leader?

One by one they left until Harry and Solomon were alone with the hooded figure. Intimidated Harry remained rooted to the spot until Solomon broke the silence.

"Greetings." one word. As if it could understand, its head moved, as if inclining it towards him. Whether it was in a hostile or friendly manner, Harry didn't know.

But as a skeletal hand took hold of him, he flinched. Solomon observed the Dementor for any signs of hostility, finding none. He remained alert, magic wrapped around him and ready to pull Harry from the situation if need be.

Even close up, Harry couldn't see a face behind this hood. Shuddering at the feeling of its icy, wrinkled touch, he nearly shouted in surprise when a rattly, haunting voice entered his mind.

**Thanatos**

It didn't call out to Harry, but the soul animagi within him. As if it were not one voice but a thousand, Thanatos answered in Harry's place.

'**How do you know my name?**'

**You do not remember.**

It was a statement rather than a question, Harry feeling as if he were an intruder upon a conversation. And then, memories not belonging to him filled his mind. Only brief flashes, but dawning realisation not Harry's own filled him.

'...I fear that I lost more memories during my calling to a mortal body than first thought. It's good to see you again, Heimdal.'

Harry tried to imagine an expression on the Dementor's face, finding it impossible.
You are inside this human. Why?

'I was called to Harry on the night a dark wizard tried to murder him. He's essential to our continued survival.'

Explain.

Harry listened to Thanatos' recounting of events, which lead them up to why they were here.

I requested that the day you were found here, you be brought to me. But, I did not think this possible. And then, Heimdall turned his attention to Harry.

Harry Potter.

'Yes?' he tried to remain calm, even if internally panicking.

I loathe humans, they who bound us to servitude. My assistance is offered, only in aid of a friend and to ensure our continued survival. However, I demand one thing in return. The soul of this Vampire.

'Can I speak to my friend about it?'

Yes.

Granted permission, Harry's throat was dry. "There's nothing wrong, but it turns out he’s friends with Thanatos. He'll help, but he wants Seraphina's soul."

Of all the things he expected, this wasn't one of them. He could have her soul, but only if they emerged victorious. If they lost against her, none would be alive to see this Dementor's wrath. One path was eternal damnation and the loss of this world, while the other held uncertainty but promise of peace.

"We have no use for her soul, so yes."

Able to hear Solomon's words, Harry imagined that he felt pleased with this outcome.

Good. We will assist. Until next time.

Free to go Harry watched as he floated back to where he was, statue-like if not for the faint flutter of robes.

'Care to explain? I lost years of my life after that.'

'Sorry. Heimdall and I met when I first travelled to the soul realm. Unlike others of his kind, he doesn't usually consume souls but instead carries wayward ones to the afterlife. He is the soul world's guardian and as such, protects it from harm. I had forgotten until his own memories reminded me.'

Harry didn't think it was possible to sleep on this and for it to fully sink in. He had much to share.
Groaning to himself, he'd better forewarn everyone before there was a panic. He'd save that for tomorrow when everyone would be there.

As they left, Solomon spoke quietly. "You are a strange human."

"Don't I know it?" snorting to himself they returned to Hogwarts, intent on sharing what happened.

Unable to meet at all the second day, it was just after midnight when Harry stopped by Alistair's quarters. Finding him silently looking out of the window, it offered a quiet, still night view which contrasted against warring emotions.

Rather than checking his bracelet, somehow a part of Harry could sense deep sadness within him as if it were his own emotions. He liked to think it was because he knew Alistair so well he could guess them, especially as the final day was near. But somehow, he knew that wasn't the entirety of it.

Something strange was happening to him. Firstly he found Alistair could no longer catch him off guard, then able to see his and as he'd discovered other magical cores and now, this.

If he didn't have bigger things to worry about, Harry would be hitting the books himself. At least, outside of learning about more magic.

Though he was feeling a similar way, he couldn't bear the thought of Alistair experiencing these emotions. So he stepped up behind, wrapping his arms around him. Able to see a faint reflection of themselves against the window, Harry's breath misted against the cold glass.

"It seems like once one situation is dealt with, another appears in its place. Dumbledore, the Death Eaters, those Vampire assassins Seraphina sent and now, her. Do you think we're ready?"

Sounding unsure of himself and more lost than ever before, Alistair turned around within the circle of his arms. "I believe that we have done all that we could. Waiting is painful and yet, we must do so."

Harry hated waiting, not knowing. But with the Dementors, those added to everyone else may just make the difference. "What would you say if I said that there's a white Dementor called Heimdall twice the size of regular ones, it communicated with the soul of Thanatos in me and with a promise of Seraphina's soul, is going to help us?"

Blinking rapidly, Alistair tried to process the information. "I would assume that alcohol was a strong influence. But then, this information is coming from you. Is that where you have been?"

"Yeah, I went with Solomon. Though nothing happened, I didn't exactly want to go alone."

"A wise choice. Dementors are unpredictable, though I am shocked that one is able to communicate."

He wasn't the only one. As silence fell between them, they sat beside one another on the sofa. Leaning into his shoulder, some of the thoughts he'd kept behind Occlumency shields began to leak out. From the moment Seraphina's voice projected across the hall he'd kept his fearful thoughts at bay, distracted over the last few days with the knowledge that they needed as much help as possible.

But now, Harry was unable to prevent his trembling. Voice shaking he squeezed his eyes shut as if he could somehow push away the inevitable permanently.
He'd done so many adult things, seen things which had stripped away his innocence, piece by piece. And yet, with what faced them, he felt exactly like a scared teenager. What he'd said to Alistair the day they came back from his Gringotts' vault was true. He wanted to live, alongside everyone else. They wouldn't accept her words and surrender, their preparation over these days indicated as much. But she was responsible for a feat of magic which had killed hundreds of millions. It seemed like no force in the world could ever hope to conquer that.

"Why is it that every time I'm truly happy, something else comes along to mess it up? Why can't she just accept we're not all the same and leave us alone? I don't want to hurt Vampires. I've lost so much, I don't want to lose anymore."

Gripping Alistair's hand tightly, tearful green eyes filled with so much pain pinned bright, wavering ones. "She doesn't want to just kill you, but take everything away and use your magic to harm. You've never wanted to hurt anyone either and the thought of you gone and your magic used like that? I-

Tears escaping from his eyes Harry reached up, wrapping his arms around him and squeezing tightly. "I want us all to live. Sirius, Remus, my friends, everyone. And you. I don't want to lose you-

Sobs escaping him Harry pressed his face close, muffled as arms with equal strength wrapped around them. More than anything Alistair wanted to reassure him and as he'd done before, say things would be better, that everything would be alright.

That he would always be there for him.

But he couldn't. None of them knew the outcome and similarly, he was terrified of losing Harry. There were several ways this could go, some of which could lead to winning and losing, yet both involving loss of lives. The likeliest outcome would be his death. Seraphina wanted him, Harry was nothing more than an added bonus.

He wanted everyone to live too, more than words could express.

Unable to hold him any closer physically, he kissed the top of his head. "Harry. I wish I could guarantee a future together and yet, I cannot. But no matter what happens, I will always love you."

He hated how that sounded. Those words brought with it a tone of finality. "I love you too, more than anything."

Looking up at him Harry was unable to see his face, vision blurred. Closing his eyes, familiar, welcoming lips gently kissed the tears away.

"Rest now, while there is a chance."

Knowing that clarity of mind could be the difference between life and death, Harry nodded. Unsure if he would be able to sleep, he still closed his eyes. Grasping the material of Alistair's shirt, he did his best to relax. "Don't go."

"I will remain here until morning comes." he soothed, a softly spoken story of peaceful times gone by, lulling Harry to sleep.

He wanted to live. Not only because he appreciated life and its experiences, but to share it with those
he held dear. His death would mean Solomon's, many other innocents and as she had done before, Seraphina would either keep Harry alive to torture him or take his magic as well.

He couldn't let that happen. But the choice, may not be his. All they could do was push this towards it being in their favour.

Standing up with Harry in his arms, a quick transfiguration of clothing had him in something a little more comfortable. Knowing a bed would provide a more restful sleep, the younger man latched onto him once they lay down, in a way which made his heart ache.

They'd spent so much time together and yet, it seemed like no time at all. Others within the castle found themselves sharing similar fears, many resorting to sleeping draughts so sleep wouldn't be troubled.

Their fates would be decided, in a matter of hours. This weighing down on them all, it seemed as if the world itself began to hold its breath, in anticipation for what was to come.

Chapter End Notes

Prepare yourselves for next week, it's going to be very eventful!
Death's Own Eyes

Chapter Summary

It's the day of Seraphina's arrival. Everyone is made aware of things previously kept quiet and rivalries are settled. As the time comes, so do those who must fight against and alongside others. During this, an idea born of necessity leads to a sacrifice, one of which shakes the hearts of those close by. What will be the outcome?

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Preparation for Seraphina's arrival, involving bringing in allies who will help and alongside all this, fears and worries for the unknown.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warning: Violence in this chapter.

By the morning, nearly everyone Harry expected to be here was. Gathered here together, it was a strange mix of different races with different capabilities. Sitting from where they were, he could see a noticeable divide between Vampires and Werewolves and similarly, the Fae had isolated themselves from most.

"It's not like I expected anything different," Harry spoke, on the verge of sighing. The Great Hall was fit to burst with many, expansion charms doing their work.

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink," Hermione added, their voices easily heard over the otherwise dead silence. "Still, not everyone is keeping to themselves."

As she gestured over to their left, Harry could see a few students were introducing themselves to some of the others. It was certainly better than nothing, providing hope for better relations overall.

The next and last to arrive were the Minister, Amelia and all the Aurors that could be spared. Harry expected them, but not who followed alongside Kingsley. Able to locate him among the crowd of people he strode over, clad in battle robes. Giving him a firm handshake, he explained.

"Miss Voska overheard a discussion with Dawlish regarding today." sparing a brief glare for the man in question, Kingsley's gaze was serious. "I'll leave this up to you, Mr Potter."

With all that had happened and knowing about Lorelei's past, Harry found himself surprisingly calm and instead, waited for her to speak. The pure hatred radiating from her and directed towards him was there no longer.
"I don't expect forgiveness, nor will I ask for it. However, this is something which I can channel all of my magical energy into, something not for revenge purposes and that will help. So, I offer my assistance." Expression neutral, she seemed to wait for Harry's judgement.

It didn't take long for Harry to decide. Only, one thing came to mind. "We're glad for the help. However, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin are here. Can I have your word you won't attack them, at any point?"

Flinching slightly, Harry could see her emotions towards them were far from resolved. Gritting her teeth, she nodded stiffly. "I promise."

She had a long way to go, but this was a start. Leaving them alone, Lorelei went to a corner devoid of anyone, trying to adapt from an area with little to no human contact to one with many gathered there.

"Well, that was unexpected." sparing her a moment's glance, having everyone here helped to settle his own nerves.

Eyeing her with mild suspicion, Ginny was contemplative. "Do you think she'll keep to her word?"

Harry nodded. "I've learned to always trust my instincts and for this, they say yes."

The conversation he'd had with Lorelei took no more than a minute but in that time, he spotted someone else in the middle of a conversation. Remembering what happened last time, he took action. "I'll be back."

Heading straight for them, Harry wondered if he'd have to play peacemaker yet again until a hand on his shoulder stopped him. Looking up and seeing it was Remus, he listened to his words with mild incredulity. "Sirius is proposing a truce."

"Did you put him up to it?"

"Surprisingly, no. It was his idea."

Will wonders never cease? Staying put Harry watched, on guard just in case.

Sirius was almost tempted to say he'd prefer more time in Azkaban than what he was about to do. But spending time in that hellhole, only to be cooped up in a house he hated, twisted him into someone he didn't recognise anymore. Then he'd died, been brought to life and brought to a properly far nicer, but still not free.

Now that he was and he'd spent a few weeks seeing a part of the world he never had alongside the man he loved, it had given him a whole new outlook on life and his actions.

He didn't like Snape and truthfully, never would. But today was bigger than anything they'd ever faced, even more than during or before his time. He didn't want to go out there with regrets. Survival wasn't guaranteed. He'd already died once with regrets, Sirius didn't want to do that again. He wanted to do this not just for him but Harry, who he'd hurt more than once.

'Suck it up Sirius you flea-bitten mutt!' he scolded himself, approaching the other man stiffly.

"Ah, Black. How... delightful to see you." tone implying otherwise he sneered, lip curling in the
same way which always had Sirius' fingers itching to grab his wand. Forcefully going against his usual instincts, he didn't bite back.

"Yeah, I'm not pleased to see you either. I came here to sort things out. I won't apologise since at this stage I doubt you'd accept. But at least, remain on neutral grounds."

Sirius didn't offer his hand as, like with an apology, he didn't think it would be accepted. Hiding away any traces of awkwardness, he waited for the verdict.

Severus had made his peace with Potter and Lupin. Black was someone he hated far more than the two put together. While the urge to curse him remained, there were others today far more deserving.

"Very well." keeping his tone carefully neutral, the men left it at that.

As Sirius came back over to them, Harry gave him a bright smile. "That was great."

"You heard?" looking slightly embarrassed, he treated Harry to an affectionate hair ruffle, hoping it would distract him.

"I'm proud of you." stating this unabashedly, Sirius placed a hand over his mouth, muffling the rest of his words. "Yeah yeah, I get it. Had to be done."

Smirking at his embarrassment, Harry went over to speak with the Delacours. In the distance, he could see Alistair, in the midst of his own conversation.

Alistair was more than happy to introduce himself, though kept his distance from Fenrir. He could tell his presence wouldn't be appreciated, but that hadn't stopped some of the more curious pack members from approaching them. One such pack member was a man in his mid-twenties, burly looking and nearly matching them for height.

"I'm Ivan. Came over here to say everything's good between you and us, since no one else's got the balls to go against Fenrir. All the Vampires that aren't you lot are free game, yeah?"

Alistair nodded. "Indeed they are."

"Tear their throats out, I implore you." Rupert's tone was gleeful.

"Aye, we can do that." seeing Vampires in a new light after that brief interaction, Ivan went over to the side of the room which had been unofficially claimed as the Werewolves'.

It was only a few hours until Seraphina's arrival. In that time, Harry had seen more and more of the others, crossing the divide between them, to talk. Encouraged by this, it would make everyone working together go much more smoothly. But still, he'd yet to tell everyone about Aela. Feeling her beneath his robes, he could barely picture how that would turn out.

Everyone had come prepared today, whether they were battle robes or armor. Harry wore the armor
he’d received from the Fae, carried both of his wands, the blades he was given alongside the armor and finally, the sceptre. He hadn't had the chance to use it, power outstripping both of his wands combined. But today, it might just have a use. While he had some explaining to do, he knew Ginny in particular would. She hadn't told any of her family about being with the Fae or her training. Imagining Mrs Weasley's expression, he could barely hold back a wince.

But, now was the time. Making his way over to Headmistress McGonagall, Harry asked her a question. "Can I use the podium? There's a lot I need to tell everyone."

Once given permission he stepped up, casting a sonorous charm so that his voice would be heard over everyone.

"Can I have all of your attention, please?"

Voice easily overpowering the few conversations, all eyes were on him. Nervous when faced with an amount close to Hogwarts at full capacity, Harry kept calm. Even through everyone, he still managed to see Alistair's reassuring, warm gaze.

"Firstly, thank you all for coming here. For many of you, this is your first time meeting others or even, other races. But we're all here for one reason and that's to stop this world as we know it, from succumbing to a very real threat. In a matter of hours, Seraphina will be here and until she arrives, we won't know who or what she's brought along. We have to be ready for anything. There are some among us here from another world entirely, but there's a reason for this. Their fates are tied in with our own. Last year, I made a discovery, finding a world entirely different from this one and from there, I met the fae. Given items to help me and some of my friends for whatever we may face, we later made another discovery which changed the lives of three of us."

Looking towards Hermione, Ginny and Luna, they stepped up alongside him. Moving aside, Hermione took over. "Sun, Moon and Bloom. Ginny, Luna and I found ourselves in the middle of something very important. For many months we've trained, under the Fae's guidance. Our job is to bridge the gaps between worlds and on this day, the prophecy will be fulfilled, no matter the outcome. We're all here, working together."

As Ginny swiped her thumb over an earring, Shattered Blaze and her accompanying armor appeared. "I am Sun."

Familiar gasps to her rang throughout the room, able to see heads of red hair and accompanying shocked expressions.

"I am Moon." Luna held in her hand Gentle Whisper, her own protective clothing in place.

And lastly, Hermione. With Willow's strike nearby, her determined brown eyes shone out at students and others gathered there, seeing the three in a new light completely. "And I am Bloom."

Able to see the reveal of this had shocked many in the room, they weren't finished yet. As Neville stepped up to the podium, his own story surprised many, but none more so than Augusta.

"Months prior, I was given a plant by Harry. I had no idea what it was until I found it in a book filled with suspected mythical flora. Called Zeme's vessel, its powers were transferred to me during the time I was trying to conduct further research into its origins. From there this power has awakened, granting me the ability to renew and liven plant life, something of which will be of great use today."
As Harry took Neville's place, green eyes burned with the light of resolve. He would do what needed to be done but only that, show Seraphina exactly why he wouldn't back down.

Then, it came to explaining Aela. He did so, but not without a great wave of fear or alarm meeting his words. It took a lot of reassurance before those who didn't already know were calm. What he didn't tell them was her shrinking capability and that she was with him right now.

He left nothing out, including the Dementors who would be with them, once outside. Harry was no longer affected and Vampires couldn't be either by their aura but thanks to Alistair and without the need of Patronuses, everyone there was given an item which would ensure immunity to their effects. Admittedly that was something Harry hadn't thought of, thankful as always that the man was alongside him, step by step.

Once assured that he'd said everything they needed to, Harry could hear discussions turn towards what each would do, in assigned groups. He would be working alone unless stepping in to help someone. Hermione, Ginny and Luna would be a unit and for the others, he wasn't sure.

The energy in the room was a nervous kind, fuelled with uncertainty and unknown, but it served to bolster Harry. Sitting back down and drinking in the atmosphere, he heard Aela hiss. "I can feel the power. Even if thisss vampire is strong, your mate and many otherss in this room are capable. Together, it will be a challenge."

"That's what I'm hoping. She's not the only immortal here. In fact, at least a quarter of everyone in this room is. Though I've learnt at this point, immortality only means it's impossible to die from natural causes."

And then, shock not his own passed through Harry's system. Easily able to locate the source, he looked into visibly shaken orange eyes.

"...I can understand you both."

For a minute, Harry thought his brain misfired. “But that's impossible! It's not a learned language." head spinning, Aela poked her head out from Harry's sleeve, regarding Alistair with deep curiosity. "You can underssstand me?"

Looking at Aela, he nodded. “Yes. I am not sure how and yet..." trailing off, it wasn't English Harry heard, but fluent hissing.

"You can speak it as well!"

Alistair had never been more confused in his life. To him, it had sounded like he was talking normally. Sitting alongside Harry, this newfound information didn't sink into his mind but sat upon the surface.

"Weird things have been happening to me and you. What does this mean?" stunned, Harry found himself spacing out slightly.

"It means that together, we have defied all odds and what either history or science has proven, is wrong."

That was definitely one way to put it and in another sense, gave a further reason to the extensive list
of why they should live. "If today doesn't kill me, curiosity will. For Merlin's sake, we've got to get through this so I can find out."

Harry marvelled at the fact he was able to joke about something like this, but it nonetheless produced a small chuckle from the man sitting next to him. Reaching out to take his hand he held it, grip strong and sure.

"...That hissing was sexy." blurtung out his internal thoughts once more, Alistair returned fire.

"Ah, now you know precisely how I feel. There is something particularly erotic about Parseltongue."

Biting his lip, Harry had the urge for a moment to put an hour aside and give into natural instincts.

An indignant hiss roused them both from the conversation. "If you want to mate, do it while I'm not here."

With muttered complaints about humans, vampires and their sexual habits as a whole, Harry laughed to himself. "Don't worry, we're not doing anything."

By way of apology, he ran his fingers along the smooth, cool scales of her head. Accepting this, Aela relished being able to move freely outside of the castle, in a few hours' time.

2:50 pm. Ten minutes before Seraphina's arrival. While she hadn't specified where he suspected it would be near the Forbidden Forest. It was where Neville had his plants hiding in wait and within those depths, anything could emerge.

The walk outside was silent. Hundreds of footsteps fell upon the stone flooring, a sombre, unofficial march which rendered even the chattiest of portraits quiet. The halls usually filled with life or some form of activity held nothing, just an empty shell of what once was.

Harry had fought against those who wanted to kill him or the nature of dangerous situations for years but for the first time, he was prepared. He could do no more than what he already had, fingertips thrumming with power.

As they came outside, a downpour threatened them all. Black cloaks fluttering in the breeze, Harry located the Dementors and among them, Heimdall. Somehow, he looked more intimidating here than at Azkaban.

And then, a dark figure materialised in front of the forest. Black smoke dissipating with her arrival she wore robes, of deepest black and embroidered with protective runes. Closing the distance she walked forward, one foot in front of the other and possessing elegance only a Vampire could hold. Seeing all who stood alongside or behind Harry and Alistair, her black eyes glinted. "So you have chosen to resist. Foolish, but not surprising. It is always far more exciting when the prey chooses to run."

Maliciousness curling her lips, Seraphina's eyes bored into Alistair. "Lothaire. Soon, you will be mine. And then, your 'lover' will be of great entertainment to me. I have not yet finished breaking him in."
Alistair was the epitome of quiet, calm confidence. “You boldly assume your victory on this day. For such great age, you show great foolishness to accompany it. You of all people should know the unpredictability of life.”

Fingers curling around her wand, faint displeasure registered in her gaze. "You will pay for that remark."

"No, he won't. You will. For every single innocent person you've hurt or killed, we'll all get you back, tenfold." Harry spoke up, eyes flaring angrily.

She had come alone. Or at least, had appeared to. Harry wasn't stupid. She'd brought others with her, in hiding.

"The time for talking is over. Today, you will all die." with a snap of her fingers, Harry got the shock of his life.

There, now standing beside her, was Voldemort.

"You joined her?" Harry stuttered, stopping with Alistair's voice.

"No, he is not here of his own will. Neither are the others."

The others he referred to, were Fae. Outcries and mutters spread along their side, many coming to understand why this prophecy was so. All the Fae who had gone missing for unexplainable reasons could be seen here.

But still, the numbers were off. Harry's side still held the advantage in that.

Within the Forbidden Forest, Alistair stretched out his senses. He could tell there were far more than what she let on, within there. They numbered at least a thousand strong. Each tied to her, they were nothing more than puppets on a string and with her death, they too would die. It was a monstrous kind of transformation a rare few undertook, due to the risks it posed. Each one gave Seraphina a little strength but with their deaths, a tiny fraction of power would be stripped away. For the ones already immortal Alistair didn't know, but those who were previously mortal, their fates were sealed.

Communicating as much to Harry he quickly spread the information, every individual having a focus. Somehow, Harry had the feeling he would cross wands with Voldemort again. But like this? He was far from satisfied.

As a sickly purple spell fired at lighting speed headed straight for Alistair, a shield easily absorbed it. That one spell set off a chain reaction. "Attack!"

At Seraphina’s command, Harry found himself in the midst of pure, unadulterated chaos. The moment that one word left her lips, more and more Vampires revealed themselves and as Neville guessed, came from the forest.

With the rest of Zeme's ashes in hand, Neville sprinted towards the edge, emptying the last of them out into the air. A controlled wind directing their course every speck of ash spread out among the trees, given mobility. Roots still and buried beneath the ground moved, each one tearing through the ground they rooted themselves in to trip up or distract those passing through.

Able to see more Vampires Neville didn't stick around to watch any longer, hoping the others who
called the forest their home would be able to keep the bulk of them at bay for a little while.

As a team of three, Hermione, Ginny and Luna had planned out what to do, depending on who or what Seraphina brought with her.

From the Black Lake's waters, Hermione saw something which made her blood run cold. "Inferi!"

Hearing her words, Ginny sprung into action. Fire was their enemy and more than anything, *incendio* worked wonders when welding shattered Blaze. Her armor holding steadfast against stray spells she nimbly dodged the more dangerous ones, able to sense Hermione and Luna not far off. Swinging her glaive into the abdomen of one it sliced clean through, cutting and burning slimy, wet flesh. When an arrow doused in fire hit another, Ginny finished that one of with a strong, swift kick. Driving the glaive through the reanimated corpse, Shattered Blaze set alight ensured they kept their distance, even if Ginny didn't keep her own.

Apparating to a higher vantage point, Hermione had mastered archery to the point that she should fire arrows, with a speed on par to some of the immortals joining them in this battle. One after one a rain of arrows doused in fire hit their targets, senses awakened for anything amiss.

Able to see a spell heading for her direction Hermione quickly erected a shield. Finding herself faced with two Vampires who had noticed her above ground level. Changing her focus the tips of her arrows were now pure light. Firing one it struck the shoulder of the one nearest to her, cold flesh sizzling and burning.

"Rgh!" ripping the arrow from his shoulder he threw it aside, Hermione able to tell from his healing rate that this Vampire was only young. Even so, his physical strength would far outstrip her own. The well-oiled cogs turning in her mind Hermione whispered a spell, one of which produced identical versions of her. As the last one appeared in her place she apparated at the same time, to some distance behind.

And then, she struck. Targeting that same vampire three arrows struck him in the back, blood spattering the ground below as the sharpened tips easily pierced clothing. Unable to remove them in time they exploded, the light instantly rendering him nothing more than ash and the other vampire with him, blinded from severe light exposure.

Finishing the last one off Hermione kicked the corpse away from her, the last of the recently deceased Vampire carrying onto the ozone-laden breeze. Returning her attention towards the Inferi, Ginny was holding her own against them well and even from here, could see that the Vampires around Luna were having a very difficult time.

All magic was useful. While Luna couldn't use anything effectively other than defensive, light or protective magic, light itself, one of her strengths, was deadly to them. Able to make her aura glow with it, any closer than a foot within her proximity, burned. While a part of Luna mourned the loss of life, particularly since many were turned against their free will, another reminded herself that it was either them or her friends and family. Father, Brio, Harry, Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Neville, everyone was here. She had to protect them.
Gentle whisper in her grip the breeze around picked up, hair floating almost serenely on this wind as she let her magic flow naturally into the focus.

And then, Luna let go. Body glowing she expelled the light, a circular wave spreading outward. Pained cries filling her every sense they were burnt beyond recognition. So many needed help and yet, she had to keep a level head. Running over to someone she recognised propped against a tree, she took his arm in hand.

"It's me," she spoke soothingly if urgently, Ron flinching back. With a gash on his arm, he knew only a little healing magic, unable to stop the flow. As golden light encased his arm, the wound healed immediately.

"Thanks." nodding to show his appreciation, he was ready to move on. Glad to be of assistance Luna once more found herself surrounded, repeating the same, gentle pattern which remained nonetheless harmful to all Vampires lacking immunity.

Harry noticed that there were dragons, which Seraphina had brought along. The skies were filled with fire, much like the constant flash of incendio beside the Black Lake. Only, one of those in the sky didn't look like a dragon, but a snake.

Senses alert, he dodged a spell aimed his way and much like in his fourth year, a barrier surrounded them. Harry and Voldemort.

The look in his eyes was unnatural, born of someone no longer in control. He didn't speak the words of a madman nor of one who had regained their sanity, turning into something which became nothing more than a vessel for destruction.

Seamless chains of spells lit the already colourful air, of which Harry returned either with shields or dodging, learning superior reflexes and spells which would mimic a Vampire's advantage.

Because that's what Voldemort was now. Something which gave him an air of incredible danger. Lumos and Lumos Maxima would work against him, providing that he could land a single spell.

But in whatever amount of time Voldemort had to adapt to these changes, Harry couldn't land a single spell from the sheer speed at which he was able to dodge. At this stage he was only one problem among a sea of which they all had and as such, he had to conserve his energy. With one spell he wasn't quite fast enough, slicing through and into his cheek.

Wincing at the fierce stinging pain he dropped down, rolling to the side and avoiding more as he muttered a healing spell. It wasn't the best, but it would do. Relying on the spell which Alistair had taught him it offered a similar amount of speed, every inch of space being used in the quest to kill.

Several minutes later, Harry had an idea. Reckless, but it could just work. Panting, adrenaline was what fuelled him the most. The moment a spell was about to hit him it fizzled out, through a shield which held no physical signs of being there. As though it hit him he stumbled to the ground, nursing the arm it would have.

Cackling to himself Voldemort drew closer, damning words about to leave his lips when Harry
pulled what was once his signature move.

"Expelliarmus!"

Caught unawares, the grip around his wand was just enough for it to be released. Recognising this as the wand he'd won from Dumbledore, power unlike anything Harry had experienced surged through him. This was the Elder Wand. He'd known as much on that day but to hold it for himself, was nothing short of incredible. Robes singed, burned and torn away, he may as well shed them to reveal the armor beneath, for all the protection it provided.

Not giving him time to respond, it was too late for Voldemort to back up now. "Lumos Maxima!"

Used to the power output of all his wands, Harry was unprepared for the massive surge which channelled through it. A stream of white-hot light leaving the wand, he had to grip it with both hands, to prevent shaking.

A high pitched scream of sheer agony reflecting his hours in the Swallow's nest rung within Harry's ears. As the light died, he recognised nothing of what the man once was, nor did he feel any pleasure in his death.

But among the corpse, was a ring. One of which Harry recognised as clearly, the former Horcrux which Dumbledore had set his sights on and what was revealed, to be the resurrection stone.

Unable to leave it there where anyone could claim it Harry picked the ring up, securing it safely. Later, if there was a later, he would reflect on what he now had in his possession and what it meant. For now, though, he saw a more immediate problem.

A giant. Far larger than Grawp he could see it, one footstep clearing more forest than he could if running for minutes on end, each footfall cracking the ground beneath. The trees didn't stop it. While they'd held back the Vampires the Giant uprooted a large one, flinging it towards a section where many people were.

Panicked as he could see people he knew there, Harry cast Sonorous. "WATCH OUT, FLYING TREE!"

He hoped to Merlin that no one he knew was trapped beneath there, watching it land. With no time to check for himself, Harry sprinted to a clear section, transforming into Lume. Taking to the skies he joined the dragons, locked in battle with the largest giant Harry had ever seen. Releasing a fireball in its direction its arm caught on fire, a fearsome roar shaking the foundations much as every footstep had so far.

Full sized and mindful not to harm those on her side, Aela chose the moments to strike. Whether freezing them permanently or filling their weak bodies with highly toxic venom, many fell to her fangs and gaze. But, not far above, she saw a winged serpent. Flying overhead she slithered close to the forest, slanted eyes regarding this enemy with interest and sadness.

She didn't want to fight it but even now, it targeted Harry, in his strange alternate creature form. No one in the world to her was more important than him now. If she had to take down a relative of sorts, so be it.
Curling into a tight coil Aela opened her jaws wide, springing up and latching onto the tail end.

With an angry hiss the flying serpent struggled, unable to shake her hold until, with one powerful movement, she was flung overhead. Smashing through the standing stones and rolling onto the bridge, it broke beneath her great weight as she barely managed to avoid going over with it.

As fangs sunk into her scaly skin she hissed, finding herself on the other end of things. Carried high into the air and above the roofed tiles, Aela was dropped, crashing into them as they broke, bits of debris crumbling. Ducking out of harm's way and a set of long fangs, she tried to communicate.

"We don't have to fight like thisss! Join uss." coiled defensively Aela pleaded, able to combat the Venom flooding her own system with natural immunity.

"I fight for my massster only, all others musst die."

It spoke with the same mindless tone Aela recalled from her own experiences. "I wasss like you, once! Do you fight for her of your own free will or are you bound? Join me, you can break her hold!" her head swayed from side to side slightly, looking up and into the clear eyes of this flying serpent. "I am Aela. Who are you?"

A name. Did he have a name? Yes, long ago. What was it?

Seeing him stop and contemplate, Aela spoke further. "Help us fight and after thisss, you can be free. You'll never ansswer to her call again." a desperate look in her gaze, she could sense his internal struggle.

"I am...Ozem."

As if shaking cobwebs from his mind, Aela tried to help. "Yesss that's it. Don't let a filthy Vampire control a noble ssserpent like yourself."

"You are... correct."

A few seconds later, Aela could see the bond of magic snap in the air, the aura around this serpent changed as remorse flickered in his eyes. "Sorry."

Tail curling around Aela's mass she shrunk herself slightly, able to be carried with ease and dropped to the ground once more. "I will help you."

And, rather than fight Lume, Ozem flew in the air, latching onto the giant's bulky shoulder.

Pleased that she could help Aela returned to business and if she could, would wince at the damage her body had caused when impacting with parts of the castle.

Unable to penetrate the barrier which surrounded Alistair and Seraphina, frustration filled Solomon. Frustration, of which he viciously directed towards those nothing more than puppets. The Fae, he tried to leave alone. Anyone who could be spared would be beneficial, but with every Vampire belonging to her deceased, it would make the fight for Alistair less of a burden.
Fawkes hovered beside him, hours spent alongside Dumbledore's former familiar. Getting to know him, the two had formed an unbreakable bond, stronger than any which Fawkes had ever had before. Bound by similar tragedies, it was a privilege and honour to fight alongside the one which had helped to renew his trust in others again.

Relying on his enchanted weaponry rather than magic itself, many found themselves wholly unprepared when one swift swipe from Solomon, was enough to set them immediately on the defensive. The younger ones, if severely wounded enough and unable to heal on time, would succumb to such injuries. Powered with enchantments, it would ensure they didn't come back anytime soon.

Every now and then, he always found a spare second to check on Hermione. She was holding her own well and despite today's importance, would be worried no matter what fate had in store for them.

Seeing Rupert's mouth stained with blood with a visible chunk torn out of his victim's neck, he merely blinked. "That is one way to fight the enemy."

Bloodstained teeth grinning back at him, it was so at odds with his otherwise angelic and youthful appearance, that most Vampires who faced him didn't realise, until far too late. "A sure way that they no longer have claims to immortality." laughing, a trail of freshly bitten corpses would lead whoever followed to Rupert, a veritable killing machine.

Now, this was more like it. Fenrir and the packs he'd brought along could barely wait to begin, the blood of Vampires staining every inch of exposed skin. Able to undergo his transformation at will, none were able to stand against him. Once there were no Vampires, then he'd start on the others. For too long he'd been idle. Now, he had years of pent up rage to release.

"Hahahahaaaa!" a laugh rumbling in his chest, bloody lips curled into a vicious sneer when he slammed two Vampires together, skulls dented from the force. Dropping them he pressed all of his weight on their heads, splitting open as if nothing more than watermelons.

There was no feeling greater than this. If Fenrir should die today, it would be doing what he loved the most.

In the strangest twist of whatever Severus had ever found himself in, Lupin and Black were on either side, helping to fight off the seemingly endless swarm of Vampires. He more than anyone knew he couldn't always pick his allies and should take advantages where possible. Lupin, perhaps. But Black? Then again where one wolf went, the mutt would follow.

Dark amusement quirking his lips, a string of curses later left them, leaving his enemy more open, bloody wounds than recognisable features. More than once that dreaded curse had left his wand, saving it for the creatures that actually could die by the green light.

Recognising the sound of Potter's voice above all and frowning at his words, Severus' eyes widened
when looking towards the skies. Freshly uprooted and heading for their direction, was an entire tree.

"Move!" he ordered, forcefully shoving Sirius backwards and getting himself out of the way. He didn't notice another in the way, until too late.

Remus had heard the shout but to no avail. The tree slamming into him it rolled over, trapping and crushing every bone in his legs.

"AHHH!" a scream tore through his voice box, fingers clenched and every muscle taut as pain, unlike anything he'd experienced assaulted him. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Every inhale became physically taxing as he heard the snap and crunch.

"REMUS!" he heard a fearful shout from someone he recognised, but could barely think of the spell to move something this large. He was alive but immobile. The same couldn't be said for some of the Vampires, completely crushed beneath the tree's great weight.

Even Severus was pale when faced with this and before they could do anything, were swept into a flurry of weapons and spellfire.

Sirius fought against this with everything in him, desperate. No! He couldn't leave him there!

"GET OUT OF THE FUCKING WAY!" he roared, rage fuelling his actions as dark curses only members of the Black family knew, left his wand. He'd vowed to not be like his family and yet at this stage, Sirius didn't care. He was far past the realm of light, bordering on grey. He would do anything for Remus and by Merlin, he wasn't going to lose him.

Coming to the tree and senses alert, Sirius crouched by him. "We're getting you out! Wingardium Leviosa!"

But alone, he couldn't do it. Then a calmer voice joined his own.

Severus and Sirius stood side by side, pouring their power into the spell. It barely budged an inch.

Able to see the commotion and pleased that his plants were doing their work, Neville went over to lend a hand. Skidding on uneven footing he stopped, drawing his wand. "I'll help, hang in there Remus!"

As three spells hit the tree, it began to move. But still, not enough for Remus to slide himself out.

"Come on!" Sirius shouted, on the verge of tears. They had to get him out. Leaving him there wasn't an option.

On the battlefield for the same reasons as Luna, Brio had carefully avoided causing permanent injury to those who had fallen victim to this Vampire, casting spells of light or healing any allies that he possibly could. Seeing that they were in need of assistance the markings on Brio glowed a brighter blue, making his way over and communicating with the uprooted tree.

'Once we are done here, I will return you to the forest. But please, cooperate with us.'

As Brio's nurturing magic joined the others, the tree was lifted enough. Legs freed Remus shuffled back, slowly and whimpering in pain. He'd moved less than a foot, but it had robbed all of his strength. Slumping backwards and sweat pooling on his skin, he found himself lifted on an even
"I will heal him. During the process, I will be unable to defend myself. I will need all of you to be my shields," Brio instructed, navigating through dead bodies littering the ground. The grass slick with blood made their footing treacherous, those gathered there voicing a promise of protection.

As Brio placed Remus down he began to chant immediately, golden light encasing his legs.

Standing in a half circle were Severus, Neville and Sirius. Three no one would put together and yet they stood determinedly, facing all those who seek to target the vulnerable.

Once finished by the forest some of the plants had taken to following Neville, one creeping up behind an unsuspecting Vampire. Quadrupling in size its leafy jaws opened, swallowing the woman whole as digestive juices got to work.

"This is your doing?" Severus asked, Observing the plant with interest as the majority of his senses were attuned to any approaching threats.

"Yeah, that's thanks to Zeme's Ashes."

"...Ten points to Gryffindor."

Incredulous a laugh left Neville. Later on, if there was a later, he would reflect on the ridiculousness of the situation he found himself in.

Bit by bit the bones in Remus' legs began to heal. Muscles reknitting and internal bleeding stopping, the only telltale sign that his legs had suffered beneath such a great weight, were the holes torn through with rough, chipped bark. Standing shakily on his feet, he took a much-needed movement to recuperate.

"Thank you." gratefulness in his eyes he was treated to similar by Sirius, who squeezed his hand tightly. Contact only brief, it still assured him that Remus was there, alive.

If not in this situation he would take longer, but they would need all the help possible here. Feeling almost good as new, Remus vowed to check the skies for wayward trees. Next time, he might not be so lucky.

Why the flying serpent had a change of heart Harry didn't know but appreciated when it began to attack the giant alongside him and the other Dragons instead.

Nothing more than bird-sized when compared to the giant it swatted at them, skin shiny from burn wounds. While slow one arm covered a great distance, as Harry found himself narrowly dodging the attacks.

Until it caught one of the dragons. Hitting full force Harry didn't see the dragon larger than his own form crash into him until too late. Losing momentum they fell, a tangle of wings and injuries into a tree. Breaking it clean in half, Harry wheezed as pain flared. He was sure he'd broken or at the very least bruised something.
The Dragon and its rider who had been hit wasn't so lucky, two pairs of lifeless eyes, staring into his own mercury ones.

He had to try a different tactic. The smaller he was, the less he'd be noticed. There were still a lot of dragons and the flying serpent to distract him. Righting himself he took flight, keeping low and eventually rising higher. Behind the giant, Harry transformed in mid-air.

Back to his human form he landed on the giant's head, having the urge to gag at the smell of greasy, never washed hair. He moved through and out, securing his footing and holding onto fistfuls of hair firmly. He still had the blades the Fae had given him, assured they were sharp to cut through most anything. He'd never thought about how to kill a giant. This one didn't live in the skies, only accessible by a beanstalk so that fairytale method wouldn't be available to him.

Compared to the giant, Harry was insignificant in size. But even so, he'd learned a lot about anatomy and blood flow, largely thanks to Alistair. A giant's insides were much the same, only on a far larger scale. One of the major blood flow points was in the neck, of which Harry was currently navigating. if he could puncture that point, it would seal its fate. It didn't care who or what it trampled on, evidently by the footprints with some Vampires within the indentations. For a second, he questioned Seraphina's intelligence in bringing one along when it caused more harm than anything.

He didn't know another way. They were very resistant to spells, many not taking effect and harmlessly fading against the skin.

He needed one of the carotid arteries. Remembering where Alistair's fangs had punctured his neck, he knew the artery would be visible pulsating beneath the skin.

Closer to the right side than left, Harry saw what he was looking for. Holding onto the grease laden strands with his free hand, the other removed one of the blades secured to his back. Raising his arm up high he plunged it in deep, as far as it would go. driving it in he used his foot on the non-sharp edge, to push it in further. Reaching down he twisted it, yanking it back out. Breathing heavily by this point, the pain with every breath let him know that his normal state, it was his ribs that had been hit by the dragon. If in his human form, the damage would have been worse.

Harry forgot what would happen immediately afterwards until his body was coated with a jetstream of blood so powerful, he nearly lost his grip entirely. Moving away from the arterial spray he coughed, blood not his own resting on his tongue. Wiping at his face to see the giant barely had time to scream, losing blood at a rate which coincided with its heartbeat. Falling backwards, the sudden whoosh of air rushed by Harry as with a thunderous crash, it hit the ground and crushed several trees beneath it.

Hand slick with blood Harry lost his grip, rolling off and over to the side a few feet from the ground. Lying face up in a shallow, large pool of blood, he saw stars for a moment. Checking to make sure he was alone Harry aimed towards his injury, patching himself up as best he could.

Dementors swarmed the forest, feasting on souls of the deceased there and across the battlefield. Harry barely shuddered, able to see that despite the sheer number of Vampires, he recognised more on his side than anywhere else. From where he was standing, the tides were in their favour.

Joining the masses again he kept an eye out for his friends or anyone else who needed assistance.
Alistair had imagined what it might be like to meet his match, after many years of finding no one who could hold up his magical prowess and how long and hard he’d trained for, but the reality was keeping him figuratively and literally on his toes.

Away from everyone else, it was just him against her, in a barrier of her own creation to prevent outside interference. There was no time to look around, see how everyone else was doing. One or two spells had already managed to hit him, feeling their effects even now.

But still, Seraphina wasn't completely unscathed. While the robes she wore mended themselves due to the runes stitched within, her skin took a long time to heal from the various nasty curses he aimed in her direction. To everyone else, they would be nothing more than blurs but with each other, they moved normally.

"Once you have conquered the world, what then? There is no joy living in a world devoid of everyone else. Why must you do this?" those words left him, tinged with a hint of sadness. He wanted to understand, not fight. But she'd left him with no choice, threatening everything he loved and held dear.

"Enough whining! You are trying my patience. Die, Lothaire." snarling she upped her pace, Alistair increasing his own to match. It was no use.

Blades of grass clean or dyed with blood were stripped from the ground all around them, thousands upon thousands swirling around him. Sending those as a distraction they passed through a wash of Seraphina's magic, hardened and sharpened as if needles. Aimed back towards them they stuck in the ground, missing him.

Hidden beneath his robes, were explosive throwing knives. He knew how to use them, even if magic was his strength. Gripping his wand he pointed it towards her as if about to fire but instead, threw a knife.

Expecting a spell she was ready to shield. But when a knife buried itself firmly into her shoulder and exploded, she shrieked.

A hole opening Alistair could see clean through, losing blood at an accelerated rate until her healing magic began to kick in. Pressing his advantage, nothing held him back now. He threw his all into his, thought of his love, his brother and his friends fuelling him. He believed everything had an underlying reason and unknowingly, he had been training until this very moment. It was always meant to be, no matter when, where or with who.

Hair whipping in the wind she chuckled, genuinely amused. "How clever. Why would you waste such talents on the wrong side? Submit to me and I may choose for your death to be painless."

"I refuse," Alistair stated, hands a blur of motion as he threw the other knives. Aware that he had them Seraphina dodged to the side, but caught herself in the midst of one small explosion, stumbling. Rather than fall to the ground she pressed this to her advantage, slicing through personal space and leaping onto his body.

Surprised by her physical attack Alistair fell back over, grabbing her wrists. Flinging her from his own body he sprang upward, regaining his footing.

Blasting her backwards with a wave of destructive magic she slammed into her shield, a shimmer of
blood on there. Licking some more away from her lips, she smiled. Alistair took comfort in the fact
that he, along with his allies, had managed to deplete her physical strength considerably.

He didn't think she'd revealed all in this duel yet, proven correct when she removed a small square
box. Crushing it in her hand, an unseen force rendered him immobile. Dropping to the ground on his
side, it was as though he were petrified. That is, until a feeling akin to being hit repeatedly with a
sledgehammer, brute forces its way onto his pain scale.

"Ahh, I had hoped it would work." smirking sinisterly, she tilted her head to the side. "I am sure you
can break free. Though I am doubtful it will be on time." she would never show it but internally,
wanted this farce to be over. Any longer and her plans would go to ruin, as he was far stronger than
she'd anticipated.

Alistair could see within her eyes, she believed victory was hers. Identifying and recognising the
spell, he realised that in the confusion, something must have stuck to his robes or skin. Analysing
what he had to do he worked quickly, jaw clenched even as she raised her wand. No Vampire would
survive this spell. She had killed all those with age and a lack of magical power or brains on their
side, to test.

They had died, screaming. Oh, how she longed to make this man scream. Silently chanting, it was a
race against time. The seconds counting down, a shred of Alistair feared he may have to suffer these
consequences. As his mind was the only thing moving he utilised this, combating against this spell
while simultaneously, a ball of white hot fire left his fingertips. Scorching the ground beneath her feet
it bought him a little more time, heart beating rapidly. He wouldn't succumb to her now. Not after all
this.

Harry had offered his assistance just about everywhere he could and to everyone. Crossing wands
with more Vampires, he noticed a visible difference in how many of them were no longer there. The
majority were Fae, turned by Seraphina. Rather than dead they were stunned, in a way which others
couldn't undo the work.

There were many others he hadn't seen, however. Placing those thoughts aside, a feeling of dread
began to fill him. His senses were screaming, clawing at his insides, that something was horribly
wrong. This time it wasn't just his gut feeling, but emotions similar yet not quite his.

In all of this, there was only one who could possibly have such a connection. Still wearing the
bracelet which allowed them to communicate, Harry glanced downward. Black filled his vision.

No!

Able to see a barrier in the distance he didn't think, but acted. Apparating he reappeared outside of it,
seeing Alistair immobile before a chanting Seraphina. Able to see that she was more injured than him
and her wand shaking beneath an angered grasp, he panicked.

'I need to help him!' whatever that spell was, Harry had a horrible feeling it would mean the end.
Not only Alistair's but everyone here.

'I have an idea.'
With Thanatos' voice, Harry responded immediately. *I'll try anything, tell me!*

When he was met with a few seconds of silent, Harry snapped. *Now!*

'*...I cannot guarantee your survival.*'

'*Just tell me.*' if Alistair died here, they all would. Better that Harry gave them all a chance to continue, than none whatsoever. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

'*I am your soul animagi. As such, you have control over death. Avada Kedavra cannot kill an immortal, but enough power can weaken the soul and as a result a body, entirely. It would require you to draw upon all the power you can. Focus and imagine the tail and mane hairs of my form returning to you. All across the world, this curse has been uttered. Death is absolute and everywhere. Whether lingering in the air or remaining upon corpses, it never fully fades. Once charged I will be able to leave your body, towards Seraphina.*'

'*Will this work?*

'*I don't know. But that's why I can't guarantee your survival. Even with someone so closely connected to death, you are still mortal. The efforts could destroy your own soul.*'

Harry was scared, of that there were no doubts. But he feared what would face them all if he chose not to act instead. The one advantage he had, he needed to use. Even if it damned him in the process.

'*...I'll try.*'

'*We will be with you throughout.'* hearing Lume's reassuring voice, Harry imagined just what Thanatos had told him. Every mane and tail hair, every ounce of death here and elsewhere, returning to where it truly belonged.

His body began to glow, the bright, eerie green of Avada Kedavra. Eyes shining similarly everything seemed to go in slow motion. Wisps of green formed in mid-air, swelling and joining the rest. Somehow he knew the power he held would hold against the barrier of Seraphina's creation. Passing through it death itself kept any resulting pain at bay, the last words leaving Seraphina's lips.

Harry held the sceptre in his hand. The Fae had given him this for a reason and resonating within him, was the knowledge that now and only now, what was it was for. Holding it in his grip the green aura around him increased tenfold. Every part of his body aching and crying out for rest, he ignored. The sceptre firm in his grip, Neither Alistair nor Seraphina could see one another, as the magic of disease, met death itself.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

And Harry released the magic. It burst, taking the shape of Thanatos as it and his soul rushed towards her shocked form. Encasing her in green light a pained moan left her, falling to her knees and dizzy beyond comprehension.

Cancelling out her magic completely, Alistair broke free, thankful for Harry’s timely intervention. *‘Solomon, now!’*

Rushing to her side, it was time to end this. As Solomon materialised on her other side, together, they sunk their fangs into her exposed throat. Given no time to cry out they drained her of all blood,
power once belonging to their father returned to the ones who would look after it from now on. They would not touch her own magic, for fear it would corrupt them completely.

Wounds yet to heal both brothers bled, weak from fatigue and magical strain. As if waiting for this moment all along, Heimdall took their place and with it, a soul darker than any they'd seen before, was consumed by the dementor.

Her bloodless and soulless corpse on the ground, it was over. With her death, those completely bound died with her, as those already immortal yet bound, were broken from the trance they were in completely.

Harry observed all this, a weak smile curling his lips. Not a second later the sceptre shattered, shards of wood embedding themselves into his fingers.

A cold sweat overtook him. He felt violently ill all of a sudden as if he were suffering from the Dementor's attacks he used to have. Strength failing him, and head pounding, the last thing he saw was a pair of familiar sunset eyes, before the world went dark.

Alistair barely had time to reflect on their victory today. Turning to Harry, he found himself rushing to catch an unconscious, cold body. Too cold.

Knowing that Solomon and the others would help restore things to normal, he barely registered Seraphina's body fading into nothingness, before reappearing in the Hospital Wing.

Trembling from head to toe Alistair's eyes swam with fear, locating who he needed desperately. "Poppy!"

With healers from St Mungos there to lend their assistance, the wing was full with patients suffering from curses, blood loss or unconscious and in need of treatment. With Brio immediately returning to offer his assistance it left them all less rushed off their feet.

Seeing the unconscious form of Harry in his arms Poppy rushed over, instructing him to be placed down on the bed. Healing his immediate injuries and cleaning the blood away she ran a diagnostic, frowning. Waving over another healer they muttered words between them, a worrying number of minutes passing by as others not too worse off entered the Hospital Wing, to find those they hadn't seen since the beginning.

Little by little the number of injured patients decreased, some needing St Mungos rather than the Hospital Wing. As Hermione supported a wounded Ginny she saw Alistair. With a healer fixing her up, freckles stood out starkly against pale skin.

"Harry! Is he ok?" panicked Ginny asked Alistair, not reassured by the look on his face.

"I do not know."

With the curtains drawn around them, Alistair waited nothing else at that moment matters. Please, not now. Not after all this. He couldn't be...

No. He wouldn't allow himself to think that.
Hearing worried voices and a number of spells cast behind the now drawn curtains, Alistair couldn't help but fear the worst. Barely acknowledging his own fatigue, he wouldn't rest until knowing.

As the curtain opened, Alistair saw Poppy's pale expression. "Mr Potter has fallen into a coma. But, this is unlike any kind I have seen. Whatever he's done, it put a strain on his magic to near depletion. Such a loss of it in a short time has put pressure onto his brain. For a moment, his heart stopped. He's alive, but only just."

"...Will he be alright?" Alistair feared to ask this question, in case the answer wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"I don't know. As of now, he is unresponsive. Alistair..."

Breaking professionalism for a moment, true sadness shone in her eyes. "We nearly lost him just now. There's a chance this will happen again and if not that, there's a high chance he may never awaken again."

The news slammed into all those gathered there, as if a train had sped along broken tracks, hitting bodies in its wake.

"What?" shaken this had come from Sirius, Remus not far from him, as the last of his friends had gathered to overhear the news.

"I'm sorry. I will do all I can for him. If his magical core wasn't depleted, I could guarantee something more positive, but I don't know." ashamed to admit as much, it still wouldn't prevent her from giving him the best treatment possible.

Alistair vaguely registered the sounds of sobbing. Whether that came from him or someone else, he didn't know. He always saw the beauty in this world. So bright and colourful. But now, there was nothing but black and white.

If he had been just a fraction quicker, perhaps there would have been another way, something which didn't lead to this outcome. The light in Alistair's eyes dying completely, it was as the spell which would have ensured his death, had actually worked.

Harry was his love, his life. Alistair had learned the true meaning of love. Someone who had supported, surprised and comforted him. Together they had been through much and his scarred, once un-beating heart had opened to let in such a wonderful person.

If death didn't claim him, this coma could. His smile, sparkling eyes, self-assured and comforting voice. The voice of never seeing or hearing those again was too much for him.

A world without Harry was no world at all. He'd never felt so connected with anyone, despite many generations between them.

Without realising he'd done as much, Alistair found himself sitting on the seat beside Harry. Memories of their happiest times together flooded his mind, making now painful beyond words.

"Harry..." to all those gathered there, a name had never been uttered so heartbrokenly, hopelessly. Resonating within everyone else gathered there Alistair went into a trance, not even roused by a hand on his shoulder.
When a head of white hair and silver eyes crouched before him they didn't meet, sunset eyes unseeingly looking towards a closed pair which he may see again for the last time.

As cool arms wrapped around him Alistair's lacked all strength, only touching him a little. It was as though he’d switched to autopilot, no longer autonomous.

However, having his brother nearby and the familiar, welcoming feeling of his magic, brought back enough awareness of reality to sink in.

Harry may die and if not die, be nothing more than a memory of happier times, trapped inside a body which would remain unmoving.

Alistair’s heart broke, a river of blood flowing out of it. Or at least, that was what he pictured. He tried to remain optimistic but in the name of love and relationships, something terrible always happened. Now, at a time where he could say he truly had never been happier, that had been taken away from him, again.

This time, he was the one who began crying.

Robes dampened beneath a flood of tears the cries which left Alistair shook Solomon to the bone. Not even their parent's death had shaken him this badly or at least, he wasn't around to hear it. A shard of pain pricking his own heart their roles were reversed. From the age of ten up until he could care for himself, Alistair had taken on the role of not just an older brother, but mother and father too. Without him, he would have found himself in a number of fatal situations.

Right now, he was the elder brother. There to support and reassure though for this, he didn't know how other than the way he'd been taught with over a thousand years of exposure to affection.

A hand carding through tangled, bloody hair, both brothers lacked their usual elegance, one chest heaving with sobs while another absorbed every tear of pain and hopelessness. Feeling the grip on his shirt tighten Solomon returned it, gritting his teeth against a wave of emotion. Hermione was alright. If she were in that situation, he wouldn't know what to do. But over the last few months, he'd come to see Harry as family too, like a much younger brother. He liked him as a person, but the happiness he'd brought to Alistair as well.

Relieved to have him there Alistair soaked up every ounce of comfort Solomon was willing to give, eyes smiling slightly even if his mouth didn't when gentle hands wiped his tears away. "Do you need anything?"

Grateful for his concern, Alistair shook his head. feeling empty and devoid of anything, his tongue seemed to be weighed down considerably. "No, I will be alright."

He prided himself on honesty and yet, both knew that was a lie. He wouldn't be, not with Harry like this.

With reassurance that he would be fine alone, Alistair's eyes lacked focus when looking towards Madam Pomfrey. "Is there anything I can do?” his own voice sounded foreign as if it came from another.

Her response came immediately. “Talk to him. For many coma patients, it has been known to speed recovery and help them regain consciousness.”
Alistair had planned to anyway. But knowing that it could help, provided a small amount of reassurance.

Rather than stay in the chair Alistair lay next to Harry, not minding the lack of space but craving the closeness. Like Harry had done so many times before with him, he lay his head on the younger man’s chest, the arm around him trembling.

Such a feeble, weak heartbeat. He could rest here, for now. He would go nowhere else. Closing his eyes as if to shut out the pain, Alistair was unable to picture a future without Harry by his side. He had to awaken, with time. What would happen if not, he didn’t want to consider.

'Harry, my love. For as long as it takes I will be here. I will always be here.'

All he could do now was wait.

Chapter End Notes

If any of you were half as emotional typing this up as I was, then I know how you feel! Next week will resolve things.
He's the One

Chapter Summary

Without him, Alistair doesn't know what to do. Even the simplest things are a reminder of what's no longer there. Seeing this, Sirius and Remus try to help. During all this Harry finds himself in the midst of more unbelievable situations, moving forward to find the path of wakefulness.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Together they faced Seraphina, resulting in victory. But, through his choice, this placed Harry's life on the line.

Hours passed by, of which Alistair didn't move. Every sense attuned to ensuring that Harry's heartbeat remained. It was only later that he realised he was still wearing the same clothing from earlier. Perhaps because of his presence, Poppy knew that this side of caring for Harry would be met by him.

He could detect three wands and a ring on his person. Feeling strangely sluggish he eased himself up, sitting on the side and conjuring a protected box, for safekeeping. Large enough to hold everything he recognised the Elder Wand and Resurrection Stone, an indication that Voldemort was dead.

Summoning Harry’s pyjamas, it was a matter of simple spellwork to switch the clothing he wore. The small pile in his hands faded away, taken by the House Elves to clean. Bending down, he gazed into a face which looked as if he were just sleeping. Remaining there for a few short seconds, lips tinged with sorrow pressed against Harry's cheek. "I will be back soon." Though unresponsive, Alistair still wanted to provide the reassurance.

Even considering the circumstances, he sternly reminded himself that self-care was important. How could he see to the needs that were possible for Harry, if he neglected his own? While away from the Hospital Wing, he could see how everyone else was doing too.

A flash of guilt surfacing that he hadn't thought of this until now he disappeared, reappearing within his quarters.

He'd planned to head for the bathroom, freshen himself up and see the rest of this day through. However, he hadn't taken into account just how much of his days were filled with Harry.

Every morning he saw him and they always shared conversations. If not there physically their link ensured some form of communication. He was here, a matter of hours ago.

On the left side of the sofa was a cup, one of which Alistair knew was previously filled with hot
chocolate. Harry's favourite, made by him in an effort to relax before the day's events unfolded.

Memories were precious. In fact, to Alistair, they were more important than most things. Even now, the sofa itself brought with it memories. Happy ones, but now they cut into him like a rusted knife. Alone in the room, he could almost swear a faint echo of Harry’s joyful laughter filled the silence.

He'd asked the House Elves to let him maintain his own quarters but allowed them free reign with other things. Opening the door to his bedroom, Alistair almost wished he hadn't made that request.

Here, more than anywhere was Harry. His warm scent, the powerful yet reassuring presence of his magic and the bed itself, with drawn back covers and indentations, of where his head lay on the pillow opposite.

Carefully Alistair straightened everything out. It was almost as if no one but him were here. His senses told a different story.

The bathroom was also a stark reminder. Ever since the first time they shared one together, many more times they had, sometimes leading to more interest in one another than actually washing away gathered dirt from the day's activities.

Coming to stand in front of the mirror, Alistair gazed upon his reflection as if meeting it for the first time.

All of his physical wounds were healed, though dry blood, dirt and debris still coated exposed skin. The eyes reflected in a crystal clear surface held no joy, no spark. As if to make sure it was really him Alistair raised a hand. As his mirror image did so, it confirmed as much. This was him, a side he didn't recognise.

Filling the tub full with hot, steaming water, Alistair slowly stripped off. A part of him believed a bath would be soothing. But instead, it was as though he were submerging himself in more memories.

Dipping his head back to wet it he began to wash his hair, the shampoo doing its job as the water darkened. He wished it would wash away his heartache too.

The day he'd discovered Alex with another man and that their relationship was built upon a foundation of lies, wounded him deeply. It took him a considerable amount of time to heal and even now, some hurt remained. But at least that situation had an answer, was definite. All he had to do was allow time to patch over a reopened wound.

But in this case, all time would do was confirm what he dearly hoped, or what he didn't want to accept, even if it was a real possibility.

As Alistair went to wipe away more, slower tears, all that did was leave a wet streak across his face. Never in all his years, had he felt so lost, clueless. He'd never been faced with such a situation before. What could he do? He had questions, but no answers.

He'd stayed here for long enough. It was time to go.

Rising from the bath Alistair cleaned up after himself, dressing and running a brush through his hair. Even that and his usual hair care had lost its appeal.
Suspecting that everyone not in need of medical treatment would be in the hall, he headed straight there.

Up to date with everything now Alistair confirmed Voldemort’s death and as of yet, were unsure of the total casualties on their side. In the next few weeks, they would learn more.

While Alistair was about to return to the Hospital Wing, a strange sight on the outskirts of the forest was enough to rouse his curiosity.

There he saw Aela, another snake and two more forms which shouldn't have been possible. Wondering if he would have answers to Harry's state more than what he just saw, Alistair appeared before them.

Aela was the first to notice. "Where is Harry? I haven't seen him for hoursss."

"He is comatose. At this stage, I am not sure if he will awaken." saying those words, drove a dagger into his heart.

Lowering her head, Alistair could see the sadness in her eyes. "He alwayss comes to visit. None of the other humansss can understand me. He's my favourite human."

Compassion rising within him, Alistair reached up to pat her head. "While I am not a human, by some strange twist, I can now communicate with you. You are welcome to travel around with me until he awakens."

She nodded and while her features lacked the capability of obvious emotion, Alistair could tell his offer hadn't gone unappreciated. "Who are you?"

As his eyes met the all white ones of another snake, introductions were made. Learning that he had been bound by Seraphina and Aela had helped to break it, Alistair was thankful that Ozem had provided his assistance.

And then, he turned towards Lume and Thanatos. Though it should be impossible both were there, as separate forms rather than animagi.

Stepping forward Thanatos butted Alistair's hand, the palm of it touching his head. As he did so, memories helped to piece together the puzzle of what happened.

He'd harnessed the power of death, to weaken Seraphina’s and for the final blow to be made. While Harry’s soul was intact it had expelled not only Thanatos' but Lume’s soul from his body. Avada Kedavra had given Thanatos his physical form, while Harry’s own magic had similarly powered Lume.

Within his memories, Alistair could sense remorse. They were unable to communicate back and forth but knew Thanatos would still understand his words.

"It is not your fault. I am sure that Harry would have acted in a similar manner, even without your idea."

While not verbally responding, Alistair believed he could detect calmness within his flame-like eyes. At least the part of him unsettled by a lack of information could finally be at ease. Bidding farewell
he headed back to the Hospital Wing.

In one month, normal operations had resumed, but a number of people were missing. Some bodies had been found but others listed missing in action. All the names of those they knew would be added and Alistair would attend to honour them. It was the least he could do, in thanks to those who aided them all.

While Minerva had offered him time away, he'd refused. Better he put his time to good use and then use the moments he had spare to visit Harry. Otherwise, he would lose himself completely.

He could feel hope dwindling. It was though he moved slowly and everything else was much faster. The only times he felt close to normal, was when teaching the students.

He'd thought that age would guarantee a mastery of emotions, but Alistair was numb, deadened. He missed Harry more than words could express and several times he could almost swear he heard his voice but when dulled eyes sparkled with excitement, realised it was just a figment of his imagination again.

He visited Harry every day and often spent nights there too, often without Poppy's knowledge. With some subtle magic in place, he'd talk for hours, the sounds of his voice filling the room. Whether just about his day or a story, it had become a ritual of sorts.

Today was no exception. Alistair could see he'd lost a lot of weight, skin pale from lack of sunlight. He was dying, right before his eyes and could do nothing.

During this time, Alistair had discovered something. It felt as if his connection had deepened with Harry, to beyond his understanding. He'd enlisted the help of Solomon, in an effort to find out why Harry and he had both undergone changes.

'Alistair?'

As if just the thought of him had brought his voice forth, Alistair's response was delayed. '...Yes?'

'I believe I know what is happening between you and Harry.'

'What have you found?'

'You are soul bound.'

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Alistair experienced an emotion which was far from despair. Mind coming to a halt, he began to think. Soul Bonding was a natural occurrence, one which happened during a couple's first time together.

But so rare that these days, it was seen as nothing more than a myth. But Alistair believed in it and while his parents never said as much, believed that they too, were soul bound. If one died, the other would follow suit. That was something he'd always seen as a cruel twist.

But, there was only one issue with that.

'I am immortal and Harry is mortal. That is impossible.'

'Not impossible, just very unlikely. What else could it be? You know that Parseltongue is a language
that cannot be learned. Magic has determined that it was meant to be. Do you know what this means?'

An immortal soul would always overpower a mortal one, as one was not limited by age. So...

'Harry is immortal?'

'Correct. Only your death would mean the end of his life. I have only theories at this point but as you each possess abilities of the other, this will apply to his age. He will either stop when his body and magic is at its best or if not, remain like Rupert.'

If, no when he awakened, what on earth would Alistair tell him? They had yet to touch upon that discussion. But now, he had no choice in the matter. Harry would watch friends and family die, while he remained alive.

At this stage, it was almost too much to handle. The fairytale sleeping beauty came to mind as effectively, Harry was now frozen in his own timeline. Only, he wouldn't awaken with a kiss. He may not wake at all. Leaning forward in his seat, Alistair covered his face with both hands.

He didn't realise how much he depended on Harry in one sense, listening to him and absorbing a unique kind of advice. His immortality right now felt like a burden.

'Thank you for your help.' conveying his gratitude through the link with Solomon, Alistair began to talk to Harry again.

Entwining their fingers together, he told the very same story which he had last year, of the place he'd fallen in love with once the sun was no longer fatal. Only, there was a part he had yet to tell.

Looking directly at him, Sunset eyes met a pair of closed ones. "Butterfly Beach. It is a story that you love, so I will share more. Many days and nights were spent, walking barefooted through sands heated by the sun, or cooled when the moon rises. Away from civilisation, nothing mattered but me, the palm trees swaying in a soft breeze and the sea lapping against sandy shores. It seemed endless, so many parts to explore. Perhaps there is treasure buried somewhere? I have not yet found any, but the possibilities are endless. Together, we will discover more-"

Alistair stopped himself, heart gripped in a vice. He'd forgotten, just for a moment, about Harry's current state.

Misty-eyed, Alistair cradled the hand he held, against his cheek. "...I own this beach now. No one else has ever seen it and as it is special to me, I have not shared the experience I hold dear. But with you, I-"

It was though Seraphina's spell had trapped him again, the pain slamming against a body that remained stiff, rigid. These days, he didn't know much else other than sorrow, fearing for the future or shedding tears that somehow made him feel worse. Squeezing his eyes shut, hair which hadn't been tied back in months fell about his shoulders.

"Please, come back to me. I am so lost without you..."

The hand holding Harry's trembled once more, wondering if the pain would end as he relived his heartbreak, again. It seemed endless, the same loop of despair and inability to move forward.
Motionless in the doorway were Sirius and Remus. They'd visited every day as well but in that time, hadn’t run into Alistair. This time they had, overhearing everything the man had to say.

Remus' eyes watered. Blinking back tears of his own he silently gestured for them to leave and come back later. It didn't seem right to speak up or say anything.

The Hogwarts year had ended, with the Quidditch cup and House cup claimed by Gryffindor. At this point not even the most house proud students cared, many still recovering from April’s events.

Without asking, Poppy always let Alistair know from a medical perspective, how Harry was doing. His magic had yet to replenish as, like many times before, it was focusing on helping to keep his body in working condition.

If he awakened, his core would replenish. The first month it had always been a case of when, but now doubt began to creep in.

Usually eager to begin the day he often spent hours away from everyone else or just with Harry instead, keeping to the same monotonous routine. When it came to himself he only did what was necessary, nothing more.

A solid wall lay between him and Harry, cut off to the point of feeling constantly breathless, even without a need to breathe. Alistair realised Harry wouldn't want him to be like this but didn't know how to change that.

Today, the Astronomy Tower was his chosen place. In a reflective mood, inevitably, more memories assaulted him.

The softness of Harry's skin, the lilt to his voice and how depending on what emotion he felt, those eyes an enchanting shade of green flickered a different, new shade. There were so many sides to Harry, like an endless, beloved puzzle.

He was so young and had not explored the wonders of life for long. Would his condition be cruel enough to take that away from him, forever?

Gripping the bannister tightly, the same, recurring thoughts had utterly consumed him.

"We're going out a bit later, Want to come with us?"

So lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice the arrival of anyone else. Glancing back at them, he could see concern flicker across Sirius and Remus' faces. They were hurting just like him but found himself envious that they could appear to be fine. Yet, he couldn't at all.

"Where are you going?" he asked Remus.

"Just a club we know. Thought it might be a change of pace for you."

Alistair's eyes flickered with guilt. Thinking of Harry who so independent had to rely on others to care for even his most basic needs, he shook his head silently.

Sensing the direction his thoughts had gone, Sirius marvelled at the fact that he was the one actually trying to give advice. "I know what you're thinking. You can't enjoy yourself somewhere when Harry's like that. But everyone deserves to be happy and enjoy themselves, even in times like this. I
might not know Harry as much as I would have liked to since his birth, but I know one thing. He'd kick your arse to Romania and back if he knew you were here, haunting Hogwarts like a Vampire ghost."

The corner of Alistair's lips upturned. "That is true. The wrath of Harry is fearsome indeed." he could picture him doing just that.

Sirius barked a laugh. "Not half. So, what do you say?"

Met with two pairs of expectant eyes, Sirius did have a point. He'd made a promise to look after himself and yet, his mental and physical wellbeing were on the decline. This might be exactly what he needed. If there were any changes in Harry, he'd be able to sense it through their connection.

After a moment, he agreed. "Alright."

"That's the spirit! Meet us by Hogwarts' gates in an hour?"

After voicing his agreement the men left, Alistair returning to his quarters to get ready.

For the first time in a while, he chose to tie his hair back. Dressing smart yet casual, he vowed he would try to enjoy himself. He appreciated their offer, knowing it was made in an effort to cheer him up.

Once satisfied with his appearance he waited closer to the time, meeting Sirius and Remus by the gates. While a large part of him still felt guilty, he couldn't carry on like this forever.

According to Sirius, the Nightclub in question was called 'Delirium.' Whether inspired by wild excitement or illusions Alistair didn't know, but it had a certain promise of intrigue.

Allowing himself to be lead to its destination he didn't recognise where they were exactly, but the flashing neon sign accompanied by swirls could be seen from a great distance. It seemed loud and almost boisterous. Once inside that was proven to be correct, the dance floor entirely occupied and a cacophony of either drunken or enthusiastic voices.

The smell of alcohol in the air was strong, filled with the kind of life Alistair hadn't possessed in a while.

This seemed like a place where everyone was welcome. He could even recognise Vampires and other Werewolves here too.

"This has been here since we were in school. I convinced Remus to go with me once. Have you ever seen a bookworm trying to dance? It's comedy gold."

"Shut up." Remus elbowed him none too gently. "I'll show you. This old wolf has learned some new moves."

"You mean other than throwing your head back to howl?" smirking, a growl was his response when his arm was suddenly grabbed. Pulled onto the dance floor, they were lost in the crowd.

Amused by their little exchange, Alistair headed to the bar. While he doubted anything they had would get him merry, let alone drunk, he was curious to see what they had. Sitting at an available barstool, a young woman with hair hiding one eye addressed him. "What can I get you?"
"What would you recommend?" open to suggestions, Alistair could see there were many cocktails, both magic and non-magic inspired.

Without looking at the list she stared at him for a moment. "What about Amortentia? You've probably noticed they're either potion or creature inspired. It's sweet but towards the end, has a powerful kick."

With a melancholic smile, it was as if that potion had a hand in how deeply he'd fallen in love. Only, it was so natural that Alistair could hardly believe it at times. "I will try it."

"Awesome!" with practised hands she made the cocktail before him, replicating the colour and texture eerily closely, but through the use of fruit juices and spirits.

As the drink was placed before him, he took a sip. As she said it was sweet, gradually growing stronger. Perhaps the return to normality more than the drink itself was what helped to ease the tension he hadn't realised he had.

"There we go. A happy customer is the best one!" enthusiastic, Alistair realised that he was smiling.

"Thank you, it is delicious," he told her, enjoying the taste.

With the eye he could see, it filled with satisfaction. "Good to know. You can relax here, it's a friendly place. Anyone causes trouble they get kicked straight out, my boss makes sure of that."

"They sound like a fine owner."

"Definitely, I'm proud to work here. Want another?" indicating to a glass which he realised was empty, he agreed.

As Alistair was served again the bartender went to more customers, finding stools on either side of him quickly occupied.

"Damn, nice eyes! Are those contacts?"

"No way, they're totally real."

"Contacts!"

"Real!"

"They're contacts you muppet! Who do you know with orange eyes?"

Finding himself in the middle of a debate Alistair could see they were twins, one male and one female. Roughly in their early twenties, they possessed an alternative style, with heavy, dark makeup and contact lenses.

"Yes, they are real," Alistair confirmed, eyes twinkling with amusement when the female on his right threw a two-fingered gesture towards the male on his left.

"I'm so jealous! Our normal eye colour is boring," he moaned, slumping across the table dramatically.
Rolling her eyes at his antics, she nodded in agreement. "Orange is so much cooler. Or warmer, I guess." shrugging, she held her own drink. "What's your name? Haven't seen you around before and we pretty much live here."

Alistair found that it was impossible for him to be lost in darker thoughts, with their presence. "I am Alistair."

"Nice to meet you! I'm Tabitha and that idiot brother of mine is Tyrone. He's not worth knowing, really. More than a minute talking to him and your IQ will lower."

"Hey!"

As Alistair shook their hands, he chuckled to himself. "I shall keep that in mind."

As Tyrone downed the drink in his glass, he eyed the dance floor. "Since I'm an idiot, I may as well infect the dance floor with it."

Standing up he stumbled slightly, looking towards Alistair, "Come on, join us. Looks like you could do with the stress relief. Maybe you'll cancel out my idiocy with your awesome eye colour."

He didn't see why not. After the few drinks he'd had, he did feel in a more sociable mood. Making new friends was always welcome in his eyes.

As Alistair found himself on the dance floor many were doing their own thing and, to his amusement, saw Sirius bring Remus down for a dramatic dip in their own dancing. He was glad the men had convinced him to come out. This was certainly a place he'd love to show Harry. It had helped to restore some of his optimism and faith.

Body swaying to the thumping music his laughter was lost among a sea of exuberance, as Tyrone classed hopping from one foot to another dancing. The club itself was not too large but here, it felt as if everyone belonged.

Alistair had regained some of his spark. At a later date, he would have to think of a way to thank Sirius and Remus. This and everyone here was helping him to cope.

The three didn't return to Hogwarts until hours later when everyone was asleep. While Alistair could support himself, Sirius and Remus stumbled over one another.

As Alistair returned he changed into something more comfortable, heading up to the Hospital Wing.

Mind still fresh from his experience Alistair took the usual seat and in the only way, he knew how to connect, took Harry's hand. Excitement in his voice he recounted the events, continuing even when his throat desired to rest for a while.

For a moment, he could almost swear the hand in his twitched. But then, he wasn't in the best state of mind. Keeping hold of Harry's hand, he kissed the back of it. He should try to rest, properly. Closing his eyes but not letting go of the smaller hand in his own, Alistair found himself drifting off into a light sleep.
Where the hell was he? One minute he'd channelled Avada Kedavra into a curse to weaken Seraphina and now he was wandering through an endless fog, with absolutely no sense of direction. Was he dead? If so, it was nothing like Harry expected.

He hoped not. He didn't want his friends or family to mourn for him but also, hadn't had the chance to live himself yet. Hopefully, he was stuck in his own mind again.

Harry kept hearing voices. Or was it his imagination? Whispers of people who sounded familiar, but the name always bypassed conscious thought.

It was like an endless grey fog, unable to see more than a foot in front of him and hoping he wouldn't run head first into anything. It felt like he'd been here for an eternity, trying to locate an unknown destination.

"Can you give me any directions?" Harry didn't know what or who he was asking, but those words prompted a clearing of fog. Bright light assaulted his eyes, squinting against the intensity until it dimmed enough to see what lay ahead.

A large field. With colourful flowers and the sun shining overhead, Harry couldn't be any more confused. That confusion turned to shock when seeing two people who were definitely dead.

Sitting on a wooden bench they didn't look surprised to see him but overjoyed nonetheless. Coming closer he drank in their features, not much older than the pictures he'd seen of them in school.

"Mum? Dad?" he asked, in awe and thoroughly shaken.

As they rose to their feet, it was Lily who answered him. "Yes, sweetheart."

More composed of the two, James' eyes shone with unshed tears. He seemed to be doing the same as Harry, taking in everything he'd never had a chance to see.

This could be a figment of Harry's imagination or a dream, but he didn't care. It felt so real. The sun on his back, the warmth of their arms around him as he found himself in a hug between them and their voices, only familiar from other memories and never his own, lost among all he'd endured throughout his life. He would embrace this moment and them, for as long as it would be allowed to happen.

He had so many questions, bubbling and bursting forth. But the prominent one was his current state. "Do you know where we are? Am I dead?"

Inviting him to sit between them, he found his questions answered by Lily. "You are neither dead nor alive, but somewhere in the middle."

Sharing a look that Harry couldn't read, James continued. "Your connection with Alistair has deepened, to the point where you can't die. You either remain here forever or awaken."

"...What do you mean I can't die?" the confusion hadn't cleared up for him.

As his parents had seen everything, they filled him in. He was soul bound to Alistair? Of all the things he expected to hear, that wasn't one of them.
Harry stopped himself from overloading them with questions, wondering if he'd gone mad and his mind was conjuring up his current experience and it was just a highly realistic dream.

Whatever this was, he saw it as an opportunity. All his life since knowing more about them, he'd only heard from others. He still didn't know whether this was a dream or not, but couldn't let the chance to know more about them or hear their opinions on things he'd always wanted to ask, slip by.

"What do you think of Alistair and everything that's happened?"

"That's a broad subject," James responded jokingly, eyes glinting behind round glasses. "He's a good bloke. Never thought my son would end up with a Vampire, but life works in mysterious ways. As for the other? Well, Everyone who did you wrong deserved all they got and worse, bastards."

Grumbling to himself, he looked thoroughly chastened with Lily's lecturing tone. "Not in front of our son."

Thinking of his own colourful language, Harry had the grace to look embarrassed but was amused by his dad's situation.

As her eyes met Harry's, Lily gave a brilliant smile. "I'm so proud. You've made the lives of everyone so much better. I'm glad we are able to watch over you, even if unable to be there in person. We always are, in here."

Placing the palm of her hand against his heart, Harry choked up. He'd said as much to Alistair but right here, could feel it.

His mum's words filling him fit to burst Harry found every single one of his questions answered and in the process, came to learn more about his parents that he could ever have possibly imagined.

Again Harry didn't know how much time had passed but when their smiles became tinged with sadness, knew it was close to saying goodbye. He didn't want to. It wasn't fair. He was only just getting to know them.

"Harry, we haven't much time left. We can only spend so long here before our spiritual forms fade."

With his mum's words, it confirmed what he already expected. Hanging his head, it was an effort for him not to break down. He wanted them to be alive with him, so they could meet everyone. It seemed too horrible, as though it was a taste of what he could never have.

Heart heavy, he didn't want to leave the arms which encased him. He closed his eyes as if that could banish away the inevitable.

"I know. I wish you could come with me."

"I wish we could too." brown eyes filled with sadness, James went to ruffle his hair affectionately. "Could you pass on a message from me to Moony and Padfoot?"

As Harry nodded, the sound which left him later sounded like a mixture of a laugh and sob.

"They'd better not stop their Marauding ways, or I'm finding a way to come back and haunt them. I'll see them later."
The thought of his dad coming back to haunt Sirius and Remus was an amusing thought. As he glanced towards his mum to see if she had a message of her own she held onto Harry tighter, as if not wanting to let go.

"Give Sirius and Remus my love. And... tell Severus that I forgive him."

"I will," he promised, wanting to fulfil their requests. As they'd told him he was in a coma from what happened with Thanatos, he just had to find a way of waking up. But a part of him didn't want to, stubbornly clinging onto now.

"Don't go," Harry whispered, brokenly.

Despite his words, he didn't fight or cling on when arms returned to their sides. Even without their words, he knew they had to as before his eyes, their forms were fading. Standing up to face them he felt helpless, watching them go.

"We love you." their voices speaking in unison, those three words were more of a goodbye than the word itself.

"I love you too!" Harry called out, desperately.

As they faded into nothingness, he had the urge to cry but held it back. He was confident that it wasn't a dream now. None of them had held such depth. Everything he'd learned can't have been conjured by his mind alone.

Wiping away the few tears that stubbornly refused to stay put, he hadn't taken another step, when two more figures formed before his eyes. A pair that he'd never met, yet heard so much about. Maven and Callan Lothaire. Why were they here? How could they be? He didn't think Vampires and Humans were connected to a sort of afterlife, in that sense.

Harry noticed his surroundings changed, to the very same one in Alistair's memory and captured in the picture frame, though without the brothers. They were in the living room.

In person Mr Lothaire looked every bit as stern as Alistair told him, channelling Professor Snape in some ways.

Mrs Lothaire was far from it.

"Oh, it is lovely to meet you!" sweeping him into a warm embrace Harry was too startled in returning it, blinking and already able to tell exactly where Alistair's personality came from.

As she drew back, orange eyes flickered in faint apology. "Perhaps I got a little too carried away. But is this not exciting? Darling, this is Harry!"

Stunned all Harry could do was stare, her own musical laughter a mirror of Alistair's. Mr Lothaire, much calmer, responded normally.

"Yes, I am aware. Hello Mr Potter." holding out a hand for him to shake Harry accepted, their personality differences making his head spin.

"Call me Harry, Sir."
As he nodded in acceptance, Harry could see her excitement overflow. "Ever since you entered our son's lives, I have always wanted to meet you. Thank you so much, for all that you have done." Eyes filled with so much love and gratitude were directed towards him.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, he averted his eyes. "No need to thank me. They've done a lot to help in return."

Then, Harry thought of something and wondered if they would be able to confirm things. They were older than Alistair and Seraphina, surely they'd know more about it. "Can I ask you both a question?"

"Of course."

As Harry took a seat across from them, he reflected on all he'd learned, about their connection. "I saw my mum and dad earlier. They told me I have a soul bond with Alistair. Is that true?"

"Yes. During your night of intercourse, this is when the bond began to form."

Mr Lothaire's tone was so serious, Harry almost missed the words he'd used.

"You can be so unromantic at times. As you well know, a bond such as this only forms when a couple is deeply in love with one another and connected in every way imaginable." lips curving into a smile she placed her hand delicately over his, laughing when able to see a flicker of awkwardness in his expression.

Harry could see exactly why Alistair loved and missed his mother so much. Just listening to her was enough to put Harry's heart at ease. He'd only just met her, but already felt a connection. Like Alistair, she was the kind of person difficult to dislike.

"Oh, I wish I could meet Hermione too," Maven spoke, sighing sadly. "He has chosen wisely. I am glad that your fate tied with our family. It is painful, watching and being unable to intervene. Alistair is a dear, but I have several word choices for his past partners. And oh, Solomon-"

Shaking her head with a painful look in her eyes, it was at odds with the sudden radiant smile in his direction, redirecting the subject. "But you, Harry, are perfect. A mother has special instincts and I told my husband that you would be the one."

Looking and sounding confident Harry gave the man sat beside her a bewildered glance. He inclined his head. "She did. I expressed doubt, as humans have shown us no kindness before. But you have proven yourself. Before this moment and when you chose to harness the magic of death itself. A bold move, one which secured victory and my magic is now in their hands."

The light of approval shining in his eyes, that was something which had brought Harry great relief, before falling unconscious.

And then, her words registered.

"Perfect? Thanks, ma'am, but I'm far from that." disagreeing, he could see a twinkle in her eyes.

"Call me Maven, I insist. And perhaps not perfect as no one is truly, but I could not ask for a more suitable and adorable future son in law!"
"Hey," Harry protested, face flaming. Adorable? Future Son In Law? she hadn't just jumped the gun but an entire cannon.

"Maven," Callan spoke firmly, putting an end to her words. Giving him a sad, puppy-eyed look he withheld a sigh, to meet Harry's eyes. "You want to awaken?"

Getting right down to business, Harry straightened in his seat. "Do you know how?"

"Follow your connection with him. Right now, he is touching your hand. Close your eyes, focus on that sensation and follow it."

"Thanks." with his words, Harry sensed it was time for them to leave as well.

"Tell our sons that we love them, very much. Without our guidance for much of their lives, they have done splendidly."

Wearing a loosely flowing dress Maven reached into a small pocket, removing an object. Silver and star-shaped it held a jewel in its centre, lacking the shine Harry associated with them.

As it was given to him, she spoke. "I cannot tell you what this is, as only our family are permitted. But Alistair will know, with time. Farewell, Harry."

"I'll tell them, it was good to meet you both."

Unlike his parents they didn't fade away but waved, exiting the room. As they did, his surroundings returned to blinding white.

Focusing on what Mr Lothaire had told him Harry closed his eyes, to see if he could sense a connection. The whole time, before meeting his own and Alistair's parents, he had the feeling someone had been talking to him, but couldn't work out who.

Realising that a lot of what he heard must have been from Alistair, it wasn't difficult for Harry to notice the connection. Glowing faintly he followed it, concentrating with everything he had.

The connection grew in strength until the light faded into darkness. The darkness, Harry realised, was the inside of his eyelids.

Coming to awareness, he realised very quickly, that he felt awful. Stiff as if he was a wooden plank rather than a human. Throat dry Harry could barely make a sound but felt his hand held in another.

Looking to his left he saw Alistair, Harry's heart swelling with love and concern. Bone-Deep despair, the likes of which he'd never felt, shrouded the sleeping man. Below his eyes were red-rimmed, a sure sign he'd been crying. He looked exhausted.

It was strange. Obviously, Harry had been out of it the whole time but in his head he was awake, walking around and trying to find something. As though emerging from deep waters his mind struggled to process things at first. But then, the curtains around his bed were pulled back.

Seeing Madam Pomfrey Harry tried to grin, but his face remained stiff.

Relieved, she didn't try to hold back her smile. "I'm glad to see you're awake, Mr Potter."
Keeping her voice quiet she scanned him with her wand, reading the results and looking satisfied. "You will have to stay here for a few more days. Now that you're awake, your magical core will replenish. No magic until it does. After that, you will need to build up your strength."

Nodding seriously, a glass of water was handed to him. With her hand helping to support his shaky one, he wet his dry throat, swallowing. Closing his eyes in bliss he opened them, glancing towards Alistair.

"I will leave you two alone. When you're ready, I will inform the others." closing the curtains shut around them, Harry missed the small, unprofessional fist pump which conveyed her happiness.

Throughout all that, Alistair hadn't awakened. It just went to show that even if sleep for him was optional, fatigue depending on the situation could still affect him. Experimentally, Harry gave the hand in his a squeeze. Propped against the pillows now, he could see exactly when Alistair opened his eyes.

They stared at one another, for a long moment. Breaking the silence Harry spoke, wincing at the hoarseness of his voice.

"Hey."

Alistair didn't respond, staring as if he'd never seen him before. In his eyes Harry could see a flicker of hope, in otherwise dulled eyes he'd only seen when looking at his own reflection.

"I am dreaming, I must be," Alistair muttered, shaking his head softly.

"Vampires can't dream, remember?" Harry pointed out, smiling. "It's not a dream. See?" To prove his point Harry squeezed the hand in his again, voice teasing. "Is it me, or are you sexier than ever before?"

Alistair didn't know whether he was laughing or crying. Ensnared between the two, it confirmed it for him.

Faster that Harry's mind could process he found himself within the circle of Alistair's arms, feeling his shoulder become damp. Though it took some effort Harry returned it, shaken by how much Alistair was trembling.

"Oh, Harry. I feared you would never awaken again. I am so, so relieved."

Pulling back with tears falling from his eyes, it nearly set Harry off. "There's no way I couldn't come back. I'm a stubborn arse. Can't leave you alone can I? I love you far too much for that."

Kissing him, Alistair broke down. Relief, love and worry all swirled into one, leaving him in sobs which tugged Harry's heart.

"I love you too. More than I could have ever possibly imagined. You are irreplaceable to me. I have learned this, more so over the time I have not been able to speak with you."

That was a point. Soothing him, his scent came as a great reassurance to Harry. Once calmer, he asked the last, most prominent question on his mind. "How long have I been out for?"
Alistair's eyes flickered, a hint of hesitation there. "Three months. It is July 29th."

"What?!" Harry exclaimed, shocked and falling into a coughing fit shortly after. As Alistair patted him on the back gently, Harry marvelled at how much time had actually passed. "How is everyone?"

As Alistair updated him with everything, Harry vowed to visit the memorial stone that had been erected, listing the name of those who lost their lives.

As silence fell between them, Harry could detect Alistair's nervousness. "Harry, there is something that I must tell you."

Guessing where he was going with this, he saved him from explaining. "Is it about our soul bond?"

That stopped him in his tracks. "How on earth did you know?"

There wasn't really another way Harry could put it. "This is going to sound weird, but my parents told me and your parents confirmed it."

 Weird, in Alistair's opinion, was an understatement. "I admit, I do not understand. I would like an explanation eventually but, I apologise."

As remorse shone within his eyes, Harry frowned. "What for?"

"Another choice has been taken away from you. This bond is unbreakable and only my death will grant your own."

Harry shook his head firmly. "Stop that. You're blaming yourself, aren't you?"

When he was met with no response, his suspicions were confirmed. Wanting to set the record straight he cupped both of Alistair's cheeks, tilting his head and pinning him with stern green ones. "I don't know much about soul bonds but it's decided by magic, right? Neither of us has a choice. We've just got to make the most of it."

And then, a thought occurred. "If this soul bond hadn't happened, I might be dead. So look at it that way. There's a bright side to this."

Falling silent to rest his voice, Alistair absorbed his words and everything else. The touch of his fingers, the eyes he feared he may not see again and nodded. His own narrowing slightly he touched noses with Harry, rubbing affectionately. "I have much to say on the recklessness of your actions, but I will save that for later."

Harry expected as much, hiding a wince. It was only when leaning on his left side, he felt something dig in. Taking it from his pocket, it was the object which Maven gave him. How it had managed to appear in his pocket here he didn't know but confirmed that everything he'd experienced was true.

Harry met his eyes. "Look in my mind. It's better for you to see yourself."

Letting the recent memories rise, he showed Alistair everything. Taking no more than a few minutes to process it, Harry was amused to see a faint blush on his cheeks. "Ah. Even now, my mother has not lost her ability to chastise."

"She's brilliant. And Solomon is like your dad. I can barely believe I met them and my parents. It
Eyes alight with great warmth, he voiced his agreement. "Yes. I am overjoyed to know that she is fond of you too."

And his own parents were with Alistair. It was reassurance neither knew they needed. "Anyway, that's for you, whatever it is."

Handing the object over to him, Alistair pocketed it for safekeeping, then backtracked to an earlier topic anxiously. "Harry, about our soul bond. How do you feel? I realise that may not be the most appropriate question, however, I am unable to think of another way of phrasing it."

Harry's voice was hesitant. "I'm not really sure what to think just yet. But I do know the thought of dying and leaving you alone is the last thing I want. Everyone deserves to be happy and if you find that with Harry Potter, the idiot who lived, who am I to question it? Just so long as you're happy being stuck with me."

Grinning, he nearly purred when a gentle hand ran through his hair. "You know just the right words to set my heart at ease. I can think of no one else I would rather be 'stuck' with. And you are not an idiot."

Harry folded his arms. "Come on, listening to my animagus and using Avada Kedavra against a sworn enemy and knowing full well I might not survive does make me an idiot."

"Your actions may be, but you are not. You are an intelligent young man," Alistair spoke, with an underlying firmness that warmed Harry's chest.

Harry's words sparked Alistair's memories of Lume and Thanatos, but that could be saved for a little later. Harry had been awake for a while now and he wasn't the only one wanting to see him.

"Are you ready to let everyone else know?"

Harry nodded, hiding the fact that he felt tired. He'd been out for three months, surely that could wait. He wanted to see everyone else too. "Yeah. Better make it a few at a time, especially if the entire Weasley family show up."

As they alerted Madam Pomfrey, Harry was treated to more hugs and tears that he could handle. There was something about emotional women and some men for that matter that put him completely out of his depth. It was only when talking to Hermione, that he remembered something very important.

"Oh bugger, I missed the rest of the school year." Harry groaned, anxiety rising at the amount he would have to catch up on. That was alleviated slightly, with her next words.

"I have notes of everything you missed. I'm sure the Professors will be willing to help you catch up too."

Harry spoke with dead seriousness. "Hermione, you're my hero. Thanks."

Giving him a brief hug, she beamed. "You're welcome. I'm just glad you're alright."

So was he. He hadn't wanted to die but like many decisions in his life, he'd jumped in headfirst, not
thinking. Usually, because he had no time to.

Seeing everyone like this had drained him. But still, stubbornness reared its head. Sirius and Remus were the last he needed to see and before he forgot completely, needed to speak with Professor Snape.

As the men in question approached his bedside, Harry wondered if he’d ever be able to tame his hair into something manageable, from the number of hair ruffles he’d gotten. Sirius was no exception, ensuring that it resembled a bird’s nest.

“Oi!” batting his hand away in amusement, they seated themselves on the edge of his bed.

“How are you feeling?” warm amber eyes narrowing in concern, Harry did his best to reassure.

“A bit shit, but can’t expect anything else really.” shrugging, Harry’s eyes were serious. “I saw my parents. I know you might think it was just a dream but it wasn’t, I’m sure. It was too real and I learned things about them I didn’t know before. They told me to pass on a message, but I’ll show you the memory, so you can both see.”

It took longer this time but by the end, neither men could hold back their emotion. Harry could tell they had for his sake when first entering, but didn’t blame them. It was difficult for him to keep his composure as well.

“Hasn’t changed a bit.” voice gruff, a mischievous twinkle entered his eyes. “Well Moony, can’t ignore a direct order from Prongs himself! We’d better start plotting.”

Even though Harry was used to hiding his true feelings, they seemed to instinctively sense his fatigue anyway and didn’t stay too long.

Checking that the coast was clear, Harry relied on natural abilities to sneak out. Alistair was with Solomon, updating him on what had happened and Madam Pomfrey was in her office. Even though he couldn’t use magic, he could still sense where it was.

Biting back the instinct to yell when his bare feet touched the stone floor, he successfully managed to navigate the wards, descending into the dungeons. Halfway down he began to tire physically but pushed on. It was too late now, but Harry hoped he was in the classroom or his office.

Sending a mental apology to Madam Pomfrey for sneaking out yet again, he located the man’s
office. Knocking on the door, he waited.

“Enter.”

Relieved that he was in Harry opened the door. Greeted with not just one but both eyebrows raising, the man appraised him silently.

It was only standing there, that he realised he’d forgotten to change out of his pyjamas. Why that hadn’t occurred to him when he was barefooted Harry didn’t know, but there wasn’t much he could do about it now.

“What I’ve got to say won’t take long and then I’ll ah, go.” feeling awkward, he spoke quickly. “My mum said she forgives you. The coma I was in trapped me between life and death and I saw her when there.” Harry purposely chose not to mention his dad.

Unable to read his expression, Harry didn’t expect an overly emotional reaction.

“I see. Thank you.”

Nodding his head, Harry went to leave.

“...Welcome back.”

Rooted to the spot he stared, but the man had returned to documents on his desk in need of looking over. Opening and closing the door behind him, Harry hoped his words had brought with them some measure of peace.

By some miracle, she hadn’t noticed he’d left at all and when returning to the hospital wing, climbed back in bed.

He didn’t sleep, simply lay down with his eyes open, until a thought occurred. Where were his wands? And everything else?

A few minutes later, Alistair returned. When Harry asked the question he was given them all back
but refused the Elder Wand and Resurrection Stone. “Keep them there, for now, I’m not sure what to do with them. I know all three means I’d be the master of death, but I think my experience with Thanatos was more than enough.”

That reminded him. Where were Lume and Thanatos? He hadn’t heard their voices at all. He couldn’t detect anything, in fact.

Frowning with confusion, Alistair guessed what direction his thoughts had gone. “There is something that I must show you.”

As Madam Pomfrey came over to check on him, Harry seized the opportunity. "Can I go out for a bit? I won’t be long and I'll come straight back. Alistair can be my guard Vampire."

Chuckling Alistair nodded his head, agreeing. Knowing that the elder man was a more reliable sort, she acquiesced. "Very well. Fresh air will do you good. But the moment you feel ill or tired, you come straight back here."

"I will." staring at him with doubt, Harry could see why. More than once he'd snuck out of the Hospital Wing, today included.

With the help of Alistair Harry dressed, glad of the pain-relieving potion which helped to ease the ache of his joints and muscles. Looking in the mirror, Harry grimaced at his pale, almost waxy appearance. "Bloody hell, I look like Nearly Headless Nick. Except my head's firmly intact. Could easily mistake me for a ghost though."

He lost a lot of weight. It had taken him a while to build some muscle and eat right in an effort to battle past malnutrition. Set back a large step, it would take a while for him to return to normal.

He was interrupted, by arms effortlessly picking him up. With a loud exclamation, Harry wrapped his arms around Alistair's neck, swept away by his exuberance. "Ah, Harry. Even so, you are devastatingly handsome. Let us go forth and venture outside, where many wondrous things await us!"

In a giddy mood, Alistair's actions were borderline silly, but his heart began to repair itself when hearing Harry's laughter. "Yeah! Let's go forth and find stuff!"

Cheering they disappeared on the spot, Reappearing on the forest’s outskirts. There, he completely forgot about his tiredness when faced with an unbelievable sight, placed back on the ground. "What the hell? How did that happen?"

Seeing Lume and Thanatos emerge, Alistair explained for his benefit. Absorbing the information, Harry felt no disappointment. While it was clear he now had no animagi forms, he’d gotten off lightly. It could have meant his death or worse, Seraphina’s survival. Patting them both affectionately, a welcome and familiar sight greeted him, in a bundle of basilisk energy.
“Harry!” with overjoyed hissing her large body vibrated with excitement, moving closer.

“Hey, how are you doing?” reaching up to stroke her scales, he was surprised to see another, equally large snake keeping its distance. Sensing the direction he was looking in, Aela’s hissing turned hesitant. “Thisss is Ozem. I told him he could have a home here, with me.”

There was something in her words which made him think there was more behind them. Smirking, he tilted his head to look up at Alistair. “Aela’s found herself a boyfriend while I was gone?”

“It appears so.” chuckling softly, Aela had been around humans enough to know what boyfriend translated to. Ducking her head almost shyly, Harry thought he’d never see the day where a Basilisk could nearly blush.

Waving Ozem over Harry greeted him, smiling. “Hogwarts can be your home for as long as you want. If Headmistress McGonagall doesn’t know of you yet, I’ll make a case and say why you should stay as well.”

“You would go thisss far for me? I was with the enemy.”

“Was being the keyword,” Harry corrected. “A friend of Aela is a friend of mine.”

“...Thank you.”

Harry could tell he wasn’t the talkative type. Turning his attention back to Lume and Thanatos, Harry had one question. “Any idea what you’ll do now? It’s weird for me, but probably even weirder for you.”

As they were no longer a part of him, Harry couldn’t understand. So instead, a transference of memories occurred. Thanatos would stay with the Thestrals, while Lume could possibly find a home with Charlie at the Dragon reserve. While not strictly related, it was his hope he would be accepted among them anyway.

Harry felt a brief pang of sadness. In a way, it was like saying goodbye to close friends. He’d spent a long time with them, coming to learn about them and their abilities.
As Lume and Thanatos headed towards the forest, Aela and Ozem used the outside underground passage, which lead into the castle. While she could shrink her body he couldn’t, so this way was necessary.

Feeling the cool breeze against his skin and eyes slowly adjusting to the sun, Harry sighed. "That's much better. I'll take this time to relax, before sticking my nose to the grind for all the work I've missed out."

"We have discussed this in the Staff Room. All of us have agreed to help you catch up. The Ministry is aware of your actions which helped in putting a stop to Seraphina, so exceptions have been made. Do not worry about this. For now, focus on your recovery."

Kissing the top of his head, Alistair could still hardly believe Harry was here. A large part of him was ready to say goodbye and on that day, there was no going back for him. He would never let another into his life like Harry. It would be far too painful.

As he said, the soul bonding did save Harry's life. There was nothing that could be done now. Alistair had to look for the positives, rather than negatives.

His heart belonged to Harry but as he'd discovered, much more. He'd smiled more times with him than he ever had without, sitting beside him in the Hospital Wing, marking essays or going about necessary business.

He was brought from his thoughts when Harry leaned back into him. Glancing down, he could see his eyes flickering closed. "Are you tired?"

"No, must be your imagination." Harry's response was delayed and slightly sluggish. Shaking his head, Alistair was unsure whether to chastise him on the importance of sleep or kiss him for being so adorable. Torn between the two, it was obvious that he did need the sleep. Gently turning Harry around to face him, his fingers touched beneath his eyes.

"You promised Poppy to return when tired."

Harry sighed, frustrated. "I know, but I slept for ages, I don't want to again. You waited for me to wake up all that time as well."

"You were not asleep, but comatose. That does not provide your body with adequate rest. I would feel better knowing that you are well rested. I would rather you not collapse from exhaustion."

Alistair's words winning him over, Harry nodded. "Ok, I'll go back. But I'm not happy about it."

Grumbling good-naturedly, Alistair carefully hid his smile. He'd found that with some things relating to Harry, he could say no.

Changing back into sleepwear once in the Hospital Wing again Alistair drew back the covers, Harry sliding beneath them.

Giving Alistair a playfully pleading look, he pulled back the covers. "Join me? It's harder to sleep
without my ancient teddy bear."

Grinning towards the end, Alistair narrowed his eyes. "Ancient? I will have you know I have not
reached that status yet. As for the teddy bear part? I am yours to hold."

He accepted Harry's invitation, the bed extending to comfortably fit both of them. Magic aiding him
in slipping into something more comfortable, the feeling of Harry holding him and being able to do
so in return, was indescribable. Joy welling in his heart Alistair settled, to watch over him.

"Rest well, Harry."

"Mmm, I will since you're here." it wasn't long before he fell into a deep sleep. Able to distinctly tell
the difference between his comatose state and asleep state, Alistair was able to reassure himself that
there was nothing amiss.

Saying hello in his mind and heart to both his own and Harry's parents, Alistair finally began to
believe that at last, he could find his promising future and happy ever after, with Harry by his side.

Chapter End Notes

I can confirm for certain that after this chapter, there will be two more over two weeks
and then this fic can finally be marked as complete ;)
Will You?

Chapter Summary

Time, as always, moves forward. With it comes a myriad of different things, such as growing older and questions. There's one question in particular, that has the power to stop time for just a second. Harry learns what that question is.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Follows everyone's progress, mainly Alistair's and how difficult he finds it without the one he loves by his side. During this Harry meets his and Alistair's parents, finding the path to waking up and then, recovery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1998, Graduation Day

Harry Potter stood in front of the mirror, with a proud gleam in his eye. Donning black formal robes, the sight in and of itself was almost surreal. Once upon a time, he never believed he would live to see the day of his own graduation.

Inevitably, today would be the day he reminisced on all that had happened, since July of last year. Unable to help it, the memories rose within his mind.

Over the summer holidays, he had regained his health and strength, spending the majority of it with Alistair and they, alongside several others, awarded for services to the school and the Wizarding world as a whole. It was nice to be recognised for something he actually did do rather than as a helpless, vulnerable baby who didn't know otherwise.

Harry had gained a deeper understanding of his relationship with Alistair as well. It seemed as if the closer they were to one another, the more changes they noticed between them. Though he'd lost his animagus ability, he was able to shapeshift instead. Providing he studied it with as much dedication as he had Lume and Thanatos, he could change into anything. That revelation he discovered by accident, the desire to join Alistair in his Fennec Fox form one time so overwhelming, that the transformation had occurred. From there he'd learned much more, made easier followed by the full maturity of his magical core.

With the Resurrection Stone and Elder Wand, Harry had considered for a moment, to destroy them both but afterwards, dismissed that idea. They were a part of history, as was the Invisibility Cloak. While the wand was powerful, he would only make himself a target if seen with it and others realised
its origins. That was the last thing he wanted.

The stone held too much temptation and while what happened to that brother wouldn’t with him, it still would do him no good. As the Lothaire vault by far was the most protected, Harry decided to place them there instead. Perhaps one day he would have a reason to either one or both but for now, they could just remain an intact part of history.

Close to starting his final year at Hogwarts, he received one of the biggest shocks in his short life. There, in an envelope, was the Head Boy's badge. Him, Head Boy?

Unsurprisingly Hermione had become Head Girl. Once he'd shared the information with everyone else, it had helped to sink in more. Like with his role as a Prefect, he would do all he could to encourage inter-house cooperation, helped with the fact that he'd cemented his friendship with Draco.

Two surprises came during September. The first being over the holidays, Severus had asked if Solomon wanted to accept the recently vacated post as Potions Master. With the basilisk skin sold that Harry had given him and only having a desire to create potions of his own rather than teach about the same things, he could finally do what he'd always wanted to ever since his own school days. Accepting he retired, Solomon taking his place.

Not only that, but the second surprise came in the form of Alistair becoming Gryffindor's new head of house. As Solomon joined the staff, together, Minerva had indulged in her curiosity and placed the sorting hat on their heads. Alistair was placed into Gryffindor while Solomon, Ravenclaw. The hat had expressed Slytherin was also an acceptable choice for the latter while the former, would fit anywhere but Slytherin.

Minerva knew without a doubt, that Alistair would be a wonderful head of house. With only her headmistress and Transfiguration duties to oversee, she found herself with more free time than ever before.

As for Harry, he had a normal year. No Dementors, possessed Professors, rogue diaries or mysteries. The only thing he had to focus on, was his schoolwork. It had taken a lot of time for him to catch up with everything, but his NEWT year and seventh year as a whole proved to be tough for an entirely different reason.

Left with far less free time Harry treasured the odd weekend he could spend with Alistair or his friends, needing those bursts of fresh air before the workload overwhelmed him. But now that his exams were done, he just had to wait until August, for the results.

As a wave of nausea passed over him Harry staggered, seeing double for a minute. Sitting down on the bed he breathed deeply, taking a small vial from the bedside drawer. Uncorking it he drained the contents, closing his eyes for a moment.
'Are you feeling ill again?'

Glancing down at his bare wrist, a small part of Harry missed the bracelet. But at this point it wasn't needed, only serving as something decorative now. Their connection ran so deep now, that he could sense Alistair emotions and communicate without it.

'A bit, but it'll pass. Solomon's potions help out.'

Even now, the day he used Avada Kedavra on Seraphina hadn't left him completely unscathed. Madam Pomfrey found no underlying conditions which would cause it, but Alistair could sense Harry's soul was weakened. Physical and further magical growth would help to strengthen it again but for now, it was something he'd have to cope with. Considering what could have happened, Harry believed he'd got off lightly.

'Good, I will see you soon.'

Feeling the flutter of a kiss in his mind, Harry smiled to himself. Hearing a knock on the door he opened it, seeing Hermione in her own robes. Their friendship had also deepened further. With rooms next door to one another, Harry didn't think he would have handled his exams so well without her organisation skills.

"Are you ready?" she asked, looking a combination of nervous and excited.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Let's go."

Offering his arm in a friendly gesture Hermione linked in, muttering words to herself. Recognising it as part of her Head Girl speech he smirked. "Hermione, you've been practising this for ages. I'm sure you could rehearse it in your sleep."

"I know, but I want it to be perfect. Short of a time-turner, we can't relieve this moment. After our third year, I'm not keen for history to repeat itself." thinking back to her younger self, she winced. "I can't believe you haven't written one."

"I'll be fine. The more I practice wordy things the less genuine it sounds. Stupid I know, but I want it to come from the heart."

"It's not stupid at all, I want mine to be the same. Our words could have a positive effect."

That was true. Most students had already left, though family were allowed to attend. Alongside them were family, so the Hogwarts grounds would be fit to burst.
They’d all seen their fair share of terrible weather here, especially around winter. But as Harry and Hermione stepped outside, not a cloud could be seen. The sun shining it cast a warm glow as if to honour what would be one of the most memorable moments of their lives.

Already he could hear tearful voices, emotional at having to leave yet excited, to cement their futures in the Wizarding World

"Mum, Dad!" waving them over Hermione made her way through the crowd, releasing Harry's arm to hug them both.

Standing by her side he greeted Dan and Emma, curious. "What do you think of Hogwarts?"

"We haven't been here long but it's amazing! Truly." vibrating with a similar kind of excited energy that Hermione had, Dan nodded, agreeing. "It really is a different world. It's amazing how many people go their whole lives without learning about this."

Harry thought it was a shame, even if necessary. He hoped for the day that magic and non-magic users could live alongside one another, peacefully.

As there was still some time Hermione showed her parents around the grounds, finding their places taken by Fred and George

"Oh, Harrikins! We're so proud."

"-Of our honorary brother, graduating."

"When we couldn't."

Not far from them were, the other Weasleys and to Harry's surprise, Percy. Then again, it would take a special kind of arse to miss his own brother's graduation.

"Still, you're doing well for yourselves," Harry insisted. "Since your portable swamp caught Malfoy that day, didn't the American Ministry catch wind and contact you?"

"Yeah, we’ve had this contract with them for a while now. Found out a few of our products helped to capture some of their elusive criminals." thumping his chest proudly, Fred glanced to his side. "Mum's finally accepted it as well."

That was good to hear. As Ginny and Ron came over, the former gave him a brief hug. "Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived To Graduate."
"I thought the same actually. I've got so many monikers now I can't keep track."

Looking towards Ron, the changes in him were drastic. Not only his personality and work ethic but that he hadn't escaped the battle with Seraphina unscathed.

Magic couldn't heal everything. Ron had come into contact with a nasty curse, which slashed across his right eye and immediately rendered him blind in it. While no scars remained, the complete whiteness of his eye stood out starkly. But rather than hide away, he'd embraced it. Harry could see as much and even now, stood confidently.

"Congratulations." smiling warmly, they shook hands. Over the months they'd gotten to know each other properly and while they would never be close, Harry was glad he had the chance to know the real Ron, rather than one he believed he had.

"Thanks. Shitting bricks for our NEWT results though," Ron admitted, flinching a second later.

"Ronald, language!"

Face set in disapproval it didn't last long before Molly smiled. "Oh Harry, you look wonderful dear. I'm so proud of you."

Swept into one of her enthusiastic embraces he returned it, patting her on the back and grinning at Mr Weasley, just behind.

He spent some time speaking with Neville and Augusta, able to see their relationship had improved with Neville coming into his own. Also, he'd run into Hagrid, treated with a more crushing embrace than usual and reassurances, from Harry, he'd come to visit.

As Sirius and Remus came over, Harry was reminded how well the latter had settled into the role of teaching again. He'd elevated the subject from something used for napping or studying for other subjects, to something interesting in and of itself. Giving the man a fond smile, it only reaffirmed that they’d all dodged several bullets.

“I can barely believe we all got to this day. For a long while, I honestly thought we wouldn't have."

"I felt the same way. But we're here. Lily and James are watching now, I'm sure of it. They're proud of you, as are we."

Sirius added his own words. "Very. With everything you've overcome and all you've faced, I think this is the most normal thing to happen in your life."
Nodding absentmindedly, Harry managed to meet the eyes of Alistair, stood beside the Headmistress. Sending a warm smile in his direction, Harry marvelled that after a long while of knowing one another, it still managed to have the same effect.

As the Headmistress' voice rang throughout all gathered there. Stood on a white, slightly elevated platform there were seats, which everyone had made their way to. Quickly Harry found his own, next to Hermione and towards the front. Their names would be called in alphabetical order, much like when they were sorted, to receive their certificates. They would shake the hands of their heads of house, the headmistress and accept their certificates from a ministry official.

As Professor McGonagall spoke, Harry listened to her words closely. Though always seen as no-nonsense and strict, he could see that even she barely held back her own emotion. With a sonorous charm to power her voice, she somehow managed to meet the eyes of every graduating student, during her short speech.

"Good afternoon and welcome to you all. For years I have seen many students graduate, of whom I recognise with a family of their own, here today. I am not the first nor will I be the last, to congratulate our graduating students. Each and every one of you has the potential to change this world as we know it. I am proud and humbled to have seen your growth. I wish nothing but the best for your futures."

As a round of applause rang throughout the air, she swiftly moved on. "I will now call each of your names."

It was strange, seeing Professor Sinistra in place of Professor Snape as Head of Slytherin. Harry didn't blame him though, it was clear to see he didn't enjoy teaching. He hadn't seen or spoke with him since the day he awakened from his coma. Wherever he was, Harry hoped he was doing well and living life to the full, or as much as he could when used to being bound between two masters for so long.

"Granger, Hermione."

While he clapped for every student accepting their certificate, Harry cheered for her enthusiastically, ensuring his voice was heard. As she shook hands and took her certificate she returned to her seat beside him, blushing slightly but smiling.

Down the list, they went until, eventually, his name was called out.

"Potter, Harry."

As Harry rose to his feet, the sounds of cheering and clapping were almost deafening. Caught off guard he nearly stopped what he was doing to look, slightly stunned but appreciative. Stepping up onto the platform he came face to face with Headmistress McGonagall, misty-eyed and shaking his hand firmly.
"Congratulations, Potter. Your parents would be proud."

"Thanks," Harry spoke, fighting off a wave of emotion. At the end, he still had a speech to give. Reminding himself of this he remained composed. The moment he stepped up to shake Alistair's hand, the warmth travelled along and up his arm. With each day he fell deeper in love. With the smile on his lips right now, the gentle, sunset hue of his eyes, the list could be never-ending.

"I can only echo words already spoken, but our world will benefit greatly from you. It already has, in fact. I consider the day we met, to be the best in all my years."

If Alistair was trying to make him cry, he was going the right way about it. “Back at you. Look after all those Gryffindors for me. Remind the other houses why we're the best.” winking at him he moved on, finally accepting his certificate. In a subtle touch, the ribbons which were tied around the parchment represented their house colours. His was red and gold and he could see for the other houses, it was the same.

After the last name on the list was called out, Harry and Hermione's names were called out again, by the Headmistress.

"Our current Head Boy, Harry Potter and Head Girl, Hermione Granger, have a few words that they would like to share."

"Ladies first," gesturing with his hand Harry gave her a supportive smile, sitting and listening to her words before he took his own turn. Showing no signs of the nervousness she'd expressed to him just last night, Hermione out of everyone he knew, would be a one to cause ripples of change. She's already expressed a desire to work in the ministry and from there, help to replace some of the more archaic laws around Vampires and Werewolves. Without those such as Umbridge, Lucius or Dumbledore, those days were closer than ever. Though there were still some obstinate members that remained.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione's words flowed naturally. "Hello everyone. I can hardly believe we're here now. Sometimes, it feels as if the letter addressed to me one Saturday morning detailing Hogwarts was only yesterday. In this time, we've all come to learn something. We'll be leaving our second homes, flying the nest to pursue the careers we dreamed of. We have to say goodbye to the halls we've walked many a time, to all the memories we've made and all the friendships formed. We’ve laughed, live and most importantly, lived. We will continue to and even after we leave today, I believe this isn't the end, but the start to the rest of our lives. Thank you and good luck to everyone." bowing her head politely Harry could see a glimmer of relief hidden within them, as he added to the applause.

Now it was his turn. Really, she'd echoed his words. Standing up he took her place, looking out and seeing everyone he cared about. And among them, he could have sworn he saw Professor Snape. While no longer a Professor, Harry doubted he'd be able to call him anything else. Dismissing this as his imagination, he found that the words came easily to him.
"Unlike most of you, I didn't get my Hogwarts letter straight away. My relatives hated magic and kept everything from me. Until it came, I had no idea this world existed. My uncle tried everything. Locking me in my room, threatening to shoot the owls which came, sealing the letterbox. He even went so far as to take us to an isolated location in the middle of the sea. But nothing worked. Those letters kept coming until eventually, just after I turned eleven, Hagrid knocked down the door. Terrified my relatives hid from him, as I discovered through the letter he gave me, a world far from the one I knew."

Pausing for a moment memories rose within his mind, snapshots from each year. "I think we know, more than most our age, what it's like to face hardships. Especially last year. But even so, we did it. Not only have we finished school, but put a stop to someone who threatened to cut short all of our futures. And you know what? I'm proud of myself and of everyone here. I've only got one more thing to say. Let's show this world we mean business!"

Clutching his fist triumphantly he was met with a wave of cheers, accepting Neville's high five before he sat down. That went better than he thought.

And then, came the most nostalgic ride of their lives. Much like the way they first arrived at Hogwarts they would leave in the same way. Taking the boats across to shore and then, once out, the Hogwarts Express would be waiting for them. Once at King's Cross Station, they would leave, only to return when greeting friends or one day, if they had children of their own.

With no more than three to a boat, Hermione, Neville and Harry managed to secure one. Normally it would be four but as most of them were significantly taller and heavier than when first arriving, there had to be a change somewhere. As before Hagrid lead them across the lake. Turning back Harry waved to those gathered there, seeing many tearful gazes and some voices, gradually fading.

Turning back to face them, he sighed. "I'm both sad and happy. It's like a combination of the two, I'm not sure how to feel."

Hermione wiped some stray tears which fell from her eyes. "I know what you mean. But if I'd attended a normal school, I would have never made such good friends."

"The same for me. I would have been stuck with the Dursleys until I was old enough to just leave. You two along with Ginny and Luna, are the best friends I could have ever hoped to have." a smile touching his lips, the boat rocked threateningly when Hermione threw her arms around him. Staying perfectly still it returned to normal, internally breathing a sigh of relief.

"I don't fancy falling into the lake, though it would make the day more memorable," Neville commented, drinking in Hogwarts for the final time.

"Sorry." staying put Hermione returned to normal, though knew it wouldn't be the last time she got emotional.
The ride away from Hogwarts was poignant yet beautiful, gentle ripples in an otherwise mirror-like surface spreading across undisturbed waters. The sun shining on their backs, it was almost as if it reached out, to comfort them. Hermione was right. This was only the beginning.

Stepping out of the boats Hagrid saw them all onto the train. Claiming a compartment together Ron ended up joining them. Then, looking at Hagrid’s forlorn expression, muttered quiet words to them. “I’ll be back soon.”

As all the students were on the train now, it was due to leave any minute. But he wouldn’t be long.

“Hagrid!” Harry shouted, jogging over to him. Before he could so much as respond, Harry placed all the strength he could, into hugging him. “Take care of yourself, ok? I’ll see you soon.” This was the first friend he’d ever made. He couldn’t in good conscience, leave without giving him a proper goodbye.

Apparently, that was too much for Hagrid. Bursting into heaving sobs he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, resembling more of a hand towel than anything. Dabbing beneath his eyes, Harry’s own watered when this time, he could feel just how careful Hagrid was when patting his head to return the affection.

“Go, before yeh miss the train.” sniffling to himself Harry nodded, returning to his compartment. As the train pulled away from the station, Harry didn't hesitate to stick his head out of the window, waving back to Hagrid until he was nothing more than a blur.

Sitting down and talking with everyone, it felt like the shortest ride of Harry's life as before long, they arrived back at King’s Cross Station. Saying goodbye to everyone here, more than anything, reaffirmed that his school life was now over. As a scarce few remained on the platform, familiar, warm arms wrapped around him from behind.

"Are you alright?"

Feeling the faint heat at his back, Harry nodded, confident. "I'm fine. Sad that it's over, but this is a day I'll look back fondly on."

Eyes holding a spark of mischief, Harry turned around, looking mock dissatisfied. "I was disappointed I could only shake your hand though. Do you have any idea how tempting you were, standing there so sexily?"

"I did not, but now, I do." looking pleased with himself he leaned down, to whisper softly in Harry's ear. "You will not be disappointed for long. While I have already expressed my congratulations, there is a particular kind I have yet to show."
A kiss filled with promise landed on Harry's lips. He'd lost count of how many times they'd kissed, only knowing that each time, he became more proficient in this particular activity. Hand stretching upwards to stroke through the soft strands, he'd yet to grow any taller. But he'd come to accept this, embrace it, even. It was hard not to, especially when Alistair often expressed how much he loved him for that, among other things.

Later in the day, he'd be with Sirius and Remus, celebrating in an obvious, alcohol filled way. But for now, Harry would happily indulge himself, until that time came. As the pair disappeared King's Cross Station became empty once more, awaiting the arrival of old and new student's faces, come September.

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**Results Day**

"Everything will be alright, I am positive."

Even those words from Alistair couldn't settle Harry down. In the Lothaire Castle living room, he sat, leg jerking violently and green eyes shaking with nerves. Unable to sit still across the morning he'd transformed into various animals, in an effort to let off some steam. His NEWTs results would be coming today. These would help to determine his future. He'd been with Sirius and Remus earlier but unable to calm down, had hoped Alistair would be able to help.

He had, but not as much as Harry hoped. He was more wound up than first thought. Running a hand through his hair in agitation, he wished they'd hurry up. "How do you know? Vampire or not you don't have laser eyes that can see through the envelope until I open it. What if I've got T's in everything?" groaning, his own disappointment would be matched by everyone. Sirius, Remus and Hermione, the most studious of them all.

As his hands were taken and squeezed softly, Alistair sat beside him. "I have seen how hard you have worked. Not only for your own exams but to help your peers too. I am confident that you have done well."

But also, disappointing Alistair. That was something he never wanted to do. "Don't jinx it. What if I did so bad they created an entirely new grade? Like S for shit?"

Aware that he was being slightly ridiculous, his heart eased some with Alistair's amused laughter. "I highly doubt that."

Before Harry could respond, a tawny owl flew through the window. Requiring nothing from him it took flight, as the envelope was untied from its leg.

These were his results. He could tell by the wax seal and somehow, the parchment felt far heavier
than usual. This was a far different kind of nervousness to facing death head-on, but would always take whatever this moment held, over the countless times he'd dodged death itself.

Taking a deep breath he broke the seal, unrolling the parchment and automatically expecting the worst. In his mind it made more sense, as if he expected to do well but ended up doing terribly, the disappointment would be greater.

But as he scanned the parchment, Harry's jaw dropped. His contacts must be faulty or he'd knocked his head. There was no way.

To Mr Potter,

Please see below the results of your NEWTs (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests)

O- Outstanding

E- Exceeds Expectations

A- Acceptable

P- Poor

D- Dreadful

T- Troll

Astronomy: O

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Charms: O

Defence Against the Dark Arts: O

Transfiguration: O
Herbology: O

History of Magic: O

Potions: O

Congratulations, you have scored the highest marks in Defence Against the Dark Arts seen since Tom Riddle. Find enclosed your certificate.

"Does... that say what I think?" to double check Harry showed Alistair the parchment, eyes twinkling brightly.

"Yes. Oh, Harry, this is wonderful news!" hugging him tightly, it still hadn't quite sunk in.

Across the board, in every subject, he was awarded Outstanding. Not only that but as with his Owl results, he'd scored the highest marks in defence. Along with this was another certificate. Feeling a sense of Deja vu but also a strange kind of sadness for Voldemort’s fate, it hadn’t quite sunk in for him yet.

"...I got all O's?" blinking rapidly he was soon pulled from a state of shock, wrapped up in a series of affectionate kisses by the man at his side.

"You did. I knew that you would do well, but I did not expect this. It proves my earlier point, you have worked incredibly hard for this and it is wholly deserved."

A book in hand, Solomon walked into the living room. "Hermione wants to know how you did. She received Outstanding in all subjects and a certificate of high achievement in Arithmancy."

Harry smiled, amused. Trust Hermione to want to know how he did so soon after finding out herself.

"Tell her I got a similar kind of certificate but in Defence, and all O's."

A rare smile appeared on his face. "Congratulations." as he conveyed his results to Hermione, a flicker of discomfort registered for a brief moment. Even without saying as much, Harry could easily picture her shouts of excitement. She celebrated his achievements just as much if not more than her own.

He was relieved, but also overjoyed. As the news finally started to sink in, he could have collapsed with relief. He'd expressed his faith in him on more than one occasion, always there to help with
extra revision, moral support or if time allowed for it, ‘extracurricular activities’. All of those combined had helped him greatly. Without him, Harry feared things might have started to get on top of him. He was eternally grateful.

Afterwards, he told Sirius and Remus, who expressed similar delight. It was far more than Harry ever expected but this made all the months of stress and preparation, worth it. Now he would enjoy his holidays, before exploring different options moving forward. While he had enough money to live without ever working, there were careers which called to him. He wanted to live as normal a life as possible. Or at least in every sense, other than the fact he had a Vampire boyfriend. That aspect of his life was far from normal, but Harry would have it no other way.

While for most couples there would sometimes be the question of, ‘Will you move in with me?’ that had never happened for Harry. They spent time with one another so often, that the step to stay at Lothaire Castle with Alistair more than Evergreen Manor became natural. Sirius and Remus spent their time there, but they’d told him they were on the lookout for a home to call their own.

One day a short time later, Harry believed it would be like any other they shared. Whether exploring the castle alone, with him or outside, adventuring, anything he did with Alistair always held a thrill of excitement alongside cultural experiences he could have never possibly imagined.

With an air of mystery not too long ago, Alistair had asked him to pack his things for warmer weather and dress similarly. They were going on a trip together. While it wasn’t the first time they’d done this, there was something in the tone of his voice which indicated a difference. Doing as asked he shrunk a bag filled with things he’d need, placing it in his pocket. “Where are we going?”

Instead of answering him, Alistair only smiled wider. “You will see.”

Taking a hold of his hand they left, reappearing somewhere which held far more warmth.

It was a beach. Different from the one in Surrey, as there were palm trees here. Early in the afternoon, the sun shone high, skies and the sea a calming, clear blue.

He’d heard this story before, more than once. When the sun had set but also, during the day. Compared to other beaches with palm trees, to another, it wouldn’t stand out.

But Harry could tell straight away where this was. He knew it within his heart, instinctively. But also, the look of joy on Alistair’s face was an indication that it could be nowhere else.

“Is this Butterfly Beach?” he asked just to be sure, but the answer was already clear.

As a warm breeze blew past them, Alistair’s hair fluttered within it. “Yes. I have not visited in a long time. You are the first person I have brought here.”
Harry knew the great significance of this place, looking hesitant. “Are you sure you want to bring me here? It’s your special place.”

Softly shaking his head, Alistair’s eyes held all the sincerity they could. “It is important to me. But Harry, so are you. I would like for this to be our special place now.”

A place to call their own. That thought did appeal. Harry was touched. “I see why you kept things a surprise now. I did as you asked and I packed for warm weather. But also-“

Cutting himself off he resized the bag, dropping it onto the sand. Releasing Alistair’s hand he kneeled down, rummaging through the contents until he’d found what he needed. Removing two towels he lay them on a flat surface. Returning to the bag he pulled out two bottles, holding them out for Alistair to see.

“Sun Cream?” seeing his questioning glance, Harry couldn’t help but feel a little pleased with his forward thinking. “I know magic can help protect us from the sun, but I’m in the mood to massage you.”

He never held back with what he wanted now. While Alistair could still catch him off guard sometimes, Harry had discovered a side of himself that liked to take charge.

As a brief flicker of surprise passed through Alistair’s expression, that soon gave way to delight. “Massage me for as long as you wish. I hope that you will permit me to return the favour afterwards.”

Running his thumb across Harry’s bottom lip he gently bit it, narrowing his eyes teasingly. “That’s why I have two bottles. One for you and one for me. An ancient Vampire or not, your skin is still sensitive right? I thought you’d need a higher factor than me, so I got one.”

“I am not ancient,” he protested, heart, fluttering at Harry’s laughter.

“I know, that’s around 3,000 years old I think you told me? Got a long way to go yet.”

Patting the towel invitingly, Harry held a bottle in his hand. “You first, I insist.”

Wrapped up in Harry’s exuberance Alistair was happy to acquiesce. Even after the amount of time they’d spent together, finding all of his affection and gestures returned in equal measure was new to him. Before Harry he had so many occasions of one-sided affection, he hadn’t realised just how much he missed out on, until over these few years. Removing his shirt he sat down, the towel cushioning him. “Which side?”
Harry thought for a moment. “I’ll do your back first.”

Readjusting himself Alistair lay down, folding his arms. In front of him were endless golden sands, waves gently lapping at the shore. At the time he believed nothing else could compare. But he was wrong. Having Harry here with him too added an element of perfection he would have never dreamed of.

Not for the first time and certainly not the last, Harry reflected on how incredibly lucky he was. Not only to turn 18 and see the end of his schooldays but to spend time with someone he loved.

While many would say he had his whole life ahead and romantic relationships came and went, for Harry, there was no other. They’d been through too much, had shared too many memories, for things to ever be different. Not to mention their soul bond.

Sometimes, Harry got bouts of tightness in his chest. He loved him so much he could barely breathe during them.

Seeing him lay there now, reaffirmed it in Harry’s heart. He wanted to heal him. All those broken relationships, betrayals and lack of affection. For everything his past partners didn’t do Harry wanted to, tenfold.

Admiring the smoothness of his skin, Harry didn’t hesitate to straddle him. Having better access from there, he could hear the delight in his voice.

“Why Harry, how bold of you.”

Oh, he wasn’t anywhere near finished. Leaning forward he swept his ponytail aside, kissing his neck and murmuring into his ear. “I can be bolder.”

Feeling the body below him shudder ever so slightly, Harry was almost satisfied. He was only fully satisfied, once he began rubbing the cream into Alistair’s back. Working his way across the shoulder blades he moved downwards, skin glistening beneath the sun as he ensured every inch of his skin was treated in the same manner.

Alistair’s voice never failed to send him careening off the edge of a metaphorical cliff, particularly when Harry knew it was a direct result of his actions. As a quiet moan overlapped the waves’ sounds, he spoke. “Enjoying yourself?”

“...Very much so.”

His response slightly delayed, Harry paid careful attention to working the cream in every available spot. Moving down to where his legs were slightly spread, Harry placed his palms down flat,
spreading the cream along his inner thighs and rubbing it in until no trace remained. Going as far up as his shorts would allow, this resulted in coming close to dangerously pleasurable territory. He took his time, savouring every inch of skin available which were accompanied by the soft sounds of Alistair’s voice. Once satisfied with his work, he gave firm yet gentle instructions. “Turn over and sit up.”

“Yes dear,” Alistair replied immediately afterwards, teasingly as red-tinged Harry’s cheeks. Seeing his mild discomposure, he could see pleasure from that and his actions in the older man’s eyes.

Positioning himself either side of Alistair’s legs Harry squirted a little more cream into his hands, touching his face to smooth it in. Eyes falling closed he nearly purred from Harry’s attentive yet thorough ministrations, only opening his eyes when fingers brushed over areas particularly sensitive.

Sensing his gaze Harry looked up, grinning unrepentantly. “Not sure if nipples can be sunburned, but why take the chance? I learned my masseuse skills from someone with very good hands.”

As if to demonstrate his point his thrums brushed over a nipple, purposefully.

Rewarded with a sharp gasp, Harry mentally cheered, even as a warm hand stroked along his back.

“Ah, I suspected you had an ulterior motive.”

Eyes alight with a passionate gaze, Harry responded to them, by briefly kissing his lips. “Have to take advantage of what’s in front of me, you’re far too tempting.”

Continuing downwards he took hold of Alistair’s arm, massaging the cream into it and his hands. They were so soft, especially when comparing them to his own. His other arms, shoulder and legs were liberally coated, ensuring nothing was neglected.

Once finished, Harry quickly found their roles reversed. Lying on the other towel, he willingly gave himself over to a masterful touch.

“That’s it, right there.” he verbally encouraged him, paying careful attention to his shoulders. With every part protected from the sun, he would drop a kiss in that very same spot. Much like him, he was taking full advantage of the situation. The tenseness unravelling from his muscles completely, Alistair switched to his front, from behind.

Taking a different approach to him, there was something about watching Alistair’s hands smooth cream into his skin, that held a sense of eroticism. Either way, Harry enjoyed himself, matching Alistair in being fully protected from the sun now.

Once finished, Harry accepted the hand offered in pulling him to his feet. Picking up his bag and
their shirts they walked hand in hand, arriving outside of a beach house far closer to nature than most Harry had seen.

The interior was rustic, holding a certain, different kind of charm. Undoubtedly Lothaire Castle was beautiful, but the way this was removed from constantly evolving technology, Harry couldn’t help but feel this would be the perfect spot to escape stresses of life.

Placing his bag down he seated himself on the bed, admiring the picturesque view of outside.

“This is beautiful. How long can we stay for?”

“As long as you wish. Even once I return to teaching, you can stay here.”

“Really?” Harry responded excitedly, feeling the touch of Alistair’s hand caressing his cheek.

Gazing into impossibly warm eyes, Harry was given all the confirmation he needed. “Of course. It would be a shame to spend only a few hours here.”

In his mind, nothing could be more perfect. Away from everything, with the person he loved. Never one to sit idle whenever it was possible to head outside, Harry had packed trunks appropriate for swimming, in case the warm location they headed to did have water. With this confirmed, he quickly got changed. Sporting a deep green pair of shorts, Harry’s eyes glinted with a friendly challenge. “I’ll race you!”

Following suit in a slightly different pair coloured blue, Alistair accepted. “I will give you one minute, as a head start.”

For a split second, Harry’s face registered confusion until he realised. “Oh yeah, you’ve got super Vampire speed on your side, I forgot.”

Lips curving into a fond yet bewildered smile he took Harry’s hand, leading them outside as their bare feet touched soft sand. “We have known one another for quite some time now. I am surprised this is a detail that you can forget.”

Harry was as well in a way. But he knew why. “I’ve never seen you as a Vampire. I know you are, but to me, you’re just Alistair. Nothing more or less and I wouldn’t change you for anything.”

Sincerity shining within his emerald gaze, Alistair had come to know Harry very well. But on occasions such as this, his words still had the power to surprise him. All he’d ever wanted, for those he became intimate with, was to see beyond his Vampirism. Many hadn’t. But Harry had bypassed this completely, seeing what Alistair wanted to show him and yet, finding much more.
His heart melted, reforming into a strong, steady beat. Each one, reaffirming his love for him more.

“Thank you.” squeezing him within the circle of his arms for a moment, he observed Harry assume a starting stance.

“Just because you’re faster than me, don’t think I’m going to make it easy for you,” Harry spoke, flashing a confident smile his way and setting his gaze on some distant palm trees. That would be his destination.

“I would not expect any less from you.” returning his smile with a fond one, he counted down.

Once given a countdown Harry was off, kicking up particles of sand. While fast for a human certainly, he wasn’t fast enough. In a playful mood, Alistair would enact a little entertaining plan that had just come to mind.

While flying would always be his favourite physical activity, there was something about running very liberating, like any worries were left straggling behind in the sand. Hair whipping about his face he left well-formed footprints in the flat section of sand, almost as if each one detailed his life journey.

Not long after, as Harry suspected, Alistair matched his pace. He hadn’t turned around to watch but guessed he’d closed the distance between them in well under half the time he’d taken.

No sooner had he skidded to a halt in front of the palm trees that he’d chosen as the goal when his feet no longer touched solid ground.

Easily picked up, Harry heard a chuckle filled with mischief just above him. “You may try to make your escape. If not...”

Leaving his sentence unfinished, Harry could see the water growing closer. “It’s comfortable here. I think I’ll stay.”

Relaxing as if to make his point, Alistair kissed the top of his head. “You are welcome to relax, for the duration of your stay.”

Glancing up and seeing the same eyes before, during and after a prank, Harry had a foreboding feeling.

Stepping into the sea the water level slowly rose, submerging himself to just below waist deep. Altering his stance in the water and his grip on Harry, he came to a dawning realisation. Playfully he
did try to struggle free from his arms this time but to no avail, arms stronger than ever.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Harry cried out, dramatically throwing his arms behind him.

Laughing at his antics Alistair dipped him down just shy of touching the water, kissing him passionately. At a hair’s width from one another, he pulled back ever so slightly, eyes filled with laughter.

“While your firebolt is not here, I am. Enjoy the ride, my love.”

Before Harry could respond, he was thrown several feet into the air and a fair distance away.

“Ahh!” he yelled, remembering to take a deep breath and close his eyes. Hitting the water with a great splash his body was bathed in water warmed by the sun. Breaking free of the surface he gasped, thoroughly soaked now. Upon opening his eyes, Alistair could see the rare smile which still held a hint of childhood enthusiasm.

“Woo!” raising his fist and cheering, he pinned Alistair with an eager look. “Can you do that again?”

He had to ask. That shouldn’t have been as fun as he found it, but Harry wanted to be thrown again. He’d discovered a playful side a little into their relationships, further nurtured by Alistair’s own.

“How could I possibly refuse such an adorably heartfelt request?” swimming over to him with perfect form he was picked up once again and thrown. Knowing what to expect completely this time he tucked his legs in, feeling the rush of adrenaline coursing throughout his system as he hit the water. Emerging from it Alistair indulged his childish side, time and time again.

Heart pumping with the thrill it provided, Harry noticed that Alistair remained dry in some areas. He would have to change that. Swimming over to him he looked out over the horizon. While a part of him admired the view, most of him feigned a lack of action.

Until a few seconds later he created a wave with his arm. Aiming it towards Alistair with a large splash, he became drenched. Not stopping his attack until he was thoroughly soaked through Harry laughed, though that soon died in his throat.

Swallowing he watched as Alistair ran a hand through his hair which at some point, he’d removed the ribbon from. Pushing it away from his eyes water droplets trailed down his chest, as if in slow motion.

Harry had come to terms with having this particular fetish, even if he hadn’t managed to control the effect it always had on him.
He blushed, deeply.

As the distance closed between them, Harry’s cheek only blazed further when Alistair’s fingertips brushed across it. “It seems I did not use enough sun cream.”

Regarding him with an amused expression, There was one droplet which had him in a slight trance. Forcefully breaking eye contact with that, he gathered what coherent thought remained to form a sentence.

“It doesn’t matter when you’ve stepped from the shower, got caught in rain or otherwise. There’s something about wet skin that’s so sexy. It makes me want to...”

“Want to what?” tilting his head to the side, Alistair’s eyes held the knowledge of precisely what it made him want to do.

Harry wasn’t in the habit of holding back now, nor did he intend to for this. Using the water to his advantage he hooked his legs around Alistair’s torso, arms looped around his neck. “This.”

The feeling of his skin pressed against Harry’s, words could do no justice. They were outside, with little clothing. Knowing this caused his body to shudder. Ignoring the flames of his passion, he continued the very same type of kiss which Alistair started just minutes before.

Supporting him from underneath, skin previously cooled from the water and exposed to wind heated up again, Alistair’s heart beating a steady rhythm now. He’d noticed precisely how arousing Harry found those moments to be and over the time he knew this, had taken great care to show him visual prompts. No one reacted in the same way to his teasing quite as Harry did.

Even if they spent hours exploring one another’s bodies, Harry always felt like it was never enough. Every time he discovered something new, as though he were freshly unmapped territory. Wet skin simply added a new, desirable dynamic.

“You did that on purpose, sweeping your hair back.” He accused, narrowing his eyes up at him.

“I simply did so that I was able to see,” Alistair stated, eyes still twinkling.

“Maybe, but there’s no way you didn’t know how that would look to me. I think you need to learn a lesson.”
Alistair was both intrigued and aroused. “And what lesson would that be, Professor Potter?”

Stressing the temporary title in his name, Harry shivered with delight. Kissing his neck he then began to bite, just hard enough to leave a series of temporary red marks, which wouldn’t take long to fade. Using his tongue to move upward he traced the shell of Alistair’s ear, taking a lobe between his teeth to softly, lovingly nibble.

Feeling the arms around him tremble ever so slightly Harry pulled back, just enough for his tongue to flick over a nipple.

“Ahh..” Alistair’s voice nothing more than a breathy sigh, even he found it hard to speak. “...If there are to be future lessons, I anticipate all that you have to demonstrate.”

“Oh, there will be.” his tone filled with promise, a surge of affection welled within Harry. Pulling him closer, he just held on for a long moment.

Cupping the back of his head with one hand Alistair rested his chin on his shoulder, inhaling his comforting scent. Life for them had been so perfect as if they were a part of a beautiful fairytale. There was no ending for those who were immortal but still, happiness was within reach. He’d struggled with one of the biggest decisions in his life for a few months now, but this trip would cement everything into place, for better or worse.

His love had grown as if it were a cherry blossom tree. So beautiful, that simply thinking of right now brought joy like no other.

For a while they swam in the sea and during that time, Harry listened to the tips he was given for swimming. He wasn’t very good at it, Gillyweed during the Second Task enduring he didn’t drown or flail around. But by the end, he believed he could do an acceptable doggy paddle. He was made for flying more than swimming, after all. It was a start.

Once stepping out they returned to the property, drying and dressing. As Harry followed him to another room, he saw another Grand Piano. Different to the one at Lothaire Castle it had a much more simple, classic design, with light wood polished to a shine.

“I have one at every property I own. I believe it adds to the ambience,” Alistair explained. In the room was a small fireplace and with a brief movement of his hand, the flames were lit. Cooler on a night Harry could feel a slight chill in the air, banished away with the fire’s cosiness.

An armchair was just beside the piano. Invited to sit down there, Alistair took a seat on the stool. In the now dimmer lighting, Harry could make out the softness of his expression. “I am going to play a little something for you.”
He loved it when Alistair did this. Often a spur of the moment he’d heard many songs over the years, some his own composition and some by others.

Positioning his fingers over the keys, Harry noticed it always came naturally to him. It wasn’t a hobby, but another way of life.

But this song was different from the others. He could tell as much with the first notes, softly punctuating the air. Finding himself unconsciously swaying to them, Harry was surprised that unlike all the others he’d heard, this one had lyrics.

He’d never heard him sing, until now. It took his breath away, stolen as if each pressed note and Alistair’s voice had gently taken hold of it, for the duration of those minutes.

He could feel the passion in every word, each one resonating within Harry deeply.

“Our souls, entwined in a loving dance, this magic has found us, to give one last chance.”

Curling up in the armchair he didn’t take his eyes away from Alistair for a moment, a natural smile upturning his lips.

Before long it was over, but the music filled Harry’s mind. It would stay there for a long time.

“I’ve fallen in love with you all over again,” he sighed, almost dreamily. Harry thought romantic songs were directed more towards women, but that had blown his theory out of the water. This song, out of all the ones he’d heard, was his favourite. There was something deeply moving about it.

Alistair had a confession of his own to make. “This is another of my own. Only, very recent. I composed this for you.”

“This was a song for me?” that was why it had such an impact on him. “What’s it called?”

“I have yet to give it a name. Perhaps it does not need one. It is simply your song,” still sitting at the piano, Harry came over to join him.

He’d written a song? Alistair had done so much for him and yet, there was more. “Thanks, it’s beautiful. That and your voice, I love it.”

Trailing off he leaned into the man’s side, entwining their fingers. “I thought you said Solomon was the one who sung when you performed together? You sound great. I sound like a cat dragged through a bush backwards.”
Laughing aloud, a thought sprung to Alistair’s mind. “Not Minerva, I hope?”

Harry choked on air. That hadn’t occurred to him. Lips twitching with mirth, he shook his head. “Not as far as I know.”

Alistair’s eyes held nostalgia within them. “In answer to your question, he is the one who would sing. I believe my talents lie elsewhere. As in, he is the singer of songs I or others have composed.”

“Will you sing for me again sometime? Even if just like this?” he didn’t want this to be the only time.

“Of course I will.”

Happy with his answer and heart aglow from the love song he’d just heard, Harry glanced outside. There, he could see the very sunset he remembered Alistair describing many months ago.

There were many colours, all mixed together and reflecting upon the water’s surface. It looked so peaceful.

As Alistair rose to his feet, he held his hand out. “Care for an evening stroll?”

A walk on the beach during sunset sounded perfect. Accepting the offered hand they stepped outside. While Harry looked to the sky in wonder, Alistair looked down to the pocket of his trousers. They bulged with the lightest weight and yet, he believed the world itself would be easier to carry on his person.

For a short while they walked, talking softly among themselves and admiring the beauty Butterfly Beach had to offer.

“Harry.”

“Yeah?” looking up into the eyes of his lover, he could almost swear a hint of nervousness were contained with them.

“Do you know what today is?”

Should he? Was there a birthday he’d missed? Thinking for a moment, he remembered the date. August 20th. If that didn’t hold significance, Alistair wouldn’t have asked.

Harry had met him in August. Was it then?
He remembered now. Two days after he’d spent his first full moon with Remus, he’d gone to Transylvania to explore. Once meeting Alistair and staying there for a short while, the date had stuck with him.

“It’s the day we met, two years ago,” Harry responded, sure of his answer. Two years? The time truly had flown by.

“Yes.”

Rather than holding one hand, Alistair came to stand in front, taking both of them in each of his. There was something different about his aura which made him pay extra attention. Harry’s gut feeling hadn’t kicked in for a while, but his senses told him that something was about to happen. What he didn’t know, but prepared himself.

Squeezing his hands gently, Alistair’s eyes held the sun in its entirety. The warmth, its light, everything.

“Harry. Our time together has been wonderful. We have shared so much. With you, my heart has opened to new possibilities, aspects of life I did not believe existed. Without you, I fear I would still be alone at home without hope nor family. I have watched you grow, conquer many challenging feats and each time, you have overcome them. Over time and right now, I am the happiest I have ever been.”

As Harry’s hands were released, he got the biggest shock of his life. Eyes still locked within his own, Alistair knelt, with one knee. He continued to talk, even as his eyes began to mist over with emotion, voice wavering.

“For over a thousand years, I have searched for the one whom I wish to share my life with. After much heartbreak, I believed that I would never find true love. But then, you found me. Harry, words can no longer describe my love for you. You are... wonderful, my one and only.”

Reaching into one pocket he removed a small box, velvet red in colour. Opening the top, there sat a sparkling ring. White gold it seemed to shine with a light of its own. In the middle was a diamond, reflecting what Harry could now see were stars above.

Throughout it all, Alistair had yet to break eye contact. Able to see his emotions change, unshed tears shone within eyes which sparkled more brilliantly than the gemstone between them. “Harry James Potter, will you marry me?”

His gut feeling had happened for a reason, but he never expected this. Being together with him was as natural as breathing. Of course, he’d wondered what it would be like, but...
There was no one else in the world who could bring such joy to Harry, more than him. Even if there were millions upon millions out there, none of them was Alistair.

Harry had thought this day was perfect before. But now? There was only one answer.

“Yes,” he spoke, nothing more than a whisper as his voice was rough, but easily heard.

Removing the ring from its box with careful hands, Alistair gently took Harry’s own and gently slid it into place, on his ring finger.

Harry couldn’t hold back any longer. Throwing his arms around him Alistair fell backwards, cushioned by the soft sand beneath.

Smiling through his tears, Harry’s voice shook. “I’m yours.”

This was the first time that he had ever proposed. Alistair was terrified, particularly with what happened the last time he’d intended to propose, but never had. What if something went wrong? But it hadn’t. Harry had accepted.

“And I am yours.” It had been a long time since Alistair was this discomposed. Holding him tighter than ever before they stayed there, right on the sand.

Pulling back he cupped Harry’s cheeks, thumbs smoothing over them as if for the first time all over again. Drinking in the sight of him, he never thought this day would come, with anyone.

As Harry pressed a series of ticklish kisses beneath Alistair’s damp eyes, he was caught between laughter and sobbing outright. Never had he felt such pure joy. Cupping his head, they shared a kiss which seemed so much sweeter than usual.

Snuggling closer Harry leaned into him, the simple yet elegant ring shining beneath a slowly darkening sky. “It’s beautiful.”

Taking that same hand, Alistair kissed his ring finger. “Yes, but a diamond does not compare to your radiance.”

From anyone else that line would sound false. But two years with him and Harry knew he truly meant every compliment.

“I can say the same for you, husband to be,” Harry teased, that word spoken aloud rendering them both quiet for a moment.
“That sounds..”

“Amazing?” Harry finished, green eyes brighter and clearer than ever before.

Alistair could hardly believe it. He had longed for this moment for so long and soon, it would become reality. “Yes.”

Turning around, Harry placed his hands on Alistair’s shoulders. Eyes holding a note of seriousness, his fingertips touched a lock of wayward hair. “You won’t be alone again. And if anyone tries to hurt you, they’ll have me to answer to.”

Once again, the reassuring feeling of protection. He had been the protector for so long, that rarely had Alistair felt protected by another.

“What say you, my knight in shining armor? Shall we return and celebrate the rest of this night?”

Regaining his composure but losing none of the joy given with Harry’s acceptance, his answer came in the form of a far more intense, meaningful kiss. “I say, let’s go!”

Carrying his betrothed they returned to the beach house, spending their first time together, engaged. While a dream of Alistair’s had finally come true, Harry had found his first and only love, with a man he knew, would treasure him, now and always.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not a song writer, so made something up on the spot, but I thought that was a cute idea :)

I was sobbing writing this literally, its taken from 2016 until now to get to this point, they've been through so much over the years as have I. In my mind the song that resonates with me for them is A Thousand Years by Christina Perri, if you haven't heard that I'd recommend it, it's beautiful <3

Last chapter next week! I can hardly believe it after so long.
I Do

Chapter Summary

It's Harry and Alistair's big day, which holds all the promise of it being memorable. They spend it with others then together, reflecting on the future from here.

Chapter Notes

LAST CHAPTER: Graduation, moving on and a proposal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Ashikaga flower park. That was another story of which he remembered Alistair telling him about and he'd said during this time, he'd love to visit with him. Back then, Harry would have never believed it if his future self told him that in fact, he'd not only see it but have his bonding ceremony with Alistair right here.

Bonding Ceremonies were much like weddings, only instead of exchanging vows before a deity, magic would oversee them. As they were already soul bonded, that in and of itself was silent approval that things were meant to be. The next step was to make it official so that it would be recognised by everyone.

Harry had heard horror stories of preparations for this day, which had lead to a great amount of stress for both in ensuring that one day would be perfect. He didn't want that for either of them so together and taking their time, they'd come to an agreement where both were satisfied. It hadn't taken very long, rarely if ever disagreeing or having arguments. They'd picked everything out together, including suits, courtesy of Madame Bellerose and rings. They had yet to see one another in them, but already knew they would fit for the day.

Mid-April to Mid-May was when Wisteria, Azalea and Peonies bloomed. They picked this month not only for Harry to see these flowers in person, but so everyone could attend while it was Easter break. Some still did have to work, even over holidays, but the majority were free.

Like many areas, the flower park did cater to the magical community. It had taken a booking of months in advance and negotiation on Alistair's part, for smooth proceedings. But finally, the day was upon them.

They were to be bonded beneath a lilac Wisteria tree, the largest and far-reaching one in the park. In rows were seats for the guests, Harry being thankful that those who worked here were aware of the Wizarding world.
Between them, they'd invited The Weasleys, Professor McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid, Sirius, Remus, Ginny, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Draco, Daphne, Lilah, Solomon, Rupert, Tonks, Madame Bellerose, Brio, and some others. Also one, who had yet to confirm they were coming. At this stage, Harry was unsure if he would, but a part of him hoped so.

Temporary rooms had been provided for Harry and Alistair, most of the guests already seated outside. The spring weather was clear, with a cool breeze to take the edge away from heat with the more sun sensitive among them.

Harry had thought his results day was nerve-wracking. Apparently, it didn't compare to this. In a changing room, he looked at himself in the mirror, turning this way and that. Did he look ok? He would have associated those thoughts more with women but today more than ever was anxious about his appearance.

"Come on Harry! I'll have grown a beard by the time you're done in there."

Hearing a distinct sound of what he believed was Remus hitting Sirius upside the head, he snorted. Those thoughts were later confirmed by an exasperated voice.

"Be patient. This is one of the most important days of his life."

"I know, but I want to see..."

With him, for pre-ceremony support, were Sirius and Remus. Similarly, Solomon was with Alistair. They had yet to see each other, vowing not to communicate, even mentally, until later. He was glad to have them with him as alone, his thoughts would go a mile a minute.

Wearing a fitted suit and a waistcoat beneath Harry's was white, with silver embroidery and a silken shirt beneath. the tie also silver, Harry had tried to let Madame Bellerose and Alistair have at it since he still knew little to nothing about fashion. But they included him in their conversations, by explaining things in ways which were easier to understand. He knew colours at least and could give his input there. Having never worn a fitted suit before he'd envisioned it to be restrictive but in fact, was the most comfortable formal item he'd ever worn. Changing his nose ring to a small stud, he still had the earrings gifted to him by Alistair during their first Christmas, but had swapped them out for small studs as well, to fit the suit's aesthetic.

Inhaling and giving himself a once over, Harry drew back the curtain to be faced with Sirius and Remus, the ones he'd hear for feedback. Watching a series of different expressions flicker across their faces, he was taken aback when the former looked almost tearful.

"Is it that bad?" Harry asked, part jokingly and part seriously.
Sirius shook his head, reminiscent of Padfoot. "No, far from it, you look great. It just... hit me. You're all grown up now."

"I'm turning 19 this year and it took you that long to figure it out?" Rolling his eyes fondly, Harry squeezed the man's shoulder. "It's a bit late to be having those thoughts now."

"Alistair will certainly approve, so there's no need to worry on that front," Remus added, detecting his nervousness.

"You think? I know we decided on this together, but it's different when we don't know what each other looks like in them."

Wanting to rub the back of his head out of nervousness he refrained from doing so, using hair care spells taught to him by Alistair to manage the more untameable side of it, at least for today. Seeing Sirius and Remus' matching rings, Harry was reminded of their own news to share, once he'd told him he was engaged to be married. They'd exchanged their own vows, a simple affair at a registry office. Since they only needed a witness they'd invited Harry to be one. It took no more than 15 minutes at the most and yet, it was the most memorable few minutes of his life. He'd always been supportive of their relationship once knowing but seeing them make it official? He couldn't ask for anything more.

"I don't think, I know. My instincts are never wrong." Spoken as if it were a fact, Harry could think of several reasons why that was untrue.

"The fleas tell him secrets," Remus stage whispered.

"Hey, I don't have fleas!" He protested, looking indignant.

Pretending to cough and mask his resulting laughter, Harry appreciated their efforts to put him at ease. It had worked, mostly. Checking the time, he needed to go. He didn't believe there was such a thing as 'fashionably late'.

"I'll leave you to flirt in peace." Smiling amusedly, Harry made his way outside.

Alistair had never regarded emotions to be a 'human' thing. Vampires and other species could feel emotion just as acutely. However, this level of nervousness he hadn't felt in such a long time. His own suit was like Harry's but instead of silver, were golden highlights. Harry had never failed to express his appreciation, whether it was through casual, formal or a distinct lack of clothing. But this day was very important for both of them. Alistair would go as far as to say that this was the most important day of his life so far. Something of which he had yet to experience but travelling worldwide and seeing so many happy couples, he dearly wanted that aspect of life to be included in
And today, it would be. Never had he experienced such pure, sure love. He was sure of Harry's feelings towards him like he was sure of his own towards Harry's, something which was lacking before but hadn't realised, until these last few years. There was no doubt in his mind. But what if, for whatever reason, it was called off? That something happened? Alistair knew this was nothing more than pre-ceremony nerves guiding tumultuous thoughts, but still.

As always with most of his attire, he wore a matching hair ribbon and again, checked to make sure everything was neat and tidy. Within the mirror's reflection, his sunset eyes showed a great deal of anxiety and excitement. In a way, it was as though he were beginning his immortal life anew, reborn.

"You look fine, I have told you a thousand times," Solomon spoke, observing his brother with a neutral expression.

"I believe that is a little excessive. You have told me five times, in fact."

As Alistair faced him, he chose to ignore the eye roll and gazed outside, with a little trepidation. Noticing that he'd yet to calm himself Solomon stood in front, blocking his view as silver eyes narrowed faintly. "Just be yourself. That is how Harry fell in love with you, after all."

"I never thought I would hear you say that," Alistair admitted.

Solomon never thought he would say it, either. But when else could he? This was the biggest day of his brother's life, the most important person to him. Never one to openly air his emotions often, a few seconds of embarrassment and awkwardness would be worth it, so long as Alistair knew his true feelings. Eyes more open than ever before, a natural smile graced his lips.

"It is true. I have watched many partners enter and leave your life. To know that magic nor time can completely heal a broken heart has, in turn, hurt me. I have never liked any of your partners, whether I expressed this aloud or kept quiet. But Harry is different. He has protected and nurtured your heart throughout. I am glad that he is joining our family."

The last time Solomon had spoken like this, was long ago before the day Dumbledore captured him. To know his feelings right now, before he was due to leave, meant more than Alistair could say. Squeezing him within the circle of his arms, it was instantaneously returned. Solomon was always there to pick up the fragmented pieces of his heart, whenever anything went wrong with his relationships. The years he wasn't there, Alistair had found himself unable to function properly. But now, with him here and Harry showing the true meaning of love, all that had changed.

"Thank you. You will have a younger brother soon." Alistair smiled at the thought. He was already aware that Solomon liked him, but to hear verbal confirmation was reassuring. Enough, that he had faith this day would go how they planned.
Something like this with others would have caused Solomon to reject the idea immediately. But he had much to thank Harry for and in turn, he would gratefully welcome him as a sibling. Even if having an immortal human for one was a slightly strange thought.

Sensing that it was time to go, Alistair appreciated the support beforehand. Anxious yet excited, he could hardly wait for things to be official. Heading outside, a large part of him believed that their Mother and Father and Harry's own parents were watching over them all, even now.

As Sirius and Remus went to find their seats, Harry stepped outside. Through the lilac flowers above his head, he could see pinpricks of clear, blue sky. But for now, the Wisteria itself was to be their sky. It filled his vision entirely, stepping upon the lush green grass. Either side of him were rows of seats for the guests in attendance, one significantly larger than the others. Feeling all eyes upon him he walked down, able to see the strong, sturdy back of Alistair's along with an officiate here, to make a recording of their ceremony.

Standing by the side of the man he loved, he turned to face him. Heartbeat quickening, a mild blush covered his cheeks. He looked far better than Harry could have ever envisioned.

"You look amazing," he spoke, voice audible as silence had fallen over the guests gathered there. Seeming to glow with an inner light of his own, the sun reflected off of the golden motifs embroidered into his suit. Hair fluttering in the soft breeze, the corners of his eyes crinkled ever so slightly, as Alistair smiled.

"I can only echo your words. You look much more handsome than I could have ever envisioned."

As Harry's hands were held in his to squeeze, he leaned over to kiss the back of one. That area tingling, he heard a few feminine dreamy sighs among the guests gathered.

Observing their interaction with a neutral expression, their officiate wore white robes, holding a lengthy roll of parchment and sporting a serious expression. "Are you ready to begin?"

With a glance towards one another, they nodded. It was time.

Subtly clearing her throat, she began to read what was written there. "Friends, we are gathered here today, to share on a special occasion. Throughout their time together, they have seen their love and understanding of each other grow, blossoming into this moment. Now they have decided to live out the rest of their lives as one. If any should protest that these men will be bound now and always, speak, or forever hold your silence."

Given a few seconds for voices to be heard, dead silence was all that answered. Once satisfied, the
officiate continued, with an opening reading and the definition of these ceremonies, highlighting them as a whole and what they meant. Until it came to their vows. This was one of the things they hadn't shared with each other, wanting the moment to be fresh and new in their minds. Harry hadn't worked this hard on something since his NEWT days and even now, hoped his love and genuineness came across.

One day, during his search for vow inspiration, he'd come across a poem. Written by Benjamin Alire Saenz it was titled, 'The Desert'. Reading this it had struck a chord within Harry so deeply, he had to have this for beginning his vows. He believed it captured the essence of their relationship very well. Taking a deep breath, it wasn't hard for his own feelings to shine through, during it.

"I came to you one rainless August night.
You taught me how to live without the rain.
You are thirst and thirst is all I know.
You are sand, wind, sun, and burning sky,
The hottest blue. You blow a breeze and brand
Your breath into my mouth. You reach—then bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new."

Vision going slightly hazy Harry paused, gathering himself. Taking Alistair's hands in his own he held on, smiling through unshed tears of joy.

"You wrap your name tight around my ribs
And keep me warm. I was born for you.
Above, below, by you, by you surrounded.
I wake to you at dawn. Never break your
Knot. Reach, rise, blow, Sálvame, mi dios,
Trágame, mi tierra. Salva, traga, Break me,
I am bread. I will be the water for your thirst."

For this Harry had to learn a little Spanish but seeing the look of awe in his eyes, it was certainly worth it. Steadyimg his emotions, he carried on. "This poem, more than any I've seen, made me reflect on the journey we've taken together. I did find you during August and with it, I'm complete. I was born for you and I will be the water for your thirst. I'll be the shoulder for you to lean on, the hand to hold in times of trouble. I'm here, always, in whatever form you need me to be in. Hand in hand, side by side as our footprints make their mark on this world as one."

Harry could hear the distinct sounds of sniffling. He didn't look to see who, in case it influenced his own emotions. He was barely keeping it together himself.

Once Harry's words were absorbed by all gathered there, it came to Alistair's turn. He too had chosen poetry that resonated. But hearing Harry's and seeing within his mind's eye the first time they'd met, it rendered him silent for a long moment. His promise and this declaration of love had shaken him to the core. This sonnet, more than any, had called to him. He had never struggled with articulation and yet, found himself wordless. Closing his eyes briefly he reopened them, the back of his hand brushing against Harry's cheek. So soft, warm and sure. Meeting his eyes throughout it was
as if no one else were there. Not the officiate or guests but them alone, speaking through the beauty of a specific art form.

"The sweet-souled instrument in silence stands And yearns for the musician, far apart, To thaw the music frozen round its heart With the caress of his miraculous hands. It dreams of him astray in other lands: Long silence cannot kill its tones, that start To life again at once, touched by his art Who alone feels with it and understands. So bides my heart in silence (ah too long) For thee, and will not yield that secret tone To others which to thee must still belong. Yet I forget not how the notes should throng, Thee I forget not dreaming here alone. Touch me, and I shall blossom into song."

The sonnet was so achingly beautiful, that previously unshed tears began to fall from Harry's eyes. But still, he listened, even as a gentle hand came to brush them away. Gazing up and into equally emotional depths, everything between them was laid bare.

"Harry, you are my musician. Scattered to the winds were fragments of myself, but you have brought them back. They are reunited with me and I am one, again. My heart was quiet. Lost in a frozen sea of solitude, sadness. But now it sings a melody, one of which changes at your presence and your touch alone. I offer you everything that I am and in turn, promise to treasure, protect and support you, for as long as we both shall live."

For many couples, this would be determined by their lifespan. But for them, age wasn't a factor. They would remain this way until earth as they knew it ceased to exist. And as Harry suspected that would be many, many years from now, those words meant everything.

Even without looking, Harry would recognise the sound of Hagrid's loud sobs from anywhere. Smiling through his own tears a small cushion appeared in mid-air. On it, were the rings. Both enchanted they glowed with a soft light. One ring was white gold, with three emeralds. One in the middle and two smaller, on either side. The other yellow gold, spessartite garnets were set into the metal, in a similar fashion.

They loved one another, deeply. But as Alistair was enchanted by the colour of Harry's eyes, Harry, in turn, was as well. A reminder of a better tomorrow they held the sunset within them, times when he would often gaze out of the window and hope with it, this would bring a better day. While for Alistair, he had seen everything within those depths. Whether the shade of emerald he'd first seen or the glow of the killing curse, brightened through the magic of Thanatos and of which, put an end to one who deserved it. Life, Love, Death. It was all here, within one enchanted object.

As Harry picked up the ring, faint trembling could be seen in his hold. Steadying himself, Alistair
held his hand out.

"I give you this ring, as an eternal symbol of my commitment."

Sliding the emerald ring into place on his finger, Alistair picked up the one intended for Harry. Repeating the same words, Harry's gaze flicked to his finger. It held such a light, yet considerable weight.

"Would the couple, please link their left hands together."

With the officiate's words they did so, gripping firmly. As her wand touched them she began to chant, a rope of soft light, almost ribbon-like, winding around where they were joined. Staying there for a moment it then burst, as if it were a shower of droplets. "You may release your hands."

Standing to face the officiate once more, she spoke again. "In the eyes of magic and through what I have seen today, I pronounce you Husband and Husband. You may kiss now."

While Harry knew it was a sacred thing to share a kiss in this manner, he couldn't help but blush when hearing an enthusiastic round of applause, as their lips met briefly. Pulling back, the officiate shared her final words. "I present to you the newly bonded couple, Mr Alistair Avis Lothaire and Mr Harry James Potter-Lothaire."

As the roll of parchment disappeared, Harry faced everyone. From what he could see, there weren't many dry eyes and even now, could see damp handkerchiefs clutched firmly in hands that went to applaud.

While there were no tables or any kind of refreshments before they appeared now, enough open space there for the House Elves to do their work. He'd enlisted the help of Dobby, Misty and some others, ensuring things went without a hitch from there on. While the day would start out with more traditional music, there were a number of modern songs for the younger crowd as well. Harry's own tastes were diverse, mind opened to a new kind of music through someone who had seen many kinds. As a song began to play, Alistair leaned forward, holding out his hand. "May I share this dance?"

Reminded of the Halloween party, Harry had no reservations. Accepting his outstretched hand, everything about this situation, other than their feelings, was the opposite. Rather than swept along in a fairly fast pace and allowing himself to be lead, they seemed to know, instinctively, what their dance should be.

Held close Harry found himself swaying to the music, turning slowly as the Wisteria hung above them. There were no fancy moves, just the knowledge and security that they would be together, forevermore.
This was the happiest either had ever been. So trusting, Harry rested his cheek against Alistair's chest, closing his eyes and losing himself within the moment. At his actions, Alistair had the urge to cry at such sweetness but held them at bay. With one hand supporting him and another at the back of his head they moved, with everyone falling silent once more.

Watching her best friend and seeing him so happy, had caused Hermione to cry off what little makeup she wore. Her mum and dad sat near Professor McGonagall, in the midst of conversation until the newlyweds began to dance. Even now, she could feel more tears well up.

"It's beautiful." As she swallowed, Luna voiced her agreement. Not wanting to miss anything she observed them, starry-eyed.

"I'm so happy for them!" Humming to herself quietly she, in turn, swayed to the music, even while sitting down.

Though she'd graduated, Daphne still hadn't lost her reputation as the Ice Queen. However, her time with Neville had helped to thaw her heart and in turn, couldn't help but show a small smile. "Before today, I wouldn't have paired those two together. But seeing them now, I can understand why. They've got the influence and ability to make this a grand affair for the media to lap up and yet, they didn't. The people I know would have. I'm relieved they're not anything like that."

With Daphne's words, Neville could understand. He wouldn't have pictured Harry with a Vampire and if asked, Harry himself probably wouldn't have either. It was a struggle to keep a lid on his own emotions but had managed, with his girlfriend's own composure. "Harry's spent his whole life trying to avoid the limelight. I think if any reporters showed up here, he'd hex them."

She smirked. "Now that I would like to see."

Silently, he concurred. That would make for great entertainment, though it could be saved for any other day. Seeing their bonding ceremony had spurred Neville's own imagination, of what it might be like. He could picture a future with Daphne by his side, easily. She'd met his grandmother, the biggest influence in his life and to his surprise, they got on well. Afterwards, though they couldn't communicate back, he'd also introduced her to his parents. The next steps seemed natural. He did love her and in a way, this had given him the courage to start thinking bigger. Glancing to his ride side and seeing Ginny and Draco, Neville hid his smile. She was so adamant when in school that she would never end up with any student. While nothing had been confirmed, he could see there was something developing between them.

Quicker to anger than cry, Ginny found it difficult to not cry in this situation. For years Harry had faced things which no one his age should have. But with the arrival of Alistair, he'd found someone who understood him. They were very different and yet, so much alike at the same time.
"I hope you don't start blubbering as well, I'm already surrounded by crying women." Sneering, Draco didn't outwardly show any reaction but internally, he was pleased for his friend. Their friendship had come along late but still, counted Harry as one of his best. Ginny too, in fact. It had taken longer for them to start using first names. With years of damnation from him and his family's lips about blood traitors and their financial status, there was far more to repair. But over time, they had. To his surprise one morning, when in the Ministry, a letter from her had come to him. Throughout her Seventh year and beyond they'd communicated and now, he considered them to be good friends. If told this years before now he would have laughed, treating such news with disbelief and scorn. But right now, here he was, surrounded by flowers. Oh, how far the once death eater in training had fallen.

Feeling an air of dark amusement at his thought, he was treated to a heated glare. "Oh, shut up. Just because a cardboard box has more emotion than you, doesn't mean to say that you can make fun of people who openly feel."

Draco sniffed. "It had better be a high-quality box. I won't settle for anything less."

"Arse."

"Weaslette."

Having the urge to stick his tongue out at him, Ginny marvelled at the fact that they could share such harmless banter. Times really had changed. The whole time their voice was hushed, not wanting to overpower the moment Harry and Alistair were sharing together. She had to wonder if her own future had something similar in store.

Seated among the other guests, Severus had never felt more uncomfortable in his life. That was saying something, since once upon a time he had to kiss the bare feet of the Dark Lord. He tried to remain nondescript, at the very back when observing the ceremony and staying silent throughout. Perhaps that would have worked out better if he wasn't the only one wearing black and in surroundings which were far from dark. He hated flowers unless they had a practical purpose such as for potion experimentation. Some did, in fact. Those he could tolerate. But here was far too bright, unnecessary.

He had attended the Seventh years' graduation those years ago, invited by Minerva to see off the students that he'd taught for the majority of their school life. He'd agreed, keeping himself scarce and afterwards, adopting the same approach to his lifestyle.

Not for the first time but in an entirely different way, he had a Potter to thank for his current lifestyle. Able to live comfortably and pursue his passion and what he wanted to make for the first time in years, Severus could say he was content.
So when an invitation to a bonding ceremony between Potter and Lothaire had turned up on his doorstep, shocked was an understatement. He’d toyed with the idea of not attending but then, he was here. Even now he wasn’t quite sure why he’d accepted, but then Lothaire, or Alistair, as Severus corrected himself, had visited the place that he now called home, with Potter. The visits were far from frequent, so not enough to irritate him. But strangely, he didn't mind their company. Perhaps it was to return the favour of sorts. That and Severus couldn't recall the last time he was invited to anything.

But still, finding himself surrounded by overly emotional women wasn't his idea of a good day. Finding himself sat beside one of whom he'd never met, he conjured a handkerchief and silently offered it to her.

"Merci Monsieur," she addressed him, dabbing beneath her eyes and appreciating their dance, as it came to a close.

Feeling uncomfortable at being thanked for such a simple thing, he returned her good intentions. "You are... welcome."

As she turned to meet his eyes, Severus could see that she wore makeup, but not to the degree of it being applied with a shovel as he'd seen with so many women these days. With petite features, there was something about her which sparked his rarely awoken intrigue.

"You are Potions Master Severus Snape, Oui?"

It wasn't often his title was used. Now he was certainly interested. "I am. And you are?"

"Oh! Forgive me. I am Anaïs Bellerose."

As she held her hand out, Severus shook it. She knew who he was and yet, could see no scorn or disgust in her eyes. Whether anyone cared to investigate or not, the previous life he'd led was no secret. He was used to many a cold glance but if he was not mistaken, her dark eyes held a hint of warmth.

While he dismissed the very thought of this, he couldn't shoo away his intrigue and, before he knew it, found himself in the midst of a conversation with someone he'd conjured a handkerchief for.

Without a doubt, that was one of the most magical moments of Harry's life. It was no more than a few minutes but now, in the eyes of magic and everyone gathered, he was married. It had happened but still, he couldn't believe it.
Moving back just a little they still held hands, as the song came to an end. Catching Hermione's tearful gaze he grinned, sending a thumbs up as she waved back at him.

Inundated with voices of congratulations from those gathered there, one of the most vocal among them, was Hagrid. Wearing what Harry could see was his best clothing he came over, sweeping them into a crushing bear hug. Both lifted off their feet Harry was short of breath. While Alistair didn't face this issue, Hagrid's strength still shone through.

"Beautiful. Jes' Beautiful. Arry, Alistair, I'm happy for yeh."

His tearful voice at odds with the strength behind his arms, Harry managed to free one of his own, patting him. "Thanks, Hagrid, it means a lot to us that you came."

"Yer my friends, course I'd come." Saying this with great confidence he finally put them down, patting Harry's shoulder. Wincing slightly he rubbed that spot, but wouldn't change him for anything. He was honest to the point of danger sometimes, indicated by his first year at Hogwarts. But still, there were a rare few with a heart of gold and Hagrid was one of them.

"Harry!"

At the sound of his name being called, he barely had time to react before a teen sized bullet hit him. Able to see that it was Lilah, she'd grown since the last time he'd seen her. Now a third year, Alistair had been giving him updates about her. She'd adopted a Hermione-like approach to school, only less seriousness and more cheerfulness. Seeing his friends weren't too far away he invited Lilah to sit with them, knowing he'd reunite with Alistair soon enough.

Pulling up a chair, he noticed Hermione dabbing at her eyes. "I think you've shed enough tears to make all the deserts wet."

With a watery chuckle, she pulled herself together. "That's probably true."

"Where's Luna?" Harry asked, scanning everyone mingling or getting to know one another better.

Ginny joined the conversation. "Over there, with Brio. She'll be back soon."

Nodding to himself he spotted Draco beside Ginny, reaching over to give him a firm handshake. "Glad to see you came."

"I'd never hear the end of it otherwise." Eyes glimmering coolly, he couldn't hide the small smile which emerged.
As they were joined by Luna and Brio, he could see she had a glass in her hand. Taking a tip she spun on the spot, almost dreamily and somehow not managing to spill a drop.

Looking at the contents, he was curious. "What's that?"

"A strawberry cocktail. Dobby told me it's his speciality."

Cocktails were his speciality? Scanning the crowd, he saw Dobby and sure enough, the elf was mixing drinks.

"I would've never pegged him for a mixologist." Shaking his head softly, Harry would have to try one of Dobby's concoctions.

"Lilah! How are you?" As Luna placed her drink down she took a seat beside her, eyes lighting up happily.

Along with Harry, Luna was another she'd kept in contact with, once she'd graduated too. Without her, Lilah wouldn't have been able to handle her abilities half as well. "I'm great! Who's your friend?"

Noticing her gaze turned to him, Brio introduced himself. He found it easier, at home in these surroundings. "I am Brio Winterfell."

"Nice to meet you! Wow, so cool..." Shaking his hand, Lilah looked at his robes with swirling patterns.

As Lilah and Luna chatted animatedly, Harry was happy to see Brio in his comfort zone, along with Luna. He'd hadn't seen much of them over the years, compared to when he was at Hogwarts. Rather than the Fae world visited, it was this world instead. Staying with Brio full time, the air was much cleaner and clearer when with him. He hadn't noticed much of a difference between worlds, but then his past connection with death wasn't exactly light magic. Either way, it was good to see them both. Everyone, in fact, all gathered in one place. It made for a nice change since the last time was for something far more sinister.

With music still playing in the background, some of the guests had begun to dance. Among them, he could see Daphne and Neville. Much like he was dedicated in his fourth year when dancing with Ginny, he placed the same amount of dedication in dancing with her.

The moment Luna turned a puppy-eyed look towards him, Brio knew that whatever left her lips, his answer would be yes. Rarely had he ever said no to her, but knew she wasn't the type to take advantage of the generous side of him.
"Dance with me?"

He suspected as much. While dancing wasn't his favourite activity, it was made less unpleasant with Luna as a partner. Extending his hand by way of invitation, her own hand touched his as they joined the crowd.

Not wanting to miss out on the fun, Lilah ran over to Hagrid. Smoothing down her dress, she cleared her throat with a measure of seriousness. "Hagrid, I formally invite you to dance with me. Ah, that's if you want to I guess..." Tapering off at the end she looked mildly sheepish, with chuckles from Minerva, Sirius and Remus who were stood nearby, observing.

He wasn't one for dancing. He didn't have a graceful bone in his body, but couldn't pass up her invitation. Since Harry had left, things would have become much more lonely for him, if not for Lilah's visits. They'd formed a strong friendship. Black eyes twinkling he stood up, following Lilah to the large section of grass which had been claimed as the dance floor.

One by one his friends stood, the one he shared with Alistair first paving the way for future dancing. Able to see someone he hadn't for a long time now, Harry made his way over. "Tonks! It's good to see you."

Usually the life of the party, she kept to herself. He knew why. One of the people they'd lost in the battle with Seraphina, he'd later found out, was Kingsley. He knew they had a close working relationship and from his perspective, they were friends. He'd believed at the time, though he had no proof, that Tonks had felt something more for him.

Withdrawing from everyone, the only time she was close to being normal, was during work. But even then she had her moments, particularly when Amelia assigned a new partner to her.

Able to see that she was her normal self, Tonks gave him a brilliant smile. "Wotcher Harry, congratulations. See? Told you he liked you." Giving him a wink, he was reminded of her verbal encouragement during the Halloween party.

"Come and dance with me." Offering his hand, she looked hesitant. "What about Alistair?"

"He won't mind, look." Glancing in his direction, he could see him dancing with Professor McGonagall.

She gave a low whistle. "Minerva's getting on in age, but she's got some moves."

"Alistair's ancient history, but he still looks 26." Harry pointed out, smirking as a voice entered his mind.
'Why do I have the feeling that you are discussing my age again?'

'Your feeling would be correct. I was just telling Tonks about my fossil of a husband.'

'Fossil? Why, how cheeky. Later on, once we are finally alone, I shall have to demonstrate that I am still in the prime of my life.'

Harry shivered, in a pleasant way. He was enjoying the day so far but would look forward to later.

Eventually, Tonks nodded. "I'll dance with you. But be warned, I've got two left feet and I'll be standing on yours every other second."

"That's no problem, Madam Pomfrey's here somewhere. If you break my feet she can heal them."

Snorting to herself she accepted his hand. Despite her words, she did try to avoid standing on his feet but inevitably, his toes were trodden on a few times. Even so, Harry didn't mind. A little pain was worth it to see Tonks enjoy herself. Throughout the time they talked she hadn't shown a smile which lit her eyes. But with them all here, Harry could see a little of the person he knew, returning.

While Hermione was content in watching everyone else dance, Solomon had come over to offer his own hand. He'd expressed before he didn't like dancing, feeling as though it was forced upon him for all the formal occasions as opposed to Alistair, who enjoyed it. They'd danced together before, though it hadn't happened often. Wanting to take advantage of his good mood she eagerly agreed, Finding herself pulled closer and a hand within his own. Everyone had found their own rhythm, including them. While not the best at dancing, she could say with confidence that no feet would be stepped on.

Over the years, Hermione had done a lot of thinking. While that wasn't anything new, this was something which would change her life, permanently and without the option to reverse it. Those thoughts had started the moment she'd found out about Harry and Alistair's soul bond. Her best friend was now immortal. They had adapted well, considering it was unknown and unexpected. Not having found out until months later, Hermione had a choice.

Today had simply confirmed it. She loved Solomon and knowing that he had rarely opened his heart to anyone, she couldn't bear the thought of old age or other mortal related circumstances claiming her. She didn't want to leave him alone. Not only that but Harry too. She didn't know if the transformation would work on Remus, who was already a werewolf, but imagined the results couldn't be good either way. With Sirius, he could always try, but there was still the risk of death. Not to mention an inability to be exposed to sunlight, until the Vampire bodies adapted to it. Luna was also in a similar position, with her father.
If she decided to do this, there was a chance Hermione would be faced with the same issue. She'd already discussed this with her parents and while they didn't like the idea, respected whatever decision she would make.

She wanted to be there for Solomon but also, wanted to support her friends. Hermione liked to believe her willpower was strong enough to survive the transformation. Taking a deep breath, she finally decided to share her decision aloud. "Solomon."

Hearing the seriousness in her tone, he straightened a little. "Yes?"

Feeling the significant weight of her words, it was better to be direct than edge around the topic. She wasn't one to do that and had no intentions of doing so now. "Once I'm older, I want you to turn me."

Her words were shocking enough for Solomon to nearly miss a step. Silent he didn't respond until the song came to an end. Directing her over to a seat he sat beside her, gaze intense. "Are you sure? I am reluctant to intentionally put you in harm's way. If the worst should happen..." Solomon didn't allow himself to continue, not wanting to even consider the possibility of her death. Though without and as a mortal, her death was guaranteed.

"I've thought of all the pros and cons since we learned of Harry's soul bonding. I believe I'm strong enough to survive the transformation. My parents and close family already know of you and this idea so if it happens, it won't come as a shock. I won't force you, but I would like you to consider the idea. It's just, seeing Harry so happy and knowing he will be with Alistair, makes me want the same thing too. I won't be making the decision lightly."

Unless in a situation with no time, Solomon knew she wouldn't suggest this if she hadn't put a great deal of thought into it. He had thought about it once but dismissed the idea, realising how incredibly risky it could be. It didn't rely on him, but her. Age had given him a mastery of the transformation on his side, but he always had to be met halfway.

"I understand. If that is what you want and when you are ready, we will try. Though, I hope that day is a few years from now." Exposing his vulnerability, Hermione squeezed his hand.

"It will be. I don't plan on staying in the body of a teenager forever. I'm glad Harry is still ageing too. I know it would have irked him to stay the same height without even a slim chance of growing more."

More than once, he'd heard Harry's grumbling about growth spurts and how they avoided him. Amusement within his eyes, he turned to regard Hermione. Hair into a chic bun some tendrils had escaped, framing the side of her face. Wearing a dress very similar in colour to the Wisteria hanging above their heads, he stole a kiss. "You look beautiful, by the way."
Surprised by his actions and words, Hermione flushed. "Thank you. And you look very handsome."

Wearing a deep blue suit it held a faint shimmer, with a tie to match. Noticing that it was a little askew, she adjusted it. Taking note of how popular Dobby was turning out to be, she held out her hand. "Want to see what our temporary mixologist can make us?"

Finding himself curious Solomon agreed, following her over to him.

Alistair loved to dance. Sharing the first with Harry on this day had only spurred him on to dance even more. He'd spoken with Sirius, Remus, Rupert and a number of other people. Now, he was sharing a dance with his colleague. He'd never found himself among so many good spirited people, seeing Lilah and Hagrid pass him by as he twirled her on the spot. Sparing a glance for them, he chuckled warmly. "It seems like they are in their element."

Following his gaze, Minerva agreed. "It does. I was worried for Hagrid, once Harry graduated. But she has visited him often."

Hair free from the usual bun she had it in, Alistair saw her in a different, softer light. Rare was the day that she metaphorically let it down but today, she was partaking in both. "Some spend an entire lifetime without ever being married. You have spent several. I'm a firm believer that everyone has the one that they're meant to be with. I am overjoyed to know that you have found your special someone. Congratulations."

"Thank you, it is much appreciated." Heart fit to burst with good wishes he found himself exchanging partners, much like Harry and some of the others.

He'd danced with Tonks but ended up dancing with several others too. Lilah, Luna, Ginny and at one point, Daphne. Exchanging partners again, he found himself with Mrs Weasley. Molly, he corrected himself. He still hadn't gotten used to using her first name, even now.

Grinning he held her hand, matching her pace and for once, feeling tall. That rarely happened, so he decided to embrace the moment.

"Congratulations dear, Arthur and I are so happy for you."

Able to keep up the pace while dancing with him, Harry responded. "Thanks so much. How are things?"
As she filled him in, he absorbed the information, pleased. With the Weasley's claim to Gryffindor, it had given Arthur the seat and with it, a higher paying position. Pushed forward by Amelia for his aid at Hogwarts he'd accepted, able to provide for his family much more. Right now they were in the process of looking for a new house, something smaller since most of their children had left home.

As the music switched to a faster tempo, Harry found himself back with the one he'd shared his first dance with. "Fancy seeing you here," he joked, changing to laughter when all of a sudden, he was picked up and spun around on the spot. Holding onto Alistair he could barely breathe for laughter, then swooped so low that his hair brushed the grass beneath.

"It would be a crime to not dance with my husband again." The sentence delivered seriously, Harry could still see the bright twinkle in his eye.

Before long people gravitated towards seats, Dobby the mixologist serving more drinks than ever. They didn't plan on having a cake, just a spread which catered to everyone's tastes. Seeing everyone chatting and enjoying themselves, everything was going well. Harry was glad that for the day, this section of the flower park was closed to others. Otherwise, he imagined many would see unbelievable sights.

Taking hold of Alistair's hand he took him over to Dobby, who seemed in his element. Seeing them immediately, his large ears flapped exuberantly. "Master Harry, Master Alistair! What can Dobby be making for you?"

It had taken a while for him to drop their surnames along with 'sir' attached to the end but like them all, Dobby had come a long way. He still worked at Hogwarts but to Harry's knowledge, was one of the more experienced elves who tried to broaden his knowledge. Wearing a black apron, mismatched socks and a neon bowtie, he'd even dressed up for the occasion.

"Something punchy?" It was the first thing which came to Harry's mind.

Seeing them together, Dobby's eyes lit up. "I can be doing that, right away!"

Out of thin air came various mixtures, combining, shaking and with some ice added. The glass that became filled with the mixture was large, accompanied by two straws. For the finishing touch, he snapped his fingers, the drink now having some extra fizz. Sliding it over to Harry, his large eyes were filled with enthusiasm. "To share."

Harry had guessed as much, with two straws and a larger glass. "Thanks, Dobby!"

"You is welcome." Looking thoroughly pleased with himself they selected a table, sitting next to one another. Straws in hand they sipped, Harry's eyes widening some before coughing. "I don't think this is a punch. More like a roundhouse kick. Bloody hell."
Patting him on the back, Alistair had to admit it did have a great deal of strength behind it. "True, but it is delicious. He knows his flavours well."

Harry couldn't deny that. It was strong but tasted great. He'd eaten something, so felt confident in drinking a little more. It was a time to celebrate, after all. Though, he reminded himself not to overdo it. Afterwards, Alistair had selected a destination for them. Harry didn't know where but knew he wouldn't be disappointed. He never was, every location always hitting the mark with something for them to do or see.

As a hand found its way into his hair, Harry nearly purred. Alistair knew this was one of the things that he enjoyed the most and sometimes, encouraged him to feel drowsy from such a relaxing touch.

"Hi Nev, enjoying yourself?" Spotting his friend not far from them he greeted him, pulling a chair over. As Neville sat down he nodded, a bit too violently and with unfocused eyes.

"Yep. Daphne had to go early, 'cause she's got work in th' morning. But I can stay forever."

Harry showed his amusement. "It's only for one day, so forever's a bit excessive. I can see you're enjoying yourself though. Maybe too much."

Neville shook head with enough force that Harry feared it might fly off. "No such thing as too much."

"I'd say there is, you look hammered." Clapping him on the shoulder Sirius joined the conversation, eyes glinting with approval. "Good lad! There's nothing like the feeling of your liver taking a battering."

"I'll drink to that!"

Rolling his eyes at the pair Remus sat himself down, his own drink in hand. "Never thought I'd see Neville have one too many, remarkable. Are you enjoying yourselves?"

"Definitely. Right?" Glancing up at Alistair, Harry flushed from far more than the alcohol with the whispering in his ear. "Certainly, but I shall enjoy you personally, later."

"Why did you have to say that now?" Moaning to himself his head hit the table with an audible thump. Having sensitive hearing of his own, Remus managed to pick up the exchange of words between them. Smirking to himself he dragged Sirius away, who shouted a quick goodbye and congratulations.

Similarly, Arthur, one of the soberest people there, supported Neville. If Augusta had been able to make it, he had a feeling Neville wouldn't have drank quite this much. With a smile and
congratulations for them, he ensured Neville wouldn't end up face down in some Japanese gutter. If they had gutters, that was. He hadn't visited many countries but after seeing this, he would convince Molly to do a little travelling of their own.

Harry thought he'd seen him before, but this confirmed it. Sitting away from the majority of the action, was Professor Snape.

"I wasn't sure he'd come, to be honest. I'm glad he did though," Harry commented, observing him nurse what from where he was sitting, looked like Whisky.

Noticing the direction of his gaze, Alistair's own was warmer than ever. "He has spent most of the day chatting with Anaïs. Before I met him, she was already aware of his work. Apparently, his Wolfsbane creation has helped friends and family of hers who are affected with Lycanthropy."

"He's helped a lot of people, whether directly or indirectly. It's good she's shown her appreciation. We'll have to thank her somehow, for these suits. They feel really nice. Though, they'll be even better once we take them off."

Lowering his voice for the last part, their flirting had reached new heights, especially today. Harry placed that down to their normal interactions but also, mutual newlywed emotions. "I'm going to go say hi to him before he takes flight like the bat everyone believed him to be."

With a heated gaze at his back, Harry could feel the intensity of Alistair's stare. When a hand briefly caressed him from behind, he bit his lip to block out any of the more embarrassing sounds to leave his lips. Shaking thoughts of later from his mind for now, despite the increased difficulty of this, he pulled up a chair next to the man. "It's good to see you, Professor."

He regarded him with slight irritation. "Potter, I have not wasted my expertise on dunderheads for the last two years now. That title is redundant."

"I know, but what else can I call you?"

"I was not born and named 'Professor Snape'. Apply some common sense." Sneering, Harry finally caught on. His first name? That was even more bizarre than when he stopped calling Draco, Malfoy.

Harry had the feeling that untold doom would fall upon him if he used the man's name. It was an invitation to do so, but he was the most wand trigger happy of them all.

"Severus."

As Harry spoke his name to try it out, Harry hid his laughter at the way they both grimaced simultaneously. "If I'm using your first name, it's only fair you use mine then."
Severus’ reply was delayed but came along eventually. Unable to hide his discomfort at the thought, he agreed it would be odd to stay on a one-sided surname basis. "Very well... Harry."

Scratch that. Hearing his first name from Severus was the weirdest thing he'd ever experienced in his life. That would take some getting used to.

After saying his goodbyes to Severus, Harry saw Fred and George distanced from everyone slightly, muttering to themselves. Suspecting this indicated some form of mischief, he crept up behind them. "What's going on?"

As one, they jumped. "Bloody hell Harry, have you been taking sneaking lessons from the former bat of the dungeon?"

Harry entertained that thought for a moment. It would have made any interactions they shared interesting, at the very least. "Nope, I just have a natural talent for it now. Are you going to cure my curiosity?"

Glancing at one another for a moment, they showed him a box. With the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes logo, it had various cartoon explosions imprinted upon it. "Are those fireworks?"

"We'd planned to let them off as a surprise. End the day-"

"-With a bang. We made them for you and Alistair."

Finishing each other's sentences again, Harry remembered that their fireworks were far from ordinary. "That's brilliant. It's close to sundown anyway. Want to let them off now?"

Agreeing Harry returned to Alistair, excitement in his eyes as he informed him. "Their fireworks are amazing, you're in for a treat."

As Fred and George set them up, they called for attention. "These are for a special honorary brother and his significant other. Who, without them-"

"-Weasley's Wizard Wheezes wouldn't be a thing. Enjoy the show, everyone."

Enjoy it they did. Harry was blown away. Their fireworks had colour, depth, dimension and shape. Everything from Hogwarts castle itself, to singular bursts of colour. Clapping with each one, the last in their few minutes display, topped it all.

A seeker sitting on a broom, chasing after the snitch. Once catching it, Harry could see the broom
trail had made one word. 'Congratulations.' With the snitch caught at the full stop, it exploded, into a shower of rainbow colours that illuminated the sky. Cheering loudly the twins took theatrical bows, as Alistair whispered in his ear. "I believe that is our queue to leave."

Swept off his feet completely it attracted the attention of remaining guests, Harry waving to everyone he could see and laughing all the while. As they stepped outside of their venue for the day, he spoke at a normal volume. "Close your eyes, my love."

Doing as asked he kept them that way, even when detecting a complete change in the atmosphere.

He was placed down, sitting on what he believed to be a stone wall. Feeling a subtle shift in the air, he guessed Alistair had seated himself beside him.

"Open them."

As Harry did so, he gasped.

Endless, calm waters greeted him. High above the sun had just begun to set, casting an orange glow over the area. Looking to his left and right, he could see they were at a temple of some sort.

"It's beautiful. Where are we?" Leaning on his shoulder, Harry was pulled closer as he felt the sensation of a kiss atop his head.

"We are in Bali, Indonesia. And this is Uluwatu Temple. I know how fond you are of sunsets, and this spot, in particular, offers a spectacular view of one."

"It's perfect. Everything, this entire day, has been." Entwining their hands he could see both of their rings, catching what remained of the sun and sparkling. "You're my husband now. That thought is mind-blowing, I don't think its sunken in yet."

"It will take a while for it to, with me," Alistair admitted, holding him with both arms. "But, my wish has come true."

"What wish?"

"My first birthday celebration with you, in the Room of Requirement. You told me to make a wish but not speak it aloud, in case it did not come true. As it has, I believe I am able to speak freely."

Those words capturing Harry's attention, a warm hand caressed his cheek. Coaxed to look up, so much love was held within his eyes, that it stole his breath away. "I wished, to spend an eternity with you. I had seen so many enter and leave my life, but I could not bear the thought of the same fate
Those words were an exact echo of his own. The birthdays with Alistair in his life, he'd had one wish. To live, with him. Harry's life had changed, for the better. Without Alistair and his help in uncovering more of Dumbledore's various plots and helping him to further break free from his gnarled clutches, he might have never graduated and lived to see this day. His first taste of love, being loved, was now his last and only.

"Looks like we both need new wishes then, because that was mine as well." Reaching up to tuck a lock of wayward hair behind Alistair's ear he cupped the back of his head, pulling him down so they were nose to nose. His eyes were so crystal clear, that the man was able to see a reflection of himself within them. "I love you."

Rather than sitting beside him, Harry found himself placed onto Alistair's lap. Warm and secure, the kiss they shared was sweet, slow as if to match the sun's gradual descent.

As the weather was warm both men removed their jackets, carefully placing those and their ties aside. Heart at peace and more content than ever before, he responded likewise. "I love you too, so much that sometimes, I cannot believe my good fortune." Savouring the moment, Alistair physically inhaled. Not out of necessity, but as if to take everything in. The fresh air, the view and most importantly, Harry himself. What started out as a friendly alliance with some attraction there, had concluded with this moment. When all the odds were against them they had come out on top, every time and had faced adversity. Whether past love lives, those who posed a threat to everyone's wellbeing or mental scars, they had seen each moment in time through.

Turning to face the view again, Harry relaxed into him. "You and me both. But we're in this together, for better, for worse, forever."

Forever. He had longed for such a thing, with another. And now he was here, within his arms. "This is not the end. I believe today, heralds a new beginning."

Harry thought so too. As eyes of Emerald Green and Sunset bid farewell to this day and greeted the night, both held within them the question, of what the next chapter in their lives would be.

The End

And now, in 2019, it's complete. I can barely believe it's over in a way. I want to thank everyone, from the bottom of my heart, for all the overwhelming feedback and positivity. Even some of the negativity, as most helped me to improve on my writing. Without you all, both the silent readers or otherwise, this wouldn't have shaped into what it came to be. I've broken schedule and posted today, since this is the last chapter and I finished writing it up about an hour and a half previously.

I'm very happy this was finished within Pride month too! What better way than to end within in a month celebrating those who love the same gender and both, with a main pairing that's M/M?

While this fic has ended, the universe as a whole hasn't. I've got a lot of ideas in my head, around the developing couples, more scenes between them, some more things into the future and scenes I never got round to writing. I love them all far too much for this to be the end <3 Also, I'll be going back through and editing this at some point, to change and reword some things that don't make sense and also correct earlier, slightly cringeworthy writing.

In the meantime I'll be continuing WIPs I've neglected, which are many of them. I won't be keeping to a schedule for those though. I might try to dabble in some original stuff too but if I post those, they will probably be on a website more suited for this kind of thing.

Happy pride month everyone and thank you for sharing the EOAG journey with me 😊

http://www.sonnets.org/love-sonnets.htm (The sonnet Alistair used is here ❤️)

Works inspired by this one: [Eyes of Avada Green Cover [FAN ART]] by Levinson, Vă Multiimesc by Tranquil Tevine

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!